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CHAPTER V

THE INDUSTRIAL NOVELS

Our understanding of the response to industrialism would be incomplete without reference to an interesting group of novels, written at the middle of the century, which not only provide some of the most vivid descriptions of life in an unsettled industrial society, but also illustrate certain common assumptions within which the direct response was undertaken. There are the facts of the new society, and there is this structure of feeling, which I will try to illustrate from *Mary Barton*, *North and South*, *Hard Times*, *Sybil*, *Alton Locke*, and *Felix Holt*.

Mary Barton (1848)

Mary Barton, particularly in its early chapters, is the most moving response in literature to the industrial suffering of the 1840s. The really impressive thing about the book is the intensity of the effort to record, in its own terms, the feel of everyday life in the working-class homes. The method, in part, is that of documentary record, as may be seen in such details as the carefully annotated reproduction of dialect, the carefully included details of food prices in the account of the tea-party, the itemized description of the furniture of the Bartons' living-room, and the writing-out of the ballad (again annotated) of *The Oldham Weaver*. The interest of this record is considerable, but the method has, nevertheless, a slightly distancing effect. Mrs Gaskell could hardly help coming to this life as an observer, a reporter, and we are always to some extent conscious of this. But there is genuine imaginative re-creation in her accounts of the walk in Green Heys Fields, and of tea at the Bartons' house, and again, notably, in the chapter *Poverty and Death* where John Barton and his friend find the starving family in the cellar. For so convincing a creation of the

characteristic feelings and responses of families of this kind (matters more determining than the material details on which the reporter is apt to concentrate) the English novel had to wait, indeed, for the early writing of D. H. Lawrence. If Mrs Gaskell never quite manages the sense of full participation which would finally authenticate this, she yet brings to these scenes an intuitive recognition of feelings which has its own sufficient conviction. The chapter *Old Alice's History* brilliantly dramatizes the situation of that early generation brought from the villages and the countryside to the streets and cellars of the industrial towns. The account of Job Legh, the weaver and naturalist, vividly embodies that other kind of response to an urban industrial environment: the devoted, lifelong study of living creatures—a piece of amateur scientific work, and at the same time an instinct for living creatures which hardens, by its very contrast with its environment, into a kind of crankiness. In the factory workers walking out in spring into Green Heys Fields; in Alice Wilson, remembering in her cellar the lings-gathering for besoms in the native village that she will never again see; in Job Legh, intent on his impaled insects—these early chapters embody the characteristic response of a generation to the new and crushing experience of industrialism. The other early chapters movingly embody the continuity and development of the sympathy and cooperative instinct which were already establishing a main working-class tradition.

The structure of feeling from which *Mary Barton* begins is, then, a combination of sympathetic observation and of a largely successful attempt at imaginative identification. If it had continued in this way, it might have been a great novel of its kind. But the emphasis of the method changes, and there are several reasons for this. One reason can be studied in a curious aspect of the history of the writing of the book. It was originally to be called *John Barton*. As Mrs Gaskell wrote later:

Round the character of John Barton all the others formed themselves; he was my hero, *the* person with whom all my sympathies went.¹

And she added:

The character, and some of the speeches, are exactly a poor man I know.¹

The change of emphasis which the book subsequently underwent, and the consequent change of title to *Mary Barton*, seem to have been made at the instance of her publishers, Chapman and Hall. The details of this matter are still obscure, but we must evidently allow something for this external influence on the shape of the novel. Certainly the John Barton of the later parts of the book is a very shadowy figure. In committing the murder, he seems to put himself not only beyond the range of Mrs Gaskell's sympathy (which is understandable), but, more essentially, beyond the range of her powers. The agony of conscience is there, as a thing told and sketched, but, as the crisis of 'my hero; *the* person with whom all my sympathies went', it is weak and almost incidental. This is because the novel as published is centred on the daughter—her indecision between Jem Wilson and 'her gay lover, Harry Carson'; her agony in Wilson's trial; her pursuit and last-minute rescue of the vital witness; the realization of her love for Wilson: all this, the familiar and orthodox plot of the Victorian novel of sentiment, but of little lasting interest. And it now seems incredible that the novel should ever have been planned in any other way. If Mrs Gaskell had written 'round the character of Mary Barton all the others formed themselves', she would have confirmed our actual impression of the finished book.

Something must be allowed for the influence of her publishers, but John Barton must always have been cast as the murderer, with the intention perhaps of showing an essentially good man driven to an appalling crime by loss, suffering and despair. One can still see the elements of this in the novel as we have it, but there was evidently a point, in its writing, at which the flow of sympathy with which she began was arrested, and then, by the change of emphasis which the change of title records, diverted to the less compromising figure of the daughter. The point would be less important if it were not characteristic of the structure of

