

Gone but Not Forgotten

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If memory's chief function is to keep us in contact with something or someone that would otherwise be gone from us, its most emotionally valuable application could be argued to be in respect of the dead. This could certainly be contended with regard to the Victorians, for whom the remembering of the dead seems, from a twenty-first-century viewpoint, to have been of immeasurable importance. It has been commonplace to speak of the Victorians' "cult of death," but this rather crude expression (Wood 103-14) appears to recognise the ubiquity of death in the average Victorian person's experience without appreciating its qualities. The nuances of recollection familiar to any reader of Victorian diaries, letters and autobiographies illustrate the centrality of the remembrance of the dead in the Victorian consciousness, while material manifestations of the Victorians' will to remember the dead – graveyards, monuments and statues – along with other hardly less evocative forms of the same impetus – poetry, song and other music – remain around us in all their insistence and detail.

This essay considers another form which also reflects this habit, Victorian painting, whose *embourgeoisement* and commodification in the middle of the century (say, between 1840 and 1860) combined to incline it to mirror the characteristic customs, values and perceptions of the growing urban middle class that was increasingly its mainstay.

Victorian painters were keenly aware of trends and tropes in their field, and those positioning themselves as painters of modern life, invested in topical subjects and concerns, and mainstream values. Genre compositions or "fancy pictures" often charged painting with the function of *aide-mémoire*, with pensive, musing or yearning figures and titles such as *Old Associations*, *Memories*, and *Reverie*. As one clear-eyed critic wrote in 1860:

The small class of picture-buyers who are at once wealthy and refined is being outnumbered by a host of newly rich. Of these a great number are able, active men, who have risen because they seize thoroughly the spirit of the day, and who have in them the sterling qualities that lie at the bottom of the English character. They are blind to the finer subtleties of genius, but buy with liberality according to their taste. Show them a mother praying over a child's cradle, or an old man reading the Bible to his grandchildren, and there is something in them answering to the scene with a sympathy that passes well enough for admiration of the picture as a work of art. Crude as it may be, they will buy it. They are right; they buy what they can feel. ("Fine Arts" 213)

This essay looks at a specific instance of the truth of that observation in respect of the deeply rooted relationship between memory and mortality central to the psyche of that gallery-going public.

In 1864, the painter Emily Mary Osborn (1828-1925) showed at the annual Royal Academy exhibition (and later that year at the annual Birmingham exhibition) a medium-to-large canvas entitled *For the Last Time* (1864) (see Figure 1). She had been producing since the beginning of the 1850s precisely the kind of fare that the up-to-date middle-class gallery-goer might be expected to like. Although she has been characterised in the twentieth century as a feminist, through her known connections with the Langham Place women's rights circle and recent interpretations of her best known work *Nameless and Friendless* (1857) (Harris and

Nochlin 228; Cherry 78ff), Osborn was not necessarily expressing her own views in either selection or treatment of any subject, nor pursuing a political agenda. Like the majority of genre painters of the time, she will have been producing pictures designed to please her target audience: this may have been progressive and liberal, but there is insufficient evidence on which a conclusion about this issue could be reached.



Figure 1: Emily Mary Osborn, *For the Last Time* (1864).
Photo: Sotheby's.

The irrevocable departure from this life of a beloved relative was already the regular stuff of popular fiction, and mid-century painting was more and more inclined to share its territory. Whether or not the gallery-goer of the early 1860s recalled Dickens's *Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) and *Bleak House* (1853), Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), or Thackeray's *The Newcomes* (1853-55), had been reading Mrs Henry Wood's huge success *East Lynne* (1861), or consumed the ripe fiction in the monthlies that had proliferated since 1860 in which the serial was kept going by many an opportune death, their own family life is statistically likely to have introduced them to the pains of death and bereavement. Death, dying and mourning were not unusual themes in contemporary painting, and seem to have been markedly more

frequent than marriage and weddings. The deathbeds of famous individuals, from Cleopatra to Oliver Cromwell, made frequent appearances at the painting exhibitions, while the death of a child or young person was a topical subject in art, boosted by H. P. Robinson's highly popular photographic composition *Fading Away* (1858).

