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Linguistic Contracts and the Female Speaker in
Elizabeth Gaskell's Fiction.

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on

Linguistic Contracts and the Female Speaker

in Elizabeth Gaskell's Fiction

The critical reception of Gaskell as a writer whose work falls into the two opposing categories of the 'condition of England' novel and the 'feminine novel' has evaded a central issue in her work: the relation of the individual to language. Her Unitarian background provides a conception of language that is 'performative' in nature, and which posits the individual as the autonomous, 'intending', site of meaning or 'truth'.

This conception of language has been subjected to a Derridean deconstruction in its present-day manifestation of Speech Act theory. Gaskell's texts can be similarly deconstructed to expose their ideological assumptions. The deconstruction yields a notion of a 'social contract' which, guaranteeing 'shared meaning', promotes 'communication' between individuals. That contract however is seen to evade the issue of gender. An analysis of Gaskell's novels which focuses on the interaction between gender, the autonomous speaking subject and language, exposes the male bias in what those texts posit as 'meaning' or truth. This thesis analyses both the gradual surfacing of these concerns in Gaskell's texts, and the texts' attempts to 'solve' the ideological contradictions upon which they are based.

For my parents

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Preface

My aim in this thesis has not been to uncover a unifying theme in Gaskell's works, nor settle the question of her status as 'condition of England' novelist or 'feminine' novelist once and for all. I have attempted to explore the impact of two ideological determinants, gender and Unitarian conceptions of language, on Gaskell's texts. Accordingly my thesis is arranged chronologically to reflect what I see as the gradual surfacing of these determinants in the novels. The analyses in Part One therefore reflect the decentred status of issues which become in Part Two central concerns in the novels. I have chosen Cranford as the turning point for one primary reason. As the text most often cited as 'proof' of Gaskell's 'feminine' skills, it seemed crucial to look closely at its ideological sub-structure. The resulting analysis, departing as it does from traditional readings of the text, raises the issue of the 'site of meaning', the individual's relation to language, which increasingly troubles the succeeding novels.

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Chapter One

i) Introduction

The primary emphasis, in literary criticism, on Elizabeth Gaskell as a 'condition of England' novelist has often led to an unbalanced and complacent view of her writing. Whilst one agrees that Gaskell does "give utterance to unfamiliar points of view"¹ and perhaps that she writes with "the quiet assumption that to know is to understand, to forgive, and even to respect",² such comments are ultimately unsatisfying. More recent criticism is similarly limited. Recognition that Gaskell "sees perfectly clearly . . . that women have needs and desires which no one state can wholly satisfy"³ is a welcome departure from the more typical 'social novelist' criticism. Nevertheless, Gaskell criticism, past and present, has thus far failed to investigate the impetus behind her novel writing and the 'utterance' it gives to unfamiliar points of view. The gap can be partially filled by an examination into Gaskell's Unitarian background - a dissenting religion which also recognised, or at least attempted to understand, the needs and desires of women. Unitarianism is singular both in its articulation of non-conventional viewpoints and in the absence of comprehensive, authoritative writings and commentaries on its history and social influence. Indeed, Unitarianism has only recently come into its own as an area worthy of research. Its influence on the lives and works of those who called themselves Unitarian, Gaskell amongst them, has yet to be investigated thoroughly. What follows

here is an overview comprising a brief history of Unitarianism; an outline of its philosophical origins; a look at the most significant Unitarian doctrines and beliefs; a sketch of Unitarian contributions to the English society of Gaskell's day; a a brief profile of a Unitarian congregation.

ii) Unitarianism

In the broadest possible terms, Unitarianism can be said to have originated in the English Renaissance. During this time, the concept of the individual's right to think for her/himself even when in opposition to the state first formed itself. It is upon this fundamental belief in the integrity of the individual that Unitarianism's distinctive theology is based. As Cook (an historian writing at the turn of the century for the American Unitarian Association) outlines the origins of Unitarianism, the basic belief in the right of the individual "developed clearly [into] the idea that he may become the transmitter of valid revelations of spiritual truth. [T]hat God may speak through individual intuition and reason, and that this inward revelation may be of the highest authority and worth."⁴ The principle of individuality can be attributed to Protestantism as a whole. Where Unitarianism differs in in its added insistence on the importance of man's reason in establishing the individual's relationship to God, and in investigating religion in general.

Insistence on the capacity of human reason to examine God and religion was obviously unpopular. Unitarians were excluded from the benefits of the 1689 Toleration Act,⁵ and were not officially

welcomed in society until 1813 when they attained the legal right to exist.⁶ Until that time, the Occasional Conformity Act of 1711 effectively disallowed Unitarians from holding any government office by imposing a penalty on any elected officers who attended a non-Church of England religious meeting during their time in office.⁷ Similarly, the Schism Act of 1714 necessitated the administration of the sacrament, according to Church of England practice, before the opening of a school, or teaching, could take place.

Even in 1813 when Unitarianism was declared legal, the welcome was limited and constrained. Unitarians were still unable to hold the office of mayor, town-clerk, member of council, office of magistracy, or any position of trust which pertained to the government of cities. These positions remained closed to them by the continued administration of the Corporation Acts of 1661, and the eighteenth-century acts outlined above, which demanded adherence to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper - a rite opposed by Unitarians. Not until 1828, when the acts were repealed, were any of these offices held by Unitarians.⁸ The Municipal Corporations Act further facilitated the holding of office by Unitarians. Up until the passing of this act in 1835, the strongholds of Unitarianism (Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham) had no municipal government. With its passing, Unitarians were elected to civic posts in some of the most important English towns, such as the mayorships in Manchester and Liverpool.⁹

Once finally given such rights, Unitarians appear to have had a great impact on local government, social reform, and social life in general. The first Statistical Society and the Sanitary Association in Manchester, for example, were founded by Unitarians. A list of

of Unitarians reveals their widespread prominence most succinctly:

Jeremy Bentham, Charles Booth (surveyor of social conditions in London),¹¹ James Stansfeld, MP, who petitioned for the abolition of the Contagious Diseases Act,¹² Florence Nightingale, James Martineau, W.R. Greg, Samuel Rogers, Josiah Wedgwood, and of course Elizabeth Gaskell, are but a few.

One expects, after becoming acquainted with these few historical facts, to find in Unitarianism the articulation of an extreme, radical faith. A modern reader with such expectations may well be disappointed. But once Unitarianism is placed within an historical context, and its doctrines are compared to other, more conventional, Protestant dissenting sects, then its uniqueness achieves definition.

The most important Unitarian doctrine, and the belief from which all of the ensuing doctrines originate, is the all-pervasive Unitarian emphasis on the use of reason in matters of religion. The faculty of reason was to be exercised upon the Bible itself, and it is from the results of such scriptural criticism that Unitarians derived their faith. At this point, it is useful to look at the philosophical origins of Unitarianism since they help to elucidate the Unitarian emphasis on reason. The metaphysical base of Unitarianism was the school of Scottish Common Sense philosophy. This school itself was a reaction or response to Hume's skeptical ontological theories.¹³ With Hume positing that humankind "could know nothing about ultimate reality",¹⁴ the Scottish philosophers, primarily Thomas Reid (1710-1796) and his disciples, George Campbell (1719-1796), James Beattie (1735-1803), Dugald Stewart (1753-1828) and James Oswald (1715-1769), set out to re-establish ontological realism. If Hume suggested that

the individual can 'know' only his/her own sense perceptions and that everything else, including one's knowledge of God, is in a sense 'fiction', then Reid and his followers determined "to reassure modern man that . . . he could still rely on reason and common sense for objective knowledge."¹⁵ They asserted that "God had implanted common sense in the human mind . . . [in order to] enabl[e] man to trust his perceptions and, through them, to apprehend God's ways."¹⁶

In a sense, Scottish Common Sense philosophy was a way of re-establishing confidence in the empirical methodology of contemporary science and its essential compatibility with a belief in Christianity. Whilst realising that there was no logical way of proving the validity of the individual's sense impressions, the common sense philosophers asserted that since every individual does believe in his/her existence and in the existence of the physical world, then it is because humankind was 'made' in such a way as to make the conviction of existence a matter of intuition.¹⁷ In other words, humankind must trust and accept as authoritative the senses and perceptions which God has chosen to give.

This Scottish common sense emphasis on sense perception or sensory evidence initiated yet another important facet of Unitarian theology: the importance of testimony, or witness. The common sense school divided 'evidence' into three categories. The first was 'intuitive evidence,' or evidence which is accepted on the basis of common sense, such as the belief in the validity of one's own senses as outlined above. The old a priori problem of proving the existence of one's sense perception was resolved by the assertion of the necessity of a basic trust in the structure of one's God-created mind. The second kind of evidence was 'demonstrative'. This category encompassed

evidence which was derived from logical deductions made from accepted premises. If for example one can touch a table, one deduces that it exists. The third type of evidence which is primary to Unitarian theology is 'moral evidence' - or as it was understood by contemporaries of the Scottish school, 'empirical' or sensory evidence. This last category itself was divided into three sections: induction, analogy, and reasoning on facts. The first two types of 'moral' evidence seem self-explanatory. The last is most crucial in Unitarianism. 'Reasoning on facts' is the basis for belief in events supported only by 'testimony'. In these instances (eg. the work of an historian) such considerations as the credibility of the witness, his/her opportunities for observation, and the degree to which s/he was disinterested or interested in the events recorded, are all used in order to assess the degree of validity to be accorded to the events described.¹⁸

Since for Unitarians, "Religious faith . . . was grounded upon testimony, and differed from sensory knowledge only in not being first-hand"¹⁹ such a mode of verifying evidence is crucial. In the words of one Unitarian minister, "the Holy Spirit did not so guide the Apostles as to suspend the peculiarities of their minds, [therefore] . . . a knowledge of their feelings, and of the influences under which they were placed is one of the preparations for understanding their writings."²⁰ Similarly, one must recognise and make allowance "for the tendency of the older writers [ie. early translators and interpreters of scripture] to surround great men with a supernatural halo, and to ascribe to them supernatural powers."²¹ The Bible, in effect, was to be scrutinised as carefully as any other text. It is "a book written for men in the language of men, and . . . its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books."²² Indeed,

as a text the Bible required the most fastidious literary examination. Channing, outlining his precepts for biblical interpretations, reminds us that since biblical rhetoric is "singularly glowing, bold, and figurative, [it] demand[s] more frequent departures from the literal sense than that of our own age and country, and consequently demand[s] more continual exercise of judgement"²³ in order that we do not "extend to all times and places what was of temporary and local application."²⁴

Stemming from this emphasis on reason and its application to Biblical scripture, are a number of significant Unitarian tenets. One of the most important beliefs, inherent in the emphasis on reason, is the belief in the fundamental dignity of man. Unitarians rejected completely the doctrine of original sin or innate depravity. Unlike Hobbes or Mandeville who maintained that all of man's actions stemmed from self-regard Unitarians believed that man was capable of altruistic acts. The basis for the belief is the Unitarian assertion that humankind is not innately depraved, but that its soul is fundamentally divine. "[T]here are," says Channing, "traces of infinity in the human mind, . . . it bears a likeness to God." Indeed,

the divine attributes are first developed
in ourselves and thence transferred to
our Creator. The idea of God, sublime
and awful as it is, is the idea of
our own spiritual nature, purified and
enlarged to infinity.²⁶

Accordingly, 'sin' was not implicit in human nature. Rather, sin pointed to "an abnormal state of disorder"²⁷ in which the individual's reason, its most divine attribute, has been superseded by a lower, baser faculty.

Complementing the doctrine of the dignity of man, is a rejection of baptism as it is most often defined. Since humankind was not

innately sinful, there was no need for a baptism, or a cleansing of an already untainted soul. The Unitarians substituted an 'act of dedication' which took the form of public declaration or acknowledgement of the parents' commitment to the religious education of their child.

The rite of Holy Communion was also rejected by Unitarian followers. The grounds for their rejection is threefold. Firstly, the idea of transubstantiation itself was regarded as a barbaric superstition not to be believed by rational man. Secondly, they considered that the 'saving' or cleansing properties of the communion service negatively influenced a person's daily activity. With the prospect of being 'cleansed' through Holy Communion, stress is laid upon the importance of 'ritual' rather than an actively good daily life. Since Unitarians believed in the freedom of man's will²⁸ (a belief based also on Scottish common sense philosophy),²⁹ any ritual such as Holy Communion which detracted from the active pursuit of goodness was rejected. Thirdly, the long-continued use of the rite by the state as a text for government office made it, quite understandably considering the barring from civic service it imposed on Unitarians, a symbol of political oppression and compromise.³⁰

Unitarianism also rejected the doctrine of the Trinity. For Unitarians, God was

one being, one mind, one person, one
intelligent agent, and one only, to
whom underived and infinite perfection
and dominion belong.³¹

In their theology, therefore, Christ is not 'divine' if by such a term one declares that he is the physical embodiment of one aspect of God. Rather, in Unitarian theology, Christ is 'divine' in that

he is a messenger sent by God. His exalted status obtains from the perfection of his character, or the complete fulfilment of his human potential.³² Part of the reasoning behind the 'lower' status attributed to Christ is the belief that the Trinity, as it is normally embraced, undermines the affection the individual gives to God. Within the Trinity, Christ is the most appealing entity. Since Unitarians recognise the anthropomorphic tendency in human nature, the Trinity for them facilitated, indeed encouraged, an idolatrous propensity in mankind which they found repellent.³³

Stemming from both this alteration in Christ's usual status within the Trinity and the Unitarian rejection of original sin, is the repudiation of the doctrine of atonement, and a consequent de-emphasizing of the importance of Christ's crucifixion. For Unitarians, the essentially Calvinist insistence on the importance of the crucifixion and Christ's atonement for humankind's sins is abhorrent, and a fitting belief only for pagans.³⁴ Such a belief is based on the principle that

man, having sinned against an
Infinite Being, has contracted infinite
Guilt, and is consequently exposed
to an infinite penalty.³⁵

The physical body being unable to withstand infinite penalty, this doctrine demands a substitute to endure the necessary penalty, that substitute being Christ. Unitarians, rejecting original sin, and thus effectively abolishing the Calvinist premise, claim "the obvious maxim that the guilt of a being must be proportioned to his nature and powers".³⁶ Christ, without the context of original sin within which to operate, becomes important as an exemplary teacher, a fosterer

of virtue, and a restorer of the soul.³⁷

Christ's importance as a teacher itself presupposes a distinctive conception of the structure of man's conscience. Unitarians viewed the conscience as operating upon three axiomatic principles: the necessary, the intuitive, and the fixed or absolute.³⁸ 'Necessary conscience' is the capacity in the individual which enables him/her to distinguish between 'right' and 'wrong'. Unitarians firmly maintained that each person possessed the faculties necessary to make the distinctions between the two concepts.³⁹ The second principle of conscience, the intuitive, is akin to the process by which the individual initially trusts the validity of his/her senses. Just as the individual is constructed so as to trust intuitively the evidence of his/her senses, so the knowledge of what constitutes the concepts of 'right' and 'wrong' is intuititive. For Unitarians, the definition of 'right' was one which everyone understood without exception.⁴⁰ It did not presuppose a knowledge of God gleaned from scripture, but was a faculty possessed by Christians and non-believers alike.⁴¹ The third principle of conscience, the fixed or absolute, is the idea that the obligation to do right is implicit in man's grasp of the idea of 'right'. These principles of conscience humankind shared with God. By means of conscience, or moral sense, each individual had the capacity "to perceive the eternal truths of morality as readily as God himself did . . . [and so] participate in the divine homage to virtue."⁴²

At the same time, the Unitarians also viewed the conscience as a bipartite structure, comprised of the cognitive and the volitional. The cognitive element was operated by the principles outlined above. The volitional element is the means by which Unitarians accounted for the performance of 'wrong'. Whilst asserting that the individual

had the potential ability to make moral judgements, Unitarians recognised that "all men did not avail themselves of their moral capabilities."⁴³ It is in this sense that 'sin' or performing 'wrong' is disharmonious. Having the capacity to choose 'right' the sinner avoids utilising it and thus sins.

With a belief in this type of conscience, or moral sense, Unitarianism necessarily placed great emphasis on the importance of education and teaching. If humankind's moral sense was not automatically nor universally utilised (to which the existence of 'wrong' attested), then a method of encouraging the use of the conscience was necessary. William Stevenson (Gaskell's father) in a discussion of the merits and demerits of a classical education, posits the following 'goals' or aims of education. Firstly, education should foster a knowledge of nature's laws that may enable an individual to aid humankind or prevent injuries. Secondly, education should promote the habitual consideration and comprehension of the consequences of action which is the foundation of duty. Thirdly, education should facilitate a knowledge of the meaning and power of language so that ideas and information can be both communicated and understood.⁴⁴

It is the second aim that is most relevant to the issue of conscience. Unitarians believed strongly in each individual's right of access to information. If one is to be able to grasp the consequences of all actions and so perform one's duty, then one must be aware of all of the causes of actions. Only with such 'complete' knowledge can humankind's reason operate effectively, thus allowing the individual to perform his/her duty.

At the same time, education must encourage the exercising of individual judgement. If the scriptures themselves must be minutely

scrutinised in order to take account of an individual author's peculiarities and biases, then 'information' or 'facts' must be approached in the same way. It is for this reason that Stevenson laments the ubiquity of the classical education system. According to Stevenson, the system encourages an uninformed reliance on the veracity of 'authority', that is on the information disseminated under the aegis of ancient names.⁴⁵ Instead of fostering judgement, a classical education promoted the implicitly uncritical capacity of memory, thereby ensuring the perpetuation of old errors and prejudices.⁴⁶ A preferable method of education would produce individuals capable of discovering the basis for every proposition to which they assented or of which they disapproved, as well as individuals able to discern the motives and influences of their own actions.

This ability to distil 'pure' information or knowledge uninfluenced by individual circumstance and bias, is crucial to Unitarianism. Whilst recognising that humankind errs, Unitarians were reluctant to cast doubts on the faculties given to humans by God, or the knowledge which these faculties allowed them to deduce.⁴⁷ Since knowledge forms the basis of individual actions (one does 'right' increasingly in proportion to one's growing perception of which acts constitute 'right'), the individual must trust his/her ability to distinguish the truth and falsehood contained in the information s/he is given.⁴⁸

Once an individual is capable of exerting his/her reason in this analytic manner, s/he would have no difficulties in performing the 'right' acts which the moral sense defines for him/her. S/he would possess not only an abstract knowledge of what is right, but an "emotional relish"⁴⁹ for right. Through the correct utilisation of knowledge and judgement, each individual recognises that it is

by the development of a Christian character (or the performance of duty) that real happiness is achieved. Just as Christ the teacher embodied the complete fulfilment of human potential, so the individual by means of education and the exercising of judgement, can progress through the various stages of the formation of a Christian character until s/he ultimately attains a Christ-like and finally a God-like nature.⁵⁰ In other words, though such progress was not considered easy to achieve, Unitarianism did maintain that by diligent self-improvement one not only attained happiness, but lived a true Christian religious life.⁵¹

All of this emphasis on reason and the precise analysis of 'information' led to a charge of over-intellectualism being laid against Unitarian theology. Unitarians admitted that they laid "no stress on strong excitements"⁵². Nevertheless, they were adamant that Unitarianism did not exclude warmth from religion. For them, Christianity "is intended to act powerfully on our whole nature, on the heart as well as the understanding and the conscience."⁵³ Certainly, the case of the Reverend Hutton, a popular London Unitarian minister at Carter Lane Chapel, whose "inability to control his feelings; and . . . tenderness. . . of heart"⁵⁴ seemed rather to threaten the continuation of his sermons, suggests that Unitarianism was not all rigorous intellectual enquiry. Unitarians were adverse, not to emotions, but emotionalism. An appeal to the emotions was considered to be suspect primarily because Unitarians feared its capacity to undermine individual opinion and judgement. The Crucifixion is the prime example. Its emotive symbolism and the doctrine of atonement was not only repugnant but destructive. Any emphasis on such an emotive icon detracted from the Unitarian stress on individual effort whilst bolstering a complacency in its power to cleanse.

iii) Unitarian contributions to social reform

Holt reports that "Towards the middle of the nineteenth century [Unitarians] thought of themselves as 'the Vanguard of the Age.'"⁵⁵ Glancing at a list of Unitarian achievements and social contributions, the communal self-esteem that such a title suggests is neither surprising nor overly self-congratulatory. Elizabeth Gaskell, born in 1810. could look back on an impressive Unitarian heritage. Such people as Thomas Butterworth Bayley (1774-1802), an early prison reformer;⁵⁶ William Smith, MP, involved in the abolition of slavery movement with Wilberforce and Clarkson;⁵⁷ John Fielden, factory owner and a leader of the agitation for the 1803 Factory Acts;⁵⁸ T.H. Porter, involved in the Union and Emancipation Society which supported the North in the American Civil War;⁵⁹ each of these men was a Unitarian. The 'Tate' in Tate Gallery, London;⁶⁰ the establishment in 1774 of the first Humane Society in the country in London by Howes and Gogan⁶¹ - these too were Unitarian achievements. The late eighteenth-century and Victorian Unitarians were pioneers of a sort: life insurance began with Richard Price;⁶² Thomas Potter was one of the promoters of the first Manchester Joint Stock Bank in 1848;⁶³ the first cotton mill was built by Unitarian Daniel Brown, in Leominster, Herefordshire;⁶⁴ and Thomas Henry (1734-1816) devised a number of improvements in the dyeing and bleaching of material.⁶⁵ In Gaskell's own day, the Gregs (a family she knew well) were well-respected as industrial innovators who built houses for their workers, and who treated their poorhouse apprentices humanely.⁶⁶ Indeed, Unitarian industrialists were generally regarded as positive exceptions to the usual character of northern 'captains of industry.'⁶⁷

Reading about these innovations, one is struck by the sheer diversity of the achievements. For such a small body of dissenters, the achievements seem disproportionately numerous. But perhaps, as Holt suggests, it is the very fact of their dissent which accounts for the Unitarians' abundant innovative activity. Since their theology demanded freedom from reliance on external authority, and such freedom was attained through the exercising of the rational faculty, innovation and pioneering seem the inevitable results.⁶⁸ Certainly the Unitarian contribution to Victorian journalism tallies with their theological stance. With a firm belief in the individual's right of access to information, and belief that the structure of government should be derived from an educated public opinion, it is almost to be expected that Unitarians were responsible for establishing The Manchester Guardian, a paper renowned in that day for its liberalism;⁶⁹ that its first editor, J.E. Taylor, was both its primary financial benefactor and a Unitarian;⁷⁰ and that H. Crabb Robinson, a Unitarian was foreign editor at The Times.⁷¹ The Unitarian support of the growing co-operative movement⁷² also accords with its philosophy since the movements encouraged active self-help and promoted independence from established authority.

Unitarian contributions to education can also be seen as stemming directly from their stress on the necessity of personal judgement and freedom from external authority. They were involved in promoting all kinds of educational opportunities, from adult education and women's education (unfortunately then considered separate categories) to unsectarian education.⁷³ Holt suggests that, because of existing prejudices, Unitarians were unable to spread their educational ideals widely, and that as a result their work in the education field, as

elsewhere, was primarily of a pioneering nature.⁷⁴ Though that might well be the case, their 'pioneering' work has certainly had a lasting effect. Many of today's older redbrick universities - Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool, Birmingham - have Unitarian foundations. The Unitarian dissenting academy at Warrington, for example, went through several metamorphoses, from Manchester Academy to Manchester College (with teachers such as James Martineau, Francis William Newman, and J.J.Taylor) and finally to Manchester College, Oxford.⁷⁵ Similarly, Liverpool University grew from the (Unitarian) Royal Institute, established in 1817 by William Roscoe, which housed the developing School of Medicine from 1834 to 1844.⁷⁶ When Liverpool University's first college, University College, opened, a Unitarian, Rev. Charles Beard, who was chairman of the Committee of the Association for the Promotion of Higher Education in Liverpool, was instrumental in its establishment.⁷⁷

But, aside from helping to establish such centres for higher education, these places of study also embodied the modern idea of the university. Institutes such as Manchester College (est. 1840) were free from religious testing long before either Oxford or Cambridge were. They provided the opportunity for college education for laymen, as well as educating ministers for radical dissenters, without asking for adherence to any particular religious creed.⁷⁸ In the same spirit of education for all, the Mechanics' Institutes (such as the one in Manchester where W. Gaskell lectured in English) offered working men the chance of an education which took into account their working hours and interest.⁷⁹ W. Gaskell's own lecture on the dialects of the Manchester area (published as an appendix to the 1854 edition

of Mary Barton) illustrates admirably the principle of tailoring education to the individual's needs and interests.

Accompanying their advocacy of education for all, Unitarians were strong supporters of the idea of public libraries. After the passing of the Free Libraries Act, Manchester in 1852 opened the first public library in the country.⁸⁰ The Portico Library or Manchester Subscription Library was established and administered by Unitarians, and became Manchester's public library. W. Gaskell himself was its chairman (before the Free Libraries Act) from 1849-1884, well after it became a public library.⁸¹ Unitarians were also anti-Sabbatarians. They campaigned for parks and libraries to remain open on Sundays.⁸²

Gaskell's own experience (discussing Walter Scott on a Sunday brought acrimony on her head from a fellow Unitarian)⁸³ suggests that the degree of anti-Sabbatarianism varied from one individual to another.

Nevertheless, Unitarians as a body did campaign for the Sunday opening of certain recreational and educational facilities.

iv) The Victorian Unitarian Congregation: a profile

All of these contributions to social reform and development. bespeak the Unitarian concern with the exercise of reason and the use of personal judgement. At the same time, they hint at a problematic aspect of Unitarianism which concerned its followers deeply.

If a list of who's who in Unitarian society often resembles a list of who's who in Victorian society, then the similarity did not exist without its drawbacks. Despite their radical views and reformism, Unitarians very much constituted a social elite,⁸⁴ a body of individuals

very much concerned with respectability.⁸⁵ Obviously, the Unitarian emphasis on reason and education necessitates a well-educated, intellectual body of followers. Holt further suggests that Unitarian 'respectability' was a reaction to the isolation imposed upon them because of religious prejudice, as well as being a response to the 'enthusiastic' or more emotional types of dissent. If Unitarianism was suspect because of its radical theological and social views, at least its followers did not rant, shake, or quake.

Unitarianism's respectability and social elitism, however, can also be attributed to more concrete, more easily delineated, causes. Victorian Unitarian congregations were able to trace their history from the early Puritan establishments: the Presbyterians, the Independents, and the General Baptists.⁸⁶ A sketch or profile of one of these earlier dissenting congregations illustrates the historical basis for Unitarianism's social elitism. Of the six hundred members of the dissenting congregation at Banbury (est. 1717 by Dr. J. Evans), seventy were county voters (and therefore substantial property holders); thirty-five were gentlemen, and the rest were tradesmen or farmers.⁸⁷ The first dissenting congregation at Bristol represented an estimated value of £400,000.⁸⁸ Similarly, the long lines of carriages which gathered each Sunday outside of the Corn St. Chapel, Manchester, and Upper Chapel, Sheffield, attest to the wealth of the members of the congregation within.⁸⁹ Cross St. Chapel, Manchester, where W. Gaskell was minister, was established in the late eighteenth-century by Presbyterians. Its trustees in the 1770's and 80's were established Manchester textile merchants, and the chapel itself was the oldest and most opulent in Manchester.⁹⁰

It was from this type of congregation that Unitarianism developed. Families in Unitarian chapels could trace their membership back generations, often to before the chapel adopted Unitarian views.⁹¹ Not surprisingly, the Victorian Unitarian congregation was not a working-class body. The majority of its members were people with a moderate amount of education and property: shopkeepers, artisans, clerks, and schoolmasters.⁹² The occupations of the trustees of Cross St. Chapel (W. Gaskell's chapel at a later date) in 1828 suggest the typical make-up of the Unitarian congregation. Of the trustees, twenty-four were merchants; two bankers; three manufacturers; two gentlemen; two solicitors; one doctor; one wine merchant; one warehouseman; one actuary; and one chandler.⁹³ Admittedly, trustees constitute the elite of the congregation, but as the main body of the membership consisted of shopkeepers, clerical workers, small manufacturers, with a third part composed of bankers, merchants and industrial employers, with only a small handful of weavers,⁹⁴ the predominantly monied, middle-class character of the Victorian Unitarian congregation is clearly defined. Indeed, in many respects, it was this very social elitism which ensured Unitarianism's survival in Victorian England. When Unitarians were threatened with the loss of their oldest chapels because of theological change, the history to which many members of the congregation could point, and the local influence which often accompanied such long-standing presence in the community, helped with the passing of the 1844 Dissenters' Chapel Act.⁹⁵

Along with this high social standing, the concentration of Unitarian congregations in industrial areas was a legacy of the dissenting movement in general. By the 1858 Religious Census figures, Lancashire had thirty-five Unitarian congregations (the highest per

county in the country), and of these thirty-five, ten congregations had more than two-hundred-and-fifty members each, Gaskell's Cross St. Chapel amongst them.⁹⁶ When one couples this concentration of Unitarians with the close links often established during an academy education, where laymen and future ministers were educated together, and the frequent inter-marrying between Unitarian families,⁹⁷ one realises how close-knit and homogenous a group Unitarians were. Isolation through religious prejudice further banded Unitarians together, and resulted in a very tightly-knit, chapel-oriented community.⁹⁸

Such insularity and inter-dependence is true of all extreme dissenting sects, of course, but it is particularly significant for Unitarianism. Because of their wealth and social influence, their political power (there were approximately twelve Unitarian MP's after the 1832 parliamentary reform); the fact that their rationalistic ideology was closely connected to the contemporary ideologies of political economy and utilitarianism; and the Unitarian emphasis on active reform.⁹⁹ the Unitarians of Victorian England were a powerful, though small, section of society.

Yet as important and useful a tool, politically, as their middle-class social profile was, it did counter-act one of Unitarianism's most integral doctrine - the exercise of personal judgement. If such judgement had to be based on 'information', then how, with a still largely uneducated general populace, was the vital information to be circulated? More importantly, since the means by which this belief was formed involved an intense, intellectual effort (ie. a scrupulous 'sifting' of the Bible), how can the validity of personal judgement, even reason itself, be 'proven' and circulated amongst

an uneducated audience? Unitarians recognised the block which their intellectualism constituted as long as education remained primarily a privilege for the upper classes, and attempted to popularise their religion. The Unitarian Fund was established which promoted a new 'type' of minister and a plainer, more familiar method of preaching was attempted in order to illustrate the Unitarian theology, and thus gain a congregation's rational or intellectual agreement to Unitarian propositions.¹⁰⁰

Earlier attempts at popularisation had been made. Richard Wright, a Unitarian missionary, walked between the years 1810-1822 approximately 3,000 miles annually, spreading Unitarianism. His preaching had some success in establishing small pockets of Unitarianism which were then put in touch with other Unitarian sympathisers.¹⁰¹ By the 1820's, in fact, working-class congregations comprised of weavers, colliers, etc., were in existence in Rochdale, Newchurch, Padiham, Oldham, Rawenstall, Middleton, Swinton, Todmorden, Hollinwood, Astley, Blackburn, and Leigh.¹⁰² Indeed, John Fielden, the manufacturer and MP mentioned earlier as leader of the agitation for the 1803 Factory Acts, was himself converted by Richard Wright, and went on to found the Unitarian congregation at Todmorden.¹⁰³

All in all, however, this early nineteenth-century push for popularisation was not successful. The small congregation at Rochdale and the pockets of Unitarians in South and East Yorkshire were the only notable additions to early nineteenth-century Unitarianism.¹⁰⁴ The lack of success can be attributed to the fact that Unitarianism still appealed primarily to those with "a measure of social independence and a moral culture that was individualist"¹⁰⁵ - in other words the artisans, shopkeepers and craftsmen of society. In the

rural areas, Unitarianism was stopped effectively before it could start by the resistance of long-established local Anglican landowners and clergy,¹⁰⁶ while the Unitarian reputation of intellectualism and tight, closed social communities aided its defeat amongst the working-classes.¹⁰⁷

A second, later attempt seems to have been more successful. The Unitarian Domestic Mission (est. 1833), and the Unitarian Home Missionary Board (1854) which trained the missionaries, aimed "to preach the Gospel to the poor in their homes as a friend, and through personal affection and influence [to] awaken the spirit of religion,"¹⁰⁸ Holt praises the initiative "not only as indicating the emergence of a new spirit and for the value of the work [Unitarians] did, but [because it brought] Unitarians into closer contact with the actual conditions under which people were living."¹⁰⁹ The preaching was combined with other activities such as evening classes, allotments, and libraries.

This mission was not however fully supported by the Unitarian ministry. Few ministers actually ventured into the homes of the poor (leaving that to the trained missionaries) though, importantly, Gaskell's husband was one of the few who did.¹¹⁰ Unitarians believed primarily that it is the individual's conduct in life, and the disposition or character of his/her mind which affects his/her future, hence the stress on personal judgement. The idea of converting or altering an individual's opinions to Unitarian opinions, in such a context would not gain complete support as a matter of first importance.¹¹¹ The converts too appear to have been ostracised from the Unitarian social 'elite' in some areas. Seed quotes from a diary (admittedly published in 1832, one year before the mission officially began work) which indicated how a convert to Unit-

arianism may have been treated. Edward Hereford, of Mosley St. Chapel, Manchester, writes,

in our soi-dissant pure-Christianity
chapels no one ever thinks of opening
the door of his pew to a stranger
(especially if he happens not to have
a good coat on his back) as they
universally do in the churches of
the establishment and other
dissenting chapels.¹¹²

The word 'universally' suggests that perhaps Hereford is not quite as informed as he should be of the etiquette and social customs of members of the Church of England. It seems equally as likely that a Church of England 'gentleman' would not welcome the poor worshipper as a gentleman of any other professed creed. Perhaps Hereford's remarks should be considered accordingly. In any case, whilst the continued intellectualism of Unitarian sermons (stemming perhaps as Seed suggests from "distrust of the anti-intellectualism of evangelical strategies to gain popular attention")¹¹³ does suggest that some working-class converts may well have felt alienated, the changes wrought in the Unitarian congregation's structure suggests that the Domestic Mission did have a positive impact. With the new zeal and democracy of the converts, the congregation changed from one administered by an élite of trustees and supported by high pew rates and subscriptions, to one administered by a committee representing all of the membership, and supported by a collection from all of the members.¹¹⁴

Notes

¹Kathleen Tillotson, Novels of the Eighteen-Forties, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 221.

²Ibid.

³Shirley Foster, Victorian Women's Fiction: Marriage, Freedom and the Individual. (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1985), 139.

⁴George Willis Cooke, Unitarianism in America: A History of its Origins and Development, (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1902), 2.

⁵Raymond V. Holt, The Unitarian Contribution to Social Progress in England, (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1938), 16.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., 319

⁸Ibid., 316

⁹Ibid., 217.

¹⁰Ibid., 225.

¹¹Ibid., 27

¹²Ibid., 23.

¹³David Walker Howe, The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy 1805-1861, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 29.

¹⁴Ibid., 29.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., 38

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid., 35.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰William Ellery Channing, Unitarian Christianity and other Essays, (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1957), 6. One must note that Channing, though an American minister, is an appropriate source for information on the English Unitarian movement. As Holt, 342, points out, there were nearly 3,000 subscribers in England to a cheap edition of Channing's work in 1842, and that 21,000 copies of a 1869 edition of his works were sold within a twelve-month period. The close connection between English and New England Unitarians is corroborated by Gaskell's own sympathetic relationship with Charles Eliot Norton.

²¹Thomas Sadler, The Unitarians of London Fifty Years Ago, (Printed at Elsom and Co., Hull, 1900), 31.

²²Channing, 4.

²³Ibid., 6

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid., 93.

²⁶Ibid., 90.

²⁷Howe, 60.

²⁸Cooke, 38.

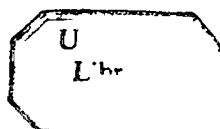
²⁹Howe, 67.

³⁰John Seed, The Role of Unitarianism in the Formation of Liberal Culture, 1775-1851: A Social History, unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Hull (Dec. 1981), 227.

³¹Channing, 11.

³²Howe, 119.

³³Channing, 15.



³⁴Joseph Henry Allen, Our Liberal Movement in Theology, (New York: Arno Press, 1972). First published Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1892., 19.

³⁵Channing, 27.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Channing, 29.

³⁸Howe, 49.

³⁹Howe, 49.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Howe, 55.

⁴²Howe, 53.

⁴³Howe, 54.

⁴⁴William Stevenson, Remarks on the very Inferior Quality of Classical Learning, Printed at the office of G. Nicholson, Manchester, Sold by H.D. Symonds, 20 Paternoster Row., London, 1896, 5.

⁴⁵Ibid., 30.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Channing, 46.

⁴⁸Channing, 47.

⁴⁹Howe, 109.

⁵⁰Howe, 120.

⁵¹Howe, 115.

⁵²Channing, 31.

⁵³Channing, 32.

⁵⁴Sadler, 8.

⁵⁵Holt, 13.

⁵⁶Holt, 45.

⁵⁷Holt, 15.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Holt, 47.

⁶⁰Holt, 25.

⁶¹Holt, 24.

⁶²Holt, 34.

⁶³Holt, 46.

⁶⁴Holt, 39.

⁶⁵Holt, 50.

⁶⁶Holt, 51-52.

⁶⁷Holt, 42.

⁶⁸Holt, 243.

⁶⁹H. McLachlan, The Unitarian Movement in the Religious Life of England: Its Contribution to Thought and Learning 1700-1900, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1934), 144.

⁷⁰Seed, 214.

⁷¹Holt, 19.

⁷²Holt, 202.

⁷³Holt, 243.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Holt, 21.

⁷⁶McLachlan, 154.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸McLachlan, 145.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰McLachlan, 144.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Holt, 24.

⁸³J.A.V Chapple and Arthur Pollard, eds., The Letters Of Mrs Gaskell, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), 62.

⁸⁴Seed, 155.

⁸⁵Holt, 331.

⁸⁶Holt, 329.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Holt, 330.

⁹⁰Seed, 65.

⁹¹Holt, 331.

⁹²Seed, 185.

⁹³Seed, 210.

⁹⁴Seed, 212.

⁹⁵Holt, 331.

⁹⁶Seed, 60.

⁹⁷See Holt, 331, and Seed, 221.

⁹⁸Seed, 183.

⁹⁹Seed, 183-4.

¹⁰⁰Seed, 186.

¹⁰¹Seed, 191.

¹⁰²Seed, 191.

¹⁰³Ibid.

¹⁰⁴Seed, 203.

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

¹⁰⁸Holt, 337.

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

¹¹⁰Holt, 338.

¹¹¹Seed, 203.

¹¹²Seed, 204.

¹¹³Seed, 205.

¹¹⁴Holt, 338.

Chapter Two

i) Unitarian Conceptions of Language: performative utterances

"A man . . . is so in the way in the house!"¹

In The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, Gaskell is represented by seven quotations. Six of those seven are taken from Cranford, the one above topping the list. Whilst such representation might seem incidental, it does in fact point to one of the more limiting approaches to Gaskell's work. The quaint, genteel spirit of Cranford dominates the critical appraisal of Gaskell's fiction. From the time of her writing to the present date, Gaskell is often viewed as an 'authoress' who wrote charmingly light, feminine pieces of fiction; whose heroines could "depress one like an old acquaintance"² with their lack of passion and inability to surprise. An authoress in other words whose novels were a 'pleasure' rather than a challenge to read because she neither questioned nor upset the status quo.

At the same time, the last of the seven quotations listed in the ODQ points complacently in the direction of the dominant strain of Gaskell criticism. The quote, "That kind of patriotism which consists in hating all other nations,"³ is from Sylvia's Lovers, and implicitly refers to the writer who dramatises and remarks upon the 'condition of England' question. Whilst an improvement upon the 'genteel writer' label, the category of social novelist limits our apprehension of Gaskell's fiction to much the same extent.

Wright's seminal Mrs Gaskell: The Basis of Reassessment is a case

in point. In his attempt to find "some line of development in Mrs Gaskell's work, some evidence of maturing as a novelist and an observer . . . or the slow discovery of an essential direction for her thoughts and powers,"⁴ Wright convincingly argues that Gaskell "develops her central interest in observing and analyzing the various aspects of individual emotion and behaviour, as controlled by social custom and belief, that combine to form a unified or disorganised society."⁵ But something remains undiscussed. Both approaches focus primarily on the overt 'themes' of Gaskell's work: her pleas for social reform, her analysis of country and city life.

In the context of Gaskell's Unitarian background, such a consensus of judgement may not seem extraordinary. As has been discussed, socially and politically the Unitarians appeared to be a prosperous, respectable and influential section of society; a body of individuals in which it seems quite reasonable to find a writer of 'light' social fiction. Accordingly any criticism of Gaskell's work which takes into account her Unitarianism tends to focus on those aspects of her faith which collude with the two prevailing critical approaches to Gaskell's work. Lansbury for example, notes that Gaskell was "released from much of the prejudice and oppression enjoined upon other women"⁶ because of her Unitarianism, and goes on to discuss its impact on her fiction. Nevertheless, this impact to Lansbury is still primarily thematic. Because Gaskell is "dedicated to the principle of individual independence and yet determined to ameliorate society,"⁷ as all Unitarians were, her novels are read for their analysis of particular social issues. Lansbury's chapter titles indicate the direction in which Gaskell's Unitarianism has taken

her. "Mary Barton: the condition of the working class in Manchester;" "Ruth: moral depravity and capital gain;" "North and South: civilising capitalism;" "Wives and Daughters: the economic landscape;" each title reflects the social novelist emphasis. Duthie too in the more recent The Themes of Elizabeth Gaskell, uses the biographical fact of Unitarianism as support for yet another reading of Gaskell's fiction which focuses on the social issues with which Unitarianism is here identified.

As valid and enlightening as such analyses of Gaskell's work can be, Unitarianism provides more than simply the biographical 'reason' for Gaskell's choice of subject matter. In a sense, to limit Gaskell's Unitarianism to the one application is to collude with the commonly held notion that Gaskell is an 'artless writer' of compassion and sincerity, for whom structure and language took second place to social issues, if they took any place at all. It is to assume that whilst being at the centre of the stimulating, intellectual circle which the Unitarians in Manchester formed, Gaskell was simply a passive receptacle for the 'content' of Unitarian interests, and so is primarily a "social historian of unusual prescience using fiction as her analytical method."⁸ But Unitarianism is more than the now respectably liberal sum to which its social concerns appear to add up. It had its methodology, its philology, which were the radical foundations for its often ostracized place in Victorian society, and these attributes provide an alternative approach to Gaskell's work.

Unitarianism is built firmly on the basis of its rational criticism of the Bible. Since Unitarians believed that "only what was rationally plausible could be accepted in religious faith,"⁹ the Bible was

subjected to intense critical investigation. Channing, discussing the uniqueness of Unitarian Christianity, asserts that "the Bible is a book written for men, in the language of men, and that its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books."¹⁰ Such investigation of course presupposes a faith in human reason itself. Unitarians, believing it "impossible that a teacher of infinite wisdom should expose those whom he would teach to error,"¹¹ were confident that a rational criticism of the Holy Scriptures would reveal God's Word.

At this point it is imperative to recognise that Unitarians distinguished between 'Holy Scripture' and 'God's Word'. The scriptures were "the records of God's successive revelations to mankind,"¹² not the actual revelations, or God's Words, themselves. As 'records', the reading of scripture had to be the applied practice of the theory of what can be called "reasoning on facts,"¹³ an analytic method employed in those instances when events or ideas were to be believed on the basis of testimony. The method was applied primarily to written and oral testimonies, the Holy Scriptures being the most prestigious example. The process involved an evaluation of the witness which assessed credibility, the opportunities for observing the events which are attested to, disinterestedness and the idiom of the language used.¹⁴ Channing states the Unitarian perspective on scripture matter-of-factly:

the Holy Spirit did not so guide the Apostles as to suspend the peculiarities of their minds, . . . a knowledge of their feelings, and of the influences under which they were placed, is one of the preparations for understanding their writings.¹⁵

Unitarians were particularly concerned not to "extend[] to all times and places what was of temporary and local application"¹⁶ in the scriptures. Misapplication could easily occur if a reader was over-hasty or 'subjective' in his/her criticism. Because the scriptural style "nowhere affects the precision of science or the accuracy of definition,"¹⁷ literal translations could lead to the anathema of misreading. The impulse "to surround great men with a supernatural halo"¹⁸ had to be perceived and excoriated from both the text and its reader.

The distinction between scripture and God's Word however gives rise to more than the concept of 'witnessing' and the means by which to assess the resultant testimony. It also generates two separate models of the structure of language, both of which can be used to illuminate Gaskell's fiction. It is perhaps best to look first at the language model which the concept of 'God's word' generates. Channing states that "The word of God bears the stamp of the same hand which we see in his works, It has infinite connections and dependences."¹⁹ More simply, "God's works and God's word are no way at variance, but in true and beautiful harmony."²⁰ The two statements speak of 'connections' and 'harmonies', but this is in actual fact misleading. What Channing is attempting to describe is the Unitarian conception of God's language as 'performative utterance'. The term is Austin's ²¹ and it is used to describe those utterances when the actual uttering of words constitutes an action. To be specific, Austin defines 'performative utterances' by four main characteristics: they are utterances which are not nonsense; which do not describe, report or constate anything; which are not

nonsense; which are not true or false; and which, in their utterance, are or constitute a part of, doing an action.²² The utterance 'I do', in the course of the marriage ceremony, is an example. By uttering 'I do', one performs the act of marrying. Austen realises, of course, the contextual nature of performative utterances or 'performatives'. If I say 'I do' when purchasing a pint of milk, I should be surprised to find myself married. Accordingly, Austen introduces the condition that "the circumstances in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, appropriate."²³ In the above example, the words 'I do' would need to be said by someone not already married; to someone not already married; and in front of someone invested with the authority to marry. If the circumstances are 'apt', the performative is what Austen calls "felicitous"²⁴. If circumstances are not apt, the performative becomes an 'unhappy', 'void', or 'infelicitous' performative.²⁵

This last category is most important. Performatives uttered in the wrong circumstances do not become mere false statements.

If I say 'I promise', but fail to fulfil the promise, the utterance itself does not cease to be performative; to say 'I promise' is still to promise, even if I have no intention of ever fulfilling it. Its essential status is not altered because of a subsequent failure to act out the thing promised - it becomes merely a different degree of performative (in this instance, an 'insincere performative'), not a different kind of utterance.

Because of the contextual nature of performatives, it is difficult to posit the existence of a 'pure performative', that is an utterance which would remain felicitous under any circumstances. The closest Austen can get to the 'pure performative' is what he calls 'explicit

performatives.'²⁶ He defines these performatives as ones which begin with or include some highly significant or unambiguous expression, 'I bet' for example. But even in this instance, the performative can be abortive. If I say 'I bet X wins,' but you do not say 'Agreed', then my performative has been misexecuted, and is therefore infelicitous. One cannot 'bet' without someone or something to bet against.

To return to Channing, God's language is what, in Austin's terminology, can be called 'pure performative.' The Genesis text, "And God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light." illustrates the concept under discussion. It is God's Word (God said) that is God's action: God saying 'Light' is light - a pure performative utterance, to say is to do. No context or set of circumstances declares it void or infelicitous. In a sense, a pure performative utterance can be viewed as a type of 'primal sign' in which the word, or sign, 'Light' is the signified 'Light.' There is no distinction or gap between the two; the saying or uttering of the sign is the signified itself.

At the same time, the text "And God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light' points to that other model of the structure of language. If God's language is 'pure performative utterance', what is human language? The structure of the above text tells us. Note that in attempting to transcribe God's Word, the scriptural passage (remember that scripture is not God's Word but a record of it) assumes a linear structure. This linear structure tells us that human language is, at best, made up of a combination of felicitous and infelicitous performatives. Put another way, our words do not always correspond to our 'performance', our actions, and so are incapable of describing, or embodying, a type of language that is always 'pure

performative.' Instead, the closest to pure performative that human language can get is the word (eg. 'light') followed immediately by the act performed, or the thing itself (eg. 'Light'). We can have 'felicitous performatives' or performatives made valid by ensuing circumstances (eg. by the fulfilment of a promise); or we can have infelicitous performatives which are made so because of circumstances or contexts which 'get in' the gap of the linear 'x, and there was x.' rendering the performative unfulfilled and so infelicitous. Perhaps at this point it would be useful to set up a series of equations which would explicate the differences between 'types' of performatives clearly and succinctly. If the equations are modelled on the text 'And God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light,' the equations would look something like this:

A felicitous performative - 'x, and there was x.'

An infelicitous performative - 'x, and there was
[circumstances intervene] y

A pure performative - 'X'

At this point it is vital to take into account one other aspect of the performative. The above quotations reveal that, in the first two instances, it is 'circumstances' or 'context' which determines the degree of felicity which can be attributed to any performative. The importance of 'circumstance' is indeed something which Austin argues stems from the 'contractual nature' of all performatives.²⁷ Austin illustrates the contract by drawing up a list of 'conditions' that are implicit in the idea of a performative and which, depending upon the degree to which they are observed or ignored, determines the felicity/infelicity of any performative. Austin's conditions

are best presented in full, and are as follows:

- A i) an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect; that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances.
- ii) particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure involved.
- B i) the procedure must be executed by all participants correctly and
- ii) completely.
- C i) where a procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts/feelings or as an inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then the participant(s) must have the requisite thoughts/feelings, and the participant(s) must intend to conduct themselves and
- ii) must actually conduct themselves accordingly.²⁸

Conditions A i and B i and ii most concern us here. These conditions assert that both the speaker of the performative, and the person(s) to whom that performative is addressed, are aware of a contract which is implicit in the concept of a performative. If either speaker or addressee/audience refuses to fulfil the conditions of that contract, for whatever reason, then the performative is rendered infelicitous - whether through misexecution or abuse. For example, to illustrate conditions A i and ii, Austin posits the situation in which a person is 'picking' a team, perhaps for sport. The conditions which obtain to the performative 'I pick' are as follows: 'I pick' is only in order when the object of the verb is a 'player', and a command is in order only when the subject of the verb is a 'commander', or an 'authority.'²⁹ In other words I cannot 'pick' a passing pedestrian to be a member of my team; my performative, 'I pick', will be infelicitous because the pedestrian is not the appropriate audience/listener.

Similarly, if I am the passing pedestrian I cannot 'pick' as members of my team, individuals from the group posited above; my performative 'I pick' is infelicitous because the addressees have not agreed to participate in the 'social contract' which is implied in my performative. Of course, if I, the passing pedestrian, agree to be picked when chosen, or if the group agrees to respond to the passing pedestrian, then both performatives are felicitous. As Austin points out, there needs to be some sort of social contract (whether verbal, written, or tacit) fulfilled by all participants, for a performative to be felicitous.³

Conditions B i and ii similarly imply a social contract, an agreement, which determines the felicity/infelicity of any performative. Again, Austin's illustration is useful. He asks the question as to when a performative can be considered to be complete; his example is the giving of a gift.³¹ If I say 'I give this gift' and the addressee/audience of my performative accepts the gift, then the performative 'I give' can be considered as felicitous. If however, the addressee/audience of my performative refuses the gift, then my performative is rendered infelicitous by misexecution. One half of the participants in the social contract has declined to fulfil the conditions.

The main point here is that performatives do not occur in a vacuum. They are dependent upon a listener who, in turn, "depends upon an understanding of meaning and force of an utterance,"³² that is depends upon the existence and fulfilment of a social contract in order to be considered either felicitous or infelicitous. It is perhaps useful at this stage to outline the assumptions which, in turn, underline the social contract of a performative. Again Austin's outline of these assumptions (what he terms the 'implications'

of a performative utterance) will be given in full. Austin presents the implications with reference to the performative 'I apologise':

Implication

- i) it is true that I am doing (have done) something (eg. apologise).
- ii) it is true that certain conditions do obtain (cf. conditions Ai and Aii above).
- iii) it is true that conditions Ci and ii obtain (ie. that I have the appropriate thoughts/feelings.)
- iv) it is true that I am committed to doing something subsequently.³³

Once again, it is the degree to which these 'implications' of the social contract of a performative are upheld or abused which constitutes the felicity or infelicity of a performative. For example, if I apologise without feeling apologetic, I flout the condition which states that individuals can assume that those speakers who apologise are sincere in their apologies. This notion of insincerity is important. Saying 'I apologise' without the appropriate feelings is not to utter a false statement, but an infelicitous performative. Insincerity is in fact for Austin the element (resulting from the nonfulfilment of Implication iii) which distinguishes lying from merely saying what is false.³⁴

Finally, it is important to recognise the 'individuality' of the performative social contract. Austin states that "any utterance which is in fact a performative should be reducible, or expandible, or analysable into a form, or reducible in a form, with a verb in the first-person singular present indicative active."³⁵ The 'I' behind each performative must be discernible. Written utterances,

for example, may end with a signature - reference to the 'I' who is doing the uttering. Austin illustrates the individual 'I' which is implicit in a warning sign. If we encounter a sign stating, "This bull is dangerous," Austin considers it to be a performative. He suggests that inherent in the warning sign is the statement, 'You are warned,' which in turn implies, 'I [the person who recognises the hazard] warn you that this bull is dangerous.'³⁶ We, the addressee/ audience, infer a speaker to whom we are bound by the contractual nature of the performative. As with the example of the gift, our subsequent response to the performative renders it felicitous or infelicitous. In the same way, the 'speaker' who places a 'warning' sign where there is no hazard does not fulfil his/her side of the social contract, whilst the 'speaker' who places a warning sign at a point of danger has fulfilled one half of the social contract, thus contributing towards its felicitousness.

Ultimately, the distinguishing characteristics of the 'performative' necessitate that language itself be considered performative in essence. All of our words, not just explicit performatives such as 'I pick', 'I apologise', are rendered felicitous or infelicitous depending upon the circumstances which follow. Our words assume a listener (even if only ourselves); they assume the possibility of communication. Indeed, Austin proceeds in his book on performatives to posit that language is 'performative', that is that each utterance constitutes an act (ie. the act of uttering), a performative. The concept of the 'performative utterance', with its initial focus on explicit performatives, develops into a theory of speech/act. Though more about this theory, and its applicability to Gaskell's work, will follow, at this point the basic assumptions of speech/act theory

can be briefly outlined. Austin states that to say anything is:

- A. always to perform the act of uttering a certain noises (a phonetic act), and that utterance is a phone.
- B. always to perform the act of uttering certain vocables or words, ie. noises of certain types belonging to, and as belonging to a certain vocabulary in a certain construction. This is a 'phatic act'; and the utterance which is uttered is a 'pheme.'
- C. generally to perform the act of using a 'pheme' or its constituents with a certain more or less definite 'sense and a more or less definite reference which together are equivalent to 'meaning.' This is a 'rhetic' act; and the utterance which is uttered is 'the rheme.'

