

**Dying Young : A Social Problem and Its Repercussions  
in the Victorian Novel**

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## 要約

### 若くして死ぬこと：1つの社会問題と、それがヴィクトリア朝小説に与えた影響

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「若くして死ぬことは大変不幸である。妻の、子供の、父親の、早すぎる死ほど悲痛なものがあるだろうか。」この打ちひしがれた叫びは、1851年のグレート＝ブリテン島人口調査に関する公式説明に対して生じたもので、人々の喪失感の広がりを感じさせる。死に瀕している子供達にせよ、孤児達にせよ、子供達にまつわる数々の痛ましい挿話を、ヴィクトリア朝時代の流行として激しく非難することは無情すぎるといえる。作家達自身にみられる自伝の執筆への衝動を、自己憐憫の結果とみなし、大衆の反応を空涙を流しているものと解釈し続けることはやめねばならない。それどころか我々は、1つの社会問題であると同時に深い個人的痛手であり、人間として逃れられない条件の1つの要素であるこの問題に、ヴィクトリア朝時代の人々が勇気をもって対処しようとした、その様々な方法に注意を払うべきである。特に我々の知識の未知の領域を、この世での意識の最期の瞬間へと押し進めた、ヴィクトリア朝小説家達の文学的業績を認めるべき時がきている。

Papa, I can't think how Jesus can be in all the boats! Perhaps they don't go quite at the same time? He must be, you know, because he comes to fetch us.

Mrs Henry Wood, *East Lynne*.

Meredith, doubtless with his own estrangement from his father in mind, has the German princess Ottilia remark in *The Adventures of Harry Richmond*, "of love is not much in de family in England, it is said."<sup>1</sup> For the Victorian period, this hearsay has never been heresy.

Sociologists are still hotly debating one possible cause of the high incidence of harsh parenting: in past centuries, writes the pioneer family historian, Philippe Ariès, "[p]eople could not allow themselves to become attached to something that was regarded as a probable loss."<sup>2</sup> As if to corroborate this, here is Lady Rosalie Ashby in Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey*, talking about the seven- or eight-week-old daughter she is determined not to be "troubled with nursing": "But I can't devote myself entirely to a child," said she: "it may die—which is not at all improbable."<sup>3</sup> The farming out of new-borns and the stringency of Victorian nursery regimes sometimes make early death seem less cause than effect. We could put it like this: Rosalie's already delicate child is unlikely to thrive.

A correlation between infant mortality rates and a failure of parental devotion cannot be proved, however. Some sociologists strenuously deny it.<sup>4</sup> In *Agnes Grey* itself, the eponymous heroine is quick to condemn Rosalie's indifference, seeing it not as a reasonable defence against emotional trauma, but as an abrogation of a sacred charge—part of her "false idea of happiness and disregard for duty." Her own children "shall want no good thing that a mother's care can give."<sup>5</sup> Agnes no doubt is her author's surrogate. But Lady Arabella in *Dr Thorne*, another titled mother with doomed offspring, is far from being Trollope's. Nevertheless, her maternal instinct is seen to prevail. The services of the compliant Dr Fillgrave are exchanged for those of the more demanding village practitioner; sacrifices, not only of London seasons but also (more costly still) of pride, are made for the health and welfare of surviving children.

Margaret Oliphant's belated discovery of her mother's deep attachment to her warns us to be similarly wary of correlating strictness with absence of feeling.<sup>6</sup> Mrs Gaskell was perhaps a more representative mother than Anne Brontë's Rosalie. She may seem to be expressing sentiments similar to Rosalie's when she cries out in her diary, with reference to her first-born, "Oh! may I try not to fasten and centre my affections too strongly on such a frail little treasure. . .";<sup>7</sup> but no sensible reader would mistake this for anything other than anguish at the awful and none too remote possibility of loss. We know that Mrs Gaskell felt obliged to join her husband in administering corporal punishment even to three-year-old Marianne, but also that she carefully monitored every aspect of her childrens' development, and took pains to give them a healthy diet. We know too that when she did lose a later child, her only son William, she was

devastated: her husband encouraged her to work on *Mary Barton*, her first novel, to take her mind off her grief. Her letters show that she grieved for other parents in her position. Bereaved mother turned novelist, she deals sympathetically with such losses in her fiction, as do so many of her contemporaries.

Lambasting the Victorian vogue for pathetic episodes involving children seems uncharitable, then. Instead of continually ascribing autobiographical impulse in the author to self-pity, and interpreting public response as crocodile tears, we might more fairly infer that Princess Ottilia was misinformed (there is much in Meredith's novel itself to belie her words) and that Ariès's coldly logical proposition is untenable. In its place we could put an anomaly which is nevertheless more humanly acceptable: despite their repressive attitudes towards children, and even the distance they kept them at, most Victorians did care deeply about their children, and suffered intensely when they died. Such feelings were sometimes exploited by the novelists to promote awareness of the larger social problems contributing to early mortality.

This is an area where anomalies and paradoxes are legion. Selflessness is also suggested by the fact that (contrary to popular opinion) early death was not necessarily, or even usually, dealt with in a negative way in Victorian fiction.

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Demographical data must be treated with caution. It is true that after Victoria's accession, the population continued to mushroom; but it was a young population. According to the 1851 census, for instance, the mean age of males in Great Britain as a whole was 25.87 years, only slightly up on the figures for 1841 (25.49 years) and 1821 (25.13 years); the mean lifetime in England was only 40 years. Those who got through the critical early childhood period often had to watch helplessly as parents, siblings, and their own offspring were snatched away from by disease. "[U]ntimely death is a great evil. What is so bitter as the premature death of a wife, —a child, —a father?": this stricken cry rises from the official commentary of the census to touch us with a sense of widespread individual loss.<sup>8</sup>

Nor did things seem to be getting better. The London Bills of Mortality up to 1830 had shown a considerable improvement in death-rates for the under-fives (1730-79: 66.2 percent; 1780-1829: 'only' 37.8 percent). But the improvement was patchy, and a steady momentum could not be maintained. Pondering these figures soon after Victoria's accession, Sir Edwin Chadwick posited that they only masked "positive deterioration" among certain classes;<sup>9</sup> several decades later, Sir William Farr was disturbed to discover evidence of an overall deterioration in the youngest age-group:

The death-rate of infants [under 1 year of age] in England and Wales, in 1875 was 158 per 1,000, or 4 per 1,000 above the average rate in the 10 years 1861-70. This implies that the mortality among infants is increasing.<sup>10</sup>

Farr's deductions are not always reliable, but this one seems safe enough, and is significant for literary criticism. It refutes the modern argument<sup>11</sup> that early death was actually on the wane, and that therefore the Victorians' preoccupation with it was

obsessive and excessive. Like the medical men, the novelists were deeply concerned with actual trends in their society, as reflected in such figures.

I learn from the statistical tables that one child in five dies within the first year of its life; and one child in three, within the fifth.

That don't look as if we could never improve in these particulars, I think!

writes Dickens in the voice of an anxious father, in "Births. Mrs Meek, of a Son."<sup>12</sup>

It is worth stressing that the novelists' interest in the subject was rarely, if ever, academic. One bereavement, like Mrs Gaskell's, could be harrowing enough. Dickens's shock over the unexpected death of his teenage sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth, is well



Punch's sombre cartoon of 1875 shows a well-fed, complacent Victorian father taking his children for an outing on London's 'playground'—or 'plague-ground,' Hampstead Heath. He is also accompanied by an anxious nursemaid, and the spectres of fever and smallpox. Despite advances in vaccination, and legal requirements for it, a smallpox epidemic had only recently subsided. This family looks prosperous, but prosperity was no protection against such killers as smallpox, typhoid and scarlet fever. Note the long faces of the children, especially the eldest: their expressions might indicate their severe Victorian upbringing, or the sense of doom which threatens their young lives.

known. It returned vividly to his mind as he decided to follow Forster's advice, and lift Little Nell "out of the commonplace of ordinary happy endings."<sup>13</sup> Later, he was to lose a seven-month-old daughter unpropitiously named after David Copperfield's child-wife:

Our poor little Dora! I had just been playing with her, and went to preside at a Public Dinner to which I was pledged. Before it was over—even before they sang the Grace—she was dead. I had left her well and gay. My servant came down with the sad news, but they kept it from me until the meeting was over.

