

RUTH : MRS. GASKELL'S NEGLECTED NOVEL

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RUTH was Mrs. Gaskell's second full-scale novel, and of all her novels it is perhaps the one which excites least interest in her modern readers. Published in 1853, some five years after the appearance of *Mary Barton*, and written concurrently with much of *Cranford*, it seems to evade the categories suggested by both of those works, and it is perhaps inevitable that traditionalist admirers of Mrs. Gaskell's novels of provincial society and the more sociologically orientated enthusiasts of her industrial fiction have both tended to neglect it. As a social-problem novel concerned with the issue of unmarried motherhood *Ruth* seems to deal with what modern social attitudes profess to see as no problem at all, while as a novel of social observation it seems too heavily committed to its overtly propagandist stance. Thus it is that a recent commentator can remark that

A real effort of critical imagination is needed to do justice to Mrs. Gaskell's intentions and artistic execution in *Ruth*.¹

This is not to say, however, that such an effort will prove unrewarding, and, if indeed there is much in the novel that today we find naive or even mawkish, there is also much to admire, and much that represents new possibilities for its author's development as a novelist. Furthermore, the differences

¹ Margaret Ganz, *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Artist in Conflict* (New York, 1969), p. 105. Cf. J. G. Sharps, *Mrs. Gaskell's Observation and Invention* (London, 1970), p. 152: "Yet, as far as its central theme is concerned, *Ruth* is not artistically a success: invention fails in its attempt to come to the aid of morality". Notwithstanding their reservations, Ganz and Sharps do discuss *Ruth* in detail while, amongst other commentators, Arthur Pollard devotes a full chapter to the novel (*Mrs. Gaskell, Novelist and Biographer* (Manchester, 1965), pp. 86-107). Outside the specialized field of Gaskell studies, however, it has received far less attention. In this respect it is interesting to note that a chapter entitled "The Theme of Seduction" in a recent study of Hardy fails to mention it at all in an examination of Victorian precursors of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (see Merryn Williams, *Thomas Hardy and Rural England*, London, 1972).

between *Ruth* and Mrs. Gaskell's other novels, differences which, in the case of *Mary Barton* she herself stressed,¹ are, as I shall suggest in the course of this article, largely superficial: in many ways it has far more in common with Mrs. Gaskell's other major fiction than has been generally acknowledged.

If our own critical preoccupations have tended to minimize the importance of *Ruth* amongst Mrs. Gaskell's novels, they scarcely represent the feelings of its author, or the eagerness with which it was received by her contemporaries.

Long have we been looking for some new manifestation of the genius of the authoress of "Mary Barton": and now that that is before us, we welcome it with joy and become familiar with it without disappointment,

wrote an anonymous reviewer in *Bentley's Miscellany*, a judgement echoed by his counterpart in *The English Review*:

The author of "Mary Barton" . . . could scarcely add to her reputation; it is much to say that she has not detracted from it.²

Notices such as these presumably did something to dispel Mrs. Gaskell's own anxiety about having dared to deal explicitly with such a sensitive issue: always conscious, when dealing with such topics, of the potential conflict between her artistic commitment and her public role within her husband's congregation, she seems to have gone through agonies of self-doubt about *Ruth's* effect: "I have been so ill, I do believe it has been a 'Ruth' fever", she writes to her friend, Eliza Fox, and continues

Now *should* you have burnt the 1st vol. of *Ruth* as so *very* bad? . . . Yet *two* men have; and a third has forbidden his wife to read it, they sit next to us in Chapel and you can't think how "improper" I feel under their eyes.³

Elsewhere she compares herself to "St. Sebastian tied to a tree

¹ In a post-script to a letter to her sister-in-law, Anne Robson, written at the time of *Ruth's* publication, Mrs. Gaskell writes: "I myself, don't see how Mary B. and *Ruth* can be compared. They are so different in subject, style, number of characters &c.—everything, and made different partly that people might *not* compare them, but take each for the good that was in them" (*The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, ed. J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester, 1966), p. 222 (hereafter referred to as *Letters*)). I suspect in this instance that Mrs. Gaskell, anxious to avoid a reputation for deliberately dealing with provocative themes, protests too much.

² *Bentley's Miscellany*, 3 February 1853, no. 33, p. 237; *The English Review*, April 1853, pp. 193-4.

