In Maria Cummins's *Mabel Vaughan*, a minor American novel of the 1850s, the heroine, Mabel, encouraging her orphaned nephew, assures him that she does “not believe that a man who is activated by pure Christian benevolence is any less faithful to single duties, because he is also striving to benefit humanity on a larger sphere of usefulness”. Mabel then enforces her point by a concrete image of such activity: “You know, Alice, that the steam-hammer that rivets and welds together great masses of solid iron, can also crack a nutshell, without injuring the kernel by its delicate touch. Do but strive for the right kind of power, and then never fear, but that it can be applied to small things as well as large”. What interests me here is both the image of power and engineering skill and also the fact that the whole illustration, for Alick’s benefit, was inserted into Miss Cummins’s novel by Elizabeth Gaskell as part of her editorial work on Sampson Low’s English edition of *Mabel Vaughan*: it proves to be one of those additions inserted, Gaskell says, “always with the kindly-granted

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1 A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library on Wednesday, 7 November 1984. The text is unchanged from that of the lecture, but I have taken the opportunity, in preparing the notes, to incorporate points raised in subsequent discussion. I should like also to acknowledge here the help and kindness received over more than ten years of using the Rylands Library.

2 After the success of Cummins’s *The Lamplighter* (1854), English publishers sought to profit by her next novel: Routledge’s edition of *Mabel Vaughan* was a direct reprint of the Boston original (1857); Sampson Low aimed at an authorised edition, with the added attraction of introduction, notes and additional material by Elizabeth Gaskell (for details, see my article, “Elizabeth Gaskell, ‘An Incident at Niagara Falls’, and the Editing of *Mabel Vaughan*”, *English Language Notes*, 17 (1980), 273-77).
permission of the authoress". The image seems slight enough, yet draws together a complex of ideas that serves to highlight Elizabeth Gaskell’s concern with issues which I hope to explore here. It is first an image of power in terms of modern invention and technical achievement: such a steam-hammer, for instance, “which forges an anchor, or cracks an egg-shell, with an equal regulation of its power”, had been displayed at the Great Exhibition of 1851. The power the steam-hammer employs is vast and yet subtly controllable by the ingenuity of its creator, while an implication of moral purpose and responsibility resides in the understanding of proportion in regulating the force needed. We might also note the accuracy of description and remember that while Tennyson was impressed by the railways and incorporated them into *Locksley Hall*, his allusion is not only poetically unspecific — “Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change” — it is also inaccurate, Tennyson believing the train’s wheels to run in grooves. The error scarcely matters for the poem, yet Elizabeth Gaskell’s interest matches that of Tennyson, even while her accuracy suggests a concern about process that is enforced by her wish to display, for good and ill, the industrial world she knew from personal experience, a world full of evil and moral failure, yet one also which had matter for legitimate pride, unknown, it seemed, to the majority of England. Men like James Nasmyth of Patricroft were amongst Lancashire’s engineers, inventors of the steam-hammer, iron-founders, and improvers of machinery; they added to the legitimate wealth and power of England, and often asked the fundamental questions — questions that our own time seems too often to fail to ask — about the value of technology and industrial development. Other men, of less note, yet as heroic in their way, were struggling to assert the dignity and value of the individual. Gaskell found the material of romance in

4 See [Charles Knight], “Three May Days in London. III. The May Palace (1851)”, *Household Words*, 3 (3 May 1851), 124a: the opening of Knight’s article evokes the sense of wonder in modern technology by paralleling the magic edifices of the Arabian Nights with the Crystal Palace and its contents.
5 Nasmyth, with whom the Gaskells were friendly, invented the steam-hammer in 1839, though the first one on his design was constructed in Germany (1841); he had made one at Patricroft by 1843 (see *DNB*, which also notes counter-claims for the original idea); a fuller account is in *James Nasmyth, Engineer: An Autobiography*, ed. Samuel Smiles, London: John Murray, 1885 (new edn.), ch. 13.
the accurate depiction of the world immediate to her: with these men and women she concerned herself and exhibited them and their achievements as legitimate subjects of pride in her novels and tales of the industrial world of Manchester. As Carlyle, writing to congratulate her upon *Mary Barton*, declared in November 1848 (the letter is in the Rylands Library), “your field ... is new, important, full of rich materials (which, as is usual, required a soul of some opulence to recognize them as such”).

What I want to do, in exploring Elizabeth Gaskell and the Novel of Local Pride, is to concentrate on a particular way of looking at that work of hers which deals with Manchester and industrial life and in particular two of her novels, *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (serialized 1854-55; volume issue 1855). In doing so, I am well aware that I am leaving out a great deal and quite deliberately I am setting aside Gaskell’s depiction of Manchester in terms of its misery. While the appalling urban conditions, the result of rapid industrial development, are major concerns of those novels, I want to think about certain interests of Gaskell’s not usually brought out, though evident enough and highlighted by that seemingly trivial addition to *Mabel Vaughan* about the steam-hammer.

Now, to establish first of all this idea of Local Pride and Gaskell’s connection with it. It is a pride about Manchester and the North West, aware of the predominance so long asserted, economically, politically, culturally, by London and the South East, yet certain that the balance has shifted, and finding expression in novels directed at a readership eager to be entertained and willing to be enlightened, yet largely uneducated about or unconnected with industrialization. This readership is to be educated, therefore, in industrialization, in both its misery and its positive qualities of individual heroism and scope of vision. Here, Gaskell is very different from those other writers about the Condition of

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6 Rylands English MS. 730; subsequent references to Carlyle’s letter are to this manuscript.