.....

We laid the child in her grave today.<sup>14</sup>

This was in the very year of the mid-century census, and about eight years before he wrote the gratuitous little episode in *A Tale of Two Cities* in which Lucie Darnay's young son dies.

Other writers had to face repeated bereavements, with similar repercussions for their work. Tuberculosis was the 'family attendant' not only of Mrs Trollope, the Brontës and the Oliphants, but of the MacDonalds. George MacDonald lost his mother to the disease in 1833, when he was eight; his fourteen-year-old half-sister Isabella in 1855; his father and brother John one after the other in 1858; and later four of his own children, two of them again within a year of each other. One of the others, Grace, had survived childhood only to die in 1884 after giving birth to a baby destined to follow her with the same disease. No wonder MacDonald (subject to frequent chest troubles himself) was constantly preoccupied with the subject of death, and set himself to make sense of it even in his children's writings.

Not only the fact of death but also the process of dying, in a period when diagnosis and treatment were fraught with uncertainties, and pain management was primitive, would wring the heart. What it was to watch a loved family member being inexorably eaten up by consumption, long before her time, can be gauged from Charlotte Brontë's growing anxiety and fears for Emily and Anne, and her even more pathetic attempts to snatch reassurance from a less haggard look, the remote possibility of a cure; or from G. H. Lewes's anguished entries in his diary (8–13 May, 1869) as he and George Eliot nursed his second son through his losing battle with spinal tuberculosis. 'Thornie' suffered excruciating pain, and died in Eliot's arms: "This death seems to me the beginning of our own," she wrote in her grief.<sup>15</sup> Childless herself, she had already mourned over the deaths of several much-loved nieces and nephews, as well as that of her sister Chrissey in 1859.

Dickens and his contemporaries did not, then, as another over-subtle recent critic has suggested, deliberately set out "to domesticate death . . . and take it in by the fireside" as a ploy for coping with its prevalence in the harsh, urbanizing world outside.<sup>16</sup> Death was already a familiar presence at the family hearth. What several of them did was just the opposite. Like Josephine Butler, whose daughter's death sent her out to help fallen women, they took their personal grief and channelled it into social conscience. Mrs Gaskell saw this as the very "secret of comfort": "the sufferer wrestling with God's messenger until a blessing is left behind, not for one alone but for generations."<sup>17</sup>

Death was no respecter of class: Prince Albert died of typhoid in 1861, and was nearly followed by the Prince of Wales in 1872 (whose own heir-apparent died of pneumonia in 1892). But, inevitably, it dealt most savagely with the under-nourished, badly-housed and over-worked. And the epidemics which swept rapidly through the overcrowded and insanitary areas of the industrial cities, killing large numbers of the poor, picked off a disproportionate number of the very young. As well as the dreaded typhoid and cholera, the childhood diseases of scarlet fever, measles and whooping cough are all cited in Registrars' notes in the Quarterly Returns as causes of alarming increases in the death rates in urban areas. In the Spring Quarter of 1846, for example, 118 people died in Sheffield South, 41 of them under the age of one. The whole figure was found to be

very considerably above average... which must be attributed principally to the fact that measles has scarcely ever been known so prevalent and fatal as during the last 3 or 4 months.<sup>18</sup>

That the picture was different in healthier places, such as Surrey, could have come as no surprise. Chadwick had pointed out in 1842 that the age of death could vary considerably not only between two such large and disparate areas, but also between adjoining drained, partly drained and undrained streets in the same locality, and between the different classes of people inhabiting them.

For rich and poor alike, the early death of a parent might be more traumatic, more devastating in the long term, than the death of a child. MacDonald treasured until the day he died a letter from his mother to his grandmother about her difficulty in weaning him; seven-year-old Edmund Gosse, his dying mother's sole companion during the months of her painful and unavailing treatment in London, then had to face interminable days as the sole companion of his grieving father. The novelists, several of whom had shared the experience, did not forget the shattering of young lives by such blows. Frances Trollope has a mother's death-bed scene in *Michael Armstrong*, in which the stagy elements are kept in check by a number of realistic touches: Mrs Drake's last words are addressed to her youngest child—"Little one!"<sup>19</sup> Orphans would come in for a mythology of their own. As for the dying, however, it was the not the loss of adults in the prime of life, but the terrible toll on the children of the labouring classes, which touched the consciences of reformers and novelists most.

South Sheffield's figures for one quarter give little idea of the scale. In Manchester where the Gaskells lived, the 1851 census revealed that "100,000 children born are reduced to about half (49,910) in *six years*."<sup>20</sup> Mrs Gaskell's son was only one of the casualties, and she was only one of the thousands of mothers faced with what Fielding's Parson Adams had called "one of those great trials where our grief may be allowed to become immoderate."<sup>21</sup> She fully realized this, and in *Mary Barton* and its successors, the novelist's heartache is vented to some purpose, in describing the illnesses and deaths of workers' children. The longest-drawn-out case is that of the invalid boy Franky, the son of a widowed washerwoman in "The Three Eras of Libbie Marsh," whose feebly waving hand catches Libbie's attention from an opposite window, and whose inevitable

decline is much cheered by her simple gift of a pet canary. That the sick children of better-off people (Ailsie in "The Manchester Marriage," Osborne and Aimée's son in *Wives and Daughters*) are allowed to survive, may be Gaskell's acknowledgement of the different odds for rich and poor.

Franky's decline, with its social implications, is central to Libbie's story. When the emotion is cultivated without purpose (as in the Darnays' child's death in *A Tale of Two Cities*), or really goes over the top, the novelist is clearly being self-indulgent. The prime example of the latter is "The Death Chamber" chapter of *East Lynne*, when seven-year-old William embarks for heaven amid a storm of tears. One factor to be cited in extenuation of such episodes is the overflow of the novelists' feelings, including anxiety, for their own children. (Mrs Wood lost at least one child to scarlet fever.) The temptation to capture and move the large Victorian readership with affecting or even sensational scenes, a temptation which the more theatrical novelists, like Mrs Wood, were bound to embrace, may have had similar roots. The market forces at work here need not have been the sinister ones suggested by Peter Ackroyd, who hints at hypocrisy and "latent cruelty";<sup>22</sup> they may have been like those operating in our own times, when a public besieged by random violence rather than epidemics is fascinated by films and documentaries about serial killers. The complicity, in other words, is more (though not exclusively, because there is a certain collective responsibility) that of fear than that of guilt.

The notoriety of these scenes should not, anyway, blind us to the steady resolution with which the Victorian novelists generally faced and even probed what was at once a burning social issue, a deep personal hurt, and an inescapable element of the human condition.

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Following the tradition of early religious tracts, the Evangelical children's writer Mrs Sherwood had exploited child death to two main ends: to direct parents' attention to their children's spiritual health, and to impress the need for self-examination and -improvement upon the children themselves. But she did not forget the broken-hearted mother. Characteristically, she mingled exhortations and even stern warnings with her reassurances. *The Infant's Grave* shows a bereaved woman totally absorbed in her grief, now questioning the very existence of God, now accusing God of cruelty. A compassionate stranger argues the truth of the Bible, telling the mourner that God planned her child's salvation and that he is now in heaven. Impressed but not entirely convinced, the woman goes her way, resumes her life and eventually "the deceitful pleasures of the world." In the midst of these, she dies "an early and sudden death" which "fixed her destiny forever."<sup>23</sup> The ending may shock—is *intended* to shock, but the message is clear and positive. We are neither to dwell morbidly upon our losses, nor to forget them; they should aid us in working towards our own salvation. The British Library's copy of the 1833 edition of this little book is inscribed "as a gift to Emily Jane from Fanny—July 17th 1845" and we can well imagine the unhappy circumstances that prompted the gift, and the earnest struggles of its recipient.

