# Defining Pastoral in *North and South*

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## I

The 2003 reissue of the Penguin Classics edition of Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* reproduces on its cover William Cowen's 1849 painting of a small rural enclave, complete with a collapsing wall, a derelict house, a verdant lawn and resting cattle. The vast landscape stretches into a background dominated by dry, dusty earth, which extends to an industrial city with chimneys belching smoke into the grey-brown sky.[1] The cover illustration draws attention to the significance of place in the novel's structure. The "north" lies in the distance in Cowen's painting; the "south" occupies the foreground, preserved from radical industrialisation.

Yet it is impossible to separate the pastoral from the industrial. They contrast, but the contrast is based on mutual dependence. The pastoral foreground is a remnant of an agrarian past, a museum-piece confronted by the new industrial norm depicted in the background. The identity of each depends on its contrast with the other. Moreover, the artist's view of these different environments is ambiguous. The lush foreground contains a patch that is gloomy and slightly threatening; the industrial background is suffused with light, and can be read as a promised land glowing on the horizon.

The novel tells the story of Margaret Hale's move from pastoral south to industrial north, from her comfortable, secure home at Helstone to the constant change which characterizes life in Milton-Northern. The move from south to north, however, is not merely a symbolic removal from idyllic pastoral life to polluted industrial existence. Margaret's perception of both places undergoes radical change. She initially loves Helstone and feels homesick on moving to the north, but by the end of the novel she returns to Milton from choice, to real friends and active life. Shifts in Margaret's view of Helstone function as a gauge of her perception of herself, and demonstrate

that pastoral is a reflection of an individual consciousness and its relationship to place, rather than a reflection of real rural life. Description is only one means of shaping the reader's image of a place; the perspective of the character who views the place, and the intersection between place and time, have a more powerful influence on the reader's reaction to the environment.[2]

The pastoral mode has undergone substantial change over its long history.[3] The etymological meaning suggests that the pastoral must deal with the life of shepherds; in practice, this meant particularly their music and their loves. The first Idyll of Theocritus, for example, describes a shepherd and a goatherd complimenting each other on their piping when they meet in the pastures at noon. Post-classical pastoral rarely includes such scenes, and today the term is applicable to any text which involves a retreat from urban life, where its pressure is forgotten, at least for a time, in the encounter with an earlier and simpler culture. This temporal element of pastoral is associated with the concept of the Golden Age, the notion that the present, "fallen" state of the world is a decline from an earlier, better time.[4] As Peter Marinelli puts it, "The great characteristic of pastoral poetry is that it is written when an ideal or at least more innocent world is felt to be lost, but not so wholly as to destroy the memory of it or to make some imaginative intercourse between present reality and past perfection impossible".[5] Such nostalgia is analogous to the return to a supposed childhood simplicity: the early periods of human civilization viewed by later generations are a cultural echo of the adult's retrospective view of childhood, a key concern of the Romantic poets. Wordsworth's *Prelude*, the autobiographical account of growth and education, and of the role of nature in this process, especially in childhood, was published in 1850, only four years before the serial publication of *North and South* began in *Household Words*.[6] Margaret's construction of Helstone as a pastoral idyll depends on her memories of infancy and childhood there before she was removed to live with her Aunt Shaw and cousin Edith in Harley Street. In each of the three main periods of Margaret's life at Helstone, she perceives the place in a different way. It is her childhood home of pleasure and enjoyment. When she returns, she inhabits it as an adult and is confronted by the reality of her parents' life. Finally, when Helstone has changed almost beyond recognition, she can separate from reality the ideal she remembers existing in her childhood. When the perceived pastoral

reality suffers change, Margaret can no longer identify it as a remnant of the golden age, but as a result its emotional power only increases: the golden age is dissociated from a lingering and potentially fallible reality, and becomes purely a product of the imagination, no longer contained by the constraints of reality.

In addition to this temporal element, pastoral is intimately concerned with place. The typical pastoral scene is a rural retreat, a garden or some other place which offers a physical, as well as social, contrast to the city. The physical setting frequently dominates in the construction of the pastoral, perhaps because it is difficult to grasp an abstract "better time" as a reality. Identification of a particular place as a remnant of the lost past allows a stronger connection with the time via the more concrete elaboration of a lost, or at least rare, landscape. Just as the pastoral mode itself reflects a desire to escape from the social realities of urban life, the construction of a specific pastoral landscape reflects an individual desire for an escape from daily reality. In *North and South*, the possibility of imagining Helstone as pastoral is dependent on Margaret's experiences in London and Milton. Her perception of Helstone therefore changes as her experience of these other places changes.