³ *Letters*, pp. 222-3.

to be shot at with arrows " and makes the revealing admission that

Of course it is a prohibited book in *this*, as in many other households ; not a book for young people, unless read with someone older (I mean to read it with MA some quiet time or other.)¹

As with *Mary Barton* then, Mrs. Gaskell had chosen a theme which was to prove potentially explosive, and in the case of *Ruth* she was even more convinced that she was in the right : there are none of the defensive suggestions of artistic inadequacy with which she protects herself in *Mary Barton*, and if her letters at this time indicate distress at criticism this is paralleled by the delight with which she announces a more sympathetic response :

Three or four *men* have written to approve . . . two with testimony as valuable as fathers of families . . . I think I have put the small edge of the wedge in, if only I have made people talk & discuss the subject a little more than they did.²

Much of Mrs. Gaskell's discomfort would seem to have been occasioned by the direct reactions of personal acquaintances and connections within the Manchester Unitarian circle. The portrait of the unrelenting utilitarian moralist, Bradshaw, in *Ruth* would thus seem to have had a certain ironic appropriateness. Certainly there was some public criticism, and a predictable lack of detachment from a number of the reviews, but on balance Mrs. Gaskell could scarcely have been distressed by the kind of reception which *Ruth* attracted, and more than one of her reviewers made a special point of congratulating her on the tact with which she had presented such difficult material.³ For example, after calling the novel " an inexpressibly beautiful and touching story " *The Guardian* went on to make what is, in more than one way, the crucial point about the novel's heroine :

. . . her guilt is as little as can ever exist in such a case. Yet all through the book . . . she is never suffered to forget her fall, nor are we ever either . . . it is as the humble self-distrusting penitent . . . that she wins our respect and love.⁴

I suggest that there are moments in *Ruth* where artistic intuition

¹ *Letters*, p. 221. " MA " is Mrs. Gaskell's eldest daughter, Marianne.

² *Letters*, p. 226.

³ For an analysis of the reception of *Ruth* by the reviews see Annette B. Hopkins, *Elizabeth Gaskell, Her Life and Work* (London, 1952), pp. 124-7.

⁴ *The Guardian*, 2 February 1853.

is at odds with its author's moralistic purpose, but basically the comment here is much to the point. Mrs. Gaskell's courage where *Ruth* was concerned consisted of openly discussing what was held to be best concealed, and suggesting an amelioration of the law of cause and effect that repaid the sinner with damnation. The guilt may be deliberately minimized but it is never denied, and the reader who goes to *Ruth* in the hope of finding a morally agnostic attitude to its heroine's early lapse is as likely as not to be repelled by the penance which Mrs. Gaskell has in store for her. "Why should she die? Why are we to shut up the book weeping?"¹ asked Charlotte Brontë, a question which we are liable to extend to include the entire life-pattern which Mrs. Gaskell creates for Ruth after her rescue by the Bensons—a dissenting pastor and his sister, who providentially come upon her at the moment of her desertion—and her installation as the recipient of their kindness. Ruth's situation is in fact not so much an issue in itself as the instrument by which Mrs. Gaskell is able to dramatize her wider theme of the proper conduct of human relationships within the context of a meaningful Christian ethic, a concern which aligns the novel naturally with *Mary Barton* and *North and South*. The sequence of events involving the Bradshaw family, for instance, far from being in the nature of a sub-plot, is thus integral to the novel as a whole: the nemesis of the inflexible moralist is a theme which Mrs. Gaskell had used in *Mary Barton* and was to use again in *North and South*. Indeed, although contemporary opinion seems to have admired Ruth Hilton as a successful character portrayal, one suspects that this was to a large extent due to the rather unique way in which she fulfilled its idealization of, on the one hand the penitent sinner, and on the other the devoted mother, for on more than one occasion Mrs. Gaskell seems to deprive her of fictional vitality at the very point where she takes on an individuality of her own.

There is one further factor that must be taken into account in a preliminary discussion of *Ruth*. The situation of the fallen woman was one to which Mrs. Gaskell returned with what seems

¹ Letter to Mrs. Gaskell, 26 April 1852, quoted by Mrs. Gaskell herself in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (Everyman's Library edition, chapter 24, p. 358).

to us an almost obsessional regularity. The pattern was set by the story of Esther in *Mary Barton*, it was repeated in the short story *Lizzie Leigh*, which Mrs. Gaskell wrote for the first issue of *Household Words* in 1850, while the moral exposure of adolescent girls is, in various ways, a crucial element in *Sylvia's Lovers*, *Cousin Phillis* and *Wives and Daughters*, of the major fiction alone.¹ There can be no doubt that Mrs. Gaskell's own position as the mother of four daughters, two of whom were nineteen and sixteen respectively when *Ruth* was published, and all of whom grew into womanhood while her career as a novelist developed, was a factor in her recurrence to these themes. Ruth Hilton, we are told early in the novel

... was too young when her mother died to have received any cautions or words of advice respecting *the* subject of a woman's life—if, indeed, wise parents ever directly speak of what, in its depth and power, cannot be put into words—which is a brooding spirit with no definite form or shape that men should know it, but which is there, and present before we have recognised and realised its existence (chapter 3, p. 43).²

The terminological evasions are revealing ("I mean to read it with MA some quiet time or other") in the way they show how much Mrs. Gaskell had to overcome in herself in writing this novel: against this kind of linguistic imprecision the dramatic effectiveness of the scenes in North Wales where Ruth herself is revealed to be living with Bellingham, her aristocratic seducer, is all the more marked. For some Victorian authors one suspects that the theme of illegitimacy, significant perhaps psychologically in terms of their domestic values, was to a large extent remote from their living experience. For Mrs. Gaskell the emergence of feminine sexuality was part of her experience as a mother, and it is this experience which has such marked effects, both good and bad, for her fiction. And if, at this point, one may make the obvious comparison with *Adam Bede*, it is perhaps worth

¹ It is worth mentioning that Mrs. Gaskell's obsession, if so it can be called, proved damaging when it expressed itself on two occasions in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. Both references were amongst the material that had to be amended in the revised third edition of the work.