In this story, there is hope for the child even of a disbeliever, if not for the disbeliever herself. Her conviction of original sin notwithstanding, Mrs Sherwood trusts that Jesus's righteousness has been "imputed" to the dead boy.<sup>24</sup> More dyed-in-the-wool Evangelicals, those Victorians with Calvinist leanings, would feel differently—as the pioneer educationalist Molly Hughes found when she tried unsuccessfully to argue with someone who believed in the eternal damnation of the unbaptized infant.<sup>25</sup> Hardy's Tess would be much exercised by this question, on the death of her daughter Sorrow after a makeshift home baptism. But Mrs Sherwood's glossing over the point here proved more typical, with mothers throughout the period being advised to let their children go from this vale of temptations while still innocent, and, having relinquished them selflessly, not to want them back.

Andersen's "The Story of a Mother" (published in *A Christmas Greeting to My English Friends* in 1847, a volume affectionately dedicated to Dickens) exactly captures the mood of the times. Here, the bereaved woman sets out on a Romantic quest to recover her child, her various encounters along the way involving her in great sacrifice. But after winning her way into Death's "great greenhouse," she is brought to realize that her daughter's future in this world might have been nothing but "sorrow and distress, horror and wretchedness":

Then the mother wrung her hands, fell on her knees, and prayed to our Lord: "Oh, hear me not when I pray against Thy will, which is the best! hear me not! hear me not!"<sup>26</sup>

Later, Andersen wrote of his satisfaction that this and another story of resignation had "given many grief-stricken mothers consolation and courage."<sup>27</sup> But the whole story is really only a fanciful elaboration of Dickens's words about Little Nell at the end of Chapter 71 in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, words which he would echo after recounting his own daughter's death: "if we could call her back to life, now, with a wish, we would not do it."<sup>28</sup>

The struggle to yield up a child like this might be very intense. Mrs Wilson in Gaskell's *Mary Barton* at last gives her dying son, whose twin brother already lies dead from the "ghoul-like fever," to her sister-in-law, Alice:

"May happen yo'd better take him, Alice; I believe my heart's wishing him a' this while, for I cannot, no, I cannot bring myself to let my two chiler go in one day; I cannot help longing to keep him, and yet he sha'nt suffer longer for me"<sup>29</sup>

The boy soon expires in his aunt's arms. The mother who thus commits "her child, a portion of her own being, to the corruption of the grave . . . resigning the life which out of her own life had been created, unto the Creator of all" is ennobled by her sacrifice: Ursula Halifax in Dinah Mulock's mid-century best-seller, *John Halifax, Gentleman*, is elevated to the status of the mourning Virgin when the "utmost sorrow and crowning consecration of motherhood" falls upon her, and her blind daughter dies.<sup>30</sup>

Little wonder that children dying within this framework of belief are often depicted as angels even before they leave this mortal coil. Only Emily Brontë dared to show, in

Linton Heathcliff, the possibility of a young invalid's tyranny, his decline from pettishness to moroseness and equally unattractive apathy. Generally, the child character's demeanour becomes less child-like and more saintly: even Thackeray's spirited Bryan, Barry Lyndon's nine-year-old son, becomes saintly on his death-bed. A halo of bright curls, sunlight or lamplight is apt to grace the sick-bed pillow, confirming the child's destination. Instead of protesting that he wants to stay in this world, like Tommy Anderson in Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Lucie Darnay's son in *A Tale of Two Cities* obediently prepares to leave his parents and sister: "I am called, and I must go!"<sup>31</sup>

Now Josephine Butler's little girl had long blond hair which cascaded over her father's arm as he picked her up after her fatal fall from the stair-head: "she seemed to rebuke our grief in her rapt and holy sleep";<sup>32</sup> the Earl of Shaftesbury was deeply impressed by the serene, even glad acceptance, evinced by one of his sons who died of pleurisy at Harrow, at the age of sixteen. Victorian parents and children alike were capable of valiant efforts of faith. Such efforts were, however, devalued by the prettification of childhood death by some authors. The chief offenders were childrens' writers who over-compensated for Mrs Sherwood's often gruesomely honest depictions of death-throes, and even references to evil smells, with scenes of pure kitsch. Here is the ending of "Bertha's 'Good-Night'" in *The Girls' Birthday Book* of 1860:

You might have seen on that bed a few days after a pretty white coffin, with silver nails and figures of winged angels, and the name of Bertha on it; and inside, under that beautiful lid, lay a lovely, lovely figure, strewed over with sweet-smelling violets.<sup>33</sup>

In another story for female consumption, "The Weeping and the Smiling Child" in Mrs Gatty's *Aunt Judy's Christmas Volume for Young People* (1870), the smiling child is the one in the white muslin dress, 'sleeping' among gorgeous flowers in the glimmer of candle-light, while sweet anthems fill the air. Her selfish elder sister, suffering torments of guilt as she kneels beside the coffin, is the unenviable weeper. Boys might be nerved to confront death as a great adventure (as J. M. Barrie puts it in *Peter Pan*); but girls apparently should look forward to their funeral adornments.

Both more and less than fairy-tale endings, in which a Snow White or a Sleeping Beauty is restored to this world again, these flowery tableaux seem designed to hide the scary fact of physical suffering and decay. Nothing could better support Jacqueline Rose's provocative thesis in *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, that children's fiction is fundamentally dishonest, disguising or mystifying the real nature of the child and childhood experience.<sup>34</sup>

In comparison with these sickly pieces, Dickens's description of Little Nell's death-bed in *The Old Curiosity Shop* shows delicacy and restraint. The physical details of Kit's and his companions' journey—their slow, hushed progress through the white wintry landscape, the snow on their eyelashes, and the numbing of their limbs—have prepared us not only for the presence of death, but also for its emotional toll. The scattering of winter berries and green leaves on Nell's couch is not simply part of the blurred pathos of the scene,<sup>35</sup> but reminds us of this journey, and works on a symbolic level to hint more

subtly at the new life, the regeneration, which the narrator promises for her. Besides, having overcome his reluctance to let Nell go, which lingered even after Forster jogged his arm about her, Dickens finally comes to the point with repeated assertions of her death. No doubt there is some self-pity in his threnody for dead innocence: but the rhapsodic, sentimental commentary which punctuates these assertions, in the narrator's and the schoolmaster's voices, is an attempt to address, rather than obscure, the issue of mortality, and Dickens goes on to show us that, for her grandfather, nothing can ever fill the "weary void" which Nell leaves in this world.<sup>36</sup>

A more detached scrutiny of early death occurs in Gaskell's *North and South*, when the teenage victim, Bessy Higgins, and her sceptical father both discuss their feelings about it with the Hales. Bessy has led a wretched existence in a poverty-stricken, motherless family, first as a child labourer in the mills, then, when her lungs have been damaged by long hours of inhaling fluff, as a restless invalid; her last remaining sister is slatternly and her father drinks. She expresses her readiness to escape to another existence, which she pictures in terms that her father scoffs at. But what he calls her "Methodic fancies, and her visions of cities with goulden gates and precious stones" are not always enough to sustain her, while what simple faith he does have, is severely tested by the harsh conditions of his life. Yet Higgins apologizes for his scepticism: "But yo' know, she's lying dead at home; and I'm welly dazed wi' sorrow, and at times I hardly know what I'm saying," and Gaskell comes back to the same stand as Dickens, on religious faith as "the one sole comfort in such times."<sup>37</sup> But in this work there is no rhapsodizing to paper over the cracks in it.

