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Mary Barton and the Dissembled Dialogue¹

Roland Végső

I.

The historical changes in the reception of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (first published in 1848) reveal a very conspicuous and, seen from the perspective of today's theoretical developments, a rather predetermined tendency. The mid-nineteenth-century middle-class reception of the work, in spite of quite a few hostile reviews from the conservative press (Hopkins 14), was so enthusiastic that it soon became a veritable best seller (3). Unfortunately, we have very little evidence of contemporaneous working-class readings from this period (Recchio 8–11), so we are left with the assumption that there is something in *Mary Barton* that resonated fairly well in the Victorian bourgeois consciousness and conscience. This positive estimation was much tempered by later Marxist readings, the most representative of which is probably to be found in Raymond Williams' *Society and Culture*. Williams acknowledges (and to a certain degree even praises) Gaskell's imaginative and sympathetic identification with the working-class, yet he also charges that the structural and formal inconsistencies of the novel (most tellingly revealed by the shift of title and focus from John to Mary Barton) arrest "the flow of sympathy with which she began" (89) and that, by the end of the text, it is all too clear that Gaskell's position is that of the humanitarian bourgeois pestered by the fear over working-class violence (87–91).

As the latest phase of *Mary Barton's* reception seems to prove, how-

ever, the exact political force of the novel is rather difficult to assess. Recent critical responses to Gaskell's politics stretch over the whole spectrum of possible assessments: for example, Macdonald Daly claims that "the narrative is one which routinely attempts to neutralize its own transgressions" (xvi) and in the final analysis Gaskell's "essential complicity with *laissez-faire* is demonstrable" (xviii); Deirdre d'Albertis argues that it is characterized by a "conservatism with a vengeance" (8); Marjorie Stone attributes more subversive political force to it when she writes that "[Gaskell] subverts the hegemony of middle-class discourse that empowers her to speak" (176); Anne Graziano, writing about *Mary Barton* and Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke*, says that "if we attend more closely to the patterns of the heroes' dismissal, we will see that the narratives are more complicated than the transparent expressions of the writers' political conservatism" (136). No matter where these critics tend to put the emphasis, the common element in all of these readings is an alternating movement between radicalism and conservatism.

This difficulty of political judgment is, of course, by no means unique to Gaskell's text; rather, it appears to be a necessary consequence of the intersection of the aesthetic and the political. As aesthetic and political judgments get tangled up with one another, we are reminded that neither politics nor the aesthetic is a domain where easy judgments are possible. What makes *Mary Barton* a rather interesting case is that its earlier reception (both bourgeois and Marxist) appears to be based precisely on the stability of these judgments, whereas more recent readings all tend (either explicitly or implicitly) to question these stabilities. The common element in a significant amount of recent readings of the novel is the tendency to evaluate its politics through a reversal: the novel *appears* to be doing one thing, but in reality, it is actually doing the opposite. This duplicitous appearance (as both a political and aesthetic strategy) will be the central focus of my paper.

I will use the concept of the "dissembled dialogue" to account for both the poetics and the politics of the text. I borrow the concept of dissembling as a critical tool for a reading of Gaskell's text from Deirdre d'Albertis, who argues that Gaskell's "dissembling fictions" use several strategies to create a "poetics of narrative dissimulation" (2): for example, besides other modes of political or social resistance, Gaskell relies on plot devices of disguise and doubling, and representations of withholding or misrepre-

senting the truth (4). By “dissembled dialogue,” I mean social communication as performance that always includes a certain degree of fictionalization and has political purposes or consequences. On the level of poetics, Gaskell’s novel defines the role of fiction as a social dialogue that has overtly political aims. The narrator’s self-fashioning and the direct addresses to the audience represent a possible model of how the dissembled dialogue functions effectively in a given cultural context. On the level of politics, and this is the more difficult problem in *Mary Barton*, the novel argues for the need of self-representation as a mode of fictionalization in order to be able to enter into a social dialogue in an effective way. My conclusion will be that Gaskell presents the poetics of dissembled dialogue as a means of effective political action. Gaskell’s emphasis on the performative uses of dissembling in political dialogue actually achieves a certain aestheticization of politics (inasmuch as effective political action is necessarily fictionalized to a degree) and also a politicization of the aesthetic (inasmuch as fiction, as a mode of dissembling, becomes a public performance with a political purpose). As I will also argue, the conflation of the two categories through the performative dissembled dialogue achieves a certain suspension of political judgment in the text that makes it excessively difficult to reduce its politics to clear-cut definitions.

