

## MANUFACTURING ACCIDENT: INDUSTRIALISM AND THE WORKER'S BODY IN EARLY VICTORIAN FICTION

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I refer to the health of millions who spend their lives in manufactories. . . I ask if these millions enjoy that vigour of body which is ever a direct good, and without which all other advantages are comparatively worthless? (*The Effects of Arts, Trades, and Professions, and of civic states and habits of living, on health and longevity*, C. Turner Thackrah)

[Factory reformers] wrote in the newspapers, and circulated pamphlets - they petitioned Parliament - exhibited diseased and crippled objects in London - and made such an impression on the public mind, that their measures were carried in the House of Commons almost by acclamation, notwithstanding the testimony of facts of a directly contrary nature. (*Exposition of the Factory Question*)

THIS ARTICLE SEEKS to explore the significance of the injured working-class body in debates about the nature and meaning of industrial capitalism in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> It will argue that a growing awareness that the comforts of middle-class existence depended on processes that maimed working-class lives was profoundly unsettling to the bourgeois conscience as it threatened one of its most important narratives of legitimation. Finally, it will trace the emergence of the “accident” (as both concept and fictional trope) as a response to and resolution of this ideological crisis.

In order to understand why the recognition of this particular form of working-class suffering should have proved so problematic to the middle class, it is necessary to appreciate the important role played by what Thomas Laqueur describes as the “humanitarian narrative” in legitimizing the bourgeois social order. In Laqueur’s account the rise of capitalism in eighteenth century Britain is accompanied by the rise of the humanitarian narrative which is not only attentive to the sufferings of ordinary people but which also seeks “to make apparent the causal chains that might connect the actions of its readers with the suffering of its subjects” (176–77). This particular narrative has two key features.

Firstly, it identifies the secularized and individuated body as the common bond between sufferers and relievers. Secondly, in its attention to both causality and human agency it represents “ameliorative action . . . as possible, effective, and therefore morally imperative” (177–78).

Clearly the emphasis on the knowability and traceability of causes combined with a commitment to ameliorative action encodes a belief in society’s capacity to control and thus mitigate (and ultimately perhaps even to remove) the causes of human distress. Thus the humanitarian narrative can clearly be identified as one of a cluster of ideologies affirming the universality of the interests of the various capitalist class fractions. In a more concrete way than either political economy or utilitarianism, the humanitarian narrative reassured the merchants, manufacturers, and professionals that they were indeed the agents of progress, that their individual interests and actions ineluctably contributed to the greater happiness of all. In particular the humanitarian narrative, like the felicific calculus, provided an “objective” measure (absence of pain) against which the progress of the new order (relative to the *ancien regime*) could be charted.

The continuing vitality of the humanitarian narrative in nineteenth-century Britain is attested to by C. Turner Thackrah’s *The Effects of Arts, Trades, and Professions, and of civic states and habits of living, on health and longevity* (1832). Described by Roy Porter as “The first great work on occupational diseases in English” (100 fn.13), this text opens with an exemplary statement of the humanitarian narrative’s linkage of an identifiable social ill with a duty to discover and institute a remedy:

Most persons, who reflect on the subject, will be inclined to admit that our employments are in a considerable degree injurious to health, but they believe, or profess to believe, that the evils cannot be counteracted . . . I reply, that in many of our occupations, the injurious agents might be immediately removed or diminished. Evils are suffered to exist, even where the means of correction are known and easily applied. Thoughtlessness or apathy is the only obstacle to success. But even where no adequate remedy immediately presents itself, observation and discussion will rarely fail to find one. (Thackrah 7–8)

It is clear from the full title of Thackrah’s work, which offers “*suggestions for the removal of many of the agents which produce disease, and shorten the duration of life,*” that he envisages the possibility of progressively diminishing the degree of occupational illness through the application of reason and science (7–8). Indeed, Thackrah points to the mining industry as an example of what can be achieved once a fatalistic acceptance of deaths and injuries has been abandoned (8). Once again, diminution of physical suffering is treated as a measure of social progress.

However, the optimistic assumptions which underpin Thackrah’s work sit rather uneasily with the findings of his study. For example, Thackrah devotes some 149 pages to cataloguing the occupational illnesses of the working class, whilst only 34 pages are required for all the other social classes combined. Moreover, Thackrah insists that employers have responsibilities for the health of the workforce, and at times betrays a degree of anxiety about the likelihood of their choosing increased health over increased profitability:

Masters however enlightened and humane, are seldom aware, never fully aware, of the injury to health and life which mills occasion. Acquainted far less with physiology, than with political

economy, their better feelings will be overcome by the opportunity of increasing profit, and they will reason themselves into the belief that the employment is by no means so unhealthy as some persons pretend, and that the children will be nothing the worse for two or three half-hours a day more labour, and a little less time for meals. (81–82)

This would seem to threaten the humanitarian narrative insofar as it suggests the intrinsically deleterious nature of capitalist production relations. At the very least it appears to question the bourgeoisie's self-characterization as the "heroes" of that narrative.

Elsewhere, Thackrah seeks to absolve the majority of employers by attributing their indifference (to the issue of occupational health) to a lack of awareness rather than a "want of humanity or kindness" (222). In addition, he argues that many workers are the authors of their own misfortunes, citing intemperance and greed as major causes of working class ill-health (45–50, 209–11). In other words poor physical health is read as a sign of immorality. This attribution of a direct causal link between the moral health of a workman and his physical health persisted throughout the century. In the 1890s, Thomas Arlidge, later Chief Factory Inspector, argued that the "reckless" element of the working class was attracted by the higher wages offered to those undertaking hazardous occupations (qtd. Figlio, "What is an Accident?" 200–01).