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That Christian acquiescence to early death was the common, if difficult, goal, is amply attested to in Augustus Hare's collection of *Epitaphs for Country Churchyards*, published in 1856. Anonymous verses such as this could be read on many a country tombstone:

Weep not, dear mother, weep not, I am blest,  
And I must leave heaven did I return to thee;  
For I am where the weary are at rest,  
The wicked cease from troubling. *Come to me.*

Or:

Here innocence and beauty lies, whose breath  
Was snatch'd by early, not untimely death;  
Hence was she snatch'd, just as she did begin  
Sorrow to know,—before she knew to sin.  
Death, that can sin and sorrow thus prevent,  
Is the next blessing to a life well spent.<sup>38</sup>

A more strained assent informs the brief reference to the Lord's Prayer on Milly Barton's tombstone in George Eliot's "Amos Barton": "Thy will be done."<sup>39</sup> Milly has been buried with her new baby in her arms, and leaves a husband and six surviving children. The nineteenth-century tomb of the Walton family at All Saints Parish Church, Kingston—

upon-Thames, records, amongst other deaths, those of a young wife and her five-week-old infant, and expresses the further implication of this reference: "Thy will be done O Lord not mine."

Another of Hare's epitaphs expands the frequently appended exhortation to the living.

Can aught be more than this?

Yes, Christian, yes!

It is *much more* to live,

And a long life to the 'good fight' to give. . .<sup>40</sup>

These words of encouragement also carry their implication. Read one way, they too hide real bitterness: early death represents a loss of opportunity. Acceptance was not invariably achieved, and George Eliot was not the only one to suggest this. Nell's grandfather, and William's mother in *East Lynne*, soon follow their little angels to the grave. Many felt that in certain cases, acceptance was not even in order—especially not when the death could be laid at society's door.

The poor had more chance of misery in adult life. The novelists realized that young people like Gaskell's Bessy or Dickens's Jenny Wren in *Our Mutual Friend*, might actually wish themselves well out of it: "Have pity on me. Take me up and make me light!" cries the latter to the angels she sees during her "chilled, anxious, ragged" and suffering childhood.<sup>41</sup> Even reformers such as Annie Macpherson, the revivalist and social worker who helped Dr Barnardo from the sixties onwards, might sometimes feel that early death could be a special mercy for them, considering the imminent temptations of alcohol and other vices. Of course this itself was a severe indictment of society. But Charles Kingsley, on behalf of the Ladies' Sanitary Association, spoke against this point of view:

I would rather have the living child, and let it take its chance, than  
let it return to God—wasted. O! it is a distressing thing to see  
children die.<sup>42</sup>

The child must be preserved for the struggles of life, he says: guarded against evil, yes, but not by sending the soul back precipitately. Dickens, who sees to it that Jenny Wren is cured of morbid tendencies, was foremost among those who begged "men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts"<sup>43</sup> to look unnecessary death in the face. He wanted them to see it for what it was: the Evangelical politician, Henry Drummond, talking specifically of working children's premature deaths, uncompromisingly and emphatically termed it "WHOLESALE MURDER!"<sup>44</sup>

Deaths of this kind are presented with unbridled indignation by the Victorian novelists. Pathos comes in, of course, in fact it is sharpened by the sufferer's victim status, and played upon in order to manipulate the reader's response. The child is not denied hopes of better things to come, either. The aim, however, is not "Comfort in Sorrow" (the heading for the chapter following Bessy's death in *North and South*). The author wants to criticise rather than console, to rub the public's averted nose in the stink of the back-alleys. Prevention is the end purpose. Such is preeminently the case with Jo, the poor crossing-sweeper in *Bleak House*, who has no family to weep for him anyway,

and whose case is treated as representative of all those from the squalid tenements of Tom-all-Alone's. These are the destitute, who live and die like bewildered, driven animals while the Chadbands and their likes are squabbling among themselves, and self-righteously blaming others for their condition. Jo's "whole material and immaterial life is wonderfully strange; his death, the strangest thing of all."<sup>46</sup> Readers are asked to contemplate this strangeness, born of social injustice, and act on their findings.

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Early death can be a handy trick of the literary trade. Some young characters die of what one contemporary satirist called "Don't-know-what-to-do-with-him-phobia."<sup>46</sup> In *Nicholas Nickleby*, for instance, Smike is in obvious danger once Ralph Nickleby has been brought to book; a brain-damaged teenager, his yearning for Kate Nickleby cannot possibly come to anything. Similarly, David Copperfield's 'child-wife,' Dora, nominates a more suitable bride for the hero before making her poignant but convenient exit. More commonly, early death serves to elevate a character already too good for this world, like Little Nell, or the saintly Edwin Russell in Dean Farrar's *Eric or, Little by Little*. Bereavement may be essential to the plot or theme: William is sacrificed to force the denouement of *East Lynne*, breaking and punishing his mother for her adultery by dying in her arms, not knowing who she is; less sensational is baby Leonora's death in Yonge's *The Daisy Chain*, partly engineered to recall her mother Flora to what Yonge considers to be her proper sphere—the nursery.

Early death is rarely *just* a device in the Victorian novels, though. Far from unsympathetic to the individual mother's predicament, both Mrs Wood and Charlotte Yonge are nevertheless addressing a social issue. In Yonge's case, the purpose is very specific. Leonora dies with symptoms of withdrawal after having been dosed with narcotic cordial by an ignorant nursemaid. It is a fact that many children did die in this way. In the Lincoln Registrars' Notes for the June quarter of 1846, the "marked disproportion" of recent deaths in infancy is thought to have been caused by "the extraordinary use of laudanum, Godfrey's Cordial, and other narcotics."<sup>47</sup> *Cassell's Household Guide* was still warning mothers not to use Godfrey's cordial in the 1870s, "one drop having been known to cause death."<sup>48</sup> The incident in *The Daisy Chain* is Yonge's contribution to the campaign to end such fatal accidents, just as Jo's death in *Bleak House* is Dickens's contribution to the campaign for the street arabs.

On the whole, the art of the Victorians (and not just that of the social novelists, and artists like Luke Fildes, who spent two years painting the needy and destitute for his "Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward") is deeply humanitarian. Where it softens and sentimentalizes, as Fildes softens the outline of his hapless queue, it generally does so to comfort, or to attract sympathy. Where it seems to exaggerate, it is often telling the unpalatable truth. But in Gaskell's dealings with Bessy Higgins, and in a few other works, notably Dickens's *Dombey and Son* and George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind*, we find something more than art which treats early death as either a social or a personal problem. The novelist in these cases is, as Milan Kundera puts it in *The Art of the Novel*, an explorer, pushing back the frontiers of human understanding—some-

times, to the very last minute of earthly consciousness.

Again, the Victorian novelists' effort seems to have been concentrated on children because of their vulnerability. Young people are the vehicles and often the target audience of their explorations.

Though Dickens uses Jo's simple, trusting repetition of the opening of the Lord's Prayer to great effect in *Bleak House*, conventionally religious sentiment often inhibits innovation. In *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, for instance, fifteen-year-old Arthur, recovering from the fever which has struck Rugby, tells his friend about his resentment and desolation at the prospect of death. Like Gaskell, Thomas Hughes imagines the child's natural fears, but the echoes of the Bible, Bunyan, and even Milton's sonnet on his blindness, convey them far less than convincingly than Bessy's broken phrases:

I got terribly impatient, and accused God of injustice, and strove to justify myself; and the harder I strove the deeper I sank. . . And I cried out, 'The living, the living shall praise Thee, O God; the dead cannot praise Thee. There is no work in the grave; in the night no man can work. But I can work. I can do great things. I *will* do great things. Why wilt thou slay me?' And so I struggled and plunged, deeper and deeper. . .<sup>49</sup>

Arthur may go deeper and deeper, but Hughes himself has been buoyed too high by the swell of his own rhetoric. He has lost sight of this child's experience in his eagerness to speak to many others.

