**‘On Not Concluding: realist prose as practical reason in Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters’***

**Josie Billington, University of Liverpool**

Abstract

This article argues that one of the hallmarks of Gaskell’s mature realism is its inconclusiveness. While traces of this disposition are visible in the author’s earliest short fiction, *The Moorland Cottage* specifically*,* it finds its fullest expression and achievement in *Wives and Daughters.* In the author’s final novel, the tendency toward not concluding is demonstrable not only in the casual inconsequentialities of plot but in the novel’s resistance to dramatic revelation or epiphanic realisation and its refusal of final ‘answers’ or knowledge in respect of causes, outcomes and meanings. Multiplicity and indeterminacy are richly intrinsic to the novel’s syntax, too, disclosing the relative density and intractability of what is always, nonetheless, a depiction of ordinary, ‘everyday’ life. I broadly compare and contrast these tendencies with the formal orientation of Gaskell’s near-contemporaries, George Eliot and Henry James, and with the late nineteenth-century movement toward modernist sceptical indeterminacy, in the work of Thomas Hardy for example. I contend that Gaskell’s mode of inconclusiveness is not only more accepting than its sceptically ironic counterparts, but (for that reason) arguably more radical and thorough-going. I argue further that Gaskell’s tough disclosure of obduracy and struggle offers a practical model for ‘thinking life’ and I connect this contention to the recent turn in critical studies towards an engaged literary humanism in place of the sceptically ideological stance of recent decades.

When, on 12 November, 1865, Elizabeth Gaskell’s life sadly ended, the novel she was writing did not, and still does not. ‘Here the story is broken off, and it can never be finished,’ wrote the *Cornhill Magazine* editor, Frederick Greenwood, who provided the end-piece to the unfinished final instalment.1 Arguably, the larger contours of the story, Molly’s marriage to Roger Hamley in particular, were already predictable and substantially foreshadowed.2 But that is not the principal reason why the reader does not feel cheated. For breaking off in the middle of life’s ongoingness – as indeed Gaskell’s own life was broken off when she was mid-sentence3 – is utterly consonant with the mode of the novel itself. This is realism, that is to say, that is pitched in the middle of life, perhaps more than any English novel of the nineteenth-century. Beginnings and endings were entirely arbitrary to Gaskell, as the original manuscript for the novel shows. There are no chapter breaks, except rarely;4 all divisions and titles were imposed either by the author herself or, more probably, by editors and compositors, at printing and proofing stage.5 Instead, there are lengthy fluent paragraphs proceeding from this writer’s immersion in life’s dense midst. The prose, like the life, just keeps going.6 But it is not simply the case that formally this novel does not ‘do’ conclusions. Rather, there are manifold ways in which this novel is not conclu*sive*.

Novelistic irresolution or inconclusiveness of the kind I will be describing in what follows has been recognized in literary criticism and theory more as a phenomenon of late Victorian realism than of the period of high realism to which Gaskell’s work belongs. The habit of George Gissing’s novels, for example, to be ‘finished without being final’7 has been regarded as a symptom of the fin de siècle turn toward sceptical or satiric realism.8 In Thomas Hardy’s fiction especially, a deep distrust of the value and viability of human goals, meanings and purposes has its literary concomitant in an abandonment of the mid-Victorian novel’s all- encompassing purchase on an envisioned ‘reality’ or ‘truth’, in favour of troubled indeterminacy in relation to final causes or teleology.9 When such proto-modernist tendencies have been traced within mid-Victorian realism, they have been confined to the mature work of George Eliot - *Middlemarch,* in particular - and have been regarded as an unintended by-product of the author’s positivist worldview. For Terry Eagleton and J. Hillis Miller, *Middlemarch* is a ‘totalizing enterprise’ - most demonstrably in its famous controlling image of the web – which, nonetheless, in its myriad incompatible and heterogeneous narratives, inadvertently discloses the inevitable failure of conclusive totalization and witnesses the deeper truth of radical incoherence. ‘The presence of [unsynthesisable] incompatible models brings into the open the arbitrary and partial character of each and so ruins the claim of the narrator to have a total, unified and impartial vision.’10 The fact that the rich multiplicity of Gaskell’s own greatest work has not been subjected to this kind of rigorous deconstruction is in part an outcome of the disregard and critical neglect into which the novel fell until the end of the last century. But it is also a result of the book’s not seeming to offer itself to critical-theoretical exegesis of this kind and even of its not appearing to *have* a ‘worldview’. There are no dominant metaphors or guiding ideas, no identifiable formal structure and no narrator magisterially in possession of the life depicted: there is simply, as the subtitle announces, ‘an everyday story’.

I have argued elsewhere, to the contrary, that what lies hidden inside Gaskell’s apparently transparent and informal realist prose, and what pre-empts scepticism, is scepticism’s opposite: belief.11 Behind Gaskell’s undiscriminating reproduction of incompatibly multitudinous forms and modes, there is an implicit Christian faith in immanent coherence or systemic order that is unavailable to limited human vision. It was an essentially religious trust, that’s to say, which left Gaskell free to dissolve into the irreducible complexity and multiplicity of the real – a kind of immersed omniscience - in tacit acknowledgement and acceptance of how the complexity goes beyond the power of formal comprehension or conclusive ideas to represent its reality. Paradoxically, what this religious trust offers to the reader, I argue here - partly via the very stamina for immersion in the ordinary which it confers - is a vision of inconclusiveness arguably tougher and more obdurately intractable than the most secular and witheringly bitter instances of late nineteenth-century or modernist sceptical irony. It is part of my contention, moreover, that while this accepting irresolution is most fully realized in *Wives and Daughters*, it is not a feature of Gaskell’s mature work only but a staple of her realism from the first. Thus I turn back first of all to an early and short work of fiction – *The Moorland Cottage*, published in 1850. Here we see the kind of intractability within ordinary real life – specifically within familial relationships – in which Gaskell’s distinctive version of inconclusiveness is characteristically to be found as a sort of embedded metaphysic.

 I choose this particular early work because the germ of *Wives and Daughters* can be traced back to it. Admired on its publication by writers as otherwise distinct as Charlotte Brontë and Matthew Arnold,12 this novella has been accepted as a blueprint for George Eliot’s fictional autobiography, *The Mill on the Floss,* ever since Swinburne drew attention to the similarities between the two, and how the early chapters of *The Mill* *on the Floss* owe, as he put it, a ‘palpable and weighty and direct obligation to Mrs Gaskell’s beautiful story’.13 But as Jenny Uglow pointed out in a footnote to her biography of Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* almost exactly repeats the character groupings of the novella written 15 years earlier.14 *The Moorland Cottage*, that’s to say, is a prior model for Gaskell’s *own* great realist (and semi-autobiographical) novel. This is one obvious way in which Gaskell’s final novel is not really itself an ‘ending’. Justly regarded as a culmination, the last and greatest exercise and display of her mature powers as a writer (‘her last book is absolutely her best’, the author’s ‘crowning work’ as contemporary reviewers abundantly and generously asserted15), *Wives and Daughters* was in many ways a *beginning*, or a kind of *renewed* beginning. In it, Gaskell both returned for the subject of the novel to the events and places of her childhood, and reprised, in maturity, material she had worked on in her early life as a writer*.* In her introduction to the Oxford World’s Classics edition of *The Moorland Cottage*, Suzanne Lewis has drawn attention to how the contrasting sister figures of Molly Gibson and Cynthia Kirkpatrick in the later novel have their prototypes in Maggie Brown, the central protagonist of *The Moorland Cottage,* and Erminia, her rival (though the situation is never so antagonistic as the term suggests) for Maggie’s lover, Frank Buxton.16 Equally, the Squire and Osborne Hamley relationship in *Wives and Daughters,* can be seen to have had its origins in the earlier novella.

 Maggie, a clergyman’s daughter, and Frank, son of the local Squire, have grown up together, fallen in love and become engaged. Though the Squire cares for Maggie (who was like a daughter to his late wife as, of course, the heroine Molly is to Mrs Hamley in *Wives and Daughters*), he is adamant that his son should make a more ambitious marriage, and the two have become locked in stubborn opposition*.* This passage occurs when Frank comes home from Cambridge before taking up his profession as a lawyer. (I follow it immediately with the ‘corresponding’ passage from *Wives and Daughters* to highlight how one is the seed for the other):

Mr Buxton was reserved with Frank for the first time in his life; and Frank was depressed and annoyed at his father’s obstinate repetition of the same sentence, in answer to all his arguments in favour of his engagement – arguments which were overwhelming to himself, and which it required an effort of patience on his part to go over and recapitulate, so obvious was the conclusion: and then to have the same answer forever, the same words even, -

 ‘Frank! It’s no use talking. I don’t approve of the engagement; and never shall.’

He would snatch up his hat, and hurry off to Maggie to be soothed. (*MC*, p. 55)

Here is the equivalent exchange from *Wives and Daughters,* between Squire Hamley and his eldest son, Osborne, who has arrived at Hamley Hall when his mother is close to death. Osborne, too, has dashed all his father’s hopes for him - in this instance by failing at Cambridge. He has also, the Squire believes, borrowed money on the expectation of what he will receive, as heir, on his father’s death. Though this is not in fact the case, Osborne, unbeknown to his father, has secretly married a Frenchwoman of no connections (an offence almost as great in his father’s eyes):

Osborne did not stand up when his father entered. He was too much exhausted, too much oppressed by his feelings, and also too much estranged by his father’s angry, suspicious letters. If he had come forwards with any manifestation of feeling at this moment, everything might have been different. But he waited for his father to see him before he uttered a word. All that the squire said when his eyes fell upon him at last was, -

 ‘You here, sir!’

 And, breaking off in the directions he was giving to Molly, he abruptly left the room. All the time his heart was yearning after his first-born; but mutual pride kept them asunder. Yet he went straight to the butler, and asked of him when Mr Osborne had arrived, and how he had come and if he had had any refreshment – dinner or what – since his arrival? (*WD*, p. 213)

The novel is called *Wives and Daughters*; but few English novels of the nineteenth century give a better account of Fathers and Sons,17 especially a father and son who, as Squire Hamley movingly puts it, are ‘out of tune with one another’, who have ‘lost one another’s language’ (*WD*, pp. 276, 365), and yet who are still in every sense, related. What the first of these quotations shows is that Gaskell was inhabiting this testing area of human relationship in some of her very earliest prose. Take the first part of that long sentence which begins the Squire and Frank Buxton passage:

Mr Buxton was reserved with Frank for the first time in his life; *and* Frank was depressed and annoyed at the obstinate repetition of the same sentence.

In a passage that is principally concerned with separations and being split apart, these are not, even so, two separate sentences; the semi-colon which separates the father and son also holds them together. So with the word which follows the semi-colon: ‘and’, not ‘but’, not a dramatic contradiction. Father and son exist, in antagonistic opposition to one another, but they do so side by side, as separate worlds within in the same world, as separate people still within the same family. They are held together in the same syntactic unit in imitation and in accepting recognition, on Gaskell’s part, of that deep and difficult family logic - distance and closeness both at once: this is family’s primary grammar. From the very first, Gaskell’s apparently transparent prose was thus registering the intricate complexities of dense middle life.

We see those tiny movements of syntax do similar work in the Squire Hamley and Osborne passage, in which, by this stage in the novel, father and son are far more estranged than their prototypes, apparently absolutely split apart, occupying entirely separate *paragraphs*, and unable it seems to find any middle-ground between the father’s suspicion and impatient anger, on the one hand, and the son’s weary resentment of that suspicion on the other. Yet still there is a deep syntax of connection: witness these two sentences, from ‘Osborne’s paragraph’ and ‘the Squire’s paragraph’ respectively:

Paragraph 1

**If** he had come forwards with any manifestation of feeling at this moment, everything might have been different. **But** he waited for his father to see him before he uttered a word.

Paragraph 2

**All the time**, his heart was yearning after his first-born; **but** mutual pride kept them asunder.

‘If … But’; ‘All the time … but’. In terms of their syntactic shapes, the sentences in separate paragraphs are loosely a mirror image of one another, registering a first impulse towards expressing feeling, and a second impulse in retreat from it. ‘Mutual’ is the explicit clue to this hidden familial grammar. The very trait that keeps them asunder – pride - is the one they share in common (like father, like son). What separates them at this moment, that’s to say, is itself an aspect of their prior kinship. The syntax has to be finer than the common human material through which it is worked – the knee-jerk response and habitual reactive behaviours of father and son – in order to keep faith with the fuller reality of each of these men’s feelings and of their relation to one another.

The relationship between these passages from the early novella and the last great novel is a sign that, in *Wives and Daughters,* Gaskell was, indeed, in some senses starting again, picking up matters which she had apparently long left behind. The difference between the two works is this: in the novella, Gaskell got one go at the rich and complex intricacy of this father-son relationship. The richness, that’s to say, is incidental to the central quasi-parabolic plot in which Maggie must choose between loyalty to Frank and loyalty to her disreputable and criminal brother. In the later work, the example given here is just one instance of a situation which is revisited over and again, the richness accumulating and rendering relations steadily worse between the pair.

Here is one brief glimpse of that deteriorating repetition, when, after Mrs Hamley has died and Hamley Hall has become a sorrow-filled place, the pair meet at the dinner-hour. Handsomely got up in full evening-dress, Osborne gives the Squire an ‘uncomfortable consciousness’ of his ‘rough black coat, drab trousers … and splashed boots’:

‘When I was a young man … I should have laughed myself to scorn if I’d stood fiddle-faddling at a glass, smirking at my own likeness, all for my own pleasure.’

Osborne reddened, and was on the point of letting fly some caustic remark on his father’s dress at the present moment, but he contented himself with saying, in a low voice, -

‘My mother always expected us all to dress for dinner. I got into the habit of doing it to please her and I keep it up now.’ Indeed, he had a certain kind of feeling of loyalty to her memory in keeping up all the little domestic habits and customs she had instituted or preferred. But the contrast which the squire thought was implied by Osborne’s remark, put him beside himself.

‘And I, too, try to attend to her wishes. I do: and in more important things. I did when she was alive; and I do so now.’

 ‘I never said you did not,’ said Osborne, astonished at his father’s passionate words and manner. (*WD,* p. 262-64)

Now it is not their feeling for one another that is holding father and son both together and apart, but their mutual love for, and suffering loss of, the dead wife and mother. The impulse they share – that of keeping up old and familiar routines, both in her memory, and for their own bereft and abandoned sakes – is what brings them together at all here (and is what involuntarily restrains Osborne’s ‘caustic remark’). It almost cannot be helped that what they share is also, simultaneously and instantly, a source of contention – so at least the prose suggests as it unfolds the further estrangement which neither one of them actually intends. For if the contrast in their manner of dress is at one level merely secondary and trivial compared with the ‘loyalty’ to the dead woman which is their primary feeling, still, it is only *within* the apparently secondary - ‘the little domestic habits and customs she had instituted or preferred’ – that that loving loyalty can be expressed at all. The conflict between the men cannot avoid, it seems, becoming snagged in the seemingly small and inessential. All the while, the point of conflict is actually born of an *equivalent* mistakenness in respect of one another’s intentions or sensitivities: ‘the contrast which the squire *thought was implied* by Osborne’s remark’ is matched by Osborne’s being ‘*astonished* at his father’s passionate words and manner’.

 The familial complexity, that’s to say, in all its unresolved richness and irresolvability is not ‘beside the point’ of the main plot of *Wives and Daughters*: these dense involvements of everyday life precisely *constitute* the plot or the subject-matter.18 It is one reason why it hardly matters that the novel does not formally end: for it is really made up of the intricate tissue of the common and everyday, with its undramatic non-endings, and intractably *in*consequential or inconclusive life matters.

 There are signs of Gaskell similarly relishing this inconclusiveness from her earliest work. Here is how the passage from *The Moorland Cottage* (quoted above) continues.

[Frank] would snatch up his hat, and hurry off to Maggie to be soothed. His father knew where he was going without being told; and was jealous of her influence over the son who had long been his first and paramount object in life.

He needed not have been jealous. However angry and indignant Frank was when he went up to the moorland cottage, Maggie almost persuaded him, before half an hour had elapsed, that his father was but unreasonable from extreme affection. (*MC*, pp. 55-6)

It is the surprise in that final paragraph which was to become so characteristic of Gaskell’s late prose. What Maggie (the father’s ‘antagonist’) does here is recover for Frank the love which deeply motivates his father’s obstinate urgings: she restores to Frank, that is, the affection which, in their mutually indignant deadlock, *the father* cannot express or cannot give, and which *the son* cannot receive or cannot accept. More, she does this entirely at the expense of her own feelings for Frank, and without reward from Squire Buxton who will continue jealous of her though he ‘needed not have been’. A kindred extra twist occurs in the ‘equivalent’ passage I quoted from *Wives and Daughters*, though it comes from within the Squire himself now:

Mutual pride kept them asunder. Yet he went straight to the butler, and asked of him when Mr Osborne had arrived, and how he had come and if he had had any refreshment – dinner or what – since his arrival?

That ‘Yet’ which contradicts Squire Hamley’s indignant pride, and announces his impulse to make sure that Osborne has been fed and is comfortable, does not really come *after* his anger but ontologically and biologically *before* it; it comes from the heart that not only *yearns* for his first-born but which cannot help this sudden and involuntary solicitude for his son’s primary needs: food, comfort. Osborne isn’t just his ‘first-born’, at this moment, but closer to his ‘just-born’: ‘and … and … and’ is the syntax here of natural instinct.

These are instances of what D. H. Lawrence might have called the ‘inconvenient’ emotions: the ones that do not fit or conform to the general plan.19 Indeed, what the novel seems to offer at such times is a version of what philosophers call *practical reasoning* as opposed, that is, to *theoretical* reasoning. In theoretical reasoning, one can generalise. Anybody who accepts such and such theoretical premises must accept such and such a theoretical conclusion. If a conclusion follows from a given set of premises, it can be drawn from any larger set containing those premises, no matter how many are added to the set. The point of theoretical reasoning is to ensure that one can never pass from true assertions to false assertions. With practical reasoning this is not so. The relationship between premises and conclusions in practical reason is not as tight or as easy to regiment. Practical reasoning is always what philosophers call *defeasible*. It is always vulnerable to another consideration that comes along, and which can invalidate the original conclusion. A pattern of reasoning which would justify a certain course of action at one point in the thinking out, would cease to justify it in the light of new considerations.20

So to give a very simple example (borrowed and adapted from Anthony Kenny).21 I need to be in London by 4.15pm. If I catch the 2.30pm train I’ll be there by 4.15. Conclusion - I’ll catch the 2.30pm train. Though this may be a reasonable conclusion from the premises first set out – I need to be there by a certain time, this train gets me there by that time - this *ceases* to be a reasonable if we add the premises that the 2.30pm will be crowded to bursting point and that I need a seat to be able to work on the train.

 *Wives and Daughters* is full of this defeasibility, the inclusion of the extra consideration which invalidates the theoretical proposition or explanation. In the passages above, for example, the conclusion that father and son are straightforward antagonists is not feasible for very long. There is nothing merely *straightforward* in this form of thinking at all, in fact. And it is as a practical ‘form of thinking’, I contend, that Gaskell’s realist prose in *Wives and Daughters* – and the realist novel as a genre – really deserves to be regarded and read. Arguably, it is the best model humans (who are not, after all, theoretical beings) really have for thinking about ordinary living.

 The passage which follows offers an example of realism’s practical thinking. But I choose it because it also helps to show how Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters* might be regarded as the quintessence, the purest form, of realism’s very *im*pure and inconclusive reasoning. All literary realism, as J.P. Stern put it long ago, is at some level dealing with the ‘rubble’, the ‘detritus’, the odds and ends left over by a fallen, agnostic or Godless world.22 But nineteenth-century literary realism tended to find a meaningful shape amid the chaotic residuum – what Barbara Hardy called ‘the appropriate form’23– often from within the experience of the individual protagonist. Typically, in the work of George Eliot, or Henry James, or Thomas Hardy, things are brought to a point or a crisis or a climax: such happenings form an ‘epoch’, to use George Eliot’s characteristic term.24 The ‘epochal’ narrative in Gaskell’s oeuvre occurred early - in *Mary Barton*’s successive crises of class conflict, murder, trial and escape, and in *Ruth’*s of seduction, secrecy, revelation and death. But from *North and South* onwards, a narrative of time’s onward drift, with its ceaseless succession of competing concerns and considerations, begins to replace a narrative of definitive event. Indeed, at the close of *Sylvia’s Lovers,* where the final page reminds that the narrative begins sixty years after the story of Sylvia and Philip Hepburn has ended, time’s unending narrative takes over from character and story, its indifferently neutral perspective effectively displacing the narrator’s imaginative engaged indiscriminateness: ‘the waves come lapping up the shelving shore with the same ceaseless, ever-recurrent sound as that which [Philip Hepburn] listened to in the pauses between life and death. And so it will be until “there shall be no more sea”’.25 Here time effectively concludes the narrative, precisely by not concluding it - by taking it on into infinity. It is tempting to ponder whether Gaskell might have intended a similarly double perspective at the conclusion of *Wives and Daughters* – the action and characters from an older world at once consigned to the distant past yet also absorbed into time’s successive continuity both within the present and as part of the ‘ceaseless, ever-recurrent’ future. Certainly, this had been Gaskell’s (thwarted) intention in relation to her mature novella *Cousin Phillis,* where the pressure of serialisation had required the author to abandon her plan of ‘concluding’ young Phillis’s classic story of the fall from innocence into experience by depicting its vital sequel and ongoing afterlife within a narrative present.26 Even the truncated ending, ‘We will go back to the peace of old days. I know we shall; I can, and I will’,27 is less transcendent epiphany than a trusting to (future) time to make amends.

Indeed, what separates the inconclusiveness of Gaskell’s mature prose from its modernist and late Victorian counterparts – and what makes it arguably more radically inconclusive than both - is its emphatic resistance to the epiphanic realisation or dramatic revelation which, almost single-handedly, helps redeem inconsequentiality and redundancy in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century fiction. No work of Gaskell’s eschews the epiphanic as demonstrably as *Wives and Daughters.* Imagine the situation depicted in this passage in the hands of George Eliot, or Thomas Hardy, or Henry James.

Mr Gibson has re-married in order to provide Molly (who is now receiving attention from suitors) with the protection and guidance of a mother figure, and his new wife, Mrs Kirkpatrick, is proving a selfish and trivial woman, whose own daughter, Cynthia, now living with the family, has been damaged by early neglect. This is some time after the marriage has taken place when the family has apparently adjusted to the change in circumstance.

On the whole, it was well that Mr Gibson spent so much of his time from home. He sometimes thought so himself when he heard his wife’s fret or pretty babble over totally indifferent things, and perceived of how flimsy a nature were all her fine sentiments. Still, he did not allow himself to repine over the step he had taken; he wilfully shut his eyes and waxed up his ears to many small things that he knew would have irritated him if he had attended to them; and, in his solitary rides, he forced himself to dwell on the positive advantages that had accrued to him and his through his marriage. He had obtained an unexceptionable chaperone, if not a tender mother, for his little girl; a skilful manager of his previously disorderly household; a woman who was graceful and pleasant to look at for the head of his table. Moreover, Cynthia reckoned for something in the favourable side of the balance. She was a capital companion for Molly: and the two were evidently very fond of each other. The feminine companionship of the mother and daughter was agreeable to him as well as to his child – when Mrs Gibson was moderately sensible and not over-sentimental, he mentally added; and then he checked himself, for he would not allow himself to become more aware of her faults and foibles by defining them. At any rate, she was harmless, and wonderfully just to Molly for a stepmother. She piqued herself upon this indeed, and would often call attention to the fact of her being unlike other women in this respect. Just then sudden tears came into Mr Gibson’s eyes, as he remembered how quiet and undemonstrative his little Molly had become in her general behaviour to him: but how once or twice, when they had met upon the stairs, or were otherwise unwitnessed, she had caught him and kissed him – hand or cheek – in a sad passionateness of affection. But in a moment he began to whistle an old Scotch air he had heard in his childhood, and which had never recurred to his memory since; and five minutes afterwards he was too busily treating a case of white swelling in the knee of a little boy, and thinking how to relieve the poor mother, who went out charing all day, and had to listen to the moans of her child all night, to have any thought for his own cares, which, if they really existed, were of so trifling a nature compared to the hard reality of this hopeless woe. (*WD*, pp. 337-8)

In a George Eliot, or a Henry James, or a Thomas Hardy novel, this might have been the moment of revelation or of self-knowledge – the point at which Mr Gibson recognises how mistaken he has been in his choice of a second wife. From such realisation, change, or growth, or defeat, would usually proceed. Typically, in these novelists’ fiction, protagonists’ forward-going narratives are brought to a stop by some happening or some discovery. The past comes back in a Hardy novel; some secret is uncovered in Henry James; some mistake or trust misplaced is found out in George Eliot. The result is that the protagonist is suddenly thrust outside of his or her life-story and made to confront that story’s meaning. But this passage toughly resists the tradition of the ‘key’ moment or point of growth.

 Firstly, Mr Gibson is not pushed involuntarily *out of* his routine life. This is a brief and fortuitous time-out from the ineluctable reality of his daily round, hemmed in as he usually is by immediate and pressing concerns of a domestic kind on the one hand – the home life he has just left - and of a professional kind on the other, the sick boy he is about to treat. The introspective reflection occurs *en passant* and in the interstices, not in a dramatic set-piece. Secondly, he initially *exploits* the distance from his life *not* in order to see or reflect upon it, but as a blessed relief *from* it: ‘it was well that Mr Gibson spent so much of his time from home. He sometimes thought so himself when he heard his wife’s fret or pretty babble over totally indifferent things, and perceived of how flimsy a nature were all her fine sentiments’. Thirdly, and most significantly, he uses the moment not to see the truth of his ‘mistake’ more clearly, but to do precisely the opposite. For it is only when thus away from his married life, not beset by many irritating small things, nor having to put energy into ‘wilfully shutting his eyes and waxing up his ears’, that he can talk himself into believing that nothing much is wrong: ‘in his solitary rides, he *forced* himself to *dwell* on the *positive* advantages that had accrued to him and his through his marriage’. This man does not want self-knowledge: ‘he would *not* allow himself to become *more* *aware* of her faults and foibles *by defining them’*. He wants to make the best of things.

The passage discloses with characteristic neutrality and equanimity the gains and losses of this strategy. For the more Mr Gibson refuses self-knowledge, the more suppressed knowledge forces its way into his consciousness, through the tiny fault lines in his assiduously adopted practical attitude:

He had obtained an unexceptionable chaperone, *if not a tender mother* ... The feminine companionship of the mother and daughter was agreeable to him as well as to his child – *when Mrs Gibson was moderately sensible and not over-sentimental*, she was harmless and wonderfully just to Molly *for a stepmother*.

Finally, the held-back knowledge – the graver thought that he has indeed made a mistake in marrying Mrs Kirkpatrick– is what erupts in the foreground of Gibson’s consciousness: ‘Just then sudden tears came into Mr Gibson’s eyes’. But even then his sudden tears do not mark a sudden *consciousness* of the change in Molly (as they might in equivalent moments in nineteenth-century realism). The tears are, we know, the stored-up emotional result of those mental additions – ‘if, not, when’ – which momentarily overwhelm him ‘as he remember[s] how quiet and undemonstrative his little Molly had become in her general behaviour toward him’. This consequence of his mistake – that he has visited suffering upon the Molly he loves and has possibly damaged his daughter - has long been known to him in a dim, shadowy, *un*defined, kind of way. Dim and undefined would not have been enough for a George Eliot, in whom the recognition or thought, ‘Have I ruined my daughter’s life?’, would be forced upon a character, for that character’s own sake. George Eliot would have made sure of the supremely significant moment of revelation, the explicit realisation, as a means of rescuing *from* failure, a thought *about* such failure. Coming to a meaningful conclusion, a point, was George Eliot’s defence against what could not be concluded or put right in any other way. What Gaskell accepts, instead, is this passing pang, this moment*ary* pain, from which Gibson all too gladly escapes into the busyness of ongoing time and ordinary duty. The pain does not *come out*: it goes back down or in: it is not purged or exorcised or concluded. On the contrary, it recurs.

So here 100 pages later, father and daughter are together alone for the first time since Mr Gibson has re-married:

 ‘It is such a comfort to have you all to myself – it makes me happy.’

Mr Gibson knew all implied in these words, and felt that there was no

effectual help for the state of things which had arisen from his own act. It was better for them both that they should not speak out more fully … but he walked away from her with a sharp pang at his heart, which he stunned into numbness as soon as he could by throwing himself violently into the affairs ad cares of others. (End of Chapter 36, *WD*, p. 419)

This is a novel in which the truth, for better or worse, is consciously not given form, not spoken, not even thought. No one has the luxury of getting it out in the open. If Mr Gibson were to speak out now – especially if he were to say to Molly, ‘I did it for you’ - that ‘coming to the point’ could only make things worse, both by letting himself off the hook at his daughter’s expense, and by an exposure of a secret truth which the precarious family harmony might not survive, now or ever. There is no optimum or right time in this novel when the truth could or should be known.

But, more than that, and perhaps above all, there is never any *final* truth to be had or told in this novel. Molly is *not* ruined. Her early experience with her father, however lost to them it might feel now, has given Molly a far better start than Cynthia has had. It is never definitely the case, moreover, that Gibson actually made a mistake in re-marrying at all. Even when young Mr Coxe - whose attentions to Molly are the principal reason for Mr Gibson finding a wife and chaperone - leaves Hollingford to become a relative’s heir soon after Gibson marries, Mr Gibson’s precautionary step is not necessarily invalidated. Another suitor might have come along. Indeed, immediately following the sad recognition of the state of things that has ‘arisen from his own act’, at the end of chapter 36 (the passage quoted above), there comes, at the beginning of chapter 37 (the immediately succeeding paragraph in Gaskell’s manuscript), this sentence:

The honour and glory of having a lover of her own was soon to fall to Molly’s share. (*WD,* p. 420)

Mr Coxe comes back – not even another lover but the *same* one - as if by a kind of natural vindication of Mr Gibson’s ‘mistaken’ re-marriage. As this novel’s sentences go seamlessly on, inclusively adding one thought or consideration to another, we cannot *feasibly* conclude anything, in relation to what is right or wrong, good or bad, true or false. This is the most fully realised and comprehensive version of the accepting relativist worldview of which glimpses were visible in some of Gaskell’s earliest fiction. One of the great achievements of this mature work is the dauntless stamina and untroubled equanimity with which *Wives and Daughters* registers the amorphous unpredictability and intractable relativism of the most ordinary human life.

For this species of indeterminacy is not the crushing kind of Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*, for example, where, likewise, there is no final word - no certainty, that is, as to what defeats all Jude’s purposes. Not knowing*,* or not having a conclusive answer, is itself part of the defeat in Hardy’s novel. Inconclusiveness, in *Wives and Daughters*, by contrast, is closer to the rich outcome of this novel’s way of thinking-out life in struggling practice, its tough-minded immersion in models of human being which are too amorphous or contradictory for static reasoning.

Tolstoy it was who, like his character Levin in *Anna Karenina*, exhausted theoretical philosophy in his impatient search for answers, and finally dismissed it all as inadequate to his needs.

[The philosophers] seemed to him fruitful when he read … But he had only … to return direct from real life to what had appeared satisfactory so long as he kept to the given line of thought – and suddenly the whole artificial edifice tumbled down like a house of cards, and it was evident that the edifice had been constructed . . . without regard for something in life more important than reason.28

Realism’s thinking, by contrast – especially the quintessential and almost indiscriminately inclusive realism of Gaskell and Tolstoy - comes as close as possible to the puzzling life from which it originates. That is why the novel, as a language and form of thinking, still offers, as I suggested, the best authentic alternative to rational secular philosophy.

There has been a welcome turn in recent literary studies towards an acknowledgement of fiction’s power to mediate experience and offer complex personal models of thought and feeling. ‘Literature is one of the places,’ says Andy Mousley, in his attempt to rescue the affective value of literature from the sceptically anti-humanist criticism which has dominated literary studies in recent decades, ‘where humanity’s grounding values and characteristics are explored, put to the test, “lost and re-found” and sometimes lost again.’29 For Brigid Lowe, the ethical insights of the Victorian novel are particularly crucial to the reclamation of an engaged literary humanism as ‘an alternative to the hermeneutics of suspicion’. The mixedness and multiple dimensions of Victorian fiction, says Lowe, ‘cannot be understood … from the anti-humanist, “distanced” perspective adopted by much recent so-called “political” literary’. Victorian novels ‘consistently and powerfully contest the notion of man as atomic and rational [and] stand up, passionately, against the brutalities of all discourse without a truly human subject’.30 For Andrew H. Miller, this ethical power and passion is intrinsic to novelistic discourse itself in the Victorian period. One of Victorian fiction’s great experiments, says Miller, was its twofold mission to ‘represent second-person relations between its characters (friendships and marriages within the novel) and cultivate in its readers diverse desires to form analogous relations with particular characters’. It is not naively over-trusting to be personally affected by character and story; it is what the novel ethically demands – its full realisation or ‘perfection’ via the imaginatively responsive act of reading.31 The implicit and inconclusive realism of *Wives and Daughters* is arguably the epitome of the realist novel’s thus seeking to finalise itself, and to have its implications completed, within the mind and life of the reader.

 For this rich and generously inconclusive prose is not only, as I have suggested, the best practical means of ‘thinking life’, as it were. This prose can ‘think’, in addition, the kind of irresolvable or impossibly complex thoughts which humans *cannot* have for themselves.32

 Look at this apparently simple little sentence, where Cynthia, out of a half-conscious awareness of how damaged she is, has suggested to her new sister, Molly, that she might as well leave home and become a governess. (I have numbered parts of the sentence to distinguish five separate movements.)

(1)‘Cynthia! What do you mean?’ asked Molly, aghast. ‘You’ve been asleep – you’ve been dreaming. You’re over-tired,’ continued she, sitting down on the bed, and taking Cynthia’s passive hand, and stroking it softly – (2) a mode of caressing that had come down to her from her mother - (3) whether as an hereditary instinct, (4) or as a lingering remembrance of the tender ways of the dead woman, (5) Mr Gibson often wondered within himself when he observed it. (*WD,* p. 344)

The five movements are these. First, there is the event at the surface of the narrative – Molly’s comforting words to Cynthia and her taking of Cynthia’s hand, and stroking it softly. Second - at that undramatic dash – there is a sudden shift away from the present to the past, or rather the ‘letting into’ the present of the influence of the past upon it – ‘a mode of caressing that had come down to her from her mother’. Moves three and four, are two possible ways in which the past has power in the present – perhaps this mode of caress is a biological inheritance *from* mother to child, perhaps it is the child’s involuntary *memory of* the dead mother’s touch. Five is that final seamless shift in which thoughts (3) and (4) belong not to an all-knowing narrator, but to the loving father and bereaved husband, who best remembers the dead woman’s tender ways, *and* in whom the witnessing of the mother in the child must be a source of delight and pain at once. The shift happens, not at ‘Mr Gibson’ but further back, unnoticed, at that ordinary connective ‘whether’. There is an extra thought here, also, which is not numbered. For the possibilities in Mr Gibson’s mind are not mutually exclusive – that touch might be *both* remembered *and* inherited.

Mr Gibson no more finally knows where his daughter’s loving touch comes from than he knows why, at the conclusion of his solitary ride, in the different context of worrying that he has hurt his little girl, he begins ‘to whistle an old Scotch air he had heard in his childhood, and which had never recurred to his memory since’. This unconscious summoning of his own child self, like the Squire’s involuntarily attending to the primary needs of his first-born, are the outcome of an imagined present so full of the past, so rich with its resonance, that it cannot finally be pinned down. And not the past alone, but death itself is the unconcluded matter in this passing sentence. Molly’s mother – whom, like Molly, we never know - is as much a subtle under-presence in this novel as, long after she has gone, Mrs Hamley comes to be. In this year which marks the anniversary of Elizabeth Gaskell’s passing, it is a poignant thought that in her latest and greatest novel, in the very writing of which she passed away, the event which apparently concludes everything absolutely is the most resonantly inconclusive of all.

 The multiplying deep family thoughts in this disarmingly simple, single sentence *belong to* these people – father, mother, daughter - and belong *only* to them. Yet those thoughts cannot be contained by any one person within this saturated situation. The father himself is not physically present at the surface event (at 1), any more than the dead mother is. It is the literary sentence alone which mysteriously brings them together even while acknowledging their apartness, like a tiny miracle. The mystery is that it is impossible to have thoughts *about* this sentence which could adequately capture all that it contains. This is why, for all that I admire Gaskell’s portrayal of Fathers and Sons - because I admire it so - it is still Tolstoy, not Turgenev, I think of when reading Gaskell. “If I were to try to say in words,” Tolstoy wrote of his great novel *Anna Karenina*, “everything that I intended to express in my novel, I would have to write the same novel I wrote from the beginning”.33 What Tolstoy’s statement really means is that the novel exists as a model for life in its over-brimming resistance to a language of explanation or conclusive answers which would be simply disloyal to its reality. That is why Gaskell’s legacy is not merely the accepting reproduction of ‘real life as it is’. As John Berger, the acclaimed contemporary novelist of real life has put it: ‘The most complex total reality which humans could once imagine was God. Realism is the attempt to grasp that totality in terms of humanity: humanity with its “stolen essence” – as Feuerbach defined God - restored to it’.34 In its undaunted capacity to hold together the amorphous inconclusiveness of ordinary experience, *Wives and Daughters* is arguably one of the first and highest examples of what ‘literary humanism’ really means and constitutes.

1. Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters*, ed. by Angus Easson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 683.
2. My thanks to Alan Shelston for suggesting to me to the contrary, however, that Greenwood’s assertion that ‘We know that Roger Hamley will marry Molly’ ignores some vital clues, especially in relation to George du Maurier’s illustrations for the serial edition, that a ‘happy ending’ was not, in fact, intended by Gaskell.
3. Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 610.
4. Chapters 3, 30 and 59 only give some indication of a chapter division: chapter titles are absent throughout (see *Wives and Daughters,* MS, Gaskell Collection 877, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester).
5. For an account of Gaskell’s tacit acceptance of changes made by the *Cornhill* editors, even where she did not directly oversee them, see Easson, p. xxix, and Josie Billington (ed), *Wives and Daughters,* Volume 10 of *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell,* ed. by Joanne Shattock (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006), p. 1.
6. I discuss the relationship of the form of Gaskell’s prose in *Wives and Daughters* to the movement and tempo of the life depicted in ‘The Characteristic Syntax’, Josie Billington *Faithful Realism* (Lewisburg; Bucknell University Press, 2002), pp. 50-67.
7. Wendell V. Harris, *British Short Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979), p. 22. See also, Barbara Rawlinson, *A Man of Many Parts* (New York: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 2, 46, 155-6, 168-9.
8. See, for example, Aaron Matz, *Satire in an Age of Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 37-104.
9. See J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982),pp. 116-46.
10. J. Hillis Miller, ‘Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*’ in Jerome Buckley (ed.), *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp., 125-45, p. 144. See also Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (London: New Left Books, 1976; new edition, Verso, 2006), pp. 110-125.
11. See *Faithful Realism,* pp. 97-108 and *Wives and Daughters*, 2006, pp. xxii-xxiv.
12. Arnold was reported to have been moved to tears by the story (see Uglow, p. 252) and Charlotte Brontë described the story as ‘fresh, natural, religious’, Letter to Elizabeth Gaskell, 4 January 1851, *The Brontës; Their Lives and Correspondence,* 4 vols,ed. T. J. Wise and J. A. Simmington, (Oxford; Basil Blackwell, 1933), III, p. 194.
13. Algernon Charles Swinburne, *A Note on Charlotte Brontë* (1877)*,* in *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by David Carroll (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 164. I discuss the relationship between *The Moorland Cottage* and *The Mill on the Floss* in Josie Billington, ‘Reading and Writing Short Fiction: Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot’, *Gaskell Society Journal,* 29 (2015), 24-36.
14. Uglow, p. 646.
15. *Manchester Examiner and Times* and *The Spectator* quoted *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Angus Easson (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 468, 474-5.
16. Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Moorland Cottage and Other Stories*, ed. by Suzanne Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. xii-xiii.
17. For discussion of the possibility that *Wives and Daughters* (1865) ‘was intended as a reference to *Father and Sons’*,(published by Turgenev in 1862), see Patsy Stoneman, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (Manchester: Manchester University press, 2006), p. 112. For a comparison of Gaskell’s writing with ‘Turgenev’s lyricism’, see Martin Bidney, ‘Philosophy and Victorian Literary Aesthetic’ in William Baker and Kenneth Womack, *A Companion to the Victorian Novel* (London: Greenwood Press, 2002), pp. 99-108, p. 107.
18. I have argued elsewhere that Gaskell, in her last novel, found the most congenial context for these subtle intricacies of life in the small, quasi-feudal community in which she grew up and in the classical social unit of the family: *Wives and Daughters,* ed.by Josie Billington, Volume 10 of *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell,* ed. by Joanne Shattock (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006), pp.viii-ix.
19. D.H. Lawrence, *Study of Thomas Hardy and Other Essays,* ed. Bruce Steele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 202.
20. Adapted from Anthony Kenny, *Will, Freedom and Power* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), pp. 43, 91-96, 115-117.
21. *Will, Freedom and Power,* pp. 91-2.
22. J. P. Stern, *On Realism* (London: Routledge and & Kegan Paul, 1973),p. 171.
23. In Hardy’s critical work of that name, *The Appropriate Form: An Essay on the Novel* (London: Athlone, 1964).
24. See, for example, George Eliot, *Middlemarch,* ed. by David Carroll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 208, 788.
25. Elizabeth Gaskell, *Sylvia’s Lovers,* ed. by Andrew Sanders (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 502.
26. Gaskell sketched this expanded ending in a letter to her publisher George Smith, in December 10 1863, while she was writing what came to be the final number of *Cousin Phillis*. It comprises ‘a last scene long years after’ in which Phillis, recovered from the breakdown she suffers after she learns of her émigré lover’s marriage to another, is carer to her bedridden mother and the adoptive mother of children orphaned by typhus fever in the distant village which she has taken as her home: see John Chapple and Alan Shelston (eds). *Further Letters of Mrs Gaskell* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 259-60.
27. Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cousin Phillis*, ed. by Heather Glen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 244.
28. Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. by Aylmer Maude (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 782.
29. Andy Mousley, *Literature and the Human: Criticism, Theory, Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 9.
30. Brigid Lowe, *Victorian Fiction and the Insights of Sympathy: An Alternative to the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (London: Anthem Press, 2007), p. 241.
31. Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008) pp. 77-8, 82.
32. I develop this idea more fully (in relation to Tolstoyan realism) in *Is Literature Healthy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 32-44, (‘Unthinkable Thoughts’).
33. R. F. Christian, (ed & trans) *Tolstoy’s Letters,* 2 vols (London: Athlone Press), vol 1, p. 296.
34. John Berger, *Art and Revolution* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd., 1969; repr. London: Granta Books, 1993), p. 52. Berger refers Ludwig Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity* (1841; translated by George Eliot, as Marian Evans, 1854) which argues that God was an expression of humanity’s highest needs and aspirations objectified as a transcendental being.