II.

Gaskell’s novel is very much concerned with the issues of both dialogue and authority. If we wanted to find a master term that could function as the gravitational center of the novel’s ideological concerns, “dialogue” would not be a bad choice. The text is saturated with an ideology of dialogue, both on the level of the represented reality and on the level of aesthetic communication as well. Gaskell’s anti-revolutionary reform novel projects the need of a non-violent social change based on a sympathetic social dialogue. This ideological message, in turn, is communicated through the dialogical medium of aesthetic experience which then defines the function of art itself as a means of social dialogue. On the most pragmatic level of diegesis, this dialogue is figured by Gaskell’s “engaging narrator” (Warhol 42–72) that openly addresses its audience; on the level of textual construction, it is inscribed into the language of the novel through its Bakhtinian dialogicity (Stone 175). In light of this dialogical

construction, Bernard Sharratt's following comment appears to be somewhat amiss: "Mrs. Gaskell's strategy, in other words, is to 'convert' her readers into making an active contribution she herself can avoid having to make, precisely by opting to convert others" (quoted in Daly vii). Sharratt's implication here is that the author is not actually doing what she is preaching. But if her emphasis is not simply on social action but social dialogue as action, by writing the novel she is actively involved in "action" by initiating a social dialogue. (The question that still remains to be answered, however, is what kind of a social dialogue is being initiated here and at what price.) If the novel is effective in its rhetorical intention (i. e., persuasion), if the necessity of sympathetic dialogue is accepted by the contemporary audience, then the novel's self-presentation as a dialogue through its "engaging narrator" becomes a conflation of social and aesthetic ideologies. As I already pointed out, a certain politicization of the aesthetic as well as an aestheticization of the political takes place: the representation (depiction in fiction) of the working class becomes a mode of political representation that is denied them in reality and within the story as well. Consequently, the representation of non-representation through the ideology of dialogue serves as one of the major authorizing forces of the text. The Bakhtinian dialogization described by Marjorie Stone, the thematic representation of the need for social dialogue, and the inherent definition of the pragmatics of narration as direct social communication interact in the creation of narratorial authority.

The problem raised by this definition of social dialogue is that the parties involved in the interaction need to earn the right (or the authority) to participate in it somehow. Gaskell's representation of the working class and of women resembles Marx's insight that those who cannot represent themselves also need to be represented somehow. The most explicit formulation of this idea occurs in the foreword to the novel:

The more I reflected on this unhappy state of things between those so bound to each other by common interests, as the employers and the employed must ever be, the more anxious I became to give some utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people; the agony of suffering without the sympathy of the happy, or of erroneously believing that such is the case. (3)

This single sentence contains the problems discussed here in a very concise form. First of all, the personal involvement of the narrating 'I' foregrounds the question of authority and representation becomes a matter of personal authority to represent those who cannot/may not speak for themselves ("this dumb people"). The need for this representation is justified by a social crisis rendered through the language of sentiments: "the unhappy state" (which through the multiple meanings of the word "state" is politicized in a peculiar way), "agony," "suffering," "anxious," "sympathy." The urgency of the crisis gains significance through the interdependence of the classes that are bound together by "common interests." And finally, as the necessity of social sympathy is being addressed in the final words of the sentence, we get a rather carefully executed authorial remark so typical of the narratorial position of the whole novel: the cause of social instability is *either* the lack of sympathy *or* the "erroneous belief" that it is missing. This judgment concentrates solely on the lack of the social dialogue and refuses to incriminate explicitly any of the parties involved.

Authority, representation and dialogue are brought together in a language that was not alien to contemporary audiences at all. As Macdonald Daly argues, this theory of social union depicted in the novel was "the unceasing, constantly self-renewing historical programme of the bourgeois intelligentsia" which aimed at "reproducing the prevailing capitalist relations of production" (xix). At the time Gaskell was writing her novel, the idea of the politically neutralizing social dialogue was already appropriated for essentially conservative purposes. As Daly suggests, the theory of the "dumb working class" was actually used to silence its members by denying them forms of expressions that did not conform to bourgeois standards. Thus, the narrator's authority to speak about the need to neutralize political conflict was sanctioned by a widely available dominant discourse. In the present context, at least, the ideology of the dialogue (initiated from above) is essentially an oppressive ideology. Although the novel presents the terrible living conditions of the working class and the cruel refusal of political representation by the upper classes, in the final analysis it falls back upon the message of the mutual education of the dependent classes in order to eschew more violent social change. In this respect it is important to emphasize that the novel never presents the ideal of public political representation of working class interests: the final consolidation of the classes (the concluding talk between Mr. Carson, Jem Wilson and

Job Leigh) takes place as a private dialogue. This politicization of the private (and consequent sentimentalization of politics) might well be one of the points where Gaskell departs from the generally circulating ideology of the social dialogue.

