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**Nineteenth-century
religious Dissent
in the Novels by
Elizabeth Gaskell & George Eliot**

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Introduction

Charity, compassion, strict morality and hypocrisy are considered to be the basic notions along which Victorian ideology developed. Yet, despite common knowledge, one of the most influential principle that regulated politics, society and manners throughout the reign of Queen Victoria, was religious Nonconformity. From a twentieth or twenty-first century point of view religion might seem a secondary factor compared to issues such as economy, multiculturalism or national identity, yet faith, and more specifically the contrast between the Church of England and its counterpart, the Dissent or Nonconformity, played a crucial role in nineteenth century Victorian England.

The terms Dissent and Nonconformity both refer to any English Protestant congregation, sect or confession that did not conform to the doctrine of the Anglican Church, the Established Church of England. The term Dissenter was used for the first time during the Westminster Assembly of Divines between 1642 and 1647 in relation to five ‘Dissenting’ preachers (the ‘Dissenting Brethren’), whereas the term Nonconformist was first adopted in penal acts almost twenty years later. After the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 and the Act of Uniformity of 1662, the term Nonconformist came to indicate every place of worship or ‘conventicle’ of congregations that did not agree with the principles of the Church of England.

In nineteenth century due to various factors, such as internal conflicts, bad organisation, absentee clergy, pastoral apathy and the ever-growing population, the Church of England ended in being more and more indifferent to the needs of the members of its community, therefore, on the one hand a great amount of believers sought relief and help in Dissenting congregations and in more caring and engaged Dissenting preachers and ministers, while, on the other hand, a part of the Victorian society began to question and doubt contemporary religious institutions.

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate the religious turmoil of the Victorian society from a dissenting point of view. Furthermore, since nineteenth-century authors were profoundly influenced and affected by the religious turmoil of their epoch, both because of a direct experience or a direct acquaintance with believers, ministers or preachers, Dissent is also examined through the fictional works of two prestigious Victorian novelists, George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell.

The first chapter is devoted to an analysis of Nonconformity from a political, social and historical point of view. Although Dissent managed to shape the politics of the period and influence the society and culture of Victorian England, it remained nonetheless outside Conformity, outside the culture of the Church of England, and thus obliged to struggle for the recognition and, above all, the respect of the Anglican community. Also, as Dissent flourished in specific regions, primarily in the new industrial areas in northern England, the relation between the Dissenters and the middle and new working classes is discussed on the background of the specific geography of Dissent in England. The last section of the first chapter focuses on the main varieties which constituted Victorian Dissent.

The second chapter deals with religion, doubt and Dissent in a novel by Elizabeth Gaskell, *North & South*. This chapter discusses the doubts and Dissenting confessions of the main characters which mirror some features of religious and Dissenting 'unrest' in ever-changing industrial cities like Manchester, epitomised in the novel by the town of Milton Northern.

The third chapter deals with the biographical features of George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell which are associated with their profound and strong relation with religion. In addition, the representations of Dissenting preaching in *Adam Bede* and *Ruth* are also discussed. The dissenting characters of the lay preacher Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede* and

of the dissenting minister Thurstan Benson in *Ruth* are analysed as representatives of two contemporary Dissenting doctrines.

Chapter I:

Nineteenth-century Dissent

In Victorian England, Protestant Nonconformity enjoyed a degree of prominence in national life which had not previously experienced [...].

Gerald Parsons¹

¹ G. Parsons, *From Dissenters to Free Churchmen: the Transitions of Victorian Nonconformity*, in *Religion in Victorian Britain, Vol. 1: Traditions*, ed. by G. Parsons, Manchester, MUP in association with the Open University, 1988, 4 vols., pp. 67 – 116, p. 68

1.1. Politics and Society

Historians overall recognize that the nineteenth century was the age of doubt and Dissent in England. Three illustrious scholars (Valentine Cunningham, Gerald Parsons and David Thompson) show different views regarding the period of utmost prosperity of Dissent throughout the nineteenth century. Valentine Cunningham remarks that “Dissent had increased massively between 1801 and 1851, and it increased commensurately in the second half of the century”². Gerald Parsons states instead that the fifty years from the early 1830s until the mid 1880s was a very fortunate time for Nonconformity, especially due to the great number of bills that passed in favour of Dissenters, since the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828. Furthermore, David Thompson in his turn goes as far as to divide the age of Dissent into three phases. He calls the first phase from 1828 until 1861 the period of “growing confidence” in view of the fact that, according to him, during this period Dissenters were becoming more aware of their increasing power. The second phase from 1862 until 1886 is the “golden age”, Thompsons indicates this as the phase of utmost success of the Dissenting congregations, whereas he alludes to the period after 1886 as the “the ebb tide” phase. Despite the fact that these three scholars do not agree on a precise period that covers the highest diffusion, or decline, of Dissenting faith, nevertheless they all acknowledge that the Dissent was widely established since the early decades of the nineteenth century.

As it was pointed out by Parsons the first most important acts that, slowly, enabled Dissenters to cease to be, what Cunningham called, “second-class

² V. Cunningham, *Everywhere Spoken Against: Dissent in the Victorian Novel*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1975, p. 106

citizens”³, were approved between the 1830s and the 1880s. Historically, the first major achievement for the Dissenters was the above-mentioned repeal of the sacramental requirements of the Test and Corporation Acts, two Acts that were ratified during the reign of Charles II. As a matter of fact the reign of Charles II is most notably famous for the Restoration of the monarchy, the reopening of theatres and the introduction of female actors on the stage, but it was also marked by a vast critical attitudes against Dissenters. The Test and Corporation Acts repealed in 1828 had been ratified, respectively, in 1661 (Corporation Act) and in 1673 (Test Act). Between 1661 and 1673 many important acts that limited the liberty and harshly persecuted the Dissenters were passed. The Corporation Act for instance was part of a series of repressive decrees that constituted the Clarendon Code, a code named after Edward Hyde, 1st Earl of Clarendon, Lord Chancellor of Charles II. The four acts that composed the Clarendon Code were designed to debar Nonconformist individuals from religious and public offices; more specifically the 1661 act obliged components of governmental corporations to take the oaths of supremacy and allegiance to the Church of England along with the sacrament of Holy Communion at an Anglican parish church “in the year preceding election to corporate office”⁴, whereas the 1662 bill, the Act of Uniformity, similar to the decree of the previous year, debarred the access of Dissenters to church offices unless they renounced their faith and accepted the Anglican Creed. The Conventicle Act of 1664, which was revised in 1670, forbade any meeting of more than four Dissenters who did not belong to the same household, thus pronouncing the Nonconformist worship illegal. The last act that constituted the Clarendon Code was the, also very limiting, Five-Mile Act

³ V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 22

⁴ K. R. M. Short, *The English Indemnity Acts 1726 – 1867*, in “Church History”, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Sep., 1973), pp. 366-376, p. 366

according to which Nonconformist preachers could not live, visit or walk within the distance of five miles from their former parishes unless they, once again, renounced their faith and accepted the Established Church. The Test Act of 1673 obliged holders of municipal and national offices to also take the oaths of supremacy and allegiance, and the sacrament of the Holy Communion, yet the Anglican sacrament had to be taken within three months of instalment in the office. From a legal point of view these acts perpetuated religious intolerance against the Dissenters for over a century although, in practice, from 1726 until 1867 the government passed almost every year⁵ an Indemnity Act that permitted Nonconformists to qualify to be employed in public offices or to be elected in the House of Commons, as in the case of a group of Dissenters known as the ‘Dissenting Deputies’, who became members of Parliament since 1732. Hence the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828 did not have a crucial legal impact and was far from ending the struggle of Dissenters for equal rights, yet it “was a decisive landmark in the constitutional recognition of the growth of religious pluralism in Britain”⁶.

Nineteenth-century politics mirrored the social antithesis between the Church of England and Nonconformity through direct equivalents: the Conservative Party, the Tories, traditionally promoted the privileged position of the Established Church and supported the many civil disabilities suffered by Dissenters, whilst the Liberal Party, the Whigs, were the “traditional allies”⁷ of Dissent. After the 1828 repeal and the ratification of the Roman Catholic Relief

⁵ Only in the years 1730, 1732, 1744, 1749, 1750, 1753 and 1756 indemnity acts were not passed for unknown reasons.

⁶ G. Parsons, *From Dissenters to Free Churchmen: the Transitions of Victorian Nonconformity*, cit., p. 88

⁷ G. Parsons, *Reform, Revival and Realignment: the Experience of Victorian Anglicanism, in Religion in Victorian Britain, Vol. 1: Traditions*, cit., pp. 14 – 66, p. 15

Act in 1829, according to which Roman Catholics were granted the same legal and civil rights of Dissenters, the Tory Government lost its cohesion and power, therefore in 1830 the Whig Party became the first party in England, and managed, two years later, to pass the first Parliamentary Reform Act that enabled a more fair and democratic representation of the new ever-changing industrial areas in the English Parliament. During this age, the so-called “age of great cities”⁸, due to the massive migrations to industrial towns and cities, many small rural boroughs depopulated, yet many members of Parliament continued to return from these areas even though the number of eligible voters had decreased to a great extent. These rural boroughs were commonly named either ‘rotten boroughs’ or ‘pocket boroughs’: the former term was used if they were virtually unpopulated, whereas the latter referred to boroughs controlled by a landowner or a family from the aristocracy or the landed gentry who could bribe or coerce the remaining few inhabitants into voting for the representative of their choice. Before the 1832 Reform Bill more than 140 parliamentary seats out of 658 belonged to rotten boroughs. Following the passing of this Reform Bill into law on 4 June 1832, 56 boroughs lost their representation and 42 new boroughs were created. This Reform did not permit either the working classes or the lower middle classes to vote, but it did in any case widen the democratic representations of the English citizens since at least the middle classes of new industrial cities such as Manchester, Sheffield, and Birmingham, among whom there were a great number of Dissenters, could now be represented by appointed members of parliament.

In 1832 a great number of Victorian commentators were genuinely concerned with the contemporary political and religious state of affairs, for the

⁸ R. Vaughan, *The Age of Great Cities: Or, Modern Society Viewed in Its Relation to Intelligence, Morals, and Religion*, 1843, Vol. I, as quoted in Valentine Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 76

status of the Anglican Church as the Established Church of England, Wales and Ireland was threatened by the advancement of liberal thinkers and religious Nonconformists. On the one side English society was also becoming more and more aware of the fact that religious Nonconformity was a reality, but nevertheless “most Anglicans were content that Dissenters should go on suffering their traditional civil disabilities: these were part of penalties for dissenting from the State Church.”⁹ On the other side, Nonconformists kept on pushing forward the battle to overcome their status of second-class citizens and believers. Marriages, birth certifications, burials, the opposition to church rates taxation, and education were the main topics of the conflict.

Dissenters who wanted to marry in Dissenting chapels would not be considered husband and wife by law, as the civil registration of marriages, births and deaths was a privilege of the Anglican Church. Only from 1st March 1837, on behalf of the Marriage Act, Dissenters could be wedded by Nonconformist ministers in the presence of a civil registrar or could choose a civil marriage performed by a civil registrar.

The institutionalisation of civil registration opened to Dissenters did not only solve the issue of marriage but also the birth certification problem. Before that date the official records of births, deaths and marriages were documented in the parish registers but, in truth, these registers only recorded the events of Anglican ceremonies, “Nonconformists, therefore, were compelled to have their children baptized in an Anglican ceremony by the parish priest if they wished to be able to established a legally valid record of their birth dates.”¹⁰

⁹ V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 19

¹⁰ R. J. Helmstader, *The Nonconformist Conscience*, in *Religion in Victorian Britain, Vol. 4: Interpretations*, cit., pp. 61 – 95, p. 72

Moreover, the burial question was not so easily solved. Throughout the nineteenth century members of Dissenting chapels could not bury their dead within their premises, Dissenters had to be buried in churchyards of an Anglican Church. Additionally, the parish priest could also set some limits to the Dissenting burial: he could refuse the use of his churchyard for Nonconformist burials and services and dictate what should be inscribed on the tombstone, hence he could decide to prohibit, for instance, the inscription 'Reverend' for a deceased Dissenting minister. In 1855 a new legislation created public cemeteries divided into Anglican consecrated soil and unconsecrated ground for non-Anglicans where Dissenters could inter their beloved during a Dissenting funeral service. Only twenty-five years later, during Gladstone's second term as Prime Minister, Dissenters were finally authorised to perform their burial rites in Anglican parishes thanks to the Burial Bill of 1880.

The payment of church rates was another strong point of dispute. Church rates were a compulsory taxation that both Anglicans and Dissenters were compelled to pay in order to support the building and the conservation of parish churches since it was wrongly assumed that "all ratepayers would be worshippers in the Church of England".¹¹ By the 1830s Nonconformists in most cases began to refuse to pay these taxes as they supported a church that did not foster or help them in any way. This refusal resulted in forced payments by the seizing and selling of household goods, "sometimes in circumstances of which perhaps the less said the better"¹², and even imprisonment until 1868, when Gladstone's first government abolished these taxes.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 71

¹² J. Oakley, *The Mid-Lent Gospel: A Sermon, Preached in Manchester Cathedral . . . March 31st 1889 . . . the Day Following the Burial of the Late Rt. Hon. John Bright, MP* as quoted in V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 20

Another factor that indubitably shows the clash between the Established Church and Nonconformity was education. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century many societies were founded in order to promote the ‘eternal salvation’ through the evangelisation and education of the poor. In 1811 the National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church was established to control the national education¹³ while strenuously opposing any form of Nonconformist teaching. Nevertheless, in 1833 the British government became aware of the fact that education was no longer fostered only by the Established Church, since Dissenting Sunday Schools also promoted the education of the youth and poor citizens. For this reason it allowed annual grants for primary education both to the National Society and the Nonconformist British and Foreign School. During the following ten years it seemed that a sort of agreement upon education between these two main religious parties had been reached, yet when in 1843 Sir James Graham proposed a Factory Education Bill to regulate the working-hours and the education in factories this unsteady balance held no more. In practice, Graham’s Bill would have promoted the establishment of grammar schools affiliated to factories under the authority of Anglican priests. Dissenters like Edward Baines, a Congregationalist who was Member of Parliament for Leeds from 1859 to 1874, strongly opposed Graham’s proposition stating that it was “the greatest outrage on Civil and Religious Liberty attempted in modern times”¹⁴ and consequently promoted the idea of a voluntary system of economic self-support of Congregationalist schools which were to refuse the annual allowances from the State. By the late 1860s Baines concluded that such a voluntary system could not manage to economically afford the

¹³ M. A. Crowther, *Church Problems and Church Parties*, in *Religion in Victorian Britain, Vol. 4: Interpretations*, cit., pp. 4 – 27, pp. 4 – 5

¹⁴ E. Baines, as quoted in V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 68

education of Dissenters, yet Baines's campaign encouraged Edward Miall, a Congregationalist minister who was forced to leave his parish in Leicester because of his opposition against church rates, and later founder of the radical Dissenting newspaper *Nonconformist* and also MP of Rochdale from 1852 to 1857 and of Bradford from 1869 to 1874, to found in 1844 the Anti-State Association, later renamed in 1853 Liberation Society. The Liberation Society became one of the most important organ of defence and promotion of equality for Dissenters, coordinating a vast number of campaigns against the civil disabilities suffered by Nonconformists, while from the 1860s it also became a crucial presence in the politics of the second half of the reign of Queen Victoria. One of the most important battles of the Liberation Society was the abolishment of discrimination against Dissenters who wanted to study at the Universities of Cambridge or Oxford. Basically it was impossible for a Nonconformist student to obtain a degree in either of these two ancient universities and remain faithful to his religious Dissent. On the one hand at Oxford the student had to swear upon the Thirty-Nine Articles and the doctrinal code of the Church of England at the early stage of enrolment, i.e. the matriculation, whilst on the other hand at Cambridge he had to assent to this obligations upon taking a degree. Oxford ceased to impose the submission upon matriculation in the mid-1850s, yet both universities debarred admission of Dissenters until Gladstone's University Test Act of 1871 (a law strongly supported by Liberalists), according to which most of the degrees were now accessible to Nonconformists¹⁵.

Nevertheless, Dissenters did not only have to struggle for their legal recognition as equal citizens but also against, what Cunningham termed, Anglican

¹⁵ The academic degrees of Bachelor and Doctor of Divinity were still restricted for Dissenters until 1915 in Cambridge and 1920 in Oxford.

“snobbery”¹⁶. The high-brow attitudes towards Dissenters that can be encountered while reading a Victorian novel was not an invention of Victorian novelists, but it was rather the rendering of a factual reality. Matthew Arnold was, among Victorian writers, one of the most critical against Dissent. In his *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) he stated his opinion on the life of the Dissenters which, to him, was “a life of jealousy of the Establishment, disputes, tea-meeting, opening of chapels, sermons”¹⁷ whilst he also accused them of being extremely illiterate and ignorant.

Even though many Nonconformists were illiterate and many laymen had only a limited education, Arnold’s accusations were an oversimplification of the dissenting cultural deficit and a clear example of what offensive beliefs Dissenters had to endure and wanted to overcome, as clearly stated in this extract from the *Nonconformist*:

If Nonconformists are narrow and inadequate in their ideal of human perfection – if they do not attach sufficient importance to culture and poetry – it ill becomes an Oxford Professor, lecturing at Oxford, to tax them with their deficiency. For two hundred years they have been shut out from that University by the exclusive and jealous spirit of the Establishment, and from whatever sweetness and light it is supposed to diffuse. Why select the victims of its meanness and intolerance as an illustration of one-sidedness, when the cruel monopolist to whose injustice it should be attributed is suffered to escape? Why ridicule the stunted proportions and deformities which have been the result of hard usage, and not rather denounce the narrow and inadequate ideal of the Establishment which deliberately and persistently inflicted them? Man of culture and poetry as Mr. Matthew Arnold is, he has not showed himself free from the vice of the system in connection with which he was trained. We have not asked to shut any one out of the Universities, nor insisted upon sectarian education, nor desired to

¹⁶ Cf. V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 13

¹⁷ M. Arnold, *Culture And Anarchy with Friendship’s Garland and Some Literary Essays*, in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. by R. H. Super, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1965, p. 103

compel others to support our religious organisations, nor been jealous of the intrusion of other than our own clergy into parochial burying places, nor cast contempt upon other's right to teach Christianity, nor advocate tests, nor infringed upon the sacredness of social life. We have left these things to the Establishment.¹⁸

Despite the fact that Dissenters did not yet have the same privileges as the Anglican believers, by the 1840s they had established themselves in Victorian society. Many important newspapers had already either editors that belonged to Dissenting groups as in the case of the *Sheffield Independent*, the *Leeds Mercury* (whose editor was Edward Baines), the *Manchester Times* and the *Manchester Guardian* (founded and edited by the Unitarian Trustee John Edward Taylor) or, as in the case of the *Birmingham Journal* and *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, were supporting them. At the same time, many developing towns and cities since the 1840s trusted the Dissenters to be appointed as mayors. As a result of this, the first five mayors of Leicester ("the metropolis of Dissent"¹⁹ according to the *Leicester Chronicle*) were Unitarians, seven of the nineteenth-century mayors of Birmingham were Quakers, both Norwich and Colchester appointed Independents and in Manchester both Thomas Potter and his son Sir John Potter, appointed mayors respectively twice the former and three times the latter, were Unitarians. The office of mayor, however, was not the only means to keep the control of a town or city in the hand of Dissenters. As Professor Briggs, for instance, stated in relation to Birmingham:

Many of the important decisions about the city life were taken by a small knot of Nonconformist families, who knew each other well, frequently

¹⁸ *Mr. Matthew Arnold on the Nonconformist* in "Nonconformist", 27 (10 July, 1867), pp. 557 – 558, as quoted in V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 21

¹⁹ V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 77

intermarried, and continued until the middle of the twentieth century to dominate local social life.²⁰

²⁰ A. Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, London, Penguin, 1990, p. 204

1.2. The Geography of Dissent

Dissent's geographical distribution was not, then, uniform. George Eliot's masterly survey as she conducts the reader of *Felix Holt* on a coach journey through the Midlands, indicates the connection between the incidence of Dissent and specific locales: the absence of hand-loom and mines saves the agricultural labourers from Dissent; coal-pits, hand-loom, the 'breath of the manufacturing town', spawn Dissenting chapels as they do 'riots and trades-union meetings'.²¹

Throughout the nineteenth century the clash between religious Nonconformity and the Established Church was clear also through the geography of their popularity. The 1851 Census of Religious Worship showed that generally, but not exclusively, Nonconformity belonged to the North, whereas the Anglican Church was most worshipped in the South, although, quite surprisingly to Dissenters and Anglicans alike, Nonconformity had a minor appeal even in more rural areas. Additionally, Dissent was not only massively strong in the Midlands and Northern England but also in Wales, where it was preponderant in 67 major cities and relative boroughs. At the end of the century Dissenting lay preachers were 47,781 against the 21,164 reverends of the Established Church. The Church of England was mainly preeminent in 26 counties, of which 21 were agricultural and five were industrial. On its part Dissent had the majority of its worshippers in mining counties (Bedford, Chester, Leicestershire, Cornwall, Durham, Lancashire, Monmouth, Northumberland and Yorkshire), in three of the most important manufacturing counties (yet not in Staffordshire and Warwickshire), in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire (which were partially mining counties and partially agricultural counties) and in the agricultural county of Bedfordshire. Victorian novelists represented this dichotomy in their fiction. George Eliot's

²¹ V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 69

Dinah Morris for instance recounts how successful Methodism (one of the most important varieties of Nonconformity) was in a demanding manufacturing city like Leeds:

“It’s wonderful how rich is the harvest of souls up those high-walled streets, where you seemed to walk as in a prison-yard, and the ear is deafened with the sounds of worldly toil. I think maybe it is because the promise is sweeter when this life is so dark and weary, and the soul gets more hungry when the body is ill at ease”²²

as well as in the “dreary, bleak”²³ town of Wirksworth in Derbyshire whose main trade was cotton, epitomised in the novel by Snowfield in Stonyshire.²⁴ In *Adam Bede* George Eliot also illustrated how Dissent did not manage to succeed completely in agricultural areas of “green pastures and still waters”²⁵, like the rural Hayslope (which doubled Ellastone in Staffordshire²⁶). In Chapter 2 a traveller stops at this rural town to have his horse feed and, while he waits, he talks with the landlord of the Donninthorne Arms, Mr Casson, about the success of Methodist preaching in such a rural area as Hayslope:

“But you’ve not got many Methodist about here, surely – in this agricultural spot. I should have thought there would hardly be such a thing as Methodist to be found about here. You’re all farmers, aren’t you? The Methodists can seldom lay much hold on them.’ [...] ‘There’s plenty of empty i’ this country-side, sir. An’ there’s a fine batch o’ Methodisses at Treddles’on – that’s the market town about three miles off – you’ll maybe ha’ come through it, sir. There’s a pretty high score of ‘em on the Green now, as come from there. That’s where our people gets it from, though there’s only two

²² G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, (1859), ed. by S. Gill, London, Penguin, 1985, Ch. 8, p. 137

²³ G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., Ch. 8, p.133

²⁴ D. W. Shimwell, *Images of the Peak District, A.D. 1150 – 1950*, in “Manchester Geographer, Journal of the Manchester Geographical Society 1980 – 1993”, pp. 19 – 38, p. 26

²⁵ G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., Ch. 8, p. 137

²⁶ D. W. Shimwell, Ivi

men of ‘em in all Hayslope: that’s Will Maskery, the wheelwright, and Seth Bede, a young man as works at the carpenterin’.”²⁷

Moreover, it is also correct to point out that in some districts the attendance of believers was not specifically divided into Anglicans and Dissenters. Dissenting chapels attracted not only Nonconformist believers but also Anglican worshippers for the high percentage of meeting-houses throughout the districts as “outside the towns, Dissent was most usually associated [...] with large parishes, where settlements was dispersed and many inhabitants lived far away from the parish church”²⁸. Cunningham esteemed that

There was also clearly a fluid band of church-goers between Church and Dissent: including the Anglicans who would attend a near-by chapel on rainy days, or in the evening when the Church was not open, and the Methodists who continued in Victorian years the older habit of attending Church in the morning and chapel later.²⁹

Victorian authors satirised this behaviour in their works. Charles Kingsley in Chapter 2 of his novel *Two Years Ago* (1857) recounts the perplexity of a curate of the West Country where some Anglican ministers also attended the Bryanite Chapel, while Thomas Hardy in his short-story *The Distracted Preacher* (1879) mocks the practice of Nether-Moyton Dissenters who belonged “to the mixed race which went to church in the morning and chapel in the evening”³⁰.

