

Title: Revised version of A Moabite among the Israelities: *Ruth*, religion, and the Victorian social novel

Author: Tim Dolin

Affiliation: School of Media, Culture and Creative Arts, Curtin University, GPO Box U1987, Perth WA 6845 Australia

© Tim Dolin 2016

Abstract

When Elizabeth Gaskell's reputation was revived in the 1980s and 1990s, *Ruth* was reread along with the factory novels, and uneasily assimilated to the secular socio-economistic, feminist Gaskell that emerged at that time. *Ruth*'s overt religiosity was necessarily downplayed, however, and it was reconstructed as a social novel about the sexual double standard. What happened to religion? This article argues that it is effaced by historicism: Gaskell's and ours. *Ruth* was Gaskell's attempt to reimagine social fiction; but it was only a first stage, a transitional work that looks towards a different kind of ethical fiction-reading subject who will be a different kind of agent in social change. Rather than proposing a naively transcendental solution to the conditions of history and ideology, whether in the Romantic form of feeling or the Christian form of faith in God, Gaskell offers an explanatory fable of social renewal through the energy of the outsider. *Ruth* is like her Moabite namesake: she foregoes her own religious identity as a devout Protestant Christian to take up a greater genealogical imperative, to instate the lineage of a new secular religion. In this respect, the fate of *Ruth* itself has been somewhat akin to the fate of the biblical heroine. For it too stands as a kind of lone Moabite among the Israelites, an outsider fiction seeking religion's readmission to the vital debates about feminism, social realism, and the role of fiction in social change, and promising that it can go whither they go.

Ruth (1853) is the least popular and least interesting of all Elizabeth Gaskell's novels to modern readers. Something of an anomaly in Gaskell's oeuvre, it is jammed awkwardly between the two kinds of fiction for which she is best known: Manchester factory novels; and comic-melancholic idylls of small-town and village life in the hinterlands of the manufacturing and commercial centres. Like *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1854), which frame it, *Ruth* is a novel with a purpose, directing its readers' attention and sympathies to the 'great social evil.'¹ But its story 'lies far from all class-feelings, from all the subjects for blue-books and commissions of inquiry,' as one of its first reviewers remarked.² It has none of its predecessor's sprawling and unruly vitality, but a distinctive compactness of scene and character. Its 'subject is less grand, less inspiring; there is no attempt to produce a modern epic in the guise of a novel, to embody the sufferings and the lives of a class which is counted by millions.'³ Nor does romantic love play any part in the resolution of *Ruth*. Gaskell was determined not to use romance, as she had done in *Mary Barton* and would do in *North and South*, as a 'regulating law between both parties'⁴ to provide 'imaginary or "formal" solutions' to what were in reality 'unresolvable social contradictions'⁵ in the public sphere. Most of all, though, *Ruth* is disliked now for its uncomfortably intense and somewhat dated religiosity. All Gaskell's fiction was 'a vehicle for her belief': writing was for her 'a religious exercise and therefore "permissible"' to the wife of a Unitarian minister. But *Ruth* is different.⁶ Even Gaskell's contemporaries were taken aback to find that she had retreated from the big questions of the industrial novel to this 'moral problem worked out in fiction,' and some were concerned that there was, 'perhaps, over much religion in [*Ruth*'s] pages ... to be perfectly satisfactory.'⁷

Was this where Gaskell's fiction was going? Charlotte Brontë, wondering, raised an eyebrow over the early chapters of the following novel, *North and South*, which began with Mr Hale and 'his religious difficulties as a conscientious man of the Church.'⁸ As we now

know, that novel resumed the battle between masters and men, and *Ruth* receded into the background between two of the big Victorian documents of class struggle, leaving its eponymous heroine to her quietude and fervour, teary piety, and glad, brave self-sacrifice. When Gaskell's reputation was revived in the 1980s and 90s, *Ruth* was duly re-read along with the factory novels,⁹ but was only ever uneasily assimilated to the secular socio-economistic, feminist Gaskell that emerged out of and responded to Thatcherist hard times.¹⁰ Its overt religiosity was downplayed, and it was reconstructed as a social novel about the fallen woman and the sexual double standard, which modern readers tried to fit into the existing genealogy of mid-Victorian condition-of-England fiction. Was this a result of our modern-day embarrassment at *Ruth*'s lavish pietistic sentimentality? Our distaste for the heavy odour of evangelical repression and duty? Part of the problem, I would suggest, is that *Ruth* actively resists any simple classification as either a religious novel or a social novel. After *Mary Barton* Gaskell turned her back on the then-accepted conventions of industrial fiction—in Martineau, Dickens, Mrs Trollope, and Disraeli—in order to bring the plots and tropes of religious belief and conduct into the service of a new kind of social novel. Like Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (1850), to which it is in many points a response,¹¹ *Ruth* presents a case for Christian radicalism: not a system of cooperative socialism like Kingsley's, but a form of community-minded individualist quietism so deeply interpenetrated with emerging liberal values (sympathy, tolerance) that it could be absorbed into the secular society to which it appealed. *Ruth*'s radicalism, therefore, lies (as it did for George Eliot later in *Felix Holt, the Radical*) in a paradoxical return to the roots of social action in the past—in this case, in the Christian traditions of good works. To interpret *Ruth* aright is to enlarge our view of history, reminding ourselves that 'in order to understand Victorian fiction it is essential to understand Victorian religion.'¹² This essay accordingly redirects the historicist interpretation of Victorian social-problem fiction through the screen of biblical criticism. It argues that Gaskell found a way of overcoming the challenge set by *Mary Barton* of a social-problem fiction that put itself in competition with statistics and blue books and market forces. Rather than proposing a naively transcendental solution to the conditions of history and ideology, whether in the Romantic form of feeling or the Christian form of faith in God, Gaskell offers