feeling within which she was working. It is not only that she recoils from the violence of the murder, to the extent of being unable even to enter it as the experience of the man conceived as her hero. It is also that, as compared with the carefully representative character of the early chapters, the murder itself is exceptional. It is true that in 1831 a Thomas Ashton, of Pole Bank, Werneth, was murdered under somewhat similar circumstances, and that the Ashton family appear to have taken the murder of Carson as referring to this. Mrs Gaskell, disclaiming the reference in a letter to them, turned up some similar incidents in Glasgow at about the same time. But in fact, taking the period as a whole, the response of political assassination is so uncharacteristic as to be an obvious distortion. The few recorded cases only emphasize this. Even when one adds the cases of intimidation, and the occasional vitriol-throwing during the deliberate breaking of strikes, it remains true, and was at the time a subject of surprised comment by foreign observers, that the characteristic response of the English working people, even in times of grave suffering, was not one of personal violence. Mrs Gaskell was under no obligation to write a representative novel; she might legitimately have taken a special case. But the tone elsewhere is deliberately representative, and she is even, as she says, modelling John Barton on 'a poor man I know'. The real explanation, surely, is that John Barton, a political murderer appointed by a trade union, is a dramatization of the *fear of violence* which was widespread among the upper and middle classes at the time, and which penetrated, as an arresting and controlling factor, even into the deep imaginative sympathy of a Mrs Gaskell. This fear that the working people might take matters into their own hands was widespread and characteristic, and the murder of Harry Carson is an imaginative working-out of this fear, and of reactions to it, rather than any kind of observed and considered experience.

The point is made clearer when it is remembered that Mrs Gaskell planned the murder herself, and chose, for the murderer, 'my hero, *the* person with whom all my sympathies went'. In this respect the act of violence, a sudden aggression against a man contemptuous of the sufferings of

the poor, looks very much like a projection, with which, in the end, she was unable to come to terms. The imaginative choice of the act of murder and then the imaginative recoil from it have the effect of ruining the necessary integration of feeling in the whole theme. The diversion to *Mary Barton*, even allowing for the publishers' influence, must in fact have been welcome.

Few persons felt more deeply than Elizabeth Gaskell the sufferings of the industrial poor. As a minister's wife in Manchester, she actually saw this, and did not, like many other novelists, merely know it by report or occasional visit. Her response to the suffering is deep and genuine, but pity cannot stand alone in such a structure of feeling. It is joined, in *Mary Barton*, by the confusing violence and fear of violence, and is supported, finally, by a kind of writing-off, when the misery of the actual situation can no longer be endured. John Barton dies penitent, and the elder Carson repents of his vengeance and turns, as the sympathetic observer wanted the employers to turn, to efforts at improvement and mutual understanding. This was the characteristic humanitarian conclusion, and it must certainly be respected. But it was not enough, we notice, for the persons with whom Mrs Gaskell's sympathies were engaged. *Mary Barton*, Jem Wilson, Mrs Wilson, Margaret, Will, Job Legh—all the objects of her real sympathy—end the book far removed from the situation which she had set out to examine. All are going to Canada; there could be no more devastating conclusion. A solution within the actual situation might be hoped for, but the solution with which the heart went was a cancelling of the actual difficulties and the removal of the persons pitied to the uncompromised New World.

North and South (1855)

Mrs Gaskell's second industrial novel, *North and South*, is less interesting, because the tension is less. She takes up here her actual position, as a sympathetic observer. Margaret Hale, with the feelings and upbringing of the daughter of a Southern clergyman, moves with her father to industrial Lancashire, and we follow her reactions, her ob-

servations and her attempts to do what good she can. Because this is largely Mrs Gaskell's own situation, the integration of the book is markedly superior. Margaret's arguments with the mill-owner Thornton are interesting and honest, within the political and economic conceptions of the period. But the emphasis of the novel, as the lengthy inclusion of such arguments suggests, is almost entirely now on attitudes to the working people, rather than on the attempt to reach, imaginatively, their feelings about their lives. It is interesting, again, to note the manner of the working-out. The relationship of Margaret and Thornton and their eventual marriage serve as a unification of the practical energy of the Northern manufacturer with the developed sensibility of the Southern girl: this is stated almost explicitly, and is seen as a solution. Thornton goes back to the North

to have the opportunity of cultivating some intercourse with the hands beyond the mere 'cash nexus'.²

Humanized by Margaret, he will work at what we now call 'the improvement of human relations in industry'. The conclusion deserves respect, but it is worth noticing that it is not only under Margaret's influence that Thornton will attempt this, but under her patronage. The other manufacturers, as Thornton says, 'will shake their heads and look grave' at it. This may be characteristic, but Thornton, though bankrupt, can be the exception, by availing himself of Margaret's unexpected legacy. Money from elsewhere, in fact—by that device of the legacy which solved so many otherwise insoluble problems in the world of the Victorian novel—will enable Thornton, already affected by the superior gentleness and humanity of the South, to make his humanitarian experiment. Once again Mrs Gaskell works out her reaction to the insupportable situation by going—in part adventitiously—outside it.