² All page references to the novel which follow are to the Knutsford Edition of the *Works* of Mrs. Gaskell, London, 1906, volume iii, of which *Ruth* forms the major part.

suggesting that in one important aspect Mrs. Gaskell's maternal experiences work to her advantage : the lack of charity (to put it bluntly) that George Eliot shows to Hetty Sorel is something from which Mrs. Gaskell's more practical, if more sentimentalist, ethic has at least saved her.

II

Structurally, and indeed qualitatively, *Ruth* is an uneven novel. At times the reader finds himself irresistably drawn into the crises of Ruth Hilton's career ; nevertheless such involvement tends to alternate with a sense of labour, sometimes even of embarrassment, as the novel reverts to the course of domesticated regeneration which Mrs. Gaskell ordains for her heroine. The contrast is most marked by the beginning and end of the novel : the chapters set in North Wales in which we see Ruth Hilton enjoying, and then losing, the attentions of Henry Bellingham, set a standard which Mrs. Gaskell finds difficult to sustain, whereas the melodramatic final chapters, in which Ruth sacrifices herself in the service of others when acting as sick-nurse in a cholera epidemic and, in a situation the irony of which can only be described as grotesque, dies as a result of nursing her old lover, are such as even contemporary readers seem to have found difficult to take.¹

Mrs. Gaskell's difficulties are the result, not so much of awkwardness in the writing of the novel as such—it is worth remarking that her handling of her supporting cast, the Bensons and the Bradshaws, and even of peripheral characters like the servant, Sally, and Bradshaw's partner, Farquhar, scarcely falters—as of what she makes of Ruth Hilton herself during the fourteen years of her life with which the novel is concerned. There is indeed an elementary difficulty in her basic conception of the character. From the outset Mrs. Gaskell is on the defensive where Ruth Hilton is concerned. She always sees her as being in a position of dependence, whether on the kindness of others or, ultimately, on her own regeneration, and however

¹ Ganz cites the specific objection of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to the ending of the novel (op. cit. p. 271) and the more generalized objections of George Eliot and Clough to Mrs. Gaskell's handling of her material (ibid. p. 108).

tactfully that regeneration is handled we are inevitably left with a heroine whose qualities must display themselves within the limitations of a self-admonishing quietism. The code is established as soon as Ruth begins her life with the Bensons where, under the influence of their tenour of life, she submits not only to their kindness but to the crueller rebukes implicit in the behaviour of their servant. Self-examination begins almost immediately, as for example when, at the birth of her child, she reflects on his father's true nature :

Slight speeches, telling of a selfish, worldly nature, unnoticed at the time, came back upon her ear, having a new significance. They told of a low standard, of impatient self-indulgence, of no acknowledgement of things spiritual and heavenly (chapter 15, pp. 161-2).

The reassessment of Bellingham is, of course, a reassessment of Ruth's own response to him, and Mrs. Gaskell explains this capacity for self-criticism by Ruth's new situation—"the new spirit of maternity that had entered into her and made her child's welfare supreme". In its immediate context the change is rendered further credible by the careful building-up of the good effect of the Benson ménage, but in the wider context of the novel as a whole the shift to this moralistic equanimity on the part of its heroine is less satisfactory. It is, after all, only twelve months since Ruth's initial involvement with Bellingham when, in order to minimize the degree of her responsibility in the affair, Mrs. Gaskell was at pains to emphasize her lack of experience, even childishness in human affairs. Dramatic developments of moral awareness are a commonplace of the nineteenth-century novel, but the most indulgent of readers must surely feel that in Ruth's case there is something rather magical about the baby Leonard's effect.

Once Ruth's life with the Bensons has begun, her path is clear, and the chances of the kind of conflict that makes for dramatization of character are, on the face of it, minimal. There are, indeed, important moments of moral choice ahead of Ruth, as in the case of her involvement with the Bradshaw family as governess and even as confidante, when she knows that she is compromised by her past, and such incidents provide opportunities for the kind of dramatization of moral scruple at which

Mrs. Gaskell excels. There is also the somewhat fortuitous re-entry of Bellingham into her life, an issue which, as I shall suggest, contributes to a major query about Mrs. Gaskell's conception of Ruth's character. Incidents such as these are validly used to show the extent to which Ruth's development is one of increasing strength and quality of character. The basic pattern, though, is one of self-denial, and in so far as that self-denial implicitly involves the rejection of the possibility of a love-relationship (we never really believe that Ruth will become involved with Bradshaw's manager, Farquhar, as at one stage Mrs. Gaskell seems rather vicariously to suggest) Ruth Hilton's history is one with which the form of the Victorian novel was not well-equipped to deal.