an explanatory fable of social renewal through the energy of the outsider. Ruth is like her Moabite namesake: she foregoes her own religious identity (as a devout Protestant Christian in her case) to take up a greater genealogical imperative, to instate the lineage of a new secular religion. In this respect, the fate of *Ruth* itself has been somewhat akin to the fate of the biblical heroine. For it too stands as a kind of lone Moabite among the Israelites, an outsider fiction seeking religion's readmission to the vital debates about feminism, social realism, and the role of fiction in social change, and promising that it can go whither they go. Ruth is not just the stranger who challenges the prevailing rules of the closed community, therefore, like Margaret Hale after her. She is the stranger who challenges the prevailing values of the national community and the prevailing discourses of social progress, and who, having done her epic work, is allowed to pass out of history. Thus does *Ruth* pass out of literary history too. Gaskell's short-lived excursion into the strange territory of the novel of piety—a territory then being taken up by Charlotte Yonge and others—vanishes with its heroine, having succeeded triumphantly in what it set out to do.

Taking their cue from *Mary Barton*'s conflicted and (self-confessedly) inept politics, modern critics have tended to interpret *Ruth*'s story of fallenness as part of a more or less continuous project in Gaskell's social-problem fiction 'to criticize utilitarian calculation and determinism.'¹³ In this vein Amanda Anderson, for example, argues that Bradshaw inhabits 'fully the corrupt instrumental egotism of the public realm,' and with his 'insidious "practical wisdom,"' serves to accentuate the negative effects of mutually reinforcing social and religious determinisms.'¹⁴ On the other hand, Ruth Hilton 'is vindicated and redeemed through her instinctive participation in a noninstrumental, sympathetic mode of being': her 'noncalculating morality of sympathy.'¹⁵ Ruth's 'pure unknowingness,' the unselfconsciousness that led to her seduction and rejection in the first place, is here contrasted with the deliberative morality of the utilitarian mainstream: where moral action is based on the judgment of consequences, which breeds a culture of retributive justice.¹⁶ This

is a perceptive analysis of *Ruth*'s cardinal binary opposition between instrumental and non-instrumental morality, which nevertheless falls into the trap of implying that Protestantism belongs exclusively in the male public realm, where it is characterized as the religious arm of utilitarianism, and where 'mutually reinforcing social and religious determinisms' do their mischief.¹⁷ In this argument the non-calculating morality of sympathy is by contrast also somehow non-Protestant: that is, it is progressive—radical—because it is Romantic, humanistic, liberal, and secular.

Why should we not want to see Ruth Hilton for what she is, a devout Protestant Christian? The answer lies with Gaskell, and the place of Unitarian Protestantism in her enterprise of recivilizing and remoralizing the culture of industrial capitalism in the post-Chartist 1850s. In *Mary Barton* her aim, she wrote, was to 'give a spur to inactive thought, and languid conscience.'¹⁸ This was the familiar view of social fiction as ethical praxis, targeting specific problems and demanding direct, focused action. Gaskell quickly recognized, however, that the inequality of masters and men could not be remedied by striving for mutual understanding between the classes, but only by altering the structure of society. That was the lesson of the failure of Chartism, and it was fundamentally inimical to 'middle-class Unitarians [who always] negotiated their demands for equality—religious, social, and political—within the inherited hierarchical norms of English society.'¹⁹ Where was left for Gaskell's Carlylean 'fiction with a purpose' to go? The answer lay in another direction: viewing social fiction as a model for a gradualist social morality. *Mary Barton*'s originality lay in its representation of the classes meeting and befriending each other as individuals, hearing each other's stories of hardship and pride, and seeing how the other lived and died. This was the rich territory of the novel. But the challenge to translate social representation into social morality was as great as the challenge to translate it into social action. Gaskell's high-minded ambition to promote a solution to class warfare with *Mary Barton* had left her open to charges of naivety: social suffering on that scale could hardly be fixed by legislative reform as, say, the conditions for chimney-sweepers could. But its alternative, an ethically mimetic social fiction, opened her to the charge of colluding in a systemic hypocrisy. Fiction, she feared, would only draw (in Mary Poovey's words) 'an

