Brief Encounters: Street Scenes in Gaskell’s Manchester
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BRIEF ENCOUNTERS: STREET SCENES IN GASKELL’S MANCHESTER

BY SUE ZEMKA

I. THE NOVEL AND THE CITY STREETS

The open road: Mikhail Bakhtin says that it is an ancient chronotope with great importance for the novel and its history. A chronotope, in Bakhtin’s famous articulation, is a type of image that fuses spatial and temporal concreteness in a manner that is “saturated” with significance. The road chronotope comes by its freighted significance honestly, for what could be more natural and intuitive than the metaphor of life as a solitary journey? But the journey is seldom lonely, since the typical pilgrim in his travels meets many strangers, and these, Bakhtin suggests, bring “sociological heterogeneity” into the realm of the narrative. Thus the chronotope of traveling along a path aims at a collective vision of society, but one that is tethered to a single everyman, whose allotted time in this life, along with world he traverses, is condensed to a road trip.

In the Victorian novel, the road is often a city street. The very point of these roads is that they are crowded, bringing passing strangers into physical intimacy. In terms of sheer numbers, these streets are dominated by the working-classes, an often deracinated body of wage-earners, Irish, exiles, and women, many in recognized lines of employment, others scraping by in those curious professions chronicled by Henry Mayhew. To the middle-class pedestrian, they pose a host of offences: they smell bad, wear clothes that don’t fit, and speak with bluntness and humor, ignoring the protocols of interclass etiquette. Together with a variety of differently occupied men (gentlemen, shopkeepers, and clerks), and of the better situated, riding in carriages, the urban proletariat contributes to variations on the old chronotope, making it spatially packed and temporally fast-paced. The not-so-open road. How does the chronotope of the road change when it runs through a city? How does the tradition of storytelling known as the nineteenth-century novel accommodate this new type of road, the urban street?
The larger issue here concerns the new extremes of social density and diversity in urban environments. Statistics make this point impressively: between 1841 and 1851, London absorbed 330,000 migrants, a 17 percent increase in its population; in 1831, Manchester boasted a population of 142,000, having doubled in size since the census of 1801. Literary and social theorists have addressed urban growth from different angles. Franco Moretti, for one, argues persuasively that urban novels depend on their mapping of city streets and neighborhoods: “Specific stories are the product of specific place, I have often repeated; and now, the corollary of that thesis: without a certain kind of space, a certain kind of story is simply not possible.” Moretti claims that the influence of nineteenth-century city life shifts the novel away from dualistic, melodramatic structures to more complex triangulations, where society itself is the mediating term—“the sign of the Third . . . is the sign of urban existence itself.” Complexity is often taken as a sign of increasing sophistication in fiction writing (certainly Moretti takes it this way), but plots that revel in complexity often end in simplicity, as many Victorian plots do. Honore de Balzac’s forays into the intrigues of Parisian society, for example, place so much pressure on his plots and themes, such a dizzying excess of possibility, that he reacts by retrenching in “drastic simplification.” In the end the fates of protagonists overshadow the intrigues generated by so much social context. Faced with the teeming mass of bodies that comprise the modern city, novels seem destined by the nature of textual narrative to a pattern of expansion (out into the many) followed by reduction (back into the few).

Moretti makes this argument with maps, and maps appeal to the spatial imagination. But if it is the mixture of temporal with spatial detail that “saturates” a chronotopic image with significance, then maps are not chronotopes, for all the power of their symbolism. Moretti is not the only theorist of the interplay between stories and cities who singles out the spatial and scopic aspects. Michel de Certeau, in a meditation on urban pedestrianism, conceives of city walking as a type of storytelling where the random or selectively chosen routes of city walkers create a crisscrossed graph of “enunciations” on the urban topography:

[The urban pedestrian’s] swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities. Their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together. In that respect, pedestrian movements form one of these ‘real systems whose existence in fact makes up the city.’
The city walker is an elaborate apparatus for social interaction, animated by unrecognized losses, memories, and desires. She imparts these “condensations and displacements” to the shared psychic memory of the urban environment, which becomes a changing, entangled skein of routes, each route marking a new “opening of meaning” (W, 106). De Certeau’s social imaginary thus operates on linguistic and psychoanalytic principles, but his critical model for interpreting this process is spatial, not temporal: pedestrian movement-as-articulations are “not localized; it is rather that they spatialize” (W, 97). Lynda Nead borrows from de Certeau’s essay to underscore just this point: “Space, at street level, is beyond the discipline of an urban system.” It is striking that both de Certeau and Moretti prioritize spatial metaphors in their articulations of the city-as-story, given that stories and novels are inherently temporal forms, and city life is organized by clock time, precise and ubiquitous.

There is a further similarity between Moretti and de Certeau. Densely inhabited space is contested space, even in this matter of stories, and the contest for de Certeau also falls into a pattern of complexity versus simplicity. Thus the signifying practices of his urban neighborhoods create spaces of play that vie with those of the univocality of a dominant culture. “Supererogatory semantic overlays,” de Certeau calls them, or more simply, “local authorities”; this ancient and amorphous catalogue of utterances, legends, and remembered silences are what make places habitable, and are a vital sign of true habitation (W, 106). De Certeau’s adumbrated powers of “totalitarianism” are more recent than the hegemonic cultural traditions that reign in Moretti’s nineteenth-century novel, but the dynamics he sees in urban storytelling are similar (W, 106). Social crowding fosters the chaotic vivacity of signifying acts; cultural authority, however, directs this activity into organized and familiar channels. Compare this with the many nineteenth-century novels and we have another iteration of the fact that their endings are invariably conservative. Possibilities are more open and unpredictable in the middle of the story, before the need for closure finds an ally in the comforts of ideology. And lest we forget, these possibilities in the middle have a human face, often the faces of the crowd: to walk in the city, de Certeau concludes, is “to be other and to move toward the other” (W, 110). A tangle of streets, each with its rapidly moving pedestrians, all amounting to so many possibilities for fiction: the impulse to look at faces in the city places pressure on the inclusive logic of the novel form.
These observations lead me to state my previous question more specifically: how do novels incorporate into their form the randomness and brevity of street encounter—both the space of the urban chronotope (its human crowdedness) and its time as well (rapid, fast-paced, infinitesimally divided)? The question is relevant to the dual pull that Moretti and de Certeau observe in urban narrative. It’s relevant because the brief and arbitrary street encounter can complement the larger arc of a plot or interrupt it; it can redirect the story, or simply cross it.

In Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd,” a random passing takes control of the narrator’s mind: “suddenly there came into view a countenance . . . which at once arrested and absorbed my whole attention.” This momentary event dilates into the flâneur’s obsession to find the old man again, but when he does he resorts to a pitiful reduction, seeing in the old man “the type and genius of deep crime.” Jo, the crossing sweep, stands at the edge of a crowded London street only to get swept up in Bleak House’s story of invisible relations. He sees Nemo for a few minutes a day, but after these brief encounters it is Jo’s narrative destiny to become the novel’s starkest piece of evidence for invisible human relations, redirecting Esther Summerson’s story through small pox (thus do the innocents bear the scars of humanity denied). In both cases, a street encounter featuring a bona-fide street person determines the direction that the plot subsequently takes. But numerous other minor characters simply cross the narratives of nineteenth-century urban fiction and leave no lasting mark.

