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# *Invisible Architecture and Social Space in North and South*



BEN MOORE

**Abstract:** Building on previous critical accounts, this article analyses the insufficiently considered role of architecture in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* and explores its relationship to the text's social, aesthetic and political concerns. Proceeding from an initial discussion of 'invisible architecture', understood as what is unseen or unseeable in the modern city, with reference to *Mary Barton* and the writing of Friedrich Engels and James Kay-Shuttleworth, the article contends that Marlborough Mills is central to the tensions of the novel, acting as a locus around which the dynamics of industrial Manchester are explored. It also considers moments where architecture is directly mentioned in the novel, including the comparison between Oxford and Milton, as well as Mr Hale's lectures on Ecclesiastical Architecture, which take place at a 'neighbouring Lyceum'. The article ends by arguing that the Manchester Lyceum schools, established in the city in 1838, serve as an important lens through which to consider the novel's final rapprochement between Mr Thornton and Mr Higgins.

One of the most prominent critical debates around Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854-55) has concerned the relationship between public and private arenas, sometimes couched in terms of 'domestic and industrial spheres' or 'domestic and public life'.<sup>1</sup> While critics are generally in agreement that the novel attempts to bring together these two strands, some have argued that the gap between the domestic family and wider society is never overcome; Catherine Gallagher, for example, finds that industrial novels concerned with 'social paternalism and domestic ideology', including *North and South*, 'assume the separation of the public and private spheres they attempt to integrate', contributing to a crisis in the realist novel. This crisis is understood as the transformation of 'implicit tensions' within realism regarding 'the nature and possibility of human freedom', 'the sources of social cohesion' and 'the nature of representation' into 'explicit contradictions'.<sup>2</sup> For Christoph Lindner, the key question is the relationship between production and consumption under modern commodity culture, but he similarly argues that these two spheres are held apart, so that while Trollope and Thackeray produce narratives celebrating conspicuous consumption, Gaskell's industrial novels are located 'on the outside looking in', concerned with 'the productive activity that makes Victorian commodity culture possible', producing domestic spaces that are overwhelmingly alienating rather than comforting.<sup>3</sup>

More dominant, especially in recent criticism, has been the line of thinking which finds that, as Patsy Stoneman puts it using a quote from Virginia Woolf, Gaskell correctly recognises that ‘the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected; that the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other’.<sup>4</sup> Other versions of this argument have been made by Rosemarie Bodenheimer (citing the ‘consistent and deliberate intermingling of domestic and industrial spheres’), John Kanwit (‘the erroneous idea that domestic and public life were distinct in the nineteenth century’), Anne Longmuir (considering ‘consumption [...] enables us to develop our understanding both of relationship of the public and private spheres, and of women’s role in connecting the two’) and Michael Lewis (‘while leisure belongs to private space and time, “strict rules of business” make it necessary to incorporate discussion and disagreement into the public space and schedule of the factory’).<sup>5</sup> Even critics who challenge such readings, such as Jessie Reeder, for whom the ‘broken’ body of Margaret Hale, as typified by the riot scene in Volume One, Chapter Twenty-Two, does not fit within the public/private framework, recognise the significance of the structure.<sup>6</sup>

Yet despite the reliance of this public/private structure on specific distributions of social space, particularly within the industrial town of Milton-Northern, little attention has been paid to the role of architecture in the novel (Kanwit’s essay, which looks at household taste, is perhaps the main exception).<sup>7</sup> To stretch the point, we might even say that architecture has itself been rendered invisible in critical readings of the novel. This is perhaps unsurprising given that, as this paper contends, there are a number of ways in which architecture is made less visible, even invisible, in the novel, despite the fact that it plays a central role in the conflicts that run through the narrative; most centrally, but not exclusively, through Mr Thornton’s house at Marlborough Mills, around which many significant elements of the novel gather. I suggest that focusing on architecture, at least as a starting point, can help draw out the set of aesthetic and political concerns with which Gaskell is grappling and can reveal how these concerns are articulated through features of the social spaces of the novel. Such a focus can help develop a more nuanced reading of what Lewis calls the ‘intermediary space’ between masters and workers in the novel, which must, I argue, be read in the context of existing spatial arrangements in Manchester at the time of writing.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, I propose in the final section that we should rethink the rapprochement that takes place between Thornton and Higgins through the lens of the Manchester working men’s Lyceums, established in the city in 1838.

Ultimately, I want to show that architecture in *North and South* is more than just a background to the events of the novel, a reflection of opposing classes, or an element easily divided into public and private spaces; rather, it comes into prominence when social pressures and tensions are at work, as an arena where these pressures and tensions are rearticulated in terms of material aesthetics (and vice

versa). In order to explore these questions, I begin by glossing my use of the term ‘invisible architecture,’ with reference to Friedrich Engels, James Kay-Shuttleworth and Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848), before turning to consider how *North and South* complicates the model I have put forward.