In a novel which is presented by an omniscient third person narrator, there is another way to present a landscape to the reader as pastoral: through the narration. The narrative voice can provide the description, sustaining the illusion of a present pastoral for the reader to accept. The landscape thus takes on an objective form and supports the notion that place has a spirit independent of human perception; that certain landscapes have an inherent identity which affects anybody who enters them.[7] The narrator's descriptions of the garden and forest at Helstone, for example, imply that the place is, of its nature, pastoral. Similarly, the idea of the "air" at Milton implies an objective and universally recognized industrial "spirit of the place": the town itself seems to declare its industrial character to the reader without the intervention of individual subjectivity. The effect of this construction of Helstone as a pastoral landscape at the narrative level is the creation of a magical or mystical space, the landscape apparently controlled by some unseen and unknown power.

The concept of pastoral, therefore, involves a nexus between notions of time and place. Pastoral offers a nostalgic representation of a lost way of life but it is also firmly grounded in a real place, whether that place is the projection of a character's desires or whether it is intended to have an independent "spirit".

## II

The identification of Helstone as the location of a pastoral idyll begins early. In the opening chapter, Margaret has some trouble describing it to Henry Lennox, but paints a sketchy picture of a landscape with cottages and "roses growing all over them" (13). Throughout the conversation, Margaret draws on childhood memories of the place, which, in her nine years of residence in London, have been supplemented only by occasional holiday visits to her parents' home. Margaret takes some offence at Lennox's suggestion that the landscape "sounded like a village in a tale rather than in real life":

> 'And so it is,' replied Margaret, eagerly. 'All the other places in England that I have seen seem so hard and prosaic-looking, after the New Forest. Helstone is like a village in a poem – in one of Tennyson's poems. But I won't try and describe it any more. You would only laugh at me if I told you what I think of it – what it really is.'
>
> 'Indeed, I would not. But I see you are going to be very resolved. Well, then, tell me that which I should like still better to know: what the parsonage is like.'
>
> 'Oh, I can't describe my home. It is home, and I can't put its charm into words.' (14)

At this time in the narrative, Margaret cannot find words to express her feelings about Helstone, a difficulty which underscores her perception of her childhood home as an ideal. Her memories are informed by her awareness of an imminent return. She does not imagine that the life she formerly knew at Helstone will have passed, as is conventional in a second visit to a pastoral landscape, but that it will continue as in her childhood when she returns there as an adult. Henry Lennox, an older man in adult conversation with Margaret, forces her to defend this view, and, in suggesting that she describes it (and thinks of it) as "a village in a tale", shows considerable

understanding. The pastoral locality is an ideal, lost environment, a construction of the urban mind, which seeks escape from the "haste" and "bustle" of the city (7, 16). William Empson, in his classic study, notes that the desire to return to a simpler rural existence is intimately connected with the adult desire to return to the lost innocence of childhood.[8] The desire to do either is an illusion. Margaret's hope that she can return to the life she once knew at Helstone rings false because she no longer sees through the eyes of a child and others, including her parents, no longer see her as one either. Gaskell simultaneously constructs an image of a pastoral landscape and undermines that image by leaving Margaret's individual perspective open to question by Henry Lennox.

When she returns, Margaret finds, not surprisingly, that Helstone is not as she remembers it. Before she even arrives, her longing for the past receives a challenge from the evidence of the present in the figure of her father:

> She took her mind away with a wrench from the recollection of the past to the bright serene contemplation of the hopeful future. Her eyes began to see, not visions of what had been, but the sight actually before her; her dear father leaning back asleep in the railway carriage. His blue-black hair was grey now, and lay thinly over his brows. (17)

The passage goes on to provide further evidence of Mr Hale's decline into age. On arrival in Helstone, the pattern continues, with most of the second chapter devoted to explaining Mrs Hale's dissatisfaction with Helstone and Margaret's own feeling that her father's mind is disturbed. He has taken to loitering in the garden instead of visiting parishioners, and every day eagerly awaits the arrival of the postman. Life at Helstone, characterized by her parents' distraction and their evident unhappiness, fails to live up to expectations: "Her out-of-doors life was perfect. Her indoors life had its drawbacks. With the healthy shame of a child, she blamed herself for her keenness of sight, in perceiving that all was not as it should be there" (19). The spirit of Helstone, the landscape itself, is unchanged, and the outdoor environment satisfies and delights Margaret as it did in childhood, but now she is aware of conflicts and disturbances within the family. Gaskell uses the

spatial notions of "indoors" and "out-of-doors" to denote the difference between the physical environment and the relationships which exist within it. The very title of this second chapter, "Roses and Thorns", draws on the danger lurking beneath the superficial peace and beauty of Helstone. Rustic simplicity of thought and action is compromised by complexity, dissatisfaction, and desire for change.

