

# **‘For you, pollution’. The Victorian novel and a human ecology: Disraeli’s *Sibyl* and Gaskell’s *Mary Barton***

## **Introduction**

Catherine Gallagher, in *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* locates the interest of Victorian literature in its deconstruction of boundaries. Her notion of a ‘dialectical synthesis’, in the novel, between Victorian political economy and ‘the unique, nonfungible properties of things’ and ‘noninstrumental nature of people’ (2006: 1) might, in turn, inform a less dichotomous ecological theory that would substitute (broadly) romantic, deep ecology with a more dialectical understanding in which the now recognised complexity of ecological systems would extend to encompass the human realm including, ultimately, issues around environmental injustice.

Gallagher argues that, for the Victorians, political economy was not ‘a form of early industrial capitalist apologetics’ (2) but, rather, a “‘bioeconomics’”. This concept

refers to political economy’s concentration on the interconnections among populations, the food supply, modes of production and exchange, and their impact on life forms generally. In bioeconomics, “Life” is both the ultimate desideratum and the energy or force that circulates through organic and inorganic nature [...] [Bioeconomics emphasises] the natural limitations on economic activity as well as the tendency of that activity to rearrange nature. (3)

This was, in turn, articulated through and nourished by what Gallagher calls “‘somaeconomics’”, ‘emotional and sensual feelings that are both causes and consequences of economic exertions’ (3). The idea is that a Victorian sense of ecological interconnectedness, one perpetually (re)shaped by economic activity, was experienced through the body and in the mind (4). It becomes obvious, moreover, in her analysis that this somaeconomic awareness was sharpened by literature, Victorian novels that exhibited ‘stylistic, structural, and thematic manifestations’ of the bioeconomical perspective (5).

The novels Gallagher examines are the ‘Condition of England’ books, published in the 1840s and 1850s. It is my contention that this sub-genre of the Victorian novel captured the gist of current ecocritical debates that explore whether the novel is the literary form best

equipped – in terms of scope, characterisation, and narrative complexity – to tease out the intersections and ramifications of the complex ecological relationships that encompass political economy, society, nature and the human body. The essay will focus on two books, Benjamin Disraeli's *Sibyl* (1845) and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) but I will begin by discussing the recent, somewhat belated ecocritical interest in the novel.

### **Ecocriticism and the novel**

A number of arguments concerning the novel's ability to address ecological themes have emerged. The temporal emphasis might, for example, augment the more conventional ecocritical emphasis on place allowing for a sustained analysis of the emergence, evolution and impact of natural or, indeed, ecologically destructive processes (see Ryle 2000: 12). Greater emphasis on the human dimension might in itself engender consideration of humanity's environmental impact – storylines, for example, about pollution or the erosion of the countryside and green space. While this might also apply to nonfiction nature writing, the novel's stress on character and individual action allows specifically for questions about human agency both in relation to the presentation of human/nonhuman relationships and in terms of responding to fictionalised environmental issues.

An example is offered in Anthony Vital's analysis of Nadine Gordimer's *Get a Life* (2005). Describing Paul, a conservationist, seeking solace from life's demands in a walled and gated garden tended by a nameless, near invisible black gardener (see 2008: 99-104), Vital posits an impasse between the romantic convention of 'nature as a realm of attractive ahistorical freedom' and society as a shifting, contextual category in which environment and humans alike are subject to evolving historical forces that demand confrontation and engagement. Suggesting that it is the novelist's – perhaps also the critic's – duty to unpick the reality of these wider political and environmental forces, a process he calls 'rich theorizing', Vital's interest, aside from post-Apartheid South African politics, is in how the novel as a form might explore the ways in which 'people enact ecological knowledge within a social arena and within the specific textures of life that this arena affords' (99), for example the comfortable middle-class suburban and professional existence described in Gordimer's book.

Arguably the most thorough ecocritical discussion of the novel occurs, however, in Dominic Head's 1998 article 'Problems in Ecocriticism and the Novel'. Citing the philosopher and musician Arnold Berleant's premise that 'person and environment are continuous', Head suggests that 'If biological science can definitively break down the

separation between the human individual and his or her environment [...] then the implications for our modes of perception appear to be enormous' (69). Breaking down does not of course mean uniformity. Ecological theory posits, more accurately, a chain of linked but distinct species in the nature of Daniel Botkin's 'discordant harmony'. In that context, ecological representation extols the fundamental interconnectedness of species but maintains a distinctively human perspective, something Head suggests in describing 'the represented landscape' as 'a text in which human interaction with the environment is indelibly recorded' (66). On such a basis, ecological aesthetics requires 'The apparent paradox of a representation which is stylized yet referential' (67) and it is, Head indicates, the very textuality of the novel that can most do justice to such complexity. As Serpil Oppermann puts it, the novel has a unique potential to 'disclose how the discursive constructions of nature shape and condition the human valuation and understanding of the environment' (2008: 243).