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Condition 'C' is the point from which the performative can be determined felicitous or infelicitous. Under condition 'C', we can place the conditions A (i) to C (ii) and Implications (i) to (iv) as outlined previously. Obviously, a 'noise' in isolation (condition A above) cannot be either felicitous or infelicitous since it will be nonsensical. Not until condition 'C', which introduces meaning and the accompanying sense of communication, does the contractual, hence felicitous or infelicitous, nature of language emerge.

The performative nature of human language, that is the degree to which it is made felicitous or infelicitous by circumstance (the fulfilment or non-fulfilment of the contract) explains why Channing earlier is unsuccessful in describing God's language. He speaks of 'connections' and 'harmonies' precisely because, writing as he is with the 'human' language available to him, he has only those linear structures to work with. It is impossible for him to describe a purely performative language structure in a language which

can only get close to pure performative itself. The question must arise therefore, if no human can describe a pure performative language structure, where there is the authority for a Unitarian conception of God's language as a pure performative utterance? The obvious starting point is the structure of the very language which Unitarians believed to be the closest to God's word: biblical scripture. For the sake of convenience let us refer to the Genesis text quoted above: 'And God said, 'Let there be Light,' and there was light.' As I have pointed out, the structure of the quotation is linear or to be more precise causal. At the same time, however, note the attempt to render in linguistic terms a simultaneity of action. The two main clauses of the sentence, 'God said' and 'there was' share the same tense to suggest simultaneity, a fusion of word and act. It is only the word 'and' which makes the text linear and causal in structure. Such structure is implicit not in the word/act referred to, but in the very language available for use.

Besides the authoritative stature which Unitarians attributed to the 'most felicitous' performatives available in human language (ie. biblical scripture), the sheer cumulative weight of 'speech/act' references in Unitarian literature point to a conception of God's language as pure performative. Of course, as in Channing's statements, the references are necessarily expressed in language incapable of pure performative. Nevertheless, the attempt to reach toward a 'pure performative' is clear enough. The very common technique, in Unitarian sermons, of depicting an honoured Unitarian chapel member as a 'speaking example' is a case in point.

The term 'speaking example' itself encapsulates the main distinctions

of a performative. Firstly, 'example' implies an act, something tangible, in that it can be imitated. Secondly, 'speaking' suggests that the effect of such an act is eloquent, that is that an act can 'speak' or communicate in much the same way as language does. Thirdly, both terms imply an 'addressee' or audience to whom the communication (the example) is directed, which in turn intimates the social, contractual nature of the speaking example.

At the same time, the term 'speaking example' also refers to the concept of words-as-actions. If we read 'speaking, not as an adjective describing example, but as a deverbal noun, then the term reads, 'Words [speaking] as actions [examples].' As with an eloquent act, the idea of a speaking example - words which are actions that can be imitated - implies the existence of an audience/addressee and thus reinforces the contractual nature of a performative.

The need for two successive definitions of the single term requires comment itself. It is because of the linearity of language that we read causally. Our first reading of the term defines 'speaking' in adjectival relationship to 'example'; only then can we reverse the order of the words. But such linear readings are essentially false. The point of the term 'speaking example' is that it indicates the simultaneity of action-as-words/words-as-actions, despite our automatic response to read differently. The simultaneity of the term is crucial. Whereas reading in a linear fashion allows us to determine whether a speaking example is felicitous or infelicitous, reading 'speaking example' so that the double definition is recognised simultaneously leads us closer to the concept of pure performative which Unitarians posited as a possibility.

Since 'speaking example' possesses the distinguishing characteristics of the performative outlined above, and hence can be determined to be felicitous, infelicitous or pure, the Unitarian use of 'speaking example' resonates with significance. If we analyse the startling opening to a 'funeral discourse' ("Refreshing indeed is the recollection of departed excellence.")³⁸ in terms of the performative nature of the speaking example, its significance begins to emerge. Firstly, the actions/behaviour of the dead man are considered eloquent; they 'speak' of benevolence, justice and mercy. In this instance, Gilman seems to be stressing the 'actions-as-words' reading of 'speaking example', and presenting these actions as felicitous performances addressed to the audience which is listening to his sermon. At the same time, the notion of pure performative is implied. Gilman notes that the dead man, the speaking example, is now "beyond accident,"³⁹ or circumstances, and so is "unalterable. . . fixed. . . [and] imperishable."⁴⁰ The words are important because they suggest that Gilman can present this speaking example as a pure performative. Whereas, when alive, the dead man's speech/acts are rendered felicitous or not by circumstance the speaking example is now beyond such alteration by the speaker.

The words and actions which constitute the speaking example can no longer be affected by subsequent words or actions. They are, in essence, timeless; hence they no longer function in the realm of the causal and linear, but in the realm of the pure performative.

But of course the other half of the contract which underlines any performative, the listener, is still capable of rendering the speaking example infelicitous. The audience of this sermon for example could simply refuse to listen to the speaking example completely.

William Gaskell's sermon, "A Sermon on the Occasion of the Death of the Rev. John Gooch Robberds,"⁴¹ illustrates a different performative aspect of the 'speaking example.' On one level, the sermon elucidates the 'words-as-actions' characteristic of the speaking example. The dead man is remembered not only because his deeds matched his words, thus making his words felicitous. But, also because his words themselves constituted effective actions, or performatives. The plethora of positive references to Robberd's sermons, lectures, biblical scholarship, prose style and voice, indicate the validity of language as action. But more importantly, Gaskell's sermon underlines the contractual nature of the speaking example. He chooses the text, "He Being Dead Yet Speaketh," as the focus for his sermon. His choice indicates his decision to emphasise the role of the audience (listening to his sermon) in a 'speaking example.' Robberd's words continue to be 'speaking examples' because the audience who reads them continues to make them either felicitous or infelicitous by their subsequent response. The choice of emphasis is doubly appropriate: not only is Gaskell addressing an audience, exhorting them to continue making Robberd's performatives felicitous, but Robberds himself was a minister. His role was to use words/actions in such a way as to initiate a response from his audience/congregation that would make the contract which bound them together one which yielded as many felicitous performatives as possible.

In the same way, the especial attention given in sermons to the language used points to the performative concept. Ellis, in his sermon on the death of Dr. Channing, takes care to point out the inappropriateness of "the language of panegyric,"⁴² and the use

of epithets commonly applies to "men of high renown"⁴³ when speaking of Channing, one of the most influential Unitarian ministers of his day. "Ordinary language"⁴⁴ simply cannot for Ellis sufficiently delineate the "high testimony"⁴⁵ which constitutes Channing's importance. Ellis's concern here is more than the eulogist's concern to speak positively of his subject. He is concerned that the language of the sermon on Channing is true to Channing's use of language as it is possible to be. It is the last phrase, 'high testimony', which comes nearest to encapsulating the performative notion. Channing's words, his sermons, lectures and conversations for which he is remembered and mourned, are testimonies (the connotation of active witnessing is important), are his actions, and so are performatives.

Importantly, Ellis's sermon itself ends with a quotation from Channing's last public sermon.⁴⁶ The quote is not simply a 'tribute' to the power of Channing's language. It is an attempt to make the sermon itself a felicitous performative (by as it were using proven felicitous performatives), and so to exhort the sermon's listeners to fulfil their side of the performative contract, thus making it, through their responding words/actions, felicitous.

Interestingly, Ellis himself notes one of the main determinants of a pure performative. He states that "In Europe the death of Dr. Channing will be felt more deeply as a public calamity than here [in the U.S.A.]"⁴⁷ His reason for this assertion is that Europe lacked the "long familiarity and frequent opportunity"⁴⁸ for contact to which Channing's local chapel members had access. Instead, Europeans had only Channing's words. The assertion, on a first reading, seems perverse. One expects the familiarity of a lost person to be a prime component of grief. Nevertheless, the assertion is not perverse

and can be explicated in terms of 'pure performatives.' Those who had the advantage of 'long familiarity' had also, one assumes, the opportunity to witness those instances (they may have been few in number) when Channing's performatives were infelicitous or void (Ellis carefully tells his congregation that Channing did have his faults). They were aware of and could witness the circumstances which intervene to make performatives infelicitous or felicitous. In contrast, the Europeans were acquainted only with Channing's words, his performatives. They were not privy to the circumstances and contexts which rendered them either felicitous or infelicitous.

One might be tempted to explain the Europeans' greater grief by attributing it to a feeling of lost opportunity. Europeans, having never met Channing, have lost that chance forever by his death. On the other hand, Channing's status in the Victorian Unitarian community (indeed in the nineteenth-century Boston Unitarian community) suggests an alternative reading. Channing was widely held as one of the most prestigious, enlightened, and valuable ministers of the Unitarian movement. His works were massively popular amongst American Unitarians, and were widely read in Britain.⁴⁹ As such a figure, Channing's performatives were to his European audience not just the highly felicitous performatives they were to his Boston community. His performatives had, perhaps, assumed a level of almost pure performative to the European community lacking circumstantial or personal knowledge of Channing. At this point it is important to remember that words themselves constitute actions which are only then subsequently labelled felicitous or infelicitous according to circumstance. In Channing's instance, because of his status as minister, and the contractual nature of

the performatives which the role of minister serves to emphasize, his performatives can be rendered felicitous/infelicitous in two ways. Firstly, when he is alive, they can be made felicitous or infelicitous through his own actions. Secondly, and equally important, his performative (eg. sermons) can be rendered felicitous/infelicitous by the degree to which his audience/addressees fulfil their half of the performative contract. Even when dead, Channing's performatives function in the latter way. Audiences still read and respond to his words: other ministers like Ellis use them to exhort felicitous performatives from their congregations. Finally, and equally valid, Channing's performatives have become 'pure' in the same way as the performatives of the subject of Gilman's sermon above has become pure. On an individual level, Channing's performatives are pure: his words can no longer be affected by his subsequent circumstances. They too have become, again on the individual level, essentially timeless, and no longer operate within the causal/linear structures by which they were previously governed.

Finally, the 'proof' of a Unitarian conception of God's language as pure performative can be gleaned from the manner in which Unitarians envisage the possibility of movement from human language with its felicitous/infelicitous performatives, to God's pure performative language. If one has a method of getting from A (felicitous/infelicitous language) to B (pure performative), one is assuming B exists. Despite the apparently unbridgeable gap between the two, God's pure language and humankind's performatives are not irrevocably divided. The duty of each Unitarian is 'to become what s/he praises', to aspire to become a user of language according to the divine model. One way is through biblical criticism. Though God's word itself has not been 'read' by humankind, the scriptures represent the translation

of God's pure performatives into the most felicitous human language possible, hence the great importance of assessing witnesses. Once a section of scripture has been scrutinised, with the circumstances, prejudices and idiom of the writer taken into account, what the Unitarians were left with is what they believed to be the closest approximation, in felicitous performatives, to God's pure performatives.

But the act of biblical criticism does not only point to the 'seeds' of pure performatives in Scripture. The discerning Unitarian reader cannot rest content with an ability to 'recognise' the evidence of pure performance when s/he confronts its. More importantly, the investigation of biblical language reveals 'language' itself to be the link between humankind and God. Channing asserts words (eg. wisdom, goodness, benevolence) used to describe God are meaningless if they do not share an affinity with those same words when describing humankind.⁵⁰ They would, he says, "signify nothing."⁵¹ Instead, words reveal to the individual his/her potential for perfection. If a reader is able to grasp the 'meaning' of a word, such as 'benevolent,' commonly attributed to God, then his/her understanding implicitly suggests for Unitarians an ability to 'be' the attribute. Recognition of a word or form leads to a synthesis of form and meaning. Channing illustrates the process with reference to one's ability to name another person's attributes. Although one individual's mind is invisible to another, in the same way that God's 'mind' is invisible to humankind in general, individuals feel confident in their ability to name each other's attributes. Their ability to do so stems, Channing states, from a recognition of a quality in another which they themselves possess.⁵² Since Unitarians believe that man is capable of

perfection, of being God-like, and that "an attribute by becoming perfect does not part with its essence,"⁵³ the same process allows humankind to 'know' God. An individual recognises God's attributes as they are related in Scripture, at a rate in direct proportion to the unfolding of those attributes in him/herself. The true understanding of a linguistic term as it is encountered in authorised scripture is not simply entwined with performance - the two occur simultaneously.

If we translate this process into equations, it becomes clearer. Because Unitarians posit the perfectability of humankind, they also posit three possible uses of language: the infelicitous, felicitous and pure. In a quick overview, the individual can use language infelicitously; saying 'x' and performing 'y.' Individuals can also use language felicitously; saying 'x' and performing 'x'. Finally because each individual has the potential for perfection, they also have the potential to use language purely, as God does. Such usage involves, as Channing points out, true understanding. In this circumstance, saying 'x' equals understanding 'x' equals being 'x'. Though the equation has to be rendered in linear terms here, if it were possible to present the equation three-dimensionally, the x's would pile up on top of each other - **x** as it were - rather than appear in the apparently causal line-up which an equation represents. In other words, just as God saying 'light' is "Light", so a human being, having reached the level of true understanding, saying/understanding 'x' is 'x'.

The importance and the workings of this process can be seen more clearly if we compare the models of felicitous, infelicitous and pure performatives, and the process of moving from one to another,

with the Unitarian conception of conscience discussed earlier. Howe offers a clear-cut model of the Unitarian conscience. In summary it is comprised of two components: the cognitive and the volitional. The cognitive conscience, which is innate in all individuals, is the ability to recognise, to understand, the concept of 'right.' The volitional component involves the individual's motivation to perform the 'right' which s/he recognises.⁵⁴ If we translate the process into felicitous and infelicitous categories, than an individual who recognises 'right' (x) but fails to perform it (performs 'y' instead) uses the conscience infelicitously. An individual who recognises 'right' (x) and is motivated to perform it (x), uses the conscience felicitously. In either case, the functioning of the conscience is determined to be felicitous/infelicitous in a linear fashion. One recognises 'x', and then either performs it or not.

But there is another possible functioning of the conscience, one which abandons linearity and achieves the simultaneity of the pure performative. The Unitarian conscience can function in a way that meshes the cognitive and the volitional. In this process, the cognitive component (the ability to grasp 'x') occurs simultaneously with the performance of that which is grasped. The process is a 'conscience equivalent' to the individual's potential to use language purely, as God does. Indeed, the process does have a linguistic basis. In the equation, 'Each individual has the ability to recognise 'x', 'x' is often the linguistic representation of an idea/concept which each individual performs felicitously or infelicitously or, in instances of true understanding, purely. The purely functioning Unitarian conscience fuses what is said (cognitive) with what is,

what is performed (volitional). When Unitarians assert that the voice of conscience is the voice of God,⁵⁵ the assertion carries more than its usual resonance. It does not simply refer to the Unitarian belief that each individual carries the seeds of perfection (the voice of God) within her/himself. The term 'voice' must be stressed; it intimates that it is through language, and an understanding of how it functions, that an individual begins the ascent to perfection.

In this context, the concept of sin as "a breakdown in the internal harmony"⁵⁶ of the conscience enlightens the use of 'sin' to describe a mis-use of language.⁵⁷ The two are the same. Similarly, the Unitarian exhortation to 'speak', to testify to the beliefs which have sprung from their "conscientious study of [God's] word"⁵⁸ is not only an encouragement to 'spread the word.' It is an indication that only by 'speaking' can a Unitarian actually "become what [s/he] praise[s]"⁵⁹ - the two are irrevocably entwined. When we read of the "highly self-conscious efforts [that Unitarians] made to cultivate a Christian character - elaborate schedules of projects, conscientious resolutions, and records of how many pages of worthy books they read each day,"⁶⁰ two things should strike us: firstly, the combination of 'acts' (projects) and language-based activities (resolutions, reading) which make up their endeavours to become Christian; and, secondly, the self-consciousness of these exercises which intimate an awareness of the important and necessary part which language plays in the attainment of a God-like Christianity.

ii) Speech Act Theory and approaching the text.

With a background like this, in which language plays such a crucial role, it is blinkered to consider Gaskell an 'artless' writer for whom language is significant only because it is her chosen mode of communication. A look at the diary which Gaskell kept concerning the education of her daughter Marianne reveals that language, and a self-conscious attitude to its use, was a part of Gaskell's daily life. She comments twice on the importance of language:

I have never allowed [my daughter Marianne] to be told anyone was going to do anything for her unless they really were, and have tried to speak as truly to her as ever I could.⁶¹

Similarly,

I am not aware that any promise has been made to her that has not been strictly fulfilled. And the consequence is, she has a firm reliance on our word, and a pretty good idea of giving up a present pleasure to secure a future one, feeling sure that the promise will be performed.⁶²

The cultivation of a working Unitarian conscience in her daughter by example illustrates clearly enough both the Unitarian conscience's linguistic foundation (ie. the awareness of language can be used infelicitously/felicitously, and the need to make her own language and the language of those who come into contact with her daughter as felicitous as possible. Saying 'x' only if 'x' is to follow) and its linguistic technique, that is through speaking, using language felicitously that the working Unitarian conscience was developed.

To move from this to Gaskell's fiction itself does not require a 'leap of faith'. There is ample evidence that Gaskell is both

aware of and concerned to explore the language systems that I have termed 'human language' (ie. felicitous/infelicitous), and the divine or pure language. The move however does require a theoretical bridging. It is necessary to establish the validity of applying Austin's categories of speech to Gaskell's written discourse. Earlier I briefly outlined the way in which Austin's idea of a 'performative utterance' developed from that of explicit performatives ('I promise', 'I do') to speech-act theory which, in summary, stated that to 'say' anything was always to perform certain acts: the phonetic act, the phatic act, and the rhetic act. This idea of the speech act has been developed by several linguists since Austin. But its importance to us is that it retains the basic notion of a 'social contract' which underlies language use. A speech-act depends upon a listener, and speech-act theory itself "proceeds within a causality that suggests that meaning or communication intent is the cause of language use."⁶³

Before exploring the ideological assumptions behind this 'communicative' model of language, it might be useful to outline speech-act theory at more length. One version of the 'social contract' underlying language use has been developed by the linguist H.P. Grice. He terms it the 'Co-operative principle', and it both extends Austin's 'conditions' which render performatives felicitous/infelicitous, and applies to all speech acts or verbal discourse. The Co-operative principle can be outlined as follows:

Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk-exchange in which you are engaged.⁶⁴

This in turn is specified in what Grice calls 'Four Maxims.' They are

1. The Maxims of Quantity.
 - i) Make the contribution as informative as is required (for the correct purposes of the exchange).
 - ii) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
2. Maxims of Quality
 - i) Make your contribution one that is true.
 - ii) Do not say what you believe to be false.
 - iii) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
3. Maxim of Relation.
 - i) Be relevant.
4. Maxims of Manner
 - i) Be perspicuous.
 - ii) Avoid obscurity of expression.
 - iii) Avoid ambiguity.
 - iv) Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
 - v) Be orderly.⁶⁵

These maxims are adapted according to the purpose of a 'talk-exchange.' Conversations/speech acts do not always have the exchange of information as their prime motivation, but can simply be the exchange of 'tellable' subject matter.⁶⁶ An example is perhaps helpful. If in the course of a conversation on deviant behaviour, I say, "I bought some milk today," it could be assumed that I have ignored the maxim of relation by offering irrelevant information. If however it is known that I rarely if ever purchase milk because of an allergy to that liquid, my 'speech act' places itself under the category of 'tellable speech' [in this instance, deviant behaviour] and I cannot be accused of straying from the relevant.

The example above points to another important aspect of the co-operative principle. Not only do I undertake to maintain the principle in my speech acts, but my 'audience' assumes that I undertake to fulfil the principle in the same way that I assume that other speakers are adhering to the principle. As a result, "the hearer, in decoding the speaker's utterance, will make all the deductions and inferences necessary to maintain the assumption that the speaker is observing the [Co-operative principle]."⁶⁷ In the example above, my listeners assume that my speech-act is 'relevant' to the discourse on deviant behaviour before suspecting that I am ignoring the co-operative principle.

My subsequent speech will, of course, either confirm or deny their supposition. If I explain my allergy, the co-operative principle is seen to be upheld, and my speech act is 'felicitous'. If I do not explain my allergy then the suspicion that I am ignoring the co-operative principle, and am performing an infelicitous speech act, will arise.

All of this still seems a far cry from Gaskell's written discourse.

But speech act theory itself has been extended into the domain of the written. Mary L. Pratt's Towards a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse, is an attempt to bring 'literary' or written discourse into the jurisdiction of speech-act theory. But before the actual application of the theory, Pratt needs to eradicate, to prove untenable, the traditional split between 'ordinary language' and 'poetic' or literary discourse, the belief that "literature is formally and functionally distinct from other kinds of utterance . . . [and the] concomitant belief that literature is linguistically autonomous."⁶⁸ She traces the origins and subsequent bolstering of the traditional split through

to Saussurean ideas of langue and parole. Ultimately, Pratt asserts that the split between ordinary language and literary discourse thrives because of a simple manoeuvre: linguistic theories of language are never applied to literary works except from a standpoint which presumes a distinction. The distinction itself, Pratt asserts, is never tested.⁶⁹ Pratt offers an example using Saussure's categories of langue and parole. In the same way that langue [the rules of a grammar of a given language] is opposed to parole [speech derived from langue], so the literary canon [rules which determine which works are accepted into it] is opposed to the individual work [the work derived from the rules]. A further structuralist opposition can be posited between the individual work and the individual readings that can be derived from the work which is similar to the langue/parole opposition. Pratt argues an alternative concept of literature: literary discourse can be seen as parole in relation to the langue [the grammar] of any language. There is no need to postulate two langues of any language - one for written discourse and one for speech. To suggest "a separate grammar of poetry which is related analogically to the grammar of language very easily obscures the real relation that holds between poetic utterances and the grammar of the language in which they are written, namely that of parole to langue, the relation that all utterances in a given language hold with respect to the grammar."⁷⁰

From this standpoint, Pratt then compares written discourse to an accepted linguistic category of speech: the natural narrative. The comparison is lengthy and not all of its details are necessary to our discussion. In summary, Pratt points out "that all the problems

of coherence, chronology, causality, foregrounding, plausibility, selection of detail, tense, point of view, and emotional intensity exist for the natural narrator just as they do for the novelist, and they are confronted and solved (with greater or lesser success) by speakers of the language every day. These are not rhetorical problems that literary narrators have had to solve by inventing a poetic language; they are the problems whose solutions can readily be adapted from spoken to written discourse."⁷

With the obliteration of the ordinary/literary language distinction, speech act theory is then applied to literary discourse by Pratt.

The underlying assumption of a 'social contract' between speakers and listeners is also applied. In the literary discourse situation, the readers assume the listener's position and the 'author' assumes the position of the speaker. Pratt outlines some of the assumptions on the reader's part which form part of the 'literary' social contract. They are:

- i) that the book was published and was intended to be so.
- ii) that the book was composed in writing and is 'definitive' - that is that the author had time to plan and prepare, to correct and improve the utterance before the audience saw it.
- iii) that the author considers it a satisfactory version.
- iv) that it has been 'selected' by publishers, librarians (if in a library) etc. And that the name of the publisher (author), collection, count as 'credentials' as do cover design, price etc.
- v) that within its genre/subgenre, the book is recommended.
- vi) that the book's 'relevance' is 'tellability'.⁷²

The 'speaker' of the literary discourse, similarly, undertakes "to

know and reveal the whole story and . . . [to] enable [the audience] to understand the sequence of events and to adopt the desired attitude towards them."⁷³

At the same time, certain adjustments to the co-operative principle between speaker and audience need to be made when it is applied to literary discourse. Pratt outlines the ways in which individuals can violate the co-operative principle. They can,

- i) quietly violate the maxim, hence mislead
- ii) declare an inability to co-operate
eg. 'I cannot say more.'
- iii) can be unable to fulfill all the maxims
of the co-operative principle.
- iv) blatantly fail to fulfill a maxim, or
deliberately flout the co-operative principle.⁷⁴

Pratt states that only the last method of non-fulfilment of the co-operative principle (iv-above) is possible in the literary speech situation.

We [readers] know the violations in [literary works] are intentional because of what we know about the circumstances under which literary works are composed, edited, selected, published, and distributed.⁷⁵

When approaching a literary text, the reader assumes that the range of 'real' mistakes is smaller than in spoken discourse because of the amount of 'revision' and deliberation which is built into the category of 'literary texts.' Furthermore, and most importantly, we also assume that despite the flouting of the co-operative principle maxims, the co-operative principle is working at its highest level. That is, we as readers are expected to recognise and resolve any violations of the Co-operative Principle.

The other methods of opting out of the co-operative principle do not apply to literary texts. Because literary works are "volunteered utterances",⁷⁶ the speaker of the work cannot declare an inability to co-operate. Nor would the speaker volunteer an utterance which s/he knows in advance s/he is unable to accomplish. Nor can the speaker of a literary text 'mislead'. At this point, of course, one must distinguish between the 'speaker of the text' - or the fictional speaker/narrator - and the 'author'. Whilst it is possible that a fictional speaker's discourse/text is full of violations of the co-operative principle [eg. s/he can be naive/ignorant/deliberately misleading], speech act theory posits that the author's text - what is called the display text - can only 'flout' or blatantly fail to fulfil a maxim. Pratt states,

In order to co-operate as the literary speech situation requires, the reader confronting a violated maxim in a literary work must interpret the violation as being in accord with the 'accepted purpose or direction of the exchange' in which he and the author are engaged. The reader must assume that regardless of what the fictional speaker [omniscient, first-person etc.] is doing the author is observing the [co-operative principle] as defined for display texts; and he must calculate all the implications necessary to maintain this assumption.⁷⁷

Pratt's example of Tristram Shandy is a useful exposition. Where Tristram, reputedly writing within the genre of the autobiography, deliberately opts out of the co-operative principle rules for autobiography, Sterne is flouting the co-operative principle maxims for the novel and the autobiography.⁷⁸ His violations are deliberate and therefore constitute flouting. In such an instance, the reader can be said to read, in effect, twice. On one level, s/he notes where Tristram

co-operates/opts out of the Co-operative Principle; on another, s/he constructs a set of 'implicatures' which make sense of the author's utterance, and maintains the Co-operative Principle because of his/her awareness of the flouting.

The application of speech act theory to literature as Pratt outlines it does have its difficulties. In the distinction between author and fictional speaker above, the theory side-steps the issue of the 'identity of the author.' Pratt does not seem to posit a distinction between an 'omniscient narrator' and the 'author' (though she does distinguish between other narrators and 'author'), primarily because she equates the omniscient narrator's 'text' with the historical author's 'display text.' At the same time, the theory itself does allow for a distinction: the process of selection, production, publishing, the cover, the choice of genre, the price, which the theory points out as important elements in reading, are all aspects of the 'author's display text. Nevertheless, it is perhaps more satisfactory to use Todorov's terms, the 'subject of the enunciation' and the 'subjects of the enonce';⁷⁹ in which the former parallels Pratt's author, and the latter refers to Pratt's 'fictional speakers' - be they first person/omniscient narrators or characters in the text.

More important, however, is the issue of the 'site of meaning' which complicates both speech act theory and Unitarian conceptions of language. Speech act theory posits the 'individual' as the site of meaning. Its stress on intention, or illocutionary force, suggests an individual whose 'sincerity' in language will ensure that his/her 'meaning' prevails. Derrida finds in this stress "a classic restatement of the philosophic stance that privileges 'speech' at the expense

of 'writing'"⁸⁰ and which equates 'truth' with the 'presence' of the speaker. Where speech act theory equates the 'truth' or 'felicitousness' with the 'sincerity,' and implicitly the 'presence' of the speaker, Derrida points to the quality of 'iterability' which makes language possible. As he comments, speech acts "derive their operative meaning from the fact that they embody conventional forms and tokens of utterance which are always already in existence before the speaker comes to use them".⁸¹ Speech act theory does appear to recognise at some deep level, both the autonomy of language and the impotence of the individual in language. Its stress on contracts, appropriate conditions, and principles of co-operation, points to the need for communal accord, for rules and maxims, if any meaning is to be established as orthodox, and implies a recognition that meaning is, in its terms, dangerously multiple and unstable.

As a modern articulation of nineteenth-century Unitarian conceptions of language, speech act theory and its philosophical assumptions provide an interesting basis from which to explore Gaskell's fiction and its assumptions. On the one hand, speech act theory allows aspects of Gaskell's fiction which have hitherto lain dormant to achieve definition. The 'lie' that runs throughout her novels - John Barton's concealment of his identity as Carson's murderer; Margaret Hale's lie to the police officer as to her presence at the railway station; Philip Hepburn's silence as to the reason for Charlie Kinraid's disappearance; Holdsworth's avowed but unfulfilled love for Phillis; the Benson's lie about Ruth's marital status; Cynthia's concealment of her past involvement with Preston - each lie needs to be considered not just as pivotal elements of plot, but as aspects of Gaskell's examination

of the importance and the impossibilities of the individual's use of language. If a lie is, in Austinian terms, distinct from a mere false statement, the status of the lie and the disavowal of the social contract which it involves, needs to be reassessed in Gaskell's fiction.

More complexly, Gaskell's awareness of speech act language structures necessitates that we investigate her explorations of how such structures operate. As a Unitarian and as a woman, Gaskell confronted the adverse effects of language every day. Her Unitarian background provided her not only with a comprehension of linguistic structures, but with an image of 'woman' which meant she was expected, as an individual, to attempt to attain the 'perfection' which linguistic awareness made possible. Knowledge of the process which could lead to the attainment of perfection, indeed knowledge and perfection were not withheld from women in the Unitarian ideology.

At the same time, Victorian society as a whole thrust an image of 'woman' upon her which contradicted the Unitarian one. Whilst expected to be the preserver of morals (in a sense to be perfect), Victorian 'woman' was denied access to the knowledge, the experience upon which morality is based, and upon which Unitarianism based its system of beliefs. Gaskell had to contend with a social system which generated images of women (as moral protector, as angel-in-the-house) that directly opposed those generated by the Unitarianism to which she was allied, and which nevertheless effectively constrained her. One has only to consider the general reception of Ruth to understand the conflict. On the one hand, Unitarianism requires that an exposé of how the denial of access to knowledge can undermine women must be attempted. It is her duty as an individual to 'speak' what she

has reason to believe is true. 'Literature', writing a novel, in Unitarian theology is not a sphere of discourse separate from 'ordinary' language. It is one of the 'human' languages available which differs from others only because of the greater degree of permanency with which its 'appearance' on paper seems to endow it. As with any other form of speech, a Unitarian has the obligation to make his/her written discourse as felicitous as possible, since the speech act social contract obtains as completely here as with any other mode of discourse.

On the other hand, the Victorian 'audience' which receives Gaskell's speech act approaches the text with a very different 'social contract' in mind. Firstly, the category of 'literature' itself constitutes a sphere of 'influence' separate from other modes of discourse. Not only is literature imbued with permanency, it could be apprehended as an elevated, lofty discourse, different in kind from 'ordinary' discourse. Though in the hierarchy of literature the novel form is not as exalted as poetry, nevertheless it is conceived as a discourse distinct from and more powerful than everyday speech. Secondly, the general Victorian audience's conception of women is markedly different from the image of woman as individual advocated by Unitarian theology. Complementing the opposition between ordinary/literary discourse, is the opposition between man and woman, which in turn generates a series of binary opposites that, privileging man, define and constrain woman. Cixous's oppositions map out the general geography of such a phallogentric system: if man/woman, then, activity/passivity, culture/nature, head/heart, intelligent/sensitive.⁸² We can add by implication, knowledge/ignorance.

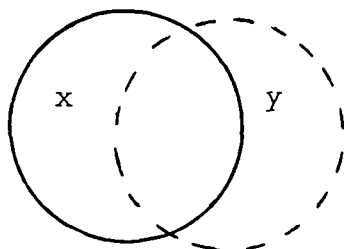
Within this system, Gaskell's Ruth is doubly subversive. The existence of a woman writer immediately upsets the oppositions. She has entered into the privileged domain of activity, culture,

and intelligence which the binary opposites are constructed to deny her. Secondly, the choice of a 'taboo' subject - the fallen woman suggests access to the privileged half of the binary opposite which, in a sense, generates all others. It indicates access to knowledge, to power, rather than to the ignorance and weakness that is allowed to women,⁸³ and thus it threatens to subvert the whole structure. As a result, Ruth is received with shock and disgust; shock that it is written by a woman (women are not 'capable' of participating in culture), and disgust that it tackles a subject which women should not be aware of.

That the shock and disgust was shared by some members of William Gaskell's own congregation further complicates the conflict. Other Unitarians, living in the very Victorian society which alienates them, can express horror at a written document which embodies their (supposedly) own beliefs. What this response reveals is the apparent absence of a gender 'variable' in the Unitarian conception of performatives, or speech acts. Where Unitarianism offers a model of 'human language' within which each individual's speech acts are either felicitous or not, with a potential posited for pure performatives, Victorian society offers only a phallogentric model of language which, by implication, renders each woman's speech acts non-existent, or at best void in that they merely support the phallogentricity which defines them. Gaskell, offering novels as 'specimens' of human language in a phallogentric system which does not recognise such a category, strides directly into the circle of controversy: gender. Necessarily her novels need to be re-approached within the context of such a clash.

The approach requires a modification to the concept of speech

act. Like its Unitarian predecessor, modern speech act theory lacks a gender variable. Both Austin's performatives and the speech act theory which Pratt adapts for literary discourse, in no way account for the alteration in impact which the gender of the speaker of any speech act will occasion. This is a direct result of both theorists' (and it would seem speech act theorists in general) assumption that 'language' constitutes a neutral system by which humans express themselves through 'intention', a system unaffected by gender. A more persuasive alternative views language in terms of 'dominant' and 'muted' groups. In such an approach, the dominant group "control[s] the forms of structures in which consciousness can be articulated;"⁸⁴ whilst the muted groups "must mediate their beliefs through the allowable forms of dominant structures."⁸⁵ At the same time, the concept of dominant and muted groups within any given culture also points to the possibility of some form of expression for the beliefs of the muted groups, despite the control of articulation by a dominant group. Showalter illustrates the possibility of expression of these beliefs in her essay, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." Her dominant and muted groups are arranged thus:



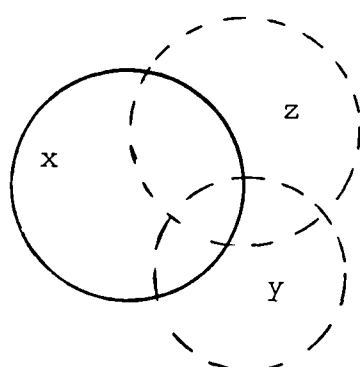
x = dominant group (male)

y = muted group (female) ⁸⁶

In this way, "the boundaries of the [muted group's] culture and reality overlap but are not wholly contained by the dominant (male) group."⁸⁷ Women (the muted group) have what she terms a 'wild zone' of experience,

alien to the dominant group, within which some of their beliefs are expressed, whilst also filtering beliefs through the accepted structures of the dominant group. Because of this duality of expression, Showalter terms women's writing (and we must, I think, add speech) "a double-voiced discourse"; one "that always embodies the social, literary, and cultural heritages of both the muted and the dominant."⁸⁸

With this gendered concept of language grafted on to it, speech act theory becomes more comprehensive. If we recognise that language reflects the values and concerns of the dominant group, then what constitutes felicitous and infelicitous performatives, indeed the status of the speech act, requires re-definition. Gaskell writes from a tradition which, theoretically at least, posits the existence of a neutral, non-gendered human language. What she encounters is a phallogentric language which does not recognise such neutrality. In a sense, the relationship of Unitarianism (in its theoretical support for non-gendered language) to phallogentric Victorian society mimics the relationship of Showalter's muted group to the dominant group. In Showalter's terms,



x = dominant (Victorian society)

y = muted (Unitarian)

z = muted (Victorian society)

The comparison is valid in three ways. Firstly, it explains the response of Gaskell's congregation to some of Gaskell's fiction. As with any muted group, Unitarianism participates to some degree in the dominant structure. At the same time, the comparison pinpoints

the origination of the concept of a 'human' language; it is in that part of the muted group which is, in effect, autonomous from the dominant in that it can formulate dissenting language systems. Thirdly, the comparison unveils the arena in which Gaskell's novels must stake their place - as novels they are constructs of the dominant group whilst Gaskell herself, as a Unitarian, must 'air', must speak her 'truths', in the public forum where the dominant group reigns.

This last point is vital. Gaskell does 'air' her views in the public forum. Having encountered two opposing language systems, Gaskell does not cease writing novels. The dominant group's taboo on women writers does not so affect her as to finish her career.

Nor, I would suggest does Gaskell collude with the dominant group's phallogentric system once she experiences conflict. Instead, what we find is Gaskell directly confronting and exploring the phallogentric system. Novels such as Ruth, Cranford, North and South, Cousin Phillis, have at their centre the examination of the phallogentric categories of, respectively, the fallen woman, the amazon, and the spirited heroine. In effect, Gaskell is working "within 'male' discourse . . . [while] work[ing] ceaselessly to deconstruct it"⁸⁹ through exposure. Indeed, the gradual disappearance of biblical quotations from her texts suggests a growing awareness on Gaskell's part of the phallogentricity of a language that has hitherto been considered the 'most felicitous' of human languages. Perhaps she comes to view the Bible, in modern terms, as "a masculinist assertion, a canny political statement, and a myth used to impose male ownership upon a complex realm of human experience,"⁹⁰ and thus finds the biblical text inadequate for, if not contradictory to, her purposes.

At the same time, we can see Gaskell exploring the whole idea of the performative, of the speech act, as it operates within a phallogentric

system. She investigates 'performatives' which are gender-dependent, which are performatives only from within the phallogentric system. For example, the phrase 'I love you', spoken by a man to a woman. In the Victorian phallogentric system, the phrase has two statuses. The phrase is 'performative' for the Victorian man only in the sense that he has performed the act of uttering. For the Victorian woman, however, operating within the phallogentric system of binary opposites, the phrase is equivalent to the explicit performative ['I do'] of the marriage ceremony. Underlying it, to the listening woman is a different 'social contract' to the one underlying the man's utterance, and they are deemed to be felicitous/infelicitous in different ways.

A Victorian woman can of course exercise the option of refusal in such a situation. But a declaration of love, spoken by the phallogentrically defined Victorian woman is equal to a promise of marriage: only the ensuing marriage ceremony can make the performative felicitous, fulfil the social contract in her eyes. For the Victorian man, however, the explicit performative (ie. the ceremony) is not implicit in his spoken declaration of love. Though the woman's response can render the performative felicitous/infelicitous, it is not automatically explicit upon utterance. Whilst both men and women operate within the phallogentric system, what is an explicit performative in the muted group's discourse is not one in the dominant group's discourse.

Whilst exploring the effects and constraints which phallogentric language places upon women, Gaskell also reaches towards the expression of a non-gendered language which is based on the individual as non-gendered, as neutrally 'human'. Several key incidents in her fiction revolve around situations in which characters are asked to make a performative utterance that is felicitous in society's phallogentric

terms, but false to the idea of a human performative language. These incidents often have a legal context - that is they are situated within the dominant group's most articulated, regimented, and defined rules of social reality, where the contractual nature of speech is most formally manifested. Mary Barton's appearance in court; Margaret Hale's lie to the police officer; Sylvia Robson's non-fulfilment of the marriage contract; Robson's attack on the government's press-gang; each of these are instances in which the demands of the phallogentric group clash with the demands of a Unitarian concept of 'human' speech acts.

Ultimately, Gaskell's examination of gendered speech acts leads to an examination of the very premise of speech act theory and Unitarianism itself: the concept of the autonomous, willing, speaking subject. On the one hand, her novels can be seen as attempting the transition from phallogentricism to a human-centred language, thereby laying the foundation for a potential leap to the 'pure performative' which Unitarianism posits. But, what her novels work to suppress, and yet ceaselessly disclose, is the impossibility of such a transition within a system which collapses the very distinctions between the two points. The resulting complexities and contradictions in the depiction of women in Gaskell's novels are the issues which this thesis aims to explore.

Notes

¹The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, Third Edition, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 221.

²Virginia Woolf, Women and Writing, (London: The Women's Press, 1979), 149.

³ODQ, 22.

⁴Edgar Wright, Mrs Gaskell: The Basis for Reassessment, (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 9.

⁵Ibid., 12.

⁶Coral Lansbury, Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis, (London: Paul Elek Books, Ltd., 1975), 11.

⁷Ibid., 15.

⁸Ibid., 214.

⁹Howe, 71.

¹⁰Channing, 4.

¹¹Ibid., 10.

¹²Ibid., 4, emphasis mine.

¹³Howe, 33.

¹⁴Channing, 5.

¹⁵Ibid., 6.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Sadler, 31.

¹⁹Channing, 5.

²⁰William Gaskell, Unitarian Christians Called to Bear Witness To the Truth, (London: Edward T. Whitfield, 1862), 19.

²¹J.L. Austin, How To Do Things With Words, Ormson and Sbisá, eds., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

²²Ibid., 5.

²³Ibid., 8.

²⁴Ibid., 14.

²⁵Ibid., 15.

²⁶Ibid., 32.

²⁷Ibid., 7.

²⁸Ibid., 14-15.

²⁹Ibid., 28.

³⁰Ibid., 29.

³¹Ibid., 37.

³²Richard L. Lanigan, Speech Act Phenomenology, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977), 5.

³³Austin, 46.

³⁴Ibid., 41.

³⁵Ibid., 61-62.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid., 94.

³⁸Samuel Gilman, A Discourse on the Life and Character of the Honourable Thomas Lee, Charleston, Printed by Burges and Jones, East Bay St., 1839, 7.

³⁹Ibid.,

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹William Gaskell, A Sermon on the occasion of the Death of the Rev. John Gooch Robberds, (London: E.T. Whitfield, 178 Strand, 1854).

⁴²George E. Ellis, A Sermon Preached in the Meeting House. (Boston: William Crosby and Co., 1842), 6.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid., 9.

⁴⁵Ibid., 17.

⁴⁶Ibid., 24.

⁴⁷Ibid., 14.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Holt, 342.

⁵⁰Channing, 93.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid., 50.

⁵³Ibid., 93.

⁵⁴Howe, 53.

⁵⁵Ibid., 94.

⁵⁶Ibid., 60.

⁵⁷W. Gaskell, Unitarian Christians Called to Bear Witness.
13-14.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Channing, 97.

⁶⁰Howe, 110.

⁶¹Elizabeth Gaskell, My Diary: The Early Years of my daughter Marianne, London [1835], privately printed by Clement Shorter, 1923, 18.

⁶²Ibid., 26.

⁶³Lanigan, 4.

⁶⁴M.L.Pratt, Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse, (London: Indiana University Press, 1977), 129.

⁶⁵Ibid., 130.

⁶⁶Ibid., 136.

⁶⁷Ibid., 154.

⁶⁸Ibid., xi.

⁶⁹It has of course been tested by Derrida. See Christopher Norris, Deconstruction: Theory and Practice, (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1982).

⁷⁰Pratt, 11.

⁷¹Ibid., 66-67.

⁷²Ibid., 115-118.

⁷³Ibid., 157.

⁷⁴Ibid., 159.

⁷⁵Ibid., 170.

⁷⁶Ibid., 171.

⁷⁷Ibid., 198-9.

⁷⁸Ibid., 202-3.

⁷⁹Catherine Belsey, Critical Practice, (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1980), 30.

⁸⁰Norris, 107.

⁸¹Ibid., 110.

⁸²Ann Rosalind Jones, "Inscribing Femininity: French Theories of the Feminine," in Making A Difference. Edited by Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn, (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1985), 82.

⁸³Peter T. Cominos, "Innocent Femina Sensualis in Unconscious Conflict," in Suffer and Be Still, Martha Vicinus, ed., (London: Indiana University Press, 1972).

⁸⁴Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," in Writing and Sexual Difference, Elizabeth Abel, ed., (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 30.

⁸⁵Ibid., 31.

⁸⁶Ibid., 28.

⁸⁷Ibid., 29.

⁸⁸Ibid., 31.

⁸⁹Mary Jacobus, Women Writing and Writing about Women, (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 13.

⁹⁰Adrienne Munich, "Notorious signs, feminist criticism and literary tradition," in Making a Difference, Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn, eds., (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1985), 239.

P A R T O N E

Chapter Three: Mary Barton (1848)

The critical debate surrounding Mary Barton has been defined, and to a great extent, limited by the labels commonly attached to the novel. Mary Barton is either a 'social problem novel,' a 'condition of England novel,' or an 'industrial novel,' with a resulting focus of critical attention on Mary Barton's 'industrial' subject matter, that is, its exploration of class relations, and the economic and political forces which shape them. Not surprisingly, such labelling yields an almost unanimous critical decision: Mary Barton is a carefully and sympathetically observed, detailed description of life amongst the industrial working classes in Manchester during the 'hungry' 1840's.¹ A novel too whose major weaknesses are generally agreed to be two in number. Firstly, Gaskell's middle-class perspective compromises her analysis of class relations and trade unions. Secondly, the novel is irrevocably split into two distinct parts, the second of which can be dismissed as conventional, and essentially unrelated to the first.²

Mary Barton can however be viewed from a different critical angle, one which, rather than determining the genre to which the text belongs and the ways in which it upholds or transgresses that genre's definition, seeks to see in Mary Barton both the issues, and seeds of issues, which become the objects of Gaskell's attention in her later pieces of fiction, and the methods of analysis which she brings to bear on these issues. In other words, instead of focusing

on 'defining' Mary Barton, it is also possible to see the novel as a blueprint for Gaskell's future concerns; a blueprint whose undeniably bi-partite structure points to submerged, contentious issues, and is not simply or primarily an indication that Gaskell, uncomfortable with the issues she consciously raises, reverts to the conventional love story which "she knows will be acceptable to a novel-reading public."³ Gaskell's Unitarian background, in particular speech act concerns, illuminate the blueprint and provide the necessary tools for exploration.

The opening chapters of the novel contain the nucleus of Gaskell's most important method of portraying and assessing the class relations which are the overt subjects of her scrutiny. Almost immediately, the reader is aware of two opposing groups: the master within whose power it is to grant holidays ⁴ and the workers who may or may not 'seize' those holidays to which they feel entitled (40). The two verbs indicate the discrepancy of power between the two groups, and indeed encapsulate the issues which are at the very heart of the novel: the inter-relation between groups of people, the possible interpretations of nature of that relationship, and the way in which such relations are rooted in, and revealed by, language or discourse. If the masters 'grant' holidays it is because they envisage their position as one of authority over the workers; a request or supplication has been conceded. In opposition, the workers 'seize' holidays, that is they take what they construe is rightfully theirs from someone who wrongfully with-holds it.

From this microcosm of what is going to be her major area of investigation, Gaskell immediately presents the reader with a detailed

picture of the positive model of such inter-relation, or discourse, by focusing on a working-class group of people. The discourse between the Bartons and the Wilsons, unlike that between masters and men hinted at earlier, rests on a shared definition of their relation to each other, a definition which is revealed in their instant recognition and comprehension of each others acts and sayings. Mr and Mrs Wilson, invited to tea at the Bartons, know the necessity for ignoring all of the financial transactions which necessarily precede the partaking of tea. They know "full well, that it all related to the preparations for hospitality" (50) because similar preparations would be required if the situations were reversed. That they refrain from commenting on the straitened pecuniary circumstances of their hosts indicates not a nicety of manners, but an understanding and sympathy of the Barton's financial situation. For the Wilson's to comment would indicate a false, but no less estranging, difference in circumstances between themselves and the Bartons - a different conception of the relationship between them.

Other details surrounding the tea episode emphasize the 'unity' which characterises the type of discourse which operates amongst working-class people. Alice Wilson, also invited to the Barton's home, accepts the offer of tea with thanks, and immediately reciprocates with an offer of simples which she has collected for a spring drink. The exchange points to the assumed, and accepted, equality of status between the members of the exchange. The simples are not, in the language of the masters and workers' relationship, a supplicant's response to a favour 'granted' or extended; they are a gesture of thanks made possible, indeed required, by the terms of the equality

which obtain amongst the working classes. In a similar way, Mrs Barton's response to Alice Wilson's unintentionally "unlucky toast"(53) indicates a willingness to maintain the unity required by equality. When Alice's toast causes upset, Mrs Barton does not condemn her. Such an act of judgement carries implicitly with it the seeds of inequality. Mrs Barton's immediate reassurance of Alice however recognises that Alice "didn't mean any harm"(54); neither feels judged nor in the position to judge.

The entire scene demonstrates what can be termed the 'social contract',⁵ which exists between members of the working classes, a contract which is based on the equal status of its members and is illustrated by the type of communication, the rules of discourse, which exist between them.⁶ Time and time again, Gaskell depicts the contract as one typified by a spirit of 'exchange' which presumes equality, and a consideration for the rights of others. When, as so often happens, a neighbour is immediately ready to visit, to chat with another neighbour, the motive is not prying nosiness nor gossip interest, but a genuine concern for the other person's well being, a concern that can acted upon because of the assured equality of those involved. Job Legh's decision to "put a book and his pipe in his pocket and just step round the corner to fetch his grandchild, ready for a talk if he found Barton in; ready to pull out pipe and book if the girls [Mary and Margaret] wanted him to wait"(79) epitomises the easy equality of working class discourse. The same sense of equality, and sincere interest in a fellow man's life, motivates Job, upon hearing of John Barton's return after a long absence, to offer a visit. The offer is immediately made, and it is a mark of

the importance attached to such instantaneous hospitality that Job, halted from his visit by Mary's concern for her father, begins "muttering away in high dudgeon"(424), greatly offended by the refusal. Similarly, Mary's experience of procuring a boat to pursue Will in the John Cropper, illustrates the equality amongst speakers which characterises the working-class's 'social contract.' Though the episode is a minor one, Gaskell is careful to point out the manner in which the incident is conducted. The boatmen who agree to take Mary down the Mersey require a steersman. The man they single out is not simply asked nor is he ordered to render his services. Instead, an explanation is given as to the urgency of the request(356). The point here is quite simple, although perhaps not immediately obvious. That an explanation is given indicates not that the boatmen feel it most likely to persuade the steersman to agree (though this may partly be true), but that those involved in the transaction are equals. Just as the boatmen knew the urgency of Mary's request and so agreed to transport her, so the prospective steersman has the right, as an equal, to that same information before he makes his decision. The parley itself, which is not reported, takes up less than a paragraph of the narrative, yet behind it lie the concepts of equality and the rules of discourse, which combine to form the working class social contract.

The linguistic basis of this contract is repeatedly revealed in subtle references to the importance of discourse and a shared set of definitions. When John Barton says of Alice, "She's a poor woman, and can feel for the poor"(46), he is pointing to a shared experience between Alice and others which allows Alice to understand

their plight. Significantly, Alice's 'understanding' is often depicted as based in discourse or communication. Even when deaf, Alice, living with Jane Wilson after the death of Jane's husband, has a 'communicative' importance. She states, "I think I'm a comfort to Jane, if I'm only someone to scold now and then . . . It takes off her thoughts from her sore losses when she can scold a bit. "(167).

The comment points to Alice's recognition of the value and therapeutic potential of a discourse which is rooted in shared definitions and experiences. Alice's deafness does not nullify her understanding of loss. Like Jane, she too has experienced a change in family circumstance.

In a more complex way the episode concerning the Davenport family explores and dramatises the nature of the working class social contract. When John Barton hears of the distress of the Davenports, he immediately wraps up his own few pieces of food to take to the family(97). The action might seem well-meaning but ineffective on the surface. John Barton's own poverty appears to rule out the possibility of his involvement in any effective remedy to the Davenport's situation. His response however indicates the degree to which working class inter-relations stem from shared definitions. Mr Carson's own response to the Davenports illustrates the nature of the working class social contract admirably. Carson, upon being informed of Davenport's situation, issues an out-patient's order (109). His son donates five shillings from his own pocket. Both responses are in the nature of a reflex. To Carson, the millowner, there are only two methods of dealing with distress amongst his workers. The first, an in-patient's order for a stay in the Infirmary, is reserved for accidents (109), presumably sustained in his factory. The second, the out-patient's order he issues for

Davenport, covers all other forms of distress. Similarly, the younger Carson, with no Infirmary orders at his disposal, responds to distress with financial aid. Neither know the utter uselessness of both responses in Davenport's case.

In contrast, Barton's response to the news given him indicates his understanding, based on shared experience, of the types of distresses undergone by the working classes. Unlike Carson, Barton does not limit his actions to one of several pre-formulated responses. He wraps up his food; but does not hand it over to Wilson, the messenger, and then stay put, sure of the validity and efficacy of his response to the news. Instead, he immediately sets off for the Davenports' to investigate their situation, the better to respond as adequately as he is able to within his means. Barton, being poor himself, knows of degrees of poverty which Carson's definition of 'poor' cannot accommodate. Where Carson sees distress as precisely twofold in structure - requiring either an in-patient or out-patient infirmary order - Barton is aware of a whole spectrum of definitions within each of Carson's two categories. Gaskell's description of the Davenports' distress provides both a detailed description of the Davenport's cellar [" the damp, nay wet, brick floor, through which stagnant moisture of the street oozed up"(100)], and a jolting recognition that even by Barton's and Wilson's poverty-stricken standards, such an abode is appalling. If people who live in a court with an open drain running down its centre are almost knocked over by the foetid smell (98) of the Davenport's home, then Carson's definition of distress is alarmingly inadequate. The effect is of course to highlight the inadequacy of Carson's response and his conception of distress.

But more importantly, the episode underlies the necessity for shared definitions/experience if responses to situations are to be adequate. John Barton purchases food, light, and warmth (99) because he knows the type of distress the Davenports are suffering; he has defined the degree of poverty accurately since, unlike Carson, he has seen and investigated it himself.

The shared definitions and experiences which form the nucleus of the working-class contract and which allow them to interact with each other as equals pervades Mary Barton not just in episodes like the ones described above, but more overtly in the songs (eg. 72-3,138), poems (154-5), and dialect words by which Gaskell dramatises the world of the working classes. As Gaskell herself indicates in reference to "The Oldham Weaver" which Margaret sings, the songs and poems of a people signify, and are made potent by, shared experiences and definitions.⁷ Whilst "The Oldham Weaver" may seem humorous to those who are happily ignorant of the way of life it describes, the song is "powerfully pathetic"(73) to those who have lived it. In microcosmic form, the diversity of possible responses to the Oldham Weaver (humour, identification) indicates the existence of differing sets of shared experiences and the linguistic expression of those experiences. In much the same way, Gaskell's decision to transcribe the language of her working-class characters in dialect points to her determination to unveil the linguistic element in the unifying, working-class social contract. If the working classes share the horrific experiences which Gaskell presents with such minute detail, they also literally present a linguistically-unified group by the very appearance and shape of their language on paper.

