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**AN EXAMINATION OF SELECTED BINARY OPPOSITIONS IN THE
WORK OF ELIZABETH GASKELL WHICH SERVE TO DEMONSTRATE
THE AUTHOR'S RESPONSE TO UNITARIANISM AND OTHER
PREVALENT INFLUENCES WITHIN MID-VICTORIAN SOCIETY**

by

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines in detail the work of Elizabeth Gaskell, a mid-Victorian English author. It establishes that she was significantly influenced in her writing by the Unitarian social milieu to which she belonged during her lifetime, and by a wide range of other dominant influences, such as Romanticism and the rise of Darwinism. It demonstrates that conflicting doctrinal strains within Unitarianism, and emphases in Unitarianism differing from that of other prevailing influences within society, jointly contributed to the particular nature of her literary output.

Elizabeth Gaskell's work is characterised by a series of binary oppositions, a feature of her fiction which serves to illustrate her individual response to conflicting values or concepts. Rather than dogmatically resolving the series of antinomies revealed throughout her work, she maintains their co-existence in such a manner that the mutual interdependence of each set of polarities is perpetuated. This suggests that she preferred, despite varying emphases at certain points, an intelligent open-endedness regarding opposing views. In fact, her work infers an acceptance that textual vitality and purpose is fostered by allowing such tensions to exist.

The binary oppositions exhibited in her work that are discussed in this dissertation are varied in nature. In Chapters Two and Three, the Priestleyan notion of necessarianism, a form of moral determinism, is set against the equally evident notion of free-will and divine benevolence. In Chapter Four, the radical edge of her Unitarian faith is balanced by an equally strong appreciation of the benefits of social respectability. Elizabeth Gaskell's work reflects a recurrent commitment to the Unitarian espousal of truthfulness, but she also understands the textual benefits of concealment and deception. This is discussed in detail in Chapter Five. In Chapter Six it is demonstrated that in her work an appreciation of the beauty of the natural world contrasts with an acceptance of Darwinian theory and the optimism accompanying Victorian progress in many fields. The desire on the part of some characters to achieve personal freedom, or, alternatively, to remain in a state of

submission or resignation, is another clearly differentiated example. This is illustrated, metaphorically, in Chapter Seven, by window scenes in Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction. All the above chapters support the hypothesis that the notion of binary oppositions is a useful mechanism in a critical examination of her work.

The problematic nature of Elizabeth Gaskell's work is resolved by an appreciation of her personal history and by an understanding of the period in which she lived. The nature of mid-Victorian English thought leads, in her case, to the acceptance or accentuation in her fiction of a conjunction of conflicting influences. Elizabeth Gaskell's response is to maintain these opposing influences in such a way that they become an integral and fruitful tension in her writing.

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Deo optimo maximo.

DECLARATION

The material in this dissertation is wholly original and has not been submitted for any other academic award.

CHAPTER ONE

"TO TRUTH, TO LIBERTY, TO RELIGION":

UNITARIANISM AND OTHER INFLUENCES IN THE LIFE AND WORK OF ELIZABETH GASKELL

Elizabeth Gaskell's Unitarian Background

Elizabeth Gaskell (née Stevenson) was constantly exposed to Unitarian thought and teaching throughout her entire life (1810 - 1865). Her father, William Stevenson, was a Unitarian minister; she attended a school in Warwickshire favoured by Unitarians such as the Wedgwoods, of pottery fame [1]; spent time with prominent Unitarian families like the Turners, of Newcastle [2]; and finally married an influential Unitarian minister, William Gaskell, with whose ministry she was deeply involved [3]. During her married life in Manchester she was to meet most of the foremost Unitarians of her time, including the Martineaus and J. J. Tayler. She lived and functioned as a minister's wife and woman of letters within an increasingly significant and respected Unitarian middle-class best represented in the industrial centres of mid-nineteenth century England [4].

The Unitarian influences to which she was exposed made a significant impact upon her literary output. Even though Elizabeth read widely and throughout her married life met influential philosophers, scientists and social reformers from a wide range of backgrounds, the Unitarian thought and teaching to which she was constantly exposed through reading, discussion and weekly sermons provided the undergirding assumptions about the theocratic nature of life evidenced in her work. There is certainly no evidence to suggest that she ever rejected or even largely modified the basic tenets of her inherited faith.

The Relationship between William and Elizabeth Gaskell

There are differences of opinion concerning the relationship between William and Elizabeth Gaskell. Some biographers have sought to demonstrate that after the ardour of early marriage their relationship cooled and became little more than a tolerable co-existence of very different personalities [5].

Correspondence records Elizabeth's frequently unsuccessful attempts to incorporate William in her therapeutic trips away from the highly industrialised environment of Manchester. In fact, her pleas to have him take a holiday of any kind confirm other suggestions that William was more reclusive than his wife, preferring above all else the privacy of his study. When he could be persuaded to venture outside the city he frequently travelled alone. The deliberate, almost complete destruction by William and Elizabeth's daughters of the correspondence between their father and mother has also created, up until today, an air of suspicion as to the tenor of their relationship [6].

On the other hand there is evidence to suggest that their relationship was strong and stable. It was William who encouraged Elizabeth to write her first novel [7], and when her work created controversy, he wholeheartedly supported her through some tense and delicate situations [8]. He allowed her more freedom than was customary in Victorian society and appears to have been loving towards the children [9]. Elizabeth was a thoughtful and caring wife, allowing William the time and space he needed to prepare his sermons and lectures. There was some flexibility in their financial arrangements [10] and towards the end of her life Elizabeth secretly and generously bought a house for William from her literary earnings. They were faithful to and supportive of each other throughout their marriage, and William did not remarry after his wife's premature death.

The complex, enigmatic nature of William and Elizabeth's relationship does not seem to have impeded their busy, separate and highly successful careers. Elizabeth Gaskell became one of the foremost novelists and biographers of the Victorian period, while William had a long and respected ministry as a Unitarian minister in Manchester. Both were involved in specific ministries to the poor and marginalised in Manchester and William used his considerable intellectual abilities in the education of the working classes [11]. While Elizabeth's literary reputation has remained untarnished, and, has in fact, increased markedly in recent decades [12], William has been,

and remains, a much neglected figure in Victorian studies. There is only one scholarly, but restricted biography of his life [13]. Yet, the historical evidence suggests that, at that time, in Manchester society and beyond, both were highly respected. They were complex, complete but very different individuals, and each had a wide circle of friends both in England and abroad. Cross Street Chapel, in Manchester, where William was the minister, became a wealthy and influential centre for social and philanthropic activity in the north of England [14].

Although there were some obvious tensions and dark moments throughout their long marriage [15], in broad terms, it fostered for each of them, a level of energy and productivity that demands explanation. There are numerous examples of similar marriages throughout history which have disintegrated under the pressure of incompatible strength, independence and intelligence. But for the Gaskells their relationship appears to have been a successful catalyst for two creative and fruitful lives. Their worlds and interests, although frequently so different and independent, were pursued in such close proximity, and with such direct reference to each other, that it is difficult to assess the success of one without an acknowledgement of the contribution of the other.

They each benefited from the relationship through a variety of influences, sometimes of a sustained and intangible nature. Each was informed by the stance and opinions of the other. There can be little doubt that the busy world of Unitarian church life that Elizabeth was swept up into after her marriage to William gave her a major impetus to write. *Mary Barton*, *Ruth* and *North and South* all stem from situations that she was exposed to through her role as minister's wife [16]. More importantly, and not formerly recognised, her religious convictions must inevitably have been shaped by a weekly exposure to William's sermons. William was an excellent preacher and his homilies reveal a strong Unitarian orthodoxy [17]. Although she had been born into a strongly Unitarian social milieu, her marriage to William brought her into the centre of Unitarian life, giving her an opportunity to meet with some of the leading Unitarian figures of her time. It sustained and nurtured Elizabeth's religious beliefs, giving her a doctrinal position she did not markedly differ from during her adult life. In fact, subtle changes in her attitude to central issues such as moral determinism reflect similar changes in English Unitarianism. She kept pace with the changes that came about through a range of other influences on Unitarianism as well [18].

Elizabeth markedly extended William's exposure to the realm of literary discourse and creativity. Although his literary background and understanding were appreciated by the many working class people who attended his lectures over a number of years, his literary energies were directed towards the preparation of sermons, lectures and editing the *Unitarian Herald* [19]. He certainly would not have had the wealth of literary enrichment that came to him over many years had he not been married to Elizabeth. She gave him first-hand experience of the creative processes involved in a sustained and varied literary output, as well as the resolution of the personal frustrations and fears associated with publication. William's relationship with Elizabeth also positioned him, reluctantly or otherwise, amid the leading literati of England. The fact that William was loathe to leave Manchester was not an impediment in this sense, as eminent people constantly sought them out in Manchester.

A key element in the success of their relationship was the complementarity of their personalities. His retiring, rational, and ascetic nature was counterbalanced by the gregariousness, warmth, even passionate nature of his wife. His personality was shaped by a strong indebtedness to eighteenth century rationalism and sense of order, while Elizabeth increasingly absorbed the diverse, but burgeoning influences of Romanticism. She read widely, had a deep appreciation of the natural world, and was frequently exposed to Continental influences through her trips to Paris, Germany and Rome. Elizabeth Gaskell's fondest memories were of her time in Rome. But she also cherished visiting her friend, Madame Mohl, in Paris. There she met, or became acquainted with the work of, many leading French intellectuals [20]. The very strength of their relationship seems to reside in this opposition. Their differences highlighted their individual strengths, bringing into focus polarities that contributed to the enduring reputations of both husband and wife.

The Gaskells' relationship is an ideal example of the organic interconnectedness of literary and theological discourses that was possible in the middle of the nineteenth century. In an era when the publication of both literary and theological works markedly proliferated, when both genres were taken seriously and competed for sales, the Gaskells' relationship and work serves to demonstrate how the mutual inclusiveness of such areas of knowledge could occur. In a society where theocratic assumptions and conservative Christian doctrines were still widely maintained by the bulk of

the population, and where the novel was playing an increasingly significant role as a vehicle for social commentary, it was not, however, always possible to find agreement on the value of the novel as a means for conveying religious understanding. The Gaskells' high view of both theology and literature, although not exceptional, was outstanding because of the duration of their balanced appreciation of both disciplines.

The Nature of Mid-Victorian Unitarianism

However, before attempting to assess the evidence for the influence of Unitarianism within the diversity of texts which constitute the corpus of her literary output, it is important to stress that mid-nineteenth century Unitarianism held a complex religious position, embracing a range of doctrinal beliefs which were constantly subject to review, and which often created internal conflict [21].

English Unitarianism emerged principally from the English Presbyterian churches of the seventeenth century. While the Scottish Presbyterian movement became Calvinistic, the English Presbyterians, in conjunction with the General Baptists and some other dissenting congregations, progressively accepted an Arminian position, eventually rejecting Trinitarian teaching and totally embracing universalism [22]. While elements within Unitarianism always remained Arian, the tendency was to become Socinian. A major influence in bringing about the widespread acceptance of Arianism, a midway point between the Trinitarian position and that of the Socinians, was Richard Price, the English philosopher and theologian.

Arianism was a prominent influence in the fourth century church and was denounced as heresy in Councils at Nicaea and Constantinople. The basic assertion of Arianism was that Jesus is subordinate, because of his creaturehood, to God the Father. Elizabeth Gaskell herself at one point expresses identifiably Arian beliefs. Socinianism emerged in sixteenth century Europe as a response to Italian humanism. Socinians (precursors of the later Unitarians) believed in the humanity of Jesus. To them Christ was a perfect man, endowed with divine attributes as needed (e.g. at the Ascension) but not in himself divine. Certainly it was in the area of Christological formulations that significant variations occurred. Unitarians also rejected many other aspects of what was considered orthodox Christian

doctrine, including the innate depravity of Man and the substitutionary atonement of Christ [23].

The resolve of Unitarians throughout the seventeenth century was tested, after the Restoration, by the same legislation which restricted all dissenting positions. The Corporation Act of 1661, the Act of Uniformity of 1662, and the Conventicle Act and the Five Mile Act of 1665 all made progress and consolidation difficult. What has become known as 'the Great Ejection' of 1662 saw two thousand ministers of religion forced to resign because they could not accept the Prayer Book in its entirety. Although resistance to dissent weakened slightly with the Declarations of Indulgence in the 1670s and the Toleration Acts of 1689, Unitarians, along with others, were still marginalised [24].

As Unitarians were precluded from studying at English universities in the eighteenth century, they established, along with other dissenting traditions, their own academies. They became respected institutions of higher learning in their own right. The most prestigious early example was Warrington Academy (1754 - 1786), where the study of divinity, classics and mathematics was later expanded to include chemistry and modern languages. Joseph Priestley was appointed as tutor of 'languages and belles lettres' in 1761 and began his scientific career there as well. J.P. Marat, a leading figure in the French Revolution, also tutored at Warrington Academy [25]. After Warrington closed Manchester Academy became the main centre for Unitarians to undertake a liberal education at tertiary level in England. After periods in Manchester and York this respected institution finally moved to Oxford in 1889. James Martineau and J.J. Tayler were major influences at Manchester College from the 1850s onwards [26].

English Unitarians gained university degrees by studying outside of England, usually in Scotland or Germany. Between 1690 and 1780 dozens of Unitarian students were sponsored to study at the University of Glasgow, where the Chair in Moral Philosophy was held by a remarkable succession of philosophers, including Frances Hutcheson, Adam Smith, and Thomas Reid [27].

Joseph Priestley (1773 - 1804) was a leading figure in the development of English Unitarianism. His unique blend of optimism, liberalism, commitment to intellectual freedom and inquiry, his wide-ranging intellectual interests alongside an unswerving religious conviction, ensured

that he became the dominant voice in rational dissent in England in the eighteenth century. His position as a student and lecturer at Warrington Academy made the propagation of his views easier within dissenting communities throughout the country during that period.

Priestley was very influenced by David Hartley's *Observations on Man*, (1749) which he read as a student at Warrington Academy between 1752 and 1755. Priestley's integrated view of knowledge led to an easy acceptance and development of 'associationism', a theory which had scientific and theological application for him, as for many other eighteenth century scholars [28]. Derived from John Locke (1632-1704) and Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727), but most convincingly presented in David Hartley, it was an attempt to explain the internal structure of matter and its forces, and sought to deal with the mind-body dualism of Descartes. It hypothesised, in theological terms that:

God was the uncreated Being, existent from the beginning, and with Him, as necessary consequences of His existence, but not attributes of it, were space and time. By an act of Divine Will, matter had been created, homogeneous, particulate, and possessing position, extension and movement. And the constant acting Will of the immanent Creator was manifest in the forceful principles of interaction of those particles of matter, principles deterministically expressed in natural law, describable in mathematical terms, and confirmable by experiment. It was a mark of God's wisdom and contrivance that He should produce so great a variety of effects by so simple and easy a method. [29]

Priestley outlines his views on the problem of free will and necessarianism (a form of determinism) in *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated* (1777) [30]. It has been pointed out that Priestley's views can be reduced to three propositions: that all actions have motives; that motives are causes; and that everything (including actions, events and the causes of actions) has a cause [31]. Priestley's views prompted a prolonged but amicable exchange of ideas with Richard Price, a theologian and philosopher for whom Priestley had a great respect (although Price did not agree with him on this issue). Their exchange of ideas was published in 1778 as *A Free Discussion of the Doctrines of Materialism and Philosophical Necessity, in a Correspondence between Dr. Price and Dr. Priestley* [32].

Priestley applied this theory in his scientific experimentation. It also became the basis for his strong renunciation of Scottish Common Sense Philosophy, because Priestley claimed that Thomas Reid's identification of inherent principles of the mind was unnecessary, as associationism offered a simpler, sounder explanation. Priestley claimed that Reid's 'vain multiplication of explanatory entities' contravened Newton's first Rule of Reasoning: that we are to admit no more causes of natural things than such as are sufficient to explain their appearances. His views are outlined in *An examination of Dr. Reid's inquiry into the human mind on the principles of common sense* (1774) [33]. While Scottish Common Sense Philosophy had an impact on the Harvard Unitarians, it was far less influential in English Unitarianism [34].

Priestley's central position in the development of Unitarian thought meant that his theological understandings stemming from associationism had a major impact on rational dissent. He believed that human behaviour, issuing always from predetermined motives, was perfectible, and could be brought into line with divine intent. This process of personal sanctification, if interrupted by moral abrogation, had to be taken up again after the inevitable consequences of personal failing were confronted. Priestley rejected any doctrine of substitutionary atonement, at one stage accepting Arian views, but later modifying them to a completely Socinian Christology [35].

He became a confirmed materialist, rejecting the dualism of Descartes, allowing only for a final supernatural intervention in the last days, when deceased believers would be completely and miraculously reconstituted in order to spend eternity with God. He could not explain in scientific terms how this was possible. By stressing the indivisible nature of the material and the spiritual, associationism proposed a strong relationship between human behaviour and spiritual consequences, and between divine imperatives and personal outcomes. As a universalist, he believed that a benevolent God would ensure the eternal security of all. An extract from Priestley's memoirs indicates the development of these combined viewpoints:

... I published the third and last part of my *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*; and having in the Preface attacked the principles of Dr. Reid, Dr. Beattie and Dr. Oswald, with respect to their doctrine of "common sense", which they made to supersede all rational inquiry into the subject of religion, I was led to consider

their system in a separate work, which though written in a manner that I do not entirely approve, has, I hope, upon the whole, been of service to the cause of free inquiry and truth.

In the preface I had expressed my belief of the doctrine of Philosophical Necessity, but without any design to pursue the subject, and also my great admiration of Dr. Hartley's theory of the human mind, as indeed I had taken many opportunities of doing before. This led me to publish that part of his *Observations on Man*, which related to the doctrine of association of ideas, detached from the doctrine of vibrations, prefixing *Three Dissertations*, explanatory of his general system. In one of these I expressed some doubt of the immateriality of the sentient principle in man; and the outcry that was made on what I casually expressed on that subject can hardly be imagined. In all the newspapers, and most of the periodical publications, I was represented as an unbeliever in revelation, and no better than an Atheist.

[36]

Priestley's contribution to the development of scientific thought, theological understanding, and liberal education [37] should not be underestimated. His balanced and unsceptical integration of faith and knowledge often made him a provocative figure, acceptable to neither the religiously orthodox, nor those on the growth edge of humanist thinking. But his capacity to incorporate facets of these recent developments into his faith made him an appealing leader in the intellectually aware and liberal-minded Unitarian milieu to which he belonged.

Selected extracts from material written by English Unitarians in the first half of the nineteenth century indicate that Priestley's notion of determinism persisted for some time. Although the general acceptance of associationism and its derivative philosophical conclusions declined under the influence of Romanticism, there are some startling examples, within Unitarian circles, of the acceptance of the strong relationship between behaviour and consequences. W.R. Greg, a member of the Gaskell's Cross Street Chapel congregation and prominent social campaigner, wrote in 1851 that:

The doctrine of the eternity of future punishments, false as it must be in its ordinary signification, contains a glimpse of one of the most awful and indisputable truths ever presented to human understanding - viz., the eternal and ineffaceable consequences of our every action, the fact that every word and deed produces

effects which must, by the very nature of things,
reverberate through all time, so that the whole futurity
would be different had that word never been spoken, or
that deed enacted. [38]

Through the centuries an ebb and flow of Unitarian allegiances and the changing political scene in England at times marginalised the Unitarian movement, and at other times brought it squarely into the centre of social acceptability. The Commonwealth period, significant involvement with Whig politics in the eighteenth century, and middle-class respectability and social involvement in the nineteenth century, were high points for Unitarianism in England. The Restoration and later Unitarian support for the French Revolution brought hardship and persecution. Joseph Priestley's support for the French Revolution forced him to leave England for America at this time [39].

By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, as latitudinarian elements within the established church adopted a position somewhat akin to Unitarianism, the situation improved. Theophilus Lindsey, an Anglican priest, founded Essex Street Chapel in London in 1774. A rational model of Anglican worship, using a reformed liturgy, was practised there. The whole venture was supported enthusiastically by some prominent Cambridge reformers [40]. By the 1840s, during Elizabeth Gaskell's early adulthood, there was a reorientation of Unitarianism back into the political centre ground. Unlike many other nonconformists, Unitarians refused to be caught up in the push for disestablishment. They were also assisted by parliamentary reforms such as the Dissenters' Chapels Act of 1844, an Act which guaranteed them continued ownership of the chapels they had used for decades, many of which had Presbyterian origins, and by the Dissenters' Marriage Act of 1836 [41].

Unitarian involvement in social reform and industrial progress added to the growing respectability of the Unitarian position in the nineteenth century. In 1825 the British and Foreign Unitarian Association was formed and many other societies of a similar philanthropic nature came into existence at about that time [42]. Numerous industrialists and mill-owners in the north of England were Unitarian, along with an increasing number of members of Parliament and other civic leaders. Robert Aspland, a leading Unitarian, began *The Monthly Repository* in 1805, and *The Prospective Review*, similarly a Unitarian journal, was begun by James Martineau and colleagues

in 1845. John Edward Taylor, a Unitarian, founded *The Manchester Guardian*. Unitarians were becoming a significant voice in all areas of society, and many became prominent citizens [43].

In Elizabeth Gaskell's early years conflicting views began to emerge within English Unitarianism. While Priestley's influence was dominant in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, it was challenged by the introduced views of the American Unitarian, William Ellery Channing, and elements of Transcendentalism, a religious movement based on the work of Emmanuel Kant which became popular with Unitarians in the New England region in the 1840s. Ralph Waldo Emerson was the leading figure in America. James Martineau was the strongest exponent of such teaching in England. Less rational, more accommodating of the inner life and the personal, emotional responses of the believer, it essentially reflected the influences of German Romanticism. A significant body of documentation in the 1830s records Martineau's strong resistance to Priestleyan teaching and there is a lively response from the Priestleyan camp [44].

The Influence of Unitarianism on Elizabeth Gaskell's Oeuvre

It is with an understanding of the complexities of mid- nineteenth century Unitarianism that one must measure its impact on Mrs. Gaskell's work. It is important to distinguish the different strains within Unitarianism which most affected her views. There is some evidence to suggest that Mrs. Gaskell was directly influenced by the new changes James Martineau and his colleagues brought about, but more reason to suggest an indebtedness to Priestleyan necessarianism, a legacy from Locke and eighteenth century rationalism. She tacitly accepts the constraints of determinism in much of her work, and the denial to the individual of triumph over circumstances is apparent in the resolutions of several novels and short stories. Thus the belief that one is never exempted from the consequences of actions which transgress an immutable moral order is a major thematic determinant in her work. It would seem to have its origins in the teaching to which she was exposed through Unitarian preachers such as William Turner, with whose family she spent two winters before she was married.

Dr. Boggs, in his doctoral thesis, distinguishes several significant ways in which Mrs. Gaskell was influenced by Unitarianism [45]. As with other such

postulations (e.g. Dr. M. L. B. Howell [46]) the emphasis in this thesis is on the positive attributes of a faith which stressed tolerance, the basic goodness of Man, and the deprecation of a dogmatic creed. Such insights are relevant, but stand outside the basic and more critical theological dilemmas which seem to be reflected in her work because of Unitarianism and attendant Victorian attitudes. Such issues will become a major focus throughout this thesis. Certainly the issue of necessarianism is significant, but equally as important is the struggle her work expresses to achieve a satisfactory notion of atonement for her characters; attitudes to divine benevolence and humanism; the question of truth and mendacity (a critical notion in Unitarianism [47]); and attitudes to conduct.

Little attention has been given to the theologically problematic nature of her work in terms of such issues. On examining the question of atonement in her work a tension is revealed in attempts to provide a satisfactory atonement for major characters, particularly in such novels as *Ruth* and *Mary Barton*. Although grace is not a commonly delineated concept in mid-nineteenth century Unitarianism, it is suggested in a weakened form in some of her work. The Unitarian preoccupation with truth is a critical issue thematically and in terms of textuality. She, like other intelligent and socially poised Unitarians of her time, struggled to balance the desire stridently to articulate a need for social change, with a clear recognition of the benefits of social respectability. This was reflected in the Unitarian movement by a desire to establish a tangible and permanent cultural identity, unlike the precarious and ephemeral place of English Unitarian institutions in previous generations. All such issues would seem to reflect difficulties within Unitarian doctrine with which Mrs. Gaskell engages in her work.

This problematic nature of her work reveals much more cogently the influence of Unitarianism than superficial treatments which stress only the positive attributes of Unitarianism (of which there are, nevertheless, undeniably many). English Unitarians espoused tolerance, liberal mindedness and the pursuit of truth. They exhibited a sustained willingness to be involved in efforts to bring about much needed social reforms.

Other Influences

A complex variety of influences originating outside of Unitarianism also contributed to the unique nature of Mrs. Gaskell's literary output. They are relevant to this dissertation as they contribute to the problematic nature of her work. At times, however, it is difficult to distinguish between those influences which came through the Unitarian movement and those which came totally from outside it. For Unitarianism, often at the forefront of social and intellectual change, rapidly embraced what it perceived to be radical trends within society. Mrs. Gaskell's interest in the social problems, for example, of an industrial society, and her responses to nascent feminism, seem to have come as much from developments outside Unitarianism as from within it.

The contribution of Unitarianism to social progress in England is well documented [48]. But it must be remembered that the increase in philanthropic endeavour characteristic of Unitarianism, is also present in individual and organisational efforts across the religious and secular spectrum. Mrs. Gaskell's active involvement, alongside her husband, in bringing relief to the poor of Manchester, is indicative of a general awareness of social responsibility which came from many quarters, some other than Christian. Her depiction of the needs of the impoverished mill-workers in *Mary Barton* is, in large measure, a reaction to the Unitarian mill-owners' lack of compassion. It is a challenge to Christian England [49], even though the novel's suggested resolution finally provides a political framework acceptable to Christian society [50]. What makes her work so interesting at this level is her capacity, while safely ensconced within a religious community, to challenge with candour some of the mores of that community.

Her indirect support for the emergent consciousness of the role of women in the mid-nineteenth century is a good example. While acknowledging that the Unitarian emphasis on personal liberty encouraged less repressive attitudes to women, the momentum for this movement came from many sources. Mrs. Gaskell worked with and admired a wide and various circle of independent and creative women such as Florence Nightingale, Charlotte Brontë and Madame Mohl [51]. She observed, along with so many others, the prevalent sexual hypocrisy of her times, and made positive attempts to alleviate female suffering (e.g. the Pasley case [52]). Her novel *Ruth* documents the plight of a young 'fallen' woman in such a way as to evoke

sympathy and to highlight the inadequacy of much institutionalised Christianity to deal compassionately with such a person in crisis. The strong reaction that the novel created demonstrates that the objective criteria by which appropriate Christian behaviour was assessed was not always to be found within the Christian establishment [53]. Recent studies have also shown that Mrs. Gaskell struggled to give voice to female possibilities within a male-dominated language world largely affirmed by the Christian church [54].

Mrs. Gaskell's work demonstrates a significant problem brought about by the impact of Romanticism. This influence (largely extrinsic to Unitarianism, except later through James Martineau) conflicted with some of the basic assumptions in Priestleyan necessarianism. The conflict in many of her works created by a passionate willingness to step outside the parameters of an immutable moral framework, indicates an awareness of the impulses of the individual spirit so characteristic of Romantic influences and the burgeoning of a religion of humanity. Within Romanticism itself, however, these were conflicting elements, and at times there is uncertainty as to the author's preference for a more Byronic or Wordsworthian response to the situations the characters confront. The late Wordsworthian passive accommodation of the limitations of the human condition, more akin to Priestleyan necessity, appears to prevail. This, for example, occurs in the novel *Sylvia's Lovers* [55] and stories such as 'Half a Lifetime Ago' [56]. Even though it is equally obvious that Mrs. Gaskell is finally unable to accommodate the consequences of such moral abrogation, and that by the end of each text the characters are firmly brought back within the closures and constraints of an overarching moral determinism, flexing of individual expectations is nevertheless apparent. Her friendship with and appreciation of the works of Charlotte Brontë indicates that she was responsive to influences outside her Unitarian circle. The Gothic elements in a number of her short stories confirm her indebtedness to other influences (she loved ghost stories and the macabre) and display a psychological complexity not always evident elsewhere.

Although her acceptance of the basic tenets of Unitarianism is obvious, there are occasional suggestions that Mrs. Gaskell developed an appreciation for other doctrinal positions as well. She spoke very highly of George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858) and *Adam Bede* (1859) [57], curious choices in view of their sensitive treatment if not commendation of the behaviour of

evangelical characters. She would, however, have responded positively to the general principles of George Eliot's 'religion of humanity', thus inadvertently acknowledging the influence of Comtean Positivism. Other sources indicate an appreciation of the Quaker movement [58] and a general respect for most well-meaning clergy, except Methodists, whose 'enthusiasm' she denounced. This again is unusual in view of her liking for *Adam Bede*, where the main female protagonist is a Methodist lay preacher. Although there is no suggestion that she ever modified her views to accommodate other doctrinal positions, some works by writers of other religious persuasions became thematic precursors for her novels and short stories. A good example in this regard is the novel *Helen Fleetwood*, an industrial novel by the ardently evangelical author, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna [59].

Finally, the place of emergent scientific theories should be considered. The impact of Darwinian theory on her work is significant. Its optimism regarding the future of mankind and the positive possibilities of change finds a sobering counterpoint in the inherent savagery this theory can also depict. The influence of these conflicting strands is most apparent in texts such as *Cousin Phillis*, *Wives and Daughters* and *Sylvia's Lovers*. The ending of the beautiful novella, *Cousin Phillis*, and aspects of characterisation in *Wives and Daughters* (as well as *Mary Barton* and *North and South*), affirms a positive, developmental understanding, while the depiction of nature in *Sylvia's Lovers* suggests a hostile natural world more akin to Darwin's original insights [60].

Binary Opposition as Theoretical Model

So it can be seen that Elizabeth Gaskell was exposed to a wide variety of religious, cultural and intellectual influences throughout her lifetime. As discussed, many of these influences came as a result of her Unitarian background, while others were inevitably brought to bear through extensive reading and fraternisation with some of the leading intellectuals of her generation. The mélange of ideas to which she was exposed, many of which she adopted, was instrumental in creating for the modern reader of her works a strong sense of recurrent antinomies, conflicting ideas which create a conviction that the work is problematic. Some of the tenets of Unitarianism, as discussed, by their very nature, foster this sense of conflict (e.g.

determinism versus humanism). In other contexts it is obvious that her ideas reflect a conflict between her traditional Unitarian beliefs and the Zeitgeist of mid-Victorian England. A good example of the latter is the noticeable tension between residual rationalism and widespread Romanticism evident in *Sylvia's Lovers*.

A close study of the full breadth of Elizabeth Gaskell's work indicates that such antinomies are never fully resolved and remain as significant points of tension throughout her fiction. While there is a shift of emphasis in some instances (Chapters Two and Three deal with the best example of this) it is apparent that much of the cogency and effectiveness of her work is derived from these very antinomies themselves. But, rather than accepting the inherent tensions in her work as merely unfortunate, even weakening contradictions, this phenomenon, because it adds to, instead of detracting from, the appeal and value of the work, must be explained in other terms.

As a result, the enigmatic nature of Mrs. Gaskell's fiction can best be resolved through the notion of binary opposites (the terms 'contraries' and 'antinomies' being used in a synonymous sense) [61]. A close examination of her work reveals this to be particularly true in theological emphases. While one is always conscious, to a greater or lesser extent, of her undergirding commitment to moral accountability and determinism, this is so often offset by the active presence of a benevolent divine hand (see Chapters Two and Three of this dissertation). The two concepts, often theologically divergent, are readily identifiable in much of her work, often in the same text. What appears to be happening is that each position is decentring the other in such a way that one is forced to search for a theology which will maintain this dichotomy (determinism and divine benevolence) in an acceptable tension. This is largely achieved through mid-Victorian Unitarianism. As a result of its strong emphasis on universalism, the examples of moral abrogation and resulting atonement through suffering become, in her texts, a mechanism for divine restitution. Determinism and divine benevolence thus become interdependent. Ruth is saved by a form of prevenient grace (through Benson and his sister) that her atonement may be complete on this earth [62]. The divine hand operates to restore the moral order, not to circumvent it.

Another pair of binary opposites exists in Mrs. Gaskell's frequent expression of both social conservatism and radicalism. Although not primarily theological concepts, they reflect a theological dilemma implicit in Unitarianism and readily identifiable in its history. Perhaps the best

paradigm is in the development of Unitarian architecture, where the marked contrast between eighteenth century architectural discretion and nineteenth century ostentation is so stark. This change in architectural preference might be seen as a desire to recapture some aesthetic pleasure in an otherwise arid industrial environment, but that in itself reflects a conflict of purpose (see Chapter Four of this dissertation).

Discreet but politically subversive in the eighteenth century [63] (many Unitarians, for example, supported the French Revolution) by the mid-nineteenth century Unitarianism was unashamedly bourgeois. Many of the most prominent and exploitative mill-owners in Mrs. Gaskell's Manchester were Unitarian. In her early novels, particularly *Mary Barton* [64] and *North and South*, [65] there is tension created by courageously wishing to depict the need for radical social and industrial reform and yet to maintain a close identification with the establishment. This tension is also inherent in Unitarianism. Like some other forms of dissent (e.g. Methodism) social acceptability and domestic comfort lessened the need for and appeal of radicalism. Mrs. Gaskell's conscience was kept sufficiently acute for her to be disturbed by this dilemma as she visited the slums of Manchester with her husband and then sought an appropriate response in fiction. Unlike Engels [66], what she finally proposes is a conservative response which is in opposition to the radicalism of her willingness as a woman writer to expose the plight of the Manchester mill-workers and incur the wrath of the mill-owners. The explicit nature of the descriptions in the text subverts the encoded message of conservatism. This is also apparent in Elizabeth Gaskell's depiction of disease, an aspect of Victorian society which clearly demonstrates her ambivalence as to social sympathies.

Throughout the breadth of her work Elizabeth Gaskell maintains a recurrent concern with the issue of truth and the destructive potential inherent in mendacity. Revelations concerning deceit and concealment frequently occur at critical points in her texts and sometimes foreshadow resolution of conflict. But the Unitarian preoccupation with truth is accompanied by an equally strong desire on Elizabeth Gaskell's part to adhere to Victorian notions of discretion, confidentiality and social propriety. The resulting tension creates a further example in her work of productive antinomies.

It is possible to explore a similar sense of binary opposition in her Gothic short stories, opposed, say, to *Cranford* [67]. Likewise, *The Life of Charlotte*

Brontë, [68] seems to encompass both a willingness to explore the bizarre and unknown face of Haworth life and yet to maintain Charlotte's perfect respectability as well as her own. The two elements are also very evident in *Sylvia's Lovers*, where any expectations on the part of the reader that the novel is similar to *Wuthering Heights* are overturned by the strong compliance with the levelling effect of moral determinism.

Overview of Thesis

Throughout the body of this dissertation several primary examples of the existence of binary oppositions within the work of Elizabeth Gaskell will be developed.

In Chapters Two and Three, key elements in her work, the contrasting yet inseparable notions of moral determinism and divine benevolence, will be explored in detail. It will be demonstrated that as her writing career progressed, Mrs. Gaskell became less accommodating of the strictures of a notion of moral determinism adopted from the Priestleyan tradition within English Unitarianism. Yet, in all her work, this tension remains apparent to some extent.

In Chapter Four, the contrasting commitment she made to maintaining the radical edge of her nonconformity is shown to be in conflict with a growing sense of the benefits of social respectability. This is set against the background of similar changes of attitude within Unitarianism, including significant changes in Unitarian ecclesiastical architecture in mid-Victorian England; changing attitudes to poverty and disease; and an ambivalence concerning the differences between urban and rural life.

Chapter Five demonstrates Elizabeth Gaskell's concern with the polarities of truthfulness and mendacity. The need for personal honesty and lack of concealment was a strong feature of mid-Victorian Unitarian teaching. It is reflected in the author's repudiation of physiognomy (because of the transparently false basis of any connection between physical appearance and moral character) and in a preoccupation throughout her work with conflicts arising from deception. This chapter also mentions other antinomies inherent in Elizabeth Gaskell's work, such as her ambivalent attitude to Romanticism, and her utilisation of the Gothic mode. The latter reflect overlapping tensions in her total acceptance of Unitarian principles.

Chapter Six explores the influence of Darwinian theory on Elizabeth Gaskell's work. While some saw the notion of evolution as a firm acknowledgement of the potential for progress in human endeavour, for others it meant the destruction of comforting theocratic assumptions. Elizabeth Gaskell's work reflects the optimism prevalent in contemporary society regarding scientific and industrial advances, yet displays a nostalgia for the untroubled rural idyll of her childhood, with its undisturbed sense of harmony and integration.

Chapter Seven uses the example of window scenes in Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction to suggest that embedded in all levels throughout her work the reader can discern margins and unresolved contraries, binary oppositions which stem from the particular belief system she adopted and the social and intellectual context in which she lived and worked.

The final chapter, Chapter Eight, draws together conclusions concerning the maintenance of binary oppositions in the life and work of Elizabeth Gaskell that are discussed in detail throughout this dissertation. It proposes a fresh and positive assessment of her place in Victorian life and literature.

The antinomies discussed in the following chapters demonstrate how the notion of binary opposition shaped Elizabeth Gaskell's depiction of human endeavour in her fiction. Just as the concerns of her own life exhibit an interesting eclecticism, Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction ventures into many such areas as well. The treatment of determinism and free will (as discussed in Chapters Two and Three) is essentially a theological concern, while the opposition of social conservatism and radicalism (as discussed in Chapter Four) demonstrates how doctrinal precepts can impinge on the socio-political domain. Chapter Five, in its detailed consideration of truth and mendacity in her fiction, has essentially a moral orientation, whereas Chapter Six discusses the problematic conjunction of theological and scientific thought. Chapter Seven postulates some interesting linguistic and philosophical distinctions. The dissertation concludes, in Chapter Eight, with an overview of the significance of all the above antinomies to her life and work.

The above examples have been chosen because they clearly illustrate the hypothesis that the critical balances inherent in Mrs. Gaskell's work originate within the very tenets of the English Unitarianism to which the author was exposed, and sometimes by a conflict between the doctrinal positions

adopted by Unitarianism and prevailing social attitudes. But they also illustrate that the effectiveness of her work is enhanced, not weakened, by the existence of such mutually dependent oppositions.

NOTES

- 1 Full details of the school Elizabeth Gaskell attended in Warwickshire can be obtained in Hicks, Phyllis, *A Quest of Ladies: The Story of a Warwickshire School*, Frank Jukes, Birmingham, 1949. The relevance of her schooling to her later development is discussed in Chitham, Edward, 'Elizabeth Gaskell's Schooldays', *The Gaskell Society Journal*, Volume 5, 1991, pp. 1-15. For Mrs. Gaskell's relationship with the Wedgwood family see Chapple, J.A.V., 'An Author's life: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Wedgwood Family', *Transactions of the Brontë Society*, June, 1979, pp. 287-292.
- 2 See Chapple, J.A.V., 'Unofficial Lives: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Turner Family', in Parish, Charles, *The History of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle upon Tyne, Volume 2, 1896-1989*, The Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1990, pp. 106-120. The sermons of Rev. William Turner preached at Hanover Square, Newcastle, approximately corresponding with the period of Elizabeth Gaskell's residence with his family, reflect his commitment to the Priestleyan emphasis in Unitarianism (copies in the Library of The Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle upon Tyne). This is confirmed in the nature of the books in his library, recorded in the catalogue for their sale in 1842 (copy in the Library of The Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle upon Tyne). As yet there is no authoritative biography of this praiseworthy Unitarian minister.
- 3 The best analysis of the life and ministry of this underrated Victorian is in Brill, Barbara, *William Gaskell, 1805-1884, A Portrait*, Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society Hardback, Manchester, 1984.

- 4 The most recent and authoritative biographies of Elizabeth Gaskell are Uglow, Jenny, *Elizabeth Gaskell (A Habit of Stories)*, Faber and Faber, 1993, and Gérin, Winifred, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, Oxford, at the Clarendon Press, 1976. Jenny Uglow, in particular, gives a detailed account of Elizabeth Gaskell's Unitarian background. For the purposes of this dissertation the other most important biography of the author is Hopkins, A.B., *Elizabeth Gaskell (Her Life and Work)*, John Lehmann, 1952. Hopkins work, however, predates the significant publication of the author's letters in 1966 (see Chapple, J.A.V., and Pollard, Arthur, *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, Manchester University Press, 1966).
- 5 Gérin, Winifred, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, Oxford University Press, 1976, p. 259.
- 6 *ibid.*, p. 259.
- 7 *ibid.*, pp 74-75, and 260.
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 263.
- 9 Uglow, Jenny, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, Faber and Faber, London, 1993, pp. 109, 137, 159, 267, 358.
- 10 Gérin, Winifred, *op. cit.*, p. 261.
- 11 *ibid.*, pp. 264-266 and Uglow, Jenny, *op. cit.*, pp. 246-247.
- 12 The revival of interest in the fiction of Elizabeth Gaskell began, several decades ago, with the work of Raymond Williams. Prior to this she was principally recognised as the author of *Cranford*.
- 13 See Brill, Barbara, *William Gaskell (1805-1884), A Portrait*, Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society Hardback, 1984.
- 14 Uglow, Jenny, *op. cit.*, p. 87.
- 15 For example, the death of their infant son, Willie. See Gérin, *op. cit.*, pp. 73-74.
- 16 The cotton mills of Manchester provided the background for two of the novels, and the beginning of *Ruth* stems from a similarly industrialised context.
- 17 Copies of numerous sermons by William Gaskell are extant, although frequently in poor condition. The best collection is at Dr. Williams

Library, London, Manchester Central Library and Manchester College, Oxford.

- 18 The American historian, R.K. Webb, has written extensively on English Unitarianism. See, especially, Webb, R.K., 'The Gaskells as Unitarians', in Shattock, Joanne (ed.) *Dickens and Other Victorians*, Macmillan, 1988.
- 19 For details on William Gaskell's involvement in the Unitarian Herald, see Uglow, Jenny, op. cit., p. 497.
- 20 See Lesser, Margaret, Clarke, *A Portrait in Letters of Mary Clarke Mohl (1793-1883)*, Oxford University Press, 1984.
- 21 An analysis of the development of Unitarian theology is well conveyed in Martineau, James, 'The Three Stages of Unitarian Theology', Anniversary of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, May 19th., 1869, Unity Church, Islington, in his *Essays, Reviews, and Addresses, Volume 4*, London, 1891, pp. 565-581. For a fuller analysis of Unitarian theology at this critical point of its development read the work of R. K. Webb. See Webb, R. K., 'The Gaskells as Unitarians', in *Dickens and Other Victorians*, edited by Joanne Shattock, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1988, pp. 144-171; Webb, R. K., 'John Hamilton Thom - Intellect and Conscience in Liverpool', in *The View from the Pulpit (Victorian Ministers and Society)*, edited by P. T. Phillips, Macmillan of Canada, 1978, pp. 210-243; and Webb, R. K., 'The Unitarian Background', in *Truth, Liberty, Religion: Essays Celebrating Two Hundred Years of Manchester College*, Manchester College, Oxford, 1986, pp. 1-30. See also the articles of John Seed listed in the bibliography of this dissertation.
- 22 See Godfrey, P., Hague, G., and McLachlan, J., *The Unitarian Heritage*, privately published 1986, pp. 9-10, and Packer, Brian A., *The Unitarian Heritage of Kent*, privately published 1991, pp. 6-16.
- 23 See Waller, Ralph, 'James Martineau: his engagement as a theologian, his Christology, and his doctrine of the Church, with some unpublished papers', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, King's College, University of London, 1986.

'The only thing I am clear and sure about, is this, that Jesus Christ is not equal to his Father, that however divine a being, he was not God; and that worship as God, addressed to Him, is therefore wrong in me'.