In Charles Dickens’s last completed novel, Our Mutual Friend, John Harmon marries Bella Wilfer, and at their wedding the only witness for “the People” is a peg-legged pensioner, Christian name unknown, memorialized here as “Gruff and Glum,” a stranger who is “stricken by so sudden an interest” in Bella’s beauty that he follows these unknowns to the church. In their brief appearances, these two strangers are synecdoches for a vast urban public that hovers between anonymity and familiarity. Their evanescent acquaintance makes crowded public spaces into something uncanny, with disquieting echoes of the known amid the unknown, and indeed, Sigmund Freud’s essay on the uncanny features his memory of getting lost on the streets of an Italian town.

These further observations bring me to a final version of my original question: how do Victorian novels of urban life use the temporality of the street encounter to comment upon their limited capacity to forge and sustain intimacy with all of their characters? How do they respond to the problem which their street chronotopes raise—that here, for the purposes of storytelling, there are too many others to know?
This essay brings these thoughts and questions to bear on one urban writer, Elizabeth Gaskell, and specifically on her two novels of Manchester life, *Mary Barton* and *North and South*. Manchester city streets are crucial to the plot and verisimilitude of both novels. From John Barton to his daughter Mary and her Aunt Esther, and on to Margaret Hale and Nicholas Higgins, and around them a variety of unnamed characters whose entry and exit into these novels is staged on a city street, it is the chronotopic convergence of a brief temporality and a densely populated public space that makes Gaskell’s fictions possible.

Gaskell herself says as much when, as a narrator, she steps into the London Road beside her protagonist, John Barton. Barton has just come from a cellar dwelling where a family rendered destitute by the stoppage of the mill lays sick with fever. Searching for a druggist’s shop, Barton pauses:

He wondered if any in all the hurrying crowd had come from such a house of mourning. He thought they all looked joyous. But he could not, you cannot, read the lot of those who daily pass you in the street. How do you know the wild romances of their lives; the trials, the temptations they are even now enduring, resisting, sinking under? You may be elbowed one instant by the girl desperate in her abandonment, laughing in mad merriment with her outward gesture, while her soul is longing for the rest of the dead, and bringing itself to think of the cold-flowing river as the only mercy of God remaining to her here. You may pass the criminal, meditating crimes at which you will tomorrow shudder with horror as you read them. You may push against one, humble and unnoticed, the last upon earth, who in heaven will for ever be in the immediate light of God's countenance. Errands of mercy—errands of sin—did you ever think where all the thousands of people you daily meet are bound?215

Other authors of the era write about street life as a source for fiction; few of them place their pedestrians under tactile assault. “You” are elbowed and pushed; “you” meet and pass thousands daily. The human mass imposes itself kinesthetically. John Barton is pushed and shoved by a crowd of passersby; he or his hypothetical equivalent is jogged into the stimulation of imagining stories for the members of this multitude, threads of narrative that follow before and after, on through the twists and turns of the streets.

This passage, with its Simmelesque display of urban embodiment, sets the terms for the encounters that follow, both here and in *North and South*.16 Street encounters in these novels happen suddenly and
briefly but open into other temporalities, ones that allow for imagined intimacy. In *Mary Barton*, this alternative time breaks in upon the characters through memories of death; in *North and South*, it breaks in through erotically charged innuendo. For when strangers pass in the streets of a Gaskell novel, the plots that they set in motion run on the basic drives: sex and death. Sex and death animate Gaskell’s street encounters and through them the problem and remedy of her fictions coalesce: the street chronotope at once makes social antagonism palpable, and it softens that antagonism with imagined affective bonds. Eroticism and mourning open into another time and space, subjective and unspoken, but imaginatively contiguous.

In the mid nineteenth century, to write about urban public spaces in this way was to write against the more prevalent deployment of them as danger zones of class hostility. Thus W. Cooke Taylor on Manchester streets, circa 1840:

> As a stranger passes through the masses of human beings which have accumulated around the mills and print-works in this and the neighboring towns, he cannot contemplate the ‘crowded hives’ without feelings of anxiety and apprehension almost amounting to dismay. . . . It is an aggregate of masses, our conceptions of which clothe themselves in terms that express something portentous and fearful.  

The description might stand as a symbolic inversion of the one that Gaskell pictures in the *London Road*: instead of middle-class feelings of “anxiety and apprehension” before a specter of the working-class, she posits a sympathetic curiosity piqued by the thought that all these pedestrians have “wild romances.” For Gaskell, even the “criminal, meditating crimes” results in nothing more than a scary newspaper report, violence channeled into frisson.

Walking in the city is thus a phenomenological starting point for Gaskell’s social mythologies, for the “conceptions which clothe themselves,” as Taylor says—or rather, for the conceptions with which we clothe others. This suggests the following: for all that Gaskell is a social condition novelist, a novelist of the class antagonisms and political-economic tensions that accompanied industrialization, she is also a novelist of the city street. She is not one and then the other, but both, inextricably. Gaskell’s chronotopic street encounters are central to her literary imagination, and they test and pull at her political intentions. In fact, it is the combination of recalcitrant and thematically cohesive elements in Gaskell’s street scenes that make them prime material to explore after considering Moretti and de Certeau’s observations on
the dynamics of urban storytelling. For her social condition novels are well known for both their radical potential and conservative endings. As Kathleen Tillotson first stated, and others have repeated, *Mary Barton* first ventures into a rare degree of honesty with its politically charged subject matter, then returns to the pieties of melodrama. A similar pattern of narrative daring followed by a retreat to familiar ground characterizes *North and South*. Margaret Hale walks around Milton-Northern with a bold disregard for sexual impropriety, and in the process both she and the novel experiment with the sexually charged semiotics of working-class street behavior. In the end, however, this novel despairs of anything more than guarded friendships between classes; Higgins’s and Thornton’s respect for each other is based on their acceptance of mutual interests and separate spheres.

Since Tillotson, critics have been enamored with Gaskell’s failures, these reversals in her writing. The general method of this criticism is allegorical; Gaskell’s stories of Manchester life, with their mixed riffs on literary genres, encode deeper narratives that articulate positions on class conflict, gender, and prostitution. I wish to point out that the concern with semantic coherence in these readings abstracts us from the sensory and experiential immediacy of the novels. In order to mitigate this tendency, I will scan the novels not for their discursive substrates but for their empirical records of a chronotope which locates in a specific time and space, that is, on the border between city walking and novel writing. The figure for this experience is the chronotope, which locates us in a specific time and space, but one that resonates with the imagination of literary forms. Historically, the challenge for critics in analyzing the Bakhtinian chronotope has always been how to hold the spatial and temporal quotients in balance. What we will see in this study of Gaskell is that (contrary to Moretti and de Certeau) it is the temporal and not the spatial quotient that tips the scale in her urban chronotopes. This is because they anticipate the later modernist theory of urbanism as an experience of shock, of suddenness and brevity. Thus, with a kinesthetic immediacy, Gaskell’s urban chronotopes register an experience of humanity that is at once a literary source, a motive, and an impossibility. They place her readers in moments of time that are freighted with the task of an all-inclusive intimacy; they are as powerful in their brevity as they are unsuited to survive.

II. MOURNING BECOMES (MIS)RECOGNITION

The street encounter in *Mary Barton* is a parable of mourning. Time and again, the novel presents us with characters who are lost, needy,
or hungry children. Another child transposes itself onto these—a child who has been lost to death, leaving a grieving parent. This recognition, or more accurately misrecognition, triggers an act of kindness.