It is here, too, that the time-scale of the novel makes for a further difficulty. As I have said, the novel covers fourteen years of Ruth's life, and it does so in a way that keeps the reader constantly aware, in a special sense, of the need to keep his eye on the time. Indeed Mrs. Gaskell herself is aware of this need, regularly reminding us of the passage of time, but, however skilfully she manages to suggest changes in the characters surrounding the heroine, there is an inevitably static quality about Ruth herself. When we are told, for example, that Ruth appeared to Farquhar as "the very type of what a woman should be—a calm serene soul, fashioning the body to angelic grace" (chapter 25, p. 305) we are aware not only of the sentimentalized values implicit in the language—it is in fact a tribute to Mrs. Gaskell's skill in this novel that she gets away with so much in this direction—but of the limitations which such a conception implies for the central character of a three-volume novel.

There is, finally, a further source of embarrassment. Mrs. Gaskell certainly manages to persuade us of the excellence of Ruth herself, in spite of her rather frequent recourse to the language of Victorian sentiment, but our tolerance is stretched, I suspect, by her deliberate authorial intrusions, and the situation of Ruth, and indeed the explicitly evangelical purpose of the novel as a whole, is such as to induce such interpolations distressingly frequently. I have referred earlier to the consequences for her fiction of Mrs. Gaskell's concerns as a mother, and here it

has to be said that these work to her disadvantage, whether she is dealing with Ruth's memories of her own mother, or with her experiences as a mother herself. Significantly, in the light of Mrs. Gaskell's own experience, Ruth has an obsessional anxiety about her child's safety,¹ and it is perhaps here that Mrs. Gaskell's failure to detach herself from the fictional situation is most evident :

Her whole heart was in her boy. She often feared that she loved him too much—more than God himself—yet she could not bear to pray to have her love for her child lessened. But she would kneel down by his little bed at night—at the deep still midnight—with the stars that kept watch over Rizpah shining down upon her, and tell God what I have now told you, that she feared she loved her child too much, yet could not, would not love him less ; and speak to Him of her one treasure as she could speak to no earthly friend. And so, unconsciously, her love for her child led her up to love of God, to the All-knowing who read her heart (chapter 19, p. 207).²

The sincerity of such a passage is unquestionable—and it is important to remember that the ultimate intention of the novel is an affirmation of true Christianity. Its tone, however, is rather less so, and it is a tone which we meet fairly regularly during the course of the novel.

III

There is much, then, about *Ruth* which would seem to suggest that if it is now a neglected novel, this is no more than it deserves. As so often with Mrs. Gaskell, however, concentration on her weaknesses produces an analysis which is at odds

¹ Mrs. Gaskell's infant son, William, died of scarlet fever in 1845 when only ten months old, while the Gaskells were on holiday in North Wales, but it is interesting to note that even before this, in the diary which she kept of the infancy of her first child, Marianne, Mrs. Gaskell refers to her fear that the child might suffer an early death : "She is, I think, a small child, and I fear not a very strong one. We hope to take her to the seaside this spring. Oh ! may I constantly bear in mind the words 'The Lord hath given, and the Lord hath taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.'" (*My Diary: The Early Years of My Daughter Marianne* (privately printed by Clement Shorter, London, 1923), pp. 19-20). (*My Diary* covers the period from March 1835 to October 1838).

² Again it is interesting to compare this passage with the following from *My Diary* : "Lord ! unto thee do I commit this darling precious treasure ; thou knowest how much I love her ; I pray that I may not make her too much my idol" (*My Diary*, p. 17). Sharps (op. cit. p. 152) has commented on another point at which the novel seems to recall the earlier fragment.

with the sense of pleasure which we receive from reading the novels themselves, and in the case of *Ruth* there is much to justify the valuation placed upon it by the more discriminating of Mrs. Gaskell's contemporaries. In the first place the ethos which Ruth's career is organized to demonstrate is presented with a subtlety and tact which scarcely get their due from reductive analysis. Ruth, whether living in the morally and psychologically therapeutic environment of the Benson household or reacting to the contrasting atmosphere of the Bradshaw ménage, is always alive and aware, never the object-lesson that description of her situation tends to suggest. If the conception of Ruth's character is static, the presentation gives it flesh and blood. Furthermore, there are times in Ruth's career when that presentation seems interestingly at odds with the basic conception. Indeed, as in *Mary Barton*, where one feels a tension between Mrs. Gaskell's explicit condemnation of working-class violence and her sympathy for the suffering which produces it, one senses that at crucial moments in *Ruth* the imagination, perhaps even the sympathy, of the artist, is at odds with the preconceived moral purpose.