In this discussion of the final dialogue between the classes, it appears to be necessary to make a distinction between *dialogue* and *dialogism*. The first term, of course, means the linguistic interaction of several parties with alternating positions of “speaker” and “listener”—it is something external in the sense that it manifests itself as an aspect of form; dialogism, in the Bakhtinian sense, however, is internal since it does not necessarily conform to the formal structure of an actual dialogue—it is only metaphorically a dialogue (if we understand the last term in a restricted, formal sense). As Bakhtin frequently refers to it, “internal dialogism” manifests itself on several levels, but the most basic of these layers is that of the lexical. This level provides an excellent contrast with the formal, external dialogue. For Bakhtin, every single word is partly a “foreign word” because of this internal dialogism, since every person who utters a particular word uses it in a unique way that creates a dialogue with other possible uses of that given word, ultimately leading to a complex social stratification of language. The dialogue that is inherent in language is not the actual formal dialogue between several parties that will eventually lead to consensus—it is the constant silent conflict of the different potentials of language that exists only relationally.

This significant distinction calls attention to the fact that a formal dialogue can be essentially ideologically monological and that a formal monologue is also always internally dialogical. From this point of view, one of the most important scenes in the novel is precisely the final encounter between Jem Wilson, Job Leigh and Carson I already referred to above. Gaskell presents an actual dialogue to communicate her message for the need of social dialogue between the different classes. This presentation of the dialogue, however, in spite of the fact that it allows different social languages to interact, is ideologically monological: it is a reductive ideology of social dialogue that is bound by the standards of middle-class Christian morality and by the unitary pull of Biblical language. (This complication of the text recalls Paul de Man’s reading of Bakhtin where de Man argues that one troubling point of Bakhtin’s theory is that he cannot himself avoid the leap to the monological in his formulation of his

theory—the specter of a monological theory of dialogism lurks in the background [111–2].) Stone is right in claiming that the polyphony of the novel creates a constant interaction of the different voices that always questions univocal authority. But the locale of deauthorization lies somewhere else: the monological presentation of the dialogue has its own internal dialogism that interacts with the different languages of the novel and internally questions the authority of the (seemingly rather explicit) ideological intention of the text.

As I would like to argue, both contemporary middle-class and later Marxist readings (like that of Raymond Williams) were based on the assumption that Gaskell's ideological message can be reduced to this monological theory of sympathetic dialogue. But as Audrey Jaffe argued, for Gaskell acts of sympathy also involve an act of fictionalization (58) that complicates this monological interpretation. In light of recent readings like Jaffe's, the political strategy of the text appears to be more complicated. It seems as if another dialogue were also going on. The earlier readings were all based upon the assumption that Gaskell (and, consequently, her theory of social dialogue as well) was bound by the restrictions of Victorian morality. Consequently, critics also assumed that the most effective reading strategy would be to read her through the nineteenth-century moral imperative of veracity and take her to be as naïve as the self-representations of the narrator would lead us to believe. The inscription of the novel, however, a quotation from Carlyle, asks us the following question: “‘How knowest thou,’ may the distressed Novel-wright exclaim, ‘that I, here where I sit, am the Foolishest of existing mortals’” (1). If P. N. Furbank is right in claiming that “Mrs. Gaskell is the poet of deceit” (55) and foolishness might turn out to be only a façade, we enter a much more sinister terrain that seems to complicate the simplistic views of Victorian morality. The narrative's involvement in the politics put forth within the narrative itself might only be accessible to a narratological reading that focuses on this latter complication of the fictionality of the text (as deceit).² Without trying to fully uncover this political complexity so that it would stand before us as naked truth, in the next section of my paper I will investigate the strategies of dissembling and deceit by way of concentrating on the Victorian anxiety over theatricality, lying and veracity, and the problem of political and aesthetic representation.

