Smoke or no Smoke? Questions of Perspective in *North and South*

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Man’s increasing control over all four elements of the natural world, brought about dramatic physical and social changes, as coal and steam power superseded ancient energy forms and transformed manufacturing processes. Inspired by industrial development a new fictional genre emerged in mid-19th century Britain, giving particular importance to topography, with narratives set in an improbable locale, the grimy factory town with its foul air and thick fogs. In her preface to *Mary Barton* (1848), Elizabeth Gaskell draws attention to the paradox of depicting romance in the lives of Manchester workers, then apparently finds the idea so groundbreaking that she opens her first industrial novel with a pastoral scene. Factory people are shown enjoying a springtime holiday and strolling in green fields outside the town, into which the reader is steered gently through fresh country air, as the operatives return home to “pent-up houses” (*MB* 49) and the sordid reality of filthy courtyards, damp cellar dwellings, raging typhus fever and industrial strife.

2 *North and South* gives a subtler, more complex picture of Victorian industrial culture. The gulf dividing the two nations appears to be an oversimplified representation of English society in the 1850s and the novelist now seems to protest that industrial life is unthreatening. If the manufacturing metropolis is still a smoke-blackened place of social unrest, material progress is shown in a largely positive light, partly in response to accusations of one-sidedness and undue sympathy for the workpeople made against *Mary Barton*. Much of the later novel’s ambivalence seems to stem from the writer’s complex aspirations, for Gaskell strives in her second novel dealing with “Condition of England” issues to be fair to Manchester manufacturers, while urging a message of social responsibility.

3 When the industrial north is set against the rural south, the polarity is not as sharp as one might expect. Generous space is given to triumphant creativity, as men exult in the harnessing of inanimate matter and there is little emphasis on dirt and disease. As the industrial culture is portrayed as socially dynamic, atmospheric pollution appears as an
unavoidable by-product of the “dazzling” new civilisation. Perhaps most of all, the subjective—and so flawed—character of individual perception is made clear through contrasting responses to the physical environment and to industrial relations more generally.

Again there is no brutal thrust into the murky northern town and its smoke-filled skies. North and South opens in an elegant Harley Street drawing room, then follow bucolic scenes in Hampshire, before the Hale family leaves their picture postcard hamlet behind for a new life in gloomy Milton Northern, in the county of Darkshire—fictional names for Manchester and Lancashire. The allusion to dark northern mills underscores the disparity with the Arcadian life Margaret believes her displaced family is leaving behind. More significantly, the place names correspond to assumptions about the bleakness of northern culture which are questioned and invalidated in the course of the narrative.

From the outset, the writer underplays the sinister aspect of Milton’s environmental features. The great textile town is approached by rail and the pollution generated by intense industrial activity—and in all probability, a high concentration of domestic coal fires—is visible from some distance:

_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. It was all the darker from the contrast with the pale grey-blue of the wintry sky; [...]. Nearer to the town, the air had a faint taste and smell of smoke; perhaps, after all, more a loss of the fragrance of grass and herbage than any positive taste or smell. Quick they were whirled over long, straight, hopeless streets of regularly-built houses, all small and of brick. Here and there a great oblong many-windowed factory stood up, like a hen among her chickens, puffing out black “unparliamentary” smoke, and sufficiently accounting for the cloud which Margaret had taken to foretell rain._ (59, italics mine)

When Margaret Hale is the focalizer, her misreading of the elements is predictable, conditioned by life in the country where black clouds denote a weather change. The identification of the cloud’s true source is supplemented by a further detail: the air pollution is unlawful. The epithet “unparliamentary”, a testimony to a growing link between environmental concerns and public health issues, cannot be convincingly attributed to Margaret’s awareness. The young woman is entering a foreign land, where she will elbow unfamiliar social types, study an alien code of behaviour, and learn a new language but as yet, she is likely to know little of parliament’s attempts to regulate smoke emission and even less about the independent character of the Darkshire mill-owners, who openly defy the law as their chimneys relentlessly fill the air with toxic substances. John Thornton will explain how laws and fines are ignored, he himself having altered his chimneys to consume smoke, not because parliament has “meddled” with the affair as he puts it, but to save coal. The ineffective legislation is chronicled with greater severity by Dickens. Hard Times which immediately preceded North and South in Household Words, gives a picture of Coketown shrouded in “a blur of soot and smoke” making it “impervious to the sun’s rays” but the mill-owners see no further than their utter ruin when it is merely hinted that “perhaps they need not always make quite so much smoke” (HT 146–148). The ironic treatment in fiction is complemented by the simultaneous publication of a vivid, detailed denunciation of London’s suffocating air-borne pollution in “Smoke or No Smoke”, an article which appeared in the same periodical.