Yet Thackrah's specific concern with what he describes as the "superfluous mortality" occasioned by industrialization, points to one of the ironies attending the historical development of the humanitarian narrative (5–6). The clarity with which it formulates physical well-being as the ultimate measure of the moral worth of a social system, comes to ground a powerful critique of capitalism which emerges at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This critique focuses on the physical damage inflicted on the working class by industrialization and in debates around the 'factory question' itself in two ways; through a concentration on occupational illness, and on industrial injury. Nor was the factory system the only area of the economy to undergo such scrutiny. Elisabeth Cawthorn notes that in the early 1830s newspapers in general, and the *Times* in particular, carried a spate of industrial injury stories describing factory, mining, and railway-construction accidents (84–85, 160–61). Such stories lent support to the factory reformers' charge that the factory system, and its masters, "[coined] gold out of the blood and bones of the operatives" (J. R. Stephen, qtd. in Ward 183).

At first sight the factory accident would appear to provide a graphic and dramatically effective way of highlighting the literally injurious nature of the factory system, as the following extract from the *Memoir of Robert Blincoe* shows:

one evening . . . just as [Mary Richards] was taking off the weights, her apron was caught by the shaft. In an instant the poor girl was drawn by irresistible [sic] force and dashed on the floor . . . [Blincoe] saw her whirled round and round with the shaft - he heard the bones of her arms, legs, thighs, etc successively snap asunder, crushed, seemingly, to atoms, as the machinery whirled her round, and drew tighter and tighter her body within the works, her blood was scattered over the frame and streamed upon the floor, her head appeared dashed to pieces. (Brown 36)

Yet such "atrocious tales" are relatively rare in working-class writings of this period. Both David Vincent and John Burnett in their respective studies of nineteenth century work-

ing-class autobiographies have found few accounts of industrial accidents. Tales of sudden maiming and injury appear to have held a peculiar fascination for higher class readers. It is noticeable that of the two most famous narratives of injury, the *Blincoe Memoir* and William Dodd's *Narrative*, the first was effectively written by a middle-class radical journalist and the second was produced under the aegis of Lord Ashley.

While the Factory Movement was prepared to use injury tales as part of its campaign, it considered its most powerful symbol of the harm wreaked on working-class bodies to be that of the figure of the malnourished factory-child, deformed or exhausted as a result of unnatural labor, and subjected to intolerable punishments by cruel overseers. Even Frances Trollope's *Michael Armstrong* (1839/40), which draws heavily on the *Blincoe Memoir* and has often been accused of deliberate sensationalism, makes no use of the previously quoted accident scene and relies instead on scenes of employee exhaustion and overseer brutality to achieve its propagandist aims. Similar rhetorical strategies are pursued in poems such as J. C. Prince's "The Death of the Factory Child" (1841) and Caroline Norton's "A Voice from the factories" (1848).

Why then this focus on the figure of the factory-child? Catherine Gallagher argues that it represents an attempt by conservative writers to imagine the working class in ways which stressed the latter's dependency. She suggests that the "natural" limits of this dependency explains the shift in focus from working-class children to working-class women in the social protest fiction of the late 1840s and 1850s — when distressed needlewomen replace pauper apprentices as the ultimate symbol of capitalist degradation (127–32). This is an intriguing and suggestive argument, but it rests somewhat uneasily on an imputed ideological ineptness which does not tally with the propagandist effectiveness of the texts themselves. Rather, I would suggest we see the decision to use the figure of the working-class child as an authorial strategy offering a cogent response within existing ideological frameworks. This is the line taken by Sharon Winn and Lynn Alexander in the introduction to their anthology *The Slaughterhouse of Mammon*. Here they argue that the general strategy pursued by such writers was to provoke pity leading to moral indignation in the expectation that this would produce the public outcry necessary to remedy the perceived evil (xxiv). It is not difficult to see how the figure of the, frequently orphaned, working class child functions within such a strategy. Moreover, the figure of the child immediately disallows a wide range of *laissez-faire* arguments concerning the inviolability of contracts between independent agents.

In addition, the effectiveness of this strategy was enhanced by its appropriation and refiguring of rhetoric and images previously associated with the great moral crusade of the bourgeoisie — abolition. As Robert Gray observes:

References to slavery quickly became established in the language and iconography of ten-hours agitation. Banners displayed the overlooker's strap, or the billy roller. . .with slogans about 'white slavery', and 'the representation of a deformed man, inscribed — "Am I not a man and a brother?"' (39)

Moreover, Gray notes the "significant transformations involved in the reworking of these slogans and symbols" (39); the change from the muscular, strong, adult black slave to the deformed, enfeebled, white factory-child. In a manner which also recalls the abolitionist

campaign, Blincoe himself appeared at Factory Movement meetings where he displayed his deformities and scars to authenticate his narrative (Musson 198).<sup>2</sup>

It is also possible that the focus on the factory-child rather than the factory accident stems, on the working-class side at least, from a desire to represent injury as an everyday and not an exceptional aspect of factory life. From as early as 1807, radical critics had seen the systematic deformation of young bodies through factory work as offering the most damning indictment of industrialization. For example, Charles Whetstone's memoir, entitled *Truths* (1807), contains the following account of the Derby silk mills:

as the child was kept on its feet all day, from 6 o'clock in the morning till 6 o'clock in the evening, and its attention constantly awake by the active rod of the superintendent, the cruel and oppressive, and monotonous task, which could not be accelerated by exertion or address, soon deprived it of all vivacity and vigour. Its legs, unable to support the weight of the body so long together, and in the same position, became bent outwards from the ankles to the knees; its hips unequal and distorted; the body crooked and stooping; the shoulders narrow; the chest flat; and the whole form miserable, and emaciated. (92–93)

