

NEW DIRECTIONS IN RELIGION AND LITERATURE



Forgiveness in Victorian Literature

Grammar, Narrative, and Community

RICHARD HUGHES GIBSON

B L O O M S B U R Y

Forgiveness in Victorian Literature

NEW DIRECTIONS IN RELIGION AND LITERATURE

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*For Alison,
Partner in all*

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Preface

Reflecting on the surge of interest in forgiveness in recent history, many contemporary theorists have suggested that we have entered—or are on the threshold of—an “age of forgiveness.”¹ In the preface to a recent edited volume on ancient notions of forgiveness, the philosopher Charles Griswold makes the following observation about our times:

Talk about forgiveness has reached astonishing proportions in the contemporary world. Forgiveness is said to do it all: it is the cure for wrongs both personal and political, the road to salvation, and the secret to mental and physical health. [...] Forgiveness and related notions [such as apology, mercy, and reconciliation] are now so thoroughly woven into the fabric of culture that it is hard to imagine a moral world without them. (xi)

Political events (as Griswold then notes) have served as one catalyst for this chatter, particularly the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission through its demonstration that forgiveness could contribute to civic-healing and the project of state-building. But the forgiveness phenomenon is much broader, its impact evident in a host of academic disciplines and areas of life. This process has been widely chronicled (and often promoted) by academicians, including, of course, Griswold. Many commentators imply, if not directly state, that something unprecedented has taken place, whether in culture broadly or academe more narrowly. The psychologist Robert Enright and the philosopher Joanna North, to cite an extreme case, preface their edited collection *Exploring Forgiveness* (1998) with the claim that “explorations of forgiveness have been scarce for almost sixteen hundred years” (4). Between “St. Augustine’s writings in the fifth century and 1970,” the editors were able to find only 110 books or articles on “interpersonal forgiveness—that is people forgiving other people” (4).

The extensive work on the history of forgiveness produced in the last decade gives good reason to reject such claims. In fact, a number of periods might answer to the description of an “age of forgiveness.” Griswold’s collection noted above, for instance, stresses the prominence of forgiveness in ancient—not only Christian but also Judaic and Classical—ethical thinking. Its contributors examine works of philosophy, theology, biblical criticism, and drama. In her work on Shakespeare, the literary critic Sarah Beckwith makes the striking claim that “The Reformation was an argument about the very nature of forgiveness” (37). The Reformation had profound implications for interpersonal forgiveness, which Beckwith traces through examples from Shakespeare’s late romances. Karen Pagni, meanwhile, has called attention to forgiveness’s significance to the literature of Enlightenment France, the concept of forgiveness dogging philosophers, its practice remaining appealing, even vital, to writers such as Racine and Molière.² Scholars have also observed sustained attention to questions of forgiveness—human and divine—in medieval literature, philosophy, and theology.³

The Victorian period might have an even better claim than our own to the title “age of forgiveness.” Discussions of our contemporary “forgiveness-centricity” (if you will) often stress that forgiveness is at once the subject of specialist investigation and part of our everyday vocabulary. In establishing the “astonishing proportions” of contemporary forgiveness-talk, Griswold turns for examples, at least initially, not to academic publications but the popular press. There are “countless self-help and religious tracts [that] urge us to forgive our enemies unilaterally or instruct us how to do so” (ix). “One can hardly open the newspaper without reading about an apology being offered by, or demanded from, some organization, state, or prominent individual” (xi). These descriptions could be applied almost verbatim to Victorian print culture.

Past discussions of forgiveness’s role in Victorian literature among critics have tended to emphasize broad ethical consensus in the period and thereby give the impression that forgiveness was merely a conventional, even banal, concept within Victorian culture.⁴ While Victorian authors did generally agree that forgiveness represented a moral good, close examination of Victorian print culture reveals momentous disagreements among commentators about what

forgiveness means and how it works. In the ensuing chapters, I explore a few acres of the Victorian period's "geography of dilemmas," to use a phrase from the work of the philosopher Olivier Abel. Yet it is vital to observe at the outset that broad agreement regarding forgiveness's value is part of what makes disputes among Victorian authors about forgiveness's proper shape and meaning such urgent affairs.