No dying child could be more saintly than Charlotte Brontë's Helen Burns, or speak more confidently of her reception by God. But there is more inwardness here, a much greater sense of the dying child's own consciousness. Some of Helen's grounds for being resigned to die are negative: "I have only a father, and he is lately married, and will not miss me. . . I had not qualities or talents to make my way very well in the world."<sup>50</sup> Her younger friend Jane Eyre has no one to miss her, either, and has felt herself far inferior to her friend in store of knowledge, but whatever she says in passion or self-deprecation, we know very well she does not set her earthly self at naught. The clash between Jane's observation of her friend's suffering, and Helen's submissive martyrdom, is complemented by a clash between Jane's positive attitude to this life, and Helen's readiness to leave it. More impressive than the conventional words of faith uttered by the dying child during the pair's last whispered conversation, is the sense that she is letting her identity drift away, dissolve almost, while Jane is embarking on the struggle to establish hers. Charlotte Brontë enters into the experience of early death, feels the pull of selfless submission to it, but responds much more heartily to the challenges presented by this world. John Reed calls his cousin Jane 'Madam Mope,' but this is a misnomer; Jane recalls being taken from her dead friend's arms in the morning, cuts briskly through the confusion surrounding it, remembers Helen's grave in one sentence—and moves on to a new chapter in her life.

In Miss Scatcherd's class, Helen had sometimes been "listening to the visionary brook"<sup>51</sup> which runs near her home. The retreat from the quotidian is marked, in

*Dombey and Son*, by a whole series of allusions to the sea and the Thames. Far more subtle than Hughes, whose symbolic river does not even seem to flow, Dickens roots the archetypal and Biblical associations of water in the details of Paul's immediate surroundings, and makes Paul's recently awakened imagination their vehicle.

A few points can be added to Barbara Hardy's sensitive tracing of Paul's decline.<sup>52</sup> The water seems to draw Paul, coming around the wheels of his little carriage on the Brighton beach, and throwing up the weather-beaten old seaman, Glubb "who smelt like a weedy sea-beach when the tide is out,"<sup>53</sup> to be his companion; but he is not so much overwhelmed as enticed by it: hence his illusion, from his window at Dr Blimber's sea-front establishment, that the silvery sail of a moonlit boat is beckoning him like an arm. Child-like, he forgets this illusion in the excitement of glimpsing his sister, as she passes on the street beneath; she draws him back into life with her love. But with the telling change of scene, from beach to sea-view window, and finally to the wall of the little invalid's London bedroom, the enticement of the water continues. During the day, ripples of sunlight remind him of it; night terrors induced by thoughts of the black river hurrying through the city are inevitably soothed. At last he reports that the boat, which will reunite him with the mother he has never seen, is "out at sea, but gliding smoothly on."<sup>54</sup>

Further than even Paul's imagination can stretch, this pleasant water imagery mingles with the tangy salt-breeze atmosphere of the happier side of the novel, which will lift its clouds at last, and set another, sturdier Paul upon a shining beach with his repentant grandfather. The namesake strategy with which Dickens often boosts scriptural promises for his departed children is brilliantly reinforced here: the new Paul is the son of two characters, Florence and Walter, whose names are also associated, by their sounds, with the "mighty sea" of the the novel's concluding paragraph, and its promise of new life.

(A much heavier-handed, even grotesque, passing on of the baton occurs in *John Halifax, Gentleman*, when the daughter who dies on the very eve of her eleventh birthday embraces her new-born sister: their breaths mingle together and "a strange likeness"<sup>55</sup> grows between them.)

Paul's decline is not marked only by imagery, but also by the ebb and flow of his consciousness which accompanies it at the end. To look at some of Dickens's short pieces, such as "Lying Awake," published in *Household Words* a few years after this, is to realize that his attempt to express the links and lacunae between fleeting perceptions, some triggered by underlying mental preoccupations, some by external reality, is just as deliberate as Sterne's in *Tristram Shandy*, just as much an anticipation of later novelistic techniques. One of Paul's intermittent spells of dizziness occurs when he is wondering whether the old nurse Florence has just told him about is still alive. Losing his grip on reality, except for the one steadfast figure he never fails to recognize, "Floy, are we *all* dead, except you?" he asks his sister.

There was a hurry in the room, for an instant —longer, perhaps; but it seemed no more—then all was still again; and Florence, with her

face quite colourless, but smiling, held his head upon her arm. Her arm trembled very much. 'Show me that old nurse, Floy, if you please!'

We have only the child's own vague sensation of rushed movement and time-lapse to account for the interval between question and request. When Paul comes to himself, though, he is at once aware of his sister's expression and how her arm shakes as she supports him, and of his original desire to see this other "kind face" he so dimly remembers.<sup>56</sup> We are left to guess at the mixture of relief, and determination to comfort and reassure, which produces Florence's smile at this desperate juncture. Having been promised that Polly Richards will come, Paul at once closes his eyes and falls into a deep sleep.

The river provides George Eliot with a much more dynamic (and integral) expression of Maggie Tulliver's movement towards death in *The Mill on the Floss*, but the whole imaginative recreation of the experience of dying here, especially through such *omission* of detail, is deeply impressive. Beside this, William's pious speculation about the boats in a religious painting in *East Lynne* (quoted in my epigraph) is crudely superficial and manipulative; of course, it is Lady Isabel's moral turpitude, and current suffering for it, not the boy's own innocent faith and failing strength, which are Mrs Wood's primary concern.

An extraordinary blend of fundamental Christian tenets with current evolutionary thought, and fantasy, enables Charles Kingsley to conceive of the dissolution of the self in quite a different way from Dickens. Hiding his religious uncertainties with playfulness rather than portentousness, Kingsley ends up denying the seriousness of his purpose, but the first two chapters of *The Water Babies* contain a refreshingly unsentimental and positive treatment of child death, quite an achievement for one who found the reality of it so upsetting.

The pace is brisk, the narrator's sympathy does not preclude humour, and the approach to the great mystery is made, as it must be, through nature. Not through wintry solemn wastes or pastoral meadows, but through the kind of varied and uneven terrain where, as the author has an old cock-grouse maintain, the end of the world is always just around the corner.

A Rebelaisian hue and cry goes up when Tom, a ten-year-old chimney-sweep, is discovered in little Ellie's bedroom. This leads to a spirited barefoot run through the grounds of Harthover House, a scramble through the scratchy undergrowth of its woods, a sharp brush with the stone wall bounding the estate, a jog across the adjoining fell, and a scramble down Lewthwaite Crag to the stream. Kingsley evidently enjoys buffetting and surprising the city-bred boy with the flora and fauna, and changing features, of the countryside, almost all of which is seen from Tom's point of view. This is very much in the popular vein of current children's literature: the first of Mrs Gatty's five volumes of *Parables from Nature* was published in 1855, his own *Glaucus, or The Wonders of the Shore*, in the same year. But gradually even the naive readership which Kingsley addresses (his own youngest son and the "other good little boys" of the dedication) must realize that

this child is being literally driven to his death, first by his cruel master, Grimes, and Ellie's father, Sir John (*et al.*), and then by his own urgent need for the water which will quench his thirst, cool his feverish body and cleanse his sooty skin.

Increasingly giddy from banging his head on the wall, faint because of the hot mid-day sun on the exposed rocky moorland, famished as well as parched, and "b-e-a-t, beat," Tom bumps and slithers his way down, down, down, down. "I wish it was all over ; and so did he,"<sup>57</sup> says the narrator, echoing the cry torn from many a watcher by a pain-tossed sick-bed.

