



重訪伊莉莎白·蓋斯凱爾的《北與南》： 一部女性遊記

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摘要

本研究旨在重新閱讀伊莉莎白·蓋斯凱爾(Elizabeth Gaskell)的小說《北與南》(*North and South*)，視其為一部女性遊記。小說敘述女主角瑪格麗特從英國南方鄉村遷移到北部工業大城；之後返回出生地，又再遷居至倫敦。女主角的移動——流離——其實是一種現代性的經驗。然而，流離不見得只有負面意涵。一方面，女主角的流離動搖了「家」做為旅行終點的觀念；另一方面，蓋斯凱爾呈現女主角的能動性，挑戰旅行為男性專屬的特權。從瑪格麗特的旅行敘事中，讀者能見識到她與當地不同階級的人互動。本文結論為：瑪格麗特因為經歷家鄉變化，而體認到田園式的家園無法外於現代化過程。她的歸屬感是多元的，在於她離家的能動性，移動的經驗使她重新繪製家的認同。

關鍵字：遊記、女性能動性、流離、「反」家命題。



Revisiting Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*: A Female Travelogue

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Abstract

This essay attempts to re-read Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* as a female travelogue. In the course of the novel, Margaret moves from the south to the north, from the rural idyll to the industrial town, then returns to the country, and later (temporarily) settles in the metropolis, London. The heroine's experience of movement is actually an experience of modernity: a sense of dislocation. Dislocation, however, should not be viewed as negative in its literal sense. On the one hand, Margaret's dislocatedness, as the consequence of her travel, destabilizes the established concept of home as the end-point of one's departure. On the other hand, Gaskell's representation of Margaret's mobility undermines the notion that travel is a masculine project, a privilege that excludes women's participation. Through Margaret's travelogue, we readers witness her interaction with the local people of different classes. The essay concludes that Margaret, with the experience of witnessing her hometown's transformative development, comes to realize that Helstone is not immune to the process of modernization. Her plural senses of belonging lie in her mobility to travel from the home, and through the



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experience of moving she remaps her identity in transit.

Key Words: travelogue, female mobility, dislocation, anti-home motif.



Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* is undoubtedly one of the important Victorian texts that have drawn much attention from feminist criticism. Roughly speaking, feminist critiques of this novel usually revolve around the two major issues. One deals with how the heroine, Margaret Hale, develops her own female agency in mediating the class conflict between the capitalist, John Thornton, and his factory workers.¹ Margaret's effort to alleviate their antagonism, although just bringing about a temporary suspension of class hostility, is interpreted by feminist critics as a "political action," an act—albeit motivated by the heroine's individual love to protect Thornton—that takes her to the public realm of social forces.² Obviously, such a feminist theme about Margaret's significant role as a female class mediator is still discussed within the traditional frame of "industrial fiction" whose class agenda is often observed by Marxian critics like Raymond Williams.³

Besides the former approach that treats Margaret's feminine power in class negotiation, the other critical reading, having appeared recently, is that her participation in social affairs has challenged the strict ideological division of private/public spheres in the Victorian period (Elliott 1994; Harman 1988; Mann 1975; Nord 1995; D'Albertis 1997). The essays by Nancy D. Mann, Barbara L. Harman, Dorice W. Elliott, Deborah E. Nord and Deirdre D'Albertis temporally range from 1975 to 1997, and this indicates that the study of the novel's female transgression of domestic ideology has become an academic trend over the last three decades. Their concern is principally focused on the female protagonist's mobility outside the realm of home, a place that restricts women's role as "The Angel in the House"—the title

¹ Hilary M. Schor, "Gender Politics and Women's Rights," in *A Companion to The Victorian Novel*, ed. Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 178-79.

² Schor, 179.

³ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958), 91-92.



of Coventry Patmore's poem. These critics have all agreed that Margaret's intervention in the workers' strike and her solitary visit to the working-class family in an unfavourable condition are the proofs that she destabilizes the notion that women are "naturally" domestic figures within the home territory, while the public realm is the appropriate site for men to exercise their intellect in social activity regarded as masculine. In this issue of the heroine's mobility on the streets, *North and South* is thus regarded more as an "urban fiction," which represents how Victorian women lack the access to the city's open space, than as an industrial novel which is too burdened with class politics.

The above feminist critics affirm Margaret's mobility outside the home which is ideologically and materially "feminized." By emphasizing her transgression of the domestic/public binarism, they, however, narrowly limit the interpretation of her mobility to only a back-and-forth movement between her home and the streets (including the labourers' neighbourhood). These critics tend to be so concerned about Margaret's public exposure in the Milton-Northern⁴ episodes, which manifest her urban experience of non-domestic activity, that they fail to pay heed to her moving routes outside the city. That is, in many critics' analyses of Margaret's violation of domestic ideology, her particular practice of journeying between the country and the city is, as it were, rendered absent from their argument. Such a city-oriented examination of her entrance into the public urban space may risk neglecting other possibilities of her moving experience. In my view, the heroine's mobility should also contain her experience of travel, that is, the larger scale of her movement in England: she migrates from the south to the north, from the rural idyll (Helstone) to the industrial town

⁴ Milton-Northern, although a fictional city in the novel, actually refers to Manchester. Manchester often appears in Gaskell's novels as the main setting. One example is her first work, *Mary Barton*, in which the major events take place in this city.



(Milton-Northern), then returns to the country, and later temporarily settles in the metropolis, London. My viewpoint about Margaret's realization of mobile agency is supported by Wendy Parkins's "Women, Mobility and Modernity in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*" (2004), one of the latest critiques which firstly relate Margaret's mobility to women's modern experience of travel. Inspired by Perkins's insight, I see that the novel's travel narrative should be discussed beyond the previous debate of private/public division, because such a debate merely attends to Margaret's movement between home and the streets in the episode of her stay in Milton. Instead of repeating the earlier study of female presence in the public arena, I will connect Margaret's migrations at different times (from the south to the north, from the country to the city), and relate all these spatial movements as the parts of her travel narrative.

Therefore, this essay aims to reread *North and South* as a travelogue, since the perspective that the novel as a whole is constituted by travel narrative is overlooked by most critics except Parkins. Briefly speaking, in her analysis Parkins argues that it is the drive of modernity that results in the emerging phenomenon of "dislocation,"⁵ and that the modern experience of dislocation is a predominant motif explored in Gaskell's novel. The meaning of Parkins's use of dislocation is more positive than we may suppose, inasmuch as she sees travel, mobility, and migration as ineluctable experiences of displacement, so that sedentarism in pre-modern times becomes less possible. She emphasizes that in Gaskell's novel

immobility is not an option; like the most strident celebration of modernity, *North and South* makes clear that stasis equates with death and that a certain degree of mobility

⁵ Wendy Parkins, "Women, Mobility and Modernity in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*," *Women's Studies International Forum* 27 (2004): 507.



and change is inevitable in modern life. . . . [The novel] seeks to find a solution to how to be at home—physically, ethically, emotionally—in a modernity characterized by mobility.⁶

In *North and South* it seems that no character can remain in stasis by resisting modernity's drive of mobility, and such a drive varies in different forms practiced by each character. The first kind of mobility which constitutes the novel's major plot is Margaret's enforced migration propelled by Mr. Hale's renouncement of his clerical position in Helstone and by his decision to take a tutoring job in Milton-Northern. This migration from the south to the north is not merely a geographical movement, but also a transition from one life mode to another. The travelling route from Helstone to Milton maps the heroine's alteration from an "aristocratic" country life, in which she is distanced from "people whose occupations have to do with land," to a more turbulent city life where she loses her gentry status for the reason that she "[lives] in the middle of factories, and factory people."⁷ Of course, another kind of Margaret's small-scale mobility within Milton's streetscape should also be noted, since it is her subjective and voluntary act to expose herself to the public sphere which has been exclusively considered as males' territory.

The second type of mobility can be exemplified by the tourism made by the Shaws, a bourgeois family in London. Edith Shaw (Margaret's cousin), upon her marriage to Captain Lennox, spends a time of sojourn with her mother, Mrs. Shaw, on an Mediterranean island, Corfu, where her husband serves for the British army. Here Gaskell's portrayal of Edith's tourist voyage can be interpreted in two senses. On the one hand, Edith's "gay new life" that

⁶ Parkins, 513.

⁷ Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (New York: Norton, 2004), 72, 19, 43.



is filled with “boating or land picnics” and “pleasure-seeking”⁸ activities marks a sharp contrast to Margaret’s more worry-laden life in the industrial town. Such a contrast between Edith and Margaret in their different forms of movement actually implies their class difference: the former is capable of a tourism-oriented journey which the later cannot afford. On the other hand, the narrative of Edith’s trip is underlain by the hidden theme of England’s imperial expansion without which the material condition for her and Captain Lennox’s mobility would not be possible.

The third is Frederick Hale’s (Margaret’s elder brother) exile from England and his expatriate stay in Spain as his political refuge. His forced dislocation is caused by his involvement in the mutiny against the captain’s tyrannical rule on a British ship during his service in the navy. And in a broader sense, Frederick’s émigré—although Gaskell makes it an incidental (perhaps unnecessary?) subplot to Margaret’s story—suggests that his rebel against his British superior cannot be read only as a personal act; rather, the episode of his exile hints that he has once participated in England’s imperial project under which he develops his travel narrative. His long voyage to “South America” and later to “Cadiz”⁹ in Spain conveys that his exilic movement takes place against the background of Empire’s rise (although Gaskell’s insufficient details of Frederick’s expatriation make her attitude toward Empire very ambivalent). And by comparing Frederick and Captain Lennox, we can see that they are both mobile male subjects due to the fact they are involved in the workings of Empire.

Putting altogether these diverse forms of mobility, we can say that *North and South*’s

⁸ Gaskell, 62.

⁹ Gaskell, *North and South*, 101.



inclusion of different travel narratives (all of which occur simultaneously) displays the fact that “the paradigmatic modern experience is that of rapid mobility over long distance.”¹⁰ Yet, it should be noted that the characters’ mobility is not neutral but gender-based: Margaret’s movement to the north under her father’s decision seems to be her particular feminine experience of redefining the meaning of home, and by contrast, Captain Lennox’s and Frederick’s travels are more adventure-like, showing masculine attributes of individual enterprise (such as Frederick’s acquisition of a better social position in the foreign country, Spain, while he is an outlaw for the British government). Despite such gendered practices of mobility, it is still appropriate to read *North and South* as a female travelogue in which the main story of Margaret’s mobility has other minor travel narratives for comparison. That is, her state of being a female mobile agent must be interpreted in the context that the other characters are also undergoing a certain form of moving.

When reading *North and South* as a travelogue, we have to begin with novel’s questioning of the established travel-versus-home binarism. Conventionally speaking, movement/mobility is often contrasted with the concept of home which is “represented as fixed, rooted, stable—the very antithesis of travel.”¹¹ To say that home and travel are in an antithetical relation suggests that the former provides security and self-identity, while the latter represents instability and the lack of rootedness. Even though home may become “a site of departure,” it nevertheless will be “a point of arrival” which finally fulfills the promise of “homecoming.”¹² However, such an interpretation of home and travel is actually a practice of dualism, as Rosemary M. George argues. She points out the oppositional fallacy that

¹⁰ David Morley, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000), 13.

¹¹ R. Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 2.

¹² Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), 5.



“[h]omes and nations are defined in the instances of confrontation with what is considered ‘not-home,’ with the foreign, with distance [and with movement/travel].”¹³ Correspondingly, the recurring motif in *North and South* is also to challenge the traditional presupposition that home is a familiar “base, a source of identity even more than a refuge . . . the goal of all the voyages of self-discovery.”¹⁴ The novel, as a text affirming modern women’s mobility, undermines the inveterate concept that home is a fixed point, waiting for the end of travel as the destination of movement.

It may seem odd for some reviewers why I propose that the novel may “deconstruct”—to use a postmodern verb—the dualist concept of travel and home. For them, the novel’s characters, although having been set in motion in the age of modernity, nevertheless express a strong desire to come home after experiencing a sense of uncertainty and rootlessness. They are inclined to think that the home is the central site for one individual’s identity-formation, and that it provides the fatigued traveller with spiritual rejuvenation. Such an assumption can be found in W. A. Craik’s argument in which she contrasts Milton’s disagreeable characteristics to the desirable qualities of Helstone—a homeland waiting for Margaret’s final return. Craik opines that

Helstone [is] the place Margaret thinks of as home. Her brief stay there, before she is ousted by Mr. Hale’s giving up his living and leaving the Church of England, renders its enchantment through the eyes of the enthusiastic and enchanted Margaret, and allows it both to exist in its own right, and to function as an extention [sic] of her nature.

¹³ George, *The Politics of Home*, 4.

¹⁴ Andrew Gurr, *Writers in Exile: The Identity of Home in Modern Literature* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester, 1981), 13.



Because it does so, it can reveal and establish her connections and disunities with others. It is “the place where Margaret grew to what she is”. . . .

During Margaret’s stay in Milton, Helstone is recalled in contrast, by allusion and recollection. Bessy Higgins sees it in imagination from Margaret’s descriptions, and connects it in her mind with the Heavenly Jerusalem of the Apocalypse. Thus Helstone becomes more remote and idealized, even though Margaret occasionally acknowledges its drawbacks. . . .¹⁵

Actually, Craik’s view about Margaret’s idealization of the south riskily repeats the mythology of home, according to which home “symbolises ‘an end to questing, to wandering, to trouble—home is closure; the arrival [there] brings the story to an end . . . return signals . . . escape from misadventure . . . [to the safety of] the domestic hearth, coded female.”¹⁶ And the paradox is: Margaret, after the bereavement of her both parents in Milton, indeed returns to Helstone—a place that reminds her of “the old picturesqueness, the old gloom, and the grassy wayside of former days”¹⁷—but this return is nothing but a short stay which hardly serves to fulfil the conventional meaning of homecoming. Gaskell’s arrangement of such a revisit to the motherland, ironically, rewrites beyond the previous tradition that going back home after a long and weary itinerary resembles the wandering Adam’s rediscovery of Eden, a regaining of paradise lost. On the contrary, Margaret’s travel back to London near the end, following the revisit to Helstone, gives us a new concept that even what is called home may just become an in-transit point for next journey, not the destination.

¹⁵ W. A. Craik, *Elizabeth Gaskell and the English Provincial Novel* (London: Methuen, 1975). 114-15.

¹⁶ Morley, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity*, 65.

¹⁷ Gaskell, *North and South*, 358.



The established notion that homecoming marks an end point of travel is reversed in *North and South*. The first two chapters inform us that Margaret has been already on her way from London to Helstone, yet, ironically, Gaskell renders this journey back home not as the heroine's settlement but as a starting point of her later departure to the unfamiliar Milton. In a sense, the opening London scene (in chapter I) functions as Gaskell's affirmation of female mobility. First of all, the London setting is where Margaret attends her cousin's wedding, and Gaskell here presents Edith's marriage not in conventional terms; that is, she does not depict marriage as changing Edith into an "angel in the house."¹⁸ Interestingly, Edith's passage into wifehood is not to position her within the domestic sphere, but offers her a prospect of travelling. In a private conversation with Margaret, Edith talks about

Captain Lennox, and what he had told Edith about her future at Corfu, where his regiment was stationed; and the difficulty of keeping a piano in good tune (a difficulty which Edith seemed to consider as one of the most formidable that could befall her in her married life), and what gowns she should want in the visits to Scotland, which

¹⁸ The opening London scene is generally interpreted as a setting where two cultures, respectively represented by the country girl, Margaret, and the bourgeois Edith, are compared. Many critics tend to hold that the two women's contrast displays the different modes of thinking and acting between the country and the city. That is, Margaret is looked upon as an active agent, while Edith (including Mrs. Shaw) appears to be a domesticated creature, insulated from the outside world. Such a view is adopted, for example, by Deborah E. Nord (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), who writes:

In London, from the very first pages of the narrative, middle-class women are represented as passive, narcoleptic creatures, bred to be adorned, displayed, and married off. Margaret's cousin Edith, likened at the outset to the fairy princesses Titania, Sleeping Beauty, and Cinderella, never emerges from childhood into adulthood in the course of the narrative, despite her experience of marriage and motherhood. . . . [By contrast, Margaret] sees that London will lull even the most active woman into passivity. (168)

My argument, however, differs from the common interpretation as above, because Nord's point has unwittingly duplicated the Victorian domestic ideology that middle-class women should be kept at home, and that inactivity is an accepted feminine quality. Nord's reading actually rules out the possibility of middle-class females' mobility, and my essay is to propose that Edith also has a certain degree of mobility as Margaret, even though her ability to travel is predicated upon her marriage to Captain Lennox.



would immediately succeed her marriage. . . .¹⁹

On the other hand, Mrs. Shaw, albeit for the reason to restore health,²⁰ desires a travel from England to enjoy “a [warmer] winter in Italy,” a trip recommended by “some complaisant doctor.”²¹ In my view, both Mrs. Shaw’s and Edith’s readiness to travel may be Gaskell’s deliberate narrative arrangement by which she foreshadows the subsequent migration of Margaret’s family. Like Mrs. Shaw and Edith, Margaret will travel, just in a different way.

North and South reveals that its heroine is marked by “disruption and the kinds of temporal discontinuities that are associated with modernity,” as Parkins argues.²² Besides, Gaskell does not portray Margaret as fitting the conventional representation of the domestic woman who is prone to show nostalgia for the past and home. In this sense, Margaret’s migration manifests the theme of modern individuals’ permanent state of change and unfixity: “the fashionable London milieu, then the country parish of Helstone are depicted, only to be rather quickly left behind.”²³ Yet, not every character feels comfortable with the drive of mobility, and the impulse to cling to the realm of home can be found in Mrs. Hale’s (Margaret’s mother) objection to her husband’s decision about leaving Helstone. Compared

¹⁹ Gaskell, *North and South*, 7.

²⁰ Mrs. Shaw’s desire to travel to improve her bodily strength actually reflects the trend of health tourism in the nineteenth century. In *Across New Worlds: Nineteenth-Century Women Travellers and Their Writings* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), Shirley Foster indicates that bourgeois women’s motivation for travel is “[m]ore easily admissible” if it is a “search for health.” “With these travellers there is often a link between physical weakness and geographical mobility. . . . Illness is also a highly respectable if somewhat gloomy motive for travel. . . . The significant factor [in health travels], however, is not that such journeys were undertaken but that their physical and psychological results were often quite surprising” (9-10).

²¹ Gaskell, *North and South*, 15.

²² “Women, Mobility and Modernity in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*,” 510.

²³ Rosemarie Bodenheimer, “*North and South*: A Permanent State of Change,” in *North and South*, ed. Alan Shelston (New York: Norton, 2004), 531-47.



with Margaret, who still takes Helstone as a “beloved place” and a “quiet harbour of home”²⁴ but who is nevertheless willing to face the different mode of future life in the north, Mrs. Hale pertinaciously adheres to the discourse of home, or of familiarity, according to which she equates living in the industrial Milton with a kind of alienation. In her protest at the movement, Mrs. Hale complains to Margaret by projecting an abject image upon Milton:

You can't think the smoky air of a manufacturing town, all chimneys and dirt like Milton-Northern, would be better than this air [in Helstone], which is pure and sweet. . . . Fancy living in the middle of factories, and factory people! [In Milton] we shall not be admitted into society [of gentry] anywhere. It will be such a disgrace to us!²⁵

Mrs. Hale's resistance to leaving home, on the other hand, betrays her anxiety about the loss of her aristocratic status, because this social position, acquired through her family background, enables her to connect with “the gentry of the country.”²⁶ For her, moving from the south to the north is by no means only a geographical dislocation; rather, such a removal will bring about the degradation of her class superiority. It seems that Mrs. Hale's illness—which occurs before the migration—is the physical symptom of her mental angst about her pending decline in the social hierarchy.

Detached from the aristocratic society to which she once belonged, Margaret, after the move to Milton where the working class constitute the majority, actually undergoes a process of “proletarianization” (by which I mean her loss of aristocratic privilege, since Mr. Hale now

²⁴ Gaskell, *North and South*, 38, 48.

²⁵ Gaskell, 43.

²⁶ Gaskell, 44.



works as a paid private tutor without land property). As is formerly pointed out, her migration is an experiencing of different modes of life from the rural to the urban. Such a change in life mode cannot be viewed only as a change in Margaret's living standard; more than that, it has altered her manner of mobility. It can be said that her proletarianization makes her have knowledge about and contact with the working class whose existence was barely perceptible to her when she lived in the south. Despite living "in the middle of factories and factory people," Margaret, unlike Mrs. Hale who always distances herself from those below her, does not isolate herself within the domestic space from the outer social reality. She enters the public sphere and has interaction with lower-class families, such as the Higgins and the Bouchers.

In this sense, Margaret's mobility in the city can be regarded as a social mapping of class encounters.²⁷ Her walking route in Milton therefore conveys a strong socio-geographical meaning: it presents the topography of different classes' population distribution. Following the heroine's moving lines, we readers can see her going "up and down to butchers and grocers," walking near the "mills, out of which poured streams of [factory people] two or three times a day,"²⁸ venturing into the worse-off neighbourhood to visit the ailing Bessy Higgins, and then encountering the local strikers whose rage is provoked by the reduction of jobs due to their master's (Mr. Thornton) introduction of Irish labourers. These social realities would not have been known to Margaret, had she still maintained aristocratic "haughtiness"²⁹ and

²⁷ Many critics, such as Mann (1975), Harman (1988), Elliott (1994), Nord and D'Albertis (1997), deal with Margaret's urban mobility by arguing that she challenges the ideology of public/private division by which Victorian males label those females walking on the street as fallen women or prostitutes. But my analysis does not adopt their approach, and I will relate the class issue to the heroine's mobile agency.

²⁸ Gaskell, *North and South*, 65-66.

²⁹ Gaskell, 72.



insulated herself from the daily workings of the industrial town. As a matter of fact, her proletarianization enables her to be conscious of the living condition of the labouring class, and at the same time to develop a local perspective on Milton's social system. Through Margaret's narrative of her mobility in the streets, we are carried to the deprived communities whose presence is almost invisible to the upper-class capitalist, Mr. Thornton.

Analyzing the Milton episodes, Deirdre D'Albertis considers the mobile Margaret to be a "social observer," who acts like a "pedestrian" to "arrive at the 'truth' of urban malaise."³⁰ Undeniably, Margaret's narrative of what she has witnessed appears as a recording of the dispossessed people's condition which gives the reader "a sullen sense of injustice"³¹ in the industrial town. D'Albertis's reading, however, may dangerously treat Margaret only as an "objective" narrator, as if she were just observing a series of local events without intervening in them. The heroine, in this interpretation, seems to have used the "sight" but not the "heart" to represent the social happenings. Conversely, my point is that Margaret, with her both subjective mind and objective reasoning, does participate in the workings of the neighbouring community. On the one hand, her subjective concern is expressed for the diseased Bessy Higgins whom she provides spiritual support. She is not, on the other hand, totally overpowered by the feminine quality of sympathy with the underprivileged, but willing to probe into the underlying cause of the poor girl's infirmity. That is, Margaret realizes that Bessy's ill health does not stem from natural-born weakness but from the dehumanizing working environment of textile industry that damaged her lungs when she was a child labourer. Thus Margaret perceives the harsh reality behind the surface: it is because of the capitalist's

³⁰ Deirdre D'Albertis, *Dissembling Fictions: Gaskell and the Victorian Social Text* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 49.

³¹ Gaskell, *North and South*, 76.



money-making logic that he places a higher priority on cost-reduction and neglects his labourers' perilous working condition. Such reality would not be understood and criticized, if she simply remained at the affective level of personal empathy. In this sense, Margaret not only observes, through her objective eyes, the daily course of the local community, but also gets involved in it with an empathetic heart, be it good or bad.

For Margaret who is firstly a migrant, to gain the identity as one Milton member is not an easy process during which her status as an “outsider” is often questioned. In spite of her concern for labouring people's life, such a concern does not immediately make her accepted as an “insider” of Milton. The example is that her encounter with the practical-minded Thornton becomes a confrontation of two sets of values. Thornton praises Milton-Northern's capitalist spirit but depreciates Margaret's languid “southernness” by commenting that “I would rather be a man toiling, suffering . . . [in Milton], than lead a dull prosperous life in the old worn grooves of what you call more aristocratic society down in the South, with their slow days of careless ease.”³² Like a “political economist,” he holds that the efficiency of Milton's industry lies in its use of the “magnificent power” of machinery.³³ He, in the position of the local host, treats Margaret as only a migrant guest who knows nothing about Milton: “You are just like all strangers who don't understand the working of our system, Miss Hale.”³⁴ But the irony is that Margaret, albeit being a newcomer, has more insights about Milton's social reality than Thornton, who imposes the stereotyping of strangeness and foreignness upon her. When he highly estimates the grandeur of machinery as “practical realization of a gigantic

³² Gaskell, 75.

³³ Gaskell, 108, 75.

³⁴ Gaskell, 113.



thought,”³⁵ she is already capable of noticing the negative consequence brought about by machines. That is, through her observation of lower-class people’s life, she, although labelled as a stranger, presents a truer perspective on the “working” behind mechanical production. She therefore points out Thornton’s lack of the knowledge of his local workmen’s living condition:

You do not know anything about the South. If there is less adventure or less progress . . . from the gambling spirit of trade, which seems requisite to force out these wonderful [mechanical] inventions, there is less suffering [in the south] also. I see men here going about in the streets who look ground down by some pinching sorrow or care—who are not only sufferers but haters. Now, in the South we have our poor, but there is not that terrible expression in their countenances of a sullen sense of injustice which I see here.³⁶

In this debate between the two protagonists, Gaskell renders it a paradox that the dislocated migrant, Margaret, acts as a “seemingly” omniscient participant who can look into another neglected world which even the local citizen, Thornton, is unable to comprehend. At this point, Gaskell reverses their opposite positions: the stranger becomes the host, and vice versa.

Thornton’s labelling of Margaret’s “southernness” to some extent can be interpreted as his strict and inflexible conception of home and identity. He assumes that one’s identity is an ontological formation according to which he categorizes his own “northernness” as differential from her southern quality, as if she were an “other.” He distinguishes Milton people’s “Teutonic” spirit—which dismisses “a life of leisure and serene enjoyment” and evaluates

³⁵ Gaskell, 75.

³⁶ Gaskell, 75-76.



“action and exertion”³⁷—from southerners’ “stagnant habits of mind that they are almost fatalists.”³⁸ Thornton’s idea of home-versus-other is actually based upon the ideology that identity or the sense of belonging must be articulated to a certain place or territory. Furthermore, he contrasts the north to the south by a “gendered” geography: the north represents masculinity, and the south, femininity.³⁹ For him, Margaret, despite her settlement in Milton, still carries all the aristocratic attributes which have already forged her into an ontological southern being. However, Margaret defies such an assumption and presents to us that her identity-formation is always an in-transit process rather than being constructed by “sedentarism.” She rejects the binary opposition that Helstone is her eternal home and that Milton is Other (as a temporary settlement). Rather, she comes to rethink the notion of the “familiar” and the “strange” by making a fusion of northernness and southernness. It is because of her experience of leaving Helstone and migrating to Milton that she develops a kind of “double consciousness,” with which she challenges Thornton’s one-dimensional view of identity. Margaret’s plural identities thus attest to David Morley’s argument: “[T]he idea of home is remapped by migrants, so that it no longer represents simply one particular place (of origin or destination), but rather a dispersed set of linkages across the different places through which they move, ‘a single community spread across a variety of sites.’”⁴⁰

In Gaskell’s narrative arrangement, she draws the heroine’s travelling route as a circular movement; that is, Margaret sets forth on a voyage to the south again after the loss of her both parents. In a sense, her departure from Helstone and the later revisit to her birthplace seem to

³⁷ Gaskell, 304.

³⁸ Gaskell, 275.

³⁹ Felicia Bonaparte, *The Gypsy-Bachelor of Manchester: The Life of Mrs. Gaskell's Demon* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 184.

⁴⁰ Morley, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity*, 43.



be a form of “parallelism,” in terms of which one may interpret that her initial home-leaving foretells her final homecoming. However, as I have argued earlier, her return is not to regain the southernness of Helstone, nor is it a search for the rootedness of the Mother earth. Of course, we cannot say that Margaret has cast away the idea of home and that she prefers the drifting state of journey. It is true that she, during her Milton days, the image of home still lingers over her mind when she feels a sense of dislocation. She used to suppose that “[n]ature [in Helstone] felt no change, and was ever young,” and that the south represents “the golden stillness of the land.”⁴¹ Before her return, she has for a long time maintained such a thought that Helstone embodies “timelessness” and “unchangingness.” Yet, she comes home only to find what was deemed as everlasting is already changed or even destroyed. The first great change which she observes is that in Helstone’s landscape:

Here and there old trees had been felled the autumn before; or a squatter’s roughly-built and decaying cottage had disappeared. . . . [Margaret] came past the spot where she and Mr. Lennox had sketched. The white, lightning-scarred trunk of the venerable beech, among whose roots they had sat down was there no more . . . the [old] cottage had been pulled down, and a new one, tidy and respectable, had been built in its stead.⁴²

But the more striking transformation occurs in Helstone’s human-cultural system: now the country’s children attend to the “parochial school” instead of receiving “natural education stopping at home”; the latest method of schooling adopts a new “Phonetic system” unfamiliar to Margaret; the incumbent vicar, Mr. Hepworth, who takes Mr. Hale’s place, is a

⁴¹ Gaskell, 350.

⁴² Gaskell, 352.



“teetotaller”⁴³ whose strict dogmatism of alcohol-prohibition makes him keep a less harmonious interaction with his parishioners than Mr. Hale did. All these alterations, both in natural landscape and human culture, demonstrate that Helstone as home can never remain in a permanent state of sameness and fixity.

Despite the fact that the difference between the Helstone in memory and the Helstone in reality disrupts Margaret’s ideal of home, she is not overwhelmed by her nostalgic sorrow at these unexpected changes. Parkins argues that Margaret, with this experience of witnessing the country’s transformative development, comes to realize that Helstone “is not immune to the process of modernization.” “The natural world—even at Helstone—is not outside the process of history but culturally inscribed in historically specific ways.”⁴⁴ Her revisit therefore brings her a renewed consciousness of home: she now “begins to see the south through her new northern eyes.”⁴⁵ She no longer holds the bipolar division that the north is propelled by the spirit of making progress and that the south represents the virtue of immutability. For her, both sides can never resist the external force of change. In her meditation upon these occurrences in Helstone, she gains a new perspective that mutation is a perpetual phenomenon and that even home cannot escape change.

If the world stood still, it would retrograde and become corrupt. . . . Looking out of myself, and my own painful sense of change, the progress all around me is right and necessary. I must not think so much of how circumstances affect me myself, but how they affect others. . . .

⁴³ Gaskell, 354, 356, 352.

⁴⁴ Parkins, “Women, Mobility and Modernity in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*,” 511.

⁴⁵ Bonaparte, *The Gypsy-Bachelor of Manchester: The Life of Mrs. Gaskell’s Demon*, 191.



And I too change perpetually—now this, now that—now disappointed and peevish because all is not exactly as I had pictured it, and now suddenly discovering that the reality is far more beautiful than I had imagined it.⁴⁶

The revisit to Helstone becomes the starting point of the next journey; Margaret returns in order to leave. This does not mean that she regards the already-changed Helstone as a “not-home,” but that home can be more than a single site. For her, Helstone, London (Aunt Shaw’s family) and Milton are all her homes. Her plural senses of belonging lie in her mobility to travel from the home, and through the experience of moving she remaps her identity in transit. As Karen R. Lawrence indicates, travel narrative “has provided discursive space for women, who sometimes [leave] home in order to write home, discovering new aesthetic as well as social possibilities.”⁴⁷ That is, the sense of home could have hardly been reconsidered, had Margaret not travelled.

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⁴⁶ Gaskell, 364.

⁴⁷ Karen R. Lawrence, *Penelope Voyages: Women and Travel in the British Literary Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 18.



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