But perhaps the most significant episode in Mary Barton which dramatises both the linguistic element of the social contract and the concept of equality that characterises it, is Job's recounting of his trip to London. The narrative takes up several pages and, on an initial reading, can appear to be nothing more than an entertaining digression. Considered as a species of discourse however, Job's narrative assumes a different signification. The context of Job's narrative is important: John Barton has returned from his journey to London as part of the Chartist delegation of working-class men. Discouraged and embittered by Parliament's lack of response to the delegation, John begins to recount his experiences there, only to break off with a curse and a refusal to continue speaking (145). At this point, Job intervenes with his narrative. If we consider his intervention from the viewpoint of the speech-act notion of narrative, its illustration of the working-class social contract begins to emerge. If, as Pratt outlines, story telling itself represents an agreement, a contract, between speakers and listeners, Job's offer to recount a tale binds him to the articles of that contract. Furthermore, a close look at the type of narrative he offers reveals particulars of the nature of the contract which obtains in the situation presented here. Significantly, Job's choice and manner of narration suggest that the 'narrative contract' is closely allied, indeed a part of, the 'social contract' which operates amongst the members of the working classes. Job selects his narrative on the principle of what Pratt terms 'being relevant.' He "thought of a subject, neither sufficiently dissonant from the last to jar on the full heart, nor too much the same to cherish the continuance of the gloomy train of thought." (145) In other words, Job as John

Barton's equal chooses a topic which makes no attempt to 'judge' John's bitterness by evoking a moral, nor trivialises John's feelings by completely changing the focus of the conversation. His narrative contains elements sympathetic to John's experience: a man's need to leave Manchester for London in an attempt to improve his lot (145) and the strangeness of London (147). At the same time Job's tale indicates the unity amongst the poor working classes which John Barton, in his disheartened state, has forgotten. It is a chambermaid (149) and a countrywoman (153) who help Job care for the infant Margaret. But as well as sympathetic content, Job's manner of narration indicates that he is operating from a belief in the equal status of both listeners and speakers. He is careful to "not be long over ending"(150) his story, and his response to Mary's falling asleep during his recitation ["don't look so gloppened because thou'st fallen asleep while an oud chap like me was talking on oud times"(154)] indicates that he does not view his status as speaker or narrator of the tale to have higher claims than those of his listeners. Significantly too, Job's decision to recite a poem of Bamford's at the close of his tale emphasizes the unity generated by a social contract based on equality. The scene ends with John Barton no longer feeling estranged and isolated by his experiences in London, but aware of others who share the knowledge of distress amongst the poor, and asking Mary to copy down the lines of Bamford's poem so that he possesses a permanent record of that shared knowledge.

In contrast to the shared definitions which characterises the working class social contract, the 'contract' which operates between the classes is distinguished by the extreme gap between the two groups

that generates a lack of communication, shared definitions and, as a result, unity. Again Gaskell illustrates the contract with reference to the species of discourse, the type of speech acts, which exist between them. The meeting between the striking men and the master of the mills encapsulates the type of social contract which operates between them. When analysed in terms of the 'speech act' situation, the meeting reveals the inequality and lack of communication which form its dominant structure. Importantly, Gaskell prefaces the encounter with a depiction of a 'social contract' which stresses communication. Although the masters are divided as to the extent of conciliation with the men they envisage, that division does not sow discord. Meeting at the public room chosen for the interview, the masters first amicably discuss the weather, and then fall to "talking about the business which brought them together." (231) Their decorous observation of what Grice calls the co-operative principle, whilst it does not settle the question of the amount of capitulation to be accorded to the striking men, engenders a unified front on the most central element in the interview: their conception of the workers. Each master is like his fellow in refusing to consider the workmen "as brethren and friends" (232), with the result that the "wild beasts" (232) are never approached as reasonable men and certainly not as equals. The workers' delegates similarly present a unified, communicative group. They bring with them "the operatives' statement of the case" (233), a document presumably formulated by discussion and debate.

Other than this shared characteristic however, the two groups are markedly different in their attitude to the 'speech' situation in which they find themselves engaged. The whole concept of a meeting

between two groups presupposes an equality of status, an agreement to discuss on equal terms the issues which make the meeting necessary. Such a definition accommodates disagreement, but any disagreement is not seen to be determining 'right' or 'wrong' factions, or the shifting status of speakers. The discussion between masters prior to the arrival of the delegates is a case in point. A look at the episode in question, however, reveals that the two groups have two separate definitions of the nature of the meeting. The working men approach the meeting with a definition similar to that outlined above. Their spirit is one of co-operation, based on the assumption that both groups are present in order to discuss a situation by which both are affected. Accordingly, the workers maintain what can be termed the co-operative principle, or the rules of discourse, which obtains in such a meeting. However much the specific details of their discourse can be seen as extravagant or inflammatory, the delegates state their case (the list of grievances and demands) at their appointed turns (233-4), withdrawing and re-entering the discourse when the rules of the meeting render it necessary.

In contrast, the conduct of the masters suggest that their definition of the type of meeting taking place is strikingly different. Once the delegates refuse the masters' offer, it is clear that the masters are operating within a definition of 'meeting' which incorporates an assumption of authority and superiority. Carson, upon hearing the refusal, suggests changes to the masters' offer. The changes themselves are essentially unimportant. The significance of Carson's speech lies in the fact that he makes the suggestions in front of the delegates, uncaring that his actions indicate his assumption

of authority. To the workers, Carson is 'flouting' the rules of the discourse in which they are involved, rules which outline that Carson should propose any new changes when the delegates had withdrawn. For Carson and the other masters, Carson's actions are not 'flouting' any rules at all. Indeed his actions serve primarily to unify further the masters' definition of the meeting. Assuming as they do, their superiority over the delegates before them, Carson's aggressive resolutions and assessment of the workmen's conduct in the strike are not insulting transgressions of the meeting's rules, but a re-affirmation of their authority over the workers. Accordingly, the masters' listen to Carson's proposals, vote, and pass the resolution, all in the presence of the 'inferior' delegates.(234-5).

Despite such provocation, the workers' delegation maintain the rules of the 'meeting.' Though they listen with "glaring eyes"(234), the one attempt to speak 'out of turn' is checked "in obedience to the stern glance and pressure . . . received from the leader."(234) The delegates hear the resolution, and leave the room. It is only when they uncover unmistakeable proof of the masters' attitude to the meeting that they rebel. They find the caricature which the young Harry Carson has drawn of them, looking "lank, ragged, dispirited, and, famine-stricken"(235), and Carson is murdered for it. Such a response needs to be examined carefully. As one of the workers says, "I could laugh at a gist as well as e'er the best on 'em, though it tell again myself"(238) - the humorous potential of a caricature is not debated. Rather it is as an emblem of an attitude that the caricature is reviled. That Harry Carson could compose such a drawing indicates his ignorance of the workers' situation it is true - but

more importantly, it indicates a general disinclination to discover the facts, and a reliance on pre-formulated notions. Carson's caricature is possible because he is unquestioning as to the 'definition' of the meeting he is attending. He assumes his superiority to the workers in front of him, and can therefore utilise their appearance to a comic purpose. Like both Carsons' response to Davenport's illness, Harry Carson's response here indicates a limited and pre-formulated definition of the issue presented to him. To the Carsons and the other masters, a 'worker' is nothing more than a 'function', to be made use of or not. The definition has no room for the idea of 'exchange' or 'communication' which, for the workers at least, is the defining characteristic of a meeting. Essentially Carson's caricature is not a caricature at all. Far from exaggerating the subject before him, Carson's drawing neatly encapsulates his definition of the working men: alien objects of interest whose essence can be composedly translated onto paper. A caricature by definition identifies a ruling, predominant characteristic. For Carson, a caricature is the equivalent of a carefully-wrought portrait of his definition of the working-class delegates.

Each time the two classes meet, this clash of definition and expected modes of discourse reverberates. Previous to the meeting between masters and delegates, the encounter between Jem Wilson and Harry Carson represents a similar interchange undermined by differing rules of discourse, and definitions of the meeting. Jem proceeds within the rules of discourse which govern meetings between individuals with a mutual interest. Accordingly, he approaches Carson with respect (226), stating the reason for his appearance, and expecting

answers to his queries (228). Carson's definition of this meeting is however substantially different. Accordingly he does not answer Jem's questions (228), nor does he proceed within the same set of rules for discourse. Where Jem openly declares his interests and requirements, Carson never divulges his. Rather he manipulates Jem's speech in an effort to glean the information he desires. He wants to "ascertain . . . the man's relation to [Mary]"(228), but because of his rules of discourse, he does not simply ask the question as Jem, in the same situation, is doing. Their differing definitions are most neatly seen in Harry's expectations of Jem's response. Carson does not answer Jem's forthright questions; nevertheless he both desires and expects "a distinct answer"(229) to his own questions. Similarly, once Carson has discovered the item of information he does require, then the discourse is to him closed (229). That Jem's questions have not been similarly answered, reveals Carson's differing definition of their respective status, and accompanying rights, in the discourse.

The effect of such division in the rules of discourse can be seen in the efforts of the Carsons' 'nurse' to inform the family of young Carson's murder. Though Parker, as the children's former nurse, benefits from a manner "less haughty"(257) than the one usually accorded to domestics, the rules of discourse which pertain between the masters, their families and the working classes (whether operatives or domestics) make the disclosure of personal, intimate information impossible. Parker enters the drawing room where the three Carson girls sit waiting for tea. Her blanched face, had it belonged to one other than a servant, would have been noted immediately. But

because Parker is a domestic, her very entrance is not noted (257). The girls continue "arranging their various articles of employment"(257). Gaskell carefully outlines Parker's difficulty in conveying information which the rules of discourse between classes render impossible. She "want[s] them to look up. She want[s] them to read something in her face - her face so full of woe, of horror"(257). But the girls go "on without taking any notice"(257). For them, Parker's entrance into the room is confined to one definition: she usually "came into the drawing-room to look for things belonging to their father or mother"(257) so they neither look for nor expect the revelation of personal, important information.

The 'solution' to these discordant rules of discourse is not easily found. Gaskell does not find it in that supposedly objective, disinterested body: the legal system. On the contrary, the legal system is seen to embody the masters' perceptions and definitions to be a translation of those definitions into a literal system of rules and contracts enforced by appointed officials. From very early in the novel, the police are seen to be separate to the world of the working classes. A series of references, significant in their very casualness, their lack of an atypical context, suggest that the attitude they reveal is typical of the discourse between the legal system and the working classes. Policemen can be good men, but are not spoken to because of their position (46); they are the first threat thrown at the working class child who bumps into a middle-class one (438), and they seem unmoved by working class distress (144). More importantly, the legal system is seen to support actively the social contract which alienates class from class. In the

altercation between Jem Wilson and Harry Carson, the policeman's instant offer to arrest Jem (230) betrays his sympathies. Having observed the "violent discussion"(230) between the two men, the police officer presumably also saw that Carson struck Jem first. Even when Carson admits to provoking the scuffle, it is Jem who receives the warning of law not Carson.

It is the progression of the trial which most clearly indicates the alignment of the legal system with the masters' rules of discourse, and their definition of the social contract existing between classes. Carson's desire for a "speedy conviction, a speedy execution"(274) is seen to be unimpeded by the processes of law. The circumstantial nature of the evidence against Jem and Carson's desire for a quick conclusion may be deemed "injudicious"(344), but it is never really opposed. If Carson's earlier response to such issues as Davenport's illness betray a dependence on pre-formulated responses and rigid definitions, the court itself is a three dimensional version which operates on identical terms. Gaskell neatly pinpoints the parallel in her depiction of the jury's and Carson's response to the revelation of Jem's innocence. Carson, "having once defined an object,"(396) responsible for his son's murder, is overwhelmed with frustration exact in kind (though differing in degree) to the frustration of the jury who are dismayed to discover that their 'opinion' (396) needs reshaping. The legal system's dependence on pre-formulated definitions is further illustrated in its instant acceptance of Will Wilson's testimony in defense of Jem once an "accredited pilot, appointed by Trinity House"(397) is brought in to testify. Trinity House pilots are "known to be above suspicion"(397). It is a sign of the power

of such pre-formulated definitions that Carson sinks down in "sickening despair"(398) when it is brought before court.

If the legal system so uncompromisingly reflects an alienating social contract, the communication breakdown between classes appears permanent. The gap could be reduced by conditions which fostered shared rules of discourse, and a mutually defined social contract, though it is first necessary that the knowledge and experience which lead to such unified definitions is held in common. But even this avenue of action seems closed. The failure of the Chartist delegation to London is a case in point. The workers cannot believe that Parliament knows the misery of their situation: it "had still to be revealed in all its depths"(127). Their supposition is accurate, however, in a way they do not foresee. Trusting that adequate knowledge will engender an adequate response, as it does amongst themselves, the delegation aims to convey the 'adequate information' in the form of their own testimony to the body of officials empowered to respond to their situation. Parliament however shares their belief in knowledge equalling adequate response all too completely. It "refuse[s] to listen to the working-men, when they petitioned with all the force of their rough, untutored words"(141) precisely because listening entails response. By refusing to hear the testimony, Parliament simultaneously short-circuits and upholds the equation.

But the gulf between classes so efficiently regulated by the rules of discourse and the social contract which operates between them, is not as unbridgeable as the behaviour of Parliament and the machinations of the court room suggest. If the Carson girls need excessive prodding to look at Parker (she stands before them an inordinate

length of time), they do eventually look, and when they do they can read the "glimpse of some terrible truth"(257) that disturbs Parker's face and renders her inarticulate. It is in the subject of the sorrow that the possibility for communication between estranged social classes is glimpsed. Gaskell finds the answer to differing class contracts in what can be termed the 'familial contract.' In other words, it is the recognition of shared familial bonds that unites separate classes. Not until John Barton recognises that he has killed a brother and succumbed to "perverted reasonings"(436) which made him place trade union obligations over and above his obligations to the concept of 'family', can he be forgiven. In murdering the young Harry Carson John Barton forcibly points to the common area of experience between himself and the older Carson: each are parents, and each have now lost a child (435). Barton forces himself to realise that he is as guilty of the crime of rigid definition as Carson is himself. No longer is Carson simply a representative of a class "desirous to obtain the greatest quantity of work for the lowest wages"(436); no longer one "eternally placed in antagonistic attitude"(435). Barton, like Carson, learns the necessity of flexible definition.

The solution may seem facile or, at best, optimistic. But Gaskell is adamant about its efficacy. The death bed scene which dramatises the reconciliation of Barton and Carson is conventional in many ways. But one of its most superficially conventional elements - the biblical text chosen in prayer - points to the tumultuous experience of re-defining social contracts undergone by Barton and Carson. The text, "God be merciful to us sinners"(441), emphasizes the essential unity of persons of substantially different social classes - a unity which

is based and expressed in language. More significantly, the subsequent and final meeting between different social groups illustrates the changed social contract, as manifested in rules of discourse, between them. Carson, after Barton's death, invites Job Legh and Jem to discuss the circumstances of his son's death. The invitation reveals Carson's progression from a reliance on rigid definitions to awareness of the need for flexibility in definition. Though Carson's first speech indicates his initial adherence to the 'old' rules of class discourse [he assumes that Job and Jem have a different attitude towards speaking the truth than his own], he immediately retracts the statement which indicates this (453). The rest of the episode is a model of communication: questions are asked and answered by both sides. Carson's careful attention to maintaining a social contract based on equality and unity is seen in his immediate retraction of the adjective "unfortunate" (455) which he is about to apply to his son's involvement with Mary Barton. The adjective implies a discrepancy between Jem and Carson's son which he wants to avoid. Importantly, the three men retain their differences as to the "power, or want of power in masters, to remedy the evils the men complain of" (458), but these differences are not depicted as inevitably leading to judgement and estrangement.

Despite the apparent neatness of Gaskell's solution, the concept of the 'familial contract' is problematic in a way not linked with its optimistic simplicity. Though, in the novel's terms, it paves the way for a social contract between individuals which transcends those shaped by class and economics, the 'familial contract' contains within it a more insidious contract than the class one. It is a contract which operates on the very terms of rigid definition and

and pre-formulation which Gaskell isolates and criticises as the impetus behind the estranging class social contract, and yet it is never subjected to the same scrutiny. The complexity of this submerged contract is attested to by the fact that it is the root cause of what has hitherto been dismissed as primarily 'bad' writing: the bi-partite structure of Mary Barton.

In order to maintain that Mary Barton is inexplicably flawed, one must assert that Gaskell is primarily and solely interested in the influence which economics has on communication. Such a contention necessitates that John Barton, the trade union and the resolution of class conflict is at the centre of the novel, and that when that concern is evidently evaded (at the point of Carson's murder), Gaskell is consciously and cowardly refusing to deal with the issues she has raised.⁸ There is however an alternative approach to Mary Barton which proposes that Gaskell's apparent 'switch' in narrative focus from John Barton to Mary Barton is not a retreat into a romantic love plot,⁹ but the inevitable consequence of issues which she unconsciously raises.¹⁰

It is perhaps best to begin at the end with a look at the section of the novel which is emblematic of the submerged 'contract' which dictates the novel's structure: Mary Barton's testimony in the Liverpool Assizes. On one level, Mary's testimony is an integral element in Gaskell's attempt to undermine the stereotypes which perpetuate class division. Mary's intention to exculpate Jem whilst not exposing her father as the murderer is a narrator-approved elevation of the familial contract over the requirements of the law. It is a statement of the individual's filial bonds made potent by its articulation in a situation which embodies the public, social contract. Nevertheless,

though Mary's statement is radical in its challenge to the claims of a public social contract, it is unabashedly conformist in a way which can only be exposed by a revision of what is at the center of Mary Barton. That centre, where the overt focal point of divisive class contracts buckles under pressure, can be pinpointed to the discovery of Harry's murder, and the initially undiscovered evidence of the murderer's identity: the paper wadding.

When Esther produces the wadding which she discovers in a hedge bordering the scene of Carson's murder, she places in Mary's possession a microcosmic image of the structure of Mary Barton: the paper is part of the sheet, torn from a Valentine sent to Mary by Jem, which Mary had used to copy down the lines of Bamford's poem on the distress of poverty. In other words, the paper represents two aspects of Mary's life (her economic position as a member of Manchester's industrial working class, and her sexual position as a female member of that class), and the two motives posited for Harry's murder: the actual economic motive of Barton's, and the alleged sexual motive of Jem Wilson. More importantly, the necessity for the paper's discovery leads us directly to the submerged contract dictating the structure of Mary Barton.

It is vital to note that up until Esther presents her with the gun wadding, Mary is resolutely certain that Jem is guilty of Carson's murder. Her immediate response to the news that Jem is to be tried for murder is one of conviction. Though she does not blame him, "she doubted not his guilt"(282). More puzzling than this instantaneous judgement of Jem, is Mary's immediate involvement in his guilt. Not only is Jem the murderer, but she instantly recognises "how much

cause"(282) she has given Jem for murder. She condemns herself as "guilty"(282) with a rapidity identical with her adverse judgement of Jem.

One is tempted to accuse Mary of a strange desire to implicate herself in the 'glory' of crime by whatever means of illogical reasoning. But the text refuses to allow such an explanation: the entire cast of characters is as resolutely convinced of Mary's guilt and involvement as she is. Each and every one assumes that not only is Jem the murderer but that Mary is to blame. Job Legh considers that Jem has been "ill used and - jilted"(305), and that Mary's "light conduct"(305) has led directly to the "fatal consequences"(305) of murder. Margaret considers Mary to be "a girl devoid of the modest proprieties of her sex"(306), and is "surprised and disappointed by the disclosure of Mary's conduct"(306) whilst never once denouncing Jem whom she believes to be a murderer. Jane Wilson too, though refusing to consider Jem guilty, is equally sure that Mary's "arts and . . . profligacy"(281) render her guilty.

In a novel which has hitherto detailed economic duress with painful accuracy, this immediate privileging of a sexual motive over an economic one is both illogical and inexplicable. Even more inexplicable, is Mary's continued sense of guilt once she is aware of her father's culpability. Mary, faced with the judging silence of Margaret's presence, "knew herself to blame, felt her errors in every fibre of her heart"(316) even though she knows of the economic motive for the crime. Finally, in a novel which so powerfully delineates the dangers of presumptive judgement and limited definitions, Mary's belief that Margaret has a "right to judge"(319) her conduct is a

puzzling contradiction. Under what contract does Mary place herself? What rules of discourse and behaviour render Mary guilty of a crime apparently as odious as murder itself?

In order to answer these questions thoroughly it is necessary to return to the point when Mary first learns that Jem is accused of Carson's murder. Her first impulse is to return to "the ominous, prophetic words"(282) which Jem had last spoken to her: "you'll maybe hear of me as a drunkard, and may be as a thief, and maybe as a murderer. Remember! when all are speaking ill of me, you will have no right to blame me, for it's your cruelty that will have made me what I feel I shall become.'"(175) When Jem's words were first spoken they seemed to be nothing more than the overwrought response of a spurned lover. But their significance extends beyond that. Far from being solely Jem's response to Mary's lack of interest in him, the words form part of what can be termed the 'pastoral contract' whose rules of discourse and definitions govern the relationship between the sexes. The term 'pastoral contract' is appropriate because what the reader encounters in the progression of Jem and Mary's relationship mimics the situation normally encountered in the pastoral lyric.¹¹

In order to establish the nature of the pastoral contract, it is useful to turn to an analysis of that contract as it appears in other literatures. Adrienne Munich, in her essay "Notorious signs, feminist criticism and literary tradition,"¹² conducts one such analysis. She takes as her subject the story of Marcella, an episode in Cervantes' Don Quixote. In summary, the story concerns Marcella, a beautiful heiress who decides to become a shepherd in an attempt to escape the numerous suitors that pursue her. But as Munich points out,

the world of the pastoral provides no escape from the patriarchal definitions of women which had previously doomed Marcella to the perpetual annoyance of suitors aiming to capture her beauty and virtues. On the contrary, the pastoral scene generates yet another definition of 'woman' which Marcella finds equally constraining: she becomes "the conventional object of shepherds' laments."¹³

During the scene Munich outlines, Marcella is reviled as the 'murderer' of one of the shepherds, Chrysostom, who has apparently died of a broken heart - the result of Marcella's refusal to favour his attentions. Marcella attempts to defend herself from the accusation of murder: she asserts that she clearly told Chrysostom of her indifference, and that she does not feel obligated to love a man simply because he loves her. But as Munich points out, Marcella's honest speaking is ineffective. In the pastoral world, it is Marcella as 'woman', and the language of her body, that is privileged above her words or individual discourse.¹⁴ Precisely put, Marcella's "body contradicts (speaks against) her words".¹⁵

In opposition, the depiction of the relationship between man, his body, and his language stresses congruence. The dead Chrysostom's body, in front of which the accusing shepherds are gathered, is proof of his love for Marcella in precisely the same way that his love poetry about Marcella 'proved' his love for her. Where Marcella represents a dislocation of word and body, Chrysostom's body and language are unified; each expresses his emotional state.¹⁶

If Cervantes seems too distant to be relevant to Gaskell, Rousseau's Emile (1762) attests to the durability of the pastoral contract and its definition of women. Rousseau, describing the ideal wife for Emile and outlining the type of education which forms a 'Sophy-like'

creatures, presents a definition of 'woman' which is in complete accord with the pastoral contract. His definition is worth presenting at length. The two most salient aspects of Rousseau's women are the fluency with which their bodies speak, and the responsibility they hold with regard to stimulating male passion. The first is something to which Rousseau returns again and again. In an effort to aid Emile in his pursuit of Sophy, Rousseau suggests that Sophy's words are immaterial:

Why do you consult their words when it is
not their mouths that speak? Consult their
eyes, their colour, their breathing . . .
that is the language that nature gave
them for your answer.¹⁷

So powerful is a woman's physical presence that it not only overrides any linguistic message, it is also capable of speaking when the woman herself is silent. When Sophy says nothing in response to Emile's request for permission to visit, Rousseau tells us that her "blush is an answer."¹⁸ Presumably, Sophy's silence allows the signals of her physical presence to be read all the more clearly. Rousseau also recognises that if physical presence is the eternal female language, it is sadly apt to decay. Whilst the "male is only a male now and again"¹⁹ because his reason can disarm his sexuality, "the female is always a female, or at least all her youth."²⁰ Rousseau's qualifier reveals the 'grammar' that is physical presence to the male reader. A young woman is always 'female', ie. a sexual creature; an old woman's body needs re-defining. She is still defined by her physical presence but, no longer sexually desirable, she becomes in effect a cypher.

Women's responsibility for arousing male passion is the inevitable

consequence of the 'power' of their physical presence. Not surprisingly, Rousseau's vocabulary reflects man's feelings of helplessness before the unrelenting signals of the female presence. Rousseau speaks of "draughts of poison"²¹ and intoxication, of weapons,²² and mesmerism by the 'charm' that is the female body²³ - each term transfers the responsibility for a man's sexual arousal onto a woman's shoulders (or arms, or breasts, or hair).

Lurking below these two aspects of woman is, not surprisingly, a fear of them. Women are apparently capable of "stimulating man's passions in excess of man's power of satisfying,"²⁴ and can "so easily stir a man's senses"²⁵ that it is a possibility that men can be "tyrannised over by women, [could] at last become their victims, and [could] be dragged to their death without the least chance of escape."²⁶ More importantly, a woman can possibly pass illegitimate children off as the heirs of unsuspecting husbands.²⁷ Luckily, accompanying this limitless power, Rousseau also finds a natural restraint - female modesty - which acts to constrain women's power, ensures that they submit to their husbands, and guarantees that primogeniture can be practised with reasonable confidence.

Finally, the reification of woman finds a niche in Rousseau's thoughts on Sophy. Their status as objects is constantly upheld by his insistence that they not only be virtuous, but that they are seen to be virtuous in a way not demanded of men.²⁸ It is reputation that is a woman's "throne."²⁹ Women essentially, for Rousseau, help to uphold chivalric concepts of love which he terms 'real love.' Real love, he says, cannot exist "without enthusiasm, and no enthusiasm without an object of perfection real or supposed, but always present

in the imagination."³⁰ Women, as such objects, are the recipients of a love usually accorded to a divinity. It is not such a large step from this to the Victorian concept of the 'angel in the house', and woman as the male moral touchstone.

If we interpret Mary and Jem's relationship in the light of such a 'pastoral contract,' Mary's response to the murder of Carson appears not contradictory, but unavoidable and predictable. Jem's reaction to Mary's behaviour when he offers her marriage indicates that he is working within the rules of the pastoral contract. Mary finds herself inarticulate at Jem's proposal, and Jem both expects and queries if her silence "gives consent"(175). His expectation betrays his adherence to a pastoral definition of 'woman.' If, in pastoral terms, the female body is always an object of desire, and a woman's body and language are always incongruous, then a silent woman 'speaks' only the language of her body: that is, the language of consent. Mary, insisting that silence does not equal consent with her (175), asserts herself as an individual, separate from pastoral definitions, and in so doing momentarily shatters the pastoral contract. Jem is forced to flee, stopping only to threaten Mary with responsibility for any decline in his character.

Mary's refusal is her final attempt to escape the structures of the pastoral contract. A series of incidents preceding Jem's proposal indicates Mary's previous efforts to escape through non-participation. From her first appearance, Mary's behaviour reveals her acute awareness of the pastoral contract. Within minutes of entering the novel, Mary is seen slapping Jem's face for having kissed her. Mary is "blushing rosy red, more with anger than shame"(47),

and it is not surprising.³¹ Being only, as we are told, a girl of thirteen, Mary is resolutely determined not to implicate herself in a pastoral contract at such a young age. She is aware of the ways in which to keep herself free of its constraints. Having overheard a conjecture that Jem is her sweetheart, Mary refuses to answer Jem's next speech (49). In the same way, when John Barton suggests that Jem and Mary share a tea-cup [oblivious to the sexual connotations a sharing would have for the adolescent Mary whom he still terms 'little'(44)], Mary "secretly determine[s] to take care that Alice brought her [own] tea-cup and saucer, if the alternative was to be her sharing anything with Jem."(51)

When Mary finally does speak to Jem she could have predicted (and probably did) his definition of her speech. Mary visits the Wilson home when she hears of the death of their twin sons. Responding to Jem's deep sorrow, she offers her comfort. Jem immediately feels a "strange leap of joy in his heart . . . it . . . was happiness, was bliss, to be so spoken to by Mary."(119) Mary's subsequent response to Jem's revealed feelings is "unfeigned distress, almost amounting to vexation"(119), a response which Jem reads as repugnance. But Mary's repugnance reveals not a loathing of Jem in particular, but an unwillingness to ratify the pastoral contract in which Jem attempts to engage her. To respond verbally to a statement such as Jem's is, as Mary recognises, tantamount to an agreement to be governed by the rules of the pastoral contract.

What Mary does not realise is that she is powerless to influence the progression of the pastoral contract. No matter how many times she avoids addressing Jem (120;133;161) she is inextricably caught

by the contract's rules and definitions. Indeed Mary herself accords with the contract in her relationship with Harry Carson. She feels herself "as good as engaged to be married"(120) to Carson, even though all of the speech has been articulated by Carson not herself. At this point Mary, though aware of the existence of the pastoral contract, is ignorant of its true nature, and the position to which she is assigned within it. This ignorance is seen at work in Mary's meeting with Carson when she decides to break off their relationship. Mary states her intentions clearly, but Carson insists, to her puzzlement, on misunderstanding her. Mary does not realise that, according to the rules of the pastoral contract, women do not speak unless to ratify the contract. To assert uninvolvedness is not only confusing, but contradictory - no matter what Mary says, the language of her body/presence, as perceived by Carson, articulates consent. He considers her rejection a "charming caprice"(186); it is inconceivable that he would read the rejection in a way which undermined the foundation of the contract.

Carson is unaware of Mary's semi-understanding of the contract's terms. Though on the one hand, Mary accepts responsibility for engendering love in a man³² [N.B. Mary's relief at realising that she need not feel "penitent"(183) for arousing Carson's love once she realises its shallow nature], she operates on the belief that she can discriminate between those who profess to love her. Essentially Mary believes she has the right to 'action', in the form of rejection, as long as that rejection is clearly articulated.

But more important than Mary's inadequate grasp of the pastoral contract's terms is that this ignorance appears to flourish despite

her evident knowledge of the reasons for its very existence. The novel reverberates with the power of what can be termed the myth of sexuality. It is the power of this myth that dictates each character's response to the murder. Mary believes that "passionate feeling"(300) can ignite the murderous impulse; Job believes Jem's "blood has been up"(305) and so accepts that a murder could occur; Carson finds it easiest to hate a murderer when he "imagine[s] him a young man, full of lusty life, defying all laws, human and divine"(439), but acting in accordance with the 'laws' of passion as the myth perpetuates them. Indeed, the novel's structure is the most overt 'proof' of the power of the myth: once raised, the issue of passion cannot be abandoned. The rest of the novel is not the 'solving' of Carson's murder, but the expiation of Mary's more frightening sexual crime. The depiction of Mary Barton's gradual initiation and integration into the pastoral contract is a process which ensures that both the passion, so all powerful that it needs the pastoral contract to define it, and the woman who unleashed it, are again regulated by the rules of pastoral discourse.

The expediency with which Mary is made to toe the pastoral line testifies to the alarm which surrounds the breaking of the pastoral contract. Mary not only immediately discovers that Jem is indeed the man she loves, but she is soon attempting to ratify the contract Jem extended to her by writing a letter (189). Though Mary declares she does not intend to write a courting letter (189), her indignation at the accusation that she is, hints at her conscious knowledge that discourse, no matter what the subject matter, equals overt consent to the pastoral contract. Mary's impulse here recalls her mistaken

assumption that a woman's articulated discourse has an important and influential role in the pastoral contract. But Margaret Legh knows better: she advises that passivity by suggesting that Mary must "wait and be patient"(190). Her advice is appropriate of course. Jem will soon enough re-read the language which Mary's body offers.³³

From this point Mary's re-integration into the pastoral contract conducts itself along exemplary lines. The revelation that Carson's murder is economically, not sexually, motivated, causes not the slightest hesitancy in Mary's conviction that she needs sexual re-tutoring. In the terms of the pastoral contract, a deviation is none the less serious because it does not lead to the outbreak of passion. It is Mary's duty and her right (340) to save Jem because she must be seen to destroy any vestiges of her potential to untie passion/sexuality from its pastoral constrictions. Such an undertaking might be expected to require much vigorous action on Mary's part, but Gaskell is careful to show that though Mary must 'exert' herself, that exertion is accomplished in a manner compliant to the pastoral definition of women. Accordingly, Mary's actions are compared to those of 'The Constant Woman' whose unsteady hand and poor eye (311) introduces the reader to Mary's method of exculpating Jem. She possesses "weak powers"(324) which seem barely adequate for her needs. But Mary's 'activities' are not an integral part of her powers. It is as the pastoral woman, one based on passivity and silence, that Mary is most effective. In a world where the actual actions needed to exculpate Jem are performed by men (the boatmen who row down the river; Will's testimony; the young Charley who guides Mary through the strangeness of the Liverpool pierhead), Mary wisely allows the pastoral contract to work for her.

It is her "patience . . . [and] perhaps her silence"(356) which gets her the necessary row boat to chase the John Cropper; her "little acknowledgement of inferiority"(349) and her willingness to "appropriate"(350) that decides Charley to help her. Indeed, so powerful is the pastoral contract's definition of women that other women respond enthusiastically to a Mary acting (or rather not acting) according to its strictures. It is Mary's "humble, self-abased words"(282) that finally spur Jane Wilson to relent in her condemnation of Mary. Similarly, it is Mary's admission that she has done wrong which allows Margaret to view her once again as the "same, sweet, faulty, impulsive, lovable creature she had known in the former Mary Barton."(318)

In accordance with the de-privileging of female action in the pastoral contract, once Mary has succeeded in contacting Will Wilson her vigour begins its steady decline into passivity. Significantly, that diminishment manifests itself in a decreasing power of articulation. Mary's words seem "not her own, and beyond her power of control"(361); indeed nothing seems to "signify"(361) to Mary at all: streets, names, nothing is meaningful. She is losing her ability to decode signs, the basis of the ability to articulate language, and so chooses to keep silent out of dislike for speaking. (378)

In this context of diminishing power of articulation, the necessity for Mary to testify in court gains new significance. She exerts "every power she had to keep in the full understanding of what was going on"(389), and of what she is saying, in order to ensure she does not reveal the identity of the murderer. But Mary's testimony not only reveals that she is adhering to the rules of the 'familial contract' which Gaskell has privileged above the legal contract with

such care and *vehemence*. The testimony is also Mary's final punishment for her previous attempts to opt out of the pastoral contract by re-defining her position within it. As such a cleansing, it is necessary that Mary be forced to articulate in language what is generally encoded in the submerged language of the body: her sexual desire and preference for a specific individual. Mary must articulate clearly "what every woman usually whispers with blushes and tears, and many hesitations"(390) because of her previous insistence on her right to articulate which transgressed the pastoral rules of discourse. Mary, understanding and accepting the punishment, does not allow "feminine shame"(390) to stop her declaration, and it her willingness to endure exposure and subjugation that transforms her into an exemplary 'pastoral' woman. Jem, realising the significance of Mary's speech, stands "erect and firm"(392) - Mary's translation into the pastoral woman re-asserts his own male identity.

Having testified, Mary is free to undergo a 're-birth' which guarantees her status as a pastoral woman. She suffers a nervous breakdown which pushes her back into a pre-articulate stage of consciousness: "[Sight] and hearing [are] no longer channels of information to that poor distracted brain, nor could human voice penetrate to her understanding."(401) After a long respite in this stage, Mary makes a rapid transition from childhood to sexual awareness which conforms to the pastoral contract. Moving from the "tender state of a lately-born infant"(416) through to a "look of memory and intelligence"(416), Mary is re-initiated into a sexual consciousness (she blushes a bright red when she sees Jem looking at her) characterised by softness, gentleness and a predilection for silence. (418) Appropriately, it is Jem who witnesses this rebirth, he whose pastoral contract was rejected, and who responds correctly to the emergent

sexual consciousness by leaving the room. (416) When Mary completes her recovery, their 'pastoral contract' is evidently sealed: Mary is full "of love and confidence"(418) and Jem feels "no uneasiness"(418) as to the state of their affairs.

Having 'mended' and so upheld the pastoral contract, Gaskell is free to tie up the loose economic ends of the issues she has raised. John Barton makes his re-entry at precisely this moment (412), and the problems he brings with him are rapidly dealt with by the reconciliation effected with Carson. Although this reconciliation, and the last four chapters of text which outline it, have been criticised as an over-simplistic 'solution' to the economic issues presented in Mary Barton, the ending is in fact true to the terms of the contract which has dominated the second half of the text. Whilst the reconciliation scene itself operates on newly-forged rules of discourse between the social classes, the emigration of Mary and Jem to Canada is not an aberration. Rather it is a literal return to the world of the pastoral for the two characters whose relationship has evolved into a model of the pastoral contract.

The ending of Mary Barton also raises the issue of Esther, whose presence on the surface appears to subvert the pastoral contract. If Mary must undergo extensive tutoring and punishment for her early transgression of the pastoral, why does Esther the prostitute escape such condemnation? To answer this question, it is first necessary to ascertain the nature or definition of the crime which Esther has committed by becoming a prostitute. From the beginning, it would seem that Esther's 'sexuality' is defined primarily in economic terms: she is recognised as a prostitute by her dress (42;169) in much

the same way that a 'lady' is recognised by her clothing. Indeed, Esther's actual motivation for prostitution is economic - she turns to it in order to provide for her child. (210) It is because - Esther's sexuality is economically activated that she can be forgiven. Though Esther feels like the "unholy Lady Geraldine"(293), Gaskell asserts her human dignity and her right to be re-integrated into society. Esther's self-blame is not supported by the text in the way that Mary's is. Where Mary is shown to be correct in blaming herself for her potential involvement in crime, Esther's hatred of her "violent and unregulated nature"(290) is shown to be the cause of social isolation (291) and in need of correction. Though Esther is a prostitute, her behaviour reveals her basic adherence to the pastoral contract. Her tale of seduction and abandonment, her revelation that the man involved had "promised [her] marriage"(209) shows that unlike Mary, Esther apparently conformed to the pastoral contract: a man offers marriage and Esther acts accordingly. She cannot be blamed for a subsequent withdrawal of the terms of the pastoral contract by the man involved. In fact her continued observation of the pastoral definition of woman [she is humble (171); ashamed (292); and passively accepts being an outcast (290)] guarantees that she is not forced to undergo extensive punishment. Esther's interment in a single grave with John Barton symbolises the common, forgivable, ground of economics which here literally unites them.

The willingness with which overtly 'economic' sexuality is not judged can also be seen in a minor exchange between Mrs. Sturgis and her husband. Mrs Sturgis, presented with the near unconscious Mary by her husband, immediately ponders if Mary is "a bad one"(377),

in exactly the same way that Mrs Jones suspects Mary to be involved in a love affair "of not the most creditable kind"(346). Nevertheless, both women are willing to help Mary, and are not deterred by their suspicions. Their willingness might seem surprising in a novel which judges Mary so harshly. But, if a prostitute, Mary is not a threat to the pastoral contract in the way she is when she refuses to comply. That Gaskell's depiction of the evolution of a prostitute is a reflection of the actual situation for many Victorian prostitutes, suggests that prostitution, far from being a transgression of the pastoral contract on a woman's part, can be considered one of the contract's consequences.

This last possibility leads us to the only criticism of the pastoral contract which Gaskell ventures in the course of Mary Barton. If Gaskell can envisage only one role for women which accords with the pastoral rules, she recognises that men have more options. Gaskell is careful to outline the moral status of these options, but she is powerless to evoke a punishment for those roles she views with distaste. In simple terms, men have two options within the pastoral contract. They can take their role 'seriously' as do Jem and Will Wilson, or they can 'dally' with the role. The first attitude is seen to be commendable: both Jem and Will articulate their offers of marriage in good faith, and seem unwilling to articulate an offer unless circumstances appear to render them favourable.(225) Jem waits until Mary's offer of condolence at his brothers' deaths suggests warm regard for him; Will patiently waits until Margaret seems open to a proposal.

The alternative approach is exemplified in Harry Carson's multiple

flirtations. Harry's sisters, discussing his behaviour, outline the effects that 'dalliance' with the contract can have, and thereby prove that the pastoral contract transcends class.³⁴ The passage is worth quoting:

I do think he is behaving wrongly. The more I think of it the more sure I am that she [a Jane Richardson] thinks he means something, and that he intends her to think so . . . As soon as he leaves off paying her attention . . . she will have many and many a heartache, and then she will harden herself into being a flirt. Poor girl! . . . I think he hardly knows the misery, the crimes to which indulged vanity may lead him.(256)

The passage is a microcosm of the pastoral contract itself: a man speaks, and a woman reads it as commitment, a reading which the man can choose to ratify or not. Should he choose ratification, all goes well. But if he does not, 'crime' must inevitably follow. As Harry's sister is aware, that 'crime' and misery attaches to the woman not the man. It is Miss Richardson, not Carson, who will experience the heartache. More interestingly, the passage pinpoints the place at which the discernible effects of the pastoral contract alter with class. Where Esther, in the same situation as the unfortunate Miss Richardson, evolves into a prostitute because her economic status makes it necessary, Miss Richardson will evolve into 'a flirt', the equivalent in all but economic terms (she will not get paid) to a prostitute. Sophy Carson's use of the term 'crime' suggests that being responsible for the existence of a flirt is a grave offence. The crime is of course not what becomes of the woman denied the pastoral contract, but the denial of the contract itself. Whether flirt or prostitute, the cause of a woman's change in status is a male crime.

Gaskell knowing the effects of male dalliance with the pastoral contract, condemns Harry Carson for his actions. But his murder is not part of that condemnation. Carson's importance in the text rests more overtly on his part in the familial contract which transcends class (hence his murder leads to class conciliation). His flouting of the male position in the pastoral contract remains a submerged, but none the less significant, issue which is never consciously analyzed.

Finally, it is vital to recognise the degree to which the pastoral contract is integral to the familial contract which Gaskell so vehemently, and unquestioningly, upholds. Once Mary has proven her successful re-integration into the pastoral contract, it is still necessary to display the complementary nature of the two contracts. Jem is unsuccessful in his first attempt at convincing his mother of the compatibility of the pastoral and familial contracts. His mistake is to appeal to his ability to transcend the mythic power of sexual love. But his query, "Why should you think I've only room for one in my heart?"(409), is met with a silence to be expected in a novel which depicts a universal belief in the all-consuming and destructive power of sexual love. His second attempt is felicitous since he appeals to the family (and so, the familial contract) which will be the inevitable result of his pastoral contract with Mary.(410) Jane accepts sexual love when it is placed in the 'safe' context of the family, and the final scene of Mary Barton in which Jem and his family are depicted in a unified group awaiting the arrival of another family, verifies the belief in the pastoral contract's ability to transform sexuality into the basis of the familial contract.

Gaskell's complete support for the pastoral contract does not continue uncriticised into her subsequent novels. What the reader encounters instead is a gradual awareness of, first the existence

of the contract, and secondly, its constraints upon women. Subsequent chapters will explore Gaskell's confrontation with 'definitions' of women. Whilst Mary Barton conveys a limited grasp of the effects of gender, the novel itself provides what proves to be a stimulating and effective method of analysis: rules of discourse, and the social contracts which underlie them.

Notes

¹Jenni Calder, in Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 68, writes:

A major part of Elizabeth Gaskell's achievement as a novelist lies in the way she records, quietly and steadily, the intimate relationship in ordinary [ie. working class] life between work and home.

See also Raymond Williams' comments in Culture and Society, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1961), 99, and Ellen Moers, Literary Women, (London: The Women's Press Limited, 1978), 20.

²Stephen Gill, ed., Mary Barton, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1970), 21, and W.A.Craik, Elizabeth Gaskell and the English Provincial Novel, (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1975), 5.

³Craik, 5.

⁴Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary Barton, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1970). Subsequent references are to this edition, and appear in the text.

⁵The term 'social contract' deliberately echoes Rousseau's 'social compact' or contract for several reasons. Firstly, in a novel which resounds with references and allusions to the Romantic poets, a reminder of Rousseau's indirect influence on Gaskell's text is not amiss. More importantly, Rousseau's definition of the social contract stems from the concept of a 'family contract,' and incorporates the same male-bias which, as this chapter argues, undermines Gaskell's own conception of the 'social contract.' Rousseau, like Gaskell, posits the family as a primary model for society. In The Social Contract and Discourses, (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1950), Rousseau writes that "the most ancient of all societies, and the only one that is natural, is the family." (4) He proceeds to compare the father/child relationship with that of the ruler/people. Although he asserts that the 'family' as a social model breaks down once children no longer need a father's protection, he retains the father/child analogy as a model for society. Accordingly the privileges and benefits of the social contract which Rousseau delineates are reserved solely for men. When Gaskell posits 'brotherhood' as a viable method of achieving unity and discourse between the classes, she consciously or not colludes with the deep-rooted privileging of men which forms the basis of the social contract. For a further discussion of Rousseau's male bias, see chapter four in Eva Figes, Patriarchal Attitudes, (London: Faber and Faber, 1970).

⁶Williams also notes the co-operative nature of the relations between members of the working classes. See Culture and Society, 100.

⁷Calder states, in Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction, 71:

A signal feature of industrial folk-song is its communication of solidarity, its predicaments beyond the individual, and Mrs Gaskell's frequent reference to them is surely no accident.

⁸The distaste with which critics have viewed the shift is understandable if, as I will argue is not the case, economics is the main issue in Mary Barton. Jacqueline Sarsby, in Romantic Love and Society, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1983), summarises the studies on types of marriages, and outlines a view of 'love marriages' (where the individuals concerned choose each other as partners) which suggests that such marriage can "be used as an alternative to kinship obligation and to justify economic individualism" (3) by focusing on the marriage partner. If Gaskell was using Mary's involvement with Jem as an escape route from the economic situation she raises in the novel, then not only is she guilty of a certain cowardice, but she effectively undermines her plea for economic sympathy between classes by implicitly advocating economic individualism in the way Sarsby describes. If however the second half of Mary Barton does not swerve but inevitably ensues from the first, then the accusation is both unnecessary and unwarranted.

⁹The retreat into the personal becomes a recurrent problem in later Victorian literature. Patricia Stubbs, in Women and Fiction, (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1981), 7, remarks that Arnold's "Dover Beach" is "perhaps the most characteristic poem of the Victorian psyche, [in its] mood of bewildered retreat into personal relationships". The concluding marriage and retreat of Esther Summerson and Alan Woodcourt in Bleak House (1853) is another instance.

¹⁰Such an approach necessitates a rejection of Moers' assessment of Mary Barton. She states in Literary Women that Mary Barton is "a remarkable work not only for its subject matter, but for its smoothness of execution, its relaxation and confident intermixing of the traditional young-woman-in-search-of-a-husband story of female fiction with illustrations of the particularly brutal political economy of the Hungry Forties." (20) The comment indicates a welcome portrayal of Gaskell as a conscious and self-confident author, yet ignores the obvious tension in the novel to which the disruptive shift of focus from John to Mary Barton attests.

¹¹The term pastoral contract is appropriate on several levels. In a novel which moves from the initial idyllic pastoral scene of Green Hays fields and ends in marriage and the literal locus amoenus that is Canada, the contract by which a return to the pastoral is

effected can legitimately be termed pastoral. Secondly, whilst Mary's relationship with Jem operates along the terms of the pastoral contract, other elements of Mary Barton suggest that the generic term 'pastoral' is not inappropriate for the novel itself. John Barton's character and behaviour suggest that the novel might be what Empson, in his Some Versions of Pastoral, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1935), terms a "realistic sort of pastoral"(17) in which a figure, an outcast because of his poverty, becomes a critic of the society which shuns him. Empson's comment that "so far as [the outcast] is forced by [his position] into crime he is the judge of the society that judges him"(17) seems appropriate for John Barton.

¹²Adrienne Munich, "Notorious signs, feminist criticism and literary tradition," in Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism, Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn, eds., (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1985).

¹³Ibid., 246.

¹⁴Ibid., 247.

¹⁵Ibid., 248.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Emile, Barbara Foxley, trans., (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1911), 348.

¹⁸Ibid., 378.

¹⁹Ibid., 324.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid., 378.

²²Ibid., 327.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid., 323.

²⁵Ibid., 322.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., 325.

²⁸Ibid., 328.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid., 354.

³¹The initial delineation of Mary as a sexual creature (ie. the object of sexual interest and a responder to sexual innuendo) might seem unusual in a novel dealing, in its first half, with primarily economic concerns. Nevertheless, the delineation is to be expected. Though Mary subsequently acquires an economic role (her situation in Miss Simmond's dressmaking establishment contributes to the economic situation of the Barton family as it makes provisions for Mary's meals unnecessary), that role is minor compared to the economic situations which define the men in the novel as working-class or not. Sarsby, in Romantic Love and Society, suggests a possible explanation for the foregrounding of Mary's sexual status. She outlines that the main economic role assigned to women is that of a transmitter of inheritance. Through marriage, the patriarchal society ensures that women safely produce legitimate heirs to their husband's estates (39). In the case of the working class woman, however, there is little or not property to be transmitted. Even such a sexually-based economic function as 'transmitter of inheritance' is barred to them. These women, Sarsby states, "are left only with a sexual function, therefore it is this capacity which is prized." (42)

³²Other women in Victorian literature share Mary's sense of responsibility and guilt for arousing male passion. Helen Huntingdon, in Anne Bronte's The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (1848), cares for a man who has treated her so abominably that she reluctantly broke the bonds of marriage. Her return to nurse Arthur is presented as an illustration of Helen's Christian piety, but it also makes sense in terms of the pastoral contract. If women are 'guilty' of arousing male passion, Helen's return to Arthur constitutes her effort to assuage that guilt by caring for a man who is otherwise detestable.

In Jane Eyre (1847), too, one can see the influence of the pastoral contract. Though Jane does decide to leave Rochester once she knows of the existence of Bertha Mason, her leavetaking is not entirely positive in her eyes. She abhors herself, is bereft of self-respect, and hateful to herself. Such intense feelings suggest that, despite her belief in the rightness of leaving Rochester, Jane maintains a sense of guilt which can perhaps be attributed to the pastoral contract. Having aroused sexual passion, and yet found herself unable to 'legitimise' that passion through marriage, Jane must assume guilty responsibility. Her subsequent three days of isolation can be read as both punishment for this sexual responsibility, and as a cleansing of the sexual guilt which ultimately allows her to return to Rochester when marriage is once again possible.

³³Harold Toliver, Pastoral Forms and Attitudes, (London: University of California Press, 1971), comments on the behaviour prescribed for those involved in the world of the pastoral. He states that

"stylized courtship and reluctance in pursuit are often the credentials for success, while aggression . . . is cause for exile . . ."(25)

³⁴It is interesting to note that Mary is the only working class character who does not speak the Manchester dialect accorded to the other working- class characters in the novel. Whilst this may suggest Gaskell's decision to have a more 'acceptable' middle-class heroine, it also indicates the degree to which Mary's situation and actions can be viewed as 'archetypal.' Although contemporary opinion articulated a belief in the greater lewdness and sexual vulgarity of the working classes, Mary's 'neutral' middle-class speech suggests that Gaskell does not view her sexual predicament as exclusive to the working-classes. That Jem Wilson gradually utilises a more middle-class accent too, consolidates the suggestion that he and Mary are a 'representative' couple, standing for the sexual or pastoral contract completely, and not just as members of their overt class.

³⁵Monica Correa Fryckstedt, Elizabeth Gaskell's Mary Barton and Ruth: A Challenge to Christian England, (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1982).

³⁶Ibid., 91.

Chapter Four: Ruth (1853)

Ruth is probably the most difficult of Gaskell's novels for the modern reader to come to terms with. Whereas the critical labelling of Mary Barton as a 'social novel' may produce readings which are limited, the 'fallen woman' tag that comes attached to Ruth preconditions the modern reader's response more significantly. Before one begins to read one expects to encounter a novel earnestly arguing for an enlightened reaction to what the modern sensibility may no longer consider to be an interesting social problem, let alone a sin. When one then meets Gaskell's particularly religious approach to the novel, one tends to agree that Ruth "no longer speaks for itself,"¹ and that because of "the deep religiosity of its tone,"² Ruth has become "the least readable of Mrs. Gaskell's novels."³

The modern response to Ruth has certainly engendered a number of studies which dig deep into the structure and content of the novel in an attempt to pinpoint precisely what it is about Gaskell's handling of the 'fallen woman' theme that makes Ruth so unpalatable for modern tastes. After all, we know that Ruth is in many respects a pioneering novel in its treatment of the fallen woman. Gaskell's portrayal of the child, Leonard, as a means of redemption, and her decision to allow Ruth to reject Bellingham's marriage proposal were both innovations to the fallen woman theme. Fryckstedt argues that it is Gaskell's aim for Ruth which renders it ultimately flawed and repellent to modern tastes. She approaches Ruth as a social document through which Gaskell hoped to challenge the sexual double standard

operating in Victorian society by uncovering the 'facts' surrounding the fallen woman.⁵

Accordingly, Fryckstedt concentrates on the area of Victorian attitudes to prostitution; its relation to their views on the sexuality of men and women; the rehabilitation of prostitutes in penitentiaries and Gaskell's personal interest in the effects of such institutions; and finally the working conditions of dressmakers' apprentices. Fryckstedt concludes that those parts of Ruth which are the most abhorrent to modern readers are the result of Gaskell's attempt to sweeten the bitter pill of social facts as she presents them by occasionally conceding to the conventional morality of her day. Thus, in order to retain readers who would find it "too shocking to meet a street-walker as a heroine,"⁶ Gaskell presents Ruth as a seduced innocent. In the process, and "in her anxiety to palliate the negative reactions"⁷ she anticipates, Gaskell attributes an unconvincingly extreme innocence and ignorance to her heroine.⁸ Similarly, Ruth's death, probably the most unsavoury aspect of the novel, is "no doubt, a concession to the conventional attitude of [Gaskell's] severest readers,"⁹ as well as Gaskell's way of avoiding repelling those readers who would be alarmed at a fallen woman's successful social rehabilitation.

Other critics suggest that it is Gaskell's "commitment to certain religious principles"¹⁰ which is the source of Ruth's flaws. Ganz suggests that Gaskell views Ruth's sexual fall as a divine rather than social transgression. From such a standpoint, Gaskell's original intention of challenging social attitudes to sexual offences in women becomes less and less evident as she concentrates on Ruth's spiritual salvation. As a consequence, the social ostracism which Gaskell

initially set out to criticise as nothing more than the result of the double standard, becomes more and more associated with divine retribution or the testing necessary for Ruth's spiritual salvation. As Ganz suggests, "the very possibility that social condemnation reflects divine retribution will make it progressively more difficult for [Gaskell] to challenge such manifestations of it as Ruth is forced to endure."¹¹ In such a context, Ruth's death is not a concession to contemporary conventional morality, but the result of Gaskell's gradual equation of social with divine atonement.

