

Mobile Narrative, Spatial Mediation, and Gaskell's Urban Rustics in *North and South*

Abigail Dennis

University of Toronto

Addressing the (hitherto relatively neglected) question of spatial relations in Elizabeth Gaskell's industrial novel North and South (1855), this essay draws on Raymond Williams's concept of the 'knowable community', as well as nineteenth-century notions of the aesthetics of the picturesque (as elucidated by Linda Austin and Nancy Armstrong), to examine Gaskell's construction of class and social space. I employ close reading of the text and critical synthesis to demonstrate that Margaret Hale, posited as a 'spatial mediatrix' and ethnographer of the nascent industrial metropolis of Milton/Manchester, progresses from a conception of working-class life as essentially picturesque – aesthetically stimulating, but lacking in material substance – to an appreciation of the complexity and materiality of social spaces. Margaret is a flâneuse, who attempts an active identification with the urban environment and its inhabitants. By enabling Margaret to view her own position in society relative to that of others, Gaskell makes visible the 'knowable community' of the industrial urban poor, and demonstrates the importance of moving beyond an aestheticized mode of comprehending this community's material concerns and conditions. Paradoxically, however, a consistent lack of subjectivity and interiority in Gaskell's representations of the members of this community testifies to their status as 'urban rustics', a term the author uses to describe a version of the deindividuated choral mode that Williams identifies as characterizing George Eliot's 1859 portrait of rural life, Adam Bede. While Gaskell's novel succeeds in introducing its heroine and its reader to the private spaces of the industrial working classes, it ultimately stops short of bestowing fully formed and individualized consciousnesses on the knowable community it renders visible, thus negating its social and literary effectiveness. Significantly, however, Gaskell's novel comes to terms with the loss of an idealized rural past, and the ascendance of the urban, in a way that Eliot's seems, finally, unable to countenance.

Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855) is a remarkably mobile narrative. The action moves between Helstone (Margaret Hale's rural childhood home); Milton-Northern (a fictionalized Manchester); Milton's surrounding countryside; London's Harley Street; Oxford; the Outwood train station, scene of a crucial plot development; Heston and Cromer, both coastal resorts; Corfu; Spain; and (North) America. Beyond its wide-ranging traversal of physical space, however, the novel is concerned with the journeying and border-crossings of its heroine, Margaret, a spatial mediatrix of considerable social and imaginative mobility. Her urban wanderings, first as a female philanthropist and eventually as a kind of *flâneuse*, enable her to cognitively map the social spaces of Milton, her new and unfamiliar home. In doing so she progresses from a conception of working-class life as essentially picturesque – aesthetically stimulating, but lacking in material substance – to an appreciation of the

complexity and materiality of social spaces and modes of existence different to those she has known. Her newfound perspectival advantage allows her to mediate across the barriers that divide the social spaces of Milton, a city riven by industrial conflict, and institute dialogue and understanding in place of pride and resentment. By enabling Margaret to view her own position in society relative to that of others, Gaskell makes visible what Raymond Williams calls a 'knowable community' – in this case, that of the industrial urban poor – and demonstrates the importance for England's middle and upper classes at this time of moving beyond an aestheticized, 'picturesque' mode of comprehending this community's material concerns and conditions.¹ Ultimately, however, a lack of subjectivity and interiority in Gaskell's representations of the members of these communities testifies to their status as what I somewhat paradoxically term 'urban rustics', after Williams's conception of the deindividuated 'choral mode' evident in George Eliot's 1859 novel of rural life, *Adam Bede*.² This essay will develop Williams's conception of the rustic in light of Linda Austin and Nancy Armstrong's work on the 'picturesque', or aesthetics of the surface, in Victorian fiction, as a mode of representation that tends to reduce the social to the aesthetic.³ It will thereby illuminate Gaskell's representation of social spaces in *North and South*, and provide a new mode of approach to the spatial and social divisions in evidence throughout the genre of the Victorian urban-industrial novel. The centrality of spatial relations to *North and South* makes it a productive and illuminating textual field against which to examine, develop, and synthesize these complementary critical paradigms.