III.

As John Barton is hurrying to the druggist's shop to procure some medicine for the sick Ben Davenport, he is struck by the contrast of happy passer-bys and his own grief. As he starts contemplating "the hurrying crowd" (63) of the streets, the narrator slowly takes over and describes the instability of city life in a way that is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire's Paris, where Benjamin, writing about the figure of the *flâneur*, describes the cultural anxiety about the unknowability of the urban crowd and the potential threat this instability creates that is epitomized by the threat of crime. As Benjamin argues, the rise of physiognomic literature was to answer the needs of this anxiety by securing the readability of urban life (542–56). Catherine Gallagher's reading of the novel makes it clear that a similar anxiety is at the heart of Gaskell's text as well. According to Gallagher, in *Mary Barton* Gaskell is torn between the tenet of moral free will advocated by the Unitarianism of the 1840s and the constraining force of social determinism (62–87). As the latter theory would have it, people are totally defined by their social circumstances (and therefore not fully responsible for their acts) which, in turn, could then provide a readable code for the interpretation of human character.

These are the narrator's comments on Barton's thoughts: "But he could not, you cannot, read the lot of those who daily pass you by in the street. How do you know the wild romances of their lives; the trials, the temptations they are even now enduring, resisting, sinking under?" (63). The three examples that the narrator mentions as representatives of this unknowable crowd are the young girl who looks cheerful on the surface but hides suicidal sentiments in her heart; the criminal; and the humble, totally unnoticed, insignificant person who will eventually be rewarded for his/her virtuous life in heaven. In this passage, life becomes "elbowing" your way through this sinister crowd, where the personal narratives (romances) of sin, crime and virtue become unreadable. More precisely, coming from a strong Unitarian background, Gaskell is not questioning the knowability of sin and virtue as such; she is only questioning the real value of public performances of the self. The discrepancy between appearance and essence is what makes these public performances essentially suspicious. As the passage already indicates, social existence is much like a performance—and in Gaskell's representation, it is a peculiar kind of per-

formance that reflects the Victorian misgivings about “theatricality” (Auerbach 4). This theatricality represents life perfectly since it is life itself, but simultaneously it hides the essence of character. As Nina Auerbach concludes in her *Private Theatricals*:

I suggest that the source of the Victorian fears of performance lay not on the stage, but in the histrionic artifice of ordinary life. Playing themselves continually, convinced of the spiritual import of their lives, Victorian men and women validated those lives with the sanction of nature but feared that nature was whatever the volatile self wanted it to be. The theater was a visible reminder of the potential of good men and women to undergo inexplicable changes. Its menace was not its threat to the integrity of sincerity, but the theatricality of sincerity itself. (114)

The anxiety about the theatricality of sincerity reflects the fear that the moralized Truth that was so much revered in Victorian culture has the same performative origins as deceit which was condemned by the Victorian cult of sincerity as morally pernicious. John Kucich argues that Auerbach’s perceptive reading is somewhat amiss in that it reduces “conceptual ambivalence” to a “symptom of anxiety or repressed desire” and claims, still acknowledging contemporary obsession with truth-telling, that the Victorians “valued deceit much more positively” (15):

Lying was seen, variously, as a fundamental form of resistance to social control, as a way to deepen norms of subjective development, as a way to recognize the presence and the force of desire, and [. . .] as a way to rethink the distribution of power across lines of social or sexual difference. (15)

Kucich’s critique of Auerbach is important for my reading since it revalues the political force and potential of lying by explicitly turning it into a strategy for action. The major difference between these two interpretations of Victorian culture is the differing emphasis on agency. In Auerbach’s reading theatricality is not emphasized as a conscious strategy of resistance (although, neither is it denied the potential to become resistant)

whereas Kucich's defines lying as precisely such a terrain of subversive agency. In my definition of the dissembled dialogue I want to employ both the Victorian "fear of theatricality" and the "power of lying," since I want to extend the connotations of lying by understanding it as a performative theatricality that is a fictionalizing self-representation.

