



Stephen E. Huntley: Epistles

Edition One

Epistles:

Essays, Communiqués and Supplications

EDITION ONE

Stephen E. Huntley

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Aim and Purpose

Essays, Communiqués and Supplications on Various Topics.

About the Web Site

The web site at **stephen.huntley.link**¹ is an attempt to build a writing platform whose contents can be formatted for either web or print publishing from the same source, in hopes of being able to preserve its contents for the long term by producing hard copies. By itself there's nothing new about this aspiration, over the past fifteen years or so in particular a number of tools and workflows have been devised in pursuit of dual web/print publishing.

What I'm striving to produce more specifically is a matrix both for: day-to-day writing, revising, blogging, research, outlining, brainstorming and gathering feedback; and for compiling, editing and archiving a comprehensive compendium of the total creative output of my life.

That is, the web site is meant to be simultaneously a writing and publishing platform, and a project for producing and annotating a volume of "Complete Works" which stands ready at all times to be published in full and yet will be continually added to and improved. Thus I envision that my "Complete Works" will not be the product of a final retrospective stage of my life, but a goal always being approached asymptotically but never finally reached until I can write and work no more.

This vision is inspired by a desire to bridge pre-internet traditions of intellectual work into the current era in a format adapted to today's technology and expectations. And thus to recover a portion of something valuable which seems to me to have been lost.

I'm among the last generation whose memory, education and work experience will incorporate any of the practices, guidelines and wisdom of intellectual creation that arose and were routinely taught before the advent of personal computers and the popular embrace of the internet.

In times past, intellectual and creative writers created a great deal of work product: notebooks, drafts, correspondence, manuscripts, fair copies. This work product of course was and is of value to scholars; indeed creators of the past consciously collected, sorted and preserved their archives if they had any expectation of or aspiration to notability, knowing that their papers would be studied and curated. More importantly, it was valuable to the creators themselves as they worked: their papers provided a medium for review, contemplation, re-evaluation, insight, inspiration. Accumulated work product amounted to a sort of labyrinth of meditation in the medieval sense.

By way of illustration, the poet Percy Shelley, in his impecunious early years, was well-practiced in skipping out on debts and stiffing landlords for unpaid rent. When he later attained a more firm financial footing, he only ever repaid one bad debt: to a landlady in Wales who was holding a trunk of his notebooks and manuscripts hostage.

¹<https://stephen.huntley.link>

This creative resource seems now largely to have been lost.² Who saves drafts when working with a word processor or text editor? Who among creative people has a plan to back up and preserve their work? Commercial web sites into which millions of people pour uncountable hours of creative effort disappear overnight and take everything with them. People now are deluged with email; who makes an effort to archive worthy conversations?

In place of the former ways, corporations that provide internet and social media services have constructed for us another sort of labyrinth, designed to work in the ancient Greek sense of a place to get permanently lost in. In order to make meaningful contact with others in our digital society we are expected to direct our creative efforts toward producing content for these services, and as we do our attention and concentration are run through their mazes and dissipated. Our movements through the labyrinth are recorded and quantified, and the statistical results are monetized for the corporations' benefit. In the meantime we are alienated from our own creative work, our selves and our posterity denied the opportunity to develop life-long relationships with it, and with such relationships are lost the spiritual opportunities for insight and self-knowledge.

The web site is designed and implemented with the goal of restoring some of what has been lost. A workspace to doodle with notes, diary entries and drafts, turn drafts into manuscripts and manuscripts into books, essays, monographs and collections. A resource for scholars should there ever be interest. Most importantly a retreat and reference for a lifetime of review and reflection. Every edit and revision is saved, and the full record of revisions is part of the work, in postmodern fashion. The current provisional state of each division of the site is publishable in hard copy form, however rough it may be. The "Complete Works" is a destination always aspired to but never quite reached, but at the same time always present and accessible now.

As a member of the technical world that prefers to have distinct, searchable and indexible names for software concepts and tools, I've been using the abbreviation *EDIWTB* to label this toolset/workflow, which for those requiring a technically descriptive meaning I'll claim stands for "Edit/Distribution Integration from Web Template to Binding". But for the sake of my own literary inspiration I assign to it the mantra "Every Day I Write The Books".

An experiment in simultaneous research, authoring, and digital/print publishing.