7 The points I seek to develop about Gaskell’s sense of pride in Manchester (and her personal involvement with the region) have, of course, been touched on or discussed by a variety of critics: see e.g. Arthur Pollard, *Mrs. Gaskell: Novelist and Biographer*, Manchester, 1865, chs. 3 and 6; Edgar Wright, *Mrs. Gaskell: The Basis for Reassessment*, London, 1965, ch. 6; John Geoffrey Sharps, *Mrs. Gaskell’s Observation and Invention: A Study of Her Non-Biographic Works*, Fontwell, Sussex, 1970, section X; and my own *Elizabeth Gaskell*, London 1979, ch. 2.
England — Carlyle chief amongst them, along with novelists like Dickens, Disraeli and Charles Kingsley — though they all have in common the wish to analyse society and to change it. Gaskell is different because she lived in Manchester, in daily contact with the world she describes. She settled in Manchester in 1832 when, at the age of twenty-two, she married William Gaskell and effectively lived in the city until the end of her life, thirty three years later. There were, of course, visits, frequent and quite often extended, to friends and abroad — to France, to Italy, to Germany. Nonetheless, it was in Manchester that she lived and worked, as the wife of a Unitarian Minister, whatever her fame as an author, and it was in Manchester that she brought up a family and was concerned with parish duties and the city’s condition. Between Elizabeth Gaskell and Manchester there is a special relationship.

Certainly, she had very mixed feelings about Manchester. She had not grown up there, and coming to live in the city after growing up in Knutsford, a country town, her original impressions may well have been akin to those of Margaret Hale in North and South who comes to Manchester (called Milton Northern in the novel) from a southern vicarage in a small rural parish. Margaret approaches it with a sense of depression as she sees the dark cloud, which she takes at first for a rain cloud, over the city:

For several miles before they reached Milton, they saw a deep lead-coloured cloud hanging over the horizon in the direction in which it lay ... Here and there a great oblong many-windowed factory stood up ... puffing out black 'unparliamentary' smoke, and sufficiently accounting for the cloud which Margaret had taken to foretell rain.8

The smoke pall enforces the darkness of Manchester as well as Margaret’s depression of spirits, and Gaskell in her letters refers often enough to the difficulties of living in Manchester: to the soot, to the dirt, and even to the gardening problem of “What perennials will do in Manchester smoke ...”9 She once characterized herself as Medieval and UnManchester, and she often longed to be elsewhere than in a city which more and more seemed

adversely to affect her health, declaring in 1860 that “I should like to be going tomorrow, and out of this misty foggy Manchester, which gives me a perpetual headache”, yet even when remembering Italy and contrasting its sweetness with “old dull ugly grim grey Manchester”, she still begins that sequence of epithets with the caressing term “dear”. While one side of her was UnManchester, and while accepting that for her it was often an uncongenial, even disgusting place, Gaskell was still tied up with what Manchester meant. She sought to tell its truth as she knew it, whether it was of the man who grasped her arm when she was visiting for the District Provident Society and said, “Ay, ma’am, but have ye ever seen a child clemmed to death?” or of the radical Samuel Bamford, a “great, gaunt, stalwart Lancashire man”, and his delight in a gift of Tennyson’s poems.10

In this access to the daily life of the area she is importantly different from those other novelists who were writing of the Condition of England, for while her aim, like that of Dickens and Disraeli, is to sensitise a nation’s conscience, unlike them she lives in this place, whereas Dickens and Disraeli, so far as they saw Manchester or Sheffield or Birmingham or Preston — and they often saw such places vividly — were visitors, not residents. Living in Manchester, Gaskell could appreciate the power as well as the misery of such a place, just as Dickens, for all his social concern, can yet revel in London, his knowledge of it, like Sam Weller’s, being “extensive and peculiar”, so that a depiction of its squalor and misery is also infused with affection and the energy of delight. Gaskell, while capable of being repulsed by the reductive nature of industrialism, as Dickens was repulsed by the reduction of the workmen in Coketown to ‘hands’ subjected to the piston of the steam-engine, which “worked monotonously up and down like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy-madness” (Hard Times, Bk. 1, ch. 5), also has an idea of the vast strength of the Industrial Revolution and of its benefits. Dickens visited Preston in 1854, to see the strike there, and observed the town closely, Hard Times coming out of the experience:12 but the observation

10 Letters, pp. 492, 597 and 489.
12 Dickens wrote of Preston in “On Strike”, Household Words,, 8 (11 February 1854), 553-59; Hard Times was serialized in Household Words, vol. 9, from 1 April 1854.
in *Hard Times* is of detail concretely and externally realized, accurate as far as it goes, but not going very far. Gaskell was the only major novelist writing about this period of England's experience who actually lived in an industrial as opposed to an urban area. Some of the differences between her and Dickens can be seen if we compare *Mary Barton* not with *Hard Times* but set it against *Bleak House* or indeed any of Dickens's other novels which depict London rather than industrial life. What strikes us is that Dickens is much more in touch, obviously and necessarily, with London than he is with Preston, even when it is a Preston imaginatively recreated as Coketown: while returning to *Mary Barton* from this urban Dickens, we catch something of the same pleasure, of the vivid energy that Dickens finds in London, in Gaskell's Manchester.