The significance of spatial relations in Gaskell's work remains a relatively neglected area of critical inquiry, but in a chapter of her doctoral dissertation on architectural and bodily motifs in Victorian fiction, Keiko P. Kagawa gestures towards the importance of spatial representation in *North and South*, and its fruitfulness for a reading of Gaskell's social politics:

[C]lass and gender roles in city and country spaces, as well as national and continental boundaries, are succinctly established through her articulation of space [...] [so that]

¹ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (1973; repr. London: Hogarth, 1985), p. 165.

² *Ibid.*, p. 175.

³ Linda Marilyn Austin, *Nostalgia in Transition, 1780-1917* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007); Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

reading Gaskell through her spaces becomes a coherent organizing system for both her novel's narrative form and thematic content.⁴

It is, in fact, the *differentiation* of spaces that Gaskell repeatedly emphasizes: contrasts between the urban and rural, the domestic and public, and the commercial and the personal form a vivid background to the story of industrial unrest and unlikely romance. Such distinctions formed part of the code governing Victorian social interactions, based on a doctrine of naturalized separation of classes and genders. Gaskell defends Margaret's transgressions of these boundaries (her visits to the home of factory-worker Nicholas Higgins) through her invocation of the figure of the benevolent 'lady visitor', a role assumed by Gaskell herself throughout her time in Manchester. A committed Unitarian, the author fulfilled her social obligations with regular visits to the poor; her exposure to the domestic consequences of industrial and social disputes, and her ability to fictionalize the squalid reality of human suffering, form the basis of a plea for a more compassionate society in many of her novels. Such female philanthropy was generally recognized as contributing positively to efforts at building a rapprochement between classes, as an anonymous Victorian commentator suggests: '[o]nce in awhile a [lady] visitor may mediate between the master and the man. So the circle widens and spreads, and who can tell the misery which that one kind woman's call may have averted?'⁵

Nonetheless, the very necessity of such justifications suggests that considerable anxieties persisted surrounding the displacement of middle-class females from their insular domesticity; as Dorice Williams Elliot suggests, '[t]he question of ladies' visiting was a contest over who had access to and who would control a whole range of social spaces and practices'.⁶ But Gaskell also figures Margaret as a kind of amateur ethnographer, taking her middle-class readership into strange and unknown social territory in order to engage with a community and experience that had been, to use Williams's term, 'essentially opaque'.⁷ Gaskell develops this impulse in her earlier 'social problem' or 'condition of England' novels, *Mary Barton* (1848) and *Ruth* (1853); of the former, Borislav Knezevic notes:

⁴ Keiko P. Kagawa, 'Bodies in the "House of Fiction": The Architecture of Domestic and Narrative Spaces by Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oregon, 2002), p. 134.

⁵ Cited in Dorice Williams Elliot, 'The Female Visitor and the Marriage of Classes in Gaskell's *North and South*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 49.1 (1994), 21-49 (p. 22).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁷ Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 165.

The industrial novel often took upon itself tasks we have come to associate with the practice and discourse of ethnography, which was just beginning to emerge as part of a comprehensive epistemological reorganization of science in the nineteenth century. [...] [A] novel like *Mary Barton* does seem to be predicated on the idea that there is such a thing as a distinct culture of the Manchester working class, and that this thing can be isolated for the attention of a concerned middle class.⁸

Knezevic goes on to suggest that a preoccupation with ‘cultural mapping’ (Knezevic’s term) is also at the heart of Gaskell’s *Cranford* (1853), a comic novel that is commonly supposed to eschew such perplexing problems: ‘[j]ust how Cranford culture is to be mapped and measured in its relationship to the industrial modernization of the north, or in its relationship to the state culture of the south, is the central question of the novel’.⁹ A similar challenge orientates the action of *North and South*. Middle-class expeditionist Margaret constructs an ethnography of the industrial, and maps the social geography of Milton’s working class. As she moves across and between social spaces – the Higgins’ cottage, the city streets, the Thorntons’ drawing room, the mill yard – she mediates relations between their inhabitants, negotiating geographical, political, and sexual borders.

