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The Missionary Novelist: Reading as Conversion in *Mary Barton*

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When the Gaskells moved to Manchester, Elizabeth Gaskell was disappointed the members of her husband's Unitarian congregation were free with their money, but unwilling to give their time to the poor: "The numbers of people who steadily refuse Mr. Gaskell's entreaties that they will give their time to anything, but will give him or me tens and hundreds, that won't do half the good that individual intercourse and earnest conscientious thought for others would do" (Gaskell qtd. in Seed 23). In her opinion, money could not replace human relationships. If the poor were to be saved, Gaskell thought they needed living examples of morality, examples which could only come from interacting with members of her husband's middle-class congregation.

In the 1840s Elizabeth Gaskell served as a home visitor for the Manchester Domestic Mission, and her husband served as its secretary. Missionary studies conducted in Manchester argued that the immoral behaviors of the poor were the cause of their economic and spiritual dissipation, and training them out of their destructive ways was all that was needed to alleviate their suffering. In 1841, the Domestic Mission Committee of Manchester concluded: "There can be no doubt that a very large proportion of this destitution and wretchedness is to be traced to improvidence, intemperance and crime" (Seventh Report of the Domestic Mission qtd. in Seed 18). But these moral faults could be remedied, the Missionaries argued, if the poor were taught

habits of cleanliness and temperance by the middle-class missionaries, and given access to religion and education to help them learn these new habits. The “Missionary Resolution” called for missionary teachers who would visit the homes of the poor, put themselves “in close sympathy with their wants – become to them a Christian adviser and friend – to promote the order and comfort of their homes, and the elevation of their social tastes – to bring them into a permanent connection with religious influences – and, above all, to promote an effective education of their children, and to shelter them from corrupting agencies” (Missionary Resolution qtd. in Seed 14). John Seed argues that this form of local pastorship eventually aimed to “phase out state responsibility for poor relief” (Seed 14).

But as Lauren Goodlad and Amanda Claybaugh¹ have argued, the role of the pastor-educator affirmed the middle-class view of the poor as morally degenerate. If the people were in need of a pastor, it was because they must be trained in the desire to live morally, and given the skills for making moral choices: “social tastes,” cleanliness, temperance. The material conditions that might prohibit lower-class individuals from living morally are disregarded. Indeed, proponents of this anti-determinist narrative of degeneracy that emphasized free choice as the cause of the destitution of the poor believed that any individual can be taught to triumph over his or her material conditions and live morally despite his circumstances. For Unitarians like Gaskell and her husband, free choice was also the cornerstone of their religious beliefs. As Mark Knight and Emma Mason suggest, Unitarian schemes for education “underlined [...] the right of the individual to employ rational inquiry in order to arrive at a set of personal conclusions” (Knight and Mason 53).

For Unitarians, social conflicts, then, would not be solved simply by government or social reform, but were instead matters that could be worked out only between particular individuals. As Lauren Goodlad has argued, nineteenth-century Unitarianism was driven by the sense of a “civilizing mission [...] promoting abstract spiritual equality

while exhorting the tireless improvement of self and society” (Goodlad 46-7). Unitarian Domestic Missions “sought to transcend socioeconomic boundaries by forging bonds [...] that one British disciple described as ‘heart acting on heart, conscience on conscience, soul on soul, man on man’” (Goodlad 47). Unitarians promoted an ideal of education that privileged individual relationships over institutions. The best kind of education would be facilitated not through schools and churches, but through relationships with people who could serve as individual examples of morality in daily life.

In *Mary Barton*, Gaskell’s most explicit condition-of-England novel, she argues for religious fellowship between individuals rather than institutional politics as the best remedy for class conflict. She believes the “Spirit of Christ” should be “the regulating law between both parties [of masters and men]” (335) because systems like politics and economics – expressions of a class-based power structure – have caused masters and men to see each other as enemies. Christian ethics, on the other hand, functioned as a middle way because it might promote a sense of equality between classes not by negating the power structure, but by fostering a sense of understanding between the governors and the governed. As one Unitarian minister, J. J. Tayler, argued, “the final achievement of the Christian ethic will mean that men and women ‘will no longer look upon each other as ‘strangers and foreigners’ but regard themselves over the world as ‘fellow-citizens’ and members of the household of God” (Tayler qtd. in Seed 20). Even if class-based inequalities remained, Christianity could function as a sort of virtual democracy of the soul. And, in *Mary Barton* this sense of Christian ethics comes not from institutional experiences of politics or religion, but from private reading of the Bible, and of Gaskell’s religiously-inflected novels.

