

Political Melodrama Meets Domestic Fiction: The Politics of Genre in North and South

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Recent attempts to redeem Condition of England novels from charges of conservatism often turn to the politics of form. Much attention has focused lately, for example, on what Amanda Anderson calls “the mode of (embedded) argument” in these novels, which she regards as an implicit endorsement of “democratic practice” (347). Michael Lewis has elaborated similar claims in an essay about Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1855), and his conviction that the novel’s argumentative mode sustains a democratic ethos has been echoed by other readers who align its formal irresolution with progressive attitudes toward ideological debate (Lewis, “Democratic” 247–49).¹ But formal and argumentative irresolution make shaky grounds for political claims. Does the mode of argument exemplify democracy or dysfunction? In Chris Vanden Bossche’s view, arguing characters in *North and South* talk past one another, and their debates “merely serve to reinforce the class ideals and identities of the respective speakers” (179).

It is difficult to adjudicate these interpretations of an isolated formal mode like argument without attending to the broader narrative frameworks in which it is embedded. For that reason, my essay traces Gaskell’s politics of form back to the genre conventions that shape the meaning of *North and South*’s political debates. Genre weaves formal elements together with thematic and rhetorical conventions in a thick discursive web.² Generic innovation thus has the potential to create strong new frameworks for political discourse rather than gesture uncertainly toward ideological values through form alone. Recent genre theory has raised the stakes for its practitioners in precisely these terms. Rejecting 1970s dismissals of genre as a mystified concept, theorists have insisted that thematic and even semantic meaning is profoundly genre-bound.³ As John Frow puts it, genre is what makes it possible to “actively generate and shape knowledge of the world” (*Genre* 2). Strong epistemological claims of this kind have, indeed, fueled much recent work on the social impact of genre.⁴

¹ For celebratory readings of the novel’s formal and ideological irresolution, see Levine 41–42; Lee; or Harman esp. 5.

² On form, theme, and rhetoric as key components of genre, see Frow, “Reproducibles” 1631. Elsewhere Frow observes that “in an important sense each of these three dimensions is ‘formal,’ since they involve recurrent structures” (*Genre* 83).

³ Key texts in the critique of genre are those by Derrida and Todorov.

⁴ An excellent discussion of the return to genre as a privileged site for analysis of “the social life of forms” is Frow, “Reproducibles” esp. 1629. One of the first and most influential attempts to situate genre in relation to social history was that by Ralph Cohen. See also Beebee 15; and White, *Content* 24. Rhetorical theorists long ago rooted genre in the communicative conditions of social relations. See Miller’s classic 1984 essay and Devitt’s summary of the field (1–32).

My essay explores *North and South's* attempt to "generate and shape knowledge of the world," which it performs by hybridizing two nineteenth-century narrative genres: domestic fiction and "political melodrama"—a term I apply to a broad swath of nautical and domestic melodramas, as well as to the "economic distress" melodramas of the 1830s and 1840s, which routinely revolve around the conflict between social elites and the poor and powerless. By bringing domestic fiction and political melodrama into collision, Gaskell moves beyond them to create new generic—and thus new epistemic—possibilities for social-problem fiction.⁵ Crucially, Gaskell keeps those possibilities open by refusing to let the genres she hybridizes settle into a comfortable synthesis. Condition of England novels have too often been faulted (and overlooked) because of their unresolved generic multiplicity, or what Catherine Gallagher calls "generic eclecticism" (87). But their incomplete hybridity, I will argue, is precisely what enables them to make new interventions in political discourse. As I will demonstrate, *North and South*, like other Condition of England novels, uses generic dissonance to urge its readers toward creative political engagement by stressing the urgency of reform, but without fixing expectations about the outcome of the reformist energies it unleashes. Such dissonance in Condition of England novels creates generic frameworks for political experimentalism rather than embedding political dogma in rigid generic formulae.

It may appear redundant to speak of "generic hybridization," since—as those 1970s critiques taught us—genres are always already mixed affairs.⁶ That truism still tempts some critics to dismiss genre as a prohibitively unstable concept. Caroline Levine begins *Forms* (2015), for example, by rejecting genre in favor of form, which she believes to have greater interpretive consistency (13–14). But genre is, in fact, no more slippery than other quite useful critical concepts, such as "realism," "the novel," or "literature"—not to mention categories Levine analyzes, such as "rhythm" or "whole"—all of which tolerate considerable conceptual elasticity. Generic conventions are stable enough—or, as Catherine F. Schryer has put it, they are often enough "stabilized-for-now" (108)—to constitute historically contingent but widely recognized literary templates.⁷

Defining the relative stability of genres at given historical moments can help us articulate how genres tend to be hybridized—combinations that also constitute relatively stable historical patterns. In this sense, generic hybridization is an

⁵ As Todorov reminds us, new genres can emerge only out of old ones (161).

⁶ Derrida's essay is one of the most influential declarations of the intrinsic mixedness of genre. See also Beebe 27; Pavel 202; Warhol 14; and Fishelov 12–15 for useful descriptions of the impure conditions of genre.

⁷ Frow claims that relations within and among genres are "more or less systematically ordered at any point in time" (*Genre* 5). Genette's masterful treatise argues that all genres are "empirical classes, established by observation of the historical facts" (66). Formulations of the interdependence of stability and instability in genre studies are legion: White writes, for example, that "mixture, hybridity, epicenity, promiscuity—these may be the rule now," but "we are still enthralled by an ideal of purity" ("Anomalies" 602); Derrida, too, claims that, in terms of genre, "there is no madness without the law" (81).

important second-order way in which genres shape meaning. Unfortunately, generic hybridization has not been rigorously theorized, for reasons that a recent introduction to genre studies by Wai Chee Dimock can help illustrate.⁸ Dimock catalogs an impressive array of generic hybridizations (or what she calls “regenreing” [“Introduction” 1380]), including uptake, circulation, commingling, remediation, reuse, receiving, reproducing, pooling, translation, filtering, coalescing, interfacing, embedding, cross-currents, kinship, switching, stacking, and rescaling. Her overview of this range of generic strategies opens up new areas for critical exploration, especially among those interested in the impact hybridization can have on political representation. But it remains breathlessly nonsystematic (as the grammatical variations in her nomenclature suggest). Dimock proudly seeks to put “fluidity . . . front and center in our study of genres” (1381).⁹ It could be argued, however, that fluidity has been all too characteristic of genre studies lately, as theorists hasten to ward off long-standing attacks on the field—or recent ones, like Levine’s—by overzealously embracing the instability others find fault with in their central concept.¹⁰ One problematic consequence of such zeal is that hybridization is sometimes described in frictionless terms, as if writers recombine genres effortlessly, encountering no resistance from genres themselves or from their own frustrations with generic rigidities. Dimock, for example, speaks of hybridization as a “fluid continuum” in which genres “can be brought forth or sent back as the user chooses, switched on or off, scaled up or down” (“Introduction” 1379).