On first encountering Milton, however, Margaret finds herself disoriented and overwhelmed, both by its geography and by its inhabitants. She perceives the city as a bewildering aggregate of unfamiliar social and economic relationships, manifested as a grey, smoky opacity:

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. [...] Nearer to the town, the air had a faint taste and smell of smoke [...]. Quickly they whirled over long, straight, hopeless streets of regularly built houses, all small and of brick.¹⁰

Milton’s industrial pall and its uncannily uniform streets, so different from the crooked, rural picturesqueness to which she is accustomed, render the city unreadable for Margaret. Here, Gaskell fictionalizes the disconcertedness expressed by many Victorian commentators and

⁸ Borislav Knezevic, ‘An Ethnography of the Provincial: The Social Geography of Gentility in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford*’, *Victorian Studies*, 41.3 (1998), 405-26 (p. 405).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 407.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (1855; repr. Ware: Wordsworth, 1994), p. 55. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *NS*.

artists at the changes wrought by processes of rapid urbanization and the unprecedented transformations, particularly in the north of England, of small market towns into teeming centres of industry.¹¹ As Deborah L. Parsons notes, '[t]he city is not only aesthetically but also structurally a different environment from the open landscape. Crucially, it is labyrinthine, and although mappable, is a place of numerous trajectories'.¹² Milton is built partly on ground that was once an orchard belonging to Margaret's godfather, Mr Bell, and he represents the prevailing mood, particularly among the upper classes, of nostalgia for a cognitively dependable rural past:

It is years since I've been at Helstone – but I'll answer for it, it is standing there yet – every stick and every stone, as it has done for the last century, while Milton! I go there every four or five years – and I was born there – yet I do assure you, I often lose my way – aye, among the very piles of warehouses that are built upon my father's orchard. (*NS* p. 352)

Like Margaret, Mr Bell finds the new metropolis unnavigable; his solution is to retreat into the unchanging and socially immobile world of Oxford. The indomitable Margaret, however, determined to engage productively with the ascendant forces of industrialism, attempts the production of a workable social map of the incomprehensible city of Milton/Manchester.

Her forays into its streets are initially undertaken out of necessity, and are highly discomfiting experiences since they bring her into contact with the factory workers – a group newly emboldened, Gaskell suggests, by a sense of their economic power: '[u]ntil Margaret had learnt the times of their ingress and egress, she was very unfortunate in constantly falling in with them. They came rushing along, with bold, fearless faces, and loud laughs and jests, particularly aimed at all those who appeared to be above them in rank or station' (p. 66). These trespasses on Margaret's jealously guarded physical and psychological space are all the more alarming to her because of a sense of superiority fostered by her privileged upbringing and her class-conscious mother.¹³ As Barbara Leah Harman notes, these 'verbal and physical invasions are meant to disrupt the very sense of class distinction that Margaret, for one, has

¹¹ Perhaps the greatest (certainly the most well-known) of the Victorian urban novelists is Charles Dickens, but as Williams observes, '[t]he only novelist of the mid-nineteenth century who comes as close as Dickens to the intricacies and paradoxes of the city experience is Elizabeth Gaskell' (*The Country and the City*, p. 219).

¹² Deborah L. Parsons, 'The Passante as *Flâneuse* in Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*', in *Babylon or New Jerusalem?: Perceptions of the City in Literature*, ed. by Valeria Tinkler-Villani (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 155-68 (p. 156).

