

Tolerance

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“IS there anything left to say about sympathy in George Eliot’s work?” Carolyn Burdett asked in 2020.¹ Sympathy has long been a focal point of Victorian studies, and it is arguably most prominently tied to George Eliot and her ethical theory of the novel. Yet around the time of composing *Daniel Deronda* (1876), Eliot pens the entry “Birth of Tolerance” in her notebook, which indicates that she also had an interest in tolerance, as distinct from sympathy.² If we can question whether there is anything left to say about sympathy in Eliot’s work, I argue that there is a lot left to explore about her, and other Victorian writers’, specific engagements with tolerance. A better understanding of tolerance in Victorian literature works both as a corrective to the very strong focus on sympathy and adds a literary perspective to the recently renewed interdisciplinary discussion of tolerance.

Tolerance is widely understood as a means to achieve peace, justice, and human rights. In the “Declaration of Principles on Tolerance,” issued by UNESCO in 1995, tolerance is defined as follows: “Tolerance is respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human. It is fostered by knowledge, openness, communication, and freedom of thought, conscience and belief. Tolerance is harmony in difference. It is not only a moral duty, it is also a political and legal requirement. Tolerance, the virtue that makes peace possible, contributes to the replacement of the culture of war by a culture of peace.”³ However, over the last two decades philosophers and political theorists have condemned such uncritical celebrations of the concept and have instead stressed the relevance of its roots in the Latin term *tolerare*, which means “to suffer,” “to endure.” If we tolerate a person, belief, or behavior, we object to that belief or behavior on the grounds that it is wrong, bad, or even evil, but accept that it exists. This sense of objecting to something but enduring rather than eliminating it is largely outdated and

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marked as “obsolete” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “The action or practice of enduring or sustaining pain or hardship; the power or capacity of enduring; endurance. *Obsolete.*”⁴

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, scholars have explored tolerance as distinct from neighboring concepts such as respect, liberalism, or openness and have emphasized its problematical and negative aspects: both those felt by the recipients of tolerance, and those experienced by the tolerators who “suffer” and “endure” what they consider to be wrong or evil. For example, Wendy Brown criticizes tolerance as a vague concept that can be endorsed by groups with very different views and agendas, and works toward uncovering its veiled power relations.⁵ Lars Tønder similarly argues that it is necessary to see tolerance in a less positive light and advocates for acknowledgment that tolerance is difficult and painful.⁶ Teresa Bejan promotes an understanding of tolerance as merely guaranteeing a minimum of “unmurderous coexistence” and deplors what she calls a process of “*reductio ad respectum*”: the tendency of equating “tolerance” with “respect” that is, for example, evident in the “Declaration of Principles on Tolerance.”⁷ In literary studies and in Victorian studies in particular, we see a similar tendency of understanding “tolerance” in aspirational terms and a lack of discussing it in its specificity: I call this a *reductio ad sympathicum*, a reduction of tolerance to sympathy.

Literary studies have begun to take account of the recent reevaluation of tolerance in other disciplines, most thoroughly in the 2019 collection *Imagining Religious Toleration: A Literary History of an Idea, 1600–1830*, edited by Alison Conway and David Alvarez.⁸ Tolerance in Victorian literature remains a lacuna, not only since the focus of the collection ends in 1830 but also since it revolves around religious toleration while the concept of tolerance becomes increasingly diversified in the Victorian period. John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* (1859) is widely seen as instrumental in extending the concept of tolerance to secular dimensions and establishing it as a way of negotiating difference in plural societies. However, Mill’s “no harm” principle, which limits the sovereignty of the individual only to protect others from harm, focuses on the pain of the other and sheds little light on the “harm” experienced by tolerators. To better understand this aspect, it is necessary to acknowledge that tolerance is difficult and painful, and, in the words of political theorist Lars Tønder, in order to “[bring] pain back in,” “the discussion of contemporary tolerance should be reconnected with the study of pain.”⁹ Literary texts can offer detailed case studies

of the cognitive, emotional, and physical pains that tolerance includes, and literary studies thus add an important perspective to current discussions of tolerance.

A literary investigation of tolerance, with its focus on the objection to others' beliefs and behaviors and the pains involved in not acting on it, is related to research on the negative affects to which scholarship increasingly pays attention. In "Affective Aversion, Ethics, and Fiction," Thomas Blake emphasizes that aversion to different looks, habits, or customs has physiological and evolutionary origins and that "deeply ingrained resistance to otherness must be acknowledged if it is to be consciously contested."¹⁰ This is also true concerning an ethics of fiction, and, regarding Victorian literature, Burdett reexamines Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* in terms of antipathy, the "opposite" of sympathy, while Zachary Samalin discusses how a focus on disgust can "disrupt or displace the pride of place that literary theory has . . . granted to desire and sympathetic identification."¹¹ Research on tolerance as the managing of antipathy and aversion thus does not abandon the important ethical concerns of Victorian literature and Victorian studies, but adds to the well-explored ethics and aesthetics of sympathy as a less comfortable, less aspirational, but realistic focus on tolerance.

NOTES

1. Carolyn Burdett, "Sympathy–Antipathy in *Daniel Deronda*," *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 29 (2020): 1, doi: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.1983>.
2. George Eliot, *Essays of George Eliot*, edited by Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge, 1963), 449.
3. UNESCO, "Declaration of Principles on Tolerance," UNESCO, General Conference 1995, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000151830>.
4. *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) s.v. "tolerance, n."
5. Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).
6. Lars Tønder, *Tolerance: A Sensorial Orientation to Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
7. Teresa Bejan, *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 160–61.

8. Alison Conway and David Alvarez, eds., *Imagining Religious Toleration: A Literary History of an Idea, 1600–1830* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 2019.
9. Tønder, *Tolerance*, 7, 6.
10. Thomas Blake, “Affective Aversion, Ethics, and Fiction,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Affect Studies and Textual Criticism*, edited by Donald R. Wehrs and Thomas Blake (London: Palgrave, 2017), 215.
11. Burdett, “Sympathy–Antipathy,” 1–20; Zachary Samalin, *The Masses Are Revolting: Victorian Culture and the Political Aesthetics of Disgust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 88.