Hard Times (1854)

Ordinarily Dickens's criticisms of the world he lives in are casual and incidental—a matter of including among

the ingredients of a book some indignant treatment of a particular abuse. But in *Hard Times* he is for once possessed by a comprehensive vision, one in which the inhumanities of Victorian civilization are seen as fostered and sanctioned by a hard philosophy, the aggressive formulation of an inhumane spirit.³

This comment by F. R. Leavis on *Hard Times* serves to distinguish Dickens's intention from that of Mrs Gaskell in *Mary Barton*. *Hard Times* is less imaginative observation than an imaginative judgement. It is a judgement of social attitudes, but again it is something more than *North and South*. It is a thorough-going and creative examination of the dominant philosophy of industrialism—of the hardness that Mrs Gaskell saw as little more than a misunderstanding, which might be patiently broken down. That Dickens could achieve this more comprehensive understanding is greatly to the advantage of the novel. But against this we must set the fact that in terms of human understanding of the industrial working people Dickens is obviously less successful than Mrs Gaskell: his Stephen Blackpool, in relation to the people of *Mary Barton*, is little more than a diagrammatic figure. The gain in comprehension, that is to say, has been achieved by the rigours of generalization and abstraction; *Hard Times* is an analysis of Industrialism, rather than experience of it.

The most important point, in this context, that has to be made about *Hard Times* is a point about Thomas Gradgrind. Josiah Bounderby, the other villain of the piece, is a simple enough case. He is, with rough justice, the embodiment of the aggressive money-making and power-seeking ideal which was a driving force of the Industrial Revolution. That he is also a braggart, a liar and in general personally repellent is of course a comment on Dickens's method. The conjunction of these personal defects with the aggressive ideal is not (how much easier things would be if it were) a necessary conjunction. A large part of the Victorian reader's feelings against Bounderby (and perhaps a not inconsiderable part of the twentieth-century intellectual's) rests on the older and rather different feeling that

trade, as such, is gross. The very name (and Dickens uses his names with conscious and obvious effect), incorporating *bounder*, incorporates this typical feeling. The social criticism represented by *bounder* is, after all, a rather different matter from the question of aggressive economic individualism. Dickens, with rough justice, fuses the separate reactions, and it is easy not to notice how one set of feelings is made to affect the other.

The difficulty about Thomas Gradgrind is different in character. It is that the case against him is so good, and his refutation by experience so masterly, that it is easy for the modern reader to forget exactly *what* Gradgrind is. It is surprising how common is the mistake of using the remembered name, Gradgrind, as a class-name for the hard Victorian employer. The valuation which Dickens actually asks us to make is more difficult. Gradgrind is a Utilitarian: seen by Dickens as one of the *feelooosofers* against whom Cobbett thundered, or as one of the *steam-engine intellects* described by Carlyle. This line is easy enough, but one could as easily draw another: say, Thomas Gradgrind, Edwin Chadwick, John Stuart Mill. Chadwick, we are told, was 'the most hated man in England', and he worked by methods, and was blamed for 'meddling', in terms that are hardly any distance from Dickens's Gradgrind. Mill is a more difficult instance (although the education of which he felt himself a victim will be related, by the modern reader, to the Gradgrind system). But it seems certain that Dickens has Mill's *Political Economy* (1849) very much in mind in his general indictment of the ideas which built and maintained Coketown. (Mill's reaction, it may be noted, was the expressive 'that creature Dickens'.⁴) It is easy now to realize that Mill was something more than a Gradgrind. But we are missing Dickens's point if we fail to see that in condemning Thomas Gradgrind, the representative figure, we are invited also to condemn the kind of thinking and the methods of enquiry and legislation which in fact promoted a large measure of social and industrial reform. One wonders, for example, what a typical Fabian feels when he is invited to condemn Gradgrind, not as an individual but as a type. This may, indeed, have something to do with the

common error of memory about Gradgrind to which I have referred. Public commissions, Blue Books, Parliamentary legislation—all these, in the world of *Hard Times*—are Gradgrindery.

For Dickens is not setting Reform against Exploitation. He sees what we normally understand by both as two sides of the same coin, Industrialism. His positives do not lie in social improvement, but rather in what he sees as the elements of human nature—personal kindness, sympathy, and forbearance. It is not the model factory against the satanic mill, nor is it the humanitarian experiment against selfish exploitation. It is, rather, individual persons against the System. In so far as it is social at all, it is the Circus against Coketown. The schoolroom contrast of Sissy Jupe and Bitzer is a contrast between the education, practical but often inarticulate, which is gained by living and doing, and the education, highly articulated, which is gained by systemization and abstraction. It is a contrast of which Cobbett would have warmly approved; but in so far as we have all (and to some extent inevitably) been committed to a large measure of the latter, it is worth noting again what a large reevaluation Dickens is asking us to make. The instinctive, unintellectual, unorganized life is the ground, here, of genuine feeling, and of all good relationships. The Circus is one of the very few ways in which Dickens could have dramatized this, but it is less the circus that matters than the experience described by Sleary:

that there ith a love in the world, not all Thelf-interetht after all, but thomething very different . . . it hath a way of ith own of calculating or not calculating, which thomehow or another ith at leatht ath hard to give a name to, ath the wayth of the dogth ith.⁵

It is a characteristic conclusion, in a vitally important tradition which based its values on such grounds. It is the major criticism of Industrialism as a whole way of life, and its grounds in experience have been firm. What is essential is to recognize that Dickens saw no social expression of it, or at least nothing that could be 'given a name to'. The experience is that of individual persons. Almost the whole or-

ganization of society, as Dickens judges, is against it. The Circus can express it because it is not part of the industrial organization. The Circus is an end in itself, a pleasurable end, which is instinctive and (in certain respects) anarchic. It is significant that Dickens has thus to go outside the industrial situation to find any expression of his values. This going outside is similar to the Canada in which *Mary Barton* ends, or the legacy of Margaret Hale. But it is also more than these, in so far as it is not only an escape but a positive assertion of a certain kind of experience, the denial of which was the real basis (as Dickens saw it) of the hard times.