Osborn resisted this established motif and fixed instead on those left to mourn: her emphasis is not on those who die but on those who survive and must continue living in the face of death. Her two sisters do not share the picture-space with any moribund character who would monopolise the viewer's sympathy, as in Thomas Brooks's *Resignation* (1863), where a young mother expects her child to die as she sits by its sickbed. Neither are they shown as part of a family of bereaved, as in Frank Holl's highly praised canvas of a few years later, *The Lord Gave and the Lord Hath Taken Away* (1868).

Though Holl's painting was very successful, winning him a scholarship from the Royal Academy Schools and being coveted by the Queen, its popularity may have had something to do with its derivation from Dinah Craik's 1851 novel *The Head of the Family*. The Biblical quotation which gave the work its title also lent it gravitas. Osborn, with no known literary prop, and giving no gloss on the picture for the exhibition catalogue (as she had on occasion for other exhibits and would do again in the future), instead offering her viewers a simple scene, easily read. She gave the work no narrative other than the implicit fact that someone close to these two young women had recently died, making the pair bear the full weight of attention and nearly all the burden of making meaning. Unlike Richard Redgrave (1804-88), who had established this kind of picture in the 1840s with *The Governess* (1844), previously titled *The Poor Teacher*, and *The Sempstress* (1844), she did not sow the composition with clues and details that the viewer could stitch together to make the fabric of a story explaining how the characters came to be in the situation that the viewer has before them; a dog, some flowers and a still interior do not add up to a narrative of Redgravean standing.

In paintings in which the protagonists were sisters, it was usual to contrast them, fair and dark, but Osborn has rejected the obvious or glib. In fact, of the bereaved, it was the widow or mother who was the most often treated by mid-century painters, so in this choice, too, Osborn was being novel, while exploiting the appeal of the familiar theme. Of course, there was one particular widow and mother who had brought the question of mourning to especial notice in the previous few years – if not in the exhibition-room, then in the pages of the press and the living-rooms of the nation. Queen Victoria's conduct since the death of her husband Albert in 1861 had made the figure of the grieving woman controversially resonant; her daughters had made relatively little impact as mourners (Casteras Ch. 8). It was in April 1864 that the *Times* carried Victoria's self-justifying letter explaining her prolonged refusal to fulfil her obligations to the nation ("The Court" 9) and in June – as Osborn's painting was on view in the exhibition in central London – that she made her first (fleeting) public appearance since her husband's death.

Osborn's painting was noticed in the usual quarters. The leading specialist publication at the time was the monthly *Art Journal*, run by Samuel Carter Hall and his wife Anna Maria, and, though it may have been characterised as the century proceeded as representing conservative taste, its endorsement gave valuable exposure to an artist like Osborn. It included a substantial paragraph on her exhibit in its review of that year's show:

A[nother] work which may be here mentioned as every way commendable for its sentiment and motive, not pointing, indeed, as the picture just mentioned, to the bright morning of life, but descending the deep valley of shadows, is Miss Osborn's *For the*

Last Time [555]. Two sisters sorrowing, hand in hand, are opening the door of the chamber where death keeps watch over all that was mortal and earthly of a parent gone to the Father of spirits. These orphans in their house and home, their heads bowed under grief's burden, bear in their hands flowers as a last offering. The pathos, it will be seen, is impressive, and that the more so, because no intrusion breaks in upon the silence and the solitude which the painter, with a sensitive heart to the demands of the situation, has studiously maintained. We incline to think, however, that the picture would have been none the worse for a little more attention to the execution, especially in the region of the head of at least one of the figures. ("The Royal Academy" 164)

