FROM DISCREET CHAPEL TO GOTHIC OSTENTATION: DEVELOPMENTS IN 19TH CENTURY UNITARIAN ARCHITECTURE AS A PARADIGM FOR THE PROBLEMATIC NATURE OF ELIZABETH GASKELL'S FICTION.

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Conservatism and Radicalism as Binary Opposites

The fictional works of Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell exhibit the problematic co-existence of an adherence to mid-Victorian bourgeois social values constantly being undercut by a latent radicalism.[1] While the overt tenor of the texts supports a deliberate identification with the economically and intellectually successful, predominantly Unitarian social milieu to which she belonged in Manchester, the graphic portrayal of social injustice in novels like *Mary Barton*, *Ruth*, and *North and South*, confirms an equally strong desire to highlight the shortcomings of English society in general, inclusive of the daily concerns of her often hypocritical mill-owning Manchester connections.[2] While the nature of the texts suggests, through didactic authorial commentary and parables of conventional Christian reconciliation,[3] a desire to conform to the prevailing moral conventions of her time, the sheer force of the sustained, graphic depiction of human misery subverts any attempt at trite theological solutions.

The paradoxes inherent in Victorian attitudes to religious duty are effectively expressed throughout her work.[4] Even though Engels and Elizabeth Gaskell both witnessed the appalling conditions created by widespread social displacement stemming from industrialisation, their differing conclusions highlight the difficulty of arriving at a satisfactory Christian position on social inequality.[5] While the dynamic of new testament biblical injunctions for sacrificial service to others drove many into the plethora of worthwhile Christian societies in existence, for some Pauline theology could just as easily be identified with the maintenance of the status quo. The conflict between establishment

values and aspirations and any unbridled attempt to identify and deal with social injustice was difficult to resolve.

Paradigm of Unitarian Ecclesiastical Architecture

This dichotomy in Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction finds an interesting parallel in the development of Unitarian ecclesiastical architecture immediately preceding and throughout her lifetime. Just as the works of Mrs. Gaskell struggle to resolve the tension created by an acceptance of the value of middle-class aspirations and the need to address the disturbing plight of the working classes, changes in Unitarian ecclesiastical architecture indicated a similar tension. There was a marked transition from the discreet chapels of the marginalised Unitarian congregations of the late eighteenth century to the ostentatious Gothic edifices of the mid-nineteenth century. This contrast was no more evident than in the north of England, where, in keeping with their new-found social respectability and confidence, some of the wealthiest Unitarian congregations were able to allow significant expenditure on the construction of new churches. While Manchester was the setting for some of the best examples of civic architecture built under the influence of Pugin and Ruskin, some of the outstanding churches of the Gothic revival were also built there. Many of these churches were erected for Unitarian congregations. The prominent Unitarian architect, Thomas Worthington, a member of William Gaskell's Cross Street Chapel congregation, was the architect for several such churches (e.g. Brookfield Unitarian Church, Morton Unitarian Church).[6]

Mrs. Gaskell could not help but be aware of this transition. Her correspondence indicates that she and William knew the Worthingtons and she had read and attended lectures by Ruskin on architecture.[7] He, of course, was largely responsible for the enthusiastic manner in which the Gothic style was embraced at this time in England. She had witnessed at first hand the contrasting styles of ecclesiastical architecture adopted by Unitarian congregations. While many of the prominent Gothic Unitarian churches in the north of England were not built until after her death, some noteable exceptions were (Hope Street, Liverpool, 1849; Mill Hill, Leeds, 1847; Upper Brook Street, Manchester, 1839, recognised as the first neo-Gothic nonconformist chapel). She must have been acutely conscious of the contrast these churches bore to the chapel (probably based on her early church life in

Knutsford)[8] that is referred to in *Ruth*.