The arrival of Henry Lennox at the end of chapter two is another such blow. In the first chapter, during their discussion about Helstone, Lennox told Margaret that he would visit before the end of the vacation to see what the place was really like and how Margaret passed her time there. The description of the outdoors life Margaret has been living since her return precedes his unexpected arrival on the promised visit and distils the perfection of the "out-of-doors life" before the first major disruption. Lennox's entry concludes the chapter, hinting that a watershed (perhaps a proposal of marriage) is approaching:

> Margaret was at an age when any apprehension, not absolutely based on a knowledge of facts, is easily banished for a time by a bright sunny day, or some happy outward circumstance. And when the brilliant fourteen fine days of October came on, her cares were all blown away as lightly as thistledown, and she thought of nothing but the glories of the forest. The fern-harvest was over; and now that the rain was gone, many a deep glade was accessible, into which Margaret had only peeped in July and August weather. She had learnt drawing with Edith; and she had sufficiently regretted, during the gloom of the bad weather, her idle revelling in the beauty of the woodlands while it had yet been fine, to make her determined to sketch what she could before winter fairly set in. Accordingly, she was busy preparing her board one morning, when Sarah, the housemaid, threw wide open the drawing-room door, and announced, "Mr Henry Lennox." (23)

The juxtaposition of a carefree outdoor existence with the arrival of the sophisticated and occasionally sarcastic London lawyer reflects the conflicting ideologies of country and city which Margaret and Lennox hold. Lennox is surprised by the state of things at Helstone, having assumed modesty on Margaret's part when she described the paucity of her father's

living. The roses, the honeysuckle, the light, the lawn, the verbenas and geraniums are bright and their colours strong, but he observes the dilapidation of the house. The passage of time has faded the interior of the drawing room, which is smaller than he had expected it would be. As they sketch "picturesque" cottages (26), with Margaret's bonnet removed and hung from the branch of a tree, the illusion of peace and tranquillity is supreme. After lunch, Mr Hale, Lennox and Margaret go into the garden to eat pears, but, as they are eating, Lennox mentions the wasps, who are "impudent enough to dispute it with one, even at the very crisis and summit of enjoyment" (29). This short speech is a metaphorical paraphrase of the events of this chapter: the idyll is destroyed by violence. After eating their pears, Margaret and Lennox wander in the garden while Mr Hale eats his more slowly, peeling thin slices with his knife as befits his contemplative nature. Once again, Margaret and Lennox discuss Helstone, but now the place is physically present to them both and Margaret acknowledges its drawbacks in the face of Lennox's new assumption of eternal pastoral perfection: "You must please to remember that our skies are not always as deep a blue as they are now. We have rain, and our leaves do fall, and get sodden: though I think Helstone is about as perfect a place as any in the world" (29). The scene culminates in Henry Lennox's proposal of marriage to Margaret. The narration of his speech in proposal is revealing in its description of Lennox taking physical "possession" of Margaret:

> 'Margaret,' said he, taking her by surprise, and getting sudden possession of her hand, so that she was forced to stand still and listen, despising herself for the fluttering at her heart all the time;
>
> 'Margaret, I wish you did not like Helstone so much – did not seem so perfectly happy and calm here. I have been hoping for these three months past to find you regretting London – and London friends, a little – enough to make you listen more kindly' (for she was quietly, but firmly, striving to extricate her hand from his grasp) 'to one who has not much to offer, it is true – nothing but prospects in the future – but who does love you, Margaret, almost in spite of himself. Margaret, have I startled you too much? Speak!' For he saw her lips quivering almost as if she were going to cry. (30)

A day which might have been "the very crisis and summit of enjoyment" for Margaret, in the peace of the garden at Helstone with a sympathetic friend from her London days, has turned into a nightmare. In the tradition of the medieval French *pastourelle*, the maiden has been symbolically violated: first he takes "sudden possession of her hand" and she must "strive" to extricate it; then he becomes hard and cynical in response to her refusal. Lennox suffers disappointment, but for Margaret the destruction of pastoral peace is more traumatic. The scene takes place in the garden, the site of Margaret's perfect "out-of-doors life". Lennox's intrusion symbolizes the destruction of the pastoral peace, the expulsion from Eden.[9] And the whole event takes place the same day that Mr Hale reveals his intention to resign his ministry and leave Helstone, the day he tells Margaret that he will cease to be a pastor. During this one day, the pastoral image of Helstone is dramatically challenged and Margaret's imaginative construction cannot withstand such incursions.