EDIWTB is:

"Edit/Distribution Integration from Web Template to Books"

or

"Every Day I Write The Book"

That is, as a matter of producing a lifetime's creative output, instead of going through separate stages of doodling, inspiration, research, drafting, editing and then posting or printing of individual works or publishable volumes, I envision incorporating every day's work into a provisional final form that is

²"Local literary scholars lament the lost art of letter writing" <https://web.archive.org/web/20230622165727/https://www.telegram.com/story/news/local/south-west/2014/03/15/local-literary-scholars-lament-lost/38148460007/>

always ready for publication on the web and in print, and asymptotically approaches but never reaches the final definitive compendium of complete works that represents a life's effort.

Thus bridging pre-and post-internet traditions of creating and distributing creative and intellectual work.

Book Club:

In early 2023 I joined a book club, focused on the classics.¹ Below are my thoughts on some of the books read.

¹<https://web.archive.org/web/20220523031332/https://www.meetup.com/1001books/>

Goodbye to Berlin

Christopher Isherwood

Book Club June 18, 2023

Goodbye to Berlin reads as a tenuously connected series of character sketches and anecdotes, collected by the author during his years in the city at the end of the Weimar era, teaching English to support himself as he tried to write. The novel famously set off the chain of inspirations (another set of tenuous links) that led eventually to the play and movie *Cabaret*.

Isherwood's tone generally ranges from bemused detachment to mild disdain, and sometimes to outright alienation, as the first page contains the well-known passage: "I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking."



Christopher Isherwood

But as he is poised at his window, depicting himself as a passive observer, in the very next paragraph he relates how young men come down his street in the autumn evenings and boldly whistle up to their lovers in their own flats on the block. He is not passive in his observation of these rude, passionate, messy pursuits of the necessities of life; rather, his reaction is one of active repulsion: "Because of the whistling, I do not care to stay here in the evenings... I determine not to listen to it, pick up a book, try to read."

On the first page he thus reveals himself as a liar. He is actively on the run from life. Is he being ironic, or is he unaware of his duplicity, un-self-reflective? It is from the point of this self-revelation, knowing

or otherwise, that the work unfolds as a novel not a sketchbook, with a direction and a conclusion meaningful to Isherwood the narrator.

He describes his room as a microcosm of the dead Berlin of the past:

The tall tiled stove, gorgeously coloured, like an altar. The washstand like a Gothic shrine. The cupboard is also Gothic, with carved cathedral windows: Bismarck faces the King of Prussia in stained glass. My best chair would do for a bishop's throne. In the corner three sham medieval halberds (from a theatrical touring company?) are fastened together to form a hatstand.

Isherwood the narrator is hiding in Berlin, among the shadows that the past still casts there. For him it is a labyrinth where he can avoid himself. The connecting thread of the novel is how the city progressively turns into a hall of mirrors, where he must at last catch glimpses of himself, but only through the prisms of other people – without seeming to realize it.

While nightcrawling with the wild English teen runaway Sally Bowles, he meets Clive, a rich American who is happy to pick up the bills as the three lose themselves in weeks of partying. Clive is typically American to English eyes, voluble and outgoing, always ready for a good time. “Yet, even as he appealed to us, I thought I could sometimes detect odd sly flashes of sarcasm. What did he really think of us?”

Isherwood seems oblivious to the notion that, in his condescending and supercilious manner with others, always masked by his charming English politeness and diffidence, he might come across to others in the same way. When Clive suddenly disappears from town, there is a glimmer of reflection: “I imagined him leaving every new town and every new set of acquaintances in much the same sort of way. I sympathized with him, a good deal.”

He encounters a shuffling senior drug addict in a dive bar: “The old man had a nervous tic and kept shaking his head all the time, as if saying to Life: No. No. No.” By this time it is not hard for the reader to fill in for oneself just who it is saying No.

Isherwood decides to spend the following summer on a working-class resort island, as always claiming that the move is to facilitate his writing. He shares a cabin with another Englishman, Peter, who is close to him in age, and with a German teenager named Otto. In this sketch, the narrator soon seems strangely to disappear almost entirely from the narrative, and the focus falls on Peter as he seems forlornly to pursue a relationship with Otto, without any hint given as to the goal of his pursuit (beyond the priapic association of his name).