The basic pattern finds its way into the novel at several junctures, most importantly, when John Barton, on his way to kill Harry Carson, hears an Irish boy crying in the street and is reminded of his own son, who died during an earlier economic depression. Barton is diverted from his murderous mission long enough to take the child home (M, 198). A course of action is thus interrupted by a needy child—this one lost in the literal sense of having lost its way—who is only present for a moment and makes no further appearance. And yet, this brief interruption carries Gaskell’s design. It triggers a haunting, Barton’s recall of his own lost son. And when dead children haunt their parents in this novel, their parents becomes caregivers. Here we confront an impressive list: Barton, the grieving father, takes care of the Irish boy; Esther, a grieving mother, endeavors to protect her niece; another grieving mother, a cottager on the road from London to Manchester, feeds and clothes Job Legh’s infant granddaughter; Mr. Carson, grieving for his murdered son, witnesses a scene between two children on a Manchester street and begins a night of soul-searching that inspires him to forgive Harry’s murderer. In all cases, people are moved to charity or forgiveness by the mental transposition of a stranger with a dead child.

Mourning thus inspires generosity and forgiveness by transposing the beloved dead onto the living, be they anonymous, familiar, or guilty of sin. The implications of this for identity are profound, although based on a fleeting confusion: Gaskell’s use of mourning as the basis for empathy between strangers or the estranged creates images of human selves that are ephemeral and composite. Barton never knows the Irish boy; his mercy proceeds from transposing him with his own son. This is poignant, humanizing, and ethically effective, but a misrecognition nonetheless. The lost child continues to be a stranger first and foremost because of the randomness and brevity of the street encounter, but these chronotopic conditions have a benefit. Anonymity facilitates his imaginative substitution for another person. This emptying-out of character applies in different ways for all of the acts of generosity that are triggered by mourning. If the lens that opens up into empathy for strangers is the remembrance of a dead loved one, it carries the caveat that the stranger becomes something of a ghost.

Strangers who emerge from the night, from the crowd, on the street: in all instances, they lose their strangeness, if only momentarily, by an
act of misrecognition that imports the past into the present. So powerful is the act of remembrance and the emotions there contained—and contained almost in a ritual sense, where memory is a sacristy—that the begging Irish boy momentarily becomes John Barton’s son or (as I will discuss below) the prostitute becomes Mary’s deceased mother. In all cases, misrecognition brings about the recognition of a cherished and personalized humanity. It is the mistake, the confusion of the beloved dead for the living stranger, which breaks through the effects of prejudice, competition, and anonymity to arouse compassion.

We might think of this as a kind of equivalent in the sentimental style of the poetics of remembrance that Walter Benjamin identifies in Charles Baudelaire. Like Baudelaire, Gaskell’s method for assuaging the shock and alienation of the modern urban street relies on an alternative temporal consciousness. The sudden moment of an encounter opens into a time of remembrance; thus Jem, approached in the street by the long-lost Esther, pauses before recognizing her, and then “forgot the present in the past” (M, 160). Baudelaire achieves his effects through lyric; Gaskell in Mary Barton achieves hers through a tightly woven fabric of coincidences, typologies of loss and repetition. Everyone grieves for a parent or a child: such is the reconciling, cross-class foundation of the imagined community in this literary performance.

III. STREET PEOPLE AS INTERRUPTIONS

Mary Barton allots a virtue to this type of temporal subjectivity, a fact that is evidenced by the relative lack of it in the heroine herself. In another street scene, Mary passes a hungry Italian boy and, in distress over Jem’s arrest, first ignores him, then returns, somewhat begrudgingly, to give him food. Her duty to the boy discharged, she rushes home, “greedy of every moment which took her from the full indulgence of painful, despairing thought” (M, 230). No memories of the dead soften Mary’s charity, and this, combined with the gratuitousness of the scene, is provocative. Why does Gaskell, whose narrative is building momentum, allow herself such a digression now? And why does she digress with a scene that undercuts the formula of memory as (mis)recognition which operates in the novel’s other encounters on the road? For, far from sparking in her mind an identification with her own loved ones, past or present, this street urchin only interrupts Mary’s emotional preoccupation. Temporally, he presents a distraction, not a window to an expansive inner time, since Mary at this point only wants to surrender to the anguish of the present.
Perhaps Gaskell is being consistent with her heroine, since both as a character and a plot device, Mary’s temporality is one of haste and intensifying suspense. Melodramatic time is her leitmotif, following her wherever she goes, accelerating with her feelings, mounting to a breaking point—Mary faints. Thus the consistency: Mary’s immersion in the present moment precludes the kind of remembrances that enable John or Jem or Alice or the cottager woman to remember the dead without losing hold of the distinction between past and present. And yet, her extreme presentness acts as another type of alternative consciousness, one that also carries an ethical valence in that it blurs the lines between public and private space, between the silences and rejections that govern public life and the emotional expansiveness of domestic interiors. Hence Mary’s maddening misapprehension of her aunt as the ghost of her mother, past and present collapsed into an overwhelming but effective mistake. Embracing Esther on the threshold of her home, Mary owns the prostitute as belonging inside. Similarly, in her consummate act of melodramatic performance, when Mary stands before the gallery at Jem’s trial, her sense of time collapses into a hallucinatory present consciousness; and, as when she collapses into Esther’s arms, the result of this temporal delusion transforms a hostile space of public judgment (the streets that Esther walks as a pariah; the court that would condemn Jem as a murderer) into a private interior, ruled by love: “The present was everything; the future, that vast shroud, it was maddening to think upon; but now she might own her fault, but now she might even own her love” (M, 325).

In the end, once recovered from the brain fever that is the consequence of such melodramatic intensity, Mary is delivered from the theatrical demands that the novel has placed on her to the lush stasis of a Canadian clearing, forest-encased homes being Gaskell’s favorite topos for idyllic retreat. So perfect is the escape, it almost questions its own plausibility. It is introduced by a narratorial intrusion in the first-person (“I see . . .”), which situates the vision not in a chronotope of the country but of the mind, as if to repeat the route inward that Alice takes to reach the Cumberland home of her childhood (M, 392-93). Dementia is the path out of the city, back to the country. Dementia or vision, the ending is not only a fantasy but an unsatisfactory one for many readers, since it encodes a remedy for social distress much resented by the Chartists, which was to relocate the English surplus population to the colonies.

Which leaves us back in Manchester, back in the urban present. Or rather, in two Manchesters, and two presents. For when the Italian
boy’s cries pierce Mary’s preoccupation, and when she steps back in the street to return to him, in effect we move out of the present of melodramatic suspense into a present human exigency which, in this case, has no connection to the plot. In other words, we step into a real city street. That Mary does not access the inner space of mourning is one repudiation of the novel’s consolations; that she momentarily loses her psychic immersion in a suspenseful present is another. Instead, she is immersed in a present that is simply aggravating, an immersion in stressful demands. The episode begins and ends in imaginatively unrefomed urban time, unadorned by an inward turn of memory. Mary’s motivations are other than sentimental, less than ideal: she enacts the rule that the poor take care of one another simply because she must. She does it automatically, she does it reluctantly, she does it because—in this city, at this time, as in other cities, at other times—the indigent poor, whose plight is one lost job away from her own, are always there.

Within a text that assimilates Manchester’s struggling denizens into recognizably sentimental figures, the scene provokes an attempt at imaginative familiarity that it simultaneously denies. In his narrowly drawn character, the Italian boy is the nodal point of this denial. While his response to hunger and its relief are affectingly rendered, the very fact of his untimely interruption in the narrative imports a new element of reality into the text. Even here there is a pattern, or perhaps a small idée fixe on Gaskell’s part, for the Italian boy’s interruption reminds us that in fact all of the acts of charity and recognition which take place on roads are interruptions: when Jem is accosted by Esther, he is on his way to work; when Job Legh imposes on the cottager family, he is on his way to Manchester, and when John Barton stops to find the Irish boy’s home, he is on his way to murder. Narratives of direction, and the larger direction of the narrative, are intersected by other lives moving in other directions. Most of the time Gaskell brings them into her narrative logic through the motif of mourning; in the case of the Italian boy, she does not. However, the failure to do so might finally satisfy her impulse to return to such scenes. Standing outside of the pattern of mourning as (mis)recognition, this interruption and this act of charity imbue the text with a sentimentally inassimilable origin: the faces of strangers on the street who are outside the house of fiction.