Quoted in Dullemen, J. J., *Mrs. Gaskell: Novelist and Biographer*, H. J. Paris, Amsterdam, 1924, p. 88.

See Richardson, Alan and Bowden, John, *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, S.C.M. Press, 1983.

For a detailed discussion of Arianism, see Thomas, D. O. *The Honest Mind: The Thought and Work of Richard Price*, Oxford University Press, 1977, pp.-34–38.

- 24 Godfrey, P., Hague, G., and McLachlan, J., op. cit., pp. 12-13, 16-17, and Webb, R.K., 'The Unitarian Background', in Smith, Barbara, (ed.), *Truth, Liberty, Religion: essays celebrating two hundred years of Manchester College*, Oxford, Manchester College, 1986, pp. 3-4.
- 25 Godfrey, P., Hague, G., and McLachlan, J., op. cit., p. 49, Burney, Lester, *Cross Street Chapel: (Manchester and its College)*, 1983, p. 2, and Bolam, C.C., Goring, J., Short, H.L., Thomas, R., *The English Presbyterians, from Elizabethan Puritanism to Modern Unitarianism*, London and Boston, 1968, p. 224.
- 26 See a detailed account in Burney, op. cit.
- 27 Webb, R.K., op. cit., p. 9.
- 28 See Schofield, Robert E., 'Joseph Priestley: Theology, Physics, and Metaphysic', *Enlightenment and Dissent*, Volume 2, 1983, pp. 69-81. See also Priestley, Joseph, *Autobiography of Joseph Priestley*, comprising 'Memoirs of Dr. Joseph Priestley, with a journal of his travels', 'Notes to the Memoirs', and 'An Account of Further Discoveries (1775) by Joseph Priestley', introduction by Jack Lindsay, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970.

For a thorough discussion of Priestley's view of determinism, see Thomas, D.O., op. cit., pp. 160-169.

- 29 Schofield, op. cit., p. 72.
- 30 Priestley, Joseph, *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated*, London, 1777.
- 31 Thomas, D.O., op. cit., p. 161.

- 32 Price, Richard, *A Free Discussion of the Doctrine of Materialism and Philosophical Necessity, in a Correspondence Between Dr. Price and Dr. Priestley*, London, 1778.
- 33 Schofield, op. cit., p. 75.
- 34 Howe, Daniel Walker, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1970.
- 35 Priestley's indebtedness to Hartley's concept of associationism is discussed in Priestley's memoirs. While a lecturer at Warrington Academy (1761-1767) Priestley was an Arian. He became a Socinian when a minister at Mill Hill Chapel, Leeds, (1767-1773). See Priestley, Joseph, *Autobiography of Joseph Priestley*, pp. 83, 91 and 93.
- 36 Priestley, Joseph, op. cit., p. 113.
- 37 See Watts, Ruth, 'Joseph Priestley and Education', *Enlightenment and Dissent*, Volume 2, 1983, pp. 83-100.
- 38 Greg, William Rathbone, *The Creed of Christendom*, 1851, p.283, quoted in Wigmore-Beddoes, Dennis G., *Yesterday's Radicals: A Study of the Affinity Between Unitarianism and Broad Church Anglicanism in the Nineteenth Century*, James Clarke and Co.,Ltd., Cambridge, 1971.
- 39 See Philp, Mark, 'Rational Religion and Political Radicalism in the 1790s', *Enlightenment and Dissent*, Volume 4, 1985, pp. 35-46.

For details of the 'Honest Whigs', a politically active group of predominantly dissenting intellectuals to which Priestley belonged, see Thomas, D. O., op. cit., pp. 142-145. The group included Benjamin Franklin, Theophilus Lindsey, Richard Price and James Boswell, amongst others.

- 40 Bolam, C.C., Goring, J., Short, H.L., Thomas, R., op. cit., pp. 228-229.
- 41 Bolam, C.C., Goring, J., Short, H.L., Thomas, R., op. cit., pp. 244, and Godfrey, P., Hague, G., and McLachlan, J., op. cit., p. 71.
- 42 Godfrey, P., Hague, G., and McLachlan, J., op. cit., p. 70.
- 43 Bolam, C.C., Goring, J., Short, H.L., Thomas, R., op. cit., pp. 237-242.
- 44 Bolam, C.C., Goring, J., Short, H.L., Thomas, R., op. cit., pp. 255-257.

- 45 Boggs, Arthur W., 'Reflections of Unitarianism in Mrs. Gaskell's Novels', unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, 1950. For a recent, perceptive and more balanced article concerning the influence of Unitarianism on the work of Elizabeth Gaskell, see Wheeler, Michael, 'Elizabeth Gaskell and Unitarianism', *The Gaskell Society Journal*, Vol. 6, 1992, pp. 25-41. This article deals briefly with some aspects of Unitarian thought discussed in this dissertation and makes effective use of several Gaskell letters. An extended treatment of Elizabeth Gaskell's use of biblical allusion can be found in Professor Wheeler's doctoral dissertation entitled 'Elizabeth Gaskell's use of literary sources in *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*' (London University College, 1975).
- 46 Howell, Mary Lou Brooks, 'The Heart of Elizabeth Gaskell: The Unitarian Spirit', unpublished doctoral dissertation, Texas Women's University, 1985.
- 47 See 'Mendacity in Mrs. Gaskell', *Encounter*, 40, June, 1973, pp. 51-55.
- 48 A comprehensive survey is given in Holt, R. V., *The Unitarian Contribution to Social Progress in England*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1938.
- 49 See Fryckstedt, Monica Correa, 'Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*: A Challenge to Christian England', *Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis*, *Studia Anglistica Upsaliensia*, 43, Uppsala, 1982.
- 50 The tendency to provide for Christian reconciliation has long been commented upon. See Cazamian, Louis, *The Social Novel in England, 1830-1850*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and Boston, 1973 (first published 1903).
- 51 For an extensive treatment of Mrs. Gaskell's friendships see Haldane, Elizabeth, *Mrs. Gaskell and Her Friends*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1930. Also Gérin, Winifred, *Elizabeth Gaskell*. See also Lesser, Margaret, *Clarkey: A Portrait in Letters of Mary Clarke Mohl (1793-1883)*, Oxford University Press, 1984.
- 52 For letters regarding the Pasley case see *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, pp. 98-100. A good discussion of this case is given in Alan Shelston's introduction to *Ruth*, *The World's Classics*, 1989, pp. vii-xx.
- 53 See Mirza, Zobaida, 'The theme of Mrs. Gaskell's *Ruth* and the reception of the novel', unpublished dissertation, Birbeck College, London, 1986.

- 54 This approach is adopted in Stoneman, Patsy, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, Harvester, Brighton, 1987. This is the best feminist critique of her work, alongside that of Hilary M. Schor in *Scheherezade in the Marketplace (Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel)*, Oxford University Press, 1992. See also Brodetsky, Tessa, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, (Berg Women's Series), Berg, Leamington Spa, 1986.
- 55 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Sylvia's Lovers*, The World's Classics, 1989 (1982), first published 1863. For a detailed analysis of the impact of German Higher Criticism and Romanticism on the work of Elizabeth Gaskell see Unsworth, Anna, 'Elizabeth Gaskell and German Romanticism', *The Gaskell Society Journal*, Volume 8, 1994, pp. 1-14.
- 56 Gaskell, Elizabeth, 'Half a Lifetime Ago', in *Cousin Phillis and Other Tales*, The World's Classics, 1987 (1981), pp. 59-102.
- 57 On the 25th. & 30th. of October, 1859, she wrote 'I think I have a feeling that it is not worth while trying to write, while there are such books as *Adam Bede* and *Scenes from Clerical Life* - I set 'Janet's Repentance' above all, still.' See *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, No. 444.
- 58 In *Sylvia's Lovers*, for example, the behaviour of some Quaker characters is obviously sanctioned by the author.
- 59 Tonna, Charlotte Elizabeth, *Helen Fleetwood*, London, 1841. See Chapter Four, footnote 23, for a discussion of this work.
- 60 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Cousin Phillis and Other Tales*, Penguin Classics, 1986 (1976), the novella first published in 1865.
- 61 The notion of binary opposition, a useful concept developed by Structuralists, has not been without its opponents. The French feminist theorist, Hélène Cixous, refers to 'death-dealing binary thought'. Her major concern, however, is with gender related issues. She argues against the post-enlightenment use of binary opposition from a particular vantage point, but one which does not challenge the concept as used in this dissertation, where the artistically fruitful interdependence of opposites exists without any possibility of resolution. See Jefferson, Ann, and Robey, David, (eds.), *Modern Literary Theory (A Comparative Introduction)*, B.T.Batsford Ltd., London, 1982, pp. 210-212.

Throughout this dissertation the terms 'contraries', 'antinomies' and 'binary oppositions' are used in a similar sense. They are used to suggest the existence of two opposite, but mutually supportive concepts, the understanding of one being dependent on the existence of the other. Thus 'radicalism' has no meaning in a context where 'conservatism' does not exist. 'Free-will' is meaningless apart from 'determinism'. The term 'contradiction' is not used because it does not convey this sense. The above terms are here used, as Coleridge expressed it, to imply the 'homogeneous' nature of the opposites in question. They are 'unius generis'. See Appendix B of *Two Classes of Men (Platonism and English Romantic Thought)*, David Newsome, John Murray, 1974.

- 62 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Ruth*, The World's Classics, 1989, first published 1853. The Unitarian belief in an ongoing process of atonement is well conveyed in Thom, John Hamilton, *Unitarianism Defended*, 1839, Lecture 1, page 35, where he states: 'We believe that even in the future there is discipline for the soul; that even for the guiltiest there may be processes of redemption; and that the stained spirit may be cleansed as by fire. We believe that this view of a strict and graduated retribution exerts a more quickening, personal, realizing power than that of Eternal torments which no heart believes, which no man trembles to conceive.'
- 63 An effective summary of the English Unitarian support for the French Revolution is given in Jenny Uglow's recent biography of Elizabeth Gaskell. See Uglow, Jenny, *Elizabeth Gaskell (A Habit of Stories)*, Faber and Faber, London, 1993, p. 9.
- 64 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Mary Barton*, Penguin Classics, 1985, first published 1848.
- 65 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *North and South*, Penguin Classics, 1986, first published 1854-5.
- 66 Engels, Frederick, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Panther, 1969, first published in Great Britain in 1892.
- 67 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Cranford and Cousin Phillis*, Penguin Classics, 1986 (1976), the former first published in 1853.
- 68 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Penguin Classics, 1985, first published 1857.

CHAPTER TWO

"THE DOME OF IRON":

AN EXTREME VIEW OF FREE WILL AND MORAL DETERMINISM IN THE FICTION OF ELIZABETH GASKELL

Introduction

In Chapter One reference was made to the validity of examining the influence of Unitarian theology on the works of Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell. A representative selection of the works of Mrs. Gaskell reflects the mid-Victorian author's perpetual concern with a range of theological problems. Her strong indebtedness to the doctrinal precepts of Unitarianism, and to prevalent Victorian attitudes of wider currency, shapes a particular response to the issue of free will and moral determinism.

Works such as 'My Diary' (1835-1838), *Mary Barton* (1848), *Ruth* (1853), *North and South* (1854-5), 'Half a Lifetime Ago' (1855), *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), *My Lady Ludlow* (1858), *Lois the Witch* (1858), *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863), 'A Dark Night's Work' (1863), *Cousin Phillis* (1865) and *Wives and Daughters* (1864-5) reflect the diverse but developing response Mrs. Gaskell makes to such concerns [1]. While her works cover a range of social contexts, the most noticeable being the polarities of industrial squalour and rural idyll, an ongoing preoccupation is to establish an appropriate response, largely in fictional terms, to some of these major dilemmas of the human predicament.

Central to any fictional engagement in her work, and especially in regard to the issue of individual moral responsibility and suffering, are certain theocratic assumptions. Her work, in the main, infers the notion of a benevolent God [2], whose dealings with his creatures are principally determined by their adherence to well-defined moral dictates. Moral transgression has consequences, and if it is not always valid to suggest that

in her work suffering is directly inflicted by God, then it often arises as a result of the natural law of cause and effect.

In the above works Mrs. Gaskell ranges widely across the doctrinal emphases available in such assumptions. At times, particularly in her early work, she appears to accept a form of rigid determinism which overrides any notion of human responsibility or free will. The human species simply becomes the victim of a relentless, mechanistic divine will. Usually, however, this view is considerably softened to an acceptance of human suffering as the result of moral transgression. Occasionally this is taken further, to suggest the more comforting distinction between an immutable moral order and a benevolent divine being whose purpose is to use the resultant suffering as a means of spiritual reconciliation.

Mrs. Gaskell's theodicy, as reflected in the corpus of her work, appears through her writing career to be steered away from the rigid notion of determinism with which she began to a more ambivalent and liberal position.

The following analysis of Elizabeth Gaskell's treatment in her work of the issue of free will and moral determinism illustrates a development of thought in this area, which, in terms of her writing career, is broadly chronological. But more importantly it demonstrates the ongoing tension the issue presents to the author. The first section examines four texts which situate the author's theodicy very convincingly in the Priestleyan tradition of strong determinism [3]. The second and largest section examines numerous texts which suggest an inherent and recurrent ambiguity in much of her work when dealing with this issue. The third and last section cites some instances where Elizabeth Gaskell courageously articulates a repudiation of any moral accountability outside the domain of divine benevolence.

This change of emphasis in her work corresponds with a trend in Unitarianism to embrace the general, almost irresistible influences of Romanticism. Throughout her lifetime Priestley's influence did decline, and was supplanted by a greater emphasis on individual freedom and a more personal spirituality. An obvious indication of this was the author's increased preparedness to accept more liberal notions of human potential and progress. All are natural concomitants of Mrs. Gaskell's personal growth; as through travel, reading, and her ever-widening social milieu, the strictures of a Priestleyan theodicy were relaxed. The change in her narrative technique and literary preoccupations also reflect this development. But

throughout this chapter a clear sense is maintained of the inherent ambiguity of her work in regard to the issue of free will and determinism. Whatever her position on the spectrum between complete free will and rigid determinism, the binary nature of the two extremes is represented in her work.

Section 1

In the first section six texts are examined. 'My Diary' (1835-1838), 'Half a Lifetime Ago' (1855), *Lois the Witch* (1859), 'A Dark Night's Work' (1863), *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863), and *Wives and Daughters* (1864-5), all demonstrate within their individual complexities the potential in Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction to adopt an extreme form of determinism in which stringent, often inexplicable divine accountability is portrayed. Such accountability is frequently expressed in terms of a strict adherence to moral categories, but in some cases there is no obvious connection between behaviour and personal outcome. While this view is tempered to some extent in 'A Dark Night's Work' and *Sylvia's Lovers* by a conventional context for Christian reconciliation, they still remain texts which predominantly depict the strong sense of moral accountability that is in keeping with the Unitarian theology of her time.

'My Diary'

'My Diary', composed between the 10th. March, 1835 and the 28th. October, 1838, is a slim private journal that was later published in a very limited edition. It records Elizabeth Gaskell's feelings and concerns during the early years of the infancy of her daughters, Marianne and Margaret Emily ('Meta'). A strong sense of the young mother's preparedness to accept the notion of an overarching and inescapable divine will is prevalent throughout this short work. Written in a period of extreme frailty of life for children, it is noticeable how frequently Mrs. Gaskell articulates her fears concerning the possible loss of her daughters to some unidentified childhood disease. Constantly she seeks to adopt a spirit of submission, preparing herself for whatever may eventuate.

We yesterday heard of a connexion of William's who had just lost his only son - a fine lad of nine or ten - by a sudden attack of croup. His father and mother were wrapped in the boy, who had every promise of excellence. Oh! how I trembled when I heard of it, and felt how 'insecure these treasures in earthen vessels' are.

Oh, God! give me that spirit which can feel and say Not my will, but thine be done. Teach me to love this darling child with perfect submission to thy decrees. I dare hardly think of the uncertain future, but thou wilt uphold me in time of trial, and into thy hands I commit my treasure. Do with her, Oh Lord, as seemeth best unto thee, for thou art a God of Love and wilt not causelessly afflict. (November 5th., 1836) [4]

Eighteen months later, when Marianne has croup, she again writes:

Oh! may I bring myself to a thorough resignation about the afflictions which God may see fit to send me; and Oh, Lord, while I pray thee to preserve my darling children, may I not be too much wrapt in them. (August 4th., 1838) [5]

In all her comments she appears to accept that if either of her daughters were to die, then it would be divinely ordained. Rather than her prayers seeking to express a strong desire for and confidence in God's capacity to protect and sustain, they accentuate some form of divine involvement in and orchestration of the sad affairs of mankind. An important element in the recognition of this strongly theocratic world view, permeating as it does every aspect of human endeavour, even the domestic realm, is one's own moral accountability. At several points she accepts the possibility that her maternal affection may spill over into idolatry, thereby provoking divine correction, even retribution. This fear was common in Victorian society but appears to be excessive in this young mother's case. The likelihood exists that if one of her daughters falls ill and dies it will be because she has offended God by loving her too much:

Oh! may I not make her into an idol, but strive to prepare both her and myself for the change that may come any day'. (August 4th., 1835) [6]

Just a few months later she again writes:

Lord! unto thee do I commit this darling precious treasure; thou knowest how I love her; I pray that I may

not make her too much my idol, and oh! if thou shouldst call her away from 'the evil to come' may I try to yield her up to him who gave her to me without a murmur. (October 4th., 1835) [7]

The Unitarian emphasis on moral determinism is thus strongly in evidence in the very earliest writings of Elizabeth Gaskell. *Ruth* (1853), discussed at length in Chapter Two and Chapter Three, has elements which modify the more rigid sense of determinism of 'My Diary' and other works. It again picks up on the issue of maternal idolatry, but consciously moderates the harsher view. Although Ruth Hilton constantly struggles to reconcile her love for her illegitimate son, Leonard, with a sense of guilt about the nature of his conception, her maternal love, despite her concerns, is finally seen in positive terms:

Her whole heart was in her boy. She often feared that she loved him too much - more than God Himself - yet she could not bear to pray to have her love for her child lessened. But she would kneel down by his little bed at night - at the deep, still midnight - with the stars that kept watch over Rizpah shining down upon her, and tell God what I have now told you, that she feared she loved her child too much, yet could not, would not, love him less; and speak to Him of her one treasure as she could speak to no earthly friend. And so, unconsciously, her love for her child led her up to love to God, to the All-knowing, who read her heart.

It might be superstition - I dare say it was - but, somehow, she never lay down to rest without saying, as she looked her last on her boy, 'Thy will, not mine, be done;' and even while she trembled and shrank with infinite dread from sounding the depths of what that will might be, she felt as if her treasure were more secure to waken up rosy and bright in the morning, as one over whose slumbers God's holy angels had watched, for the very words which she had turned away in sick terror from realizing the night before. [8]

Later, when Leonard falls ill [9], Ruth fears that he will die. But he does recover. Her worst fear, that she will have to atone for her former behaviour by the death of her son, is allayed.

The crucial difference, of course, between 'My Diary' and *Ruth*, is that the former, by the very nature of the genre involved, has an inevitable air of uncertainty and incompleteness about it, whereas the latter, a novel, is

subject to much more authorial control. In *Ruth*, the insecurities of real life can be satisfactorily resolved within the parameters of a linear and discrete fictional representation. In 'My Diary', as the fears are being journalised in the immediacy of experience, there is no mechanism available (such as retrospectivity) to place or condition them. The raw emotional responses of 'My Diary' are useful for analysis in that they avoid, to a large extent, the overlay of early Victorian fictional conventions prevalent throughout her work. The strong emphasis on reconciliation and resolution, evident elsewhere, is absent, and the reader is left with something of the pleading, invocatory nature of the Psalter. In this sense 'My Diary' allows a clear, relatively unencumbered insight into Elizabeth Gaskell's theodicy. Despite the fact that the language employed conveys clichéd sentiments at times, the refreshing emphasis on process reinforces the conviction that in her early years Elizabeth Gaskell intuitively responds to life's uncertainties with a greater indebtedness to the Priestleyan emphasis on necessity than has formerly been acknowledged. Her concern about her young daughters demonstrates unquestioned theocratic assumptions, including a strong belief in moral accountability and determinism consistent with the Unitarian teaching of her time. The sense of divine benevolence, occasionally alluded to throughout 'My Diary', is strikingly subsumed in a much stronger emphasis on the need to bring oneself into a submissive acceptance of divine prerogatives.

'Half a Lifetime Ago' (1855), '*Lois the Witch*' (1859), and 'A Dark Night's Work' (1863).

Three shorter works begin this discussion of fictional representations of reality by Elizabeth Gaskell in which strong determinism is present. In each there is a overwhelming sense that the individual's capacity to escape from tightly circumscribed divine expectations is very limited. Divinely sanctioned moral absolutes force, sometimes unreasonably, each of the three female protagonists (and others) into a state of resignation and compliance with divine imperatives, giving each work an impetus that may sometimes seem to stem from malevolence. Each story is pervaded by a sense of crushing gloom, and in each there is little of the refreshing freedom that accompanies some of her later work.

The little-known short story 'Half a Lifetime Ago' (1855), admirably exemplifies the acceptance, by Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell, of a strong sense of moral determinism. The story deals with a young woman, Susan, who on her mother's deathbed, pledges that she will care for her orphaned younger brother, Willie. Subsequently he is ill and becomes deranged. When Susan receives an offer of marriage from Michael Hurst, conditional upon her sending Willie to an asylum, she steadfastly refuses. She nurses the occasionally violent Willie until his death, and then lives on in committed spinsterhood. Many years later she finds Michael Hurst, now married but a drunkard, dead in the snow near her cottage. His accidental death provides Susan with an opportunity to care for his widow and children. The purpose she had in nursing Willie is thus restored.

Although there is no suggestion that Susan transgresses any moral order, it is obvious that the morally non-negotiable nature of the pledge precludes Susan from making and acting upon her own decision. She has no choice but to refuse Michael. A tone of resignation permeates the story. Passion and individual freedom are sublimated to what appears to be Susan's divinely ordained but joyless role in life. In the poignant scene following the final rejection of Michael Hurst's proposal, the old servant, Peggy, offers the only consolation she can: 'it is not long to bide, and then the end will come' [10].

The sense of an oppressive and stultifying divine sovereignty in this story is frequently reinforced by the landscape. When Susan Dixon is on the verge of finding her former suitor's body 'the whole lift of heaven seemed a dome of iron' [11]. Likewise when she visits the wife of Michael Hurst to break the news of her husband's death the 'dim-purple' skies 'brooded ... over the white earth' [12]. One is aware of a constraining divine presence which restricts individual activity.

Lois the Witch (1859) is the sustained fictional treatment of an incident from the Salem witch trials of the late seventeenth century. This long story reflects Mrs. Gaskell's predictable response to Puritan values so antithetical to Unitarianism, while, at the same time, maintaining her consistent adherence to the strictures of determinism.

The clearest enunciation of this concern is when Manasseh attempts to save Lois, the subject of his crazed affection, from being hanged as a witch. The following statement is his tenable emphasis on predestination as a means of moral vindication:

I do not care. I say it again. Either Lois Barclay is a witch, or she is not. If she is, it has been foredoomed for her, for I have seen a vision of her death as a condemned witch for many months past - and the voice has told me there was but one escape for her - Lois - the voice you know' - In his excitement he began to wander a little, but it was touching to see how conscious he was, that by giving way he would lose the thread of the logical argument by which he hoped to prove that Lois ought not to be punished, and with what an effort he wrenched his imagination away from the old ideas, and strove to concentrate all his mind upon the plea that, if Lois was a witch, it had been shown him by prophecy: and, if there was prophecy, there must be foreknowledge; if foreknowledge, no freedom; if no freedom, no exercise of free will; and therefore, that Lois was not justly amenable to punishment. [13]

Dr. Cotton Mather, one of the visiting investigators from Boston, claims that this statement is 'trenching on heresy', presumably because it denies any notion of free will and even suggests a form of divine malevolence. It seems surprising that the omniscient narrator agrees that Manasseh is 'plunging into heresy' [14]. Such a strident denial of the validity of Manasseh's claims is partially contradicted by the tenor of the rest of the story. From the outset, when Lois promises her dying mother that she will join her uncle, Ralph Hickson, in New England, there is an emphasis on the lack of free will exercised by this young woman. This scene, so reminiscent of the deathbed promise in 'Half a Lifetime Ago', is later reinforced by Lois' revelation that in her childhood a woman mercilessly stoned for witchcraft prophesied that no-one would intervene to save Lois either when she was similarly accused.

But perhaps, in Mrs. Gaskell's eyes, the distinction being made is more subtle. For, in Unitarian terms, Manasseh's claim that Lois could not be condemned for her divinely ordained adoption of witchcraft could be considered invalid, even heretical, because it totally absolves the individual from moral responsibility. Such absolution is a position she never adopts in her fiction. Even in circumstances beyond personal control, the individual must still comply with moral and ethical expectations. This is borne out when Lois refuses to lie to save herself from the accusation of witchcraft. The lie, so often a mechanism for measuring moral integrity in Mrs. Gaskell's work, is accompanied by the recurrent suggestion that personal worthiness is enhanced through suffering. In *Ruth*, *Sylvia's Lovers* and *Cousin Phillis*, much of the conflict is derived from a moral dilemma created by characters

deliberately withholding vital information, or by sheer fabrication. The momentum of the narrative in Mrs. Gaskell's work usually encompasses a resolution of such moral flaws. In this novella Lois behaves as a Christian martyr during her trial and imprisonment and is given the opportunity for a selfless death by assisting the old Indian woman, Nattee, who is also accused of witchcraft. It is not sufficient that the prevailing irrationality brings innocent Lois to an untimely death; she must behave in a morally responsible manner throughout this chaos.

The story, 'A Dark Night's Work' (1863), is pervaded by a strong sense of imminent sorrow. As an accomplice to the accidental yet circumstantially incriminating death of her father's colleague, and the subsequent clandestine disposal of the body, Ellinor Wilkins and her father are for many years burdened by the fear of what would happen if Wilkins's involvement in this dark secret were discovered. Even after her father's death, Ellinor's anxiety concerning this matter continues with sustained speculation about the loss of reputation to be incurred if the as yet undiscovered body were revealed and her father accused.

The following authorial comment early in the story reinforces an acceptance of the inevitability of sorrow to the human condition. It determines, with prophetic force, the subsequent despair and inescapable gloom which overlays Ellinor's attempts to find personal happiness.

And thus the sad events of the future life of this father and daughter were hardly perceived in their steady advance, and yet over the monotony and flat uniformity of their days sorrow came marching down upon them like an armed man. Long before Mr. Wilkins had recognised its shape it was approaching him in the distance - as, in fact, it is approaching all of us at this very time; you, reader, I, writer, have each our great sorrow bearing down upon us. It may be yet beyond the dimmest point of our horizon, but in the stillness of the night our hearts shrink at the sound of its coming footstep. Well is it for those who fall into the hands of the Lord rather than into the hands of men; but worst of all is it for him who has hereafter to mingle the gall of remorse with the cup held out to him by his doom. [15]

What distinguishes this story from 'Half a Lifetime Ago', the previously discussed story in which a similar sense of rigid determinism is operative, is the manner in which this constraining influence is finally relieved by the

timely intervention of some caring characters, including Canon Livingstone, Phillis's suitor and subsequent husband. His efforts to assist Phillis at her point of greatest need, the discovery and misguided arrest of the elderly servant Dixon on a charge of murder, contributes significantly to the dissipation of sorrow at the end of the story. A comparison might justifiably be made with the Rev. Thurstan Benson in *Ruth*, and both characters will be fully discussed at a later stage.

Sylvia's Lovers

In late October and early November, 1859, Mrs. Gaskell visited Whitby, an isolated whaling town on the north-east coast of England. During the few weeks spent there for her daughter's health, she gathered information about the local riot in 1793 caused by the violent and unjust practices of the press-gang. She heard details of William Atkinson, an elderly man, who was hanged at York Castle for his part in the riot [16].

The information Mrs. Gaskell collected became the basis for one of her finest novels, *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863). In this work, Atkinson is embodied in the convincing character of Daniel Robson, Sylvia's father. Much of the first half of the novel deals with his attitude to authority, involvement in the riot, and his subsequent trial and hanging.

Throughout the novel Mrs. Gaskell struggles to maintain an even-handedness in her treatment of Robson. While acknowledging the tyranny perpetrated by the press-gang [17], she is careful to recognise Robson's complicity and abrogation of moral responsibility in organising the riot. Ultimately, she favours the view that he must accept the consequences of his actions, regardless of any implicit sympathy on her part. In shaping and embellishing a minor historical character and event, she uses moral determinism as a means of interpreting the tragic outcome for Robson. It is a way of dealing with the troubled past because it partially explains what at face value appears to be an unacceptably severe punishment for a character seeking simply to redress injustice.

Mrs. Gaskell, in retrospectively condemning the 'tyranny' [18] of the press-gang, is sufficiently distanced from an ugly episode in social history to feel comfortable in strong censure. She states: 'we cannot imagine how it is that a nation submitted to it for so long, even under any warlike enthusiasm,

any panics of invasion, any amount of loyal subservience to the governing powers' [19]. The injustices are clearly demonstrated in the rambling and often bitter reminiscences of Daniel Robson. He sacrificed a forefinger and thumb to escape from the press-gang and bears a reasonable grudge against its nagging presence in Whitby [20].

But Robson, although a victim, is not without his own dark side. He has been involved in smuggling and horse-stealing, and has his judgement distorted as he becomes totally preoccupied with the activities of the press-gang [21]. Yet he is a man known for his kindness, especially for the 'down and put out' [22]. He is thus seen as a warm-hearted, occasionally unscrupulous and vulnerable figure.

His limited moral sensibilities become an important determinant for Mrs. Gaskell in achieving a meaningful assimilation of the details of the historical event. After all, Atkinson was hanged for his participation in what appears to have been a justified reaction to injustice. Taking the little available information about the riot in Whitby, Mrs. Gaskell has given her fictional representation of the morally neutral Atkinson's particular character traits which contribute to his own demise. He is not the passive victim of injustice, neither is he an individual triumphing through death. Robson is rather portrayed as a conscious, responsible adult who must be held accountable for what happens on the evening of the riot. He becomes a striking example of an understanding of human behaviour in an historical context that is deliberately imposed and developed by the author. A strong sense of moral determinism is operative in this novel.

Robson's life is overshadowed by the same sense of resignation that Susan submits to in 'Half a Lifetime Ago'. He comes to the realisation that his actions, in starting the riot and in encouraging the burning down of the Mariner's Arms, have sober and wide-reaching ramifications for him and for the community. But he is rendered powerless to resist the forthcoming retributive legal action:

If at any time that morning they had had the courage to speak together on the thought which was engrossing all their minds, it is possible that some means might have been found to avert the calamity that was coming towards them with swift feet. [23]

His impotence is symbolically reinforced by an inability to escape, despite warnings, from the authorities who later come to arrest him. His co-

conspirators do not sweep him away to the safety of the moors, neither are there protestations of his innocence on the part of the author.

Robson's vitality, up until the riot, gives the novel much of its interest and momentum. In conversation with other characters at Haytersbank Farm, he is garrulous, defiant and purposeful. But with the realisation of the consequences of his actions he becomes 'uncomfortable' [24]. His violent repudiation of the injustice of the press-gang releases a savage but sanctioned reprisal for his moral abrogation. Mrs. Gaskell tacitly accepts that Robson and all those involved are accountable [25].

The trial and subsequent conviction of Robson takes some time. At Haytersbank Farm his wife, Bell, and daughter, Sylvia, wait expectantly for news of the proceedings at York. As the outcome of the legal action becomes more apparent, a strong sense of foreboding and resignation (despite contrary protestations) falls on the household. The following scene is similar to one in 'Half a Lifetime Ago', where Susan finally acknowledges the irrevocable action she has taken in rejecting her suitor. In both cases, talk of death is on the minds of the characters involved:

'Will this day niver come to an end?' cried Bell, plaintively.

'Oh, mother! it'll come to an end sometime, never fear. I've heerd say -

'Be the day weary or be the day long,
At length it ringeth to even-song.'

'To even-song - to even-song', repeated Bell. 'D'ye think now that even-song means death, Sylvie?'

'I cannot tell - I cannot bear it, Mother,' said Sylvia, in despair, 'I'll make some clap-bread: that's a heavy job, and will while away t'afternoon.'

'Ay, do!' replied the mother. 'He'll like it fresh - he'll like it fresh.'

Murmuring and talking to herself, she fell into a doze, from which Sylvia was careful not to disturb her.
[26]

The death of Robson, based as it is on an historical event, sets the pattern for determinism throughout the rest of the novel. The outcome of his situation is a prefiguration of the moral categories and determinism generally operative in this fictional world, elements which are inescapable for the central love triangle of Philip, Kinraid and Robson's daughter, Sylvia.

At the end of the novel Philip Hepburn dies in poverty, the pitiable victim of circumstances created by withholding information in order to protect his chances of gaining Sylvia's love. When the departing Charley Kinraid is taken from an isolated beach near Monkshaven by the ever-threatening press-gang, Philip observes the event and is charged with the responsibility of telling Sylvia what has happened. But he fails to relay the message to her, and she is left thinking that Charley, her first love, will soon return. When he doesn't, she reluctantly accepts Philip's proposal, and a fragile matrimonial state ensues. Charley's eventual return renders any chance of an ongoing relationship with Sylvia untenable, and a period of estrangement and suffering begins for Philip. His failure to act in a morally responsible manner, aberrant behaviour for him, has dire consequences for Sylvia as well as for himself. Her remorse at his death fosters a belated attempt to acknowledge the spiritual dimension so obviously operative in his life.

For there is a marked shift at the end of this novel in that Mrs. Gaskell allows for divine intervention at Philip's death in order for him to be reconciled with God and his estranged wife. Recognising that Philip, having been atoned for by suffering, alienation and finally an early death, is now at peace with God, Sylvia states: 'if I live very long, and try hard to be very good all that time, do yo' think, Hester, as God will let me to him where he is?' [27]. Even Hester Rose, the Quaker girl who truly loved Philip, lives out her life as a spinster, founding 'alms-houses for poor disabled sailors and soldiers' [28]. The dislocation created by an act of deliberate omission has profound ramifications. As all the characters are brought back within the stringent parameters of moral acceptability, and passion and individuality are largely stilled, one is conscious of how strongly Mrs. Gaskell subscribes to a notion of moral determinism. In a novel which echoes *Wuthering Heights* in so many other ways, the tendency to draw back to this level terrain is markedly different.

It is also, in a sense, more tragic. For whereas in *Wuthering Heights* the central characters reserve, through free will, the right to perpetual self-abasement, in *Sylvia's Lovers* and others of Mrs. Gaskell's works, the overarching determinism precludes any such Romantic impulses. Her characters are not given the liberty to remain in a less than morally acceptable state.

It has long been recognised that Elizabeth Gaskell's work reflects the influence of Romanticism, particularly through her indebtedness to

Wordsworth. She frequently alludes to his verse, and the poet's emphasis on resignation and quiescence appears to be another factor in shaping an emphasis on such qualities in her earlier work. It has been suggested that Elizabeth Gaskell's writing more often embodies the Wordsworthian notion that 'Wisdom is oft-times nearer when we stoop / than when we soar' (See Wordsworth, William, 'The Excursion', Volume 3), rather than that aspect of Romanticism more readily identified with individual freedom. The later Wordsworth's passive accommodation of the limitations of the human condition is reflected in stories such as 'Half a Lifetime Ago' and the author's recurrent reliance on traditional patterns of Christian atonement and reconciliation. Only occasionally is the Byronic side of Romanticism apparent in her work, mirroring when it does occur a more vigorous attempt to embrace the potential for personal freedom as distinct from the fear and the levelling effect of moral accountability.

An example which clearly demonstrates both extremes is *Sylvia's Lovers*. In a novel which constantly suggests some of the Byronic features of *Wuthering Heights*, there is, finally, an undoubted acceptance of the constraints of moral necessity. At different points throughout the novel, Philip Hepburn, Charley Kinraid and Sylvia Robson, characters caught up in a turbulent love triangle, behave (within the parameters of Mrs Gaskell's fictional world) in a wilful and morally and socially unconstrained manner. Heedless of clear moral imperatives, all three flaunt their desire for personal satisfaction. Charley carelessly seeks and gains Sylvia's love, Philip lies to protect his prior claim on Sylvia, and Sylvia herself selfishly destroys her relationship with Philip to pursue the unattainable with Charley. This passionate and selfish entanglement preoccupies all three for most of the novel. It is only resolved when Philip and Sylvia are convincingly confronted with the inescapable consequences of moral abrogation.

Thus, the influence of Romanticism on Elizabeth Gaskell's work and commitment to moral determinism is ambivalent. It has the capacity to reinforce the notion of personal freedom as well as to suggest its antithesis, depending on whether the Wordsworthian or Byronic current in Romanticism predominates. At times the influence of Romanticism is barely distinguishable from the Priestleyan emphasis on moral determinism as derived from Unitarian teaching, while at its other extreme it establishes a binary opposition that sets the pursuit of personal freedom in tension with the strictures of a rigid determinism. Romanticism should not be seen then as

simply being a constant influence in her work that operates in direct opposition to the influences of Unitarianism [29].

In all this, Mrs. Gaskell's work reflects a strong indebtedness to mid-nineteenth century Unitarianism. Her reliance upon moral determinism as a means of ordering and understanding human behaviour comes largely from Joseph Priestley, whose influence on early nineteenth century English Unitarianism was significant and has been explained. Priestley, along with Theophilus Lindsey, Thomas Belsham and others, guided and shaped English Unitarianism in the previous century, especially through nonconformist academies such as Warrington Academy. In his work, *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated* (1777) [30], Priestley elaborates on his notion of necessarianism (a form of necessitarianism). Priestley postulates that a divine moral order exists. When, as frequently happens, moral transgressions occur, God uses such to good effect, his purposes ultimately directed towards the well-being and redemption of all. Priestley, like other Unitarians of his time, was a universalist. Evil is thus seen as part of the divine economy, a means by which the individual is humbled and made reliant in the realisation that ultimately a benevolent God knows what is best. This strong sense of divine sovereignty should, in Priestley's view, produce 'humility', 'resignation' and 'confidence' [31]. Although bearing some similarity to Calvinism, it is markedly different in that moral transgression is seen to have divine purpose and the unredeemed transgressor does not suffer eternal punishment.

Priestley's very positive acceptance of the benefits of necessarianism is not always apparent in the works of Mrs. Gaskell. At times it becomes no more than a tacit acceptance of the constraints of moral determinism, and even a denial to the individual of triumph over circumstances. The belief that one is never exempted from the consequences of actions which transgress an immutable moral order is occasionally oppressive. In stories such as 'Half a Lifetime Ago', where no moral transgression occurs, one is nevertheless aware of a constraining moral framework which stultifies individual activity. Behaviour appropriate to divine demands occasionally becomes the dominant expectation. That which begins as a mechanism for demonstrating divine concern, has the sense of benevolence blanching out of it, and assumes a cold rigidity. At this point it resembles strict Calvinism, a position in which personal accountability to a divinely sanctioned moral order is accentuated.

Both Calvinism and this emphasis on moral determinism within Unitarianism also harbour the risk of an extreme position where individual moral responsibility becomes irrelevant to personal outcomes. Both then become amoral. Susan's limited capacity to choose between marriage and the care of her brother barely avoids this extreme in 'Half a Lifetime Ago' [32].

Yet this is not a consistent position. One of the surprises in reading Mrs. Gaskell's work is to see how frequently divine grace penetrates the moral determinism to restore a sense of real paternal concern for the plight of the characters involved. Although not a commonly delineated concept in Unitarian theology, grace is evident in several works, including *Sylvia's Lovers*. But whereas in the early novel *Ruth* (1853) [33], grace is central to the resolution of the major dilemma in the novel, in *Sylvia's Lovers* it is little more than a momentary acknowledgment of the appropriateness of a conventional Christian solution. The scene surrounding Philip's death is a belated attempt to impose a comfortable resolution on a drama largely fostered by the abrogation of those moral expectations sanctioned by the author.

While not wanting to detract from the existence of such moments, for whatever reasons, the more usual demands of a strict, moral order foster a particular attitude to the past. If one accepts that there is a strong relationship between moral conduct and consequences for the individual, then one must assume that a significant factor in comprehending the lives of those who have lived before is in these terms.

There are obviously other ways to understand the individual in an historical context. A more common manner is with an emphasis on the prevailing social and political forces which led to that person responding in a particular way. This is an option available to Mrs. Gaskell in *Sylvia's Lovers*. Robson's behaviour is perfectly understandable in view of the injustice he has suffered at the hands of such a barbaric political instrument as the press-gang. But while she appears to be acknowledging the relevance of such forces, in this work they come as a precursor of some mortally damaging moral abrogation of greater interest. Robson suffers because he fails to comply with the strict moral categories created by the author.

Essentially a good man (Unitarians denied the notion of innate depravity) Robson is led astray by his fixation on the press-gang. He is finally overtaken by 'a supernatural kind of possession, leading him to his doom' [34]. The

fixation weakens his rationality and causes a significant lapse of moral judgement.

The tension between right conduct and improper social practices is a common concern in Mrs. Gaskell's work. It is unreasonable, for example, that Susan, in 'Half a Lifetime Ago', should look after a half-crazed younger brother on her own. Yet her adopted, but sometimes almost imposed personal morality demands it. When Benson, in *Ruth*, lies to protect the young 'fallen woman' from further social censure, he finally regrets his moral weakness. What to us may appear as an understandable act of kindness, has significant moral import for Mrs. Gaskell's character. At no point does she sanction moral transgression, however much she understands the circumstances which bring about such behaviour.

At one level it is a theologically complex thesis, yet it is limited in terms of the understanding of historical events that it proposes. It constantly moves the focus from the social and political domain into the personal and moral. Even though Mrs. Gaskell is able to sustain detailed, incisive portrayals of social conditions (for example, the deplorable conditions of the working classes in Manchester in *Mary Barton* (1848) [35]), the momentum of her analysis is channelled into a preoccupation with Barton's murder of the mill-owner's son, Henry Carson. The author's concern for accountability within the individual, moral domain, demonstrates the centrality of moral determinism to her thinking.

This shift, from a localised, historical focus, to the broader arena of moral accountability, is even more interesting when one considers English Unitarian history. Mrs. Gaskell lived through a period when Unitarianism, especially in Manchester, had become synonymous with social respectability. Cross Street Chapel, where her husband was the Unitarian minister for many years, had a large congregation with numbers of successful professionals, mill-owners and parliamentarians. The diverse list of eminent visitors to the Gaskell home in Manchester indicates the respect they enjoyed.

But this had not always been the case. It was less than a century before that Priestley had been forcefully evicted from his home and made to flee to America. Whereas Unitarian churches built in the mid-Victorian period were architecturally prominent, a century earlier they had been small and discreetly situated in back streets. The Unitarians, in Mrs Gaskell's time, had recently emerged, through parliamentary reform, from a period of social

marginalisation, even persecution. Toleration was granted to Unitarians in 1813. The Reform Bill of 1832 and the Dissenters' Chapels Act of 1844 are examples of reforms, mentioned in Chapter One, which favoured Unitarians, giving them a measure of freedom and equal standing with others that they had not experienced before [36].

So when she emphasises moral determinism in her treatment of Robson, she is choosing to ignore the fact that the recipient of social injustice, like the earlier Unitarians, may bear no responsibility for treatment received. One would imagine this lesson of history to have been at the forefront of her mind. Yet suffering equates very strongly with moral responsibility in the wide range of Mrs. Gaskell's work. Ruth, in the novel of the same name, is subjected, like Philip in *Sylvia's Lovers*, to a prolonged process of atonement through suffering before she is made acceptable to a sympathetic, yet doctrinally cautious author.

Wives and Daughters

When Mr. Gibson, the local doctor of Hollingford in *Wives and Daughters* (1864-6), decides to re-marry, his close relationship with his teenage daughter, Molly, is threatened. Lady Harriet, who views Molly as her protégé, senses that Molly does not like the prospect of her new step-mother, and gently warns her about Clare Kirkpatrick. She has extensive knowledge of Clare's wily ways.

