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The city vs. the country: A climate of anti- -urbanism in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*

Abstract. This paper aims to discuss a contrast between the city and the country in *Mary Barton*, Elizabeth Gaskell's first novel. By juxtaposing negative images of early-Victorian Manchester with positive descriptions of rural life and scenery, Gaskell reveals an anti-urban attitude prevalent among a large section of the cultivated middle and upper class. In *Mary Barton*, nature is an agent of creating an atmosphere of nostalgia for the simple and pure rural world that is disappearing, giving way to a hostile and brutal reality of industrial cities. Strong bonds and human inter-reliance marking rural communities are replaced by aggregation and alienation of human beings in the city. Living in a human-made environment dominated by machine technology of industrial processes, some characters in the novel try to reconnect with the natural world by cultivating rural traditions or seeking in the country an escape from the dreariness of urban existence. Numerous references to nature and its importance for the novel's characters are a testimony to its ideological significance to Victorian society and an apprehension of unbridled urbanisation.

Keywords: country, rural, nature, pastoral, pre-industrial, city, community, industrial.

1. Introduction

The body of critical scholarship on Elizabeth Gaskell's literary output is extensive. It ranges from presenting the author as a social problem novelist, one whose novels explore universal truths to offering a feminist critique focusing on discussing the issues of class and gender in her works. These different perspectives are represented in the critical works of Kathleen Tillotson (1956), Miriam Allott (1960), Edgar Wright (1965), John McVeigh (1970), Wendy A. Craik (1975), Coral Lansbury (1975), John Lucas (1977), Enid L. Duthie (1980) and Patsy Stoneman ([1987] 2006). This article attempts to contribute to the scholarly discussion on Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* by offering the reading of the novel as a work that reflects a strong anti-urban climate of its epoch. While not its primary purpose, the novel attests to the anti-urban mood and

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pervading anxiety of nineteenth-century intellectuals about pernicious consequences of urbanisation and industrialisation on the condition of city population. Numerous references to the countryside and nature and their role in the novel reveal Gaskell's awareness of these concerns and her ideological stance in the discourse on the urban-rural dichotomy. The historical and cultural context for discussing *Mary Barton* as a novel which in its idealised, nostalgic depiction of nature and the country draws from the pastoral tradition in English literature and depicts economic, social and emotional consequences of agrarian and industrial capitalism on the condition of urban communities has been gleaned from such seminal works as Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* (1973), Harold James Dyos' *Exploring the Urban Past. Essays in Urban History* ([1982] 2003), Francis M.L. Thompson's *The Rise of Respectable Society. A Social History of Victorian Britain* ([1988] 2016), and Richard Dennis' *Cities in Modernity: Representation and Productions of Metropolitan Space 1840–1930* (2008).

2. Urbanisation

The transition from a pre-industrial economy to industrial capitalism in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was manifested not only in England's profound economic transformation but also in social and demographic changes. The growth of manufacturing production in towns, enclosures and changes in land ownership in the country as well as the inexorable decline of the agricultural sector in economy progressing since the early seventeenth century induced demographic transformations leading to a massive rural-to-urban migration (Thompson 2016: 28). This process disrupted the hitherto existing balance between the rural and urban populations in England and left its mark on the social and communal organisation. As a result, English society in the Victorian period became the first predominantly urban society in the world – by mid-century urban population had already exceeded the rural one (Williams 1973: 2, 217). When in 1843 a Congregationalist minister, historian and writer Robert Vaughan, published his book *The Age of Great Cities*, its title became a catchphrase used by contemporary writers and intellectuals to give a name to the unprecedented rise of large cities and the ensuing transformation in people's lifestyle (Williams 1973: 217; Briggs 1990: 72). This assertion is confirmed by the fact that while in 1801, London was virtually the only metropolis in Britain, three decades later, seven other large cities – Manchester, Glasgow, Liverpool, Edinburgh, Birmingham, Leeds, and Bristol – emerged, each with the population of more than 100,000. Together with London, they comprised one-sixth of the total UK population (Thompson 2016: 31). One of the fastest-growing new cities in Victorian England was Manchester – “an urban prototype” (Douglas et al. 2002: 235) of a modern manufacturing and commercial centre displaying the material and human components of the new industrial society. To the Victorian society, particularly its intellectual elite, it was a “shock city” (Briggs 1990: 116; Thompson 2016: 34), an epitome of

unimpeded economic progress encapsulating all the entrepreneurial opportunities that industrial capitalism offered but also baring human, social and moral shortcomings of the new economic system.

