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Reports from a Dark Continent:
The Condition of England and the Condition of the Novel

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Abstract

Reports From a Dark Continent:
The Condition of England and the Condition of the Novel

Mark O'Reilly

This thesis looks at several specimens of what has come to be known as the "Condition of England" novel. These novels were written in response to the economic and social crises in England in the 1840s. Each of the novelists presents his or her analysis of the causes of the crises, together with suggestions as to how they might be resolved. The two most pronounced features which all of these novels have in common are their didacticism and the fact that for virtually the first time in English fiction working-class characters are presented in such a way as to be taken seriously by the reader. It is my contention that these novels, although they are all more or less failures in themselves, constitute a vital but little-recognised stage in the development of the novel as a genre. They do so because both their didacticism and their attempt to deal with a class whose appearances in fiction had hitherto been restricted to supporting and comic roles clashed with the established conventions of the novel. Ultimately those conventions proved too inhibiting for the novelists to deal adequately with their subject matter, but their problems constituted a diagnosis of the condition of the novel, on the basis of which subsequent writers have been able to expand the parameters of their genre so as to make it the all-inclusive and, in a sense, anarchic phenomenon that it has become in the twentieth century.

The specific writers and books I deal with are: Benjamin Disraeli (Sybil); Elizabeth Gaskell (Mary Barton and North and South); Charlotte Brontë (Shirley); Charles Kingsley (Alton Locke); and George Eliot (Felix Holt).

"All great truths begin as blasphemies."

George Bernard Shaw

(Annajanska)

Contents

Introduction

The novels which are commonly known as the "Condition of England" novels are a group of books written by middle-class authors about working-class characters for a middle-class readership. More specifically these books are about the particularly bitter period of class-conflict which followed the passing of the First Reform Bill in 1832 and culminated in Parliament's rejection of the People's Charter in 1848. These issues spawned a large quantity of fiction, very little of which is widely read today. The novels which are still read -- and with which, with two exceptions, I propose to deal -- are: Sybil (1845) by Benjamin Disraeli; Mary Barton (1848) by Elizabeth Gaskell; Yeast (1848) by Charles Kingsley; Shirley (1849) by Charlotte Brontë; Alton Locke (1850) by Charles Kingsley; North and South (1854-55) by Elizabeth Gaskell; Hard Times (1854) by Charles Dickens; and Felix Holt (1866) by George Eliot.

One of the books which I shall omit from this list is Hard Times, and the reason is this. Very briefly, the nineteenth century inherited from the eighteenth at least two reasonably distinct traditions in the novel. One of them begins with Richardson and descends through Jane Austen. All the writers mentioned above except Dickens wrote within this tradition. Dickens, on the other hand, descends from his own professed exemplars, Fielding and Smollett. The two traditions are so different in purpose and method that any comparison between two writers, one of whom belongs to each, would need to concern itself at some length with the differences between the two traditions. Since these differ-

ences form no part of the subject of this thesis, I have reluctantly decided not to give individual consideration to Hard Times, although it is otherwise well-qualified for inclusion.

Two of the novels I do propose to consider require a word of justification. The "Condition of England" debate was a response to that part of class-conflict which arose specifically out of the rapid industrialisation of many towns and cities, especially in the North of England; in other words, to the complex of issues which surrounded the Charter. Most of the novels on my list were written before, in, or shortly after 1848. Felix Holt, published in 1866, seems to be something of an afterthought. It is suitable for inclusion, however, because it deals with working-class characters, with their relations with each other and with members of the middle-to-upper class in a time of intense class conflict. Likewise, although Shirley looks back to the time of Luddism, the issues it deals with are in essence the same as those that were being publicly debated at the time of its composition. The structure of society as a whole is dealt with far more comprehensively by Bleak House and Middlemarch than by any of the six novels on my list; what they have in common is a preoccupation with what has come to be known as industrial relations and with what each of their authors perceives to be its most important corollaries.

In what follows I am going to use the terms "working class" and "middle class" extensively. It is therefore important to explain at the outset exactly what I mean by the concept of "social class". The concept is so thoroughly ingrained in the English consciousness that it rarely occurs to anyone to ask how long it has been there. If pressed for an answer, the English would probably think of mediaeval barons and

serfs, and reply that there has been class in England for as long as the English have been there. They would be surprised to learn that the concept has only originated within the last two centuries; that Adam Smith, for instance (though admittedly not an Englishman), never uses the word "class" in its modern sense. As Asa Briggs says:

> The concept of social "class" with all its attendant terminology was a product of the large-scale economic and social changes of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Before the rise of modern industry writers on society spoke of "ranks", "orders", and "degrees" or, when they wished to direct attention to particular economic groupings, of "interests".1

It is important to note here that Briggs is talking about the concept of "class", not the phenomenon. That concept is a product of the Industrial Revolution. Before that time it did not exist, and ever since that time it has existed. But that statement needs two qualifications.

Firstly, what was happening in the first half of the nineteenth century was not merely the rise in importance of one section of society as compared with another, but a fundamental change in the very structure of society, against which particular social groups could be defined. Like any social change, however rapid, this one took time to accomplish, and there was a period during which these two structures coexisted, before one fully replaced the other. Jane Austen, at the beginning of the century, lived in a period when the new structure was making major advances on the old, yet despite her conscientious retailing of how many thousands a year every eligible young gentleman may have had at his

disposal, she shows no interest whatever in the concept of "class". It is possible, therefore, to speak of "conflict" in two quite separate ways. First there is the way in which it is most commonly understood today, the conflict between two social groups whose interests collide. This can be, as it is today, the conflict between Labour and Capital, but it can also be between baron and serf or even colonist and subject people. In other words, conflict exists between two (or more) groups within the same social structure, whatever that structure may be. Secondly, in a society that is undergoing rapid and fundamental change, "conflict" may be understood to exist between the structure that is fading and the one that is struggling to replace it. The interests of the landowner and the capitalist are -- or are seen to be -- in conflict with each other, as are those of the agricultural worker and the factory operative. This issue is particularly relevant in connexion with Shirley and North and South, and will be dealt with at greater length in the chapters concerning those books.

Secondly, it must be emphasised that although the rate of social change was particularly rapid in the early nineteenth century, change was going on before that period and has continued to go on since. The advent of the concept of "class" did not, in a few decades, turn a static agrarian and aristocratic society into a static industrial and capitalist one. The phenomenon of class, as distinct from the concept, does not remain static. To be working-class in 1987 does not mean what it did in 1847. E.P. Thompson gives this brief definition of class:

> By class I understand an historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness. I

> emphasise that it is an historical phenomenon. I do not see class as a "structure", nor even as a "category", but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships.2

Class, then, is not a thing, but a relationship between people. It is a relationship which can arouse feelings of solidarity or hostility, of rightness or wrongness, but any definition which presents it as a thing which can exist in the abstract is either misleading or meaningless. In the first half of the nineteenth century, when communication was incredibly sparse by modern standards and when even literacy was exceptional among those at the very bottom of the various social strata, there existed a new but rapidly growing industrial proletariat in the North of England, and a large and long-established body of "urban poor" in London. With certain individual exceptions, these two groups did not perceive themselves as belonging to a common class, or to any other social grouping within their power to define. Their traditions, their culture, and even their language differed so radically that most of them would have found the idea that they had anything in common quite risible. But from two important viewpoints, it is possible to see that each of these groups did belong to what is now called the working class. One of these viewpoints is that of modern hindsight. We can see that the two groups had a common relationship, both to inanimate objects (which they did not own) and to other social groups (who had power over them). The other viewpoint is that of the other social groups, who, whether or not they used the terminology of class, could see quite clearly that between them the two groups constituted "the poor", and that "the poor" presented them with intense problems, which might be pragmatic or moral

or both. The essential point that the two groups have in common with each other, as well as with the present-day English working class, is not their economic status, but the relationship in which they stand to their surroundings, both human and inanimate.

As I said at the outset, the novels to be considered here were written by the middle class about the working class for the middle class. It is generally thought that, apart from a few exceptional individuals, the working class themselves were not reading fiction for the simple reason that they were illiterate. While it is true that many of them were, illiteracy was by no means universal among them. Carlo M. Cipolla estimates that in 1850 between thirty and thirty-three per cent of the adult population of England and Wales was illiterate.[3] By "adult" Cipolla means anyone over the age of ten, and by "illiterate" he means "unable to read". His figures reflect generously on the state of literacy in England and Wales, since, as he points out elsewhere in his book, there must have been a large (though not accurately calculable) number of people who could read a little and perhaps even write a little, but who did not have the skill to read even the simplest continuous text for pleasure. Nevertheless, that left a sufficient number of working-class people who had the necessary skill to constitute a substantial market for popular fiction. In an exhaustive study of the subject, Louis James has shown that the period 1830-50 saw the beginning of the modern distinction between "high-brow" and "low-brow" fiction:

> The destruction of the old poetic traditions was not the only disaster to popular literature. Shoddy and poor as much of it had been in the past, it was expensive and rare enough to be written to keep; the mass literature in penny numbers was

> meant to please for a few hours, and the less [sic] demands it made on the comprehension of the tired workman the better. The need for a constant stream of material also meant a lowering in quality. Fiction has always been written for money, but a massive commercial enterprise catering for the transient stimulation of bored minds meant something new... The era of mass popular fiction had arrived.[4]

The fiction produced for the working class was for the most part formulaic, highly stylised romance. Nobody expected the working class to read Condition of England novels. Meanwhile it is a matter of fact that Disraeli, Brontë, Gaskell, Kingsley, Eliot and even Dickens -- though he had known real hardship as a child -- were themselves middle-class.

These middle-class novelists, writing for their middle-class readers, were working in a middle-class tradition. What was new was their working-class subject matter. Taking Robinson Crusoe -- the earliest estimate -- as the first novel, in 1845, when Sybil was published, the novel was only a hundred and twenty-six years old. As Ian Watt has shown, the rise of the novel is closely associated with the corresponding rise of the middle class in the eighteenth century. According to Watt, there are two principal reasons for this. The first is practical:

> The price of novels . . . though moderate when compared to larger works, was still far beyond the means of any except the the comfortably off. Tom Jones, for example, cost more than a labourer's average weekly wage. It is certain, therefore, that the novel's audience was not drawn from such a wide cross-section of society as, for example, that of Elizabethan

> drama. All but the destitute had been able to afford a penny occasionally to stand in the pit of the Globe; it was no more than the price of a quart of ale. The price of a novel, on the other hand, would feed a family for a week or two. This is important. The novel in the eighteenth century was closer to the economic capacity of the middle-class additions to the reading public than were many of the established and respectable forms of literature and scholarship, but it was not, strictly speaking, a popular literary form.[5]

As Watt says, this is important. In the early history of the novel, the new genre was being addressed to a very specific audience. Circulating libraries did not begin to appear until the later part of the eighteenth century, and the price of a novel was beyond the means of the poorer sections of society, so there was no point in addressing it to them. The intelligentsia looked down on the mere telling of tales in prose and preferred to go on reading more traditional forms of literature, so there was no point in the novel's being addressed to them (Fielding, it must be admitted, made some attempt to do this, but still drew most of his audience from the middle class). There were thus strong economic and aesthetic pressures on the early novelists to direct their work towards the bourgeoisie: the social stratum to which they themselves belonged. The early novels are accordingly riddled with the concerns and values of the bourgeoisie. For the present, only one of these need concern us: individualism. For the first time in Western literature, as Watt says:

> . . . the actors in the plot and the scene of their actions had to be placed in a new literary perspective: the plot had

> to be acted by particular people in particular circumstances, rather than, as had been common in the past, by general human types against a background primarily determined by the appropriate literary convention.[6]

Watt associates this with the movement towards "realism" in both literature and philosophy:

> . . . both the philosophical and the literary innovations must be seen as parallel manifestations of larger change -- that vast transformation of Western civilization since the Renaissance which has replaced the unified world picture of the Middle Ages with another very different one -- one which presents us, essentially, with a developing but unplanned aggregate of particular individuals having particular experiences at particular times and at particular places.[7]

The rise of the novel was as startlingly rapid as that of the bourgeoisie. The eighteenth century was largely a time of experimentation in the new genre, but by the early decades of the nineteenth century, at least two traditions had been quite firmly established. (A third, begun by Sterne, did not become a tradition until the present century.) The two principal traditions were ushered in by Richardson and Fielding respectively. As I have already said, it was to the dominant, Richardsonian tradition that all but one of the Condition of England novelists owed allegiance, and it was this tradition which laid the greater emphasis on the particularity -- and therefore the individualism -- that Watt discusses. Probably the simplest way to express the history of the English novel is to divide it into three broad phases: the eighteenth century, a period of innovation and experimentation; the nineteenth

century, a period of consolidation; and the twentieth century, a period of further experimentation and, possibly, disintegration. Part of the aim of this thesis is to examine some of the weakness of this view as it relates to the nineteenth century, but allowing for the fact that it is a simplification, there are elements of truth in it. As T.B. Tomlinson says:

> In a society which, though in the upshot more peaceful than most parts of the Europe that led up to and continued from 1848, was still torn by class-conflict and the developing industrial revolution, the English novel emerges as broadly speaking a middle-class, and very stable enterprise . . . . to put it with more historical accuracy: what seems to me to have happened was that writers from Jane Austen onwards picked up leads developed in the main by Richardson, whose heroines grasp, unconsciously perhaps but very accurately, the mixture of personal and economic factors surrounding them, and then went on to develop the middle-class and bourgeois interests that he had distilled as one at least of the novel's main concerns . . . . [C]ertainly by the mid-century a hundred years after Richardson, there is no doubt about the status and function of the English novel: it is very much a middle-class enterprise.[8]

It is important at this point to distinguish between two ways in which class can impinge upon the novel: class as data and class as theme. The early novelists, notably Richardson, exhibited an extensive interest in those divisions of society which, conceptually at least, were the immediate predecessors of class. Richardson's heroines, as

Tomlinson says, are to a great extent aware of the social and economic relations in which they stand to members of other social groups; to the extent that they are not aware of it, Richardson is, and he makes this quite clear to his readers. But this awareness is part of the particularity of time, place and person to which Watt draws attention, and in the end it is the particularity of person only which is of over-riding thematic concern to the novelist. Richardson understands the extent to which the personalities and destinies of Pamela and Clarissa are determined by social and economic factors, but his overwhelming interest is in the heroines themselves and in how they interact with individual members of other social groups. That, essentially, is what I mean by class as data. Class as theme, on the other hand, is the goal to which the Condition of England novelists aspired. Their works are basically romans à thèse, and their theses concern, not individuals, but broad masses of people. But the novel, despite its youth, had by their time become firmly entrenched in a thoroughly bourgeois, and therefore individualistic, outlook. One of the major problems facing these novelists, therefore, was that of reconciling the use of an individualistic medium -- the novel -- with an ideological purpose -- an analysis of the problems of industrialisation, together with, perhaps, some projected solutions. For the most part, their attempted resolutions of this problem took the form of introducing love-stories between members of opposing social classes. Tomlinson finds this resolution an uneasy one:

> There is a more general malaise . . . operating, I think, and though it escapes final or complete diagnosis, one might approach an understanding of it by considering the persistent disjunction in these novels between politics on the one hand,

and the rather unconvincing love-stories very much on the other.[9]

It would be reasonable to raise here the objection that since, as I have already said, class is a process, a set of relationships between people, and not a static or abstract thing, then a genre which is particularly well-equipped to explore relationships between members of one class should be equally well-equipped to explore relationships between members of another. The working class is, after all, composed of individual men and women to precisely the same extent as the middle class. The answer is that, in literature, individuality depends more on the eye of the beholder than on the individual concerned. As P.J. Keating puts it:

> Most working-class novels are, in one way or another, propagandist. They are usually written by authors who are not working-class, for an audience which is not working-class, and character and environment are presented so as to contain, implicitly or explicitly, a class judgement. The author may wish to show, for instance, that the working classes are basically no different from other people, or that they are, in a spiritual sense at least, more fortunate than other social groups; or that they are not at heart violent and so long as their just complaints are listened to sympathetically the middle and upper classes have nothing to fear from them. Or even more directly, that they need help, that they shouldn't drink, that more schools, hospitals or workhouses -- as the case may be -- should be built for them. Put simply the most important single fact about the fictional working man

is his class.10

Members of the working class were of course as different from one another as members of the middle class. But seen from the other side of the enormous gulf which divided the two classes, individual differences were subsumed under class-similarities. Those novelists who were sympathetic to the plight of the working class were at pains to show differences between its individual members. They were aware that many members of their own class saw the working class as a vast mass of undifferentiated (semi-) humanity, and it was part of their thesis to show that these people were in fact individual human beings. But that raised a further problem. Jane Austen, writing of her own class, did not have to formulate a thesis that its members differed from one another; that was already obvious both to her and to her readers. She wrote from an intimate knowledge of the people she was writing about. The Condition of England novelists, on the other hand, set out consciously to demonstrate individual differences among the people they were writing about, and what they produced was the result of a mixture of imagination and deliberate research, which is a very different and inferior thing to intimate personal knowledge.

The middle class's ignorance of the working class deserves some emphasis in this age of easy communications and class-mobility. Mrs. Jellyby's preoccupation with Borioboola-Gha in Bleak House is a direct satirical attack on it. Largely concurrent with the industrialisation of England was the expansion of the British Empire. This was of course a purely economic enterprise, but it was attended with much self-righteous determination to "civilise" or "Christianise" the inhabitants of what is now known as the Third World. Many middle-class ladies --

and some gentlemen -- with little else to do were busily engaged in charitable schemes to bring about this ostensibly philanthropic end. Meanwhile, like Mrs. Jellyby's family, many of their own compatriots were abandoned to hunger, squalor and ignorance. Some mitigation of this misdirected activity is provided by the fact that the industrial working class lived in the North of England, while the middle-class philanthropists tended to live in the South, and the two were even further apart then than they are now. But that is at best a very partial mitigation, since there was also poverty on a vast scale right on the doorsteps of the philanthropists in London. From the perspective of the late twentieth century it is hard to appreciate the extent of that separation of one class from another which prompted Disraeli to subtitle Sybil "The Two Nations". The extent of the separation may be illustrated by the following quotation from T.H. Huxley, the force of which is best appreciated in the light of the depth to which racism permeated the Victorian consciousness: "The Polynesian savage in his most primitive condition is not half so savage, so unclean, so irreclaimable as the tenant of a tenement in an East London slum".[11] This is what Asa Briggs has to say on the subject:

> From about the 1830s and 40s onwards, people did begin to use the imagery of two nations in one. Within one city, you could actually have communities which were, in effect, in their ways of life, in their perceptions of life, totally separated from each other. So that contemporaries said that they were as widely separated from each other as if they were living in different continents even -- one in Africa and one in Europe. There was also the idea at various points in the 19th century

> that the best way to approach the kind of sights that you would see if you went into the poorest areas was rather like an explorer going into a dark continent. And, of course, the mysteries of these places began to be interesting.12

To some degree each of the novelists we are going to consider was just such an explorer. But they were also creative artists. The explorer best known for his work as an explorer was Henry Mayhew. In 1849 he wrote a series of articles for the Morning Chronicle, which were later gathered together in book form and published as London Labour and the London Poor. His readers were as shocked by what he had to report as by anything sent back from Africa, the more so because what he had to tell them was happening under their own noses. His descriptions of poverty and all its attendant miseries are moving and shocking. But the fact that the Victorian working class lived for the most part in unbelievable squalor is well known now, and to pile up details would be merely sensationalist. What is more pertinent to the present purpose is what Mayhew discovered about the social relations in which a majority of Londoners lived. He reported, not on a society within a society, but on a whole series of overlapping societies, each with its own values, manners and beliefs. Working before the invention of the tape recorder, he must have had either an astounding memory or a very plausible imagination, for he claimed to have recorded verbatim the statements of many of those he interviewed. What are now popularly known as "Victorian values" were of course the values of the Victorian bourgeoisie. As Marx and Engels say:

> For each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it, is compelled, merely in order to carry

> through its aim, to represent its interests as the common interests of all the members of society, that is, expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones.13

This is of course true of all societies, yet there is a curious sense in which it appears to be particularly true of Victorian Society. But differing codes of morality did exist. I will give three examples from Mayhew.

In the first example an old woman who sells sheep's trotters is abused by a woman in a public house. The landlord intervenes with kindness. The old woman says to Mayhew:

> "She wasn't a woman of the town as used me so. I have had worse sauce from modest women, as they called themselves, than from the women of the town, for plenty of them knows what poverty is, and is civiler, poor things -- yes, I'm sure of that, though it's a shocking life. -- O, shocking!"14

The bourgeois perception of a prostitute was of a woman bereft of all morality. The trotter-seller testifies, not only that prostitutes were kind and sensitive to those with whom they shared the plight of poverty, but that by some, at least, of the working class, this was seen as more important than the way they earned their living. And what makes this the more significant is that prostitutes were not a minority group living on the "fringe" of society; one estimate puts the number of prostitutes at about eight per cent of all women in Victorian London.15 Of course this notion has ossified into the modern cliché of the "whore with a big heart", but to the average Victorian bourgeois

mind the mere association of whores with hearts would have been shocking.

Although the nineteenth century was a time of religious, as well as political, controversy, the hold of Christianity, and particularly of Christian morality, on the middle class was still extremely strong in the 1840s. This is what a costermonger had to say to Mayhew on the subject:

> "I have heerd a little about our Saviour -- they seem to say he were a goodish kind of a man; but if he says as how a cove's to forgive a feller as hits you, I should say he know'd nothing about it . . . . Before father died, I used sometimes to say my prayers, but after that mother was too busy getting a living to mind about my praying. Yes, I knows! -- in the Lord's prayer they says, 'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgives them as trespasses agin us'. It's a very good thing, in coorse, but no costermongers can't do it."[16]

Ironically, this anticipates much of the scholarly New Testament criticism that was to come in the ensuing century or so: the recognition that as a system of morality the teachings of Jesus as portrayed in the gospels are simply impracticable. Elsewhere, Mayhew describes in some detail the system of values which governs the costermongers' behaviour. It is in some respects quite similar to that of society at large, but it is not, like that of many members of the middle class, hypocritical, in that it does not profess one morality and practise another.

As a final example, there is the behaviour of the dredgermen, who dredge the river for, among other things, corpses:

> . . . no body recovered by a dredgerman ever happens to have

> any money about it, when brought to shore. There may, indeed, be a watch in the fob or waistcoat pocket, for that article would be likely to be traced. . . . The dredgers cannot by any reasoning or argument be made to comprehend that there is anything like dishonesty in emptying the pockets of a dead man. They consider them as their just perquisites. They say that anyone who finds a body does precisely the same, and that if they did not do so the police would. After having had all the trouble and labour, they allege that they have a much better right to whatever is to be got, than the police who have had nothing whatever to do with it.17

What the dredgermen do is certainly illegal, and by bourgeois standards it is also immoral, but in essence their view merely reflects an alternative perspective on rights to property and payment. They do not rob living people, but they do not see in what sense a dead man can be said to own anything. And since society does not pay them for this part of their work, they consider it only just to pay themselves from the obvious source.

In all three examples cited, the behaviour of the working-class people Mayhew encountered is not the product of a lack of morality, but that of a moral code which differed from that of the ruling class. But, in the light of Marx's and Engels's observation, it is very easy to see how from a bourgeois point of view their behaviour can be seen as simply immoral. And since ignorance is a major corollary of poverty, even the best-intentioned bourgeois "explorers" of the working class were very prone to see working-class behaviour as merely the product of an ignorance of middle-class values. It is a situation analogous to that of the

missionaries who went out to "civilise" and "Christianise" the "savages" of Africa and elsewhere, without ever considering that civilisation and religion can take forms different to, but just as valid as, their own.

The explorers were, without exception, "advocates" of the working class. Their perception of the malaise from which England was suffering was that it proceeded primarily from a lack of mutual understanding between the working and the middle class. Their own role was to plead the case of the working class before the court of the middle class. But since the middle class, which embodied the dominant value-system of the time, was likely to perceive any other system of values as "deviant" and "inferior" -- or just plain non-existent -- the novelists worked under a high degree of self-generated pressure to present their "clients" as replicas of the middle class: materially poorer, of course, and with rather rougher manners, but essentially similar to their "betters". This process of "bourgeoimorphism" undoubtedly increased the level of support for what the novelists were trying to do, but at the same time, compounded with the novelists' relative ignorance of the people they were writing about, it produced an inevitable distortion of reality.

Chapter One

Benjamin Disraeli

Although Sybil is now one of the less widely-read of the novels under consideration, it is still read (Penguin reissued it in 1980) for two obvious reasons: its author went on to become one of Britain's best-known Prime Ministers; and its subtitle -- "The Two Nations" -- has entered the language to such an extent that there are many people who are familiar with the expression but unaware of its origin.

The novel itself is a curious mixture; it follows public events in England from 1837 to 1844 with considerable historical fidelity, but it weaves into the fabric of those events an improbable personal story which is at times unintentionally hilarious. Disraeli combines penetrating insights into personal motivations and political machinations with a preposterously naive theory of history and the consequent nostrum for righting the social wrongs of the time.

Disraeli's theory of history is romantic, Catholic, Monarchist, and impossible to set out in a systematic way because of its inherent anti-rationalism. Among the villains of Disraeli's scheme of things are the families which were elevated to the aristocracy as a result of the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688. The novel's hero, Egremont, is the younger brother of the current Lord Marney, and although there were lords of Marney before 1688, they were of an opportunist character:

> But in 1688, alarmed at the prevalent impression that King James intended to insist on the restitution of the Church estates to their original purposes, to wit, the education of the people and the maintenance of the poor, the Lord of Marney

> became a warm adherent of "civil and religious liberty" . . . and joined the other Whig lords, and great lay impropriators, in calling over the Prince of Orange and a Dutch army, to vindicate those popular principles which, somehow or other, the people would never support. (35)

In fact the aristocratic status of the Egremont family is the result of the assiduous efforts of one Baldwin Greymount to assist Henry VIII in the suppression of the monasteries. Baldwin's descendants, according to the Disraeli theory of history, are therefore morally tainted. Exactly why Egremont is an exception to this is never specified.

Disraeli had, probably, a genuine sympathy for the suffering of the poor. He explains the historical origin of their plight in his third chapter, where he blames it on "Dutch finance", "French war" and "the Venetian Party". These ideas are too outlandish -- Louis Cazamian calls them "this farrago of imaginary history"[1] -- to be worth elucidating, but his broad scheme of things comprises solidarity with the monarchy, the "people", the "real" (i.e. Saxon) aristocracy and the Church (although he never makes it absolutedly explicit, it is fairly clear that he means the Church of Rome). The villains of the piece are the capitalists and the newly-created (i.e. Whig) aristocracy. At one point he speaks of "the priest and . . . the gentleman, the ancient champions of the people against arbitrary courts and rapacious parliaments" (331). The novel contains a good deal of very biting satire on the way in which seats and votes in Parliament are won and lost. He exposes the absolute pragmatic cynicism of this process. One of the most effective elements in the novel is the way in which he juxtaposes such scenes in the salons of Westmister with scenes showing the infinitely greater

simplicity and honesty of working-class characters.