Gaskell, however, after this narratorial aside, promptly plays down the issue of contaminated air and responsibility. The impact on the senses is barely perceptible (“faint”), a mere impression of a country-dweller (“an absence”, “a lack of herbage”), not
a tangible source of offensiveness. Objectively, the smoke—certainly combined with soot—is visible to the eye, offensive to nose and harmful to lungs. As a southerner, hailing from the “pleasant pastures” of rural England and arriving “with a repugnance to the idea of a manufacturing town” (59), Margaret might be expected to show greater sensibility to the unwholesome air, one of the most frequently deplored features of Victorian industrial towns, but not the novelist’s primary concern.

Almost invariably, newcomers to the northern towns were appalled by the volumes of filthy smoke which they describe as dense, reeking, pestiferous. Alexis de Tocqueville writes of a “new hell”, a city covered with thick black smoke. Hippolyte Taine discovered Manchester in the summer of 1859, also at the end of a rail journey. Hovering over the sky he sees a “strange-shaped” cloud, “motionless” above tall chimneys by hundreds. Endless masses of blackened buildings are noted, then a “lugubrious” walk in the streets reveals “earth and air impregnated with fog and soot”. He wonders about winter “when the fog descends to drown, choke, engulf the whole of the visible, natural world”. The city air is “turgid” and “vile”, “contaminated” “unnatural”. Seen from Margaret’s perspective, the new scene is surprisingly pleasing, as the writer draws on reassuring similes to convey the outsider’s first impressions. What several commentators depict as prison-like warehouses and ugly chimneys spewing out filthy smoke are fondly likened to farmyard fowl, inoffensive, gently “puffing” out smoke. Dr Kay’s chimneys “vomit forth dense clouds of smoke”. Engels found “thickly crowded” mills “belching forth black smoke from their chimneys” (56). De Tocqueville saw fearsome factories and warehouses which deprived the small dwellings of air and light, shrouding them in permanent fog (“[qui] empêchent l’air et la lumière de pénétrer dans les demeures humaines qu’elles dominent; elle les enveloppent d’un perpétuel brouillard”). Gaskell’s reassuring simile is clearly at odds with Dickens’s imagery too, full of menace, represented through metaphors of evil and savagery:

Coketown […] a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. […] a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and vast piles of buildings full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness… (HT 28)

Coketown may be a caricature but its “monstrous serpents of smoke” trailing all over the town (HT 91) seem closer to documented reality.

There are no hellish images in North and South betraying fear of the factory system, but the cautiously soothing image, suggesting a close bond between benevolent mill-owner and protected workers, is not without irony, since such harmony proves to be absent from their dealings. Margaret will soon be denouncing the “cash nexus” which is displacing human relationship, arguing with Thornton, the fiercely independent but perfectible cotton master, about the laissez-faire ethos prevalent among the northern captains of industry, and directing him to his moral duty as an employer. The simile, attributable both to Margaret’s ignorance of the true state of affairs and the novelist’s concession to the more enlightened manufacturers characterises the ambivalence of the novel. Furthermore, the fusion of perspectives in this passage raises the problem of identifying the beholder of the heartening vision of Milton. Is it EG the inhabitant of Manchester, so accustomed to fouled brick and contaminated air that they cease to disturb, Gaskell the novelist, eager to appease wronged industrialists, or is this a proleptic glimpse of the transformed Margaret Hale, who, in the course of the novel, comes to
value the stimulating life beyond surface of Milton’s unpromising externals? The uncertainty is in keeping with much of the novel’s representation of social issues and the writer’s reluctance to take position clearly. The ideology of political economy, for instance, is discussed and viewed from various critical perspectives without being denounced explicitly as erroneous, in what Jo Pryke terms a “remarkably agnostic” presentation of the subject for the time.  