¹³ Before arriving in Milton, Margaret had spoken disdainfully of merchants like Mr Thornton as 'shoppy people' (*NS* p. 18).

been so eager in the past to maintain'.¹⁴ Soon, however, Margaret's walking begins to resemble that of a *flâneuse*; she wanders the streets not out of necessity, but because she has developed an interest in the life of the city's spaces. Parsons suggests that what differentiates the female *flâneuse* from the male *flâneur* is the impulse, not merely to create and influence one's surroundings through the subjectivity of perception, but to actively *identify* with the urban environment: 'the tendency of the *flâneuse* seem[s] to be not so much the careful detachment from the crowd practised by her male counterpart but rather a merging with it'.¹⁵ As she embarks on active exploration of the city streets, Margaret begins to observe as well as to be observed, thus initiating a process of identification with the external urban environment (and, by extension, its inhabitants):

Margaret went out heavily and unwillingly enough. But the length of a street – yes, the air of a Milton street – cheered her young blood before she reached her first turning. Her step grew lighter, her lip redder. She began to take notice, instead of having her thoughts turned so exclusively inward. (*NS* p. 123)

Margaret's developing interest in the conditions of those around her eventually enables her not only to navigate, but also to take pleasure in the city.¹⁶ From the day of her first visit to the home of the Higgins family, Gaskell tells us, 'Milton became a brighter place to her. It was not the long, bleak, sunny days of spring; nor yet was it that time was reconciling her to the town of her habitation. It was that in it she had found a human interest' (*NS* p. 69). Margaret, recognizing the humanity of its inhabitants, no longer finds Milton threatening; these relationships form markers that contribute to her psychic construction of the city as habitable space (and, perhaps, of the city *as* psyche; again, Parsons's notion of the *flâneuse*'s creation of the city through perception is relevant). From this moment on, Margaret becomes increasingly attuned to her physical environment, and to the energies and concerns of the workers who populate it. Immediately preceding the protest that forms one of the narrative's dramatic climaxes, Margaret is en route to the Thorntons' house when she is 'struck with an unusual heaving among the mass of people in the crowded road upon which she was entering.

¹⁴ Barbara Leah Harman, 'In Promiscuous Company: Female Public Appearance in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*', *Victorian Studies*, 31.3 (1988), 351-74 (p. 365).

¹⁵ Deborah L. Parsons, 'Souls Astray: Elizabeth Bowen's Landscape of War', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 8.1 (1997), 24-32 (p. 28).

¹⁶ The explicitly affective nature of Margaret's urban experience – '[h]er step grew lighter, her lip redder' – may recall the subversive pleasures young Victorian women were said to derive from novel-reading. For more on nineteenth-century women's reading as pleasurable and/or physically affective, see Pamela K. Gilbert, 'Ingestion, Contagion, Seduction: Victorian Metaphors of Reading', *LIT*, 8.1 (1997), 83-104.

[...] There was a restless, oppressive sense of irritation abroad among the people; a thunderous atmosphere morally as well as physically, around her' (p. 160). Margaret has developed a sympathetic intuition of the ideological (or 'moral') energies of Milton's workers, which manifests itself in her ability to detect disturbances in the physical space she shares with them. Throughout this crucial scene, Margaret's unusual capacity for sympathy is emphasized: '[b]ut now, in this real great time of reasonable fear and nearness of terror, she forgot herself, and felt only an intense sympathy – intense to painfulness – in the interests of the moment' (p. 163). This culminates in Margaret's physically placing herself between Thornton and his striking workers in an attempt to defuse a violent conflict. The spatial construction of the scene is telling. Margaret leaves the safety of the feminized domestic sphere to enter the site of industrial conflict. Standing on the steps of the Thorntons' imposing mansion, she speaks from a position of economic and social privilege; but as she faces the mill yard and the workers, her sympathetic capacity allows her to psychically cross the class divide and 'read' the motivations of the strikers: '[s]he knew how it was [...] Margaret knew it all; she read it in Boucher's face, forlornly desperate and livid with rage'; '[s]he saw their gesture – she knew its meaning – she read their aim' (p. 165, p. 166). Margaret's experiences on the city streets and in the homes of the poor have given her a perspectival advantage, and her knowledge of the city's diverse spaces enables her to create pathways between them, leading to desirable political and personal outcomes. One telling example occurs towards the end of the novel: a shift towards mutual understanding between Thornton and his workers, the result of Margaret's intervention, leads to the institution of a dining-room scheme, in which 'masters and men' take their midday meal together. Gaskell's suggestion is that the scheme will enable meaningful and sustained dialogue through the merging of previously distinct social spaces; as Elliot argues, '[t]he dining room domesticates the factory [and] blurs the boundaries between public and private spheres'.¹⁷

