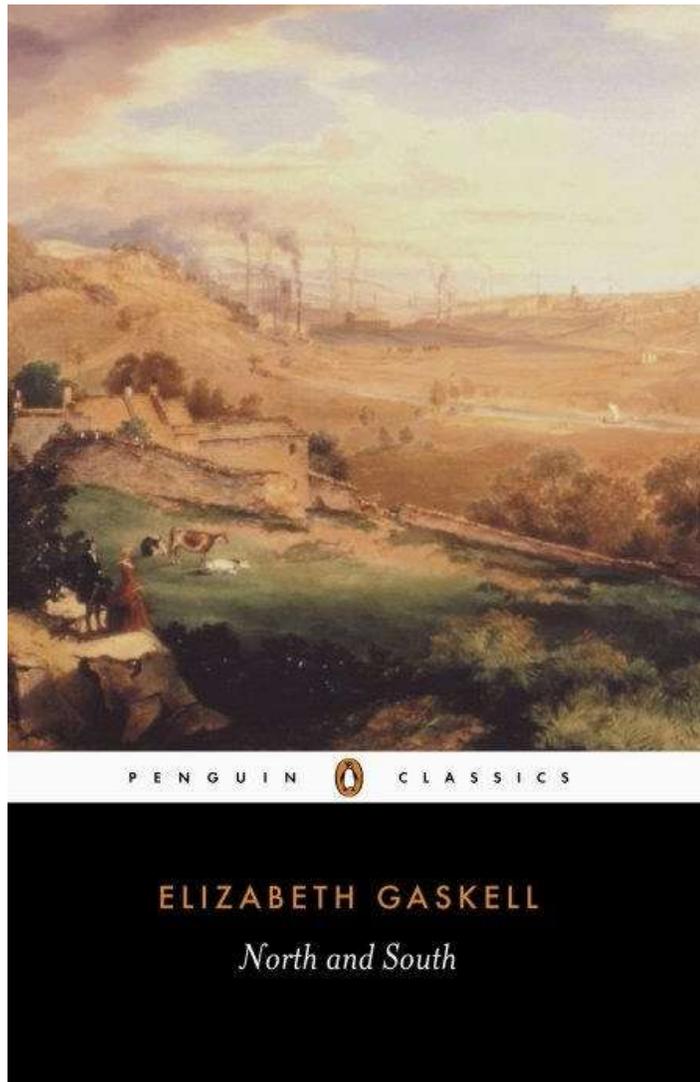


Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865): *North and South* (1854-1855)



If you wonder how a Victorian author might inform her reader that the hero and heroine, after professing their love, have kissed passionately (I almost said, “made out”), turn to the final page of *North and South*, where conversation resumes “after some time of delicious silence.”

For the ardor that can be provoked by watching a woman serve tea, I give you Chapter 10, “Wrought Iron and Gold.” Mr. Thornton is a friend of Margaret Hale’s father. He is there to talk to him. But:

She had a bracelet on one taper arm, which would fall down over her round wrist. Mr Thornton watched the re-placing of this troublesome ornament with far more attention than he listened to her father. It seemed as if it fascinated him to see her push it up impatiently, until it tightened her soft flesh; and then to mark the loosening – the fall.

But *North and South* offers more than the pleasures of romance. It addresses regionalism, as expressed in the differences (and sometimes antagonism) between the agrarian south and industrialized north of England (hence the title). A major plotline tackles the relationship between industrialist and labor, played out in a workers' strike that tips into violence. There are also personal problems of duty and responsibility.

For example, towards the end of the novel, our heroine, Margaret, loses almost everyone close to her through death or other circumstances. At this point, when everyone to whom she owes duty is gone, she is the mistress of properties and funds that she has no training in managing. She has said goodbye to the hero, but a serious misunderstanding clouds their farewell, which she expects to be a permanent break. Her cousin is pushing her to marry a man she has already rejected. Her aunt is pulling her back into London society, in which Margaret has little interest. The family takes a few weeks at the seaside town of Cromer. There, Margaret spends her time alone, sitting on the beach (Chapter 49, "Breathing Tranquility"):

...all this time for thought enabled Margaret to put events in their right places, as to origin and significance, both as regarded her past life and her future. Those hours by the sea-side were not lost...

When she returns with the family to London,

Margaret fulfilled one of her sea-side resolves, and took her life into her own hands...she had learnt, in those silent hours of thought, that she herself must one day answer for her own life, and what she had done with it; and she tried to settle that most difficult problem for women, how much was to be utterly merged in obedience to authority, and how much might be set apart for freedom in working...Margaret gained the acknowledgement of her right to follow her own ideas of duty.

When I first read this passage, I was struck by how that is still a problem I wrestle with—although I would replace “obedience to authority” with “obligations to and expectations of others.” One thinks of family and community responsibilities, but also what others think one should be doing with one's own life—what kind of wife, mother, daughter, friend, volunteer, activist, employer, employee, entrepreneur, artist, etc., etc. one should be. Is it wrong to spend time writing stories that do not produce income for my family? Is it selfish not to say yes to every request for volunteer time? How many calls to Congress is doing my part? Am I a bad mother if I close the door and tell my child I'm working?

I like that Gaskell shows that this question is important enough that Margaret must spend noticeable time by herself thinking about it and settling it for herself. Secure in her mind, she then carries out the fruit of her thought. Your life is worth understanding and purpose, says Gaskell. You owe others attention and care, yes. But you also owe yourself a life of your own—and you will have to claim it.