An equally authoritative source of criticism on the Royal Academy's exhibition was the *Times*, whose review identified Osborn's work as exemplifying "our English ways of treating even the most pathetic domestic subject" ("The Royal Academy" 8). This was written in the light of comparisons between French and English painting provoked by the International Exhibition of 1862, which had fixed especially on genre pictures as an expression of national temperament – an idea which had arisen at the 1855 Paris Exposition and which continued to preoccupy the French, if not the English themselves (Thomas Ch. 4, Chesneau Ch. 6). The review went on to sum up the salient points for the critical viewer: "two orphan sisters taking flowers into the chamber of death, in which the artist relies for effect at least as much on the beauty of the two girls as on the expression of their faces or the sentiment of the situation" ("The Royal Academy" 8). *The Builder's* columnist also found it a "somewhat too pretty rendering of pathos," though allowing that it improved on Osborn's previous works ("Royal Academy" 391). The *Illustrated London News* reviewer, meanwhile, reflected other recent critical debates about the proper limits of good taste in the picturing of contemporary life, in addressing it as "a pathetic picture – perhaps too mournful in its interest, but painted certainly with more refinement than anything else she has previously exhibited" ("Fine Arts" 455).

The painting's colouring is of necessity sombre, with the image dominated by the blacks of the sisters' dresses against which their bright hair shines out, the red-gold tresses of the one on the left flowing down over her bodice, the golden head of the one on the right gleaming angelically. The head of the dog (of sympathetic hue, it could be said, as befits its symbolic connotations of fidelity) catches a light whose source is invisible, but which plays even more on the heads and faces of the young women – an emphasis which brought the criticism of inappropriate prettiness, and which shows, incidentally, that it was not only male artists who invested in the visual appeal of a pretty girl to draw viewers in. When the painting was engraved for the *Illustrated London News* a month after the exhibition's opening, the monochrome exposed the visual power of these two bright heads: emptied of colour, the black-and-white rendering gives a gloomy image indeed but for this luminous zone. The other bright spots in the scene are the window on the turn of the stair which the two girls have ascended to reach the parental bedroom, although the blinds have been drawn down and mute the daylight; and the flowers they carry, identified as lily, rose, azalea and violet, which reviewers supposed were to be placed on or near the deceased. These, and the black cross on a bead chain which each girl wears, the one on her wrist and the other at her waist, are the mourners' only adornments and serve to break up the large area of blacks that covers almost half the picture surface.

It was reported in *The Lady* that the artist had meant to spread her theme across the classes with a companion painting (on show elsewhere in London because it had not been finished in time for submission to the Academy), *Half the World know not how the other Half lives*.

Although this painting is not now known by sight, it is said to have depicted the recent death of an infant in the garret home of a cobbler's family – the working-class equivalent of the middle-class death treated in the Academy exhibit ("Lady Artists" 183). This work received a prize at its venue, the Crystal Palace exhibition, for best genre or figure painting, supporting the point made by the critic quoted earlier that the provocation of feeling was one of the most valued capacities in painting at this time.

Thus, while Julian Treuherz suggests in his consideration of the social realism which arose in the following decade that the mass of viewers "wanted to be touched, they did not want to be pained" (10), it is surely true to say that, in general, the Victorian viewer was ready to be drawn into a sorrow they recognised and a melancholy they themselves had experienced or expected to undergo, and in this specific case would have appreciated immediately the pain that only memory can hope to staunch. While Osborn's work did not contradict Treuherz's generalisation that "death was painted in terms of funerals and mourners, with rarely a corpse in sight" (10), its propriety was a concern of perhaps the most self-conscious representative of the mainstream to report on the 1851 Exhibition, the *Illustrated London News*. In addressing this question, the paper was at pains to set out the protocols for contemporary genre painting, remarking:

. . . we would extend the scope and functions of art as widely as possible. A purely painful domestic tragedy, indeed, or a subject calculated merely to harrow up the feelings of the spectator or to excite feelings of horror and disgust, like many of the Spanish pictures of martyrdom, should, in our judgment, be proscribed as violating esthetic [*sic*] propriety. But we are not disposed, therefore, to exclude those scenes of pathos, even if founded on the sense of hopelessness, which appeal only to sentiments of the gentlest and purest pity. There are such things in the world as death and orphanage. They are the frequent themes of the poet – and why not also of the painter? ("For the Last Time" 566)