The rapid growth of extra-metropolitan large towns was a novel phenomenon that fascinated the Victorian public. It provoked a considerable literary response, particularly in the form of *the social problem novels*, from such writers as Elizabeth Gaskell, Benjamin Disraeli, Charles Dickens and Charles Kingsley whose literary comment on Thomas Carlyle's *condition of England* question (1843: 3) exposed social injustice suffered by the working population of industrial cities (Stoneman 2006: ix). What inspired interest, was not only the phenomenal growth of their population but also the fact, that unlike their urban predecessors, these new cities were built as places of work – with factory chimneys, engines, mills and iron foundries, surrounded by workers' houses constituting their central topographical features. This proximity of home and work in new manufacturing cities entrenched the dominant social relations based on the segregation of the employers and the employees and challenged the familiar notions of community life and mutual obligations (Williams 1973: 220; Thompson 2016: 31), supplanting them with “atomism and aggregation” (Williams 1973: 231).

These transforming experiences only enhanced the perceived dichotomy between the city and the country, which had its roots in classical times and persisted in English literary and intellectual tradition through centuries. In the nineteenth century, it produced a climate of anti-urbanism in which the fundamental differences between urban and rural life were revealed. The rural ideal shaped by pastoral tradition was extolled for its associations with a simple natural way of life, tranquillity, innocence and moral stature. Urban life was its antithesis. Despite some positive connotations with learning and achievement, the city was foremost imbued with hostile features such as moral degradation, worldliness, noise and pollution – all of which were the implications of industrial capitalism. Negative attitudes to the city were further enhanced by the perception of nature as a purifying force and an expression of divinity with which man had an organic link, a view that the Victorians inherited from the Romantic period (Machlow 1985: 97-98; MacMaster 1990: 118-119; Burchardt 2002: 47).

3. *Mary Barton* – an industrial novel

Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *Mary Barton*, labelled by most literary critics as a *social-problem novel* (Stoneman 2006: ix) or an *industrial novel* (Stoneman 2006: 3) provides a humanitarian perspective on the suffering of the masses of workers in the 1840s. The writer declares in the Preface to the book: “I had always felt a deep sympathy with the care-worn men, who looked as if doomed to struggle through their lives in strange alternations between work and want” (Gaskell 2006). Gaskell's moving descriptions of abject poverty and atrocious living conditions in back-to-back houses and cellars in industrial

Manchester corroborate the view that, like many middle-class commentators of the period, she identified *industrial capitalism* in the new cities as the force responsible for the plight of multitudes of manufacturing workers. She is explicit about it in a letter to Mary Ewart (1848): “we must all acknowledge that there are duties connected with the manufacturing system not fully understood as yet, and evils existing in relation to it which might be remedied in some degree” (Chapelle & Pollard 1997: 67).

The setting of the novel is Manchester, but Gaskell mentions in the Preface that her original choice was the rural scenery of Yorkshire. Perhaps because of this initial idea or the fact that, as she declares she lives in Manchester but has “a deep relish and fond admiration for the country” (Gaskell “Preface” 2006), the reader can find numerous references to the country and nature in *Mary Barton*. Those are either reminiscences of a childhood spent by Old Alice in a remote Lake District village, descriptions of rural scenery near the city, or accounts of nature-related pastimes of the characters. These descriptions have a multifaceted function in the novel. They also suggest that to Gaskell’s contemporaries, industrialism and urbanisation must have been a crushing experience that had left its imprint not only on nature but also on the humankind and its relation to nature.