increasingly definite boundary between the imaginary world depicted in the novel, where ethical values could prevail, and the actual world outside, where corruption and greed seemed to make moral certainty impossible.²⁰ And as Carolyn Betensky adds, mid-Victorian purposive fiction produced a highly-developed bourgeois social conscience in which ‘reading and knowing and feeling are in themselves socially valuable,’ so that ‘the pursuit of knowledge of the poor may actually preclude the very consequence of intervention that it is supposed to activate.’²¹ The social novel was always at risk of encouraging moral complacency in its readers, a satisfied sense that their emotional engagement with the problems of the world was valuable enough in itself. *Ruth*’s big question, “‘Is it not time to change some of our ways of acting and thinking?’”,²² brings reading and knowing and feeling into the orbit of practical action. This call to charitable enterprise brought Gaskell ‘within the circle of what must be called religious novelists’²³ for the first and last time. When George Henry Lewes reviewed the novel for the radical *Leader*, he noted that Gaskell had swapped ‘the struggle between employers and employed for the old and ever-renewing struggle between Truth and Truth-seeming, virtue and convention, good deeds and bad names.’²⁴ In other words *Ruth* did not pre-eminently concern itself with a struggle between powerful men and powerless women: Gaskell was ‘not pleading only for her own sex,’²⁵ as the *Guardian* saw, but for both sexes. What these contemporary observations bear out is that in *Ruth* Gaskell was not trying to write a social-problem novel that fulfilled its role of provoking debate about, and active intervention in, the social problem of the sexual double standard and the fallen woman. It had another, higher aim, one that would become the hallmark of the ethico-aesthetic social fiction written, for example, by George Eliot, and endorsed by Matthew Arnold: fiction dedicated to the formation and maintenance of civic subjects in industrial modernity. The question *Ruth* asks, therefore, is: how can Christianity continue to be relevant to secular ethics, and especially to the promulgation of ethics in literature, which was, after all, usurping the ethical functions of Christianity? If the fallen woman was ‘an unfit subject for fiction,’ as she feared, so too, in its way, was Christianity.

This points to the great challenge Gaskell faced with *Ruth*. Readers not alienated by the worldliness of the plot were likely to be alienated by the Godliness of the novel’s themes

and treatment, and vice versa. *Ruth*'s predominant readership was one of undoctrinal, middle-of-the-road, established-church Protestants, for whom fiction should reveal 'the real meaning of Christianity, in social and ethical, rather than in doctrinal terms,'²⁶ and who would be wary of the merest hint of Nonconformist extremism in *Ruth*'s devout example. In this regard Unitarianism was Gaskell's best protection. It was necessary to obscure her protagonists' exact sectarian affiliations, because Unitarianism was feared and reviled, as Ruth Watts points out, for leading its adherents to

disbelief in religion altogether. There was some justification for this. The abandonment of some of the central tenets of traditional Christianity, constant questioning of the scriptures, enthusiasm for scientific discovery and a passion for social justice all contributed to readjustments of faith that took some out of Unitarianism into scepticism, agnosticism or even atheism.²⁷

On the other hand, Gaskell could also take advantage of sectarian differences and antagonisms among Dissenters that were not always recognized by outsiders (who tended to viewed Nonconformity homogeneously) to displace the worst excesses of Calvinism and paternalism onto Bradshaw's bigoted evangelicalism. The Bensons, on the other hand, allow Gaskell to disavow sectarian or even explicitly religious discourse, and to share her mainstream readers' distaste for proselytizing, conversion, and tracts. The Unitarians were committed to realizing religious ideals through non-religious discourses. In this context *Ruth Hilton* is a prime example of what the Unitarian Lucy Aikin called in 1839 'rational religion ... silently working its way in society.'²⁸ Because Unitarianism was dedicated to the reproduction of the 'the rational perpetually self-improving, enquiring, public-spirited individual,'²⁹ Gaskell managed to present a highly-charged, unashamedly *holy* Protestantism as a model for ethical behaviour in an increasingly secular society.

Moreover Unitarianism was a direct object of Gaskell's criticism in *Ruth* as it had been in *Mary Barton*. Cross Street Chapel, as Valentine Cunningham points out, was where the bourgeoisie of Manchester, including 'the millocracy, the benefactors, the leaders, of Manchester society', worshipped God.³⁰ The Unitarians were notably pluralistic and tolerant,

rational and socially radical; a force for social justice, equality, and reform, and champions of feminism. Manchester Unitarians, however, for all their social radicalism, held, as Jenny Uglow observes, to ‘an ideal of individualism rather than one of equality, to the ethic of the market as much as that of the Gospels.’³¹ Advocating the primacy of economic freedom, they ‘did not take kindly to interfering criticisms of the free-market forces of political economy. Even apologists for Unitarian progressivism cannot mask the sect’s illiberality in this respect.’³² Some of the fiercest criticism of *Mary Barton* had come from this ‘bourgeois Dissenting quarter’ close to home, led by Gaskell’s fellow worshipper at Cross Street, William Rathbone Greg. *Mary Barton* was ‘more than a woman’s protest against a man’s world,’ therefore; ‘with exceptional courage Mrs. Gaskell is prepared to suggest that all is not well with the code of the Liberal-bourgeois-Dissenting millocracy. And the accused were not a distant and alien body of people: *Mary Barton* hurt friends.’³³