John Seed argues that in *Mary Barton* Gaskell draws on the examples of the Domestic Mission reports for the form and details of her descriptions of the poor: “[the novel] shares the central ideological co-ordinates and ‘structure of feeling’ of the Mission

reports" (Seed 19). Although Gaskell may describe the condition of the poor in a style similar to that of the missionary pamphlets, she reverses the formula in order to throw into relief the faults of the masters, not of the men. Where the reports of the Domestic Missionaries portrayed the faults of the working class in order to recruit middle-class missionaries to the necessary task of instructing the degenerate poor, Gaskell contrasts the destitution of the working class with the carelessness of the middle-class masters. With this she shows her middle-class reader how much the degeneracy of the working poor is due to their material conditions, which might be remedied by the middle class. The moral example of her tale is the working man, not the master, as she explained in a letter to a friend: "I had so long felt that the bewildered life of an ignorant thoughtful man of strong power of sympathy, dwelling in a town so full of striking contrasts as this, was a tragic poem, that in writing he was my 'hero' ... Some people are very angry and say the book will do harm" (Gaskell 354)². As she notes in a letter to her publisher, Edward Chapman, the mill owners of Manchester felt the force of her direct address: "Half the masters are bitterly angry with me - half (and the best half) are buying it to give to their work-people's libraries ... I had no idea it would have produced such a fire brand" (Gaskell 353)³.

The final scenes of the reconciliation between master and man, and the subsequent conversion of the middle-class master, are significantly scenes of reading. In this paper, I argue that in *Mary Barton* Gaskell proposes that reading can function as a form of mediation between individuals when politics and institutional religion fail. Nearly ten years after the defeat of the first People's Charter (1839) and five years after the second defeat (1842), Gaskell suggests that if politics cannot mediate social conflict, perhaps the Bible and her novel might. She hopes that the experience of reading her novel will change the behaviors of the middle class, who have the power to act if they can overcome their idea of the poor as inherently degenerate. For Gaskell, reading novels

about the poor can teach the middle class how to transform their narrative of the poor as degenerates by replacing it with the unifying narrative of Christianity.

Yet as I will argue, the reconciliation scenes between master and man are complex in *Mary Barton* because Mr. Carson overcomes his idea of the poor as degenerates not because of a closer understanding of the details of their lives, but because he recognizes their shared identity as Christians, which seems to negate Gaskell's Unitarian emphasis on individuality. If we understand condition-of-England novels to be "unmediated presentations of social reality" (Gallagher xii), then *Mary Barton* presents a strange case, a realist novel in which the details of social reality are finally negated by or subsumed into the overarching narrative of Christianity through acts of reading. Reading in the novel actually has a distancing effect, even though it simultaneously produces the scene of reconciliation. Rather than achieving a closer understanding of the details of the poor's lives, the novel makes these details palatable for the reader through the experience of reading a fictional narrative rather than a report on social conditions. For Gaskell's characters, that narrative is the Bible; for Gaskell's readers, her novel. *Mary Barton* prompts readers to solve social problems not through politics, but through individual acts of Christian charity which they learn to perform by learning to read.