Part of my argument, then, is that Gaskell, however much she disliked Manchester at times, had connections here that gave her sensory and imaginative perceptions about the industrial revolution to which Dickens and Disraeli did not have access: as a novelist, indeed, it has been effectively argued by John Lucas, she had access to Manchester in a way that a polemicist like Engels did not. However lively Disraeli's description in *Sybil* is of the manufacturing town of Mowbray, it exaggerates in the way of caricature, becoming grotesque rather than taking us further into the lives of people. Even Dickens, in *Hard Times*, misses this imaginative access to the inner life of people, though there are telling physical details of how they live (the cotton worker who "appeared to have been taking a shower-bath of something fluffy": Bk. 2, ch. 1) and chilling details of how they die: the artisans' houses where the staircases are so narrow that the undertakers have special ladders to let the coffins down from the upper windows (Bk. 1, ch. 10). Such detail is telling, yet Dickens reveals little about the tissue of day-to-day life in Coketown, as Gaskell reveals it in *Mary Barton* (with whatever qualifications about stylistic clumsiness or uncertainty of tone in this, her first novel) when she details the Bartons' "house-place" near the

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beginning of *Mary Barton* (ch. 2; pp. 49-50):¹⁴ there is the cupboard which Mrs. Barton deliberately leaves open so that her tea-time guests can see the china that she has, and there is the penetrating observation of the “triangular pieces of glass” on which knives and forks are rested while carving, so as not to grease the tablecloth: all signs of the luxury of an industrious worker in a time of full employment. It is the kind of detail Dickens constantly offers in his work, in *The Chimes*, for instance, when Trotty Veck entertains Will Fern and Lilian with tea and bacon rashers. For Gaskell, there is a relationship with her materials, frequently a relationship of delight, as though showing off something she is consciously taking pride in, rather as Mrs. Barton takes pride in her possessions being seen, a pride in possession mingled with a delight in sharing with others, and this pride is important to our reading and understanding of *Mary Barton, North and South*, and many of the short stories.

Again, I must stress that I am not in any way denying the horror of England and of Manchester at this time. Gaskell’s novels provide plenty of evidence, as, for instance, the description in *Mary Barton* (ch. 6; pp. 98-101) of the cellar in which the Davenports dwell, with “three or four little children rolling on the damp, nay wet, brick floor, through which the stagnant, filthy moisture of the street oozed up”, and its back-room, which adds threepence to the rent, never used, “nor could a human being, much less a pig, have lived there many days”. The hideous implications of a world where human beings are housed worse and must endure longer than pigs are grotesque yet masterly. There’s no denying, in Gaskell, the way people die, there’s no denying that much needs to be changed, and there’s no denying either that she very much felt a compulsion in writing *Mary Barton* to expose and to bring about change. In the novel’s Preface, she makes it clear how the compulsion of here and now made her write it, although originally she had set about writing a historical romance of eighteenth-century Yorkshire. And yet the pressure of the real led to new lights on the sordid and the hopeless. She was brought to consider, as she moved through Manchester, whether there wasn’t just as much of romance amongst the figures who jostled her daily in the streets: “I

bethought me how deep might be the romance in the lives of some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets”. When Carlyle wrote to congratulate her, in that letter already quoted from, he spoke of “rich materials” and the novel is often bright as well as shocking in its novelty. To find romance in these lives is also, for Gaskell, to take pride in them and to show their interest to a readership previously ignorant or uninterested. She made such material, as Carlyle insisted, speak: “a real contribution (almost the first real one) towards developing a huge subject, which has lain dumb too long, and really ought to speak for itself, and tell us its meaning a little, if there be any in it at all!” The danger of such material, for all its possible eloquence, was the overwhelming impression that nothing could counter problems of such magnitude. The now aged novelist Maria Edgeworth heard Mary Barton read to her with great delight, but writing to Gaskell’s cousin, Mary Holland, she was led to say that the “fault of this book is that it leaves but a melancholy, I almost feel hopeless, impression”. That sense of melancholy or hopelessness, though, is contained and ultimately confuted by all the just causes of pride that Gaskell finds in the region in which her two novels of industrial life, Mary Barton and North and South, are set, whether it is the potential of a steam-hammer and the brain that forged it or the capacity of the people.

Mary Barton, Elizabeth Gaskell’s first novel, was published in 1848 and proved an immediate success. Let me begin with what might seem a minor feature of the novel, yet one which underlines the whole issue of local pride, and that is its use of dialect, in which, indeed, it proves to be a novel that stresses patterns of regional language (and of local customs) for what might now be called ideological underpinning. Walter Scott had established the independent claims of dialectal forms of English; his use of dialect is supple and often associated with the most vital characters and incidents of his novels. What Scott’s fiction did for Scotland,
Maria Edgeworth's did in some measure for Ireland, and now Gaskell's was reinforcing the serious claims of the regional novel. Gaskell recognized the unfamiliarity of her dialect to her potential readers and she glosses many words. Yet by these glosses she is doing something more than helping the reader's ignorance. She is also making a point about the vitality and the primacy of this language, that it is more alive and more truly English than the ordinary cultivated speech of standard English which, arguably, is corrupt and lacklustre. Hence Gaskell, in explaining words, does not simply give the meaning: she also quotes examples from Anglo-Saxon or from Middle English to enforce the point that the people of Lancashire still speak the language that our common forefathers spoke. "Nesh" is glossed as "Anglo-Saxon, nesc, tender" (ch. 1; p. 42), while "sin" is glossed "since" and its high lineage enforced by a line from the Prologue to the Canterbury Tales ("Sin that his lord was twenty year of age") (ch. 5; p. 84). Thus a sense of continuity is stressed, a living historical link with the virtues of the past that the South has lost. To the educated community that is not associated with industrialization, that may even despise it, Gaskell, by saying "Here is a word used by the Anglo-Saxons, by Chaucer, by Wycliff, by Langland, by Spenser, by Ben Jonson", is claiming that these Manchester people are part of the cultural tradition which that educated community intellectually and academically values. For the characters in Mary Barton this language is a living tradition, whereas for the southerner it is literally a closed book; he has to look up these words in his dictionaries or in the glossary at the back of his edition of Chaucer or Spenser. John Barton and George Wilson and Job Legh in their current usage have the fairer claim to be speaking true English. Instead of looking down upon these quaint people with their substandard language, the reader must adapt himself to accept the proud survival of the real English language.¹⁶