Such an approach overlooks the challenges writers face when trying to forge new narrative frameworks out of inadequate or recalcitrant generic material. To Dimock’s provocative list, then, my essay ventures to add yet another model of generic hybridity, but one that acknowledges the limits of existing genres and the difficulties writers have when combining them to produce new kinds of narrative. I will argue that Gaskell hybridizes political melodrama and domestic fiction only by “relocating” the conventions of these two genres so as to disrupt and rework them. That is to say, Gaskell transplants the formal, thematic, and rhetorical conventions of each genre to the plotlines and subject matter of the other, undermining normative expectations about both genres and highlighting the need for new kinds of stories about social conflict.

Finding neither political melodrama nor domestic fiction adequate to represent the problems of industrialization, the former because of its moral and political oversimplifications and the latter because of its class-bound privileging of the

⁸ There have been complaints about undertheorization in many phases of genre studies recently. Frow laments: “[I]t’s just not one of the topics about which interesting discussions are happening these days” (“Reproducibles” 1627); Warhol notes that while work on genre is alive and well, “what seems to have nearly died out is the broader discussion of what genre is and what it does” (par. 1).

⁹ Dimock’s work on genre as a “world system” (*Through* 73) sustains her sense of the porousness of genre and the absence of historical or cultural boundaries to its dispersal: “I put far-flung kinship at the center of any discussion of genre” (80).

¹⁰ Warhol claims that “genre today is most notable for its fluidity” (par. 20).

private sphere, Gaskell aspired to write a wholly different kind of fiction. Of course, when nineteenth-century novelists tried to supplant older genres by mixing them in new ways, they often sought to conceal the seams of such hybrids.¹¹ Like other Condition of England novelists, however, Gaskell heightens the irreconcilability of existing genres; rather than try to blend them smoothly, she “relocates” elements from both political melodrama and domestic fiction into unfamiliar generic territory, hoping to let their dynamic dissonance fuel a spirit of political reform she refuses to entomb in some neat generic fusion.

As the opening section of my essay will demonstrate, Gaskell makes generic relocation possible by first defamiliarizing both genres, exposing their intrinsic limitations while calling attention to the new conceptual work each genre’s conventions might perform in unexpected contexts. The body of my essay explores how generic relocation underpins Gaskell’s efforts to open new avenues of political thought—a project overlooked, it should be said, by those who see in her fiction only a reactionary politics.¹² I will conclude by suggesting that in its approach to genre, *North and South* typifies Condition of England novels, which routinely relocate existing generic conventions of many kinds—the bildungsroman, the regional novel, crime fiction, the roman à clef, the biblical allegory. Transplanting conventions from these various genres into narrative contexts where they seem not to belong, Condition of England novels exploit formal dissonance as an instrument of open-ended literary and political regeneration. My focus on generic hybridization in these novels thus seeks, above all, to affirm their political vitality. It does so by asking a question Frow claims should be central to genre studies, given the powerful epistemic consequences of generic innovation: “What kind of world is brought into being here?” (“Reproducibles” 1633).

Denaturalizing Political Melodrama and Domestic Fiction

From the outset, *North and South* invokes the conventions of political melodrama only to denaturalize them. Through the Frederick Hale subplot, Gaskell refuses basic tropes of political melodrama as they had emerged in the wake of the French Revolution: the villainy of the upper class; the persecuted innocence of a working-class, often female protagonist; the mistaken or misled judgment of social authorities about that persecuted figure; and, above all, the absolute distinction between good and evil that Peter Brooks (esp. 14–15) has defined as fundamental to postrevolutionary melodrama.¹³ Gaskell also rejects political

¹¹ See, for example, Armstrong’s argument that the realist novel subdues gothic narrative elements to represent a unified individual subject (22) and Jameson’s claims about the “compensatory” functions of romance in realist fiction (*Political* 238).

¹² This critical tradition has been strongly influenced by Raymond Williams; see esp. 91–92. Exemplary accounts are Yeazell; Gallagher 166–84; and Bodenheimer 53–68.

¹³ I focus on “political melodrama” (a phrase Brooks uses interchangeably with “melodrama”) rather than supernatural melodrama, temperance plays, seduction melodrama, or the form of political discourse Hadley calls the “melodramatic mode” (3). See Davis for a good discussion of the multiplicity of nineteenth-century melodramatic forms.

melodrama's theatricalized emotions and the rising melodramatic action that culminates in an apocalyptic settling of social relations.¹⁴

At first glance, Frederick's story is a typical nineteenth-century nautical melodrama, one of political melodrama's most popular subgenres: after helping to overthrow a tyrannical—indeed, a murderous—sea captain, Frederick is harshly condemned to death as a mutineer and forced to plead his innocence from exile in Spain.¹⁵ But although Mrs. Hale views her son as heroic because he defies “arbitrary power” (109), the novel dwells uncomfortably on his story's moral and political ambiguities. The narrator judges Frederick's account of his captain's cruelty as “very much exaggerated” (107), and we are warned that his temperament is “rather too passionate” (108).¹⁶ In effect, Frederick's oversimplifications and exaggerated passions make him an unreliably melodramatic narrator. Moreover, Deborah Denenholz Morse has shown that Frederick's case closely parallels a savage 1797 mutiny on the *Hermione*, one that met overwhelming public condemnation that would have lingered in the minds of the novel's first readers. Fittingly, then, Frederick's plot thread peters out in scattered references to his growing bitterness, rather than climaxing either with triumphant exoneration or with execution—the only two possible endings for conventional mutiny melodramas. His melodramatic histrionics persist late in the novel, when he declares that he wants to “unnative himself” (335), but his passions remain offstage, denied access to the melodramatic spectacle of a trial, even as he repudiates the British public sphere itself.