Hence another commentator's remark: "We often marvel, and have almost as often asked the question, 'why artists choose the sad instead of the cheerful?'. . . [but then] a wholesome lesson may be learned from such subjects" (Dafforne 263). Indeed, the readiness of reviewers to identify the subject of Osborn's painting indicates how close this scene was to the Victorian gallery-goer's life experience, which is what the contemporary genre painter saw as their most ingratiating source of subject-matter.

Osborn's subject, then, apparently immediately recognisable to her public, was not so much death in the family as surviving death in the family. This is where memory was to play its part: memory as a force that works with time to combat the loss that time itself incurs. The painting's title emphasised the passage of time, an inevitable element of the human condition which it seems universal for human beings to rail against, resist or regret; and too, the medium of our mortality. Time is the watershed demarcating the happiness of life as it is lived at first from the sorrow of the life that has known death. But also, time is potentially the healer, insofar as memory harnesses it. For, generally speaking, it was expected that the dead's passing from this life could be compensated for by the living remembering them:

. . . They have a home, – nor dark, nor far away –
 Their proper home, – within our faithful hearts;
 There happy spirits wed,
 Loving for ever;
 There dwell with us, the dead,

Parting – ah, never –
There do they dwell!

ran the mid-century poem “Where dwell the dead?” (596). Many a sentimental middle-brow treatment of the subject such as those found in Thomas Moore’s *Irish Melodies* (1808-34, and sung well into the twentieth century) claimed it to be not a duty but a pleasure to remember the dead, for memory offered a means of their survival mitigating their literal absence.

But Victoria’s obdurate exercise of her memory – her persistence in spending more mental energy on remembering the dear departed than on attending to the living – was by 1864 giving the commemoration of the dead a bad name. Avowedly “shaken by the utter and ever-abiding desolation which has taken the place of her former happiness” into reclusion (“The Court” 9), she represented the excesses of a response to death which allowed the memory to paralyse all other mental faculties. The Queen’s example indicated that if all the bereaved’s energy were put into remembering the dead, there would be none left for continuing their own life.

Osborn’s two young mourners gave bereavement a much more attractive face than, at that moment, did the widowed queen, as they stood not just at the door of the death chamber but on memory’s threshold, preparing to move on from living with their parents (it was supposed) to remembering them. That they presented this melancholy prospect attractively was, as has been seen, in the opinion of some commentators an error on the artist’s part. The artist’s challenge, though, was to render the requisite sobriety of the theme, which must be dominated by the non-colour black, without sacrificing visual appeal. If “the deadness of attire was the outward expression of a spiritual state [and] the blackness of garb spoke of desolation within” (Morley 64), the painter had to do something to leaven what would be a very gloomy picture. Hence the sisters’ bare heads: though in truth convention would not have required them to cover their heads inside the home, still the artist may well have been prompted by a salutary mental picture of the many photographs and engravings in circulation of the Queen and her daughters quite engulfed in their mourning attire including headgear, even in the home, the effect being of the bereaved experiencing an equivalent burial in a sea of black stuff. Similarly, images in the public domain of the deathbed of the late Prince showed a positive crowd of well-wishers gathered to farewell him, in contrast to which Osborn’s two girls cut a poignantly desolate figure.

