

ELIZABETH GASKELL 1810 – 1865

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To the stern business man of the early nineteenth century the fashion for visiting the poor must have seemed a godsend. Visiting the poor was woman's work, it kept wives and daughters quiet, and as they visited with broth and blankets as well as with tracts it kept the poor quiet too.

But things so seldom turn out as business men hope. Probably in the whole of creation there is not a more disappointed species than business men, something is always getting between them and their aspirations – a war or a peace, a pestilence or an act of parliament or a change in the weather. By the middle of the nineteenth century visiting the poor was showing the most disappointing results. The poor were no quieter, and even in prosperous society you could scarcely hear yourself add up, so many people were discussing the lot of the poor. For by visiting the poor you ultimately learn how the poor live, and

having learned how they live you may begin to speculate why they do not live otherwise. Wives and daughters, instead of concentrating on the family mutton-chops, began to air their views on the absence of mutton-chops in other families, and too late, many stern business men must have wished to God they had followed their original inclination and lived as Mahometans.

In 1849 the *Manchester Guardian* (guardian of *laissez-faire* and rugged business individualism) reviewed *Mary Barton, A Tale of Manchester Life*. It was a first novel written by a Mrs Gaskell, and the Manchester life it dealt with was of much the same kind as the Manchester life described by Friedrich Engels in his *Condition of the Working-Class* in 1844. The reviewer complained that the author showed a 'morbid sensibility to the condition of operatives,' and added that such sensibility had become fashionable among the gentry and aristocracy. *Divide and Rule*. Assuming that the operatives had money and schooling enough (leisure was easier come by in a time of standing-off and lock-outs) to read both book and review, the *Manchester Guardian* would safeguard them against any untimely enthusiasm for the book by reminding them that its writer belonged to the gentry. Four years earlier Disraeli had published *Sybil*, another example of morbid sensibility to the condition of operatives. The Industrial North, its privacy already invaded by factory legislation, had no mind to see its home life further broken up by the attention of novelists; and took to literary criticism.

It needed no great discernment to see that *Sybil* was a dangerous book. It was indisputably grounded on government reports and bluebooks, it was written in a style of steely sophistication, it attacked definite abuses, abuses already recognised as such. Moreover, it had the advantage of being written by a man, and a man who was already well-known. At first it seems surprising that *Mary Barton*, following it, should have created the hullabaloo it did create, the partisans for and against, the solid critiques proving it economically unsound, the attacks on the accuracy of its dialect (superficial gentry again), the acclamations of writers so diverse as Carlyle and Landor.

For *Mary Barton* was written by a woman, and a woman nobody knew about unless it might be the congregation of her husband who was a dissenting minister; and it was based on nothing more indisputable than the impressions of any woman who went about visiting the poor; and showed no interest in economic laws, did not indeed even appear to recognise how awful they are, and how immutable, and at the same time how frail and how tittupy; and attacked no special abuses but only such commonplace things as poverty and subjection; and was written in a style so simple and natural that you would think the woman was talking rather than writing a book; and had a stagy plot, and abounded in deathbeds, and was sentimental; and finally was so shamelessly lacking in sophistication that it represented the workers of Manchester poor and careworn and their employers rich and carefree . . . just like that, *sans façons*, as one might say 'the rose is red, the violet's blue.'

But for all these defects the book was dangerous. The *Tale of Manchester Life* told the world nothing new about Manchester, but it showed the 'condition of operatives' in a new light, transferred it from being a problem, a scandal, a distressing phenomenon of industrial progress, a state of affairs grossly exaggerated, to something in real life. Even in her first novel Elizabeth Gaskell had found her feet as an artist, and was armoured in the artist's essential limitations. She did not harangue or argue. She attacked no abuses, she preached no remedies, she supplied no answers, she barely questioned. She presented her characters and told their story.

