(DIS)COVERING / (DE)CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY IN ELIZABETH GASKELL'S *NORTH AND SOUTH*

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Abstract: The convoluted social spectacle of the Victorian age reflects itself in the ways literature (re)dimensioned the conventional definitions of gender roles, assumed as social paradigms and the argument in this dissertation rests upon opening a pluri-faceted outlook towards how these constructed identities are - assumed, voiced and lived. Lynn Pykett supports the very idea in her study Women Writing Woman: Nineteenth Century Representations of Gender and Sexuality where she writes that: "participation in the cultural domain - and particularly writing - was one of the most significant ways in which nineteenth-century women could shape and change how they understood their own gender and sexuality, and how these were understood generally" (Lynn Pykett, 2001, p. 79). A double perspective opens itself, inwards and outwards, plunging deep into the abysms of the self while also breathing the strong air of the heights and thus I will approach the quest of feminine self through archetypal criticism, in a symbolic (re)dimensioning of the Lacanian double perspective of 'stade du miroir', in an attempt to compose and recompose images, by means of replacing the idea of fragmentation with that of unity and completeness all applied to Elizabeth Gaskell's novel North and South.

Keywords: womanhood, gender studies, cultural politics, politics of difference, écriture feminine

This paper, that will consider the ways in which Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell imagines the territories of womanhood, stays under the sign of the musical technique of *punctus contra punctum* – reflected not only in a constant juxtaposition of multiple-angled gendered perspectives, but also by the personal profile of the least controversial of all Victorian female writers, outstanding for its undisguised 'femininity' and acknowledged for being not so much a transgressor of accepted gender norms, thus, a counterpoint in itself. In '*Feminist Critics and Literary Mothers: Daughters Reading Elizabeth Gaskell*', Deanna L. Davis comments upon Gaskell's potential to undermine twentieth century critics' assumptions regarding women's capacity to overcome or equally fail to overcome the Victorian era's gender constraints without being seen either as 'controversial', or 'radical' (Deanna Davis, 1992, pp. 507-532). Furthermore, it seems that Mrs. Gaskell's signature is forged within the very crucible of gendered Victorian canonicity, within the space of 'marital' and 'maternal' selves, for she was one of those explorers who did not need to be an island in order to be able to contemplate the blue immensity of the sea; she contemplated her when she either sailed it or simply stood gazing from the safe embrace of the shore. In her works, Gaskell builds a more symbiotic system of relationships, though ultimately based on (middle-class) male authority and dominant representations of masculinity. She operates with what Michel Foucault refers to as 'normalizing gaze', one scrutinising eye that captures the details with the talent of a miniaturist, whose intention, nevertheless, focuses not on punishing, but on sketching a chronicle of a gender-oriented architecture, with a broader and more interdependent scope: '[…] a *surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify, and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them. That is why, in all the mechanisms of discipline, the examination is highly ritualized. In it are combined the ceremony of power and the form of the experiment, the*

