

Rioting, Nineteenth-Century Fiction, and the Limits of Liberalism

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RETELLING THE HISTORY OF THE LONG STRUGGLE between liberty and authority in the opening pages of *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill describes the French Revolution as one of many “temporary aberrations,” “a sudden and convulsive outbreak” of ungovernable feeling that proved to be no more than a momentary digression from the universal progress toward a “democratic republic” that would come “to occupy a large portion of the earth’s surface.”¹ Violent convulsions of popular feeling justified by calls for “self-government” always risk descending into the tyranny of the will of the majority over the individual, according to Mill (7–8). By contrast, responsible government must establish limits that protect the individual from the “tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling,” just as finding and maintaining a limit to the “legitimate interference of collective opinion” is “indispensable to a good condition of human affairs” (8–9). Taking Mill’s observations on the risk to a liberal politics posed by convulsive expressions of popular feeling as a starting point, the following essay reads the formal volatility of riot scenes in Dickens’s *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849), and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1854) as part of a long historical struggle to represent and categorize the riot as a specific form of political protest that oscillates wildly between inchoate violence and legible legitimate resistance. Riot scenes challenge the liberal ethos of disinterest, progress, and individual responsibility that underlies these novels. Aberrant, transient, and unpredictable, the riot introduces the suggestion of dissent without limit, the prospect of a collective chaos that correspondingly takes the representational ambitions of the nineteenth-century

¹ John Stuart Mill, “On Liberty,” in *On Liberty and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 7. All subsequent references to “On Liberty” will be to this edition and given in parentheses in the text.

novel to its limits. Yet the prospect of harnessing the affective energy of the riot held an allure for all these novelists, who variously and unevenly mobilize the riot as a means of dramatizing the horror that ensues when collective opinion takes an illegitimate form, while at the same time attempting to sympathetically represent the plight of the individual caught up in events beyond her control. Crucially for these novels, the riot, unlike the more durable political transformations that constitute a revolution or even more orderly forms of popular protest, such as the organized crowd, is more containable aesthetically and ideologically.

In Alain Badiou's recent schema, there are three forms of riot: the spontaneous violence of the immediate riot; the historical riot, which is driven by an "Idea" that transcends the negation of immediate conditions; and the latent riot, which has the unrealized potential to become a historical riot. According to Badiou, all these varieties of riot are prepolitical in the sense that they are protean rather than sustainable new political forms or organizations. Badiou's *The Rebirth of History* (2011) proposes a new method for analyzing the riot as a potentially politically transformative event that signals the beginnings of a revolutionary alternative to the present neoliberal world order, which, he argues, conforms to the norms of its birth in "a dyed-in-the-wool liberalism of mid-nineteenth-century vintage."² Inspired by the riots in Tahrir Square and across the Middle East and Europe in 2011, Badiou claims that these "first stirrings of a 'global popular uprising'" against this regressive liberalism also hark back to the "first insurrections of the nineteenth century" (5). We thus find ourselves "in a *time of riots* wherein a rebirth of History, as opposed to the pure and simple repetition of the worst, is signaled and takes shape" (5). And yet the chaotic form of the riot troubles Badiou's optimism. He concedes in the context of the 2005 riots in Paris and the 2011 riots in London that riots triggered by "state murders" are "violent, anarchic and ultimately without enduring truth" and insists that if riots are to become the signal of a reawakening of History that cannot destroy and "plunder without a concept," they must "accord with an Idea" (21). Tracing historical continuities in the form of riots from 1848 to the present is central to Badiou's understanding of how the riot can and has historically accorded with an "Idea" capable of transforming its reactive and local immediacy into a world-historical event.

