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Industrial cityscapes in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*

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Following the Industrial Revolution, the nineteenth century was a time of significant growth in cities and urbanization. The census conducted in England in 1851 demonstrated that for the first time in the history of the nation just over fifty percent of its citizens lived in the cities. The urbanization of the country was a rapid process: the data from 1831 showed that seventy five percent of English people still lived in the countryside (Davis 13). By 1871, only a quarter of the population still lived in rural areas (Purchase 19). What contributed to such a marked increase of urban populace was the emergence of the new industrial cities of the English Midlands where a confluence of existing technologies and new inventions created a new way of life. In his *Notes of a Tour in the Manufacturing Districts of Lancashire* (1842), William Cooke Taylor (1800-1849), a prolific Irish man of letters, writes:

> The steam engine had no precedent, the spinning-jenny is without ancestry, the mule and the power loom entered on no prepared heritage: they sprang into sudden existence like Minerva from the head of Jupiter (Cooke Taylor 4).

The passage shows that the great change in the English way of life was both sudden and unprecedented, creating new and often troubling social phenomena which could not be interpreted according to any previously established patterns. Cooke Taylor, an Anti-Corn Law propagandist, and a defender of child-labor on the grounds that it is better than starvation, perceived the Industrial Revolution as a positive development, yet in his *Natural History of Society in the Barbarous and*

Civilized State (1840), he pointed out that one such perplexing phenomenon was the industrial city, symptomatic of

> a system of social life constructed on a wholly new principle, a principle vague and indefinite but developing itself by its own spontaneous force and daily producing effects which no human foresight had anticipated (qtd. in Briggs 12).

The industrial city became for many a fascinating but also a threatening object. Thomas Carlyle, who visited Birmingham in 1824, described his impressions in the following way:

> Torrents of thick smoke, with ever and anon a burst of dingy flame, are issuing from a thousand funnels. . . . You hear the clank of innumerable steam-engines, the rumbling of cars and vans, and the hum of men interrupted by the sharper rattle of some canal-boat loading or disloading. . . . I have looked into their iron works where 150.000 men are smelting the metal in a district a few miles to the north; . . . their tubs and vats, as large as country churches, full of copperas and aqua fortis and oil of vitriol; and the whole is not without its attractions as well as repulsions. (Froude, vol. I, 232)

The passage aptly illustrates an ambivalent attitude towards the industrial city. The city is perceived as a site where untamed energy creating new things reveals itself, yet this energy possesses a destructive potential as well – the potential suggested by corrosive and caustic properties of the substances enumerated by Carlyle.

An important characteristic of the city – any city – is its heterogeneity. As Aristotle noted in *The Politics*, "The city is composed of different kinds of men; similar people cannot bring a city into existence" (321). Thus the city becomes a meeting place of a multitude of people from all walks of life, people of different social backgrounds and different customs. Their relations are not founded on the shared memories of the common past and fixed traditions associated with common locality, but have to be newly negotiated. This heterogeneous and protean aspect of the city life is particularly visible in the nineteenth-century new industrial cities that came into being as a result of massive migration from rural to urban areas. In the industrial city the factory comes to replace such traditional social structures and institutions as e.g., the church, for it becomes an establishment organizing the life of most of the city-dwellers, both the factory-owners and the factory workers.

This new nineteenth-century industrial city, with its problems of economic and social strife, demands both comprehension and description, and the task is taken up by a new literary genre, the industrial novel, which flourished in England in the 1840s and 1850s, and was created mostly by middle-class authors for middle class-readers. The typical setting of the novel is the city of the industrial Midlands and the North. According to Herbert Sussman, "the shape of the industrial novel replicates the shape of the industrial city," because the representations of the working-class life carried out by the middle-class authors ultimately strengthen "the bourgeois perception of the workers as Other"(Sussman 249). The difference between the social classes depicted in the industrial novel parallels the distance that separates the districts inhabited by the workers and those inhabited by the mill-owners in the industrial city. One of the characteristic features of the industrial novel is the representation of the relations and tensions between the industrial laborers and mill-owners. For the middle-class writer, the depiction of the plight of the working-classes and of the grit and poverty associated with the factory life "necessarily involved a journey, socially between classes, geographically between districts, imaginatively between cultures – a journey analogous to colonial exploration" (Sussman 249). The worker is frequently shown as someone inhabiting foreign territories, and the *topos* of the journey becomes a common literary motif in industrial novels.