This is not to say, however, that the brilliance and authenticity of the political (i.e. parliamentary) scenes are remotely matched by the working-class scenes. Cazamian recognized this in 1903: "Sybil tells us everything about working-class life that one would expect a highly intelligent and politically well-informed tourist to bring away from a quick survey of the situation."[2] But even in 1845, the year of the novel's publication, readers were noticing that in attempting to portray working-class life, Disraeli was venturing into uncertain territory. The following is from a review of Sybil by W.M. Thackeray:

> His aim would appear to be to take a glance at the whole cycle of labour: from the agricultural he takes us to the manufacturing and the mining districts. Here, as we fancy, his descriptions fail; not from want of sympathy, but from want of experience and familiarity with the subject. A man who was really familiar with the mill and the mine might now, we should think, awaken great public attention as a novelist. It is a magnificent and untrodden field . . . to describe it well, a man should be born to it. We want a Boz from among the miners or the manufactories to detail their ways of work and pleasure -- to describe their feelings, interests, and lives, public and private.[3]

When Disraeli describes the conditions under which working-class people live, his prose assumes the tone of an indignant travelogue. Consider, for example, his description of the dwellings of Marney:

> These wretched tenements seldom consisted of more than two rooms, in one of which the whole family, however numerous,

were obliged to sleep, without distinction of age, or sex; or suffering. With the water streaming down the walls, the light distinguished through the roof, with no hearth even in winter, the virtuous mother in the sacred pangs of childbirth, gives forth another victim to our thoughtless civilization; surrounded by three generations whose inevitable presence is more painful than her sufferings in that hour of travail; while the father of her coming child, in another corner of the sordid chamber, lies stricken by that typhus which his contaminating dwelling has breathed into his veins, and for whose next prey is perhaps destined, his new-born child. These swarming walls had neither windows nor doors sufficient to keep out weather, or admit the sun or supply the means of ventilation; the humid and putrid roof of thatch exhaling malaria like all other decaying vegetable matter. The dwelling rooms were neither boarded nor paved; and whether it were that some were situate in low and damp places, occasionally flooded by the river, and usually much below the level of the road; or that the springs, as was often the case, would burst through the mud floor; the ground was at no time better than so much clay, while sometimes you might see little channels cut from the centre under the doorways to carry off the water, the door itself removed from its hinge: a resting place for infancy in its deluged home. These hovels were in many instances not provided with the commonest conveniences of the rudest police: contiguous to every door might be observed the dung-heap on which every kind of filth was accumulated, for the purpose of being disposed of

> for manure, so that, when the poor man opened his narrow habitation in the hope of refreshing it with the breeze of summer, he was met with a mixture of gases from reeking dung-hills. (81)

This is very shocking; but it is indistinguishable from what one might find in a Blue Book. Like many passages in Sybil, it lacks the concreteness of fictional writing; Disraeli is not describing the home of any particular agricultural worker, much less of a character in his story, but merely compiling an aggregate of all the cottages in the town. The passage quoted is what one might expect anyone previously unfamiliar with the town to write after one reasonably conscientious tour of inspection; expanded a little, it would make a good article for a newspaper, and it would carry no tinge of fiction. There are also one or two underlying assumptions embodied in the language of the passage which indicate that, however sincere the intention, the point of view is very much that of an outsider. It is not merely that "the virtuous mother in the sacred pangs of childbirth" is the kind of language which no working-class person, then or at any other time, would use, but also that these conceptions of motherhood and childbirth are deeply rooted in middle-class idealism. It is even more doubtful whether the presence of her family hurts the mother more than her labour-pains.

Disraeli, then, is our first explorer in the dark continent of "the poor"; he carries with him to that continent his cumbersome baggage of middle- and upper-class ideology, and he brings it back intact.

There are several elements which recur in many of the Condition of England novels. One of them is the misguidedness of those philanthropists who support the missionary efforts to "civilise" and "convert"

members of foreign societies when there is so much work of a similar nature to be done at home. Here, for instance, Disraeli is inveighing against the need of working-class mothers to put their babies out to nurse so that they can go back to work:

> The expense is not great: laudanum and treacle, administered in the shape of some popular elixir, affords these innocents a brief taste of the sweets of existence, and, keeping them quiet, prepares them for the silence of their impending grave. Infanticide is practised as extensively and as legally in England, as it is on the banks of the Ganges; a circumstance which apparently has not yet engaged the attention of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. (131)

There is, despite the racist assumption, an admirable indignation in the irony here. More specifically related to the issue of propagating Christianity is the confession of faith of the girl Morley meets at Wodgate:

> "Yes sir," said the girl with the vacant face and the back like a grasshopper; "I be a reg'lar born Christian and my mother afore me, and that's what few gals in the Yard can say. Thomas will take it to himself when work is slack; and he believes now in our Lord and Saviour Pontius Pilate who was crucified to save our sins; and in Moses, Goliath, and the rest of the Apostles."
>
> "Ah! me!" thought Morley, "and could they not spare one Missionary from Tahiti for their fellow-countrymen at Wodgate!" (208)

Another of these recurrent themes again concerns "foreigners", though this time in a quite different sense of the word. As I pointed out in the Introduction, the English working class was by no means a homogeneous body of people. Within the same town or region, different occupational groups were often ignorant of and hostile to one another. To an even greater extent, this was true of people from different parts of the country. Mowbray is in the industrial North of England; Suffolk is in East Anglia, which even today is predominantly agricultural. Dandy Mick and his friends discuss the importation of farm workers from Suffolk to work in Mowbray: "'Ah! them's the himmigrants,' said Caroline; 'they're sold out of slavery, and sent down by Pickford's van into the labour market to bring down our wages'" (130). Caroline's (presumably) literal understanding of what she says clearly and economically underlines both her ignorance of and her hostility to this other group of English workers. At the same time there is a sense, not very far removed from the literal, in which her statement is quite true. At no great distance from Mowbray, there is a mining district. Here is a fragment of conversation among the miners:

> "We had a Chartist here the other day, but he did not understand our case at all."
>
> "I heerd him," said Master Nixon, "but what's his Five Points to us? Why, he ayn't got Tommy among them."
>
> "Nor long stints," said Waghorn.
>
> "Nor butties," said Juggins.
>
> "He's a pretty fellow to come and talk to us," said a collier. "He had never been down a pit in all his life." (440)

It is in passages such as this that Disraeli comes closest to accounting for the failure of Chartism. The miners see clearly that the Chartist delegate has no specific understanding of their own peculiar problems, but instead of trying to educate him on these points, they dismiss him as unable to do anything for them. They also fail to consider the possibility that their own particular grievances may be subsumed under the Five Points.

But by far the most significant point in this connexion occurs at the climactic end of the novel, where it is not the good artisans and operatives of Mowbray who instigate the anarchic rampage that destroys Mowbray Castle, but Bishop Hatton's Hell-Cats from Wodgate; these are, as Disraeli has been at pains to point out, "foreigners" to Mowbray. Sybil, who, although obviously attracted to Egremont, has refused to consider marrying him because he is her class-enemy, finds herself with the Mowbray family at the time of the attack and undergoes a considerable modification of loyalties during it:

> "I see some Mowbray faces," cried Sybil springing forward, with a flashing eye and glowing cheek. "Bamford and Samuel Carr: Bamford, if you be my father's friend, aid us now; and Samuel Carr, I was with your mother this morning: did she think I should meet her son thus? No, you shall not enter," said Sybil advancing. They recognised her, they paused. "I know you, Couchman; you told us once at the Convent that we might summon you in our need. I summon you now. O, men, men!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands. "What is this? Are you led away by strangers to such deeds? Why, I know you all! You came here to aid, I am sure, and not to

harm. Guard these ladies; save them from these foreigners! There's Butler, he'll go with us, and Godfrey Wells. Shall it be said you let your neighbours be plundered and assailed by strangers and never tried to shield them? Now, my good friends, I entreat, I adjure you, Butler, Wells, Couchman, what would Walter Gerard say, your friend that you have so often followed, if he saw this?" (483)

The Daughter of the People is here employing her considerable rhetorical powers to persuade the people of Mowbray to change the axis of their loyalties; members of their own class are to become "strangers" and "foreigners" because they come from another part of England, while the Mowbray family, until very recently the oppressors and enemies of the people, are transformed into "neighbours" because they happen to live in the same region.

I will return to Sybil's apostasy. At first sight it might appear to be an example of the process I have called "bourgeoimorphism" (except that the term is not altogether appropriate in Disraeli's case, as he was openly hostile to the bourgeoisie), but in fact it is more complex than that. But that process -- or its Disraelian equivalent -- does operate in Sybil. When Warner, the handloom-weaver, for instance, is destitute, his wife seriously ill and his children starving, he is working on a piece of material for which he has already been partly paid.

"Don't you think, Warner," said his wife, "that you could sell that piece to some other person, and owe Barber for the money he advanced?"

"No!" said her husband fiercely. "I'll go straight."

"And let your children starve," said his wife, "when you

could get five or six shillings at once. . . ." (153)

We are being asked to believe that this man cares more for the moral-economic code which is itself responsible for his destitution than for the lives of his wife, his children and himself. The novelist being more powerful in his world than the philanthropist in his, Warner is rewarded for his "honesty" by the timely arrival of the angelic Sybil and the saintly Mr. St. Lys. Within a conservative value-system, refusal to go into debt is very admirable, but it is a luxury few can afford, and it is hard to imagine any human being, especially one with responsibilities to others besides himself, who would voluntarily choose starvation over debt.

One curious element which is to be found in several of the novels (though it is by no means confined to the Condition of England novels) is what might be described as "the dog-index". Nineteenth-century English novelists, whatever their ethical, philosophical, aesthetic, political or religious differences, appear to have agreed on one thing: that the single most reliable arbiter of moral worth in a character is always a dog. In Sybil it is Harold, who, like most of the human characters, must have his racial pedigree clearly stated; he is "a young bloodhound of the ancient breed, such as are now found but in a few old halls and granges in the north of England" (156). Obviously, Harold is a Saxon dog. He is also a dog of great perspicacity. The reader, along with the other human characters, has to wait a long time to discover the villainous nature of Stephen Morley. Harold is aware of it much earlier. On this occasion Morley and Egremont are visiting Gerard and Sybil at their cottage:

Morley rose and wished them good night. He shook hands with

> Egremont and bade him farewell with some abruptness. Harold who seemed half asleep suddenly sprung from the side of his mistress and gave an agitated bark. Harold was never very friendly to Morley, who now tried to soothe him, but in vain. The dog looked fiercely at him and barked again, but the moment Morley had disappeared, Harold resumed his usual air of proud high-bred gentleness, and thrust his nose into the hand of Egremont, who patted him with fondness. (244)

When Egremont leaves, he is attacked on the lonely road by a person he fails to recognise. Harold intervenes and saves his life. It is never made entirely clear, but there is some reason to believe that Egremont's attacker is Morley. In any case it is Morley who will eventually try to blackmail Sybil by offering to give her the means of saving her father's life only if she will promise to dissociate herself entirely from Egremont. Harold's insight, courage and physical prowess are clearly ideals which few of the human characters achieve.

The penultimate item on the list of elements common to most or all of our novels can be dealt with very briefly. It is Disraeli's attitude to the Trades Unions, as exemplified in Dandy Mick's "initiation" (see 267-71). The treatment is neither realistic nor satirical; it is a piece of gross libel which reads like nothing so much as an account of a Black Mass, and beyond the fact that there were no doubt some readers who believed it, it does not deserve to be taken seriously. After quoting some extracts from the passage (and comparing the whole to a meeting of the Ku Klux Klan), Mary Eagleton and David Pierce go on to say:

> The distortion of language in these quotations cannot be explained by simple ignorance of working-class behaviour. The

> beliefs that inform the language are that the working class are dangerous, they are unstable and violent, and that collective action is anarchic and mindless.4

The whole episode is so exaggeratedly ludicrous that there can really be no alternative to Eagleton's and Pierce's view.

Finally, there is the matter of what can be done to save the country from its current state of affairs. Although he has his own mystic nostrum about the monarchy, the aristocracy and the priesthood, Disraeli shares with other Condition of England novelists the illusion that the principal thing that is lacking is communication between the classes. According to this view, the poor are suffering because the rich simply do not know that they are suffering: an assertion which is contradicted by Disraeli's own portrait of the cynical and inhuman Lord Marney. The poor, correspondingly, blame the rich for their plight because they do not understand that the rich too have their problems: an assertion which, apart from being blatantly insulting to the poor, is contradicted by the ambivalent figure of Stephen Morley, whose understanding of things in general by far exceeds that of anyone else in the novel. Nevertheless, the message that communication between the classes will heal the rift is hammered home, and we are made to see it on both sides of the rift. Nixon the miner, for instance, says to Morley:

> "And I'll tell you what, sir, that I never knew the people play [strike] yet, but if a word had passed atween them and the main-masters aforehand, it might not have been settled, but you can't get at them any way. Atween the poor man and the gentleman there never was no connection, and that's the wital mischief of this country." (182 f)

This state of communication after which Nixon yearns is obviously rare but it is not, in Disraeli's scheme of things, impossible. In order to achieve it, however, certain conditions must first be met. Mr. Trafford, we are told,

> . . . was the younger son of a family that had for centuries been planted in the land, but who, not satisfied with the factitious consideration with which society compensates the junior members of a territorial house for their entailed poverty, had availed himself of some opportunities that had offered themselves, and had devoted his energies to those new sources of wealth that were unknown to his ancestors. His operations at first had been extremely limited, like his fortunes; but with a small capital, though his profits were not considerable, he at least gained experience. With gentle blood in his veins, and old English feelings, he imbibed, at an early period of his career, a correct conception of the relations which should subsist between the employer and the employed. He felt that between them there should be other ties than the payment and the receipt of wages. (224)

The prerequisite for humane capitalism would seem to be that the capitalist have "gentle blood in his veins and old English feelings". The exact nature of such feelings is not specified. The aristocratic capitalist must also have "some opportunities", the nature of which Disraeli evidently felt to be so obvious as to require no explanation. And the end result is that between employer and employee there should subsist "other ties than the payment and the receipt of wages". To do him justice, Disraeli does elsewhere describe some of the differences

between Trafford's factory and other factories, but it is a singular and perhaps psychologically significant fact that he omitted from his most basic account of the relations between employer and employee the fact that the latter is required to perform work for his wages. Of course the whole theme of improved communication between the classes is -- unconsciously or otherwise -- nothing but a smokescreen to disguise the fact that the interests of capitalists and workers are by the very nature of their relationship opposed; and that that relationship, whether overtly or covertly, is necessarily a hostile one.

P.J. Keating makes an interesting point which will serve as a post-script to the theme of communication. As it is usually understood, communication means a dialogue, a two-way process. Yet it is doubtful whether this is quite what Disraeli had in mind. Keating first quotes from Sybil: "'I tell you what,' said Mick, with a knowing look, and in a lowered tone, 'the only thing, my hearties, that can save this here nation, is -- a - - strike'." Keating goes on to talk about the perceived power of the industrial worker, and then says:

> It was his suffering to which novelists drew attention, but his potential power that was their true concern. The possibility that the workers might have ideas of their own about the uses to which this power could be put was discountenanced by the novelists. On this subject they had made up their minds long before they began their journeys north or put pen to paper. First and foremost they were determined to prove misguided anyone who thought like Dandy Mick.[5]

In the light of Keating's comment, as well as of the extent of working-class input into the debate around which Sybil is centred it would seem

that the nature of the "communication" which Disraeli envisaged between the classes was to consist of the workers drawing attention to specific grievances and those with the power deciding whether or not they could be redressed.

There are several aspects of Sybil which place it firmly outside any tradition of the English novel that existed at the time of its publication. One of the key structural elements of the book is the love story of Egremont and Sybil. Their belonging to different social classes is by no means the only barrier to their union. Egremont, it is fair to say, is Disraeli's best attempt at a flesh-and-blood living portrait of a human being in fiction. Sybil, on the other hand, is a grotesque abstraction of idealised womanhood, religious fanaticism and fantastic beauty. The novel as a whole is in fact an uncomfortable mixture of satire, attempted realistic fiction and documentary-style reporting, but it is in the figure of Sybil herself that the problem becomes particularly acute. As her father says of her, "'Sybil is right to take the veil. She cannot look to marriage; no man that she could marry would be worthy of her'" (347). The romantic story of Sybil and Egremont takes a back seat throughout the novel, but its presence is necessary for two reasons. Their marriage serves as a symbol of reconciliation between the best of their respective classes. Egremont, according to Cazamian, "chooses a wife from among the enemies of his hereditary caste, and by this marriage becomes leader of a group we recognise as Young England."[6] At the same time, in the 1840s, a novel without a love story would have been a very rare phenomenon; "romantic interest" was an indispensible ingredient of the genre. Cazamian goes on to discuss the way Disraeli attempted to obviate the difficulties of

this peculiar union:

> Disraeli is at pains throughout to soften the extravagant boldness of Egremont's marriage: Gerard is not a common worker, but an overseer; his manners and culture are those of a man from a higher class; and in the end it turns out that he is of aristocratic descent. He has always been known to have come from a family distinguished before the Norman Conquest, and so to be of "noble" Saxon birth. But Disraeli felt it necessary to provide him with a more definite escutcheon: he proves to be the descendant of an aristocratic family whose property was seized at the Reformation. His daughter, Sybil, inherits the fortune and manor of the lords of Mowbray, thus bringing Egremont the gift he needs if he is to lead the new Toryism."[7]

In "softening the extravagant boldness" of the marriage, Disraeli has of course undermined his initial symbolic purpose; far from marrying "beneath" him, Egremont ascends the social ladder by marrying Sybil. He has admittedly been strongly attracted to Sybil before finding out about her aristocratic heritage, and the resistance to the marriage has come from Sybil. But the hilariously melodramatic moment when she acknowledges her love for him comes before she discovers that her family's claim to the earldom of Mowbray has been proved. So Disraeli seems to be trying to have it both ways. On the one hand the initial "courtship" of Sybil and Egremont symbolises reconciliation between their classes; on the other, their marriage is vindicated by their turning out to be of the same class after all. Put like that, it is easy to see the logical flaw in the structure. But the marriage -- or at least the courtship --

must still take place, if not for symbolic purposes, then at least to satisfy the formal requirements of the genre within which Disraeli was working.

The problem of the marriage forms part of a larger problem: namely, that of using the novel form as a vehicle for the advancement of specific philosophical, religious and political doctrines. It is this problem which prompts Disraeli to interpolate his extraordinary essay on English History and call it Chapter Three of the first book, and it is also that problem which causes Warner, the handloom-weaver, to step out of the pages of a book and deliver a tract, for all the world like a soliloquising character from Elizabethan drama reading from a Blue Book. Thackeray, in the review of Sybil from which I have already quoted, evidently felt that this doctrinal use of the novel was something which neither could nor should be attempted:

> We stand committed as to our idea of the tendency and province of the novel. Morals and manners we believe to be the novelist's best themes; and hence prefer romances which do not treat of algebra, religion, political economy, or other abstract science.[8]

Thackeray was merely expressing the conventional view of the time. It was a view which was to come increasingly under attack as time went by, and even in 1845 it was not the only view. A matter of days after the publication of Sybil, Disraeli received a letter of warm praise from a woman who described herself as "a mechanic's wife". This, among other things, is what she said:

> Your writings now are for the great body of the country, the People can feel, can understand, your works. I think you have

> a noble end in view, something better than the mere wish of painting passions, awakening soft sentiment, or depicting scenes of splendour and enjoyment which create only sensations of envy or dissatisfaction with the greater part of your readers. You set forth in stirring words in animated, striking, and truthful description the real social condition of the country the monstrous distinction betwixt Rich-Poor. . . [9]

This is a striking critique of the essentially romantic ethos in which the novel had its origins. Mrs. Baylis (the mechanic's wife) was not a sophisticated reader, but she was evidently an intelligent one. For her, the area of experience illuminated by the novel was of greater importance than its adherence or non-adherence to traditional formulas. It would be interesting to know whether the novels she despises are the "silver fork" novels which were popular at the time, or whether she is attacking the novel more generally. In either case, however, she evidently felt that with Sybil Disraeli was opening up new ground for the novel and that this new ground was accessible and of benefit to working-class readers. There is no objection in her letter to any of the features of Sybil which I have described as un-novelistic. She evidently thought the novel was a perfectly legitimate vehicle for a specific didactic purpose. Of course, as I have already pointed out, Sybil also contains many of the features of the tradition that existed at the time of its composition. Aesthetically, Sybil was not a revolutionary novel; rather, it was a novel which made a quantum leap within the evolution of the genre. That is not immediately apparent from the perspective of the 1980s, but in their very different ways both Thackeray's mockery and Mrs. Baylis's praise bear witness to it.

Chapter Two

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell

> The centre of Disraeli's novel is Egremont, the theme is his enlightenment as to the "condition of England"; he is the discoverer of the "other nation", and a projection of the author. Mrs. Gaskell's novel need contain no projection of herself; she was not a discoverer, but was writing of what had long been sadly familiar. As one of her most thoughful critics has said, Disraeli knew his material "as a traveller knows the botany of a strange country," she "as an ardent naturalist knows the flora of his own neighbourhood."[1]

So writes Kathleen Tillotson in response to the unusual fact that Mary Barton is concerned almost exclusively with working-class characters. Tillotson's view of the novel requires some scrutiny, but it states plainly the most obvious difference between Sybil and Mary Barton. Mrs. Gaskell was born into the middle class in the South of England but spent most of her childhood in Knutsford -- not far from Manchester, but still, at the time, very much a rural area. She married the Rev. William Gaskell, a Unitarian minister whose work was in the slums of Manchester, where she lived and worked for the rest of her life. When writing about the working class she had, therefore, a much more intimate knowledge of her subject than Disraeli. There is no "explorer" in Mary Barton equivalent to Egremont in Sybil. Although there are middle-class characters in the novel, their roles are subordinate to those of the working-class characters whose stories are told.

Mrs. Gaskell knew her subject well, and her subject -- bearing in

mind the distinction between "subject" and "theme" -- was the daily lives of industrial workers. Whereas Disraeli was concerned primarily with "the poor", whether they were miners, mill-workers or farm-labourers, Mrs. Gaskell's concern was specifically with the Manchester working class. This class differs in several important ways from other classes of poor people. At the beginning of the novel, for instance, we are given a description of the factory girls on their outing to Green Heys Fields:

> Their faces were not remarkable for beauty; indeed, they were below the average, with one or two exceptions; they had dark hair, neatly and classically arranged, dark eyes, but sallow complexions and irregular features. The only thing to strike a passer-by was an acuteness and intelligence of countenance, which has often been noticed in a manufacturing population. (41)

In contrast to this, Mary Barton's mother is described:

> She had the fresh beauty of the agricultural districts; and somewhat of the deficiency of sense in her countenance, which is likewise characteristic of the rural inhabitants in comparison with the natives of the manufacturing towns. (41)

At the time in which Mary Barton is set -- the late 1830s to the early 1840s -- the population of a town like Manchester would have been a mixture of those born and bred there with people of rural origins drawn to the towns in search of work. Mary Barton senior is one of the latter. The theme is developed further, however, in the character of Alice Wilson. To the urban proletariat Alice is a symbol of a better time and place. She has brought with her to Manchester the ways and wisdom of

rural Cumberland. She has no "acuteness of countenance", but she practises herbal medicine and selfless devotion to others. She provides, not only a contrast, but also an invaluable contribution to the proletarian culture of the town.

Before he becomes consumed with bitterness, John Barton is representative of his class: a class which Mrs. Gaskell knows, not only in its material conditions, but with respect also to its attitudes on all manner of subjects. Speaking of his initial search for the missing Esther, Barton says: "'I even went to a policeman, a good enough sort of man, but a fellow I'd never spoke to before because of his livery'" (46). The point is not emphasised, here or anywhere else, but Barton's words demonstrate exactly the attitude of an intelligent proletarian towards the police. He recognises in the "livery" a natural enemy, the servant of those who oppress him, but he is not so blinded by class feelings as to fail to acknowledge the human being who wears the livery. That human being is a member of his own class and therefore "a good enough sort of man", who has been forced by economic or other necessity to adopt the equivocal role of policeman. The attitude of a working man to the police is, of course, an important component of his system of values, but we are given other details about Barton which at first appear to be quite arbitrary. When he has bought medicine for the dying Davenport, for instance, we are told that "Barton left the shop with comfortable faith in the physic given him; for men of his class, if they believe in physic at all, believe that every description is equally efficacious" (102). This is sad, because Davenport is beyond the help of any kind of medicine. But Mrs. Gaskell's apparently rather irrelevant comment both adds to her readers' confidence in her knowledge of

her subject and indicates in some small degree how the mind of her typical working man works; this is the man who in time will be unable to see the merits of the individual case because of the strength of his belief in the general.

Mrs. Gaskell realises, moreover, that the morality of the working class is not identical with that professed by the middle class. When Esther visits Mary with what appears (to Esther) to be a piece of evidence that proves Jem to be a murderer, Mary implores her not to inform against Jem. Esther protests; "The tears sprang to her eyes, at the idea that she was suspected of being one who would help to inform against an old friend" (296). Obviously the personal loyalty of Esther to Jem, whom she has not seen for several years, is greater than any sense of "justice" based on the law. Significantly, Mrs. Gaskell does not comment on Esther's attitude. The evidence which appears to incriminate Jem in fact, Mary realises, puts the blame squarely on her father. But knowing him to be the murderer, Mary wants to exculpate Jem without incriminating her father. This is more immediately understandable than Esther's attitude, but, once again, Mrs. Gaskell does not comment. Finally, when Mary is taken home by the Liverpool waterman, he produces "a square bottle of smuggled spirits" (377) to revive her, and Mrs. Gaskell neither blames nor excuses the practice of smuggling. Whereas the non-fictional "explorer", Henry Mayhew, never for a moment entertains the possibility that the morality of the dredgermen who relieve corpses of their cash may be a viable alternative to his own, Mrs. Gaskell merely accepts that morality as being as natural as the weather, and is content to report on it without comment.