4. The old and the new world

The country in *Mary Barton* is a powerful symbol of the previous epoch or the loss of *Merry Old England*. The opening passage of the book takes the reader to Green Heys Fields, a piece of a rural landscape near Manchester frequented by city residents in good weather. Like A.W. Pugin’s *Contrasts* (1836) – a graphic satire on contemporary life – which in several contrasting plates argues for the superiority of mediaeval social organisation, the beginning of Gaskell’s novel signals a polarity between the old rural society and the new manufacturing urban one. It is “a symbolic threshold between the rural past and the industrial present” (Gravil 2007: 29). In her rendering of the rural area and juxtaposing it with the picture of early-Victorian Manchester, Gaskell ensures that the reader, like her characters visiting this rural spot, is prepared to feel and acknowledge “the effect of contrast in these common-place but thoroughly rural fields, with the busy, bustling manufacturing town he left but half an hour ago” (2006: 5). Pastoral images of verdant vegetation, sounds of nature, descriptions of farming activities and rural occupations represent the world that is disappearing, one which “speaks of other times and other occupations than those which now absorb the population of the neighbourhood” (Gaskell 2006: 5). The impression is enhanced by the use of epithets that invariably indicate the past: “an old black and white farm-house”, “old farmyards,” or “a medley of old-fashioned herbs and flowers” (Gaskell 2006: 5-6). The passage and the description of carefree enjoyment of peaceful rural beauty by young workers from Manchester are tinged with nostalgia for *Merry Old England* and simple idyllic existence in pre-industrial

times. Thus, in this dimension, Gaskell's references to the country dispersed through the text tend to respond to a "shared, consensual, sympathetic vision" of the past that she shared with her contemporaries (Ellison 2004: 495).

Another potent reference to the loss of *the old country* due to social and economic changes brought about by agrarian capitalism is made when recounting Old Alice's life story. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, agriculture, particularly small farming, was declining and, as a consequence, unemployment, poverty and suffering in the country were widespread, reaching a critical level after 1815 (Williams 1973: 182). This situation triggered large-scale migration from rural areas to cities. A fast developing manufacturing centre was an obvious choice for the dispossessed as it offered much better prospects of employment and stability than farming. Like many other impoverished country folk, Alice's family was lured by the promise of a better life in the city, so to ease the burden on her parents, she followed her two brothers to Manchester:

Tom [...] had come to Manchester, and sent word what terrible lots of work was to be had, both for lads and lasses. So father sent George first [...], and then work was scarce out toward Burton, where we lived, and father said I maun try and get a place. And George wrote as how wages were far higher in Manchester than Milnthorpe or Lancaster. (Gaskell 2006: 31)

Alice found work as a domestic servant, replicating a characteristic employment pattern of country girls who migrated into the city. Although many young country women were employed in factories, a large number were recruited for domestic service or worked as seamstresses. According to Alan J. Kidd, in Manchester in the early 1840s female workforce of around 37,779 was almost evenly distributed between cotton mills employing 11,427 female workers in 1841 and domestic service and dressmaking providing work to 9,961 and 2,251 women respectively (2002: 17). Abject poverty, toil and hopelessness of the workers' existence that glean from the pages of *Mary Barton* leave little doubt that for many incomers economic opportunities that the city seemed to offer proved elusive. Nevertheless, Gaskell admits that industrial capitalism also offered opportunities for achieving financial success and for some shrewd entrepreneurial individuals, the city became a springboard to fortune and upward mobility. John Barton reflects upon it when he recounts the progress *from rags to riches* of his former employer, Henry Carson, and several other wealthy mill owners: "there's many on 'em has had nought to begin wi'; there's Carsons, and Duncombes, and Mengies, and many another, as comed into Manchester with clothes to their back, and that were all, and now they're worth their tens of thousands" (Gaskell 2006: 64).

The description of Green Heys Fields, a rural idyll still immersed in Britain's recent pre-industrial past, which existed on the doorstep of Manchester, is contrasted with an image of a metropolis in development. Gaskell joins a chorus of other middle-class

commentators alarmed by the unchecked growth of large manufacturing cities and presents a bleak and pessimistic perspective in her depiction of early-Victorian Manchester. She signals the transition from the old pre-industrial order – safe and familiar, in which man lived in harmony with nature, surrounded by its numerous animate and inanimate forms – to the new industrial world, alien and confusing. It is particularly pronounced in the description of the Bartons' and the Wilsons' return journey home from their outing to the country: “the party proceeded home, through many half-finished streets, all so like one another, that you might have easily been bewildered and lost your way” (Gaskell 2006: 13). Thus, in the novel, the two families' progress home becomes symbolic of the country's metamorphosis from the state of pre-industrial and largely rural social and economic organisation to industrial urban-centred capitalism.