Both avenues of approach point to what appears to be at the centre of Ruth's flawed narrative: the confusion which results when circumstantial or socially-initiated transgression is punished with a religious intensity better suited to 'sin.' Nevertheless, where both approaches prove unsatisfactory is in the degree to which they fail to point out how inextricably tied the problems of Ruth are to contemporary attitudes and conceptions of women (in particular Gaskell's understanding of the significance of the 'double standard') and the resulting limited number of alternatives available to Gaskell when she chooses to investigate one such conception, the fallen woman.

Gaskell's Unitarian background makes the 'fallen woman' an almost inevitable choice for her consideration. With the Unitarian stress on rationality and the right of each individual to have access to the information necessary for him/her to make informed, rational moral decisions, the contemporary attitude to fallen women as unpardonable sinners and deserving outcasts shouts out for investigation. Certainly other Unitarians were interested in the subject. W.R. Greg, writing in the Westminster Review, was only one of many voices contributing

to the current discussion on prostitution and its causes and effects.¹² His conclusions on the ways in which women became prostitutes suggest that in many cases a lack of knowledge and inappropriate education is responsible. He speaks of two 'classes' of prostitutes, those who because of a "defective or injudicious education"¹³ can be flattered by the attentions of those above them in station, and those who 'fall' from "pure unknowingness"¹⁴ of what constitutes proper manners between the sexes. Other reasons for recourse to prostitution range from those who have no choice because their parents before them were prostitutes themselves, to those who turned to prostitution because of abject poverty.¹⁵

Such causes of prostitution were certain to aggrieve the Unitarian mind since they reveal that it is the absence of a proper, fitting education, along with the significant weight of circumstances, both potentially rectifiable, that cause women to 'fall.' At the same time, Greg, like Gaskell and others, saw the situation exacerbated by the existence of the double standard which sees "a whole life of indulgence on the part of one sex as venial and natural, and a single false step on the part of the other as irretrievable and unpardonable."¹⁶ Greg's response to what he presented as the cause of prostitution was however to suggest, not a broadening of education for the women so victimised, but perversely a curtailing of the materials available to male children in an attempt to repress the 'natural' urge to satisfy sexual feeling and so shrink the demand for prostitutes.¹⁷ This circumscription was to be accompanied by, amongst other things, an improvement in the general economic status of working women by providing them with better jobs, and a plea for the continued application

of the controversial Contagious Diseases Act.¹⁸ Though Greg advocates that social ostracism as punishment for sexual transgression be transferred from the seduced to the seducer, at no time does he suggest the need for educational reforms for girls and women.

Gaskell's tactic in Ruth is substantially different. Her care to point out the circumstantial nature of Ruth's fall is evident from the beginning of her narrative. She quickly establishes her belief in the power of individual circumstance to shape the progress of life itself:

The daily life unto which people are
born, and into which they are absorbed
before they are well aware, forms
chains which only one in a hundred
has moral strength enough to despise,
and to break when the right time comes.¹⁹

Couple this with the orphaned Ruth's position as a dressmaker's apprentice, the "unnatural mode of existence"(9) it entails, and Gaskell's painstaking efforts to show the reader that Mrs Mason, choosing to believe each of her apprentices had both friends and activities to entertain her each Sunday and so making no provisions to ensure either physical comfort or spiritual guidance on that day, was the type of woman whom Greg and others such as the anonymous writer of the "Milliners' Apprentices"²⁰ partly held responsible for the 'falling away' of many women, and we quickly see that Gaskell gave 'circumstances' a prominent role in the progress of a young woman's life.

But more importantly, Gaskell decides to stress the importance of education in the lives of girls such as Ruth. We learn that Ruth had never

received any cautions or words of advice

respecting the subject of a woman's life--
 if indeed, wise parents ever directly
 speak of what, in its depth and power,
 cannot be put into words -- which is a
 brooding spirit with no definite form
 or shape that men should know it, but
 which is there, and present before we
 have recognised and realised its
 existence.(43)

In other words, Ruth is entirely ignorant of both love and sex, and indeed, has no way of recognising the symptoms of falling in love. She was "young, and innocent, and motherless"(56), and so completely lacking in knowledge of the proper behaviour between men and women (never mind the mechanics of sex) that her fall can only be seen as the result of social circumstances. By her economic situation, her unfinished education and her 'pure unknowingness', Ruth fulfills three of Greg's six categories of women likely to fall, and so is three times more likely to fall than most other women.

Critics, past and present, have lamented Ruth's extreme innocence and ignorance. Some, like the reviewer in Sharpe's London Magazine, doubted the very existence of such purity,²¹ and so dismissed Ruth as "not a veritable type of her class."²² Others such as G.H.Lewes considered that "[t]he guilt . . . of Ruth is accompanied by such entire ignorance of evil, and by such a combination of fatalities, that even the sternest of provincial moralists could hardly be harsh with her".²³ Still, even these criticisms could be countered by the comment that Ruth's innocence and subsequent fall were deliberately selected to prove Gaskell's contention: the education of girls and young women was reprehensible because of the silence with which it evaded 'the' subject of a woman's life: romantic and sexual knowledge. But such a refutation of one of the most recurrent criticisms levelled

against Ruth is impossible, for Gaskell does not dramatise, or consciously advocate, the broadening of a young woman's education to include the sexual knowledge which dictates her heroine's fall.

Part of the responsibility for Gaskell's apparent evasion of the issue must lie, not with her determination to show the social origins of Ruth's sexual transgression, but with the images and language available to her with which to dramatise Ruth's socially-determined sin. The imagery and language can be divided into three separate, though inter-connected, categories: the natural, the pastoral and the paradisaical. The very first image of Ruth is a natural one. Pent up in Mrs Mason's establishment, Ruth uses the few moments of reprieve from work allowed her to press up against the very physical boundaries of her work place - the building's walls - much like a bird in a cage (4). Her view is of a tree which once flourished in a large lawn but which now, like Ruth in Mason's home, is pent up (Gaskell uses the same word to describe both the girl's and the tree's physical situation) in the flagstones which comprise the backyard (5). From this point, Ruth is continually associated with nature. She chooses the darkest, draughtiest corner of the sewing room in which to work because of the view it affords of a now faded panel of painted flowers (6), the closest equivalent to the real flowers of her past home which Ruth can find inside Mason's home. She relishes the visit to the garden of her old home (45), and revels in the natural splendour of the Welsh countryside (64). She is constantly associated with flowers, from the camellia Bellingham offers her (17) to the water-lilies he places in her hair.

Gaskell is obviously trying to use the association with nature

to demonstrate Ruth's innocence. The echoes of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" reverberate around Ruth's association with nature and initiate Gaskell's attempt to parallel Ruth's innocence here with the bygone innocence of the narrator of Wordsworth's poem. If Ruth's situation is similar to that of the flagstone-trapped larch in Mason's back garden, then the fact that the grass had once grown "caressingly up its very trunk"(5), and the echo with Wordsworth's poem that evokes,²⁴ suggests that hers is an innocence locked by circumstances which led to her city living. Similarly, the reference to Ruth's time in Wales with Bellingham as one which the present was "all in all"(75), and feeling and loving (73) constituted its main elements, suggest again a parallel to the innocent narrator of Wordsworth's poem.

Undermining the establishment of innocence however is another aspect of the natural image Gaskell chooses to utilise. If Ruth is unconscious of the past and future, content to dwell in the present, she seems equally unconscious of herself. Living in the present breeds not only a "child-like dependence on others"(79) and a child-like nature (Ruth associates Mrs Bellingham's arrival with Mrs Mason much in the manner of a child equating fear with an early, first figure of dread), it also generates an alarming fluidity of self which verges on extinction. Ruth can view herself and never think of associating the reflection with her own self. The reflection and what it tells her is "abstract, and removed from herself."(73) Similarly, when Bellingham is ill, Ruth's senses "seemed to have passed into the keeping of the invalid, and to feel only as he felt"(82). She becomes such an unsubstantial self whilst Bellingham is ill that she moves "as if she were a vision"(82), and surprises Mrs Bellingham

as a "white apparition which seemed to rise out of the ground"(84).

Ruth can seem a cypher, not the living sixteen year old she is.

Gaskell's other images involve a similar undermining or qualifying of the innocence which she is trying to establish. Ruth's visit to her old home, Milham Grange, with Bellingham is a case in point. Gaskell is attempting two things at once here. On the one hand, the visit reasserts Ruth's innocence by connecting her to a way of life so innocently paradisaical that the man-made and the natural have forged into one. The gables of the grange are "blended"(45) with, or pass imperceptibly into, the green growing vines of roses and creepers. Indeed so wholly given to nature is this Wordsworthian 'pastoral farm' that human and animal inhabitants share equally the living space which the cottage provides. The old couple who once helped Ruth's father now occupy the back part of the cottage, whilst the birds occupy the front. At the same time, as the chapter title "Treading in Perilous Places" announces, Gaskell is attempting to relay a sense of Ruth's imminent elopement with Bellingham, and connect it with the faulty education received at her home. The long passage describing the desolation of what was once Ruth's daily existence - content and safe in her parents' love and guidance with added help from Thomas's didactic tales taken from Pilgrim's Progress - suggest that Gaskell is again asserting the circumstantial nature of Ruth's forthcoming fall. Had the scenario, now vanished, of family life persisted, Ruth would not have turned ignorantly and innocently to Bellingham.

But it is not the possible social causes of 'falling' to which this long passage refers which dominate the chapter at all. Rather,

the cumulative effect of small phrases which occur in the opening of the chapter is to suggest that Ruth's fall is caused not by her social circumstances, but is implicit in her gender. The phrases, only three in number, redolent as they are of Milton's Garden of Eden, are powerful enough to throw off the sense of innocent nature which they are intended to evoke, and replace them with an image of Ruth as Eve, superficially innocent perhaps, but inherently sinful. The cottage with its "untrimmed garden"(45) is a "picturesque mass of irregularity"(45), whilst the garden itself abounds in "luxuriant and overgrown shrubs"(49) through which Ruth "wound in and out in natural, graceful, wavy lines"(49). From this to the "flow'ry Arbors.../ . . . with branches overgrown"²⁵ which characterises Milton's pastoral paradise is not a large step. Indeed, Gaskell here perhaps unconsciously echoes phrases from Milton's text. The weaving path which Ruth negotiates in the garden and the luxurious shrubs recall both the zig-zagging movements of Satan throughout Paradise Lost, and Milton's depiction of the Garden of Eden as fruitful and prolific to the point of disorder and chaos.

The description of Ruth's past home life collapses under the accumulated weight of the Miltonic, paradisaical references, with the result that the carefully established social conditions of Ruth's forthcoming fall disintegrate. Ruth becomes at some deep, barely articulated, level associated with the inherent sinfulness of Eve. Indeed, the association necessitates a re-reading of a scene which initially seemed primarily to indicate the annihilation of self which accompanied some of Gaskell's chosen natural images. Ruth's detachment from the reflection of herself in the pond now finds a disturbing

parallel in Eve's own inability to associate self with reflection.²⁶ Indeed, Ruth's much earlier dream in which Bellingham hands her flower after flower (18) is now coloured by its similarity to Eve's dream of a gentle voice which tempts her to a midnight walk, and the plucking of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.²⁷ In this context, Old Thomas's dire but unhelpful biblical exhortations to Ruth indicate not only the unsuitable education Ruth has received (the biblical language is incapable of warning Ruth of sexual peril; she can think only of childish visions of lions' heads), but signposts the shift that Gaskell has made, however unconsciously, from the land of social realism to the land of biblical destiny.

The discomfiting shift made, Gaskell seems unable to reassert her original thesis that Ruth's fall is socially engineered. Indeed, if her subsequent dramatisation of Benson's supposedly rehabilitative approach to Ruth is anything to measure by, Gaskell herself seems unaware of the undermining tendency of the images she has invoked. Considering her stress on the role that ignorance plays in Ruth's seduction, one expects that at least part of Benson's rehabilitation programme would include a restructuring of Ruth's education so as to include the type of guidance Gaskell found wanting. Ruth does certainly gain an education; she is seen at her lessons under Benson's tutelage, and her subsequent post as the Bradshaw's governess along with her decision to undertake Leonard's education indicates her success in them. But though Ruth may have learnt history and maths, the whole of the Benson's household, from occupants to surroundings, seems calculated to perpetuate the very ignorance which led to Ruth's seduction.

The description of Ruth's bedroom warns the reader that Ruth has returned, or rather has never left, the world of natural, flowery images with which Gaskell indicated her sexual ignorance. The bedroom "had something of the colouring and purity of effect of a snowdrop; while the floor. . . suggested the idea of the garden mould out of which the snowdrop grows." (136) More disturbingly, the Benson house as a whole seems to be firmly in the tradition of the pastoral paradise. The very flowers "forced themselves almost into the room" (139) in a manner similar to the obliging nature found in images of garden paradises such as Marvell's "The Garden." All of this at a first reading seems nothing more than Gaskell's efforts to present the Benson's world as unthreateningly kind and co-operative. Nevertheless, the effect, in combination with the garden scene at Milham Grange and the previous connections of flowers with Ruth's sexual destiny, is once again to place Ruth, not in the context of defective social conditioning which can be corrected, but in the context of the traditional biblical images which surround inherently sinful sexuality.

Of course Ruth has already fallen and this must influence our reading of the garden imagery here. If Ruth once inhabited the hortus conclusus of Milton's Garden of Eden, and so was fated to fall because of woman's role in that garden, she seems now to have been transplanted to a hortus conclusus of another sort, the 'walled garden' of family life as outlined by Houghton.²⁸ If this garden is a sacred place in which "certain virtues too easily crushed by modern life could be preserved,"²⁹ it is also the place where sexuality, "the skeleton in the parental chamber,"³⁰ is securely walled by the boundaries of a family life which stresses or recognises only its procreative

function. The "full luxuriance in a little square wall-encircled garden"(206) is no longer an omen of Ruth's sinful sexuality. Rather, because Ruth's importance, once seduced, quickly alters from that of an ignorant innocent girl to that of a mother who must do her best for her child, the luxuriance is a sign of the positive fertility (ie. Leonard) that will lead to Ruth's redemption. Accordingly, we hear very little from this point on of Ruth's ignorance on the subject of a woman's life. As far as actual facts are concerned, Ruth's only knowledge of what constitutes proper behaviour between the sexes is not acquired through education, but is presumably deduced from her knowledge of what is undesirable behaviour as attested to by various individuals who comment on her relationship with Bellingham in Wales. The Bensons, as Ruth's champions, certainly provide no model of education as 'preventative medicine.' Indeed, the goodness and purity which are depicted as the main characteristics of the Benson household are clearly described as the result not of education or knowledge, but of a strict adherence to rules. Gaskell presents a household comprised of members whose "lives were pure and good, not merely from a lovely and beautiful nature, but from some law, the obedience to which was, of itself, harmonious peace, and which governed them almost implicitly, and with as little questioning on their part, as the glorious stars which haste not, rest not, in their eternal obedience."(141) There is no mention of education or knowledge here. Indeed, the phrase 'governed . . . implicitly' suggests a degree of unconsciousness which is distressingly akin to the ignorant innocence pleaded for Ruth. If Ruth comes to the Benson's "living in the bright present, and strangely forgetful of the past or future"(130)

in a way which her ignorant innocence has necessitated, it is hardly surprising that she is later approvingly described as "learning neither to look backwards nor forwards, but to live faithfully and earnestly for the present"(176). Having merely exchanged one garden for another, how can one expect Ruth to have progressed?

The confusion in Gaskell's mind to which all of this attests can be pinpointed to a type of ignorance on her own part: the ignorance of what exactly, in challenging the traditional conception of the 'fallen woman,' she is tackling. Critics do agree that Gaskell sets out to attack the double standard of sexual behaviour.³¹ But none investigate Gaskell's understanding of it. If Ruth represents Gaskell's thinking on this issue, then we can see that she saw her task as one of rebalancing. Because the double standard dictated that a sexual transgression on a woman's part was an irretrievable error and a sin, whilst any male 'indulgence' was tolerated as a natural vice, Gaskell first attempts to undermine the sexual standard by showing that 'bad' women could be rehabilitated, and secondly, by redirecting the 'blame' of a sexual transgression from the seduced woman to the male seducer. But both aspects of Gaskell's challenge to the double standard reveal her ignorance of the sexual standard's true importance. The standard is not the root cause of the issue Gaskell wants to challenge. Rather it is the articulation of attitudes to women which, separating women into two categories - the madonna or whore figure - need to be dismantled in order for us to understand the very existence of the double standard itself. In other words, by tackling the issue of 'bad' women and showing their potential to be 'good' women, Gaskell is ignorant that both labels categorise

women in an attempt to restrict and disarm them. It is not just the idea of the prostitute or fallen woman that needs to be expiated in social terms. The labels 'good' and 'bad' reveal that the concept of womanhood itself is seen to require the palliative of division into stereotypes.³²

The reviews of Ruth and contemporary arguments about the nature of women show quite clearly that both the good and bad images of women are socially constructed in the way that Gaskell understands only the 'fallen woman' to be. Greg's important work on prostitution shows that the negative image of the prostitute is founded on the conception that women are essentially asexual.³³ He states that sexual desire in women "scarcely exists in a definite and conscious form,"³⁴ but is "dormant, if not non-existent, till excited; always till excited by undue familiarity; almost always till excited by actual intercourse."³⁵ Indeed, sexual desire is not seen as part of even the married woman's makeup. Greg approvingly quotes a woman who states, "It is not a quarter-of-an-hour's ceremony in a church that can make that welcome or tolerable to pure and delicate feelings."³⁶ The belief in female asexuality may seem a surprising aspect of the double standard. If sexual desire is as hard to inculcate in women as Greg seems to suggest, one wonders why it is that the 'fallen' woman should be considered such irretrievable sinners. At the same time, the concept of female asexuality does explain the more horrendous social stigma that is attached to a fallen woman. Having succumbed to sexual appetite, the fallen woman effectively punctures the illusion of female asexuality. And it is for this puncturing of the illusion that the fallen woman is punished. If, as Eva Figes suggests, the

assumption of the image of the asexual woman is an attempt to "protect[] oneself against feelings of sexual inadequacy,"³⁷ and to disarm the previously dominant image of woman as sexually insatiable compared to the fixed sexual energy of men,³⁸ then the fallen woman is a threatening, frightening female image for men, and so needs to be punished.

Gaskell's apparent unawareness that the good woman is as much a social construct as the fallen woman leads necessarily to a short circuiting. Because there are not images of women besides the good/bad sides of the female coin, Gaskell must turn to an image of woman which not only upholds the double standard she is attacking, but which directly undermines the means - education and knowledge - by which she feels such negative images as the fallen woman can be rectified. If we examine the type of good woman, the mother, which Gaskell has chosen to juxtapose against the image of the fallen woman, then we can see the ways in which the issues of knowledge and education which Gaskell overtly advocates in Ruth can have no place in the 'solution' she expounds.

Gaskell first hints at the positive possibilities of the maternal instinct when Ruth, running hastily from Benson once Bellingham has left her, turns to help Thurstan who has fallen. The action, we are told, "called [Ruth] out of herself"(96), making her realise that "she was wanted in the world, and must not rush hastily out of it."(97) The instinct, in essence the maternal one to care, is termed a woman's "holiest instinct,"(119), and is seen to give the previously grief-stricken Ruth a "mysterious source of strength."(125) This is all well and good, except that it seems to provide no opportunity for Ruth to grow from ignorant innocence to conscious knowledge.

Rather, the stress remains on the instincts of motherhood, a variation only it would seem upon the instincts which connected Ruth with the innocent Wordsworthian figure of Tintern Abbey, and more ominously with the sexual instinct (insofar as it was inherent) of the Eve-like Ruth in the garden of her fall. Accordingly, Ruth's growing stature in the novel, the sign of her rehabilitation, is connected with a degree of unconsciousness which refutes Gaskell's stance on education. Ruth is described as being "unconsciously"(207) led to God through her instinctual love for her child - a very strange approach for the rationalistic Unitarian mind to support. Ruth too is seen "insensibly teaching Leonard to conform to the law of right, [and] to recognise duty in the mode in which every action was performed."(363) It seems that at no time is Ruth to be credited with an active, thinking role in her rehabilitation which Gaskell's insistence on education and knowledge would seem to make desirable. Ruth teaches Leonard by her "noble, humble, pious endurance"(415) of her ostracism, but that teaching is done "unconsciously and indirectly"(415). And for herself, it is Ruth's "true instincts"(365) which now govern her responses to her position in life: there seems to be no degree of consciousness in her rehabilitation. Even in her lessons with the Bensons, it is Ruth's instincts which are stressed. Her "quick perceptions . . . ready adaptation of truths . . . her immediately sense of the fitness of things . . . [and the] complete unconsciousness of uncommon power"(185) are the distinguishing characteristics of Ruth at her lessons. The very adjectives emphasise the immediacy of instinctual response, not the mediation of knowledge gleaned slowly through education.

But it is not only the instinctual basis of motherhood which is worrisome. The images of women presented throughout Ruth all

stress the physical aspect of women -whether it be through appearances or by the instincts - and suggest that Gaskell is unaware that it is this privileging of a woman's physical presense, her instincts, above any of her other attributes which leads, not only to the sexual double standard she is attacking, but to the other limiting images of women available to her. Ruth's transformation into a nurse is a case in point. Ruth initially becomes a nurse out of an instinct comparable to the one which guides her through other areas of her life. She does not 'decide' to be the fever-ward matron, but states that she "felt that she must go."(422-emphasis mine) Accordingly, Ruth's primary importance as a nurse appears to derive from her physical self. Ruth's "manner, voice, and gesture"(387), along with her silence (388), mean that her patients "unconsciously"(387) - as is appropriate for a response to the physical, not articulated, gesture Ruth offers- feel soothed and gratified by her presence.

But more interesting is Gaskell's handling of Ruth's physical beauty. G.H. Lewes complained about Ruth's prettiness, wishing that Ruth had been plainer so that Gaskell's discussion of the fallen woman problem was not clouded "by all manner of graceful accessories."³⁸ But Gaskell's decision to make Ruth beautiful pinpoints the type of problems to which her handling of the sexual double standard leads. Gaskell emphasizes Bellingham's infatuation with Ruth's looks, and in the process indicates her criticism of one who treasures such superficial attributes. Ruth's beauty is "all [Bellingham] recognised of her"(74), and we are told that "[s]he pleased him more by looking so lovely than by all her tender endeavours to fall in with his varying humour."(74) Appropriately enough for someone so interested in physical

beauty, Bellingham is made most happy by Ruth's silence (56). Her language is not a necessary aspect of their relationship when Bellingham can 'read' Ruth's thoughts and feelings by the mere "trembling of [her] little hand"(56). In order to establish Ruth's innocence in the face of Bellingham's stress on the superficial, Ruth herself, though aware that she is considered beautiful (12), is presented as ignorant of the social status of physical beauty, and so misunderstands when she is chosen to represent Mrs Mason's establishment at the ball (10).

All of this must be read as an evasion of the issues on Gaskell's part. By stressing Ruth's beauty, Gaskell is evidently arguing that it is Ruth's ignorance of her physical beauty and the temptation it provides which contributes to her seduction. She seems to suggest that 'pretty women are seduced' when the statement must simply read 'women are seduced.' The change of emphasis is important. If Bellingham is guilty of reading Ruth's physical beauty to the exclusion of all her other attributes, then it is the act of reading the body which must surely be considered responsible for Ruth's seduction, not the resulting adjective.

In this context, Ruth's non-apprehension of her physical beauty is irrelevant. Yet Gaskell herself seems not to recognise it as inconsequential. Her portrayal of Ruth and other women in the text reveals that her understanding of how the reading of physical presence affects women is limited to the resulting labels. She recognises that a woman can be "excluded . . . from any of the envy of rivalry"(12) by her plainness, whilst a "waving outline of figure"(11) such as Ruth possesses can reflect well on the propriety of the establish-

ment which employs it. But Gaskell does not recognise that the very act of reading women in terms of their 'presence' is itself damaging and insidious. Accordingly, Ruth's rehabilitation must be made manifest in bodily terms, the emphasis upon which she concurrently asserts led to Ruth's seduction. Though Bellingham is berated for reading Ruth's 'trembling hand' as a sign of deep love for him (Gaskell ensures we know it only points to her bewilderment), Gaskell herself can assert that Ruth's eyes show she has grown "thoughtful, and spiritual"(207), whilst her early ability to contemplate Bellingham's *camille* with equanimity is best dramatised by a description of Ruth's "open, straight-looking eye"(17) and the absence of a blush.

One might argue that Gaskell's utilisation of the physical description of women to relay their moral status is inevitable. Berger's Ways of Seeing provides a possible gloss on Gaskell's technique. He states that "the social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under [the] tutelage of men".⁴⁰ Woman has been "taught and persuaded to survey herself continually",⁴¹ and as a result she can be said to be made up of two elements: the 'surveyor' and the 'surveyed.' The 'surveyor' is that part of woman which, realising how important her appearance in a phallogentric society is, regards what is 'surveyed' so that it 'presents' the correct, the most beneficial aspect. Berger further states that the surveyor in each woman is essentially male since it mimics the actions of that most powerful spectator, whilst the surveyed element is female.⁴² The result is that woman "turns herself into an object -- and most particularly an object of vision: a sight."⁴³ Gaskell's handling of Ruth shows signs of this phenomenon. Early in the novel, two

of Ruth's reactions to her involvement with Bellingham are illuminated if we bring Berger's terminology into play. Ruth has met Bellingham for the second time when both are involved in rescuing a small boy.

Ruth, chatting to Bellingham about financial arrangements for the child, suddenly becomes aware of Bellingham's expression. She "instinctively read[s] the change in the expression of his countenance, [and so] . . . drop[s] her large white veiling lids"(24). The action, in a girl supposedly ignorant of all matters of sexual attraction, can be problematic since it suggests a degree of sexual sophistication on Ruth's part (her action makes Bellingham think her lovelier than ever) which Gaskell has vigorously opposed. If however we view the situation in Berger's terms, the action is seen not to be contradictory but inevitable. It suggests that Ruth, at this time, recognises a 'surveyor' in Bellingham when she sees one, and so assumes the modest demeanour, not with intent to seduce, but innocently in the manner she has been trained. That her recognition is instinctual further indicates that Ruth, as a woman, has been brought up to view herself as men do and so can recognise the activity when performed by another. Finally, Gaskell's own description of Ruth's 'large, white veiling lids' which so captivate Bellingham suggests that she too is practised in the art of surveying the female form, perhaps by the necessity in her own life of performing the two roles Berger describes.

Other incidents in the novel suggest that the notions of the 'surveyed' and the 'surveyor' affect Gaskell's handling of the women in the text. Ruth, again with Bellingham, suddenly becomes aware of his admiration for her figure, and as suddenly is rendered silent (46).

Her response suggests a level of awareness of her role as 'woman.' Being surveyed, Ruth becomes as silent as one might expect an 'object' or 'sight' to be. In the same way, Jemima's response to Ruth's announcement that she is to be a fever nurse, is to "involuntarily glanc[e] over the beautiful lithe figure, and the lovely refinement of Ruth's face"(384). The involuntary nature of Jemima's reaction is important. It suggests a woman's awareness of the importance of appearance, and so means that Jemima's first response must be to check if appearance will fit the proposed occupation. Though Jemima's assumption that Ruth's beauty is inappropriate for a sick nurse is proved wrong, her instinct to 'read' the body is correct since it is Ruth's body which is her primary definition. Similarly, the description of Ruth in her mother's garden when she revisits her home, emphasises the degree to which the 'surveyed' part of the woman is her important credential. Ruth wanders in the garden "careless of watching eyes, indeed unconscious, for the time, of their existence."(49) But if Ruth temporarily forgets that she is the 'surveyed,' the two male spectators of the scene reassert her significance as a 'sight.' Bellingham can feel only "passionate admiration"(49) for Ruth's beauty despite the fact that he knows she is visiting the home of her deceased parents. Old Thomas too, though not a prospective lover, is aware that Ruth's status as a "pretty creature"(49) means that she is in danger from other male gazers even if she is, as he is confident, the same sweet girl he knew.

It is interesting to note at this point, when Ruth is the object of two male spectators, that Gaskell chooses to present Ruth, waving and weaving in the shrubbery, as a type of 'unconscious' Eve in the

garden, an erotic image which emphasises her sexual, bodily elements.

Gaskell seems powerless to assume any other role than that of the essentially male surveyor herself.

Other women too seem powerless to be other than the surveyor of those parts of themselves and other women which constitute the 'surveyed.' When Sally cuts Ruth's long hair, she removes not only one of the more overt symbols of Ruth's nubility and sexual status, she also ensures that Ruth's appearance complies with her adopted situation. Faith Benson's own worries that her inner youthful feelings belie her outer appearance (204) reveal how important it is that the 'surveyed' elements of woman match up to her situation. Faith's answer to a mismatch confirms the priority given to physical presence. She thinks of ways "to keep remembering how old [she is], so as to prevent [herself] from feeling so young"(205). She never considers matching her body to her inside state. In such a context, it is not surprising that the young Bradshaw girls, aged twelve and eight, are already accomplished observers of love affairs (240). It is after all as skillful 'observers' or surveyors of themselves that they will spend their lives.

Since women appear to be powerless to be anything other than the surveyor of themselves, it is to be expected that the last image of Ruth herself which we see in the novel is the one seen by the male surveyor. Interestingly, this surveyor has a triple presence in Ruth's last appearance, an overwhelming indication of its power and ubiquity. Donne/Bellingham, visiting the Benson house to make financial arrangements for his son, is inadvertently led up to view Ruth's body. Though he is initially repelled by the thought of what

he is about to see, Donne finds Ruth to be what she has always been to him, an object of beauty. Accordingly, he is "awed into admiration"(447) by the sight of the dead Ruth. It is a sign of how little importance he attaches to a living Ruth that Bellingham is able to carry on a relatively lengthy conversation with Mr Benson about his intentions regarding Leonard with no signs of distress caused by the presence of his past lover. Ruth dead and Ruth alive are, it would seem, equally inconspicuous.

The second and third 'surveyors' of Ruth in the scene are however more interesting. Importantly, it is Sally who, "grown strangely proud of [the] marble beauty"(447) of the corpse, induces Bellingham to view it. Her equanimity in the face of death is such that she can kiss the "marble, unyielding"(448) lips of the corpse in a way that suggests that Sally the surveyor recognises no real difference between this "motionless, serene body"(448) and the once-alive, though still surveyed, Ruth. Indeed, there seems not to be. The surveyed Ruth remains as beautiful, serene and calm as she ever was in life.

Death has not altered her distinguishing characteristics at all. Accordingly, that third surveyor, Gaskell herself, can utilise the same technique of physical description which she applied to Ruth. It is Ruth's "perfect oval"(447) of a face, her "waving auburn hair"(447) and her "delicate cheeks"(447) which relays to the reader Ruth's 'essence', her true self, at this time, exactly as her unblushing face, wide eyes, and calm demeanour denoted her character when alive.

Finally, the stress on the physical appearance of women makes the absence of such descriptions of men all the more conspicuous. Since men are never the 'surveyed', only the 'surveyor,' their physical

appearance is of no consequence. Only one male, Thurstan Benson, of all the male characters in Ruth, is treated to a physical treatment. As might be predicted, he is found to be beautiful (67), and is accredited with a "feminine morbidness of conscience"(374).

Thus far it would seem that Gaskell is prostrate before the combined might of a society which trains women to be the continual surveyors of themselves, and which sites their importance in their success or failure to be objects of such surveillance by man. Attacking the accepted definition of the fallen woman, Gaskell seems powerless to confront and dismantle the processes which led to the existence of such a female category. Nevertheless, though Gaskell does seem predominantly a colluder in the processes which lead to male images of women, there are aspects of Ruth which suggest that her collusion is not only unwilling, but that she is attempting to come to terms with the "mythic masks . . . fastened over [the female] human face,"⁴⁴ and so see behind them. The relationship between Jemima and Ruth is a case in point. Though little critical attention has been paid to the friendship of these two women, it does illustrate a certain awareness on Gaskell's part of the way in which male expectations and definitions of women influence their appraisal of each other. More importantly, it suggests that Gaskell is struggling to find an alternative.

Jemima first makes her appearance as an admirer of the by now exemplary Ruth. Ruth so appears the epitome of Victorian womanliness, vulnerable, patient, humble and beautiful, that Jemima feels she could be her slave (182). Gaskell presents this heroine-worship in a convincing way. Jemima, we know, is a girl just on the edge

of womanhood. Lacking the physical beauty preferred for women, and knowing the advantage that lack represents in a male-dominated society, Jemima is attracted to the womanly ideal which Ruth embodies, whilst understandably rebelling against the pattern of womanhood to which she feels she cannot aspire. At the same time, Jemima is highly conscious of the injustice to which the patterns of womanhood expose her. She is outraged by the overt manoeuvring with which relationships between the sexes are arranged (238), and feels that the "calm consent of acquiescent acceptance"(219) which is expected of a woman is far more degrading than to be openly treated as the object or commodity which these manoeuvres prove women to be (238). One wishes that Jemima would win her battle of rebellion. Unfortunately, Jemima is soon seen to be desirous of becoming the object which she scorns (217), if the alternative is to be ignored. Accordingly, all eventually comes right with her proposed husband, and Mr Farquhar who so dreaded Jemima's impetuosity is left to ponder with satisfaction "the control which he should have a right to exercise his actions at some future day" (371).

But underlying Jemima's conventional development from rebellious teenager to relatively acquiescent woman, is a questioning of the method of male surveillance of women which her attitude to a newly-sinful Ruth constitutes. Upon hearing of Ruth's fall, Jemima is immediately convinced that Ruth is a "sinful creature"(319). At the time, the surveyor in Jemima is deeply confused by the revelation of Ruth's sexual conduct: "if Ruth - calm, modest, delicate, dignified Ruth"(321) is completely abhorrent then on what can that part of her which is the surveyor base its judgement? Ruth is,

as Jemima recognises, a challenge to the whole system of surveillance. One can argue that the system which Berger outlines functions as a means of reassurance for the male surveyor. In the bluntest terms, the system provides the illusion of knowing that which is, to the observer, unknowable: the physical intactness of the woman surveyed.⁴⁵ The investiture of certain actions/signs (modest demeanour etc.) with the status of infallible indicators of sexual innocence, and other opposing signs (bold behaviour etc.) with the status of the indicators of sexual experience, coupled with the social process which ensures that women early, and completely, learn this sign system⁴⁶, mean that an illusion of complete knowledge of the female is created and delicately kept afloat. The calm, modest demeanour with which Ruth faces the world undermines the entire system.

Faced with the devastation of her methods of gleaning what is 'true' about other women, Jemima does not reject them. Rather, the shock causes her to review her surveillance, carefully searching for an overlooked indicator of what she now knows Ruth to be. To her bewilderment, Jemima can only conclude that "Whatever Ruth had been, she was good, and to be respected as such, now"(323). It is important to note that Jemima trusts this conclusion of her surveillance only once she realises that Ruth has never attempted to re-introduce herself into the sexual market. That is, despite carrying all of the outward signs of modest, young, 'intact,' womanhood, Ruth has never exploited the reading which a surveyor could make in order to attract male affection. Indeed she has actively repelled it (322). More importantly, Jemima's recognition that she governs Ruth's activity in the sexual market [she can intervene with an articulation of Ruth's

sin (322)], suggests that Jemima is unconsciously aware of why it is women are surveyed by both themselves and others.

Still Jemima is sufficiently indoctrinated in the surveillance ideology to continue her watching of Ruth. And it is this surveillance which allows her to make an important and challenging statement of support for Ruth when Ruth's sexual status is revealed to Mr Bradshaw. Jemima asserts that, after weeks of watching Ruth, she has "never seen one paltering with duty . . . [nor] the faintest speck of impurity in thought, or word, or look"(335). Her statement suggests that she, and Gaskell with her, are to a degree questioning the importance if not the reality of Ruth's sexual fall. Since Ruth outwardly conforms to what has been put forward as phallogentric society's notion of female virtue, for what can she be ostracised?

Unfortunately for Ruth, Jemima misunderstands the function of the surveillance technique because she herself is a product of it.

What her own conditioning as an object of surveillance has suppressed is an important aspect of her ignorance here. Jemima assumes that since Ruth's fall appears not to have changed her essence (ie. her goodness and modesty), Ruth's goodness deserves to be reinstated as her defining characteristic. Jemima is of course unaware that it is precisely a woman's sexual state which the surveyor, though s/he cannot rightly discern it, constitutes as her 'presence', as her definition. Accordingly, once this physical state has been 'proven' to be sullied, the woman's status is unalterable. Whatever her behaviour, no matter to what degree her modesty and goodness are indicated, her 'essence' is that of a 'fallen' woman, a despoiled object.

At the same time, Jemima's ignorance of the centrality of a

women's sexuality is itself dictated by her position within the surveillance system. As Berger states, a woman surveys herself continually because the importance of her appearance to man has been a carefully and thoroughly learnt lesson.⁴⁷ Her marginal status in a phallogentric society necessitates an adherence to the methods of assessment of the dominant members, their notions of acceptability, if she is to survive economically and socially. If we combine this with the knowledge that the male Victorian ideal of womanhood embraced an ignorance of sexual matters,⁴⁸ then Jemima's use of surveillance, despite her ignorance of what it exists to survey, can be accounted for. Indeed the proof of Jemima's thorough grasp of the female surveillance lesson can be seen in her reaction to her first recognition that she can feel sexual jealousy. Her realisation that Ruth is a preferred person in Farquhar's eyes, leads her to condemn the "capability for evil"(243), that is the sexual desire, she can experience. Even later, assured of Farquhar's love, Jemima remembers the evil thoughts (372) which once characterised her feelings towards Ruth, and feels undeserving of her present happiness because of it. The extremity of her terminology for what is a natural feeling indicates the degree to which surveillance is dominant. Wanting to retain her status as 'modest' and 'virginal' she must vehemently reject any desires which the Victorian ideal of woman excludes.

Because she is both ignorant, and a product, of the surveillance technique, Jemima does not doubt the knowledge of Ruth's 'essence' which its methods provide. Ruth is for Jemima the good, kind woman she reads her to be. Accordingly, Bradshaw's rejection of Jemima's witnessing on the grounds that it reveals only "more and more how deep is the corruption this wanton [Ruth] has spread"(336), renders Jemima immobile. Having

had her only method of finding 'truth' rejected, Jemima finds that Ruth's predicament is not "past [her] power"(337) and understanding. She fails to see that, despite its superficial air of authority, the surveillance method masks a fundamental recognition of its own inability to ascertain what it aims to uncover: the sexual status of the woman surveyed. Bradshaw can instantly accuse Ruth of "innocent seeming"(336) because it is precisely the figure of the woman whose physical appearance hides a sexual nature that haunts the surveyor.

At the same time, such a figure is a necessary element in the illusion of authority which the surveillance method gathers about itself. If the surveyor posits a central female figure whose physical presence is duplicitous, then his readings can never be termed faulty. All those women who, learning the lesson of surveillance at an early age as well as the Victorian lesson of sexual ignorance, are indeed 'modest women' (ie. physically intact, or sexual only in the legitimate context of the procreative family), and will know the correct manner of articulating that sexual status. At the same time, all those women known to be physically 'despoiled' and yet continue, as their education has taught them, to exude a modest presence, can be accounted for. The surveyor's knowledge will be far outweighed by what is known as the 'truth' about such women. Even women, like Jemima, who are physically modest will be sufficiently the product of surveillance to see as 'evil' any immodest behaviour or thoughts which threaten their carefully learnt sexual innocence. In each case, the surveyor's stance as absolute authority is never questioned. He either 'knows' through surveillance the essence of women, or can refer to the model of female potential for corruption and so privilege the knowledge of a sexual fall over any 'truth' his surveillance might yield.

Hence Bradshaw, meeting Ruth, is assured of his authority and rejects outright Jemima's attempts to re-define his knowledge.

At this point, it is necessary to revert to Gaskell's invocation of the Eve-like figure in Chapter four. If Gaskell is unable to extricate herself from the role of surveyor as her descriptions of Ruth throughout the text suggest, then this earlier apparent 'slip' in Gaskell's imaging of Ruth becomes more explicable. It is Eve who is the model of the woman possessing a hidden, unfathomable nature and who allows Bradshaw to be certain of Ruth's guilt, despite her outwardly modest behaviour. Ruth, like Eve, looks exactly the same after her transgression. Gaskell's early switch from a socially-determined fall to one which is inherent now seems inevitable. With the male tools of surveillance as the only method with which to assess women, the spectre of Eve and her hidden sexual status will remain firmly at the centre of her assessment, as it does for Bradshaw, despite her attempts to explore the phenomenon of the fallen woman from another angle.

Gaskell seems truly locked in a method of analysis which will not permit her the images of women for which she is searching. Nevertheless, amongst the products of male surveillance techniques, one can discern a level of meaning in the novel which suggests a tentative dismantling of the surveillance. From that dismantling, one can excavate a liberating image of woman. If we retrace our steps back to the point at which Ruth's 'fall' is first aired in Ecclestone, we can see that the process which upsets the definitions produced by the visual methods of surveillance is essentially verbal in nature. Jemima is told, not shown, that Ruth is a 'sinful creature.' One assumes that Bradshaw learns

the 'truth' concerning Ruth's sexual status in a similar way. One then remembers that Ruth's own consciousness of her fallen state is similarly the result of a verbal transaction (71). What is most important is that, in each instance, an individual who usually privileges the truth of visually-transmitted information, immediately revises his/her definition of another (or in Ruth's case, of herself) in the light of this verbally-transmitted information. The immediacy of the change is significant. It suggests that Gaskell recognises that Ruth's fall is primarily an effect of language. That is, Ruth is 'sinful' only to those who have been told she is - it is not something which can be seen to exist otherwise. Indeed Gaskell's apparently unconscious imaging of Ruth as Eve strengthens the primacy of the verbal articulation. Gaskell uses a literary source to present what is the ultimate literary type of woman: the biblical Eve in Paradise.

One would imagine that Gaskell's ability to disengage herself from the literary authority of the biblical and Miltonic Eve would be slight. But, her decision to use the authority given to verbal articulation to over-ride what is the effect of language - Ruth's status as a fallen woman - intimates an invalidation of this dominant image of woman. She does this primarily in two ways. The first can be seen as a direct result of her Unitarian heritage. Jemima's declaration of Ruth's purity and goodness is an assertion that Jemima's status as a living reliable witness of truth outweighs any previously conceived 'witnesses' to women. Jemima has seen Ruth to be good and truthful, and bears witness to, that is articulates, that truth. This for Gaskell is as true an assessment as one can hope for.

Her second method is the result of her recognition that, as explained above, such witnesses as Jemima are considered inadequate in the minds of those who assesses 'truth' with a surveillance method

based on preconceived notions. If we explore a crucial scene in Ruth, the meeting on the sands between Ruth and Bellingham, we can see Gaskell's attempts to re-work the 'preconceived' idea which is at the centre of the surveillance technique, and so undermine it.

The meeting on the sands was certainly controversial in Gaskell's day. Ruth's rejection of Bellingham's marriage proposal was attacked by contemporary critics. Some urged Ruth's acceptance on the basis of her moral influence over Bellingham, for "who will save him from his own unrighteousness if she will not."⁴⁹ Others protested Ruth's presumption at denying Leonard a father's guidance and protection.

If we investigate the tactics with which Ruth and Bellingham approach each other, we can see that each is bringing to the confrontation decidedly opposite notions of what constitutes 'womanhood'. In terms of speech-act theory, each brings to their meeting a different set of meanings, or a different 'discourse.'⁵⁰ In effect, they bring to their meeting differing notions of what exactly constitutes the social contract obtaining between them. The 'discourse' that influences Bellingham's behaviour and comments is that of the surveyor. His first perception of the woman he believes to resemble Ruth is a physical one: "this woman was far handsomer. Her face was positively Greek . . . [with a] proud, superb turn of the head; quite queenly." (275) Importantly Bellingham's immediate assessment is that such a woman cannot be Ruth. The regal bearing does not accord with the male surveyor's perception of the 'one thing' Ruth could have become.

More interestingly, Bellingham brings to the interview the male surveyor's belief in the sexual nature of a woman's essence. That is, he enters the meeting in the terms of the pastoral contract;

it is the pastoral contract's rules which he feels govern its progress. He assumes that because he knows of Ruth's sexual status (n.b. he is the only male surveyor that can ever 'know' Ruth's status because he is the seducer), he is in the position to manipulate her behaviour. To Bellingham, and any participant in the pastoral contract, a 'fallen woman' has only two possible choices of social roles. Her sexually despoiled status means that she must either become a prostitute as he had assumed Ruth to be (275), or she must legitimise her despoiled state by marrying the man responsible for it. He expects Ruth's face "[to] brighten into joy"(299) when he offers the possibility of the latter, and is bewildered when his offer is rejected.⁵¹ To Bellingham, Ruth is always the sexual commodity - the "beautiful walk"(299), the "majestic and graceful"(299) attitudes - which the pastoral contract defines as 'woman.' Her sexuality is all he recognises and can respond to.

In opposition, Ruth comes to this meeting with a very different social contract in mind. And accompanying her social contract is a different discourse, a different set of assumed meanings. Her sexuality, as rejection of Bellingham's proposal shows, is not her defining characteristic of herself. She is not, at this point, an observer or participant in the pastoral contract. Accordingly, she can remember a time of past sexual joy in Wales without implicitly assuming that sexuality must perpetually be her definition. Bellingham, in contrast, assumes the admission of sexuality to be the first step in Ruth's capitulation to his male surveyor's definition of her and all women.

What Ruth has placed at the centre of her discourse is a conception

of identity which, unlike Bellingham's, is fluid. Though her past 'sin' is part of her consciousness (300), it is not the entirety of her essence. Ruth loved Bellingham once; she does not do so now, and cannot envisage ever doing so again. Bellingham's concept of a fixed female identity, with sexuality at its centre, is undermined by Ruth's vision of a fluid self. Ruth, accordingly, posits her status as maternal carer as her present identity, and she, as carer, can reject Bellingham in Leonard's name. To capitulate at this point would mean to resign her vision of a fluid self for the model of woman which Bellingham assumes, and the fixity which accompanies it.

Though one might argue that Ruth's substitution of a maternal 'centre' for a sexual one is nothing more than a by-product of her sexuality, her stress on what she is now, and her unwillingness to accept past behaviour as definitive essence suggests that it is her conception of a 'changing' identity which is important, not its present manifestation. Unlike her past self which seemed fluid and insubstantial to the point where she could not recognise herself, this ability to change and adapt does not denote weakness, but strength. Ruth derives from her present status a strength of purpose and identity which equips her to reject the sexual essence which male surveyors, the pastoral contract, and the surveyor in herself, place at the centre of female identity.

But one must also note that, contrary to one's initial expectations, Bellingham eventually accepts Ruth's reworked definition of female identity. At first he is confused at Ruth's ability to use verbal articulation. A woman who declares her identity (that is, proclaims

her 'essence' through her speech not her physical presence) is an oddity which eludes the pastoral contract and the accompanying discourse which Bellingham has at his disposal. Ruth's speech-acts are "strange and incoherent"(295) - he can assign them no meaningful status in his own discourse. Indeed, he attempts to rework Ruth's words into the discourse of the pastoral contract from which he works. Though he cannot understand her, Ruth's lack of anger and resentment (296) suggest to Bellingham that her words are mere "pretty defiance"(300). Such defiance is not an act which the pastoral contract's discourse allows him to approach. Bellingham defines it as the behaviour of one who, aware that their 'true' sexual status is known, requires more than the usual amounts of overtures and compliments before marriage.

Finally however Ruth's perseverance in placing her maternal role at her centre wins. It is again a measure of the degree to which participants in the pastoral contract, users of the surveillance technique, can privilege verbal articulation as a 'truer' source of essence than their own flawed surveillance system.⁵² Because they privilege speech, Ruth's verbal articulation must be recognised as valid despite its deviation from the tradition which denies women speech by stressing presence. Bellingham's discourse, relying as it does on a construct of woman designed to keep the illusion of male authority intact, contains also the seeds for the recognition of Ruth's verbal articulation, and so forces him to accept her refusal.

In terms of speech act theory, Ruth's triumph at this point posits a social contract between men and women which can, if tapped, over-ride the dominant pastoral contract. It is furthermore, a contract which, unlike the pastoral contract, privileges verbal articulation

without discriminating against the gender of the speaker. Whilst the pastoral contract is based on the devaluation of a woman's verbal authority and a concurrent privileging of male verbal authority, the social contract in which Ruth has engaged Bellingham utilises this existing verbal privileging without an accompanying sexual discrimination. The possibility of redefinition of the contract is an important step forward for Gaskell. She has found the means with which to reshape that which has previously presented an unmitigating unassailable front.

After rejecting Bellingham's advances, Ruth's experience of desolation is a sign of her remembrance that her present 'identity' as mother is also subject to change and redefinition. Though it gives her the strength to reject Bellingham, it will not always remain as an 'essence' with which she can combat the definitions which others will thrust upon her. One can perhaps interpret Ruth's subsequent definition as 'nurse' as a tacit admission of the fluidity of 'essence'. With the recognition that she will not always be the carer she now is to Leonard, Ruth must look elsewhere for identity.

If we analyse Ruth's subsequent 'act', her nursing of Bellingham, we can see the extent to which Ruth's search for identity is hindered not only by its fluidity, but the limited number of choices. Ruth's status as 'nurse' is perhaps the inevitable 'next' identity for a woman who claims, for a time, a maternal essence. It is simply the extension of the focus of caring. At the same time, the image of the nurse is, like that of mother, a part of the 'good' woman image which Ruth presents in opposition to the bad/fallen woman image previously fastened upon her. In other words, though Ruth has successfully

cast off the image of the fallen woman by the end of the novel, she is left with an identity which, whilst socially desirable, is no less an 'essence' pressed upon her than the previous fallen label.

In such a context, Ruth's desolation after Abermouth, and her eager embrace of a life-threatening career, indicates the anxiety which the imposition of yet another social construct of woman - the good woman - causes. Ruth still has no identity which she can claim as her own, and which encompasses the sexuality that she finds a part of herself. She has merely oscillated between the two poles of the model of womanhood espoused by the surveillance system.

Ruth's predicament, the oscillating nature of her social identity and the apparent impossibility of attaining a social identity which embraces her sense of a multiplicity of essences (the mother, the sexual woman, the carer, the friend) is neatly embodied in her final act. The scene in which Ruth expresses her decision to nurse Bellingham is significant on two levels: it reveals that the only possible identities for women belong to the dichotomy discussed above, and it reasserts the degree to which these categories are effects of language or products of discourse.

When Ruth discovers that Bellingham is ill, she immediately approaches Mr Davis the doctor, urging the necessity of her attendance at Bellingham's bedside. Davis, unwilling to risk Ruth's life, attempts to dissuade her; but Ruth is adamant. Unlike her first 'feeling' that she should nurse (422), Ruth asserts three times her decision that she 'must go' (436-7). Ruth's assertion, however, takes on a multiplicity of meanings depending upon whom one assumes to be the listener. Firstly Ruth's statement is seen as simply the 'decision'

of the 'good woman' to continue to perform those acts which validate her status. Davis, representing the opinion of others such as Benson and the Eccleston villagers who view Ruth as a 'good woman', therefore attempts to persuade Ruth that this last act is not necessary to uphold her image. Ruth has more than proved her goodness.

On the other hand, had Bellingham been conscious and so able to hear Ruth's assertion at this point, her statement would signify the exact opposite. It would be an indication of Ruth's sexual capitulation, and hence a confirmation of her identity as the 'fallen', that is sexual, woman. Both Bellingham and Davis read Ruth's statement in the terms of the two only possible public meanings it can have: the utterance of a 'good woman' or the utterance of the 'fallen woman.'

At the same time, we as readers must note that Ruth's assertion is not, as far as she is concerned, a public statement.⁵³ Her 'I must go' is addressed privately and secretly to Davis. At this level, Ruth's 'I must go' has a different meaning. To Davis, the illegitimate son of a fallen woman, Ruth's statement (once he informed of her relationship to Bellingham) makes sense because it is "but what my mother would have done"(438). That is, he can recognise that Ruth will be performing an individual, private act, and not one which constitutes a part of her public image as the 'good woman.' Davis recognises, in essence, a 'family contract' between Ruth and Bellingham, and gives validity to that contract, though illegitimate in society's terms, because of his own experience as an illegitimate child.

At the same time, we must recognise that Davis's reading of Ruth's assertion is extremely limited. Although he apprehends a familial claim in Ruth's statement that she cares for Bellingham,

he does not seem to recognise it as a claim for an identity which the public images of good/bad women cannot offer. Importantly Ruth herself appears to perceive Davis's limited vision, and understands the level of meaning at which to engage Davis in order to gain his approval. She initially dwells on her intimate feelings for Bellingham before suddenly stating that he is Leonard's father (437). The suddenness of the statement suggests that Ruth can see that it is only within a family contract - whether 'illegitimate' or not - that Davis will understand her decision. But her need to care for Bellingham is not one that arises out of the familial contract Davis posits; it is rather a desperate avowal of Ruth's sexuality, presented in the private sphere because she realises it is an impossible statement in the public one. Ruth yearns to care for Bellingham because he is her past lover, not because he is Leonard's father. Her stuttering admission of her love for him attests to the importance of their intimate relationship, not the parental link she previously rejected in Leonard's name (300).

But even this private assertion, this private claim to a sexual voice and identity, is lost in the multiplicity of discourses by which her statement can be decoded. Her love as evidence of a familial contract; her love as evidence of her 'good woman' status; her love as evidence of a sexual capitulation; these readings overpower and eliminate Ruth's plea for an individual identity which would allow an escape from the sexual dichotomy of female images, and thus embrace both goodness and sexuality. 'I must go' is ultimately meaningless to the very one who speaks it because of the multiple meanings which are attached to it. With its meaninglessness, Ruth's opportunity to

forge an identity evaporates.

In such a context, Ruth finally attests to the strength and durability of the restricting images of women which the surveillance technique, and the pastoral contract which underlies it, projects. Ruth succumbs, or is forced to submit, to the definition of herself as 'fallen.' Being a product of surveillance, Ruth, like Jemima, cannot accept the sexuality which Bellingham's reappearance has forced her to confront. Unable to incorporate that sexuality into her identity, yet unwilling to reject completely an aspect of herself which can, as she knows, bring great happiness, Ruth dies with no real sense of herself, no discourse by which to fashion an identity, that is, insane.