It was inevitable, given the kind of criticism that Dickens was making, that his treatment of the industrial working people should have been so unsatisfactory. He recognizes them as objects of pity, and he recognizes the personal devotion in suffering of which they are capable. But the only conclusion he can expect them to draw is Stephen Blackpool's:

Aw a muddle!⁶

This is reasonable, but the hopelessness and passive suffering are set against the attempts of the working people to better their conditions. The trade unions are dismissed by a stock Victorian reaction, with the agitator Slackbridge. Stephen Blackpool, like Job Legh, is shown to advantage because he will not join them. The point can be gauged by a comparison with Cobbett, whose criticism of the System is in many ways very similar to that of Dickens, and rests on so many similar valuations, yet who was not similarly deceived, even when the trade unions came as a novelty to him. The point indicates a wider comment on Dickens's whole position.

The scathing analysis of Coketown and all its works, and of the supporting political economy and aggressive utilitarianism, is based on Carlyle. So are the hostile reactions to Parliament and to ordinary ideas of reform. Dickens takes up the hostility, and it serves as a comprehensive vision, to which he gives all his marvellous energy. But his identification with Carlyle is really negative. There are no social alternatives to Bounderby and Gradgrind: not the time-

serving aristocrat Harthouse; not the decayed gentlewoman Mrs Sparsit; nowhere, in fact, any active Hero. Many of Dickens's social attitudes cancel each other out, for he will use almost any reaction in order to undermine any normal representative position. *Hard Times*, in tone and structure, is the work of a man who has 'seen through' society, who has found them all out. The only reservation is for the passive and the suffering, for the meek who shall inherit the earth but not Coketown, not industrial society. This primitive feeling, when joined by the aggressive conviction of having found everyone else out, is the retained position of an adolescent. The innocence shames the adult world, but also essentially rejects it. As a whole response, *Hard Times* is more a symptom of the confusion of industrial society than an understanding of it, but it is a symptom that is significant and continuing.

Sybil, or The Two Nations (1845)

Sybil can be read now as the production of a future Conservative Prime Minister, and hence in the narrow sense as a political novel. The elements of political pleading are indeed evident in any reading of it. Their curiosity, their partisanship and their opportunism are matched only by their brilliance of address. The novel would be fascinating if it were only political. The stucco elegance of Disraeli's writing has a consonance with one kind of political argument. What is intolerable in his descriptions of persons and feelings becomes in his political flights a rather likeable panache. The descriptions of industrial squalor are very like those of Dickens on Coketown: brilliant romantic generalizations—the view from the train, from the hustings, from the printed page—yet often moving, like all far-seeing rhetoric. There are similar accounts of the conditions of the agricultural poor which need to be kept in mind against the misleading contrasts of *North and South*. Again, in a quite different manner, there is in *Sybil* the most spirited description of the iniquities of the tommy-shop, and of the practical consequences of the system of truck, to be found anywhere. Disraeli's anger—the generalized anger of an out-

sider making his way—carries him often beyond his formal text. The hostile descriptions of London political and social life are again generalization, but they have, doubtless, the same rhetorical significance as those of the forays among the poor. Anyone who is prepared to give credit to Disraeli's unsupported authority on any matter of social fact has of course mistaken his man, as he would similarly mistake Dickens. But Disraeli, like Dickens, is a very fine generalizing analyst of cant, and almost as fine a generalizing rhetorician of human suffering. Both functions, it must be emphasized, are reputable.

In terms of ideas, *Sybil* is almost a collector's piece. There is this, for instance, from Coleridge:

But if it have not furnished us with abler administration or a more illustrious senate, the Reform Act may have exercised on the country at large a beneficial influence? Has it? Has it elevated the tone of the public mind? Has it cultured the popular sensibilities to noble and ennobling ends? Has it proposed to the people of England a higher test of national respect and confidence than the debasing qualification universally prevalent in this country since the fatal introduction of the system of Dutch finance? Who will pretend it? If a spirit of rapacious covetousness, desecrating all the humanities of life, has been the besetting sin of England for the last century and a half, since the passing of the Reform Act the altar of Mammon has blazed with triple worship. To acquire, to accumulate, to plunder each other by virtue of philosophic phrases, to propose a Utopia to consist only of WEALTH and TOIL, this has been the breathless business of enfranchised England for the last twelve years, until we are startled from our voracious strife by the wail of intolerable serfage.⁷

It is true that this is political, a part of the grand assault on Whiggery. But the terms of the assault are familiar, as part of a much wider criticism. Or again this, which was to reappear in our own century with an air of original discovery:

' . . . There is no community in England; there is ag-

gregation, but aggregation under circumstances which make it rather a dissociating than a uniting principle. . . . It is a community of purpose that constitutes society . . . without that, men may be drawn into contiguity, but they still continue virtually isolated.'