One of the most interesting manifestations of early Victorian preoccupation with the theatricality of social existence is to be found in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*. Professor Teufelsdröck's "Philosophy of Clothes" is an extended meditation on essence and appearance. The significance of this work for my present reading of *Mary Barton* lies in the fact that I see some important similarities between Carlyle's and Gaskell's attitude toward social self-fashioning. In order to sum up Carlyle's opinions, I want to quote two of Professor Teufelsdröck's maxims. The first relates to the theatricality of society: "Society, which the more I think of it astonishes me the more, is founded upon Cloth" (48). Here Carlyle demonstrates his belief in the essentially constructed nature of our social selves. But, as I would like to argue, for Carlyle the clothing of social theatricality hides an essentialized "real" self. The philosophical program of Carlyle's German professor is precisely the excavation of this real self from below the social pretences:

Perhaps not once in a lifetime does it occur to your ordinary biped, of any country or generation, be he gold-mantled Prince or russet-jerkined Peasant, that his Vestments and his Self are not one and indivisible; that he is naked, without vestments, till he buy or steal such, and by forethought sew and button them. (45; emphasis original)

The totally internalized social self is not identical with the real self. If the Vestments and the Self are not identical, if the socially constructed self and the Self are not the same, we have to assume that the naked Self is the real self of the individual. As the professor claims: "The beginning of all Wisdom is to look fixedly on Clothes, or even with armed eyesight, till they become *transparent*" (52; emphasis original). If a critical glance is capable of penetrating the pretences of social institutions and customs, real knowledge can be achieved. This is why I would argue that Carlyle, similarly to Gaskell, cannot really be called a "social constructivist" since

the socially constructed identity is not the only identity available for the individual—it hides a real self that can be reached as a source of true identity.

Mary Barton is a novel that is very conscious of the significance of clothing. Indeed, the attention paid to clothing is one way of communicating the social message of the work. The few instances of cross-dressing we can find in the text (either along gender lines or class) are used by Gaskell to foreground the necessary theatricality of Victorian culture. The first act of cross-dressing, presented in the comical mode, occurs in Job Leigh's story of his only visit to London—a story that is intended to distract the listeners' attention from John Barton's humiliating political experience in the same city. This juxtaposition of political representation (and its failure) and the self-representation within the private sphere is a general pattern in Gaskell's novel. Indeed, as we will see later on, the power of effective self-representation is gendered by Gaskell: it is a female prerogative. In this scene, which is arguably Gaskell's representation of the failure of the Chartist petitions, John Barton returns from London utterly devastated by the humiliating experience: "As long as I live, our rejection of that day will abide in my heart; and as long as I live I shall curse them as so cruelly refused to hear us; but I'll not speak of it no more" (102). In his narrative of the failure of political representation, Barton explicitly discusses the contrast between the workers and the London high-society in terms of their appearance: "The [workers] looked grave enough, you may be sure; and such a set of thin, wretched-looking chaps as they were!" (100). The description of the workers is then contrasted with the luxury of the London upper class, and as Barton lets us know, although he was denied the possibility to see the real Queen, just about every single lady he saw in the streets looked like the Queen to him.

The story thrown in by Job Leigh to divert attention from Barton's gloomy forebodings is similarly a trip to the capital. As Job Leigh and Jennings are on their way back from the capital to take home the motherless little Margaret, Jennings has the idea that the way to pacify the little baby would be to wear a woman's nightcap (106). This trick is not really successful, but the scene foreshadows a more important scene, Aunt Esther's visit to Mary, where cross-dressing across class-lines becomes the means of assuming maternal authority. Being a prostitute, Aunt Esther, the fallen woman, does not have the authority to participate in certain dia-

logues. John Barton simply refuses to listen to her (in spite of the fact that she only wants to save Mary) and the encounter only lands her in prison. Her next choice is Jem Wilson, who is finally willing to listen to her, which encourages Esther to try to seek out Mary when she finds the piece of evidence that could take the police to Mary's father. In order to be able to enter into a dialogue with the girl, however, Esther has to hide her social identity (the prostitute) and dresses as a mechanic's wife (236). Mary's first reaction to the visitor is that she mistakes her for her own mother (or her ghost) and faints (232).