So then, these two young women – even if appealing in their distress – prepare to perform the mournful duty of looking for the last time on their loved one’s physical form, and attempt to fix in their memories every aspect of the person they will never see again in that form. They may see the dead face at rest and possibly, as such, a sight not unduly painful to commit to memory. The last visit to view the deceased on their deathbed was a ritual widely observed, albeit sometimes shrunk from, and construed as a responsibility indicative of respect as much as a mitigation of the pain suffered by the bereaved (who, it was assumed, would feel sorrow and anguish at their loss, although anyone well versed in the prose fiction of the period knows that responses to a family death could include indifference, relief, satisfaction and even glee). The girls pause at the door, bracing themselves to commit to memory as much as they can absorb in their distressed state, pondering on how definitively final this last time will be, fighting the despair engendered by that prospect, or simply fearful of how painful the sight will be that they find within the room. Even had they been aided up to this point – as in life they surely would have been – by clergy, undertaker, solicitor or housekeeper, at this moment they perform this particular duty without moral support.

The ages of the two sisters suggest, moreover, an added sorrow: that, if it is their parent or parents they mourn, these have met unfortunately early deaths; if a sibling, even more so. This was a question addressed by the *Illustrated London News*, giving a demonstration of how the viewer was inclined to scan such paintings as if they were episodes of the latest serial fiction:

Of whom have they been bereaved? The drawn blinds of the house windows tell of one still unburied. The girls, whose eyes are red with weeping, have lost one near and dear. They are unattended by other members of the family in this last sad visit. They have no companion but their faithful dog. These circumstances would seem to indicate that they are left lonely orphans. (“For the Last Time” 566)

The simplicity of their setting served to indicate further the bareness of their lives since being bereaved. This death left their lives, as it left their home, empty.

These girls’ appearance alone at the door of the death-chamber in such a sparsely furnished interior held further significance for the 1864 viewer. The prospect of two young women of this social class and age being orphaned implied further distress than the obvious one of bereavement. Discussion of middle-class women’s ability to support themselves had been part of the dominant discourse for at least a decade (see, for instance, Holcombe). Perhaps this adds to their ominous hesitation: they are about to look in the face of their impoverishment or destitution. As young single women brought up in expectations of domestic security, until marriage handed them from one protective male to another, this death may have left them on the brink of a very uncertain future which readers of current fiction and polemic alike will have been only too able to imagine. This had certainly been the theme of Redgrave’s pioneering social issue paintings, and Osborn had already shown herself aware of the questions accumulating around women and girls in the rapidly modernising, stratified Victorian society in such works as *Home Thoughts* (1856), *Nameless and Friendless* (1857), and *The Governess* (1860). If the feminist potential of *this* composition was latent rather than explicit, the resonance its protagonists had with the black-clad heroine of *The Governess* was there for the alert and sympathetic gallery-goer who had been following the public conversation about women’s education and employment since its emergence in the mid-1850s.

Such a viewer may have been put in mind of Dinah Craik’s well-meaning if somewhat clumsy poem, *The Young Governess*, which concluded:

So I will be a governess
And earn my daily bread,
Honest and happy, holding high
My independent head;
O what a merry house we’d be
If mother were not dead! (in Reilly 43)

Or reminded perhaps of the “reduced” Agnes Grey’s remarks towards the end of Anne Brontë’s eponymous novel, in the light of her own father’s death:

We often pity the poor, because they have no leisure to mourn their departed relatives, and necessity obliges them to labour through their severest afflictions: but is not active employment the best remedy for overwhelming sorrow – the surest antidote for despair? (Brontë 357)

While the painting's provenance is incomplete, it seems to have found a buyer (because the artist did not exhibit it again). But it was typical of the state of the art market that Osborn subsequently exhibited the sketch for the composition at the Society of British Artists (1865), and in Glasgow (1868), milking its appeal as much as possible. She also returned to its subject a few years later, in a form that appealed similarly to mainstream susceptibilities, with *God's Acre* (1866) (see Figure 2) shown in a minor London venue – not the Royal Academy but the dealer Henry Wallis's Winter exhibition.



Figure 2: Emily Mary Osborn, *God's Acre* (1866).
Photograph: Guarisco Gallery.