The conflict I am suggesting seems to me to come to the fore in two protracted and highly significant episodes in Ruth's career, where the reader is directly exposed to the reality of her relationship with Bellingham. There is, as most critics have noted, much that is unsatisfactory about the relationship, if indeed it is allowed to exist explicitly as such within the novel at all. Bellingham himself is a typical example of the rich and idle young man to whom the daughters of the subservient are simply objects of pleasure, and one scarcely needs to compare him with Arthur Donnithorne in *Adam Bede*, let alone with Dickens's Steerforth, to realize how much of a type, and how little of a character, he is. Mrs. Gaskell, to be fair, does not have the same degree of interest in him as do George Eliot and Dickens in their respective paratypes: he is there simply as the agent of Ruth's downfall, and the mechanical contrivance by means of which he is re-introduced later in the novel is a measure of Mrs. Gaskell's lack of interest in him in other than the crudest narrative, and perhaps sociological, terms.

What is interesting is Ruth's reaction to Bellingham, and here Mrs. Gaskell finds herself in considerable difficulty. As I have indicated, she goes out of her way to emphasize Ruth's innocence and naivety at the beginning of the novel, as a means of minimizing her responsibility in the affair with Bellingham: it is only after she has been deserted that she begins to recognize his true character. The approach is familiar enough, but it still leaves a major problem: however Mrs. Gaskell may try to justify Ruth's lapse it is difficult to associate such an error of judgement with someone whom we are for the rest of the novel asked to accept as possessing almost instinctive moral perception. Comparison with *Adam Bede* again makes the point: Hetty Sorel's seduction is a direct consequence of her shallow-mindedness, of her fatal tendency towards flirtatiousness that turns her away from Adam himself. And George Eliot's moral certitude being what it is, Hetty is punished and Adam is saved. In *Ruth* the situation is very different; it is almost, in fact, as if we were asked to believe that in a moment of immaturity Dinah Morris had run off with the squire.

The point is made not to be facetious but to suggest that there is more to Ruth's situation than her creator's direct instructions to the reader tend to suggest. There is nothing more remarkable in *Ruth*, perhaps in all of Mrs. Gaskell's fiction, than those chapters early in the novel which precede Ruth's career of regeneration, when we see her living with her lover in North Wales, and positively enjoying the experience. It is this section of the book, one suspects, that caused offence to William Gaskell's congregation, rather than the subject-matter as a whole, for the spontaneity of Ruth's feelings at this stage communicates itself to the reader with a force that temporarily makes nonsense of Bellingham's own limitations as a fictional character, and which raises reverberations that carry throughout the remainder of the novel.

The kind of enjoyment I am referring to on Ruth's part is conveyed, of course, not in terms of direct sexual pleasure, but through the empathy with nature which she feels during her stay in Wales, and which acts almost as an index to the emancipation of spirit which she experiences. We are, of course, left in no

doubt of Bellingham's fundamental worthlessness, but curiously this tends to emphasize the ambiguity that surrounds the presentation of Ruth herself : her feelings of freedom, of pleasure in her situation, come from within herself, and it is therefore all the more unconvincing when they disappear as soon as she begins her new life. Here, for instance, she is persuaded by Bellingham to observe her own reflection in a pool :

She obeyed, and could not help seeing her own loveliness ; it gave her a sense of satisfaction for an instant, as the sight of any other beautiful object would have done, but she never thought of associating it with herself. She knew that she was beautiful ; but that seemed abstract, and removed from herself. Her existence was in feeling and thinking, and loving.

Down in that green hollow they were quite in harmony. Her beauty was all that Mr. Bellingham cared for, and it was supreme. It was all he recognised of her, and he was proud of it. She stood in her white dress against the trees which grew around ; her face was flushed into a brilliancy of colour which resembled that of a rose in June ; the great, heavy, white flowers drooped on either side of her beautiful head, and if her brown hair was a little disordered, the very disorder seemed only to add a grace (chapter 6, pp. 73-74).

The situation, in which the wider moral context of Ruth's position seems temporarily suspended while she is presented as a child of nature, is not allowed to last for long and within a paragraph the moralizing qualification is introduced : " She became pensive and sad, and could not rally into gaiety." But the imaginative force of passages like this—and they are not infrequent in this section of the novel—gives Ruth an independence of character that reveals the speciousness of her supposed immaturity and which remains at the back of the reader's mind throughout the remainder of the novel.

The emotional and imaginative investment which Mrs. Gaskell has in the North Wales chapters of *Ruth* has been very properly attributed to her own experiences there, both on honeymoon and, more sadly, on the holiday which was terminated by the death of her son. It is interesting to note how, in terms of the mechanics of the plot, the events in Wales take up far more room than is strictly necessary : Mrs. Gaskell is lingering over an area that she knows and loves. There is, though, more to this than recollected affection on Mrs. Gaskell's part. Ruth's stay in Wales gives her a brief interlude of apparent independence before her life of retribution begins. " Apparent ", because in

terms of Mrs. Gaskell's conception of the novel, such independence can only be an illusion to be shattered when Bellingham, under the influence of his class-conscious mother, deserts Ruth. But however apparent or temporary the experience may be it takes on a reality that goes beyond the moralistic thesis of the novel, and it is the strength of this reality that raises very similar questions when Bellingham re-enters Ruth's life later in the novel. I refer, of course, to the passages at "Abermouth"—again the reversion to Wales¹—when Ruth, acting as governess to Bradshaw's children, is confronted by Bellingham in his role as Bradshaw's political protégée. Again Ruth is isolated, free for once of the beneficial influence of the Bensons, and again she reacts in a way that seems to be somewhat at odds with what Mrs. Gaskell would have us believe of her situation.