No other city could serve the purpose of juxtaposing the evanescence of the old pre-industrial world and the onset of the new industrial order better than Manchester. At the time when the novel is set, it encapsulated the forces of capitalism and urban growth and served as a model example of a new industrial metropolis. Modern technologies embraced by the local industry as early as the last decades of the eighteenth century stimulated further development of the industrial base and encouraged in-migration. As a result, in the first half of the nineteenth century, Manchester experienced exponential growth of its population, from the meagre 22,481 in 1773 to 235,507 in 1841 and 303,382 ten years later (Kiersnowska 2017: 55). In the 1840s, it was a city still in the early stages of its development, whose local government system had just been established and had not yet achieved its full potential. Manchester was incorporated as a borough on 23 October 1838, and its first Borough Council elected two months later began to exercise its duties in early 1840 (Perrin 1857: 44-45). Thus, Gaskell's depiction of Manchester streets as unfinished and deprived of any distinctive features typically acquired with time, emphasizes the newness of the city. The image of a maze of streets in which one can lose its way is also a harbinger of the overpowering impression that in *Mary Barton* the city is an alien organism with which the main characters have little affiliation, it is an aggregate of human beings, houses lining dirty narrow streets and courtyards, factory chimneys and industrial buildings. The possibility of losing one's way in a large city referred to earlier can be interpreted literally, but when considering the tragic fate of some characters in the novel, it acquires a deep symbolic meaning. Concordantly with many of her contemporaries, Gaskell perceived the city as dangerous (Janssen 2016), particularly for young women like Mary Barton, whose unchaperoned journeys in the dark narrow streets made her easy prey for Harry Carson, a roguish mill owner's son. Mary avoided the downfall, but her aunt, Esther, naively trusting the promises of a young officer, ended up as a prostitute and social outcast. John Barton, broken and enraged by the injustice of the industrial capitalist system, lost his moral compass and committed murder.

A striking contrast between *rus* and *urbs*, the old and the new, pristine natural beauty of the country and ugliness and dreariness of urban surroundings, becomes even more pronounced in the description of the workers' quarter where the Bartons lived. An image of a charming farmhouse with rose bushes, lavender and herbs that the two families saw when strolling in Green Heys Fields, is juxtaposed with a grim picture of a typical working-class neighbourhood of back-to-back houses, lacking any beauty and uninviting: "a little paved court, having the backs of houses at the end opposite to the opening, a gutter running through the middle to carry off household slops, washing suds, &c." (Gaskell 2006: 13). The novel offers numerous other descriptions of dirty streets and courtyards, shabby houses and dank cellars unsuitable for living, yet being home to poor families like the Davenports. It appears that the imperfect work of the man has replaced God's perfection of nature. William Cowper's words that "God made the country, and man made the town" ominously resonate in Gaskell's depiction of life in early-Victorian Manchester.

5. Nostalgic perception of the country

Raymond Williams argues that in British literature, particularly in pastoral and neo-pastoral poems, the country often represents the idea of happier past and innocence typically associated with childhood (1973: 46). Gaskell subtly hints at this nostalgic perception of the country through the prism of childhood experience and family home in the scene when John Barton invites the Wilsons to supper and sends his daughter Mary for victuals: "And get it Cumberland ham, for Wilson comes from there-away, and it will have a sort of relish of home with it he'll like" (2006: 15). Treating his friend to food from his home region, Barton shows sensitivity in understanding a continuing emotional connection that migrants from rural areas, like Wilson, maintain with their home villages. Nostalgic overtones are quite explicit and persistent in many other descriptions of country life in *Mary Barton*; notably, in references to Old Alice's family home in the Lake District. When Mary asks if she grew up in a pretty place, Alice replies: "Pretty, lass! I never seed such a bonny bit anywhere" (Gaskell 2006: 32). She continues in words full of love and longing for the people and the views she had to leave behind and never see again. She reminisces of her impoverished but happy childhood in Burton, spent in communion with nature, filled by its sounds, colours and smells:

Gray pieces o' stone as large as a house, all covered over wi' mosses of different colours, some yellow, some brown; and the ground beneath them knee deep in purple heather, smelling sae sweet and fragrant, and the low musing of the humming-bee for ever sounding among it. (Gaskell 2006: 33)

Alice recalls a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction from simple jobs like gathering “ling and heather for besoms, and it was such pleasant work [!]” (Gaskell 2006: 33). From the account of her nephew, Will, the reader learns that throughout her life in Manchester Alice nourished a dream of going back home: “She used to tell me long stories about her childhood, and we used to plan how we would go some time, please God (that was always her word), and live near her old home beyond Lancaster; in the very cottage where she was born, if we could get it” (Gaskell 2006: 189). For Alice, the recollections of childhood have permanent significance – nature, the past and childhood are powerfully fused in her memory. A bond with nature which she established early in her life remains strong throughout her later life in the city and provides her with peace and comfort in the last moments of her life.

6. Nature as a source of happiness

Gaskell’s allusions to the association between happiness and nature are quite persistent in *Mary Barton*. The opening scenes of the novel presenting its main protagonists when enjoying a respite in a country spot are the first and the last moment in the story when despite concern for Esther, they appear to be at peace. The course of their later life in Manchester is marked by anguish and distress caused by disease, death, unemployment, destitution and hunger. The connection between human happiness and nature is particularly manifested in Old Alice’s life story and, most notably, in the scene of her death. In her last hours, the old woman, oblivious to Jem’s arrest, a calamity that caused turmoil in her household, is at peace as she is mentally transferred to the days of her childhood: “she was once more in the scenes of her childhood, unchanged and bright as in those long departed days” (Gaskell 2006: 209).

Gaskell’s descriptions of rural areas, both Green Heys Fields near Manchester and Alice’s family home in the Lake District, have a painting-like quality, as, like a landscape painter, she depicts the richness of nature with its array of hues and colours. This visual quality of descriptions of nature is complemented by evoking its sounds and smells and thus leaving the reader with a full picture of a pastoral idyll that is denied the city population. The contrast between the city and the country is made even more acute by the fact that Gaskell’s descriptions of Manchester lack this richness of colour. They are rather monochromatic depictions of a grey and gloomy, smoke-enveloped city. It is particularly striking in the scene when Mary leaves on a train for Liverpool and when looking back at her hometown, all she sees are “the factory-chimneys, and the cloud of smoke which hovers over Manchester” (Gaskell 2006: 273).

Gaskell’s Manchester appears to be an alien, man-made creation existing apart from nature, barren and even hostile to any vegetation: “The next evening it was a warm, pattering, incessant rain – just the rain to waken up the flowers. But in Manchester, where, alas! there are no flowers, the rain had only a disheartening and gloomy effect”

(Gaskell 2006: 95). The rain, which in the country is a reviving force bringing vegetation to life, in the city appears to have lost this life-sustaining and rejuvenating quality. It only washes the dirt off the houses into streets and increases the hopelessness and desolation of the residents who, like the streets and buildings, are “wet and dirty” (Gaskell 2006: 95). This striking contrast between the country being part of nature, a place where nature and its forces have their most complete manifestation, and the city which exists apart from nature and where natural phenomena acquire a distorted abnormal character becomes even more apparent in the description of spring. In the opening passage, Gaskell offers a detailed and poetic description of a spring day in full glory in Green Hays Fields when nature comes to life and there is an all-pervasive feeling of optimism:

The softness of the day tempted forth the young green leaves, which almost visibly fluttered into life; and the willows, which that morning had had only a brown reflection in the water below, were now of that tender gray-green which blends so delicately with the spring harmony of colour. (2006: 6)

This image is in striking contrast to a summary and dispiriting rendering of the season in Manchester after Carson mill’s fire. It is as if nature corresponded to and even enhanced the miserable mood of the residents. As the trade continued to decline and the economic downturn set in, “the cold, bleak spring came on (spring, in name alone)” (Gaskell 2006: 57) and rather than bring hope for the improvement of their lot, it only enhanced the overpowering feeling of despair.

