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FEAR OF WORKING-CLASS AGENCY IN THE VICTORIAN INDUSTRIAL NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

This work examines the Victorian Industrial novel as a genre of literature that reflects the middle-class biases of influential authors like Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell, who cater to middle-class readers by simultaneously sympathizing with the poor and admonishing any efforts of the working class to express political agency that challenge the social order. As such, the Victorian Industrial novel routinely depicts trade unionism in a negative light as an ineffective means to secure socioeconomic gains that is often led by charismatic demagogues who manipulate naïve working people to engage in violent practices with the purpose of intimidating workers. The Victorian Industrial novel also acts as an agent of reactionary politics, reinforcing fears of mob violence and the looming threat of revolutionary uprising in England as had occurred throughout Europe in 1848. The novels display a stubborn refusal to link social ills to their material causes, opting instead to endorse temporary and idealist solutions like paternalism, liberal reformism, and marriage between class members as panaceæ for class antagonisms, thereby decontextualizing the root of the problem through the implication that all poor relations between the worker and employer, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, can be attributed to a breakdown in communication and understanding. These texts propose that proper communication between classes is sufficient to mitigate the damage engendered by free trade and competition to such an extent as to deescalate and dismiss revolution as a viable means of change. Authors like Dickens and Gaskell propose superficial changes that are beyond the control of the working class.

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Introduction

Modern conceptions of the Victorian era are characterized by imagery of the middle and upper classes: ostentatious dress, drawing rooms, and social gatherings. This imagery has had the effect of obscuring the poverty and destitution of the era from the public consciousness. The extremity of poverty in the nineteenth century once aided in the development of the modern welfare state, which lessened the damages of capitalist production by protecting those most at risk of being consumed by it. The result of this “disremembering” of poverty in the west is the steady repeal of securities and safety nets, the incremental erosion of the welfare state and a return to unregulated or under-regulated capitalism. This privileged attitude puts the great victories of social reform at risk, and it is necessary to confront the difficult facts of the past to prevent a slide backwards.

These incomplete memories of Victorian life are beyond dangerous; they portray the good life of what constituted a minority in the population. For the majority of people in nineteenth-century England, there was little in the way of comfort or prosperity. The skies were black with smoke, which settled in the weak lungs of the laborers and made breathing difficult. The streets were poorly paved, sometimes not at all, and so horribly constructed that waste accumulated, festered, and attracted vermin and disease. Workers went without food, clothing, medicine, shelter, and all the other basic furnishings of a decent living, while the bourgeoisie, the property-owning class, reaped from them the profit of their labor, lived in luxury, feasted on the finest banquets, and influenced lawmakers in order to widen its profit margin. This was not a

state of things that could last. And still, apart from a brief allusion here and there, the tumultuous waves of people clambering over one another for bread seem conspicuously absent from British literature, at least until the dawn of the labor movement in the 1820s. When they are present, they exist only as props or caricatures to facilitate the development of a middle-class character. They are rarely portrayed as heroic and their actions are often relegated to the background.

The Victorian Industrial novel, also known as the social problem novel or the “condition of England novel,” seems to counter balance this trend. It refers to a work of fiction written in nineteenth-century Britain that sets its characters and their conflicts in the foreground of a social ill, which may express itself through class, race, or gender, with the intention of commenting on the social problem or proffering remedies and resolutions. The roots of the social problem novel, addressing issues through their effects on the characters, can be traced back a century before the period of rapid industrialization in the nineteenth-century and even as far back as the poetry of William Blake with “The Chimney Sweeper” in 1789. Popular middle-class author Charles Dickens wrote several social problem novels including *Oliver Twist* (1837), *Bleak House* (1852), *Hard Times* (1854), and *Little Dorrit* (1855). George Eliot contributed with *Felix Holt* (1832), while Benjamin Disraeli produced *Sybil, or The Two Nations* in 1845. More, Charles Kingsley composed *Alton Locke* (1850), Charlotte Brontë wrote *Shirley* (1849), and Elizabeth Gaskell wrote *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855).

Writers like Dickens and Henry Mayhew attempted to record the conditions of the working class and all the grime that went along with the life of labor, but even these works were insufficient. They wrote to effect change through social reform, but they do not carry enough weight to counter the tendency to magnify and celebrate the intolerable details of poverty and crime so enjoyed by the sensationalist fiction of the day and our own fascination with viewing

the poor as a separate species. We peer as through a microscope at the grit and dirt of their conditions, and we often highlight those demons such as “Jack the Ripper” who briefly drew the attention of the upper classes by slaughtering the downtrodden. It is safe to neglect the poor, whose suffering and death can be turned into entertaining fictions, but it is socially forbidden to redirect the lens of the microscope to evaluate the causes of poverty, and the institutions, actions, attitudes, systems, and relationships that create, enforce, and perpetuate the conditions of the working class. For in doing so, the very legitimacy and stability of the socioeconomic order would come into question.

The Industrial novel is inherently political. The genre addresses poverty, alienation, and class struggle—either admonishing the latter or ignoring it outright. However, Industrial novels also replicate the blind spots of the middle class. Simply, the omission of a certain politics or the failure to sufficiently connect material conditions to the sources that create them reveal much about the ideologies, fears, and beliefs of the authors and consumers of Industrial fiction. The presence of working-class political agitation and its negative depiction in Industrial novels suggests the authors are not as sympathetic to the liberation of the poor as may be believed. They resolve social conflicts too easily, and without bloodshed and sufficient punishment of the antagonists, which pacifies the feelings of agitation of the proletariat in favor of incremental change out of their control. We would expect the Industrial novel to remedy the problematic portrayals of working class people in Victorian literature, and yet it consistently fails to do so. There is an underlying tension between the collective and the individual at the heart of the Industrial novel, which displaces the people most at risk of exploitation. Though the authors seem to seek justice for the voiceless and demonized working class, the results of this work suggest middle-class writers of Industrial fiction were so affected by class biases that their work

is antagonistic to the expression of working-class political agency by disparaging their attempts to organize, unionize, and agitate for change beyond liberal reformism.

As the title of this thesis suggests, the content of this work focuses on uncovering and recording the ways in which the Industrial novel undermines the various means by which the working class directly acts to defend itself, protest for better conditions, or in any way threaten to upset the status quo via active political agency. This thesis is significantly informed by the work of Friedrich Engels, namely *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, and by Karl Marx, whose development of dialectics and historical materialism in *The Communist Manifesto*, which was published in English in Britain in 1850 (Žmolek 787), and *Das Kapital* have profoundly influenced the way this work approaches the political realm of the nineteenth-century. Both authors reshaped the way class relations, political economy, and social problems were understood during their lives and long after their deaths, and their work fundamentally influences how the social sciences operate in the present. They challenged “the various religious and pseudo-scientific theories that sought to make the poverty of workers a ‘natural’ rather than a man-made condition,” demonstrating “how capitalism produced poverty as a necessary byproduct of the industrial process” (Pelz 119). Above all, they identified and studied the concept of class struggle between the proletariat, defined as “the class of modern wage labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live” and the bourgeoisie, “the class of modern capitalists, owners of the means of production and employers of wage labour” (Marx and Engels 62). The work of Marx and Engels reveals the undercurrent of liberal reformist ideology that runs in the Industrial novels of Gaskell and Dickens, a political attitude vehemently opposed to working-class political agency.

Elliott notes a rise in novels addressing class antagonism and social interaction between classes during the 1850s: “Although the immediate fears of political and social upheaval that many in the middle classes had harbored during the 1840s had declined with the demise of Chartism and the touted prosperity of the 1850s, a wave of strikes beginning in 1852” yielded an opportune period in which middle-class authors could write about class (Elliott 28). In a letter to Gaskell postmarked 21 April 1854, Dickens states, “I have no intention of (depicting) striking. The monstrous claims at diminution made by a certain class of manufacturers, and the extent to which the way is made easy for working-men to slide down into discontent under such hands” are in his plans for *Hard Times*. Yet both texts criticize trade unionism and reject violence as an appropriate response to the violence inflicted upon the working class through economic woe.

To say that the years preceding the composition of both *North and South* and *Hard Times* were not conducive to literary experimentation vis-à-vis radical working-class movements would be a severe understatement. Europe saw a great many revolutions in 1848, most of which failed or had little effect on the political structure at large. However, the great political revolutionary “upheaval of 1848 had shaken the social order, and the resultant reaction had established it more firmly than ever. The tone of philanthropic literature after 1850 was different from what it had been before. A new timidity inhabited the most wholehearted supporters of intervention” (Cazamian 499). Such was the effect of these revolutions, which “shook the Continent of Europe in the years 1848 and 1849, though they left England virtually unaffected, (and) could not but leave behind them in a large part of English society a mingled sense of repugnance and relief” (Ward 507). These conditions effected such influence upon prominent English writers whom had before “shown so genuine and so special an interest in our working-classes; who had insisted so strongly on the justice as well as on the expediency of hearing both sides of the questions at

issue; and who... pleaded that justice should be done” to the claims of the workers to the extent that the only solution proffered in their novels thereafter involved joining as friends instead of enemies (Ward 508). Thus, Dickens and, to a greater extent, Gaskell broach the subject of class struggle as a logical extension of the content in their Industrial novels, but ultimately fail to follow through with it on any meaningful level.

Some have argued that depictions of the working class in Victorian fiction represent a certain ideology of humanitarianism shared by writers like Dickens and Gaskell. Some, like Patrick Brantlinger, argue in “The Case against Trade Unions in Early Victorian Fiction” as published in *Victorian Studies*, that this ideology allowed for sympathy toward reformist (legal) methods of social change but pushed against means that were deemed unlawful, uncivilized, or in any way socially objectionable. He argues that “Mrs. Gaskell is able to sympathize to some extent with trade union action so long as it is directed toward the guilty upper classes, but not when it is directed toward the guiltless poor” (Brantlinger 42). Brantlinger finds that Dickens’s “attitude toward the Coketown union is a curious mixture of middle-class prejudice and strong sympathy for the poor... (He) does not avoid repeating (fictions about unions) himself... (And) he still falls roughly into line” with the capitalist perspective about unions (49). Macdonald Daly, lecturer of Modern Literature at the University of Nottingham, writes in his introduction to *Mary Barton* that Gaskell’s social problem novels are antagonistic to burgeoning working-class movements: “In response ... to the contemporary crisis which Marx and Engels were busily sketching ... Gaskell proposes a return to religion, chivalry, sentiment” (xi). Gaskell’s narratives are dramas “of working-class radicalization and its consequences, both personal and social... The embrace of action politics is equated with the erosion of humanity” (Daly xxiii). Dorice Williams Elliott, in “The Female Visitor and the Marriage of Classes in Gaskell’s *North and South*,”

published in *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, suggests that authors like “Dickens and Gaskell, declared their sympathy with the working classes and felt a moral responsibility to alleviate the negative side effects of industrial capitalism and to promote class harmony” (Elliott 29).

Others have cleared the ground for further research into depictions of crowds in Victorian novels, tracing fears of mob violence back to medieval literature. In “Roaring Beasts and Raging Floods: The Representation of Political Crowds in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel,” published in *The Modern Language Review*, Nicholas Visser finds that political crowds and their material conditions are almost invariably removed from social context and described in figurative language that connotes the unpredictability of natural forces like floods. Further, he notes an increase in frequency of such depictions in reaction to the French Revolution, spawning attempts to create a psychology for the crowd to delegitimize and remove the political agency of the individual actors within a crowd.

I.

Before we review the depictions of the labor movement as they pertain to Dickens’s *Hard Times* and Gaskell’s *North and South* in Chapter 1, we must first establish and review the conditions under which labor unions formed, their declared purpose for combining, and the reaction of the bourgeois manufacturers to their existence. In *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Engels traces the history of the labor movement in Victorian England to the creation of the so-called “great cities,” prominent in Industrial fiction, which constitute the “birthplaces of labour movements; in them the workers first began to reflect upon their own condition, and to struggle against it; in them opposition between proletariat and bourgeoisie first

made itself manifest” and from them came Trade Unions¹, Chartism², and Socialism³ (Engels 133).

The stage of Industrial Revolution most important to the development of the working class and the creation of unions began in the 1820s and consisted of increased mechanization and construction of factories. From thence on capitalism dominated Britain, though the workers of the 1830s “did not face a relatively amorphous elite class, but a specific predatory group ... that had control of the state apparatus” (Calhoun 488). The unity between artisans and factory workers birthed Chartism, a movement later weakened from internal strife, particularly concerning the use of physical force (Calhoun 491). Initially, unions were varied in purpose and membership. It is important to note that most workers’ movements were not inherently radical, but were instead formed in search of concessions by capitalist elites; they were not always supportive of revolutionary change (Calhoun 493). The unions depicted in the Industrial novels discussed herein are not particularly revolutionary and often bow in respect to the law.

Modern fears of automation echo the difficulties faced by the working class during the Industrial revolution (Engels 32). Machinery drove workers into the city after the industrialization of agriculture, and after they were driven from rural life to the towns due to the

¹ Trade unions refer simply to a collective of workers who organize for shared interest, often for redress of grievances against an employer.

² Chartism is used in reference to the working-class political reform movement in Britain that sought the adoption of the People’s Charter, which included reforms for universal male suffrage, equal representation in Parliament, annual Parliamentary elections, secret ballots, and adequate payment for working members of Parliament (Engels 236).

³ In contrast to the centrally held capital of nineteenth-century political economy, Socialism is defined as democratic and social ownership in common of the means of production (Engels 243-244).

centralizing tendency of capital, the workers were tossed into the war of all against all through competition, which Engels describes as both the cause of the plight facing workers and the thing which they naturally unite against in order to survive (Engels 87-88). In effect, the bourgeoisie “agglomerated population, centralised means of production, and ... concentrated property in a few hands. The necessary consequence of this was political centralisation” (Marx and Engels 69). Instead of enjoying the benefits of machinery that reduced the expenditure of physical labor, each improvement in machinery drives “workers out of employment, and the greater the advance, the more numerous the unemployed; each great improvement produces, therefore, upon a number of workers the effect of a commercial crisis” (Engels 145). Thrown into this want the proletariat, with no property or capital to fall back on, competes against itself for the opportunity to be exploited by the manufacturer, who can toss workers back into the muck to starve without explanation. Thus, a unity between workers formed because of their condition.

The concept of wage labor discussed in the Industrial novel developed in response to the “modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society,” as access to capital was increasingly privatized in the hands of the few, establishing “new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones” (Marx and Engels 63). It differed from previous relations like primitive accumulation and slavery—the complete theft of bodies and their labor power—in that it “resolved personal worth into exchange value, and ... has set up that single, unconscionable freedom—Free Trade” as a sacred cow (Marx and Engels 66). These laborers “must sell themselves piecemeal” as a “commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market” (Marx and Engels 72). Competition in the system of wage labor—the capitalist relationship between employer and worker wherein the latter subsists by selling their

labor power in exchange for an hourly wage, a fraction of the value their labor produces for the former, while owning nothing they produce—thrives on the displacement of workers from their trades, therefrom emerges the “effort of the workers to nullify this competition by associations, hence the hatred of the bourgeoisie toward these associations, and its triumph in every defeat which befalls them” (Engels 88). Faced with destitution and the perpetual threat of starvation, the worker is “made to feel at every moment that the bourgeoisie treats him as a chattel, as its property, and for this reason, if for no other, he must come forward as its enemy” (Engels 220). This rebellion occurs first internally, then develops and is expressed violently.

Workers rebelled by halting the introduction of machinery, and often resorted to seizing and destroying it. They directed “attacks not against the bourgeois conditions of production, but against the instruments of production themselves; they destroy imported wares that compete with their labour, they smash to pieces machinery,” and they set alight the factories, Churches of Holy Commodity (Marx and Engels 74). Nevertheless, machinery was introduced, but combination increased (Marx and Engels 75). A new tool developed in the strike, which “supplanted machine breaking and populist attacks on the corruption of elites not because the same people were becoming more modern in their attitudes, but because a new working class was supplanting” the old classes of preindustrial Britain (Calhoun 490).

The bourgeois manufacturers of the Industrial novel reflect their real-life counterparts by attacking working-class movements through a police force, who routinely shut down assemblies of working people, often using informants and “making mass arrests to sow doubt” in working-class movements like Chartism,” or harassing the poor for minor infractions or recreation; policing was first and foremost created to enforce and protect private property laws (Žmolek 758). Indeed, since the working class is by definition without private property, the police

targeted them most, directed and backed by their masters, the bourgeoisie, brimming with fears of uprisings and resulting property damage. In addition to the police, the bourgeoisie owned most seats of power and played an active role in government, passing legislation that catered to their interests in an unregulated market, although small concessions to the working class were not unheard of. After public outrage against the New Poor Law, which made poverty relief available only through workhouses, and the Six Acts, which were aimed at suppressing radicalism, the Combination of Workmen Act 1824, “repealed all laws by which coalitions between working men for labour purposes had hitherto been forbidden,” granting the right of association and free expression (Engels 222).

The Industrial novel’s politics on trade unionism are influenced by contemporary Parliamentary politics affecting combination. While coalitions had been formed before, and had measures of success in agitating a general strike of weavers and miners in Scotland, these associations struggled due to their condition of secrecy in consequence of the Combination Act 1799, which prohibited trade unions entirely (Engels 222). The Combination of Workmen Act 1824, despite its constraints, permitted limited free association, leading to the growth of combination (Engels 223). The Conspiracy Laws and more specifically the Combinations of Workmen Act 1825 criminalized the formation of unions whose sole reason for existing was striking and collective bargaining, and the latter stayed in place until its repeal by the Trade Union Act 1871, which legalized trade unions for the first time, and the Criminal Law Amendment of 1871 (which criminalized picketing) and later, the Conspiracy, and Protection of Property Act 1875, which fully legalized labor unions by lifting previous restrictions. The lattermost legislation did not go into effect until many years after the peak of the Industrial novel, but workers actively reacted to the earlier forms of union suppression, including the

Reform Act of 1832, “which they had thought would bring substantial democratization to public affairs, but benefited only the middle class. They reacted to the oppressive and degrading New Poor Law of 1834,” as well as the artificially high food prices of the Corn Laws (Calhoun 493). The aforementioned laws ignited a wave of agitation that assisted in swelling Chartist ranks but by 1848 “millions would sign petitions, (but) very few were interested in risking much in an insurrectionary mobilization” (Calhoun 493). The numbers were there, but there was no direction.