deployment of force and the establishment of truth. At the heart of the procedures of discipline, it manifests the subjection of those who are perceived as objects and the objectification of those who are subjected' (Michel Foucault, 1980). Mrs. Gaskell constructs the social self by transferring elements that draw their hierarchical positions onto the chess table. One of these elements, of utmost importance that seems to prolong her discourse from *Mary Barton*, is the word uttered in public, of deep social connotations that would '*give some utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people*' (Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, pp. 37-38). Gaskell entrusts Margaret with the task of articulating and implicitly mastering the logos, in a game that acquires insightful connotations since it is on behalf of working men and with a man that she assumes this battle. This is the Victorian feminine 'marriage' between a marginal chronotope and the articulated commitment of utterance, in an attempt to fissure the hegemony of male-dominated logos. While forging the social self, Mrs. Gaskell also considers (re)dimensioning the idea of marginalia, called to accommodate not only the peripheral destinies of women, but also the socially-excluded, depersonalised people of the working class. Though it is through actions, rather than logos, that Margaret Hale will accomplish her mission, it is the inappropriateness of utterance and perspective that accounts for her first confrontational encounter with John Thornton: '*Miss Hale, I know, does not like to hear men called 'hands', so I won't use that word, though it comes most readily to my lips as the technical term, whose origin, whatever it was, dates before my time*.' (Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, p. 120). Furthermore, Gaskell resorts to what we might refer as disruptive, technical, 'masculine' *logos*, deeply rooted into the language of the Patriarch that enciphers the precise semantics of an utterance that would only add another valance to the concept of marginalia. Elizabeth Gaskell's testimony from the preface to Mary Barton, where she acknowledges her sheer knowledge of political economy '*I know nothing of Political Economy, or the theories of trade*' (Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, p. xxxvi[)], further echoed by Margaret's admitting that '*I know so little about strikes, and rate of wages, and capital, and labour, that I had better not talk to a political economist like you*' (Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, p. 122) annul any 'feminine' dimension of expression, leaving women dumb in the agora. The voice of paternal authority butts in, restoring gender hierarchy of the social code of the age, according to which silence, seen as an inwardly reflected utterance, shadows the footsteps of women. '*Her father made a sign to her to be silent, and allow Mr. Thornton to finish what he had to say*' (Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, p. 123). The '*blind unreasoning kind of obedience*' accompanies closely the perspectives of peripherality, imposed upon and demanded by the very core of the system; thus, the riot scene may be interpreted in the key of denied logos, of rippling circles doomed to exclusively circumnavigate the paths of exclusion and rejection. If the ways of the words seem to be rather feeble and ineffective, articulated action, though 'inarticulate' as its expression may be, tells a story; I refer to the famous scene when the rioters are gathered in the courtyard of the mill, and the only vehicle that managed to cover the distance from the marginality of the circle to its very heart is not an uttered thought, but a hurtfully materialized one in the shape of a stone. Ironically, it ended up functioning on the principle of a boomerang, hurting another expression of peripheral areas, which, in turn, abandoned logos as a means of reaching the core of the system, and chose as a means of expression, a mother-like, protective, pain self-assuming

attitude – the moment it offered herself as the target of the hurl. In a world of material values and capital culture, verbalization petrifies itself, the people of the fringes become synecdoche articulated onto the profile of maximized civilization, turning into simple instruments – deprived of any other identity apart from the part attributed through social conventionalism; paraphrasing one of Lord Tennyson's lines, we could say, that in Gaskell's interpretation of *North and South*, the line would recite, *workers to labour, women to nurture, and all to obey*. Change was one of the epitomes of the Victorian age, and transformation follows closely the destinies of the characters that populate the world of *North and South*; ever more interesting, in the forge of the social self, the novelist turns to a displaced self-centred pattern that (re)dimensions the concept of patriarchal hegemony. Connel underlines the idea when he argues that, since: '[…] *gender relations were historical, so gender hierarchies were subject to change. Hegemonic masculinities therefore came into existence in specific circumstances and were open to historical change. More precisely, there could be a struggle for hegemony, and older forms of masculinity might be displaced by new ones*' (R. W. Connell, 2000, pp. 832-833). Let us imagine the following diagram that would describe the relations of power and authority, overlapping the issue of gender balance. If Sherry B. Ortner places at the very heart of the gender system the indomitable authority of men, whose satellite name spells femaleness, considering Elizabeth Gaskell's sense of fluidity in approaching the question of gender, though doubled by a final (re)assertion of the canon, I would suggest a reversed interpretation of Sherry B. Ortner's description of gender perspectives:

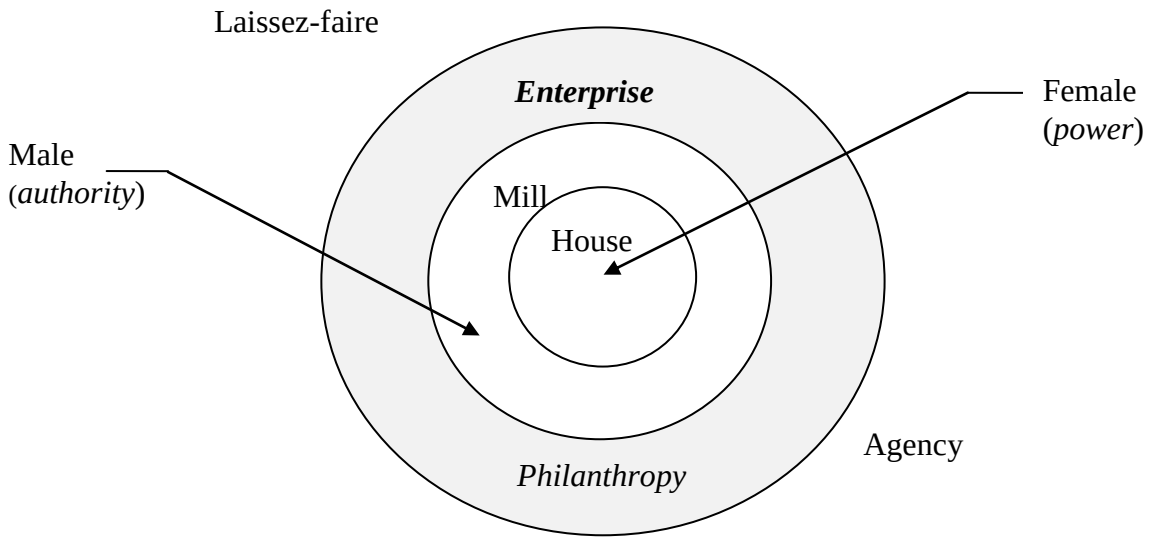

Figure 1: ***North and South*** **- architecture of gender balance** (original)

The embracing circles may also be construed in the actual terms of the novel's architecture that tells us that the Thorntons have their residence house inside the mill, as the pulsing heart of the business. In so doing, Gaskell erodes the autocracy of individualism exclusively conjugated under a unique common denominator, masculinity – interpreted either in terms of *culture, being, logos, enterprise* - by placing the core of the 'micro-cosmos' under the sign of female power and power of influence over *the Other* – so much

so, that homogeneity gives way to heterogeneity and reform. Female agency plays a very important part in bringing about the promise of reconciliation between manufacturers and workers. Inheritance of property and capital is the instrument that marks the stepping of women from the private into the public realm, a scenario present not only in Gaskell's *North and South*, but also in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* – since both Margaret Hale and Shirley Keeldar decline a new identity, one of men's privileged identities, that of an investor in new businesses and social reform. Just as the latter recommends herself as the landlady of the terrain that accommodates Robert Moore's mill and his main investor, Margaret Hale too becomes John Thornton's landlady as well as his financial rescuer. With the transfer of property and material wealth comes a transfer of utterance, the moment a woman utters timid words of business and bank interest: '[…] *if you would take some money of mine, eighteen thousand and fifty-seven pounds, lying just at this moment unused in the bank, and bringing me in only two and a half per cent. – you could pay me much better interest, and might go on working Marlborough Mills*' (Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, p. 435).

Elizabeth Gaskell believed in the language of business herself, and advocated women's need for stepping out of the tight seclusion of ignorance and isolation into the courageous assuming of a more intrepid, business-like attitude. Unlike Jane Eyre, another of Charlotte Brontë's ladies, who inherits considerable wealth and only turns it into a means that would ensure her signing the marital contract as her husband's financial equal, Margaret takes a step further, and becomes to think, talk and adopt a proper business-like manner, that would enable her to get married and, at the same time, obtain and a good return on that money lying '*unused in the bank*.' The binominal *power-authority*, completes the dialogue of gender polarities engaged in a constant, double-fold interpenetration of complementarities and disjunctions. Margaret decides to invest her inheritance in Marlborough Mills, an action that may just as much be regarded as an act of *restitution in pristinum*, as it restores Thornton's dominant position, both as master of his business and senior of his house. Thus, the core of the rippling circles, enclosing upon the iconic dwelling of the *Angel*, (re)asserts and helps (re)establish the rule of the Patriarch. Margaret's attitude towards investment may thus be regarded from a canonical, non-disruptive perspective that is intended to intervene and put an end to the crisis of masculine authority. Female agency, embodied by Margaret's several interventions destined to protect her outlaw brother from the long arm of justice, her standing between Thornton and the riot workers, her assisting Nicholas in finding employment after the strike and her final injection of capital into the Thornton family mill, conjugates a life philosophy based on the intermediacy of self, as the only possible actor capable of restoring a climate of peace, understanding, mutual acceptance – with a far greater perspective – that of curing England's social plagues, from poverty to illiteracy. Margaret's power of influence over Thornton and her father, concerning the relationship between masters and workers, stresses precisely this concept of female agency, further strengthening women's power and influence displayed throughout the novel. Patricia Ingham argues that: '*By stepping out of her class to defend the workers and then Thornton, she has stepped out of her gender. By becoming an agent in the public sphere and the centre of all eyes she has turned herself into a public woman, an actress not an angel, potentially a fallen woman*' (Patricia Ingham, 1996, p. 67).