¹⁶ For Stephen Gill's anticipation of my point, see Mary Barton, p. 474. The long hostile review of Mary Barton, contributed by "a Correspondent" to the Manchester Guardian (28 February 1848, p. 7), claimed that the "most obvious" of the novel's numerous inaccuracies was "the extraordinary incorrectness of the dialect"; possibly it was this criticism that prompted the addition of William Gaskell's Two Lectures on the Lancashire Dialect as an appendix to the novel's 5th edition (1854).
Again, through language, Gaskell aims to establish the cultural patterns of this world. Early on in *Mary Barton* (ch. 4), Margaret, a workgirl who sews to earn her living, sings a song called “The Oldham Weaver”. Rather than reporting that this dialect poem was sung, Gaskell introduces it into the narrative, to give some sense of the traditions that these people have. This example of what exists in the language gives a palpable sense of an oral culture. Gaskell guides our response: to read it, “it may, perhaps, seem humorous; but it is that humour which is near akin to pathos” (p. 73), and with Margaret’s singing, we are told, the beauty of her voice helps move her listeners to tears. As Wordsworth in *Lyrical Ballads* brings out the “still sad music of humanity”, heard even in the despised or grotesque, with a tragic rather than a hopeless sense, so Gaskell seeks to reveal the true emotion that lies in such songs, valued none the less because unknown to the reader.

Elsewhere in the novel we have other such vehicles of emotion that are also good grounds for pride. There is the poem, “God Help the Poor” (ch. 9; pp. 154-56), by Samuel Bamford, a working man Gaskell knew. As quoted, again at length, its direct purpose is to enforce the desperate condition of people in Manchester:

God help the poor, who, on this wintry morn,
Come forth from alleys dim and courts obscure.
God help yon poor pale girl, who droops forlorn,
And meekly her affliction doth endure ...

Yet Gaskell presumably is not only using it for its content; she also means to draw attention to what Manchester people are capable of producing. Samuel Bamford was an ordinary silk-weaver, yet he wrote poetry about this world in which he worked and others suffered. And so, by such examples, we are led to see the qualities of endurance, determination, and creativity that justify celebration.

From the undifferentiated mass of people in the streets, individuals begin to emerge. Gaskell mentions certain weavers who sit at their looms and, as they throw the shuttle, so they look into their copy of Newton’s *Principia Mathematica*, laid open before them. They delight in mathematics and, snatching at the volume in work hours, revel over it “in meal times, or at night” (ch. 5; p. 75). This is a fact to stagger our sense of what the weavers of
Manchester are like. Few of us will have looked at, much less have read, the Principia Mathematica. It is a startling instance of levels of education under adversity that might well be matters of pride. Gaskell herself taught in Sunday Schools which, being Unitarian, provided not only the reading necessary for study of the Bible, but also writing, literature, history and some natural science. And in related spheres, the achievements of Manchester men were high. John Dalton, for instance, who established the atomic theory in chemistry, worked in Manchester and in another novel, Elizabeth Stone's William Langshawe: The Cotton Lord (2 vols., 1842), a very minor piece but one also symptomatic of pride in Manchester, there is suddenly a scene, a little night-piece, where Dalton is pictured working in his laboratory in the depths of a sleeping city. Gaskell shared with others this sense of pride in local achievement and, besides the weavers reading, shows it in her anecdote of a naturalist who, wanting to find a particular plant, was referred to "a hand-loom weaver in Manchester" (ch. 5; p. 76). From these real instances comes the particular fictitious instance of Job Legh in Mary Barton, whose interest in natural science leads to his collecting of plants and, in particular, of insects. This knowledge is the more precious, to the men themselves and to those who properly understand them, by virtue of its being won out of adversity: hence is demonstrated the quality of mind of these people, and in the contrast between their circumstances and their achievement the sense also of the potential that lies in such a society and which might be realized if they could be cleared of their difficulties.

Gaskell enforces her point by authenticating her fictional characters through reference to real Manchester men: she does not introduce real people as characters in the novel, but they stand as exempla giving the force of "historical" truth to her fictitious portraits. Samuel Bamford has already been mentioned: in a footnote (ch. 9; p. 154) Gaskell identifies him as the author of Passages in the Life of a Radical, a man "who illustrates his order, and shows what nobility may be in a cottage". Bamford had been involved in the agitation for Parliamentary reform and present at

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18 Cf. George Head's anecdote of the working-man taxidermist: A Home Tour through the Manufacturing Districts of England in the Summer of 1835 (1836), p. 78.
the Peterloo Massacre, subsequently being arrested and tried for treason. In his non-violent radicalism, Bamford could stand for one of the themes of *Mary Barton*, the reconciliation of class with class, which was to be more fully worked out in *North and South*.

Other real people mentioned in *Mary Barton* include the singer Deborah Travis: Margaret the sempstress is compared to her — and Thomas Wright, the working-man philanthropist, a one-man prisoners’ aid society. Wright, who worked at a foundry, began by standing surety for an ex-convict who was about to be dismissed for having concealed the fact to obtain work. Subsequently, Wright helped discharged prisoners and became a channel for other people’s charity as well. His working-day stretched from 5 a.m. to 6 p.m. and yet he found time in his evenings and on Sundays for these activities. He is described without being named when Mary Barton’s Aunt Esther is released from prison, as a man who fulfils the scripture of visiting the sick and imprisoned, “and never deserting those who have once asked help from him” (ch. 14; p. 206). The reference is clumsily introduced, in what Gaskell may have seen as a passage of fine writing (Carlyle urged her to “learn ever more ... to be concise”), but Wright is established as one more subject for admiration, one more cause for local pride.