There is a sense in which the working-class body not only provides the central focus for these narratives but becomes the text which contains the narrative. As Gray observes, "In narratives like Blincoe's . . . the truth of the [factory] system is inscribed in the worker's body" (139). In similar fashion non-working-class opponents of the factory system saw in the injured working-class body a piece of irrefutable empirical evidence with which to deny or contest the authority of political economy. It is noticeable that this narrative is peculiarly vulnerable to a "paternalist-conservative" articulation (hence its attractiveness to writers such as Charlotte Tonna, Frances Trollope, and Caroline Norton) precisely because the working-class body itself remains morally neutral as an object of knowledge. Although "truth" is inscribed on the working-class body, this does not imbue it with moral agency. Rather, these are bodies which tell the truth because they are totally determined by external forces and are therefore incapable of the autonomous agency which is the hallmark of moral action. It is the response to the suffering body which is either moral or not. In this model, the recognition of working class suffering indicates the moral superiority of the observer over both the sufferers and those who inflict that suffering.

The responses of defenders of the factory system suggest the effectiveness of these tactics. Bourgeois sensitivity to the charge of causing physical suffering is clearly betrayed by the anonymous expositor whose objection to the exhibition of "diseased and crippled objects" prefaces this article. The initial, almost instinctive, response of the industrial bourgeoisie and its ideological defenders was to deny that harm occurred. This was a tactic adopted by Dr. Edward Holme of the Manchester Infirmary who, before a Parliamentary Commission in 1818, was not prepared to concede that 23 hours continuous labour was necessarily harmful (Ward 25). A more subtle response involved contesting the veracity of narratives such as Blincoe's or sounding a note of caution regarding their interpretation, or even both as in Joseph Birley's pamphlet which argues:

Every station of life has, more or less, its abuses — and workers in Cotton Factories are not exempt. Isolated cases, some true, some coloured, some entirely false, some of old date, are

no proof of general suffering . . . Tales of sorrow, got up for a Parliamentary Committee, cannot establish the justness of a sweeping accusation. (6)

While cruelty on the part of overseers could be condemned as an “abuse” of power, the charge of permanent injury arising out of the manufacturing process itself proved rather more intractable. Many industrialists found it almost impossible to concede that harm befell their employees as a direct consequence of their employment. Holland Hoole, for example, is unable to acknowledge anything more than “inconveniences connected with the [factory] system” and contends that the health of mill-workers is “at least, equal to that of any other class of the labouring poor” (9). He is joined in this rather unambitious claim by another “Lancashire Cotton Spinner” who argues that the health of his industry’s workforce is comparable with that to be found “in any other occupation, with the exception of those engaged in husbandry labour” (18). A significant loss of confidence is detectable in these arguments. Industrial capitalism is no longer championed as being better than other systems, it is merely no worse than its competitors.

Popular opinion was generally convinced that the factory system had at least some baleful consequences. The question it wanted answered concerned the extent and nature of the harm caused. In 1833 the Factory Commissioners were required by their Central Board to complete a “List and Description of the Workpeople” which included the following headings: “Maimed,” “Time, Place and Mode of Maiming,” “Distorted,” “Description or Degree of Distortion” (*Instructions* 34–35). Thus two years before the Select Committee on Mine Disasters, which Laqueur credits with creating “a new politics of narrative” regarding industrial injury (191), the agitation for factory reform had made occupational health a public issue.

Many historians have suggested that the 1830s and 1840s constituted a period of “organic crisis” for the industrial capitalist order. Economic crisis was compounded by ideological crisis as existing narratives of legitimation, amongst them the humanitarian narrative, were called into question. Maxine Berg, for example, argues that “the credibility of the middle-class social and economic programme was under attack from an increasingly vociferous Tory and radical critique” (297). The debate over the extent and nature of industrial injury and occupational illness exemplifies the total lack of congruence between the two accounts of industrial capitalism competing for dominance in this period. Firstly, there is the radical-bourgeois model which asserts in Panglossian mode that everything is ultimately for the best and that the industrial system is delivering improved and improving living standards. In opposition, critics of the factory system (both working-class and non-working-class) argued that these material advances are unevenly distributed to say the least and depend on economic arrangements which are positively harmful to the working class, both individually and collectively.

In order to increase ideological congruence a way had to be found of admitting to the problems of the industrial order without admitting that these were problems caused by that same order. The squaring of this ideological circle was achieved through the use of what might be described as strategies of “displacement.” These were developed by the statistical societies as a means of reconciling “a recognition of problems requiring intervention . . . with a defence of the factory system” (Gray 82). Berg draws attention to the separation of social and moral from economic problems effected by the statistical societies (296–97), whilst Gray highlights the shift of attention away from the factory and onto the

urban environment as the major cause of working-class ill-health (82). Both of these displacements can be found in *Kay's Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes* where they are augmented by a further displacement which identifies the moral shortcomings of the poor as a major cause of their own misery (5–6).