At times, Badiou's evocative description of the unreflective contagion of the immediate riot, its self-consuming rage, collective fever, potential corruption by criminal elements, and destructive tumult recalls the critical rhetoric of Victorian liberals like Mill and, even more so, Matthew Arnold's account of the localized working-class claims of the Hyde Park Rioters, or "roughs," in *Culture and Anarchy*, who, as he puts it, have no "visionary schemes of revolution and transformation."³ Badiou writes that "in among the destruction of hated symbols, the profitable pillaging, the sheer pleasure in smashing what exists, the joyous whiff of gunpowder and guerilla warfare against the cops, one cannot see clearly. The subject of immediate riots is always impure" (26). Badiou's account of the transition from the vengeful "nihilistic din of riotous attacks" to the "extended time of the historical riot" (33) is haunted by these impure beginnings, highlighting the precarious achievement of "possible *longue durée*, intensity of compact presence," and a "multi-faceted crowd counting as the whole people" (35). The precariousness of this achievement of enduring political change is reinforced by Badiou's own premature claim for the rapid

² Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2012), 5. All subsequent references to this work will be given in parentheses in the text.

³ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 88.

victory of the Tunisian and Egyptian riots of 2011 and his subsequent argument for the riot as “the guardian of the history of emancipation in intervallic periods” (41), although he does not distinguish at this point in the essay between immediate or historical riots. Here again Badiou argues through historical parallels that align, in his terms, the hegemony of liberal democracy in the present “intervallic period,” in which classical capitalism has been revived following the collapse of communism from 1980 to 2011 (and beyond), with the “liberal monarchy” of the intervallic period (1815–50) that was characterized by the ascendancy of modern capitalism in the wake of the failure of the “republic revolution” (45). What this parallel reveals for Badiou is the need for contemporary protest movements to recognize and overcome their own repetition of the failure of previous emancipatory struggles if they are to generate a new, truly revolutionary political organization free of the limits of liberalism and the desires of and for the West.

In the space of the revolutionary event, outside the limits of liberalism, the “inexistent of the world” will finally acquire more than a local minoritarian “fictional voice” in the decisions that determine their fate (56). Yet if we return to Mill, there are significant parallels between his account of the tyranny of public opinion that characterizes revolutionary movements and Badiou’s argument for the authoritarian or “dictatorial element” of the historical riot “that enthuses everyone, just like the finally discovered proof of a theorem, a dazzling work of art or a finally declared amorous passion” (61). Ultimately, the “political truth” of the historical riot can be preserved only through a process of “intensification, contraction and localization” that replaces the “identitarian object” (81) with “a real presentation of generic power” or “radicalized generic” (81) that Badiou optimistically insists is fundamentally distinct from the restrictive power of the state. Risks abound in this scenario, of a return to the regime of opinion of liberal pluralism in which individual liberty trumps justice and responsibility, of a failure to translate the spontaneous localized energy of the riot into a political organization that moves beyond the parliamentary apparatus of the state and the circumscriptive management of opinion by the regulatory power of capital. Riots in the end do not provide the answer to the questions they raise about the representational limits of liberal democracy or a model for new forms of political organization. In Badiou’s antiphilosophical account, they are instead redescribed and rethought in terms of a new set of criteria that divides emancipatory futures from the regulatory normativity of neoliberal empiricism. In this sense, Badiou turns the riot into a catalyst for new modes of political description and forms, a generative and generalizable destructive political force with potentially enduring significance that is continuous, yet distinct, from the riots that occurred during the intervallic period of the liberal monarchy (1815–50), to use Badiou’s classification.

So what can we learn from this earlier time of riots that Badiou gestures toward and that writers such as Brontë, Dickens, and Gaskell struggled to assimilate, according to John Plotz, as an “innovative alternative” to their own “middle-class ethos and mindset”?⁴ As John Plotz rightly argues in the context of Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*, the assimilation of the riotous crowd as a rival form of public representation is a concession to its politically transformative potential, not a hegemonic engulfing of a “doomed rival” (171). The working-class or “representative” crowd in *Shirley*, Plotz continues, functions as a powerful “rival discourse” that requires “Brontë to postulate new forms of bourgeois freedom” that recognize, in muted literary form, the unprecedented power of the modern industrial crowd to organize and inform both public and private life (172).

⁴ John Plotz, *The Crowd: British Literature and Public Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 171. All subsequent references to this work will be given in parentheses in the text.