> The chapel was up a narrow street, or rather cul-de-sac, close by. It stood on the outskirts of the town, almost in fields. It was built about the time of Matthew and Philip Henry, when the Dissenters were afraid of attracting attention or observation, and hid their places of worship in obscure and out-of-the-way parts of the towns in which they were built. Accordingly, it often happened, as in the present case, that the buildings immediately surrounding, as well as the chapels themselves, looked as if they carried you back to a period of a hundred and fifty years ago. The chapel had a picturesque and old-world look, for luckily the congregation had been too poor to rebuild it, or new face it in George the Third's time. The staircases which led to the galleries were outside, at each end of the building, and the irregular roof and worn stone steps looked grey and stained by time and weather ... The interior of the building was plain and simple as plain and simple could be.[9]

The inherent tension of conservatism and radicalism evident in Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction can be examined through the historically adjacent paradigm of ecclesiastical architecture. Having established a close correspondence between the author and the prevailing influences within architectural development (especially those relevant to Unitarianism) observations regarding such architecture can illuminate aspects of Elizabeth Gaskell's more subliminal interlacing of the contradictions embodied in her fictional material.

In addition, while examples exist in fiction where architecture becomes a conscious focus of the text (e.g. Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*),[10] in Mrs. Gaskell's work some consciousness (the example from *Ruth*) needs to be complemented by an historical understanding of her awareness of the developments in Gothic architecture. Although Gothic architecture is not referred to in *Mary Barton*, for example, it is suggested by its absence in opposition to the dreadful slum dwellings so vividly described within the text. Its inferred presence completes the landscape of social disparity.

At the end of the eighteenth century, English Unitarianism, partly because of its support for the French Revolution, was marginalised in English society. Along with other nonconformists, Unitarians did not have the security or opportunities of their fellow countrymen. Joseph

Priestley was forced to flee to America and many Unitarian clergy took their degrees in Scotland because they were prohibited from doing so in England. William Gaskell, for example, graduated from Glasgow University.[11] Along with this, the more liberal theological position adopted by many Unitarians led to a concern for social improvement. Unitarianism became a major movement in the widespread Victorian commitment to philanthropic endeavour.

By the mid-nineteenth century, as the result of a series of parliamentary reforms, Unitarianism had become socially respectable, and its continued dependence on rationalism attracted the educated and successful. The Gaskells' own church (Cross Street Chapel, Manchester) was the outstanding example.[12] But even in this era of social buoyancy for nonconformists, mid-Victorian Unitarians remained aware of the injustice inflicted on their immediate predecessors. The tension between alertness to injustice and acceptance of plenty was maintained.

In view of the particular theological disposition of Unitarianism, a shift from the more restrained architectural forms of previous centuries, to a willing involvement in the Gothic revival, raises significant questions. Commentators did note the apparent incongruity of any nonconformist adopting a form of architecture espoused by the Ecclesiologists. Reference was made in Parliament to the Quaker background of Alfred Waterhouse, the architect for the Manchester Assize Courts (1859).[13] For Unitarians were in company with several nonconformist denominations in embracing the Gothic form. A good example is Mansfield College, the Congregationalist college in Oxford.[14]

But while Unitarians were swept along by the same degree of political emancipation enjoyed by other dissenting traditions, it would have been inconsistent with their much espoused pursuit of 'truth' and 'liberty', and their desire for intellectual integrity, for them to have embraced a style of architecture so markedly divergent in emphasis as the Gothic. Even accepting the possibility that social comfort fosters complacency, the antithetical nature of such architecture and Unitarian tenets of faith is still stark. The detailed, elaborate forms of Gothic architecture would appear to be more suited to the rituals of Anglo-Catholicism than to a denomination which sought to cut through any hindering reliance on tradition. The plain truth of scripture could only be discovered, it was thought by Unitarians, if the doctrinal accretions of previous centuries were dispensed with. The Gothic revival indicated a re-assertion of many of the values that Unitarianism had

struggled to overcome.

This form of architecture accentuated the Unitarian acceptance of opulence. The sense of height and upward movement inherent in the Gothic lines conveyed a confidence (both spiritual and temporal) normally reserved previously for the established church. It inferred a prosperity and permanence that was so much in contrast to the tenuous link with life experienced by the working-class masses in Manchester. The detail in design suggested a preoccupation with reflection and introspection at odds with the frequently expressed pragmatism and progressivism of Unitarianism.