A journey to the city and the industrial setting play a significant role in Elizabeth Gaskell's 1855 novel, *North and South*. While told by a third person narrator, the story unfolds for the most part from the perspective of Margaret Hale, a young woman who has been brought up in a small southern town and has to move to an unknown world of the North. The very title of the novel is suggestive of the contrast between the traditional values and traditional ways of life of the agrarian communities in the south of England and the life in the newly industrialized urban North. The country and the industrial city are placed in symbolic opposition to each other, signifying in a number of ways the juxtaposition between the natural and unnatural, the traditional and the changing. Using the formula of country versus city appropriated from the Romantics, Gaskell treats the opposition in terms of

geography, transplanting her heroine from the rural English South to the newly industrialized and urbanized North.

Margaret Hale is a daughter of the clergyman who experiences a crisis of faith and decides to give up his parish in a small town named Helstone in the agrarian Hampshire and to move to the industrial city of Milton-Northern located in the county of Darkshire. Although for the last ten years Margaret has lived with her wealthy relatives in a fashionable district in London, when the novel opens she is about to return to her father's " country parsonage . . . where her bright holidays had always been passed" (Gaskell 2). The prospect of her future life in Helstone fills her with delight for she has always loved the small and tranquil town of her childhood and derived great pleasure from the beauty of surrounding countryside. Her father's decision to move the family to Milton-Northern, where he "can earn bread for . . . [his] family" shocks and pains her (Gaskell 40). She experiences "almost a detestation for all she had ever heard of the North of England, the manufacturers, the people, the wild and bleak country" (Gaskell 42). In the course of the novel, Margaret will develop a different attitude to the North and its inhabitants, as she will learn how to overcome her snobbish repulsion of 'trade' and those involved in it.

Milton-Northern is modeled on Manchester – the city that Elizabeth Gaskell knew well, for she was married to the Reverend William Gaskell, a minister at Cross Street Unitarian chapel in Manchester. As the minister's wife, she was involved in numerous charitable activities, visiting the Manchester poor and consoling the sick, which provided her with countless opportunities to observe the life of the city which was visibly transformed by technology and development throughout the reign of Queen Victoria. According to Alan Shelston, Elizabeth Gaskell's "personal experience as the wife of a leading figure of Manchester life" resulted in her contacts with "the 'business' Manchester . . . and the cultural Manchester of the great institutions" (Shelston 47). This experience had a bearing on her portrayal of both the factory hands and mill owners in *North and South*. Darkshire is a fictional name, but the county is based on northern Lancashire, and *dark* seems to be indicative of negative emotions experienced by Margaret Hale when she tries to envision her new

life in an alien place so different both from her native rural Helstone and from the polished and refined London where she lived with her rich cousins.

Helstone is a small town surrounded by fields and woods, whose inhabitants live close to nature which brings them joy and provides them with metaphors that organize their perception of the world. In one of the early chapters of the novel, the reader finds a description of Margaret walking through the nearby forest and meadow, enjoying the air, the sunshine, the fragrant plants and the sights of

> multitudes of wild, free, living creatures, reveling in the sunshine, and the herbs and flowers it called forth. This life – at least these walks – realized all Margaret's anticipations (Gaskell 15-16).

She experiences a kind of union with nature and these people who live according to natural laws: "She took a pride in her forest. Its people were her people. . . . Her out-of-doors life was perfect" (Gaskell 16). Yet, she has to abandon this familiar world for a place which constitutes its total opposite.