Notwithstanding this, the city was undoubtedly the centre of nineteenth-century Dissent. The 1851 Census reported that the majority of Dissenters worshipped in cities such as Manchester, Bolton, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Hull, Birmingham; in Leeds 31 per cent of the population preferred chapels to churches

²⁷ G. Eliot, *Adam Bede.*, cit., Ch. 2, p. 60

²⁸ *Parish by Parish: the Place of the Victoria County Histories in the Revolution in Historical Method*, in “TLS”, 13 Mar. 1969, as quoted in V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 72

²⁹ V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 107

³⁰ T. Hardy, *The Distracted Preacher*, in *Wessex Tales*, London, Macmillan, 1926, pp. 218 – 291, p. 219

(only 15 per cent). Nonconformists understood before their 'adversaries' of the Established Church that miners, factory-workers, domestic servants, clerks and urban citizens of cities of over 50,000 people needed more spiritual comfort and aid than the rural and aristocratic landowners or the quiet farmers, whilst simultaneously Nonconformist middle-class morality was most in accordance with the attitudes of Victorian merchants, bankers and the rest of middle-class *élite*. The Victorian urban bourgeoisie felt correctly represented by Dissent whereas the Established Church seemed to be either excessively careless or indifferent.

1.3. The Varieties of Dissent

In any period it is a mistake to treat Protestant Nonconformity in England as though it were uniform. There have always been important differences within and between the various denominations.³¹

‘Dissent’ is a portmanteau term, covering, but not masking, kaleidoscopic shifts and varieties.³²

... many of us can remember country districts in which the great mass of the people were christianised by illiterate Methodist and Independent ministers; while the influence of the parish clergyman a few among the poor did not extend much beyond a few old women in scarlet cloaks, and a few exceptional church-going labourers.³³

As the 1851 Census testifies despite the many civil disabilities suffered by Dissenters, a great number of Victorians preferred the Nonconformist faith to the established dogma. In 1833 in a conversation with Alexis de Tocqueville, William Pleydell-Bouverie, 3rd Earl of Radnor, who de Tocqueville simply named Lord Radnor, expressed his perplexity about the current state of the Established Church. Although being himself a fervent Anglican, whilst also being a Radical open-minded supporter of freedom of religion, Catholicism in particular, he believed that the Church of England was detaching from the people it should have fostered and assisted since it was “without zeal” and fulfilled its obligations “lazily”³⁴. Lord Radnor took into account the case of a clergyman of Salisbury, who did not actually reside in the town of his parish but in a neighbouring area and left the incumbent duties to a young minister, and stated that “it is the same in

³¹ D. Thompson, *Nonconformity in the Nineteenth Century*, 1972, p. 1, as quoted in G. Parsons *From Dissenters to Free Churchmen: the Transitions of Victorian Nonconformity*, cit., p. 68

³² V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 25

³³ G. Eliot, *Natural History of German Life* (1856), in G. Eliot, *Selected Critical Writings*, ed. by R. Ashton, Oxford, OUP, 1992, pp. 260 – 295, p. 277

³⁴ A. de Tocqueville, *Journeys to England and Ireland* (1828), trans. by G. Lawrence and K. P. Mayer, ed. by J. P. Mayer, New Haven, YUP, 1958, p. 57

a great many places: the resident clergy are generally who take all the responsibilities of the apostolic ministry, but have hardly enough to live on” meanwhile “the number of dissenters is rapidly increasing; sects are multiplying infinitively”³⁵. Hence it is wrong to assert that Nonconformity was a singular reality as religious Dissent was a diversified ingredient of the nineteenth-century life. As a matter of fact, variety is one of the basic features of Victorian Dissent, it included a large number of different congregations that shared common social values, political viewpoints and origins, and also differed in significant matters, namely theological doctrines and internal government. While the 1851 Census showed that Victorian Dissent consisted in thirty different confessions, the *Whitaker’s Almanack* of 1869 attested that the Registrar-General of that year recorded 101 places of worship which more than doubled in the following thirty years.

Victorian Dissent is conventionally divided into two main groupings: the “‘Old Dissent’ and the ‘New Dissent’”³⁶. The Old Dissent gathered within itself four varieties, Congregationalists (or Independents), Baptists, Presbyterians (or Unitarians) and Quakers, whose origins can be traced back to the religious debates of the mid-seventeenth century. Meanwhile the New Dissent was composed by Methodism, a confession that originated in the eighteenth century during the Evangelical revival (which in truth revived also some of the branches of the Old Dissent, i.e. the Quakers, Congregationalists and Baptists), which was the most vast congregation of the nineteenth century, achieving more and more importance throughout the Victorian Age.

³⁵ A. de Tocqueville, *op. cit.*, p. 57

³⁶ G. Parson, *From Dissenters to Free Churchmen: the Transitions of Victorian Nonconformity*, cit., p. 71

From a historical perspective, Dissent derived from late sixteenth and seventeenth century Puritanism, which possibly was the first Dissenting movement that had deeply influenced the history of the English nation since the earliest decades³⁷ that followed the ratification of the Act of Supremacy. Even if the Tudor Act of Supremacy of 1534 denied the authority of the Roman Catholic Church and established the Anglican Church as the only true Church of England, the aim of the Puritan congregation was to ‘purify’ the Established Church of the ‘popish’ residue that still dwelled within the Anglican dogma. Consequently, as a result of this struggle for religious purification, the main features of this reform movement were a strict morality and severe lifestyle, strenuous and powerful preaching inspired by everyday experience along with the reading of Scriptures and faith in the principle of predestination. Predestination, in particular, was a distinctive bond between Puritanism and the Calvinist theology.

From a theological point of view the confessions of the Old Dissent asserted that their faith was based upon the Calvinistic doctrine, notwithstanding the fact that its common belief that only a few elected were going to be saved had been broadly replaced by the Arminian thesis, according to which the eternal salvation was a possibility for the whole human kind. One of the causes of this theological adjustment from a high Calvinistic attitude towards a more lenient doctrine was partially motivated by the fact that strict Calvinism did not promote any Evangelicalism, which on the contrary was the basic, if not the most crucial, feature of the success of eighteenth-century spirituality and of the foundation of nineteenth-century Nonconformity.

³⁷ According to Thomas Fuller the earliest use of the word ‘Puritan’ dates back to 1564, as stated in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, ed. by W. Yust, Chicago, Encyclopedia Britannica, 1951, Vol. XXII, p. 665

The Congregationalists (along with the Baptists) founded their movement on a congregational structure, that is to say that there was not a superior ‘legal body’ that coordinated the ministry of a community or the services of a parish (as in the case of the Methodist Conference) but each and every congregation was self-regulating and independent. This independent attitude explains why the Congregationalists were also called Independents. They were not ruled by any superior authority but their own. Among this group even the minister did not have a distinguished role within the community. Congregationalism developed from one of the branches of the sixteenth and seventeenth-century Puritanism. Together with the other confessions that constituted Old Dissent, it suffered a period of stagnation in the eighteenth century, which was overcome by the institution of Unions and Associations, like the County Union and Associations for mutual support of Evangelical inspiration. Another element that favoured the revival of this grouping (and its geographical expansion) was the incorporation of part of the English Presbyterianism in the eighteenth century. The Presbyterian confession merged in Congregationalism after a schism that occurred among its members in 1719, regarding the notion of Trinity. Some members of the community opposed this notion and began to believe in a Unitarian doctrine, thus establishing Unitarianism.

The Baptists were similar to Independents as regards their origins, as they also came into being in the seventeenth century, and their internal government. Concurrently they also differed from Congregationalism due to their position in relation to baptism: Baptists believed in the believers’ adult baptism and refused infant baptism (which on the contrary was accepted and promoted by Congregationalists). This variety was divided into two branches, the General

Baptists (who followed an Arminian theology) and the Particular Baptists (who preferred a more strict Calvinist dogma). Similarly to the Congregationalists, Baptists at the end of the eighteenth century founded some associations, like the Missionary Society in 1792 and the Home Missionary Society in 1797. From the late eighteenth century to the early decades of the nineteenth century Baptism was most strong among the upper working-classes and the lower middle-class, nevertheless between the 1830s and the 1860s the movement advanced towards the middle-class. In the nineteenth century Congregationalists and Baptists were mostly established in the Home and Eastern Counties; the Congregationalists settled mainly in Surrey, Essex, Middlesex, Suffolk and Hertfordshire whereas the Baptists occupied the “London Area”³⁸ (i.e. Cambridgeshire, Suffolk, Bedfordshire, Huntingdon, Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire, Northamptonshire and Berkshire) and some counties in Wales but they both were very weak in the upper part of the northern counties. Unitarians were most dominant in great urban areas such as Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool, Cheshire, Lancashire along with Warwickshire and Worcestershire, even though they always differed from the other confessions, both of the Old and New Dissent, due to theological incompatibilities.

Unitarianism based its creed on the aforementioned refusal of the doctrine of Trinity as unscriptural and favoured a more calm and rational attitude. This congregation (to whom the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell belonged) fascinated a great number of Victorian authors who realised that the Established dogma was in discord with their more rational attitude, like for instance George Eliot, Francis William Newman and John Sterling. Unitarianism did not intrigue only novelists

³⁸ V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 71

but it also “sustained a tradition of provincial politicians, mayors [like the already mentioned mayors of Manchester] and leaders of provincial civic life whose socially reforming contribution to Victorian society gave Unitarianism an importance out of all proportion to its actual size”.³⁹ For instance James Martineau, a Unitarian minister and brother to the writer Harriet Martineau, was inspired to promote the idea of Unitarianism as a ‘spiritual home for doubters’ by the critical awareness of the intellectual crisis of personal devotionism in the Victorian Age.

The Quakers were the last group that composed Old Dissent. Although they deeply participated to the life of Victorian society thanks to welfare projects, nevertheless, due to several factors such as their commitment to a precise line of behaviour, way of dressing and speaking, they separated from contemporary society until the 1830s, when this confession started to be more opened, even though they had become very few, as they “expanded comparatively little and tended to be suspicious of converts”⁴⁰. According to Parsons the Quakers had four elements in common with Unitarianism. First both these confessions, although being relative small in numbers, had a vast impact on Victorian society, socially and politically. For instance before 1892 Birmingham appointed seven Quaker mayors. Second they both belonged to a more quiet heterodoxy compared to the other confessions that were inspired from the over-caring evangelical tradition. Third both Unitarians and Quakers belonged to the commercial middle-class, and as a conclusion they rather stood on the periphery of nineteenth-century Nonconformity.

³⁹ G. Parsons, *From Dissenters to Free Churchmen: the Transitions of Victorian Nonconformity*, cit., p. 80

⁴⁰ V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 34

New Dissent was theologically based on the Arminian doctrine, hence it was more open towards a conciliation between free will and God's supremacy (only the Calvinist Methodist continued to be faithful to a more strict doctrine based on predestination). This Nonconformist grouping originated in the mid-eighteenth century during the Evangelical Revival, and immediately had a great success.

Methodism was the most important and vast confession produced by the Evangelical Revival. In relation to this confession the poet George Crabbe in the Preface to his collection of poems *The Borough* (1810) even talked about a "spiritual influenza"⁴¹. The fundamental features of Methodism were established and promoted by John Wesley in 1725 with his group of Bible studies known as 'The Holy Club' or 'The Methodists' at the Oxford University and were perfected after his acquaintance with George Whitefield, who was the actual founder of the Methodist Revival in 1735. First of all John Wesley professed that Christian devotion was not complete unless it also involved practical charity, and that "experimental religion"⁴² was preferable to religious orthodoxy. The life of Christ as narrated in the New Testament had to be the main ambition in life and promote "personal and social 'holiness'"⁴³, while the Evangelical attitude was to inspire the help of the poor and sinners and the teaching of the Gospel. Another crucial element of this confession was the equality between appointed ministers and laymen. Dinah Morris, the woman lay-preacher of *Adam Bede*, in Chapter 3 recalls to Seth Bede the self-denying apostolic attitude of a Methodist preacher who has to help the poor:

"God has called me to minister to others, not have any joys or sorrows of my own, but to rejoice with them that do rejoice, and to weep with those

⁴¹ G. Crabbe, Preface to *The Borough*, as quoted in V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 26

⁴² R. E. Davies, *Methodism*, London, Penguin, 1962, p. 11

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 12

who weep. He has called me to speak his word, and he has greatly owned by work. It could only be on a very clear showing that I could leave the brethren and sisters at Snowfield, who are favoured with very little of this world's good; where the trees are few so that a child might count them, and there's very hard living for the poor in the winter. It has been given me to help, to comfort, and strengthen the little flock there, and to call in many wanderers [...].”⁴⁴

Still, it is very important to point out that when Methodism developed and became widespread during the mid-eighteenth century it was not a Dissenting movement, and it did not have the more Whig political attitude of its nineteenth-century counterpart. On the contrary John Wesley's desire was the formation of an “*ecclesiola in ecclesia*”⁴⁵ meaning a Church within a Church promoting the aspects of Christianity that had not been taken into consideration by the Established Church, while he (and consequently his movement) remained a strenuous Tory Anglican till the end of his life in 1791. Notwithstanding this, the apostolic spirit of Methodism based on itinerant ministers and communities run by simple laymen, an attitude that continued throughout the following century, promoted the idea of a Dissenting movement and thus encountered the continuous oppositions of the Establish Church.

Eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Methodism did not favour an independent development of the confession, they were both based on “disciplined hierarchy”⁴⁶ where the classes (or groups of discussion divided in male and female classes) and the societies (local chapels) were at the bottom of the hierarchy, and were ruled by a “‘circuit’ of local societies”⁴⁷, the so-called

⁴⁴ G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., Ch. 5, p. 79

⁴⁵ R. E. Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 13

⁴⁶ G. Parsons, *From Dissenters to Free Churchmen: the Transitions of Victorian Nonconformity*, cit., p. 82

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“district committees”⁴⁸, supervised by the Conference, a group of one hundred ministers who decided the proceedings of the confessions. The nineteenth-century Wesleyan Conference faced many harsh critics especially when under the control of Jabez Bunting whose anti-democratic and anti-reform attitude was not much tolerated. The discontent with the Conference was one of the main causes of detachment from the original Wesleyan Methodism. As it has already pointed out, Methodism was one of the vastest congregations characterised by continuous regroupings. Wesleyan Methodism was the most famous group, yet Primitive Methodism was the largest. Primitive Methodists detached from the Wesleyans in 1827 due to an opposition to a decision of the Conference. This grouping had a strong appeal on the proletarian classes. Another famous group was the Independent Methodists founded between 1805 and 1806 near Manchester.

As a matter of fact, despite the many sects within the Methodism, it was “an affair of song”⁴⁹ since this confession was born during the Evangelical Revival which was greatly characterised by hymn-singing. The Lancashire Independent Methodists were usually nicknamed “Singing Quakers”⁵⁰ (partially because they were also influenced by Quaker features) whereas the Primitive Methodists were also known as “Ranters”⁵¹ because of their attitude of singing in the streets.

As a conclusion, since John Wesley professed that Christian devotion also had to involve practical charity, we might say that one of the key aspects of Methodism that conveyed its success among the working and middle-classes was its considerable interest in the poor, help and comfort marked by strenuous efforts to help and comfort them, together with the promotion of Victorian moral

⁴⁸ Ivi

⁴⁹ V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 42

⁵⁰ Ivi

⁵¹ Ivi

standards against the urban vices such as drunkenness, immoral behaviours and utter ignorance, which were likely to promoted more vices, unrest and brawls. Methodists of all the nineteenth-century regroupings are always recalled also as promoters of self-improvement, helping the ‘nobodies’⁵² to become ‘somebody’⁵³. Lay preachers and believers alike were encouraged to become better persons. The common man Joseph Barker asserted:

““And when I found myself noticed and cared for by him [Joseph Mill, a Methodist schoolmaster and preacher who taught Barker Latin at 6 a.m. and helped him with his preaching], and even treated with brotherly respect, it made me feel I can scarcely tell how. I felt as if I had risen from the rank of nothingness to that of being: I felt as if I really was a man, or destined to be one, and as if the world had not been made in vain. I felt as if I had been an outcast from the world before, an outcast from the world of thoughtful, intellectual, honourable men, and as if I was now admitted within its circle.””⁵⁴

⁵² Cf. V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 95

⁵³ Cf. Ivi

⁵⁴ J. Barker, *The Life of Joseph Barker*, p. 73, as quoted in V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, pp. 94 - 95

Chapter II:

North & South and Dissent

The best way to approach the religious ambiguities of the period might be to consider the discourse of the texts that it produced.

– Lance St John Butler¹

¹ L. S. J. Butler, *Victorian Doubt. Literary and Cultural Discourses*, Worcester, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990, p. 4

2.1. The Way to Milton Northern

When her most celebrated novel, *North & South* (1855), was published Elizabeth Gaskell was already a famous author acclaimed by Victorian men of letters and more common readers. She became a celebrated yet criticized novelist thanks to the uproar and interest caused by her first novel, *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life*, at first published anonymously by Chapman and Hall in October 1848, the year of European revolutions. *Mary Barton* is an industrial novel which recounts the hardship, misery and poverty of an industrial city like Manchester, describing a conflicting love story along with the rage of the striking working class against the insensitive bourgeois manufacturers. These problems and themes are recurrent topics of many novels and essays by Victorian authors such as Harriet Martineau (*A Manchester Strike* in *Illustrations of Political Economy*, 1832), Frances Trollope (*Michael Armstrong. the Factory Boy*, 1839), Charlotte Tonna (*Helen Fleetwood*, 1841) and Benjamin Disraeli (*Coningsby*, 1844, and *Sybil*, 1845) and are also the background of Gaskell's later work *North & South*.

After the success of her first industrial novel Gaskell's fame improved with her second novel, *Ruth*, published in January 1853 by Chapman and Hall. The topic of this novel is extremely delicate since Gaskell narrates the story of a naïve young girl who becomes pregnant out of wedlock. It was the first time that a 'fallen woman' was the main character of a novel which was neither farcical nor that presented this character as a model to avoid.

Notwithstanding this, while she was attacked for the core of *Ruth*, she also received a great number of pleasing reviews and letters concerning the stories

which later came to compose *Cranford* which, since 1851, had been published weekly in Charles Dickens's *Household Words*.