'... I wonder how you'll get on together?'

'So do I!' sighed out Molly, under her breath.

'I used to think I managed her, till one day an uncomfortable suspicion arose that all the time she had been managing me. Still it's easy work to let oneself be managed; at any rate till one wakens up to the consciousness of the process, and then it may become amusing, if one takes it in that light.'

'I should hate to be managed,' said Molly, indignantly. 'I'll try to do what she wishes for papa's sake, if she'll only tell me outright; but I should dislike to be trapped into anything.'

'Now I,' said Lady Harriet, 'am too lazy to avoid traps; and I rather like to remark the cleverness with which they are set. But then of course I know that, if I choose to exert myself, I can break through the withes

of green flax with which they try to bind me. Now, perhaps, you won't be able.' [37]

In *Wives and Daughters* there are numerous examples of relational entrapment, where characters find that promises made, or marriages entered into, are later sorely regretted. Victorian social conventions prevent an easy release from such commitments and the characters are left with little alternative to grim resignation. Mr. Gibson (along with his daughter Molly) regrets his decision to re-marry. Osborne Hamley becomes aware of the difficulties created by his marriage to the French peasant-girl, Aimée. Cynthia Kirkpatrick is distressed by the promise to marry Preston.

Overall this text establishes a consistent rationale for entrapment: circumstances are often beyond human control. The dilemma of free will in the context of an all-encompassing determinism is relevant in this work, as in earlier novels and short stories. While Cynthia accepts Preston's proposal under psychological duress and Molly has little choice but to accept her father's decision to re-marry, it would appear at first that Mr. Gibson and Osborne Hamley have to assume responsibility for the proposals of marriage that they make. So entrapment would seem to result equally from either passive or active involvement in the prevailing circumstances. Neither makes a great deal of difference.

For it is possible to exaggerate the degree of free will that Gibson exercises. The text clearly indicates that his developing interest in Clare Kirkpatrick is beyond personal control, that 'fate' is ultimately responsible for his poor choice of a marriage partner.

If Squire Hamley had been unable to tell Molly who had ever been thought of as her father's second wife, fate was all this time preparing an answer of a pretty positive kind to her wondering curiosity. But fate is a cunning hussy, and builds up her plans as imperceptibly as a bird builds her nest; and with much the same kind of unconsidered trifles. [38]

The references to 'fate' in this novel indicate a significant departure from the more overtly Christian sense of divinely-sanctioned determinism evident in some of Mrs. Gaskell's other works. In addition to the above passage, there is at least one other passage which directly emphasises the influence of 'fate'. Early in the novel, Gibson, in uncharacteristic eloquence, informs Molly that 'the Fates have decreed' [39] that her visit to the Hamleys should

take place. It is there, of course, that she later meets her future admirer, Roger Hamley, son of the squire, whose ailing wife she initially goes to keep company. Fate appears to be so fickle or indiscriminate that it directs the father to make an unwise choice in marriage while the daughter makes a wise choice.

Only very occasionally is there evidence of a dependence on divine benevolence or direction. Molly prays for Roger's safety in Africa, but there is no deliberate textual confirmation (as in other works such as *Ruth* and *Sylvia's Lovers*) of her prayers being answered and of solace received [40]. There is, rather, a sense of forces operating which are cruelly uncaring, if not totally impersonal. When Molly hears of Cynthia's 'engagement' to Roger Hamley, 'for a few minutes her brain seemed in too great a whirl to comprehend anything but that she was being carried on in earth's diurnal course, with rocks, and stones, and trees, with as little volition on her part as if she were dead' [41]. Utilising Wordsworthian imagery the author depicts her as being swept along by cosmic forces beyond her control. What appears to be taking place, partially at least, in this, Mrs. Gaskell's last work, is an abandoning of Christian notions of divine sustenance and divinely-sanctioned moral determinism, for a more generalised classical understanding of 'fate' so prevalent in classical literature. This is also a feature of the later work of Thomas Hardy, a good example being *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

The issue of moral responsibility, always important for mid-Victorian Unitarians, is evident in the novel and particularly at the time of Osborne's death. Squire Hamley tentatively accepts that he deserves the sadness of Osborne's passing because of his unfeeling treatment of the elder son [42]. But, in view of the frequency of classical as well as biblical allusions fostered by Mrs. Gaskell, with her references to 'fate', the consequences for Hamley of his treatment of Osborne might as readily be thought of as nemesis as much as divine judgement in a Christian sense.

And the importance of moral responsibility is significantly weakened by the ultimate marital success and happiness of Cynthia Kirkpatrick, whose flirtatious and intemperate behaviour creates many of the dilemmas in the novel.

By contrast, Gibson, who is certainly to be seen as the most morally upright and admirable character in the novel, does suffer in making a selfless

decision to marry, a decision he thinks will benefit his daughter and household. This, however, is not inconsistent with the notion of moral determinism. While moral abrogation always results in the need for atonement through suffering, upright behaviour does not always end in happiness. Because, as noted elsewhere (for example, in 'Half a Lifetime Ago') within a deterministic framework some choices, for better or worse, are morally binding, and some decisions are almost inescapable.

For whatever reasons some characters find themselves in difficult situations, a common response is to face the predicament with resignation. Roger speaks of Cynthia's final rejection of him 'with sense and resignation' [43] and Miss Browning, knowing she is about to hear bad news from her sister, states: 'I am so well prepared for misfortune by the frequent contemplation of its possibility that I believe I can receive any ill news with apparent equanimity and real resignation' [44].

Mr. Gibson frequently reflects on his decision to marry Clare Kirkpatrick. The personality traits which she displays disappoint him, especially in comparison with those of his deceased wife, Molly's mother. Yet having made the decision 'he did not allow himself to repine over the step he had taken; he wilfully shut his eyes and waxed up his ears to many small things that he knew would have irritated him if he had attended to them; and, in his solitary rides, he forced himself to dwell on the positive advantages that had accrued to him and his through his marriage' [45]. Later it is said that he 'accepted the inevitable; he told himself in more homely phrase that it was no use crying over spilt milk' [46].

Molly sorrowfully resists her father's decision to marry Clare Kirkpatrick. She correctly interprets his decision as marking an inevitable shift in their father-daughter relationship. Roger consoles Molly when he finds her weeping about the decision soon after it is announced [47]. Later, when they discuss the matter again, she responds with more vehemence:

'... It is difficult', he went on, 'but by-and-by you will be so much happier for it.'

'No, I shan't!' said Molly, shaking her head. 'It will be very dull when I shall have killed myself, as it were, and live only in trying to do, and to be, as other people like. I don't see any end to it. I might as well never have lived. And as for the happiness you speak of, I shall never be happy again.'

There was an unconscious depth in what she said,

that Roger did not know how to answer at the moment; it was easier to address himself to the assertion of the girl of seventeen, that she should never be happy again.

‘Nonsense: perhaps in ten years’ time you will be looking back on this trial as a very light one - who knows?’

‘I daresay it seems foolish; perhaps all our earthly trials will appear foolish to us after a while; perhaps they seem so now to angels. But we are ourselves, you know, and this is now, not some time to come, a long, long way off. And we are not angels to be comforted by seeing the ends for which everything is sent.’ [48].

In the latter outburst Molly repudiates any notion of resignation, urging instead a personal, immediate response to the troubles of the moment.

Much later, after the marriage is a ‘fait accompli’, she senses that her father is unhappy in his marriage [49]. But by this stage even she must react with resignation, acknowledging that there is nothing she can do: ‘it was all hopeless, and the only attempt at a remedy was to think about it as little as possible’ [50].

Wives and Daughters, coming at the end of Mrs. Gaskell’s writing career, reflects many of the influences of Unitarianism observable in the bulk of her other work. There is still the sense that the affairs of men are largely overridden by forces beyond human control and that the only appropriate response is one of acceptance and resignation. But rather than a specifically Christian sense of divine omniscience and providence, a diffused, somewhat confused incorporation of the notion of ‘fate’ weakens the stridently Christian language of earlier novels such as *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*.

Elements indicative of rigid determinism are not restricted to the above six texts. There are glimpses of Elizabeth Gaskell’s capacity for such a view in almost all her works. Frequently they are no more than passing references, inferences encapsulated in the description of a landscape, or comments about a detached and dispassionate God. Chapter Three will continue the discussion of free will and determinism, demonstrating that in certain texts, in a roughly chronological sense, there was a lessening of the influence of moral determinism. As Elizabeth Gaskell was influenced by more liberal, humanistic trends in popular thought, trends reflected in the changing

emphases in Unitarianism, the constraining influence of Priestleyan theories of necessity declined.

NOTES

- 1 Refer to the main bibliography for the editions of the works of Elizabeth Gaskell used for this dissertation.

A close comparison of aspects of *Mary Barton* (1848) and *Madame Bovary* (1857), by Gustave Flaubert, highlights the distinctive nature of Elizabeth Gaskell's approach to moral determinism. The central female protagonists in both novels, Mary Barton and Emma Bovary respectively, share similar personal aspirations. Both indulge in romantic fantasies and endeavour to translate such into reality. Emma Bovary's preoccupation with romantic illusion is thoroughly explained by Flaubert, who is at pains to attribute many of her problems to a fertile imagination and poor reading habits, which includes authors such as Walter Scott (Part One, Chapter 6). Her self indulgence in this area is a flaw which inevitably draws her into moral corruption and its entanglements. At no point does Flaubert allow for any divine agency to intervene in order to prevent Emma from bringing about her own demise. In this sense her fate resembles that of the much later Tess in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), by Thomas Hardy. But what distinguishes Emma Bovary from Tess is that she is not the victim of imposed circumstances, but of a personal propensity to allow her escapist inclinations to override any desire for commonsense and self preservation. The extent to which it would have been possible for her to overcome the psychological determinism which leads to her destruction is, of course, questionable.

The only character in the works of Elizabeth Gaskell who in any way resembles Emma Bovary is Mary Barton. In a manner similar to that of Emma, Mary fosters romantic illusions concerning young Mr. Carson, the mill-owner's son. The author explains that her aspirations for self-

improvement have their basis in the wayward aunt Esther's earlier suggestion that one day Mary would become a lady (p. 44). From this day onward Mary is conscious of her own beauty and its potential for social mobility (p. 62 and p. 67). She seeks to achieve her goal by marrying out of poverty into the wealth of the mill-owning class (p. 80). Her 'visions of the golden future' (p. 115) temporarily blind her to the real love of her childhood friend, Jem Wilson:

Yes! Mary was ambitious and did not favour Mr. Carson the less because he was rich and a gentleman. The old leaven, infused years ago by her aunt Esther, fermented in her little bosom, and perhaps all the more, for her father's aversion to the rich and the gentle. Such is the contrariness of the human heart, from Eve downwards, that we all, in our old-Adam state, fancy things forbidden sweetest. So Mary dwelt upon and enjoyed the idea of some day becoming a lady, and doing all the elegant nothings appertaining to ladyhood.' (p. 121)

But, unlike Emma Bovary, Mary's illusions are short-lived. She clarifies her love for Jem Wilson and draws back just in time from the potentially corrupting influence of her developing relationship with Carson. Although there is no direct link between her moral impropriety and the crises which ensue for her, from that point Mary appears to be atoning for her foolishness in entertaining improper romantic illusions. But any difficulties for Mary are largely resolved at the end of the novel and she is comfortably re-situated within the ambit of moral acceptability. This recurrent reflexive tendency towards divine reconciliation and moral uprightness in Elizabeth Gaskell's work is in stark contrast to Flaubert's depiction of uninterrupted moral decline.

- 2 Victorian Unitarians, in an age of much negative eschatology, stressed the benevolence of God. For example, Channing states: 'We believe that God is infinitely good, kind, benevolent, in the proper sense of these words; good in disposition, as well as in act; good, not to a few, but to all; good to every individual, as well as to the general system.' See Channing, William Ellery, *Works*, 3rd. edn., 6 vols., Glasgow, Heddeswick, 1840-44, III, pp. 83-4.
- 3 For references to Joseph Priestley's theory of necessarianism see footnote 21 in Chapter One.

As mentioned, this form of determinism is different in nature to that evidenced in *Madame Bovary* (1857) by Gustave Flaubert, a novel written at the height of Mrs. Gaskell's literary career. While there is a strong sense of moral accountability in her writing, her characters remain inherently good. Whenever they transgress the moral code, restitution awaits them. In Flaubert's novel, it is obvious from the outset that Emma Bovary is a psychologically flawed character whose selfish desires lead her down an irreversible pathway of personal destruction. There are a significant number of characters in Mrs. Gaskell's oeuvre who share Emma Bovary's romantic illusions (for example, Mary Barton, in *Mary Barton*, Sylvia Robson, in *Sylvia's Lovers*, and Cynthia Kikpatrick, in *Wives and Daughters*) but none forego, by their irresponsible behaviour, the opportunity for divine reconciliation. There is no sense of divine benevolence in Flaubert's novel and this links his work quite directly with later writers such as Thomas Hardy. For a full discussion see Williams, D.A., 'Psychological Determinism in *Madame Bovary*', *Occasional Papers in Modern Languages*, No. 9, University of Hull, 1973, Section One.

- 4 Gaskell, Elizabeth, 'My Diary: The Early Years of My Daughter Marianne' (1835-1838), limited edition of 50 copies published privately by Clement Shorter, 1923, p. 24.
- 5 *ibid.*, p. 13.
- 6 *ibid.*, p. 11.
- 7 *ibid.*, p. 17.
- 8 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Ruth*, p. 209.
- 9 *ibid.*, p. 306-313.
- 10 Gaskell, Elizabeth, 'Half a Lifetime Ago', in *Cousin Phillis and Other Tales*, *The World's Classics*, 1987 (1981), p. 88.
- 11 *ibid.*, p. 95.
- 12 *ibid.*, p. 99.
- 13 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Lois the Witch and Other Stories*, *Pocket Classics*, 1989, p. 71.

The Unitarian attitude to the worst aspects of Puritanism is well conveyed in an 1831 review of Charles Upham's *Lectures on Witchcraft, Comprising a History of the Delusion in Salem, in 1692*, Carter, Hendee and Babcock, Boston, 1831. The reviewer refers to his conviction that 'a sober and general belief, that "the evil being himself was in a special manner let loose, and permitted to descend upon them with unexampled fury", was sufficient, independently of every external cause, to dispose men to the miserable superstitions and barbarities, that followed'. He goes on to reassure his more enlightened readers that this problem has declined as 'Happily the advancing light of philosophy and of religion leave us to good hopes'. See *The Christian Examiner and General Review*, Volume XI (New Series, Volume VI), Boston and London, 1831, pp. 241-242 & p. 257.

- 14 Gaskell, Elizabeth, op. cit., p. 3.
- 15 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *A Dark Night's Work and Other Stories*, The World's Classics, 1992, p. 28. This comment reflects the emphasis in William Turner's sermon of 1833, entitled 'Resignation and Submission under the Afflictive Dispensations of Providence'. See discussion in Chapter Eight.
- 16 Sharps, Geoffrey, *Mrs. Gaskell's Observation and Invention*, Linden Press, Fontwell, Sussex, 1970, pp. 374-421.
- 17 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Sylvia's Lovers*, World's Classics, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1982, first published 1863, p. 6.
- 18 *ibid.*, p. 6.
- 19 *ibid.*, p. 7.
- 20 *ibid.*, pp. 38 and 52.
- 21 *ibid.*, pp. 34, 103, 253.
- 22 *ibid.*, pp. 263 and 269.
- 23 *ibid.*, pp. 276-277.
- 24 *ibid.*, p. 273.
- 25 *ibid.*, p. 283.
- 26 *ibid.*, p. 313.
- 27 *ibid.*, p. 501.

- 28 *ibid.*, p. 502.
- 29 Brontë, Emily, *Wuthering Heights*, Heron Books, London.
- See Stone, Donald, D., *The Romantic Impulse in Victorian Fiction*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 1980, Chapter 5. Stone makes some direct connections between Wordsworth's poetry and Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction, including 'The Idiot Boy' and 'Half a Lifetime Ago' (1855), 'Michael' (1800) and 'The Crooked Branch' (1859) and the 'Lucy Poems' (1798-9) and *Cousin Phillis* (1863-4).
- 30 Priestley, Joseph, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit*, and *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated* (1777), Garland Publishing, New York/London, 1976.
- 31 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *op. cit.*, p. 108.
- 32 One is reminded of the extreme position arrived at in *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) by James Hogg.
- 33 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Ruth*, World's Classics, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985, first published 1853.
- 34 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Sylvia's Lovers*, p. 253.
- 35 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Mary Barton*, Penguin Classics, 1970, first published 1848.
- 36 For a discussion of this area see Short, R.L., 'Presbyterianism under a New Name', in *The English Presbyterians: From Elizabethan Puritanism to Modern Unitarianism*, edited by Bolam, C.G., Goring, J., Short, H. L., and Thomas, R., Beacon Press, London/Boston, 1968, and Webb, R.K., 'John Hamilton Thom - Intellect and Conscience in Liverpool', in *The View from the Pulpit (Victorian Ministers and Society)*, edited by Phillips, P.T., Macmillan of Canada, 1978.
- 37 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Wives and Daughters*, The World's Classics, 1989 (1987), first published 1864-5, pp. 165-166.
- 38 *ibid.*, p. 75.
- 39 *ibid.*, p. 58.
- 40 *ibid.*, p. 434.

41 *ibid.*, p. 391. This is almost a direct quote from the fifth of Wordsworth's Lucy Poems:

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

See Wordsworth, William, *Selected Poems*, edited by Roger Sharrock, Heinemann, London, 1958, p. 62.

42 *ibid.*, p. 586.

43 *ibid.*, p. 635.

44 *ibid.*, p. 535.

45 *ibid.*, p. 337.

46 *ibid.*, p. 431.

47 *ibid.*, pp. 117-121.

48 *ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

49 *ibid.*, p. 430.

50 *ibid.*, p. 432.

CHAPTER THREE

"GOD DOES NOT WILLINGLY AFFLICT":

A MORE TEMPERED VIEW OF FREE WILL AND MORAL DETERMINISM IN THE FICTION OF ELIZABETH GASKELL

The first part of this chapter will deal with the works by Elizabeth Gaskell which demonstrate an ambivalent, more tempered approach to the issue of moral determinism. Such texts at times suggest that the author wishes to depict a divinely sanctioned moral order which is beyond purpose or compassion. But frequently this view is moderated to acknowledge that the victim of suffering which results from personal moral abrogation is given an opportunity for divine restitution. This then demonstrates a divine but sometimes unarticulated desire to exercise compassion and to achieve reconciliation.

The incidence in the works of Elizabeth Gaskell of a final acceptance of divine benevolence and of the triumph of free will be discussed in Part Two. In this section the discussion will be restricted to the author's espousal of the Unitarian theological precept of atonement through suffering, and some of the ambiguities the author expresses in arriving at a satisfactory theodicy. This will be achieved by examining *Ruth* (1853), *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1854-5), and finally *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857).

Part One

Ruth

Jemima Bradshaw's reflections in *Ruth* (1853) on the revelation that Ruth Benson is a 'fallen woman' indicate a basic doctrinal tension inherent in the novel. In attempting, with regard to this issue, to shake off the 'hard doctrines' of her father, the author asserts that Jemima initially fails to attain 'a pity, so Christ-like as to have both wisdom and tenderness in it' [1]. At this stage she falls short of the position adopted by Thurstan Benson, the nonconformist minister who does so much to rescue Ruth. Jemima attempts to make the transition from a ruthless, dispassionate distinction between individuals on moral grounds to an acceptance of human frailty and the need for forgiveness:

Without being pharisaical in her estimation of herself, she had all a Pharisee's dread of publicans and sinners, and all a child's cowardliness - that cowardliness which prompts it to shut its eyes against the object of terror, rather than acknowledge its existence with brave faith. Her father's often reiterated speeches had not been without their effect. He drew a clear line of partition, which separated mankind into two great groups, to one of which, by the grace of God, he and his belonged; while the other was composed of those whom it was his duty to try and reform, and bring the whole force of his morality to bear upon, with lectures, admonitions, and exhortations - a duty to be performed, because it was a duty - but with very little of that Hope and Faith which is the Spirit which maketh alive. Jemima had rebelled against these hard doctrines of her father's, but their frequent repetition had had its effect, and led her to look upon those who had gone astray with shrinking, shuddering recoil, instead of with a pity, so Christ-like as to have both wisdom and tenderness in it. [2]

The characters of Bradshaw and Benson are emblematic of two clear, doctrinal strands in Mrs. Gaskell's work. While the narrative outworkings of this text finally support the benevolent and compassionate position adopted by Benson, other recurrent images suggest a clear recognition of forces and agencies which constrain and manipulate the lot of mankind. Bradshaw is representative of this antithetical understanding. As a consequence,

throughout the novel, there is a tension created which extends beyond the structurally central ideological conflict between Benson and Bradshaw. The covert acknowledgement throughout of darker forces reinforces the rigidity and sternness displayed by Bradshaw.

This reinforcement frequently occurs in unfocussed, incidental references to influences which are sharply in contrast with Benson's theology. In discussing the downfall of Ruth's father, the author allows for the possibility of him being 'the object of an avenging fate' [3], and when Ruth becomes a governess to the Bradshaw family, the author suggests that the 'scroll of fate was closed, and they could not see the future' [4]. This passage does allow, however, for divine rectification at a later time. In an extended passage which strongly resembles a passage in *North and South*, Ruth, in a state of great anxiety, throws open her bedroom window to the elements, listening to 'the sound of galloping armies' [5] and pondering the reference in the Psalter to 'the stormy wind fulfilling his word' [6]. Jemima, in a similar setting, is overcome by the 'notion that the earth was wandering lawless and aimless through the heavens' [7]. Such passages are suggestive of a latent and largely unformulated acceptance of a theological viewpoint which stands at the extreme edge of the free will/determinism dichotomy. There, human destiny is outside the orbit of personal control.

For Ruth, the constant possibility of being overwhelmed by forces beyond her control is counteracted by the haven of security offered in the Benson household. Thurstan's intervention to assist Ruth during the crisis point of her illicit relationship with Bellingham saves her from destitution and personal ruin. Throughout the years spent with the Bensons in Eccleston she continues to be largely protected from such forces by a domestic setting which is unconsciously attuned to divine expectations:

In the Bensons' house there was the same unconsciousness of individual merit, the same absence of introspection and analysis of motive, as there had been in her mother; but it seemed that their lives were pure and good, not merely from a lovely and beautiful nature, but from some law, the obedience to which was, of itself, harmonious peace, and which governed them almost implicitly, and with as little questioning on their part, as the glorious stars which haste not, rest not, in their eternal obedience. This household had many failings; they were but human, and with all their loving desire to bring their lives into harmony with the will of

God, they often erred and fell short; but, somehow, the very errors and faults of one individual served to call out higher excellences in another, and so they re-acted upon each other, and the result of short discords was exceeding harmony and peace. But they had themselves no idea of the real state of things; they did not trouble themselves with marking their progress by self-examination; if Mr. Benson did sometimes, in hours of sick incapacity for exertion, turn inwards, it was to cry aloud with almost morbid despair, 'God be merciful to me a sinner!' But he strove to leave his life in the hands of God, and to forget himself. [8]

Ruth appreciates what the Bensons have done for her and later describes herself as 'safe in the dear old room - the haven of rest - the shelter from storms' [9]. Even as Bradshaw rails against Ruth's integrity after the disclosure of her former life, the brunt of his wrath is taken by Thurstan. The vindictive forces which lurk in scattered textual references and appear directed against the orphaned, marginalised Ruth have their brooding, temporal representative in the inflexible, legalistic character of Bradshaw. By shielding Ruth from him she is protected for some time.

Bellingham (later Donne) is a more difficult influence for Ruth to deal with. Ostensibly her rescuer, it is through him that the central moral dilemma of the novel occurs, and Mrs. Gaskell is careful to elaborate on his personal deficiencies. In a typically Victorian inversion of moral responsibility so applicable to women, she nurses and finally dies for her former seducer. His reappearance throughout the novel troubles and threatens her strong efforts for moral reconstitution. Only through death can she escape the insidious influence he exerts. Soon after their initial separation, Benson struggles to release Ruth from Bellingham's influence [10] and, at the end of the novel, as Benson and Bellingham stand over the body of Ruth, there is textual support for Benson's censure of Bellingham [11]. In temporal terms, Bellingham's beguiling influence leads to her early death, even though at the same time Ruth thus completes her clearly acknowledged requisite penance. There are some forces which even Benson cannot counteract.

Between the two extremes represented by Benson, arbiter of divine grace, and the unbridled forces of cosmic malevolence or apathy which appear to unconsciously propel characters like Bellingham, must lie a *modus operandi* which can satisfactorily resolve the conflicts within the novel. While the

interdependence of these opposites appears necessary (divine grace is meaningless without divine wrath and vice versa) there exists the conventional narrative necessity of closure through resolution and reconciliation.

This need is provided by the accepted relationship between moral abrogation and its consequences. The existence of strongly defined moral categories in Mrs. Gaskell's work poses the possibility of transgression and restitution. At one end of the doctrinal spectrum moral transgression sanctions an understanding of human suffering as punitive. It endorses what might otherwise be thought of as aimless, divine cruelty. At the other end of the same spectrum human suffering is seen as not having divine origin in specific instances but only in the post-edenic sense of the Fall and its general effect. On most occasions Mrs. Gaskell's work indicates that she is at the latter end of the spectrum, but struggling to resist the pressure to concede the validity of the harsher view. In her later works she at times denies vehemently that human suffering originates with God (see *Cousin Phillis*) although the imagery utilised in the following passage from *Ruth* comes close to undermining that conclusion:

Now she knew the truth, that the earth has no barrier which avails against agony. It comes lightning-like down from heaven, into the mountain house and the town garret; into the palace and into the cottage. [12]

The imagery suggests a theodicy in which there is no divine attenuation of the painful extremes of human suffering and a later passage reaffirms the frequently stated position in Mrs. Gaskell's work that 'deeds, however hidden, and long passed by, have their eternal consequences' [13].

The reader may feel that Ruth suffers excessively as a result of her youthful naivety, but within the moral framework accepted in this novel, her moral transgression is always considered as serious. Her accountability is never understated, even by Benson, her strongest and most caring supporter. The doctrinal context of the text does not allow for any all-sufficient prayer of repentance, as is more commonly associated with what was considered to be orthodox theology. In this mid-Victorian Unitarian context repentance needs to be accompanied by acts of penance, as exemplified in the privations, suffering and death experienced by Ruth. This insistent pressure to achieve spiritual restoration, unless modified, would appear to validate the sense

that human suffering cannot be easily relieved and is but another example of the relentless, divine cruelty imposed on mankind.

What makes the difference in Mrs. Gaskell's work is that the primary focus in penance is the restoration of divine acceptability and consolation. At several points throughout the novel Ruth experiences divine grace (such as the timely intervention of Benson, the pleasure her illegitimate son, Leonard, brings to her, and moments of special spiritual insight). But the reader's belief that she has been fully restored is ironically undermined by the prolonged series of encounters with suffering needed to achieve this restitution. Nevertheless, Mrs. Gaskell does achieve what appears to be a satisfactory, if somewhat uneasy reconciliation of polarised views in a theology of human suffering.

Mary Barton & North and South

In Mrs. Gaskell's two novels set in an industrial city, *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1854-5) [14], the northern English city is representative of displacement and suffering. The setting for both novels is Manchester (although referred to as Milton-Northern in *North and South*), a city the author knew well after many years of active involvement across the social spectrum. While she enjoyed the comforts and benefits resulting from her influential social connections and her husband's successful ministry, she was acutely aware, through philanthropic endeavour, of the privations endured by the masses of working class mill-hands.

Sickness and starvation ('clemming') are by-words in both novels, and the plight of many characters is directly attributable to the effects of living in such a city. This is accentuated by constant references to other more wholesome environments. At the end of *Mary Barton*, Mary, Jem and his mother migrate to Canada to begin a new life away from Manchester. In *North and South*, the transfer of the Hale family from idyllic Helstone to Milton-Northern has a deleterious effect on the health of all family members and eventually leads to the death of Mrs. Hale.

Throughout both novels the author struggles to reconcile the benefits of progressivism as represented by an industrial city with the appalling human cost sustained by the resident work force. While acknowledging the material comforts which derive from industrialisation, both novels posit alternatives

which encompass conservatism and the more proven and accepted appeal of rural villages such as Helstone, cities such as Oxford and London, and even the Canadian wilderness. But the pervasive, inescapable presence in both novels is Manchester, constantly generating as it does its own sordid magnetism. Away from the centres of culture, Manchester (like so many cities in post-colonial literature) is dominant but inferior because of its unrestrained capacity for vulgarity and for inflicting human misery. The nature of the city always gives it uneasy value, even to its strongest proponents (like Thornton's mother in *North and South*).

Against this background characters in both novels attempt to establish their own rationale for human suffering. Almost all subscribe to theocratic assumptions and thus seek to understand suffering in terms of some divinely ordained purpose. Expressed opinions in both novels vary, however, from the acceptance of callous divine indifference to suffering, to the view that the purpose of suffering is to achieve a higher good or to provide a means of individual penance.

In *Mary Barton*, a great deal of suffering is graphically depicted. For her own part the author states that if she is given 'nobler and higher reasons for enduring meekly what my Father seeks to send, ... I will try earnestly and faithfully to be patient' (p. 301). This view is reflected in the comments of several characters [15]. God's plans are understood to usurp Man's best intentions [16] and to oppose the events God sends is considered to be blasphemy [17]. Alice is 'stricken of God and afflicted' [18] and characteristically 'patience' is a quality which is seen as desirable to accompany suffering. Blind Margaret speaks of patience as being 'the hardest work we, any of us, have to do through life' [19]. Jem displays 'meekness and patience' [20] in the face of suffering and Mary is 'resigned and submissive' [21] in similar circumstances.

But by far the most sustained discourse on suffering occurs at the end of the novel, with the conversation between the mill-hand, Job Legh, and the mill-owner, Carson. In discussing the problems of mechanisation in industry and the consequences for employees, Job concedes that such inventions are the 'gifts of God', despite the suffering they often bring. But he typically points to the responsibility of the employers in alleviating any suffering caused [22]. Blessing and duty coincide. He goes on to suggest that acceptance of the suffering brought about by industrial disputation is also made easier if the employers do all they can to assist with this hardship [23].

The willing submission to divinely ordained suffering is conditional upon all avenues of employer intervention having been exhausted. This emphasis on human responsibility indicates a consistent emphasis on moral accountability in Mrs. Gaskell's works. But its expression in such political terms is restricted to her earliest novels. The discussion concludes with the following authorial comment:

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 capability 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 recurrence to others as well as to themselves.

Hence the beautiful, noble efforts which are from time to time brought to light, as being continuously made by those who have once hung on the cross of agony, in order that others may not suffer as they have done; one of the grandest ends which sorrow can accomplish; the sufferer wrestling with God's messenger until a blessing is left behind, not for one alone but for generations. [24]

In the divine economy, suffering is again seen as purposeful. Throughout the novel there is a strong sense that, despite suffering, divine benevolence prevails. As stated elsewhere, a demonstrable influence on mid-Victorian Unitarian theology was the work of Joseph Priestley in the previous century. The following passage from the Preface to *An Essay on the First Principles of Government* (1771), by Priestley, indicates a similar understanding of the manner in which divine sovereignty overrides the flawed nature of human existence (presumably including suffering) to bring about some higher purpose:

Such is my belief in the doctrine of an overruling providence, that I have no doubt, but that everything in the whole system of nature, how noxious soever it may be in some respects, has real, though unknown uses; and also that every thing, even the grossest abuses in the civil or ecclesiastical constitution of particular states, is subservient to the wise and gracious designs of him, who, notwithstanding these appearances, still rules in the kingdoms of men.

Such an optimistic view of the nature of divine sovereignty is reminiscent of the views of the English poet, Alexander Pope, and more particularly the German philosopher, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646 - 1716). Leibniz believed that because God had given men and women the capacity to choose between good and evil, then the imperfect nature of the human species was deliberate. Thus God, constrained by this initial decision about human nature, could only create the best of all possible worlds, and that would always have elements of evil in it. So, in interpreting the human predicament, anything that seemed evil or cruel can ultimately be seen as part of God's plan. Natural disasters, the consequences of human greed and hatred, all can be explained in this way.

Voltaire attempted to point out the absurdity of this view. In Chapter 29 of *Candide*, Pangloss, having been 'hanged, dissected, whipped, and still tugging at the oar', still subscribes doggedly to Leibniz's view that regardless of outward appearances, harmony and purpose exist in the world.

But, indirectly, through Priestley and others, it is apparent that Leibniz's work made an impact on English Unitarian thought, and ultimately on the work of Elizabeth Gaskell [25].

There are, however, several passages in the later novel, *North and South*, which reveal the tendency Mrs. Gaskell often has in her fictional representations to project the possibility of a much darker, mechanistic and deterministic notion of divine order.

A startling example early in the novel is when Margaret Hale is faced with the prospect of leaving her much-loved village, Helstone for the industrial centre of Milton-Northern. Although the following extract indicates that Margaret felt herself to be wrong in her initial assumption, it suggests a recurrent, alternative possibility that the author is constantly exploring in her work.

She looked out upon the dark-gray lines of the church tower, square and straight in the centre of the view, cutting against the deep blue transparent depths beyond, into which she gazed, and felt that she might gaze for ever, seeing at every moment some farther distance, and yet no sign of God! It seemed to her at the moment, as if the earth was more utterly desolate than if girt in by an iron dome, behind which there might be the ineffaceable peace and glory of the Almighty: those never-ending depths of space, in their still serenity,

were more mocking to her than any material bounds could be - shutting in the cries of earth's sufferers, which now might ascend into the infinite splendour of vastness and be lost - lost for ever, before they reached His throne. In this mood her father came in unheard. The moonlight was strong enough to let him see his daughter in her unusual place and attitude. He came to her and touched her shoulder before she was aware that he was there. '

'Margaret, I heard you were up. I could not help coming in to ask you to pray with me - to say the Lord's Prayer; that will do good to both of us.'

Mr. Hale and Margaret knelt by the window-seat - he looking up, she bowed down in humble shame. God was there, close around them, hearing her father's whispered words. Her father might be a heretic; but had not she, in her despairing doubts not five minutes before, shown herself a far more utter sceptic?' [26]

The same possibility is entertained at the end of the novel, when Margaret, having passed through all the suffering of life in Milton-Northern, is again back at Helstone. Having lost her mother and father in the space of a few years and regretting her seemingly spoiled prospects for marriage, she is conscious of being swept along by forces beyond her control. Her capacity to control her life appears to be limited. But again she draws back from the initially stated position.

A sense of change, of individual nothingness, of perplexity and disappointment, overpowered Margaret. Nothing had been the same; and this slight, all-pervading instability, has given her greater pain than if all had been too entirely changed for her to recognise it.

'I begin to understand now what heaven must be - and, oh! the grandeur and repose of the words - 'The same yesterday, today, and for ever.' Everlasting! 'From everlasting to everlasting, Thou art God'. That sky above me looks as though it could not change, and yet it will. I am so tired - so tired of being whirled on through all these phases of my life, in which nothing abides by me, no creature, no place; it is like the circle in which the victims of earthly passion eddy continually. I am in the mood in which women of another religion take the veil. I seek heavenly steadfastness in earthly monotony. If I were a Roman Catholic and could deaden my heart, stun it with some great blow, I might become a nun. But I should pine after my kind; no, not my kind, for love of

my species could never fill my heart to the utter exclusion of love for individuals. Perhaps it ought to be so, perhaps not; I cannot decide to-night.'

Wearily she went to bed, wearily she rose again in four or five hours' time. But with the morning came hope, and a brighter view of things.

'After all it is right', said she, hearing the voices of children at play while she was dressing. 'If the world stood still, it would retrograde and become corrupt, if that is not Irish. Looking out of myself, and my own painful sense of change, the progress of all around me is right and necessary. I must not think so much of how circumstances affect me myself, but how they affect others, if I wish to make a right judgment, or a hopeful trustful heart.' [27]

In both the above examples, coming as they do at the beginning and end of *North and South*, Mrs. Gaskell presents, through Margaret Hale, a theologically radical proposition which she quickly modifies to one that is socially acceptable. In the first instance, Margaret is quickly shaken out of a vehement articulation of divine indifference by praying with her father. In the later passage, the same sense of personal helplessness in the face of human mutability and transience is soon accepted as inevitable and proper. The modifications of the initially expressed views, however, are largely unconvincing. Textually, the sustained vigour of Margaret's outbursts in support of an understanding of divine nature as indifferent or mechanistic is more likely to persuade the modern reader that this is the encoded message, the message which the author prefers the reader to accept.

The theological misgivings which lead Margaret's father, at the beginning of the novel, to relinquish his parish and to become a private tutor in Milton-Northern, appear to contribute to an inexorable dynamic which fashions the course of events in the lives of his family. Although the question as to whether Hale had to leave Helstone or not is later discussed [28], the inevitability of finally residing in the northern industrial city becomes the predominant metaphor of suffering in this novel, as in *Mary Barton*. Undoubtedly associated with the worst instances of witnessed suffering in the author's life, Manchester (or Milton-Northern) becomes a vortex which many are powerless to resist. It embodies, par excellence, the worst features of a relentless determinism in which free will is subsumed in overwhelming social forces. As there is small measure of divine opposition to the major

dislocation and distress created by such mid-Victorian industrialisation, it may even be interpreted as being consistent with divine purpose.

Occasionally, as noted elsewhere in Mrs. Gaskell's work, she stridently resists the notion of suffering as a punishment for moral abrogation. But this is not a position consistently espoused by her characters. Mrs. Hale believes that she is 'rightly punished' for never fully appreciating Helstone [29]; Hale himself later believes that he has been subjected to the 'cruellest martyrdom of suffering, through the suffering of one whom I loved' [30]; and Thornton implicitly acknowledges the existence of divine will in the question 'who has sent me my lot in life, both of good and of evil?' [31].

But it is in Margaret's encounter with the suffering Bessy Higgins that this issue is highlighted. Throughout the novel the reader's response to Bessy is directed towards an acceptance of the inevitability of her suffering and early death; a position reinforced in the following conversation. Her passive response to and interpretation of a bleak prognosis contrasts with Margaret's assertion that 'God does not willingly afflict'. The latter position allows for the possibility of Bessy's recovery, as it does in *Cousin Phillis*, where a similar repudiation is made by the Revd. Holman, and his daughter Phillis does finally recover from her illness [32].

'... Oh, Bessy, God is just, and our lots are well portioned out by him, although none but He knows the bitterness of our souls.'

'I ask your pardon,' replied Bessy, humbly.
'Sometimes, when I've thought o' my life, and the little pleasure I've had in it, I've believed that, maybe, I was one of those doomed to die by the falling of a star from heaven: 'And the name of the star is called Wormwood; and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and men died of the waters, because they were made bitter.' One can bear pain and sorrow better if one thinks it has been prophesied long before for one: somehow, then it seems as if my pain was needed for the fulfilment; otherwise it seems all sent for nothing.'

'Nay, Bessy - think!' said Margaret. 'God does not willingly afflict. Don't dwell so much on the prophecies, but read the clearer parts of the Bible'. [33]

So, throughout both *Mary Barton* and *North and South* the theological implications of suffering are explored in a setting which highlights some of the inherent ambiguities of industrialisation. Both novels leave the reader

with contradictory messages about the source of suffering, and indicate the author's recognition of the alternatives possible in a theological interpretation of suffering.

The Life of Charlotte Brontë

Towards the end of Charlotte Brontë's life, she and Elizabeth Gaskell are recorded in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* [34] as having a theological discussion concerning the issue of 'sorrow and disappointment'. In view of Elizabeth Gaskell's prevalent acceptance in her literary works of the rigid constraints of determinism, it is surprising that in this discussion she favours a less encompassing sense than Charlotte of the individual human condition as being foreordained. From her personal experience of repeated sorrow, Charlotte's background is obviously divergent from that of Elizabeth Gaskell, whose major sorrows in life, as she grew older, further receded behind her continued domestic security and social success.

We talked about the different courses through which life ran. She said, in her own composed manner, as if she had accepted the theory as a fact, that she believed some were appointed beforehand to sorrow and much disappointment; that it did not fall to the lot of all - as Scripture told us - to have their lines fall in pleasant places; that it was well for those who had rougher paths, to perceive that such was God's will concerning them, and try to moderate their expectations, leaving hope to those of a different doom, and seeking patience and resignation as the virtues they were to cultivate. I took a different view: I thought that human lots were more equal than she imagined; that to some happiness and sorrow came in strong patches of light and sorrow, (so to speak), while in the lives of others they were pretty equally blended throughout. She smiled, and shook her head, and said she was trying to school herself against ever anticipating any pleasure; that it was better to be brave and submit faithfully; there was some good reason, which we should know in time, why sorrow and disappointment were to be the lot of some on earth. It was better to acknowledge this, and to face out the truth in a religious faith. [35]

Elizabeth Gaskell's sense that 'happiness and sorrow came in strong patches of light and shadow' or 'pretty equally blended' is reflected in the

letter she later wrote to John Greenwood, the stationer at Haworth, in which she imposes her own understanding of the human condition on the views of her recently deceased friend.

But remember how brave she was, all through her many sorrows; and to whom she always looked as the Sender of Sunshine and of Storm. She was a wonderful creature, and her life was wonderfully appointed; full of suffering as it was. [36]

Charlotte reflects on little 'sunshine' in the earlier discussion.

The text of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* belies the balance between happiness and sorrow that Elizabeth Gaskell espouses. When Kingsley read the biography he spoke of it as 'the picture of a valiant woman made perfect by suffering' [37]. Any brief respite from the portrayal of suffering is subsumed in the overriding impression created for Kingsley. For the biography repeatedly reminds the reader of the appropriateness of 'patience' and 'resignation', of the need willingly to submit to divinely sanctioned suffering and sorrow.

Near to death, Maria Branwell, Charlotte's mother, is 'patient, cheerful and pious' [38]. Later the suffering mother is again described as a 'patient, cheerful person' [39]. Charlotte's sister, the Helen Burns of *Jane Eyre*, is spoken of as her 'gentle, patient, dying sister' [40]. Charlotte displays 'gentle resignation' when ridiculed by her peers at school [41]. In a sustained discussion of these qualities, the Rev. Brontë, prior to his cataract operation, displays exemplary behaviour: 'Under his great sorrow he was always patient' [42]. The same qualities are referred to in quotations from letters used by Elizabeth Gaskell throughout the biography [43].

This then is the unresolved position adopted by Elizabeth Gaskell in much of her work. The reader is left with a sense of unresolved ambiguities, in that, while a purposeful agenda of atonement through suffering is frequently provided, there at times remains the very real prospect that it is no more than cruel and meaningless. The expressions of passive acceptance that accompany suffering reinforce the impression that it is divinely ordained. But, in industrial terms, this is challenged in the more humanistic assertions that a great deal can be done to achieve better working conditions in the mills and thus reduce suffering. At best, suffering is a means of reconciling

the wayward with a benevolent God. At worst, it is a convenient misappropriation of blame in a society so obviously in need of reform. The tacit acceptance of the latter view is borne out to a greater extent than anywhere else in the progressivism expressed by the Rev. Ebenezer Holman in *Cousin Phillis*, and the Christian compassion expressed by the Rev. Thurstan Benson in *Ruth*. Both will be discussed in the next part.

Part 2

There are moments in the works of Elizabeth Gaskell when the pervasive nature of moral determinism refreshingly subsides and other more liberating influences are operative. This is particularly the case in *Ruth* (1853), where the agency of divine grace is an effective counterpoint to the moral determinism undergirding that novel. In a different sense it is true also of *Cousin Phillis* (1865), which, coming at the end of her writing career, confidently and most effectively expresses an acceptance of more liberal ideas.