Peter, in his lugubrious, hang-dog pursuit seems uncannily to be a golemic projection of Isherwood himself, evidently lacking self-consciousness or capacity for introspection; he seems to want to play house with Otto, but the teen is too energetic and volatile for that. Peter's desire not only dares not speak its name, but he cowers even from conceiving what he wants.

And so Isherwood's aloofness progresses via metaphor to a crippled inability to cultivate an inner life, a deficiency that comes to threaten his life spiritually and physically as the Nazi party begins its final ascent to power.

In Berlin he makes friends with Bernhard, a cultured department store manager from a wealthy family. Bernhard's life has all the trappings of success and happiness, but he is dissatisfied in ways he will not express, and is evidently paralyzed when it comes to making changes. Like Isherwood he hides behind a mask, one of culture and taste. Bernhard seems to be courting Isherwood in enigmatic fashion, but like Peter is unwilling or unable to put a name to his desire.

Finally Isherwood lashes out:

I often wonder why you have anything to do with me at all. I feel sometimes that you actually dislike me, and that you say and do things to show it... what I can't stand is that you show your resentment by adopting this mock-humble attitude.... Actually, you're the least humble person I've ever met.

Again, Isherwood shows no self-consciousness that this is how he likely comes off to others. Their relationship ends with Bernhard saying:

all this seems to me a little unreal, a little – please don't be offended, Christopher – trivial, I know that I am getting out of touch with existence... Do you know, there are times when I sit here alone in the evenings, amongst these books and stone figures, and there comes to me such a strange sensation of unreality, as if this were my whole life? Yes, actually, sometimes, I have felt a doubt as to whether our firm – that great building packed from floor to roof with all our accumulation of property – really exists at all, except in my imagination... And then I have had an unpleasant feeling, such as one has in a dream, that I myself do not exist.

And with this self-incrimination Bernhard indicts himself, Christopher and Berlin all at once. Unwillingness to face oneself, denial of one's inner life, leads to loss of empathy, loss of touch with reality, and paralysis; and through this spiritual void the Nazis are able to march to power.

In his soulless wanderings through the labyrinth of the city, Christopher encounters not only the rich and dissipated but also the poor, sick and debased. His encounters begin at last to awaken in him the sense that others are real, and with that comes the beginnings of empathy and a balanced sense of what life is.

He at last takes on Herr N. as a pupil, a middle-class government employee who is planning to emigrate to the United States:

Herr N. talks to me chiefly about his family. He is worried about his son, who is very delicate... His wife is delicate, too. He hopes the journey won't tire her. He describes her symptoms, and the kind of medicine she is taking... In a tactful, impersonal way we have become quite intimate... Behind everything he says I am aware of an immense sadness.

Herr N. is grappling with the necessities of life no less than the profane whistlers under Christopher's window. Love, care and sadness, taken together over the years, compose a life. And rather than feeling repulsion from life's messiness, for the first time in the novel Christopher describes himself as feeling actual intimacy with someone.

And now at last Christopher is able to sense the reality of the Nazi threat, as something more than a joke being played on the citizens of Berlin who unlike him don't have the option to leave. He is shocked to overhear a conversation between a young Nazi and his girlfriend in a cafe:

“Oh, I know we shall win, all right,” he exclaims impatiently, “but that’s not enough!” He thumps the table with his fist: “Blood must flow!”

The stakes to him now are real. Like Herr N. he at last finds the will to break his paralysis and leave Berlin in pursuit of an authentic life. On the eve of leaving, he visits a cabaret with his friend Fritz. As they leave they encounter a party of rowdy young Americans:

“Say,” he asked Fritz, “what’s on here?”

“Men dressed as women,” Fritz grinned.

The little American simply couldn't believe it... “Do you mean they’re *queer*?”

“Eventually we’re all queer,” drawled Fritz solemnly, in lugubrious tones...

“You *queer*, too, hey?” demanded the little American, turning suddenly on me.

“Yes,” I said, “very queer indeed.”

On the first page of the novel Isherwood describes himself as a camera, a mechanism, recording only the surface features of life without evident capacity for introspection. On the last page he is able to imagine photographic reality in its proper proportion, as something distinct from him and his personal identity and feelings, which are as real to him now as what the camera shows:

I catch sight of my face in the mirror of a shop, and am shocked¹ to see that I am smiling... The trams are going up and down the Kleiststrasse, just as usual. They, and the people on the pavement, and the teacosy dome of the Nollendorfplatz station have an air of curious familiarity, of striking resemblance to something one remembers as normal and pleasant in the past – like a very good photograph.