To the forefront of the ecological possibilities of the novel is narrative. Ursula Heise suggests that a pragmatic, ecological necessity, the 'foregrounding of causal connections that are not immediately obvious [...] calls for at least a rudimentary, and often quite elaborate, narrative articulation' (2002: 762). Offering, as an example, the ways in which 'contemporary novelists use chemical substances as a trope for the blurring of boundaries between body and environment, public and domestic space, and harmful and beneficial technologies' (748), Heise posits narrative intervention as the way in which environmental risk is 'made intelligible to the reader'. This occurs in character positioning, narrative closure, the narrators own relation to the material etc (763).

The other obvious question which stems from this is which type of novel? Given the emphasis on discursive, textual constructions of nature, theorists not surprisingly have turned to contemporary, deconstructive forms of writing. Lee Rozelle argues, for instance, that modernist techniques of fragmentation can represent society's 'failure to find interconnectedness' (2002: 102); Heise, that fictional rendering of the 'fundamental uncertainties' intrinsic to risk societies would most likely entail experimental, non-realist narrative modes, the 'disturbance in the reading process' of, for example, postmodern fiction (2002: 756). Discursiveness and textuality are also, however, features intrinsic to the critical realist novel. For while, in a sense, mimetic, the realism in these novels is, invariably, constructed out of discordant, dialectical, contingent interconnections between humans or in relation to the nonhuman. As Vital argues, critical realism 'offers no ideological resting place' (2008: 111).

Precisely this informs the Condition of England novels. These were shaped, as the copious research in Victorian literature and science has demonstrated, by new scientific ideas, notably evolutionary theory, to the extent that, George Levine argues, even novels not directly influenced by science absorbed and tested new scientific ideas (1988: 2-3). Neither Disraeli nor Gaskell were especially interested in science, but what an increasingly ubiquitous evolutionary theory bequeathed to these novelists was a strong sense, on the one hand, of the interconnectedness of species and, on the other, of the contingency of both natural and human history. Both were seen as constructs or signs, to be contested, questioned and reconstructed, albeit, ultimately, ‘grounded in the real’ (see Sussman: 562), a fact recognised by Head in arguing that our own ecological materialism might be shaped with reference to the classic realist novel:

The emphasis on textuality, on complex reading, can easily be associated with an alienated consciousness, divorced from contact with the natural world *and so intimately connected to systems of eco-damage*. However, the detective work required in the analysis of Hardy’s and Lawrence’s nature imagery puts this in perspective. The complex layerings of these writers consciously employ a pointed textuality – the encodings and inscriptions of the represented landscapes – as an integral part of their design. The simple point is that a textualizing process, for the novel, belongs to the creative as much as the critical sphere, and that, far from producing alienation, it may indicate the necessary route to an invigorated Green materialism in literary studies. (Head 1998: 66)

My argument is that the conscious textuality of the ‘Condition of England’ novelists allowed for subtle, complex representations of the human-ecological realities governing our existence – notably, the dialectical relation of political economy, society and physical environment that Gallagher calls ‘bioeconomics’. Consequently, these novels offer a template, as follows, for the types of literature that might inform a ‘human ecocriticism’:

- Novels studied might be informed by those scientific paradigms which correspond to ecological understanding in the period under discussion;
- They should maintain some semblance of a deep ecological affinity for other species and/or the landscape/environment as a whole.

- The novel might employ a resultant sense of interconnectivity, or ecological materialism, towards diagnosing the risks posed to nonhuman and human environments alike by polluting, unsustainable economic practices. In the novels under consideration here this occurs in three ways.
  - A dramatisation of the condition of the physical environment, characterised by what Nataalka Freeland calls ‘transgressively graphic accounts of filth and waste’(2002: 799).
  - Evolution from aesthetic, *environmental* representation to deeper, scientifically informed, *ecological* modes of description.
  - An extension of both modes of analysis, particularly the second, to a consideration of the human environment.
- Investigation of the (human) causes of and responsibilities for the social and environmental conditions being described. This might entail, as it did for the ‘Condition of England’ novels (and Dickens), an exploration of elusive social connections carried out via the gradual unravelling of plot. Tina Young Choi in her essay ‘Writing the Victorian City: Discourses of Risk, Connection and Inevitability’ argues that a ‘developing tradition of literary realism’ in the novel was one of a range of new forms – others including the sanitary investigations of Edwin Chadwick, and the emergence of social statistics – by which the Victorians sought to trace and document risk (2001: 563).
- Finally, the human-ecological novel might also be characterised by the pragmatic deployment of narrative towards a presentation of the author’s preferred political remedies. The role of the individual in the novel both as (potential) victim of environmentally unsustainable processes and agent of change, is often central here, not least in the frequently eponymous ‘Condition of England’ novels.