Ruth

Mrs. Gaskell's controversial novel *Ruth* (1853), deals with a young orphaned woman who falls under the influence of Bellingham, a casual acquaintance, while she is working for Mrs. Mason as an apprenticed dressmaker [44]. When the dictatorial Mrs. Mason discovers that Ruth has been accompanying Bellingham on a country ramble she dismisses her and Bellingham exploits the situation by offering to provide for Ruth. She subsequently has a son, Leonard, after Bellingham has abandoned her. Fortunately for Ruth, however, she is rescued by Thurstan Benson, a nonconformist minister (probably Unitarian [45]) who is holidaying in Wales at the time of her desertion. He and his sister Faith take Ruth into their home, where she is declared to be a widowed relative, a ploy to make Ruth acceptable to some of Benson's legalistic congregation. Ruth ultimately demonstrates, even after the revelation of her past, that she is a worthy member of Eccleston society by living an upright life and sacrificially nursing the many victims of the typhus epidemic which decimates the local community.

A critical point in the novel comes when the Reverend Benson intervenes to rescue Ruth from the plight which almost overwhelms her [46]. At this point grace becomes operative. Grace is not a commonly delineated theological concept in the climate of the residual Priestleyan necessarianism (a form of determinism [47]) which pervaded mid-nineteenth century Unitarianism. And generally Mrs. Gaskell tacitly accepts the constraints of determinism in much of her work, a reflection one must assume of some formative influences earlier in her life [48]. The denial to the individual of triumph over circumstances is apparent in the resolutions of several novels, particularly *Sylvia's Lovers*. In such a deterministic context, where God is less than personal, grace is not usually a relevant option. In addition, the Unitarian denial of substitutionary atonement contributes to a lower view of grace, for the doctrine of Christ's atoning death is generally acknowledged by orthodox Christians as the ultimate expression of grace. Without it only a generalised sense of God's undeserved favour remains. So Thurstan's intervention, obviously identifiable as an embodiment of grace [49], comes by surprise. That grace is operative through human agency does not invalidate its effectiveness. Ironically, in fact, it is consistent with a Pelagian emphasis within Unitarianism on human conduct [50] implicit in Christ's primary role as moral exemplar rather than substitutionary redeemer. In a climate where humanism affects all modes of thought (including the theological) the ennobling qualities of Christ are readily appropriated by humankind.

What makes Thurstan Benson's behaviour problematic as an outworking of grace is that he tells a lie in order that Ruth's past may be concealed. Later he has to face up to the ramifications of an action which makes it difficult for him to survive economically when his affronted members leave the church. In his attempt to save Ruth from the traditional and seemingly unavoidable consequence of sexual misdemeanour in a mid-Victorian novel (life and probably death in a penitentiary) Thurstan may be seen as subverting his own effectiveness as an instrument of divine grace. That is, unless it is possible in some way to divorce his act of loving concern from the ethical ramifications of a lie, however seemingly inconsequential and uncharacteristic of him. On the one hand this would appear to be difficult in light of Mrs. Gaskell's insistence elsewhere that one is always accountable for personal behaviour (an attitude consistent with Unitarian teaching). The fact that Thurstan later acknowledges his guilt reinforces this understanding. The

lie could thus be seen as a major moral determinant in assessing the overall endeavour of Thurstan to rescue Ruth. But, on the other hand, as grace is divine in origin, the flawed nature of its human expression (the chosen manner in which God's unmerited favour is dispensed in this instance) does not invalidate the overall divine initiative of placing a benevolent man in the right place at the right time. It could be argued that the fact that Thurstan makes an error of judgement is not ultimately of great importance and is well overridden by the dynamic of grace, which unleashes enormous potential for spiritual reconciliation at many levels throughout the novel. This appears to be the better conclusion. The novel thus pivots on the decision on Thurstan's part to intervene respectfully, and he becomes a continuing agent of divine grace in the subsequent problems faced by Ruth. By the end of the novel the steady, ever-present Benson (and his sister Faith) have played a major role in restoring Ruth's personal and social integrity.

Leonard's birth is seen by Thurstan as a means of reconciling Ruth with God. He states this quite explicitly to Faith:

'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.' [51]

Ruth loves Leonard and expresses at several points her thankfulness and commitment to God. At Leonard's christening she

came to the presence of God, as one who had gone astray, and doubted her own worthiness to be called His child; she came as a mother who had incurred a heavy responsibility, and one who entreated His almighty aid to enable her to discharge it; full of passionate, yearning love which craved for more faith in God, to still her distrust and fear of the future that might hang over her darling. When she thought of her boy, she sickened and trembled; but when she heard of God's loving kindness, far beyond all tender mother's love, she was hushed into peace and prayer. [52]

The novel concludes with Leonard being gently led home from his mother's grave by Bradshaw, the hard-nosed member of Benson's church who had objected to Ruth's presence and influence on his household as a governess when he discovered that she was a 'fallen woman'. Leonard ironically becomes a symbol of reconciliation, and his 'advent' becomes all that Thurstan predicted it would.

Leonard's birth in *Ruth* may appear as a radical theophany if one considers that in this novel the birth of an illegitimate child alludes to Christ's incarnation. It is radical in the sense that it seems unacceptable to align the consequences of an illicit relationship in the novel with the many ascribed, positive associations of divine intervention in human history through the virgin birth. While it is possible, in human terms, to argue that Christ was illegitimate, such a view is theologically contentious. It would have been even less acceptable in Victorian society, where moral categories were acted upon with greater rigour, especially in the area of sexual behaviour.

Yet this is what Mrs. Gaskell achieves in *Ruth*. From the moment Thurstan Benson becomes aware of Ruth's pregnancy he makes that connection. In coalescing his thoughts he responds to the concerns of Faith, his sister: 'Faith, do you know I rejoice in this child's advent' [53]. The word 'advent' immediately triggers the comparison in the reader and from this point it is perpetuated in constantly recurring incarnational imagery.

Leonard, in Thurstan's mind, immediately assumes salvific qualities. Thurstan suggests that he may be 'God's messenger to lead her back to Him' [54] and reverence for the child 'will shut out sin, - will be purification' [55]. A little later he elaborates on this by suggesting 'that if the present occasion be taken rightly, and used well, all that is good in her may be raised to a height unmeasured but by God; while all that is evil and dark may, by His blessing, fade and disappear in the pure light of her child's presence' [56]. Within the parameters of Unitarian doctrine Leonard is to go some way to provide for Ruth's redemption. Her love for and attention to the child is to become a means of personal sanctification and acceptability before God.

Incarnational imagery with reference to Leonard is maintained throughout the novel. In the same way that Christ's advent is described in terms of 'light' (John 1: 1-9) so the hope of Leonard's presence is described as 'pure light' or 'a beacon'. His purity and holiness are constantly affirmed. He is described as 'a new, pure, beautiful, innocent life', 'innocent and good', an 'innocent babe'. He is 'God's messenger', 'holy, mysterious', a 'holy and sacred creature'. He provides for Ruth 'her one treasure' and 'only point of hope' [57]. All such references to Leonard consolidate the comparison.

In addition, Ruth is seen as a madonna figure, 'the gentle, blessed mother, who had made her childhood's home holy ground' and Leonard's birth is a

nativity scene: 'The earth was still hiding her guilty front with innocent snow when a little baby was laid by the side of the pale white mother' [58].

Although one must acknowledge that a *via dolorosa* of sickness, suffering and even death also seem to be necessary to achieve Ruth's ultimate redemption (her untimely death was objected to by Charlotte Brontë; see Footnote 7 in Chapter Four) Leonard nevertheless in large measure provides the basis for such redemption. The following passage points to the fact that Thurstan's prediction is ultimately correct:

Her whole heart was in her boy. She often feared that she loved him too much - more than God himself - yet she could not bear to pray to have her love for her child lessened. But she would kneel down by his little bed at night - with the stars that kept watch over Rizpah shining down upon her, and tell God what I have now told you, that she feared she loved her child too much, yet could not, would not, love him less; and speak to Him of her one treasure as she could speak to no earthly friend. And so, unconsciously, her love for her child led her up to love to God, to the All-knowing, who read her heart. [59]

The radical nature of the comparison between Leonard and Christ is thus raised, maintained and then emphatically resolved in Thurstan's later ideological conflict with Bradshaw, his legalistic church member, over the action the former took in shielding Ruth. Without condoning Ruth's behaviour Thurstan uncompromisingly aligns Christ's teachings and ministry with the plight of the socially marginalised. While acknowledging his mistake in deceiving Bradshaw and Eccleston society, he makes no apology for what he has been seeking to do in protecting Ruth by claiming that she was a widowed relative:

'Is it not time to change some of our ways of thinking and acting? I declare before God, that if I believe in any one human truth, it is this - that to every woman, who, like Ruth, has sinned, should be given a chance of self-redemption - and that such a chance should be given in no supercilious or contemptuous manner, but in the spirit of the holy Christ.' [60]

The question of legitimacy is significant in *Ruth*. Intrigued as one may be initially by the comparison between Leonard and Christ, one can finally observe that against the background of the pharisaism that Bradshaw represents, a radical reconstituting of Christian values in mid-Victorian

society is necessary. Through Benson the reader has been alerted to the possible illegitimacy of Christ's being, example and teaching in a society which has distorted Christian truth to the extent that those in greatest need are shunned by the Church. Thus the comparison is validated [61]. Through Leonard, an iconoclastic sense of Christ's ministry is presented and shown to appropriate the needs of a 'fallen woman'. Christian society in the text, as represented by Bradshaw, lacks the capacity to find an appropriate response to immoral behaviour or a lie told in love.

The response to the publication of *Ruth* demonstrates the radicalism of Mrs. Gaskell's treatment of this theme. Her philanthropic work with women such as Pasley demonstrated that in mid-Victorian society there was a significant difference between those mores espoused by most Christians and the outworking of such in society at large.

Mrs. Gaskell's sympathetic portrayal of a nonconformist minister and the manner in which she allows a very negative experience to be transformed by divine grace into a life-changing influence for good, reflect the strong commitment she had as a Unitarian to the ultimate benevolence of God. In a world overshadowed by an excessively negative eschatology, the Unitarian position featured a belief in God's benevolence quite prominently. In addition Unitarianism, although on the fringe of what was considered to be orthodoxy, reflected a strong alignment in mid-century with many traditional tenets of Christian belief. God existed and moral categories were important in Mrs. Gaskell's world.

This is borne out through the novel *Ruth*. At times of rejoicing, sorrow and anxiety Ruth calls on God. She is brought up with a Christian understanding and returns to that dependence after Thurstan Benson assists her. Although essentially a doctrine of redemption through suffering [62] which pervades Ruth's Christian experience in the novel (a position adopted in part by Unitarians) God is nevertheless relevant at all points in Ruth's restoration.

Cousin Phillis

In *Cousin Phillis* (1865) there appears to be a significant clarification of the notion of moral determinism. Throughout the novella the Rev. Ebenezer Holman is presented as a character to be admired. He embodies many of those qualities valued by mid-nineteenth century Unitarians. He respects

education, yet is practical and hard-working. His physical demeanour exudes strength, vigour and commonsense. Scientific and technological advances are of great interest to him, yet held in balance with an appreciation of the natural world. His faith is obviously non-credal and anti-dogmatic. He is caring and sensitive.

It is not surprising, therefore, that this liberal and affable clergyman becomes the measure by which the reader assesses the visit of Brother Robinson and his colleagues to Holman at the time of Phillis's severe illness. When Robinson exhorts Holman to demonstrate 'an example of resignation', he reacts adversely to the use of the word because it seems to presuppose 'that the dreaded misery of losing Phillis was inevitable'. He sums up his reaction to such advice with the statement: 'Brethren, God will strengthen me when the time comes, when such resignation as you speak of is needed. Till then I cannot feel it, and what I do not feel I will not express; using words as if they were a charm' [63].

Pressed even harder by the two visitors to repent of the sins which have brought about this 'trial' (they offer suggestions), he repudiates the notion of divine punishment for sin: 'I hold with Christ that afflictions are not sent by God in wrath as penalties for sin' [64]. This confident dismissal by Holman of the oppressive notion of wrathful, divine punishment for behaviour which transgresses the moral order, clarifies our understanding of Mrs. Gaskell's later view of moral determinism. Assuming that a strong causal relationship between moral transgression and human hardship is accepted, as it seems to be in Mrs. Gaskell's novels and short stories, two alternatives remain. One is that the correlation between transgression and hardship is independent of any divine mind, just a fixed law of creation. This is not an alien notion in Unitarianism. But evidence from other novels, particularly *Ruth*, and tentatively in the latter section of *Sylvia's Lovers*, suggests a personal, benevolent divine being in existence whose purposes are other than recriminatory. While it is impossible in Mrs. Gaskell's work to avoid the consequences of moral abrogation, the consequent hardship is often depicted as a means of reconciliation. The Unitarian notion of atonement through suffering allows for Ruth and Philip Hepburn, central transgressors in two novels, to be reconciled to God and their fellows. The arid, impersonal and mechanistic notion of moral determinism is thus seen in a much more vital and positive manner.

Conclusion

Throughout the preceding chapter it has been demonstrated that the works of Elizabeth Gaskell reflect a strong indebtedness to the Priestleyan emphasis on moral determinism, but that this emphasis declines as her writing career progresses. These conclusions are based on a wide and representative selection of texts, including novels, novellas, short stories, a biography and a diary.

Of equal significance is the sense of interdependence that occurs across the range of her work, both within or between texts. Some (e.g. *Ruth*) carefully maintain a tension between moral determinism and divine grace, while in others the emphasis is more convincingly in favour of one aspect. Finally, however, one senses that the polarities of moral determinism and divine grace are mutually dependent and that one cannot be subsumed by the other. Aspects of determinism still linger in those texts which seek most to express divinely fostered human progressivism (e.g. *Cousin Phillis*), personal freedom, or divine intervention of a more starkly dramatic kind (e.g. *Ruth*). In the darkest moments of those works depicting rigid determinism a solid commitment to divine benevolence abides. The binary opposition of moral determinism and divine grace is employed in the context of a thoroughly conceived Unitarian commitment to a high view of moral conduct and accountability, as well as a high view of divine benevolence and its accompanying emphasis on a universalistic eschatology. In Unitarian doctrine, as in some other Protestant traditions of this time, it was possible to marry the two extremes. A Unitarian explanation of the balance would suggest that those not abiding by the divinely established moral framework are subject to whatever atoning process is necessary, but that when the process of restitution is complete all are assured of eternal salvation. Thus moral accountability and divine benevolence are made inseparable.

Although it can be accepted as a generalisation that throughout her work Mrs. Gaskell relinquishes much of her emphasis on moral determinism, this shift from one extreme to another continued throughout her writing career and can be demonstrated in some interesting examples.

The two stories by Elizabeth Gaskell entitled 'Half a Lifetime Ago' (1855) (discussed in detail earlier in Chapter Two) and 'Six Weeks at Heppenheim' (1862) are divergent treatments of a remarkably similar theme [65]. Both stories involve a young woman's rejection of a proposal of marriage. But, in

the earlier story, an oppressive sense of moral determinism overrides free will and any possibility of happiness, whereas in the later story divine grace is more obviously operative and a satisfactory resolution to life's difficulties is attainable.

In 'Half a Lifetime Ago', Susan Dixon rejects Michael Hurst's offer because she is committed to caring for her orphaned and mentally ill younger brother. Her promise, at the time of her mother's death, to accept this responsibility, leads to a protracted and debilitating commitment and a lifetime of extreme loneliness. By contrast, in 'Six Weeks at Heppenheim', the rejection by Thekla, the German girl, of one suitor, Franz Weber, soon leads to another proposal and a more promising prospect of happiness.

What further establishes a striking congruence between the two stories is that both are centrally concerned with their young female protagonists accepting responsibility for nursing sick children. In 'Half a Lifetime Ago', Susan Dixon nurses her younger brother, Will, over a long period of time. In 'Six Weeks at Heppenheim', Thekla nurses the sick child of her employer, Fritz Muller, when the infant becomes seriously ill after the grape harvest. She also nurses the narrator of the story, a touring Englishman, and it is during the period of his convalescence that the crisis surrounding Thekla's broken relationship develops.

The dissimilar manner in which the simple stories of Susan Dixon and Thekla unfold, however, demonstrates a significantly different theological vantage point in each case. In 'Half a Lifetime Ago', Susan's attempts to find happiness are dispelled by the grim reality of her commitment to care for her brother. The death of her parents plunges her into sorrow [66] and she is forced into the choice between her brother's needs and the selfish demands of her suitor, Michael Hurst. The disappointment of having to make a difficult choice is effectively conveyed in the image of the broken paper windmill, a toy with which Will at one point seeks to cheer up his disconsolate sister.

... He came back in a trice, bringing with him his cherished paper windmill, bought on that fatal day when Michael had taken him to Kendal to have his doom of perpetual idiocy pronounced. He thrust it into Susan's face, her hands, her lap, regardless of the injury his frail plaything thereby received. He leapt before her to think how he had cured all heart-sorrow, buzzing louder than ever. Susan looked up at him, and that

glance of her sad eyes sobered him. He began to whimper, he knew not why: and she now, comforter in her turn, tried to soothe him by twirling his windmill. But it was broken; it made no noise; it would not go round. This seemed to afflict Susan more than him. She tried to make it right, although she saw the task was hopeless; and while she did so, the tears rained down unheeded from her bent head on the paper toy.

'It won't do', said she, at last. 'It will never do again.' And somehow, she took the accident and her words as omens of the love that was broken, and that she feared could never be pieced together again. She rose up and took Willie's hand, and the two went slowly into the house. [67]

The image is more than one of a broken love relationship. It is a full recognition of the implications of her promise to her mother to care for Will. The scene is pervaded by a tone of resignation and submission to a grim moral imperative.

It is quickly followed by the scene in which Susan receives small comfort from her elderly servant, Peggy, who reassures her that the difficulties of the human predicament are soon made meaningless by the transience of life [68]. Authorial comment later suggests that through her doubts Susan reaches a point where she is 'capable once more of taking pleasure in following an unseen guide through briar and brake' [69]. But the comfortable resignation expressed here is overstated and not borne out in subsequent events.

The attempted reconciliation between estranged parties at the end of the story, when Susan decides to care for her former suitor's widow and children, is but an extension of a life compelled to find its *raison d'être* in service to others. In this story the strictures of determinism seem never to be lessened.

By contrast, in 'Six Weeks at Heppenheim', the same constraining sense of commitment to duty, although evident, is easily relieved. Thekla's feelings of responsibility for Franz Weber, her childhood love, are quickly dispensed with when his true nature is discovered. While Susan Dixon's responsibility to her younger brother coincidentally worsens after her final breach with Michael Hurst, Thekla's attention to her master's sick baby son provides the catalyst for her to realise her love for this kind spinster. Rather than personal suffering becoming a mechanism for further restricting self determination, as

in 'Half a Lifetime Ago', in the later story it becomes a means of unexpectedly uncovering life's better possibilities.

Ironically, 'Six Weeks at Heppenheim' is introduced to the reader as a 'sad little story' [70]. It proves to be much less so than 'Half a Lifetime Ago'. For in the fictional world of Heppenheim divine grace is operative. The happy outcome of the story is foreshadowed by a scene in the grape harvest when a popular German harvest-hymn is sung. With reassuring simplicity it acknowledges God as the provider of 'all good gifts' [71]. Immediately after this scene the master's little son falls ill, but after such an expression of divine goodness it would have been a cruel irony if he had not recovered.

It is difficult to offer satisfactory biographical explanations for the very different nature of these two stories. But the move in the later story towards a fictional representation of a life in which greater personal freedom is possible is consistent with a similar trend in much of Elizabeth Gaskell's work.

What can be supported biographically is that with the increasing financial security, domestic comfort and personal recognition of her later years, some of the traumas and uncertainties of her earlier life became less psychologically oppressive. The early loss of her own parents, a brother at sea, and an infant son in the first years of marriage, were compensated for by the companionship and support she received from her husband and four daughters and an ever-widening circle of friends [72].

It is also apparent that her wide reading and the social and cultural milieu to which she belonged exposed her to more liberalising influences within society and served largely to free her from some of the restrictive elements within Unitarian doctrine. Quite apart from the increase in technical sophistication evident in later works such as *Wives and Daughters* (1864-66), particularly in comparison with earlier works such as *Mary Barton* (1848), the acceptance, in her characterisation, of an unmitigated accountability to divine expectations is significantly lessened.

This, of course, in the broad spectrum of her oeuvre, is reinforced by many of the thematic concerns of her earlier novels. *Mary Barton* (1848), *Ruth* (1852) and *North and South* (1854-5) all deal with the darker side of life in industrialised England. They are inherently concerned with issues which might engender a strong authorial response to the tensions and enigmas of any notion of a divinely sanctioned moral framework being operative in such

a context. For any author this issue was not easy to resolve in a society where basic human rights were in conflict with equally justifiable national interests. The shift in her later work, to settings and concerns which focus more on the rural idyll so reflective of her youth, removes much of the urgency for theological explanations to pressing socio-economic dilemmas.

Nevertheless, this does not suffice to explain the difference between these two stories, both of which do have rural settings, and yet, tonally, are so divergent. Both stories deal with young women confronted equally by the potential hazards of life. But for each, from the outset, the prospect of future happiness is so markedly different. The sense that the two stories depict antithetical divine responses to the human condition is indicated, as much as anything else, by the description of the natural environment in each story.

The references to darkness in 'Half a Lifetime Ago' contrast with the references to light in 'Six Weeks at Heppenheim'. Read in conjunction, the two stories provide, in this respect, a binary opposition akin to the chiaroscuro effect achieved in painting.

In 'Half a Lifetime Ago' the reader is introduced from the outset to an oppressive darkness in the description of the deserted house where Susan Dixon once lived:

Some miles on this side of Coniston there is a farmstead - a grey stone house, and a square of farm-buildings surrounding a green space of rough turf, in the midst of which stands a mighty, funereal umbrageous yew, making a solemn shadow, as of death, in the very heart and centre of the light and heat of the brightest summer day. [73]

The yew becomes representative of Susan's predicament, for it is under this tree that she first fully realises the insanity of her brother, Willie [74].

When Susan is anticipating a reunion with her lover, or reflecting on happier days spent with him, the natural landscape is described in all its beauty [75]. But this is a transient and illusory expectation compared with the tone of helpless acquiescence conveyed through the description of bleak landscape and weather. Setting off one winter evening to see Michael Hurst, now her estranged suitor, she waits for sight of him in the shelter of an 'old wreck of a yew-tree' [76]. Years later, on the night when she discovers him close to death in the snow, the weather and landscape are dramatically aligned with the situation soon to confront Susan:

The day had been keen, and piercingly cold. The whole lift of heaven seemed a dome of iron. Black and frost-bound was the earth under the cruel east wind. [77]

At the time when Susan sets out to tell Michael Hurst's wife of his death, the description is similarly of darkness:

The grey, solemn, winter's noon was more night-like than the depth of summer's night; dim-purple brooded the low skies over the white earth [78]

By contrast, in 'Six Weeks at Heppenheim', the references to sunshine are numerous. The narrator enjoys 'the last warm rays of the slanting sun' and in his convalescence the window has to be shaded to keep out the morning sun. Later, he looks out at 'the sunny atmosphere of the garden outside' [79]. His improvement, despite German reservations, appears to be commensurate with the amount of sunshine to which he is exposed.

It was a hot, sunshiny day, and I craved for air. Fresh air does not enter into the pharmacopoeia of a German doctor; but somehow I obtained my wish. During the morning hours the window through which the sun streamed - the window looking on to the front court - was opened a little; and through it I heard the sounds of active life, which gave me pleasure and interest enough. [80]

The grape harvest takes place on a 'sunny hillside' and roofs of the nearby houses are described as 'glowing in the noonday sun'. During the crisis with her employer's little boy, the narrator awakens from bad dreams to 'broad daylight' [81].

The darkness and light in these two stories is metaphorically indicative of the complementarity in Elizabeth Gaskell's work of two antithetical doctrinal positions. The treatment of Susan Dixon in 'Half a Lifetime Ago' is more typical of her early work and highlights a more severe notion of moral determinism and divine accountability. Thekla's treatment in 'Six Weeks at Heppenheim' suggests a greater acknowledgement of divine grace and the divinely sanctioned human capacity to triumph over hardship. The binary nature of these two extremes is maintained throughout her work, despite the fact that there is a gradual shift in emphasis from the strictures of the harsher view to a greater acceptance of unqualified divine benevolence and personal freedom. With this understanding the marked difference between the two stories is much easier to accommodate.

NOTES

- 1 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Ruth*, p. 324.
- 2 *ibid.*, pp. 323-324.
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 36.
- 4 *ibid.*, p. 200. An obvious comparison can be made here with *Silas Marner* (1861), by George Eliot. Just as Leonard has a salvific function for Ruth, so the child Effie has a similar function for Silas in the later novel.
- 5 *ibid.*, p. 272.
- 6 *ibid.*, p. 274.
- 7 *ibid.*, p. 333.
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 142.
- 9 *ibid.*, p. 311.
- 10 *ibid.*, pp. 100-101.
- 11 *ibid.*, pp. 453-454.
- 12 *ibid.*, p. 83.
- 13 *ibid.*, p. 313.
- 14 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *North and South*, Penguin Classics, 1986, first published 1854-5.

At one or two points in this dissertation the term 'vortex' is used to describe the dire effects of Manchester on displaced rural communities who sought employment there. Engels also uses the term to refer to the effects of industrialisation on English life in *The Condition of the Working-Class in England*. He states '... in diesen allgemeinen Strudel der Bewegung wurde alles hineingerissen'. Quoted in Marcus, Steven, *Engels, Manchester and the Working Class*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1974, p. 141.

- 15 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Mary Barton*, p. 301.
- 16 *ibid.*, p. 117.
- 17 *ibid.*, p. 151.

- 18 *ibid.*, p. 268.
- 19 *ibid.*, p. 190.
- 20 *ibid.*, p. 405.
- 21 *ibid.*, p. 443.
- 22 *ibid.*, p. 457.
- 23 *ibid.*, p. 458.
- 24 *ibid.*, p. 459.
- 25 Priestley, Joseph, *An Essay on the First Principles of Government*, 2nd. Edn., London, 1771, Preface. See also Voltaire, *Candide*, introduction by H.N. Brailsford, J.M. Dent, London, 1937. For a discussion of Leibniz see notes on the Oxford University Press edition of *Candide*, edited and introduced by J.H. Brumfitt, in 1968, p. 187.
- 26 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *North and South*, pp. 76-77.
- 27 *ibid.*, pp. 488-489. Tonally, this passage is reminiscent of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, published in 1850, just four years before *North and South*. In a letter to Eliza Fox in 1850, Elizabeth Gaskell summarises Tennyson's influential work as 'a book to brood over - oh how perfect some of them are - I can't leave them to go on to others, and yet I must send it back tomorrow' (*The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, No. 73). By August that year she owned a copy of her own (*The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, No. 79).

The fictional works of Elizabeth Gaskell frequently embody an implicit concern with the possibility of disorder. Written in the shadow of a prolonged period of political unrest in France, and set, in Britain, against a recent history of industrial disputation and social marginalisation for those involved in the Unitarian movement, it is not surprising that Mrs. Gaskell was acutely aware of the fragile nature of social stability. Add to this the strong Victorian sense of human frailty, exacerbated by recurrent, decimating epidemics; a range of profound social changes brought about by the industrial revolution; and the emergence of radical critical processes and theories such as German Higher Criticism and Darwinism; then the extensive range of factors contributing to this possibility is recognised.

Some of her works display this unease more than others. The French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars are an integral factor for personal change in *My Lady Ludlow* and *Sylvia's Lovers* respectively, and the recognition of inescapable social flux is central to both *Cousin Phillis* and *Wives and Daughters*. *Cranford* depicts a rural haven constantly threatened by the intrusion of disruptive influences. *Ruth*, *Mary Barton* and *North and South* immerse the reader in the grim realities of social conflict, perceived moral decline, and resultant confusion. While Elizabeth Gaskell recognises the inevitability of change (the ending of *Cousin Phillis* is a good example) a wistful desire for a former, idealised England (as represented by Cranford and Helstone in *North and South*) occasionally turns into muted alarm at the precipitous nature of such change.

When Margaret Hale, in the passage quoted from the end of *North and South*, realises, with disappointment, what a crisis the events of the preceding years have created for her, her personal rejoinder is also a universalised response to the encroaching forces of the disorder with which she is surrounded. Although a temporary state for Margaret, it indicates that the author acknowledges the potential for an existential crisis in a world of change.

After passing through many exotic but trying experiences, Burton, in 'The Shah's English Gardener' (1852), a little-known short story by Elizabeth Gaskell, returns to the safety of England:

The remembrance of Mr. Burton's Oriental life must be in strange contrast to the regular, well-ordered comfort of his present existence. (p. 603)

What the author fails to recognise in this statement, unlike in her other work, is that such safety is illusory. Within the seemingly safe province of her narrative concerns, disorder, even chaos, is a distinct possibility. Such sentiments are reminiscent of similar lines from the well known hymn, 'Abide With Me', in which the hymn writer, Henry Francis Lyte (1793-1847), observes that 'change and decay in all around I see.'

28 Gaskell, Elizabeth, op. cit., p. 466.

29 ibid., p. 177.

30 ibid., p. 430.

31 ibid., p. 517.

- 32 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Cousin Phillis*, p. 351.
- 33 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *North and South*, pp. 186-187.
- 34 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Penguin Classics, 1985, first published 1857.
- 35 *ibid.*, p. 510.
- 36 Chapple, J.A.V., and Pollard, Arthur, *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, Manchester University Press, 1966, Letter No. 238, May 5th., 1855.
- 37 Quoted in Gérin, Winifred, *Elizabeth Gaskell (A Biography)*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1976, p. 257.
- 38 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, p. 83.
- 39 *ibid.*, p. 87.
- 40 *ibid.*, p. 104.
- 41 *ibid.*, p. 164.
- 42 *ibid.*, p. 301.
- 43 *ibid.*, pages 108, 170, 354.
- 44 The fictional precedents for the plight of the oppressed needleworker as depicted in *Ruth* are outlined in Wheeler, M.D., 'Elizabeth Gaskell's use of literary sources in *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*', unpublished doctoral dissertation, London University College, 1975.
- 45 Thurstan Benson was probably based on the Rev. William Turner, a Unitarian minister from Newcastle who was known to Mrs. Gaskell. He was renowned for his ministry to the poor and needy in that city. See Gérin, Winifred, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, pp. 132-134.
- 46 Refer back to the beginning of Part One of this Chapter.
- 47 For a full discussion of the impact of necessarianism (or necessitarianism) on Unitarianism see Webb, R.K., 'The Gaskells as Unitarians', in *Dickens and Other Victorians*, edited by Joanne Shattock, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1988.
- 48 See, for example, a sermon by William Turner entitled 'Resignation and submission under the afflictive dispensation of providence', a sermon

preached on the death of James Losh, (1833). This sermon is further referred to in Chapter Eight.

- 49 Grace is symbolically demonstrated when Ruth first meets Benson. Seeing that she needs assistance to cross the rushing stream before her, he says: 'The water is very rapid; will you take my hand? Perhaps I can help you.' See Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Ruth*, p. 67.

Dr. Kenn, in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and the Rev. Thurstan Benson, in *Ruth* (1852), provide an interesting parallel and contrast with regard to the issue of clergymen acting as agents of grace. In both novels the main female protagonists, Maggie and Ruth respectively, receive support and encouragement from these clergymen. Maggie's reputation is in question after a reckless but innocent relationship with Stephen Guest. She turns to Dr. Kenn, the incumbent minister in the parish where she lives, for support and encouragement. Ruth's situation is more serious. She is an innocent and abandoned 'fallen woman', who, at the point of facing total ruin and desolation, is rescued by the Rev. Benson, a nonconformist minister holidaying in Wales at the time of her desertion. Although the degree of seriousness in the circumstances facing each woman is different, both face severe social marginalisation as a result of their conduct.

The nature of the assistance given to Maggie by Dr. Kenn is markedly different from that given to Ruth by the Rev. Benson. Dr. Kenn, a kindly but socially conscious parish priest, offers measured and restrained help to a young woman whose happiness continues to be destroyed by a society maliciously unprepared to accept the truth about her innocence. Dr. Kenn's resolve finally buckles under social pressure and he essentially abandons Maggie. The Rev. Benson, on the other hand, is tirelessly and sacrificially supportive of Ruth. Although complicated by some deceptive behaviour on his part, through his actions he remains steadfastly attentive to Ruth's needs, even when he and Ruth are also confronted by stern and unfeeling responses to Ruth's former illicit relationship. It is therefore possible to conclude, that Dr. Kenn and the Rev. Benson, despite similar positioning in terms of narrative development, fulfil quite distinct roles.

Dr. Kenn first becomes aware of Maggie's needs when he meets her at a bazaar. From the outset she interprets his demeanour as supportive:

... she saw it was Dr. Kenn's face that was looking at her: that plain, middle-aged face, with a grave, penetrating kindness in it, seeming to tell of a human being who had reached a firm, safe strand, but was looking with helpful pity towards the strugglers still tossed by the waves, had an effect on Maggie at this moment which was afterwards remembered by her as if it had been a promise. The middle-aged, who have lived through their strongest emotions, but are yet in the time when memory is still half passionate and not merely contemplative, should surely be a sort of natural priesthood, whom life has disciplined and consecrated to be the refuge and rescue of early stumblers and victims of self-despair. Most of us, at some moment in our young lives, would have welcomed a priest of that natural order in any sort of canonicals or uncanonicals, but had to scramble upwards into all the difficulties of nineteen entirely without such aid, as Maggie did.' (pp. 465-466)

There is an immediate indication that Eliot intends the reader not confuse Maggie's attraction to Dr. Kenn with some misguided desire for religious solace, but rather an appreciation of the benefits of the wisdom of middle-age. He later refers to himself as 'one to whom a long experience has been granted.' (pp. 529-530)

At the point of Maggie's personal crisis she visits Dr. Kenn. There is 'an entire absence of effusive benevolence in his manner.' (p. 531) His advice that she 'take a situation at a distance' in order to save her from the 'painful effect of false imputations' (p. 532) is an acknowledgement of his incapacity to confront the less than Christian response to Maggie's difficulties. It also reflects an attitude of resignation regarding the Church as an institution providing mutual support and comfort.

Dr. Kenn supports Maggie's desires to stay in St. Ogg's, but finds a solid wall of opposition to his desire to have Maggie's reputation restored. Although tactically inappropriate behaviour to have her appointed as Governess to his recently motherless children, it demonstrates a willingness to accept his individual responsibility for Maggie. But his behaviour is misconstrued. When Maggie last visits Dr. Kenn, his advice is that she leave St. Ogg's. She returns to her lodgings with a 'new sense of desolation'. (p. 550) This advice, in conjunction with the letter she receives from Stephen on her return, quickly foreshadows her sense of spiritual resignation, the ensuing flood, and final release through death.

She is reconciled with her brother Tom, but in her own words dies 'so young, so healthy' (p. 553), with many of her deepest problems unresolved. Dr. Kenn's ineffectual behaviour, constrained as he is by the relentless pressures of social propriety, renders him an impotent figure who contributes to Maggie's demise.

This contrasts with the behaviour of the Rev. Thurstan Benson, in *Ruth*. Benson, from the outset, is introduced as a figure of significant reconciliatory potential. He first meets Ruth when she is crossing a stream, and offers to assist her. (p. 67) When he later meets her in a situation where, like Maggie, she feels deserted, he immediately takes action to alleviate her distress. (p. 95) Our introduction to the Rev. Benson is tonally so different from our first impressions of Dr. Kenn.

Page numbers are taken from Eliot, George, *The Mill on the Floss*, and Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Ruth*, The World's Classics, 1989.

- 50 Many Unitarian sermons of the period emphasise conduct and duty. See, for example, Gaskell, William, 'The Duties of the Individual to Society', (1858) and Turner, William, 'Resignation and submission under the afflictive dispensation of providence', (1833). Turner mentions 'duty' several times in this sermon, stating at one point that in life's circumstances 'there are so many and so great both duties and temptations' (p. 4).
- 51 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Ruth*, p. 119.
- 52 *ibid.*, p. 180.
- 53 *ibid.*, p. 118.
- 54 *ibid.*, p. 119.
- 55 *ibid.*, p. 119.
- 56 *ibid.*, p. 121.
- 57 *ibid.*, 'pure light' (p. 121), 'a beacon' (p. 137), 'a new, pure, beautiful, innocent life' (p. 161), 'innocent and good' (p. 340), 'innocent babe' (p. 163), 'God's messenger' (p. 119), 'holy, mysterious' (p. 164), 'holy and sacred creature' (p. 343), 'her one treasure' (p. 269), 'one point of hope' (p. 383).
- 58 *ibid.*, p. 160.

- 59 *ibid.*, p. 209.
- 60 *ibid.*, p. 351.
- 61 Obviously some very interesting comparisons can be made at this point with Tess's illegitimate child in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, by Thomas Hardy. See Stiles, Peter, 'Grace, Redemption and the 'Fallen Woman': Ruth and Tess of the D'Urbervilles', *The Gaskell Society Journal*, Volume 6, 1992, pp. 58-66.
- 62 As Unitarians of this period had largely rejected the doctrine of substitutionary atonement, they sought an alternative. Ruth suffers through childbirth, alienation, disease, and finally death before she is made acceptable.
- 63 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Cousin Phillis*, pp. 350-351.
- 64 *ibid.*, p. 351.
- 65 Gaskell, Elizabeth, 'Six Weeks at Heppenheim', in *A Dark Night's Work and Other Stories*, edited by Suzanne Lewis, The World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1992.
- 66 Gaskell, Elizabeth, 'Half a Lifetime Ago', p. 75.
- 67 *ibid.*, p. 85.
- 68 *ibid.*, p. 88.
- 69 *ibid.*, p. 89.
- 70 Gaskell, Elizabeth, 'Six Weeks at Heppenheim', p. 195.
- 71 *ibid.*, p. 227.
- 72 For biographical details see Gérin, Winifred, *Elizabeth Gaskell*.
- 73 Gaskell, Elizabeth, 'Half a Lifetime Ago', p. 59.
- 74 *ibid.*, pp. 76-77.
- 75 *ibid.*, pp. 76-77 & 89.
- 76 *ibid.*, p. 90.
- 77 *ibid.*, p. 95.
- 78 *ibid.*, p. 99.

79 Gaskell, Elizabeth, 'Six Weeks at Heppenheim', pp. 196, 198, & 200.

80 *ibid.*, p. 202.

81 *ibid.*, pp. 224, 225, & 230.

CHAPTER FOUR

FROM DISCREET CHAPEL TO GOTHIC OSTENTATION:

DEVELOPMENTS IN NINETEENTH CENTURY UNITARIAN ARCHITECTURE AND ATTITUDES TO DISEASE AS PARADIGMS FOR THE OPPOSITIONAL NATURE OF ELIZABETH GASKELL'S FICTION

Conservatism and Radicalism as Binary Opposites

The fictional works of Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell exhibit the problematic co-existence of an adherence to mid-Victorian bourgeois social values constantly being undercut by a latent radicalism [1]. While the overt tenor of the texts supports a deliberate identification with the economically and intellectually successful, predominantly Unitarian social milieu to which she belonged in Manchester, the graphic portrayal of social injustice in novels like *Mary Barton*, *Ruth*, and *North and South*, confirms an equally strong desire to highlight the shortcomings of English society in general, inclusive of the daily concerns of her often hypocritical mill-owning Manchester connections [2]. While the nature of the texts suggests, through didactic authorial commentary and parables of conventional Christian reconciliation [3], a desire to conform to the prevailing moral conventions of her time, the sheer force of the sustained, graphic depiction of human misery subverts any attempt at trite theological solutions.

The paradoxes inherent in Victorian attitudes to religious duty are effectively expressed throughout her work [4]. Even though Engels and Elizabeth Gaskell both witnessed the appalling conditions created by widespread social displacement stemming from industrialisation, their differing conclusions highlight the difficulty of arriving at a satisfactory

position on social inequality [5]. While the dynamic of New Testament biblical injunctions for sacrificial service to others drove many into the plethora of worthwhile Christian societies in existence, for some, current conservative trends in theology could just as easily be identified with the maintenance of the status quo. The conflict between establishment values and aspirations and any unbridled attempt to identify and deal with social injustice was difficult to resolve.

Disease and Class Distinctions in *Ruth*, *Mary Barton* and *North and South*

The depiction of class distinctions in mid-Victorian English society is an excellent example of this binary opposition in her work. Whereas some authors of the period restrict the scope of their concerns, Mrs. Gaskell's novels derive much of their vitality and cogency from the tensions issuing from their portrayal of competing class interests. This is especially the case in *Ruth*, *Mary Barton*, and *North and South*.

While the gulf between the poverty-stricken working classes in mid-Victorian England and their much wealthier employers in industry is but one example of class distinction, it is one where an uneasy social interdependence is clearly highlighted. The mill-workers of the large industrialised centres were dependent on the mill-owners as much as the mill-owners were on them, although the latter often failed to recognise their reciprocal dependence. The subsequent neglect and poverty suffered by the working classes in industrial cities throughout England is well documented. The failure of the rich to acknowledge and accept responsibility for the condition of the poor finally brought England to the brink of a profound social crisis in the 1840s. Even though rich and poor co-existed in industrial cities across the nation, it was considered possible for the wealthy to live within a totally separate sphere from that inhabited by the numerically dominant poor. Living in more favourable areas, where they did not have to confront overcrowding and the poor sanitation and living conditions suffered by their employees, it was possible to remain cruelly oblivious to the hopelessness facing so many. Furthermore, in their abject state, the workers were powerless to negotiate.

Any smugness or complacency on the part of the mill-owners in regard to the obligation-free benefits to be derived from a subservient and dependent

labour force, was dramatically disturbed by the outbreak of serious epidemics in the 1830s and 1840s, which had their origin in the appalling living conditions endured by the poor. Most alarming was the fact that disease had no respect for person or class and despite the best efforts quickly transgressed social barriers. Some sense of responsibility for what industrialisation had created was thus forced upon the wealthy. If they were to survive in their privileged enclaves it was necessary for them to act to improve the living conditions of the working classes. The frequently expressed theological correlative that the high incidence of disease and death amongst the working classes resulted from their degenerative behaviour and poor morality was thus challenged but not overturned. It was difficult to sustain such a view, however, when even the Prince Regent could succumb to a disease so clearly associated with poor sanitation. But this view did persist and continued to aggravate the division between the industrially rich and their employees [6].

Such issues are well disclosed in an examination of the inherent tensions which Elizabeth Gaskell confronted in her dual role as the wife of a socially respectable and very successful Unitarian minister who sought to assist the poor of Manchester, and as an author who longed to highlight graphically social needs in her work and yet maintain her hard-earned respectability. It was always difficult for her to balance her Unitarian commitment to social reform with an appreciation of the value of social position.

This tendency is well illustrated in the treatment of disease in *Ruth*. Wealthy Bellingham, purporting to be the rescuer of the orphaned and deserted Ruth, leaves her a 'fallen woman' and thus in an even more precarious state. This appears to be but one more example of a member of the upper classes taking advantage of the poor. His moral culpability is reinforced by the brain fever he suffers and almost dies from while they are in Wales. But he does recover, only to reappear much later in Ruth's life when her restitution, under the care of the Bensons, has almost been completed. Now, as the budding parliamentarian, Donne, he is again struck down, this time by the epidemic sweeping the community. Ruth, who has successfully nursed many through the epidemic without contracting the disease herself, makes one final offer to nurse, this time for the critically ill Donne. Again he recovers, but on this occasion she succumbs to the disease and dies.