In all her writings Elizabeth Gaskell has, to a high degree, this power of 'presentation.' She writes very much as Vermeer painted, with the same unemphatic sensibility to detail, the same mixture of coolness and intimacy. This Vermeer-like quality of pure and scrupulous verisimilitude is most frequently admired in her later work, in such things as *Cousin Phyllis*, where it gives both radiance and realism (like the light and stiffening of a delicate frost) to pastoral scenes and characters. In *Mary Barton* the method of Vermeer is

applied to scenes of squalor and misery, to the starvelings and criminals of want. There is such devastating persuasion in the manner of her writing that the faults of matter drop into insignificance. Critics of her own day proved that she understood nothing about economic problems, but they could not dispute her presentation of cold and hunger. Later readers have with justification fallen foul of some terrible outbursts of refinement of *nimini-pimini*; but her power of narrative keeps them reading nevertheless. She was unjust, said the Manchester School, to employers; she took no account of their feelings, for employers also live by trade and feel its fluctuations. She should not address herself so often, say we, to the gallery; and I dare say the stricter Trades Unionists may deplore her morbid sensibility to the condition of black-legs. Any one, in fact, may pick a hole in *Mary Barton*. But it is not so easy to demolish Elizabeth Gaskell, who to this day gives her testimony against the oppressors of the poor. She is one of those maddening witnesses, the despair of cross-examining counsel, who may be made to look a fool but who can by no means be made to look a liar.

Yet I suppose to a reader of to-day Elizabeth Gaskell might look like a hypocrite, for her testimony is preceded by an unqualified and unquestioned kissing of the book. To us it is embarrassing to find working-class characters expressing so much Christian resignation, and the author who so represents them is bound to arouse our suspicion. But if we are to form a balanced appreciation of English nineteenth-century literature we have got to realise that religion was part of everyday life and feeling. Granted that men and women believed in heaven, it is not surprising that pie in the sky consolations should be real, and hopefully dwelt upon; nor is there any reason to suspect the good faith of writers who show them as doing so.

How deeply religion had penetrated into English society is reflected in one of Elizabeth Gaskell's letters to her American friend, Charles E. Norton. Her daughters, she writes are amiable, intelligent; domesticated,

everything she could wish them to be. But she doubts if they will find husbands, for they have been brought up as Unitarians. If the Misses Gaskells were unlikely to find husbands, what tolerance might be expected for a young woman with a baby but no wedding ring? Having written *Mary Barton*, Elizabeth Gaskell, with her feminine knack for being irritating, made the heroine of her next novel, *Ruth*, such a young woman, and had the additional vexatiousness to represent other characters in the book, characters undeniably good and virtuous, as not merely compassionating Ruth, but positively respecting her. Just as in *Mary Barton*, an effort of historical imagination is needed to swallow the piety, if *Ruth* is to be read with intelligence the reader must bear in mind the Victorian rancour against the lost maidenhead, the mixture of religious feeling and property sense with which society regarded the fallen woman, as householders might regard a plate-chest which had deliberately thrown itself into the embraces of a burglar. The blind panic with which the Victorian novelists approached the magdalen only reflects the spirit of their day. Irresistibly drawn to the subject (Victorian novels have a notably higher proportion of magdalens than our own), they founder on it, submerging in a welter of false sentiment and defeatist prudery. And in the Esther of *Mary Barton* Elizabeth Gaskell must herself be counted among the shipwrecked.

But in her second novel she steers a deliberate course, sails full-set, and does not sink. The result is a Victorian *Clarissa*. Where Richardson asserted that a young lady may lose her maidenhead and remain a noble character, Elizabeth Gaskell, in a century that was using the word *sociological*, places her heroine much lower in the social scale (the virtue of Richardson's low-born Pamela had to be guaranteed by ultimate marriage) and asserts that a young woman may lose her maidenhead and remain a good member of society. The assertion was then sufficiently remarkable, but much more so was the coolness of the tone in which it was made, the writer's opinionated refusal to comply with a contemporary hysteria, and lose her head.

All accounts of Elizabeth Gaskell, and her own letters, show her as an amiable, unselfconscious character, with (in Dr. Johnson's phrase) 'a bottom of good sense,' and such a liberal interest in her fellow men that she could be equally appreciative of Charlotte Brontë and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. She was handsome, likeable, and probably a trifle domineering, as the amiable and unselfconscious can so easily be; and except for some purely practical tempers about the difficulties of enlarging or curtailing stories to fit into the requirements of editors, she seems to have written as easily as a bird sings. But the slightest acquaintance with a canary is enough to teach one that there is nothing more headstrong than a singing-bird; and all Elizabeth Gaskell's books indicate self-will and obstinacy of a high order.