Thus, the conditions that gave rise to worker combination were in direct response to the war against the toiling proletariat, a war that the bourgeoisie expended great effort to conceal. This “social war,” as Engels calls it, is fought in daylight, and as such the brutality of the bourgeoisie is not open and undisguised, but “chiefly carried on under the mask of civilization and humanity” (Engels 179-180). The ruling class has a special interest in manipulating the ways in which workers are socialized, as an open declaration of war is not profitable. It is then in their interest “to conduct this war hypocritically, under the disguise of peace and even of philanthropy, the only help for the working men consists in laying bare the true state of things and destroying this hypocrisy” (Engels 221). The middle-class authors of Industrial fiction play an unwitting role in this disguised social war by supporting and legitimizing the oppressors while denigrating the efforts of the oppressed to repel the attacks of the former.

The foundational objects of the trade unions were based in freeing themselves from individual exploitation, “to fix wages and to deal, *en masse*, as a power, with the employers; to regulate the rate of wages according to the profit of the latter, to raise it when opportunity offered, and to keep it uniform in each trade throughout the country” (Engels 223). As we will see in texts like *Hard Times* and *North and South*, they were to offer financial assistance to

unemployed working men, either directly or by means of a card to “legitimate the bearer as a ‘society man’, and with which the working man wanders from place to place, supported by his fellow-workers, and instructed” where to find employment—a practice known as tramping (Engels 223).

The authors of *Hard Times* and *North and South* display skepticism toward trade union funding. Unions were historically structured according to necessity, and officers were employed to meet the basic functions of the combination, thus a “President and Secretary are engaged at a salary (since ... no manufacturer will employ such persons), and a committee collects the weekly contributions and watches over their expenditure for the purposes of the association” (Engels 223). If an employer refuses the demanded wage of the Union, a “deputation is sent or a petition forwarded ... if this proves unavailing, the Union commands the employees to stop work, and all hands go home” (Engels 224). This powerful action, the strike, is the greatest weapon against the manufacturers, and is “either partial when one or several, or general when all employers in the trade refuse to regulate wages according to the proposals of the Union. So far go the lawful means of the Union, assuming the strike to take effect after the expiration” of legal notices (Engels 224).

However, since the law is itself written by the bourgeoisie, striking is only so effective within legal constraints, and “lawful means are very weak when there are workers outside the Union, or when members separate from it for the sake of the momentary advantage offered by the bourgeoisie” (Engels 224). Those who apply to the masters for work during a strike effectively cut the throats of the unified workers, and are most despised by them. These workers are referred to as “knobsticks,” or “scabs” by members of the working class, and are routinely “threatened, insulted, beaten, or otherwise maltreated by the members of the Union; intimidated,

in short, in every way. Prosecution follows, and as the law-abiding bourgeoisie has the power in its own hands, the force of the Union” is unfailingly broken by the first act that breaches the confines of the law (Engels 224). As a result, knobsticks sound the death knell of the strike, for “the funds of the Union are soon exhausted by the great numbers requiring relief, the credit which the shopkeepers give at high interest is withdrawn ... and want compels the working man to place himself” under the boot of the exploiters (Engels 225).

It is of no surprise, then, that the ruling class seeks at every opportunity to undermine the labor movement, and “declaims with the greatest violence against these Unions, and is constantly trying to prove their uselessness to the working men” (Engels 229-230). They manipulate the working people into turning on the leaders of the Unions, thereby displacing the blame; furthermore, “they declare that the paid agents of the Unions are interested in the agitation because they live upon it, as though the necessity for this payment were not forced upon them by the bourgeois, who will give such men no employment!” (Engels 231). Instead of recognizing “this forward step in the general movement of the workers, the property-holding class saw in it only a source of rage against a class of people who are fools enough to declare themselves no longer submissive to the treatment” they have until now received (Engels 265-266). The manufacturing bourgeoisie did not see justice in the formation of trade unions; it did not care to take notice of the depths it had sunk working people into that would necessitate combination; it “saw in the just demands of the non-possessing workers only impertinent discontent, mad rebellion against ‘Divine and human order’; and, in the best case, a success ... won by ‘ill-intentioned demagogues who live by agitation and are too lazy to work’” (Engels 266). The significance of striking is not to be found solely in the improvement of conditions, or a fairer distribution of wages. Instead, the importance of strikes and trade unionism is this: “they are the

first attempt of the workers to abolish competition. They imply the recognition of the fact that the supremacy of the bourgeoisie is based wholly” upon the war of each against all, competition of the proletariat among themselves (Engels 226). Therefore, trade unions constitute a legitimate threat to the social order.

Trade unionism in the modern world is under threat from neoliberalism and austerity, which intensified in the 1980s and have since systematically disempowered and disabled the ability of the working class to protect itself from the damaging effects of exploitation. Combination too was dismantled in Victorian Britain, though not entirely through legislation. Instead, the rising tide of agitation was broken and the rage of the workers pacified through paternalism, the belief that the relationship between employer and worker should go beyond the cash nexus, much like the relationship between a parent and their child. It had the devastating and ultimate effect of punishing “rebellion and idleness with transportation and the workhouse whilst rewarding obedience with advancement and a shot at earning ‘respectability’, a term whose meaning had now changed to ... inculcating in oneself the personal virtues of obedience, thrift, and industry” in order to succeed in the capitalist market (Žmolek 836). The working class fell under the spell of bourgeois ideology and lived to define itself in terms of respectability (Calhoun 490). Employers recognized that workers had to internalize submissiveness to authority and acquiesce in order to control them efficiently, hence the Mid-Victorian compromise whereby laborers and employers established the foundations of modern liberalism in the United Kingdom (Žmolek 836). Due to the nature of the subject matter, this analysis will be influenced by a Marxist theoretical approach to reading literature. As such, in reference to the value of labor, this work adheres to the Marxist theory of labor value as developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in *Das Kapital*. The texts analyzed herein are very much based in class struggle, power

dynamics between classes, and the limitations of liberal politics. It is only fitting then that they be examined using approaches developed to critique, contextualize, and draw out assumptions, preconceptions, and learned behavior. The Industrial novel introduced the squalid conditions of the working class to many persons unaware, but the politics of the texts internalized in middle-class readers, thereby influencing the course of working-class political agency in the social sphere. As class antagonisms increase and class disparity widens in the twenty-first century, it is imperative that we identify the means through which political ideologies develop so that harmful or regressive ones may be effectively countered. Examining the literature of the past is a step forward in contextualizing the literature of the present and future.

II.

It is expected that the Victorian Industrial novel would be wholly sympathetic to the working class, but the reality is complicated; the sympathies of the authors of the social problem novels are informed by class prejudices, which influence the ways in which their work function as literature designed to raise awareness of a given issue. The problem is that Industrial novels are products of middle-class conceptions of the working class, which reveal themselves through the internal politics of the novels. The Victorian Industrial novel censures all manners of direct action by the working classes: they decry the perceived callousness of trade unionism, perpetuate contemporary fears of rebellion, mob violence, and gatherings of poor persons, and promote nonviolent, idealist liberal reformist politics instead of radical change to deprive the working class of political agency.

Chapter 1, "Combination," carefully examines the Victorian novel's perception of trade unionism through two influential texts written concurrently. Chapter 2, "Riots," explores the

Victorian novel's perception of direct action undertaken by members of the working class and the fears of violent protest (i.e. riots or crowds) it perpetuates, while also comparing the language used to detail and censure the riot in both fiction and primary source accounts from newspaper accounts of contemporaneous strikes. Chapter 3, "Revolution and Reform," culminates with an assessment of revolution in the Victorian novel and its historical and literary significance in the creation of texts that take hostile approaches to working-class agency in the Victorian era. It also addresses the reductive, passive, and bloodless ways in which the novels discussed herein resolve class conflict, contextualizing them as products of middle-class writers promoting their own agendas rather than amplifying the voices of the working class.

Chapter 1

Combination

Between 1 April 1854 and 27 January 1855, two of the most influential texts belonging to the Industrial novel genre were published in Charles Dickens's weekly periodical, *Household Words*. Dickens wrote the first novel, serialized in twenty parts starting on 1 April and ending on 12 August 1854. Dedicated to Thomas Carlyle, *Hard Times* is a novel set in the red-bricked manufacturing village of "Coketown," a mill-town based on Preston, where Dickens visited to research the results of the famous Preston strike. Its plot is almost entirely focused on the relationship between manufacturers and their workers, referred to as Hands, "a race who would have found more favour with some people, if Providence had seen fit to make them only hands, or, like the lower creatures of the sea-shore, only hands and stomachs" (Dickens, *Hard Times* 56). These two opposing groups, those with property and wealth and those wholly without, are represented by two equally different men, Josiah Bounderby, "banker, merchant, manufacturer, and what not" (*Hard* 17) and Stephen Blackpool, a forty-year-old hand who "looked older, but he had had a hard life" (*Hard* 56). The conflict between these two men is produced by the agitation of worker combinations, or labor unions; Bounderby refuses to acquiesce to the collective demands of his employees, while fellow workers shun Blackpool for refusing to join their cause, forcing him to leave town and tramp elsewhere in search of work. The second novel published in *Household Words* immediately following Dickens's novel was serialized from 2

September 1854 to 27 January 1855. Elizabeth Gaskell authored *North and South* while maintaining a contentious editorial relationship with Dickens. Like *Hard Times*, Gaskell's *North and South* is set in a fictional industrial town based on Manchester. The plot divides between the "South" in the rural village of Helstone and the industrial North of "Milton-Northern," a "manufacturing town in Darkshire" (Gaskell, *North and South* 38), often shortened to simply "Milton." In the vein of *Hard Times*, the disparity between the manufacturing class of Milton and the working proletariat represents itself through the depiction of these classes by two agents: John Thornton and Nicholas Higgins. Thornton is a mill owner who hates regulation in his capitalist affairs and rejects wage-related concessions demanded by members of a labor union under his employ. Higgins acts as a committee leader of said labor union. Gaskell departs from Dickens by introducing a protagonist, Margaret Hale, through which to view this class struggle, who is neither bourgeois nor proletarian. The daughter of a vicar stationed in the South of England, Margaret is mostly raised by her wealthy aunt, sent back to her father's house in Helstone, and forced to relocate to the manufacturing North in Milton due to her father's change of conscience and resignation as an Anglican minister. Although initially critical of the working people of Milton, Margaret gradually aligns and sympathizes with them while analyzing the manufacturers' unsympathetic adherence to political economy as exemplified by Mr. Thornton, a formerly poor worker who rose through the ranks and believes anyone can do the same.

Though written and published almost concurrently, both authors use stylistic means to comment on trade unionism: Dickens satirizes the hyperbolic speech of trade union rhetoric, while Gaskell utilizes literary realism to highlight the costs of union membership and striking. Dickens's novels imply that the efforts of trade unions are futile and unnecessary, while Gaskell concedes their utility but finds great fault with their methods. Gaskell and Dickens hold positions

chiefly sympathetic to the working class as a whole, but are antagonistic toward the self-determination of the workers to combine. The solutions offered by Dickens and Gaskell are developed and informed by their middle-class biases; they function as observers looking into worlds they are not part of. Indeed, Brantlinger argues that the “Humanitarian perspective” of Victorian writers like Dickens and Gaskell was “flexible enough to include sympathy for the Ten Hours Movement, the agitation against the New Poor Law, cooperative associations, and even ‘moral force’ Chartism, but it did not include much sympathy for trade unions and strikes” (37). Hence, the authors rescinded support of the working class when its emerging consciousness pushed against the status quo, promoting liberal reformist politics in place of agitation.

Both Dickens and Gaskell worked closely together during the creation of these two texts so that they would not produce copies of the same story, yet both novels confront the same subjects and are inextricably tied to the conditions of the manufacturing proletariat, the greed and hypocrisy of the wealthy mill owners, and, most importantly, the subject of trade unions—all consequences of capitalist production. That Dickens and Gaskell both champion the poor in these novels during the height of the labor movement, with the rise of the People’s Charter and Owenian Socialism in the collective consciousness of the working class is of note. Intimidating and sometimes violent agitation and the rejection of the status quo exemplified by these movements dampened sympathy for the working class among what Friedrich Engels referred to as the *Mittelklasse*, meaning, like the French *bourgeoisie*, “the possessing class, specifically that possessing class which is differentiated from the so-called aristocracy—the class which in France and England is directly and in Germany, figuring ‘public opinion’, indirectly in possession” of political power (Engels 14). The middle class consumed the periodicals in which these novels appeared, and were thus exposed to the ideas therein. The decision of the authors of the

Household Words novels to portray the working class sympathetically and labor unions poorly certainly influenced the members of the *Mittelklasse*, as literary taste no doubt valued criticism of forces that were perceived troublesome to the middle-class way of life.

Dickens in particular is critical of the men paid to be the voices and speakers of the combinations, a consequence of his suspicion of tricksters and hypocritical manipulators, while Gaskell concerns herself with the proposed benefits of striking and its effects upon the families of the workers. Different too is the distinctive Dickensian satire that furiously courses in the pages of *Hard Times*. The stylistic disparity between the two texts is not simply evidence of their authors' contradictory politics, but a concerted if not conscious effort to betray allegiance to emancipatory working-class politics while simultaneously demarcating middle-class boundaries between sympathies. This has the effect of alienating those who would argue against reformism as an effective remedy to the ills plaguing the working class, a sizable population whose daily existence is so precarious that they cannot depend on the slow-moving machinery of governing bodies to intercede, and whereby progress is always subject to repeal, revocation, and reversal. Rather than acting on their own, the working class is simply told to wait patiently for upper-class writers, politicians, and reformists to take charge and to do so on their behalf.

This essay will begin by exploring how Dickens's portrayal of trade unionism in *Hard Times* is not only antagonistic to all forms of combination undertaken by members of the working class in their right to self-determine, but also repeats Victorian tropes about unionists in the process. These narrative and stylistic choices reveal in Dickens a disdain for working class agency as it pertains to challenging the established order through means other than passive reformism. Then, this essay will examine Gaskell's depiction of trade unionism in *North and*

South, unpacking biases and assumptions about working-class political agency through the vehicle of combination.

I.

There is little doubt surrounding Dickens's negative opinion of trade unions. For all his sympathy for the poor, the man who speaks of union "chivalry in *Household Words* in 1851," which became "tyranny in *Hard Times*," makes clear in "his article 'On Strike' in 1854 ... that he did not visit Preston in order to decide whether strikes could benefit the workers," for he had already decided they could not and were inherently wrong (Brantlinger 44). Indeed, when asked if he was friendly to either the strike or the lockout, Dickens proclaims, "Not at all ... Not in the least" (Dickens, "On Strike" 318-319). In his account of the Preston Strike in *Household Words*, entitled, "On Strike," Dickens offers the following pronouncement on the benefits of the matter: "this strike and lock-out is a deplorable calamity. In its waste of time ... of a great people's energy ... of wages ... of wealth that seeks to be employed... [I]n the gulf of separation it hourly deepens between those whose interests must be identical or must be destroyed," and as such it is a great national "affliction" (330). In other words, despite claiming the working class has "a perfect right to combine in any lawful manner," Dickens seems to view all such efforts as futile and fruitless ("On Strike" 320). Based on his attitudes gathered from "On Strike," as well as his depiction of trade unionists in *Hard Times*, his works suggest assemblies of working people were particularly susceptible to violence and demagoguery, and were thus incapable of organization and directive to challenge a perceived slight on their own. Unfortunately for him and the many who purported unions and striking were innately violent, the "Preston strike proved that the workers could conduct themselves in a peaceful manner," but such attitudes were largely

unchanged regarding the effectiveness of unions and striking (Brantlinger 44). *Hard Times* functions as an extension of “On Strike,” for the signature Dickensian sympathy and sentimentalism toward the individual is present in copious amount, but the text is utterly devoid of support for any larger social movement that entails organization of working people. The chief criticism of trade unionism made in the text centers around the treatment of workers who refuse to join the cause of the union. Brantlinger notes that the abuse of Stephen Blackpool in *Hard Times* is the “best known example of workers tyrannizing over their ‘brethren; in fiction, but the abuse is nonviolent ... the wrongdoing occurs once the workers allow their allegiance to the union to militate” against their inherent goodness (43). In *Hard Times*, Dickens frames trade unions as abusive fraternities led by populist demagogues who command their underlings to isolate, intimidate, and otherwise harm the innocent and sympathetic Stephen Blackpool.

Dickens’s use of hyperbole is most notable when the text attacks trade unionism, channeled primarily through Slackbridge, thereby “presenting the (union) organizer as a slick devil and the ostracism practiced against good hard-working Stephen Blackpool as forced collective torture” (Bodenheimer 538). The effect is plain, suggesting workers cannot unify to liberate themselves and can only make incremental progress through the sacrosanct individual, an idealistic and reformist politic that is antagonistic to the methods of trade unionism. As such, Dickens chooses to present trade unionists as naïve souls who are easily led by demagogic figures. Chapter IV of Book the Second, appropriately titled “Men and Brothers,” opens cold on the speech of a union representative named Slackbridge to an assembly of working men in a spacious hall. His words are populist and sympathetic to the plight of the working class, and are replete with calls for unity. The sighing calls for attention seem both familiar and designed to fluster: “Oh my friends, the down-trodden operatives of Coketown! Oh my friends and fellow

countrymen, the slaves of an iron-handed and a grinding despotism!” (*Hard* 113). He speaks of an hour that has come, “when we must rally round one another as One untied power, and crumble into dust the oppressors that too long have battened upon the plunder of our families, upon the sweat of our brows, upon the labor of our hands,” and upon the stamina of their muscle, upon the rights of humanity, and the brotherhood of men (*Hard* 113). In true Dickensian fashion, Dickens “has Slackbridge deliver to the labourers what Dickens’s middle-class readers would understand to be a simplification and an abstraction of the middle and owning class” (Barnes 446). By simplifying the demands of trade unionism, Dickens allies unionists with the likes of Bounderby; both are in search of the “golden spoon,” and utilize bombastic and impassioned speech to denounce their opposition. Though his rhetoric skills are sufficient to secure agreeable responses from his audience, Dickens makes a point to contrast the orator with his audience of laboring men. The man was “above the mass in very little but the stage on which he stood. In many great respects, he was essentially below them. He was not so honest, he was not so manly, he was not so good-humoured; he substituted cunning for their simplicity, and passion” for their reason (*Hard* 113).