In its more extreme riotous incarnation, however, the “yell” of the mob also allowed Brontë and her contemporaries to summon a more pessimistic scenario that imagines the failure to realize those “new forms of bourgeois freedom.” In this sense, the novelistic representation of the riot, in particular, is consistent with what Amanda Anderson has dubbed the long tradition of “bleak liberalism” that “derives from the awareness of those forces and conditions that threaten the realization of liberal ambitions.”⁵ In contrast to Badiou’s monarchic characterization of this period’s uncomplicated liberal hegemony, Anderson captures the palpable unease that informs nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century liberal thought, a philosophical tradition with which the guiding ethos of the novels I am discussing here can be loosely aligned. Following Anderson’s reading, the stress on the ethos of the central characters in these novels models a more provisional contingent responsiveness, what John Plotz suggestively calls the “vicarious attachment” (176) required to hear and understand the competing forms of public action and speech that are necessary and vital elements of the nineteenth-century public sphere. Rather than providing a monologic narrative glorification of instrumental reason and the triumph of capital or an emancipatory fiction of triumphant riots and revolution, these novels are embedded and implicated in the complex, fractious social milieu they describe and in which they circulate. These “bleak” novels give expression, to paraphrase Anderson, to a dialectics of skepticism and hope, freedom and equality, individual and collective expression.⁶ Eleanor Courtemanche identifies some of these productive tensions in Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* in her analysis of the persistent troping of Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” in British fiction from 1818 to 1860. Gaskell’s narrator, she argues, has to counterbalance the need to represent the “correct” middle-class response to the workers’ demands with the competing impulse to sympathetically describe the suffering caused by their intolerable working conditions. Drawing parallels with *Hard Times* and other fictions, Courtemanche identifies a common tension between “an expressed allegiance to a providential model of optimistic social outcomes and a more or less suppressed awareness of the disasters, errors, and vices” that shaped their social worlds.⁷

In the case of *Mary Barton*, to develop the implications of Courtemanche’s reading a little further, this tension manifests as a sustained oscillation between modeling a form of critical sympathy through good listening and a pragmatism, perhaps derived from Smith, that is intrinsically quietist in its privileging of civilized speech over riotous bad speech. There is also a persistent muted pessimism that unsettles, yet is inseparable from, the progressive impulses of Gaskell’s liberal sympathy. It is this pessimism that informs Gaskell’s implicit recognition of fiction as a flawed medium that can only suggest rather than impose models of effective communication between the classes. This bleakness is epitomized in one of the reconciliatory concluding moments of the novel, as Courtemanche notes, when Mr. Carson struggles to hear Job Legh. Responding to the exemplary clarity of Job Legh’s insistence on the value of all “our talk,”⁸ Mr. Carson insists: “My good man, just listen to me. . . . There will come times of great changes in the occupation of thousands, when improvements in manufactures and machines are made. It’s all nonsense

⁵ Amanda Anderson, “Character and Ideology: The Case of Cold War Liberalism,” *New Literary History* 42, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 213.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁷ Eleanor Courtemanche, *The “Invisible Hand” and British Fiction, 1818–1860: Adam Smith, Political Economy, and the Genre of Realism* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 72.

⁸ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 386. All subsequent references to *Mary Barton* will be to this edition and given in parentheses in the text.

talking,—it must be so!” (384–85). Carson’s speech, with its breaks and exclamatory insistence, registers the strain of maintaining an economic ideal in the face of the suffering that Job Legh articulates and embodies. Job Legh’s heartfelt broken syntax counters the muting effects of Mr. Carson’s wavering insistence on “facts” and market-driven rationalism with the inarticulate passion derived from literal experience. Job Legh functions in this sense both as a potential medium of the unassimilable noise of working-class resistance and also as a characterological manifestation of a liberal imperative to assimilate the unassimilable, which is necessarily and inevitably haunted by the possibility of failure and unprofitable social chaos. In Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* and *North and South* and in Brontë’s *Shirley* this assimilative impulse is synonymous with the failure of the domestic sphere to filter and manage the noise of the outside world—the noise outside the boundaries of the sayable or what counts as “rational” speech to adapt Rancière’s *Disagreement*.⁹