Gothic Architecture, Rural Landscapes and the Need for Aesthetic Satisfaction

This difficulty can best be explained by examining the social context in which Gothic architecture made its greatest appeal to Unitarianism. It is generally true that the northern industrial cities of England were at the forefront of adopting this style.[15] There clearly was an unconscious, only occasionally articulated need for some reference point for aesthetic satisfaction in an otherwise depressing environment. Gothic architecture appeared to provide that.

For influential Unitarians in Manchester this may have been a very acute need. Many were involved, in a proprietorial or managerial capacity, with the development of aesthetically arid industrial complexes (e.g. cotton mills). Others, such as William and Elizabeth Gaskell, made sustained efforts to alleviate human suffering, thus spending considerable periods of time in slum areas (such as those so vividly recorded in *Mary Barton*). Their efforts in both fields, equally attributable to the Unitarian espousal of human progress and philanthropy, called forth a need for the personally nourishing qualities of some aesthetic realm. This was provided, in part, by beautiful architecture. Theological precepts directed against the perpetuation of many traditional practices are overriden in this social context by the thirst for satisfying forms (such as the Gothic form) in an otherwise engulfing industrial vortex.

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REFERENCES

1. Other commentators have observed this quality in Mrs. Gaskell's work. John Lucas, in The Literature of Change, states that: "There is a marvellously

anarchic force at work in Mrs. Gaskell's fiction. The official side of her, liberal, pious, incuriously middle class, pleads for a more complacent notion of reconciliation and tries to fashion art so as to reveal its pattern. But an endlessly rewarding unofficial side keeps pushing this pattern awry, revealing different patterns of inevitability, of antagonism, misunderstandings, hatred."
See J. Lucas, The Literature of Change (Studies in the Nineteenth-Century Provincial Novel), The Harvester Press, Sussex, 1977, p.13. Jenny Uglow, in her recent biography, frequently makes reference to the dualities expressed in Elizabeth Gaskell's life and work. See J. Uglow, Elizabeth Gaskell (A Habit of Stories), Faber and Faber, London, 1993, pp.31, 93, and 259-260. The following section from a letter Elizabeth Gaskell wrote to Tottie Fox is very revealing in this regard:
'...that is the haunting thought to me; at least to one of my 'Mes', for I have a great number and that's a plague. One of my mes is, I do believe, a true Christian - [only people call her socialist and communist], another one of my mes is a wife and mother, and highly delighted at the delight of everyone else in the house, Meta and William especially who are in full extasy. Now that's my 'social' self I suppose. Then again I've another self with a full taste for beauty and convenience which is pleased on its own account. How am I to reconcile all these warring members?'. See The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell, p.108. Felicia Bonaparte, in The Gypsy-Bachelor of Manchester (The Life of Mrs. Gaskell's Demon), bases all her conclusions about the nature of Elizabeth Gaskell's work on the premise that throughout her life the author struggled with a fundamental dichotomy in her personality. She desired to be the respected and conventional Unitarian minister's wife, Mrs. Gaskell, but at the same time sought to serve her 'demon'; the unconventional, rebellious side of her nature. While exploring Elizabeth Gaskell's psychological complexity at great length, Bonaparte does not attempt to address the ambiguities and tensions inherent in English Unitarianism.
See F. Bonaparte, Gypsy-Bachelor of Manchester (The Life of Mrs. Gaskell's Demon), University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville and London, 1992.

2. Mary Barton, like Ruth, caused a considerable furor when first published. Many were offended by Mrs. Gaskell's inferred criticism of the treatment of mill-workers in Manchester and elsewhere. See W. Gérin, Elizabeth Gaskell, Oxford University Press, 1976, pp.88-89.

3. Examples are the death of John Barton in the arms of Carson in Mary Barton and the reconciliation of Sylvia and Philip Hepburn at the end of Sylvia's Lovers.