I am arguing here that the Victorian period hosts an extensive and sophisticated debate about forgiveness, and that literature, particularly narrative literature, represents one of its major venues. In doing so, this project calls attention to rich Victorian reflections on forgiveness that have been largely overlooked in the theoretical work on forgiveness published in recent decades. The seminal investigations of figures such as Jacques Derrida, Paul Ricoeur, and Griswold, among others, have ignored the period. The closest theorists have come to the Victorians is the eighteenth-century divine Joseph Butler, who occupies the paradoxical position of being at once celebrated by modern proponents of forgiveness and of resentment. Perhaps the neglect of the Victorians should not surprise us, however, given the numerous nineteenth-century commentaries on forgiveness that have long since passed out of print and are only now easily accessible via digital channels. Yet it is also not insignificant that whereas the modern conversation has been disciplinarily diffuse, involving not only theologians and philosophers but also political scientists, psychologists, and classicists, among others, theology and biblical criticism were conspicuously central to disputation about forgiveness in the nineteenth century. In other words, forgiveness was fundamentally and inescapably a religious issue for the Victorians, and even those who advanced more heterodox views about forgiving tended to do so within arguments on theological or biblical topics.

It is also important to note at the beginning that while this book emphasizes the theological and religious issues that forgiveness poses for Victorian writers, it is not primarily a study of Victorian theological writing, though documents of this kind will be discussed throughout the study. Forgiveness and reconciliation are now held to have multiple dimensions, which, in turn, can be analyzed by members of various fields, many mentioned above. On the proper "field" of forgiveness, Paul Ricoeur observes:

It remains a question to know whether forgiveness—the act of forgiving—still belongs to the field of philosophy or even of theology as a speculative and critical enterprise, or rather to the realm of poetry or of wisdom in whatever sense of the word. Yet, even if it may find an appropriate place in those argumentative disciplines, it is at the price of appearing as a splintered topic, to the extent that it crosses the philosophical and theological field at several intersections. (“The Difficulty to Forgive” 6)

Ricoeur’s nomination of “poetry” as the “realm” to which forgiveness might belong may surprise readers, yet his conclusion springs from his belief that forgiveness relies on a higher order of feeling, speech, and imagination. He repeatedly argued in print that if forgiveness has a genre it would be the hymn, the only medium seemingly capable of registering forgiveness’s “height” and “extravagance” (*Memory, History, Forgetting* 467). The present study contends that in the Victorian period, imaginative literature represents one of forgiveness’s chief “realms.” My focus, however, is not on hymns (though the Victorians were prolific hymn-writers and wrote numerous hymns about forgiveness) but on narratives. Modern theologians have stressed that forgiveness is “timeful” in its dimensions and operations, arguing, in turn, that those who study the topic must also investigate the nature and uses of narrative. Forgiveness, Stanley Hauerwas writes in this vein, “requires display through temporal narration of lives. Insofar as novels provide such display, they help us imaginatively to capture the complex character of forgiveness” (52). Accordingly, this book offers readings of narratives, with a particular focus on the novel, by Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and Oscar Wilde.

If literature is considered here as a sphere for serious reflection on forgiveness, I also strive to show in this book that literary depictions of forgiveness engage with theological and philosophical questions. When it comes to forgiveness, the relation of theology and literature is something more like a Venn diagram, in which much overlaps, rather than separate spheres. I mean to honor Ricoeur’s exhortation to remember the perennial place of the fields of theology and philosophy when striking out in new disciplinary directions for the study of forgiveness. In this way, I seek to emulate the several

excellent recent studies of Victorian religion and literature that have revealed how Victorian artists responded to contemporary developments in theology and biblical criticism in the distinct terms afforded by their chosen creative genres.⁵

Notes

- 1 Such claims appear in the writings of the psychologist Everett Worthington, the theologian Desmond Tutu, and the philosopher Jacques Derrida, among others.
- 2 See Pagani's forthcoming book *Marginal Prophet Figures: Accounting for Forgiveness in the Age of Reason*.
- 3 The potential examples are innumerable, particularly given the ongoing scholarly interest in the sacrament of penance. For two theorized examples, see Jerry Root's *Space to Speke: The Confessional Subject in Medieval Literature* (1997) and the edited collection *Levinas and Medieval Literature* (2009), which includes discussion on rabbinic literature.
- 4 For examples, see note 2 of Chapter 1.
- 5 For broad studies, see, for example, Mark Knight and Emma Mason's *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction* and the section on the nineteenth century in *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*. The last decade has seen several recent superb monographs published in the area, including Michael Wheeler's *St John and the Victorians* and Stephen Prickett's *Origins of Narrative: The Romantic Appropriation of the Bible*, two texts that move easily between theology, biblical criticism, and literature.