As a counterpoint to Brontë’s rioting Luddites and Gaskell’s Chartists, Dickens’s *Barnaby Rudge* reenacts the Gordon Riots of 1780, which—in contrast to Badiou’s image of workers rioting in response to their exploitation by the monarchic liberal establishment—were remembered in the early 1840s, when the novel was published, as a shameful outpouring of Protestant intolerance against Catholics that temporarily transformed London’s streets into a violent conflagration. Dickens’s struggle to contain the voices of the Gordon rioters in *Barnaby Rudge* tested the limit of his phonographic ambitions for the novel more generally. Transcribing the voices of the rioters and the noise of the riot is in this sense not incidental but pivotal to understanding Dickens’s attempt to creatively harness the riot’s imaginative energy, its optimistic projection into a historical future when local and specific demands assume universal or, at least, national significance. This was a struggle that Dickens shared with many of his contemporaries, who were also drawn to the sheer dynamism and symbolic power of the riot as a spectacular instantiation of unchecked dissent. In addition to Brontë and Gaskell, Disraeli, Eliot, Kingsley, and James all mobilized different modes of rioting to explore the limits of the novel’s capacity to assimilate and channel the transformative force of the riot into an assertion of the novel’s role as a legitimate alternative form of knowledge and political representation. In the remainder of this essay I will examine specific riot scenes from *Barnaby Rudge*, *Shirley*, and *North and South* to reveal the unexpected continuities between their pessimistic treatment of the riot as localized, immediate, and transient, while conceding its historically transformative effects, and Badiou’s optimistic historical claims for the riot as a potentially revolutionary sequence that, if driven by an “Idea,” can move beyond its immediate and local or latent incarnations and assume historical and generic significance.

BARNABY RUDGE

Writing excitedly to his friend John Forster, Dickens describes being consumed by his portrayal of the Gordon Riots’ energy and momentum: “I have let all the prisoners out of Newgate, burnt down Lord Mansfield’s and played the very devil. Another number will finish the fires and help us on towards the end. I feel quite smoky when I am at work. I want elbow-room terribly.”¹⁰ This letter not only reveals how formally central the riot was to *Barnaby Rudge* but also suggests that Dickens struggled to structurally harness the energy it unleashed. Liberated from Newgate, the

⁹ Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 15.

¹⁰ Charles Dickens to John Forster, 18 September 1841, in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Madeline House, Graham Storey, et al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965–2002), 2:385.

rioters run amok, diffusing the central focus of the novel, which is to bring together two very different plots: a detective plot in which the hapless Barnaby Rudge and his mother elude the murderous Barnaby Rudge Senior only to find themselves engulfed by the other plot of the novel, which dramatizes the underground machinations of the Gordon rioters, who burst out onto the streets of the novel and sweep up both mother and son, just as they do the author himself.

Dickens erroneously claims in the preface to the serial version of the novel published in *Master Humphrey's Clock* between February and November 1841: "No account of the Gordon Riots, having been to my knowledge introduced into any Work of Fiction, and the subject presenting very extraordinary and remarkable features, I was led to project this Tale."¹¹ By contrast, fictional accounts of the riots had long provided a means of exorcising the specter of the French Revolution in George Walker's *The Vagabond* (1799), Maria Edgeworth's *Harrington* (1817), and Thomas Gaspey's *The Mystery* (1820). As Miriam L. Wallace has argued, these novels contributed to the solidification of the historical perception of the Gordon Riots as integral to the "revolutionary worldview" that emerged in the 1790s and 1800s. "The 1780 riots become a kind of fulcrum," Wallace argues, "pointing back on the one hand to traditions of carnivalesque popular revolt, and forwards on the other towards a nineteenth-century concept of mass protest and revolutionary action by the proletariat."¹²

Capturing the eccentric particularity of individual voices, their distinct rhythms and cadences, is one of Dickens's key techniques for creating space for individual characters, both central and minor.¹³ In *Barnaby Rudge* the novel's titular character is rarely heard amid the hubbub created by the multiple voices of minor characters competing for space in the crowded interiors and street scenes that dominate the novel. But on the odd occasions when Barnaby does speak, his childlike phrasing creates a space for a more sympathetic reading of the potential idealism and enthusiasm of individual rioters unwittingly drawn into the political machinations of an ambitious few.