Because politics divides people rather than unites them, it prohibits understanding between people of different classes. In the preface to *Mary Barton*, Gaskell argues that she did not set out to present a political philosophy: "I know nothing of Political Economy, or the theories of trade. I have tried to write truthfully; and if my accounts agree or clash with any system, the agreement or disagreement is unintentional" (Preface, 6). With this disavowal of Political Economy, Gaskell suggests that truth rests with individuals, outside of any system. Instead of presenting a program for political change, she writes an appeal to specific middle-class individuals – the mill-owners she knew and lived among – who had power over the working class; she hopes that from her novel, they will learn to change their ways and begin to act rightly towards those

they encounter in daily life. Politics in the novel is an elaborate farce in which both sides see each other as caricatures, not as individuals. When John Barton goes to London to testify in Parliament “to the unparalleled destitution of the manufacturing districts” (78), the workmen are not even given the chance to speak. Barton describes their reception as “just a piece of London news ... as long as I live I shall curse them as so cruelly refused to hear us” (92). He concludes that they “mun speak to our God to hear us, for man will not hearken; no, not now, when we weep tears o’ blood” (89). Rather than listening to the narrative of the poor men’s lives, their trip is treated by Londoners as just another event in the constantly shifting narrative of the news.

At a meeting in Manchester between the masters and the men, the masters see the outward signs of the workmen’s misery, but they do not see that it is their responsibility to alleviate that suffering. When one of the masters concludes even before seeing the men that he “for one won’t yield one farthing to the cruel brutes; they’re more like wild beasts than human beings,” the narrator interjects: “(Well, who might have made them different?)” (161). Gaskell doesn’t deny the narrative of degeneracy; instead, she uses that narrative to call attention to the responsibility of the masters to change it. Harry Carson – the son of Mr. Carson, the mill owner – draws a “caricature of them – lank, ragged, dispirited, and famine-stricken” (163), rather than listening closely to their plea for higher wages. Then he passes the drawing round the room for a laugh: “his neighbors ... all smiled and nodded their heads” (163).

Indeed, the poor characters themselves confirm Carson’s representation when they get hold of the sketch: “That’s John Slater! I’d ha’ known him anywhere, by his big nose. Lord! how like; that’s me, by G-d, it’s the very way I’m obligated to pin my waistcoat up, to hide that I’ve gotten no shirt. That is a shame, and I’ll not stand it [...]. It seems to make me sad that there is any as can make game on what they’ve never knowed; as can make such laughable pictures on men, whose very hearts within ‘em are so raw and sore as ours” (165). In this scene, realist art rightly captures the details of the lives of its

subjects, but those details block understanding between the artist, the represented subjects, and the readers. It is also important that out of this scene, the political murder of Harry Carson is born. The sketch is torn into pieces of paper which the men use to draw lots to become his murderer: "A number of pieces of paper (the identical letter on which the caricature had been drawn that very morning) were torn up, and one was marked" (168).

John Lucas argues that Harry Carson's murder simplifies the social problems of the novel: "[Gaskell's] mind shuts out the awareness of a muddle so colossal that it defeats the explanations of her social creeds, and so she attempts to impose order by turning to a murder, where a neat pattern can realize itself: class antagonism producing a violence from which springs reconciliation. It is far too simple, principally because the antagonism is reduced to a matter of individual violence" (Lucas 503). Lucas is right that the antagonism is converted into an act of individual violence, but because the murder springs from the reaction of particular individuals to the alterity of representation, Gaskell seems to be showing the way in which art can lead to further misunderstanding because representation itself simplifies. Gaskell seems to be suggesting that realist representations of the conditions of the poor – like the reports of the Domestic missionaries, or a realist novel – are representative in a dangerous way because they erase the particularity of individuals by grouping them as members of a class. Indeed, as this scene demonstrates, the gruesome details of the workmen's lives do not generate middle-class sympathy for the workman, but instead feed the narrative of the workmen as degenerates.

By contrast, Mr. Carson's conversion at the end of the novel is brought about not through knowledge of the details of Barton's life, but through metaphor. Until he is able to see the details of Barton's life through the narrative of the New Testament, Carson is unable to forgive Barton for killing his son. Once he sees Barton as a representative of Christ's suffering, he re-envision the specifics of Barton's story that previously

prevented him from exercising merciful judgment. Gaskell implores her reader to “judge [...] with something of the mercy of the Holy One, whom we all love” (153), and shows Carson learning this principle of judgment through his experience of reading of the Bible. For Gaskell, even if the details of the lives of the rich and poor are vastly dissimilar, the Christian narrative is shared by both masters and men. The Bible also transcends sect. Institutional religion – like politics – only divides people, but Gaskell portrays the Bible as a narrative shared by all. Gaskell writes little about churches in *Mary Barton*, yet her narrator⁴ and her characters⁵ often quote from the Bible. It is significant, then, that the scene of reconciliation between master and man does not involve an experience of institutional worship; after all, Carson and Barton, divided by their class, would not attend the same place of worship. Instead, the Bible functions as the text that binds Christians of all classes together outside the religious institution. Reading need not be mediated by an institution, and because it can happen anywhere and at any time, Gaskell suggests reading is a more powerful agent for social change than the institutions of church, school, or government. Reading can prompt individual changes of heart, one by one.