All the while, his failing power is appropriately (for a tale which will soon become a parable about redemption) expressed by his fancy that he hears church bells. At length he himself suspects the bells are in his own head, but even when this is confirmed—when he is told by the old dame in the Vendale schoolhouse that it is not Sunday—he tosses and turns restlessly in his sanctuary there, feeling that he must clean himself up before going to the service. He leaves the dame's hay-strewn outhouse (with its promising connotations of the nativity) and hurries off in a delirium :

"Ah," said Tom, "I must be quick and wash myself ; the bells are ringing quite loud now : and they will stop soon, and then the door will be shut, and I shall never be able to get in at all."<sup>58</sup>

The bells turn out to have been imaginary, while the river, which has had all the allure of a mirage, turns out to be real. Tom, ripping off his sooty rags, is soon inside it.

The only panic in the little sweep's last moments comes from that fear of rejection which is, Kingsley suggests, the lot of a child whose religious education has been totally neglected.

From the earthly point of view Tom's life ends here. Kingsley puts the facts clearly. A black 'thing' is recovered from the water, mourned over by a contrite Sir John and retinue, and buried in Vendale churchyard, where a tombstone is erected over it and regularly adorned with garlands of flowers by the schoolhouse dame until she grows too old to visit the grave. But by now, a lively inventiveness has already taken over ; these facts, says Kingsley, are all meaningless. The black 'thing,' Kingsley tells us, was only his "husk and shell" (sound Biblical teaching); it has been removed like the split and discarded skin of a caddis-worm, or may-fly larva (Kingsley's knowledge of the grub he used for fishing-bait). Tom, reduced by a process of "strange degradation"<sup>59</sup> or backwards evolution to precisely 3.87902 inches long, and endowed with a set of gills, is seen to have entered on a new phase of his existence as an amphibian in the purgatorial stream.

Both church bells and river were real enough on the symbolic, spiritual level : as the old dame had quickly realized, "God's guided the bairn, because he was innocent !"<sup>60</sup> and God in this fantasy is the Queen of the watery world in the first of her many incarnations, the Irishwoman who has watched him the whole way and preceded him into the river. This is why sentiment has been largely irrelevant, and why Kingsley can now poke fun at Sir John's wife, who cries for Tom—even though she wears a wig.

After all, then, early death is not such a terrible thing (Kingsley's speech about this

had been made in 1859; *The Water Babies* was started in Spring, 1862), for it offers children like Tom a second chance; in fact, a number of second chances. Kingsley still inveighs against the treatment of 'land-babies': who can forget Tom's encounter with the poor Tomtoddlies, all heads and no bodies, being crammed with facts until they turn into watery turnips (could Kingsley have had Paul Dombey in mind here?) ? But, among the lobsters, the salmon and the oysters, and under the continued guidance of the similarly amphibuous and many-faceted mother-figure, the spiritual journey that started in the Harthover estate can be completed.

But this is not, after all, *The Infant's Progress* liberally sugared with fantasy and a love of marine biology. Disconcertingly, Kingsley ends up restoring Tom, along with Ellie (who had later fallen in the very same river and been taken directly to heaven from her sick-bed), to *terra firma*. This rather pulls the rug out from under the first two chapters. Was the whole object of the exercise simply, as the child reader at the end assumes, to make Tom a fit companion for an angelic, upper-class girl? The author's denial lacks conviction.

Kingsley's problem was, perhaps, in envisaging heaven in any more meaningful terms than those already provided by Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby's maternal embraces, or those promised by more mature fondlings (we know the author imagined himself ascending to heaven in sexual transports with his wife Fanny).<sup>61</sup> He ends up committing children to "hard work and cold water"<sup>62</sup> as ways of dealing with that 'black thing'—the sinful body and the death it dies.

MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* was also written for children by an active churchman touched by current controversies. Yet this, the most courageous of the Victorian novelists' efforts to address what he ruefully called elsewhere "the apparently universal shrinking from annihilation,"<sup>63</sup> never descends to banality. It does not get behind the worn face on the pillow in the same way that Dickens does (though the young hero's fantastic excursions are also, we gradually realize, the wanderings of a sick child's mind); and it does not provide such novel and exuberant images of an after- (or rather, between-) life as Kingsley does. But it externalizes the hazy presentiments, hopes and fears of a dying child with haunting delicacy, and puts him through a series of adventures which make sense out of mortal suffering without either minimizing or escaping from it.

These adventures are instigated by another mysterious female force: the biting but seductive, and fundamentally benign, North Wind. This wind blows through the knot-hole in the flimsy wall of Diamond's hay-loft bedroom (the same hopeful association with the manger that Kingsley made, when Tom was approaching death), and appears to the coachman's son as a sublime, woman's face with flowing dark hair. We know that MacDonald had been cheated of maternal love, just as we now know that Kingsley's obsession with cleanliness was a symptom of his guilt about his strong sexual drives.<sup>64</sup> For both writers, the feminine principle has tremendous, disturbing, ageless allure, and a close connection with death. But instead of splitting it up into the gnarled, schoolmistressy Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid, the cosily cuddling Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby, and so forth, MacDonald keeps all its facets in the one powerful

apparition. The gain is in the richness of the figure itself, and also in the honesty and poignancy of what it communicates to the young.

Here is the child's first conversation with the strange presence which will eventually take him away from this world altogether. In tension with the utter simplicity of the dialogue are the warnings of duplicitous appearances; and the demands on Diamond's pluck tell us that this is another young hero who is not going to be passively refined by the progress of his illness; nor will he be allowed to recover in the end.

"Well, please, North Wind, you are so beautiful, I am quite ready to go with you."

"You must not be ready to go with everything beautiful all at once, Diamond."

"But what's beautiful can't be bad. You're not bad, North Wind?"

No; I'm not bad. But sometimes beautiful things grow bad by doing bad, and it takes some time for their badness to spoil their beauty. So little boys may be mistaken if they go after things because they are beautiful."

"Well, I will go with you because you are beautiful and good too."

Ah, but there's another thing, Diamond: what if I should look ugly without being bad—look ugly myself because I am making ugly things beautiful? What then?"

"I don't quite understand you, North Wind. You tell me what then."

"Well, I will tell you. If you see me with my face all black, don't be frightened. If you see me flapping wings like a bat's, as big as the whole sky, don't be frightened. If you hear me raging ten times worse than Mrs Bill, the blacksmith's wife—you must believe that I am doing my work. Nay, Diamond, if I change into a serpent or a tiger, you must not let go your hold on me, for my hand will never change in yours if you keep a good hold. If you keep a hold, you will know who I am all the time, even when you look at me and can't see me the least like the North Wind. I may look something awful. Do you understand?"

"Quite well," said little Diamond. "Come along, then," said North Wind, and disappeared behind the mountain of hay.

Diamond crept out of bed and followed her.<sup>65</sup>

From this point on, MacDonald explores the possibility of a trusting co-operation with an awesome but benevolent force. Between the bouts of illness which coincide with his excursions with the North Wind, Diamond is able to put to good use the lessons he learns from her—"To try to be brave is to be brave" and "All kindness is but justice."<sup>66</sup> He rescues a little street-sweeper and her crippled friend, and valiantly supports his family

when his father (now reduced to being a London cabbie) gets sick himself. In other words, like the North Wind, the delicate but game little boy becomes an instrument of God.

Writing for the young on this most frightening of subjects, MacDonald has trodden the line between candour and reassurance skilfully. For the 'older readers' whom he also addresses in this novel (and, one suspects, for himself—two years before its publication, he had lost a specially beloved son, who had never been strong), he offers a positive account of dying as an exhilarating process of learning, and death as an initiation into ultimately unguessable joys.