Esther's cross-dressing is important because it provides a very clear example of the "dissembled dialogue." Esther has to put on a fictionalizing act, a theatrical performance hiding her social identity, in order to be able to have a voice. The only way she can enter and remain in the dialogue is by performing a self to meet the demands of the social expectations about possible dialogues. A decent girl cannot have a dialogue with a prostitute—this particular dialogue, among others, is culturally encoded as impossible, so Esther has to change her social self. As Deborah Epstein Nord comments: "This scene raises the possibility that even 'character' can be adopted, put on and taken off, played like a part, and that a woman like Esther is no more definable by the prostitute's finery [. . .] than she is by the costume of a laborer's wife" (152). In Gaskell's depiction, however, Esther does have a real self that is none of her socially constructed selves. Her real self is a loving, maternal one. Using Carlyle's terms, the prostitute and the mechanic's wife are just Vestments that hide the real self. Esther uses the disguise of the respectable woman as a performance in order to be able articulate the concerns of her real self. Her main goal with the visit to Esther is to act as a mother surrogate for the girl. She wants to express her real self that is denied to her by her social role as a prostitute, so she assumes another social identity which, on the level of appearances, is still at odds with her real self ("it was necessary that she should put on an indifference far distant from her heart" [237]). Even though the "mechanic's wife" is neither her real self (a loving mother) nor her usual social self (prostitute), Esther can use this performance effectively to achieve her aims. As the figure of the feminine Victorian *flâneur*, the prostitute with a mother's heart, Esther is one of the most effective plotters of the whole novel.

Similar to the family drama of the Bartons', political dialogue as the

need for representation is also presented in terms of performativity. The encounter between the owners of the factory and the representatives of the workers on strike is depicted in sartorial terms. Here the text seems to suggest that the workers failed in what Aunt Esther excelled at. The contrast of this failure and Aunt Esther's success is an attempt to displace effective political action from overt male (potentially violent) political action to the covert sphere of (maternal) influence that is encoded in Victorian ideology of the separate spheres as feminine. The workers are not capable of dissembled dialogue—they cannot represent themselves in a way that would secure them entry into a dialogue and consequently would secure them representation. These are the narrator's comments about the representatives:

In choosing their delegates, too, the operatives had had more regard for their brains, and power of speech, than to their wardrobes; they might have read the opinions of that worthy Professor Teufelsdröck, in "Sartor Resartus," to judge from the dilapidated coats and trousers, which yet clothed men of parts and of power. It was long since many of them had known the luxury of a new article of dress; and air-gaps were to be seen in their garments. Some of the masters were rather affronted at such a ragged detachment coming between the wind and their nobility; but what cared they? (182)

The inability to enter the dialogue is partly explained by the appearance of the workers. Pure appearance does not necessarily incite the kind of sympathy that would ensure political representation. In this scene, the perception of the workers is caught between insult and ridicule. Obviously, none of these earns them the right to enter into an asymmetrical, hierarchized dialogue as equal partners. In order to be able to do so, the workers would have had to represent themselves as "less threatening" to the middle-class. This sartorial failure to perform a self that is accepted by the more privileged party of the dialogue costs the workers all possibility to represent their interests. In one of the rather memorable scenes of the novel, during this meeting Harry Carson, amused by the appearance of the delegates, draws a caricature of the workers. The mirth occasioned by this little

drawing among the employers does not go unnoticed by John Barton who later returns to the scene of the meeting to secure the little piece of paper. When Barton shows the caricature to the other members of the delegate, the effects are disastrous: the plot of Harry Carson's murder is conceived. As we have seen, instead of the political representation of their interests, the workers are given an aesthetic representation in the form of the caricature that will prove to be the pretext that will trigger the central murder of the novel, the murder of the author of the caricature itself.

Another significant instance of the dissembled dialogue occurs during Jem Wilson's trial. As the falsely accused Jem occupies the center of attention in the courtroom, Gaskell introduces two faceless voices, presumably those of two clerks. The center of discussion between these two figures is a physiognomical reading of the criminal. This conversation is introduced by a description of Mr. Carson, the father of the dead man whose alleged murderer is on trial. Mr. Carson is by definition perceived in positive terms (in spite of his actual working class origins): "What a noble looking old man he is! so stern and inflexible, with such classical features! Does he not remind you of some of the busts of Jupiter?" The reference to nobility and the "bust of Jupiter" already signifies that perception itself is aestheticized. The proceedings of the trial are perceived through aesthetic categories that correspond to social categories: the privileged is perceived in term of classical nobility, the underdog is bestialized. The other clerk, however, is more fascinated by Jem:

I am more interested by watching the prisoner. Criminals always interest me. I try to trace in the features common to humanity some expression of the crimes by which they have distinguished themselves from their kind. I have seen a good number of murderers in my day, but I have seldom seen one with such marks of Cain on his countenance as the man at the bar. (320)