By such means as these Mrs. Gaskell is able to convey the impres-

sion that she knows the people she is writing about much better than Disraeli knows the working class. Unlike him, she ventures far beyond what is reported in the Blue Books. One feature of Mary Barton which is significant in this respect is the use of footnotes for dialect words and expressions, in which she gives, not only translations into standard English, but also precedents for these usages in Anglo-Saxon or Middle English. The object is obviously to show that Lancashire dialect is not "substandard". While it is true that Lancashire dialect preserves much of the language of Chaucer that is lost to standard English, it is unfortunately also true that Mrs. Gaskell's enterprise is based on a mistaken understanding of the development of language. Many of her examples depend very closely on the etymology of the word. For instance, when she uses the word "nesh" (42), she gives its origin from the Anglo-Saxon "nesc", meaning "tender". "Nesh" is still used in Lancashire, but its meaning has changed from "tender" to "cold". It is easy to see how this has happened. "X is nesh" meant, at one time, that X is susceptible to the cold. But gradually it came to be understood to mean that X is cold. By extension, the weather can now be described as "nesh", a usage impossible within the meaning Mrs. Gaskell ascribes to the word. But if its validity depends on its derivation from the Anglo-Saxon, then modern Lancastrians who say "It's nesh today" are using the word incorrectly. Plainly that is absurd; it is of a piece with the inveighing of eighteenth-century English grammarians against the splitting of infinitives in English on the ground that they are not -- because they cannot be -- split in Latin. Language evolves, and a correct usage at one time does not depend on its replication of an earlier usage in a different language. Mrs. Gaskell's appeal to Anglo-Saxon

betrays a linguistic conservatism which ultimately defeats her purpose of showing that Lancastrian is a viable alternative to standard English. With that qualification, Mrs. Gaskell deserves much praise for her use of dialect. Previous to Mary Barton, dialect had mostly been used for "local colour" or for comic effects, and it had frequently been used very badly. Disraeli's northern characters, for instance, speak for the most part like literary Cockneys. In Mrs. Gaskell's hands, however, the use of dialect lends credibility, dignity and a high degree of articulacy to the working-class characters.

In summary, it would be hard to dissent from Cazamian's assessment of Mary Barton's verisimilitude:

> Even Mary Barton's severest critics were forced to concede that it gave an accurate picture of conditions. Mrs Gaskell's characters were more than generally representative symbolic types: they were recognisably of their local setting, with the mixture of simplicity and humour that is characteristic of Lancashire dialogue.[2]

For two important reasons, Mary Barton is no mere catalogue of misery. For very persuasive rhetorical reasons, Mrs. Gaskell chose to open her story in relatively prosperous times. This allows the reader to see the lives of the working people at a time when those lives are not cramped and pinched by poverty, and consequently to see the people as people, rather than as so many mouths to feed, bodies to clothe and so on. When we return to them in harder times we are seeing, not merely hunger in the abstract, but the hunger of people with whom we are already acquainted. There is of course no logical difference between the two; hunger requires someone to be be hungry, but the hunger of someone we

know -- even if it is only a character in a novel -- is considerably more persuasive than the hunger of a complete stranger. The other thing which saves Mary Barton from the documentary style which plays too large a part in Sybil is the melodrama which takes up about a third of the book. Melodrama has been in disfavour for some time now, but in the nineteenth century it was popular. Mary's desperate race to catch Will Wilson so that he can provide an alibi for his cousin is reminiscent of Esther Summerson's chase after her mother at the end of Bleak House -- or it would be, if it was not for the fact that it was written first. It must be noted that the melodramatic parts of Mary Barton are firmly rooted in the book's thematic concerns: John Barton's crime is portrayed as the inevitable outcome of intolerable circumstances on a hitherto reasonable man; the over-indulged, frivolous character of Henry Carson is sufficient cause alike for his trifling with Mary and his cruel caricature of the workers' deputation; and while Jem's motive for murder is as strong as John Barton's, his position in the world is not such as to induce him to take desperate measures. Mary, meanwhile, is caught in a truly nightmarish dilemma; the man she loves is falsely accused of the crime her father committed, and to clear Jem of the accusation is to risk incriminating her father. This is not cheap, sensational melodrama, but it is melodramatic. Its use in "serious" fiction today would probably be a very bad idea, but in the 1840s it allowed readers who had a taste for the genre -- a much bigger proportion of the reading public than it would be now -- a further opportunity to feel, suffer and ultimately identify with the working-class Mary.

I have tried to show that, despite her disclaimer that she knew "nothing of Political Economy" (38), Mrs. Gaskell knew her subject far

better than Disraeli, and chose to write, instead of a fictionalised treatise expounding a personal doctrine, a novel in which characters resemble people more than pieces on a chessboard. Nevertheless, Mary Barton is a novel with a specific social theme, and that theme will bear some investigation. I have said that Mrs. Gaskell knew the working class; it remains true that she was of the middle class. That put her in what, in the 1840s, was a very unusual position. With literary talents and a conscience, she evidently felt some kind of duty to use that position to try to awaken in middle-class readers of her fiction an awareness of the concerns and grievances of the "other nation". She wants to show her readers, not so much how many people have to share the same room, or how typhus spreads among the cellar-dwellers, as how the members of the working class themselves think and feel about the economic system which reduces them to such circumstances. Sometimes we are given the words and thoughts of John Barton on the subject, but I want to look now at a fairly lengthy passage in which Mrs. Gaskell explains, in her own persona -- and therefore addressing her peers -- the working-class perspective on these matters:

> At all times it is a bewildering thing to the poor weaver to see his employer removing from house to house, each one grander than the last, till he ends in building one more magnificent than all, or withdraws his money from the concern, or sells his mill to buy an estate in the country, while all the time the weaver, who thinks he and his fellows are the real makers of this wealth, is struggling on for bread for their children, through the vicissitudes of lowered wages, short hours, fewer hands employed, &c. And when he knows trade is

> bad, and could understand (at least partially) that there are not buyers enough in the market to purchase the goods already made, and consequently that there is no demand for more; when he could bear and endure much without complaining, could he also see that his employers were bearing their share; he is, I say, bewildered and (to use his own word) "aggravated" to see that all goes on just as usual with the mill-owners. Large houses are still occupied, while spinners' and weavers' cottages stand empty, because the families that once occupied them are obliged to live in rooms or cellars. Carriages still roll along the streets, concerts are still crowded by subscribers, the shops for expensive luxuries still find daily customers, while the workman loiters away his unemployed time in watching these things, and thinking of the pale, uncomplaining wife at home, and the wailing children asking in vain for enough of food, of the sinking health, of the dying life of those near and dear to him. The contrast is too great. Why should he alone suffer from bad times?
>
> I know this is not really the case; and I know what is the truth in such matters: but what I wish to impress is what the workman feels and thinks. True, that with child-like improvidence, good times will often dissipate his grumbling, and make him forget all prudence and foresight. (599)

The second of these paragraphs is one that is often quoted by critics. They point out, quite correctly, that although Mrs. Gaskell claims to "know what is the truth in such matters", she never favours us with an explanation. The implication is that in fact she did <u>not</u> know what the

truth was. My contention is that she knew exactly what the truth was, and that is why I have quoted the preceding paragraph, which has the ring of truth even in isolation. In relation to the novel as a whole, it might almost read as an "advertisement". Immediately afterwards, we are told that John Barton had lost his job. His son fell ill; the doctor said he needed good food; Barton could not find another job to pay for it; he saw his former employer's wife buying luxurious foods; he went home and found his son dead. That is precisely the situation, now related to specific characters, which is stated in impersonal terms in the first of the paragraphs quoted. It is impossible to accept the general statement and the specific case without seeing the disclaimer that separates them as ironic; Mrs. Gaskell was not stupid. This is borne out by Mrs. Gaskell's "admission" that when times are good the workers are "improvident" and fail to save money to cover periods of short hours or unemployment. Times are good when the novel opens, yet we see the extraordinary measures that have to be taken because the Bartons have invited three adult friends to join them for tea. If they do not have enough cups to go round when times are good, it is hard to see how they could save enough money to be of any use to them when their entire source of income is removed. It is very hard to believe that Mrs. Gaskell intends this much-quoted passage to be taken literally.

The question which follows naturally is whether Mrs. Gaskell aligned herself with the working-class radicals, and the answer is an unequivocal negative. The whole tragedy of John Barton is, among other things, a slur on radicalism. But it is not intended to be a slur on John Barton. He is the victim of circumstances which could have been avoided, not by himself, but by the class that will read the novel. At

one point we are told of Barton's "morbid thoughts":

> It is true, much of their morbid power might be ascribed to the use of opium. But before you blame too harshly this use, or rather abuse, try a hopeless life, with daily cravings of the body for food. Try, not alone being without hope yourself, but seeing all around you reduced to the same despair, arising from the same circumstances; all around you telling (though they use no words or language), by their looks and feeble actions, that they are suffering and sinking under the pressure of want. Would you not be glad to forget life, and its burdens? And opium gives forgetfulness for a time.
>
> It is true they who thus purchase it pay dearly for their oblivion; but who can expect the uneducated to count the cost of their whistle? Poor wretches! They pay a heavy price. Days of oppressive weariness and languor, whose realities have the feeble sickliness of dreams; nights, whose dreams are fierce realities of agony; sinking health, tottering frames, incipient madness, and worse, the consciousness of incipient madness; this is the price of their whistle. But have you taught them the science of consequences? (219)

This is bitter rhetoric. Mrs. Gaskell is concerned, not, ultimately, to justify John Barton's act of murder, but to explain as fully as possible the circumstances that led to it. She understands very well the misery of the unemployed and apportions the blame for it quite accurately. Yet there is a note of equivocation in her final rhetorical question. The implication is that if the poor had been taught "the science of consequences" -- i.e. if they had been better educated -- they would not

resort to opium. But there seems to be some confusion of causes and effects here. The use of opium is an effect of unemployment, not a cause. Even assuming that well-educated people do not use opium -- were Coleridge and de Quincy uneducated? -- it is hard to see how refraining from opium will cure unemployment. John Barton's mind may be in a state of drug-induced torpor, but it is only in that state because the reality of his life is so awful as to make lucidity unbearable.

Nevertheless, while Barton is to be blamed, certainly for the murder, and possibly also for his use of opium, Mrs. Gaskell makes it quite clear that his initial hardship is the fault of the industrialist class. An interesting perspective on the novel's theme is provided by Monica Fryckstedt. On this particular subject she says:

> In tracing step by step Barton's mental breakdown, Gaskell gives a frightening picture of the distress on one individual. The author herself regarded his life as a "tragic poem", and certainly, during his transformation, John Barton acquires the stature of a tragic hero.[3]

Fryckstedt goes on to say that

> Gaskell shared the opinion . . . that the Lancashire workers were a noble, generous and hard-working race. They were not violent, bitter and unreasonable by nature. The reason, Gaskell implies, was the indifference of the rich: had they been true Chrisians and not acted like Dives they could easily have prevented a great deal of suffering.[4]

I think Mrs. Gaskell does rather more than "imply" that the rich are responsible for the suffering of the poor, but otherwise this is a fair statement. The question, however, remains: why did the rich allow the

poor to suffer? According to Fryckstedt, Mrs. Gaskell's view was an entirely religious one:

> It is implied repeatedly throughout Mary Barton that with the rich, religion is superficial -- merely for show; like good "Christians" they attend church every Sunday, yet their religion is an empty shell. With the poor, on the other hand, who were generally considered irreligious since they seldom attended church, religion is part of their nature -- theirs is a religion of the heart.[5]

This should be evident to anyone who has read the novel. But Fryckstedt has turned up some evidence which supports the view that Mary Barton is written from a specifically Unitarian point of view (William Gaskell was a Unitarian minister). The Manchester Unitarians produced annual Reports of the Ministry to the Poor in the 1830s and 40s, and Fryckstedt shows by extensive quotation that several substantial passages in Mary Barton are taken verbatim from these Reports. She goes on to comment:

> Through the character of John Barton [Mrs. Gaskell] explored the reasons for the growing bitterness of the operatives and endeavoured to explain why Chartism and violence were the natural consequences of the alienation that prevailed between the classes. On this issue her views are wholly identical with the official Unitarian voice.[6]

With the ailment thus diagnosed, the prescription is simple: both rich and poor -- but especially rich -- must be infused with a renewed spirit of religion. In short, the poor man and the rich man must recognise that they are brothers under the skin; brothers alike in joy and sorrow. This, certainly, is the message that is hammered home in the final

reconciliation of Barton and Carson senior. Carson talks about his grief for his son, and then:

> 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 this not the very anguish he had felt for little Tom, in years so long gone by that they seemed like another life!
>
> 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. (435)

Fryckstedt's reading of the novel, then, is well-founded. In this scene Barton recognises that rich and poor are alike susceptible to sorrow, as the death of Carson's son reminds him of the death of his own.

There is, however, a fairly strong objection to the way in which Mrs. Gaskell has chosen to embody her message. In any population, at any time, the proportion of people who die by murder is a very small one; in the Depression of 1839-42, the number of people who died of starvation or disease brought about by poverty was extremely high. To the extent that Barton and Carson are intended to be representative of their classes, therefore, Mrs. Gaskell's device for making them share their suffering is a highly artificial one. Fryckstedt never mentions this rather obvious point. She does, however, make a brief statement of what she understands to be Mrs. Gaskell's political -- as opposed to religious -- standpoint:

> Elizabeth Gaskell was, of course, no radical. Afraid of social upheavals, strikes and agitations, she took pains to assure her audience that her challenge to the rich and plea for the poor did not entail any weakening of the social structure: everybody had his or her given station in life. This accounts for her many reservations aimed at convincing her readers that she was really one of them, although in Mary Barton she described conditions as they appeared to the poor.[7]

That much is obvious. Without for a moment questioning the sincerity of Mrs. Gaskell's religion or her concern for the suffering of the poor, it is possible to see in Mary Barton a quite different motivation for her drawing attention to that suffering. It is suggested by the above quotation from Fryckstedt, though she does not explore this line of reasoning at any length. It is best encapsulated by Mrs. Gaskell herself, in this very direct appeal to her fellow-bourgeois:

> The actions of the uneducated seem to me typified in those of Frankenstein, that monster of many human qualities, ungifted with a soul, a knowledge of the difference between good and evil.
>
> ———
>
> The people rise up to life; they irritate us, they terrify us, and we become their enemies. Then, in the sorrowful moment of our triumphant power, their eyes gaze on us with a mute reproach. Why have we made them what they are; a powerful monster, yet without the inner means for peace and happiness? (219f)

Here we have as motive for "compassion", not religion or morality, but

simple, pragmatic fear. In their sheer numbers the urban proletariat presented a terrifying prospect to the bourgeoisie. If ever they should combine together effectively they could overthrow the power and privilege of that class in a very short time. That is why, whatever else their differences, middle-class novelists were without exception hostile to Chartism, to the Trades Unions and to any other means by which the working class attempted to take their fate into their own hands. Although it is less strongly stressed in Mary Barton than in Sybil, there is essentially the same misrepresentation of the Unions as sinister, almost diabolical secret societies. When Mr. Carson asks Job Legh -- a relatively educated and "sensible" working man -- whether John Barton was an Owenite, he replies: "'No, no! John Barton was no fool'" (455). As in Sybil, as well as in many other novels in the group, working-class agitation always comes from outside. Mary Barton being set in Manchester, it is the "delegate from London" (i.e. a Chartist) who is subjected to the following disparagement when he comes to address the workers after their demands have been rejected by their employers:

> Then the "gentleman from London", (who had been previously informed of the masters' decision) entered. You would have been puzzled to define his exact position, or what was the state of his mind as regarded education. He looked so self-conscious, so far from earnest, among the group of eager, fierce, absorbed men, among whom he now stood. He might have been a disgraced medical student of the Bob Sawyer class, or an unsuccessful actor, or a flashy shopman. The impression he would have given you would have been unfavourable, and yet there was much about him that could only be characterised as

doubtful. (61)

Much of the merit of Mrs. Gaskell's writing in Mary Barton lies in that specificity of description which proceeds from intimate knowledge of her subject and absolute sincerity of purpose. In the passage just quoted, the over-riding impression is that she simply doesn't know what she is talking about. Of one thing, however, she is certain: whatever kind of man this delegate is, she dislikes him intensely. And so she heaps upon him a pile of epithets drawn from the least respectable occupations she can think of. This very uncharacteristic piece of description is the closest we ever come to fulfillment of an earlier passage. After she has told us about the death of Barton's son, Mrs. Gaskell goes on to say:

> You can fancy, now, the hoards of vengeance in his heart against the employers. For there are never wanting those who, either in speech or in print, find it their interest to cherish such feeling in the working classes; who know how and when to rouse the dangerous power at their command; and who use their knowledge with unrelenting purpose to either party. (22)

In all the Condition of England novels there are shadowy outsiders who foment sedition among the working class. They are invariably outsiders, both in the obvious geographical sense and in the sense of not belonging distinctly to any class. It is hard to escape the conclusion that their insubstantiality as characters proceeds from their creators' ignorance of their real-life counterparts. In the case of Disraeli, who wrote mainly from consciously undertaken research, this is to be expected; in

the case of Mrs. Gaskell, who wrote mainly from direct personal experience and who had a very considerable talent for concrete description, it would be rather more surprising if it were not for the fact that it is very much in her class-interest to keep these characters as undefined and as menacing as possible.

Mrs. Gaskell leaves us in no doubt that the troubles which form the subject of Mary Barton are initially the fault of the bourgeoisie. However, as P.J. Keating points out:

> The workers of course are not left blameless. They too must offer up scapegoats or bow in repentance if the necessary class balance is to be achieved. Mrs. Gaskell was particularly conscious of this. In answer to the criticism that Mary Barton was biassed in favour of the workers, she replied: "No one can feel more deeply than I how wicked it is to excite class against class; and it has been most unconscious if I have done so . . . no praise could compensate me for the self-reproach I shall feel if I have written unjustly." It is impossible to doubt Mrs. Gaskell's sincerity of purpose in either this statement or her two industrial novels; but it is precisely this refusal to face the class implications of the situation she is analysing that ultimately weakens the power of Mary Barton She relies, in common with the other industrial novelists, on personalized relationships to make her point, and it is in the contrived nature of these relationships -- in the unbelievable class balance they are meant to symbolize -- that the bias is to be found.8

I have already pointed out the imbalance of starvation and disease on the one hand, and murder on the other. I have also attempted to defend Mrs. Gaskell's use of melodrama. The melodrama only becomes contemptible in the scene in which "John Barton lay a corpse in Mr. Carson's arms" (442). His dealings with Barton teach Carson the lesson he needs to know:

> . . . that a perfect understanding, and complete confidence and love, might exist between masters and men; that the truth might be recognized that the interests of one were the interests of all; that hence it was most desirable to have educated workers, capable of judging, not mere machines of ignorant men; and to have them bound to their employers by the ties of respect and affection, not by mere money bargains alone; to acknowledge the Spirit of Christ as the regulating law between both parties. (460)

What Mrs. Gaskell fails to see is that the interests of one are not the interests of all; that the class relations between employers and employed are such as to make their interests directly opposite and contradictory. Barton and Carson may be brothers as Christians; but as manufacturer and proletarian they are enemies by definition. To the extent that Mary Barton is a roman à thèse, Mrs. Gaskell is guilty of specious argumentation. At the outset Barton and Carson are known to each other only as representatives of their respective classes (in fact they do not meet until after the murder of Carson's son). Barton's hostility to Carson proceeds purely from class concerns. Carson's hostility to Barton proceeds from a personal cause, but murder, as I have pointed out, is a very unrepresentative issue to bring up. Their final recon-

ciliation is a purely personal affair, but it induces in Carson the kind of sentimental piety about class relations quoted above. In other words, Mrs. Gaskell has taken a class conflict, supplied a personal resolution and then inferred a wholly invalid conclusion about class relations.

Since Mrs. Gaskell adheres rather more closely to novelistic conventions than Disraeli does, it is worthwhile to ask whether in the end she simply falls foul of those conventions. The answer, I believe, is a partial yes. The novel was in the 1840s probably the most personal of all literary forms. Mrs. Gaskell respected that apsect of the novel, but she wanted also to use it to promulgate a particular religio-social doctrine. A large part of the problem with Mary Barton is that it combines conventionally fictional material far too closely with the overtly didactic. The result is jarring, partly because of the inherent dissonance of the combination, but more especially because Mrs. Gaskell was, in the traditional sense, a far better novelist than a social, political or even religious analyst.

North and South (1854-55) was written approximately six years after Mary Barton. More importantly, it was written at a time when the English middle class had had several years to reflect on the upheavals in France and elsewhere in 1848. North and South is a very different novel from Mary Barton, and the contrast between the two continues to elicit very different reactions from critics. T.B. Tomlinson finds the later novel an improvement on the earlier:

> North and South is I think a better novel than Mary Barton, and in part it is better because Mrs. Gaskell's

> enquiry into the phenomenon of industrial magnate versus working men, though still fairly conventional and limited, is by now slightly freer.[9]

Tomlinson goes on to say surprisingly little about exactly what he means by the increased freedom of North and South. A little later, however, he does say that "North and South is emotionally tougher than Mary Barton, and less of its energy is diverted into the masochistic pleasures of an apparently tragic separation that ends happily for the lovers."[10] Clearly Tomlinson prefers his novels without melodrama. As far as the overall quality of the two novels is concerned, Raymond Williams takes a view exactly opposite to Tomlinson's: "Mrs. Gaskell's second industrial novel, North and South, is less interesting, because the tension is less. She takes up here her actual position, as a sympathetic observer."[11]

In their overall assessments of the novels, both Tomlinson and Williams hint at the two major, related differences between Mary Barton and North and South. The first of these is that the function that had been fulfilled by the narrator in Mary Barton is largely taken over by the protagonist in North and South; namely, to provide a "link" or "bridge" between the world of the novel and that of the intended readers. Margaret Hale stands for the well-educated, well-intentioned but initially ignorant middle-class Southerner at whom the book is aimed. Thus, rather than being told, by an authoritative narrator, what life is like among the northern factory workers, the gentle reader has a ready-made representative with whom to make the journey into the dark continent. Whether this is a merit or a fault depends entirely on the reader's class perspective. Viewed entirely as propaganda, it is, as

Cazamian points out, an effective device: "North and South . . . was even more likely than Mary Barton to encourage every well-intentioned individual without affronting anyone. Its more cautious didacticism could only add to its effectiveness."[12] On the other hand, viewed as reflections of the lives of northern working people, North and South is clearly inferior to Mary Barton. There is a much greater variety of middle-class characters in North and South, and, as Eagleton and Pierce say:

> In fact the multiplicity of middle-class groupings in North and South has shifted the class balance. Although Mrs. Gaskell is now more dense and subtle in her presentation of different value groups within the middle class, she no longer attempts the long realistic descriptions of working-class life. The centre of interest and the future is now more firmly rooted within the middle class and the working-class voice is muted.[13]

By aligning the novel's point of view more closely with that of her middle-class readers, Mrs. Gaskell paid the inevitable price of rendering the novel's working-class characters at one extra remove from her few working-class readers.

The second major difference between the two novels was evidently of sufficient importance to Mrs. Gaskell for her to summarise it in the second novel's title. Animosity between the North and the South of England existed before Mrs. Gaskell and it continues to exist today, but during the Industrial Revolution the distinction between North and South was between far more than two geographical regions. I have already mentioned the superimposition of the new industrial social structure

upon the old agricultural one. Broadly speaking, in the 1840s and 50s, large sections of the North had been industrialised, while almost none of the South had. We have seen in Sybil that the northern industrial workers had no more sympathy for the agricultural workers imported from Suffolk -- "them's 'the himmigrants'" -- than for their own employers. Mrs. Gaskell shows how the middle class is similarly divided. Cazamian clearly recognises this, yet apparently fails to fully understand it:

> In North and South the industrial question is no longer the whole of the novel. Manchester -- renamed Milton in the book -- stands for the industrialized, despoiled areas which, in turn, become one of the two poles on which England turns. The opposition is between the old and the new forms of civilization, rather than merely capital and labour. The slow-moving agricultural South, pastorally idyllic, is contrasted with the feverish energy and tough austerity of the North. This profound contrast was, for the future, to be an essential part of English life and a fertile theme for moral, economic, and artistic consideration. It was quite an achievement on Mrs. Gaskell's part to have grasped this clearly so soon, and to have characterised decisively some aspects, at least, of the question.[4]

Most of this is perfectly true, but to say that "the industrial question is no longer the whole of the novel" is to fail to see the scope of the impact of industrialisation on the entire nation. The industrial magnates of the North were struggling for admittance into the social hierarchy at the same time that the squierarchy of the South was struggling for its very existence. This was a class-struggle no less real

than that between the mill-owners and the mill-workers, even though, for the most part, the antagonists refused to acknowledge it. The agriculturally-based social structure had existed for centuries before the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, so it is clear that this largely unacknowledged class-struggle was caused very directly by the advent of industrialism. Cazamian is right in praising Mrs. Gaskell for being among the first to recognise that a conflict between North and South intersected with, and profoundly influenced, the conflict between employers and employees in the North.

The protagonist is Margaret Hale, representative of the genteel, educated, but -- significantly -- not rich, southern rural middle class. She states her class loyalties and antipathies unequivocally early in the novel:

> "Gorman," said Margaret. "Are those the Gormans who made their fortune in trade at Southampton? Oh! I'm glad we don't visit them. I don't like shoppy people. I think we are far better off, knowing only cottagers and labourers, and people without pretence."
>
> * * * * *
>
> "No! I call mine a very comprehensive taste; I like all people whose occupations have to do with land; I like soldiers and sailors, and the three learned professions, as they call them. I'm sure you don't want me to admire butchers and bakers and candlestick-makers, do you, mama?" (50)

There could hardly be a more succinct statement of the snobbery of one of Margaret's time, place and class. Hers is a rigidly structured society, in which the suitability of people for her patronage is determined

absolutely by what she perceives to be social, but what are in reality economic, criteria. It is a society circumscribed by strict notions of "place" and "propriety" on the part of all its members. Shortly after the move to Milton, Dixon, the "faithful family retainer", takes on herself the task of finding a servant girl:

> Dixon's ideas of helpful girls were founded on the recollection of tidy elder scholars at Helstone school, who were only too proud to be allowed to come to the parsonage on a busy day, and treated Mrs. Dixon with all the respect, and a good deal more of fright, which they paid to Mr. and Mrs. Hale . . . . But nothing short of her faithful love for Mrs. Hale could have made her endure the rough independent way in which all the Milton girls, who made application for the servant's place, replied to her enquiries respecting their qualifications. They even went the length of questioning her back again. (108f)

This is a clear case of the clash of two opposing social structures. Economically speaking, Dixon and the girls who apply for the job are on a roughly equal footing; but nothing would induce either party to recognise in the other anything but her inferior.

Despite her blatant snobbery, Margaret is not indifferent to the plight of the poor. At Helstone she has been used to visiting them and performing acts of ladylike charity. At Milton her class assumptions are confounded when she meets Nicholas and Bessy Higgins:

> . . . at Helstone it would have been an understood thing, after the enquiries she had made, that she intended to come and call upon any poor neighbour whose name and habitation she

had asked for.

