

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

THE CONTEMPORARY RECEPTION OF MRS GASKELL
AS NOVELIST AND BIOGRAPHER, WITH SPECIAL
REFERENCE TO REVIEWS OF HER WORK

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Abstract

This study sets out to cover the contemporary reception of Mrs.Gaskell's major works: Mary Barton, Ruth, Cranford, North and South, The Life of Charlotte Brontë, Sylvia's Lovers and Wives and Daughters.

The first chapter shows that Mrs.Gaskell's contemporary readers fully appreciated Mary Barton for treating a still largely unexplored subject, industrial life in Manchester, with sympathy, understanding and considerable literary skill. Few critics objected to the author's message of social reconciliation.

In the second chapter we follow the largely favourable reception of Ruth, treating a very sensitive issue, the social and spiritual redemption of an unmarried mother and her illegitimate child. By largely following contemporary notions about the social and religious meaning of sexual transgression, Mrs.Gaskell reassured most reviewers, and enhanced the effectiveness of her message that a fallen woman's child could be his mother's incentive to seek social rehabilitation.

In the third chapter we review the unanimous delight in Cranford as a minor masterpiece, full of deep moral and social significance, behind its façade of humour and compassionate irony.

North and South, the subject of the fourth chapter, was favourably received, though not as widely or enthusiastically as Mary Barton. Contemporary readers liked it better than Dickens's Hard Times, finding that Mrs.Gaskell's knowledge of the industrial scene was without parallel. A number of critics began to consider Mrs.Gaskell, after the death of Charlotte Brontë in 1855, the most outstanding lady novelist of the time.

In the fifth chapter we trace the reception of Mrs.Gaskell's

sensationally successful, though controversial, Life of Charlotte Brontë.

The critical response to Sylvia's Lovers, the subject of the sixth chapter, is less exciting and more sombre: many reviewers failed to appreciate Mrs.Gaskell's attempt to present the prosaic shopkeeper Philip Hepburn as a tragic hero.

In the last chapter, treating the reception of the posthumously published Wives and Daughters, we find the reviewers almost unanimously recognizing Mrs.Gaskell as a first-class realist, worthy to be compared with Jane Austen and George Eliot.

Besides her artistic genius, Mrs.Gaskell's greatest assets for her contemporary readers were her optimistic vision, her celebration of the value of tradition and culture, and her unshaken faith in the value and meaning of human life.

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Preface

There has been no major study, and consequently little precise knowledge, of Mrs. Gaskell's literary reputation in her own time. Even in W. G  rin's recent work Elizabeth Gaskell: a Biography (1976), references to the critical reception of Mrs. Gaskell's work are too general, perfunctory, or simply non-existent -- for instance, in relation to Cranford and North and South.

It has always been known, however, that Mary Barton, Ruth and The Life of Charlotte Bront   made considerable impact when they first appeared; some of the criticism they provoked during Mrs. Gaskell's life-time has also been known; but there has been no serious attempt to determine the value, extent and exact content of such criticism.

The reason for the neglect of such an important and interesting subject is not hard to find. C. K. Northup's list of criticism of Mrs. Gaskell's works (1929), long considered the standard bibliography, is particularly thin on the period of the contemporary reception 1848-1866. For Mrs. Gaskell's various works Northup records 38 contemporary reviews in all, 31 of which are on Mary Barton, Ruth and The Life of Charlotte Bront  . Northup lists 2 reviews apiece for Cranford and North and South, one review for Wives and Daughters and none at all for Sylvia's Lovers.¹

In her doctoral dissertation "An Annotated Bibliography of Criticism on Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell, 1848-1973", (1974),² Dr. Marjorie

1. Northup covers the years 1848-1929. His bibliography is published in Gerald DeWitt Sanders, Elizabeth Gaskell, Newhaven, 1929.

2. University of Mississippi.

T.Davis provides useful annotations, but adds only 16 reviews to those previously listed by Northup for the period 1848-1866.

This situation has considerably changed with the appearance in 1977 of Robert L.Selig's annotated bibliography Elizabeth Gaskell: a Reference Guide. Selig pays particular attention to the contemporary reception, and he certainly succeeds. He records 367 items for the period 1848-1866, about 200 of which are reviews, the rest are obituaries, comments and other references to Mrs.Gaskell's work.

The present study had been undertaken some time before the publication of Selig's most useful and long-awaited bibliography. Selig recorded many items that I thought I was the first to locate. However, I am happy to find that the bibliography I have prepared for the present study still has a considerable number of items which have escaped Selig's notice. Thus I supplement his substantial work by another 73 entries for the period 1848-1866, 49 of which are reviews. Most of these reviews moreover happen to fill in significant gaps in Selig's work, namely, those relating to North and South, Sylvia's Lovers, and Wives and Daughters. Selig has 11 reviews for North and South; I record 20; for Sylvia's Lovers I supplement his 22 reviews by another 8; for Wives and Daughters I supplement his 10 reviews by a further 9. Many of the reviews I record are substantial items and come from relatively well-known sources -- in the case of Wives and Daughters, for instance, they appeared in the Westminster Review, the British Quarterly Review, the Contemporary Review, the Reader, the Press, the London Review, the Illustrated London News, the Globe and the Literary Churchman.

I have also suggested or established the authorship of over

twenty-five unsigned articles that Selig records as anonymous. The authorship of the Athenaeum's reviews of Mrs. Gaskell's major works (7 reviews and an obituary), for instance, has been established by consulting the marked file of the Athenaeum, now in the possession of the New Statesman.

The present study also draws upon hundreds of contemporary items that did not appear in periodicals. These are usually letters (often by well-known writers) which comment on Mrs. Gaskell's work; some of these letters are still in manuscript form.

For the purpose of the present study I have also drawn upon some reviews -- for instances, of Mrs. Trollope's Michael Armstrong, Disraeli's Sybil and Dickens's Hard Times -- that have not been recorded (as far as I know) in any previous study or bibliography.

The main purpose of this study has not been bibliographical, however. The search for reviews and other contemporary material has been carried out in order to present a full picture of what Mrs. Gaskell's contemporaries thought of her major works: Mary Barton, Ruth, Cranford, North and South, The Life of Charlotte Brontë, Sylvia's Lovers and Wives and Daughters.

So that I could provide a coherent and meaningful account of the mass of opinions, judgements and facts available, I selected and emphasized what appeared to me the most significant comments (which are not necessarily the most perceptive or profound). I also referred to contemporary works, issues, theories and practices whenever such matters were deemed relevant to the work under study.

In writing a study like this, some are tempted to record conscientiously, and usually indiscriminately, every opinion and comment, thus producing a work not unlike some biographical "compilations" of

the Victorian times. On the other hand, an excessive zeal to be creative and original, or to see very neat patterns of thought, taste and feeling, can produce a more readable piece of work perhaps, but hardly a fair and comprehensive treatment of the subject. Between these two extremes I have tried, successfully I hope, to steer a middle course.

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my gratitude to the librarians and staff of Manchester Central Public Library, the Brotherton Library (University of Leeds), Colindale Newspaper Library, London, the English Library, Russell Square, London, and last, but not least, the Brynmor Jones Library, the University of Hull, especially to Mr.D.J.Orton, supervisor of inter-library loans.

I am also grateful to the proprietors and editor of the New Statesman for permitting access to the marked file of the Athenaeum, now in their possession.

It has been a privilege to conduct this study under the supervision of Professor Arthur Pollard: his interest in the subject, suggestions and encouragement have always been most valuable.

I am also grateful to my wife Salha, who helped me in various ways during the final stages of this work. I also thank my family in Syria for their sympathy and patience. I am especially obliged to my elder brother, Sabah, who, a very long time ago, taught me the English alphabet, and unintentionally inspired me with the ambition -- still scarcely realized -- to become a "writer".

My thanks are also due to the University of Aleppo, Syria, whose study grant has made the present study possible.

List of abbreviations

Letters: The Letters of Mrs Gaskell, eds, J.A.V.Chapple and Arthur Pollard, Manchester, 1966.

MB: Mary Barton

NS: North and South

S.H.B.: The Brontës, their Lives, Friendship and Correspondence, eds, J.T.Wise and J.A.Symington, 4 vols., 1932.

Waller: Ross D. Waller, "Letters Addressed to Mrs Gaskell by Celebrated Contemporaries. Now in the Possession of the John Rylands Library," Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, XIX(Jan. 1935),102-69

Works: The Works of Mrs Gaskell, ed., A.W.Ward, the Knutsford edition, 8 vols., 1906.

Chapter One

"A Magnificent and Untrodden Field": The Reception of Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life.

Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life, Mrs. Gaskell's first novel¹, was published anonymously on October 14, 1848 as part of Chapman and Hall's "Series of Original Works." It came out in two, neat, cloth-bound volumes, and was priced eighteen shillings. This should have helped the sales of the anonymous novel at a time when almost all works of fiction ran into three volumes, and were sold for no less than a guinea and a half.² A much more important factor in favour of the novel, in terms of circulation, was its treatment of a subject about which there was much public curiosity and interest, the way of life of cotton-weavers in Manchester and the highly topical issue concerning the relations between industrial workers and their employers.

The topicality of the subject chosen by Mrs. Gaskell, however, goes back much earlier than 1848. Industrial matters began to engage the attention of the nation from the early decades of the century,

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1. Mary Barton was not Mrs. Gaskell's first published work, however. "Sketches Among the Poor", a poem she wrote with her husband, was published in Blackwood's Magazine of January 1837. In 1840 appeared her description of Clopton House in William Howitt's Visits to Remarkable Places. Her three tales: "Libbie Marsh's Three Eras", "The Sexton's Hero" and "Christmas Storms and Sunshine" were published in Howitt's Journal, I-III (1847-1848) under the pseudonym of "Cotton Mather Mills".
 2. The price of Mary Barton, favourable as it was for prospective buyers, was not essential for attracting a wide circle of readers. Most contemporary novel-readers, instead of purchasing new works of fiction, borrowed them from the Circulating Libraries for an annual subscription fee.

when rapid industrialization, especially in the Midlands and the North, began to change the face of the country. During the same period, the language and pattern of industrial strife became increasingly familiar: power-loom weavers, for instance, determined not to be "put upon" by the manufacturers, "combined" (illegally until 1824) in "trade-unions", and went on strikes, more often to protest the reduction of wages than to demand higher ones. The manufacturers or "masters" (many of them had all the rough edges of the self-made in conditions of fierce competition) responded defiantly by shutting down their factories, "locking out" their operatives or "hands". The national press, besides reporting these and other strange happenings in the "Black Country", occasionally printed reports of Royal Committees on the dreadful conditions of child- and women-labour, in factories as well as coal-mines, and described the bad conditions of work generally. Accounts of the industrial poor became news-worthy, especially in the curiously frequent periods of economic depression, when large-scale destitution fell to the lot of workers and their families at a time when the pre-industrial machinery of social relief (the Poor Laws) was totally inadequate to deal with the new problem of mass industrial unemployment.

In the early thirties the working classes, and the poor generally, suffered two setbacks: the Reform Bill of 1832 ignored their political demands, and the New Poor Law of 1834 justly roused their deep resentment. Fuelled by such frustrations and sense of grievance, they rallied in large numbers behind Chartism, the mass movement of political reform, set up in 1836.

Thomas Carlyle was among the first to respond to the challenge of the social forces released and human problems created or aggravated by the machine. He saw in the rise of Chartism a symptom of a more fundamental disturbance in the body politic, and a vindication of the diagnosis he had made in Signs of the Times (1829) that the organic

structure of society was being undermined by the new materialism in "The Mechanical Age".¹ In Chartism (1839) he vehemently preached the Gospel of work, inveighed against those who regarded "Cash Payment as the sole nexus between man and man", exhorted the higher classes to perform their social and moral duties of leadership and guidance: "A Legislature making laws for the Working Classes ... is legislating in the dark",² because the rulers are ignorant of the conditions and needs of those whom they rule; until such knowledge became available, "the Condition of England question" would get menacingly worse and worse.

Even before Carlyle made this call on the higher classes to understand the condition of the lower, two writers had already started in the summer of 1839 to accomplish in their own ways this mission (Chartism was published in December). Charlotte Elizabeth (Mrs. Tonna) wrote Helen Fleetwood, depicting with fanatical Evangelical fervour the horrors of industrial conditions.³ Mrs. Frances Trollope, not so committed to a religious viewpoint, described in Michael Armstrong the dreadful conditions of industrial slums and the terrors of child-labour.

The year 1839 also marked the beginning of the bad years (1838-1842), "the Hungry Forties". These were hard, trying times for the working-population, which even troubled the middle classes. A measure of the confusion and fears of social upheaval that oppressed many a thoughtful mind at the time can be seen in this reaction of the Athenaeum to Mrs. Trollope's novel, a work the reviewer regarded, not without justice, as one of little literary merit.

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1. Signs of the Times in Thomas Carlyle: Selected Writing, ed. Alan Shelston, The Penguin English Library, 1971, p.64. This edition reprints in full both Signs of the Times and Chartism.
 2. Chartism, ibid., pp. 199, 160-161.
 3. Helen Fleetwood, as the title of the following informative article suggests, is now forgotten, and it seems it faded from the memory soon after its appearance: Ivanka Kovačević and S. Barbara Kanner, "Blue Book into Novel: The Forgotten Industrial Fiction of Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna", Nineteenth Century Fiction, XXV (September 1970), 152-73.

Still, despite the critic's poor opinion of the novelist's artistic skills, or her grasp of the principles of political economy, he ended his review by this appeal:

We implore this lady to remember that the most probable immediate effect of her pennings and her pencillings will be the burning of factories...and the plunder of property of all kinds: while the remote effects of the success of her ill-conceived political economy, would be the driving of manufacture out of the kingdom, and consequently the misery of four millions of people, with that all the victims of their agonizing re-action, - in a word, civil war, bankruptcy, and national destruction. Such success, however, we do not fear; we do not think the English nation utterly degraded, nor its governors and legislators quite mad. 1

Few novels before Michael Armstrong or since evoked such wide-ranging fears of apocalyptic destruction and anarchy.

Besides Mrs. Trollope and Mrs. Tonna, Dickens was another, far more influential, writer to champion the poor, though in a way that did not seem to endanger the safety of the body politic. As early as 1839 his novels Oliver Twist (1837) and Nicholas Nickleby (1839) earned him the title of social peacemaker, conferred upon him by a no lesser source than the Edinburgh review:

One of the qualities we most admire in him is his comprehensive spirit of humanity, the tendency of his writings is to make us practically benevolent - to excite our sympathy in behalf of the aggrieved and suffering in all classes; and especially those that are most removed from observation. 2

Another novelist to "become the fashionable preacher of the circulating libraries"³ was Benjamin Disraeli, M.P., and leader of the Tory Young England Movement, whose political aims and ideals he partially

1. No. 615 (August 10, 1839). p. 590.

2. LXVIII (October 1838).

3. Tait's Edinburgh Magazine, Review of Sybil, XII (June 1845), 449.

advanced in his trilogy Coningsby, Sybil and Tancred (1844-1847). His novel Sybil,^{or} the Two Nations was, as the Literary Gazette morosely observed, a panoramic view of social classes, including the different types of the poor:

Mr.D. runs through the grievances and miseries of agricultural labourers, with wages insufficient to sustain nature. He next exhibits the factory workers in as deplorable condition, victims of the truck-system, and mercenary oppressive task-masters. He then shows that the mining districts are under a still more barbarous tyranny: in sort, that the land is overspread with starvation, cruelty, and slow murder, whilst a few revel in unbounded luxuries. 1

The Literary Gazette considered the book's "tendency" to be "the worst among the worst." In such a "disappointing" work "there is one comfort: it is not calculated to make such an impression on the poorer classes as other productions of the same genus."² In other words, Disraeli, "the member of the British senate"³, was after all part of the establishment, and was not attempting, like the irresponsible Mrs.Trollope and her like, to throw open the floodgates of social revolution. Other reviewers, too, recognized that Disraeli had no subversive designs upon society, though there was much resistance on the part of some to acknowledge that the conditions of the labouring classes were actually as harsh as described in Sybil - this in itself was a measure of the ignorance between "the two nations" of rich and poor that Disraeli and others were trying to eradicate. Consequently, these reviewers found themselves in the awkward position of admitting that Disraeli's descriptions were mainly based upon factual documents, reports of Select Committees and blue books, while at the same time

1. No. 1478 (May 17, 1845). p. 307.

2. Ibid., p. 308.

3. Ibid.,

refusing to believe the accuracy of his description. H.F.Chorley, for instance, accused Disraeli of exaggeration in the manner of Mrs.Trollope:

In other of the sketches of popular life contained in 'Sybil' there is obvious and fierce exaggeration. Digg's Tommy Shop, when open, out-Trollopes Mrs.Trollope, and is closed according to Mrs. Trollope's best notion of melodramatic justice, melodramatically. 1

Disraeli had an axe to grind: he advocated an alliance between Queen, Church, the aristocracy and the working class vis-à-vis the "barbaric" manufacturers. This nettled Chorley, and enraged others, notably the manufacturer-critic W.R.Greg.²

Charles Kingsley was another writer to use the novel for political ends as well as to break down the barrier of mutual ignorance that separated rich and poor. In Yeast (1848) he concentrated on the abject poverty of agricultural labourers. Kingsley, a Chartist sympathizer, was a Christian socialist who wanted the Church to play a role in espousing the cause of the poor.

While novelists were busy trying to familiarize the rich and well-off with the affairs of the poor, Chartism continued to exercise a hold over the minds of the masses. In 1839 Chartists' hopes of peaceful political action were temporarily dashed, however, when Parliament refused by an overwhelming majority to admit the People's Charter for democratic, parliamentary reform.³ Some began to feel that peaceful means were not enough (Mary Barton powerfully registers this mood of hope giving way to disillusion and despair in the episode of John Barton's

1. Athenaeum, no.916 (May 17, 1845), p.478. Sources for the identification of anonymous articles are provided in the Bibliography at the end of each item.
2. See Westminster Review, Review of Sybil, XXXIV (September 1845), 141-52.
3. The Charter's six points of political reform were: manhood suffrage, vote by ballot, equal electoral districts, annual parliaments, abolition of property qualification for M.P.'s and the payment of M.P.'s.

abortive mission to London as a Chartist delegate). A minor uprising broke out in Wales, which was ruthlessly suppressed, and the Movement seemed faced with disintegration. Chartism soon recovered, however, partly because of the long period of economic depression 1839-1842, and continued to attract more adherents. Certain members of the middle classes like the Christian Socialists, F.D.Maurice, Ludlow and the novelist Charles Kingsley were also sympathetic.

On April 10, 1848 - about six months before the publication of Mary Barton - the Chartists made their last effort to have their voice reach Parliament. A huge meeting was called for, to be followed by a spectacular procession towards the Houses of Parliament. This plan must have seemed to the government too threatening to be permitted to be carried out: prompt and severe action succeeded in preventing the procession, though the Chartist petition itself was allowed to be presented. Soon after this abortive Chartist demonstration of strength, social uprisings on the Continent shook France, Austria and Italy. In that year of social turmoil at home and abroad, many in the higher ranges of society must have felt very uncomfortable indeed.

Mrs.Gaskell was well aware that these events were exceptionally favourable for the reception of her first novel, dealing, as it does, with conditions of industrial strife and suffering. Looking through her correspondence with her publisher, Edward Chapman, one can see her increasing irritation over an unexpected delay in the publication of the novel. Writing to him on March 21, 1848, she said: "I cannot help fancying that the tenor of my tale is such as to excite attention at the present time of struggle on the part of work people to obtain what they esteem their rights."¹ Then on April 2, 1848 (eight days before the

1. The Letters of Mrs.Gaskell, eds., J.A.V.Chapple and Arthur Pollard, Manchester, 1966, letter no. 22. Henceforth referred to as Letters, followed by the number of the letter to which reference is made.

planned Chartist demonstration): "I hope you will not think me impatient in expressing my natural wish to learn when you are going to press, as I think the present state of public events may not be unfavourable to a tale, founded in some measure on the presen(t) relations between Masters and work people."¹ Her last letter on the subject, dated July 10, referred to the social upheavals that had recently shaken Europe: "The only thing I should like to make clear is that [my novel] is no catch-penny run up since the events on the Continent have directed public attention to the consideration of the state of affairs between the Employers, & their work-people."²

Mrs. Gaskell's letters also show that she was hoping that her "neutrality", that is, her dissociation from any of the political movements of the day, would ensure her a friendly hearing from all contending parties. Her hope was based upon her pious, "conscious" intention not "to excite class against class"³ but to impress upon both masters and men that they were "bound to each other by common interests."⁴ The same hope was expressed by her very close friend, Emily Winkworth, no doubt an echo of Mrs. Gaskell's own ideas: "'Mary Barton' is particularly welcome at the present time, bearing so directly as it does upon all important labour questions of the day, and the more so because the writer has no particular system which this story is meant to uphold."⁵

1. Letters, 23.

2. Ibid., 26.

3. Ibid., 36.

4. Mrs. Gaskell's preface to Mary Barton, ed., Stephen Gill, Penguin English Library, 1970, p.37. All quotations are made from this edition.

5. From an unpublished manuscript review of Mary Barton in the Gaskell Collection, Brotherton Library, Leeds, p.1 of MS.

If Mrs.Gaskell really counted upon a calm reception of her novel, she was to be disillusioned almost as soon as the book came out. Some manufacturers (half of Manchester employers, if we were to believe what Mrs.Gaskell was told) rushed to buy copies of the new book "to give to their work-people's libraries."¹ But many manufacturers, including the Unitarian Gregs (whom Mrs.Gaskell knew personally and respected) expressed with varying degrees of ferocity their indignation at what they alleged to be the working-class bias of the novel, its misrepresentation of facts and its suppression of the employers' point of view.

Mrs.Gaskell was a very sensitive person and was deeply hurt by this type of criticism, from which she could not easily escape, living as she did, in the heartland of the cotton-industry, Manchester.² But had she been able to ignore this local (and even then not generally shared) hostility, concentrating on the reception of her work in the national press, she might have considered herself very fortunate indeed. For no social-problem novel of the 'thirties or 'forties, and hardly any in the whole of the mid-Victorian period (including her own North and South and Dickens's Hard Times), enjoyed so genuinely enthusiastic a reception as Mary Barton did. All the reviews that appeared in 1848 (14 of them) were highly enthusiastic. Another 10 reviews appeared in 1849, only 3 of them were hostile, the rest being very favourable. Reviews of Mary Barton continued to appear after 1849. A laudatory

1. Letters, 37.

2. In 1857 Mrs.Gaskell, anticipating trouble, stipulated to the publisher of her Life of Charlotte Brontë that he could not publish the work until she was safely out of the critics' reach - in Rome. Even at the volume publication of North and South (1855), a book less likely to cause controversy, she made off to Paris to escape the reviewers. (Letters, 225). See chapters 4-5.

review appeared in 1851 in the North British Review,¹ and another, equally enthusiastic, appeared in the Westminster² of July 1852, written anonymously by the brilliant mid-Victorian critic, George Henry Lewes.

The earliest reviews of the anonymous novel appeared on 21 October, a week after its publication. H.F.Chorley, who had in the past accused Mrs.Trollope and Disraeli of exaggeration, emphasized in his unsigned review in the Athenaeum the fairness and truth of Mary Barton, a theme that was to recur in many later reviews:

We have met with few pictures of life among the working classes at once so forcible and so fair as "Mary Barton". The truth of it is terrible. The writer is superior to melodramatic seductions, and has described misery, temptation, distress and shame as they actually exist. 3

Britannia, in a review appearing on the same day as that of the Athenaeum, made a point of drawing the attention of its readers to the superiority of Mary Barton to previous stories of industrial life - a reference to Helen Fleetwood, Michael Armstrong, and possibly also to Sybil:

We did not expect much pleasure from the perusal of these volumes. From their title we imagined we should find them full of descriptions of the cotton-mills, of the brutality of over-seers, the drunkenness and debauchery of the working-classes, and of all the other details that we are accustomed to meet with in works that profess to give us an idea of the state of our large manufacturing towns. But

1. XV, 424-27.

2. LVIII, pp. 138ff. Sources of the attribution of anonymous reviews of Mrs.Gaskell's works are given in the Bibliography, Section I.

3. No. 1095 (October 21, 1848), p. 1050.

this book is of a very different kind. The author has evidently been an eyewitness of scenes similar to those he describes with so much ability and feeling. He is well-acquainted with the characters and habits of life of that large and suffering portion of our fellow-creatures - the "factory" men and women of Manchester. 1

The reviewer then goes on to point out another merit of the book that was to be frequently praised by later critics: the ability of the anonymous novelist (whom the reviewer, like Chorley, believed to be a man) to depict realistically an all-embracing picture of industrial workers preserving their dignity and humanity in spite of the harsh and degrading conditions of their existence: "We have", said the reviewer approvingly, "the bright side of the poor man's life as well as the dark." Britannia concludes its review by the prediction that "these volumes cannot fail to powerfully excite sympathy for that class whose cause the author so earnestly and eloquently pleads."²

The third review to appear on 21 October was that of the Morning Herald. This was a brief notice in which the reviewer praised Mary Barton as "a domestic tale in which the mode of life and manners of the factory people of Manchester are painted in strong and lively colours", and their "complaints of neglect on the part of the prosperous are feelingly described."³

A week later the Literary Gazette and the Standard of Freedom gave the anonymous novel a splendid welcome. The Literary Gazette, which in the past had given a poor reception to both Michael Armstrong, a

1. IX (October 21, 1848), 684.

2. Ibid.

3. p.7.

Factory Boy¹ and Sybil as poorly written or ill-conceived, had nothing but praise for Chapman and Hall for publishing the new novel, and for the anonymous author, who, not relying on invention, portrayed the little known industrial life exactly as it was:

The series of original works of which this is the latest example has been justly received with well-deserved popularity ... We are inclined to place Mary Barton foremost in the class to which it belongs, as a vivid and complete picture of a state of society hitherto only known by scraps, and yet possessing an interest and importance hardly second to any other in the British empire. It is the true picture of the condition of all ranks in the manufacturing capital, Manchester... There is no invention in these volumes, though circumstances may have been connected together for the sake of a story to bring out the characters... There is so strong an impress of individuality upon them, and reality upon the whole, that the colouring of the piece is lost in the contemplation of its nature in conduct and effect. 2

The Standard of Freedom, in a review written probably by William Howitt, a friend of Mrs. Gaskell's (and indeed the one who helped in having Mary Barton published by Chapman), opened its article by expressing the opinion that Mary Barton was not only a good work but exactly the sort of novel that many had been expecting:

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1. Cf. "There is but one way to produce an effect on the public in works of this kind: it is by devoting the most minute examination to the system which is to be exposed to objection and obloquy, in order to amend it; and, as another requisite, possessing the talents to exhibit its wrongs and errors in the most powerful light. Dickens's Parish Workhouse [in Oliver Twist 1837] and Yorkshire School [in Nicholas Nickleby 1839] are splendid examples of this class; their details came home to the understanding and the heart, because they were founded on actual observation, - facts, truths, pointed with all the force of the most acute perception of individualities and generalities, and realised by traits of such accurate nature, and touches of such exquisite feeling, that none ever doubted the existence and the sufferings of a persecuted Oliver Twist or a miserable Smike. Mrs. Trollope has relied on invention in this imitation of a brilliant Model: her circumstances are not British; her characters are not living; her adventures are romance; and in short, her Factory Boy is a very unsatisfactory Factory Boy." (Literary Gazette (December 1839), pp.825-26).
 2. XXXVIII (October 28, 1848), 706-707.

This will do. This is welcome. We have waited for it. To the injury of public morals, and the general detriment of society, scores of novels, filled with deleterious trash, have for too long a time issued from the establishments of publishers..., but here is a genuine book... 'Mary Barton' should be found on every table in the land. 1

Few contemporary readers would not have endorsed this manner of welcoming Mary Barton. Until the publication of Mrs. Gaskell's novel of Manchester life, many in the 'forties felt that the industrial poor had not yet found their novelist; Thackeray himself in an unsigned review of Sybil in the Morning Chronicle of October 21, 1845, not only expressed this common feeling but also the hope that a really truthful novel of industrial life would be written one day. Thackeray, though appreciative of the literary ability and good intentions of Disraeli, was very doubtful about the value of this writer's endeavours to represent the way of life of the poorer classes; Mrs. Trollope's Michael Armstrong in his opinion was much inferior. It is interesting to notice that Thackeray, frustrated by the failure of middle-class novelists to represent in a convincing way the industrial poor, pinned his hopes upon the emergence of a talented weaver or miner to depict this "magnificent and untrodden field." It is thus a little ironical that in the same year Thackeray was making these remarks Mrs. Gaskell had already started to write Mary Barton; had Thackeray known of that, he would perhaps have held little hopes of success for Mrs. Gaskell, who not only was middle-class but also a woman and a very busy housewife:

[Sybil] is written with honesty, truth, and hearty sympathy. [Disraeli's] aim would appear to be to take a glance at the whole cycle of labour: from the agricultural he takes us to the manufacturing and the mining districts. Here, as we fancy,

1. (October 28, 1848), p.12.

his descriptions fail; not from want of sympathy, but from want of experience and familiarity with the subject. A man who was really familiar with the mill and the mine might now, we should think, awaken great public attention as a novelist. It is a magnificent and untrodden field (for Mrs. Trollope's Factory story was wretched caricaturing, and Mr. Disraeli appears on the ground but an amateur): to describe it well, a man should be born to it. We want a Boz from among the miners or the manufactories to detail their ways of work and pleasure - to describe their feelings, interests, and lives, public and private. 1

If William Howitt was the author of the Standard's review of Mary Barton, he seemed to have doubly enjoyed the game of anonymity, Mrs. Gaskell's and his own; he alludes to the short stories Mrs. Gaskell published in Howitt's Journal without revealing the author's name or indicating that the magazine was in fact his own:

Our thanks to the author for the good work which she (the style we think betrays her sex) has accomplished... Already, in literary circles, considerable interest is manifested about the author. Her preface informs us that she resides in Manchester, but who is she? ... Thus much, at least, we know, and thus much we can reveal. She ... wrote a year ago some clever stories in Howitt's Journal under the assumed name of "Cotton Mather Mills." 2

On November 4 three further appreciative reviews appeared in the Atlas, John Bull and the Examiner. John Bull found Mary Barton "deeply and painfully instructive." It recognized the usefulness of

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1. Morning Chronicle (May 13, 1845); reprinted in Thackeray: Contributions to the 'Morning Chronicle', ed., G.N. Ray, 1955, pp. 77-86.
 2. (October 28, 1848), p.12. William Howitt, in an unsigned review of Charlotte Brontë's Shirley in the same newspaper the following year, reiterated his high opinion of Mary Barton, indicating that its author seemed more familiar with the working-people than Charlotte Brontë, whose Shirley showed her most at ease with the masters. (November 10, 1849), p.11). Charlotte Brontë identified Howitt to be the author of this review. See The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships and correspondence, 4 vols, The Shakespeare Head Brontë, eds., T.J. Wise and J.A. Symington, 1932, III, 35. This work will henceforth be referred to as S.H.B.

the lessons "affecting the interests and welfare of both masters and men" in the "well-imagined and well-executed" novel.¹ The Examiner, in a substantial and very sympathetic review, written probably by John Forster (who as reader for Chapman has the credit for recommending the novel for publication), began its review by asserting that the story was "one of unusual beauty and merit", evidently written by a woman, as might be seen in the novelist's sure hand and "the delicate points of the portraiture where women and children are in question", and also "from the mixed diffidence and daring with which the question of employers and employed is treated." The reviewer proceeds to acknowledge the importance of the subject and applauds the spirit of reconciliation that animates the novel:

To treat the lives of "our dangerous classes" with the calm brevity of the Eastern chronicler, and be satisfied with the knowledge that they are born, are wretched, and die, is certainly no longer possible. It behoves everybody to know more of the matter, and fiction may be allowed to enter where philosophy cannot well find its way. We defy any one to read Mary Barton without a more thoughtful sense of what is due to the poor... This is not done in the least by contrasting class and class, for the faults of the poor are not spared any more than the thoughtlessness of the rich. The aim is rather to lessen the interval that separates them. 2

A Unitarian weekly, the Inquirer, wrote a week later that "the great beauty" of Mary Barton "consists in its self-evident truthfulness", and trusted that the writer would use the talents God had given him (or her) to write more novels "in defending the cause of the needy and destitute, and thus draw down the approbation of all good men."³

1. p. 711.

2. (November 4, 1848), p.708.

3. (November 11, 1848), pp. 710-711.

On November 15 the Critic hoped that every one would read the new story of Manchester life, whose author was evidently "intimately acquainted with his subject" and whose scenes were "drawn with almost the skill of DICKENS."¹ The Morning Post on 24 November heartily "approved of the benevolent purpose" of the novel and expected it to succeed in "calling the attention of the masters to the true condition of their operatives, and of leading them to treat that much-neglected class with more kindness and consideration than hitherto has been exhibited towards them."²

On November 25 a fresh review of Mary Barton appeared in the Economist. This weekly, established in 1845 by the Manchester School men Cobden and Bright, was anything but hostile to the manufacturers. It is thus significant that the reviewer, instead of finding Mary Barton objectionable, was deeply touched, indeed overwhelmed by the book's terrible revelations:

In this work, the reader is presented with a most melancholy, nay, an appalling picture of the lives of operatives in Manchester, and we fear in other manufacturing cities. The impress of truth is not to be mistaken, and, therefore, the perusal of the book has a most depressing influence, and we must overcome our feelings ere we can form a judgement upon Mary Barton. 3

The judgement soon formed is most favourable: "Mary Barton has not, we believe, flowed from the pen of a noble author" (a reference to the objectionable Disraeli). Having satisfied himself that the writer is not an aristocrat "getting at" the manufacturers, the Economist's reviewer pronounces Mary Barton to be:

1. p. 454.

2. (November 24, 1848), p.6.

3. (November 25, 1848), p.1337.

an attempt, and we should say a successful one, to create in the reading public an interest for the miserable operatives, by showing their domestic virtues, their industry, their unwearied but too generally ineffective struggles against the fate which sooner or later, overtakes them. 1

The reviewer continues to observe in a tone sympathetic to the workers' cause,² and quite different from that of some political economists of the time who saw in the poor an incorrigible, improvident mass, that Mary Barton will inspire social thinkers to solve the apparently insoluble problems of the industrial workers. The reviewer, however, points out perceptively that the author of Mary Barton seems herself to have little hope of a solution: her story ends with the working-class couple Mary Barton and Jem Wilson preparing to emigrate to Canada:

It is not our duty, nor is this the place to inquire into the sources of the social anomaly presented, by a large body of men, industrious, prudent, saving, and virtuous, being reduced by no fault of their own to the most abject want, and but too often driven to crime. The moral philosopher, the political economist must solve this knotty point; we only draw the attention of our readers to the striking peculiarities of Mary Barton, hoping that its pages may inspire them with the wish to contribute their mite towards the lasting relief of the class depicted there. We fear the author has but little hope of a speedy realisation of that object, for he has not been able to find any other means for securing the happiness of his hero and heroine, than that of sending them to Canada, into voluntary banishment. 3.

1. Ibid.

2. Cobden and Bright, founders of the Economist, though staunch defenders of the laissez-faire system, were generally on good terms with the working-class, whom they hoped to win over in an alliance with the manufacturers vis-à-vis the landed gentry. See Asa Briggs, Victorian People, Penguin Books, 1965, pp. 205ff.

3. Ibid., p. 1338.

The Sun in its review of 30 November confirmed the previous judgements, calling Mary Barton a real picture of humble life and "one of the most interesting" novels of the year.¹

The last review to appear in 1848 was that of the New Monthly Magazine, which affirmed that, "It has seldom fallen to our lot to read a work written with more earnestness of purpose or feeling than 'Mary Barton'", a novel written with "surpassing energy and vitality." Though painful to read, its perusal is beneficial; The whole book is "almost sanctified by its wholesome truthfulness."² The reviewer, despite his evident admiration for the novel, was the first source to claim that there was something amiss with the anonymous novelist's equipment in political economy; John Barton's antagonistic remarks with regard to the employers, he complained, should have been corrected by the novelist, especially so since Barton's remarks smacked of "staunch communism:"

The authoress professes to have nothing to do with political economy or the theories of trade, she says that she merely wishes to impress what the workman feels and thinks, but she allows the discontented to murmur in prolonged strains without an attempt to chasten the heart or to correct the understanding. Barton rails at all capitalists as being so only through the toil of the poor. This would be staunch communism. There surely must be capitalists or the condition of the poor would be worse than ever. We are told in Scripture that the poor shall never cease out of the land, but we are also told that their expectation shall not perish, and that those who trust, shall be fed and be delivered out of affliction. ³

Early the following year three further reviews, all highly appreciative, appeared in the Sunday Times⁴, the Eclectic Review⁵ and the

1. p. 3.

2. LXXXIV, pp. 406-7.

3. Ibid., p. 407.

4. (January 14, 1849), p.3.

5. n.s. XXV (January 1849), pp. 51-63.

Unitarian Prospective Review.¹

The first American review appeared in the United States Magazine and Democratic Review of February 1849. The reviewer, in a relatively long article, begins his comment by reporting to his American audience the universal acceptance in Britain of Mary Barton as a true picture of industrial life. It is interesting that the patriotic reviewer makes no attempt to hide his satisfaction that the self-complacent British have been for once compelled by the self-evident truth of this novel to own that the British social system has serious shortcomings:

No author's name stands on the title page of this work. But it reaches us fully endorsed, as to the truth of its descriptive passages, by the press of Great Britain. The journalists of that country, though not over prone generally to acknowledge British wrongs, or British injustice, or anything that is to the disparagement of the institutions under which they live, do not contradict, or condemn as exaggerated, the pictures of human misery, which this work spreads before the reader: they could not. The truth stood up too plainly before them. 2

The reviewer goes on to read ominous lessons in Mrs. Gaskell's fearful tale and its unfamiliar pictures of industrial misery and strife;³ he finds in them a clear warning, despite the author's message of reconciliation, that intensive industrialisation was bound to lead to revolution: a fate he would not like to see overtaking even the haughty and wayward British:

The American reader will shudder oftentimes in perusing "Mary Barton," and wonder at the extent and intensity of human misery, of which he had entertained no adequate conception. The story leads him through damp, unwholesome, dens, crowded

1. V, pp. 36-57.

2. n.s. XXIV (February 1849), p. 189.

3. The United States was less industrialized than Britain in 1848; its industrial centres were also less dense and more evenly spread across the country.

with human beings who starve, infested with pestilential diseases, which are hailed as deliverers since they bring a term to want and woe - through scenes of agony and death, yet of fortitude, Spartan endurance, and obscure heroism - and occasionally, as if in mockery, or to deepen the gloom of lowly wretchedness by the contrast of the gorgeous dissipation of the wealthy, the reader is ushered into the glittering palaces of the merchant princes, the "masters" who found the proud edifice of their fortunes upon the ill-requited toil of starving thousands. No ranting speech of aspiring demagogue could have a more incendiary tendency than the gloomy work we are now noticing. Written in a plain but nervous style - somewhat *à la* Carlyle - it holds up two pictures, the starving operatives, and the luxurious rich who own the factories. And while it purports to hold forth doctrines of a conciliatory nature, while it preaches in a spirit of laudable conservatism, - on the one side, patience - on the other, charity - its consolatory comments are uttered "in the desert;" because the substance of the book illustrates in vivid colors, the evils of the manufacturing system, when carried to a certain point. It pictures the necessary consequence of reckless competition, in driving the "masters" to extend their operations, in holding forth fitful inducements for factory labor, in training thousands to a factory life and no other, so that when the supply of such labor chances for any cause to exceed its demand, the poor operatives find themselves utterly at the mercy of their employers. That such a state of things cannot for ever last, that sooner or later, the thousands who have long suffered in silence must be aroused to active despair, with some such war-cry as "La propriété est un vol," - lamentable experience teaches us to believe. Long may such a result be averted, even for England; and may the system that leads to such a result, never obtain upon our native soil! 1

In the same month (February) this American reviewer was confidently, and somewhat vindictively, reporting the general acceptance in England of the truth of Mary Barton, two English reviews appeared to invalidate his assertion. The first was that of the Manchester Guardian, which fiercely attacked the anonymous novel, written by a lady resident in Manchester, "the wife of a dissenting minister," as one-sided and unfair to the manufacturers: "What indulgence", exclaimed the reviewer, "can [the authoress of Mary Barton] expect from the class she has

1. Ibid., 190-191.

maligned...?" Especially annoying for the reviewer was the popularity of the novel; the fact that it had so quickly reached a third edition made the task of correcting its alleged misrepresentations all the more urgent:

... If the work [Mary Barton] had met with the fate of nineteen out of twenty of the novels published now-a-days, I might have been well content to let it sink into oblivion, with its false statements unchallenged, and its doubtful logic unquestioned; but, possessing an internal force and vitality far above mediocrity, it has reached that height of a novel writer's ambition, a third edition, thus showing that it is being well read, and, consequently, that its errors have become dangerous. 1

The other hostile review to appear in the same month was a long-winded and supercilious article in the British Quarterly Review.² Like the Manchester Guardian, the reviewer was irritated by the popularity of a novel that cast an unfavourable light on the manufacturers; so, as if anxious that the success of Mary Barton should not turn the head of its author, he thought it fit to remind the anonymous novelist that such success was to a large extent due to the topical issue she had hit upon:

Circumstances frequently give to a work a degree of importance somewhat out of proportion to its intrinsic value. If it treats upon a subject towards which attention is strongly directed, and especially if it falls in with a tone of thinking which is general or fashionable, it may call for a more extended notice than a work which is, perhaps, more remarkable in itself, but comparatively isolated in its interest. The work before us evinces no ordinary ability, but it is chiefly for reasons such as the above that we have thought it desirable to offer a few criticisms upon it. 3.

1. (Feb. 28, 1849), p.7.

2. IX, 117-36.

3. Ibid., p. 117.

The second American notice, a favourable and lengthy one, appeared the following month in the Christian Examiner, written by J.E.Bradford.¹

The third review to raise the charge of unfairness to manufacturers came out in the Edinburgh Review of April 1849.² This was written anonymously by W.R.Greg. Like Mrs.Gaskell, Greg was a Unitarian. He also knew the industrial scene in Manchester intimately, being a mill-owner himself (he remained so until 1850). Acute, high-principled, a man of wide interests, Greg was a brilliant advocate of the manufacturers' point of view. His lengthy critique of Mary Barton was often appreciative and perceptive despite his fundamental disagreement with Mrs. Gaskell over a number of issues, which we shall discuss later.³

In the same month Greg published his substantial article on Mary Barton, two further reviews appeared in the Westminster Review and Fraser's Magazine. The writer of the latter piece was Charles Kingsley, who saw in Mrs.Gaskell's book a most useful instrument of disseminating knowledge throughout the country, and especially among "the mass of higher orders", of the shocking state of the industrial workers. Mary Barton's terrible revelations are all facts, he asserted, which need to be known in order to deal with the political discontent and understand the despair of the working-class. It is noteworthy that Kingsley was unique among the reviewers (excepting that of the United States Magazine), in that he ruthlessly emphasized the grave social consequences that he believed were certain to follow if the facts revealed by Mary Barton were ignored; most other reviewers were not so interested in "alarming" the

1. 4th ser. XI (March 1849), 293-306.

2. LXXXIX, 402-35.

3. See pp.67ff. below.

nation:

Do [the rich] want to know why poor men, kind and sympathising as women to each other, learn to hate law and order, Queen, Lords and Commons, country-party, and corn-law leaguer, all alike - to hate the rich, in short? Then let them read Mary Barton. Do they want to know what can madden brave, honest, industrious North-country hearts, into self-imposed suicidal strikes, into conspiracy, vitriol-throwing, and midnight murder? Then let them read Mary Barton. Do they want to know what drives men to gin and opium, that they may drink and forget their sorrow, though it be in madness? Let them read Mary Barton. Do they want to get a detailed insight into the whole 'science of starving,' - 'clemming,' as the poor Manchester men call it? Why people 'clem', and how much they can 'clem' on; what people look like while they are 'clemming' to death, and what they look like after they are 'clemmed' to death, and in what sort of places they lie while they are 'clemming'; and who looks after them, and who - oh, shame unspeakable! - do not look after them while they are 'clemming;' and what they feel while they are 'clemming,' and what they feel while they see their wives and their little ones 'clemming' to death round them; and what they feel, and must feel, unless they are more or less than men, after all are 'clemmed' and gone, and buried safe out of sight, never to hunger, and wail, and pine, and pray for death any more for ever? Let them read Mary Barton. Lastly, if they want to know why men learn to hate the Church and the Gospel, why they turn sceptics, Atheists, blasphemers, and cry out in the blackness of despair and doubt, 'Let us curse God and die,' let them read Mary Barton. 1

Charles Kingsley was evidently using Mary Barton to further the sacred war against the rich which he launched the previous year in Yeast. The sympathetic reviewer of the Westminster had no such intention. His opening paragraph restates with remarkable composure Kingsley's point that Mary Barton is a distinguished contribution to the much needed knowledge of the feelings and conditions of the industrial poor. But he then quickly points out that the time is not yet ripe to solve the problems posed in the novel:

THIS is a most striking book; and we are glad to see that it has already reached a third edition. It is an appropriate and valuable contribution to the literature of the age. It

embodies the dominant feeling of our times - a feeling that the ignorance, destitution and vice which pervade and corrupt society, must be got rid of. The ability to point out how they are to be got rid of, is not the characteristic of this age. That will be the characteristic of the age which is coming. 1

The last notable comment in the press on Mrs. Gaskell's work came from the elderly poet W.S. Landor in the shape of a poem addressed "To the Author of 'Mary Barton'", which he concluded with this tribute:

Thou hast taught at the fount of Truth
That none confer God's blessing but the poor
None but the heavy-laden reach his throne. 2

If we pause to consider the contemporary response to Mary Barton in the comments we have seen so far, we find that three factors combined to elicit such a wide and frequently intense interest in Mrs. Gaskell's anonymous book. The topicality of the subject was an important factor, but so also were the authentic character of the novel and its literary merits as an interesting story in its own right.

As we have already indicated, the year 1848 was especially right for a story of Manchester life. No sooner had the ruling classes experienced some relief after their success in aborting the Chartist demonstration of April than they were reminded of the power of the masses in the news of social uprisings on the continent. The comments we have seen show that at least the reviewers had much sympathy for the working-class, but there were also fears of social upheaval, especially among those closest to the industrial scene like the reviewers of the Manchester Guardian, the British Quarterly Review, Greg, and indeed

1. (April 1849), p.48.

2. Eclectic Magazine, XVII (June 1849), 261. This was later reprinted in Landor's The Last Fruit off an Old Tree, 1853, pp. 481-82.

Mrs.Gaskell herself. Such fears were sometimes deeper, and indeed exaggerated, when they were experienced at a distance, as is shown in the prediction of social revolution by the reviewer of the United States Magazine.

After 1848 such fears, and the intense national interest in matters industrial, began to recede. Chartism never really recovered from its defeat of April 1848. This was largely because of a steady improvement in the economy, which started in 1849 and continued in the 'fifties and 'sixties. Mrs.Gaskell's second industrial novel North and South (1854-55) and Dickens's Hard Times (1854) roused little national interest mainly for this reason.¹

We may also notice that it took some time for the importance of Mary Barton to be fully recognized by the reviewers; had Mary Barton come out under the name of a well-known author, most of the notices would have appeared almost immediately, instead of being spread out over a period of seven months. However, even before the important "reviews" like the Westminster and the Edinburgh began to notice the book, Mrs.Gaskell's national reputation was established - many by that time knew that the anonymous novelist was the wife of a Unitarian minister in Manchester. And as if to consolidate her new-found fame, Mrs.Gaskell allowed herself, though with much trepidation, to be "lionized" by her publisher Chapman. Encouraged by him to visit London, she spent April and May there, where she met many celebrities of the time, including the Carlyles, Richard Monckton Milnes, the Howitts and Douglas Jerrold.²

1. See ch. 4.

2. Cf. Winifred Gérin, Elizabeth Gaskell, a Biography, Oxford University Press, 1976, pp. 95 ff.

Yet the topical interest of Mary Barton was hardly sufficient by itself to account for its enthusiastic reception. 1839 was perhaps as propitious for novels of industrial life as 1848. The former was the year of the huge Chartist petition, the start of the Hungry Forties, and a time when some (like the above-quoted reviewer of Michael Armonstrong in the Athenaeum) felt that they were sitting on a volcano. Yet Helen Fleetwood and Michael Armstrong came close to be completely ignored by the press, and never received (as far as I was able to find out) a single favourable review. Both novels lacked what Mary Barton had in abundance, a well-sustained note of authenticity and a superior command of the art of fiction. Disraeli's Sybil published in 1845 was widely received. Many acknowledged the literary merits of this work, but nearly all the reviewers noted that Disraeli seemed on surer ground in his descriptions of parliamentary intrigues and the aristocracy than in his sketches of the poor which he so diligently composed. We have already quoted Thackeray expressing his disappointment on this point. Another interesting comment is to be found in Greg's review of the same novel. Greg, taking advantage of Disraeli's weakest point, his uncertain steps in the industrial districts, pounced on him in this merciless manner:

[Disraeli] has written, and written dogmatically, and with the air of a sage instructing the ignorant of his own discoveries on a subject, the condition, feelings, and wants of the artisan class -- with which it is not too much to say that he is wholly unacquainted, -- his only knowledge of it being derived from published reports, which he had not even preliminary information enough to read aright... The result is a picture singularly unreal and untrue, bearing upon every feature of it proof and proclamation, that it is not drawn from life, but concocted from second-hand sources... His costume, too, (to speak technically), is almost uniformly incorrect. With the exception, perhaps, of Devilsdust and Warner, who appear but seldom, there is not a single character among the artisans whom he brings upon the stage, that has a prototype in real existence: their language is what no one who had ever conversed

with those classes would have dreamed of putting into their mouth; and the vulgarisms by means of which he endeavours to give an air of life and nature to their conversations, are never those of the provinces, but always either Cockneyisms or Americanisms. 1

After this, Greg, much in the manner of Thackeray, hopes that a truthful novel about the life of the artisan class would one day be written by a talented member of that class. Greg's list of qualifications, one may notice, is far more stringent than Thackeray's; he is also far less confident that such a novel would ever be written:

... A novelist who should depict all this with a faithful and courageous pencil ... would be a hitherto unseen phenomenon, and might do immeasurable service both to the class of whom, and the class for whom, he writes. But such a novelist must be a man of far greater diligence, patience, and knowledge than Mr. D'Israeli... Indeed, duly to execute such a work as we have suggested, would require two qualifications so rarely found in combination, -- great powers of delineation, and intimate and prolonged acquaintance with the working classes -- that we despair of its accomplishment till some one shall arise among those classes themselves gifted with descriptive powers like those of Burns, and at the same time with the soundness and dignity of moral feeling which shall induce him to employ his powers, rather to portray and justify his fellows, than to rise out from among them. 2

In his article on Mary Barton three years later, Greg readily granted Mrs. Gaskell's work many of the points he had denied Sybil. Mary Barton, he says, "is clearly 'a Labour of Love'", written by one who "has evidently lived much among the people she describes [and] made herself intimate at their firesides." The dialogues in Mary Barton "approach both in tone and style to the conversations actually carried on in the dingy cottages of Lancashire." Referring to Disraeli, Greg goes on to say, that the author of Mary Barton:

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1. Westminster Review, (September 1845), pp.142-43.
 2. Ibid., p.146.

must not be confounded with those writers who engage with a particular subject, because it presents a vein which they imagine may be successfully worked - get up to the needful information, and then prepare a story as a solicitor might prepare a case. 1

Authenticity, the "self-evident truthfulness"² of Mary Barton was more than a matter of intimate knowledge and accurate observation, however. It needed intuition, imagination, understanding, discrimination as well as literary skill. In this respect again Mary Barton as a story of working-class life was unique and recognized as such by its contemporaries. Mrs. Gaskell's superiority here was never challenged even by later writers. Kingsley, for instance, wrote Alton Locke, Tailor and Poet (1850) in the autobiographical method as a history of a London worker who grows up to become a Chartist and a poet. Most reviewers noticed that this hero was more a mouthpiece of Kingsley than a real working-man. A sympathetic critic in the Spectator excused Kingsley, however, on the grounds that "the spirit of earnestness and goodness" which animates the book makes up for the fact that "literary consistency is kept subordinate to the purpose of painting our social evils."³ Another sympathetic reviewer was that of Fraser's Magazine, who again saw Kingsley speaking through Alton Locke to the detriment of verisimilitude. The reviewer also points out that Kingsley betrays himself to be a stranger among the people he describes - a criticism that was levelled against Disraeli (and will be against Dickens's Hard Times)⁴ but is unthinkable; and in fact never occurs in the case

1. The Edinburgh Review, LXXXIX (April 1849), 403.

2. Inquirer, (Nov. 11, 1848), p. 710.

3. No. 1156 (Aug. 24, 1850), p. 805.

4. See ch. 4 below.

Mary Barton:

we consider that a higher and more educated mind is at work in the autobiography than that of a misshapen youth, who is brought up in the dry and ungenial atmosphere of Calvinism, debarred from the cultivation of knowledge, and put out to get his bread and scramble through life as he may in the pestiferous and crowded workshop of a tailor. The illusion vanishes the moment we turn over the title-page, and we feel as we advance through the work that it is not a stunted tailor, or an aspiring verse-maker, or a hair-brained Chartist, who is speaking, but a scholar and a thinker, not always as wise as he could be if he would, but always original and fresh and earnest in the creed he assumes; not one who is of the life he paints. 1

That the authentic impression of Mary Barton was a matter of art as well as observation was recognized by the contemporary readers. Indeed, looking at the reviews as a whole one is struck by the fact that most reviewers saw Mary Barton as a novel, a work of art, and not simply "Manchester Life" in narrative form. Kingsley was in a minority when he refused to discuss the literary merits and "praise the 'talent'" in the anonymous novel on the grounds that its "matter puts the manner out of sight."² It is also remarkable that Mary Barton had the distinction of being found successful as a novel even by those who did not agree with its social implications. This type of unanimous praise eluded most social-problem novels of the time, including Sybil, Dickens's Hard Times and Mrs.Gaskell's own Ruth and North and South. Both Greg and the British Quarterly Review praised Mary Barton. Even the Manchester Guardian reviewer, though very distressed by the "errors" of Mrs.Gaskell's book, did not hesitate to describe Mary Barton as a "beautifully written story."³

1. (Nov. 1850), p. 577, (italics mine).

2. Ibid., (April 1849), p. 430.

3. (Feb. 28, 1849), p.7.

Having looked at the main features of the critical reception of Mary Barton, we may now proceed to examine more closely what the contemporary readers had to say about the literary qualities of Mrs. Gaskell's work. After that, we shall deal with the comments made specifically on "the message" of Mary Barton as a novel with a purpose.

To its contemporary readers Mary Barton offered a striking contrast not only to previous novels of industrial life but also to the majority of the novels that dominated the earlier decades of the century. The lives and destinies of poor weavers in smoky, unromantic Manchester presented something very different from the romantic colouring and heroics of the once very fashionable historical novels. There was also little in common between Mrs. Gaskell's work and the "silver-fork novel" of the 'thirties with its stylized and superficial pictures of "high life". As for those readers who relished the sentimental melodrama of the crime novels of the past decade, the events of Mary Barton, despite its elements of melodrama and moments of sensation, seemed to belong to the ordinary and common rather than the unusual and sensational.

The difference between Mary Barton and the types of fiction mentioned above was recognized and generally welcomed whenever comments on plot, character, or Mrs. Gaskell's realism were made. Thus in discussions of the plot we find the Inquirer's observation fairly typical: "The events of the tale are simple and probable."¹ "The events of the story..., with one exception [? the fire episode]" wrote the Christian Examiner "are of the most common, every-day character; but they are painted by a master's hand."² On the same lines ran other comments, that of the Athenaeum, "the events of the story are of the commonest

1. (November 11, 1848), p. 710.

2. (March 1849), p. 298.

quality,"¹ and the British Quarterly, "the plot of 'Mary Barton'... is simple."² This description of the plot of Mary Barton as simple and ordinary was a sign of approval rather than censure. Plot, long associated in reader's minds with the stock devices of melodrama, was often considered the least praiseworthy part of a novel.³ "Few men", asserted a Fraser's critic, "feel interest in a plot after nineteen ... from that time forward they look only to the development of character."⁴ Not all critics of the time, however, associated plot with the sensational, contrived and improbable incidents of melodrama. For some it was "the logical working out of a certain initial situation and springing from the nature of the characters."⁵ Used in this sense, "action" rather than "plot" was employed, as was done by Tayler in the Prospective when he expressed high admiration for the way the events in Mary Barton grew naturally out of each other, forming one compact and harmonious whole:

The interest of which [the action] is susceptible, must be obvious. To fulfil its demands and make the most of its opportunities, was a severe test of genius. It is high praise to say, that the authoress has reached the height of her argument, and that the treatment equals the design. The conception of the whole is compact and forcible. The incidents are so happily arranged, and flow so easily and naturally out of each other with the progress of the narrative, that we could almost suspect a long-practised pen; and if this be indeed a first production, it is a surprising work. 6

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1. (October 21, 1848), p.1050.
 2. (February 1849), p. 125.
 3. See Richard Stang, The Theory of the Novel in England, 1850-1870, 1959, p.129.
 4. XLIII (January 1851), 88.
 5. Stang, op.cit., p.129; see also National Review, I (October 1855), 346.
 6. (1849), p.41.

Compared with the general run of contemporary novels, the plot of Mary Barton belonged clearly to the ordinary and probable. Yet Mrs. Gaskell's first novel, especially in its second half, made considerable use of the effects of sensation and melodrama. These "thrilling" parts in Mary Barton did not escape the notice of the novel's earliest critics. We find these critics generally praising the anonymous author's skill in handling them, while pointing out that the merit and originality of Mary Barton lay elsewhere. One of the critics was Tayler in the Prospective Review, who wrote:

The passages that would probably most strike the general reader - the fire at Carson's factory, the pursuit of the ship containing the witness [Will Wilson], and the scene at Jem Wilson's trial - are not those which we should select as the clearest proofs of genius. They are powerfully wrought and excite a thrilling interest; but the interest is of that kind and composed of those elements which we meet with in all novels, and which a clever imitator, void of all originality, might work up with tolerable effect. They are founded on the love of strong excitement, the least pure and exalted of all the resources of art. 1

The Christian Examiner concurred in Tayler's judgement when it remarked that "'the fire', and other thrilling scenes ... are more like what we meet with in other works, whilst in 'Mary Barton' what we particularly admire is the freshness and vigor of conception."² The Athenaeum, too, praised Mary Barton's unmelodramatic portrayal of poverty and suffering, noting, at the same time, the masterly way in which the other thrilling parts of the novel were rendered:

The writer is superior to melo-dramatic seductions, and has described misery, temptation, distress and shame as they really exist. Only twice has he (?) had recourse

1. V, 43.

2. (March 1849), p.304.

to the worn-out machinery of the novelist, - and then he has used it with a master's hand. 1

Mrs. Gaskell's success in her use of suspense had won her novel the epithet "dramatic". From the hour Mary Barton leaves Manchester, wrote the Westminster, to seek the only witness capable of proving the innocence of her lover and during the trial scene "the interest becomes intense - so life-like, so unexaggerated, that fiction disappears; and the reader seems placed as an anxious spectator..."² "Highly dramatic" was also used by the Christian Examiner to describe "the manner in which the incidents are woven into the narrative."³

Contemporary readers of Mary Barton, a work with a professedly didactic purpose, were generally happy that the novel was rendered "dramatically", depending, that is, upon action and dialogue rather than preaching. Although it had always been axiomatic that a novel should instruct as well as please, mid-Victorian readers and critics were usually put off by long stretches of direct instruction. While some degree of straightforward authorial commentary and exposition was tolerated, indeed expected, excessive preaching was invariably attacked. The following rebuke, earned by Charles Kingsley, an arch-offender in this respect, was fairly typical of contemporary taste: "The capital error in [Westward Ho!] - the error that swallows up its success - is, that Mr. Kingsley... is all along in a pulpit preaching at his readers."⁴ None of Mary Barton's critics made a similar complaint concerning the

1. (October 21, 1848), p. 1050.

2. II, 58.

3. (March 1849), p. 294.

4. Athenaeum, (March 31, 1855), p. 376.

few occasions on which Mrs.Gaskell assumes the role of preacher. Gregory Smith in the North British Review, indeed, noticed that Mary Barton gained in "the appearance of truth and nature" because it had little direct didactic preaching. This is a time, the critic went on to say, when most readers of fiction are for the "indirect unconscious mode of teaching through the medium of facts, in preference to long-winded interruptions to the plot, in the shape of didactic dialogues."¹

Instead of being found hampered by dull exhortation, Mrs.Gaskell's novel was praised for its fast movement and dramatic dialogues. The novelist's power in dialogue, in particular, earned her very enthusiastic praise. "Its dialogues", wrote W.R.Greg "are managed with a degree of ease and naturalness rarely attained even by the most experienced writers of fiction."²

While expressing their happiness about the life-like quality of Mary Barton's dialogue, critics paid special attention to the authoress's pioneering use of the Lancashire accent for her uneducated working-class characters. Only Scott was found to have achieved a similar measure of success in his attempt to represent the speech of his peasants. Tayler, another Manchester man like Greg, noted that "the warm local hue" and the "picturesque individuality" of Manchester operatives were greatly enhanced by the author's Scott-like use of local dialect:

As for the northern patois which is liberally introduced into the dialogue ... [its] copious sprinkling ... on every page, is to our feeling very agreeable, as giving a peculiar raciness to the speech of shrewd and earnest men, and diffusing a warm local hue, without vulgarity or obscurity, over the whole narrative. It is only giving to the operatives of Lancashire, the same kind of picturesque

1. XV (August 1851), 424.

2. Edinburgh Review, LXXXIX, 403.

individuality, which Scott in his immortal tales has conferred on the peasantry of Scotland. 1

H.F.Chorley in the Athenaeum expressed his admiration for the novelist's skilful use of Lancashire patois, not a common ability, as the failure of Scott's imitators had shown:

In yet another respect 'Mary Barton' deserves praise. The author has made use of the Lancashire dialect - a vigorous and racy, but in some districts scarcely intelligible, patois - with ease, spirit and nicety in selection. By all who have paid any attention to kindred subjects - and, as an instance, have compared Sir Walter's Scotch with the Scotch of any other Northern novelist - this will be accepted as high commendation. 2

The Inquirer reviewer was even more supercilious than Chorley in his description of the Lancashire common speech as "harsh and disagreeable", but was equally laudatory in his appreciation of the racy dialogues of Mary Barton: "The author excels particularly in his dialogues, most of which are given in the Lancashire dialect, which as far as we have met with it, is a most harsh and disagreeable patois."3

Other critics, too, commented favourably upon the author's use of dialect. The North British Review found "the conversations easy and racy."4 The British Quarterly Review observed that "the graphic power [of the cottage-scenes] is a good deal enhanced by the liberal use of the broad though vigorous Lancashire dialect."5 The Eclectic Review shrewdly recognized Mrs.Gaskell's intention of appending her husband's notes to

1. Prospective Review, V, 42.

2. (October 21, 1848), p. 1051.

3. (November 11, 1848), p.710.

4. XV, 426.

5. IX, 131.

explain "the unintelligible" words of the dialect by quotations from Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, and other highly respected poets. This, the Eclectic observed, gives dignity to a speech, that is often considered a mere degeneration of the language:

The notes show us the derivations of the terms that are too often regarded as vulgar corruptions of our English, but which are genuine portions of those old tongues, for a thousand years preserved here, of which our English itself is compounded. 1

Two Manchester readers, however, found fault with Mrs. Gaskell's representation of Lancashire dialect. The first was Samuel Bamford, whose admiration for Mary Barton was so great that he felt very reluctant to point out the "few trifling" defects of the novel. One of these blemishes was the Lancashire accent which, he thought, "might have been better."² The second critic, unhappy with the accent, was Mary Barton's reviewer in the Manchester Guardian. Unlike Bamford, he was over-anxious to expose any mistake in the representation of facts, an office he zealously performed because of his disagreement with the social implications of the novel. Thus after a circumlocutory attack against the economic and social errors of the writer, he went on to deplore "the extraordinary incorrectness of the dialect throughout". He found it containing Scotticisms and far from consistent. Finally, he wound up his argument with a note of facetious triumph: "It is not at all surprising that a lady should have fallen into these mistakes, or that London critics should have praised the book for its accuracy in this respect."³

1. (January 1849), p.54.

2. From a letter addressed "to the authoress of 'Mary Barton', dated March 9, 1849; reprinted in Ross D. Waller, "Letters Addressed to Mrs. Gaskell by Celebrated Contemporaries", Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, XIX (1935), 107. From now on referred to as Waller.

3. (February 28, 1849), p.7.

That the criticism of both the Manchester Guardian and Bamford was beside the point as well as pedantic can be easily shown. It is true that Mrs. Gaskell's rendering of dialect was not always accurate (phonetically and syntactically) nor consistent.¹ But then she was in honourable company. Scott, the Brontës, Dickens, Hardy and others who ostensibly reproduced the common speech of their uneducated characters never aimed at actually producing an exact transcript of dialect. Theirs is at best a kind of representative dialect that gives the flavour and catches the true note of common speech without being a replica of it. Relevant in this respect is Hardy's reply later in the century to a similar charge concerning his reproduction of the Wessex speech of his rustic characters. Especially significant is his view that an exact reproduction of dialect is apt to disturb the artistic balance of the novel, distracting the reader's attention from the novelist's aim of portraying "men and their natures" to the peculiarities of their linguistic habits:

A somewhat vexed question is re-opened in your criticism of my story, 'The Return of the Native'; namely, the representation in writing of the speech of the peasantry, when that writing is intended to show mainly the character of the speakers, and only to give a general idea of their linguistic peculiarities.

An author may be said to fairly convey the spirit of intelligent peasant talk if he retains the idiom, compass, and characteristic expressions, although he may not encumber the page with obsolete pronunciations of the purely English words and with mispronunciations of those derived from Latin and Greek. In the printing of standard speech, hardly any phonetic principle at all is observed; and if a writer attempts to exhibit on paper the precise accents of a rustic speaker, he disturbs the proper balance of a true representation by unduly insisting upon the grotesque element; thus directing attention to a point of inferior interest and diverting it from the speaker's meaning, which is by far the chief concern where the

1. See "A Note on Mrs. Gaskell's Use of Dialect" by Gerald De Witt Sanders in his Elizabeth Gaskell, Cornhill Studies in English, New Haven, 1929; also, Edgar Wright, Mrs. Gaskell: The Basis for Reassessment, 1965, pp. 258 ff.

aim is to depict the men and their natures rather than their dialect forms. 1

The reviewer in the Manchester Guardian was also wrong when he claimed that London critics had praised Mrs. Gaskell for her exact transcription of dialect; for, indeed, all those who commented on this aspect of her work expressed their appreciation of "the nicety in selection"² exercised by the writer and her "avoidance of vulgarity or obscurity"³ in representing the speech of Manchester operatives.

"The picturesque individuality"⁴ which dialect bestowed upon Mrs. Gaskell's rugged Manchester operatives was an important reason why her characters were generally found to be strikingly vivid and true to life. Another reason was her manner of depicting character. "The characters [in Mary Barton] are distinct"⁵. "The delineation of individual characters is wonderfully graphic."⁶ "The accessory characters are touched with the fidelity of a daguerreotype."⁷ These are specimens of the comments that praised Mrs. Gaskell's talent for the drawing of character. Especially significant is the recurrence of terms like "graphic" and "the fidelity of a daguerreotype". They are signs of the growing taste for realism, a trend that was to dominate the next two or three decades.

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1. English Theories of the Novel: Nineteenth Century, ed. Elke Platz-Waury, Germany, 1972, p. 79.
 2. Athenaeum, (October 21, 1848), p. 1051.
 3. The Prospective Review, V, 42.
 4. Ibid.
 5. North British Review, XV, 426.
 6. Christian Examiner, (March 1849), p. 294.
 7. Athenaeum, (October 21, 1848), p. 1050.

The realism¹ which critics observed in Mrs. Gaskell's first novel was of two kinds; firstly, her technique, that is, her graphic or "Dutch-painting" manner of drawing character and scenes; secondly, her relatively novel practice of choosing all the principal characters from the ranks of humble working-class people, depicted in their daily round of existence rather than as tools of crime and melodrama or sentimental sympathy.

As we have earlier indicated, no novelist before Mrs. Gaskell succeeded in writing a novel of industrial life that was found to be fully successful in terms of authenticity or imaginative sympathy. In their comments on Mary Barton many reviewers were favourably surprised that the anonymous authoress had transformed a common and seemingly uninteresting material, that is, the life of poor industrial workers, into a fascinating narrative:

Mary Barton is a poor weaver's daughter; her home, a small house in a "little paved court" in "dingy, smoky, Manchester." Who has ever associated romance or pathos with the dizzy whirl of machinery, or the fumes of roaring furnaces...? Yet the writer of this tale has succeeded in producing a charming work. 2

[Mary Barton] shows us, what a deep poetry may be lying hid under the outward meanness and triviality of humble life... We rise from its pages with a deep interest in all our fellow beings; with a firmer trust in their great and glorious destiny.³

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1. The terms "realist" and "realism", however, never occur in the criticism of Mary Barton in the period under discussion (1848-1852). The earliest use of "realist" in English criticism, as recorded by Stang (op. cit. p. 148), is 1851; and that of "Realism", 1853.
 2. Christian Examiner, (March 1849), p.293.
 3. Prospective Review, V, 57. Mrs. Gaskell's first impulse, when her husband advised her to take her thoughts off her dead child by writing, was to write a historical novel "in some rural scene" on the borders of Yorkshire. Although she "always felt a deep sympathy with the care-worn people" of Manchester, her decision to abandon the historical novel so as to write Mary Barton came as a revelation to her, "when I bethought me how deep might be the romance in the lives of some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets of the town in which I resided." See Author's preface, Mary Barton, ed., Stephen Gill, The Penguin English Library, 1970.

The author of the last comment saw in Mrs. Gaskell's choice of humble life a larger significance. He begins by observing that literature "seems to follow a kind of cycle which indicates the presence of a law." At the early states of social development poetry flourishes, but later it gives its place to prose fiction, as has happened at the present time. This does not mean that "the spirit of poetry has died out." It is now attracted to the novel, which, unhampered by the restrictions of verse, can afford "a freer utterance" to "the ampler materials" produced by "a more complex state of society and a greater multiplicity of human interests." "Another peculiarity marks the literature of fiction in advanced periods of civilisation -- the choice of its subjects from the humbler classes of society", the reason being that "men become sated with luxury and weary of conventionalisms." Thus "they turn for refreshment to the images of a more simple and natural life."¹ Besides its choice of humble life, which the Prospective saw as characteristic of the present advanced stage of social development, Mary Barton belonged to the new realistic tradition on another score. This was its representation of every-day events in a natural, life-like manner.

For the purpose of this study we may simplify the mid-Victorian attitude to realism as one of two extremes with a large number of critics occupying a middle ground. Exponents of the first extreme postulated a simple relationship between the artist and reality, using such terms as "Dutch painting" and "the fidelity of a daguerreotype" to describe what they saw as a truthful representation of real life. The better the artist the more he reflected life clearly and without distortion, even by the imagination. Thackeray was frequently found to be such a clear mirror,

1. Prospective Review, V, 36-7.

and was praised for depicting "life as it is, coloured as little as may be by the hues of the imagination."¹ Opposed to these "photographic" realists were the "idealists", who insisted that art should never reflect life in such a passive way. A Blackwood's critic, for instance, recognized Dickens's realistic method but was careful to point out that his method surpassed mere Dutch painting. It was highly selective and aimed to reach for "truth" rather than "fact":

Mr. Dickens chooses to show us in such pictures [of idealized, typical characters as Sam Weller] the difference between a thorough Dutch portrait of a scene, and the refined representation which seizes the necessary truth, but rejects the prosaic fact, which is neither agreeable nor edifying. 2

Another writer in the North British Review voiced a similar opinion when he said, "the novelist, like the dramatist or any other artist, limits his materials, selects those which are most suited to his purpose, and intensifies their action somewhat beyond the actual results of experience. This seems to us... the necessary distinction between art on the one hand, and life on the other."³

In contemporary discussions of Mrs. Gaskell's art in her first novel, we come across comments exemplifying the views of both the "simple" realist and the "idealist". As we have already noted, in descriptions of Mrs. Gaskell's manner of character drawing, terms denoting simple realism were frequent: "The delineation of individual characters is wonderfully graphic;"⁴ "the accessory characters are touched with the

1. Westminster Review, LIX (April 1853), 274.

2. Blackwood's Magazine, LXXVII (April 1855), 455, (*italic author's*).

3. XXXVI (November 1856), 209-10.

4. Christian Examiner, (March 1849), p.249.

fidelity of a daguerreotype."¹ "Our authoress seizes with singular felicity the salient points of character and manners and paints them distinctly to the very eye."² The same terms were also used in reference to Mrs.Gaskell's descriptive method: "Every scene is indeed a touch of nature;"³ Mary Barton is remarkable for its "graphic scenes of distress".⁴ Mrs.Gaskell was also praised for her unsentimental attitude to her humble poor, who "are not sublimated into models of heroic excellence"⁵, but depicted with their virtues as well as their shortcomings. Indeed, Mrs.Gaskell's portraits of the industrial poor looked so meticulously precise and so true to life that the Prospective reviewer believed them worthy of the perusal of those interested in social statistics:

[the first two chapters] are a complete and most admirable piece of Dutch painting, which for the accuracy of its details respecting the habits and economy of the poor might almost be studied by a collector of social statistics. 6

At the same time there were many who noted the selection and intensification that went into the writing of Mary Barton. Often the same critic who showed his appreciation of the novel's Flemish-painting portraits, commended its "idealized" pictures of reality. Thus the very reviewer who recommended the opening chapters of the book to the attention of the collector of social statistics had this to say about the novelist's

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1. Athenaeum, (October 21, 1848), p. 1050.
 2. Prospective Review, V, 42.
 3. New Monthly Magazine, LXXXIV, 407.
 4. Westminster Review, LI, 50.
 5. North British Review, XV, 425.
 6. Prospective Review, V, 42.

technical economy and her sense of proportion:

The style is full of life and colour, betraying a quick observant eye. It grasps its objects with remarkable steadiness and precision, does not dwell too long on any one, but throws in just enough of individual traits, to realise it distinctly to the imagination. 1

The characters in Mary Barton, he said, "have great variety and contrast, are finely discriminated, and sustained with vigilant consistency".