### **Invisible Architecture**

I use ‘invisible architecture’ as a term to group together whatever is unseen (hidden, underground, concealed) or unseeable (lost, vanished, dreamt, imagined) in the architecture of the modern city. More precisely, it is an attempt to name a phenomenon that emerges, or at least comes into greater prominence, during the nineteenth century, in which cities become structured so that parts of them are not easily seen or visited, while at the same time those parts that are visible hint at the existence of something beyond them, which we might call a ‘spatial unconscious.’<sup>9</sup> An example comes from Friedrich Engels’s account of Manchester in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845):

[A]nyone who knows Manchester can infer the adjoining districts, from the appearance of the thoroughfare, but one is seldom in a position to catch from the street a glimpse of the real labouring districts. [...] I have never seen so systematic a shutting out of the working classes from the thoroughfares, so tender a concealment of everything that might affront the eye and the nerves of the bourgeoisie, as in Manchester.<sup>10</sup>

In this passage, the labouring districts of 1840s Manchester have become a spatial equivalent to Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic unconscious, that region of the mind which we cannot directly access, but upon which the operations of the conscious mind rely. For Freud, ‘an unconscious conception is one of which we are not aware, but the existence of which we are nevertheless ready to admit on account of other proofs or signs.’<sup>11</sup> If we take Engels’s claim that one can ‘infer’ the presence of adjoining districts from the appearance of the thoroughfares as a spatial equivalent of this mental process, we can consider Manchester as having a ‘conscious’ and an ‘unconscious’ side. The city’s unconscious would include above all the homes of the working classes, which are not seen from the main streets but are nonetheless vital to the functioning of the city as a whole. The fact that Engels highlights the danger to the ‘eyes’ and ‘nerves’ of the bourgeoisie implies that the sight of working class living spaces is not just unpleasant but traumatic, which is appropriate for Manchester, whose rapid industrialisation had led it to become known as a ‘shock city’ by the 1840s.<sup>12</sup> We can take another term from psychoanalysis here and argue that the working class spaces are not only concealed but repressed; that is, their separation from parts of the city where the middle classes operate is not accidental but rather allows the wealthy to avoid confronting the extreme inequality which the factory system has produced and on which their own success relies.

The problem presented by this unseen, unconscious side of Manchester was addressed by early sociologists such as James Kay-Shuttleworth (1804-77), a friend of the Gaskells and author of the pamphlet, *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes Employed in the Cotton Manufacture in Manchester* (1832). In the Advertisement that opens the first edition of the pamphlet, Kay cites 'the importance of minutely investigating the state of the working classes', referring to 'the evils here unreservedly exposed', indicating both that the logic of uncovering the city is central to his investigation and that this uncovering has a moral goal, helping to prevent 'evils' which will grow if left unseen.<sup>13</sup> For Kay-Shuttleworth, statistics are the main tool to achieve this goal, and he consequently divides the city into fourteen numbered districts, gathering information about each in a series of charts, about one of which he remarks that it 'will render the extent of the evil affecting the poor more apparent'.<sup>14</sup> Yet Kay-Shuttleworth also admits that full visibility is impossible through statistics alone, commenting, 'It is [...] to be lamented, that even these numerical results fail to exhibit a perfect picture of the ills which are suffered by the poor'.<sup>15</sup> He finds the sexual behaviour of the poor particularly opaque, referring to 'a licentiousness capable of corrupting the whole body of society, like an insidious disease, which eludes observation'.<sup>16</sup> This eluding of observation, even more than the 'licentiousness' itself, is a source of anxiety for Kay. This is another form of the spatial unconscious, but the threat it posed in Engels has been reversed, so that now invisibility rather than visibility is the problem. This points to a double process operating in the city: first the dominant classes repress potentially traumatic working-class space, then this repression itself creates a threat, since it places the behaviour of the poor outside the visibility, and hence control, of the newly emergent urban planners and sociologists like Kay.

If statistics prove insufficient to the challenge of representing the invisible side of Manchester, other kinds of representation are needed. This is where Gaskell comes in, with her preface to *Mary Barton* famously describing it as an attempt to 'give some utterance to the agony which from time to time convulses this dumb people'.<sup>17</sup> Gaskell's first novel provides a narrative rather than scientific account of the city, a form of representation that promises more possibilities for sympathy and understanding than reports or statistics. The problem presented by the impenetrability of the city's unconscious is not erased, however, as becomes evident in Chapter Eight when the narrator steps outside the story to speak directly to the reader, stating: 'It is so impossible to describe, or even faintly to picture, the state of distress which prevailed in the town at that time [1839-41], that I will not attempt it'.<sup>18</sup> This 'state of distress' particularly affects those 'living [...] or rather starving, in a crowded garret, or damp cellar'.<sup>19</sup> Located at the margins of the house, often hidden even from other inhabitants, cellars and garrets are at the edges of both liveability and representability. The 'dim gloomy cellar' of the Davenports visited by John Barton in Chapter Six is the most obvious example, its contrast with the

transparent visibility of the 'well-lighted shops' on London Road highlighted by the narrator.<sup>20</sup> Even in this novel designed to give a voice to the poor, then, some parts of Manchester continue to challenge the limits of description.

### ***North and South: Marlborough Mills***

If *Mary Barton* draws attention to the problem of unseen spaces in Manchester that Kay and Engels had observed, and begins to explore the class divisions that give rise to them, in *North and South* Gaskell engages with visibility and representation in a new way. She rearticulates both the terms of the problem and its implications for class relations by recentering it on the houses of the middle-class characters and, in particular, Marlborough Mills.