### *Sibyl*

Gallagher writes that bioeconomics and somaeconomics ‘linked political economy to the life sciences of the early nineteenth century by concentrating on Man in nature, and on natural, corporeal Man’ (4). While *Sibyl* largely predates Darwin, Disraeli was attuned to earlier works of evolutionary science like Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* (1830) and Robert Chambers’ *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844). Prior to *Sibyl*’s publication

Disraeli wrote to Sarah, his sister, that Chambers' book 'is convulsing the world [...] and it will soon form an epoch' (*Letters*: IV, 154). In his novel *Tancred* Lady Constance recommends to Tancred the fictional 'The Revelations of Chaos', a book that

explains everything ... by geology and astronomy ... all is development ... we were fishes, and I believe we shall be crows ... We are a link in the chain, as inferior animals were that preceded us: we in turn shall be inferior; all that will remain of us will be some relics in a new red sandstone (see *Letters*: VI, 155).

*Sibyl* demonstrates, then, a sense of interconnectedness shaped in consciously evolutionary terms. Disraeli took the view that, as human history was itself a process of evolution, society was impermanent, contingent, contestable, not least in acts of textual representation (see Ulrich 2002: 4-6). This is apparent from early in the novel where Disraeli diagnoses a convergence of Whigs, Nonconformity and commerce as having bequeathed 'an extremely limited and exclusive class, who owned no responsibility to the country' (38). He regards an economy based on credit and debt as having introduced a 'loose, inexact, haphazard and dishonest' spirit into public life 'reckless of consequences and yet shrinking from responsibility' (45). Such consequences were social but also environmental, and strikingly contemporary. They include globalisation (exploitative practices and rice shortages in 'Hindostan') (108), itinerant labour (the appearance of 'himmigrants' from Suffolk) (130) – and environmental degradation.

The first, obvious example of a 'Green materialism' in *Sibyl* is, as suggested above, dramatisation of the consequences of industrialisation on the physical environment. Endowed with a Victorian sense of social responsibility, Disraeli was concerned about the veracity of his observations and gathered much of his evidence from official sources – speeches in Parliament, Edwin Chadwick's report (1842) into *The Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population*, and government Blue Books, the reports into social conditions generally carried out by royal commissions or parliamentary committees (see Fido: 268-9; 273-4). In *Sibyl* Disraeli brought to life, therefore, a compendia of systematic description, statistics and tables (see Fido 1977: 275; Smith 1966: 17).

One unique feature of *Sibyl* is that the story takes place in and around Marney, a rural town rather than an industrial city, which suggests the degree to which an industrialised mode of production permeated England as a whole. Descriptions of that environment allude to its subsistent richness:

About half a mile from Marney, the dale narrowed, and the river took a winding course. It ran through meads, soft and vivid with luxuriant vegetation, bounded on either side by rich hanging woods [...] (86)

However, Disraeli soon exposed the complexity here:

In a spreading dale, contiguous to the margin of a clear and lively stream, surrounded by meadows and gardens, and backed by lofty hills, undulating and richly wooded, the traveller on the opposite heights of the dale would often stop to admire the merry prospect, that recalled to him the traditional epithet of his country.

Beautiful illusion! For behind that laughing landscape, penury and disease fed upon the vitals of a miserable population! (80)

This initial level of description quickly gives way to a deeper, more complex, mode of analysis. While Mowbray, another nearby manufacturing town is described, aesthetically and environmentally, as ‘like all places in the manufacturing districts, very disagreeable’ (105) Disraeli nevertheless rapidly progresses towards narrating more pervasive, ecological impacts, encompassing environment, animals, humans alike: ‘You never have a clear sky. Your toilette table is covered with blacks; the deer in the park seem as if they had bathed in a lake of Indian ink’ (105). Likewise, the opening of book three describes a ‘peculiar landscape’, in which ‘a range of limestone hills’ are ‘interspersed with blazing furnaces, heaps of burning coal, and piles of smouldering ironstone’, and where ‘patches of the surface’ were ‘covered, as if in mockery, with grass and corn’ [...] ‘intermingled with heaps of mineral refuse or of metallic dross’ (177). Yet in describing this as a ‘dingy rather than dreary region’, the preference for ‘dingy’ over the more aesthetic adjective ‘dreary’ – meaning soiled, sullied, tarnished – connotes, again, in this description of a land contaminated, a deeper, ecological mode of analysis.