Notes

¹Monica Correa Fryckstedt, Elizabeth Gaskell's 'Mary Barton' and 'Ruth': A Challenge to Christian England, (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1982), 120.

²Winnifred Gérin, Elizabeth Gaskell: A Biography, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 130.

³Ibid., 141.

⁴Fryckstedt, 135 - though George Sand's Claudie contains a rejected marriage proposal by a seduced girl as well.

⁵Ibid., 121.

⁶Ibid., 164.

⁷Ibid.

⁸See also Margaret Ganz, Elizabeth Gaskell: The Artist in Conflict, (New York: Twayne Publishing Inc., 1969), 110.

⁹Fryckstedt, 165.

¹⁰Ganz, 109.

¹¹Ibid., 122.

¹²Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870, (London: Yale University Press, 1957), 366.

¹³W.R. Greg, "Prostitution," Westminster Review, 53 (1850), 458.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Greg, 460.

¹⁶Greg, 471.

¹⁷Greg, 457.

¹⁸Greg, 495.

¹⁹Elizabeth Gaskell, Ruth, (London: Everyman's Library, 1967),
2. All subsequent references are to this edition, and appear in
the text.

²⁰Fryckstedt, 147.

²¹Sharpe's London Magazine, n.s. II (1853), 126.

²²Ibid., 125.

²³G.H. Lewes, "Ruth and Villette," Westminster Review, n.s.
III (1853), 477.

²⁴Walford Davies, ed., William Wordsworth: Selected Poems,
(London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1975), 39, l. 17.

²⁵John Milton, Paradise Lost, Merritt Y. Hughes, ed., (New York:
The Odyssey Press, 1962), 102, Book IV, ll. 626-28.

²⁶Ibid., ll. 460-65.

²⁷Ibid., Book V, ll. 38-94.

²⁸Houghton, 343.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid., 353.

³¹See Fryckstedt, 120 and Ganz, 124.

³²Robin Lakoff, Language and Woman's Place, (London: Harper
and Row, 1975), 24. Lakoff discusses a similar use of modern euphemism
to conceal an essentially derogatory definition of womanhood.

³³See William Acton, Prostitution, Considered in Its Moral,
Social and Sanitary Aspects, in London and Other Cities, (London,
1857) and Houghton.

³⁴Greg, 456.

³⁵Ibid., 457.

³⁶Ibid., 473.

³⁷Eva Figes, Patriarchal Attitudes: Women in Society, (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 85.

³⁸Figes, 48.

³⁹Lewes, 480.

⁴⁰John Berger, Ways of Seeing, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1972), 46.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., 47.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination, (London: Yale University Press, 1979), 17.

⁴⁵Michel Foucault in Power and Sex: An Interview with Michel Foucault, (Le Nouvelle Observateur, March 1977), comments upon, though does not explain, this need to know. He posits an interesting question: "How has sexuality come to be considered the privileged place where our deepest 'truth' is read and expressed?"(152).

⁴⁶Berger, 46.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸See Peter Cominos, "Innocent Femina Sensualis in Unconscious Conflict," in Suffer and Be Still, Martha Vicinus, ed., (London: Indiana University Press, 1972), 155-173.

⁴⁹J.M.F. Ludlow, North British Review, xix (1853), 162.

⁵⁰Foucault's concept of discourse, taken from The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, (London: Allen Lane, Penguin Books Ltd., 1979), seems particularly apt here. He discusses types of discourse on sexuality, the effect of which is to gain some degree

of detachment from sex, a way of regulating that which has been deemed subversive, chaotic and mysterious (20-25). His concept of a "general economy of discourse on sex"(11) seems to work well with speech act theory. Just as speech act theory posits 'social contracts,' that is differing sets of assumed meanings for differing situations which are designed to facilitate communication, Foucault's idea of differing discourses suggests a possible reason for the failure/infelicity of certain speech act situations. If individuals approach a social contract with different ideas of what constitutes the appropriate assumed set of meanings, communication will not take place.

⁵¹Bellingham's sexual discourse is that of the dominant group in a phallogentric society. His discourse takes as its centre the legitimate sex of the procreative couple, and assigns to all others the status of what Foucault terms 'peripheral sexualities' (The History of Sexuality, 41). Hence his bewilderment at Ruth's rejection of what he would term an opportunity to transform Ruth's 'peripheral sexuality' to the only legitimate form in his discourse.

Foucault also notes that the "machinery of power that focused on this [peripheral sexuality] did not aim to suppress it, but rather to give it an analytical, visible and permanent reality"(The History of Sexuality, 44). One can see that this is the aim of the surveyor's technique: to make what is peripheral to his discourse (female sexuality) appear knowable.

⁵²Ruth's success is also proof of the 'power' which accompanies the use of a discourse not usually recognised as part of the general economy of sexual discourse. Ruth's discourse is neither that of biology, medicine, psychology nor ethics, and so is not recognised by the surveyor as an accepted discourse on sex. See Foucault, The History of Sexuality, 6.

⁵³Arthur Pollard, Mrs Gaskell: Novelist and Biographer, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1965), 91, states that "Public events do not matter" in Ruth. Yet Ruth's problems originate in what only can be a public matter, her reputation, and continue because of her restricted access to such a public construct in order to change it.

Chapter Five: Cranford (1853)

In 1851 the Census of Great Britain listed a statistic which proved to be the focus of much debate: a spate of articles in the journals and newspapers of the day show the range of reactions to the unsettling revelation. The figures which caused such consternation stated the 'excess' of women to men in Great Britain. The figures themselves are interesting. In 1801 there were 180,027 more women than men in Great Britain. By 1851, that figure had risen to 349,871. Though the census also revealed that the proportion of women to men remained relatively stable [from 103,353:100,000 in 1801 to 103,363:100,000 in 1851), it was the apparent doubling of 'surplus' women which caused dismay. More troubling was the announcement that of the 290,209 women considered to be at child-bearing age (ie. between the ages of twenty and forty-five), nearly half (120,403) were unmarried.¹

That Cranford, which began serialisation in December 1851, has never been considered in the light of these statistics and the panic which followed seems a curious omission. If however one approaches the novel within this context, aspects of the text leap to the foreground which the traditional approach to it as a charming tale of rural life downplays. The shift of focus begins with the first line. Much critical commentary on Cranford concerns itself with the degree to which the opening line, "In the first place, Cranford is in possession of the Amazons,"² is ironic. Many commentators, like the editor to the Penguin edition, assert that the sentence "is, of course, an

ironic reinforcement of the qualities not normally associated with the mythical Amazons."³ That 'of course' is typical of the general assurance that the text's irony operates at only one level of meaning. The Cranford ladies - genteel, delicate and verging on the delightfully dotty - are 'simply' the complete inverse of the mythically fierce female warriors. When the sentence is not read as primarily 'ironic', it is usually considered as an indication of the extent to which the Cranfordians constitute a caring, close-knit, female community.

A look at the articles which surfaced in response to the Census figures, however, suggests an alternative. When the number of 'surplus' women was pinpointed in 1851, there began increased agitation for the widening of educational opportunities and possible 'occupations' for women. F.B. Cobbe's "What Shall We do with Our Old Maids?"⁴, published in 1862 in response to the renewed panic caused by the 1861 census which confirmed the rising number of 'excess' women, is typical of the articles which advocated female education and indeed female emigration (a favourite with many reviewers)⁵ in an attempt to re-structure the social arrangements which made marriage the sole 'occupation' of women. In response to the articles pleading for reform, however, came articles which reasserted the traditional role of women, and castigated those who attempted to redefine the 'natural' function of women in response to what was seen as a temporary problem.⁶

Within these articles one can sense a feeling of comforting definitions being under siege. Reviewers worry that women given more educational opportunities will abandon marriage, and the "tedious duties of training and bringing up children, and keeping the tradesmen's bills, and mending the linen"⁷ will fall upon the men. Others invoke

the dire spectacle of unmarried women, having taken advantage of increased educational opportunities, becoming feckless doctors prone to being "decoyed into any den of infamy"⁸ and so being ruined. More alarming is the prospect of female commitment to careers which might lead to a "gross infringement of the connubial contract"⁹ when these commitments involve night duty.

Lurking behind such outraged responses to the idea of female education is, not very surprisingly, a great fear that the reign of the status quo was hastily coming to an end. Though reviews seem confident in their assertions of the traditional role of women and their ridiculing of those who seek change, the image of being under siege is striking. In a few cases, that image is expressed in such a way as to prove interesting for readers of Cranford. One writer attempts to deflate the cry for reform by invoking the name of the Amazons, in particular Penthesilea - leader of the Amazons.¹⁰ He notes what he terms the tendency of women to 'display' their triumphs over men, even if those triumphs number but one, and hopes by the comparison to belittle the significance of the recently passed Divorce Act. By making the act comparable to Penthesilea's triumph over Achilles, he effectively makes any female supporter of the act into one of the "ten thousand tight-zoned virgin warriors"¹¹ who celebrated with Penthesilea. He makes a similar attempt to deflate the Congress for the Promotion of Social Science (a forum for many feminist speakers, Bessie Parks amongst them) by placing the "insane, idle, crotchety and preposterous"¹² suggestions which emerge from that forum firmly in the 'Amazonian tradition' of the writings of Wollstonecraft - the apparent 'failure' of Wollstonecraft's writing to elicit reform

effectively damning the Congress to the same fate. Another writer for the Saturday Review terms those women who agitate for female rights, "indiscreet amazons,"¹³ effectively disparaging their activities by the innocuous adjective.

Although these reviews are not exactly contemporary with Cranford, one nevertheless suspects that the term 'amazon' was a current, disparaging term for women exploring women's rights. Gaskell's use, in this context, of the same term intimates that contrary to being an ironic description of the Cranford women, the term 'amazon' is a suggestion for a certain approach to Cranford.¹⁴ The new focus certainly yields interesting results. In the contemporary journals, there is the latent assumption that the very women who agitate for reform are the women who, in one reviewer's terminology, have "failed in [a woman's] business"¹⁵. Their 'cackling' and "shrill protests"¹⁶ pinpoint them as spinsters. Gaskell's 'amazons' are also spinsters, with the added distinction of being in precisely the class of women which the Victorian advocates of reform posited to be most at risk. The amazons of Cranford are in possession, not of the town in entirety, but of all the houses above a certain rent. They thus constitute the specifically located sub-group of women, middle class and educated,¹⁷ were identified as especially hard-hit 'victims' of the excess of women.¹⁸

With the women of Cranford thus firmly established as the subjects of a current debate it seems an oversight to approach the text in a manner which may, or may not, ignore what it has to say about the status of women. In order to examine the text thoroughly, it is first necessary to establish the both the gender and the status of the 'speaker' of Cranford. Mary Smith, as we later discover her to be, is female, middle class and single. Gaskell's later story "The Cage

at Cranford" (1863) intimates that we can place the Mary of the earlier chapters in her early to middle twenties, and we can further deduce that her marital status remains unchanged.¹⁹ In other words, the observer of the Cranford spinsters is a woman who can conceive the possibility of her own future status as 'spinster.'

Issuing from the mouth of such a speaker, Cranford's opening sentence gains a wholly new resonance. If the amazon evoked in the reviews pointed to a fear of what reform could lead to, in what way can these apparently benign, timid, and fearful women be seen as amazons? The answer lies in the tactics used by the journals cited earlier. If the term 'amazon' both betrayed and consolidated the sense of fear at female reform which one senses in the reviews, it is also a tactic of deflation. By the application of derogatory labels reviewers can be seen to be 'defining' and so 'limiting' a phenomenon which threatens to destabilise the status quo of sexual relations. Such a tactic, literary or linguistic in essence, suggests that an investigation of uses or tactics of language in Cranford may prove illuminating.

The investigation reveals an interesting split. On the one hand one can place the type of language usage exemplified by Deborah Jenkyns and her love for Doctor Johnson. Johnson's measured, balanced prose is embraced as a model of literary propriety, opposed to the vulgarity of other literary forms (48). In essence, this type of language is depicted as masculine. Not only is Johnson its originator, but the rector is its propogator, and through Deborah ensures that it remains at the centre of Cranford's language. The characteristics of this type of language can be ascertained by collating the 'evidence'

which the language of the rector, of Mr Smith, and others provide. From Mr Smith's letter to Mary, we can deduce that 'masculine' language confines itself to the communication of apparently impersonal facts: there is rain, trade is stagnant, and business rumours are disagreeable (172). The rector's letters to his wife share this element of impersonality insofar as they appear not to be addressed to his wife at all, and provide none of the personal information which she requires from him. Instead of a letter about killing a pig, which Mrs Jenkyn's required, she receives an ode, in classical style, addressed to Maria. Indeed the public, impersonal style of the letter is confirmed by the fact that the ode it contains was initiated by the occasion of the publication of one of the rector's sermons, and is itself reported as published in the Gentleman's Magazine number for December 1782 (88). Deborah's own letters confirm both the impersonal and public nature of masculine speech. Miss Matty laments the necessity for burning Deborah's letters, stating that "Anyone might profit by reading them"(89), and comparing them to the published Letters on the Improvement of the Mind (1774) by Hester Chapone.

The residents of Cranford appear to share Deborah's enthusiasm for masculine language.²⁰ Their obsession with nomenclature, the 'proper' form of address, suggests an interest in an impersonal use of language which establishes public status. The discussion on how to address Lady Glenmore (115); the preference for calling Sam Brown 'the signor' because "it sounded so much better"(153); and the tendency to transform names from the personal (Miss Matty; Mary) to the formal (Miss Matilda Jenkyns; Miss Smith) when the occasion requires it (155;191) suggests that the Cranford women can use and delight in

a language comparable to 'masculine' language along with Deborah and the rector.

For Mary however such language is unsatisfactory, dull, and lifeless (88;172). Her disapproval of the letters appears to parallel her disapproval, couched in comic terms, of that aspect of Cranford society ruled over by the despot of 'propriety' and elegant economy. Mary cites a number of occasions on which adherence to propriety necessitates the public disavowal of what is a personal pleasure. Miss Matty and Deborah must retire to separate, private rooms in order to enjoy an orange without offending anyone with the 'unpleasantness' of a sound associated with babies (66); Miss Matty wonders if what she finds thoroughly entertaining is not improper, and looks to the presence of the rector at the evening with Signor Brunoni to dispell her reservations (136). More importantly, the fifteen minute limit imposed on social calls suggests that 'propriety', and the impersonality that implies, leads not only to the repression of personal pleasures, but to stagnation. Not only does the fifteen minute rule limit conversation, the apparent rule that ladies must talk about what they read and the impossibility of getting good servants means that the Cranford women, not widely-read and happy with their servants, suffer from a "dearth of subjects for conversation." (49)

But of course, reading Cranford one is struck not by a lack of talking but the volubility of speech. How can one account for these apparent transgressions from the rules of propriety and 'conversation'? The answer lies in the split between the public and the personal to which both the concept of propriety and the 'impersonal' nature of personal letters point. Before examining that split, it is

necessary to review the 'other' usage of language one can detect in Cranford. If the Cranford women are concerned with nomenclature, they are also prodigious and imaginative story tellers.²¹ Not only does the imparter of news partake of an exalted status in Cranford (168), but there is a constant exchange of stories. Mary herself (besides being the 'author' of Cranford) tells us the story of the cow in the grey flannel suit (43-44), and shows a propensity for fashioning tales of sentimental romance (70). Miss Matty's story of Peter's expulsion is an evocative piece of story-telling, all the more surprising as it comes from a usually timid speaker (98-99); Miss Pole and Miss Matty exchange stories of murder and mayhem (141); and all of the women reveal their talent for collective story-telling when they manage to create the 'Panic' between them.

As story tellers the women of Cranford are certainly distinguished from users of 'masculine' language. Whereas the latter stress fact and maintain a demeanour of impersonality, the story telling of the Cranford 'amazons' suggests a spontaneity and creativity opposed to fact and impersonality. More importantly, the status of the women as users of 'masculine' language or as story tellers is significantly different. At each of those points where the women espouse 'masculine' language and the rules of propriety which mimics its impersonality, they are essentially ridiculous creatures. For all of Miss Matty's assertions that Deborah's letters rank with those of Mrs Chapone's and Mrs Carter's, the over-riding image is of Deborah brandishing her crossed letters as models of communication, when in fact "the words [which] gathered size like snowballs"(90) are just so much gibberish to Miss Matty. Similarly, it is when Miss Betty Barker

and Miss Matty adhere closely to the rules of the fifteen minute social call, all "swimming courtesy"(108), bowing acceptance (107) and polite speech (106-7), that Miss Matty is primarily a ridiculous spectacle wearing two caps, and Miss Barker an unappealing snob to the social hierarchies of Cranford. Significantly, it is Deborah, one of the few Cranford women to abstain from story telling, who represents the stereotypical 'spinster'; her jockey cap identifies her as the ridiculous old maid par excellence.

As story tellers however, the Cranford women retain a dignity which overrides any impression of ridiculousness. The dignity is achieved primarily by the personal characteristic of story-telling. Miss Matty's narrative on Peter's disappearance cannot be dismissed as ridiculous, but is a moving tale of personal experience. Similarly, the cat who swallowed the lace, and the cow in the flannel suit story are not ridiculous, though comic. Neither Mrs Forrester nor Miss Barker appear with two caps when relating their respective tales, nor is communication hampered by an impenetrable style.

The change of status which the women undergo when they alter their method of communication requires elucidation, and can be explained by the split between the public and the private referred to earlier. The journals attest to the prevalence of what has come to be termed the doctrine of 'separate spheres.' The sphere of women is defined as being "exclusively domestic"²², the space within which women are to fulfill their 'proper' destiny of being married, having children, regulating the household, and being a helpmate to her husband.²³ By keeping to their 'proper' sphere, women ensure that society functions as it should, and any considerations of the 'enlargement' of that

sphere must be guided by an awareness of the chaos that will ensue if the status quo were unsettled. The male 'proper' sphere embraces, in contrast, both a domestic world of sorts (he has wife, home and family), and a public one. It is the male who is seen as the leader of armies, the maker of laws, the governor of empires.²⁴ In essence, the 'proper' male sphere consists of a fullness of life which the female sphere, restricted to the domestic, does not emulate.

In Cranford the split is quite tangible. Only men such as Captain Brown, the rector, and Mr Smith, have lives unfettered by domesticity, and distinguished by travel. Their mobility is ubiquitous: Brown is a half-pay captain from the army and is connected with the railway; the rector ventures to London; and the Mr Smith leads an active, business life. The only women, aside from Mary herself, to have travelled is Signor Brunoni's wife. Her trek across India, however, is not life-enhancing but life-threatening. With such unrestricted, mobile lives, it seems only logical that these men are users of the impersonal, masculine language. Adherence to facts is not dull and lifeless if one's own life provides excitement, change and stimulation.

Significantly, it is the Cranford women, leading lives restricted by elegant economy and their status as women limited to a domestic sphere which precludes careers, who are the story-tellers - users of a language which stresses the spontaneity, vitality and creativity missing from their lives.²⁵ At the same time, the fact that the Cranford women are also users of masculine language, and concede to the limitations of propriety in the rules which govern their social calls, is a vital qualification of their use of 'creative', unrestrictive language. The women of Cranford are fragmented speakers, adapting

to different types of language to different situations.

The fluctuating language usage of such fragmented speakers is important, and appears to be the phenomenon upon which Mary Smith concentrates. The existence of two languages, one which restricts by its impersonality and insistence on facts, the other which fosters creativity, is an indication that Mary Smith, and the text with her, perceives the 'domestic sphere' of women in a way which would surprise or at least discomfort the writers of the contemporary journals. We have discussed the way in which reviewers asserted the 'natural' role of women and their place in the domestic sphere, and we have also noted the fear which appears to structure the ridiculing of those who attempt to widen that sphere. The fear seems initially puzzling, accompanied as it usually is with an apparent trust that women are 'naturally' inferior to men in intellect,²⁶ and that the doctrine of separate spheres is divinely ordained.²⁷

But the fear indicates that despite such superficial assertions of the ridiculousness of independent women, the reviewers are uneasy about the status of the female domestic sphere, and its ability to provide an outlet for all that a woman should be. In such a context, the story-telling so foregrounded in Cranford corroborates that fear. It is an indication that hidden behind the world of propriety and decorum, the domestic sphere of women who cannot be wives or mothers, is another world of existence.

This world needs to be examined in two ways: firstly, the way in which it operates for the women in Cranford, and secondly, the purpose to which Mary Smith puts its existence.

The first has been briefly noted. The Cranford women in general lose that quality of ridiculousness which seems to obtain when they

are users of 'masculine' language. More specifically, this other 'world' and its language shed the limitations of propriety and hierarchy. What is put in its place is not a stereotypical depiction of female speech. The Cranford women are not variations upon Austen's Miss Bates - garrulous ridiculous spinsters - nor the source of humour which Vicinus tell us spinsters represented in the Victorian music-halls and operattas.²⁸ If the creators of 'masculine' language see spinsters as ridiculous, voluble fools, the story telling in Cranford undermines that definition. If Mrs Forrester tells the story of the cat who swallowed the lace, she does not disruptively inject the tale into conversation. Though this 'creative' speech is free of the strictures molding the public, fifteen-minute discourse, it is not as a result chaotic or disordered. Mrs Forrester's tale comes in response to Lady Glenmire's admiration for the lace, and so is offered to one who has expressed an interest in its background. It is a satisfying, tellable tale for the listener, not a dull, lifeless and impersonal relation of facts.

All of the women's creative discourse share this characteristic. They swap stories and tales as equals, knowing the interest of the listeners and desiring to satisfy it. This is not the discourse of the 'social' visit when financial inequalities force one to plead: the beauty of the night in order to disguise the absence of a coach and four (42). As creative speakers, all such distinctions are erased. When Miss Pole tells the story of Lady Glenmire's forthcoming marriage, all thoughts of "darned caps and patched collars"(168) are forgotten. In their place comes a flexibility characterised by a consideration for speakers (168), a concern to satisfy listeners (131), and a general

assumption of equality between speakers and listeners (149) which encourages the exchange of tales.

Mary's interest in this other language usage, and the change it occasions in the women, is vital. On one level she is as willing a listener to these tales as Miss Pole, Miss Barker or Miss Matty herself, and her enjoyment of them is evident. At the same time, Mary does with these tales something which the Cranford women would never think of doing: she publishes them. The importance of the act must be emphasized. A particular incident provides a useful illustration. The Cranford women as we have seen are fragmented speakers. As users of masculine language, and participants in propriety, their acts and speeches are seen to be based on social hierarchies, and what is deemed to be the 'correct' manner of behaviour. But Smith suggests that the use of masculine language and dictates of what is 'proper' for spinsters is more than simply ridiculous, it transforms the women into non-speakers. Mrs Forrester's tea parties are a case in point. Mary notes that the women, herself included, confine themselves to "short sentences of small talk"(41) and are "punctual to our time."(41) Even when they are obliged to vacate their seats in order to facilitate the removal of tea trays concealed there, the women of Cranford continue to talk about "household forms and ceremonies"(41), implicitly overlooking any indication that their hostess did not have "a regular servants' hall, second table, with housekeeper and steward"(41). In other words, the women bypass the obvious narrative potential, the tellability, of such an incident in preference of maintaining an illusion of a specific, socially acceptable, atmosphere.

But Mary does tell it, and what is more, she publishes it. What the women deem a 'private' incident to be related when propriety can be momentarily banished, is brought into the public realm of discourse - taking its place with the rector's sermons, Mrs Chapone's letters, and Doctor Johnson in the published world. By doing so she effectively confers the same 'authority' and 'validity' which such public discourse possesses, upon the private discourse which resides behind the 'proper' sphere of the Cranford spinsters.

In the same way, Mary relates several incidents in which the two types of language usage confront each other, and where the 'creative' usage effectively displaces the masculine as 'authoritative', however temporarily. The first is the relation of the cow in the flannel suit tale. It is important to note, first, that Captain Brown whilst sharing a 'public' life and mobility with the other men of Cranford, is also aligned on several levels with the 'creative' urge of the Cranford women. Unlike the rector and the factual Mr Smith, Captain Brown's interest lies not in the impersonal, factual language epitomised by Johnson, but with Dickens, the model of vulgar language usage scorned by Deborah Jenkyns (48). He also appears to break the rules of propriety, associated with masculine language usage, at several points. Not only does he attend the women's tea parties unlike the other male inhabitants of Cranford (46), he also does not modulate his discourse to the occasion, talking instead "in a voice too large for the room." (43) This breaking of 'propriety' of course appeals to the ladies who are also breakers of propriety when they swap stories, and it is not surprising that Captain Brown is popular with the women at Cranford.

This popularity, however, does not banish or preclude Brown's usage of 'masculine' speech, and it is equally unsurprising that he is also considered an "authority"(43) by the women of Cranford in a way similar to the 'authority' of men such as Johnson and the rector. His gender seems to strike the women of Cranford more than his interest in 'creative' language. His dual status has been thus outlined because it is an important fact to bring to any look at the incident of the cow in the flannel suit. Miss Betty Barker, owner of the poor lime-flayed cow in question, approaches Brown for advice. She accepts his sarcastically offered precepts in a manner which the 'authority' of masculine language dictates. That is, Miss Barker accepts all of Brown's statement as 'fact.' One might wonder that she is not surprised that language deserving of the 'authorative' label should apparently be able to diversify into personal response (in the suggestion to dress the cow). Miss Barker is either too assured of its 'authority' to question what appears to be a deviation from the factual, or she is too relieved to hear the 'solution' offered to question its validity. Accordingly, a flannel waistcoat and flannel drawers are fetched, and the cow survives.

The incident is interesting on several levels. On the first, it reveals one of the pitfalls of impersonal, masculine language. Brown's real advice, to kill the cow, neglects to consider one vital piece of information: Miss Barker's cow is no ordinary cow, it is a favoured pet, the loss of which would be devastating. For Brown, a cow with no hair is simply one which should be killed, presumably because it is past its functional use.²⁹ He overlooks the personal element in Miss Barker's request.

Secondly, the fact that the advice which was offered flipantly in masculine terms, proves successful suggests that 'authority' and the sense of infallibility which goes with it, usually attributed to 'masculine' language is not wholly deserved. What to one language seems a fanciful and frivolous measure, is a viable alternative in another, and one which avoids the cruelty of impersonality that masculine usage implicitly suggests.

Another incident in Cranford illustrates the way in which the 'creative' speech of the women is a more benevolent language usage than the masculine. At the same time the incident reveals the way in which the women at Cranford are constantly shuttling between masculine language and the rules which accompany it, and their own private discourse. When Miss Matty enters a shop, only to hear of the rejection of a man's five pound note, she immediately engages in conversation with them in an attempt to understand the situation. What is crucial here is that those rules of 'propriety' which would disallow Matty from discussing subjects with a shopkeeper and farmer (the individual involved), except within an exchange recognising social hierarchies, are here absent. Matty, Mr Johnson the shopkeeper, and Mr Dobson the farmer, engage in an exchange in which each has an equal, personal interest. As a 'personal' speaker, unhampered by rules of public discourse for middle class spinsters, Matty is able to speak freely and cogently about the note. Once however Matty becomes aware of the public context of this speech-exchange, the individuals with whom she speaks become an "audience"(177). In public, the rules of propriety reassert themselves, and though Matty follows through her personal interest in the transaction by making good the farmer's

rejected note, she loses her eloquence. It belongs to the realm of equal, creative speakers, not the public world of short sentences and time limitations.

A final illustration confirms the status of creative speech as usage which is effective and viable in contrast to the stultification of masculine speech. Matty tells Mary of the time when her father made Deborah and herself keep a diary: "on one side [they] were to put down in the morning what [they] thought would be the course and events of the coming day, and at night [they] were to put down on the other side what really happened." (158) As Matty tells us this in the context of a discussion on matrimony and her own past belief that she would marry, the recollection that it was the rector's concern for social hierarchies that prevented Matty's marriage to Holbrook (69) highlights the potential for cruelty in the 'masculine' use of language, and the accompanying rules of propriety. In his emphasis on facts, the rector denies what we recognise is a positive, vital use of language. To imagine what will happen in one's day is closely akin to telling a story; the rector's insistence on puncturing that 'story' by the 'facts' of the day appears a hard lesson which we as readers are meant to reject in favour of the delight which the exercise of the imagination can bring.

Ultimately of course whilst these episodes attest to the positive, creative aspect of the 'private' discourse of the Cranford women, one is struck by the way in which they vacillate between 'masculine' language and the creative, personal speech of their own stories. It is Mary who asserts the validity of such creative speech, not the women themselves. The difference between Mary's perception of story-telling and the

women's perception can best be seen if we look at a specific occurrence in Cranford: the return of Peter Jenkyns. The return has been interpreted as an admission on Gaskell's part that 'women without men' lead unsatisfactory and inadequate lives.³⁰ The interpretation can be challenged on several levels.

Firstly one must point out that Peter, like Captain Brown, cannot be aligned completely with masculine users of language such as the rector, Mr Smith and Doctor Johnson. Though his school letters to his father show a capacity to utilise the "occasional quotation from the classics,"(92) his 'real' style appears to have a more personal element akin to the creative language of the women in Cranford. Importantly, it is the excerpts of these more 'personal' sections of his letters ("Mother dear, do send me a cake, and put plenty of citron in," and "My dear, dear, dear, dearest mother, I will be a better boy -- I will indeed . . ."(92)], which are quoted to us, not the accounts of his studies written to his father. The excerpts suggest that it is this 'personal' language which we are to note as constituting Peter's salient characteristic.

With the capacity for such personal writing, it is not surprising that Peter proves to be, upon his return to Cranford, as prodigious a story-teller as the women themselves (211). He is accordingly very popular with them, and they delight in his tales of India. But his warm reception into the Cranford circle is not primarily an indication of an empty space of Cranford society which he then fills. Though his appearance in Cranford means that Matty closes her tea-shop, and the kind contributions of her friends are no longer necessary, one must not deduce that the tea-shop and the contributions

were therefore, and necessarily, only inadequate measures taken by the inadequate women in Cranford. Mary is careful to point out that the tea shop is a viable concern (205) and that Matty enjoys the employment it brings her.

Still, Peter's reappearance does effect change, and one must investigate its nature in order to determine precisely the role he plays in Cranford. It is important to note, for example, that whilst the women enjoy Peter's story-telling prowess, they also have the tendency to view him as 'authoritative' in much the same way that they saw Captain Brown in two ways. It is by appeal to propriety, and the social hierarchy that underpins it, that Peter successfully brings together that bastion of social snobbery, Mrs Jamieson, and the woman who so offends her, Mrs Hoggins. His 'authority' as a male means that Mrs Jamieson responds to his bribe of patronage rather than to the apparent transgression of hierarchies which Mrs Hoggins represents (217). As creatures who vacillate between masculine language and story telling, it is not surprising that the women of Cranford respond to Peter in both ways.

But though the women see Peter as authoritative because of his gender and a story teller, Mary suggests an alternative. For Mary, it seems Peter is simply another Cranfordian. His reappearance at Cranford does not change its world fundamentally. He simply foregrounds one aspect of Cranford society which is always latent, in much the same way that Mary does by publishing the tales. Though the appeal to hierarchy effects the change, it is the equality and "old friendly sociability"(218) which always existed in the women's story-telling that Peter helps to precipitate.

Accordingly, Mary as story teller foregrounds not the ploy by which Peter bribes Mrs Jamieson, but the story of the cherubim which he uses to maintain it (217), and the effect of equal sociability which is the ultimate result. In other words, Mary presents Peter as a creative type of language user, not as a representative of the 'authority' of masculine language and gender.

For the reader sensitive to the depiction of types of language in Cranford, the opening sentence seems no longer ironic. By asserting the validity of a language which stresses creativity, equality and the personal, Mary attempts to banish the fragmented female self created by the split between the 'public' female sphere - that is the domestic, restricted sphere of the Cranford spinsters - and the 'private', or hidden sphere of their story telling. She confers retrospectively a unification of being upon Cranford women which, as speakers/users of both masculine and creative languages, they lack. By 'publishing' their private speech and in effect making them speak, Mary attempts to fashion the women of Cranford into 'amazons,' women who, like those referred to in the contemporary journals, step out of the boundaries of a female 'proper' sphere by speaking with a voice not contained by the domestic sphere to which they ostensibly belong.³¹

The appeal of fashioning such a unified female self is certainly strong. If Ruth articulates anything it is the extent to which Gaskell perceives the absence of a unified self as 'non self', that is an horrific annihilation of being. The strange serenity that surrounds

Ruth's insane death suggests that death, however individually a tragedy, is in some manner preferable to an existence of continual efforts to redefine 'essence' in the hopes of eventually achieving an acceptable and liberating image of womanhood. But does Cranford provide such an image?

The answer is a complex one. On the side of reservation, one must note that the Cranford women do not themselves speak publicly. Their private story-telling remains private, and they would not 'publish' it as Mary does. Secondly, Cranford does not address the obstacle to a unified female self which Ruth posits: sexuality. The Victorian journals and indeed the 1851 census itself can only discuss the 'excess' number of women as a 'problem' because of the assumption they share that women are simply a sexual function.³² Women are intended to marry and have children; if they cannot, because they outnumber men, women become not wives nor mothers, but spinsters. The label indicates that the sexual function is stagnant because unused in a legitimate way.

Cranford seems to have overlooked the sexual basis, then, of the doctrine of separate spheres. Though it notes the fragmented life of the Cranford women, it does not grasp the prime reason for that fragmentation. Even when it does enter into the realm of the sexual, Cranford does not link it with fragmentation. Mary Smith notes the way in which the Misses Jenkyns retire to their separate rooms when sucking oranges. But she does not overtly connect their sense of shame at a noise resembling that of an infant's suckling to the ignorance of sexual matters revealed in Matty's obliviousness to Martha's pregnancy. Both incidents confirm the Misses Jenkyns'

exemplary status as what Cominos terms the 'innocent femina sensualis.' The attitude to oranges, and Miss Matty's ignorance of a nine-month pregnant woman, suggest that the mechanism of repression which Cominos describes is functioning well to repress all things connected with sexuality, instincts and desires, and keeps both Miss Jenkyns's as models of female modesty and sexual ignorance.

But even if Cranford did address the sexuality which causes fragmentation of the female self, and still managed to fashion an image of unified womanhood, how successful is that image? Mary is a case in point. It is an important, though not an emphasized point, that if Matty is ignorant of childbirth, Mary is not. Though she comes from a similar middle class background, Mary is not an Innocent Femina Sensualis. She knows of sexual matters, at least in its maternal manifestation, and is an advocate for reaching for what one desires [eg. her enthusiasm for Matty's trip to Holbrook's farm (72)]. More significantly, it is Mary who is the 'speaking centre' of Cranford.

If Mary is the unfragmented, speaking female self which Cranford celebrates, how does one account for the complete absence of review/readings of the novel which ascertain that self? The contemporary reviews of Cranford did not view it as 'amazonian', as a threatening, speaking image of women unconfined to 'proper' spheres. Contemporary reviewers saw in the text a reflection of what was 'real' in their society. "[T]his unpretending little' book evokes the reality of its old-maid 'heroines' and their commonplace lives."³³ - the emphasis is upon the 'realistic' qualities of a book which depicts the 'little' sphere of spinsters in a 'little' book, reasserting a reassuring image of spinsters, not as leading a rather large army (349,871)

of amazons, but as leading commonplace and unthreatening lives. It is the "'imitation' of ordinary life";³⁴ the well-written account of what is "'almost nothing to write about,"³⁵ the "'most inimitable portraiture of human nature female'"³⁶ the exaltation of "traditional female 'virtues'";³⁷ and the "uniquely adorable vitality"³⁸, which captivated contemporary readers and continues to appeal to readers today. The stress is on finding in Cranford something which, whilst 'adorable,' in no way confounds the reader. It is 'portraiture', 'realism,' the encounter of nothing unknown, that characterises this response to Cranford.

How are the contradictory views possible? How does the 'challenge' which Mary's narrative constitutes remain so clearly unobserved by these readers? The answer lies in the text itself. One remembers Matty's conversation in the draper's shop about the demise of the joint-stock bank, her immediate eloquence and sudden inarticulacy. The change was effected by Matty's sudden redefinition of her listeners: different listeners entailed and so elicited different speech. The incident seems a fairly close analogy to the situation in which Cranford finds itself. Some readers see in the text a level of meaning which disrupts the traditional image of womanhood; others see it as confirmation of that image. If we then recall Gaskell's Unitarian, speech-act based, background, its ideological assumptions, we can see the reasons why Cranford can be seen to occupy an uneasy status in her writings: it both asserts 'truths' which she found missing from the dominant culture's imaging of women, and undermines those 'truths' by disclosing fundamental flaws in the process by which those truths were constructed.

One recalls Unitarianism's insistence on the importance of the

individual: the emphasis upon the individual's outlook on events and the subsequent valuation of the concept of witnessing; the stress on each individual to work continually through speech and act towards a type of language termed 'pure performative.' One then recalls the Gaskell's deep interest in Romantic literature, and the emphasis on the individual in that tradition. One further recalls the Unitarian emphasis on the right of the individual to education and, in broader terms, their political support of such democratic movements as the Revolution in France, and their unease (eventually settled) over the apparent over-riding of individual rights in the American Civil war when they considered the right of the South to secede from the Union.⁴⁰ The emphasis is quite clearly on the individual, the autonomous unified self, to participate freely in society. The fettering of just such a self, through denial of access to education, information, or the right to vote, was a major Unitarian concern.

Cora Kaplan in an essay concerned with the relationship of women to the concept of the autonomous, unified self, begins with the example of Mary Wollstonecraft and A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792). Although Wollstonecraft was not a Unitarian herself, she came into contact with it through her friendship with Dr. Richard Price.⁴² In the simplest terms, Wollstonecraft, a warm supporter of the French Revolution, saw as the major obstacle to female participation in the democratic process an education which led to a concept of the female self which effectively barred involvement. The woman, as exemplified in Emile's (1762) Sophy, is no more than an object of desire, incapable of rational, autonomous selfhood. In A Vindication., therefore, Wollstonecraft strives to liberate women from this sexually-

based identity in order that they could freely and equally take part in the democratic process opening up to them.⁴³

It would seem that Gaskell's Unitarianism and its concept of language necessitates a similar construction of the unified, autonomous female self. Beginning with the positing of a model of society in which each individual slowly progressed towards the divine language of the 'pure performative' through the exercise of their own 'performative' language skills, Gaskell first encounters the social injunction against female speech - that is she encounters the 'pastoral contract', the contract of communication by which a female 'communicates,' or is spoken, through her physical presence. Gaskell's struggle against this contract and its privileging of female 'presence' has been explored in Ruth, but it would seem that Cranford constitutes Gaskell's 'answer' to the pastoral contract. If one can make women 'speak,' the pastoral contract is not only nullified, but the now autonomous and unified female speaker can get on with her divinely appointed task along with all the other Unitarian individuals.

What both Gaskell and Unitarianism neglect to explore is the security of the basis of the 'speaking self.' Cranford presents 'speaking' women, but not all readers have moved closer to the image of womanhood which the 'speaking female self' suggests is possible. In order to explore the foundations of the 'unified self' it is first necessary to construct an idea of what this concept 'meant' to individuals like Gaskell, and what powers would have been attributed to it. The Unitarian conception of a 'performative' language is a good starting point. The term 'performative' language assumes a 'performer', an individual who 'performs' the act of speaking. Unitarianism with

its basis in the Scottish commonsense philosophers and its belief that one must trust God-given senses, would never question the assumption of such an identity. One's senses 'prove' that one exists: the existence of the 'I', the performer, of the utterance is not challenged or doubted.

The notion of performative language and the 'I'/performer also implies, as speech-act theory makes clear, the idea of intention and commitment. Victorian Unitarians would concede this characteristic, concerned as they were with achieving a language in which act/word coincided, and with measuring human performatives by the degree to which speech coincided with act. Speech acts are in some way 'guaranteed' or 'made good' by the speaker her/himself. The 'felicity' of a promise depends upon the subsequent actions of the speaker. Accompanying this notion of intention is one of control. The speaker is seen as in 'control' of the 'meaning' which his/her speech act imparts to a listener. But as Derrida points out, this assumption is contradictory with the speech act view of language. Speech act theory foregrounds the communicative element of language, the way in which speakers utilise language forms to relay meaning. Necessarily, a model of language forms or structures which can be appropriated by the speaker for his/her utterances is proposed. Included amongst these structures (eg. that verb will follow noun, and will agree) is a commitment to shared meaning. Each speaker 'communicates' knowing that listeners hear the utterance with an understanding of the meaning he implies with each word. Derrida points out however that the pre-existence of these structures and forms contradicts the idea of a speaker in 'control' of meaning. If s/he has to choose from pre-existing meanings

and structures, then the very act of 'choice' limits the meanings available for use, and precludes the possibility of an individual in complete 'control' of speech.⁴⁴ For Derrida, speech act's theory of language "partake[s] of the differance or distancing from origin that marks all language in so far as it exceeds and pre-exists the speaker's intention."⁴⁵

One can see in this quick over-view why Cranford might be, in Unitarian terms, a radical text. A female, speaking 'I' effectively banishes the pastoral contract. Gaskell proceeds from the fundamental premise that women have a unified self which is simply fragmented in the dominant culture. It is a case simply of releasing the barred segments of femaleness by giving women a chance to do what they are denied: that is to speak.⁴⁶ Once given the opportunity to speak, to undermine the 'authority' of the 'speaking' female physical presence, individual women can relay her 'own' meanings. Having a woman 'speak' that the female possesses a unified, autonomous self, that the life women lead and the language they use is as valid as that of the male in dominant culture, is to relay the meaning of the vitality, the attractiveness, and the real existence of such a female self.

What Cranford shows us however, is that the 'communicative' model of language is the only one which will yield such a meaning. Moreover, it shows us that speech-act theory has a fundamental flaw which accounts for the differing responses to the text. Speech act theory assumes that each speaker and listener will agree to enter discourse with the 'agreed' meanings it posits. It does not account for the refusal of speakers to make such a pact; the effect of such variables as gender and class on the conception of that pact; or

a speaker/listener's decision to withdraw from the pact, but to keep that withdrawal secret. In other words Cranford shows us the precise way in which readers, approaching the text, can refuse or reject the 'meanings' which the text potentially contains. If Cranford foregrounds the story telling capacity of women, a reader can 'choose' to foreground, not the story tellings, but its position within the masculine language of the dominant culture. One can choose to foreground Matty's inarticulacy in front of an audience and so view that inarticulacy as a literary corollary to the 'speech-less' status of women in the dominant culture.⁴⁷ That choice, furthermore, is influenced by the particular point which social/biological variables meet to form from which 'I' approach the text. If I am a male reviewer, writing in an anti-feminist review for anti-feminist readers, my 'choice' will be made accordingly: 'I' will foreground inarticulacy.⁴⁸

Cranford's reception points moreover to a contradiction in the text itself. Where story telling stresses the equality of speakers, and the text attempts to upgrade the status of women by both giving them speech and asserting its equality with the dominant 'male' discourse, the effect of Cranford is very different. One must note that 'equality' in the 'new' language foregrounded in the text effectively means 'shared meanings.' It does not mean that differing meanings are given equal status in the text. One enters Cranford as Peter and Captain Brown do - as a story teller or user of 'creative' language in some way. Peter and Brown must share Mary's disdain of hierarchy to be admitted. Though masculine language is ostensibly asked to consider a 'co-language', in effect Cranford banishes 'masculine language' as completely as it is possible. It does not become part

of the 'shared' meaning of Cranford society. By privileging story telling and equality, by silencing masculine language by labelling it dull, lifeless and impersonal, Cranford performs the same act of exclusion, restriction and silencing of which it accuses the dominant culture.

All of this assumes of course the pre-existence of a 'speaker' to use the structures of language as meaningfully, or for Derrida as meaninglessly, for him/herself as possible. But the existence of such a speaker, such an 'I', is itself a contestable point. Benveniste, in Problems in General Linguistics, questions to what the 'I' in speech refers. He notes that "[t]here is no concept 'I' that incorporates all the I's that are uttered every moment in the mouths of all speakers,"⁴⁹ and questions if 'I' can therefore be a reference to any particular individual. What he concludes is that the 'I' in discourse can refer only "to the act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced, and by this it designates a speaker . . . [it] has only a momentary reference. The reality to which it refers is the reality of the discourse."⁵⁰ In other words, the 'I' of speech is only the 'I' which is at a specific point in time uttering. In order to proclaim oneself constantly a subject, one would constantly have to use 'I', for "the basis of subjectivity is in the exercise of language."⁵¹

One can see in this context the importance of 'speaking,' of saying 'I', for the female. But more, one sees the precariousness of that 'I' which Cranford presents as a liberating image. If the 'I' position which enables the individual to speak,⁵² refers to no constant individual 'I', except that one to which it refers in that specific moment of discourse, in what is the 'unified' self to take

root? How can one postulate that such a changing entity can generate meaning in a way that another 'I', similarly inconstant and changing, could grasp and retain? 'Meaning' would necessarily be as fleeting and as impossible to pin down as post-structuralists posit it to be.⁵³ Cranford's basis in the unity of self, the power of discourse, and the ability of each unified self to use discourse as a means of conveying the 'intended' meaning of the self, is thus challenged.

Having just read Cranford, and derived from it this very concept of a unified, female self, one can only conclude that ultimately the question one must ask is, "What does the experience of reading do for the 'reader'?" Belsey notes that realist fiction is one of the ways in which the existing ideology of modern time (capitalist/liberal humanist) represents and reproduces the "myths and beliefs necessary to enable people to work within the existing social formation."⁵⁴ The particular myth which realist fiction represents is the individual's existence as an autonomous, unified self. By inviting the reader to assess or 'judge' the 'truth' of the reproduction, the reader effectively 'proves' his/her existence and the validity of his/her world view (it is 'truth' in this 'realist' novel). The fact that 'I' can see in Cranford's concept of a female unified self the signs of collapse of the conception itself, must be a positive thing. If the very structure of essence Cranford is proposing offers the possibility of fluidity, then for women who have always been constrained/limited by the insistence on an 'essential' self, the power of 'essence' (even when sympathetically refashioned) is drastically undermined. Secondly, and perhaps this is where one must bring a perpetually undermining, shifting argument to an end, the ability

to posit a 'reading,' a 'perspective' in a mode of discourse (realism) which attempts to state that only one 'truth' is possible, is a radical ability. "[Texts] do not determine like fate the ways in which they must be read."⁵⁵ Finding a relativist perspective on realism, and so finding that "meaning is never a fixed essence inherent in the text but is always constructed by the reader, the result of a 'circulation' between social formation, reader and text,"⁵⁶ means being able to approach such texts as Cranford as the ideological constructs they are: containing no 'truths', negative or positive, but ideologies which we can reject, reshape or appropriate as we see fit.

Notes

¹The Census of Great Britain, 1851. Population Tables I. Numbers of the inhabitants in the years 1801, 1811, 1821, 1831, 1841, & 1851. Volume I. London: 1852, xx-xxxii.

²Elizabeth Gaskell, Cranford, in Cranford/Cousin Phillis, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1970), 39. Subsequent references are to this edition and appear in the text.

³Peter Keating, ed., Cranford/Cousin Phillis, 16.

⁴Journals and reviews were full of articles concerned with the status of unmarried women. They discussed female education, female careers, emigration and the rights of women in general. They ranged in tone from the vitriolic to the frightened and optimistic. For examples of the range of articles see,

F.B. Cobbe, "What Shall We Do With Our Old Maids?" Fraser's Magazine, 66 (1862), 594-610.

"Queen Bees or Working Bees?" Saturday Review, 3 (1857), 172-73.

"Queen Bees or Working Bees?", Saturday Review, 8 (1859), 576-76.

"Woman's Mission," Saturday Review, 8 (1859), 44-45.

[M. Oliphant], "The Condition of Women." Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 83 (1858), 139-54.

[J. Neale], "Men and Women: Brief Hypothesis concerning the Difference in their Genius," Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 16 (1824), 387-94.

[W.E. Aytoun], "The Rights of Woman," Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 92 (1862), 183-201.

⁵See "Safety for Female Emigrants," Household Words, 3 (1851), 228 and Oliphant.

⁶Oliphant, 146.

⁷Saturday Review, 8 (1859), 576.

⁸Aytoun, 197.

⁹Ibid., 192.

¹⁰Ibid., 183.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., 189.

¹³Saturday Review, 8 (1859), 44.

¹⁴Gaskell's use of the term 'amazon' must be a subtle contribution to the contemporary debate on women, their rights and status. Several articles refer to agitators for women's rights as amazons. (See Aytoun, and Saturday Review, 8). Although the references are not exactly contemporary with the publication of Cranford, the ease and apparent delight with which these commentators dismiss female emancipation as the 'doings' of 'amazons' suggests that the term may be considered a colloquialism of the time. In addition, the general sense of 'warring women' which one gleans from these articles intimates that Gaskell's use of 'amazon' is deliberate. Certainly, to place Cranford in the very lively, contemporary debate on unmarried women is vital, and the lack of such a context in previous discussions of the text is a surprising oversight.

¹⁵Saturday Review, 8 (1859), 44.

¹⁶Aytoun, 189.

¹⁷The Misses Jenkyns's behaviour leads us to the sexual ignorance which also characterised this sub-group of women. See Peter Cominos, "Innocent Femina Sensualis in Unconscious Conflict," in Suffer and Be Still, Martha Vicinus, ed., (London: Indiana University Press, 1972).

¹⁸James A. Hammerton, "Feminism and Female Emigration, 1861-1886," in A Widening Sphere, Martha Vicinus, ed., (London: Indiana University Press, 1977).

¹⁹"The Cage at Cranford," (1863), appended to Cranford, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1970), Appendix B, 329.

²⁰Masculine language can, in its characteristics of impersonality and insistence on facts, be compared to what Spender terms 'phallogocentric language.' Its stress on the impersonal suggests an adherence

to 'categories'; whilst its emphasis on facts (things which are true) suggests a connection to the defining impulse of phallogentric language. See Dale Spender, Man Made Language, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985).

²¹It is interesting to note that Gaskell used the same format, the narrating of 'spinsters' tales' in her short stories "Disappearances" which appeared in Household Words, 3 (1851), 246-50, just one month before the serialisation of Cranford began in that journal. Gaskell carefully presents the source of her stories as a "very clever old lady"(247) who is clearly demarcated from the stereotypical garrulous spinster. She is "too intelligent and cultivated . . . to lend an over-easy credence to the marvellous."(247) She also notes the "quietness that always marked the simplicity of her narration"(248) which suggests a parallel to Matty's tone of dignified self-possession in her discussion with Mr Johnson and Mr Dobson. More interestingly, Gaskell uses the term "I will answer for it . . .," as Mary Smith does, an indication perhaps that this short story provided the nucleus of the idea to write a series which presented women's tales as something interesting and worth listening to, and as something representing 'the truth' as from a reliable witness.

²²Aytoun, 190.

²³Ibid.

²⁴[J.G. Phillimore], "Women's Rights and Duties," Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 54 (1843), 379.

²⁵Florence Nightingale, Cassandra, (1859), appended to Ray Strachey's The Cause, (London: G. Bell & Son, 1928), discusses the link between female daydreaming, novel writing (story-telling) and the lack of interest in women's lives (397). Though she herself disapproves of day-dreaming, she posits as its source the restriction of women to the domestic sphere and argues for a public life for women.

²⁶Saturday Review, 8 (1859), 417.

²⁷See Oliphant, 145 and Aytoun, 190.

²⁸Martha Vicinus, Suffer and Be Still, (London: Indiana University Press, 1972), xii.

²⁹One can almost see 'phallogentrism' in action here. Brown's thoughts might run something like this: cow? : function, gives milk: flayed hide?: no milk: functionless: kill. Miss Barker's thoughts might be translated thus: cow? : who's cow; my cow; pet; suffering; how best to help?.

³⁰Martin Dodsworth, "Women without Men at Cranford," Essays in Criticism, 13 (1963), 143.

³¹Cominos states that "In *Femina Sensualis* the sense of I-ness, of individuality, of apartness, was thwarted in its development." (160) Mary's ability to assert both her own identity and that of the Cranford women suggests her great triumph over the *Femina Sensualis* model of womanhood.

³²The Census tables which exclusively enumerated the number of women at child-bearing age (20-45) points to this implicit assumption. No table enumerating the number of fertile men accompanies it. See Census, xxxii.

³³[Anon.], "Literary Examiner. Cranford, . . . ", Examiner (London) 23 July 1853, 467-8. Listed in Robert L. Selig, Elizabeth Gaskell: A Reference Guide, (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1977), 13-14.

³⁴[Anon.], "Literature. Cranford, . . . , " Nonconformist (London) n.s. 13 (August 1853), 625. Listed in Selig, 15.

³⁵[Anon.], "Review of New Books. Cranford, . . . , " Peterson's Magazine (Philadelphia) XXIV (October 1853), 215. Listed in Selig, 19.

³⁶[Anon.], "Literature. Cranford, . . . , " Tait's Edinburgh Magazine, n.s. 20 (August 1853), 503-4. Listed in Selig, 15.

³⁷Hazel Mews, Frail Vessels: Woman's Role in Women's Novels from Fanny Burney to George Eliot, (London: University of London, Athlone Press, 1970). Listed in Selig, 356.

³⁸Aldo Camerino, "Il paese delle nobile signore," in Scrittori di lingua inglese, (Milan and Naples: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1968), 62-4. Listed in Selig, 347-8.

³⁹Catherine Belsey, "Constructing the Subject: deconstructing the text," in Feminist Criticism and Social Change, Newton and Rosenfelt, eds., (London: Methuen, Inc., 1986), 52.

⁴⁰See The Letters of Charles Eliot Norton and Elizabeth Gaskell, Jane Whitehall, ed., (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1932).

⁴¹Cora Kaplan, Sea Changes: Essays on Culture and Feminism, (London: Verso, 1986), 155-161.

⁴²Claire Tomalin, The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1974), 60-62, 100-101.

⁴³Kaplan, 155-161.

⁴⁴Christopher Norris, Deconstruction: Theory and Practice, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1982), 110.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶This assumes, as Kaplan notes, that men possess such a unified self, and are "the conscious, constant and triumphant source of the meanings they produce." (225)

⁴⁷D.W. Fokkema and Elrud Kunne-Ibsch, Theories of Literature in the Twentieth Century: Structuralism, Marxism, Aesthetics of Reception, Semiotics, (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1978). This phenomenon is precisely what reception theory aims to investigate. Reception theory "must be able to describe the place which a work, at the time of its appearance, occupies in the frame of reference created by the reader's expectations . . . [or] must describe which elements of the structure are actualised at a given moment within a prevailing system of literary norms." (150).