This nautical melodrama's failure to conform to generic expectations highlights Gaskell's more consequential disruption of the novel's central political melodrama: the conflict between Mr. Thornton, the mill owner, and his workers.¹⁷ This plot's apocalyptic culmination occurs halfway through the novel—not at the end, as in a proper melodrama—and apocalypse dissolves into anticlimax when Margaret Hale defuses Thornton's confrontation with an angry mob. In this scene, Gaskell hollows out basic elements of political melodrama. For one thing, as in Frederick Hale's case, she invites us to pass moral judgment while she simultaneously frustrates it. The working-class mob includes “cruel and thoughtless” boys who initiate the violence (176). But it also includes fathers worried only about their “starving children.” On his side, Thornton is at first admonished by Margaret, who tells him, “[I]f you have any courage or noble quality in you, go out and speak to them, man to man” (175). But when he decides to do just that, Margaret hastily reconsiders: “Oh! Mr. Thornton! I do not know—I may be wrong—only—.” Stage melodramas of the 1840s and 1850s tended to make their villains landlords or

¹⁴ On the first point, see Jameson's discussion of melodramatic “named emotions” (*Antinomies* 140); on the second, see Brooks 15.

¹⁵ Carolyn Williams discusses the popularity of nautical melodrama (200).

¹⁶ Many critics have noted that Frederick's passions disqualify him as a model of political action; see, for example, David 15. Lewis is one of the few who regard him as an expression of Gaskell's radicalism (“Mutiny” 89–90).

¹⁷ Some critics prefer to see Frederick's story as a foil for the main plot, serving as a cautionary tale about violent resistance to authority. See, for example, Bodenheimer 59–60.

factory owners, as class resentments increasingly rose to the surface of the genre (see Brooks 87–88). Thornton verges on this role—and yet Margaret hesitates in assigning it to him.

As the confrontation unfolds, the difficulty of squaring it with melodramatic conventions is fully vested in Margaret, who has been identified with the novel's moral center through her condemnation of other characters' shallowness and through her benevolence toward the poor. Impulsively throwing herself between Thornton and the mob, Margaret then fails to define right and wrong—as if she were an actress rushing onstage for her big scene only to forget her lines. Brooks observes that in melodrama, "characters tend to say, directly and explicitly, their moral judgments of the world" (36). But although Margaret enters the scene in a moral passion, her eyes darting "flaming arrows of reproach" (176), words quickly fail her: they "died away" from her lips, even though she "strove to make her words distinct" (177). Managing only to tell the workers they will have relief for their complaints—"whatever they are"—she resorts to the inarticulate gesture of throwing her arms around Thornton's neck, which provokes conflicting moral and political interpretations. Mrs. Thornton reads it as a scandalous sign that Margaret loves her son, whereas Thornton himself does not; the mob reads it as a desire to leave Thornton "sheltered" (178), whereas Thornton tells them Margaret was trying to save them from themselves. Readers can be excused if Margaret's actions leave them, like the crowd itself, feeling "irresolute, and as if asking what this meant" (176). The scene itself dissolves in confusion: someone throws a stone that strikes Margaret by mistake; Thornton descends into the crowd and dares them to kill him; and then the strikers disperse, but for unclear reasons. Whatever the cause, melodramatic climax is averted.

Competition over the melodramatic role of the persecuted innocent is similarly confused in this scene: the role belongs to everyone and no one. Alone against a multitude, Thornton puts his life at risk for the sake of his principles. But Margaret later tells him: "There was not a man . . . in all that crowd—for whom I had not more sympathy" (193).¹⁸ The workers, too, are intermittently represented as persecuted victims. But as the weaver Nicholas Higgins laments later, their use of violence undermines their claims to innocence; the union had opposed such violence, he argues, precisely because "they didn't want to have right all mixed up wi' wrong, till folk can't separate it" (198). Margaret certainly appears to be a damsel in distress, both in her vulnerability to the mob and in her shame at having been presumed to act out of love. But she judges herself far more harshly, calling herself a "romantic fool": "Did I do any good? They would have gone away without me" (188). Even she cannot be sure whether she is a persecuted innocent, a heroic rescuer, or a self-deluded lover.

Most importantly, this failed apocalyptic scene settles little. It helps end the current strike, but labor conflicts continue unabated, and Thornton declares that future strikes are inevitable: "A more hopeful man might imagine that a closer and more genial intercourse between classes might do away with strikes. But I am not a

¹⁸ Brooks points out that a common plot twist in political melodrama has the victim saving the life of her persecutor—a role Margaret could be said to play (25).

hopeful man" (421). This particular undermining of melodramatic conventions echoes Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), in which the climactic trial scene exonerates Jem Wilson of murder but does not fully clear his name. Its failure to do so compels him to emigrate from England rather than to enjoy the triumph of virtue that most often concludes political melodrama.

Many readers have felt that Gaskell abandons her political plot for domestic romance after the anticlimactic mob scene.¹⁹ But long before *North and South* invokes and neutralizes the conventions of political melodrama, it defamiliarizes standard elements of domestic fiction as well. These include its courtship plot, along with thematic and formal conventions embedding such fiction in middle-class ideology: its idealization of companionate marriage and parent/child bonds; its normative gender binarism; its fusion of materialism and moral earnestness, sometimes through alliances between the commercial and professional middle classes; and its love of ordinariness and domestic stability.²⁰

Gaskell's systematic unraveling of these generic elements should give pause to those who believe she simply retreats from politics to domesticity. The novel begins, for example, with a glimpse of the moral bankruptcy of the materialistic, upper-middle-class Lennox household in which Margaret was raised. Margaret's aunt, Mrs. Shaw, admits that she married for money, not for love; she claims that her daughter Edith will not make the same mistake, but Edith turns out to be more interested in her wedding trousseau than in her husband—she is "a sweet little spoiled beauty" (341), as Mr. Bell later puts it. Meanwhile, Henry Lennox's lack of earnestness upends the novel's first courtship plot, since Margaret rejects him largely because of his compulsively ironic levity.

When the novel follows Margaret back to her own, more humble family—which we might expect to serve as a foil for the degraded morals of the upper middle class—cracks appear in the companionate marriage that usually anchors domestic fiction. Mrs. Hale's discontent with her husband's lack of ambition causes him to suffer "habitual distress and depression" (18); he consoles himself by withdrawing to brood in his study. On returning to this household, Margaret finds her heart "more heavy than she could ever have thought it possible in going to her own dear home" (17). No haven in a heartless world, the "marring of the peace of home, by long hours of discontent, was what Margaret was unprepared for" (19).