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1

Introduction: Grammar, Narrative, and Community

*We could recount the history of literature as the
history of the representation of forgiveness.*

OLIVIER ABEL, "TABLES DU PARDON"¹

Victorian England, this book argues, would deserve a lengthy chapter in Abel's imagined history. It is difficult, in fact, to overstate the incidence with which the language of forgiveness appeared in the writing of the period. Novels, autobiographies, dramas, broadsheets, sermons, legal, philosophical, and theological tomes: forgiveness is an important topic in all of these genres. It is also a prominent theme in children's literature and in texts used to teach reading, particularly Sunday school primers (a major vehicle for literacy in the period). An indication of the popularity of the theme appears in the publisher Ward, Lock, and Tyler's decision to publish a book that consisted entirely of *Forty Stories about Forgiveness*. For adults, meanwhile, there was *Forgiveness, A Novel* (1860) and *Past Forgiveness? A Novel* (1889). Interest in the issue is pervasive in the period's literature: there were accounts of forgiving targeted at readers highbrow and low, adult and child.

Victorian newspapers and journals also testify to the high demand for forgiveness. Didactic poems and stories, some bearing such

forthright titles as “Forgive and Forget,” were prevalent in the popular press. A poem titled “Forgive!” that was first printed in Dickens’s journal *Household Words* in 1851, for example, later appeared in a number of local newspapers as well as the anthology *Songs of Love and Brotherhood* (1864). Newspaper reports on crime and court proceedings also often featured highly sentimental accounts of repentance and reconciliation. Repentance and forgiveness were also common themes of the publications of The Religious Tract Society (among others of its kind), which reached the height of its production—not just of tracts but also books and periodicals—in the mid-Victorian period. The advent of new databases and means of searching Victorian texts has only served to reinforce earlier scholarly claims about the prevalence of forgiveness in Victorian print culture.²

These were church-going times, furthermore, and forgiveness represented a familiar theme in religious culture across the denominations. Instruction on forgiving issued from the pulpits of the Broad Churchman F. D. Maurice, the Baptist Charles Spurgeon, the Catholic John Henry Newman, and the Unitarian James Martineau, to name a few voices among countless others who weighed in. Forgiveness was also a favorite subject of Victorian hymnists and the writers of devotional books. It was a vital matter for theology across the period. Scholars have observed that in the second half of the nineteenth century the “centre of gravity” of British theology shifted from “*atonement* to the *incarnation*, from transcendence to immanence” (Wright 149). In the mid-century Atonement controversies, divines debated the mechanism by which divine forgiveness reaches its human recipients. Later Incarnational theologies commended Christ-like forgiveness and compassion as vehicles for social change. Forgiveness thus represents a point of contact between the disparate camps and movements of the period. Putting all of these observations together, we might say that forgiveness was thoroughly woven into the fabric of Victorian culture.

But if forgiveness was a widely acknowledged ethical ideal as we have seen, many at the time believed that it was widely misunderstood (and, in turn, offered their corrections from the pulpit or in the press). Others believed that, despite all the bluster

about it, forgiveness was a rare thing in practice. A number of learned observers noted—and worried over—shifting usages of “forgiveness” and related words like “repentance” and “mercy,” recognizing behind these usages distinct assumptions about matters like sin, society, and grace.³ To read across many of the genres mentioned above—such as sermons, books of biblical criticism, philosophical works—is to be confronted not only by calls to forgive and be forgiven but also campaigns to sift the *true* meaning of forgiveness from the errors then circulating. Must, Victorian commentators asked, one always forgive? Or should forgiveness only follow heartfelt repentance? Is human forgiveness the same thing as divine? Forgiveness should thus be recognized as a conceptual and practical problem for the Victorians, not just a common value; indeed, it seems that so many parties weighed in on the issue exactly because of forgiveness’s concomitant contested meaning and broad appeal.

The present study examines how literary texts, specifically narrative ones, both reflect and contribute to the period’s highly charged debates about forgiveness. The works of the five authors gathered here—Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and Oscar Wilde—offer a range of assessments of what it means to forgive, when forgiveness does and doesn’t apply, and what changes (or doesn’t change) as a result. Sometimes voices within their texts are themselves divided on these questions. It would be easy to gloss over this period of literary history, as some previous criticism has done, and ascribe to it a narrative in which forgiveness, once a prominent feature of literature, rapidly declines in importance in the 1890s.⁴ But this view whitewashes the debates about forgiveness already begun early in the period and overlooks the concern for forgiveness that remains at the century’s end. I show that authors across the Victorian period wrestle with similar issues pertaining to forgiveness’s meaning and practice, such as whether and to what degree forgiveness ameliorates or even nullifies the consequences of wrongdoing.

Modern commentators have repeatedly observed that forgiveness is “multifaceted” or has several “aspects” or “dimensions.”⁵ It has been discussed, for example, as an internal event, involving a transformation of feeling, and a “performative” one, requiring communication