Bellingham's re-appearance comes at a point when five years have passed since Ruth's adoption by the Bensons. Motherhood, we are told, has made of Ruth a creature of instinctive dignity that expresses itself as much in her physical appearance as in her behaviour :

The increase of dignity in her face had been imparted to her form. I do not know if she had grown taller since the birth of her child, but she looked as if she had. And although she had lived in a very humble home, yet there was something about either it or her, or the people amongst whom she had been thrown during the last few years, which had so changed her that whereas, six or seven years ago, you would have perceived that she was not altogether a lady by birth and education, yet now she might have been placed amongst the highest in the land, and would have been taken by the most critical judge for their equal, although ignorant of their conventional etiquette—an ignorance which she would have acknowledged in a simple, childlike way, being unconscious of any false shame.

Her whole heart was in her boy . . . (chapter 19, p. 207).

The suggestion is one of equanimity, self-adjustment and moral integrity, and if the modern sensibility winces at "she might have been placed amongst the highest in the land" it misses Mrs. Gaskell's point if it forgets that in society's terms Ruth should be an outcast. There is, of course, a serious threat to Ruth's position, in that it depends upon the lie about her

¹ Sharps, *op. cit.* p. 157, identifies Abermouth with Silverdale, near Morecambe in Lancashire, where the Gaskells had spent seaside holidays themselves, but the name given to the resort in the novel seems clearly to indicate that Mrs. Gaskell has Wales in mind.

situation told by the Bensons when they first took her in, but Ruth's regeneration is made to seem at this point independent of such a threat. Mrs. Gaskell makes great play with the moral problems surrounding the lie on several occasions, but she herself takes no absolute stand on the issue, using it, one suspects, as much to facilitate her plot as a moral issue in its own right.¹

The most important factor in Mrs. Gaskell's assessment of Ruth at this point is that Bellingham would appear to have been forgotten. He is scarcely in fact mentioned in the novel after Ruth's reflections about him at the time of Leonard's birth until he re-appears in the improbable guise of Bradshaw's election candidate. Prior to Bellingham's return there is just one reference to

. . . a strange yearning kind of love for the father of the child whom she pressed to her heart, which came, and she could not bid it begone as sinful, it was so pure and natural, even when thinking of it as in the sight of God . . . (chapter 18, p. 190).

But at the time Mrs. Gaskell ignores the tension which such a feeling on Ruth's part implies. We are therefore insufficiently prepared for Ruth's reaction when she comes face to face with Bellingham at Abermouth :

The figures near her vanished into strange nothingness ; the sounds of their voices were as distant sounds in a dream, while the echo of one voice thrilled through and through. She could have caught at his arm for support, in the awful dizziness which wrapped her up, body and soul. That voice ! No ! if name, and face, and figure were all changed, that voice was the same which had touched her girlish heart, which had spoken most tender words of love, which had won, and wrecked her, and which she had last heard in the low mutterings of fever (chapter 23, p. 266).

¹ The question of the moral propriety involved in the telling of a lie, or rather the concealment of the truth, in the interests of the wider good is examined by Mrs. Gaskell in several of her novels, most notably in *North and South*, where the heroine, Margaret Hale, is placed in a situation where she knows that to reveal a particular truth will bring positive harm to her innocent brother, but that to conceal it is not only effectively to tell a lie, but to bring shameful imputations upon her own character. Sharps argues that "the conversation between Mr. Bradshaw and Mr. Benson when the secret is out demonstrates the usual Gaskell moral : that lying even with the intent that good may come, is scarcely defensible" (op. cit. p. 165), but this seems to me an over-simplification of Mrs. Gaskell's position, both in this specific instance and generally. When she came to write *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* Mrs. Gaskell was to have very effective practical experience of the problem which she liked to set her own heroines.

Alone in her room, Ruth torments herself with her dilemma :

Oh, my God ! I do believe Leonard's father is a bad man, and yet, oh ! pitiful God, I love him ; I cannot forget—I cannot ! (chapter 23, p. 271).