If this domestic plot starts badly, it comes off the rails when Mr. Hale announces that he is leaving the Church and removing the family to shabby impoverishment in a northern industrial city. Hale's professional abdication coincides with his failure as a middle-class husband and father: too cowardly to break the news to his wife, he makes Margaret do it. These early scenes blow up domestic fiction's usual portrait of the norms of middle-class marriage, family, and gender roles as well as the comfortable everydayness of the middle-class home. In their aftermath, the domestic world is physically taken apart before our very eyes. The house is littered with packing cases; empty of furnishings, the "rooms had a strange echoing

¹⁹ Lesjak, like many recent critics, deplors what she sees as these novels' privileging of "private, domestic matters rather than collective, political ones" (15).

²⁰ See Fraiman for an excellent survey of the conventions of domestic fiction.

sound" (53). Even the garden, that middle-class sanctuary, is spoiled: "[T]he pretty lawn at the side of the house was made unsightly and untidy by the straw that had been wafted upon it through the open door and windows" (53). The family decamps to hotels, and their new home in Milton-Northern offends middle-class sensibilities in every possible way. It is not large enough, and it has no garden—it is located, fittingly, in a suburb named "Crampton." The living room wallpaper is a "gaudy pattern" (62), and the cornices are too heavy; in general, the place is decorated with a "taste that loves ornament."

This ruination of the middle-class home is symptomatic of a series of broader disruptions to domestic values in Milton. Women applying to be servants imperpetually question the Hales about their finances. On the street, the usual distance between working and respectable middle classes is abridged: lower-class men and women comment openly on Margaret's appearance. Middle-class rules of social status are also upended: wealth trumps birth, education, and profession. Even Margaret's attempt to assume middle-class female philanthropic duties fails when Nicholas Higgins regards her offer to visit his family as condescension.²¹

Shattered abruptly and systematically in this relocation to Milton, the domestic sphere is then undone again in slow motion, as family members drop away one by one: first Mrs. Hale and then Mr. Hale dies; Frederick abandons England for good—"[H]e is lost to me, and I am so lonely," Margaret laments (373)—and finally, her godfather, Mr. Bell, dies.²² Her home broken up a second time by all these losses, Margaret is orphaned back to the Lennoxes, where Bell had arranged for her to stay at £250 a year. Intuiting that the Lennoxes might tire of Margaret and send her packing, Bell negotiates her presence as a matter of contract rather than kinship, which is symptomatic of her alienation from this household. Its moral bankruptcy contributes to the oppressive "inactivity" of her days (365) and her need to invent duties for herself.

In all these ways, Gaskell disrupts the conditions, values, and plotlines of domestic fiction. The resulting narrative wreckage no doubt contributed to her sense that the opening, in particular, was "flat & grey" or "dull" (*Letters* 282, 290) and perhaps to the drop-off in sales after the first few serial numbers (see Gérin 153). But Gaskell did not put domestic conventions back on track after the early chapters had disappointed her readers. Quite the contrary: the cornerstone of domestic fiction, its courtship plot, founders for nearly the entire novel. This disruption of romance cannot be understood simply as a spillover of sensationalism from the political plot, since political melodramas rarely featured the obstruction of erotic union.²³ Impeded romance seems intended, instead, to frustrate several fundamental conventions of domestic fiction.

²¹ Dredge comments usefully on the novel's disruption of philanthropic relations between middle-class women and the poor; see esp. 84: "Gaskell insists that the exchange goes both ways." See also Guy 164.

²² Gaskell joked wanly to Charles Dickens that "a better title than *N. & S.* would have been 'Death & Variations'" (Gaskell, *Letters* 324).

²³ Brooks points out that political melodrama seldom blocks romantic desire; what is threatened is simply "virtue's claim to exist qua virtue" (32).

In thematic terms, Margaret and Thornton block domestic fiction's typical alliance of professional and commercial middle classes—and, symbolically, its union of culture and capital—by failing to internalize newly emergent perspectives on social class. Margaret's snobbery blinds her to the growing equality of their social stations, even though her father tries to enlighten her. "Don't call the Milton manufacturers tradesmen, Margaret," he cautions. "They are very different" (65). On his side, Thornton alienates Margaret by failing to accept the political responsibilities that middle-class economic power has newly come to demand. As Margaret admonishes him: "We may ignore our own dependence, or refuse to acknowledge that others depend upon us in more respects than the payment of weekly wages; but the thing must be, nevertheless" (122).

In formal terms, Gaskell teases us with romantic plot conventions that go awry, as love is thwarted by one absurd accident after another. Readers might expect the novel to heal the rift between its protagonists by reforming them. But even when they both acquire more charitable middle-class social perspectives—independently of one another—plot twists constantly arouse our expectations for resolution only to disappoint them: the dying Mrs. Hale begs Mrs. Thornton to regard Margaret as her daughter, but Mrs. Thornton perverts this deathbed promise, turning it into a duty to scold Margaret and further alienate her; Thornton attends Mrs. Hale's funeral, demonstrating his loyalty, but servants omit to inform Margaret, leaving her to assume he is indifferent; Bell promises to tell Thornton that the man he saw Margaret walking with was only her brother, but Bell either forgets or just doesn't get to it before he dies. Erotic delay may be standard in romance plots, but Gaskell teases us until the very last page, giving us an abrupt romantic conclusion that looks very much like a melodramatic last-second rescue rather than the gradual reconciliation with which domestic fiction usually depicts emotionally temperate, companionate relationships. Like Gaskell's political plot, her domestic plot systematically and sometimes shockingly frustrates expectations, leaving its various generic conventions available for unexpected uses elsewhere.

Political Melodrama Relocated to the Domestic Plot

Gaskell's denaturalization of generic conventions makes it all the more evident that she uses them to perform new kinds of work in unfamiliar locations. From the outset, *North and South* relocates melodramatic devices from the public arena to the domestic plot—making that last-second love scene seem an appropriate conclusion. Although domestic melodrama has a long history of its own (Gaskell herself practiced it in short stories such as "Half a Life-time Ago" [1855] and "The Crooked Branch" [1859]), *North and South's* relocation of melodramatic elements into the domestic plot is all the more striking because it jars against the novel's fundamental domestic realism: its careful descriptions of commonplace objects and routines, its psychological acuity, and its attention to details of social status.

Mr. Hale's crisis of faith, for example, envelops his family in a discordant sensationalism that has tempted many a parodist. By martyring himself for his convictions, Hale also assumes the melodramatic role of the persecuted innocent—but in the domestic rather than the political plot. The servant Dixon regards him as a

“blight” on her mistress’s fortunes (22), Henry Lennox ascribes his actions to “a morbid state of conscience” (371), and even Margaret rebukes him for what she calls his “errors” (68). Only gradually, as a chorus of favored characters come to defend Hale for being true to his principles, does he seem—partly because of his effeminacy—to resemble something like a long-suffering damsel in distress.