In Milton-Northern, the city of paved streets and brick factories and houses, there is no place for greenery or wild animals. The sky and the sun are obscured by something that looks from a distance like "a deep lead-coloured cloud hanging over the horizon" (Gaskell 66). It is significant that Margaret, accustomed to interpreting the world around her by means of concepts rooted in nature, "had taken [the cloud] to foretell rain" (Gaskell 67), yet what she sees is the smoke coming from numerous factory chimneys. Thus the element of the natural world becomes replaced by a phenomenon resulting from the process of industrial production, further defamiliarizing Margaret's new surroundings. The air of Helstone is described as sweet-smelling, while the air of Milton had "a smell of smoke," easy to detect because of "a loss of the fragrance of grass and herbage" (Gaskell 66). The spatial organization of Milton also diverges from the familiar patterns of the small agrarian community. Coming to the city, Margaret and her father are "quickly . . . whirled over long, straight, hopeless streets all small and of brick" (Gaskell 66) – an image that stands in a clear contrast to the natural world full of irregular and highly diversified shapes. The man-made space of the industrial city with its mechanical

regularity and repetitiousness becomes dehumanized, which Gaskell suggests by her use of the adjective "hopeless."

As Richard Sennet notes in *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*, "urban space becomes a mere function of motion;" thus it has to be organized in such a way as to facilitate safe and easy movement, and "roads become straightened and regularized" (Sennet 18). The long, straight streets of Milton-Northern are constructed to advance efficient transportation of material goods, so they are always full of vans, wagons, trucks, and people moving with a definite sense of purpose. Speed is one of the central facts of life in the industrial city, and Milton-Northern is perceived by Margaret as a "busy bustling place" with streets full "streams of men and women" who come "rushing along" in a specific direction (Gaskell 80, 81). All human activity is geared towards accomplishing a definite goal. The thoroughfares are full of vehicles carrying either raw cotton or bales of calico. The pedestrians thronging the pavements do not take leisurely walks; all seem to be in a hurry, and none pay much attention to their surroundings. From Margaret's perspective grounded in the aesthetics of nature, the industrial landscape peopled by creatures dressed with "a slovenly looseness" (Gaskell 67), the ever-present soot dirtying windows and curtains cannot possess any value deserving contemplation.

Inspired by Aristotle's idea of the city, Sennet points out that

> the city brings together people who are different, it intensifies the complexity of social life, it presents people to each other as strangers (Sennet 25-26).

Gaskell illustrates this complexity in a particularly insightful way through the changing reactions of Margaret Hale, who encounters a variety of people from different social classes making up the population of Milton-Northern, none of whom can be placed in her customary categories born out of her rural experience. Urban landscape creates anonymity among the inhabitants of the city, the anonymity which Margaret perceives as troubling and unsettling. When she meets industrial workers for the first time, she finds it almost impossible to see them as individuals. In her mind, they form a kind of dehumanized and therefore threatening crowd. It is worth noting at this point that the workers, especially the ones who became engaged in any

kind of organized political action, were often presented as dangerous in the social and literary discourse of the nineteenth century. One characteristic feature of the Victorian industrial city is that a great number of people live together in a relatively small space, and their life is no longer regulated by traditional social structures; thus they may become a source of social unrest. In the words of Herbert Sussman,

> As an aggregate, workers were figured in a politically charged vocabulary as a mass (as in the phrase "mass society"), the crowd (with implications of the loss of control), or the mob (sub- or nonhuman force beyond reason) (Sussman 250).

Such notions definitely influence the way Margaret views the workers as a group. Accustomed to her rambles through the fields and woods surrounding Helstone, she wants to walk the unfamiliar streets of Milton, where she finds herself in "a thoroughfare for the factory people." She is annoyed by "streams of men and women" who come

> rushing along, with bold fearless faces, and loud laughs and jests, particularly aimed at all those who appeared to be above them in rank or station. The tones of their unrestrained voices, and their carelessness of all the common rules of street politeness, frightened Margaret a little at first (Gaskell 81).