The fictionalisation of the stories and anecdotes in *Cranford* keeps close to the story of Elizabeth Gaskell's family (especially the Hollands, the cousins from her mother's side who lived in Knutsford and Manchester) and differs vastly from the dark and sad themes and plots of her previous and later novels like *North & South* and the tragic *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863). Gaskell's contribution to Charles Dickens's magazine, as a matter of fact, is a collection of instalments with a strong feeling of nostalgia and echoes of a pre-industrial world about a community "in possession of the Amazons"² which, for instance, strongly opposes the construction of a railway (which stands as the symbol of modernity) in the neighbourhood of their little town. In this society of old ladies and widows, morning calls, tea meetings, obsessions with etiquette and little eccentricities regulate the life of every 'Cranfordian' ("there were rules and regulations for visiting and calls"³). This collection differs from most of her short-stories, novellas and novels for there is no deep social commitment, its comical recollections and mostly light-hearted narration, which are to be found again in her unfinished novel *Wives and Daughters: An Every-day Story* (1866), are not engaged to display any hideous truth (as the indigent conditions of the working-class in *Mary Barton* or the domineering husband and father in the short-story of *Lizzie Leigh*, 1850) or rejected reality (like Ruth's fate) yet the nostalgic and satirical thread of the *Cranford* stories have nonetheless an aim: these stories are employed by the novelist to analyse how the past can influence the present (a

² E. Gaskell, *Cranford* (1853), ed. by E. P. Watson, Oxford, OUP, 1998, Ch. I, p. 1

³ E. Gaskell, *Cranford*, cit., Ch. 1, p. 2

strategy that she also employed in *Ruth*, and to some extent in *North & South* as well).

This commitment to a magazine was not Gaskell's first publication in a periodical. Following the path of many other Victorian authors before and after her who serialised their novels in magazines (like, among many, William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* or Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* that were serialised respectively in *Punch Magazine* and in *Bentley's Miscellany*), Elizabeth Gaskell was an accomplished writer whose stories, as well as two of her later novels (*North & South* and *Wives & Daughters*), were published in periodicals. Gaskell's first publication in a magazine was a poetic composition published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in January 1837. The poem, *Sketches among the Poor, No. I*, was inspired by George Crabbe's poetry and belongs to an 'educational' project planned by Elizabeth Gaskell and her husband William, according to which they wanted to give the reader a moral lesson through the description of single portraits of men and women. Ten years later, between June 1847 and New Year's Eve 1848 she published her first series of short-stories in *Howitt's Journal*: the three-part story of Libbie Marsh, *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras* (printed throughout June 1847), *The Sexton's Hero* (printed in September) and *Christmas Storms and Sunshine*. This magazine, that lasted only eighteen numbers due to some financial problems related to a previous agreement, belonged to her friend William Howitt who, together with his wife Mary, was at the centre of an influential circle of eminent personalities of the time, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning, William Wordsworth, Dickens, Alfred Tennyson, William Johnson Fox (a former Unitarian minister, editor of the

Monthly Repository until 1836 and an active opponent to the Corn Laws and MP for Oldham from 1847), John Chapman and John Forster.

John Foster in particular was a remarkable confidant and editorial adviser to many authors of the period. William Thackeray said about him that he was “the greatest man I know. Great and Beneficent like a Superior Power [...] whenever anybody is in a scrape we all fly to him for refuge. He is omniscient and works miracles”⁴. Foster was born and grew up in Newcastle, was also Unitarian and attended William Turner’s Hanover Square Chapel, yet the novelist and the editorial adviser never met before the 1840s since Gaskell started to live at the Turners’ house few months after Foster had moved to Cambridge and London to become a barrister. He was not a novelist yet he wrote for W. J. Fox’s *Sun*, Dickens’s *Daily News* and the *Examiner* and, above all, he was an influential reader who promoted a great number of contemporary writers to publishers Chapman and Hall, like among the others William Thackeray, Anthony Trollope, Thomas Carlyle and Charles Kingsley, thus “bridging the gulf between the Patron of the eighteenth century and the Literary Agent of the twentieth”⁵. Foster enacted as a key figure for Elizabeth Gaskell’s literary career. While she was finishing *Mary Barton* she sent the manuscript to William Howitt who was “delighted with it”⁶ and showed it to John Foster. Foster was very pleased with Gaskell’s novel as well, he suggested her a list of elements that should have been improved but nevertheless proposed its publication to Chapman and Hall. After such a lucky encounter that ended in Gaskell’s first publication, Foster continued to support the novelist, she visited him every time she stayed in London, while he became her

⁴ W. Thackeray to Sir J. E. Tennent, 1 – 3 October 1846, in *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, ed. by G. N. Ray, New York, Octagon Books, 1980, 4 vols., Vol. 2, pp. 251 – 253, p. 252

⁵ J. Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell. A Habit of Stories*, London, Faber & Faber, 1999, p. 183

⁶ Cf. M. Howitt, *Autobiography*, as quoted in J. Uglow, *op. cit.*, p. 182

mentor until his marriage in 1856 and his 'retirement' from London literary scene. The publication of *Mary Barton*, its success and Foster's acquaintances widely promoted Elizabeth Gaskell's fame as a novelist. In the following year, between April and May 1849, while visiting London she became acquainted with many eminent figures of London and Victorian culture and literature, especially Thomas Carlyle and Charles Dickens who both deeply appreciated her work.

Charles Dickens was an established writer and publisher by that time, he had already written a great number of publications, novels and contributed as an editor to Richard Bentley's *Bentley's Miscellany*, and was now planning to run his own weekly periodical. He managed to publish his new *Household Words* with the help of his London publishers Bradbury and Evans and the co-operation of William Henry Wills, a trusted friend from his time as editor of *The Daily News*, whom he chose as an editor of his newly-born magazine. Dickens was deeply interested in the social issues of the time, the sanitary reform, the dreadful conditions of poor classes living in slums, the often inhumane way workers were treated and the ostracism suffered by young mothers or young girls who eventually would become prostitutes, the so-called 'fallen women'. The aim of his *Household Words* (which ran from 1850 until 1859) was "to bring to innumerable homes, from the stirring world around us, the knowledge of many social wonders, good and evil"⁷, hence to inform, instruct and entertain his readership. Dickens was determined to ask for contributions not only by celebrated journalists or established writers like himself, but also by people from mostly all over the British Empire, from different classes and from various professions and to writers

⁷ C. Dickens, *A Preliminary Word*, in "Household Words", 30 March 1850, No. 1, p. 1

whose fame and career were just at the beginning, as it was the case with Elizabeth Gaskell.

Elizabeth Gaskell's contribution was requested since the first number. On 31 January 1850 Charles Dickens wrote her a letter in order to persuade her to be part of his new weekly periodical:

"I do not know what your literary vows of temperance or abstinence may be, but as I *do* honestly know that there is no living English writer whose aid I would desire to enlist in preference to the authoress of "Mary Barton" (a book that most profoundly affected and impressed me), I venture to ask you whether you can give me any hope that you will write a short tale, or any number of tales, for the projected pages."⁸

At the beginning Gaskell had some hesitations concerning her involvement in this new project for she was afraid that she could not be able to fulfill properly her role of mother and lady of the house as well as her new role of a writer; additionally, she also believed she would not be able to limit her natural disposition for details. Dickens, however, managed to overcome her fears and convinced her that her writings would not interfere with the duties in her household ("I am not at all afraid of the interruptions necessary to your domestic life, and I think you will be far less sensible of them in writing short stories than in writing a long one."⁹) and that her habit of a detailed fiction would perfectly suit periodical publication ("Secondly, that the tendency to detail, where detail is an indispensable part of the art and the reality of what is written (as it decidedly is, your case) cannot be an objection or impediment to any kind of fiction."¹⁰) and thus their collaboration began.

⁸ C. Dickens to E. Gaskell, 31 January 1850, in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by G. Storey, K. Tillotson, N. Burgis, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989, 11 vols., Vol. 6, pp. 21-22

⁹ C. Dickens to E. Gaskell, 5 February 1850, in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, cit., Vol. 6, p. 29

¹⁰ Ivi

The collaboration between Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell lasted for many years, until 1863, two years prior to her death. She continued to write for him even when he decided to close *Household Words* because of a disagreement with his publishers Bradbury and Evans and launched his new periodical *All the Year Round*, which ran from 1859 until 1870. Their relationship lasted for almost fifteen years and despite the fact that she wrote for him two-thirds of the more than forty stories and articles that she penned throughout her career, and that the successful cycle of *Cranford* and her novel *North & South* were published in his first magazine, they had a series of quarrels over Gaskell's style and Dickens's editorship. On the one hand, Dickens imposed his editorial decisions on Gaskell's writing more than once, suggesting her the fate of a character (as it was the case of Mr. Hale and Mr. Bell's departures), or interfered considerably as during the composition of *North & South*. On the other hand, the topics of Gaskell's fictions (the conditions of women, of poor people and workmen and the implications of domineering men to name a few) were dear to Dickens's heart, yet the endings of her stories were excessively dark, sad and full of sorrow, for frequently the main protagonist, who often was just a victim of the events, did not survive. In a letter to his editor Wills, he complained about the accidents that were suffered by Gaskell's characters which ended in their death, concluding that he wished that "her people would keep a little firmer on their legs"¹¹ since to him many of these deaths caused a tearful pain that could be avoided. Another problematic issue between Dickens and Gaskell was her 'incapability' of writing stories for a prescribed space, hence not exceeding in descriptions and details that would make her stories too long. Nevertheless, ironically, at the beginning of their

¹¹ C. Dickens to W. H. Wills, 12 December 1850, in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, cit., Vol. 6, p. 231

collaboration Dickens wrote her that she should not have troubled herself about the length of a story, on the contrary she should have “allow[ed] the story to take its own length and work itself out”¹², an advice that he probably regretted when he started to print her most famous novel, *North & South*.

¹² C. Dickens to E. Gaskell, 6 March 1850, in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, cit., Vol. 6, p. 55

2.2. North & South

“‘No!’ said Margaret, half sighing. ‘I come from the South – from the Hampshire,’ [...]. ‘That’s beyond London, I reckon? And I come fro’ Burnley-ways, and forty mile to th’ North. And yet, yo see, North and South has both met and made kind o’ friends in this big smoky place.’”¹³

Eighteen months before Gaskell engaged herself to work on her new industrial novel she sent Dickens one of the last stories of *Cranford* (*The Panic*), to which he replied: “As to future work, I do assure you that you cannot write too much for *Household Words*, and have never written half enough.”¹⁴ As a matter of fact however, the length of *North & South* was the source of a great number of arguments between Dickens and Gaskell.

After consulting her mentor John Foster she presented the outline of her first serial novel to Dickens and started to write it in March 1854. Elizabeth Gaskell wished to entitle her book ‘Margaret’ or ‘Margaret Hale’, thus following the path of her previous novels whose titles came from the names of their eponymous characters Mary Barton (although the working title of this novel was ‘John Barton’ and later changed into *Mary Barton* by Chapman and Hall¹⁵) and Ruth Hilton, but Dickens suggested her otherwise. According to him “North South appears [...] to be a better name than Margaret Hale. It implies more, and is expressive of the opposite people brought face to face by the story”.¹⁶ Winifred Gérin suggests that Elizabeth Gaskell started to work on *North & South* in February 1854 and that in April she showed her progresses to one of her trusted

¹³ E. Gaskell, *North & South* (1855), ed. by A. Easson, Oxford, OUP, 2008, Vol. 1, Ch. 8, p. 73

¹⁴ C. Dickens to E. Gaskell, 13 April 1853, in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Vol. 7, ed. by G. Storey, K. Tillotson and A. Easson, cit., 1993, p. 62

¹⁵ J. Uglow, *op. cit.*, p. 186

¹⁶ C. Dickens to E. Gaskell, 26 July 1854, in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Vol. 7, cit., p. 378

confidant Emily Shaen¹⁷. By 17 May 1854 she penned the first 76 pages, the following month she sent to Dickens the first hundred pages. Soon after he received these pages he informed Gaskell that he “had asked the printers for a cast-off, to estimate the space her foolscap pages would fill, and had divided the copy she had sent into the first six numbers”¹⁸. Yet Dickens was perplexed about the second number of the serialized publication as it described a long dialogue which dealt with a difficult topic: religion. Dickens suggested Gaskell to revise this part and possibly reduce it, a suggestion that the novelist did not accept deeply enraging her publisher. Additionally, the printers had miscalculated the length of the novel that was to be longer than it had been expected to be. Throughout the summer of 1854 Gaskell wrote and revised her novel with Dickens, she was aware of his complaints and proposed to wait for the whole novel before starting to serialize it. Notwithstanding this, the author of *David Copperfield* could not wait for its completion for he needed a new serial for the following September. *North & South* was therefore first printed weekly from 2 September 1854 to 27 January 1855 in Dickens’s *Household Words* and published later that same year as a two-volumes novel by Chapman and Hall. She kept on writing the novel meanwhile it was published, thus altering the planned story and feeling as if it was “‘unnatural’ and ‘deformed’”¹⁹. The *Household Words* publication was expanded from the scheduled twenty episodes to twenty-two but, as Gaskell’s was compelled by Dickens to finish her novel in a hurry, she had to conclude her *North & South* abruptly (an experience that she almost repeated with her unfinished novel *Wives & Daughters* which was published in *Cornhill Magazine*). When she revised it before its publication in two volumes she altered

¹⁷ Cf. W. Gérin, *Elizabeth Gaskell. A Biography*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977, p. 151

¹⁸ J. Uglow, *op. cit.*, p. 360

¹⁹ E. Gaskell, as quoted in J. Uglow, *op. cit.*, p. 368

and corrected her composition, expanding certain passages and situations that had to be condensed due to the limited space to which she was afforded in the magazine. She expanded the last section of the serialized publication, corrected a few number of paragraphs that had been misplaced and add two new chapters²⁰, along with chapter titles, quotations from past and contemporary authors as epigraphs at the beginning of every chapter and a preface, explaining her motivations for the new additions and alterations.²¹

North & South tells the story of a nineteen-years-old girl, Margaret Hale, the daughter of the vicar of a little community in the south of England who is forced to move with her family from the idyllic Helstone (in Hampshire) to the harsh North for her father had a crisis of conscience and decided to resign from his role as a minister of the Church of England in order to be a private tutor in the grey and smoky Milton Northern, in Darkshire. Life in Milton is very different compared to her previous experiences (Helstone and London), Margaret struggles to comprehend and learn the different rules of this new town. Milton Northern is a manufacturing town whose main income comes from the factories, mainly cotton-mills. It is the friendship with a worker, Nicholas Higgins, and his sick daughter, Bessy, that helps Margaret to overcome her biased opinions about Milton and to understand the new reality she is living in: the factories, the conflict between the trade union of workers and the owners of the factories, the ‘masters’, and the

²⁰ The chapters XLVI and XLVII (or Vol. II, Ch. XXI and XXII), “Once and Now” and “Something wanting” which expanded the journey of Margaret Hale, the protagonist, and her godfather, Mr. Bell, to her rural hometown Helstone where her reconsideration of her early life is expanded.

²¹ “On its first appearance in ‘Household Words’ this tale was obliged to conform to the conditions imposed by requirements of a weekly publication, and likewise to confine itself within certain advertised limits, in order that faith might be kept with the public. Although these conditions were made as light as they well could be, the author found it impossible to develop the story in the manner originally intended, and, more especially, was compelled to hurry on events with an improbable rapidity towards the close. In some degree to remedy this obvious defect, various short passages have been inserted, and several new chapters added. With this brief explanation, the tale is commended to the kindness of the reader [...]”, (E. Gaskell, *Preface*, in *North & South*, cit., p. 4)

causes of the strike that is paralysing the economy of the town. At the same time she also becomes acquainted with an older pupil of her father, Mr. John Thornton, who is the master of the cotton factory of Marlborough Mills. Although he falls in love with her at their first encounter they quarrel throughout the novel because of their conflicting opinions in relation to the role of the masters and the union's strike and their different ideas about the life in an industrial town (to which Margaret is not used to yet). Margaret is entangled between two realities: the working-class reality and the reality of her own middle class, represented in Milton by trade. During the eighteen months that she lives in Milton Northern, Margaret has to mature quickly due to a series of deaths that affect her family and friends and thus begins to change her opinion on Milton. After the death of both her parents she has to move again to her aunt's house in London; while there Margaret starts to realise that she misses the frenzy and the vibrant power of Milton. While she is in London, she also travels to Helstone (with her godfather Mr. Bell, an old friend of the deceased Mr. Hale) which she sees now with different eyes. She comprehends that her beloved Helstone is not the idyllic hamlet of her past, yet a rather tiny village where superstition and magic are still trusted and where the new vicar is more interested in scolding and reprehend his parishioners who drink beer at the pub than to comfort, help and console them. After this experience Margaret is finally resolved to go back to Milton Northern with a new awareness regarding her role as a woman who can take active part in the development of the new reality of a modern industrial town.

Despite the fact that the novel is set in the 1830s, possibly around 1832 or 1833, Gaskell introduces into her novels a great deal of debated issues and questions that belong to the period of the composition of her novel. One of the

germs of *North & South* was the strike that paralyzed the industrial city of Preston in Lancashire between June 1853 and May 1854²². The leading cause of this strike was the demand of a ten per cent wage increase by the town weavers. Gaskell echoed a similar demand in her novel, where the trade union of Milton Northern requests a five per cent increase of their wages in order to better support their families. The clash between manufacturers and workers changed since 1848, to some extent it became softer due to the many initiatives that were introduced to better the work and life of the workers²³ (like a new acknowledgement of the status of workers as persons and not simply a mere workforce, or the constructions of dining-rooms for the workers, improvements that are all inserted in the narration of *North & South*) yet strikes were still a problematic reality and the workmen's conditions were still a strongly debated question which opposed the *laissez-faire* attitude of the middle-class and the new demanding socialist attitude of the work-force. *North & South* widely debates these two opposite Victorian frames of mind and explores as well the contemporary political economy, the role of the state in factories regulations and its intervention, the female independence and rebellion, two topics that are depicted through the transformation of Margaret from a narrow-minded girl trapped in her feminine role to a self-sufficient woman who asserts her own ideas and decides by herself about her life.

²² Cf. H. I. Dutton and J. E. King, *Ten Per Cent and No Surrender. The Preston Strike, 1853-1854*, Cambridge, CUP, 1981, pp. 198 – 199

²³ These initiatives were not always welcomed by the labour force, as in the case of the introduction of wheels in the factory rooms of cotton-mills. These wheels were installed in order to improve the air of the working-rooms and reduce the circulation in the air of cotton bits which were inhaled or swallowed by the workers. Yet, since the workers had got used to swallowing this cotton waste its limitations would have induced hunger during the work-hours, hence a group of workers rebelled against the installation of a wheel, threatening a strike. This event was included in the narration when Bessy Higgins explains to Margaret Hale the cause of her illness (p. 102). Cf. W. H. Hutt, *The Factory System of the Early Nineteenth Century*, in *Capitalism and the Historians*, ed. by F. A. Hayek, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1963, pp. 156 – 184, p. 182

Nevertheless, Elizabeth Gaskell additionally explores another theme that was fervently debated in the century of introspection, zealous spirituality and doubt: religious rebellion. The powerful, strong and devoted Dinah Morris, the Methodist woman-preacher penned by George Eliot in her novel *Adam Bede* (a novel that was eagerly ‘devoured’ by the Mancunian novelist who deeply admired George Eliot) has no equivalent in this novel. Yet, Gaskell manages to illustrate the religious uneasiness of her Age in her fiction. Faith and doubts rebel against the Victorian Anglican morality, through the confrontation of Margaret Hale’s Anglican mindset with the rebellious ethos of three characters who are very close to her: firstly her father Mr. Hale, who experiences a dissenting crisis of faith in the Established Church; secondly her friend Bessy Higgins, whose escapist belief does not follow the customary profession of faith of the Established Church; and thirdly Nicholas Higgins, who Margaret labels as an atheist, an infidel, although in truth he rather represents a new facet of the religious revolution of the later Victorian Age: agnosticism.

2.2.1. Mr. Hale: a doubting Anglican

“And master thinking of turning Dissenter at this time of life, when, if it is not to be said he’s done well in the Church, he’s not done badly after all.”²⁴

Mr. Hale’s ejection from the State Church, although pivotal for the outset of the plot, after its announcement, does not further influence the narration. This narrative choice has puzzled the readers since its first publication. At the beginning of the novel Gaskell focuses for two whole chapters (the fourth and fifth) on this sensitive topic, and thus Mr. Hale’s resolution may appear to the reader as a crucial element that would deeply reverberate through the web of future events. For instance the novelist Charlotte Brönte, a dear friend of Elizabeth Gaskell’s with whom she exchanged a great number of letters and about whom she was later to write a biography (*The life of Charlotte Brönte*, 1857), after she had read the third instalment of *North & South* in *Household World* which dealt with Mr. Hale’s crisis, was confident in believing that the question upon doubt and faith would be central in the plot:

“The Subject seems to me difficult: at first, I groaned over it: if you had any narrowness of views or bitterness of feeling towards the Church or her Clergy, I should groan over it still; but I think I see the ground you are about to take as far as the Church is concerned; not that of attack on her, but of defence of those who conscientiously differ from her, and feel it a duty to leave her fold.”²⁵

Nevertheless, despite its peripheral importance in the course of the events, Mr. Hale’s religious rebellion is relevant nonetheless; Gaskell could have avoided this detail, Angus Easson suggests that she could have followed a more traditional course of narration according to which Margaret could have become an orphan or

²⁴ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. 1, Ch. 5, p. 48

²⁵ C. Brönte to E. Gaskell, 30 September 1854, *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by A. Easson, London, Routledge, 1991, p. 330

could have had to move to the North to work as a governess, another typical conventional plot device (for instance used in the celebrated *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brönte), which mirrored the real-life occupation of more than 20.000 young girls of the middle of nineteenth century. Additionally, John Kucich asserts that “loss of religious faith was seldom considered a subject appropriate to raise in the pages of a novel”²⁶, therefore it is not a coincidence that Dickens recommended Elizabeth Gaskell to revise the section of the novel which dealt with Mr. Hale’s crisis, for he considered it a “dangerous subject”²⁷.