Yet in all this social and personal turmoil, the landscape at Helstone has remained the same. Only Margaret's perception of it has changed. Lennox's mention of the wasps and the title of the second chapter are examples of the narrator providing the symbolic framework for the story. The move to Milton, though, involves a substantial change in the environment. In Helstone, the "air", the narrator tells us, was fresh and clean, although still rather damp and not at all suitable for Mrs Hale's constitution. In the evening, after Lennox's proposal and her father's declaration, when she sees Margaret looking unwell, Mrs Hale blames it on "this soft, damp, unhealthy air" and believes that Margaret has caught cold from "the bad air from some of the stagnant ponds" (43). Margaret benefits from spending time outdoors at Helstone, but her mother increasingly confines herself to an indoor life: "Mrs Hale said that the neighbourhood of so many trees affected her health; and Margaret would try to tempt her forth on to the beautiful, broad, upland, sun-streaked, cloud-shadowed common; for she was sure that her mother had accustomed herself too much to an in-doors life, seldom extending her walks beyond the church, the school, and the neighbouring cottages" (19). The pastoral "air", whether it is favoured by Margaret or shunned by Mrs Hale, is an individual response to the place. With the move to Milton, by contrast, it is the narrator who describes the

"air" of the place as an objective fact:

> For several miles before they reached Milton, they saw a deep lead-coloured cloud hanging over the horizon in the direction in which it lay. It was darker from the contrast with the pale gray-blue of the wintry sky; for in Heston there had been the earliest signs of frost. Nearer to the town, the air had a faint taste and smell of smoke; perhaps, after all, more a loss of the fragrance of the grass and herbage than any positive taste or smell. (60)

The change in "air" between Milton and Heston, and again between Milton and Helstone, receives particular attention, marking the move from the pastoral south to the industrial north.

But the precise meaning of the "air" is ambiguous. Pastoral, I have suggested, is an indication of an independent spirit of a place as much as it is a state of mind. The "spirit" is an objective and universally felt atmosphere of a place: the landscape itself is pastoral. However pastoral is most often identified as a reaction against perceived deterioration in urban life; in Robert Coleman's terms, "a reaction against certain aspects of the culture and material environment of the city".[10] Such a definition of pastoral denies that the landscape itself has any independent identity. Gaskell's description of Milton's dark cloud, for example, implies an objective "air" which is not the object of interpretation by an individual consciousness. But a character rather than the narrator usually describes the "air" at Helstone. Mrs Hale's seemingly ludicrous suggestion that she is suffering at Helstone from the proximity of so many trees is an indication of her own hypochondria rather than a statement of a general response to the environment. Milton, by contrast, is quintessentially and factually industrial. Perceptions of Helstone change, both within and between characters. Its pastoral landscape receives constant challenge, and as Margaret begins to perceive the change, the reality loses its emotional power. Milton, on the other hand, is constantly associated with change and progress. It is never stable in any sense, certainly not economically or socially, because of its industrial "air", its lively, active, unpredictable and essential nature. Change at Milton, therefore, is not confronting because it is expected, while any variation at Helstone is devastating because a pastoral cannot be allowed to change.

## III

Milton-Northern's constant activity and change is a byword for the new discourse of development and progress. John Thornton himself, the prosperous industrialist, is a self-made man: although his father had some modest wealth, he lost it through gambling and Thornton's position in Milton is entirely the product of his own efforts. In the early part of the novel, discussions between Mr Hale, Margaret and Thornton focus on ideas of self-improvement and progress. To these conversations, each brings particular knowledge and attitudes: Margaret brings social conscience, Hale brings academic learning, and Thornton brings commercial skill and the ideology of enterprise. Thornton develops a much stronger sense of his social responsibilities from these discussions, but his mind always seeks to apply abstract ideas to the present or the proximate future. Mrs Thornton expresses her regret that her son has returned to his study of the classics, and Thornton does eventually abandon it, partly because he does not wish to see Margaret, and partly because of the increasing pressure of his own work, but also, implicitly, because the study he is engaged in with Mr Hale is largely decorative. Mrs Thornton denies that knowledge of the classics is useful in the conduct of business and believes it detracts from work.[11] Mr Hale unquestioningly accepts the role of the classics in informing an understanding of the present, but Mrs Thornton (and Milton folk in general) do not share the assumption:

> 'I have no doubt the classics are very desirable for people who have leisure. But, I confess, it was against my judgment that my son renewed his study of them. The time and place in which he lives, seem to me to require all his energy and attention. Classics may do very well for men who loiter away their lives in the country or in colleges; but Milton men ought to have their thoughts and powers absorbed in the work of today. At least, that is my opinion.' This last clause she gave out with 'the pride that apes humility'. (113)

When Thornton draws on notions of utopia and how they might be brought into practice, Mr Hale's immediate response is that "[w]e will read Plato's Republic as soon as we have finished Homer" (120). Hale looks to

the past for understanding of the present and hope for the future, but Thornton's reaction to this interjection emphasizes his view of the place of classical philosophy: "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". Rather than be diverted by Mr Hale's reference to an ideal, he returns the conversation to the immediate problems faced by Milton's masters and workers. Towards the end of the novel, Thornton finds a balance between the purely academic study of the past which his mother derides (and which is represented by Mr Bell, the Oxford don who owns Thornton's mill, and to a lesser extent by Mr Hale) and a more practical political economy, of which both Margaret (in the novel) and Gaskell (in real life) claimed ignorance. His project of supplying a canteen for the "hands" combines the practical Miltonian attention to the present with the larger principles of social responsibility which Mr Hale and Margaret advocate:

> 'I've got acquainted with a strange kind of chap, and I put one or two children in whom he is interested to school. So, as I happened to be passing near his house one day, I just went there about some trifling payment to be made; and I saw such a miserable black frizzle of a dinner – a greasy cinder of meat, as first set me a-thinking. But it was not till provisions grew so high this winter that I bethought me how, by buying things wholesale, and cooking a good quantity of provisions together, much money might be saved, and much comfort gained. So I spoke to my friend – or my enemy – the man I told you of – and he found fault with every detail of my plan; and in consequence I laid it aside, both as impracticable, and also because if I forced it into operation I should be interfering with the independence of my men; when, suddenly, this Higgins came to me and graciously signified his approval of a scheme so nearly the same as mine, that I might fairly have claimed it; and, moreover, the approval of several of his fellow-workmen, to whom he had spoken. I was a little "riled," I confess, by his manner, and thought of throwing the whole thing overboard to sink or swim. But it seemed childish to relinquish a plan which I had once thought wise and well-laid, just because I myself did not receive all the honour and consequence due to the

> originator. So I coolly took the part assigned to me, which is something like that of a steward to a club. I buy in the provisions wholesale, and provide a fitting matron or cook.' (352-53)

Thornton's language reveals the combination of good effects which the project has achieved, combining economy with improved public health and social progress.[12] Instead of a stultifying ideal but unreal society, Thornton's education in social responsibility produces tangible benefits for the people, which, moreover, do not depend on the master intruding into the workers' lives. If pastoral is the creation of an urban sensibility unhappy with flawed city life, it is an escape from the changing reality which *North and South* confronts so directly in the relationships between capital and labour, an escape from the present into an imaginary, unchanging past.[13]

After the deaths of both her parents, Margaret's present is far from ideal and she welcomes the opportunity to seek refuge in the imaginary. She visits Helstone with Bell, but now sees that it, too, is touched by change and "progress". In the reader's first encounter with Helstone, it was a place imbued with Margaret's memories of her childhood, but it also represented her future. Looking back in chapter forty-six, after her experiences in Milton, her view is very different. It is no longer an ideal past, and although it retains elements she remembers, "she finds it riddled with antagonisms, discontent and brutal pagan superstition".[14] The visit to Helstone prompts Margaret to consider some of the many changes she has experienced since her family left, and she is shocked by the scale of alteration:

> There was change everywhere; slight, yet pervading all. Households were changed by absence, or death, or marriage, or the natural mutations brought by days and months and years, which carry us on imperceptibly from childhood to youth, and thence through manhood to age, whence we drop like fruit, fully ripe, into the quiet mother earth. Places were changed – a tree gone here, a bough there, bringing in a long ray of light where no light was before – a road was trimmed and narrowed, and the great straggling pathway by its side enclosed and cultivated. A great improvement it was called; but Margaret sighed over the old picturesqueness, the old gloom, and the grassy wayside of former days. (384)