Yet, in time, she manages to overcome her fears, and begins to take interest in the people she meets on her way. She is first attracted to the groups of women, with their bright, quick faces and easy banter. Then, her attention is drawn to one careworn, middle-aged worker, whom she sees walking with his ill-looking daughter. Feeling pity for the invalid, Margaret impulsively offers her some flowers, and enters into a conversation with the girl and her father, asking the man:

> Where do you live? I think we must be neighbours, we meet so often on this road. . . . And your name? I must not forget that.
>
> I'm none ashamed o' my name. It's Nicholas Higgins. Hoo's called Bessy Higgins. Whatten yo' asking for?
> Margaret was surprised at this last question, for at Helstone it would have been an understood thing, after the inquiries she had made, that she intended to come and call upon any poor neighbor whose name and habitation she had asked for (Gaskell 83-84).

Experiencing a sense of displacement, Margaret finds out that human relations that she took for ordinary and natural in Helstone are not viewed as such in the industrial city. One may say that her rural ways cannot be easily transplanted into an urban environment. Nevertheless, she wants to show her sympathy for those whom she perceives as deserving and needy. Yet, her compassionate desire to visit the sick girl is interpreted by her father as an impertinence on Margaret's part. "I am none so fond of having strange folk in my house," Higgins tells her, but seeing Margaret blush, he relents, adding

> Yo're a foreigner, as one may say, and maybe don't know many folk here, and yo've given my wench here flowers out of yo'r own hand; – yo may come if yo like (Gaskell 84).

Margaret is "half amused, half nettled at this answer" (Gaskell 84). There is an interesting congruity of conflicting emotions experienced by both the worker and Margaret: he is half offended and half grateful for her wish to visit his home, while Margaret experiences similarly mixed feelings. Gaskell represents the relationship between Margaret and the Higginses as much more complex than the traditional ties that existed between the heroine and her poor neighbors in the rural countryside.

While Margaret gradually comes to perceive Higgins and his daughter as friends and unique individuals, she continues to experience problems with the industrial workers as a social group with antagonistic aims. Although she has learned "to thread her way through the irregular stream of human beings that flowed through Milton streets," at one time she gets "struck with an unusual heaving among the mass of people" who do not "appear to be moving on, so much as talking and listening, and buzzing with excitement" (Gaskell 203). It is a group of workers readying themselves for a strike, but Margaret is unaware of that, because their concerns remain alien to her. Her reaction to the group does not go beyond a vague feeling of danger: she perceives "a thunderous atmosphere morally as well as physically around her," and sees "the first slow-surging wave of the dark crowd come, with its threatening crest, tumble over, and retreat" (Gaskell 203). The image of a dangerous wave conveys the sense of threat posed by a crowd of angry workers – the crowd that is just one step away from turning into an uncontrollable mob. The

threat achieves its culmination in the moment of confrontation between the mass of laborers and John Thornton, the mill-owner. Witnessing the face-off, Margaret finds herself in front of the "angry sea of men" deprived of any individual features. The worker who directly addresses her is described as "one from out the crowd, with fierce threatening in his voice" (Gaskell 211).

The fear of the dehumanized mob – a common motif in the industrial novel – has to be reconciled with the desire of the authors to inspire in their readers sympathy for the plight of the working classes and ultimately bring about social reform. As Mary Poovey has noted in *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-64* (1995), the industrial novel is often predicated on a contradiction between threatening groups of workers and individual workers as British subjects deserving sympathy and assistance. Therefore, in addition to mob scenes, the novels contain numerous images of the middle-class characters forming affective relations with individual workers, thus showing the audience that members of the working class are human beings with a subjective emotional life. The best known example would be Stephen Blackpool, the working-class character in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), whose unmistakable sign of virtue is the fact that he resists the temptation to join the trade union and suffers the rejection of his fellow workers. Gaskell appears to follow a similar pattern in *North and South*, representing Nicholas Higgins as a noble worker, all the more so because he successfully withstands being absorbed into any group, and he retains his individuality and independence. Although he is a union member, he firmly refuses to ostracize non-members. He is a free-thinking man, whose innate intelligence, unorthodox views, profound love for his invalid daughter, and sympathy for others hidden under the rough exterior differentiate him from any crowd. The relationship that develops between Higgins and his daughter Bessie and Margaret and her father is built on mutual respect and growing affection. Mr. Hale finds an interesting conversation partner in Higgins while Margaret comes to admire the long-suffering Bessie, who finds solace in her deep faith in God, and her growing friendship with the Higginses contributes to her own transformation.