Disease in the relationship between Bellingham (Donne) and Ruth is thus symbolic of the contest for loyalties in Elizabeth Gaskell's response to Ruth's plight. Throughout the novel the author purports to be very sympathetic to her situation. Twice Bellingham (Donne) suffers in a manner which can only be interpreted as punishment for his selfish and manipulative treatment of Ruth. In a striking parallel to the social disparity of mill-owner and mill-worker, the privileged, callous Bellingham takes advantage of the poor, defenceless seamstress. His susceptibility to disease at the time of his dealings with her is a timely reminder, however, that moral accountability cannot be ignored in Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction. But the cruel, ironic twist is that Bellingham (Donne) does survive and Ruth dies. In a feature of the plot which Charlotte Brontë could not comprehend and with which she expressed great disappointment [7], Elizabeth Gaskell demonstrates her ambivalence concerning moral culpability. Why does Ruth have to atone through death for behaviour over which she has little control or is too young to understand? Is Elizabeth Gaskell unconsciously agreeing that Ruth is ultimately more culpable because of her social origins and thus giving fictional credence to a view prevalent amongst the ruling classes that there is in the poor a clear alignment of poverty, moral turpitude and disease?

While this may be true to some extent, there is, ironically, in theological terms, the possible acceptance also of atonement through suffering and death continuing, and even increasing, our understanding of the author's sympathy for Ruth. Her eternal security is assured, whereas Bellingham (Donne) lives on in an unrepentant and spiritually unchastened state. At the end of the novel, in a final gesture of misguided benevolence, in which he seeks to absolve himself of paternal responsibility, Bellingham (Donne) offers to recompense Benson financially for being left with the care of Ruth's illegitimate son, Leonard. Benson rejects any such offer and with uncharacteristic feeling states: 'Men may call such action as yours, youthful follies! There is another name for them with God' [8]. Bellingham's moral condition is left unaddressed, and if, in Unitarian terms, he does avoid the prospect of eternal punishment, the steep pathway to future divine acceptability is left undefined.

Disease is also very prevalent in *Mary Barton*, a novel in which the effects of abject poverty are graphically depicted. The death of Barton's mother, and son, Tom [9] along with other members of their Manchester mill-working community from poverty or poverty-related diseases, again captures the

reader's sympathy. The scene involving the futile attempts of John Barton and George Wilson to assist Ben Davenport, dying of a fever in his putrid cellar, is particularly stark and almost tendentious in its criticism of the callous indifference of those who could have offered aid [10].

What complicates Elizabeth Gaskell's fictional representation of social injustice in *Mary Barton* is that in her attempt to draw attention to the need for the rich to take responsibility for the poor, she will not relinquish or even soften an insistence on moral accountability amongst the poor. John Barton's heart is hardened through tribulation to the point of conspiring with others to murder the son of Carson, the mill-owner. After being chosen to commit the crime, he passes through a physical and psychological decline which ends in death from unspecified causes. Similarly, the wayward Aunt Esther unconvincingly dies in the last pages of the novel [11]. If the reader is to understand that the plight of the poor mill-working community results from neglect and oppression, as Elizabeth Gaskell seems to infer, then in so many instances, to align moral abrogation, sickness and death, is to accept and espouse the very view propagated by the ruling classes. This is even more so in the case of Barton and Aunt Esther, both of whom are propelled towards a certain death without any credible sense on the reader's part of either having contracted any disease or having any identifiable medical condition. The place of disease and sickness in *Mary Barton* is therefore a confused one, especially as no one from the mill-owning community contracts any disease which might serve as a reminder of social obligations.

By contrast, the treatment of disease and death in *North and South* suggests, with considerable subtlety, a greater sense of the need for mutual dependence between the industrially rich and their employees. It is consistent with the overall trend in this later novel to depict reconciliation between the classes, a feature which marks a clear distinction between it and *Mary Barton*.

The sustained depiction of protracted illness in both Mrs. Hale and Bessy Higgins achieves this awareness. Margaret Hale spends a great deal of time alternating between the bedside of her sick mother and her socially humble, ailing friend, Bessy. Both are cases where ill-health arises from the shared industrial environment of Milton-Northern. Mrs. Hale comes to this northern city against her best wishes. After leaving the tranquil rural village of Helstone, where her husband resigns from his curacy, she suffers deteriorating health in the polluted industrial wasteland of Milton-Northern.

She finally dies from some unspecified but serious disease, a condition obviously exacerbated by the depressing conditions of her urban existence.

Bessy Higgins, who becomes Margaret's friend after a chance meeting with her father, is dying of a pulmonary disease contracted from inhaling cotton fibres in the carding room of the factory where she worked. She is a clear victim of industrial neglect. Although she and Mrs. Hale are from very different social backgrounds, their shared vulnerability to the deleterious effects of life in an industrial city establishes a common bond between the two women which traverses social boundaries. It goes a long way towards demonstrating that the alarming incidence of disease and death in an industrial vortex like Milton-Northern can make class differences irrelevant. The constant interchange of scenes involving Mrs. Hale and Bessy, as Margaret visits one and then the other, reinforces the sense of their shared plight. In this novel disease does not remain the domain of the poor. In both cases, also, there is not the least suggestion that the disease stems from any moral abrogation.

Despite minor shifts of emphasis, the depiction of disease in the early works of Elizabeth Gaskell demonstrates the constant juxtaposition of a strong identification with middle-class values and a profound sympathy for the working classes. The maintenance of this tension contributes significantly to the ambivalent nature of her work.

Engels and Elizabeth Gaskell in Manchester

There are some distinct differences between Engels' 1844 description and analysis of the appalling social situation in Manchester in the 1840s and 1850s, and the manner in which it is depicted in Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction. Engels' observations encompassed many cities in mid-nineteenth century England and were predominantly directed towards establishing an accurate and comprehensive analysis of working class conditions in England. *The Condition of the Working Class in England* [12] conveys a convincing picture of human deprivation and misery by amassing vivid first hand descriptions and statistical information interlaced with political commentary. Engels comes into Manchester as a detached but concerned outsider, painting with a broad brush and occasionally referring anecdotally to some memorable experiences during his life there. He is, essentially, a social and political

theorist. His descriptions move through the various areas of the city in an omniscient manner, highlighting distinctions, and mapping the stark realities of social differentiation and inequality [13].

Elizabeth Gaskell's approach is different. As a resident of Manchester, she had long established sympathies for the plight of the mill-workers, and her fiction becomes the appropriate vehicle for conveying her concern for individuals in need. Her characters are fictional representations based on a wealth of daily encounters, experiences gained largely as a supportive minister's wife working in the slums of Manchester. In *Mary Barton* and *North and South* the reader walks the streets of Manchester, viewing poverty and despair in a setting where the emphasis is on human relationships. It is an imaginative depiction of Manchester life that evokes more heartfelt sympathy than the more obviously polemical and clinical analysis of Engels. But both are effective in these differing approaches.

Engels and Elizabeth Gaskell both stress the need for mutual responsibility between the workers and the mill-owners in overcoming the problems that beset all residents of this arid, depressing industrialised environment. Engels insists that the working class and the middle class industrialists are both demoralised by the situation in which they find themselves [14]. This sense of the presence of widespread discontent in such an environment is also evident in Elizabeth Gaskell's novels set in Manchester. In *Mary Barton*, it is not only John Barton, the embittered Chartist leader and his colleagues who live under the shadow of alienation, cruelty and privations brought about by the abysmal working conditions endured by the mill-workers. The perpetrators, like Carson, the mill-owner whose son is murdered, also suffer. Their greed and wilful perpetuation of the callous exploitation of so many helpless victims of social change isolates them within the community to which they belong and destroys any opportunity they might have for ultimate personal well-being or spiritual contentment. They have what they believe to be desirable, but yet their lives are empty:

The possessing class and the class of the proletariat represent the same human self-estrangement. But the former is comfortable in this self-estrangement and finds therein its own confirmation, knows that this self-estrangement is its own power, and possesses in it the semblance of a human existence. The latter feels itself

annihilated in this self-estrangement, and sees in it its impotence and the reality of an inhuman existence. [15]

There is some ambivalence in Engels' conclusion to *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. He is not sure about the capacity of the English working class to develop socialistic mechanisms that will avoid social revolution and then allow them to achieve peacefully the much needed reforms [16]. But Elizabeth Gaskell only ever suggests that the answer lies in co-operation and reconciliation between the mill-owners and the workers. Carson is reconciled with John Barton at the end of *Mary Barton* [17], the murderer dying in the mill-owner's arms. In *North and South*, employer and employees become more and more conscious of each other's needs. Thornton modifies his administrative practices and develops a genuine concern for the welfare of his mill-workers during a period of economic hardship [18]. What Elizabeth Gaskell proposes stems from her understanding of the most appropriate response to need, from her commitment to Christian care and reconciliation. Engels proposes a political solution, while Elizabeth Gaskell's perhaps less sophisticated approach is, in relative terms, an equally valid alternative to the dislocating and crushing priorities of industrialisation.

Paradigm of Unitarian Ecclesiastical Architecture

This dichotomy in Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction finds an interesting parallel in the development of Unitarian ecclesiastical architecture immediately preceding and throughout her lifetime. Just as the works of Mrs. Gaskell struggle to resolve the tension created by an acceptance of the value of middle-class aspirations and the need to address the disturbing plight of the working classes, changes in Unitarian ecclesiastical architecture indicated a similar tension. There was a marked transition from the discreet chapels of the marginalised Unitarian congregations of the late eighteenth century to the ostentatious Gothic edifices of the mid-nineteenth century. This contrast was no more evident than in the north of England, where, in keeping with their new-found social respectability and confidence, some of the wealthiest Unitarian congregations were able to allow significant expenditure on the construction of new churches. While Manchester was the setting for some of the best examples of civic architecture built under the influence of Pugin and Ruskin, some of the outstanding churches of the Gothic revival were also built there. Many of these churches were erected for Unitarian congregations.

The prominent Unitarian architect, Thomas Worthington, a member of William Gaskell's Cross Street Chapel congregation [see Illustration 2], was the architect for several such churches (e.g. Brookfield Unitarian Church, Monton Unitarian Church) [19; see Illustration 5].

Mrs. Gaskell could not help but be aware of this transition. Her correspondence indicates that she and William knew the Worthingtons and she had read and attended lectures by Ruskin on architecture [20]. He, of course, was largely responsible for the enthusiastic manner in which the Gothic style was embraced at this time in England. She had witnessed at first hand the contrasting styles of ecclesiastical architecture adopted by Unitarian congregations. While many of the prominent Gothic Unitarian churches in the north of England were not built until after her death, some notable exceptions were Hope Street, Liverpool, 1849; Mill Hill, Leeds, 1847; Upper Brook Street, Manchester, 1839, recognised as the first neo-Gothic nonconformist chapel [see Illustrations 3 and 4]. She must have been acutely conscious of the contrast these churches bore to the chapel (probably based on her early church life in Knutsford) [21] that is referred to in *Ruth*.

Illustration 1:

Knutsford Chapel, 1689

IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT ISSUES

Illustration 2:
Cross Street Chapel, 1694

IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT ISSUES

Illustration 3:
Mill Hill, Leeds, 1848

IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT ISSUES

The chapel was up a narrow street, or rather cul-de- sac, close by. It stood on the outskirts of the town, almost in fields. It was built about the time of Matthew and Philip Henry, when the Dissenters were afraid of attracting attention or observation, and hid their places of worship in obscure and out-of-the-way parts of the towns in which they were built. Accordingly, it often happened, as in the present case, that the buildings immediately surrounding, as well as the chapels themselves, looked as if they carried you back to a period of a hundred and fifty years ago. The chapel had

Illustration 4:

Hope Street, Liverpool. Built for James Martineau in 1849 (since demolished).

IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT ISSUES

Illustration 5:

Monton Unitarian Church, Salford, 1875.

IMAGE REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT ISSUES

a picturesque and old-world look, for luckily the congregation had been too poor to rebuild it, or new face it in George the Third's time. The staircases which led to the galleries were outside, at each end of the building, and the irregular roof and worn stone steps looked grey and stained by time and weather. ... The interior of the building was plain and simple as plain and simple could be. When it was fitted up, oak-timber was much cheaper than it is now, so the wood-work was all of that description; but roughly hewed, for the early builders had not much wealth to spare. ... The congregation consisted of here and there a farmer and his labourers, who came down from the uplands

beyond the town to worship where their fathers worshipped, and who loved the place because they knew how much those fathers had suffered for it, although they never troubled themselves with the reason why they left the parish church; of a few shopkeepers, far more thoughtful and reasoning, who were Dissenters from conviction, unmixed with old ancestral association; and of one or two families of still higher worldly station. [22; see Illustration 1]

The inherent tension of conservatism and radicalism evident in Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction can be examined through the historically adjacent paradigm of ecclesiastical architecture. Having established a close correspondence between the author and the prevailing influences within architectural development (especially those relevant to Unitarianism) observations regarding such architecture can illuminate aspects of Elizabeth Gaskell's more subliminal interlacing of the contradictions embodied in her fictional material.

In addition, while examples exist in fiction where architecture becomes a conscious focus of the text (e.g. Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* [23]), in Mrs. Gaskell's work some consciousness (the example from *Ruth*) needs to be complemented by an historical understanding of her awareness of the developments in Gothic architecture. Although Gothic architecture is not referred to in *Mary Barton*, for example, it is suggested by its absence in opposition to the dreadful slum dwellings so vividly described within the text. Its inferred presence completes the landscape of social disparity.

At the end of the eighteenth century, English Unitarianism, partly because of its support for the French Revolution and general radicalism of thinking, was marginalised in English society. Along with other nonconformists, Unitarians did not have the security or opportunities of their fellow countrymen. Joseph Priestley was forced to flee to America and many Unitarian clergy took their degrees in Scotland because they were prohibited from doing so in England. William Gaskell, for example, graduated from Glasgow University [24]. Along with this, the more liberal theological position adopted by many Unitarians led to a concern for social improvement. Unitarianism became a major movement in the widespread Victorian commitment to philanthropic endeavour.

By the mid-nineteenth century, as the result of a series of parliamentary reforms, Unitarianism had become socially respectable, and its continued

dependence on rationalism attracted the educated and successful. The Gaskells' own church (Cross Street Chapel, Manchester) was the outstanding example [25]. But even in this era of social buoyancy for nonconformists, mid-Victorian Unitarians remained aware of the injustice inflicted on their immediate predecessors. The tension between alertness to injustice and acceptance of plenty was maintained.

In view of the particular theological disposition of Unitarianism, a shift from the more restrained architectural forms of previous centuries, to a willing involvement in the Gothic revival, raises significant questions. Commentators did note the apparent incongruity of any nonconformist adopting a form of architecture espoused by the Ecclesiologists. Reference was made in Parliament to the Quaker background of Alfred Waterhouse, the architect for the Manchester Assize Courts (1859) [26]. For Unitarians were in company with several nonconformist denominations in embracing the Gothic form. A good example is Mansfield College, the Congregationalist college in Oxford [27].

But while Unitarians were swept along by the same degree of political emancipation enjoyed by other dissenting traditions, it would have been inconsistent with their much espoused pursuit of 'truth' and 'liberty', and their desire for intellectual integrity, for them to have embraced a style of architecture so markedly divergent in emphasis as the Gothic. Even accepting the possibility that social comfort fosters complacency, the antithetical nature of such architecture and Unitarian tenets of faith is still stark. The detailed, elaborate forms of Gothic architecture would appear to be more suited to the rituals of anglo-catholicism than to a denomination which sought to cut through any hindering reliance on tradition. The plain truth of scripture could only be discovered, it was thought by Unitarians, if the doctrinal accretions of previous centuries were dispensed with. The Gothic revival indicated a re-assertion of many of the values that Unitarianism had struggled to overcome.

This form of architecture accentuated the Unitarian acceptance of opulence. The sense of height and upward movement inherent in the Gothic lines conveyed a confidence (both spiritual and temporal) normally reserved previously for the established church, and especially the Oxford movement. It inferred a prosperity and permanence that was so much in contrast to the tenuous link with life experienced by the working-class masses in Manchester. The detail in design suggested a preoccupation with reflection

and introspection at odds with the frequently expressed pragmatism and progressivism of Unitarianism.

Gothic Architecture, Rural Landscapes and the Need for Aesthetic Satisfaction

This difficulty can best be explained by examining the social context in which Gothic architecture made its greatest appeal to Unitarianism. It is generally true that the northern industrial cities of England were at the forefront of adopting this style [28]. There clearly was an unconscious, only occasionally articulated need for some reference point for aesthetic satisfaction in an otherwise depressing environment. Gothic architecture appeared to provide that.

For influential Unitarians in Manchester this may have been a very acute need. Many were involved, in a proprietorial or managerial capacity, with the development of aesthetically arid industrial complexes (e.g. cotton mills). Others, such as William and Elizabeth Gaskell, made sustained efforts to alleviate human suffering, thus spending considerable periods of time in slum areas (such as those so vividly recorded in *Mary Barton*). Their efforts in both fields, equally attributable to the Unitarian espousal of human progress and philanthropy, called forth a need for the personally nourishing qualities of some aesthetic realm. This was provided, in part, by beautiful architecture. While there were strong theological reasons for not accepting the Gothic form, in this social context they were overridden by the thirst for satisfying forms.

In the seminal second chapter of *The Stones of Venice* [29], Ruskin convincingly demonstrates how aspects of the Gothic style, unlike others, reflect an appreciation of natural beauty. Of the six elements of the Gothic form that he identifies ('Savageness', 'Changefulness', 'Naturalism', 'Grotesqueness', 'Rigidity' and 'Redundance') nearly all can be said to have their creative impulse in the natural world. 'Savageness' indicates "mountain brotherhood between the cathedral and the Alp' (p. 164), and 'Changefulness' is justified on the grounds that 'we must no more expect to derive either pleasure or profit from an architecture whose ornaments are of one pattern, and whose pillars are of one proportion, than we should out of a universe in which the clouds were all of one shape, and the trees all of one

size' (p. 167). 'Naturalism' demonstrates that to 'the Gothic workman the living foliage became a subject of intense affection' (p. 172) and 'Redundancy', a striking characteristic of nature, ensured that the 'cathedral front was at last lost in the tapestry of its traceries, like a rock among the thickets and herbage of spring' (p. 177).

In the following passage, Ruskin argues, with irony, for the benefits of Gothic architecture in an increasingly urbanised Victorian society. The relevance of his comments to the squalid monotony of mid-Victorian Manchester is not lost:

All the pleasure which the people of the nineteenth century take in art, is in pictures, sculpture, minor objects of virtu (sic) or mediaeval architecture, which we can enjoy under the term picturesque: no pleasure is taken anywhere in modern buildings, and we find all men of true feelings delighting to escape out of modern cities into natural scenery: hence that peculiar love of landscape which is characteristic of the age. It would be well, if in all other matters, we were as ready to put up with what we dislike, for the sake of compliance with established law, as we are in architecture. (p. 167).

The works of Mrs. Gaskell highlight this dilemma. The novels that deal with the difficulties of industrialisation, *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, do contain reference to contrasting environments of natural beauty [30]. The mill workers in *Mary Barton* and 'Libbie Marsh's Three Eras' escape to the relative appeal of 'Green Heys Fields' and 'Dunham Park' respectively. In *North and South* there is an obvious contrast between idyllic, rural Helstone and the bleakness of Manchester. Works such as *Cranford*, *Sylvia's Lovers*, *Cousin Phillis* and *Wives and Daughters* explore the attractiveness and fecundity of the English countryside. The cogency of scenes depicting industrial poverty is matched by the author's equally effective, sustained description of rural settings [31].

Significantly, Elizabeth Gaskell's writing career began with a description of contrasting landscapes. The opening chapter of *Mary Barton* indicates that she is acutely aware of the refreshment provided to city-dwellers by the pleasures of a pastoral environment. In 'Green Heys Fields' the 'artisan deafened with noise of tongues and engines, may come to listen awhile to the delicious sounds of rural life' [32]. In 'Libbie Marsh's Three Eras', a short work of the same period, the Manchester townspeople flock to Dunham Park on a public holiday to enjoy a rural respite 'which presents such a complete

contrast to the whirl and turmoil of Manchester'. This motif is consistently repeated throughout her work. Poignancy frequently accompanies the description of female protagonists returning to the rural settings of their childhood. Ruth Hilton, in *Ruth*, returns with Bellingham to the country cottage where she spent her happiest years and indulges in 'a vision of former days' that is in sharp contrast to the privations of her present position as a seamstress [33]. Margaret Hale, at the end of *North and South*, journeys back to Helstone, and discovers that the 'common sounds of life were more musical there than anywhere else in the whole world, the light more golden, the life more tranquil and full of dreamy delight' [34]. The beauty of this small village differs from the description given of Milton-Northern as the Hale family first arrive there:

For several miles before they reached Milton, they saw a deep lead-coloured cloud hanging over the horizon in the direction in which it lay. It was the darker from contrast with the pale gray-blue of the wintry sky; for in Helstone there had been the earliest signs of frost. Nearer to the town, the air had a faint taste and smell of smoke; perhaps, after all, more a loss of the fragrance of grass and herbage than any positive taste or smell. Quick they were whirled over long, straight, hopeless streets of regularly-built houses, all small and of brick. Here and there a great oblong many-windowed factory stood up, like a hen among her chickens, puffing out black 'unparliamentary smoke', and sufficiently accounting for the cloud which Margaret had taken to foretell rain. [35]

Likewise, in a moment of crisis, Molly Gibson, in *Wives and Daughters*, receives comfort from the familiar view out of her bedroom window: 'Gradually the consciousness of the soft peaceful landscape stole into her mind and stilled the buzzing confusion. There, bathed in the almost level rays of the autumn sunlight, lay the landscape she had known and loved from childhood; as quiet, as full of low humming life as it had been at this hour for many generations' [36].

Lois Barclay, in *Lois the Witch*, recalls on her arrival at Boston pier 'the cottage covered with Austrian roses and yellow jessamine, where she had been born' [37], and Miss Greator, in the introduction to *My Lady Ludlow*, states that due to her move to Edinburgh she will have to 'exchange our romps in the garden and rambles through fields for stiff walks in streets' [38]. All these descriptions reinforce the impression that a rural landscape

provides a nourishing counterpoint to the pressures and difficulties of life, particularly in town and city.

'Lizzie Leigh' (1850), the first story to be serialised in *Household Words*, clearly demonstrates this dichotomy of rural haven and industrial wasteland in Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction. When Anne Leigh, after the death of her husband, decides to leave Upclose Farm with her two sons and spend a year in Manchester in search of her wayward daughter, Lizzie, she is warned by a family friend, Samuel Orme, that 'Thou'lt be sadly pottered (vexed) wi' Manchester ways' [39]; a warning which implicitly confirms the contribution Manchester life made to Lizzie's downfall.

Elizabeth Gaskell highlights the differences between Upclose Farm and Manchester when the move to Manchester is eventually made:

Before the wild daffodils were in flower in the sheltered copses round Upclose Farm, the Leighs were settled in their Manchester home; if they could ever grow to consider that place as a home, where there was no garden, or outbuilding, no fresh breezy outlet, no far-stretching view, over moor and hollow... [40]

Through the coincidental and timely intervention of Susan Palmer, Lizzie's highly idealised alter ego, Lizzie is given an opportunity for atonement and divine restitution. This process involves the tragic death of her infant daughter, Nanny, but more significantly, her return to the country, to a cottage even more isolated than Upclose Farm: 'a cottage so secluded that, until you drop into the very hollow where it is placed, you do not see it.' It is a setting far from Manchester and its inherent evils. Before their departure from the city, the value of a rural landscape is again reinforced when Nanny is taken away from the city to a 'lone moorland graveyard' to be buried 'on the sunny slope, where the earliest spring flowers blow' [41].

A scene in *Ruth* which stresses the need for compensating beauty in an industrial environment is when Ruth, seeking relief from the long hours of dressmaking, finds pleasure in the highly decorated wall panels of the room where she works. In a manner similar to that evident in Gothic architecture, the beauty of the natural landscape is thus incorporated in a form of artistic endeavour accessible to the aesthetically deprived:

...on these panels were painted - were thrown with the careless, triumphant hand of a master - the most lovely wreaths of flowers, profuse and luxuriant beyond

description, and so real-looking, that you could almost fancy that you smelt their fragrance, and heard the south wind go softly rustling in and out among the crimson roses - the branches of purple and white lilac - the floating golden-tressed laburnum boughs. Besides these, there were stately white lilies, sacred to the Virgin - hollyhocks, fraxinella, monk's hood, pansies, primroses: every flower which blooms profusely in charming old-fashioned country gardens was there, depicted among its graceful foliage, but not in the wild disorder in which I have enumerated them. At the bottom of the panel lay a holly-branch, whose stiff straightness was ornamented by a twining drapery of English ivy, and mistletoe and winter aconite; while down either side hung pendant garlands of spring and summer flowers; and, crowning all, came gorgeous summer with the sweet musk-roses, and the rich-coloured flowers of June and July. [42]

Commentators frequently differentiate between Manchester and Cranford as if the two locations are representative of exclusively separate spheres for the author [43]. Her major works are often categorised as either social problem novels or novels of manners in the Jane Austen tradition. Little attention has been given to the intersubjectivity implicit in the contrasting landscapes she utilises. Whereas the marked distinction between industrial and rural landscape in her work has been observed, the manner in which the corpus of her work maintains, through its variety, an interplay of issues, is the more interesting feature. The frequent transition from one location to the other does not argue against the textual complementarity of her work as a whole [44].

A chronology of her major works does not indicate (except towards the end of her writing career) any desire to concentrate on one location at the expense of another. *Mary Barton* (1848), was followed by *Cranford* (1851-1853), *Ruth* (1852), *North and South* (1854-5), and *My Lady Ludlow* (1858).

Elizabeth Gaskell hated aspects of Manchester life. The polluted atmosphere often made her unwell. She refers to her 'bad head aches: which I am afraid are produced by the air of Manchester, as I hardly ever have them - certainly not anything like so violently; anywhere else' [45]. The effect of conditions in Manchester on the Gaskell family is graphically recounted by Mary Clarke Mohl, Elizabeth's close friend in Paris. An obvious factor

which also contributed to her headaches was the tiring work schedule she set for herself:

Mrs. Gaskell had a constant headache for six months in Manchester, which went away as soon as she was here, but returns in the night very often, when she wakes in a bustle to hurry off to the committees and poor folk. And she still faints for quarter of an hour (from time to time) when she is in Manchester, and hurried or too late. When she gets over this, she gets better. She has very often been out from nine in the morning to seven at night, and so tired that she could not eat - the children in the schools often fighting and so troublesome and impudent, but not bad. Her three daughters who are at Manchester are so worn out that their father means to send them away for a time. [46]

Elizabeth Gaskell's commitment to the demands of her husband's ministry and her capacity to accept the harsh, aggressive edge to life in the major industrial centre of England in the nineteenth century, was maintained alongside a love for the rural centres of her childhood and youth. Some works, like *Cranford*, and *North and South*, maintain a constant juxtaposition of both industrial and rural setting. In the former novel, Drumble, the industrial centre to the north, constantly impinges upon the rural enclave.

One fleeting moment where this interdependence of rural idyll and industrial wasteland is starkly demonstrated is in 'Libbie Marsh's Three Eras'. Franky, the dying child, is taken to the top of a grassy knoll in order to see Manchester in the distance. The ambivalence of this moment is effectively captured by the poignant manner in which the distant city is described, and then by the workers response. Buoyed up by their rural respite from the demands of Manchester life, the mill-workers salute the source of their personal hardship:

Far, far away in the distance on that flat plain, you might see the motionless cloud of smoke hanging over a great town, and that was Manchester, - ugly, smoky Manchester, dear, busy, earnest, noble-working Manchester; where their children had been born, and where, perhaps, some lay buried; where their homes were, and where God had cast their lives, and told them to work out their destiny. [47]

Mrs. Gaskell reveals throughout her work a strong sense of the impact of industrialisation on the English psyche. The grim reality of the destruction of

rural values by social displacement and mechanisation, later so forcefully articulated in the novels of Thomas Hardy, is anticipated by the manner in which her writing finds its most telling polarities in industrial wasteland and rural idyll. It conveys the realisation that this pair of topographically exclusive, but powerful and intoxicating locations, constitutes the parameters of human experience in her novels. While Mrs. Gaskell was able to take holidays away from Manchester (e.g. Silverdale) the bulk of her adult life was spent there, engaged and productive, yet constantly reflecting on that alternative locale. This was not the case with countless thousands, crushed into industrial cities by economic necessity. For those who had come to eke out a meagre existence in the daunting mills, rural life was but a memory of potential beauty, a utopian dream few would realise. When Margaret Hale, in *North and South*, speaks to the dying Bessy Higgins about the home she left in Helstone, the reader is made aware that the industrial working classes are frequently precluded, even in Wordsworthian recollection, from enjoying some of the most basic pleasures of the natural realm:

(Margaret's) heart was opened to this girl: 'Oh, Bessy, I loved the home we have left so dearly! I wish you could see it. I cannot tell you half its beauty. There are great trees standing all about it, with their branches stretching long and level, and making a deep shade of rest even at noonday. And yet, though every leaf may seem still, there is a continual rushing sound of movement all around - not close at hand. Then sometimes the turf is as soft and fine as velvet; and sometimes quite lush with the perpetual moisture of a little, hidden tinkling brook near at hand. And then in other parts there are billowy ferns - whole stretches of fern; some in the green shadow; some with long streaks of golden sunlight lying on them - just like the sea.'

'I have never seen the sea', murmured Bessy. 'But go on.' [48]

For some of those entrapped characters in her industrial novels, the unattainable beauty of the rural setting is replaced by the seemingly attainable beauty of heaven through death (e.g. Bessy Higgins in *North and South*). Thus the notion of natural beauty as a necessary psychological concomitant to the pressures and privations of life in an industrial city is comfortably confirmed in theological terms. Gothic ecclesiastical architecture in the northern industrial cities of England conveyed the same compensating

sense of solid, dominating and tangible beauty, while pointing beyond its own temporal limitations:

... in Gothick, the upward tendency in spiritual things,
which is its grand lesson, is symbolized by a real
physical upward tendency in the lines of the building.
[49]

While Elizabeth Gaskell appears to be responding throughout her work to an appreciation of the novel's capacity to be used for didactic purposes, her novels also strongly embody a nostalgic re-creation of the rural pleasures she knew as a child in Knutsford and at school in Warwickshire [50]. As Gothic architecture provided for the citizens of Manchester a visual, aesthetic counterpoint to urban squalour, so Mrs. Gaskell utilised the full, evocative potential of the novel to satisfy , in a primary context of social concern, cravings for aesthetic satisfaction [51]. The apparent contradiction inherent in the Unitarian utilisation of Gothic forms is resolved through a proper acknowledgement of the mid-Victorian need for compensating beauty. Mrs. Gaskell's fiction expresses the same need. In a society marred by the relatively recent disfigurement of industrialisation, it was still possible to conceive of beauty beyond a skyline of tall chimneys.

At the beginning of this discussion it was suggested that a balance between social conservatism and radicalism is very evident in Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction. Her Unitarian heritage and exposure to liberal, progressive thought fostered in her a stronger commitment than many of her contemporaries to social justice, and a more compassionate and tolerant view of the socially marginalised. Her plea, on behalf of the poverty stricken working classes of Manchester, was the basis for some of her best work. But her insistence on moral accountability, in an industrial context where sickness and contagious diseases were more attributable to poor sanitation and living conditions, points to a desire on Elizabeth Gaskell's part to identify frequently with and accept entrenched middle-class attitudes to the lower classes. This is accompanied by a constantly expressed desire to draw back from the unpleasant aspects of an industrial city like Manchester and to seek, in her fiction, the compensating beauty of an idealised rural environment (reminiscent, no doubt, of her childhood years in Knutsford). In this manner the vigorous nature of these antinomies is maintained.

Conclusion

Throughout this analysis it has been demonstrated that Elizabeth Gaskell constantly maintained, both in her life and fictional works, an enduring commitment to confronting the inequities and injustices of a newly industrialised society, at the same time as she sought and enjoyed the benefits and comforts to be derived from her own close identification with the prosperous and successful middle-classes of Manchester, many of whom were the very perpetrators of the social problems she sought to address. While her crusading spirit and her desire to be involved in philanthropic endeavours were similarly fostered by a Unitarian heritage which challenged establishment values, both were offset by an obvious enjoyment of the personal recognition available in social compliance and acceptance. This is evident in her ambivalent attitude to the source and nature of disease and suffering, and in her desire to discover a satisfying aesthetic to compensate for the inescapable aridity and the oppressive, unsightly aspects of life in Manchester. Whereas many of her Unitarian contemporaries realised this need in a somewhat incongruous acceptance of the Gothic form in architecture, Elizabeth Gaskell sought it more in the compensating beauty of the natural environment. Within her fiction the industrial wasteland and the rural idyll are constantly juxtaposed. While the former is the realm of stark, but real contrasts; progress, decay, prosperity and despair, the latter is the realm of wistful reflection, nostalgia and a Wordsworthian yearning to recapture the lost pleasures of childhood.

This discussion has confirmed the existence of another set of interwoven contraries in Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction. It suggests that the tension she maintains in her work between divergent, even opposing viewpoints, stems largely from the complex, often confused Unitarian social milieu to which she belonged. She exemplifies the mid-Victorian Unitarian concern to maintain the radical stance of her recent, dissenting predecessors, with their rich legacy of social concern and reform, yet seeks to remain part of a newly emergent, prosperous, successful, well integrated and socially secure Unitarian sub-culture. Although not always incompatible, at times these two positions created a conflict of ideals and motivation which even the adept Mrs. Gaskell struggled to maintain.

NOTES

- 1 Other commentators have observed this quality in Mrs. Gaskell's work. John Lucas, in *The Literature of Change*, states that:

There is a marvellously anarchic force at work in Mrs. Gaskell's fiction. The official side of her, liberal, pious, incuriously middle class, pleads for a more complacent notion of reconciliation and tries to fashion art so as to reveal its pattern. But an endlessly rewarding unofficial side keeps pushing this pattern awry, revealing different patterns of inevitability, of antagonism, misunderstandings, hatred.

See Lucas, John, *The Literature of Change (Studies in the Nineteenth-Century Provincial Novel)*, The Harvester Press, Sussex, Barnes & Noble, New York, 1977, p. 13.

Jenny Uglow, in her recent biography, frequently makes reference to the dualities expressed in Elizabeth Gaskell's life and work. See Uglow, Jenny, *Elizabeth Gaskell (A Habit of Stories)*, Faber and Faber, London, 1993, pages 31, 93, and 259-260. The following section from a letter Elizabeth Gaskell wrote to Tottie Fox in 1850 is very revealing in this regard:

...that is the haunting thought to me; at least to one of my 'Mes', for I have a great number and that's a plague. One of my mes is, I do believe, a true Christian - (only people call her socialist and communist), another one of my mes is a wife and mother, and highly delighted at the delight of everyone else in the house, Meta and William especially who are in full extasy. Now that's my 'social' self I suppose. Then again I've another self with a full taste for beauty and convenience which is pleased on its own account. How am I to reconcile all these warring members?

See *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, p. 108.

Felicia Bonaparte, in *The Gypsy-Bachelor of Manchester (The Life of Mrs. Gaskell's Demon)*, bases all her conclusions about the nature of Elizabeth Gaskell's work on the premise that throughout her life the author struggled with a fundamental dichotomy in her personality. She desired to be the respected and conventional Unitarian minister's wife, Mrs. Gaskell, but at the same time sought to serve her 'demon'; the unconventional, rebellious side of her nature. While exploring Elizabeth

Gaskell's psychological complexity at great length, Bonaparte does not attempt to address the ambiguities and tensions inherent in English Unitarianism.

See Bonaparte, Felicia, *The Gypsy-Bachelor of Manchester (The Life of Mrs. Gaskell's Demon)*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville and London, 1992.

- 2 *Mary Barton*, like *Ruth*, caused a considerable furor when first published. Many were offended by Mrs. Gaskell's inferred criticism of the treatment of mill-workers in Manchester and elsewhere. See Gérin, Winifred, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, Oxford University Press, 1976, pp. 88-89.
- 3 Examples are the death of John Barton in the arms of Carson in *Mary Barton* and the reconciliation of Sylvia and Philip Hepburn at the end of *Sylvia's Lovers*.
- 4 F.W.H. Myers famously records a conversation with George Eliot at Cambridge in 1873 in which the author stresses the pre-eminence of 'duty' in an age of declining faith. Myers speaks of Eliot 'taking as her text the three words which have been used so often as the inspiring trumpet-calls of men, - the words God, Immortality, Duty, - pronounced, with terrible earnestness, how inconceivable was the first, how unbelievable the second, and yet how peremptory and absolute the third.'

Quoted in Willey, Basil, *Nineteenth Century Studies (Coleridge to Matthew Arnold)*, Penguin Books, 1973 (1949), p. 214.

- 5 See Engels, Frederick, *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*, Panther, Granada Publishing, 1969, first published in Great Britain in 1892.

For a full discussion of the different emphases in Engels' and Gaskell's account of the plight of the mill-workers in Manchester, see John Lucas, *The Literature of Change*, Chapter 2.

Refer also to Marcus, Steven, *Engels, Manchester and the Working Class*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1974.

- 6 For a full discussion of this issue see Williams, A. Susan, *The Rich Man and the Diseased Poor in Early Victorian Literature*, Humanities Press International, Inc., Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1987.

- 7 "Why should she die? Why are we to shut up the book weeping? My heart fails me already at the thought of the pang it will have to undergo. And yet you must follow the impulse of your own imagination."
Charlotte Brontë to Elizabeth Gaskell, 26th April, 1852, in Wise, T.J. and Symington, J.A., *The Brontës: Their Lives and Correspondence*, Shakespeare Head Brontë, 4 volumes, 1933, page 332. Quoted in the Introduction by Alan Shelston to Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Ruth*, The World's Classics, 1989, first published 1853, p. xix.
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 454.
- 9 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Mary Barton*, Penguin Classics, 1985, first published 1848, p. 60.
- 10 *ibid.*, pp. 97-110.
- 11 *ibid.*, pp. 464-465.
- 12 Engels, F., *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, 1844, first published in England in 1892, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1973.
- 13 See Engels, *op. cit.*, chapter entitled 'The Great Towns'.
- 14 Marcus, Steven, *Engels, Manchester and the Working Class*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1974, p. 232.
- 15 Quoted in Marcus, Steven, *op. cit.*, p. 233, from *Werke* 11.
- 16 See Engels, *op. cit.*, chapter entitled 'The attitude of the Bourgeoisie Towards the Proletariat'.
- 17 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Mary Barton*, pp. 441-442.
- 18 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *North and South*, Chapter 50.
- 19 A good background to English Unitarian architecture is given in Godfrey, P., Hague, G., and Mclachlan, J., *The Unitarian Heritage*, published privately, 1986.

For Thomas Worthington see Pass, A. J., *Thomas Worthington: Victorian Architecture and Social Purpose*, Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society Publications, 1988.
- 20 Passing reference is made to the Worthingtons in several letters (including nos. 3 & 118a) from *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, edited by

Chapple, J.A.V., and Pollard, Arthur, Manchester University Press, 1966.
See also Pass, op. cit., pp. 72, 104-105, 116-117.

Letters 101, 159, and 360 indicate that Mrs. Gaskell was exposed to Ruskin's views. Ruskin is frequently referred to in her correspondence. Ruskin's importance to Elizabeth Gaskell is effectively conveyed in the following comment written by her friend, Charles Eliot Norton, during their travels through Italy in 1857:

One day, as we were travelling in Italy, Mrs. Gaskell and her daughters and I were talking about the books we would choose if we were shut up in prison or on a desolate island. At last we agreed to choose one book by a living author, and when it came to Mrs. Gaskell's turn to tell us what she had chosen she said "Modern Painters".

Quoted in Uglow, Jenny, *Elizabeth Gaskell (A Habit of Stories)*, Faber and Faber, London, 1993, p. 424, from the *Letters of Charles Norton*, London, 1913, Volume 1, p.174.

- 21 A full explanatory note for this suggestion is given in *Ruth*, edited by Alan Shelston, The World's Classics, 1985, p. 465.

Elizabeth Gaskell was certainly aware of the splendour of Gothic cathedrals. A letter in 1841 indicates that William and Elizabeth enjoyed visiting cathedrals in Flanders. See *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, No. 15, page 41, where she refers to their 'practical poetry'.

- 22 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Ruth*, pp. 151-153.

- 23 See chapter on *Jude the Obscure* in Wiesenfarth, Joseph, *Gothic Manners and the Classic English Novel*, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988.

- 24 Gérin, Winifred, op. cit., p. 45.

- 25 Pass, A.J., op. cit., p. 133.

- 26 "At Manchester the Gothic style had recently been selected for a building at a meeting attended by many men of business, with a Quaker for the chairman (Laughter)." Quoted from Parliamentary proceedings in Brooks, Michael W., *John Ruskin and Victorian Architecture*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick and London, 1987, p. 175.

- 27 For a full discussion of Mansfield College see Binfield, Clyde, 'We Claim Our Part in the Great Inheritance: the Message of Four Congregational

Buildings', *Protestant Evangelicalism, c.1750- c.1950: Essays in Honour of W.R.Ward*, edited by Keith Robbins, *Studies in Church History, Subsidia* 7, Blackwells, Oxford, 1990, pp. 201-223.

The Unitarian church at Brookfield designed by Thomas Worthington is another good example. The following description reveals the irony inherent in the choice of this architectural form:

At Brookfield Worthington designed a large, handsome church in full Gothic with a most distinguished tower and spire ... Symbolism was fully embraced, for the church is adorned with the emblems of the evangelists and representations of saints, martyrs, philosophers and scientists. In the churchyard Peacock is interred, an industrial baron in a medieval tomb, in a handsome marble vault of Worthington design. Here a different symbolism prevails, and on each of the four corners is a carved and reverential figure representing an engineer, a blacksmith, a draughtsman and the architect himself.

See Archer, J., *Art and Architecture in Victorian Manchester*, Manchester University Press, 1985, p. 100.

A recognition on the part of Elizabeth Gaskell of the existence of contrasting architectural styles is inferred throughout her work. In *North and South*, for example, a deliberate juxtaposition is established, at least in characterisation, between the Teutonic north, represented by Thornton, and the Classical south, represented by Margaret. (See Bonaparte, *The Gypsy-Bachelor of Manchester*, pp. 187-188, and 193.) It also needs to be stated that the Classical and the Gothic competed for popularity in nineteenth century England and some Unitarian chapels were built in the former style. Upper Chapel, Sheffield was reconstructed in 1848 with a Classical stone facade and portico supported by four Ionic columns. Ironically, this was the same year in which Mill Hill Unitarian Chapel, Leeds was built, in a highly decorated Gothic style. (See Hague, G., and Hague, J., *The Unitarian Heritage*, pp. 39-40.) At the height of the Gothic revival architectural competitions still attracted submissions in both styles. (See examples in Pass, Anthony J., *Thomas Worthington, Victorian Architecture and Social Purpose*.) While the aesthetic qualities of the Gothic style, so vigorously reinforced by Ruskin, are the focus of this chapter, some similar qualities can be attributed to the Classical. In the context of the industrial north of England all grand architectural styles stand as an ironic reminder of wealth gained through the exploitation of

the working classes. This subverts their function of providing a much needed aesthetic dimension in this arid landscape.

28 Godfrey, Hague and McLachlan, op. cit., page 75.

29 Ruskin, John, *The Stones of Venice*, Collins, St. James Place, London, 1960, first published 1853, Chapter 2.

Contemporary commentators in mid-Victorian industrialised England were aware of the need for aesthetically pleasing forms. During discussion of the new Town Hall at Leeds (1859), Dr. J. D. Heaton, a Leeds physician, commented that 'in the ardour of mercantile pursuits the inhabitants of Leeds had not omitted to cultivate the perception of the beautiful and a taste for the fine arts'. Ruskin, speaking in the divisive debate which preceded the decision regarding a final proposal for the Bradford Wool Exchange, criticised the local community for not utilising the Gothic form in civic as well as ecclesiastical buildings, thereby shutting themselves off from 'the beauty of good architecture'. See Webb, Igor, 'The Bradford Wool Exchange: Industrial Capitalism and the Popularity of Gothic', *Victorian Studies*, 20, 1976, pages 52 and 55.