Slackbridge manipulates the working people by appealing to their anger. Through this caricature, “Dickens reproduces the middle-class fear of an organized working class... In the guise of fiction, Dickens echoes Carlyle’s denunciation of unions in *Chartism* as dogmatic and intolerant fraternities” (Barnes 447). His description is wholly unkind, as if Dickens believes the lie of the manufacturers that “the paid agents of the Unions are interested in the agitation because they live upon it, as though the necessity for this payment were not forced upon them by the bourgeois, who will give such men no employment!” (Engels 231). Leavis finds that Dickens’s implication of Slackbridge as a parasite leeching off union dues “betrays a marked limitation.

There were undoubtedly professional agitators, and Trade Union solidarity was undoubtedly often asserted at the expense” of the individual (408). Yet, the text gives “the representative role to the agitator, Slackbridge, and make(s) Trade Unionism, nothing more than the pardonable error of the misguided and oppressed” (Leavis 408).

Dickens implicates Slackbridge through his an extensive vocabulary and educated manner of speech, while the president and chairman of the proceedings—like almost every working person in the text— speaks with a heavy dialect. Moreover, the chairperson of the union barely speaks at all, and the fact that he is not named suggests he is chairperson in name only and that Slackbridge is de facto leader. Blackpool himself acknowledges the nature of the man’s place with the operatives as an employed spokesperson: “’Tis this Delegate’s trade for t’ speak ... and he’s paid for’t, an he knows his work. Let him keep to’t” (*Hard* 116). Dickens’s mention of the state of his dress aligns him with Feargus O’Connor figure, “a Chartist leader, who came to Manchester during the insurrection of 1842,” (and whom) appeared, amidst the deafening applause of the working men, in a fustian suit of clothing” (Engels 78-79). Instead of being identified with the workers, the orator is said to have “contrasted most unfavourably, even in his mongrel dress, with the great body of his hearers in their plain working clothes” (*Hard* 113). Dickens paints Slackbridge as a rabble-rousing agitator; he decries “to see this crowd of earnest faces, whose honesty in the main no competent observer free from bias could doubt, so agitated by such a leader” (*Hard* 114). Bounderby later demands Blackpool inform on the union and its numbers, but places special interest on knowledge of Slackbridge: “You had better tell us at once, that that fellow Slackbridge is not in the town, stirring up the people to mutiny; and that he is not a regular qualified leader of the people: that is, a most confounded scoundrel” (*Hard* 120). Therefore, the manufacturers fear Slackbridge for his ability to rouse popular support while at

the same time recognizing that he is dishonest and not fully proletarian. As a member of the middle class, Dickens's view of Slackbridge, a destructive voice that condemns Blackpool to a cruel fate, and the men of the union "represent such a powerful minority, and in that sense his depiction of them is a caricature, but his point still remains that power impervious to critique represents the working class to be plastic and passive rather than active and intelligent" (Barnes 448).

Narratively, Dickens infantilizes the workers laborers in their liability to be so easily swayed by the voice of one man, as if they have not weathered similar pointed rhetoric under their employers. Though he is certain not to dismiss their grievances—"to pretend that they went astray wholly without cause, and of their own irrational wills, was to pretend that there could be smoke without fire, death without birth, harvest without seed" (*Hard* 114)—Dickens plainly and unambiguously states that they were "unhappily wrong" in their current reasoning for agitation, just like the Preston strikers: "in (the) belief, right or wrong," that every man believed the improvement of his existence required allying with the men around him (*Hard* 114). Regardless of the "validity" of their frustration, the men unionize because "every man felt his condition to be, somehow or other, worse than it might be ... considered it incumbent on him to join the rest, toward the making of it better" (*Hard* 114). Dickens's depiction of the unionists as mere vehicles hijacked by an ideologue and directed here or there, instead of the drivers of the labor movements themselves, is troublesome in that it removes their political agency; they are bystanders rather than agitators.

Slackbridge is further distinguished through hyperbole in his treatment of Stephen Blackpool, the one man who refuses the call to unionize. Slackbridge makes an absurd, exaggerated comparison of classical traitors to Blackpool, pontificating, "I do not wonder that

you, the prostrate sons of labor, are incredulous of the existence of such a man. But he who sold his birthright for a mess of pottage existed, and Judas Iscariot existed, and Castlereagh existed,” and so does Blackpool (*Hard* 115). Slackbridge paints Blackpool as someone who “deserts his post, and sells his flag; who, at such time, turns a traitor and a craven and a recreant” (*Hard* 114). However, Stephen Blackpool is not a traitor. He is well respected among the working people, and the president of the meeting reminds the crowd of his status: “You know awlung o’ his misfort’ns, and his good name” (*Hard* 115). Blackpool graciously admits his hesitation to join the cause—“I’m th’ one single Hand in Bounderby’s Mill, o’ a’ the men theer, as don’t coom in wi’ th’ proposed reg’lations. I canna’ coom in wi’ ‘em. My friends, I doubt their doin’ yo onny good. Licker they’ll do yo hurt” (*Hard* 116)—as well as his loyalty to his fellow workers—“But’t ant sommuch for that as I stands out. If that were aw, I’d coom in wi’ th’ rest.” Further, the difference between Blackpool and Slackbridge is made manifest in the way they speak to the crowd and the ways in which the crowd reacts to their words. Slackbridge interrupts Stephen several times over the course of his speech and receives calls of shame. Conversely, Blackpool speaks with a dignified manner and the hall is silent. He is certainly held in higher regard than the man exciting the workers and he neither admonishes his fellow workers, nor attacks Slackbridge beyond referencing his inherent separation from the men: “my fellow-workmen—for that you are to me, though not, as I knows on, to this delegate heer” (*Hard* 116). Blackpool’s acceptance of the punishment, to be shunned by every union member, is indicative of Dickens’s sympathy for the downtrodden, humble working poor while simultaneously criticizing the labor movement and trade unions for their exile of fellow proletarians who, for one reason or another, cannot or will not join in the agitation. Thus, Dickens portrays the working class as both directed and directionless; they are naturally kind, compassionate, and honorable, yet there is no

mistaking Dickens's contempt for combinations so long that they engage in practices of which he does not approve.

Dickens sympathetically frames Stephen Blackpool as an innocent worker whose cause is his own, emphasizing both the individual and the harmful effects of trade unionism. He has his reasons for not joining his fellow workers, and all he wants to do is be able to work: "I mak' no complaints o' bein turned to the wa', o' being outcasten and overlooken fro this time forrard, but I hope I shall be let to work. If there is any right for me at aw, my friends, I think 'tis that" (*Hard* 117). The union crushes Blackpool's livelihood because he refuses to partake in their movement; hence, he represents Dickens's sympathetic view towards those people trade unions harm simply because they keep their heads down. Of course, there is no indication in the text that Dickens understands why it is imperative that all workers combine for unions to have success. Instead, he spends most of the time depicting the moral superiority of the working man who steps away from the crowd of agitating unionists. When Bounderby sends for Stephen to gather intelligence on the activities of the union, the latter does not inform on his peers. Blackpool would be within reason to inform on the combination considering he is effectively shunned and denied all social interaction, but he refuses. He is too much a working proletarian in his fierce loyalty and promptly shuts down his employer's demands: "Wi' yor pardon, sir ... I ha' nowt to sen about it" (*Hard* 120). In contrast, Bounderby reiterates his contempt for the working people with threat of physical violence in addition to the violence they face by starvation, informing Harthouse that he "warned this man against the mischievous strangers who are always about—and who out to be hanged wherever they are found ... would you believe it, that although they have put this mark upon him, he is such a slave to them still" that he will not speak of them (*Hard* 120). Blackpool's denouncement of Bounderby's inflammatory remarks about the working people signifies his

commitment to his class and his resolution to protect their livelihoods—“God forbid ... I, that ha’ ett’n an droonken wi’ em, an seet’n wi’ em, and toil’n wi’ em, and lov’n ‘em, should fail fur to stan by ‘em wi’ the truth, let ‘em ha doon to me what they may!” (*Hard* 121)—while still conceding his disagreement with the reasons for unionizing and defending those who combine: “I’m as sooary as yo, sir, when the people’s leaders is bad ... They taks such as offers. Haply ‘tis na’ the sma’est o’ their misfortuns when they can get no better” (*Hard* 120).

Dickens makes an effort to show that Blackpool, a common person, is more noble and fair than the bourgeois assembly before him. In the presence of powerful manufacturers and politicians, he spoke “with the rugged earnestness of his place and character—deepened perhaps by a proud consciousness that he was faithful to his class under all their mistrust; but he fully remembered where he was, and did not even raise his voice” (*Hard* 121). Indeed, the working people are “true to one another, faithfo’ to one another, fectionate to one another, e’en to death. Be poor amoong ‘em, be sick amoong ‘em, grieve amoong ‘em for onny o’ th’ monny causes that carries grief to the poor man’s door, an they’ll be tender wi’ you, gentle wi’ you,” Christian with you (*Hard* 121). They perish in squalor before acting any less human in spite of the masters’ incessant attempts to dehumanize and pacify them. In his exculpation of his people and their character, Blackpool commits the ultimate sin before Bounderby by suggesting the manufacturers share in the blame: “How ‘tis ... that what is best in us fok, seems to turn us most to trouble an misfort’n an mistake, I dunno. But ‘tis so. I know ‘tis, as I know the heavens is over me ahint the smoke. We’re patient too, an wants in general to do right. An I canna think the fawt is aw wi’ us” (*Hard* 121).

It is here that Dickens uses his rhetorical power to speak to the readers through Blackpool by addressing the powerful men sitting in the room, the manufacturers and politicians of the

outside world. Stephen details the source of the turmoil, asking the wealthy to look around town and “see the numbers o’ people as has been broughten into heer, fur to weave, an to card, an to piece out a livin’, aw the same one way, somehows, twixt their cradles and their graves. Look how we live, an wheer we live,” in such ghastly numbers (*Hard* 122). The mills work people only toward one object, one certainty—death; the very bodies of the working people are devoured for profit, and still they receive little in the way of respect and human decency: “Look how you considers of us, an writes of us, an talks of us, and goes up wi’ yor deputations to Secretaries o’ the State ‘bout us, and how yo are awlus right, and how we are awlus wrong” (*Hard* 122). Thus, Dickens gently admonishes the manufacturers and aristocrats who dismiss the pain and pleas of the working class, and the ruling class is puzzled when confronted with the realities of the matter that fail to comprehend why such antagonisms exist and from whence they come.

Dickens condemns the efforts of those seeking to crush the labor movement through the removal of individual agitators, recommending instead they direct their attention to the causes that create conditions favorable to agitation. These people are represented through Bounderby, whose solution to combination is to “make an example of half a dozen Slackbridges. We’ll indict the blackguards for felony, and get ‘em shipped off to penal settlements” (*Hard* 123). Their cure, then, for the exploitative nature of capitalism, a system which gives rise to populism, class antagonism, and social isolation through the alienation and commodification of human beings, is to eliminate the vanguard of the proletariat, a wholly temporary and ineffective measure, for “if yo was t’ tak a hundred Slackbridges ... an was t’ sew ‘em up in separate sacks, an sink ‘em in the deepest ocean as were made ere ever dry land coom to be, you’d leave the muddle wheer ‘tis” (*Hard* 123). It is “treating” the symptoms of the disease, for the poisonous roots remain, and

from them new symptoms emerge in time. Blackpool's turn of rhetoric by using the phrase "mischievous strangers" indicates that he is fully capable of handling himself in debate against a bourgeois. The bourgeois will not admit to having had anything to do with class antagonisms, and attributes the source of agitation to the misbehavior of a small minority of the people, a rowdy group of anonymous troublemakers—a trope repeated both throughout the Industrial Novel genre and the political literature vis-à-vis unionism and direct action in the form of strikes and mobs. However, Stephen Blackpool, and by extension Dickens, corrects this fiction: "'Tis not by *them* the trouble's made, sir. 'Tis not wi' *them* 't commences. I ha no favor for 'em ... but 'tis hopeless an useless to dream o' takin them fro their trade, 'stead o' takin their trade fro them!" (*Hard* 123). His closing statements cast doubt on Bounderby's methods, the course of government, political economy, and ostensibly warn against maintaining the established order: "The strong hand will never do't. Vict'ry and triumph will never do't. Agreeing fur to mak one side unnat'rally awlus and for ever right, and toother side unnat'rally alwus and forever wrong, will never, never do't. Nor yet lettin alone will never do't" (*Hard* 123).

Dickens seems to understand that the bourgeoisie cannot resolve class antagonisms by use of force, for they are byproducts of the system itself, and they cannot ignore the disparity and inequality of the very system that benefits them, for the inevitable upheaval will surely dethrone them. Blackpool refers to these natural opposites in consequence of overwhelming possession and ownership of the means of production in the hands of the few, leaving the many, the roaring multitudes to fight amongst themselves for the leftovers: "Let thousands upon thousands alone, aw leadin the like lives and aw faw'en into the like muddle, and they will be as one, and yo will be as another, wi' a black unpassable world betwixt yo, just as long or short a time as" such misery cab last (*Hard* 123). Dickens makes clear the workers are not tools to be used and

disposed of when broken; they are not numbers and statistics in the utilitarian calculations of the masters—they are people, and they combine because they are not treated as such, but are regarded as nasty little “things.” Dickens’s malicious Mr. Bounderby completely misses the point, does not heed the advice of a worker, and lashes out through the only means he knows: the reinforcement of class lines. Before firing Blackpool, a man shunned by his own people, and with nowhere else to work, effectively condemning him to death by starvation, Bounderby twists the knife: “You are one of those chaps who have always got a grievance. And you go about, sowing it and raising crops. That’s the business of *your* life ... You are such a waspish, raspish, ill-conditioned chap ... that even your own Union ... will have nothing to do” with you (*Hard* 124). With no options left for a source of income, and as a proletarian already fallen into despair, there is nothing left for Stephen Blackpool to do but to “quit this part, an try another. Fortnet or misfortnet, a man can but try; there’s nowt to be done wi’out tryin’—cept laying down an dying” (*Hard* 130). The lone worker, disadvantaged by age, is not secure after so many years spent in toil, and must go tramping in search of bread: “so strange to have lived to his time of life, and yet to be beginning like a boy this summer morning!” (*Hard* 134). Blackpool’s fate serves as Dickens’s damning critique of trade unions, for had he joined the union, he would have had financial support from his fellow workers. Without it, he could only resign himself as a beggar in Coketown. Such is the state of society driven by competition that people must unify and help one another to survive, and those without that support must turn elsewhere like Blackpool, even at the risk of death.

II.

In contrast to the harsh critique of trade unionism in Dickens's *Hard Times*, Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* offers a far more nuanced review of the relationship between organized labor and manufacturers. It is also a notable departure from the exaggerated characters of the former in favor of a more complicated, realistic style of prose, which often situates commentary on political ideologies in dialogue between characters, contributing to the novel's somewhat ambivalent appearance regarding the benefits of trade unions. Though she admonishes the manufacturers for their greed and troubles them with sharing the blame for class conflict, Gaskell challenges trade unionists for their perceived callousness against both employers and their own fellow workers, a nasty result of pride and not knowing when to give in to prevent starvation. A comparative analysis between Gaskell's first novel involving trade unions, *Mary Barton*, and *North and South*, reveals both a growth in the author's skill of characterization and a revision of political allegiances and sympathies. More specifically, the latter text is written as an apology to the manufacturers caricatured in the former text, which neglects the fact that working class unionists are portrayed in equally farcical ways in both novels. Thus, Gaskell's attitude toward combination in *North and South* is better addressed if contextualized with how trade unionism is depicted in her earlier work. For example, in *Mary Barton*, trade unionists are portrayed as secretive and ritualistic, as initiates are forced to recite "one of those fierce terrible oaths which bind members of Trades' Unions to any given purpose" (Gaskell, *Mary Barton* 190). When gathered in preparation for planning an assassination, the trade unionists seem to bathe in the desire to kill: "Deeper and darker grew the import of their speeches... Their clenches firsts, their set teeth, their livid looks, all told the suffering which their minds were voluntarily undergoing in the contemplation of crime" (*Mary* 190). Indeed, Gaskell harshly criticizes the manufacturers—more so than in *North and South*—but she makes an effort to frame unionists in

a similarly poor light: “They had no right to tyrannise over others, and tie them down to their own Procrustean bed. Abhorring what they considered oppression in the masters, why did they oppress others?” (*Mary* 173). In short, Gaskell declares that trade unionism or combination is an “awful power. It is like the equally mighty agency of steam; capable of almost unlimited good or evil. But to obtain a blessing on its labours, it must work under the direction of a high and intelligent will; incapable” of being derailed by passion (*Mary* 173). All of this is to say Elizabeth Gaskell did not think positively on matters of trade unionism and working-class political agency.

In *North and South*, Margaret Hale, the middle-class protagonist of the text, serves as the vehicle through which the audience becomes familiar with the people and practices of the working class in Milton. Her characterization is plain in that the novel is not explicitly about *her*, but is instead written with the intent of remedying the conflict between classes. Thus Margaret is a stand-in for the middle-class reader, an avatar they inhabit to experience the vastly different cultures, dwellings, beliefs, and practices of both the working class and the property-owning manufacturers. Margaret Hale’s status as an outsider, as not quite Northern and not entirely Southern, draws a discussion of the development of trade unions and their relationship to location into the narrative. Her decisions and beliefs pertaining to the working poor are highly informed by her faith in Anglican doctrine. Her ignorance of Northern practices, of striking and class politics, presents a relatively unprejudiced account of events. As a blank slate, she is initially ignorant as to the state of class antagonisms in Milton, and asks what the workers are striking for and what they hope to gain from it.

In response, Mrs. Thornton, mother of John Thornton, the head of the mill who vies for Margaret’s affection, misconstrues the rationale of the strike, thereby suggesting manufacturers

intentionally or even unconsciously misrepresent the aims of trade unions to deprive them of their power. She speaks of the workers without the slightest understanding of their reasoning, believing them to strike “for the mastership and ownership of other people’s property ... That is what they always strike for. If my son’s work-people strike, I will only say they are a pack of ungrateful hounds” (*North* 116). Gaskell knows this view is false, representing a complete failure of the manufacturing class to relate to their employees, who, in this text, are not “ungrateful” and merely seek just wages for their labor. The truth of the matter, according to Mrs. Thornton, is that “they want to be masters, and make the masters into slaves on their own ground. They are always trying at it; they always have it in their minds; and every five or six years, there comes a struggle between masters and men. They’ll find themselves mistaken...” (*North* 116). However, the unionists do not wish to “make the masters into slaves,” and the struggle between masters and men every “five or six years” is patterned after the periodic cycles of economic crisis recorded by Engels in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*.