The domestic plot amplifies melodramatic conventions of this kind through a number of theatricalized rhetorical devices. These include the dramatic entrances and exits characters perform in normally staid settings. Sometimes, characters burst into domestic spaces immediately after being named, as if responding to a stage cue.²⁴ For instance, Margaret visits Higgins in his cottage and tells him, “I am sorry I asked you to go to Mr. Thornton’s. I am disappointed in him”; the next sentences read: “There was a slight noise behind her. Both she and Nicholas turned round at the same moment, and there stood Mr. Thornton, with a look of displeased surprise upon his face” (317). Later, Margaret’s aunt, Mrs. Shaw, invites Mrs. Thornton to visit whenever she comes to London with her husband, only to be corrected about the *dramatis personae*: “My husband is dead. Mr. Thornton is my son. I never go to London; so I am not likely to be able to avail myself of your polite offers” (360). The next sentence reads: “At this instant Mr. Thornton entered the room; he had only just returned from Oxford.” Thornton’s stagey comings and goings also dramatize his volatile emotions. The day following Margaret’s rejection of his marriage proposal, he bursts unexpectedly into the Hales’ drawing room to deliver a basket of fresh fruit. After explaining in one brief sentence that Dr. Donaldson suggested fruit would be good for Mrs. Hale, Thornton declares: “I must go . . . I cannot stay. If you will forgive this liberty,—my rough ways,—too abrupt I fear—but I will be more gentle next time” (212). He delivers a quick good-bye, and the narrator declares: “He was gone. Not one word: not one look to Margaret.”

Theatricalization of the novel’s domestic plot takes many other forms as well, both formal and rhetorical. Sometimes the narrator provides parenthetical notes that look uncannily like stage directions. When Bell innocently asks Thornton if he has ever seen Helstone, Margaret’s former home, Thornton answers: “‘Yes.’ (Very shortly.)” (344). When Bell is told that Frederick once came to England despite the sentence of death hanging over him, Bell promises to keep the secret and then says: “‘Stay!’ (interrupting himself rather abruptly) ‘was it at your mother’s funeral?’” (368). Theatricalized rhetoric also overwhelms emotional description. When Mrs. Thornton tells her son that Margaret is in love with him, “she was not sure of the nature of the emotions she had provoked. It was only their violence that was clear. Was it anger? His eyes glowed, his figure was dilated, his breath came thick and fast. It was a mixture of joy, of anger, of pride, of glad surprise, of panting doubt; but she could not read it” (184). As Margaret tries to figure out how she feels about Thornton, her emotional state is rendered in barely indirect discourse as a dramatic struggle: “How was it that he haunted her imagination so persistently? What could it be? Why did she care for what he thought, in spite of all her pride; in spite of herself? . . . What strong feeling had overtaken her at last?” (279–80).

²⁴ I am indebted for this point to my student Lech Harris.

Both Margaret and Thornton are also assigned the melodramatic role of the persecuted innocent. Thornton flirts with it throughout their first encounters and takes it up decidedly when Margaret rejects him: "You are unfair and unjust," he tells her. "It is because you do not understand me" (193). Margaret plays this role, too, at several domestic plot points. Just before Thornton's proposal, as she reflects on her actions at the mill, the narrator remarks: "She looked like some prisoner, falsely accused of a crime that she loathed and despised, and from which she was too indignant to justify herself" (191). After being suspected of lying (or worse) by civil authorities—the police inspector and Thornton himself as magistrate—Margaret spends much of the second half of the novel tortured by the knowledge that she suffers general misperception of her guilt.

The courtship plot also generates dozens of soliloquies, in which lovers vocalize their passions at the textual footlights, as it were. "Oh! Margaret, Margaret!" Thornton exclaims inwardly. "Mother, how you have tortured me! Oh! Margaret, could you not have loved me? I am but uncouth and hard, but I would never have led you into any falsehood for me" (307). Or again: "'No!' said he, 'I put it to the touch once, and I lost it all. Let her go,—with her stony heart, and her beauty. . . . Beauty and heiress as she may be, she will find it hard to meet with a truer heart than mine. Let her go!'" (361). Margaret constantly pours her tortured feelings into soliloquies: "'Oh dear!—oh dear! what shall I do? What do I mean? Why do I care what he thinks, beyond the mere loss of his good opinion as regards my telling the truth or not? I cannot tell. But I am very miserable!'" (315). Passages like these turn domestic romance into melodramatic spectacle.

Appropriately, halfway through the novel, Frederick walks straight out of his melodramatic subplot and into the courtship plot, further infecting it with theatricality. His being seen with Margaret in compromising circumstances makes her a tragically innocent figure, falsely accused; it allows Thornton to mistake Frederick as a genteel, villainous seducer, inflaming Thornton's violent jealousy. It also intrudes a real villain—"that bad Leonards" (249)—who inadvertently embroils Thornton in the conviction that Margaret loves another man, at the same time giving him an opportunity to heroically save her from the indignity of an inquest. After having wandered, like Frederick, out of the melodramatic plot, where he fails to exact vengeance, and into the courtship plot, where he wreaks havoc without meaning to, Leonards then expires for undetermined reasons—not something villains typically do—as if he were simply a conventional figure who turned up in the wrong plot and had to be disposed of.

Frederick's intrusion into the courtship plot also triggers a series of melodramatic secrets, mistakes, coincidences, and delays that contribute to its theatricality. Thanks to Frederick, Thornton eventually knows that Margaret knows that he knows that she lied, and out of loyalty to Frederick, Margaret cannot clear up the misunderstanding. A jumble of melodramatic coincidences fuels this romance of mutual misunderstandings: Thornton's being called in as magistrate in the case; the police inspector meeting Thornton just as he is leaving the Hale household; Thornton's having power over the inspector by virtue of having gotten him his job; the unlikely fact that Leonards's paramour is one of Thornton's servants. All these coincidences feed the melodramatic sensationalism of the courtship, functioning

as what Fredric Jameson would call “shorthand explosive devices” (*Antinomies* 154). None of them, perhaps, is more stagey than Margaret’s swoon after the police inspector’s visit, when she passes out in the study (only to recover herself a few minutes later) at the same time that Thornton is upstairs in the drawing room with her father. The scene is a set designer’s dream.