A letter from Elizabeth Gaskell to Eliza Fox in 1850 creates a telling contrast between life in London and Manchester. The aesthetic deprivation suffered by those in the northern city is acknowledged thus:

I wish I had the opportunity of hearing more grand sacred music; you have great things in London for calming yourself - grand pictures - holy music seem so to take the fretting pain out of one's heart - I wonder if R. Browning's poem would do the same. But here we have no great external beauty either of nature or art the contemplation of which can put calm into one; and take one out of one's little self...

See Chapple, J.A.V. and Pollard, Arthur, *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, Letter 69, pp. 109-110.

30 An interesting antecedent to this contrast between rural idyll and industrial wasteland exists in *Helen Fleetwood* (1841), by Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna. In this earlier social problem novel, the plight of a recently impoverished rural family, and their callously orchestrated move from their ancestral seaside parish, 'this quiet retreat' (p. 35), to M. (presumably Manchester) brings these polarities of location into sharp focus. The author emphatically renounces the stark injustice of prevailing

social pressures which 'allure the industrious countryman from his beautiful sphere, to perish, with his little ones, amid the noxious exhalations of those unnatural dens' (p. 42).

A series of contrasts are set up in the early section of the novel as Mrs. Green, her grandchildren, and the adopted Helen Fleetwood, contemplate and finally enact the transition. Just prior to their departure, as they gather in 'their humble but beloved abode' (p. 39):

'The moonbeam, now broad and strong, fell upon them as they sat, and bathed them in its silvery light, passing through the pure clear atmosphere peculiar to a healthful sea-coast' (p. 44).

After they naively undertake the journey to M., which, for most of them, results in the cruelty and privations of child-labour in the mills, it is revealed that 'above all annoyances, the oppressive weight of the atmosphere was felt and complained of by each' (p. 48).

Acknowledging that their life in M. appears to be a 'thorny patch' (p. 56) in which their strong religious beliefs will be tested, they are struck by 'the contrast between the dense smoky atmosphere of these narrow, gloomy, filthy streets, and the pure sea-breeze of their own sweet native village' (pp. 71-2). Tonna, Charlotte Elizabeth, *Helen Fleetwood*, London, 1841.

- 31 The rural landscape in Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction does not always depict beauty. Country skies, for example, are used as a metaphor for a range of tonal variations.

At times the sky reflects the oppressive nature of the circumstances in which characters are situated. At the funeral of the husband of Anne Leigh in 'Lizzie Leigh' 'the black storm-laden dome of heaven lay very still and close upon the white earth' (p. 3). This scene is similar to two scenes in 'Half a Lifetime Ago' where Susan Dixon is on the verge of finding her former suitor's body in the snow and 'the whole lift of heaven seemed a dome of iron' (p. 95) and when she later visits the wife of the same Michael Hurst to break the news of her husband's death and 'dim-purple brooded the low skies over the white earth' (p. 99). Here the sky becomes a metaphor for desolation and foreboding. In *Sylvia's Lovers*, Philip Hepburn, feeling forsaken, experiences a similar sky:

The cold sleet almost blinded him as the sea-wind
drove it straight in his face; it cut against him as it was

blown with drifting force. The roar of the wintry sea came borne on the breeze; there was more light from the whitened ground than from the dark laden sky above. (p. 153)

A clear sky is unusually suggestive, on at least one occasion, of a cruel divine detachment. Margaret Hale, from *North and South*, in a moment of distress, initially looks into the 'deep blue transparent depths' and finds 'no sign of God' (p. 76).

The sky can also convey ambiguity or uncertainty. At the beginning of *Mary Barton*, while the Manchester workers enjoy their short respite in Green Heys Fields, the 'round, soft, white clouds' are sometimes 'varied by one blacker and more threatening' (p. 40) and Margaret Hale, from *North and South*, recognises that as the sky above will change, her life will be subject to painful transitions (p. 488).

Frequently, too, the sky becomes a source of inspiration. Ruth Hilton, in *Ruth*, momentarily finds the earth 'fresh and brave as the blue heaven above' (p. 45) and later she finds inspiration in a sunset when 'the whole western sky' became 'one flame of fire' and she is 'swallowed up in the unconscious sense of God's infinity' (p. 305).

The Victorian appreciation of subtle variations in the nature of cloud formations is also borne out in John Ruskin's two lectures entitled 'The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century' (1884). See *The Works of John Ruskin*, edited by E.T.Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, George Allen, London, 1908, pp. 9-80.

32 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Mary Barton*, p. 39.

Some of the ironies of contrasting urban landscapes in Manchester are clearly conveyed by Engels in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Appalling slum conditions are contrasted with civic buildings, roads, bridges and the railway.

33 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Ruth*, p. 48.

34 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *North and South*, Penguin Classics, 1986, first published 1854-5, p. 489.

35 Gaskell, Elizabeth, op. cit., p. 96.

- 36 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Wives and Daughters*, The World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1989, first published 1853, p. 391.
- 37 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Lois the Witch and Other Stories*, Pocket Classics, 1989, p. 2.
- 38 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *My Lady Ludlow*, Pocket Classics, 1985, p. 1.
- 39 Gaskell, Elizabeth, 'Lizzie Leigh', in *Cousin Phillis and Other Tales*, The World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1987, first published 1850, p. 4.

For evidence that Elizabeth Gaskell had read James Hogg see Mack, Douglas S., 'James Hogg, Elizabeth Gaskell and the tradition of oral storytelling', *The Gaskell Society Journal*, Volume 8, 1994, pp 70-76.

- 40 *ibid.*, p. 7.
- 41 *ibid.*, p. 31.
- 42 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Ruth*, pp. 6-7.
- 43 See, for example, Chapter 6, 'The World of Manchester', and Chapter 7, 'The World of Cranford', in Wright, Edgar, *Mrs. Gaskell, The Basis for Reassessment*, Oxford University Press, London, 1965.
- 44 Authors and commentators have been aware of the interdependence of the rural and industrial locales in Victorian England. Alan Shelston comments on George Eliot's introduction to *Felix Holt* (1866) as reflecting 'the inextricable interrelatedness of this varied and changing society'. See Shelston, Alan and Shelston, Dorothy, *The Industrial City (1820-1870)*, Macmillan, 1990, p. 3.

Some have noticed this feature in the work of Elizabeth Gaskell. John Cartwright notes that 'Behind the pleasures of a day's release from the toil lay the mills, whose very existence had permeated every aspect of the worker's being'. See Cartwright, John Simpson, 'Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Kingsley: the Creative Artists' Interpretation of a Working Class World', unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of London, 1980, p. 309.

Linda Costic's comments are similar:

Among students of the Victorian period, an image persists of Gaskell as a nostalgic country girl forced to

live in Manchester, writing books of two very different sorts: idyllic pastorals and ambivalent cityscapes. But the truth is more complex. Although their settings are different, Gaskell's novels are of a piece: they all depict social change, and they all demonstrate the consequences to those who refuse to grow.

See Costic, Linda Seidel, 'Elizabeth Gaskell and the Question of Liberal Education', *University of Hertford Studies in Literature*, 14(2), p. 50.

See also Uglow, Jenny, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

45 Quoted in Wright, Edgar, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

46 Quoted in Lesser, Margaret, *Clarkey: A Portrait in Letters of Mary Clarke Mohl (1793-1883)*, Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 169.

47 Gaskell, Elizabeth, 'Libbie Marsh's Three Eras', in *A Dark Night's Work and Other Stories*, edited by Suzanne Lewis, The World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 183.

48 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *North and South*, p. 144.

49 Brooks, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

50 Gérin, *op. cit.*, Chapter 3.

51 As in so much Victorian literature, idealised womanhood is another locus of the need for beauty. This is discussed in Schor, Hilary M., *Scheherezade in the Marketplace (Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel)*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992, Chapter 2.

CHAPTER FIVE

'I AM AFRAID I ENJOY NOT BEING FETTERED BY THE TRUTH':

TRUTH AND MENDACITY IN THE LIFE AND WORK OF ELIZABETH GASKELL.

Introduction

Several aspects of Elizabeth's Gaskell's work indicate that she was aware of the benefits for her literary purposes to be derived from a treatment of the polarities of truthfulness and concealment, deception and mendacity. This is conveyed in a variety of thematic preoccupations throughout her work, including her approach to physiognomy, and her female protagonists' recurrent involvement in situations involving the complexities of behaviour where the constant evasion of truth, clarity and exposure is sought. As in previous examples, this binary opposition in her work releases a dynamic for the fruitful exploration of ideas, and has its origins in the currents of Unitarian theology and social attitudes to which she was exposed.

Elizabeth Gaskell's Attitude to Physiognomy

The impact of physiognomy on characterisation in the European novel of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century has received due attention [1]. But, despite a generalised acceptance of some of its principles, the fictional works of Elizabeth Gaskell include some striking instances where this widespread influence is challenged.

With at least two examples, this is achieved by overturning preconceptions about character based on physical appearance. In *Ruth*, the Reverend Thurstan Benson is first introduced as having 'the stature of a dwarf' and as being 'deformed' [2]. But rather than engendering dread (as is meant to be the case in Miss Pole's hyperbolic and amusing description of the burglar in *Cranford*) this hunchback, along with his sister Faith, resourcefully intervenes to save Ruth, a 'fallen woman', from her tragic plight. His salvific function in the novel is unexpected. [3]

Similarly, in *Cousin Phillis*, the Reverend Ebenezer Holman exhibits a physical bearing which deliberately contradicts the stereotypically effete appearance of a clergyman. Cousin Manning, the narrator in the novella, comments that 'I never saw a more powerful man - deep chest, lean flanks, well-planted head' [4]. The description, of course, is to some extent consistent with Holman's part-time farming interests.

In a further three examples, Elizabeth Gaskell even more directly questions the veracity of physiognomical conclusions. Harry Carson's caricatures of the Manchester mill-workers in *Mary Barton* elicit a stinging response from John Slater, who remains incredulous that anyone could derive amusement from the physical features of a father driven to distraction by the poverty and suffering of his young family [5]. The wider inference in the incident is that physical features may provide a very misleading measure of a person's emotional state and belie profound need.

In another, later example from *Mary Barton*, Elizabeth Gaskell makes her most direct attack on physiognomy. In the courtroom scene, two unidentified spectators discuss the appearance of Jem Wilson, the accused. There is a sustained discussion of his facial features:

'I am more interested by watching the prisoner. Criminals always interest me. I try to trace in the features common to humanity some expression of the crimes by which they have distinguished themselves from their kind. I have seen a good number of murderers in my day, but I have seldom seen one with such marks of Cain on his countenance as the man at the bar.'

'Well, I am no physiognomist, but I don't think his face strikes me as bad. It certainly is gloomy and depressed, and not unnaturally so, considering his situation.'

'Only look at his low, resolute brow, his downcast eye,

his white compressed lips. He never looks up, - just watch him.'

'His forehead is not so low if he had that mass of black hair removed, and is very square, which some people say is a good sign. If others are to be influenced by such trifles as you are, it would have been much better if the prison barber had cut his hair a little previous to the trial; and as for down-cast eye, and compressed lip, it is all part and parcel of his inward agitation just now; nothing to do with character, my good fellow.'

Poor Jem! His raven hair (his mother's pride, and so often fondly caressed by her fingers) was that too to have its influence against him? [6]

As the reader is fully aware of Jem's innocence before the trial, he can but agree with this authorial comment and the comments made by the one onlooker who sensibly discounts physiognomy.

A further example is in *Wives and Daughters*, with Molly, although pressed, refusing to speculate about the character of the Hamley brothers on the basis of their portraits:

'I like their faces!' said Molly. 'I suppose it is so long ago now, that I may speak of their likenesses to you as if they were somebody else; may not I?'

'Certainly,' said Mrs Hamley, as soon as she understood what Molly meant. 'Tell me just what you think of them, my dear; it will amuse me to compare your impressions with what they really are.'

'Oh! but I did not mean to guess at their characters, I could not do it; and it would be impertinent, if I could. I can only speak about their faces as I see them in the picture.' [7]

As mentioned earlier, the detailed and amusing description of the burglars Miss Pole imaginatively fashions in *Cranford* also highlights the potential abuse of physiognomical speculation:

Miss Pole was very much inclined to instal herself as a heroine, because of the decided steps she had taken in flying from the two men and one woman, whom she entitled 'that murderous gang'. She described their appearance in glowing colours, and I noticed that every time she went over the story some fresh trait of villainy was added to their appearance. One was tall - he grew to be gigantic in height before we had done with him:

he of course had black hair - and by-and-by, it hung in elf-locks over his forehead and down his back. The other was short and broad - and a hump sprouted out of his shoulder before we heard the last of him; he had red hair - which deepened into caroty; and she was almost sure he had a cast in his eye - a decided squint. As for the woman, her eyes glared, and she was masculine-looking - a perfect virago; most probably a man dressed in woman's clothes: afterwards we heard of a beard on her chin, and a manly voice and a stride.
[8]

While the fictional works of Elizabeth Gaskell elsewhere indicate a tacit acceptance of some of the more general precepts of physiognomy [9], the six examples above indicate her significant reservations about this imprecise science.

The Unitarian Concern for Truth

Elizabeth Gaskell's rejection of physiognomy in the examples given reveals a typically Unitarian response to the need for honesty and clarity of insight in all matters. Just as many Unitarian biblical scholars of the time sought to demystify passages of scripture which they believed to have been subjected to confusing extra-textual supposition, so Elizabeth Gaskell criticises the tacit acceptance of a science which is recklessly speculative and often cruel and damaging. Wanting to strip aside the theological accretions of centuries of ecclesiastical history, such mid-Victorian expositors wished to arrive at a simple and truthful account of the life of Christ. It was on this basis, through the influence of eighteenth-century rationalism, that they rejected the Trinitarian conclusions of St. John's Gospel. This highly rationalistic and intellectually rigorous approach to biblical exposition became a strong feature of the Unitarian *modus operandi*. Truth, liberty and religion were frequently connected terms in Unitarian homilies of the time. 'To Truth, to Liberty, to Religion' is engraved upon the Memorial Stone over the entrance to Manchester College, Oxford, and was used in the formal opening of the earlier Manchester Academy in Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, in 1786 [10]. Elizabeth Gaskell is merely maintaining in a different context this desire for commonsense and integrity.

A sermon preached by William Gaskell in 1875 entitled 'The Christianity of Christ' makes reference on at least three occasions to the importance of truthfulness. In extolling some of the outstanding Unitarian leaders of the past fifty years, such as Thomas Belsham, Robert Apsland, Lant Carpenter, Charles Wellbeloved, William Turner, and John James Tayler, he affirms:

With pride may we turn to the integrity and faithfulness to conviction which these, and not a few others like them, displayed. They were never ashamed to bear witness to what they believed to be the truth, but were at all times ready to contend earnestly for it.
[11]

Later William Gaskell reasserts the Unitarian conviction that Jesus Christ's example demonstrates the need for the unhindered pursuit of truth:

If anything about him is clear, surely it is that what he had supremely at heart was to emancipate men from every spiritual yoke; from the dominion of priestly rule, from the thralldom of ceremonial observances, from the tyranny of appetite and passion, and bondage to any moral evil. What truth did he ever enforce by any other authority than its own evidence and effect? What check did he ever put upon honest inquiry? What censure did he ever pass on sincere conviction? Did he not appeal to reason, to testimony, and to facts? His, indeed, furnishes a unique and solitary instance of a religion based on intellectual liberty. [12]

Towards the end of the sermon he reinforces the point once more:

In what is known as the "religious world", an opposition has very generally been set up between reason and revelation which is most damaging to the latter, as though it would not bear examination; and from the very way in which "rationalism" is often spoken of, we might verily be led to think that "irrationalism" was to be preferred. Of the fear which orthodoxy thus displays of what it terms a "carnal power", our free faith knows nothing. It asks men only to use it diligently and conscientiously, seeking to learn God's truth and what He requires of them, and never think so unjustly of Him who guides their ways as to believe that He will then suffer it to lead them into damnable error. [13]

The Treatment of Mendacity and Deception

Elizabeth Gaskell's reaction to the prevalent Unitarian preoccupation with truth is a recurrent exploration in her fiction of the issue of mendacity. In much of her work narrative tension is maintained through the characters falsifying or deliberately withholding information. The consequences are often dramatic, prompting a major moral dilemma for one or more characters, but in most cases this leads to a satisfactory resolution.

This feature of Elizabeth Gaskell's work has attracted attention before. Yvonne ffrench, in her early work on the author, noted that:

... a rather contradictory aspect of her moral philosophy is to be found in her attitude towards falsehood. Lies and their consequences play a definite part in the moral aspect of her work ... lying has an inventive attraction of its own. [14]

Of the wide range of works by Elizabeth Gaskell referred to in this dissertation many feature one or more instances of falsehood or deceit. The plot of *Mary Barton* depends upon an ill-conceived political conspiracy which leads to murder and a veil of secrecy. Benson's lie, in *Ruth*, about the identity of the young woman he rescues, postpones but does not avoid a painful confrontation that is only later defused when the pious accuser's son is caught up in his own web of deceit. In *North and South*, Margaret Hale lies to protect her brother, but in so doing precipitates a crisis with the man she loves. When Philip, in *Sylvia's Lovers*, witnesses the capture of his wife's former lover by the press-gang and fails to communicate the information to her, it eventually leads to his own demise. Central to the short story 'A Dark Night's Work' is the clandestine disposal of a body and the subsequent guilt suffered by all those involved. Molly Gibson, in *Wives and Daughters*, becomes enmeshed in the lives of a squire's son with a secret wife and a step-sister with a secret and damaging engagement. The truth about moral impropriety is concealed in 'Lizzie Leigh' and in *Cousin Phillis*, a well-meant but altered message has dire consequences for Phillis. In all of the above works mendacity is a central concern.

The examples of deception and concealment that recur regularly throughout Elizabeth Gaskell's work indicate an ongoing engagement with the opposition of absolute truthfulness and discretionary reserve. The pursuit of truth, so clearly advocated in Unitarian teaching, is matched by a

balanced response to the demands of social propriety and confidentiality. The issue creates a significant fascination for the author and she explores the subtleties of this dilemma most frequently through her female protagonists.

On most occasions the act of deception and concealment is not perpetrated by a female protagonist, but discovered and sensitively responded to by her. Mary Barton supports her father in the depths of his secret despair, as does Ellinor her father in 'A Dark Night's Work'. Molly Gibson, in *Wives and Daughters*, directs much of her mental energy to helping Cynthia Kirkpatrick in her unfortunate engagement, as well as inadvertently sharing in the trials of Osborne Hamley's secret marriage. In 'Half a Lifetime Ago', Susan Dixon cares for and shields her insane brother, Willie, from public scrutiny. In each case the desire of the female protagonist is to bring solace to the secret sufferer.

Several morally complex situations occur when male and female protagonists initiate concealment for motives which would appear to be for the benefit of others. Benson's desire to save Ruth and to protect her from the destructive repercussions of exposing her moral corruption, prompts him to lie about her past. The nature of this moral dilemma was noted when the novel, *Ruth*, was first published and has been a matter of discussion ever since [15]. The 'Athenaeum' of January 15, 1853, and 'Sharpe's London Magazine' of the same date, both concluded that in view of the lie the novel was flawed. Emile Montegut, in the 'Revue des Deux Mondes' of June 1, 1853, held to the opposite point of view. Stating that Benson's lie was justified he went on to attack the hypocritical respectability of English society [16].

A similar situation occurs in *North and South* when Margaret Hale lies to the investigating officer about her presence at the railway station. Although done to protect her brother, her lie, along with that of Benson, raises serious questions about the acceptability of any lie, even when motivated by the desire to shield someone else. In a fictional world where theocratic notions remain unquestioned, moral absolutes demand that both Thurstan Benson and Margaret Hale eventually face up to the consequences of such falsehood.

Ironically, although the consequences of falsehood are inescapable, the crises that ensue provide a catalyst for eventual restitution. When Bradshaw's daughter, Jemima, learns of Ruth's past, her jealousy dissipates and she develops a more realistic appreciation of the young mother.

Margaret Hale's lie and the ensuing confusion in Thornton's mind about the possibility of her having another admirer other than himself, forces them to recognise their mutual love. In this sense mendacity becomes a curious means of precipitating reconciliation.

Throughout her lifetime Elizabeth Gaskell dealt with others in an open and truthful manner. On one level the writing of *Mary Barton* and *Ruth* demonstrates her desire for an accurate depiction of problems which other authors and commentators either evaded or ignored. On encountering the obvious repression of truth by others in her daily life she could also be scornful and bitingly sarcastic. Her letter regarding the birth of a baby to one of her husband's ministerial colleagues amusingly indicates this:

Mrs. J.J. Tayler has got an impromptu baby at Blackpool; - went there and lo and behold a little girl unexpectedly made her appearance, and clothes have had to be sent in such a hurry. Bathing places do so much good. Susan and Mary went to Blackpool last year, but did not derive the same benefit. Mr. J.J. Tayler came home from London on Saturday hoping to find wife and children at home but had to post off to Blackpool leaving Father Abraham to preach, and on Sunday morning Mrs. J.J. Tayler presented him with the little lady - So ends Mrs. J.J. Tayler's "delicate state of health, arising from some internal complaint" as Mr. Ransom called it. [17]

However, at times she also accepted the benefits of misconstruing information in such a manner as to assist a particular party. Sometimes she even resorted to unabashed secrecy. This is evident in attempts to preserve her authorial anonymity, the painstaking selectivity exercised in the choice of material for her much criticised biography of Charlotte Brontë, and the fulfilment of her desire secretly to purchase a country house for her husband. In an age when the business rights of women were very limited, this act of love and commitment was also one of sheer tenacity [18]. In her personal life, as well as in her fiction, Elizabeth Gaskell appreciated the tensions and complexities inherent in antinomies such as truth and mendacity.

The Gothic Mode in Elizabeth Gaskell's Fiction

A feature of Elizabeth Gaskell's work that has received more attention in recent years and does contribute to a consideration of her treatment of

truthfulness is the utilisation of the Gothic mode in several short stories [19]. Stories such as 'The Old Nurse's Story' (1852), 'The Poor Clare' (1856), and 'The Grey Woman' (1861), while enhancing the author's reputation by demonstrating the stylistic variety of her work, also contribute to its problematic nature. Feminist critics have suggested that her effective but limited fictional involvement in the realm of horror and phantasy indicates subliminal frustration in her domestic and social role, even to the extent of sexual repression.

Such conclusions have significant ramifications for the issue of truthfulness in her work. For while Elizabeth Gaskell may well have sought to depict an open, honest response to the social conditions of her time, here, as with the ambiguity of much of her fiction, in its balance between radicalism and conservatism, is an additional vantage point from which her attempts at compliance with Unitarian teaching can be seen to be subverted. For while much of her work exhibits a reasonably poised and confident overt identification with the needs of the socially disadvantaged, the covert sense of insecurity and dissatisfaction available through an interpretation of her short stories which emphasises their psychological patterning and complexity, contributes to an unavoidable need for the reader to have several perspectives in considering the treatment of truth and mendacity across the full range of her fictional output. The following short story, although Elizabeth Gaskell's one venture into the related genre of phantasy, is a good example of this issue.

Truth and Mendacity in 'Curious, If True' (1860)

Elizabeth Gaskell's short story, 'Curious, If True' was published in the second number of 'The Cornhill' in 1860. It was her first contribution to that leading literary magazine, the brainchild of George Smith, of Smith, Elder & Co. [20]. The story purports to be an extract from a letter by Richard Whittingham, a descendant of John Calvin's sister, who visits France 'in order to examine registers and archives' [21] that relate to this line of his family history. While in Tours he regularly walks in the late afternoon through the countryside surrounding the city. On one such occasion he becomes lost and seeks refuge in an isolated chateau, where he is warmly received, as if expected. A large number of guests are gathered there for some social entertainment. Whittingham is readily included in a busy round

of interesting conversations, but is constantly struck by the unusual nature of the people he meets, many of whom remind him (and the reader) of characters met formerly in some other context. Although Whittingham does not make the connection, the reader is left with a trail of clues which clearly identify the guests as figures from well known fairy tales. Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Puss in Boots, Tom Thumb, and Beauty and the Beast are there, to name but a few. Some are thinly disguised, and what makes others interesting is that they have aged and are considerably changed from the appearance the reader retains from childhood renderings of the traditional tales. Cinderella, for example, is markedly altered:

Opposite to me sat a very sweet-looking lady, who must have been a great beauty in her youth, I should think, and would be charming in old age, from the sweetness of her countenance. She was, however, extremely fat, and on seeing her feet laid up before her on a cushion, I at once perceived that they were so swollen as to render her incapable of walking, which probably brought on her excessive 'embonpoint'. Her hands were plump and small, but rather coarse-grained in texture, not quite so clean as they might have been, and altogether not so aristocratic-looking as the charming face. Her dress was of superb black velvet, ermine-trimmed, with diamonds thrown all abroad over it. [22]

Later, we gain further, startling insights into Cinderella's personality and subsequent history:

... I went across to the lame old lady. She acknowledged my coming with the prettiest gesture of thanks possible; and, half apologetically said, 'It is a little dull to be unable to move about on such evenings as this; but it is a just punishment to me for my early vanities. My poor feet, that were by nature so small, are now taking their revenge for my cruelty in forcing them into such little slippers [23]

There are numerous characters like her, all taken from well known English and French versions of the tales we read or had read to us, tales by Charles Perrault and Marie-Catherine Le Jumel de Barneville, Baronne d'Aulnoy, amongst others [24]. After many such encounters, Whittingham, and the assembly, are suddenly disturbed by the appearance of Madame la Feemarraine, the Fairy godmother. Whittingham finds himself 'lying in the grass close by a hollow oak-tree, with the slanting glory of the dawning day

shining full in (his) face, and thousands of little birds and delicate insects piping and warbling out their welcome to the ruddy splendour' [25].

'Curious, If True' provides an excellent basis for an examination of a tension inherent in much of Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction. Throughout her work she exhibits a strong desire to escape from the harsh realities of mid-nineteenth century Manchester, where she worked diligently alongside her husband, William Gaskell, to address the needs of the socially marginalised and impoverished. She and her husband were daily confronted by the privations and anguish brought about by large scale social displacement, as people sought employment in the cotton mills of Manchester. The respectable and well educated bourgeois Unitarian milieu to which she belonged was committed to social reform and industrial progress (often conflicting aims) and Elizabeth Gaskell frequently found herself confronting the dilemma of being an outspoken supporter of the needs of the poor, while wanting not to offend her Manchester social circle, many of whom were in her husband's congregation. Having grown up in an idyllic rural environment (Knutsford, in Cheshire) she frequently articulates, in her life and work, the wish to escape from the tensions and severe headaches she endured during her time in Manchester. As a Unitarian of that time, she was committed to philanthropic endeavour, to truth (a key word in nineteenth century English Unitarianism) and to all that the struggles of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century had provided within England for dissenting traditions such as Unitarianism.

On the other hand, as a thoughtful, imaginative author, and as a woman, she was confronted by other possibilities, alternatives to the harsh, male-dominated concerns of an industrial city. For, while she accepted the benefits to be derived from her strongly rationalistic, Unitarian heritage, she was also exposed to a growing tendency within Unitarianism to embrace some of the principle tenets of Romanticism coming through influences such as Transcendentalism. Introduced to English Unitarianism through the work of fellow Unitarians in America such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, and keenly embraced by James Martineau, the leading English Unitarian theologian of the period, Transcendentalism emphasised an inner spiritual life for the individual that was in contrast to the rationalism that had dominated in English Unitarianism up until that point. Her wide reading inevitably exposed her to such influences as well. Throughout her writing career Elizabeth Gaskell constantly maintained a tension between her concern for

clear, social insight and involvement, and a desire to transcend the immediate, to seek an alternative environment, often a rural idyll suggestive of her early life. There were both realist and escapist tendencies in her life, as in her fiction [26].

'Curious, If True' confirms a recognition of this tension, of unresolved antinomies which exist within her work. Elizabeth Gaskell establishes a deliberately realistic frame and context in which to explore the imaginative, gently amusing fantasy realm which is at the centre of this story. It is subtitled 'Extract from a letter from Richard Whittingham, esq.', the letter form providing a common authorial framing device to reinforce credibility. And Whittingham, in a business-like manner, is seeking solid documentary evidence to establish his connection with Calvin's sister. Unlike some, who prefer their family history to remain apochryphal, he seeks the truth in 'registers and archives', however unglamorous the details may prove to be. As a descendant of Calvin's family, the inference, also, is that he is pragmatic and rationalistic, coming from a tradition not unlike Unitarianism in its desire to circumvent the doctrinal and liturgical accretions of the pre-reformation period (although it is different in so many other respects). English Unitarianism of the mid-Victorian period was quite unlike Calvinism, in that it did not subscribe to the notion of innate human depravity, or see the need for substitutionary atonement. It accepted the doctrine of universalism and the inherent goodness of humankind. Atonement, for Unitarians, was through moral rectitude and/or suffering, in line with an Arian or Socinian Christology. However, it shared with Calvinism some concerns regarding determinism (or predestination) and was strongly in the nonconformist tradition, as were some Calvinistic denominations [27].

However, his behaviour is somewhat contradictory. At the beginning of the story he shuns company in Tours and prefers solitary walks in countryside unknown to him outside the city. In this his behaviour is like that of the author, who frequently escaped from her busy social life in Manchester to rural retreats such as Silverdale in the Lake District, or overseas to Paris and Rome [28]. At the chateau, Whittingham is welcomed as if he belongs, Richard Whittingham obviously being confused with Dick Whittington. Ironically, they are related, in that Whittington goes to the city (London) and Whittingham leaves the city (Tours) to visit the country. Ironically, also, despite his unwillingness to enter into informal conversation with others at his hotel in Tours, here, at the chateau, he feels relatively

comfortable, especially considering the odd nature of his company. The sober, no nonsense Whittingham is accommodated by, and accepts with surprising ease, a fantasy world which defies credibility, which makes not the faintest pretence to anything other than a parade of conventional, only slightly veiled fairytale characters. The transition from realist to escapist mode is achieved with complete ease by Whittingham, so much so that he is unaware of the the change.

The interaction between Whittingham and the guests at the chateau results in an accommodation on the part of both parties of what the other represents. But for this to happen, perceptions concerning the stark contrast between the two worlds represented have to be modified to make them acceptable. Whittingham overcomes the shock of his encounter with the fantasy realm by a sustained resistance to belief in the true identity of the characters he meets. He also accentuates physical and behavioural aspects of these characters in such a way as to de-romanticise or de-mythologise them, exposing their foibles or less attractive side. The guests receive Whittingham, not as the puritan genealogist, but as one of their own, a slight name change being all that is necessary.

Indeed, names are an important aspect of this process of negotiation. Not only is Whittingham's name modified to make it acceptable to the guests, but there is a scene where Whittingham parries with the Beast (of Beauty and the Beast) to establish which is dominant, the realm of fantasy or the world of political realities, the world from which Whittingham has just emerged. When the Beast expresses disappointment to Whittingham that he is not accompanied by 'Le grand Jean d'Angleterre', Whittingham misconstrues this to mean political contemporaries such as John Russell, English Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, or, John Bright, the leading Anti-Corn Law Reformer. He, for some time, represses the possibility that the Beast is referring to Jack the Giant-killer. Both Whittingham and the Beast want to establish meaning in their conversation in terms of their very different perceptions of reality. But Whittingham is sufficiently respectful of the questioner to provide a satisfactory response, especially when he realises that Jack the Giant-killer had once been very real in his own life as a child:

... Jack the Giant-killer had once, it is true, been rather an intimate friend of mine, as far as (printer's) ink and paper can keep up a friendship, but I had not heard his name mentioned for years; and for aught I knew he lay enchanted with King Arthur's knights, who lie

entranced until the blast of the trumpets of four mighty kings shall call them to help at England's need. But the question had been asked in serious earnest by that gentleman, whom I more wished to think well of me than I did any other person in the room. So I answered respectfully that it was long since I had heard anything of my countryman; but that I was sure it would have given him as much pleasure as it was doing myself to have been present at such an agreeable gathering of friends. [29]

If Elizabeth Gaskell had wanted to resolve the ongoing opposition the story establishes between the realm of fairy tale fantasy and the realm of reality, then the dramatic intrusion of the Fairy Godmother, near the end, could have provided that. But, whereas it does shatter the uneasy conjunction between Whittingham and the guests at the chateau, it is far from conclusive. Unlike the knight-at-arms in Keats's ballad 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', who, after his encounter, ends up on 'the cold hill side' [30], Whittingham's fate is quite different:

And in a moment I was lying in the grass close by a hollow oak-tree, with the slanting glory of the dawning day shining full in my face, and thousands of little birds and delicate insects piping and warbling out their welcome to the ruddy splendour. [31]

This final paragraph suggests that Whittingham's return to reality has not left him bereft, as in Keats's poem. Rather, he has been restored to a world which has suddenly become infused with light and enchantment, a world quite unlike that which he left behind on arriving at the chateau. It is a world of 'slanting glory' and 'ruddy splendour', where 'thousands' of small creatures celebrate the coming day. Whittingham's reality has been enriched by entering the fantasy realm. In Wordsworthian terms some of the 'glory' that has 'past away' from life has been restored to Whittingham, and his existence has again been 'Apparelled in celestial light', that is if one substitutes an alternative definition of 'celestial' to the one Wordsworth probably meant. The poet seems to be suggesting a heavenly light, not a realm of fairytale enchantment when he says:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and freshness of a dream. [32]

So, while the venture into the fantasy realm cannot be sustained in the story, and the close conjunction of the antithetical worlds of Calvin's offspring and an ageing Cinderella (dour pragmatist and whimsical inventiveness) is all too intense, the events of the story have exhibited, nevertheless, their long term interdependence. Whittingham was welcomed at the chateau and, equally, some of the light of another world has spilled over into the world of a weary English genealogist. While the fairy godmother's entry and the breaking of the spell may seem to signal closure, any finality is resisted. A new day has arrived and the vitality of oppositions continues.

The story also stresses the indivisible nature of past and present experiences. Whereas in the common retelling of fairytales the characters and situations are forever recounted as an immediate experience, 'Curious, If True' gives a retrospective dimension that forces the reader to take account of the characters' subsequent personal history. This reinforces another prominent tenet of Unitarian theology, a strong adherence to the notion of moral determinism. The legacy, in Elizabeth Gaskell's writing, of Joseph Priestley's notion of Necessity, an influential form of moral determinism in English Unitarianism up until the middle of the nineteenth century, can be demonstrated through the manner in which her characters are always held accountable for their behaviour. Characters bear the consequences of their moral lapses and personal peccadilloes. So many of the characters in this story are troubled by and unable to escape from the events of their former lives as depicted in the respective fairytales from which they have been taken. In this literary mode, as elsewhere, the influence of Unitarianism on Elizabeth Gaskell's work is inescapable. Whittingham's presence, disturbing as it does the time-honoured preservation of a constant retelling of the fairytales as discrete stories by bringing subsequent events to light, reminds the reader that Whittingham represents Calvin and the inevitable consequences of human behaviour that all Calvinism, of whatever form, implies.

It has been suggested that this incident in Whittingham's life is a dream. It seems meaningless to make this distinction, as for Whittingham the whole encounter appears to be part of his ongoing, uninterrupted consciousness. Certainly, however, it is a special, discrete experience. It may also be read as a parody of childhood fantasy. But, again, while Whittingham doesn't see the joke, it is difficult to divorce the experience from his reality. For the reader,

the guests at the chateau provide a striking foil to Whittingham's blandness, with their eccentric features and odd behaviour. But, like Whittingham, they also take themselves very seriously. The possibility that the entertainment is a costume party also fails to challenge the argument that, for Whittingham, this is all part of his unified consciousness. If he is convinced that these characters really are from a fantasy realm (something he barely acknowledges) then it is no more than accepting the illusion created by any artistic representation of reality (any stage play, for example). Human consciousness often expresses the need to accommodate, unashamedly, contraries such as those depicted in this short story. The co-existence of reality and fantasy is necessary and stressed by the very nature of this story [33].

The open-endedness of the story is also essential. Reductionist possibilities, such as those discussed above, fragment, and ultimately destroy, what is best read as an integrated treatment of psychological complexity. Closure enforces rigidity, permanence, and placement, and denies the benefits of an invigorating interdependence of opposites. Open-endedness ensures survival, growth, and a healthy elusiveness from fixity. It fosters a sense of equilibrium. There is good reason to think that Elizabeth Gaskell preferred that position, despite the manner in which she frequently forces her work to comply with conventional patterns of Christian reconciliation.

The story encapsulates, in its few pages, a suggestion of contrasting strains in Elizabeth Gaskell's background. Her codified social and ecclesiastical background is contrasted with an escapist psychological dimension, and both are necessary to deal with her busy world of incongruities. Submissive minister's wife and intrepid holiday maker (both at home and abroad), paragon of Unitarian rectitude and gossipy correspondent, keen supporter of progress and scathing critic of the human cost of industrialisation, Elizabeth Gaskell was very adept at maintaining the balance between such contraries throughout her lifetime and in her work.

For Whittingham, the experience at the chateau may be considered as a significant interlude, a catalyst which enriches his self-confessed world of ennui and social diffidence. It adds 'ruddy splendour' to a previously colourless world. If there is nothing left when the spell is broken, then the fantasy is a lie (as other interpretations would like to render it). But the open-endedness of the story guarantees continuity and enrichment, a transfer of

benefits between both realms. Elizabeth Gaskell sought this in her own life. Her darkest moments in smoggy Manchester were counterbalanced by memories of Knutsford, Silverdale, and the sunshine of Rome. There was, for her, another reality beyond the depressing cruelties of industrialisation, even though the Gaskells' philanthropic commitment kept drawing them back to this place of tragic need. Both spheres were necessary for the author. The diversity of her literary output testifies to this. Elizabeth Gaskell was capable of evoking, with sustained skill, the beauty of the English countryside. But she was equally well able to depict, very incisively, the hypocrisy of the successful middle-class Unitarian milieu to which she belonged.

A belief in the security of our eternal destination parallels Elizabeth Gaskell's recurrent acknowledgement of the existence of an idyllic rural world outside the industrial vortex which, in her lifetime, ensnared so many. Her idealised appreciation of some edenic alternative realm is matched in this story by the natural acceptance, on Whittingham's part, of a fantasy world unlike his own (although that world is by nature equivocal). The author's existential understanding confidently encompasses that which is beyond the temporal and immediate. Her religious faith fostered this duality. Calvin and Cinderella are strange 'bedfellows', but their union in this story, as elsewhere, has left us with healthy offspring [34].

Truth in Elizabeth Gaskell's Fiction

Earlier it was indicated that Elizabeth Gaskell, because of her Unitarian background, had a special desire to depict an ultimate truthfulness in her characters. Scenes involving the setting right of characters involved in withholding truth are frequent. Her attitude to physiognomy likewise indicates a desire to avoid popular methodologies which are not scientifically truthful. But 'Curious, If True' raises the more complex issue as to what constitutes truth in Elizabeth Gaskell's literary output, what it is in her chosen forms of literary expression that gives artistic integrity to her work.

For this author it appears to rest in a fusion of contraries, of a number of works where the paradoxical coexistence of issues from private world and social agenda is so characteristic. The desire for social realism in much of her work, driven as that is by her philanthropic commitment, is accompanied by thematic elements which can readily be deconstructed to divulge

psychological realities concerning the author, although in a superficial reading they are effectively disguised.

Working with a strong sense of social purpose (a role akin to her ministry alongside her husband within the church) she was nevertheless subliminally responding to troubling aspects of her former life (the early death of her mother, her brother's loss at sea, and the loss of an infant early in marriage), to a desire (both temporal and eternal) to transcend the physical limitations of life in Manchester, and to constantly guard her hard-earned bourgeois respectability.

Artistic truth in Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction can only be understood when her attempt to achieve social realism (the didactic edge to her work) is taken in conjunction with features which stem from psychological complexities which she may not have acknowledged, but, for the discerning reader make perfect sense. The truth is in this balance.

Elizabeth Gaskell was familiar with the 'Faerie Queene', by Edmund Spenser. She, along with many other Victorian authors, made reference to the Una/Duessa, truth/duplicity dichotomy in her work. In *Wives and Daughters*, Molly's father compares her to Una [35], and later Roger Hamley describes Cynthia Kirkpatrick as 'the false Duessa' [36]. In *North and South*, Thornton's assessment of Margaret Hale, after he suspects her as having a clandestine relationship with another man, is that 'he felt hardly able to separate the Una from the Duessa' [37].

The Una/Duessa dichotomy provides an interesting opposition in support of the hypothesis that Elizabeth Gaskell's work depends for its vitality and integrity on the positing of fruitful oppositions, something she was equally aware of in her own life. In *Wives and Daughters*, Molly and Cynthia are temporarily viewed as morally divergent. But this view is not sustained. Elizabeth Gaskell finds it difficult to create a wholly wicked character, her underlying Unitarian commitment to human goodness prevents that. So Cynthia is drawn back from that opposition to a Una/Duessa opposition within herself, a position most of Elizabeth Gaskell's female protagonists eventually arrive at.

Margaret Hale, in *North and South*, for all her moral rectitude, lies to the police to protect her brother. Mary Barton, in the novel of the same name [38], for some time shields her father from arrest for murder. Likewise Ellinor, in 'A Dark Night's Work' [39]. Thurstan and Faith Benson, in *Ruth*

[40], lie to protect Ruth from social censure as an unmarried mother. Yet, all the above characters are to be viewed as morally defensible and ultimately admirable. They all compromise on perceived social propriety to achieve in falsehood what appears to the reader as a higher goodness. The realisation of a Una/Duessa dichotomy in such characters, the juxtaposition of moral truth and justifiable duplicity, provides the most fruitful approach to achieving a humane, healthy and complete response to the problems confronting characters, especially in a codified society where moral expectations are so tightly circumscribed.

Una or Duessa are both seen as having little meaning in isolation. Truth, without the concept and possibility of falsehood, is lame, even pointless. Falsehood loses its potency without truth as a point of reference. But together they foster meaning and direction. Again, the need for fruitful oppositions is maintained.

Truthfulness in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*

Truthfulness in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* is maintained in a similar manner. As Felicia Bonaparte has correctly pointed out [41], Elizabeth Gaskell presents Charlotte Brontë as two distinct personalities; as Currer Bell, the passionate, disturbing novelist, and as one of the Brontë daughters, meek, dutiful and submissive. This distinction prevents Elizabeth Gaskell from resolving the antithetical elements in Charlotte's character and allows her to sustain throughout the biography something of the same duality that she seems to prefer in an assessment and projection of her own personality.

Subsequent renderings of the life of Charlotte Brontë suggest how much Elizabeth Gaskell played down aspects of Charlotte's life, especially her relationship with Monsieur Heger, the schoolmaster in Brussels [42]. At one level she is keen to protect Charlotte from innuendo and to present her as a paragon of Victorian virtue, focussing rather on her patience and resignation in the face of personal hardship. She controls the biographical material in such a way as to ensure that the image of Charlotte that the reader of the biography is left with is a worthy tribute to her friend.

Elsewhere in this dissertation the nature of nineteenth century Unitarian eulogies has been discussed. In keeping with the Unitarian concept of human perfectability and an emphasis on personal attributes and conduct which

demonstrated a serious desire to view Christ as divine moral exemplar, these eulogies now read as hyperbolic and one sided. The following description of Elizabeth Gaskell was written by Catherine Winkworth, who was visited twice by the author, during Winkworth's period of recuperation from illness at Southport in 1848. It demonstrates the capacity of her Unitarian and sympathetic contemporaries to view others in terms of perfection of character:

Southport has a halo of glory round it in my eyes now, because of Mrs. Gaskell's visit to us. It was so delightful having her all to ourselves, and we got so intimate together. Everything I see of her makes me admire and love her more. She is so full of information on such various subjects, has seen so many clever and curious people, so much life altogether - and then she is so thoroughly good. Her thoughtful kindness and gentleness to me, because I was ill, was as great as if I were one of her own children. Well! she certainly is as near perfection as any one I know, ... [43]

A sermon which admirably illustrates the Unitarian emphasis on Man's inherent goodness is 'An Exemplary Christian Minister, The Honoured Instrument of God's Goodness'. This sermon was preached by John Kentish, at Stourbridge and Cradley, on 30 December, 1827, on the occasion of the death of Rev. James Scott [44]. Elizabeth Gaskell, steeped in Unitarian thought, would have been exposed to many such eulogies. On one level then, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* reflects this and can be read as a sustained Unitarian appreciation of the best qualities exhibited by Charlotte Brontë.