Gaskell traces Margaret's developing appreciation of the complexity of Milton's social economy through her changing aesthetic understanding of the spaces to which she is exposed (and to which she increasingly seeks exposure). Austin's analysis of the picturesque cottage in Victorian landscape painting illuminates the processes by which a middle- and upper-class conception of the rural poor excluded the material hardship the latter faced, and appropriated their crumbling dwellings as memorials of quintessential Englishness, 'depicting "decay" as a natural growth overtaking a cottage or as a luxurious and infantilizing *physis*'.¹⁸

¹⁷ Elliot, p. 48.

¹⁸ Austin, p. 134.

An example of this figuration of material degradation as rustic picturesqueness occurs at the beginning of *North and South*, in the rural idyll of Helstone, which ‘represents to Margaret everything that she values in home as a place’.¹⁹ Margaret and her suitor, Henry Lennox, venture into the surrounding countryside to sketch a set of derelict cottages:

‘These are the cottages that haunted me so during the rainy fortnight, reproaching me for not having sketched them.’

‘Before they tumbled down and were no more seen. Truly, if they are to be sketched – and they are very picturesque – we had better not put it off till next year. [...] Who lives in these cottages?’

‘They were built by squatters fifty or sixty years ago. One is uninhabited; the foresters are going to take it down, as soon as the old man who lives in the other is dead, poor old fellow!’ (*NS* p. 23)

Here, Gaskell fictionalizes ‘the conventionally picturesque vision of the built landscape naturalizing into its environment’, and in Margaret and Henry, we have two observers fundamentally detached from the scenery’s material implications.²⁰ Since ‘aesthetic principle dictated that the inside of the cottage be hidden, sometimes deliberately, from the viewer’, the reader is not shown the interior of the decrepit dwelling.²¹ Like Margaret and Henry, we remain unaware of the living conditions of its inhabitant, and ‘have no economic or political stake in the truth of the thing represented’.²² By comparison, Margaret’s temporary return, at the end of the novel, to her former life of privilege is characterized by a newfound awareness of her position relative to those on whose labour it rests:

She found herself at once an inmate of a luxurious house, where the bare knowledge of the existence of every trouble or care seemed scarcely to have penetrated. The wheels of the machinery of daily life were well oiled, and went along with delicious smoothness. [...] There might be toilers and moilers there in London, but she never saw them; the very servants lived in an underground world of their own, of which she

¹⁹ Harman, p. 362.

²⁰ Austin, p. 131.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 132.

knew neither the hopes nor the fears; they only seemed to start into existence when some want or whim of their master and mistress needed them. (*NS* pp. 344-45)²³

Margaret's experiences in Milton have clearly helped her to appreciate the moral obligation to examine obscured social and economic relations.

Thornton initially appears to conceive of his labourers and their environs in terms of what Armstrong calls 'the metropolitan picturesque': '[h]ere was the same æsthetics of the surface applied to those sectors of the city too dangerous to inhabit and to the people who inhabited them'.²⁴ With Margaret's encouragement, however, he too begins to question the æsthetics of the surface. Leaving his fortress-like factory, Thornton makes his own journey into the realm of 'the Other', visiting Higgins's home. What he witnesses there catalyzes a rethinking of his attitude to relations with his men: 'I saw such a miserable black frizzle of a dinner – a greasy cinder of meat, as first set me a-thinking' (*NS* p. 334). As Austin argues, '[t]he absence of the dwelling's interior in picturesque representation [...] precluded awareness not only of material hardship but of individual, private life'.²⁵ Thornton's viewing of the interior, private space of working-class experience (again, an indirect result of Margaret's intervention), leads to a newfound appreciation of the material circumstances of those upon whom his own wealth relies. As Elliot suggests:

When Gaskell has Margaret teach Thornton [...] that he can initiate such personal contact with his employees in their homes as well as in the workplace, she is not merely idealizing or romanticizing industrial relations; rather, she is advocating a type of social management, pioneered by women in the social space of the home.²⁶

North and South, then, constitutes an attempt, through the medium of fiction, to restore some of the materiality that Armstrong argues the urban poor were losing in the new visual order of the nineteenth century.²⁷ Gaskell's factory workers are an example of Williams's notion of a 'knowable community' – a previously marginalized community that becomes 'knowable' through literary representation. Williams posits that 'what is knowable is not only a function of objects – what is there to be known. It is also a function of subjects, of

²³ Note also how Margaret has adopted Milton working-class slang: the phrase 'toil and moil' is first used by Bessy Higgins (*NS* p. 140).

²⁴ Armstrong, pp. 97-98.

²⁵ Austin, p. 150.

²⁶ Elliot, p. 31.

²⁷ Armstrong, p. 95.

observers – of what is desired and what needs to be known'.²⁸ In tracing the development of Margaret's, and finally Thornton's, recognition of the need to make themselves aware of working-class experience, Gaskell's novel stands as an example of the literary development that Williams sees occurring throughout the nineteenth century: 'a recognition of other kinds of people, other kinds of country [in this case, other kinds of city], other kinds of action on which a moral emphasis must be brought to bear'.²⁹

However, Williams also points to the danger inherent in the artistic attempt at such representations (exemplified, he argues, in Eliot's *Adam Bede*): that of presenting members of this community as merely part of a (social) landscape, in which characters are collectivized and generalized rather than endowed with individual consciousness. A disconnection between the author and her characters occurs, and the result, rather than the rendering of finely nuanced fictive voices, is either a chorus of inauthentic 'rustics', or the substitution of the author's own voice in place of that of her characters.³⁰ Williams's discussion, of course, refers specifically to the portrayal of rural communities; however, I use the term 'rustic' not only in its better-known sense of pertaining to the countryside, but more pertinently in its secondary meaning of simplistic, or rough-hewn. In so doing, one can ask whether, despite the novel's implicit aim – the presentation of a realistic portrayal of the working-class community of Milton/Manchester – there is a sense in which Gaskell's characters may be described as what I will call 'urban rustics'.³¹ We have already seen, in the passage quoted above, an instance of the literary rural picturesque in *North and South*, the crumbling cottage inhabited by an aging, deaf, rheumatic labourer, who stands next to his dwelling as Margaret and Henry sketch. Gaskell, in turn, draws him as a charming but somewhat irrelevant aspect of the landscape, grateful for the attention granted him ('[h]is stiff features relaxed into a slow smile as Margaret went up and spoke to him'); but denied the opportunity to speak (as Margaret approaches him, the narrative defers to Lennox's point of view, as he pencils the two figures into his sketch of the cottage) (*NS* p. 23). The aging peasant's representation in the novel as silent, visual, and 'placed' next to his picturesque dwelling strongly suggests the photographic subjects Armstrong refers to in her discussion of the metropolitan picturesque: '[t]hese figures do not ask to be photographed; they are caught in the act of living their lives and seem unable

²⁸ Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 165.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

³¹ The term is seemingly oxymoronic, but in this context – derived as it is from Williams's usage – I use it to refer to a mode of representation of the *urban* working classes that, similarly to Eliot's rural villagers, fails in its attempt to bestow authentic individual consciousnesses on the members of this community.