What ideological work do these relocations of melodramatic elements do? They cannot be aligned with a single motive or effect, but because Gaskell so explicitly invokes the genre of political melodrama, relocating its conventions to the domestic plot helps politicize the private sphere. Jameson may be wishful in claiming that melodrama always resonates politically, by virtue of its origins as a critique of illegitimate authority (*Antinomies* 159).²⁵ But Gaskell deliberately uses melodramatic effects to tease out political meanings.

Hale’s sensational dismantling of his domestic world, for example, reminds us that the power wielded by patriarchs is absolute—even when the patriarch happens to be personally timid. Part of the shock of his decision, and one reason the plot trajectory it launches seems so out of keeping with domestic fiction, is that Hale neither consults the women in his household nor assists them in reassembling their lives. The melodramatic atmosphere of the courtship plot also illuminates how political conflict shapes romance itself. Social frictions between Margaret and Thornton are both the cause of their difficulties and the source of their attraction: he finds her haughtiness alluring; she is intrigued with his power over wealthy commercial men. In the courtship plot, Gaskell thus confronts a disturbing reality many have accused her of evading in the political plot: the fact that economic and social differences structure personal relations.²⁶ The novel’s generic hybridity forces the public and private spheres together relentlessly in these thematic terms, never letting us forget that the personal is political.

On the level of plot, political melodrama breaks its bounds and invades domestic spaces themselves, revealing their inextricable relation to politics. Because Thornton’s house is unconventionally located adjacent to his mill, for example, the striking workers threaten both simultaneously. Twice we are told that they gather “right under the very wall of the house” (174). While Mrs. Thornton, her daughter, and their servants take shelter in their home’s deeper recesses, Margaret crosses the threshold between domestic and public space by rushing out to protect Thornton—only to be carried back across that threshold moments later, a victim of political violence. Less directly, the novel weaves political trouble into domestic spaces by splicing plot strands closely together. When Margaret goes to Thornton’s mill in the run-up to the mob scene, for example, she barely notices the gathering crowd because she is consumed with anxiety about her dying mother.

Gaskell’s infusion of melodramatic elements into the domestic plot thus reminds us that domesticity is not the stable other to the political realm. For the courtship

²⁵ Carolyn Williams also argues that political associations in melodrama run deep, particularly in its dramatization of illegitimate forms of expression in conflict with authority (199). Hadley offers a bracing challenge to these assumptions by diagnosing melodrama’s politics as a reactionary celebration of patriarchal “deference society” (5).

²⁶ This is a widespread criticism; see, for example, Guy 166.

plot to resolve, in particular, both protagonists must commit themselves to addressing injustice in the public sphere, and romantic resolution depends discordantly on the purchase of a factory. However one decodes the nature of their plans for industrial reform, the two protagonists fuse domestic courtship inextricably with political change, a generic innovation that depends on Gaskell's use of melodrama to force the public sphere into middle-class romance. On that unfamiliar terrain, the novel further extends the ideological work of generic hybridity by projecting domestic values back into political contexts.

Domesticity Relocated to Politics

Just as Gaskell relocates melodramatic conventions to the domestic plot, so too she relocates the conventions of domestic fiction to her political plot. Doing so enables her to explore surprising epistemic frameworks within which social problems might be rethought. Of course, a long critical tradition has faulted Gaskell and other Condition of England novelists for recasting politics in domestic terms. But Gaskell's generic hybridization has demystifying potentials, whatever other forms of ideological work it may also do. Its relocation of domestic tropes to political contexts productively exposes a number of tensions between domestic and political frameworks of thought rather than simply sublimating the latter within the former.

Gaskell sometimes turns domestic thematics against fallacies of liberal economics, for example. At one point, Thornton waves away suggestions that he explain his policies to his workers, scoffing: "Do you give your servants reasons for your expenditure, or your economy in the use of your own money?" (117). But the domestic plot shows the Hales violating this principle of economic individualism all the time, in collaborations with their servant Dixon (even if actual conversations about money are not recorded). Early in the novel, Mrs. Hale consults with Dixon about winter clothing for the poor; Dixon moves with the family to Milton because she "quite intends it," even though she understands she will have to "put up with a very different way of living" (52); and Margaret frequently shares the household work with her in these reduced circumstances. Dixon is simultaneously a member of the family and an employee.

Deploying domestic tropes in political contexts exposes another fallacy of economic individualism: the notion, often articulated by Thornton, that workers' private lives are irrelevant to economic negotiations. The domestic plot proves the contrary by documenting the impact of labor conflicts on families—in particular, the effects of malnourishment on striking workers' children.²⁷ These narrative juxtapositions of political strife with domestic hardship expose the blindness of those who separate political and economic issues from domestic life. Putting this critique into explicit terms, Margaret finds she cannot reconcile Thornton's "hard-reasoning, dry, merciless" political logic with his sympathy for her dying mother: "The discord jarred upon her inexpressibly" (152).

Besides mobilizing political critique, conventions of domestic fiction sometimes perform constructive ideological work when translated into political plots, and in

²⁷ See MacLure's compelling reading of the novel's "pathoeconomics" (343).

North and South they do so without offering sentimental solutions or papering over chronic social conflicts. Indeed, in discussions between Thornton and Higgins that take place in the latter's cottage—after the failure of their first meeting in the public space of the mill—common ground is achieved only because each man accepts the otherness of his interlocutor. Thornton finds Higgins's character to be like "some strange beast newly caught in some of the zones" (331). Higgins, too, is unsettled by the "queer" sound of Thornton's opinions, even when he happens to agree with them. Both men declare that they will not back down from disagreement, but Higgins softens that prospect by finding private space conducive to the airing of political differences: he promises "that when I seed yo' going wrong, and acting unfair, I'd speak to yo' in private first; and that would be a fair warning" (312–13). Domestic space makes it possible for these characters to engage in political dialogue, but only because each finds it a safe place to become comfortable with the alienness of the other.