According to John Stuart Mill, Victorians believed that every single action, no matter how irrelevant, that should distance itself from the accepted Victorian dogma would be considered immoral and as disgraceful and as reproachful as any offence against the law (“peculiarity of taste, eccentricity in conduct are shunned equally with crimes”²⁸). Moreover, in accordance with the social philosophy of the Victorian Age, the stability of past traditions was equivalent to the stability of the society, consequently every action that would defy Victorian conventions would endanger the *status quo*. Mr. Hale’s distressing confession to Margaret is uttered in the fourth chapter of the novel and, as it has already been stressed, stands as the decisive and compelling reason for his family moving away from their parish and settle in the North. He is aware of the pain and shame he and his family would presumably have to endure if they remain in Helstone, he is aware that his decision defies the moral and social conventions of the times and therefore he is reluctant to confess his stand to his daughter:

²⁶ J. Kucich, *Intellectual debate in the Victorian novel: religion, science, and the professional*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Novel*, ed. by D. David, Cambridge, CUP, 2001, pp. 212 – 233, p. 214

²⁷ C. Dickens to E. Gaskell, in J. Uglow, *op. cit.*, p. 361

²⁸ J. S. Mill, *On Liberty* (1859), in *On Liberty and Other Essays*, ed. by J. Gray, Oxford, OUP, 1998, p. 68

“He made her take a chair by him ; he stirred the fire, snuffed the candles, and sighed once or twice before he could make up his mind to say – and it came out with a jerk after all – ‘Margaret! I am going to leave Helstone.’

‘Leave Helstone, papa! But why?’

Mr. Hale did not answer for a minute or two. He played with some papers on the table in a nervous and confused manner, opening his lips to speak several times, but closing them again without having the courage to utter a word. Margaret could not bear the sight of the suspense, which was even more distressing to her father than to herself.

‘But why, dear papa? Do tell me!’

He looked up at her suddenly, and then said with a slow and enforced calmness:

‘Because I must no longer be a minister in the Church of England.’²⁹

At the same time, Margaret is unable to imagine what profound and unsettling cause may have forced her father to renounce his role as an Anglican clergyman. From a religious point of view she is the typical Anglican believer: she prays, attends Church services on Sundays, assists the poor, respects her parents and lives her life according to the rules of morality and respectability that are expected from every Victorian. It is important to underline, however, that her faith is more conventional than fervent. Although, to some extent, she is always very wary of heterodox practices and cannot repress her suspicious Anglican background (for instance when she firmly replies and reproaches Bessy Higgins’s evasions into the biblical world or when she ‘sighs’ after her brother Frederick tells her that his Spanish fiancée Dolores is a Roman Catholic) she does not adhere to the militant nineteenth-century Evangelical religious demeanour. She does not belong to the zealous Anglo-evangelical branch of the Anglican creed. She acts in accordance to the Evangelical pillars of temperance, moral purity, and the afore-mentioned Sabbath observance and assistance of the less fortunate, because these

²⁹ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. I, Ch. 4, p. 33

conventions have become Victorian conventions since “the Evangelical contribution to nineteenth-century culture was not primarily intellectual but moral”³⁰. Throughout the novel she never defies the orthodoxy of her creed, after she has come to terms with her father’s decision to leave the Church she tries to profess her faith with a more open-minded disposition yet she never abandons her customary commitment to Anglicanism. Additionally, Gaskell labels her “Margaret the Churchwoman”³¹ hence, since her religious attitude is the attitude of an orthodox Victorian that follows nineteenth-century moral customs (at least while she resides in the South, in Helstone, and both at the beginning of the novel when she lives at her aunt Shaw’s house in London and towards the end, when she has to lodge there once again after her father’s death) her reaction to her father’s statement of being unable to overcome his *doubts* (she is “more shocked than ever”³²) is the exemplary reaction to be expected from any Anglican Victorian. Margaret refuses to believe to the ‘outrageous’ act that her father has committed, “she cannot sympathise with her father’s doctrinal doubts”³³, she wants to believe that what she is experiencing is not reality but a nightmare where her father has ceded to temptations; the morning after Mr Hale’s confession she even asks herself whether her father’s doubts were not the action of the Devil (“where, to what distance apart, had her father wandered, led by doubts which were to her temptations of the Evil One?”³⁴). As Margaret’s bewilderment can show, doubts were an extremely serious and uncomfortable matter during the Victorian Era, “to raise a doubt about a creed established by general acceptance” meant “a direct

³⁰ R. Gilmour, *The Victorian Period: the Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1830 – 1890*, Harlow, Longman, 1993, p. 74

³¹ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. II, Ch. 3, p. 233

³² E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. I, Ch. 4, p. 34

³³ E. L. Duthie, *The Themes of Elizabeth Gaskell*, London, Macmillan Press, 1980, p. 151

³⁴ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. I, Ch. 5, p. 43

injury to the general welfare”³⁵. For instance, when Thomas Arnold had few remonstrations concerning some points of the Thirty-Nine Articles (the regulations that are at the basis of the Anglican dogma) was intimated by John Keble (who ironically few years later would be one of the founder of the ‘dissenting’ Oxford Movement) to cease such a scepticism “by main force” and to become a vicar “somewhere or other, and cure himself not by physics, *i.e.*, reading and controversy, but by diet and regiment, *i.e.*, holy living”³⁶. Consequently, Mr. Hale’s rebellion is relevant because it represents one of the aspects of the religious turmoil of the nineteenth century.

Robin Gilmour suggests that during the Victorian Age there were two phases of “crisis of faith”³⁷ which stroke the consciences of Victorian Christians. The first phase begun around 1830s and extended until 1859, whereas generally the second phase developed throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and continued till the end of the Victorian Era; generally, the date which separates these two stages of crisis is 1859 or 1860, *i.e.* the year of publication of Charles Darwin’s revolutionary book, *The Origins of Species*, a scientific work that strongly influenced and profoundly reformed the Victorian frame of mind.

Traditionally, scholars suggest that the crisis of the first doubters was generated by the advancements in the field of geology that took place in the 1830s, along with the new interpretation of the Bible which followed a new method based on a confluence of history and science, whereas the scientific discoveries of the second half of the nineteenth century were at the basis of the crisis of the second generation of doubters. However, Robin Gilmour also asserts

³⁵ J. A. Froude, *The Oxford Counter-Reformation*, as quoted in W. E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830 – 1870*, New Haven and London, YUP, 1957, p. 59

³⁶ J. Keble, as quoted in W. E. Houghton, *op. cit.*, p. 133

³⁷ R. Gilmour, *op. cit.*, p. 84

that these new advancements, that endorsed “the erosion of historical certainties”³⁸ nonetheless, were not the preeminent motives that provoked the loss of faith or promoted the religious doubts of this first generation of doubters. He states that their

“objections to Christianity were overwhelmingly moral rather than scientific, [they were] objections to certain key doctrines of evangelical religion in which some had been reared but all had experienced in the religious culture of the time.”³⁹

Mr. Hale’s stance mirrors the uneasy position of a great number of intellectuals, scientists, and ordinary Victorians who had to confront the issues of Dissenting beliefs and Dissenting sentiments for they doubted the validity of Anglican orders or, even worse, for they doubted the validity of the Christian dogma and thus defied the moral agenda of the Victorian Age. Walter E. Houghton affirms that the Dissenting crisis felt by Mr. Hale is mostly typical of a great amount of nineteenth-century clergymen who presumably had to endure an even more painful suffering compared to the alienation and confusion experienced by lay believers, for they belonged to the religious establishment that they were questioning⁴⁰. These churchmen could follow three different paths in order to overcome their moral dilemma. The first option was reticence: to suppress their unorthodox opinions and to continue to perform their duty as ministers of the Established Church of England pretending that they truly believed in the conformed doctrine. Another option was based on the Victorian peculiar feature of hypocrisy: to remain members of the Anglican establishment and to adhere to the moral demeanour that was required from a clergyman but, notwithstanding this, to interpret the Anglican creed according to the new line of thought of the

³⁸ R. Gilmour, *op. cit.*, p. 87

³⁹ R. Gilmour, *op. cit.*, p. 87

⁴⁰ Cf. W. E. Houghton, *op. cit.*, pp. 402 – 403

period. This specific attitude was suggested by both J. S. Mill and Matthew Arnold, yet it was a dangerous approach since, most probably, it would not protect the clergyman from accusations of perpetrating a ‘Dissenting conduct’. The third alternative for a doubting minister could have engaged could be the most dangerous choice (since the price was for him and his family the ostracism of the community): the resignation from his clerical duty. The vicar of Helstone followed the Dissenting path of resignation after he had previously attempted to be contented with the profession of silent obedience. He confesses to Margaret:

“It is not a month since the bishop offered me another living; [...] Margaret, I tried to do it; I tried to content myself with simply refusing the additional preferment, and stopping quietly here – strangling my conscience now, as I strained it before. [...] I have written to the bishop [...]. He has been most kind; he has used arguments and expostulations all in vain – in vain. They are but what I have tried upon myself, without avail.”⁴¹

In the following chapter, when Margaret informs her mother of her father’s Dissenting conduct, Mrs. Hale wonders what exactly the bishop has tried to compel her husband to do. “Can’t the bishop set him right?”⁴² she wonders, which means to convince him to ‘abjure’ his doubts and continue to perform his duties of Anglican vicar, presumably in even a better position, notwithstanding his perplexities.

Moreover, Gaskell does not give any precise time indication concerning how long Mr. Hale was reticent about his dissent before his final decision, except for the use of expressions such as:

⁴¹ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. I, Ch. 4, p. 36

⁴² E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. I, Ch. 5, p. 45

“my anxiety for years past, to know whether I had any right to hold my living – my efforts to quench my smouldering doubts by the authority of the holy Church from which I am to be shout out!”⁴³

and, further on, for the utterance of: “I must do what my conscience bids. I have borne long with self-reproach [...]”⁴⁴ These are nevertheless additional evidence of how profoundly the internal religious struggle could afflict a Victorian man.

Resignation from the church led unquestionably to a social stigma that few clergymen decided to experience, on the contrary “the vast majority stayed uncomfortably where they were and did their unhappy best to ignore the dogmas they disbelieved”⁴⁵. Mrs. Hale fears the negative opinion her family is going to face along with the ostracism that she knows is going to ensue (“if your father leaves the Church, we shall not be admitted into society anywhere. It will be such a disgrace to us!”⁴⁶). Similarly, Margaret knows that her father’s choice is a problem, and she knows that his family must leave the Anglican South (“It is a painful thing, but it must be done”⁴⁷) to avoid social isolation. As a matter of fact, when Margaret goes back to Helstone towards the end of the novel, she meets some of her former neighbours and some of his father’s parishioners and she discovers that, despite her father’s questionable choice, Mr. Hale was still beloved and missed. Yet the negative reaction that her mother mostly feared, and that she knew they would face, occurred nonetheless, as we can see in the account of Mr. Lennox who reports new vicar’s opinion about Mr. Hale:

“Perhaps I have been wrongly informed. But I have been told, by his successor in the living – a clever, sensible man, and a thoroughly active clergyman – that there was no call upon Mr. Hale to do what he did,

⁴³ Ivi

⁴⁴ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. I, Ch. 4, p. 35

⁴⁵ W. E. Houghton, *op. cit.*, p. 403

⁴⁶ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. I, Ch. 5, p. 45

⁴⁷ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. I, Ch. 4, p. 37

relinquish the living, throw himself and his family on the tender mercies of private teaching in a manufacturing town; the bishop had offered him another living, it is true, but if he had come to entertain certain doubts, he could have remained where he was, and so had no occasion to resign. But the truth is, these country clergymen live such isolated lives – isolated, I mean from all intercourse with men of equal cultivation with themselves, by whose minds they might regulate their own, and discover when they were going either too fast or too slow – that they are very apt to disturb themselves with imaginary doubts as to the articles of faith, and throw up certain opportunities of doing good for very uncertain fancies of their own.”⁴⁸

Mr. Lennox’s reproach recalls the social judgement expressed by Walter Bagehot who stated that when a person did not conform to the public opinion there would always be a “gentle murmur of the “‘most unfortunate ideas’, ‘singular young man’, ‘well-intentioned, I dare say’”.⁴⁹ The social stigma and ostracism that resigning vicars would encounter, and that Mr. Hale might have faced if he remained in Helstone (for the positive feelings that his parishioners still felt for him might have been motivated by the fact that they did not truly appreciate the new teetotal vicar), was similar, if it was not the same, stigma that Nonconformist had to encounter for their heterodox and Dissenting creeds. Mr. Hale, who has chosen to resign, becomes a Dissenter in the public opinion because with his stance he has defied the dogma. His faith does not vacillate, thus like all Dissenters he is an example of what Alfred Tennyson called an ‘honest doubt’ in his poem *In Memoriam A. H. H.* (1850):

There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. II, Ch. 19, p. 380

⁴⁹ W. Bagehot, as quoted in W. E. Houghton, *op. cit.*, p. 397

⁵⁰ A. Tennyson, *In Memoriam A. H. H.*, Sect. XCVI, vv. 11 – 12, in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by C. Ricks, London, Longmans, 1969, pp. 861 – 988, p. 948

Mr. Hale honestly doubts, presumably, certain obligations an Anglican minister is expected to perform, he never ceases to believe according to the Anglican creed or to perform his role of helper of aching souls. When he discusses with the ‘infidel’ Nicholas Higgins together with his daughter Margaret about the existence or non-existence of the Almighty, Margaret states “we do not reason – we believe [...]. It is the sole comfort in such times”⁵¹. Furthermore, while talking to Nicholas Higgins who is desperate for the loss of his beloved daughter Bessy, he still believes that God’s words can soothe the heart in difficult times. Yet, despite the fact that Mr. Hale’s objections are not about the existence of God and that he does not convert to any Dissenting congregation, society does nonetheless label him a Dissenter. It does not matter that after his rejection of his role as Anglican minister he is not involved into any ‘new’ or different type of congregation when he moves to the North with his family. Dissent was extremely strong in the North of England, where the industries ‘welcomed’ every willing worker, thus it was logical to assume that Mr. Hale had converted to a Dissenting form of faith.

Gaskell, notwithstanding, presents a typical Victorian vicar afflicted with prolonged introspective doubts, yet it is important to specify once again that Mr. Hale’s uncertainties, and consequently his religious rebellion, are not established on doubts relating to his faith (he strongly denies such a possibility “No! not doubts as to religion; not the slightest injury to that.”⁵²) but rather on doubts relating to the doctrines and institutions of the Church of England. Since the author does not discuss the nature of her character’s doubt, Angus Easson argues that Mr. Hale’s crisis of conscience lies in the obligation of accepting the Thirty-Nine Articles and consequently to swear upon the Act of Uniformity, for Mr. Hale

⁵¹ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. II, Ch. 3, p. 227

⁵² E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. I, Ch. 4, p. 34

asserts that in order to accept the new living offered by the bishop he would “have had to make a fresh declaration of conformity to the Liturgy at my institution.”⁵³ This interpretation is confirmed also by Mr. Hale’s personal parallel with John Oldfield or Otefield, a former country preacher, who lived between (supposedly) 1627 and 1682, who was forced to resign from his rectory in Carsington, Derbyshire, because he refused to swear allegiance upon the Act of Uniformity. Like Mr. Hale, Oldfield deeply believed in the Christian dogma and had a very high consideration for his role as a minister of the Church of England, yet as Mr. Hale in Gaskell’s novel, Odefield in 1662 questioned “the State’s right to prescribe a man’s belief or to control his conscience”⁵⁴. Oldfield’s soliloquy that Mr. Hale reads to his daughter in order to better support his motivations was cited in Edmund Calamy’s *An Abridgment of Mr. Baxter’s History of his Life and Times* (1702), who labeled the former vicar of Carsington as a dissenter. Gaskell, however, did not insert in her novel Calamy’s version of Oldfield’s soliloquy, which was the original source, but she inserted the quotation she found in the work of an Anglican vicar who became a Unitarian minister: Theophilus Lindsey.

Lindsey’s *The Apology of Theophilus Lindsey, M. A. on Resigning the Vicarage of Catterick, Yorkshire* (1774), was a widely known book which had been frequently reprinted throughout the nineteenth century and Angus Easson is certain that Theophilus Lindsey was one of the possible figure upon which Gaskell based Mr. Hale. In his *Apology* Lindsey affirms that he became an Anglican minister “with a full persuasion, that it was the best way in which I could serve God, and be useful to men, and with the earnest desire that I might

⁵³ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. I, Ch. 4, p. 36

⁵⁴ A. Easson, *Mr. Hale’s Doubts in North & South*, “The Review of English Studies”, New Series, Vol. 31, No. 121, Feb. 1980, pp. 30 – 40, p. 34

promote these great ends of it”⁵⁵ and later on, he explains that he could not approve the points expressed in the Thirty-Nine Articles and thus had to renounce his parish. Two attitudes that are mirrored in Mr. Hale, who is a deeply caring minister for his parishioners (“there will be a trial, but worse, far worse, will be parting from my dear people”⁵⁶) and who cannot force himself to swear upon his conformity. Lindsey, in a footnote, defends his resolution in the same manner employed by Mr. Hale, quoting the original source of the extract read by the former vicar of Helstone: Mr. Oldfield’s soliloquy. Lindsey’s life story mirrors the story that Gaskell wrote for Mr. Hale; they both suffer from a crisis of conscience and refuse to swear upon the Thirty-Nine Articles for that would challenge their integrity. Mr. Hale’s and Lindsey’s stories differ in relation to their stand after they have resigned: Mr. Hale becomes a tutor in Milton, whilst Lindsey, as it has already been pointed out, became a Unitarian minister, more specifically the minister of the first Unitarian Chapel in London, the Essex Street Chapel.

Some scholars, among whom Angus Easson, agree on the assumption that there is a Unitarian background behind Mr. Hale’s doubts. Gaskell’s own father, William Stevenson, a Unitarian minister, might have been one of the models for Mr. Hale. Gaskell’s father, similarly to Margaret’s father, dismissed his role of minister because of a moral objection, he refused to receive a payment for his ministerial duties, but he did not defy the Unitarian creed. Easson in his essay *Mr. Hale’s Doubts in North & South* (1980) stresses the fact that this parallel does not find any attested sources, yet suggests that Mr. Hale’s refusal to be subjected to the Thirty-Nine Articles was indeed a Unitarian defiance of the “Parliamentary

⁵⁵ T. Lindsey, *The Apology of Theophilus Lindsey, M. A. on Resigning the Vicarage of Catterick, Yorkshire*, 1882, as cited in A. Easson, *op. cit.*, p. 35

⁵⁶ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, *cit.*, Vol. I, Ch. 4, p. 36

religion”⁵⁷, as the Anglican religion was called by the founder of the Unitarian confession, Joseph Priestly.

Furthermore, scholars acknowledge two more possible models for the Dissenting vicar. The two famous contemporary doubters: James Anthony Froude (1818 – 1894) and Frederick Denison Maurice (1805 – 1872). The novelist personally knew J. A. Froude, he was the tutor of the young Derbyshires’ girls, a family with whom Gaskell entertained a long friendship. Allegedly, they became acquainted during a train journey, when they shared a carriage, and talked extensively upon the issues of faith⁵⁸. Froude was deeply interested in John Henry Newman’s views about religion and was also much influenced by his idea in relation to Catholicism. Froude himself almost converted to Roman Catholicism like Newman, who became Catholic in 1846, yet in that same decade for a long period of time he was heavily distressed by doubts, a phase of his life that he described in his two semi-autobiographical novels *Shadows of a Cloud* (1847) and *The Nemesis of the Faith* (1849). More specifically, his *The Nemesis of the Faith* recounts the troubles of a young clergyman who loses faith in the Church of England and its Thirty-Nine Articles and composes ‘Confession of a Sceptic’ after reading Carlyle’s and German Biblical criticism. This book was considered an attack against the Established Church, and it was publicly burnt by the senior tutor of the Exeter College in Oxford. The outrage that followed the publication of this novel forced Froude to resign from his fellowship at the Exeter College and to move to the North, in Manchester (which is epitomized in the novel by Milton Northern) where he became a tutor. Jenny Uglow stresses the similarities between Mr. Hale and Froude: they both had to resign from their role in a southern

⁵⁷ J. Priestly, as quoted in A. Easson, *op. cit.*, p. 33

⁵⁸ Cf. J. Uglow, *op. cit.*, p. 228

community and they both moved northwards and employed their classical education to support their families; Uglow's connection between the fictional character and the factual English historian is also reinforced by Froude's own comment to Elizabeth Gaskell. After he read *North & South* Froude wrote her a letter in relation to the description of the study of Mr. Hale: "it gave me such a strange feeling to see our drawing room in Greenheys *photographed*"⁵⁹. Hence, Uglow continues, "although the fictional character and situation are quite different, Elizabeth undoubtedly had Froude in mind."⁶⁰

F. D. Maurice was the other possible model for Gaskell's Mr. Hale. Maurice was raised according to the Unitarian doctrine, and studied law at Cambridge University. Yet, since he refused to swear allegiance upon the Thirty-Nine Articles, his graduation was proscribed. In the 1830s he adjusted his opinion upon the religious obligation in relation to the Anglican creed and, as many other Dissenters before and after him, converted to Anglicanism and thus he was admitted to Oxford where he graduated. In 1834 Maurice became an Anglican vicar and chaplain at Guy's Hospital in London, while six years later, in 1840, he was appointed Professor of English Literature and Modern History at King's College in Cambridge. In 1846 he became Professor of Divinity at the Lincoln's Inn, in London. Nevertheless, despite these public signs of association with the Anglican Church, since 1838 Maurice was seen with high skepticism by the Anglican community. In 1838 Maurice published the book *The Kingdom of Christ*, which promoted the first suspicions of his promotion of unorthodox ideas. In *The Kingdom of Christ* Maurice explained the thesis according to which he believed that there should not have been any separations, factions, sects among

⁵⁹ J. Uglow, *op. cit.*, p. 229

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the Christian religion but that, on the contrary, the Church should stand to unify these conflicting elements and should not promote diversity and partiality. The mistrust of the Anglicans in relation to Maurice's ideas intensified ten years later, in 1848, when he founded the Christian Socialist Movement along with other contemporary important figures such as Charles Kingsley and John Malcolm Ludlow. As it has already been broadly suggested, during the Victorian Age every act which would differ from the common customs would face strong oppositions, and this attitude would intensify in relation with religious matters. Maurice's scandal erupted in 1853 when he published a collection of essays, *Theological Essays*, where he presented extremely unorthodox views concerning the world after death, views which could not be accepted by the Anglican establishment. Maurice in his *Theological Essays* confessed his disbelief in the eternity of hell and thus in July 1853 was dismissed from his role of professor of divinity of King's College. Elizabeth Gaskell deeply admired this intellectual and was much concerned with his unorthodox points of views and, since she herself was a Dissenter for she professed the Unitarian creed, was strongly touched by the religious debate and intolerance that involved F. D. Maurice.