4. F.W.H. Myers records a conversation with George Eliot at Cambridge in 1873 in which the author stresses the pre-eminence of 'duty' in an age of declining faith. Myers speaks of Eliot 'taking as her text the three words which have been used so often as the inspiring trumpet-calls of men, - the words God, Immortality, Duty, - pronounced, with terrible earnestness, how inconceivable was the first, how unbelievable the second, and yet how peremptory and absolute the third.'
Quoted in B. Willey, Nineteenth Century Studies (Coleridge to Matthew Arnold), Penguin Books, 1973 (1949), p.214.

5. See F. Engels, The Conditions of the Working Class in England, Panther, Granada Publishing, 1969, first published in Great Britain in 1892. For a full discussion of the different emphases in Engels' and Gaskell's account of the plight of the mill-workers in Manchester, see John Lucas, The Literature of Change, Chapter 2.

6. A good background to English Unitarian architecture is given in P. Godfrey, G. Hague, and J. Mclachlan, The Unitarian Heritage, published privately, 1986. For Thomas Worthington see A.J. Pass, Thomas Worthington: Victorian Architecture and Social Purpose, Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society Publications, 1988.

7. Passing reference is made to the Worthingtons in several letters (including nos. 3 & 118a) from The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell, edited by J.A.V. Chapple and A. Pollard, Manchester University Press, 1966. See also Pass, op.cit. pp.72, 104-105, 116-117. Letters 101, 159, and 360 indicate that Mrs. Gaskell was exposed to Ruskin's views. Ruskin is frequently referred to in her correspondence. Ruskin's importance to Elizabeth Gaskell is effectively conveyed in the following comment written by her friend, Charles Eliot Norton, during their travels through Italy in 1857: 'One day, as we were travelling in Italy, Mrs. Gaskell and her daughters and I were talking about the books we would choose if we were shut up in prison or on a desolate island. At last we agreed to choose one book by a living author, and when it came to Mrs. Gaskell's turn to tell us what she had chosen she said "Modern Painters".'
Quoted in J. Uglow, op.cit. p.424, from the Letters of Charles Norton, London, 1913, Volume 1, p.174.

8. A full explanatory note for this suggestion is given in Ruth, edited by A. Shelston, The World's Classics, 1985, p.465. Elizabeth Gaskell was certainly aware of the splendour of Gothic cathedrals. A letter in 1841 indicates that William and Elizabeth enjoyed visiting cathedrals in Flanders. See The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell, No.15, p.41, where she refers to their 'practical poetry'.

9. E. Gaskell, Ruth, pp.151-153.

10. See chapter on Jude the Obscure in J. Wiesenfarth, Gothic Manners and the Classic English Novel, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988.

11. W. Gérin, op.cit. p.45.

12. A.J. Pass, op.cit. p.133.

13. "At Manchester the Gothic style had recently been selected for a building at a meeting attended by many men of business, with a Quaker for the chairman (Laughter)." Quoted from Parliamentary proceedings in M.W. Brooks, John Ruskin and Victorian Architecture, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick and London, 1987, p.175.

14. For a full discussion of Mansfield College see C. Binfield, 'We Claim Our Part in the Great Inheritance: the Message of Four Congregational Buildings', Protestant Evangelicalism, c.1750-c.1950: Essays in Honour of W.R.Ward, Keith Robbins (ed), Studies in Church History, Subsidia 7, Blackwells, Oxford, 1990, pp.201-223. The Unitarian church at Brookfield designed by Thomas Worthington is another good example. The following description reveals the irony inherent in the choice of this architectural form: 'At Brookfield Worthington designed a large, handsome church in full Gothic with a most distinguished tower and spire ... Symbolism was fully embraced, for the church is adorned with the emblems of the evangelists and representations of saints, martyrs, philosophers and scientists. In the churchyard Peacock is interred, an industrial baron in a medieval tomb, in a handsome marble vault of Worthington design. Here a different symbolism prevails, and on each of the four corners is a carved and reverential figure representing an engineer, a blacksmith, a draughtsman and the architect himself.' See J. Archer, Art and Architecture in Victorian Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1985, p.100.

15. Godfrey, Hague and McLachlan, op.cit. p.75.