What becomes a mark of Margaret's metamorphosis is her changing attitude towards the industrial city, which turns into a site of energy and imaginative

potential. Margaret becomes more open to promises and opportunities offered by the urban life and even begins to draw a kind of new vigor from her walks in the city streets, gradually coming to a realization that a traditional monotonous rural life may produce mental stagnation which results in an inability to cope with challenges and unexpected turns of fate. She admits that "the country-bred man" must find it difficult "to be active, and equal to unwonted emergencies" (Gaskell 358). In contrast to her simple and uneventful life in Helstone, in Milton-Northern Margaret gets involved not only in the toils and troubles of the Higginses and other factory workers but also in the lives of the manufactures and mill-owners, one of whom is John Thornton, who becomes Margaret's love interest in the course of the novel. She develops an awareness of the difficulties that exist in the process of communication between the factory-owners and the workers, "masters and men," two classes which she perceives as "dependent on each other in every possible way, yet evidently regarding the interests of the other as opposed to their own" (Gaskell 138). She takes it upon herself to become a kind of intermediary between these two classes, trying to build a bridge between workers like Higgins and mill-owners like Thornton, who seem to have lost the ability to listen to each other. Margaret's new life in the industrial city offers her a space for finding her own sphere of meaningful activity. Having experienced the more complex, vital and fulfilling life in the city, she finds the rural Helstone unsatisfying. Although she will always have fond feeling for Helstone – a place firmly associated with her idyllic childhood – it is the city where she can mature and develop. The city provides her with a space for moral growth and for meaningful activity. The city is a place where things change, and as a result of her life in Milton, Margaret has come to the realization that "[i]f the world stood still, it would retrograde and become corrupt" (Gaskell 479).

The city becomes a setting for the romance plot which traces a complex relationship between Margaret and John Thornton, who at first irritate and misunderstand each other, but develop a strong mutual attraction, and after many complications become united at the end of the novel. Thornton – the young mill-owner whom Margaret's father tutors in the classics – seems to be an embodiment of Carlyle's Captain of Industry. Carlyle's military metaphor implies force and power

rooted derived from entrepreneurship, innovation and personal wealth resulting from work. In his classic study *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (1957), Walter E. Houghton points out that the Victorians admired force and firmness, "the power of the machines, and of the men who make and run them" as well as "the mastery of the passions, patience and resolution, the controlled energy focused on work" (Houghton 198). This admiration is visible in *North and South*, where Mr. Hale, Margaret's father, considers John Thornton to be a man who personifies "the power of the machinery of Milton, the power of the men of Milton" and who "impressed him with a sense of grandeur, which he yielded to without caring to inquire into the details of its exercise" (Gaskell 78-79). When Thornton explains to Mr. Hale "the magnificent power, yet delicate adjustment of the might of the steam-hammer" which recalls to Mr. Hale "some of the wonderful stories of the subservient genii in the Arabian nights," he goes on to observe: And this imagination of power, this practical realization of gigantic thought, came out of one man's brain in our good town (Gaskell 92-93).

Thornton is proud "of belonging to a town – or I should rather say a district – the necessities of which give birth to such grandeur of conception" (Gaskell 93). He is aware of his own power and considers himself and other entrepreneurs like himself to be almost a new breed of men:

> We are of a different race than the Greeks, to whom beauty was everything. . . . We do not look upon life as a time for enjoyment, but as a time for action and exertion. Our glory and our beauty arise out of inward strength which makes us victorious over material resistance , and over greater difficulties still. (Gaskell 398).