Despite the experience of life at Helstone before the move to Milton, Margaret has since leaving continued to imagine Helstone as eternal and stable, an escape from her new industrial home. In the face of the deaths of both her parents and the experience of an entirely different kind of life in Milton, she returns to Helstone expecting to find the lost past: "Every mile was redolent of associations, which she would not have missed for the world, but each of which made her cry upon 'the days that are no more,' with ineffable longing" (376). As the carriage approaches Helstone, Margaret is able to sustain the illusion of stability and security: "It hurt her to see the Helstone road so flooded in the sunlight, and every turn and every familiar tree so precisely the same in its summer glory as it had been in former years. Nature felt no change, and was ever young" (376). But on arrival, it becomes clear, as Mrs Purkis remarks, that "times is changed" (377). The new vicar and his family are very different in character from the Hales. They are making "alterations" to the house and challenging established traditions, for example by insisting that ginger beer rather than malt liquor be sent to the men working in the hay-field (378). The real, substantive changes which have taken place in Helstone since her departure are forcefully brought home to Margaret, and she is no longer able to sustain the illusion of immutability.[15] And the change is not simply one of perspective. Although she certainly sees the landscape at Helstone differently, there are real changes even to the sites of her "out-of-doors life":

> It was not like the same place. The garden, the grass-plat, formerly so daintily trim that even a stray rose-leaf seemed like a fleck on its exquisite arrangement and propriety, was strewed with children's things; a bag of marbles here, a hoop there; a straw-hat forced down upon a rose-tree as on a peg, to the destruction of a long beautiful tender branch laden with flowers, which in former days would have been trained up tenderly, as if beloved. (383)

The Hales' attention to the garden and the natural landscape contrasts with the careless attitude of the new vicar's family. The landscape which had such a powerful effect on Margaret in childhood and when she returned from her years in London, has not stayed still. As she leaves Helstone, Margaret decides that "she was very glad to have been there, and that she had seen it

again, and that to her it would always be the prettiest spot in the world, but that it was so full of associations with former days, and especially with her father and mother, that if it were all to come over again, she should shrink back from such another visit as that which she had paid with Mr Bell" (391-92). The recollection of pastoral perfection jars with the present reality. Margaret's memories of Helstone are inextricably linked to her memories of her parents, and although she receives a friendly welcome from Mrs Purkis, holds young Susan's hand, and feels affectionate and protective towards the children "who had received the solemn rite of baptism from her father" (382), it is preferable to remember it as a paradise lost than as a present reality, altered and flawed.

## IV

In the early chapters of *North and South*, Margaret was characterized as a child of nature, who came to London "all untamed from the forest" (10) and called the gardens of Helstone home, but she was equally able to function in sophisticated London society. At the end of the novel, she decides to return to the new landscape of industrial England represented by Milton, and to the more progressive ideology which Thornton has adopted. Place is a central element in this development. Margaret tells Bessy that "my home was in a forest" (100) and goes on to describe Helstone when it is still fresh in her memory, still, to some extent, the pastoral landscape she remembers from her childhood:

> Margaret had never spoken of Helstone since she left it, except just naming the place incidentally. She saw it in dreams more vivid than life, and as she fell away to slumber at nights her memory wandered in all its pleasant places. But her heart was open to this girl: 'Oh, Bessy, I loved the home we have left so dearly! I wish you could see it. I cannot tell you half its beauty. There are great trees standing all about it, with their branches stretching long and level, and making a deep shade of rest even at noonday. And yet, though every leaf may seem still, there is a continual rushing sound of movement all around – not close at hand. Then sometimes the turf is as soft and fine as velvet; and sometimes quite lush with the perpetual moisture of a little,

> hidden, tinkling brook near at hand. And then in other parts there are billowy ferns – whole stretches of fern; some in the green shadow; some with long streaks of golden sunlight lying on them – just like the sea.'
>
> 'I have never seen the sea,' murmured Bessy. 'But go on.'
>
> 'Then, here and there, there are wide commons, high up as if above the very tops of the trees –' (100-1)