Nowhere is this disparity between voices more clearly marked than in the description of Barnaby "stationed" at the head of the rioters and walking between his supposed friend Hugh, "that dangerous companion," and Dennis the hangman: "Forgetful of all other things in the ecstasy of the moment, his face flushed and his eyes sparkling with delight, heedless of the weight of the great banner he carried . . . the only light-hearted, undesigning creature, in the whole assembly" (390). Barnaby's inarticulate joy and failure to hear the real meaning of his fellow rioters' words recall Thomas Carlyle's contemporaneous characterization of the Chartists as "wild inarticulate souls."¹⁴ Yet, unlike Carlyle, who allows his crowd of "dumb creatures" to speak in one voice only when they pray for heroic leadership, "Guide me, govern me! I am mad and miserable, and cannot guide myself,"¹⁵ Dickens gives Barnaby direct speech of his own. Throughout

¹¹ Charles Dickens, preface to *Barnaby Rudge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3. All subsequent references to *Barnaby Rudge* will be to this edition and given in parentheses in the text.

¹² Miriam L. Wallace, "Thomas Holcroft and the Gordon Riots: Romantic Revisionings," in *The Gordon Riots: Politics, Culture and Insurrection in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Ian Hayward and John Seed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 163.

¹³ This point draws on Alex Woloch's reading of Dickens in *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

¹⁴ Thomas Carlyle, *Chartism*, in *Selected Writings*, ed. Alan Shelston (London: Penguin, 1971), 155. John Plotz provides an excellent reading of voice in Carlyle's *Chartism* in *The Crowd*, 127–53.

¹⁵ Carlyle, *Chartism*, 184.

the riot Dickens uses Barnaby's comments to register a counterdiscourse of unalloyed loyalty and bravery. Barnaby assures his companions, "Nobody will wrest this flag away" (392), in the midst of the "execrations, hoots and howlings" of the "mad monster" that the mob had become (393). Dickens consistently uses Barnaby's voice in dialogue and working at cross-purposes with the violent intent of his companions Hugh and Dennis (395). In response to Hugh's insincere inquiry after his well-being at a critical moment when the riot is spinning out of control—"How are you, boy?"—Barnaby registers the gulf between his experience of the riot and the brutal religious intolerance that drives Gordon's acolytes:

"Hearty!" cried Barnaby, waving his hat. "Ha, ha, ha! And merry too Hugh! And ready to do anything for the good cause, and the right, and to help the mild, pale-faced gentleman—the Lord they use so ill—eh, Hugh?" (423)

This dissonance between Barnaby's simple exclamations and the complex sophistry and "violent words" (424) of Gashford, Gordon's key adviser, introduces the idea of mishearing at this critical moment in the plot while implicitly raising the possibility that the crowd is too confused and multivocal to be understood as speaking in one voice. This gesturing toward the possibility of a more democratic representation of the complex social conditions underlying the personal history of individual rioters, however, strikes a minor, if unsettling, note in a novel ultimately driven by a Victorian liberal ethos of religious tolerance, as well as an anti-Chartist-inspired assertion of the necessary triumph of rational order.¹⁶ Rational order is literalized in the novel's systematic calculation of the evidence of the crimes of the rioters and the numbers of dead, wounded, imprisoned, and injured parties, after "the crowd [is] utterly routed" (605).¹⁷

Understanding the meaning behind Barnaby's naïve speech requires a more skeptical and hopeful engagement of the middle-class reader (to return to Anderson's characterization of the dialectic of "bleak liberalism") just at the point in the novel when the narrative voice is most damning in its criticism of the religious intolerance and xenophobic violence that had been the initial catalyst for the riot. Only one character, Gabriel Varden, listens and engages with Barnaby in a manner sanctioned by the novel. Varden, the narrative voice reminds the reader, remains attuned to the sounds and voices of the street, unlike the "men of gloom and austerity" whose reformist intolerance makes them deaf to the "music" and "songs and cheerful sounds" of the many (201–2). Breaking frame to address this anonymous judgmental minority, the narrative voice urges: "Listen to the million voices in the summer air, and find one dismal as your own" (202).