Far from being heterodox, however, or worse—a woman speaking out of turn—Gaskell’s forthrightness was entirely in keeping with the pluralistic critical traditions of Unitarianism, in which freedom of religious opinion, doctrinal individualism, and the right of women to participate in public discourse were all cardinal tenets. Thus, in *Ruth* Gaskell stood against the political elite in the Manchester congregations once again, arguing passionately that Unitarian social justice must involve more than intellectual debate, social policy reform and parliamentary representation. It must also cultivate the ‘higher charity,’ the attainment of social equity and social reform through a non-denominational, unevangelical, and non-paternalistic practice of good works, which united people of all classes in a single purpose.³⁴ Gaskell’s own tireless work with the Unitarian Domestic Mission co-founded by her husband in 1833, and with other voluntary associations, was vital here. The Mission’s ‘strategy of visiting the poor became a mainstay of philanthropic practice and inspired many similar charities,’³⁵ and was ‘part of a much wider middle-class drive to intervene in working-class life in these years.’³⁶ It was also instrumental in developing the liberal idea of civil society as an important site of social existence outside the state, where ‘an ethical vision of social life’ would prosper because people of all ranks were sharing a public space. John James Tayler, minister at the nearby Upper Brook Street Chapel and a leading figure in the Manchester

Domestic Mission, complained in 1842 of ‘the difficulty in uniting persons of all classes’ in communities of worship, contending that ‘without effacing those social distinctions which for wise and good purposes are permitted to exist, there are occasions when it is good for all ... to meet on the common ground of men and brethren.’³⁷

As Howard Wach argues, Tayler was influenced by the New England Unitarians, who were moderating the native Priestleyan rationalism of the sect with a strain of Romantic social organicism: ‘The higher charity, like the religion it drew upon, began in feeling. It was not an abstract principle.’³⁸ And the life of (religious) feeling began in the family. It was not expected ‘in the market, the exchange, the warehouse or the workshop,’ wrote John Gooch Robberds, William Gaskell’s colleague: ‘These are not the places in which men in general think of taking their religion with them.’³⁹ For Elizabeth Gaskell, however, that was precisely the problem. *Ruth* is about the supreme importance of religious feeling in social transformation, and the role of the novel in representing and inspiring religious feeling—by which Gaskell means *fellow-feeling*. The novel is aligned in this way with charitable institutions as part of civil society: its community of readers comprised individual moral agents with a shared concern; it was committed to testing ‘the boundaries and languages of social relations outside the realm of formal politics and establish[ing] the sources of moral authority which define hegemonic social relationship’;⁴⁰ and it was crucial in introducing competing discourses into the public realm, especially ‘conceptions of social and political organization, hierarchies of knowledge, and prescriptive foundations of public and private morality.’⁴¹

For the Unitarians, domesticity and the family provided an obvious model for a paternalistic culture of charity. As John Seed contends, the ‘language of paternalism, derived from the private spheres of family and church offered an ideological model of class relations and a way of articulating precise problems of social policy’ to the liberals,⁴² especially those for whom there was only one God, God the father. On the face of it, Gaskell might be expected to conform to this ideal. Motherhood was to her ‘the role par excellence whereby women achieve knowledge, autonomy and power,’ and the first duty of women was to be in the home.⁴³ But she also ‘believed women should have moral responsibility for themselves,

should speak out when necessary as she did, share in the creation of values and do their own appointed work,' and she strongly supported women who chose to go into public life.

Moreover in *Ruth* Gaskell carefully sets up a contrast between two family structures. One of them is stiflingly conventional, respectable, and patriarchal, dedicated to the transmission of property and values exclusively through blood and marriage. The other is a highly unconventional, flexible and inclusive social formation, which has no patriarch or hierarchy, is not based on any assumption of blood relationship, sexual difference or prescriptive gender roles, and whose paragon of domestic womanliness is a mother, but also a fallen woman and a working woman.

In the Bradshaw family, the patriarchal head transmutes Calvinistic consciousness of sin, awakening of grace, and commitment to a life in Christ into Pharisaical moral rigidity, cant, self-complacency, severe censure of others' weaknesses, and the empty display of ritual worship. It is obvious from the start that if the Bensons are on the side of Truth, virtue, and good deeds, then Bradshaw, the oppressive paterfamilias, is a humbug on the side of Truth-seeming, convention, and bad names. But it is not as simple as that. Gaskell is asking her readers to consider exactly what it is that constitutes a serious Christian life: to ask what it means to preach and practice forgiveness. Bradshaw is undoubtedly the utilitarian king in his counting house, whose 'love of the purely useful' (154) controls his ethical conduct (and is reflected even in his name, which is the same as the publisher of the famous Victorian railway timetables). Justice, for Bradshaw, is 'certain and inflexible' (195), calculated according to unalterable moral principles and applicable to every circumstance, without consideration of anything that might bear upon, or mitigate, the matter (hence his angry incapacity to understand Benson's refusal to prosecute his son Richard when the boy's guilt is revealed). In love with 'the pomp of principle' (176), as his business partner Farquhar so nicely puts it, Bradshaw is stained 'by no vice himself, either in his own eyes or in that of any human being who cared to judge him,' which allows him to 'speak and act with a severity which was almost sanctimonious in its ostentation of thankfulness as to himself' (172). Aptly, he is 'a tall, large-boned, iron man; stern, powerful, and authoritative in appearance; dressed in clothes of the finest broadcloth, and scrupulously ill-made, as if to show that he was