But this is not always easy to achieve. To some extent she attempts to do so by deflecting attention away from Charlotte's deficiencies. Patrick Brontë's eccentricities are accentuated and Branwell Brontë's life of dissipation is detailed, although the blame in his case is shared with Mrs. Robinson, to whom he became fatally attracted. Felicia Bonaparte demonstrates the inconsistency of this, of having Mrs. Robinson receive the blame for Branwell's decline while Charlotte's well attested attraction to Heger is carefully smoothed over in the text. Culpability and responsibility are frequently attributed to other characters and circumstances beyond Charlotte's control. Again, there is a strong deterministic edge to her writing.

But the letters of Charlotte Brontë speak for themselves and frequently run counter to Elizabeth Gaskell's intentions, prompting the reader to redress the imbalance that is being conveyed. And it is impossible to discuss Charlotte

Brontë's novels, particularly *Jane Eyre*, without demonstrating that Currer Bell was a woman of passion whose writing reflects a mind at odds with social conventions regarding female conduct. The deliberate exclusion of the juvenilia, which Elizabeth Gaskell had read, still leaves plenty of material in the biography in order to deduce the other side of Charlotte's character.

Through a process of omission and inclusion, hyperbole and understatement, Elizabeth Gaskell has been able to present a largely convincing view of Charlotte Brontë as the ideal Victorian woman. But it is possible to read against the text in such a manner as to view a totally different person, one that subsequent research has begun to recover. Elizabeth Gaskell cannot conceal the duality she prefers.

This has become very apparent with the recent publication of another major biography of the Brontës. Juliet Barker highlights the fact that Elizabeth Gaskell, while purporting to present a fair, detailed and revelatory account of Charlotte's life, in fact showed a distinct preference for information from certain quarters, particularly Ellen Nussey. Rather than consulting Patrick Brontë or Nicholls personally regarding details about their place in Charlotte's affairs, she preferred second-hand information from sources which fancifully misrepresented Patrick's character, making him appear eccentric and severe. There is a conflict for the author in undertaking this biography. It shows up her tendency to pursue the bizarre and captivating detail, to accept distortion and exaggeration rather than present a balanced, thoroughly researched account of Charlotte Brontë's life [45].

NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Tytler, Graeme, *Physiognomy in the European Novel*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1982.
- 2 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Ruth*, The World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 67.
- 3 See Stiles, Peter, 'Grace, Redemption and the "Fallen Woman": *Ruth* and

Tess of the D'Urbervilles', *The Gaskell Society Journal*, Volume 6, 1992, pp. 58-66.

- 4 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Cranford* and *Cousin Phillis*, Penguin Classics, 1986, p. 231.
- 5 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Mary Barton*, Penguin Classics, 1985, p. 238.
- 6 *ibid.*, pp. 384-385.
- 7 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Wives and Daughters*, The World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 65.
- 8 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Cranford* and *Cousin Phillis*, pp. 144-145.
- 9 Some examples are given in *Physiognomy in the European Novel (Faces and Fortunes)*, by Graeme Tytler. In most of her novels physical appearance consistent with Elizabeth Gaskell's idealised depiction of womanhood could be considered. The description of John Barton on pages 41-42 of *Mary Barton* is a clear example of Elizabeth Gaskell's use of physiognomical principles.
- 10 See Burney, Lester, *Cross Street Chapel (Manchester and its College)*, Manchester, 1983, p. 10.

In 'My Diary: the Early Years of My Daughter Marianne', Mrs. Gaskell refers on several occasions to the need for truthfulness in child-raising. At one point she states:

I have never allowed (my daughter Marianne) to be told anyone was going to do anything for her unless they really were, and have tried to speak as truly to her as ever I could. (p. 18)

In response to savage criticism for some of the personal details included in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, she makes similar comments: 'I did so try to tell the truth, and I believe now I hit as near the truth as anyone could do. And I weighed every line with all my power and heart.' See *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, p. 454.

The opinions regarding Unitarian preoccupation with truth is borne out by Martin Fitzpatrick in 'Toleration and Truth', *Enlightenment and Dissent*, Volume 1, 1982, p. 11.

- 11 Gaskell, William, 'The Christianity of Christ: the sermon preached before the British and Foreign Unitarian Association at their Fiftieth Annual Meeting, May 19, 1875', *Pamphlet 1875*, Dr. Williams's Library, 14 Gordon Square, London, p. 3.
- 12 *ibid.*, p. 6.
- 13 *ibid.*, p. 13.
- 14 French, Yvonne, *Mrs. Gaskell*, Home and Van Thal, 1949, pp. 56-57.
- 15 See Boggs, Arthur W., 'Reflections of Unitarianism in Mrs. Gaskell's Novels', unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, 1950, pp. 109-111, and Chard, M. J., 'Spiritual Pilgrimage: a study of its sources and thematic significance in the novels of Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot', unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1982, p. 260.
- 16 See 'Athenaeum' (London) No. 1316, January 15, 1853, pp. 76-78, and 'Books and their Authors', 'Sharpe's London Magazine', January 15, 1853, pp. 125-126.

See also Montague, Emile, 'Les Romans de Mistress Gaskell', in *Revue des Deux Mondes*, Paris, XX11, June 1, 1853, pp. 894-926.
- 17 Chapple, J.A.V., and Pollard, Arthur, (eds.) *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, Manchester University Press, 1966, Letter 9, p. 20.
- 18 For a discussion of Elizabeth Gaskell's attempts to maintain her authorial anonymity see Uglow, Jenny, *Elizabeth Gaskell (A Habit of Stories)*, Faber and Faber, London, 1993, Chapter 11.

For details concerning the purchase and preparation of this house see Gérin, Winifred, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, Oxford University Press, 1966, Chapter XX111, and Uglow, Jenny, *op. cit.*, Chapters 26-28.
- 19 See Schor, Hilary M., *Scheherezade in the Marketplace (Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel)*, Oxford University Press, 1992, Oxford, p.165-166. Also see Stoneman, Patsy, *op. cit.*, p.15. Jenny Uglow, in her recent biography discusses this Gothic element at various points in her work. See Uglow, Jenny, *op. cit.*, pp. 37, 118, 143-144, 227. Felicia Bonaparte, in *The Gypsy-Bachelor of Manchester: The Life of Mrs. Gaskell's Demon*, suggests that in her short stories Elizabeth Gaskell 'allows herself to use what

Ellen Moers has called the language of the “female Gothic”, a language in which she is able to formulate thought about herself in code’ (p. 49). See Moers, Ellen, *Literary Women: The Great Writers*, Doubleday: Anchor Press, New York, 1977.

- 20 For publication details see Sharps, John Geoffrey, *Mrs. Gaskell’s Observation and Invention*, Linden Press, 1970, p. 331. Concise information on ‘The Cornhill’ can be found in Sutherland, John, *The Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction*, Longman, 1988, p. 150.
- 21 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Cousin Phillis and Other Tales*, The World’s Classics, 1981, p. 241.
- 22 *ibid.*, pp. 245-246.
- 23 *ibid.*, p. 251
- 24 *ibid.*, p. 361 contains notes on the origin of the stories referred to in ‘Curious, If True’.
- 25 *ibid.*, p. 257.
- 26 Uglow, Jenny, *Elizabeth Gaskell (A Habit of Stories)*, Faber and Faber, London, 1993, is now the definitive biography of Elizabeth Gaskell. It contains some reference to most of the biographical details raised above.
- 27 See Bolam, C.C., Goring, J., Short, H.L., Thomas, R., *The English Presbyterians, from Elizabethan Puritanism to Modern Unitarianism*, London and Boston, 1968, and Mclachlan, H., *The Unitarian Movement in the Religious Life of England*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1934.
- 28 Again, see Jenny Uglow, *op. cit.*, for biographical details.
- 29 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *op. cit.*, pp. 253-254.
- 30 Keats, John, ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’, 1819.
- 31 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *op. cit.*, p. 257.
- 32 See Wordsworth’s Ode, ‘On Intimations of Immortality’, in *Selected Poems*, edited by Roger Sharrock, Heinemann, 1964, p. 103.
- 33 Each of these points is taken up in Sharps, John Geoffrey, *op. cit.*, pp. 333-4.
- 34 This story has rarely been examined in detail. Further discussion can be found, however, in Bonaparte, Felicia, *The Gypsy-Bachelor of Manchester: The Life of Mrs. Gaskell’s Demon*, University Press of Virginia, 1992, and

- Spencer, Jane, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, Macmillan, 1993, pp. 117-126.
- 35 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Wives and Daughters*, The World's Classics, 1989, p. 54.
- 36 *ibid.*, p. 677.
- 37 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *North and South*, Penguin Classics, 1986, p. 411.
- 38 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Mary Barton*, Penguin Classics, 1985.
- 39 Gaskell, Elizabeth, 'A Dark Night's Work', in *A Dark Night's Work and Other Stories*, The World's Classics, 1992.
- 40 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Ruth*, The World's Classics, 1989.
- 41 See Bonaparte, Felicia, *The Gypsy-Bachelor of Manchester (The Life of Mrs. Gaskell's Demon)*, University Press of Virginia, 1992, Chapter XV11, 'Mrs Gaskell and Currer Bell', pp. 232-253.
- 42 See Gordon, Lyndall, *Charlotte Brontë (A Passionate Life)*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1994, pp. 101-131.
- 43 Quoted in Gérin, Winifred, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, Oxford University Press, 1976, pp. 93-4.
- 44 See *Tracts (Collected Unitarian Sermons)*, Macquarie University.
- 45 See Barker, Juliet, *The Brontës*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1994. These issues are also taken up in Gordon, Lyndall, *Charlotte Brontë (A Passionate Life)*.

CHAPTER SIX

'LAWS IMPRESSED ON MATTER BY THE CREATOR':

DARWINISM AND CONFLICTING VIEWS OF THE NATURAL WORLD IN THE WORK OF ELIZABETH GASKELL

During the period of Elizabeth Gaskell's literary output there was an increasing awareness of the challenge Darwinian theory posed for the variety of more accepted and conservative theological positions collectively known as natural theology. Theologians such as William Paley (1743 - 1805) and William Whewell (1794 - 1866) had sought to accommodate developments in geological and paleontological understanding in their theologies without disturbing a strong commitment to theocratic conclusions. For them the created world reflected a divinely sanctioned state of balance, order and harmony. They believed that notions of adaptation could be comfortably incorporated within their views and that the fecundity and plenitude existing in the natural world was a convincing demonstration of divine creative impulses [1].

The basis of Darwinian theory ran counter to such assumptions. Darwin's conclusions in *The Origin of the Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) [2] were that species evolved and faced extinction in a random, often chaotic manner, within a context of survival and supremacy. His theory, as it was developed, was a renunciation of stasis, order and purpose and avoided almost completely any theocratic interpretation of the natural world, or, in fact, of the cosmos. Darwin, himself, did not abandon a strong belief in divine involvement in evolutionary processes, choosing rather, in the concluding pages of *The Origin of Species*, to speak of 'the laws impressed on matter by the Creator', and 'of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one' [3]. But his views, carried forward ruthlessly by others, highlighted the increasing need to reconcile scientific theories with Christian doctrine in the nineteenth century.

Throughout the nineteenth century the impact of such views on traditional doctrinal assumptions was profound. Sometimes conscious, more often subliminal, the influence of Darwinian theory fostered anxiety and uncertainty in an age beset with significant challenges to traditional patterns of belief. In the midst of industrial dislocation, aridity, and rapid social change, the world of nature could not be viewed in the same comforting light as before [4]. For the intellectually aware it was no longer possible to consider it as an extension of the divine realm, as an unchanging respite from the anarchic forces within society, or as a safe haven for the disillusioned.

Darwinian theory reinforced in the English consciousness of the mid to late Victorian period the notion of human progress, at the same time introducing the disconcerting concept of natural selection. It was thus able to be interpreted antithetically, capitalising on the burgeoning mood of optimism that accompanied the social and industrial developments of the period, but also creating anxiety and challenging the theocratic assumptions which provided the anchor for much religious faith.

The strong belief in human development in this period was fostered by many individuals within the intellectual establishment. A post-Napoleonic renewal of hope after about 1830, came through the works of J.S. Mill (*System of Logic*, 1843), Carlyle (*Signs of the Times*, 1829, *Characteristics*, 1831, *Sartor Resartus*, 1833), and Herbert Spencer (*Social Statics*, 1851), to name but a few authors and works. Comtean positivism was introduced by George Henry Lewes in his *Biographical History of Philosophy* (1845-6). Many minds were focussed on the possibilities that existed for creating wealth and comfort on a scale that had never been known before in English society. The theory of evolution allowed for an increase and refinement of human strength and intelligence.

But it also contributed to an unsettling sense that through the concept of natural selection, the survival of the whole species is paramount, and overrides the needs of the individual. Natural theology, as mentioned, had viewed the created world as a demonstration of divine benevolence, a realm where natural processes aided and abetted the needs of mankind. But natural selection, if accepted, could only be seen as forcing an alarming disjunction of traditional doctrinal precepts and advances in human understanding. It cut the destiny of mankind loose from any safe theocratic ties and made the future very uncertain. Tennyson, in *In Memoriam* (1850), picks up well on this theme:

Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life;

That I, considering everywhere
Her secret meaning in her deeds,
And finding that of fifty seeds,
She often brings but one to bear,

I falter where I firmly trod,
And failing with my weight of cares
Upon the great world's altar-stairs
That slope thro' darkness up to God,

I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,
And gather dust and chaff, and call
To what I feel is Lord of all,
And faintly trust the larger hope. [5]

Commentators note how subtly modification of scientific and literary language usage occur through the period when Darwinian theory made its initial impact upon Western consciousness. Darwin's emphasis on adaptation as an integral notion in the proliferation of species suggested that processes of change were inevitable, if not always desirable. Closure and reconciliation were concepts more appropriate to natural theology and were reflected in the narrative techniques of many pre-Darwinian authors. After Darwin's views were assimilated by Victorian authors open-endedness became more prevalent as it was seen as a precursor for growth and progress [6].

Romanticism led to a rediscovery of the natural world as wild, unpredictable and well beyond the controlling hand of humankind. Wordsworth brought the undeveloped areas of Britain into public consciousness and the development of the railway made such previously inaccessible landscapes available to many. To some extent, then, the later emphasis in Darwinian theory on the frequently savage, predatory life cycles of living things, is but an extension of this awareness of the magnitude and diversity in the natural realm as fostered by the Romantic movement [7]. Novels such as *Wuthering Heights*, by Emily Brontë (1847) testify to this, as do the novels of Thomas Hardy later in the century. Thomas Hardy uses a variety of landscapes throughout *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* to reflect Tess's changing fortunes. In all but 'The Valley of the Great Dairies', an environment which predominantly favours Tess, nature becomes a vehicle

for repression, even malevolence [8]. As theocratic assumptions about the natural world decreased, descriptions of landscapes became less frequently a symbol of order, serenity and benevolent mutuality. The ordered gardens of Jane Austen's fiction, so reflective of eighteenth-century rationalism, could not be maintained [9]. During Elizabeth Gaskell's lifetime the setting was right for the acceptance of the Darwinian principles of change and savagery.

The fictional works of Elizabeth Gaskell indicate an awareness of the shift in European sensibilities referred to above. Her social milieu brought her into direct contact with Charles Lyell, William Chambers, and Charles Darwin, all significant figures in the development of 'Darwinian' theory. She mixed socially with Lyell, author of *Principles of Geology* (1832) [10]. Chambers, author of *Vestiges of The Natural History of Creation* (1844) was an Edinburgh publisher known to her [11]. Darwin, who greatly admired her work, was indirectly related to Elizabeth Gaskell through the Wedgwoods. Darwin visited the Gaskells in Manchester and family members spent holidays together. There is little doubt that William and Elizabeth Gaskell were aware of Darwin's views. Her correspondence indicates that she was in contact with the Darwins from as early as 1851 until her death in 1865 [12]. The extent to which she was familiar with Darwin's work is difficult to ascertain, but, as mentioned, Darwinian insights were easily assimilated through a variety of indirect sources. She creates an opportunity to be derisive of Darwinian principles and preoccupations in *Wives and Daughters* with the character of Roger Hamley, the scientist, but quite deliberately refuses to take it up. On the contrary he is a figure to be admired, as are other characters in her fiction with an interest in learning and science [13].

The influence of Darwinian theory is evidenced in at least two significant and complementary ways in her work. Elizabeth Gaskell's dependence on the concept of the rural idyll in her fiction, a means of providing the compensating beauty needed for life in industrialised Manchester, is discussed in Chapter Four. But her attitude to nature is ambivalent. Although it often represents an alternative environment for characters embroiled in their individual concerns, it is not an environment characters can return to with any assurance of it being as they had expected. Childhood or earlier experiences of rural life are difficult to replicate in the lives of Elizabeth Gaskell's characters. Nostalgia, and a longing for some Utopian other realm, do not in themselves provide the momentum necessary for realisation. Return to any rural idyll remains an elusive desire for many. The

processes of change preclude such a possibility. Changes within the individual, social changes, and now even the challenge to and unease associated with viewing the natural world as being a fixed, stable entity, make it impossible to conceive of such a return. Set against this in her later work there is an acceptance, even affirmation, of the inevitability of transience and mutability. So, Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction constantly expresses both an enigmatic yearning for the unattainable, as well as a gradual recognition of the inescapable presence of change. In this her work is typical of much nineteenth century literature.

It is interesting to explore Elizabeth Gaskell's response to change in terms of her Unitarian background. While English Unitarians were generally supportive of the major social reforms that occurred at the beginning of the nineteenth century and of the benefits for the general populace to be derived from industrialisation, Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction indicates, that for her, not all change is synonymous with progress. While forms of humanism (such as Comtean positivism) adopted a very positive approach to social development in the context of industrial expansion, others, better attuned to the social problems of cities such as Manchester, saw the risks and the suffering that could occur. Add to this the amoral, and seemingly ruthless nature of Darwinian change, and the result is that there is an unsettling conjunction of both changing social patterns and a changing perception of the stability of the natural world. So, while Elizabeth Gaskell wants to share in the general enthusiasm for social improvement (the Great Exhibition of 1851 readily exemplifies this) her longing to seek out a natural world where the expectations of Wordsworthian romanticism are realised highlights this dilemma. Change was coming from many quarters.

This is a further example of the antinomies operating in her fiction, of binary oppositions which contribute to the vitality of her work. The desire to return to the security of an Edenic rural existence is set in opposition to an acceptance of the need for change. This opposition, as much as anything else, can be attributed to the emergence of Darwinian theory. As a young woman living in Knutsford, Cheshire, Elizabeth Gaskell knew the youthful pleasures of rural life. Later, as a successful author and minister's wife living in Manchester, she could appreciate the broad spectrum of social changes which were of benefit to her (but often dire for other people). Change was a dilemma she constantly confronted. Carried forward by a strong Unitarian endorsement of social change, she, nevertheless, constantly expresses in her

fiction a longing for the past, childhood, and the paradoxes of the natural world [14].

There is, for example, a stark contrast between the depiction of nature in *Cousin Phillis* (1865) and *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863). Conceived and written within a short period of each other, the two texts reflect a recurrent tendency discernible in Elizabeth Gaskell's work for antithetical responses to the same issue. Taken in conjunction, however, their treatment of the natural world maintains the sense that the author is holding conflicting views in tension, maintaining an opposition which is difficult, even undesirable to resolve.

In *Cousin Phillis*, the Holmans of Hope Farm at Heathbridge live in close harmony with the natural realm encompassing them. The countryside suggests an idyllic, Edenic world of stasis, where human endeavour is fruitful, complementing a divine order where the uncertainty and savagery of Darwinian notions of natural selection are totally absent. Reflective of the work of Virgil, especially the *Georgics* [15], or James Thomson's *The Seasons* [16], it is an idealised pre-nineteenth century conception of nature.

In *Sylvia's Lovers*, by contrast, nature is constantly alluded to as being cruel, ruthless and harsh. Monkshaven, a coastal town in northern England (really Whitby) provides an isolated locale where windswept seascape and rugged moors are appropriate for the passions and intrigues that constantly engage the characters of this novel. It is a coarser, untamed setting, beset by a 'lashing, leaping tide' [17], brambles [18], stunted trees and violent winds [19]. It is a world in which the unrelenting, almost predatory patterns and cycles of nature are paralleled by human behaviour (such as the violent intrusions of the press-gang). The Robson's home, Haytersbank Farm, on the cliffs above Monkshaven, is, in its exposure and tenuous existence, a world apart from the serenity of Hope Farm.

Monkshaven is depicted as a coastal town hemmed in on one side by unpredictable, wild seas and on the other sides by rugged, hostile moors [20]. Here is a society accustomed to the realities of a natural world against which human endeavours are constantly pitted. The predacious nature of human behaviour in Monkshaven mirrors this setting, with its constant reminders of the scope and magnitude of natural forces. This can be demonstrated in at least three ways. The whaling industry strikingly establishes the parallel through the numerous references to high sea encounters and whale bones. The press-gang, like the whalers, reinforces the predacious element within

human behaviour and provokes the violent struggles that are central to the first half of the novel. And finally, in this environment, it is also not surprising that the troubled relationship between Philip and Sylvia fails.

As indicated, nature presses in on all sides in Monkshaven. The opening pages of the novel establish this sense quite clearly. Metaphorically, the Butter Cross in the marketplace ('worn and mutilated') [21] stands as a fast fading reminder of a pre-Darwinian conviction of religious certainties, and appears to be failing in its effort to stem an encroaching natural world which has so clearly influenced the attitudes of the town's inhabitants. This is a place attuned to the principles of the survival of the fittest. To move outside the town is inevitably to confront either treacherous seas or a rugged hinterland. Lives are frequently lost at sea and Philip almost perishes on the moors when he wanders broken-hearted away from Monkshaven [22].

The inhabitants of Monkshaven are depicted as living by predacious behaviour, for many are involved in smuggling and whaling. Their dwellings often bear the starkest emblem of their predacity, 'great ghastly whale-jaws, bleached bare and white, were the arches over the gate-posts to many a field or moorland stretch' [23]. Bones, human or animal, align the novel's concerns with central themes of evolutionary theory, as bones are a primary source of evidence in paleontology. The whalers of Monkshaven form part of an unbroken chain of human predacity leading back into pre-history (well before Elizabeth Gaskell's seemingly distanced, but relatively recent, Napoleonic setting).

The press-gang brings predatory behaviour into the centre of Monkshaven. While at times the town appears to be a secure, civilised enclave, set against a ruthless, unremitting natural world, the illusion is violated when the press-gang strikes right at the heart of this isolated society. The violent impressment of local men and an equally violent reprisal by enraged citizens, reinforces the sense that violence is endemic and an accepted response to dissension [24]. The manner in which the press-gang lies in wait to trap the unsuspecting victims is strikingly aggressive. Elizabeth Gaskell has chosen a setting in which the refinements of a gentler, pastoral England (Knutsford, for example) give way to a depiction of events which has human behaviour encompassed by and not distinct from evolutionary processes.

There is therefore little surprise in the fact that Sylvia Robson and Philip Hepburn are not compatible. Sylvia, and her parents, are identified, more than anyone else in the novel, with the natural world. At one point Philip gives Sylvia a ribbon with a 'briar rose pattern running upon it' [25], a symbol of her enigmatic, sometimes unruly nature. She constantly rebuffs the affection of Philip, who comes up regularly to Haytersbank Farm from his more ordered Quaker business life in Monkshaven. They are very different people, Sylvia preferring the rougher, more free-spirited whaler, Charley Kinraid. Yet Philip, for all his relative refinement, is not without his predatory impulses. He will have Sylvia at any price, even if it means letting Kinraid walk into the press-gang trap, and subsequently withholding information from Sylvia concerning Kinraid's real fate and intentions, information which would have reduced even further Philip's matrimonial chances with Sylvia [26].

Yet, ironically, both *Cousin Phillis* and *Sylvia's Lovers* resist any simplistic differentiations regarding their rejection or acceptance of Darwinian principles. While Hope Farm may appear to represent Paley's pre-Darwinian sense of purpose and harmony in the natural order, and Haytersbank Farm the post-Darwinian emphasis on the struggle for survival, the endings of both works subvert any clear distinctions. In each there is a final drawing away from the approach to nature adopted throughout that text.

In *Cousin Phillis* the Holman family's idealised existence is shattered by Phillis's distress concerning the misconstrued intentions of Holdsworth. The uncertainty and ambiguity that accompanies this intrusion into domestic security is reinforced by similar feelings about technological advances. The last sentence of this novella is ironic. Change cannot be resisted. Thus, although the author dwells longingly on rural scenes reflective of her own childhood (Hope Farm is said to have been based on her uncle's farm at Sandlebridge) she recognises the inevitability of change, progress and the pain that accompanies both.

In *Sylvia's Lovers* the opposite occurs. Throughout the novel there is a strong sense that change and insecurity are rife in this area of England, remote from the civilising influences of the South and historically distanced from the more enlightened mind of the mid-Victorian reader. In this secluded corner of the country, human savagery and the rawness of nature are complementary. But the end of the novel imposes resolution and moral accountability on each of the main protagonists. The reckless, fickle and often

thoughtless actions of Philip and Sylvia are brought back within a divinely sanctioned order, a firm rejoinder to the chaos of social unrest and injustice perpetrated by the press-gang and by the personal crises of the characters buoyed along by the drama as it unfolds. Ironically, in taking the reader back to the safely removed previous century, Elizabeth Gaskell frees herself to acknowledge, in a manner barely recognised elsewhere, a strong Darwinian understanding of the unsettling continuum of violence (both human and natural), a legacy that trails back even further than late eighteenth-century Monkshaven, back into the mists of time.

So both texts pull back from the brink of the extreme positions they begin to express. The cloistered, idyllic world of Phillis Holman in *Cousin Phillis* is untenable, and the events of the novella bring about its inevitable destabilisation. But, similarly, the savage excesses of life at Monkshaven must be tempered by divine constraints and order imposed on a disorderly realm. The two texts, taken together, suggest that Elizabeth Gaskell's stands at a point of conjunction between the residual influences of conservative theologies, such as those espoused by Paley, and a post Darwinian acceptance of change, whether that be for better or for worse.

NOTES

- 1 For a full discussion of this issue see Beer, Gillian, *Darwin's Plots*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983, and Levine, George, *Darwin and the Novelists (Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction)*, University of Chicago Press, 1988. The best recent biography to plot the nuances of the development of Darwinian theory is Desmond, Adrian, and Moore, James, *Darwin*, Michael Joseph, London, 1991.
- 2 Darwin, Charles, *The Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, Murray, 1859, and *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Murray, 1871.

- 3 Darwin, Charles, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, D. Appleton and Company, New York, 1896, pp. 304 and 306.
- 4 See detailed outline of these contrasting states of mind in Houghton, Walter E., *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1970, pp. 27-38 and 64-71.
- 5 Tennyson, Alfred, *Plays and Poems*, Oxford University Press, 1967, stanzas 55 and 56, p. 243.
- 6 This issue is discussed in Levine, George, op. cit., p. 97:

Darwin knew that preoccupation with beginnings could only obstruct consideration of the astonishing and awesome phenomena of organic life. His capacity to leave problems alone was a kind of scientific version of negative capability, opening possibilities simply unavailable to the rigorous systematists. The open-ended nature of his world, implicated in time that never ultimately resolves into permanence, is paralleled by the theory itself, which aspires to ask questions as much as to answer them, and which does not claim to know anything of absolute beginnings. Such resistance to closure, such preoccupation with new possibilities as opposed to the comforts of resolution, is one of the distinctive marks of Darwin's break with natural theology.

- 7 In Book 1 of *The Prelude*, by Wordsworth, the following passage amply exemplifies this sense of nature:

I dipp'd my oars into the silent Lake,
And, as I rose upon the stroke, my Boat
Went heaving through the water, like a Swan;
When from behind that craggy steep, till then
The bound of the horizon, a huge Cliff
Rose up between me and the stars, and still,
With measur'd motion, like a living thing,
Strode after me ...
... and after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days, my brain
Work'd with a dim and undetermin'd sense
Of unknown modes of being; in my thoughts
There was a darkness, call it solitude,
Of blank desertion, no familiar shapes
Of hourly objects, images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;

But huge and mighty Forms that do not live
Like living men mov'd slowly through my mind
By day and were the trouble of my dreams.

- 8 See Hardy Thomas, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Macmillan, 1974, first published 1891.
- 9 Subtle intrusions into this ordered view of nature are apparent in *Persuasion* (1818).
- 10 Lyell, Charles, *Principles of Geology, Being an Attempt to explain the Former Changes of the Earth's Surface, by reference to Causes now in Operation*, 3 Vols., Murray, 1830-33. See No. 444 of *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*.
- 11 Chambers, Robert, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, 1844. See *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell* Nos. 310 and 423.
- 12 See *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell* Nos. 99, 100, 308, 443a, 476, 484b, 550 and 553, for references to Darwin. Also *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin*, editors Burkhardt, Frederick, and Smith, Sydney, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990. See letters of 10/10/ 1853, Volume 5, p. 161, and 29/9/1857, Volume 6, p. 458.
- 13 Figures such as Job Legh in *Mary Barton* and Paul Manning's father in *Cousin Phillis* are examples.
- 14 Margaret Hale, in *North and South*, returns to Helstone after a long period of absence in M. It is a journey filled with nostalgia, the more so because any chance of permanent return to this rural setting is impossible. Likewise, Ruth Hinton's return to the rural cottage where she grew up with her parents in *Ruth*.
- 15 See Chapter 25 of Uglow, Jenny, *Elizabeth Gaskell (A Habit of Stories)*, Faber and Faber, London, 1993.
- 16 James Thomson's 'The Seasons' (1830), was one of the most popular and reprinted of all English pastoral poems, and much admired by J.M.W. Turner, the painter.
- 17 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Sylvia's Lovers*, p. 19.
- 18 *ibid* p. 13.
- 19 *ibid* p. 34-35.
- 20 *ibid* p. 1.

21 *ibid* p. 15.

22 *ibid* p. 388-389.

23 *ibid* p. 5.

24 *ibid* Chapters 3, 22-23.

25 *ibid* p. 134.

26 *ibid* Chapter 18.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TO THE THRESHOLD:

WINDOW SCENES IN ELIZABETH GASKELL'S *RUTH*

The Value of Binary Oppositions as a Model

The notion of binary oppositions is a useful one for any close examination of the fiction of Elizabeth Gaskell. Critical insight can be advanced by a consideration of the constantly emerging interdependent polarities or contraries in her work. The problematic nature of her fiction is best resolved by accepting the tensions that such antinomies create. Opposing notions such as moral determinism and free will, or social conservatism and radicalism, exhibit, in the strength of their juxtaposition throughout her work, an acute appreciation of the maturity of her intuitive judgement about the nature of life.

In her acknowledgement that each position is dependent for its truth and cogency on the existence of its opposite, she also maintains a position that greatly enhances the quality of her work. The reader is rarely confronted with categorical understandings, but left to balance the irreconcilable, the enigmas which make the human predicament interesting, if at times perplexing. Her fiction, in its complex patterning of such oppositions, provides the reader with room to assess the validity of seemingly contradictory propositions. In this way her work is never tendentious or monochromatic.

Further examination of her work would undoubtedly reveal other oppositions. The examples of oppositions in Elizabeth Gaskell's work given earlier (such as moral determinism and free will, conservatism and radicalism) are broadly descriptive of polarities that have their basis in some

of the theological ambiguities to which she was exposed as a Unitarian. Although they are discussed throughout this dissertation as neatly differentiated pairs, each opposition stems from a conflict within Elizabeth Gaskell's belief system, and can be seen to derive from that common source. This inevitably sets up a pattern of similar oppositions. In this chapter a frequently utilised motif in Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction is examined. It demonstrates the consistency with which her work renders in a variety of ways the same recurrent oppositions and marginality.

Window Scenes in Fiction

What could be more mystical or magical than ordinary daylight coming in through an ordinary window? ... Why should not that wonderful white fire, breaking through the window, inspire us every day like an ever-returning miracle? ... The mere fact of existence and experience is a perpetual portent. Why should we ever ask for more?

- from *The Common Man*, by G.K. Chesterton. [1]

I wrote a paper on Victorian women's imagination of space. "Marginal Beings and Liminal Poetry". About agoraphobia and claustrophobia and the paradoxical desire to be let out into unconfined space, the wild moorland, the open ground, and at the same time to be closed into tighter impenetrable small spaces - like Emily Dickinson's voluntary confinement, like the Sibyl's jar.

- from *Possession (A Romance)* by A.S. Byatt. [2]

Windows allow an observer to look out of or into a building. As it is physically impossible to be both inside and outside at the same time, a window distinguishes between an area occupied by the observer and an area observed but physically unoccupied by the observer. Thus a window situates the observer and differentiates between physical presence and mental awareness.

But there is no real detachment between the observer and the scene observed. All observation involves psychological complexity and reflexivity. It is coloured by the personal history of the observer and involves complex cognitive processes. In this sense there is a strong connection in any observation through a window between the exterior and the interior.

Scenes in fiction depicting observation through windows operate in a similar manner. While a character within a fictional text may appear to be preoccupied with looking out of a window at the scene outside (most are of this kind), the reader is frequently made aware simultaneously of the subject of observation and the observer. The transcendent reader can be both within and without at the same time, aware of the physical appearance and emotional or psychological state of the observer as much as the nature of the scene outside the window being described.

The reader in such scenes, however, is often given the advantage of looking both inwards and outwards with an objectivity that the character involved lacks. This occurs because of the freedom that the reader is allowed in having several vantage points from which to observe both the exterior physical attributes of the scene observed, as well as the intricate psychological relationship between the observer and the observed. Rarely, in nineteenth century fiction, does the character have the ability to view him or herself in the same manner that the reader does. [3]

A most effective exception is a scene from *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), by Henry James. One Sunday afternoon the Governess sees the spectre of Quint through the window in the dining room. Thinking that she has seen a prowler, she rushes outside to confront the offender. Obviously not achieving her objective, she then looks in at the same window where she first saw Quint:

... I applied my face to the pane and looked, as he had looked into the room. As if, at this moment, to show me exactly what his range had been, Mrs. Grose, as I had done for himself just before, came in from the hall. With this I had the full image of a repetition of what had already occurred. She saw me as I had seen my own visitant; she pulled up short as I had done; I gave her something of the shock I had received. She turned white, and this made me ask myself if I had blanched as much. She stared, in short, and retreated on just my lines ... [3]

An interesting vehicle for interpretation is provided by window scenes. Discrete, exterior observations from a window can be seen as a projection of the character's inner turmoils and yearnings and can be read as a sub-text for the overt textual explication of the relationship between the observer and the scene observed. The view from the window can effectively frame a series of

cameo insights into the psychological state of the character which go well beyond any surface reading of the text.

Climatic conditions in Victorian England obviously ensured that much time was spent looking out of windows. The limitations imposed by inclement weather forced anyone seeking relief from the tedium of life indoors to observe the outside world from behind glass. The following observations about window scenes in Victorian fiction are based on the work of one author, Elizabeth Gaskell. While they share much in common with similar scenes from other authors, they also indicate some very particular concerns in her work.

Window Scenes in *Ruth*

From the outset, *Ruth*, by Elizabeth Gaskell, highlights a textual concern with views from windows. The assize-town which provides the setting for the beginning of the work is said to be 'amusing' because of 'the infinite variety of windows...crammed into (its) walls' [4]. There follows in the rest of the novel a number of scenes in which Ruth or another character views and assesses life through a window. Scenes of this type frequently signify critical moments in the text.

In *Ruth*, such scenes can be broadly characterised as alluding to the desire for escape at a time of crisis or the availability of restorative influences in the larger world outside of the window. Interspersed as they are, such scenes serve to demonstrate the ebb and flow of anguish and serenity in Ruth's emotional state throughout the novel.

Window Scenes Depicting Crisis

On several occasions Ruth seeks to escape from the oppressive nature of her problems. The victim of her own sexual innocence, she has to confront the shameful consequences of her relationship with Bellingham (later Donne) when she gives birth to an illegitimate son, Leonard. At first abandoned, later in the novel she also has to deal with the renewed advances of her former lover. Many of the crises arising from this situation are depicted in passages where Ruth is looking out of a window. All such scenes involve

heightened emotion and are concerned with the complexities of morally appropriate actions in conflict with repressed desires.

There are three scenes of particular relevance in this regard. In the first Ruth seeks to escape from the near imprisonment of her work as a seamstress by striving to gain access to the night air. Later, after rejection by her seducer, and while in Benson's care, her thwarted desire for reconciliation with Bellingham is well conveyed in another window scene. Finally, The most dramatic scene of the three occurs when Ruth is reunited with Bellingham (now the budding politician Donne).

The exploitation Ruth suffers as a seamstress in the first scene is quickly exchanged for an alternative source of marginalisation, this time through sexual exploitation and moral dilemma. The latter two scenes both stem from difficulty of this kind. Only Thurstan and Faith Benson, the kindly minister and his sister, make any impression upon the series of repressive influences to which she is subjected. All three window scenes referred to above convey Ruth's desire to live a more unrestricted existence, one in which, as a young, orphaned woman, she is not repeatedly victimised. Such scenes, with their heightened emotion, demonstrate the point of desperation to which Ruth is driven in an attempt to resolve her personal struggles.

Utilising the language of entrapment the first scene effectively conveys the parlous plight of the Victorian working classes. With other young seamstresses in an airless room at two o'clock in the morning Ruth exhibits claustrophobic behaviour:

... Ruth Hilton sprang to the large old window, and pressed against it as a bird presses against the bars of its cage. She put back the blind, and gazed into the quiet moonlight night...

Ruth pressed her hot forehead against the cold glass, and strained her aching eyes in gazing out on the lovely sky of a winter's night. The impulse was strong upon her to snatch up a shawl, and wrapping it round her head, to sally forth and enjoy the glory; and time was when that impulse would have been instantly followed;
... [5]

Here, a window clearly distinguishes between the immediate and real and the unattainable, the separating and joining window pane accentuating the cruel reality that the observing Ruth is restricted only to visual impressions. She is denied the benefits of feeling and inhaling the restorative night air.

While, for most of the episode the reader is alongside Ruth within the room, the reader's ability to be outside has clearly been demonstrated earlier, as the scene begins with the reader looking into 'a window (through which the moonlight fell on (Ruth) with a glory of many colours' [6].

The second window scene, set in Wales, is rendered in such a way as to project dramatically onto the observed scene the distress suffered by Ruth at the point of her abandonment by Bellingham. Her emotional confusion and uncertainty as to whether she should pursue Bellingham is mirrored in the kaleidoscopic nature of the changing sky:

Ruth stood in the little bow-window, looking out.
Across the moon, and over the deep blue heavens,
large, torn, irregular-shaped clouds went hurrying, as if
summoned by some storm-spirit. The work they were
commanded to do was not here; the mighty gathering-
place lay eastward, immeasurable leagues, and on they
went, chasing each other over the silent earth, now
black, now silver-white at one transparent edge, now
with the moon shining like Hope through their darkest
centre, now again with a silver lining; and now, utterly
black, they sailed lower in the lift, and disappeared
behind the immovable mountains; they were rushing in
the very direction in which Ruth had striven and
struggled to go that afternoon; they, in their career,
would soon pass over the very spot where he (her
world's he) was lying sleeping, or perhaps not sleeping,
perhaps thinking of her. The storm was in her mind,
and rent and tore her purposes into forms as wild and
irregular as the heavenly shapes she was looking at. If,
like them, she could pass the barrier horizon in the
night, she might overtake him. [7]

This description lacks, after the initial sentence, any sense of an intervening window-pane, or the window mediating or obstructing the scene Ruth observes. There is, rather, an indistinguishable similarity between her emotional state and the unsettled night sky. Their mutually mimetic quality makes it difficult to determine which is the antecedent of the other. But, despite Ruth's close identification with her nocturnal observations, she is as much restrained as in the previous scene. Her moral guardian, Benson, observes (as the reader also does) her 'longing gaze outwards upon the free, broad world' [8] and appeals, through reference to Ruth's mother, to her sense of moral propriety. Although not physically restrained (Benson is incapable of that) she remains within, relinquishing what she believes to be

her last opportunity for reconciliation with Bellingham. This is entrapment of another kind.

The most dramatic window scene occurs towards the end of the novel. Now, having lived a peaceful and productive life with the Bensons for a number of years, and with the further complicating factor of her love for their son, Leonard, any prospect of reconciliation with the morally unscrupulous but tempting Bellingham (now Donne) is even more fraught. Her behaviour becomes almost suicidal in this scene. In an attempt to gain freedom from her anxious and confused station as observer, she comes close to achieving the desired, therapeutic transition from detached observer to one in close harmony with the observed.

There is, as she throws open the window, a deliberate emphasis on her ability to remove any intervening pane of glass, to achieve a sense of physical engagement with the elements to which she is exposed. But although the recipient of some restorative influences through this experience, she is, however, in this liminal state denied any ability to transcend her human limitations as observer. This episode, nevertheless, does provide her with more than the visual impressions of the first and second scenes. The very restricted visual dimension available to her in the dark, night sky is more than compensated for by the rain and the invigorating air. This offers some consolation:

She fastened her door, and threw open the window, cold and threatening as was the night. She tore off her gown; she put her hair back from her heated face ...

She threw her body half out of the window into the cold night air. The rain beat down on her. It did her good. A still, calm night would not have soothed her as this did. The wild tattered clouds, hurrying past the moon, gave her a foolish kind of pleasure that almost made her smile a vacant smile. The blast-driven rain came on her again, and drenched her hair through and through. The words "stormy wind fulfilling his word" came into her mind. [9]

As if fascinated by the possibilities for sacramental significance and resolution offered in such a window scene, in the space of sixty pages Elizabeth Gaskell has Jemima Bradshaw attempting to come to terms with her jealousy of Farquhar's attentions to Ruth in a very similar manner. Opening a window to the elements and to the variety of a changing, natural

vista is a recurrent motif in this work and one which deserves attention because of its sheer frequency. Again it is a young, female protagonist who is depicted, someone similarly caught up in the confusion of moral loyalties and sexual desire:

At length Jemima could stand it no longer, and left the room. She went into the schoolroom, where the shutters were not closed, as it only looked into the garden. She opened the window, to let the cool night air blow in on her hot cheeks. The clouds were hurrying over the moon's face in a tempestuous and unstable manner, making all things seem unreal; now clear out in its bright light, now trembling and quivering in shadow. The pain at her heart seemed to make Jemima's brain grow dull; she laid her head on her arms, which rested on the window-sill, and grew dizzy with the sick weary notion that the earth was wandering lawless and aimless through the heavens, where all seemed one tossed and whirling wrack of clouds. [10]

The preceding passages stress, in the main, the inability of the characters involved to achieve the desired transition from dissatisfied observer to a state of integration with the scene observed. The observer is described as 'pressed ..against the cold glass', 'in the little bow-window', 'half out of the window', 'on the window-sill' [11]. All these images suggest that the critical moment of transfer is imminent, but in each case it is not accomplished. Rather, there follows a need for the character to be resigned to the limitations and difficulties of the present situation. Consecutively through the scenes Ruth stands 'dreaming of the days that were gone', is 'calm, in the absence of all hope', or resorts to repentant prayer, while Jemima, similarly, resigns herself to overwhelming inevitabilities of cosmic origin [12].