Gaskell makes clear the hatred with which the manufacturers view the working class. In one scene, Mrs. Thornton describes having to find her way “through a crowd of white, angry men, all swearing they would have Makinson’s blood as soon as he ventured to show his nose out of his factory; and he, knowing nothing of it, someone had to go and tell him, or he was” doomed (*North* 116). Her subsequent course of action in this event and the preparations for such agitation illustrate the violence the ruling class is willing to use to pacify and quell the righteous anger of the working people of Milton, since she scaled the factory to the roof, where there were “stones piled ready to drop on the heads of the crowd, if they tried to force the factory doors. And I would have lifted those heavy stones, and dropped them with as good an aim as the best man there, but that I fainted with the heat” (*North* 116). Mrs. Thornton’s willingness to do this,

despite once knowing the suffering and uncertainty the proletariat faces, reveals much about the conditions that produce organized strikes and in which combinations form, for unions do not suddenly come from nothing, and the manufacturers must be aware of the dissention among their employees. People of the pastoral South like Margaret are frightened by what Darkshire men and women call “living and struggling. But when you’ve been ten years among a people who are always owing their betters a grudge, and only waiting for an opportunity to pay it off, you’ll know whether you are a coward or not” (*North* 116). It is a wonder then that the working people struggle, why, for ten years Mrs. Thornton hears the working people “owning their betters a grudge,” thirsting to bring justice to the injustice of their situation and force reparations from their oppressors. It is a wonder too if the manufacturers like Thornton simply not see the gathering storm, or perhaps they choose to ignore it for pecuniary increase. Mrs. Thornton represents this fear of a united working class, and is depicted as having an inclination toward violence or the suggestion of violence, something usually charged against the working class.

Gaskell sympathizes with the working class by criticizing the manufacturers for not explaining their reasoning for cutting wages, which she suggests led to the prevalence of trade unions. Mr. Thornton’s thoughts on the threatened strike underlie his perceived but hypocritical right to profit upon the surplus labor of others, while at the same time denying the worth of their labor and paying decent remuneration for it. He calls the strikers fools, “they think trade is flourishing as it was last year. We see the storm on the horizon and draw in our sails. But because we don’t explain our reasons, they won’t believe we’re acting reasonably” (*North* 117). Thus, the chief offense taken by Thornton is the notion that employers should give rationale for their supposed inability to increase wages in times of poor trade. However, why should the ill effects of trade be brought disproportionately upon that class which possesses no property, no

capital, and no stability, especially when the tradespeople may be guilty of bringing the storm upon themselves through irresponsible speculation? If wages are stagnant even when trade is favorable, what can be considered unreasonable on the part of the workers, especially when the tactics of the manufacturers for denying increased wages are so morally reprehensible and repugnant? Thornton's narrative of the manufacturer Henderson and his methods for dealing with striking workers and agitation illustrate how unreasonable and deceiving the bourgeois is. Henderson "rather wanted a strike. It would have suited his book well enough. So when the men came to ask for the five per cent they are claiming, he told 'em he'd think about it, and give them his answer on the pay day; knowing all the while what his answer would be" (*North* 117). Even to the manufacturer, striking can be profitable. Hearing of the poor trade, the defeated workers withdrew their claim and resumed work. However, the "Milton masters," who are engaged in their own conspiracy, "today sent in our decision. We won't advance a penny. We tell them we may have to lower wages; but can't afford to raise. So here we stand, waiting for their next attack" (*North* 117). Knowing the consequences of their decision, the immovable, obstinate, pertinacious manufacturers refuse to compromise, and so they have all the cards, for they also possess sole ownership of the means of productions. The workers, who cannot live on the lower wage threatened, must combine and strike to combat the manufacturers. Therein lies the ultimate fear of the bourgeois manufacturer: the general strike, a "simultaneous strike. You will see Milton without smoke in a few days" (*North* 117).

Gaskell critiques the contradictions the manufacturers reveal when challenged to defend their status. Indeed, the world of the manufacturers is a world of contradiction. Mr. Thornton repeatedly expresses his desire for the old days of manufacturing, nostalgic for the era when workers had no ability to associate, agitate, and collectively bargain. He wishes the old laws

criminalizing combination still applied. “It is too bad,” he says, “to find out that fools—ignorant wayward men like these—just by uniting their weak silly heads, are to rule over the fortunes of those who bring all the wisdom and knowledge and experience ... can give” (*North* 144).

However, he also recognizes the abuses of the past. The fear of the manufacturers, then, is of being displaced, of losing control as masters over their workers. Thornton loathes the day “that we shall have to go and ask—stand hat in hand—and humbly ask the secretary of the Spinners’ Union to be so kind as to furnish us with labour at their own price” (*North* 144). Excusing the

hyperbole of his statement, one may detect a sort of psychological enjoyment derived from the belief of superiority over a mass of others. It is the divine right of kings of the capitalist era. For instance, Thornton finds himself changing topics of discussion to those he finds pleasurable:

“Suppose we find a more agreeable subject. What do you say to a strike, by way of something pleasant to talk about?” (*North* 143). While intended in jest, Thornton takes the opportunity to

emphasize his economical stature and higher intelligence—“they don’t quite understand all, though they think they do” (*North* 143). Thornton must emphasize his sentiment of having

earned his rank through his innate superiority so that the uniting of workers seems

inconsequential in comparison. He does not appear to be alone in this behavior among his

manufacturing peers, as the manufacturer Hamper is said to have declared that if he were “ruined by the strike, he would start life again, comforted by the conviction that those who brought it on

were in a worse predicament than he himself,—for he had head as well as hands, while they had only hands” and could not turn to anything else for wages if they pushed away the market (*North*

145). The hands are thus described by the masters as being incapable of rising through the ranks, as it were, contradicting the very same principle they champion as being the beauty of their

political economy that work alone is sufficient to join the wealthy on the hill, leaving behind those without merit to toil endlessly below.

Though he longs for the days of no regulation, Thornton represents those manufacturers Gaskell critiques for holding the advantage of law. At first, Thornton's men do not take to the strike and begrudgingly work at the mill "through fear of being prosecuted for breach of contract. I'd have had every one of them up and punished for it that left work before his time was out" (*North* 143). Thus, the bourgeoisie uses the law when it suits them, but the very use of it is no longer one-sided, as it cuts into their profits, thereby highlighting what occupies their sole concern: "the law expenses would have been more than the hands themselves were worth—a set of ungrateful naughts!" (*North* 143). The state of manufacture pits manufacturers against their profits as a consequence of competition, and it obstructs them from the unfettered capitalism they so desire, as Nicholas Higgins alludes to: "they've gotten a pretty lot of orders, all under contract; and they'll soon find out they'd better give us our five per cent than lose the profit they'll gain; let alone the fine for not fulfilling the contract" (*North* 150). More, if trade is poor, or if the manufacturer is in any way defeated by those starving masses who cut into profit, if they "don't get a fair share of the profits to compensate us for our wear and tear here in England, we can move off to some other country; and that, what with home and foreign competition, we are none of us likely to make above a fair share, and may be thankful enough if we can get to that" (*North* 144). In other words, if the manufacturers cannot make more than what they believe is an acceptable profit from "their" labor, the surplus value they leech off the workers under their employ, then they might as well uproot their entire production to some foreign land where they can exploit the proletariat there by paying even less in wages. Thornton essentially believes the

people of Milton should thank the manufacturers for not doing so, which Gaskell implies is a pompous proposition.

Gaskell portrays the working class as being extremely sympathetic to trade unionism through Higgins, but she also uses Bessy to dispel the manufacturers' notion that all working people have radical sympathies. Much of Margaret Hale's knowledge of unions derives from her interactions with a proletarian family, consisting of Nicholas Higgins and his daughters Bessy and Mary. Nicholas is a committee leader and member of a millworkers' union, Bessy is dying of a preventable lung illness caused by her employer's failure to ventilate "fluff" in a carding-room, and Mary spends much of her time working to support her family. Bessy is often pessimistic about the benefits of striking, for she has seen three in her short lifetime and very little change: "what have ye gained by striking? Think of that first strike when mother died—how we all had to clem (starve)—you the worst of all; and yet many a one went in every week at the same wage, till all were gone in that there was work for; and some went beggars" after (*North* 133). In contrast, Nicholas Higgins is a proud man who promotes a great spirit at the commencement of the strike, but slowly gives in to drink as a means to cope with his depression as the prospects of a successful strike grow dimmer, for in times of strike there exists much to "knock a man down, for all they start so hopefully, and where's the comfort to come fro'? He'll get angry and mad ... and then they get tired out wi' being angry and mad, and maybe ha' done things in their passion they'd be glad to forget" (*North* 136). Before the strike takes effect, Nicholas is certain of victory: "See if we don't dang th' masters this time. See if they don't come, and beg us to come, back at our own price. That's all. We've missed it afore time, I grant yo'; but this time we'n laid our plans desperate deep" (*North* 132). The father and eldest daughter Higgins are established as two subsets of the working class at the beginning of a strike,

those resolute and unflinching in expectation and those skeptical of the benefits of organized striking and weary of its consequences. When a strike ends in failure, the former party is portrayed as readily equipped with excuses: “That there strike was badly managed. Folk got into to’ management of it, as were either fools or not true men. Yo’ll see, it’ll be different this time” (*North* 133). The latter party feels bludgeoned by the failures of past strikes, as dying Bessy “could have wished to have had other talk about me in my latter days, than just the clashing and clanging and clattering that has wearied a’ my life long, about work and wages, and masters, and hands, and knobsticks” (*North* 134). To the battle-hardened agitator, however, such talk is music to be played at every opportunity.

Nicholas Higgins’s position as a committee leader and fervent supporter of the union is of particular importance in the novel as it allows the voice of the working-class agitator to be contrasted with that of the bourgeois manufacturer, Mr. Thornton. Thornton’s claim that trade is poor and that the manufacturers may have to lower wages does not fit cohesively with Higgins’s narrative. The manufacturers pay the “wages they’ve been paying these two years past, and flourishing upon, and getting richer upon. And now they come to us, and say we’re to take less. And we won’t. We’ll just clem them to death first; and see who’ll work for ‘em then” (*North* 133). We are to ask whether this is merely exaggeration from the leader of a union or a factual criticism from a worker. Bessy implies the union leaders tend to exaggerate the state of matters: “They do say trade has been good for long, and the masters has made no end o’ money; how much father doesn’t know, but, in course, th’ Union does; and, as is natural, they wanten their share o’ th’ profits, now that food is getting dear” (*North* 150). In an extension of this suspicion we find the same criticism of unions that Dickens makes with the character of Slackbridge in *Hard Times*: “To be sure, the men were cutting their own throats, as they had done many a time

before; but if they would be fools, and put themselves into the hands of a rascally set of paid delegates, they must take the consequence” (*North* 162). This critique repeats again: “There is always a mysterious supply of money from these Unions” (*North* 165).

Higgins’s debates with Margaret represent the tension between workers from the industrial north and the agricultural south of England, where the labor movement is not only underdeveloped, but owing to the proportionately smaller number of employers and lack of class-consciousness, sometimes entirely absent. Margaret notes, “if the people struck, as you call it, where I come from, as they are mostly all field labourers, the seed would not be sown, the hay got in, the corn reaped ... what would become of the farmers?” (*North* 132). The end result of a strike would be the same, as the farmers would “have either to give up their farms, or to give fair rate of wage” (*North* 132). In the hypothetical context of an agricultural strike, Margaret’s use of debate for debate’s sake both challenges the authority of the Milton strike and represents a defense of the manufacturers through the tempering of expectations for the strike. Whatever her intention, Higgins’s subsequent belittling of the laborers in the south further depicts the challenges inherent in trade unionism with regard to uniting two or more disparate groups of workers into a unified front; as poorly educated as the northern working class is, the agricultural south is more so. Their lack of agitation is seen by a northern working-class leader as the consequence not of location, climate, education, or ability, but of a lack of spirit, a disposition to idleness, and an ignorance of class: “I have heerd they’re a pack of spineless, down-trodden men; welly clemmed to death; too much dazed wi’ clemming to know when they’re put upon. Now, it’s not so here. We known when we’re put upon; and we’en too much blood in us to stand it” (*North* 132-133). According to Nicholas Higgins, the workers of the south have not the passion

to take their hands from their looms and crops to say, “Yo’ may clem us, but yo’ll not put upon us, my masters!” (*North* 133).

Gaskell uses Margaret’s accessibility in moving between different worlds and class lines to draw an equivalence of culpability—both manufacturer *and* worker are at fault for the state of labor relations. To this effect, she injects the text’s representatives of the classes, Higgins and Thornton, with myriad misunderstandings, misconceptions, and prideful retorts to avoid placing the full weight of the crimes on either. Higgins dismisses Margaret’s well-intentioned but naïve proposition to ask the masters why wages have lowered, “They’d tell us to mind our own business, and they’d mind theirs. Our business being, yo’ understand, to take the bated wage, and be thankful; and their business to bate us down to clemming point, to swell their profits” (*North* 134). His response to the claim of poor trade is framed as unreasonable: “That’s just a piece o’ masters’ humbug. It’s rate o’ wages I was talking of. Th’ masters keep th’ state o’ trade in their own hands ... it’s their part ... to beat us down, to swell their fortunes; and it’s ours to stand up” and fight back (*North* 134). In contrast, the manufacturer is written to see the reason for striking as being solely based in the “theft” of their profit, which is derived from the surplus labor of the workers they employ. The worker, in the form of Higgins, admits to former strikes being about retrieving an extra sliver of the surplus value from surplus labor, which is intended to weaken the idea that workers only strike after a long train of abuses, but Gaskell also emphasizes that the focal narrative strike is different; this strike is not about wanting and striking for “their brass so much this time, as we’ve done many time afore. We ‘n gotten money laid by; and we’re resolved to stand and fall together; not a man on us will go in for less wage than th’ Union says” is due (*North* 134-135). This may be taken as an expression of Higgins’s fidelity, or it may be viewed as a manipulative lie from an unreliable and biased source. A disparity in a narrative as told by a

proletarian and a bourgeois is to be expected and anticipated, and immense reward could result from uncovering the truth of the matter, reconciling the fault on either party, and excising fabrications from the tale. But no definitive answer is to be found in the text, for the strike ends in failure and the manufacturers profit just the same. In fact, Mr. Thornton imports cheap labor from Ireland to ensure smoke billows from the chimneys of his mill during the strike. Thus leads into the politics of unions and their avowed enemy, knobsticks.

Gaskell victimizes opportunistic workers to frame unionists and trade unions as equally vicious and merciless to fellow laborers as the manufacturers are to them. This line of thought follows directly from *Mary Barton*, wherein the mill owners are deserving of “the violence which the workers aim at them, (but) it is not masters alone who are assailed by trade unions. There are other, far more innocent victims of Barton and his ‘combined’ fellows than their hard-hearted employers” (Brantlinger 42). For example, Thornton resorts to hiring knobsticks from Ireland to undermine the strike by rendering moot the strikers’ refusal to work. This action, he believes, will teach the workers “once for all, they shall know whom they have got to deal with. I can give them a fortnight, — no more. If they don’t see their madness before the end of that time, I must have hands from Ireland” (*North* 145). The strikers are predictably enraged by this action, and the Irish hands are barricaded in the roof of Thornton’s mill “to keep them safe from those brutes, who will neither work nor let them work” (*North* 172). Gaskell expects her audience to find the treatment of these workers abhorrent, but given the rampant discrimination against Irish people in the Victorian era, and the penchant for violence against them, Thornton should have expected nothing less than a riot. The unions were often rampant with prejudice toward Irish workers, who members saw as taking their jobs instead of regarding them as proletarians much like themselves. Engels and Carlyle believed this, with the latter declaring them “the sorest evil

this country has to strive with. In his rags and laughing savagery, he is there to undertake all work that can be done by mere strength of hand and back—for wages that will purchase him potatoes” (qtd. in Engels 102). Gaskell rightly rejects this prejudice against the Irish worker, identifying that the English workers’ “indignation was tempered, in some degree, by contempt for ‘them Irishers,’ and by pleasure at the ... strange exaggerated stories of which were already spreading through the town” (*North* 225). But at the same time the arrival of the imported hands is sufficient to ignite the powder keg of hungry, disenfranchised workers so that they storm Thornton’s mill: “(Thornton) has imported hands from Ireland, and it has irritated the Milton people excessively—as if he hadn’t a right to get labour where he could; and the stupid wretches here wouldn’t work for him; and now they’ve frightened these poor Irish starvelings” (*North* 172). The text victimizes the manufacturer instead of challenging him for his shortsightedness, and condemns the perpetrators, the strikers, for severing production and hindering the economic status quo, essentially risking the political power of England on the stage of global affairs.

John Boucher, Higgins’s fellow unionist, represents the families harmed both directly and indirectly from trade unions and striking. Although unions are designed to provide aid for families when a worker is unemployed, during an organized strike of the magnitude described in *North and South*, these support systems are overburdened and stretched thin by sheer need. The union as “Higgins conceives it is admirable and intelligently directed, and the strike is justified by the despotism of the masters. But workers like Boucher cannot afford to strike” once the union’s power is depleted, creating new divisions within the established class hierarchy of the labor force (Bodenheimer 538). As an important figure of the union, Nicholas Higgins is confronted more and more by starving families and union members seeking assistance as the manufacturers refuse to break. Bessy in particular is disturbed by these events, as she is

frightened by the violent rhetoric the men use when speaking of the manufacturers, and sees “women ... plaining (wi’ the tears running down their cheeks, and never wiped away, nor heeded), of the price o’ meat, and how their childer could na sleep at nights for th’ hunger” (*North* 150). A distraught striker, Boucher, comes to Higgins, imploring him that the union not lead him astray, since he loathes to see his family suffer so during the strike: “Hoo cannot live long a’ this’n. Hoo’s just sinking away—not for want o’ meat hersel’—but because hoo cannot stand th’ sight o’ the little ones clemming” (*North* 153). In a demonstration of his good character, Higgins takes Boucher to purchase food for his family, but the strength, purpose, and strategy of the union is called into question through the suffering of his family. He says the unionists exercise a greater tyranny than the masters do when they say, “‘Clem to death, and see ‘em a’ clem to death, ere yo’ dare go again th’ Union.’ Yo’ know it well, Nicholas, for a’ yo’re one on ‘em. Yo’ may be kind hearts, each separate; but once banded together, yo’ve no more” pity than a hungry wolf (*North* 154). Even when the cause seems lost, Higgins refuses to acknowledge defeat: “If I’m going wrong when I think I’m going right, it’s their sin, who ha’ left me where I am, in my ignorance ... An’ I say again, there’s no help for us but having faith I’ th’ Union. They’ll win the day, see if they dunnot!” (*North* 154).