7. Community bonds

When discussing the issue of urbanisation in the Victorian period, an urban historian, Harold James Dyos (2003: 9-10), maintains that in that period, no English city was completely severed from its rural connections. On the contrary, the link with the country manifested itself in various dimensions in the city. As cities grew, they gobbled up the whole adjacent villages absorbing their population with its characteristic networking and communal bonds. Manchester experienced a “dormitory expansion” already in the first half of the 19th century when new extensive suburbs were established to the north and south of the city (Rodgers 1962: 5). In the process, some features characteristics of closely-knit rural communities that were joined to the city were inevitably eroded and were replaced with those that came to be associated with urban life – anonymity, isolation and a sense of alienation of an individual. However, according to Dyos, a visible sense of community, based on a strong feeling of shared identity, enhanced by everyday purposes of life, poverty, social injustice, face-to-face familiarity and a network of neighbourly relationships continued in the back streets and slums of manufacturing cities. Such communities functioned as separate individual entities and their residents

formed a “village of a sort” (2003: 9), bound by a system of mutual experience and relations, distinguishable from other communities in the city. The rural culture was also planted in working-class communities by migrants from the countryside who came to the city looking for work. These country-bred citizens transplanted their traditions and, with the help of their family upbringing, kept them alive in an urban environment. Despite living in the city, they wanted to retain the original bond existing between man and nature and experience at least a semblance of pastoral bliss.

The earlier mentioned processes, attendant on urbanisation find their reflection in *Mary Barton*. Elizabeth Gaskell tends to emphasise rural origins of some of her characters and implies that it is this background that imbued them with certain personality traits. These characteristics are particularly evident in the depiction of Old Alice as a paragon of neighbourly care and helpfulness. Her disinterested devotion to others and willingness to provide assistance are the features typically attributed to country folk and playing a crucial role in the development of cohesion and unity of village populations. Years of living in the city did not efface the lessons she learned in her Lake District family home. As her brother, George, says: “there’s none more ready to help with heart or hand than she is. Though she may have done a hard day’s wash, there’s not a child ill within the street, but Alice goes to offer to sit up, and does sit up too, though may be she’s to be at her work by six next morning” (Gaskell 2006: 12).

The shared experience of poverty and a sense of grave injustice cement working-class neighbourhoods in *Mary Barton*. Like in a village, where the relative smallness of the community and physical proximity of its members enable them to monitor each other’s lives, also in Manchester, working-class districts are enlivened by the spirit of close neighbourly relations and mutual help. It is particularly evident when George Wilson and John Barton help the Davenport family. The two men, “rough, tender nurses as they were” (Gaskell 2006: 59), not only offered care and emotional support but also spent their meagre savings on food and coal for the starving family of the dying man. It was an act of compassion for other human beings but also a demonstration of communal identity and class consciousness that workers in manufacturing cities shared. Also, Job Legh’s involvement in obtaining legal counsel for Jem Wilson and the support and assistance he offered to Jem’s mother and Mary Barton throughout the trial attest to the fact that community spirit remained strong in poor working-class pockets in 19th-century Manchester.

While rural-like community cohesion pronounced in strong ties and a sense of responsibility for each other can be observed among Manchester working population, Elizabeth Gaskell signals in numerous ways that such a bond does not exist between the workers and their employers. Already at the beginning of the novel, she implies a deep gulf separating the poor and the rich, evident in John Barton’s pronouncement: “we are to live as separate as if we were in two worlds; ay, as separate as Dives and Lazarus, with

a great gulf betwixt us” (Gaskell 2006: 11). The chasmic character of the city (Dennis 2008: 32) is demonstrated both in the physical and emotional detachment of the two classes in *Mary Barton*. The workers’ quarters are situated in the vicinity of the factories, whereas the masters’ opulent, luxurious residences are located far away from the city noise and smoke. In order to get an in-patient infirmary order for Davenport from his employer, George Wilson has to walk over two miles to the Carsons’ house (Gaskell 2006: 65). Physical separation contributes to the masters’ ignorance, lack of interest in the fate of the workers and the inability to understand their demands for a pay rise (Gaskell 2006: 183). This lack of consideration takes the most extreme form in a mocking cartoon that young Harry Carson draws when a group of emaciated workers comes to negotiate the conditions of ending the strike with mill owners (Gaskell 2006: 183). Thus, in Gaskell’s novel, the city is a divided space inhabited by two incompatible groups of people – the operatives and the masters.

