**Working-Class Methodism and Eschatological Anxiety in Elizabeth Gaskell’s Fiction**

ABSTRACT

This article details how Elizabeth Gaskell engages with the spiritual and political implications of millennialism, or the belief in the thousand-year messianic kingdom on earth (based on Revelation 20:1-6). After introducing Gaskell’s engagement with the increased interest in millennialism and huge growth of working-class Methodism in the early nineteenth-century, and the later burgeoning of the Methodist Unitarian Movement, I offer some analysis of four texts that she published between 1848 and 1855: *Mary Barton* (1848), ‘The Well of Pen Morfa’ (1850), ‘The Heart of John Middleton’ (1850), and *North and South* (1854-55). In each, Gaskell models different responses to understandings of millenarianism in working class communities: while some characters adopt an other-worldly hope, others use the language of revelation and apocalypse to challenge hierarchy and the ordering of society. I suggest that the tension that Gaskell identifies between these different understandings enables her to carve out a vision of radical Christianity that has at its heart eschatological ideas that carry the promise of the transformation and renewal of this world along with an urgent call to action.

In Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1854-55), middle-class protagonist Margaret Hale advises Bessy Higgins, a working-class Methodist girl who is dying from lung disease caused by inhaling the ‘fluff’ from carding in a cotton-mill, not to be ‘impatient with [her] life’.[[1]](#footnote-1) Rather than dismissing Bessy’s longing for heaven as a impatience with life, a rejection of the world or, as her father understands it, as something that ‘amuses her’ (*NS*, p.90), I suggest that it should instead be understand in the context of Gaskell’s wider representation of working-class Methodists and her engagement with early to mid-nineteenth debates about eschatology (understood here as the disclosure of divine mysteries that are to do with the future). In this article, I explain how Gaskell engages with the spiritual and political implications of the hope that the biblical promise of renewal will be ultimately attained on earth. I also suggest how, for Bessy and many of Gaskell’s other working-class characters, Christ was not understood simply as moral exemplar (as he was for many Unitarians) but as an Apocalyptic figure in whom they are bound up and in whose life they will ultimately participate. Extending Robert Kachur’s recognition of how Gaskell uses ‘theApocalypse to envision expanded roles for women’ not just within the church but ‘within society at large’, my readings highlight some of the ways in which her fiction attends to the way in which the growth of Methodism among working-class communities accentuated the inseparability of spiritual and temporal (including gender and class) egalitarianism.[[2]](#footnote-2) My focus is on four texts that Gaskell wrote between 1848 and 1855: *Mary Barton* (1848), ‘The Well of Pen Morfa’ (1850), ‘The Heart of John Middleton’ (1850), and *North and South* (1854-55). In all of these, Gaskell engages with the prevalence of Methodism in working-class communities and its strong association with an eschatology that carries the promise of the transformation and renewal of this world along with an urgent call to action.

In a letter that Gaskell wrote to her friend Eliza Fox in 1850, she expresses her conflicted sense of self as she describes her ‘many mes’, or the ‘warring members’ of her own identity.[[3]](#footnote-3) The first of her ‘many mes’ she identifies ‘is a true Christian’; only, she adds in parenthesis, ‘people call her socialist and communist’ (ibid). Rather than expressing a conflict between the terms Christian, socialist, and communist – as Deirde D’Albertis suggests – what I think Gaskell is doing here is reflecting on how the ‘true Christian’ can be mistaken for a ‘socialist and communist’ because of a shared commitment to social justice and change.[[4]](#footnote-4) This perception associates her with a tradition of Christianity that, according to Christopher Rowland, offers a language of hope rooted in ideas of revelation and apocalypse to those who experience the reality of ‘oppression, poverty and dehumanizing attitudes and circumstances’.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Before turning to Gaskell’s fiction, I want to attend to her response to what Judith Wolfe describes as the ‘renewed interest in millennialism, particularly in its pre-millennial form’ that ran through the whole spectrum of Protestant churches in the nineteenth century.[[6]](#footnote-6) Wolfe explains:

Millennialism – also called millenarianism (from the Latin for ‘thousand’) or chiliasm (from the Greek equivalent) – denotes the belief, based on Revelation 20:1-6, that a thousand-year messianic kingdom on earth will precede the general resurrection and the creation of a new heaven and earth. Pre-millennialism specifies that Christ himself (rather than, as for post-millennialism, a divinely appointed human leader) will inaugurate this messianic kingdom, i.e., that Christ’s return will precede rather than post-date the millennium.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In her fiction, Gaskell acknowledges the huge social and political implications of the belief that the millennial life of peace is continuous in kind with earthly life. The crux I identify – where her Unitarianism meets the radical strands of working-class Methodism and John Wesley’s millennialism – is in the commitment to a theology that is practically implemented because of an understanding that the ‘true Christian’ (see above) must imitate Christ and actively bring about the renewal of the world. While a Unitarian might see this renewal in terms of the revelation of the ultimate perfectibility of human life, many Methodists might understand it in terms of initiating Christ’s return. As Gaskell demonstrates in her fiction, responses to understandings of millenarianism in working-class communities could be especially fraught. While some adopted an ‘other-worldly’ hope and passively accepted their earthly sufferings, others found in Christianity a call to challenge hierarchy and the ordering of society.