Some, however, are inflated beyond the ordinary dimensions of life.

"Old Sturgis", for instance, "has a more strongly-marked individuality [than the sailor, Will Wilson], but somewhat inclining to caricature."²

Greg in the Edinburgh pointed out John Barton as another character over-coloured by the imagination: "The lights and shadows are thrown too strongly on everything relating to [him]." The result is a "more startling" picture, "but, we think at the expense of probability".³ We have also seen, in our discussion of Mrs. Gaskell's use of dialect, how the critics who recognized the life-like quality of the racy, vigorous dialogues praised at the same time the novelist's "nicety in selection"⁴ from "the harsh, disagreeable patois"⁵ of the North. The North British Review put the case of those who were not satisfied with the simple fidelity of Dutch painting most clearly when it observed: "The peculiar charm of 'Mary Barton' is its extreme naturalness, not, however, without sufficient elevation of tone and sentiment to raise its life-like delineations above the level of mere Dutch painting."⁶

1. Ibid., 41-2.

2. Ibid., 43.

3. Edinburgh Review, LXXXIX, 412.

4. Athenaeum, (October 21, 1848), p. 1050.

5. Inquirer, (November 11, 1848), p. 710.

6. XV, 425.

Another interesting comment on Mrs. Gaskell's realism as it presented itself to the contemporary readers occurs in an anonymous and belated review of the novel by George Henry Lewes (1852). Lewes, in a lengthy discussion of the literature of women, and taking Jane Austen as his touchstone of excellence, says that truth to experience is the true mark of a superior artist. Good literature, he says, is never a mere reflection of society, but the expression of "the emotions, whims ... and enthusiasms which move every epoch"; it requires on the part of the literary artist two qualities, rarely found together, "observation" and "sentiment" (psychological subtlety and sensitivity to feeling). Some novelists are mainly strong in the first faculty, observation, like Mrs. Edgeworth, Fanny Burney and Mrs. Gore; others are primarily good at sentiment like Mrs. March. Of the contemporary women novelists only Mrs. Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë have combined the two qualities in more or less just proportions; they have moreover made such a powerful impact because they reproduced things they knew and experienced:

Two celebrated women whose works have produced an extraordinary "sensation" - the authoress of "Jane Eyre" and the authoress of "Mary Barton", owe their success, we believe, to the union of [these two] rare yet indispensable qualities. They have both given imaginative expression to actual experience - they have not invented, but reproduced; they have preferred the truth such as their own experience testified, to the vague, false, conventional notions current in circulating libraries. Whatever of weakness may be pointed out in their works, will, we are positive, be mostly in those parts where experience is deserted, and the supposed requirements of fiction have been listened to ... Note, moreover, that beyond this basis of actuality these writers have the further advantage of deep feeling united to keen observation. 1

1. Westminster Review, "The Lady Novelists", n.s. II (July 1852), p. 138.

In summary we can say that regardless of whether critics considered Mary Barton a straightforward and meticulous imitation of real life or one that went beyond that, they were virtually unanimous in acknowledging Mrs.Gaskell's great art in concealing her art. Hence their liberal praise for a work of fiction that looked so indistinguishable from the stuff of everyday reality:

[In Mary Barton] there is no effort, no straining after effect, so simply and naturally is the fearful story told, that we feel as if we were listening to a true tale from the lips of a friend _; we forget that [what] we have been told ... is only a fiction. 1

Mrs.Gaskell's ability to create and sustain a powerful illusion of reality was fully recognized. So was the "elevation of tone and sentiment"² so dear to Victorian hearts. The Manchester celebrity, Bamford, was not alone in his inability to read Mrs.Gaskell's novel "with tearless eyes"³. The serious-minded Westminster Review was not above confessing that many a scene in Mary Barton caused us "to melt with sympathy"⁴. The reviewer in the British Quarterly forgot his "ideological" differences with the authoress to declare that "the pathos of some of the [cottage-] scenes is hardly exceeded by anything that exists in our language."⁵ William Greg, who also believed the authoress too sympathetic with the artisan class, proclaimed that

1. Christian Examiner, (March 1849), pp. 293-294.

2. North British Review, XV, 425.

3. From a letter by Samuel Bamford addressed to "the Authoress of Mary Barton", dated March 9, 1849; repr. Waller, p. 107.

4. II, 59.

5. IX, 131.

pathos was the book's strongest merit:

[Mary Barton's] interest is intense: often painfully so; indeed it is here, we think, that the charm of the book and the triumph of the author will chiefly be found. 1

The painful interest of Mary Barton must have been too much for the elderly novelist, Maria Edgeworth, as we find her writing to Mrs. Gaskell's cousin, Miss Mary Holland: "The fault of the book is that it leaves such a melancholy I almost feel hopeless impression." Edgeworth's reasons for feeling so despondent after reading the novel are interesting. Firstly, she shrewdly observes that the sending of Jem Wilson and his bride Mary to Canada is an escapist solution to the industrial problems posed in the novel: "Emigration is the only resource pointed out at the end of the work, and this is only an escape from the evils not a remedy..."² Edgeworth's second reason for the painful effect of the novel is also interesting. The author(ess) has, in her opinion, defeated her purpose of exciting compassion for her suffering Manchester operatives by exciting it too much and too often:

There are... too many living creatures in this book __ The reader's sympathy is too much divided - cannot flit as fast as called upon from one to another without being weakened. The more forcible the calls and the objects of pity the more the feelings are harassed and in danger of being exhausted. 3

Another distressing factor was that there were "too many deaths in the book". It was unwise "for a good moral writer to have recourse to this source of pathos - hackneyed too and worn to nought."⁴ In her

1. Edinburgh Review, LXXXIX, 403.

2. From a letter dated December 27, 1848, repr. in Waller, pp. 109-110.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

complaint against the numerous deaths in the novel, Edgeworth found a supporter in the British Quarterly, which said "the author has rather a hankering after death scenes. Besides the murder, there are no fewer than eight deaths ... including a couple of unfortunate little twins, who might just as well have been left out."¹ Although the objection to a novel if it was found too painful was common, Edgeworth was the only source to raise such an objection against Mary Barton. It is also noteworthy that side by side with complaints against excessive pathos, it was generally believed that the proper use of pathos not only raised a work of fiction above mere Dutch painting but was also morally beneficial: the feelings of pity, compassion, and shock stimulated by pathos softened the heart and made it more susceptible to moral impulses and precepts. Of this faith in the purifying effects of pathos, which stems ultimately from Aristotle's idea of catharsis in tragedy, one finds copious examples in the contemporary response to Mary Barton. "We feel", wrote the Christian Examiner, "that by their influence [i.e. of scenes depicted "with a reality that is painful"], as by that of real affliction, the heart is purified and softened."² Greg in the Edinburgh Review quotes a long passage from chapter 6 of the novel; wherein John Barton and George Wilson, themselves in much need of help, forget their own troubles to tend the dying Davenport, comfort his crazed wife and nurse his starving children. Greg then asks if any of our well-off readers can contemplate this picture "without a sickening of the heart, and a sense of shame and self-condemnation, - that multitudes of fellow-creatures ... should be sinking under miseries like these, while we are

1. IX, 131.

2. (March 1849), p. 298.

daily wasting in vanities, or worse indulgences?... These are uneasy feelings" and we try to "quiet them" by our reasoning about the improvidence of the working class and the inevitability of periodic misery. We do not object to "the administration of these [intellectual] remedies at the proper stage."

But we think the first access of pain should not be repressed by their impatient application; and that all strong emotions, which naturally arise on certain occasions, should be permitted to run their course ... before we begin to question [their] wisdom ... The sickening of the heart may often be the necessary preparative for its softening ... In scenes like these there is no provocation and no reproach from the sufferers; and in their silence the low breathings of our hearts and consciences may, therefore, be better heard. 1

Apart from Maria Edgeworth, then, contemporary readers seem to have emerged from the experience of reading the pathetic scenes in Mary Barton ennobled and purified rather than harassed and distressed. Partly responsible for this was the cathartic relief afforded by the tragic elements of the novel, and partly, perhaps, the readers' satisfaction with their own susceptibility!

Another important factor which inclined readers more to hope than despair was the moral and essentially optimistic vision that permeates Mary Barton. It was a book that presented a world governed by eternal and ultimately just laws. Whenever man (John Barton) transgresses such a law (e.g. committing murder), he cannot escape just retribution (pangs of conscience, and death), but not before he has been purified by his own penitence and brought to a reconciliation with

1. LXXXIX, 409. Greg here unconsciously admits that the "natural laws" of political economy had their emotional use for the middle classes, in that they comforted their consciences when confronted with the massive, and apparently insoluble, problem of poverty. See p. 74 below.

his enemy (old Carson). The greatest afflictions, according to this vision, instead of leading to despair and moral chaos (though they can for a while do so, as in the case of John Barton), are seen to be agents of moral enlightenment, regeneration and order. Hence Barton's last moments of recaptured humanity and generous sympathy for rich and poor. Hence, too, the enlightening effects upon old Carson of his (for a while) shattering calamity, the assassination of his only son.¹

Another element in Mary Barton which helped the contemporary readers to go through it with hearts not always overwhelmed by feelings of "pity and terror"² is the comic relief provided by those touches of humour which break through the most pathetic of scenes, an aspect of the novel that was generally appreciated. "The author of 'Mary Barton...', wrote Chorley in the Athenaeum, "is not of necessity confined to distress in Art. He has power over what is quaint and whimsical, no less than

1. The moral and Christian outlook which shaped Mary Barton is partly revealed in the following passage of authorial exposition of the potentially beneficial effects of affliction. The immediate context is old Carson's gradual moral revival after the death of both his son and son's murderer, John Barton:
 "... There are stages in the contemplation and endurance of great sorrow which endow men with the same earnestness and clearness of thought that in some of old took the form of Prophecy. To those who have large capabilities of loving and suffering, united with great power of firm endurance, there comes a time in their woe, when they are lifted out of the contemplation of their individual case into a searching inquiry into the nature of their calamity, and the remedy (if remedy there be) which may prevent its occurrence to others as well as to themselves. Hence the beautiful, noble efforts which are ... made by those who have once hung on the cross of agony, in order that others may not suffer as they have done. It took time before the stern nature of Mr. Carson was compelled to the recognition of this secret of comfort ... [Before long, however, though he remained outwardly stern, his dearest wish began to be] that none might suffer from the cause from which he had suffered ... [and] to have [the operatives] bound to their employers by the ties of respect and affection, not by mere money bargains alone..." (MB, ch.37, pp.459-60).

2. Athenaeum, (October 21, 1848), p. 1050.

over the deepest emotions of pity and terror."¹ The writer has ability, the Christian Examiner concurred, "in depicting a comic scene, as well as one requiring the aid of the tragic muse."² In more poetic terms, wrote Tayler in the Prospective Review:

The fountains of mirth and sadness spring up side by side, and sometimes mingle their waters in their passage through the soil. Mary Barton [sic.] is rich in humour as well as in pathos. The mermaid scene between Will Wilson and Job Legh is exceeding comic. There are passages where the humour and the pathos are intermixed and pass into each other. This power of transition is no common gift. 3

Tayler then illustrates this subtle ability of the novelist to interweave pathos with humour within the same scene by Job Legh's account of his visit to London. Arriving there, he finds that both his daughter and her husband had died leaving a newly-born infant. Later he returns to Manchester, accompanied by the elderly father of his dead daughter's husband, carrying the problem child, the very young infant:

The perplexities of the two old men about their infant charge, their trouble with it at night, their ludicrous expedients to keep it quiet, the sharp contrast of their characters and their altercations - are described with exquisite humour, and yet blended with such touches of natural feeling, such strains of sadness coming unbidden from the full heart, as render this whole narrative one of the most remarkable in the book. 4

Tayler then proceeds to attach philosophical significance to Mrs. Gaskell's technique of mixing humour with pathos, and especially her device of effecting subtle changes of mood (for instance, from sorrow

1. Ibid.

2. (March 1849), p. 302.

3. V. 46.

4. Prospective Review, V, 46.

to joy) inside the same character: "as if [our authoress intends] to show how near together lie the sources of joy and sorrow, of good and evil in the human soul."¹ Of the latter technique Tayler gives three examples. First, Mary coming back home, shocked and dismayed, having just learnt of young Carson's death, and

distracted by her own unhappy relations with Jem, meets a little starving Italian boy, and at first absorbed by her own feelings, treats with indifference his piteous entreaties for a bit of bread, - till she bethinks herself, and fetches her own crust to give him, and feels softened and comforted by the return of her natural tenderness. 2

A second and similar instance occurs when John Barton, leaving for Glasgow, with the sense of gloom and guilt sitting heavily upon his heart, meets at dusk a little child who has lost his way home. The child crying bitterly for his mother revives within Barton's breast "his half-extinguished tenderness", so he leads him by the hand to his parents, "and then gloomily pursues his destined way."³

A third example pointed out by Tayler is:

Where the elder Carson, intent on vengeance, and determined never to forgive the murderer of his son is reminded of the beauty of another feeling, on seeing a little sportive girl who has been rudely knocked down by a heedless passer by,

1. Ibid., 49.

2. Ibid., (M B, ch.20, p.284)..

3. Ibid., (M B, ch.17, p.251). Besides revealing Mrs. Gaskell's psychological subtlety, this episode has striking ironic and symbolic significance which Tayler overlooks. At the time John Barton meets the straying boy, he has himself lost his moral bearings and is physically and symbolically drifting away from the warmth and security of home heading for a strange city (Glasgow), where he is friendless. Thus while he guides the lost child, he is himself in much need of moral guidance and a return to his own home. The symbolic significance is accentuated by "the dusk" during which this event takes place.

though much hurt, exhibit no resentment, but entreat that the offender may be pardoned and let go. 1

The three episodes cited by Tayler can also be seen as further illustration of Mrs.Gaskell's resources for balancing the despairing effects of the shocking realities depicted in her first novel. They all reflect her moral and essentially optimistic vision, which is ever reminding the reader that man's capacity for good is never extinguished - even though it can for a while be stunned and disrupted under the special circumstances of fear, guilt or the thirst for revenge. Mrs.Gaskell's moral outlook and her fondness of contrast were also determining factors in her creation of character. Thus John Barton as a man of abundant sympathy turning under extreme pressure into intense hatred and the capacity for destruction is balanced by that of Job Legh (and old Alice) as the embodiment of a sympathy that keeps flowing into the right course under all circumstances. This aspect of Mrs.Gaskell's work found a response in contemporary comments in the form of unease towards, and general lack of understanding of, John Barton. At the same time there was unreserved approval of his fellow worker Job Legh (and old Alice).

The two principal characters in Mrs.Gaskell's work, John Barton and his daughter Mary, naturally attracted the most attention. Compared

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1. Prospective Review, V, 49, (M.B., ch.35, pp.437-8). This incident, too, contains an irony, though of an obvious kind. This is perhaps why Tayler considered this last example "the least pleasing, and the worst executed. There is something far-fetched and calculated in the effect aimed at." (ibid., p.50).

Tayler's recognition of this "evident fondness [on the part of the authoress] for a sharp contrast of feelings - a bringing of two opposite states of mind into immediate collision" (ibid., 49) was only part of his astute recognition of Mrs.Gaskell's sharp sense of contrast displayed in the three examples and in her drawing of character: "The characters in this Tale have great variety and contrast ... Mary's impulsiveness and lively fancy are set off by the plain sense and steady principle of her friend Margaret." (ibid. 42-3).

with his daughter, John Barton presented a more difficult character to appraise. This was not only because of his controversial activities as a Chartist and Union delegate but also because, as an individual, he was conceived in a more complex manner. As Mrs. Gaskell wrote to a friend: "'John Barton' was the original title of the book. Round the character of John Barton all the others formed themselves; he was my hero, the person with whom all my sympathies went."¹ The reason why John Barton's name did not appear on the title-page, however, is apparently because Mrs. Gaskell took her publisher's advice that it would be unwise to name a book after a murderer.² That such advice was not unsound can be gathered from the fact that no critic, whether sympathetic with labour or not, ever suggested that John Barton should be "the true hero of the story", as it was said, for instance, of Jem Wilson.³ Contemporary critics, however, did not find it hard to observe that John Barton was the nearest to Mrs. Gaskell's heart: "But indeed," wrote Greg in the Edinburgh, "the lights and shades are thrown too strongly on everything relating to John Barton."⁴ In similar terms wrote Tayler in the Prospective, "If the outlines of the portraiture [of John Barton] are indeed drawn from reality [as we have heard], we suspect that lights and shades have been largely thrown in by the imagination of the writer."⁵

1. Letters, 42.

2. In her letter to a friend, Miss Lamont, Mrs. Gaskell wrote (January 5, [1849]): "'John Barton' was the original name [of the novel], as being the central figure to my mind ... and it was a London thought coming through the publisher that it must be called Mary B." (Letters, 39).

3. Prospective Review, V, 42. One reader, however, the same Miss Lamont, mentioned in the previous note, did suggest that the novel should have been called "John Barton". Mrs. Gaskell was very grateful that her original hero was recognized by this friend, especially so since she found that "many people overlook John B. or see him merely to misunderstand him." (*ibid.*)

4. LXXXIX, 412.

5. V, 52.

Of John Barton's development from a man full of sympathy for humanity to his intense hatred of the rich, reaching a climax in his assassination of a wealthy manufacturer's son, there were two contrasting opinions. The Westminster considered "the train of thought called up... in the mind of the gloomy, earnest [John Barton] - his joining a trades-union, and his becoming a delegate - are most naturally described."¹ Tayler in the Prospective saw inconsistency where the Westminster had seen natural development. He believed there were two "incompatible elements" in John Barton's character: "his wild and erring nature" and his "general nobleness and benevolence of spirit."² Greg, too, thought of John Barton as composed of two contradictory natures:

It is not that he has, more or less, two natures. That is common to us all. Our objection is, that his conduct is radically inconsistent with his qualities and character. 3

Unlike Tayler's, Greg's main emphasis was not on the evil-good nature of John Barton, but upon the contradiction between his being an intelligent, steady worker and his improvidence and ignorance of "the first principles of commercial and economic science".⁴ Since Greg objected to John Barton mainly because of his disapproval of the social theme that he embodied, more will be said of his opinion of Mrs. Gaskell's hero later.⁵

The novelist Maria Edgeworth, uninhibited by the social views

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1. II, 50.
 2. V, 52.
 3. Edinburgh Review, LXXXIX, 412-3.
 4. Ibid., 412.
 5. See p.70 below.

of critics like Greg, considered John Barton "admirably kept up from 1st to last."¹ So did the Manchester ex-weaver poet Samuel Bamford, who by direct reference to his life-experience was able to assert, "Of John Barton I have known hundreds, his very self in all things except his crime."²

The titular heroine Mary Barton presented a simpler case to contemporary readers. One thing about her that struck them as new was her being a poor working-class girl who even by the end of the story never comes into an unexpected inheritance, does not discover rich or more respectable parents, nor marries a gentleman. As a poor heroine who really is poor and never becomes rich and a lady, Mary Barton was received with general, though surprised, approval. The following comment in the Westminster in its mocking recapitulation of the staple qualities of the "refined" heroines of the past decades shows, however, that Mrs. Gaskell's choice of Mary Barton as heroine was not against the taste of her time:

Mary Barton is no heiress, nursed in the lap of luxury, living upon the produce of other people's labour ... refined, generous, capricious, indolent - dying first of ennui, then of love, and lastly falling a prey to a fortune-hunter, or a military swindler. No; Mary Barton is one of Labor's [sic.] daughters - heiress of all the struggles, vicissitudes and sufferings consequent upon the ignorance and prejudices of the society into which she is born. 3

Common working-class girl though she is, Mary Barton is not without many of the graces of the traditional heroine. Mrs. Gaskell,

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1. From a letter dated December 27, 1848, repr. Waller, op.cit., p.108.
 2. From a letter by Samuel Bamford, dated March 9, 1849, repr. Waller, op.cit., p. 107.
 3. II, 48.

a creature of her time, and probably also with an eye on the market, is generous in the quantities of beauty, courage, tact and sense which she bestows upon her. Notwithstanding the growing taste for strict realism, no objection was made to these graces of the blonde, blue-eyed Mary Barton. On the contrary, the intelligent, spirited and affectionate heroine was welcomed by the middle-class readers, who were happy to have their notion of the poor as a coarse and dull race corrected by this image of Mary, which in many ways resembled, if not surpassed, any lady. "Mary Barton" wrote the North British "is endowed with inexpressible grace, delicacy, and innate refinement, which accompanies a tender, unselfish, loving disposition."¹ The aspect of Mary's character, however, which satisfied the growing appreciation of truth to life was her being "not too perfect morally."² Her flirtation with Henry Carson in the first part of the story was seen to be "not altogether unpardonable under the circumstances." Moreover, it was needed for the plot, as "the tragic interest of the story arises partly from a little coquetry on her part."³ Mrs. Gaskell's success in not ruffling mid-Victorian moral sensibilities on account of Mary Barton's temporary flirtation with young Harry has indeed been complete. The Westminster reviewer not only pardoned Mary's "errors" but also joined the novelist in dismissing the prudent reproaches of Mary's blind friend, Margaret, as coming from a person not qualified to pass judgement on human frailty; Margaret could not understand our weakness before temptation because temptation never came her way:

[Mary Barton's] errors, that had their source more in the temptations to which the gift of her natural beauty

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1. XV, 425.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid.

exposed her than in any serious levity of conduct, are drawn with delicate discrimination; and the harsh judgement of her friend Margaret, who, "never exposed to the trial of being admired for her personal appearance, had no sympathy with the temptations to which loveliness, vanity, ambition or the desire of being admired, expose so many" finds no response in the mind of the reader. 1

The novelist Maria Edgeworth likewise considered Mary "charming - from not being too perfect." She also saw as "ingenious and interesting" Mrs. Gaskell's putting her heroine "in a new and good difficulty between her guilty father and her innocent noble lover." This situation, which is "fit for the highest Greek Tragedy", is not "unsuited to the humblest life of a poor tender girl."² Edgeworth agreed, too, with the New Monthly Magazine in finding that "the manner in which [Mary Barton] declares her preference for the prisoner [Jem Wilson] ... at the bar is most effective."³

Only Tayler in the Prospective described the last episode as "the worst conceived and least natural incident in the story". According to him Mary's "unreserved display" of her love for Jem in the open court (though a sort of poetical consequence balancing her unfeeling rejection of his love earlier in the story) is "a feeling which the circumstances of the time would rather have led her to suppress."⁴

Tayler's dissatisfaction with this scene was only part of his general unhappiness about the conception of Mary Barton as a whole. What he found unconvincing in the creation of this heroine was her sudden transformation from the immature and giddy girl of the first half of the story to the heroic and self-effacing woman of the latter half.

1. II, 51 (M B , ch. 22, p.306).

2. Letter dated December 27, 1848, repr. Waller, op.cit., pp. 108-9.

3. LXXXIV, 408 (M B , ch. 32, pp. 390-1.)

4. V, 52.

This change, immediately following her rejection of Jem's proposal, is "the work of a moment" and no satisfactory "psychological explanation is offered to the reader." It is true that "a change of object" or a "wavering purpose" might be "effected by the strong impression of a moment, but never the complete transformation of character." To bring about such a radical and permanent change "years would have been needed to make it possible." Moreover, "to preserve consistency in the groundwork of [Mary Barton's] character, traces of her former ["vain, selfish, cold-hearted"] self should have shown themselves in the latter part of her history."¹

We know now that Mrs. Gaskell's banishing John Barton to the background and her pushing his daughter to the forefront of the story in the latter half of the book was partly in response to her publisher's advice that a Chartist and a murderer should not be made the hero of the novel. It is also generally accepted now-a-days that this change of artistic purpose has made Mary Barton suffer in harmony and unity. Tayler in the Prospective could have no way of knowing about Mrs. Gaskell's mid-way change of tactics. This fact makes all the more remarkable his astute foreshadowing of modern criticism by observing that "the discrepancy between the two [characters of the heroine, the immature and common-place girl of the earlier chapters of the novel, and the heroic one of the second half] involves consequences in the development of the story, which form the chief drawback on its general impression of naturalness and probability."²

Jem Wilson, Mary Barton's steady, honest, working-class lover and future husband was sufficiently uncomplicated and so moral and

1. Ibid., V, 50-52.

2. Ibid., 50.

"noble" in every respect that critics had little to say of him except praise. Jem Wilson, wrote the ex-weaver Bamford, is not,"and I [am] proud to say it, a solitary character in the young fellows of our working population, noble as he is."¹ The word "noble" in reference to Jem recurs in the Prospective, where he is curiously enough considered "the true hero of the story."² - but perhaps this is not so strange if we remember that Tayler was not satisfied with the consistency of both the two principal characters, John Barton and his daughter.

The reviewer of the New Monthly described Jem as "hard-working, steady, and 'gallant'". Then, anticipating objection to his conferring the last epithet upon a humble worker, he paused to justify himself, not without a trace of supercilious amusement on his part:

... "gallant!" the reader will exclaim, can a workman be gallant? Yes, read that most stirring scene of a fire in a factory, in which Jem Wilson saves so many lives at the peril of his own, and gallantry will not be denied to rude, coarse men, akin to that of any knight's most glorious deeds. 3

As for the eccentric, kind-hearted, scientific-minded weaver, Job Legh, Chorley in the Athenaeum felt called upon to explain to his readers that Legh's scientific interests were not a figment of the imagination: "Job Legh [is] one of those exact and eager collectors in Natural History so frequent in manufacturing towns."⁴ Tayler in the Prospective echoed Chorley's observation, but he went on to point out

1. Waller, p.107.

2. Prospective Review, V.42.

3. XV, 407 (M.B., ch.5).

4. (October 21, 1848), p. 1050.

perceptively that Job Legh had a greater significance as a person who succeeds in preserving his inner peace and interest in life in the midst of noisy Manchester and in spite of the dire restrictions of poverty:

Old Job Legh with his odd volumes of books and entomological rarities is a fine specimen of a form of character not uncommon among the workmen of Lancashire, quiet, studious, contemplative - a philosopher of nature's making - amidst the din of manufactures and the many distractions of poverty, serenely finding his happiness in silent thought and the observation of God's works. 1

The same critic considered Job Legh's account of his tragicomic journey from London back to Manchester "the most remarkable [incident] in the whole book."² The Christian Examiner saw the same episode "so simply and naturally told, that we suspect its pathetic interest must be derived from fact."³ Although we may now consider this episode a rather long digression impairing the unity of the novel, contemporary critics were simply happy and grateful for it. Yet such objections were not uncommon in the criticism of the time. Indeed we have an example of this in Maria Edgeworth's dissatisfaction with the sub-plot illustrating the progress of Esther as a fallen woman. Esther's story, in her opinion, was a gratuitous weight on the book, since prostitution was not peculiar to industrial life, the main concern of the novel:

I think that some of the miseries might be left out - For instance Esther who is no good and does no good to Mary or to anybody else - nor to the story - she might be and may be in every town in the Empire as well as at

1. V, 42-3.

2. V, 46 (M.B., ch. 9).

3. (March 1849), p. 300.

Manchester. Her faults are not the results of manufacturing wrongs from masters or evils of men. 1

Taylor in the Prospective disagreed with Edgeworth, finding in Esther's story a further illustration of the book's skilful handling of contrast, in this instance, between womanly purity and feminine degradation:

Poor Esther's story throws a deeper shade into the dark background of the picture, and stands out in sad relief against the womanly purity which sheds over it a sweet and holy glow. 2

The Christian Examiner considered Esther's story "drawn with a fidelity and truth really terrible."³ Like Chorley in the Athenaeum⁴, it regarded "the deeply affecting" midnight visit of Esther to her niece "one of the most admirably drawn scenes in the book."⁵

If Esther's history excited pity and terror in the hearts of contemporary readers, they were soothed and refreshed by old Alice. Against the gloomy background of suffering, misery and destructive conflict, she shone like a beacon of peace and holiness. "There is no character", wrote the Inquirer, "that pleases us more than the gentle, religious Alice - she is one of 'the Sisters of Mercy', who are better known in heaven than on earth."⁶ Maria Edgeworth joined the Inquirer in noting that old Alice was painted with heightened colours, yet not too heightened for probability, "I can believe in the existence and operation

1. Letter, dated December 27, 1848, repr. Waller, op.cit., p. 110.

2. V, 43.

3. (March 1849), p. 303.

4. (October 21, 1848), p. 1050.

5. (March 1849), p. 303.

6. (November 11, 1848), p. 710.

of such virtue - not too good for everyday life - though I never had the luck to meet with like -"¹ The elderly novelist who thought the novel overcrowded with living characters and wished some like Esther away, was not prepared to do without Alice on any account. She saw her important to balance and take the edge off the exceeding painfulness of Mary Barton:

I have heard it wished that the character of Alice should be expunged. But this is not my wish or feeling on the contrary this character does not increase the sum of painful or despairing feeling - But adds to the salutary - because in spite of all misfortunes she is happy through life and happy in death from her internal resources of benevolence and energetic virtue. 2.

Taylor in the Prospective, who also found old Alice the most beautiful character in the book, described her admirable qualities with obvious affection:

Perhaps the most beautiful creation in the whole book is Alice. Her unconscious goodness, her faith in God never forsaking her, her unselfish devotion to the service of others, her gratitude for the smallest mercies, the child-like innocence and simplicity of her spirit, and the still and quiet happiness that floats round her whole being, like the fresh and pure air of her native hills - are truly delightful. 3

No such affectionate praise was bestowed on the Carsons. The highest acknowledgment they received was from Maria Edgeworth, who thought: "there is great discretion in the drawing of the characters of the Carson family."⁴ The Christian Examiner also believed its

1. Waller, p. 111.

2. Ibid., pp. 110-111.

3. V, 43.

4. Waller, p. 108.

"fashionable readers will admit the truthful and happy manner in which the young ladies in Mr. Carson's [house] are described."¹ On the whole, little mention of the Carsons was made in the contemporary criticism of the novel. This is hardly surprising as Mrs. Gaskell herself had far less interest in them as individuals than as tools needed for the plot and the social theme. Two comments are, however, worth mentioning. First, the British Quarterly, totally unhappy to see the two representatives of the manufacturing class, old Carson and his son, depicted as "arrogant selfish, unfeeling men", dismissed them as caricatures of a most harmful kind. The critic then seized the opportunity to attack the practice of presenting caricatures in contemporary novels: "More than one modern writer of fiction, even among those who hold the foremost rank (? Dickens), need to be admonished, that to exhibit a caricature ... is an act of dishonesty."² The reviewer of Mary Barton in the Manchester Guardian was, among other things, dissatisfied (not without some justification) with the exaggerated portrayal of old Carson's lust for a speedy revenge against Jem Wilson, the supposed murderer of his son. Old Carson, he protested, is endowed "with a vindictiveness not to be exceeded by an Indian savage."³ - this last species of savage being apparently the most ferocious the Guardian critic could think of!

The reviewer of the British Quarterly took exception to Mrs. Gaskell's suggestion that old Carson, being a self-made manufacturer, was especially hard and unfeeling in his attitude to his work-people: "We enjoy the acquaintance" said the reviewer, "of several who have so

1. (March 1849), pp. 302-303.

2. IX, 132.

3. (February 28, 1849), p.7.

risen and have found them, without exception, to be of the most opposite character."¹ The overwhelming majority of Mary Barton's critics apparently did not have the good fortune of being acquainted with these "patterns of energy and philanthropy,"² for we find them either implicitly or explicitly endorsing the truth of the novel's treatment of the Manchester employers. Even William Rathbone Greg, himself a very enlightened manufacturer by the standards of his time, evidently felt that to defend the employers in the manner of the British Quarterly was a lost cause; instead he directed most of his energy to other things (for instance, John Barton as an untypical working-man).

A variety of reasons influenced critics in this general lack of interest in defending the employers; many evidently believed the truth of Mrs. Gaskell's representations; others, while clearly seeing that the employers got a raw deal in Mrs. Gaskell's book, did not care to chastize her on this score, re-assured that she had no revolutionary designs upon society, but was trying simply to create sympathy for the industrial poor -- if, in so doing, she was not able to draw a flattering picture of the masters, then it was perhaps all for the good. Furthermore Mrs. Gaskell's realism, the "self evident truthfulness"³ of her work, especially her unrelenting description of the heart-sickening misery that decimated the workers in the period of the novel (1839-1842), left many reviewers in no mood to insist that the novelist should have divided her sympathies evenly between the employers and their workpeople.

Only a few quotations are needed to illustrate and amplify what I have said:

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1. (February 1849), pp. 122-123. (*italics mine*).
 2. Ibid., p. 123.
 3. Inquirer, (November 11, 1848), p. 710.

The book is an ungilded and sorrowful picture of the life of the class of workpeople in such a town as Manchester ... [The author] does not affect to offer any solution of a problem involving so much misery, but appears to think that good may be done by wholesome sympathy ... [Her] aim is ... to lessen the interval that separates [mill-owners and workers], and show with what advantage to both each might know more of the other. (Examiner) 1

[Mary Barton in an attempt] to create in the reading public an interest for the miserable operatives by showing their domestic virtues, their industry, their unwearied but too generally ineffective struggles against the fate which, sooner or later, overtakes them. (Economist) 2

[Mary Barton is a story of] fearful and saddening realities ... [In it we find] many a useful lesson, affecting the interests and the welfare of both masters and workmen. (John Bull) 3

To the rest of the world, and even to many an in-dweller in that place [Manchester], much that is entirely new will be found in these volumes. (Literary Gazette) 4

[Mary Barton] should be read by individuals of all ranks, but especially by the highest and wealthiest. To such indeed it will preach unpalatable truths. [But the rich should not turn their faces against] the suffering of the poor! -- the monstrous inequalities in the social condition of God's human creatures upon His earth. (Standard of Freedom) 5

To give in a few words the best descriptions, and the highest eulogium of "Mary Barton", we may say that it affords a most graphic sketch of the habits and thoughts and feelings of the important [working] class to which it relates ... We sympathise most heartily in their despairing isolation ... The wrongs and wrong-doing of both employers and employed are gently touched upon ... (Sun) 6

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1. (November₄ 1848), p. 708.
- 25,
2. (November₂₅ 1848), p. 1338.
3. (November 4, 1848), p. 711.
4. (October 28, 1848), p. 707.
5. (October 28, 1848), p. 12.
6. (November 30, 1848), p. 3.

It is obvious, that in this experiment, all depended upon the manner in which it was conducted. It is equally able and attractive. We are not only introduced to every variety of Manchester life, but we are introduced in the right spirit. We feel that we are led by the hand of a clear, warm, and noble nature. We are made to see the ways and errors of all, without exasperation against any. There is a fine balance of mind in the writer, kept true by the surest instinct, and by a sympathy broad as human nature itself. (Eclectic Review) 1

We heartily approve of the benevolent purpose which actuates the author of these interesting volumes. He has struck out for himself a new path, and worked out his laudable design in a most unobjectionable manner. He introduces us to humble life in Manchester, and such life as may be seen every day in the manufacturing districts of the north of England. He brings us into acquaintance with the circumstances, condition, feelings, wants, and desires of the working classes of that locality; he discloses their very hearts to us; he places their good qualities, it is true, in the most advantageous light, but he neither disguises their weakness nor excuses their folly. There is no false sentimentality about him, no desire to bring the rich into contempt, while the obvious scope and tendency of the entire work is to elevate and improve the condition of the poor. He is anxious to make the wealthy manufacturer better acquainted with the true position of the distressed factory operative, from whose industry and skill he has derived his wealth, and to excite Christian sympathy and benevolence on behalf of the latter. The author's feelings have evidently a favourable preponderance towards the working classes; but there is no inclination manifested to disparage or excite antagonistic feelings against the employers. The mistaken views of each party are occasionally developed in the form of dialogue, in which every speaker is undoubtedly permitted to tell his own story in his own way, and without any false colouring on the part of the author. (Morning Post) 2

All reviewers recognized the importance of the subject chosen by Mrs. Gaskell for her first novel. Only a few (like Kingsley and the Standard of Freedom), however, felt inclined to emphasize the dangers inherent in social strife, and exacerbated by the wide gap of

1. (January 1849), p. 53.

2. (November 24, 1848), p.6.

understanding, as well as wealth and political power, between rich and poor. It seems to me that the majority of reviewers were inhibited from doing so by a superstitious fear that talking about a potential social danger would somehow contribute to making it a reality. Also, the middle-classes had been recently reassured by the defeat of Chartism. Besides, there was a deep-seated feeling that the nation was not likely to come to social or political grief because of the innate sense and moderation of the people, both high and low. The social convulsions on the continent made not a few people nervous in Britain, but many believed and hoped that the "revolutionary mania of the continent" would never infect Britain.¹

If we look at the reviews of the employers' apologists (Greg's, the British Quarterly's, the Manchester Guardian's), we find a much greater reluctance to admit that anything was seriously wrong with the industrial situation. The British Quarterly reviewer assures his readers that "the existence of an angry feeling towards employers" on the part of operatives is virtually non-existent at the present time, and that it is "an exaggerated view of what was common even in the time of distress. [1839-1842]."² Greg, too, speaks admiringly of the "submissive hopefulness", which is "the predominant characteristic" of the working-class even in "periods of severe suffering."³

1. Cf. "[The author of Mary Barton says] at the conclusion of the preface:- 'To myself the idea which I have formed of the state of feeling among too many of the factory people in Manchester ... has received some confirmation from the events which have so recently occurred among a similar class of people on the continent.' We should hardly have thought ... that the revolutionary mania of the continent could in any sense furnish a clue to the state of feeling in this country." (British Quarterly, (Feb. 1849), p.121).
2. (February 1849), p. 125.
3. Edinburgh Review, (April 1849), p, 405.

At the same time both these writers betray their awareness of the gravity and dangers of industrial conflict not only by taking the trouble of writing long reviews of Mary Barton but also by contradicting themselves, when they admit that "it will not be safe or wise to close our eyes" before the "flood of light [lately] ... let in upon the condition and prospects of large masses of the community." (The British Quarterly).¹ "Considering ... the ignorance and mis-conception of their true interests and position, which are still too common among the artisans of many of our large towns, the effect of [reading Mary Barton], if taken without some corrective, might in these quarters be mischievous in the extreme." (Greg).²

The main complaint raised against Mary Barton by these critics was that it was one-sided and unfair, and that the writer felt a "too exclusive and indiscriminating sympathy with [the working-class]".³ Bradford in the Christian Examiner gives a good answer to this complaint. In spite of his admiration for the energetic manufacturers of Manchester, he points out the justice of giving the poor the pride of place in Mrs. Gaskell's novel, considering that the point of view of the rich has always had its advocates:

It has been said, that the design of this work was to bring the rich and the poor into more friendly contact, and create a feeling of sympathy between them. This is not, however, the conclusion at which we have arrived. From the great power the writer has evinced, we cannot doubt her ability to have carried out such a design if it had been her object. The rich are never in want of chroniclers. "Mary Barton", we should say, is a soul-stirring, powerful plea for the poor.⁴

1. (February 1849), p.118.

2. Edinburgh Review, (April 1849), p.404.

3. Ibid., p.403.

4. (March 1849), p.304. Uninhibited by the fears of his English counterparts, this American reviewer here states the plain fact that Mary Barton was one-sided, though justifiably so.

Sentimentality was not a term to be used in connection with Mary Barton. The only exception was the critic in the British Quarterly, who expressed his annoyance that the industrial population had lately received a "disproportionate amount both of attention and compassion" because of the class-jealousy of land-owners and "the mawkish sentimentality" of certain members of the middle and upper classes.¹ He also considered that "the touch of religious sentiment in [the reconciliation scene between Carson and John Barton] does not, in our view, redeem it from being too much in the melodramatic style to be consistent with either probability or good taste"².

One would have thought that this critic should have welcomed the moral and social significance of the scene in which the working-man John Barton realizes (on confronting the shattered employer whose son he himself had in his intense hatred of the rich destroyed) the fallacy of his notion of the master as "a being of another race, eternally placed in antagonistic attitude; going through the world glittering like gold, with a stony heart within, which knew no sorrow but through the accidents of Trade."³ The critic, however, was inhibited from appreciating the enlightenment of John Barton because of his inability to believe in John Barton's existence or the reality of his state of mind: "We think it would be very difficult to find an intelligent and thoughtful workman so utterly ignorant and prejudiced [against the masters.]"⁴

1. (February 1849), p. 118.

2. Ibid., p. 129.

3. MB, ch. 35, p. 435.

4. British Quarterly, (Feb. 1849), p. 129.

Unlike the British Quarterly reviewer, Greg never attempts to beat Mary Barton with the stick of sentimentality. This is significant: Greg and other like-minded political economists of the time frequently used this method of attack against all those who in any way questioned or showed impatience at the rather inhumane operation of the "natural" laws of political economy. "Political economy", wrote John Stuart Mill, was denounced "as hard-hearted;... We retorted by the word 'sentimentality', which along with 'declamation' and 'vague generalities' served as common terms of opprobrium."¹

Greg's main grievance is that Mrs.Gaskell has given too much importance and shown too much sympathy for John Barton. Mrs.Gaskell's statement in the "preface" that she knew "nothing of political economy"² was taken literally by him (and others); this, for Greg, explained what he regarded as the inconsistent and improbable nature of John Barton: at once ^{an} intelligent and steady worker, and an improvident and discontinued union-delegate:

There is, too, it seems to us, a double error, both an artistic error and an error of fact, in representing a man of Barton's intelligence and habits of reflection and discussion, to be so ignorant of the first principles of commercial and economic science... Probably this arises from the writer's acknowledged unacquaintance with social and political economy herself, and from her ignorance how far the rudiments of these sciences have been mastered by the more thoughtful and the better educated artisans of our large towns. 3

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1. Autobiography of John Stuart Mill, ed. R.Howsen, New York, 1924, p.77.
 2. MB, Mrs.Gaskell's preface. A.W.Ward in his introduction to Mary Barton in the Knutsford edition of her Works (I,p,LII) said that "as a matter of fact, she had read Adam Smith, and perhaps, like Nicholas Higgins in 'North and South', had 'tugged at' a few later authorities". One contemporary reviewer (The Eclectic Review (1849), p.53) believed, too, that the authoress "flings aside technicalities [of political economy etc.], not because she is not wholly master of her subject, for that she evidently is, but because she would have her readers to forget them and follow her through the dwellings of the rich and the poor, till they are impressed by what they see and hear.
 3. Greg, op.cit., p. 412.

Greg regretted that the admirable portrayal of "the stoic endurance" of the artisans, as exemplified by George Wilson and old Alice, was impaired by giving the discontented John Barton a more prominent position in the novel. This will leave "the erroneous impression" that patience among the poor is the exception and "ill-humour and vindictiveness is the rule - especially among the stronger and more thoughtful natures".¹ Such feelings, he concedes, "unquestionably and unfortunately do exist in a considerable degree and in a degree which varies with the time." Yet we believe "they are exceptional, not general - local, limited, and transient." Thus:

As a picture of an individual, -- that is, of the feelings of this or that person, -- John Barton is unhappily true to the life; as the type of a class, though a small one, he may be allowed to pass muster: but to bring him forward as a fair representative of the artisans and factory operatives of Manchester and similar towns generally, he is a libel alike upon them and upon the objects of their alleged hatred. 2

John Barton, who in good times, "never lays by a farthing for a time of sickness at home or stagnation of trade", should, when these periods come, curse "his own improvidence" instead of cursing the masters.³ Indeed, not only the creation of John Barton but:

The whole book, too, is pervaded by one fatally false idea, which seems to have taken possession of the writer's mind... viz. that the poor are to look to the rich, and not to themselves, for relief and rescue from their degraded condition and their social miseries. An impression more utterly erroneous, more culpably shallow, more lamentably mischievous, it is difficult to conceive... It is a

1. Ibid., p. 405.

2. Ibid., p. 411-12.

3. Ibid., p.413.

thoughtless echo of the virulent declamations daily sounded in the ears of the artisans by the worst of their intestine enemies [i.e. Trade-Union delegates]. 1

The working-class should in fact "emulate their employers instead of envying them". They should "imitate their prudence and worldly wisdom, their unresting diligence, their unflagging energy [and] their resolute and sturdy economy." When the artisans acquire these qualities, and the ability "to withstand present temptation" (such as drink, gambling and improvident marriages), "they would have no need to call upon the rich or on the legislature to assist them".²

That the poor had mainly themselves to blame for their poverty was a belief widely shared by the political economists of the time. This attitude is starkly expressed in Benjamin Love's book on the distress that hit the cotton-weaver of Lancashire in the 'Hungry Forties':

If these men had been provident, had laid by something to fall back upon, when needed, how much misery and distress might have been spared! But the principle of individual saving seems unpopular with a great proportion of operatives. They live only from day to day, or at most put by a few pence per week, for club money.

In the times alluded to they might have saved money, and now they are reaping the punishment that follows improvidence. Few elevate themselves, even when they might, from a state of even servile dependence. Those who are not confederated in a bond of mutual support, fly to charities, seek gratuitous medical advice, and appeal to the benevolent societies of the town on every apparent emergency; and they get so into the habit of thus doing, that they come to think they have a prescriptive right not to do anything for themselves.³

1. Ibid., 419-20.

2. Ibid., 420.

3. The Handbook of Manchester, 1842, pp.99-100. (*italics author's*). Love's claim that the Manchester working-class flew to charities at every apparent emergency is highly exaggerated. Davenport in Mary Barton suffers his family to starve without seeking relief for fear of being sent back to his original parish. Many families, inhibited by no such deterrent, sank into destitution, and some actually starved, in Manchester without seeking or getting public help, which, in any case, could not cope with the magnitude of the misery which reached its peak in 1842. See Joseph Adshead, Distress in Manchester, 1844, pp. 25-41.

In the early decades of the Industrial Revolution many people, starting from humble beginnings succeeded in becoming substantial manufacturers and merchants. (So do Carson in Mary Barton, Thornton in North and South and Bounderby in Hard Times). This encouraged the belief that any person with initiative and perseverance should be able in the new era of opportunity to achieve similar results. Although the myth of success may be considered useful as an incentive to hard work, it was often used, or rather abused, by the laissez-faire exponents and self-made manufacturers to put the blame of poverty at the poor man's door. Dickens in Hard Times calls this a fiction of his industrial city, Coketown, and punctures it in his characteristic style:

This, again, was among the fictions of Coketown. Any capitalist there, who had made sixty thousand pounds out of sixpence, always professed to wonder why the sixty thousand nearest Hands didn't each make sixty thousand pounds out of sixpence, and more or less reproached them every one for not accomplishing the little feat. What I did you can do. Why don't you go and do it? 1

The Malthusian theories lent "scientific" weight to this "fiction". Thomas Robert Malthus, rejecting in his Essay on Population (1798) the eighteenth-century thinking that a large population was a source of national wealth, argued that a large population constituted a grave social problem: the population, increasing at a geometrical ratio, was bound to outstrip the means of subsistence, which increased at a mathematical rate. To redress the balance between the increasing population and the food available, nature used such checks as misery, poverty, epidemics and wars. Malthus later modified his opinions laying the emphasis not on the ruthless checks of nature, but on moral

1. Hard Times, ed. D.Craig, The Penguin English Library, 1969, p. 152.

preventives. By this he meant that the poor would learn to limit voluntarily the size of their families and endeavour to become rich themselves by following the course of frugality, prudence and industry.

Since many of the poor failed to take this path towards riches, it followed that poverty was the sin rather than the misfortune of the poor. Benjamin Love in the above-quoted passage even invokes the Old Testament to justify this assumption: "Now they are reaping the punishment that follows improvidence". So does even the sensitive and enlightened Greg, when he, for instance, says: "The Laws of Nature, which are the ordinances of Providence, and therefore the embodiment of unerring wisdom, have decreed that idleness and improvidence shall incur destitution". Even the offspring of "improvident" parents shall not escape misery, since "the sins of the fathers are visited upon their children."¹

This hard attitude towards the poor was evidently one way for the middle-classes to allay their sense of guilt, when confronted with the huge and seemingly intractable problem of poverty. Also, in the process of dealing "objectively" and "rationally" with a complex and extensive human situation, imaginative sympathy and sensitivity sometimes seem to be a burden rather than a help. This was certainly the case in many contemporary studies of the poor; where they were treated en masse; the poor as a body were improvident, submissive, discontented, lacking in self-reliance or irreligious. This blurred the distinction between the able-bodied and the sick, the weak and the strong, children and adults, the well-paid or ill-paid, the fully

1. Mistaken Aims and Attainable Ideals of the Artisan Class, 1876, pp. 94, 102..

employed, half-employed or idle. The virtue of a work like Mary Barton lies in transforming these abstractions into the complexity and vividness of life itself. Thus a man like John Barton cannot be labelled, and thus condemned, as a Discontented Chartist; instead he is presented in Mrs. Gaskell's work as a unique human being, by nature affectionate and fair-minded, whose very strong sense of justice and the frustrations of his private life and political expectations cause him to become obsessive in his hostility to the rich, and thus embark him on the road that eventually leads to self-destruction. Likewise, in the context of the novel, to bring up the charge of improvidence against the dying Davenport and his starving family, living in their rat's hole of a cellar, is both insulting and irrelevant.

Moreover, in asking and expecting a poor man to possess a tremendous amount of sobriety, diligence, forethought and self-denial, forgetting the long hours of his monotonous and exhausting work, the filthy, and squalid state of his accommodation, his uncertainty of employment, and his craving for leisure, variety and entertainment, one was indeed expecting the humanly impossible. Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth, himself in favour of "the ascertained truths of political science [to] be early taught to the labouring classes",¹ could not, as a physician with much experience of the industrial poor of Manchester, but see that their living and working conditions stunted their moral, mental and physical growth:

The population nourished on this ["comparatively inutritious"] aliment is crowded into one dense mass, in cottages separated by narrow, unpaved, and almost pestilential streets... The

1. The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes employed in the Cotton Manufacture in Manchester, 2nd ed., 1832, p.97.

operatives are congregated in rooms and workshops during twelve hours in the day in an enervating, heated atmosphere, which is frequently loaded with dust or filaments of cotton, or impure from constant respiration, or from other causes... They are drudges who watch the movements, and assist the operations of a mighty material force, which toils with an energy ever unconscious of fatigue...

Hence, besides the negative results - the abstraction of moral and intellectual stimuli-- the absence of variety -- banishment from the grateful air and the cheering influences of light, the physical energies are impaired by toil, and imperfect nutrition. 1

It is not here the place to discuss fully the limitations of political economy. Relevant here, however, is a contemporary evaluation of this "science". It occurs in the Eclectic's review of Mary Barton: the writer is not attempting a theoretical refutation; he simply bases his indictment upon the meagre achievement of political economy in allaying the misery and insecurity of the working-classes. We may note that the reviewer is not only disillusioned with the economists but also with those (like Greg)² who invoke Christianity to preach resignation to the mass of the poor:

Political Economy has laboured hard and long to solve the great problem of misery of the manufacturing districts, without, in any remarkable degree, abating that misery. The vast masses of human beings who populate those districts are sunk in a destitution which has nothing beyond it, but

1. Ibid., 24-5.

2. Cf. [Greg] The Edinburgh Review (April 1849), p.404): "[The poor] are often very deficient, it is true, in the foresight and self-denial which might provide against the recurrence of privation; but, when it comes, they meet it with a cheerful, manly, simple resignation accepting

'Each ill

As a plain fact whose right or wrong
They question not, confiding still
That it shall last not overlong;
Willing from first to last, to take
The mysteries of our life as given,
Leaving the time-worn soul to slake
Its thirst in an undoubted Heaven'"

the destitution of Ireland. The violent contrast of masters in palaces and men in cellars, of luxury in the few and frightful indigence in the many, are things that remain, spite [sic] of all philosophizing on the subject, and spite of all that Christianity can preach... The masters, whatever their wealth, have, for the most part, sprung out of the labouring class. They know, or ought to know, what are the real conditions, feelings, and modes of reasoning, of the men. The men are not blind machines, but have long discussed the causes of their grievances with all the acuteness of logicians, and the sturdy discontent of Englishmen. They have murmured, and resisted too, times almost innumerable. Strikes and riots have borne witness to their sense of misery and determination to obtain redress. But the system has rolled on enriching a few, crushing many, making wretched beyond description the bulk of the industrious masses... It has been in vain that Christianity has been preached from church and chapel... The arguments of patience and resignation, and the mystery of the sufferings of this life, have come with a very unconvincing aspect from those who had no need of patience or resignation, and felt little of the mystery of distress that they spoke of. 1

Although this passage approximates the feeling and vision that shaped Mary Barton, Mrs. Gaskell herself was less self-confident when she had to face the hostile criticism stirred by her novel. She was most upset about the charge that by suppressing the masters' viewpoint, and giving all the prominence to such a "discontented" Chartist and union member as John Barton, she was fanning class strife instead of abating it: "No one", she wrote to Miss Ewart (late 1848), "can feel more deeply than I how wicked it is to do anything to excite class against class; and the sin has been most unconscious if I have done so... I could only repeat that no praise could compensate me for the self-reproach I shall feel, if I have written unjustly"². A few months later her anxiety over the effect of her work became even

1. (January 1849), pp. 51-52.

2. Letters, 36.

greater, as appears in a letter she wrote to her publisher, Edward Chapman, to thank him for his letters which had revived her spirits as they "put things in a right point of view, at which I was looking a little morbidly".¹ As for the reviews "I have not troubled myself about [them], except the one or two which I respect because I know something of the character of the writers; what I felt was the angry feeling induced towards me personally among some of those I live amongst". Mrs. Gaskell concludes the letter by expressing her faith that "what I wrote so earnestly & from the fulness of my hear(t) must be right, but meanwhile & when I am not quite well this (angry talking) troubles me in spite of myself".² The same feeling, though more confident this time, recurs in another letter to Miss Lamont (January 5, 1849): "Some people here are very angry and say the book will do harm; and for a time I have been shaken and sorry; but I have such firm faith that earnest expression of any one's feeling can only do good in the long run, --."³ In another letter to her publisher, referring to the reception of the novel among Manchester masters, she expresses her surprise that her tale caused such a stir, and regrets that those who treat Mary Barton as a social tract fail to appreciate the timelessness of its tragic vision:

Half the masters here are bitterly angry with me -- half (and the best half) are buying it to give to their work-people's libraries. One party say it shall be well abused in the British Quarterly, the other say it shall be praised in the Westminster. I had no idea it would have proved such a fire brand; meanwhile no one seems to see my idea of a tragic poem; so I, in reality mourn over my failure -- Mr. Carlyle's letter remains my real true gain." 4

1. Ibid., 38.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 39.

4. Ibid., 37.

Carlyle's words of encouragement, sent to her through her publisher, did much to sustain her morally and help her to brave the storm of criticism and hostility. In the above letter she calls it "my real, true gain". In an earlier letter to her publisher she wrote, "In the midst of all my deep and great annoyance, Mr. Carlyle's letter has been most valuable; and has given me the only (unmixed) pleasure I have yet received from the publication of M.B."¹ It is fitting, if only because of Mrs. Gaskell's great estimation of Carlyle's sympathetic letter, to conclude this survey of the contemporary reception of Mrs. Gaskell's first novel by listening to the prophet of "the Mechanical Age" blessing the warm-hearted champion of Manchester operatives (apparently, taking her sex into consideration, Carlyle does not think it fit to advise Mrs. Gaskell to switch to history):

Dear Madam,

(For I catch the treble of that fine melodious voice very well) -- We have read your book here, my wife first and then I; both of us with real pleasure. A beautiful, cheerfully pious, social, clear and observant character is everywhere recognizable in the writer, which sense is the welcomest sight any writer can show in his books; your field is moreover new, important, full of rich material (which, as is usual, required a soul of true opulence to recognize them as such.) The result is a Book deserving to take its place above the ordinary garbage of Novels -- a book which every intelligent person may read with entertainment. I gratefully accept it as a real contribution (about the first real one) toward developing a huge subject, which has lain dumb too long... Speech or literature... could hardly find a more rational function, I think, at present. You will probably give us other books on the same matter; and "Mary Barton", according to my auguries of its reception here, is likely to procure you sufficient invitation. May you do it well and even better! Your writing is already very beautiful, soft, clear, and natural. On the side of veracity, or devout earnestness of mind, I find you already strong. May you live long to write good books.
T. Carlyle. 2

1. Letters, 33.

2. A.B. Hopkins, Elizabeth Gaskell: Her life and work, 1952, p.82. Mrs. Gaskell received Carlyle's letter in November 1848.

Chapter Two

"It is Too Painfully Good": The Reception of Ruth

The praise bestowed on the literary excellence of Mary Barton must have left Mrs.Gaskell in no doubt about her literary ability. Then, as if she needed additional encouragement, came a letter from Dickens himself asking her in very flattering terms to contribute to his projected journal, "Household Words":

...as I do honestly know that there is no living English writer whose aid I would desire to enlist in preference to the authoress of "Mary Barton" (a book that most profoundly affected and impressed me), I venture to ask you whether you can give me any hope that you will write a short tale, or any number of tales, for the projected pages. 1

"Lizzie Leigh" was the story Mrs.Gaskell sent Dickens in response to his request. In this short, sad story of a fallen woman Mrs.Gaskell returned to a subject she had touched upon in Mary Barton (in the story of Esther), and in which she was at the time taking practical interest. Evidence of her efforts in this delicate area of social work is preserved in her correspondence with Dickens, whose help she enlisted to have a seduced young girl sent to Australia.² The point was that by emigration to Australia Mrs.Gaskell's protégée (Pasley by name) would have a fresh start, away from the harsh mid-Victorian

1. Letter dated Jan.31, 1850; Letters of Charles Dickens, edited by his sister-in-law and his eldest daughter, 2 vols., 1880, I, 216.
2. Letters, 61-62..

sexual morality which effectively drove many a poor girl, once seduced, to a life of permanent prostitution.

"Lizzie Leigh" was followed by other short tales, notably the Moorland Cottage, which received an excellent and wide reception, remarkable for a relatively short story, published as a Christmas book by Chapman and Hall in December 1850.¹

Mrs. Gaskell's next major work Ruth was a 3-volume novel published by the same publisher in January 1853. Ruth, a story of a poor seamstress, who is seduced, but later struggles to attain social and moral rehabilitation, was related to the problem of prostitution, an important and sensitive issue in Mrs. Gaskell's time, as testified by the vocal interest, or silence from embarrassment that surrounded it, especially from the 'fifties onwards.

Henry Mayhew's letters to the Morning Chronicle (1849), later published under the title of The London Labour and the London Poor, were the first significant discussion of the problem of prostitution in a newspaper. Mayhew in grim realism uncovered the hard facts of the habits, moral conditions and temptations of the London poor. He relentlessly narrated one story after another of young poor dress-makers "compelled to resort to prostitution to eke out their subsistence."² These revelations stirred similar discussions and comments in the press of the day and had some influence on current debates in Parliament on social questions.³

It is not, perhaps, fortuitous that Mayhew's articles should have

1. See Bibliography, section I.

2. Quoted by Aina Rubenius, The Woman Question in Mrs. Gaskell's Life and Work, Upsala, 1950, p.169.

3. Ibid.

appeared in 1849. With the defeat of Chartism the year before came the sense of relief that an ominous political danger was averted. Reformers had more time now to concentrate on the less threatening issues like the so called fallen women, drunkenness, bad sanitation and housing conditions.

The trend to discuss the vice of prostitution continued in the 'fifties with increasing momentum. In 1850 Greg published a probing and forthright essay on the subject in the Westminster Review.¹ Societies for the reformation of fallen women were set up. William Wilberforce Society for the Suppression of Vice and Encouragement of Religion was especially active. Increasingly more people came to share with the Times (May 6, 1857) the view that prostitution was the "Greatest of Our Social Evils."²

Ruth, coming out in 1853, was part of this general debate and social effort to deal with the problem. Moreover, it was the first mid-Victorian novel to depict sympathetically an unmarried mother and show her eventually redeeming herself socially and spiritually. The storm of protest and enthusiasm, the stream of letters abusing or praising the author, the numerous reviews all indicate that Mrs. Gaskell's sense of timing was right, and that the day was ripe to draw the curtain (however partially) off one of the most sensitive issues of the day, the fallen woman and the unmarried mother.

About forty reviews of Ruth appeared. This was more than Mary Barton had received five years before, and more than any of Mrs. Gaskell's future work would receive, except for The Life of Charlotte Brontë (1857).

Two reviews, thoroughly hostile on religious and moralistic

1. "Prostitution", LIII, pp. 448-506.

2. For useful background material see Keith Nield's introduction to Prostitution in the Victorian Age, 1973; also, Eric Trudgill, Madonnas and Magdalens: The Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes, 1976; Margaret Dalziel, Popular Fiction 100 Years Ago, 1957.

grounds, appeared in Britannia¹ and the ultra-conservative Christian Observer². Uncomfortable for primarily squeamish reasons (Ruth unsuitable for family reading) were a (lady?) reviewer in Sharpe's London Magazine³ and a critic in Dublin University Magazine⁴. Ruth seriously irritated the reviewers of the Literary Gazette and (Colburn's) New Monthly; both thought that Mrs. Gaskell had been hampered by current notions of sexual morality thus producing a "dull"⁵ story or a too "dolorous"⁶ and melancholy one. George Henry Lewes was another critic to indicate that Mrs. Gaskell had been less than bold and clear-sighted enough in her treatment of the social theme; he was nevertheless highly appreciative of Mrs. Gaskell's literary skill, and the great courage she needed to write such a novel as Ruth in the first place. His favourable opinion of the novel, and its importance, was expressed in two reviews, first in the Leader,⁷ and then, along with Charlotte Brontë's Villette, in the Westminster Review.⁸ In a belated review of Ruth, W.R. Greg called it "a most beautiful and touching tale", but was more critical than Lewes; in fact he reviewed the novel (along with others) under the unflattering title of "The False Morality of Lady Novelists".⁹ Also conscious of Mrs. Gaskell's limitations and difficulties were the

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1. XIV (Jan. 29, 1853), 81.
 2. LIII (July 1853), 498-500.
 3. n.s. II (January 5, 1853), 125-26.
 4. (November 1853), 622-23.
 5. Literary Gazette, (February 5, 1853), 123.
 6. New Monthly, XCVII (February 1853), 197-98.
 7. IV (January 22, 1853), 89-91.
 8. n.s. III (April 1853), 474-85.
 9. National Review, VIII (January 1859), 165 ff.

Gentleman's Magazine (which reviewed the novel twice)¹ and Tait's Edinburgh Magazine². The Quaker H.F. Chorley, always watchful for confusion of matters of right and wrong, gave ambiguous praise to Mrs. Gaskell's treatment of the central problem of Ruth, but remonstrated with the novelist for making the Dissenting minister Benson acquiesce in the falsehood of passing off Ruth as a widowed woman.³ Benson's untruth also troubled many other sources, including the enthusiastic reviewer of the Unitarian Inquirer.⁴

Favourable criticism came from many other sources, including the North British Review (a substantial piece by the Christian socialist J. M.F. Ludlow)⁵, the Nonconformist⁶, the Examiner (John Forster?)⁷, the Prospective Review⁸ and Bentley's Miscellany⁹.

In America the recently launched Putnam's Monthly¹⁰ published an anonymous and very enthusiastic review by George William Curtis. Other favourable reviews appeared in the Literary World¹¹ and the New York Daily Times¹². We may note in passing that in America there was

1. n.s. XXXIX (February 1853), 184-185; n.s. XL (July 1853), 22-24.
2. n.s. XX (April 1853), 217-20.
3. No. 1316 (Jan. 15, 1853), 73-78.
4. No. 552 (January 28, 1853), 66.
5. XIX (May, 1853), 151-74.
6. n.s. XIII (January 26, 1853), 84-85.
7. (January 22, 1853), pp. 51-53.
8. IX (month unknown, 1853), 222-47.
9. XXXIII (February 3, 1853), 237-40.
10. I (February 1853), 233.
11. XII (March 26, 1853), 250.
12. (February 26, 1853), p.3.

nothing like the prudish or religiously hostile reception that Ruth sometimes met with in Britain.

Writing on the reception of Ruth, A.B.Hopkins says:

As one looks at the contemporary criticism of Ruth from nearly a century of perspective, the most striking fact that appears is, not the amount of stupid abuse to which the book was subjected but the numerous instances of critical appreciation of the author's purpose. They are as modern in attitude as if they had been written today. ¹

It is true that most reviewers of Ruth were sympathetic and sometimes highly enthusiastic. But this was mainly, as Hopkins does not seem to notice, because Ruth did not startle its readers by a radically new attitude to sexual transgression. As for the claim that most reviews were as "modern in attitude as if they had been written today" (this for Hopkins is 1952), this is a strange reading of the reviews, and a compliment that the mid-Victorian reviewers themselves would have found most offensive; virtually all of them would have regarded our tolerance, and acceptance, of pre-marital sex as decadent and evil. I shall illustrate this last point soon, but before that I intend to look at Ruth briefly to determine the extent to which Mrs.Gaskell departed from, or conformed with, mid-Victorian notions of sexual morality -- this I feel is needed not only for its relevance to the present study, but also because it is something that has received relatively little attention even in modern criticism of Mrs.Gaskell's novel.²

1. Elizabeth Gaskell, her Life and Works, 1952, p. 126.

2. A notable exception is in Margaret Ganz, Elizabeth Gaskell: The Artist in Conflict, New York, 1969, pp. 105-131.

Ruth is a sixteen-year-old orphan who, while working as a seamstress, falls in love with a rich young man, Bellingham. The inevitable seduction and desertion soon take place. But Ruth is conceived in such a way that she is shown to yield to Bellingham not from sexual attraction but from ignorance and innocence. Structurally, a thick veil is drawn over Ruth's fatal journey to London - the scene of her actual seduction. We only meet her again living with Bellingham at a Welsh inn.

In keeping with her conception of Ruth as a pure young girl, Mrs. Gaskell shows us her heroine after her fall full of joy in nature and in her love for Bellingham. She is still scarcely conscious that she has transgressed human or divine law. Only after her desertion by her lover and her residence with the kindly Dissenting minister, Thurstan Benson, and his sister in Eccleston, does she awaken to a full realization of what has happened. Yet when she does so, her feelings about her loss of chastity (endorsed by the author and inspired by the gentle minister) are as anguished and soaked in the religious concept of sin as any mid-Victorian reader, young or old, could desire.¹ This is how Ruth feels listening to Benson reading a chapter in the first Sunday service she attends at Eccleston:

Ruth did not ... hear aught but the words which were reverently -- oh, how reverently! -- spoken by Mr. Benson ... And so it fell out that, as he read, Ruth's heart was smitten, and she sank down, and down, till she was kneeling on the floor of the pew, and speaking to God in the spirit, if not in the words, of the Prodigal

1. Incidentally, Ward mentions "good Sir William Fairbairn" among the enthusiasts for Ruth, which he read "'with all the enthusiasm of a young man of twenty in place of one that has numbered a year or two above sixty'". (Works, III, p. XIV).

Son: "Father! I have sinned against Heaven and before Thee, and am no more worthy to be called Thy child!" 1

To save Ruth from worldly castigation, Benson agrees, after much hesitation, with his religious but practical-minded sister to pass her off as a widow and a distant relative. Thanks to this deception, Ruth is allowed to grow intellectually and morally in the congenial atmosphere of the Bensons' household.

An essential means of Ruth's purification is the child she bears from her seducer. Here Mrs. Gaskell parts with the conventional morality which regarded the illegitimate child as a badge of shame and a form of punishment for his sinful mother. In the following argument between Faith Benson and her brother Thurstan (soon after the doctor announces that their protegee Ruth is pregnant), Mrs. Gaskell pleads eloquently -- through Thurstan -- her conviction that Ruth's sin should be separated from its consequences (the child), and that the birth of her motherly love for the child would give meaning to her life and help her regain her self-respect:

"The sin appears to me to be quite distinct from its consequences".
 "Sophistry -- and a temptation," said Miss Benson decidedly.
 "No, it is not," said her brother, with equal decision. "... we knew her error before, Faith."
 "Yes, but not this disgrace -- this badge of her shame!"
 "Faith, Faith! let me beg^{of} you not to speak so of the little innocent babe, who may be God's messenger to lead her back to Him. Think again of her first words [on her learning that she was pregnant] -- the burst of nature from her heart! Did she not turn to God, and enter into a covenant with Him -- 'I will be so good?'? Why, it draws her out of herself! If her life has hitherto been self-seeking and wickedly thoughtless, here is the very instrument to make her forget herself, and be thoughtful for another. Teach her (and God will teach her, if man does not come between) to reverence her child; and this reverence will shut out sin, -- will be purification". 2

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1. Ruth, The Works of Mrs. Gaskell, ed. A.W. Ward, 8 vols, 1906, III, 152-153.
 2. Ibid., p 118.

Thurstan's argument proves right. For the sake of being a good mother for her child, Ruth, helped by the Dissenting minister, sets about expanding her modest store of learning. Her quick mind and rich sensibilities help her to develop into an educated, gentle and mature woman. In fact, she becomes such a noble but unassuming lady that Mr. Bradshaw, the richest member of Benson's congregation, singles her out as a worthy object of his ostentatious patronization. Thus she gets employment as a day-governess for his young children.

At this stage in her career, the reader might assume that Ruth has at last achieved spiritual peace. She has a child whom she dearly loves, she is being usefully employed as a governess, cherished by the kindly Bensons, and even adored by Mr. Bradshaw's eldest daughter, Jemima. Yet this is not to be. For in spite of Ruth's growth to a self-effacing maturity (she gently disregards the attentions of Bradshaw's partner, Farquhar, who, repulsed by Jemima, begins to take a serious interest in the pretty, grave and gentle Ruth) she is still overwhelmed by the memory of the sin she has, in her innocence, committed. This burning sense of shame, the self-loathing she feels, her secret shrinking from her own child, from the Bensons, even from the eye of God emanate not so much from the fear that her secret might come out but from her increasing awareness that she is a "stained" woman in the social and religious meaning of the word. This is what she says to her former lover, Bellingham, who unexpectedly turns up at Eccleston, is struck again by her beauty, wants to renew the relationship, is refused, proposes to marry her but is once more rejected:

I was very young; I did not know how such a life was against God's pure and holy will -- at least, not as I know it now; and I tell you the truth -- all the days of my years since I have gone about with a stain on my hidden soul -- a stain which made me loathe myself,

and envy those who stood spotless and undefiled; which made me shrink from my child -- from Mr. Benson, from his sister, from the innocent girls whom I teach -- nay, even I have cowered away from God Himself; ... 1

Nine years after her recovery by the Bensons, the truth about Ruth's unmarried state comes out. Benson is punished severely by his own sense of shame at having agreed to the deception of passing off Ruth as a widow and his later "connivance at the falsehood by means of which Ruth had been received into the Bradshaw family" as a governess.² He is also ostracized by the wealthy, pharisaical member of his congregation, Mr. Bradshaw; who, however, in keeping with his ostentatious character goes on paying the rent of his pew at Benson's chapel. Ruth is unceremonially and ruthlessly thrown out of the pharisee's house, and has now to climb the ladder of social acceptance from the very bottom. True to her noble and self-abnegating nature, she accepts her fate meekly. She does not resent the world's harsh opinion of her herself. Her main worry is that her child would now suffer from man's prejudice and contempt. She starts on the road of redemption by sewing for humble folk. She later gets employment as a kind of "out-patient" nurse visiting the sick (mostly rough, poor people) in their houses. But her greatest chance to reinstate herself in the world's regard comes when a typhus epidemic breaks out. At the town hospital they are so short of staff that they are glad to accept the "fallen" woman as ^anurse. Her tender, patient and heroic care for the sick wins her universal admiration.

Ruth's nobility shines even more brightly when she tenderly

1. Ruth, p. 296.

2. Ibid., 348.

nurses her worthless seducer, and the cause of all her suffering, back to health. As he recovers, however, she succumbs to the fever herself, and dies a saintly death. Her heroism during the epidemic wins her a certificate of praise signed by the town-board. At last she has achieved full spiritual and worldly restoration - but only at the expense of years of mental anguish, world's prejudice, and finally death.

From this brief summary, we can see how limited Mrs.Gaskell's departure was from the contemporary notions about sexual transgression. Although she falls in innocence, Ruth is consistently shown to bear the burden of spiritual suffering, and later the world's harsh judgement, without questioning either the religious or the social interpretation of her sin. This aspect of the novel reassured most reviewers, both "enlightened" and not so enlightened, who recognized that Mrs.Gaskell was not seeking a radical reappraisal of the accepted attitude towards a woman's loss of chastity.

Among the enlightened reviewers of Ruth we must number G.H. Lewes, who was not particularly religious, and certainly far from being prudish, both in his thinking or his private life. Still, he wrote of Mrs.Gaskell's intentions, approvingly:

In "Ruth" there is no confusing of right with wrong; no tampering with perilous sympathies, no attempt to make a new line of action such as the world's morality would refuse to warrant, but a clear insight into the nature of temptation, and wise words of exhortation to those who have fallen -- showing them, that no matter what clouds of shame may have gathered around them, they may still redeem themselves if they will only rise and do honestly the work that still lies before them to be done, and that, in every position, however dark or degraded, there is always a certain right course which, if followed, will lead them once more into light. 1

1. Westminster Review, (April 1853), p. 476.

Lewes did not even object (as some of his contemporaries did) to the unnecessary ending of the novel with the saintly martyrdom of Ruth. Instead he described "Ruth's feelings on the eve of her departure" from this world as a "little poem."¹

Lewes, however, blamed Mrs.Gaskell for presenting the guilt of Ruth "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". This, he thought, was "a mistake on the part of the authoress". She should have portrayed her heroine as older and more capable of understanding the consequences of her transgression.²

Arthur Hugh Clough was more forthright and far-seeing than Lewes. Although like the latter critic he considered the novel "really very good", he called Mrs.Gaskell "a little too timid". She need not have made her heroine go through a long, painful process of redemption. Ruth's loss of chastity from innocence neither warrants the spiritual humiliation that later overtakes her nor the world's harsh judgement of her error:

Ruth did well [he wrote to a friend] -- but there is also another way and a more hopeful way -- such at least is my feeling. I do not think [Mrs.Gaskell] has got the whole truth. I do not think such overpowering humiliation should be the result in the soul of the not really guilty, though misguided, girl any more than it should be justly, in the judgement of the world. 3

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1. Ibid., p. 485. Charlotte Brontë wrote to Mrs.Gaskell after receiving the plan of the novel: "Hear my protest, why should she [Ruth] die?" (C.Shorter, The Brontë's, Life and Letters, 1908, II, 263). E.B.Browning also complained in a sympathetic letter to Mrs.Gaskell: "Was it quite impossible but that your Ruth should die?" (Waller, p.141).
 2. Ibid., p. 477.
 3. F.L.Malhauser, ed., The Correspondence of Arthur Hugh Clough, 2 vols., Oxford, 1957, II, 418.