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*At the Back of the North Wind* was published in Puffin Classics as recently as 1984. Its continued popularity, like the immense success of C. S. Lewis's Narnia series, suggests that MacDonald's adult narrator in the novel was right in supposing some children to be "profound in metaphysics."<sup>67</sup> But though children themselves do not change, the attitude of adults towards children certainly changes, and it was changing now.

Child mortality was decreasing by the end of the century, as a result of improved working and living conditions, public health measures such as vaccination, and better medical treatment. For instance, the mean annual death rate (per million living) for male children between the ages of one and four had roughly halved, declining from over 36,000 in the period 1848–72, to just under 19,000 between 1901 and 1910; for older children, the change was more dramatic.<sup>68</sup> Concern with their premature decease began to seem morbid.

Two trends of thinking supported this view, the one Christian, and the other post-Darwinian. Kingsley and the writers associated with his muscular brand of Christianity celebrated the fighting spirit. Hughes's frail Arthur must be toughened up by Tom Brown, so that he becomes strong enough to survive the fever, to do the good work on this side of the river, alongside his great headmaster, Tom himself, and many of their fellows. Since this might well involve toiling in the colonial arena, Imperialist feeling played its part here. Kingsley (whose support of strong-arm tactics by the Governor of Jamaica eventually led to his estrangement from Hughes) firmly believed that the English race was superior to all others, and wanted "every child that is born into this great nation of England [to] be developed to the highest pitch to which we can develop him," in the hope that he would live to fight and either die or grow old in his country's service.<sup>69</sup>

For others, however, Christianity had lost its power either to inspire or to console. The traditional formulae for dealing with bereavement were being lost. What Trollope's hard-hearted Sir Hugh says to his distraught wife in *The Claverings*, when she murmurs her pious submission to God's will and hopes for their only son's reception into heaven, must have looked more like common sense than callousness to some readers:

"That's all very well in its way," said he, "but what's the special use of it now? I hate twaddle. If you have been living up to that kind of thing all your life, it may be very well; —that is as well at one



This cartoon, which appeared in *Punch* at the end of 1869, on what was to be Dickens's last Christmas Day, explodes the old sentimentality associated with his feeblers children. The caption reminds us of Paul Dombey's death in Chapter 16 of *Dombey and Son* (headed, "What the Waves were Always Saying"), and the setting sun recalls the sunlight that comes and goes during that episode. But the small girl here, who has been playing on the beach, is looking forward excitedly to seeing the sun fall into the sea with a huge splash!

time as another. But it won't give me back my boy."<sup>70</sup>

This novel was published in the late 60s. Nearly three decades later, when Jude's son 'Old Father Time' takes the lives of Sue and Jude's babies in *Jude the Obscure*, and then commits suicide himself, the doctor, "an advanced man," can offer "no consolation" to the shattered parent.<sup>71</sup> If this was the new way of treating child death, perhaps (as the reception of the novel also suggested), it was better not to deal with it at all. "Commonly," wrote W. D. Howells in *Harper's Weekly*, "a boy like the son of Jude . . . hardens himself against his misery, fights for the standing denied him, and achieves it."<sup>72</sup>

Howells admired the unflinching unity of Hardy's tragic vision. But Frances Hodgson Burnett satisfies the now 'common' expectation in *The Secret Garden*, where the young hypochondriac Colin is pushed and prodded and otherwise stimulated to forget all thoughts of invalidism and death. It is as if Linton Heathcliff had been given a good shaking. The effect is electric:

When new, beautiful thoughts began to push out the old, hideous

ones, life began to come back to him, his blood ran healthily through his veins, and strength poured into him like a flood.

In the penultimate chapter of this vastly popular children's book, having built himself up partly by his own efforts, and having acquired a range of noble ambitions, the (as so often) ten-year-old hero exclaims, "I'm well! I'm well! . . . I shall live for ever and ever and ever!"<sup>73</sup>

Not only were more children "well" now than ever before, but, thanks largely to Freud, child death was being replaced as a focus of interest by child sexuality. *Wuthering Heights*, *The Water Babies*, *Alice in Wonderland* and other well-known novels about or for children have long been happy hunting-grounds for psycholiterary critics, who find the repressed urges of their authors popping up in the adventures of young characters. Prurience is closer to the surface, and undoubtedly exists, for instance, in Diamond's encounter with naked boy-angels, who tumble into "a mound of struggling merriment" and then embrace him until his "heart was ready to melt within him from clear delight."<sup>74</sup> But the nearest the Victorians get to deliberate innuendo about burgeoning sexual maturity (outside George Reynolds and his like) is when the lascivious Quilp gloats over Little Nell:

"Such a fresh, blooming, modest little bud, neighbour," said Quilp, nursing his short leg, and making his eyes twinkle very much; "such a chubby, rosy, cosy, little Nell!"<sup>75</sup>

It is unlikely that Dickens really intended that "short leg" to mean anything, but the speech as a whole is suggestive enough.

Burnett's children are as innocent as their predecessors, but, despite the careful choice of pre-pubescent age, not quite so asexual: they constantly flush and gaze with rapt excitement at companions of the opposite sex, though they still kiss flowers rather than each other. Such coyness would last much longer in children's literature than it could in the mainstream. But adolescence was rapidly becoming a much more interesting phase for both for adults' and children's novelists alike. After the great children's classics dealing with pre-pubertal boys and girls would come the modern classics about the trials of growing up—most of the best of which, like Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding* and J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, are from the other side of the Atlantic.

U. C. Knoepfelmacher has posited a protracted and fruitful struggle between mature self-awareness and regressive, escapist drives in nineteenth-century children's literature, and Humphrey Carpenter as well as Peter Coveney have suggested that the latter emerged triumphant in the later nineteenth-century children's classics.<sup>76</sup> *Peter Pan*, at the turn of the century, has been most thoroughly savaged by Jacqueline Rose. It is certainly true that the writers of children's fantasies believed in keeping the child in us alive (as indeed did Dickens). MacDonald says as much in *The Princess and Curdie*: "The boy should enclose and keep, as his life, the old child at the heart of him, and never let it go. . . The child is not meant to die, but to be forever reborn."<sup>77</sup> But this was not necessarily a regressive desire. Unlike MacDonald's previous child hero, Diamond,

Curdie grows up to fulfil his potential, marry the princess and become the next king ; as for Colin in *The Secret Garden*, though he feels charged with youthful energy, he does not expect to live as a child forever, like Peter Pan. He already sees himself as an athlete, a lecturer, a scientist.

The call to grow up clearly (inevitably?) prevails in the end. Even Barrie came to realize that his best-loved work was not really about staying young in order to have fun—that was only his, like Peter Pan's, "greatest pretend." About a year and a half after Michael Llewelyn Davies, the most promising of his adopted sons, drowned himself, he wrote in his notebook

—It is as if long after writing 'Peter Pan' its true meaning came to me—Desperate attempt to grow up but can't.<sup>78</sup>

Barrie had discovered, what Dickens had realized long ago when drawing the character of Dora in *David Copperfield*, that prolonged childhood is no less tragic for the individual than a foreshortened life. The pull of the passively idyllic past, ultimately associable with the Freudian death-instinct, gives way in Dickens, as in Victorian literature in general, to a more positive response to the dynamic challenge of the unpredictable future.

Of course, children still die in novels, as they do in the world : in 1894, Mrs Ward has a pathetically bronchitic little boy expire in front of the philanthropic heroine in *Marcella*, very much in the style of the early Dickens ; soon after the publication of *Jude the Obscure*, Marie Corelli makes the eleven-year-old hero of *The Mighty Atom* commit suicide as well, to drive home the danger of bringing up children without any faith. But these cases stand out. Ward's best-known child character is Sandy in *David Grieve*, whose impish doings were taken from those of Ward's nephew, Julian Huxley ; Corelli's other hard-done-by child, the eponymous hero of *Boy*, survives almost despite himself and his author, to fight and die in the Transvaal. As a literary phenomenon, the child death-bed scene and its variations was largely over.