Margaret offers Bessy an eloquent description of Helstone, insightful in its description of unseen but constant activity. It is a pointed contrast with her inability to describe the place to Henry Lennox in chapter two, where she claimed that she could not describe Helstone because "it is home, and I can't put its charm into words" (14). By the time she talks to Bessy, though, Margaret has left Helstone for good. It is no longer her home and it is therefore vulnerable to the power of language to circumscribe and contain, while, simultaneously, it expands its pastoral qualities to paint precisely the "picture" of "a village in a tale" which she told Henry Lennox she would not paint. When she lived in London, her residence in Helstone belonged to the past, but a return to Helstone lay also in the future. It was a present reality in the sense that she had a lifetime relationship with the place and was aware that she must return there. Her powers of description were thus limited by an awareness of her closeness, an awareness that she was describing a real place. In conversation with Bessy, though, Helstone has passed out of the present and into the past, into the historical realm where pastoral finds its imaginative home. Moreover, Margaret's description to Bessy is contained in chapter thirteen, entitled "A Soft Breeze in a Sultry Place", the idyllic image describing Margaret's part in bringing comfort to the dying woman. Bessy's talk is of heaven and the afterlife, and she remarks on her reading of the Biblical book of Revelation (102). The sense of a lost Eden underlies Christianity, and fits into a larger schema in which the present is a decline from an ideal past represented by a haven to which humanity may no longer be admitted – which, indeed, can no longer be found. Leaving Helstone, especially under the circumstances of theological dissent, is akin to an expulsion from Eden.[16] Thereafter, Margaret reimagines the place, its physical features no longer standing as an objective reality but as a confluence of temporal and spatial elements. Margaret has always regarded Helstone as

beautiful, but it is now the more so for its absence, for its symbolic value as a paradise beyond reality. The return to Helstone is inevitably uncomfortable because the reality can never hope to live up to the pastoral expectations which Margaret has created.

In his discussion of the structural contrast between the northern and southern worlds of *North and South*, Ian Campbell identifies London and Oxford, other places beyond the text's central geographical division, as "carefully neutral".[17] If the novel is characterised as attending to a simple north versus south dichotomy, then Campbell makes a valid point. But the novel's larger concerns, particularly its treatment of education and social relationships, suggest a much more complex geography than this model allows, with its identification of London and Oxford in a neutral position between the extremes of Helstone and Milton. The conversation in chapter 40 between Mr Thornton and Mr Bell, so clearly identified with the cerebral Oxford he has made his home, draws Oxford into a discussion of education and places it at an opposite pole to Milton:

> 'Mr Thornton, we were accusing Mr Bell this morning of a kind of Oxonian mediaeval bigotry against his native town; and we – Margaret, I believe – suggested that it would do him good to associate a little with Milton manufacturers.'
>
> 'I beg your pardon. Margaret thought it would do the Milton manufacturers good to associate a little more with Oxford men. Now wasn't it so, Margaret?'
>
> 'I believe I thought it would do both good to see a little more of the other ...' (325)

The importance which Margaret and Mr Hale attach to a dialogue between these two groups stresses their differences in outlook. Oxford studies the past; Milton lives in the present. Yet knowledge of the past improves the future for Thornton and his men, while an awareness of the harshness of present life gives Margaret's life new zest, away from the shawls and other fashions of London life in the first chapter. To propose this structure is to ignore the pattern of dichotomy and conflict giving way to flexibility and acknowledgement of interdependence which pervades the novel. This is most fully demonstrated, both thematically and stylistically, in Thornton's

changing view of the relationship between capital and industry. Discussing his project of providing a canteen for his workers in the penultimate chapter, he says that his "only wish is to have the opportunity of cultivating some intercourse with the hands beyond the mere 'cash-nexus'" (420). The word "beyond" is revealing, implying that Thornton no longer sees his relationship with the "hands" in the straightforward terms he used at the beginning. The "mere" cash-nexus itself is a simple act of exchange, but underlying it are complex economic and social forces. Thornton is able to acknowledge these forces at the end of the novel.