For men like John Thornton, the industrial city becomes a space for self-realization. Only in the city, the men who do not enjoy the benefits of aristocratic origins or the ones whose wealth does not come from the ownership of land can achieve the position which gives them a sense of control over their lives and over their world, a world in which the rules of the old feudal system are not observed any longer, and the new system of laissez-faire creates countless possibilities for those who are willing to work hard. John Thornton is proud to be an "architect of his own fortunes," and is aware that his status in life is due to a newly-developing social

order based on commerce and industry, in which "every brave, honest, and persevering man" can

> raise himself to a level from which he might see and read the great game of worldly success, and . . . command more power and influence than in any other mode of life. Far away, in the East and in the West, where his person would never be known, his name was to be regarded, and his wishes to be fulfilled, and his word pass like gold (Gaskell 500).

Different kinds of power co-exist in the industrial city: the power to invent new things, the strength of the machines and of men who control them, and the personal power of people like John Thornton, which arises out of their intense identification with their mills.

There comes a time when the power of the mill-owners has to be directed against the workers, or factory hands, who rebel against their masters, join trade unions and organize strikes. In *North and South* Elizabeth Gaskell seems to reveal her conviction that organized resistance to inescapable and unrelenting market forces is futile: the prolonged strike at John Thornton's factory turns out to be completely counterproductive. Thornton – a hard and stubborn man – does not yield to the demands of his workers, although a protracted walkout threatens him with financial ruin. Nevertheless, he remains committed to the values of honest entrepreneurship and refuses to enter into any get-rich-quick schemes but instead struggles hard and almost hopelessly to keep his mill in operation when the trade cycle declines. The conflict is resolved on a personal and affective level, for the rapprochement between the industrialist and his work force is made possible thanks to Margaret's attempts to provoke in John Thornton sympathy and understanding for the workers and to convince him to take a more humane approach to their problems. She urges him to talk to his workers to show them that he is aware of their shared relations, and even to take some responsibility for their education and for the life they live outside of the factory. Although he initially rejects her advice, in the course of the novel, he also undergoes a significant transformation and learns how to reconcile his aims with those of factory-hands. He comes to appreciate his difficult but ultimately productive relationship to one individual worker Nicholas Higgins. He used to view himself and his workers as leading

> parallel lives – very close, but never touching – till the accident (or so it seemed) of his acquaintance with Higgins. Once brought face to face, man to man, with an individual of the masses around him, and . . . out of the character of master and workman, in the first instance , they had begun to recognize that 'we have all of us one human heart'" (Gaskell 500)

He begins to feel a deep interest

> in his position as manufacturer, simply because it led him into such close contact, and gave him the opportunity of so much power, among a race of people strange, shrewd, ignorant, but, above all, full of character and strong human feeling (Gaskell 501).

Gaskell makes it clear that any resolution of class conflict is predicated on sympathy for the individual worker.

The resolution of the romantic plot comes as a result of Margaret's inheriting a considerable fortune and valuable property in Milton and using her newly-acquired wealth to rescue the almost-bankrupt John Thornton. The couple marry and return to Milton-Northern, where Thornton becomes a model mill-owner, whose "only wish is to have the opportunity of cultivating some intercourse with the hands beyond the mere 'cash nexus'" (Gaskell 515). It is significant that Margaret, who has become financially independent, chooses to spend her life in the northern industrial city, for such a choice testifies to the potential of the city as a site of energy and of change. The reader is left with a hope that thanks to a metamorphosed John Thornton, and other factory-owners like him, the city will become a place where a "personal intercourse" and "that sort of common interest which invariably makes people find means and ways of seeing each other , and becoming acquainted with each others' characters and persons" can flourish (Gaskell 515). Elizabeth Gaskell is a writer too much aware of the problems of industrial capitalism to believe that human sympathy may put an end to all economic and social strife, yet what emerges out of the final chapters of the novel is a rather optimistic vision of the industrial city in which people as different as John Thornton and Nicholas Higgins cease to be antagonists, and lovers as different as Margaret Hale and John Thornton can be united.

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