The intended effect of these displacements is to insulate economic practices from criticism whilst simultaneously interpellating the middle class (as “professional” and “moral” rather than economic agents) as the continuing bearers of progress and improvement. As a strategy it fosters an intriguing split in “bourgeois practical consciousness” wherein harmful aspects of the economic “system” can be recognized as long as they are acknowledged as a non-essential part of the same. James Kay offers a model formulation of this position, “The evils here unreservedly exposed, so far from being the necessary consequences of the manufacturing system, have a remote and accidental origin, and might, by *judicious management*, be entirely removed” (15). With all deference to Kay’s italics, the most important word here is “accidental.” For it is the twin notions of the “accident” and the “accidental” which helped reduce the ideological distance between the two accounts of industrial capitalism identified earlier, and in so doing contributed to those processes of ideological realignment which accompanied and assisted the onset of mid-Victorian stability.

An indication of the hegemonic efficacy of “accident” is given by considering its role in the reshaping of an area of English law which had profound consequences for industrial and class relations. Put simply the notion of “accident” makes possible the Employer’s Liability Act 1880 and the Workmen’s Compensation Act 1897. To appreciate the symbolic importance of these pieces of legislation it is necessary to trace the twin histories of employer liability and workers’ compensation in the nineteenth century. For the first half of the century these histories were, from the perspective of the working class, brutally simple. As *Winfield and Jolowicz on Tort* (1994) states:

The recorded history of employers’ liability does not start until 1837, and then it began by denying the worker a remedy. *Priestley v Fowler*, decided in that year, is generally regarded as the *fons et origo* of the doctrine of common employment, which held that the employer was not liable to his employee for injury caused by the negligence of another employee, but the case really went further than that. It came close to denying that an employer might be liable to his workmen on any grounds, and there can be no doubt that the judges of the nineteenth century viewed with alarm the possibility of widespread liability for industrial accidents. (Rogers 206)

This account is confirmed by Bartrip’s survey of the historical origins of workmen’s compensation. In *Workmen’s Compensation in Twentieth Century Britain* (1987), Bartrip notes that attempts to increase employer liability were fiercely resisted, and even when legislation was passed (such as the Factory Act 1844 which empowered the Home Secretary to start civil action on behalf of an injured workman), it was rarely if ever enforced (4–5). In addition, Bartrip observes that in the aftermath of *Priestley v Fowler* the courts developed three legal “fictions” (“common employment,” “contributory negligence,” and *volenti non fit injuria* i.e. “the principle that in accepting dangerous employment a workman willingly consented to the risks involved and implicitly renounced all claims to be compensated”) which increased the difficulty of demonstrating liability on the part of the

employer (6). It is clear that the highest reaches of the English legal system were unwilling to accept that employers bore any direct responsibility for the harm which befell working-class bodies in their employ.

Elsewhere in the legal system the picture was rather different. The popular, common-sense notion (advocated by the factory reformers) that a master owed a duty of care to his employees was being affirmed with particular force at coroners' inquests. This was achieved through the use of the archaic legal verdict of 'deodand' which allowed a jury to declare a death-causing instrument forfeit "with the money from its sale being used, in some cases, as compensation" (Bartrip 7). In *Job Accidents and the Law in England's Early Railway Age* (1997), Elisabeth Cawthorn argues that "in the 1830s and 40s, deodands enjoyed a resurgence among inquest juries . . . [who] employed [them] to indicate that they felt employers . . . had been negligent" (130).

Similarly whereas judges sought to minimize employer's liability, a number of coroners appear to have been equally intent on proving maximum employer responsibility. Foremost amongst these was Thomas Wakley, of whom Cawthorn comments that there were times when he "seemed to be the only party prepared to believe that the victim had not been responsible for his own fate" (106). Wakley was also editor-in-chief of the *Lancet*, and it is no coincidence that under his editorship it became "one of the very few organs of opinion which publicly advocated any system of compensation for the victims of occupational accidents" (Cawthorn 106). Many coroners and inquest juries appear to have shared Wakley's sympathies if the reaction of the higher legal authorities is anything to go by. The right to a verdict of deodand was removed in 1846 ostensibly as part of the sweeping process of law reform then underway. At least one legal historian, J. H. Baker, argues that such inquest decisions provided the impetus for legal reform in this area, while Roger Cooter comments that, "The extent of railway accidents and the amount of capital bound up with them came to render deodand 'irrational'" (112). Cawthorn is even more pointed in her assessment of the factors behind this reform:

The coroners' courts seem to have grown too vehement in their denunciation of employers' callousness, too prominent in the public's view, and too disparaging of the ability of lawyers to deal with the problem of occupational accidents. A combination of outraged lawyers, employers, and judges by the mid-1840s succeeded in severely limiting the power which coroners' courts had in dealing with employee deaths. (138)

However, despite appearances this should not be seen as a one-sided process involving the loss of "traditional" rights. The 1844 Factory Act established minimum industrial safety standards and included compensation clauses (Bartrip 4–5). More significantly, the second half of the nineteenth-century witnessed a veritable sea-change in judicial opinion concerning employer liability. From the mid-1850s a series of cases, most noticeably *Brydon v Stewart* (1855), *Tarrant v Webb* (1856), and *Roberts v Smith* (1857), established the right of a worker to recover damages as a result of an employer's negligence. Indeed, Rogers comments that by 1858 this right had been established as "something of a general principle" (207).

How then are we to account for these diametrically opposed phases of legal history? Why does the drive to diminish employer liability between 1837 and 1846 become a drive to establish the same, albeit in a very limited form, from the mid-1850s onwards? Clearly,



any full explanation of these changes would need to pay attention to the dialectic between those pressures internal to the legal system and those external, popular pressures which found a temporary means of articulation through the Factory Movement and coroners' courts. It is not my intention to attempt such a feat here. Instead, I want to examine the role which the notion of "accident" played in this process. My contention is that "accident" made possible a compromise formula which allowed industrial capitalism to accept responsibility for its casualties without having to admit its responsibility in producing those casualties.