Hence, Mr. Hale's doubts and stand represent not simply the anguished situation of a Victorian doubting believer but also Gaskell's own Dissenting confession.

2.2.2. Bessy Higgins: an escapist Methodist

“I dare say it would be wiser; but where would I hear such grand words of promise [...] as in Revelations? Many’s the time I’ve repeated the verses in the seventh chapter to myself, just for the sound It’s as good as an organ, and as different from every day, too. No, I cannot give up Revelations. It gives me more comfort than any other book i’ the Bible”.⁶¹

Bessy Higgins is Margaret Hale’s very ill and feeble friend, she is nineteen years old as the main character, yet her social class, her worries, her future and her faith are very different. Bessy belongs to the working-class of Milton, she is aware that she is not going to live a long life, on the contrary, she is aware she is going to pass away soon, for she suffers from an industrial disease, the byssinosis (a disease which was officially diagnosed for the first time in 1860 even though it was already a well-known illness in industrial communities) and she is not Anglican. After the death of her mother, Bessy has worked in a cotton-mill, in a carding-room where she had to remove seeds or raw material from the cotton which was later to be spinned. This process produced a great amount of cotton ‘fluff’ which impaired the respiratory system and induced serious bronchitis or the fatal byssinosis disease, which is the cause of Bessy’s death in the novel:

“[...] and the fluff got into my lungs, and poisoned me.’

‘Fluff?’ said Margaret, inquiringly.

‘Fluff’, repeated Bessy. ‘Little bit, as fly off fro’ the cotton, when they’re carding it, and fill the air till it looks all fine white dust. They say it winds round the lungs, and tightens them up. Anyhow, there’s many a one in a carding-room, that falls into waste, coughing and spitting blood, because they’re just poisoned by the fluff.’⁶²

⁶¹ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. I, Ch. 17, pp. 137 – 138

⁶² E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. I, Ch. 13, p. 102

Since the first time that Margaret and Bessy meet, the poor working class girl is always very weak for she is already at an advanced stage of this bronchitis inflammation.

In *North & South* there is no precise sign of Dissent for throughout the novel Gaskell never introduces any Dissenting place of worship, any Chapel, and she never describes any Dissenting congregation or renowned Dissenting family. Furthermore, the author does not openly specify Bessy's belief, she only hints that she professes the Methodist doctrine through the comment of Bessy's father Nicholas, who says that his daughter has "methodee fancies"⁶³. Nevertheless, scholars agree that she is a Methodist because of her characteristic attitude of explaining the events of her life according to the Scripture. She specifically represents the biblical theology of John Wesley.

The Bible was crucial for Methodism. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist confession, regarded the Holy Book as the "book of God"⁶⁴ and established his theology on this holy text. According to the first Methodist preacher, the Bible had within itself an "implicit trust"⁶⁵ that explained every facet of earthly life. Wesley believed that even the most obscure and incomprehensible biblical passages could represent the human experience for they could be explained by a comparison with other, more lucid, extracts which would show their real essence; it is not coincidental that this doctrine sprouted from a group of biblical studies. R. E. Davies asserts that Wesley's dogma is deeply inclined towards a strenuous literalism, but that it is nevertheless a coherent "body of doctrine"⁶⁶. At the core of Methodism stands the assumption that believers have a

⁶³ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. I, Ch. 11, p. 90

⁶⁴ R. E. Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 95

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⁶⁶ R. E. Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 96

direct relationship with God, and that this personal relationship between the mortal man and the Almighty is established on a specific type of awareness which is labelled “imaginative awareness”⁶⁷. This distinct consciousness, Wesley believed, is settled on an experience which goes beyond the mere human senses and perception. The Methodist experience is founded on a existence led on a ‘experiential’ doctrine which confirms the religious truth within the Scripture. In *North & South* Bessy always talks about her future in relation to the Holy Book and she constantly quotes passages from the Bible, a feature distinctive of Methodists:

““Sometimes, when I’ve thought o’ my life, and the little pleasure I’ve had in it, I’ve believed that, maybe, I was one of those doomed to die by the falling of a star from heaven; “And the name of the star is called Wormwood; and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and men died of the waters because they were made bitter.” One can bear pain and sorrow better if one thinks it has been prophesied long before for one: somehow, then it seems as if my pain was needed for the fulfilment; otherways it seems all sent for nothing.”⁶⁸

Moreover, Wesley believed that the law of God, which was to be found in the Bible, would assist the believers to open their eyes about their sins and thus to be prepared to avoid them in the future. Davies suggests that the eighteenth-century evangelist trusted the sacred text as a method to avoid ill conducts. Yet in the character of Bessy the element of escapism is not simply employed in order to avoid reprehensible attitudes, Bessy’s escapism is an escape from a harsh reality into the biblical world.

⁶⁷ R. E. Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 97

⁶⁸ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. I, Ch. 17, p. 137

Valentine Cunningham states that “Bessy Higgins’s Methodism is not made an issue”⁶⁹ in *North & South*. As a matter of fact the Anglican Margaret does not oppose to this Dissenting doctrine yet she contrasts Bessy’s escapist inclinations for they dissent from the sobriety of the Anglican doctrine. Patricia Ingham explains that the escapism of this poor working-class girl is motivated by her disease and by the hardship she had to endure⁷⁰. In relation to escapism Robert B. Hilman wrote:

“if we run through any historical dictionary we find that escape has long meant a departure from tangible sources of distress and disaster: accidents, threats, epidemics, unfriendly animals, premature deaths in various forms [...].”⁷¹.

In the world of an industrial town escapism is realized in diverse manners: men could entertain themselves with streetwalkers, or could spend their days gambling or, as the great majority of the nineteenth-century workers depicted in novels did, could flee the harsh reality of their industrial town while drinking a great deal of alcohol in order to obliterate their senses. Nicholas Higgins for instance drinks in order to get through his boring life and to overcome the greyness of his work at the factory, whereas his daughter seeks refuge in the Bible, more specifically in the Book of Revelations. John L. Longeway in his *The Rationality of Escapism and Self-deception* explains, that the main aim of an escapist attitude is to avert, usually for a limited period of time, the undesirable realities one is forced to face. He asserts that escapist stratagems are adopted in order to compensate depressive tendency, as it happens in Bessy’s case, who longs to pass away because of the pains caused her by byssinosis and thus

⁶⁹ V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 141

⁷⁰ Cf. P. Ingham Note on the text in E. Gaskell, *North & South* (1855), ed. by P. Ingham, London, Penguin, 2003, p. 430

⁷¹ R. B. Heilman, *Escape and Escapism. Varieties of Literary Experience*, “The Sewanee Review”, Summer 1975, Vol. 83, Number 3, pp. 439 – 458, p. 440

expresses this desire by quoting a passage from Isaiah (62: 4) during a conversation with Margaret:

“Well, Bessy, how are you? Better, I hope, now the wind has changed.’

‘Better and not better, if yo’ know what that means.’

‘Not exactly,’ replied Margaret, smiling.

‘I’m better in not being torn to pieces by coughing o’ nights, but I’m weary and tired o’ Milton, and longing to get away to the land o’ Beulah [i.e. Jerusalem]; and when I think I’m farther and farther off, my heart sinks, and I’m no better; I’m worse.’”⁷²

Longeway states there are various (at least ten) strategies adopted by escapists, and two of these schemes are mirrored in Bessy’s religious escapism. The escapist may, for instance, adopt a “persistent peripheral consciousness”⁷³, as the young Higgins does (“I read the book o’ Revelations until I know it off by heart, and I never doubt when I’m waking, and in my senses, of all the glory I’m to come to”⁷⁴), a philosophy to which Margaret promptly opposes (“Don’t let us talk of what fancies come into your head when you are feverish”⁷⁵ or “Nay, Bessy – think! [...] Don’t dwell so much on the prophecies, but read the clearer parts of the Bible”⁷⁶).

Another option that could be employed to deal with an imperfect existence is self-deception. In order to endure the pain of her disease Bessy tries to persuade herself about the certainty of a fascinating world awaiting her after death based on her extensive reading of the Book of Revelation (“I shall have a spring where I’m

⁷² E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. I, Ch. 11, p. 89

⁷³ J. L. Longeway, *The Rationality of Escapism and Self-Deception*, “Behaviour and Philosophy”, Fall/Winter 1990, Vol. 18, Number 2, Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies, pp. 1 – 20, p. 2

⁷⁴ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. I, Ch. 13, p. 102

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⁷⁶ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. I, Ch. 17, p. 136

boun to, and flowers, and amaranths [i.e. an immortal flower], and shining robes besides.”⁷⁷).

Therefore, it is possible to state that Bessy Higgins is a Wesleyan escapist Methodist who employs the Holy Bible to escape in a less painful world.

⁷⁷ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. I, Ch. 8, p. 73

2.2.3. Nicholas Higgins: an Agnostic Infidel

“I believe what I see, and no more. That’s what I believe, young woman. I don’t believe all I hear – no! not by a big deal.”⁷⁸

Nicholas Higgins, similarly to Mr. Hale, has doubts. Yet his doubts differ from the ones of the former vicar of Helstone for the workman questions one of the fundamental pillars of faith: the existence of God. Together with Dissenting doubts and with all Nonconformist creeds, to ‘not-believe’ in the Almighty was considered a vicious attack on the morality of the Victorian Age and consequently on the nineteenth-century society as a whole. Walter E. Houghton asserts that during the nineteenth century a great amount of men and women who attended the Victorian churches “did not truly believe in the prayers and creeds that they repeated”⁷⁹. Nicholas Higgins clearly points out this circumstance:

“There’s many and many a one wiser and scores better learned than I am around me, – folk who’ve had time to think on these things, – while my time has had to be gi’en to getting my bread. Well, I see these people. Their lives is pretty much open to me. They’re real folk. They don’t believe i’ the Bible, – not they.”⁸⁰

These people continued to frequent the Sunday services because the social pressure was massively powerful, influential and obliged them to behave according to its rules. Higgins continues:

“They may say they do, for form’s sake; but Lord, sir, d’ye think their first cry i’ th’ morning is, “What shall I do to get hold on eternal life?” or “What shall I do to fill my purse this blessed day? Where shall I go? What bargains shall I strike?””⁸¹

They keep on behaving according to this accepted social rules because the social censorship was constant and never ceased to control them. J. S. Mill was

⁷⁸ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. I, Ch. 11, p. 91

⁷⁹ W. E. Houghton, *op. cit.*, p. 401

⁸⁰ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. II, Ch. 3, p. 226

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confident in stating that in Victorian times “from the highest class of society down to the lowest, every one live[d] as under the eye of a hostile and dreaded censorship. [...] It [did] not occur to them to have any inclination, except for what [was] customary.”⁸² Yet atheism was nevertheless a Victorian reality which, obviously, the nineteenth-century community was afraid to confront.

This lack of faith was mostly common among the working-class, the social class to which Nicholas Higgins belongs and among the more learned middle class. As it has already been mentioned, the Church of England, for a great part of the nineteenth century, did not perform its ecclesiastical duties properly, on the contrary a great number of vicars and exponents of the higher ranks of the clergy did not truly care for their parishioners and believers, they neglected them in times of need when the poor and the destitute needed help the most. Additionally, the working-men felt as if all the pains, misfortunes, miseries and deaths they had to endure were incompatible with the kind and caring nature of an existing God. Nicholas Higgins perfectly embodies this lack of confidence in the existence of God due to the unfortunate events in his life. For instance he states:

““but a man mun speak the truth and when I see the world going all wrong at this time o’ day, bothering itself wi’ things it knows nought about, and leaving undone all the things that lie in disorder close at its hands – why, I say, leave a’ this talk about religion alone, and set to work on what yo’ see and know. That’s my creed. It’s simple, and not far fetch, nor hard to work.”⁸³

Higgins follows simple, secular rules of conduct, he strictly believes in his own senses. He does not approve the faith of her daughter, yet he accepts it only because it diminishes the pain she has to endure, although he considers her

⁸² J. S. Mill, *op. cit.*, p. 68

⁸³ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. I, Ch. 11, p. 91

“visions”⁸⁴ of a better world with “goulden gates”⁸⁵ (as the Christian heaven in the Holy Scriptures) wrong and unacceptable. At the same time however he does not favour Margaret’s religious ideas to be “preached”⁸⁶ into his house. He contrasts more than once Margaret’s solid religious mind. Margaret considers him a good man, yet she also considers him an atheist, an infidel (“Papa – you must not wonder at what he says: he’s an —— I mean he does not believe in much of what we do.”⁸⁷). Her conclusion is constant throughout the novel and it correctly mirrors the way Nicholas Higgins would be perceived because of his views. Any person who would question such a transcendental entity would have been called infidel or atheist during the time setting of the novel but also in the period Gaskell composed her book. Nevertheless Nicholas Higgins’s lack of faith is not absolute. He does not assert that God does not exist to an absolute extent, on the contrary he says: ‘There’s many a time when I’ve thought I didna believe in God, but I’ve never put it fair out before me in words, as many men do’⁸⁸. He rather states that He might not exist for he cannot establish His presence to a worldly extent and through his reason:

“I have looked round at after, to see if He heard me, if so be there was a He [...]. There’s but one thing steady and quite i’ all this reeling world, and reason or no reason, I’ll cling to that”⁸⁹.

Mr. Hale comprehends his stand: Nicholas Higgins is not an infidel as Margaret assumes him to be. He doubts the existence of God yet he believes in Him nonetheless.

⁸⁴ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. I, Ch. 11, p. 90

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⁸⁶ Cf. E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit. Vol. I, Ch. 11, pp. 90 – 91

⁸⁷ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. II, Ch. 3, p. 222

⁸⁸ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. II, Ch. 3, p. 227

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Nicholas Higgins is an agnostic ahead of the times. The term agnostic was formulated by Thomas Henry Huxley in 1869. T. H. Huxley was a biologist and a strenuous advocate of the theory of evolution proposed by Charles Darwin. When he conceived this term he specified that his concept contrasted with the notion of atheism⁹⁰, for the latter expresses an idea of absolute denial of the existence of God, whilst his concept simply establishes that the human being ‘does not know’. Huxley believed that “humans were incapable of gaining certain knowledge of God, but [he] agreed that [...] positive denial of God’s existence was out of the question”⁹¹. The agnostic takes into account that there is at least a minimum possibility that there is a superior power above. He questions the possibilities of the human’s destiny after death, like Higgins when, in response to his daughter who hopes to abandon this terrestrial life in order to live in an immortal world, states “‘I’m not sure o’ that”⁹². Higgins is not sure of the existence of what Bessy longs for. Agnostics acknowledge that there might be no life after death, and that there might be no heaven, yet they do not rule out these possibilities completely.

The nineteenth century was a period of severe transitions, new discoveries, the realization of unimaginable creations in the field of technology and machineries and thus the established beliefs were consequently broadly debated. The secular frame of mind was established on ‘matter-of-fact’ points of view, which profoundly widespread among the middle-class involved in trade and the more common workmen. Higgins’s agnosticism stands at the border of the Christian and Anglican creed, yet it does not cross it.

⁹⁰ Cf. B. Lightman, *The Origins of Agnosticism. Victorian Unbelief and the Limits of Knowledge*, Baltimore and London, The John Hopkins University Press, 1987, p. 17

⁹¹ Ivi

⁹² E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. I, Ch. 8, p. 73

However, he is a Dissenter nonetheless for he defies the Victorian religion which in the 1850s, and in the following decades, was even more powerful than politics:

““What I mean by belief just now, is a-thinking on sayings and maxims and promises made by folk yo’ never saw, about the things and the life yo’ never saw, nor no one else. Now, yo say these are true things, and true sayings, and a true life. I just say, where’s the proof?””⁹³

⁹³ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. II, Ch. 3, p. 226

Chapter III:

**Two Dissenting Lady Novelists
and
two variations of Dissenting preaching**

3.1. George Eliot: how she came to write fiction, her free-thinking faith and her religion of humanity

George Eliot's life was characterized by difficult decisions that largely defied nineteenth-century social conventions; her achievements were the result of hard work and independence, her stands forced her to live in an "internal exile"¹ ostracized by both her family and by a part of the literary society she lived in from 1850s onwards. She did not match the social requirements of Victorian morality, beauty, religion and marriage. George Eliot was not a beautiful woman like Elizabeth Gaskell for instance, many of her acquaintances said that she was rather plain yet her mind, so outstanding and fascinating, and her intellect, which mesmerized her contemporary men of letters, compensated her unattractive exterior. Her unorthodox life-choices and her formidable reviews, translations and later works of fiction, so imaginative yet so realistic, made her one of the most discussed figure in nineteenth-century literary circles. She shocked the Victorian society because she did not conform to its Victorian obligations: she did not actually marry the love of her life, George Henry Lewes, although they lived together as husband and wife, she was the 'ghost' editor of the influential and progressive *Westminster Review* (whose 'nominal' editor was John Chapman) and she did not conform to the Anglican creed. George Eliot did not convert to Unitarianism or any other Dissenting congregation as his brother dreaded², yet she questioned the religious beliefs of her century through her knowledge and rational thinking, she had challenged the religious conventions since an early age, when she was twenty-two years old. She was agnostic and was one of the few authors of the Victorian Age (together with Mark Rutherford, Elizabeth Gaskell and to a certain degree Margaret

¹ R. Ashton, *George Eliot. A Life*, London, Penguin, 1997, p. 6

² Cf. R. Ashton, *op. cit.*, p. 44

Oliphant) who did not inflame her writings with prejudices against Dissenters. Iris Murdoch in her article *The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited* (1959) enrolls George Eliot among great novelists because of her tolerance towards what did not conform to her frame of mind. According to Murdoch a great novelist “displays a real apprehension of persons other than the author as having a right to exist and to have a separate mode of being which is important and interesting to themselves”³, which is exactly George Eliot’s approach to Dissent. Valentine Cunningham stresses her “openness”⁴ towards Dissenters: since in her novels Dissenters are not grotesque or malignant characters, she discloses the nineteenth-century reality of Dissent. George Eliot’s novels mirror her reality and her memories, so that the Dissenting characters of her stories are not the mere representations of “stock assumptions”⁵ of Dissent. They can be very different. Good as the Methodist Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede* (1859) or bad as the Methodist banker Nicholas Bulstrode in *Middlemarch. A study of Provincial Life* (1874). They are always real.

George Eliot was the *nom de plume* of Mary Anne Evans (later to be called Mary Ann and Marian), who was born on 22 November 1859 in Nuneaton, near Coventry, in Warwickshire. She was the daughter of Robert Evans, the land agent of the Newdigate Estate and several other neighbouring properties, a man of strong principles who followed a strict moral code and never accepted foul behaviours from anyone, not even from members of the higher ranks of society, attitudes that Eliot mirrored in the protagonist of her first novel *Adam Bede*. From a religious point of view Robert Evans was a traditional believer in the Established Church, he was not a fervent Anglican or Evangelical (in the 1820s he gladly listened to the

³ I. Murdoch, *The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited*, in “Yale Review”, 49, 1959, pp. 247 – 271, p. 258

⁴ Cf. V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 9

⁵ V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 17

sermons of the Evangelical Reverend John Jones but he never ‘converted’ to this wing of the Anglican Church⁶), he was rather distrustful towards both Roman Catholics and Dissenters, whose congregations were predominant in the Coventry area. Religious Dissent as a matter of fact was fairly represented in Warwickshire and Midlands. All main Dissenting confessions (Congregationalism, Baptism, Unitarianism, Quakers, Presbyterianism and Wesleyan Methodism) had their own representative places of worship in Coventry. According to the Independent minister John Sibree (father of Mary Sibree, a friend of George Eliot’s until her loss of faith) in the district of Foleshill, where Mary Anne Evans moved with her father in 1841, there were at least twelve Wesleyan chapels. Methodism as a matter of fact covered the highest prevalence of nineteenth-century Dissent, it was very popular in both Yorkshire and Midlands, and more specifically the Wesleyan branch of this grouping had the largest following compared to the other congregations. In Coventry, as in almost every industrial area of nineteenth-century England, the Dissenting manufacturers who improved their social role thanks to the success of their industries and factories also promoted philanthropic improvements in the city. Joseph Cash, for instance, a Quaker and member of a powerful family supported the construction of the Infants’ School in his Sherbourne House in 1835, where a group of Wesleyans was also allowed to worship.