Disraeli also traces industry’s impact on the human population, the rarity of finding any ‘girl who has seen a flower’ (205), or the fantastically named ‘Chaffing Jack’ observing ‘I have breathed this air for a matter of half a century. I sucked it in when it tasted of primroses [...] and I have inhaled what they call the noxious atmosphere, when a hundred chimneys have been smoking like this one’ (419). This, again, more ecological mode of analysis surfaces in the example of soil erosion – “the subterranean operations [of the mining]

[...] prosecuted with so much avidity that it was not uncommon to observe whole rows of houses awry, from the shifting and hollow nature of the land” (1980 [1845]: 177) – and in a built environment incapable of providing basic standards of comfort and shelter. Cottages ‘built of rubble, or unhewn stones without cement’ are, because of the ‘badness of the material’, unable to hold together:

the gaping chinks admitted every blast [...] while in many instances the thatch, yawning in some parts to admit the wind and wet, and in all utterly unfit for its original purpose of giving protection from the weather, looked more like the top of a dunghill than a cottage. (80)

This thread of the novel, exploring the continuity of ecological impacts on the land into the human habitat, primarily centres around living conditions, sanitation and health.

Wodgate, a lawless community on the margins of the mining region, while famous for its skilled workmen, is ‘squalid’ with ‘long lines of little dingy tenements’, ‘grimy shops’, ‘alleys [...] streaming with filth’ (205). We see a ‘lank and haggard youth, *rickety and smoke-dried*’ and ‘a stunted and meagre girl’ (205). Disraeli, like Gaskell, saved his most dramatic condemnation for poor or non-existent sanitation and its most dire consequence, cholera, a personal preoccupation we see in his own increasingly alarmed responses to successive outbreaks of the disease in mid-century London (see VI, 8/8/54, 2671, pp.356-7). The flow of water in *Sibyl* carries all the horror of an ecological interconnectedness being (re)shaped by polluting industrial practice. Before ‘the doors of [...] dwellings’ subject to occasional flooding by the river or underground springs that would ‘burst through the mud floor’, there

ran open drains full of animal and vegetable refuse, decomposing into disease, or sometimes in their imperfect course filling foul pits or spreading into stagnant pools, while a concentrated solution of every species of dissolving filth was allowed to soak through and thoroughly impregnate the walls and ground adjoining.

Those wretched tenements seldom consisted of more than two rooms, in one of which the whole family, however numerous, were obliged to sleep, without distinction of age, or sex, or suffering. (80-1)

A later extract describing the alleyways and passages that branched out from the courtyard of other dwellings, offers a broader condemnation.



Gutters of abomination and piles of foulness and stagnant pools of filth; reservoirs of leprosy and plague, whose exhalations were sufficient to taint the atmosphere of the whole kingdom and fill the country with fever and pestilence. (205)

In these references to disease we see environmental conditions written not on but in the body. In a corner of the cottage described above lies a father 'stricken by that typhus which his contaminating dwelling has breathed into his veins, and for whose next prey is perhaps destined, his new-born child', a child referred to as a 'victim to our thoughtless civilization' (81). This is carried to the next level of human ecological analysis when it is placed within an environmental justice context by Walter Gerard, a factory inspector active in the Chartist cause:

'We have more pestilence now in England than we ever had, but it only reaches the poor. You never hear of it [...] This goes on every year, but the representatives of the conquerors are not touched: it is the descendents of the conquered alone who are the victims.' (215)

Consequently, Disraeli presents and assesses, in *Sibyl*, the potential political solutions.

The blame is attached to the liberal economics identified above. The solution is arrived at by Disraeli employing narrative to sift alternate social realities. Extracts of the novel hint at the 'back to nature and back to the land' elements that Peter Gould regards as having represented a false turn for a Victorian 'early green politics' (see 1988: 32-3). A description of the modestly bounteous landscape surrounding the River Mowe

A stone bridge unites the opposite banks by three arches of good proportion; the land about consists of meads of a vivid colour, or vegetable gardens to supply the neighbouring population, and whose various hues give life and lightness to the level ground (168)

offers an alliance of beauty ('vivid colour') with subsistence compounded by Gerard's nearby home, a model of modest living in harmony with nature. The house is solidly built from local materials, the stone 'common' to the Mowbray quarries; architecturally it co-exists proportionately with the environment, the windows large enough to let in light but,

