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North and South: A Permanent State of Change

ROSEMARIE BODENHEIMER

NORTH AND SOUTH was a title suggested by Dickens and accepted by Elizabeth Gaskell, who thought of her novel as “Margaret Hale” during the early stages of composition.¹ The choice represents Dickens’s imagination rather than Gaskell’s; it sets up an absolute contrast, a sharpening of distinctions between pastoral and industrial worlds, that Dickens himself might have used to make his rhetorical points. His own “condition of England” novel, *Hard Times*, was running in *Household Words* as he received Gaskell’s chapters, and it seems likely that he invented a title which would link the new novel with his own and with Disraeli’s *Sybil*, or *The Two Nations*, and advertise it as another account of the crisis of social division. But *North and South* is not really organized as a system of contrasts;² nor is it exactly a “social-problem novel,” for it does not identify a clear version of industrial crisis and cry

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¹ See Winifred Gérin, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 150.

² The widely shared idea that the novel is organized by contrasts appears in Margaret Ganz, *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Artist in Conflict* (New York: Twayne, 1969), p. 81; Edgar Wright, *Mrs. Gaskell: The Basis for Reassessment* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 132 ff.; and in the biographies by A. B. Hopkins, *Elizabeth Gaskell: Her Life and Work* (London: John Lehmann, 1952), pp. 139–40, and by Gérin, p. 151.

for a solution.³ It is rather a novel about irrevocable change, and about the confused process of response and accommodation that attends it.

This essay is written from a desire to offer a reading of the strengths and the internal coherence of a book which strikes me as Gaskell's most radical and courageous work. *North and South* is so often treated as part of some other question—in comparison with *Mary Barton*, as one in a larger group of industrial novels, in relation to Charlotte Brontë, or as a book written under the stress of Gaskell's stormy relationship with Dickens—that it still deserves some attention to its own terms.⁴ It is by no means a formally perfect work; my argument is partly that it cannot be, because it is so good at posing knotted issues and feelings that cannot come formally to rest except in the depiction of ongoing process and readjustment. In its every situation, whether industrial politics or emotional life, traditional views and stances break down into confusing new ones, which are rendered in all the pain of mistakenness and conflict that real human change entails. To suggest how that principle works in all of the novel's parts, my discussion will move, roughly, from social to emotional topics: from the social landscapes to the issues of class and industrial conflict, and finally to Margaret's character and interior life. Throughout, however, I want to emphasize how *North and South* depicts social change as personal change without dissolving either into an "industrial novel" or into a love story.⁵

³ This redefinition of Raymond Williams's "industrial novel" (*Culture and Society, 1780–1950* [1958; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1966]) may be found in John Lucas's article, "Mrs. Gaskell and Brotherhood," in *Tradition and Tolerance in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, ed. David Howard, John Lucas, and John Goode (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), pp. 141–205. The article includes a strong and interesting assessment of *North and South*.

⁴ *North and South* is often compared unfavorably with *Mary Barton*, as showing diminished strength of feeling for the poor. See Ganz, p. 80, and Gérin, p. 152. Raymond Williams, p. 92, cites the emphasis on attitudes to the poor rather than their feelings; Edgar Wright, p. 132, takes a correspondingly conventional view that *North and South* redresses the balance in favor of the middle class. The story of Gaskell's editorial relationship with Dickens is most fully told in Hopkins's biography, pp. 135–37. The most generally appreciative accounts come from W. A. Craik, *Elizabeth Gaskell and the English Provincial Novel* (London: Methuen, 1975), pp. 89–139, and Barbara Hardy, "Mrs. Gaskell and George Eliot," in *The Victorians*, ed. Arthur Pollard (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1970), pp. 176–78.

⁵ The view that the private romantic plot predominates is expressed by Ganz, pp. 100–101; Gérin, p. 152; Hopkins, p. 139; and Martin Dodsworth, in his introduction to the Penguin edition of *North and South*, ed. Dorothy Collin (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), pp. 17–18.

The novel's opening—the apparently multiple openings—have generated both confusion and criticism. First the fashionable London milieu, then the country parish of Helstone are depicted, only to be rather quickly left behind. Charlotte Brontë assumed that it would be a story about religious doubt,⁶ and later readers with the whole novel in hand have criticized the treatment of Mr. Hale's defection from the Church of England as unmotivated, or without serious consequences, or as a mere pretext for the family's removal to Milton-Northern.⁷ But the consistency of the narrative emphasis on change itself makes these early chapters both emotionally coherent and socially significant.

Margaret Hale is introduced as she sits by her sleeping cousin's side silently brooding over "the change in her life" occasioned by Edith's marriage. The first extended attention to her consciousness comes as she remembers arriving at the London household nine years earlier, and crying "with such wild passion of grief" at the unfamiliar rituals and ceremonies of the place.⁸ Now she has come to love the London life and to regret leaving it; the Brontë-like childish passion has taken a normal human course of accommodation and learning. The theme would be unremarkable were it not to be expanded and explored in episodes of increasing intensity.