Gaskell’s Italian urchin, in this regard, evidences a brilliant fidelity to an impulse which, strictly speaking, is not good writing. Marxist theory offers two terms for this type of awkward innovation. Raymond Williams claims that “new significances and experiences”—in this case,
that of urban space transformed by an influx of population, the human actors and casualties of industrialization—generate “emergent” cultural forms. These creative responses to historical change stand, as soon as they appear, on the brink of incorporation into the hegemonic meanings of dominant culture. Benjamin’s concept of the dialectical image has some kinship with Williams’s thinking on this score, although wedded more fully to a non-linear concept of historical time. An image is dialectical, for Benjamin, when elements of the historical past interact with “what is present” to release a new formation. Benjamin emphasizes the brief nature of these images—they “flash” forth and are “suddenly emergent”—because, as for Williams, they can hardly be apprehended in any social sense without being processed through traditional meanings, conventions, ways of seeing (or feeling). However, the “flashing forth” of the dialectical image is for Benjamin truly and literally momentary. Given their instantaneous quality—dialectical images are both temporally precarious and historically synthetic—Benjamin does not see them posing a measurable threat to a dominant culture in the manner of Williams’s more diffuse and marginally more enduring “emergent” forms. And so with Gaskell’s street people, halting images of the unknown poor are posed dialectically between the shock of industrialization and absorption into sentimental fiction. They briefly materialize and disappear again: the crowds around John Barton on London Road, the Irish and Italian urchins, even in a sense Esther herself, whose home is a dark street from which she intermittently emerges—if they arrest in image something of the lives of Manchester’s poor, it is with the caveat that they retain some of the unknowability, the inaccessibility, of the poor.

Here again, Mary’s Italian urchin completes the logic of mourning as (mis)recognition precisely because he is not mediated through a memory of loss. He remains the stranger whose social role signifies another type of death, that of alienation. And yet, by allowing him to traverse her narrative in this fashion, Gaskell gains a small victory over alienation—not with literary compensations, but by allowing this street person to stand on his own, in the unincorporated brevity of his presence, homeless and nameless both. To return to the London Road passage, we do not know “where he is bound,” and are neither asked nor allowed the time to imagine what his life may be. His is the presence of street people whose stories we do not read, perhaps because, as readers of this novel circa 1848 we would not recognize or understand them if we did.
To summarize thus far: with the exception of the Italian boy, the strangers on the streets of *Mary Barton* become stories; more specifically, they become one story with variations, that of the lost child or family member. They become these familiar objects not in reciprocity but in the act of being looked at. For mourning through (mis)recognition is a one-way street of perception, occurring in the minds of the novel’s main characters when they meet, in passing, strangers or the estranged. The pedestrians who crowd John Barton on the London Road, the Irish urchin, Job’s infant granddaughter, Esther (both when she meets Jem and when she appears at Mary’s door): in all instances, a jolt of memory expands the moment; a stranger and the instant of their appearance is saturated with another time and another life. In this fantastical effect, the temporal quotient of the street chronotope carries forward Gaskell’s project of social healing.

These occurrences are set against an implied backdrop of urban crowding or working-class anonymity and deracination—Manchester’s London Road, or the other London road that Job Legh takes home to Manchester. But in fact after the initial London road scene that backdrop is only implied. So many of the street scenes are strangely bereft of people; they have a theatrical quality, where the street is a set that refers to a crowd, although no crowd is seen. The novel thus invokes the idea of a crowd with a narrative device that borrows from the theatre. Likewise with the acts of remembrance that compose the storyline: the dilation of the moment through memory translates the Victorian dramaturgy of the situation into narrative and psychological representation. But if the arrested moment in Gaskell’s novel is an aesthetic gift from the stage, it also underscores the limitation on mourning as a social remedy: even frozen, it only lasts for a moment.

Interestingly, then, when Gaskell exchanges *Mary Barton*’s Manchester, a real city with melodramatically-enhanced public spaces, for *North and South*’s Milton-Northern, a quasi-fictional city, the public spaces become much more real. It’s as if the city that she first imagined through grief, now, at the distance of several years, no longer conforms to that interpretive frame. What takes its place is an urban setting teeming with moving bodies. The question this raises is not so much how the narrative imagination can match the demands of these bodies—personalize members of the crowd, as it did in *Mary Barton*—but rather why it would even try, so overwhelming is the task, and so wide the gulf that urban crowding opens between its constituent social groups. Overwhelmed and out of step: Gaskell as much as
acknowledges that the timing of her storytelling cannot keep pace. The key scene of this acknowledgement occurs in London, not Milton-Northern, but the point has less to do with differences between the two cities than with the similarities of urban street time. Passing Henry Lennox in pedestrian traffic, Margaret fails to recognize him until he is “a hundred yards away.” Mrs. Hale spies him first, her eyes trained by window-shopping to register details: “Oh, and there, I declare—no, it is not—yes, it is—Margaret, we have just passed Mr. Henry Lennox. Where can he be going, among all these shops?”

If the recognition of friends is impossible in these fast-moving, commodity-packed streets, how much more so the (mis)recognition of strangers though memories of the dead? The scene is a counterpoint, then, to that with John Barton in the London Road; the new task is not to imagine storylines for all the passersby, but rather to learn a means of interacting in impersonal crowds. Gaskell is a risk-taker, at least before she ends her novels, and faced with the inadequacy of mourning to the chronotopic street encounter, she resorts to sexualizing it.

V. MOURNING AS SOCIAL SEGREGATION

Which is not to say that her characters stop dying in North and South; they do die, in alarming numbers, but when they do, their survivors retreat into mourning rituals that are classed behaviors. Death in this novel reinforces the social divisions of a factory town rather than engendering a chain of sympathy that crosses class lines.

Through her street rambles, Margaret Hale makes the acquaintance of a Mancunian hand, Nicholas Higgins, and his invalid daughter, Besse. After her mother falls ill, she thinks:

[Far away in time, far away in space, seemed all the interests of past days. Not more than thirty-six hours ago, she cared for Bessy Higgins and her father, and her heart was wrung for Boucher; now, that all seemed like a dreaming memory of some former life; everything that had passed out of doors seemed disjoined from her mother, and therefore unreal. (N, 170)]

Concerns shared “out of doors” stay there as Margaret withdraws into private spaces and private grief. The leitmotif of Mary Barton is played in reverse: the sufferings of strangers who Margaret has met in her street rambles become less meaningful when her own mother dies. This reversal from Mary Barton informs subjective temporality as well. Rather than past and present coming together in a moment
of time, Margaret’s anxiety for her mother expands the distance between past and present. The past retreats instead of coming forward; subjectively it becomes more, not less remote. Thirty-six hours ago belongs to “some former life.”