¹I made a strange and somewhat disturbing discovery when checking this quote at an online source. Instead of “shocked”, the word “horrified” is used in all editions of the novel I could find but one: The New Directions Publishing edition of 1963, a reprint of which I have owned for many years. This edition is “my” *Goodbye to Berlin*, and now I find it is in its own way unique, a mutant, a *lusus naturae*. The Internet Archive let me check editions from 1954 to the present, and all the others contain the latter word. It’s disturbing because in a tale of rising fascism it seems Orwellian to change a text, to amend its history silently, even if it be to no evident purpose. Also disturbing because substituting this single word changes the tenor of the ending, and thus of the entire novel. One can be positively or negatively “shocked,” thus the word here suggests that Isherwood may be pleasantly surprised by the changes that have been wrought in him. But “horrified” only goes one way. The word suggests a much darker and more confused psyche in the narrator as the text ends. I can’t fathom why such a change would have been made. Regrettably I don’t have the energy or eyesight to check exhaustively in what other ways this edition may differ from the others.

Memento Mori

Muriel Spark

Book Club July 9, 2023

The Scottish novelist Muriel Spark converted to Catholicism as an adult and credited her new religion with enabling her to become a successful writer. But in *Memento Mori*, she shows no evidence of interest in such things as grace or redemption for her characters. The novel's main characters are senior citizens, most of them dealing with their last days of physical and mental soundness; yet Spark seems to write gleefully of them as ninnies and neurotics – wasting their time running about trying to get the most of the time they have left when they could be doing the decent thing and simply disappearing from public life into the variety of care homes and hospices waiting for them.

The only character she shows evident sympathy for is the wickedest of them, the bully and crook in her early senior phase who does her best to corral and exploit the other elders in her grasp. Spark here reminds me of what Blake said of John Milton, the intensely religious author of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*: “The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God and at liberty when of Devils & Hell is because he was... of the Devil's party without knowing it.”¹



Muriel Spark

The main characters are being harassed by an anonymous serial phone caller, who simply says “Remember you must die” to his targets. That and the title suggest that the theme of the novel is that life

¹*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, by William Blake

needs to be put into perspective by keeping awareness of death's inevitability close. There are also suggestions that there is honor in memorializing the dead: Alec Warner and Jean Taylor, former lovers, muse about the ephemerality of existence:

"Do you think, Jean, that other people exist?... you see that here is a respectable question. Given that you believe in your own existence as self-evident, do you believe in that of others? Tell me, Jean, do you believe that I for instance, at this moment, exist?"

"...One does sometimes wonder, perhaps only half-consciously, if other people are real."

"Please," he said, "wonder more than half-consciously about this question. Wonder about it with as much consciousness as you have, and tell me what is your answer."

"Oh," she said, "I think in that case, other people do exist. That's my answer. It's only common sense... This graveyard is a kind of evidence," she said, "that other people exist."

"...They are, I quite see, they are," he said, "an indication of the existence of others, for there are the names and times carved in stone. Not a proof, but at least a large testimony."

"...But the graves are at least reassuring," she said, "for why bother to bury people if they don't exist?"

Their conversation suggests a literary project of anchoring the existence of us the living, in this modern age, via acknowledgement of the dead and those near death; the novel thus becoming something of an embodiment of the title, a first draft of a eulogy. But later the narrative turns to suggest that acknowledging death means the undoing of life and certainty, rather than the culmination and crowning of them. Later, after Jean has retired to a nursing home, she says to Alec:

We all appear to ourselves frustrated in our old age, Alec, because we cling to everything so much. But in reality we are still [in retirement] fulfilling our lives.

But in her case as in most of the others, the fulfillment seems to come from giving up, from letting go of one's life's goals and giving in to the uncertainties of meaning and existence, embodied in the uncertainty about the nature of the phone stalker. Sparks' sympathies go to the characters who retire and disappear, and directs mockery to those who continue to try living a full life.

The exception, and the turn of narrative purpose, comes in depiction of the antics of Mrs. Pettigrew, the live-in caretaker who browbeats her elderly charges into docility for her own convenience, engages in power struggles against other servants who might challenge her will, and snoops her way into blackmail opportunities. Her verve, energy and clarity of purpose distinguish her from the other characters, and she is the only one fruitfully in command of her life's direction.