Nevertheless, George Eliot’s acquaintance with Dissent, and more specifically Wesleyan Methodism, was not limited to the Dissenting worshippers of the town where she grew up. From 1832 until 1835 she attended a Nonconformist school in Coventry which was run by two sisters, Rebecca and Mary Franklin, daughters of Francis Franklin, the Reverend of Cow Lane Particular Baptist Chapel.

⁶ Cf. K. Hughes, *George Eliot. The Last Victorian*, New York, Cooper Square Press, 2001, p. 22

According to Eliot's biography composed by her late husband John Cross, despite her Anglican upbringing and her Evangelical attitude during this phase of her life, she "was deeply involved in the religious work, leading prayer-meetings among the girls and attending the [Baptist] chapel"⁷. George Eliot never converted to Baptism (although there were rumours about such a possibility) but she was nonetheless intrigued by this religious confession. Still, her direct contact with Dissent extended within her own family. Her aunt and uncle from her father's side were Methodists. Robert Evan's younger brother Samuel had converted to Methodism in the 1790s whilst the conversion of his wife Elizabeth took place in 1797. Elizabeth Evans was also a Wesleyan Methodist itinerant lay preacher until 1803, when the Conference forbade women preachers (she and her husband converted then to Primitive Methodism, so that she could continue her preaching). Despite the fact that George Eliot met her Methodist aunt only for short periods of time during her visits at the 'Griff' or 'Griffe' (the house in Nuneaton where Eliot lived until she was twenty-one years old), Elizabeth Evans left a crucial impression on the young writer to be. In 1839, during one of these visits, 'aunt Samuel' told Mary Ann Evans (as she had wanted to be called since 1837) the story of her meeting with a condemned child murderer, how the girl confessed to her the hideous crime when she stayed with her the night before her death. Eliot never forgot this anecdote. She had a remarkable memory which enabled her to "remember everything"⁸ and to forget "nothing that [...] ever [came] within the curl of her eyelash"⁹. This story became the germ of George Eliot's first novel *Adam Bede* and her Methodist aunt was to be one of the models upon which she created the character of the Methodist preacher, Dinah Morris.

⁷ V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 146

⁸ C. Bray to G. Eliot, 18 September 1859, in R. Ashton, *op. cit.*, p. 205

⁹ G. H. Lewes, as quoted in R. Ashton, *op. cit.*, Ivi

Religion played a central role in George Eliot's life. Before her loss of faith in 1842 and her acceptance of a new Positivist religion, she became acquainted with another important facet of the nineteenth-century religion: Evangelicalism. From 1828 until 1832, George Eliot studied at the boarder school of Mrs. Wellington in Nuneaton where she befriended the principal governess of the school, Maria Lewis. Miss Lewis was an Irish governess who professed a strict zealous Evangelicalism to which the young Mary Anne Evans was introduced when she was her pupil. Maria Lewis was George Eliot's first close friend, who cherished deeply this friendship and continued to exchange letters with her former governess until her refusal to continue to believe in the dogma of the Established Church of England. Maria Lewis influenced George Eliot's future perception of this fervent aspect of Anglicanism. Throughout her teen years, for almost a decade, George Eliot followed the Evangelical rules of behaviour imparted to her by Miss Lewis. Piety, severity, self-denial, harsh criticism against vanity, a neglect in her appearance and a decisive opposition against any kind of 'unlawful' trivialities (such as theatre or light-hearted and imaginative literature) characterized the life of the young novelist. During her unforgiving and narrow-minded Evangelical phase Eliot was far from being the tolerant writer who described Dissenters with a compassionate and sympathetic voice. She was unable to accept her Methodist aunt's Arminian point of view and frequently clashed with her during her visits because of her belief. Throughout her adolescent years George Eliot never ceased to profess her strict Evangelical Calvinistic enthusiasm even in relation to her readings. As many of her contemporary fellow-readers, Eliot liked to read fiction, a reading choice which clashed with the pious attitude of Evangelicalism, which outlawed every form of

“imaginative literature”¹⁰. Since her “Evangelical conscience did not allow her to read for pleasure”¹¹ she defended her reading choices to Maria Lewis with a cunning motivation: since these fictions were constant referred to in every-day life (often a precise action or attitude were labelled with the name of the hero or heroine of these works) she thus believed that it was “acceptable, even desirable”¹² to know their original sources. Yet, notwithstanding her clever explanation, she felt the Evangelical obligation to limit her more imaginative readings nonetheless, hence she read historical and religious works extensively. She eagerly read the books relating to the life of Evangelical models (such as the anti-slavery reformer William Wilberforce and the pious Hannah More) and other works which dealt with religious topics such as *Schism as Opposed to Unity of the Church* (1839) by the independent minister John Hoppus, *History of the Church of Christ* (1794 – 1797) by Joseph Milner and *Tracts for the Times* (1833 – 1841) by the Anglican thinkers with Catholic sympathies who were to form the Oxford Movement.

Throughout 1841 George Eliot continued to behave according to the pious Evangelical requirements, but she had already abandoned the strict and unforgiving attitude of her previous years. She had started to focus her attention on the historical criticism of the Bible, promptly reading every book which presented a critical analysis of the Established religion, like *Inquiry concerning the Origin of Christianity* (1838) by Charles Hennell. Hennell’s criticism was the result of an extensive study about the truth of the events in Gospels by a comparison of the four holy accounts, together with a discussion upon the life of Jesus Christ and his presumed divine nature (Hennell was, a matter of fact, Unitarian). According to his logical analysis, Hennell suggested that it was not possible to establish the divine

¹⁰ R. Ashton, *op. cit.*, p. 28

¹¹ K. Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 32

¹² G. Eliot, as quoted in R. Ashton, *op. cit.*, p. 28

nature of Jesus Christ, for the accounts in the four Gospels had too many “discrepancies”¹³ to confirm or confute such a statement. Similar conclusions had been drawn by the German Biblical critic David Friederich Strauss two years before in his *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (1835 – 1836), a work which was unknown to Charles Hennell when he wrote his dissertation, for it was translated to English for the first time by George Eliot as *The Life of Jesus* in 1847. Strauss’s work was a more scholar and even more detailed investigation than Hennell’s analysis yet despite some divergent opinions (for instance Strauss was even more sceptical than Charles Hennell about the “‘historical reality’ of the Gospels”¹⁴), it supported Hennell’s ideas. George Eliot owned the second edition (1841) of Hennell’s book, where the author explained that, since the first publication of his *Inquiry*, he had read the work of Strauss which he recommended to his readers. Eliot was fascinated by Hennell’s work. It promoted a different kind of Christianity, more practical and based on good actions rather than rules and dogmas, whilst it did not question God. By 1841 she had started herself to question the logic, the truthfulness and the rituals of the dogmas of the different branches of Christianity and in the following year she decided she could not accept the Christian dogmas any longer.

The conventional date that marks the beginning of the new phase of George Eliot’s religious life is Sunday 2nd January 1842. On this date for the first time she refused to attend the religious service, causing a hard break with her father who would not accept such an unconventional behaviour from his daughter. She had to face his “blank silence and cold reserve”¹⁵ and “cooled glances, and exhortations to

¹³ C. Hennel, as quoted in R. Ashton, *op. cit.*, p. 37

¹⁴ R. Ashton, *op. cit.*, p. 38

¹⁵ G. Eliot to E. Pears, 28 January 1842, in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. by G. S. Haight, New Haven, YUP, 1954, 8 vols., Vol. 1, p. 125

the suppression of self-conceit”¹⁶; allegedly he did not want to live in the same house as her daughter anymore and even contacted an agent to renounce the lease of the house in Foleshill¹⁷. She almost left their house due to this collision with her parent in order to find employment somewhere else, yet thanks to the intervention of her brother Isaac she reconciled with her father on 15 May, when he accepted her desire to “think as she pleased”¹⁸.

Her unconventional religious attitude, however, did not only produce the reproach of her father but also the astonishment and the disapproval of some of her friends. Rumours about the causes of her ‘abjuration’ of the Christian creed came immediately to surface. According to her former governess, her ‘infidelity’ had been caused by her acquaintance with the Franklins and with her Methodist aunt, whilst the new acquaintance with the free-thinkers Brays was taken as a cause even after the death of George Eliot. Cara Bray, wife of the “unabashed iconoclast”¹⁹ Charles Bray (to whom Eliot was introduced on 2 November 1841) in 1895 firmly contested the assumption of her correspondent Frances Power Cobbe about Brays’ role in Eliot’s loss of faith. On the contrary she stressed how George Eliot already doubted and dissented Christianity before she befriended them²⁰. Martha Jackson, an Evangelist school-friend from Mrs. Wallington’s school, in 1884 recalled that she felt a “‘deep regret’ and ‘astonished grief’”²¹ when she was informed about Eliot’s decision to abandon the Anglican dogma, and ‘accused’ “the fascinating society of certain enlightened friends whose rationalistic metaphorical minds had

¹⁶ G. Eliot to M. Lewis, 18 February 1842, in *The George Eliot Letters*, cit., Vol. 1, p. 127

¹⁷ Cf. R. Ashton, *op. cit.*, p. 43

¹⁸ R. Ashton, *op. cit.*, p. 45

¹⁹ R. Ashton, *op. cit.*, p. 40

²⁰ Cf. Ivi

²¹ Martha Jackson, as quoted in R. Ashton, *op. cit.*, p. 40

carried them altogether beyond the revealed word of God”²² with tempting her friend with ‘unholy’ questions. Moreover, some other friends of George Eliot’s even tried to quiet her doubts through the influence of their acquaintances. The Independent minister John Sibree for instance asked the Reverend Francis Watts, professor of theology who taught at Spring Hill Independent College in Birmingham, to open her eyes, while her former school teacher Rebecca Franklin invited a Baptist minister to talk to Eliot in order to overcome her loss of faith. Both reverends did not achieve to defeat her Dissent. The Baptist minister stated:

“That young lady must have had the devil at her elbow to suggest her doubts, for there was not a book that I recommended to her in support of Christian evidence that she had not read.”²³

In a letter to her father dating 28 February 1842 Eliot explained the motivation behind her new agnostic position:

I regard these writings [Scriptures] as histories consisting of mingled truth and fiction, and while I admire and cherish much of what I believe to have been the moral teaching of Jesus himself, I consider the system of doctrines built upon the facts of his life and drawn as to its materials from Jewish notions to be most dishonourable to God and most pernicious in its influence on individual and social happiness.²⁴

Consequently, we are allowed to state that George Eliot’s loss of faith was the result of broad studies, that she was resolute in her decision, and she was not merely influenced by her new radical friends, the Brays.

The Brays however did influence the course of Eliot’s life. Between the 1840s and the 1850s eminent men of letters, journalists, scientists, radicals and free-thinkers of the mid-nineteenth century, such as J. A. Froude, John Chapman, George Combe, Harriet and James Martineau and Herbert Spencer, attended Brays’

²² Martha Jackson, as quoted in R. Ashton, *op. cit.*, p. 40

²³ Mary Sibree’s account in J. Cross, *Appendix* to the second edition of *George Eliot’s Life*, London, 1886, as quoted in V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 146

²⁴ G. Eliot to R. Evans, 28 February 1842, in *The George Eliot Letters*, cit., Vol. 1, p. 129

house, Rosehill, a few miles from Coventry. George Eliot found here a safe intellectual haven. It was at Rosehill that she engaged herself to translate a foreign work for the first time. During one of her visits in 1842 she met Sara Hennell, Charles Hennell's sister who became her lifelong friend, and Elizabeth Rebecca "Rufa" Brabant, daughter of Doctor Robert Brabant. Miss Brabant was currently translating Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu*, a difficult task that she gladly passed to George Eliot in 1843. She worked on this translation for over two years, and in 1847 John Chapman, the London radical publisher, an acquaintance of Charles Bray's and a visitor at Rosehill, planned its publication. The original German work was composed by two very long volumes which became three in the English translation. *The Life of Jesus* was a success. Charles Wicksteed in his review for the Unitarian magazine *Prospective Review* wrote that Eliot's translation was "faithful, elegant and scholarlike"²⁵ and also asserted that the translator (for he did not know her true identity) was a man with "a familiar knowledge of the whole subject"²⁶.

During the following two years Eliot continued to live with her father at Foleshill and to visit her radical friends despite her parent's disapproval. In June 1849 Robert Evans passed away after a long illness, hence Mary Ann Evans was now independent. The Brays kindly invited her to take part to their continental tour, an invitation that she gladly accepted. The two previous years had been very hard for George Eliot for she had had to nurse her ill father on her own, for apparently none of her siblings ever visited them during their father's illness. Her state of mind during the continental journey with the Brays was affected by the previous exhausting experience and by her angst for the unknown future. Yet when they reached Geneva she decided to spend some time there alone and did not accompany

²⁵ C. Wicksteed, as quoted by R. Ashton in *op. cit.*, p. 62

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 63

her friends back to England. Eliot lived by her own in Geneva from July 1849 until March 1850. After she came back to England, Eliot lived for a few weeks at the Griff's house, where now her brother Isaac with his family lived (for he took their father's role as the land agent of the Newdigate property). While there she decided to move to London, where she wanted to live independently and economically support herself by translations and writing reviews, thus she asked her friend Sara Hennell to inquire whether she could reside at John Chapman's new lodgings at 142 Strand where he lived and where his publishing company was.

142 Strand was a pivotal meeting point for the more radical and intellectual personalities of the mid-nineteenth century London society. When George Eliot moved there in January 1851 she revived her acquaintance with Froude, Miss Martineau, and Rufa Brabant (now Hennell) and in spring 1852 she became the undisclosed editor of John Chapman's newly-acquired radical magazine, the *Westminster Review*. This periodical had been founded in the 1820s by Jeremy Bentham and James Mill and throughout John Stuart Mill's editorship it established itself as one of the most influential magazines combining "political articles and good literary reviewing".²⁷ John Chapman wanted to restore the historical reputation of the *Westminster Review* and George Eliot helped him extensively in this project until she discovered her excellent abilities as a novelist and devoted herself to compose what are considered to be some of the best nineteenth-century novels ever written. Meanwhile on 1 March 1852 she began her reviewing career in London with the first of two reviews of Harriet Martineau's and Henry George Atkinson's *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature* (published by Chapman in the same year) printed in the progressive weekly periodical *Leader*, run by Thornton

²⁷ R. Ashton, *op. cit.*, p. 81

Hunt and Eliot's future lifelong companion G. H. Lewes. In her review Marian Evans (she had changed the spelling of her name once again) stressed her persistent agnostic beliefs, stating that "while science teaches us that we are profoundly ignorant of *causes* and *realities*, it becomes us not to dogmatize upon what we *cannot* know", for "as it is confessed we cannot have direct immediate knowledge of God, so neither can we know that he is not"²⁸.

By the 1850s she was remarkably sceptical about both atheism and dogmatic Christianity. William Hale White (the author of the fictional autobiographies of Mark Rutherford), who met her during his staying at the 142 Strand between 1852 and 1854, described her as "one of the most sceptical, unusual creature I ever knew."²⁹ Yet, by her mid-thirties she became more and more fascinated and interested in a new, more rational, 'religion', the so-called 'Religion of Humanity' promoted in Auguste Comte's Positivist philosophy which did not question the existence of God but rather promoted a Christianity based on human relationships and mutual support. Many men of letters of mid- and late-nineteenth century were charmed by this new 'humanist religion'. George Henry Lewis, John Stuart Mill, John Ruskin, Leslie Stephen, Walter Pater and Matthew Arnold all sympathized with Comte's doctrine. T. W. Wright describes Comte's Religion of Humanity as follows:

The Religion of Humanity was a systematic attempt to found a humanist religion which differed from other forms of religious humanism [...] in claiming to have established the three essential elements of religion, a creed, a cult and a code of conduct, on a scientific basis without resort to unverifiable supernatural hypotheses. [...] Metaphysical questions about the existence of God or a future life, since they could not be proved or disproved, played no part in the Religion of Humanity. Comte did, however, preserve what he

²⁸ G. Eliot, in "Leader", 1 March 1851, p. 202, as quoted in R. Ashton, *op. cit.*, p. 83

²⁹ W. H. White, in "Athenaeum", No. 3031, 28 November 1885, p. 702, as quoted in R. Ashton, *op. cit.*, p. 4

considered best in Christianity, arguing that Positivism fulfilled rather than destroyed previous religions.³⁰

The French philosopher believed that mutual help between men was the only way to survive in this often hostile world. According to him (and George Eliot agreed with this belief) the ‘objective reality’ which men have to face every day is unchangeable, thus men must not refuse to help one another, for solidarity and benevolent humanity enable them to overcome the pains caused by the restless reality. George Eliot was deeply affected by this philosophy. She could not and would not accept the Christian dogma according to which men were not to misbehave in order to enter heaven. She refused to conform to a religion where “the sole basis of morality is man’s selfish desire for reward and fear of punishment”³¹. George Eliot rather believed in this social religion based on sympathy, which might inspire men to be better persons for, to her:

[...] the human heart

Finds nowhere shelter but in human kind.³²

Still, Comte’s Positivist doctrine was not the only philosophical reasoning which fashioned her sympathetic mindset. The German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach promoted a similar humanist religion that embraced the importance of “love and duty between human beings”³³. This Feuerbachian principle entered George Eliot’s life in 1854 (when she translated his *Das Wesen des Christenthums* for John Chapman) and never ceased to influence her attitude and decisions, including the development of her own works of fiction which she was to compose from 1856 onwards.

³⁰ T. W. Wright, *The Religion of Humanity. The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain*, Cambridge, CUP, 1986, p. 3

³¹ B. J. Paris, *George Eliot’s Religion of Humanity*, “EHL”, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Dec. 1962), pp. 418 – 443, p.424

³² G. Eliot, *The Spanish Gypsy*, (1868), Edinburgh, Blackwood, 1868, p. 312

³³ R. Ashton, *op. cit.*, p. 109

By the year 1856 Eliot had already an extensive career as a reviewer and writer of long articles where she thoroughly presented her mindset and opinions about contemporary matters, like for instance the Evangelical preaching (in *Evangelical Teaching: Dr Cumming*³⁴), or numb Evangelical novels written by women (in *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*³⁵). Nevertheless, this year also stands as the beginning of her career as a novelist, thanks to the encouragement of G. H. Lewes³⁶. Her relationship with the editor of *Leader* had begun in late 1853 and continued until his death in 1878. Lewes was already married when he met Mary Ann and could not file for a divorce since, according to the law, he had condoned his wife's infidelity when he accepted and registered as his own the children his wife Agnes had had from his friend T. Hunt. Eliot and Lewes started to live together in 1854 nonetheless although the Victorian double standards of morality did not forgive Marian's choice, for the Victorian society could not accept that a man and woman could honourably live together outside marriage. Thus she was ostracised by her own brother (who refused to have any contact with her until her late marriage with the young John Cross in 1879) and by a large part of the contemporary men of letters and a large number of their wives. When she decided to work on her first work of fiction, which was to form *Scenes of a Clerical Life* (1857), she was aware that her merits would not be recognized due to her 'sinful' relationship with Lewes and that readers would have been more curious about her 'scandalous life' than about her stories. Hence her first story, *The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton*, was published anonymously in *Blackwood's Magazine*

³⁴ G. Eliot, *Evangelical Teaching: Dr Cumming*, in "Westminster Review", October 1855, in G. Eliot, *Selected Critical Writings*, cit., pp. 138 – 170

³⁵ G. Eliot, *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*, in "Westminster Review", October 1856, in G. Eliot, *Selected Critical Writings*, cit., pp. 296 – 321

³⁶ "He [G. H. Lewes] began to say very positively, 'You must try and write a story', and when we were in Tenby he urged me to begin at once", G. Eliot's account in R. Ashton, *op. cit.*, pp. 165 - 166

on January 1857. No one knew about Eliot's contribution to this periodical, not even its owner, John Blackwood, for when G. H. Lewes (who had himself contributed to the magazine since 1843) sent him the manuscript of this first story, he carefully added in an accompanying letter that an unnamed friend "had asked him to submit it"³⁷. By the time of the publication of the second story, *Mr. Gilfil's Love-Story*, she had settled on the pseudonym by which we still call her: George Eliot. She later told her husband John Cross that she chose 'George' because it was the Christian name of Lewes and Eliot because this name had a nice sound and was also easy to pronounce³⁸. The third story by Lewes's mistaken 'clerical friend'³⁹, *Janet's Repentance*, was printed later in 1857, and its readers, among whom there were John Foster, Jane Carlyle, J. A. Froude, Thackeray and Elizabeth Gaskell to name a few, were all amazed by her writing style and the tender yet realistic stories of her "middle England"⁴⁰, while the mystery identity of the author continued to intrigue them. In June 1857 many rumours about the true identity of the writer of *Scenes of a Clerical Life* became more and more persistent, and they worsened after the publication of Eliot's first novel, *Adam Bede*, which was published in 3 volumes by Blackwood in 1859. One of the motivations of such a stir about the undisclosed author of these 'clerical stories' was Eliot's references to Warwickshire. As a matter of fact when she came to compose *Scenes of a Clerical Life*, George Eliot based her stories on events that occurred in Nuneaton which she had witnessed or that her father had told her about. Many other authors before and after her, or contemporary to her like Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, Margaret Oliphant and Elizabeth Gaskell, mirrored characters and episodes taken from real-life, yet the mystery

³⁷ R. Ashton, *op. cit.*, p. 167

³⁸ Cf. R. Ashton, *op. cit.*, p. 166

³⁹ Cf. J. Blackwood to G. H. Lewes, 18 November 1856, and G. H. Lewes to J. Blackwood, 22 November 1856, in *The George Eliot Letters*, cit., Vol. 2, p. 275, p. 277

⁴⁰ R. Ashton, *op. cit.*, p. 6

behind the pen-name George Eliot stimulated the readers' desire for the truth. Therefore, when she decided to work on her first novel she "chose more private materials"⁴¹, hoping to dissimulate the possible correlation with familiar accounts.