Nicholas Higgins’s optimism is constructed to be dangerous to the lives of his fellow workers in the face of an unwinnable battle. Gaskell frames this battle in the quantity of unnecessary pain even when the end result is clear, although the question remains as to whether the strikers or the masters should be faulted for driving their hands to despair. Gaskell does not resolve this, and her “serious criticism of union strikes is presented in a way that is not typically redolent of middle-class fears; it is the further issue of the problematical relationship between the union and the poverty-stricken workers who become victims of the union” (Bodenheimer 538).

However, this relationship does not deserve this criticism, for the kinship of the unionists runs much deeper than the circle of conspiracy shared by manufacturers. The cause of combination is as dear to the worker as the cause of country is to the soldier. Nicholas Higgins considers dying for his cause—starving to death—an honorable death, for he looks “forward to the chance of dying at my post sooner than yield. That’s what folk call fine and honourable in a soldier, and why not in a poor weaver-chap?” (*North* 134). Like an army, the Union members fight “not for ourselves alone, but for them round about us—for justice and fair play” (*North* 134). Striking is not the activity of an apathetic or selfish people; it is just as much the cause of a soldier, but “the cause he dies for is just that of somebody he never clapt eyes on, nor heerd on all his born days, while I take up John Boucher’s cause, as he lives next door but one, wi’ a sickly wife, and eight childer” (*North* 134). True to his word, Higgins takes on the burden of caring for the children when their father, Boucher, commits suicide.

Dickens and Gaskell both disapprove of trade unionism to varying degrees, but they meet in the source of their dislike. Dickens’s point of contention lies in the perceived demagoguery of union leaders and paid speakers, but he also sharply critiques the fundamental practices of combination that require alienation of workers who refuse to combine to be effective. In contrast, Gaskell is far more sympathetic to trade unionism, and she too criticizes the practice of shunning non-unionists by illustrating the depths of despair it may cause, but she breaks from Dickens in her more developed disgust at the treatment of relief workers, or knobsticks, by members of working-class combinations. The fact that both *Hard Times* and *North and South*, published so closely together in the same periodical by authors with conflicting attitudes about writing a social problem novel in serialized format, come to similar conclusions on problematic behaviors of

trade unionism attests to the power of middle-class politics on the Industrial novel, which feign sympathy to the working class while reproaching their attempts to organize.

Chapter 2

Riots

Despite containing critiques of unions, the Victorian Industrial novel is more favorable toward trade unionism than direct action, which consists of physical intimidation by the working class to secure their livelihoods. In other words, as much as middle-class authors like Dickens and Gaskell reveal their disdain for trade unionism, they loathe direct action far more. It is clear why—one of these courses is peaceful, while the other is prone to aggression and violence. Both courses also challenge the exploitation of workers by the bourgeoisie, albeit in distinctly opposing ways. Whereas trade unions threaten the profit margins of employers by marginally decreasing the quantity of surplus value extracted from the surplus labor of workers, direct action, usually in the form of mob or crowd violence, endangers property, finances, and questions the legitimacy of bourgeois rule. It is also criminalized.

Visser produces a particularly excellent analysis of the depiction of crowds and mob violence in the novels of nineteenth-century Britain. He compiles contemporary portrayals of collective action, nearly all of which reflect the bourgeois fear of damage to the status quo, for the great anxiety in crowds does not lie with their threat of immediate violence. Instead, what “prompts the anxiety and the manifest ideological passion underlying the depiction of the crowd is less any direct and immediate threat this or that particular crowd poses than the more abstract and general threat to authority and property” attributed to oppressed classes (Visser 289-290).

This threat increases as members of oppressed classes organize. (290). Collective action, crowds, or mobs are almost unfailingly discussed using cataclysmic language or animalistic phrasing, both of which perpetuate beliefs of inherent unpredictability and inhumanity the ruling class is more than happy to foster in the minds of middle-class readers. The pattern of manipulation and displacement, or removal of “political crowds from the realm of the social and transferring them to the realm of nature (a figurative ploy which effectively dehumanizes the crowd) almost invariably accompanies novelistic representations of political crowds” (Visser 290). This result is not particularly surprising in the aftermath of the French Revolution, which “rekindled anxieties toward collective action and made those fears a central recurring concern of the novel throughout the nineteenth century” (Visser 291). In this fear, which engaged the bourgeoisie of England, the Revolution became a landmark by which insecurities and distortions in relation to the social order were based. As a means of coping with the potential for proletarian uprising and in order to sabotage sympathies with the discontented working class, “beliefs about crowds (for instance, that they are fickle, irrational, inherently prone to violence, and bloodthirsty) constitute[d] a stockpile of social ‘knowledge’” that proliferated in various media, especially novels (Visser 293). The intended effect was to disparage the legitimacy of collective action by the working class. Social scientists stubbornly clung to attempts to uncover the innate psychologies driving crowds. Visser speaks of Gustave Le Bon, whose purportedly objective evaluations of mob behavior reduced social actions to a distinct cause, an abstraction into “a unitary phenomenon stripped of all social and historical specificity” (294). This is to say most contemporary research into the actions of the crowd were bourgeois and thus significantly influenced by dominant ideological trappings.

Visser does fair work in clearing the ground for further research on crowds in Victorian fiction, but this general approach does not consider their depiction in the nonfiction of the period. That is, his work lacks a crucial element of material analysis to address the ways in which historical accounts of the mob either support the criticisms of Victorian authors or subvert them. The inclusion of such a dimension significantly improves and better informs the fine work he has already contributed, as further study may reveal a relationship between how more readily accessible literature of the period represents organized collective action and how this particular expression among the oppressed working class is portrayed in “higher” literature like the novel, a medium typically consumed by the middle class. Indeed, “the individuals who produced and presented texts and whose reading of texts we have knowledge about were mostly members of the middling sort” of class (Mayer 284). Additionally, Visser’s findings skew toward a very specific end wherein Victorian literature demonizes crowds and delegitimizes their cause for action, but this pattern, however supported, is incomplete, missing an important component to a well-rounded study of working class politics in nineteenth-century British literature. The work of some authors, like Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell, certainly betrays a deep distrust and fear of the mob’s capacity for bloodshed, but upon closer reading these insecurities reveal superficial anxieties lurking beneath their ideology, the contradictions of which manifest under a close reading. Chief among these anxieties is that the people are right to rebel, that the fault lies not with them but with those who created and maintained the conditions ripe for class violence. Such insecurities, while lifting some of the blame for the violence and destruction, have the secondary effect of infantilizing those who partake in violence, for it also removes some level of individual agency, rendering them manipulated children who can be appeased instead of empowered proletarians who have achieved a measure of class-consciousness and united under a

common banner. The purpose of this essay, then, is to fill the vacuum left by Visser and reevaluate some of his findings, which I believe to be incomplete or lacking in dimension. The first section will present depictions of historical crowds in primary sources like newspapers throughout the nineteenth century, and the second component of this work will complement Visser's findings by challenging the pattern of mob depiction in exclusively reproachful terms via the reevaluation and reinterpretation of scenes depicting collective action in some of these novels.

I.

Newspapers and pamphlets were common sources of information in Victorian Britain. They were far more accessible to the working class than novels due to their cost, which had become cheaper due to developments in printing production technology from the Industrial Revolution. Of course, many novels, including *North and South* and *Hard Times*, were published piecemeal in monthly periodicals only to be collected and sold in their entirety later, but this was considerably less frequent than daily, weekly, or monthly publications. Though not nearly as educated as the ruling class, the working poor were not uniformly illiterate. Engels devotes an entire chapter of *The Condition of the Working Class in England* to the literacy of the working-class population in Britain, citing the reports of several inspectors who record great numbers of illiteracy among poor districts, especially in mining and agricultural populations. They are either mostly illiterate or barely functionally literate, and "when one reflects upon the confused orthography of the English language which makes reading one of the arts, learned only under long instruction, this ignorance is readily understood. Very few working people write" often (Engels 122-123). These findings are not terribly surprising given that "the working classes of

England were not educated, that formal schooling was capricious and uncertain and frequently appallingly bad,” though some have questioned the validity of contemporary measures determining literacy (Webb 333). Generally speaking, “the bourgeoisie has little to hope, and much to fear, from the education of the working class” (Engels 122). However, it is of little consequence whether or not the working class were great consumers of newspapers, since the “English working man, who can scarcely read and still less write, nevertheless knows very well where his own interest and that of the nation lies. He knows, too, what the especial interest of the bourgeoisie is, and what he has to expect” of them (Engels 124). The workers understand that the reality of their oppression is misconstrued, hidden, and ignored, and that the middle class may see the rich as symbols of meritocracy and the poor as lazy and consumed with drink. It is, however, of great consequence that newspapers were often consumed by the middle class, whose sympathies and allegiances can play an important role in the success or failure of working-class movements. A brief examination of newspapers, selected here for their content, will better inform our reading of crowd and mob depictions in Victorian novels by supplying a historical-contextual dimension to the forthcoming analysis. We will see how the language used in contemporary accounts of actual working-class action often mirrors their negative portrayal in novels. Most of these historical accounts, which are strikingly comparable to the rhetoric used to denigrate direct action by crowds, despite being published several decades apart, are resolutely unsympathetic to the plight of the working class, and often reduce them to entitled, violent, and animalistic “roughs.” The bourgeoisie “trace every movement which they do not understand, to the influence of ill-intentioned agitators, demagogues, traitors, spouting idiots, and ill-balanced youth” (Engels 231). It cannot be that their own actions are responsible for driving the workers into such action, they argue.

An article in the *Glasgow Herald* dated 23 April 1856 relates a “serious riot at Airdrie” that occurred when the Airdrie police received reinforcements via train for fear of a “disturbance.” A “crowd of persons, several hundred in number, began to assemble around” the reinforcements, and “the mob began calling out, ‘There’s the militiamen; there’s the police in plain clothes!’” (Miners’ Strike). The police “paid little attention to these remarks ... and continued to wend their way peaceably; but the infuriated rabble, composed ... of both men and women, began an onslaught with stones, and pelted the poor fellows most unmercifully” (Miners’ Strike). This particular writer expresses immense sympathy for the police in the display of civility—they purportedly ignored the remarks against them and “peacefully” went about their business—and in the language used to refer to them after their assault by the mob, who were the first to strike with stones and “pelted the poor fellows most unmercifully.” The police were not armed with their “sticks” or batons, and so “could not defend themselves successfully against such numbers; they did their best, but were ultimately obliged to relinquish the contest, and retire in the safest manner possible” (Miners’ Strike). What precisely is meant by “they did their best?” The author elides the possibility of wrongdoing or violence on the part of the police, expresses concern over their injuries, and fails to mention why the reinforcements were sent beyond “the authorities ... fearing a disturbance (in Airdrie).” The author omits key details to barbarize the miners, threatening, “We trust ... that if the miners on strike had any hand in this disgraceful outrage, they will quickly perceive the fact, that however successful they may be for a time, the strong hand of the law will ultimately be triumphant, and the ringleaders brought to justice” (Miners’ Strike). What is not said is equally as telling as the ways in which the author betrays his sympathies for the protectors of property and disdain for organized workers.

An entry dated 28 January 1881 in the *Dundee Courier*, a paper in Dundee, Scotland, speaks of a miners' riot wherein "several thousand miners assembled ... (and) demanded that the men at work (referring to knobsticks) should be brought out" (Fatal Miners' Riot). The police inspector, joined by a "large force of police," pleaded with the men to disperse, supposedly to no avail, so they "charged with their truncheons. The mob gave way, but turning again, hurled large stones, bricks, and coal at the police, who were forced to retire. Rallying, however, they charged again repeatedly, laying about them vigorously, and ultimately the mob took to flight" (Fatal Miners' Riot). One man was killed when a wagon overturned and dragged him down an embankment; some had broken arms and legs, and "all the police were injured, some having their heads badly cut." That the article makes a point to emphasize the rationality and civility of the police inspector through his attempt to diffuse the tension is telling; the violence perpetrated under the guise of an authority figure—the police charging with their clubs—is acceptable if a mob does not acquiesce to its demands. Conversely, the emphasis on the violence committed by the miners against the police, whose heads were lacerated from the mob's use of thrown projectiles, attaches negative sentiment to the collective action undertaken by the displaced miners. However, the miners did not resort to violence until the police threatened their presence with clubs, the punishment for a crowd that "refused to disperse." The miners are depicted using calamitous language, not unlike the texts outlined by Visser, for they "turned" like an ocean, "hurled" stones like a hurricane, and briefly overcame the police force, a victorious and almost heroic group that "rallied" to defeat the assembled men, pushing back against the storm of "several thousand men."

The 10 February 1887 issue of the *Birmingham Daily Post* details a riot of socialists in London. The crowd was "composed of East-end roughs, who had taken advantage of (a)

demonstration on Clerkenwell Green to work a little mischief on their own account, appears to have numbered from 200 to 400” (Socialist Riot in London). The very language used to describe the composition of the crowd is clearly hostile and can best be described as classist. The term “East-end roughs” is intended to elicit a negative emotional response, while the presupposition of intent—“to work a little mischief on their own account”—facilitates an easy dismissal of the crowd’s agency. Several policemen followed the “roughs,” but were said to have been too few in number to counter them. The paper relates the destruction of property with great remorse: “One fellow in the crowd . . . smashed a window in the shop of (a) baker. The crowd did not stop here, but rushed across Compton Street and surrounded” the shop of a Mr. Veering, a butcher. The conflation of the actions of an individual—the “one fellow” who smashed a window—with the subsequent direction of the crowd—“the crowd did not stop *here*”—is significant in identifying prejudices associated with collective action undertaken by members of the working class, wherever they come from. Later, “a gentleman who was passing was knocked down, and the contents of the shop were carried off” (Socialist Riot in London). The threat posed in this demonstration is not fundamentally tied to the sort of bloodlust or vengeance we see associated with mobs in Victorian fiction, but in the theft and destruction of property—the only thing the bourgeoisie deem worthy of protection and universal rights. So long as it is not theirs, life is expendable. The life of the man who was knocked down only matters in this fleeting instant because his assault is useful in portraying the “savagery” of the crowd. The butcher, armed with pistols, discharged blank cartridges at the crowd, raising a cry of “Kill him!” The mob is said to have backed off, though “several policemen . . . were knocked down and trampled upon.” The paper praises Veering’s actions as “courageous.” However calamitous the demonstration seems, the costs of property damage in the neighborhood “will not exceed £100.”

The report also contains an account of the prosecution of a “young man of the poorer class (who) was charged with being concerned in the socialist disturbances, and with inciting to riot.” Prosecutors claim the accused acted as a ringleader of the “disorderly crowd,” directing the mob as to what windows to target with rocks. The account concludes, “All the time he was leading the mob,” though when arrested he proclaimed his innocence: “you have made a mistake. I have only just left my work, and am going home ... What are you to do? They are always following us about. We are not allowed to beg, and we must not steal” (Socialist Riot in London), recalling Engels’s examination of the economic insecurity of the working class: “If he can get no work he may steal, if he is not afraid of the police, or starve, in which case the police will take care that he does so in a quiet and inoffensive manner” (Engels 38). The paper is unambiguous in making its position known: “there was no doubt that only the excellent precautions taken by the police authorities prevented” further damage. However, what then are we to make of the crowd’s restraint, as evidenced by the cost of property damages and lack of deaths? The paper attributes these results to the combined efforts of police and a courageous lone man with a gun, but his discharging of a pistol, live rounds or not, could have equally incited terrible violence by the crowd or police like the events at the Bastille in Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Surely, these readings informed the prejudices of middle-class readers, who also found similar language describing demonstrations by the working class in the novels they consumed. These readings do not represent objective reports of historical events. They frame the masters and their police guards as victims, and generalize the workers as bloodthirsty brutes or troublemakers, not unlike the language used to denigrate the legitimacy of political activists today. Negative depictions of direct action appear to have bled into the manner of portrayal in

the nineteenth-century British novel, and the reverse is likely true as well. Until recently, “scholars of the novel have tended to see novelistic discourse in relation to, or as part of, larger discursive formations and as a result have reminded us that novels not only respond to socio-cultural transformations but also effect those changes” (Mayer 279). In other words, the Victorian Industrial novel is not merely a product of social change within society. It is influenced by social conditions and the language used to describe them, but it also perpetuates those patterns of language or establishes them outright so they become the zeitgeist.

Strikes, riots, and violent crowds are common elements in the Industrial literature of nineteenth-century Britain as a result of the cultural shift begot by the Revolutions of 1848. Visser states that this “interest in crowds shown by novelists was part of a much broader political and philosophical concern with collective action which developed through the century, largely in response to recurring social, economic, and political crises” (293). This is expected in that the industrial novels addressed here were published after the Peoples’ Spring, also known as the Revolutions of 1848. Since, however, he notes that writers frequently reject even casual relations “between the conditions under which the poor live and any direct, collective effort to end those conditions, the ideological myth of the crowd can be left with a problem of accounting for just how collective political action gets initiated” (Visser 313). Indeed, collective political action does not merely occur in a vacuum, dispelling the “assumption that left to their own devices, the poor would be reasonably content with their lot” (Visser 313). These texts often account for the cause of political action but only partially so. These sorts of assumptions and hyperbolic portrayals persist because they represent a manifestation of middle-class paranoia, a palpable “projection of the anxieties of the propertied classes ... (which) both deny the legitimacy of the poor and oppressed acting in their own interests” and suggest “any such efforts will inevitably

lead to individual and collective disaster for those seeking social redress” (Visser 311). However, where Visser finds complete ambivalence or disdain toward the actions of the political crowd, this essay finds the narrators to be of questionable credibility, replete with hypocrisy, or blinded by downright ignorance. Gaskell slips in and out of narration when admonishing the siege on Thornton’s mill, and her narration is more disturbed by working-class violence than bourgeois violence against working people, while Dickens’s crowds are inherently violent despite being comprised of average working-class people. Both authors reveal unsettling contradictions in their depictions of direct action, which effectively highlight their class biases.

II.