As far as environmental policies are concerned, one corollary of authorial hedging is that Milton manufacturers are not explicitly held accountable for industrial waste. Just as the politics of air quality are brushed aside, water contamination from industrial activity is barely alluded to, and then only to make a tragic episode more gruesome. When Boucher, a distressed operative, drowns himself in a brook polluted by dyeing processes, the description of his swollen, discoloured corpse and his stained skin is the novel’s only testimony to the hazards of building factories along the banks of canals and rivers. Yet judging by contemporary accounts, Manchester’s waterways, fetid and multicoloured, could have more than rivalled with Coketown’s river, “black and thick with dye.” (HT 148)  

The “hopeless” streets glimpsed from the railway carriage, could seemingly belong to Coketown, a place where people “equally like one another” endure invariably tedious lives in identically dreary streets (HT 28). But the implication of the transferred epithet should not be pinpointed too hastily. Despondency is shown to be little more than a question of perspective and when “Nature is bricked out and pollution bricked in” (HT 83), the deprivation is all the worse in Gaskell’s world because it parallels social isolation. Margaret’s bleak vision of her future among northerners in their hostile country is reinforced but briefly by “the thick yellow November fogs” which soon shut out all. Unquestionably the fog is noxious and inescapable: “outside a thick fog crept up to the very windows and was driven into every open door in choking white wreaths of unwholesome mist” (65). However, as she prepares to “endure smoke and fog for a season” (66), the smog is transformed from an objective blight into perceived gloom, as the foul grey atmosphere becomes a metaphor for dismal circumstance. Remembering that London fogs can be much worse, she is challenged by Mrs Hale’s reminder that friends lay behind the murkiness there. In Milton, the uprooted family is cut off from former friends, struggling in unknown territory so that “all other life seemed shut out from them by as thick a fog of circumstance” (66). A blank wall looms through the smog “like a great barrier to hope” (66). It is a gloomy image which is undermined before long.  

For Margaret’s initial impressions are rapidly overturned when she enters the streets and discovers the bustling activity related to thriving industry. Walks around the town reveal not bleakness but effervescence, lively crowds throng the streets “full of purpose” and eagerly the young woman learns about trade depressions, unions and strikes, quickly assimilating local terminology and shocking her elders by speaking “factory slang”. In the streets, she begins the transformation from prejudiced stranger, scorning tradespeople, to enthusiastic insider, “[standing] up for the progress of commerce” (330) when confronted with the “musty” opinions of an Oxford don. Dirt and smoke seem to vanish and Milton is perceived as “a brighter place” once “a human interest” is found in the form of two factory operatives befriended in the street (74). Margaret feels “how much of interest [the crowded narrow streets] had gained by the simple fact of her having learnt to care for a dweller in them” (99). She is increasingly cheered by street life—“Yes, the air of a Milton street cheered her young blood” (131), insists the novelist, conscious of the paradox. After a stimulating dinner party discussion, Margaret almost skips back home.
through “clean” streets, “ready to dance along with the excitement of the cool, fresh, night air” (166).

13 It is above all, Milton’s infectious sense of achievement and opportunity which captivates the southerners and the smoke nuisance is beside the point. In Mary Barton, Gaskell wrote of “the agency of steam capable of almost unlimited good or evil” (MB 223). Unlike the earlier novel, North and South voices a deliberately optimistic view of the potential of steam power, in a number of passages which identify Milton implicitly with Manchester. John Thornton, possibly inspired by James Nasmyth, who invented the steam hammer in Manchester, regales Mr Hale with an awe-inspiring account of its mechanical power and precision in a eulogy tinged with local pride. The intoxicating challenge began, he claims, with Arkwright’s water-powered spinning frame which opened up a world of mechanical genius, in which social mobility depends on winning the battle opposing the elements to scientific skill: “we have many among us who [...] could carry on the war which compels and shall compel all material power to yield to science.” There is no discernible irony in the northern industrialist’s speeches and the effusive language is indicative of Gaskell’s determination to dispel the anger induced by her first novel in many she lived amongst, for there is little doubt about local identity in these passages: “I am proud of belonging to a town which [...] gave birth to such grandeur of conception” (81), boasts Thornton.

14 While his words transport her father to the marvels of the Arabian Nights, Margaret is roused to defend “her beloved South”, where the poor are not consumed by the sense of injustice she has observed in the faces of factory workers. It is a view which is gradually qualified as her growing appreciation of northern vitality is paralleled by dissatisfaction with southern inertia. At a dinner party among manufacturers, she is won over by their earnest, stimulating talk, a refreshing change from the “wearying” platitudes of Harley Street gatherings (163). As Milton men delight in their supremacy, she finds “much to admire in their anticipated triumphs over all inanimate matter at some future time which none of them should live to see.” (163–4). Growing respect for the northerners’ energy and fervour brings her to question what she had formerly perceived as rural bliss.