W.R.Greg was another to hold identical views to those of Clough in relation to Mrs.Gaskell's treatment of Ruth's sin. Greg considered Ruth "a beautiful and touching tale", but was most unhappy about what he saw as Mrs.Gaskell's exaggerated estimation of the gravity, not of the loss of female chastity in general, but of such a mistake as Ruth has in her ignorance and innocence committed. Like Lewes, he thought this weakened the force of the social message of the novel. Greg was more frank than Lewes, however, when he regarded the long and hard life of penitence and spiritual anguish suffered by Ruth as both unnecessary and sentimental:

Mrs.Gaskell scarcely seems at one with herself in this matter. Anxious above all things to arouse a kinder feeling in the uncharitable and bitter world towards offenders of Ruth's sort, to show how thoughtless and almost unconscious such offences sometimes are, and how slightly, after all, they may affect real purity of nature and piety of spirit, and how truly they may be redeemed when treated with wisdom and with gentleness, -- she has first imagined a character as pure, pious, and unselfish as poet ever fancied, and described a lapse from chastity as faultless as such a fault can be; and then, with damaging and unfaithful inconsistency, has given in to the world's estimate in such matters, by assuming that the sin committed was of so deep a dye that only a life of atoning and enduring penitence could wipe it out. 1

Greg, in the same article, makes sure that his remarks apply only to the particular case of Ruth. He has no intention, he says, to seriously challenge the contemporary thinking on the subject, especially with respect to the severe social penalties that attended sexual transgression:

Far be it from us to say one word calculated to render less strong, less lofty, less thorny, or less insurmountable, the barrier which protects female chastity in our land, or to

1. National Review, (Jan. 1859), pp. 166-67.

palliate untruly that frailty which is always a deplorable weakness, and often a heinous sin. Its gravity cannot easily be overstated; and, God knows, the penalty exacted is always most terrifically adequate. 1

Most other sympathetic reviewers did not find it necessary to draw the distinction that Greg (and Lewes) makes between ordinary loss of chastity and the particular case of Ruth. While fully recognizing that Ruth deserves her hard-won spiritual and social restoration, the favourably-disposed reviewers seemed to agree with Mrs.Gaskell, rather than with Greg or Clough, that Ruth needed to redeem herself in the manner shown in Mrs.Gaskell's novel. The reviewer of Bentley's Miscellany, for instance, was deeply touched by the story of Ruth, a girl "of lowly origin" though "of infinite beauty and grace", but described the story of this heroine, without meaning to be distasteful, as a tale of "one who has come through great tribulation, a leper whose leprosy is cleansed."² Another enthusiastic critic was that of the Guardian, who recognized that Ruth was "the victim in extreme youth of her own ignorance, of the force of circumstances, and of the acts of a wicked but most accomplished man". Though Ruth's guilt was thus as "little as ever can exist in such a case", the Guardian reviewer continued approvingly that Mrs.Gaskell's heroine:

is never suffered to forget her fall, nor are we ever suffered to forget it either. Its consequences pursue her with stern and unrelenting tenacity; she is made to drink the bitter cup of disgrace to its dregs, and to involve her poor child in her own shame. There is no weak sentimentalism in the book; ... 3

1. Ibid., p. 164.

2. (Feb. 3, 1853), p. 237. (*italics mine*).

3. (Feb. 2, 1853), p. 82. (*italics mine*).

Eliza Cook's Journal, too, noted the long and hard way Ruth has taken to redeem herself, and wondered mournfully: "When does sin die? - sin, the only escape from which is through suffering".¹ The Prospective, again, saw that "[Ruth] fell in ignorance".² Nevertheless, the reviewer disapproved of Benson's lie on the grounds that it was folly "to counteract the great law of retribution".³

In her anxiety to win sympathy for Ruth, Mrs. Gaskell not only brought out her heroine's inherent innocence and nobility but also endorsed, sincerely, the prevalent religious and social thinking about sexual transgression. That she succeeded in her main purpose is borne out by the many testimonies to the purity of the author's novel and mind, and the beneficial effects of her moral tale. Only a few readers like Lewes, Greg and Clough thought that Mrs. Gaskell had paid too much regard for ordinary notions of sexual morality; most were happy with the Gentleman's reviewer that the author of Ruth was not to be associated with the rash champions of women's rights:

The work of a woman, written on a subject materially affecting women's character and position, it will have to submit to a severe ordeal; ... [but happily] there is no trace throughout of that braggart and daring spirit which has too often been put forth in the discussions of women's rights and wrongs. ⁴

Mrs. Gaskell's largely conventional treatment of sin, however, enhanced the effectiveness of her social message in another way. While not startling her readers by radical ideas about sexual transgression,

1. (Feb. 26, 1853), 279.

2. (May 1853), p. 231.

3. Ibid., p. 243.

4. (Feb. 1853), p. 184.

she prepared those readers to accept her two significant departures from prevalent attitudes, namely, her presentation of a fallen woman's child as a means of his mother's purification, and her strong condemnation of the double standard in morality which hardly blamed the man for illicit sexual relationships, while painting a woman's loss of chastity as something, to use a current cliché of the time, "worse than death".¹ On both these issues Mrs. Gaskell received prompt approval from many readers.

To appreciate Ruth's break with the traditional attitude towards the illegitimate child, it is useful to quote George Crabbe's tragic picture of this unfortunate creature earlier in the century (1819):

A creature doom'd to shame! in sorrow born;
A thing that languish'd, nor arrived at age
When man's thoughts with sin engage. 2

This picture of the unlawful child as a badge of shame was far from being out of date by Mrs. Gaskell's time. Child murder, for instance, in contemporary works of fiction (e.g. Yeast 1848, Dombey and Son 1847-8) was only a reflection of the world's harsh judgement that actually drove some unmarried mothers to dispose of their babies.³ The Christian Observer

1. Cf. "Since female chastity was regarded not just a virtue but as virtue itself, it followed that loss of it, whether voluntary or not, was the worst disaster that could befall a woman. The phrase 'worse than death' was used in all seriousness [to describe this sexual disaster]." M. Dalziel, Popular Fiction, op.cit., p.96.
2. Poetical Works, ed, H.J. and R.M. Carlyle, 1908, p. 365.
3. A number of reviewers, drawing upon their own experience, testified to the same fact. Cf. "Let us remember that infanticide, the most unnatural of all crimes, is frequent in England to an extent which few are aware of, unless they follow the country coroner to each brief formality of an inquest, and compute every verdict of "found dead" upon a babe that perished in the field. We happen to have witnessed much of this, and own it as a national abomination." (Tait's Edinburgh Magazine, (April 1853), p. 219.)

and Britannia (the only two sources to consider Ruth a ploy to rip open the moral fabric of society) fully endorsed the severe attitude to bastard children on the grounds that it deterred potential sinners.

Britannia wrote:

Ruth, however, offends in an especial manner by taking up the cudgels against society for visiting the sins of the frail mother on her innocent illegitimate child. In the prosecution of this task the writer brings to bear great powers of description, and no little knowledge of the frailty of human nature, on the sorrow that follows the sin of seduction, and the injury that necessarily falls on the innocent offspring of that sin by the judgement passed by the world on the frailty of the parent. Who, looking to the awful consequence of a contrary judgment, and bearing in mind that the sin thus legislated on by society is by nature clothed in the most attractive form, can say that society has not done right in this matter. The theoretical hardship of visiting on the innocent the sin of the guilty, when rightly viewed, is an attempt to influence the sinner by the best and strongest feeling -- parental affection. The fear of the consequences to the unoffending child may perhaps arrest a weak conscience ere its owner passes the brink of the precipice. 1

The fullest tribute paid to Mrs. Gaskell for her insight into the reformatory role of the illegitimate child came from the North British Review. The anonymous reviewer, the Christian socialist J.M.F. Ludlow, begins by pointing out the truth that "shines out, clear and bright as day" in Ruth, when a fallen woman's child is shown to be a means of her restoration instead of driving her further into a life of sin. Ludlow then proceeds to find a precedent for Mrs. Gaskell's new approach in no less respectable and ancient a source than David's Psalms: "'Children and the fruit of the womb are an heritage and gift which comes of the Lord'". But ancient and noble though this truth is, it is, he observes, generally denied these days:

1. (January 29, 1853), p. 81.

A very strange truth, indeed, now-a-days -- a truth denied by every advertisement asking or offering the services of married men or women, "without incumberances", a truth denied by the fearfully increasing number of cases of child-poisoning, child murder, abandonment of children, and perhaps still more so by the perpetual verdicts of "concealment of birth". 1

In view of this unchristian attitude towards the unmarried mother and her illegitimate child, he continues, great is our admiration for Mrs. Gaskell's fine motherly instinct, which led her to see the reclamatory possibility of the child, and to separate the sin from its consequences:

But the authoress of "Ruth" is a mother, and the duties of hallowed motherhood have taught her own pure soul what its blessings may be to the fallen. Ruth the seduced girl is made a noble Christian woman by the very consequences of her sin. Satan sent the sin -- God sends the child. 2

Ludlow goes on to recount impatiently the customary arguments against tolerance:

It is so much easier to point the lesson of the sin, through its consequences, to insist on the shame, on the trouble, on the expense of the unlawful motherhood. Another time, perhaps, a tiny corpse will be found in the cesspool. -- Why should we wonder? Is it not one "incumbrance" the less in the world, both to the mother and to the country at large, over-population being taken into account. 3

Not satisfied that he has made his point clear to his opponents, he winds up his defence of Mrs. Gaskell by adopting a new, and somewhat ingenious, line of attack. Apart from the child being a means of his mother's sanctification, through the responsibility she feels towards him, there is a larger significance in the woman-child relationship in

1. (May 1853), p. 155.

2. Ibid.

3. North British, (May 1853), p. 155.

the novel. Since Ruth's loss of chastity can be considered a form of damage sustained by the family order, her motherly attachment to her child constitutes a form of reparation to that damage:

But the tracing out of the influence of Ruth's motherhood upon herself is but a part, we take it, of the larger and more general purpose of the book ..., that as the sin of unchastity in the woman is, above all, a breaking up or a loosening of the family bond -- a treason against the family order of God's world -- so the restoration of the sinner consists mainly in the renewal of that bond ... both by and through and around herself. 1

Other readers praised Mrs.Gaskell for her new treatment of the fallen mother's child. Lewes wrote in the Westminster: "With immense truth and delicacy [Mrs.Gaskell] has separated the consequences of an action from the action itself."² Mrs.Hare wrote to the authoress: "You will have the blessed reward of restoring health to many a sorrowful broken heart, by the way in which you have spoken of the child as a blessing and a redemption to the Mother".³ Mrs.Stanley, too,praised Mrs.Gaskell on this issue, though she emphasized that customary world practice was still a long way from the novelist's higher morality:

About the child, I have an instance under my own eyes at this moment of the reverse of the picture -- of the child being the misery, the clog, the disgrace -- that is the common view and belongs to the common feeling. That yours is the higher, the nobler, the regenerating principle I have no doubt. 4

The Guardian critic joined the enthusiasts. This writer (who, we may

1. Ibid.

2. (April 1853), p. 480.

3. March 12, 1853. Copy in the Gaskell Collection, Brotherton Library, Leeds University.

4. Letter to Mrs.Gaskell, March 12, 1853, Ward, op.cit., p. XVI.

recall, approved of the "relentless tenacity" with which the bitter consequences of Ruth's sin pursue her) recognized that "with a fine instinct [Ruth's] child is made the means of her purification; her great motive to holiness of life".¹

The second instance of Mrs.Gaskell's departure from prevalent attitudes was her uncompromising condemnation of the grossly unequal (or, rather, the complete lack of) punishment visited upon the male sexual transgressor.

The mid-Victorian double-standard in morality was partly based upon the commonly held notions about the different sexuality of men and women. The male's sexual drive was considered to be naturally strong and difficult to control. By contrast, the female's sexual desires were thought to be dormant, or non-existent, until awakened and developed by actual practice. Mrs.Gaskell in Ruth subscribes to this mode of thinking by showing her heroine yielding to Bellingham from innocence rather than from sexual passion. Greg, in his enlightened essay on "Prostitution" (1850), gives full utterance to this theory in the course of his argument that women generally "fall" from external pressures like poverty and the male's more animal nature:

Women's desires scarcely ever lead to their fall, for ... the desire scarcely exists in a definite and conscious form, till they have fallen. In this point there is a radical and essential difference between the sexes ... In men, in general, the sexual desire is inherent and spontaneous, and belongs to the condition of puberty. In the other sex, the desire is dormant, if not non-existent, till excited; always till excited by undue familiarities; always till excited by actual intercourse. 2

1. (Feb. 2, 1853), p. 82.

2. The Westminster Review, LIII, pp. 456-7.

This theory about the radical difference in the sexuality of the two sexes was a double-edged one. In the hands of enlightened and conscientious people like Greg, and Mrs. Gaskell, it could be used to prove that in a seduction-situation the male was the guiltier party. The same theory, however, lent substance to the belief that since women were not much troubled by sexual passion, those among them who actually "fell" did so either because of their weak moral character or as a result of their abnormal sexuality. Mr. Bradshaw in Ruth voices this opinion when, in reply to Ruth's pathetic plea "I was so young", he ruthlessly retorts: "The more depraved, the more disgusting you."¹

The Gentleman's reviewer was among those to approve of Mrs. Gaskell's denunciation of the virtual absence of punishment for the male sexual offender. He tolerantly, however, conceded that some "good" people might not agree with him:

There is another part of the subject which is very painful; from it however we may not shrink; and, happily, there are good and strong men who allow the injustice of merely punishing the delinquents of one sex, however repentant, however desirous of return, with perpetual exclusion -- while not the betrayer only, but the actual deserter of the betrayed woman is scarcely less welcomed by society after than before his offence. Here ... Mrs. Gaskell has strongly felt a deep and painful truth, and has written under its influence. 2

Ruth's reviewer in Tait's Edinburgh Magazine spoke in much stronger terms on the injustice of the double-standard in morality:

This monstrous disproportion of the punishment, as visited on the two sexes, has no reasonable ground. Let us acknowledge, with our noble Milton, that

1. Ruth, 334.

2. (July 1853), p.22.

unchastity is "in the man, more deflowering and dishonourable". But we dare ask any candid man who knows the world, whether chastity in manhood is not, in the immense majority of cases, the fruit of matured reason and established principle controlling unworthy passions ... If we must confess this, why regard the virtue of an erring woman as irretrievably and for ever lost? 1

The Prospective critic also condemned "the enormous wickedness", "the baseness and perfidy" of the seducer:

For does he not, by appealing to what is most lovely in a woman's nature, her love, her trust, her abnegation of self, lure her into an abyss of wretchedness ... Men may call such actions youthful follies, but, as Mr. Benson [in Ruth] truly observes, there is another name for them with God. 2

From this general condemnation of Ruth's seducer, Ludlow in the North British Review dissented, not to condone his wickedness, but to question the rightness of Ruth's decision to reject his offer of marriage -- an offer Bellingham makes when, years after having deserted Ruth, he sees her again by chance on coming to contest the seat for Eccleston under the adopted name of Mr. Donne. Ludlow's opinion on this point is important, if only because his review was one of the best and most appreciative critiques of the novel -- "It is so truly religious, it makes me swear with delight," said Mrs. Gaskell on reading it.³ More importantly, it shows how Ludlow's subtle and conscientious mind was not immune from the all-pervasive double-standard in morality.

Ludlow approaches the issue with proper humility: "We certainly do not feel qualified to teach ethics to the authoress of

1. (April 1853), p. 219.

2. (May 1853), pp. 246-7.

3. Letters, 149.

'Ruth'". Yet "there is one point of her story on which we have felt some moral doubt, and hereby submit it to her." Is the moral novelist "quite sure that Ruth has the right, when Mr. Donne offers to marry her, and give their son all the advantages of his position, to reject his offer?"¹ After this, he proceeds to put forth his main argument. Strictly speaking, it is just and natural that Ruth should refuse to marry the man who seduced and abandoned her. Yet is he not the father of her child? Nay, can she not be considered to be in the eye of God married to him? Was it not expedient in the high and Christian sense of the word for Ruth to have accepted her seducer's offer of marriage?

... Is [the authoress] quite sure that there is not something of a wilfulness in [Ruth's] plea -- I love you no longer, addressed by a woman to the man by whom she is a mother -- something of pharisaism in the plea, you would corrupt my child, addressed to that child's father? Granted that Mr. Donne has wronged and deserted her. Granted that her beauty is the main occasion of his present suit. But after all he is suing for leave to atone for his own wrong, both to her and to his child ... It is just no doubt, strictly just, for her to reject him. He has no right to complain of his punishment. But is it expedient, in the high Christian sense of that expediency ...? However slender, compared with his, her share in the sin of former days, does it not create on her part an obligation toward him which outstretches as it were mere justice? ... Is it so very certain that there are no roots of goodness in him, which her hand, that he now bows to, might quicken into life? 2

There are a number of assumptions underlying the critic's argument.

There is the implicit belief that ultimately one is "to infer the mission of women from a consideration of the wants of men."³ Thus

1. (May 1853), p. 162.

2. Ibid., pp. 162-3.

3. William Landels. Women's Sphere and Work, considered in the Light of Scripture. A Book for Young Women, 6th ed., 1862, p. 32.

no matter how Ruth feels towards her seducer, she is not to refuse him now that a chance meeting with her makes him wish to renew the relationship under the influence of her beauty and some concern for his son. Ruth's affections (based upon her new and mature appraisal of her lover: "I do not love you [any more]. I did once."¹) not only carry no weight but are dismissed as wilful.

Ludlow's argument also stems from his conviction of the pragmatic value of marriage - though this value is sincerely couched in sublime terms. A socially unprotected unmarried mother is at one level much better off married to a wealthy man like Bellingham.

The tortuous logic and self-deceptions in Ludlow's reasoning are too obvious to need full analysis. Consider, for instance, how he admits that Mr. Bellingham's offer of marriage emanates principally from his awakened lust for his previous victim, but later asserts that Mr. Bellingham is in fact seeking to "atone" for the wrong he had inflicted upon Ruth. That the concept of atonement with its religious overtones is absurdly inapplicable to the worldly and selfish nature of Mr. Bellingham must have eluded Ludlow in his enthusiasm to see Ruth enter the sacred bond of marriage. Another instance of self-deception by the potent magic of cliché occurs in his rhetorical question in respect of the proposal situation: "Is it so very certain that there are no roots of goodness in him, which her hand, that he now bows to, might quicken into life?"² Bowing and humility are totally beyond Bellingham as he is presented in the novel: confounded by Ruth's rejection of his initial offer to live with him again in sin, Bellingham offers her marriage,

1. Ruth, 299.

2. Op.cit., p. 163 (*italics mine*).

not humbly, but prompted by no loftier sentiments than: "We will try something more, and bid a higher price."¹

In fact Ludlow gets so carried away by his own reasoning that he sees in Ruth's rejection of Bellingham a moral lapse on her part that even outweighs her seducer's treachery and renders her, rather than Bellingham, the guiltier party. Hence her death at the close of the story (from the fever she catches after having nursed Bellingham back to health) is deemed by him as a form of poetical justice, appropriately - though perhaps unconsciously - visited upon the noble Ruth by the moral novelist:

We doubt whether it be Christian, whether, in God's eye, she be not his wife, and forbidden to turn from him when he turns to her; whether, in fact, her refusal of him be not simply the sign that she has not self-sacrifice enough in her to devote her life to the man who has wronged her, though she may have self-sacrifice enough to die for him. And we cannot help thinking that the making of Ruth die of a fever caught by Mr. Donne's bedside is after all a little bit of unconscious, involuntary poetical justice on the part of the writer. 2

Ludlow's was not, however, the only voice that questioned the justice of Ruth's refusal to enter wedlock with Bellingham. The Gentleman's reviewer, once more tolerantly reporting the reaction of "excellent and admirable"³ people to the moral issues posed in Ruth, cites this as another point of controversey - though he himself strongly endorses Ruth's decision:

It has been gravely said that Ruth should not have rejected her seducer's late and desperate offer of marriage. From that opinion we give our unqualified

1. Ruth, p. 299.

2. (May 1853), p. 163.

3. (July 1853), p.22.

dissent; no such woman, we think, could ever have accompanied such a man to the altar, there to plight her solemn vows before God and man. 1

Others, besides the Gentleman's, approved of Ruth's firm rejection of Mr. Bellingham. The Guardian, for instance, wrote simply that the heroine "rejects her seducer because she sees his wickedness."² Yet the most cogent reply to Ludlow's moral doubts came from the Prospective. The reviewer in the latter journal begins by restating the opinion of those who consider Ruth wrong in having declined to answer her seducer's call to matrimony on the grounds that it was "too late for her to refuse the marriage obligation" and that "the change in her affections, resulting from the discovery of her lover's treachery [is] in no respect different from a disappointed marriage."³ The critic then goes on to emphasize that he himself is deeply convinced of "the sacred and indissoluble character of marriage", and cites the ease with which divorce can be obtained in Germany as a disease that "strikes the very root of morality".⁴ Though the marriage bond is sacred, he remarks, Ruth cannot be justly considered to be committed to her seducer, who at the time of the seduction never intended to marry her. Moreover, the critic shrewdly observes, had Ruth accepted Mr. Bellingham's tardy offer of marriage in order to escape worldly disgrace, she would have abused a most sacred social bond:

Feeling however thus strongly upon the subject, we cannot agree with those who regard such a connection as that between Ruth and Mr. Bellingham as morally

1. Ibid., p. 23.

2. (Feb. 2, 1853).

3. (May 1853), p. 244.

4. Ibid., pp. 244-5.

binding upon the least guilty party. Perpetuity is an essential element in our conception of marriage; the presence of this idea in the mind of Ruth, though unrealized... redeemed her, we think, from the consciousness of guilt, while its utter absence from the thoughts and intentions of Mr. Bellingham rendered the connection, in so far as he was concerned, an unholy one, and absolved his partner [Ruth] from all subsequent obligation ... and it seems to us that it would be a cruel injustice to render binding a compact entered into by one of the parties with manifest bad faith, and who, moreover, by his subsequent conduct had proved himself utterly unworthy of a woman's love; while marriage, accepted under such circumstances, as a mere means of worldly escape from disgrace, would be a profanation of the most sacred of all social relations. 1

There was another departure from conventional morality in Ruth which did not meet with the same favour. This was Benson's acceptance, urged by his practical-minded sister, to pass off his protegee Ruth as a widow.²

The controversy that the Bensons' lie stirred was astutely anticipated by Charlotte Brontë, who wrote to the author:

I anticipate that a certain class of critics will fix upon the mistake of the good Mr. Benson and his sister in passing off Ruth as a widow as the weak part of the book--fix and cling there. In vain is it explicitly shown that this step was regarded by the author as an error, and that she unflinchingly follows it up to its natural and fatal consequences -- there I doubt not -- some critics will stick like flies caught in treacle. These however let us hope will be few in number; and clearer sighted commentators will not be wanting to do it justice. 3

A number of contemporary readers refused to believe that a conscientious man like Benson could have committed a fraud: "We

1. Ibid., p. 245.

2. Mrs. Gaskell, while showing that Benson acquiesces in the falsehood for worthy reasons (shielding Ruth and her, as yet unborn, child from a harsh world), makes it clear that he was unwise to do so. (See Ruth, p.121).

3. Quoted by Hopkins, op.cit., pp.125-6.

fearlessly assert", wrote Sharpe's, "that no Gospel minister who knew and valued truth could have [committed this deception]".¹ The Quaker Chorley in the Athenaeum exaggerated the importance of the Dissenting minister's lie out of all proportion, and came near to damn Ruth on account of it:

Here we come on the error of the tale on a piece of teaching:- an error which many persons will imagine decides the soundness or unsoundness of choosing such a subject [as the fallen woman] as the basis of a work of Art ... A Good man such as Mr. Benson is shown to be -- preaching truth in the face of his congregation ... could not, we apprehend, so easily have connived at an actual lie... 2

Many rose to Mrs. Gaskell's defence, but none did so with the enthusiasm shown by George Henry Lewes. Lewes was not a man to lose his temper easily; Chorley's moral scruples so irritated him, however, that he would not let the opportunity pass without hurtling at the Athenaeum's reviewer this severe and spirited rebuke:

A contemporary critic has, indeed, raised a protest against the story and its teachings, lecturing the author, in his accustomed style of priggish pretension, on the "want of art" displayed in one of the leading incidents; so that in his case we are forced to confess the story has not carried its meaning home. We doubt, however, whether director minds will feel any such misgiving. At all events the point is worthy a brief discussion. This is the case:-

Ruth, while yet a child -- at least, in innocence, and scarcely more in years -- is seduced by a young man, and by him subsequently abandoned. In her grief she would have committed suicide, but for the interference of a Dissenting minister, with whom she has previously formed a slight acquaintance. This minister, Mr. Benson, has all his active sympathy excited for her. He calls his sister to aid him in the task of saving the young creature, not only from suicide, but from the world. They agree to take her home with them.

1. (Jan. 15, 1853), p. 126.

2. (Jan. 15, 1853), p. 77.

The sister, womanlike, perceives the "consequences" of such an act, and her perception is intensified when she learns that Ruth is about to be a mother. To do an act of charity, and to shield both Ruth and themselves from the harsh and mistaken judgements of conventional morality, she suggests that on going home, Ruth should be passed off as a widow. This is done, though not without very natural reluctance on the part of the minister; but he is over-ruled, and consents to allow the fiction.

Here, according to the critic, lies the fundamental error of the tale. That a Dissenting minister should tell a "white lie" is a "fault in art" which damages the whole. Now, this sensitive moralist and purblind critic must be answered that he has made a ludicrous mistake. In the first place, it is really no improbability that even a virtuous Dissenting minister should tell a "white lie;" we fear the very best of men may be found to have done so, and Mr. Benson, although a noble and religious man, is not held up to us as a "faultless monster." In the second place, the Artist has to deal with human nature, not with ideal abstractions -- has to show how much divine goodness is operative among even imperfect elements, and not to eliminate those imperfections; so that the "fault in art" would have been the reverse of what is here done. In the third place, as a treatment of a great moral question, the highest ideal is more emphatically brought out, not didactically but artistically, by this very untruth at which Benson connives. It is to show this that we have noticed the alleged "fault in art." 1

Also significant are those comments which, while sceptical about the propriety or probability of the upright Benson committing a falsehood, recognized that the fault did not really lie with this particular clergyman but rather with the harsh double-standard of morality which compelled such a good and conscientious a man as Benson to practice a deception. "The guilt of falsehood", wrote the Gentleman's, "is never palliated, though the hurry and the urgency of the case are fairly stated ... [but] surely it is among the serious ill consequences resulting to morals from merciless severity towards

1. Leader, (Jan. 22, 1853), pp. 89-90.

a single and early offence".¹ The Prospective, too, believed that Benson's lie "shadows forth the conventional morality which prevails in reference to the subject, by which additional difficulties are thrown in the way of those who are striving to redeem the erring".²

The practical aspects of Ruth's message of mercy to female sinners did not escape the attention of some contemporary readers. Lewes in the Westminster saw that Mrs.Gaskell's novel would help stem the tide of vice and clandestine relations:

If women who have placed themselves in Ruth's position only could find the moral courage to accept the duties entailed upon them by their own conduct, it would much lessen the misery and social evil that now follows in the train of illicit connexions. ³

Ludlow affirmed that the old truth about the child as a "gift which comes of the Lord" is "as applicable to a harlot who has become a mother as to the Queen of England on her throne". Then, praising the way Mrs.Gaskell traces the growth of self-respect, sense of responsibility and motherly affection in the heart of Ruth, he exclaimed: "Is there a harlot mother in whom the germs of these feelings cannot be found if only we look deep enough for them".⁴

The Bentley's, too, pointed out that Mrs.Gaskell's message of charity would create an atmosphere of sympathy for the unfortunate women reduced to prostitution:

If the sad histories of all those poor outcasts who people by nights the streets of our large towns were

1. (Feb. 1853), p. 184.

2. (May 1853), p. 242.

3. (April 1853), p. 480.

4. North British, (May 1853), p. 15.

known to the world, how large a proportion of the great evil would be written down to the account, not of the wilful depravity, of the wretched creatures themselves, but the hardness and uncharitableness of those who might have redeemed them. 1

A similar lesson was grasped by Curtis in Putnam's who affirmed that "if any man turns away from the tale to frown upon the most abandoned of offenders, that man seems to us as far from heaven as Dives when his dogs shamed him and licked the sores of Lazarus."²

Moreover, the fact that Ruth was "the work of a woman, written on a subject materially affecting women's character and position"³ was sometimes appreciated -- though not as widely or explicitly as one would expect. E.B.Browning wrote "I am grateful to you as a woman for having so treated such a subject".⁴ Mrs.Esther Hare, probably referring to Mrs.Gaskell's practical work in the reclamation of at least one fallen woman,⁵ said: "Your experience of life had taught you the truths which you have so frankly expressed [in your novel]."⁶ Tait's, too, observed that the social problem treated in Ruth needed "no less than slavery did in America. [H.B.Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin] the pen of a gifted woman to challenge its consideration".⁷

Many contemporary readers, too, seem to have been convinced that a woman, especially a married woman, was the best person qualified to deal

1. (Feb. 3, 1853), pp. 239-40.

2. (May 1853), p. 539.

3. Gentleman's Magazine, (Feb. 1853), p. 189.

4. Letter to Mrs.Gaskell, July 16, 1853, Waller, p.141 (*italics mine*).

5. See Letters, 61, 62.

6. 12 March 1853, op.cit.

7. (April 1853), p. 219.

with the subject. Even the Sharpe's reviewer, who had misgivings that Ruth as a novel might undermine the innocence of young readers, expressed the conviction that it was principally the responsibility of "the matrons of England" to help and succour those among their sex who had fallen.¹

Apart from its social teaching, Ruth was generally considered good and interesting as a novel;² many reviewers prefaced their criticism with lavish praise for the "inexpressibly beautiful and touching story",³ the "beautiful poem full of lovely lights and refreshing shades,"⁴ and the work "managed with the utmost skill and delicacy."⁵

In our own time many readers will find it hard to feel excited about Ruth. We are likely to find that Ruth's credibility and interest has suffered too much from Mrs. Gaskell's uncertainty about the real meaning of her heroine's loss of virginity. We may also feel disappointed that Mrs. Gaskell shows herself in the portrayal of Ruth (as one reviewer said referring to the Bradshaws of his time) to have almost as "superstitious and exaggerated/estimate of physical virginity"⁶ as her

1. (Jan. 15, 1853), pp. 125-26.

2. We are usually reluctant to assess "the moral" independently from the "story". Mid-Victorian readers were not so inhibited; for example, Kingsley's Alton Locke was often considered poor as a story though admirable for its earnest desire for social reform. See ch. I, p.28 above.

3. Guardian, (Feb. 2, 1853), p.82.

4. Gentleman's Magazine, (July 1853), p. 24.

5. [G.W.Curtis], Putnam's Monthly, (May 1853), p. 537.

6. Cf. "We must be permitted to say, deliberately and without offence that in regard to a person like [Ruth] imagined in this book, whose fault was done in ignorance, weakness, and indiscretion, whose affection remained constant, her behaviour modest, her sentiment pure and her conscience, though reproving her, still in its integrity, (which is all very possible in the case of a victim of seduction,) we should ascribe the opinion, which condemned her as hopeless, to no basis but a superstitious and exaggerated estimate of physical virginity, a vague notion which is not unmingled with gross and sensual conceptions of the matter, such as deformed the mystical theology of the monkish ages." (Tait's Edinburgh Magazine, (April 1853), pp. 219-20).

own Bradshaw!

Most contemporary readers of Ruth, however, more or less fully shared Mrs.Gaskell's views about sexual morality. Even those few -- like Lewes, Clough and Greg -- who were uncomfortable about Mrs.Gaskell's treatment of Ruth,¹ thought highly of the novel. Lewes, especially, was enthusiastic: he seemed to believe that Mrs.Gaskell's latest work was superior to Mary Barton, in that it was not a "social" novel but a novel of all time; we are likely to disagree with him, but few readers would object to his enthusiastic enumeration of Ruth's many merits:

The author of "Mary Barton" has wisely done what very few authors see the wisdom of doing -- opened a new mine, instead of working the old one. Her previous success in the regions of Manchester life and manufacturing "evils," would have seduced a less sagacious mind into a repetition of the old work under new names. She has quitted the inky atmosphere of Manchester and its many miseries. Her story is not of the struggle between employers and employed; it is the old and ever-renewing struggle between Truth and Truth-seeming, virtue and convention, good deeds and bad names, -- the trials and sorrows of a beautiful soul, trying to adjust its life to the necessary imperfections which surround it in our semi-civilized condition. Ruth is not a "social" novel, but a moral problem worked out in fiction. A book so full of pathos, of love, and kindness; of charity in its highest and broadest meanings; of deep religious feeling, and of fine observation, you will not often meet with. It cannot be read with unwet eyes, nor with hearts uninfluenced. The lessons are suggested, not preached; they are not formally "inculcated," but are carried straight to the soul by the simple vehicle of the story. 2

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1. Indeed one reviewer felt so confused by Mrs.Gaskell's treatment of Ruth that he pretended he could not understand why Mrs.Gaskell took the trouble to write such a good but aimless work. Cf: "The lesson - if lesson there was to be learnt from Ruth Hilton's career -- did not come home to us either in principle or sympathy; and in this respect we believe that it must be found wanting, from the very circumstance of a distinct purpose being absent from the writer's mind, in consequence, apparently, of the confusion of ideas, arising as well from partial views as from the great difficulty of constructing a story, which, while it involves an exceptional case, might still square with the actual realities of life. In a word, the one great fault of this book is, that it wants that impress of truth which is always requisite in order to excite the sympathies of the many." (Dublin University Magazine, (Nov. 1853), p.622.)
 2. Leader, (January 22, 1853), p.89.

In his description of Ruth as "a moral problem worked out in fiction" Lewes was expressing his admiration for Mrs. Gaskell's ability to make the action of the novel (the sequence of transgression, retribution and redemption) carry the humanitarian message of the work (hope for female sinners) without the need for direct preaching. On this point Lewes was joined by many critics:

[The message of Ruth] is not ticketed in the shape of a moral, but inwoven with the whole texture of the book, and as such part of it as the softness of a cashmere shawl, or the delicate design of a Lyons silk. ([J.M.F. Ludlow], North British Review) 1

The unobtrusiveness of the moral elements in "Ruth" constitutes, we think, one of its greatest charms, and enhances its merit as a work of art. A passage from the volume of life, one of the saddest contained in that mysterious record is transcribed for our perusal and is left, without comment, to suggest its appropriate lesson. (Prospective Review) 2

Mrs. Gaskell's success in incorporating the "message" in the action is closely related to her control over the materials of Ruth. Unlike Mary Barton (where the interest shifts mid-way from John Barton to his daughter), Ruth is the centre of interest throughout. Many reviewers noticed Mrs. Gaskell's greater competence in the management of the plot, singling out this aspect of the novel for special praise.

The Tait's reviewer expressed his admiration for Ruth's unity of interest -- a characteristic which he found lacking in contemporary works of fiction, especially those published in monthly parts:

The main artistic excellence of this novel [Ruth] is the unity of interest. We notice it the rather,

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1. (May 1853), p. 154.
 2. (May 1853), pp. 228-29.

because this merit has become rare in our popular literature. The method of piecemeal publication, in monthly parts, adopted in an evil hour [by Charles Dickens] ... has gone near to destroy the English novel. 1

This unity, he goes on, is based upon the fact that "the events and all the experience of the story grow out of one root, -- one fatal event [Ruth's seduction]". This "organic unity" in Ruth -- reflected also in the number of its characters -- is worthy of being an example to other novelists:

The personages, who are in any way prominent, are indispensable; not an extraneous crowd who encumber the stage. We can assure the sketchy and desultory writers of the day, that without such organic unity, like that of the members of a plant or animal, they will inspire a book with no characteristic life. 2

Curtis in Putnam's praised Mrs. Gaskell on the same grounds. "'Ruth'", he said, "has a rare unity, and the whole moves resistlessly forward towards the end. There are no superfluous characters, and each character has a marked rôle to play".³ More briefly the Bentley's expressed the same opinion: "The canvas is never crowded ... the interest is single -- concentrated, 'Ruth' [sic.] is everything to it."⁴

The Tait's critic, who thought highly of Ruth's organic unity, was not happy, however, about the side-plot of the Bradshaw family. Though excellently managed on its own, he said, the disproportionate

1. (April 1853), p. 218.

2. Ibid.

3. (May 1853), p. 537.

4. (Feb. 3, 1853), p. 237.

prominence given to it in the last volume of the novel tends to distract our attention from the centre of interest, Ruth herself:

The book now before us is remarkable for harmonious consistency. During the first two volumes at least the fate of poor Ruth is the interest ever present with us; and other occurrences only as affecting this. Latterly, the troubles of the Bradshaw family, though admirably managed on their own account, are placed more fully in relief than is requisite from their relation to the principal affair [i.e. Ruth's road to redemption]. 1

Ludlow expressed similar dissatisfaction with the Bradshaw family affairs, especially the love-story of Jemima and Farquhar. Although this episode is worthy of Miss Austen, he observes, it unduly lengthens the book, distracts our interest from the fortunes of Ruth and does not grow naturally out of the main action of the novel:

A [grave] artistic defect ... lies in the length of the work, and in the eking out of it by the love-story of Jemima and Mr. Farquhar. This, indeed, is in itself almost perfect, and wrought out with the truth and finish of a Miss Austen. But the character of Ruth herself and her fortunes are of too overwhelming an interest to allow us to dwell with complete satisfaction on this side-plot, which after all scarcely advances the action, since Jemima, though the first to learn of Ruth's fault, yet has no hand in revealing it. 2

Ludlow tries to find an artistic excuse for Mrs. Gaskell's dwelling on the Jemima-Farquhar affair. Mrs. Gaskell may have deliberately lingered at this side-plot, he surmises, as a relief (both to herself and the reader) from the intense painfulness of the main plot. He does not find such an excuse satisfactory, however. Although not a single instance of Ruth's suffering is superfluous, as

1. (May 1853), p. 218.

2. North British, (May 1853), p. 160.

"each is the logical and almost necessary consequence of her [original] fault", the novelist has, nevertheless, "overlengthened" the story of Ruth's trials: "May we hint to her", he concludes his comment, "that [Harriet Martineau's] 'Deerbrook' is surely a not unworthy example of how a good novel may yet gain by curtailment".¹

The same critic reserved special praise for Mrs. Gaskell's growing mastery in the handling of the plot. This is manifested, he said, in her resisting twice the temptation of digressing into a detailed and irrelevant description of the miseries of needlewomen. First, Ruth's life at Mrs. Mason's establishment is "the merest introduction to what follows". Later:

We hear of Ruth, while at the Bensons earning a little money by plain needlework. [But] the writer takes no trouble to conduct us to the warehouse, to show us the needlewomen waiting for orders, and the foreman bullying or fining them. [The authoress] knows well that such scenes would but distract us here from her main purpose, the growth of holiness in the heart of the fallen woman... In this clear conception of her object, in the resolute avoidance of temptations which lay very close to her way, we acknowledge an evidence of high power and self-mastery; ... 2

Alongside praise bestowed on Ruth's unity of interest, a number of tributes were paid to Mrs. Gaskell for her truth to feeling. Lewes in the Westminster, for instance, marked out two scenes for special praise. One was "the admirable stroke of nature by which Ruth cannot be made to feel 'sorry' that she is to have a baby!". Another equally

1. Ibid.

2. Ibid., p. 164. Ludlow is right in describing the hard lot of needlewomen as tempting. In the early fifties this was one of the most topical social issues of the day. Besides Kingsley's Alton Locke (1850), "innumerable stories recount[ed] the miserable conditions and wages of girls working in dress-maker's establishments". (Dalziel, op.cit. p. 89).

successful example was Faith's confession that she cannot help enjoying making up more details of Ruth's widowship.¹ Another instance of Mrs. Gaskell's psychological subtlety was cited by Chorley in the Athenaeum, who exclaimed admiringly: "Nothing in the way of Art can be truer or more natural than the description of [Benson and his sister's] return home and of their reception on arriving by virtuous indignation, in the form of an old family servant, Sally".² Chorley was equally enthusiastic about another episode relating to Sally. This is when the old maid-servant entertains Ruth and the Bensons by telling them the story of her two proposals of marriage. Here, Chorley asserted, "is a bit of honest, unlicked, unpainted nature; as good, after its kind, as the sturdiest Flemish housewife to whose thick legs and blunt features Maas did full justice."³

Ludlow gave many illustrations of the novelist's fidelity to feeling. One is: "Ruth [after her fall] living with her seducer at a Welsh inn -- a grand opportunity for commonplace moralists to picture to us terrible struggles of conscience in one or both of them -- the debasement of the one, the corrupting influence of the other". But Mrs. Gaskell "does no such thing. Ruth is still the simple girl, country-bred, delighted with the new sight of mountain scenery, with all her sympathies not deadened, but heightened by "her trustful devotion and love of Mr. Bellingham." Another "exquisitely natural development of circumstances alike and of character is shown in the well-meaning untruth of the Dissenting minister and his sister as to Ruth's history".⁴

1. (April 1853), p. 479.

2. (Jan. 15, 1853), p. 77.

3. Ibid., p. 78.

4. North British, (May 1853), pp. 151-2.

There are instances, however, when Mrs.Gaskell was thought to be misled by melodrama from her customary truth to feeling. Lewes, for example, cited the episode when Ruth (after the secret of her unmarried condition comes out) prepares her child Leonard to face the world's new attitude by explaining to him that she was unmarried. Leonard's intense grief on learning this, protested Lewes, is "conventional and unnatural". Mrs.Gaskell's language describing the revulsion of the young child from his mother, his wailing and fitful dreams "is sheerly impossible. No child would at once realize any such shame". To render Leonard's anticipation of social disgrace plausible, Mrs.Gaskell should have first shown him in "scenes of insult and opprobrium from his companions and the world at large".¹

Another episode found smacking of the melodramatic was Mr. Donne's [Bellingham's] callousness at Ruth's death-bed. "Lord Stanley (my nephew)", wrote Mrs.Stanley, "sat up till two o'clock reading [Ruth]; and the only objection he made was that he thought it unnatural to carry Mr.Donne's hardness of heart so far as the last scene does".² The Prospective critic, too, objected to the same scene on the grounds that since "we have no faith in the existence of such a disease as the complete moral ossification of the human heart, we are tempted ... to believe that no man could have remained so utterly unmoved under [such solemn] circumstances".³

Other critics and readers, however, saw in Mr.Donne's unnatural coldness at the sight of the dead Ruth a deeper meaning. Thus

1. Westminster, (April 1853), pp. 484-5.

2. Ward, p. XV.

3. (May 1853), p. 246.

Lewes in the Westminster admired the quiet and subtle way in which Mrs. Gaskell makes Mr. Bellingham more repulsive by the additional fact that he remains unaware of how bad he is:

The author has gone into no vituperation of Ruth's seducer, but he is so drawn as to suggest all that could be said; the interview between him and Mr. Benson, by the side of Ruth's dead body, satisfies the requirements of poetical justice. He is none the less miserable and contemptible that he does not know himself to be so. 1

Mrs. Stanley, in her above quoted letter, described the thrill of her sudden realization that Mr. Donne's portrait is true to life because villains like him never change:

And now shall I tell you what I thought the master stroke of the book? the very part that Lord Stanley objected to ... It took me by surprise. I expected differently, but I recognized at once the truth -- the all-important and awful truth -- that hardened hearts do not soften -- no, not, "if one came to them from the dead". 2

On the whole, Ruth was considered free from melodrama. This should have delighted Mrs. Gaskell whose conscious intention was, as she wrote to a friend: "to keep [the novel] quiet in tone, lest by the slightest exaggeration, or over-strained sentiment I might weaken the force of what I had to say". 3

Ruth's general quietness of tone did not, however, prevent critics from recognizing the strikingly dramatic power of some of its scenes. Ludlow again paid this aspect of the novel special attention. He begins by observing that, compared with Mary Barton, Mrs. Gaskell's second novel shows greater control in the use of dramatic effects.

1. (April 1853), p. 483.

2. Ward, p. XV.

3. Letter to Anne Robson [before Jan. 27, 1853], Letters, 148.

Still, there are many scenes in the novel which are thrilling and dramatic without being exaggerated or sentimental:

The dramatic power of the authoress of "Mary Barton" was not to be doubted. But what marks "Ruth" is her extreme sobriety in the wielding of it, the common incidents out of which she evolves it, the distinctive abstinence from exaggeration in her most highly-wrought and pathetic passages. The nerving of a young girl to self-control through the sudden illness of her lover, her despair and attempt at suicide when deserted by him, her sudden meeting with him in after days ... her rejection of his renewed suit for her child's sake ... and finally, the impulse of seemingly renewed affection which makes her wait upon her sick lover, her catching the infection from him, and her death -- these are surely, almost without an exception, elements of dramatic interest which ... scarcely transcend the painful realities of every-day life. 1

George Eliot, however, apparently felt that these dramatic scenes, enumerated by Ludlow, were too dramatic for real life. For this seems to be what she had in mind (and probably, too, the idealized purity and nobility of Ruth and the shallowness of her seducer) when she wrote to Peter Taylor:

"Ruth" with all its merits, will not be an enduring or classical fiction -- will it? Mrs. Gaskell seems to me to be constantly misled by a love of sharp contrasts -- of "dramatic" effects. She is not contented with the subdued colouring -- the half-tints of real life. Hence she agitates one for the moment, but she does not secure one's lasting sympathy; her scenes and characters do not become typical. 2

If George Eliot was not happy about Mrs. Gaskell's "sharp contrast", she dwelt lovingly in the rest of the letter, however, upon the novelist's power in graphic descriptions:

1. North British, (May 1853), p. 153.

2. Feb. 1., 1953, The George Eliot Letters, II, 86.

But how pretty and graphic are the touches of description! That little attic in the minister's house, for example, which, with its pure white dimity bed-curtains, its bright green walls, and the rich brown of its stained floor, remind one of a snow drop springing out of the soil. 1

Other critics, too, found in the graphic descriptions of Ruth a special point of excellence. Thus the Prospective admired the novel's "graceful diction, [and] graphic delineation of nature and skilful portraiture" and found these elements to explain why Mrs.Gaskell's work "seizes upon the mind with the strong grasp of reality."² Even in the unfavourable review of the Spectator, we find the authoress praised for her "clear perception of external imagery, and [her] powerful distinct style, especially in description".³

One type of description, however, which Mrs.Gaskell extensively used in Ruth was her detailed and often impressionistic portrayal of nature. This new aspect in the novel attracted the notice of contemporary readers, and was generally considered to be a praiseworthy development in the novelist's artistic powers.

Especially significant are those critical comments which perceived the correspondence between the scenic atmosphere and the states of mind of the characters, especially in moments of intense feeling or high drama. "One characteristic of our author's genius" wrote the Prospective, is "the happy art with which she heightens the effect of her narrative, by the graceful and harmonious blending of natural scenery with the sentiments and emotions of her characters".⁴ The most

1. Ibid.

2. (May 1853), p. 229.

3. (Jan. 15, 1853), p. 61.

4. (May 1853), p. 230.

detailed analysis of Mrs.Gaskell's art in this respect is to be found in Tait's. The reviewer begins with expressing some qualms as to whether the deep interest he has taken in Ruth should disqualify him from being an impartial judge on the quality of novel. He gracefully extricates himself from this dilemma by announcing that his intention is not "to assess the merits" of the novel as a whole, but to comment on two or three points: "The most obvious one is the appeal ... to that imaginative perception of a mysterious response".¹ This seeming sympathy between inanimate nature and the intense feelings of the human heart, although akin to mysticism, can be used as a very powerful artistic device. One superb example is Mrs.Gaskell's Ruth:

This ideal sympathy of nature with man, when really regarded as a fact, is the author of superstitious mysticism; but employed artistically, it is a potent charm of poetry. The senses are ... [so liable to be influenced by the predominant "bias of the mind" that] during any moment of excited feeling, we find the symptoms of the prevailing affection. The inventor of fictitious life uses the privilege, therefore, of surrounding his persons with that kind of scenery, by describing which he may infect the reader with a sentiment akin to ~~what~~ his persons are feeling. The author of "Ruth" has been very skilful in this art; nor do we remember any prose narrative, where it is more successfully ... applied. 2

This correspondence between nature and man, which gives the reader a vivid insight into the emotional life of the characters, is "a legitimate means of effect" on no less ancient an authority than Homer, who "sends the murmuring man to 'walk reluctant along the shore of the many-murmuring sea'". Similarly in Mrs.Gaskell's novel "the dreary mood of Ruth, going unwilling to meet her persecutor [Mr.Donne] on

1. (April 1853), p. 217.

2. Ibid.

the sands" has a parallel in "'the eternal moan of the waves, since the beginning of creation'".¹ The critic then proceeds to cite many instances of how the authoress helps her readers to grasp Ruth's state of mind by exploiting subtle affinities between external nature and the heroine's prevailing mood:

It would be curious, if one could analyse the satisfaction of reading, to ascertain how much we are helped, in our sympathizing with Ruth's experience, by the reflex influence of these external glimpses. In the milliner's work-room, a panel painted with flowers cherishes her fresh youth of heart, through all the dulness and drudgery. At the window, looking out on the Welsh hills, her cheerful relish of their novelty sees, in the rainy weather, the 'swift fleeting showers come across the sunlight, like the rush of silvery arrows; the purple darkness on the heathery mountain side, and the pale golden gleam which succeeded'. The fondness of her love [for Bellingham] is warm and close 'in the green gloom of the leafy shade, at the still hour of noon'. When scornfully repelled from her lover's sick-chamber, listening at the door in dread to hear his breathing cease, she hears 'the soft wind outside sink, with a long low distant moan, among the windings of the hills, and lose itself there, and come no more again'. Very touching, in her unprotected desolation, is that little bird, in a nest among the ivy of the house walls, 'chirping out its wakefulness before the dawn, but the mother bird spread her soft feathers, and hushed it into silence'. 2

Before he goes on to give more examples of Mrs. Gaskell's use of nature as an extension or illustration (by parallel or contrast) of Ruth's feelings, the critic pauses here to affirm that "these incidents are no mere prettiness or fanciful decoration of the story, but the very poetry of each moment." They are, moreover, equally successful, whether used to depict unusual states of consciousness, as a metaphor or to register real correspondences between nature and man:

1. Ibid., p. 217.

2. Ibid., pp. 217-18.

How truthful an observation of the workings of our minds it is, that in the wildest astonished despair, when the deserted [Ruth] has been running up the interminable road, pursuing her betrayer's carriage till it is out of sight, breathless falling on the ground, she notices, and ever afterwards remembers, a tiny trifle, the green beetle on the grass! 1

In addition to the praise bestowed upon Mrs.Gaskell for her truth to feeling and skilful ability to link nature with intense human emotion, her success in stirring the feelings of her readers received many a tearful tribute. John Forster "confessed that he had a 'good cry' over the final chapters."² Curtis, who seems to be the most introspective of the novel's readers, pointed out three beneficial effects the pathos in Mrs.Gaskell's book had on him. Firstly, by quickening our sympathies it puts us in a morally more receptive state of mind: "In the sad and sweet story of 'Ruth' ... the profound pathos ... searches out the tears that hide away from men's eyes in their hearts. And those tears moisten the sympathy that generally dries up in the whirl of events ..." Secondly, there is the enlightening effect of real pathos: "[On reading Ruth] the heart beats, the cheeks tingle, the eyes quiver and fill ... [Ruth] is a tear, washing the eyes clear, so that they can see the way out of [the moral problem it depicts]. Thirdly, there is the feeling of humility akin to the catharsis inspired by sublime tragedy: "[Ruth] leaves us more meek and humble as we close the book."³

A number of readers, however, found Mrs.Gaskell's book too

1. Ibid., p. 218.

2. E.Haldane, Mrs.Gaskell and her Friends, 1930, p. 64.

3. Putnam's, (May 1853), pp. 537-39.

painful. The New Monthly described it as "most dolorous" and asserted that it "does not amuse".¹ Sharpe's, dissatisfied with the novel on grounds of propriety, concluded its summary of the plot with: "Such is the sad story of Ruth, and again we ask, why was it written? Not to amuse, certainly, for the tale, from first to last, is very painful -- one agony succeeding another;"² Charlotte Brontë, too, wrote to the authoress: "Why are we to shut the book crying?"

Ludlow, having heard similar complaints, embarks on a thorough defence of the painfulness of Ruth:

There are, indeed, many who will object to the painfulness of "Ruth" as a positive defect. "I don't think I shall go on with it", said one very dear to us, after the reading of the first twenty pages, "I am sure it is not going to be pleasant!"³

This objection, he continues, is not confined to Ruth, however. There are many people who dislike sad novels for various reasons, but mainly upon the grounds that the proper role of fiction is to present the reader with a more pleasant reality than that of everyday life:

Why should people be made miserable about fictitious woes, say some, whilst there are so many real ones to find out and relieve? ... If I have time to spend over a novel, let me at least escape to some better and brighter world than this great gloomy one of every day -- let me brace up my hopes and energies by being shown how happy and sunny a thing life might be made -- how virtue might be rewarded -- how true love might run smooth -- how the wicked might find an earthly doom.⁴

The novelist's reply to such complaints, Ludlow suggests, should be to

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1. (Feb. 1853), p. 197.
 2. (Jan. 15, 1853), p. 126.
 3. North British, (May, 1853), p. 160.
 4. Ibid., pp. 160-61.

assert that his mission consists in depicting the world as he finds it. If the clear-sighted artist detects unpleasant but hidden aspects in the world of every-day life, he had better point them out rather than gloss over them:

The novelist's true answer seems to be: I have to paint God's world as I find it, and above all, to shew others those portions of it on which I think they ought to look; a duty the more incumbent upon me, if I am acquainted with holes and crannies which others have not pryed into, and which contain, nevertheless, sights which they should see. 1

If this was the true function of the novelist, a happy end in Ruth would have been untrue to every-day life:

It might have been far pleasanter for me [as a novelist] as for you, to have shewn you Ruth Hilton overcoming by degrees all worldly evil without, as well as all spiritual evil within; to have left her at the third volume the wife of a loving husband, a happy and prosperous mother. But look around you, and ask yourself how often the complete spiritual restoration of a fallen woman, as I have depicted it, is ever accompanied by complete worldly restoration? Or ask yourself rather, how seldom either will occur alone, and then see if in shewing you the painfuller picture, I have not shewn you also the truer one. 2

A less theoretical and more simple justification for the sad end in Mrs. Gaskell's book is the practical one of instruction. Ruth's long suffering and final death would have an edifying and deterrent effect upon potential sinners or those who have already fallen:

There is another test which may be used, and a simpler one. The book is above all written for an earnest purpose; written less for those who are whole, than for those who are sick, or bear the seeds of disease within them. Is there one girl who would be tempted or encouraged to sin by the picture of fallen Ruth's

1. Ibid., p. 161.

2. Ibid., pp. 161-2.

ultimate holiness? Is there one fallen woman who would be encouraged to remain in sin by the picture of penitent Ruth's sufferings and death? 1

It is noteworthy that in the contemporary reviews of the novel we find the critics, who indulged the sensibility of their readers by long quotations of moving pathos, were no less anxious to quote equally long passages, mainly about Sally, introduced by such a typical preamble: "By way of relieving the pain which on many grounds this tale has given us, we will exhibit [Sally] to the reader as discoursing in her rough north-country fashion".² Sally with her "rough north-country" accent and "racy humour"³ was a favourite in contemporary comments not only as a "genuinely humorous"⁴ maid-servant but also, in the view of some critics, as the best drawn character in the novel. The Literary Gazette reviewer found fault with almost everything in Mrs. Gaskell's novel except Sally, the "eccentric maid of all work" and "the best character in the book".⁵ Sharpe's, another source of serious criticism, observed that Sally was depicted "with a strong and skilful hand" and found her "the most original and true to her rugged nature of any [other character] in the book".⁶ Chorley in the Athenaeum expressed a similar opinion when he said that "among the characters we have singled out the maid Sally, as perhaps the best".⁷ Charlotte Brontë called Sally "an 'apple of gold'" which

1. Ibid., p. 162.

2. Athenaeum, (Jan. 15, 1853), p. 77.

3. Prospective, (May 1853), p. 233.

4. North British, (May 1853), p. 165.

5. (Jan. 22, 1853), p. 80.

6. (Jan. 15, 1853), p. 126.

7. (Jan. 15, 1853), p. 71.

deserves to be "set in a picture of silver".¹ George Eliot admired "the rich humour of Sally",² whereas Eliza Cook's found her "worthy of Dickens."³

This general praise for Sally is remarkable since it came from both hostile and sympathetic critics. Moreover, the enthusiasm for this maid-servant was not always shown towards the principal character, Ruth. Indeed, the heightened nobility of Mrs.Gaskell's heroine alienated a number of critics and made them accuse the novelist of cutting her characters to suit a mental pattern instead of drawing them from every-day life:

"The novel before us argues ... a conception of character, not altogether abstract, but derived from cogitation rather than from life." (Spectator) 4

[Mrs.Gaskell's] characters are either too good or too bad -- and it is only where she seems to be drawing after the life, as in the characters of Mr.Benson, his sister, and their servant Sally, that she shows any of the strength which distinguished her 'Mary Barton'. (Literary Gazette) 5

Although the above comments were not typical, the fact that they were made at all is significant. It shows that the "fabulous virtue"⁶ of Ruth, admired by such critics as Curtis, did not appeal to those who wanted a stricter fidelity to nature, of the type exhibited, and much admired, in Mrs.Gaskell's first novel.

Ruth was a work that needed even more courage to write than

1. S.H.B., IV, 35.

2. The Letters, op.cit., II, 86.

3. (Feb. 26, 1853), p. 279.

4. (Jan. 15, 1853), p.61.

5. (Jan. 22, 1853), p. 80.

6. Putnam's, (May 1853), p. 353.

Mary Barton: others, like Mrs.Trollope and Mrs.Tonna, had preceded Mrs. Gaskell in taking up the cause of the industrial poor, but no mid-Victorian novelist before Mrs.Gaskell devoted a 3-volume novel to the story of an unmarried mother, who is shown to succeed in redeeming herself and returning to a life of purity and social usefulness. Some reviewers like Ludlow and Lewes were obviously moved by Ruth as a story, but the fervour of their enthusiasm emanated also from their appreciation of Mrs.Gaskell's courage in tackling the sensitive subject of the fallen woman and her illegitimate child.

Bearing in mind Mrs.Gaskell's boldness in writing such a novel as Ruth, and remembering the well-known mid-Victorian irrational fears and inhibitions in respect to sexual morality,¹ we may expect that Mrs. Gaskell would have been gratified by the wide, and mostly enthusiastic, reception of her novel. Yet the aftermath of Ruth's publication proved more painful to her than the controversy that followed the publication of Mary Barton five years before. In her letters we find her concentrating on the few periodicals that were hostile or prudish² -- she only mentions her delight with Ludlow's review.³ As in the case of Mary Barton, it seems that Mrs.Gaskell was more hurt by the disapproval of people she personally knew than by the comments of the national press.

Many of the objections to Ruth reached Mrs.Gaskell directly in the form of letters of protest and expressions of disapproval. The stream of letters and "the unkind things people were saying"⁴ made her

1. Cf. Eric Trudgill, Madonnas and Magdalens, op.cit., pp. 174 ff.

2. Letters, 151.

3. Ibid., 149.

4. Ibid., 148.

sick: "I have been so ill;" she wrote to Eliza Fox, "I do believe it has been a 'Ruth' fever".¹ The strain was too much for her that "in several instances I have forbidden people to write". In the midst of her anguish, she conceded in exasperation that her chosen theme was "'an unfit subject for fiction'", but continued defiantly, "I knew all this before, but I determined notwithstanding to speak my mind out about it".²

Slurs upon her feminine delicacy in writing Ruth stung her deeply. She was accused of being "improper"³ and possessing a "morbid fascination"⁴ for dwelling on sin.

Many people, however, reassured the sensitive novelist that her book was perfectly "proper", had no tendency to favour evil and that it treated a subject in much need of thoughtful consideration. Mrs. Jameson affirmed in a sympathetic letter that your book had "exposed 'that demoralizing laxity of principle' ... with mingled courage and delicacy".⁵ Mrs. Hare described to Mrs. Gaskell the horror her husband, the archdeacon, felt on hearing that "your virtuous friends had burnt 'Ruth' ... [but] he quieted down with the remark 'well, the bible has been burnt, and many other precious books have met with the same fate, which yet have done their work'".⁶ Archdeacon Hare was among the earliest enthusiasts for the book. A month before Ruth appeared he expressed his conviction that it must do both women and men good to read.⁷

1. Ibid., 150.

2. Ibid., 148.

3. Ibid., 150.

4. Sharpe's, (Jan, 15, 1853), p. 126.

5. From a copy in the Brotherton Collection, University of Leeds, (*italics mine*).

6. Ibid.

7. Letter from Susanna Winkworth (Dec. 20, 1853), in M. Shaen, ed., Memorials of Two Sisters, 1908, pp. 109-10.

E.B.Browning (who was to follow in Mrs.Gaskell's footsteps in her Aurora Leigh 1856) emphasized the purity of the novel. Your book, she wrote, "is noble as well as beautiful, which contains truths purifying and purely put".¹ F.D.Maurice and Monckton Milnes also joined those who stood by Mrs.Gaskell, assuring her that Ruth had not only won their admiration but also met with the appreciation of their best friends.²

Kingsley, the news of Mrs.Gaskell's troubles reaching him, came to the rescue by writing a very encouraging letter in which he categorically asserted that all his friends, decent men and pure ladies alike, unanimously praised her righteous book. Kingsley, intent on reassuring Mrs.Gaskell, was exaggerating the unanimity of praise. It is true, however, that there were remarkably few "bigots" among the reviewers of Ruth, if not among the public at large:

Eversley Rectory, July 25, 1853.

MY DEAR MADAM,

I am sure that you will excuse my writing to you thus abruptly when you read the cause of my writing.

I am told to my great astonishment, that you have heard painful speeches on account of 'Ruth'; what was told me raised all my indignation and disgust.

Now I have read only a little (though, of course, I know the story) of the book; for the same reason that I cannot read 'Uncle Tom's Cabin', or 'Othello', or 'The Bride of Lammermoor'. It is too painfully good, as I found before I had read half a volume.

But this I can tell you, that among all my large acquaintance I never heard, or have heard, but one unanimous opinion of the beauty and righteousness of the book, and that, above all, from real ladies, and really good women. If you could have heard the things which I heard spoken of it this evening by a thorough High Church fine lady of the world, and by her daughter, too, as pure and pious a soul as one need see, you would have no more

1. July 15, 1853, Waller, p. 141.

2. Shaen, op.cit., p. 103.

doubt than I have, that whatsoever 'snobs' and the bigots may think, English people, in general, have but one opinion of 'Ruth', and that is, one of utter satisfaction.

I doubt not you have had this said to you already often. Believe me, you may have it said to you as often as you will by the purest and most refined of English women.

May God bless you, and help you to write many more such books as you have already written, is the fervent wish of

Your very faithful servant

C.Kingsley.¹

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1. Charles Kingsley, His Letters and Memoirs of his Life, edited by his Wife, 2 vols., 5th ed., 1877, I, 370. (*italics Kingsley's*). Kingsley makes a point of reporting the favourable response of women. This was something worth reporting; mid-Victorian females, due to poor education and the cramping morality of a man's world, were far more squeamish and hysterical about matters sexual than men.

Chapter Three

It "Stands out in the Memory Like an Experience":

The Reception of Cranford.

"The beginning of 'Cranford'", Mrs.Gaskell told Ruskin, "was one paper in 'Household Words' , and I never meant to write more";¹ this being the case, considerable credit goes to Charles Dickens, as editor of Household Words, for the full tale we now have. The Cranford paper mentioned by Mrs.Gaskell "so delighted" Dickens that he "put it first in the number"² and lost no time in pressing Mrs.Gaskell for more episodes in the same line. Mrs.Gaskell apparently did not need much persuasion; her second Cranford piece was written and despatched promptly, without a title, little more than a fortnight later. Dickens, having supplied the missing title, wrote to Mrs.Gaskell informing her of the editorial amendment, and reaffirming in his playful manner that his delight in the delicate tale was unabated:

If you were not the most suspicious of women, always looking for soft sawder in the purest metal of praise, I should call your paper delightful, and touched in the tenderest and most delicate manner. Being what you are, I confine myself to the observation that I have called it A Love Affair at Cranford, and sent it off to the printer. 3

Distracted by other activities and writings, notably Ruth

1. Letters, 562.

2. The Letters of Charles Dickens, ed. W.Dexter, 1938, II, 361.

3. Letter dated, Dec.21, 1851, ibid., II, 364.

(published January 1853), Mrs. Gaskell could not comply with Dickens's needs for regular contributions to his weekly magazine. Occasionally he had to prod her: "Oh what a lazy woman you are, and where is that article?"¹ However, when Dickens secured the seventh (the last but one) episode, his impatience gave way to a surge of editorial joy; even if we have no other means of ascertaining the popularity of the serialized Cranford, Dickens's enthusiasm on this occasion is evidence enough:

I have joyfully sent the Cranford last received to the Printers, and I shall joyfully send its successors yet to come. As to future work, I do assure you that you cannot write too much for Household Words, and have never yet written half enough. I receive you ever, (if Mr. Gaskell will allow me to say so) with open arms...
 You shall collect Cranford when you please, and publish it where you please... 2

With the next and last episode appearing on May 21, 1853, the eight instalments were gathered the following month and published in one volume by Chapman and Hall.³

John Forster did not wait for the book to be completed to express the pleasure he derived from the tale. His keen appreciation of the serialized papers is recorded in a number of enthusiastic letters he sent the authoress at different stages of the story. Thus on the

1. Feb. 25, 1852, Ibid., II, 380.

2. April 13, 1853, ibid., II, 457. Despite the intermittent manner of its serialization, Cranford was evidently a popular serial: many reviewers began their notices with the assumption that the Cranford papers have "already amused and won the admiration of many..." (Nonconformist (Aug. 3, 1853), p. 625); "the chronicles of Cranford are well known to the reading world through the medium of 'Household Words'" (Tait's, (August 1853) p. 503). Even in the United States, where Dickens's magazine had a smaller circulation, the Cranford serial was "a great favourite" (Literary World, (Aug. 13, 1853), p. 39).

3. For full bibliographical details of the eight episodes and their subsequent splitting into sixteen chapters in the first edition, see Cranford, Elizabeth Watson, ed., 1972, p. 179.

same day he read "Memory at Cranford" (the third instalment) he wrote: "I cannot tell you what charm the whole quiet picture has for me, with those shadows from the past".¹ In another letter, dated March 16, 1852, he again expressed his pleasure in "the universally liked" tale, hoping that "if Peter is to die in India, he'll leave Matty really well off after all her troubles".² Having seen Captain Brown, his eldest daughter, the formidable Miss Jenkins and Matty's old lover consigned to the grave so early in the story, Forster understandably spoke of Peter's death in India as if it were a foregone conclusion!

In another letter Forster assured Mrs. Gaskell that her Cranford papers "positively grow better and better. I never saw so nice, so exquisite a touch. The little book that collects them will be a 'hit', if there be any taste left for that kind of social painting."³

Forster was not far wrong in his prediction; the publication of the Cranford papers in book form did not quite cause a sensation, but the little volume was received by the twenty or so periodicals which noticed it with an enthusiasm that equalled, and sometimes surpassed, that shown to its more ambitious and substantial predecessors Mary Barton and Ruth;

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1. Forster Letters, Gaskell Collection, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.
 2. Ibid. Most contemporary reviewers were too happy with Cranford to notice the dwindling number of characters through natural and accidental deaths, except Tait's: "One regrets that death has so much to do in this Paradise of old maids. Poor Captain Brown! We wish he had lived, at least to the end of the last chapter, and witnessed the return of Mr. Peter, and the restoration of the excellent Matty to her lost position in society. But we must not quarrel with destiny - even the destiny of writers of fiction". (August 1853), p. 504). Mrs. Gaskell wrote that she had "killed Capt [sic] Brown very much against [her] will" (Letters, 562). The first Cranford instalment was a self-contained piece and was not intended, as we have mentioned, to form part of a serial. All this was not, of course, known to this reviewer.
 3. Ibid.

perhaps affection is the word to describe the type of praise showered on "the most perfect little book",¹ "the charming little"² volume, Mrs. Gaskell's "inimitable"³ and "exquisite tale."⁴

The enthusiasm emanated partly from a sense of the novelty of the subject chosen by Mrs. Gaskell: there was nothing quite like Cranford in contemporary literature. Parts of Mrs. Gaskell's book reminded George Henry Lewes in the Leader for a moment of the essayist Charles Lamb, but he soon settled for calling the book "a companion volume of Miss Mitford's 'Our Village'."⁵ Others, like the reviewers of the Westminster⁶ and the Spectator⁷, also mentioned Miss Mitford's work, but they were quick to point out that, despite the similarity between the two books, Cranford was both superior and different. This was also the conclusion reached by the Nonconformist:

No one can read "Cranford" without thinking of Miss Mitford's "Our Village"... [Both works] are sketches, highly finished, most perfect in detail... But Miss Mitford and Mrs. Gaskell have few further resemblances. The former is ... her best self in those descriptive passages ... Mrs. Gaskell has the higher genius, displayed in her deep intuition of character, and her power of presenting a great variety of minor traits pervaded by a uniting spirit, so as to form brilliantly distinct individualities, and to give them the breath of life. 8

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1. Examiner, (July 23, 1853), p. 467.
 2. Nonconformist, n.s. XIII (Aug. 3, 1853), 625.
 3. Tait's Edinburgh Magazine, (August 1853), p. 503; also Britannia, XIV (Aug. 13, 1853), 531.
 4. Harper's New Monthly Magazine, (Sept. 1853), p. 569.
 5. (July 2, 1853), p. 644.
 6. n.s. IV (July 1853), 273.
 7. XXVI (June 25, 1853), 614.
 8. (August 3, 1853), p. 625.

The Gentleman's reviewer, in his relatively late notice of November 1853, apparently anxious to put the earlier critics right on this point, had no time for Miss Mitford, but set out directly, and rightly, to say that the two works were in reality very different:

Very unlike Miss Mitford's pictures of country-town life, owing nothing to description, limiting itself to a small circle in a small place, omitting even antiquarian associations, not hinting at religious differences, nor even romancing about pretty maidens and country swains, it is wonderful how the interest [in Cranford] is sustained throughout. 1

How Mrs. Gaskell managed to keep up the interest in a work that seemed to lack a unifying plot was another source of puzzled admiration: one reviewer tried to get round the mystery by this paradoxical exclamation:

Few books ever written can equal the one under notice, story! "Lord bless you; there is none to tell;" but there is as much that is suggestive, pleasing and delightful in it as would suffice for the groundwork of a dozen. 2

H.F. Chorley in the Athenaeum engaged in some intelligent guesswork as to the genesis of the book: "Possibly", he shrewdly guessed, "it was commenced by accident, rather than on any settled plan; but if this was the case the author early became alive to the happy thought pervading it;...". Chorley does not tell us what felicitous idea permeated Cranford, though he later seems to suggest that such an idea lay in the author's intention to vindicate "'the spirit of goodness'

1. (Nov. 1853), p.494.

2. Weekly Dispatch (June 17, 1855), p.6. This is a review of the cheap edition of Cranford, published by Chapman and Hall in June 1855.

living and breathing in an orbit so limited." For Chorley the Cranford world had the poignant charm of a way of life on its way to extinction, a world that "will hardly have an existence a quarter of a century hence."¹

In their attempt to identify the source of Mrs.Gaskell's success in a book that lacked not only a unifying thread of events, but also other ingredients of the more solid pieces of narrative work,² most reviewers rightly emphasized that Mrs.Gaskell's real power in this book lay with the sympathies; her evocation of mood and atmosphere was so successful because of her penetration of the human heart even in seemingly shallow and dull people. This was especially admirable since the author's intention, apparently, was to show how kindness and goodness inhabited even the most unlikely places:

If asked what is the general impression left on the reader's mind respecting the author's particular aim (that at least which presided as a leading thought over her when writing), we can only give our own, which is, that it seems designed to show - at all events that it does show - the sort of goodness that may find a home and exercise in outwardly dull, uninteresting circles; how the small vanities, the stupid pretensions, the foolish love of gossip, can all be put aside, and the kindest efforts made to meet a case of hardship arising in its little world; how inanity may be lighted up, and shallowness dignified, by the presence of an actual call to the exercise of benevolence. We have already said how narrow are the outer limits in which Mrs.Gaskell on this occasion moves. It is quite a microscopic contemplation, and most amusing are the quiet revelations of the inner movements of those who are placed within reach of her keen and accurate eye. 3

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1. (June 25, 1853), p. 765.
 2. One reviewer, for instance, regretted the lack of passages of natural scenery in Mrs.Gaskell's provincial work: "In one respect, "Cranford" is defective; it contains no descriptions of scenery - a want which all who have read 'Ruth' will regret; but both the nature of the story and its mode of publication were against this." (Inquirer, (July 30, 1853), p. 484).
 3. Gentleman's Magazine, (Nov. 1853), p.494.