Helstone, the home to which Margaret returns, is quickly but carefully set up to represent a pastoral condition as apparently immune to change as any that could be imagined. Margaret thinks of it as "a village . . . in one of Tennyson's poems" (I, 1); her impulse is to set it out of time altogether. A country village, a Church of England parson, a set of traditional charitable relationships with individual parishioners, a world more stable even than Jane Austen's—the danger would seem to lie only in domestic boredom. The point of Mr. Hale's decision is to overthrow all that, and to suggest how, by a murky and confused process of internal change, he has grown apart from his social role and come to a state of mind, indefinite and yet absolute, in which he cannot sign the Articles

⁶ See Dodsworth, p. 7.

⁷ See Gérin, p. 151; and Ganz, p. 84.

⁸ *North and South*, ed. Angus Easson, Oxford English Novels (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), Vol. I, ch. 1. Subsequent quotations are from this edition and are cited in parentheses by volume and chapter, corresponding to the volume and chapter of the 1855 edition. To find a second-volume reference in a modern edition that numbers chapters continuously throughout the novel, add twenty-five to the chapter number given here.

which signify his allegiance to a higher authority. Gaskell's refusal to investigate the substance of Mr. Hale's decision is not a weakness but a placement of emphasis: his irrevocable change, its statement of doubt in the face of a traditional order, his cowardice and ineptitude at facing its social consequences are the issues she attends to.

The function of the South is not to provide a contrast with the industrial North but to be itself the subject of changing perspectives. When Margaret and Mr. Bell return to visit Helstone near the end of the novel, the point about change there is quite obviously recorded—perhaps most delightfully in the detail that the schoolchildren have modern terms for grammar that Margaret does not know, rendering her traditional social help obsolete. But by that time Margaret has experienced other pressures on her point of view. Trying to describe Helstone to Bessy Higgins, she finds her nature metaphors falling on uncomprehending ears, while Bessy, deafened by factory noise and dying of factory air, picks out the parts of the description which answer to her experience and desires (I, 13). Later Margaret thinks of the South as a workplace for Nicholas Higgins and recognizes the destitution and solitude of agricultural labor, as compared with the comradeship of factory life (II, 12). The New Forest is no longer a place for rustic sketching. Forced to think in class terms, Margaret sees the social reality beneath the picturesque view, and the necessity which drives the "romantic" poacher. The South, where social change is less visible, nonetheless requires a new vocabulary, and Margaret is a worthy heroine because she is able to learn it.

When the narrative moves on to describe Margaret's responses to the streets of Milton, the adjustment of vision is again an implicit organizing principle. The scenes are recorded in fluid terms which stress the mental activity of confronting and absorbing something new; the streets are not there to provide symbolic social geographies like those of Dickens or Engels.⁹ As Margaret and her

⁹ Steven Marcus's analysis of changes in the descriptive and metaphorical language with which Victorian observers organized their responses to the new industrial phenomenon is the relevant work here: see *Engels, Manchester, and the Working Class* (New York: Random House, 1974), pp. 30–66. Marcus does not treat Mrs. Gaskell except to say that her representations are in accord with Engels', but without his "generalizing and organizing power" (pp. 48–49, n. 32; and p. 198, n. 77). But it is exactly that nongeneralizing power which allows for her singular openness to the industrial landscape, and for her ability not to turn it into a metaphor for something else.

father first approach Milton, they see a cloud which Margaret takes to foretell rain; later it proves to be factory smoke. Despite the mild irony in the mistake, there is little emphasis on the desecration of the natural landscape; the description of the "lead-coloured cloud" sounds like a precise report of weather conditions, told by a mind that wishes "sufficiently" to account for any phenomenon. Standing among the smaller houses, the factory looks "like a hen among her chickens" (I, 7); and the barnyard simile is also not so much ironic as oddly accurate, suggesting both Margaret's country sources of comparison and the economic structure of Manchester factory life.¹⁰ Much of this first description—of the width of the streets, the cargo of the luries, the dress of the populace—is done through comparisons with London street life, and although monotonous Manchester loses by contrast, Margaret's careful distinctions emphasize her attempt to balance and come to terms with what she sees. It is the absence of controlling metaphor or generalizing vision which is powerful here: refusing the role of authoritative or didactic narrator, Gaskell renders the condition of intelligent openness without judgment.

The fluctuating mix of responses in class-sensitive Margaret is even more striking in the description of her encounters with factory crowds in the streets. The paragraph begins with a fearful, negative judgment:

Until Margaret had learnt the times of their ingress and egress, she was very unfortunate in constantly falling in with them. They came rushing along, with bold, fearless faces, and loud laughs and jests, particularly aimed at all those who appeared to be above them in rank or station. (I, 8)

This vision quickly modulates into her acceptance of the women in terms which demonstrate the weakening of class vocabulary: "There was such a simple reliance on her womanly sympathy with her love of dress, and on her kindness, that she gladly replied to these inquiries, as soon as she understood them." Her fear of the men is stronger, anticipating her prideful struggle with sexuality:

She, who had hitherto felt that even the most refined remark on her personal appearance was an impertinence, had to endure undisguised

¹⁰ Lucas, p. 192, sees this passage as an example of social criticism undermined by Gaskell's personal affection for Manchester; again I would emphasize rather the quality of nonrhetorical openness, the absence of an intent to critically "symbolize."

admiration from these outspoken men. But the very out-spokenness marked their innocence of any intention to hurt her delicacy, as she would have perceived if she had been less frightened by the disorderly tumult. Out of her fright came a flash of indignation which made her face scarlet, and her dark eyes gather flame, as she heard some of their speeches. (I, 8)

There is a crucial movement in the whole passage, from class terms to psychological ones: Margaret's prideful and indignant responses are shown to be defenses against class fears and are quickly linked to fears about sex and violence, as they will later be with Thornton. In this way the problem of changes in class assumptions created by the massing of workers in towns is presented as a concrete case for personal adjustment, requiring not the practice of some general spirit of benevolence but real psychological stress and reorganization.