This painting showed the next step or proper sequel in the timetable of bereavement to *For the Last Time*'s scene, although in their likeness to the first two girls, these younger ones suggest what contemporary popular culture knows as a “prequel” – the earlier death of the first parent. The action they portrayed here was the other most common expression of individual or personal remembrance of the dead, a visit to the grave of the deceased. If the older girls had been performing a unique action, whereby for the one and only time they would look upon the body of the deceased, these younger ones were enacting a sadly repetitive visit, which would become a melancholy routine as the years passed: what is depicted here is one of *many* times. The belief that somehow the dead were enduringly present at and in the grave was not one which the Victorians were peculiar in holding, and the present-day continuation not only of cemeteries as places of commemoration but of the individual practice of going to the graveside to “talk to” the dead is proof enough of the

persuasive power of that notion. These girls place on the grave a wreath, tellingly termed by some reviewers an *immortelle*. The contrast between the short time that they themselves have been on this earth, and the idea of eternity contained in that word added to the work's freight of poignancy: they have a long, long time of remembering ahead of them before that memory can be relieved. Following on from *For the Last Time, God's Acre* ratcheted up the endurance of the partnership between bereavement and memory that could be called upon until the latter's palliative power could make bearable the former. It was as much in the imagined reiteration of this sad rite, as the seasons succeed each other and the years go by and the girls continue to miss their mother's love and care (and it was a mother that most reviewers assumed they had lost), that the viewer was expected to find the pathos of this subject. The two girls' main support is memory: despite their youth, despite the inclement weather, it is to assuage and to feed their memories that they make this melancholy pilgrimage – time after time, the viewer may assume.

The child at the graveside was not only visible but topical in contemporary art, with Arthur Hughes's *Home from Sea (The Mother's Grave)* appearing in the Pre-Raphaelite exhibition held in Bloomsbury in 1857 and then, in the revised version that is known today, before a much larger and broader audience in the Royal Academy exhibition of 1863. Meanwhile, fellow Pre-Raphaelite Frederick Sandys's design *The Little Mourner*, illustrating a poem of the same name by Dean Alford in the book *English Sacred Poetry* (1862), came even nearer Osborn's own conception of the theme. It is not known what Osborn's attitude was to Pre-Raphaelitism, but her treatment of the motif recuperated it for mainstream taste, prepared as that was with vivid mental pictures of Little Nell, Little Dorrit and Pip, vulnerable children in graveyards all.

If they had a conventional belief, viewers will have expected these poor little mourners to meet the deceased again eventually when they themselves died, accepting their grief as a medium for greater spirituality – not a burden but, in a way hard for the bereaved to appreciate then and there, a gift from God, “[t]ill time shall every grief remove, / With life, with memory, and with love” (Thomas Gray, *Epitaph on Mrs Clerke*). They would feel, with Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey*, that, “If we keep in mind the glorious heaven beyond, where both may meet again, and sin and sorrow are unknown, surely that too may be borne; and, meantime, we endeavour to live to the glory of Him who has scattered so many blessings in our path” (382). Pat Jalland suggests that in the 1860s the image of heaven as a place of family reunion, a “heavenly home,” burgeoned (Jalland Ch. 13). But for the present, the families of both pairs of girls in Osborn's paintings were cleft in two, with all parties awaiting the demise of the still living – according to the conceit that the dead were as impatient as the living for reunification – before happy unity could be attained. While elaborate mourning rituals suggested for how long the remembrance of the dead should be a regular action, the impact of the absence of a beloved parent or sibling did not dissipate automatically or abruptly after a set number of months (conventionally set at twelve for a parent, six for a sibling). So the bereaved had meanwhile to store up their memories, inadequate though they be to counter the pain of loss – a misery expressed in popular culture with little variation in sentiment between the distinguished and the forgotten instances. Though no Milton, Mrs Eliza Warren, filling a space at the bottom of a page in her monthly *The Ladies' Treasury*, struck as true a note for her readers with her poem “The Widow”:

. . . Time flies on, but there is sorrow
Which escapes not on its wings;
There is grief to which the morrow