These people, and fictional characters like Job Legh, exemplify self-sufficiency as they make the best of it under adversity as well as the worst of it. A character like Alice Wilson, while retaining much of her country ways, is a dignified survivor in the city: in the details of her cellar dwelling, which contrasts so vividly with the cellar of the Davenports, we see how she keeps up a pride in self, reflected in cleanliness, order, and the willingness to help. John Barton himself is such another example of self-sufficiency and personal pride: he refuses to seek for charity by putting himself upon the parish nor will he take money from the Trade Union when its limited funds might be better given to those with young children. Barton may rail, he may be savage, he may be sullen, even brutal, yet he will not go cap in hand to others. This is the pride of the devil, perhaps, rather than a source of pride to his

19 The *Manchester Guardian* correspondent (see note 16) also made factual objections to Gaskell’s brief reference to Deborah Travis (Travers, as Gaskell calls her, p. 74); the information available, however, says she was a handloom weaver.
author; he will, though, seek to solve problems by mutual help rather than expecting things done for him by his social superiors: the petition to the Government in London is one such effort, dispiriting failure though it proves to be; and Barton tries also to work through the Union, which brings about the fatal meeting with the masters, the determination to revenge the insult of Henry Carson with death, and the drawing of lots which falls on John Barton to be executioner.

Is Gaskell, then, offering us a murderer as an object of local pride? In simple terms, of course not; yet Barton is, with all his faults and even with the wretched outcome of his life, a man of the kind Manchester could yet be proud of. And here we might turn back to the way in which Gaskell conceived of her novel in terms of "romance" and of her hero in terms of "tragedy".20

Although Maria Edgeworth wrote of the book's overall melancholy, almost hopeless impression, yet in praising the dilemma of Mary Barton, torn between love for her murderer-father and love for Jem Wilson, falsely accused of the murder, Edgeworth called the situation one "fit for the highest Greek tragedy, yet not unsuited to the humblest life of a poor tender girl". Her remark, though chiefly referring to Mary Barton, must have gratified Gaskell when eventually transmitted to her, since she wrote ruefully in January 1849 that "no one seems to see my idea of a tragic poem" (Letters, p. 68): Edgeworth saw a possibility in "humblest life" that Aristotle would not have allowed. Gaskell never wore the mantle of the prophet, as Carlyle did, and if she hoped, in the words of the epigraph to Mary Barton, to instil "somewhat" in the ears of those more ignorant than herself,21 revelations about the Condition of England were by no means her exclusive purpose: there was an artistic one as well. Her conception of John Barton as a tragic figure was crucial to her idea of the whole novel and reinforces her conviction that the

20 Without being bothered too much by claims for chronological priority, we may notice that Erich Auerbach claims for Madame Bovary (1856-57) the possibility that Flaubert "was the first to have represented [tragedy] in people of slight intellectual culture and fairly low social status"; more important is Auerbach's point about the way romanticism had made possible new kinds of tragedy (Mimesis, trans. Willard Trask, New York (Anchor Books), 1957, p. 431; and see the general discussion in ch. 18): particularly important for Gaskell was Wordsworth, who in a poem like "Michael" wrote a narrative tragedy set in a "low social station".

21 The epigraph is from Carlyle's Biography (1832).
world she describes is not hopeless and is not crudely determin-
istic. Tragedy in the novel is designed to enhance understanding of
our common humanity, to draw from us a sense of identity with
John Barton as well as pity and fear at his situation, while laying
claim to Manchester providing the substance of literary tragedy
as surely as the House of Atreus or the History of Thebes or
the Chronicle of King Lear. What might be dismissed as the
apparently meaningless life of one mill-worker amongst many, is
in John Barton made a cause of wonder. There is power in this
individual, which is also just grounds for pride.

John Barton is first presented to us as a man held in balance,
with great potential for good or evil (potential like the steam-
hammer’s, yet here of moral rather than physical force):

His features were strongly marked, though not irregular, and their
expression was extreme earnestness; resolute either for good or evil; a
sort of latent, stern, enthusiasm. At the time of which I write, the good
predominated over the bad in the countenance, and he was one from
whom a stranger would have asked a favour with tolerable faith that it
would be granted. (ch. 1; p. 41)

John Barton rapidly swings, in his situation and himself, to the
bad: his wife dies, he is out of work in the great trade recession
of 1839-41; he turns to the Unions, to opium, to revenge. Yet
Gaskell has established the sense of value in him, something he
never loses, as his act of tenderness towards the lost child even as
he goes to kill young Carson establishes (ch. 17; p. 251). We
can call John Barton tragic as we call Macbeth tragic, because
we know his potential value and understand that the man’s
moral awareness is painfully and actively involved with his own
divided nature. To compare John Barton with Dickens’s Stephen
Blackpool in *Hard Times* is to see the difference between the tragic
and the pathetic, between the man who chooses freely to act and
the man who is victim. One might pity Stephen; one might be
proud of Barton.