The case is further pointed at the end of the chapter, when Margaret meets the working-class hero, Nicholas Higgins. She makes the automatic class assumption that a charity visit will be in order, only to find it interpreted as a reciprocal "impertinence." Higgins reverses the roles, inviting Margaret to his house because she is lonely and kind; and Margaret's shock of pride is recorded: "She was not sure if she would go where permission was given so like a favour conferred" (I, 8). But Higgins has the last word: reading Margaret's face rather than her social status, he correctly predicts that she will overcome her pique. His insistence on a personal interpretation displaces the class reflex; and the scene serves not only as an introduction to Higgins—who will later insist on the same kind of reversal in relation to his employer—but also as a lively example of the novel's insistence on the difficult bending of conventional class assumptions into recognitions of individual character. The need for such delicate adjustments of status is always imaginatively dramatized: Margaret's complex relationship with the traditional servant Dixon and Thornton's with Higgins are prominent cases.

Gaskell's account of shock and revision in such personal encounters widens into a more theoretical concern for the correction of balances between asserted authority and accepted dependence. This issue is made explicit during the important "Masters and Men" dialogue between Margaret, Mr. Hale, and Mr. Thornton (I, 15); here the analogy between parents and children, masters and

men, organizes the conversation about mutual duty and dependence. Thornton argues for a factory relationship which splits work from life, insisting on absolute authority during working hours and independence for his workers at other times. Mr. Hale, arguing by analogy with families, suggests that workers, like children, must be brought up to attain both independence and a measure of authority. Margaret, closest to the narrative stance, brings up the actual interdependence of workers and masters, stressing the need to share economic information and decisions with factory workers. But it would be a mistake to read these dialogues as abstract position papers which are meant to be "won" by one view or another. The social dialogues are dramatic—that is, truly novelistic—scenes in which the pressures of personal history can be heard, and the contradictions inherent in positions felt. The coalescence of personal and social vision is, in fact, closer to the point of the dialogues than is the content of the abstract statements. The way the talkers' views are shaped by domestic experience and personal history is emphasized when Thornton allows himself to tell his own story, but it is implicit throughout in the parental metaphor.

The views of Margaret and her father are consistent with their recent experiences. Margaret has suffered under Mr. Hale's inability to share his decision with his dependents, and her insistence on the need to share information with factory workers reflects her sense of that failure. Mr. Hale's withdrawal from authority in his very declaration of independence from the Church shows how fully he yearns not to wield power, and is reflected during the dialogue in his stress on developing independence in children or workers. His actual weakness makes a domestic parallel with Thornton's attitude toward his workers: "I can always decide better by myself, and not influenced by those whom I love. . . . I cannot stand objections. They make me so undecided" (I, 4), he has earlier apologized; Thornton, of course, does not fear objections, claiming to relish honest opposition from an independent stand. But he too wants to decide by himself, and to deny the actual dependence of his employees. The parallel between the situations, though not the characters, of the two men defines Thornton's respect for independence in his workers as a similar withdrawal from responsibility.

Thornton's reliance on his righteousness as a master and on setting a good example for his men is also placed in relation to his

own "thorny" relationship with larger authorities. If he had not altered his own factory chimneys before "parliament meddled with the affair," he tells Mr. Hale, he would have resisted the law and "given all the trouble in yielding that I legally could" (I, 10). The contradictions in his stance are apparent, yet they contain the potential for change on which the virtue of Thornton's character is built. He learns to respect the workers' right to give legal "trouble in yielding" and to recognize that he cannot be a law unto himself in the fortunes of the larger economic community. These changes, based on new personal experience, are also logically demanded by his earlier theoretical stance.

Such points are constantly made through parallels—between Thornton and Hale, Thornton and Higgins—and are rarely explicated by the narrator. But the technique meets us at every turn: Frederick's story reflects again the dangers of Thornton's authoritarian position, as well as the corresponding dangers for the striking workpeople. None of the painful paradoxes and consequences of Frederick's shipboard mutiny is avoided in the brief treatment of that subplot. Margaret's defense of her noble if impulsive brother echoes Higgins's vision of the strike: "Loyalty and obedience to wisdom and justice are fine; but it is still finer to defy arbitrary power, unjustly and cruelly used—not on behalf of ourselves, but on behalf of others more helpless" (I, 14). This idealistic rhetoric is quickly qualified, as it is in the strike plot. As their leader, Frederick is indirectly guilty for the hangings of his sailor-followers; his "right beyond the law" will never be recognized; he is condemned to fugitive exile. The story remains opaque and insoluble matter, resting, perhaps, only in the wry view of the law that is Frederick's legacy: a court-martial is, in his words, "a court where authority weighs nine-tenths in the balance, and evidence forms only the other tenth. In such cases, evidence itself can hardly escape being influenced by the prestige of authority" (II, 6). The fact that his sister is saved from judicial process by the prestige of Thornton's authority is yet another irony in the great accumulation of puzzlement and contradiction which the novel builds around this issue.