This passage from the Gentleman's points to the strongest charm Cranford held for its contemporary readers, namely, Mrs. Gaskell's ability to make dullness and inanity interesting, even loveable. G.H. Lewes in the Leader put this point too strongly when he said: "Provincial life in all its dulness moves before us [in Cranford]; we enjoy every detail of the pageant as heartily as we should detest the reality."¹ Lewes was alone, however, in drawing such a sharp contrast between reality and art; most other reviewers voiced the generally held belief that life was essentially full of moral significance for the eye of the artist who penetrated deep enough into its manifestations. A variation on this theme, again frequently expressed, was that the business of the superior artist was to make interesting our essentially dull and common-place life. That there was a contradiction between these two attitudes hardly troubled the reviewers; some of them, like the author of the second extract expressed both assumptions in the same paragraph:

It is the privilege of talent to exalt whatever it comes in contact with, however lowly; to adorn it, however plain; and to endue it with attractions, however unprepossessing. This is pre-eminently the case in this instance. We here find something worth noticing in the humblest individual before us; some touch of feeling is manifested by the meanest capacity; and under the auspices of such a genial advocate the darkest sphere is irradiated by a light that transforms the simple into the sublime. (Sun) 2

[Cranford] holds "a mirror up to nature"; how our common humanity touches us, even in its foibles and littleness. We need more and more these humanizing touches, in the present state of our literature.... [Works like this book] winnow our common-place, prosaic daily-life of its selfishness -

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1. (July 2, 1853), p. 644.
 2. (June 30, 1853), p. 3.

they throw a halo around the ordinary men and women...; and heroes, under their influence, retire into mist, and become mythical. (New York Daily Times) 1

Confirmation of "our common humanity", so prized by the contemporary readers of Cranford, was a highly regarded and eminently desirable aim at a time of bewildering and too rapid social and cultural change: Change is striking everywhere, wrote a member of the Manchester Athenaeum, "Faith in the old is shaken before the New is defined and acknowledged." Our time makes "strong minds doubt and weak hearts despond" waiting for time to bring "the resolution of the discord" everywhere.²

Furthermore, the concept of "common humanity", derived from Rousseau and Wordsworth, acquired in the 'forties and 'fifties some specific political overtones; it referred to the social classes which, no matter how different and wide apart they socially stood, had humanity as a common denominator. "Boz and men like Boz", wrote an 1850 critic, "are the true humanizers, and therefore the true pacificators of the world. They sweep away the prejudices of class and caste, and disclose [our] common ground of Humanity."³ The term "pacificators" is significant: this was a time when the poor were protesting their depressed social status in not always peaceful ways. In this context a work like Cranford was clearly relevant and useful: it presented a re-assuring picture of a world where social harmony was still possible; the "Amazonian" society of Cranford with its well-defined and durable (though not unshakeable) code of "propriety and

1. (Aug. 15, 1853), p.2.

2. Quotation from the preface of "a member of the Manchester Athenaeum" to Leon Faucher, Manchester in 1844, 1844, p.VII.

3. Fraser's Magazine, XLIII (Dec. 1850), 700.

humanity"¹ was one in which people were conscious (often ludicrously so) of their "place", and observed unquestioningly what was expected of them in relation both to their superiors and inferiors in rank. Mrs. Gaskell's humorous vision is also a broad and sympathetic one: both high and low in Cranford are depicted with compassionate irony. Moreover Mrs. Gaskell makes sure to point out the virtues of the social cohesion of Cranford; the genteel ladies generally carry out conscientiously their responsibilities towards their subordinates; whereas servants like Martha and Flora are loyal and, at times of crisis, come to the help of their betters with moving kindness and devotion. We have already seen the reviewer of the New York Daily Times expounding the virtues of Cranford in throwing a halo upon everyday existence. In another place he underlines the social and political significance of Mrs. Gaskell's work more clearly when he says:

[In works like Cranford] not a good serving-woman in their pages, but shines as a fixed star - not the commonest laborer..., who is true to his manhood, but yields a far-reaching splendor... and one great merit of such works is, their thorough freedom from sectarianism or the partiality of caste. The high and the low have alike holiest virtues; - one class is not arrayed against the other; the rich are not all villains, and the poor are not all angels. 2

Another aspect of Cranford that appealed to, and was emphasized by, many readers was the obviously female hand that wrote it: "No male creature", said the Westminster, "could have written [Cranford], -- only a woman of genius, quick of wit, and no less quick of feeling."³ The feminine

1. Cranford, Works, III, p. 21.

2. (Sep. 3, 1853), p. 92. Chorley, too, noted with satisfaction that Mrs. Gaskell's new tale has "no wicked and hardened rich people - no eloquent and virtuous paupers." Instead, "there is rare humour in the airs and graces" of a "few foolish and faded gentlewomen of limited incomes." (Athenaeum, (June 25, 1853), p. 765).

3. (July 1853), p. 273.

genius that produced Cranford led another reviewer to contemplate the mysterious differences between the sexes:

Indeed, what men could write the works of the best women? Could WALTER SCOTT or DICKENS have written JANE AUSTEN'S novels? No, not if the large sums realised by those popular writers had been quadrupled for a single work. Where the charm is we know not - we could not exactly point out the delicate touches which distinguish the writings of the sexes. That they exist is indisputable... 1

A mid-Victorian critic who particularly liked to indulge in speculation about the differences between female and male genius was G.H.Lewes. In an 1852 article entitled "The Lady Novelists" he repeated the old belief that the female mind was predominantly emotional, whereas that of the male primarily intellectual. Of all types of literary writing, he observed, fiction suits the talent of women best. In the novel they use their "domestic experience" and their sensitivity to sentiment to advantage. A male novelist may succeed better in "the construction of plots or the delineation of character" but a woman will have the edge on him "in finesse of detail, in pathos and sentiment."² Lewes welcomes the advent of the literature of women, and admonishes the lady novelists of the time not to imitate men, but to illuminate the still largely unexplored feminine world:

To write as men write, is the aim and besetting sin of women; to write as women, is the real office they have to perform ... we are in no need of more male writers; we are in need of genuine female experience. The prejudices, notions, passions, and conventionalisms of men are amply illustrated; let us have the same fulness with respect to women! 3

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1. New York Daily Times, (August 15, 1853), p.2.
 2. Westminster Review, n.s. II (July 1852), 133.
 3. Ibid., p.132.

It is not difficult to see that Cranford is in many ways a fulfilment (purely accidental on the part of Mrs. Gaskell) of Lewes' expectations of a female writer's novel: pathos, sentiment and delicate humour Cranford has in abundance; its sphere is also almost exclusively restricted to the special world of a group of women. It comes as no surprise therefore to find Lewes in the following year pronouncing Cranford to be superior to its predecessors Mary Barton and Ruth (both of which, we may recall, he had given enthusiastic reviews):

THERE is something extremely pleasant in being able to "report progress" in the case of a writer who has once made a great effect. Mrs. Gaskell has produced no work to excite such "a sensation" as Mary Barton, but her subsequent works have all shown a great advance in art, if less of à propos.

Cranford is her latest. We think it will be more permanent than the others, though less noisy in its reputation. There is so much delicate feminine observation, so much bright and genial humour, shadowed every now and then by passages of quiet pathos, that the book transports us into this secluded village, makes us intimate with its old world ways, and stands out in the memory like an experience. 1

Of all Mrs. Gaskell's feminine characters Miss Matty, otherwise known as Matilda Jenkins, received the most affectionate praise. Chorley was especially fascinated by this epitome of the Cranford world:

The main figure, Miss Matilda, is finished with an artist's hand. Her gentleness of heart and depth of affection, her conscientious and dignified sense of right, her perpetual shelter under the precepts and counsels of beloved ones that have gone home before her, - invest the character with an interest which is unique, when her weakness of intellect and narrowness of training are also considered. 2

Another admirer of Matty was the reviewer of the Examiner (he was

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1. Leader, (July 2, 1853), p. 644.
 2. Athenaeum, (June 25, 1853), p. 765.

possibly John Forster), who dwelt with a great deal of affection on the essential goodness of this character:

Miss Matilda, or Miss Matty as she is more frequently called, is quite the heroine of the book. Before it ends, we somehow have taken her entirely into our hearts - her and the whole of her little history ... She has many old-fashioned prejudices, and silly little weaknesses and ways; - but there is such a righteous nature underneath them, such a true and tender heart, such a noble regard for what is just to others at even the cost of injustice to herself - that the impression of all that human goodness making itself felt in such simple, quiet, unromantic guise, has a thoroughly delightful effect. We shall always be pleased to think of Miss Matty Jenkyns. Indeed we are sorry we did not know her in time, after that foolish Mr. Holford took his refusal from her so quietly. ¹

The importance of Matty was fully recognized; she was not only the most important character but also the one "whose private history forms a kind of under-current through the book."² The other character, Mary Smith, through whose point-of-view much of the book is narrated, received less attention. The Examiner, however, showed the greatest interest in Mary Smith as a link between Cranford and the outside world of Drumble. The reviewer, in his emphasis upon the shrewdness and slyness of Mary Smith, seemed vaguely aware that she was not simply a mouthpiece of Mrs. Gaskell, but a means by which Mrs. Gaskell could combine, in the words of a recent writer on Cranford, "a subtle mixture of ironic distancing and affectionate concern";³

1. (July 23, 1853), pp. 467-68.

2. Inquirer, (July 30, 1853), p. 484.

3. Compare: "The impression often given by a first reading of Cranford is that the narrator is virtually anonymous, or simply a cover for Mrs. Gaskell's own observations; certainly we learn of her name only late in the book when she begins to take a more active part in Cranford's affairs, and it would be foolish to try to argue that she is in any sense a fully developed character. But she is by no means anonymous. Her individuality is fixed from the beginning and plays an important part in establishing Cranford's distinctive tone... by emphasizing both her youth and connections with industrial Drumble, it was possible to heighten the strangeness of Cranford's way of life by a subtle mixture of ironic distancing and affectionate concern." (from Peter Keating's introduction to Cranford, The Penguin English Library, 1976, p.14).

[Miss Matty] is still at Cranford, and we hope still visited by that sly and sagacious young lady, "Mary Smith", whose occasional railway trips from Drumble have led to the pleasant though unauthorised disclosures now made to the world at large. For Miss Mary Smith cannot help revealing not a little of her own character in making so free with the characters of her friends - and a young woman more shrewd or penetrating, sharper in the midst of her indulgence, more critical behind her kindness, or more knowing under that meek look of unconsciousness she is perpetually putting on, we have not encountered for a very long time. 1

Walter Scott defended the novel earlier in the century on the grounds that it has "a most blessed power in those moments of pain and of langour, when the whole head is sore and the whole heart is sick."² The therapeutic influence of works of fiction is not perhaps their best defence, nor is it restricted to fiction. Still, Scott's remark seems to apply especially to a work like Cranford. Indeed, there are several contemporary instances of Mrs.Gaskell's book providing suitable reading for people who are mentally or physically exhausted or unwell. Charles Eliot Norton described to Mrs.Gaskell the soothing effect of reading Cranford to his sick father in his last days of listlessness and langour, terms reminiscent of those employed by Walter Scott:

During the summer of 1853 as my Father's life was gradually drawing to its peaceful close, there was little left for those who loved him to do but to endeavour to amuse the listless and languid hours of decline. It was then that your Cranford, which had been read aloud (and much of it more than once) in our family circle when it first appeared in 'Household Words', was again read to him and gave to him more entertainment and pleasure than any other book. It was indeed, I think, the last book he cared to hear. 3.

Interestingly, reading and re-reading Cranford proved a refreshing experience to its own author. In an 1865 letter to John Ruskin she

1. (July 23, 1853), pp. 467-68.

2. Miscellaneous Prose Works of Walter Scott, 1829, III, 256.

3. Letter to Mrs.Gaskell, June 5, 1855, in Letters of Mrs.Gaskell and Charles Eliot Norton, ed. Jane Whitehill, 1932, p.1.

wrote:

I am so much pleased you like [Cranford]. It is the only one of my own books that I can read; - but whenever I am ailing or ill, I take 'Cranford' and - I was going to say, enjoy it! (but that would not be pretty!) laugh over it afresh! 1

In Ruskin's letter to Mrs.Gaskell, one notices, besides his admiration for the art in the delightful book, the fact that Cranford was read several times by his mother:

I have just been reading 'Cranford' out to my Mother. She has read it about 5 times; but the first time I tried, I flew into a passion at Captain Brown's being killed and wouldn't go any further - but this time my Mother coaxed me past it - and then I enjoyed it mightly. I do not know when I have read a more finished little piece of study of human nature (a very great and good thing when it is not spoilt) nor was I ever more sorry to come to a book's end. 2

It was Charlotte Brontë, however, who, in a passing reference to Cranford, summarised in her vivid way this book's particular charm, a quality that was to endear it to later generations:

Thank you for your letter, it was as pleasant as a quiet chat, as welcome as spring showers, as reviving as a friend's visit, in short, it was like a page of 'Cranford'. 3

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1. Letters, 562.
 2. Letter to Mrs.Gaskell, dated Feb.21, 1865. Quoted, Ward, Works, p.XXIV.
 3. Letter to Mrs.Gaskell, dated 1853, quoted by Anne Ritchie Thackeray in her Preface to Cranford, 1891, p.VI. Other fellow novelists who liked Cranford were Charlotte Yonge and George Eliot. Later in the century Cranford came to be regarded, mistakenly, as suitable reading for children. The first instance of Cranford recommended for young persons occur in Charlotte Yonge's comment on this work in her religious magazine The Monthly Packet of Evening Readings for Younger members of the English Church: "We hope ... our readers ... will not fail to read 'Cranford' by the author of 'Mary Barton', to our mind the best of all the sketches we have seen of uneventful country-town life, and an excellent lesson in the respect that may be united with a full sense of the ridiculous." (VI (November 1853), 399). George Eliot in 1859 (when her reputation was already considerable), hinted at a debt to Mrs.Gaskell's work: "I was conscious, while the question of my power was still undecided for me, that my feeling towards Life and Art had some affinity with the feeling which had inspired 'Cranford' and the earlier chapters of 'Mary Barton'". (George Eliot Letters, III, 198).

Cranford cemented Mrs.Gaskell's already well-established reputation: it especially confirmed her versatility. Few agreed with Lewes that Cranford was Mrs.Gaskell's masterpiece, but many made a point of emphasizing that the "exquisite tale" of Cranford was "a new proof of the versatility of talent so richly displayed in the previous works",¹ and that Mrs.Gaskell, with Cranford published in book form only months after the appearance of Ruth, was "fast making good her claim to a place in the highest ranks of literature."² But none was so enthralled by the multi-faceted genius of Mrs.Gaskell as the Nonconformist's reviewer, whose contemplation of her achievements made him look forward to a glorious future not only for her but also for the literature of the age:

In "Cranford" we get a new phase of this genius; and one that must lead to a higher appreciation of the powers of the author. If we bring together in our minds, the moral earnestness and deep tone of "Mary Barton," - the admirably wrought plot and profound knowledge of character in "Ruth", - and the minute detail and elaborate imitation of common life in "Cranford" - without dwelling on other features in which each is excellent - we have a union of qualities and powers adequate to the production of a fiction, which should incorporate the life of the age in imperishable forms, and be at once its drama and its epic. 3

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1. Harper's New Monthly Magazine, (Sep. 1853), p. 569.
 2. New York Daily Times, (August 15, 1853), p.2.
 3. (July 3, 1853), p. 625.

Chapter Four

"MAY HER SUN INCREASE!": MRS.GASKELL IN 1855, AND THE RECEPTION OF NORTH AND SOUTH

Shortly before Cranford appeared in book form, Mrs.Gaskell began to consider attempting a very different type of work which would utilize, like Mary Barton, an industrial setting. Dickens, apparently receiving a resume of the contemplated novel, immediately decided, perhaps bearing the success of Mary Barton in mind, to encourage Mrs. Gaskell both in writing and publishing the planned book in his own magazine Household Words. Your work, he wrote to her on May 3, 1853 is "certainly NOT too serious, so sensibly treated", and you "may do a great deal of good by pursuing it" in the magazine. He thought it was fair, however, to warn her that he himself was giving "anxious consideration" to writing a novel on a similar subject.¹ Mrs.Gaskell was not always keen on competing with well-known authors even on dissimilar subjects - She had requested Charlotte Brontë in 1853 to delay the publication of Villette by several weeks so that her own Ruth might have the undivided attention of the press. However, in the present case Mrs.Gaskell did not appear to be unduly perturbed by the prospect of seeming to run in competition with Dickens, and the inevitable comparisons that would be made between their two novels; she evidently felt (justifiably, as we shall see) that in writing about industrial life in the North she could compete with any writer, not

1. Letters of Charles Dickens, edited by his sister-in-law and his eldest daughter, 1880, I, 301.

excepting Dickens himself. The work that Dickens had in mind was Hard Times, serialized in Household Words between April 1 and August 1854; Mrs. Gaskell's novel North and South followed Dickens's in the same magazine, beginning with the number for September 2 and completed on January 27 the following year.

The piecemeal publication of North and South, unlike that of Cranford, turned out to be a rather unhappy experience for Mrs. Gaskell, and a source of friction between herself and a Dickens anxious to tailor her novel to the particular requirements of his magazine. Mrs. Gaskell found the space of twenty-two numbers allotted to her work too restrictive, the punctuality in submitting copy too demanding, and Dickens's insistence upon curtailment too unreasonable. The division of the novel into weekly parts of the right size proved to be a particular area of conflict between author and editor. Only reluctantly did Dickens accept Mrs. Gaskell's refusal to adopt his divisions or carry out the suggested abridgements, especially in the second and third numbers -- the section of the novel where the conscientious vicar, Mr. Hale, struggles with his religious doubts. Dickens rather unreasonably dubbed this episode as "dangerous and difficult"¹, apparently worried that readers of his magazine would not like to be shown a Church of England clergyman joining the ranks of Dissenters, no matter how non-partisan and tactful Mrs. Gaskell was in her treatment of this, after all, minor episode. That Dickens was a member of the Established Church, and Mrs. Gaskell a Unitarian, might also have influenced Dickens in his demand for the paring down of the potentially controversial section. Incidentally, in the light of the contemporary response to the novel,

1. Letter to Mrs. Gaskell, June 16, 1854; The Letters of Charles Dickens, Dexter, II, 561.

Dicken's misgivings were to prove entirely unjustified.

Dickens's annoyance with Mrs.Gaskell cast a temporary shadow over their up till then happy relationship. The letters he wrote during the serialization of North and South lack the warmth and generous praise he used to bestow upon his "dear Scheherazade"¹. In fact, his editorial clash with Mrs.Gaskell appears sometimes to have seriously prejudiced his opinion of her new work. In a letter to his assistant editor, Wills, he attributed the drop in the sales of his magazine to "the wearisome way" Mrs.Gaskell had divided her novel.² More tellingly, he eulogized a lesser work, Wilkie Collins's Hide and Seek (1854), pronouncing it to be "the cleverest novel I have ever seen written by a new hand. It is much beyond Mrs.Gaskell, and is in some respects masterly".³ However, on the day the last instalment of North and South appeared (27 January 1854), Dickens seemed in a different frame of mind. Brushing aside all hard feeling for Mrs.Gaskell, he wrote a really gracious letter to her; Dickens genuinely liked Mrs.Gaskell, and, in any case, he was not prepared to lose such an important contributor:

Let me congratulate you on the conclusion of your story; not because it is the end of a task to which you had conceived a dislike.. but because it is the vigorous and powerful accomplishment of an anxious labour. It seems to me that you have felt the ground thoroughly firm under your feet, and have strided on with a force and purpose that must now give you pleasure.

You will not, I hope, allow that non-lucid interval of dissatisfaction with yourself (and me?), which beset you for a minute or two once upon a time, linger in the shape of any disagreeable association with Household Words. I shall still look forward to the large sides of

1. Letter to Mrs.Gaskell, Nov. 25, 1851, ibid., 359.

2. Letter dated October 14, 1854, ibid., 597-8.

3. Letter to Georgiana Hogarth, dated July 22, 1854; ibid., 569-70.

paper, and shall soon feel disappointed if they don't begin to reappear. 1

The story of the tussle with Dickens is significant. Mrs. Gaskell, until North and South a somewhat pliable contributor, stood out firmly against Dickens's editorial prerogatives, stipulating, as he complained to Wilkie Collins, "not to have her proofs touched, 'even by Mr. Dickens.'"² Mrs. Gaskell's uncompromising rejection of Dickens's advice testifies to her increasing consciousness of the artist's responsibility for his own work. It also shows that her confidence in her literary powers had substantially increased, now that she had three major and remarkably popular works to her credit. As this chapter will show, Mrs. Gaskell's reputation, especially as a lady novelist, stood very high indeed in the years 1854-1855. If she was a little bit "conceited"³, as Dickens complained, her high opinion of her work was shared by many a contemporary reader.

Despite her successful struggle with Dickens about alterations and chapter divisions, Mrs. Gaskell was only able to extract from him one more issue;⁴ only a relatively short novel would suit the requirements of his magazine. Compressing a novel within a relatively short space was a rather stringent condition for the mid-Victorian novelist; Dickens himself managed to keep Hard Times within reasonable limits only

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1. Letters of Charles Dickens, op.cit., II, 618-19.
 2. Letter to Wilkie Collins, dated March 24, 1855, ibid., 645.
 3. Letter to Wills, May 4, 1854; quoted by A.B. Hopkins in "Dickens and Mrs. Gaskell", Huntington Library Quarterly, IX (1946), 368. This article by Hopkins, later incorporated in her Elizabeth Gaskell, 1952, contains a full account of the problems with serializing North and South.
 4. See Hopkins, ibid., 373.

at the expense of finding "the difficulty of the space CRUSHING".¹

As for Mrs. Gaskell, it was the first time she published a full-length novel as a regular serial. The pressure of time, and especially space, irked her considerably. Although she had written a substantial part of the novel before publication began, completing the work proved painful and difficult: "I've been ... nearly dazed and crazed with this c --, d --", she wrote to Eliza Fox, "be h -- to it, story as can be. I've been sick of writing, and everything connected with literature or improvement of the mind."² In another letter she again complained: "I have not written one line of 'Margaret' [the original title of North and South] for three weeks for headaches and dizziness."³ Indeed, had we not been familiar with Mrs. Gaskell's readiness to develop psychosomatic symptoms under strain -- one recalls, for instance, her sickness after the storm raised by Ruth -- we would say that an additional difficulty was created for her by ordinary physical illness.

Mrs. Gaskell's anxiety became most acute as the story drew to a close. In a letter accompanying the last but two instalments (and addressed most probably to Dickens) she sounded unusually ironical and disillusioned.⁴ Both to meet the requirements of space and to terminate what she came to consider an unpleasant task, she managed to finish the novel in another two instalments. But she was never really satisfied with the resulting work. As she wrote to her friend Anna Jameson: "If the story had been poured just warm out of the mind, it would have taken a much larger mould. It was the cruel necessity of compressing it that

1. Quoted by Angus Easson, ed., North and South, Oxford Univ. Press, 1973, p. X.

2. December 24, 1854, Letters, 222.

3. Ibid., 200.

4. Ibid., 220.

hampered me."¹

Six weeks after the appearance of the last instalment, North and South, slightly augmented, was published in two volumes by Chapman and Hall around the middle of March 1855.² Mrs. Gaskell prefaced the 2-volume novel by a short note in which she justified the additions she had made on the grounds that they were meant to rectify structural defects caused by the piecemeal mode of publication:

On its first appearance in Household Words, this tale was obliged to conform to the conditions imposed by the requirements of a weekly publication, and likewise to confine itself within certain advertised limits, in order that faith might be kept with the public. Although these conditions were made as light as they well could be, the author found it impossible to develop the story in the manner originally intended, and, more especially, was compelled to hurry on events with an improbable rapidity towards the close. In some degree to remedy this obvious defect, various short passages have been inserted, and several new chapters added. With this brief explanation, the tale is commended to the kindness of the reader.³

Feeling dissatisfied and rather guilty about the whole affair, she took off to Paris in order, as she half-seriously put it, to "run away from reviewers."⁴

Over twenty reviews of North and South appeared. Most favourable were those of the Examiner (John Forster?)⁵, the Athenaeum

1. Letter to Anna Jameson, January 30, 1855, Letters, 227.
2. Mrs. Gaskell slightly expanded three chapters (corresponding to 44, 45, 46 in Household Words and (vol.2, chs. 14-15) in the volume form). She also added two completely new chapters (vol.2, chs. 20-21). The new chapters emphasize Margaret's disillusion with the South and allow an interval before the death of her newly-found father, Mr. Bell.
3. North and South, ed. Dorothy Collin, Penguin English Library, 1970, p. 31. All quotations are made from this edition.
4. Letters, 225.
5. (April 21, 1855), pp. 244-45.

(H.F.Chorley),¹ the Observer,² the Manchester Weekly Advertiser,³ the Critic,⁴ the Literary Gazette,⁵ the French Revue des deux mondes (Emile Montegut)⁶ and the American Christian Examiner (A.Woodbury)⁷ and Harper's New Monthly Magazine (G.W.Curtis)⁸. Further favourable, though insubstantial, notices appeared in America in Graham's Magazine⁹ and Godey's Lady's Book.¹⁰ Two articles favourably reviewing Mrs.Gaskell's work up to date, including North and South, appeared in the New Monthly Magazine¹¹ and the Monthly Christian Spectator.¹² The Press¹³ and the Guardian¹⁴ were rather lukewarm in their praise, pronouncing Mrs.Gaskell's new work to be rather inferior to its predecessors. Of a similar opinion was Charlotte Yonge in her comment on North and South in the Monthly Packet.¹⁵ Ambiguous praise came also

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1. No. 1432 (April 7, 1855), p. 403.
 2. (July 22, 1855), p. 5.
 3. (April 14, 1855), p. 6.
 4. XIV (March 1, 1855), 107.
 5. (July 14, 1855) p.441.
 6. XXV (October 1, 1855), 114-146.
 7. "Factory Life - Its Novels and its Facts," LIX (November 1855), 354-79.
 8. X (May 1855), 569.
 9. ns. XLVI (June 1855), 576.
 10. I (May 1855), 469.
 11. "Mrs.Gaskell's Novels", CV (December 1855), 427-33.
 12. "The Author of Mary Barton and Ruth", V (1855), 689-700.
 13. III (April 14, 1855), 358-59.
 14. No. 507 (August 22, 1855), pp. 647-48.
 15. "Hints on Reading", X (November 1855), 398-99.

from another fellow novelist, Mrs. Oliphant, reviewing for Blackwood's Magazine.¹ Critical for various reasons were the reviewers of the Inquirer², the Leader³ and the National Review (Walter Bagehot).⁴ The severest criticism of the novel, and indeed the feeblest, appeared in the Spectator.⁵

Among contemporary readers who commented on North and South was Charlotte Brontë, who wrote to Mrs. Gaskell expressing her delight in her friend's new work.⁶ The Rev. Patrick Brontë also liked the novel, curiously finding a likeness between himself and Mr. Hale, the heroine's father.⁷ The Manchester critic, W.R. Greg, expressed his appreciation;⁸ so did the brilliant Manchester engineer, Sir William Fairbairn.⁹ Appreciative comments came also from Parthenope Nightingale, Florence's eldest sister,¹⁰ and Mrs. Gaskell's literary friend, Mrs. Anna Jameson.¹¹

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1. "Modern Novelists Great and Small", LXXII (May 1855), 559-60.
 2. No. 671 (May 12, 1855), pp. 291-92.
 3. VI (April 14, 1855), 356.
 4. "A Novel or Two," I (October 1855), 349-50.
 5. XXVIII (March 31, 1855), 341-42.
 6. S.H.B., IV, 153-54; see also Mrs. Gaskell's comment on Charlotte Brontë's opinion, Letters, 223.
 7. Letter dated Nov. 3, 1856, in "The Reverend Patrick Brontë and Mrs. Gaskell", Transactions and Other Publications of the Brontë Society, VIII (1936), 99.
 8. Ward's introduction to North and South, Works, IV, 1906, p. XIX.
 9. Ibid., XX.
 10. E. Haldane, Mrs. Gaskell and her Friends, 1930, p. 105.
 11. Ibid., 113.

An American literary friend, the novelist Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe, wrote to Mrs. Gaskell that she and her "twin daughters read 'North and South' with so much enthusiasm". She playfully added that she was rather angry with Mrs. Gaskell because she had made her "cry very unfairly over 'Mary Barton'" when she bought the book to entertain herself on a journey.¹ Another American correspondent was Charles Eliot Norton. He assured Mrs. Gaskell that her works, including the recent North and South, had established her reputation on the other side of the Atlantic, where she now had "a very wide circle of unknown friends."²

Mrs. Gaskell's consciousness of the imperfection of North and South, especially her anticipation of severe criticism on this score, proved justified, though exaggerated. The only two sources to take up the issue at some length were the reviewers of the Inquirer and the National Review. Both critics, however, far from being disarmed by Mrs. Gaskell's apologetic preface and her plea for mercy, seized upon this admission of guilt as a valuable opportunity to air their strongly-held views that piecemeal publication was incompatible with the production of serious fiction.

The newly-launched National Review listed Mrs. Gaskell's novel among the "Recent Works Suitable for Book Societies", observing briefly that "the masterly conception of this tale has suffered much from its periodical form. Yet it is not unworthy of its author".³ A few months later (October 1855), it printed a full review of the novel considerably more critical than the above comment. Walter Bagehot, the anonymous writer of the review, found the plot "sadly disjointed", the

1. Waller, Letters, pp. 164-65.

2. Letter dated June 5, 1855. Letters of Mrs. Gaskell and Charles Eliot Norton, ed. Jane Whitehill, 1932, p.1.

3. I (August 1855), 252.

characters "rather subordinated to the [discussional] 'views'".

Although the novel still possessed "much of the power of its author", Mrs. Gaskell was found to have committed a serious error in agreeing to submit her work to the injurious influence of serial publication:

There is sufficient excuse for [these faults], however, in the periodic form of the tale; but art will not endure piecemeal generation; and the author has this time sacrificed art in the interest of popular amusement. 1

Proceeding from the same conviction, the Inquirer published one of the most formidable attacks on the wide mid-Victorian practice of publishing novels piecemeal. The reviewer, starting with a sizeable quotation from Mrs. Gaskell's preface, observes magnanimously: "After so frank an avowal and explanation of the defects of the work, criticism is to a large extent disarmed".² We do not doubt "the capability of the author"; had Mrs. Gaskell been free of "the shackles of periodical publication" she could "have given us something much more complete and satisfactory". Yet this is an occasion, he continues, to express our serious concern about "a very common mistake on the part of some of our popular writers". Many of them voluntarily lend "the lustre of their names" to this or that periodical, forgetting that by doing so they might be "permanently injuring their lasting reputation". If we appear to be "unduly exacting", it is because "we cannot help thinking that the public has quite as much claim upon writers of recognized reputation that they should not trifle it away by injudicious and unsuitable form of publication, as that they should bestow upon their work an average amount of care and thoughtfulness". Justifying his strictures, the Inquirer critic draws an interesting comparison between

1. Ibid., 350.

2. (May 12, 1855) p. 291.

the novelist and the public man; our criticism, he observes, should not be seen as an unwarranted interference with the freedom of the author because:

established writers, like public men, by their position forfeit a large part of their licence to do injury to themselves. The public has a right to be jealous for their reputation, though they themselves may be negligent of it. 1

Serialization, the Inquirer concedes, has its advantages, ease and absence of risk in publication. It might, moreover, be considered a minor evil if it had been limited to works of an ephemeral and episodic nature. The evil of serialization becomes most serious when it is regarded by the novelist merely as a first step leading to the publication of the work in book form, regardless of whether or not the work deserves to be so republished and placed "among the works by which his genius is to be estimated." Hence "we cannot but feel some irritation", continues the Inquirer referring to Mrs.Gaskell, when such a writer deprecates criticism of his work by "an avowal which is the most complete refutation of the claim thus put forward". i.e. if Mrs.Gaskell really believed her work to be imperfect (as her preface mentions) she should not have published the novel in book form in the first place.

The impatience of the Inquirer reviewer with Mrs.Gaskell emanates from his jealousy for her reputation and art; she should never associate herself, he exhorts her, with those "whose writings essentially belong to Magazine literature, whose events naturally fall into shillingworths, and can be neatly added up in two or three independent volumes, at any particular shillingworth" - an

1. Ibid.

uncomplimentary reference most probably to Dickens. Mrs.Gaskell's art does not lend itself to serialization:

Characters, such as those delineated by her, whose portraiture is so dependent on the development of the plot of the story, are irretrievably injured by its curtailment. No isolated chapter [later inserted] can supply by any but doubtful and imperfect suggestions the defective portion. 1

We may note that, like Bagehot, the Inquirer reviewer makes a distinction between high art and art produced for "popular amusement"² or "Magazine literature"³, as he calls it. To place the novel generally, and Mrs.Gaskell's work in particular, so vehemently in the former category is an example of the increased respectability of the novel.

This changed attitude towards the novel was, in fact, behind the widespread suspicion of serial publication, first used by Dickens and later adopted by many novelists like Thackeray, Charles Kingsley and Wilkie Collins. Indeed the tremendous popularity of serialization in the fifties engendered the fear of its becoming exclusively "the favourite mode of publication with writers of fiction."⁴ Bagehot and the Inquirer reviewer were not alone in believing that piecemeal publication implied and encouraged a frivolous attitude to the novel, and that the pressures of time and space and the distracting business of winning popular favour (as gauged in an increase or drop in the sales of each magazine number or part) could only adversely affect the quality

1. Ibid.

2. National Review, I (October 1855), 350.

3. Inquirer, (May 12, 1855), p. 291.

4. Ibid.

of the serialized work.

These fears were exaggerated. Writing for serial publication neither suited all talents nor did it by itself encourage slipshod productions. Moreover, some of the contemporary writers were no less prejudiced against it than some of the critics. Charlotte Brontë, for instance, wrote once to her publisher, Mr. Smith: "I will publish no serial of which the last number is not written before the first comes out."¹ Another writer not to favour serialization was Anna Jameson, who in response to Mrs. Gaskell's request for a frank opinion of the serialized North and South,² had this to say:

...since you ask my opinion so distinctly you shall have it. I do think the conclusion hurried -- and what you call huddled up; there should be more gradation in effect, and the rapidity of the incidents at the close destroys the proportion of your story as a work of art...This is a fault of construction -- but what is done is so beautiful and complete that it is only in considering the work as a whole that we feel too great compression. We want to know something more about the other characters. I do not know whether to advise you to alter it -- what has been once thrown warm off the mind and has run into the mould seldom bears alteration -- but do not with your powers, engage to write periodically; it has had a mischievous effect, I think, on Dickens and Thackeray... 3

Mrs. Jameson's words were so effective that as soon as Mrs. Gaskell

1. Quoted in The Life of Charlotte Brontë, ed., C.K. Shorter, 1924, p. 542, n.1. In a letter dated September 24, 1854, Charlotte Brontë had to temper her dislike of serialization when she wrote to allay Mrs. Gaskell's anxiety over the publication of North and South in Household Words: "Do not suffer yourself to be either vexed or in low spirits about what you have 'gone and done'. We all know that it is not precisely advantageous to a really good book to be published piecemeal in a periodical - but still - such a plan has its good side. 'North and South' will thus be seen by many into whose hands it would not otherwise fall." (S.H.B., IV, 153).

2. Letters, 225.

3. Quoted in Haldane, op. cit., p.113.

received the letter she "sent ... to stop the press"¹ in order to perform a minor surgical operation on the ending. While heeding Mrs. Jameson's suggestion not to make extensive alterations, Mrs. Gaskell ignored her advice, and that of Bagehot and the Inquirer reviewer, that she should never serialize her future work. Among her important work after North and South, only Sylvia's Lovers was to be published directly in volume form. Her last and best work Wives and Daughters appeared in the monthly Cornhill Magazine, and was left unfinished at her sudden death in 1865 - a fate suffered by Thackeray's Denis Duval two years before, and for which Dickens's Edwin Drood was destined five years later. No matter what critics thought, the novelists knew that serious art was not incompatible with serialization. Novels serialized in periodicals were a financially tempting undertaking; they secured double pay for the writer, first from the magazine and later from the volume publisher. Equally tempting, perhaps, was the excitement of taking the risk of addressing the public with an unfinished work, and then having to meet the weekly or, more commonly, monthly challenge of having to write another part or instalment.

Besides the reviewers of the Inquirer and the National Review and, to some extent, Mrs. Jameson, the Leader reviewer was another source of serious criticism of North and South, though his criticism was of an entirely different nature. Indeed, the Leader critic was so absorbed in his main thesis, that a true social-industrial novel was a contradiction in terms, that he had little time to discuss anything else. His review shows thus an affinity with that of the Inquirer critic.

1. Letter to Anna Jameson, January 30, 1855; Letters, 227.

Although their aims and interests were widely apart, the two reviewers had this in common: they both set out presumably to review a particular novel, namely North and South, but it soon turns out that their real interest is in something far larger and wider, serial publication or the nature of the novel, respectively. Meanwhile, Mrs. Gaskell's novel, the supposed purpose of their reviews, only receives relatively cursory attention beyond its exemplary role as an illustration and proof of the validity of their theories.

The Leader reviewer (whose style resembles that of G.H.Lewes) observes that a novel legitimately heightens what it portrays. Personal and romantic themes, the normal material of fiction, are thus intensified. This is the way in which a novel works, and this is why to present a true account of such a large issue as the Cotton Trade in narrative form can only result in failure. As the "gross, dauby libel" of Mrs. Trollope Michael Armstrong (1839-41) and Disraeli's Sybil (1845) have already shown, this theme has been the stumbling-block of novelists. North and South is no exception. Although it is good and interesting as a novel, it fails as a social novel:

North and South is an exceedingly good novel of life in the Midland Counties. By this paradox we mean to say the book under notice is a good novel in all the generalities that make a novel good, wherever the scene may be laid; but, as relates to anything special to either the North or the South, or to those two Districts in contrast, it is not so successful; is, not to mince matters, a failure.

... Mrs. Gaskell [fails] distinctly, not in the tale, for North and South is a successful and a good novel, but in an attempt to dramatise spinning and weaving, and throw a light on the vexed questions of corn and cotton, of masters and men. Such failures we hold to be inevitable. A novel must have the same essential dramatic characteristics, the same principles of incident lay the scene where you will; if you lay the scene in Lancashire, and are true to its men and present arrangements, you cannot have those essential requirements...

We therefore are of opinion on general grounds, deduced by abstract reasoning, that the Cotton Trade

presents ample field for the philanthropist, the practical reformer, the political economist, and the general writer, that it affords no proper material for the veracious delineator of human life in a harmonious, interesting whole; in a word, for the writer of fiction. 1

One point of failure in Mrs.Gaskell's novel, according to the Leader reviewer, is the idealization of Thornton; such an all-powerful, exceptionally acute character, he protests, is not a typical manufacturer, but rather a figment of Mrs.Gaskell's imagination:

Your grand ideal manufacturer, with we know not how much sunk in business, who keeps an acute eye on all the markets of the world, ready to change his productions to meet any demand, who makes some awful venture to a distant port, and waits returns with furrowing brow and grizzling hair, till, adverse winds keeping argosies out of port, half a day stands between him and ruin, when suddenly the gale shifts, and blows in a colossal fortune and general denouement of prosperity, is as utterly false as it would be to describe such a man selling yarn on the Manchester Exchange in doublet and trunk-hose. 2

In order to give edge to his argument that the manufacturers and operatives are far more commonplace than Mrs.Gaskell, by virtue of being a novelist, is tempted to present them, the Leader critic runs to the other extreme of gross simplification of the whole industrial situation. It is to be noted, however, that his objections to North and

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1. The Leader, VI (April 14, 1855), 356.
 2. (April 14, 1855), 356. The reviewer is here emphasising his point that North and South, as a novel, presents life in a more dramatic and glaring light than life actually is. Hence his description of the thrilling venture of "the manufacturer". Mr.Thornton in North and South, however, is never shown in such a situation; his reinstatement as a wealthy manufacturer would hopefully take place after Margaret's last-page acceptance of his hand. The reviewer, then, can only be referring to a minor episode in the novel, the speculative venture that the honest Mr.Thornton refuses to take on the grounds that it would endanger his creditors' money. The risk is taken, however, by the unscrupulous Mr.Watson, who against all odds, is spectacularly successful. (ch. 50).

South are not apparently motivated by doctrinal differences with its author. He, too, though not so consistently, holds in true Carlylean fashion that the first step towards a social solution consists in basing the relationship between man and man upon a higher bond than that of the cash nexus:

Six months' study will teach you spinning, six days, manufacturing... Men who can neither read nor write, and with capacities little removed above that of the swine, make fortunes in the trade... For one-and-twenty years the history of the Cotton Trade has been one of septennial crises. A demand arises, a crisis being past, and for three years or more, anybody who can manage to spin or weave has only to spin or weave and sell the product at the market price, settled by competition to a fraction... While as regards the question of masters and men and strikes, the masters, making of money being their highest ideal, always endeavour to make as much as they can by keeping the operatives wages as low as they can; while the operative, spending [thoughtlessly "at wakes, fairs, and dog-fights"] as he gets, is always ready to use his real or fancied power to get more without any reference as to whether the Masters can afford more at the time in question ... There can be no solution of this question till both master and man have learned that neither money, nor things purchasable by money, are the highest ends of man's being here. 1

Mrs.Gaskell's social teaching in North and South was considered "vague" by a few contemporaries,² ^{is} and described as inconsistent and lacking in complexity by some modern critics. But how subtler and infinitely more balanced Mrs.Gaskell's approach appears in comparison with that of the Leader critic! Apart from his simplistic, unsympathetic and rather contemptuous attitude to both masters and men, he seems to accept without question all the political economists' arguments about the incorrigibility and improvidence of the operatives, the inevitability of periodic crises and the power of the market to

1. (April 14, 1855), 356.

2. See p.184 below.

settle "to a fraction" matters of wages and prices. But later he swallows all these hard political-economy facts to hope that money -- according to his own analysis the raison d'être of the industrial activity -- should cease to be the prime aim of both masters and men. There are other flaws in his argument, for instance, his putting manufacturers and operatives on an equal footing in respect of the objectionable greed for money. Yet we should not assume an air of superiority (as some modern Gaskell critics rather too readily do¹) when, more than a century later, we see limitations and inconsistencies in the argument of a mid-Victorian trying to come to grips with the relatively new and developing problems of industrialization. It is also to be noted that the Leader reviewer is not a common London critic, with only a hazy and superficial notion of what is going on to the north of the Metropolis. He has long taken, he tells us, a deep "interest in the questions that agitate Lancashire and its trade arrangements". Then, as if to prove that his enduring interest in the industrial North has been time well spent, he produces a long and a really impressive list of "technical" errors he has found out in Mrs. Gaskell's industrial novel:

...in North and South, we have an instance of the truth of our theory. The book is interesting, but how? By Thornton being made an untrue picture of a Lancashire millowner, by Higgins and the hands being made embodiments of Mrs. Gaskell's ideas of the workpeople's feelings, but not of their feelings. Independent of this, so much of the book as relates to Lancashire is full of errors which it is inconceivable for a resident in Manchester to have made,

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1. Cf., for instance, these comments by Professor M. Allott, a competent and otherwise sympathetic critic of Mrs. Gaskell: "Mrs. Gaskell in her social novels voices the good intentions and modest insight of the 'aroused' decent citizen". Mrs. Gaskell "fails in turning her social novels into successful works of art... because she does not see far enough into the industrial life which she is struggling to present". Elizabeth Gaskell, 1960, pp. 5, 11.

and which none but a lady could have so made. Thornton is described as a very extensive spinner and manufacturer -- trading to all parts of the globe, and known all over the kingdom, and he rents his mill on a lease. We will engage to say there are not two large concerns in Lancashire that rent their mills; except in small concerns, to own them being the invariable rule. Error number one. Thornton, again, is a merchant shipping to all quarters of the globe: this again is extremely exceptional. There are not ten concerns that so ship as a rule, and these ten are owned by millionaires who deal in all manner of produce in the countries to which they ship. Only in times of great depression do manufacturers export on their own account, and this is the time when Thornton ceases shipping. Error number two. Again, Thornton has bills drawn on him for his cotton -- cash payments in ten days being the immutable and never invaded rule of Liverpool; a fact that needy men wishing to spin know to their cost. Error number three. Again, accounting for the necessity to keep wages lower, Thornton says, "The Americans are getting their yarn so into the general market, that our only chance is to beat them by producing at a lower rate." We have heard all manner of reasons assigned for bad trade, but this is the first time any man, woman or child found this out. American competition is altogether a bagatelle, and in yarn it is less than nothing. They cannot even supply themselves, with high protective duties. Error number four. Again, Thornton stocks heavily, and that after the strike. To stock at all is so much at variance with the custom of Lancashire manufacturers, as coupled with the fact of that stocking following on the strike, to make this Error number five. Again, when Thornton is in difficulties, Higgins stops to work after the mill has closed. To do this the engines must have run for the generous Higgins's two looms, in which case, for every twopence his generosity gave Thornton, that gentleman would lose five pounds. Error number six. Again, Thornton gets into difficulties partly by his stocks falling one-half. From October, 1853, to December, 1854, occurred the greatest fall on record in the history of the cotton trade, and yet stocks never fell one-half, nor one-quarter. Error number seven. Lastly, to crown all, comes the closing absurdity in two senses, in a trade sense and a literary sense. This great millowner, this extensive merchant, this man rich enough to stock heavily, when he has made a severe loss and his stocks have fallen one-half, can be set on his legs by what? -- by £1875! Why, as many thousands would hardly have done it. This is the trade absurdity. But this Thornton who is in desperate love with Margaret Hale, and is firmly convinced that she dislikes him, when she in his difficulties -- he in hers having been a sound friend -- offers, out of her forty thousand pounds, to lend him this £1875, is so staggered with the munificence, that he construes it at

once into a declaration of her love for him. This is the other absurdity. 1

The Leader's extensive inventory of errors is a useful reminder that writing such a novel as North and South was not a light undertaking for Mrs.Gaskell, if only because it entailed a mastery of the intricacies of business matters -- something that was, as the Leader rather too victoriously asserted, outside the normal range of a mid-Victorian lady. Mrs.Gaskell, herself, was, of course, keenly aware of her deficiency in this respect, and had put this forward in an early letter to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth as one reason why she would not attempt a novel written from a master's point of view. Such a work, she had said, needed a "man's correct knowledge"² of trade and industrial concerns.

Yet we need not give too much importance, as the Leader emphatically does, to what technical faults Mrs.Gaskell may have committed. Such errors are to be found in almost all novels treating specialized subjects. Also, they are not unlike those errors in costume, speech or social procedure that often creep into a historical novel. But no one would be seriously worried about them. One is apt to be more concerned about serious flaws in such questions as an artist's total vision, the way he shapes and explores what material he chooses to use, his insight into the moral, emotional and social life of his characters. The Leader critic scarcely tackles issues of this magnitude. True, he begins his enumeration of the technical faults by repeating his claim that Thornton and Higgins are not representative figures, but rather Mrs.Gaskell's own ideas of a

1. (April 14, 1855), p. 356.

2. July 16 [?1850], Letters, 72a.

master and an industrial worker. This is an unusual opinion that runs counter to contemporary judgement on this aspect of the novel¹, and receives support primarily from his untenable theory that North and South, because it is a novel, is bound to distort the industrial situation that it attempts to portray. Yet the shaping and intensifying of material is a legitimate way in which all novels, by his own admission, "work upon" the reader. Moreover, it seems that North and South was able, despite - or rather because of - its selection and heightening of the industrial realities of the time to touch even this critic by its influence; he endorsed, as we have seen, Mrs.Gaskell's basic plea in the novel, namely, that the relation between master and man should transcend their respective economic or money-making roles.² He also concluded his review by a hearty recommendation of Mrs.Gaskell's excellently written work:

Apart from these things, we can heartily praise North and South. The tale is deeply interesting. And it has all that purity of style and true appreciation of character and skill in its delineation for which Mrs.Gaskell has hardly a rival among our lady novelists. 3

The objections of the Leader reviewer to North and South as an industrial novel are essentially literary and of a general nature: can a novelist deal with a social problem without falsifying and

1. See p. 206 below.

2. It is to be noted, however, that, apart from his uncomplimentary opinion of the masters, this is his only departure from the standard convictions of the Utilitarian economists of the time. Notice also his deprecation of feeling and exultation of reason: "nothing but sound, strong, masculine, practical insight can aid their solution [i.e. of industrial problems] ... sentimental yearnings and feverish idealizations only complicate matters." (Ibid.)

3. Ibid.

misrepresenting that problem? This is remarkable because most contemporary objections to such a novel as North and South were based upon explicit doctrinal grounds, or upon specific "errors" in the representation of this or that character or situation; the right of the novelist to deal with social problems was usually conceded, provided he was truthful and fair in his treatment of what social questions he was interested in. Arguments, similar to those of the Leader reviewer, were not, however, unknown; though they approached the question from a somewhat different route. A decade before North and South appeared, Thackeray, reviewing St. Patrick's Eve by Lever, grumbled:

You cannot have a question fairly debated in this way. You cannot allow an author to invent incidents, motives, and characters, in order that he may attack them subsequently. 1

Thackeray's argument that a novelist cannot prove anything in fiction was to be taken up by other critics, especially against novels having a too obvious design upon the reader. Kingsley's Alton Locke, for instance, was almost unanimously considered unsuccessful artistically because of its polemical nature, and also because Kingsley was seen to be using the novel merely as a vehicle to justify, prove and publicise his social thinking.² Greg, for example, attacked Alton Locke in 1851 for these reasons,³ but never raised similar objections against another novel with a purpose, Mrs. Gaskell's Mary Barton, when he reviewed it at length in 1849. Indeed, notwithstanding his many factual and ideological

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1. Contributions to the Morning Chronicle, ed. G.N. Ray, Urbana, 1955, p. 71.
 2. Cf. "It is a remarkable maxim, that instances never prove principles; and no fictitious congeries of dramatic incidents can be accepted in proof of any general theory affecting legislation, society or morals". (Fraser's Magazine, Review of Alton Locke, XLIII (November 1850), 576).
 3. "Polemics, whether religious, political or metaphysical, lie wholly beyond its [i.e. fiction's] province." (Review of Alton Locke, Edinburgh Review, XCIII (January 1851), 30-31).

criticisms of Mary Barton, he firmly believed that it was a very successful novel. Greg's high opinion of Mary Barton seems, moreover, to have increased with time.¹ Thus in 1852 he approvingly remarked that Mrs. Gaskell's novel and Dickens's Oliver Twist were fully at one with the spirit of the age:

The tales of rough passion or of tender sentiment which charmed the readers of Richardson and Fielding find few admirers now;... a new class of novels, of which "Oliver Twist" and "Mary Barton" are the type, harmonize more closely with the taste and temper of the times. 2

Another objection to the social-problem novel was that its topical interest was of necessity transient and soon outdated. This type of novel, some argued, was thus doomed to imminent oblivion, except in exceptional cases when a work survived its topical interest thanks to the novelist's superior artistry, and in spite of his or her original topical intention. This was an opinion that Fitzjames Stephen voiced in 1855. Interestingly, he cited Mary Barton as an example of the surviving type of the social novel:

It is curious to observe how the artistic bias of the writer's mind gets the better of her theories. Mary Barton remains an excellent novel after its utter uselessness, politically speaking, is fully recognized. That poor people out of work in Manchester were very discontented and very miserable, and that being so, they behaved much as the authoress of Mary Barton describes their behaviour, will continue to be a fact worth representing, however notorious it may always have been, long after everybody has recognized the truth, that the fact has little or nothing to do with either the cause or the remedy of their wretchedness. 3

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1. In 1855 he considered Mary Barton a "thorough work of genius". See p. 177 below.
 2. Westminster Review, n.s.I, (January 1852), 64.
 3. "The Relation of Novels to Life", Cambridge Essays, (1855), 185.

It is not without significance that we do not find in the contemporary comments on North and South, apart from the special arguments of the Leader, many of the complaints usually made against other didactic novels. Topical and with a purpose as North and South was, it was happily received as such virtually by all; some, indeed, like Mrs.Oliphant in Blackwood's, were rather disappointed that Mrs.Gaskell did not pursue the social theme in a fuller way. "We have little time", wrote Mrs.Oliphant, "to think of Higgins and his trade-union." It is to "Mr.Thornton's fierce and rugged course of true love" that the author is "most anxious to direct our attention."¹

One reason for the generally good reception of North and South as a novel with a purpose (something which applies equally well to Mary Barton) was the feeling that Mrs.Gaskell was too good an artist to use the novel purely as a means of advocating social reform. Equally important for many critics was the fact that the social theories that informed North and South were basically uncontroversial. Unlike the polemical or political framework of, say, Disraeli's Sybil or Kingsley's Alton Locke, Mrs.Gaskell's message was essentially a simple, though powerful, plea for greater understanding and closer human contact between rich and poor, and especially the duty of the manufacturers to exercise Christian compassion in their dealings with their workpeople. Yet another important reason in favour of North and South was the more or less unanimous recognition that Mrs.Gaskell was the novelist of industrial life par excellence - superior in artistic ability to her predecessors, Mrs. Tonna, Mrs.Trollope and Disraeli, excelling them all, too, in truth and authenticity, not excepting in this respect the author of Hard

1. LXXVII, 556.

Times himself.¹ This last consideration was especially important, as the theoretical objections against a novel were often raised when a critic felt that the didactic novelist was writing outside the range of his knowledge, meddling with things he did not understand. The Leader reviewer, with his list of technical errors to prove that a true social novel was not possible, is a case in point. It is well to remember, however, that this was the only source to raise such an objection against Mrs. Gaskell's new work.

With Mary Barton's merits becoming even more apparent with time,² and with the new North and South, again asserting Mrs. Gaskell's unique knowledge of life in the industrial capital of the North, Mrs. Gaskell's novels began to be referred to almost as if they were official documents. The early advice of Mary Barton's reviewer in the Prospective of 1849 that Mrs. Gaskell's authentic novel should be closely studied by the social researcher began to be taken in earnest after the publication of North and South. We find an example of this in the Edinburgh of January 1856, in an article not related to literature or novels at all. The reviewer of Lectures to Ladies on

1. Dickens's Hard Times hardly impressed the contemporary reviewers for its authenticity or its social criticism. See Mrs. Oliphant's criticism (Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, LXXVII (April 1855), 451-66), the Westminster Review, n.s. VI (October 1854), 604-8; also the Rambler's merciless attack: "On the whole, the story is stale, flat, and unprofitable; a mere dull melodrama, in which character is caricature, sentiment tinsel, and moral (if any) unsound. It is a thousand pities that Mr. Dickens does not confine himself to amusing his readers, instead of wandering out of his path in trying to instruct them" n.s. II (October 1854), 362). Hard Times was compared unfavourably with North and South by a number of reviewers, including those of the Critic (March 1, 1855), p. 107) and the Manchester Weekly Advertiser (April 14, 1855) p. 6).
2. See Greg's and Stephen's remarks, p. 170 above, see also p. 177 below.

Practical Subjects stressed the need for extreme tact on the part of the lady district visitor in her social work among the poor. Such a lady, he says, may also occasionally venture into a new ground, tackling the delicate task of mediating between the poor operatives and their masters -- an idea suggested to the reviewer, he gratefully admits, by Mrs.Gaskell's recent novel:

Once in a while a visitor may mediate between the master and the man. So the circle widens and spreads, and who can tell the misery which that one kind woman's call may have averted? And here it is impossible not to allude to a work most fruitful in suggestion on this subject. We mean that part of Mrs.Gaskell's novel 'North and South', which portrays the gradually acquired ascendancy of Margaret over the radical and infidel weaver, Nicholas Higgins. The more nearly it is examined, the more genuine and free from blemish does this picture appear. Humility and deep sympathy on one side, meet in time with the due abatement of pride on the other: the whole coming quite within the range of ordinary probabilities. 1

Another interesting example of this life-to-novel reference occurs in another article that appeared in the same month in Blackwood's Magazine. The writer, discussing the recent Lancashire strikes, quotes Dickens's Hard Times to illustrate his argument that trade-union men can exercise tremendous pressure upon a worker to make him join the union (a reference to Stephen Blackpool's tragic difficulties with the union in Dickens's novel). Feeling that Dickens is not a good enough authority on the subject, the writer turns to North and South, written by one, he asserts, whose knowledge of Lancashire is without parallel:

Mr.Dickens, in his Hard Times, has given a thrilling description of the persecution to which a poor operative

1. CIII (January 1856), 151.

was subjected because he would not comply with the arbitrary mandates of the union; but his testimony may be suspected of exaggeration. Let us turn to Mrs. Gaskell, then, whose knowledge of Lancashire life is superior to that of any modern fictionist, and who, in her North and South, has drawn to the life the situation of a man [Boucher] who works in a factory, and dares to think differently from those around him... 1

Recognition of Mrs. Gaskell's knowledge and ability to portray the industrial North was widespread. Charlotte Brontë, a Northerner herself, and one who tried her hand at depicting situations of industrial conflict in Shirley (1849), wrote to Mrs. Gaskell: "It seems to me you understand well the Genius of the North. Where the Southern Lady and the Northern Mechanic are brought into contrast and contact, I think Nature is well respected."²

A Manchester man, the eminent engineer Sir William Fairbairn, bore testimony, too, to the representative truth of the working-man, Nicholas Higgins:

Poor old Higgins [he wrote to Mrs. Gaskell], with his weak consumptive daughter, is a true picture of a Manchester man. There are many like him in this town, and a better sample of independent industry you could not have hit upon. Higgins is an excellent representative of a Lancashire operative -- strictly independent -- and is one of the best characters in the piece. 3

Mrs. Oliphant in Blackwood, while wishing that North and South and Dickens's Hard Times had given more attention to the contemporary problems of industrial life, recognized Mrs. Gaskell's ability in the portrayal of the poor operatives as a matter of course:

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1. LXXIX (January 1856), 55.
 2. S.H.B., VI, 153-4.
 3. Ward, Works, 1906, VI, p. XX.

There is one feature of resemblance between Mrs.Gaskell's last work and Mr.Dickens's Hard Times. We are prepared in both for the discussion of an important social question; and in both, the story gradually slides off the public topic to pursue a course of its own. North and South has of necessity, some good sketches of the "hands" and their homes... 1

Chorley in the Athenaeum, in a note reminiscent of his praise of Mary Barton seven years before, again praised Mrs.Gaskell's pioneering effort in the depiction of the industrial North, and especially her use of dialect, which he found comparable only to that of Scott and Edgeworth:

The author of 'Mary Barton' seems bent on doing for Lancashire and the Lancashire dialect what Miss Edgeworth did for Ireland and Scott for the land across the border. There has been no use of English patois in English fiction comparable to hers. 2

The Observer, after a critical summary of the plot, began its comment by saying that North and South "was a novel written with great power and profound knowledge of some of the phases of factory life in this country."³ The Spectator reviewer, less enthusiastic for Mrs.Gaskell's novel than the Observer, had reservations about the suitability of the Hales as representatives of the South. Still, he admitted rather grudgingly that "the North at least is strongly represented [by Higgins and Thornton]" and that in the novel generally Mrs.Gaskell was "for the most part on her strong ground."⁴ The Guardian thought North and South less successful than Mary Barton, but fully

1. LXXVII, 560.

2. (April 7, 1855), p. 403.

3. (July 22, 1855), p. 5.

4. (March 31, 1855), p. 342.

acknowledged Mrs.Gaskell's mastery of the industrial-situation part of the former work, which has "the same knowledge of manufacturing towns and of the character of workmen"¹ exhibited in Mrs.Gaskell's earlier novel of industrial life.

Mary Barton, with John Barton, Job Legh, the Wilsons, and old Alice dominating the stage, was a novel that Mrs.Gaskell intentionally wrote to reflect the operatives' point of view. As a consequence, a number of critics and friends accused her of class bias in favour of the workers. In her second industrial novel, Mrs.Gaskell tried to correct the balance by leaning on the other side, choosing an energetic manufacturer as hero and giving him every opportunity to expound the views and achievements of the employers: their harnessing inanimate material for the welfare of society and the great risks they boldly and imaginatively take in pursuit of their ideals and objectives. The working-class are not left out of the picture. However, their main representative, Higgins, though drawn very sympathetically, is certainly given a secondary place.

How much Mrs.Gaskell was influenced in the new direction of North and South by the reception of the first novel is a matter of speculation. It is certain, however, that she highly respected some of the critics, notably, Samuel and William Greg, members of one of the most enlightened industrialist families in Manchester.²

Bearing the new class orientation of North and South in mind, we will not find it difficult to predict that Mrs.Gaskell's new work met with the approval of the same critics who had previously attacked

1. (August 22, 1855), p. 647.

2. See Mrs.Gaskell letter to Mrs.Samuel Greg, written probably early 1849, Letters, 42.

Mary Barton as a one-sided novel. First among those comes William Greg, fully blessing and approving the right tone of the novel. It is to be noted, however, that Greg frankly says that North and South, beautiful though it is, is not so good as Mary Barton. We may disagree with him. But it is certainly to the credit of this honest critic that he did not let doctrinal considerations determine his taste in matters artistic. His honesty, however, did not stretch so far as to make him complain about the different sort of "one-sidedness" in North and South:

... I find no fault in [North and South], which is a great deal for a critic to say, seeing that one inevitably gets the habit of reading in a somewhat critical spirit. I do not think it as thorough a work of genius as 'Mary Barton' -- nor the subject as interesting as 'Ruth' -- but I like it better than either; and you know how, in spite of my indignation, I admired the first. I think you have quite taken the right tone, and the spirit and execution of the whole is excellent. The characters are all distinct, and kept distinct to the last, and the delineation is most delicate and just. Now you are, I know, so used to full and unmodified eulogy that I daresay my appreciation will appear faint, scanty, and grudging. Indeed it is not so; if you knew how painfully scrupulous I am (not as a matter of conscience, but of insuperable instinct) in matters of praise to keep within the truth -- you would read more real admiration in my cold sentences than in the golden opinions of more demonstrative ones. 1

Another friend of Mrs. Gaskell's to praise the "impartiality" of the novel was Parthenope Nightingale: "A deal of wisdom there seems to me in 'N & S'", she said. "It has instructed me exceedingly, you hold the balance very evenly and it must be a hard task."²

In 1849 Greg (and other like-minded critics) feared that "the effect of [Mary Barton] if taken without some corrective [e.g. his own 34-page review of the novel] might, in these quarters [that is, among

1. Ward, Works, IV, p.XIX.

2. Letter to Mrs. Gaskell, Haldane, op.cit., p. 105.

working-class readers], be mischievous in the extreme."¹ No such fears were expressed towards North and South. Indeed, we have an instance of the opposite; an enthusiastic London critic explicitly hoped that Mrs. Gaskell's new work, not yet published in volume form, would soon be reprinted in a cheap edition for the benefit of the misguided among the Lancashire operatives:

It is hoped that this excellent exposition [North and South] of the state of feeling between the employers and the operatives of Lancashire will be again reprinted in a cheaper form, if only to show the latter that there are some who, while they perfectly understand and sympathise with their feelings, do not agree with the policy, or rather impolicy, of internecine tactics which they are too often persuaded to adopt. 2

The reviewer concludes his comment by putting North and South high above Hard Times -- hardly a surprising preference. Dickens, for one thing, depicts his Bounderby as a hypocritical, contemptible sort of manufacturer in contrast to the honest and admirable Thornton of Mrs. Gaskell:

Mrs. Gaskell's work, for truthfulness and comprehension of the subject, offers a marked contrast to Mr. Dickens's more pretentious work, "Hard Times", certainly one of the most aimless and injudicious books ever published. 3

Another critic to show similar preference to North and South on exactly the same grounds was the reviewer of the Manchester Weekly Advertiser. Unlike Greg, however, this critic thought Mrs. Gaskell's latest novel showed greater artistic control and maturity in comparison with Mrs. Gaskell's earlier work, especially Mary Barton. This is an

1. Edinburgh Review, LXXXIX, (April 1849), 404.

2. Critic (March 1, 1855), 107.

3. Ibid.

opinion, incidentally, that many modern readers would accept:

Mrs.Gaskell's style...has attained its maturity in "North and South," and it is wonderful by what quiet touches, she produces the most pathetic effects. The interest of the story, admirably sustained without any introduction of melodramatic incidents, will keep the mere novel reader on the alert until the volumes are closed. Its masterly exhibition of character, in combination and in contrast; its sharp glances into the working of our social system, especially in the manufacturing districts; the spirit of hopefulness, cheerfulness, and self-reliance which is breathed from out its deepest sadness, give it claims, moreover, to the admiration of much more fastidious critics than the mere novel-reader. It is a very decided advance upon "Mary Barton;" it is a higher, wider, and clearer book than that celebrated performance, although, very possibly, in the present condition of the public mind, it may not attain the same popularity. In our district, where the scene is chiefly laid, it has a special title to be widely read, and the publication of "North and South" in Household Words (from which it is now collected), may retrieve for the latter some of the popularity which it lost, by being made the vehicle of that unjust and untrue caricature of manufacturing life and character, Mr.Dickens's "Hard Times." 1

It is not to be supposed, however, that Mrs.Gaskell's movement to a predominantly middle-class point of view in North and South was obvious to all contemporary readers of the novel. Higgins, his consumptive daughter, Boucher, all manage to display Mrs.Gaskell's immense, though now controlled, sympathy and insight into the lives of the poor. The spirit of Mary Barton still appears in North and South, though somewhat subdued, and without the passion that went into the making of the earlier novel. This spirit was, however, strong enough for Chorley, a highly sympathetic critic, to equate North and South with Mrs.Gaskell's first work. Hence his plea that one should tolerate Mrs.Gaskell's rather excessive sympathy for the operatives in view of her good intentions and realistic method of depicting the poor:

1. (April 14, 1855), p.6.

[Mrs.Gaskell] has strong Lancashire sympathies, too;-if they be class-sympathies such as propel her to a somewhat disproportionate exposure of the trials and suffering of the poor, her excess is a generous one. 1

Two more critics approached the question of the point of view in North and South in a still different way. The New Monthly Magazine and the Examiner believed that both Mrs.Gaskell's industrial novels were free from class bias, being "living and speaking portraits" of the novelist's deep sympathy with the careworn men [of Manchester]". It is likely, said the Examiner, that North and South

will be thought to deal more fairly than Mary Barton did with the question of employer and employed, and the masters will have certainly no right to object to such a representative as Mr.Thornton. But it is only a shallow criticism of either tale that would attribute to it the grave design of favouring or depreciating, or even of literally depicting either class. In reality not more quarter was given to the faults of the poor than to the thoughtlessness of the rich in Mary Barton, and as the aim of that very striking book was not to widen but to lessen the interval that separates them, and to show with what advantage to both each might know more of the other, so it is exactly the same purpose, in a more catholic sense, which we may discover in [North and South]. 2

The Examiner is, of course, right in saying that both Mary Barton and North and South were written for the purpose of class reconciliation. Yet, although the intention was the same, the resulting work was not. Those who were worried that Mary Barton might prove a destructive tool, should it fall in the hands of working-class readers (as if many such readers had much time to read) were not afflicted with paranoiac fears. One can imagine the champion of the proletariat, Karl Marx, praising

1. Athenaeum, (April 7, 1855), p. 403.

2. (April 21, 1855), 244.

the author of Mary Barton -- as he actually did.¹ Yet one is not so sure whether he would be sanguine about North and South with its noble, rather idealistic Thornton.

We should notice, however, that the remarks of the Examiner were only reflecting what seems now to be a general change of attitude towards Mrs. Gaskell's earlier novel, a greater recognition of Mary Barton as a true representation of the feelings and life of the Manchester operatives in the period it depicts, 'the Hungry Forties'. We have already come across this attitude in Greg's description of Mary Barton as a work of genius that harmonized with the spirit of the time; also, in Stephen's remarks on the timelessness of the artistic value of this novel.² Mrs. Oliphant, too, provides us with a useful index of the status of Mary Barton in 1855, when she says: "Mrs. Gaskell has built herself an important reputation. The public mind seems to have accepted Mary Barton as a true and worthy picture of the class it aims to represent."³ The stabler years of the 'fifties, allaying middle-class fears of a colossal social upheaval, apparently brought about this increasing acceptance of the, once, hotly controversial novel.

The stability of the 'fifties also affected the attitude to

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1. Cf. "The present splendid brotherhood of fiction-writers in England, whose graphic and eloquent pages have issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians publicists and moralists put together, have described every section of the middle class... And how have Dickens and Thackeray, Miss Bronte and Mrs. Gaskell painted them? As full of presumption, affectation, petty tyranny and ignorance; and the civilized world have confirmed their verdict." (New York Daily Tribune, XIV (August 1, 1854), 4).
 2. Cf. pp.170,177 above.
 3. Blackwood's, LXXIX, 560. Cf. another 1855 description of Mary Barton: "Mary Barton has gone through many editions, and has taken a high and permanent place in the gallery of standard fictions". (Christian Spectator, V, (1855), 691.)

North and South, though not so favourably. North and South, especially its social teaching, received relatively little attention, far less than Mary Barton had done in 1848-1849. The less controversial nature of Mrs. Gaskell's new work was partly responsible for this. Yet Dickens's Hard Times, far more likely to stir polemical retorts, scarcely created a sensation. It attracted relatively brief comments in the Westminster, Blackwood's, the Rambler,¹ and was only reviewed favourably in the Examiner,² which published an even more favourable notice of North and South. In the years 1854-1855 the problem of industrial relations was still a living issue -- persistent strikes and "lock-outs", for one thing, kept it so. But the affairs of the poor were no longer the greatest national problem. The first national problem in 1855 was in fact the Crimean war, going on and off with confused impotence thousands of miles away from the shores of Great Britain.

The more complex North and South also seems to have posed difficult problems for the reviewers -- something which applies even more to Dickens's mixture of symbolism, phantasmagoria and specific social criticism. Whereas Mary Barton was relatively a straightforward exposition of the trials of the industrial poor, North and South was constructed in a more ambitious way. In the earlier work, Mary Barton's initial flirtation with Carson and her later love for the mechanic Jem Wilson were hardly relevant to the basic concern of the novel. In North and South, however, the pattern of the Margaret-Thornton relationship-- prejudice, love, marriage -- parallels

1. See p. 172 n.1 above.

2. (September 9, 1854), pp. 568-9.

and coincides with the resolution of the main themes of the novel, the coming together of Northern energy and Southern refinement and culture; also, better understanding between manufacturers and operatives, represented by Thornton and Higgins, each reformed in the course of the novel in a different way. In this process of education undergone by the principal characters, substantial discussional dialogues form an important part of the novel. Some of the issues discussed, moreover, are never resolved satisfactorily; for example, Margaret's advocacy of a kind of Christian paternalism on the part of the masters, and Thornton's not unconvincing rejection of this policy as contrary to the traditional independence of Northern operatives.

The response to the more complex thematic and structural pattern of North and South took other forms besides critical reluctance to undertake a thorough examination of the novel's social message. Some of Mrs. Gaskell's basic intentions were not ignored, as can be seen in such comments: "The symbolic reconciliation of the social poles of the middle class is affected in the union of Margaret and Thornton"¹; the story "aims, nobly and generously, at reconciling two long-opposed sections of English society by exhibiting to each the true worth and beauty of the other."² But lengthy analysis was generally inhibited by what seemed to a number of critics as vagueness in the social message imparted. The purpose of the story, wrote the Monthly Christian Spectator:

is as obvious as that of "Hard Times" or "Sybil"... but the teaching is not distinct, partly, perhaps, because

1. Monthly Christian Spectator, (1855) p. 694.

2. Manchester Weekly Advertiser, (April 14, 1855), p. 6.

the writer seems to have only imperfectly mastered her own views; still more because she was hampered by "periodical" exigencies. It is owing to these same "periodical" exigencies that the plot of 'North and South' is destitute of unity. 1

A similar view was expressed by Bagehot in the National Review. It is interesting to notice that the supposed vagueness was carried over to the plot, and all was then blamed partially upon the serialization of the novel:

The plot is sadly disjointed and the interstices are 'viewy'... The action of the tale is "retarding"... and the [delays] are not fresh obstacles to be overcome, but interjectional distractions. There is sufficient excuse for this in the periodic form of the tale. 2

The Inquirer critic, too, was not much impressed by the discussional sections. He had no objection against them as such, but they were too long and tedious in the short, 2-volume novel:

The heroine's father and lover, and the heroine herself, are habitually given to discourses on the relations of master and man in the manufacturing districts, to which we have no objection whatever in their place, but which are necessarily very incomplete and exceedingly tiresome in a two volume novel, where there is no room for the development of the plot itself. 3

Chorley's evasive comment on North and South serves well to illustrate the general attitude to the novel: wide recognition of Mrs. Gaskell as one "whose knowledge of Lancashire life is superior to any modern fictionist"⁴ coupled with lack of interest in the details of her reformative ideas:

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1. (1855), 695.
 2. (October 1855), 349-50.
 3. (May 12, 1855), 291.
 4. Blackwood's, (January 1856), p.55.

We imagine that this year of [Crimean] war will produce few better tales than 'North and South'... The Author of 'Mary Barton' possesses some of an artist's best qualities. She will be attended to, having never as yet written without engaging the reader's interest, whether he agrees with or dissents from her philosophies. 1

After thus opening his review in the Athenaeum, Chorley turns to other matters (Mrs.Gaskell as a worthy chronicler of Lancashire life, the poetic Bessie Higgins, etc.) without taking the trouble to specify which "philosophy" of Mrs.Gaskell his hypothetical reader will accept or find objectionable.

Chorley was a very sympathetic reader of the novel. Yet it should not be supposed that this was the reason why he would not pick faults in it. He does, for instance, spend the second half of the review explaining that the importance given in the novel to Margaret's lie to the inspector is unjustifiable either on moral or artistic grounds. Other critics not so favourably disposed towards the author of North and South showed the same unwillingness to elaborate on the social message. The Spectator critic, for example, who had two years before directed harsh criticism against Ruth, began his review of North and South with a somewhat modified estimation of Mrs.Gaskell's powers -- though one can still see that his grudge against Mrs.Gaskell for her unfavourable portraits of the rich in Ruth (Bellingham and Bradshaw) was still rankling:

The author of Mary Barton displays that intellectual quality understood by the word power. She has power in conception, power in description, power in expression. She has little or none of the larger and loftier faculties implied by genius and imagination, which enable their possessor to exhibit the spirit of things whereof only a glimpse has been obtained. The life and its concomitants with which she is familiar - the factory districts, and

1. Athenaeum, (April 7, 1855), p.403.

the society of a country town - she delineates truthfully... When she passes into a higher sphere she is indebted to speculation for her ideas. Her persons are rather abstractions than living beings, some of their traits are ingeniously conceived, but exhibited more freely than is ever the case in living beings. Other of their qualities partake of the notions which the vulgar entertain about the aristocracy... In North and South the writer is for the most part on her strong ground... 1

After this beginning, remarkable as the first elaborate statement on Mrs.Gaskell's "limitations" by a contemporary critic, the reviewer of the Spectator goes on to summarize the plot of North and South hardly making any significant comment on the social theme of the novel, and decidedly turning his face against any explanation of what things Mrs.Gaskell's alleged lack of genius inhibits her from seeing.