'And is that their condition in cities?'

'It is their condition everywhere; but in cities that condition is aggravated. A density of population implies a severer struggle for existence, and a consequent repulsion of elements brought into too close contact. In great cities men are brought together by the desire of gain. They are not in a state of cooperation, but of isolation, as to the making of fortunes; and for all the rest they are careless of neighbours. Christianity teaches us to love our neighbour as ourself; modern society acknowledges no neighbour.'⁸

These views of the Chartist Stephen Morley were the common element in a number of varying political positions. They have remained the terms of a basic criticism of Industrialism.

The two nations, of rich and poor, have of course become famous. The basis of the attempt to make one nation of them is the restoration to leadership of an enlightened aristocracy. For,

'There is a change in them, as in all other things,'
. . . said Egremont.

'If there be a change,' said Sybil, 'it is because in some degree the people have learnt their strength.'

'Ah! dismiss from your mind those fallacious fancies,' said Egremont. 'The people are not strong; the people never can be strong. Their attempts at self-vindication will end only in their suffering and confusion.'⁹

It is, of course, the familiar injunction, in Cobbett's words, to 'be quiet', and the familiar assumption of the business of regeneration by others—in this case 'the enlightened aristocracy'. Disraeli shared the common prejudices about the popular movement: his account of the initiation of Dandy Mick into a Trade Union—

' . . . you will execute with zeal and alacrity . . . every task and injunction that the majority of your brethren . . . shall impose upon you, in furtherance of our common welfare, of which they are the sole judges: such as the chastisement of Nobs, the assassination of oppressive and tyrannical masters, or the demolition of all mills, works and shops that shall be deemed by us incorrigible.'¹⁰

--is characteristically cloak-and-dagger. This must be acknowledged alongside the shrewder assessment:

The people she found was not that pure embodiment of unity of feeling, of interest, and of purpose which she had pictured in her abstractions. The people had enemies among the people: their own passions; which made them often sympathize, often combine, with the privileged.¹¹

This shrewdness might well have been also applied to some of Disraeli's other abstractions, but perhaps that was left for later, in the progress of his political career.

The passages quoted are near the climax of that uniting of Egremont, 'the enlightened aristocrat', and Sybil, 'the daughter of the People', which, in the novel, is the symbolic creation of the One Nation. This, again, is the way the heart goes, and it is the novel's most interesting illustration. For Sybil, of course, is only theoretically 'the daughter of the People'. The actual process of the book is the discovery that she is a dispossessed aristocrat, and the marriage bells ring, not over the achievement of One Nation, but over the uniting of the properties of Marney and Mowbray, one agricultural, the other industrial: a marriage symbolical, indeed, of the political development which was the actual issue. The restored heiress stands, in the general picture, with Margaret Thornton's legacy, with Canada, and with the Horse-Riding. But it is significant of Disraeli's shrewdness that, through the device, he embodied what was to become an actual political event.

Alton Locke, Tailor and Poet (1850)

In part, *Alton Locke* is in the orthodox sense an 'exposure': an informed, angry and sustained account of sweated labour in the 'Cheap and Nasty' clothing trade. Much of it can still be read in these terms, with attention and sympathy. It is fair to note, however, that in respect of this theme the Preface is more effective than the novel, and for the unexpected reason that it is more specific.

The wider intention of the book is rather different. It is really a story of conversion: of the making of a Chartist in the usual sense, and of his remaking in Kingsley's sense. This is the basic movement in a book which is extremely discursive in mood. The earlier chapters are perhaps the most effective: the caricature of the Baptist home; the indignant realism of the apprenticeship in the sweating-rooms; the generalized description of the longing from the 'prison-house of brick and iron' for the beauty apprehended as knowledge and poetry. The beginnings of Alton Locke in political activity are also, in general outline, convincing. With them, however, begins also the major emphasis on argument, on prolonged *discussion* of events, which is evidently Kingsley's motive and energy. Often this discussion is interesting, particularly as we recognize the familiar popularization of Carlyle and of the ideas which Carlyle concentrated. This merges, from the time of the conversion (the curious chapter *Dreamland*), into the Christian Socialist arguments with which Kingsley's name is commonly identified. It is doubtful whether much attention of a different kind, attention, that is, other than to the genealogy of ideas, can be given to all these parts of the book. A very large part of it is like reading old newspapers, or at least old pamphlets. The issues are there, but the terms are arbitrary and the connexions mechanical. The book is not an 'autobiography' but a tract.