⁴⁸That Cranford is a 'realist' text seems to Belsey almost to dictate this response. She states that the realist text reinforces the concept of the unified self by positing a reader as the 'subject' of the text who is invited to assess the 'truth' presented there. The reader thus 'proves' his/her own existence by his/her ability to recognise 'truth', the re-presentation of the world in the text. The 'truth' s/he recognises is in turn 'proof' not only of his/her existence, but of his/her world view. See Belsey, 52.

⁴⁹Emile Benveniste, Problems in General Linguistics, Mary Elizabeth Meek, trans., (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1971), 226.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Belsey, 47.

⁵³See Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory: An Introduction, (Minneapolis: University Press, 1983), and Belsey, 53.

⁵⁴Belsey, 46.

⁵⁵Ibid., 53.

⁵⁶Ibid.

Chapter Six: North and South (1855)

Midway through North and South, Margaret Hale and John Thornton discuss the meaning of the terms 'gentleman' and 'man.' Thornton asserts that the former is "a term that only describes a person in his relation to others; but when we speak of him as a 'man', we consider him not merely with regard to his fellow-men, but in relation to himself, - to life - to time - to eternity."¹ Thornton quite evidently places a higher value on the relation of man to himself, and Margaret with a "slow conviction"(218) she finds unable to express agrees. There follows proof that Thornton's preference for the latter term yields a very authoritative, and to Margaret, attractive image. Thornton's brusque comments to other masters about the strike, reveal him to be a 'man' sturdily in touch with himself. His comments, studded as they are with 'I's', are notable for the attention they draw to the image of a man of endurance, strength and faith in himself. The incident is an interesting one since it points to a conflict of 'meaning' and its source which is central to the novel: the definition of 'I' which the individual attributes to, and forges for, him/herself, and the relationship of that 'I' to the 'I' whose meaning is formulated in relation to others in a community. The incident is central too because the existence of, and value attached to, these two definitions of 'I' are asserted by a man, attended to and conceded by a woman, within the context of discourse.

Before beginning an exploration of the significance of the above incident, it is perhaps useful to overview the concept of 'meaning'

and its relation to discourse and the speaking subject so as to keep in mind the approaches which are possible. Derrida's analysis of Husserl's phenomenology is one such overview which both outlines the assumptions about meaning in a traditional western metaphysics, and points to their contradictions and limitations. One can propose that Gaskell's Unitarian education and beliefs, with its 'commonsense' belief in the evidence of one's senses rooted in the work of the eighteenth-century Scottish common sense philosophers, its stress on rationality, and the division traditionally implicit in such a stress between the mind or soul and the body, shares many of the assumptions of the traditional metaphysics Derrida detects in Husserl's work. One can conjecture, therefore, that Husserl's perspective on meaning and discourse is a fair approximation to the types of ideas on meaning and the individual's relation to it which informed Gaskell's attitude to the subject.

A simplified version of Husserl's main premises is as follows. Firstly, and most revealingly to Derrida, Husserl's interpretation of the sense of being is as 'presence': "something is insofar as it presents itself or is capable of presenting itself to a subject—as the present object (ob-jection) of a sensible intuition or as an objectivity presented to thought",² and the subject or self "is only insofar as it is self-present, present to itself in the immediacy of a conscious act."³ Upon this foundation of 'being as presence' Husserl erects the possibility of 'meaningful' language. The move from one to the other needs to be examined closely. It would seem that for Husserl, the awareness of being (or presence) and being itself are the same thing. In the same way, the awareness of things

in the sensory world (sense experience) and the things themselves are the same - 'objects' are what one intuitively feels them to be, not temporal objects, but ideal in the Platonic manner. 'Meaning' then is subjective, is controlled and intended by the subject whose awareness of being/being itself is the transcendental signifier which allows him/herself to intuit 'meaning'.

The possibility for meaningful language thus established, Husserl further divides it into two categories: expressive signification and indicative signification. The former is what Husserl terms, and privileges, as 'pure expression'. Pure expression takes place within the internal sphere of the subject's "solitary mental life"⁴, in the awareness of being as it were. Indeed, the expressive signification has not even need to go beyond this internal sphere; it is a type of internal monologue whose 'meaning' is ever clear and present to the internal sphere in which it takes place because that sphere is also the site of 'meaning' itself. It is a monologue utilising, as it were, 'pure' signs that can be "fully understood as [they] are found in . . . private mental life, without reference to transient circumstances or actual empirical objects."⁵

When expressive signification does venture outside of the 'solitary mental life', as it necessarily must for Husserl admits that 'expression' is 'originally framed' for communication, it is transformed into 'indicative signification' which is essentially a voluntary exteriorisation of the 'meaning' of the internal sphere. Since such an expression cannot be the expressive signification, it is necessarily indicative. Actual communication is precisely a matter of indicative signification, a "re-presentation of what primordially occurs in [the] inner sphere."⁶

As such it is a 'contaminated' version of 'pure expression', of pure signs, capable only of indicating meaning.⁷ It comes, in effect, only at the expense of meaning.⁸ It is important to note that 'expression' involves the intention or will of the internal sphere to express: "[I]t animates a voice which may remain entirely internal and . . . the expressed is a meaning . . . , that is, an ideality 'existing' nowhere in the world."⁹ There is "no expression [no indicative signification] without the intention of a subject animating the sign".¹⁰ 'Meaning', in communication, remains in the control of the speaking subject.

The main points to be drawn from Husserl then, for the purposes of the argument here, are three in number: i) that Husserl posits being as 'presence' and that one's constant presence to oneself constitutes 'subjectivity' or the solitary mental life; ii) that the site of consciousness is also the site of meaning, of expressive signification (pure signs); and iii) that the expression of 'meaning' is effected through indicative signification and is a willed, intentional process which involves a 'contamination' from the 'pure expressive' or the meaning of expressive signification.

What Derrida sets out to prove, by pointing to inconsistencies in Husserl's account, is that 'signification' precedes and gives rise to the very concepts of self, presence and meaning, and is not the result of those concepts.¹¹ Meaning, for Derrida, is not what is explicitly intended or willed by a subject, a matter of 'pure signs', but "derives from the distance that extends between one particular sign and the system of other signs in linguistic use."¹²

Derrida begins his deconstruction by pointing to the implicit contradictions of Husserl's interpretation of being as presence. Husserl conflates awareness of being and being itself so as to imply a state of 'being' which is not maintained through repetition, but is atemporal. 'Self-presence', however, which forms Husserl's basis of consciousness of being, seems to imply a continuous (and so temporal) process - the repeated presentation of self to self provides the basis for 'meaning', for establishing the ideality of the object, the 'pure sign'. As Derrida says, ideality is "but another name for the permanence of the same and the possibility of its repetition . . . absolute ideality is the correlative of a possibility of indefinite repetition."¹³

Secondly, Derrida points out that Husserl "admits that expression is 'originally framed' to serve the function of communication. And yet expression itself is never purely expression as long as it fulfils this original function; only when communication is suspended can pure expression appear."¹⁴ Derrida traces this confusion to Husserl's conception of the 'sign' in general which Husserl never actually discusses, and yet which must exist if his distinction between expressive signification and indicative signification is to work. Husserl asserts that 'indication' is not a function of the solitary life: "In a monologue words can form no function of indicating the existence of mental acts, since such indication would there be quite purposeless. For the acts in question are themselves experienced by us at that very moment."¹⁵ Self-communication is an impossibility; one can imagine oneself communicating with oneself, but this is only a representation of communication. Indeed, as Derrida points out, there is

no need to communicate with oneself in Husserl's philosophy, certainly not to prove the existence of the inner sphere: "The certitude of inner existence, Husserl thinks, has no need to be signified. It is immediately present to itself. It has living consciousness."¹⁶ And yet, Husserl posits expressive signification - a term which Derrida shows to be a contradiction, even in Husserlian terms. If 'expression' and 'pure expression' are the 'meaning' of the solitary mental life, their uniqueness is implied. Yet signification, and language, by its very nature, is representative. A sign is re-usable, one is able to repeat it. It is its "formal identity [which] enables it to be issued again and to be recognised."¹⁷ Without formal identity, a "sign . . . would take place but 'once' [and that] would not be a sign."¹⁸ Husserl's term expressive signification seems to betray that it is representative in nature, not the matter of 'pure signs' as Husserl claims it to be.

Effectively, Derrida deconstructs in Husserl what he sees as a variant of the privileging of voice over writing common in Western philosophies.¹⁹ Husserl's privileging of expressive signification as a matter of pure signs is akin to the privileging of voice, or voix, and the idea of presence, and the individual's intention of meaning (hence more 'truthful' language) which lies behind it. Similarly, his downgrading of indicative signification, as a contamination of the pure signs in order to communicate, is analagous to the ubiquitous damning of writing as more false, because removed from 'presence', than voice in Western culture.

With Husserl and Derrida's analysis of his work in mind, North and South is more than one woman's return to the site of social issues she explored in Mary Barton seven years earlier. If the text has

as its ostensible subject the relationship between the working classes and the 'masters' who employ them, it also has as a sub-structure of sorts a concern with the relationship of the speaking subject to the concept of 'meaning' which informs and complicates the superficial 'social' theme of social relations. If we examine Margaret Hale's progress in the novel and compare it with that of John Thornton, her male antagonist/protagonist, that sub-structure of subject and meaning is spotlighted.

The opening scene in Harley street, London, neatly sets up the types of overt issues and themes which the text explores. Edith, all "white muslin and blue ribbons . . . and silken curls"(35), is set against the ignored "tall, finely made figure, in [a] black silk dress"(39) which Margaret presents. Her physical difference from the conventionally pretty, and socially-admired and desired figure of Edith, is an important aspect of Margaret's 'uniqueness'. For if Edith is seen as the pliant soft figure of femaleness whose 'identity' is rooted in, if not constituted by, the traditional roles of mother and wife which she is on the threshold of assuming, Margaret is presented to the reader as that rarity: the woman who is, and wants to be, in control of her self and her identity. What makes Edith "shiver and shudder"(37) in dual proof of her conventional femininity (the shuddering is both a call to be "coaxed out of her dislike by her fond lover"(37) and a manifestation of her real distaste for anything resembling an unusual life), makes Margaret "glow"(37), come alive in a way which underscores her 'deviance' from the traditionally feminine.

But more than this physical uniqueness, Margaret is presented

in these early pages as a woman who not only aims to control her own identity, but who appears to have, in her own view, successfully conveyed that identity to others. Both levels of 'controlled meaning' are intimately linked with life at Helstone, and it perhaps best to begin there in tracing Margaret's 'uniqueness'. Margaret is brought "all untamed from the forest"(38) to London, and whilst that adjective suggests the gradual 'civilisation' of her into a creature socially acceptable in London, her leavetaking of that city is tinged with "cat-like regret"(39). The description, slight as it is, points to a 'core' of Margaret which is presented as relatively unchanged by her life in London, and it is to that 'core' that one must pay attention. It is the core which "snuff[s] up"(39) the spicy eastern smell of the Indian shawls she is called upon to model, and which takes tactile pleasure in those same shawls' "soft feel and their brilliant colours"(39) in a way which is linked to childhood, specifically for Margaret, her Helstone childhood (40).

More importantly, this 'core' provides Margaret with a strong sense of control over 'meaning'. If Helstone is a place where, as she later recalls, she walked "only guided by her own sweet will"(110), it is also a place the meaning of which Margaret is confident she has complete control. Attempting to describe Helstone to the barrister Lennox, Margaret is adamant that she is "not making a picture [but] trying to describe Helstone as it really is."(42) Although the comment reveals Margaret's distrust that language can adequately convey 'reality', it equally reveals that Margaret is speaking as someone who assumes she has the 'reality' of Helstone firmly in her mind. Where Lennox anticipates a description of the 'picturesque', that is what has

been socially accepted as the "village in a tale"(42), Margaret insists not only on her own perspective, but on the connection between her perspective ["what I think of it"(43)] and reality itself ["what it really is"(43)]. The connection is represented textually with a (-), and the immediacy of connection which that dash denotes must be noted. And indeed the control over Helstone which Margaret's comments imply here, is clearly upheld in the chapter of her return to Helstone itself. The forest fern "yield[s]"(48) to Margaret's tramping foot, its people are "her people"(48), and her life at Helstone, most specifically her life in the forest, "realize[s] all Margaret's anticipations."(48) She appears, in other words, to be that unique being whose 'life' seems composed of what Husserl would call her 'solitary mental life' - at least to herself. For Margaret, the inner and outer Helstone, no matter how difficult to describe or represent in language, match - her 'meanings', her definitions of Helstone and its pleasures appear to be the sole ones they contain.

Unsurprisingly in one so confident of her 'meaning' of place, Margaret is similarly confident of her 'control' over the 'meaning' of herself. What Margaret is to herself, she assumes she is to others, and any apparent indication that this is otherwise is forcibly rejected. Margaret, standing in the Indian shawls when Lennox bursts into the room, is not, like the other ladies, "half-ashamed of their feminine interest in dress"(40). Having no such feminine interest (hers is tactile and sensuous), Margaret looks at Lennox with a "bright, amused face, as if assured of his sympathy in her sense of the ludicrousness at being thus surprised."(40) She assumes, in other words, that her 'look' will effectively convey her 'meaning', her dissociation

from the feminine interest in dress to Lennox.

The same assumption of control over self-definition is seen in Margaret's reactions and responses to Lennox when he visits Helstone. It is an indication of the strength of Margaret's belief in such control, that it takes a proposal of marriage from Lennox for Margaret to begin to, if not question, then doubt the strength of her self-definition. Lennox's arrival causes no initial alarm in Margaret. She greets him openly and eagerly, and does not seem to note the very 'personal' signification which Lennox attaches to this visit. What seemed to Margaret a friendly promise to visit Helstone merits, in Lennox's view, to be spoken about in the "lower tone"(54) of voice reserved for intimacy. Margaret's resilient ignorance of Lennox's purpose in visiting, however, remains intact. His sketch of Margaret appears no indication of his personal interest in her - her flush seems more the result of the exertion of washing her paint palette than any sign of flustered embarrassment. Lennox appears dumbfounded by Margaret's ignorance of what a "regular London girl . . . looking through every speech that a young man made her for the arrière-pensée of a compliment"(58), would soon discern. He certainly is sure that Mr Hale will perceive the meaning of his visit, and withholds his sketch of Margaret momentarily for that very reason (58).

When Lennox does venture to propose, one is struck by Margaret's surprise and contempt. Having always thought of Lennox as a friend, his proposal is not only startling but an affront, an assault, to her self-definition. She has not considered herself as a 'lover', and for Lennox to do so is highly offensive. It is "maidenly dignity"(61) which characterises Margaret to herself, not desirability. The guilt

she feels at having found herself "grown so much into a woman as to be thought of in marriage"(65 - emphasis mine), suggests that Margaret is angered by the sudden revelation of an apparent ineptness of self-control; she has failed to be the vigilant gardener of her own growth. Though her "instinct"(64) allows her to refuse Lennox's offer - thereby matching inner definition with outer - it was not powerful enough to have stunted her 'growth' in the first place.

Indeed, it is lack of control which she finds disconcerting in Lennox himself. His hesitations in speech are unbearable indications of lack of control in the same way that his assumption of a quiet sarcasm, upon being refused, concerning "what ought to have been the deepest, holiest proposal of his life"(64), reveals an inability to assert "real self"(63) consistently in the way that Margaret, able to "answer the right thing"(63), could. Only upon reflection can Margaret see the possibility that Lennox's sarcasm is the sign not of a wavering self-will, but of deep disappointment.

It is Margaret's first real encounter with the world outside the 'solitary mental life' which she has thus far inhabited, the first realisation that she is not the sole site, the only creator, of 'meanings' of herself. It is her ignorance of the other 'mental lives' with which she comes inevitably into contact, that seem to be the intended focus of North and South, for no sooner has Margaret been seen to be insensitive to Lennox, than her whole world falls apart. Margaret is called into her father's study to be told of the necessity for leaving Helstone, and the "one staid foundation of her home, of her idea of her beloved father, seemed reeling and rocking."(67) Our sympathy for Margaret at this time may blind us

to her apparent overlooking of Mr Hale's earlier behaviour - "musing over something, and from time to time sighing deeply"(65). But the condemnation of Mr Hale, in this chapter, for being unable to communicate his problems and ideas much earlier to his family mean that we must concentrate on the role which the 'solitary mental life' will be permitted to play in North and South. Mr Hale's dilemma suggests, not that the individual's willed meanings of him/herself are per se (Mr Hale is seen to be positive in being strong in his convictions of what he does and does not believe in), but that they must be tempered with due concern for the 'willed meanings' of those around him/herself. Hale's transgression is a wish to be "but myself in the world"(73), to be 'responsible' only to his own solitary mental life in exactly the same way in which Margaret has shown herself hitherto to be.

The role of the solitary mental life and the extent to which it is legitimate as the site of meaning, then, is a vital issue in the text. And yet that issue is present obliquely. If we cast our eyes over the preceding chapters of the text in light of the role of the solitary mental life, then one thing must stand out clearly. If Mr Hale's 'mental life' has led him to defer making an important communication to his family, and indeed abdicate from any responsibility to communication by enjoining Margaret to be his speaker, Margaret's is complicated in a very different way. What one is struck by is the sexual component to Margaret's situation. Where Mr Hale's religious convictions are seen to have led him to abuse familial communication, Margaret's ignorance of any 'meaning' other than her own is, at a covert level not fully articulated in the text, seen to collide with 'sexual' definitions of women. If we return to the opening scene

of contrast between Edith and Margaret what one now sees is not simply that Margaret is strong-willed in comparison with Edith's soft pliancy, but that the text itself is saying something about women at the deep level of sub-structure, and that deep level of meaning will complicate and subvert the overt level. That deep level of meaning is that women are their physical presence: Edith is soft muslin, ruffled curls and ribbon; Margaret is tall, stately, dark and regal with a "wide mouth [that] was one soft curve of rich red lips; and [with] skin, if not white and fair, [that] was of an ivory smoothness and delicacy."(48)

The scene with the shawls is now illuminated, from below as it were. What Margaret does not know, and what the text does not overtly recognise, is that North and South is not simply the tale of Margaret's gradual enlargement of her solitary mental life to include 'communication' or the meanings of others. North and South is at a deeper level the tracing of one woman's gradual relinquishment of her 'mental life', of herself as a site of meaning, with a correspondingly gradual grasp of her 'meaning' as sited in the society around her. The shawl scene reveals that, despite her look of dissociation from the traditionally feminine, despite her evident dislike of Lennox's compliments on her character, Margaret will be regarded, will be 'defined' by Lennox, as other men define all women in the sub-structure of this novel; not as a "sort of block for the shawls"(40), but as a woman to be responded to in terms of her physical presence. Lennox will 'read' Margaret at this moment very differently than she assumes: as a woman whose particular physical presence elicits a proposal of marriage from him. And to underscore the inevitability

of such a reading, the shawl scene is immediately followed by Edith's entry into the room, "altogether looking like the Sleeping Beauty just startled from her dreams"(40) - the mythical figure of woman animated, literally given 'being' and life, and so meaning, by man.

The role of the mental life and the individual as a site of meaning then is complicated in a way which the text itself strives to constrain. In order to tease out the complications, it is perhaps best to first look at a presentation of the role of the mental life which is presented straightforwardly - excavating a measuring device, as it were, for Margaret's relation to the issue. Thornton, Margaret's antagonist-cum-protagonist, is the obvious starting point, for his 'progress' in the novel is paralleled by and counterpointed to Margaret's throughout. Thornton is presented in the novel as an almost stereotypical 'self-made' man, confident of what he wants and determined to get it. The real picture we get of him is in his second visit to the Hale home, now removed from Helstone to Milton Northern, and one of his first comments indicates the strong sense of self-will which he shares with Margaret. Speaking about the Parliament bill of 1844 which sought to ensure that every mill-furnace burnt its own smoke, Thornton declares that his were "altered by [his] own will, before Parliament meddled with the affair"(123), and indeed underscores the strength of his self-will when he states that he is not "sure whether [he] should have done it, if [he] had waited until the act was passed. At any rate, [he] should have waited to be informed against and fined, and given all the trouble in yielding that [he] legally could."(123) It is a minor example of Thornton's self-will, his determination that the meanings of his 'solitary mental

life' would match his life in the outside world. But more important than Thornton's financial or business will, is the stress on his ability to control 'meaning' in his personal life. Throughout North and South, Thornton is presented as one who stops and wills something to be or 'to mean', and is successful in doing so. Responding to Margaret's actions at the time of the riot, Thornton approaches her with an avowal of love and a proposal of marriage. But what is pertinent at this point, is the way in which Thornton, for all his "hot passion"(252), panting (253), and "savage words"(254), is remarkably controlled. He stops to "weigh each word"(252) and there is a sense of great effort of will, a refusal to allow his 'meaning' to be lost or overridden by any of the possible responses to such an exclamation. His "will is triumphant"(252) in the encounter, allowing him to impress the strength of his 'meaning' on Margaret. Though she declares her lack of interest, indeed her contempt, Thornton insists that she "cannot avoid [his] love"(254), and that he "would not"(254 - emphasis mine) allow her to escape from it, even if he could.

Once away from the encounter with Margaret, Thornton's self-will does not falter. Chapter twenty-six opens with what is essentially a scene of one man reaffirming himself, his inner life, as the 'site of meaning' of his life. Though words of hate are spoken to himself, the 'meaning' of the inner sphere is triumphant. The text makes clear the difference between language [what he "said to himself"(267)] and what actually is, what actually 'means' in Thornton's inner sphere, in a way which upholds the distinction Husserl makes between the inner sphere's 'expressive signification' and the indicative signification of language, of communication. What Thornton "shape[s]"(267) to

himself is immediately cast out by an actual physical "sharp sensation of love"(267). The adjectives which describe that sensation, 'wild,' 'sharp,' like 'lightning'(267), connect it to the 'wild', untamed Margaret of Helstone who, then in any case, seems similarly in control of meaning. Thornton's own meaning, that "[s]he could not make him change. He loved her, and would love her; and defy her"(267), is reaffirmed, entrenched by a willed determination to "make this resolution firm and clear."(267) Thornton remains the site of his own meanings, uncontaminated by any of the input which Margaret's response to him constitutes. He can take the basket of fruit to the ailing Mrs Hale, despite any 'reading' which Margaret might confer on his reappearance in her home, because he "will not be daunted from doing as [he] choose[s] by the thought of her."(275) And his 'meaning' is triumphant; Thornton is right to "exult in the power he showed in compelling himself to face her"(302). Margaret 'reads' the act as Thornton willed it to be read: it is "good of him to bring it; and after yesterday too!"(276). It is not seen as a sign of 'love' by Margaret, but as the act of kindness he intended it to mean.

Of course, though Thornton's 'self-will' is seen as positive and admirable, the text does present it as something which does need to be tempered by consideration of other points of view, of meaning. Thornton is castigated for his refusal to 'communicate' with his men, for failing to give their 'meanings' equal status with his own. His movement towards 'communication' is presented as his positive growth, and is indeed the only change which the text overtly dictates as necessary. Importantly, Thornton remains the "architect of his own fortunes"(511), remains in control of his 'definition' and 'meaning',

but this is seen to operate alongside a willingness to communicate. When Higgins is allowed to work in his factory, the "intercourse"(512) which arises as a result is not characterised by a lessening of Thornton's will. Thornton's attitude to Higgins near the end of the novel, when Thornton's manufacturing career is proving to be unstable, is a case in point. Though Thornton is angered by Higgins's involvement in a strike which contributed to his present uncertain position, he is quick in his resolve to curb his anger: "It could not satisfy him to avoid Higgins; he must convince himself that he was master over his own anger"(512). It is a significant detail. Though we learn that this anger does subside, "he lost all sense of resentment in wonder how it was, or could be, that two men like himself and Higgins, living by the same trade, working in their different ways at the same object, could look upon each other's positions and duties in so strangely different a way"(512) - the eradication of anger does not equal the eradication of Thornton's own meaning. It is carefully pointed out that communication does "not have the effect of preventing all future clash of opinion"(512;525) - the individual retains his/her own meaning or perspective on issues - but it does lead to the individual granting the validity of the 'meanings' which others retain. Importantly, it is the individual's encounter with another individual which causes the assimilation, or acknowledgement of other 'meanings.' Thornton has had ample contact with men as 'hands' - as mere segments of humanity to which he could not attribute a 'solitary mental life'. It takes being "brought face to face, man to man, with an individual of the masses around him"(511) for Thornton to realise what he shares in common with other men.

Higgins represents the same movement towards such assimilation as Thornton. Though they begin from what seem patently opposing sides, North and South reveals the shared prejudice that both must shed. The depiction of the Union is one which stresses its members' enforced espousal of one perspective. Men like Boucher, who repudiate the Union's vision, pay for their dissent. They are either "obliged to come in"(366) by the treatment meted out by their fellow workers, or [like Boucher made to join against his will (368)] end their lives miserably. Margaret's questions to Higgins on Boucher and the Union underscore the calamitous results of the imposition of one man's 'will' or 'meaning' on another. Not only does Boucher kill himself, but his enforced membership in the Union leads both to the riot and the consequent detraction of public sympathy for the Union's cause. Only when brought face to face with the consequences of the imposition of his 'meaning' on Boucher does Higgins begin his movement towards 'communication.' And when he does reach that goal, it too is characterised by a retention of his own willed meanings along with a willingness to hear the other side. Higgins maintains his union ideas, but now he discusses them with Thornton, and that communication is advantageous to both (524).

But if the progress of class relations illustrates the need for a blending of the individual's 'site of meaning' with the solitary mental lives of those around him/her, the progress of sexual relations when measured against it assumes quite a different character. If we examine Thornton's relationship with Margaret then we can see that the only time Thornton's 'willed meanings' waver are, not in a class context, but in a sexual one. Their first meeting is vital

to the novel for it encapsulates the way in which the text operates at two levels at those points in which sexuality becomes a factor in the relationship of the speaking subject to meaning. Margaret enters the room in which Thornton awaits her with the "straight, fearless, dignified presence habitual to her." (99) This fearlessness, coupled with the "simple, straight, unabashed look" (99) which characterises Margaret's countenance at this time, both disconcerts and eventually incenses Thornton to the point that he wants to leave the room. The reader may well wonder why one stranger should, apparently instantaneously, evoke such a reaction in another. Part of the answer can be found in the undermining of Thornton's expectations of who the daughter of Mr Hale would be. Expecting a little girl, he sees a self-possessed young woman. The issue is transparently one of power, and Thornton's subsequent note that "she seemed to assume some kind of rule over him at once" (99) is significant. At the same time, the issue of power cannot be confined to one of age. Thornton's real anger occurs in response to Margaret's indifference in the face of his unrepressed admiration - it is the unbalancing of sexual power that is unnerving. Thornton faces the "white flexible throat. . . the full, yet lithe figure; her lips . . . her eyes" (100), and cannot reconcile them with the message of "quiet maiden freedom" (100) which Margaret sends. In other words, where Thornton reads women as physical presence and so expects the, to him, sexually desirable Margaret to blush in confusion and surprise at his presence, Margaret seems to allow no such 'reading' to be sustained. For one "in habits of authority himself" (99), the undermining of his own meaning is unbearable; he wants to leave the scene of such a challenge, and only the

arrival of Mr Hale persuades him to stay.

The scene points to the vulnerability of the individual 'site' of meaning; Thornton finds at least one who does not concur with, indeed, seems unaware of, his 'meaning' of her. At the same time, however, the text subtly reinforces Thornton's male perspective on the female figure. Though we have never encountered Thornton before, and have had a detailed description of Margaret, the reader is not provided with a physical description of Thornton. Rather, Margaret's physical presence is carefully catalogued. Details of her clothes, her look, her lips, her throat, her figure, her eyes, tumble from the text in a way which only emphasizes the apparent perversity of Margaret's behaviour. Why isn't such a woman, so sensually 'present', blushing in the manner Thornton expects of her? The male perspective, the male reading of woman as physical presence, is privileged. Though Margaret is described as having a 'quiet maiden freedom', it is far outweighed by the two paragraphs of physical description which precede.

The reader may understandably be confused. If Thornton's willed meanings, Mr Hale's 'solitary mental life', Higgins's self will, are all seen to be needing only the leavening of other's meanings, through the process of communication, why is Margaret's own meaning here so completely over-ridden by the text in favour of the male perspective? The answer must be that the scene constitutes a fissure in the text, a point at which the overt and covert structures of the text meet and garble. The scene implicitly tells us three things, all of which can be traced through the text to its close. Firstly, that women have no 'site of meaning' for themselves. Secondly, that the male perspective on female 'meaning' will be privileged in such a

way that all 'meaning', except that of female 'presence', will be seen to require the moderation of communication with other men. Thirdly, and most importantly, the scene reveals that what the text presents as 'self will' is itself a social construct. Because the 'omniscient' narrative and Thornton's perspective collude on the definition of women as presence, the status of Thornton's perspective as his 'solitary mental life' is undermined. What Thornton thinks of as his own 'meaning' of Margaret is a social one, shared by the text and one presumed to be shared by the reader. The siting of 'meaning' in the individual is seen to be a social construct, a shared communal assumption.

All three of these statements, the implicit basis of the scene between Margaret and Thornton, need to be brought to bear on what can be termed the two major incidents in North and South: the riot and Margaret's lie. Though on the surface both events illustrate what can be called points of progress in Margaret's ostensible 'journey' from self-willing individual to an individual, like Thornton and Higgins, who recognises the validity of communication, they in fact point to a second, deeper 'journey' which Margaret undertakes and successfully completes in the course of the novel.

The chapters describing the riot begin with Margaret's plea for communication. Interestingly, the rioters themselves are initially presented in natural terms. There is a "thunderous atmosphere"(226), a "low, distant roar"(226), and Margaret hears the "first long far-off roll of the tempest; saw the first slow-surfing wave of the dark crowd come, with its threatening crest"(226). That naturalness is coupled with descriptions of violence: the men ram themselves with

"great beats"(229) against Thornton's millgates, setting up a "fierce unearthly groan"(229), a "fierce growl"(231), a "fiendlike noise"(232) which is likened to be as "inarticulate as that of a troop of animals"(233). Both sets of images, the natural and the violent, link the rioters strongly to Margaret as she was at Helstone, at one with a natural environment to which she responded with 'gentle violence'. Though the degree of violence is greater, the kind is not, and it suggests that the rioters are operating from the same sense of 'self-will' that Margaret herself did at Helstone. Importantly, it is Margaret who recognises what lies beneath the apparent animalistic violence. She urges Thornton to "[s]peak to [his] workmen as if they were human beings . . . [to] go out and speak to them, man to man"(232).

The context of successfully urged communication - the rioters do disperse - is covertly ironic. For what happens in the midst of this appeal, Margaret's shielding of Thornton from the rioters, will be seen to involve precisely the relationship of the individual to communication. Margaret's action is clearly seen to be 'instinctual': "She only thought how she could save him."(234) But what to her is "woman's work"(247), enacted only in the name of fair play, is seen as a sign of her love for Thornton. The clash is between Margaret's 'willed meaning' of the event, and the public meaning of female presence. That public meaning is, again as in the scene when Thornton and Margaret first meet, presented as the private 'meaning' of Thornton. No sooner have the rioters dispersed, and Margaret brought inside the Thornton home, than Thornton is considering the 'meaning' of Margaret's act. Every "pulse beat in him as he remembered how she had come down and placed herself in foremost danger, - could

it be for him? . . . every nerved in his body thrill[ed] at the thought of her"(237). The connection of Thornton's meaning with his inner mental state (again, as with the rioters and Margaret, through natural bodily sensations), and the interrogative form of Thornton's reflections intend to personalise Thornton's reading of Margaret's act. But indeed his tentative reading, that Margaret must care for him, immediately given communal authority by the women's response to Margaret's action. The Thornton servant declares to have seen "Miss Hale with her arms about master's neck, hugging him before all the people"(239) and Thornton's sister Fanny, immediately reads this as evidence that Margaret "cares for [her] brother . . . [and would] give her eyes if he'd marry her"(239). Indeed "anybody can see"(239) that Margaret cares for Thornton now. Certainly, Mrs Thornton shares the reading of Margaret's behaviour. Margaret's action shows that "[a] girl in love will do a good deal"(243), and indeed finds she likes Margaret "the better for seeing clearly at last."(246) Margaret's action has only the one, the clear, reading of sexual capitulation which all of these characters formulate. Thornton's inability to read the "touch of [Margaret's] arms around his neck - the soft clinging which made the dark colour come and go in his cheek"(244) as anything but proof of passion is now given communal authority. Though the text persists in presenting Thornton's reading as a personal, bodily felt meaning, it is now nothing of the kind. Thornton's decision to ask Margaret to marry him is a significant translation of a 'personal' reading into a social act.

But it is Margaret's response to her act which is most revealing of the text's deeper structure. Her immediate response is to reassert

her own meaning of her own act. Her "well-poised judgment"(247) refuses to relinquish its hold on the reasonable nature of her action, and she concludes, "I would do it again, let who will say what they like of me. If I saved one blow, one cruel, angry action that might otherwise have been committed, I did a woman's work"(247). And yet underneath this ringing rhetoric, there lies in Margaret's speech the seeds of recognition of the 'public' meaning of such female action. Margaret contrasts the "fallen"(247) status of a woman who has so "disgraced"(247) herself as to be 'read' in a sexual way, with her resolution that she is "pure"(247) and can withstand any insults cast on her "maiden pride"(247). The choice of words, redolent as they are of the contemporary vocabulary for the physical (ie. sexually despoiled or not) state of women, suggest that Margaret has shifted, almost imperceptively, to the perspective which reads women as physical presence, if indeed she was ever disentangled from it in the first place. She reads her act, at a deep level, as a physical one - one which makes her 'maiden' or 'pure' - despite her dissociation from the physical reading of those around her. Unsurprisingly, Margaret's overt assertion of the non-physical nature of her act is followed by a dream in which "[s]he could not be alone . . . a cloud of faces looked up at her, giving her . . . a deep sense of shame that she should thus be the object of universal regard"(248-9). Margaret is, after all, in her own mind the 'object', the physical presence, she professes not to be.

From this point in the novel, Margaret's hold over her own 'meanings', her ability to rely on herself as a site of meaning, diminishes rapidly. Though she repudiates Thornton's offer of marriage, the incident

leaves her disliking him "for having mastered her inner will"(257), and unable to confront the "great power . . . [of] his idea."(257) The "[s]harp, decisive speeches"(257) that might have impressed her own meanings on the action at the riot come too late to be used, and Margaret is left with "[t]he deep impression made by the interview, [that] was like . . . a horror in a dream"(257) - a reaffirmation perhaps of her status as 'female presence' conveyed in her own dream the night before. Where Thornton is able to relay his meaning of love for Margaret, able to communicate a "clear conviction"(256), Margaret's own meanings are denied any such clarity of conveyance.

Margaret's 'lie' is a similar, heightened indication of the covert, gradual relinquishment of meaning which is juxtaposed by her overt 'progress' to the synthesis of communication and individual meaning. Again, the event concerns Margaret's 'presence' as a woman, and the reading of that presence. Whereas, during the riot, the reading of Margaret's presence is bolstered by certain physical actions to be interpreted, this second instance deals with, as it were, distilled female presence. Was Margaret at a particular place or not, and what is the reading to be gleaned if she was? The stress on mere 'presence' and the sexual signification it always has is made clear in the details of the scene. Thornton simply sees Margaret at the Outwood station accompanied by her brother. What the reader has been told is Frederick's "wistful anxiety"(331) at leaving his sister to cope alone with their grieving father, is immediately read by Thornton as an "attitude of . . . familiar confidence"(339), with stress on 'familiar'. Merely by being out, "[a]t that late hour, so far from home"(339) is a sign so sexually weighty that there follows

in Thornton's mind "all sorts of wild fancies"(339) of the way in which Margaret would love. To fortify the sexual significance of Margaret's presence at the station further, Margaret rejects a look of "undisguised admiration"(332) from a local shopboy. Margaret's insistence "upon going into the full light of the flaring gas"(331), and so into a situation where she finds herself admired, is a subtle indication of Margaret's intention to be 'seen' - and to be seen is to be read, in this novel, as all women are, as physical presence. Though the 'plot' of the novel tells us the reason behind Margaret's insistence (to shield Frederick, as she shielded Thornton), the admiring stare of the young man betrays its social significance.

In this context of the sexual meaning of female presence, Margaret must 'lie' about her presence in order to protect her brother. The 'willing' behind this meaning of female presence is quite discernible. Margaret's impact on the inspector who arrives to question her is somewhat akin to her first impression on Thornton. The inspector is "daunted by the haughtiness of her manner as she entered"(342), and is "a little abashed by her regal composure"(345). For her part, Margaret is "controlled"(343), "expressionless"(343), and "unflinching"(344), like "some great Egyptian statue"(345), in her attempt to make her words, her meaning of non-presence, overpower the 'meaning' of presence so automatically imposed on women. One must note that the emphasis here is on Margaret's physical appearance to appreciate the obstacle she is attempting to bypass. Part of the 'meaning' of Margaret's actions here are conveyed in precisely the terms which the text suggests she can evade through 'will.' The reader is expected to know, if the inspector does not, the significance of the lips which "swell[]

out into a richer curve than ordinary"(343). The inspector expects Margaret to "wince"(345) if she is lying, not stand immobile. The 'truth' for both reader and inspector is still sited in Margaret's physical presence.

After her ordeal, Margaret can only temporarily uphold her faith in her meaning. She tells herself that "she would tell that lie again"(349) if Frederick's safety required it. And yet, for all her apparent strength of purpose, the status of Margaret's lie is ambiguous. On the one hand, the text acknowledges Margaret's claim that she lies for Frederick's protection. Mr Bell concurs with that justification, and indeed his surprise that Margaret considers the lie a shaming thing suggests her overwrought reaction (484;486). On the other hand, the text quickly and deftly strips away any claim to family loyalty or concern for another that Margaret might make in defence of her lie. In its place we find a growing assertion that Margaret's reasons for lying cannot supersede the reading of her presence as sexually significant.

Accordingly, what is the subtlest indication of Margaret's forthcoming redefinition of her lie, the naming of the lie as a "temptation"(348) thereby giving it the sexual dimension she overtly rejects, is foregrounded in Margaret's subsequent analysis of the event. There is a tangible split in Margaret's mind, and the narrative itself, between the lie as something "really false and wrong"(355) and the 'natural' act of accompanying her brother. But again, the language employed belies the distinction. Though Margaret asserts that the lie was wrong, whilst her presence was justified, her choice of words to describe the lie ["the one lurid fact"(355) , the thing which

"degrade[s]"(355) her and causes her to "fall"(356) from imaginary heights to Thornton's feet, compels her to dream of "exaggerated and monstrous circumstances of Pain"(335) in a way similar to her dream of exposure after the riot] all intimate a conflation of the lie and her presence in a way which bestows upon both the sexual signification of female presence. Margaret is degraded and shamed by her lie in precisely the way she felt degraded by her actions at the riot because it has become a sign of her 'presence.'

Importantly, one must note that Margaret's intense reaction to her lie comes only after she has learnt of Thornton's knowledge of it. All knowledge of her reasons for the lie, all the meanings with which she has invested it, are lost because "in Mr Thornton's eyes, she was degraded."(335) Margaret has lost her individual perspective, herself as a site of meaning, and has assumed the sexual meanings of female presence which Thornton himself expresses. Her language then, 'lurid', 'degraded', 'fall', is no longer her own, but that of the male perspective. The anguish of the loss is clearly conveyed. Margaret cannot understand why "[Thornton] haunted her imagination so persistently"(358), why "in spite of herself"(358 - emphasis mine), she finds the prospect of Thornton's "low opinion"(358 - emphasis mine) more difficult to contend with than the "sense of Almighty displeasure"(358). But the "strong feeling"(358) of Thornton's reading of her act remains triumphant, despite her questionings. She feels "not good enough, not pure enough"(358 - emphasis mine), an indication that the assimilation of sexual meaning is complete.

Margaret's language at this point must be emphasized because there is a basic contradiction in the text about Margaret's awareness

of Thornton's 'reading' of her presence at Outwood station. Mrs Thornton is, in terms of plot, the person who reveals to Margaret what her presence signifies to those around her. Margaret responds passionately to Mrs Thornton's 'new idea' as "too insulting"(392) and refuses to discuss it. The scene itself however, like similar ones preceding it, fortifies the significance of female presence. Mrs Thornton, anticipating the scolding she is about to administer to Margaret, relishes the thought of showing her indifference to the " 'glamour' which she [is] well aware Margaret had the power of throwing over many people"(391). The full extent of that 'glamour', that bewitching power, is seen by the immediate sight of Mrs Thornton's succumbing to it. Her imagining of a "picture of the beauty of her victim; her jet black hair, her clear smooth skin, her lucid eyes"(391) is proof that sexual presence is always the basis from which the individual responds to a woman. Mrs Thornton declares her insusceptibility to Margaret's physical presence, but her thoughts show otherwise.

And yet, despite Mrs Thornton's warning and the overwhelming power attributed to physical presence, both Margaret and the reader are expected to believe in her later ignorance of this significance of her presence at the station. Talking to Mr Bell, Margaret is "surprised . . . hurt and offended"(486) by Mr Bell's suggestion that Thornton would consider Frederick her suitor. One is tempted to see the incident as a straightforward flaw in the text. But yet again, Margaret's rejection of this reading is couched in sexual terms which confuse and undermine her statement. She talks again of being "tempted"(486) and of how she "fell into the snare"(486) - language which pinpoints her as a 'fallen' woman in a way she does

not overtly intend.

Margaret seems truly to have lost all power over herself, all ability to assert herself as a 'site of meaning'. Unsurprisingly she longs to "gain her power and command over herself"(408), to escape the feeling of "individual nothingness"(488) which overpowers her. The rest of the text suggests, in fact, that Margaret does regain that power, that self-will. But the context in which that accomplishment takes place requires careful consideration. A close look at the text reveals that despite Margaret's purported movement towards synthesis of communication and self will, something very different actually takes place. Margaret does recognise that she "change[s] perpetually"(489) as does Helstone, the place in which she is prompted to reflect on change and continuity. The recognition suggests Margaret's movement away from the self as touchstone of meaning, no longer "disappointed and peevish because all is not exactly as [she] had pictured it"(489), towards a stance which embraces diversity and change in a way which intimates an increased value for communication, for different perspectives. Though Margaret had always espoused the value of communication in class relations, urging Thornton to speak to his workmen, her refusal to discuss her lie (until with Mr Bell) suggests that, on a personal level, communication has not been so favourably assessed.

Nevertheless before the synthesis is crystallised, two things occur in North and South which complicate the synthesis and point to a very different, covert, 'resolution' in the novel. Margaret is seen to contemplate her past life, when "it had seemed to her . . . that she had only to will"(502) to have the meaningful life she desired, and by such contemplation "to put events in their right places, as to origin and significance"(506). Margaret emerges believing herself responsible for her own life (508), and determining upon

a course of charitable good works which reflects the 'meaning' of the life as she had chosen it. But before this resumption of self-determination takes place, two events have occurred: Mr Bell has died, leaving Margaret a very rich heiress, and Mr Thornton, unbeknownst to Margaret, has learnt the identity of the man accompanying her at Outwood station.

The first event is an important indication of what exactly provides Margaret with the will to reassume 'self-determination'. It is as soon as she hears of Bell's death that Margaret "surprises herself with the firmness with which she asserted something of her right to independence of action." (501) The reader may not, however, be as surprised as Margaret herself. The relationship between money and the 'power' of the individual is an understated theme in North and South insofar as it involves Margaret. The relationship between Thornton and his 'hands' is the obvious illustration of the power money wields as a 'self-determining' tool. Thornton can compel "all material power to yield to science" (122), and his money means he has very nearly the same control over the 'material power' of his workmen. His money, able to import labour from Ireland, is the 'catalyst' which dooms the strike. His handling of his money allows him to be assured of his status amongst fellow masters (216) and provides him with a calling card to London society (523). Most importantly, Thornton's handling of his money allows him to end his business career in the manner he desires, in a way which upholds his definition of himself. Choosing not to risk ruining others, for his "own paltry aggrandisement" (516), Thornton leaves the world of Milton Northern business in the way he determines. Once his money is gone, however,

it is not Thornton but another master, Watson, who is "wise and far-seeing"(518) as Thornton was once considered to be.

Margaret's relation to money, and its role in 'self-determination', is a more subtle affair. It is nevertheless there, not only in her attraction to "the exultation in the sense of power which Milton men had"(217), and her assumption of power over the servant Dixon (83), but in the way in which her status in the novel is indelibly linked to her financial status. Secure in Harley street, financially stable in Helstone, Margaret maintains a sense of self-determination which is lost only when her family loses their financial security and financial status. In Milton Northern, the Hales are simply a family that "only spent at a certain rate"(109) and one which is notably lower than their air of gentility leads the local people to expect. Once money is gained, however, Margaret resumes 'control' of her life. Though it appears that the recovery of self-determination, and the ability to confer meaning on her life by organising it herself, comes as a result of Margaret's acceptance of change, of the different perspectives that facilitate communication, the conferment of money upon her at such a significant moment suggests that the text, at a deep level, recognises that it is money which confers self-determination upon those who have it, and not vice-versa, as the text superficially, through Thornton, articulates.

The second event however, Thornton's knowledge of Frederick's identity, is a more significant complication to Margaret's ostensibly straightforward progress from self will to a synthesis of that quality with communication. This chapter has already outlined the way in which Margaret has gradually assimilated the male 'meaning' of her

two most prominent actions in North and South, and made it her own. Thornton's recognition of Frederick as Margaret's brother appears to validate Margaret's meaning of her presence at Outwood station. The recognition however has a more complicated status than that. It is important to note Thornton's reaction to the news Higgins provides him. He says to himself, "I know she could not be unmaidenly; and yet I have yearned for conviction. Now I am glad"(515). The statement reveals the way in which personal meanings or definitions of women are no such things, but are instead solely the social ones of presence. Though Thornton's knowledge of Margaret would lead him to discredit any 'unmaidenly' conduct attributed to her, the social definition of women as presence makes any conviction on his part impossible. Thornton reads women as 'presence' in both instances, though he might not consciously recognise it. Margaret's behaviour, up until Outwood, might seem to make that presence 'positive', but once any doubt on that presence is articulated, Thornton must capitulate. The very 'reading' of women which incensed Thornton when he first met Margaret, is the one which allows him to imagine her "dancing toward him with outspread arms, and with a lightness and gaiety which made him loathe her, even while it allured him."(410-11) Higgins's information simply calls for a re-reading of Margaret's presence at Outwood; it does not alter the 'essence' which is being assessed, nor privilege Thornton's conviction of Margaret's maidenliness. Both are readings based on the social meaning of woman as presence. The Outwood incident, for all of Margaret's attempts to make it a sexually empty incident, retains its full sexual significance. Whereas it initially seemed an indication of Margaret's already sexually 'taken' (and therefore

fallen) status, it now signifies her 'purity', or availability as a lover.

With these two events occurring just as Margaret appears to reach the synthesis which North and South ostensibly promotes, it must come as no surprise that Margaret's reaction to Thornton's proposal is one of "beautiful shame"(530). Though the text attempts to connect this Margaret with the Margaret of Helstone, grabbing at the Helstone roses with a "gentle violence"(530) characteristic of that earlier, self-willed individual, and though the text stresses 'communication' by an ending dialogue, Margaret's 'shame' and her comment that she is not "good enough"(529) tell the reader that her 'self-definition' is possible only because it has become that of the male perspective: Margaret is now presence. Unsurprising because though Margaret now has money, real power to define in North and South, she cannot use that power as one might have expected her to. Having assimilated the meaning of woman as presence, having 'recognised' that a woman's natural duties are as wife and mother (509), money gives her the power only to consolidate what is no longer in her control. Margaret will become both wife and mother because money will make contact with Thornton possible. But more ominously, it will make that inevitability seem, both to Margaret and to the reader of North and South, an exercise of individual choice and self determination in a novel whose very deep structure shows such choices to be impossibilities.

Notes

¹Elizabeth Gaskell, North and South, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1970), 218. Subsequent references are to this edition and appear in the text.

²Jacques Derrida, Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs, David B. Allison, trans., (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), xxxii.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., xxxiv.

⁵Ibid., xxii.

⁶Ibid., xxxv.

⁷Ibid., 38-39.

⁸Ibid., xxxv.

⁹Ibid., 33.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., xxxvii.

¹²Ibid., xxxviii.

¹³Ibid., 52.

¹⁴Ibid., 38.

¹⁵Ibid., 49.

¹⁶Ibid., 43.

¹⁷Ibid., 50.

¹⁸Ibid., 50.

¹⁹Christopher Norris, Deconstruction: Theory and Practice, (London: Methuen, 1982).

Chapter Seven: Cousin Phillis (1863)

Cousin Phillis has been described as a "simple romantic idyll",¹ a "country love story of the simplest and tenderest kind",² which shows "Mrs Gaskell's feminine talent at its best."³ At the same time, Margaret Lane who makes these critically orthodox remarks, points us unwittingly in the direction for a possible reassessment of Cousin Phillis. Lane, summarising the plot of the novella, refers to the moment in the text when Minister Holman discovers Phillis' love for Holdsworth, and accuses her of lacking in filial love. Lane then states, as is indeed the case, "[f]rom this point it is on Phillis herself that our attention is concentrated".⁴ The comment is extraordinarily misleading for the reader unacquainted with the text, implying as it does that an in-depth look at Phillis and her predicament follows. It may startle some readers to discover that, contrary to the import of Lane's remark, there follows only eight-and-one half pages of narrative 'concentrating' on Phillis in a text nearly one hundred pages in length named after her.

The apparent perversity of titling the text Cousin Phillis when Paul Manning would seem more appropriate is, however, more than explicable if we examine the text in light of the insight into the concepts of 'self' and 'language' which Cousin Phillis's predecessor, North and South, yielded to the reader. The overt contrasts in Cousin Phillis between Virgilian language and Holdsworth-ian language, the progressing world of the railway and the pastoral realm of the farm, between in fact growth and stasis, can be seen to be gendered issues

in a text which, though a love story, does not directly address gender.

It is important that from the start of Cousin Phillis the right of the male to progress or evolve is clearly stated. Paul Manning, writing from a past personal perspective, notes that he was never "so satisfied and proud in [his] life"⁵ as when he first attained the independence of his own lodgings. Indeed most of the male characters in the novel can be seen in some way as progressing or evolving creatures. Paul's father is "raising himself every year in men's consideration and respect"(219) by virtue of his inventive genius; Holdsworth is involved not only with the railway, a literal sign of the changing times, but works his way to a greater position of authority when he accepts the position of a challenging job in Canada; and Minister Holman, whilst apparently leading a changeless life, is in a continual state of progression or evolution due to the constant change in his 'role' which his dual status as minister/farmer requires.

Within this general male right to progress or evolve, however, Cousin Phillis seems primarily to focus upon one aspect of change in male life: the change which incorporates sexual maturation. Paul, as narrator as the text, has become not only financially independent, but free for the first time to indulge his senses. He begins "to taste with relish the pleasure of being his own master"(220), and although that feeling seems initially focused on food – the hamper packed with pots of preserves by his mother – there is a general sense in Paul's relish for "interminable feasts"(220) and the prospect of indulgence, which indicates that it is the independent exercising of all his physical sense, not just his tastebuds, to which Paul looks forward.

It is not surprising therefore that juxtaposed closely to this concern for his meals, Paul's encounters Phillis whose skin is so white (226) that he immediately compares their ages and is curiously pleased to find them close enough to render them companions. He finds himself "in a little flutter of desire to make [himself] agreeable, and wishing that his companion were not quite so tall"(230). Phillis, in other words, is immediately perceived by Paul as a potential sexual partner: she is assessed for her desirability - white skin, but too tall. It is not until Paul has determined their incompatibility by concluding that Phillis's knowledge of books outweighs her physical appeal, even though "her hair was looking more golden, her dark eyelashes longer, her round pillar of a throat whiter than ever"(235), that they can be friends and confidantes (241).

One might expect to find a paralleling developing independence for Phillis, who is Paul's contemporary, but we only ever see her in her role as daughter to the Holmans in these opening scenes, doing her kitchen chores and being pleasant to Paul as a family guest. This is perhaps explained by the fact that Cousin Phillis is Paul's story, told from his perspective, and therefore privileging his viewpoint and his feelings. But as we shall see such a defence in fact inverts the process which dictates the text's structure. The reason why Phillis is always viewed as a character (not presented from within) is not because this is Paul's story about her. Rather, a story concerning Phillis must always present her as viewed, not as the reflecting consciousness of a narrative, precisely because the definition of 'woman', as gleaned from the text, bars any sense of autonomy, any sense of a female viewing self, from being attributed to Phillis.

This definition of 'woman' which so dictates the presentation of Phillis is perhaps best seen, in action as it were, in the scene which is crucial to the reading of the novel as a whole: the revelation to Minister Holman of Phillis's love for Holdsworth. The scene takes place immediately after the minister receives a letter from Holdsworth announcing his marriage to a Canadian girl, Lucille. His surprise that both Paul and Phillis already know of the marriage quickly leads to a suspicion that Holdsworth had "played tricks upon Phillis"(306). Paul is obliged to divulge that he had informed Phillis of Holdsworth's declared love for her, and Holman rails against the destruction of Phillis's "peaceful maidenhood"(307) which Paul has effected. But more important is Holman's reaction to Phillis's confession that she had loved Holdsworth. His first response is to state, "I don't understand"(308), quickly followed by a question which reveals the definition of 'woman' upon which the novel revolves: "Had he ever spoken of love to you?"(308).

Holman's response is vital for it demands that a comparison be made between the two 'indiscretions' which Paul and Phillis have unwittingly committed in Holman's eyes. Both indiscretions involve language, the individual's right to use it, and the proper way in which to utilise it. But the two indiscretions are made startlingly different in status in Cousin Phillis by only one variable: the gender of the speaker. If we investigate Holman's initial response to Paul's confession we can see that it involves the protocol which surrounds the declaration of love made by a man to a woman, what has been termed earlier in this thesis the 'pastoral contract.' Paul's indiscretion lies in repeating an avowal of love for a woman

made by another man, Holdsworth, but not addressed to the woman, Phillis, herself. Paul himself has felt misgivings over his actions. Though he had not "received any charge of secrecy, or given even the slightest promise to Holdsworth that [he] would not repeat his words"(287), he retains "an uneasy feeling sometimes when [he] thought of what [he] had done"(287). But if we actually investigate the reasons why Paul repeats Holdsworth's words, we can see that his feelings of unease stem not from his unauthorised repetition, but from his accidental discovery of the reason for Phillis's ill-health. Paul stumbles across Phillis re-reading the pencil notes Holdsworth had made in one of her Italian books. The realisation of her love for Holdsworth comes to him "like a flash of lightning on a dark night"(283); it is because he cannot "bear to see the sweet serenity of [his] dear cousin's life so disturbed by a suffering which [he] thought he could assuage"(284) that he tells Phillis of Holdsworth's love for her. Her response to his disclosure immediately tells him that this "conjecture was well-founded"(285).