"I can not imagine a nobler scope for a thoughtful energetic man, desirous of doing good to his kind, than that presented to his powers as the master of a factory," Mrs. Gaskell wrote to Lady Kay-

Shuttleworth in 1850, musing about the manufacturing novel she wanted somebody else to write. "But I believe that there is much to be discovered yet as to the right position and mutual duties of employer, and employed."¹¹ Three years later she found that she was to be the author herself, and *North and South* reiterates the need for new relational concepts. Gaskell's pessimism about finding a good "system" for factory organization informs her letter, but her insistence that Thornton cannot be a good manufacturer on his own shows how clearly she came to see that the problem can no longer be conceived as one of making "better factories." Admitting the need for "discovery" is, then, Thornton's crucial shift in the novel: he switches tutors, leaving Mr. Hale's classical tradition aside in favor of the keen social intelligence of his workman Nicholas Higgins. Thornton comes to define the present as a time of "men groping in new circumstances" (II, 15); the phrase shows he has learned the lesson of the novel, that a deliberate exploration of assumptions about traditional roles must precede the leap to solutions.

Gaskell's commitment to the need for openness in industrial relations can be tested in her treatment of Nicholas Higgins. The genuine intelligence and autonomy with which his character is drawn would seem to be the best argument against the preference for *Mary Barton* that many critics share, for the portrait of John Barton—like the tragic poem Gaskell thought it was¹²—comes to rely on pathos, while Higgins is always represented with the respect warranted by his ability to think, learn, and change. Higgins's position as a political spokesman is equal and parallel to Thornton's, and it is accorded the same kind of critical hearing. But it is necessary to point out the conceptual limits within which that hearing is interpreted.

Gaskell's position can be distilled from the points in the dialogues that are not left open for further questioning. Most centrally, the novel takes a stand against the idea that labor and capital represent opposing interests which must be expressed in class strug-

¹¹ *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, ed. J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1967), p. 119.

¹² Writing to her publisher, Edward Chapman, 1 Jan. 1849, Gaskell complained about the manufacturers' responses to *Mary Barton*, saying, "meanwhile no one seems to see my idea of a tragic poem; so I, in reality mourn over my failure" (*Letters*, p. 68).

gle. In that sense, *North and South* falls squarely in the category of middle-class fictions which argue for the identity of interest between workers and owners.¹³ That view depends on an acceptance of the liberal principles of economy—the flux of the market according to natural economic laws—whose blows of fortune are seen as affecting workers and manufacturers with equally uncertain results. Higgins is given the strong argument that the liberal view is simply part of the masters' "line" to their workers. The weight of the novel's argument does not challenge the concept, but uses it rather as an economic basis for a stance which often moves into a religious appeal for the interdependence of human beings. When Thornton, near the end of the novel, comes to give Higgins work, the narrative reveals its bias: Higgins's patience and generosity have made Thornton "forget entirely the mere reasonings of justice, and overleap them by a diviner instinct" (II, 14).

Along with those tenets of the liberal position, the novel stands clearly against violent means of persuasion. But Gaskell does not identify striking with violence. She does a great deal of work to demonstrate the generous nobility in Higgins's conception of the union, his careful orchestration of the principles which are to determine the strikers' behavior, and his rage when those principles are violated by the rioters. Thornton himself is made to say finally, "this last strike, under which I am smarting, has been respectable" (II, 15). The serious criticism of union strikes is presented in a way that is not typically redolent of middle-class fears; it is the further issue of the problematical relationship between the union and the poverty-stricken workers who become victims of the union as well as of the masters. The fair-mindedness in Gaskell's account can easily be seen if it is compared with Dickens's version of unionization in *Hard Times*, which presents the organizer as a slick devil and the ostracism practiced against good hard-working Stephen Blackpool as forced collective torture. In *North and South*, the union as Higgins conceives it is admirable and intelligently directed, and the strike is justified by the despotism of the masters. What is wrong is simply that workers like Boucher cannot afford to strike; that the union has created a new class division with op-

¹³ Lucas's thesis, pp. 146-47, is that strain in the "social-problem novel" arose because novelists felt compelled to preserve a vision of the identity of class interests against the probabilities they actually felt.

pressive tendencies within the labor force itself. Boucher is made a weak but passionate character, and his suicide is treated unsentimentally; his case does not undermine Higgins's position so much as it demands further adjustment in its conception.