That many of Gaskell’s working-class characters are Methodists is indicative of the rapid growth and huge prevalence of Methodism among the working-classes in the early to mid-nineteenth century.[[8]](#footnote-8) In *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963),E.P. Thompson offers what has become one of the most well-known accounts of working-class dissent*.* He describes how, in the evangelical revival, Primitive Methodism (which emerged in the early 1800s) worked as ‘the religion *of* the poor’ while orthodox Wesleyanism remained as ‘a religion *for* the poor’.[[9]](#footnote-9) In accounting for what he perceives as the way in which Wesleyan Methodism acted as a politically ‘stabilising’ influence and prevented a revolution among the working-classes in England in the 1790s, he looks back to the defeat of the Levellers in the Commonwealth (p.45). He argues that ‘when the millennial hopes for a rule of the Saints were dashed to the ground, there followed a sharp dissociation between the temporal and spiritual aspirations of the poor man’s Puritanism’ (p.32). Thompson then considers the effect of Gerrard Winstanley’s ‘movement of feeling’, turning away from the ‘“kingdom without” to the “kingdom within”’ (ibid). After describing how John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678) became, along with Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* (1791), ‘one of the true foundation texts of the English working-class movement’ (p.34), he attends to its focus on the after-life and on its reminder that ‘faith in a life to come served not only as a consolation to the poor but also as some emotional compensation for present sufferings and grievances’ (p.37). In his book, *Radical Christianity* (1988), Rowland offers a more nuanced picture of Winstanley’s legacy. He suggests that while Winstanley himself expressed despair at the failure of the Digger commune, his concern for inner transformation provided a resource for a ‘silent project against the status quo’ when it was the ‘the only strategy available to those who sought to keep alive the flame of radical protest’.[[10]](#footnote-10) Following this recognition, he explains how figures including William Blake inherited something of the hope for a complete structural change and the ‘radical protestantism of Winstanley’s generation’ and drew on it to speak out against the ‘oppression materialism’ of the age (p.114).

Thompson identifies the ‘millennarial instability within the heart of Methodism’ as a key factor in accentuating the dissociation between temporal and spiritual aspiration. This dissociation was, he claims, fueled by the way in which the Wesleys encouraged masochism and ‘morbid deformities of “sublimation”’ among working class communities.[[11]](#footnote-11) He cites from the Wesleys early hymn in order to highlight their ‘customary millennarial imagery’:

Erect Thy tabernacle here,

The New Jerusalem send down,

Thyself amidst Thy saints appear,

And seat us on Thy dazzling throne.

Begin the great millennial day;

Now, Saviour, with a shout descend,

Thy standard in the heavens display,

And bring the joy which ne’er shall end. (Qtd, p.52)

While Thomson cites the hymn in order to prove Methodist otherworldliness, seen in the emphasis on the ‘saints’ and on Christ’s ‘dazzling throne’, the call for the ‘tabernacle’ of God (cf. Revelation 21.3) to be ‘erected here’, and for the ‘millennial day’ to begin ‘now’, can be seen to point to a continuity between earthly life and millennial life. Gaskell engages with the instabilities of this language of millennialism when she critiques the way it was used as tool of oppression in being made to point to a wholly future hope that legitimizes working-class suffering by seeing it in terms of a necessary but brief prelude to heaven. As part of her critique, she incorporates into her fiction alternative perspectives that use eschatological and millennial language to imagine how an egalitarian society might look in the future.

Scholarship on Gaskell and religion has largely concentrated on her Unitarianism. Although no Unitarian characters appear in her fiction, Michael Wheeler comments on how her method of biblical allusion follows a ‘uniquely Unitarian contour’ and R.K. Webb traces how Unitarian concerns can be seen ‘in the dynamics of her narratives and in her comments upon her characters actions.’[[12]](#footnote-12) While there remains more to be said about Gaskell and Unitarianism, I suggest that a more nuanced understanding will emerge if the presence of Methodism in her fiction is also scrutinized. Such an undertaking is key in unpacking her critique of the particular type of compensatory and passive pre-millennialism that Thompson decries. It is also central in an analysis of her engagement with the interface between the eschatological vision of the millennium and positive social action in transforming society for the better.

Scholars have largely missed the presence of Methodism in Gaskell’s fiction. It is likely that this is because of the apparent incompatibility between its emphasis on enthusiasm with Unitarian principles of rational thought. In their introduction to religion and literature in the nineteenth century, Mark Knight and Emma Mason comment on how the division between Evangelicals and rational Dissenters was accentuated in the late eighteenth-century by the emphasis that George Whitefield and John Wesley put on the ‘religion of the heart.’[[13]](#footnote-13) The following lines from Wesley’s hymn, ‘For the Mahometans’ is testament to the outrage that many Methodists subsequently came to feel at the Unitarians refusal to believe that Jesus was the son of God:

Stretch out Thine arm, Thou Triune God

The Unitarian fiend expel,

And chase his doctrine back to hell.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In her book, *Romanticism and Methodism* (2017), Helen Boyles details the ever-widening division that Knight and Mason outline and explains that ‘Methodism’s simpler evangelical genesis presented a contrast to the critical literacy of Rational Dissenting sects like the Quakers and Unitarianism’ and was distinguished from them by its ‘broader accessibility.’[[15]](#footnote-15) Nonetheless, she identifies some points of connection when she considers the way in which sometime Unitarians Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Hazlitt remained receptive to the ‘emotional inspiration’ of the culture of religious Evangelicals even if they could not accept the tenets of Methodism (p.182). In his book on Gaskell, Angus Easson charts Gaskell’s increasing dissatisfaction with what she termed ‘dogmatic hard Unitarianism’ and aligns her with the ‘revival of an emotional strain in Unitarianism’ that was encouraged by James Martineau and that was given further impetus when ‘some Methodist congregations came over to Unitarianism.’[[16]](#footnote-16) As I indicate in my reading of Gaskell’s fiction, a sympathy for the warmth and the devotion of the Methodists is repeatedly combined with a stress on the tolerance of Unitarianism to offer the most promising vision of Christianity.

For the most-part, the fiction that Gaskell wrote between 1848-1855 is set in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century: a time that saw schisms and splintering groups within both Methodism and Unitarianism. It centers primarily on working-class communities who were typical in their practice of a version of Christianity that was ‘at variance with the official versions on offer from the churches.[[17]](#footnote-17) This version of Christianity, Gerald Parsons explains, ‘had little or no time for doctrine or dogma […] What did matter was practical Christianity, the morality of the Bible, the ethical discipline of the Ten Commandments, and the ethics of the Sermon of the Mount and the parable of the Good Samaritan.’[[18]](#footnote-18) While scholarship has addressed Gaskell’s representation of this ‘practical Christianity’ among working class communities, the predominant focus on her Unitarianism has meant that little has been said about how it is, particularly for her Methodist characters, informed and characterized by an eschatological and millennial hope and described in language of emotional and affective inspiration.

It was partly through her friendship with Travers Madge that Gaskell witnessed what Easson describes a ‘cross-fertilization’ of working-class Unitarianism and Wesleyan Methodism.[[19]](#footnote-19) This cross-fertilization gained ground among working-class Christians whose practices of faith were at ‘variance with the official versions’ (see above). It had first come about when, after being expelled by the Methodist Conference in 1806 for propounding heretical views, Joseph Cooke formed a new movement in Rochdale that, over time, became associated with Unitarianism. Many Chartists and social reformers were associated with the Rochdale chapel and, as Herbert McLachlan explains, it played a huge part in the development of the early co-operative movement.[[20]](#footnote-20) Madge, a regular visitor to the Rochdale chapel, entered Gaskell’s circle when he became acquainted with her husband William as one of the first students of Manchester New College in 1840. As his biographer Brooke Hertford explains, Gaskell remained an ‘always willing helper in all his good work’ and contributed to the *Sunday School Penny Magazine* he established for the ‘thousands of children [from] poor homes.’[[21]](#footnote-21) Through the outreach work Madge undertook as a student and as a Unitarian Mission Visitor, he was especially drawn to rural congregations such as those in in the Rossendale villages on the outskirts of Manchester which had, like the Rochdale congregation, begun as Wesleyan but had then moved over to Unitarianism. In detailing Madge’s spiritual journey, Hertford stresses how these congregations, ‘who had come out from the *doctrines* of Methodism while retaining its best *spirit* and *life*’ modelled true Christian brotherhood to him.[[22]](#footnote-22) In what follows, I suggest that Gaskell invokes and interrogates the ‘best *spirit* and *life*’ of working-class Wesleyan Methodism in her fiction in order that she might show the outworking of practical Christianity while also pointing to an eschatology of renewal and transformation.

1. ***MARY BARTON***

In Gaskell’s first novel, *Mary Barton*, it is the poorest character, Ben Davenport, who stands as the representative of devout Methodism. We are introduced to him in Chapter 6 when he is dying of typhus fever. The chapter is given the title ‘Poverty and Death’ and Gaskell uses a poem, termed a ‘Manchester Song’, as the motto. It begins:

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| How little can the rich man know  Of what the poor man feels,  When Want, like some dark dæmon foe,  Nearer and nearer steals![[23]](#footnote-23) |
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The emphasis through the poem – on the complete lack of perception by the ‘rich man’ of the feelings and experiences of the ‘poor man’, who not only knows starvation himself but must hear his children cry out for bread – echoes the message of the Preface in which Gaskell stresses how the poor interpret indifference and neglect by the rich as ‘injustice and unkindness’ (*MB*, p.3). The paragraphs that follow the poem set out the stark contrast between the repercussions of the fire at John Carson’s mill for the Carson family who could enjoy more leisure time, and for the families of the workers for whom ‘leisure was a curse’ (*MB*, p.56). Among the workers at this time of trial, we are told that ‘[t]here was Faith such as the rich can never imagine on earth; there was ‘Love strong as death’; and self-denial among rude course men’. The narrator continues: ‘The vices of the poor sometimes astound us *here*; but when the secrets of all hearts shall be made known, their virtues will astound us in far greater degree. Of this I am certain’ (*MB*, p.57; italics in the original). The eschatological perspective that is introduced here – through invocation of 1 Corinthians 14.25’s vison of an afterlife of complete knowledge – invites the assumed middle-class readers (‘us’) to prepare to have their understanding of working-class communities turned upside down.

The virtues of the poor, and the problems that can arise when they are stretched in times of extremity, are illustrated through the self-sacrificial service of John Barton and George Wilson as they care for Ben Davenport and his family. As Lesa Scholl explains, it is Barton’s ‘attitude of sacrifice’ that leads to his own destruction, ‘with his opium addiction gaining strength as he refuses to accept financial help from the Union, claiming that others require it more than him, even though he himself has nothing.’[[24]](#footnote-24) It is important, Scholl comments, that Barton ‘originally tries not to be *interested*’ in Davenport’s plight; ‘yet he destroys himself through his extreme lack of self-interest’ (ibid; italics in the original): he cannot help but be self-sacrificial here. After witnessing the desperate poverty in which the Davenport family lived, Barton pawned all the valuables he had left in order that he might purchase the necessities that would give ‘food, light, and warmth’ (*MB*, p.59). He then went to seek medical advice from a druggist.

The description of Barton’s experience, as he made his way through the ‘hurrying crowd’ towards the druggist (*MB*, p.61), echoes the reflection Gaskell offers in the Preface when she describes how the genesis of the novel came from a wonder at the ‘romance in the lives of some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets of the town in which I resided’ (*MB*, p.3). With the words that describe Barton’s errand, ‘he could not, you cannot, read the lot of those who daily pass you in the street’, there is an eliding of voices between Barton, the narrator, and the reader (*MB*, p.61). The realisation of the separateness of bodies – of ‘he’, ‘you’, and ‘those’ – comes through pain: the pain of being elbowed and the pain of the individuals encountered. We are told of the pain of ‘the girl desperate in her abandonment, […] and bringing itself to think of the cold-flowing river as the only mercy of God remaining to her here’ (foreshadowing the fate of Esther Barton); of the pain of ‘the criminal, mediating crimes at which you will to-tomorrow shudder with horror’ (foreshadowing John Barton’s later actions); and the pain of ‘one, humble and unnoticed’, who will shortly be in Heaven and ‘in the immediate light of God's countenance’ (foreshadowing Ben Davenport) (*MB*, p.61-2). What is significant here is that the reader is invited to a renewed perception of each individual as he or she stands in a relationship with God: as an individual with inherent dignity. The implication is that such a perception should transform one’s action in the present.

The dialogue between Wilson and Barton about Davenport models an empathy with another’s suffering that goes beyond surface appearances. Wilson had worked with Davenport at Carson’s factory and first describes him to Barton – as they watch him cursing and swearing in agony and delirium – as ‘good but too much of the Methodee’ (*MB*, p.58). The most revealing glimpse we get of Davenport as a pious Methodist belies the way in which he is represented as desperate in his sickness. Wilson recollects the letter that Davenport wrote to his wife while tramping to find work and, in response to Barton’s question, "Han yo known this chap long?”, tells him:

"Better nor three year. He's worked wi' Carsons that long, and were alway a steady, civil-spoken fellow, though, as I said afore, somewhat of a Methodee. I wish I'd gotten a letter he sent his missis, a week or two agone, when he were on tramp for work. It did my heart good to read it; for, yo see, I were a bit grumbling mysel; it seemed hard to be spunging on Jem, and taking a' his flesh-meat money to buy bread for me and them as I ought to be keeping. But, yo know, though I can earn nought, I mun eat summut. Well, as I telled ye, I were grumbling, when she (indicating the sleeping woman by a nod) brought me Ben's letter, for she could na read hersel. It were as good as Bible-words; ne'er a word o' repining; a' about God being our Father, and that we mun bear patiently whate'er He sends." (*MB*, p.63)

From this letter, it seems that Davenport had responded to the type of ideologically orthodox teaching that Thompson identifies as preventing revolution: the teaching that exhorts workers to understand their experiences as lessons in patience and resignation. Davenport’s dying prayer, ‘Oh Lord God! I thank thee, that the hard struggle of living is over’, reinforces this perspective (*MB*, p.69). However, the narrator’s aside that ‘the trump of the archangel’ would eventually ‘set his tongue free’ is indicative of the lesson that, however much their voices are dismissed and their ‘lamentations and tears are thrown aside as useless’ (*MB*, p.4), the voices of the oppressed will, one day, be heard. Gaskell indicates that it is only when they are heeded that any authentic transformation of society can happen.

Barton refuses to accept the idea that suffering on earth is something that must be endured as a momentary prelude to heaven and acknowledges the rationale that spiritual egalitarianism gives for political subversion. In response to Wilson’s account of Davenport’s letter, he asks: ‘Don ye think He's th' masters' Father, too? I'd be loath to have 'em for brothers’ (*MB*, p.64). Following Wilson’s retort that there must be ‘many a master as good or better nor us’, Barton asks: ‘How comes it they're rich, and we're poor? I'd like to know that. Han they done as they'd be done by for us?’ (ibid). On his death-bed, Barton explains how the disjunction between Jesus’s teaching that ‘whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them’ (from Matthew 7.12), and its practice by masters claiming to be Christian, led him to give up both trying ‘to make folks’ actions square with the Bible’ and ‘following th’ Bible mysel’’ (*MB*, p.358). Shortly afterwards, John Carson appears and witnesses Barton in death’s throes. The words of the Lord’s Prayer that he utters, ‘Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us’, signify the coming together of the two men as fellow men in need of salvation (*MB*, p.359). Such a coming together signals the new ordering of society that Christianity calls for.

1. **‘THE WELL OF PEN MORFA’ AND ‘THE HEART OF JOHN MIDDLETON’**

After reading *Mary Barton*, Charles Dickens decided that Gaskell would be an ideal writer to come on board with his new journal. He wrote to her in January 1850 requesting that she ‘write a short tale, or any number of tales’ for his new two-penny weekly and commenting, ‘I do honestly know that there is no living English writer whose aid I would desire to enlist in preference to the authoress of *Mary Barton* (a book that most profoundly affected & impressed me)’.[[25]](#footnote-25) Gaskell responded with ‘Lizzie Leigh’, which Dickens included as the lead story in the first issue. She then sent him ‘The Well of Pen-Morfa’ and ‘The Heart of John Middleton’ later that year.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Thomas Recchio suggests that the optimism and faith in human sympathy that Gaskell expresses in the Preface to *Mary Barton* ‘is made explicit and extended in Dickens’s “A Preliminary Word.”’[[27]](#footnote-27) While there are certainly echoes of Gaskell’s Preface in Dickens’s ‘A Preliminary Word’, I perceive a sharper divide in the way in which the two authors come to a place of hope for the future. Whereas Gaskell asks the reader to contemplate – in all its horror – the ‘agony of suffering’ that the working classes must so often endure (*MB*, p.3), Dickens calls on the Romance tradition when he asks the readers of *Household Words* to lift their gaze from the ‘grim realities’ of life.[[28]](#footnote-28) In the paragraphs that follow, I suggest how, in ‘The Well of Pen Morfa’ and ‘The Heart of John Middleton’, Gaskell introduces Methodist characters as mouthpieces of a radical Christianity which calls for a unflinching contemplation of suffering and a subsequent re-imagining of how society might be changed and transformed. This version of Christianity stands in contrast to any approach that asks readers to look for comfort above or beyond the problems of the world. While Dickens, when reading ‘The Heart of John Middleton’, expressed his ‘wish’ that ‘[Gaskell’s] people would keep a little firmer on their legs,’ Gaskell demonstrates through her fiction that the only way to imagine a better future is to confront suffering and death in its rawest moments.[[29]](#footnote-29)

‘The Well of Pen Morfa’ is set in North Wales at the end of the eighteenth century. In it, a widow’s daughter Nest Gwynn becomes engaged to a local property owner who quickly calls off the engagement after she is permanently injured after slipping in the frost while collecting water at the well. In her disappointment at her suitor’s disregard for her, we are told that Nest ‘turned away from cold reason’ and ‘bound her sorrow tight up in her breast, to corrode and fester there’ (TW, p.206). It is not until she meets and receives advice from an elderly Methodist preacher, David Hughes, that she begins to embrace a life of reason and look outwards (TW, p.207). David had been converted from a life of slave-ownership by John Wesley and subsequently became part of ‘the earnest, self-denying, much-abused band of itinerant preachers, who went forth under Wesley’s direction to spread abroad a more earnest and practical spirit of religion’ (ibid). Nest’s recognition of his humility and willingness to suffer alongside others leads her to ask for his advice at a point of desperation. In response to Nest’s expression of agony, David tells her:

Henceforth you must love like Christ; without thought of self, or wish for return. You must take the sick and the weary to your heart and love them. That love will lift you up above the storms of the world into God’s own peace. The very vehemence of your nature proves that you are capable of this. I do not pity you. You do not require pity. You are powerful enough to trample down your own sorrows into a blessing for others; and to others you will be a blessing. (TW, p.208)

Nest’s complaint to her mother that ‘I wish had died when I was a girl, and had a feeling heart’ is shown to be faulty when David revives her emotion and opens up the possibility of another path in the same way that John Wesley had opened a new path for him (TW, p.206). Nest’s response to David’s prophetic words is to take in Mary Williams, a helpless girl described as a ‘poor wandering idiot’; this act enables her to receive and give love (TW, p.208). At the end of her life, she expresses a transformed memory of youth. The well that is by the house called ‘The End of Time’ is the place in which she finds ‘immortality, instead of her fragile perishing youth’ (TW, p.209). The story ends by stressing the huge change that Nest’s love brought to Mary Williams. The ripple effects of the practical and Christ-centered religion that was taught and expressed by Wesley and his followers is thus shown to have a longevity in the community of Pen-Morfa.

In ‘The Heart of John Middleton’, the ‘practical spirit’ of Wesleyan Methodism is juxtaposed against the teaching of the Calvinist Primitive Methodists, or ‘Ranters’ as they were known. The story is written as a spiritual autobiography and set in Lancashire at the end of the eighteenth century. Through it, the protagonist John Middleton traces the operation through his life of ‘the golden filmy thread’ that signified God’s mercy (TH, p.326). After encountering Nelly as an adolescent and being taken aback at her gentleness and kindness, he sets himself on the path of improvement and learns to read and write. After eventually marrying Nelly, who had lost the use of her legs after shielding him from the blow of a stone thrown at him by his oppressor and rival Dick Jackson, the son of the factory overseer, he struggles to maintain his family when the demand for workers remains low. While his family are starving, he prays ‘for the second coming of Christ’ so that their troubles would be over (TH, p.330). It is at this point of finding the world ‘too cruel, and hard, and strong’, and of fighting the temptation to ‘lead a wild, free life of sin’, that he first attends some hill-side preaching (TH, p.330-1). Here, he is moved by the fervent and passionate preaching. It is not long after this that ‘religion’ becomes for him a ‘a life and a passion’ and he becomes ‘zealous and fanatical’ in fasting and ‘an ascetic in bodily enjoyments’ (TH, p.332). John’s commitment to ‘religion’ – rather than to love and compassion – comes to a crisis when Dick Jackson returns as a convict coming back before his time.

It is only when Nelly sends their aptly named daughter Grace to him with the words of Christ as he is about to take vengeance on his long-standing enemy that he comes to embrace Christ’s teaching of forgiveness and reconciliation. His mission, taken up after Nelly’s death, ties him with David Hughes of ‘The Well of Pen Morfa’: ‘I try to go about preaching and teaching in my rough, rude way; and what I teach is how Christ lived and died, and what Nelly’s faith of love’ (TH, p.334). So, rather than praying for Christ’s second coming, he begins to work to actively usher in the golden age of the millennium through practical religion: a version of Methodism that brings the transformation that leads to renewal for the individual and community. Gaskell can be understood to be endorsing here, as her friend Madge had done, the ‘*spirit* and *life*’ of a theology that is practical and that provides a vision of transformation and change (see above).

1. ***North and South***

*North and South* was first published in 20 weekly instalments in *Household Words* between September 1854 and January 1855.[[30]](#footnote-30) In it, Gaskell recalls ‘The Heart of John Middleton’ when she has Margaret use her body a shield to protect Thornton from a stone. While Margaret is not permanently injured by it, she is shown to have a more substantive body than Nelly’s that, through the novel, is described as bleeding and fainting. In their allusion to Christ’s words on the cross to his attackers (‘Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do’, Luke 23.34), Margaret’s words to the workers who throw the stone, 'For God's sake! do not damage your cause by this violence’, render her a Christ-like figure of wisdom (*NS*, p.179).[[31]](#footnote-31) Margaret is the voice of truth and reason through the novel. Her godfather Mr. Bell’s jest that she had become ‘a democrat, a red republication, a member of the Peace Society, a socialist – ’, reaffirm Gaskell’s association between being a Christian and being a socialist (see above) (*NS*, p.330).

Kachur explains that, by the time Gaskell was writing *North and South*, the book of Revelation

had not only helped to shape public discourse about labor-management disputes, but had reinforced its highly polarized nature. On the one hand, middle-class writers associated with established, mainline churches tended to characterize discontented workers as agitators preparing the way for the antichrist; on the other, working class writers associated with fringe religious movements tended to characterize unyielding capitalists as oppressors acting out antichrist-like tyranny.[[32]](#footnote-32)

In his analysis of the novel, Kachur stresses how, as a Unitarian woman, Gaskell uses Apocalyptic allegory as a means through which to address class and gender inequities. The novel’s most recognizable engagement with interpretations of Revelation comes in the conversations that Margaret has with Bessy. After expressing a desperate anger at the differences that she perceives between her life and Margaret’s seemingly easy and untroubled life, Bessy exclaims that she is ‘very wicked’ before reassuring Margaret that she does have faith in God (*NS*, p.101). She tells her:

‘I believe, perhaps, more than yo’ do o’ what’s to come. I read the book o’ Revelations until I know it off by heart and I never doubt when I’m waking, and in my senses, of all the glory I’m to come to.’ (*NS*, p.102)

When, in a later conversation, Margaret suggests that, instead of ‘dwell[ing] so much on the prophecies’, Bessy might ‘read the clearer parts of the Bible’, Bessy asks where else would hear ‘such grand words of promise’ (*NS*, 137). While Margaret learns from and is ‘attracted and interested’ by the way in which the Higgins family discuss Bessy’s approaching death, she critiques Bessy’s use of the promises in Revelation to rationalise her own suffering (*NS*, p.73).

As she had done in *Mary Barton*, Gaskell identifies unity, prayer and a shared purpose as the surest means by which Revelation’s promises might be realized in this world. Following Bessy’s death, she describes the moment when Nicholas Higgins, Bessy’s father, joins Margaret and her father in their prayers:

'I reckon it's time for me to be going, sir,' said Higgins, as the clock struck ten.

[…]

'Stay!' said Mr. Hale, hurrying to the book-shelves. 'Mr. Higgins! I'm sure you'll join us in family prayer?'

Higgins looked at Margaret, doubtfully. Her grave sweet eyes met his; there was no compulsion, only deep interest in them. He did not speak, but he kept his place.

Margaret the Churchwoman, her father the Dissenter, Higgins the Infidel, knelt down together. It did them no harm. (*NS*, p.233)

Through this understated moment of coming together in prayer, the recognition of family is widened. All are shown to be striving after the same thing: unity, reconciliation, justice and mercy for the forsaken. It is a sentiment expressed by F.D. Maurice, Gaskell’s friend and one of the founders of Christian Socialism, in a series of nine sermons delivered in 1848 on the Lord’s Prayer. In the first, he emphasizes the importance of joining with the community of believers in prayer. ‘The name Father’, he comments, ‘loses significance for us individually when we will not use it as the members of a family.’[[33]](#footnote-33) Alongside a recognition of the danger of individualism in faith, Maurice perceived the potential of millennialism to drive the transformation of society, commenting: ‘I think that the Millenarians are right […] when they bid us think more of Christ’s victory over the earth and redemption of it to its true purposes, than of any new condition into which we may be brought when we go out of the earth.’[[34]](#footnote-34) I want to point here to how Gaskell’s identification of the ‘*spirit* and *life*’ in Wesleyan Methodism that Madge had so admired comes about in her fiction through a focus on community and on the shared drive among her characters to transform society.

Although my focus in this article has been on Gaskell’s engagement with Methodism in her mid-century fiction, there is scope for considering further her continued, albeit less pronounced, engagement with it in her later work. For example, in *My Lady Ludlow* (1858), Gaskell introduces Mr Grey, the local minister who had the reputation of being a ‘Moravian Methodist’, and his efforts for increasing the provision of education for working classes.[[35]](#footnote-35) The novella ends with the establishment of a school and Harry Gregson, the son of a notorious poacher, as the spiritual leader of the community (p.77). Gregson’s appointment as vicar of Hanbury signals the move from a spiritual to a temporal egalitarianism where social class is permeable. Such a move, as in all the texts discussed in this article, is shown to be significant for renewal. It is a mistake to confine discussion of Gaskell’s representation of the outworking of ‘practical religion’ to a focus on her Unitarianism, however important this specific context is. Instead, I want to suggest that future work might consider in broader terms her engagement with the eschatological discourse that was prevalent in the nineteenth century. It is, I argue, the gradual realisation of Kingdom of God, as understood in the progressive pre-millennialism of Wesley’s later work and of early nineteenth-century Methodism, that coheres with Gaskell’s vision of what true Christianity involves. As seen in her characters’ and narratives’ attention to the practical and social implications of working as agents in bringing about the Kingdom of God, where peace is established, and hunger eradicated, Gaskell’s vision is more radical than it has been given credit for and has at its heart a concern with the convergence of spiritual and temporal equality.

1. Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1855] 2008), p.102; p.90. Subsequent references are to this edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Robert M. Kachur, ‘Elizabeth Gaskell, Gender and the Apocalypse,’ in *Reinventing Christianity: Nineteenth- Century Contexts,* ed. by Linda Woodhead (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), pp.211-29 (p.211). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ### *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. by J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Mandolin, 1997), p.108.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Deirdre D’Albertis, ‘The Life and Letters of E.C. Gaskell,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*, ed. by Jill L. Matus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.10-26 (p.15). Gaskell’s letters express her engagement with Christian Socialism from its outset and her interest in the work and ideas of Charles Kingsley, John Ludlow, and F.D. Maurice. See, for example, a letter of 1850 where she discusses the new ‘series “on Christian Socialism” proposed to be issued by the writers of ‘Politics for the People”.’ *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p.105. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Christopher Rowland, *Radical Christianity: A Reading of Recovery* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1988), p.152. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Judith Wolfe, ‘Eschatology,’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century Christian Thought*, ed. by Joel D.S. Rasmussen, Judith Wolfe, and Johannes Zachhuber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). Web. DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198718406.013.36. pp.1-22 (p.3). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Wolfe, p.8. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For more detail on the growth of Methodism among working-class communities, see Gerald Parsons, ‘From Dissenters to Free Churchmen: The Transitions of Victorian Nonconformity’, in *Religion in Victorian Britain*, vol. 1, ed. by Gerald Parsons (Manchester: Manchester University press, 1988), pp. 67-116. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Thompson, E. P., *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, Kindle Edition [1968] 1980), p.41. Italics in the original. Subsequent references are to this edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Rowland, p.113. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Thompson, p.52; 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Michael Wheeler, ‘Elizabeth Gaskell and Unitarianism,’ *The Gaskell Society Journal* 6 (1992): 25-41, p. 25; R.K. Webb, ‘The Gaskells as Unitarians,’ in *Dickens and Other Victorians,* ed. by Joanne Shattock (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1988), pp. 144–71 (p.161). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Mark Knight and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Quoted in Knight and Mason, p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Helen Boyles, *Romanticism and Methodism: The Problem of Religious Enthusiasm* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, pp. 136; Angus Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 8, 10. For more on Gaskell’s relationship with James Martineau, see: John Chapple, ‘Unitarian Dissent’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*, ed. by Jill L. Matus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 164-177 (p.168-9). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Gerald Parsons, ‘A Question of Meaning: Religion and Working-Class Life’, in *Religion in Victorian Britain*, vol. 2, ed. by Gerald Parsons (Manchester: Manchester University Press in Association with the Open University, 1988), pp. 63-87 (p. 77). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Parsons, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Easson, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Herbert McLachlan, *The Methodist Unitarian Movement* (Manchester: The University Press; London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1919), p. 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Brooke Hertford, *A Protestant Poor Friar: The Life-Story of Travers Madge* (second ed; Boston, Mass.; Damrell and Upham, [1867] 1892), p. 65; 63. Gaskell published ‘Hand and Heart’ in the *Sunday School Penny Magazine* in five parts in 1849, and ‘Bessy’s Trouble at Home’ in four parts in 1852. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Hertford, p.87. Italics in the original. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1848] 2006), p.55-6. Subsequent references are to this edition. Shirley Foster explains that ‘as Ward and other editors notes, the unidentified ‘Manchester Songs’ were probably provided by William Gaskell. They are used as a further means of suggesting regional authenticity, although they are not the locally produced verse of the urban working class’ (p.416, n.5). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Lesa Scholl, *Hunger Movements in Early Victorian Literature: Want, Riots, Migration* (London: Routledge, 2016), p.60. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *The Letters of Charles Dickens*. Vol. 6, 1850–1852. ed. by Graham Storey, et al. (Clarendon Pilgrim, 1998), 6.21. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. ‘Lizzie Leigh.’ *Household Words* vol. 1, 30 Mar. 1850, pp. 1–6; vol. 1, 7 Apr. 1850, pp. 32–35; vol. 1, 13 Apr. 1850, pp. 60–65; ‘The Pen of Well-Morfa.’ *Household Words* vol. 2, 16 Nov. 1850, pp. 182–86; vol. 2, 23 Nov. 1850, pp. 205–10; ‘The Heart of John Middleton.’ *Household Words* vol*.* 2, 28 Dec. 1850, pp. 325–34. Web: <https://www.djo.org.uk>. Subsequent references are to these versions. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Thomas Recchio, *Elizabeth Gaskell’s Cranford: A Publishing History* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Charles Dickens, ‘A Preliminary Word.’ *Household Words* vol. 1, 30 Mar. 1850, pp. 1–2 (p. 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *The Letters of Charles Dickens, 6.238* [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Gaskell’s dissatisfaction with the compression of the novel in *Household Words* has been well documented. Her 1855 2-volume novel differs substantially from the serial issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. For a longer discussion of this scene and on the figuration of Margaret as a Christ figure, see Jo Carruthers, ‘The Sanctity of Our Sex”: Refiguring the Fallen Woman and the Passion of Christ in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1854-1855)’ in *The Figure of Christ in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Elizabeth Ludlow (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. will add page refs at proof stage [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Kachur, p.211. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Quoted in *Literature and the Bible: A Reader,* ed. by Jo Carruthers, Mark Knight, and Andrew Tate (London, New York: Routledge, 2014), p. xvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Quoted in Wolfe, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Elizabeth Gaskell, *My Lady Ludlow* (New York: Harper, 1858), p.10. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)