indifferent to all outward things' (126). Like most utilitarians in the mid-Victorian novel, Bradshaw is close to a caricature of the ultra-masculine philistine, an aggrandizer of all material progress and mercantile values who is scornful of the namby-pambyism of liberals and, naturally, utterly opposed to the idea that feeling enters into ethical or any other decisions: 'It's your sentimentalists that nurse up sin' (328), he snaps at Benson, whom he constantly bullies (and patronises) for the naivety of his unrealistic and impracticable moral idealism. Bradshaw does not suffer fools, and to him almost everyone is a fool:

He drew a clear line of partition, which separated mankind into two great groups, to one of which, by the grace of God, he and his belonged; while the other was composed of those whom it was his duty to try and reform, and bring the whole force of his morality to bear upon, with lectures, admonitions, and exhortations—a duty to be performed, because it was a duty—but with very little of that Hope and Faith which is the Spirit that maketh alive (262)

Thurstan Benson embodies the moral code that the novel opposes to Bradshaw's. With 'his pure, child-like nature' (92), he is the feminine man whose physical deformity leads him into a life of plain living and high thinking that is completely at odds with Bradshaw's coarse energy and natural tendency towards action: 'it was that early injury to his spine which affected the constitution of his mind as well as his body, and predisposed him, in the opinion of some at least, to a feminine morbidness of conscience' (305). Susceptible to unwholesome brooding, and 'more given to thought than to action' (305), Benson is prone to the moral uncertainty of one for whom feeling is as important and as precious as reason, and for whom utilitarianism is anathema: 'My indecision about right and wrong—my perplexity as to how far we are to calculate consequences—grows upon me, I fear' (164), he confesses to his sister, 'a more masculine character than her brother' who 'kept him in check by her clear, pithy talk, which brought back his wandering thoughts to the duty that lay straight before him, waiting for action' (167). In one sense, Benson's moral confusion is the price he pays for his gift to Ruth, the lie he tells to protect her:

'I have got what you call morbid just in consequence of the sophistry by which I persuaded myself that wrong could be right. I torment myself. I have

lost my clear instincts of conscience. Formerly, if I believed that such or such an action was according to the will of God, I went and did it, or at least I tried to do it, without thinking of consequences. Now, I reason and weigh what will happen if I do so and so—I grope where formerly I saw’ (293)

Against the Bradshaw notion of duty—a mechanical deference to spiritual authority, and an unthinking obligation to evangelize—the Bensons represent what the novel describes as a Wordsworthian ideal of duty: ‘their lives were pure and good, not merely from a lovely and beautiful nature, but from some law, the obedience to which was, of itself, harmonious peace, and which governed them almost implicitly, and with as little questioning on their part, as the glorious stars which haste not, rest not, in their eternal obedience’ (115). The direct reference here to Wordsworth’s ‘Ode to Duty’ (1804)—duty is the law that ‘dost preserve the stars from wrong’ (l.47)—implicitly contrasts a genuinely Christian conception of duty, which only comes with the internalization of the moral law, and the pharisaical duty of the law-knowers, who do good by conscious intent and not by habit.⁴⁴ One must be a ‘law unto oneself’: in other words, if you do not have the law, you must ‘do by nature the things contained in the law’ (Romans 2:13-15). In this idea of duty Gaskell proposes that the instinctual moral subjectivity of Romanticism unites with and tempers the hyper-conscientious moral subjectivity of Protestantism. In place of ‘the self-scrutinizing anxieties of traditional Nonconformity’,⁴⁵ *Ruth* extols the pure conscience of the Wordsworthian child, with its unselfconscious adherence to right: those ‘who ask not if thine eye / Be on them’ (ll.9-10) but ‘do thy work, and know it not’ (l.14).