"I thought -- I meant to come and see you." She suddenly felt rather shy of offering the visit, without having any reason to give for her wish to make it, beyond a kindly interest in a stranger; it seemed all at once to take the shape of an impertinence on her part; she read this meaning too in the man's eyes.

"I'm none so fond of having strange folk in my house." But then relenting, as he saw her heightened colour, he added, "Yo're a foreigner here, as one may say, and maybe don't know many folks here, and yo've given my wench here flowers out of yo'r own hand; -- yo may come if yo like." (112f)

With a light touch, Mrs. Gaskell here points to the difference between the southern working man and his northern counterpart. Whereas the southern peasants never question the right of their "betters" to enter their homes and generally interfere in their affairs at will, Higgins has sufficient self-esteem to consider his home his own domain. In her new milieu, Margaret's assumption that she can visit him when she chooses is precisely what she begins to fear it is: an impertinence. Higgins's independence, however, does not amount to hostility. Margaret has performed a simple act of kindness in giving Bessy the flowers, and in recognition of that act, Higgins gives her permission to visit his home; the terms in which he does so, though they are perfectly friendly, make it quite clear that it is she, and not he, who should be obliged for the invitation. The forelock mentality of the South does not exist in the North.

What does exist is a steady hatred on the part of the employees for

the employers -- a fact which makes it all the more remarkable that a man like Higgins is able to distinguish between one type of "gentry" and another -- and an employer class which views its employees exactly as it views its machines and other property. So long as it performs the function required of it, nobody thinks of asking a machine when it is turned off whether its parents or children are ailing. In precisely the same way that Margaret represents the South, John Thornton, manufacturer, represents the North. Here is his statement of the case:

> "Well, in the Platonic year, it may fall out that we are all -- men, women and children -- fit for a republic: but give me a constitutional monarchy in our present state of morals and intelligence. In our infancy we require a wise despotism to govern us. Indeed, long past infancy, children and young people are the happiest under the unfailing laws of a discreet, firm authority. I agree with Miss Hale so far as to consider our people in the condition of children, while I deny that we, the masters, have anything to do with the making and keeping them so. I maintain that despotism is the best kind of government for them; so that in the hours in which I come into contact with them I must necessarily be an autocrat. I will use my best discretion -- from no humbug or philanthropic feeling, of which we have had rather too much in the North -- to make wise laws and come to just decisions in the conduct of my business -- laws and decisions which work for my own good in the first instance -- for theirs in the second; but I will neither be forced to give my reasons, nor flinch from what I have once declared to be my resolution. Let them turn out! I

shall suffer as well as they: but at the end they will find I have not bated or altered one jot." (167)

Thornton recognises his class-relations with his employees for what they are: a state of war, in which a strike is equivalent to a particularly intense battle. Under such conditions it is not surprising that he sees the philanthropy of (for instance) the southern gentry as "humbug". Otherwise his speech is nothing but hypocritical cant. His analogy between the relations of masters and men and those of parents and children is astounding in its inappropriateness -- either to actual conditions or to conditions anyone outside a novel could possible desire. While it may be true that children "are the happiest under the unfailing laws of a discreet, firm authority", it is also true -- and was as much so in the nineteenth century as it is today -- that children require from their parents love, protection and education: things which, prior to Thornton's "conversion", there is never any mention of any factory worker in Milton ever getting from his or her employer.

Unlike Mary Barton, North and South is not ~~only~~ not about working-class life in the North, it is not even about the relations between the working class and their employers under industrialism. What, above all else, it is about, is a crisis within the middle class. The rural, southern middle class did not, except at moments of particularly overt class hostility, feel threatened by the northern, industrial working class. A majority of the southern gentry must have gone through life without ever seeing a factory worker. They did, however, see uncouth northern industrialists with barbaric accents at Westminster, and even in elegant London salons. The Margaret of the early part of the novel illustrates a fairly typical reaction to such sights. But a little

reflection would show that these alien northern beings were the natural allies of the gentry. They provided, in the first instance, a buffer-zone between the gentry and the teeming millions of Manchester, Liverpool and Newcastle. If the gentry did not feel threatened by the proletariat, it was because it was the job of "those other chaps", the manufacturers, to keep them in their place. Secondly, many of the comforts enjoyed by the gentry were provided by wealth generated in the North. These first two points would have been generally conceded by the southern gentry. It took a little more insight to see that the relationship needed to become a mutual one. Mrs. Gaskell, child of the South but living in the North, had the necessary insight. She saw that the brutal way in which the workers were treated by their employers would, sooner or later, lead to open rebellion. In fact, it had done already and failed, but the working class had both time and numbers on their side. What was required, in order to maintain the existing social structure, was a subtle change of attitude on the part of the employers. Now the northern bourgeoisie, for all their energy and intelligence, were short on subtlety, but their southern counterparts had sufficient and to spare. What was required, then, was a marriage of northern economics with southern personnel management: in other words, a marriage of John Thornton and Margaret Hale. Each will exert a softening influence on the other -- she will lose her snobbery and he will lose his overt brutality -- and together they will thus tighten their grip on their privileged social and economic position.

There is no denying that this structure is there in the book -- in fact Mrs. Gaskell borrowed a fair amount of it from her friend Charlotte Brontë's novel Shirley, published five years earlier -- yet to express

it in such bald terms produces a reductive, over-schematic representation of the totality of North and South. Similarly, to attribute to Mrs. Gaskell such an amoral pragmatic set of motivations as this structure implies is to be very unfair to her. She was a compassionate woman, alive to injustice and ready to acknowledge both merit and faults where she saw them. In Mary Barton it had been her fond hope that religion would help to mitigate the suffering and strife of her age. Without (presumably) losing her own personal faith, she came to see that any solution to these problems must be more firmly rooted in economic reality. And so, in North and South, she took a step back from her subject in order to encompass a greater swathe of that reality. What she gained in comprehensiveness she lost in intensity, but she did hit on precisely those class relations which were most directly relevant to her subject. It is very much to her credit that in both her romans à thèse she consistently adhered to what she perceived to be the reality of whatever she was describing -- however askew some of her perceptions may now appear to be.

A good illustration of this is the way in which the South is presented in the novel. In the early stages Helstone appears to be a pastoral idyll. On closer inspection, however, it can be seen to be an idyll only in the mind of Margaret -- in contrast, first with the elegant vapidities of Harley Street, and later with the ugliness and grime of Milton. But relations between rich and poor within the old social structure, can be, if possible, even more brutal than those at Milton. This point is made humorously in Dixon's aside to Margaret:

> "It's the good old Beresford blood. Why, the last Sir John but two shot his steward down, there where he stood, just for

> telling him that he'd racked the tenants, and he'd racked the tenants till he could get no more money off them than he could get skin off a flint." (178)

And even in present-day Helstone itself, when Margaret returns to visit after the death of her father, she is appalled by the ignorance and savagery of the roasting of a cat for some superstitious purpose (477f). She has, from time to time, comforted the dying Bessy Higgins with descriptions of the countryside that Bessy has never seen. But when, after her death, Bessy's father tells Margaret of his plan to take Boucher's children South, Margaret's honesty compels her, first, to warn him about the very low wages earned by agricultural labourers, and then to go on to say:

> "I owe it to you -- since it's my way of talking that has set you off on this idea -- to put it all clear before you. You would not bear the dulness of the life; you don't know what it is; it would eat you away like rust. Those that have lived there all their lives, are used to soaking in the stagnant waters. They labour on, from day to day, in the great solitude of steaming fields -- never speaking or lifting up their poor, bent, downcast heads. The hard spadework robs their brains of life; the sameness of their toil deadens their imagination; they don't care to meet to talk over thoughts and speculations, even of the weakest, wildest kind, after their work is done; they go home brutishly tired, poor creatures! caring for nothing but food and rest. You could not stir them up into any companionship, which you get in a town as plentiful as the air you breathe, whether it be good or bad -- and

> that I don't know; but I do know that you of all men are not one to bear a life among such labourers. What would be peace to them, would be eternal fretting to you." (382)

There is a convincing touch of psychological realism in the way in which Margaret is prepared to undermine her own idyllic fantasy for the sake of someone she cares for who has been taking it too seriously.

There is some serious debate on the subject of Trades Unions between Higgins, Margaret and Thornton, resulting, predictably, in a very unfavourable impression (though perhaps not quite so bad as the one given in Mary Barton), but all three are shown to have points of view worth listening to, in contrast to the sublimely irrelevant pronouncement of the unworldly Mr. Hale on the subject --

> "Oh!" said Mr. Hale, sighing, "your Union in itself would be beautiful, glorious, -- it would be Christianity itself -- if it were but for an end which affected the good of all, instead of that merely of one class as opposed to another." (296)

-- which is roughly equivalent to saying: "Oh, wouldn't war be a beautiful thing, if only both armies fought on the same side!" There is a good chance that a number of Mrs. Gaskell's well-intentioned contemporaries may have recognised in this rigorously conditional blessing a parody of their own views on the subject. But, if they had read up to the point in the novel at which it occurs, it is to be hoped they would realise its inadequacy.

The problem in North and South is not the same as that in Mary Barton. Of course both novels arise from the overall phenomenon of

industrialisation, but the context of Mary Barton is much narrower than that of North and South. The earlier novel, centred in the depression of 1839-42, deals with the immediate reality of poverty. That, together with the sincerity and authenticity of the descriptions of working-class life in its early chapters, is what gives it its intensity. Essentially the problem is this: how is any decent life to be made possible for working-class people in Manchester? There are two complicating factors. The first is the theme that Mrs. Gaskell was to explore more fully in Ruth: that of prostitution. Esther's rather shadowy presence throughout the book serves as a continuous warning of what might happen to a poor girl such as Mary if she fails to guard against the attentions of the rich and cynical Harry Carson. In the end Mary's virtue, aided by her love for Jem Wilson, triumphs. This is not incredible, but it does raise a doubt about the extent to which the details of Mary's behaviour are representative of her counterparts in reality. The second factor is the issue of criminality; the taint of culpability attached to a man who, though proved innocent, has stood trial for murder. Jem, although he has been popular with both his employer and his fellow-employees, although he is an outstanding workman, loses his job as a direct result of having been accused of murder. However unlikely the union-inspired murder may have been, the issue of false or mistaken accusation is one which does recur from time to time. The solution is emigration to Canada: to start a new life in a new country. But it is never made entirely clear to which problem this is intended to be the solution. Most obviously, it is the solution to the problems of a man who has been accused of murder and a woman who is the daughter of the real murderer. But that is hardly the central issue of the book. As I have said, the

reconciliation between Barton and Carson and the "reform" of the latter impose too heavy a tax on the reader's credulity. If Carson's improvements are to have any efficacy, it is hard to see why Jem and Mary have to come to Canada to achieve a happy ending. My suggestion is that Mrs. Gaskell herself found it hard to believe that a happy ending was attainable for them in England. The charge of murder against Jem and Mary's taint of being a murderer's daughter serve as a convenient device to provide an extra incentive for them to leave the country. Thus the solution is external to the provenance of the book; and even the problem which it addresses is external to the book's main concerns. Mrs. Gaskell's perceived need to furnish a happy ending (i.e. to work within the novelistic tradition) has thereby done damage both to the verisimilitude of her novel and to the thesis of her roman à thèse.

It is easy to see three ways in which the ending of Mary Barton might have been made less happy, and the book as a whole more amenable to twentieth-century tastes. Firstly, Mary might have succumbed to Harry Carson and thus have met a fate like Esther's; secondly, she might have failed to reach Will Wilson in time to save Jem from the gallows; and thirdly, there might have been no reconciliation between Barton and Carson. From a twentieth-century point of view, the first and third of these would probably have constituted "improvements" in the book; they would have been the natural outcome of the situation Mrs. Gaskell is describing. Yet it is from the second one that the happy ending most naturally proceeds, and it is precisely this possibility -- that of mistaken prosecution -- which has least to do with the problem that the book as a whole addresses. The constraint of providing a happy ending is therefore not a superficial one, a matter of grafting a false conclu-

sion onto a set of valid premises; it reaches deep into the structure of the book and forces Mrs. Gaskell to erect a structure which, while it is viable within the tradition of the novel, falsifies some of the experience to which she is otherwise so true.

What Canada is to Mary Barton, Mr. Bell's legacy is to North and South. Mr. Bell is everybody's favourite rich uncle. He is kind and charming to the point of knowing exactly when to die, which he does to the considerable inconvenience of his otherwise healthy self. Despite his occasional appearances, he is as external to the story as Canada is to that of Mary Barton. Yet, in striking similarity to the structure I have just been describing in the earlier novel, Mrs. Gaskell has to create a problem for his legacy to solve. Throughout most of the book, Thornton is one of the most prosperous mill-owners in Milton. Towards the end there is a general depression, which forces some of the masters out of business. But if anyone at all is to survive --- and every depression in trade must have had its survivors as well as its casualties -- it is likely to be Thornton. Yet Mrs. Gaskell forces him to go under with the rest. Why? The only answer furnished by the text is so that Margaret can rescue him with the wealth she has recently acquired from Mr. Bell. What Mrs. Gaskell wanted to show was that humane and effective management of the urban proletariat could only be achieved by a marriage of the northern and southern branches of the middle class. Being herself in the somewhat ambivalent position of a Southerner living in the midst of northern industrialism, she must have been particularly anxious to show her northern peers that the old southern middle class had a real and valuable contribution to make. The marriage must therefore be one of equality. And, given the preoccupation of the northern

mill-owners with what she calls "the cash nexus", what more effective way of equalising the marriage than by giving Margaret a large sum of money to contribute to it? Northern readers might consider Margaret's philanthropy so much "humbug", but they were not likely to fail to see the value of cash, while southern readers, who, as Jane Austen bears ample witness, were by no means indifferent to the value of money, were more likely to be alive to the humanitarian and paternalistic values represented by Margaret.

Once agair the solution is external to the problem. Mr. Bell's legacy does not seem likely to save future Bessy Higgins's from dying of industrial diseases, or to prevent future John Bouchers from committing suicide. And even if it were likely to do these things, there would be a limit to the number of enlightened Manchester mill-owners who could expect to marry southern heiresses and thereby realise their visionary schemes for providing lunch for their employees.

In both of these novels, Mrs. Gaskell is faced with a dilemma. One horn is the traditional novel, which demands a degree of versimilitude and a happy ending. The other is her didactic purpose in writing the industrial novels, which demands that her characters and situations be representative of their counterparts in reality. On the face of it, the novel tradition is quite capable of harmonising with the didactic purpose, with the exception of the happy ending. But as we have seen, happy endings are not merely grafted on at the last minute; they require beginnings deep in the structure of the book. And that in turn interferes with the representative requirement of the didactic novel. The novel <u>per se</u> has no problem with exceptional characters or exceptional stories; so long as they are credible, they are quite permissible. But

in order to address the social problems she deals with in these two novels, Mrs. Gaskell has to make her individuals representative of their respective classes. And in order to provide the problems with solutions which deserve to be taken seriously, she has to create stories which are not only credible for individuals, but also likely for whole classes of individuals. Her ultimate failure to do these things is not an indication of her weakness as a novelist; it is an indication that the individualistic medium of the novel will require radical changes before it can successfully tackle broad social issues such as those of industrialism.

Chapter Three

Charlotte Brontë

Unlike Sybil, Mary Barton and North and South, Shirley is a novel which is not always assigned a place within the Condition of England canon. There are probably two reasons for this. One is that, although it was written during the era of Chartism, it deals with an earlier period of industrial unrest, that of Luddism. The other is that it takes in a number of social issues other than that of industrial conflict, and this has prompted several critics -- notably Asa Briggs -- to accuse it of "disunity". My contention is that both of these reasons proceed from critical myopia, and that Shirley, far from being apocryphal, deserves to be placed at the very centre of the canon.

One of the ways in which most of the Condition of England novels differed from the majority of nineteenth-century novels -- at least, of those that are still read -- is in their contemporaneity. The typical nineteenth-century novel is set in a period several decades prior to that of its composition. The Condition of England novels, on the other hand, are set in periods very close to those of their composition. Charlotte Brontë, it seems, felt unable to deal adequately with contemporary issues in a novel. The following is what she wrote to George Smith, her publisher:

> You will see that Villette touches on no matter of public interest. I cannot write books handling the topics of the day; it is of no use trying . . . . To manage these great matters rightly they must be long and practically studied -- their bearings known intimately, and their evils felt

> genuinely; they must not be taken up as a business matter and a trading speculation.[1]

Brontë, as is well-known, was a peculiarly self-effacing writer, and this modesty should perhaps not be taken too seriously. Whether or not she was able to handle them in a novel, she was certainly intensely interested in the political events of her own day, and it will be worthwhile to look for other possible reasons for her decision to write -- ostensibly -- about Luddism rather than Chartism.

Terry Eagleton claims that Shirley is about neither Luddism nor Chartism, but about internal conflicts within the ruling class.

> The main ideological thrust of Shirley is to re-create and celebrate that class-consolidation between squire and mill-owner, achieved as it was by the catalyst of working-class militancy; and it is for this reason that the novel is at once backdated to Luddism and relevant to its own time. What interests Charlotte about Luddism is hardly at all the nature of working-class protest, but its effect on the complex alignment of interests within the ruling class; and that historical closing of ranks is obviously relevant to the problem of how to confront Chartism.[2]

The most significant social/political conflict in Shirley is not between workers and capitalists, but between Tories (Helstone) and Whigs (Robert Moore). Both of these belong to privileged classes, but their community of interests has been temporarily obscured by the war with France and, particularly, by the Orders in Council which prevent the manufacturers from exporting their goods. Meanwhile, both groups are threatened by the dispossessed workers and unemployed, and must consequently

reorganise themselves in order to deal with the external threat. This "lesson from history" has obvious applications to 1848, the year in which Shirley was published.

If there is another reason why Shirley is set in the past, it is one which is closely connected with the problem of the novel's unity. I have already said that most nineteenth-century novels are set a few decades in the past. I have also mentioned two novels which, if the term "Condition of England" had not come to refer specifically to the group of novels under consideration here, would certainly deserve to have that epithet appended to them. Both Bleak House and Middlemarch are thorough-going analyses of the state of English society, and both are set in periods before those of their composition. In order to aspire to the comprehensiveness which both of these novels achieve, a certain distance from the subject matter would seem to be, if not indispensable, then at least highly desirable. The Condition of England novels focus on the individual trees of industrial conflict, whereas Dickens and Eliot put those trees into their contextual forest of English society as a whole. Their forests, unfortunately, are so large that these particular trees are no longer discernible. What Brontë does in Shirley is to create a forest without altogether losing sight of the trees. Naturally, that invites comparison with Sybil, the only other Condition of England novel to attempt such comprehensiveness. But the similarity is a superficial one. Disraeli was essentially a tourist in the country at large; Brontë had an intimate knowledge of the one small area of which she was writing, and she used that knowledge to create a vividly-realised microcosm of the whole country. Although the action of the novel never strays more than a few miles from Briarfield, Brontë

uses the idea of North and South in much the same way as Mrs. Gaskell. The major difference between the two novelists in this respect is that Gaskell, born in the South but living in the North, sees virtues and vices on both sides, whereas Brontë, a life-long Northerner, sees only virtue in the North and only vice in the South. But the essential conflict within the ruling class, between the old hierarchy and the new -- represented, in Shirley, as land-owner and mill-owner -- is equally present in both novels.

Readers of the more generally-celebrated Jane Eyre and Villette seem to find it hard to know what to make of the more varied content of Shirley. Here, for instance, is part of Robert B. Martin's response to the novel:

> All the action of Shirley takes place within the careful [sic] described confines of Mr. Helstone's parish or its immediate neighbourhood, and characters who go further afield than Nunnely Priory simply drop out of the story until their return to the circumscribed pocket of Yorkshire that is the centre of the story. It is a locale of painstaking realism with its roots in the Annual Register rather than in the Gothic tale. There are actual working-men speaking broad Yorkshire as they dye cotton or lose their jobs, landladies worry about the rent, country visiting is accompanied by slices of ham (nowhere else in Miss Brontë's pages is there so much description of food), the number of shillings needed to save out-of-work labourers from starvation is carefully calculated, preserves burn when molasses is used instead of sugar. Against such a background of Monday morning, outsize emotions and

> inflated rhetoric loom in fustian, and the moon is suddenly seen to be made of country cheese.[3]

By implicitly comparing Shirley to Jane Eyre and Villette, Martin has betrayed himself, not only into some "inflated rhetoric" of his own, but also into a degree of factual inaccuracy. Brontë's "research" for Shirley came, not from the Annual Register, but from the memories of her older acquaintances and the files of the Leeds Mercury, and nobody in Shirley dyes cotton; although we hear about the workers, the actual work they do remains a closed book. Shirley is certainly unsatisfactory as a Gothic tale, but the real question raised by Martin's comments is whether that of the Gothic tale is the correct perspective from which to view Shirley, and the answer, it seems to me, is clearly not.

A more helpful perspective is offered by Jacob Korg in an article in which he addresses the problem of unity in Shirley, and finds the novel rather more unified than do the majority of critics:

> Shirley's theme is, of course, the romantic egoism which is the germinating impulse of all Charlotte Brontë's work; the characters seem to divide themselves into three well-defined groups, each with a different attitude towards this theme. Closely identified with it are the romantics themselves, the little group of characters who choose to be guided by feeling rather than custom or common sense; these include Caroline Helstone, Shirley, the Moore brothers and most of the children (though not the parents) of the Yorke family. The ordinary Yorkshiremen -- both mill-workers and gentry, such as Mr. Helstone, the elder Yorkes, and Joe Scott -- are plain, sturdy folk, too unimaginative to share the romanticism of the heroes

> and heroines and therefore at some distance from the novel's thematic center. Most distant of all are the people from outside Yorkshire, the effete and overcivilized foreigners like the curates and the Sympsons, whose emotions run shallow and who are motivated by convention rather than feeling. Thus, the novel may be pictured as a design whose central point is the romantic doctrine, with the three groups of characters, each having its own set of values and beliefs, forming concentric circles at various distances from this center.[4]

Later in his article, Korg further defends the romantic perspective from which he views Shirley by attacking the possibility that it can be read as a social novel:

> Charlotte Brontë's treatment of the mill-workers, in portraying their suffering sympathetically but denying them the right to act for their betterment as a class, is not so inconsistent as it may seem. Explicitly refusing to become involved in a social novel, she prefers to maintain the point of view that action is meaningful only when it springs from sincere individual desire.[5]

If a refusal to allow the workers the right to act for their betterment as a class is a feature of romantic individualism, then all of the novelists under consideration in the present work are romantic individualists. There may well be an element of truth in that, but in so far as Sybil, Mary Barton, North and South, Alton Locke and Felix Holt are universally acknowledged to be social novels, it does not seem a particularly helpful statement to make. Korg's insights can be helpful, however, if we see Brontë's romantic individualism as the equivalent of

what Cazamian sees as Disraeli's social Toryism or Fryckstedt as Mrs. Gaskell's challenge to "Christian" England. There is no doubt that Brontë is a romantic individualist. But to say that with reference to Shirley is inadequate; in that novel, she brings her romantic individualism to bear on a set of problems that are specifically social in nature. To that extent, Shirley is certainly a social novel, a fact which is in no wise incompatible with Brontë's romantic point of view.

Although the characters in the novel are connected to one another by their respective positions with reference to Brontë's central romanticism, Korg's article does not entirely solve the problem of unity in Shirley; it remains to be seen precisely what Luddites have to do with governesses. Igor Webb sees the problem as essentially illusory:

> The special history of women . . . is set in relation to the history of the working class, of the landed gentry, the laissez-faire industrialists, and the middle ranks. The ideological ambition of the novel is to discover and affirm in these interconnected histories a single source of value. The flawed rendering of Luddism damages the novel, but it is not on the basis of Luddism alone that one can either fully understand or judge Shirley.[6]

The single source of value of which Webb speaks is of course the individual. For Brontë people have value only as individuals, not as classes. But that is not to say that she ignores the issue of class; far from it, she provides what is probably the most thorough-going analysis of the class structure to be found in any of the novels presently under consideration. Although she is far from being a "leveller", Brontë does see the artificality of the class structure and some of the damage it

does to human potential, and her analysis exposes some of its inherent contradictions. What makes this analysis particularly interesting in retrospect is that it shows a society in transition, at a point where the land-based social hierarchy and the capital-based class structure coexist on terms of near-equality. And it is in showing this process at work that Brontë ultimately provides the unity that so many critics find lacking in Shirley; apparently disparate social groups are seen to suffer to much the same extent from the repressive and stultifying structures within which they are forced to live.

Brontë covers virtually the whole range of the English social hierarchy from the highest to the lowest. It will be a revealing exercise merely to list the components of the hierarchy, together with their representative characters in the novel. To start at the top then: the aristocracy: Sir Philip Nunnely; the gentry: Shirley herself and her relatives, the Sympsons; the industrialists: Robert Moore and Mr. Yorke; the clerics: Mr. Helstone, Mr. Hall and Dr. Boultby; the curates: Mr. Sweeting, Mr. Malone and Mr. Donne; the old maids: Miss Ainley and Miss Mann; the workers: Joe Scott and William Farren; and the unemployed, who have no permanent individualised representative but in which capacity William Farren does temporary service. Several things should be evident from this list. First, that the categories are not watertight. Not only is William Farren variously a worker and unemployed, but Mr. Yorke might as easily have been placed among the gentry as among the industrialists; his family belongs to the gentry, but he has taken up manufacturing. And that brings us on to the second point. The list is a long one because it includes some social groups that belong to the emergent

nineteenth-century class structure, and others that belong to the earlier hierarchical structure which it was in the process of replacing. Since the gentry are a rank, and industrialists, a class, Mr. Yorke can be seen to be making the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century by acquiring a class. The fact that the list superimposes the two structures accounts for any difficulty there may be in deciding which of any two groups should have precedence over the other: the mill-owner has precedence over the operative, as the lord of the manor has over the farm-labourer, but it is difficult to compare the representative of one structure with that of the other. And thirdly, there are some notable omissions from the list. Apart from their own specialised group of "old maids", there is only one woman, and no matter how approximately the two structures are superimposed, it is impossible to assign any specific place in the hierarchy to tutors and governesses. In this connexion it may well be significant that there is no permanent male representative of the unemployed in the novel; they may be grouped together with all tutors and governesses and most women, as "the dispossessed". Tutors and governesses are denied the right to any emotional or family life of their own, while the unemployed and most women are denied the right to the economic activity which is the sole means by which they might exchange their "rank" for a "class". That is why the name of Caroline Helstone, one of the central characters in the novel, does not appear on the list. I will look more closely now at each of the groups mentioned.