We need note here only the conclusion, alike of the story and of the argument. Once again, the motive to Chartism, to a working-class political movement, has been sympathetically set down (it was on this score that Kingsley and

others were thought of as 'advanced' or 'dangerous' thinkers). But again the effort is seen finally as a delusion: in effect—'we understand and sympathize with your sufferings which drove you to this, but what you are doing is terribly mistaken':

'Ay,' she went on, her figure dilating, and her eyes flashing, like an inspired prophetess, 'that is in the Bible! What would you more than that? That is your charter; the only ground of all charters. You, like all mankind, have had dim inspirations, confused yearnings after your future destiny, and, like all the world from the beginning, you have tried to realise, by self-willed methods of your own, what you can only do by God's inspiration, God's method. . . . Oh! look back, look back, at the history of English Radicalism for the last half-century, and judge by your own deeds, your own words; were you fit for those privileges which you so frantically demanded? Do not answer me, that those who had them were equally unfit; but thank God, if the case be indeed so, that your incapacity was not added to theirs, to make confusion worse confounded. Learn a new lesson. Believe at last that you are in Christ, and become new creatures. With those miserable, awful farce tragedies of April and June, let old things pass away, and all things become new. Believe that your kingdom is not of this world, but of One whose servants must not fight.'¹²

It is not surprising after this that the destiny of the hero is—once again—emigration. Alton Locke dies as he reaches America, but his fellow-Chartist, Crossthwaite, will come back after seven years.

The regeneration of society, according to Kingsley's Cambridge preface to the book, will meanwhile proceed under the leadership of a truly enlightened aristocracy. It will be a movement towards democracy, but not to that 'tyranny of numbers' of which the dangers have been seen in the United States. For:

As long, I believe, as the Throne, the House of Lords, and the Press, are what, thank God, they are, so long

will each enlargement of the suffrage be a fresh source not of danger, but of safety; for it will bind the masses to the established order of things by that loyalty which springs from content; from the sense of being appreciated, trusted, dealt with not as children, but as men.¹³

Felix Holt (1866)

Felix Holt was not published till 1866, but we can set beside it a passage from a letter of George Eliot's, written to J. Sibree in 1848, just after the French Revolution of that year:

You and Carlyle . . . are the only two people who feel just as I would have them—who can glory in what is actually great and beautiful without putting forth any cold reservations and incredulities to save their credit for wisdom. I am all the more delighted with your enthusiasm because I didn't expect it. I feared that you lacked revolutionary ardour. But no—you are just as *sans-culottish* and rash as I would have you. . . . I thought we had fallen on such evil days that we were to see no really great movement—that ours was what St Simon calls a purely critical epoch, not at all an organic one; but I begin to be glad of my date. I would consent, however, to have a year clipt off my life for the sake of witnessing such a scene as that of the men of the barricades bowing to the image of Christ, 'who first taught fraternity to men'. One trembles to look into every fresh newspaper lest there should be something to mar the picture. . . . I should have no hope of good from any imitative movement at home. Our working classes are eminently inferior to the mass of the French people. In France the *mind* of the people is highly electrified; they are full of ideas on social subjects; they really desire social *reform*—not merely an acting out of Sancho Panza's favourite proverb, 'Yesterday for you, today for me'. The revolutionary animus extended over the whole nation, and embraced

the rural population—not merely, as with us, the artisans of the towns. Here there is so much larger a proportion of selfish radicalism and unsatisfied brute sensuality (in the agricultural and mining districts especially) than of perception or desire of justice, that a revolutionary movement would be simply destructive, not constructive. Besides, it would be put down. . . . And there is nothing in our Constitution to obstruct the slow progress of *political* reform. This is all we are fit for at present. The social reform which may prepare us for great changes is more and more the object of effort both in Parliament and out of it. But we English are slow crawlers.¹⁴

The distinctions in this are doubtful, but the tone indicates an intelligence of a different order from the other novelists discussed. We are interested in Mrs Gaskell or Kingsley or Disraeli because of what they testified; with George Eliot there is another interest, because of the quality of the witness.

This quality is evident in *Felix Holt*, which as a novel has a quite different status from those previously discussed. It has also, however, much in common with them. The formal plot turns on the familiar complications of inheritance in property, and Esther, with her inherited breeding showing itself in poor circumstances, has something in common with Sybil. As with Sybil, her title to a great estate is proved, but there the comparison with Disraeli ends. Harold Transome is, like Egremont, a second son; like him, he turns to the reforming side in politics. But George Eliot was incapable of resting on the image of an Egremont, the figurehead of the enlightened gentleman. Harold Transome is a coarser reality, and it is impossible that Esther should marry him. She renounces her claim and marries Felix Holt. It is as if Sybil had renounced the Mowbray estates and married Stephen Morley. I do not make any claim for the superior reality of George Eliot's proceedings. The thing is as contrived, in the service of a particular image of the desirable, as Disraeli's very different dénouement. George Eliot works

with a rather finer net, but it is not in such elements of the novel that her real superiority is apparent.