To some extent the force of feeling here is a consequence of the novelistic tendency towards melodrama—"That voice!"—but the reader cannot help feeling that the repression of her feelings for Bellingham, which is implicit in Ruth's response at this point, should surely have been acknowledged by Mrs. Gaskell not just at this stage but as a factor to be contended with in the process of re-adjustment with the Bensons. Here again the presentation of Bellingham is crucial : either he is a wooden figure, and an agent in the plot who can later be ignored, or he has qualities and characteristics which are attractive to a heroine even as convincingly virtuous as Ruth. This is not to say that a good woman cannot love a bad man, but that a fully realized character should not be made to respond to a cardboard cut-out, and that is the situation which Mrs. Gaskell contrives. Again we are forced to the conclusion that there is more to the Ruth-Bellingham situation than Mrs. Gaskell explicitly admits, and again with *Mary Barton* in mind it is interesting to note that the threat posed to Ruth by the re-introduction of Bellingham into the novel is overtaken by the course of events involving Ruth's exposure to the Bradshaws. As in *Mary Barton*, where the issues raised by the strike are overtaken by the detective-story of the Carson murder, a major issue is left unresolved by the introduction of, in a sense, "safer" material.

Ruth's reaction to Bellingham is not simply a matter of what we are told, somewhat melodramatically, by Mrs. Gaskell's commentary : the passages in which Ruth struggles with her feelings about him are as splendidly conceived, in imaginative terms, as anything in the novel. In the chapter entitled "The Meeting on the Sands" (chapter 24), in which Ruth keeps her assignation with Bellingham, there is again that superb manipulation of natural imagery to express Ruth's psychological state that was in evidence in the early chapters of the novel ; take for instance the passage in which Ruth sees Bellingham waiting for her :

And now, close under the heathery fields, where they fell softly down and touched the sands, she saw a figure moving in the direction of the great shadow

made by the rocks—going towards the very point where the path from Eagle's Crag came down to the shore.

"It is he!" said she to herself. And she turned round and looked seaward. The tide had turned; the waves were slowly receding, as if loth to lose the hold they had, so lately, and with such swift bounds, gained on the yellow sands. The eternal moan they have made since the world began filled the ear, broken only by the skirl of the grey sea-birds as they alighted in groups on the edge of the waters, or as they rose up with their measured, balancing motion and the sunlight caught their white breasts. There was no sign of human life to be seen; no boat, or distant sail, or near shrimper. The black posts there were all that spoke of men's work or labour. Beyond a stretch of the waters, a few pale grey hills showed like films; their summits clear, though faint, their bases lost in a vapoury mist (chapter 24, pp. 292-3).

Here a recurrent image of Victorian literature, the inscrutable timelessness of the sea as an expression of the universality of human suffering, is transformed by Mrs. Gaskell's attention to detail into a specific substantiation of Ruth's isolation as she goes to meet her old lover. The connection between described landscape and psychological state is inescapable and it recurs, more explicitly, after the interview is over, when Mrs. Gaskell describes Ruth's exhaustion after her ordeal:

Her struggle, her constant flowing tears, which fell from very weakness, made her experience a sensation of intense bodily fatigue; and her soul had lost the power of throwing itself forward, or contemplating anything beyond the dreary present, when the expanse of grey, wild, bleak moors, stretching wide away below a sunless sky, seemed only an outward sign of the waste world within her heart . . . (chapter 24, pp. 301-2).

This is something very different from the fatigue to which Victorian heroines are notoriously prone; born of the experience embodied in the novel and given shape by its embodiment in an instinctively appropriate natural imagery, it convinces in a way which I would claim is rare in the whole range of Victorian fiction.

IV

In the figure of Ruth Hilton Mrs. Gaskell achieves her first full-scale character portrayal. In *Mary Barton* her stated priorities led her to conceive of her characters in terms of what they could be made to represent, and even when she transcends this rather elementary conception of character her loyalties are divided. *Ruth*, however, gives to its heroine a pre-eminence that is sustained throughout the novel. We should therefore be

careful in suggesting a simple disparity between intention and achievement where Ruth herself is concerned ; rather is it a case of Mrs. Gaskell presenting a complex character within which her emphasis on the qualities of submission and self-sacrifice are more at odds than she seems to appreciate with the imaginative expression given to less predictable emotional responses. At one point Mrs. Gaskell refers with conviction to the goodness which comes from " the hidden life and experience of the heart " (chapter 19, p. 210). The hidden life and experience of her own heroine would seem on occasion to be more complicated than she herself is prepared to admit, and it is perhaps not too extreme a speculation to suggest that her anxieties about the novel as a whole were to some extent related to this factor.

Ruth, however, is not simply the story of its heroine's regeneration. Much of its attractiveness comes from its evocation of the life-style of the Bensons, Ruth's protectors, and from its tough-minded treatment of the deliberately contrasted Bradshaw family. Here Mrs. Gaskell shows us two forms of the Christian conscience : the pragmatically humane in the form of the Bensons' selflessness, and the rigidly ideological in the form of the unshakable self-conviction of Bradshaw.

Benson's protection of Ruth ultimately founders on the lie about her which he is forced to tell at the outset : as he himself says when Ruth has been exposed, " It has been my doing, my mistake, my sin " (chapter 27, p. 353). But to accept Benson's words of regret at this point is to ignore the fact that the lie has obtained for Ruth the years during which she has been able to restore herself, as Benson's more practically minded sister is quick to point out :

Ruth has had some years of peace, in which to grow stronger and wiser, so that she can bear her shame now in a way she never could have done at first (chapter 27, p. 358).