From this point, Paul does all he can to protect her 'secret'. When he must tell Phillis that Holdsworth is married, he carefully refrains from telling the minister thereby allowing the change in Phillis - "a new, sharp, discordant sound . . . in her voice, a sort of jangle in her tone; . . . her restless eyes [with] no quietness in them"(296) - to be unconnected with that event, if it is detected at all by her family and those around her. Similarly, he ensures that Betty, who also intuits Phillis's love for Holdsworth, keeps the secret, and is as we have seen determined not to reveal Phillis's secret to her father.

But one must ask the question why Paul would consider a knowledge of Phillis's love for Holdsworth reason enough to divulge information which, as he knows himself, is not his to tell? The reason is not unconnected with the minister's immediate question to Phillis when he hears her confession: "Had he ever spoken of love to you?"(308). There must be, in both Paul's and Holman's minds, a preceding male desire before one can speak of a love between a man and a woman. To think of Phillis loving Holdsworth before knowing of his love for her is, to Holman, an unnatural act which can only stem from some failing in Phillis's family life: "Have we not loved you enough?"(308). It is not something which could occur within a 'normal' set of circumstances.

In the same way, Paul, discovering Phillis's love, puts it 'right' by providing the male desire which, though Phillis did not know it, preceded the signs of her love for Holdsworth. Having made it 'right', having given Phillis the 'nutrient' required for her to become "like a rose that had come to full bloom"(290), Paul can have no misgivings until Holdsworth is found to have altered his affections.

The shared impulse behind Paul's action and Holman's question is crucial. It is important to note that as soon as Holman has the full 'facts' of the situation, that is that Phillis loves Holdsworth, his assessment of Paul's indiscretion alters drastically. Whereas initially Paul's talk with Phillis appeared as a perverse attempt to inculcate desire where none existed, on behalf of another man, with Phillis's admission it becomes explicable. Even though a love declared by proxy is still to be censured Paul's action suddenly

appears an attempt to balance the equation of desire. Seeing Phillis's love, Paul matches it with Holdsworth's - an irresponsible, but no longer despicable, act in Holman's eyes. Suddenly we see that Phillis's indiscretion is to proclaim love without encouragement, an act so apparently pernicious that only a breakdown in the family structure can account for it. And indeed, such a breakdown is precisely what follows: Hope Farm is left to manage without Holman at its head, and Holman himself is unable to lead the family prayers as is his wont, whilst Phillis lies ill with a brain fever.

In order to make sense of the complete breakdown which follows Phillis's articulation of love one must investigate closely the status of the 'declaration of love', and how it functions in Cousin Phillis. Specifically one must determine the nature of the contract between men and women which dictates that of the three individuals who articulate this particular declaration in various ways - Paul, Phillis and Holdsworth - only Phillis is overtly 'punished', or rather allows herself to be, for her speech. Though like Holdsworth and Paul she can only be said to be 'guilty' of proclaiming love to a person other than the loved one, her breakdown suggests that, in terms of the ideology of womanhood underpinning the text, such a proclamation is at some level in the text, more harmful than that of either man.⁶

In order to begin assessing the differing status of the three speakers, it is perhaps best to begin with an analysis of the 'types' of language or discourse which Cousin Phillis presents as possible language choices. Language appears to fall into two distinct categories: the Virgilian and what may be termed the Holdsworthian. The main characteristic of the former is established by Minister Holman who,

extolling the virtues of Virgil, claims that "It is all living truth in these days." (296) It is this quality of enduring 'truth', an eternal veracity, in Virgil which is constantly stressed. Not only do particular agricultural practices laid down by Virgil in the Georgics seem right to Holman centuries later, but he has also "hit the enduring epithets, nearly two thousand years ago, and in Italy" (233) for describing Nature as it is in Italy or nineteenth-century England. Unsurprisingly, Holman himself, the character most closely associated with Virgil in the text, reveals a propensity to use words only in their 'correct' place which is connected to this idea of eternal veracity. Though he is a minister, as a farmer he recognises the inconvenience that ill-timed sermonising can pose to working men (244). Unlike his wife, Holman considers that words can be out of their place. To misuse language by ill-timing threatens its durability and so its veracity. Indeed, the threat that misuse of language constitutes is effectively revealed in Holman's reactions to fellow ministers who, hearing of Phillis's ill-health, exhort him to bespeak his resignation in the face of his troubles. Holman, who cannot feel such resignation, refuses to express it since that would constitute "using words as if they were a charm." (312) Holman's choice of term here, 'charm', is illuminating. With its connotations of magic and deception, the term represents an antonym to truth and as such contradicts Holman's Virgilian sense of language.

In contrast 'Holdsworthian' language is characterised precisely by its randomness, its apparent lack of 'eternal veracities'. Holdsworth speaks "a style of half-joking talk" (259) unknown to the inhabitants of Hope Farm. His style of speech both confuses

and attracts the Holmans who, if Holdsworth did but know it, do "take Virgil for gospel"(265). The minister proclaims his view on Holdsworth, characteristically "weighing his words"(265) as he does so, as someone whom he likes, but "who takes hold of [him], as it were"(265), who threatens to carry the minister away in spite of his judgement, and indeed is intoxicating "like dram-drinking"(266). Paul too reports on the "unconscious hold that [his] friend had got over all the family"(266), and notes that any "suspicion that [Holdsworth's] careless words were not always those of soberness and truth"(271) which Holman may harbour, seemed "more as a protest against the fascination which the younger man evidently exercised over the elder one"(271).

Both Paul's and Holman's language when describing Holdsworth is important for it connects Holdsworth firmly with the type of language-use which Holman ostensibly rejects. A speaker who has the ability to carry his listeners away, whose effect is one of a fascination akin to the effects of alcohol, is clearly using words as a 'charm' in Virgilian terms. And yet, what is most important, is that despite two such differing approaches to language, these male speakers in Cousin Phillis are, if not eager, then able, to overlook these differences, and so come to see worth in that other language use. Holdsworth finds that "really it is a very wholesome exercise, this trying to make one's words represent one's thoughts instead of merely looking to their effect on others."(264) Holman too comes to see Holdsworth's words as 'fit' in their context. Though Holdsworth's words would not have been "true and sober"(290) in Holman's mouth, "they were so to a man of his class of perceptions"(290). In other words, both Holdsworth and Holman are allowed to change their perceptions and

attitudes to language use. Despite the clear-cut divisions between 'Virgilian' and 'Holdsworthian' language, individual preferences do not in the end constitute prejudices.

Phillis's punishment as a speaker in Cousin Phillis in this context of an open-minded approach to language use is contradictory. Having recognised and accepted a relativist element in language because of his association with Holdsworth, one might expect Holman to accept Phillis's statement of love for Holdsworth as a 'fit' expression of her viewpoint in much the same way as he accepts that Holdsworth speaks 'true and sober words' for a man of his perceptions. Instead, Holman looks for a 'matching' declaration from Holdsworth as a measure of the validity of Phillis's speech. His response indicates that she has no right to use language in either of the ways the text outlines. Her speech is intolerable and unjustifiable in a narrative which otherwise illustrates a widening of attitudes to language use. At the same time, Holman's response directs us to reasons for the negative status of Phillis as a speaker. Phillis's love for Holdsworth appears to have overthrown the very basis of her identity in Holman's eyes. She would have "left [her] home, left [her] father and [her] mother, and gone away with [a] stranger, wandering over the world." (309) Her identity as her father's "only child; [his] little daughter . . . hardly out of childhood" (306) whom he had expected to "gather . . . under [his] wings for years to come" (306) has been completely undermined. Suddenly there appears a part of Phillis of which he has no knowledge, over which he exerts no influence. Though Paul is at a similar point in his life, the first break from the family, Phillis is evidently disallowed a paralleling opportunity to assert independence and

selfhood, and one must ask why.

The answer lies in the status of women, and their function in this novel. In each respect, the women in Cousin Phillis are assessed in terms of their usefulness to men. Both Holman and Phillis see the parish women as 'morally' important. Not in themselves, however - indeed, they seem an inadequate group "apt to tarry before coming to [chapel], to put on ribbons and gauds"(245). But despite such moral backsliding, the women are valued as moral guides for their husbands and children. We have already seen the way in which Phillis is immediately assessed as a potential sexual partner by Paul. She is similarly assessed by Mr Manning, senior. Relating the four main attributes of Phillis which stand out in his mind - her upbringing which makes her a good homemaker, her cleverness, her fortune as a farmer's only child, her beauty - it is important to note that Manning judges each attribute according to its usefulness in a wife (252). Phillis' homemaking skills, her dowry and beauty are seen as assets in a wife; while her one drawback - her intelligence - is not only discounted because non-functional in a wife, but undermined as a fleeting, superficial attribute which will soon disperse once Phillis is "a wife and a mother"(252).

A more insidious measure however of woman's status lies in the terms with which she is described, Phillis being the prime example. It has been a critical commonplace to note the 'natural descriptions' which proliferate in Cousin Phillis: the evocation of the countryside, the descriptions of the seasons as they unfold in the cyclical activities of a farm. But more important is Phillis's strong association with nature, and the cyclical passage of time. She is first seen as "[t]he westering sun shone full upon her"(226), and from this point she is associated with, or described in, natural images. She is the

sun with her "golden hair, her dazzling complexion, lighting up the corner of the vine-shadowed room"(228); her empathy with animals is such that pigeons on the farm "fluttered down at the sound of her voice"(240); the afternoon sun shining on her hair gives Paul a feeling of such "tranquil monotony"(242) that he felt he "should live forever"(242). Walks make "her cheeks bloom like the rose"(246); she moans "like the sobbing of the wind"(283); she can gurgle and whistle in precise imitation of various birds (289); she is the "very apple of her father's eye"(289); and is "like a rose that had come to full bloom on the sunny side of a lonely house, sheltered from storms"(289) when she hears of Holdsworth's love for her. At the same time, she is always present at those activities on the farm which register the cyclical progress of time: the hay-making, the apple-harvest, and the shelling of summer peas.

Importantly however none of these images originate from Phillis. Each is an imposed description, and as such tells the reader more about the observer than the subject/object observed. The effect of such descriptions of Phillis is to render her a curiously atemporal object of beauty who, if she exists in time at all, exists in that type of cyclical time which suggests eternity and changelessness. She is a unified object of perception and observation, always consistent, changing only as nature changes, in cycles.

One might question how such female images function for men in Cousin Phillis, in what way they measure female status. If we recall the concepts explored in North and South, the relation of the self to language, and Margaret's dilemma as a woman operating as an autonomous self with control over meaning who suddenly finds both selfhood and

control denied her, then the natural images surrounding Phillis in this text become startlingly ominous. If North and South illustrates the impossibility of a female perception of 'self', and the gradual relinquishment of control over self and language by Margaret as a necessary corollary of that impossibility, then Cousin Phillis illustrates the reasons why a female conception of 'self' is a threatening proposition. The notion of self, as illustrated in North and South and as theorised by Husserl, must precede the possibility of control over the 'meaning' of language. Husserl constructs this notion of self on the basis of awareness - to be aware of oneself is to 'be.' Husserl's debt to the subjective idealism of such philosophers as Berkeley and Hume on this point is clear. Berkeley's assertion that "[i]n truth the object and the sensation are the same thing",⁷ that "esse is percipi",⁸ and Hume's extension of this idea to the concept of self - that the self is inextricably bound up with its perceptions, and without perceptions there can be no self - have profound implications for Cousin Phillis and Phillis's status within that text. What Phillis is, is solely what she is perceived to be by Paul, her father and Holdsworth - a unified object, essentially static and unchanging in their perception, who alters only in a patterned, foreseeable way as do the cycles of nature.

Her stable image is vital for, as we shall see, it provides the basis upon which the male identity constructs itself. If we return momentarily to Husserl, Berkeley and Hume, we see that what unites these three theorists is the centrality, by virtue of either its presence or absence, of a stable entity which permits the possibility of 'meaning', and so language. Husserl posits the 'self', the 'solitary

mental life' as the fount of meaning; Berkeley posits a God, an infinite mind, who ensures "the existence of all things when no human mind is perceiving them",⁹ and with it a stability of meaning. Hume, too, though "unable to find a 'principle of connexion' which binds the particular perceptions"¹⁰ in the form of, say, an infinite mind or self, finds it difficult to go beyond the idea of such an absence, such a vacuum, and so "take[s] it for granted, whatever may be the reader's opinion at this present moment, that an hour hence he will be persuaded there is both an external and internal world."¹¹

This 'principle of connexion', or stable entity which allows the possibility of meaning is, in Cousin Phillis, not an infinite mind, a God or the self: it is Phillis, woman, herself. If we re-read those passages where Phillis is perceived, is given a 'meaning' by an observer, and those infrequent points where Phillis undermines these perceptions either through speech or appearance, we can see that she is a primary source of 'meaning' in Cousin Phillis - an absolute other. We noted at the beginning of this chapter the conspicuous presence of the male right to progress; Paul not only gets a job, but is being sexually educated; Holdsworth quite literally travels. But more important is the way in which this progress is 'meaningful' only in juxtaposition to the 'stable signifier' of woman. When Paul first meets Phillis, he describes her at length, and then notes that she looks at him "steadily in the face with large, quiet eyes, wondering, but untroubled by the sight of a stranger." (226) He states too that he "found it odd that so old, so full-grown as she was, she should wear a pinafore over her gown." (226) Later when he says goodbye to the Holmans after his first visit, he stresses Phillis's golden,

dazzling hair, and again notes that she "looked at [him] straight as she said her tranquil words of farewell"(228). A suspicion that Phillis's "steady gaze"(227) is upon him, causes Paul to raise his own "stealthily"(227) in response. On the surface these minor descriptions seem to register nothing more than the glances they describe. But if re-read closely, we can see that it is Paul's consistent perception of Phillis which allows him to document the progress of his slowly awakening sexual interest. Though the young Paul may claim that he is unsure why a comparison of his and Phillis's ages is pleasurable, the elder narrating Paul notes its repressed disingenuousness. It is Phillis, if Paul but knew it, and her unchanging beauty which makes Paul's comments 'speak', make them the meaningful indications of his newly emerging sexuality. From making a first obscure relation between his sexuality and Phillis ["when I was nearly nineteen, and beginning to think of whiskers on my own account, I came to know Cousin Phillis"(222)], Paul eventually progresses to stating the connection overtly. But more importantly, this can only take place once their sexual incompatibility is established. Paul is pleased that Phillis states her liking for him, but being "young coxcomb enough to have wished to play the lover"(244), also recognises the remark as too straightforward an avowal of friendship to indicate any romantic inclinations on her side.

Phillis provides a similar 'connexion of perception' for her father. As long as Phillis remains a child, his daughter, Holman is a capable and successful minister and farmer. Hope Farm is an image of the bounteous, pastoral world in which all have their appointed place: animals are well-kept and carefully tended; the land provides

a plentiful crop which is never seriously threatened by natural events (the lightning storm is more a background for a love scene than a serious threat to the hay-gathering); and even the 'half-wit' Timothy Cooper is accommodated. Once Phillis steps out of her role as 'daughter' however, Minister Holman and Hope Farm with him lose their sense of identity. The farm is entrusted to the workers' care, but without Phillis it is "as though a cloud was over the sun." (310) The minister loses his power for language, unable to lead even his family to their daily prayer (315) and Timothy Cooper is hurled out of the once pastoral paradise. Not until Phillis recovers is he reinstated.

As a 'connexion of perceptions', Phillis fits into what Homans has termed a 'masculine tradition' of literature. Discussing the way in which the male poet forges an identity, Homans notes the traditional use of feminine images in such writers. These images serve as a 'primary other', a basis for imagination, and the way of separating the subject or writer from the object of perception which gives the poet an identity and a voice. Importantly, while these images provide a basis for subjectivity, they themselves lack subjectivity or identity.¹² The Mother Nature that proliferates in Wordsworth's poetry, whilst being "the necessary complement to his imaginative project, the grounding of an imagination so powerful that it risks abstraction without her",¹³ is "no more than what he allows her to be."¹⁴ If she were to be more, she would acquire that subjectivity and hence the capacity for self representation which is the basis for creativity and speech, whilst depriving the male poet the basis for his own.

One can see now why Phillis's declaration of love is so devastating. By asserting an emotion, Phillis asserts her own subjectivity and identity, and its mere presence is incompatible with her role in Cousin Phillis. More specifically, a female declaration of love threatens one of the most potent ways in which men use women to ratify their sense of self, or make that self meaningful. If we investigate the issue of marriage in the text, we can see in it a microcosm of the process by which men utilise women to anchor or stabilise their sense of self. One of the most important characteristics which the male characters of Cousin Phillis share is their sexual freedom; all have or have had a choice of sexual partners. Paul moves from an initial contemplation of Phillis to marriage with Margaret Ellison; Holdsworth moves from Phillis to Lucille; Paul's father refers to his first love, Molly (251); and Minister Holman, whilst not alluding to a previous lover, can be said to have in his relationship with his daughter an equivalent freedom in relationships which makes his own wife "jealous of her own child, as a fitter companion for her husband than she was herself." (249) In contrast, no similar freedom is granted to women. Phillis's punishment is not for having too many loves but for daring to have initiated one at all.¹⁵

As a primary other, women must be denied such freedom in the sexual market. Eagleton, quoting Culler, has pointed out that "[to] say 'I love you' . . . is always at some level a quotation; in its very moment of absolute, original value, the self stumbles across nothing but other people's lines, finds itself handed a meticulously detailed script".¹⁶ But Cousin Phillis operates within an ideology which, if it is to affirm a male sense of self, must deny this reading

of the love declaration. Phillis's punishment in the text is for revealing, in her statement of love, the fallacy which underlies the 'pastoral contract'. Because man can have more than one potential sexual partner, to say 'I love you' is indeed a quotation, if only of himself. It is therefore acceptable that one man can tell another of his desire for a woman - the statement carries with it no automatic commitment. At the same time, if women are to remain the means by which men ultimately 'make sense' or define themselves in marriage in order that their lives of unhindered movement and progress can continue (male movement made meaningful by female stasis), it is vital that any female hearer of the 'quotation' be unable to recognise it as such. Women must read men's avowals of love as statements of individual intention and commitment. If they do not, the female stasis upon which men depend for identity will disappear. In telling Phillis of Holdsworth's declaration, Paul effectively shows his ignorance of the first facts of avowals of love. Like the women in this society, Paul reads Holdsworth's words of love as words of commitment and intention, and so passes them on to Phillis in a gesture of sympathy.

Phillis, as she must, accepts them as authoritative, her subsequent reclamation of health illustrating the centrality of male love in her life. Had the text ended there, or pages later with the revelation of Holdsworth's marriage in Canada, Cousin Phillis would be a relatively uninteresting tale of love in a pastoral setting. But instead Phillis speaks, and her words of love, uttered as a statement of commitment, reveal the pastoral commitment - the agreement which outlines behaviour between men and women - as the 'lie' it is. Neither Paul nor Holman are at liberty to reveal the lack of implicit commitment which

underpins all male declarations of love by railing against Holdsworth. He cannot be accused of deception because, in male terms, he has committed nothing of the sort. Paul's actions too cannot be blamed. Though he betrays himself as untutored in the terms of the contract, it is but a lesson he must learn.

Rather it is Phillis who must be 'punished' if the ideology of womanhood as depicted in Cousin Phillis is to be upheld. Her statement uncovers the 'quotation' element in male speech by forcing the issue, and so threatens to release women from their static role as primary others. Recognising now the freedom of movement that men claim, she has the potential to break free. But more importantly, Phillis' statement threatens male identity in a way which seems irrecoverable. Hitherto, the 'pastoral contract' allowed men the best of both worlds. An avowal of love can be a 'quotation', that is an impersonal, non-committing, essentially meaningless statement, until the individual has decided it will 'become' a meaningful, intentional statement which binds him to his chosen hearer should he want to be so situated.

One might at this point posit the woman's conventional right of refusal as one way in which women can gain some control in the 'pastoral situation'. Yet despite this apparent option, I would argue that such a 'right' carries with it no real power. Woman may refuse, but as Munich points out with the story of Marcella from Don Quixote, to do so is to risk being labelled 'cruel', 'unkind', even unfeminine.¹⁷ Marcella quite rightly asks those who deem her cruel why "should she love a man simply because he loves her."¹⁸ But she misses the point. As a woman, her language, her refusal, has

no eloquence, no meaning, to a male hearer. She is simply the 'other', the object which allows man to make sense of himself. She has in male eyes no subjectivity or identity by which to make her refusal meaningful. One might also add in support of the impotence of the female right to refuse, the contemporary views on female sexuality. The New Female Instructor firmly states that "love should by no means begin on your part; it should proceed from the attachment of the man"¹⁹ - a sentiment clearly aligned with the Victorian view that female sexuality is excited by, created by, male interest.²⁰ In such a context, a refusal is only ever a response to a statement, never an initiating or 'creative' statement in itself. The power of the Victorian woman to 'refuse' to accept or acknowledge that which Victorian man has essentially 'given' her (a sexual sensibility) is thus dramatically decreased. Hellerstein documents the comments of a Parisian professor of the newly emerged science of obstetrics and gynaecology which underscore the futility of saying 'no'. Marc Colombat (1797-1851) articulates a widespread contemporary attitude when he states,

Whereas before puberty she existed but for herself alone, having reached this age, the spring time of life, when all her charms are in bloom, she now belongs to the entire species which she is destined to perpetuate, by bearing almost all the burden of reproduction.²¹

Besides providing yet another context in which to place the natural images surrounding Phillis in the text, the extract shows the futility and, pointedly, the self-ishness of such a 'communal' creature as the sexually vital woman attempting to refuse an offer of marriage. Belonging to the entire species, with no 'self' from which to speak,

her 'no' can resonate with little power. When one considers too the 'relative' role of the Victorian woman as defined by Ellis,²² any vestigial power of the articulated refusal is completely eradicated. As a creature whose life must revolve around the comfort and happiness of others, the exercising of 'self' implicit in saying 'no' can have no real impact.

Each female hearer is then effectively bound by a declaration of love. The man thus has the option to choose the moment at which his declaration becomes meaningful, and consolidate it with the appropriate behaviour. He can in other words choose the time of the 'fixing' of his sexual identity by choosing a female hearer to make his utterance meaningful.²³ But Phillis's statement has unwittingly robbed man of that option by forcing into prominence the 'quotational' nature of the male declaration. If speech is a quotation, however can one individual 'fix' his sense of self, his 'individual' identity, through that medium? He cannot of course, and so the revealer of that disruptive notion must be punished.

One might wonder why, if Cousin Phillis constitutes such a threat to a male conception of self, the story of Phillis and Holdsworth should be told at all. The answer lies in its ending. Phillis falls ill, only to recover obligingly saying that she intends to "go back to the peace of the old days"(317). We have already seen what those 'old days' mean for women. Cousin Phillis posits a return to the world of mobile male identity made meaningful by female stability or stasis. But more importantly, the text betrays the biased structure of such an ideology. Cousin Phillis is important because it tells us that its story of pastoral love and innocence is, and

can only be, a male story. It is Paul, who so clearly revealed his ignorance of the facts of male speech, who records the harnessing and eventual taming of the threat to male identity which Phillis's story represents. Having learnt his language lesson, Paul illustrates his competence in the correct presentation of the female image. His choice of a pastoral setting, and his use of natural cyclical images to describe Phillis, reveal how efficiently he has learnt the necessity of presenting 'woman' as a unified series of male perceptions if the fallacy of the female as primary other, which makes his identity and his faculty of speech possible, is to be upheld.

Betty can urge Phillis's right to be recognised as a 'grown woman', and can also insist that Phillis do something for herself (316). But these suggestions of a potential for female 'selfhood' are ultimately outweighed by Paul's control over his story. It is he who chooses to end the text on Phillis's apparently uplifting words, but it is also he who has the option of ending Phillis's story before she is (if ever she could be) an independent subject. Though Paul is writing from a perspective of some years, and though he is careful to tell us what he has become (a married, prosperous business man), he chooses to 'frame' or 'contain' Phillis by refusing the reader access to what she becomes. Paul, like Homans's representational Romantic writer, uses language, his narrative skill, to appropriate Phillis and so solidify his own identity. By making Phillis identifiable with Nature, he objectifies her. Without identity, without autonomy, she becomes in a sense his property, his to frame and present in a manner which illustrates his accession to manhood. Her 'otherness' becomes a means of making his subjectivity, his

selfhood, powerful. Like Wordsworth's Mother Nature, Phillis is only what Paul allows her to be. Choosing to affirm his control over the phenomenon that is Phillis by focusing on her encounter with love, Paul reveals the true status of what he terms the "one small event"(247) on Hope Farm. The removal of Phillis's pinafore may seem insignificant. But in an ideology which makes primary others of sexually available women, that 'small' event, signalling as it does Phillis's accession to sexual status, is not only the main constricting event of Phillis's life but the primary consolidating event in the life of any man who will attempt to 'fix' his identity by her.

Notes

¹Margaret Lane, introduction to Cousin Phillis, (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1970), vi.

²Ibid., vii.

³Ibid., ix.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Elizabeth Gaskell, Cousin Phillis, in Cranford/Cousin Phillis, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1970), 219. Subsequent references are to this edition and appear in the text.

⁶Certainly Phillis's breakdown, associated as it is with her disclosed sexuality, has a basis in documented cases of hysteria of the period. One particular case, cited in Erna Olafson Hellerstein et al., Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth-Century England, France, and the United States, (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1981), seems particularly pertinent. Jean-Baptiste Louyer-Villermay (1776-1837), a noted Parisian specialist in hysteria, outlines the extreme case of a young woman's hysteria evidently produced by overly zealous and rigid surveillance of the young woman's involvement with a young man which led to its curtailment. Louyer-Villermay's prescribed treatments (pp. 111-112), leeches to the vulva, blisterings of the neck and thighs etc., suggest the great seriousness in which the complaint was held, and his determination to alleviate it.

⁷E.R. Emmett, Learning to Philosophize. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1964), 163.

⁸Ibid., 157.

⁹Ibid., 166.

¹⁰Ibid., 171.

¹¹Ibid., 173.

¹²Margaret Homans, Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Bronte, and Emily Dickinson, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 12-20.

¹³Ibid., 13.

- ¹⁴Ibid.
- ¹⁵New Female Instructor, (London: Thomas Kelly, 1824), 57.
- ¹⁶Terry Eagleton, William Shakespeare., (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1986), 19.
- ¹⁷Adrienne Munich, "Notorious signs, feminist criticism and literary tradition," in Making a Difference, Gayle Green and Coppelia Kahn, eds., (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1985), 238-59.
- ¹⁸Ibid., 247.
- ¹⁹New Female Instructor, 57.
- ²⁰See W.R. Greg, "Prostitution," Westminster Review, 53 (1850), 448-506. See also William Acton, Prostitution, Considered in its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects, in London and Other Cities, London, 1857.
- ²¹Hellerstein, 91-2.
- ²²Sarah Stickney Ellis, The Women of England, their Social Duties and Domestic Habits, (London: Fisher, Son & Co., 1839), 210.
- ²³The contemporary strictures on female conversation uphold the passivity and impotence of the woman's part. Ellis stresses the importance of women knowing "exactly when to cease from conversation and when to withhold it altogether." (196) Her rules for female conversation are designed to make women ideal listeners, rather than talkers, people who "lead others out into animated and intelligent communication" (196) rather than people who are "intent upon making communications from their resources of [their] mind[s]" (196).

Chapter Eight: Sylvia's Lovers (1863)

Sylvia's Lovers cannot be said to fall within the confines of what Eagleton has identified as the "two characteristic Gaskellian modes of proletarian grimness and bourgeois gentility".¹ Yet despite its apparent divergence from Gaskell's usual subject matter, there is in Sylvia's Lovers a concern for language and its relation to the individual which links it strongly with her preceeding novels. The historical setting of Sylvia's Lovers has led to a concentration of critical discussion on the issue of the individual versus an apparently inevitable and impersonal historical process. But where that concentration has often led to a discussion of the 'tragic' elements in the text,² the historical realism of the novel might be more usefully approached as one manifestation of Gaskell's concern with the individual and his/her placement within a surrounding structure or pattern which is also embodied in her exploration of the legal system and the institution of marriage. All three of these areas can in turn be seen as methods by which Gaskell chooses to explore the issue of the idividual's relation to, and construction in, language.

It is perhaps best to begin with the presentation of the law and the legal system for Sylvia's Lovers, like North and South, contains two levels of discussion which, apparently converging into a unified whole, in fact betray conflicting ideologies. Gaskell's opening description of Monkshaven as a whaling community first introduces the theme of the type of 'social contract' which binds

this community together.³ The aristocracy of Monkshaven is not, as in other towns, the local representatives of country families, but the shipowners. More importantly, these shipowners do not constitute an impenetrable elite. The lowest sailor "might rise by daring and saving to be a shipowner himself."⁴ Indeed, the equality which prevails upon the whaling ships seems to spill out into the community itself, for the "common ventures and dangers, the universal interest felt in one pursuit"(7) makes class distinction in Monkshaven less apparent than it might be in other communities, and "bound the inhabitants of that line of coast together with a strong tie"(7).

As might be expected in such a 'democratic' community, the attitude towards government and law stresses the individual's right to speak. Daniel, who is representative of the whaling community, states his definition of what a government is and should do quite clearly. Representation to Daniel means the right to have his individual thoughts spoken in Parliament by the representative he votes for. The House hears "What I, Dannel Robson, think right, and what I, Dannel Robson, wish to have done"(40). The conception of a government which rules "for the good of the nation"(40) rather than an specific individual is anathema to Daniel. He recognises only individuals: "nation's nowhere."(41) Accordingly, the presence of the pressgangs in Monkshaven proves unbearable to Daniel and the Monkshaven sailors of his ilk. Having already lost one finger in determination to flout a pressgang 'recruiting' for the war against America, Daniel rejects the nation's present involvement in the Napoleonic wars as 'reason enough' for the present impressment of Monkshaven sailors.

It is of course precisely this belief in the individual's right

and ability to act as he sees fit that leads to Daniel's hanging. But the complexities within which this episode takes place require careful elucidation. If we examine closely the incidents which lead up to the burning of the *Randyvowse*, we discover that what appears to be the determined act of an individual is in fact a communal one. From the first introduction of the pressgang in action, the text presents a constantly shifting interplay of individual and community. Sylvia and Molly, watching the first whaling ship of the year enter the Monkshaven harbour, meet a good many individuals as they make their way towards the harbour. From the gruff old sailor, to Margaret Christison, to the mother holding aloft her baby to view his father's ship, to an old blind man awaiting the return of his son, the passage stresses the individual anxiety and impatience of those waiting the arrival of the *Resolution*. As soon as the pressgang captures the ship, however, these quite carefully delineated individuals merge to form a "stormy multitude"(29), a "dense mass"(29) which can no longer be separated into individuals. The many voices of the second chapter unite into one "low, deep growl"(29). The women too specifically form what is likened to "a Greek chorus"(29), some members of which now look "scarce human . . . with lips . . . tightly drawn back so as to show the teeth with the unconscious action of an enraged wild animal"(29). What unites these people into a sharp simultaneous cry of rage and despair is of course their shared attitude to the pressgangs. Each of them share a sense of outrage at the enforced service to the government which the pressgang represents.

Thus far the effect of the pressgang upon Monkshaven seems clear and uncomplicated. To speak of individuals united against a common

enemy carries with it no outward signs of complicated thinking. But the pressgangs are not significant simply as unsavoury recruiters for the Napoleonic wars. Gaskell clearly points out that the Admiralty utilising this measure had "ample precedent for its use, and . . . common (if not statute) law to sanction its application"(5). The pressgang then, in Monkshaven at least, has a larger significance. It represents the law, or the legal system in its entirety. Indeed a description of its structure stresses its legal status. The sea coast is divided into "districts, under the charge of a captain in the navy, who again delegated sub-districts to lieutenants; . . . all ports were under supervision"(5 - emphasis mine). Those captured by the pressgang find it difficult to "bring evidence of the nature of their former occupations"(6) to release them from captivity, and there is a careful absence of suitable listeners to such evidence if they did.

As a representation of the law, the effect of the pressgangs in Monkshaven and in particular Daniel's death which results from his encounter with them, must assume a larger significance. Daniel's encounter with the pressgang leads the reader directly to concerns which structure the novel as a whole: the idea of communal meaning, and the role of the individual. The chapters dealing with the attack on the Randyvowse begin with the delineation of Robson as one "possessed"(253) by the idea of revenge on the pressgangs. Nevertheless, when the pressgang ring the Monkshaven fire bell to lure people to a convenient spot for capture, Daniel's 'possession' is seen to be shared by all his companions. Though he is the one to articulate the idea of revenge, it is but "the thought that was surging up into

the brain of every one there."(258) Such community of feeling is not surprising; all of those present in the market-house where the fire bell is kept have responded to a signal which has a communal meaning. The bell means that "neighbourly assistance"(256) is required to quench a fire. When Gaskell speaks of the cynical betrayal by the pressgangs of the Monkshaven community's "kindest feelings"(256), both definitions of 'kind' are operative.

The text is also careful to point out the degree to which Daniel's formulation or definition of the forthcoming events differs from those around him. What Daniel looks forward to as a "rough frolic of which he was to be the leader"(258), assumes to many around him "a deeper and more ferocious form than Daniel had thought of when he made his proposal of a rescue."(258) Yet the discrepancy between what Daniel considers to be the 'character' of the revenge and what others make it is as instantly undermined as it is formed. He finds himself a "laggard in planning"(259) that night's events, yet nevertheless assumes "the lead"(259) when those events are acted out. Though he finds the entry into the Randyvowse, his ages obliges him to sit "inactive, while the strife and the action was going on"(260). When the other rioters take him at his word to turn the Randyvowse into a bonfire, Daniel is happy in his ignorance to assume the responsibility for a fire which Simpson, left homeless as a result, attributes to him. In other words, what begins as a chance remark or chance discovery is soon appropriated by the crowd; and Daniel is pleased, just as quickly, to re-appropriate the new event or definition as his own. Daniel complacently states that "it's a great thing for folk to have a chap for t'lead 'em wi' a head on his shouthers"(262),

and it both "touched and flattered at the way in which those who formed his 'world' looked upon him as a hero." (264) But though "his name had been bruited abroad as one of those who had planned the affair" (264), the reader is aware that whilst Daniel agrees with what has been performed, he cannot be said to have 'initiated' the events in the singular way that the terms 'leader' or 'hero' imply. Daniel can make a 'proposal', but it is the reception of that proposal which defines its content. Daniel has no real control over the content of his language - it is a content constructed in community, between speakers and hearers.

It is Daniel's misfortune however to believe in his own individual efficacy to articulate and so 'initiate' the events of that night. For if he knows that there were many Monkshaven people "who would bless them and caress them for that night's deed" (259), the law certainly is not interested in the communal definitions of the event as something positive. And it is at this point that the larger significance or function of the law in Sylvia's Lovers emerges. The morning after the rebellion, Philip informs the Robsons that the militia have been called to quell the rioting that had continued far past Daniel's involvement, and that warrants for arrest are sure to follow. Daniel is understandably made uneasy at the "new view of his conduct presented to him" (273), though he declares he would do it all again if necessary. His uneasiness is of course to the point, for the law will not punish communities, it punishes individuals. Daniel is to be made an example of what happens to those who oppose the law of the pressgang. And this is the paradox which Sylvia's Lovers confronts: whereas the law might be said to represent the

"common understanding by men of the advantages to be derived from security and protection to property afforded by governments",⁵ that is to address man as a 'social' creature within a community, and to express the shared definitions of what is defined as important (lawful or unlawful), the law chooses to over-ride communal meaning to punish the individual. In other words where the law, by its own structure, points to the community as the source of meaning, it chooses in its practice to overlook its own structure. The 'speaker' is held responsible for the content of his language though that content is not his sole construct. Daniel is arrested and hanged, but the death of the individual cannot erase the 'meaning' of his act. The rebellion remains "a distinctly popular movement"(283).

At the same time, one must be careful to note Daniel's continued belief in his ability to define the meaning of his own actions. He "retain[s] his pride in his achievements"(307), and when questioned for his defence continues to berate the outrages of the pressgang. In other words, Daniel stresses the individuality rather than the communality of his definition of the pressgang's actions as "outrages"(308), and refuses to countenance any other definition of that evening's events. This continued belief in the individual as a 'site of meaning' might seem perplexing in a novel which has thus far illustrated how very 'communal' are Daniel's beliefs and definitions. But more interesting is the way in which the text is itself uneasy and inconsistent in its depiction of the law. On the one hand, Daniel's death is seen as the inexorable result of the law's requirement that an 'example' be made of those who rebelled against the pressgang. Though acting in a communal rebellion, arising from communally held

beliefs, the individual Daniel is hanged. At the same time however, the text appears at pains to point out that, however lamentable, there is indeed a "necessity for prompt and severe punishment of rebellion against authority." (308) It is the term 'authority' which puzzles for it suggests that the law against which Daniel has acted issues from an autonomous entity distinguishable from the community or nation to which it refers, and so generates its own meanings in isolation. It suggests in fact that meaning is not communal, but 'authoritative' in the sense that it comes from a specified 'site' of meaning exterior to the community.

The text manages to convey conflicting ideas: that meaning is communal and that meaning is sited in the individual or an authority. Daniel is an 'example', that is both representative and singular, both victim and identified offender. Choosing like the law to pin the 'meaning' of language to a specific site, the individual speaker, the text nevertheless asserts the individual's lack of control over language, and can therefore both lament and see the necessity for Daniel's death.

One must of course place the text's mirroring of the law's structure in a larger context. For if the Monkshaven community defines the pressgang attacks as 'outrages', the nation as a whole does not. Southerners "took the oppression of press warrants more submissively" (7). The Monkshaven community's definition of the pressgang can therefore be seen in the light of a 'minority definition' - still the result of community, but not the community of 'England' as a whole. What the law in Sylvia's Lovers reflects is in fact the structure of language with which the text is concerned. Just as language as a

set of meanings or definitions is an existing structure into which the individual must enter in order to communicate, so the law as a system which sets out a series of definitions or meanings (what is legal/illegal) pre-exists the individual who will be both governed by it and express him/herself within it. Daniel's individual definition of the pressgang, so clearly presented as a communal one, is one which the 'larger' community, the nation which Daniel rejects, has previously banished from its set of meanings as unbeneficial. At the same time, it is a 'meaning' that the larger system itself makes possible for it is the result of the same process of 'meaning-made-in-community' upon which the law is based. Though the circumstances of individual opportunity for advancement do not exist in the entirety of England as it does in Monkshaven, the process of producing 'meanings' which are beneficial to the individuals within that community is precisely the same as the process which yields 'meanings' of what is lawful, unlawful or beneficial for the nation as a whole.

And it is precisely the relation of what is 'beneficial' to what is 'meaningful' that unites the two apparently unrelated subject interests in Sylvia's Lovers: Daniel and the pressgang, and Sylvia and Philip's relationship. It is not coincidental that the character or action of the pressgang brings together both strands of the text. If we re-examine the reason for the Monkshaven definition of the activities of the pressgang we see that it is directly related to economic profit. Where Southerners might view enforced service in the Navy as "adventurous employment"(7), the Monkshaven men had "the chances of profit beyond their wages"(7) which the democratic system

operating on boardwhaling vessels made possible. The pressgangs deprive them of an economic opportunity. Daniel himself adamantly refuses the right of the pressgang to impress a man when "ten to one his wages [were] all unpaid"(90). If the law is concerned primarily with "the public, property-owning sphere of life",⁶ the Monkshaven rebellion is both lawful (as a protection of the Monkshaven community's economic welfare) and unlawful as a threat to the larger public 'property' that is England. Gaskell seems unable, in the overtly legal theme of the text, to overcome the problems inherent in the individual's relationship to meaning and community as expressed in law. Daniel's death is lamented, and yet there appears to be no other option but to punish the minority definition he represents when it threatens the 'larger' community.

When we turn to the progress of the relationship between Sylvia and Philip, the individual's relationship to meaning appears to undergo a sudden shift. If however we keep in mind the way in which the legal system embodied a process of definition which links 'meaning' with what is economically beneficial to the community, this apparent inconsistency in the text is revealed as a very subtle, indeed insidious, consistency.

It is perhaps best to begin with Sylvia and the development of her relationship to language. It is important to note that, from the beginning of Sylvia's Lovers, Sylvia is depicted as an extremely wilful individual. From the opening expedition to buy a cloak and Sylvia's determination not to "yield[] to Philip in anything that she could help"(27), her refusal to allow Philip to call her 'Sylvie'(25), to her strong statements of hatred for Philip (383) and the man who

gives evidence against her father (319;331), Sylvia is depicted as a woman of passionate emotions and enduring convictions.

At the same time, one must note what appears to be an anomaly in Sylvia's relationship to language. There is a sense in which Sylvia, from the time of her betrothal to Kinraid, engages with language as with an autonomous structure over which she can exert no control once words are spoken. At a literal level the contractual nature of language is clearly manifested in Sylvia's marriage to Philip. As she herself points out to Kinraid, returned alive from the war in France, she is "bound and tied"(383) by the marriage oath she has sworn to Philip. Indeed she recognises the contractual nature of language long before the marriage itself takes place. Considering her forthcoming marriage to Philip, and unsure still if Kinraid is indeed dead, Sylvia wishes that "she had not repeated the solemn words by which she had promised herself to Philip"(326). Her wish reveals her recognition of the binding nature of the marriage contract, and a sense of the loss of self-definition which speaking words of a legally binding nature entails. More interesting however, is the sense of contract which adheres, in Sylvia's mind, to all her words, not just those which have an overtly legal function in their utterance. Having cursed Philip for his betrayal of both Kinraid and himself, Sylvia is importuned by Hester to forgive him. She declares however that she "daren't forgive Philip, even if [she] could; [she had taken] a great oath again' him"(445). Even when Sylvia is more relenting towards Philip, the "shadow of her vow"(490) against him renders her unable to act in a manner opposite to that implied in her oath. Indeed, she is unable even to contemplate how to respond to Philip

in a way inconsistent with her vow, and as a result has recourse to "the re-utterance of unforgiving words"(490) against him. Words once spoken by Sylvia are lost to her. She can effect no alteration in their meaning, despite her previously illustrated willfulness, and seems fated to perpetuate the 'meanings' she can no longer control.

It would seem that Sylvia's relationship to language corresponds closely to that of her father. There is in her initial oaths a very strong sense of intention, of the individual's control over language and meaning. When she discovers Philip's treachery towards her, Sylvia's sense of control over what she says is paramount. Though she cannot strip away the contractual element of her previous vows to Philip and so agree with Kinraid that her "marriage is no marriage"(382), she does "assume[] to herself the right of speech"(380) in order to swear that she will never "live with [Philip] as his wife again." (383) But once the original impetus of immediate 'intention' is gone, the autonomous nature of language surrounds Sylvia, and she is like Daniel embroiled in the results of definitions of her acts and words over which she has no control.

Thus far Sylvia's Lovers would seem a text exploring the individual's relationship to meaning in a consistent way. Both Daniel and Sylvia demonstrate the ultimate helplessness of the individual to exert influence over meanings s/he expresses despite an initial strength or 'intention'. But Philip's relationship to language appears to originate from a very different conception of the individual's role or non-role within a linguistic structure than that which shapes both Sylvia's and Daniel's predicament. Importantly however, this new conception can be found only at a sub-textual level in the narrative,

and its divergence from the dominant ideological conception of language is perhaps best noted in the way in which Philip's relationship to language overtly conforms to the dominant conception is first illustrated.

One should note that despite Philip's evident awareness of his place within a community [he both argues that the pressgangs are necessary to force those abstaining from contributing to the war against France to contribute their share (40) and conforms to 'local' meanings when he connives at smuggling], there is one area in which he essays to control or shape at an individual level. That area is Sylvia, what she is and should be. From his first interference in the colour of Sylvia's cloak and his desire to name her 'Sylvie', Philip consistently attempts to refashion and so define what Sylvia is. Though she is the "only woman in the world"(128) for Philip, the individual who figures prominently in all his future plans (130;166), he seems curiously ill at ease with what Sylvia appears to be, and is intent on reshaping her. Where "others only admired, [Philip hoped] to appropriate"(134). At first Philip's efforts to redefine are confined to those ones which sought to make Sylvia his 'wife'. Anything that Sylvia might do or say until that definition is effected is deemed positive in Philip's eyes if it suggests the possibility that she will become his wife. As long as Sylvia "spoke graciously to him"(190), as long as she does not act in a manner which intimates the impossibility of his ever re-defining her as 'wife', Philip is happy. His desire for Sylvia is such that it seems as if "it must compel all things to his wish in the end"(161). He translates change in Sylvia, whenever he possibly can, as change which will effect his goal.

One might expect that once engaged or married, Philip's intent to re-define Sylvia would wane, having achieved its objective. Indeed this seems initially to be the case. Where once he was attracted to Sylvia's "liveliness and piquancy"(270), the engaged Philip now "dote[s] on her languor, and thought her silence more sweet than words"(270). For Philip the change in Sylvia, the result the reader knows to be of her belief in Kinraid's death, can still be defined in terms of himself. Having achieved his aim in contracting Sylvia to be his wife, all change in Sylvia simply makes her more suitable than ever to perform that function. This satisfaction however does not last long. Philip soon discovers that Sylvia is "so unchanged by her new position towards him"(327) as not to fit his definition of a wife-to-be. Though "quiet and gentle"(327), Sylvia is "no shyder, no brighter, no coyer, no happier, than she had been for months before"(327). Where his eyes "beam[] out love at her approach"(327), Sylvia neither "blush[es] nor smil[es]"(327); where Philip "took delight in whispers . . . [Sylvia] always spoke to him in her usual tone of voice"(335). Even when married, Philip's dissatisfaction with what Sylvia has become in marriage is clearly conveyed. The "old burst of impatience, the old pettishness"(342) which had been attributes of the former Sylvia are now lamented. Her passiveness, her docility, all contradict what Philip now wants Sylvia to be. He wants her to "have a will of her own"(342) that he might gratify the pleasures it specified, but Sylvia remains as languorous and silent as he once wanted her to become.

In this respect, Philip's lack of control, lack of power to define, accords with the dominant image of the relationship between

the individual and 'meaning'. Able like Sylvia to influence events up to a certain point, Philip is ultimately ineffectual in initiating change. Sylvia becomes his wife, but not the wife he intended her to be. This impulse to define and its inevitable failure is more specifically illustrated in the scene in which Philip witnesses Kinraid's kidnapping by the pressgang. Whereas Philip's relationship with Sylvia is an attempt to 'redefine' a personality, here Philip tackles language itself. The scene begins with Philip's realisation of the forthcoming ambush of Kinraid by the pressgang, and his decision to conceal his presence rather than attempt to warn Kinraid. Immediately the scene is placed in the context of the individual and his/her relationship to language and meaning. Philip as "an inhabitant of Monkshaven at that day, well understood the betokening signs"(215), of the pressgang. But rather than act on the Monkshaven 'reading' of the sign by shouting 'ambush', Philip attempts to "deafen as well as to blind himself, that he might neither hear nor see anything"(215). Unable to redefine the meaning of the 'betokening signs', Philip chooses to ignore them.

Having thus initially eluded acting on a shared meaning however, Philip is soon faced with another dilemma in language. Kinraid, catching sight of Philip, calls to him to tell Sylvia that he is a witness, and most importantly, to remind her "not [to] forget the great oath [they] took together this morning; [for] she's as much [his] wife as if [they had] gone to church"(220). Kinraid's request causes a great upheaval in Philip's conscience yet he manages to quell it because of one vital event. Though "almost relenting into pity for the man captured before his eyes"(219), Philip spots the

ribbon which Sylvia has given to Kinraid as a love-token, and recognises it as one he had himself presented to her in the same light. The ribbon is important for in seeing it Philip must recognise two things: that not only does Sylvia regard herself as Kinraid's betrothed, but that Philip's powers to 'shape' Sylvia into the wife he considers her to be are impotent. This latter consideration is reinforced by the great surge of anger that results from the ribald jesting about Sylvia that issues from the pressgang. For Philip it is Kinraid who has "exposed the idea of Sylvia to be the subject of ribald whispers"(220 - emphasis mine), who has affronted Philip's conception of what Sylvia is and should be.

As a result of Kinraid's 'trespass' on the idea of Sylvia, Philip decides to withhold the crucial message Kinraid sends her. But interestingly that decision is the outcome of a determined re-definition of language. If Kinraid has broken the image of Sylvia that Philip has constructed, Philip's response to such iconoclasm is to redefine the promise by which Kinraid has enjoined him to inform Sylvia of his imprisonment. Philip carefully ponders exactly what it is he had said to Kinraid, "how much of a promise he had made to deliver those last passionate words"(221). He "could not recollect how much, how little he had said"(221), and feels sure that Kinraid had not heard any response he had made. On the basis of these 'facts', Philip considers the definition of 'promise'. His first definition that a "promise given is a fetter to the giver"(221) is one that we can assume accords with the 'communal' definition of the word. To promise is to assure to do some act or give some service or goods to the receiver of the promise. It is a specifically contractual

term of language, and as such one must suggest that it is not within the power of one of the individuals to alter the agreed upon terms. Kinraid calls upon Philip to act in accordance with the shared meaning of the word. But Philip contrives, despite the existence of a shared meaning, to alter the definition to suit his purposes. His definition, "a promise is not given when it has not been received"(221) is an attempt to remove the contractual element of a term which is inherently contractual. The onus of the term is now not on both speaker and listener, but now solely on the hearer of the promise, and denies the implicit mutuality of the term.

Philip repeats this act of sophistry concerning language and the 'source' of meaning on more than one occasion. Having decided to conceal the content of Kinraid's message to Sylvia, Philip must still decide whether to relay the fact of Kinraid's capture. Able to replace the meaning of Kinraid's words as "grains of gold"(225), which both Sylvia and Kinraid would attribute to them, with his own definition of them as "lighter than dust"(224), Philip is nevertheless unsure if Kinraid's impressment should be relayed; not to Sylvia specifically, but to her father and the Monkshaven community. What arrests him is that same intrusion on the 'idea of Sylvia' which halted his pity for Kinraid. Hearing sailors in the inn where he sits writing, speak of Kinraid and his prowess amongst women, Philip adds to their list of sexual conquests the name of Sylvia. In doing so he yet again attributes to Kinraid a definition of 'sexual conquest' that contravenes his own, and so allows himself to remain silent on Kinraid's disappearance. In a similar way, Philip redefines the word 'dead' in order to validate, at least to himself, his silence.

Not only does he take it upon himself "to decide that, with such a man as the specksioneer, absence was equivalent to faithless forgetfulness"(230), that 'forgetfulness' is in turn redefined as death. Kinraid may have been killed in war or at sea, but "even if not, he was as good as dead to her; so that the word 'dead' might be used in all honesty certainty, as in one of its meanings Kinraid was dead for sure."(329) This particular redefinition shows the subtlety of Philip's approach. If meaning is communal, then in one sense Kinraid is indeed dead: Sylvia, Daniel, and the Monkshaven community believe him to be so. But of course, whilst Philip is at one level exploiting the communal basis of meaning for his own purposes, he does realise that the meaning of 'dead' upon which Sylvia, Daniel, and Monkshaven are operating is entirely different from his own. Kinraid is "as good as dead to her"(329) only if that 'her' corresponds to the 'idea of Sylvia' which Philip embraces. To such a Sylvia, the bride and wife of Philip's conception, Kinraid is dead because she shares Philip's definitions.

In terms of the novel's overt exploration of the relationship of the individual to language, Philip's attempts to assert control over the 'meaning' of language is certain to fail. And, at the level of narrative, those attempts do. Kinraid is not after all dead; and he returns to claim Sylvia as his wife. Philip's belief in the "terrible earnest[ness]"(251) of Kinraid's avowal of love is seen to be rooted in actuality (377-78). As the only individual who consciously denies the communality of meaning, Philip's 'punishment' in the text is far more severe than that of Daniel whose death is depicted equivocally. Suddenly acutely sensitive to the communal definition of his behaviour as treachery against love (386), and

unwilling to encounter the "popular indignation"(386 - emphasis mine) that would result, Philip determines to exile himself. His subsequent disfigurement, and return to Monkshaven as Widow Dobson's unknown lodger, is his 'punishment'. Not until he becomes "too indifferent to life and the world to have a will"(454), and recognises that supreme 'authority' lies in God not himself, does Philip die peaceably.

His death however is not as straightforward as it might seem. The text strives to make clear in the chapter "A Fable at Fault" that Philip, unlike Sir Guy of Warwick, cannot expect to win back Sylvia's love after his betrayal. But if on the surface Philip seems in a position of powerlessness in comparison to Sir Guy, one can see that at a deeper level Philip is in control of the 'story' of his life in a way not dissimilar to that of Sir Guy. The fable is an interesting illustration of the individual's control over meaning. In the brief outline sketched in Sylvia's Lovers one might well ask why Sir Guy waited so long before giving the "secret sign"(465) that brings his long-ignorant wife Phillis rushing to his side. Having no apparent reason to maintain his anonymity (unlike Philip he appears not to have betrayed his wife in any way), the dominant impression he creates is of a man in control of the 'meaning' of his life, a man who determines how he shall be defined: as 'hermit', 'husband' or 'earl'. Philip in contrast seems to have relinquished any claim to 'self' at all, and certainly any attempt to control the definition of his life. We are told that he returns to Monkshaven to find "his Phillis"(467) - the term is meant to underline the futility of Philip ever finding in Sylvia the 'wife' he wished her. He remains, in Monkshaven, unknown and seemingly intent on maintaining his anonymity.

But at this point the stories of Guy and Philip, far from being sharply differentiated, begin to converge. Though Philip has no 'secret sign' by which to summon Sylvia, we are told that he requests Sylvia's presence as he lies dying from an internal injury sustained in rescuing their child. It is as 'father' to her child that Philip can request Sylvia's attention. This in itself would seem scant reason to assert that Philip has reclaimed 'control' over his life. But if we examine the text closely we see that, despite the apparent inefficacy of his previous attempts to exert individual control over language by willed re-definition, Philip's definition of the event that led to his exilement has become the accepted 'meaning' of that event. Where Philip determined that Kinraid was 'as good as dead' to Sylvia because of inconstancy Philip attributed to him, Kinraid has become so (496). Now remarried Kinraid presents himself as an unworthy, fickle lover (though Coulson, in a similar situation, is never presented in this light). Kinraid's "old, passionate love"(451) has "faded away and vanished utterly"(451), has become as dead as Philip defined it to be. But most importantly, it is Sylvia who accepts this definition, and now seeing that Philip "would not have acted so"(437), recognises the "real nature of [his] love"(437). As a result Sylvia becomes "wife"(500) - Philip is ultimately successful in aligning Sylvia with the 'idea' of her he has conceived all along. Sylvia is "his Phillis"(467), the generic woman as wife.