I linked John Barton just now to my initial example of the
steam-hammer and part of the romance of *Mary Barton*, as of
*North and South*, is the romance of power, of what science and,
above all, applied science in technology and engineering, can do.
Gaskell is no Luddite and on the evidence we have would never
have recommended the destruction of a machine, though she is
conscious of the moral responsibility in machinery’s control and
use. A significant scene in *Mary Barton* is the eve of John Barton's departure to London as a delegate to present the working-men's petition: people come to his house to encourage him, to wish him well, and to tell him what he ought to say to the folk in London. One of those present — and we are meant to sympathize though not to agree with his point of view — says, "'Bless thee, lad, do ask 'em to make th'masters break th'machines. There's never been good times sin' spinning-jennies came up'" (ch. 8; p. 128). His is only one in a babble of views being offered John Barton and is not endorsed by the novelist: however Gaskell may sympathize with his feelings, she doesn't agree with his argument. The great shift from pure to applied science that was so integral a part of the Industrial Revolution had happened: the cost in human suffering was often high and Gaskell was no believer in a Juggernaut view of history. She knew of misery and was presumably well aware, for example, of the collapse of silk-weaving in Macclesfield in the 1840s, besides the general recession of 1839-41 in Manchester. Nonetheless, the solution, for Gaskell, was not the giving up of machines but their proper use, directed by men who were concerned about both ends and means. She understood, even if she never directly stated, what is involved in a historical process that is not to be reversed: essentially, that understanding leads to a tragic rather than a pathetic or sentimental view of man's situation, and there are signs, even in her depiction of John Barton, that she was not fully prepared to face up to the consequences of her own understanding. But she recognized that industrialization had in many respects improved standards of living and she is always convinced that the city worker in full employment is better off than the agricultural worker. Progress lay forward, in co-operation and human control. This understanding of both the meaning and the power of the Industrial Revolution is important: the power of the machine, of the workshops and mills of Lancashire, is matter for pride in human ingenuity, in human strength, in human will, all in ways that Dickens did not perceive and Disraeli only generalized about, and for Gaskell it is a source of local pride to understand and display what her readers have not known before.

Romance, in common parlance, lies somewhere else, in time or in place; but Gaskell's romance is of contemporary life, romantic.

22 Cf. the reaction of Margaret Hale to Higgins's proposal that he seek agricultural employment (*North and South*, vol 2, ch. 12, pp. 305-306).
in its unfamiliarity, and romantic, too, in being part of a great upheaval of imagination, thought, and feeling, a continuation of the Romantic Movement. Gaskell's own first idea of romance had partaken indeed of the charm lent by distance: "Living in Manchester, but with deep relish and fond admiration for the country, my first thought was to find a frame-work for my story in some rural scene" (Preface; p. 37). Rejecting this, she plunged into the here and now, of Manchester and its power, which her acquaintance, Geraldine Jewsbury, claimed, in the introduction to *Marian Withers* (3 vols., 1851), is a "world of inedited romance" (1.1). The masters of Jewsbury's novel are acknowledged to be often rude, uncouth, most of them having been workmen or at best the sons of workmen, yet they are already cultivating themselves and others out of the products of their own industry. In *North and South*, Thornton employs Mr. Hale to pick up again with the polite education necessity had made him abandon. Manchester may seem a dark, hidden world, yet the light shed by those who know it shines out in bright flashes as well as deep shadows, which reveals a world strange and wonderful. It may not be the romance of fairy-story, but fortunes as great, contrasts and transformations as startling, power as irresistible exist, beyond the dreams of prince or magician or giant. This power is changing England, with spinning, weaving, iron founding and railways all casting it anew.

One outward sign of this power was wealth. The opening of *Mary Barton* shows the material profusion of the working-class home in times of full employment — the "place seemed almost crammed with furniture (sure sign of good times among the mills)" (ch. 2; p. 50), and even more the world of the masters displays this opulence. The wealth of the Carson household, with pianos and servants and steaks broiling for breakfast, is presented far more critically than the simple pleasure of the Bartons in displaying their possessions (which besides represent the investment of their money, duly realized by selling when hard times come). Elsewhere, Gaskell points up the glaring discrepancy between Barton's search for food for his starving son and the unthinking progress of the master's wife, Mrs. Hunter, from ordering delicacies for her party (ch. 3; pp. 60-61). Yet the point that Geraldine Jewsbury made: that many of the masters were workmen but yesterday, is a cause for hope as well as bitterness. In *Mary Barton*, the millowner, Carson senior, is a new man, who
came to Manchester with nothing save the clothes he stood up in and now with Dick-Whittington-like progress is worth his tens of thousands (ch. 6; p. 104); comparing himself and masters like Carson, John Barton declares, "'They'n screwed us down to th'lowest peg, in order to make their great big fortunes, and build their great big houses, and we, why we're just clemming, many and many of us. Can you say there's nought wrong in this?'" (ch. 6; p. 104). It seems that fortune comes by chance and there is no justice, the only consolation being the savage anticipation that the consequences to Dives and Lazarus in the parable will be rigorously enforced in the next world. Even at the reconciliation of John Barton and Carson at the end of Mary Barton, Carson has no memory of his origins or his social kinship with Barton. Still, if the wealth is unfairly distributed and the gulf between rich and poor is wide, the power of industrialization to raise a man if he has the will, to break the mould of inherited wealth, to open the way to talent and, as suggested by Jewsbury in Marian Withers and explored by Gaskell in North and South, the increasing sense of responsibility and need for self-development of the wealthy, is an important and increasingly realized potential for good. The young engineer, Jem Wilson, whom Mary Barton eventually marries, works for an engineering firm that sends out its products to the realms of the Czar and the Sultan, to Russia and Turkey, those two great autocratic powers, which yet are dependent upon the commercial and intellectual strength of Manchester, so that, in turn, the political power of these great domains is dependent on the democratic, commercial and intellectual power of England. So England is to be seen as a greater Empire than either the Russian or the Turkish, not because of its territorial possessions but because of its economic scope. A sense of romance surely invests a great Empire, centred upon Manchester and developed from the fragile cotton threads of Lancashire, a new empire of peace, more powerful than an empire of conquest and territorial aggrandizement.23 The situation had its ironies: an Empire of commerce is