Nor again is there much superiority in her creation of Felix Holt himself. He is shown as a working-man radical, determined to stick to his own class, and to appeal solely to the energies of 'moral force'. He believes in sobriety and education, argues for social rather than merely political reform, and wants to be

a demagogue of a new sort; an honest one, if possible, who will tell the people they are blind and foolish, and neither flatter them nor fatten on them.¹⁵

It is not easy, at any time, to say whether a character 'convinces'. We are all apt, in such questions, to impose our own conceptions both of the probable and the desirable. But one can usually see, critically, when a character comes to existence in a number of aspects, forming something like the image of a life; and, alternatively, when a character is fixed at a different and simpler stage: in the case of Felix Holt, at a physical appearance and a set of opinions. Mrs Gaskell could conceive the early John Barton in much these terms, but, because other substance was lacking, she had virtually to dismiss him as a person when the course of action found necessary on other grounds went beyond the limits of her sympathy. Felix Holt, like Alton Locke, is conceived as a more probable hero: that is to say, as one whose general attitude is wholly sympathetic to the author, and who is detached from him only by a relative immaturity. Like Alton Locke, Felix Holt becomes involved in a riot; like him, he is mistaken for a ringleader; like him, he is sentenced to imprisonment. This recurring pattern is not copying, in the vulgar sense. It is rather the common working of an identical fear, which was present also in Mrs Gaskell's revision of John Barton. It is at root the fear of a sympathetic, reformist-minded member of the middle classes at being drawn into any kind of mob violence. John Barton is involved in earnest, and his creator's sympathies are at once withdrawn, to the obvious detriment of the work as a whole. Sympathy is transferred to Jem Wilson, mistakenly accused, and to Margaret's efforts on his behalf,

which have a parallel in Esther's impulse to speak at the trial of Felix Holt. But the basic pattern is a dramatization of the fear of being involved in violence: a dramatization made possible by the saving clause of innocence and mistaken motive, and so capable of redemption. What is really interesting is that the conclusion of this kind of dramatization is then taken as proof of the rightness of the author's original reservations. The people are indeed dangerous, in their constant tendency to blind disorder. Anyone sympathizing with them is likely to become involved. Therefore (a most ratifying word) it can be sincerely held that the popular movements actually under way are foolish and inadequate, and that the only wise course is dissociation from them.

Of course, that there is inadequacy in any such movement is obvious, but the discriminations one would expect from a great novelist are certainly not drawn in *Felix Holt*. Once again Cobbett is a touchstone, and his conduct at his own trial after the labourers' revolts of 1830 is a finer demonstration of real maturity than the fictional compromises here examined. Cobbett, like nearly all men who have worked with their hands, hated any kind of violent destruction of useful things. But he had the experience and the strength to enquire further into violence. He believed, moreover, what George Eliot so obviously could not believe, that the common people were something other than a mob, and had instincts and habits something above drunkenness, gullibility and ignorance. He would not have thought Felix Holt an 'honest demagogue' for telling the people that they were 'blind and foolish'. He would have thought him rather a very convenient ally of the opponents of reform. George Eliot's view of the common people is uncomfortably close to that of Carlyle in *Shooting Niagara*: 'blockheadism, gullibility, bribeability, amenability to beer and balderdash'. This was the common first assumption, and was the basis for the distinction (alike in her 1848 comment and in *Felix Holt*) between 'political' and 'social' reform. The former is only 'machinery'; the latter is seen as substance. The distinction is useful, but consider this very typical speech by Felix Holt:

The way to get rid of folly is to get rid of vain expectations, and of thoughts that don't agree with the nature of things. The men who have had true thoughts about water, and what it will do when it is turned into steam and under all sorts of circumstances, have made themselves a great power in the world: they are turning the wheels of engines that will help to change most things. But no engines would have done, if there had been false notions about the way water would act. Now, all the schemes about voting, and districts, and annual Parliaments, and the rest, are engines, and the water or steam—the force that is to work them—must come out of human nature—out of men's passions, feelings, and desires. Whether the engines will do good work or bad depends on these feelings.¹⁶

But the 'engines' mentioned are, after all, particular engines, proposed to do different work from the engines previously employed. It is really mechanical to class all the engines together and to diminish their importance, when in fact their purposes differ. The new proposals are an embodiment of 'passions, feelings, and desires': alternative proposals, supported by alternative feelings, so that a choice can properly be made. The real criticism, one suspects, is of 'thoughts that don't agree with the nature of things', and this 'nature of things' can either be a supposedly permanent 'human nature', or else, as probably, the supposedly immutable 'laws of society'. Among these 'laws', as Felix Holt's argument continues, is the supposition that among every hundred men there will be thirty with 'some soberness, some sense to choose', and seventy, either drunk or 'ignorant or mean or stupid'. With such an assumption it is easy enough to 'prove' that a voting reform would be useless. George Eliot's advice, essentially, is that the working men should first make themselves 'sober and educated', under the leadership of men like Felix Holt, and then reform will do some good. But the distinction between 'political' and 'social' reform is seen at this point at its most arbitrary. The abuses of an unreformed Parliament are even dragged in as an argument against parliamentary reform—it will

only be more of the same sort of thing. The winning through political reform of the means of education, of the leisure necessary to take such opportunity, of the conditions of work and accommodation which will diminish poverty and drunkenness: all these and similar aims, which were the purposes for which the 'engines' were proposed, are left out of the argument. Without them, the sober responsible educated working man must, presumably, spring fully armed from his own ('drunken, ignorant, mean and stupid') head.