Sir Philip Nunnely, the only aristocrat in Shirley, is the merest cipher of a character. It is hard to imagine two attributes more damning for a character in a novel than to be good natured and a bad poet.

His function in the novel is merely to demonstrate that Shirley will no more swerve from her resolve for the sake of her "superiors" than for the sake of her "equals", and incidentally to elicit further comedy from Mr. Sympson. It is true that Brontë had little acquaintance with the aristocracy, and it may very well be that it is for motives of prudence that she refrains from any serious attempt to write about them. But it is equally consistent with her limited delineation of the amiable poetaster to infer that she recognised that even in 1812 the aristocracy had had its day, that by its very lack of any significant economic activity it had no part to play in the new industrial England. The precise extent to which she recognised that fact will have to remain an open question.

Only very slightly further down the hierarchy come the gentry. They are distinguished from the aristocracy chiefly by their lack of titles -- not a very substantial difference -- and in manners they are inclined to ape their immediate superiors. They are frequently satirised. "English country ladies", we are told, for instance,

> have a certain expression stamped on their features, which seems to say, "I know -- I do not boast of it -- but I <u>know</u> that I am the standard of what is proper; let everyone therefore whom I approach, or who approaches me, keep a sharp look-out, for wherein they differ from me -- be the same in dress, manner, opinion, principle, or practice -- therein they are wrong." (312)

Well may we be reminded of Lady Catherine de Bourgh. More specifically, Sam and the tribe of Wynne are introduced into the novel to furnish examples of how not to behave. At the school feast, for instance:

> For Miss Keeldar's comfort, Mr. Sam Wynne inducted himself into the very vacancy she had kept for Moore, planting himself solidly on her gown, her gloves and her handkerchief. Mr. Sam was one of the objects of her aversion; and the more so because he showed serious symptoms of an aim at her hand. The old gentleman, too, had publicly declared that the Fieldhead estate and the De Walden estate were delightfully contagious . . . . (383)

But the epitome of gentrified, self-seeking narrow-mindedness is Mr. Sympson. When Sam Wynne's symptoms of passionate and sentimental attachment have become so acute as to induce his father to apply on his behalf for the position of husband to Miss Keeldar, Mr. Sympson splutters his approval of the candidate: "'Decidedly suitable! Most proper!' pronounced Mr. Sympson. 'A fine unencumbered estate; real substance; good connexions. It must be done'" (443). Mr. Sympson here evinces the traditional aversion of the English gentry to, on the one hand, the sentimental view of marriage, and, on the other, verbs and personal pronouns. In only sixteen words he has performed an act of linguistic self-demolition; the remainder of his role in the novel is mere commentary on that act. But before leaving him entirely to his own devices, it is worth looking briefly against what groups of people Mr. Sympson's prejudices are directed. The first answer must be: women; he would be unlikely to see any need to set himself up as marriage-broker on behalf of a nephew. When Shirley allows him to think she plans to marry Robert Moore, his expostulation is "'The Flemish knave! The low trader!'" (518). Since women, foreigners and persons belonging to social groups he considers lower than his own constitute all but a tiny

minority of humankind, the final answer must be: nearly everyone.

However, Brontë's portrayal of the gentry is by no means all satirical. After all, Shirley herself belongs to their number. Like Mr. Yorke, she is a transitional figure, for a large proportion of her income must come from Hollows Mill, but her position in society is defined by her family. We are told: "There were mercantile families in the district boasting twice the income, but the Keeldars, by virtue of their antiquity, and the distinction of lords of the manor, took the precedence of all" (208). Brontë sets out quite clearly the apparent paradox that the higher income does not necessarily mean the higher position in society. The reason for this is the tenacity with which old and ossifying patterns of thought were clung to amid the rise of industrial capitalism. Shirley, of course, has a much larger function in the novel than merely to represent the gentry; she tells us more about being a woman than about being lady of the manor. But in so far as she is lady of the manor, it is, paradoxically, her paternalistic values that are of the most importance. Her easy-going manner with the poor, and her charitable provision for them are vital qualities which the capitalists lack and which they must learn from the gentry.

These capitalists -- in the West Riding, mainly mill-owners -- were the people who saw that, regardless of whether or not anybody liked it, technological innovation and expanding industry were the inevitable direction in which the country was heading. There is a case for saying that there is no representative of this class in Shirley. Shirley herself and Mr. Yorke are both recruits from the gentry, and, in Robert Moore, Brontë had to reconcile the roles of romantic hero and hard-headed capitalist. That reconciliation is achieved, if at all, only

after several very traumatic events in Moore's life, culminating in his being shot and severely wounded. It is in the early part of the novel that he comes closest to being a representative of his class, and as such he is almost universally hated: "And it perhaps rather agreed with Moore's temperament than otherwise to be generally hated; especially when he believed the thing for which he was hated a right and expedient thing . . . " (63). This is only one of many equivocations over the character of Moore. The thing for which he is hated is the direct result of setting his own commercial interests above any other considerations, and, contrary to the implication of the sentence quoted, there is nothing admirable or heroic about that. He is again portrayed in a heroic light, when, after the successful defence of his mill against the attack of the Luddites, he ensures that proper care and medical attention are given to the wounded rioters. In the real incident on which that episode is based, the attack on Rawfolds Mill, Mr. Cartwright, the mill-owner, is said to have withheld medical attention and even water from the wounded rioters unless they turned informer.[7] Brontë is writing a novel, not a historical account, and is consequently under no obligation to stick to the facts, but such historical evidence as there is does not suggest that Moore's actions are typical of his class. Elsewhere we are given hints that he is really a kindly man. His intercession with Mr. Yorke to find work for William Farren is one such hint, but we are left wondering whether someone who employs cheap child labour while the unemployed parents of those children are unable to feed them adequately can really be a kindly man. Not only does Brontë try to convince us that Moore is not as bad as he seems to be; she also makes excuses for his being as bad as he is:

> it is not to be expected that he would deliberate much as to whether his advance was or was not prejudicial to others. Not being a native, or for any length of time a resident of the neighbourhood, he did not sufficiently care when the new inventions threw the old workpeople out of employ: he never asked himself where those to whom he no longer paid weekly wages found daily bread; and in this negligence he only resembled thousands besides, on whom the starving poor of Yorkshire seemed to have a closer claim. (61)

What this amounts to in effect is that Mooore, being half-Belgian, could not recognise starvation when he saw it; others in his position, being English, could, and that he is therefore less to blame than they are. The best that can be said about that is that Brontë put her experiences in Belgium to better use in Villette.

There are some respects in which Brontë was able to make Moore the kind of character she wanted him to be without making him such a curious specimen of his class. She has him say to Caroline, for instance, "'You are mistaken if you think I am anxious to curry favour with rich and great people. I only want means -- a position -- a career'" (110). His manner, moreover, suits his words: "You would not have thought, to look at him, that he was a poor, struggling man seated beside a rich woman; the calm of equality stilled his aspect: perhaps that calm, too, reigned in his soul." (306). Robert Moore and Mr. Sympson belong, not merely to different social groups, but to different epochs. To "get on in the world" requires a very different kind of insensitivity from that embodied by Mr. Sympson. To Mr. Sympson, only a very limited number of people can be useful; he can therefore afford to be prejudiced against

most others. To Moore, almost anyone might prove useful -- as investor, customer, employee, wife -- so he must either already possess or cultivate the ability to be at ease with all kinds of persons.

That he is also endowed with finer feelings is more credible in his personal relations than in his dealings with his workforce. There is evidence throughout the book of his feelings towards Caroline, but of course it is to Shirley that he proposes first. He sees that proposal purely in the light of a business proposition, and that remains true even if we ascribe to him the noblest of motives for not marrying Caroline. For a romantic hero to propose to the wrong woman for financial reasons is, as all readers of nineteenth-century novels will know, an unpardonable breach of decorum. Charlotte Brontë knows that too, which is why she does not allow her readers to discover the circumstance until Moore's "confession" to Mr. Yorke, when he has already had time to learn from his mistake.

It is only when he has learned all his lessons and been punished by mental and physical suffering for his earlier misdeeds, that Moore is allowed to claim his reward: Caroline. In fact the double marriage with which the book ends is rather a complex affair. Shirley and Robert Moore are already economically linked in the relation of landlady and tenant. The land-owning gentry and the factory-owning capitalists are similarly linked. Both groups are possessors, and it is in the interest of neither to lose what they possess. But their community of interests has been obscured by the war. The gentry are in favour of the war because patriotism is an integral part of their system of belief. The capitalists are against it because the Orders in Council prevent them from exporting their goods. When the Orders in Council are revoked, the

capitalists no longer have any pragmatic reason for opposing the war; and they are not the kind of people to oppose it for any other sort of reason. They can therefore effect a reconciliation with their natural allies, the gentry, and both groups can turn their attention to their natural enemies, the dispossessed. The dispossessed have more immediate concerns than what is happening in Spain or Russia; they need food, or the means to buy it. The capitalists, who have been really frightened by the Luddites, now understand that it will be much cheaper for them to supply the needs of the dispossessed than to risk further unrest -- in other words, experience has finally taught them what the gentry already knew -- and this, of course, happily coincides with their need for more workers now that they can sell their stockpiles of goods and get on with manufacturing more. But, shocked as they have been by what the Luddites were capable of doing, they understand now, as they did not before, that it is very much a matter of expediency for them to be rather more generous than hitherto, to put a thin smear of icing on the workers' share of the cake. In particularly enlightened cases, this may even involve a recognition that they and the dispossessed belong to the same species, that they have a common world of feeling; in other words, that the dispossessed man is the capitalist's brother. And in Shirley, so he is; his name is Louis Moore. As I have said, Robert Moore and Shirley are already linked economically; there is no need for them to marry each other to bring about a reconciliation. The link between Louis Moore and Caroline is more tenuous, but they do have in common that they are dispossessed; there is therefore no point in their marrying each other. So in each case a possessor marries a member of the dispossessed, thereby, in a sense, repossessing them. The underlying structures which brought

about the conflict remain unchanged; a point which Brontë made clearer by setting the novel in the past. But for a while, at least, some kind of mutual accommodation has been reached, and for as long as that accommodation lasts, people can be nice to each other again. As Robert Moore says to Caroline:

> "Such a Sunday-school as you will have, Cary! such collections as you will get! such a day-school as you and Shirley, and Miss Ainley, will have to manage between you! The mill shall find salaries for a master and mistress, and the Squire or the Clothier shall give a treat one a-quarter!" (598)

This Moore's utopia is all coziness and very little substance. To give him his due, he seems to be aware of this himself. His last words in the novel are: "'Extravagant day-dreams . . . yet perhaps we may realize some of them. Meantime, the dew is falling: Mrs. Moore, I shall take you in'" (598). Since he and Caroline are not outside at the time, we are left wondering in what sense he means to take her in.

The next step down the hierarchy brings us to the clergy. The fact that, although they receive a salary for performing certain duties, they do not produce anything, places them squarely within the old structure that was withering away, though this has not become entirely clear until our own century. In 1812 their influence, and their power to use it for good or ill, were very considerable. In Shirley the Dissenting churches are closely linked with Luddism, and their only representative is the crazy Michael Hartley. Brontë's hatred of Catholicism is one of the more unpalatable aspects of Villette. For her, all that is proper in religion emanates from the Church of England. Anyone who opposes that

church must be at best misguided. But she is by no means uncritical. As the famous opening sentence of the novel indicates, she has a poor opinion of curates. Of the three who appear in Shirley, two are from the South of England and one is Irish. She does not absolutely make this an excuse for their neglect of their duties, but she does extract a fair amount of humour from their ignorance of Yorkshire manners. She endows each of them with a number of individual qualities, but essentially they remain "the curate chorus". As such they are open to the charge that they are irrelevant to the rest of the book. In fact, they are no more irrelevant than the chorus to a Greek play, a point which is demonstrated adeptly by Igor Webb. He begins by quoting from the passage in which the three curates are dining together at Mrs. Gale's house. Malone has just cried out for "more bread":

> Mrs. Gail offered the loaf.
>
> "Cut it, woman," said her guest; and the "woman" cut it accordingly. Had she followed her inclinations, she would have cut the parson also; her Yorkshire soul revolted absolutely from his manner of command. (42)

Webb goes on to say:

> Malone's impious arrogance marks him as a stranger to Yorkshire. In Shirley Charlotte Brontë attributes to Yorkshire a traditional mutual respect and commonality among classes; allowing for a rough independence but also for a fixed hierarchy, this commonality is posited in the novel as the basis on which harmony, a pious, vital community life, might be regained. Moreover, this once extant harmony, although partly violated in the novel by the Yorkshire people themselves, is

> most crudely violated by any number of outsiders. Prominent in this alien invasion, the curates expose themselves as unworthy by their crass intolerance, their boorishness, their scorn for the claims of human moral equality. Brontë pointedly underlines, in the opening scene, the false distinction between servant and guest. The quotation marks around "woman" indicate, as well, that she intends us to notice, beyond the false distinctions of class, the equally false distinctions between the sexes. Far from an irrelevancy, then, the curates dramatize one aspect of the external threat to Yorkshire and, chiefly, a certain male selfcenteredness, a pervasive male chauvinism (to use our language).[8]

Despite Webb's very different starting point, this comes close to Korg's romantic reading of the novel. From either point of view, the curates are thematically indispensable.

Unlike the curates, the three rectors are more sharply individualised. Even so, their personalities are subservient to their function of demonstrating the range of types possible within the Church. At either extreme are the pompous Dr. Boultby and the saintly Mr. Hall. They represent the worst and the best the Church has to offer. Somewhere in between is the more interesting figure of Mr. Helstone. He is a clergyman who has missed his vocation as a soldier, and he is more remarkable for his political opinions than for his religious doctrines. He is an old High Tory, and as such he has nothing but contempt for those who belong to the new structure. Before the marriage of land and capital is even a courtship, Shirley asks him what Robert Moore's politics are. "'Those of a tradesman!'" he replies, "narrow, selfish and unpatrio-

tic'" (214). But after the Battle of Hollows Mill, which has demonstrated the desirability of that alliance, he says to Shirley:

> "Your tenant Moore . . . has won my approbation. A cooler commander I would not wish to see, nor a more determined. Besides, the man has shown sound judgement and good sense. . . he has hitherto been very unpopular in the neighbourhood; but, mark my words, the tide of opinion will now take a turn in his favour: people will now find out that they have not appreciated him, and will hasten to remedy their error; and he, when he perceives the public disposed to acknowledge his merits, will show a more gracious mien than that with which he has hitherto favoured us." (354)

It will be some time before he is fully vindicated, but these words of Mr. Helstone regarding his future nephew-in-law do turn out to have been prophetic. He has hitherto identified his own interests with those of the gentry; now for the first time he recognises the need for an alliance with the capitalists. Mr. Hall will continue to do what he perceives to be his duty under any regime; but Mr. Helstone acknowledges the need for the old structure to come to an accommodation with the new.

The next step down the hierarchy brings us to the old maids, but they are accorded even this lowly status only because they are considered ladies rather than women. They are not defined by their economic activity; therefore they are not a class. Being neither workers nor breeders, they are useless to the capitalist structure; it is small wonder, then, that most of them spend their lives in earnest attempts to make themselves useful. In fact, they are a sort of waste material, generated by an attitude that sees human beings, particularly women, as

commodities, to be dumped out of sight when they are of no further use. To become such a piece of human refuse is the fate that awaits any young lady who loses in the marriage game, and the fate of old maids is inseparable from that of women in general. There will be more to say on that subject later, but for the present I will pass on to the workers and the unemployed.

The only individual representatives of this class are Joe Scott and William Farren. Joe Scott is an overseer, Robert Moore's "right-hand man", and as such he cannot be said to be typical of the working class. Farren, on the other hand, is a working man pure and simple, except that when we meet him he is unemployed. It is by being shown the domestic economy of his household that we learn of the real conditions under which the unemployed lived. But Farren is rather a domestic beast than a Luddite. After his initial conversatipn with Robert Moore, we are told that:

> By speaking kindly to William Farren, -- who was a very honest man, without hatred or envy of those more happily circumstancec than himself; thinking it no hardship and no injustice to be forced to live by labour; disposed to be honourably content if he could but get work to do, -- Moore might have made a friend. (157)

Moore will of course learn from his mistake; when he has learned the expediency of making such friends he will provide a Sunday-school for Farren's children. But what is most interesting is the way in which Farren himself is described. Brontë's respect for the working class is of rather a peculiar nature. Farren, she says, is "disposed to be honourably content". The juxtaposition of "honourably" and "content"

would seem to indicate that he is honourable only in so far as he is content with his lot. He is of course allowed to be discontented while he is unemployed, as long as he does nothing more about it than a little ineffectual pleading. Those who do try to do something about their plight are made the subjects of plain abuse. Michael Hartley is a half-crazed alcoholic. We never see the leaders of the Luddites, but we are told that:

> They were strangers: emissaries from the large towns. Most of them were not members of the operative class: they were chiefly "downdraughts", men always in debt and often in drink -- men who had nothing to lose, and much -- in the way of character, cash and cleanliness -- to gain. (370)

Later on disaffection is personnified: "Disaffection . . . was still heard muttering to himself. He swore ominous oaths over the drugged beer of alehouses, and drank strange toasts in fiery British gin" (493). We should by now be familiar with the Condition of England novelists' device of externalising the undesirable. In the light of Korg's assertion that Yorkshire is the "romantic centre" of the novel, it is not surprising that the device is particularly pronounced in Shirley. Just as the curates come from Ireland or the South of England and Robert Moore from Belgium, so the Luddite leaders are "emissaries from the large towns". The working class, Yorkshire variety, is disposed to be honourably content. But in the second quotation, the nebulous Luddite leadership is endowed with a positively demonic quality that breaks through the narrative decorum of the book. This is the kind of language which, applied to nobody in particular, belongs more to popular journalism than to the novel.

And if Moore only knew it, the canine William Farren is his master's best friend. Apart from Caroline, the first characters in the book to recognise the good qualities of Louis Moore are William Farren and Shirley's dog. One of the few critics to recognise the crucial role played by the latter is Jacob Korg:

> The character who most perfectly embodies Charlotte Brontë's romanticism and who occupies the central point about which the three concentric rings of characters seem to be arranged is, oddly enough, Shirley's dog Tartar. A large, ugly, slobbering beast, half-mastiff and half-bulldog, he has no intelligence and is capable of only two reactions: passionate devotion and demonic anger. He exemplifies Charlotte Brontë's doctrine of feeling in its most elemental form. Between him and Shirley there is a special intuitive understanding, and Louis Moore enters into this understanding when the dog displays a mysterious adoration for him, forging an invisible link betwen him and his mistress by going restlessly back and forth between them. Each of the Moore brothers bears a resemblance to Tartar; Shirley tells Robert Moore on one occasion that he has a bulldog's tenacity and that nature should have given him a bulldog's head; ". . . you give no warning, you come noiselessly behind, seize fast and hold on." She tells Louis Moore that " . . . you are my mastiff's cousin; I think you are as much like him as a man can be like a dog." Moore in reply describes the unusual intimacy between Shirley and her dog, which extends even to a kiss, and concludes: "It is dangerous to say I am like Tartar: it suggests

to me a claim to be treated like Tartar."9

This is perceptive, but it is not quite adequate. Tartar may well be at the romantic centre of the novel, but he is hardly offered as a pattern of behaviour for all the other characters to follow. Tartar is presented by Brontë rather as a model of specifically working-class behaviour. The general attitude of his more enlightened "superiors" to William Farren is similar to Shirley's attitude to Tartar: they are genuinely fond of him and they respect him as a judge of character; but they will no more allow him to act with the freedom they themselves enjoy than Shirley will allow Tartar to fight with other dogs. Dogs are often trained to display human behaviour, such as shaking hands, and praised when they do it. We are told of Caroline's elder Sunday-school pupils that, "Peasant girls as they were, they had too much of her own English sensibility to be guilty of the coarse error . . . receiving her slight smiles . . . with a good feeling and good breeding . . . " (308). Or again, when Brontë is giving vent to one of her xenophopic bouts of Yorkshire pride:

> Now, let me hear the most refined of cockneys presume to find fault with Yorkshire manners! Taken as they ought to be, the majority of the lads and lasses of the West-Riding are gentlemen and ladies, every inch of them. (346)

These lads and lasses are gentlemen and ladies only in the same anthropomorphic sense in which Tartar is a fine old fellow. Let them once try to exercise the power of real gentlemen and ladies, and they will become "the mob" and be whipped into submission; or let Shirley mete out to the real gentry a little of that "honest abuse" (345) which she is so sure her honourable peasants enjoy. It is always touching to see an old and

toothless dog, faithfully following his master with what remains of his strength, and "It is always the frailest, the oldest, and the poorest that brave the worst weather, to prove and maintain their constancy to dear old Mother Church" (547).

No attempt is being made here to deny that Brontë had a sincere liking and respect for the members of the working class; but it must be seen that that liking and that respect are tempered by an unshakeable belief that they must know their place, not attempt to rise above it, and not show disrespect to those who are already above it. She appears never to have seriously questioned the old High Tory views of her father, and while, with respect to some social groups, her perception of the need for an accommodation between the old and the new social structures is remarkable, she seems to have seen the applicability of that accommodation to the working class as being limited to the charitable provision of a few schools and a quarterly "treat" for the children.

In general, the working class have at least the consolation of their own friends and families. Tutors and governesses, though they are adequately fed, are relegated to some such position as that of Louis Moore: "a satellite of the house of Sympson" (429). The deprivation of their lives is treated much more fully elsewhere in Brontë's work, and I will not dwell on it here. It is worth pointing out, however, that they are a class in that they are defined by their economic activity, and that as such they belong more to the new structure than to the old. But the ambivalence of their position, always solitary, and occupying a place above the servants and below the family in a household, prevents them from associating much with anyone, much less with members of their own class, thereby effectively denying them the kind of corporate iden-

tity by means of which both capitalists and workers are able to define their roles. It is for this reason that it is difficult to assign them a precise place in the hierarchy, and, more importantly, that they are in a very real sense dispossessed.

But by far the largest group of the dispossessed in Shirley comprises all but one of the women. Women are, of course, in the first instance defined by biological rather than economic criteria, and so, strictly speaking, they cannot be called a class. But there is an important sense in which they might be termed a "negative class", on the grounds that most of them are denied access to economic activity. Here are the thoughts of a young woman who does not consider it likely that she will ever marry:

> I speculate much on the existence of unmarried and never-to-be-married women now-a-days; and I have already got to the point of considering that there is no more respectable character on this earth than an unmarried woman, who makes her own way through life quietly, perseveringly, without support of husband or brother; and who, having attained the age of forty-five or upwards, retains in her possession a well-regulated mind, a disposition to enjoy simple pleasures, and fortitude to support inevitable pains, sympathy with the sufferings of others, and willingness to relieve want as far as her means extend.10

Note the admiration for any woman who can accept this state and still retain a "well-regulated mind", the recognition of "inevitable pains", and, above all, the determination to be useful despite the impossibility of paid employment. It describes perfectly the fate that appears to

await Caroline, if only she can bring herself to accept it with sufficient "fortitude". But this is not Caroline, confiding in Shirley after visiting Miss Mann and Miss Ainley, but Charlotte Brontë herself, quoted in Mrs. Gaskell's biography of her. The only alternative that is open to Caroline, as to Brontë, is to become a governess; in other words, to step from one sector of the dispossessed to another.

Caroline is the type of the dispossessed woman. She is what Jessy Yorke calls "a lady" (175), and as such she can never work in a mill or as a domestic servant. On the other hand, she has no fortune and so she cannot expect to find a wealthy husband without exposing herself to accusations of "fortune-hunting", and in the early stages of the novel she cannot even expect to marry the struggling Robert Moore; as she says to herself: "I am poverty and incapacity; Shirley is wealth and power" (262). In this she agrees with Moore himself, who feels that he simply cannot afford to marry her. The models of a woman's life offered by the other women of Briarfield are not exactly encouraging: the most desirable of course is Shirley, but Caroline does not have a thousand a year; there is Hortense Moore, who is a sort of glorified housekeeper to her brother, but Caroline has no brother; there is the gloomy matriarch, Mrs. Yorke, but Caroline cannot hope to marry anyone as wealthy as Mr. Yorke: there are the two old maids, Miss Mann and Miss Ainley, but much as Caroline admires and respects them, she cannot wish to be like them; and there is the woman who turns out to be her own mother, Mrs. Pryor, who has spent most of her life as a governess, and whose conversation is full of the miseries of being either married or a governess. Caroline's choice, in so far as she can be said to have one, seems to be between becoming a governess and becoming an old maid. The former, despite her

mother's sad experience, is at least an active, rather than a passive step, and Caroline has a great desire to do something active lest she waste away from sheer inactivity. Accordingly, she informs her uncle of her intention to "Look out for a situation", to which his response is: "'Look out for a situation, indeed! For what situation are you fit?'" (204). When she tells him she wants to be a governess, he replies:

> "Pooh! mere nonsense! I'll not hear of governessing. Don't mention it again. It is rather too feminine a fancy. I have finished breakfast, ring the bell: put all crotchets out of your head, and run away and amuse yourself."
>
> "What with? My doll?" asked Caroline to herself as she quitted the room. (205)

Women are not even to be allowed to choose the form of their dispossession; like children's, their position in society is to be determined by their fathers, their husbands, or even their uncles. Despite their large difference in wealth and station, Caroline and Shirley agree that they would like to have a trade or profession (235). But the conventional opinion is that no woman should have a job unless she absolutely needs one to subsist:

> So her friends thought, and, as far as their lights enabled them to see, they reasoned correctly: but of Caroline's strange sufferings, which she desired so eagerly to overcome or escape, they had no idea, -- of her racked nights and dismal days, no suspicion. . . . (247)

Given that human beings are social animals, that they form communities and work together for their mutual betterment, the cause of Caroline's misery is that the greater part of her humanity is denied her; in other

words, that the role which society expects her to play is scarcely that of a human being at all.

Shirley herself is the one emancipated woman in the novel. The essential pre-requisite of her emancipation is, of course, her thousand a year; without that, she would no more be able to enjoy her uncle's absurdity than to give to the poor of the parish. Her power in fact derives from four principal sources. As an orphan, she is not subject to parental curbs. Her wealth enables her to be treated with equality by Robert Moore, whose financial affairs are inextricably bound up with hers. Her family and position as lady of the manor elicit the respect of Mr. Helstone, though in order to protect the old misogynist from the feeling that he is taking her entirely seriously she has to take on that masculine identity of "Captain Keeldar" that Mrs. Pryor so disapproves of. And it is through her more personal qualities of integrity, humour, generosity and autonomy of opinion that she wins the affection of Caroline.