Elizabeth Gaskell’s political views may be summarized through Margaret Hale’s characterization, “who, though she censures collective action, nevertheless feels compassion for some of the individuals who have joined the crowd” (311). Such a view is consistent with middle-class liberal ideology, as the “increasingly self-conscious middle class intended to buttress the political and economic power it had gained from threats further down the social hierarchy. Particularly with the increasing insolent agitation of what would later be” referred to as the lower-middle class and the working class (Hudson 573). The novel is both sympathetic to the plight of the working class and removed from the experiences of its people. It concedes that something is wrong, but places as much blame on the poor as it does on the factory owners, and it is immensely critical of any direct action on the part of the working class to secure a decent living. By admonishing strikers, organized mobs, and the like, the novel reinforces the “homology that the individual is to civilization as the collectivity is to savagery” (Visser 300). What better tool is there to influence opinion and inculcate an unfriendly disposition toward

working-class agency than through a strike that turns ugly? Narratively speaking, the strike “conveniently dramatizes the question at issue in any discussion of the capitalist industrial system which calls in aid its rationale, political economy, because a strike is, even if peacefully prosecuted, self-evidently a challenge” to the social order (Pryke 549).

The novel balances the violence of the crowd against Mrs. Thornton’s will to commit violence. Margaret speaks to Thornton on the treatment of hands by their masters, who “would like their hands to be merely tall, large children—living in the present moment—with a blind unreasoning kind of obedience” (*North* 119). The threat of the crowd and the fear of its capacity for destruction then lies in the hands bucking this status quo. Gaskell views them sympathetically when they act solely as “tall, large children,” but become monstrous, wretched things when they mature—that is, when they act like adults and show their agency by organizing into a collective force, paradoxically asserting the same individuality championed by the bourgeoisie as an admirable trait. The fear of rich blood being spilt is evidenced by Margaret’s rather negative description of the crowd breaking into Thornton’s mill, which fits nicely into Visser’s analysis of the Victorian crowd as a mindless, disorganized pack of rabid animals, or destructive natural forces. However, Gaskell has, perhaps unintentionally, already presented a brutish predator to which the strikers pale in comparison in the form of Mrs. Thornton some chapters before the critical strike even takes place. She speaks of the roughness of Milton mobs, having “had to thread my way through a crowd of white, angry men, all swearing they would have Makinson’s blood as soon as he ventured to show his nose out of his factory” (*North* 116). Mrs. Thornton, asserting her place in the ruling class, felt it was her duty “to go and tell him, or he was a dead man; and it needed to be a woman ... and when I had got in, I could not get out. It was as much as my life was worth. So I went up to the roof, where there were stones piled ready to drop on”

their heads if they acted in unison to break open the factory doors (*North* 116). Fortunately, Mrs. Thornton found herself unable to commit such bloody violence, though not out of some conscience or reservation about violence, but because she fainted from the heat. She even seems to fantasize about the violence she wishes she had inflicted, declaring proudly that she “would have lifted those heavy stones, and dropped them with as good an aim as the best man there, but that I fainted with the heat...” (*North* 116). Is this not the behavior of an irrational person desensitized to the consequences of violence? She, who takes it upon herself to climb the roof of a fellow bourgeois mill and prepares to lob heavy stones upon an unsuspecting crowd of emaciated workmen, is surely not the sort of “civilized” person one associates with the well-to-do of Victorian fiction.

Gaskell ostensibly affirms a Marxist relationship between violence and the willingness of the ruling class to wield it without repercussion. It goes beyond social murder in that the proletariat is “in law and in fact, the slave of the bourgeoisie, which can decree his life or death” (Engels 88). Mrs. Thornton does not concern herself with the law while the rioters must be vigilant and adjust their behavior accordingly when the enforcers of law come to the aid of their masters, the ruling class. Violence, then, is deemed offensive, unlawful, and barbaric when used by members of the working class for any purpose whatsoever—striking, survival, defense against the bourgeois security force, etc. The obverse, in contradistinction to proletarian action, is that violence is necessary, lawful, ordered, and justified both when concealed through exploitation of labor, “chiefly carried on under the mask of civilization and humanity” (Engels 179-180), and explicitly by the bourgeoisie in the form of police repression or direct aggression (Mrs. Thornton, rock hurler). Consider the results of her hypothetical assault upon those without the basic securities of life.

If we are to view the crowd at Makinson's in the same way Margaret relates the strike at Thornton's, then this mob of "white, angry men" must surely be composed of young boys, children even. Margaret notes that "many in the crowd (at Thornton's) were mere boys; cruel and thoughtless, —cruel because they were thoughtless; some were men, gaunt as wolves, and mad for prey... they were like Boucher, — with starving children at home" (*North* 176). This break of sympathy is itself of significance—Margaret temporarily separates the singular Crowd of Victorian fear into constituent parts, that is to say, individual agitators with legitimate motivations behind their actions—in that she does not collectively demonize the men pushing at the status quo. The crowd is not just "white, angry men," for it is filled with boys and starving workers who rely on the success of the strike to feed their children at home. They act cruelly because they are "thoughtless" toward the political impact of their violence, thereby affirming the view of the ruling class who, remaining to this day stubborn in their righteousness, ask the oppressed—who violence is inflicted upon with a guise of gracious civility—to protest their oppressors—the exploiters and perpetrators of institutional violence—in a peaceful and dignified manner. Similarly, Mrs. Thornton is cruel because she is thoughtless, ignorant of the consequences and ramifications of hurling large stones at an angle from an elevated point onto the unprotected heads of workers—men "gaunt as wolves," boys, and other unspecified elements. She is cruel because, unlike Margaret, she does not understand the plight that would drive hands to direct action. Hence, Margaret is sympathetic toward the individuals within the crowd, but cannot allow herself to align with the crowd as a whole, which affirms Visser's conclusion that middle-class writers depict "social relations" as taking place "between individuals rather than between social groups or classes. Sympathy extends to individuals or

occasionally to a thoroughly downtrodden group who suffer passively and may therefore be represented” at a safe narrative stance (Visser 302).

Gaskell moralizes to the crowd through Margaret and uses religious rhetoric to extend sympathy to the individuals. “For God’s sake!” Margaret yells during the assault on Thornton’s mill, “do not damage your cause by this violence. You do not know what you are doing” (*North* 177). This marks the second consecutive time Gaskell uses this particular Biblical allusion in a novel: “[W]hen men get excited, they know not what they do. Judge, then, with something of the mercy of the Holy One, whom we all love” (*Mary* 173). She addresses the crowd, but the intent of her plea is directed its composition. The allusion to Luke 23:34 in the King James Bible (“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do”) frames Margaret in the role of a mediator, a petite-bourgeois savior who simply resolves class antagonisms through communication, despite the utter failure of the working class’s bourgeois-sanctioned and “approved” form of protest in communicating with their employers. In fact, very little is actually resolved in *North and South* through simple dialogue. It is not that dialogue has broken down but that it was always one-sided.

The workers speak but their voices are not heard. Their warnings are not heeded. It is only collective action, or the threat of it, that sparks change in hierarchical relationships in the text. Mr. Thornton, for instance, only begins to take the strikers as a serious threat after the mob’s intimidation. The potential violence of Mrs. Thornton is depicted less negatively than the actual violence that takes place at Thornton’s mill, but the consequences are markedly different. Whereas only Margaret is injured during the siege at Thornton’s mill—coincidentally by a thrown projectile, a “sharp pebble”—Mrs. Thornton’s casting of heavy stones from above would have enraged an “irrational” group of angry men further, if not outright murdered some of them,

legitimizing their defense in wanting to spill the blood of the factory owner. Her intervention would only incense them more by perceiving stones from above as an attack by the factory owner.

The riot scene, dubbed, “A Blow and its Consequences,” is integral to the plot of *North and South*. Mob violence is sharply condemned by both Margaret Hale and Nicholas Higgins. The former’s plea for mercy extinguishes the crowd’s blood lust, thereby saving the life of Mr. Thornton, but not before sustaining a head injury from a thrown projectile that renders her unconscious. The latter, Higgins, also denounces the revolutionary agitation of the crowd for effectually destroying the momentum of the strike. The distinction must be made that the mob is not uniform, as “many in the crowd were mere boys; cruel and thoughtless, –cruel because they were thoughtless; some were men, gaunt as wolves, and mad for prey” (*North* 176). The mob itself was made up of “Milton workmen, who had defied and disobeyed the commands of the Union to keep the peace, whatever came” (*North* 225). Although union member Boucher is among the mob, he is notably changed from his prior appearance. Union member or not, the working people looked the same, “forlornly desperate and livid with rage” (*North* 176).

The fact that the union did not support the riot is of no matter. The bourgeoisie use any evidence of violence by the working class to chop down the progress of the labor movement. Higgins in particular is devastated by the riot; as a member of the Union committee on the strike, he was to emphasize that there would be “no going again the law of the land” (*North* 197). Nicholas Higgins goes so far as to threaten to assist the police with tracking down and identifying the “leader” of the mob, Boucher, to distinguish the union from the mob. He would show “the world that th’ real leaders o’ the strike were not such as Boucher, but steady thoughtful men; good hands, and good citizens, who were friendly to law and judgment, and

would uphold order; who only wanted their right wage ... but would ne'er injure property" or life (*North* 198). Here Engels draws a line of where unions end in their usefulness, willing to do violence to themselves by starving but rejecting any sort of organized intimidation against the very forces preventing access to higher wages. Higgins's union, for example, tries to "reason wi' (the knobsticks), and m'appen warn 'em off; but whatever came, the Committee charged all members o' th' Union to lie down and die, if need were, without striking a blow" so as to influence the public perception of worker protest (*North* 198). But, one must consider that this injunction expects to win the fickle support of a group of people that paid little attention to the working class in the first place.

The scene of violent protest serves as a strong criticism of political and economic uprising, though not necessarily of associations themselves. Indeed, combination is not directly responsible for the violence, but the manner of the crowd's entry into Thornton's mill—via a simultaneous charge against the guarding fence—implicates unionism playing a role in teaching the proletariat how to organize and cooperate as a class, or merely fosters agitation that gives way to unpredictable mob violence. In this way, the union, with its development of the workers, assists the creation of the mob, which, in its lack of uniformity, shares a relationship with a revolutionary crowd. This threat of violence against the manufacturing class was believed to be a sign of things to come, for strikes are "the military school of the working men in which they prepare themselves for the great struggle which cannot be avoided" (Engels 232). The rise of the welfare state, however, tempered revolutionary zeal. Still, in the assault on Thornton mill there exists an element of the bourgeois belief that riots are brought on by a paradoxical few "ill-intentioned demagogues who live by agitation and are too lazy to work" (Engels 266). Margaret states that "their reckless passion had carried them too far to stop—at least had carried some of

them too far; for it is always the savage lads, with their love of cruel excitement, who head the riot—reckless to what bloodshed it may lead” (*North* 177). This omniscient narrative voice of the novel, not Margaret’s, isolates the “savage lads,” presumably boys, as being the main agitators of the riot, and not just of this particular incident, but also every possible riot. It is *always* the savage lads who lead a riot. By so firmly affixing a specialized group at the forefront of every collective action by a disgruntled populace this narrator has effectively neutralized the legitimacy of the mob. There can never be a justified crowd because it is *always* associated with a group of rascals who spearhead the movement, just as the prior account of the socialist riot in London attributed the direction of the movement to “East-end roughs” and men of the “poorer class” seeking mischief rather than a redress of grievances. There can be no mistaking the rationale driving these classist tropes: the perpetuation of existing power relations and the protection of property. Indeed, after the riot on his mill, Thornton informs his mother of the preventive steps he has taken to avoid another such attack. His aim is clear and pointed: “Punishment and suffering, were the natural consequences to those who had taken part in the riot. All that was necessary, in order that property should be protected, and that the will of the proprietor might cut to his end and sharp as a sword” (*North* 186). Regardless of whoever led the riot or initiated it, Gaskell’s narrator makes clear the loyalties of the bourgeois in relation to the proletariat; the former will take any precaution that allows them to successfully extract the labor from the latter even if the workers, “gaunt as wolves,” perish and live in filth while property owners live lavish existences. Through Margaret’s emotional pleas, Gaskell also makes clear that she does not embrace a violent response to oppression.

III.

Though *Hard Times* provides commentary on trade unionism, there is little in the way of depiction of collective action. Therefore, a different text is required to compare scenes of crowds and mobs as we have done with *North and South*. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens takes an equally poor attitude toward “the crowd,” which is largely portrayed as an irrational and unstoppable force of nature. While agreeing in some respects with Gaskell’s politics, Dickens’s views on the organization of the working class are far less ambivalent. His depictions of the crowd as innately ferocious, for example, suggest “that reason belongs not just to the individual but more specifically to the middle-class individual, who is not only not poor but also, apparently, not ever ignorant” (Visser 303). Dickens is less forgiving than writers like Gaskell, for “where they appear to vacillate, Dickens unreservedly censures; where they temper their condemnation of the crowd’s actions with compassion of their condition, he declines to sympathize (Visser 305). In other words, Dickens’s politics require he not pledge support of any kind in the way of working-class liberation movements that entail an overthrow of existing power dynamics. He criticizes the exploited and their exploiters alike, but refuses to condemn outright the political order that brings about the French Revolution—the structure itself is not considered problematic, but its abusers are. He “separates questions of conditions which might lead to social upheaval from the assertion of the absolute illegitimacy of popular uprising” (Visser 305), meaning Dickens severs the connection between poor conditions and revolutionary zeal through his condemnation of populist violence of any sort. The closest he comes to identifying a material connection between the operation of society and political uprising is late in the text and still attributes a mere abuse of power to be the cause of the uprising instead of the laws and system itself: “There could have been no such Revolution, if all laws, forms, and ceremonies, had not first been so monstrously abused, that the suicidal vengeance of the

Revolution was to scatter them to the winds” (Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* 313). This is not surprising since Dickens thinks highly of the law: “Speak well of the law... Leave the law to take care of itself. I give you that advice” (*Tale* 62).

Of course, Dickens is not oblivious to the struggles of the poor, as his frequent championing for social reform suggests otherwise. Indeed, his Industrial novels informed middle-class readers of the conditions of the working class, thereby agitating for reform. He makes clear, for instance, the dire conditions facing the working class in Saint Antoine and condemns the gleeful nihilism of the ruling class. Visser points to the scene in *A Tale of Two Cities* where the “carriage of Monsieur the Marquis, whose guiding political principle is that ‘repression is the only lasting philosophy’ (p.153), runs over a child ... (and) melodramatically ties the miserable conditions under which people live to the arrogant and oppressive actions of the nobility” (305). However, this renders Dickens rigid in his stance on working-class politics. Essentially, the rich should not be permitted to inflict violence on the poor, but even if they do, the poor should never respond with violence in turn. The people of the working class in Dickens’s text are “at one moment victims, at the next mindless and rapacious animals or devils ... The ‘solution’, then, to the Condition of England is continued passivity made more bearable by better treatment,” and this goes against everything collective action aspires to create because the very nature of reformism is antagonistic to working-class progress (Visser 305). However, Visser does not go far enough in unpacking the contradictions of the reformism promoted by the Victorian Industrial novel. The effects go beyond passivity. When reforms are made, they cannot by nature provide lasting comfort to the working class. They provide merely the illusion of social progress, for a small victory can easily be repealed and its protections retracted. The lives and newfound securities of the working class granted by reform are still subject to the whims of

whoever holds power. In other words, reformism takes one-step forward in the interests of the poor, but it is also liable to walk their progress two steps backward in a matter of time.

Dickens expresses sympathy only for passive protest aimed at influencing government reform, but refuses to cross the line that the poor know must be breached for change to occur—change through mass direct action. His politics are so staunchly anti-mob because the untamable crowd poses a threat to the current order by undermining “the basis for maintaining social control” and the insistence “on reform only from above” and not from below (Visser 306). Dickens is terrified of kindling the fire of an enraged populace, and his criticisms of the social order, whatever they may be, stop notably short of the endorsement of political agency from within the ranks of the lower class. Instead, he offers “social reforms sufficient to placate the populace without disturbing existing social relations,” since violent, revolutionary activity calls “into doubt the legitimacy of the entire social order” (Visser 306). Dickens’ reformism is shown to be the “better” course of action in *A Tale of Two Cities*, which he achieves by capturing the fear of revolutionary paranoia and hysteria to great effect. Such a political position was more than welcome in Britain during a period of social upheaval throughout Europe. One does not find cause in addressing a systemic ill if its victims are portrayed as brutes who agitate for amusement.

Visser also fails to comment on the “The Wine Shop” chapter, which is unique in *A Tale of Two Cities* in that it displays the contradictions in Dickens’s political view of the crowd; it simultaneously humanizes and brutalizes a gathering of the working poor, complicating Dickens’s predominately negative and denigrating portrayals of the revolutionaries. This evaluation adds a dimension not found in Visser’s overview of riots by arguing that Dickens’s clear hatred of riots is in direct tension with his humanitarian sympathies for the oppressed. In

contrast to the violence of the novel, the working people in this scene are neither hunting down the ruling class, nor guillotining some hysterical aristocrat. Instead, the denizens of Paris share in the contents of a cask of red wine that has burst upon the street outside the Defarge wine shop in Saint Antoine. There is a notable joviality in the proceedings, and most of the “uncultured” proletariat are honorable, a trait supposedly reserved only for the possessing class. They are unified in their objective, which is itself indicative of their condition. Dickens says, “some men kneeled down, made scoops of their two hands joined, and sipped, or tried to help women, who bent over their shoulders to sip, before the wine had all run out between their fingers. Others ... dipped in the puddles with little mugs of mutilated earthenware” (*Tale 31*).

Indeed, this scene may be viewed by some with disdain, the perceived anarchy of it all characteristic of a “lesser” people whose only refuge in life is in drink, but one might instead note the childlike admiration with which Dickens views the crowd in this scene, seeing a “special companionship in it, an observable inclination on the part of everyone to join some other one, which led, especially among the luckier or lighter-hearted, to frolicsome embraces, drinking of healths, shaking of hands, and even ... dancing” (*Tale 32*). Dickens does not hesitate, however, to remind us that these very same people would soon bring about the deaths of monarchs, so-called public servants, and aristocrats. Whereas traditionally wine is symbolic for courage and spirit and connotes a direct connection to the ancient Gods, not to mention important to Christianity and the doctrine of transubstantiation, the wine in the street is clearly suggestive of spilled blood: “red wine ... had stained the ground of the narrow street in the suburb of Saint Antoine, in Paris, where it was spilled. It had stained many hands, too, and many faces, and many naked feet” (*Tale 32*). The crowd takes on a darker shade from here on, as Dickens speaks forebodingly, “Those who had been greedy with the stores of the cask, had acquired a tigerish

smear about the mouth” and one “tall joker ... scrawled upon a wall with his finger muddy wineless—BLOOD” (*Tale 32*). “The time was to come,” Dickens writes, “when that wine too would be spilled on the street-stones, and when the stain of it would be red upon many there” (*Tale 32-33*).