⁴¹ G. S. Haight, *George Eliot's Originals*, in *George Eliot's Originals and Contemporaries. Essays in Victorian Literary History and Biography*, ed. by H. Witemeyer, London, Macmillan, 1992, pp. 3 – 21, p. 9

3.1.1. Adam Bede

“[*Adam Bede*] has had greater success than any novel since Scott (except Dickens). [...] I do not mean has *sold* more – for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Les Mystères de Paris* surpass all novels in sales; but in its *influence* and in obtaining the suffrages of the highest and wisest as well as of the ordinary novel reader, nothing equals *Adam Bede*.”⁴²

Like Eliot’s masterpiece *Middlemarch*, *Adam Bede* fictionalises the ‘great web of human actions’. George Eliot’s first novel describes the life of the rural community of Hayslope, a little village at the end of the eighteenth century. The eponymous character Adam Bede is a carpenter who is in love with the stunning yet vain and egotistical niece of the farmer Mr. Martin Poyser, Hetty Sorrell. Hetty lacks sympathy towards anyone, be they animals (like for instance “the round downy chicks peeping out from under their mother’s wing”⁴³) or suffering human beings. Dinah Morris, nephew of Mrs. Rachel Poyser, stands in stark contrast to her cousin Hetty. Dinah’s inner spirit is in complete opposition to the one of her ‘kitten-like’ cousin. Unlike Hetty who is a conventional Anglican (and who, in reality, is not moved by any religious doctrine⁴⁴), Dinah is a Methodist lay-preacher who never ceases to work for the comfort of her fellow humans in need (like for instance the widowed Lisbeth Bede or her sick old friend who resides in Snowfield, Stonyshire where Dinah also lives and where she works in a cotton-mill). Throughout the novel Dinah professes the typical self-denial of her faith (she even refuses to marry believing that such an action would interfere with her mission). Dinah’s life of duty is opposed to Hetty’s life for pleasures. Both Hetty and Dinah

⁴² G. H. Lewes, as quoted in *George Eliot. The Critical Heritage*, ed. by David Carroll, London, Routledge, 1971, p. 9

⁴³ G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, (1859), cit., Ch. 16, p. 200

⁴⁴ Hetty represents the vast number of Victorians who kept on professing the Anglican creed without believing in it: “More and more as the years passed the Victorian churches were filled by men who did not believe the prayers they said or the creeds they repeated” W. E. Houghton, *op. cit.*, p. 401, Cf. G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., Ch. 37, p. 430

are beautiful, yet Dinah's beauty is more sober, more pure than her cousin's. Hetty's sweet beauty is a deceitful mask that hides a selfish soul ("her heart's as hard as a pibble"⁴⁵). She dreams of luxuries and a grand future as the wife of the young squire, Captain Arthur Donnithorne. Arthur is the only person who is capable of startling Hetty's stony heart; like Adam he is mesmerized by Hetty and cannot avoid arousing in her false expectations of a wealthy and happy future together. Arthur is, unwillingly, Hetty's ruin. Their sinful relationship ends in an unwanted pregnancy (unknown to the young squire, who leaves Hayslope before Hetty realizes it), hence she, out of shame and desperation, tries to reach him in Windsor, where she thinks his militia is stationed. Yet, as the Loamshire Militia has now moved to Ireland, she decides to move back to the Midlands, but when in Stoniton (which doubles the city of Derby⁴⁶) she gives birth to a baby that, out of mad despair, she buries alive in the woods. She is discovered and she has to stand for a trial, accused of child-murder. She is then condemned to the gallows. Yet, although her sentence is commuted into exile, her solitary actions, her fall, do not influence just the course of her life, they also affect the whole community of Hayslope. Adam Bede, Arthur Donnithorne, the Poyser family and Hetty's cousin Dinah Morris all endure a drastic inner transformation. At the end of the novel both Adam and Arthur never cease to think about their young love, their plans for their future are not what they expected at the beginning of the narration, but they have nevertheless matured, like Dinah, through desperation and suffering.

One of the peculiar merits of George Eliot's novels is their realism. Rosemary Ashton asserts that "all her novels except *Romola* picture English life in the

⁴⁵ G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., Ch. 16, p. 201

⁴⁶ Cf. D. W. Shimwell, *op. cit.*, p. 26

nineteenth century”⁴⁷. As a matter of fact the time frame of *Adam Bede* expands from 1799 until 1807, yet George Eliot, like Elizabeth Gaskell in *Ruth* and *North & South*, manages nevertheless to display typical nineteenth-century phenomena and issues setting them on the background of a world that is no more. Hetty for instance represents the intrusion of nineteenth-century consumerism (“she could not resist spending her money in bits of finery which Mrs Poyser disapproved”⁴⁸), and her indifference towards her rural home (“Hetty could have cast all her past life behind her and never cared to be reminded of it again”⁴⁹) and her lack of sensitivity (“some fatal influence seems to have shut up her heart against her fellow-creatures”⁵⁰) are signs of the nineteenth-century attitude of social restlessness. Moreover, Mr. Ryde, the fervent minister who came after the beloved Latudianian Mr. Irwine as the ‘spiritual guide’ of the community of Hayslope, stands as another intrusion of modernity in the narration. He represents the new, rather obtuse and extremely zealous Evangelical Anglicanism. To him, the notions of the doctrine are more important than the real well-being of his parishioners. He is narrow-minded and strenuously opposes against anything and anyone who does not conform to the Anglican dogma. Still, Mr. Ryde is not the only example of a nineteenth-century religion in *Adam Bede*. Throughout the narration George Eliot also describes the foundation of Methodism and through the character of the lay preacher Dinah Morris she manages to convey a truthful representation of the Wesleyan preacher, a reality which began in the eighteenth century and continued in nineteenth century.

⁴⁷ R. Ashton, *op. cit.*, p. 7

⁴⁸ G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., Ch. 15, p. 201

⁴⁹ Ivi

⁵⁰ G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., Ch. 41, p. 467

3.1.2. The dissenting preacher: Dinah Morris

“Dinah Morris bears so many indication of being a reflection of facts well known to the author – and the phenomena of Methodism, from the frequency with which their existence is referred to in her pages, appear to be so familiar to her, - that I hesitate to do anything but thankfully accept her portrait.”⁵¹

Henry James

George Eliot, as it has already been pointed out, developed the plot of her first novel from the experience of her Methodist aunt Elizabeth Evans. On 30 November 1858 she wrote in her journal that the “germ of *Adam Bede*”⁵² was told her during one of her aunt visits at her father’s house in 1839 or 1840, and that she never mentioned this memory to anyone until December 1856, when she recounted it to G. H. Lewes. Initially “My Aunt’s Story”, for this was the name Lewes and Eliot used when referring to it⁵³, was to be part of her first work of fiction, *Scenes of a Clerical Life*, until she decided to end this collection with the sad but redeeming vicissitudes of Janet Dempster in *Janet’s Repentance*, therefore she planned to fictionalise her aunt’s story in a long novel. The cathartic confession of Mary Voce, who alike Hetty Sorrell refused to confess her crime until Elizabeth Evans prayed with her throughout the night before her execution, was to be the core of the story, while other memories of Eliot’s relative and some elements of his father’s early life as a carpenter in Ellastone (the Hayslope of the novel) and features of his temperament were to shape the narration and characters.

George Eliot in her journal states that the two women, her aunt and Dinah Morris, differed in their physical appearances and also in their demeanour, for Mrs. Samuel Evans, in her youth, was more fervent, “vehement”⁵⁴ than the fictional lay-

⁵¹ H. James, in “Atlantic Monthly”, 18 (Oct. 1866), as quoted in V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 147

⁵² G. Eliot, *History of Adam Bede*, journal entry for 30 November 1858, in Appendix I in G. Eliot. *Adam Bede*, cit., pp. 585 – 588, p. 585

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 586

⁵⁴ *Ivi*

preacher. Additionally, despite the rumours stating that George Eliot copied Dinah's sermon from Elizabeth Evans's manuscripts⁵⁵, George Eliot strongly denied any similarities between her character's speeches and prayers and those of her aunt's. Elizabeth Evans was not the only real-life woman preacher who shaped the character of Dinah, nor was Dinah just a portrait of her aunt. John Wesley welcomed the help of many women preachers in his 'Evangelical mission' of converting the godless. Mrs Fletcher, Miss Bosanquet and Sarah Crosby for instance were three "precious fellow-helpers"⁵⁶ of Wesley's, and Miss Crosby, in particular, presumably was one of the first women allowed to be a Methodist preacher. Although this female-preacher element belongs to late eighteenth-century Methodism, Dinah Morris is still a faithful and realistic representation of the nineteenth-century Methodist phenomenon of lay-preaching nevertheless. Her accuracy as Methodist preacher is established through her origins, her attitude, and the features of her sermon, which are in line with Wesley's advices.

In Chapter 8 Dinah and Mr. Irwine have a long conversation about her origins and vocation. She was an orphan adopted by her Methodist aunt who belonged to the Methodist Society of the industrial town of Snowfield in Stonyshire, where she works in a factory. Her origins are humble and like many other Methodists she is not much of a literate. She comes from a modern city. The inhabitants of Snowfield are not farmers or carpenters, they belong to the nineteenth-century working-class, being miners or factory-workers. The city is grim and harsh and a great number of its inhabitant seek help in Methodist confession in order to find some religious comfort in a distressed life.

⁵⁵ Cf. G. S. Haight, *op. cit.*, p. 9

⁵⁶ J. Wesley, as quoted in V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 158

In this chapter Dinah also recounts to Mr. Irwine her 'call' for preaching, and her direct experience as a preacher. While talking to Mr. Irwine she says:

"I'd been used from the time I was sixteen to talk to the little children and teach them, and sometimes I had had my heart enlarged to speak in class, and was much drawn out in prayer with the sick. But I had felt no call to preach; for when I'm not greatly wrought upon, I'm too much given to sit still and keep by myself: it seems as if I could sit still and keep by myself: it seems as if I could sit silent all day long with the thought of God overflowing my soul [...]. That was my way as long as I can remember; but sometimes it seemed as if speech came to me without any will of my own [...]. I was called to preach quite suddenly, and since then I have never left in doubt about the work that was laid upon me."⁵⁷

Dinah continues her 'confession' describing her first preaching to Mr. Irwine. She recalls it was not planned, for she was simply accompanying an old preacher to Hetton, twelve miles from Snowfield, where there were neither an Anglican church nor a Dissenting chapel. Dinah had to substitute the old lay preacher for he was extremely fatigued after the long walk. She did not truly know how to preach the Gospel, but then:

"I felt a great movement in my soul, and I trembled as if I was shaken by a strong spirit entering into my weak body. And I went to where the little flock of people was gathered together, and stepped on the low wall that was built against the green hill-side, and I spoke the words there were given to me abundantly. And they all came round me out of all the cottages, and many wept over their sins and have since been joined to the Lord. That was the beginning of my preaching, sir, and I've preached ever since."⁵⁸

Such a recollection of the call and its description to listeners was a typical Methodist attitude of Methodists. Yet, recollections of religious experiences through 'confessions of faith' were also a conventional feature of Methodist propaganda, for Methodism was one of the congregations which recruited the most.

⁵⁷ G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., Ch. 8, p. 135

⁵⁸ G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., *Ibid.*, p. 136

The Methodist faith based its doctrine on the tie between Holy Scriptures and personal experience since Wesley believed in the importance of “experimental religion”⁵⁹. As a matter of fact, a Methodist preacher in his sermons had to stress the relationship between the saving and redeeming potential of the word of God and his life experiences, thus the description of his call was part of the design. John Wesley believed that the ‘divine guidance’ would lead his fellow-Methodists, yet he nevertheless suggested them how to behave when preaching and how to compose a powerful and effective sermon, so their sinful hearers would be encouraged to convert and ask the forgiveness of the Lord, and their already-converted believers would be confirmed their faith.

Consequently, during her sermon, Dinah follows the ‘Wesleyan method’ of revealing the right path to salvation and of showing the misguided behaviours which would end in eternal damnation. According to Wesley a Methodist preacher should always have a “serious, weighty, and solemn”⁶⁰ demeanour. He should behave with simple manners. Dinah is introduced in Chapter 2 through the eyes of a stranger who notices her simple black dress. Dinah in fact has a “quaker-like”⁶¹, modest dressing style: she always wears a cap (which she takes off when she preaches or prays) and dark clothes, even when she marries Adam Bede, her wedding-dress is grey. Her appearance is also sober, calm and unaffected; to the eyes of the stranger she even appears to be possibly too delicate to be a preacher, unsuitable to move the hearts and souls of sinners. On the contrary, Dinah is a

⁵⁹ R. E. Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 11

⁶⁰ J. Wesley, *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, A. M., ed. by T. Jackson, London, 1829, viii, p. 317, as quoted in K. Watson, *Dinah Morris and Mrs Evans: A Comparative Study of Methodist Diction*, in *George Eliot. Critical Assessments*, ed. by S. Hutchinson, 4 vols., Vol. 3, Mountfield, Helm Information, 1996 pp. 33 – 45, p. 40

⁶¹ G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., Ch. 2, p. 64

capable preacher who affects the consciences of her listeners through a sermon which unravels through a climax.

At the beginning she is poised and her voice has a “moderate tone, as if speaking to some one quite near her”⁶², in accordance with Wesley’s instructions. Wesley supported the idea that the preacher had to open his sermon with a “general declaration of the love of God to sinners”⁶³ and then to inform his hearers about God’s openness towards them and about his willingness to forgive who has sinned. Consequently, Dinah constantly repeats how merciful and willing to forgive God is (“deal with them according to the free mercy which Thou didst show to her. Speak to them, Lord, [...]; bring their sins to their minds, and make them thirst for that salvation which Thou art ready to give.”⁶⁴) as she begins her preaching with a blessing in which she describes God’s kindness towards a woman who has sinned but has repented thanks to His intervention. After the blessing Dinah begins to lightly raise her voice as she tells her hearers a personal event, the first time she heard the Gospel, and in what the ‘good news’ consists. Wesley always reminded to ‘his’ preachers that they must express their sermon clearly and strongly, avoiding the use of complex metaphors or elaborated allegories, for they might confuse the hearers. Dinah, again, behaves accordingly. Throughout her sermon she does not employ obscure examples, on the contrary she offers elementary every-day logic to move her hearers to come to God and to hear the Gospel:

“To be sure we can’t help knowing something about God, even if we’ve never heard the Gospel, the good news that our Saviour brought us. For we know everything come from God: don’t we say almost every day, “This and that will happen, please God;” and “We shall begin to cut the grass soon, please God to

⁶² G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., Ch. 2, p. 68

⁶³ J. Wesley, *Letter on Preaching Christ*, Works, XI. 480 – 481, as quoted in V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 152

⁶⁴ G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., Ch. 2, p. 68

send us a little more sunshine.” We know very well we are altogether in the hands of God [...] everything we have come from God.”⁶⁵

The stranger is fascinated by Dinah’s way of conveying her sermon and is touched by its simplicity which manages to present known truths as new wonders (“the simple things she said seemed like novelties, [...] the quiet dept of her conviction with which she spoke seemed in itself an evidence for the truth of her message”⁶⁶).

Dinah then moves her attention on Jesus Christ, a key figure in Methodist symbolism. The life of Christ was an important model for every Methodist believer. Christ’s self-denial and his infinite care for everyone, even for *pariahs* who were shunned by society, are in fact embodied in Dinah. As soon as Mr. Irwine informs her of the sudden death of Matthias ‘Thias’ Bede, Adam’s father, she immediately decides to go and assist the now-widowed Lisbeth Bede. Although she does not know her, she is moved to help her anyway⁶⁷. Even when she returns to Snowfield she has not ceased to think about her. In a letter to Seth Bede, Adam’s Methodist brother, she writes:

My heart is knit to your aged mother since it was granted me to be near her in the day of trouble. Speak to her of me, and tell her I often bear her in my thoughts at evening time, when I am sitting in the dim light as I did with her, and we held one another’s hands, and I spoke the words of comfort that were given to me [2 Samuel 12: 15 – 23].”⁶⁸

Dinah repeats multiple times how she and her hearers are not at all different, for Jesus Christ has sacrificed himself for all of them. She stresses how Jesus Christ truly cares about the poor and the sufferers:

“Jesus spent his time almost all in doing good to poor people; he preached out of doors to them, and he made friends of poor workmen, and taught them and took pains with them. Not but what he did good to the rich too, for he was full

⁶⁵ G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., Ch. 2, p. 67

⁶⁶ G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., *Ibid.*, p. 71

⁶⁷ Cf. G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., Ch. 10

⁶⁸ G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., Ch. 30, p. 373

of love to all men, only he saw as poor were more in want of his help. So he cured the lame and the sick and the blind, and he worked miracle to feed the hungry, because, he said he was sorry for them; [...] and he spoke very tenderly to poor sinners that were sorry for their sins.”⁶⁹

At this point of her sermon, Dinah has now the full attention of the witnesses near the Green, Methodists and Anglicans alike are now hypnotised by her preaching. Hence she begins to advance to the next, crucial, part of her sermon: she must now convert the sinners who are listening to her preaching and bring them to repentance. In order to succeed in this purpose she changes her manner of speaking and her style:

“Her manner became less calm, her utterance more rapid and agitated, as she tried to bring home to the people their guilt, their wilful darkness, their state of disobedience to God [...].”

Dinah then follows another technique promoted by Wesley. She addresses to every one of her hearers, ‘particularizing’ on each and every one of them, in order to promote in them a self-analysis of their sins and bad behaviours. Dinah manages to arouse desires of self-improvements in Sandy Jim, one of Adam Bede’s co-worker, but it is Bessy Cranage who is the most moved among her hearers.

During the more calm and ‘controlled’ part of Dinah’s sermon, Bessy is just a silent and distant witness of the preaching. Yet, when Dinah’s manners changes into more ardent and vehement ones, she begins to comprehend Dinah’s plea for repentance. She thinks about her life, about her little moral faults, for she knows she is considered to be a very frivolous girl. Bessy is also vain and, similarly to Hetty, enjoys consumerism. When Dinah notices Bessy’s uneasiness she particularizes on her and describes to the young girl how, after death, she is not going to be saved by God and Jesus Christ if she does not change her way of living, for as Wesley

⁶⁹ G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., Ch. 2, p. 70

preached, “grace is the source, faith the condition, of salvation”⁷⁰. Dinah profoundly moves Bessy who repents and converts to a more proper life-style throwing away her earrings, symbols of her naughtiness. Bessy’s conversion represents the climax of Dinah’s sermon which ends in the distinctive Methodist practice of hymn-singing. Hymns recounted different stages of Jesus Christ’s life. Charles Wesley, brother of John Wesley, composed the most important chants. The act of performing them signified to adhere to Methodism and thus to undergo the Methodist experience.

In his introduction to *Adam Bede*, Stephen Gill suggests that even if the novel is set sixty years before its composition, various elements of this narration, like for instance Methodism “signified the emergence of a new age, whose fruits [...] both writer and reader of *Adam Bede* in 1859 consciously enjoyed”⁷¹. Notwithstanding the great varieties of regroupings and continuous secessions which characterize the development of the nineteenth-century history of this confession, the fundamental features of Methodism never changed. The internal conflicts of this sect were caused by divergent opinions on the internal structure and decisions of the Methodist Conference, while Wesley’s designs to reform and improve the Anglican doctrine were not questioned. Independent Methodists, Wesleyan Methodists, Primitive Methodists and the minor groups that came to form the nineteenth-century outcome of this congregation, all professed the same tradition preached by Eliot’s dissenter Dinah Morris who thus, despite her gender, mirrors a traditional Methodist lay preacher, whether female or male.

⁷⁰ J. Wesley, as quoted in R. E. Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 100

⁷¹ S. Gill, Introduction to *Adam Bede* in G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, *cit.*, pp. 23 - 24

3.2. Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell: a Unitarian novelist

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell (née Stevenson) was born in Chelsea on 29 September 1810, however she did not grow up in this London neighbourhood (which, at that time was simply a village on the outskirts of the English capital city), but in Knutsford, in Lancashire, and later in Manchester. Little is known about her mother, Elizabeth Holland, who passed away when the novelist was only 13 months old, yet her family connections with a great number of Unitarian relations and families shaped the life of Elizabeth Gaskell. On her mother's side Gaskell was related to eminent families such as the Darwins, the Wedgwoods, and, more importantly for the future of the writer, the Turners and the Hollands, with whom she lived and whose stories she knew so extensively that she was inspired by them in the development of some of her long-works, such as *North & South*, *Ruth*, *Cranford* and *Wives & Daughters*.