‘mullioned’ and ‘latticed’, quite sturdy; orchards ‘screened the dwelling’ from the wind; the garden is of ‘no mean dimensions’ but with the potential opulence offset because ‘every bed and nook [...] teemed with cultivation’ (170). Yet the seductiveness of this Heideggerian vision is exposed, the pastoral interludes in *Sibyl* never allowed to settle, because a return to nature is regarded as insufficient to address Victorian social ills, both by Gerard himself, who becomes increasingly embroiled in Chartist activism, and the novel’s hero, Egremont. Strolling around Marney Abbey, we find Egremont, prior to his first meeting Gerard and his daughter Sibyl, enjoying a ‘perfection of solitude [...] which rendered him far from indisposed for this loneliness’ (88). Gradually, though, Egremont, ‘his sympathies [...] more lively and more extended’ (170), understands that these turbulent social and environmental crises require action and he resolves to work towards this in his capacity as a Conservative Party MP (see 169-70). The divergent political philosophies represented by these two friends are, consequently, those worked through in the novel.

A possible communitarian solution, bridging Chartism with social ecology, is advertised at length in several places in *Sibyl*. For example, Lord Marney and the local clergyman, Mr St Lys argue about the low levels of social subsistence. Attributed by Marney, a Malthusian, to overpopulation it is explained by St Lys – in the preferred reading – as due to an unfair distribution of resources (144). Communitarianism is most apparent, however, in the character of Gerard’s friend the radical journalist Stephen Morley and is articulated, intriguingly, with reference to evolutionary theory.

Early in the novel, Morley talks about an aggravated urban condition in which ‘A density of population implies a severer struggle for existence, and a consequent repulsion of elements brought into too close contact’ (95). Regretting that the population ‘are not in a state of co-operation, but of isolation’ he argues ‘It is a community of purpose that constitutes society’ (95). In a later, pivotal conversation between Stephen, Gerard, Sybil and Egremont, an essentially social ecological position seems to be accorded preference over something akin to Heideggerian deep ecology:

It is not individual influence that can renovate society; it is some new principle that must reconstruct it. You lament the expiring idea of Home. It would not be expiring, if it were worth retaining. The domestic principle has fulfilled its purpose. The irresistible law of progress demands that another should be developed. It will come; you may advance or retard, but you cannot prevent it. It will work out like the development of organic nature. In the present state of civilization and with the

scientific means of happiness at our command, the notion of home should be obsolete. Home is a barbarous idea; the method of a rude age; home is isolation; therefore anti-social. What we want is Community. (237-8)

Yet while *Sibyl* is largely 'based', M. Smith writes, 'on the idea of society as a complete organism [...] against the Benthamite view of society as an aggregate of units, individuals' (1966: 15), communitarianism was not, of course, Disraeli's central philosophy.

The trilogy of novels to which *Sibyl* belongs arose from Disraeli's involvement in a movement, Young England, that had attempted to revitalise the Conservative Party (Smith 1966: 11). Young England was characterised by paternalism, seen in its opposition to the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, support for factory reform, and campaigns for improved living conditions, better national holidays and even allotments for the working class (see Smith 1966: 12). It is epitomised in the novel by the juxtaposition between the self-governing, anarchic community at Wodgate and the paternalistic factory of Trafford who provides, we find in a long lingering description, ventilated working conditions, decent homes, good sanitation, and shares in the business, and whose workers, in contrast to those at Wodgate, are physically and morally healthy (225-6). Young England remained, nevertheless, an essentially feudal idea seeking to evolve, albeit against the tyranny of commerce, a Conservatism constituted, in 'One nation' terms, of 'nine-tenths of the people of England [...] the landed proprietors and peasantry of the kingdom' (cited Smith 1966: 10). Consequently, the communitarian position is progressively undermined in the novel. This occurs, for instance, in the initiation of 'Dandy Mick' into the trades union. Led down 'obscure lanes' and into an 'obscure chamber', Mick undergoes a ritual conducted by men 'Enveloped in dark clothes and wearing black masks, [and] a conical cap of the same colour', who denounce workers engaging in anti-union practices, and who vow to demolish 'mills, works and shops' and assassinate 'oppressive and tyrannical masters' (see 268-71). Seen, also, in the factionalism of the Chartist delegation, this is, however, engineered primarily through the gradual narrative undermining of Stephen Morley, first his arguments, then his character.