In short, "accident" and its correlate "accidental" achieve this by confounding those questions of causality and intention which lay at the heart of the debate over working-class injury. To understand how this was achieved it is necessary to consider the semantic evolution of "accident" in the nineteenth century. By the start of the century, as both Figlio and Green observe, accident had shed its earlier sense of "event" or "incident" and come instead to signify a specific type of event (Green 35–51). More accurately, "accident" comes to signify a paradoxical kind of event, witness Figlio's definition:

The idea of an accident seems straightforward. It is an unforeseen event which is also expected . . . the moment of any one accident remains unknown, although it is often retrospectively "predictable." ("What is an Accident?" 180)

In addition, as Robert Campbell observes, this term presumes a very particular form of agency, "Accidents are caused but unexpected events (or the repercussions of events) involving human agency" (25–26). Yet this agency must also be unintentional or unmotivated, "the deliberately brought about is, by definition, non-accidental" (27). From the notion of unintentional it is but a small semantic step (or slip) to the notion of unwished for or undesired. The consequences of this slippage become apparent if we consider the difference between the following statements: "industrial injuries are an unforeseen aspect of factory production," and, "industrial injuries are an undesirable aspect of factory production." In the case of the latter, the "facts" of intention effectively negate those of causation. Alternatively, the notion of the "accident" permits the reverse of this. Figlio argues that "accident" may establish "a field of neutralized intention; [where] in place of actions come events which just happened" ("What is an Accident?" 198).

It is clear that that "accident" is a complex, multi-accented, over-determined figure. An indication of its complexity is suggested by Judith Green's observation that "accidents have become very specifically constructed as preventable events, which should not ever, in an ideal world, have happened" (51). The importance of this formulation, which paradoxically preserves the utopian aspirations of the humanitarian narrative at the same time as it recognizes its violation, cannot be overemphasized. Campbell notes that when either "accident" or "accidental" is used, claims are made "simultaneously, about agency, epistemology and value" (17). In addition, as I have argued in the preceding paragraph, the simultaneity of these claims also permits their transcoding, allowing (epistemic) questions of causation to be judged according to standards appropriate to questions of intention (agency). An important consequence of this is the suspension of questions of culpability as either irrelevant or inappropriate. This allows the bourgeoisie to admit the harmful consequences of industrialization (accidents are caused events) without conceding its own responsibility (accidents are undesired events).

In a manner which resembles the statistical societies' de-coupling of economic and social problems, "accident" effectively de-couples causation and intention. In doing this it legitimates the principle of "accountability without culpability" (Campbell 30), through the creation of an as-if situation, in which neither party is blamed, or held to be at fault, but one of the parties agrees to behave as if they were responsible. An informal acknowledgment of this principle can be seen in the phenomenon of "contracting out" which followed the Employer's Liability Act 1880, "whereby workers signed away their right to take advantage of the Act, normally in return for employers' contributions to accident funds" (Bartrip 8). The Workmen's Compensation Act 1897 can be seen as a formal ratification of the principle:

that an injury could occur which was nobody's responsibility, but which fell to the employer to compensate, because it arose 'out of and [in] the course of employment'. The injury — or the disease — became an accident. (Figlio, "What is an Accident" 182)<sup>3</sup>

The fiction of the "accident" makes it possible for the bourgeoisie to simultaneously acknowledge the fact of working-class injury, deny its own culpability, and yet assume responsibility for such events. I wish now to consider the ways in which notions of the "accident" are deployed in three mid-century novels; Charlotte Yonge's *Heartsease* (1854), Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854–55). These novels, all of which were published on the cusp of the judicial sea-change described earlier, illustrate the ways in which the "accident" figured in the "practical consciousness" of the period. In the following paragraphs I intend to trace three distinctly different inflections of this figure. These range from the conservative, and blatantly ideological, use of this trope in *Heartsease*, through the hostile attitude manifest in *Hard Times*, to its orthodox deployment in *North and South*.

One of the sub-plots of *Heartsease* concerns the awakening of a young aristocrat, Lord St. Erme, to a sense of his social duties. St. Erme inherits a recalcitrant and insubordinate workforce when he decides to assume full responsibility for a colliery which had previously been leased. Upon receiving reports that the lessee had compromised safety standards, he insists on inspecting the pit himself. In the course of this inspection a shaft collapses, trapping him and fourteen colliers. The situation appears hopeless but St. Erme inspires and supervises the efforts of the trapped miners to rescue themselves, while his sister, Lady Lucy, similarly encourages the rescue work occurring above ground. After five days, not only are all the men rescued but class reconciliation has also been effected, with Lord St. Erme firmly established as "King of [the colliers'] hearts!" (371)

On one level this text repeats the fantasy, shared by Disraeli and Kingsley, of a new generation of aristocrats conscious of, and anxious to fulfill, their social responsibilities. Moreover, it replays the fantasy wherein aristocratic leadership naturally calls forth an appropriate working-class response. Retelling the events St. Erme remarks,

I would not but have had it happen ! One seldom has such a chance of seeing the Englishman's gallant heart of obedient submission. Some were men who would not for worlds have touched their hats to me above ground; yet, as soon as I tried to take the lead, and make them think what could yet be done, they obeyed instantly, though I knew almost nothing compared to them, and while they worked like giants, I could hardly move. (405)

It is noticeable that this accident is used by Yonge to develop a situation in which the shared experience of bodily danger justifies and naturalizes, rather than obliterates, social hierarchy. The accident, therefore, functions dialectically as an image of both social disaster and social ideal.