While the poor characters know they should live by the Bible, speaking in its phrases even though they cannot always live by its principles, hemmed in as they are by circumstances of economic hardship, the middle-class have the privacy and the time to read the Bible in their own homes, yet they hardly ever open it, and often do not apply its principles in their public lives. Mr. Carson’s family lives a life of “ease, luxury [...] [and] hollow vanities” (117). Carson’s Bible, which he purchased on the birth of his son, is described as “all grand and golden, with its leaves adhering together from the bookbinder’s press, so little had it been used ... the spotless leaves” (319).

The faults of the Carson family seem to spring from how little they apply religion to their daily lives. Carson’s son, Harry, is a rake who takes advantage of poor girls like Mary Carson for his pleasure; his sisters are educated, but idle and spoiled: “like many

similarly situated young ladies, they did not exactly know what to do to while away the time until the tea-hour" (178). And his mother is weak and helpless in the moral governance of her children. Though Gaskell describes the working poor as "uneducated [...] ungifted with a soul, a knowledge of the difference between good and evil" (150), Mrs. Carson too is uneducated, but not because she hasn't the time to better herself: "Mrs. Carson [...] was not well [...]. But it was but the natural consequence of the state of mental and bodily idleness in which she was placed. Without education enough to value the resources of wealth and leisure, she was so circumstanced as to command both" (178). The Carsons' Christianity is not something that governs their daily actions, but is instead a religion of power and revenge to be called upon only when needed. When Harry is killed and Mr. Carson vows to seek the death of the murderer, Gaskell uses the scene to reflect upon the selfishness of nineteenth-century Christianity: "the old man lived on; with the single purpose in his heart of vengeance on the murderer. True, his vengeance was sanctioned by law, but was it the less revenge? [...] Oh! Orestes, you would have made a very tolerable Christian of the nineteenth century!" (188).

At the end of the novel, when Carson finally discovers Barton is the murderer, he visits him only to tell him he will have no mercy. In this first meeting between the two, it is Barton who is moved to pity Carson because of the spectacle of his master's suffering:

"And have I had no suffering?" asked Mr. Carson, as if appealing for sympathy, even to the murderer of his child [...]. "I seemed hard and cold; and so I might be to others, but not to him! — who shall ever imagine the love I bore to him? [...] And he is gone — killed [...] out of my sight for ever [...]."

The eyes of John Barton grew dim with tears. Rich and poor, masters and men, were then brothers in the deep suffering of the heart; for was not this the very anguish he had felt for little Tom, in years so long gone by! [...] The mourner before him was no longer the employer; a being of another race, eternally placed in antagonistic attitude; going through the world glittering like gold, with a stony heart within, which knew no sorrow but through the accidents of Trade; no longer the enemy, the oppressor, but a very poor and desolate old man. (316)

Barton pities Carson because he sees similarities between his own narrative and his master's. Barton's experience of having lost a son himself leads him to realize that the middle-class too are capable of experiencing suffering, even if it is the suffering of the soul rather than of the body. Here, Mr. Carson becomes a "mourner" rather than an "employer," a "man" rather than an "oppressor," an individual rather than the representative of a class. Barton, Gaskell's moral hero, sets the example of forgiveness by interpreting the narrative of Carson's life not through the narrative of Trade, but through the narrative of the human heart. Yet Carson leaves the scene without forgiving Barton, learning nothing from the moral example Barton has set for him, and returns home.