The Leader critic, with his evident knowledge of industrial problems, seemed well qualified to discuss the romantic and humanitarian solution preached in North and South. But he would not, as we have seen, go beyond pointing out technical faults. Greg was another critic even more qualified than the Leader reviewer. That he had reservations about the novel is obvious from his rather ambiguous praise. Yet what reservations he had, he preferred to keep them to himself.²

In the face of this critical apathy, it is refreshing to find a few sources like the Examiner, the Christian Examiner and Émile Montégut, doing Mrs.Gaskell's novel justice by attempting a detailed discussion of its didactic intention. The Examiner's piece seems to have been the work of John Forster, a friend of Mrs.Gaskell's, who wrote her a number of letters during the composition of North and South.³ His review is

1. (March 31, 1855), 341-42.

2. See his letter to Mrs.Gaskell p.177 above.

3. See Letters, 191-192, 195; also, Gaskell Collection, Forster Letters, Brotherton Library, Leeds.

of interest not only as a sympathetic reading of the novel, but also as a reflection to some extent of Mrs.Gaskell's own ideas about her work. We can, for example, detect this in his already quoted comment that North and South aimed, like its predecessor Mary Barton, at class reconciliation, for "the aim of that striking book [Mary Barton] was not to widen but lessen the interval that separates [the social classes]"¹ -- something that Mrs.Gaskell always protested when faced with accusations of being prejudiced against the masters.

"Know one another", said Forster, "is the idea impressed upon every part of [North and South]". Mrs.Gaskell's purpose is especially welcome in view of the wide gulf of mutual ignorance and lack of sympathy that separates the rich and the poor:

There are classes in this country distant from any proper comprehension of each other's character as far as the North is from the South; and as comprehension, up to a certain point at any rate, must precede liking, with the good thoughts and good deeds that follow in its train, the purpose of the story is to help towards the uniting of those interests which now are as North and South to one another. 2

The book is built, continues the reviewer, on the contrast between the North and the South of England, that is, its "agricultural and manufacturing communities". The South is "symbolised by Helstone... the scene of the heroine's birth and youth", and the North by Milton "the scene of her trials". The union of these two cultural extremes is achieved eventually by Margaret's marriage to the manufacturer Thornton. This is only one theme of the story, another is the coming together of the two social poles in the Northern city of Milton itself:

This, however, is but the outer circle within which the novelist confines her spell. An inner ring is formed by

1. Examiner, (April 21, 1855), p.244.

2. Ibid.

the yet more finished depiction of the chief aspects of Milton life, and there again two classes are found, the owners and the "hands", which are as North and South to each other. 1

Margaret makes friends with members of both conflicting classes; each gives her an unsympathetic picture of those on the other side of the social scale. But she learns to like them both, drawing at the same time her own conclusion that:

Nothing more is requisite for bringing them together than the comprehension of the masters by the men and of the men by the masters...such comprehension can arise only when the attitude of distrust has given place to habitual frankness ...when the hands are credited with hearts; and when the masters are known to the men but as the servants of a great community... 2

Margaret's views are later given a chance of being implemented by the beautiful contact of her two friends, the weaver Higgins and the manufacturer Thornton:

Both [Higgins and Thornton] are upright men, showing a stern face to the world, when they first appear upon the scene with a class view of the other; but beneath the crust of each there is a world of love and gentleness, and by the time the story ends the two men have found out their respective natures. The intercourse between them in the second volume draws forth the writer's highest powers. It is to the last degree dignified and touching in its simplicity and unaffectedness on both sides. 3

Another source to give lengthy consideration to questions arising out of North and South was The American Christian Examiner. The learned Unitarian reviewer, A. Woodbury, chose Mrs. Gaskell's recent novel and Dickens's Hard Times as a starting point for his

1. Examiner, (April 21, 1855), 244.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 245.

discussion of "Factory Life - Its Novels and Its Facts". He begins by repeating the common observation that to the present time belongs the discovery that "humble life has its poetry and romance."¹ Furthermore, the English novel, he goes on, is now predominantly didactic. This development is most welcome, for "we firmly believe that fiction can be made an excellent medium for communicating truth", and the current "increasing earnestness of our fiction is a good sign". If the writers of fiction "can infuse into us a purer love for the right, and can quicken our sympathy for the weak and the wronged, we are glad to be so influenced."² Industrial life is an especially rewarding subject for the novelist, as has been demonstrated in Britain by Mrs. Gaskell's work and Dickens's recent novel. It is a subject that American novelists may take up with advantage, for in Britain as well as in America industrial life is essentially similar, and offers a rich field for the imaginative writer:

The passion and pathos of factory life have found at last their chroniclers. Even amid the clang and clatter of machinery, there is humanity, with its hopes and loves, fears and woes, working and struggling for greater results than those accomplished by the material forces around them. There is something besides mere facts, statistical tables, reports of Parliamentary commissions, and the like. ³

The reviewer then embarks on a brief comparison between Hard Times and North and South. He thinks both works successful, though he prefers Mrs. Gaskell's novel on the grounds that it has more distinct characters and is more interesting as a story:

1. (November 1855), 354.

2. Ibid., 355.

3. Ibid.

It was a new field for Dickens to enter upon, this of factory life, and perhaps not so well suited to his light and jovial genius. Yet he has been entirely successful in it... Still we think Mrs. Gaskell has produced a much better book. It is deeper in feeling, more earnest, and altogether more skilfully and compactly put together. In each book the plot is very simple, and naturally developed. But Mrs. Gaskell has the advantage of much better characters; at least she has drawn them more finely. We remember the sensation which "Mary Barton" occasioned, on its first appearance, among novel-readers. We think that "North and South" will be even better appreciated - as it deserves to be, - judging more from the impression left upon us. 1

Bounderby in Dickens's work is more of a fantastical creation than a real manufacturer; for instance, the story he is fond of telling about his progress from poverty to riches is a "pure fabrication"² which contrasts with "Mr. Thornton's modest and manly narrative" of his own real progress.³ There is a similar contrast between Higgins in North and South and Stephen Blackpool in Dickens's work; the latter is feeble and rather unimpressive, Nicholas Higgins on the other hand is:

a far more decided and independent character, and speaks his mind with greater freedom. He has more intelligence, and a sturdier firmness, and is a leader among the operatives in their strike. Still he is a man of great gentleness at heart, and will do for others a great deal more than for himself. 4

Both novels, however, the reviewer is happy to find, confirm his own deeply-felt conviction that "capital and labor are but complements of each other [and] are to be used in harmony rather than in discordance."⁵ Industrial harmony would prevail once this idea has

1. Ibid., 356-7.

2. Ibid., 361.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 365.

5. Ibid., 368.

got through to both workers and employers. Then, reflecting the greater mood of optimism in regard to industrial relations in the 'fifties, the reviewer exaggerates the advances made in this field and allows himself to look forward to an even more glorious future for all parties connected with the industrial activity:

Red-tapists, political economists, statesmen, philanthropists, have been drawn into the enterprise, till the assurance of justice for the operative is now completely established. Wages are reasonable; distress, except in some localities not altogether under the influence of "the more excellent way", all but impossible; and masters and men are gradually coming to understand, that the golden rule of the Gospel is as applicable to the business in their hands as to any other of the practical labors and duties of life. We by no means forget the suffering caused by the strike at Preston during the year before the last [1853]. We do not forget that the millennium for work-people is still far distant in the future. We do not forget that the old feud between labor and capital, master and man, is by no means ended. But we rejoice that a better era has dawned upon the English factory system, and that in some instances it has been found both just and profitable that union and good feeling should exist, that the hatchet should be buried, and peace prevail between employer and employed. 1

The lengthiest and the most thoughtful review of North and South came out ironically enough in a French journal, Revue des deux mondes. It was written by Émile Montégut, a prolific French critic, who showed considerable interest in the English novel in the 'fifties. He was also a very sympathetic reader of Mrs. Gaskell, whose Mary Barton and Ruth he reviewed favourably in the same magazine two years before.²

Montégut begins by making the necessary explanations to his French readers of the peculiar, geographically-based social division in England, a predominantly industrial North and an aristocratic,

1. Ibid., 370-371.

2. XXIII (June 1, 1853), 894-926; reprinted in his Écrivains Modernes de l'Angleterre, 2nd. Series, Paris, 1889.

agricultural South, something which does not apply to France, where industry, he says, is not concentrated in any particular part of the country and where "la société, que j'appellerai historique, occupe les même provinces que la société manufacturière".¹ Montégut then proceeds to examine the basic moral of the novel, which he, like the Examiner, finds to be the need to overcome mutual ignorance between North and South on the one hand and between the operatives and manufacturers in the same city on the other: "tout mal vient de l'ignorance." Success in this involves the eradication of prejudice on all parts: "Volonté, opiniâtreté, telle est la note morale dominante chez tous les personnages de ce livre."²

One of the main reasons of class-conflict, Montégut observes, is the mechanical, joyless type of work allotted to the industrial worker. The operative feels that he is merely an appendage and that "la machine seule...est réellement productive".³ The emotionally and physically harsh life of the worker can only impoverish him morally. Thus we are not astonished by the vices attributed to the industrial population: "ce qui nous étonnerait davantage, c'est qu'ils n'existassent pas". Class-warfare, defiance, jealousy and hatred will continue as long as the operatives feel they are victims of social and economic conditions that they little understand:

Le chômage, la misère, la baisse des salaires, tombent sur l'ouvrier des manufactures sans qu'il en sache bien la raison. Il est soumis au gouvernement invisible, insaisissable, capricieux, d'une sort de mathématique commerciale tout à fait abstraite; il souffre, parce qu'à cent lieues de lui, à un moment donné, tel produit a

1. Ibid., XXV, (October 1, 1855), 118.

2. Ibid., 132.

3. Ibid., 136.

éprouvé une dépréciation; il souffre, parce que la concurrence d'un pays qu'il n'a jamais vu et ne verra jamais a donné les mêmes marchandises fabriquées à meilleur compte; il souffre de la hausse et de la baisse des produits, des caprices de la mode, des progrès toujours nouveaux de l'industrie. 1

In this context, continues Montégut, Higgins's atheism is hardly an intellectual affair; it is rather an expression of social despair "comme un cri de douleur et de malédiction."² Higgins derives little profit from reading the book on political economy that one of the manufacturers throws to him. The workers, Montégut claims, can scarcely take interest in the abstract principles of trade, "une seule chose les intéresse et les regarde directement, c'est le prix du travail."³ In order to secure more wages, they go on strike. But a strike is hardly the solution. For what is merely a nuisance to the manufacturer is a total, though temporary, deprivation on the part of the worker of his only income. Moreover, for a strike to be effective, it should be general. To achieve this trade-unions resort to tyrannical methods to intimidate those unwilling to take part in the strike. This is why Mrs.Gaskell "se montre très hostile en général aux grèves et aux trade unions, et nous retrouvons dans son nouveau roman plus d'une scène qui rappelle les douloureux tableaux déjà tracés dans Mary Barton."⁴

Mrs.Gaskell's basic idea, Montégut observes, that the hardness of the North should be tempered by Southern refinement finds expression in the feminine, fairy-tale solution of marriage. Besides, Thornton's love for Margaret is structurally important; it is the nucleus of the

1. Ibid., 136-7.

2. Ibid., 133.

3. Ibid., 137.

4. Ibid., 138.

action and the social theme, the latter being the chief interest of the work:

L'emblème de cette union désirable est représenté comme dans les contes de fées par un mariage, le mariage de Marguerite, la fille de la civilisation aristocratique du sud, avec M. Thornton, le type accompli des manufacturiers du nord. Sans trop chicaner mistress Gaskell sur ce que cette donnée a d'un peu sentimental et de trop féminin, nous reconnaitrons qu'elle est traitée avec un singulier bonheur. L'amour de M. Thornton pour Marguerite Hale est le noeud du roman, le lien qui sert à rattacher les uns aux autres tous les épisodes de la vie du nord, véritable but et principal intérêt du livre. 1

Romantic and sentimental as the marriage solution is, the French critic continues, Mrs. Gaskell's art is far from being sentimental. Alone among modern English lady novelists, except Charlotte Brontë, "elle ne tombe pas en effet dans les défauts habituels aux auteurs de son sexe; elle voit la société sous un jour plus large et plus sévère, sans pour cela abdiquer les qualités féminines."² In comparison with an American novelist with a similar bent of mind (Mrs. Stowe), Mrs. Gaskell, as a social critic, is especially impartial and clear-sighted, not unlike her heroine Margaret Hale:

La charité de mistress Gaskell n'est pas sentimentale, comme celle du romancier américain; elle est singulièrement éclairée, impartiale; elle s'aide de l'analyse et s'appuie sur les faits; elle n'attaque ni ne soutient les maîtres et les ouvriers, elle instruit le procès des uns et des autres et leur dit la vérité. Mistress Gaskell joue dans ces querelles sociales le rôle de Marguerite Hale dans l'émeute dont nous avons cité le récit: selon elle, parce que M. Thornton est dans son droit, ce n'est pas une raison pour que ses ouvriers aient tort, ou réciproquement. Leurs griefs aux uns et aux autres ont une cause qu'aucune des deux parties ne veut voir, et mistress Gaskell, s'appuyant sur le privilège d'inviolabilité de son sexe, indique les raisons

1. Ibid., 144.

2. Ibid., 145.

de ce malentendu. Elle joue le rôle d'arbitre en invoquant pour ainsi dire ses droits de femme. 1

There are a few points worth examining in Montégut's comments. First, he achieves a remarkable degree of empathy with the working-class. His remarks on the feelings of the industrial worker contrast with simpler and cruder statements of other contemporary writers, those of the Leader critic, for instance. He rightly observes that the working-man suffers from alienation at different levels. Feelings of frustration and insignificance are generated daily as he faces the machine, in relation to which he is an appendage. Then there is the bewilderment and resentment caused by his consciousness that he is a victim of economic forces operating on too large and impersonal a scale for him to control or even grasp. After this perceptive analysis, Montégut's views approach those of the Leader reviewer, however, when he observes that wages were the only thing that concerned a worker. From this he proceeds to imply that strikes and tyrannical unions were the necessary but deplorable and barren fruit of the workers' preoccupation with the price of their labour. By saying this Montégut denies his earlier remarks about the alienation and insecurity that hang over a worker's life. He does not appear to appreciate that the union provided the workers with the human and social dimension which he himself said was missing in the routine of their daily life. The unions provided their members with opportunities for mutual help, solidarity and working together for one general cause (feelings especially intense during a strike), in addition to the promise of achieving higher wages or the protection of existing ones. Also, in the relative absence of state legislative intervention, the worker, as an individual, had little hope of combating those economic forces of the market that Montégut seems

1. Ibid., 145.

well aware of.

It is also interesting to notice that Montégut assumes that North and South confirms his own opinion about the deplorable futility of the union. This is why, he says, Mrs.Gaskell appears to be "très hostile" to strikes and unions. We hardly need to go into lengthy analysis to show that North and South displays nothing approaching extreme hostility to either. Mrs.Gaskell certainly did not fully share Higgins's firm faith in the union or the efficacy of collective wage-bargaining. She apparently, too, was aware of the potential for violence, as the murder in Mary Barton or the riot in North and South indicate. But she realized at the same time that the union was the worker's only power, imperfect though it was. Thus Higgins, through the influence of Margaret, is restored to Christianity, but never gives up his faith in the union, and it is not suggested that he is the worse for it. Towards the end of the novel, too, the manufacturer Thornton seems to bow -- not happily, but without his earlier feelings of resentment -- to the fact that strikes would continue indefinitely. Moreover, Mrs.Gaskell was not unaware of how the union fulfilled emotional needs for the worker besides its concern with wages, needs of cooperation and sharing in a common goal. Higgins does not convince Margaret of all these virtues of the union, but he is never deprived of an opportunity to put his case in a forceful way.¹ Indeed, Mrs.Gaskell's refusal to commit herself to a utopian solution in which class-conflict would disappear and trade-unions become superfluous did not escape the notice of some critics; one of them, the Press reviewer, was made unhappy by what seemed to him to be Mrs.Gaskell's essentially pessimistic vision of the future of industrial relations:

1. See NS, ch. 28, p. 298. ch. 36, pp. 365-66.

The writer appears to think that such things are inevitable and that the fierce strife between operatives and masters is the natural working of society. It is true that towards the end of the story Mr Thornton is represented as a little humanized, but every one will see that these softening effects are obtained at the expense of consistency. 1

Montégut over-emphasised Mrs.Gaskell's scepticism towards the union. He also magnified the significance of another episode in the novel, Mr.Hale's religious doubts, though his excess in this respect fell on the right side. Before we examine his views on this topic, it is useful to begin with the comments of other readers.

We have already seen that Dickens wanted Mrs.Gaskell to curtail the episode, believing that it was a dangerous subject. Similar worries were expressed by Charlotte Brontë, lately married to her father's curate, Mr.Nicholls. Having read only the early chapters of the novel, she feared that her Dissenting friend, the Unitarian Mrs.Gaskell, was heading for a new area of controversy -- defection from the Church of England was not without contemporary examples², and if used in a novel, it would possibly have as much firework effect as Mrs.Gaskell's earlier works, Mary Barton and Ruth. This is how Charlotte Brontë warned her friend:

The subject seems to me difficult; at first I groaned over it: if you had any narrowness of views or bitterness of feeling towards the Church or her clergy, I should groan over it still; but I think I see the ground you are about to take as far as the Church is concerned; not that of attack on her, but of defence of those who conscientiously differ from her, and feel it a duty to leave her fold. Well - it is good ground, but still rugged for the step of fiction. Stony - thorny will it prove at times, I fear. 3

1. (April 14, 1855), p.359.

2. See J.G.Sharps, Mrs.Gaskell's Observation and Invention, 1970, pp. 220-21.

3. S.H.B., IV, 154.

Mid-Victorian critics had considerable ability to detect controversial points. It is thus curious that Mr.Hale's difficulties with religious faith escaped their scrutiny with remarkable peace -- this was possibly because of the secondary importance of the episode, and the vagueness with which Mrs.Gaskell shrewdly shrouds the doubts, described as relating to some unspecified tenets of the Established Church. All those reviewers who summarized the plot reported Mr.Hale's conscientious reservations with an air of complete indifference and discreet lack of curiosity. Only one of them referred to them specifically as "some scruples of conscience on the subject of the Thirty-nine [Articles]."¹ For others they were simply "a doubt relating to Church".²

Against this background of doctrinal fears and intriguing silence, Montégut's interest in the episode stands out, revealing a truly enlightened and sensitive mind. Recalling Mrs.Gaskell's interest in similar situations of moral difficulties, Benson's lie in Ruth, and Margaret's in North and South, the French critic hails Mrs. Gaskell as the novelist of conscience, emphasising her utmost tact in presenting the delicate case of Mr.Hale:

Mistress Gaskell excelle, comme on sait, à raconter ces affaires litigieuses de l'âme et tous ces petits procès intérieurs des facultés morales entre elles. C'est le romancier des cas de conscience; le charmant roman de Ruth était, si l'on s'en souvient, fondé sur un mensonge innocent. Armée de cette faculté exquise et toute féminine, le tact, elle ne juge pas les actions humaines d'après le code des conventions mondaines, ni d'après le code légal, ni même d'après le code religieux; elle cherche à pénétrer le vrai motif de ces actions...Elle sait à merveille et avec un goût parfait poser aux pharisiens de petites questions

1. Observer, (July 22, 1855), p. 5.

2. Spectator, (March 31, 1855), p. 342.

imprévues et embarrassantes. Ainsi l'affaire de M.Hale pourrait être traitée par plus d'un d'apostasie, de conversion par beaucoup d'autres. Apostasie et conversion, ce sont là de bien gros mots, pourrait-elle répondre; au fond, la conduite du clergyman est strictement conforme à la règle du décalogue qui dit: Tu ne mentiras pas. 1

Mrs.Gaskell's interest in moral questions, continues Montégut, is all the more remarkable in view of the unjustified neglect of such matters by the novelists and dramatists of the time:

Les scrupules de M.Hale nous suggèrent une réflexion. Y a-t-il rien au monde de plus dramatique que les tourmens de conscience d'un honnête homme? Je suis toujours étonné que les romanciers et les dramaturges cherchent avant tout les émotions violentes du vice et du crime, comme si l'honnêteté ne leur fournissait aucune ressource. 2

To the customary argument that these topics are monotonous, Montégut replies vehemently that, on the contrary, "les mobiles qui font agir l'honnête homme sont excessivement variés, infinis comme le monde moral, complexes comme le monde matériel dans lequel nous vivons".³

To illustrate his point, he again takes up Mr.Hale's case:

...il n'est pas difficile de comprendre ses combats intérieurs. Il doit obéir à sa conscience, cela est une règle générale, et cependant il peut arriver tel cas où la stricte application de cette règle soit, comment dirai-je? une faute, le mot est trop faible, -- un péché, le mot est trop fort. Les expressions elles-mêmes manquent pour formuler ces difficiles et subtiles questions... il y a souvent de l'égoïsme à avoir trop soin de son âme, à écouter trop scrupuleusement sa conscience, car alors nous courons risque de ne pas avoir soin des âmes qui nous sont confiées. Quelle perplexité! 4

Montégut then draws attention to the significance of the other moral

1. (October 1, 1855), pp. 121-22.

2. Ibid., 122.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 122-3.

problem in North and South, Margaret's lie to the police inspector out of fear for her brother's safety. The loss of self-esteem that Margaret suffers in consequence (especially when Thornton accidentally knows about the untrue statement she has made, but nobly will not expose her), coupled with her increasing respect for Thornton, observes Montégut, triggers her love for the manly manufacturer, revealing "pour ainsi dire Marguerite a elle-même".¹

No comparable analysis of Mrs.Gaskell's preoccupation with problems of conscience is to be found in other contemporary comments on the novel. There is one extended comment, however, in the Athenaeum. The reviewer, Chorley, who voted North and South the best novel of the year takes Mrs.Gaskell to task for the same reason that Montégut praised her. Chorley, "the scrupulous Quaker", was usually generous and chivalrous towards the lady novelists - whose books he especially liked to review - except when he thought that an authoress was falling or about to fall into a moral pitfall.² In such a position he sees his favourite Mrs.Gaskell; so he sets about warning her not to dwell too long and unnecessarily upon difficult moral issues, which, in any case, do not fall within the scope of fiction:

The Author of 'North and South' is open to remonstrance. She deals with difficulties of morals needlessly, and too fearlessly, because, as we have again and again said, the riddle propounded cannot be solved in fiction; and because by all one-sided handling of such matters, - when passions become engaged and generous feelings are persuaded, and when the temptation must be dwelt upon as cruel, in apology for the offence, - there is always a danger of unmooring the eager and the inexperienced from their anchorage. The flat lie which Margaret Hale is made to tell in order to secure the escape of her brother, is gratuitous, painful, - staggering as an incident, and without useful result as a

1. Ibid., 145.

2. See L.A.Marchand, The Athenaeum: A Mirror of Victorian Culture, Chapel Hill, 1941, pp. 182 ff.

lesson. We cannot, in our hearts, blame Margaret; yet the author, by the sufferings which followed as consequence, takes pains to show how blame-worthy Margaret was. A kindred dilemma, it will be recollected, is to be found in the author's 'Ruth', - which, in place of aiding, interfered with the advocacy of the cause which was the argument of that novel. Here the motive of the incident is less obvious. In real, actual life, blameable, cowardly, and selfish is the man who turns away from dealing with difficulties so terrible. They must be faced, with such honour, such charity, such disposition to excuse, and such power to weigh good and evil as can be summoned; but to thrust them forward in Fiction (where only artistic truth is possible) amounts, in deed, if not in purpose, to a wilful "playing with fire". It should be added, however, that the tenor and tissue of our author's writings are such as to satisfy us that no wilfulness has been in her mind, but an earnest, if a mistaken desire to do good. 1

Margaret's deliberate lie gave rise to a minor controversy.

A larger and more complex one stirred concerning the religious influence of Mrs.Gaskell's writings. Montégut, Catholic in more than one sense, again, took part on the sympathetic side. He praised Mrs.Gaskell's liberal attitude to the various religious sects, as can be seen in her sympathetic delineation of Mr.Hale, his daughter, and Frederic, each of them sincerely embracing different convictions:

La grande question est d'obéir a la vérité, qui est toujours invisible, et non pas aux formes extérieures de la vérité, qui sont toujours imparfaites. Armée de ce principe, qui est celui des unitaires les plus éclairés...mistress Gaskell n'a pas de préjugé de secte et regarde d'un oeil bienveillant toutes les formes diverses qu'a revêtues l'idée chrétienne ... Ainsi les personnages de son roman appartiennent tous à diverses sectes: M.Hale est dissident, sa femme et sa fille sont anglicanes; son fils Frédéric, après un long séjour en Espagne, penche vers l'église romain, et pourtant tous sont sincères. 2

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1. (April 7, 1855), p. 403.
 2. (October 1, 1855), p.122.

It was for the same reason commended by Montégut that Mrs. Gaskell was again found to be at fault; Charlotte Yonge, a fellow novelist, and editor of The Monthly Packet of Evening Readings for Younger Members of the English Church felt obliged to ban North and South in order to protect the faith of her young readers. In an imaginary conversation between Elinor and Fanny, Yonge voices her opinion that Mrs. Gaskell is rather too liberal and too tolerant of religious diversity:

F. Would really [North and South] make one a worse churchwoman, for that [novel] was not allowed to me?

E. North and South is a striking story, but it goes on the principle of the Chinese... when they shake hands, ask each other -- what is your sublime religion? mutually compliment each other that all religions are good, and take leave.

F. That is what people want to come to.

E. I fear they do, and this latitudinarianism is so spread into common literature that I am afraid the infection is widely dispersed. ¹

To complicate the picture in which contemporary readers viewed the religious influence of Mrs. Gaskell, we find the Observer, in a favourable review of North and South, pointing out that the only thing it did not quite like was that the author "puts too much faith in piety as applied to the business of life." Mrs. Gaskell, added the reviewer, "depends or rather inculcates a dependence upon Providence, when human exertion would amply suffice." Apart from that, the novel is "informed by a fine spirit and abounding in lofty thought".²

Two critics in addition to Montégut, however, thought that Mrs. Gaskell's treatment of religious matters was unexceptionable. The New Monthly Magazine recognized that Mrs. Gaskell "writes under a sense

1. (November 1855), 394.

2. (July 22, 1855), p. 5.

of responsibility, a religious conviction, which gives unity and purpose to her fiction."¹ The pious critic in the Monthly Christian Spectator dwelt likewise with satisfaction upon the works of Mrs.Gaskell, a "most Christian lady", performing in her novels "a truly Christian office".²

Besides the religious sympathies of Mrs.Gaskell, the Margaret-Thornton relationship sometimes attracted sharply conflicting views. Moreover, these two characters failed individually to please every one. Margaret, for example, with her superb beauty, sensitivity and strong character was bound to command respect. Yet Mrs.Gaskell's attempts to emphasise the superiority of her heroine made that admiration develop into irritation on the part of some readers.

Mrs.Gaskell, writing in January 1855, reported that Charlotte Brontë liked the novel, though she found Margaret Hale "over good".³ The Examiner reviewer, a most sympathetic critic, cited Margaret as the main weakness of the novel. "Of [Margaret's] feminine temper, indeed," he said, "some may be apt to think that she has too much, and that the effect is not always what it is sought to convey". Especially irritating were Margaret's "small defiances and disdains [which] are sometimes not intelligible to us."⁴ Other points of criticism were the excessive splendour of Margaret and Mrs.Gaskell's minute description of the heroine's facial expression in moments of emotion:

We fancy [Margaret] now and then a little too "superb" in the description. We have too much of her "curled upper

1. (December 1855), p. 432.

2. V, 693, 699.

3. Letters, 223.

4. (April 21, 1855), 245.

lip", of "the lovely haughty curve" of her face, and of her "round white flexible throat,"... We cannot always reconcile the freaks that flit over the surface of her emotion to the depth and truth of the emotion itself. 1

Winding up his criticism, the reviewer affirms that all this was only "a slight drawback of the charm of her character and the deep and honest sympathy she wins from us."²

Bagehot in the National Review, not so well inclined towards the novel as a whole, picked the same faults raised by the Examiner, though in greater detail and with more pronounced symptoms of impatience. Bagehot, a literary critic with much interest in science, found that Mrs. Gaskell was showing a misplaced scientific precision in her descriptions of Margaret:

The style... is sometimes touched with something morbid, from which "Cranford" was, we think, quite free. We refer to the descriptions of emotion; which are overdrawn, and especially... the descriptions of minute changes in the physical expression in periods of deep feeling. This is, we are convinced, unrealistic as well as false taste. The minute physical changes are not observed in themselves, but only in the change of expression which they produce, in all cases of deep emotion. It is a mistake both in taste and art, to draw attention to "curving throats", "dilating lips", &c &c, as the symptoms of emotion. These things may produce the expressional effect but the very interest of the result in expression prevents observations of the physiological medium. It would require a scientific man, intending to prepare "plates" of the different emotions, to note these things. And the mind instinctively shrinks from the record of them. The grief and the love and the fear should absorb the attention, and not the resulting state of muscular expression. It is uncomfortable and always suggests the presence of a participating spectator with a note-book. 3

If Mrs. Gaskell had not read the strictures of the National Review, she

1. Ibid.

2. Ibid.

3. (October 1855), 349-50.

almost certainly saw those of the Examiner, written by her friend, John Forster. She must have taken them to heart for she never in her future work returns to such minute descriptions of facial changes that these two critics found so irritating.

The Spectator was another quarter to express qualified approval of Margaret. Mrs.Gaskell's heroine, said the magazine, "is an agreeable conception rather than a creation", who "stops short of being charming by a very slight touch of brusquerie and a somewhat overstrained contempt for trade and traders." This is rather incongruous, observed the Spectator judiciously, since "her own social position is not really so high as that of many commercial people."¹

Yet it would be wrong to suggest that Margaret was universally received with such reservation. The Observer, for example, described her, not meaning to be ironical, as "a priceless pearl among women-kind, a glory to humanity."² Mrs.Oliphant also summarised Margaret's superb qualities without a trace of disapproval:

Mrs.Gaskell lingers much upon the personal gifts of her grand beauty. Margaret has glorious black hair... exquisite full lips, pouted with the breath of wonder or disdain, or resentment, as the case may be... she is altogether a splendid and princely personage. 3

It is not without significance, however, that even the solemn Monthly Christian Spectator, notwithstanding its admiration for the princely Margaret, was of opinion that this temperamental young lady needed an occasional "shaking":

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1. (March 31, 1855), 342.
 2. (July 22, 1855), p. 5.
 3. Blackwood's, (May 1855), 559-60.

A glorious creature is Margaret ... and beautiful and piquante is her dignity, but, it is occasionally (as in real life), quite unintelligible; and we feel as we read that we should have been as dumbfounded by her behaviour as poor Mr. Thornton, and rather inclined to tell her she was idiotic, and wanted a good shaking. 1

If Margaret had too much of the "soft feminine defiance"² to be fully intelligible, no such drawback attached to Thornton, "le représentant parfait"³ of the energetic manufacturers of the North. Astute, sensitive and high-minded as he was, Thornton was generally considered the best drawn if not the most original character in the book. Bagehot, who so disliked the delineation of Margaret, pronounced him "a masterly piece of drawing".⁴ Forster, also critical of Margaret, exclaimed with generous exaggeration: "The subtlety of discrimination apparent in the working out of every part of the character of Mr. Thornton is above all praise. The author knows him to the very core of all his strength and all his weakness."⁵ The Spectator, sitting in judgement upon each of the main characters, extended full approval only to Thornton as a convincing representative of a Northern manufacturer, though he was "a little sensitive with refined people, and rather prejudiced against them".⁶

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1. V (1855), 691. Margaret's temper seems to have gained in sweetness with time. Nine years later, the Reader, reviewing Sylvia's Lovers and Dark Night's Work, complained that the heroines of these two novels were "charming in many ways" but rather melancholy. "We cannot forget", said the Reader critic, "that Mrs. Gaskell has drawn sweeter types of womanhood than these. Will she never give us another Margaret Helstone [sic.]?". (III (Jan. 2, 1864), 12.)
 2. NS, ch. 7, p. 100.
 3. Montégut, op.cit., p. 127.
 4. National Review, (October 1855), p. 350.
 5. Examiner, (April 21, 1855), 245.
 6. (March 31, 1855), 342.

The New Monthly's critic said that Mrs. Gaskell drew well "the rigid, forbidding and coarsely tyrannical, but sound at the heart [Thornton]". He found him rather boring, however, because recent novels abounded in heroes like him:

... if we incline to tire a little of him, it is only because we have lately had such a flood of these hard-headed, strong-hearted lovers, in the fictions of the day, all of whom are at first so intolerable to the heroine, and at length fascinate her as never was heroine fascinated before. ¹

While the New Monthly's critic spoke in general terms, Mrs. Oliphant in Blackwood's cited Jane Eyre specifically as the ultimate source of Mrs. Gaskell's inspiration. In a long article reviewing the work of "Modern Novelists, Great and Small", the prolific novelist-critic did brief justice to such established names as Mrs. Gore, Mrs. Trollope and Mrs. Marsh. These, she said, "are orthodox and proper beyond criticism". Among the new unorthodox breed of novelists Charlotte Brontë stands out as the initiator of a new type of love in modern fiction. In Jane Eyre the heroine fights against "a vast, burly, sensual Englishman ... whose power consists of some animal force ... it is impossible to describe or analyse." Then after Jane has discovered "the excitement and relish" of the love-struggle, she "begins to think of her antagonist all day long" and ends falling into "fierce love" with him.² Miss Kavanagh's novels, continues Mrs. Oliphant, show her to be doing nothing but copying the Brontëan love-war pattern. A less direct influence appears in the recent work of Mrs. Gaskell, "a sensible and considerate woman, [who is] ranking high in her sphere." North and South is an "extremely clever" story and perhaps "better and livelier than any of her previous works". One can

1. (December 1855), p. 430.

2. (May 1855), 557.

still find in it:

the wide circles in the water, showing that not far off is the identical spot where Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe [Villette] in their wild sport, have been casting stones; here is again the desperate, bitter quarrel out of which love is to come; here is love itself, always in a fury, often looking exceedingly like hatred, and by no means distinguished for its good manner, or its graces of speech. 1

More seriously, Mrs.Oliphant does not find the whole love-situation in North and South entirely convincing. It is not that she is against this type of love as such. Jane Eyre, gross as it is, she says, has "a force that makes everything real." Not so is Gaskell's recent work. Although it is excellent in all respects, the novel strains one's credulity by showing the "princely" Margaret falling in love with the rough-mannered Milton manufacturer:

Mrs.Gaskell is perfect in all the "properties" of her scene, and all her secondary characters are well drawn, but though her superb and stately Margaret is by no means a perfect character, she does not seem to us a likely person to fall in love with the churlish and ill-natured Thornton, whose "strong" qualities are not more amiable than are the dispositions of the other members of his class whom we have before mentioned. 2

Finally, Mrs.Oliphant in a doleful note anticipates the consequences of Mrs.Gaskell's defection to the Brontë camp of novelists:

The sober-minded who are readers of novels will feel Mrs. Gaskell's desertion a serious blow. Shall our love-stories be squabbles after this? 3

Mrs.Oliphant's objection to the love-situation in North and South is curious and rather superficial, if we judge from the reasons

1. Ibid., 559.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 560.

she gives, namely, Margaret's superior beauty and refinement. It is thus more curious to see another lady indirectly supporting Mrs.Oliphant's argument. This was Parthenope Nightingale, who wrote to Mrs.Gaskell:

...I am afraid Margaret will not be happy [when married to Thornton], tho' she will make him so; he is too old to mould, and the poetry of her nature will suffer under the iron mark which has compressed him so long. 1

Mrs.Oliphant's suggestion of a Brontëan influence in North and South is more convincing. Mrs.Gaskell liked Charlotte personally and admired her as an artist. It is not unlikely that this admiration, which was mutual, showed itself partially in Mrs.Gaskell's recent novel, besides her later testimony of friendship and devotion, The Life of Charlotte Brontë (1857).

Margaret shows some similarity to Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe in the strength of her character. She also has deep emotions, which she habitually suppresses in order to face up to her many responsibilities, especially as the practical head of her family. This last aspect of Margaret, however, serves to distinguish her from Charlotte Brontë's heroines. Love occupies a relatively small part in Margaret's life; much of her energy goes into caring for her father, mother and brother, besides her championship of the operatives. By comparison, Brontë's heroines live in much greater spiritual and social isolation; society seems to be important for them primarily as a background to their vividly painted sexual and romantic yearnings. As for the prejudice-love-marriage pattern of North and South, it is more similar to Austen's Pride and Prejudice than to Charlotte Brontë's novels.²

1. Haldane, op.cit., p.105.

2. If North and South bears resemblance to any one novel of Charlotte Brontë, Shirley (and not Jane Eyre and Villette mentioned by Mrs. Oliphant) should be the candidate. Yet, beyond the similarity in the industrial setting (Brontë's work, however, deals with a much earlier period) and the bulldog tenacity of "the manufacturer", each of these two novels pursues a course of its own.

Apart from Mrs.Oliphant, all critics liked the "beautiful ... way in which Margaret's love becomes revealed to Thornton, and to his loving hand her wild heart is at last tamed."¹ Mrs.Jameson was charmed by "the beautiful picture of the gradual opening of the mutual mind and heart of the two beings ... created with intense vitality".² The New Monthly observed happily that "with power and spirit [Mrs. Gaskell] orders the 'strife and peace' between [Thornton] and Margaret". There was "the finesse of a practised hand in her way of gradually and artfully composing these antagonistic forces". As to "whether He or She bears the bell in interest and character" that is "a vexed question".³ Montégut recognized the importance of Margaret's lie in taming her wild heart. Her humiliation coupled with her increased recognition of Thornton's superiority marks the beginning of her attachment to him. Margaret has a proud soul, and "l'estime est le grand mobile de l'amour chez les âmes sévères, éprouvées et nobles".⁴ The final reunion of Margaret and Thornton is thus the inevitable destiny of these two noble characters whose love is so characterstically English:

Tout cet amour de Marguerite et de M.Thornton est très beau, très sérieux, très anglais, froid comme le nord, sans folles flammes... C'est réellement l'amour de deux âmes qui sont faites l'une pour l'autre, de deux âmes faites pour s'unir ou pour rester éternellement solitaires. 5

1. Examiner, (April 21, 1855), p. 245.

2. Haldane op.cit., p.113.

3. (December 1855), p.431.

4. Op.cit., p. 145.

5. Ibid.

Mrs.Oliphant's other claim that North and South shows its author to be "perfect in all the 'properties' of her scene"¹ met with wide recognition. Mrs.Gaskell's recent work was generally seen as having the same realistic imprint that distinguished the author's earlier novels. North and South, wrote the Literary Gazette, is full of "the good sense and truthful delineations of English character which marks all the works of [Mrs.Gaskell]".² Curtis in Harper's fully agreed:

It [North and South] is equally remarkable with [the admirable Mary Barton] for its keen penetration of character and motives... The incidents... are described with such exquisite naturalness as to produce an ineffaceable impression of reality... Such a succession of vivid home-like scenes ... is rarely enjoyed in works of fiction.

Especially praiseworthy for Curtis was the "terseness and grace" of the novel's style, which made him exclaim:

[North and South derives] an additional charm from the unaffected and expressive diction in which the narrative is clothed. English literature can boast of no living female prose writer who commands a style of such blended sweetness and strength as the author of "Mary Barton".³

Curtis's description of Mrs.Gaskell as the foremost living English novelist was not a generous slip of the tongue. For this was an opinion that he again expressed vehemently a month later. In a tender obituary of Charlotte Brontë, he asserted that of all modern

1. Op.cit., p. 559.

2. (July 14, 1855), p. 441.

3. X ([June] 1855). 569.

female writers only Mrs.Gaskell was a peer to the author of Jane Eyre.¹

The Monthly Christian Spectator was another source to express admiration for Mrs.Gaskell's realistic scenes in the "charming, domestic" word-pictures, as it called them.² Chorley, too, observed that Mrs.Gaskell had "a keen eye for character"³ and was highly appreciative of the effect of the Lancashire patois upon the overall impression of reality.

Not all North and South was composed of the stuff of everyday life. The riot incident, for example, when Margaret clasps her arms round Thornton to shield him from the furious mob, belongs to a different order of experience. This episode, in particular, drew different comments. Forster described it as "the most striking and powerful scene in the story".⁴ The reviewer of the New Monthly agreed that it was well drawn but thought that "the climax [was] a little theatrical". He, however, cited two more episodes in the novel as of "great effect". One is the scene when Margaret tells the police inspector a deliberate lie in order to save her brother from possible arrest. The other is when the same heroine succeeds by sheer force of

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1. Cf. "Have we not a tear for Charlotte Brontë?... Among the feminine writers of a time so affluent in works of feminine genius, Charlotte Brontë was, in England at least, the most important and powerful. Her only peer in many points was Mrs. Gaskell, the author of "Mary Barton", "Ruth", "Cranford", and "North and South". But their genius was very different; and they were peers without being rivals. Among the swarm of English authoresses, the Mrs.Gores, and Mrs.Marshes, and Julie Kavanaghs, and Miss Yonges, and all other leaders of the circulating library, the position of the author of "Jane Eyre" was like that of Thackeray or Dickens among the Ainsworths and Bulwers..." (Ibid., XI (1855), 128).
 2. (1855), 695.
 3. Athenaeum, (April 7, 1855), p. 467.
 4. Examiner, (April 21, 1855), 245.

character in preventing the "stubborn" Higgins, recently bereaved by the death of his daughter, from going out to drown his sorrow in drink.¹

Equally affecting for the Athenaeum were Mrs. Gaskell's pathetic scenes, especially those featuring the consumptive Bessy Higgins:

[Mrs. Gaskell] calls out pathos skilfully. Few things have been met in modern fiction more touching than the fading away of the poor girl [Bessie Higgins] ... The poetical Methodism of this girl, - the homely, uncomplaining affection, - the mixture of rudeness and reverence with which she looks up to the delicately-nurtured lady [Margaret Hale], make up an admirable picture. ²

In terms reminiscent of Maria Edgeworth's feelings towards old Alice in Mary Barton, the New Monthly's critic felt that Bessie was "a true sketch, though some who have never come across a like character may suppose it fanciful and unreal, which it assuredly is not". Mrs. Gaskell's "command of pathos", he continued, "is well proven, and this sick girl exemplifies it anew".³

Another character to excite pity was Margaret's unfortunate, rather petty-minded mother. Both Forster and the Inquirer agreed that in the beginning she does not appear worthy of much affection, but later wins our sympathy for her courage during the fatal disease:

[Her illness] reveals something we had not known in her character. She has pined incessantly since the change from Helstone, yet it would seem that she was but half known even by those who knew her best (and how often this is so), for while she incurred censure for fidgeting at trifles, she was

1. (December 1855). 431.

2. (April 7, 1855), p. 407.

3. (December 1855), p. 432.

submitting to the tortures of a fatal and hopeless disease with the mention of which she was unwilling to alarm her husband and daughter. 1

Mrs.Hale's learned but weak husband did not fail to excite respect mingled with pity. The New Monthly's reviewer described him as a "dreamy conscientious clergyman -- refined, gentle, courteous and utterly unfitted to breast the tide of life".² The Spectator pronounced him "a very respectable specimen of the South", yet not the "most distinctive or memorable".³ Montégut sympathised with him as an honest person whose delicate moral spirit inhabits a weak and nervous body.⁴

If serious thoughts were associated with Mr.Hale, his servant, Dixon, was greeted in a happier way. The New Monthly saw her, together with Dixon in Ruth, as another proof that Mrs.Gaskell is "healthily alive to the ludicrous."⁵ Forster in the Examiner asserted with enthusiasm that she was "an important person in the story, and acquits herself to the life whenever she appears."⁶

A far more important "character" was that of the author herself. We have already seen that by 1855 respect for Mrs.Gaskell, as perhaps the ablest lady novelist living, was general. This respect was accompanied by a considerable degree of affection with a good number of readers. Her genial humour, her tact, her charming femininity and her

1. Examiner, (April 21, 1855), p. 245.

2. (December 1855), p. 432.

3. (March 31, 1855), 342.

4. Op.cit., p. 119.

5. (December 1855), p.432.

6. (April 21, 1855), p. 245.

"lofty thought" earned her many a tribute, like this of the Monthly Christian Spectator:

We are jealous over [Mrs.Gaskell] with a godly jealousy, springing from our high estimation of her noble gifts, and concurrent with the affectionate interest we feel in her career. May her sun increase, and go down at some far-off day in a beautiful splendour, leaving a track of light over the world of human thought! 1

1. (1855), 699-700.

Chapter Five

"A GLORY TO THE LITERARY BROTHERHOOD": The Reception of
THE LIFE OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË

Early in April 1855 Mrs.Gaskell was preparing to post the two volumes of the recently published North and South to Charlotte Brontë at Haworth, West Yorkshire. For over five years, it had been customary for the two authors to exchange their literary productions. Indeed, the first contact ever established between them had to do with their work. This was in November 1849, when Charlotte Brontë sent Mrs.Gaskell her second work Shirley. After this friendly gesture Mrs.Gaskell expressed a keen desire to meet the fellow novelist.¹ In the summer of 1850 the two, already well-known, lady novelists of the North met for the first time under the auspices of the Kay-Shuttleworths. It was a meeting that laid the foundation of a friendship that was to continue and grow, reinforced by reciprocal visits and the medium of correspondence. As we have already seen, Charlotte Brontë never failed to write appreciative letters to Mrs.Gaskell on Ruth, Cranford and the serialized North and South.

The dispatch of the volume copy of North and South was never to take place, however. On April 4, the same day Mrs.Gaskell intended to write to Charlotte, news reached her of the death of her friend. The ill news could scarcely have left a stranger unshocked; Charlotte Brontë was only 38 and had been married for barely a year. It was poignantly ironical too that the death of Charlotte Brontë, whose novels set such a store by love and sexual attraction, was linked to her decision to accept the matrimonial offer of her father's curate,

1. Letters, 72.

Mr.Nicholls: Charlotte Brontë succumbed to pregnancy disorders, fatally aggravated by the same hereditary tuberculosis which over six years before had destroyed the lives of her brother Branwell and her two sisters Emily and Anne.

Mrs.Gaskell learnt of Charlotte's death through a note from the elderly Haworth stationer, Mr.Greenwood. Immediately she sent a letter of condolence to the two bereaved men at the Haworth vicarage, Charlotte's father and husband. She also wrote a few lines to Greenwood:

I cannot tell you how VERY sad your note has made me. My dear dear friend that I shall never see again on earth! I did not even know she was ill... I was meaning to write to her this very day, to tell her of the appearance of a copy of my new book, whh I was sending to her. You may well say you have lost your best friend; strangers might know her by her great fame, but we loved her dearly for her goodness, truth, and kindness, & those lovely qualities she carried with her where she is gone... I loved her dearly, more than I think she knew. I shall never cease to be thankful that I knew her; or to mourn her loss. 1

Brief as this note is, it still reveals Mrs.Gaskell's profound feeling of grief at the sudden loss of her friend. Mrs.Gaskell's words also give a clue to the kind of regard she had always held for Charlotte Brontë; she thought highly of the author of Jane Eyre as a literary artist, but she placed a much greater value on the "lovely qualities" of her friend as a woman of an extraordinary personality and thoroughly admirable character.

It was not long before both the nature and depth of Mrs.Gaskell's feeling for Charlotte Brontë were put to a serious test. On June 16 she received "most unexpectedly"² an invitation from Charlotte's

1. Letters, 232.

2. Ibid., 245.

father to write an authorised biography of his daughter. The Rev. Patrick Brontë was anxious, he told Mrs.Gaskell, to correct misrepresentations of his daughter's life in some of the obituary notices and periodical articles. Mr.Brontë's stronger motive for commissioning the biography, however, was the commemorative impulse; the supremely self-centred old man had in his own way no small amount of pride in the literary talents of all his children, especially the last to die, and the best known, Charlotte. He may also have perceived the great artistic potential for such a subject as that of Charlotte's life depicted by Mrs.Gaskell, a very sympathetic friend of his daughter, and the creator of the dutiful, passionate and imaginative Margaret Hale (North and South), in many significant ways an image of his departed child. In any case, Mr.Brontë's high expectations and his faith in Mrs.Gaskell's abilities are obvious from his anxiety that the proposed work should clearly bear her name so that it might achieve wide popularity and remain of permanent value:

My dear Madam, - Finding that a great many scribblers, as well as some clever and truthful writers, have published articles in newspapers and tracts - respecting my dear daughter Charlotte since her death - and seeing that many things that have been stated are ...false... I can see no better plan under the circumstances than to apply to some established Author to write a brief account of her life - and to make some remarks on her works. You seem to me to be the best qualified for doing what I wish should be done. If, therefore, you will be so kind as to publish a long, or short, account of her life and works, just as you may deem expedient and proper - Mr.Nicholls and I will give you such information as you may require. I should expect and request that you would affix your name, so that the work might obtain a wide circulation, and be handed down to the latest times... Mr.Nicholls approves of the step I have taken, and could my daughter speak from the tomb I feel certain she would laud our choice. 1

1. J.Lock and W.T.Dixon, A Man of Sorrow: The Life, Letters and Times of the Rev. Patrick Brontë, 1965, p. 493.

Pondering Mr.Brontë's letter, Mrs.Gaskell could have thought of a number of considerations to make her at least hesitate to comply with this request. First of all, there were the difficulties and embarrassment usually encountered in telling the life-story of a recently departed person. Such difficulties were especially apparent in Charlotte Brontë's case. The author of Jane Eyre had experienced more than an ordinary amount of trials and suffering, relieved at times by moments of moral and literary victory. In this, of course, there was material that should have appealed to the novelist in Mrs.Gaskell. Moreover, to champion the cause of her late friend, and thus to expose the misdeeds of all those who contributed to Charlotte's privations and unhappiness, was a mission especially tempting to Mrs.Gaskell, whose Ruth and Mary Barton had already shown how intensely she disliked injustice and sympathised with its victims. Yet to do so was to record the misdoings and shortcomings of still living people, one of whom, ironically enough, was the proposer of the biography, Mr.Brontë himself. After her brief stay with Charlotte at the Kay-Shuttleworths' in 1850, Mrs.Gaskell's impression of the father of her new friend was far from favourable. Basing her opinion presumably upon anecdotes supplied by her hosts, she uncharitably summed him up in a subsequent letter to Catherine Winkworth as a "strange half mad" man.¹ Later contact, especially during her 1853 visit to Haworth, when Charlotte provided her guest with a résumé of her life, seemed to have strengthened Mrs.Gaskell's conviction that Mr.Brontë's eccentricity and his wayward educational notions added to the bleakness and misfortunes of the Brontë family life, already beset by poverty, poor

1. Letters, 75.

health and the harsh environment of the Yorkshire moors.

There were still other reasons that could have made Mrs. Gaskell pause before undertaking the biographical project. On a general level, the art and conventions of biography impose constraints that are not always congenial to the practitioner of the freer art of fiction. Also, biographical writing in Mrs. Gaskell's own time, though remarkably prolific and popular, rarely attained the excellence and powerful impact of the novel, which in theory was only an imitation of the reality that biography set out directly to capture. Earlier in the century such works as Southey's Nelson and Lockhart's Scott, and more recently Carlyle's Sterling, conferred on the art of biography the prestige of such eminent names. But the biographical genre as a whole lagged far behind the novel, which in 1855 could boast a much greater number of masterpieces and masterpiece-writers.

The reasons for the general lack of inspiration that characterised Victorian biography are manifold. Evangelicalism with the related emphasis upon moral example and the increasing practice of reticence gradually restricted the role of the life-writer to that of the hagiographer. On the technical side, the growing respect for facts and documentation resulted in what Carlyle disparagingly called "compilations", which in the worst examples presented dull collections of events, letters and annotations. If we add to that the fact that the biographical art normally requires its practitioner to subserve his personality to that of his chosen subject, and that many contemporary subjects were uninspiring in the first place, we may appreciate why nineteenth-century biography - unlike the novel, for instance - generally failed to attract the most imaginative and original minds. As we shall see, even contemporary critics had few illusions about the quality or survival capability of the numerous biographical works

which, together with history, fiction and religious books, crowded the lists of "New Publications".

Whatever Mrs.Gaskell felt on receiving Mr.Brontë's letter of June 16, it did not take her long to make up her mind. On June 18 she wrote to Charlotte Brontë's publisher, George Smith, announcing her decision with an air of eager excitement:

My dear Sir,

I have received (most unexpectedly) the enclosed letter from Mr.Brontë; I have taken some time to consider the request made in it, but I have consented to write it, as well as I can.....I shall have.... to omit a good deal of detail as to her home; and the circumstances, which must have had so much to do in forming her character. All these can be merely indicated during the life-time of her father, and to a certain degree in the lifetime of her husband-- Still I am very anxious to perform this grave duty laid upon me well and fully. 1

Mrs.Gaskell's agitation should be attributed to the fact that she hardly expected the reserved Mr.Brontë even to consider the idea of a biography written of his child. It must have been another considerable surprise for Mrs.Gaskell to find herself selected by Mr.Brontë and his son-in-law (the latter, she suspected, disliked her as a Dissenter) for what the two men could only regard as a most intimate and sacred task. Mrs.Gaskell's apparent keenness to accept Mr.Brontë's offer was more than a matter of gratitude, however. The impulse to commemorate that impelled the bereaved father to make his request (and, in so doing, override his son-in-law's initial objections) was itself strongly felt by Mrs.Gaskell.² More than two weeks before she received Mr.Brontë's

1. Letters, 245.

2. Mr.Brontë was prompted to choose Mrs.Gaskell by his daughter's life-long friend, Ellen Nussey. It was Ellen who originally thought of the necessity of a true biography to be written by Mrs.Gaskell. Ellen Nussey's letter to Mr.Nicholls (dated June 6, 1855) and his polite dismissal of her suggestion (June 11, 1855) are reprinted in Clement K.Shorter, Charlotte Brontë and her Circle, 1896, pp.10-11.

letter, she had written to George Smith:

If I live long enough, and no one is living whom such a publication would hurt, I will publish what I know of her, and make the world (if I am but strong enough in expression) honour the woman as much as they have admired the writer. 1

At the time she thought of this as a long-term project, believing that there was no prospect of her friend's father and widower approving of it in the near future. This rather frustrated her; the romantic sadness and beautiful nobility of Charlotte's life, she confided to Smith, were too valuable not to be preserved in a memoir that might one day be published:

... this summer I would put down every thing I remembered about this dear friend and noble woman, before its vividness had faded from my mind: but I know that Mr. Brontë, and I fear that Mr. Nicholls, would not like this made public, even though the more she was known the more people would honour her as a woman, separate from her character as authoress. Still my children, who all loved her would like to have what I could write about her; and the time may come when her wild sad life, and the beautiful character that grew out of it may be made public. 2

After Mr. Brontë's letter had freed her from these fears, and shown them to have been ill-founded, Mrs. Gaskell appeared to have no other worry, except the resolution communicated to Smith to suppress those details that might hurt the feelings of the two men Charlotte had left behind -- this was a resolution she was not going to observe strictly, however.³ As for the general state of the biographical art in her time, Mrs.

1. Letters, 241.

2. Ibid., 242.

3. Mrs. Gaskell, determined to give a full picture of the circumstances that formed Charlotte's character, was to narrate certain educational and temperamental habits of Mr. Brontë, which he found objectionable. See p.231 below.

Gaskell might well have felt that her own life-story of her friend would shine all the more brightly because of the relative absence of serious competition in this field. Susanna Winkworth was almost certainly reflecting Mrs.Gaskell's own confidence in her powers when she said: "[Mrs.Gaskell] will make a capital thing of the 'Life', and show people how lives ought to be written."¹ Mrs.Gaskell, moreover, had no intention of going against the mainstream of adulation and didactic intention that so pervaded contemporary biography. In this respect she was sincerely at one with the spirit of the time, her own image of Charlotte being one of strong and inspiring admiration.

Mrs.Gaskell began to prepare for the Life almost as soon as she informed George Smith of her decision. The industry and thoroughness of her hunt for primary material testify to the seriousness with which she viewed "the grave duty"² laid upon her. In addition to the numerous letters she successfully gathered from almost every possible source, she took it upon herself to visit nearly all the places Charlotte Brontë ever had been to - these included two schools in Yorkshire and Mme. Heger's Institute in Brussels. The shape she decided to give to her work was a modification of the "Life and Letters" type of biography common at the time. Charlotte Brontë's life was to be narrated as a connected story, with the emphasis upon using Charlotte's words whenever that was possible. This left the earlier part of the work mainly told in Mrs.Gaskell's own language with quotations from Charlotte's correspondence increasingly playing a prominent role, especially in the latter half of the story.

With the Life nearing completion late the following year (1856),

1. Quoted in Hopkins, op.cit., p.165.

2. Letters, 245.

Mrs. Gaskell's worries about the reception of her new work began to loom large in her letters to her new publisher, George Smith. Time and again she told him that she detested contemporary reviewing, which, she believed, was either too flattering or too unintelligently censorious.¹ Past experience with the reception of Mary Barton and Ruth, in addition, no doubt, to the strain of the present work, made her stipulate to George Smith that he could not publish the Life until she was out of the reviewers' reach - having a holiday with the Storys in Rome.² Her premonitions concerning the critical response to the new work were especially intense this time, since she anticipated facing the critics on two fronts. She would feel very unhappy, she told Smith, not only if reviewers attacked her part in the Life, but also if they had any unfavourable remarks to make upon the subject of her work:

I hope to have finished my Life of Miss Brontë by the end of February, and then I should like to be off and away out of the reach of reviews, which in this case will have a double power to wound, for if they say anything disparaging of her I know I shall not have done her and the circumstances in which she was placed justice;.... her circumstances made her faults, while her virtues were her own. 3

Finishing the biography on February 7, Mrs. Gaskell soon made for Rome on a well-deserved holiday. The Life of Charlotte Brontë appeared on March 25 in 2 volumes, cloth. The young, shrewd publisher, George Smith, anticipating a wide circulation of the book, priced the two volumes at 24 shillings, instead of the average 20.⁴

1. Letters, 313-314, 326.

2. Ibid., 314, 329, 331, 338.

3. Ibid., 313.

4. Smith was found to be at fault by the Monthly Christian Spectator, which complained: "...the only fault we have to find with the book is, that it is too dear. Twenty-four shillings for two volumes of 330 pages each is too much; nor can any prospect of a cheap edition hereafter reconcile us to the policy of a first publication at this price." (VII (May 1857), 305.)

He proved right. The circulating libraries rushed to buy the new book. The biggest, Mudie's, proudly put it at the top of its list of "New and Choice Books", announcing that it had bought fifteen hundred copies. This, in a list comprising over 60 items, was second only to Macaulay's History of England, volumes 3 and 4, which were 2,000.¹ Because of the General Election held at the time, the weeklies were able to catch up with the dailies in noticing Mrs. Gaskell's new work. Thus the earliest reviews appeared on April 4. On that day very favourable notices came out in the Daily News,² the Globe,³ the Press⁴ and in the three important literary weeklies, the Athenaeum⁵ (H.F. Chorley), the Spectator⁶ and the Saturday Review.⁷ In the following fortnight the Life was again favourably received by the Leader (Thomas Hunt)⁸, the Examiner,⁹ the Observer,¹⁰ the Economist¹¹ and the Weekly Dispatch.¹² On April 24 four further appreciative reviews appeared in the Manchester Weekly Examiner¹³,

1. Cf. Athenaeum, (June 6, 1857), p.710.
2. P.2.
3. P.1.
4. V.339-41.
5. No.1536, pp.427-29.
6. XXX, 373-74.
7. III, 313-14.
8. Two-part review: (April 11, 1857), pp.353-4; (April 18, 1857), 376-7.
9. (April 11, 1857), pp. 228-29.
10. (April 12, 1857) p.5.
11. XV (April 18, 1857), 425-26.
12. (April 19. 1857), p.6.
13. P.3.

the Inquirer¹, the Court Circular² and The Times.³ The last-mentioned important newspaper, not previously well disposed towards the fictional productions of Charlotte Brontë, published a substantial and very enthusiastic article on the book, noting both Mrs. Gaskell's skill and the powerful impact of her new work; Mrs. Gaskell, wrote the Times, who is:

a sister authoress, gifted herself with superior powers, has described with true womanly sympathy and eagerness the whole course of the life which is now closed for ever, and we receive the record so honourable to both without searching for its imperfections; contented, and more than contented, to regard it as a monument of courage and endurance, of suffering and triumph, which is not only a glory to the literary brotherhood, but a creditable testimony to the tendencies of human nature. ⁴

The monthlies and quarterlies, which began to notice the book in May, joined the weeklies and dailies in the chorus of praise. In May and June we find laudatory reviews of the Life in Fraser's Magazine (Sir John Skelton),⁵ the Monthly Review,⁶ Colburn's New Monthly Magazine,⁷ the Sun,⁸ the Guardian,⁹ the Manchester Guardian,¹⁰

1. No. 773, p. 260.
2. III, 2.
3. P.9.
4. Ibid.
5. LV (May 1857), 569-82.
6. II (May 1857), 307-319.
7. CX, 317-35.
8. (May 1, 1857), p.3.
9. No. 596 (May 6, 1857), p. 359-60.
10. , (May 7, 1857), p.4.

Tait's Edinburgh Magazine,¹ the Gentleman's Magazine² and the National Magazine³. In July fresh reviews continued to appear, some of them breaking for the first time what had been virtually a consensus of approval.⁴ The Roman Catholic Rambler printed a brief dismissive review, attacking both Charlotte Brontë and her biographer. We have no time, said the reviewer, to discuss in detail the work of "the three wayward spirits", Charlotte and her two sisters. Their work, especially that of Charlotte, has "power and finish", but "the ill-omened system of training" they received at home "entailed wretched consequences on [their] minds and bodies." As for Mrs. Gaskell's plea that the world should judge Charlotte Brontë leniently in view of the harsh circumstances of her life, this was totally absurd: "Mrs. Gaskell and Miss Brontë", said the reviewer, "profess to instruct the world." It is thus "childish to whine about" the not unmerited "severity, harshness or cruelty" of the criticism they have incurred.⁵ Another religious journal, the ultra-conservative, evangelical Christian Observer published a lengthier and more severe article, again attacking both Mrs. Gaskell and the subject of her biography. The earlier reviewers had been so impressed by the Life that hardly an unkind criticism was made of Charlotte Brontë. Even the Spectator, which had been particularly chilly towards the author of Jane Eyre in

1. N.s. XXIV (May 1857), 292-5.

2. CCII (June 1857), 688-694.

3. II (June 1857), 76-78.

4. The only early reviews to criticize Mrs. Gaskell mildly for not observing "greater reticence" in relating the private affairs of the Brontë family were the Critic (XVI (April 15, 1857) 168-71) and the Englishwoman's Review (I (April 18, 1857), 2).

5. N.s. VIII (July 1857), 79.

her life-time,¹ exclaimed that it was "impossible to read through Mrs. Gaskell's two volumes without a strong conviction that Charlotte Brontë was a woman as extraordinary by her character as by her genius..., [a woman whose entire existence] seems to have been a martyrdom."² By contrast, the Christian Observer did not mince words in its attack on the irreligious tendencies of Charlotte Brontë's work. Her Unitarian champion was weighed in the same balance, too, and found hopelessly wanting. At last Mrs. Gaskell's fears of doubly-wounding reviews proved fully justified:

The publication of the present biography ... have led us to look at what had been "tabooed" volumes [of Jane Eyre]... The moral of the tale is obviously as bad as can well be conceived, in as much as it encourages the conviction that ungovernable passion is an apology for every other vice, and that a young woman may reasonably fall in love with a monster [Rochester]...

Mrs. Gaskell appears herself, to us, to partake, to a considerable extent, of the defects of Miss Brontë...; the moral influence of her writing is, to say the least, very doubtful. If "Mary Barton" teaches any moral, it is that all the miseries of society are exclusively the work of the rich: according to our view, a most false and mischievous representation. And in "Ruth", she instructs us that a woman who has violated the laws of purity is entitled to occupy precisely the same position in society as one who has never thus offended.

We may add, that the style of religion in the two friends ... is far from satisfactory ... There is little in [Charlotte Brontë's] work which enables us to decide as to the degree in which she ... embraced the whole religion of the New Testament. Mrs. Gaskell's religious creed is, we cannot but fear, one of a very limited character ... To such moral teachers we have no disposition to listen... 3

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1. For information about the contemporary reception of the Brontës' works, Professor M. Allott's edition of The Brontës: The Critical Heritage (1974) is particularly useful.
 2. (April 4, 1857), p. 374.
 3. LVII (July 1857), 487-90.

The Christian Observer and the Rambler were not primarily concerned with The Life of Charlotte Brontë. They both took the opportunity of the book's appearance to warn their readers of the spiritual perils lurking in the work of the two novelists. Three reviews, however, specifically directed against the Life, and especially against Mrs.Gaskell's role as a biographer, came out in the same month (July) and were written, anonymously, by well-known critics. They appeared in Blackwood's (E.S.Dallas),¹ the National Review (W.C.Roscoe)² and the Edinburgh (Sir James Fitzjames Stephen)³. All these reviews, especially the last, are somewhat linked to an unfortunate development that checked the book's popularity and caused much humiliation to its author. This is the famous "retraction" incident, which arose out of Mrs.Gaskell's close identification in the Life of a lady with whom Charlotte's brother Branwell is thought to have had an affair.

As we have already seen, Mrs.Gaskell started her work on the biography with one obvious resolution, namely, to suppress those details that might hurt the feelings of the living, especially Mr.Brontë and his son-in-law. With this principle in mind she dealt with the episode of Charlotte's unreturned love for her Brussels master, M.Heger. During her data-collecting mission to Brussels, Mrs.Gaskell won the confidence of Charlotte's previous teacher, who read to her (or let her see) the letters he received from Charlotte in 1844-45. Mrs. Gaskell must have realized then that the pupil's feeling for her teacher

1. LXXXII (July 1857), 77-94.

2. V (July 1857), 127-64. This is misdated, June 1857, in M.Allott, ed. The Brontës, op.cit., p.346.

3. "The Licence of Modern Novelists" CVI (July 1857), 124-56.

was innocent enough. Still, she rightly felt that Charlotte's unmmistaken expressions of love for a married man would not sound so innocent to her mid-Victorian readers. In the Life she describes Charlotte's experiences in Brussels in detail, but not a hint is given of the cause of much of Charlotte's desolation. Indeed, Mrs.Gaskell antedates Branwell's dismissal from his post as tutor to account for the depression that overcame Charlotte after she had finally left Brussels for Haworth early in 1844.

Caution in this instance triumphed, and Mrs.Gaskell left out this interesting phase in Charlotte's mental development much against her instinct as a novelist and contrary to her firm resolution to provide the fullest picture possible of Charlotte's personality.

Mrs.Gaskell considered the feelings of the living in other less drastic ways. She occasionally exercised her editorial powers, when quoting from Charlotte's correspondence, to cross out a cutting remark directed against a friend of the family. Also, when reporting her own first impression of the physical appearance of Charlotte, she slightly modified it to give a more favourable account of the plain Charlotte.¹

Apart from such rather minor amendments, and the special case of the love letters, Mrs.Gaskell carried out fully her decision to include all the circumstances of her subject's life, even if this was to embarrass or antagonize some of the living. This was the result of both her fascination by Charlotte's unusual life, and the intense pity she felt for her. It was difficult for Mrs.Gaskell to refrain from recounting the errors of those who made Charlotte suffer so frequently

1. Illustrations and a discussion of these editorial changes are to be found in Alan Shelston's introduction to his edition of The Life of Charlotte Brontë, Penguin, 1975, pp. 31-33. All quotations are made from this edition, from now on referred to as Life.

and unnecessarily. Mrs.Gaskell must also have made the generally correct guess that a full account of the events of Charlotte's life would serve her purpose of creating public sympathy for Charlotte and raising her in the world's regard.

Mrs.Gaskell clearly considered Mr.Brontë to be one of those adverse circumstances that Charlotte had to contend with. Thus, although his entire picture in the Life is not particularly unsympathetic, he is portrayed as an eccentric man who had peculiar notions about how to make his children grow hardy, and who used to vent his passion, when angry, by firing off a pistol in the back yard. Mr. Brontë admired Mrs.Gaskell's biography, offering on the whole rather mild objection:

I do not deny that I am somewhat eccentric. Had I been numbered amongst the calm, sedate, concentric men of the world, I should not have been as I now am, and I should in all probability never have had such children as mine have been. I have no objection whatever to your representing me as a little eccentric, since you and other learned friends will have it so - only don't set me on in my fury to burning hearthrugs, sawing the backs of chairs, and tearing my wife's silk gowns - With respect to tearing my wife's silk gown, my dear little daughter [Charlotte] must have been misinform'd. 1

Mr.Carus Wilson, founder of the Clergy Daughters' School, did not react so moderately to the Life's unfavourable account of that charitable institution, where the nine-year-old Charlotte spent several terrible months. Charlotte never forgot the appalling conditions, filthy food and insensitive treatment she found there, reproducing this

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1. J.Lock and Dixon, A Man of Sorrow, op.cit., p.508. Mrs.Gaskell drew part of the information about Mr.Brontë from his daughter as the above letter makes clear. A large number of the picturesque anecdotes illustrating his behaviour, however, seem to have been based upon false reports which Mrs.Gaskell trustingly received from a nurse, who was once employed at the Brontë household, but later dismissed for her inefficiency and drunkenness.

unhappy childhood experience in her portrait of Lowood in Jane Eyre.

In her treatment of this episode in the Life Mrs.Gaskell tried to take a neutral stance, but she leaned too much in favour of the general accuracy of her subject's memories that the resulting impression of the school was to excite the fury of a number of reviewers. The Times, for instance, could hardly suppress its indignation at the "picture of the children's suffering from harsh or inadequate superintendence", calling the whole affair "a species of criminality which is shamefully neglected in the statutes of the realm."¹

Mr.Carus Wilson, very old at the time, had many supporters, who kept sending a stream of abusive letters to Charlotte's biographer. Wilson's son-in-law defended his relative's cause in a pamphlet, which he lucidly called A Refutation of the Statements in 'The Life of Charlotte Brontë', Regarding the Casterton Clergy Daughter's School When at Cowan Bridge. A heated correspondence on the subject started in two local newspapers, the Halifax Guardian and the Leeds Mercury, between Mr.Nicholls and a Wilson apologist. Charlotte's widower, not sanguine from the start about the Life, rose to Mrs.Gaskell's defence, when he found the Wilson people attacking with equal severity both his wife; for her fictitious re-creation in Jane Eyre of her unhappy school days, and her biographer for repeating what they claimed were Charlotte Brontë's false and malicious allegations.

Other people found in the Life reason to complain, and protested to Mrs.Gaskell accordingly. But their complaints remained of a private nature, causing much personal chagrin to Mrs.Gaskell, but unable to touch the book's popularity. Even the vociferous Wilson supporters

1. (April 25, 1857), p. 9.

received little sympathy or publicity in the national press. The one person to attract such attention, and seriously affect the book's fortunes, was Lady Lydia Scott (formerly Mrs. Robinson). Stopping short of calling her by name, Mrs. Gaskell gave enough detail as to render her recognizable to all who personally knew her. The book's wide popularity proved to be anything but a blessing in this respect. For even if Lady Scott did not care to read Mrs. Gaskell's book, her friends must have alerted her to Mrs. Gaskell's passionate attack upon her as the "bold and hardened" seducer of the much younger Branwell, the precipitator of his moral disintegration, and the person responsible "in part" at least for his "premature death."¹

Early in May Lady Scott instructed her solicitors to initiate a libel suit unless the damaging paragraphs were struck out of the Life. Mrs. Gaskell was still in Rome; so her husband, helped by the family solicitor, Mr. William Shaen, set out to deal with a most difficult situation. Together they made the journey to Haworth, seeking evidence to corroborate Mrs. Gaskell's story, especially the love letters which Branwell was supposed to have constantly carried about in his pockets. No such evidence was forthcoming. An examination of the will of Lady Scott's former husband showed that no restriction or reference to Branwell was entered in it, as the Life alleged. Since it would have been of no avail in a law-court that the Brontë family believed Branwell's story of his intrigue, and consequently Mrs. Gaskell's treatment of that episode,² Mr. Shaen had no choice but to publicly

1. Life, I, ch. 13, pp. 273, 281.

2. In April 1857 Mr. Brontë wrote to Mrs. Gaskell praising her picture of his "brilliant and unhappy son" and his "diabolical seducer." (W. Gérin, Branwell Brontë, 1961, p. 241). Although it is now impossible to know how much truth there was in Branwell's allegations concerning the affair, a number of Brontë scholars (including W. Gérin, author of Charlotte Brontë: The Evolution of Genius, 1967) tend to believe that they were basically true.

retract in Mrs.Gaskell's name all the statements and allegations made in the Life regarding the affair. On May 30 the following correspondence was published as an advertisement in The Times and a week later in the Athenaeum¹ and the Saturday Review:²

To the Editor of the Times

York, 27th May
1857

Sir, We shall feel obliged by your inserting the following correspondence.

We are, Sir,

Your obedient servants,
Newton and Robinson.

8, Bedford-Row, London,
26 May 1857.