Since the reader knows that Jem is innocent, here Gaskell is debunking the myth of the readability of the criminal. When the other clerk expresses his objections that Jem does not look evil only depressed which is quite natural in his present position, the first clerk (still employing the storehouse of physiognomical clichés) adds: "Only look at his low, resolute brow, his

downcast eye, his white compressed lips. He never looks up,—just watch him.” (320) As a response, the other clerk, more favorably inclined towards Jem, expresses one of the most important insights of the text into the politics of self-representation:

His forehead is not so low if he had that mass of black hair removed, and is very square, which some people say is a good sign. If others are to be influenced by such trifles as you are, it would have been much better if the prison barber had cut his hair a little previous to the trial; and as for the downcast eye, and compressed lip, it is all part and parcel of his inward agitation just now; nothing to do with character my fellow. (320)

As a closure to this discussion, the narrator inserts: “Poor Jem! His raven hair (his mother’s pride, and so often fondly caressed by her fingers), was that, too, to have its influence against him?” In the passage quoted above, the speaker first shows how a “bad sign” can easily be turned into its own opposite, a “good sign.” Then he points out that if appearance is a text with culturally encoded reading strategies, Jem could have easily made his appearance into a text composed of good signs. Character and appearance are separated here in a manner reminiscent of Carlyle’s distinction between Vestments and the naked Self. The more positively disposed clerk makes it clear that what a predetermined physiognomical reading takes for organic and immutable signs of evil character is actually representation open to manipulation. What is being suggested here is that Jem should have worked on his own image in order to influence his audience. His failure at public self-representation is part of the general pattern in Gaskell’s novel of the working-class failure of dissembled dialogue.

Mary Barton’s testimony at court, however, is a more successful performance. She achieves her double aim: secures an alibi for Jem without incriminating her father (Harry Carson’s actual murderer). Her appearance in court is presented in explicitly aestheticized pictorial terms:

I was not there myself; but one who was, told me that her look, and indeed her whole face, was more like the well-

known engraving from Guido's picture of 'Beatrice Cenci' than anything else he could give me an idea of. He added, that her countenance haunted him, like the remembrance of some wild sad melody, heard in childhood; that it would perpetually recur, with its mute imploring agony. (324)

This passage presents a unique instance of dissembling in the novel through a juxtaposition of the narrator's self-presentation (as dissembling) with Mary's performance. The narrator's insistence on the reality of the narrated events all through the novel finds another expression here in her opening comment on her absence from the "actual" trial. This is one of those moments in the text where we get a glimpse at the narrator's dissembling performance. One reason for this absence might have been the need to present Mary's performance through the gendered public gaze of the friend who is always referred to in masculine terms. This perception, as the male public gaze, is shown to be laden with culturally conditioned modes of decryption: it is aestheticized. We can assume that Mary's performance was successful because we are told that the image leaves a lasting impression: it keeps haunting the observer. As the passage also makes it clear, however, the aestheticization of Mary's performance also has its political implications. First of all, the effect of the picture in the observer is the remembrance of a "mute imploring agony." This expression is just another version of the sentimentalized political language used by Gaskell in the novel, an emblem of the sufferings ("imploring agony") of the dumb ("mute") working class. In a very concrete sense, Mary's picturesque performance acts out the allegory of the suffering working class. It is not just her words that achieve her rhetorical aim; it is the pictorial efficacy of representation that succeeds. Furthermore, we also have to remember that the story evoked by Beatrice Cenci is the story of a parricidal daughter who could not stand the tyranny of her father any longer. While Jem was perceived as Cain, the murderer of his brother, Mary is perceived as a (potential) murderer of her father, the king. The reference to parricide has a narrative significance that is only meaningful for the reader at this point: by telling the full truth, Mary could incriminate her father. The other element of the Cenci story, however, which is also available to all the observers of Mary's performance, is regicide. Thus, her aestheticized perception also inscribes the possibility of working-class violence into her performance.