On his way, Carson sees a lower class boy knock over a wealthy little girl. When her nurse threatens to call the police, the girl responds: "He did not mean to do it. He did not know what he was doing" (318). Carson thinks about the biblical words as he returns home, and it is this incident – the example of a child of his class forgiving a member of the lower class, rather than the moral example of John Barton – that leads him to his Bible:

[T]he child's pleading reminded him of the low, broken voice he had so lately heard, penitently and humbly urging the same extenuation of his great guilt.

"I did not know what I was doing."

He had some association with those words; he had heard, or read of that plea somewhere before. Where was it?

"Could it be?" –

He would look when he got home. So when he entered his house he went straight and silently up-stairs to his library, and took down the great large handsome Bible, all grand and golden. [...] In spite of his desire to retain the revengeful feeling he considered as a duty to his dead son, something of pity would steal in for the poor, wasted skeleton of a man [...]. In the days of his childhood and youth, Mr. Carson had been accustomed to poverty; but it was honest, decent poverty; not the grinding squalid misery he had remarked in every part of John Barton's house, and which

contrasted strangely with the pompous sumptuousness of the room in which he now sate. Unaccustomed wonder filled his mind at the reflection of the different lots of the brethren of mankind.

Then he roused himself from his reverie, and turned to the object of his search – the Gospel [...].

Years ago, the Gospel had been his task-book in learning to read. So many years ago, that he had become familiar with the events before he could comprehend the Spirit that made the life.

He fell to the narrative now afresh, with all the interest of a little child ... understanding for the first time the full meaning of the story. (318-20)

Carson's scene of Bible reading takes place in the quiet of his own home with "nothing to interrupt his study" (320), and what he was unable to understand while he stood in front of the "wasted," dying man, he understands once reading moves him to reflection. But the immediate incident that leads him to read his Bible is the example of the little child of his own class, not the foreign suffering of Barton. And, when he finally does reflect on Barton, it is for a moment about the specifics of Barton's individual situation as it contrasts with his own, but this rapidly gives way to a more generalized reflection on "the different lots of the brethren of mankind."

Nonetheless, Gaskell means for her readers to recognize that Carson's conversion happens in this scene of reading, once he uses his Bible to help him justly interpret John Barton's character. After Carson's scene of Bible-reading, he sees Barton no longer as a Chartist, a representative of the working class, or as a murderer who has killed Carson's son for political reasons, but as a suffering individual. Yet, paradoxically, Barton also becomes less of an individual. Carson understands Barton's particular suffering through the metaphor of the suffering of Christ, not as a sign of the material conditions which Carson himself could have remedied. There is no act of identification with Barton, the kind of identification Barton performs with Carson in the previous scene when he realizes they have both lost a son. In Carson's reflection there is only a recognition of disparity in the contrast between Carson's early poverty and Barton's utter destitution, a recognition of the "different lots of mankind." This opposition is then assuaged by the understanding that, dissimilar though their lives may be, they are both Christians.

Carson's forgiveness, Catherine Gallagher has argued, "is a foretaste of the Christian spirit that the narrator assures us will allow Carson to effect industrial change [...] the conclusion of John Barton's story points to narrative as an instrument of God's providence without having to sort out the tangle of its own narrative threads [...] the novel we have been reading is finally resolved by the introduction of a different book, the Bible" (Gallagher 87). Gallagher concludes that the novel's resolution simply suspends the social problems represented by the text. Raymond Williams has argued that "the structure of feeling from which *Mary Barton* begins is a combination of sympathetic observation and of a largely successful imaginative identification" (Williams 88), but even though Carson's repentance results in a modification of his behavior towards his employees, the Wilsons' emigration to Canada dissolves the problems of the text. Any changes Carson makes to the lives of his workers will not have an effect on the lives of the characters with which Gaskell has prompted her readers to identify: "A solution within the actual situation might be hoped for, but the solution with which the heart went was a cancelling of the actual difficulties and the removal of the persons pitied to the uncompromised New World" (486).