There is a strong element of fantasy in the character of Shirley. Although she is the eponymous heroine, her arrival on the scene is delayed until Caroline has been well established as a central character. And in one sense -- a fantastic one -- she is the answer to all Caroline's problems. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar say:

> What Shirley <u>does</u> is what Caroline would like to do: Caroline's secret hatred for the curates is gratified when Shirley angrily throws them out of her house after they are attacked by her dog; Caroline needs to move Helstone, and Shirley bends him to her will; Caroline wishes early in the novel that she could penetrate the business secrets of men, while Shirley

> reads the newspapers and letters of the civic leaders; Caroline wants to lighten Robert's financial burden, and Shirley secures him a loan; Caroline tries to suppress her desire for Robert, while Shirley gains his attention and a proposal of marriage; Caroline has always known that he needs to be taught a lesson (consider her explication of Coriolanus), and Shirley gives it to him in the form of a humiliating rejection of his marriage proposal. Caroline wishes above all else for her long-lost mother and Shirley supplies her with just this person in the figure of Mrs. Pryor.[11]

There is a sense, then, in which Shirley represents the fulfilment of Caroline's wildest dreams. But as we have seen, she is also one of the partners in what Terry Eagleton calls the "marriage of identifiably bourgeois values with the values of the gentry or aristocracy".[12] He goes on to call her the "paradigm of the desired union between Romanticism and reform, gentry and capitalist, order and progress."[13]

Critics have differed widely in both their assessments and their interpretations of Shirley. Two of them -- Igor Webb and Jacob Korg -- agree that the traditional accusation that the novel lacks unity, that it does not evolve organically, is essentially inaccurate. Beyond that, however, they disagree, Webb defending Shirley's unity as a "social novel", and Korg by means of his "romantic" reading. My contention is that the dichotomy between Webb's defence and Korg's is a false one, and that their interpretations are in fact complementary. What Brontë does is to bring her intensely romantic sensibility to bear on the social problems with which she was confronted. By embodying in the "fantastic" character of Shirley the powers and freedoms of which the "real" woman,

Caroline, can only dream, Brontë creates a novel of greater unity than most earlier critics realised. When Asa Briggs complains that "The governess theme . . . is not related at all . . . to the Luddite background",[14] he is simply failing to recognise the scope of the novel. The theme of Shirley is not governesses or Luddites or old maids or selfish capitalists or bigoted clergymen, but the forces which bind these groups together. Eagleton says of Brontë's novels that they "dramatise a society in which almost all human relationships are power struggles."[15] In a society in which one man can be husband, father, employer, and upholder of the system of social, religious and political beliefs that consolidate and sanctify his position of power, any attempt to isolate particular power struggles can produce at best a partial representation. By addressing the problems of various groups of dispossessed people from her romantic point of view, Brontë brings out the links between those groups. Her achievement in Shirley is precisely that, unlike any of the other Condition of England novelists, she dared to relate the governess theme to the Luddite background.

Chapter Four

Charles Kingsley

Despite their considerable differences, Disraeli, Gaskell and Brontë have one essential attitude in common: a deep-seated conservatism. On the face of it, the fourth major Condition of England novelist working in the decade 1845-55, Charles Kingsley, differs radically from them. His first novel, Yeast, is reminiscent of Sybil; it is the story of an idealistic and idle young rich man who is taken on a social and political tour of England and awakened to the condition of the people. Kingsley's second novel, Alton Locke, differs significantly from any of its predecessors. Its full title is Alton Locke, Tailor and Poet, an Autobiography, and it is the first-person account of a Londoner, born to poverty and trained to be a tailor, who later becomes a "People's Poet" and a self-professed Chartist. Whether or not this means that we are at last to be given an insider's view of the Chartist movement, I hope to show in what follows.

Yeast appeared in instalments in Fraser's Magazine during 1848. There is evidence that Kingsley intended to turn it into a two- or three-volume novel. However, according to one of Kingsley's biographers, the principal effect of its appearance in Fraser's was to enrage the magazine's readers, and finally, "in the face of an editorial ultimatum Kingsley hastily killed his heroine."[1] Although what had been published in Fraser's was published as a single volume in 1851, Kingsley never undertook his planned expansion of the book, and it is therefore reasonable to regard it as an incomplete work. Partly owing to editorial pressure and perhaps also because serial publication simply

did not suit Kingsley, Yeast scarcely deserves to be called a novel at all, and I propose to say nothing more about it here. Instead, I will focus on Alton Locke, which was completed before it was published.

Mary Barton was probably the first novel to present what purported to be an insider's view of working-class life. But the narrator of Mary Barton is avowedly a member of the middle class, and uses her position between characters and readers to mediate what she perceives to be the reality of the characters' lives to the readers in her many garrulous interpolations. In Alton Locke, Kingsley goes one stage further than Mrs. Gaskell, in that he not only portrays a working-class protagonist, but also has that protagonist tell his own story, thereby eliminating the need for a middle-class "mediator". The rather apologetic tone of the narrator of Mary Barton gives way, in Alton Locke, to a much more defiant one:

> But nine-tenths of the improvement has been owing, not to the masters, but to the men themselves; and who among them, my aristocratic readers, do you think, have been the great preachers and practisers of temperance, thrift, chastity, self-respect, and education? Who? -- shriek not in your Belgravian saloons -- the Chartists; the communist Chartists; upon whom you and your venal press heap every kind of cowardly execration and ribal slander. You have found out many things, since Peterloo; add that fact to the number. (27)

Alton might with justice have added the other Condition of England novelists to "you and your venal press". But even with that omission, this is powerful language, a long way from Mrs. Gaskell's conciliatory tone. Here at last is a hero, sympathetically portrayed, who is an

active supporter of Chartism; although he has his moral failings, these proceed, not from his ideological stance itself, but from his being seduced away from it by the allure of prosperity and a favourable marriage. But afterwards he does what he can to make reparation for his transgressions, and it is never suggested that he has done anything but the wrong thing in succumbing to temptation.

Despite this, the overall tendency of Alton Locke is a profoundly conservative one. There is a fairly explicit warning of the book's political orientation on the very first page. By choosing a first-person narrator, Kingsley subjected himself to the necessity of a double time-frame for the novel: on the one hand there is the period during which the events narrated take place, while on the other hand there is the time at which Alton is narrating them. And though Alton cannot alter the past, he is himself so much altered by the time he comes to tell his story as to produce an effect not entirely dissimilar from Mrs. Gaskell's third-person narrator. In the second paragraph of his story, Alton says: "When will priest go forth into the highways and the hedges, and preach to the ploughman and the gipsy the blessed news that there too, in every thicket and fallow field, is the house of God, -- there, too, the gate of Heaven?" (5). From the first page, then, the reader is able to glean a fair idea of what is to be Alton's ideological destination. Perhaps a quarter of the way through the novel there is a reminder and an intensificaton of this initial warning: "For my part, I seem to have learnt that the only thing to regenerate the world is not more of any system, good or bad, but simply more of the Spirit of God" (111). Not only is the solution to the problems with which the novel deals to be a religious one, but, despite what Alton says elsewhere in praise of Chartists, it is to be religious to the exclusion of

any other approach.'

Writing before the word was coined, Alton could not describe himself as an agnostic, but that is what to all intents and purposes he is through most of the novel. Towards the end, two attempts are made to convert him to Christianity. The first is made by the prison chaplain, and it is unsuccessful:

> He carefully confined himself . . . throughout, to the dogmatic phraseology of the pulpit; while I either did not understand, or required justification for, the strange, far-fetched, technical meanings, which he attached to his expressions. If he would only have talked English! -- and then they wonder that their sermons have no effect! Their notion seems to be, as my good chaplain's was, that the teacher is not to condescend to the scholar, much less become all things to all men, if by any means he may save some; but that he has a right to demand that the scholar shall ascend to him before he is taught, that he shall raise himself up of his own strength into the teacher's region of thought as well as feeling, to do for himself, in short, under penalty of being called an unbeliever, just what the teacher professes to do for him. (288)

There is much in this that must have been so profoundly true at the time it was written that it remains true today, and on many subjects other than religion. "Mystification", as it has come to be known, is the process by which even the simplest laws governing the conduct of people in society are so enshrouded in esoteric language as to require a special caste of initiates, known as lawyers, to interpret them for the

rest of us; likewise, the ideas disseminated in formal education are often expressed in a language so far removed from that in use in working-class circles as to consititute by themselves a major mechanism among those by which class distinctions are perpetuated. The passage quoted contains strong criticism of the Church, but it is criticism exclusively of the method, and not of the content of the Church's teaching. It is interesting, too, to follow through the implications of what Alton says. He is complaining on behalf of the working class that there is too much obfuscation in religious teaching, and that its members are therfore alienated from the Church. It is unnecessary to make any such complaint on behalf of the middle and upper classes because they, for the most part, are sufficiently educated to deal with the kind of preaching that is done. Although Alton does not say so himself, it would be fair to say that, if Church of England ministers were to deliver their sermons in what Alton calls "English", his social "superiors" would feel as alienated as Alton himself does by the technical and mystifying language in which religion has so far been conveyed to him. The only way, therefore, for the Church to please all the classes would be for it to use a language appropriate to each one separately, and the only way in which this could be accomplished would be by holding segregated services. Such a measure would be so utterly contrary to all of Kingsley's intentions that even the faintest suggestion of it cannot be imputed to him. Yet it is significant that, having recognised the problem, he should deal with it in such a way as to suggest that "the teacher <u>is</u> to condescend to the scholar", rather than that the (working-class) scholar has any right to an education that would equip him to understand what the teacher is talking about.

Before moving on to look at the second -- successful -- attempt to convert Alton, it is worth comparing what has just been quoted with the following exchange, which takes place after Crossthwaite has taken Alton to his first Chartist meeting. Crossthwaite says to Alton:

> "Well, Alton! where was the treason and murder? Your nose must have been a sharp one, to smell out any there. Did you hear anything that astonished your weak mind so very exceedingly, after all?"
>
> The only thing that did astonish me, was to hear men of my own class -- and lower still, perhaps, some of them -- speak with such fluency and eloquence. Such a fund of information -- such excellent English -- where did they get it all?" (107f)

There are, then, members of the working class who, whether or not they are acquainted with the specialised language of religion, are able to speak with "fluency and eloquence". There is no contradiction here, as the working class is big enough to encompass a numerous minority of self-educated exceptions to the rule of ignorance. Presumably the Chartists' fluency is in "English" -- the language that the Church so studiously avoids -- and the Chartists are consequently much better understood than the priests by their working-class audiences. This may well account for the very curious fact that we, the readers, are not allowed to witness the meeting which so astonishes Alton. It is one thing to say that the Chartists are eloquent and plausible -- and it is certainly a refreshing change from the vituperation heaped upon them by certain other novelists -- but it is quite another to <u>show</u> them in the act of eloquence and plausibility. The latter would require a detailed

presentation of their case, which in turn might have been a little more convincing than Kingsley wanted his Chartists to be. It is worth noting, in this connexion, that the rural poor, who are entirely lacking in fluency and eloquence, are allowed to have their say at great length. But by merely discussing the relative abilities to communicate with the working class of the Church (in the person of the prison chaplain) and the Chartists respectively, Kingsley is able to suggest that the party with the "correct" message is hampered by inadequate powers of communication, while the party whose message, though sincere, is essentially wrong-headed, is able to sway the working class by its ability to communicate with them in their own language.

It is only when, following his illness, Alton is successfully converted by Eleanor, that "correctness" of manner is united with "correctness" of message. Once again, the speech is described instead of given:

> She spoke of Him as the great Reformer; and yet as the true Conservative; the inspirer of all new truths, revealing in His Bible to every age abysses of new wisdom, as the times require; and yet the vindicator of all which is ancient and eternal -- the justifier of His own dealings with man from the beginning. She spoke of Him as the true demagogue -- the champion of the poor; and yet as the true King, above and below all earthly rank; on whose will alone all real superiority of man to man, all the time-justified and time-honoured usages of the family, the society, the nation, stand and shall stand for ever. (356)

There is a problem in philosophy centred on the question of whether

specifically religious language should be accorded a special status as distinct from that of ordinary language. There is no need to go into that question here, but it should be noted that Kingsley has Eleanor address the essentially secular problems with which Alton has long been concerned, from a religious point of view and in distinctly religious language. Therefore, regardless of whether or not her language is relevant to religious matters, it is reasonable to expect that it should be coherent and relevant to the question of class with which Alton and his story have so far been preoccupied. Yet that expectation seems unlikely to be fulfilled. Eleanor speaks of Jesus as "the great Reformer" and yet "the true Conservative". If the defenders of religious language are right, there may be a special sense in which two opposite and contradictory descriptions of the same thing are reconcilable, but in the language of everyday discourse the possibility of truth in such assertions has to be denied on the ground that they are self-contradictory. The nearest approximation to something intelligible that can be extracted from Eleanor's assertion here is that the interests of the working class are best served and protected by the institutions and ideology of the Establishment. But that only shifts the burden of self-contradiction from Eleanor to Kingsley himself, for if such a view is attributed to the author, it is hard to see why Alton Locke needed to be written in the first place. Precisely the same objection applies to the ensuing pair of antitheses: "the inspirer of all new truths", yet "the vindicator of all which is ancient and eternal". The implication here is that new "truths" never contradict old ones. Yet in social and political questions, as in natural science, the wisdom of one age is often in direct contradiction to that of the

preceding one. Once again, the only possible reconciliation between the antitheses -- and it is an unsatisfactory one -- is to attribute to Eleanor the view that the best solution lies in a return to a conservatism more rigorous than that against which Alton and his fellow-Chartists have been rebelling. Eleanor goes on to describe Jesus as "the justifier of His own dealings with man from the beginning". It is axiomatic in logic that one cannot appeal to the conclusion of an argument to support that argument's premises, and it is surprising, therefore, that somebody as enquiring and independent of thought as Alton should find this circular argument so compelling. It is, of course, intended, not as a circular argument, but as an appeal to faith, but it illustrates well the danger of treating both religious and secular subjects in religious language. Religious faith may well be extra-logical, but by mixing the religious with the secular in this manner, Kingsley is inviting the kind of criticism on the grounds of logical coherence to which I am subjecting Eleanor's argument. The secular equivalent of religious faith is political quietism: the acceptance on blind trust of dispensations handed down by those in authority. The fact that many political radicals have been deeply religious shows that at least in practice this equivalency is not always the case; Kingsley's implication that it is the case is another consequence of his failure to distinguish adequately between the religious and the secular. Eleanor speaks of Jesus as "the champion of the poor", and yet as "the true King, above and below all earthly rank". The historical Jesus may well have been a "champion of the poor", but it is hard to see what application this epithet has to the Church of England's Christ. The latter personage seems more adequately described as a "King", yet once again

Kingsley describes His Kingship in antithetical terms. He is, we are told, "above and below all earthly rank". It is easy to see how the nineteenth-century Christ is above all earthly rank, but our curiosity to see on what grounds Kingsley would justify his assertion that his Christ is below all earthly rank is sadly disappointed. The final part of the passage quoted -- in which Christ is posited as the guardian of the family, society and the nation (the nation?) -- requires no more comment here than to point out that it is an endorsement of unmitigated conservatism.

Like Mrs. Gaskell, then, Kingsley advocates religious solutions to social problems. That is not to say that his principles were anything less than sincere; as Cazamian points out, "he was above all else a crusader for social hygiene".[2] There is no doubt that in practice he did a great deal to ameliorate the condition of the working class. But his analysis of the problems he was confronting leaves a lot to be desired, precisely because he attempted to draw together religious and secular concerns in such a way that, finally, he did justice to neither. Although Alton Locke did provoke a good deal of anger among contemporary readers, Kingsley himself provides unwitting testimony to its ultimate conservatism. He says, in a letter quoted by Cazamian,

> I am quite astonished at the steady-going, respectable people who approve more or less of Alton Locke. It was but the other night at the Speaker's, that Sir *** ***, considered one of the safest Whig traditionalists in England, gave his adherence to the book in the kindest terms. Both the Marshals have done the same -- so has Lord Ashburton. So have, strange to say, more than one ultra-respectable, high-Tory squire -- so goes

> the world. If you do anything above party, the true-hearted ones of all parties sympathize with you.3

It takes a nineteenth-century idealist to see in this broad-based approval of his own work a rising above party; a more sceptical twentieth-century sensibility is more likely to see in it a recognition that the work in question poses no threat to any party that is represented at the Speaker's.

Although Kingsley's conclusions are ultimately -- if unwittingly -- conservative, the fact remains that he does attempt, in Alton Locke, to portray working-class life. Despite this similarity between the two novels, however, the overall impression conveyed by Alton Locke is very different from that of Mary Barton. Early in the novel, Alton analyses his own social standing vis-à-vis that of this cousin, George:

> My aristocratic readers -- if I ever get any, which I pray God I may -- may be surprised at so great an inequality of fortune between two cousins; but the thing is common in our class. In the higher ranks, a difference in income implies none in education or manners, and the poor "gentleman" is a fit companion for dukes and princes -- thanks to the old usages of Norman chivalry, which after all were a democratic protest against the sovereignty, if not of rank, at least of money. The knight, however penniless, was the prince's equal, even his superior, from whose hands he must receive knighthood; and the "squire of low degree", who invariably earned his spurs, rose also in that guild, whose qualifictions, however barbaric, were still higher ones than any which the pocket gives. But in the commercial classes money most truly

> and fearfully "makes the man". A difference in income, as you go lower, makes more and more difference in the supply of the common necessaries of life; and worse -- in education and manners, in all which polishes the man, till you may see often, as in my case, one cousin a Cambridge undergraduate, and the other a tailor's journeyman. (209)

The passage contains a mild dose of that mediaevalism in which Sybil is saturated. Coming from Alton, the romantic distortion of mediaeval history is rather more surprising than when it comes from the aristocratic narrator of Disraeli's novel. But what more closely concerns us here is the latter part of the passage, where, in what may at first appear to be a slip, Alton speaks of "the commercial classes". Is not Alton supposed to be a member of the working class? As a tailor's journeyman, he certainly is, but his father, though unsuccessful, "was a small retail tradesman in the city" (7). In other words Alton, though poor, has not been born into the working class at all. What Alton says about levels of income at the lower end of the economic scale is undoubtedly true; for the purpose of pure physical survival, a very little will supply "the common necessaries of life", and any income above that level has a very different significance from that of the amount by which a person's income might fall short of it. But, according to Alton, these differences in income affect "education and manners" and "all that polishes the man". It would be hard indeed to imagine such language being used in Mary Barton. In the working-class society depicted by that novel, one's neighbour's poverty is cause for compassionate intervention, not for competitive comarison with oneself. In part, this can be explained by the familiar issue of North versus South -- not, this

time, the agricultural South, but London itself. Manchester grew suddenly from a group of insignificant towns and villages, and although the bulk of its population came from very different places, it was unified by being, for the most part, employed in similar kinds of work. There were only two significant classes in Manchester, the employers and the employees, and the simplicity of this situation must have done a lot to encourage working-class solidarity. London, on the other hand, was the ancient metropolis, haunt of both the idle rich and a wide variety of the commercial class. Although the working class inhabitants of London were more numerous than those of Manchester, they were not unified by engaging in any common pursuit. Nor were they exploited by any single other group, so that it would have been harder for them than for their Manchester peers to identify an enemy. Moreover, they were in regular contact with the higher classes, not only as servants, but also, as Henry Mayhew shows, as street- merchants and the like, in a bewildering variety of trades, each with its own distinct sub-culture. It is not surprising, therefore, that they should develop a spirit more competitive than cooperative. But this only partly accounts for what Alton says. As he rightly points out, in the nineteenth century a gentleman is a gentleman, regardless of his income. And allowing for some attenuation as a result of the peculiar factors of London life which I have been describing, a proletarian is a proletarian. The snob mentality exhibited by a man who is not a gentleman, but who can use an expression such as "all which polishes the man", is the distinguishing mark of the lower bourgeoisie, the species parodied endlessly by Dickens; it is exactly what one might expect from the son of a failed London merchant.

It is true that a person's class derives exclusively from economic

factors. But it is not, as is sometimes supposed, the size of a person's income which determines his or her class, but the means by which it is obtained. Alton's mother, widow of a shopkeeper, receives an annuity from her brother-in-law, and it is thus quite consistent with the poverty of his childhood that Alton should grow up with an essentially bourgeois outlook. What is less consistent is his reiterated claim to be a member of the working class. Although it is never made entirely explicit, there is a hint that Sandy Mackaye recognises this; in any event, as part of Alton's education, he takes him to a part of London Alton has never before visited. This is Alton's description of the scene:

> It was a foul, chilly, foggy Saturday night. From the butchers' and greegrocers' shops the gas-lights flared and flickered, wild and ghastly, over haggard groups of slip-shod dirty women, bargaining for scraps of stale meat and frost-bitten vegetables, wrangling about short weight and bad quality. Fish-stalls and fruit-stalls lined the edge of the greasy pavement, sending up odours as foul as the language of sellers and buyers. Blood and sewer-water crawled from under doors and out of spouts, and reeked down the gutters among offal, animal and vegetable, in every stage of putrefaction. Foul vapours rose from cowsheds and slaughter-houses, and the doorways of undrained alleys, where the inhabitants carried the filth out on their shoes from the back-yard into the court, and from the court, and from the court up into the main street; while above, hanging like cliffs over the streets -- those narrow, brawling torrents of filth, and poverty, and sin, -- the

> houses with their teeming load of life were piled up into the dingy choking night. A ghastly, deafening, sickening sight it was. Go, scented Belgravian! and see what London is! and then go to the library which God has given thee -- one often fears in vain -- and see what science says this London might be. (87)

Allowing for the factual truth of the description, the heavily emotive language in which it is conveyed is more suggestive of the reaction of a "scented Belgravian" than of a fellow-proletarian. P.J. Keating supplies a very incisive analysis of this passage:

> Kingsley's sole intention is to describe to the reader the horrors of working-class life; to recreate the feeling of repulsion experienced by himself. Even allowing for our knowledge (drawn from other sources) that conditions in St. Giles's were appalling, it is notable that Kingsley has deliberately chosen what would normally be a fairly gay scene -- a street market at its busiest moment, Saturday evening -- and that he makes no attempt whatsoever to present it from a working-class viewpoint. The gas-lights are "wild and ghastly", the shoppers are "haggard groups of slip-shod dirty women", and odours from the food-stalls are "foul"; the food is all adulterated and everyone is swearing. The roads are obviously never cleaned as the "blood and sewer water" mingles with "offal, animal and vegetable, in every stage of putrefaction." The streets are "narrow, brawling torrents of filth, and poverty, and sin".
>
> There is no vitality, humour, banter or laughter, and

> there are no family shopping outings. The horror belongs entirely to Kingsley. And the final sentence [Keating terminates his quotation with "and see what London is"] makes it clear that this scene has been chosen as typical of working-class London as a whole: it is not simply an isolated plague spot. This kind of slum description is the most common in Victorian fiction before the eighties. They are not incidental but hold a central place in the novels, in that they are being used to grip the reader and stir his conscience. Almost everything else that happens in the novel depends on such scenes for its validity. To show the shoppers laughing or joking, in this example, would defeat Kingsley's main purpose in writing the novel, as would any suggestion that the participants might express other opinions about it than his own. There is nothing indeed to be said in its favour. It is all foul and should be swept away by progressive legislation, and meanwhile if we wish to praise a working man, we can do so by showing him as someone fit for middle- and upper-class society; someone who has no kinship with the "slip-shod dirty women" of St. Giles's.4

I quoted slightly more than Keating because I wanted to show that, for Kingsley, the amelioration of the conditions he describes lies entirely in the hands of the "Belgravian" who has access to libraries containing books on sanitary reform; it is for the working class to be improved, not to improve themselves. As Keating says, the working man who is worthy of respect must absorb the culture of the classes above his own; for Kingsley, as for other novelists, there is little value in distinc-

tively working-class culture. It is because to a significant extent they are an exception to this rule that the early chapters of Mary Barton are so remarkable. Alton's acceptance by Dean Winnstay and his family, and his consequent embourgeoisiement, can thereby be seen to be an example of what I have called "bourgeoimorphism".

There are times when the extremes of radicalism and conservatism in Alton Locke produce what can only be called self-contradiction on the part of Kingsley. Early in the novel, Alton discusses his desire for what he calls "mental self-improvement":

> But there are excuses for such a want in the working man. It does sour and madden him to be called presumptuous and ambitious for the very same aspirations which are lauded to the skies in the sons of the rich -- unless, indeed, he will do one little thing, and so make his peace with society. If he will desert his own class; if he will try to become a sham gentleman, a parasite, and, if he can, a Mammonite, the world will compliment him on his desire to "rise in life". He will have won his spurs, and be admitted into the noble pale of knighthood, beyond which it is a sin to carry arms, even in self-defence. But if the working genius dares to be true to his own class -- to stay among them -- to regenerate them -- to defend them -- to devote his talents to those among whom God placed him and brought him up -- then he is the demagogue, the incendiary, the fanatic, the dreamer. (53)

Yet Alton "deserts his own class" twice; in the first place by associating with Dean Winnstay and allowing his poems to be expurgated -- he later repents of that -- and in the second, by being seduced into

conversion to a religion which, at least in the terms in which it is presented to him, fails entirely to address the problems which have been his lifelong concern. The discrepancy is principally one between theory and practice. The passage just quoted belongs to the former; it is part of the commentary added by the mature Alton to the bare account of his life. Yet the actual events of Alton's life, which might reasonably be expected to embody Kingsley's theoretical standpoint, often directly contradict the views set out in passages of Alton's commentary. Cazamian suggests what may be the origin of some of Kingsley's selfcontradiction:

> Alton Locke tells his own story. For the subject of the second novel is more psychological: it centres on the personality of a man who represents in himself the workers' revolt. Economic factors and political theories are only important in so far as they contribute to his deveolopment. Instead of a diary, written under the pressure of events as they take place, Alton Locke is a continuous retrospective narrative . . . . Kingsley was far from being a dramatic writer sufficiently gifted to create the growth of a mind with which he disagreed, without constantly stepping in to set it right and put his own point of view. He may also have feared that it would endanger his pacificatory arguments to present the strife he wanted to heal with too much objectivity. In the event, we are offered a reformed Chartist retracing the story of Chartism for us. His whole narrative is dominated by the suggestion of a higher truth which appears obscurely in the early chapters and is clarified at the end.[5]

It might, perhaps, be truer to say that the "higher truth" is further mystified than that it is "clarified", but otherwise this seems a fair assessment. Kingsley's "Christian Socialism", though it was a long way from anything now called socialism, was perceived by many of his contemporaries as un ultra-radical stance. Their readings of Alton Locke must have laid stress on different aspects of the book from those of the members of the Speaker's Club to whom Kingsley alludes in the letter I have quoted. The fact is that Alton Locke contains material for both kinds of reading, though in the end the complacency of the members of the Speaker's is probably justified.