Critics such as Shirley Foster and Michael Lewis (the latter citing Jacques Rancière on democracy) have observed that the attempt to overcome class division in *North and South* takes place largely through conversation, especially a series of interchanges between Margaret, Mr Hale, Nicholas Higgins and Mr Thornton, often at the houses of these characters.<sup>21</sup> These exchanges typically begin tensely, as with Mr Higgins's initial suspicion about Margaret's motives for speaking to him, at which she is taken aback, since 'at Helstone it would have been an understood thing, after the inquiries she had made, that she intended to come and call upon any poor neighbour whose name and habitation she had asked for.'<sup>22</sup> As this exchange signals, Milton requires a re-evaluation of social relationships and of the spatial dynamics through which different classes come into contact, compared to the persistently feudal codes of the rural South.

At the same time, a lack of connection is felt *within* as well as *between* classes, most obviously between the Thorntons and the Hales, who both fall somewhere within the capacious category of middle-class respectability. As Rosemarie Bodenheimer has pointed out, this contrast is registered in part through their houses, so that 'Elizabeth Gaskell's contrasted interiors set the massive and unused weight of Mrs Thornton's furnishings against the modest domestic charm of the Hale family sitting room.'<sup>23</sup> When Thornton visits the Hales' house in Crampton, for instance, it is notable that there are no mirrors, glass or gilding, unlike his own home (*NS*, p.79), and that the family's 'country habits' (*NS*, p.78) mean their curtains are left undrawn, implicitly putting the Hales themselves on display.<sup>24</sup> The tea table bears 'a white tablecloth, on which flourished the cocoa-nut cakes, and a basket piled with oranges and ruddy American apples, heaped on leaves' (*NS*, p.79), reinforcing an image of rustic comfort. Yet despite the impression of rural seclusion the Hales cultivate, their house is on a major thoroughfare, which in contrast to Engels's description of Manchester's main streets is dominated not by the bourgeoisie but by factory workers: 'The side of the town on which Crampton lay was especially a thoroughfare for the factory people. In the back streets around them there were many mills, out of which poured streams of men and women

two or three times a day' (NS, p.71). Gaskell's own home, Plymouth Grove, also lay on a main thoroughfare, although according to Shirley Foster it was 'a carriage route into the city' used mainly by 'the professional or mercantile classes,' rather than by workers.<sup>25</sup> In the novel, however, the house's location means that not only are the workers fully visible to Margaret, who stands in here for the middle-class female observer or novel reader, in a counterpart to Kay-Shuttleworth's male statistician, but also that she is exposed to them, having to endure 'undisguised admiration from these outspoken men' (NS, p.71) as well as comments on her dress from the women. It is this closeness to the workers that first brings her into contact with Nicholas Higgins, so that their intellectual and spiritual connection across classes follows physical proximity. Gaskell is beginning to turn the question of visibility in the city around; rather than presenting primarily a middle-class attempt to uncover the lives of the poor, she involves the risk of middle-class exposure before the eyes of the poor, as well as an interchange of gazes among the middle-classes themselves.<sup>26</sup> The former tendency reaches its apex with the strike and riot in Chapter Twenty-Two of Volume One, where Thornton is targeted by 'a thousand angry eyes' (NS, p.177), before Margaret emerges to protect him from the crowd, making herself even more visible and vulnerable than before. In both the house at Crampton and the riot scene, the gaze of the working class intersects with the middle-class gaze (often Thornton looking at Margaret), and in both cases these gazes are concentrated around the spatial boundaries of the middle-class home.

The riot, often taken as the climactic incident of the novel, occurs at Marlborough Mills, the location of Thornton's house and factory. It is this site that most clearly begins to push back against the model of urban industrial space found in Engels, Kay-Shuttleworth and *Mary Barton*, in which the middle classes by turns repress and attempt to uncover working-class space. Instead of standing on a major thoroughfare, Marlborough Mills is invisible from the city streets, as is made clear in Volume One, Chapter Fifteen, when Margaret and her father visit for the first time:

The street did not look as if it could contain any house large enough for Mrs Thornton's habitation. [...] Marlborough Street consisted of long rows of small houses, with a blank wall here and there; at least that was all they could see from the point at which they entered it. (NS, p.111)

Now it is the house of the wealthy manufacturer, rather than working-class habitations, that has vanished amidst the city streets. To gain access, visitors must enter through a lodge-door that appears 'like a common garden-door' (NS, p.111), behind which they find:

[...] a great oblong yard, on one side of which were offices for the transaction of business; on the opposite, an immense many-windowed mill, whence proceeded the continual clank of machinery and the long groaning roar of the steam-engine, enough to deafen those who lived within the enclosure. Opposite to the wall, along which the street ran,

on one of the narrow sides of the oblong, was a handsome stone-coped house, – blackened, to be sure, by the smoke, but with paint, windows, and steps kept scrupulously clean. It was evidently a house which had been built some fifty or sixty years. (*NS*, p.111)

The plain street and the small lodge-door reject ostentation, giving no sign of the grandeur of the house that lies behind. Yet although this house is hidden from the point of view of the visiting Hales, it is nonetheless highly visible to the workers in the factory, who must pass before it every day on their way to and from work, complicating the distinction between what is hidden and what is on display. It is possible to read this duality of Thornton's house – the fact it is located at the centre of the town but completely concealed from the streets beyond – as a response by Gaskell to the criticism she had received from figures such as the manufacturer W.R. Greg, writing in the *Edinburgh Review* of April 1849, for supposed bias towards factory workers in *Mary Barton*. *North and South* registers that the lives of factory owners as well as workers need to be 'uncovered', while simultaneously emphasising the spatial and narrative centrality of such owners.