It has passed too long for a kind of maturity and depth in experience to argue that politics and political attachments are only possible to superficial minds; that any appreciation of the complexity of human nature necessarily involves a wise depreciation of these noisy instruments. The tone—'cold reservations and incredulities to save their credit for wisdom'—is often heard in *Felix Holt*:

Crying abuses—'bloated paupers', 'bloated pluralists', and other corruptions hindering men from being wise and happy—had to be fought against and slain. Such a time is a time of hope. Afterwards, when the corpses of those monsters have been held up to the public wonder and abhorrence, and yet wisdom and happiness do not follow, but rather a more abundant breeding of the foolish and unhappy, comes a time of doubt and despondency. . . . Some dwelt on the abolition of all abuses, and on millennial blessedness generally; others, whose imaginations were less suffused with exhalations of the dawn, insisted chiefly on the ballot-box.¹⁷

The wise shake of the head draws a complacent answering smile. But what I myself find in such a passage as this, in the style ('suffused with exhalations of the dawn'; 'millennial blessedness generally') as in the feeling ('a more abundant breeding of the foolish and unhappy'), is not the deep and extensive working of a generous mind, but rather the petty cynicism of a mind that has lost, albeit only temporarily, its capacity for human respect.

Felix Holt's opinions are George Eliot's opinions purged

of just this element, which is a kind of intellectual fatigue. It is the mood of the 'sixties—of *Shooting Niagara* and *Culture and Anarchy*—holding an incompetent post-mortem on the earlier phases of Radicalism. Felix Holt himself is not so much a character as an impersonation: a rôle in which he again appears in the *Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt*, which George Eliot was persuaded to write by her publisher. Here the dangers of active democracy are more clearly put:

The too absolute predominance of a class whose wants have been of a common sort, who are chiefly struggling to get better and more food, clothing, shelter, and bodily recreation, may lead to hasty measures for the sake of having things more fairly shared which, even if they did not fail . . . would at last debase the life of the nation.¹⁸

Reform must proceed

not by any attempt to do away directly with the actually existing class distinctions and advantages . . . but by the turning of Class Interests into Class Functions. . . . If the claims of the unendowed multitude of working men hold within them principles which must shape the future, it is not less true that the endowed classes, in their inheritance from the past, hold the precious material without which no worthy, noble future can be moulded.¹⁹

George Eliot, in this kind of thinking, is very far from her best. Her position, behind the façade of Felix Holt, is that of a Carlyle without the energy, of an Arnold without the quick practical sense, of an anxiously balancing Mill without the intellectual persistence. Yet it is clear that, inadequate as her attempt at a position may be, it proceeds, though not fruitfully, from that sense of society as a complicated inheritance which is at the root of her finest work. In *Felix Holt*, this sense is magnificently realized at the level of one set of personal relationships—that of Mrs Transome, the lawyer Jermyn and their son Harold Transome. In *Middlemarch*, with almost equal intensity, this realization

is extended to a whole representative section of provincial society. Always, at her best, she is unrivalled in English fiction in her creation and working of the complication and consequence inherent in all relationships. From such a position in experience she naturally sees society at a deeper level than its political abstractions indicate, and she sees her own society, in her own choice of word, as 'vicious'. Her favourite metaphor for society is a network: a 'tangled skein'; a 'tangled web'; 'the long-growing evils of a great nation are a tangled business'. This, again, is just; it is the ground of her finest achievements. But the metaphor, while having a positive usefulness in its indication of complexity, has also a negative effect. For it tends to represent social—and indeed directly personal—relationships as passive: acted upon rather than acting. 'One fears', she remarked, 'to pull the wrong thread, in the tangled scheme of things.' The caution is reasonable, but the total effect of the image false. For in fact every element in the complicated system is active: the relationships are changing, constantly, and any action—even abstention; certainly the impersonation of Felix Holt—affects, even if only slightly, the tensions, the pressures, the very nature of the complication. It is a mark, not of her deep perception, but of the point at which this fails, that her attitude to society is finally so negative: a negativity of detail which the width of a phrase like 'deep social reform' cannot disguise. The most important thing about George Eliot is her superb control of particular complexities, but this must not be stated in terms of an interest in 'personal' relationships as opposed to 'social' relationships. She did not believe, as others have tried to do, that these categories are really separate: 'there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life', as she remarks near the beginning of *Felix Holt*. Yet it is a fact that when she touches, as she chooses to touch, the lives and the problems of working people, her personal observation and conclusion surrender, virtually without a fight, to the general structure of feeling about these matters which was the common property of her generation, and which she was at once too hesitant to transcend, and too intelligent to raise into any lively embodiment. She fails in the extension which

she knows to be necessary, because indeed there seems 'no right thread to pull'. Almost any kind of social action is ruled out, and the most that can be hoped for, with a hero like Felix Holt, is that he will in the widest sense keep his hands reasonably clean. It is indeed the mark of a deadlock in society when so fine an intelligence and so quick a sympathy can conceive no more than this. For patience and caution, without detailed intention, are very easily converted into acquiescence, and there is no right to acquiesce if society is known to be 'vicious'.

These novels, when read together, seem to illustrate clearly enough not only the common criticism of industrialism, which the tradition was establishing, but also the general structure of feeling which was equally determining. Recognition of evil was balanced by fear of becoming involved. Sympathy was transformed, not into action, but into withdrawal. We can all observe the extent to which this structure of feeling has persisted, into both the literature and the social thinking of our own time.