This stepping out of women's socially ascribed horizon, the abandonment of the

private realm and the subsequent audacious tentative of entering the public one equals an act of rebellious and defying behaviour similar to Frederick Hale's mutinous attitude, which may only be interpreted as severe deviation from the canonical norm and whose consequence can only be exclusion and the assuming of the outlaw status. In other words, stepping out of one's ascribed horizon equals stepping out one's canonically imposed identity, though, at the same time, it marks the first step towards self-discovery and assertion. Thus, Ingham's epithet of '*fallen*' may also be read in terms similar to the fall of angels from Paradise, interpreted as detachment from the supremacy of the matrix, in an *alter projection* from the rigor of clearly established patterns; some angels rebelled against God's rules and have been driven away from Heaven – ever since, being referred to as *fallen* angels – fallen from the sky, fallen from the Kingdom of God while failing to listen to and obey His Word. Nevertheless, whereas Margaret's 'fall' from the rigorousness of the canon, despite its assimilation to an act of inconformity and rebellion – in deeds and words – marks the beginning of a journey into the realm of light, thus putting an end to times of bleak outlooks, Lucifer's rebellion is synonymous with plunging into the very heart of darkness and error. Margaret strays no more, she manages to articulate a trajectory, which, no matter how hesitant it may be, it still guides a line into the vastness of space and time. This is what separates a heroine like Margaret Hale from Charlotte Brontë's character, rather 'immobile' in her life pattern, not sharing Gaskell's view of refusing to refer to the domestic confinement as the only possible horizon women must never '*fall*' off from, something Florence Nightingale had fervently counter-advocated: '*The family? It is too narrow a field for the development of an immortal spirit. […] The family uses people, not for what they are, not for what they are intended to be, but for what it wants them for—for its own uses. […] This system dooms some minds to incurable infancy, others to silent misery*'(Myra Stark, 1979, p. 37). The social self that Elizabeth Gaskell buds in Margaret, as she did in Mary Barton, blooms only in strict, almost symbiotic relationship to the wider enclose of the 'male' circle, whose authority becomes even more genuine, the moment Margaret's influence helps Thornton metamorphose from the hard man he used to be, into the true man who manages to turn into a successful businessman who gives another dimension to the idea of daring. Enterprise and risk would almost exclusively accompany any profit-oriented business initiative, in a time when the main concern laid with the 'cash-nexus'. Still, under the agency of a socially-concerned self, mill master John Thornton intends to look after the social and educational welfare of his employees, to whom he builds bridges and opens not only his mind but even chambers of his heart. '*My only wish is to have the opportunity of cultivating some intercourse with the hands beyond the mere 'cash nexus*' (Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, p. 431). The forge of the social self in Mrs. Gaskell's novels is in strict correlation with the Unitarian faith, as such absent from her écriture, otherwise present through its humane reflections, and compassion for human suffering is only one of them. The Victorian age has been a time of change and experiments, and of such trials speaks Gaskell's hero, *although his* would make '*some of our manufacturers, who shake their heads and look grave'* (Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, p. 431); still, determination and the will to try complete the profile of any real, respectable Victorian entrepreneur: '*I am not sure of the consequences that may result from them. But I am sure they ought to be tried. I have arrived at the conviction that no mere institutions, however wise, and however much thought*

may have been required to organise and arrange them, 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. Such intercourse is the very breath of life' (Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and So*uth, p. 432).