The site of Marlborough Mills is both typical and atypical of Manchester at the time: typical in that it demonstrates what the architectural scholar Eamonn Canniffe calls 'the sheer size and proximity of buildings squeezed onto available plots', but atypical in that by the 1820s factory owners were generally living off-site, away from the noise and pollution of the city centre.<sup>27</sup> Mrs Thornton emphatically rejects this option, not because she wants to understand the workers, but because, as she tells Mr Hale, 'I am not become so fine as to desire to forget the source of my son's wealth and power' (*NS*, p.160); the sound of the factory reminds her that 'his is the head that directs it' (*NS*, p.161). Later, when business has slackened and the factory has stopped work, Mrs Thornton is disturbed by the 'silence around her' (*NS*, p.425), undoing the conventional connection between peace and quiet and indicating that unlike Engels's typical bourgeois she is affronted not by the presence of labour, but by its absence. Perhaps the most useful commentary on Marlborough Mills appears during this part of the novel, when Mr Thornton reflects on his new relationship with his workers: 'He and they had led parallel lives – very close, but never touching – till the accident (or so it seemed) of his acquaintance with Higgins' (*NS*, p.419). It is through this idea of 'parallel lives very close, but never touching' that Gaskell addresses the apparent contradiction of increased physical proximity and enduring social distance embodied by Marlborough Mills.

In order to understand the spatial dynamics of the mill-site more clearly, we can also consider the architecture of the house itself. If it were built fifty to sixty years ago, this would be around 1790-1800, making it a mid-Georgian building. A few descriptive markers are provided: it is handsome and stone-coped, with stone facings, a large number of long narrow windows and two flights of steps up to the door, one on either side. The drawing-room looks out over the front door,

and from it the women will later watch the crowd of strikers (NS, pp.111-12, 174). Its walls are smoke-blackened, thanks to the ever-present pollution. As Thornton points out, there is a significant amount of 'unparliamentary smoke' (NS, p.82) in the city, coming from chimneys that had not been adapted in line with a recent Act of Parliament of 1847.<sup>28</sup> Given the period of construction, we can guess that the house has classical or perhaps vernacular features and that it was built before the mill, making it incongruous in its current context, a remnant of an earlier, now subsumed, incarnation of Milton.

Gaskell had in fact described a similarly incongruous juxtaposition of domestic grandeur and hard labour before, in the first chapter of *Ruth* (1853), where the abandoned mansions in Ruth's home town (perhaps Norwich) have been turned into either houses for professional men, shops or workrooms, among them the sweatshop where Ruth stitches through the night to make a ball-gown. The front of one side of the street has been pulled down and 'rebuilt in the flat, mean, unrelieved style of George the Third', a description which implies that we should read Mr Thornton's house, also built in the reign of George III, as imposing, but lacking external ornamentation or beauty.<sup>29</sup> The decoration of previous generations still exists inside Ruth's workroom, however, hidden from the streets outside, but a source of fascination for Ruth and a contrast to her own poverty. She chooses to sit in the coldest and darkest part of the room, next to a wall which carries 'a remnant of the beauty of the old drawing room, which must once have been magnificent, to judge from the faded specimen left' (RU, p.4). This wallpaper includes detailed and elaborate ornamentation, evoking a lush English country-garden. The contrast of the scene is emphasised when Ruth looks out on 'a dismal street of mean-looking houses, back to back with the ancient mansions' (RU, p.6).

If ornamentation in *Ruth* is decaying in the face of modern commercialism and textile production, in Thornton's house it is instead carefully preserved. While the outside of the house is blackened, the interior is fastidiously protected. Existing next to the factory presents a threat to the continuation of bourgeois life within the house, which, despite Mrs Thornton's acceptance of the city's noise, can only be maintained by a rigid rejection of the pollution it generates and a paranoid adherence to cleanliness. This stance is apparent in the house's drawing-room, which seems 'as though no one had been in it since the day when the furniture was bagged up with as much care as if the house was to be overwhelmed with lava, and discovered a thousand years hence' (NS, p.112). The carpet is covered by 'a linen drugget, glazed and colourless' (NS, p.112), while chairs, sofas and ornaments are similarly protected. In this room, 'Everything reflected light, nothing absorbed it', and it has 'a painfully spotted, spangled, speckled look about it, which impressed Margaret so unpleasantly that she was hardly conscious of the peculiar cleanliness required to keep everything so white and pure in such an atmosphere' (NS, p.112). Immense care and labour are evident, but employed 'solely to ornament, and then to preserve

ornament from dirt or destruction' (*NS*, p.112). As Kanwit observes, the drawing room represents Mrs Thornton's desire to 'create surface appearances', in contrast to the Hales' cultivation of a space conducive to both living and (certain forms of) working.<sup>30</sup> But one could take this argument further. The room's whiteness has a deathlike and inhuman quality, and in its ornamentation takes a strange form: the covers preserve ornament but at such a high cost of time and effort that the act of preservation becomes itself a form of ornamentation and a display of wealth. In this environment, which has no room for homeliness and comfort (the typical protections of the bourgeois subject), the covers serve paradoxically as a constant reminder of what is rejected: the creeping encroachment of the city. The place of middle-class repression, we might say, has moved from the city streets to the home itself.