The contrast between these two models of duty repeats the New Testament opposition between the law of the Pharisees, with its doctrinaire condemnation of sinners, and the love of Jesus, which actively seeks them out. The Bensons’ ‘pious fraud’ is explicitly aligned with Christ’s defence of Mary Magdalen against the sophism of the Pharisees. Ruth is represented successively and sometimes even simultaneously as a Magdalen-figure, a figure for Mary, the mother of Christ (the ‘gentle, blessed mother’ in her dark-blue sack-cloth (1.289; 2.29)), and a Christ-figure of a distinctively Unitarian kind. Unitarians rejected the Trinity and, thus, the divinity of Christ, who was seen rather as a ‘divinely chosen, physically vulnerable and

morally fallible' man,⁴⁶ and accordingly refuted the doctrines of original sin and atonement. At once exceptional in her purity of soul and heroic courage—a human being chosen by God for a special purpose, as the Unitarian Christ is—she represents the innate human capacity for weakness and sin as well as strength and righteousness. She is less a victim of the 'great social evil' than an emblem of the universality of social evil, and the bitter necessity of a long labour of penitence, duty and loving-kindness that will lead, ultimately, to social salvation. From one point of view, then, Ruth is a kind of scapegoat—a figure for substitutionary atonement, like Christ, except that she was created by someone who believed in neither atonement nor original sin. But from another point of view she is a modern Magdalen: not as that word had been appropriated by Victorians so as to avoid having to call prostitutes and unmarried mothers what they were, but an intercessor, like the Virgin Mary, whose tears of compassion mediate between God and humanity in Phineas Fletcher's epigraph to the novel.

More inventively still, Gaskell relates Mary Magdalen typologically to the compassionate and loyal Old Testament heroine who gives her name to the novel. In doing so she is not just adding another layer of biblical symbolism to a plot of redemption through duty: she is offering Ruth Hilton as a figure of epic grandeur. The biblical Ruth is the arch-outsider, one of the idolatrous Moabites so reviled by the Israelites (as the Unitarians were reviled by their fellow Christians as 'disguised papists and infidels, ... Jacobins and French spies, ... Jews'⁴⁷). She arrives in Israel as a result of complex circumstances. Elimelech and Naomi choose to escape famine by fleeing to Moab, 'the home of the historical enemies of the Israelites,' which suggests, as Bonnie Honig points out, that 'the Israelites have fallen away from their fundamental moral principles.'⁴⁸ When Elimelech and his sons die in Moab, leaving their mother to return alone, her daughter-in-law Ruth insists on accompanying her home to Israel, famously responding to Naomi's protest: 'whither thou goest, I will go ... Thy people shall be my people ... Thy god ... my god.'⁴⁹ Ruth and Naomi 'establish a joint household,' and Ruth's 'precarious position in the Israelite order is stabilized by a marriage [to Boaz] and birth [of a son] that provide the founding energy for a new monarchic regime.' Ruth, Honig argues,

is the vehicle through which the Law comes alive again, generations after the death of the lawgiver, Moses. Ruth's immigration and conversion reperform the social contract of Sinai and allow the Israelites to re-experience their own initial conversion, faith, or wonder before the law.⁵⁰

Ruth is thus a byword for the seductive power of the woman to attract men to idolatry, the woman who 'unsettles the order she joins,' and out of whose otherness a new order is born: the lineage that ends in King David.⁵¹ Through the course of Gaskell's novel, Ruth Hilton slowly emerges from the unworldly space of the chapel-house and goes out into the world, as if in fulfillment of a mission, to unsettle its order and to instate, in her son, a new order. With the quiet fervour of a committed revivalist, she re-energizes a Protestant culture that has become moribund by re-universalising the Protestant ideology that is embodied in marginal Nonconformists like Thurstan Benson. In this way, authentic Christian attitudes and values can once more permeate the secular world.

Why, then, should Ruth die? Does she re-enchant a world that is unable to accommodate her exceptionalism? Having achieved what she has been sent (by the novelist) to do, does she perish because there *are* no Ruths in realist Eccleston, after all—no saints, prophets, heroes, no one with such unworldly charisma, such purity of soul, such incorruptible rectitude? Is Ruth a modern-day St. Teresa, an impossible ideal for the striving provincial Englishwoman: like Dorothea Brooke in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* a foundress of nothing? Or is she, like her biblical namesake, silenced by her own founding act, excluded from the patrilineage she initiates?⁵² I think the answer lies in the celebrated vow: 'Thy people shall be my people.' Gaskell's *Ruth* is a call to restore religious feeling—the unconditional love of the alien sinner, the Moabite/Magdalen—to the heart of secular liberal pluralism, the Israel of the Lawgivers and keepers: the Pharisaical political economists and utilitarians, the masters and men. Ruth's fate, seen in this light, looks strangely like a symbolic playing-out of the fate of the 'vanishing mediator.' Here I am applying, or rather adapting, a term of Fredric Jameson's explicated in great detail in a well-known essay of his on a structure in Weber's social thought. To put the argument simply, Protestantism itself is a vanishing mediator. The historical transition from medieval feudalism to capitalist modernity

could only be achieved, he suggests, through the privatization of religious experience, which shifted the culture of asceticism and self-examination from the monastic enclosures of Catholicism to the internal lives of ordinary people. Once Protestantism ‘has accomplished the task of allowing a rationalization of innerworldly life to take place, it has no further reason for being and disappears from the historical scene.’⁵³ Thus, ‘religionization becomes itself the principal agent in the process of secularization,’ because the sanctification of life, Weber tells us, ‘could thus almost take on the character of a business enterprise. A thoroughgoing Christianization of the whole of life was the consequence of this methodical quality of ethical conduct into which Calvinism as distinct from Lutheranism forced men.’ The religionization of everyday life leads to ‘the disappearance of religion itself as an ultimate value from the henceforth totally rationalized and desacralized world of the capitalist market-place.’⁵⁴