In *Heartsease*, “accident” is intended to persuade the reader of a fundamental truth of the social order, as imagined by Yonge — namely the extent to which the maintenance of life literally depends on an active, aristocratic “intelligence.” It is St. Erme alone who remains calm when the roof-fall occurs and who encourages and directs the miners’ attempts to save themselves whilst simultaneously “supporting the head of the man who was hurt” (369). Indeed, St. Erme heroically maintains consciousness until the moment of rescue when the men “no longer depended on him for encouragement, [and] he sank” (370). The accident provides Yonge with a basis to imagine social reconciliation, harmony, mutuality and reciprocity which nonetheless respects and reinforces existing class boundaries. The physicality of the miners is balanced by St. Erme’s intellect. St. Erme’s support of the wounded collier is reciprocated by the miner who supports the unconscious St. Erme, “[St. Erme] was drawn up perfectly insensible, together with a great brawny-armed hewer, a vehement Chartist, and hitherto his great enemy, but who now held him in his arms like a baby, so tenderly and anxiously” (370). The maternal inflection given to this image of proletarian strength must have provided both relief and reassurance to a middle-class audience more used to monstrous images of working-class power. The extent to which the miners have now fully identified their own interests with those of their social superiors is evidenced by this particular collier’s refusal to return to his own home until he is certain that St. Erme is still alive. For his part, St. Erme considers that the physical suffering undergone as a result of the accident has facilitated the necessary empathy with the poor, “Well, I know I shall never turn indifferently away again when I hear, ‘We are starving’. . . A man feels little for what he has not experienced” (406).

This episode, a mining accident accompanied by frantic rescue activity above ground which is inspired by a near angelic woman, inevitably invites comparisons with *Hard Times*. Dickens also provides a maternalized image of proletarian strength, two of the rescuers emerge from the shaft “tenderly supporting between them . . . the figure of a poor, crushed, human creature” (289; bk.3, ch.6). There are, however, significant differences between *Hard Times* and *Heartsease*. The latter maintains an almost exclusive aristocratic focus which leads to the non-realization of both the mine and the rescue-work. *Hard Times* by contrast attends to the technical difficulties of the rescue effort. These differing focuses not only betray the very different political concerns of their respective authors but, remembering that the “accident” functions dialectically as an image of social disaster and of social ideal, provide two very different visions of the ideal society. *Heartsease* envisages an authoritarian paternalism in which benign aristocrats dictate orders which are instinctively obeyed by happily submissive workers. *Hard Times* offers a striking contrast with its vision of collective, unalienated, self-regulated labor within which work becomes a literally humanizing activity.

Another major difference between the two novels is that in *Hard Times* it is the retrieval of a broken working-class body which provides the narrative focus and it is around this same body that the waiting crowd assembles. Unlike *Heartsease*, it is obvious here that the rescued body is going to die rather than recover and, as a result, Stephen

Blackpool's speech is invested with that authority traditionally ascribed to last words. Stephen insists on three things: the reality of working-class sufferings, the need for a better understanding between the classes, and the ubiquity of "muddle." "Fro' first to last, a muddle!" (289; bk.3, ch.6), is how Stephen prefaces his catalogue of working-class suffering and death. "'See how we die an no need, one way an another — in a muddle — every day!'" (290; bk.3, ch.6). At first sight "muddle," with its suggestion of unnecessary yet unintended and non-malicious deaths, appears to perform similar ideological work to that of "accident." In particular, "muddle," like "accident" appears to suspend any question of culpability. However, both of the proffered instances of "muddle" resolve themselves, on a moment's reflection, into instances of neglected responsibility. Stephen refers to miners petitioning "'the lawmakers for Christ's sake not to let their work be murder to 'em,'" and describes Rachael's sister's fatal illness as a result "'o'sickly air has had'n no need to be'" (290; bk.3, ch.6). The use of "murder" in the first instance and the emphasis on preventability in the second foregrounds precisely those questions of culpability and responsibility which it is the task of "accident" to obscure.

Immediately after Stephen's first speech (which invokes "murder") the narrator comments: "He faintly said it, without any anger against any one. Merely as the truth" (290; bk.3, ch.6). A little while later when Stephen asks Gradgrind to vindicate his reputation, he prefaces his request with the words, "'I mak no charges'" (291; bk.3, ch.6). Dickens is careful not to make Stephen a figure who accuses his middle-class audience (both within and beyond the text) directly. However, the text invites the reader to recognize the truth beyond his analysis of "muddle." This process is doubled within the narrative as Stephen's injunction to Gradgrind requires the latter to discover the extent of his son's responsibility for the events which led up to Stephen's death. Although "muddle" recurs frequently in Stephen's dying oration, the subsequent narrative remains hostile to the notion of "accident." In particular, Dickens refuses to allow intention to negate the fact of causation and, again through the character of Gradgrind, insists on determining responsibility and allocating culpability for the witnessed events.

Dickens' hostility to the notion of "accident" extends beyond *Hard Times* and would appear to be conditioned by his awareness of the, in his view, mendacious uses to which it was being put. In 1855, as editor of *Household Words*, he commissioned and published a series of articles on industrial "accidents" as part of the ongoing campaign to extend the scope of factory legislation. The main thrust of these articles, made clear by titles such as "Fencing with Humanity" and "Deadly Shafts," was to insist that employers were responsible for preventable "accidents" which occurred in their workplaces. In the same year Dickens began publishing *Little Dorrit*, a novel which as John Carey observes was expressly designed "to show that blame could be attributed" (189), and whose original title — "Nobody's Fault" — explains Dickens' hostility to the use of "accident" to deny the facts, as he saw them, of human culpability and of our mutual responsibilities to one another.