Such domestic repression is most evident in Marlborough Mills, but is not only the preserve of Thorntons: the Hales' maintenance of a rural aesthetic is, in its own way, as much a denial of the city as this more elaborate preservation of ornament. The ominous threat the city presents to the boundaries of their home is indicated in Volume One, Chapter Eight, as in the famous opening of Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852-53), by a 'thick fog' which 'crept up to the very windows, and was driven in to every open door in choking white wreaths of unwholesome mist' (*NS*, p.65). Gaskell had also used the trope of preserving domestic furnishings against the outside world in *Cranford* (1851-53), in a more humorous mode, in the scene where, following Miss Jenkyns' purchase of a new carpet, Mary and Miss Matty spend a morning stitching newspapers together 'so as to form little paths to every chair set for the expected visitors, lest their shoes might dirty or defile the purity of the carpet'.<sup>31</sup> Although the tone is different, an excessive, and even obsessive, care for soft furnishings is again shown as a hallmark of middle-class life.

The story of the Thorntons' house takes another turn in Chapter Twenty of Volume One, the same chapter where Mrs Thornton defends her choice to live next to the mill. Her frozen drawing room suddenly turns outwards in a display of wealth when the Thorntons host a dinner party: 'Every cover was taken off, and the apartment blazed forth in yellow silk damask and a brilliantly-flowered carpet' (*NS*, p.160). Gaskell emphasises the contrast between this profusion of ornament, which becomes 'a weariness to the eye', and the 'bald ugliness' of the mill-yard through which the guests enter (*NS*, p.160). The ornamentation that is normally invisible to both workers (because hidden behind the plain exterior of the house) and guests (because concealed under covers) now leaps out from its surroundings, rendering them in turn invisible in contrast to its extreme brightness, so that background and foreground switch places. This play of display and concealment must be recognised as a social as well as an aesthetic issue. We see the bourgeois interior not only requiring protection from city space but also seeking to dominate and overwhelm it.

In this sense, the riot scene is not only about protecting Mr Thornton, but also about the simultaneous visibility of domestic space (represented in the body of the middle-class woman) and its concealment (Margaret preventing the workers crossing the threshold). After Margaret is hit by a stone, her body forms a symbolic boundary, as Mr Thornton lays her 'gently on the door-step, her head leaning against the frame' (*NS*, p.180), so that her personal visibility on the threshold allows the house to remain unpenetrated by the workers. We can build on Lindner's observation that this is an industrial novel which 'seldom make[s] it through the factory gates into the working spaces of industry' by noting that it instead takes place precisely *at* the factory gates, at the interface between workers and owners, as Marlborough Mills in general and the riot scene in particular indicate.<sup>32</sup> Thornton's house therefore stands for the project of the novel as a whole. Gaskell retains both the form of the realist novel, registered in what Brigid Lowe calls 'her commitment to the capture, recording, and recovery of the texture of everyday human existence', as well as the location of the middle-class house, which is its classic locus; in addition, she shifts them closer, both spatially and thematically, to modes of production.<sup>33</sup> The result is spatial and formal tension, since, as Elaine Freedgod observes, 'The ideology of industrial capitalism functions best at a safe remove from its processes – in London, say, or Paris. It can even move to the countryside, to the provinces; it just can't run smoothly in the factory or in the factory town'<sup>34</sup> For Gaskell, however, such tension is a necessary precondition of change, and in the characters of Mr Thornton and Mrs Thornton, she pushes against removal from the scene of production, creating a threshold novel in which boundary space is the most important terrain and Marlborough Mills its most symbolically important location.

### **Labour and Capital as Invisible Architecture**

There are at least two other ways that Marlborough Mills acts as a form of invisible architecture, by concealing by turns both labour and capital, putting it on the border of the classic Marxian industrial opposition. Firstly, the factory itself becomes a home when it houses the Irish workers Thornton imports as 'knob-sticks' (*NS*, p.318). These workers are never seen directly, only commented upon by others, usually in the context of their fragility or 'incompetence' (*NS*, p.318), but also to acknowledge that they have been left 'cowered up in a small room, at the head of a back flight of stairs' (*NS*, p.175) during the strike. Irish immigrants are here assigned a role they would fill many times during the nineteenth century, as the lowest and most excluded members of industrial society.<sup>35</sup> This is especially true following the Irish Famine which hit between 1845 and 1849 and led to the death of a million people and at least as many emigrants.<sup>36</sup> A representative opinion of the time can be found in the *Bristol Mirror* from 1848: 'To be clean, to be busy, to be independent, to be at peace – these seem to be curses in the estimation of Irishmen,

for they avoid them all.<sup>37</sup> In *North and South*, although some sympathy is expressed towards them, the Irish feature mainly to heighten the conflict between English workers and masters. They lack the characterisation afforded to the Higginses or even to Boucher and are resented by them (*NS*, p.228). Whereas Mr Thornton lives 'parallel' to the factory, the Irish have their identity submerged by it, their role tied to their conditions of work, beyond which they have no existence.<sup>38</sup>