The ‘humanization of the world goes hand in hand with a spreading philosophic and existential despair,’ however, which is expressed partly in a struggle between two bourgeois traditions, which, Jameson shows, are manifested as ‘two parental systems’ representing respectively ‘contemplation and action ... meaning and activity’: ethics and religion versus politics and business.⁵⁵ They are in essence maternal (Ruth’s family) and paternal (Bradshaw’s family), and oppose the mother’s value system (an inward sense of values) with the father’s value system (‘routine action in a mechanical and unexamined scheme of things’).⁵⁶ From this perspective, Ruth Hilton’s life and death can be thought of as a dramatized reenactment of the process Jameson describes. She *is* the vanishing mediator in this narrative, who heralds a distinctively Unitarian renewal of the religionization of everyday life, and inaugurates, in the person of her son, a new lineage, a new order, a new social morality.

Ruth’s re-sanctification of the charitable life is not, however, at odds with the world of business. To call *Ruth* a hypocritical novel, then, is only to suggest that, like the Reverend Benson, it serves God humbly and faithfully, while continuing to place its faith in the system that issues dividends on canal shares, as long as its operatives (the Richard Bradshaws) have internalized their moral duty. The Bensons’ pious fraud, moreover, is above all a useful lie. In

this regard, Benson (whose name echoes Bentham) has a very utilitarian idea of virtue: his is the socially beneficial lie, the fiction tolerated for the sake of its probable consequences, conducive to the greatest happiness of the greatest number. The lie is not the engine of a tragic mischief, nor does it delay the fateful workings of providence. Ruth dies accidentally, and only as a result of her sedulous virtue. *Ruth* does not disavow the economic world and its utilitarian ways, in other words, but seeks only to resacralize them by the diffusion of a new humanitarianism and the renewal of the Protestant work ethic. Ruth Hilton does not represent a life-affirming liberal humanism in opposition to a deathly puritanism, nor a secular Romantic ideal of feeling in opposition to Utilitarian calculation, nor fictional discourse in opposition to the discourse of political economy. She is, rather, the Moabite among the Israelites, as *Ruth*, too, is the idolatrous outsider: a religious novel among the strenuously social mid-Victorian social novels. This is not a social-problem novel, therefore, in which the social problem is the fallen woman, as the social problem in *Mary Barton* and *North and South* is the inequality of masters and men. *Ruth* triumphs in its own disappearance: the disappearance of the Christian life into the Christianization of the whole of life, and the disappearance of the novel of Christian piety into a Christianized social fiction.

¹ See Deirdre D. Albertis, "Introduction," *Ruth* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2006), p. x, Tim Dolin, "Introduction" *Ruth* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2011), pp.vii-xxviii, and Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

² Angus Easson (ed.), *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage* (London; New York: Routledge, 1991) p. 282.

³ Easson, *Critical Heritage*, p. 254.

⁴ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 458.

⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 79.

⁶ Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 134. Cf. Monica Fryckstedt, for whom *Mary Barton* and *Ruth* both 'turn social problems into a religious challenge for the reader': *Elizabeth Gaskell's Mary Barton and Ruth: A Challenge to Christian England* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1982), p. 120.

⁷ Easson, *Critical Heritage*, pp. 215, 26.

⁸ Hilary Fraser, 'The Victorian Novel and Religion,' in Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing (eds.) *A Companion to the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 107.

⁹ See, for instance, Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction*. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), and Amanda Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

¹⁰ Gaskell's elevation into the Victorian canon by feminist criticism can be dated to the publication of several full-length studies, beginning in 1987 with Patsy Stoneman's

influential volume in the 'Key Women Writers' series, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). It is not the first sustained attempt to approach Gaskell's entire achievement with some unifying thesis: see Coral Lansbury, *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis* (London: Elek, 1975), Angus Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), and Coral Lansbury, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984). Hilary M Schor, *Scheherezade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) has also been highly influential.

¹¹ *Alton Locke* is a much more programmatic and schematized novel than *Ruth*, which pits physical-force against moral-force chartism, and Christian socialism against Newmanism. It also has a hero who works in the sweated garment trade, however, and a denouement that turns on fever and the self-sacrifice of the working-class radical.

¹² Michael Wheeler, "'One of the Larger Lost Continents': Religion in the Victorian Novel", in Frances O'Gorman (ed.), *A Concise Companion to the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 180.

¹³ Anderson, *Tainted Souls*, p. 129.

¹⁴ *Tainted Souls*, p. 132.

¹⁵ *Tainted Souls*, p. 132.

¹⁶ Greg, "Prostitution", qu. in *Tainted Souls*, p. 128. Cf. Dinah Maria Craik, who questioned this tendency to 'refine away error till it is hardly error at all' by 'exalting the seduced into a paragon of injured simplicity' whose 'penitence becomes unnecessary and unnatural; their suffering disproportionably unjust' (*A Woman's Thoughts About Women* [1858]), qu. in Fryckstedt, *Challenge*, pp. 164-5).