Identified as wishing 'to create the future', such purpose is instantly undercut by Sibyl when she herself expresses this 'with a kind of sigh' (210). More substantially, comes the undercutting of the long speech, quoted above. Having culminated with the rather hectoring, didactic, capitalised 'Community', this is immediately softened and patronised by Gerard's expressed preference for home-spun comforts: 'It is all very fine,' said Gerard, 'and I dare

say you are right, Stephen; but I like stretching my feet on my own hearth.’ (238). At this point the chapter ends. Then, in the next chapter, we receive a portent of Morley’s eventual discrediting when Gerard’s dog, instinctually ‘never very friendly to Morley [...] looked fiercely at him and barked’ while in contrast ‘thrust[ing] his nose into the hand of Egremont, who patted him with fondness’! (244).

Ultimately, however, Morley is undermined most fundamentally through the narrative edifice of the novel. Gary Handwerk identifies three layers of narrative in *Sibyl*: the rhetorical, political, and domestic (1988: 322-3). It is the domestic plot, Morley and Egremont’s contest for Sibyl’s heart, that wins over the political. Morley is exposed as treacherous. He has no genuine conviction for Chartism which has been functioning, rather, as a romantic expedient: ‘I have served your father like a slave, and embarked in a cause with which I have little sympathy, and which can meet with no success.’ (366), a betrayal confirmed when he refuses to assist Sibyl after Gerard is arrested. It is here where she describes Morley’s betrayal as a ‘pollution’ (368) and so, consequently, Disraeli, ‘Not content to rely on logical persuasion [...] exerts his narrative control to undercut Morley’s stance as “votary of Moral Power”’ (Handwerk 1988: 337-8). His preferred political option is embodied, rather, through Egremont – who willingly assists Sibyl and in thwarting the revolutionary attempts of the Wodgate workers to physically enforce the Charter. The novel thus concludes with Egremont’s marriage to Sibyl sealing, the idealised alliance of High Toryism with the people.

Disraeli’s viewpoint can hardly be said to have accorded with the communitarianism of contemporary social ecology or, indeed, the early green politics which, as described by Gould, evolved in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century. Yet we should not, of course, expect to find in the literature of the past, precise remedies for our own social-ecological problems. As I have argued before, we need to establish where to disconnect as well as connect with our literary and historical predecessors (2010: 240). Leaving aside doubts about its conclusion, *Sibyl* nevertheless offers a useful template for the social ecological novel, a point to which I’ll return at the end.

### ***Mary Barton***

*Mary Barton*, like *Sibyl*, was motivated by the Victorian impulse to engage with the social and environmental ills of society. ‘The more I reflected on this unhappy state of things [...] the more anxious I became to give some utterance to [...] the agony of suffering [...]’ (1985:

37-8). Seeking to raise middle-class awareness and to give voice to the working-class, Gaskell constructed a narrative patterned from the epistemologies of Victorian science. Personally acquainted with, in particular, evolutionary thinkers – though intriguingly she once had social engagements on consecutive days with the physicist Helmholtz and John Ruskin (*Letters*: 557) – including Lyell, Chambers, and Darwin, Gaskell employed a narrative mode in fact adopted from natural history to explore the interconnecting layers stratifying Victorian political economy. Coriale observes that while Gaskell satirised the classificatory aspects of natural history, in Job Legh’s obsessive ticketing of specimens (see Gaskell 1985: 406), she also returned to

an older, non-classificatory form of natural history that describes the environmental conditions that effect behaviour. That older form, which is concerned more with habits and habitats than with classification, uses narrative strategies to establish the “history” of a particular set of behaviours. Although this older form was rendered obsolete in the mid-century scientific world by increasing pressures to professionalise natural history [...] it remained alive in the form of the British novel. (Coriale 2008: 349)

That ‘older form’ was akin to the complex ‘investigation of the total relations of the animal both to its organic and inorganic environment including, above all, its friendly and inimical relations’ by which Ernst Haeckel, in 1870, would define ecology (cited McIntosh 1985: 7-8). Adapting this approach to describe human being and the human environment, Gaskell married natural history’s forensic qualities with this, more encompassing, proto-ecological analysis.

*Mary Barton* follows a similar pattern to *Sibyl* in which the physical environment is continuous with the condition of the working-class poor. Manchester’s rain, rather than ‘waken up the flowers’ leaves ‘only a disheartening and gloomy effect’; the streets are ‘wet and dirty’ (140); there is ‘black frost’. Correspondingly:

Houses, sky, people, and every thing looked as if a gigantic brush had washed them all over with a dark shade of Indian ink. There was some reason for this grimy appearance on human beings, whatever there might be for the dun looks of the landscape; for soft water had become an article not even to be purchased; and the poor

washerwomen might be seen vainly trying to procure a little by breaking the thick grey ice that coated the ditches and ponds in the neighbourhood. (81)

Environmental features – dirt, smoke, waste water – thereafter become linked to a deeper, ecological analysis of that parlous human ecosystem, epitomised through health.