If the economic position of Milton's working classes is threatened by the cheaper labour of the Irish, as what Marx called the 'industrial reserve army' of capitalism, then Mr Thornton's economic status is also shown to be reliant upon others, specifically Mr Bell, and later Margaret, who owns the land on which his house and factory are built. In Volume Two, Chapter Twenty-Five, following Thornton's economic troubles, we hear that 'Marlborough Mills and the adjacent dwelling were held under a long lease; they must, if possible, be relet' (*NS*, p.426). Such silent land ownership (Mr Bell rarely strays from Oxford, and does his best to avoid active involvement in his property) is part of the invisible architecture of capitalism that underwrites, and benefits from, industrial growth. While Marlborough Mills and Mr Thornton are the focus of debate and social division throughout the novel, Mr Bell's role remains unrecognised and unquestioned, while his rent payments and the value of his land continue to accumulate. In this sense, the union of Mr Thornton and Margaret at the end of the novel is not only a union of North and South, rural and urban, but also of property ownership and industrial capitalism, since Margaret has inherited Mr Bell's possessions. Their marriage symbolises a strengthening of the position of the middle class, even while the narrative promises greater understanding between masters and workers.

### **Architecture and Aesthetics: Oxford vs Milton**

Although architecture is rarely discussed directly in the novel, one such moment comes in a conversation between Mr Bell and Mr Thornton that turns on a comparison between Oxford and Milton, two cities that stand respectively for South and North, passivity versus activity, inner strength versus outward sense, old money versus new money, rentier capitalism versus industrial capitalism, and even Southern European versus Northern European attitudes. After Mr Bell criticises Milton, his town of origin, Mr Thornton responds:

'I don't set up Milton as a model of a town.'

'Not in architecture?' slyly asked Mr. Bell.

'No! We've been too busy to attend to mere outward appearances.'

'Don't say mere outward appearances,' said Mr. Hale, gently. 'They impress us all, from childhood upward – every day of our life.'

(*NS*, p.334)

Mr Bell's hint about Milton's unattractive architecture is interpreted by Thornton as not only an aesthetic criticism but also a social one, bearing on Milton's whole way

of life, indicating the extent to which these categories are interlinked in Gaskell's text. Mr Thornton's defence of the private values of busyness (and business) rather than 'outward appearances' also reinforces the difficulty of understanding the private life of the manufacturer class, as both his house and his difficult encounters with Margaret have previously established. Thornton goes on to argue that 'we are a different race to the Greeks, to whom beauty was everything' and who are defined by their 'outward senses' (NS, p.334). Instead, he claims, Darkshire is strong with 'Teutonic blood,' made up of people whose glory and beauty 'arise out of our inward strength' (NS, p.334). Thornton here anticipates Matthew Arnold's distinction in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) between Hellenism and Hebraism, the former being linked to free perception, intelligence and what Arnold famously calls 'sweetness and light' (quoting Jonathan Swift), while the latter is associated with struggle, duty and 'strictness of conscience'.<sup>39</sup> The main difference from Thornton is that Hebraism for Arnold is tied closely to Christianity and a desire to follow 'the will of God,' rather than pure self-sufficiency.<sup>40</sup> In Arnold's view, Hebraism had gone too far in Britain, and his promotion of Hellenism laid much of the groundwork for the aesthetic movement of the late nineteenth century, along with the writings of Walter Pater, an Oxford academic like Mr Bell.

Thornton also reverses Engels's criticism of the traumatised bourgeoisie in this conversation. Rather than his eyes and ears being affronted by poverty, he rejects such a position as sensual and passive, proposing a model where the self pushes outwards to redefine the world, rather than being subject to it. This attitude gives rise to the narrator's later comment that he is 'architect of his own fortunes' (NS, p.419), the ideal of the self-made man in the mould of Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* (1859); although unlike Dickens's parody of the self-made man, Mr Bounderby in *Hard Times*, Thornton attributes his success not to his own special qualities but to the liberating power of 'commerce' (NS, p.419).

### **Mr Hale and the Manchester Lyceums**

The final moment I will consider may at first seem unimportant, but in fact it opens the novel up to the educational and cultural world of mid-nineteenth-century Manchester in interesting ways, which intersect with the points made above. In Volume One, Chapter Eighteen, just after the Hales have received their invitation to the Thorntons' dinner party, the narrator remarks that Mr Hale's duties are:

[...]now increased by the preparation of some lectures he had promised to deliver to the working people at a neighbouring Lyceum. He had chosen Ecclesiastical Architecture as his subject, rather more in accordance with his own taste and knowledge than as falling in with the character of the place or the desire for particular kinds of information among those to whom he was to lecture. (NS, p.141)

In the first place, this reference to a Lyceum evokes Aristotle's school of philosophy of the same name (founded circa 335 BC), whose classical ideal of exchanging knowledge through debate is replicated in the conversations between Margaret, Mr Hale, Mr Thornton and Mr Higgins. At the same time, the incident shows both Mr Hale's generosity and his slight ludicrousness, since the choice of Ecclesiastical Architecture as a lecture topic for working people adds to his image as representing what Rafaella Antinucci calls a 'bygone model', associated with 'a literary world far removed from reality'.<sup>41</sup> For Kanwit, the passage shows that Mr Hale is 'incapable of convincing workers of the moral importance of good architecture'.<sup>42</sup> My view is that these criticisms are, however, unfair, as I will explain below.