I want to look finally at the specifically aesthetic aspects of this question. The passage in which Alton gives Kingsley's first impressions of St. Giles's is preceded by one which is of particular interest in this connexion. Alton is a poet before he becomes a Chartist, and he has begun writing an epic set in the South Seas. Sandy Mackaye considers this a waste of Alton's time and talent, and tries to persuade him to find his subject-matter closer to home. Alton replies:

> "Well -- but -- Mr. Mackaye, I know nothing about these poor creatures."
>
> "Then ye ought. What do ye ken anent the Pacific? Which is maist to your business? Thae bare-backed hizzies that play the harlot o' the other side o' the warld, or these -- these thousands o' bare-backed hizzies that play the harlot o' your ain side -- made out o' your ain flesh and blude? You a poet! True poetry, like true charity, my laddie, begins at hame. If ye'll be a poet at a' ye maun be a cockney poet; and while the cockneys be what they be, ye maun write, like Jeremiah of old,

o' lamentation and mourning and woe, for the sins o' your people. Gin ye want to learn the spirit o' a people's poet, down wi' your Bible and read thae auld Hebrew prophets; gin ye wad learn the style, read your Burns frae morning till night; and gin ye'd learn the matter, just gang after your nose, and keep your eyes open, and ye'll no miss it."

"But this is all so -- so unpoetical."

"Hech! Is there no the heeven above them there, and the hell beneath them? and God frowning, and the deevil grinning? No poetry there! Is no the verra idea of the classic tragedy defined to be, man conquered by circumstance? Canna ye see it there? And the verra idea of the modern tragedy, man conquering circumstance? -- and I'll show ye that, too -- in money a garret where no eye but the gude God's enters, to see the patience, and the fortitude, and the self-sacrifice, and the luve stronger than death, that's shining in thae dark places o' the earth." (88f)

Mackaye comes up with the argument with which we should be familiar by now: that the English have no business interfering with affairs on the other side of the world until they have put their own house in order. But his is a new variant on the idea; he addresses it, not to philanthropists or reformers, but to a poet. What is more, he makes a direct connexion between art and more obviously pragmatic concerns: "True poetry, like true charity . . . begins at hame." Charity, obviously, must derive its motivation from experience; but so, according to Mackaye, must poetry. What he advocates might be seen as an extension of the manifesto set out by Wordsworth in the Preface to Lyrical

Ballads. Whereas Wordsworth called for what was essentially a one-way traffic, the input of life into poetry, the implication of what Mackaye says is that this should become a reciprocal process, with poetry feeding back into life; taken together with Kingsley's invitations to the "scented Belgravian", it constitutes a plea that poetry -- or art in general -- has a duty to bring to the awareness of those in power the reality of the sufferings of others. When Alton complains that this is "so unpoetical", he is giving utterance to the voice of a millenium or two of tradition which dictates that the subject matter of the literary artist is to be found in legend, religion and, above all, other literature -- not in everyday experience. It is significant that when Mackaye answers this objection, his appeal is not to the inherent validity of everyday experience, but to the fact that such experience does in fact meet predetermined criteria for assessing what is suitable metter for literary treatment. Two of the three instructions he has already given Alton are literary ones; besides observing the life around him, Alton must read Burns and the Hebrew prophets. All of this represents an early stage in what was to become a major movement: the move away from tradition and towards experience as the proper place for the artist to seek material.

So much for the theory. Alton Locke contains one major practical achievement. Set against T.B. Tomlinson's complaint, directed against Disraeli, Gaskell and Eliot, that their Condition of England novels consist of "truncated enquiry into sociological issues on the one hand, and thinly conventional love-stories on the other",[6] Alton's romantic attachment to Lillian Winnstay differs radically from the love stories in the other novels I have considered. Each of these writers uses his

or her love story in a way which gives the lie to what Tomlinson says. In Sybil we are given the marriage of the aristocracy to a "daughter of the People", who turns out to be a disinherited aristocrat anyway; in Mary Barton class-loyalty triumphs and the marriage is between two proletarians; and in both North and South and Shirley the harsh, pragmatic values of the manufacturing class are softened by marriage to older, more compassionate, land-based wealth. But in Alton Locke there is no marriage. In the early stages of the book Alton, the young poet, worships the idol of perfection he has constructed out of the conventional, upper-class Lillian, and by the end of the book she has turned out to be just that: a conventional, upper-class girl, quite willing to fall for Alton's manipulative cousin, George. Alton realises all along that their different classes pose an enormous barrier to his marrying Lillian, and towards the end he realises that that barrier has always been insuperable. The situation is reminiscent of one that appeared in a novel a few decades earlier: the attachment of Harriet Smith to Mr. Elton in Emma. But there are significant differences between the two situations. Firstly, Harriet's was never a "real" attachment; it was something created and encouraged by her friend, Emma. And secondly, both Harriet and Mr. Elton end up by marrying "suitable" members of their respective classes. The suggestion is that the very idea of a marriage between Harriet and Mr. Elton has always been preposterous. Class is not an artificial barrier between them, but an essential determinant of their being. Alton's attachment to Lillian, on the other hand, is suggested by nobody but himself. And there is no happy ending for either of them. Lillian, empty-headed though she is, is not so bad as to deserve George, who in any case dies, while for Alton the whole

thing ends in disillusionment. His love for Lillian has always been an aesthetic affair -- he first meets her in an art gallery -- and in the end he learns that life is conducted on very different principles from art. But the "love-story", at least, in Alton Locke, is an early attempt to introduce into art one of the principles hitherto reserved for life.

Chapter Five

George Eliot

Felix Holt (1866) was published considerably later than the other novels I have dealt with. From opposite ends of the critical spectrum, however, both T.B. Tomlinson, and Raymond Williams classify it with the other Condition of England novels. Certainly it has some of the principal features of the other novels in this group: an intelligent and radical working-class protagonist; a scene of riot and disorder, in which the protagonist struggles to avoid violence or damage to property; and a romance of sorts, between members of different classes. It was, however, written under different conditions from the other novels, and with a different purpose. By 1866 Chartism had faded into history. What was at issue was the debate surrounding the Second Reform Bill, which was to be passed the following year. Eliot chose to set her novel in the period of the First Reform Act (1832) and in a fictional town, Treby Magna, which was for the first time enfranchised. She devotes an early chapter to the history of Treby, a typical, non-industrial English market town, and then gives the following much-quoted comment:

> These social changes in Treby parish are comparatively public matters, and this history is chiefly concerned with the private lot of a few men and women; but there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life, from the time when the primeval milkmaid had to wander with the wanderings of her clan, because the cow she milked was one of a herd which had made the pastures bare. (73)

This is a disarmingly simple statement of the economic basis of personal

relationships. The novel goes on, with varying degrees of success, to exemplify that basis in each of its principal characters.

Of these, the most widely praised is Mrs. Transome. Robert Liddell, for instance, calls her:

> . . . the only character in George Eliot's novels great enough to be called tragic; and she is in the typical predicament of the tragic heroine in that she desires contradictory and irreconcilable things -- her son's return and the safeguarding of her secret. Felix is never privileged to meet her, but he would probably be too insensitive and too firmly prejudiced to see in her the walking refutation of his stupid remarks about "fine ladyism".[1]

The first part of what Liddell says attempts to vindicate the characterisation of Mrs. Transome by an appeal to classical tragedy; the implication is that the novel succeeds in so far as it recapitulates the forms of an earlier and widely different genre. This is a view of the novel which reduces it to the status of closet drama. In the remainder of his comment, Liddell seems to have forgotten that he is writing about characters in a novel and not about real people. It is quite true that Felix is never "privileged" to meet Mrs. Transome, and it is hard to see the point of speculating on what might happen if this hypothetical fictional event did take place. Clearly Liddell admires, not only the characterisation, but also the character of Mrs. Tansome, in comparison to whom, Felix is merely "stupid".

Another admirer of Mrs. Transome -- but this time from within the frame of the novel -- is Denner, her lady's maid. Denner has served Mrs. Transome over a very long period, and the early description of the

relationship between the two women is a revealing one:

> The physical contrast between the tall, eagle-faced, dark-eyed lady, and the little peering waiting-woman, who had been round-featured and of pale complexion from her youth up, had doubtless had a strong influence in determining Denner's feeling towards her mistress, which was of that worshipful sort paid to a goddess in ages when it was not thought necessary or likely that a goddess should be very moral. There were different orders of beings -- so ran Denner's creed -- and she belonged to another order than that to which her mistress belonged. She had a mind as sharp as a needle, and would have seen through and through the ridiculous pretensions of a born servant who did not submissively accept the rigid fate which had given her born superiors. She would have called such pretensions the wrigglings of a worm that tried to walk on its tail. There was a tacit understanding that Denner knew all her mistress's secrets, and her speech was plain and unflattering; yet with wonderful subtlety of instinct she never said anything which Mrs. Transome could feel humiliated by, as by a familiarity from a servant who knew too much. Denner identified her own dignity with that of her mistress. She was a hard-headed godless little woman, but with a character to be reckoned on as you would reckon on the qualities of iron. (102)

This is a picture of intriguing complexity. Denner's "creed" is of a rigidly inflexible social order. Unable, according to her own beliefs, to change her own position within that social order, she must derive her

sense of personal worth from the position allotted her. In so far as her self-esteem is dependent on her relationship with Mrs. Transome, Denner's side of that relationship is parasitic; Mrs. Transome's glory is Denner's vicarious glory. Yet she is not a sycophant. She is prepared, when the occasion demands it, to contradict Mrs. Transome, and she is not, as sycophants generally are, envious of her mistress's position. She has so thoroughly internalised the belief in the "inferiority" of the servant class as to believe that any excellences of her own must be specifically "servant excellences". Her status is, however, augmented by that of Mrs. Transome. The image of Mrs. Transome as "a goddess in ages when it was not thought necessary or likely that a goddess should be very moral" is a telling one. It is the first of many hints of Mrs. Transome's past indiscretion with Mr. Jermyn. More importantly, it shows that Denner's "worship" of Mrs. Transome is not based on admiration of that lady's virtue. Neither, as some of the later dialogues show, is it based on any acknowledgement of Mrs. Transome's superior intellect. It is in fact grounded entirely in the concept of "birth". The opening sentence of the quotation, comparing the physical appearances of the two women, indicates one of the consequences of the difference of "birth". But that alone will not account for Denner's acknowledgement of Mrs. Transome's superiority; the ugly do not worship the beautiful. The only thing that will account for it is Denner's recognition of Mrs. Transome's greater power. There is a sad irony in this perception of Denner's, because of course in her dealings with members of her own class, notably Jermyn and Harold, Mrs. Transome is singularly powerless. Her feelings of powerlessness are much dwelt upon in the description of Harold's arrival home from Smyrna, but after-

wards we are told that:

> She had that high-born imperious air which would have marked her as an object of hatred and reviling by a revolutionary mob. Her person was too typical of social distinctions to be passed by with indifference by any one; it would have fitted an empress in her own right, who has had to rule in spite of faction, to dare the violation of treaties and dread retributive invasions, to grasp after new territories, to be defiant in desperate circumstances, and to feel a woman's hunger of the heart for ever unsatisfied. (104)

As this passage suggests, Mrs. Transome has outlived her time: her "imperiousness" has become a museum piece.

In creating Mrs. Transome, Eliot is studying much the same thing that Brontë had studied in Shirley: the breakdown of one social order, and its replacement by another. The principle difference is that Felix Holt is set at a later stage in that breakdown than Shirley. The era in which Mrs. Transome could have "ruled" is already over by the time the novel opens. That, rather than her contradictory and irreconcilable desires, is her tragedy. There is in the novel a comparable figure in Sir Maximus Debarry. He plays the minor role of bumbling upper-class idiot, and there is no attempt to make him into a tragic figure. There were obviously many reasons for Eliot to dwell on Mrs. Transome rather than Sir Maximus, but one of them is simply her sex. Her immediate personal problems are all rooted in the men she is involved with: she is trapped in marriage to the half-witted Mr. Transome; she is treated as if she were herself half-witted by her son Harold; and she is so much in the power of the lawyer Jermyn, Harold's natural father, that their

relationship verges on one of blackmail. A contemporary male reviewer, John Morley, saw the evil fate of women as a major theme in Felix Holt:

> One of these puzzles, which runs pathetically through Felix Holt as through Romola and The Mill on the Floss, is the evil usage which women receive at the hands of men. Mrs. Transome, in the novel before us, is perhaps a stronger illustration than either Maggie Tulliver or Romola of the curse which a man can be to a woman. And it is not designed for a mere outburst of impotent anger and misery when she exclaims, partly crushed, partly defiant, that "God was cruel when he made women."2

It is perhaps surprising that such a theme should be recognised at all by Eliot's contemporaries. But whether it is one of the book's major themes is another question. If it were a major theme, one would expect to find it reflected in the book's other female principal, Esther Lyon. In fact it is not so reflected. Esther suffers a great deal in the early stages from female vanities which leave little room in her head for anything else, but her creator gives her a freedom which is denied to Mrs. Transome, and in the end, Esther is able to think for herself and make autonomous decisions. It seems, then, that the aspect of the novel which deals with the plight of women is not, as in Shirley, part of a broad analysis of society at large, but rather an agent of intensification applied to the tragedy of Mrs. Transome.

If Mrs. Transome represents the old blood and the old values, now in decline, her son Harold represents that blood and those values trying to come to an accommodation with the new economic and political reality. Raymond Williams compares him to Disraeli's Egremont:

> Harold Transome is, like Egremont, a second son; like him, he turns to the reforming side in politics. But George Eliot was incapable of resting on the image of an Egremont, the figure-head of the enlightened gentleman. Harold Transome is a coarser reality, and it is impossible that Esther should marry him. She renounces her claim and marries Felix Holt. It is as if Sybil had renounced the Mowbray estates and married Stephen Morley.[3]

Harold Transome is not completely cynical; yet it is hard to see what reason, other than opportunism, he has for espousing the Radical cause in politics. His opportunism consists in accepting the advantages conferred on him by tradition and Transome Court, while at the same time attempting to play a role in local and national affairs that is more socially relevant than that of, say, Sir Maximus Debarry. Eliot, according to K.M. Newton,

> shows that Mrs. Transome's belief in the superiority of her will is not freely chosen on her part but in large measure socially determined. The fact that she belongs to an upper class which has become socially anachronistic is an important factor in her devotion to will and ego. Social change in Treby Magna has deprived the Transomes of an authentic role in the community. Harold Transome has recognised that the way of life and the values of Transome Court are no longer socially relevant and has rejected his mother's Toryism for Radicalism.[4]

Harold is obviously much more in touch with the spirit of the times, yet he fails on all possible counts; he loses the election, he fails to win

Esther's hand in marriage, and he eventually has to flee Treby and the country when his true parentage is publicly revealed.

There are various reasons why he has to fail. First of all, there is a sense in which he is an imposter, even though it is only at the end of the book that he finds out he is the son of Mr. Jermyn, not of Mr. Transome. In so far as this can be taken as a reason for his failure, it is an indication, on Eliot's part, of an almost Disraelian belief in the efficacy of blood. Her portrayal of Harold's mother provides corroborative evidence for such a belief; a disappointed woman, socially irrelevant, powerless, she is nevertheless depicted with a dignity that is obviously intended to be admired. The physical contrast between Mrs. Transome and the servant Denner, which I have already quoted, is only one of many indications that Mrs. Transome is a "thoroughbred" of the human species. Harold, though he is superior in appearance to members of the servant class, is overweight. He is not only the illegitimate son of a father who is himself probably illegitimate, he is also the son of a father who is not a gentleman. In the light of what Eliot appears to have believed about "birth" and "blood", it is hardly surprising that Harold is not allowed to assume the role at Treby to which he aspires.

Secondly, there is the problem of his having been born a second son. He is not the heir to the Transome estates until the death of his elder (half-) brother, Durfey. Like second sons throughout English history and fiction, he has had to make his own fortune. His fatal mistake is that, instead of taking up one of the professions, he has gone abroad to engage in trade. He is damned by both his occupation and his destination. Eliot is able to show considerable sympathy for both the upper and the working class, but, at least in Felix Holt, the bourgeoisie are

portrayed as nasty, griping, reptilian creatures who are always trying -- and failing -- to ape their "betters". Harold has been saved from the worst excesses of what Eliot sees as the bourgeois mentality by his upbringing at Transome Court, but fifteen years of commercial life have blunted his sensibilities. His destination is if anything even worse. Smyrna (present-day Izmir in Turkey) is so far beyond the pale of "civilised" English society and values that Harold's son's mother was a slave, purchased by Harold, and for whose death he never shows the least sign of remorse. In fact, we never learn her name.

The practical reason for Harold's loss of the election implies a specific criticism of party politics. The actual offence is committed at two removes from Harold, by Johnson, the man employed by his agent, Jermyn. Harold is ignorant of what Johnson has been doing until he is informed about it by Felix, and when he does learn of it, he condemns it and tries to put a stop to it. He is, therefore, as innocent as anyone in his position possibly could be. The implication is that the fault lies, not with the player, but with the game he is playing. What Johnson has been doing is cynically stirring up the miners, with a mixture of wild promises and impressive-sounding gobbledegook, to intimidate voters -- who had to vote in public at that time -- on Harold's behalf. Harold's effort to stop this fails and the result is the perennial bugbear of the Victorian bourgeoisie, a riot. The various ways in which this kind of situation might be avoided are either ignored or dismissed by Eliot; her nostrum is not universal enfranchisement or the secret ballot, but merely to keep aloof from the electoral process, which appears to be inherently depraved.

Harold loses his title to the Transome estate through the death of old Tommy Trounsem in the riot -- for which he, Harold, has been indirectly responsible. Eliot did a lot of research into the laws of inheritance in order to construct this part of the plot, which is far too complex to summarise here. All that needs to be said is that Harold's title to Transome Court depends on Tommy Trounsem's staying alive; when Trounsem dies, the estate reverts to the representative of the Bycliffes, who is Esther Lyon, though at the time neither she nor Harold is aware of all this. The situation is the outcome of legal machinations which took place a century earlier, so there is no way in which Harold can be held accountable for it. When he and Esther are made aware of their legal standing, Harold invites her to Transome Court, and there is just a hint that he may be cynical enough to marry her in order to retain the estate. But it is not dwelt upon, and soon Harold becomes quite genuinely attracted to Esther. He senses that, although Esther has no antipathy for him, his feelings are not reciprocated. Eventually he discovers that if he has a rival at all it is Felix. Here is his reaction to that discovery:

> It seemed to [Harold] that Felix was the least formidable person that he could have found out as an object of interest antecedent to himself. A young workman who had got himself thrown into prison, whatever recommendations he might have had for a girl at a romantic age in the dreariness of Dissenting society at Treby, could hardly be considered by Harold in the light of a rival. Esther was too clever and tasteful a woman to make a ballad heroine of herself, by bestowing her beauty and her lands on this lowly lover. (536)

Harold has already had dealings with Felix, so he knows what kind of man he has to contend with. His complacency is based purely on class considerations. And in the light of Raymond Williams's comparison of this triangle with the one in Sybil, it has to be said that Harold's estimate of the situation is more realistic than the way in which it eventually turns cut. Of course for Harold the final blow which makes life at Treby untenable on any terms is the revelation of his parenthood. After that he resolves to leave the country.

Harold's comprehensive failure would seem to indicate a high degree of social determinism on Eliot's part. Harold is far from idealistic; he can be selfish and insensitive, but, according to his own lights, his actions are always honourable. Yet at every step he is thwarted by some external agency, whether it be his own past, that of his family, a political system that is inherently corrupt, or a woman whose "cleverness" and "taste" exceed his own. He has power, certainly, over his mother, but in the end that is just about the limit of his power. Both he and she, finally, become the victims of circumstance.

I have already said that Mrs. Transome suffers more as a woman than the lower-class Esther. There is a similar equivalency between Harold and Felix. Felix, of course, spends a considerable portion of the novel off-stage and in prison, which is a more obvious loss of autonomy than anything Harold suffers. Yet there is a strong sense that for the most part he has more genuine autonomy than anyone else in the novel. He has no guilty secrets, known or unknown to himself, and he acts always according to the dictates of conscience; he is never, therefore, susceptible to either blackmail or history. That leaves him free to follow his own inclinations, whether it be in the choice of a trade or of a wife.

Eliot thereby creates a situation that is unique among the Condition of England novels: one in which the two lower-class principals have more freedom of action than their upper-class equivalents.

There is a kind of dislocation that most critics recognise in Felix Holt, between two groups of characters: on the one hand Mrs. Transome, Harold and Jermyn and, on the other, Felix, Esther and Rufus Lyon. The general concensus seems to be that the part centred on Mrs. Transome is vastly superior to that centred on Felix. Robert Liddell, for instance, says, without naming his source:

> Possibly we may agree with the critic who said that George Eliot seems to have promised to write a novel that she did not write -- one on Radicalism. Why she did not write it must be a matter for conjecture -- did Mrs. Transome steal the story, or did Felix seem too unreal?[5]

In The Great Tradition, F.R. Leavis -- discernibly Liddell's master -- virtually ignores Felix, Esther and Rufus Lyon and concentrates on the Transome part of the novel. This is his final verdict:

> Felix Holt is not one of the novels that cultivated persons are supposed to have read, and, if read at all, it is hardly ever mentioned, so that there is reason for saying that one of the finest things in fiction is virtually unknown. It is exasperating that George Eliot should have embedded some of her maturest work in a mass that is so much other -- though Felix Holt is not, like Romola, "unreadable", and the superlative quality of the live part ought to have compelled recognition.[6]

It was Henry James who, in a contemporary review, initiated the debate

about the dislocation of the two parts of Felix Holt:

> As a story Felix Holt is singularly inartistic. The promise of the title is only half-kept. The history of the hero's opinions is made subordinate to so many other considerations, to so many sketches of secondary figures, to so many discursive amplifications of incidental points, to so much that is clear and brilliant and entertaining, but that, compared with this central object, is not serious, that when the reader finds the book drawing to a close without having, as it were, brought Felix Holt's passions to a head, he feels tempted to pronounce it a failure and a mistake. As a novel with a hero there is no doubt that it is a failure. Felix is a fragment. We find him a Radical and we leave him what? -- only "utterly married"; which is all very well in its place, but which by itself makes no conclusion.[7]

Leavis and James are approaching the specifics from different angles, but what they see is essentially the same problem; they share an aesthetic viewpoint from which there is insufficient connexion between the story of Felix and the story of Mrs. Transome for both of these personages to inhabit the same novel. Both of these critics were influential in reinforcing the critical notion of "tightness" in the novel: the idea that every element in a novel must be connected to every other element in every possible way. Felix Holt is not, by this criterion, sufficiently "tight" on the level of plot; Felix's influence on Mrs. Transome is indirect and belated. The six principal characters do, however, inhabit the same time and place, do partake in the community of the same town. Literature prior to the novel had experienced no parti-

cular problems with digression, and in our own era it is considered quite permissible to write novels - Thomas Pynchon's V and Anthony Burgess's The End of the World News are examples -- which tell several parallel stories, set at different times and in different places. It is possible, then, to see in Felix Holt an early step on a route along which so far writers such as Pynchon and Burgess have gone the furthest. The reason why Eliot felt compelled to take that step is not hard to see. There is a hint of it in Leavis's comment about the novels "cultivated persons" are supposed to have read. Mrs. Transome is a "cultivated person", while Felix Holt is not. Felix Holt is not an industrial novel, so Eliot had no opportunity of bringing classes into conflict in the way in which that happens in Mary Barton or Shirley. But Eliot did have a conception of society as an organic entity, as a whole of which the parts are connected whether or not they recognise the connexions. The lady of the manor may not know the farm-labourer's name, but their lives are as inextricably interdependent as those of a parasite and its host. That is why Eliot offended against the prescriptive aesthetics of James and Leavis. If she deserves censure, it is for her failure to achieve what she attempted, and not, as James and Leavis imply, for the attempt itself. As a final comment on the problem of unity in Felix Holt, here is an extract from another contemporary review:

> A critic, if he is in a nibbling mood, may easily pick holes in Felix Holt; but what would be the use of such trifling? We could easily show that, according to the approved methods of handling a plot, George Eliot has made several mistakes, that in some parts of her work there is not sufficient movement, and that in others where the movement is quite sufficient it

> lacks continuity. But it is to be hoped that true criticism will one day go beyond such cavilling, which reminds one rather vividly of the old paltry squabbles about the unities. Critics have been too much in the habit of insisting that if an author is to please us he shall follow certain rules, and that if he pleases us without following these rules he shall be condemned as an artist.[8]

If all three were alive today, it is likely that Dallas -- the reviewer from whom the above quotation is taken -- would be much more receptive to the work of Pynchon and Burgess than either James or Leavis.

The apparent lack of connexion between the Felix part of the story and the Mrs. Transome part is not the only source of complaint against the Felix part. There is also the character of Felix himself. Felix is intended to be the working-class hero of the novel, the figure equivalent to Alton Locke, Jem Wilson, et. al. Yet for a working-class hero he has rather an odd genesis: he is the son of a purveyor of patent medicines. Felix's father has been poor, certainly, but his trade is a commercial one. There can have been little occupational or class solidarity between him and his fellow-mountebanks, and in this very important respect he can hardly be said to have been working-class at all. Felix's widowed mother has carried on the trade after her husband's death and Felix has been apprenticed to a doctor in Glasgow. On his return to Treby, Felix is determined to put a stop to what he now considers a dishonest trade, and to keep his mother on what he can earn in a genuinely working-class occupation. As he says to Mr. Lyon:

> "Why should I want to get into the middle class because I have some learning? The most of the middle class are as

> ignorant as the working people about everything that doesn't belong to their own Brummagem life. That's how the working men are left to their foolish devices and keep worsening themselves: the best heads among them forsake their born comrades, and go in for a house with a high door-step and a brass knocker." (145)

This is a clear and unequivocal statement of Felix's commitment to his own class. Unfortunately, his actions do not match his words. The occupation he chooses for himself to replace quack medicine is that of watch-repairer. This is what Philip Fisher says about Felix's choice:

> What Felix has chosen is . . . an odd occupation -- that of watchmaker . . . . He has, unlike Adam Bede, joined that part of the working class that produces goods only the middle and upper classes can afford . . . . Does Holt do more for the world by producing jewelry -- and a watch is jewelry -- than by providing medicine? His idealism is more than a little hollow.9

Fisher has a good point. What he neglects to mention is that Felix, being, like his father, self-employed, is necessarily in competition with other watch-repairers, and is therefore, no matter how small his income, in an essentially bourgeois occupation. It is hard to see how, from such a vantage-point, he can experience real feelings of class solidarity. His position on class solidarity is revealed, perhaps unconsciously on Eliot's part, when he is present at Mr. Johnson's attempt to canvas the Sproxton miners:

> "I know there are some men who put up for parliament and talk a little too big. They may say they want to befriend the

colliers, for example. But I should like to put a question to them. I should like to ask them, 'What colliers?' There are colliers up at Newcastle, and there are colliers down in Wales. Will it do any good to honest Tom, who is hungry in Sproxton, to hear that Jack at Newcastle has his bellyful of beef and pudding?"