Just as she obviously wrote with pleasure, she wrote to please herself. To please herself she complied with canons of behaviour which she approved; she wrote modestly, and with decorum; but modestly, and decorously with all the grace of her admirable style, with all the charm of an amiable character, she had her will and said her say – whether about Manchester life, or the lives of the Brontës, or how a young man of exemplary Christian character can combine the vilest of behaviour with the best of motives if jealousy blows him that way – as it blows Philip in *Sylvia's Lovers*; whether, as in *Ruth*, she chooses a painful subject, or whether a painless one, as in *Cranford*.

Unfortunate *Cranford*! So swamped in indiscriminating admiration, so be-devilled as a bijou classic and the tea-shop's sweetheart . . . of all Elizabeth Gaskell's writings it is *Cranford* that has suffered most from the course of time. But if one recalls Victorian humourists, and their public's conviction of the essential contemptibility of old women who had not lost their maidenheads, *Cranford* too begins to show signs of an independent judgment.

Elizabeth Gaskell is the quietest of the Victorian novelists; and that, speaking of a period when writers habitually wrote at the top of their voices, is perhaps

putting it too mildly. She was absolutely quiet, even in her passages of drama and strong emotion she retains a tone of conversation. But though the tone is always under control and ladylike, the enunciation is distinct. And though she was not a deep thinker, she was a clear feeler. She knew her own heart. People who know their own hearts (women, perhaps, especially) are quite as subversive as people who know their own minds; and it is curious to note how piously the essential heart of Elizabeth Gaskell has been overlaid by critics, biographers, and admirers. First, she knew nothing of economics; later, she never advocated anything in the least revolutionary, and the inexperience of *Mary Barton* was atoned for by her subsequent Manchester novel, *North and South*, in which the hero was a good manufacturer (it is questionable if *North and South* was intended as an atonement; if it were, it is a very Parthian atonement); finally, she wrote that charming thing, *Cranford*. And it is undeniable: *Cranford* is charming, Elizabeth Gaskell is uninterested in economics, she advocates nothing more revolutionary than better housing, factory canteens, allowing the unmarried mother the opportunity to keep her child. What is there to be alarmed about?

Nothing; only Elizabeth Gaskell, knowing her own heart. She was so sensitive to criticism that after the first hullabaloo over *Mary Barton* she used to leave England whenever a book of hers was about to be published. But this is susceptible to two interpretations. It might have been the natural womanly shrinking from publicity that a Victorian lady would properly feel. It might also have been a headstrong character's intolerance to contradiction. In either case, she presently came back to Manchester and began another book. With one exception; she was slow to recover from the attack on her *Life of Charlotte Brontë*. Here, since she had dealt with living people, the hullabaloo was sharpened by threats of libel actions, and she returned to find that due retractations had been made on her behalf without her concurrence. 'I found trouble enough awaiting me from the publication of my life of

C.B. or rather not "awaiting" me, but settled without me: settled for the best, all things considered, I am sure. Well! We won't speak any more of that.'

She sulked for five years after. And this also is susceptible to two interpretations. The ambiguity remains, and was perhaps inherent in the character where woman and writer were so naturally and unselfconsciously mingled. Amiable and high-minded, stubborn and self-willed, she is not more ambiguous than the term *Victorian*, which suggests to some, crinolines, to others, Chartism. But there is no ambiguity about her heart, nor about the sensibility, qualified as *morbid*, the persistent Vermeer-like consideration of all sorts and conditions of men which made her end the trial scene in *Mary Barton* (when the hero is acquitted of murder, the heroine is justified, the excitement of the plot concluded) with that characteristic backward glance on the 'sad condition of humanity': "*Here, make yourself scarce! I should think you'd be glad to get out of that!*" exclaimed the gaoler, as he brought up another livid prisoner, from out whose eyes came the anxiety which he would not allow any other feature to display.'

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