Paradoxically then, Dickens both preserves and abandons the humanitarian narrative. He stresses the "causal chains" connecting sufferer and observer and insists on our moral duty to undertake ameliorative action. Yet he remains pessimistic about the possibility of ever expunging physical pain from human society. *Hard Times* suggests that working-class suffering is an essential and permanent feature of the social order, as Stephen observes of the mine, "'When it were in work, it killed wi'out need; when 'tis let alone it kills wi'out

need” (290; bk.3, ch.6). *Hard Times* recuperates the fact of physical suffering through its consecration, invoking Christian frames of reference at the end of the chapter. This represents an abandonment of the humanitarian narrative's emphasis on the secularized body in favor of a return to the much older tradition of Christian mercy which identifies Christ as the ultimate recipient of the merciful act performed (Laqueur 177).

Consistent with the higher rate of mortality which prevails in her earlier novels, Elizabeth Gaskell in *North and South* presents the reader with three significant: “accidental” working-class deaths: those of Bessy Higgins, Leonards, and John Boucher. Taken together these deaths constitute a textual sequence in the course of which notions of agency and responsibility concerning working-class injury are refined and redistributed. The following paragraphs will demonstrate the extent to which these redistributions depend on the (over-determined) flexibility of the notion of the “accident.”

The sequence begins with Bessy's death from byssinosis contracted as a direct consequence of her employment. Although Bessy is dying from an occupational illness which could be remedied by unilateral action on the part of her employer, the text is careful to apportion responsibility equally between employer and employee. The reader learns that there is a ventilation system which will carry away the cotton fluff thereby preventing it from filling operatives' lungs, but its installation is apparently opposed by workers who value cotton fluff as an appetite suppressor, “I've heerd tell o'men who didn't like working in places where there was a wheel, because they said as how it made 'em hungry, at after they'd been long used to swallowing fluff, to go without it” (146; ch.13). If anything, the suggestion is that Bessy is more of a victim of narrow-minded working-class attitudes than of her employers' cupidity.

The next death in the sequence occurs when Frederick Hale wrestles with and throws a railway porter named Leonards who dies within a few days of this fall. This raises the possibility that Frederick might be responsible, albeit inadvertently and therefore accidentally, for Leonards' death. Indeed, Watson, the police inspector charged with investigating the death, refers to “a pretty distinct chain of evidence, inculcating [Frederick]” (350; ch.35). If proven, this would leave Frederick in a position analogous to that of Tom in *Hard Times*, held responsible for the unforeseen consequences of his actions. However, *North and South* seeks to minimize, and ultimately dissolve, Frederick's responsibility. The reader is informed that Leonards' fall “was rendered fatal, the doctors say, by the process of some internal complaint, and the man's own habit of drinking” (343; ch.34). Mr. Thornton uses this medical evidence to close the case, (ab)using his powers as a magistrate to prevent an inquest and consequently the public exposure of Margaret and Frederick.

Although Thornton is able officially to close the case there is a sense in which the narrative as a whole is unable to exorcise the memory of Leonards. Indeed, the narrative of his death is given on five separate occasions within the novel: by the narrator (ch. 32), by Watson the police-inspector (ch. 34), again by him in chapter 35 where it is supplemented by Thornton's ruminations on the medical evidence; Thornton repeats his account in chapter 38, and finally Margaret offers her version of events to Mr. Bell in chapter 46. What is remarkable is the consistency of these repetitions — it is as if the text has decided on an “official” version of the events in which all the characters in spite of misgivings support each other's testimony. The hope is that if the tale is repeated often enough then it will finally convince us of its truth. Yet both of the retellings involving Thornton (which

is when the “official” version is established) are compromised by his wish to preserve Margaret’s reputation. As a result of this the circumstances surrounding Leonards’ death are always figured textually as a guilty secret shared by Margaret and Thornton. There is a sense in which the text seeks to assuage its guilty conscience regarding Leonards through its handling of the deaths of Mr. Hale and Mr. Bell. Mr. Hale’s death is sudden (although not unexpected) and Mr. Bell is contemptuous of the need for a coroner’s inquest, as if to reassure us that there really was nothing untoward or unusual in the earlier denial of one (432). Later, Mr. Bell himself dies suddenly, and this time there is no reference whatsoever to an inquest. The third instance of sudden death without inquest is intended, I think, to dispel any lingering unease on the part of the reader regarding the circumstances surrounding the first.

The convoluted process by means of which the text seeks to absolve Frederick of any responsibility for Leonards’ death is in marked contrast to the treatment of responsibility in the case of the final death in the sequence, that of John Boucher. Boucher’s reluctant support for the union and the strike becomes a desperate desire to end the strike as quickly as possible. In pursuit of this aim, Boucher leads the riot outside Thornton’s factory and then, fearing prosecution, goes into hiding. When he emerges from hiding he offers his services as a “knob-stick” (i.e., a strike-breaker) to another employer who publicly repudiates his offer. Realizing the hopelessness of his situation — unwanted by either union or employers — Boucher drowns himself. The discovery of Boucher’s body is preceded in the narrative by an exchange between Higgins and Margaret, in which the latter insists that Higgins is responsible for Boucher’s actions, ““You have made him what he is!”” (368; ch.36). Clearly, very different tests for determining responsibility apply in the cases involving Higgins and Frederick. Frederick’s immediate involvement in the events preceding Leonards’ death is ultimately revealed to have had no direct effect on that death, whilst Higgins’s heavily mediated involvement in the circumstances surrounding Boucher’s suicide renders him, according to both Margaret’s and the narrative’s logic, directly responsible for Boucher’s death.