First, I wish to consider not only the fact that Mr Hale is lecturing on architecture but also the particular place where he will speak. Angus Easson's note in the Oxford edition of *North and South* states that the Lyceum is a 'place of instruction' that 'would have a library and offer lectures' (*NS*, p.443). Many such institutions existed, such as the Portico Library in Manchester (founded 1806), which was inspired by the Liverpool Athenaeum and had the same architect, Thomas Harrison, as the Liverpool Lyceum (founded 1797). Since William Gaskell was chairman of the Portico from 1849-84, there is a direct connection to the Gaskell family. Other similar venues included the Royal Manchester Institution and the Manchester Athenaeum, the latter founded by James Heywood, whom Gaskell knew well.

The narrator of *North and South* adds that 'the institution itself, being in debt, was only too glad to get a gratis course from an educated and accomplished man like Mr. Hale, let the subject be what it might' (*NS*, p.141). It is true that many Manchester institutions were in debt in the 1840s, thanks to a downturn in trade and hence subscriptions. This is evident in a speech given by Charles Dickens at the Athenaeum in 1843, where he refers to 'the incurrence of a debt of 3,000 pounds'.<sup>43</sup> Dickens also praises the egalitarian nature of the Athenaeum, since it is open to every youth and man who 'can set aside one sixpence weekly'.<sup>44</sup> In somewhat hyperbolic terms he calls it 'neutral ground, where we have no more knowledge of party difficulties, or public animosities between side and side, or between man and man, than if we were a public meeting in the commonwealth of Utopia'.<sup>45</sup> Though this is idealised, it does seem to embody Gaskell's goal of sympathy between classes, making it an appropriate venue for Mr Hale.

Given the use of the specific term 'Lyceum', however, and the reference to addressing working people (rather than a mixed audience), it is likely that Gaskell had in mind one of the three Manchester Lyceum schools founded in 1838 for the education of the so-called respectable working classes, in Ancoats, Chorlton-on-Medlock and Salford. Articles on the Manchester Lyceums appeared in a handful of periodicals around this time, including *The Athenaeum* (March 1840) and *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* (December 1842).<sup>46</sup> In a letter of 1850 to Amelia

Strutt, Elizabeth Gaskell shows that she was aware of and indirectly engaged in these schools, recounting that William Gaskell had written a letter to 'the President of the Lyceum School', recommending a particular (unnamed) teacher for employment.<sup>47</sup> Information about the newly founded Lyceums is also included in *Manchester As It Is* (1839), an account of the town's institutions by Benjamin Love, who records the classes on offer, including 'Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, Grammar; and (at a small extra charge), sewing and knitting'.<sup>48</sup> There seems little place for ecclesiastical architecture here, but Love notes that 'lectures on subjects of popular interest are also mentioned'.<sup>49</sup> *Chambers's* similarly recounts that 'lectures upon interesting subjects' are given once a week whenever possible, but that due to a lack of funds this 'depends of course upon procuring the gratuitous services of friends'.<sup>50</sup> The goal of the Lyceums is said to be the combining of recreation and education, and they were designed to be accessible to ordinary workers, with subscription costs of just 2s. per quarter (with an option for half-quarterly tickets for those without ready money), equating to 8s. per year, less than a third of the 1£ 6s. it would cost to subscribe to the Athenaeum.<sup>51</sup>

This comparison suggests that Dickens was being slightly misleading when he portrayed the Athenaeum as open to all working people, an impression reinforced by the *Report of the Manchester District Association of Literary and Scientific Institutions* of 1840, which notes that the Royal Institution, Exchange, Portico, Athenaeum and even Mechanics Institutes 'limit their admission to a comparative few', whereas the Lyceums were an example of the working classes taking 'matters into their own hands', including scheduling their own lectures on 'interesting subjects'.<sup>52</sup> This assessment is seconded in a piece written for the *Report* by Thomas Handley, Deputy Treasurer for the Ancoats Lyceum (a position chosen by democratic ballot among members),<sup>53</sup> who writes that the Lyceums are an 'experiment, first, as to the wants of the working classes, and, secondly, as to the lowest amount of subscription that can render such institutions self-supporting'.<sup>54</sup> This language recalls Mr Thornton's words to Mr Colthurst towards the end of *North and South*, when he refers obliquely to 'one or two experiments that I should like to try' (*NS*, p.431), a repeat of the narrator's reference in the previous chapter to 'experiments lying very close to his heart' (*NS*, p.420). These experiments relate to bringing individuals into 'actual personal contact' (*NS*, p.432) with one another, so that they are presumably an extension of the dining-room Thornton has built in conjunction with his workers, first mentioned in Volume Two, Chapter Seventeen. The important point for both Thornton and Gaskell seems to be the free intercourse this space allows: 'if any of the old disputes come up again,' says Thornton, 'I would certainly speak my mind next hot-pot day' (*NS*, p.362); he notes that the men now 'talk pretty freely before me' (*NS*, p.362). Rather than Dickens's meeting in utopia, with utopia being the dream of erasing conflict altogether, Thornton here comes close to Thomas Handley's descriptions of the Lyceums, where 'no restraint