Different class cultures amplify the isolation that death brings. When death occurs among the mill-hand families, the Hales are repulsed by the behavior of the widow, Mrs. Boucher. Father and daughter reach the conclusion that urban time itself is to blame for the decline in rituals of mourning. Margaret speculates: “‘It is the town life. . . . Their nerves are quickened by the haste and bustle and speed of everything around them, to say nothing of the confinement in these pent-up houses, which of itself is enough to induce depression and worry of spirits’” (N, 302). It’s a remarkable statement on several scores. Gaskell reprises a common Victorian opinion that Mancunians observe a speed of movement unknown in other parts of the country, and that this, in concert with the small, poorly ventilated quarters of the working poor, alters human psychology. Nerves are “quickened”; manners become abrupt. Pursuing this exercise in speculative sociology, Margaret continues:

The dweller in towns must find it as difficult to be patient and calm, as the country-bred man must find it to be active, and equal to unwonted emergencies. Both must find it hard to realize a future of any kind: the one because the present is so living and hurrying and close around him; the other because his life tempts him to revel in the mere sense of animal existence[.] (N, 301)

Death and the street moment coincided in Mary Barton to bring forth an emotionally familiarizing, temporally decelerating bridge between strangers. Here, Margaret states that urban haste and crowding foreclose such possibilities: “the dweller in towns,” specifically, in context, the proletariat, is acclimated to a pace of sensations which render them a race apart, a new type of human.

Speed on all sides: in the pace at which pedestrians pass; in the frequency with which death comes; and (concurrent with all of these) in the external pressures on the novelist to produce copy: “this tale was obliged to conform to the conditions imposed by weekly publication . . . [and I] was compelled to hurry on events with an improbable rapidity towards the close” (N, xi). Little wonder, then, that North and South cannot decelerate its chronotopes of public spaces to allow for imaginative displacements, humanizing memories—or that its response would ultimately be withdrawal. The novel (its settings, plot, even its

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production) exists in a world of mandated velocity, like the “railroad
time” that “inexorably wrenches” the Hales away from Helstone to
Milton-Northern (N, 56). Moreover, the novel’s inability to subvert this
pace reveals a collusion between speed and social aggression.

Thus, the best-known street encounter in North and South is a
riot. So inured is Margaret to street traffic, to “the irregular stream
of human beings that flowed through Milton streets,” that she at first
doesn’t notice the signs—an “unusual heaving”; the “restless, oppres-
sive sense of irritation among the people; a thunderous atmosphere,
morally as well as physically, around her” (N, 171–72). Speed has
become such a constant standard that when the riot commences, the
first indicator is something so unusual as a slowing down. The people
cease “moving on”; the crowd appears as a “slow-surging wave” that
becomes “ominously still.” And then the pace shifts to sudden eru-
pions: the crowd changes its demeanor from “a moment ago” (N, 172).
Soon the men gathered at Thornton’s door become violent, “reckless.”
“A clog whiz[zes] though the air”; “a sharp pebble” grazes Margaret’s
cheek (N, 179). It’s as if the usual pace of Manchester/Milton-Northern
streets, where haste is part of the normalcy that hides or represses class
tension, now splits into two extremes, the slowness of the gathering
storm, and the rapidity of its violent release. A new chronotope of the
street encounter appears: that of the riot, and its temporal marker is
defamiliarization, an eerie collusion of deceleration and shocks.

Faced with this more complex social reality, Gaskell acknowledges
the impossibility of benevolent feelings among strangers on the streets.
She acknowledges it in a turnabout with her favorite motif: once again,
in this novel, death does not open a pathway of empathy, but closes
it. Walking through the angry crowd on her way to the Thorntons,
Margaret fails to read the import of their movements because of what
preoccupies her: “she did not know what they meant—what was their
deep significance; while she did know, did feel the keen sharp pressure
of the knife that was soon to stab her through and through by leaving
her motherless” (N, 172).

VI. MARGARET HALE, STREETWALKER

Not mourning, but sexuality, is the source of affective connections
on the streets of North and South. The situation is very different
than in Mary Barton, where the fates of both Esther and Mary make
it clear that the streets are, for women, a place of sexual danger, and
streetwalking is envisioned according to the hackneyed convention of
fallenness. However, both novels reflect real-life propriety regarding
pedestrian behavior. Francoise Barret-DuCrocq writes that “the use of urban space” in the nineteenth-century European town “was subject to strictly defined rules governing times of day, season, escorts, and so forth,” and while respectable women on the streets guarded carefully against the appearance of impropriety, women in more popular districts enjoyed greater latitude of movement. Deborah Nord gives a more menacing picture: “how powerful, how unavoidable was the sexualization of women’s entry into urban space.” Anne Wallace argues that these social customs impacted the literature of flânerie; while the male flâneur might aspire to a personal utopia of interclass crossings, society still maintained restrictions on women’s movement. Thus “the distance between poor and rich supposedly bridged in peripatetic action” was preserved “in a distance between genders” and surfaced “to disrupt imagined communities.”

Victorian streetwalking thus conformed to gendered protocols, and, as everyone from the characters in North and South to its critics observe, Margaret Hale ignores them. Critics have interpreted her peripatetic boldness as a sign of Gaskell’s advocacy of the greater role that women could play in social reform, or of the analogous and improper female publicity that, as a writer, she shares with her heroine. Hence they understand the sexual implications of Margaret’s streetwalking to serve the higher end of feminist statement. Even Elizabeth Starr, who takes issue with other critics’ treatment of Margaret’s “inappropriate female publicity,” divests her publicity of sexual import in order to understand it as a form of de-eroticized social mediation. On the contrary, it is eroticized social mediation, startling for a woman (although common for a man, and this is what is truly radical about it, so much so that having opened up this possibility, the novel reins it in the latter half. Margaret’s streetwalking suggests a vision of interclass street encounters charged with sexual innuendo.

For sexual energies circulate around Margaret when she walks the streets. Her presence on the streets of Milton-Northern makes her a magnet for attention, emphasizing how out of place she is and exposing her to presumptuous familiarity. A new type of intimacy, transient and anonymous, erupts between Margaret and the women textile workers, who come 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. The tones of their unrestrained voices, and their carelessness of all common rules of street politeness, frightened Margaret a little at first. (N, 71)
Now the kinesthesia of the street experience is intimate and self-conscious—intrusive, though presumably well-intentioned. Compared to the street chronotopes of Mary Barton, which render the urban poor sentimentally familiar, and compensate for brevity with memory, the chronotopes in North and South are fast, portentous, and obscure. Space is personal space, something to be violated; transience and speed of movement facilitate new forms of physical contact between women, with ambiguous feelings.

Less ambiguous are the intentions of the working-class men Margaret passes. She “alternately dreaded and fired up against the workmen, who commented not on her dress, but on her looks, in the same open fearless manner.” Still, she learns to tolerate both sex’s advances—the “rough, but not unfriendly freedom” of the women’s touches, the fact that the “very outspokenness” of the men shows their “innocence” of intention (N, 71). The chief interclass friendship is born out of this sexually charged chronotope. Higgins, a mill worker, initiates a relationship with Margaret after routinely passing her on the street: “He seemed to understand her acknowledging glance, and a silent recognition was established between them whenever the chances of the day brought them across each other’s path. They had never exchanged a word” (N, 72). The reader may be forgiven for wondering if this suggests sexual interest; after all, the narrative has just alerted us to how sexual acknowledgement governs interactions between men and women on these streets. In this case they don’t, but the friendship between Margaret and Higgins develops out of this environment, where indeterminate, free-floating sexual energies circulate around Margaret and are intensified by her middle-class status, where every gesture, word, or glance is what de Certeau calls a “pedestrian speech act,” words in a vocabulary that Margaret must learn (W, 99). The distinctive feature of this working-class street communication is the amount of physical judgment that goes on. Margaret sees herself in the factory workers’ eyes as a public spectacle of affluence and beauty; but everyone on the streets receives some identity-forming information about their appearance. A woman’s status, her public identity, depends on her attractiveness, as with the “womanly sympathy” that connects Margaret with the factory girls over “matters of dress” (N, 71), or in Higgins’s first words to her: “You may well smile, my lass; many a one would smile to have such a bonny face” (N, 72).