More positively, domestic tête-à-têtes facilitate a rhetorical shift that the novel suggests is fundamental to political intercourse. The dining cooperative founded by Thornton and Higgins—itself a metaphor for the insertion of domestic values into public spaces—may facilitate conversation between Thornton and his workers. Yet the novel makes it clear that these conversations can progress from casual talk to political discussion only gradually: "[H]itherto we've steered clear of all vexed questions," Thornton tells Bell. "But if any of the old disputes came up again, I would certainly speak out my mind next hot-pot day" (354). For all Thornton's assurance, however, the novel insists that a shift in rhetorical rules must precede the discussion of such disputes. Critics have faulted Gaskell's idealization of dialogue between factory owners and workers for ignoring disproportions in power.²⁸ But the projection of domestic rhetorical norms into the political plot actually does the reverse: it equalizes discursive speaking conditions as a prerequisite for political debate. Earlier in the novel, Higgins had been less offended by Thornton's refusal to offer him a job than by the latter's incivility of speech, which he dwells on repeatedly. He lectures Thornton "that it was manners to say either 'yes' or 'no,' when . . . axed a civil question" (312), and then offers him sarcastic thanks "most of a' for yo'r civil way o' saying good-bye" (314). That a working-class figure can preach "manners" to an industrialist suggests that domestic discursive norms can be appropriated by non-middle-class political actors.

In order to converse with his men at the cooperative, then, Thornton has to suppress his rhetorical power and freedom, much as the father of a family might do in the domestic sphere: he vows to make no speeches, to take no credit when improvements originate with him, and to sit down to talk with his men only when invited. These polite forms of rhetorical etiquette, rooted in domestic sensibilities, level the discursive playing field as a condition for substantive debate. In effect, they enable conversations about reform to take place upward as well as downward along the gradient of social power. As Higgins later puts it when Margaret asks him if Thornton had bullied him in argument: "It would take a deal to daunt me in my

²⁸ On the issue of power differentials, see, for example, Negt and Kluge 50 or Vanden Bossche, who accuses Gaskell of favoring paternalistic reform (164).

own house" (331). Once political conversations are modeled on rhetorical norms for domestic conversation, both workers and masters may speak freely—a point demonstrated on different social terrain when Thornton and Hale enjoy free-flowing political arguments in the congenial space of the latter's home.

Most important, in metafictional terms, Gaskell exposes the danger of any unconscious conflation of politics with domesticity. A lightning rod for criticism of Gaskell's application of domesticity to politics has been her supposed attempt, as Hilary Schor puts it, to reimagine England as a family (34). Rosemarie Bodenheimer has denigrated this conflation as "the romance of the female paternalist" (22). But Gaskell's relocation of domestic themes and plotlines works self-reflexively to expose the contradictions that constantly unsettle any easy convergence of this kind. In the first great argument among Thornton, Hale, and Margaret, for example, Thornton argues that the workers' childishness is what justifies his treating them with a "wise despotism" (120). But Hale suggests that if they can be compared to children, then workers will presumably grow in wisdom and ability, and mill owners should prepare them to become self-governing. Thornton tries to bend the analogy back in his favor by taking a self-contradictory position, arguing that it is because he respects his workers' freedom to make mistakes that he disdains obtruding his views of labor relations on them. He is thus caught in the contradiction of viewing them, on the one hand, as dependents who owe him slavish obedience and, on the other, as infantilized free agents with no political entitlement to be heard. Margaret remarks: "I am trying to reconcile your admiration of despotism with your respect for other men's independence of character" (123). When Thornton objects to having the domestically loaded term *children* used to point up these self-contradictions, Hale tweaks him: "[R]ecollect, it is you who adopted the analogy" (121). This warning sounds a note of caution not just for Gaskell's characters but for readers of the novel itself.

On this metafictional level, Gaskell sometimes critiques the middle-class ideological assumptions embedded in domestic fiction directly, by catching out her heroine in similarly facile analogies. The character who most fully embodies domestic fiction's penchant for conceiving politics in private terms is, of course, Margaret: "God has made us so that we must be mutually dependent," she tells Thornton (122), in a memorable projection of private-sphere morality into the political realm. But the novel often turns Margaret's easy assumptions about the political implications of private virtue back against her—and thus against the moral authority vested in the middle-class heroine of domestic fiction—by suggesting that workers might ground economics in domestic morality for more radical purposes. When Higgins compares the bravery of strikers to that of soldiers, for example, Margaret tries to rebut him by claiming that whereas strikers only seek selfish gains, "a soldier dies . . . in the cause of others" (134). But Higgins fires back that union members fight in the name of the family: "Dun yo' think it's for mysel' I'm striking work at this time? It's just as much in the cause of others as yon soldier—only m'appen, 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 lives next door but one, wi' a sickly wife, and eight childer." Gaskell may have been ambivalent about unionization, but her projection of domestic values into political

contexts could work—as it does here—to arm workers against their middle-class critics and thus against the political assumptions typically espoused by domestic fiction.

Making generic conventions do new conceptual work in unfamiliar contexts is a powerful effect of generic relocation. Critics have not sufficiently recognized the subtlety and range of the fresh ideological perspectives Gaskell achieves through such relocation, or her self-conscious warnings about how careful one must be when crafting analogies between private and public spheres. Nevertheless, relocating narrative conventions from one genre to another so as to distort their customary thematic and ideological trajectories leaves Gaskell's narrative without a teleology of its own. In fact, the novel constantly reminds us that its political hopefulness constitutes the beginning of a story, not its end (see Levine 41). In this sense, the conventional closure of the romance plot is inadequate to resolve the generic dissonance of Gaskell's domestic/political hybridization. Relocating generic conventions may create expectations for new forms of narrative resolution, but *North and South* pointedly refuses to fulfill them. What new political ethos can emerge from such incompleteness?

Reading Inconclusive Narratives

Hoping to control the incompleteness of her novel's generic hybridization, Gaskell offers us instructions for reading its open-ended political vision in affirmative terms. Frow reminds us that texts often model how they would like the genre in which they are embedded to be read. Readers are obviously not obliged to comply with such models, but ignoring them overlooks important clues about a text's efforts to control its genre-bound horizon of epistemic possibility (Frow, *Genre* 133). The models for reading that *North and South* gives us often allude to what we might call parallel genres of incompleteness. For example, the open-ended question is presented as a form exemplifying the entire novel, when Higgins says to Hale: "I'll just ax yo' another question, sir, and I dunnot want yo' to answer it, only to put in yo'r pipe, and smoke it, afore yo' go for to set down us . . . as fools and noddies" (223). The novel also embeds narrativity in the form of heuristic dialogue. At one point, Hale throws himself into an open-ended dialogue with Higgins that he believes will lead to progress: "[L]et us . . . speak freely to each other," he tells Higgins, "and the truth will prevail" (223). The novel's hopefulness is reflected too in Bessy Higgins's desire for a new, visionary scriptural genre. Asking to have the Bible read to her, Bessy tells Margaret: "Read me—not a sermon chapter, but a story chapter; they've pictures in them, which I see when my eyes are shut. Read about the New Heavens, and the New Earth; and m'appen I'll forget this" (199). Wishing for a new genre, a visual one that she will partially fashion out of her own imagination, Bessy hopes to see beyond the predictable narratives of industrial conflict that so demoralize her.