The unveiling of Sparks' true attitude and agenda in her delight with Mrs. Pettigrew suggests another commentary on Milton: "was Milton trying to tell us that being bad was more fun than being good?"²

²Professor Jennings, *Animal House*

Myra Breckinridge

Gore Vidal

Book Club July 30, 2023

Myra Breckinridge is a modern warrior woman who has set herself on a quest for total fulfillment of all fantasies; chief of these being the total obliteration of traditional masculinity, thus turning humanity androgynous and averting the prospect of nuclear armageddon. She is subject and object of her heroic story, trying to save the world by saving herself.

The novel is the most unexpected and idiosyncratic of Gore Vidal's novels. It is both an exemplary product of the late 1960's and a cauldron of the themes and obsessions that had filled his work from the beginning of his career.



Gore Vidal

In its anarchism, it undercuts and flips the table on every assertion, every expectation of the reader and every narrative breadcrumb trail laid down – to the extent that it's difficult to envision how even to start talking about it, or how to end. Narrative summary? Themes? Character development? Social and political commentary? Ultimate meaning? The novel works to frustrate analysis or engagement from any angle.

It is a work of high literature that has the internal logic and structure of a cheap porn novel. Parts of the narrative are as contrived as the poolman arriving to find a young woman home alone in a skimpy bikini. I think that is because whenever a work undertakes to undermine and delegitimize all social conventions and mannerisms, even those of the rebels, nonconformists and freaks, choices of formal

structure become limited – shortcuts have to be taken to get to the good parts. Be it a product of high or low culture the end result is often a horseshoe effect: a meeting in the middle, and the vulgar and refined wits become both targets and echoes of each other. For example when a narrative work busies itself with capturing total anarchy in the face of impending obliteration, it often turns out that there are only two acceptable choices for wrapping things up: breaking the frame (as in *Naked Lunch*, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, *The Final Programme*, *The Bacchae*, *Blazing Saddles*), or a contrapuntal reversion to conservative domesticity (*A Clockwork Orange*, *Natural Born Killers*, *Deep Throat*, Robert Heinlein's *Job*, *Candide*). As it turns out, *Myra Breckinridge* opts for the latter. The author consequently risks disappointment or fury on the part of the reader... but really, what other choices were there?

It's tempting to approach *Myra* as a work of self-examination and self-criticism on Vidal's part. But I don't think it should be necessary to reference the life of the artist to comprehend the artwork. On the other hand, with this work who knows what goes. Maybe Vidal simply considered himself one of the overblown contemporary mainstream idols to be knocked over.

Early along, *Myra* is clearly Vidal's voice. In her erudition and love of films, particularly her adoration of film critic Parker Tyler, she echoes him. Her thoughts run to the sublime: "Tyler's vision (films are the unconscious expressions of age-old human myths) is perhaps the only important critical insight this century has produced... Auden once wrote an entire poem praising limestone, unaware that any one of a thousand frames from *Tarzan and the Amazons* (1945) had not only anticipated him but made irrelevant his efforts."

Later she embodies Vidal's worldly cynicism: "what, finally, are human relations but the desire in each of us to exercise absolute power over others?"

And: "It is hate alone which inspires us to action and makes for civilization. Look at Juvenal, Pope, Billy Wilder."

As the story progresses, she becomes tedious – in conversation with the young people she condescends to as if children, she starts to sound like the most annoying person in a college dorm lounge:

I was brilliant. I quoted the best of the world's food authorities (famine for us all by 1974 and forget about plankton and seaweed: not enough of it). I demonstrated that essentially Malthus had been right, despite errors of calculation... What is to be done? How is the race to be saved...? My answer was simple enough: famine and war are now man's only hope. To survive, human population must be drastically reduced. Happily, our leaders are working instinctively toward that end, and there is no doubt in my mind that nature intends Lyndon Johnson and Mao Tse-tung to be the agents of our salvation... If I say so myself, I had my listeners' eyes bugging out by the time I had sketched for them man's marvelous if fiery fate.

Vidal taking himself down a peg here? Self-satire? Acknowledging how tiresome his parlor-room polemics could be?