Dear Sirs,-As Solicitor for and on behalf of the Rev.W. Gaskell, and of Mrs.Gaskell, his wife, the latter of whom is authoress of the Life of Charlotte Brontë, I am instructed to retract every statement contained in that work which imputes to a widowed lady, referred to, but not named therein, any breach of her conjugal, of her maternal, or of her social duties, and more especially the statements contained in chapter 13 of the first volume, and in chapter 2 of the second volume, which impute to the lady in question a guilty intercourse with the late Branwell Brontë. All those statements were made upon information which at the time Mrs.Gaskell believed to be well founded, but which, upon investigation, with the additional evidence furnished to me by you, I have ascertained not to be trustworthy. I am therefore authorised not only to retract the statements in question, but to express the deep regret of Mrs.Gaskell that she should have been led to make them.-
I am, dear Sirs, yours truly,

William Shaen

Messrs.Newton and Robinson, solicitors,
York.

1. (June 6, 1857), pp. 726-27.

2. III (June 6, 1857), p.518.

York, 27th May, 1857.

Dear Sir,- As solicitors of the lady to whom your letter of the 26th inst. refers, we, on her behalf, accept the apology therein contained, and we have to add that neither that lady nor ourselves ever entertained a doubt that the statements of Mrs.Gaskell were, as you say, made upon information which at the time Mrs.Gaskell believed to be well founded.

We are, dear Sir, yours truly,
Newton and Robinson

W.Shaen, Esq., Bedford-Row, London.¹

On June 6 the Athenaeum and the Saturday Review published comments deploring Mrs.Gaskell's failure to ascertain the facts relating to the affair. Since the book had been warmly endorsed on their pages a few weeks back, the two periodicals felt as if betrayed by this unexpected development. The more remarkable of their comments was the one published in the conservative, intellectual and often fastidious Saturday Review. In a two-page article the writer tries to go beyond the expected cries of moral shock to understand why Mrs.Gaskell had been misled so easily into making what appeared to be a completely groundless accusation. Two very interesting points are raised by the reviewer. He attributes the "gullibility" of Mrs.Gaskell to her class-views, her suspicion of the privileged and sympathy for the downtrodden, and to the appeal the Branwell episode had on her imagination as a novelist:

[Mrs.Gaskell] is very generally regarded as a great and influential moral teacher, and she is a woman of real genius, and of the most humane and benevolent views... Yet, she is drawn into making an accusation of which, as a woman and a mother, she must appreciate all the fearful bitterness... It is ...worthwhile to consider the steps by which this came about...It is obvious that, for the purposes of his story, a novelist values facts, not because they are true, but because they are striking, or because they embody his own general views of life and of human nature... It is also the common disposition of novelists, and especially of Mrs.Gaskell, to

1. (May 30, 1857), p.5.

take the part of those upon whom social arrangements press harshly... and the villains of their pieces are for the most part Scribes or Pharisees... Here was a 'rich widow', still 'showy', though advanced in life... the daughter of a pious father- in fact a born and bred Pharisee.¹ And here, on the other hand, was [Branwell Brontë] an obscure clever man, the son of a poor country clergyman..., full of violent, ill-regulated ambition and passion, living a melancholy life, and dying a tragical death. In short, here was just such a publican and sinner as, in one of Mrs.Gaskell's [own] novels...

Could Mrs.Gaskell avoid belief in such a touching tale as this?... The story is worked up to a climax of horror. We are made to watch... the degradation of great talents not duly balanced by principle... [Summary of Branwell's downfall as given in the Life] Such is the story decked out by all the graces of a most vigorous style, and all the force of an enthusiasm which is almost equally generous, dangerous, and unjust. Mr.Shaen's letter [in the retraction advertisement] forms a salutary though prosaic commentary upon it. 2

With the general drift of the Saturday arguments few modern readers would quarrel. Even his rather simplistic view of Mrs.Gaskell's class bias has a lot of truth in it, and casts more light on the workings of Mrs.Gaskell's mind in her treatment of the Branwell story than one finds in some modern judgments concerning this still speculative area of Gaskell criticism.³

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1. Lady Scott (née Lydia Gisborne) belonged to the celebrated Evangelical "Clapham Sect" group of families.
 2. (June 6, 1857), pp.518-19.
 3. Cf., for instance, Professor Coral Lansbury's ingeniously far-fetched explanation of the same episode. In accordance with her strange view that the Life is mainly written from Charlotte's, rather than Mrs.Gaskell's, viewpoint, she remarks: "There are few incidents in the biography that are more indicative of Elizabeth Gaskell's method than the notorious passage concerning Branwell Brontë and Mrs.Robinson... The tone of the passage vividly recalls Jane Eyre's opinion of Blanche Ingram; it is unlike Elizabeth Gaskell to voice moral indignation in tones of such shrill vehemence ...Elizabeth Gaskell...related [the story] in the tones of Charlotte Brontë. Few writers have denounced sexuality with such vehemence and been so attracted by all its manifestations, and it is this aspect of Charlotte's nature that is reflected throughout the whole...passage." (Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis, 1975, pp. 136-7). Mrs.Gaskell's tirade against Lady Scott referred to by Lansbury is on p.281 in The Life.

Mrs.Gaskell's retraction did not doom her book to irreparable damage. Although the second edition of June had to be withdrawn, a third "revised and corrected" one was published on August 22. The passages referring to Lady Scott in the latter edition were removed. Mrs.Gaskell also took the opportunity of a third edition to incorporate new material and modify those sections that were found to be objectionable by other people. Her comments on the founder of the Cowan Bridge School were somewhat toned down, much to the satisfaction of Mr.Wilson and his friends. Mr.Brontë became even happier with the Life when he saw that Mrs.Gaskell had made the omissions he had desired.¹

The effect of Mrs.Gaskell's public apology upon critics can be partially appraised from the reaction of the Saturday reviewer. He neither revoked the periodical's high opinion of the Life, nor did he doubt Mrs.Gaskell's integrity. What he found shocking was the haste and error of judgment involved in believing Branwell's allegations concerning his affair with Lady Scott; Mrs.Gaskell had a lot to be blamed for, but equally culpable was Branwell, who first deceived his family, and consequently his sister's biographer. After the retraction, the hardening of attitude towards Branwell became fairly general, and can be illustrated by the Westminster remarks. Mrs.Gaskell, observed the journal, saw Branwell through the eyes of his family,

whose natural affections after his death obscured or excused his faults. But...the conception of this youth as a fallen genius, a great intellect ruined [as the Life makes out], is a mistake into which an ordinary woman may have fallen, but which Mrs.Gaskell ought to have avoided. The lineaments

1. The reader can follow these and other changes in Alan Shelston's recent edition of the Life (op.cit.). This prints the text of the first edition, indicating all the amendments and additions of the third edition in the Notes section.

of an entirely worthless vagabond appear in his features from the beginning to the end. 1

Contrary to what is sometimes stated, no wholesale critical hostility or drastic popular apathy followed in the wake of the retraction.² Indeed a number of the most enthusiastic reviews appeared in and after July, that is, after the retraction became widely known. Both the British Quarterly Review³ and the Christian Remembrancer⁴, while properly and briefly reproachful when dealing with the recent development, dwelt at length and frequently on Mrs. Gaskell's role as a first-rate biographer. The Westminster reviewer, no less sorry concerning the retraction affair, fell likewise under the spell of the Life, registering in lofty terms his deep appreciation of its morally invigorating effect.⁵ Other favourable post-retraction reviews

1. N.s. XII (July-Oct. 1857), 296.

2. Mrs. Gaskell's recent biographer alleges that "neither the Circulating Libraries nor the general public were confident enough to rush to buy [the third edition of August] as they had before. Mrs. Gaskell was resigned to the book's failure." (W. Gérin, Elizabeth Gaskell, p. 200). It is true that Mrs. Gaskell reported that the sales in November were still slow (Letters, 379). This situation must have changed later, for early the following year Smith began preparing to issue a cheap edition (Letters, 387). Mudie's, and other circulating libraries, continued to include the Life in their advertisements throughout 1857. See the Athenaeum (1857), pp. 710, 742, 992, 1135, 1200. The last advertisement, put in by Mudie's, appeared on Dec. 12, 1857, p. 1536. The Life's success in America both in terms of sales and critical reception remained high, even after the retraction episode. Early in 1858 Harper's Weekly of New York reported: "Mrs. Gaskell's 'Life of Charlotte Brontë was the leading biographical work of the year... [and] sold remarkably well.'" (II (January 2, 1858). 6).

Hopkins, too, overstates the effect of the retraction upon the book's critical reception. (Elizabeth Gaskell, pp. 190-91).

3. XXVI (July 1857), 218-231.

4. N.s. XXXIV (July 1857), 87-145.

5. N.s. XII (July 1857), 294-296.

continued to appear on the other side of the Atlantic. These include notices in the Christian Examiner (L.P.Hale)¹, the American Church Monthly², Emerson's United States Magazine³ and the North American Review (Margaret Sweat)⁴. In France Mrs.Gaskell's constant admirer, Émile Montégut, wrote a lengthy and very appreciative article in Revue des deux mondes⁵. In short the Life was too good to be damned or ignored, however morally at fault Mrs.Gaskell appeared in making a seemingly baseless accusation, and no matter how much confidence was shaken in a biographer that admitted failure in the essential principle of telling the truth.

Looking at the unfavourable reviews, we find that Roscoe's censorious (though often appreciative) article in the National Review had been premeditated long before, and conceived regardless of, Mrs.Gaskell's public apology. Referring to the recent disclosure only in the last page of his lengthy review, Roscoe almost reproaches such quarters as the Athenaeum and the Saturday Review which expressed moral indignation after the event, and then profusely and unnecessarily: "Having had no opportunity to record [our opinion] before the late correspondence was advertised," he forbearingly observed, "we have no inclination to dwell on it now, or to follow the example of reading an insulting lesson to one who must already be painfully sensible of her error."⁶ Dallas began to prepare his far more severe critique of the

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1. LXI (July 1857), 145-149.
 2. III (Aug. 1857), 113-27.
 3. V (September 1857), 269-281.
 4. LXXXV (Oct. 1857), 293-329.
 5. VI (July 1857), 139-84.
 6. (July 1857), p.164.

Life as early as April.¹ Again, he does not give undue emphasis to the affair, though he seems, unlike Roscoe, to gloat over Mrs.Gaskell's misery. The author of the Life, he remarked, "tries to persuade herself that the said history of Branwell's intrigue, every word of which she has since been obliged ignominiously to retract, is given in the Christian hope [of bringing repentance to the heart of the lady.]"² What both Roscoe and Dallas held against the book was, as we shall see, its invasion of the privacy of the Brontë family. Mrs.Gaskell's débâcle over Lady Scott's moral turpitude played a rather minor part in their argument that a biography of Charlotte Brontë should not have been written in the first place.³

The only review that came near to be completely prejudiced by Mrs.Gaskell's retraction was Sir James Fitzjames Stephen's piece in the Edinburgh Review. Being a cousin of Lady Scott by marriage, Stephen was not a disinterested critic. Moreover, he was at the time out of humour with contemporary fiction. In a long article on "The Licence of Modern Novelists" he deplored their departure from entertainment to ill-informed attacks upon specific social institutions. Dickens was thus severely criticised for satirizing the administrative establishment in Little Dorrit. Charles Reade was cut down to size for making thinly disguised criticism of the Birmingham Prison system in It's Never Too Late to Mend. Winding up his review by a rather brief consideration of the Life, Stephen began by observing that Charlotte Brontë had herself been guilty of the same general mistake in her satire of people and

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1. See Blackwood's letter to Lewes, April 28, 1857, p. 267 n. 1 below.
 2. (July 1857), p.78.
 3. See pp. 263 ff. below.

institutions (for example, Cowan Bridge as Lowood in Jane Eyre). In the end comes Mrs.Gaskell's turn. Stephen was too perceptive and honest to deny the powerful effect of the Life. Yet Mrs.Gaskell's attack on Lady Scott was a sign that the disease had regrettably and alarmingly spread from fiction to biography. Therefore, what better criticism of the book could be made than to call it a novel, powerful, dramatic, colourful, but not true biography?

The life of this remarkable woman [Charlotte Brontë] has been read with an avidity which does not surprise us, for both the subject and the manner of the book are well calculated to excite the deepest interest. But Mrs.Gaskell appears to have learnt the art of the novel-writer so well that she cannot discharge from her palette the colours she has used in the pages of "Mary Barton" and "Ruth." This biography opens precisely like a novel, and the skilful arrangement of lights and shades and colours -- the prominence of some objects and the evident suppression of others -- leave on the mind the excitement of a highly wrought drama, rather than the simplicity of daylight and of nature. To heighten the interest of this strange representation...the biographer has thought it proper and necessary to introduce the episode of Branwell Brontë, a worthless brother of the three mysterious Bells... 1

If we take away the tone of discontent in which Stephen's remarks are made, both the modern reader and many contemporary critics of the Life can agree or would have agreed with many elements in his comment.

Although he does not specify what things were suppressed, his awareness of the selection and suppression that went into the making of the Life rings remarkably (though on his part half-knowingly) perceptive and true. Among other things, Mrs.Gaskell left out completely the episode of Charlotte's love for M.Heger. None of the book's critics knew about this, and only a few of them felt instinctively that something of the sort was missing.² Like Stephen, contemporary critics generally

1. CVI, 155.

2. See p. 258 below.

recognized the selection, the skill, and the novel-like impression of Charlotte's biography. They differed from him, however, in regarding these elements as merits in the Life rather than points of weakness.¹

Having thus followed briefly the Life's fortunes in the few months following its publication, with the complicating factor of the retraction, it is time now to consider the kind of comments Mrs. Gaskell's book drew as a work of biographical art. We shall also see how far Mrs. Gaskell succeeded in her principal intention of presenting Charlotte Brontë as an admirable woman, whose faults were mainly due to the adverse circumstances of her life.

The first thing one notices in the contemporary comments on the Life is the almost universal recognition that it clearly rose above the general run of other works in the same genre. Frustrated by the profusion of mediocre works, many critics took the opportunity of reviewing Mrs. Gaskell's book to air their grievances concerning the genre, or provide the prospective biographer with advice, often derived

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1. It is curious to see the celebrated biographer-critic, Harold Nicolson, giving in 1927 further and more elaborate theoretical backing to Stephen's prejudices against the book: "The [Life of Charlotte Brontë] is an excellent sentimental novel replete with local colour; but it is not a biography, since one of the central conceptions, that of Branwell Brontë's intrigue with a married woman, is sheer inexcusable fiction. It deals with the life of an individual, and it is certainly composed with high literary skill; but it does not fulfil the third requirement of pure biography; it is not, and in a very essential respect, accurate; it is a story, but it is not history." (The Development of English Biography, 1927, p. 128). This is a moralistic judgment coming ironically from one who insists on exclusively literary considerations in evaluating "pure" biography. It is his unhappiness with Mrs. Gaskell for tarnishing Lady Scott's reputation that makes Nicolson overlook the fact that Branwell's intrigue can not, even if it was pure fiction, make the whole book inaccurate. It is also interesting to notice that Nicolson is apparently unaware of the sensational disclosure brought about by the publication of Charlotte Brontë's letters to M. Heger in The Times (July 29, 1913).

from Mrs.Gaskell's actual achievement in the Life.

The Monthly Review opened its review by a too frequently heard complaint of the time, deploring "the deluge" of biographies written to commemorate anybody who slightly differed from the average.¹ Only a life of outstanding excellence, asserted the critic, should be immortalised in a biography:

Most biographies are impertinences. Some honest man, or worthy woman, or perhaps some precocious child, has left this world for a better, and straight-way all mankind must be informed what the first preferred for dinner, which colour the second liked for cap-ribbons, or which letter in the alphabet the third found most difficulty in learning... It seems, at all events, a questionable taste to force a departed friend or relative, justly endeared to private memories,...to appeal to the unsympathising judgment of a world of strangers. It is not excellence, but some remarkable excellence alone, which justifies publication;...²

The Monthly Review then proceeds to enumerate the common technical faults of contemporary biography, misplaced fine writing, excessive and tedious documentation or sheer obtuseness on the part of "glorifier":

Then, again, as the story is not worth telling, so the manner in which it is told diminishes rather than increases the original interest. Sometimes the historian has a passion for fine writing...sometimes an excess of dull conscientiousness make him tediously minute in his own description...or obvious incapacity induces him to spare his own comments, [plunging] his readers (if any) into a

1. Cf. this lively 1855 comment of the Saturday Review: "We are deluged with Biographies. Scarcely is a man of any note well dead - were he but a popular preacher in a provincial town - than he starts to life again in the shape of an octavo, or, it may be, ten octavos. And perhaps there is no department in literature more fertile of trash. A life well written is as rare as a life well spent." ((Dec.8, 1855) p.99). E.S.Dallas also deplored the unwholesome curiosity about "the private lives of our fellow-men" in what he called "the age of biography." (The Gay Science, 2 vols., 1866, II, 286.)

2. II, 307.

very mud-bath of feeble and profitless correspondence. In short, in many cases of biography we feel no very overwhelming interest in either the glorified or the glorifier. 1

After thus unburdening his chest, the reviewer turns with relief to the work at hand. Mrs. Gaskell's book is evidently worthy of interest, he observes. It is written by the capable hand of a famous authoress on another very remarkable woman:

It is, therefore, with a pleasure great in itself, greater by comparison, that we welcome the history of a life worth our study by a hand qualified to write it. Any particulars respecting the private life, and especially the mental history, of one so remarkable in the literary world as the author of Jane Eyre would be gladly received by the public, and we may add that any work by the author of Mary Barton would have been looked forward to with pleasurable anticipation. 2

Another quarter to take up the question of what kind of life should attract the attention of biographers was the Globe. Having in front of him an interesting life that lacked in outward excitement or grandeur, the Globe reviewer challenged the opinion that only spectacular lives were worthy of being recorded. Equally at fault, he continued, were those people (like Carlyle?) who believed that any life was of potential biographical value:

Men of thought [are carried into] the opposite error, which is that the life of every human being properly recorded would interest the world. We feel sure that it would not—because it ought not...We ought not to have our minds interested and satisfied with trivial, paltry, foolish and ignoble matters... A healthy taste in books does not crave for a glorification of the inglorious. 3

1. Ibid.

2. II, 307-308.

3. (April 4, 1857), p.1.

It is remarkable that both the Globe and the Monthly Review, disillusioned though they appear with the quality of contemporary biography, do not question its moral or didactic intention. They use "glorification" as if it were synonymous with life-writing, with a trace of impatience perhaps, but without offering serious objection. The Globe, however, proposes a somewhat different criterion to guide the biographer in choosing a subject fit for his endeavours. The Monthly Review's "remarkable excellence" becomes with the Globe a more aesthetically oriented one. Only "beautiful" lives deserve the writing. Moreover, if a biographer does his job well, he is unquestionably entitled to the status of artist, though not of as high an order as that of the novel-writer:

The first consideration for an artist of any kind is to get a subject that he believes to be beautiful and likely to arouse beautiful feelings in others; the next consideration... is to make himself so acquainted with the subject that its exposition by him seems almost like an act of nature, so simple it is, so complete and efficient. We rank most good biographers among literary artists, although they do not create or invent. To be able to know a beautiful life and all its facts, and then to grasp and set them forth in a book, so that the being who lived that life shall be restored from the dead to all who read the book, is second only to the creator of a fictitious life as beautiful and as true to nature. 1

Since Mrs. Gaskell's book seemed to satisfy all the above conditions, the reviewer was prepared to place its author "on a level with the best biographers of any country." The Life is "a truthful and beautiful book, unusually bold and honest in speaking of things and persons... related to Miss Brontë." The whole book "glows with the subdued fervour of the biographer's love and admiration for her subject." Finally, after a summary of Charlotte's life, the Globe again recommends

1. (April 4, 1857), p.1.

the Life to its readers as a fascinating, morally uplifting, though not sensationally exciting story:

[The Life of Charlotte Brontë] is truly as touching and elevating a story as we ever heard, with romance and striking contrasts, enough to satisfy all those who do not require moving incidents by flood and field as the chief things in a tale. ¹

The above comment of the Globe provides the key to an essential aspect of the book's appeal to both readers and critics. Besides satisfying the general curiosity to know about the still largely mysterious lives of Charlotte Brontë and her two famous sisters, the Life enjoyed such a tremendous success because there was so much of Mrs. Gaskell in it. Mrs. Gaskell succeeded in presenting a story that to many readers proved equally if not more interesting than her own novels. Like Ruth and Mary Barton, too, the Life makes good use of the effect of pathos and moral purpose. Even the goodness that Mrs. Gaskell saw in and bestowed upon Charlotte was as much her own goodness as that of Charlotte herself. The most astute of contemporary comments relevant in this context is that of the American art critic Charles Eliot Norton. With his sensibilities quickened by his recent personal contact with Mrs. Gaskell, Norton was able to perceive how much the Life was a mirror of its author besides being the absorbing story of another woman: "The Life of Miss Brontë", he wrote to a friend, "...is almost as much an exhibition of Mrs. Gaskell's character as that of Miss Brontë's--and you know what a lovely and admirable character [Mrs. Gaskell] has."²

1. Ibid.

2. Letters of Charles Eliot Norton, I, p.171, Henry James was another American to make a similar remark in his 1866 review of Wives and Daughters. The Life of Charlotte Brontë, he said, "has always seemed to us that it tells the reader considerably more about Mrs. Gaskell than about Miss Brontë." (Nation (Feb.22, 1866), p.246). Unlike Norton, however, James apparently thought this was a shortcoming.

George Eliot, not personally acquainted with Mrs.Gaskell, spoke nevertheless with affection of the striking similarity between Mrs.Gaskell's fictional work and her biographical tribute to her dear friend:

...there is one new book we [George H. Lewes and I] have been enjoying... The "Life of Charlotte Brontë"! Deeply affecting throughout: -- in the early part romantic, poetic as one of her own novels; in the later years tragic, especially to those who know what sickness is. Mrs.Gaskell has done her work admirably, both in the industry and care with which she has gathered and selected her material, and in the feeling with which she has presented it. 1

George Eliot, whose novels were to become so concerned with guilt and its consequences, took exception to one episode of a similar nature in the Life. Mrs.Gaskell, she shrewdly observed, did not put enough emphasis upon Branwell's own weakness of character that made such a wreck of him when his affair with Mrs.Robinson came to an end:

There is one exception, however, which I regret very much. She [Mrs.Gaskell] sets down Branwell's conduct entirely to remorse, and the falseness of that position weakens the effect of her philippics against the woman who hurried on his utter fall. Remorse may make sad work with a man, but it would not make such a life as Branwell's was in the last three or four years unless the germs of vice had sprouted and shot up long before, as it seems clear they had in him. 2

This fault notwithstanding, George Eliot singles out Branwell's last terrible years as the most moving section of the book:

What a tragedy -- that picture of the old father and the three sisters, trembling day and night in terror at the possible deeds of this drunken brutal son and brother!

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1. Letter to Sara Hennell, April 16, 1857, The George Eliot Letters, II, p. 319.
 2. Ibid., pp. 319-320.

That is the part of the life that affects me most. 1

Although reflecting Mrs.Gaskell's character, literary skills, even her relish for melodrama, the Life did not offend its critics by having the personality of the writer unnecessarily obtruding itself. A few critics did in fact complain that Mrs.Gaskell exhibited "a graceful but unnecessary humility", as when she gave "extracts from letters where her own narrative might have been employed."² Mrs. Gaskell's self-effacing "zeal" as a "congenial and admiring biographer"³ was generally appreciated, however. The author of Mary Barton, wrote the Monthly Christian Spectator,

subordinating herself to her work, and showing her friend to the world's affectionate expectation, instead of showing off herself, as is the manner of some, has raised even the high opinion of her we once expressed in this journal...All cultivated women must take a pride in these memoirs...as a literary fact of the time. 4

While tactfully stepping aside, Mrs.Gaskell used all her literary resources to good effect in the Life. It was, of course, these skills that enabled her to impose the unity and coherence of a work of art on the shapeless mass of letters, facts, anecdotes and impressions. We have already seen George Eliot admiring Mrs.Gaskell's powers of selection and the unity of feeling evident in the Life. Such comments were not scarce. While very few complained of an unnecessary detail here

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1. Ibid., p. 320. George Eliot's fascination by the Branwell episode showed itself later in Middlemarch, where the Rev. Edward Casaubon enters a provision in his will in order to hinder Dorothea from marrying Ladislav.
 2. Monthly Review, (May 1857), p. 308.
 3. United States Democratic Review, XL (Aug. 1857), 191.
 4. (May 1857), p. 305-306.

and there,¹ most noted the consistent point of view and Mrs.Gaskell's sense of relevance and economy:

There is the inspiration of a kindred genius in the rugged truthfulness with which Mrs.Gaskell has told the story of Charlotte Brontë.

Thoroughly well and artistically has the work been accomplished; an informing method presides over the whole; the illustrations are selected with admirable judgment; there is no feebleness or redundancy; every circumstance has a direct bearing on the main object of painting, vigorously and accurately, a real picture of the woman as she was. 2

The strong illusion of reality the Life created made the British Quarterly Review call the work "as interesting as a second Jane Eyre", with the generous quotations from Charlotte's correspondence giving it the "charm of an autobiography".³ The Christian Examiner exclaimed that the real Charlotte that appeared in the biography had greater vitality even than Charlotte's own immensely life-like heroines. Mrs.Gaskell was able to draw Charlotte's picture with such realism because she had already created an imaginative heroine (apparently a reference to Margaret Hale of North and South):

Jane Eyre is so real a person, that it seemed as if the biography of the author of Jane Eyre must be merely the repetition of the book itself... But the life and character which the two volumes picture is...greater than [any of Charlotte's own heroines]...It is, perhaps, her friendship for Miss Brontë that has helped Mrs.Gaskell to form this lifelike picture...She was able herself to create an imaginative heroine, as she has done before now. 4

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1. Cf. "...though we think that Charlotte Brontë's French exercises, with the marginal criticisms of M.Heger...might have been advantageously omitted; still their introduction, as an evidence of minute fidelity, gives confirmation to the remainder of the history." (United States Democratic Review, (Aug. 1857), p.191).
 2. Daily News, (April 4, 1857), p. 2.
 3. (July 1857), p. 218.
 4. (July 1857), pp. 145-148.

A similar sentiment was shared by the National Magazine critic. Spending his notice reviewing with awe-stricken admiration the events of Charlotte's life, he devoted only the last paragraph to the craftsmanship of the biographer. By way of apology, he said that the Life he had been reading was so real and absorbing that he had almost omitted to commend Mrs.Gaskell's art in concealing her art:

One word more before we let the book go which tells us of that life. That we have hardly mentioned the merit of this biography in our warm interest in, and sympathy with, its subject, is perhaps the highest testimony we could render to its excellence. It is not so much a book as a life we have been making acquaintance with. To express approval of the arrangement, to laud the style, would appear out of place under these circumstances. And we feel sure that Mrs. Gaskell in her generous friendship for Charlotte Brontë, will accept as the most welcome praise to her own portion in these volumes, that tribute of admiration and reverence for the Dead, which we believe few will find it possible to withhold when they close the book. 1

Critics and biographers alike would generally agree that life-writing is essentially a self-abnegating activity. G.H.Lewes's jibe at Forster's Life of Charles Dickens as "The Life of Forster, with notices of Dickens" is significant, though unfair. Mrs.Gaskell's aim in undertaking the biography was not so much to "add to the laurels she [had] already won"² as to win for her friend the respect and admiration of the world. It is thus certain that she would have seen in such a response as that of the National Magazine a fulfilment of her own deeply felt desire.

Yet the National Magazine's comments are significant on another

1. (June 1857), p.78.

2. Cf. Ellen Nussey's letter of June 6, 1857 to Mr.Nicholls: "Will you ask Mrs.Gaskell to under-take this just and honourable defence? I think she would do it gladly. She valued dear Charlotte, and such an act of friendship, performed with her ability and power, could only add to the laurels she has already won." Quoted in C.K. Shorter, op.cit., p.11.

score. By giving most of its attention to Charlotte Brontë, while briefly referring to her biographer, this journal showed an attitude shared by many critics of the Life. There were indeed a few periodicals, like the Spectator and the Knickerbocker, which, though very impressed by the biography, did not even say a word upon its author. This indicated an implicit approval; so long as there was nothing obviously wrong with Mrs. Gaskell's method of presentation, there was no need to make any comment. Implicit also in this sort of critical reticence is the belief that Charlotte Brontë's life was inherently interesting and that the biographer was no more than a faithful reporter of an intrinsically fascinating subject. There is one critic who expressed this attitude too emphatically when he concluded a summary of Charlotte's life by the following observation:

It will, we hope, be apparent from this sketch, that the life of Charlotte Brontë, could hardly fail, in almost any hand, to be an interesting and instructive theme. It is indeed, as given by Mrs. Gaskell, a tale full of solemn and tragic attraction. 1

This opinion, though not uncommon, was not typical. The relationship between the raw material of a life and the composer of the biography was a point on which sharply conflicting opinions were voiced. Some critics were prepared to give a great deal of credit to the life-writer. Carlyle, for example, believed that a capable biographer would produce a deeply interesting work out of seemingly dull stuff. "A true delineation", he said, "of the smallest man, and his scene of pilgrimage through life, is capable of interesting the greatest man."² We have already seen the Globe and the Monthly Review vehemently

1. American Church Monthly, (Aug., 1857), p. 125.

2. Life of Sterling, Vol. XI of the Centenary Edition of The Works of Thomas Carlyle, 1897, p. 7.

contradicting that opinion by insisting upon the choice of a remarkable or "beautiful" subject. Roscoe, in the National Review, opted for a middle course in this difficult area, and thus made a statement that would have been acceptable to the majority of the Life's contemporary critics:

[We share] the universal opinion as to the skill with which a difficult work has been executed [by Mrs.Gaskell], and an absorbing interest given to the narrative rather, we should say, to the felicity with which its native elements of interest have been marshalled and arrayed. 1

Roscoe, though unhappy with the Life for many reasons, spoke often of Mrs.Gaskell's talents and abilities that made the Life such an object of universal admiration. The Christian Remembrancer reviewer was a more sympathetic critic who gave even greater credit to Mrs.Gaskell for understanding and avoiding the usual pitfalls of contemporary biography:

As a work of art, this biography can not be too highly recommended...When some local worthy passes from the scene... it is a universal impulse [among his friends] to write his life ... So Mr So-and-so is deputed to write a biography. If this gentleman is a dull man, he probably accomplishes his task, and does not know that he has failed. If he has taste, experience and discernment, he presently becomes aware that this life so impressive in its sphere, presents, under his handling, no points sufficiently distinguishing to awaken new interest. Peculiar traits so pleasing to friends cannot be conveyed to strangers... He feels...he would be parading him where he was not understood or cared for...Mrs.Gaskell understood her task better, and realized from the first what she had to do- not the comparatively easy task of recording events, but delineating a character without the aids which incidents and adventure [as in a novel] always furnish... Her fellow-feeling as an authoress, her tenderness as a friend, sympathy and admiration, pity, resentment, all stimulated her to the effort- for an effort it must have been- of presenting this various, contradictory, yet strong, interesting and remarkable woman, to the world. ...[Mrs. Gaskell] rejoices to bring all her own powers to her task. And admirably suited they are to the purpose- her pathos, her romance, her graphic descriptions, her skill in drawing

1. (July 1857), p. 130.

character, her singular felicity of arrangement and combination, all join to produce a picture harmonious, thrilling, impressive; which...compels interest and forms, as every forcible history of an original mind must do, a valuable addition to the world's experience. 1

G.H.Lewes was another critic to dwell on the merits of the Life. This versatile writer was especially qualified to discern the artistic value of Charlotte's biography since he himself had written the celebrated and well-received Life and Works of Goethe only two years before. His letter of appreciation to Mrs.Gaskell was not entirely disinterested, however. He ends it by requesting her to retouch the impression given in the Life that his review of Shirley was disrespectful to women.² The sincerity of Lewes's remarks on the Life should not be doubted; it was a work that affected him and George Eliot deeply when they read it together while on a holiday in the Scilly Isles:

1. (July 1857), pp. 144-45.

2. In the first edition of the Life Mrs.Gaskell introduces the angry letter Charlotte Brontë wrote to Lewes in protest against his Edinburgh review of Shirley (XCI (Jan., 1850), 153-177), saying: "Miss Brontë was especially anxious to be criticised as a writer, without relation to her sex as a woman. Whether right or wrong, her feeling was strong on this point. Now in this review of 'Shirley', the headings of the first two pages ran thus: 'Mental Equality of the Sexes?' 'Female Literature', and through the whole article the fact of the author's sex is never forgotten." (Life, II, ch. 5, p.397) Mrs.Gaskell, did not personally like Lewes, who once assumed an over-familiar manner towards her (Letters, 314). This is perhaps why she overlooks the fact that the headings, harmless enough as they are, are usually inserted by the editor. She also fails to point out that Lewes's lengthy article, though ranking Shirley as inferior to Jane Eyre, was full of high regard for Charlotte Brontë's art. Lewes, however, did spend the first two pages of his review on the role and characteristics of women and women writers and then proceeded to discuss Shirley in that context.

Until 1857, when he shifted his allegiance to George Eliot, Lewes used to consider Mrs.Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë the most outstanding of the "lady" novelists of the time. He expressed this opinion in his 1853 review of Villette and Ruth, in the Westminster (LIX, 474-91), and a year before that, a similar opinion was indicated in an article in the same journal with the title "The Lady Novelists" (n.s. II (July 1852) 129-41).

I have just finished your Life of Charlotte Brontë - which has afforded exquisite delight to my evenings on this remote patch of rock, round which the Atlantic roars, and dashes like a troop of lions, making a solitude almost equal to Haworth moors... If I had any public means of expressing my high sense of the skill, delicacy and artistic power of your Biography, I should not trouble you with this note. But it is a law of the literary organization that it must relieve itself in expression, and I discharge my emotion through the penny post; at least, such of it as was not discharged in wet eyes and swelling heart, as chapter after chapter was read.

The book will, I think, create a deep and permanent impression; for it not only presents a vivid picture of a life noble and sad, full in encouragement and healthy teaching, a lesson in duty and self-reliance; it also, thanks to its artistic power, makes us familiar inmates of an interior so strange, so original in its individual elements and so picturesque in its externals- it paints for us at once the psychological drama and scenic accessories with so much vividness- that fiction has nothing more wild, touching, and heart-strengthening to place above it.

The early part is a triumph for you; the rest a monument for your friend. One learns to love Charlotte, and deeply to respect her. Emily has a singular fascination for me- probably because I have a passion for lions and savage animals, and she was une bête fauve [Louis Moore's name for the heroine in Shirley] in power...What an episode the death of hers! and how touching is Charlotte's search for the bit of heather which the glazed eyes could not recognize at last! And what a bit of the true religion of home is the whole biography!

I have nothing but thanks for the way you have managed my slight episode. There is however one thing I could have wished,- and perhaps in a second edition, if your own judgement goes that way, you might...[intimate that my review of Shirley] is not a disrespectful article to women, although maintaining that in the highest efforts of intellect women have not equalled men... 1

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1. April 15, 1857, The George Eliot Letters, II, 315-16. In the third edition Mrs. Gaskell left the passage referring to Lewes's review untouched, except for inserting the introductory remark: "Now although this review of 'Shirley' is not disrespectful of women..." (II, 143). Hopkins comments on this, saying that "Mrs. Gaskell had a way of bowing to her critics in appearance only." (Elizabeth Gaskell, op.cit. p. 192.) Mrs. Gaskell had other reasons for refusing to make a more important change in the text. Apart from her personal dislike of Lewes, which increased when she knew about his living with George Eliot (Letters, 414), she herself passionately disliked the "supercilious" or "impertinently flattering" attitude some reviewers assumed in dealing with a lady author (Letters, 314). Although Lewes does not belong to the latter category of critics, his insistence on discussing both her and Charlotte's work in the context of female literature must have been a source of irritation to her in spite of Lewes's high opinion of her work.

The Life is a good example of the interdependence between art and criticism. Outstanding works of art usually impose a challenge to critics and after a short or long period of time elicit a critical response of an equally high standard. The reverse is often true: inferior art is likely to generate inferior criticism. Thus, partly because of the different nature of biography, and to a great extent because of the indifferent quality of most contemporary biographies, Victorian critics normally concentrated on the subject of the biography rather than the technical skills of the life-writer. This is still generally true of the Life, with the exception that the degree of interest given to analyse, and usually praise, Mrs. Gaskell's portion in the Life is not only greater than the average, but of a higher standard as well. The evident superiority of the Life alerted its critics, too, to review the present state of the genre as a whole and volunteer advice and arguments to check the tide of writing too many biographies upon too many uninteresting subjects.

Indeed, if the critical statements made on the Life are considered collectively, a miniature mid-Victorian theory of biography can be pieced together from them. The comments we have discussed so far show that Mrs. Gaskell's critics applied, admittedly with different degrees of clarity and consistency, a substantial body of criteria relevant to biographical criticism. Their comments on the choice of subject, the principles of relevance, selection, economy, tone (feeling) and organic unity still sound fresh and valid. Some of them, too, showed awareness of that elusive and most difficult target of all great biographers, the simulation of a life rather than the mere history, record or story of one person's existence. All this is worth noting in view of the generally held opinion that only the twentieth

century brought with it any significant criticism on biography.¹

Like the reviewers of the Christian Remembrancer, the Christian Examiner and others, Lewes was impressed by Mrs.Gaskell's success in depicting a Charlotte that looked so immediately and self-evidently real. More specifically he referred to "the psychological drama" presented in biography. Other critics, besides Lewes, noted Mrs.Gaskell's sensitivity to feeling that helped her in the portrayal of Charlotte. Composing the biography "was no easy task to perform", wrote the Monthly Review, "for in writing a life of which the interest lies not in its having been spent among famous men and stirring events, but almost entirely in the psychological study it affords, there is obviously need of peculiar skill to prevent monotony. And this skill Mrs.Gaskell possesses."²

None of the contemporary commentators on the Life denied its author the psychological skill attributed to her by the Monthly Review. Yet Mrs.Gaskell, fascinated as she was by Charlotte's personality, did

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1. Cf: "Until the twentieth century, scholars and critics found little to say about life-writing. In our own day biographical criticism has achieved notable stature, but it has been mostly written by a handful of biographers- Harold Nicolson, André Maurois, James Clifford, Leon Edel... and a few others." (Paul Murray Kendall, The Art of Biography, 1965, p. 5).

No one can really pass a final judgment on pre-twentieth, and especially Victorian, criticism of biography until all contemporary texts, including thousands of reviews, are analysed. This has to some extent been done for the novel (e.g. by R.Stang in his The Theory of the Novel, op.cit.) but not yet for biography. This kind of study is unlikely to be carried out in the near future, however, for even critical works on nineteenth-century biography are still negligible in number. Two recent and rare works in this area are James W.Reed's English Biography in the Early Nineteenth Century, 1801-1838 (1966) and A.O.J.Cockshut's Truth to Life: The Art of Biography in the Nineteenth Century (1974). Neither of these works, surprisingly in Cockshut's case, makes any mention of the Life of Charlotte Brontë.

2. (May 1857), p.308.

not attempt a sustained psychological analysis of her heroine, especially the woman of genius who created Jane Eyre, Shirley and Lucy Snowe. Instead of a direct probing of the creative activity of the author of Jane Eyre, Mrs.Gaskell provided what perhaps no earlier biographer, except Lockhart, did by way of indirect suggestion. The influence of the environment, in the widest sense of the word, is closely and sensitively traced and documented. Contrary to the common mid-Victorian practice of giving brief attention to a subject's childhood,¹ Mrs.Gaskell made use of every scrap of information to suggest the effect of heredity, locale and specific experiences upon a very peculiar set of children. Following them, especially Charlotte, into adulthood, she cites copious instances of the interconnection between experience and the literary work, often directly identifying a particular incident or person as the "original" of this character or that episode. Mrs.Gaskell did not attempt to delve deep into the inner life or the creative spirit of her heroine. Still, her indirect method gave the impression to nearly all contemporary readers that here at last was a book that unfolded "all the secrets of the literary workmanship of the author of Jane Eyre and many of the sources from which she drew her conceptions of character."² "With a just conception of the function of biography", wrote the Manchester Guardian, "Mrs.Gaskell has exhibited

1. Cf. "Conscientious zeal for documents [mainly in the form of letters] led the [Victorian] biographers, unwittingly, to the construction of top-heavy works. We learn very fully what a man thought between fifty and sixty when his attitudes changed little, and hardly any thing of what he thought between ten and twenty when they changed much." Cockshut, Truth to Life, op.cit., p.17.

2. The Times, (April 25, 1857), p.9.

with great care the two ultimate factors, the hereditary and local influences, which united in the production of Miss Brontë's remarkable mind."¹

One reviewer who wished that Mrs.Gaskell had done more was the Saturday Review critic, who began his article by the sweeping assertion that "among the hundred female writers of fiction in England, Miss Brontë is the only one that has known how to draw a man." When Charlotte's biography came out, he continued, every reader burned with curiosity to know whether the extremely convincing picture of Rochester in Jane Eyre was drawn from the life.

We have already seen why Mrs.Gaskell had suppressed the story of Charlotte's love for her Brussels master. Moreover, Charlotte's heart, as portrayed by Mrs.Gaskell, was never touched by passionate love until her belated, unconscious attraction to her future husband, whom she accepted on his second proposal (the first was rejected partly because of Mr.Brontë's strong objections), when her love for him became conscious to herself! All very Victorian and proper, we would say. Yet it is remarkable that the reviewers of Saturday Review and the Lady's Treasury were the only sources to question this picture. The latter observed with astute feminine intuition that Charlotte Brontë must have experienced "actual love", possibly before Mrs.Gaskell had met her.² The Saturday Review critic was less sure on this point, though he was very disappointed that the Life did not satisfy his curiosity as to the history of Charlotte's heart. It is interesting to notice that this reviewer's dissatisfaction on this score leads him to regret what he

1. (May 7, 1857), p.4.

2. 1 (May 1875), 55.

considered to be another disappointing omission on Mrs.Gaskell's part; her shying away from a direct analysis of Charlotte's genius, depending instead upon the provision of numerous clues and many indirect suggestions:

Perhaps the publication of her biography within two years of her death might suffice to show that the grave had not closed over one whose loves had been so painful and intense as those she depicted -- else they could scarcely have been revealed so soon. But the answer is much more complete than a merely negative one could be. Miss Brontë, so far as is known to her biographer, never felt anything like love when she wrote Jane Eyre. She had never seen or known personally what she described... It was by instinct or insight that she knew how a rude, strong, generous man, maddened by the desperation of a forlorn middle age, would clutch at a stray hope of love. So far her genius was wholly creative -- so far the writer of Jane Eyre is not to be found in her biography. But what may be termed the accessories, the general determinants of her genius, are to be found there in abundance. 1

Two further sources to notice Mrs.Gaskell's failure to depict more directly the creative genius of Charlotte Brontë were Roscoe in the National Review and the reviewer of Emerson's United States Magazine. They both attributed this to the differences between the two novelists. The latter critic observed that Mrs.Gaskell, "who covets life in its simplicity and ease, not in its starry heights or savage grandeur," wisely adhered to a predominately external approach, since she "could not fathom the depths of her friend."² Roscoe, irritated among other things by the book's appeal to the reader to condone the coarse elements in Charlotte Brontë's novels in view of the special circumstances of her upbringing, bears down heavily on Charlotte's biographer, exaggerating in his anger not only the differences between the two authors but also the intellectual timidity of Mrs.

1. (April 4, 1857), p.313.

2. V (September 1857), 269.

Gaskell as shown in her own fictional work:

"I do not deny for myself", says Mrs.Gaskell, with an air worthy of Mrs.Candour, "the existence of coarseness here and there in her works, otherwise so entirely noble. I only ask those who read them to consider her life, which has been openly laid bare before them, and to say how it could be otherwise..." Charlotte Brontë's works are far from being "otherwise so entirely noble"; they have faults in abundance; but there never were books more free from the stain [of coarseness] here so quietly assumed, and so feelingly lamented as unavoidable... Coarse materials, indeed, she too much deals with; and her own style has something rude and uncompromising.....not always becoming in a female writer... [But] her plain speaking is itself the result of her purity. What she has that jars on us often in her writings is not so much these things as a certain harshness, a love of the naked fact too unsparing... In the school of lady-like refined writing, true in its own sphere, enlivening, softening, and elevating, which deals gently with weak mortality ... [and] punishes vice with a knitting-needle...we have many proficient. High in the list stands Mrs.Gaskell's own name. Her graceful fictions have power to beguile us, to cheer us, to instruct us; and if with too silver a voice she echoes the dread undertones of the mystery of sin and suffering and death, we remember that reality has more sides than one [i.e. the softened one depicted by Mrs.Gaskell] ... But Miss Brontë had a different call: her feet were rougher shod to walk through both life and art; and if she does not lead us through the dark caverns of life, at least she does not attempt to measure their depths with a silken thread, or hang pale lights of fancy in their mouths. 1

These few reviewers excepted, most contemporary readers were grateful that the Life provided so much information about the Brontës as to render it "a master key" to their novels.² One of the enthusiastic critics was the Gentleman's reviewer, who recommended a course in the works of Charlotte Brontë, with the Life used as a companion to the novels:

Such of our readers as are acquainted with the very remarkable and clever novels published under the fictitious

1. V, 163-64.

2. Putnam's Monthly, IX (June), p.648.

name of "Currer Bell", will need no recommendation to read the life of their authoress, which affords a key to the characters so evidently sketched from the life. Such as are not already acquainted with them will lose no time in becoming so, when they can add the interest of truth to that of fiction. 1

One person who had anticipated the Gentleman's recommendation was Charlotte Brontë's publisher, George Smith. Witnessing the Life's outstanding success, he promptly issued a cheap reprint of all Charlotte Brontë's novels. Even the Brontës' early and only book of poetry The Poems of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell was to benefit from the popularity of the biography. A 4-shilling edition of this previously little known work was duly announced by the enterprising publisher early in April.²

Enthusiasm for the biography because it shed so much light on the novels of Charlotte Brontë came from America, too. Miss Hale in the Christian Examiner, her strong affection for Charlotte Brontë enhanced further by the Life, vowed to cross the Atlantic to visit the home-land of the author of Jane Eyre:

Jane Eyre, Shirley, and Villette have acquired a new interest since we have read this life. We have now a fresh point of view from which to look upon them. We can appreciate more fully the struggles through which they were written; we have a fellow-feeling with the hitherto-unknown author. We know a little of the country in which they were laid; some day we may make a pilgrimage there. 3

The interest in the relation between life and the literary work is perennial. For the mid-Victorian readers of Charlotte Brontë's novels, this interest was especially strong since many felt that her

1. (June 1857), p. 688.

2. Gérin, op. cit., p. 190.

3. (July 1857), p. 149.

works could only have been based upon personal experience! The Life came to turn the feeling into conviction. Thus, besides the Gentleman's, we find the Daily News referring its readers to the biography, where they "will find the greatest interest in retracing, by Mrs.Gaskell's aid, the real events on which [Villette] is founded, or rather of which it is the narrative and transcript."¹ Chorley in the Athenaeum observed that "almost every incident and character in [Charlotte Brontë's novels] was studied from the life."² A firmer grasp, however, of the complex ways in which life affects a work of art was shown by Skelton in Fraser's. While basically agreeing with the foregoing statements, he left something to the power of genius that so mysteriously and unpredictably moulded the experience:

When you read her life, you read Jane Eyre, Shirley, Villette, in fragments. The separate parts have simply to be taken out, arranged, riveted together, and you have the romance. But what in the life is fragmentary and incomplete...is by the artist's insight cast into dramatic sequence... Thus the experience can never explain the work. For between lies the mystery of Genius. 3

Two people who were irritated at Mrs.Gaskell's identification of the originals in Charlotte's work were W.C.Roscoe in the National Review and E.S.Dallas in Blackwood's Magazine. Since a number of these originals were satirically portrayed, it was felt that there was a certain uncharitable indelicacy on the biographer's part in making these people targets of public mockery or indignation. Dallas accused Mrs. Gaskell of representing Charlotte Brontë "as heaping ridicule on her friends and benefactors."⁴ Roscoe tried to get to the root of the

1. (April 4, 1857), p.2.

2. (April 4, 1857), p.428.

3. (May 1857), p. 570.

4. (July 1857), p.77.

problem by examining the current literary practices. Like Stephen in "The Licence of Modern Novelists", Roscoe inveighed against the increasing boldness of novel-writers to satirise living people or institutions. Again, he cited Charles Reade's It's Never Too Late to Mend (1856) as a recent instance of this deplorable tendency. "The popular novel", he warned, "is a very dangerous weapon; its thrusts can neither be parried nor avoided."¹ It is especially damaging and most unfair, he continued, when it satirized individuals or specific institutions. Charlotte Brontë, he observed, frequently abused the novel this way. Her satire of Mr. Wilson's Cowan Bridge School is only one example of this regrettable practice:

Can any explanation, any asseverations of those who knew him best, ever free the memory of Mr. Carus Wilson from the unjust stain cast upon it in Jane Eyre? What genius has stamped with her hand, false though it be, truth, with her commonplace asseverations, can never efface. We continue to read the novels, and not the vindictory statements. And if such a charge is true, is there any right to make it? None, certainly. ²

Mrs. Gaskell, herself a popular novelist with a penchant for using the novel as a tool of social reform, compounds her guilt when she identifies "almost all the prominent characters in Miss Brontë's different novels...with real persons."³ In other words, instead of leaving the unfortunate people satirized in Charlotte's novels alone, Mrs. Gaskell made her friend's portraits more devastating by supplying the public at large with the originals.

Dallas's and Roscoe's remonstrance with Mrs. Gaskell on the issue

1. National Review, (July 1857), p. 158.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p. 159.

of the originals was but one of their grievances against the Life. A related and more fundamental fault in the biography, they alleged, was Mrs. Gaskell's disclosure of the private affairs of the Brontë family. Roscoe, though profoundly upset by this disclosure, tried to understand the sincere motives of Charlotte's biographer. In her attempt to win public sympathy for Charlotte, whose life was extremely narrow in scope, Mrs. Gaskell made the wrong, yet understandable, decision to tear the veil of privacy off the entire family of her subject:

In the warmth of her admiration for her friend, in her determination to interest the public in [Charlotte Brontë's] conscientious, self-denying character and her joyless life, [Mrs. Gaskell] has let no considerations interfere with her purpose of presenting her subject in all the detail necessary to its complete appreciation, and with all that force of graphic delineation of which she is so great a master. Frankly we will state our conviction, that she was mistaken; that the principles and the practice which in England make it indecorous to withdraw the veil from purely domestic affairs.- the joys, the griefs, the shames of the household-, have a true basis in fortitude and delicacy of feeling...¹

Dallas in his singularly scathing critique of the Life in Blackwood's put forward the same argument in much harsher terms:

Mrs. Gaskell has seasoned [the Life] with as much petty scandal as might suffice for half-a-dozen biographies... [She tells] tales to the disadvantage of every member of Miss Brontë's family, so that her father appears as a very unpleasant reverend Robinson Crusoe; her husband as a curious Man Friday to her father; her sister Emily as a repulsive creature, who never opened her mouth except to say 'No'; her brother as a scapegrace, who had a highly improper intrigue with a married lady double his age... If it was impossible to write the biography without entering into these details, then it ought never to have been written. ²

The thriving business of biography-writing in Mrs. Gaskell's time

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1. National Review, (July 1857), p. 129.
 2. (July 1857), pp. 77-78.

was bound to elicit different reactions, ranging from the hostile attitude of these two comments to great enthusiasm. Tolerance of the current biographical practice was sometimes urged on a pragmatic basis. Even badly-written works could not fail to be of some factual use. Carlyle himself partially subscribed to this belief, when he observed that even a poorly constructed biography, or a "compilation" as he called it, "lies printed and indestructible...in the elementary state, and can at any time be composed, if necessary, by whosoever has call to do that."¹ A stronger reason, however, for the immense popularity of the genre was its hagiographic orientation. Biography, said the author of The Use of Biography (1852), provides us with "the assurance...of something better than we are."² On the other hand, impatience with contemporary life-writing was based, as we have seen, on artistic considerations, the poor quality of too many productions. Apart from that, antagonism to the genre arose paradoxically as a reaction to the prevalent didactic intention. Charles A. Collins in an 1863 article in Macmillan's Magazine claimed that biography encouraged both hero-worship and hypocrisy. He alleged that eminent people, expecting their lives to be written one day, began to be self-conscious and careful in their correspondence so that their biographers could only find what was exemplary and blameless!³ Collins's unusual claim did have a grain of truth. A number of prominent Victorians who stood in danger of having future or present biographies written of them resented the fact that their public roles should automatically give a curious public the right to

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1. Review of Lockhart's Scott, Westminster Review, XXVIII (1838). 298.
 2. Edwin P. Hood, The Use of Biography, Romantic, Philosophic, and Didactic, 1852, p. 195.
 3. "Biography at a Discount", X (May-Oct. 1864), 158-163.

pry into their private lives. Mrs. Gaskell herself came to feel something like this in 1865, when she sent the following stiff reply to an applicant for biographical data:

I disapprove so entirely of...writing 'notices' or 'memoirs' of living people, that I must send you...an entire refusal to sanction what is to me so objectionable & indelicate a practice...I do not see why the public have any more to do with me than to buy or reject the wares I supply to them. 1

Thomas Love Peacock showed even greater impatience with the business of writing the lives of famous people. Interestingly, he tried to grapple with the problem of how much a biographer should divulge what he knows of the private affairs of his subject:

This appetite for gossip about notoriety being once created in the "reading public", there will be always found persons to minister to it; and among the volunteers of this service, those who are best informed and who most valued the departed will probably not be the foremost... No man is bound to write the life of another. No man who does so is bound to tell the public all he knows. On the contrary, he is bound to keep to himself whatever may injure the interests or hurt the feelings of the living, especially when the latter have in no way injured or calumniated the dead... Neither if there be in the life of the subject of the biography any event which he himself would willingly have blotted from the tablet of his memory, can it possibly be the duty of a survivor to drag it into daylight. If such an event be the cardinal point of a life; if to conceal it or to misrepresent it would be to render the whole narrative incomplete, incoherent...; then [unless there be a] ... moral compulsion to speak of the matter..., it is better to let the whole story slumber in silence. 2

Although more in favour of omission than commission, Peacock leaves room for the inclusion of even unsavoury private affairs. A biographer like Mrs. Gaskell could have used his reasoning to argue that her account

1. Letters, 571.

2. "Memoirs of Percy B. Shelley", Fraser's Magazine (June 1858), p. 643. Extract reprinted in James L. Clifford, ed., Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism, 1560-1960, 1962, p. 94.

of the unfortunate Branwell was made because she believed that Charlotte's life had been seriously blighted watching her brother's terrible downfall, precipitated by his sinful affair with an immoral lady. Both of Peacock's principles, of injury to the subject of the biography, and "moral compulsion", are to some extent involved. Yet one suspects that Peacock himself would never have approved of such a hypothetical application of his criteria. It is always difficult to agree on what is morally, artistically or historically essential to record in a biography. On the whole, Peacock would rather have discouraged life-writing itself in order to protect the sanctity of privacy. Roscoe, too, while not unmindful of the artistic potential of biography (which he regarded as largely realized in Mrs. Gaskell's work), joined Dallas, as we have seen, in saying that if Mrs. Gaskell had to reveal what she did, then she should not have attempted to write the Life in the first place.

It is well to remember, however, that the negative attitude of "no man is bound to write the life of another" was not the typical one. Biographical commemoration continued throughout the nineteenth-century unabated. As for the specific case of The Life of Charlotte Brontë, Roscoe and Dallas were the only critics who advanced such an opinion. The overwhelming majority of reviewers did not hesitate to give their full approval of the way Mrs. Gaskell wrote her biographical tribute to her friend.¹

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1. Another who expressed an attitude similar to that of Dallas and Roscoe was John Blackwood. He wrote to G.H. Lewes on April 28, 1857: "I am greatly disposed to have a walk into the biographer of Charlotte Brontë, and a friend [E.S. Dallas] has proposed a paper to me. There is execrable taste in the book, and I detest this bookmaking out of the remains of the dead..." George Eliot, who was at the time with Lewes, must have seen this letter, for she wrote to a friend: "Tell me when you have read the Life of Currer Bell. Some people think its revelations in bad taste- making money out of the dead- wounding the feelings of the living etc. etc. What book is there that some people or other will not find abominable? We [Lewes and I] thought it admirable- cried over it- and felt the better for it." (The George Eliot Letters, II, 322-23; 330).

Dallas and Roscoe, we may recall, represented a minority opinion, too, in their objection to Mrs. Gaskell's identification of the real people and events that inspired Charlotte Brontë. This feature in the Life was especially appealing to an age fascinated by the relation of truth to fiction, and partially explains the tremendous revival of interest in the work of the Brontës on the appearance of the biography.

Another service the Life rendered to the reputation of the Brontës was its largely successful attempt to win for them a greater degree of tolerance and acceptance among an audience sharply divided over the literary merit, and particularly the moral and wholesome tendencies of their work. Mrs. Gaskell's success in this respect ranged from stimulating a limited change of tone, increasing gradually until one comes upon cases of complete conversion.

The Christian Remembrancer represented those who, while deeply affected by the Life, found it very hard to budge from old positions. Still, the revelation that the real Charlotte Brontë was not as "tough" as her books and style suggested was not without its effect:

We do not blame ourselves for what has been said in our pages of the author of Jane Eyre. We could not do otherwise than censure what was censurable. Where would books get their deserts...if private consideration had weight to restrain independent public opinion?... But such revelations as the book gives us are a lesson to weigh words... We believe that all the critics thought they had a tolerably tough nature to deal with... And now [they]... have to reflect on the private most feminine sorrows of this Amazon; of a patient life of monotonous duty; of the passionate hold the purest domestic affections had on her character; and which amongst them, if he could rewrite his criticism, would not now and then erase an epithet, spare a sarcasm, modify a sweeping condemnation? We own it wounds our tenderest feelings to know her sensitiveness to such attacks.¹

1. (July 1857), pp. 136-37.

A greater readiness to condone the "defects" of the work in the light of the life was shown by The Times, which, like the above journal, was guilty of mortifying the living Charlotte by its consistent hostility: "Criticism", said The Times, "is disarmed, and we have no controversy with her genius, considering the conditions under which it worked. We remember only that a certain creative mind has ceased to fret itself; and without further mention of its faults, we add our sincere tribute to its fame."¹

Another previously unsympathetic reader was Charles Kingsley. The change of heart that overcame him on reading the Life was by far the most dramatic instance of conversion caused by the biography. In a characteristically passionate and impulsive tone, he wrote to Mrs. Gaskell about his intention to study, with humility, the previously tabooed works of Charlotte Brontë:

Let me renew our long-interrupted acquaintance by complimenting you on poor Miss Brontë's Life. You have had a delicate and a great work to do, and you have done it admirably. Be sure that the book will do good. It will shame literary people into some stronger belief that a simple, virtuous, practical home life is consistent with high imaginative genius; and it will shame, too, the prudery of a not over cleanly, though carefully white-washed age, into believing that purity is now (as in all ages till now) quite compatible with the knowledge of evil. I confess that the book has made me ashamed of myself. Jane Eyre I hardly looked into, very seldom reading a work of fiction- yours, indeed, and Thackeray's are the only ones I care to open. Shirley disgusted me at the opening; and I gave up the writer and her books with the notion that she was a person who liked coarseness. How I misjudged her; and how thankful I am that I never put a word of my misconceptions into print, or recorded my misjudgments of one who is a whole heaven above me.

Well have you done your work, and given us the picture of a valiant woman made perfect by sufferings. I shall now

1. (April 25, 1857), p. 9.

read carefully and lovingly every word she has written... I must add that Mrs.Kingsley agrees fully with all I have said, and bids me tell you that she is more intensely interested in the book than in almost any which she has ever read. 1

During her lifetime Charlotte Brontë developed a reputation for being a kind of literary rebel, a tough woman or an "Amazon", as the Christian Remembrancer put it. A number of her contemporaries, including her friends G.H.Lewes, Harriet Martineau and Mrs.Gaskell herself, regarded a number of elements as coarse in her work. Coarseness was a rather loose term of disapproval which meant different things to different people. In the Brontës' case, it often referred to bold language, "unfeminine" description of love, knowledge of dissolute, evil or violent men, or even improper quotations from the Bible.

Mrs.Gaskell attacked the problem of "toughness" associated with Charlotte Brontë by simply showing what a sensitive, rather fragile, homely and dutiful woman she really was. To many critics (few of them knew Charlotte personally) this came as a complete and welcome revelation. "Few would guess", said the Globe, "that the author of Jane Eyre was a thrifty, economical household manager- could do well all sort of women's handwork- could bake, cook, clean, and make clothes, and did these things...never suffering her intellectual activity to hinder her domestic duties."² The Literary Churchman admiringly observed that Charlotte's "principal motive for becoming an authoress was to assist the slender income of her father."³ The Life of

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1. May 14, 1857. Letters and Life, op.cit., II, 24-5. Kingsley seems to have forgotten that in 1849 he had reviewed a number of novels for Fraser's, including Anne Bronte's The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. (Fraser's, XXXIV (April 1849), 417-32).
 2. (April 4, 1857), p.1.
 3. (May 16, 1857), p. 191.

Charlotte Brontë, said Chorley in a tearful mood, is "a record of ... self-denial and struggle, sustained to the last with courage, principle, and genius, but without hope."¹

If Mrs.Gaskell found it easy to win sympathy among many readers for Charlotte as a woman, it was not so easy to convince as many of the wholesomeness of her art. We have already seen in the Christian Remembrancer an example of strong resistance in this respect. Yet even here the Life's success was considerable. Mrs.Gaskell's indirect method of tracing the influences upon the art and personality of Charlotte Brontë was on the whole effective. The outspokenness of the West Yorkshire people, the peculiar habits of the father and the Branwell episode, for instance, were meant to explain and serve as mitigating circumstances for the disquieting elements in Charlotte's work. A number of readers who had been uneasy about, though strongly attracted by, the author of Jane Eyre, found in Mrs.Gaskell's biographical explanations a way out of a dilemma that had long distressed them. Charlotte's contact with "the dissolute brother", wrote the Gentleman's Magazine, "betrayed itself in several scenes of her novels, distinguished by a degree of coarseness, both of language and ideas, which appeared almost unaccountable in one generally so pure-minded." This aspect of Charlotte's work, continued the journal, "so justly complained of in one of her sex...is thus accounted for in a natural manner, not altogether discreditable to her."² "That apparent coarseness", wrote the Monthly Review, alluding to Charlotte's life among the rough-mannered people of her home-place:

1. Athenaeum, (April 4, 1857), p. 427.

2. (June 1857), p. 691.

which some critics commented upon with too great severity, in ignorance of its cause, we, who know that cause, can perceive to be the result of early association, not the creation of her own mind. What she saw she described; it was not her fault that what she saw was unrefined. 1

Few contemporary readers were able to remain unmoved by Mrs. Gaskell's biography of her friend: it freed them from the mystery of coarseness, vividly described the influences on the life and art of the Brontës, and most important of all made them follow Charlotte from her unhappy childhood years until her spectacular rise to fame, soon followed by the death of Emily, Anne and Branwell; her belated marriage, rudely and tragically terminated by fatal illness. They felt intimately acquainted, through her letters, with her innermost thoughts, frustrations and keen sense of duty and high principle. The biography presented a spectacle that moved minds as differing as those of Kingsley, George Eliot, Lewes and Charlotte's own father. Mr. Brontë, two days before any review of the Life came out, expressed to Mrs. Gaskell his high opinion of her life-story of his child. It is touching to see how the ageing man's deep desire to honour the memory of his remarkable daughter makes him give himself almost as much credit for commissioning the Life as to Mrs. Gaskell who wrote it:

My dear Madam- I thank you for the books you have sent me containing the Memoir of my daughter. I have perused them with a degree of pleasure and pain which can be known only to myself. As you will have the opinion of abler critics than myself I shall not say much in the way of criticism. I shall only make a few remarks in unison with the feelings of my heart. With a tenacity of purpose usual with me, in all cases of importance, I was fully determined that the biography of my daughter should, if possible, be written by one not unworthy of the undertaking. My mind first turned to you, and you kindly acceded to my wishes. Had you refused I would have applied to the next best, and so on; and

1. (May 1857), p. 318.

had all applications failed, as the last resource, though above eighty years of age and feeble, and unfit for the task, I would myself have written a short though inadequate memoir, rather than have left all to selfish, hostile, or ignorant scribblers. But the work is now done, and done rightly, as I wished it to be, and in its completion has afforded me more satisfaction than I have felt during many years of a life in which has been exemplified the saying that "man is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upwards." You have not only given a picture of my dear daughter Charlotte, but of my dear wife, and all my dear children, and such a picture, too, as is full of truth and life. 1

The modern reader might find the Life too adulatory. Too much emphasis is placed on Charlotte's goodness, and the few acerbities of her character are explained away as momentary and inessential. No critic found in this aspect of the Life (with the exception of Roscoe)² a point to be complained about. On the contrary, the skills that Mrs. Gaskell brought to her labour of love and the unusually romantic life of the Brontës combined to produce a work that was intended, as Chorley put it, "to make the old feel young and the young old."³ The 'fifties were a period of intense anxiety as well as complacent optimism. The Westminster reviewer summarised well the contemporary need for such a reassuring picture of steady principle and sterling goodness as that supplied in the Life. It was a need that Mrs. Gaskell herself deeply felt, and was able to satisfy:

In days like these...possessed as we are with so much vague unrest, living in the midst of change, with all things round us in motion, and no sure abiding-place for our faith and convictions, the picture of this young girl,- growing up in a hard atmosphere, thinking only of her duty, with no peculiar religious emotions, with none of those excitements with which common people stimulate their

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1. April 2, 1857, quoted in the Life of Charlotte Brontë, Haworth edition, p. XXVIII.
 2. Cf. "With all its excellencies, and they are many, [Mrs. Gaskell's] book has a trace of the cant of paneulogism." (National Review, (July 1857), p.130).
 3. Athenaeum, (April 4, 1857), p. 427.

languid wills, but quietly in each hour doing what each hour required, the same in trouble and in success, in the flush of her fame as an authoress peeling potatoes for "Tabby", her father's one servant, teaching in the Sunday-school, and visiting the poor, - this picture is at once elevating, assuring, and composing. In the midst of collapsing creeds, habits changing, the perplexed entry into a new era, we are here upon the solid ground of humanity, which is the same today as yesterday. We see before us in the most modern form of the nineteenth century, the moral battle of life fought out and nobly won...

And thus it is that the story of a life bravely spent has an unequalled charm for us. It nerves our courage, and shames our cowardice, and while teaching us little which can be expressed in words, works upon us like an invigorating atmosphere. ¹

Despite the few unfavourable reviews, like Dallas's in Blackwood's or Stephen's in the Edinburgh, the Life received a spectacular reception that few biographies of the period enjoyed. But things did not appear in that light to the author of the Life. In keeping with her resolution to enjoy herself in Rome completely undisturbed, she instructed both publisher and husband not to send her any review or even news of the reception of the work. This gave her the needed peace of mind, but it deprived her of the satisfaction of reading the numerous enthusiastic notices of April and May. Moreover, on her return to Manchester on May 28, she was entirely unprepared for the two major controversies that her book created. The first, relating to Lady Scott, was at least resolved a few days before her return to Britain. On June 3 she wrote to Norton: "I found trouble enough awaiting me...or rather not 'awaiting' me, but settled without me; settled for the best, all things considered, I am sure."² Deeply mortified by the humiliation of a public retraction, she still understood and accepted the inevitability of the measure taken by her husband and

1. (July 1857), p. 295.

2. Letters, 349.

William Shaen on her behalf and without her prior knowledge. The second controversy concerning the Cowan Bridge School scarcely received publicity in the national press, as we have seen. Nevertheless, it proved a source of great annoyance to Mrs.Gaskell, as the Wilson partisans directly wrote to her expressing their indignation in no uncertain terms.

We have also met with Mr.Brontë requesting the removal of the objectionable anecdotes about his character, and seen Lewes displeased with the paragraph on his review of Shirley. Another complaint about a rather minor issue was received from J.S.Mill. He sent an angry letter to Mrs.Gaskell, strongly criticising her for quoting Charlotte's comments on a Westminster article on the emancipation of women written by one who later became his wife. Harriet Martineau, too, sent Mrs. Gaskell "sheet upon sheet regarding the quarrel? misunderstanding? [over Villette] between her & Miss Brontë".¹ Some of the letters reaching Mrs.Gaskell in the months of June and July made her lose all patience owing to the sheer pettiness of their content: "Two separate householders in London," she wrote to Ellen Nussey, "each declare that the first interview between Miss Brontë and Miss Martineau took place at her house." Another aggrieved person was a Haworth inhabitant, who "writes to deny my account of the Haworth commotions, & gives another as true, in which I don't see any great difference."²

All this persecution, as Mrs.Gaskell saw it, made severe demands upon her nervous resources and resilience. For the sake of a quiet life, she was to modify in the third edition nearly all the offending passages, but she did so in a spirit of desperation rather than conviction of

1. Ibid., 352.

2. Ibid.

being at fault. In the same letter to Ellen Nussey, she said:

I am writing as if I were in famous spirits, and I think I am so angry that I am almost merry in my bitterness, if you know that state of feeling; but I have cried more since I came home [than] I ever did in the same space of time before; and never needed kind words so much,- & no one gives me them. I did so try to tell the truth, & I believe now I hit as near the truth as any one could do. And I weighed every line with all my whole power & heart, so that every line should go to it's great purpose of making her known & valued,...¹

In the midst of her troubles she felt deeply thankful for every word of support. Some time in June a letter from William Fairbairn, a steadfast admirer of her books, drew from her the following grateful reply:

My dear Mr.Fairbairn,

I don't think you know how much good your letter did me..., it was the one sweet little drop of honey that the postman had brought me for some time, as, on the average, I had been receiving three letters a day for above a fortnight, finding great fault with me (to use a mild expression for the tone of their complaints) for my chapter about the Cowan Bridge School. 2

Other words of support came from friends and local celebrities,³ and, remarkably, from Mr.Brontë himself. On July 30 he wrote to her, again asserting his great respect for her and her work:

I am much pleased with reading the opinions of those in your letters, and other eminent characters, respecting the 'Memoir'. Before I knew theirs, I had formed my own opinion, from which you know I am not easily shaken. And my opinion, and the reading World's opinion of the 'Memoir', is that it is every way worthy of what one Great Woman should have written of Another, and that it ought to stand, and will stand, in the first rank of Biographies till the end of time. 4

1. Letters, 352.

2. Ibid., 358.

3. Ibid., 352.

4. Lock and Dixon, op.cit., pp. 509.

Despite such letters and the favourable reviews that continued to appear in June and July, Mrs. Gaskell considered that she had suffered enough. As early as June she decided that "for the future I intend to confine myself to lies (i.e. fiction). It is safer."¹ This was a resolution that she kept. More than that, even in the inspired "lies" she later produced, she was to steer clear of all the controversial or trouble-fraught issues that she had so fearlessly, and sometimes rashly, tackled until 1857.

Yet two months after her decision not to write any more biographies, she was for a short while tempted to break that resolution. In August 1857 the friends of Sir George Saville, an eighteenth-century Yorkshire celebrity, approached her to write a biography about him. The historical aspect of the work appealed to her. Half-amused, half-serious, she sounded her new publisher on the subject. Smith, having made certain enquiries, wrote that the biographical project was a publishable proposition. In her reply to Smith she said that she would have accepted the offer if the biography did not have to deal with political matters:

I am very much obliged to you for the trouble you have taken about Sir George Saville. I am afraid he would require a greater knowledge of politics than I either have or care to have. I like to write about character, & the manners of a particular period- for the life of a great Yorkshire Squire of the last century, I think I could have done pretty well; but I cannot manage politics. Thank you very much, though. 2

Besides its significance in showing Mrs. Gaskell firmly in control of her artistic priorities, the whole episode must have boosted her morale at a time when, at least, some of her contemporaries doubted her

1. Letters, 358.

2. August 26, 1857, Ibid., 370.

trustworthiness as a biographer.

Another welcome event of a different nature occurred early the following year, when Mr. Smith, preparing to issue a cheap edition of the Life, sent its author a cheque for £200. Mrs. Gaskell had no right to the extra money, since she had previously sold him the copyright for £800. The bonus was accepted, however, and Smith was duly thanked for his "kindness & liberality."¹

The total of one thousand pounds Mrs. Gaskell received for the biography was a considerable sum of money at the time. Anthony Trollope, the author of the successful Barchester Towers (1857) reached the £600 figure only in 1859, when he was hailed in The Times as "the Apollo of the circulating libraries."² Mrs. Gaskell's returns from the Life were £400 more than she had been given for North and South, and twice as much as George Smith had paid Charlotte Brontë for Villette. Although she was going to get more than double that amount of money for her future work, Mrs. Gaskell clearly established herself in 1857 as a rather expensive writer.

No amount of financial reward could have reconciled Mrs. Gaskell had she felt that she failed "to make the world...honour the woman as much as they [had] admired the writer."³ This was an aim she never doubted that she had achieved. Even before the Life was completely written, she was happy with it and pronounced it to be "good".⁴ In the aftermath of publication, she experienced much personal pain and anguish, but the controversy hardly touched the image of the noble Charlotte she knew and powerfully represented.

1. March 17, 1858, Letters, 387.

2. "Anthony Trollope", The Times, (May 23, 1859), p.12. Trollope received £600 for Castle Richmond from Chapman and Hall. See David Skilton, Anthony Trollope and his Contemporaries, 1972, pp. 16 ff.

3. Letters, 241.

4. Ibid., 322.

Chapter Six

Philip Hepburn's Stooping Shoulders:

The Reception of Sylvia's Lovers

In the years 1859-1860 Mrs. Gaskell published two collections of tales: Round the Sofa and Other Tales and Right at Last and Other Tales. But neither collection made much impact on the reviewers. Mid-Victorian shorter fictional pieces (much of which were of ephemeral value) did not usually excite considerable critical interest. Moreover, most of the tales were not new, having originally appeared in Dickens's Household Words. Mrs. Gaskell herself could hardly have been profoundly upset by the neglect: like most of her contemporaries she bestowed the best of her creative energy and pinned her self-esteem to the larger fictional works. The unambitious purpose of the short tales was well served, however; payments received, first from Dickens, and later from the volume publisher, Sampson Low, were always welcome and sometimes desperately needed. Besides, the tales provided Mrs. Gaskell with the valuable opportunity of experimenting on a limited scale with themes and situations that could be developed more fully in the novels.