The criticism of Higgins's position, therefore, rests on two main points: that he conceives of industrial life as class struggle, and that his union can act to oppress poor people. Higgins's story, like Thornton's, is about the way personal experiences with individual cases teach one to modify strongly argued theoretical views. The outlines of the change are expressed in the difference between two statements assessing the relationship between labor and capital. "I'll tell yo'," he says to Margaret in early dialogue, "it's their part,—their cue, as some folks call it,—to beat us down, to swell their fortunes; and it's ours to stand up and fight hard,—not for ourselves alone, but for them round about us—for justice and fair play" (I, 17). The deliberate emphasis on "acted" social roles links Higgins with every other character in the novel who begins by seeing others in terms of their role or class. Later, after Higgins has seen some of the complications for "them round about us," he accepts Thornton's job offer with a line which represents what Thornton has to learn, as well as the modifications of Higgins's original antagonist position: "I shall need a deal o' brains to settle where my business ends and yo'rs begins" (II, 14). It is the touchstone of the novel's conclusion, a tentative openness to which Thornton also submits in the plan for the factory dining room.

That exploratory frame of mind is not charity, and the complexity of the concept marks another important advance from the position of *Mary Barton*. In the early meeting with Margaret, the job-offer scene with Thornton, and the dining-room scheme, Higgins consistently refuses the role of acceptor, turning charities around into invitations apparently initiated by him. His insistence on the equality of the participants in all these relationships is charmingly suggested in his ability to make analogies between his and others' situations. When he goes to visit Mr. Hale, for example, he identifies their positions, calling him "a parson out o' work" (II, 3). The similarities between his independent pride and Thornton's are, of course, clearly marked. Like Thornton, Higgins indulges in violent verbal anger, but his actions are generous. Despite his rage at Boucher's betrayal of the strike, he takes responsi-

bility for its results by supporting Boucher's children; Thornton's second thoughts are also invariably generous. The equality which Gaskell extends in the portrait of Higgins is genuine and can be measured by the shock of her lapse into special pleading when Higgins's state of cleanliness and his class embarrassment suddenly come into focus during the visit to Mr. Hale.

What *North and South* finally has to say about its industrial theme is emblemized in the factory dining-room scheme, however summary the presentation of that plan may be. The dining room where Thornton eats by invitation is a symbol of his willingness to obliterate his earlier distinction between the men's lives as workers and as human beings. It is also a tentative forum for discussion, awaiting the growth of trust and the formation of personal respect between Thornton and his workers. No claims are made for its effectiveness, but the shifts in attitude to which the dining plan attests are consistent with the novel's theme of change through personal contact. Thornton refuses to present the plan as a model, but his way of talking about it stands for a change of heart. As fictional "solutions" go, this one has the virtue of tangible particularity and an appealing faithfulness to the rhythm of the workplace itself.

It has often been argued that Gaskell raises large social issues only to diminish them in merely personal solutions; that the love story is central, and that the marriage, a symbolic union of north and south, rural and industrial, traditional and modern, stands in for the author's position of compromise and accommodation.¹⁴ Yet in the textures of the novel that I have discussed so far, the equal weighting in the presentation of personal and social vision is especially remarkable. To make the point that political stance grows out of particular experience and that change is possible exactly for that reason is not to retreat so much as to focus on process. And, if Gaskell's call for dialogue between representatives of different views is, politically judged, a wobbly compromise position, it must also be seen as a deeply held sense of life. "I suppose we all *do* strengthen each other by clashing together, and earnestly talking our own thoughts and ideas. The very disturbance we thus are to each other rouses us up, and makes us more healthy,"¹⁵ she wrote,

¹⁴ See, for example, Raymond Williams, p. 92.

¹⁵ Gaskell to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth, 14 May 1850, *Letters*, p. 116.

not about politics but about the "good" that her correspondent had suggested she might do for Charlotte Brontë. The earnestness is Victorian, but the confrontation psychology is not; and such stress on the value of conflict makes *North and South* atypical among industrial fictions.

The story of Margaret and Thornton is strong for the same reasons that animate the social conflicts: because it is an account of deep confusion in a time of personal change and revision. Moreover, the issues in Margaret's emotional economy are closely related to those of the social plot. Margaret struggles with the implications of assumed authority and carries on a fierce internal battle between conventional female roles and feelings and the uncharted territory of personal impulse. These matters come to a head in two dramatic actions: Margaret's rush to protect Thornton from his strikers' threats, and her lie to the police inspector. The two acts of impulse—and Margaret's confused attempts to interpret them after the fact—are formally parallel and provide more evidence for the embedded coherence of the novel.

Amid critical demur at Gaskell's glamorizing of her heroine, her quite radical treatment of Margaret as a fully responsible human being has gone by with surprisingly little note. The predominant sense of Margaret's life—one which makes it an unusual account of a Victorian heroine—is that of a person forced continually into making decisions, alone and under pressure. In the early chapter "Decision" the shock of that change is recorded. In the London household, Margaret thinks, "everything went on with the regularity of clockwork. . . . Now, since that day when Mr. Lennox came, and startled her into a decision, every day brought some question, momentous to her, and to those whom she loved, to be settled" (I, 5). The quick confusion of refusing Lennox in the space of time it takes for Mr. Hale to peel and eat a pear is followed immediately by Mr. Hale's announcement and the removal to Milton; but the pace of events here is only a mild anticipation of the build-up of pressures that will accumulate to almost unbearable intensity at the novel's center. When Margaret goes to Thornton's to borrow a water bed for her mother and stays to protect Thornton from the strikers' violence, she has been up all night after her mother's attack of spasms, she is confused by her feelings about Thornton, involved in Bessy Higgins's dying, torn by Boucher's

position in the strike, and sympathetic towards Higgins himself. All these situations, each demanding internal adjustment and outward moral action on her part, play into her responses to the strikers' convergence on Thornton's mill.