Indeed, the narrative affirms the validity of Margaret’s charge providing a scene which with savage literalism lays the body of Boucher at Higgins’s door. In a powerfully realized, almost expressionistic episode, the narrative not only unfolds in slow motion but, to extend the filmic analogy, also in close-up, as a crowd assembles itself around Boucher’s body. This silent working-class body, narratable now only as a series of “disfigurements” — “glassy eyes . . . [face] swollen and discoloured . . . [skin] stained by the water” (368–69; ch.36) — confronts Higgins. Ultimately Higgins, by accepting responsibility for Boucher’s children, acknowledges his responsibility for Boucher’s death. In order to discharge these responsibilities Higgins must secure a reconciliation with Thornton. Thus, in a stunning recuperation of what had previously been an almost exclusively anti-capitalist trope, the irretrievably damaged working-class body not only accuses a fellow workman rather than a master, but also becomes a means of fostering class reconciliation rather than class antagonism.

The triad of working-class deaths in *North and South* collectively enacts an ideological move from the real to the ideal. The uncomfortable awareness of occupational disease is acknowledged but represented as the joint responsibility of capital and labor. The second death transforms this into a situation where the appearance of middle-class co-responsibility is ultimately exposed as a fallacious assessment based on an inadequate under-

standing of the facts of the case. The third death mirrors the second insofar as “expert” inquiry into the situation reveals previously hidden lines of causation, which this time inculpate rather than exculpate another character. This third death then represents the “ideal” working-class death — caused not by the bourgeoisie but the sole responsibility of the working-class (this strengthened by Higgins’ identification with the union), and an instrument of class reconciliation rather than class antagonism.

The deaths of Stephen and Leonards share an underlying narrative configuration. In both cases, the son and heir of a significant middle-class character is in some way charged with responsibility for the death of a working-class character. In both cases the death occurs as an indirect and unforeseen consequence of the son’s actions. Finally, in both cases the extent of the son’s culpability is established by an unofficial inquiry conducted by a paternal figure whose purpose is to reassure the reader that justice has not been infringed in any way.

It is not difficult to see this sequence of narrative events as registering and negotiating the profoundly unsettling insight that middle-class comforts depended on working-class suffering. Indeed, the narrative configuration outlined above offers a dramatic textual manifestation of this changed consciousness insofar as it inverts one of the generic features of the Condition novel, namely the moment of violence. In earlier Condition novels this “moment” consisted of a direct, violent assault by the working-class on middle-class persons and/or property such as the attack on Mowbray Castle in *Sybil*, the murder of Harry Carson in *Mary Barton*, and the riot in *Alton Locke*. However, in *Hard Times* and *North and South* the moment records violence perpetrated by the middle-class on the working-class whose legitimacy is only established retrospectively. The fact that legitimacy is conferred (or denied) retrospectively indicates the extent to which the significance of working-class injury can now be established only on a case by case basis.

In conclusion, the narrative importance of the injured, dying or dead worker in the later Condition novels testifies to the successful if uneasy recuperation of working-class injury within the practical consciousness of the middle class. The concepts of “accident” and “accidental” are crucial to this process of recuperation. “Accident” functions dialectically as an image of both social disaster and of a social ideal (benign authoritarian paternalism in *Heartsease*, unalienated, humanizing work in *Hard Times* and an essentially harmless bourgeois order in *North and South*). In its orthodox deployment, it is able to do this precisely because it confounds questions of intention and causation. The acknowledgment of social disaster is always undercut by the insistence that such events were unintended (in the sense of being both unforeseen and undesired). The disaster is important only insofar as it indicates (albeit negatively) the presence of the social ideal. Even in its heterodox deployment in *Hard Times*, “accident” still points to an ideal beyond itself. “Accident” preserves the humanitarian narrative by allowing the middle class to absolve itself from any direct responsibility for working-class injury. This is not, however, without cost ideologically, for the separation of intention and causation consolidates that split in “bourgeois practical consciousness” referred to earlier. This continues the dis-articulation of the economic from the social and moral which has significant implications for our understanding of the subsequent development of the ideological economy of mid-Victorian Britain.

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## NOTES

1. Earlier versions of this paper were given at the *London Nineteenth Century Seminar* (Birkbeck College) and the *Northern Victorian Studies Colloquium* (Trinity and All Saints College, Leeds). I should like to thank those who commented on/made suggestions concerning this paper. I am particularly indebted to Dr. Catherine Cundy whose critical acumen has greatly improved the rigor of both my argument and my prose.
2. I should like to thank Helen Groth for drawing my attention to this parallel.
3. Moreover Campbell argues that these legislative changes mark “a significant moment in the historical evolution of the ideology of law” (30). The principle of accountability without culpability is a radical departure from the governing principle of tort (that without fault, the loss must lie where it falls). Similarly, the assumption of a safe working environment as an implied condition of employment represents a shift from law as an arbitrator of disputes between individuals “to law as an agent of society, engineering and improving social conditions” (Campbell 30–31). Viewed from the perspective of the working-class movement, these changes illustrate the compound of material gain and ideological loss inherent in those reforms which stabilize capitalist society. The provision of compensation undoubtedly constitutes a clear material gain. In an essay entitled “How Does Illness Mediate Social Relations?,” Figlio observes that compensation costs employers money and sees workers paid without working. This means that, in some cases, there is a direct transfer of money from capital to labour (181). The ideological loss involved is that of abandoning the charge that capitalism (directly and necessarily) damages working-class bodies, accepting instead the fiction of the “accident.”

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