But as Myra's thoughts and discourse become more convoluted and profane, she is falling in love with Mary-Ann, a beautiful young woman, and losing sight of her objective of destroying masculinity. Mary-Ann's love draws Myra away from fantasies of disintegration and brings her back around to visions of wholeness, here:

Though I yearn romantically for the classic films of the Forties, I know that they can never be reproduced since their era is as gone as the Depression, World War II and the national innocence which made it possible for Pandro S. Berman and a host of others to decorate the screens of tens of thousands of movie theatres with perfect dreams. There was a wholeness then which is lacking now

and here:

there is something about Mary-Ann's wholeness that excites me. There is a mystery to be plumbed, though whether or not it is in her or in myself or in us both I do not know.

Yet just as Myra and Mary-Ann's love is about to reach a place of perfected satisfaction, wholeness proves to be a chimera. Myra is involved in a car accident; she is surgically undone and remade and learns to live with a new identity, her quest for rapture left behind. In its place is a new lifestyle in a different mode of incompleteness. But that is not a barrier to happiness; rather, in a broken world one may find that in one's brokenness one is, as Sam Spade observed "in step with life."

Is this the message and meaning of the novel? If so is it uplifting or a cop-out? If Myra is Vidal's voice does the ending represent a life lesson accepted by Vidal himself?

Vidal was not one for embracing domesticity. Or rather, he oscillated for decades between a mutant form of domesticity in Italy, and part-time residence ensconced in the apocalyptic vistas of California amid the illusion and self-deception he despised. Does the record of his own restless and surreal life invalidate the apparent conclusion of the novel? Can any author be held so personally responsible for the integrity of one's work?

I got a strange glimmer of insight from an unexpected source. The novel *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess is kin to *Myra* in its anarchic and apocalyptic vision. It also features an unexpected reversion to domesticity, infuriating to some readers. In its final chapter (cut from the film) the main character Alex decides to give up his life of gang violence, sex crimes, drugs and alcohol. He resolves instead to settle down, look for love, maybe even start a family. While imagining the eagerness with which he will be replaced in his gang hierarchy, he muses, "Power power, everybody like wants power."

Alex's observation mirrors those of Myra/Vidal. But even as Alex expresses it he is already transitioning away from this mindset and resolving to find something more in human relationships. Does the fact that Alex is making this statement at this time indicate not that he believes it, but is objectifying and othering the concept, thus suggesting that he is moving beyond it?

This contradiction in a spiritually related novel made me wonder if a similar dynamic was at work in Vidal, not so far-fetched a concept I think in a genre where denial is plenary and choices of formal

approach are constrained. Was his well-practiced patter of cynical public statements concerning power, greed, empire, love, etc. not a rubric of his viewpoints (as he let his audiences assume), but an exercise in keeping himself from being entrapped by them, of defeating their neurotic power and maintaining his distance from them?

Either this, or *Myra Breckinridge* is a work of slippery cynicism, in which Vidal fits himself for a straitjacket and then wriggles out of it and disappears leaving the reader to wonder what happened.

Or perhaps what Vidal reveals is that he both believed his cynical assertions and didn't believe them, just as he was a domesticated resident of Italy and also a participant in the dreamworld of his second home Los Angeles, as he was a man who said he didn't understand love and was the creator of Myra whose life climaxed in eloquent praise of love's glory and mystery.

The only way I could satisfy myself with reading this novel was to envision Vidal as a sort of modern Dionysian priest, empowered by his visionary authorial rituals to move between modes, to partake periodically in the madness of the gods yet not be ripped apart, given the divine grace to retreat into safe domesticity when the revels were ended. As such he acted as envoy and intermediary between worlds: able to receive visions and hear voices and then bring them back to his audience's ken, untouched, but empty.

North And South

Elizabeth Gaskell

Book Club August 20, 2023

Elizabeth Gaskell was a contemporary of Charles Dickens, and *North and South* was published in serial form simultaneously in the same periodical as Dickens' *Hard Times*. But unlike Dickens she lived and worked in Manchester with her Unitarian minister husband, and was a direct witness of the social, political and economic conflicts and outrages wrought by the industrial revolution, at Ground Zero in the era when it was working the greatest and most divisive transformations in British life.

To the author's credit, the novel is not a polemic, and she does not clearly throw the weight of her sympathy to any of the main characters. Rather, she constructs an intricate labyrinth for the leading man and lady, and forces them to thread their way through it to each other; along the way requiring each to face their deficiencies and blind spots. The resolution of the story hinges on each confronting the self-imposed circumscription of their horizons. Thus despite the epochal conflicts surrounding the protagonists, the work brings down its scope in the end to necessary human and intimate dimensions.