As in the "Decision" chapter, and often elsewhere in the text, Margaret tries in meditation to organize and separate these rapid changes of focus.¹⁶ Keeping watch beside her mother's sickbed, she thinks, "Not more than thirty-six hours ago, she cared for Bessy Higgins and her father, and her heart was wrung for Boucher; now, that was all like a dreaming memory of some former life;—everything that had passed out of doors seemed dissevered from her mother, and therefore unreal" (I, 21). That afternoon Margaret confronts the public mob in an action which mixes public and private motives inextricably. The next day, hurt and unrested, she refuses Thornton in an angry interchange, visits Bessy and hears about the pressures on the workers, hears her mother's dying plea to see her son, and writes the letter to Frederick that, she knows, may place him in mortal danger. This astonishing rapidity of event is experienced in the reading as it impinges upon Margaret's consciousness, with the effect that her actions and decisions about each event carry in them implicit pressures from all the others. The technique forces the reader into constant juxtapositions and comparisons that are not pointed out by the narrative. Feelings which rise out of one situation emerge in another one; thus, to give only one example, we hear Margaret speak of Frederick in terms which perfectly characterize the rejected parts of her action and feeling towards Thornton: "I will put my arm in the bolt sooner than he should come to the slightest harm. . . . I will watch over him like a lioness over her young" (II, 4). The result, so different from the sparse actions and spacious reflections of heroines like Austen's or Brontë's, is a sequence of strong feeling and quick action in a character whose natural bent is to control and meditate upon experience. At least in the central portion of the book, Margaret is not allowed a woman's leisure to learn, and the narrative emphasizes instead the sheer strength of character required to get through all

¹⁶ Passages in which Margaret wonderingly compares the moment with the recent past are frequent. W. A. Craik, pp. 99, 104–5, stresses the strong sense of time passing; this seems, however, to refer particularly to Margaret's sense of rapid change and her attempt to get at least some chronological control over it.

those simultaneous crises, and the continual pressure of responsibility for actions that bear heavily on other lives.

Margaret's two actions push her into the public realm of men: she joins Thornton to confront the angry strikers ("A Blow and its Consequences") and lies to the police inspector, denying that she has been present at the railway station with her fugitive brother ("False and True"). In both cases her pleas have put a man in danger, and she moves instinctively to save him from the consequences of a situation for which she feels responsible. The unthinking gestures are, in both cases, indirectly successful in averting the danger, but once done, they seem riddled with moral ambiguity, and cause Margaret enormous shame and internal strife. In both cases, too, what she sees as a human action to save another is given a sexual interpretation by others; and in the strike scene, the action does in fact include passions which Margaret is yet unable to face. What Gaskell takes on here is remarkable for its demand that Margaret share the complexities of public and private motives with the male characters: she places her heroine in situations which force her to experience and to reconcile herself to the moral ambiguity of public actions and, while Margaret agonizedly attempts to separate her "personal" from her morally disinterested self, shows how inextricable her motives "as a woman" and as a moral being really are.

It is tempting to see the strike as an irritated response to the riot scene in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, one manufacturing novel besides *Hard Times* that we know Gaskell read. In Brontë's story the theoretically feminist Shirley prevents her co-heroine Caroline Helstone from rushing to the aid of the besieged mill owner, Robert Moore. The assumptions about women's roles which underlie Shirley's reasons ought to destroy any pretenses about the nature of her feminism: she wants to keep Caroline from making "a spectacle of yourself" and argues, "And this is serious work: he must be unmolested."¹⁷ What would happen if she *did* go, Gaskell might have asked, in defiance of that traditional stance. Having Margaret go, speak to the crowd, and suffer the blow meant for Thornton is a dare, and Gaskell does not avoid the consequences that Shirley foresees. Thornton is annoyed at the violation of his

¹⁷ *Shirley*, Penguin English Library (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), ch. 19.

masculine world, Margaret suffers acutely from having become a "spectacle," and the impulsive action rebounds in unexpectedly sexual ways. The point is that Margaret is not allowed to hide and watch from the shadows, as Brontë's heroines do; she is made to share publicity and its attendant confusion with Thornton and to work out for herself the psychic consequences of her assertion.

I would emphasize the courage with which these situations are imagined, because it is so easy to criticize the scenes themselves. The writing in the chapters may well suggest a novelist pressed mistakenly into melodrama, for Margaret appears in them, too often, as the object of external regard, a suffering queen; and the strikers are turned for the purposes of the drama into a bestial force that betrays the novel's otherwise clear-eyed individual attention to the workpeople. The riot scene, with its focus on the sentimental force of Margaret's trickling blood, helps to justify the popular view that the social material is put in service of the love story. It is certainly true that the immediate consequence of "A Blow and its Consequences" is to turn our attention to the passional relationship of Thornton and Margaret and, for a time, away from the strike. But, together with the lie episode, the scene also does the more central work of implicating Margaret in the novel's questions about conventional—even legal—rules. Margaret violates a traditional idea about her place as a woman and commits perjury in a good cause. Like her father and brother, like Higgins and Thornton, she is placed in the position of asserting a personal stand in the face of a larger authority, and of enduring the complicated aftermath.