Never consolation brings. (230)

However, conventional Christian beliefs, whether Catholic or Protestant, had taken a series of blows in recent years, especially with Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) followed by the incandescently controversial *Essays and Reviews* (1860), whose impacts have been thoughtfully considered by Michael Wheeler (8ff). Osborn's viewers may, therefore, have been uncertain if her juvenile sufferers would ever again encounter those whose mortal life had ended so prematurely. For those who could not invest in the prospect of meeting again, as these two little girls blindly do, memory might be the only solace, bitter-sweet as it might be. Portraits, photographs (even, by this time, on graves), letters, jewellery and other mementoes might prompt recollection, but memory must be the primary agent of keeping their untimely dead with them as the years go by, filling the gap even if not healing the wound.

As in *For the Last Time*, Osborn in *God's Acre* pushed the situation towards a narrative of abandonment and loneliness by showing the girls unaccompanied by anyone older, but the painting was generally seen as sensitive rather than lugubrious or lachrymose. Osborn's decision to restrict her scene to a couple of figures of overt mainstream appeal posed against a simplified background shows her working the market, and indicates the broad acceptance of the attitudes assumed by the two works discussed here. Once again there is a comparison in the work of Frank Holl, in his slightly later work *I am the Resurrection and the Life* (1872), where several members of two generations enter the graveyard with a coffin, keeping each other company in a shared grief. Because the impact of both of Osborn's paintings lies in the girls' demeanours and expressions, Osborn repeated here from the earlier painting the placement of the figures within the pictorial space, having them proceed slowly from the right background to the left foreground giving the viewer time, as it were, to be struck viscerally by the pathos of their figures and to take in the simple fact of their situation – again, unembroidered by narrative clues but meaningful enough, it seems, to elicit the average viewer's sympathy.

The fact that Osborn's composition was set in Germany did not restrict its application to an English audience, which would have recognised in the painting's title the phrase taken from Longfellow's 1842 ballad of the same name to convey the emotional investment of the average Christian in the cemetery or graveyard. The girls' ethnic costume and the distinctive style of grave adornment in the right background may have formed part of Osborn's attempt to give an original twist to this trope, drawing attention to the Germanic origins of the term "God's acre," but they will not have hindered the London viewer's identification with the large-eyed vulnerability of the school-age girls braving the bitter weather in the exercise of their filial ritual. While the artist's choice of weather may seem to overdo the pathos, it was handily susceptible of a secondary layer of poignancy which was brought out when, more than a decade later, the work was reproduced as a chromolithograph for the Christmas number of *The Graphic* (1879). At the end of the year, when others were excitedly gathering holly and decorating the festive tree, these two carried a wreath in a world made cold and lonely by the death they diligently commemorate.

Although the work's attempts to appeal emotionally may strike a twenty-first-century viewer as shamelessly blatant, the artist's investment in sentiment was not criticised as such in her own time. Recent scholarly analysis of emotion in Victorian painting has been less condemnatory and more understanding of the deployment of sentiment which led to a large body of work being dismissed *in toto* in the twentieth century as "sentimental" (see Arscott and Bown, for instance). While the means Osborn uses here to capture the spectator's interest may seem unsubtle, the useful point to take therefrom is that for many viewers they were

effective and not disagreeable. As Caroline Arscott has explained in considering later Victorian painting, sentimentality is often mis-used as a value judgment when it is more useful as a descriptive term that can help us understand how painted images worked on their contemporary viewers' sensibilities (80-81). Similarly, Lionel Lambourne has observed that:

The criticisms of 'sentimentality' which can be levelled at literary depictions of childhood are also invariably applied to the contemporary paintings of childhood themes. In both cases such criticisms are over-simplistic, for it was precisely in their tendency to sentimentalise, to demand the response of compassion, that such works afforded powerful inducements to public humanitarianism. (19)

With respect to the treatment of death, as Sally Mitchell has said: "Death was domestic and familiar to the Victorians and sentimental emotion provides a way to lessen its terror and express its sorrow" (np). That such young children should be burdened with such sad memories might deliberately tug at the heart-strings, but would not have been widely criticised as inappropriate, unfitting or offensive.