A society of mirrors, of mutual reflections, of people looking at each other: one could describe these scenes as an interclass street theater based on physical approval, a social currency that transcends caste.
But it is fueled by basic sexual impulses, which can as quickly feed into animosity as acceptance. Melancholia for the dead, the emotion of social fusion in *Mary Barton*, didn’t seem half as dangerous. It was more poignant, and artistically more compact, but also less mature. In *North and South* (Gaskell acknowledges the intractability of her subject matter—society—and the result is class crossings that are more guarded, never free of tension or untroubled by misunderstandings. Moretti might say that “the sign of the third” is so dominant in *North and South* that it dissolves melodramatic binaries. There is nothing as cathartic as Carson holding the dying John Barton in his arms. Even with Higgins, the representative mill-hand brought into the Hales’ family fold, the potential for insult remains just under the surface long after his friendship with Margaret has lost any tincture of the sexually animated street environment where they first met. Gaskell does not try to disentangle the knot of complex motivations in her characters: having commingled sexual tension and class hostility, she stands back and makes no further analysis.

The commingling of motives is encapsulated in the crisis that ends the riot scene. The blood that “threads” from Margaret’s cheek “wakened [the men] from their trance of passion”—“passion” which is unequivocally political in nature, but which is cut short by the sight of a woman’s blood after she stands defiantly next to Thornton, a man with whom she shares a simmering romantic passion (*N*, 179). That passion unequivocally comes to the fore as the rioting workers withdraw from the scene: “Oh, my Margaret—my Margaret! No one can tell what you are to me! Dead—cold as you lie there, you are the only woman I ever loved!” (*N*, 180–81). Echoing *Mary Barton*, death here opens up a communication otherwise foreclosed, but the sentimental situation is compounded by other factors: the retreating men, their grievances unresolved; the mill owner, himself in a tempest of emotional confusion; and the beautiful young woman, whose presence has both irritated and ended the crisis immediately at hand. But the most telling symbolism of the scene is the way in which sexual implications at first connect Margaret and Thornton with the men gathered before them, then separate them. Margaret’s beauty, courage, and finally her blood are the subject matter of the insults that pass between Thornton and his hands, even though they have come together to fight over wages and scabs. But the mixed passions that drive the yelling match between the men ultimately contract into a nimbus of privacy encircling Margaret and Thornton.
And so it is with the novel as a whole: if sexual energy is, for a while, liberated on the streets of Milton-Northern as a circuit of communication between Margaret and working-class men and women, that same sexual energy ultimately pulls Margaret and Thornton away from public spaces into a private sphere. In the framework of the temporality of the urban chronotope, the difference can be stated as one between moments and duration. Brevity enables a freedom of sexualized acknowledgment among strangers; exchanges extended past the moment bow to the exclusiveness of the affective life—the exclusiveness of class affiliation, material interests, and monogamy.

VII. IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD

The chronotope: a juncture between temporal and spatial coordinates that creates a significance greater than the sum of its parts. Bakhtin emphasizes the harmony between particular chronotopes and the text to which they belong; folkloric, idyllic, Rabelasian, or biographical, the chronotopes Bakhtin describes are permeated with the logic of larger wholes, of genres or opuses. A pattern emerges, where the chronotope sets in local terms the temporal-spatial conditions of entire narratives. In contrast, the chronotope of the street encounter in nineteenth-century novels often interjects a formal dissidence into their larger structures. One explanation for this is that they are a distinctly modern configuration, and consequently they are inherently out of balance, their temporal quotient of brevity at odds with their spatial quotient of expansiveness and human density. In regards to the temporal quotient, the street encounter is a shock experience, and as such they register urban reality, shock being for Georg Simmel the defining feature of the fin-de-siècle European metropolis, but also experienced much earlier, in industrial Manchester, which Asa Briggs calls “the shock city of the age.”41 This places the street chronotope not only at odds with itself, but also with the texts to which they belong. Where the larger temporal framework of the nineteenth-century novel is a tangled coherence of causes and effects, of conflict and denouement, the street encounter lasts but a minute. It thus stands on the boundary between the form of a novel and its sociological material: does the encounter become part of the novel’s pattern of meaning, another cause worked into the pattern of its created whole, or does it remain what, originally, it is—a momentary interruption?

I have argued that Gaskell’s urban novels use chronotopic street encounters in two variations, as a trope of social inclusivity and as the
mark of its limitations. The manner in which she uses this trope embodies the double movement of her novels. In both *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, Gaskell’s street encounters offer forms of intimacy that are foreclosed by the larger social and ideological demands on her imagination. When John Barton heeds the cry of a lost child because it reminds him of his own dead son, the street encounter embodies the pattern of mourning as (mis)recognition that is *Mary Barton*’s organizing formula. When Mary begrudgingly feeds a street urchin in a manner that echoes nothing central to the plot or its formulas, Gaskell gives us an untoward sign that her formula is an artifice. A similar duplicity of intention is present in *North and South*, where street life runs on ambient sexuality. Margaret Hale receives innuendoes from the working men and women she passes, but this flâneuristic social imaginary capitulates to social reality as sexual energy consolidates in Margaret and Thornton’s marriage. Sexuality briefly and erratically overcomes class boundaries in public spaces, but it generates new boundaries when attraction becomes a habit.

Gaskell’s street chronotopes thus meet the standard of homologous integration in her novels only in a perverse sense. This is for the larger reason that temporal experience in the industrial-capitalist city is itself structured by the contradiction between social reality and nineteenth-century liberal ideals. While density and brevity can open into alternative temporalities that imagine a web of social sympathies, these opportunities for intersubjectivity are temporally circumscribed; interclass intimacy has no permanence in Gaskell’s world, only an isolated present. Class, gender, Chartism—all of these historical matters, which have been analyzed at depth in Gaskell’s fiction, are in their novelistic representation shaped by this underlying temporal predicament. For the formal dissonance of Gaskell’s street chronotopes—the fact that they do not convincingly extend beyond the moment—reflects their historical dissonance, where such bonds are untruths that cover the conflict of interests and instituted inequities of Victorian society.

The remarkable thing about Gaskell’s management of the street encounter is that she records this double bind. The Italian urchin in *Mary Barton*, the female mill-workers in *North and South*: in both cases, these figures reveal the recalcitrance of her material to her literary patterns of legible street intimacy. Such chronotopic street scenes are like hard kernels in the stream of the narrative, something unsettling and opaque, a momentary perturbation that its guiding sentiments cannot assimilate. They are not so much “saturated with significance” as provocations to significance.42

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Critical theory, particularly the work of Benjamin or Williams, is well aware of such incongruous elements in literature and calls them openings of utopian possibility or points of ideological destabilization. In the case of Gaskell, as I mentioned at the opening, critics are inclined to assess the movement in her novels from complexity to closure as a disappointment, a failure to follow through on her social and political motivations. The chronotope is a crucial piece in the larger project of understanding Gaskell’s fiction. Walking the city streets, her narratives encounter the material of urban fiction—the fraught humanity of the crowd—in a way that coincides with the form of urban fiction—of charting that path which is storytelling. If we see in this the novelist’s failure to imagine a society connected permanently and effectively by bonds of sympathy, we can also appreciate the poignancy of her attempt, and not from above or after, but rather at eye level. Some strangers disappear into the crowd; if a novel cannot weave in their story, is human sympathy similarly limited? The endings of novels may say so, or say that the bonds which sympathy creates are incumbent upon the higher priority of preserving a socio-economic status quo. Still, in the fast-moving streets of so many novels, it is the motive and its emotional impetus that governs: the storyteller feels drawn to the stranger on the street even when she watches him move away. What the novelistic imagination cannot remedy it at least records: Fyodor Dostoyevsky reported of London street life that the children of the poor “when hardly adolescents, while still very young, often go out into the streets, mingle with the crowd, and in the end do not return to their parents.”