If the actions of Margaret's life stress her assumption of responsibility amid rapid changes of fortune, the story of her inner life renders the process of psychic change in terms that also move beyond our usual notions about Victorian analysis. At its best, the narrative describes the strong and contradictory feelings of the two lovers with an impartial, unmoralized recognition of their integrity that anticipates the method of D. H. Lawrence.¹⁸ Gaskell's refusal to judge or categorize the feelings she names gives another

¹⁸ Barbara Hardy recognizes and summarizes this as one of Gaskell's strengths, pointing out "how often the feelings are not specialized, not kept in separate compartments" (p. 178).

kind of narrative validity to her view that honest feeling does not live by the rules of conventional role.

Margaret's transformation from child to acting adult occurs quickly, but the change from girl to woman is a far more muddled transition in which the appeal to Victorian "womanhood" is as much a mask for sexual fear as it is an assertion of adulthood. The early narrative is surprisingly honest about Margaret's sexual confusions. "If Margaret had not been very proud she might have almost felt jealous of the mushroom rival" (I, 1), we are told in relation to Edith's new sister-in-law; the narrator is clear about the force that prevents jealousy, and it is not a moral one. After Henry Lennox's proposal, "Margaret felt guilty and ashamed of having grown so much into a woman as to be thought of in marriage" (I, 4). This blunt and accurate piece of adolescent psychology establishes terms which anticipate Margaret's shamed response to her impulsive defense of Thornton.

The confusion of guilt and shame in the rejection of Lennox, pushed aside in waking life by Mr. Hale's decision, returns in a remarkable dream that dramatizes the strength of Margaret's guilt and anger, suggesting at the same time her notion of "saving" as a primary impulse of love:

He was climbing up some tree of fabulous height to reach the branch whereon was slung her bonnet: he was falling, and she was struggling to save him, but held back by some invisible powerful hand. He was dead. And yet, with a shifting of the scene, she was once more in the Harley Street drawing-room, talking to him as of old, and still with a consciousness all the time that she had seen him killed by that terrible fall. (I, 5)

What Gaskell herself would have made of the dream we do not know; that she invented it is one of the many signs of the powerful psychological intelligence that casually informs so much of her narrative. Similarly, Margaret's ambivalent stance toward free action is represented in waking scenes controlled by images of freedom and enclosure. Margaret's despair at her father's defection from the Church is expressed in images of lost boundaries: she sees him as an outcast, while the sky behind the church tower becomes "some farther distance, and yet no sign of God," and the earth seems "desolate" under "never-ending depths of space" (I, 5).

When the cottage is nearly dismantled, Margaret goes out into the garden and experiences an analogous fear. The mystery of the forest life, the "wild adventurous freedom" of the poacher (I, 6), formerly sources of romantic pleasure, become threatening. Unaccountably afraid, Margaret rushes to the door of her house, "till she was safe in the drawing-room, with the windows fastened and bolted, and the familiar walls hemming her round, and shutting her in" (I, 6). The narrator does not tell us why Margaret is afraid, not choosing to interpret her character behind her back. We are left to observe the connection between her fear of boundless distance and the stress of change in her life without being put in a position of superior wisdom. At the same time we learn something of the tendencies in Margaret's unconscious life: bold imaginative romanticism on one hand, fearful retreat to the familiar or the orthodox on the other. The partial release of pent-up forces—both social and personal—in the riot scene is partly figured in a continuation of these patterns of imagery: the strikers break down the gates of Thornton's barricadelike establishment; Margaret sends Thornton out from the enclosed safety of his house, and then follows herself, going out of bounds into the "angry sea of men" on the tide of her passionate moral impulse (I, 22). The ambivalence in her earlier responses to such uncharted spaces makes no surprise of her reactions to this one.

Margaret's psychological task is to retreat from that chaotic territory by interpreting the incident in a way that will deny the feelings for Thornton which have been crudely observed by the vulgar eyes of Fanny Thornton and the servant Jane. She does so by making herself into a Victorian angel: "If I saved one blow, one cruel, angry action that might otherwise have been committed, I did a woman's work" (I, 23). This interpretation, which she uses again to defend herself against Thornton's declaration of love, is not Gaskell's retreat to Victorian convention but a canny conjunction of feeling and rationalization: Margaret clutches at the accessible stereotype in the face of her acute shame at having been "seen" in passionate action. In her fevered night thoughts,

a cloud of faces looked up at her, giving her no idea of fierce vivid anger, or of personal danger, but a deep sense of shame that she should thus be the object of universal regard—a sense of shame so acute that it seemed

as if she would fain have burrowed into the earth to hide herself, and yet she could not escape out of that unwinking glare of many eyes. (I, 23)

The shame is about having left the protected woman's place for one of unwomanly publicity, and Margaret's insistence that her act is a representative piece of woman's work takes on its full strength of defensive meaning in relation to the shame.