If the latter half of the scene of the crowd’s celebratory wine tasting is unmistakably critical of the crowd, or at least reflective of their potential for what he believes to be irrational violence, what then are we to make of the first half, especially in light of the subsequent commentary on the condition of the working poor? Dickens reminds us that the poor are a people “that had undergone a terrible grinding and re-grinding in the mill, and certainly not in the fabulous mill which ground old people young ... the mill which had worked them down, was the mill that grinds young people old” (*Tale 33*). Their existence is terrible, and the pain inflicted upon them by those above cannot be called anything other than violence: “The children had ancient faces and grave voices; and upon them, and upon the grown faces, and ploughed into every furrow of age and coming up afresh, was the sign, Hunger” (*Tale 33*).

The workers depicted here—young and old—seem to live wretched lives, and Dickens feels for them, but he also turns from this critical exploration of working-class existence to admonish the poor for their rage, as if they were innately cruel and animalistic beasts: “Depressed and slinking though they were, eyes of fire were not wanting among them; nor compressed lips, white with what they suppressed; nor foreheads knitted into the likeness of the gallows-rope they mused about enduring, or inflicting” (*Tale 33*). This is particularly odd given the joviality of the rest of the scene, for violence is merely foreshadowed rather than depicted as is so vividly done throughout the text. He seems to view them collectively as perpetually angry “gaunt scarecrows” filled with untamed passion who fantasize about murdering their employers

at every opportunity. In fact, the narrator says these tired souls, who spend most of their miserable days working or hunting for food scraps, have fantasized so much about killing that they conceived “the idea of improving” the lamplighter’s method of lighting streetlamps via pulley by “hauling up men by those ropes and pulleys,” alluding to the early revolutionary practice of hanging men by streetlamps (*Tale* 34). However, “The Wine Shop” is not the only scene where a “peaceful” crowd is equated so plainly with frenzy and a disposition to violence.

The trial of Charles Darnay at an English court in Book One does not portray mob violence or political execution, but it does provide insight into Dickens’s attitude of crowds as an innate collective evil, or at least a beast capable of terrible evil. Darnay is quiet and composed, an individualist figure against a tidal wave of unpredictable, bloodthirsty collectivity. Indeed, present in his text is the notion that “the moment *any* conglomeration of people can merit a collective label, one is *already* in a politically disruptive realm” (Baldrige 638). The crowd “mentally hanged, beheaded, and quartered” the accused man, and “whatever gloss the spectators put upon the interest, according to their several arts and powers of self-deceit, the interest was, at the root of it, Ogreish” (*Tale* 65). What arts and powers of self-deceit one must possess to place the onus for the revolution on the masses of people seeking justice. It is curious that Dickens assigns such blame to the crowd for their obsession with death when the source of such infatuations is directly before him. Before the outbreak of revolutionary activity, the poor neither put the guilty to death nor wrote the laws to define the boundaries of acceptable human behavior. The criminal justice system’s attempt to make a spectacle of Darnay sensationalizes his crimes, thereby inciting people looking for a scapegoat, a face to attribute as the cause of their suffering. The crowd is portrayed here as inherently fetishistic regarding death, foreshadowing the normality with which the people viewed political executions in the Revolution. Such perversions

are merely symptoms of a larger disease, and the spectators are not the only pieces at play. However, in his critique of the symptoms Dickens defends the social order by bolstering the dominant ideology.

Throughout *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens quite elaborately inhabits both the opposition to the social order and those who safeguard it. Baldrige argues that the text goes to great lengths to “portray—and to denounce—a counter ideology to Classical Liberalism, in which the claims of the individual are assumed to be second to those of the collectivity, and in which the individual is seen as anything but sacrosanct” (635). As such, the French characters have no distinguishable qualities; they are not as nearly developed as the middle-class protagonists are. Their presence is solely designed to act out the revolution in the background. (Marcus 59). When he is not portraying them as animals, Dickens ventriloquizes the working poor, relegating them to the murky background instead of placing them at the forefront of their own revolution; depicting them as an oppressed but naturally violent people; emphasizing their depravity as a collective; all the while promoting bourgeois individualism, which is particularly clear in his choice of protagonists—the *middle-class* Manette family—and antagonists—Madame Defarge and “The Vengeance.” The Revolution is “nothing but a backdrop against which the fortunes of various families unfold in romance-fashion... [I]t is the target of highly conservative, indeed reactionary, moralizing” (von Rosador 5). *A Tale of Two Cities* neither explores the class dynamics behind the French Revolution with any depth or honesty, nor does it portray the revolutionary working class in any realistic fashion. It follows the line that “if the French Revolution is a form of retribution for ... distortions of humanity, it is also paradoxically a continuation of them; the new order merely perpetuates the dehumanizing class-consciousness of the old” (Marcus 59). Dickens’s disgust toward the revolutionaries and their gains cements his

personal view that just “as the Marquis and the society he represents were trapped within a system that allowed them to perceive others only in terms of their position within the social system, so too are the revolutionaries trapped within their own inversion” of it (Marcus 59).

To a far greater extent than Gaskell, “Dickens’s riots are powered by no political or social motive: they are the product of a mindless, bestial mob manipulated by evil conspirators and psychological misfits, all actuated by personal grievances” (McCalman 461). Dickens’s political novels then align with law and order over substantive change. (McCalman 467). He fails the working class by trying to “realize major historical events and movements through the fictional lives of isolated individuals divested of larger social contexts” (McCalman 461). Dickens also failed to understand or even recognize that “human collectivities, even including rioters, generally possessed a coherent political, social or cultural consciousness.” Similarly, Gaskell’s sympathy to the working class “ceases the moment individuals gather in active groups to pursue their own political ends. The political crowd is the collectivity at its most visible and most frightening” (Visser 302). Dickens’s view of collective action is that it is “necessarily evil action, that mass-movements by definition can give expression only to the basest instincts of the individuals who comprise them” (Baldrige 638). The middle-class authors of the Victorian Industrial novel then fear what they cannot control; they fear the loss thereof, placed in the hands of the oppressed.

Chapter 3

Revolution and Reform

Elizabeth Gaskell's first novel, *Mary Barton* was published in 1848, some six years before the composition of *North and South*. The differences between the two works denote an evolution of their author's literary style and politics, but far more compelling is what remains the same, namely the way in which Gaskell resolves class conflict in both texts: through the institution of marriage and Christian paternalism. Conversely, *Hard Times* ends with the deaths of working-class hero Stephen Blackpool and bourgeois hypocrite Josiah Bounderby, the latter some years after his public exposure as a liar. Yet the two working-class characters in *Mary Barton* and *Hard Times*, the radical John Barton and anti-unionist Stephen Blackpool, respectively, both express desires that the proletariat and the bourgeoisie reach a common understanding immediately before dying. That both proletarians ostensibly absolve the sins of their oppressors—thereby diffusing the class struggle inherent to the Industrial novel—is no coincidence. It is, in fact, rather telling that Gaskell and Dickens resolve the demands of narrative form in such a specific manner in texts separated by the distance of several years. It is troublesome that these Industrial novels, conceived in the aftermath of one of the greatest waves of political revolutionary movements Europe seen in the nineteenth-century, chose such tame and bloodless ends to problems that require much more than liberal reformism, matrimony, and the bonds of friendship between master and hand to amend. Though both offer ominous and prophetic warnings to those abusing the working class, the implication in their depictions of direct action is that the upper classes will be punished but the poor revolutionaries will descend

into chaotic violence rather than organize and establish a more equitable society to prevent further class antagonisms from developing. Neither Dickens nor Gaskell seemed opposed to writing about violent direct action on a large scale in their novels; Dickens wrote *A Tale of Two Cities* a few years after *Hard Times*, while Gaskell vividly depicted mob violence in both *Mary Barton* and *North and South*. Considering both authors were in communication with each other—Gaskell sending drafts of *North and South* to Dickens for revision and publication in *Household Words*—the particulars of the composition of these two texts should be further contextualized.

As mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, some note a rise in novels raising questions surrounding class antagonism and social interaction between classes during the 1850s (Elliott 28). Dickens writes to Gaskell on 21 April 1854, expressing his lack of “intention of (depicting) striking. The monstrous claims at diminution made by a certain class of manufacturers, and the extent to which the way is made easy for working-men to slide down into discontent under such hands are within” his plans for *Hard Times*. Yet both texts criticize trade unionism and reject violence as an appropriate response to the violence inflicted upon the working class through economic woe. The problem with these resolutions to the narrative conflict of political agitation is that they are not resolutions at all; they are entirely disconnected from the political implications of their previous narrative beats to close the novels on high notes. In this way they adhere to the standard conventions of traditional narrative form as a result of both authorial intent, the strict limitations imposed under threat of looming deadlines, and Dickens’s insistence upon completing the novels within *Household Words*’s promoted timeframe. This external restriction, coupled with the reformist leanings of the authors of *North and South* and *Hard Times*, and the condition of the political climate as it pertains to

revolutionary beliefs and affiliations, contribute to the sanitized, sometimes hasty, and often passive resolutions to working-class agitation borne out of economic injustice in both texts—choices that nullify the strengths of working-class characters by depriving them of both political and narrative agency.

Louis Cazamian, author of one of the first academic studies of the Industrial novel, suggested the hesitancy of Victorian authors to promote revolutionary resolutions to their novels is indicative of fears of inspiring insurrection in England on the scale of the Reign of Terror in France, as well as a means of protection from legal prosecution if an uprising occurred and authorities searched for a source. Indeed, “The revolution in Paris had impressed itself on people’s minds; they felt vaguely that moderation was necessary since excesses had been committed, and their reforming intentions were directed toward prudent solutions” out of the possibility that they would incite something that could not be stopped (Cazamian 499). Thus, Dickens and, to a greater extent, Gaskell broach the subject of class struggle as a logical extension of the content in their Industrial novels, but ultimately fail to follow through with it on any meaningful level. Gaskell resolves the boiling class conflict in *North and South* by reducing the cause of the oppression of the working class by an elite manufacturing bourgeoisie to little more than misunderstanding and miscommunication rather than economic and social structures that prop up the contradictions inherent to capitalist production, which, once rectified, permits the marriage between the novel’s middle-class protagonist and its reformed antagonist. Dickens ameliorates the suffering of the working-class protagonist in *Hard Times* through his untimely and tragic death, while punishing the wicked ruling-class villain through humiliation and a delayed death. Both texts relieve the pressure created by the very act of criticizing the status quo by completely deflating the momentum gained by the internal conflict in their works. Thus,

nothing carries to its logical end. The pressure is released carefully to prevent the proverbial kettle from screeching. Dickens shows us poor men who suffer under tyranny, and who exclaim against the hardship of things; but never such a representative wage-earner as was then to be seen battling for bread and right” (Gissing 382). Therefore, the reality of class antagonism is sanitized and artfully packaged to appeal to the middle-class readers who would have frequently purchased *Household Words*.

Gaskell’s belief in the “solution” of workers meeting as associates instead of adversaries was popular among middle-class reformists as a means to resolve the frustrations of a discontented and suffering working class. Indeed, “emphasis on communication wishfully projects a politics without power, and so is likely to appeal to those who have power and the privileges that accompany it more than it does to those who seek social redress” (Visser 302). William Rathbone Greg, a member of a powerful family of Northwestern mill owners, summarized the ideology of the average owner of the means of production and their relation to their dependents according to the duties afforded under the historical progression of economic systems: “The feudal age is gone; and neither its benefits nor its evils can now be brought back. We can no longer really serve the people, or ameliorate their condition, by *protecting* them as vassals, or *supporting* them as slaves, or by *almsgiving*” as beggars (Greg 467-468). *North and South*’s Thornton shares this attitude toward his responsibilities to his workers at the beginning of the text, though he later develops a peculiar “sympathy ... between master and worker, and gradually Thornton becomes involved with the lives of fellow-creatures whom he previously chose to ignore. We see him, rather hesitantly, help them in organizing a co-operative dining room” (Cazamian 503). In this way Thornton echoes Carlylean sentiment, proclaiming he shall deliberately seek and cultivate dialogue and intercourse with the hands beyond the “cash nexus”:

“I have arrived at the conviction that no mere institutions... can attach class to class as they should be attached, unless the working out of such institutions bring the individuals of the different classes into actual personal contact” (*North* 391). Dickens trusted in this ideal as well. During a 30 December 1853 speech in Birmingham Town Hall regarding working-class inclusion into the Birmingham Institute Committee for improving the education of working men, Dickens expressed the belief that the interests of the worker and employer were identical, inextricably linked, that they “depend upon each other, and who can never be in unnatural antagonism without deplorable results... In this world a great deal of the bitterness among us arises from an imperfect understanding of one another.” According to paternalist paintings of socioeconomic issues, the parallel to the ideal worker is “the picture of a master who, with the roots of his own strength in his native ground, aware of his power and jealous of all interference with its legitimate exercise, yet comes gradually to realise the whole of his duty” toward those under his employ (Ward 511). The idea being that the recognition of a shared commonality is sufficient to deescalate conflict and establish cooperation, but the “opposite is closer to the truth: as often as not repression exists in direct proportion to the awareness by those who dominate of the grievances and demands of those who suffer under repression” (Visser 301). These notions of communication and commonality are idealist because they already reduce the complexity of social relations to mere interaction between individuals instead of classes (Visser 302).

One cannot neglect the fact that the political ideologies and class status of the authors informed their work when composing conclusions to their novels. For example, Gaskell’s *North and South* rejects the notion “that labour and capital represent opposing interests which must be expressed in class struggle... *North and South* falls squarely in the category of middle-class fictions which argue for the identity of interest between workers and owners” (Bodenheimer

537). Similarly, “for Dickens, social change led by an authoritarian group, however well-meaning, cannot be widespread or meaningful unless it is in continuous dialogue with the working class” (Barnes 447). This view is predicated on an acceptance of the “liberal principles of economy—the flux of the market according to natural economy laws—whose blows of fortune are seen as affecting workers and manufacturers with equally uncertain results,” though neither novel depicts this faithfully, and the working people realistically and narratively are at far greater peril when the bourgeoisie crash the economy (Bodenheimer 537). In addition to adhering to these liberal values, Gaskell’s text is staunchly against violent means to an end, but Margaret Hale contradicts this, or is in the very least uncertain about the purity of her values, for she is blinded by her middle class biases when rejecting the methods of the working class to secure their right to livelihood; she betrays her hypocrisy when her brother is wrongly oppressed, proclaiming, “loyalty and obedience to wisdom and justice are fine; but it is still finer to defy arbitrary power, unjustly and cruelly used—not on behalf of ourselves, but on behalf of others more helpless” (*North* 100). Are the manufacturers not an arbitrary power? Are they not using their power unjustly and cruelly? However misguided they appear, even the rioters at Thornton’s mill act in defiance of the established order with the directive of protecting the helpless (those starving from the strike) via the surrender of a mill owner refusing to acquiesce to basic concessions, the provision of which would likely prevent such violence in the first place. Margaret takes umbrage with the tactics of the working class while she herself avoids such censure based on class and familial lines. It is of note that, unlike some novelists of the era, “Gaskell does not identify striking with violence. She does a great deal of work to demonstrate the generous nobility in Higgins’s conception of the union, his careful orchestration of the principles which are to determine the striker’s behavior, and his rage” when they are broken

(Bodenheimer 538). Yet, Margaret plays the role of mediator between classes, and violence against a manufacturer becomes intertwined with violence against the man she comes to marry.

It has been said that the political attitudes and sweeping conflicts so central to Gaskell's text "are not easily shaped into the form of a Victorian story. If *North and South* ends with too much haste and inattention, it is perhaps because its author had dared to venture so much that did not lend itself to the demands of 'resolution' in the conventions of serialized fiction"

(Bodenheimer 547). One may concede that the demands of narrative form and serialized fiction had profound impact on the composition of *North and South*. Indeed, Gaskell wrote most of the text without having settled on a fitting ending, and later, for the novel's publication in book format she "inserted chapter titles and mottoes" as "these had not been a feature of the *Household Words* text. She also made a number of changes to the *Household Words* version; in particular she revised the ending of the novel, redrafting the final chapters" (Shelston xiv).

Gaskell was not satisfied with the novel as it appeared in Dickens's periodical to the point that she threatened to never write for it again, and her working relationship with the *Hard Times* author had broken down so much by the time she composed the final few chapters of the text that very little correspondence was had between them at all. The source of much of their disagreement centered on Gaskell's realistic style, which starkly contrasted Dickens's more Romantic, sometimes sardonic, prose. Gaskell had not foreseen the conflict arising from creative differences. Dickens wanted a text with rapid pacing to keep readers engaged and, more importantly, to continue buying copies.

Dickens explains the intention of his periodical in the 30 March 1850 *Household Words*: "To show to all that in all familiar things ... there is Romance enough, if we will find it out ... [We shall] teach the hardest workers at this whirling wheel of toil, that their lot is not necessarily

a moody, brutal fact” (Shelston ix). Ignoring the implication—though well-intentioned—that the “hardest workers” (i.e. the poor) simply require a lifting of their spirits to dissuade them from the notion that life as it is for workers—commodified human bodies to be broken and discarded, condemned to die (and please be conscientious to do so quietly and out of sight lest it offend the upper classes) when no longer useful—is not *completely* brutal and unfair—something that might lead to an agitated (and organized) working class—Dickens’s stated editorial policy of *Household Words* is to “bring the greater and the lesser in degree, together ... and mutually dispose them to a better acquaintance and a kinder understanding,” almost echoing the “solutions” to the class struggle proposed by both authors (Shelston ix). With the *Household Words* text, Gaskell did not adhere to the “‘romance’ that Dickens had identified as his priority. That element is clear enough in the scenes of working-class family life in *Mary Barton*: the comparable scenes in *North and South* are much more astringent in their presentation of life in a working-class environment” (Shelston x). Though *North and South* was published anonymously by the author of *Mary Barton*—author names in *Household Words* were not published and attached to their respective works—it is conceivable Dickens might not have published a more radical novel like *Mary Barton* in serialized format in his periodical.