"It ought to do him good," Felix burst in, with his loud abrupt voice, in odd contrast with the glib Mr. Johnson's. "If he knows it's a bad thing to be hungry and not to have enough to eat, he ought to be glad that another fellow, who is not idle, is not suffering in the same way." (226f)

Johnson is practising the well-tried tactic of "divide and rule". Felix's objection, however, is based, not on an appeal to class solidarity, but to abstract morality. What he is saying is in effect that Tom is better off if Jack is well-fed, rather than that if Tom is hungry now Jack is likely to be next and that if either of them wants to help himself he had better help the other as well. Whether or not his idealism is hollow, there is no doubt that Felix is an idealist, and not somebody who is likely to do much practical good.

After the hustings, a Trades Union man has been speaking to a crowd in the street. When he has finished, Felix gets up to take his place:

The effect of his figure in relief against the stone background was unlike that of the previous speaker. He was considerably taller, his head and neck were more massive, and the expression of his mouth and eyes was something very different from the mere acuteness and rather hard-lipped antagonism of the trades-union man. Felix Holt's face had the look

> of the habitual meditative abstraction from objects of mere personal vanity or desire, which is the peculiar stamp of culture, and makes a very roughly-cut face worthy to be called "the human face divine". Even lions and dogs know a distinction between men's glances; and doubtless those Duffield men, in the expectation with which they looked up at Felix, were unconsciously influenced by the grandeur of his full yet firm mouth, and the calm clearness of his grey eyes, which were somehow unlike what they were accustomed to see along with an old brown velveteen coat, and an absence of chin-propping. When he began to speak, the contrast of his voice was still stronger than that of his appearance. The man in the flannel shirt had not been heard -- had probably not cared to be heard -- beyond the immediate group of listeners. But Felix at once drew the attention of persons comparatively at a distance. (398f)

The passage contains a physical contrast reminiscent of that between Denner and Mrs. Transome. It is never explained how Felix acquired his muscular physique while engaged in the sedentary pursuits of pharmacology and watch-making, but it is clearly necessary for him to be physically superior to the representative of a Trades Union. This vision of a social hierarchy based on inherent qualities is intensified by the claim that "Even lions and dogs know a distinction between men's glances", and by the abusive implication that "those Duffield men" are of the same order as the lions and the dogs. The gratuitous vilification of the Trades Union is much milder than its equivalent in Sybil, but it is of the same kind.

I have already said that Felix is an idealist. But the exact nature of his ideals is never made very specific. He believes in education but not the franchise, he is opposed to violence and disorder, and he has a strong aversion to cravats. With the single exception of his views on education, these are precisely the opinions that the most ruthlessly exploitative employer would want his employees to have. One of the ways in which Felix employs his education is in insulting his mother -- a re-hash of Adam Bede's mother, only this time ashamed of her son instead of proud of him. For instance, after she has said something particularly inept:

> "Mother", said Felix, who often amused himself and kept good-humoured by giving his mother answers that were unintelligible to her, "you have an astonishing readiness in the Ciceronian antiphrasis, considering you have never studied oratory. (321)

There is no mention in the novel of any attempt by Felix to enlarge his mother's mind; if the only evidence she sees of his superior education is such puerile mockery as this, it is no wonder that she has little faith in education (It is interesting to note that the narrator shares Felix's taste for gloating over the uneducated: "'Not nohow,' said the landlord, thinking that where negatives were good the more you heard of them the better" [377]). Felix's involvement in the riot probably saves one life, though it costs another and results in imprisonment for himself, from which, very improbably, he is rescued by the intervention of his class-enemies. He transforms Esther's taste for fine clothes into a taste for himself. Other than that, he achieves precisely nothing and ends up, as James aptly puts it, "utterly married". The result of his

class-loyalty has been a relapse into domestic felicity. Meanwhile the Sproxton miners continue to drink in ignorance, the Transomes continue to occupy Transome Hall, and the life of Treby remains unchanged. Although his ultimate fate is not an unhappy one, Felix is as much of a failure as Harold Transome.

At the opposite end of the social scale from Felix, class-loyalties are again reinforced at the end of the book. Sir Maximus Debarry, the upper-class idiot who disclaims acquaintance with the Transomes when he finds that Harold is standing in the Radical interest, demonstrates this when Jermyn's public revelation that he is Harold's father brings them -- Jermyn and Harold -- to blows:

> The young strong man reeled with a sick faintness. But in the same moment Jermyn released his hold and Harold felt himself supported by the arm. It was Sir Maximus Debarry who had taken hold of him.
>
> "Leave the room, sir!" the baronet said to Jermyn, in a voice of imperious scorn. "This is a meeting of gentlemen."
>
> "Come, Harold," he said, in the old friendly voice, "come away with me." (581)

In comparison with the inviolable sect of gentlemen, matters such as opinion and illegitimacy are small beer.

By the end of Felix Holt, then, nobody has done very much and nothing of any significance has changed. It is hard to see why, speaking of the Condition of England novels, T.B. Tomlinson should say that "George Eliot is quite obviously the most intelligent novelist in the group"[10], or even why Felix Holt is normally included in the group at all. For the present day, the answer can only lie in Eliot's reputa-

tion as the author of Middlemarch and Daniel Deronda. In Eliot's own day, in spite of Dickens and the other Condition of England novelists, it was still fairly unusual to include in the same novel characters of such widely different classes and to treat them with equal seriousness. That was liable to cause offence to some upper-class readers of the era, and the attitudes from which that offence grew are by no means dead today. Writing of the scene between Harold, Jermyn and Sir Maximus Debarry, just quoted, Robert Liddell claims that "The hero of the occasion is Sir Maximus Debarry, a fine gentleman of the old school."[1] Liddell's study of Eliot's novels was published in 1977. His chapter on Felix Holt contains a good deal of explication of the plot. At one point he describes what happens after Scales has cut off Christian's coat-tail:

> Felix Holt happened to pass by and find a leather pocket-book and other objects. Out of inverted snobbery he had a foolish dislike of approaching the family at Treby Manor and decided to leave everything in the hands of Rufus Lyon, asking him to effect the restitution. "I've had the ill-luck to be the finder of these things in the Debarrys' Park. Most likely they belong to one of the family at the Manor, or to some grandee who is staying there. I hate having anything to do with such people. They'll think me a poor rascal and offer me money. You are a known man, and I thought you would be kind enough to relieve me by taking charge of these things, and writing to Debarry, not metioning me, and asking him to send someone for them." Mr. Lyon does not rebuke Felix for his nasty pride -- shown by the vulgar sneering word "grandee"

> -- but it will be seen for what it is worth when we compare it with the exquisite sensibility and good manners of Philip Debarry.12

Criticism of this sort is, though it is not intended to be, a testimony to the power of Eliot's writing. It is of course a distortion of what happens in the novel to call Felix's reluctance to go in person to the Debarry family "foolish" or "inverted snobbery". It is not "foolish" or "inverted snobbery" to wish to avoid being patronised by being offered money for returning an object in a case where, if the finder had been on an equal social footing with the Debarrys, it would be considered on both sides an insult for any money to change hands. Felix's "nasty pride" and Philip Debarry's "exquisite sensibility" are judged by Liddell entirely according to the code of manners to which Debarry subscribes, without the least consideration on Liddell's part that any other code of manners could exist, much less be accorded equal status with Debarry's. When Liddell points out that Mr. Lyon does not rebuke Felix, he fails to take into account either the possibility that Mr. Lyon sees nothing wrong in Felix's action, or the fact that the relationship between the two men is not such as to confer on Mr. Lyon the right to rebuke Felix even if he does think Felix is in the wrong. Liddell's reactionary criticism is personal and emotional, and I have taken the trouble to examine it because it exemplifies the kind of attitudes, both social and aesthetic, which can condemn even so conservative a novel as Felix Holt as offending against established orders, both in aesthetics and in the social hierarchy. Viewed against the background of such reaction in the 1970s, the little that Felix Holt achieved in the 1860s can be seen to be not so little after all.

Conclusion

This thesis has been concerned with six novels which have a number of features in common. It could have been organized in either of two ways: either by tracing similarities and differences through each of the novels, or by dealing with each novel separately. I have chosen the latter method, because I wished to respect the integrity of the novels as individual works. It might have been possible to organize the chapters into a number of sections, dealing with similar aspects of each book. I chose not to do that because each novel seemed to me to demand a slightly different approach. Nevertheless, it should be apparent by now that all six books not only deal with broadly similar themes, but also adopt broadly similar methods for dealing with these themes, although of course there are differences as well as similarities. What I want to do now is to switch to the other principle on which the thesis might have been organised and set out, in summary form, the main areas in which, as Condition of England novels, these books resemble or differ from each other. That will necessitate a certain amount of repetition, but I think it is justified by the need to draw together a number of strands which have been pursued separately in each of the novels. Essentially, there are five of these areas, though inevitably there will be a degree of overlap between them: the portrayal of working-class characters; the role played by marriage in the resolution of the stories; other salient features of the resolutions; the view taken of outsiders; and the portrayal of riots. Using these areas as headings, I will look at each novel in turn, and then offer the briefest possible summary of how that area is treated in general.

The principal working-class characters in Sybil are Sybil herself, her father and Stephen Morley. The Gerards turn out to be the disinherited survivors of an aristocratic family, and, given Disraeli's apparent belief that the aristocracy differs genetically from the proletariat, the "aristocratic blood" has its effect even before Sybil finds out that she is an heiress. Throughout most of the novel, Walter Gerard is an overseer, occupying an ambivalent position between employer and employee, and Sybil seems destined to enter a convent. There is, therefore, really no sense in which either can be said to be typical of the working class. Stephen Morley's origins are obscure, but his present occupation is that of journalist, which places him firmly outwith the working class, despite his apparent commitment to it. John Barton is a good and strong man, whose roots are firmly in the working class, and who remains faithful to that class to the end. Although his act of murder is not condoned, the process of oppression which drives him to such a pitch of desperation is meticulously chronicled. Mary Barton herself is sensitively and realistically portrayed, due attention being paid to her failings as well as her strengths. Jem Wilson, on the other hand, is too strong, too skilful, too scrupulously honest and too devoted to Mary to be anything but an idealised figure. If Sybil has bogus working-class characters on centre-stage, North and South has authentic ones on the periphery. Nicholas Higgins is sympathetically and realistically drawn, but he is simply not a major character. His daughter Bessy is designed purely to pull at the reader's heart-strings. She is portrayed exclusively as a victim of industrial disease, and has little function in the novel beyond that of showing the effects of unhealthy working conditions. In Shirley the working class is represented by William

Farren, who, in so far as he can be said to be representative at all, represents only that section of the working class which, when it was finally enfranchised, came to be known as "forelock Tories". Like the Higgins family, he is a relatively minor character. Alton Locke, whose working-class credentials are doubtful to begin with, is eventually converted from Chartism to religion, and his romanticism and his taste for poetry have in any case made him exceptional all along. Felix Holt, whose working-class credentials are even more doubtful than those of Alton Locke, has a set of attitudes too strongly cast in the image of his creator to pass for authentic working-class values.

In Sybil, Alton Locke and Felix Holt, the working-class characters are barely working-class at all. In North and South and Shirley, they are, but they are not major characters. Only in Mary Barton is the main focus on a group of authentic working-class characters.

With one exception, the six novels end in at least one marriage which is crucial to an understanding of the novelists' respective purposes. In Sybil the upper class (Egremont) is rejuventated by an infusion of blood (Sybil), apparently from the working class but really from a disinherited branch of the aristocracy. Mary Barton has entertained a fantasy of marrying Harry Carson, but we, the readers, know that his intentions have never been honourable. Mary's Aunt Esther serves as a warning of what is likely to happen to working-class girls who indulge in such fantasies. In the light of the roles played by Harry Carson and Esther, Mary's eventual marriage to Jem Wilson can be seen as, not so much a gesture of working-class solidarity, as an injunction to working-class girls that they should know their station and stay in it. The marriage in North and South concerns only upper-middle-class characters,

and is intended, like the book's title, to show that proper management of the working class will be possible only when northern bourgeois energy and industry are united with southern paternalism and compassion. In Shirley, the marriage of Caroline Helstone and Robert Moore serves essentialy the same purpose as that of Margaret Hale and John Thornton. The marriage of Shirley Keeldar and Louis Moore -- both of whom have a more symbolic function than Caroline and Robert -- reiterates that theme to some extent, but it also attempts to link it to the broader social issues with which Shirley, uniquely among our six novels, is concerned: to provide the link between the governess theme and the Luddite background. Alton Locke is the exception. There is perhaps a parallel between Alton's attraction to Lillian Winnstay and Mary Barton's to Harry Carson, but it is complicated by the fact that the sexual issue works at cross-purposes with the class issue; Lillian will never take advantage of Alton, and what awaits him is not "ruin", but disillusionment and despair. Neither Felix Holt nor Esther Lyon is ever attracted to anyone above them in station, but Esther is wooed by Harold Transome. This, however, happens only at the end of the book, when Esther has already made up her mind in favour of Felix. There is no possibility that she could ever prefer Harold personally, so that her rejection of him is presented as a rejection of the wealth and power which are legally hers anyway. But the issue is blurred by the fact that she already loves Felix. It is hard to see, therefore, whether on Esther's part the marriage is an affirmation of working-class solidarity or of romantic love. In the light of the cloying "bourgeoimorphism" with which the book ends, the final pronouncement must be in favour of the latter, which makes the marriage, as far as class issues are con-

cerned, an empty gesture.

The interesting conclusion from all this is that, despite near misses in some of the novels, no real inter-class marriage takes place in any of them. The marriages in Sybil, North and South and Shirley concern no working-class characters, while those in Mary Barton and Felix Holt represent, not so much gestures of defiance against higher classes, as the advisability of staying within one's own class. Although there is no marriage in Alton Locke, the story endorses this last message, the only difference being that for Alton there is no available member of his own class.

Apart from the marriages, the fate of the principal characters at the ends of the novels gives some indication of what -- if anything -- the various authors see as solutions to the problems around which their novels are centred. Disraeli's "solution" is essentially mystical; it involves the mingling of two kinds of "blood", which is to rejuvenate England in some esoteric sense. Mary Barton is pessimistic. Mary's and Jem's emigration to Canada seems to indicate that life in England has simply become untenable. Yet the book is a good illustration of the tension between the constraints of the novel form and an author's didactic purpose. The happy ending -- required by the conventions of the novel -- concerns only Mary and Jem; their happiness in Canada contrasts harshly with everyone else's misery in England. In North and South there is a better reconciliation of message and medium. Mrs. Gaskell has by this time discovered that there is cause for optimism if only the virtues of two different branches of the middle class can be united. The traditional happy ending of lovers united and married thus fits neatly with the didactic purpose. In this respect Shirley is essential-

ly similar to North and South, but in Brontë's novel there is a complication. The fact that this happy ending is set several decades in the past, while the problems remain, tends to undermine the happiness of the ending. That ending has social relevance and validity only if it is seen as a plea for what might or should happen, rather than as a portrayal of anything that actually has happened. Alton Locke is the only hero in any of these novels to die at the end of the story. Kingsley's novel as a whole suffers from the reverse of the problem I have described in Mary Barton. Alton Locke is not intended to be pessimistic. There is hope, improbable as it may seem from today's perspective, in the religious message of the book, yet Kingsley still found it advisable to subvert the traditionally novelistic happy ending. Mary Barton illustrates well the fact that the traditional happy ending of a novel is above all an individualistic affair; the principal characters attain happiness by escaping from the misery of their society. Alton Locke, on the other hand, dies unfulfilled, yet leaves behind a message of hope for his society. That, I think, constitutes some dissatisfaction on Kingsley's part, with the individualistic basis of the novel form. I have already described the ending of Felix Holt as an example of "bourgeoimorphism". The book has nothing of any significance to say about the problems it purports to address. Yet it is worth noting that Felix's and Esther's domestic felicity is achieved, not in Treby, but in another -- unnamed -- town: a toned-down version of Mary's and Jem's emigration. The implication is that Treby, at least, is irredeemable.

In three of the books -- Mary Barton, Alton Locke and Felix Holt -- the characters have to move away from the places where their lives have been passed. With the proviso that I have already made in the case of

Alton Locke, this would seem to indicate the novelists' turning their backs on the problems with which their books have been concerned, and even in Alton Locke, the hero, at least, is unable to continue living in England. Two of the remaining three books advocate a realignment of the middle class, and Sybil, which can in some ways be seen to have this feature in common with North and South and Shirley, offers what is essentially a mystical solution, with no readily discernible foundation in social or economic reality.

The next feature I want to look at is one that is by no means peculiar to the Condition of England novels; yet it is one that is of particular interest in them. It is the attitude which is taken to outsiders. There is a kind of loyalty to a certain locality in nearly all of the novels, and quite frequently this extends to overt hostility towards anyone from anywhere else. In Sybil, workers from other parts of England are shown to be trouble-makers. Mary Barton is entirely free of xenophobia, though Mrs. Gaskell does not ignore the differences between workers from various parts of the country. In particular she shows the valuable contribution made by old rural values -- in the person of Alice Wilson -- to the fast-developing urban proletarian culture. This is probably the closest any of the novelists come to presenting the desirability of a realignment among different geographical groups of working-class people in the same way that the middle class is realigned by the same author in North and South. The later book is also free of xenophobia, but Margaret's speech to Nicholas Higgins, which I have quoted, goes a long way towards explaining the origins of the cultural difference between urban proletarians and rural peasants. Charlotte Brontë probably has the worst case of xenophobia in the group. I have explored

this theme in some detail in the chapter on Shirley, so all I will reiterate here is that the very specifically defined geographical area of Yorkshire is presented as the cradle of all that is good; people from other places make a very poor showing. Alton Locke contains no overt prejudice against workers from outside London, but the extent to which Kingsley's portrayal of the stupidity of farm workers is an accurate reflection of reality must remain an open question. Felix Holt contains little if any of this kind of prejudice.

Patriotism, or a loyalty to one's own region, probably has its origin in a territorial instinct which is still observable in many species. It becomes, however, an unfortunate obstacle to progress when our own species is divided into interest-groups, such as social classes, which cut across geographical barriers. It can also, to the novelist as well as to the politician, provide a convenient scapegoat by blaming the problems of one region on the inhabitants of another, who, for the simple reason that they are not there, cannot defend themselves. This is particularly pronounced in Sybil, and even more so in Shirley, while in Felix Holt, Eliot provides a good example of how the territorial instinct is exploited for political purposes in the speech of Mr. Johnson to the Sproxton miners.

There is a riot in all but one of the six novels -- Mary Barton is the exception -- and a remarkably similar pattern is followed in each. In Sybil the riot is instigated by Bishop Hatton's Hell-Cats, and the heroine struggles against it. In North and South, the riot is the direct result of a specific industrial dispute; it is caused by members of the Trades Union, who, though they are not outsiders in the geographical sense, are nevertheless, simply by virtue of their belonging to the

union, beyond the pale. Once again it is the heroine, Margaret, who tries to pacify the rioters and protect their victim from them. The riot in Shirley is once more the result of an industrial dispute, but in this case it is made quite clear that the majority of the rioters are not from the immediate locality. Here it is Robert Moore who heroically defends his mill from the attack on it. In Alton Locke the riot is a rural one, caused by despair; the hero struggles to stop the riot and ends up in gaol as a result of his actions being misinterpreted. In Felix Holt the riot is the result of the manipulation of ignorant miners by an unscrupulous election agent; otherwise the scenario is identical to that in Alton Locke.

There is a remarkable uniformity in the role played by riot in these novels. They are clearly intended as a warning to middle-class readers of what will happen if the just demands of the working class are not met. Riot is always portrayed in diabolical terms. It is understandable that it represents the worst fears of the middle and upper classes, since the one thing that the working class had in their favour was strength of numbers. In that respect, at least, they had the potential to topple the power and privilege of their social superiors. The riots in the novels can therefore be seen to be an appeal to the self-interest of the higher classes; this, the novelists are saying, is what will happen to you if you don't do something about the condition of the workers. It is probably best summed up in Mrs. Gaskell's "Frankenstein" image, which, perhaps significantly, occurs in the only novel in which no riot occurs.

The last thing I want to do is look briefly at the place of the

Condition of England novels within the history of the novel as a whole. I have certain fundamental disagreements with Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism, but since he is probably the greatest taxonomist of literature since Aristotle, I will use some of his descriptions of the novel. In the Anatomy of Criticism he complains about the lack of an accurate terminology for the novel. We can speak about poetry in general or about one poem in particular, but no equivalent terms exist in relation to the novel; that is why I have just had to say "the Condition of England novels within the history of the novel as a whole". The nearest equivalent term to "poetry" is probably "fiction", but the use of "fiction" in such a context can be misleading, since not all fictions are novels. To make his point, Frye appeals to our experience as readers:

> Is Tristram Shandy a novel? Nearly everyone would say yes, in spite of its easygoing disregard of "story values". Is Gulliver's Travels a novel? Here most would demur, including the Dewey decimal system, which puts it under "Satire and Humor". But surely everyone would call it fiction, and if it is fiction, a distinction appears between fiction as a genus and the novel as a species of that genus.1

The Condition of England novels, then, are to be considered as novels, and not as examples of some other form of fiction. It remains to be seen why Disraeli et. al. chose to convey their messages about the condition of England in the form of the novel, rather than in some other literary form. Frye has an interesting point to make in this connexion:

> In drama, the hypothetical or internal characters of the story confront the audience directly, hence the drama is marked by the concealment of the author from his audience . . .

> Drama, like music, is an ensemble performance for an audience, and music and drama are most likely to flourish in a society with a strong consciousness of itself as a society, like Elizabethan England. When a society becomes individualized and competitive, like Victorian England, music and drama suffer accordingly, and the written word almost monopolizes literature.[2]

It is easy to see the truth of this by appealing to a collection of phenomena that occurred almost exactly a century after the condition of England debate. The "angry young men" of the 1950s produced literature that was in many ways a twentieth-century equivalent to the Condition of England novel. England in the 1950s was still a competitive and individualistic society, and many of these literary works were novels. But the 1950s also saw a renaissance of the hitherto moribund English theatre, a renaissance brought about largely by John Osborne and other "angry young men". What had happened was that while society at large remained competitive and individualistic, a distinctive working-class culture had emerged, a culture that was the result of the consolidation of the urban working-class culture that we see in its formative stage in novels such as Mary Barton. Hence both of the social conditions which Frye describes existed, and writers, some of whom were actually working-class themselves, used both drama and the novel as media. The birth of rock and roll in the 1950s is further evidence of the consolidation of a working-class culture.

But in the meantime, something had happened to the novel, something which rendered it a much more suitable vehicle for overtly political purposes than it had been in the 1840s and 50s. Frye's description of

the novel is accurate, but, I think, out of date:

> Fielding's conception of the novel as a comic epic in prose seems fundamental to the tradition he did so much to establish. In novels we think of as typical, like those of Jane Austen, plot and dialogue are closely linked to the conventions of the comedy of manners. The conventions of Wuthering Heights are linked rather with the tale and the ballad. They seem to have more affinity with tragedy and the tragic emotions of passion and fury, which would shatter the balance of tone in Jane Austen, can be safely accommodated here. So can the supernatural or the suggestion of it, which is difficult to get into a novel.[3]

The conventions of the comedy of manners preclude the serious discussion of "issues", particularly political ones. The Condition of England novelists tried to work such discussion into their novels, where it clashed with the other conventions of the comedy of manners, such as the need for a love story in which the lovers overcome various obstacles and eventually attain a happy ending. The sense of this clash of opposing tendencies within the same book is probably as much responsible as social or political prejudice for the widely-held opinion that the Condition of England novels are not great works of literature. It is my contention that they are extremely important works of literature precisely because of their partial failure; they created a slowly-growing awareness that the conventions within which Jane Austen worked constituted a serious and damaging limitation to the potential of the novel ~~for taking~~ on board material from almost any source and treating it with more freedom than is possible in any other literary medium. That is why

I said that Frye's description of the novel is out of date; it is a very good description of the pre-Condition of England novel (and of many novels written since that time), but it does not take into account the startling diversity of subsequent novels. He wants to exclude Wuthering Heights from the novel-canon, yet Wuthering Heights is much closer to the comedy of manners than Mikhail Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita, which is never described other than as a novel, and in which the action alternates between the Devil in twentieth-century Moscow and a character who bears a close resemblance to Jesus of Nazareth in first-century Palestine. Presumably Frye would classify The Master and Margarita as a romance, which is the term he uses for books like Wuthering Heights. The issue of whether we should call these books novels or romances is in the end a non-issue of pedantic semantics; what is important is that the debate is taking place because the conventions according to which the novel is based on the comedy of manners have broken down, and the freedom of novelists in both the choice and the treatment of their material has grown enormously. Emily Brontë brought in the supernatural (which had in fact already been done, by James Hogg in his Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner); Charlotte Brontë, along with the other Condition of England novelists, began for the first time to use class as theme instead of class as data (see Introduction), thereby extending the provenance of the novel in another direction.

It is for this reason that the contribution of Disraeli, Gaskell, Brontë, Kingsley and Eliot to the development of the novel is probably greater in the long run than their contribution to the Condition of England debate.

Notes

Introduction

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Chapter Three

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[3] Cazamian, 287.

[4] Keating, 20.

[5] Cazamian, 268.

[6] Tomlinson, 73.

Chapter Five

[1] Robert Liddell, The Novels of George Eliot, (London: Duckworth, 1977) 117.

[2] John Morley, "Felix Holt, the Radical", Saturday Review 21 (16 June 1866) 722-24, quoted in Gordon S Haight, ed., A Century of George Eliot Criticism, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965) 34.

[3] Williams, 111.

[4] K.M. Newton, George Eliot, Romantic Humanist: a Study of the Philosophical Structure of her Novels, (Totawa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble, 1981) 42f.

[5] Liddell, 103

[6] F.R. Leavis, The Great Tradition, (New York: New York University Press, 1964) 61.

[7] Henry James, "Felix Holt, the Radical", Nation 3 (16 August 1866) 127-28, quoted in Haight.

[8] Eneas Sweetland Dallas, "Felix Holt, the Radical", The Times (26 June 1866) 6, quoted in Haight.

[9] Philip Fisher, Making Up Society: the Novels of George Eliot, (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981) 149,

[10] Tomlinson, 77.

[11] Liddell, 119.

[12] Liddell, 107.

Conclusion

[1] Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [1957] 1971) 303.

[2] Frye, 249.

[3] Frye, 304

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