¹⁷ *Tainted Souls*, p. 132.

-
- ¹⁸ J A V Chapple and Arthur Pollard (eds), *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell* (Manchester: Manchester U.P., 1966), p. 119.
- ¹⁹ H.M. Wach, 'Unitarian Philanthropy and Cultural Hegemony in Comparative Perspective: Manchester and Boston, 1827-1848,' *Journal of Social History* 26 (1993), p. 550.
- ²⁰ Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 374.
- ²¹ Carolyn Betensky, *Feeling for the Poor : Bourgeois Compassion, Social Action, and the Victorian Novel* (Charlottesville, Va.; London: University of Virginia Press, 2010), pp. 10, 29.
- ²² Tim Dolin (ed.), *Ruth* (Oxford: World's Classics, 2011), p. 284. Further references to this edition are placed in the text.
- ²³ Easson, *Critical Heritage*, p. 204.
- ²⁴ Easson, *Critical Heritage*, p. 215.
- ²⁵ Easson, *Critical Heritage*, p. 241.
- ²⁶ Hilary Fraser, *Beauty and Belief: Aesthetics and Religion in Victorian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 110.
- ²⁷ Ruth Watts, *Gender, Power and the Unitarians in England 1760-1860* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1998), p. 104.
- ²⁸ Watts, *Unitarians in England*, p. 107.
- ²⁹ *Unitarians in England*, p. 101.
- ³⁰ Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, p. 204. At one time 'there were five MPs in the congregation' Valentine Cunningham, *Everywhere Spoken Against: Dissent in the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 141, 31.
- ³¹ Uglow continues: '*Laissez-faire* economic principles, naturally allied to a demand for free trade and tariff reform, helped to make Cross Street the base for the Manchester Anti-Corn

Law Association in 1838 (the national Anti-Corn Law league followed in 1839). Free trade and factory reform continued to be hotly debated during the next decade, as Cross Street worshippers took an increasing part in public life, local and national'. *A Habit of Stories*, p. 87.

³² Cunningham, *Everywhere Spoken Against*, p. 132.

³³ *Everywhere Spoken Against*, pp. 132, 33, 34.

³⁴ Watts, *Unitarians in England*, p. 107.

³⁵ H.M. Wach, 'A "Still, Small Voice" from the Pulpit: Religion and the Creation of Social Morality in Manchester, 1820-1850,' *The Journal of Modern History* 63.3 (1991), p. 444.

³⁶ John Seed, 'Unitarianism, Political Economy and the Antinomies of Liberal Culture in Manchester, 1830-50,' *Social History* 7.1 (1982), p. 16.

³⁷ John Hamilton Thom, ed., *Letters Embracing His Life of John James Tayler*, 2 vols. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1872), vol. i, pp. 202, 03.

³⁸ Wach, 'Philanthropy and Hegemony,' p. 546.

³⁹ John Gooch Robberds and Mary Robberds, *Christian Festivals and Natural Seasons* (1855), qu. in Seed, 'Unitarianism,' p. 21.

⁴⁰ Wach, 'Philanthropy and Hegemony,' p. 541.

⁴¹ Wach, 'Philanthropy and Hegemony,' p. 541. 'English Unitarians were important contributors to the emergence of a liberal public sphere outside the direct control of the state': John Seed, 'Theologies of Power: Unitarianism and the Social Relations of Religious Discourse, 1800-50,' in R. J. Morris (ed.) *Class, Power and Social Structure in British Nineteenth-Century Towns* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1986), p. 111.

⁴² Seed, 'Unitarianism,' p. 25.

⁴³ Watts, *Unitarians in England*, p. 200.

⁴⁴ This is the gist of the epigraph to Wordsworth's Ode by the Stoic philosopher Seneca.

⁴⁵ Uglow, *A Habit of Stories*, p. 96.

⁴⁶ Uglow, *A Habit of Stories*, p. 5.

⁴⁷ Seed, 'Theologies,' p. 131.

⁴⁸ Bonnie Honig, 'Ruth, the Model Emigre: Mourning and the Symbolic Politics of Immigration,' in David Campbell and Michael J Shapiro (eds) *Moral Spaces: Rethinking Ethics and World Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 186.

⁴⁹ Ruth 1: 16-17. Another daughter-in-law, Orpah, had accompanied them, but turns back.

⁵⁰ Honig, 'Ruth,' pp. 187, 189.

⁵¹ Honig, 'Ruth,' p. 188.

⁵² Honig, 'Ruth,' pp. 187-88.

⁵³ Fredric Jameson, 'The Vanishing Mediator: Narrative Structure in Max Weber,' *New German Critique* 1 (1973), p. 78.

⁵⁴ Jameson, 'Vanishing Mediator,' p. 74.

⁵⁵ Jameson, 'Vanishing Mediator,' pp. 60, 87, 88.

⁵⁶ Jameson, 'Vanishing Mediator,' p. 85.