Such episodes had been exploited for effect, but they had also been a means of instructing, and of consoling the inconsolable with the companionship of shared tears. As George Eliot says at the end of "Amos Barton," "No outward solace could counteract the bitterness of this inward woe. But outward solace came."<sup>79</sup> It had impressed on the Victorian public, as apparently nothing else could, their common responsibility for the sufferings of poor children : the cruelty which brings Tom to the water's edge in *The Water Babies* pricked the general conscience so painfully that the Chimney Sweepers' Regulation Act, which prohibited the employment of children for this purpose, went through within the year (though three Chimney Sweeps' Bills introduced into Parliament in the previous decade had all been defeated, despite the presentation of irrefutable evidence of the barbarism involved). More important for present day readers are the literary skills, sympathetic imagination and challenging spirit with which a number of the Victorian novelists approached this disturbing subject. But by the end of the era, it had lost its fascination for both writers and readers alike.

## Notes

1. George Meredith, *The Adventures of Harry Richmond* (1871; London, 1924), 185.
2. Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (Harmondsworth, 1979), 37.
3. *Agnes Grey* (1847), Everyman one vol. ed., *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Agnes Grey* (London, 1914), 528, 537.
4. e. g., see Linda A. Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relationships from 1500-1900* (Cambridge, 1983), 202.
5. *Agnes Grey*, 537, 548.
6. See Oliphant's *Autobiography and Letters*, ed. Mrs Harry Coghill (Leicester, 1974), 12.
7. *My Diary: The Early Years of My Daughter Marianne* (London [privately printed, British Library Tab. 578 a. 65], 1923), 13.
8. Census of Great Britain in 1851 (British Library 1303. m. 11.), 32.
9. Report on Enquiry into the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain (London, H. M. Stationery Office, 1842), 242.
10. *Vital Statistics: A Memorial Volume of Selections from the Reports and Writing of William Farr*, ed. Noel A. Humphrey (London, Offices of the Sanitary Institute, 1885), 190.
11. See David Grylls, *Guardians and Angels: Parents and Children in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (London, 1978), 41-2.
12. *The Uncommercial Traveller and Reprinted Pieces* (London, 1958), 430.
13. John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* (1872-4; London, 1927), 1: 123.
14. *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Pilgrim Ed. (Oxford, 1988), 6: 355-6.
15. *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (New Haven, 1954-78), 5: 33-4, 60.
16. Alexander Welsh, *The City of Dickens* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), 212.
17. *Mary Barton* (1848; London, 1911), 366.
18. Registrar General's Quarterly Tables of Mortality in England and Wales, 1842-8 (British Library, B. S. 34/9).
19. *Michael Armstrong, The Factory Boy* (London, 1840), 32.
20. Census of Great Britain 1851, 33.
20. Census of Great Britain in 1851, 33.
21. *Joseph Andrews* (1742; London, paperback ed., 1962), 249.
22. *Dickens* (London, 1990), 321.
23. *The Infant's Grave* (London, 1833), 74, 75.
24. *The Infant's Grave*, 72.
25. *A London Girl of the 1880s* (Oxford, paperback ed., 1978), 171.
26. *A Christmas Greeting to My English Friends* (London, 1847), 43, 47.
27. *The Complete Fairy Tales and Stories*, trans. Erik Christian Haugaard (London, 1974), 1084.
28. *Pilgrim Letters*, 6: 356.
29. *Mary Barton*, 70.
30. *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856; London, 1961), 292.
31. Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), ed. George Woodcock (Harmondsworth, 1985), 240.
32. Josephine Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*, ed. George W. and Lucy A. Johnson (London, 1909), 52.
33. *A Collection of Tales, Essays and Narratives, Especially Designed for Girls* (London, 1860), 188.
34. Rose, however, is particularly concerned with the "sexual and political mystification of the child" (London, 1984), 11.

35. *Forms of Feeling in Victorian Fiction* (London, 1985), 66. I owe a special debt to Hardy's analyses of Little Nell's and Paul Dombey's deaths.
36. *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–41), ed. Angus Easson (Harmondsworth, 1977), 660.
37. *North and South* (London, 1963), 85, 219.
38. *Epitaphs for Country Churchyards* (Oxford, 1856), 15.
39. *Scenes of Clerical Life* (Harmondsworth, 1973), 114.
40. Quoted by Hare, 62.
41. *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–5), ed. Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth, 1971), 290.
42. *Sanitary and Social Essays* (London, new ed. 1889), 262–3.
43. *Bleak House* (1852–3), ed. Norman Page (Harmondsworth, 1971), 705.
44. *A Letter to the Working Classes in Trades and Manufactures* (London, 1859), 24.
45. *Bleak House*, 274.
46. "Inquest on the Late Master Paul Dombey," *The Man in the Moon*, March 1947, rptd. in *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Philip Collins (London, 1971), 222.
47. Registrar General's Quarterly Tables.
48. *Being a Complete Encyclopaedia of Domestic and Social Economy, and Forming a Guide to Every Department of Practical Life* (London, 1873, 74 [British Library 7943. i. 33]), 1: 10.
49. Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857; London, 1908), 281.
50. *Jane Eyre* (1847), ed. Q. D. Leavis (Harmondsworth, 1966), 113.
51. *Ibid*, 89.
52. See *Forms of Feeling in Victorian Fiction*, 68–73.
53. *Dombey and Son* (1844–6), ed. Peter Fairclough (Harmondsworth, 1970), 170.
54. *Ibid*, 297.
55. *John Halifax, Gentleman*, 288.
57. *The Water Babies* (1863), Everyman one vol. ed. of *The Water Babies and Glaucus* (London, 1908), 31, 30.
58. *Ibid*, 35.
59. *Ibid*, 47, 46.
60. *Ibid*, 33.
61. See Kingsley's sketch, "Charles and Fanny ascend to heaven together," in Susan Chitty, *The Beast and the Monk: A Life of Charles Kingsley* (New York, 1975), following p. 116.
62. *The Water-Babies*, 205.
63. *Wilfred Cumbermede* (1871; Chicago, n. d.), Ch. 58, 412.
64. See Chitty, 220–21, and William Raeper's opening chapter, *George MacDonald* (Tring, 1987).
65. *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871; Harmondsworth, 1984), 16–17.
66. *Ibid*, 70.
67. *Ibid*, 330.
68. See Tables 4A and 5A, W. P. D. Logan, "Mortality in England and Wales from 1848–1947," *Population Studies* IV, 2: 132–178.
69. *Sanitary and Social Essays*, 259.
70. *The Claverings* (1867; London, 1924), 209.
71. *Jude the Obscure* (1895; London, 1974), 287.
72. Quoted in R. G. Cox, ed. *Thomas Hardy, The Critical Heritage*, (London, 1970), 255.
73. *The Secret Garden* (1911), Octopus one vol. ed. of *The Secret Garden, A Little Princess, Little Lord Fauntleroy* (London, 1978), 225, 217.
74. *At the Back of the North Wind*. 207.
75. *The Old Curiosity Shop*, 125.

76. See U. C. Knoepfelmacher, "The Balancing of Child and Adult: An Approach to Victorian Fantasies for Children," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 37, No. 4; 497-530; Humphrey Carpenter, *Secret Gardens: A Study of the Golden Age of Children's Literature* (London, 1987); Peter Coveney, *Poor Monkey*, rptd as *The Image of Childhood: The Individual and Society: A Study of the Theme in English Literature* (Harmondsworth, 1967).
77. *The Princess and Curdie* (1882; Harmondsworth, 1966), 18.
78. Quoted in Andrew Birkin, *J. M. Barrie and the Lost Boys* (London, 1979), 297.
79. "Amos Barton," see n. 39 above, 111.

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