In this scene it is not clothing that is emphasized but the public performance of the self that involves lying. As d'Albertis points out, the similarities between the narrator's humble self representation—"playing the meek" (3)—and Mary Barton's public appearance in court bring together the politics of the novel and the politics of the act of narration/fictionalization. Gaskell, as the author of the narrative, is using a similar strategy of dissimulation to Mary's dissembled dialogue: lying as withholding the truth. Using d'Albertis' terms, Mary's court appearance is "lying *in earnest*" (emphasis in original, 3), precisely the same strategy that is espoused by Gaskell through her narrator. At this point, Gaskell's narrative simultaneously reasserts both Auerbach's and Kucich's reading of Victorian theatricality. On the one hand, Mary is capable of using her public lie to achieve her aims. Her performance does become a means of agency as Kucich would have it. On the other hand, her anxiety over the lie is so strong that she has a nervous breakdown after the trial. This complication reflects Auerbach's reading of the repressive cultural anxiety about theatricality. If we take these dissembling forces in earnest, the whole fabric of the narrative is destabilized and more so than if we simply emphasize Bakhtinian dialogicity in the text.³ The suspicion that we are left with is that the ideology of the dialogue itself is only one half of the story. Dialogue itself is dissembled in the novel because the novel itself is a dissembled dialogue.

IV.

One contemporary historical correlative of this politics of representation can be found in Paul Pickering's interpretation of the theatricality of Chartist agitation. Pickering argues that Chartist leaders were very much aware of the symbolic aspects of their performances. The significance of the theatrical rituals even transcended the importance of actual words since "the ineffectiveness of oral communication" enhanced the communicative power of symbolic communication through the visual medium (154). Quite significantly, Pickering highlights the politics of clothing as a means of this symbolic communication (155). Margery Sabin, using Pickering's article, shows how this political strategy of non-verbal communication ("theater without words" [57]) is actually a criticism of the dominant "Victorian opinion of dumb working-class yearning for leadership

from above” (58). Sabin also places Gaskell in the same category as one of the major representatives of the ideology of the dumb workers:

Mainstream Victorian writers, even those most sympathetic to the working-class plight, pay little regard to the struggle for verbal enfranchisement central to Lovett’s Chartism. Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, even Friedrich Engels, all deny the working-classes ability to function effectively in plain English, and base their sympathetic appreciation, as well as their disdain, on the very fact of this verbal exclusion. (51)

Sabin opposes Lovett’s politics of the “theater of civil disobedience” (59) to this ideology and argues that “Lovett, by contrast, wanted to stage demonstrations that would strengthen working-class self-reliance and public respect for the terms of its self-expression” (58).

In my paper, I wanted to show that if we take the recent developments in Gaskell-criticism seriously, the complexities of political judgments will also make us consider the possibility that Gaskell was closer to Lovett’s politics of representation than Sabin would concede. That is, *Mary Barton* makes the explicit claim that it endorses the dominant ideology of the dumb working-class, but then proceeds to present another political strategy, the politics of the “dissembled dialogue.” As a conclusion, let me again reiterate here that Gaskell’s theory of the sympathetic dialogue is not just a simple plea for mutual understanding, it calls for an active fictionalizing self-representation through performative theatricality that will allow the less privileged party to achieve entrance into the dialogue and through this self-representation achieve some sort of a political representation. The element of performative, fictionalizing self-representation in the text is the overlapping sphere of the aesthetic and the political. Thus, since the less privileged classes achieve the effective representation of their political interests through fictionalizing self-representation and the more privileged classes reassert their political power through the power of aesthetic representation (Carson’s caricature of the delegation of workers), the aestheticization of political action is represented in the novel as an unavoidable necessity (which also highlights the political aspects of the aesthetic in general). It is precisely the conflation of the two spheres (the aes-

thetic and the political) that makes political judgments concerning the novel extremely difficult, since politics becomes a strategy of dissembling in the text.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Linda Hughes and Bonnie Blackwell for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.
2. This narratological complication was analyzed by Coral Lansbury in the following manner: "Elizabeth Gaskell herself assumes the narrative stance of what may be described as a concerned middle-class reader. In effect she assumes the role of the reader, so that the characters may reveal themselves. Their individuality is preserved because the narrative voice so often contradicts the characters' thoughts and actions. The result is what Elizabeth Gaskell desired: her own voice becomes fiction, while the fictional characters assume reality. The tension is deliberately induced and becomes her most typical narrative technique" (25).
3. I want to point out here that according to Bakhtin dialogicity is prerequisite to the novel, thus, in terms of the political estimation of a particular text it is not the presence of dialogicity but its uses that counts: "The novel, however, does not require [the unity of language system and the unity of the author's personality] but (as we have said) even makes of the internal stratification of language, of its social heteroglossia and the variety of individual voices in it, the prerequisite for authentic novelistic prose" (264).

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