The influence of place follows a similar pattern, denying straightforward contrast, and suggesting an alternative form of understanding in which any place is complex, deriving its character both from its native spirit and from the individual consciousness which perceives it. Margaret's perception of Helstone is at the heart of *North and South*. In her movements between different places, her memories of her childhood home reflect her state of mind and acceptance of the world she inhabits in the present. Initially, her idealization of Helstone is based on knowledge that it is a present reality, but the disappointment she feels on her return from London produces a new perception based on memory of a lost past. This process of constant adjustment points to the intersection of spatial and temporal elements in her imaginative construction of place. Helstone has some elements of a conventional pastoral landscape, with picturesque cottages, forests and commons "high up as if above the very tops of the trees" (101), but the narrative does not represent Helstone as an inherently perfect place. Helstone is relative: it stands in relation to a variety of contrasting *loci* which define it. Just as the pastoral mode itself represents the desire of an urban society to escape its city-bound reality, Helstone is an escape for Margaret and the recognition that it cannot satisfy the expectations she has entertained indicates her readiness to move into a more stimulating future. It is not surprising that in this novel, so concerned with time, particularly the influence of the past on the present, the ideal childhood home remains the background against which the adult Margaret grows.

## Notes

1 Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, ed. Patricia Ingham (1855; London: Penguin, 2003). Page numbers in the text refer to this edition. The cover illustration is William Cowen, "View of Bradford" (1849), Bradford City Art Gallery.

2 Andrew V. Ettin provides a more wide-ranging discussion of the combination of effects present in the construction of the pastoral: *Literature and the Pastoral* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), chapter 7.

3 Terry Gifford, *Pastoral*, New Critical Idiom (London: Routledge, 1999), chapter 1; Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, *The Green Cabinet: Theocritus and the European Pastoral Lyric* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1969), chapter 1.

4 Peter V. Marinelli, *Pastoral*, Critical Idiom (London: Methuen, 1971), chapter 2; Rosenmeyer, *Green Cabinet*, pp. 214-24.

5 Marinelli, *Pastoral*, p. 9.

6 The influence of the Romantic poets, especially Wordsworth, is pervasive in Victorian literature in general, including Gaskell. Lore Metzger discusses changing constructions of pastoral during the Romantic period: *One Foot in Eden: Modes of Pastoral in Romantic Poetry* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1986). For a discussion of the specific influence of Wordsworth on Gaskell, see Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), chapter 4. Gill mainly deals with Mary Barton, but many of the principles he discusses are relevant to *North and South*. Shelagh Hunter has a chapter on Gaskell, which discusses *North and South* at some length, in *Victorian Idyllic Fiction: Pastoral Strategies* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984), pp. 77-119. Finally, Elizabeth K. Helsinger offers a general analysis of early nineteenth-century versions of the landscape in literature and art: *Rural Scenes and National Representation: Britain, 1815-1850* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), but she discusses Gaskell only briefly on pp. 182-87.

7 For the concept of *genius loci*, see Virgil, *Aeneid*, 5.95. A classic English version is Pope's "Epistle IV. To Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington", lines 47-56, where he identifies "Nature" as a "Goddess" whose will must be performed. He goes on to exhort Burlington to "consult the Genius of the Place in all" (line 57), reinforcing the notion that an inviolable spirit governs place.

8 William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935; Harmondsworth:

Penguin, 1995), p. 209.

9 Barbara Leah Harman, *The Feminine Political Novel in Victorian England* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1998), pp. 56-57.

10 *Vergil: Eclogues*, ed. Robert A. Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 1.

11 Wendy Craik, "Lore, Learning and Wisdom: Workers and Education in *Mary Barton* and *North and South*", *Gaskell Society Journal 3* (1989), 24-28.

12 Stephen Gill gives a fascinating account of the background to some of the progressive social ideas present in the novel, especially those of Carlyle: "Price's Patent Candles: New Light on *North and South*", *Review of English Studies* 27 (1976), 313-21. See also Andrew Sanders, "A Crisis of Liberalism in *North and South*", *Gaskell Society Journal* 10 (1996), 42-52.

13 Mary H. Kuhlman discusses the importance for Margaret's development of new experiences and challenges which she did not encounter at Helstone: "Education through Experience in *North and South*", *Gaskell Society Journal* 10 (1996), 14-26. See also Harman, *Feminine Political Novel*, pp. 61f.

14 P.D. Edwards, *Idyllic Realism from Mary Russell Mitford to Hardy* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1988), p. 118.

15 Deirdre David, *Fictions of Resolution in Three Victorian Novels*: North and South, Our Mutual Friend, Daniel Deronda (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 47ff.

16 On Mr Hale's dissent, see Angus Easson, "Mr Hale's Doubts in *North and South"*, *Review of English Studies* 31 (1980), 30-40.

17 Ian Campbell, "Mrs. Gaskell's *North and South* and the Art of the Possible", *Dickens Studies Annual* 8 (1980), 238.

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