15 While preconceived ideas relating to the north are proved inaccurate, assumptions about social codes are unsettled in Milton. North and South abounds with instances of culture shock, prompting Mr Hale’s remark: “One had need to learn a different [...] standard up here in Milton” (159). Personal relations are changing with industrial development and the emphasis is on individual response. Wrong impressions, changing perceptions and the role of subjectivity are all marshalled to put into perspective the so-called evils of industrialisation.

16 This is observable in the contrasting responses to the physical environment, in particular, to atmospheric pollution. Milton’s noxious air is consistently presented as perceived unpleasantness. Little credit can be given to discernment of those who complain about atmospheric impurity. Mr Bell’s almost physical disgust at the dirt and smoke (“Ugh! Cotton and speculations, and smoke, well-cleansed and well-cared-for machinery, and unwashed and neglected hands.” (352) is the “mediaeval bigotry” (332) of an idle Oxford fellow, “[revering] the past” (334). Mrs Hale, egocentric and petulant, socially embarrassed by her marriage to a poor clergyman, complains about the “soft” air in the south which is too “relaxing”, associating it with her husband’s reluctance to seek a better living. Yet she thrives in the smokiness of Harley Street, like Mrs Shaw, who takes a violent dislike to noisy, smoky Milton with its dreadful chimneys and dirty people when she hastens there to rescue her orphaned niece (“you won’t be better till I get you out of
this horrid air. How you can have borne it this two years I can’t imagine” (365); “this air is bad for you” (366). Fashionable society is their “element” and any amount of unwholesome air can be endured there. Faced with the prospect of moving north to “the smoky air of a manufacturing town, all chimneys and dirt”, Helstone air is suddenly perceived as “pure and sweet, if it is too soft and relaxing.” The latter epithets appear as a projection of an ineffectual character’s own indolence and so successfully are Mrs Hale’s complaints related to character, that a genuine nuisance of Milton life—the impossibility of keeping linen clean—appears as just another grumble. Shutting herself up behind her “dirty muslin blinds” (82), Mrs Hale sees nothing beyond the greyness of the “unhealthy, smoky, sunless place” (204) and soon breathes her last, dying of an unspecified illness, blaming the atmosphere: “it’s the smoke that has made me so ill” (237–8).

But the grime and noise have a different value for Mrs Thornton, proud mother of a self-made industrialist. Out of choice, mother and son live close to the mill which looms over their smoke blackened house, untroubled by the ugly lookout or the deafening din: “the continual clank of machinery and the long groaning roar of the steam-engine, enough to deafen those who lived within the enclosure” (111). Like her son, Mrs Thornton exults in residing in a place “which has risen to eminence” (98) through the advance of machinery. Their choice of residence is at variance with the organised segregation represented in industrial fiction and observed report. Novels like *Mary Barton* and *Hard Times* illustrate the usual practice. Self-made mill-owners Carson and Bounderby mark their social success by retreating from the manufacturing centre and settling in the country. In both novels topographical details point to the remoteness of wealthy manufacturers from the daily lives of their “hands”. Engels’s historical study notes how the affluent classes sought refuge from “the misery and grime which form the complement of their wealth”, enjoying “wholesome country air” on the “breezy heights” (58) of Manchester, avoiding the north eastern side where the wind drives the factory smoke “that the working people alone may breathe” (71–2). Industrialisation meant that disparate though interdependent social groups were breathing different air. But Gaskell intends to portray manufacturers who take a genuine interest in their work and the novelist must orchestrate Thornton’s acquisition of a social conscience, so mother and son take pride in Milton smoke: “She is very proud of Milton; dirty, smoky place as I feel it to be. I believe she admires it for those very qualities.” (97) whines Fanny Thornton, herself of such a pathetically frivolous disposition that her constant complaints seem unworthy of note.

Even the din is of the essence—“I have heard noise that was called music more deafening” (161), declares Mrs Thornton; the coming and going of the workpeople is no greater disturbance than “the humming of a hive of bees” (161). Silence, however, is to be dreaded. When the “hands” turn out and strike there is no uplifting sound of “the steam engine at work with beat and pant—no click of machinery, or mingling and clash of many sharp voices” (173). In its stead, the “ominous” clamour of the furious mob threatens the running of the whole mechanism. This is the gloomier face of the town, the “Milton without smoke” (117) about which Margaret has been warned, for smoke-filled skies hold the promise of employment and prosperous times.