The influence of some of these tales was to appear in Mrs. Gaskell's full-length novel Sylvia's Lovers published by Smith, Elder in 3 volumes in February 1863.¹ The gap of eight years, separating this

1. The themes of deranging, fanatical passion inexorably leading to disaster ("Lois the witch" 1859) and the inevitable pain caused by human wickedness to those bound to one another by love ("The Crooked Branch" 1859) bear directly upon the central situation in Sylvia's Lovers, where Philip Hepburn's obsessive love for Sylvia tempts him to act selfishly and dishonourably, thus ruining his own life as well as that of the object of his overpowering passion, Sylvia.

work from its predecessor North and South (1855), was a considerable one by the standards of Mrs. Gaskell's prolific time. The majority of reviewers welcomed Mrs. Gaskell's long-awaited novel. Some, like the facetious Saturday Review, made use of the occasion to throw a hint to the overproductive novelists of the day, urging them to follow Mrs. Gaskell's example and curtail the volume of their literary output. Mrs. Gaskell, said the reviewer, "is not one of those hasty and facile writers whose 'clever books', as the advertisements say, 'are in everyone's hands' and, we may add, are quickly laid down after having produced their few hours' excitement, and left small trace upon the reader's mind."¹

Over thirty reviews of Sylvia's Lovers appeared. The critics approached Mrs. Gaskell's new work with a number of questions in mind, one frequently asked was whether or not the new novel would measure up to its author's previous reputation.

Two sources whose reading of Sylvia's Lovers produced a vehemently stated, negative reply to this question were the Spectator² and the Daily News.³ The Saturday Review also considered the new work to be inferior to its predecessors, but was far less hostile than the last two periodicals, observing rather regretfully:

... if a fairly good book is given us, it seems ungracious to quarrel with the writer for not making it better. Mrs. Gaskell's former works are to blame for having raised our expectations to such a height that nothing short of equal excellence will satisfy us, and we cannot but think that in Sylvia's Lovers she has fallen below her own standard.⁴

1. XV (April 4, 1863), p. 446.

2. XXXVI (Feb. 28, 1863), 1699.

3. (April 3, 1863), p. 2.

4. (April 4, 1863), p. 446.

Favourable reviews of Sylvia's Lovers appeared in the Examiner¹, the Weekly Dispatch,² the recently-launched Literary Times,³ the Sun,⁴ the Globe,⁵ John Bull,⁶ the Morning Herald⁷ and the Morning Advertiser.⁸ Less enthusiastic, but still appreciative notices came out in the Westminster Review,⁹ the Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine,¹⁰ the Athenaeum (Geraldine Jewsbury),¹¹ the Illustrated London News,¹² the Observer¹³ and in the American Harper's New Monthly Magazine,¹⁴ the New York Times¹⁵ and Peterson's Magazine.¹⁶ Half-hearted or carefully qualified praise came from the London Review,¹⁷ the National Magazine,¹⁸

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1. Two-part review. (March 28, 1863), p.197; (April 11, 1863), p.231.
 2. (March 15, 1863), p.6.
 3. No. 1 (March 14, 1863), pp. 9-10.
 4. (Feb. 27, 1863), pp. 2-3.
 5. (April 2, 1863), p.1.
 6. XLIII (March 7, 1863), 156.
 7. (April 6, 1863), p. 7.
 8. (Feb. 26, 1863), p. 3.
 9. n.s. XXIII (April 1863), 622-23. A reprint of this review appeared in the New York Illustrated News (May 30, 1863), p.66.
 10. "The Book of the Month, Sylvia's Lovers," XXXVI (April 1863), 281-82.
 11. No. 1844 (Feb. 28, 1863), p. 291.
 12. (April 4, 1863), p. 383.
 13. (March 1, 1863), p. 7.
 14. XXVII (June 1863), 129.
 15. (March 23, 1863), p.2.
 16. XLIII (May 1863), p. 400.
 17. VI (March 7, 1863), 254.
 18. XIV (May 1863), 48.

the Reader,¹ the Press,² the Guardian,³ the Nonconformist,⁴ the Morning Post⁵ and the Manchester Examiner and Times.⁶

One reviewer, that of the Magnet,⁷ distinguished himself by declining to come up with a word of comment, limiting himself to a summary of the plot and copious quotations. We may regard this review as favourable by default, since this weekly newspaper was never reluctant to castigate works of fiction "on its table", which, upon examination, were found to be wanting either on the moral or literary side.

A striking theme in some of the favourable notices is the opinion that Sylvia's Lovers is not only a good novel in its own right but artistically superior to any of Mrs.Gaskell's previous works - this is a judgement, incidentally, that is gaining increasing acceptance in our own time.⁸ Thus we find Geraldine Jewsbury, the

1. I (Feb. 28, 1863), 207-8.
2. XI (March 7, 1863), 234-235.
3. No. 921 (July 23, 1863), pp. 718-19.
4. (May 6, 1863), p. 356.
5. (March 26, 1863), p. 3.
6. (April 14, 1863), p. 3.
7. No. 1301 (June 15, 1863), p. 6.
8. Among the first of modern critics to give Mrs.Gaskell's "high achievement" in Sylvia's Lovers serious attention was A.B.Hopkins (Elizabeth Gaskell, 1952, op.cit., pp.261-272). She was followed by others, notably, Arthur Pollard (Mrs.Gaskell, 1965, op.cit., pp. 195-223) and Graham Handley (Sylvia's Lovers, Notes on English Literature, 1968). More recently, W.A.Craik in a comprehensive analysis of the novel makes a very good case for Sylvia's Lovers as Mrs.Gaskell's "greatest novel", greater even than its successor Wives and Daughters (Elizabeth Gaskell and the English Provincial Novel, 1975, pp. 140-199).

novelist, and a frequent reviewer for the Athenaeum, asserting that "for true artistic workmanship, we think Sylvia's Lovers superior to any of Mrs.Gaskell's former works."¹ Peterson's Magazine vouched that it would be surprised if Mrs.Gaskell's latest novel was not regarded as her most "artistic" work.² This was also the conclusion of the Weekly Dispatch: "[Sylvia's Lovers] displays a maturity of power and a felicity of expression which inclines us to rank it as the best the author has yet produced."³ The Globe too noticed an evidence of "great maturity"⁴ in Mrs.Gaskell's new work, while the Englishwoman's believed that Sylvia's Lovers surpassed the author's former work in "subtlety".⁵ Signs of greater subtlety were likewise detected by the Sun:

The mournful interest of "Ruth" and the thrilling excitement of "Mary Barton" have already prepared novel-readers for a considerable display of power in works of this authoress, but there is more pathos in [Sylvia's Lovers], more deep feeling and unexpressed but comprehended sentiment.⁶

Two further views relevant in this context are those of the Reader and the Nonconformist. Their comments are especially interesting since they point to more or less the same grounds on which Sylvia's Lovers is partially favoured by modern critics. Both sources held Mrs.Gaskell's previous work in high esteem. But they found Sylvia's Lovers superior partly because, by contrast with the earlier novels, it was free from a didactic purpose. Mrs.Gaskell's new novel,

1. (Feb. 28, 1863), 29.
2. (May 1863), p.400.
3. (March 15, 1863), p.6.
4. (April 2, 1863), p.1.
5. (April 1863), p.281.
6. (Feb. 27, 1863), p.3.

said the Nonconformist:

will certainly not detract from Mrs.Gaskell's previous reputation. It is in some points more elaborate and artistic than any of her former productions. Most of her other books have had some distinct moral or social purpose to serve - this is more a work of pure fiction.... We are all the better pleased with it on this account; long passages of dull lecturing seem sadly out of place in the pages of a novel, and although every story of a human life must have some lesson to convey, we had much rather that the incidents were themselves left to suggest it than that it were continually forced upon our notice. 1

The Reader, again, preferred Sylvia's Lovers because it avoided a specific purpose. Moreover, it thought it was a merit that this novel was limited exclusively, unlike Mary Barton, to humble people. Nevertheless, the reviewer went on to predict, correctly, that Sylvia's Lovers, not possessing an intense topical interest, would not enjoy the wide popularity of Mary Barton:

"Sylvia's Lovers", although we look upon it as a better novel than "Mary Barton", will not for several reasons share the popularity of its predecessor. Some of these reasons might be reckoned by many among its merits. Those who remember the state of feeling with regard to the relations of labour and capital fifteen years ago, will not doubt that some part of the very lively interest excited by the "novel of Manchester life" was due to its entanglement with a complex problem of the day. But critics who believe all adventitious interest of this kind... dangerous to the effect of art... will find with unmixed satisfaction that Mrs.Gaskell's last novel opens no issues of this nature. Our attention to an interesting and pathetic story is not carried out of the picture, as it were, by any introduction of an element foreign to art. Mrs.Gaskell's last novel is, moreover, very superior to her first, in the absolute exclusion of all "gentility". She keeps on her own peculiar ground from the beginning of the book to the end... 2

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1. (May 6, 1863), p. 356 (*italics mine*).
 2. (Feb. 28, 1863), p.207 (*italics mine*). Another reason suggested by the reviewer for his prediction that Sylvia's Lovers would prove less popular than Mary Barton was "its exceeding painfulness".

Other reviewers, though less interested in measuring Mrs. Gaskell's latest novel against her previous work, were no less prepared to express their appreciation of the literary merits of Sylvia's Lovers. Mrs. Gaskell's craftsmanship in the "carefully written novel" was stressed by the Guardian.¹ The Examiner affirmed that: "Mrs. Gaskell has never written with more care than in this novel",² adding that Sylvia's Lovers was "a welcome addition to the sterling literature of our day."³ The Literary Times remarked that "no painter ever sat down to make a study of a sea-coast town more patiently than Mrs. Gaskell."⁴ Most enthusiastic of all, however, was John Bull, which opened its review with the assertion that "Mrs. Gaskell has written a tale of marvellous beauty. She has by this work earned for herself a high place among the few great living writers of English fiction."⁵

We should not conclude from these laudatory remarks, however, that Sylvia's Lovers was received with total approval or a really perceptive appreciation, even by the favourably disposed critics, who found a number of their moral and literary expectations frustrated by Mrs. Gaskell's new work. Indeed, this situation of failed expectations unfortunately inhibited wide-ranging analysis and accounts for the generally shallow and insubstantial nature of much of the contemporary comments.

The most important area where Sylvia's Lovers encountered

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1. (July 23, 1863), p. 718.
 2. (March 28, 1863), p. 197.
 3. Ibid. (second notice) (April 11, 1863), p. 232.
 4. (March 14, 1863), p. 10.
 5. (March 7, 1863), p. 156.

serious difficulties centred on Mrs. Gaskell's choice of humble, ordinary people for the principal roles in the novel. Sylvia's Lovers might well have been called "Philip's love for Sylvia", since, after all, it is Philip's relentless, all-consuming passion for Sylvia that lays the groundwork for the ultimately tragic direction of events. And it is Philip's conscious will (itself ironically in the grip of an ineluctable obsession) that appears to be the most active element, taking advantage of the fortuitous events of life (the kidnapping of Charley Kinraid, and the execution of Daniel Robson) in its fatally successful ambition to secure its one purpose, the union with Sylvia. The book opens with Philip's unrequited love for Sylvia, and closes with our attention focused on the two of them in the brief poignant scene of mutual "enlightenment" and reconciliation. Others enmeshed in the love-situation, like Hester and Charley Kinraid, play a secondary, indeed a minor role, compared with the two principal figures of the tragedy, Philip and Sylvia. Because Philip and Sylvia play such a central role in the novel, it is crucial that the reader is able, if not to identify fully or always with them, at least to have no serious cause to withhold his sympathy from either of them. Many contemporary reviewers failed in this effort of sympathy with regard to both Philip and Sylvia. In the case of the former, the majority seemed to experience little difficulty in deciding to dislike him; or, at best, that they could not be much interested in his tragic career. Even after his terrible purgative experiences in Syria and back home, few readers would deeply pity him. One reviewer, that of the Reader, did actually quarrel with Sylvia for forgiving her hapless husband even on his dying day!

At the root of Philip's problems with the contemporary readers

was the fact that he was considered too commonplace and dull for his heroic role; many felt that Mrs.Gaskell had taken a most unwise risk in presenting a hero, and a tragic one at that, that was consistently depicted, especially in the first half of the novel, as positively unromantic and devoid of any exceptional merit of heart or mind. In our own time a number of critics have at last done Philip, and Mrs. Gaskell, justice by considering the creation of this complex character one of the novel's finest achievements.¹ But our present-day enthusiasm for Philip would have startled the contemporary critics, who seemed to be puzzled why an experienced writer like Mrs.Gaskell should have selected a prosaic, awkward draper to carry on his stooping shoulders too heavy a burden of doom and tragedy.

Nor did the desire of Philip's heart, Sylvia, fare much better in winning over the contemporary readers; although generally more liked than Philip, she was found to be only slightly more exciting or

1. Cf., for instance: "The 'tragic hero', Philip Hepburn, is the most complex character in the book. He is also, one may hazard, the most successful full-length male character in all Mrs.Gaskell's fiction; and it is with his sentiments that the reader finds himself in greatest sympathy." (Sharps, 1970, *op.cit.*, p. 394); "[Philip] Hepburn is the only character in [Mrs.Gaskell's] works, who, along with John Barton, deserves to be considered a tragic hero." (Ganz, 1969, *op.cit.*, p. 231); "[Philip] is indubitably a greater achievement even than Sylvia: sensitive studies of women are not uncommon in the novel; studies of such power and conviction as this of Philip are rare." (Craik, 1975, *op.cit.*, p. 186). The conversion to Philip is by no means complete, however. Mrs.Gaskell's recent biographer curiously finds Philip a total failure, though necessary for the plot: "With Philip Hepburn [Mrs.Gaskell] attempted more than she could achieve. He would have cost Emily Brontë no pains to portray, since he was motivated by genuine passion for Sylvia, but Mrs.Gaskell needed to moralize and excuse, and ultimately... lost herself finally in metaphysics....Yet Hepburn, the diffident, stooping, inarticulate young draper's assistant..... was a necessary figure in the plot." (Gérin, 1976, pp. 215-216, *italics mine*).

interesting. Herein clearly lay another serious impediment to a full appreciation of Mrs.Gaskell's novel.

The failure to sympathize with Sylvia and Philip has to do, as will become clear in the course of this study, with their roles in the novel, the type of novel Sylvia's Lovers is, and also the specific period in which Mrs.Gaskell's novel appeared.

One aspect of the Philip-Sylvia relationship that the contemporary critics found confusing, and on the whole unwelcome, was what we may call the reversal of roles in that relationship. Put simply, Philip seemed to have too much tameness about him, whereas Sylvia appeared to dominate the relationship in a rather unfeminine manner. In other words, Philip's masculinity seemed to be flawed; he was awkward, self-conscious and patient, especially in his wooing of and general attitude to Sylvia. Conversely, Sylvia's vigorous animal spirits, her outspokenness and decisiveness, especially in her dealings with Philip appeared to cast doubt on her femininity.

"Philip's manhood marred by drapery is very cleverly portrayed"¹, said the Globe. Another reviewer described Philip as "a staid, young shopkeeper practising all the easy virtues that go to make up citizenship."² Philip's physical appearance, his sallow face and the slight stoop in his shoulders, seemed to emphasize his lack of virile vitality and sexual attraction, so much so that the British Quarterly felt that Sylvia's "aversion to the young draper, who is so pious, proper and demure...is a just instinct."³ The same source underlined this

1. (April 2, 1863), p.1.

2. Englishwoman's, (April 1863), p. 281.

3. "The Works of Mrs.Gaskell" XLV (April 1867), pp. 420-21.

point more clearly elsewhere when it said: "In Sylvia's dislike of [Philip] we feel inclined to sympathize from the moment we hear that he was a serious, young man, tall, but with a slight stoop in his shoulders, and a long upper lip".¹ The Guardian did not find in Philip much to catch the eye, either. Philip, it said, is "a sallow, anxious and puritanical suitor... with little to recommend him except money and constancy."² It is significant that the few who noticed that "Philip commands respect by many of his qualities" (the Nonconformist),³ emphasized primarily his social virtues. The Saturday Review, for instance, seemed to see in the self-made Philip a bright example of the self-help policy, "a specimen of a very properly behaved commendable young draper, self-educated and anxious to instruct his cousin..."⁴ The Manchester Examiner, too, found Philip "too staid and unromantic" but approved of his "quiet, steady and industrious habits."⁵

But no one saw in Philip's lack of vigorous manhood such a decisive and serious blemish as the Daily News critic. This, almost certainly lady, reviewer was evidently prepared to respect and sympathize with "the quakerish young shopkeeper." Philip, she says, "might indeed have enlisted our sympathies" had he not persisted in "his wooing [of Sylvia] in such a hang-dog fashion." All, however, was not lost for Philip so far as the sympathy of the Daily Times was concerned,

1. Ibid., p. 420.

2. (July 23, 1863), p. 718.

3. (May 6, 1863), p. 356.

4. (April 4, 1863), p. 446-47.

5. (April 14, 1863), p. 3.

for he is given another opportunity, when he marries Sylvia and shows himself to be a tender and considerate husband. But as Philip's chances for regaining the esteem of the Daily News begin to look very high, he destroys any such expectations when, three years after his lawful marriage with Sylvia, he accepts defeat at the re-appearance of his rival Charley, fleeing home and country rather than asserting his rights as becomes a husband and father:

[Charley Kinraid] returns and [Sylvia] agrees with him in the presence of her husband that the said husband is "a damned scoundrel"...That the husband should be such a villainous milksop as to stand it, however, deprives him of all our sympathy [i.e. sympathy with Philip then and later during his period of exile in Palestine and sufferings there and back home]. 1

The Reader reviewer also took exception to Philip's failure to assume the traditional role of masculinity, but he put forward his criticism in a far more interesting form. It has been customary for the woman, he observes, to lose honour and duty for the sake of her beloved, and not the other way round, as in Mrs.Gaskell's story. We might have accepted thereversal of roles, continues the Reader, if Mrs.Gaskell had gone a step further in her depiction of Philip, making him really feminine by endowing him with qualities of grace and sensitivity. Apparently the Reader critic had The Mill on the Floss in mind with Maggie and her pitying love for Philip Wakem, whose manhood was physically compromised by deformity, but who was cultured, sensitive and affectionate:

Milton's division, "He for God only, she for God in him," might be owing to a low conception of the woman's ideal, but to sacrifice honour and duty for one beloved object

1. (April 3, 1836), p.2.

is the woman's temptation, and the character which is to yield to it and yet retain our sympathy should retain the attraction of a somewhat feminine grace. This the uncouth shopman is entirely and designedly without, and loses thereby as much in an artistic as in a moral point of view. 1

If Philip was found too feeble and unmanly to be appreciated, Sylvia suffered from the opposite faults in the eyes of some critics, who deplored her lack of grace, femininity and other related shortcomings. A.W.Ward, writing in 1906, unshackled by the rather complicated and contradictory code of femininity that dominated the best part of the previous century, was the first to fall under the spell of Sylvia, the "irresistible, little heroine" and the "lovely creation before which all criticism melts into pure delight."² The most flattering compliment Mrs. Gaskell's heroine received in 1863 was far less ecstatic. The Examiner described her as a "pretty, generous, impulsive and loving maid."³ Another exceptional word of appreciation came from the Morning Advertiser, which found her "young, pretty and of engaging manners."⁴ The Literary Times showed a greater interest in Sylvia and was the only source to say unequivocally that Sylvia was an artistically successful creation, underlining rightly Mrs.Gaskell's intention to present an ordinary, non-idealized country girl: "In the portrait Mrs.Gaskell has drawn, she has been careful of colour and character. Sylvia is a

1. (Feb. 28, 1863), p. 207.

2. The Works, vol. VI, pp. XII, XIV. As in the case of Philip, Sylvia is now widely appreciated. Cf. "[Mrs.Gaskell] could register the fluctuations in a simple girl's feelings with the exactitude of a barometer" (Gerin, 1976, op.cit., p. 228); "In Sylvia [Mrs.Gaskell] creates a personality of great power." (Craik, 1975, op.cit., p. 163). Among those who still find it hard to take to Sylvia is J.G.Sharps, who considers her uninteresting compared with Philip, and in any case "a not very remarkable girl." (1970, op.cit. p.395).

3. (April 11, 1863), p. 231.

4. (Feb. 26, 1863), p.3.

pretty, somewhat wilful, half-spoilt girl, with a good head and heart, and with a very fair share of selfish appreciation. There is not much ideality about her; flesh and blood she is, and Yorkshire flesh and blood into the bargain."¹

Short as it is, the Literary Times' comment was the lengthiest favourable analysis of Sylvia's character. Other statements by favourable critics were brief and non-committal. The Sun's comment was thus typical: "Sylvia [is] a frank, fearless country girl, of no particular character, except that she was obstinate and unforgiving when deeply offended."²

This lack of character alleged by the Sun was supported by others. Both the Saturday Review and the Manchester Examiner united in the opinion that Sylvia was a shadowy figure, finding Hester more solid and memorable:

In Sylvia's character the interest ought to centre, as she is the sole heroine; yet we never can be brought to care much about her. When the book ... is closed, we remember nothing very distinctly except her beauty and her trials. The sketch of the shopwoman Hester leaves a stronger impression. (Saturday Review) 3

Hester, the shopwoman, who loves Philip silently but truly, is even a better - that is, more clearly painted character than Sylvia herself. Perhaps the heroine is less distinctly drawn than any other of the females in the tale. Mrs. Robson is a capital portrait and stands clearly out from the canvas; Sylvia is more a shadow than a substance. (Manchester Examiner)⁴

These are extraordinary judgements which must appear to us as incredibly

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1. (March 14, 1863), p. 9.
 2. (Feb. 27, 1863), p. 2.
 3. (April 4, 1863), pp. 446-47.
 4. (April 14, 1863), p. 3.

wrong and unfair. For if any of the two characters in question is of the conventional, shadowy, cut-to-a-pattern type it is Hester, rather than Sylvia, who is so refreshingly original, vital and complex, despite, indeed because of her lack of literate culture and refinement. Yet the pronouncements of these two critics do make sense from a mid-Victorian point of view: if we look at the matter from that perspective, we may find that Hester rather than Sylvia has a larger share of the mid-Victorian essence of womanhood, hence she is more easily recognizable as life-like!

Hester is tender, patient and self-effacing, almost an angel-in-the-house figure. In spite of her emotional conflicts (the mortification arising out of the unrequited love for Philip and her jealousy of Sylvia), she remains a dependable, albeit inconspicuous, haven of peace and support, spiritual as well as material, for the ill-starred Philip. After Philip abandons his unhappy home, she even tries to be kind to Sylvia despite her old jealousy and her newly-born conviction that Philip's infatuation with the ignorant Sylvia has been the cause of all his misfortunes.

By contrast, the storm-tossed Sylvia was not so capable of repressing her strong feelings (either of love or hate), and far less adept at the traditionally feminine role of submission and self-abnegation. Sylvia's incapacity to forget or forgive, moreover, leads her to utter the terrible vow never to live with Philip, thus casting him, her husband, out of his own home, a spiritually ruined man. Sylvia, weighed like this in a mid-Victorian balance, was the opposite of what Mrs. Gaskell's contemporaries hoped or believed their women to be: "an unfailing fountain of courage and inspiration to the hard-pressed man, who but for them must be worsted in life's battle... and who send

forth husband and brother each morning with a new strength for his conflict."¹

For Mrs. Gaskell's audience the line that separated what was morally right and what was life-like was often a thin one, and it became even thinner when the debate centred on such sensitive and highly emotive issues as the principles of feminine psychology and womanly behaviour. The general lack of interest in Sylvia was thus a suspension of judgement; many reviewers were obviously not comfortable with this character, but Mrs. Gaskell's skill in her delineation and the underlying religious moral (Philip sinned in idolizing Sylvia, hence his downfall) inhibited them from directly finding fault with Sylvia. The Saturday Review and the Manchester Examiner, too, appear to have decided to withhold judgement, but their moral disapproval was quite sufficiently, though still obliquely, expressed through preferring the life-like Hester to Sylvia, who is "more a shadow than a substance."

If we are still in doubt that Sylvia's difficulties with contemporary readers were largely moral ones, we can look at the comments of those reviewers who were more forthright about what they really thought of her. Not particularly outspoken, but unambiguous enough, was the reviewer of the National Magazine. This generally sympathetic critic seems to spend a long time of heart-searching over the question of Sylvia before he finally makes up his mind that Mrs. Gaskell's heroine is rather repugnant, suffering, perhaps, as he tentatively puts it, from a lack of femininity:

As we recall each excellency of the book, our objection seems fading away, and we almost lose the perception of what constituted it, yet it is there, as we turn again

1. James Baldwin Brown, The Home Life, 1866, pp. 23-5.

to the volumes, a chill something, a harshness, a want of femininity, so to speak, in the heroine; a something unloveable and repellant... we cannot more nearly define our bugbear, yet feel we have failed altogether to define it.¹

The bugbear that worried the National Magazine reviewer concerning Sylvia also oppressed the minds of other critics, who showed greater readiness, however, to define the source of trouble. "We cannot get a spark of interest in Sylvia", moaned the Daily News critic, who evidently felt sick by the mere thought of this heroine, who is no more than "a beautiful human animal, without a thought beyond the shippon and its cows or the farm and its produce, ignorant of the merest elements of education."²

As we read on in the Daily News review, it becomes apparent that Sylvia's fatal mistake for the reviewer was not primarily her profound ignorance or rural interests, but rather what the reviewer considered her moral backwardness. Sylvia first rebuffs the advances of Philip, vastly her superior, then, after Philip secures her as a wife (uncongratulated by the Daily News, since he resorted to fraud), Sylvia never stops loving Charley, even after she has born Philip a child. Finally, Sylvia shows her disregard for the first elements of moral behaviour, in the judgement of the Daily News, when she makes her vow at the reappearance of Charley never to live with Philip. (This takes place when Charley returns and Sylvia learns that Philip had deceived her by failing to tell her that Charley had been kidnapped and that he had given him a message that he would come back to marry her). The Daily News, significantly, ignores completely Sylvia's other vow, not to be

1. (May 1863), p. 48.

2. (April 3, 1863), p.2.

tempted by Charley's offer to leave Philip and marry him. In keeping with her concept of Sylvia as some sort of animal in human form, the Daily News reviewer ends her comment by calling Sylvia a self-willed vixen:

By suppressing the message entrusted to him and by encouraging her to believe that [Charley] was dead, the shopkeeper obtains her hand without any congratulation on our part. Yet when he has succoured her mother in helpless distress, and surrounded her with every possible proof of his affection - when after several years of happy [sic. !!] domesticity, and the birth of a child, the kidnapped man returns, and she agrees with him in the presence of her husband that the said husband is a "damned scoundrel" we must confess to a slight feeling of disgust... [From that moment on, we lose interest in the story and] we read with slight attention how she pronounces a "deep divorcing vow" against the husband - how he enlists for a soldier, leaving the self-willed vixen all his lands and livings. 1

In her denunciation of Sylvia, the Daily News critic overlooks a number of important details in the novel that could have materially altered this picture of Sylvia as a bad woman. Indeed, Mrs. Gaskell's presentation of the predicament of the tragic couple, Sylvia and Philip, is done with such a superb measure of insight, sympathy and pity for both that the reader is left little room to judge one at the expense of the other.

The Daily News reviewer, however, was not really interested in fairly balancing right and wrong as relates to Philip and Sylvia. By directing most of her energy of resentment against Sylvia, the reviewer was in fact protesting the implications of Sylvia's passion for Charley Kinraid that proved so tragic for both Sylvia herself and Philip.

The Daily News lets Philip off rather lightly: a man is supposed to be capable of developing a strong sexual passion for a woman.

1. (April 3, 1863), p. 2.

If such a passion (as in the case of Philip) overpowers him and gets the better of his sense of prudence and even his conscience, it is regrettable, though understandable. The woman, however, could not expect such clemency. For a start, a young unmarried woman, unless she be abnormal, is incapable of feeling strong sexual attraction. She can, however, develop a romantic attachment, as Sylvia did with Charley. Sylvia's partiality to him in preference to Philip, though it may be misguided, is acceptable since it issued in an engagement. Sylvia's unpardonable error, in the opinion of the Daily News, was not her initial love for the sailor but the persistence in her strong feelings for him in spite of her being wedded to another man. It would be of no avail to plead that Sylvia was forced by circumstances to marry a man she could not love, nor to say that she could not help feeling what she did. The message of the Daily News was simple and self-evident: no matter how just, ineluctable or overpowering passionate love on the part of a woman is, it is a destructive, irrational force unless it submits to the imperative demands of social stability and order as embodied in such institutions as marriage and the family.

The early 'sixties (and much of the nineteenth century, for that matter) were not, indeed, suitable for novels showing that passionate love might overpower a woman in the same way as it could consume a man's whole being. Three years before the appearance of Sylvia's Lovers, a storm of protest was raised over George Eliot's The Mill on the Floss. The third volume of that novel was singled out for widespread condemnation because it showed Maggie succumbing to the irresistible attraction of Stephen Guest. After Maggie's short-lived and innocent enough elopement, George Eliot makes her heroine pay dearly for this lapse from virtue. But the drowning of Maggie was not

enough to placate the many aggrieved readers who complained that George Eliot did not play fairly: she first secured their love for Maggie as a charming, romantic girl, hungering for brotherly love and protection, then faced them suddenly with the dilemma of sympathizing with this heroine in an impossible situation.

Besides the Daily News, the religious Nonconformist was another source to show disquiet at the clash of passion and social duty acted out in Sylvia's Lovers. Although more sophisticated than the Daily News reviewer, the Nonconformist critic basically adopts the same line of criticism. Thus the burden of blame for the break-up of the marriage falls on Sylvia, whose moral and feminine faults are significantly emphasized and exaggerated. Even more surprising, Sylvia is blamed for Philip's calamities; the image of Eve causing Adam's fall from divine grace is thus invoked. In short, the Nonconformist reviewer obviously had little love for Sylvia, who, instead of being the spiritual and moral support of her man in the battle of life, proves in his opinion to be a tempter and a cruel woman:

Sylvia herself fails to call forth much sympathy. She is described as very pretty, very fond of her parents, and blindly devoted to the young sailor who won her heart, after Othello's fashion, by telling her the story of his adventures, and that is all that can be said on her behalf. She was weak, ignorant, and petulant - with undeveloped mind and ill-regulated affections. She continually irritates us by her insensibility to the unwearying kindness of the infatuated Philip, whose fondness for her betrayed him into his errors and calamities. Her harsh and unforgiving spirit is hardly feminine, and destroys the pity we might otherwise have felt for one the happiness of whose young life had been so cruelly blighted. 1

Starting from these premises, it was not difficult for the

1. (May 6, 1863), p. 356.

Nonconformist critic to question the consequences of the most spectacular scene in Philip's career, when Charley returns and claims Sylvia. The reviewer objects specifically to Philip's decision to abandon his home and town, considering it to be unrealistic. At the same time, he tries to do Mrs.Gaskell justice by taking note of the many circumstances preparing for the resolution of conflict to take this course, and almost appears to be convinced, but he holds back, as if reluctant to contemplate the possibility, even in a novel, of a woman divorcing her husband - as Sylvia in effect does. Again, the assumption of an intimate relationship between the 'moral' and the 'real' appears in this particular dilemma of the Nonconformist:

Nowhere, except in novels, should we expect to find a man voluntarily abandoning his home, his family, and a prosperous business, to the success of which he was keenly alive, and accepting a life of privation and misery, in consequence of the harsh sentence of a wife, which he had not even tried to reverse. It may be said that he was stung by the accusings of conscience and the sense of degradation, but this appears to us hardly consistent with the other parts of the story. The exposure was what he had anticipated as possible- nay, must, despite all his attempts to blind himself, have contemplated as probable; and it is difficult, therefore, to admit that his conduct, under the circumstances, was very natural. However, this is really to apply too rigid a test. Mrs.Gaskell would no doubt have much to say in favour of her view, and could point to little incidents she has introduced which may serve as sufficient answers to such objections, especially to the fact that Philip's notion of the fickleness of his rival had been disproved by the event - a discovery that exercised material influence on his own future course. Waiving such criticism as possibly too cavilling, we feel bound to acknowledge the interest and power of the tale. 1

The Nonconformist critic, as can be seen in this passage, appears to have read Mrs.Gaskell's novel closely, and generally succeeded in his effort to stop his moral reservations interfering too much between

1. (May 6, 1863), p. 356.

him and "the interest and power of the tale". Not so flexible or compromising was the Daily News, nor another source we have not yet considered, the Spectator.

The Spectator reviewer showed no hesitation in dismissing Sylvia's Lovers as "one of the most painful and unsatisfactory [stories] lately put forth to the world." His main grievance was that the heroine was both morally repugnant and untrue to life - the two concepts are virtually synonymous to him. Indeed this critic, unlike any other reviewer (unlike even the Daily News, which opened its severe review by paying homage to Mrs.Gaskell's "literary skill" and "great force of style"), could not find in Mrs.Gaskell's new novel any of the usual artistic merits. Thus, stylistically, the novel is very poor "as though every sentence involved an effort". The plot, though an old one, "has seldom been treated with more contempt for probability, or the nature of ordinary human beings." The heroine is "a character who never can have existed." Sylvia is meant to be "very loveable, but in every act and almost every speech [she is] hard, selfish and unforgiving- She is always hating somebody." Sylvia has no notion of Christian forgiveness "and sends her husband to exile without a sigh because he has told her, out of intense passion, a lie." Finally, the Spectator critic winds up his observations on Sylvia in this concise form: "She is to our judgement as bad a specimen of womanhood as we were ever asked to study, and most unreal besides."

It is noteworthy that the Spectator reviewer joins those of the Daily News and the Nonconformist in being rather lenient towards Philip, reserving the harshest criticism for Sylvia. He also shares with the Nonconformist his questioning of Mrs.Gaskell's handling of Philip's encounter with the returning Charley. Again, he bases his objections on grounds of common sense, although it is obvious that his

main concern is more for the morally damaging spectacle of a woman divorcing her husband than for the rightness of Philip's self-exile in terms of art or human psychology. Dealing with this episode, the Spectator fails, however, to show the Nonconformist's cautious, rather modest approach. In fact, the matter seems to the Spectator reviewer so urgent and important that he has no time for humility, so he directly attacks his target, namely, to teach Mrs.Gaskell how she should have tackled the episode of Charley's return, had she possessed his own superior knowledge of the world and of "the nature of ordinary [as opposed to fictitious] human beings":

It is difficult to decide whether the conduct of wife or husband more violates probability ... Sylvia as a real woman might first have felt as bitterly as Mrs.Gaskell has described; but no woman ever loathed a husband superior to herself, whose love never slackened, and very few are capable of the intense selfishness which works a great wrong in order to be avenged for one done to themselves. In a very short time [Philip's] deception would have been pardoned as an offence prompted by an excess of love, and the wife... [would] have turned to her home and its cares as the one chance of happiness left. As to Philip, husbands of his kind - strong, patient and tradesmanlike - do not enlist [as soldiers] because wives threaten to cast them off. The first natural emotion would have been simply one of insulted authority, followed, if the fit lasted, by a persistent devotion to business in solitude. Men of his class do not throw up all duties... because of an outburst of female temper. 1

The reviewer does not leave the matter at that, but tries to get to the root of what seems to him Mrs.Gaskell's inability to perceive the world as it is, evident especially in her predilection for hard characters of the Sylvia type, who, he has made it clear, bear little relation to reality. Mrs.Gaskell, a member of the middle classes, he says, in observing from a distance the behaviour of another class, has

1. (Feb. 28, 1863), p. 1699.

come to the wrong conclusion that the apparent hardness of Northerners is the very essence of their character:

[The improbability of Sylvia] can only be accounted for by remembering that Mrs.Gaskell is a writer, who, belonging to one breed of English people, passes her life in watching and describing another. Like all people who observe it from the outside she has been deeply struck with the dourness perceptible in the character of Northern Englishmen, and in her intent watchfulness has come to believe that this, which is a mere quality produced by external circumstances, is the very basis of character. 1

The Spectator critic was a lone voice, however, in underestimating Mrs.Gaskell's powers of observation and perception. Since her second 'Northern' novel North and South (1855), Mrs.Gaskell seems to have established herself as a reliable and keen-sighted authority on industrial Lancashire. Her Life of Charlotte Brontë (1857) showed her no less able to penetrate rural West Yorkshire. Her reputation as an expert on the North was further enhanced with Sylvia's Lovers, where she moved farther east to a small fishing town, Monkshaven (Whitby), on the northeastern coast of Yorkshire.

Of the fairly general confidence in Mrs.Gaskell's insight into the Northern character there are many examples, often to be found in articles not primarily concerned with Mrs.Gaskell or her work. Anne Mozley, for instance, attributed in 1859 the phenomenal popularity of modern fiction to the fact that each of its major practitioners had invaded new experiential territories and fresh subject-matters. Mrs. Gaskell's share in this innovative process, Mozley observed, was to utilize successfully a seemingly "barren" and "unprofitable" field, when she presented "pictures of mechanic life, amid whirling wheels

1. (Feb. 28, 1863), p. 1699.

and smoking chimneys" which were accepted by novel-readers "as an embodiment, for which they could vouch, of the mode of existence of the masses."¹ E.S.Dallas, writing a year later in The Times, remarked that "the life of proud self-assertion... abounds in the Northern counties" by the testimony of the Brontës and "by the account of Mrs.Gaskell and by that of 'George Eliot'"²

Indeed, Mrs.Gaskell's novels and her Life of Charlotte Brontë were sometimes used to test the authenticity of accounts of Northern life by lesser writers. A few months before the appearance of Sylvia's Lovers, the Saturday Review hinted to Benjamin Brierley, author of Tales and Sketches of Lancashire Life (1862) that he could benefit from a close study of The Life of Charlotte Brontë, "written by an authoress who is Lancashire all over, and sets the character before us instinctively, without a word about it." "Our author", continued the reviewer, "by no means possesses the Ars celare artem of Mrs.Gaskell."³

With the exception of the Spectator, no reviewer of Sylvia's Lovers questioned Mrs.Gaskell's intimate knowledge of the humble people presented in that novel. The authoress of Sylvia's Lovers, said the Illustrated London News, is "essentially the novelist of the North of England", whose "reputation has been well established"⁴ in this respect. The Westminster spoke approvingly of "the pre-eminent faithfulness" with which Mrs.Gaskell depicted "the country folk" of

1. Bentley's Quarterly Review, I (July 1859), 434.

2. (May 19, 1860), p. 10.

3. XV (Jan. 3, 1863), 25. The same periodical later wrote in its review of Sylvia's Lovers that "'Mary Barton' remains a genuine and very interesting description of the Lancashire operatives." (April 4, 1863), p. 446.

4. (April 4, 1863), p. 383.

"the chilly North country shore."¹ The London Review, despite its half-hearted enthusiasm for the new novel, affirmed that Sylvia's Lovers showed its author "to have studied Yorkshire ... life to good effect."² The Observer, in a more favourable review, found "the domestic scenes of country low life" in Sylvia's Lovers "decidely good and true to nature."³

A few critics, however, while commending Mrs.Gaskell's art in the representation of life in the Northeast, were not so sure that Mrs. Gaskell's choice of low life as such was a happy one. One of these critics was the Manchester Daily Examiner reviewer, who noted that Sylvia's Lovers "breaks new grounds" by leaving industrial Lancashire to the Northeast and also by the exclusion of cultured characters: "No educated persons appear on the stage," he said. "Perhaps Mrs.Gaskell designs to show her powers in all this; if so, she has achieved her aim." But later the reviewer shows some hesitation as to whether Mrs. Gaskell's exclusion of genteel folk was a wise thing after all. In fact, in his rhetorical question he seems to believe that it was not: "Is it a fault or a merit that the book deals only with personages in the lower walks of life" and that the novel contains "no characters of whom great intelligence can be predicated [?]."⁴

The same type of seeming contradiction appears also in the Reader's approach to the subject. The Reader reviewer, in fact, shows considerable interest in this aspect of Mrs.Gaskell's novel. He thus

1. (April 1863), p. 622.

2. (March 7, 1863), p. 254.

3. (March 1, 1863), p. 7.

4. (April 4, 1863), p.3.

prefaces his review by a fairly lengthy preamble, setting out three points that formed part of the more or less standard contemporary thinking on the subject of low life in fiction. Firstly, the serious interest in low life (or what the reviewer calls the poor) is a modern phenomenon. Secondly, the portrayal of uneducated people is an exceptionally difficult task. Thirdly, such portrayal, if successful, can be beneficial in extending the sympathetic range of novel-readers. The Reader reviewer then turns to Sylvia's Lovers to find it eminently successful so far as the delineation of low life is concerned, even more successful as a story, though much simpler, than the work of "Mrs. Gaskell's only rival in this field", George Eliot:

... we have a sense of responsibility in our dealings with the poor as a body, and consequently of interest in their condition, which is altogether a new thing. The world of Addison and Fielding and Pope is, in this respect, a different world. It is not that uneducated people do not play a large part in the novels of Fielding, for instance... But they are strictly accessories; their ruggedness is only brought out to set off the polite life, in subordination to which they are all arranged. This is true to a considerable degree even of Sir Walter Scott and Miss Edgeworth, who both unquestionably belong to the new age. They linger over their sketches of the lower orders with a far more loving pencil than they bestow on the more elaborate portraits of their superiors in rank -, but it is the latter after all which form the centre of the picture. That this rugged life can be an object large enough to engross the canvas to itself, is the discovery of our own day... The aim of literature, and especially of fiction, ought to be the enlargement and elevation of sympathy - the cultivation of a catholic interest in all non-moral differences of character and life. For this object it is well that we should be sometimes taken out of our atmosphere - that we should look at the problems of life under ... simpler aspects. This is a very desirable result, and the power of producing it is very rare. Few educated people really know the poor, and still fewer can translate that knowledge into fiction. When we say, therefore, that the novel here noticed is one of the very best of this kind, we award it no slight praise. It will ... remind most readers of Mrs. Gaskell's only rival in this field; but though we cannot think it bears any approach to the rich and vigorous colouring of the author of "Adam Bede", in the outline of an interesting plot

(which we have the self-denial to refrain from extracting) the superiority lies with it. 1

After a detailed discussion of the novel, the critic concludes the review by reiterating his belief that Mrs.Gaskell has been very successful in capturing the essential characteristics and flavour of low life. At the same time, he qualifies this by the puzzling assertion that Mrs.Gaskell has failed conspicuously in the representation of her principal low-life characters individually. Even more surprising is his assertion that this alleged inadequacy of Mrs. Gaskell in the drawing of character is not peculiar to the novel under consideration:

The delineation of individual character is not the forte of our author, but she has wisely chosen a subject in which her almost unequalled power of painting the character of a class, and those deeper emotions which bring out not what is individual but what is universal, has enabled her to give us a fiction which will take its place above the high water-mark of the fashion or caprice of the day. [presumably a reference to the novel of sensation then in vogue.] 2

We have no reason to doubt the sincerity of the Reader's reviewer, who was probably David Masson, editor of this newly-launched, ambitious magazine, whose list of distinguished contributors, proudly printed on the title-page, included the names of Charles Kingsley, his brother Henry, and that of Mrs.Gaskell. It is unlikely that he has been merely trying to be kind to a prestigious and sensitive contributor, since basically the same paradoxical attitude (praising Mrs.Gaskell's masterly delineation of low life, while disliking the particular low-life characters she has depicted) appears

1. (Feb. 28, 1863), p. 207.

2. Ibid., pp. 207-208.

under various guises and forms in other reviews (one of these, that of Manchester Guardian, we have already considered.)

In the particular case of the Reader, the main objection, and the character most intensely disliked, was Philip Hepburn. He was considered an unmitigated failure, being a dull, "uncouth" and "insipid shopman", who Mrs.Gaskell "entirely and designedly" declined to set off with any personal charm or attraction. Even Charley Kinraid, admittedly "a stock novel character" would have fared much better, in the opinion of the Reader, had he occupied, instead of the unsuitable Philip, "the place of honour in the story." More seriously, Mrs.Gaskell has failed to excite the Reader's sympathy for Philip on moral grounds: "Philip Hepburn is so evidently intended to interest us on the moral side of his character, that the absence of any remorse for his treachery, apart from the fear of and regret for its consequences, strikes us somewhat painfully." How can Mrs.Gaskell, the reviewer seems to ask, expect us to respect such a character; indeed, how can we respect her own moral sense, when she allows Sylvia to call her treacherous husband in the final scene: "My Philip ..., tender and true"?:

... though the occasion [the death-bed scene of reconciliation] demands the exclusion of all bitter feeling, we yet are somewhat revolted when his wife, repenting of what seems to us her righteous indignation against him, laments him with the words "Oh, Philip, my Philip, tender and true!" Mrs.Gaskell is too much inclined to confuse the sharp line which divides those temptations which are and are not possible to a character she intends to retain its hold on our respect. 1

In other words, the Reader reviewer felt mystified and pained to find Mrs.Gaskell expecting him to identify with a hero she "designedly" portrayed as commonplace and flat, and not so designedly (but no less

1. (Feb. 28, 1863), p. 207.

unwisely), allowed to act so dishonestly that he became morally repugnant. This exceptionally uncharitable opinion of Philip suggests to the Reader critic another reason why Philip should never have occupied the central place in the novel; in a story of such painful impact, he says, and especially one that too daringly tackles unanswerable, disquieting metaphysical questions (presumably the ineluctability of human happiness and pain, and the conflict between the pursuit of happiness and adherence to moral precepts), Mrs.Gaskell should have focused our attention, not on the prosaic Philip, but on a lofty, inspiring and re-assuring character, whose exceptional merits would have taken the edge off the extreme painfulness of the tale:

[The "exceeding painfulness"] of Sylvia's Lovers in itself is neither good nor bad - a tragedy cannot be too tragic. But we do not find all that in a very painful story we unconsciously demand ... A novelist who takes us into the dark recesses which only a few human beings are called upon the tread, owes us the compensation of a central figure of large and lofty proportions, excelling, not necessarily in virtue, but in energy, in elevation, in strength ... Here our author fails ... ["The uncouth" shopman] Philip Hepburn is Sylvia's lover and nothing more ... a mere blank. [etc...] 1

Another reviewer to take a somewhat similar line was that of the Nonconformist. He also considers that the painfulness of the tale has been aggravated by the absence of morally inspiring figures, especially among the principal characters. He, again, does not underrate Mrs.Gaskell's skilful delineation of low life, and unlike the Reader, he finds no reason to criticize her ability in depicting the individual characters of the tale. He frankly says, however, that life may indeed be as Mrs.Gaskell portrays it, but he would much rather have a more softened, less austere picture of reality:

1. (Feb. 28, 1863), p. 207.

Clever and interesting as the book undoubtedly is, its general effect is painful. With the exception of the patient, uncomplaining, self-sacrificing, and unappreciated Hester Rose, and the generous brothers Foster, who play a very secondary part, there is not much to admire in any of the dramatis personae. We have no villain, but on the other hand, there is no hero. No doubt this is more true to nature, but we question whether fiction answers any good purpose when it presents us only with portraiture of men and women in whom there is little to imitate and very much to eschew [e.g. Sylvia and Philip]. 1

The Morning Post reviewer, with equal candour, preferred the "interesting" to the "real", again, mainly because he could not feel much sympathy for Mrs.Gaskell's uneducated characters. Like all the critics we have been considering, those of the Reader, the Manchester Daily Examiner and the Nonconformist, he appreciates the artistic merits of Mrs.Gaskell's new story, which he finds "in some respects the best of the author's works." He also finds that "Mrs.Gaskell is successful in her well-sustained representation of humble life in the country parts of England in the last century." Mrs.Gaskell, he continues, still adheres to "the humble class from which she has hitherto selected her material", only she has now substituted "farmers and seafaring men" for "weavers and factory hands." It is not long, however, before the reviewer makes it clear that he is not much impressed by the principal characters of the tale; Sylvia, he says, "is rather unreasonably charming; for when the reader considers her aright, he finds her ignorant even for her time and station, and has little but her beauty to recommend her." Philip is found to be more unsatisfactory, as he is both vulgar and tedious. It is rather amusing that in his impatient dismissal of Philip as unworthy of serious consideration - let alone being regarded as a tragic hero -

1. (May 6, 1863), p. 356.

the reviewer has recourse to values and a social outlook that properly belonged to an earlier period:

Philip Hepburn is vulgar and tiresome. His virtues are utterly ineffectual to atone for his solemn priggishness and a certain cast of meanness which is over all his character... Coarser and rougher natures have been made gentlemen by the influence of such a feeling as that to which Philip Hepburn's life is devoted, but there is not a trace of the gentleman in him... he is never elevated above the level of the small shopkeeper class, of which he is a member. 1

The reviewer's irritation with Philip is such that - despite his praise for the novel - he admonishes Mrs.Gaskell to give up subjects of low life altogether on the grounds that they are so uninteresting. "Mrs.Gaskell," he says, "by confining her stories within the range of one class in society, has in a manner compelled herself to be tiresome." His recipe for a more interesting story is a mixture of classes with the more refined set occupying the centre of the stage (This is a recipe from which Mrs.Gaskell was going to benefit in her next work Wives and Daughters): "Fine ladies and gentlemen", the reviewer says, "are as odious in novels unless they be interspersed with more homely and homespun material." Going back to the subject of low life, he remarks: We do not believe that "it is more noble, more true and more artistic to restrict onself always to the portraiture of low life." If one urges considerations of realism, the reviewer's answer is that "realism is undoubtedly a great point in a novel, as in every work of art, but it is not the only nor even the greatest." Then, anticipating Henry James by several decades, he continues: "Before all, a novel should be interesting." Mrs.Gaskell's mistake, as he sees it, is that she "sometimes sacrifices the greater requirement [interest] to

1. (March 26, 1863), p.3.

the smaller [realism]".¹

The preference of the "interesting", morally inspiring to the "real", or the mere ability to reproduce reality faithfully, is by no means peculiar to the early 'sixties. The emphasis upon idealized realism, however, especially the suspicion of realism in association with the fictional treatment of rural low life, can be directly related to the recent impact upon critics of George Eliot's early novels, all dealing with rural, provincial life, Adam Bede (1859), The Mill on the Floss (1860) and Silas Marner (1861).

Great excitement was generated at the appearance of Adam Bede in 1859 under the pseudonym "George Eliot." The novel's delineation of rural life in the Midlands at the turn of the century seemed so fresh and original; the author was credited with "reclaiming large tracts of existence from... obscurity", and many agreed with the Bentley's reviewer in his enthusiastic comment: "We do not know whether our literature anywhere possesses such a closely true picture of purely rural life."² Realism was the trade-mark of the new author, "evidently a country gentleman", confidently guessed the Saturday Review.³ There were many ingredients in Adam Bede that were bound to please its readers: the idyllic charm of village life half a century ago was enhanced by religious sentiment and humour, and all held together apparently by a sound doctrine of human fellowship. An enthusiastic reviewer, E.S. Dallas, was able to read in the novel a profound moral

1. (March 26, 1863), p.3.

2. Bentley's Quarterly Review I (July 1859), 433-56. Reprinted in, David Carroll, ed., George Eliot: The Critical Heritage, 1971, pp. 93, 97.

3. VII (Feb. 26, 1859), 250.

lesson (the same lesson was to be read three years later by a reviewer of Sylvia's Lovers): Our author, he said, subscribes to the idea that "our natures are the same, and that there is not the mighty difference which is usually assumed between high and low, rich and poor..." This is an idea, the reviewer added, the truth of which can only be appreciated by "matured minds... that have gone through a good deal and seen through a good deal."¹

The Mill on the Floss, coming out the following year, was received with less excitement: much of the bucolic simplicity and charm of Adam Bede seemed to have evaporated with the introduction of small-minded, half-heathen farmers and country tradesmen. The religious flavour and much of the humour of the first tale were also missing.²

We have already touched upon the strong reaction to the episode of Maggie's elopement and ultimate death in the third volume of The Mill on the Floss. Apart from the question of Maggie, the novel was criticised because it introduced the reader to a rather unpleasant world. Many complained (in terms similar to those to be used in reference to Sylvia's Lovers) that most of the characters were vulgar, unattractive and generally subsisting on too low a diet of spiritual and religious nourishment. Even E.S.Dallas, despite his ardent belief in human fellowship and his unfailing admiration for George Eliot, found it hard to like most of the characters in the book: "A majority of the

1. The Times (April 12, 1859), p.5. Compare the Examiner's remarks on Sylvia's Lovers: "There is not a person in [Mrs.Gaskell's] book of either sex who does not accredit the sound doctrine at which they who live healthily must needs arrive in their maturer years, although its evidences are not clear to youth, that men and women are good fellows in the main." (March 28, 1863), p. 197.

2. The reviewers were also more cautious this time as it became widely known that "George Eliot", far from being a country clergyman, was in fact a lady, who believed in free love and put her beliefs into practice by living with a married man, G.H.Lewes.

characters", he grumbled, "are unpleasant companions - prosaic, selfish, nasty ... We are launched into a world of pride, vain-glory, and hypocrisy, envy, hatred and malice, and all uncharitableness. Everybody is quarrelling with everybody in a small mean way; and we have the petty gossip and malignant slander ... painted to the life."¹ The same complaint made other critics question the use of realism. Doubts were expressed (again in terms virtually identical with those to be found in comments on Sylvia's Lovers) as to the wisdom of wasting so much talent upon the delineation of prosaic and disagreeable people. We have "a full appreciation", said a reviewer in the Guardian, "of the keen observation and consummate exhibition of character" in The Mill on the Floss, but "there comes also the doubt whether this was worth the painting, as [the characters] are all of them more or less disagreeable."²

The reception of The Mill on the Floss and Sylvia's Lovers serves to remind us that the well-known and genuine interest on the part of mid-Victorian reviewers in realism was never divorced from, or ever satisfied with, mere verisimilitude. It was generally assumed that deference to the laws of probability and adherence to the realm of every-day life were essential and praiseworthy; but equally essential

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1. The Times (May 19, 1860), p. 10. Less severe, though similar, criticism was made of Sylvia's Lovers by the Englishwoman's, which, nevertheless, liked Mrs. Gaskell's novel sufficiently to urge its readers to "ask Mr. Mudie for the book" without fail: "The actors in Sylvia's Lovers are all in very humble life; and with one exception - Hester - coarse in fibre, poor in brain, and quite of the 'ruck'. They have hearts and heads, but very little soul. Of the indignity of having personal affairs gossiped about, for example, they have not the least notion; nor of the intense meanness of quarrellings and makings-up. The whole lives of the characters presented to us are lived on a low level (quite apart from the question of intellectual culture), with that one exception, Hester" (April 1863), p. 281.
 2. (April 25, 1860), p. 377.

were the "content" and total effect of the work. In the 'fifties and 'sixties Dickens was often criticized for his tendency to produce caricatures, but no less frequently for his brooding in such novels as Bleak House (1853), Hard Times (1854) and Little Dorrit (1857) upon too difficult, serious, gloomy or insoluble questions.¹ Anthony Trollope, generally considered almost impeccable in terms of realism, was often held in low esteem because of his insatiable appetite for prosaic subjects.² The ideal novelist for many a reviewer was not only the one who mastered the art of make-believe and the usual techniques and conventions of mid-Victorian realism, but also who succeeded in writing a pleasant, refreshing and most important of all a morally satisfying novel. Too commonplace works in the manner of Trollope were not adequate; equally unacceptable for some were the more serious, though for various reasons "unpleasant", Bleak House, The Mill on the Floss or Sylvia's Lovers.

Despite its many problems with contemporary readers, Sylvia's Lovers held for them a number of attractions, one of which was Mrs. Gaskell's skill in pathos - not a mean achievement in view of the fact that her novel seemed to deal with unpromising material. This aspect of the book was praised, even by those who felt they could not give the work an unqualified recommendation. The Nonconformist, for instance, had a long catalogue of reservations: "There is no character with which we can identify ourselves ... In the religious character of the book there is nothing to commend... Mrs. Gaskell has fallen here into the very same mistake she has committed in some of her other tales [presumably Ruth] in awakening our interest on behalf of one [Philip]

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1. See ^{G.} H. Ford, Dickens and his Readers, op.cit., pp. 75 ff.
 2. See Trollope: The Critical Heritage, ed., Donald Smalley, 1969, pp. 11, 71, 92, 126-7, 146-8, 317-18.

whose own misconduct is the cause of his troubles." Still, the same reviewer felt "bound to acknowledge the interest and power of the tale." He also liberally praised Mrs.Gaskell's mastery of pathos and her power to invest very humble life with unusual interest:

The somewhat subdued and tender pathos which for the most part pervades her books, insensibly wins its way to the heart, and not only imparts a charm to the story, but enlists our feelings in favour of a writer so kindly in spirit and so many-sided in her sympathies. Her keen sense of natural beauties, and the interest she throws around very humble scenes and very commonplace characters, give an additional freshness and attraction to her writings,... 1

Another reviewer with many objections was that of the Reader. He, too, found the story on the whole successful, and doubted if Tennyson himself could excel Mrs.Gaskell in pathos.² Pathos was again singled out as the novel's strongest point by the Examiner reviewer, who, unlike the last two critics, felt no need at all for any reservations or apology for his heart-felt appreciation of Mrs.Gaskell's sad, poetic story:

This is a novel to read slowly, as one reads a poem. Its plot is of such a tale as Crabbe might have chosen for his verse, and although written in prose, it deals, among simple and unfashionable folk, with the truest poetry in life. 3

Apart from Philip Hepburn's war-like activities in the Levant

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1. (May 6, 1863), p. 356.
 2. "Rumour assigns a very similar plot as a subject for the labours of the laureate. We can hardly expect even from him a more pathetic rendering of it." (Reader, Feb. 28, 1863, p. 207). This is a reference to Tennyson's Enoch Arden (1864).
 3. (March 28, 1863), p. 197. The reviewer seems to be alluding to "Ruth" in Crabbe's Tales of the Hall, a story of a country girl who loses her lover after he had been kidnapped by the press-gang.

(often considered to be too melodramatic)¹, the plot of Sylvia's Lovers was generally thought to be commendably simple; its affinity with sad ballads was sometimes recognized, as in this interesting comment by the Press reviewer, comparing Sylvia's Lovers with the ballad of "Auld Robin Gray":

[The story of Sylvia's Lovers] is an oft-told tale - the ultimate triumph of the machinations of the present lover, to the injury of the absent, and the wild crop of subsequent sorrow and remorse. It is exemplified in the ballad of "Auld Robin Gray" (though there the old man is guilty of no duplicity nor falsehood as is the second lover in this story), in the successful issue of the kindness of the "auld man," in the sorrow of Jamie, and in the sairness of heart of Jeanie, and has probably been multiplied by many examples in private life from time to time. Mrs. Gaskell could not fail so to work up her materials as to form a pathetic and interesting tale. 2

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1. Cf. London Review (March 7, 1863), p. 254:
 "If the very framework of a story warns the reader not to look for probability, he makes up his mind to the marvellous, and accepts the prodigies as a matter of course. Mrs. Gaskell, however, is an artist of another and a higher school, and it is only in a moment of carelessness or fatigue that she forgets to 'hold the mirror up to nature', and starts off on a courageous expedition into the region of the impossible. If any ordinary novelist sent off one hero to Palestine to rescue another hero, his deadly enemy, under a heavy fire of artillery, we should take it as a matter of course, and neither wonder nor complain; but when the hand which depicted "Ruth" descends to such commonplace trivialities, we feel disposed to murmur at the eccentricities of talent, and in behalf of the authoress, no less than of the public she has so often delighted, to warn her against forgetfulness of the first principles of her art, and against neglect of those true natural types upon which all genuine art is necessarily dependent."
 2. (March 7, 1863), p. 234. The only modern critic to make a relatively extended reference to the ballad-like roots of Sylvia's Lovers is W.A. Craik, who, although not naming a particular ballad, comes to a similar conclusion to that of the Press reviewer: "For comparisons for Philip and Sylvia, and Kinraid, the eternally hopeless triangle, which is the tragedy of Philip and Sylvia, one can only look to the old unhappy far-off things of the ballad and of the Norse heroic edda, where great passions go along, like theirs, with a sparse and simple life. But a novel requires more than heroic simplicity of outline. Its characters cannot be pared down to the elements of a ballad situation, or of a Brynhild and Sigurd, or given the remoteness of Isolde and Tristan. They have to be filled out, given local habitations, society, houses, friends, kin, creeds and history." (op. cit., p.141).

No contemporary reviewer gave Mrs.Gaskell's novel the status of tragedy: the protagonists, as we have seen, were generally considered too simple and unimpressive.¹ The nearest approach to Sylvia's Lovers as a tragic work, however, was that of the Sun reviewer, who apparently understood the novel as a cautionary tale of a high order, and then proceeded to elucidate its significance accordingly. Mrs.Gaskell's novel, he said, will always be remembered "whenever the tempter triumphs [and] the sinner repents." Mrs.Gaskell teaches us that "no heavier punishment can befall the daring sons of humanity than to have their impious wishes and their unworthy longings gratified." The novel impresses upon us humility: "Many a maiden, deeming the world was made for her, as Sylvia did with her buoyant spirits, and Philip in his resolute mind, were fain to say at last how sad it would be if this world only was their appanage." At the last sad death-bed scene "the terrors of judgement and the triumphs of mercy seem to meet over that couch of anguish."

A few reviewers were not quite sure that such clear-cut, beneficial lessons can be read in Mrs.Gaskell's novel. The Reader seemed to doubt whether a novel like Sylvia's Lovers was justified in taking us into "the dark recesses which only a few human beings are called upon to tread."² The Reader reviewer was made uncomfortable by

1. Ward tells us that among the "eminent contemporaries who cherished a warm admiration for Sylvia's Lovers was Dr.Liddell ... who said... that this story of Mrs.Gaskell was 'like a Greek tragedy, for power'." (Works, VI, p. XXVI). The first critic, however, to succinctly link Sylvia's Lovers with tragedy along lines that were to be followed closely by most subsequent critics was an anonymous writer in the Saturday Review: "In 'Sylvia's Lovers' the note of tragedy underlying the story from the beginning is as constant as a play of Aeschylus. But the tragedy arises from cause and effect, from the necessity of character and temperament, from the resistless compulsion of circumstances; ..." (Jan. 16, 1897).
2. (Feb. 28, 1863), p. 207.

the "exceeding painfulness" of Sylvia's Lovers. So was the London Review critic, who perceptively observed that Mrs.Gaskell's novel was not the simple moral fable that it might appear to be. Mrs.Gaskell's "good-natured inclination to make everything go right in the long run," he said, "is set at naught ... The conclusion does not leave us any reason to fancy that when the dark cloud of tragedy has drawn off, the mournful landscape will be, in any material respect, altered for the better."¹ In other words, this reviewer felt that Mrs.Gaskell's ending the novel with the mutual reconciliation and repentance of Philip and Sylvia was inadequate to convince him that the difficult (and, in his opinion, unnecessarily posed) questions of human life and destiny had been satisfactorily resolved.

But no matter how uneasy the critics of the Reader and the London Review felt towards the dark realism of Sylvia's Lovers, they both showed no hesitation in pointing out that Mrs.Gaskell's work was vastly superior to the novel of sensation of the time. We may well now regard as utterly pointless spending time and energy to prove that Sylvia's Lovers was a much better novel than, say, M.E.Braddon's Lady Audley's Secret. But things did not appear in that light in 1863.

Few critics showed concern at the literary success of Wilkie Collins in the 'fifties. This skilful fashioner of plots (or puzzles, as many called them) was generally considered to have talent and a serious dedication to the art of fiction, however uncertain the true value of his efforts might be. But there were quite a number of critics who became both astonished and alarmed at the success in the early 'sixties of Wilkie Collins's less talented followers, especially

1. (March 7, 1863), p. 254.

among the lady novelists, the best known of whom were Mrs. Henry Wood and Miss Braddon.

On February 18, 1863 (a week before the publication of Sylvia's Lovers) the Era wrote: "The great success of 'Lady Audley's Secret' has been quite marvellous."¹ Three months later the Sunday Times reported with amazement and disbelief that Miss Braddon's novel had reached a ninth edition. For this reason alone, said the newspaper rather apologetically, we can no longer ignore this novel.² In the early summer of 1863, two different dramatizations of Braddon's new novel Aurora Floyd were performed with much success in separate theatres in London. Faced with the overwhelming success of this type of novel, critics began to sound notes of warning concerning the degradation of popular taste and the threat posed to the tradition of serious fiction.

Sylvia's Lovers, coming out at the time it did, benefited considerably from the recent popularity of the narrative endeavours of Mrs. Henry Wood and Miss Braddon. Critics would immediately forget their grievances against Mrs. Gaskell's novel whenever they remembered the recent vogue for the novel of sensation. In their campaign against the sensationalists, they used Sylvia's Lovers as an exhibit to prove that a novel could be both serious and highly interesting without having recourse to a plot based upon bigamy, murder or forgery. They also referred to Mrs. Gaskell's moral and literary excellence to show up the artistic clumsiness, intellectual poverty and moral weakness of the novel of sensation and its practitioners.

"It is a great relief", said the Nonconformist, "to turn from the 'sensation' books which abound, and many of which are worthy of the

1. (Feb. 18, 1863), p. 6.

2. (May 17, 1863), p. 2.

Minerva Press, to a three-volume novel [Sylvia's Lovers] and one by a lady, too, in which there is neither a murder, a forgery, a bigamy nor an elopement and whose authoress has still contrived to cater most successfully for the entertainment of her readers."¹ The London Review, again, produced Sylvia's Lovers as a healthily entertaining novel in contrast to the work of "Miss Braddon and other compilers of the 'sensation stories' just now the fashion [who fill their canvass]... with monstrosities, to which the eye gets so accustomed that one ceases to be shocked."² The Manchester Daily Examiner thanked Mrs. Gaskell "for a novel which excites as much, but less dangerously, than the 'sensation' tales of the day - tales which can only have one result - to habituate the public to scenes of murder and ill-fame."³ The Examiner wrote in its first notice of the novel that Sylvia's Lovers "contrasts so forcibly with the coarse fiction now in request", and specifically it shows up "the bad grammar of Mrs. Henry Wood and the coarse kitchen literature of Miss Braddon."⁴

The Morning Herald reviewer, equally perturbed by the new phenomenon, saw in the tradition established by Charlotte Brontë, and kept alive by Mrs. Gaskell and George Eliot, "our only safeguard against the degradation of the popular taste". The difference, he said, between the Brontë school of fiction and that of the novelists of sensation:

is not one of degree only, but of kind. In the latter all depends upon incident. The drawing of character is hardly attempted; it requires far higher powers and the neglect is

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1. (May 6, 1863), p. 356.
 2. (March 7, 1863), p. 254.
 3. (April 14, 1863), p. 3.
 4. (March 28, 1863), p. 197.

politic. But let this theory, that all depends upon the events of the story, be once accepted, and there is no reason why tales of bigamy and murder should not be acknowledged as the highest triumphs of fiction ... But a writer like Miss Evans or Mrs. Gaskell, belongs to a far higher class, and makes us know her characters so thoroughly that we feel interested in the little eddying cares and pleasures of their daily life. 1.

The genuinely interesting or legitimately sensational elements in Mrs. Gaskell's novel which the reviewers had in mind were those relating to the pressgang activities and to certain crucial moments in the careers of the principal characters. Mrs. Gaskell's skill in re-creating the terror, resentment and wild resistance of the Monkshaven people when faced with the tyranny of the pressgang during the period of the Napoleonic wars received general and profuse admiration. The Saturday Review critic, in its unenthusiastic review of the novel, found Mrs. Gaskell "highly successful in describing the wild contagious emotions and confusion of a surging crowd whose angry passions have been excited by oppression almost to frenzy."² Even the Spectator, which claimed that Sylvia's Lovers was a total failure, relented only on this occasion: "There is an admirable scene in which Sylvia's father, wild with passion and terror at the pressgang, heads an attack on [their] depot."³

Another episode to receive general praise was that of Charley's return to find Sylvia married to his rival Philip. The English Woman's considered it "the most successful scene in the book",⁴ while the Saturday Review said that: "Mrs. Gaskell has finely marked the ebb and

1. (April 6, 1863), p. 7.

2. (April 4, 1863), p. 446.

3. (Feb. 28, 1863), p. 1699.

4. (April 1863), p. 282.

flow of passion, and made very tangible the overwhelming despair which Sylvia feels when her lover's presence makes known her husband's deceit."¹

Another aspect of the novel that also appealed to the contemporary readers was the historical dimension. Sylvia's Lovers offered enough rural, provincial charm and excited sufficient nostalgia for the past to offset, to some extent, the painful effect of the Philip-Sylvia tragedy. Daniel Robson and his wife were almost universally considered creations of genius. Daniel, especially, with his "contempt for women in theory, and his dependence on them in practice, his bluff blustering manner, his long egotistical yarns, and ignorant self-esteem"² was considered "a capital portrait."³ The contemporary readers liked him as a fresh and original character and also as a quaint, curious product of a time past. The Morning Post, not untypically, preferred Daniel and his wife to Philip and Sylvia, claiming that they were "the best portraiture Mrs. Gaskell had ever produced."⁴ The Globe enthusiastically affirmed that Mrs. Gaskell's "men are man-like, not made after the fashion of the gentlemen in the generality of ladies's novels."⁵

The response to the past that Sylvia's Lovers elicited took a typically mid-Victorian pattern: a nostalgic, sad longing for a past period of relative simplicity side by side with a sense of pride and

1. (April 4, 1863), p. 447.

2. Saturday Review (April 4, 1863), 446.

3. Manchester Daily Examiner (April 14, 1863), p.3.

4. (March 26, 1863), p.3.

5. (April 2, 1863), p.1.

satisfaction with the progress achieved in the present time. "The lapse of time", said the Morning Post, "lends an attraction to representations so uncouth ... The picture [Mrs.Gaskell] draws is interesting and instructive when its quiet, restricted, self-centred life is compared with the restlessness, the diffusion, and the striving which the progress of the past 100 years has made so general."¹ By contrast, the Observer was dismayed at the "foreignness" of the past, and showed not the slightest inclination to barter the present for it:

A story of a country town in England, at the end of the last century is like the story of a foreign place; so dissimilar is it to anything within the present knowledge. The laws in those days were so unlike modern laws that it is hardly possible to understand how the people were induced to submit to them. 2

Mrs.Gaskell's powerful re-creation of the period of the Napoleonic wars made other reviewers, too, keenly aware of the tremendous advance the nation had since then made, and reminded them of the many advantages they now enjoyed in comparison with other less fortunate peoples: "We feel an irrepressible satisfaction", said the Saturday Review, "when thinking of present foreign grievances and oppressions that [the obsolete system of lawfully kidnapping recruits to man the Royal Navy] should have so passed away as to make its former existence almost incredible to this generation."³ The Nonconformist took the same lesson: "The whole account of the violent doings of the pressgang ... may serve to remind us of the advances we have made in our own

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1. (March 26, 1863), p. 3.
 2. (March 1, 1863), p. 7.
 3. (April 4, 1863), p. 446.

generation in the enjoyment of real freedom."¹ Patriotic satisfaction fluttered the hearts of readers on yet another score, in the feeling that they were the descendants of the same proud people whose passionate and wild struggle against oppression Mrs. Gaskell had so vividly drawn. But none glowed with as much pride as John Bull: "On wind-driven coasts, fed by the rudeness and loneliness of nature are dark volcanoes of human passion ... In such lonely places is nourished the true strength of that old British-Saxon-Danish-Norman race of ours."²

The patriotism that Sylvia's Lovers awakened in its readers occasionally spread to become a sense of pride in Mrs. Gaskell herself. It was only fifteen years since Mary Barton appeared. But the sense of rapid change to which the mid-Victorians were very much alive already made some critics in 1863 regard Mrs. Gaskell as part of the old, familiar and well-tried tradition of the English novel, a writer whose novels could be approached "with a pleasant sense of familiarity and security."³ Even since her last novel North and South (1855) a whole new generation of writers had appeared, or attained fame, including Anthony Trollope, George Eliot, Meredith and the novelists of sensation. Sylvia's Lovers failed to please fully many readers, but few reviewers bore its author malice or seriously doubted her literary skill or sound morality.

1. (May 6, 1863), p. 356.

2. (March 7, 1863), p. 156.

3. Morning Post, (March 26, 1863), p. 3.

Chapter Seven

Posthumous Assessment and Acclaim: The Reception
of Wives and Daughters, an Everyday Story

A good number of the reviewers of Sylvia's Lovers, while not really liking this novel, were reluctant to express their disappointment in more astringent terms: Mrs.Gaskell was a novelist of proven ability, and was considered, as we have already indicated, a major representative of the realistic tradition in the novel that lately appeared to come under serious threat from M.E.Braddon, Mrs.Henry Wood and other purveyors of the Novel of Sensation. Many also appreciated the fact that Mrs.Gaskell took novel-writing seriously. Even those who were made uncomfortable by Sylvia's Lovers noted the care with which it was written. Another point in Mrs.Gaskell's favour was the long gap that separated her last major narrative work North and South from Sylvia's Lovers. This was regarded as a further evidence of her seriousness and an indication that she was not one to rush into writing for the sake of money: reviewers in the 'fifties and 'sixties became overwhelmed by the fecundity of novelists, both great and small -- for instance, Trollope, Eliot, Collins, Kingsley, Dinah Mulock and Charlotte Yonge. Not a few (including Mrs.Gaskell herself)¹ feared that

1. Cf. this early comment by Mrs.Gaskell on Dinah Maria Mulock (Mrs. Craik), author of John Halifax, Gentleman (1857): "...our nice little friend Miss Mulock is advertising another [3-volume novel]. I wish she had some other means of support besides writing; I think it's bad in it's [sic] effect upon her writing, which must be pumped up instead of bubbling out;..." Letters, 105. Mulock built up a decent reputation and was occasionally compared favourably with Mrs.Gaskell.

such overproductivity was not in the best interests of serious writing.