23 The idea of an Empire of Peace and Commerce was not new: Dryden celebrated the Empire based on wool in the song of Pan and the Nereide (King Arthur, 1691), as did John Dyer in The Fleece (1757), which mentions "The increasing walls of busy Manchester" (bk. III, 1.338). But what Dryden and particularly Dyer also stress is Britain's self-sufficiency in the whole process from raw material to finished product; in cotton's case, importation of the raw
not inevitably an Empire of peace, and the workers can be seen as wage-slaves as surely as the subjects of Russia and Turkey are seen as slaves of despotism. Yet an ideal is there for Gaskell and her contemporaries, of power that is benevolent, as the aggressive power of military conquest has never been, and of the ingenuity of man which harnesses power and devises processes which allow of easy mechanical reproduction: a man, like James Nasmyth, invents a steam-hammer which the engineering works can reproduce again and again; a man invents a shuttle that can be fitted to a hundred machines or more, working simultaneously from a single power source. In 1835 Edward Baines, in his *History of the Cotton Manufacture in Great Britain* (London, n.d.), pointed out a necessary and causal link between the spindles of Manchester and the hoe and plough of Mississippi that bound together the interests and the fates of Britain and the United States. Peace between these nations was guaranteed by the seemingly frail yet immensely strong cotton filament. The power of cotton, the power of wealth and of the individual who possessed it, the political power for good and evil, the new and exciting possibilities, literally the glamour, of Manchester, were to be particularly developed by Elizabeth Gaskell in *North and South*.

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*North and South*, originally serialized (1854-55) in Dickens's weekly magazine, *Household Words*, and issued complete in considerably revised form in 1855, marks a very distinct development, artistic and philosophical, from *Mary Barton*. Its structure and its style show how Gaskell has learnt to control and subordinate parts to the whole. There are losses: *Mary Barton* has a conviction and a capacity to move the reader (to tears and to rage) lacking in the more chaste nature of *North and South*; but there is gain, not least in a kind of literary tact that avoids gross authorial intervention to control reader-response and gives up fine writing: the description, for example, of Mary Barton in despair — “Then she threw herself on the ground, yes, on the hard flags she threw

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material entailed a vital relationship between the source country and the manufacturing one.
her soft limbs down” (ch. 20; p. 285)\(^2\) — had been embarrassing
in context. One difference from *Mary Barton* is the absence of
direct reference to noteworthy Manchester men: there is no gallery
of worthies; rather, their spirit is embodied in *North and South*’s
principal working class representative, Nicholas Higgins, who
also stands as chief spokesman for the Trade Union.

Gaskell’s treatment of the Unions in *North and South*, while
admirably subtle in recognizing the complexities of the situation,
nonetheless sees here reason for pride. Her sympathetic depiction,
as compared with her contemporaries’ treatment of the Unions,
has been explored by Patrick Brantlinger,\(^2^5\) and not only is there
a marked difference between her picture and, say, Dickens’s in
*Hard Times* or Disraeli’s in *Sybil*, but also a shift between her own
earlier portrayal in *Mary Barton* and that in *North and South*. The
idea of a secret society, bent upon bloody revenge, has no place
here. It is true that the conflict between masters and men leads to
the attack upon Thornton’s mill (vol. 1, chs. 21-22), and the Union
itself can be held responsible for the suicide of the workman
Boucher (vol. 2, ch. 11), but the Unionists, principally Higgins,
have a case, founded on the situation, which they can and will
argue out. Mr. Hale, the Anglican clergyman whose conscience
drives him from the Church and who finds employment as a tutor
in Milton Northern (the novel’s Manchester), is given by Higgins
an account of the co-operative ideal of the Unions. It is “‘a
withstanding of injustice ... It may be like war; along wi’ it comes
crimes; but I think it were a greater crime to let it alone. Our only
chance is binding men together in one common interest’” (vol. 2,
ch. 3; p. 233). To which Mr Hale replies that “‘your Union in itself
would be beautiful, glorious, — it would be Christianity itself — if
it were but for an end which affected the good of all’” (ibid.).
Higgins argues, though, the need for the Unions and calls in
question Mr Hale’s understanding of “common interest”: for it is
those who make Unions necessary, the masters, who are the real
cause of division between classes. Higgins recognizes a necessity in

\(^{24}\) *Mary Barton*, ch. 20, p. 285: Gaskell imitates Judges 5:27, which
Wordsworth had quoted in a note to ‘The Thorn’, possibly her immediate reason
for using it; the same passage had also been discussed by Coleridge, *Biographia
Literaria*, ch. 17.

\(^{25}\) “The Case against Trade Unions in Early Victorian Fiction”, *Victorian
Studies*, 13 (1969), 37-52; see also my *Elizabeth Gaskell*, ch. 2, for discussion and
illustration.
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the situation, and a power that must be gathered to cope with it, however painful the outcome. Gaskell makes it painful indeed for him, in loss of work for his conscience's sake (he will not accept the master's right to dictate how he shall spend the money he earns: a point Mr. Hale, his fellow follower of conscience, readily concedes him: vol. 2, ch. 11; pp. 291-92) and in accepting responsibility after Boucher's suicide. For Gaskell, though, in the presentation of her character, these are not punishments but, rather, trials from which he emerges stronger. Drawing together Higgins's culture, his intelligence, and his understanding, Gaskell has him admire Margaret Hale's plain-speaking, even while he speaks in his own turn:

"Hoo speaks out plain what's in her mind. Hoo doesn't comprehend th'Union for all that. It's a great power: it's our only power. I ha'read a bit o'poetry about a plough going o'er a daisy, as made tears come into my eyes, afore I'd other cause for crying. But the chap ne'er stopped driving the plough, I'se warrant, for all he were pitiful about the daisy. He'd too much mother-wit for that. Th'Union's the plough, making ready the land for harvest-time ... " (vol. 2, ch. 11; p. 293)

Later, when the men, including Higgins, establish a canteen at Thornton's factory (vol. 2, ch. 17), we have the kind of venture that might have been singled out for distinction in Mary Barton, though I am not aware of any parallel reality that Gaskell had in mind. In North and South the scheme enforces an idea, integral to the novel's design, of independence and enterprise amongst the workers of Manchester.