The beehive image, like the personified steam engine, beating and panting, illustrates another of Gaskell’s points: industrial progress is natural and the past lives on in the present through language. Age-old earth–based rural traditions endure in the factory workers’ speech. Trade Unions are explained by Higgins via the image of a plough preparing land for harvest. Manufacturers’ sons are cultivated like plants for the world of
commerce. The previously quoted farmyard analogy serves a similar purpose by domesticating the intrusion of smoking factory chimneys on the landscape. Language implies reassuring continuity in a changing world. Public health in the “big smoky place” (73), “smoky [...] enough to blind one’s eyes” (130) is not a key concern of the novel.

Nevertheless, the issue of the dangers of steam power is not completely sidestepped. One treacherous aspect of air pollution is addressed through the experience of a nineteen-year-old operative dying from byssinosis, an occupational disease prevalent in textile towns. Bessy Higgins's lungs have been slowly poisoned by the fluff inhaled through her employment in the dangerous carding process which filled the air with particles of fibre. Again Gaskell is ambivalent. There is no schematic denunciation of negligence and it is the complexity of the health hazard which is documented. The workplace can be ventilated by means of a wheel which evacuates the dust, but few masters take the trouble, partly, explains Bessy, because of the cost but also because the operatives, accustomed to swallowing fluff, complain of hunger when deprived of it and demand higher wages. This instance of irrational conduct seems to have been based on authentic cases of apathy and ignorance among mill-workers and their opposition to improvement efforts. One mill-owner who did install a ventilation machine was threatened with a strike.⁹

“[B]etween masters and men th’ wheels fall through” (102), explains Bessy, as the novelist appears to portion out blame equally. And yet the facts speak for themselves—hunger satiated by cotton fluff suggests starvation wages and, for all the improvements, the factory system continues to claim victims. Through Bessy Higgins, the conditions of a working mill are realistically evoked. Dizzy with the “whir” and choked by the fluff, Bessy is cheered simply by speaking of the airy places she has never known. But just as Margaret’s experience in the south led her to misconstrue the meaning of a dark haze of pollution, Bessy can imagine the sound of the wind in the trees only in terms of the dizzying, deafening mill noises. “Spring is coming” (73), Margaret’s words of comfort, are meaningless to the dying girl who has spent her days “smothered” in Milton, confined in the heat and noise of the ill-ventilated mill, to the point of welcoming death as deliverance.

But the issue of responsibility is treated as irresolvable and the suffering Margaret witnesses does not diminish her burgeoning vision of Milton as a place of opportunity. Thus, she begins to articulate the inadequacy of the south, deterring her sick friend, who longs to escape, with an account of the fieldworker’s “hard bodily labour” (133), exposure to the elements at their most hostile, near starvation and the threat of the workhouse. In more forceful terms she dissuades Nicholas Higgins from seeking employment there. He could not bear, the dull monotonous toil which deadens the mind and leaves the labourers “brutishly tired” (306) and unsociable. Isolation is the lot of the southern poor and relationship, rather than alienation, is the great force of the industrial north. Companionship in a town, she tells the committed unionist, is as plentiful “as the air you breathe” (306), as though lack of oxygen is redeemed by wealth of social intercourse.

By the time Margaret revisits Helstone, her perspectives are so changed that the idyllic rural south seems no more than a cliché. From her more knowledgeable standpoint, it is a shock to discover a more sombre world, still steeped in archaic superstition, but also a changing place where progress, she concedes, is “right and necessary” (400). All places now compare unfavourably to the energetic northern town where experience has adjusted judgement. The smoothness of London society is unbearable and, as her relatives...
are busy with the season, she thinks of the invisible workers on whose toil their wealth depends. Days of "eventless ease" create "a strange unsatisfied vacuum" (373). Milton has brought to light what makes her life, particularly as a woman, "wanting and dull" (372) and relief is sought in social service. Then, just as Margaret's thoughts return regretfully to the "lurid vividness" (416) of the vibrant factory town, the latter is presented in ambivalent terms by the narrator:

Meanwhile at Milton the chimneys smoked, the ceaseless roar and mighty beat, and dizzying whirl of machinery struggled and strove perpetually. Senseless and purposeless were wood and iron and steam in their endless labours; but the persistence of their monotonous work was rivalled in tireless endurance by the strong crowds, who, with sense and with purpose, were busy and restless in seeking after—What? (418)

Animate sources of power vie with inanimate, but the resulting energy has an uncertain finality. The suspended question seems to point to the writer's "forced effort" to side with manufacturers and defend industrial culture. More significantly, it is characteristic of the novel's refusal to offer simple answers to complex questions.