is placed upon the subjects, beyond receiving the approbation of the majority present' and members discuss 'more like brothers or members of one family than fierce contending parties'.<sup>55</sup> *Chambers's* similarly reports that 'there is no limitation as to subjects, except the good sense of the members themselves,' though it quickly reassures readers that 'the subjects of debate always consist of some harmless literary or historical topic,' registering an anxiety about politics that is more openly confronted in *The Athenaeum*, which frames the Lyceums as an alternative to Socialist meetings, said to rely on 'music, dancing and conversation' to help promote 'a system so palpably absurd'.<sup>56</sup>

Moreover, Thornton's position mirrors those of the Lyceum president, vice-president and treasurer, described as 'influential residents in the neighbourhood, who are not directors by the constitution, though their presence and counsel is gladly welcomed at the meetings'.<sup>57</sup> In being designed expressly to 'compete effectually with the inn tap-room' for custom, the Lyceums also provide a potential answer to Bessy and Margaret's attempts to keep John Higgins from drinking (see for instance *NS*, pp.220-21). Weight is added to this possible line of influence by the fact that a character in *Marian Withers* (1851), a partial source for *North and South* written by Gaskell's friend Geraldine Jewsbury, founds a working-man's Lyceum.<sup>58</sup>

Gaskell's tentative vision in *North and South*, then, seems to reserve a central place for working- and middle-class city-dwellers meeting in institutions on the model of the Lyceums, rather than encroaching on each other's private space, despite the home visits that occur. In this way, boundary-space holds great potential, even as it provokes tension. Such an experiment carries a risk of collapse, however. Gaskell was writing not in the early 1840s but the mid-1850s, by which point, according to Peter Bailey, the Lyceum experiment had collapsed in the face of the more popular Manchester singing rooms.<sup>59</sup> Social tensions seems to have played their part, with the founder of the Lyceums, Benjamin Heywood (brother of James), writing to his son in 1851 that 'the character of the thing is changed'.<sup>60</sup> Mabel Tylecote has shown that by 1850 the Lyceums were threatened by the fragility of the very intermediary position they had tried to establish, so that 'despite the consciousness of the promoters that they were directly competing with the public houses, they had nevertheless taken too high a line for the great mass of the people', leaving the directors 'faced with the problem of whether to raise or lower their standards'.<sup>61</sup> Seen in this light, perhaps Gaskell's allusions to the model of the Lyceums are not so much about proposing a new experiment as trying to resuscitate one that seemed to be failing.

In this context, we can see the value of Mr Hale's great gift, which is that he does not distinguish between who he is addressing; he treats 'all his fellow-creatures alike: it never entered into his head to make any difference because of their rank' (*NS*, p.225). While it might seem ridiculous to lecture on ecclesiastical architecture to working men, there is also a certain egalitarianism in refusing to disallow

their access to aesthetic or cultural knowledge, no matter how esoteric it might be. William Gaskell was not dissimilar from Mr Hale in this regard, lecturing on literature at Manchester Mechanics Institute, as well as New College and Owens College, from 1836 onwards; nevertheless, he did tailor his subject matter to the audience by discussing ‘The Poets and Poetry of Humble Life’. In this way, Mr Hale’s peculiar egalitarianism represents the dying spirit of the Lyceums in which he lectures, but it is of course Margaret and Mr Thornton who must inherit the task of updating and remaking it.

I would like to end with a quotation from Dr Birkbeck, founder of Birkbeck College and the first Mechanics Institutes, taken from an 1839 speech at a tea party celebrating the first year of the Lyceum Schools, before the project’s troubles had begun to surface. It returns to the topic of penetrating working-class space with which I began, but in a different form, taking the tone less of a social scientist than of a newspaper advertisement, or even circus promoter, seeking not to represent working-class space but rather to entice its inhabitants into the new social spaces of the Lyceums by emphasising the ‘enjoyment’ they are missing out on:

If I had a voice that could reach all the dwellings, the subdwellings, of Manchester; if I could find access to the lowest depths in which the circumstances of life have placed some of my unfortunate brethren: I would tell them, that the cheapest enjoyment that was ever offered to them, is the enjoyment that has been offered by the Lyceums of Manchester.<sup>62</sup>

In this moment we can perhaps detect an attempt to redirect the dangerous sexual pleasures identified by Kay into another form, turning them from private and dissipated ‘licentiousness’, what Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan call *jouissance*, toward productive and educational ‘enjoyment’, analogous to Barthesian and Lacanian *plaisir*.<sup>63</sup> On the one hand, Birkbeck’s appeal aims to shift pleasure from a socially and politically dangerous mode to one which is aesthetically framed and more easily regulated. But at the same time, it is a tacit acknowledgement of what Gaskell’s novel is also aware of – that architecture, whether the ‘subdwellings’ of the slums or classically-inspired Lyceum schools, was central to the shaping and negotiation of social, political and aesthetic concerns in industrial Manchester.

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