Religious dissent deeply influenced Elizabeth Gaskell. Both her parents, her adoptive aunt Hannah Lumb, her “more than mother”⁷², the Hollands, the Turners and her husband were all Unitarians, a doctrine that she herself professed for her whole life. Unitarianism professed a doctrine quite different from the notions professed in the other Dissenting groups. As it has already been mentioned in Chapter I, this confession developed itself out of Presbyterianism and attracted a great number of nineteenth-century men of letters. As a matter of fact the members of this confession were among the most cultivated Dissenters, had college and University degrees, in “antithesis”⁷³ to Methodism. Intellectual progress and the improvement of one's status quo through knowledge were basic elements of this doctrine, hence scientific efforts and the establishments of scientific and literary

⁷² E. Gaskell, as quoted in J. Uglow, *op. cit.*, p. 12

⁷³ V. Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 129

societies were much welcomed among Unitarians. They had a keen interest in the new scientific and technical discoveries, they were extremely open towards them, consequently during the cholera epidemics of 1830s for instance they did not accept the conclusions of the large part of Nonconformist congregations and the Established Church. Despite common belief, Unitarians asserted, correctly, that cholera was not a punishment from God for the sins of the humans, but it was the result of filth, of the overcrowded slums and cities, and of the deficiency of sanitary systems. The Unitarian dogma was not only based on the Christian doctrine, but also on seventeenth-century notions proposed by key figures from various fields of knowledge, science, medicine and philosophy, like John Locke, Isaac Newton and Thomas Hobbes and by the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Unitarians followed, for instance, Locke's idea that at the beginning of his life the human mind is a *tabula rasa*, completely blank. The nineteenth-century Unitarianism was modelled by late eighteenth-century personalities like Theophilus Lindsey and Joseph Priestly, who were both a source of inspiration for Gaskell's narrative. The main Unitarian belief, which caused suspicions of un-Christianity by Anglicans and by the other Dissenting sects, was the refusal of the concept of the Holy Trinity and the acceptance of only one God. Unitarians did not oppose the figure of Christ, yet his supernatural birth was questioned together with his infallibility and his morality. He was to be considered a model to follow. Additionally, Unitarianism also opposed to the Calvinistic notion of 'election'. Since science and rationalism were pivotal elements in this doctrine, Unitarians believed in a "quest for truth"⁷⁴ based on reason and freedom of thought. Moreover, Anglicans suspected this congregation might be a dangerous threat for the Establishment because it promoted gender

⁷⁴ J. Uglow, *op. cit.*, p. 6

equality. Women were not considered inferior to men, they were encouraged to study and develop their opinion upon knowledge and education. Many important female figures of nineteenth century like Harriet Martineau and Florence Nightingale belonged to Unitarianism. As stated by Jenny Uglow, “in the nineteenth century Unitarian women were as influential as men in social reform”. Unitarians were encouraged to express their mind when they disagreed with any issue. In fact this confession, although comparatively small if compared to other congregations and especially if compared to Methodism, was one of the most tolerant confession.

In 1821 Elizabeth Gaskell moved to Warwickshire where she was enrolled in a boarding school run by the Byerley sisters. The Byerleys were Dissenters and promoted a new, more sympathetic and benevolent, approach to their pupils. Yet, this school did not welcome only students belonging to Dissenting families, since a vast proportion of them rather followed the Anglican faith, thus both the Byerleys and their students worshipped at the local Church on Sundays.

Between 1829 and 1831 she spent her winters in Newcastle-upon-Tyne at the house of the Unitarian Reverend William Turner, who was a model for one of her own fictional reverend, the benevolent Reverend Thrustan Benson in *Ruth*. William Turner was Gaskell’s guardian for two years and like her father and her future husband was a cultivated man. He studied at Warrington Dissenting Academy and at Glasgow University, like William Gaskell, who was introduced to the novelist thanks to the Turner family. In 1831 Elizabeth was visiting one of Turner’s daughter, Mary, wife to John Gooch Robberds, the current minister of the Unitarian Chapel of Cross Street in Manchester, where William Gaskell was his assistant minister; they married the following year, on 30 August 1832. William

Gaskell always supported Elizabeth throughout her career, sustaining her against the harsh criticism that her works, especially her long ones, occasioned.

3.2.1. Ruth

“I am sure I should have been repulsed by hearing that “a tale of seduction” was chosen as a subject of fiction, - *that* was the opinion I dreaded; - I felt *almost* sure that if people would only read what I had to say they would not be disgusted – but I feared & still think it probable that many may refuse to read any book of that kind.”⁷⁵

Since the success of *Mary Barton* many of Gaskell’s friends advised her to describe again the industrial conflict between masters and workers and to show this time, the employers in a more positive light. She eventually returned to write on this topic in *North & South*, while the core of her second novel, *Ruth*, aimed at illustrating another contemporary issue: the “sexual fall”⁷⁶ of a young woman and the possibility of her spiritual redemption. The recognition of a “Woman as a Victim of the existing Social Order”⁷⁷ was a matter dear to Gaskell’s heart. While visiting the New Bailey Prison in Manchester in 1849 she had become acquainted with a young prostitute named Pasley charged for theft. The young girl confessed to Gaskell that she used to be a seamstress, but that she had been seduced by a surgeon and had been forced to steal, and sell her body in order to economically support herself for she had been unable to find a proper employment because of her ‘sinful stigma’. Pasley’s vicissitudes had a great impact on Elizabeth Gaskell and thus inspired the topic of her second book.

Elizabeth Gaskell started to work on *Ruth*, her “Newcastle novel”⁷⁸, in March 1851 and it was given to printers by Christmas 1852. On 24 January 1853 Chapman and Hall published *Ruth* in three volumes. Gaskell did know that the subject of her second long-length fiction was a daring topic (“Of course I knew of the great

⁷⁵ E. Gaskell to Mary Green, ? January 1853, as quoted in J. Uglow, *op. cit.*, p. 322

⁷⁶ D. D’Albertis, *Dissembling Fictions. Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Social Text*, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1997, p. 76

⁷⁷ W. Gérin, *op. cit.*, pp. 127 – 128

⁷⁸ E. Gaskell, as quoted in J. Uglow, *op. cit.*, p. 58

difference of opinion there would be about the book before it was published. I [mean] as to whether my subject was a fit one for fiction”⁷⁹) yet she nevertheless aspired to wake the “social conscience and pity”⁸⁰ of her readers. In fact, her second book faced a stronger criticism than *Mary Barton*, even from close friends. Harriet Martineau for instance described it as “feeble and wrong”⁸¹ whilst Gaskell’s old friend Rosa Mitchell regretted that she ever wrote such a novel. Gaskell also had to face the indignation of her own community in Manchester. Two members of her own Cross Street Chapel burnt the book and many others forbade their wives and children to read it. In London, Bell’s Library withdrew *Ruth* from its shelves and many reviewers deplored Gaskell’s ‘lascivious’ choice of fiction. Nevertheless, after the first negative responses, a great number of warm and affectionate letters of congratulations and favourable reviews reached Elizabeth. Some of her Manchester and London friends were very pleased with her second book and thanked her for daring to discuss such a difficult contemporary issue. Dickens enjoyed it, Charlotte Brönte loved every aspect of it but Ruth’s death, and Kingsley informed Gaskell that his acquaintances unanimously agreed on “the beauty and righteousness of the book.... whatsoever the “Snobs” and the Bigots may think, English people in general have but one opinion of “Ruth” and that is one of utter satisfaction”⁸². George Eliot also praised the novel, although she complained about Gaskell’s extensive use of melodramatic effects (like the sudden reappearance of Mr. Bellingham).

⁷⁹ E. Gaskell to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth, 7 April 1853, in *Elizabeth Gaskell: the Critical Heritage*, ed. by A. Easson, London, Routledge, 1991, p. 203

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⁸¹ Harriet Martineau to Fanny Wedgwood, n.d. [March 1853] in *Harriet Martineau’s Letters to Fanny Wedgwood*, ed. Elisabeth Arbuckle, 1983, Stanford, 125, as cited in J. Uglow, *op. cit.*, p. 341

⁸² C. Kingsley, as quoted in W. Gérin, *op. cit.*, pp. 139 – 140

Ruth is the story of Ruth Hilton, a young seamstress, an orphan, who falls in love with the rich heir Mr. Bellingham, a spoiled and selfish young man. They elope to Wales, where he seduces her and then abandons her. Ruth is rescued from a suicide attempt by the Dissenting reverend Thurstan Benson who is on his yearly vacation in the same little Welsh village. The young girl is pregnant and unmarried; the reverend and his sister Faith, whom he has called for help, are shocked yet they nevertheless welcome her into their house in Eccleston, a little town in the North of England, to give her the chance of a better life. In order to explain her compromising state the Bensons lie about her real identity, pretending she is a distant relative, recently widowed, called Ruth Denbigh. No one is aware of her past wrong-doings but the Benson family. Ruth lives with the Bensons and their Anglican maid Sally for many years, raises her illegitimate son Leonard, repents from her sin and even becomes a governess for the Bradshaws (the most important parishioners of the Lancashire village) when suddenly her former lover and father of her child, Mr. Bellingham, who is now known as Mr. Donne, reappears in her life. Despite the girl's efforts to hide her true identity, truth surfaces notwithstanding. Ruth and the Bensons are now shunned by a large part of the community until cholera spreads in Eccleston. Ruth becomes a nurse, she is praised for her abilities and her fellow-villagers do not disdain her anymore (““She will be in the light of God's countenance when you and I will be standing afar off.””⁸³). Yet tragedy enters her life once again: while nursing the feverish Bellingham she also falls ill and dies. Ruth has now ended her life of penitence, for death signifies the completion of her redemption.

⁸³ E. Gaskell, *Ruth*, (1853), ed. by T. Dolin, Oxford, OUP, 2011, Ch. 33, p. 346

Even though Gaskell's main purpose was to inform her readers about the contemporary "morality that condoned the male partner in 'sin' and condemned the female"⁸⁴, in *Ruth* Gaskell also disclosed the tolerant position of the Unitarian dogma through the decisions and stances of the Dissenting minister Thurstan Benson, who shows how an open-minded "Christian morality"⁸⁵ might offer a redemptive alternative to a 'female sinner' like Ruth.

⁸⁴ W. Gérin, *op. cit.*, p. 127

⁸⁵ W. Gérin, *op. cit.*, p. 128

3.2.2. The dissenting minister: Thurstan Benson

Although [...] the allegiance of [Gaskell's] 'Dissenters' is usually vague, [...] Unitarianism is found in fiction (especially in *Mary Barton*, *Ruth* and *Sylvia's Lovers*) in her tracing of consequences and her emphasis on education, truth and lies, atonement and regeneration.⁸⁶

Throughout the narration Elizabeth Gaskell never specifies the confession of Thurstan Benson. Tim Dolin explains Gaskell's decision suggesting that, presumably, "she was anxious that Benson be read as a representative, and not a sectarian, figure"⁸⁷. However, critics agree on assuming that Thurstan Benson belongs to the same confession as Elizabeth Gaskell: Unitarianism. For instance, Wendy A. Craik affirms that Gaskell's "religion is at the heart of her and of all she writes, and her social concern for those of whom she writes is a practical manifestation of that religion"⁸⁸; Angus Easson states that "it would be difficult from the novel alone to guess exactly what form [Benson's] Dissent takes, though we know it is not Methodism, and Unitarianism is certainly meant"⁸⁹, while Dolin asserts that the "pluralistic liberal Dissent" of the Benson's home "closely approximates the tolerant Unitarianism"⁹⁰.

Furthermore, Benson's identification with Unitarianism is attested by the model upon which Gaskell based his characterization: the Unitarian Reverend William Turner. During the two consecutive winters that Gaskell spent at the Turners' House in Newcastle she witnessed the everyday life of this "third-generation Dissenting minister"⁹¹ and his devotion for the well-being of his parishioners. The factual and the fictional minister differ in their physical

⁸⁶ J. Uglow, *op. cit.*, p. 131

⁸⁷ T. Dolin Note to the text in E. Gaskell, *Ruth*, cit., p. 378

⁸⁸ W. A. Craik, *Elizabeth Gaskell and the English Provincial Novel*, London, Mutheun, 1975, p. 4

⁸⁹ A. Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, p. 122

⁹⁰ T. Dolin in Introduction to *Ruth* in E. Gaskell, *Ruth*, cit., p. xvi

⁹¹ J. Uglow, *op. cit.*, p. 56

appearance yet their personalities and manners are deeply similar. The ‘original’ reverend was not crippled, whilst Thurstan Benson resembles a dwarf, due to a spinal deformation caused by a fall in his tender age. But like Thurstan Benson, Mr. Turner was a beloved, simple and generous man who tried to help in any possible way the very large population of Newcastle. Turner sponsored plans for the education of poor boys, often teaching them himself, and supported his destitute parishioners by giving them what he earned or managed to spare. Unitarians, as a matter of fact, believed in an “active Christianity”⁹², a practice exemplified in the actions of both real Turner and fictional Benson.

Further elements that confirm Benson’s Unitarianism are his attitude towards Ruth’s innocent illegitimate child, the trust in a more broad acceptance and openness towards sinners, the confidence in the influence of the environment in men’s lives, and the encouragement to improve Ruth’s knowledge and thus let her cease to be just a “beautiful ignoramus”⁹³.

Upon the discovery of Ruth’s ‘illicit’ pregnancy Faith Benson and his brother Thurstan react very differently. Miss Benson’s first response follows the Victorian cold disapproval against women who have offended the “sexual mores”⁹⁴ of society. She is decided to limit her support to Ruth for she cannot accept her fault, while Thurstan has a different opinion on the matter: he is pleased about the upcoming birth of the illegitimate child. He explains to his sister that he thinks that Ruth’s transgression is “quite distinct from its consequences”⁹⁵. According to the Victorian frame of mind, Leonard should be considered a disgrace because of his bastardy, yet to Thurstan Benson he is a “little innocent babe, who may be God’s

⁹² A. Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, cit., p. 122

⁹³ E. Gaskell, *Ruth*, cit., Ch. 6, p. 62

⁹⁴ A. Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, cit., p. 110

⁹⁵ E. Gaskell, *Ruth*, cit., Ch. 11, p. 97

messenger to lead [Ruth] back to Him”⁹⁶. He states that “the world has, indeed, made such children miserable, innocent as they are; but I doubt if this be according to the will of God”⁹⁷. Thurstan believes that God is a reasonable judge who considers the life and soul of this illegitimate child as pure as the life and soul of a child born out of a lawful marriage. In fact, Unitarians denied the Original Sin and believed that every person was born without guilt.

Additionally, Unitarianism also rejected the Calvinistic notion of predestination for they believed that human deeds decided the aftermath of the soul. According to the Unitarian frame of mind, men and women were not driven towards salvation by a divine, irreversible decision which had already settled their fate. They rather believed that “the human mind and soul were not innately sinful, but instead were born with an immense potential for growth”⁹⁸. It was the *milieu*, the surrounding environment which influenced the development of the life of a person. Unitarians deeply supported the concept of “social justice”⁹⁹ and believed that everyone, even sinners, could be saved from a corrupted life when removed from iniquitous circumstances. By this, Unitarians did not affirm that the removal from a sinful situation would have implied an immediate purification, yet they believed that time and “much Christian love”¹⁰⁰ might foster a spiritual rebirth. In *Ruth* this path towards atonement is extensively supported by the minister of Eccleston who ventures to lie¹⁰¹ in order to save Ruth. He explains to his sister:

⁹⁶ Ivi

⁹⁷ E. Gaskell, *Ruth*, cit., Ch.11, p. 98

⁹⁸ R. Webster, *I think I must be an improper woman without knowing it’: Fallenness and Unitarianism in Elizabeth Gaskell’s Ruth* in ‘Victorian Network’, 4.2, Winter 2012, pp. 10 – 28, p. 15

⁹⁹ http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/unitarianism/social/social_1.shtml

¹⁰⁰ E. Gaskell, *Ruth*, cit., Ch.11, p. 98

¹⁰¹ Some reviewers and readers were more disappointed by the minister’s lie than by Ruth’s sexual offence.

“While we do all we can to strengthen her sense of responsibility [...] I can imagine that if the present occasion be taken rightly, and used well, all that is good in her may be raised to a height unmeasured but by God; while all that is evil and dark may, by His blessing, fade and disappear in the pure light of her child’s presence.”¹⁰²

Benson is conscious of the relevance of the decision he is about to set into action. The lie about Ruth’s condition contrasts with the Unitarian and Christian dogma of pursuing a life in the light of truth, but Thurstan Benson, like Gaskell, perceives that his decision would promote a ‘greater good’, a “good end”¹⁰³ in the life of the sinful girl. The minister’s decision is motivated by a simple purpose: he wishes “to place her in circumstances in which she might work out her self-redemption”¹⁰⁴. Had they left the pregnant and unmarried Ruth in Wales the young girl would have fallen victim of the unforgiving Victorian society which would have lead her, most possibly, into prostitution like Pasley and the other 83,000 women who worked as prostitutes between 1840s and 1850s¹⁰⁵. In Eccleston Ruth can redeem her conduct and cleanse her soul, for this is a proper and honest environment where she can develop her inner potential and lead an honest life despite her compromising past.

Thurstan Benson’s tolerance towards Ruth’s sin is also illustrated at the end of the novel, when the “hardened evangelical”¹⁰⁶ Mr. Bradshaw discovers Ruth’s ‘crime’ and confronts the minister. On the one side, the wealthy puritanical Dissenter Mr. Bradshaw thinks that his, now former, governess is a disgrace for his own house and has been a danger for his “innocent girls”¹⁰⁷ for she is “fallen and depraved”¹⁰⁸. On the other side, Benson is convinced that Ruth is not at all depraved

¹⁰² E. Gaskell, *Ruth*, cit., Ch. 11, pp. 98 – 99

¹⁰³ E. Gaskell, *Ruth*, cit., Ch. 27, p. 282

¹⁰⁴ Ivi

¹⁰⁵ Cf. R. Webster, *op. cit.*, p. 11

¹⁰⁶ Ivi

¹⁰⁷ E. Gaskell, *Ruth*, cit., Ch. 27, p. 283

¹⁰⁸ E. Gaskell, *Ruth*, cit., *Ibidem*, p. 284

despite her sin. Dorothy H. McGavran suggests that Gaskell, through the harsh confrontation between these two men, “tests the rigid Puritan codes of Bradshaw with the inquiring approach of Unitarianism represented by Benson”¹⁰⁹.

Consequently, Benson replies to Mr Bradshaw’s accusations stating:

“Now I wish God would give me power to speak out convincingly what I believe to be His truth, that not every woman who has fallen is depraved; that many [...] crave and hunger after a chance for virtue – [...] help – that gentle tender help which Jesus gave once to Mary Magdalen. [...] I take my stand with Christ against the world.”¹¹⁰

Benson once again expresses his trust in God’s kindness and sympathy towards the sinner, whilst his reference to Christ’s famous deed of compassion for Mary Magdalene conforms to the Unitarian perception of Jesus Christ as a human, “ethical teacher”¹¹¹.

Unitarianism however, did not ‘limit’ the improvement of one’s soul to an honest religious conduct alone. As it has been already pointed out, Unitarians had a profound consideration for the value of education. Unitarianism, unlike Methodism or Evangelicalism, was a very “intellectual faith”¹¹² and the most rational among the dissenting and established confessions. It promoted education as a fundamental instrument to better understand life and faith. Gaskell writes that Ruth’s “mind was uncultivated, her reading scant”¹¹³, hence Mr. Benson supports the girl’s decision to improve her knowledge, he assigns her books to refine her learning, so that she can be able to teach new notions to her child. It is in this dissenting, presumably

¹⁰⁹ D. H. McGavran, *Ruthless for Reform: Language, Lying, and Interpretation in Elizabeth Gaskell’s Ruth*, in ‘Postscript’ 12 (1995), pp. 39 – 49, p. 43

¹¹⁰ E. Gaskell, *Ruth*, cit., Ch. 27, 284

¹¹¹ A. Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, cit., p. 123

¹¹² Cf. G. Parsons, *From Dissenters to Free Churchmen: the Transitions of Victorian Nonconformity*, cit., p. 80

¹¹³ E. Gaskell, *Ruth*, cit., Ch. 16, p. 144

Unitarian, home that Ruth can improve both her literacy and her understanding of the moral code of society.

As a conclusion, we may assert that the disposition of the dissenting reverend Thurstan Benson towards Ruth, a ‘fallen woman’, his unbiased assistance throughout her spiritual, moral and cultural rebirth, his tolerance towards her dishonourable sin and his open-mindedness regarding the consequence of her transgression mirror some fundamental dispositions of Elizabeth Gaskell’s confession. Benson’s aid, support and confidence in giving a second chance to everyone demonstrate the great openness of Unitarianism towards sinners, therefore “Ruth’s story becomes a parable of the search for a moral life following the spirit of Unitarianism”¹¹⁴ by the Unitarian approach of Thurstan Benson.

¹¹⁴ D. H. McGavran, *op. cit.*, p. 43

Conclusions

This dissertation has argued that the Dissenting faith was a component of the life of the nineteenth-century British men and women, and it has also attempted to demonstrate how religion had never ceased to be a form of comfort, assistance and psychological protection for these bewildered believers and doubters amidst the adversities of their lives. Features of the nineteenth-century religious Dissent have been analysed and discussed in the works of George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell, focusing on various forms of Dissent in their characters and situations. Yet a conclusive fictional evidence of the centrality of religion in the life of the Victorians who had to confront new, unprecedented scenarios, is to be found in Gaskell's novel of doubt, Dissent, union's strike, conflicting love and industrial progress, *North & South*.

After the strike that has paralysed Milton Northern, John Thornton's cotton-mill is unable to fulfil the scheduled commissions and thus the finances of the factory do not allow the prompt payment of workers' salaries. Mr. Thornton must face bankrupt despite all his attempts to avoid such a tragedy. Throughout the novel this character is never attached to any form of religion. Political economy and trade seem to be the only elements that regulate his life. Nevertheless, in Chapter 25 (Volume II) after he has informed his mother about their current situation, he asks her to repeat him once again the prayers of his childhood:

“Help me, as you helped me when I was a child. Then you said many good words – [...] you said brave, noble, trustful words then, mother, which I have never forgotten, though they may have lain dormant. Speak to me again in the old way, mother. [...] If you would say the old good words, it would make me feel something of the pious simplicity of my childhood.”¹

¹ E. Gaskell, *North & South*, cit., Vol. 2, Ch. 25, p. 425

Hence, by this event Gaskell shows how in a moment of personal and economical crisis, even a master of a nineteenth-century factory, whose only faith seem to be profit and capitals, does seek comfort in religion.

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