One noteworthy example is when the sailor Will Wilson fancifully recounting his encounter with a mermaid describes her apparent ‘puffing’: ‘Well! You’ve heard folks in th’asthma, and it were for all the world like that’ (198). The key episode, however, is when John Barton and George Wilson visit and assist the Davenport family, reduced by their father’s fever to living in a cellar room. Earlier, Gaskell had described the (paved) courtyard in which the Barton’s lived, ‘a gutter running through the middle to carry off household slops, washing suds etc’ (ref). ‘The real horror’, Stephen Gill perspicaciously remarks, in his introduction to *Mary Barton*, ‘lies in that ‘etc’’ (476). Here, it is even worse:

[Berry Street] was unpaved; and down the middle a gutter forced its way, every now and then forming pools in the holes with which the street abounded. Never was the old Edinburgh cry of ‘Gardez l’eau!’ more necessary than in this street. As they passed, women from their doors tossed household scraps of *every* description into the gutter; they ran into the next pool, which overflowed and stagnated. (97-8 (Gaskell’s italics))

Descending to the cellar Barton and Wilson ‘penetrate the thick darkness of the place’ where ‘the smell was so foetid as almost to knock the two men down’ (98). They find ‘three or four little children rolling on the damp, nay wet, brick floor, through which the stagnant, filthy moisture of the street oozed up’ (98). The mother, ‘past hunger’, is unable to eat; the father is a ‘worn skeleton of a body’ (99-100). Wilson, having tended to the family, opens a door to find ‘a back cellar, with a grating instead of a window, down which dropped the moisture from pigstyes, and worse abominations’ and where the floor ‘was one mass of bad smelling mud’. The consequence is typhus:

‘The fever’ was (as it usually is in Manchester), of a low, putrid, typhoid kind; brought on by miserable living, filthy neighbourhood, and great depression of mind and body. It is virulent, malignant, and highly infectious. But the poor are fatalists

with regard to infection; and well for them it is so, for in their crowded dwellings no invalid can be isolated. (99)

Sketching the intimate interconnections that characterise human relationships with both the surrounding physical environment and each other, the most shocking detail occurs fifteen or so pages later with the death not of the Davenport children, who survive, but Wilson's twin boys, the linkage, Gaskell makes clear at the beginning of chapter seven, intentionally direct: 'The ghoul-like fever was not to be braved with impunity, and baulked of its prey [...] Wilson's twin lads were ill' (114). Hereafter *Mary Barton*, like *Sibyl*, becomes centrally concerned with bioeconomics, foregrounding the elusive social and political connections that shape the polluting, socially unjust Victorian city. It is brought to life via the somaeconomic dimension, characterisation, narrative and narrative positioning, that, not unlike Disraeli's, up to a point, sifts through the available political remedies.

John rather than Mary Barton is the original, eponymous hero of the novel and, to a large extent, remains so: 'Nobody and nothing was real [...] in *M. Barton*, but the character of John Barton [...] the character and some of the speeches, are exactly a poor man I know' (*Letters*: 82). Deeply anxious, nevertheless, about the class sensitivities stirred up by this, her first novel, Gaskell changed the name, elsewhere invoking 'fancy' to gloss over the documentary realism of *Mary Barton*:

I told the story according to a fancy of my own; to really SEE the scenes I tried to describe, (and they WERE as real as my own life at the time) and then to tell them as nearly as I could, as if I were speaking to a friend over the fire on a winter's night and describing real occurrences. (*Letters*: 82)

She was, at other times, more assertive in her defence of the book: 'those best acquainted with the way of thinking & feeling among the poor acknowledge its *truth*' (*Letters*: 827). In this context, John Barton remains pivotal, giving the novel a very different political flavour to the domestic narrative centred around Mary.

Near to the beginning, a description of John Barton is almost forensic in the detail with which it records Victorian social conditions written upon the body:

One was a thorough specimen of a Manchester man; born of factory workers, and himself bred up in youth, and living in manhood, among the mills. He was below the

middle size and slightly made; there was almost a stunted look about him; and his wan, colourless face, gave you the idea, that in his childhood he had suffered from the scanty living consequent upon bad times [...] (41).

Yet, belying such objectification, in the Davenport's cellar it is Barton who diagnoses and passionately articulates the environmental injustice. The factory owners' wealth is

owing to our labour: but look at yo, and see me, and poor Davenport yonder; whatten better are we? They'n screwed us down to th' lowest peg, in order to make their great big fortunes, and build their great big houses, and we, why we're just clemming [starving], many and many of us. Can you say there's nought wrong in this?

When the more conciliatory Wilson responds, saying he has heard that the factory owners have cut back too, Barton's reply is dismissive and blunt: 'Han they ever seen a child o' their'n die for want o' food?' asked Barton, in a low, deep voice' (104-5). Eventually, however, Barton too loses his job, as a result of union activities, and then his state of mind after, unluckily drawing lots, he is enlisted to murder Harry Carson, the factory owner's son. Reduced to starvation, falling 'into that heavy listless step, which told as well as words could do, of hopelessness and weakness' (251), John Barton, as the plot gradually shifts towards Mary, quite literally vanishes from the novel. His 'form', we read, near the end, 'glided into sight; a wan, feeble figure' with a 'sinking and shrunk body' (412).

An attempt to mitigate this stark characterisation and fate of the original central character comes with an attempted reconciliation of John Barton and the elder Mr Carson. Yet having prefaced an earlier chapter (nine) with a poem about the irreconcilability of the 'two nations', Gaskell had already discredited a notion further undercut by the incongruous nature of this plotline. Another potential resolution is offered through the domestic plot which concludes when Mary settles in Canada with George Wilson's son Jem, whose wrongful arrest for the murder, and late acquittal, dominates the closing chapters. Gaskell imagines the scene:

I see a long low wooden house, with room enough, and to spare. The old primeval trees are felled and gone for many a mile around; one alone remains to overshadow the gable-end of the cottage. There is a garden around the dwelling, and far beyond



that stretches an orchard. The glory of the Indian summer is over all, making the heart leap at the sight of its gorgeous beauty.

At the door of the house, looking towards the town, stands Mary, watching for the return of her husband from his daily work; and while she watches, she listens, smiling [...] (465)

Notwithstanding this idyllic description, the retreat to a pastoral dwelling place is quite obviously ambivalent. Gaskell had satirised romanticism in having one of the Carson daughters, in a house ‘heavy with the fragrance of strongly-scented flowers’, reading Emerson’s essays, ‘apt reading matter’, Gill notes, ‘for the Carson girls, concerned as they are with higher realities than starving, embittered men in Manchester’ (483). Conversely, the novel exhibits a sense, amongst its working-class characters, that ‘home’ is the city (see 418, 420). Travelling (for the first time) on a train, Mary looks wistfully back ‘towards the factory-chimneys, and the cloud of smoke which hovers over Manchester’ (343). Describing ‘cloud-shadows which give beauty to Chat-Moss’ (344) she responds, as Gaskell designates it, with ‘a feeling of ‘Heimweh’, homesickness (see 343-4) inverting the now familiar, Heideggerian sense of these terms. Similarly, Jem, anxiously prophesying both his arrest and the stain on his character that would compel exile, reflects ‘It was not a cheering feeling to remember that henceforward he was to be severed from all these familiar places’ (445). He too regards Manchester as his family’s ‘dwelling-place’ (416).

Freeland writes that ‘Gaskell’s novels have routinely been criticized for accurately identifying real social problems but then retreating to imaginary, romanticized resolutions’ (2002: 800). It is, she implies, more complex than that. Rather, novels like *Mary Barton*, confronted with the complexity of the social-environmental problems of Victorian society, ‘systematically expose their [own] inadequacy’ (2002: 800). While, as Gillian Beer writes, of this ending, we “need not pretend that the situation in England has changed for the better” (2009: 31), one can argue that, by denying easy resolution, novels of this nature confer a sense of responsibility, on their readers, to appreciate and engage with those problems (as Gaskell hoped) and then to seek out elusive remedies from their own social and political activities:

while novels such as *Mary Barton* [...] stop short of providing programmatic economic solutions to the problems they identify, they compellingly argue for the

necessity of such solutions, precisely by establishing the inadequacy of any idealised, sentimental resolutions. (Freeland 2002: 812)

From a contemporary, social ecological perspective neither novel is entirely satisfactory. *Sibyl* engineers a politically problematic solution; *Mary Barton* capitulates to the impossibility of finding satisfactory narrative resolution. Nevertheless, the interwoven plotlines and conscious narrative interventions of each of these novelists do offer useful, contrasting templates as to how contemporary literature might address ecological complexity. Disraeli provides, for those who believe it possible, a template by which the novel might provide ‘programmatically’ solutions; Gaskell exposes inherent limitations, but implies that the novel addresses, at least by implication, the conundrum raised by Gordimer (or Vital) – of the need to subject our own comfortable, professional lifestyles to (say) the stark dictates of climate change. As importantly, both take the view that ecological imperatives absolutely must not preclude compassion towards other human beings. And in that lies the utility, and heart, of the Victorian realist novel.