8. Connection with nature

Although in *Mary Barton*, the city and the country represent two different worlds, constructed on the basis of oppositions – physically, the country represents everything that the city is not – as already stated, these two worlds do not exist entirely apart from each other. On the contrary, characters in the novel try to maintain a connection with nature and experience blissful effects of this contact. Already in the opening passage describing Green Heys Fields, the reader is informed that in good weather “these fields were much thronged” (Gaskell 2006: 6) by groups of unmarried factory girls and young men as well as married couples with children who in the peaceful rural surroundings looked for escape and respite from the busy life in Manchester. In this description, Gaskell refers to the tradition of country walks popular with the city’s working population in her times. She also alludes to the popular association between the country and health and the view that nature was believed to have healing properties; therefore, close contact with it was supposed to bring moral, emotional and physical benefits (MacMaster 1990: 118-119; Kiersnowska 2017: 244-248).

The country is not only a place for recreation, a refuge from the noise and congestion of the city, it is also inextricably connected with the power of nature which can be used for the benefit of men. Two characters, Alice and Job Legh, use nature as a source of knowledge about the world. Alice’s knowledge of the natural world lacks scientific foundations; it instead represents folk wisdom and traditional lore. As her nephew says, Alice knows “such a deal about plants and birds, and their ways” (Gaskell 2006: 189) and she uses that knowledge for the benefit of other members of her community practising natural medicine, a skill typically attributed to country people and the one she doubtlessly learned from her mother. She roams nearby moors and with expert knowledge collects herbs to prepare infusions:

She had been out all day in the fields, gathering wild herbs for drinks and medicine, for in addition to her invaluable qualities as a sick nurse and her worldly occupations as a washerwoman, she added a considerable knowledge of hedge and field simples; and on fine days, when no more profitable occupation offered itself she used to ramble off into the lanes and meadows as far as her legs could carry her. (Gaskell 2006: 16)

As if trying to maintain the illusion of living close to nature, Alice fills her inner-city cellar with dry and live wild plants. The only window, barely above the ground and allowing little daylight is “oddly festooned with all manner of hedge-row, ditch, and field plants, which we are accustomed to call valueless, but which have a powerful effect either for good or for evil, and are consequently much used among the poor” (Gaskell 2006: 16).

Contrary to Alice, whose relationship with nature is a natural consequence of her rural upbringing, Job Legh represents a more scientific approach to it. He is an example of a self-taught worker, an avid amateur natural historian with considerable knowledge, who enthusiastically collects various specimens of fauna and flora (Buzard 2012: 131) to learn about the natural world. Job’s passion for studying nature is shared by many other members of his class – “practical, shrewd, hard-working men, who pore over every new specimen with real scientific delight” and “who steal the holiday of a day or two when any particular plant should be in flower” (Gaskell 2006: 38). Passion for different branches of natural history that has many “warm and devoted followers” (Gaskell 2006: 38) among Manchester operatives appears to have deeper, more meaningful undertones of a longing to reconnect with nature. Experiencing the effects of technology and machine-work in their daily toil in Manchester mills and factories, they turn to nature to reaffirm their place in the organic world.

9. Conclusions

Recapitulating, *Mary Barton* by Elizabeth Gaskell is a novel which revealed to the Victorian public despicable conditions of human existence in manufacturing cities. The novelist made her aim of drawing attention to the problem more pronounced by juxtaposing the images of the city and the country. Rural references in the novel are meaningful and reveal a multidimensional significance of nature to Victorian society. Gaskell continues a strong literary tradition of idealising the country and equating it to a blissful pastoral paradise. Emotionally charged descriptions of rural and urban environment emphasise a stark contrast between the positive image of the old world and the negative one of developing industrial capitalism. Her characters endeavour to feel part of the natural world and, despite living in the city, maintain a connection with it. This longing takes various forms, from nostalgic reminiscences of the family home in the country to cultivating rural traditions, pursuing a scientific interest in nature, and

seeking peace and respite in natural scenery. Gaskell also upholds philosophical ideas of her age ascribing to nature beneficial and healing properties and perceiving it as God's perfect creation. This multifaceted yet overtly positive representation of nature in *Mary Barton* reflects deep-seated anti-urban attitudes represented by the intellectual circles in the period.

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