In addition, throughout the novel there are scenes in which Ruth, as passive observer, simply accepts the sadness and limitations of her position in life. As a lonely, young seamstress, on her Sundays 'she would sit at the window, looking out on the dreary prospect till her eyes were often blinded with tears' [13], and in the most agonising moments of her abandonment in Wales, through the window she observes the dark mountains 'like giants, solemnly watching for the end of Earth and Time' [14]. Later in the novel a window scene tells Ruth 'of the lapse of time and life' [15].

Window Scenes Depicting Restorative Agencies

Interspersed with these scenes, however, are numerous scenes in which characters are exposed to the restorative influences available to an observer through a window. They counterbalance and compensate for the protagonists' inability to achieve transcendence. For the text affirms that transcendence is the substance of dreams, and not a solution to personal need. In a telling scene, Ruth, and her young son, Leonard, apart for the first time, dream about each other. Ironically, in Leonard's dream of Ruth, she achieves what has been unattainable in reality:

He ... dreamt of her sitting watching and smiling by his bedside, as her gentle self had been many a morning; and when she saw him awake (so it fell out in the dream), she smiled still more sweetly, and bending down she kissed him, and then spread out large, soft, white-feathered wings (which in no way surprised her child - he seemed to have known they were there all along), and sailed away through the open window far into the blue sky of a summer's day. [16]

Although Ruth is prevented in real life from achieving such freedom, the open window frequently becomes a source of restoration to the observer within. Refreshing air, rain, warmth, floral fragrances, effects of light, all demonstrate that the observation, so appreciated, yet frustratingly detached, can breach, through these agencies, the divide between observer and observed, thus connecting with and restoring an otherwise helpless character, one so restricted in the role of observer. There are numerous scenes of this type in the novel.

Fragrances are a good example. Elizabeth Gaskell's interest in floral diversity has recently been noted again [17], and in numerous instances throughout this novel Ruth is consoled by floral beauty. An exception, however, is when, waiting at the inn for Bellingham to return and take her off to Wales, she stands in moral confusion at the window:

The girl left the room. Ruth became as hot as she had previously been cold, and went and opened the window, and leant out into the still, sweet, evening air. The bush of sweetbrier, underneath the window, scented the place, and the delicious fragrance reminded her of her old home. I think scents affect and quicken the memory more than either sights or sounds; for Ruth

had instantly before her eyes the little garden beneath the window of her mother's room ... [18]

But this is an exception. Later in the novel, when Ruth is secure in the care of the Bensons and happier in her role as mother of Leonard, it is only the pleasant sensations of floral fragrances through windows that are mentioned: 'the peacefulness of the time, the window open into the little garden, the scents that came stealing in, and the clear summer heaven above, made the time be remembered as a happy festival for Ruth' [19]. In a later, similar scene, floral fragrances are inferred in addition to the pleasing visual effects created through the window:

But whatever poverty there might be in the house, there was full luxuriance in the little square wall-encircled garden, on two sides of which the parlour and the kitchen looked. The laburnum-tree, which when Ruth came was like a twig stuck into the ground, was now a golden glory in spring, and the pleasant shade in summer. The wild hop, that Mr. Benson had brought home from one of his country rambles, and planted by the parlour-window, while Leonard was yet a baby in his mother's arms, was now a garland over the casement, hanging down long tendrils, that waved in the breezes, and threw pleasant shadows and traceries, like some Bacchanalian carving, on the parlour walls, at 'morn or dusky eve'. The yellow rose had clambered up to the window of Mr. Benson's bedroom, and its blossom-laden branches were supported by a jargonelle pear tree rich in autumnal fruit. [20]

The visual effects and benefits that occur in this redolent description are to be found in other window scenes as well. Earlier in the novel Ruth 'lay very still in the moonlight calm of her sick bed' [21]. Later, in the period of her greatest personal contentment:

She rose while the hedge-sparrow was yet singing his reveille to his mate; she dressed and opened her window, shading the soft-blowing air and the sunny eastern light from her baby. If she grew tired, she went and looked at him, and all her thoughts were holy prayers for him. Then she would gaze a while out of the high upper window on to the moorlands, that swelled in waves one behind the other, in the grey, cool morning light. These were her occasional relaxations, and after them she returned with strength to her work. [22]

What Ruth loses, in an inability to transcend her limitations as observer, is compensated for by the pleasures that come from looking through windows. Such pleasures have wide sensory appeal. Escape may not be possible for the moment, but the comforting alternative signals to the disappointed that despair is unwarranted, that passive acceptance is appropriate (and not without its rewards) and the hope of transcendence elusively remains.

Scenes involving windows abound in *Ruth* and not of all of them have been referred to in this analysis. Collectively they indicate an interesting, recurrent dichotomy in Elizabeth Gaskell's work. As has been demonstrated such scenes point to an unsuccessful desire on the part of the observer (usually Ruth) to escape from the inherent tensions and frustrations encountered in her sadly exploited life, or, they indicate the many restorative agencies available to the observer through no action on her own part other than merely opening the window [23].

The Theological Implications of Window Scenes in *Ruth*

Thus these contrasting scenes starkly delineate a consistently espoused theological imperative throughout her work. Efforts to achieve individual freedom are frequently overridden by divine expectations regarding moral conduct along with the need to atone for former impropriety by living an ordered and compliant life, exemplary in its sustained adherence to divine dictates. While Ruth does suffer early in the novel, she is never excused from any ensuing moral abrogation. The reckless search for personal freedom provides no escape from the harshness of life.

But, to counterbalance the apparent severity of this constraining position, divine favour is unexpectedly provided for those who are undergoing this process of atonement. A sense of divine favour, even affirmation, can break into the lives of those who submit willingly and reverentially to the divinely sanctioned moral order. Obedience is rewarded.

Figuratively, this dichotomy is clearly enunciated through the window scenes in *Ruth*. Try as she may Ruth is unable to pass through the window into any realm of sacramental union with that beyond. She is unable to assume the same vantage point as the omniscient reader, who is able to see in and empathise with Ruth, yet remain unscathed by the experiences she suffers. But the reader is encouraged to rejoice when Ruth receives

temporary relief as a result of the restorative agencies available to her through the open window. The juxtaposition of scenes of both types is a noticeable feature of the novel.

While a psycho-sexual interpretation of these contrasting scenes is possible, they also illustrate a recurrent theological emphasis within Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction. The author's indebtedness to the principles of mid-Victorian English Unitarianism is generally acknowledged [24], and in these scenes the tension that exists between Ruth's desire to transcend her restricted, exploited existence, and her eventual compliance and resigned acceptance of her plight (along with whatever compensating factors that might imply) can best be understood against this background.

The sense in this novel, as elsewhere, that efforts to achieve individual freedom are frequently outweighed by divine expectations and a need to be submissive to such demands, demonstrates that Elizabeth Gaskell subscribed to conflicting doctrinal precepts. The pursuit of individual freedom, a strong vein in the dialectic of Romanticism, as well as in aspects of Unitarianism, was counterbalanced by a residual adherence to the influence of Joseph Priestley's theory of necessity [25].

Elizabeth Gaskell, like other English Unitarians of her day, was conscious of the struggle that her forebears were engaged in in their efforts to achieve social and political rights for themselves within England. Early to embrace more liberal attitudes to biblical interpretation, English Unitarians at the end of the eighteenth century had also been keen proponents of widespread social change. Their high view of the freedom of the individual in decisions relating to nuances of religious and social doctrine should not be underestimated. They had supported the French Revolution [26], and their egalitarian aspirations were reflected in their involvement in all aspects of social reform [27]. They were amongst the nonconformist intellectual élite of England, sceptical of many establishment values and strong advocates of the benefits of general education. They had a strong commitment to personal freedom.

Ironically, however, because of the strong influence of Joseph Priestley in shaping English Unitarianism, well into the nineteenth century the residual influence of a strong sense of determinism persisted as well. It was not until James Martineau became the dominant influence within English Unitarianism, and elements of Transcendentalism were introduced from its

New England counterpart, particularly through Ralph Waldo Emerson, that the influence of determinism began to decline [28]. Determinism is a very obvious element in the fiction of Elizabeth Gaskell. Freedom is always conditional in her work, always constrained by a strong compliance with and accountability to moral categories and divine expectations.

But the desire to express a need for individual freedom is also intense. Thus the tension expressed in Elizabeth Gaskell's work between the pursuit of freedom and the need for compliance and resignation can be explained in terms of her lifelong exposure to conflicting strands within Unitarian teaching. Window scenes in *Ruth* provide an interesting vehicle for exploring this opposition [29].

NOTES

- 1 Chesterton, G.K., *The Common Man*, quoted in Luci Shaw, *The Sighting*, Harold Shaw Publishers, 1981, p. 44.
- 2 Byatt, A.S., *Possession: A Romance*, Vintage, London, 1990, p. 54.
- 3 James, Henry, *The Turn of the Screw*, Signet Classic, 1962, pp. 315-317.
- a A more recent example of where a character is conscious of being simultaneously within and without, of having privileged, dual insights regarding the psychological state of the protagonists, is in F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *The Great Gatsby* (1926). Nick Carraway, disillusioned by the intrigues at Tom Buchanan's drunken party in New York, comments:

I wanted to get out and walk eastward toward the park through the soft twilight, but each time I tried to go I became entangled in some wild, strident argument which pulled me back, as if with ropes, into my chair. Yet high over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets, and I saw him too, looking up and wondering. I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.

See F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, Penguin Modern Classics, 1964, pp. 42-43.

A sense of connectedness between the observer and the observed is evident in the following scene from *Middlemarch*, by George Eliot. Dorothea reflects on the sociological implications of this inevitable interrelationship:

She opened her curtains, and looked out towards the bit of road that lay in view, with fields beyond, outside the entrance-gates. On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving - perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining.'

Eliot, George, *Middlemarch*, Penguin Books, 1968, p. 846.

The Victorian awareness of the insider/outsider dichotomy is also realised in a prevalent interest in the custom of women in Muslim countries wearing veils. For John Frederick Lewis, scenes depicting veiled women, or the life of Eastern women behind shutters, became the principal subject for his paintings in Cairo between 1841 and 1851. See Croutier, Alev Lytle, *Harem: The World behind the Veil*, Bloomsbury, London, 1989.

- b *Rear Window* (1954), Alfred Hitchcock's classic cinematic treatment of voyeurism, adds an interesting dimension to any consideration of the use of windows as a device for conveying the unstable, even threatening nature of human perception. When L.B. Jeffries (James Stewart), confined to his room by a fractured leg, observes the activities of all his neighbours in the courtyard, he looks both out of his window and in through the windows of others. Safely ensconced in his own apartment (he draws back from the window when his own privacy is threatened by recognition from outside) he is able to penetrate, unbeknown to his neighbours, deep into their private lives.

His careful observations, sometimes with binoculars or telescopic lens, lead him to witness a murder. He is able to preserve his safety and

anonymity within his sanctuary as observer, until the murderer discovers his whereabouts, and comes seeking to eliminate this witness to his crime. The film ends with Jeffries being pushed, not fatally, out of his window, but not before a struggle on his part to remain within. Thus, the climax of the film occurs when the observer is forced, for the first time in the film, across the threshold between within and without, into the realm of his observations. Like Margaret Hale, in *North and South* (See Note at the end of Footnote 29) he has to deal with the ambivalence (alluded to in the epigraph from *Possession*) of being within or without.

- c The psychological relationship between the observer and the observed is recognised by the persona in Coleridge's 'Dejection Ode', when it is stated that:

I may not hope from outward forms to win
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.

See *The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Oxford University Press, London, 1963, p. 242.

- d The restrictive or deceptive nature of observations through windows is equally well demonstrated by the virtually interchangeable notions of projection and reflection. Some window scenes become a projection of the inner turmoils and incapacity on the part of the observer to transcend reality. But because human perception involves all the complexities and subtleties of the psyche of the observer, it is also possible for such projections to be marred, distorted or manipulated in some way.

Images of restricted vision, of translucence or opacity in perception, are not uncommon in fiction. They suggest that sometimes the observer is unable to view the outside world clearly from a vantage point such as a window, that, visually, the world may be partially or fully denied to the observer.

A scene in Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *Ruth* where this restriction occurs is when Ruth, at one point, thrusts herself out of a window into the dark night air (pp. 272-274). There is no visual comfort in this instance, just a formless void confronting her. Only wind and rain are available to the observer, the opacity of the night scene preventing the creation of an alternative realm into which the observer can venture.

Window scenes depicting deception also occur in fiction. In *Villette*, by Charlotte Brontë, Lucy Snow believes she sees a ghost through a window. Conversely, the Governess, in *The Turn of the Screw*, by Henry James, believes she observes an intruder at the window, whereas she really is witnessing a spectre, perhaps one of her own making.

The observations that female protagonists make through windows in Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction are not of this latter type, however. Whereas window scenes may act as projections of the psychological struggles of the characters involved, such scenes in her work retain their integrity as faithful, often detailed descriptions of natural landscapes. They are not distorted perceptions, but, nevertheless, provide obvious typological significance.

Reflection is essentially the ultimate image of perceptual restriction. As Felicia Bonaparte indicates, mirror scenes are occasionally used very effectively in Elizabeth Gaskell's work. They provide a useful mechanism for ensuring that the observer is constantly forced to look back to the inner life rather than to the prospect of a world beyond the self. In this sense they are like window scenes in that they force the observer to seek for solutions that are to be found within and not in some transcendent experience.

Reflection can also shape the reader's attention. In *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), by Charles Dickens, the scene in which the 'great looking-glass above the sideboard reflects the table and the company' at the Veneerings' dinner party, reflection limits the perception of the reader in that it creates a focal point for character description. A series of portraits of the comical assortment of characters assembled at the dining table is provided. Each description begins with the word 'Reflects', limiting the attention to one character at a time, but also accentuating the illusory nature of these figures, and further satirising their superficiality. (See Dickens, Charles, *Our Mutual Friend*, Oxford University Press, London, 1963, p. 10)

1 Corinthians 13: 12 (a) highlights the similarities between projection and reflection. The Authorised Version translates the verse as 'For now we see through a glass, darkly', as if the restricted observation were being made through translucent glass, or at a scene without sufficient light to distinguish features. Matthew Henry comments (using the A.V.) that the

verse means that 'Now we can only discern things at a great distance, as through a telescope, and that involved in clouds and obscurity.' This is quite different from more modern translations, where the image is of a mirror. The Good News Bible translates the verse as 'What we see now, is like a dim image in a mirror'; the New English Bible as 'Now we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror'; and the New International Version as 'Now we see but a poor reflection', to take but a few. While projection and reflection may be seen as opposites, they have qualities that are very similar.

- 4 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Ruth*, The World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 1. The much later novel, *Wives and Daughters*, also opens with a window scene.
- 5 Gaskell, op. cit., pp. 4 and 5. There seems to be a good case for suggesting that Elizabeth Gaskell readily identified feelings of claustrophobia. Scenes involving female protagonists anxiously seeking fresh air are frequent. A good example is to be found in *Wives and Daughters*. Roger's proposal to Cynthia throws Molly Gibson into a state of confusion. She sought refuge in her bedroom, but 'the room grew stifling, and instinctively she went to the open casement window, and leant out, gasping for breath.' See Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Wives and Daughters*, The World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 391.
- 6 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Ruth*, The World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 3.
- 7 *ibid*, pp. 99-100. The concept of figuratively projected emotions is reminiscent of the third of the 'Preludes', by T.S. Eliot, where 'The thousand sordid images / Of which your soul was constituted ... flickered against the ceiling'. With reference to this passage and others Felicia Bonaparte makes some interesting comments on projected emotions. She compares Ruth with the mythological character, Persephone. She states:

... the mood itself is externalised in nature. Nature itself does not exist. The storm is not outside the window. It is raging in Ruth's heart ... As Persephone in the myth is the divinity of nature, in the novel Ruth is nature and the natural world is Ruth.

See Bonaparte, Felicia, *The Gypsy-Bachelor of Manchester, The Life of Mrs. Gaskell's Demon*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville and London, 1992, pp. 90-91.

- 8 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Ruth*, The World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 100.
- 9 *ibid.*, pp. 272 and 274.
- 10 *ibid.*, pp. 323-333.
- 11 *ibid.*, p. 4, p. 99 and p. 274.
- 12 *ibid.*, p. 5, p. 101, p. 274 and p. 333.
- 13 *ibid.*, p. 334.
- 14 *ibid.*, p. 83.
- 15 *ibid.*, p. 392.
- 16 *ibid.*, p. 258. Felicia Bonaparte offers an alternative interpretation of this dream. In the context of her argument that in *Ruth* 'Gaskell allows the son metaphorically to become the lover' this scene then has sexual connotations. See Bonaparte, *op. cit.*, p. 227.
- 17 Eve, Jeanette, 'The Floral and Horticultural in Elizabeth Gaskell's Novels', *The Gaskell Society Journal*, Volume 7, 1993, pp. 1-15. Elsewhere in this thesis reference has been made to Mrs. Gaskell's appreciation of and dependence on rural beauty, so much of which seems to stem from her childhood experiences in Knutsford.

The scenes depicting *Ruth* as a recipient of the restorative influences of the outside world, especially floral fragrances, appear to be based on Elizabeth Gaskell's personal experiences. In a letter from Sandlebridge to Eliza Gaskell on the 12th May, 1836, she states:

My dearest Lizzy,

I wish I could paint my present situation to you. Fancy me sitting in an old fashioned parlour, 'doors and windows opened wide', with casement window opening into a sunny court all filled with flowers which scent the air with their fragrance - in the very depth of the country - 5 miles from the least approach to a town - the song of the birds, the hum of the insects, the lowing

of the cattle the only sounds - and such pretty fields and woods all round.

From Chapple, J.A.V., *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Portrait in Letters*.

It is interesting to note that in *North and South*, after Margaret and her father leave the rural idyll of Helstone and move to the industrialised and debilitating Milton-Northern, there are very few window scenes involving restorative agencies. Window scenes there suggest a much bleaker aspect. Examples such as the following indicate this:

Outside a thick fog crept up to the very windows, and was driven into every open door in choking white wreaths of unwholesome mist. (p. 104)

The window, placed at the side of the oblong, looked to the blank wall of a similar projection, not above ten feet distant. It loomed through the fog like a great barrier to hope. (p. 105)

The mill loomed high on the left-hand side of the windows, casting a shadow down from its many stories, which darkened the summer evening before its time. (p. 213-214)

The windows were half open because of the heat, and the Venetian blinds covered the glass, - so that a gray grim light, reflected from the pavement below, threw all the shadows wrong, and combined with the green-tinged upper light to make even Margaret's own face, as she caught it in the mirrors, look ghastly and wan. (p. 228).

18 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Ruth*, The World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 60.

19 *ibid.*, p. 186. A close examination of *North and South* and *Wives and Daughters* also reveals a number of scenes in which characters are exposed to floral fragrances through open windows. The following examples are from *North and South*:

The middle window in the bow was opened, and clustering roses and the scarlet honeysuckle came peeping round the corner' (p. 55)

The little casement window in Margaret's bed-chamber was almost filled up with rose and vine branches. (p. 474)

Some further examples are taken from *Wives and Daughters*:

Then to the window, and after some tugging she opened the casement, and let in the sweet morning air. The dew was already off the flowers in the garden below, but still rising from the long hay-grass in the meadows directly beyond. (p. 1-2)

The muslim curtains flapped softly from time to time in the scented air that came through the open windows. (p. 15)

First of all, she went to the window to see what was to be seen. A flower-garden right below; a meadow of ripe grass just beyond, changing colour in long sweeps, as the soft wind blew over it. (p. 62-63)

Molly looked out of her chamber window - leaning on the sill, and snuffing up the night odours of the honeysuckle.' (p. 70)

See various page numbers in Gaskell, Elizabeth, *North and South*, Penguin Classics, 1970 and Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Wives and Daughters*, The World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1987.

20 Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Ruth*, The World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 208.

21 *ibid.*, p. 164.

22 *ibid.*, p. 177.

23 Thus, some of the scenes in which Ruth is exposed to restorative influences from outside accentuate the shift from a desire to escape, to a contentment with the passive pleasures of observation. They echo the distinction Ruskin makes, in commenting on the work of Turner and Constable, between observations made through windows, and paintings which capture and frame the same scenic beauty. The difference, he suggests, is one of degree, not really of a disappointing contrast.

For, observe, although I believe any sensible person would exchange his pictures, however good, for windows, he would not feel, and ought not to feel, that the arrangement was entirely gainful to him. He would feel it was an exchange of a less good of one kind, for a greater of another kind, but that it was definitely exchange, not pure gain, not merely getting more truth instead of less. The picture would be a serious loss; something gone which the actual landscape could never

restore, though it might give something better in its place ...

See Ruskin, John, *Modern Painters*, Volume III, George Allen, 1897, p. 138.

- 24 For the place of English Unitarianism in the life and work of Elizabeth Gaskell see Webb, R.K., 'The Gaskells as Unitarians', in Shattock, Joan (ed.), *Dickens and Other Victorians*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1988. Detailed biographical information concerning her Unitarian heritage is given in Uglow, Jenny, *Elizabeth Gaskell (A Habit of Stories)*, Faber and Faber, London, 1993. The constant tension of needing to balance divine grace with moral responsibility is taken up, by contrasting Pascal and Voltaire, in Eliot, T.S., 'The Pensées of Pascal', in *Selected Essays*, Faber and Faber, London, 1932, pp. 402-416.
- 25 Priestley's theory of necessity is outlined in Priestley, Joseph, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit, and the Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated*, Garland, New York/London, 1976.
- 26 See Uglow, Jenny, op. cit., pp. 9-10.
- 27 A good account of this influence is in Holt, R.V., *The Unitarian Contribution to Social Progress in England*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1938.
- 28 See Drummond, James and Upton, C.B., *The Life and Letters of James Martineau*, 2 volumes, James Nisbet and Co., London, 1902. Also, Waller, Ralph, *James Martineau: his engagement as a theologian, his Christology, and his doctrine of the Church, with some unpublished papers*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, King's College, University of London, 1986.
- 29 An examination in this novel of the dichotomy between observer and observed needs to take into consideration another intelligence other than that of the female protagonist, Ruth, and the variously situated evaluative intelligence that the transcendent reader brings to the text. So much of what happens is identified as being dependent on a divine intelligence. Operating as it does, it appears to be more than simply a projection of Ruth's psychological complexity. For it assumes its own complex identity, at times seeming to be consistent with an orthodox Christian understanding, at other times hinting at malevolent forces opposed to Ruth's true welfare.

In many of the window scenes discussed a divine dimension is incorporated in any attempted resolution. In Wales, Benson has to restrain Ruth by reminding her of what her mother would expect, as his prayers had not overcome her desire to follow Bellingham, or altered her 'blasphemous defiance of the merciful God.' When Ruth is recuperating from the birth of Leonard 'in the moonlight calm of her sick bed' she has an acute awareness of divine presence: 'so near, so real and present, did heaven, and eternity, and God seem to Ruth'. Later in the novel, having struggled with and resisted the temptation to return to Bellingham (now Donne) she kneels and prays 'as in the very presence of God' (*Ruth*, p. 100, p. 164, p. 274). Many other examples of this type could be given.

Similarly, there are several scenes where Ruth alludes to a ruthless, dispassionate, divine intelligence that would appear constantly to haunt the periphery of her consciousness. In her anguish in Wales she looks out a window at the 'high, dark outlines of the mountains' which 'stood, like giants, solemnly watching for the end of Earth and Time.' (*Ruth*, p. 83) In the later incident, where the difficult decision is being considered as to whether she should accede to Bellingham's tempting proposal for reconciliation, the sense of competing divine agencies is apparent:

She could not think, or indeed, remember anything but that she was weak, and God was strong, and "a very present help in time of trouble"; and the wind rose yet higher, and the house shook and vibrated as, in measured time, the great and terrible gusts came from the four quarters of the heavens and blew around it, dying away in the distance with loud and unearthly wails, which were not utterly still before the sound of the coming blast was heard like the trumpets of the vanguard of the Prince of the Air. (*Ruth*, pp. 274-275)

Window scenes in *Ruth* provide an interesting delineation between the observer and the observed, as well as the interior and exterior points of observation, both for the fictional character involved and for the reader. In this novel, divine intelligence, like that of the reader, alters from without to within with consummate ease. Referring to the scenes quoted above, when Ruth is on her knees in prayer, she feels she is 'in the very presence of God'. The consoling divine presence is within the room. When strong winds become the figurative representation of divine attention, they are without, as threatening as an intruder, but with the cowering female protagonist relatively safe behind closed windows. In

this sense the divine intelligence operative in this novel reflects the Christian paradox of omnipotent versus personal God. This is a position similar in many ways to that of the reader, who can know the characters within the text in intimate detail, yet also control, through reading and evaluative processes, whether and how the text is read.

Note. A complex and interesting scene in which Margaret Hale seeks the security of being inside, with the windows closed, occurs at the beginning of Chapter 6 of *North and South*. Believing Charlotte, the servant, to have inadvertently locked her out, she longs to be 'safe in the drawing-room, with the windows fastened and bolted, and the familiar walls hemming her round, and shutting her in' (p. 91).

CHAPTER EIGHT

**“MRS GASKELL’S GENIUS WAS SO COMPOSITE
AS A QUALITY” (HENRY JAMES):**

CONCLUSIONS CONCERNING THE MAINTENANCE OF OPPOSITIONS IN THE LIFE AND WORK OF ELIZABETH GASKELL

Throughout this dissertation it has been demonstrated that the fictional works of Elizabeth Gaskell exhibit a series of complex antinomies. The variety of oppositions identified confirms the integral nature of constantly juxtaposed concepts and positions across the range of her fiction, and in her biography of Charlotte Brontë and other writings. For a number of reasons she appears to prefer an open-endedness where, within one work, or between one or several works, opposing ideas are set against each other. This is done in such a manner that the reader is left with a conviction that the resolution or suppression of differences should be resisted. In fact, it has been argued, the maintenance of opposing ideas in Elizabeth Gaskell’s work provides much of the vitality and cogency of her writing, and, in various ways, can be shown to derive, in part, from the author’s personal life.

Her dependence on such oppositions, during her life and writing career, needs explanation. During the course of this dissertation reference has been made to several reasons for the existence of this recurrent feature of her work. Firstly, it has been explained in terms of the social and cultural context within which Elizabeth Gaskell lived her full and varied life, dominated as that was by the conflicting strains that prevailed in English Unitarianism. Secondly, and somewhat relatedly, her intelligence, open, accessible and non dogmatic nature, largely resisted closure. Experience dictated that equal consideration for and maintenance of both sides of an issue is sensible and productive. The writing of fiction fostered this attitude. Thirdly, there is,

throughout her work, a sense in which the conscious mind of the author reflects unrecognised, unconscious oppositions of a more complex, psychological nature.

Elizabeth Gaskell grew to maturity in a middle-class sub-culture which had a liberal attitude to intellectual discourse [1]. English Unitarians prided themselves on their non dogmatic, non credal stance, and, as mentioned in Chapter Five, gave high priority to the pursuit of truth. Elizabeth Gaskell read, avidly and extensively, across a range of areas, and was exposed to some of the foremost thinkers of her time. Throughout this dissertation the influence of authors as diverse as Edmund Spenser, John Ruskin, William Wordsworth, Lord Alfred Tennyson and George Eliot has been referred to in detail. Her social circle included the Martineaus, Charlotte Bronte and her father, Charles Darwin, Madame Mohl, Charles Eliot Norton, the Winkworth sisters, amongst many others [2]. Little wonder, then, that she kept a balanced stance on issues, which, for others, were expressed as extreme alternatives. Her response to opposing views within Unitarianism is a good example. Her work exhibits some of the residual strictures of Priestleyan determinism, but also grapples with the pressure to embrace the emergent influences of humanism. The doctrinal struggles within English Unitarianism and the educated community at large (free will versus determinism, social conservatism versus radicalism, natural theology versus Darwinism) have all been discussed throughout this dissertation. Elizabeth Gaskell's approach to all these issues indicates a desire to maintain the interdependence of oppositions which some viewed as exclusive. For example, while Paley viewed the natural world as harmoniously integrated, Darwin's conclusions emphasised the savagery and arbitrary qualities of the same environment. While some accepted these positions as irreconcilable extremes, both views are expressed throughout Elizabeth Gaskell's work. Rather than signal indecision, such an accommodation of polarities indicates a realisation that it is more intellectually credible to maintain and express the ironies and paradoxes inherent in such oppositions than to adopt a dogmatic position on any one issue. Any position needs to be informed by the opposing view. As a result the tenor of her work is often one of moderation. This, however, does not mean (as some have previously supposed) that she failed to struggle with the issues before her. Early this century critics failed to identify the tensions in her work created by this maintenance of oppositions. At this time she was known principally as the author of *Cranford*, a novel of manners in

the Jane Austen tradition. Only in recent decades has this supposedly comfortably domestic, female novelist been seen in different terms. Earlier this century Lord David Cecil stated:

..... she was all a woman was expected to be; gentle, domestic, tactful, unintellectual, prone to tears, easily shocked. So far from chafing at the limits imposed on her activities, she accepted them with serene satisfaction ... Mrs. Gaskell was the typical Victorian woman. [3]

To the contrary biographical information and a close textual study of her literary output indicates that she often felt torn between two extremes. Her inner turmoil regarding the publication of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* suggests this. She wanted to report truthfully her feelings and understanding of the issues in Charlotte's life, but felt constrained by the social ramifications of her action, admitting 'I hate the whole affair, and everything connected with it' and 'I am in a Hornet's nest with a vengeance' [4]. The complexities of her busy life as minister's wife, mother, and woman writer took a toll on her health. As mentioned in Chapter Four, she often suffered from severe headaches.

There are some other good examples discussed in the course of this dissertation. During her life in Manchester, Elizabeth Gaskell found it difficult to reconcile her personal dependence on the strongly middle-class Unitarian milieu of northern England with her misgivings about the treatment of the povertystricken mill workers or associated employees, especially women, depicted in her fiction (see *Ruth*, *Mary Barton*, and *North and South*). She struggled to reconcile her desire to represent graphically the plight of the working classes with her role as minister's wife, mother, woman writer, and member of a respected network of family connections (including the Hollands and Wedgwoods). This balance was not always easy, sharing sympathies as she did, with both the injustices faced by the poor, and the benefits of middle-class respectability. Many Unitarians had become wealthy and influential because of their willingness to subscribe to the changes brought about by industrialisation, and Elizabeth Gaskell, like most Victorians, recognised the benefits of change and progress. Examples of this can be found in both *Cousin Phillis* and *Wives and Daughters*. The ending of *Cousin Phillis* suggests the inevitability of change. Characters such as the narrator's father, John Manning, appear to have been based on family members or acquaintances Elizabeth Gaskell admired because of their

engineering inventiveness. George Stephenson, the railway engineer, was a colleague of William Turner, the uncle with whom Elizabeth Gaskell had spent holidays prior to her marriage to William Gaskell. Through him and other sources she was exposed to the ambivalent consequences of industrial progress. She also had the rapidity of change reinforced by the Great Exhibition of 1851 [5].

Elizabeth Gaskell's earlier work demonstrates a strong reliance on concepts such as duty, submission, and resignation, common enough concepts in Victorian society, but all of which relate closely to some prevalent Unitarian doctrines. In the theocratic world view underlying her fiction there are always divine expectations regarding human behaviour, especially when any moral abrogation occurs. The teaching of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Unitarian theologians emphasised a stringent adherence to moral accountability and atonement through some form of suffering where moral failure occurred. The sermons of William Turner, the uncle and prominent Unitarian minister mentioned above, are a good example. At the funeral service in 1833 of James Losh, in Newcastle, he preached a sermon entitled 'Resignation and Submission under the Afflictive Dispensations of Providence'. This sermon admirably illustrates the Unitarian emphasis on the doctrinal features under discussion. Although there is no suggestion of moral inadequacy on the part of James Losh, a repressive sense of divine accountability pervades the sermon:

To behave with due propriety under the various dispensations of providence is a very considerable part of practical religion. The different situations in which we are placed call for the exercise of different virtues. Prosperity demands from us gratitude and humble joy, an innocent and sober enjoyment of God's blessings, and a diligent improvement of the talents entrusted to us. Adversity requires humility, patience, submission, self-examination, and amendment.

... First, we should wait for and expect afflictions and disappointments at the hand of God. ... Second, by forming our hearts and minds to an habitual frame and temper of submission. While we are at ease, we can easily see how we ought to behave when we shall come to be afflicted. We should often think seriously of this, and provide beforehand for it, by laying up a stock of resolutions and prayers for Divine Grace, to enable us to behave patiently, submissively, and dutifully, in order that we may have a settled principle in our heart,

ready to use and act upon, when we come to have occasion for it. [6]

Against this background Elizabeth Gaskell struggled to express the sense of freedom she vicariously experienced through exposure to a broad range of expressions of Romanticism. In her own living, particularly as a minister's wife and woman writer, she frequently tested the boundaries of self expression and personal freedom. There is every indication that she did not always find the balance between expected personal behaviour and personal desires easy to maintain.

But Elizabeth Gaskell found a controlled balance of oppositions in the breadth of the fictional mode she chose, the utilisation of a number of literary conventions ensuring that her work never reads as abrasively one-sided or polemical in any confrontational sense. While the novels and short stories may express challenging views (for example, the restitution of the 'fallen woman' in *Ruth*) the radicalism of the depiction is constrained by the author's wider sympathies. Characters are rarely left in a state of intolerable human suffering, as the concept of divine benevolence ensures that the sufferings of this life are finally minimised. Opportunities for reconciliation occur in most of her novels. Attempts to balance up both sides of an issue abound. There is a recognition that in fiction the emphasis should be to depict life's many aspects (a view shared by George Eliot) [7].

It must be clearly indicated that the maintenance of oppositions throughout her work was more than a pragmatic means of avoiding conflict, of positing alternatives that mutually defuse the extremity of each position. In accordance with her commitment to truthfulness, it was important for her to reflect in her fiction the existential complexities she dealt with as an adult. She had known, for example, the pleasures of rural life, as much as the benefits of life in an industrialised city. The rural/urban dichotomy that appears in her work was fundamental to her understanding and appreciation of life. Not just the author of *Cranford*, neither is she just the author of *Mary Barton*, and the impact of either is lost in isolation from the other or the corpus of her entire work (this is discussed at length in Chapter Four). Some novels, like *North and South* depict this mutuality in the same text. Her novels are not declarations of indeterminacy with regard to the oppositions distinguished, but a faithful admission that for her these juxtapositions are an integral and inseparable part of her understanding.

While the extremes in themselves are problematic, and with each she struggles, their co-existence is necessary, truthful and fruitful.

It is interesting to speculate on the extent to which Elizabeth Gaskell was conscious of the antinomies she created throughout her work. Some, no doubt, she would have been aware of. She was acutely mindful of the struggle that many wealthy Christian industrialists had in reconciling aspirations for progress and personal gain with the dire consequences of the industrialised environment for the masses of mill-workers needed to achieve these aspirations. In close contact with both sectors of society (mill-owners attended her husband's church and she and her husband had an ongoing ministry to the poor [8]) she describes with accuracy the moral conflict they confronted. Living in Manchester, she was close to the raw reality of this dilemma. She also knew, through reading and discussion, the issues surrounding the conflict between a decline in the influence of rationalism and the many manifestations of Romanticism that were evident within her Unitarian and literary circle. The entrenched views of natural theology and the unsettling suggestions of Darwinism were also very evident to her.

But some of the other polarities that the reader can detect are more internalised, obviously less conscious to the author. In such cases, an issue that the author wishes to draw attention to can be matched, when the reader deconstructs the text, by considering some alternative psychological interpretation resulting from an examination of the close interaction between the author and the text. That is, while the author seems to be favouring one quality, close reading reveals that in fact she is condoning the opposite. This occurs in reference to several of the antinomies distinguished throughout this dissertation. In Chapter Five, examples are given of the manner in which Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction strongly supports the Unitarian espousal of truthfulness in personal relationships. Yet, in her fiction and life, she also appreciated the benefits of discretionary reserve when needed, and although she would never have acknowledged it openly, mendacity held a curious fascination for her. While she overtly purports to favour a simple truthfulness, subconsciously she is attracted to the darker, more complex potential of falsehood [9]. This suggests that she acknowledges the indivisible nature of truth and falsehood, accepting that without the clear, real and antithetical presence of falsehood, truth has little meaning. The significant attention that she gives to issues involving deception, is, curiously, an equally strong recognition of the importance of truth. While

depictions of truthfulness in fiction can be bland and uninteresting, the resolution of situations involving falsehood is usually dramatic and interesting. Such scenes point beyond themselves to the reality of truth.

Likewise, while the prevalence of window scenes in Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction indicates that many of her female protagonists were thoughtfully preoccupied with resolving the complexities of their predicament, and that standing or sitting by a window provided a suitable location for reflection and contemplation, it also signals a less conscious attempt to confront the repressed frustrations of lack of personal freedom that many such characters experienced. Superficially, these scenes read as conventional domestic scenes; less obviously as scenes where juxtapositions of significant psychological complexity are being presented [10].

The literary works of Elizabeth Gaskell demonstrate a clear patterning of oppositions which resemble the window scenes discussed in Chapter Seven. Female protagonists in this chapter vacillate between a desire to step across the threshold into some other realm, or to remain in a known but constraining domain. Their liminal experiences, examples of which abound in a number of Elizabeth Gaskell's novels, reflect precisely the constant authorial dilemma of being drawn to opposing possibilities.

This constant tension, the process of negotiating possibilities and then ultimately withdrawing, can be fraught with disease and frustration. Life on the margins, as the breadth of Elizabeth Gaskell's work appears to depict, is, in theological terms, a constant struggle to choose between the immanent and the transcendent, between that which is immediate and attainable, and that which is beyond and elusive. Rather than coalesce and balance polarities, an option which in this author's case leads to a satisfactory tension and interdependence, it could have led to disintegration and purposelessness, or to a form of dogmatism.

The tensions of understanding and expressing a strong desire for a return to some rural idyll of former years, at the same time as being thrust forward into the economic and social realities of a harsh, industrial environment, in many would have encouraged a denial of one or the other. This does not happen. Neither is there any clear transition from an acceptance of a natural world pervaded by divine goodness, to the more sobering conclusions of Darwinism. Both are maintained. Likewise, Elizabeth Gaskell appears to live

comfortably with the tensions of an adherence to middle-class social values and personal expressions of radicalism.

In each pair of oppositions the emphasis on one extreme or the other does vary throughout her work. Sometimes she seems to be favouring the rural environment, sometimes the industrial; sometimes stasis and sometimes progress. This process leads to the perpetual destabilisation and then re-establishment of balance between such oppositions. It is ironic that, whereas for some this ebb and flow could promote uncertainty or anxiety, this seems never to be the case in Elizabeth Gaskell's work.

To ensure the perpetual maintenance of such oppositions there has to be some mechanism for continually slowing down and then reversing the tendency to push towards one extreme or the other. In some of the oppositions discussed that is achieved by features of Unitarian doctrine that are likewise referred to throughout this dissertation. The conflicting notions of moral necessity and individual freedom provide one such source, and the relationship between submission to the divine will and responses to divine benevolence provides another.

As demonstrated in Chapters Two and Three, the challenges to balance the demands of moral necessity and expressions of individual freedom are created by conflicting strains within Unitarianism. Although there is a shift throughout her writing career from an emphasis on a more rigid determinism to a greater acceptance of the potential of the individual to direct his or her own destiny, the two elements continue to co-exist throughout Elizabeth Gaskell's work. *Ruth* is a convincing example. While there are constant authorial reinforcements of the inescapable nature of divine accountability, there are also indications that the author was seeking to signal her acceptance of the legitimacy of her protagonists' desires for freedom. This novel is constantly referred to in this dissertation, highlighting the dilemma of this opposition in every instance (see Chapter Two, Three and Seven).

The ebb and flow within this opposition is maintained by a recurrent aspect of Unitarian thought. Efforts on the part of characters to express individual free will are overridden by divine expectations that they conform to a pattern of living which is responsible and submissive to divinely sanctioned moral dictates. Personal fulfilment is not possible outside of such expectations. So, the outworking of characters' lives throughout Elizabeth

Gaskell's work brings about a constant testing of the boundaries of freedom and a constant compliance with restriction.

Many previous estimations of Elizabeth Gaskell's work do not take into account this complexity in her work. The emphasis on works which demonstrate her social compliance and domesticity failed to reveal the unique manner in which she dealt with the complex range of issues, opinions, and expectations that she sought to understand, assimilate, and express through her writing. At the heart of Elizabeth Gaskell's literary oeuvre is a significant capacity to bind these sometimes conflicting elements into a meaningful corpus. This capacity is indicative of the sensible, poised and balanced nature of her personal life over a period of many years. She was a truly admirable woman, revealing in her fiction and life the integration and self-possession possible, even for a Victorian woman with the tensions and frustrations she constantly experienced.

Expressions of opinion regarding the life and work of Elizabeth Gaskell vary. An early critic, Elizabeth Haldane, highlights her humour, claiming she had 'a true appreciation of the humorous side of life - an appreciation which was kindly, charitable and human and such as everyone can understand' [11]. The Winkworth sisters were overwhelmed by the vitality of her presence: 'When you were with her, you felt as if you had twice the life in you that you had at ordinary times' [12]. Her careless handling of the truth has been referred to more recently [13], and recent biographies, aided by the publication of her collected letters, have pointed to periods in her life of extreme sadness and later uncertainty and anxiety.

Documentary evidence suggests that she was a socially poised, accomplished hostess, an enthusiastic and faithful correspondent and friend, and a woman with an ongoing appetite for excitement, the unusual and the new. But she was also, when needed, very serious minded and determined in her attitudes regarding social concerns.

As the breadth and complexity of her personality and writing has emerged in recent decades, so it has become necessary to explain satisfactorily the oppositions and contraries that emerge throughout her work. This dissertation has demonstrated that they illustrate Elizabeth Gaskell's well developed capacity to contain, maintain, and express an effective cohesion and balance in all the competing and demanding areas of her life and literary expression.

NOTES

- 1 The liberal nature of English Unitarianism is discussed in Uglow, Jenny, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-9.
- 2 For details of the influence of each author see the following: Edmund Spenser (page 149); William Wordsworth (footnote 29, Chapter Two); Lord Alfred Tennyson (footnote 27, Chapter Three); George Eliot (footnote 57, Chapter One, and footnote 7 below); and John Ruskin (footnote 20, Chapter Four).
- 3 Cecil, Lord David, *Early Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation*, Constable, London, 1934, Chapter One.
- 4 The extracts quoted and other details about the furore surrounding the publication of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* can be found in Uglow, Jenny, *op. cit.*, pp. 425-435, and Whitehead, Barbara, *Charlotte Brontë and her 'dearest Nell'*, Smith Settle, 1993, pp. 203-205.
- 5 See Sharps, John Geoffrey, *op. cit.*, pp. 428-430. Also see Uglow, Jenny, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-60, and page 279.
- 6 See 'Resignation and Submission under the Afflictive Dispensations of Providence', a sermon preached October 6, 1833, at the chapel in Hanover Square, Newcastle, on the occasion of the death of the lamented James Losh, esq., by William Turner, Newcastle, 1833. Copy in the Library of the Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society, Newcastle.
- 7 The similar conception of realism in art shared by Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot is discussed in Uglow, Jenny, *op. cit.*, pp. 463-466.
- 8 See Uglow, Jenny, *op. cit.*, page 87, for a list of the prominent Unitarian mill-owners who attended Cross Street Chapel.
- 9 The discussion of Elizabeth Gaskell's treatment of truth is continued in Whitehead, Barbara, *op. cit.*, pp. 205-206.
- 10 Some of these issues are taken up in recent excellent feminist readings of the work of Elizabeth Gaskell. See particularly Bonaparte, Felicia, *The Gypsy-Bachelor of Manchester: The Life of Mrs. Gaskell's Demon*.
- 11 Haldane, Elizabeth, *Mrs. Gaskell and Her Friends*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1930, page 305.

- 12 Winkworth, Catherine, *Letters and Memorials of Catherine Winkworth*, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1908, page 24.
- 13 Whitehead, Barbara, op. cit., pp. 203-210.

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