The apparent ascendance of an individual's meaning is certainly disconcerting in a novel whose entire thrust until this point has been the individual's impotent relationship to meaning. How is it that Philip successfully asserts a personal definition when both

Daniel and Sylvia illustrate that language is a system of meaning over which the individual has no influence? The answer must lie in the definition of what Sylvia has become: Philip claims her as "My wife"(500- emphasis mine) before he claims her as 'Sylvie', and that emphasis on possession is perhaps the key to the text's apparent inconsistency. The term wife has of course a legal as well as social definition. In both Gaskell's day and the period in which Sylvia's Lovers is set, a wife was legally the property and possession of her husband. If we compare Daniel's encounter with language as embodied in law, and Philip's, then what one must note is the similarity of their situations. Daniel is hanged as a representative of a community whose 'meaning' of justice is based on what is economically beneficial. As such, it contradicts the larger definition of what is beneficial to the nation or community as a whole. Philip's attempts to define Sylvia are similarly concerned with what is 'beneficial' in a wife. But unlike Daniel's conception of justice, Philip's definition of wife does not threaten nor conflict with a larger one. Though it would appear that Philip's individual attempt to engender meaning has been successful, it is simply the case that he expresses, does not originate, a definition of woman as wife and property that is communally produced. Where meanings of what is economically beneficial, whilst always being communally produced, alter according to the differing economic opportunities of communities (Monkshaven versus the south of England), meanings of what is sexually beneficial are consistent. What Philip's equivocal success ultimately illustrates is the maleness of the community, and so the male bias of what is defined as beneficial in both economic and sexual terms.

As simply an articulator of the male, 'communal' definition of woman as wife, one might wonder why Philip is 'punished' at all. But again the definition of woman as 'property' answers the query. Philip's punishment is not for attempting to make Sylvia into the wife he requires, but for attempting to do so when he knows that she has already been defined as 'wife' by another man. Philip's decision to conceal the cause of Kinraid's disappearance allows Sylvia to consider the contract or oath she has taken to be Kinraid's wife to be no longer applicable. Philip however consciously flouts the agreed upon meaning of such a contract. Like Kinraid, Philip understands the betrothal oath between Sylvia and Kinraid makes them man and wife "as if [they had] gone to church"(220). But he allows himself to over-ride that definition in order to claim Sylvia as his own. Philip can therefore be both punished for violating the meaning that Kinraid and Sylvia's oath constituted, and rewarded with Sylvia as his wife. Philip is guilty, not of attempting a new definition of woman as property, but of failing to observe the etiquette or terms of agreement that surround that definition.

This latter context also perhaps elucidates the Christian tableau which ends the novel. At one level the ending is explicable in terms of the theme of forgiveness that runs through the novel. As Sanders says in his introduction to the text, Sylvia finds that "she cannot live on vengeful passion alone".⁷ That wilfulness which allows Sylvia to assert that "there's some things as I know I niver forgive"(333), that confidence in her own definitions of acts and events as forgiveable or not, loses its power. What were once strong words of Sylvia's intent become words she must regret (495). But perhaps we can also

view the 'Christian' element in Sylvia's Lovers as another language system with which the individual must engage him/herself. Both Sylvia and Philip comment on their 'punishment' in terms of their efforts to exert control over meaning. Sylvia laments that "Lord God Almighty has ta'en [her] at [her] word"(496), or forced her to live out the consequences of her language. Philip too realises that his judgement of Kinraid as fickle and unworthy was wrong (496). With their recognition of individual impotence in such matters, both are 'forgiven'. We must note however that for all of Philip's newfound humility, Sylvia is still his wife, his definition of her is sustained. The temptation to stress that marriage is the prime point at which law and religion collude in the translation of woman into male property becomes strong. Philip can perhaps die a 'christian' death not only because he has learnt the lesson of humility, but because he has never transgressed any of its laws in the first place. Though he has made Sylvia his "Idol"(495), and feels that "If [he] could live [his] life o'er again [he] would love [his] God more, and [Sylvia] less"(495), his desire to appropriate Sylvia can only be labelled an extreme manifestation of the socially and religiously legitimate attitude towards woman.

Finally the communal basis of meaning is reasserted by the historical structure of the novel itself. In a novel which places the individual moment within the structure of past time, the supremacy of overall structure or meaning is maintained. More specifically, we must note that despite the privileging of the narrator's viewpoint of the story of Sylvia's lovers, what persists in the reader's mind is not a tale of forgiveness at all. Though the individual can see

Sylvia and Philip's predicament in those terms, the "popular feeling"(503), the "tradition"(502) or definition of Sylvia and Philip's story that lives on is one of a wife who lived in "hard-hearted plenty"(502) whilst her husband died of starvation. The narrator asserts the validity of the tale just told, and explains away the tradition as the result of "ignorance of the real facts"(502). But despite such assertions, the narrator's relationship to the text mimics the relationship of the individual to language: positing the narrative voice as the 'site of meaning', the narrator encounters communally-produced meanings over which s/he has no control.

Notes

¹Terry Eagleton, "Sylvia's Lovers and Legality," Essays in Criticism, 26 (1976), 17.

²Angus Easson, Elizabeth Gaskell, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 162-3.

³I recognise that the ensuing discussion of 'communal meaning' and its relation to the 'law' appears to evade a definition of 'law' as the expression of ruling class interest. It is important to note however that Monkshaven is presented in the text as a democratic society in which there appears to be no overt class division of labour (See Eagleton, 21). Rather, the text presents an England demarcated primarily by the differing economic opportunities available in the separate geographical areas of the north and south.

⁴Elizabeth Gaskell, Sylvia's Lovers, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 7. Subsequent references are to this edition and appear in the text.

⁵Jane Rendall, The Origins of Modern Feminism, (London: MacMillan Publishers, 1985), 13.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Andrew Sanders, ed., Sylvia's Lovers, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), xv.

Chapter Nine: Wives and Daughters (1865)

At the close of Wives and Daughters Mr Gibson is seen sadly to reflect "Lover versus father . . . Lover wins."¹ The reflection is one which any father in any number of novels might make. But in a novel whose hero, or lover, is a character clearly modelled on Darwin,² Mr Gibson's statement resounds with rather more than the usual significance. The impact of Darwin's theory of evolution, and in particular his conception of 'sexual selection' has been briefly dealt with in other works on the novel.³ But the interaction and resulting complication of evolutionism with the concepts of the unified self and the self as a site of meaning which has structured Gaskell's previous novels, is an area which yet requires elucidation.

In the years 1864-66 which saw the serial publication of Wives and Daughters there raged a controversy on evolutionism and its effect on the emerging social sciences which Rosalind Coward, in Patriarchal Precedents, has laid out in detail. Though the peregrinations of the debate are far too entangled to summarise here, the debate itself centred on the evolution or non-evolution of familial forms, and the relationship of those familial models to models of the state, and indeed social development in general.⁴ The debate arose with the publication of Maine's Ancient Law (1861), whose theory that a complex and artificial family model - the patriarchal family - was the fundamental and universal model of family history, was deemed contrary to the prevailing atmosphere of evolutionism. Where Maine urged the notion of a primary, complex and artificial form of the

family at the origin of the human family, "Nature seemed to insist that the complex emerged from the simple".⁵ In particular, it was the way in which marital institutions organised sexuality and reproduction which became the area of speculation in the debate on man's evolution from animal to human.⁶

Such a debate might seem far removed from Gaskell's novel. But in fact what the debate provides is both a context and a possible 'solution' to the problems of women which Gaskell had been encountering in her novels. Where previous heroines are seen to be unable to reconcile a sense of 'self' with social expectations of the 'female', Gaskell's new heroine might benefit from the contemporary belief in evolutionism.⁷ Where the previous sexual and social institution of marriage constrained and limited women, Gaskell envisaged a new, evolved institution of marriage which would do no such thing, which would in fact call for a new model of womanhood as embodied in Molly.

The 'old' institution of marriage, and the type of women it both formed and demanded, is clearly represented in Wives and Daughters in the characters of Clare/Mrs Gibson and Cynthia Kirkpatrick. Clare is stamped from the moment of her introduction by the "running flow of easy talk"(51) that issues from her. Though on comic level she appears to function primarily as the unconscious butt of many jokes, the connection between the type of speaker she is and the 'career' of marriage open to women is the focus for Gaskell's exploration of women and language. Clare's speech is notable for two things: its economic basis, and its fluid adaptability. Clare overtly claims a greater liking for eldest sons (218) and views dying patients primarily in terms of prospective legacies (209). But more importantly, Clare's

speech is adaptable. She is liked at Towers Park not merely because she has a pleasant reading voice, but because she possesses the skill of being "ready to talk, when a trickle of conversation was required . . . willing to listen . . . [and able to make] exactly the remarks which are expected from an agreeable listener"(130).⁸

It is Clare's voice that ultimately compels Mr Gibson to propose marriage. Her "voice was so soft, her accent so pleasant"(138) that Gibson can imagine her as a "wife for himself"(139). Once the proposal is made, the issue of a wife's speech or language is further highlighted. Mr Gibson, leaving Tower park a newly engaged man, ponders the unsatisfactory nature of his recent (first) conversation with his wife-to-be. Expressing the hope that he and his fiancée will "shake down into uniformity before long"(143), and castigating himself for thinking that their "thoughts should run in the same groove all at once"(143), Gibson is soon remonstrating with himself on the issue: "It would be very flat and stagnant to have only an echo of one's own opinions from one's wife"(143). The ability of female speech to converge with or reflect male conversation is however precisely what is at the centre of Gibson's marital tribulations, indeed at the centre of Wives and Daughters itself. What is at first a pleasing skill of easy talk is soon presented as a deterioration of language use into one which renders words "ready-made clothes [which] never fit[] individual thoughts."(349)

If we examine closely those aspects of Mrs Gibson's speech which are most ridiculed and criticised we see that they are closely connected with the notion of the 'source' of language. If Mrs Gibson's language never seems to arise from an 'individual' source, it seems

the aim of the other characters in the text to attempt to discern the 'locus' of meaning of her words for her. Initially this aim manifests itself in other characters' desire to keep Mrs Gibson to the point in conversation. When Molly and Mrs Gibson have their first talk as mother and daughter, Molly's first request to hear some news about Cynthia Kirkpatrick is met by Mrs Gibson's comments on her own name Hyacinth and what a gentleman in the 53rd regiment thought of it (162). Not until Molly reiterates her question does Cynthia become the topic of conversation. Even then one must note that Molly's very direct questions, "When will she come? . . . When will she leave school? . . . she is to come to the wedding, isn't she?"(163), are not met with correspondingly direct answers.

But more pertinently, Mrs Gibson's language is seen to have no discernible 'source'. When she first meets Osborne Hamley, her conversation is seen not to originate in experience, or direct personal observation. Her conversational skills mean that Mrs Gibson can arrange her words "so as to make it appear as if the opinions that were in reality quotations, were formed by herself"(217). But what is most interesting here is that such 'manipulation' of language manifests itself grammatically. Whilst nothing so overt as a complete absence of the first-person pronoun occurs, one must note the obscurity of the subject-reference in Mrs. Gibson's speech. When talking to Osborne about opera, Mrs Gibson neatly asks questions which place the onus on the hearer to respond in a way which ascertains the hearer's direct 'experience' of the topic in question, not her own. She asks Osborne, "Did you observe her constant trick of heaving her shoulders and clasping her hands together before she took a high note?"(217) -

an interrogative form that implies the 'I' of the speaker, but which does not actually articulate it. Similarly, in her earlier conversation with Molly, Mrs Gibson's answers are curiously non-attributable. She speaks of what "People used to say,"(162), what "people say"(163), and what Molly's father's opinions on a topic are, but rarely responds to a question with "I think that . . . " Even comments on events she has experienced directly share this characteristic. Her comments on the Hollingford charity ball are such that "[a]nybody might have used them"(349).

The result in Wives and Daughters of such linguistic tactics is non-communication. If Mrs Gibson's language lacks a discernible source, she also begins many conversations without providing her listeners with a clear reference point or referent for her comments. Receiving an invitation from the London Kirkpatricks for Cynthia, Mrs Gibson's aggrieved comments on her exclusion are unintelligible, "no one knew to what she was referring"(468), and so guarantee that no exchange or communication takes place. Conversations with Mrs Gibson are characterised by this absence of the expected progression from comment to response. Indeed so typical are the "long inconsequential arguments"(260) that result from Mrs Gibson's style of conversation, Mr Gibson's 'defence' must perforce lie in silence.

Given that Wives and Daughters outlines the economic origin of this type of discourse, Mrs Gibson's status in the text is a source of contradiction. Her position at the Towers, where Mrs Gibson is "unwilling to [speak] any words of her own until Lady Cumnor had spoken and given the cue"(165), has guaranteed in the past that her language should convey a sense of an absence of 'source'. The dependent

position which requires a ready and flexible listener and speaker manifests itself linguistically in a correspondingly flexible 'perspective' or site of meaning. If it is "only by adopting the position of the subject within language that the individual is able to produce meaning",⁹ Mrs Gibson's apparent lack of a site of meaning comes as no surprise. When 'identity' is a matrix of subject positions,¹⁰ Clare/Kirkpatrick/Gibson can have no such source. Unable to adopt any stable position of subject because economic dependence necessitates flexibility and a constantly shifting perspective, Mrs Gibson becomes unintelligible and ultimately incommunicative.

When such obvious economic dependence is replaced by marriage for Mrs Gibson, it would seem that her speech is expected to undergo radical transformation. Though the text recognises the economic role of marriage [it brings "such a wonderful relief . . . that [Mrs Gibson] need not struggle any more for a livelihood"(140)], it does not recognise that Clare has simply exchanged one form of economic dependence for another. Accordingly, whilst her particular linguistic skills do not change, Mrs Gibson becomes the object of severe linguistic judgment. Whilst Gibson's ability to catch the "reflection of [Mr Gibson's] strong wish . . . [and] fanc[y] it was her own"(174) is nothing more than an example of the linguistic slipperiness that results from economic dependence, she is castigated severely as a "superficial and flimsy character"(175). Gone is the careful and sympathetic account of the economic determinants and "former subjection to the will of others"(175) which lie behind Clare's language. In its place is a moral censure from the narrative voice as well as other characters which assumes the individual's ability to transcend

such economic and social realities.

As a result, the search for Mrs Gibson's locus of meaning becomes a central issue in a text which has already outlined it as an impossibility. In the major confrontation between Mr and Mrs Gibson, it is the search for a centre of consciousness, meaning and motive that is highlighted. When Mr Gibson discovers his wife's awareness of the confidential fact of Osborne's ill-health, he determines to discover the source of her information. His four direct questions, "who told . . ."(426) are each met with diversionary tactics from his wife. Mrs Gibson is of course unwilling to divulge her culpability, but one must note the manner in which her responses are overwhelmingly characterised by a lack of self-referents. As in her earlier conversation with Osborne, Mrs Gibson's remarks throw the onus on her partner in conversation. She asks first, "Why? can you deny it? Is it not the truth?"(426). Her final disclosure, "if you will know, . . . it was you yourself"(426), reveals the extent to which Mrs Gibson is unable to posit herself as a subject. The reader knows that Mrs Gibson was active in obtaining the information on Osborne once she stumbled across the conversation her husband was having with the consultant. Mr Gibson's question, "Who told . . .", is framed to discover a 'subject' and should therefore elicit an answer which reflects activity/involvement grammatically, eg. "I overheard. . .". Mrs Gibson's passive answer is immediately rejected by Mr Gibson, "I never spoke to you on the subject"(426), and he demands that his wife make herself clear. Nevertheless, Mrs Gibson remains unable to articulate herself as 'subject', and it is up to her husband to deduct her 'position', which he quickly does.

Once Mrs Gibson has been forcibly posited as a subject, her ordeal is not over. Mr Gibson continues questioning in an attempt

to locate motive, and implicitly the centre of consciousness and meaning, the individual that lies behind both the initial act and her present language. Having determined 'outcome' [that Mrs Gibson overheard a confidential conversation and made sure she understood its significance with the help of a medical dictionary (427)], he attempts to deduce 'cause' or motive. He soon determines that Mrs Gibson's motive was economic. Understanding what the possible demise of the heir to the Hamley estate might mean, she alters her behaviour to the proximate heir Roger. Mr Gibson demands confirmation of this motive three times. His efforts finally yield a sulky, tentative affirmation. Mrs Gibson's "I suppose I have"(428) is not the declarative statement that Mr Gibson's direct questioning demands, but it is as close as Mrs Gibson can come to articulating such a remark. One must note how rapidly Mrs Gibson resumes her mantle of self-deference at the close of this interrogation. Whereas defence required her to posit herself as concerned mother to a potentially love-sick daughter, her need to reflect Mr Gibson's wishes in her speech soon leads to her denigration of any possible attachments her daughter may have. Mr Gibson may note the contradictions in his wife's speech (431), but her concern is to tell him what he seems to want to hear, no matter how many of her words she must retract.

In due course, the 'motive' is a part of the reflection Mrs Gibson bounces back to her husband. Mr Gibson's request that she lunch with Squire Hamley is rejected in a manner both tentative ["I am not sure . . ."(441)] and unpredictable as befits a speaker such as Mrs Gibson. But she has learnt the "hard necessity . . . of having to find a reason for her saying"(441) it, and duly announces her

'motive' once Mr Gibson requests an explanation. Of course, she eventually acquiesces to his desire, but one must note that it is not until she discerns it as her husband's proper desire that she can do so (441). Mr Gibson's first 'request' is formed as a statement, not an overt expression of his wants, and so could not be initially responded to, or reflected, in the manner Mrs Gibson eventually does.

Cynthia Kirkpatrick provides a less comic illustration of the connection between economic dependence and linguistic 'duplicity' or flexibility. Though Cynthia is never portrayed in precisely the same comic terms as her mother, saying awkward things and then "having said it, [feeling] . . . bound to stick to it for awhile"(441), the same sense of linguistic slipperiness adheres to her. She is introduced as a character with "such charm about her, [that] one forgets what she herself is in the halo that surrounds her"(191). It is important that it is Preston who makes this remark for, as with her mother, it is the need to appear charming to men that dictates Cynthia's linguistic duplicity. Her charm has its source in a "most exquisite power of adaptation to varying people and still more various moods; 'being all things to all men.'"(254-5) On an overt level, this ability is presented as simply a part of Cynthia's individual character: her nature is "to attract everyone of those she was thrown amongst"(261) be they the Miss Brownings or the heir to a vast estate. But Cynthia herself hints at a time of neglect, when she was left alone, as the source of her character, and the reader recognises her reference to her initial entanglement with Preston. The tale of that encounter is a literal illustration of the economic basis of female linguistic flexibility. "Money matters are at the root of it all. Horrid

Poverty"(456)1, and indeed it is money that Preston lends Cynthia in exchange for a promise of marriage.

In one sense the incident seems simply a straightforward illustration of one woman's particular encounter with one man. But if we look back on the episode what we note is that Preston's loan is an overt metaphor for the female predicament. Cynthia notes that other 'people' find her attractive when she appears in her borrowed finery for the first time. But in fact as Cynthia continues, the term 'people' quickly alters to that of her dancing 'partners' or men. Cynthia's power over these men is of course the power to attract. Preston's role makes clear that this power is used to search out, and ultimately exchange for, the economic security which the man in this society can bring. Note how Cynthia's power is seen to wane in direct proportion to her awareness of "how awkward it was to be in [Preston's] debt."(520)

But if Cynthia "like[s] to be liked"(453), and acts as a reflecting surface of others' opinion in order to be so, she is unable to cope when a negative reflection shines back at her. Preston's remark that "one forgets what she herself is in the halo that surrounds her"(191), establishes the importance of the nature of the reflected image that is built around Cynthia. If the sum total of others' opinion amounts not to a halo but raylessness, Cynthia is unable to function. Her declaration that she "cannot live with persons who don't think well of [her]"(516) is not a melodramatic gesture, but the inevitable result of a system which forces women to define themselves through the economic security represented by men. When Gaskell remarks upon the boundaries of Cynthia's personality, "where her reserve began, and her real self was shrouded in mystery"(461),

the term 'shroud' is doubly significant. If Cynthia cannot "submit to [anyone] thinking less well of [her] than he has done - however foolish his judgement may have been"(600), it is quite literally because she 'cannot live' in such circumstances. Her 'real self' is not so much shrouded in mystery as non-existent unless a positive image is reflected back to her from male eyes.

But like her mother, Cynthia's presentation in Wives and Daughters is contradictory. On the one hand she is presented as the product of economic circumstance. The "daily pressure and plaint of poverty"(520) are sympathetically cited as the economic determinants of her social character. But once Cynthia is engaged to Roger Hamley, the results of such determinants appear to be undermined. As an engaged woman, Cynthia's mirror-like personality is seen in terms of moral judgments not economic realities. When Mr Coxe makes his return to Hollingford to woo Molly, his first object of affection is soon replaced by Cynthia. Her "unspoken deference"(448), her "soft attractive ways"(448), attract Coxe as they reveal her to be "much easier of access"(448) than Molly. Coxe's subsequent request for Cynthia's hand in marriage baffles Gibson who expects his own daughter to be claimed, and provides a moment of comic relief in the text. But one must note the manner in which Coxe's 'inconstancy' in love is seen sympathetically as a mark of "simplicity, . . . unworldliness, [and] . . . the strength of [his] feelings"(450). In contrast, Cynthia, who has simply been defined as an object of affection, is accused of thoughtlessness (453) - not a serious accusation, but still more severe than one might expect in a text that has already outlined the reasons behind Cynthia's, and other women's, need to be admired.

The assessment of Cynthia's involvement with Preston is similarly problematic. That involvement is seen as the result of economic hardship and is presented initially in a sympathetic light. From a regrettable entanglement in which a young girl misguidedly involves herself, however, the affair becomes 'proof' of Cynthia's flirting, jilting nature, the "flaw which she herself had made"(602). Though extenuating circumstances are granted as possible mitigating factors, Cynthia is judged to be 'at fault', as someone who has determinedly acted deceitfully (602). The moral terms are hard to reconcile with the carefully outlined social and economic circumstances that initially 'explained' Cynthia's character. But one must note that, like her mother before her, the moral condemnation of Cynthia coincides with her engaged status. Mr Gibson himself emphasizes Roger Hamley's right to an explanation of Cynthia's conduct. The "full truth"(597) is necessary in order that Roger may 'protect' Cynthia, to which he has a "legal right"(597) once married. In the meantime, Mr Gibson claims that right as Cynthia's legal guardian.

At this point one recalls a detail in the confrontation between Mr and Mrs Gibson over Osborne Hamley that may explain the contradictions in both Mrs Gibson's and Cynthia's presentation in the text. Mr Gibson points out the difficulties which his wife's behaviour could bring him. As man and wife they are "one in all . . . respects"(429). Mrs Gibson cannot "do a dishonourable act without [her husband] being inculpated in the disgrace"(429). The legal status of man and wife as one person perhaps explains the discordant expectations of women in the text, and the manner in which these expectations alter through time. The text carefully outlines the economic dependence that women

have on employers or families, and notes the linguistic flexibility and mirror-like character that results from the need to please in order to gain and retain economic security. At the same time, marriage is not recognised as a form of economic dependence that similarly requires linguistic flexibility. As a result not only are women's linguistic skills now subject to moral censure, the device against which their language and action is measured is that of the man. As simply a part of the men to whom they are married, women are expected to speak as their men do, as autonomous subjects. What is unprofessional and dishonourable for a doctor is similarly so for the doctor's wife.¹¹

For Cynthia, now engaged to Roger, her mirror-like language can no longer be 'explained' or sympathetically presented. It is now subject to precisely the same rules or methods of assessment by which male language is judged. Cynthia herself recognises that the standard by which Roger is judged and judges "wasn't made for [her]"(601), and her unwillingness to be so assessed leads Mr Gibson to accept the need for their engagement to be broken.

What all of this means is that women are suddenly transformed from being economically and socially 'determined' speakers to ones which are judged as if they are 'determining' - speakers who are in 'control' of their language and actions and therefore subject to moral assessment. Mrs Gibson is suddenly interrogated for motivation when her language/actions are not within her control; Cynthia becomes a jilt, a moral assessment applicable only to the active controller of behaviour and language.

At the same time the text makes clear that the very act of marriage

which effects this transformation in the assessment of female speakers is itself based on the concept of the 'determined' not 'determining' woman. Mrs Gibson, speaking of the possibility of resurrecting Cynthia's engagement to Roger, deplores Molly's suggestion that Cynthia request to be re-engaged. Such an act is forbidden, for Cynthia "must wait until he proposes again"(618). Mrs Gibson's ideas on the etiquette of engagement is an accurate articulation of the prevailing sexual convention which dictates that a woman does not speak her love until spoken to. She is the 'selected party' in the engagement process, not the 'selector' though she may exercise the right of refusal.¹² For such a 'selected' individual to acquire suddenly the ability to 'select', and the autonomy both behavioural and linguistic that is implicit in that ability, is a contradiction which the text never fully considers. Indeed it is at the root of the contradictory status of the major female character in the text, Molly.

It is important to note from the outset that Molly is presented as a 'different' female speaker. She is a girl with a sure sense of self, who speaks with what can be termed 'linguistic integrity'. This integrity manifests itself as a 'literalness' in language, a characteristic that Molly shares with her father in precisely the same way that wives and fiancées are expected to share their husbands'/fiancées' linguistic skills. The effect of this shared literalness is a similarly shared inability to understand the linguistic flexibility utilised by women. When Cynthia and Mrs Gibson exasperate Mr Gibson by the manner in which they both refuse and accept Squire Hamley's invitation to lunch, Molly's pleading attempts to persuade them to accept the invitation indicate that, like her father, she accepts

their prevaricating "literally"(442). Indeed from the early part of Wives and Daughters, Molly's literalness in language is illustrated. When Lord Cumnor 'promises' that Molly should attend the Tower gala, she takes his absent-minded words quite seriously - the fact that he had "asked [her] twice over"(40) serving to make Lord Cumnor's 'promise' almost imperative. The Squire's ruminations on Mr Gibson's possible marriage prospects elicit the same literal interpretation from Molly. Breathlessly she asks if her father had expressed any preference only to be admonished for taking "words so seriously"(105). In the same way, Mrs Gibson's reference to Cynthia as 'poor dear' makes Molly "afraid lest she might be ill"(251).

It is only with her father that Molly's literalness does not cause such misunderstandings. "[T]he power she possesse[s] of fully understanding the exact value of both his words and his silence"(121) is based on their shared linguistic 'integrity' or literalness, passed from father to daughter during their many periods of "the most delightful intercourse together"(63).

What this linguistic integrity ultimately indicates in Molly is a sense of self. Her language in the opening scenes of Wives and Daughters embodies this 'self' clearly. Though her escapade at the Towers fête suggests a shy child, the overriding impression in these early pages is of Molly's strong sense of individuality. In particular her reaction to her father's forthcoming marriage illustrates her stress on individuality. Urged to consider other people's happiness before her own, Molly acquiesces but declares, "It will be very dull when I shall have killed myself"(170). Her language at this time is dominated by references to herself, not

merely in the over use of the first-person pronoun ["I don't think it would be nice at all . . . I will like you . . . I will try hard to love you"(165); "I like roughness"(154); "I mean to try and remember"(154); "I would rather not - because I think that I ought not . . . "(199)], but in declarations of her feelings and preferences. Such language denotes a self sure of its likes and dislikes, its boundaries and definitions. It is a language that may be termed 'expressive', that is coming from a localised source, the self. Molly's "straightforward manner"(166) or outspokenness is a quality noted by Lady Cumnor and Clare alike, and displayed in her conversation. When Lady Cumnor begins to interrogate Molly, asking a "string of very straightforward questions"(166), one notes that unlike her step-mother Molly answers directly. Each question is answered, not evaded, with a surety of opinion that leads Lady Cumnor to recognise that, for Molly, it is "a matter of course that every one should know their own affairs best."(166) Molly's language is an expression of her self, her likes, dislikes and motives, and she as yet believes all language to be a similar expression of other speakers' selves. This type of language has already been identified as the standard by which Mr Gibson judges both his own and his wife's speech. Indeed it is identified as a peculiarly 'male' conception of language. The squire's speech is likened to a "transparent medium through which the current might be seen"(303), and Lord Hollingford's language, as illustrated in a "manly, feeling, sensible letter"(410), is clearly presented as 'expressive'. It is a language associated with truthfulness and honesty, assessed in moral terms and deemed to be morally worthy.¹³

It is important to note however that whilst Molly's language

differs in its directness and quality of 'expression' from the mirror-language of other women, her source of identity does not. Though her fears of estrangement when she is mistakenly left behind at the Cumnor's gala can be seen simply as a young girl's understandable reaction to being left amongst strangers, Molly's imaging of her experience suggests a deeper significance. Feeling like "a lighted candle when they're putting the extinguisher on it"(58), feeling in other words on the edge of extinction, Molly's relief at her father's return manifests itself in a strong desire for some hidden method of constant contact. A chain that could be pulled between the two guarantees that they "could never lose each other"(58). The image is a measure of Molly's deep attachment. But, coupled with the image of the extinguished candle, it suggests that Molly's father is quite literally the source or centre of her identity. Amongst those she does not know, Molly is on the verge of losing her sense of self, feeling more inanimate than animate.

Interestingly, Gibson seems initially anxious to guarantee his place in Molly's eyes, wanting to "keep her a child"(65). But there comes a point when Molly is seventeen that Gibson's definition of his daughter as a child is rudely interrupted by the amorous attentions of his student for Molly. Gibson is "startled at discovering that his little one was growing fast into a woman and already the passive object of some of the strong interests that affect a woman's life"(87). But most interestingly, once Gibson determines that he could not "guard [Molly] as he would have wished"(87), once he accepts that "people consider[her] a young woman now"(91), Gibson seems prepared to give up his role as Molly's anchor of self in preference for that

"[k]ind of tender supervision which . . . all girls of that age require"(135).

From this point in the text, the reader encounters difficulties in Molly's presentation. On the one hand, she is presented as an 'expressive' speaker, with a sure sense of self that allows her to be so. Her father's marriage however catapults Molly into that region of 'self-lessness' which her sense of loss at the opening gala prefigures. For if Molly's separation from her father at that point made her feel inanimate, his marriage makes her feel that the "piece of solid ground"(145) on which her existence is rooted has been removed from beneath her. "[D]rift[ing] out to the infinite sea alone"(145), Molly is quite literally "not [her]self"(146) for her source of identity is gone. And it is here that the text must encounter its own contradictions. For if Molly's status is no longer that of daughter, she is about to become, as the plot and the very title of the novel prescribe, a wife. The movement from daughter to wife however is fraught with difficulties. It necessitates a movement from 'expressive' speaker to 'reflective' speaker - a movement from one in control in language to one whose speech is determined by social and economic factors. We have already seen the paradoxical way in which the 'sexually-selected' female reflects this status in her language and is morally condemned for doing so. Sexual selection presumes a passive, socially and economically 'determined' woman of linguistic flexibility. The text however paradoxically judges such women in moral terms which themselves presume a free-will, determining woman who, by implication, would not be 'sexually selected'. The difficulty in Wives and Daughters is how to make Molly a 'wife', that is sexually selected, whilst retaining that very linguistic skill which both sets her apart morally from the other women in the text by defining her as a 'determining' speaker and excludes her from sexual selection.

An uneasy compromise is the result of these mutually exclusive aims. If we examine closely Molly's 'progression' in the text, what we note is that her ability to be an 'expressive' speaker is subtly altered to be an ability confined to speaking 'expressively' on others' behalf. For her own self, once Molly is posited as a sexual entity, a nubile woman, 'expressive' language disappears, replaced not by linguistic duplicity, but silence. Molly's acquired sexual status is a measure of her similarity to the other women in the text. Once her father is placed 'out of bounds' as a source of identity, Molly quickly transfers that role on to Roger Hamley. It is now he who provides the "stable guides to her conduct"(181), to whose opinion and authority she now looks in place of her father. Roger's engagement to Cynthia however soon hurls Molly once more into the nebulous region of 'self-lessness' first experienced at the time of her father's marriage. Hearing the engagement announced, Molly can comprehend nothing but that "she was being carried on in earth's diurnal course . . . with as little volition on her part as if she were dead."(417-8).

One must note however that Molly's initial response to her suspicions of Roger's attachment to Cynthia is rather different. She "would have been willing to cut off her right hand, if need were, to forward his attachment to Cynthia, and the self-sacrifice would have added a strange zest to a happy crisis"(390). Self-sacrifice is not a side of Molly's character hitherto revealed, but this entire passage points to the split in Molly that is the result of the text's dual aims for her. On the one hand, one registers the 'self-sacrifice' as the result of Molly's newly-acquired sexual status. Whilst Roger's

attraction to Cynthia is a "sore pain and bewilderment to Molly's heart"(389), the sexual convention to which Molly is subjected dictates that she is unable to act upon that pain. As a sexually selected woman, in this instance not selected, Molly must view Roger's choice of Cynthia as "the most natural thing in the world"(389). On the other hand, there is an element of Molly's 'old self' in her response to what appears to be a 'plot' to ensure that Cynthia's selection takes place. Molly views Cynthia as a "conscious if passive bait"(390) in a plot which Molly herself would have resisted (391). But the temptation to view Molly as a self-determining individual refusing to participate passively in her sexual selection must be resisted. For Molly's display of determination here is more the result of her dislike of seeing Roger 'entrapped', that is deprived of his free-will and choice, than an inclination to exercise free-will on her own behalf.

Indeed if we look carefully at Wives and Daughters we note that once Mr Gibson abdicates his role as source of identity for his daughter, all of Molly's 'expressive', seemingly self-determining, statements are on behalf of others. When Roger advised that "[o]ne has always to try to think more of others than of oneself"(152), he articulates precisely what will be the new source or site of Molly's language: other people. All of Molly's most apparently 'expressive' acts, her instant decision to stay with Squire Hamley when Osborne dies (605), her championship of Cynthia against Preston (524) and in defiance of her father (568), her decision to keep Osborne's marriage secret (247), are all performed on behalf of others. But where other female characters, whose source of identity is also others, reflect their

construction in duplicitous decentred speech, Molly at these overt moments of 'determination' retains her linguistic integrity. One must note the way in which the 'expressiveness' so often takes the form of a 'promise' - to Osborne and Cynthia for example. The promise as a linguistic construction exactly embodies the contradictory status that Molly has assumed. On the one hand the 'promise' is presented as a linguistic arrangement by which two people 'contract' themselves. Such a linguistic contract assumes two 'expressive' speakers - ones who can be 'true to their word' because language is the medium through which they convey their 'own' meanings. It is in this light that Osborne extracts a promise of silence from Molly upon her discovery of his marriage. Molly considers herself bound by her promise as its contractual nature implies, and Osborne seems satisfied by Roger's testimony to her character that he may rely upon it. Other characters in the novel identified as 'expressive speakers' also enter promises as into contracts. Mr Gibson has "bound [him]self by a promise"(433) to Squire Hamley to reveal if any romantic entanglements should develop between their respective offspring. This contract is so strong that it overrides any other individual's wishes, as Cynthia learns. Roger too is identified as "one to respect a promise"(433). Not only is his contract to conduct a scientific investigation viewed quite literally as a promise (687), but Roger "like[s] to feel bound"(419) by such contracts. Preston too views a promise as a contract "which it requires the consent of two people to break"(530).

On the other hand, however, the 'promise' is a linguistic contract which paradoxically cannot be defined or determined by the speaker who expresses it. A promise is indeed spoken by one individual,

and accepted as a declarative statement of intent, a specimen of a speaker's 'expressive' language. But as speech-act theory reminds us, the final assessment of that 'promise' does not lie solely with the speaker. As a contract, the promise embodies the manner in which 'meaning' is not sited in the individual speaker, but between speakers. It is a matter of community or consensus over which the individual cannot have sole control. Though premised on the conception of language as residing in the individual, the promise embodies the reciprocity of language, and it is verified as felicitous or infelicitous outside of the speaker who articulates it.

The promise of marriage that Cynthia gives to Preston is a clear illustration of this contradictory nature. Preston's hold over Cynthia is based on his possession of letters which contain her "reiterated promises of marriage"(531). The reader already knows the economic context in which these promises were made, and Cynthia herself regards them as the result of "strong wills mesmerizing weaker ones into submission"(455). Indeed it is on the grounds of Cynthia's competency as a speaker of promises that Molly defends her. As a girl of only sixteen, Cynthia is seen as an inappropriate speaker. Nevertheless, though the text would itself assess Cynthia as an inappropriate speaker because of her 'reflective' language, she is unable to nullify the contract by a simple negation of her promise. Though Cynthia may claim she is 'free', and engage herself to Roger to 'prove' it, she is unable to disengage herself from Preston. Nor is he able to force Cynthia to act in such a way as to make her promise 'felicitous'. They are locked in a double-bind which neither can break. It would seem that the promise is an autonomous entity (in this instance,

literally 'concrete' in the form of a letter) over which, in the absence of a consensus on its meaning, neither individual has control. For Cynthia, the only means of nullifying the 'promise' is to negotiate its return and literally destroy it by burning the letters (538). For Preston, only the enforced relinquishment of the promise in its concrete form can be defined as a nullification of the contract. Without the letters, he has no 'promise' with which to assert control over Cynthia. Importantly neither the loss nor the return of the promise is effected by either of the individuals involved in the contract, but is negotiated by a third party, Molly.

As a construct which paradoxically assumes an 'expressive' speaker in control of language yet which is ultimately an illustration of the consensual, autonomous nature of language, the promise is an ironically appropriate linguistic structure for a speaker like Molly, balancing uneasily between 'expressive' language on others behalf and the contemporary convention of the sexually selected, and therefore linguistically reflective, woman. More appropriate however is the kind of 'promise' Molly consistently articulates: a promise to repress through silence sexual issues. The type of promise is important for it discloses the correlation between 'declarative', expressive language and sexual silence which structures Wives and Daughters. One must note that Molly's 'expressive' language is most often based on a definition of herself as non-sexual. When the Miss Brownings insinuate that Molly and Roger's shared interest in bees masks a romantic involvement, Molly declares "I can't help seeing what you fancy . . . but it is very wrong . . . I won't speak another word . . . if it puts such silly notions into your head."(184) For if

others view Molly as a possible lover, her romantic notions are still characterised by a girlish dwelling on troubadours and knights, and an unreadiness to give a "personal form and name to the hero that was to be"(182). An inability to 'speak' her sexual feelings is the corner stone of Molly's status as an 'expressive' speaker. Similarly, it is her "perfect innocence""(509), "courageous innocence"(529), and her lack of awareness that she is a young woman that allows her to meet so effectively with Preston. Her ability to interrupt him, decide whether or not to answer his questions and finally to stop his speech outright (532), illustrates that her assumption of asexuality and her use of expressive, declarative language, is at least momentarily as effective as if she were indeed "pure angel"(533). In the same way, the "truth . . . [of] tone . . . [and] true expression"(568) that wins Molly her father's trust when he first hears of the meeting with Preston is linked very clearly with Molly's childish, non-sexual status in both her own and her father's eyes. Her father's initial treatment of her causes Molly to perform a "childish gesture"(567) - and it is a measure of the success with which Molly's childish, non-sexual and therefore 'expressive' status is conveyed to her father, that by the end of their interview he accepts the 'truth' of her explanation of her conduct and calls her "child"(569).

The ability to suppress sexuality and so retain the force of an expressive speaker is however only a transient power. For if she and occasionally others like Preston succumb to this definition of Molly, the plot necessitates that Molly be sexually selected, a determined not determining individual after all. If Molly engages with Preston at the level of 'pure angel', it is the communal,

consensual definition of a meeting between man and woman as necessarily a sign of courtship or sexual intrigue that triumphs. Molly, the "simple innocent girl"(557) is soon the "unconscious black sheep of the town"(557).

But what is most interesting is the effect Molly's awareness of this public definition of herself as a sexual creature has on her speech. Hitherto Molly has avoided the area of sexuality by being expressive on others' behalf. Such a use of language allows her to articulate sexuality after a fashion. If Cynthia does not appreciate Roger Hamley as Molly feels she should, she is able with a great deal of "courage to force herself to say"(454) so on his behalf, whilst simultaneously shrinking from what amounts to an articulation of sexual preference.

But once Molly is consciously aware of what she has hitherto suppressed, once her public definition as a nubile woman is made clear. (681), Molly's expressive language effectively disappears from the text. From the moment of this recognition, Molly's "simplicity of . . . intercourse [is] spoilt"(683), her "perfect freedom is gone"(683). In accordance with the sexual convention at the heart of the text, Molly cannot be expressive on the very issue which threatens her expressivity: her sexuality. Accordingly her speech to Roger, now identified as the likely 'selector' of Molly by Mrs Goodenough, is marked by a "restraint [in] her manner"(690) and a constant checking of "her old naturalness"(685).

The retreat into silence and passivity on the issue of sexuality perpetuates the superficial differentiation of Molly from the other women in the text. Though sexually selected, Molly never deteriorates

into the reflective language which characterises both her step-mother and sister. Such silence importantly allows Molly to avoid moral censure as a duplicitous, decentred speaker. The text has however already posited the inevitability of such duplicity in Molly's speech. Challenged with the notion that she might care for Roger herself, Molly is said to speak "the truth as she believed it, though not the real actual truth"(422). The issue of the site of meaning, the site of 'truth', is one which has troubled previous Gaskell novels, most notably North and South. In that novel too the correlation between what is overtly termed 'meaningful' or the 'real truth' and a male-centred definition of what is beneficial and therefore true is posited at a deep level. Wives and Daughters appears to be an advance on North and South in its foregrounding of the issue of 'types' of speakers. But if the linguistic consequences of the education of women to be wives is an issue in Wives and Daughters, the correlation between what is deemed truthful and what is economically expedient from a male point of view is not. If the gentlemen who sponsor Roger's expedition are "most of them gentlemen of property, and saw the full importance of proving the marriage of an eldest son, and installing his child as the natural heir to a long-descended estate"(644), the text would appear to concur in what is termed 'important'. Roger returns to 'prove' his nephew's right to Hamley House, to establish a 'truth'. His efforts to put things to "rights"(645) - the convergence of the moral and legal connotations of the term is vital - are ones wholeheartedly approved by Mr Gibson, Molly and the text.

Only such an unquestioned economic landscape can explain the appearance of a 'gap' between 'truth' as the individual expressive

speaker sees it and the 'real' truth in a novel which is premised on the siting of meaning or truth in the individual. As an expressive speaker, Molly cannot be seen to lie when she does speak, whilst her sexually selected status, which guarantees the 'rightness' of primogentive practice, necessitates that she cannot be in control of her language, able to 'choose' a sexual partner, as only a determining speaker can, and so dictates her passive silence.¹⁴

Due to the incompleteness of Wives and Daughters it is of course difficult to determine what, if any, solution to Molly's predicament Gaskell might have contrived. Rosalind Coward points out that the Victorian interest in evolutionism was "a mode of evolutionary speculation in which the end-points were fixed."¹⁵ Gaskell shares this conviction, for her unquestioned acceptance of the economical status quo leaves her unable to imagine a disruption of the daughter-to-wife process which defines women. At one level, her choice of Roger Hamley as Molly's prospective husband is an attempt to envisage marriage in an uneconomic setting. Coral Lansbury has charted the 'economic landscape' of Wives and Daughters and notes that only Roger sees landscape differently: "Nature existed in its own right for Roger Hamley and he saw it without the acquisitive and predatory gaze of country folk."¹⁶ But if evolutionism provides the basis for an uneconomic view of nature, sexual selection as Gaskell envisages it does not allow women to see or be seen in the same way. Molly is still both the 'object' of selection by men, and dependent upon such selection for her economic security [Roger and Mr Gibson discuss the issue of Molly's maintenance as soon as Roger makes his attentions known(700)]. If Roger sees landscape from those around him, as a natural scientist

he is still in the business of 'naming' what he sees, a form of appropriation well attested to by Mrs Gibson's almost bewildering changes in appellation.

In a novel that so painstakingly illustrates the merits of 'communication' and the potential for women to be 'expressive' speakers, it is disappointing that Molly and Roger's mutual regard is not voiced, not spoken, but represented by the giving of a rose (691). Disappointing but inevitable, for Wives and Daughters retains its incongruities until the very end. Molly remains intent on defining her "glowing"(702) response to Roger's gesture of farewell as a sign of the sweetness of friendship in a way that the reader must recognise as 'truth' only to the sexually silenced Molly. Nevertheless one must assess Wives and Daughters in terms of Gaskell's previous texts in order to ascertain its strength. Molly's definition of her response to Roger, however much it may undermine the novel's conception of truth and its relationship to the individual speaker, does differentiate her from preceding Gaskell heroines. If Molly is ultimately unable to balance linguistic expression with female sexual status, her ability to speak such partial truths as sisterly love for men does save her from that sexual shame¹⁷ which has completely silenced, or driven mad, the women like Ruth, Margaret Hale and Cousin Phillis, who came before.

Notes

¹Elizabeth Gaskell, Wives and Daughters, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1969), 701. Subsequent references are to this edition and appear in the text.

²J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard, eds., The Letters of Mrs Gaskell, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), Letter 550.

³See Patsy Stoneman, Elizabeth Gaskell, (Brighton: The Harvester Press Ltd., 1987) and Coral Lansbury, Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis, (London: Elek Books Limited, 1975).

⁴Rosalind Coward, Patriarchal Precedents: Sexuality and Social Relations, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 17-19.

⁵Ibid., 29.

⁶Ibid., 46.

⁷See Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870, (London: Yale University Press, 1957) for a general discussion of the reception of Darwin's theories.

⁸Clare is of course conforming to Mrs Ellis's ideal of a woman's role in conversation. See Sarah Ellis (nee Stickney), The Women of England, (London: Fisher, Son and Co., 1839), 196-7.

⁹Catherine Belsey, Critical Practice, (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1980), 59.

¹⁰Ibid., 61.

¹¹Mrs Gibson's actions in the Osborne affair ironically articulate the legal and social construct of women. If Mr Gibson is indeed his wife's 'site of meaning', the 'subject' from which she speaks, then both her actions (eavesdropping) and her subsequent evasive behaviour are ironically appropriate and predictable.

¹²Mrs Gibson's engagement etiquette is in complete accord with the concept of sexual selection outlined in Darwin's The Descent of Man (1871). Gillian Beer, in "Beyond Determinism: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf," Women Writing and Writing about Women, Mary Jacobus, ed., (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1977), 85, points out:

Darwin assumes that among humans as opposed to other species, it is always the men who do the selecting.

The implication of his argument is that women's characteristics will be determined by their acceptability to men.

Interestingly, Darwin also focuses on the female voice as an early sexually-selected female attribute, though his emphasis is on tone or sweetness rather than on content.

¹³It is of course a language which manifests the Unitarian emphasis on 'bearing witness' or expressing 'truth' from a specified site: the witness. The exception to the direct correlation between male gender and expressive speaking (aside from Molly) is Osborne Hamley. Osborne's "graceful antics of language"(203) and "surface-talk"(272) align him with Mrs Gibson and Cynthia as a type of reflective speaker. But though his social status seems to undermine the economic determinants which are posited as the cause of reflective speech, in many ways his position as heir to the Hamley estate deprive him of the status of a determining speaker. Just like the women in the text, Osborne does not exercise full control in the selection of his future wife. As his father frequently points out, Osborne's wife must bring money to the impoverished Hamley estate. Of course Osborne does select his wife, but one must note that he is subsequently unable to enjoy economic security because of that choice.

¹⁴With the split in Molly's speaking status, Gaskell avoids confronting a contemporary issue: the impact of evolutionary determinism on morality. As Houghton, quoting Carlyle, outlines, Darwin's theory was considered horrific "because if man were no more than a developed animal, conscience and intellect were 'but the developments of the functions of animals'"(70). But of course the split itself, as argued in this chapter, points to the correlation between what is 'right' and 'true' and what is economically expedient from a male point of view - the fear that the "moral sentiments were simply a disguised form of selfishness, and the moral life had no moral purpose"(70) is seen to be prescient.

¹⁵Coward, 49.

¹⁶Lansbury, 194.

¹⁷Stoneman, 197.

Conclusion

The 'realist' genre in which all of the preceding texts are traditionally placed itself requires explication. What follows is neither a defence of realism nor an exhortation for its wholesale rejection. Rather it is an attempt first to posit why the writing of realist novels might have appeared salutary to Gaskell, and secondly to 'salvage' realism for the modern, particularly feminist, reader.

Realism's appeal for Gaskell is quite straightforward when one recalls her Unitarianism. Its belief in the 'reality' of the evidence or information provided by one's 'God-given' senses precludes the possibility of a phenomenological account of the self. Accordingly, the concept of the unified, autonomous individual is one which preceding chapters reveal as pervading her novels in accepted 'realist' fashion. At the same time, Unitarian interest in social conditions shows that Unitarianism operated within a structure which posited that the autonomous individual was not completely free-willed, but was affected by specific social conditions. Economic condition 'x' or 'y' could 'explain' certain aspects of the individual 'z'. The result of this combination was a religion which was both 'idealist' in that it attributed a soul or essence to the individual, and 'progressive' in that it recognised the possibility for improvement or deterioration in the individual according to the impact of specific conditions on actions. The 'individual' was seen paradoxically as both 'static' and 'kinetic'.

Unitarianism itself mimics this combinatory structure. On the one hand, one recalls the infinite expandability of a religion which,

declining to dictate the terms of belief of its followers, had no overt manifesto. Each individual was exhorted only to consider rationally and truthfully his/her beliefs, and act accordingly. The notion of 'bearing witness' stresses the role of the individual, the issue of perspective and its relation to belief, that characterised Unitarianism. It is presented as an 'umbrella' organisation, continually expanding. But, just as the individual was seen to be potentially perfect or God-like in his/her attainments, Unitarians posited a point (perfectibility) at which its 'umbrella-like' structure expanded to embrace all the multiplicity of view points imaginable. Expansion becomes at some abstract but possible point static because all encompassing.

Realism for Gaskell can be seen to operate in a similar fashion. With her first novel, the accepted boundaries of what is deemed 'appropriate' for fiction are widened to include the social 'realities' of the Manchester working classes. Conditions 'x' and 'y' (damp-ridden cellars; infant mortality) are seen to affect the individual 'z' (John Barton) and so 'explain' or posit the truth, the reality, of the individual's beliefs and actions. What is 'real' is seen to be a product of perspective: John Barton must 'bear witness' to the 'truth' of the life he sees and lives by becoming a Chartist; Elizabeth Gaskell must bear witness to the 'truth' of the living conditions with which as a Unitarian minister's wife in Manchester she had contact. In the course of that witnessing, as novel succeeds novel, Gaskell expands the boundaries of what is deemed 'real' to include the hitherto unspoken issues of women and their place in contemporary society.

The above discussion of course presumes a conscious intent on Gaskell's part in the expansion of the term 'realism' which parallels the input, or will, which Unitarianism imputed to the individual in his/her progression to perfectibility. It colludes with the premise of the autonomous, willing individual which is part of the ideology upon which realism rests. Such premises have been rightly focused upon by modern theorists and readers alike as the means not only by which individuals and groups marginalised by or excluded from what is defined as real and meaningful are kept in their positions, but the means by which the working of ideology itself is obscured. The ideology of 'realism', of liberal rational humanism, works to present the "position of the subject as fixed and unchangeable";¹ it is the voice of the status quo.

But though the 'aims' of the realist genre must be seen as, in Barthes's terms, to mystify, "to endow historical or cultural phenomena with all the appearance of natural ones",² Gaskell's use of that genre is open to a more positive evaluation. To articulate a claim for women's place as autonomous individuals within the liberal humanist ideology is no mean achievement when the ideology itself precludes women. Gaskell's ability to do so, no matter how the deep structures of 'realism' undermine themselves, is itself a 'demystification' of the system that excludes women. Liberal humanism and realism have shown themselves to be appropriable precisely because they are 'ideologies' which, though dominant, are not immutable.

The demystification of realism consists of course of more than the appropriation of an integrate, speaking subject-position for women. If we consider realism within the context of the feminist

concern in autobiography other potential approaches or assessments of realism emerge. On one level, as Toril Moi points out, autobiography concurs with "the basic feminist contention that no criticism is 'value-free', that we all speak from a specific position shaped by cultural, social, political and personal factors."³ Writers such as Cora Kaplan in Sea Changes,⁴ Jane Miller in Women Writing About Men,⁵ and Rachel Brownstein in Becoming a Heroine,⁶ to name but a few, have presented their work with autobiographical introductions and codas, have outlined some of the 'factors' that have shaped what Kaplan terms 'the-place-from-which-one-writes.'⁷ Realism as represented by Gaskell's texts can be seen as a type of social autobiography - the autobiography of the culture, society. which it describes.

But on another level, an autobiography/realism parallel necessitates that 'realism' be assessed as a 'measurer' of the place from it is written. If "the prejudices one is able to formulate consciously are precisely for that reason likely to be the least important ones",⁸ what realism can 'consciously' articulate about itself is necessarily limited. Based solidly on the self's ability to consciously and willfully explain the world around it, realism attempts to confirm itself as 'truth', but is confirmed instead as illusion par excellence by the interrogative reader. The ideology of realism is 'real' only in so far as it is dominant, "in that it is the way in which people really live their relationship to the social relations which govern their conditions of existence"⁹ in the liberal humanist tradition that prevails in Western thought. But, unmasked as simply one of the multiple factors (gender/economic class) which intersect, as on a graph, to form the autonomous self of liberal humanism, realism

is decentred. Bereft of its definition as 'all-explaining', as 'truth', and relegated to a position as co-ordinate on the axis of the construct 'self', realism and the realist novel demand to be read by feminists as interrogative, contradictory texts which expose the shifting basis of the conception of 'self' which excludes women, not rejected as confirmatory articulations of the autonomous implicitly male self.

Notes

¹Catherine Belsey, Critical Practice, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1980), 90.

²John Sturrock, "Roland Barthes," in Structuralism and Since: From Levi-Strauss to Derrida, John Sturrock, ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 50.

³Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1985), 43. See also Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, "'Back into the personal' or: our attempt to construct 'feminist research'," in Theories of Women's Studies, Gloria Bowles and Renate Duelli Klein, eds., (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983) for their discussion of ethnomethodology which posits the individual's role in the construction of 'social processes'.

⁴Cora Kaplan, Sea Changes, (London: Verso, 1986).

⁵Jane Miller, Women Writing About Men, (London: Virago Press Limited, 1986).

⁶Rachel M. Brownstein, Becoming a Heroine, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1982).

⁷Kaplan, 225.

⁸Moi, 44.

⁹Belsey, 57.

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