In these final scenes of the novel difference is bridged not by understanding the other, but by erasing the otherness of working poor through the universalizing Christian narrative. This Christian brotherhood between master and man is emphasized by the juxtaposition of Carson's scene of reading and Barton's final monologue about reading the Bible. Barton chronicles his struggles to live according to words of the Bible:

"When I was a little chap they taught me to read, and then they ne'er gave no books; only I heard say the Bible was a good book [...]. I would fain have gone after the Bible rules if I'd seen folk credit it; they all spoke up for it, and went and did clean contrary [...]. In those days I would ha' gone about wi' my Bible, like a little child, my finger in th' place, and asking the meaning of this or that text, and no one told me. Then I took out two or three texts as clear as glass, and I tried to do what they bid me do. But [...] masters and men, all alike cared no more for minding those texts [...]. At last I gave it up in despair, trying to make folks' actions square wi' the Bible;

and I thought I'd no longer labour at following th' Bible mysel' [...] But from that time I've dropped down, down—down." (320-321)

Part of his struggle, it seems, was caused by his lack of education: no one taught him how to read; no one taught him how to interpret the Bible metaphorically, how to read the spirit rather than the letter of the law. The uneducated readers around him knew neither how to interpret nor how to apply their reading, and the Bible's disconnection from the social problems of Barton's world caused him nothing but grief at the disparity between the law of the text and the actions of its readers. But this grief might have been eased, Gaskell suggests, had he been taught how to apply the Bible's metaphors to his life, and had his potential teachers – Mr. Carson and the other masters – learned this lesson for themselves first.

Identification with the gruesome details of the suffering of the poor is no longer necessary once their shared Christianity is recognized. When Carson is able to understand Barton not as an improvident, sinning poor man, but as a suffering Christian, he can finally forgive him, but this forgiveness strangely negates Barton's individuality, highlighting instead their shared identity, and Barton's typicality as one of many poor men that Gaskell hopes her readers will learn to see differently after the experience of reading her novel. In the end, Barton is buried in a nameless grave with his sister-in-law:

And there they lie without name, or initial, or date. Only this verse is inscribed upon the stone which covers the remains of these two wanderers.

Psalm ciii. v. 9. – "For he will not always chide, neither will he keep his anger for ever." (338)

The scene of forgiveness ends with Barton's death, and the narrator too erases Barton's identity. What began as "the story of a poor man I know" (qtd. in Williams 90), ends as a representative tale: "So ended the tragedy of a poor man's life" (321). In this novel's troublesome conclusion, the universalizing power of metaphor erases the problems of individuality.

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NOTES

¹ See Lauren Goodlad, "Making the Working Man Like Me: Charity, the Novel, and the New Poor Law," in *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State*, 32-85; and Amanda Claybaugh, *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 66-67.

² Letter to Miss Lamont. 5 January 1849. Reprinted in *Mary Barton* (1848). New York: Norton, 2008: 354.

³ Letter to Edward Chapman. 1 January 1849. Reprinted in *Mary Barton* (1848). New York: Norton, 2008: 353.

⁴ “But though ‘silver and gold he had none,’ (Acts 3:6) he gave heart-service, and love-works of far more value” (56); “You may push against one, humble and unnoticed, the last upon earth, (Matthew 19:30) who in heaven will for ever be in the immediate light of God’s countenance” (58); “He could not speak again. The trump of the archangel (I Thessalonians 4:16) would set his tongue free; but not a word more would it utter till then [...]. The face grew beautiful as the soul neared God. A peace beyond understanding came over it (Philippians 4:7)” (65); “The people had thought the poverty of the preceding years hard to bear [...] but this year added sorely to its weight. Former times had chastised them with whips, but this chastised them with scorpions (I Kings 12:11)” (102). Biblical identifications are provided by Thomas Recchio’s footnotes in the 2008 Norton edition of *Mary Barton*.

⁵ For example, on one page, John Barton references Genesis and Luke: “Thou’d best not put that nonsense i’ th’ girl’s head I can tell thee; I’d rather see her earning her bread by the sweat of her brow (Genesis 3:19), as the Bible tells her she should do [...] than be like a do-nothing lady [...]. We’re slaves as long as we can work; we pile up their fortunes with the sweat of their brows, and yet we are to live as separate as if we were in two worlds; ay, as separate as Dives and Lazarus (Luke 16: 19-26)” (12).

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