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NOTES

2 Bakhtin, 84–85.
3 Bakhtin, 245.
6 Moretti, 110.
7 Moretti, 113.
impressions which move at an habitual pace “use up, so to speak, less consciousness than does the rapid crowding of changing images” (410).

Time perception is central to his urban brethren. Time perception conceived in terms of physical capacity, like space or volume, such that spaces in physiological terms, as an “intensification of nervous stimulation” (410).

His urban brethren, a rational detachment which buffers him from the overwhelming sensory overload of his environment, including the human part of this environment, were it not for a protective apparatus multitudinous and swift is the sensory data of the city, the spatial correlate of a moment that is historically specific yet irrevocably severed from the past and, for that reason, also vacant of futurity—a moment, in short, whose consequences remain radically undetermined” (Catastrophe and the City: Charlotte Bronte as Urban Novelist,” Nineteenth-Century Literature 57 [2002]: 352–53).

Similarly, in Charlotte Brontë’s Villette (ed. Helen M. Cooper [London: Penguin, 2004]), when Lucy Snowe arrives in a French port town, a commissionaire guides her to an inn; after his surly refusal of Lucy’s English money, he walks out of the novel forever.

Charles Dickens, Our Mutual Friend, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), 731–32. Kate Brown develops a reading of urban scenes in Villette which, like the readings I pursue here, underscores a psychic adaptation to fragmented time. Brown suggests that the governess, like the flaneur and the prostitute, is a type of urban pedestrian for whom “the space of the city becomes a site of suspended loss: the spatial life.”

The metropolitan man develops, a rational detachment which buffers him from the sensory overload of his environment, including the human part of this environment, his urban brethren. Time perception is central to Simmel’s clinical picture—time perception conceived in terms of physical capacity, like space or volume, such that impressions which move at an habitual pace “use up, so to speak, less consciousness than does the rapid crowding of changing images” (410). Simmel’s work informs Walter Benjamin’s interpretation of Charles Baudelaire, as I discuss below. In addition, Simmel’s “mask of rationality,” as Richard Sennett calls it, is a starting point for several important sociological models of the public sphere, including Sennett’s own, which questions the premise of rationality by focusing instead on emotional communication between strangers in the city (“Reflections on the Public Realm,” in A Companion to the City, ed. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000], 384). In all cases, Simmel’s descendents preserve his concern with the temporal quotient, the fact that, for better or worse, the urban subject negotiates responses to strangers quickly and briefly.


Josephine Guy reprises Tillotson in pointing out the friction between “the radicalism underlying the verisimilitude of [Mary Barton’s] descriptive detail and the conservativism of [its] plot devices” (The Victorian Social-Problem Novel [New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996], 138).

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Deirdre d’Albertis’s reading of *North and South* also traces a pattern of creative daring and political ambition followed by withdrawal and compromise: Margaret Hale “reveals in oblique form Gaskell’s fears about her own shortcomings as a reformer. In the end, not surprisingly, Margaret’s much-tuned ‘rambling habits’ are described as lovable aberrations, idiosyncrasies to be disciplined” (*Dissembling Fictions: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Social Text* [New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997], 70).

Catherine Gallagher’s readings epitomize this method and are the most influential. She agrees with the assessment of the novels as politically confused, but argues that Gaskell’s contradictory use of melodrama and tragedy stems from the underlying inadequacy of the discourse of Unitarian reform to the crisis of industrialization. Thus, having ventured through romance, melodrama, tragedy, and realism, *Mary Barton* concludes without sorting out “the tangle of its narrative threads;” this “failure” of form, however, anticipates later literary realism, with its heightened awareness of its discursive constructions (*Gallagher, The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985], 87).

Rosemarie Bodenheimer similarly observes that the novel builds an interpretive coherence out of its concern with grief and loss. Bodenheimer further argues that grief works to keep politics in the background; “starting and ending always with personal grief, the novel is only secondarily about politics as such” (“Private Griefs and Public Acts in *Mary Barton,*” *Dickens Studies Annual* 9 [1981]: 213). But in fact the effects of grief move into and modify the public sphere of the novel. For the two most socially representative characters, Carson and Barton, the experience of death releases emotions that repeatedly affect their political and economic attitudes. In this way, the novel’s sentimentality makes for porous boundaries between private and public life.

After the sudden death of their son, Willie, Gaskell’s husband encouraged her to allay her grief by writing a novel. Thus much of *Mary Barton* was composed on the sofa of the Gaskells’ home in Manchester. Gaskell relates, “I took refuge in the invention to exclude the memory of painful scenes that would force themselves on my remembrance” (Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* [New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1993], 152–53). The high mortality rate in the novel suggests that Gaskell was hardly successful in blocking out the “painful scenes” of her loss. Some readers found the novel’s morbidity excessive: “I feel there are too many deaths in the novel,” Maria Edgeworth wrote pointedly to Gaskell’s cousin; and years later, in a retrospective review of her works, the *Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* complained that “the very portals of [Mary Barton] are choked with dead bodies” (*Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Angus Easson [London: Routledge, 1991], 92, 526). Modern critics are sometimes embarrassed by the personal reasons for Gaskell’s preoccupations with death and mourning, as if the artistic status of her novel is damaged by biographical interpretation. John Lucas calls biographical readings of the novel “arrant nonsense,” arguing that the preponderance of deaths reflects the stunningly high mortality rates in Manchester (*The Literature of Change: Studies in the Nineteenth-Century Provincial Novel* [Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1977], 41–42). Hilary Schor observes that the standard biographical account has “plagued” the novel, rather than dismiss the connections, however, she understands them as part of Gaskell’s project to create a serious authorial persona for herself: “The narrative of the grieving mother is indeed central to *Mary Barton,* but as a story about female authority and power” (*Scheherezade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992], 14). Whatever her motives, the “narrative of the grieving mother” is certainly one that Gaskell encourages, first with novel’s epigraph, which is a passage from Uhland that refers to accompanying souls to the underworld, and second, with

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interspersed incidents of direct address that refer to the author's own sorrows. Far from demeaning Mary Barton, its biographical references add another formal layer. Death is a daily occurrence in the novel and mourning its background emotion, one that triggers affective bonds among the author, her characters, and her readers.

Gaskell uses street encounters similarly in “Lizzie Leigh” (1850) to describe deracination and prostitution. A countrywoman comes to Manchester to find her daughter, who is making a living on the streets. Each night the mother walks the streets herself, searching the faces of strangers for a resemblance to her child. Her search is answered not by finding her fallen daughter but by meeting a stranger who humanizes the streets: “the best thing I can say of her looks,” the mother reports, “is that she’s just one a stranger would stop in the street to ask help from if he needed it” (Gaskell, “Lizzie Leigh,” in Four Short Stories [London: Pandora Press, 1983], 55).