The scene in which Margaret and Thornton fight about that meaning, ironically titled "Mistakes Cleared Up," is a fine representation of confusions multiplied by the clash of the antagonists' different styles of anger. Under the circumstances, Margaret's stance of outraged modesty is almost comical: "We all feel the sanctity of our sex as a high privilege when we see danger," she says, and later accuses Thornton of being no "gentleman" if he could not perceive "that any woman, worthy of the name of woman, would come forward to shield, with her revered helplessness, a man in danger from the violence of numbers" (I, 24). The irony in such terminology is deepened by Thornton's insistence that he is a "man," and has therefore a right to express feeling, for Margaret's action as a particular woman has done precisely that. Her overly general and sentimental moral language gives away the shakiness of her emotional state, while Gaskell's clarity about its fraudulence shines through the extraordinary Lawrence-like account of Margaret's private condition of mind:

As far as [her opinions] defied his rock-like power of character, his passion-strength, he seemed to throw them off from him with contempt, until she felt the weariness of the exertion of making useless protests; and now, he had come, in this strange wild passionate way, to make known his love! . . . And she shrank and shuddered as under the fascination of some great power, repugnant to her whole previous life. She crept away, and hid from his idea. But it was of no use. . . . She disliked him the more for having mastered her inner will. . . .

And so she shuddered away from the threat of his enduring love. What did he mean? Had she not the power to daunt him? She would see. It was more daring than became a man to threaten her so. (I, 25)

The blunt linkage of sexuality and power-play is the kind of thing that may suggest Brontë's influence; but Brontë would never have come out with such stark formulations of pride, passion, and fear

in a controlling narrative voice. That inner/outer voice, with its almost incantatory rhythms, is of Gaskell's invention. And this sequence of feeling is not presented as a road to resolution; it remains a stubborn set of contradictions. Margaret again returns to her Victorian solution, while the narrative simply shows the confused coexistence of moral and emotional thoughts with the courage to leave them uninterpreted.¹⁹

Thornton also gets his share of such internal life, for Gaskell—again like Lawrence—makes no bones about her ability to enter his mind with equal confidence. The description of Thornton's aimless bus ride into the countryside ("Mother and Son") is perhaps the most sustained example; in those paragraphs we get, for instance:

He said to himself, that he hated Margaret, but a wild, sharp sensation of love cleft his dull, thunderous feeling like lightning, even as he shaped the words expressive of hatred. His greatest comfort was in hugging his torment; and in feeling, as he had indeed said to her, that though she might despise him, condemn him, treat him with her proud sovereign indifference, he did not change one whit. She could not make him change. He loved her, and would love her; and defy her, and this miserable bodily pain. (II, 1)

Among all the variations spun on the theme of change, "she could not make him change" rings with special strength. Even more impressive, though, are the cadences of prose. Like the treatment of Margaret, this writing creates sympathy and admiration for a character on the basis of stubborn strength of feeling, presented without the controlling terms of moral argument.

Elizabeth Gaskell's best writing—this originality of diction and psychological honesty—is done with the unjudging openness to experience that is also at issue in the story. But it is at odds with a conventional Victorian novelist's conception of her duty, and with the formal nature of the novel itself.²⁰ The pervasive ques-

¹⁹ Martin Dodsworth, p. 25, suggests that Gaskell's style—the "determined use of the unoriginal but apt image"—is like Lawrence's; but the treatment of inner flux in "absolute" feeling and the blunt mixtures of love and power seem more crucial connections.

²⁰ Ganz's central thesis, the irreconcilable split between conventionality and iconoclasm in Gaskell's work, is relevant here, though her demand for solutions seems at odds with the nature of *North and South*. But Gaskell does always raise this question in one form or another. I cannot agree with Coral Lansbury that Gaskell deliberately

tioning of conventional roles does not function on the level of explicit design as clearly as it permeates pieces of narrative texture. Yet the novel is strongest when it is most free to set down the rather chaotic matter of experience without an insistent directive bias.

North and South may well represent the furthest stretch of Gaskell's courageous sense of the clash between observation and form, for the novels that follow are, in some ways, retreats. *Sylvia's Lovers* and *Wives and Daughters* are formally better, but they lack the intense questioning which animates everything in *North and South*. Those stories work within the social order and its judgments, even if they are often acute about its stresses; and the demands of social change are no longer issues of character. Unlike *North and South*, both of those fictions seem "contained" in their forms.

In the final ten or eleven chapters, the narrative of *North and South* seems set on the task of bringing itself to some orderly conclusion, and the writing all too often summarizes with a lack of drama or conviction that suggests the dutiful completion of a project. Strained circumstances of composition need not suffice as an explanation; it may be that the difficulty of ending had something to do with the stubbornly open presentation of character and social change in the main part of the story. The constant questioning of the dynamics of authority and dependence, the insistence on the centrality of change in human experience, and the admiration for sheer strength of feeling in character—these attitudes are not easily shaped into the form of a Victorian story. If *North and South* ends with too much haste and inattention, it is perhaps because its author had dared to venture so much that did not lend itself to the demands of "resolution" in the conventions of serialized fiction.

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invented a narrator who would reflect the prejudices of a Victorian audience; both narrative and dialogue move between the poles too frequently. See Lansbury, *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1975), p. 9.