Elizabeth Gaskell

And that is perhaps the biggest surprise of the experience of reading it, given the broad tapestry Gaskell's discursive and armillary style weaves, as one at last perceives in the final pages the intricate trap she has set and sprung on both her lovers and the reader.

Reviewers have remarked on Jane Austen's influence on Gaskell here. Teenage Margaret Hale and mill owner John Thornton superficially resemble Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy from *Pride and Prejudice*. They meet, he falls in love, she dislikes him and dismisses his advances. And Margaret's parents seem to be living a disappointing aftermath of *Sense and Sensibility*. Mrs Hale is well-bred and was raised in London society, but marries poor Mr Hale for love and resolves to live with him in a remote rural vicarage. As her middle-aged regrets mount, Mr Hale supplies the final straw by abruptly announcing that he has resigned his position as an Anglican minister for recondite reasons of spiritual conscience.

Facing imminent poverty, they move from the south of England to Manchester, the center of British industrialization, so Mr Hale can scratch together a living as a tutor of the classics to its roughly-educated citizens. Margaret, still a dedicated Christian clergyman's daughter, is appalled at the depredations that mill work with its low wages and pollution has wrought on the city's helpless poor. Thornton is an early portrait of a spirited libertarian, always ready with passionate justifications and rationalizations for his business practices despite the damage they may do.

What appears to be a soap opera-ish discursion is introduced: Margaret's long-absent older brother Frederick returns to visit their mother at her deathbed. Frederick had been a naval officer with good prospects, but mutinied against a tyrannical captain. He has been on the run for years, not daring to set foot in England for fear of court martial and hanging. He slips into Manchester just in time to comfort his mother, but as he departs he is recognized and almost captured after a scuffle.

Meanwhile, Thornton is dealing with an impending strike at his mill, but refuses to raise his workers' wages due to what he claims are the iron laws of economics and the demands of the market. Mortal bad blood arises between him and his union-led workers, and the strike is finally nullified when Thornton brings in replacements from Ireland who are willing to work at any wage.

Thornton had been taking lessons from Margaret's father, but he ultimately gets his tutoring in the humanities when he begins to form relationships with some of his workers after seeing the misery of their conditions during the strike, even as his business spirals downward due to the interruption in production and his debts being called in.

Margaret lies to the authorities about her involvement in Frederick's scuffle and escape in order to protect her brother, and Thornton finds out about her lies. Her repulsion toward Thornton is exacerbated by her Christian remorse and guilt over her lies and what she imagines Thornton must think of her. Late in the novel she undergoes a long period of introspection and self-recrimination. During a visit to her tiny home town which in her childhood had seemed ageless, she is dispirited to see visible changes in just the few years since she has left. She muses:

I begin to understand now what heaven must be - and, oh ! the grandeur and repose of the words - "The same yesterday, today, and for ever." Everlasting! "From everlasting to everlasting, Thou art God." That sky above me looks as though it could not change, and yet it will. I am so tired - so tired of being whirled on through all these phases of my life, in which nothing abides by me, no creature, no place; it is like the circle in which the victims of earthly passion eddy continually.

This passage, as the core expression of Margaret's crisis, surprised me because of its modernity. It is exactly like the crisis pronounced in the play *Angels in America*, in which the angel Metatron demands that humanity "Stop moving!" This demand and this nostalgia are the end result of the neurotic Christian yearning for sinlessness as the only conceivable embodiment of personal integrity. For finally the only possible sinless world in the Christian worldview is a static one.

Thus the crux of the anxiety about industrialization is not due ultimately to its social or political ramifications. On the deepest level it represents (to what Orwell called 'oldbelievers') a storming of Heaven. Manchester in the novel goes by the pseudonym 'Milton', which I dare say is a reference to the poem by William Blake; which contains the lines:

And did the Countenance Divine,
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here,
Among these dark Satanic Mills?

Meanwhile Thornton is undergoing a crisis of his own, though a more positive one. He has gone bankrupt, but he is energetically trying to raise backers to restart his business with a new management approach, inspired by the empathy he learned from his workers in the last days of his previous enterprise:

I felt that I was on the right path, and that, starting from a kind of friendship with one, I was becoming acquainted with many. The advantages were mutual: we were both unconsciously and consciously teaching each other...