Choosing Simmel, Benjamin’s “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (in Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn [New York: Schoken Books, 1969], 155–200) proposes that the modern urban crowd is essentially a shock experience. While in the past remembrance was ritualized in holidays, in modern circumstances the practice of remembrance is endangered by an importunate urban temporality that keeps consciousness into an infinitesimally divided present——the moments which, Benjamin writes, “cover a man like snowflakes” (189). Weaving through examples from Fleurs du mal, he argues that Charles Baudelaire’s lyrical practice seeks to create new practices of remembrance that can counter these effects of urban shock.

Ann Colley observes a similar pattern across Gaskell’s corpus: “when one reads Gaskell’s fiction, one enters narratives about how the past accompanies, intersects with, and occasionally overwhelms the present moment” (Nostalgia and Recollection in Victorian Literature [New York: Macmillan, 1998], 201). This is true but in the case of Mary Barton could be more precise: the “present moment” in the industrial city of this novel threatens to overwhelm the sentimental sensibility; thus the need to saturate it with recalled feeling, specifically that of grief. Paradoxically, a present time that moves too quickly is thus reclaimed as emotionally present by viewing it through remembered loss.

Terence Wright similarly observes how transformations in Mary Barton are concentrated into sudden moments in time. He associates the effect with religious existentialism: “[Gaskell’s] realism listens for the echo of eternity which will reinforce a commitment to the mortal; we are, as it were, in the eyes of God, and this elevates all our actions to a divine commitment, a transcendent value. The very brevity of the moment, the transience of the word, means that they take on an absoluteness of their own” (Elizabeth Gaskell, We are Not Angels: Realism, Gender, Values [London: Macmillan, 1995], 28).

“Lizzie Leigh” also ends with the relatives of a prostitute, Lizzie’s mother and daughter, living peacefully in a forest retreat: “Mrs. Leigh and Lizzie dwell in a cottage so secluded that, until you drop into the very hollow where it is placed, you do not see it” (76).

On Victorian debates about Wakefieldian remedies for poverty and social unrest, see Zemka, “Erewhon and the End of Utopian Humanism,” ELH 69 (2002): 452–53. Chartist disdain for emigration schemes inspired O’Connor’s land scheme for domestic settlement for the working-class, Sunshine and Shadow (ed. Ian Haywood [Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 1999]), a novel by the Chartist Thomas Martin Wheeler, ends with its exiled hero emphatically refusing the idea of emigration as a remedy for economic distress among the working poor: Arthur Morton says he leaves England not as an emigrant but as an exile who will one day come home (187). Wheeler openly rebukes the middle-class depictions of Chartism in novels such as Mary Barton: “The fiction

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department of literature has hitherto been neglected by the scribes of our body, and the opponents of our principles have been allowed to wield the power of imagination over the youth of our party, without any effort on our part to occupy this wide and fruitful plain” (72). *Sunshine and Shadow* appeared serially in the *Northern Star* from 31 March 1849 to 5 January 1850.


29 See Williams, 40–42.


31 Victorian dramaturgy exploited the longstanding device of the situation, where actors froze in position at crucial scenes in a tableaux vivant, before reassuming the action or ending the scene. Edward Mayhew, a writer on Victorian theater, defines a situation as a “pause, the actors remain statue-like,” allowing “sufficient space . . . for admiration of the picture” (*Stage Effect: or, the Principles which Command Dramatic Success in the Theatre* [London: n.p., 1840], 46). Martin Meisel describes the history and popularity of this theatrical device, connecting it to tableaux vivant and historical painting, all of which he sees participating in a rich tension between “narrative expansion and temporal integration” (*Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983], 23). However, if the urban scenes in *Mary Barton* reflect theatrical devices, those devices themselves were changing, in part to keep up with audiences’ desire for greater urban verisimilitude. The implementation of gaslight on stage sets made for increasingly sensational and lifelike theatrical depictions of city streets, and in the 1860s “the gaslit city scene entered into the vocabulary of Victorian drama” (Neal, 98). Some examples include Dion Boucicault’s “The Streets of London” (1864) and his conclusion for “After Dark” (1868), which borrows heavily from Augustin Daly’s American hit, “Under the Gaslight” (1867).


33 Steven Marcus has studied the archive of Manchester’s early industrial period and remarked upon the evidence of demanding psychological adjustment, what he describes as “human consciousness struggling to make, and often resist, the radical alterations and accommodations within itself that [the new] conditions required” (*Engels, Manchester, and the Working Class* [New York: Random House, 1974], 45). Victorians perceived urban haste and stress to be part of these new conditions. Taylor, visiting Manchester in the 1830s, observes “every person who passes you in the street has the look of thought and the step of haste” (50). As early as 1809, a travel writer warns visitors to Manchester of the dangers of pedestrian traffic: “in walking down Market-street-lane to the Exchange, it is likely that a person will be pushed all ways, at least twenty times, sometimes against the houses, others off the flags, notwithstanding his endeavor to walk regular; the fact is, without rule you are forced in and out, running against one another, to the annoyance of all, and the hindrance of those upon business; who being anxious to get forward, push along irregularly and increase the confusion” (quoted in Gary Messinger, *Manchester in the Victorian Age* [Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1985], 12).

34 Amanda Anderson develops her reading of Esther into a nuanced understanding of the interplay between generic conventions of fallenness and the novel’s attitude towards reading and sympathy in *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993), 119–26. Her starting point is the observation that Esther is “a real melodramatic
character” (115), a generically conventional fallen woman who nonetheless acts in the novel as if she had the status of a real character. And for a literary prostitute, fallen once means fallen forever. As Anderson is aware, the historical record gives a different picture; when working-class women resorted to prostitution, it was frequently on an intermittent basis, when other employment was unavailable or only provided subsistence wages. Mayhew and Engels hinted at this pattern of conduct, so different than the literary stereotype, and the research of Judith Walkowitz and Michael Mason confirms it. After researching the registration records that accompanied the Contagious Diseases Acts, Walkowitz concludes: “for most ‘public’ women prostitution represented only a temporary stage in their life . . . registered women appear to have stayed in prostitution for only a few years, leaving in their mid-twenties at a critical point in their lives—when most working-class women were settling into some domestic situation with a man” (Prostitution and Victorian Society [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980], 196). Mason enumerates the several forms that prostitution could take; some of these he classifies as “quasi-prostitution” (The Making of Victorian Sexuality [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994], 80–81). Moreover, working-class women who engaged in prostitution suffered little social animus within their communities for doing so. That Esther’s plight is so dissimilar shows how her character proceeds from middle-class sensibilities, even here in a novel that tries to break out of convention in order to depict proletarian life. The middle-class narrative that would meet the other, when it faces a challenge to sacred female sexuality, circles around and meets itself.


38 D’Albertis offers a detailed reading of female pedestrianism in Mary Barton and North and South, arguing that both novels are concerned with “female agency in the public sphere,” which is common to both “the author/social worker and streetwalker/observer” (64). D’Albertis addresses the sexual implications of both roles, social worker and observer, but is more concerned with how Gaskell negotiates Victorian impropriety than with her narrative openness to sexuality as social currency.


40 Libby Marsh, the seamstress-heroine of an earlier (1848) short story, also assesses her physical appearance from the reactions of mill workers on the streets. The relevant passage repeats Gaskell’s fascination with identity-formation in working-class public spaces: “You can hardly live in Manchester without having some idea of your personal appearance. The factory lads and lasses take good care of that, and if you meet them at the hours when they are pouring out of the mills, you are sure to hear a good number of truths, some of them combined with such a spirit of impudent fun, that you can scarcely keep from laughing, even at the joke against yourself” (Gaskell, “The Three Eras of Libby Marsh,” in Four Short Stories, 24).

41 Briggs, 92.

42 Bakhtin, 85.