24 In sending her heroine back to live in Milton as the wife of a cotton manufacturer, the novelist had to struggle with her own sensibility. "What do you think of a fire burning down Thornton's mill and house?" she wrote to Catherine Winkworth, as she resisted the temptation to devise an escape plan (L211). Several of Gaskell's letters deplore her adoptive town's lack of external beauty and she fled whenever possible, becoming an exceptionally frequent traveller for a woman of her time. Others betray a certain warmth of feeling for "dear old dull ugly smoky grimy grey Manchester." (L 384 to Charles Eliot Norton).

25 The novelist's Manchester fiction consistently reads as a tribute to the thousands whose "lot" it is to live and work in the great manufacturing centre, culminating in the forced, very conscious defence of industrialists in North and South, a realistic acknowledgement of the ascendancy of urban industrial life over the rural. In a reverse image of Margaret's arrival in Milton, Mary Barton's rail journey takes her away from Manchester and she looks back regretfully at the smoking chimneys and haze of pollution, already homesick. The factory people's affection for the town they call "old smoke jack" is celebrated somewhat romantically in Gaskell's first published fiction, a short story entitled "Life in Manchester: Libbie Marsh's Three Eras". In yet another pastoral tableau, the workpeople enjoy a Whitsuntide outing to woodland country, eight miles outside the "whirl and turmoil" of the city and they fondly contemplate the urban skyline and the inevitable cloud of pollution from a grassy hilltop perspective:

the motionless cloud of smoke hanging over a great town/, ugly, smoky Manchester, dear, busy, earnest, noble-working Manchester; where their children had been born, and where, perhaps, some lay buried, where their homes were, and where God had cast their lives, and told them to work out their destiny. (DNW 183)

26 There is in North and South the same combination of unchangeable external circumstance (with less religious rationalization) and possibility, the idea of what might be. There is no liberating fire, indeed this would defeat the novelist's purpose as much as bemoaning air pollution or romanticizing the countryside. We are given to understand that Margaret will "work out a destiny" in the shadow of the mill, no longer a stranger and prepared to join forces with the now enlightened manufacturer in his schemes to create new social networks.
Ultimately, the novel shows that the combination of the elements (coal, iron, and steam) which brought wealth, human hardship and environmental devastation in its wake is also creating constructive forms of relationship and awakening social consciences, as men and women “are groping in new circumstances” (334).

Margaret’s return is the choice of a changed individual, cognisant of her own power to initiate change. Thornton too learns, through his cooperative experiments, to value social intercourse beyond the “cash nexus”. This is the salient point of North and South: cultivating personal relationships (“the very breath of life” 432) which value interdependence is as vital as the air we breathe, more than ever in the smoky city “thick with chimneys”.

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NOTES

1. The Town Improvement Act (1847). Lord Palmerston’s topical campaign to abate the nuisance of smoke resulted in a law (1853) applying only to London.

2. “Smoke or No Smoke.” Household Words, 9 (1 July 1854): 464.


ABSTRACTS

As coal and steam power transformed Britain’s physical and social landscape, the industrial fiction which emerged in the 1840s chronicles the upheavals taking place, regarding environmental conditions and personal relations. Such narratives tend to be set in an improbable locale, the grimy manufacturing town with its foul air and thick smog.

North and South (1855), Elizabeth Gaskell’s second novel dealing with “Condition of England” issues, contrasts various milieus in the Victorian heyday of industrial supremacy. When the northern manufacturing centre is set against the rural south of the title, the polarity is not as sharp as might be expected. If the factory town is smoke-blackened and polluted by disease—bearing air and water, material progress is shown in a largely positive light, as the novelist can be felt striving for balance—a consequence of the hostile reception of Mary Barton by a number of industrialists. The emphasis is on opportunity and a certain exultation in the harnessing of inanimate matter. The novelist underplays the more sinister aspect of Milton’s environmental features and manufacturers are not explicitly held accountable for industrial waste. For all its smoke and grime, the bustling factory town compares not unfavourably with the backwardness of rural England, the idle drawing-room life of London or torpid Oxford academia. Individual responses to the environment, especially air quality, are shown to be subjective and Milton’s noxious air is consistently presented as perceived unpleasantness. Gaskell’s imagery is ambivalent too—even her smoking chimneys are less threatening than those of Dickens (Hard Times 1854). The novelist’s primary concern is how men relate to their environment and to one another as they find their way in new circumstances. Companionship is the force of the industrial metropolis and lack of oxygen is redeemed by wealth of social intercourse.Acknowledging interdependence and improving personal relationships (“the very breath of life”) is more vital than wholesome, unpolluted air.

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