Elizabeth Gaskell offers a far broader perspective onto the concept of intermediacy, which escapes the mere association with the female sphere and reaches the social self and its expressions as defining elements on the chess board of an age that defied and challenged the old and the impossible. There is a touch of idealism that drips from the novelist's pen, imagines a character who wholeheartedly embraces all transformations entangled by capitalism, but who, at the same time, displays a humanistic sensibility (ahead of his time) to improve the lives of his workers. '*Such intercourse is the very breath of life*' summarizes the evolution and change of someone who may be described as a business-oriented, profit-centred self into a more empathic, people-oriented person. The thick, delineator, separatory touch grows to fade its essence, while, at the same time, the irreconcilable supremacy of its demarcation metamorphoses itself into the gentler and more comprehensive embrace of curved lines. Nevertheless, *intermediacy* describes a reality whose semantics opens at least a double-angled perspective, and this is the key that would help us understand why female agency is only 'blessed' with 'temporary', 'conditional' power, incapable of conjugating a destiny of its own, that would only serve to complement the construction and shaping of the Patriarch's acknowledged identity. The very beginning of the novel may be read in this keynote of in-betweeness that would position Margaret Hale in the gallery of characters, not as a fixed, string-manipulated presence, but as a flowing river, meandering through canons and expectations. Only apparently static, a 'lay figure' posing, draped in Indian shawls, Margaret stands in between her aunt's request, her sleeping cousin Edith, the perfect embodiment of the Angel of the house – detached from the ways of the world, wearing 'white muslin and blue ribbons', soon to surrender herself to the Victorian sacred institution of marriage – as absolute reflections of the sheltered parlour – and the horizons of generous perspectives, opened with Henry Lennox's entering the room, an intermediate silhouette suspended between the private and the public realm. Margaret will never be the canonically perfect gentlewoman her cousin is, as she will not merely wrap herself in exotic fabrics, she will weave them, as she will weave her '*real true business*' (Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, p. 41). Power may be defined as the instrument that would only legitimize authority, that is canonically restored towards the end of the novel; the journey has completed the circle, the paths have been trodden, destinies affected and selves shaped – and the reader is summoned to discover that Margaret is '*That woman*' whereas Thornton is '*That man*' (Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, p. 395). The critics have generally agreed upon the fact that such a 'mirrored' positioning translates a rigid gender distinction that would only restore, almost pristine, the 'ways of the world' of those times. I would like to look at the same issue from a different perspective, namely that of a 'complementary', 'altered' selves that have trodden the trails of their self and, most importantly, have explored the world and connected with it – isolated confinements, hosting either entrepreneurial initiatives or charitable intentions, opened up, (re)visiting and (re)dimensioning an architectural project that used to be too narrow and flat. '*That*' self is the new identity assumed by either of the two characters, and although one glows '*with beautiful shame*' while the other explores