The experiment of feeding his men cheaply and effectively is aided by John Thornton, though he is careful "'to leave them free, and not to intrude my own ideas upon them'" (vol. 2, ch. 17; p. 362). The character of Thornton is central to North and South, while the artistic progress of Elizabeth Gaskell may be gauged by her handling of Margaret Hale's as the mediating point of view in the novel at large and of Thornton in particular. It has been suggested that in this novel Gaskell wished to redress the balance from Mary Barton by a portrayal favourable to the masters, and certainly Thornton, for all his toughness, is presented as the best that Manchester offers.

He is a man of power and wealth who, like Geraldine Jewsbury's masters, if not buying pictures, is aware of values beyond the cash-nexus and employs Mr. Hale to tutor him in
classical literature. He is a man who believes in the responsibility of power, believes that power, like that of the steam-hammer, must be adjusted to the task, and must be used for ends the moral meaning of which is understood. He undergoes a process of moral education, partly through Margaret, but it is a process already begun when we first meet him. He is not graceful or easy, is often fierce or harsh, sharing the qualities of the city he has helped to make. Disraeli in *Coningsby* (1844) memorably characterized Manchester: his spokesman, Sidonia, responds to Coningsby's desire to see Athens by dismissing such things as "'Phantoms and Spectres! The Age of Ruins is past. Have you seen Manchester?'" (bk. 3, ch. 1); then at the opening of Bk. 4, Disraeli in his own voice proclaims what Manchester is, seen in line of descent from the ancient world:

A great city, whose image dwells in the memory of man, is the type of some great idea. Rome represents conquest; Faith hovers over the towers of Jerusalem; and Athens embodies the pre-eminent quality of the antique world, Art ... What Art was to the ancient world, science is to the modern: the distinctive faculty. In the minds of men the useful has succeeded to the beautiful. Instead of the city of the Violet Crown, a Lancashire village has expanded into a mighty region of factories and warehouses. Yet, rightly understood, Manchester is as great a human exploit as Athens. (bk. 4, ch. 1).

Rejecting the Age of Ruins, Disraeli sees Manchester as in some sort the heir to Athens. Gaskell chooses, though, to stress, in Thorton's character and his ideas, as she chose to stress in the dialect of *Mary Barton*, an ancient and still living strength, not the Greek but the Teutonic, picking up from the example of Carlyle in such works as *Past and Present*. Thorton speaks to Margaret of himself and those like him in Manchester as part of this Teutonic race, men of energy and utilisers of power rather than the graceful idealists of the Greek tradition. Remember, Thorton says:

"we are of a different race from the Greeks, to whom beauty was everything ... I don't despise them ... But I belong to Teutonic blood; it is little mingled in this part of England to what it is in others; we retain much of their language; we retain more of their spirit; we do not look upon life as a time for enjoyment, but as a time for action and exertion ..." (vol. 2, ch. 15; p. 334)

Now, Thorton is a character within the novel: his siding with the Teutonic is conditioned by the struggle he has had in life,
which provided little matter for enjoyment. Nevertheless, he speaks for a certain mood of Manchester which is important, though the reader, of today as well as of Gaskell’s time, may be uneasily aware of the ugly justifications of brute force that the Teutonic might be used for. Among his fellow millowners, though, Thornton has authority that arises from strength of character. For Gaskell, pride in power alone is not enough. The pride must be in its right use. Thornton’s life shows how he has come to power through that Teutonic energy coupled with moral determination. His history is made important as Margaret Hale learns how his father died — committed suicide, indeed — overwhelmed by debt; how Thornton left school, earned fifteen shillings a week in a draper’s shop and with the money he saved began in time to pay off his father’s debts. He feels contempt for those whose lives are passed in different worlds: this fierce, stubborn contempt is qualified in the novel’s debate and in the debate’s resolution through his love for Margaret. The roses he asks Margaret to identify at the end of the story, plucked in the southern village Margaret came from, carry various resonances of beauty, love, understanding, and reconciliation. There is, central to Thornton and to Gaskell’s portrayal of him, the sense of what a man, with the opportunities Manchester gives, can win for himself.26

What I have sought to show, then, is that both Mary Barton and North and South display a sense of pride in the Industrial Revolution as manifested in Manchester, a pride that finds expression in Gaskell’s depiction of Manchester life, of Manchester people and customs, of cotton and its power and its wealth. She takes the stream of modern life all about her in Manchester, jarringly at odds with the medieval world she found herself at times attracted to, and yet which, as she felt “in the lives of some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets of the town”, is so full of romance. To reveal the hurt, resentment, agony of these people was one purpose of Mary Barton and North and South; to show the grounds of hope and exultation founded in Local Pride proved to be another.

26 Thornton, speaking of abuse of power by the masters, admits that things had been out of control, yet stresses that now there are measures of control and responsibility; historically, many of the masters were organizing themselves against legal imposition of safety measures and inspection in factories: see for example Henry Morley’s Household Words articles, “Fencing with Humanity”, 11 (14 April 1855), 241-44, and “More Grist to the Mill”, 11 (28 July 1855), 605-606.