to resist being turned into images'.³² The rustic is not involved in his representation; extracted and isolated from his labour, he is placed externally to the conditions (his damp, decrepit cottage) that have contributed to his own physical decay. Like Austin's cottages, he exhibits the qualities of the picturesque, but is devoid of interiority. Gaskell, then, remains unwilling or unable to offer her working-class characters an authentic voice. This is true despite – or perhaps partly because of – her appropriation of dialect, a technique Eliot adopted without success, according to Williams: 'Eliot gives her own consciousness, often disguised as a personal dialect, to the characters with whom she does really feel; but the strain of the impersonation is usually evident'.³³ The result, in Bakhtinian terms, is a novel that elides its dialogic potential even while seeming to embrace a multiplicity of voice and experience. Significantly, Williams's primary criticism of *North and South* is that 'the emphasis of the novel, as the lengthy inclusion of [political] argument suggests, is almost entirely now on attitudes *to* the working people, rather than the attempt to reach, imaginatively, their feelings about their lives'.³⁴ While the novel succeeds in introducing its heroine and its reader to the private spaces of the working classes, and even in engendering sympathy for the inhabitants of those spaces, it ultimately stops short of bestowing fully formed and individualized consciousnesses on the knowable community it renders visible. To use Williams's terms, 'as themselves they are still only socially present, and can emerge into personal consciousness only through externally formulated attitudes and ideas'.³⁵

In his discussion of Eliot's failure to create authentic rural characters in *Adam Bede*, Williams argues that 'the farmers and craftsmen can be included as "country people", but much less significantly as the bearers of active experience'.³⁶ By the logical substitution of a few terms, with which I doubt Williams would take issue – 'mill workers' for 'farmers and craftsmen', 'city dwellers' for 'country people' – the same could be said, I have suggested, of the 'urban rustics' of Gaskell's *North and South*. Yet, for all that, there are important differences between the two novels. Whereas Eliot 'conceives but cannot sustain acceptable social solutions [...] [so that] it is not then transcendence but a sad resignation on which she comes to rest', Gaskell's knowable community arguably comes closer to this transcendence, even if it rests on the improbable peacemaking marriage of classes and ideologies represented

³² Armstrong, p. 98.

³³ Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 169.

³⁴ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (1953; repr. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), pp. 91-92.

³⁵ Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 168.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

by Margaret and Thornton's romance.³⁷ More significantly, Gaskell's novel comes to terms with the loss of an idealized rural past, and the ascendance of the urban, in a way that Eliot's seems, finally, unable to countenance. In the latter, suggests Williams,

A natural country ease is contrasted with an unnatural urban unrest. The 'modern world', both in its suffering and crucially, in its protest against suffering, is mediated by reference to a lost condition which is better than both and which can place both: a condition imagined out of a landscape and a selective observation and memory.³⁸

At the end of *North and South*, Margaret's return to Helstone confirms her new appreciation of what she had initially perceived as the 'unnatural urban unrest' of Milton; although she still experiences a longing for her rural Eden, Gaskell emphasizes that this nostalgia stems from Helstone's personal associations with Margaret's now-dead parents. There is a clear recognition on the heroine's part of the folly of returning to her cocoon of ignorance of 'the suffering of the modern world, and the protest against it'; like Gaskell, who came to love 'dear old dull ugly smoky grim grey Manchester', the city is valued on its own terms, and with its own social difficulties.³⁹

While the social and literary force of Gaskell's attempt at the representation of a 'knowable community' of the urban working poor is, ultimately, hobbled by her inability (or unwillingness) to fully give voice or subjectivity to the individuals she creates, *North and South* nonetheless offers a politically useful – and arguably pioneering – paradigm in its depiction of Margaret as a spatial and social mediatrix. Similarly, despite the concessions in characterization to what I have called a kind of urban rusticism, there remains a certain visionary ability evident in Gaskell's navigation of a path for her heroine through social space; and, indeed, in her signalling of the necessity of moving beyond a picturesque mode of apprehending the material conditions of the working classes, on whose labour the wealth of nineteenth-century industrial Britain was founded.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

³⁹ Elizabeth Gaskell, cited in Patsy Stoneman, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987), p. 28.