My only wish is to have the opportunity of cultivating some intercourse with the hands beyond the mere 'cash nexus'...

I have arrived at the conviction that no mere institutions, however wise, and however much thought may have been required to organize 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. A working man can hardly be made to feel and know how much his employer may have laboured in his study at plans for the benefit of his workpeople. A complete plan emerges like a piece of machinery, apparently fitted for every emergency. But the hands accept it as they do machinery, without understanding the intense mental labour and forethought required to bring it to such perfection. But I would take an idea, the working out of which would necessitate personal intercourse; it might not go well at first, but at every hitch interest would be felt by an increasing number of men, and at last its success in working come to be desired by all, as all had borne a part in the formation of the plan; and even then I am sure that it would lose its vitality, cease to be living, as soon as it was no longer carried on by that sort of common interest which invariably makes people find means and ways of seeing each other, and becoming acquainted with each other's characters and persons, and

even tricks of tempers and modes of speech. We should understand each other better, and I'll venture to say we should like each other more.

The term “cash nexus” above is a contemporary one used in critiques of capitalism at the time. It was used in relation to the observation that capitalism tended to drive out of the public forum any notion that humans had any obligations or social commitments whatsoever to one another, beyond mere cash transactions.¹

As Thornton is having these epiphanies in the novel's last pages, the tables have turned. Margaret has inherited significant wealth, yet she can escape neither the guilt and remorse of the lies she told about her brother (even though it was to save his life) nor the feeling that she is living under the silent opprobrium of Thornton and his family (despite the fact that Thornton, after his declaration of love was rebuffed, has resolved never to acknowledge any of his feelings toward her and limits himself to strictly correct social pleasantries).

Despite these complexities of plot and character, it turns out that everything works itself out literally in the last two pages. Margaret offers a loan to Thornton to help him restart his business... Thornton simply replies “Margaret!”... and after a few halting sentences and long silences, they fall into each other's arms and all is resolved between and within them.

But these two pages are enough for the trap Gaskell has set to be sprung, and for the key to be discovered. In the months preceding this scene, Margaret's ordeal of introspection and soul-searching made her more humble, more empathetic, more calm. It seemed like a sort of personal growth fitting for the wrap-up of a long novel. In fact something had gone terribly wrong; for in trying to resolve her feelings about Thornton she makes a conciliatory gesture in the form of a business transaction: “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.” Somewhere along the line her self-perceived sin became an unbearable burden, and to anaesthetize her feelings she let herself fall into the worldview of the cash nexus.

On some level, Thornton recognizes the poison of her offer and evades its danger. Instead, he takes to heart his own preaching about new ways to manage relationships, drops his pride and wounded feelings, and insists on a moment of purely human interaction between them, much of which necessarily (but a bit surprisingly for a novelist) takes place in silence.

And this is enough for the breakthrough. Gaskell has resolved to show that neither Christian piety nor libertarian dynamism is sufficient to address the issues of her present moment in history. She repudiates both her own religious background and her adopted hometown's guiding animus to insist on something more.

¹“Cash Payment had not then grown to be the universal sole nexus of man to man; it was something other than money that the high then expected from the low, and could not live without getting from the low. Not as buyer and seller alone, of land or what else it might be, but in many senses still as soldier and captain, as clansman and head, as loyal subject and guiding king, was the low related to the high. With the supreme triumph of Cash, a changed time has entered.” –Thomas Carlyle, *Chartism*, 1839

Speaking of *Angels in America*, I want to think the two works inform each other and help illuminate their endings. In the play, God has absconded from Heaven, causing consternation and panic among the angels. They want to entice Him back by removing the blot of sin from His creation, but they believe they can only do this by putting humanity into stasis. Humanity politely refuses this solution.

Gaskell's polite refusal of the options presented to her by her cultural milieu reflects Prior Walter's. And among the bereft and the lonely, the only remaining vision of how to bring God back is to call Him forth within the matrix of human relationships, in the form of the Shekinah – to regenerate Him as it were, in the milieu of a brave new Creation.

The Great Work begins...

Ephemera:

What news

What news, what news in this our tott'ring state?

System

“I must create a system, or be enslaved by another man’s.”

– William Blake, Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion