

Victorian & Edwardian Studies



Francesco Marroni, Renzo D'Agnillo &
Massimo Verzella (eds)

Elizabeth Gaskell and the Art of the Short Story

Peter Lang

This volume presents a collection of original and interconnected essays which aim to chart Elizabeth Gaskell's literary imagination by focusing on diverse aspects of her short stories. It includes the papers read at the conference on "Elizabeth Gaskell and the art of the short story", organized by the Centre for Victorian and Edwardian Studies (CUSVE, "G. d'Annunzio" University, Pescara, 2010), to celebrate the bicentenary of her birth. While offering fresh insights into Gaskell's shorter fiction, this collection provides an introduction to the many issues that absorbed her literary attention. Most importantly, by considering the growing significance of some neglected aspects of her works and the cultural and ideological context in which she lived, the contributions collectively delineate Gaskell's artistic tensions, ethical sensibility and social commitment in a rapidly changing world. In their overall critical design, the contributors intend to shed light on the complex web of dialogic suggestions underlying her fiction, while at the same time revealing the extraordinary and multifaceted inventiveness of one of the most important Victorian writers.

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RENZO D'AGNILLO

Elizabeth Gaskell's "Disappearances": Narratives of absence between mystery and empirical detection

Elizabeth Gaskell's "Disappearances" was published in *Household Words* on 7 June 1851¹. It was written in response to four articles that had appeared in Dickens's periodical between July 1850 and April 1851 concerning the new Detective Branch of the Metropolitan Police Force. These articles, written by Dickens and his sub-editor, William H. Wills were expressly designed to boost the credibility of the Police through an evaluation of the activities of its Detective Branch. Perceived by the general public as: "a Benthamite organ of social control"², the widespread skepticism regarding the social utility of policemen stretched back to the fiasco of the first few days of its organization during which several officers were "dismissed either for non-appearance or for drunkenness"³. Furthermore, Robert Peel's force was originally composed of agricultural labourers whose detachment from the urban society they were recruited to protect only assured public hostility. The 1840s saw an attempt to refurbish the tarnished image of the Police Force by means of a more scientifically coordinated and organized mechanism to combat crime. As a result, the Detective Branch was established in 1842⁴ with the function of preventing misdeeds from occurring rather than detecting criminals after their misdeeds.

- 1 Gaskell's short stories "Lizzie Leigh", "The Well of Pen Morfa" and "The Heart of John Middleton" had all appeared in *Household Words* the previous year.
- 2 A.S. Wilson, *The Victorians*, London, Arrow Books, 2002, p. 37.
- 3 <<http://www.met.police.uk/history>>.
- 4 Donald Thomas, *The Victorian Underworld*, London, John Murray, 1998, p. 6. The branch was established "after two murder investigations which the police were thought to have bungled".

As a journalist, Dickens understood very well the importance of maintaining relations with all ranks of the detective police⁵. In fact, there existed a reciprocal relationship between the two categories of journalist and detective in Victorian England due to the overlap in their activities. So crucial were the processes of investigation, probing and exposing to journalists that they even called themselves 'investigators'. With the intent to enlighten an indifferent if not hostile public who, in his words, "really do not know enough of it"⁶, Dickens invited crime fighters employed in the metropolitan Police at Scotland Yard to his *Household Words* headquarters for an informal interview over drinks and cigars to which they willingly complied (some even turning out to be admirers of the author's works). Through their coverage of the activities of the detective police, Dickens and Wills were instrumental in turning the tide of public opinion in their favour. In his appreciation of the detective's criminological expertise in the science of physiognomy Wills draws comparison with the connoisseur of paintings. For detectives, he writes, are "so thoroughly well acquainted" with the kind of criminals known as "swell mobs-men" "that they frequently tell what they have been about by the expression of their eyes and their general manner". In "A Detective Police Party", Dickens underlines the irreconcilable contrast between Britain's first detective force, the Bow Street Police, (established by Henry Fielding), whom he disparages as "a vast amount of humbug"⁷ and "the extraordinary dexterity, patience, and ingenuity, exercised by the Detective Police"⁸. He greatly admired the ability of the modern detectives to adapt to all circumstances and oppose themselves "to every new device that perverted ingenuity can invent"⁹. More importantly, he recognised a narrative potential in their feats that were "elevated into the marvellous and romantic" in spite of the fact that each case would

5 See Shpayer-Makov Haia, "Journalists and Police Detectives in Victorian and Edwardian England: an Uneasy Reciprocal Relationship", *Journal of Social History*, 42, 4 (Summer 2009), pp. 963-987, for an interesting account of this aspect.

6 *Household Words*, July 13, 1850, p. 371.

7 *Household Words*, July 27, 1850, p. 409.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 409.

9 *Household Words*, August 10, 1850, p. 459.

be dryly compressed into the set phrase: "in consequence of information I received, I did so and so"¹⁰. The fact that his articles are almost entirely devoted to the detectives' own lively descriptions of their successful arrests was a shrewd move on Dickens's part. For, by this means, he created a blend of anecdote and fact that brought the men imaginatively alive for his readers in a way that could never have been possible with a merely detached account of their activities.

Dickens was delighted with Gaskell's contribution and expressed his pleasure in a letter to her on 27 May 1851: "I can't help writing to you to thank you for it at once. It is exactly suited to us". Nevertheless, in view of Gaskell's comparatively sceptical treatment of the theme, his enthusiastic response is somewhat puzzling¹¹. For, from the outset, Gaskell is clearly eager to set up an ideological distance between her narrator and Dickens's periodical that, effectively undermines the propagandistic effects of his socio-cultural project:

I am not in the habit of seeing the *Household Words* regularly; but a friend, who lately sent me some of the back numbers, recommended me to read "all the papers relating to the Detective and Protective Police", which I accordingly did [...] ¹².

The opening phrase is literally true and is echoed in a letter to John Forster, dated May 3 1853, while discussing her serialisation of *Cranford* for the journal¹³. This show of indifference towards Dickens's journal is compounded by the narrator's explanation that the "papers relating to the Detective and Protective Police" were given to her by a friend and that she proceeded to read them "not as the generality of readers have done, as they appeared week by week, or with pauses between, but consecutively, as a popular history of the Metropolitan Police" (*DI*, p. 199). Furthermore, her haughty aloofness from Dickens's

10 *Ibid.*, p. 460. Incidentally, only two years later, inspector Bucket, one of the earliest detectives in fiction, would appear in *Bleak House*.

11 *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson and Nina Burgis, Vol. 6, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988, p. 401.

12 "Disappearances", in *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell*, ed. Joanne Shattock, Vol. 1, London, Pickering & Chatto, 2005, p. 199. All subsequent quotations are from this edition with the page number following *DI*.

13 John Chapple and Alan Shelston, *Further Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000, p. 87: "I seldom see the *Household Words*".

public¹⁴ extends to the reading process itself, which is differentiated from that of the ideal subscriber of *Household Words* by being conducted at one sitting rather than episodically. This different reading circumstance allows her the leisure to interrelate the articles into a thematically cohesive discourse. In this respect, the irony of her reference to the articles as "a popular history of the Metropolitan Police" cannot escape the reader's attention since, far from offering any history, as such, Dickens limits himself to transcribing each detective's anecdotal account of their own successful arrests. It is no accident that, after completing her reading of the articles, the narrator, (as if to deliberately counter the euphoria Dickens seeks to create in his reader), abandons herself to "a train of reverie and recollection" (*DI*, p. 199) that leads to melancholy reflections over the extent to which the detective policeman has contributed in altering the social climate. As a consequence, Gaskell's narratives of mysterious disappearances are grounded on an underlying critique of Dickens's celebration of the Detective Police, in spite of the fact that the theme of disappearance haunted her own imagination (indeed, her fiction abounds in such examples¹⁵) for very personal reasons: her brother John Stevenson had disappeared at sea and was believed by the family to have been captured by pirates¹⁶ (although, in actual fact, his disappearance remained a permanent mystery to the Gaskell family and a constant motive of distress to Elizabeth¹⁷).

- 14 *Ibid.*, p. xviii: "One suspects [...] that *Household Words* was a journal that she might not have borrowed either, written as it was for a new and more general readership".
- 15 Examples include, *Mary Barton*, in which Esther runs away from home and is absent for most of the novel, *Cranford*, in which Matty Jenkyns's brother Peter disappears to India for several years; *Sylvia's Lovers*, in which Charlie Kinraid is press ganged and disappears for several years. Also, in Gaskell's short-story, "The Manchester Marriage" Frank disappears at sea and returns towards the end of the story to find that his wife Alice has re-married.
- 16 Cf. John Geoffrey Sharps, *Mrs Gaskell's Observation and Invention*, Fontwell, Linden Press, 1970, p. 119.
- 17 John Chapple, *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Early Years*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1997, pp. 338-339, which unearths new evidence that contradicts this version.

As imaginative recreations of factual occurrences, the seven stories that make up Gaskell's article, exhibit her characteristic blend of "gossip, rumour, local legend and apparent fact"¹⁸. They are neither autobiographical testimonies nor journalistic investigations, but an attempt to counter the modern scientific progress embodied by the detective policeman with a past world in which mysteries gave free rein to the imagination. That the nostalgic note of the narrator's evaluation is not without its paradoxes is an issue that will be raised later. In the meantime, the moral conflict it generates is immediately presented in the first story which raises the question of the extent to which a detective policeman can legitimately encroach upon an individual's privacy. The narrator begins by referring to "the unexpected manner" in which a relation "was discovered by an acquaintance, who had mislaid or forgotten (his) address" (*DI*, p. 199). The search is made all the more arduous by the fact that the narrator's cousin: "has the little peculiarity of liking to change his lodgings once every three months on an average" (*DI*, p. 199). The acquaintance, who knows the man has moved to a village outside London, is unable to locate his lodgings. As a last resource he inquires of a book-keeper at the railway station:

"No, sir, I cannot tell you where Mr. B. lodges – so many gentlemen go by the trains; but I have no doubt but that the person standing by that pillar can inform you". The individual to whom he directed the inquirer's attention had the appearance of a tradesman – respectable enough, yet with no pretensions to "gentility", and had, apparently, no more urgent employment than lazily watching the passengers who came dropping in to the station. However, when he was spoken to, he answered civilly and promptly. "Mr B? tall gentleman, with light hair? Yes, sir, I know Mr B. He lodges at No 8 Morton Villas – has done these three weeks or more; but you'll not find him there, sir, now. He went to town by the eleven o'clock train, and does not usually return until the half-past four train". (*DI*, pp. 199-200)

The acquaintance is later informed that this man is: "One of the detective Police" (*DI*, p. 200) and when he eventually encounters Mr B, the latter confirms "not without a little surprise [...] the accuracy of the policeman's report in every particular" (*DI*, p. 200). This story, which

18 Elizabeth Gaskell, *Gothic Tales*, ed. Laura Kranzler, London, Penguin, 2000, Introduction, p. xiv.

significantly contains the only description of a detective in "Disappearances", highlights two significant features. First, the ambivalence of the detective's social rank, for he possesses neither the gentility of the middle classes, on the one hand, nor the incivility or coarseness of the labourer, on the other. As a new man of the professional classes, his apparent social amorphousness appears to belie his indispensable utility. Second, although he assumes the careless air of a loungeur, his scrupulous eye for detail and powers of recollection denote highly specialised skills which, although they may allow him to subconsciously intuit the narrative potential residing within every individual, are also the product of an impersonal vision that has no place for human sympathy or interest in their destinies beyond the purely empirical sphere. This realisation leads the narrator to ponder on the fact that "there could be no more romances written on the same kind of plot as *Caleb Williams*; the principle interest of which, to the superficial reader, consists in the alternation of hope and fear, that the hero may, or may not, escape his pursuer" (*DI*, p. 200). Interestingly, whilst Gaskell points out that Godwin's novel exemplifies an interest in the fundamentally democratic struggle of man against man, which depends on individual "energy, sagacity and perseverance" (*DI*, p. 200), she bypasses the paradox that Caleb's fate is actually manipulated from a distance by his victimiser, and former benefactor, Mr Falkland, with the help of a prototype detective in the figure of the diabolical Gines. Rather, her reference to Godwin's novel underlines her concern that the empirical vision of the detective policeman will only threaten to destroy the reader's imaginative participation in fictions of this genre: "Now, in 1851, the offended master would set the Detective Police to work; there would be no doubt as to their success" for: "It is no longer a struggle between man and man, but between a vast organised machinery, and a weak, solitary individual; we have no hopes, no fears – only certainty [...] we can no more be haunted by the idea of the possibility of mysterious disappearances" (*DI*, p. 200). Therefore, the modern detective signals the end of an age of romance and mystery in which stories of disappearances haunted the narrator's imagination "longer than any tale of wonder" (*DI*, p. 200) to replace them with his own narratives of empirical detection.

Nevertheless, no sooner is the narrator's antipathy of the modern detective policemen made plain than Gaskell subsequently moderates her polemical stance to the extent that the remaining stories conclude with contained references to the detective police qualified by an apparent approval of their activities. Thus, in the second story, concerning the inconceivable disappearance of an old paralytic father, the mystery of which "never was unaccounted for; and left a painful impression on many minds" (*DI*, p. 201) the narrator confidently concludes: "I will answer for it, the Detective Police would have ascertained every fact relating to it in a week" (*DI*, p. 201). The same tone is adopted in the third story; this deals with the tragic fate of an attorney who, as the agent of a local squire, inexplicably vanishes one night after collecting the rents from his tenants. The rumour is put about that he has escaped abroad with the money. It is not until fifty years later that the truth is revealed when the local butcher confesses on his deathbed to having unintentionally killed the man in the attempt to rob him before burying his corpse. With the facts of this particular case thus settled, the narrator can only regretfully conclude: "If our Detective Police had only been in existence" (*DI*, p. 202).

Gaskell further tones down the effect of her initial criticisms in her following two stories by denouncing the morally reprehensible acts of two grooms who disappear after their weddings. Although both mysteries remain unsolved, the narrator naturally assumes the man involved in each case to have been an unwilling participant. This leads to her gleeful speculation that, in the modern world of the police detective, certain individuals would be easily caught and justly punished: "Only let a bridegroom try to disappear from an untamed Katherine of a bride, and he will soon be brought home, like a recreant coward, overtaken by the electric telegraph and clutched to his fate by a detective policeman" (*DI*, p. 203). This comically conjured finale, with its anticipation of 1860s sensation fiction which would see the continual employment of detectives and telegraphs in its action-filled plots, underlines a metaphorical victory of the scientific efficiency of modern detection over individual slyness and cunning that again clashes with Gaskell's initial dichotomy of a positive humane past and negative mechanistic present.

As Winifred Gérin has observed, Gaskell gives each of her stories an ominous twist that "leaves the reader disturbed for want of a rational explanation"¹⁹. Gaskell may have been asking for trouble when she chose to narrate episodes that were all too familiar with the general public, since several readers, evidently vexed by her personal mixing of fact and fiction, wrote letters of protest to *Household Words* disproving her versions²⁰. Two of them went so far as to attempt to clarify one of her mysteries in two subsequent numbers of the journal, whilst a third accused the writer of not having "done her homework thoroughly"²¹. Gaskell's penultimate story caused particular controversy. It concerned the connection she suggested between the mysterious disappearance of a young man from North Shields who, as an apprentice to a doctor, never returned from delivering medicine to a bed-ridden patient one evening, and the famous Hare and Burke horrors²². A letter from a correspondent, which appeared in the Chips column of *Household Words* on 21 June 1851, flatly contradicted Gaskell's version. The writer was the brother-in-law of the doctor's son and, as such, had direct knowledge of the young man's fate. He assured readers that the young man had not been murdered at all, but had in actual fact decided, on the spur of the moment, to board a ship bound for America, where he eventually found his fortune²³. Of course such protests clearly missed the point of Gaskell's purpose which was to offer a moral reflection on the consequences of these disappearances for the people involved.

Central to Gaskell's concern with the role of the detective police and, by extension, its effect on the literary and non-literary imagination is the question of personal liberty. The notion that an individual's actions and intentions can be methodically tracked and analysed, and that such a process was now part of a legal system, was both reassuring and frightening. On the other hand, disappearances create a se-

19 Winifred Gérin, *Elizabeth Gaskell, A Biography*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1976, p. 122.

20 Kranzler (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. xiv-xv for a detailed account.

21 Shattock (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 197.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 446: "William Burke and William Hare had murdered more than 15 people in Edinburgh in the 1820s and sold their corpses to the School of Anatomy".

23 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 206. The letter was later added as a postscript to Gaskell's article (possibly as a joke on Dickens's part).

mantic void that generates its own fictions. As Gaskell's stories illustrate, they also have a psychologically negative and destructive impact on those who are abandoned (as with the wives of the runaway bridegrooms and the mother of the attorney who dies in the belief that her son is a thief). These moral concerns are brought together in the final story which deals with a wealthy man who marries young, has several children and after many years of quiet happiness, mysteriously disappears while travelling to London on business:

He seemed to be swallowed up in the abyss of the metropolis, for no friend (and the lady had many and powerful friends) could ever ascertain for her what had become of him; the prevalent idea was that he had been attacked by some of the street-robbers who prowled about in those days, that he had resisted and been murdered. His wife gradually gave up all hopes of seeing him again, and devoted herself to the care of her children [...]. (*DI*, p. 204)

Paradoxically, it is precisely the modern city, with its swarming masses, that allows the man to become an invisible presence, an anonymity. What is otherwise a frightening image of alienation and perdition ("[H]e seemed to be swallowed up in the abyss") is in this case a comforting reality for the individual who seeks to be freed from the human bonds that he no longer wishes to maintain. This is confirmed years later after the family's lawyer puts an advertisement in a London newspaper inquiring upon the legal possession of deeds for the man's son, who has meanwhile come of age. An anonymous reply is sent informing the family that the deeds exist but can only be given up on certain conditions. The lawyer is directed to an old house in Barbican and on arrival submitted to be blindfolded and led through a series of passages until he finds himself in a sitting room. After he is unbandaged a middle-aged gentleman enters the room who, after obliging the lawyer to an oath of secrecy, "acknowledged himself to be the missing father of the heir" (*DI*, p. 205). The explanation for his mysterious disappearance is as mundane as it is morally reprehensible, but it receives no further comment from the narrator:

It seems that he had fallen in love with a damsel, a friend of the person with whom he lodged. To this young woman he had represented himself as unmarried; she listened willingly to his wooing, and her father, who was a shopkeeper in the City,

was not averse to the match [...] The bargain was struck; the descendent of a knightly race married the only daughter of the City shopkeeper. (*DI*, p. 205)

That Gaskell concludes her article with a story of bigamy, which she considers a way of "cheerfully (after a fashion)" (*DI*, p. 203) winding up, in itself undermines the authenticity of any condemnation that may be directed towards such voluntary disappearances. Furthermore, her final remark ("Once more, let me say I am thankful I live in the days of the Detective Police if I am murdered, or commit bigamy, at any rate my friends will have the comfort of knowing all about it", *DI*, p. 206) is all the more dubious since at no point in the article does she express gratitude as such for the existence of this figure. If anything, her final predilection for knowledge over mystery contradicts her initial regrets regarding the 'death' of haunting romances of mysterious disappearances. This ambivalent stance towards the detective police, an alternation of suspicion and appreciation, renders problematic the extent to which Gaskell intends to set humanistic values as a bulwark against the empirical world of scientific calculation. Ultimately, through all the stories in "Disappearances" there runs a doubly ambivalent message: the detective police may be necessary, but they threaten the liberty of the individual and destroy the mysteries of life. On the other hand, mystery may exert its fascination on the human mind, but in the real world it comes at a price.