Offering *Art Journal* readers an engraving of *God's Acre* in 1868, the Halls found that the artist had indeed nicely balanced the weight of emotion:

The subject is just one of those which, whatever artistic merits the canvas might possess, would at once arrest the attention and invite examination. Such an appeal as it makes to the tenderest sympathies of our nature could not fail to be irresistible; and the heart must indeed be insensible which could not sympathise with the two young girls who have faced the bitter north wind and the heavy snowfall to pay, perhaps, their daily visit to a mother's grave. It is no forced sentiment that such a principle calls into action; we recognise in it a principle . . . which is the keystone, as it were, to all human affections where they have not been blunted or hardened by ignorance or vice. ("Selected Pictures" 148)

Obvious in its conception and construction though it may seem, *God's Acre* was, the *Art Journal* assured, "a new version of an old theme, and one not more novel than it is impressive. We very much misjudge the taste of our subscribers and of the public if this engraving be not more than ordinarily popular" (148). If it was an instance of the Redgrave brothers' admission, in their account of British painting published in 1866, that the general level of British painting had fallen due to the general adoption of "subjects of a somewhat tame and familiar class, to the exclusion of the ideal and the poetical" (288), it can be assumed that those who did find the work egregiously crowd-pleasing simply passed it over.

For the permutations of children and graveyards in mid-Victorian painting were numerous and Osborn had made no greater mis-step in taste or judgment than many another competitor in the market for spectators' attention. If the aforementioned works by Hughes and Sandys were amongst the most robust, innumerable other paintings would count as mere pot-boilers, juxtaposing children (particularly female ones) with the idea of parental death in a facile complicity of prettiness and pathos. They can be typified by William Dobson's *Remembrance* (1868): it presents two little girls clasping posies who are identified as mourners only by the title and the inclusion in the far background of a church to which the willing viewer will assume they are heading. Osborn herself produced an earlier painting, *Where the Weary are at Rest* (1858), which appeared largely unnoticed at the Academy exhibition of 1858, working similar ingredients into a more reflective mood. This small composition showed two girls playing unconcernedly amongst the neglected gravestones of an old churchyard, their

absorption being not in contemplation of the dead but in gathering flowers. Here, no memory was at work although nature's inexorable cycle of time was invoked. It was, indeed, the children's innocent non-remembering in the presence of death – not just that attested by the gravestone in the scene but those many more deaths over the centuries which the church has witnessed – that was meant to give this little composition poignancy. This detachment from the death at hand was used by Thomas Faed in his own painting entitled *God's Acre*, a few years after Osborn's, in what was generally identified as “an important picture” at that year's Academy (1872): his three children, of comparable age to Osborn's, were shown “gazing fearfully but curiously” into the grave ready to receive the approaching coffin of someone unconnected to them – uninvolved and naïve onlookers (“Exhibition” 5).

In both works examined here, then, Osborn was treading familiar subject territory. They show her investing astutely in the habits and sentiments of a mainstream gallery-going public, both recognising and exploiting contemporary interest in the ordinary human sorrow common in the mid-Victorian period, and painting's agreed role in mirroring everyday life. These compositions did not refer to the deaths of people from history, of famous people, or of literary characters, but to those of members of the middle-class population of the mid-century. In addition, they underlined the part that memory played in mediating between the pain of life and its necessary continuance – an especial challenge for girls and women, according to common prejudice; and the artist's choices catered to the conventional belief that an emotional existence was a particularly female experience. Along with many another Victorian genre painting - and many a written text of the time - these two pictures reflect the belief that memory could be mobilised to mitigate the pains of death, to be the glue that linked the lost past and the unknown future and thus to enable the painful absence of the dead - which was such a large element of the average Victorian life – to be accommodated by the living.

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