'*deep feeling of unworthiness*' (Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, pp. 394-395), it is precisely that demonstrative reference that filters a new light upon the realms of separate spheres, almost echoing one verse from Milton's Paradise Lost, where Michael says that Adam may find '*a paradise within thee, happier far*'. Transgendering defines the new geography of the self explored by Elizabeth Gaskell's literary canvas. As I have already argued, Margaret Hale travels further beyond the femininity construction, only to discover that even the masculine realm has been imbued with 'feminine' qualities. Mothering, one of the virtues Victorians have treasured in a woman, almost turning it from what it should have been, virtue, fulfilment, dedication into a social norm and concept crucial to the Victorian construction of femininity that would define a whole gender as a compulsory duty, was dislocated and thus we are acquainted to Nicholas Higgins – the worker who mothers his two daughters and Boucher's orphaned children. Thus, Gaskell voices anxieties over appropriate masculine gender identity, (dis)covering and (de)constructing hegemonic representations of masculinity. According to mythopoetics, such translocations urges men to reconnect with the so-called 'Zeus energy', which Robert Bly defines as 'male authority accepted for the good of the community' (Robert Bly, 1990, p. 22). Intermediacy may also be read in terms of approaching the social class of labourers from the angle of portraying them as carriers not only of masculine values, but also of feminine traits, that would bring to light such instances as nurture and care, all in an intimate connection od dependence to the powerful middle-class, robust in its manly attitude, called to provide and look after the ones below its rank and status. Herbert Sussman, in *Victorian Masculinities*, meanders through the intricate architecture of the nineteenth-century masculine construct and marks cardinal points on the map of gender identity, accommodated by the generic term ***male***, used only in its biological sense. ***Maleness*** voices essential masculinity, understood by most Victorians as being an innate don, ***masculinity***, on the other hand, defines social constructs, reflection of maleness, whereas ***manhood***, as Sussman defines it, refers to the achievement of masculinity, without being innate, the result of arduous both public and private endeavour, thus sketching a parcours of unrelenting, challenging process of self-discipline (Herbert Sussman, 1995, p. 13). Defined as male energy, Victorian masculinity performed its hegemonic gender identity part through the hard labour, and this is the meeting point between Sussman's perspective upon maleness – impersonated by the middle class male characters of Gaskell's *North and South* – masculinity as a dynamic social construct in search of a voice and part, as reflected by Nicholas Higgins – travelling all the way to articulated manhood, as supreme accomplishment of masculinity, embodied by Thornton's final metamorphosis. I refer, of course, to him becoming master of his mill and home, responsible for both his *social protégées*, the workers of the factory, as well as his *personal* offsprings and wife. In *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, Catherine Gallagher analyses the gendered dimensions of working-class identity as an integral component of social paternalism and argues that the feminization of the working class supported their continued submission to their middle-class employers. The pattern's effectiveness did not rely exclusively on the configuration of workers as children, but '*as permanent children*' for '*when workers were thought of as daughters rather than sons, they seemed permanently in need of protection*' (Catherine Gallagher, 1985, p. 128). The two realms meet to define a complete construct of masculine gender identity, fully articulated due to the intervention and complementarity of

the feminine element, called to restore and validate the almost mythical dimension of the androgynous. Only when maleness recommends itself as manhood, the feminine touch of self stops inflicting unmanly behaviour furthermore since Patsy Stoneman argues gender in *North and South* describes the geometry of '*axes which intersect rather than coincide*' (Patsy Stoneman, 1987, p. 119). Thus, the novel intersects the two axes that present John Thornton's humanising as he travels all the way from the initial status of a '*hard*' to that of a '*true man*', due to Margaret's influence, as well as Margaret Hale's claim to authority, the moment she is the one who provides Thornton with the opportunity to reclaim his factory and restore his rank and status. Gender divisions leave individual trails by the end of the novel, when Margaret admits she '*is not good enough*', thus shifting from the interplay of 'masculine' and 'feminine' qualities – perceived, under Gaskell's pen, as re-examination of the Victorian construction of femininity, to the rather rigid construct of the time. Margaret (re)positions John Thornton on the orbit of power, at the same time as she faintly fades her profile into submissiveness. '*The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest whenever war is just, whenever conquest necessary"* argued John Ruskin in '*Of Queen's Gardens*'. Ulysses resumes his journey, conjugating action and conquest as his natural, birth-given rights, only to find himself and Penelope (re)united by the end of it and the normative beliefs of gender division re-established as sign of Gaskell's affirmation of male middle-class authority and establishment of separate spheres: '[…] *without being unique, or in any sense extraordinarily original in her range of subjects or in her method of treatment, sometimes not rising above a level which has been reached by many other English story-teller sometimes one-sided in social views, sometimes indiscreet in following her personal impulses too blindly,'* Elizabeth Gaskell *'has yet achieved a success which will live long after her*' (A. Easson, 1991, p. 509).

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