In the face of this pragmatic wisdom, and indeed in the light of the novel as a whole, Benson's final rejoinder to the effect that " God's omnipotence did not need our sin " rings rather false, for if all such situations could be left to God's omnipotence there would have been little need for the novel at all. As I have suggested, I suspect that Mrs Gaskell is not so much concerned

with the morality, or otherwise, of the lie in which, after all, the most instinctively decent people are willing accomplices, but in the dramatization of practical Christianity as it contrasts with the conventional pieties of the Bradshaws' formal creed. And, if one can adduce a very obvious piece of evidence, the almost unbroken similarity between the Bensons' chapel at Eccleston and that which Mrs. Gaskell herself knew and loved at Knutsford, together with the association of the Benson household with domestic values that she so obviously admires, should be enough to convince us that there can hardly have been any other course of action than that which the Bensons follow from the start.

Against the Bensons are set the severely moralistic Bradshaw, with his submissive wife and, in various ways, rebellious children. Here surely is the pattern for the Gradgrinds in *Hard Times*, and what in particular distinguishes Mrs. Gaskell's treatment of the situation, one feels, is that Bradshaw himself never becomes a figure of parody, while his effect upon his family, and in particular his daughter Jemima, is handled with considerable psychological insight. Here, for example, is Jemima's response to her discovery of the truth about Ruth's past :

Two hours ago—but a point of time on her mind's dial—she had never imagined that she should ever come into contact with anyone who had committed open sin ; she had never shaped her conviction into words and sentences, but still it was *there*, that all the respectable, all the family and religious circumstances of her life, would hedge her in and guard her from ever encountering the great shock of coming face to face with Vice. Without being pharisaical in her estimation of herself, she had all a pharisee's dread of publicans and sinners, and all a child's cowardliness—that cowardliness which prompts it to shut its eyes against the object of terror, rather than acknowledge its existence with brave faith. Her father's often reiterated speeches had not been without their effect. He drew a clear line of partition, which separated mankind into two great groups, to one of which, by the grace of God, he and his belonged ; while the other was composed of those whom it was his duty to try and reform, and bring the whole of his morality to bear upon, with lectures, admonitions and exhortations—a duty to be performed, because it was a duty—but with very little of that Hope and Faith which is the Spirit that maketh alive. Jemima had rebelled against those hard doctrines of her father, but their frequent repetition had had its effect, and led her to look upon those who had gone astray with shrinking, shuddering recoil, instead of with a pity so Christ-like as to have both wisdom and tenderness in it (chapter 25, p. 320).

That Mrs. Gaskell should concern herself with such precision of definition in the case of the attitudes of a character who, as far

as her plot is concerned, is a relatively minor figure, is a measure of the extent to which Ruth's story is not simply an end in itself, but an expression of a wider concern with the proper bases of social morality, expressed not only within the family but by the unease, for example, which Bradshaw feels over the more questionable aspects of his electioneering, in the wider public world. Mrs. Gaskell's insistence on the relationship between private and public morality is a constant undercurrent running throughout the novel, in fact, giving a fuller significance to such matters as the behaviour of Bellingham's mother, and the acceptance by Richard Bradshaw of conflicting standards within and without the home. It is thus perfectly appropriate that Ruth's ultimate salvation should be set against the nemesis of Bradshaw, and that this in itself should come about as a consequence of his son's exposure as a cheat in matters of business. As in *Mary Barton*, Mrs. Gaskell handles a range of inter-related themes : her belief in the need to maintain a properly integrated society, which expresses itself in her attitude towards industrial issues in *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, is as powerful, if less obviously explicit, in the predominantly pastoral atmosphere of *Ruth*. Ruth's own involvement with all the levels of society represented in the novel—with the socially superior Bellinghams, with the quietist Bensons, and with the new industrial aristocracy of the Bradshaws is in fact an expression in structural terms of this pre-occupation on Mrs. Gaskell's part, as indeed is Ruth's sentimentally conceived martyrdom in the service of a society whose natural instinct would be to reject her.

Mrs. Gaskell's treatment of her chosen social milieu in *Ruth* is restrained and affectionate, tactful and assured. It is, in itself, a more sober treatment of the world of *Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters* : Bradshaw and his business activities establish a link between the village community and the emerging commercial consciousness which is only hinted at in *Cranford* and which *Wives and Daughters*, by its deliberate reversion to the past, evades altogether. Paradoxically, however, it is those aspects of *Ruth* where Mrs. Gaskell perhaps seems less assured, or, if not less assured, less conscious of what she is doing, which represent the greatest potential for her development as a novelist. The

examination of the complexities of an individual character, and the demonstration of psychological stress by relating it to a symbolically expressive pattern of imagery, are the real advances in *Ruth*. Mrs. Gaskell's awareness of the intensity of loneliness, and its concomitant psychological problems, are areas which she later develops not only in her portrayal of her fictional heroines, but in her biography of Charlotte Brontë.