In contrast to Gaskell’s first novel, *Mary Barton*, *North and South* is overly apologetic to the manufacturing class who—like Thornton does to Margaret—accused *Mary Barton*’s author of economic ignorance and unwarranted malice. So “rather than adopting a stance pro- or anti-, the book seeks to place and explain partisan attitudes on both sides. To do this, Gaskell sets them in the context of an economic system which is shown to be cruel and oppressive... and in which” the text seeks potential for positive reform (Pryke 549) Thus she artfully elides siding entirely with one side or the other: “The presentation of these questions within conversation means that

there are no ‘winners’. People are left in possession of their positions and only manifest the effects of the points put to them subsequently, gradually and partially” (Pryke 549). Such a stance may read as indifferent to the conflict the text introduces and deems itself capable of resolving if not simplified, but Gaskell had no intention of offering real solutions. If *North and South* represents an evolution of her politics, it is an even-tempered and safe text in comparison to *Mary Barton*, which displays the difficulties of a first-time novelist as clear as the political stance of its author toward resolving class conflict.

Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* is a proto-*North and South* of sorts in that it deals with class divisions, striking, and trade unionism. Additionally, both texts are distinctly pacifist, decrying violence in any form. While her voice emerges a few times in *North and South*, Gaskell’s political agenda rears its head more often than not in her first novel. She directly addresses the reader: “It is a great truth that you cannot extinguish violence by violence. You may put it down for a time; but while you are crowing over your imaginary success, see if it does not return with seven devils worse than its former self!” (*Mary* 181). It is easy for Gaskell to condemn violence in self-defense undertaken by the working class when she is not starving, and she is not without shelter; her very existence is secured and not at stake. But it is not so for Higgins or John Barton. Indeed, such a denunciation of a means by which members of the working class are forced to result to in the struggle for their very survival reflects the reactionary fear of revolution at the hearts of liberal reformist authors. Gaskell’s Preface to the novel speaks of a fear of uprising in Manchester like the European revolutions of 1848. The novel aims to quell the “state of feeling among too many of the factory-people” so that “*Mary Barton* is thus to be seen as a calculatedly *political* novel, an historical intervention in the cause of counter-revolution” (Daly xvii). In a letter to her publisher in 21 March 1848, Gaskell expressed worry over exciting “the part of the

work people to obtain what they esteem to be their rights” (qtd. in Daly xvii). Therefore, violent revolution is “what Gaskell anticipates and wishes to pre-empt. For her, no dissolution of the class structure is imaginable, no abolition of the bourgeoisie, as prophesized by *The Communist Manifesto*; she does not envision a society” without class structure, and relations between employers and employees (Daly xii).

Instead, like *Hard Times* and *North and South*, *Mary Barton* holds up a bloodless revolution as a universal panacea to the conflict at place in the Industrial novel: “The revolution urged by *Mary Barton* is a revolution in the emotional and mental dispositions of individuals towards each other. As such, the novel is a thoroughly idealist enterprise” (Daly xii). The problem is distilled to the fact that “Nobody thought of treating the workmen as brethren and friends, and openly, clearly, as appealing to reasonable men, stating exactly and fully the circumstances which led the masters to think it was the wise policy ... to make sacrifices,” and to hope the workers did the same (*Mary* 181). Communication is held as an integral component to a harmonious mode of production, one that should remain perpetually in business and trade without regulatory interference. It is “a spiritual bond. There is nothing, for Gaskell, to be *done* as far as prevailing economic relations are concerned. These are not perceived to be the problem” (Daly xii). In effect, Gaskell removes all contextual bearing on the issue at hand, and as a result the varied “differing and defining interests of bourgeoisie and proletariat are dissolved in a commitment to perpetual, unchanging ‘common interests,’” a reductive and idealist approach to resolving the contradictions engendered by capitalist production (Daly xvii). Moreover, “it is not the suffering attendant upon economic disadvantage, then, that must be addressed. This is simply taken as given. The absence that must be met is that of fellow-feeling, or the demonstration of fellow-feeling, on the part” of those with property (Daly xvii). Yet, a breakdown of

communication does not answer *why* the poor starve, or even why both masters and workers fall upon hard times when trade collapses—a result of adventurous profiteering and overproduction controlled by the masters themselves. Gaskell was certainly aware of this, despite her claim to know nothing of political economy in the text's Preface. Her father, William Stevenson, wrote in the essay, "The Political Economist," that the sole object of Political Economy is the "increase of wealth and prosperity of communities at large, not of any class or portion of them, at the expense of another. The object of the commercial man is to benefit himself" (qtd. in Daly xv).

Neither *North and South* nor *Hard Times* come close to promoting radicalism, but *Mary Barton* in particular seems to brush along its edge. Unfortunately, "The radical potential of Gaskell's animadversions on capitalist economics is habitually defused by the resort to cautious disclaimers and qualifications" (Daly xix). In the same vein as *North and South*, Elizabeth Gaskell's "*Mary Barton* was not, ideologically, an original contribution to (reproducing capitalist relations of production). But, cast in the populist form of romantic fiction, it is one of the most accessible and readily consumed" (Daly xix). Thus, it acts as a political vehicle through which to dispense judgment on the wicked masters and the sinful workers, offering a means to cleanse them of their misdeeds and set them on a truer path. In doing so, Gaskell joins the conspiring bourgeoisie in ablutio, completely rejecting the notion that those with capital and property bear some "responsibility (for social murder). The murder plot of *Mary Barton* ... works to occlude the emergence of 'social murder' as a valid concept. If it did not, the novel would be in danger" of challenging the very order it was written to prop up (Daly xxii). A crime on such a scale would demand justice, some measured response—probably bloody.

Mary Barton, like *North and South*, is a text replete with religious allegory and Biblical allusions. A product of Gaskell's Christian sympathies to the poor, religion melds with the

politics of her texts to develop a working political ideology whereby she rationalizes her actions and stances. The novel itself is “ostensibly about the relations between labour and capital, but it puts these relations into the service of a Christian myth, so that ultimately it is possible to see the novel as a fabular narrative, or parable” (Daly viii). It is not surprising then that Gaskell appeals to doctrine when approaching politics concerning the poor. Even her “resolution” is affected by it in desiring a unity whereby workers are bound to their masters “by the ties of respect and affection, not by mere money bargains alone; in short, to acknowledge the Spirit of Christ as the regulating law between parties” (*Mary* 388). Any other form of assembly or regulation, be it through radicals uniting for a purpose in common or scheming the downfall of a manufacturing sinner, results in “an intensified disunity of mutual misgiving and fear” (Daly ix). Through his rejection of Christ as a mediator between parties, John Barton is established as a heathen, a dangerous atheist threatening to sever the link of connection between the trade unionists and their employers. However, Gaskell, like Dickens, writes not to “enlighten her readers about the complexities of British working-class politics. Instead, she is enrolling her characterization of Barton in the cause of a propaganda campaign against atheism” (Daly xxiv). Further, Gaskell writes so that her middle-class readers “resign themselves to the capitalist order which (socialism) threatens, and to embrace the consolatory Christianity which (atheism) rejects” (Daly xxvii). Daly notes that little has changed since *Mary Barton*. Indeed, “present-day liberalism seeks to persuade us that capitalism is the ultimate stage of economic development; much contemporary conservatism relies on Christianity as an ideological buttress” (Daly xxvii-xxviii). Ultimately, *Mary Barton* is a peculiar older sibling to *North and South*, with the latter improving on the former’s narrative faults, but it has the same ideological assumptions and class prejudices in its genetic material: “It shares *The Communist Manifesto*’s sense of having reached an epochal

crux ... but the means it proposes for expunging class conflict and setting history on a new, harmonious course is patently antagonistic to a political program” that aims to displace religion from the seat of power (Daly viii).

John Barton, radical trade unionist, and Stephen Blackpool, pacifist worker who refuses to take on the call to combine, may not seem like they share many commonalities beyond their class, yet both characters forgive their oppressors before perishing. Thus, Gaskell and Dickens utilize working-class characters as puppets to promote their paternalist and reformist agendas. Gaskell makes known that “[T]he wish that lay nearest to (Barton’s) heart was that none might suffer from the cause from which he had suffered; that a perfect understanding, and complete confidence and love, might exist between masters and men” (*Mary* 388). Barton wished that the “truth might be recognized that the interests of one were the interests of all; that hence it was such, required the consideration and deliberation of all; that hence it was most desirable to have educated workers,” not just ignorant machines (*Mary* 388). Many turns of chance drove Stephen Blackpool in search of work beyond Coketown, and resulted in his death by falling down a mineshaft on his way back to surrender for a crime he did not commit, modeling the moral worker to his end. These twists of fate come together to end Blackpool: “if aw th’ things that tooches us ... was not so muddled. I should’n ha’ had’n need to coom heer. If we was not in a muddle among ourseln, I should’n ha’ been, by my own fellow weavers and workin’ brothers” so misunderstood (*Hard* 216). After being retrieved from the abandoned mineshaft, a monument to the “efficiency” of capitalist production, leaving behind a wounded, scarred landscape, Blackpool forgives those indirectly involved in his misfortune, wishing for better understanding between the workers and the ruling class. He states, “in our judgments, like as in our doins, we mun bear and forbear... I ha’ made it my dying prayer that aw th’ world may on’y coom together

more, an get a better unnerstan'in o'one another" (*Hard* 216-217). In other words, the breakdown of communication is to blame for the ills facing the working class rather than a myriad of intersecting forces. The narrator of the text says as much, "The star had shown him where to find the God of the poor; and through humility, and sorrow, and forgiveness, he had gone to his Redeemer's rest" (*Hard* 217). Thereafter, class conflict is dissolved. Blackpool's death is the end of union unrest.

Among common criticisms of Gaskell's work, Bodenheimer finds that umbrage is taken with how she "raises large social issues only to diminish them in merely personal solutions; that the love story is central, and that the marriage, a symbolic union of north and south... stands in for the author's position of compromise and accommodation" (539). Traditional narrative form suggests conflicts must be resolved, and "it is one of Gaskell's great qualities as a novelist that she is aware of the complexities of moral issues and aware too that they cannot be easily, or sometimes indeed entirely, resolved" (Shelston xiii). But despite the pressures of delivering chapters of an ambitious Industrial novel for serial publication, forced to conform to the narrative and tonal demands of Dickens's *Household Words*, Gaskell utilizes the popular Victorian narrative trope of marriage made possible through miraculous inheritance to resolve conflict: "the problem is ultimately solved, in terms of the narrative, by the needs of John Thornton, and by the fortunate inheritance which enables Margaret to supply them" (Shelston xii). For *North and South*, some critics "object to the novel's "happy ending," which is almost universally read as a retreat from the troubling problems of the public sphere into a romanticized private and personal reconciliation" (Elliott 23). Instead of working toward realistic solutions, "the novel bases its case for women's mediation between classes on an analogy between marriage and class cooperation" (Elliott 26). Margaret advocates for "a type of social management, pioneered by

women in the social space of the home and based on firsthand knowledge of and practical experience with the poor rather than on the principles of political economy or other theoretical abstraction” (Elliott 31). She promotes understanding and intercedes to prevent violence. Gaskell “uses marriage, the conventional novelistic ending, as a statement of her proposed social agenda” (Elliott 47).

Both Dickens and Gaskell routinely navigate around proposals of direct action in favor of reductive and passive means to redress deeply entrenched social and class ills. That is, they refuse to depict direct action in a positive light, and will only portray working-class agency in a light that serves their middle-class agenda: quelling rage and suppressing dissent. These texts are written by middle-class authors for a middle-class audience. Gaskell, for example, “does not clearly oppose the ideas of Mr. Thornton, which are mostly simplifications of political economy and the doctrines of free trade, but she does oppose the ruthlessness with which he applies them” and the ruthlessness of competition (Brantlinger 51). She may sympathize with the suffering of the poor, but she clearly does not find fault with the very system that creates their poverty; she is not interested in breaking the machine, only in marginally resuscitating it when it slumps as a consequence of its contradictions. She is a reformist interested in alleviating the damages the system produces in its operation in the hope that the workers will be too distracted to identify the ultimate source of their suffering. This middle-class ideology does not shake up the social order in any drastic way. Workers are to be content with the notion of “reforming” that which cannot be reformed; under it, competition cannot be entirely excised in favor of cooperation; profit is still the end of everything in all human interaction. Such a fate is anathema to human life: As “collectively producing and communicating beings, people are by nature cooperative. The leap from a classless society to a society torn into antagonistic social classes, which happened around

10,000 years ago, caused a tremendous traumatic shock” to humans because it went against our social and cooperative nature (Mandel 251).

In *A Tale of Two Cities* “Dickens emphasizes the inhumanity of the French Revolution not merely for sentimental reasons but as a means of distinguishing social upheaval from substantive change” (Marcus 60). Dickens allows that the former is a natural consequence of oppression, and that the latter is possible solely through the change of a “state of mind.” His “lack of faith in political action and the inward direction of his social criticism is more than the Victorian fear of revolution. He is heir to the inward turning that took place in Wordsworth and Coleridge” after they became disillusioned with the Revolution (Marcus 60). *Hard Times*’s Blackpool condemns those “ratin (workers) as so much Power, and reg’latin ‘em as if they was figures in a soom, or machines: wi’out loves and likeins, wi’out memories and inclinations, wi’out souls to weary and souls to hope” (*Hard* 123), avoiding critique of the system itself in favor of attacking its products, its symptoms, and those who exacerbate the symptoms of the disease for profit. Through Blackpool, the exemplar of moral rectitude, Dickens refuses to attack the source “because doing so opens up the possibility that there is a fundamental problem in the structure of the social order; the admission of any such flaw in the scheme of things undermines the basis for maintaining social control and insisting on reform only from above” (Visser 306). Sydney Carton’s arc in *A Tale of Two Cities* best illustrates this pattern in that his journey first “underscores the pernicious effects of bourgeois-capitalist conceptions of individualism, then affirms the heroic potential unleashed by abandoning them, only to turn back upon itself and to reaffirm the tenets of Classical Liberalism in its last hours” (Baldrige 641). Dickens does not give this same power to Blackpool, who does not proffer remedies when asked by Bounderby how he would solve the “muddle” of class antagonism. Instead, he points to those “above” rather

than those below, and in doing so reveals his disdain for direct action in favor of liberal reformist politics: "'Tis not me as should be looken to for that, sir. 'Tis them as is put ower me, and ower aw the rest of us. What do they tak upon themseln, sir, if not to do't?" (*Hard* 123). Such a position relinquishes the political agency of trade unions, which force change from below, so that the task of pushing for change that benefits the working class is placed into the hands of political "betters" (i.e. liberal politicians or middle-class agitators). Similarly, Margaret Hale gives orders and direction to the working poor who burst into Boucher's home to stare at his distraught wife and her eight children. The narrator focuses on Margaret, the middle-class savior, rather than Boucher's wife and her children. The moment is Margaret's alone. It is a victory of the middle class over the working class. It suggests the middle-class must control the workers since the latter cannot organize and direct themselves to a common purpose. Margaret steals the political agency of the working class.

In both *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, "Gaskell ... offers love and marriage instead of revolution, socialism, or feminism," and she categorically rejects the lattermost solutions "as absurd alternatives for handling the social problems with which the novel is concerned" (Elliott 47). Elliott states, "instead of changing laws or overturning existing power structures, Gaskell offers a social vision that tempers power relations with mutual understanding and affection" (47). Indeed, *North and South* admonishes violence of any kind since "both Thornton and Higgins attempt to handle class conflict with force, (and) such tactics, Gaskell tells us, are doomed to failure. It is only through talk and through personal acquaintance that class conflict" can be resolved into harmony (Elliott 43). There can be no lasting revolution in the Victorian Industrial novel. The written word must not excite the passions of the working class lest they come to achieve class-consciousness. In this case, "both Dickens and Mrs. Gaskell describe contests for

which there can be no resolution except through love and forgiveness. The futility of strikes makes love and forgiveness ... urgent, just as, for Engels, it makes revolution seem” the only worthwhile cause for the working class (Brantlinger 50).

Conclusion

Novels reflect the attitudes of their authors. The words an author writes are conscious choices, but they are informed by a myriad of factors—societal conditioning, race, gender, age, political ideologies, religion, and class. In the Victorian Industrial novel, the political allegiances and attitudes of an author are inextricably intertwined with the story they write and the way they choose to tell it; these attitudes are made explicit by the very nature of the subject matter. We have found that “the inevitability of conflict in the system, the simple fact that it looks... different from the respective points of view of worker and employer, is perhaps the most simple and obvious statement on the subject made” by Industrial texts written by the likes of Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell (Pryke 556). Indeed, “the industrial system is seen... in *North and South* as something (presenting both admirable and evil qualities), which, for the present at least, has to be lived with” (Pryke 558). Rather than proposing lasting solutions to immediate problems, these text routinely take the view “that there is no point in hoping to do more than marginally improve the experience of working in it, exercising qualities of sympathy, self-discipline, and honesty, whose value holds good whatever the social or economic” dynamic (Pryke 558). These attitudes are situated in privilege, for their proponents are content improving social conditions incrementally, though subject to repeal and rejection. Dickens and Gaskell fall into the class of “philanthropists” and “humanitarians,” agents of what Marx and Engels referred to as conservative or bourgeois socialism. They are “improvers of the condition of the working class, organizers of charity ... hole-and-corner reformers” (Marx and Engels 103).

Of course, they should not promote an organized overthrow of the system that sustains them. Instead, they are sympathetic to the working class in advocating for beneficial reform, but they are staunch in their opposition to the violence of sweeping change: they believe “the proletariat should remain within the bounds of existing society, but should cast away all its hateful ideas concerning the bourgeoisie” (Marx and Engels 104). In the advancement of their reformism, they seek “changes in the material conditions of existence” and categorically reject “abolition of the bourgeois relations of production, an abolition that can be effected only through revolution” (Marx and Engels 104). Indeed, Marx and Engels believed England was ripe for revolution, but they underestimated the differences between social relations in England and Germany: “British thinkers tended to take these social relations as granted and to perceive the mid-Victorian compromise that had been enacted as involving a general abandonment of not only revolutionary, but also reformist agitation, in exchange for greater opportunities” in the way of social mobility (Žmolek 842). Revolution is something the middle-class authors of the Victorian Industrial novel are at “pains to avoid, since rather than prompting those, and only those, social reforms sufficient to placate the populace without disturbing existing social relations,” a text sympathetic to the radicalization of the working class casts “into doubt the legitimacy of the entire social order” (Visser 306), hence the portrayals of trade unionism as inefficient and detrimental to the health of the working class, the depictions of working-class crowds as ravenous mobs, and the pacifying conclusions to the narratives. As the repeal of the modern welfare state progresses, it would be remiss to forget that those voices not directly affected, targeted, or attacked by oppressive forces often shut down the voices of those who are.

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