These models ask us to read the incompleteness of *North and South* as a sign of the urgency of political reform and a call for active participation in both narrative and social renovation. They present narrative inconclusiveness as an invitation to engage ourselves—as the characters themselves do—in completing the story of

industrial conflict. The most explicit of these models, perhaps, is Thornton's argument that the best application of the wisdom of the past to the present—which, in a sense, is what writers do when they hybridize old narrative forms to produce new ones—is to provide pragmatic guidance. When Bell suggests that the wisdom of the past should be applied to the present as “prophecy,” Thornton responds: “It is fine when the study of the past leads to a prophecy of the future. But to men groping in new circumstances, it would be finer if the words of experience could direct us how to act in what concerns us most intimately and immediately” (327). At the end of the novel, Thornton translates his own experience into reformist workplace “experiments” (409), a term that could well serve as another model for the incompleteness of Gaskell's generic hybridization: her novel itself participates in the pragmatic, open-ended genre of the experiment.

That Gaskell links generic novelty to political change should blunt accusations that *North and South* either naturalizes the status quo or seeks to resolve ideological contradictions at the level of form—as much realist fiction has been said to do.²⁹ The answer to Frow's question about the kind of world her generic “experiment” brings into being, then, is simply this: a world of energetic involvement, in which creating better political futures depends on inventing new narrative logics that forgo prescribing that future in advance.

North and South's generic relocations mark such hopefulness as part of a broader pattern in Condition of England fiction. Whatever their many differences, these novels all share a tendency to mix genres discordantly, which is one reason critics cannot agree on a collective label for them; they are known, variously, as Condition of England novels, social-problem novels, political novels, or industrial novels. No wonder: a group of texts that systematically relocate generic conventions is bound to seem unusually heterogeneous as a whole. The patterns such generic relocation takes in these novels may be multivalent and difficult to schematize in a brief survey, but the novels' extensive use of generic relocation does ground a common political outlook, often concealed by the partisan political positions with which these works have been identified.

George Eliot's *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866), for example, echoes *North and South's* generic hybridization very closely, relocating elements of political melodrama from Felix's story into the novel's domestic plot and vice versa, enabling each half of the novel to comment unsettlingly on the other.³⁰ Esther's courtship plot is infused with the melodrama of both Felix's political trial and an adulterous inheritance plot, shaping her romantic choices as competing visions of social order rather than as mere expressions of personal desire; and conversely, domestic themes and

²⁹ On the first point, see Jameson, *Antinomies* 5. Jameson's critique of realism is dialectical, but it always insists that the nineteenth-century novel refuses to contemplate “a radically different future”; instead, it “absolutely resists and repudiates this possibility” (213). On the second, see Margaret Cohen 482, whose recent work is heavily indebted to Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*.

³⁰ Lesjak writes that Eliot's sense of social crisis is conveyed by her novel's self-conscious figuration of a crisis in narrative (63–66).

values turn out to trump political factionalism when Felix's conviction for rioting is overturned, principally as a result of Esther's moral influence over the local squirearchy.

Other Condition of England novels adopt quite different forms of generic relocation for quite different purposes. Frances Trollope's *Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy* (1839) maps political satire onto narratives of adventure, arguably to navigate between collectivist and individualist solutions to social problems. Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil, or The Two Nations* (1845) projects elements of political melodrama onto Gothic narrative terrain and vice versa. The novel thereby transforms melodrama's critique of illegitimate authority into a narrative of demonic possession, in which upper-class heroes must be saved from ungodly forces within themselves. At the same time, though, political melodrama shatters any hopes Disraeli's aristocrats might have that a new social order can be produced through supernatural means alone, notwithstanding the divine aura of the novel's heroine. Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (1850) relocates bildungsroman conventions into the political melodrama of a dystopian Chartist plot, jarringly playing out its protagonist's narrative of development within a genre notable for disillusion, disappointment, and deferred hope. Alton's story cannot be read as one of either progress or despair because the conventional materials of each genre are constantly reframed by the contradictory perspectives of the other.

For all their disparities, these novels use generic relocation to launch new forms of social critique, even if those critiques cannot be assimilated to a single politics. Gaskell's critiques of economic liberalism and of naive conflation of public and private spheres are far removed from the Tory self-critique of *Sybil* or the Tory reformism of Trollope, in particular. But all these novelists refused more seamless versions of generic hybridity that were available to realist fiction in the nineteenth century in favor of cultivating the formal dissonance of generic relocation. They did so to create new, open-ended forms of political fiction, emphasizing the urgency of achieving social changes that cannot be forecast with certainty.

A key feature of that highly generalized but shared political aesthetic is the kind of incomplete narrative trajectory we have seen in *North and South*. Of the novels I have mentioned, *Alton Locke* and *Michael Armstrong* are perhaps the most striking instances of political narratives that are either unwilling or unable to align formal resolution with a reimagined social order. But even *Sybil*, which features an apocalyptic climax that restores the old patriarchy to its rightful place, manages to spirit away its protagonists into the twilight of happy-ever-afterdom without specifying the nature of the new social reforms their marriage heralds. Walter Gerard, *Sybil*'s father, must die in the novel's final conflagration so that a new, completely indeterminate feudal order might succeed the historically definite one for which he stands. Gallagher has famously argued that the novel renders social hierarchy intrinsically fictional and infinitely rewriteable, leaving history itself "a realm without origins or stable values" (207). Meanwhile, the nature of Charles Egremont's political views and the role that *Sybil* herself might or might not play in them are left tantalizingly open.

The incompleteness of Condition of England novels consistently functions, as it does in *North and South*, to impart both a spirit of urgency and an invitation for active participation in the creation of new political narratives. Condition of England novels were the first group of literary texts calling on readers to participate at the national level in social reform, and we do well to recognize that generic dissonance played a key role in that literary and political act of inclusion. Without promoting a unilateral politics, Condition of England novels did share a common, historically conditioned desire to put narrative to work for social change. That they did so through a dissonant form of generic hybridization helps demonstrate how formal experiments energized realist fiction as a creative mode of social thought.

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