For various reasons then, Mrs. Gaskell commanded much goodwill among the reviewers in 1863. Yet she seemed bent in that year on drawing rather heavily on her reserve of critical favour when, months after the publication of Sylvia's Lovers, she allowed A Dark Night's Work, originally serialized in Dickens's All the Year Round, to be published as a one-volume novel by Smith, Elder. The work was not ignored by the reviewers, nor was it considered lacking in merits; but few reviewers found cause to feel excited about it.¹

Mrs. Gaskell's greatest opportunity to win back the popularity she had enjoyed in the early prolific years (1848-1857) came the following year, when she entered into a contract with George Smith to write a full length novel, Wives and Daughters, an Everyday Story, to be serialized in his monthly journal, the Cornhill Magazine. Smith, perhaps influenced by the limited success of Sylvia's Lovers, offered Mrs. Gaskell only £2,000 for the projected novel. She gladly accepted this offer, and the first instalment of Wives and Daughters appeared in the August number of Smith's magazine.

The sum offered by Smith for Wives and Daughters was twice as much as Mrs. Gaskell had been given by him for Sylvia's Lovers (and again double her earnings from the Life). Yet it was somewhat below the average rate for a full length novel so far as the Cornhill was concerned. Smith, taking advantage of the tremendous popularity of

1. See the Bibliography, section I, for a list of the reviews. Mrs. Gaskell wrote in the same year a much better work, Cousin Phillis. This nouvelle was serialized in the Cornhill Magazine between November 1863 and February 1864. Its belated publication by Smith, Elder in Cousin Phillis and Other Tales (December 1865) coincided with the appearance of Wives and Daughters, causing it to be almost completely ignored by reviewers.

serialized fiction, established his journal in 1860, and was from the start determined to attract to it the highest talents of the time. For this purpose he was remarkably liberal (sometimes rashly so)¹ in the amount of money he paid the popular novelists he recruited, who included Thackeray, Trollope and George Eliot. In 1865, for instance, he agreed to pay Wilkie Collins no less than £5,000 for Armadale, which was to succeed Mrs. Gaskell's work in his magazine. Mrs. Gaskell, hearing of this, was justifiably annoyed. Her frustration was all the greater since she had earlier in the year applied to Smith to increase her fee for her novel, whose serialization was proving a longer and more demanding task than she had anticipated. Smith had refused to increase the money.² For once, the ablest and most brilliant publisher of his time departed from his usual habit of generosity and largesse. And he had little excuse on this occasion: Mrs. Gaskell's novel, as we shall see, turned out to be a great success, both among readers and reviewers, whereas Collins's Armadale met with a uniformly hostile, and sometimes contemptuous criticism, unusual even for this never highly regarded novelist.³ In fairness to the commercial astuteness of Smith, however, we should say that Wilkie Collins's numerous readers were not generally of the type to be much influenced by what the critics thought of their

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1. In 1862 he paid George Eliot £7,000 for Romola, and lost heavily in consequence. He originally offered her £10,000 (which would have involved her surrendering the copyright permanently to him). This offer was described by G.H. Lewes as "the most magnificent offer ever yet made for a novel" (S.H.B., IV, 17-18).
 2. See Gérin, Elizabeth Gaskell, op.cit., p. 251.
 3. On the reception of Armadale see Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage, Norman Page, ed., 1974, pp. 17-18, 145-161; also p. 341 below.

favourite author.

The readers who followed Mrs.Gaskell's work on the pages of the Cornhill from August 1864 and throughout 1865 were never to read the final part of this novel. Instead, the January number of the Cornhill came out with an unfinished instalment, followed by a note written by the editor, Frederick Greenwood, in which he provided in his own words the conclusion of the story (the expected happy ending). Greenwood lamented the recent death of Mrs.Gaskell and made some appreciative remarks on her art. Mrs.Gaskell had died suddenly about three months before, on November 12, 1865, at the age of fifty-six.

Soon after her death many obituaries on Mrs.Gaskell were written both in Britain and America. They were mostly brief notices, which listed her works and reported, often inaccurately, the bare facts of her life.

Among the interesting notices was Chorley's in the Athenaeum. Chorley expressed his sorrow at the death of Mrs.Gaskell who, "if not the most popular, with small question, [was] the most powerful and finished female novelist of an epoch singularly rich in female novelists." He considered Cranford to be "the most perfect of her works" and noted that in Mary Barton "the Lancashire dialect ... until then a sort of uncouth curiosity ... was almost raised to the level of the 'broad Doric' used by Scott in his northern novels." Ruth was a "powerful tale, though based on a mistake [apparently a reference to the Bensons' passing off Ruth as a widow]." In North and South Mrs.Gaskell was "again" misled by her "intense but prejudiced desire to right what is wrong," -- a reference to Mrs.Gaskell's sympathies with Manchester operatives, and possibly also to Margaret's lie to save her brother

from possible arrest. Chorley concluded that "as a woman [Mrs.Gaskell] was enthusiastic -- thus frequently unjust; in her own family she was deservedly beloved."¹

In a more substantial piece the Saturday Review mourned the death of Mrs.Gaskell, "a justly favoured writer" who died in "the fulness of energy and maturity of power", after having "written herself into a well-deserved popularity, not confined to Great Britain alone." The sense of loss was especially acute since her "later fictions gave no reason to fear that her imagination was wearing threadbare, or her manner growing conventional". The Saturday Review, usually unenthusiastic about novels with a purpose, belittled the literary value of Mary Barton, North and South and Ruth: "Mrs.Gaskell wisely perceived, before she had written many novels, that the highest end and aim of novel-writing was not to improve the outside world into a juster sense of the rights of operatives or any other special class, but to produce a picture of some phase of human life that is intrinsically true." The journal predicted that "Mary Barton [would] be comparatively forgotten, for all its power and pathos, when ... Cranford and Sylvia's Lovers [were] still eagerly read and widely admired." On a note similar to that of Chorley's, the periodical concluded with a reference to Mrs.Gaskell's enthusiasm that led her astray in the earlier works, including The Life of Charlotte Brontë:

Whatever Mrs.Gaskell wrote, she felt and entered into most thoroughly. Indeed, her only faults in judgment as a writer may be said to have arisen from over-sympathy with the work upon which her thoughts were concentrated for the time being. If Mary Barton, or

1. No. 1986 (Nov. 18, 1865), 689-90.

North and South, do give an oblique view of the life they profess to represent; if the Life of Charlotte Brontë was defaced at one point by a momentary oblivion of justice to others; the error was the error of an enthusiastic woman, whose friendship had identified herself too unreservedly with everything relating to that of which she was writing. Where she rose to her highest point, Mrs. Gaskell not only showed a thorough mastery of her subject and her materials, but a judicial command over her feelings. By her death the world of letters has lost a thoroughly conscientious, industrious, pure-minded, imaginative, and vigorous artist. ¹

In another prompt obituary notice Lord Houghton (Richard Monckton Milnes), who knew Mrs. Gaskell personally, wrote in the Pall Mall Gazette that Cranford was "the purest ... humoristic description ... since Lamb", whereas "the pathos" of Sylvia's Lovers could be compared with Tennyson's Enoch Arden. Referring to Mrs. Gaskell's attack in the Life on the supposed seducer of Branwell Brontë, he called it "an error of judgement" out of keeping with the usually tolerant "spirit of her writing." He predicted that Mrs. Gaskell's "books [would] be studied in years to come ... as a faithful picture of good English life and sound English manners, beyond the accidents of class or fashion."²

Edward Dicey emphasized in the Nation (New York) Mrs. Gaskell's popularity in America, where she was considered "in many ways a representative English writer of the highest class." He remembered Edward Bulwer once telling him that the only thing he "ever knew about Manchester was that Mary Barton was born there." Ruth, Dicey said, was "comparatively a failure" because Mrs. Gaskell's mind was too pure "to describe a Magdalene." Both Cranford and North and South

1. "Mrs. Gaskell", (Nov. 18, 1865), pp. 638-9.

2. II (Nov. 14, 1865), 10.

were "clever" but "lacked any central interest". The Life of Charlotte Brontë was "the cleverest" of Mrs.Gaskell's writings. In Sylvia's Lovers Mrs.Gaskell was hampered by her incapacity to deal with "passion of the highest order." Of all her works, he concluded, Wives and Daughters was the most popular after Mary Barton.¹

On the whole, little distinguished criticism appeared in the obituary notices. Some of those who were acquainted with Mrs.Gaskell, however, noted both her high standing as a writer and her charm, goodness and active benevolence as a woman. One of the best of these notices is this sympathetic piece in the Examiner, written probably by John Forster:

In the very fulness of her powers, with her imagination quite undiminished, and her heart fresh and warm as ever, she has been taken from us. The world of letters has lost a colleague who pressed on among the very foremost in its ranks, and we have all lost one who united to rarest literary ability all the best and highest gifts of a very noble woman... Mrs.Gaskell had not only genius of a high order, but she had also the true feeling of the artist, that grows impatient at whatever is unfinished or imperfect. Whether describing with touching skill the charities of poor to poor, or painting, with an art which Miss Austin [sic.] might have envied, the daily round of common life, or merely telling, in her graphic way, some wild or simple tale; whatever the work, she did it with all her power, sparing nothing, scarcely sparing herself enough, if only the work were well and completely done...

By the death of Mrs.Gaskell many distinguished men of letters,... will feel that there has passed away one whose kindly heart and gracious presence had a charm about them which no one could resist. And there are others whose grief will be deeper still. How many young authors, struggling upward, did she assist with her ready sympathy and friendly counsel. How many operatives, in the bitterness of the cotton famine, found the authoress of "Mary Barton" as ready to help them by her active presence as she had once tried to help them by her pen. 2

1. "Mrs.Gaskell", (Dec. 7, 1865), 716-717.

2. (Nov. 1865), p. 726.

Wives and Daughters, published as a two-volume work by Smith, Elder & Co. in February 1866, received 19 reviews.

The Spectator, in a 3-page review of the novel, written possibly by the joint-editor R.H.Hutton, asserted that "Mrs.Gaskell's last book, is certainly, Cranford excepted, her best". The reviewer compared Mrs. Gaskell's work favourably with that of Jane Austen, concluding with the prediction that "Wives and Daughters [would] take a permanent and a high place among the ranks of English fiction."¹

The Saturday Review printed a relatively substantial, and again very favourable, piece on Wives and Daughters. The reviewer begins by lamenting the "sudden" and "startling" death "within the space of two years" of "two of the most distinguished of English novel-writers", Thackeray's (who died in December 1863) and Mrs.Gaskell's. The Saturday critic then describes Mrs.Gaskell's achievement with great sympathy, concluding that she was among the very few truly realistic novelists of the time, an idea that makes him return to his earlier note of sadness:

...Both [Mrs.Gaskell and George Eliot] alike force upon us the unpleasant reflection that, with all our host of novel-writers, those who can understand and describe humanity as it is, with a due regard to the nature of all true art, are few indeed. 2

The third well-known literary weekly to notice Mrs.Gaskell's work was the Athenaeum. The reviewer, H.F.Chorley, who had in the past reviewed nearly all Mrs.Gaskell's work on the pages of this magazine, was enthusiastic about Mrs.Gaskell's latest production, asserting that there had been nothing quite like it "since Miss Austen laid by the pencil with which (as she modestly said) she was used to

1. (March 17, 1866), pp. 299-301.

2. (March 24, 1866), pp. 360-361.

paint miniatures -- miniatures, nevertheless, which Scott (Great Britain's greatest creative romancer since Shakespeare's time) was never weary of admiring."¹ Wives and Daughters shows, moreover, that Mrs. Gaskell was a serious and dedicated novelist: "This novel makes it ... clear that she had aspired for progress in her craft (for tale-telling is a craft), and had attained it in performance."²

The Westminster Review, which three years before had argued that Romola was George Eliot's best work to date,³ was in no doubt about the literary excellence of Wives and Daughters, "decidedly the greatest novel since Romola", a work of consummate art and a surprising illusion of reality.⁴

The British Quarterly Review in an equally favourable notice of Mrs. Gaskell's work, "the most exquisite and perfect fiction which has appeared in our day", recommended the novel to its readers not only for its "subtle analysis" of character but also for its "simplicity and purity" that "will refine and elevate both the intellect and the heart."⁵

The London Review, not usually noted for its first-rate criticism, published a most perceptive comment on Mrs. Gaskell's work, finding in Wives and Daughters nothing to complain of except George du Maurier's 18 illustrations, alleging that they "disfigured" the novel both during its serialization and in its present volume form.⁶

1. (March 3, 1866), p. 295. Chorley is referring to Scott's enthusiastic review of Emma in the Quarterly Review, XIV (Oct. 1815), 188-201.

2. Ibid.

3. Cf. "... we do not hesitate to say that it [Romola] is its author's greatest work." (Westminster Review, LXXX (Oct. 1863), 344.

4. Ibid., (April 1866), p. 278.

5. XLIII (April 1866), 580.

6. XII (April 21, 1866), 456.

Another source to malign du Maurier, claiming that he did "all that he could to mar the story", was the Literary Churchman. This religious magazine, not usually keen on reviewing novels, made an exception in the case of the author of Wives and Daughters (whose Life of Charlotte Brontë was enthusiastically reviewed on its pages in 1857). The well-disposed reviewer starts by questioning the propriety of Mrs. Gaskell's title, since "only one wife comes prominently on the stage", who is "brought forward not to be compared with her predecessor, or with any other lady." Apart from this minor criticism, he finds Wives and Daughters one of Mrs. Gaskell's "very best" tales, having "most studied characters, most complex in their apparent simplicity."¹

Other favourable reviews appeared in the Press,² the Reader,³ the Globe,⁴ the Illustrated London News,⁵ and the recently-launched Contemporary Review.⁶

Two further reviews appeared in Manchester. Both the Manchester Guardian and the Manchester Examiner expressed their pride in the achievements and national reputation of their townswoman. The latter called Mrs. Gaskell "one of the most important novelists of our time [and] one of the greatest female novelists of all time."⁷ The

1. XII (March 10, 1866), 119.
2. XIV (March 27, 1866), 282.
3. VII (April 7, 1866), pp. 349-50.
4. No. 21080 (March 28, 1866), p. 1.
5. (March 17, 1866), p. 270.
6. II (May-August 1866), 292-3.
7. (Feb. 27, 1866), p. 3.

reviewer of the Manchester Guardian, writing rather late on May 1, fully endorsed the favourable reception of the "well-known" novel, "so greatly admired by all who possess the more delicate tastes of finer instincts of the fiction-reading public."¹

In America, the New York Times considered Mrs. Gaskell's last novel to be "unquestionably" her "best work".² Harper's New Monthly asserted that Mrs. Gaskell's Wives and Daughters, "even unfinished" was "the best of her work." The reviewer predicted that "Mrs. Gaskell [would] hold a high place among the classic writers of English fiction, long after the 'Sensation Novelists' of the day [~~were~~] forgotten."³

Harper's Weekly remarked that, even though Wives and Daughters was serialized unsigned, "the deep interest it [then] excited ... was a most gratifying confirmation of [Mrs. Gaskell's] genuine talent."⁴ The 23-year-old Henry James, in an unsigned review in the Nation (New York), proclaimed Wives and Daughters to be "the best" of Mrs. Gaskell's tales, that is, if one puts aside "'Cranford' ... which as a work of quite other pretensions ought not to be weighed against it."⁵

Henry James, who early in his literary career produced some of the most brilliant reviews of the time, showed himself to be a most fastidious, not to say supercilious, critic. In the articles he wrote for the Nation between 1864-1866 he called Dickens "the greatest of

1. (May 1, 1866), p.7.

2. (Feb. 26, 1866), p.4.

3. XXXII (March 1866), 527.

4. X (Feb. 24, 1866), 115.

5. Nation, (Feb. 22, 1866), pp. 246-7; reprinted in Notes and Reviews, Cambridge, Mass., 1921, p. 153. All quotations from this review are made from the latter source, henceforth referred to as Notes.

superficial novelists";¹ found Trollope totally deficient in imagination²; Wilkie Collins also composed his novels without the benefit of "any imagination at all"³; George Eliot had many merits, but "her plots [had] always been ... clumsily artificial ... her style diffuse ... her conclusions ... signally weak"⁴. In view of this, it is remarkable that Wives and Daughters was accorded a high degree of unstinted praise:

We cannot help thinking that in "Wives and Daughters" the late Mrs. Gaskell has added to the number of those works of fiction -- of which we cannot perhaps count more than a score as having been produced in our time -- which will outlast the duration of their novelty and continue for years to come to be read and relished for a higher order of merits. 5

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1. Nation. Review of Our Mutual Friend, (Dec. 21, 1865), p. 787.
 2. Cf. "His choice [of vulgar characters] may indeed be explained by an infirmity for which he is not responsible: we mean his lack of imagination. But when a novelist's imagination is weak, his judgement should be strong." Review of Miss Mackenzie, ibid., (July 13, 1865), p. 52.
 3. "Miss Braddon," ibid., (Nov. 9, 1865), 593-5.
 4. Review of Felix Holt, ibid., (Aug. 16, 1866), 127.
 5. Notes, p. 153. Edgar Wright, referring to James's review of Wives and Daughters, suggests that he admired Mrs. Gaskell's work because of the central-consciousness role of Molly: "To supply the standard and provide a consistent viewpoint from within the novel we have, [in Wives and Daughters], fully developed, the 'fine central intelligence' that was to become a feature of Henry James's technique. Not surprisingly James had admired Wives and Daughters [in his 1866 review of this novel]." (Mrs. Gaskell, op.cit., p. 246). In 1866 Henry James was entirely innocent of the concept of central intelligence. Moreover, Molly can hardly be considered to be providing the function ascribed to her by Wright. For Henry James's early criticism see "Early Reviews" in Morris Roberts, Henry James's Criticism, reprinted by Haskell House, New York, 1965; also Cornelia P. Kelley, The Early Development of Henry James, revised ed., Urbana 1965.

Wives and Daughters confirmed Mrs. Gaskell's movement away from novels with a purpose, something most reviewers found to their liking. "Mrs. Gaskell ... has laid aside her old plan", said the Contemporary Review. We do not find "a set purpose in her latest novel." Our memory is not harassed by "this or that detail." Instead, we are allowed to "lounge along the book ... filled with dreamy thoughts" and "refreshed in heart." This is rather curious, says the Utilitarian-minded reviewer of this religious journal, for we "have little reason to give for our delight; we cannot produce one fact learned on our ramble."¹ Unlike this reviewer, other critics, including Henry James, were able to find a wealth of "social and moral knowledge"² in Mrs. Gaskell's book. Also, instead of being launched on a dreamy line of thought, they generally needed the full use of their senses to appreciate Mrs. Gaskell's art in her last and greatest work.

In another religious source, the Literary Churchman, we find the reviewer noting with satisfaction that the moral lessons in a work like Cranford or Wives and Daughters are indirectly imparted through the truthful imitation of human life. He also suggests an interesting division of Mrs. Gaskell's work into two blocks: her humorous works, mainly concerned with middle-class life, and the tragic ones, mainly treating the lives of the Northern poor:

Mrs. Gaskell had two fields in which lay her strength. Her tragic vein found its development among the rugged northern poor; her comic vein among the well-to-do classes. It is true that nothing has ever surpassed the drollery of Job in Mary Barton -- the history of the

1. (May-August 1866), pp. 292-3.

2. Notes, p. 154.

scorpion running alive about the kitchen, and of the two old men in charge of the baby; but she is most at home when with grave suppressed humour she notes the gentle little absurdities of Cranford, carrying on the subdued pathos in the same apparently unconscious manner, and exciting the more feeling because she never seems to appeal to emotion, or expect to call it forth. Neither is any moral drawn forth, it comes out of the truth to nature just as it does in real life. 1

The critic goes on to provide another partially true simplification: In Wives and Daughters, he says, "the scene [Hollingford] is exactly such a town as Cranford", only the "good ladies" of Mrs. Gaskell's earlier tale re-appear as "the chorus" rather than as "the prime actors." Although the Miss Brownings in Wives and Daughters remind him of Miss Deborah Jenkins and her sister Matty of Cranford, he feels there is no repetition, for "two such sisters are as sure to exist in a country town as a Church and Town Hall."²

The only source to dissent from the general approval of Mrs. Gaskell's abdication of a pronounced moral or social purpose was, ironically enough, the Manchester Guardian, which in 1849 had greeted Mrs. Gaskell's first novel with a somewhat vicious attack. The Manchester Guardian in 1866 not only fully repented of any bad feelings towards Mary Barton, but was of the opinion that Mrs. Gaskell's two Manchester novels, Mary Barton and North and South, were her most powerful and original works. To prove his point, the reviewer resorts to an analogy between the artistic development of Dickens and that of Mrs. Gaskell. Repeating the frequently-heard argument that Dickens's genius manifested itself best in his early works, he applies the same notion to Mrs. Gaskell's own literary progress. It is interesting that

1. (March 10, 1866), p. 119.

2. Ibid.

the reviewer, in his anxiety to prove that Mrs.Gaskell's non-Manchester novels are not particularly original (being written, as he claims, under the influence of other novelists), forgets that Cranford preceded North and South. He also leaves Ruth out altogether as it does not fit in with his theory:

Dickens's fame will not depend upon "Our Mutual Friend" while it can be sustained by "Pickwick" and "Nickleby." And the reason is obvious. In true representative works the writer's genius asserts itself with unhindered power and freedom, leaving its impress on every page,... Once a-wing in a congenial atmosphere genius is, so to speak, at home, and disports itself unrestrained by conventional bonds and the artificialities of custom. Its creations are, therefore, of the truest sort,... bearing the impress of genuine originality. Thus "Mary Barton" is distinctive in the best sense, so is "North and South." They tell of a writer fresh, untrammelled, uninfluenced by the "spirit of the age." Thus, too, these books have become representative of their author. "Wives and Daughters" is not a less able, but it is a less characteristic work, exhibiting the modifying effects of enlarged reading and of the study of constructive art, as well as the influence of contact and intimate acquaintance with the great chiefs of fictional literature. We see, or we think we see, in Mrs.Gaskell's later stories indisputable evidence of these influences. "Sylvia's Lovers," "Cranworth" [sic] ... "Wives and Daughters," each in a positive degree exhibit them. Miss Brontë (whose biography Mrs.Gaskell wrote), Mr.Anthony Trollope, and more largely still, Thackeray and Dickens, have impressed themselves on Mrs.Gaskell's mind sufficiently to affect not only her style but her selection and treatment of characters, so that in this last story we do not recognise the peculiarities, if we feel the power, of the lady who compelled the reading world to centre their attention for a time upon the romance of Lancashire life. 1

No other reviewer found in Mrs.Gaskell's later novels, and for that matter in any of her works,² the influences suggested by the Manchester

1. (May 1, 1866), p. 7.

2. The only exception being Mrs.Oliphant's suggestion that the love-situation in North and South shows the influence of Jane Eyre. See ch. 4, pp. 207-9 above.

Guardian. Wives and Daughters, in particular, with its humorous treatment of rural, provincial life and, especially, its relentlessly ironic representation of such a character as Mrs. Gibson was seen to be unique, the nearest to it, as suggested by some reviewers, was Austen's work, and not that of Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope or Charlotte Brontë cited by the Manchester Guardian as the sources of Mrs. Gaskell's inspiration.

Wives and Daughters was generally considered to have "no intricate plot",¹ very little of it or, somewhat surprisingly, no plot at all: "'Wives and Daughters' is a character novel, although the story itself is a good one, of the natural-sequence plotless type" (Globe)²; "the plot by itself is nothing, it is the characters that give the book interest and life" (Press)³; "story there is hardly any in the sense of plot in Wives and Daughters" (London Review)⁴; "a tale so entirely free from sensational effect can [hardly] be said to have a plot at all." (Manchester Examiner)⁵.

"Plot" in 1866 came to be too closely associated with the work of Wilkie Collins and his imitators among the novelists of sensation Mrs. Henry Wood, Mary Elizabeth Braddon and James Payn. Not a few critics began to consider plot an ingredient that a good novel should use as sparingly as possible!

We have indicated before that Braddon's spectacular success in

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1. British Quarterly, (April 1866), p. 579.
 2. (March 28, 1866), p. 1 (*italics mine*).
 3. (March 27, 1866), p. 282.
 4. (April 21, 1866), p. 456.
 5. (Feb. 27, 1866), p. 3.

1863 amazed a good number of critics and engendered fears that the good, old, realistic tradition in the novel, especially among lady novelists, was seriously threatened by the novel of domestic mystery, or the novel of sensation as it was generally called.¹ In that year, however, many hoped that the vogue for sensation would prove a passing one. Three years later such hopes were considerably weakened, since the fashion seemed to have lost nothing of its strength, having in fact entered into an unholy competition with the novel of adventure, headed by "Ouida" (Louise Ramè), whose zest for the fantastically exciting, discreetly spiced with cunning allusions to sex, made her an even greater star than M.E.Braddon. The greater acerbity in the critics' remarks on the novel of sensation in 1866 was a sign of increasing frustration and impatience. The reviewers' irritation spread to affect the attitude to Wilkie Collins, generally regarded as both superior to the Braddon-school in the novel and (along with Mrs.Radcliffe)² its ultimate inspiration. In the following comments on Collins's Armadale (1866), we can see that the term "sensation novel" had become a byword for abuse, and "plot" a profitless puzzle incompatible with proper delineation of character:

Armadale is a 'sensation novel' with a vengeance ... Those who make plot their first consideration and humanity the second, -- those, again, who represent the decencies of life as too often so many hypocrisies, -- have placed themselves in a groove which goes, and must go, in a downward direction, whether as regards fiction or morals.

We are in a period of diseased invention, and the coming phase of it may be palsy. (Athenaeum) 3

1. See ch. 6, pp. 318-321 above.

2. See p.343, n.1 below.

3. [H.F.Chorley], (June 2, 1866), p. 732.

[Collins's] are not characters, they are shadowy beings put in to answer the requirements of Mr. Wilkie Collins's plot. (Spectator) 1

There is a sort of unearthly and deadly look about the heroes and heroines of his narrative, and though it is necessary for the purpose of the plot that they should keep moving, we feel that every one of their motions is due, not to a natural process, but to the sheer force and energy of the author's will. (Saturday Review) 3

Wives and Daughters (published in book form in the same year as Armada) was generally seen to offer a neat contrast to the work of Collins and his followers; many reviewers were refreshed to find that Mrs. Gaskell's last novel did not rely on mystery, showed a superb ability to present life-like characters and succeeded in transforming ordinary events (not the morally suspect stock-in-trade devices of the novel of sensation: bigamy, adultery, arson and forgery) into an interesting narrative. A number of critics made a point of emphasizing the difference between Mrs. Gaskell's work and that of the fashionable novel of sensation. One or two extracts will suffice to show the reviewer's happiness, indeed gratitude to Mrs. Gaskell, one of "the oldest and best known of 'every-day'" novelists,³ and the descendant (along with George Eliot) from the Austen school in

1. (June 9, 1866), p. 639-40.

2. (June 16, 1866), p. 726.

3. Reader, (April 7, 1866), p. 350): "We have taken Mrs. Gaskell's work as the subject of these remarks, partly because it is the oldest and best known of modern 'every-day' stories, and partly because we wished to have one more occasion of expressing our high sense of its extraordinary merits."

the novel¹;

'Wives and Daughters' constrained many to take up the periodical in which the quiet tale month by month unwound itself, -- in contrast with fictitious matter to all appearance far more artful, and certainly, in regard to spicery of incident, far more "sensational" (as the word runs).

Here is no cunning plot, -- no heroine who, having two husbands, pokes one of them into a well, and sets a house on fire, to burn out the evidences of her attempted murder... (Athenaeum) 2

In these days when the public have a morbid craving after sensation in everything -- in popular meetings, in dramas, but above all in literature -- it is quite a wonder to find a novel which does not attempt to satisfy it in this respect. The reader at once gives his admiration to an author who has the courage to hazard the success of a book without a murder at every other page; ... (Press)³

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1. There are frequent references in the 'sixties to Austen as the originator of the school of the novel of character in opposition to Mrs. Radcliffe, who was seen to have originated a school, "of which a base imitation has lately appeared in the clique of writers who owe their allegiance to Miss Braddon" (Manchester Examiner, (Feb. 27, 1866), p.3). Those who were seen to belong to the Austen school were Charlotte Brontë, Mrs. Gaskell and George Eliot. (See Morning Herald, (April 6, 1863) p. 7). This increased respect in the 'sixties for Jane Austen among reviewers disturbed by the rise of the novel of sensation is still unrecognized even in recent studies of her reputation. Cf. "Pre-1870, Jane Austen was never thought of as a popular novelist nor did she get much attention from the Victorian critics and historians." (B.C. Southam's introduction to his edition of Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage, 1968, p.2). This contradicts many statements that occur, for example, in contemporary comments on Sylvia's Lovers and Wives and Daughters. Cf, for instance, "And this faculty of introducing the reader [as in Wives and Daughters] to a set of imaginary characters, who bear the aspect of real live people, is ... very rare. To the present day Miss Austen numbers scores of readers for one who knows the novels of Fielding, and Sterne, and Smollett..." (Reader, (April 7, 1866), p. 349). I find also no mention of the influence of the novel of sensation on the status of Austen in John Halperin's excellent essay on "Jane Austen's Nineteenth-Century critics" in his edition of Jane Austen: Bicentenary Essays, 1975, pp. 3-42.
 2. [H.F. Chorley], (March 3, 1866), p. 295.
 3. (March 27, 1866), p. 282.

Unencumbered by "plot", in the narrow and special sense this word acquired in the 'sixties, Wives and Daughters was seen to have gained in the ability to represent life-like characters and situations. "The plot of 'Wives and Daughters'", wrote the Press, "is an ordinary story as might happen to any of us; and so the characters have room to move about and develop themselves like ordinary mortals", unlike the work of the sensationalists, where characters "are merely puppets without any control over their own actions, useful only to show the action of piece."¹ Like life itself, asserted the Contemporary Review, Wives and Daughters is "full of simple action and complicated motive."²

According to the reviewer of Manchester Guardian, the nearest to Wives and Daughters, as a character-novel, was the work of Anthony Trollope -- generally considered incapable of producing an elaborate plot.³ Like Trollope, said the reviewer, Mrs.Gaskell had chosen to "rely for effect upon her rare powers of characterisation and not upon the skill of a plot writer." Although this critic, alone among the reviewers of Wives and Daughters, was not quite happy that Mrs.Gaskell denied her readers the "excitement and interest" that came from the "unravelment" of a good mystery, he spoke nevertheless with great admiration of Mrs.Gaskell's powers in the seemingly plotless novel:

... as to "sensation" there is not the faintest shadow of its existence. How great, then, the talent which can paint a picture that shall rivet the spectator by its startling fidelity to real life? And, when the real life depicted is that of a little country town, amongst very ordinary people, the novelist's powers greatness as we behold. ⁴

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1. (March 24, 1866), p. 282. (*italics mine*).
 2. (May-August 1866), p. 293.
 3. See Trollope: the Critical Heritage, op.cit., pp. 133-4, 275-6, 307-8, 357-8 etc.
 4. (May 1, 1866), p.7.

The structure of Wives and Daughters is a particularly difficult one to analyse; neither is there one major theme to which all other areas of interest subserve, nor has it one line of action that links the main events of the work; instead we have several interlocking "plots" and "subplots"; among the former the most important is Molly's development from innocence to experience. Concern for Molly precipitates her father, Dr.Gibson, into -- in terms of the novel -- his momentous, and very ill-matched, marriage with the former governess, 'Clare', widow of Mr.Kirkpatrick. Molly also comes into contact in the course of the story with all the important figures in the book. Yet much of the action and interest after the first third of the novel shifts to other characters, chief among those is Molly's sister-in-law, the charming Cynthia Kirkpatrick, who enlists Molly's help in her successful attempt to free herself from the secret liaison with the land-agent, Mr.Preston. Then there are the two separate and contrasting careers of the young Hamleys, Osborne and Roger, the fortunes of the latter, in particular, impinge upon the life of Cynthia, whom he initially loves, and even more seriously upon Molly's, whom he will eventually marry. In Mrs. Gaskell's last novel we also find, finely balanced, the three main concerns she exhibited in her earlier work, the "concern for society at large, for individuals' relationships with each other in social, local and family groups, and the single soul's duties to and struggles with itself."¹

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1. W.A.Craik, op.cit., p. 207. These concerns are of course common to the mid-Victorian novel. Craik rightly argues that they are more balanced in Wives and Daughters than in any of Mrs.Gaskell's earlier work. (Cf. ibid., pp. 207-208). Craik also observes that "it is not possible to point out a main theme in Wives and Daughters, whether a personal psychological one, or a large social abstract one, any more than it is possible to do so in Middlemarch, or, to go abroad to greater things, War and Peace." (ibid., p. 208).

Contemporary critics did not attempt, apart from a straightforward summary of the story,^{to} describe in any detail these interrelated lines of interest in Mrs. Gaskell's work, inhibited by their too close association of the plot with the constructions of such a novelist like Collins; but no less so by the deceptively simple, though complex and deftly woven, structure of the novel. Many of them were aware, as we shall see, of Mrs. Gaskell's sophistication, especially in characterization, but few were as articulate as Henry James in his insistence that Mrs. Gaskell's seemingly aimless accumulation of detail, especially in the earlier part of the story, was in fact done skilfully, consciously and effectively:

In the early portion especially the details are so numerous and so minute that even a very well-disposed reader will be tempted to lay down the book and ask himself of what possible concern to him are the clean frocks and the French lessons of little Molly Gibson. But if he will have patience awhile he will see. As an end these modest domestic facts are indeed valueless; but as a means to what the author would probably have called a "realization" of her central idea, i.e., Molly Gibson, a product, to a certain extent, of clean frocks and French lessons, they hold an eminently respectable place. As he gets on in the story he is thankful for them. They have educated him to a proper degree of interest in the heroine. He feels that he knows her the better and loves her the more for a certain acquaintance with the minutiae of her homely bourgeois life. 1

In his somewhat verbose description of Mrs. Gaskell's art in the book as a whole, James is more eulogistic, though, in common with other critics, far less specific:

... So delicately, so elaborately, so artistically, so truthfully, and heartily is the story wrought out, that the hours given to its perusal seem like hours actually spent, in the flesh as well as the spirit, among the

1. Notes, p. 158.

scenes and people described, in the atmosphere of their motives, feelings, traditions, associations. The gentle skill with which the reader is slowly involved in the tissue of the story; the delicacy of the handwork which has perfected every mesh of the net in which he finds himself ultimately entangled; the lightness of touch which, while he stands all unsuspecting of literary artifice, has stopped every issue into the real world; the admirable, inaudible, invisible exercise of creative power, in short, with which a new and arbitrary world is reared over his heedless head -- a world insidiously inclusive of him..., complete in every particular, from the divine blue of the summer sky to the June-bugs in the roses, from Cynthia Kirkpatrick and her infinite revelations of human nature to old Mrs. Goodenough and her provincial bad grammar -- these marvellous results, we say, are such as to compel the reader's very warmest admiration, and to make him feel, in his gratitude for this seeming accession of social and moral knowledge, as if he made but a poor return to the author in testifying, no matter how strongly, to the fact of her genius. 1

A modern critic has written that "the superb characterization" in Wives and Daughters renders "external action and events" of lesser importance in this novel than any of Mrs. Gaskell's earlier works: "Paradoxically, while nothing much happens, everything is happening all the time. This is because so much depends rather upon what the characters are than upon what they do."² Most contemporary critics would have found themselves in more or less complete agreement with these comments. However, instead of dwelling on the "interweaving ... puzzling patterns" and "lines of interest"³ he describes, they tended to take the easier course of assessing each character individually. They also showed great enthusiasm and understanding for Mrs. Gaskell's "dramatic skill"⁴ in the presentation of character, and the interplay between one character and another.

1. Ibid., pp. 153-4.

2. Arthur Pollard, Mrs. Gaskell, op.cit., p. 225 (italics mine).

3. Ibid., p. 226.

4. Harper's Weekly, (Feb. 24, 1866), p. 115.

Though most of what "goes on" in Wives and Daughters takes place mainly at Dr.Gibson's household and to a lesser extent at the residence of the insular, proud but impoverished Yeoman of old stock, Squire Hamley of Hamleys, the reader is taken to various places in and near the rural community of Hollingford, including the Towers, residence of the aristocratic and wealthy Cumnors. We are even briefly allowed into the humble dwelling of a game-keeper. The various social classes are represented -- there is no interest, however, in the affairs of the very poor.

One reviewer who directed his attention to the large and various population in Mrs.Gaskell's novel was that of the British Quarterly. He begins by asserting that "perhaps the most difficult of all things in fiction is to write 'an every-day story,'" such as Mrs.Gaskell has produced. Although we have no apparent reason to feel "intense curiosity about what comes next", we still, "scarcely knowing how, ... feel the greatest interest in all that [the characters] say and do." Mrs.Gaskell's "art" in this work, he says, "centres in its character and dialogue." The dialogues are "perfectly natural", whereas the characters furnish much "material for subtle analysis and delicate criticism." Indeed, "the genius of the writer is seen in the natural and skilful way in which she not only conceives her ["wonderfully distinct ... unexaggerated"] characters, but constantly exhibits them in the play of complex passions and motives..." The characters, he goes on, differ greatly, although Mrs.Gaskell avoids "all coarse contrasts." The differences between the characters are constantly exhibited, but "far from being exaggerated into alienation, they are represented as compatible with deep and true mutual affection." In other words, Mrs.

Gaskell avoids introducing differences between characters so great and irreconcilable as had caused the tragedy of Sylvia and Phillip. After this, the reviewer divides the characters neatly into "four principal groups", according to their importance in the story:

The first group is the doctor's household. Himself, so upright, generous and noble; his second wife, so plausible, scheming, and weak, the finest delineation of a weak worldly woman in modern literature; Molly, simple, unsophisticated, and good, always guided rightly by her pure-heartedness and unselfishness; and Cynthia, the clever, satirical flirt, having a certain susceptibility to the purity of Molly and the nobility of Mr. Gibson, but utterly unable to imitate them; her character is perhaps, the most marvellous creation in the work.

Next the Hamleys. The rough, obstinate, affectionate, and pedigree-proud old father; with his delicate, sentimental, and clever wife, who 'was nobody;' and his two sons -- Osborne the poetic, the hope of the family, utterly disappointing it; and Ralph [sic.] with his solid practical qualities, winning for himself scholarship and fame. Nothing can be finer than the brotherly affection between the two, or the grand, generous, Lear-like, pathetic sorrow of the old father on the death of Osborne.

Then the Cumnor family. The easy, hearty old earl; and his haughty well-meaning countess; with the brusque, wilful, clever, honest lady Harriet. In each group, too, there is a subtle harmony between the characters of the children and their parentage and circumstances.

And last, not least, the village gossips; so amusing in the variety of character, and so wonderfully true to nature. It is many a day since we read a more charming or healthy tale. ¹

Harper's Weekly repeats most of the points made by the British Quarterly, adding a few more of its own. The reviewer says that Wives and Daughters is finished with a "dramatic skill and propriety" that is "very unusual among present day novelists." Referring perhaps to Dickens, he asserts that Mrs. Gaskell's work "is not a caricature, nor a striking exaggeration, compensating for its intrinsic defects by its

1. (April 1866), pp. 579-80.

picturesqueness, eloquence and humour." Rather, it is "a picture of life and character maturely conceived and ... made out with the grace, spirit and facility of a master." Reiterating the view of many other critics that, instead of a plot artificially superimposed upon the whole, the motive force in Wives and Daughters is the interplay of different, distinctly-realized character, he says: "The great excellence of the tale is the delicacy and skill with which the action of the various characters upon each other is described." Mrs.Gaskell is "wonderfully successful in showing the complexity of human character, the play of mixed motives." Then, alluding to Mrs.Gaskell's exclusion of thoroughly bad, very unsympathetic, or totally incompatible characters, he observes, we are allowed to watch "the inconsistencies and falsities which constantly check respect, yet are themselves modified in turn, and do not prove those who have them [? Mrs.Gibson and Cynthia] to be wholly monsters or criminals." There are contrasts in the novel, "exquisitely rendered," but "never emphasized", such as the one between the "superficial, unsteadied, fascinating characters [? Cynthia, Mrs. Gibson, Osborne Hamley] of good impulses and kindly but selfish feelings" and "the simple, sweet steadfastness of character [Molly] rooted in principle."¹

The three characters that were considered by far the most successful were Mrs.Gibson, her daughter Cynthia and Squire Hamley. For most readers it was "evident" that Cynthia was the one character on which "the author [had] most dwelt" and "made the most complex."² Consequently, Cynthia attracted the most attention, and was generally

1. (Feb. 24, 1866), p. 115.

2. Literary Churchman, (March 10, 1866), p. 120.

found "a rare creation"¹, the "delight of the book"² and the most "marvellous"³ character of all.

We read in Wives and Daughters that Cynthia has "a power of fascination",⁴ which is borne out by the number of characters of either sex and of various moral, intellectual and social hues that fall under her spell, including Preson^t, Molly, Roger, the young surgeon, Coxe (who, having come to ask for Molly's hand, is swept away by Cynthia's charm, and thus proposes to her instead), and latterly Mr. Henderson, a London barrister. The only person least susceptible to her influence is her father-in-law, Dr. Gibson.

Mrs. Gaskell, using the authorial voice, tells us that Molly's power to charm was "unconscious", and that it is perhaps "incompatible with very high principle."⁵ In the novel, one can see that, unlike Molly, Cynthia is in fact incapable of sustained moral exertion and unable to form or feel a deep and serious attachment. Yet Cynthia appears to be fully conscious of her powers of sexual attraction: after the rebuke she earns from Dr. Gibson (for leading Coxe on to believe that she fancied him, and thus receiving a marriage proposal from him), she says to Molly: "I knew [Coxe] liked me, and I like to be liked; it's born in me to try to make everyone that I come near fond of me; but then they shouldn't carry it too far, for it becomes very troublesome if they do."⁶

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1. Globe, (March 28, 1866), p.1.
 2. Contemporary Review, (May-Aug. 1866), p. 293.
 3. British Quarterly, (April 1866), p. 579.
 4. Works, VIII, p. 249.
 5. Ibid., pp. 249-250.
 6. Ibid., p. 472.

In view of Cynthia's moral weakness, and more especially, her flirtatious behaviour, it is remarkable that no reviewer felt antagonistic towards her, or felt any need to reproach Mrs. Gaskell, who portrays her seriously, without satire, and thus without appearing to judge her.¹ Even Chorley, now aged and more morally scrupulous than ever, seems to have been charmed by Cynthia sufficiently to withhold moral judgement. Although he sums her up as a mere coquette and flirt, he still appears to have fully relished Cynthia's dynamic personality, her respect for her upright stepfather and her ability to see through, and frequently discomfit, her foolish, scheming and shallow mother:

Nothing can be better than Molly's false step-mother, Mrs. Gibson... -- unless it be the coquette her daughter, Cynthia Kirkpatrick. The ^hcameleon colours of a beauty and a flirt not intrinsically bad at heart, but originally of a shallow nature, which no kindly care had deepened, -- have never been more delicately touched. The attraction to such a being of her step-father's generosity and uprightness, -- the perpetual, satirical antagonism with which she reviews and disconcerts her mother, -- are masterly touches of Art. 2

Henry James is more careful than Chorley when he abstains from defining the essence of Cynthia; he also notices that Mrs. Gaskell leaves the reader to understand her as best he can without the help of the authorial voice -- perhaps James is here hinting that the author herself is not certain what to make out of this character:

[Mrs. Gaskell] had probably known a Cynthia Kirkpatrick, a résumé of whose character she had given up as hopeless; and she has here accordingly taken a generous

1. See pp. 356ff below.

2. Athenaeum, (March 3, 1866), pp. 295-6.

revenge in an analysis as admirably conducted as any we remember to have read. She contents herself with a simple record of the innumerable small facts of the young girl's daily life, and leaves the reader to draw his conclusions. He draws them as he proceeds, and yet leaves them always subject to revision; and he derives from the author's own marked abdication of the authoritative generalizing tone which, when the other characters are concerned, she has used as a right, a very delightful sense of the mystery of Cynthia's nature and of those large proportions which mystery always suggests. 1

A similar attitude was taken by other critics, who highly admired Mrs.Gaskell's technique in the presentation of this character: relying upon dialogue and action, thus letting Cynthia's image gradually develop in the reader's mind, as she exhibits herself in relation to other characters, never allowing the reader to form a firm judgement of her, or if he does so, forcing him to modify continuously such a judgement. Mrs.Gaskell's technique in the presentation of Cynthia (which applies, as most reviewers recognized, to other characters, notably Mrs.Gibson) threw a halo of mystery and ambiguity upon her, challenging the reviewers' understanding and drawing from them praise for both the author and her creation:

To say that Cynthia -- the most remarkable character of all -- is a coquette, is to convey no idea of the Cynthia drawn with such masterful completeness by Mrs.Gaskell. She is the child of her mother, and her character requires to be studied in conjunction with that of her mother to be thoroughly appreciated. So it is throughout the story. None of the characters introduced lead lives apart from their fellow-creatures, and it is by the faithful representation of their conduct when brought into contact with others that their characters are portrayed. Few books in the English language, or perhaps in any language, exhibit such an extraordinary assemblage of perfectly represented individualities. (London Review) 2

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1. Notes, p. 157.
 2. (April 21, 1866), p. 456.

Watch [the characters in Mrs.Gaskell's novel]: they have their own natures to unfold, and they will require much sympathy before they will unfold them rightly. There is many a surprise for the reader: not till the end of the book will he see his way to understand Cynthia; probably not then. (Contemporary Review) 1

"Next after [Cynthia]", said Henry James, "we think her mother the best drawn character in the book." Mrs.Gaskell, he goes on, needed "the very nicest art" to prevent Mrs.Gibson from "merging into the reader's sight into an amusing caricature" composed of "a very mild solution of Becky Sharp" of Vanity Fair and "an equally feeble decoction of Mrs.Nickleby." But she is neither, for "touch by touch, under the reader's eyes, [Mrs.Gibson] builds herself up into her selfish and silly and consummately natural completeness."² The British Quarterly called Mrs.Gibson "the finest delineation of a weak, worldly woman in modern literature."³ Chorley considered her an even "better"⁴ character than Cynthia, so did the Saturday critic, who pointed out perceptively that such a character, so lacking in moral, imaginative and intellectual substance, is more difficult to represent than her infinitely more clever daughter:

... the portrait of Mrs.Gibson, the silly, good-tempered, selfish stepmother, is really a masterpiece. There are hundreds of women just like Mrs.Gibson; but the exhibition of the subtle, intangible, and incessant mingling of the motives of a woman thus thoroughly weak in everything but her selfishness, is one of the most difficult of tasks to the novel-writer.

1. (May-Aug. 1866), p. 293.

2. Notes, p. 158.

3. (April 1866), p. 580.

4. Athenaeum, (March 3, 1866), p. 295.

Her pretty, captivating, ill-disciplined girl, Cynthia, is less remarkable as a portrait, not because she is less truly painted, but because it is easier to invent talk and deeds for people of vigorous minds; whose defects are the result of an ill-disciplined childhood rather than inherent in their feeble nature. 1

We are never allowed into what goes on in Mrs. Gibson's mind. Instead, Mrs. Gaskell, throughout and relentlessly, keeps this character under her steady and consistingly ironic gaze, showing her, in ^{one} situation after another, unconsciously revealing her tenacious shallowness through her own comically feeble and confused responses. In her representation of Mrs. Gibson, Mrs. Gaskell was seen to approach very closely the art of Jane Austen, who "seldom", according to the Spectator, exhibited in a full-light "any but weak chatterers and fools." The same reviewer thought that Mrs. Gibson, together with her daughter, were "the most delicate achievement" in the book. In a long passage he dwells with zest upon the many shades of silliness, still not incompatible with some degree of amiableness, that Mrs. Gibson manifests throughout the story. He also admires Mrs. Gaskell's moderation -- not in constantly exposing her weaknesses -- but in refraining from totally condemning her or allowing the reader to do so:

This pretty, selfish, shallow, feeble-minded, vain, worldly, and amiable woman is exquisitely painted from the first scene in which she appears to the last. Her radical and yet unconscious insincerity of character, her incapacity for real affection, and strong wish to please others so far as is consistent with first pleasing herself, her soft purring talk when she is gratified, the delicate flavour of Mrs. Nicklebyish vanity and logic which is infused into her conversation without any caricature, the ambition to be reputed a good step-mother which makes her thwart her step-daughter in all her favourite tastes in order that

1. (March 24, 1866), p. 361.

Molly may seem to be treated exactly like her own daughter Cynthia, her inability to understand any feeling that is not purely worldly, -- and generally the graceful vulgarity of her mind, make a most original picture, as well as one of high pictorial effect. There is a moderation in the sketch of Mrs. Gibson's selfishness, an entire abstinence from the temptation to pillory her, a consistency in infusing a certain feeble amiability of feeling through all her selfishness, a steadiness in delineating her as, on the whole, not without agreeableness, which, when connected with so utterly contemptible a character, convey a sense of very great self-control as well as skill in the authoress. There is not a conversation in which Mrs. Gibson takes part that is not full of real wealth of humour and insight. All of them illustrate the fine shades of silliness, the finer shades of selfishness, which in delicate combination make up Mrs. Gibson's character. 1

Mrs. Gibson and Cynthia, as the contemporary critics generally agreed, were among Mrs. Gaskell's finest creations. Yet it is quite probable that had Mrs. Gaskell concentrated in Wives and Daughters mainly on these two morally imperfect characters, at the expense of others like Molly, the reviewers would have found their shortcomings a little too much to bear -- one reviewer, in fact, protested that Mrs. Gaskell showed "extreme niceness, even nastiness" in the depiction of "Cynthia's mother, [who] for all her lady-like refinement, occasionally raises one's gorge."² The introduction of Mrs. Gibson and Cynthia into the Hollingford community, with its firmly established values and traditions, was clearly a confirmation of the validity of such values. The ironic presentation of Mrs. Gibson is in fact only possible because of Mrs. Gaskell's acceptance of Hollingford's norms. The intellectual ineptitude of this character, however, places her almost outside the pale of serious moral judgment. Her daughter, Cynthia, with her superior intelligence (superior even to Molly's), her sexual charm and her flirtatious tendencies is a more

1. (March 17, 1866), p. 300.

2. Illustrated London News, (March 17, 1866), p. 270.

serious case and would easily have been a cause of concern for contemporary reviewers, had Mrs.Gaskell not anticipated objections by depicting Cynthia as potentially good, who would perhaps have grown up to be as morally responsible as Molly is, had she had her sister-in-law's proper upbringing. Mrs.Gaskell always believed in the influence of circumstances (and possibly heredity) upon the formation of character. Indeed her attitude to Cynthia reminds one (despite the many differences) of the earlier, and effective, position she took in the Life of Charlotte Brontë, that had the circumstances that formed Charlotte's character been more favourable, the nobility of her friend would have shone all the more brightly. In any case, Mrs.Gaskell's careful presentation of Cynthia and her mother was generally successful: the worst a reviewer could think of these two characters was that they were a salutary warning to the innocent readers of Mrs.Gaskell's novel:

We wish our wives and daughters and sisters to be as pure and simple-minded as Molly Gibson, and our husbands and brothers to be as sterling, truthful, and honest as Roger Hamley; and should value these examples which Mrs.Gaskell has left us as a legacy, while taking warning by the failings of Mrs.Gibson or Cynthia... 1

The standard of judgment against which Mrs.Gibson and her daughter are judged is pre-eminently represented by Dr.Gibson, whose responses and attitude to the aberrations and failings of his wife and stepdaughter provide the reader with the requisite moral perspective -- thus relieving Mrs.Gaskell almost entirely from using the authorial voice to guide the reader. When Dr.Gibson retires from the scene, soon after his blundering into marriage, the innocent but right-thinking Molly takes over her father's function -- he only reappears whenever his daughter is incapable of understanding or judging a particular situation,

1. Press, (March 24, 1866), p. 282. (italics mine).

as in the above-mentioned episode, where Cynthia, already engaged to Roger, receives a marriage proposal from the young surgeon Coxe. Although Mrs. Gaskell is least obtrusive as a moralist in this novel, her skilful handling of moral "cases" like Cynthia earned her many tributes like this: "No novelist was ever more careful [than Mrs. Gaskell] to avoid every sort of preaching" and yet "preached more persistently and worthily," said the Manchester Examiner, which went on to observe that this subtle, indirect preaching was "most of all apparent in this last and greatest of her works, Wives and Daughters"¹. Others joined the Manchester Examiner in approving of Mrs. Gaskell's "charming and healthy tale"² which "satisfies and rests the mind"³ and will not fail to "have a beautiful and noble influence."⁴

Dr. Gibson, generally withdrawn and unobtrusive, did not attract much attention. Henry James, who thought that the younger Hamleys, Roger and Osborne, were somewhat shadowy, admired Mrs. Gaskell's older men, especially Squire Hamley and Dr. Gibson: "It is good praise of those strongly-marked, masculine, middle-aged men", observes James ponderously, "to say that they are as forcibly drawn as if a wise masculine mind had drawn them."⁵ Dr. Gibson reminded the Spectator reviewer strongly of Mr. Bennet in Pride and Prejudice. He is "a much less indolent and selfish man" than Mr. Bennet; still "there is just the same extent of delineation and the same limited degree of insight into the character, in both cases." This is especially appropriate in the case of Dr. Gibson for "he is the kind of man who ... habitually pushes

1. (Feb. 27, 1866), p. 3.

2. British Quarterly, (April 1866), p. 580.

3. Spectator, (March 17, 1866), p. 301.

4. Manchester Guardian, (May 1, 1866), p. 7.

5. Notes, p. 159.

aside trains of thought and feeling if they are not immediately practical..."¹ "The only unnatural thing" about him, continued the Spectator, is his marriage with "such a widow as Mrs.Kirkpatrick," but if this is not "quite natural", it is like so many unexpected things which "manage to happen every day."² Two religious sources, the Literary Churchman and the Contemporary Review, wished that Mrs.Gaskell would devise "a means of escape"³ for the long-suffering, stoical doctor, hinting that his wife's demise would be to the benefit of all parties concerned (in the unfinished chapter, Mrs.Gibson is ill with influenza).

Molly, although no rigid paragon of virtue, being too natural, spontaneous and sensitive for that, was still sufficiently faultless for Chorley to draw from him this rebuke: "Mrs.Gaskell's heroine, Molly, only sins against truth to nature in being too useful, too sweetly-natured, too self-effacing, too perfect."⁴ Happily, he found her less coyly virtuous than Dickens's Esther Summerson (Bleak House). The London Review critic had some slight reservation towards Molly's goodness, though he observed shrewdly that Mrs.Gaskell's heroine is not sentimentally drawn in the manner of Mrs.Craik:

The spotless goodness of Molly Gibson has nothing in common with such "goodness" as the authoress of "Christian's Mistake" and "A Noble Life" delights to paint: Molly Gibson is good because she is good, not merely because Mrs.Gaskell has chosen to make her so. 5

The most fervent admirer of Molly, however, was the reviewer of the Manchester Examiner. "Molly Gibson", he exclaimed, "will be known

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1. (March 17, 1866), p. 299-300.
 2. Ibid., p. 300.
 3. (May-Aug, 1866), p. 293.
 4. Athenaeum, (March 3, 1866), p. 296.
 5. (April 21, 1866), p. 456.

as long as English is a living language." Molly for the most part remains unconscious of her love for Roger: "True, modest woman, she had no place in her heart for any thought at all unmaidenly."

Throughout the story "she moves as an angel of goodness, yet so womanly withal, that we have nothing unnatural or unreasonable in her character." She is a "true, pure woman"; in fact, "a model that might be, and doubtless often is quite realized in ordinary life."¹

Squire Hamley was generally admired. For the Saturday Review he was proof that Mrs.Gaskell was superior to Jane Austen. Jane Austen, although often considered faultless artistically (G.H.Lewes was her most important mid-Victorian admirer) was almost generally regarded as too limited in scope, incapable of depicting passion. In this very interesting comparison between Jane Austen and Mrs.Gaskell, we can see the Saturday reviewer, predictably enough, considering Mrs.Gaskell superior in the realm of passion, but, somewhat unexpectedly, asserting that Mrs.Gaskell was even better and more skilful and refined in Austen's forte, the delineation of three or four rural families:

Novels like Wives and Daughters, and indeed all Mrs. Gaskell's stories, naturally provoke the question as to the place to be assigned to her in the ranks of novelists who aim at the reproduction of the daily existence of ordinary life. It is impossible not to compare her with Jane Austen. In contrast with Emma, with Mansfield Park, and Pride and Prejudice, there can be no question as to Mrs.Gaskell's pre-eminence. In both writers there is the same freedom from exaggeration, the same delight in the ludicrous aspects of daily life, the same vivacity, the same perception of the imaginative reality of their creations, and the same recognition of the complexity of human character. But in two respects Miss Austen, with all her charms, is found wanting. She has neither the refinement nor the pathos of Mrs.Gaskell. Her most prominent and best-drawn women have usually a dash of vulgarity about them. With Mrs.Gaskell, on the

1. (Feb. 27, 1866), p.3.

contrary, even her snobs lose a certain portion of that hard unintellectual vulgarity which makes the real snob so grievous an affliction. Mrs. Gibson is as unmitigated a snob as ever existed on the earth. Little less thoroughly snobbish is Lady Cumnor; the great lady at the Towers. But in both of them, especially in Mrs. Gibson, the vulgarity is just sufficiently toned down to take off its hardest edges, and to prevent its impairing the general air of refinement that pervades the whole story. Pathos, again, does not enter at all into Miss Austen's novels. With Mrs. Gaskell it is one of her greatest charms. There is nothing in fiction more touching and more perfectly true than the heartbroken desolation of the old squire when his wife dies, and the coldness springs up between him and his eldest son. The masculine and rude strength, and the rough but real virtues of the thoroughly honourable man are never for a moment obscured; yet the tenderness, the genuine refinement, and the personal humility and forgivingness of his nature are brought out with a clearness and force of detail that would be almost impossible in a man's treatment of such a conception. ¹

This was one of two sources to claim that Mrs. Gaskell was superior to Jane Austen.² So we can hardly take it as typical of the mid-Victorian estimation of the relative merits of the two authors. Virtually all contemporary readers would have agreed with him that Mrs. Gaskell was far more capable of tackling deep emotions, and, perhaps, that she had greater tolerance in the depiction of the intellectually or morally weak or limited.³

1. (March 24, 1866), p. 361.

2. Cf. "Like Miss Austin [sic], Mrs. Gaskell was pre-eminently a character-painter; but the characters that she painted were more refined, and more poetical than any work of Miss Austin's" (Manchester Examiner, (Feb. 27, 1866), p. 3).

3. A few mid-Victorian critics were uneasy about Austen's mode of irony and its implications. Julia Kavanagh, in her English Women of Literature (1862), attributed Jane Austen's irony to her "coldness" and spoke of her "cold views of life." In an 1870 review in Blackwood's, Mrs. Oliphant, challenging the sugary picture of Austen as presented by J.E. Austen-Leigh in his Memoir of his aunt, said that Austen often repressed her "fine vein of feminine cynicism" although her "stinging yet soft-voiced contempt" was not difficult to see. Moreover, Austen seemed to have a "despair of any one human creature ever doing good to another... a sense that nothing is to be done but to look on ... and wonder why human creatures should be such fools". Quotations from John Halperin, ed., Jane Austen, op.cit. pp. 23, 28.

Besides the Saturday, the Spectator was another quarter to find in Squire Hamley an evidence of Mrs.Gaskell's ver^astility: her ability to draw a character like Dr.Gibson in the Austen mode, while being quite at ease with Hamley, presented in "a quite different style", in a way that even George Eliot could hardly surpass -- this from the Spectator, consistently adulatory towards Eliot, is high praise indeed:

The warmth and petulance of [Hamley's] feelings, the influence of his contracted experience and narrow culture upon a mind of much energy and great pride, the mixture of aristocratic self-esteem and personal self-distrust, the childishness of his impetuosity, whether of grief or anger, the vehemence of his prejudices and the simplicity of his affection, are all painted with a power and depth that even George Eliot could scarcely surpass. We know scarcely anything in modern fiction more pathetic than the picture of the old squire in the utter desolation which overtakes him after his wife's death, when his eldest son, partly estranged from him by a secret marriage, and partly by ill-health and self-occupation, is always jarring on the old squire's sore heart, while he in his turn is constantly guilty of involuntary passion, though he is secretly pining to regain his son's confidence and affection. 1

There are not enough substantial contemporary comparisons between Mrs.Gaskell and George Eliot for one to make a reliable estimation of the standing of one in relation to the other. Many reviewers in 1866 considered George Eliot next to none -- except Dickens -- in her range and art. George Eliot (like Charlotte Brontë) was often seen to have written like a man -- the highest praise for a lady novelist! Mrs.Gaskell was never found to have written except as a woman -- which implied a limited intellectual, though not necessarily artistic, ability. She was also seen to have no intense curiosity about the human condition (the mystery of life), the nature of evil or good or any such problematic issues. Most contemporary readers did not find

1. (March 17, 1866), p. 300.

this a disadvantage -- though clearly the same readers were generally more impressed by George Eliot, who was "feminine" but still seemed to have first-class intellectual powers. The following comment from the Saturday Review perhaps summarises well the general feeling that George Eliot and Mrs.Gaskell, although different in many respects, were pre-eminently realists; and although Mrs.Gaskell's realistic world was seen to be a simpler one, it was considered no less valid for being so:

In "George Eliot" it is impossible not to recognise one who feels intensely the mystery of existence, and who, while capable of an exquisite relish for the ludicrous, wherever it presents itself, is at the same time filled with a profound sympathy for every fellow-creature who is struggling onwards through the battle of existence and gazing intently at every glimpse of the unseen. Hence the essentially tragic character of her stories, and the brilliant distinctness with which her men and women stand out almost alive from her canvass. Mrs. Gaskell's thoughts, on the other hand, are ever with rich and poor alike, as they pass the routine of ordinary ways, chequered with sunshine and sorrows, not tortured with any unsolved problems of weal or woe, but satisfied to sustain and brighten life with the gentle resources that are at hand to every one who will use them. In both, however, there is the same thorough genuineness and reality both of thought and feeling; in both, everything has been studied from real nature, and nothing from novel-nature. The one fills the reader with thought and sadness, and is intense even in her merriment. The other awakens tranquil sympathies, and reminds one that it is really possible to enjoy the absurdities of one's fellow-creatures without a particle of ill-will. 1

A few tried to explain the source of Mrs.Gaskell's power to create and sustain consistently characters so various as Cynthia, her mother, Molly, Dr.Gibson and Squire Hamley. Among those was Henry James, who defined Mrs.Gaskell's genius "as being little else than a peculiar play of her personal character"; it was "so obviously the

1. (March 24, 1866), p. 361.

offspring of her affections, her feelings (and considering that, after all, it was genius) was so little of an intellectual matter."¹ The Saturday Review critic, not so obsessed with the limited intellectual potential of the feminine mind,² reached a similar conclusion in relation to Mrs. Gaskell's sympathetic faculty: he referred to Mrs. Gaskell's power of sympathy (empathy, we would now say) that made it possible for her to create thoroughly life-like characters, both male and female, with an individuality that "stamps everything they say and everything they do:"³

Mrs. Gaskell was, indeed, one of those writers in whom the important part played by the feelings in all good novel-writing was strikingly pre-eminent...

A woman's first impulse, [unlike that of a man, is] to put herself in the place of those about her, estimating their acts by her own feelings, and therefore excusing them, or applauding them, almost as if they were her own... With a woman, the study of looks and gestures and phrases and habits is the study of the working of the inner life with which she herself is already more or less en rapport.

In Wives and Daughters the power of conception thus acquired by women of natural and cultivated imaginative

1. Notes, p. 154-5.
2. In 1866 James did not think too highly of the intellectual powers of George Eliot, curiously preferring those of Charles Reade: "[George Eliot's works belong to the] novel of manners which began with the present century under the auspices of Miss Edgeworth and Miss Austen. George Eliot is stronger in degree than either of these writers, but she is not different in kind. She brings to her task a richer mind, but she uses it in very much the same way. With a certain masculine comprehensiveness which they lack, she is eventually a feminine -- a delightfully feminine-writer. She has the microscopic observation, not a myraid of whose keen notations are worth a single one of those great synthetic guesses with which a real master attacks the truth, and which, by their occasional occurrence in the stories of Mr. Charles Reade..., make him, to our mind, the most readable of living English novelists." (Nation, (Aug. 16, 1866), p. 128).
3. Press, (March 24, 1866), p. 282.

gifts is surprisingly exhibited. None but a woman, sympathetic, acute, observant, and home-loving, could have worked out the complex character of a man like Old Squire Hamley with the mingled delicacy and force without which he would have been the mere reproduction of a common-place personage as familiar to novel-readers as he is uninteresting in actual life... But it was Mrs. Gaskell's special gift, not only to create men and women in whom the complexity of character is just such as is met with in every-day prosaic life, but so to enter by hearty sympathy into these heterogeneous creatures of her imagination as to exhibit that complexity in every word they utter and every step they take. This, in fact, is the secret of the popularity of her writings, and of the air of perfect reality which, with few exceptions, they wear. 1

If we disregard this critic's suggestion that empathy is predominantly a feminine characteristic -- it is of no sex -- we can still see that he comes very near to describe accurately an important source of Mrs. Gaskell's strength as an artist; Mrs. Gaskell herself would have perhaps agreed with his speculation on her creative methods.²

No reviewer used terms like the fidelity of a daguerreotype or Dutch painting in reference to Mrs. Gaskell's manner of depicting character in Wives and Daughters. Such terms implied a static state of affairs; Mrs. Gaskell's characters, developing and interacting, needed perhaps to be described in terms of "cinematography", a word the mid-

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1. Saturday Review, (March 24, 1866), pp. 360-61.
 2. Mrs. Gaskell was not given to theorizing about her art. In this rare comment (which occurs in a letter she wrote to an applicant for literary advice) she says: "..., not a character must be introduced who does not conduce to this growth & progress of events... Set to & imagine yourself a spectator & auditor of every scene & event! Work hard at this till it becomes a reality to you, -- a thing you have to recollect & describe & report fully & accurately as it struck you, in order that your reader may have it equally before him. Don't introduce yourself into your description. If you but think eagerly of your story till you see it in action, words, good simple strong words, will come, -- just as if you saw an accident in the street that impressed you strongly you would describe it forcibly." (Letters, 420).

Victorian critics could not obviously use; and even if they could, it would still have been inadequate to describe the language-based art of the novel. Many reviewers like Chorley found Mrs.Gaskell's representation of rural, provincial life in the fictitious town of Hollingford entirely convincing: "There is not one of the people in the every-day [novel] to whose identity we could not swear."¹ It is significant, however, that these critics did not suggest that Mrs.Gaskell copied any particular character directly from life.² It is not that the critics in 1866 were generally more sophisticated and more conscious of the complex relationship between the literary artist and reality, rather Mrs.Gaskell can be said to have succeeded in educating the reviewers to a proper understanding of her art.

1. Athenaeum, (March 3, 1866), p. 295.

2. The only exception was Henry James in his description of Cynthia see p. 352 above.

Conclusion

The response to Wives and Daughters is in many ways a continuation of that elicited by Mrs. Gaskell's first novel, Mary Barton, published some eighteen years before. Right from the beginning of her career, realism was Mrs. Gaskell's trade-mark; her powers of observation, sensitivity to feeling, and the ability to use and shape a difficult material in the first novel were fully acknowledged in 1848-1849. In 1866 these skills were even more clearly recognized because of Mrs. Gaskell's greater artistic subtlety and her more confident control of the complex and rich material of her last work. Indeed, despite the varying degrees of interest in and enthusiasm for her major works, Mrs. Gaskell's contemporaries always recognized ^{in them} the hand of a great and versatile realist.

The mid-Victorians were painfully aware of the swift and wide-ranging social and cultural changes in what they generally regarded as a period of transition -- a transition, many fervently hoped, which would lead to unbounded Progress.

One of the greatest attractions of The Life of Charlotte Brontë for its contemporary readers was the image of the noble and brave Charlotte neither crushed by adversity nor unbalanced by fame and literary victory: "In the midst of collapsing creeds, habits changing, the perplexed entry into a new era", said a Westminster reviewer, "the picture of this young girl, growing up in a hard atmosphere, thinking only of her duty, ... the same in trouble and in success ... is at once elevating, assuring and composing."¹ The agnostic G.H. Lewes

1. (July 1856), p. 295.

(together with George Eliot) wept over the same picture, so "full in encouragement and healthy teaching, ... a lesson in duty and self-reliance", an embodiment of "the true religion of home."¹

Mrs.Gaskell herself was in much need for the reassuring and elevating story she presented in the Life, and indeed in nearly all her works. Even in the conflict-torn world of Mary Barton, we find her, much to the satisfaction of her audience, showing the operatives of Manchester developing a culture of their own; generally patient, kind and helpful to one another; while some of them, like Job Le^gh or old Alice, achieve through simple religion or scientific interests the mental and spiritual peace so hard to get in the midst of the harsh circumstances of their lives. Even Greg was for a moment caught with a vision of a glorious future for the Manchester operatives so powerfully represented by his talented townswoman: "The authoress", he said, "seizes on and depicts those bright, redeeming features which still characterise our operative population, and in which we recognize... 'germs of almost impossible good', signs of elements of progress towards [a distant, though "very lofty"] social and moral progress."²

In Cranford and Wives and Daughters, works not concerned with contemporary social strife, Mrs.Gaskell was even better able to celebrate the virtues of goodness, kindness and integrity, and the value of culture and established tradition. Only once, in Sylvia's Lovers, she really depressed and confused her readers, when she seemed to ~~s~~how that ordinary incompatibility between normal people - something for which there is no cure and from which there is no escape -- could sometimes

1. The George Eliot Letters, II, 315-16.

2. Edinburgh Review, (April 1849), p. 404.

lead inexorably to disaster and tragedy. Yet even in this work, Mrs. Gaskell offset some of the painful effect of the novel by her skilful evocation of the atmosphere of the Napoleonic wars and their impact upon the brave and hard-working fishing-community of Monkshaven (Whitby). More than one critic's heart swelled with pride at the notion that he belonged to the same people who fought the oppressive naval-recruitment laws with such determination and spirit.

Compared with the great novelists of her time, Mrs. Gaskell showed the least signs of neurosis or instability. She clearly saw, as in Cranford, that certain aspects of human life were simply irrational and ludicrous, but she never moved on to suggest that human life itself was absurd or futile or intolerable. This was, above and beyond her artistic genius, her greatest asset in her own time, if not in our own.

List of Abbreviations

(and dates of publication of)

(a) Abbreviations of Mrs. Gaskell's works used in the entries:

- CP Cousin Phillis and Other Tales, Smith, Elder, 1865 (CP serialized in Cornhill, Nov. 1863 - Feb. 1864).
- Cr Cranford, Chapman and Hall, 1853 (Serialized in Household Words, Dec. 1851 - May 1853).
- DNW Dark Night's Work, Smith, Elder, 1863 (Serialized in All the Year Round, Jan. - March 1863).
- G Mrs. Gaskell, Mrs. Gaskell's work.
- LCB The Life of Charlotte Brontë, 2 vols., Smith, Elder, 1857.
- MB Mary Barton, 2 vols., Chapman and Hall, 1848.
- MC Moorland Cottage, Chapman and Hall (Christmas book), 1850.
- NS North and South, 2 vols., Chapman and Hall, 1855 (Serialized in Household Words, Sept. 1854 - Jan. 1855).
- R Ruth, 3 vols., Chapman and Hall, 1853.
- SL Sylvia's Lovers, 3 vols., Smith, Elder, 1863.
- WD Wives and Daughters, 2 vols., Smith, Elder, 1866 (Serialized in Cornhill, Aug. 1864 - Jan. 1866).

(b) Abbreviations used to indicate the sources of attributions (between square brackets at the end of an entry).

- G.E.L. The George Eliot Letters, ed. Gordon S. Haight, vol. 1-7, 1954-1956.
- Northup C.K. Northup's bibliography, published in Gerald DeWitt Sanders, Elizabeth Gaskell, New Haven, 1929.
- Selig Robert L. Selig, Elizabeth Gaskell: a Reference Guide, Reference Guides in Literature, Boston, 1977.
- S.H.B. The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendship and Correspondence. The Shakespeare Head Brontë, eds. James T. Wise and John A. Symington 4 vols., 1932.
- Stang Richard Stang, The Theory of the Novel in England, 1850-1870, 1959.
- Wellesley The Wellesley Index of Victorian Periodicals, 1824-1900, ed. Walter E. Houghton, 2 vols., 1966, 1972.

Criticism of Mrs. Gaskell's Works

1 - The Contemporary Criticism

1848-1866

1848

Atlas. Review of MB, XXIII (Nov. 4), 722-23.

Britannia. Review of MB, IX (Oct. 21), 684.

[Chorley, H.F.]. Review of MB, Athenaeum, no. 1095 (Oct. 21), pp.1050-51
[Marked File of Athenaeum].

Critic. Review of MB, VII (Nov. 15), 454-55.

Economist. Review of MB, VI (Nov. 25), 1337-38.

Examiner. Review of MB, (Nov. 4), pp. 708-9.

Inquirer. Review of MB, no. 332 (Nov. 11), pp. 710-11.

John Bull. Review of MB, XXVIII (Nov. 4), 711.

Literary Gazette. Review of MB, XXXVIII (Oct. 28), 706-8.

Morning Herald. Review of MB, (Oct. 21), p.7.

Morning Post. Review of MB, (Nov. 24), p.6.

New Monthly Magazine. Review of MB, LXXXIV (Nov.), 406.

Standard of Freedom. Review of MB, I (Oct. 28), 12.

Sun. Review of MB, (Nov. 30), p.3.

1849

[Bradford] J.E. Review of MB, Christian Examiner 4th ser. XI (March), 293-306. [General Index of Christian Examiner].

British Quarterly Review. Review of MB, IX (Feb.), 117-36.

Eclectic Review. Review of MB, n.s. XXV (Jan.), 51-63.

Economist. Review of Shirley [comments on MB] (Nov. 10).

[Greg, W.R.]. Review of MB, Edinburgh Review, LXXXIX (April), 402-35.
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[Howitt, W.]. Review of Shirley [comments on MB], Standard of Freedom, (Nov.10), p.11. [S.H.B.].

[Kingsley, Charles]. Review of MB, Fraser's Magazine, XXXIX (April), 429-32. [Wellesley].

Landor, W.S. "To the Author of Mary Barton", Eclectic Magazine (New York), XVII (June) 261. Reprinted in his The Last Fruit off an Old Tree, 1853, pp. 481-82.

Manchester Guardian. Review of MB, (Feb. 28), p.7.

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