SHIRLEY

Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, like *Barnaby Rudge*, responded to contemporary Chartist-inspired political anxieties from the perspective of an earlier "time of riots," 1810–11, when the machine breaking and riotous activities of the Yorkshire Luddites challenged the authority of mill owners, who were themselves struggling to survive after the trade embargoes imposed during the Napoleonic Wars. Despite its labored romance plot, which revolves around the owner of

¹⁶ There has been considerable work on the novel as an anxious response to contemporary concerns about the potentially revolutionary rise of Chartism, including the following seminal discussions: Patrick Brantlinger, *Spirit of Reform: British Literature and Politics, 1832–1867* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 91; Steven Marcus, *Dickens from Pickwick to Dombey* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), 172–74.

¹⁷ Maurice S. Lee draws attention to Dickens's evidence gathering in *Barnaby Rudge* in "Evidence, Coincidence, and Superabundant Information," *Victorian Studies* 54, no. 1 (Autumn 2011): 87–94.

Hollow's Mill, Robert Moore, and his twin brother, Louis, and their respective love interests, Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keldar, who finally end up with one another after various power struggles and confusions of identity, the riot scene in which the Luddites and the mill owner confront one another is the most climactic and compelling moment of the novel. Brief and explosive, the riot informs all that follows, as Robert Moore, the hybrid Belgian English mill owner, comes to terms with his communal responsibility as a necessary facet of his industrial ambitions, a recognition that takes as a given the potentially transformative power of the rioting workers as a sustained countervoice to any unfettered market-driven interests. The riot may have epitomized the ultimate failure of violence as a means of effecting lasting social change for Brontë, as it did for Gaskell and Dickens, yet Brontë's compelling dramatization of the attack on Hollow's Mill reinforces the riot's role in defining the limits of the liberal imagination while staking a claim for the novel more generally as a space for articulating diverse interests and projecting new forms of reciprocity between workers and employers.

In the early chapters of *Shirley*, the narrator provides an unsparing account of the extreme suffering of workers caused by a convergence of political, economic, and environmental crises (bad harvests combined with war and trade embargoes), compounded by the inertia of those with the power to provide some respite: "Endurance, over-goaded, stretched the hand of fraternity to sedition; the throes of a sort of moral earthquake were felt heaving under the hills of the northern counties."¹⁸ The consequence was, as the narrator continues, a generic list of rebellious actions—"a food-riot broke out in a manufacturing town," "a gig mill was burnt to the ground," and a "manufacturer's house was attacked"—committed by "sufferers, whose sole inheritance was labour, and who had lost that inheritance" (30). For the majority of the novel Robert Moore misguidedly fails to listen to or distinguish between the voices of the men who work for him. As Caroline Helstone, his romantic counterpart, instructs him, it is "unjust to include all poor working people under the general and insulting name of 'the mob'" (93). This failure of the market to respond to the demands of the virtuous worker is typified in Robert Moore's misguided dismissal of the novel's archetype of ethical labor, William Farren, who recognizes that technological innovation is necessary but the consequent deprivation of "poor folks" is not (137). His demand for regulation and parliamentary reform is clearly argued, in contrast to the inchoate ranting of the radical dissenter Moses Barraclough, who accompanies him to petition the mill owner. But Moore fails to hear the difference between the two men's voices at this pivotal moment, a failure that epitomizes the precariousness of the liberal ethos of necessary and justifiable progress. He obdurately refuses Farren's appeal for negotiation: "Will n't ye gie us a bit o' time?—Will n't ye consent to mak' your changes rather more slowly?" (137). The riot is the immediate consequence of Moore's petulant response and retributive impulses, despite the fact that he quickly learns from his mistake in Farren's case and arranges work for him as a gardener: "William Farren, neither to your dictation, nor to that of any other, will I submit. Talk to me no more about machinery; I will have my own way. I shall get new frames in to-morrow:—If you broke these, I would still get more. *I'll never give in*" (138).

As Moore in a more reflective mode advises Shirley Keldar, the workers cannot be "tranquilized" by singular efforts, such as Shirley's charitable fund. Benign middle-class charity, he advises, will not induce an amnesiac inertia that denies the fact that "were all things ordered

¹⁸ Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 30. All subsequent references to *Shirley* will be to this edition and given in parentheses in the text.

aright, they ought not to be in a position to need that humiliating relief” (291). Continuing in a similar vein, he poses an open-ended rhetorical question that undermines the smug middle-class ethos that drives charitable endeavors: “to whom should they be grateful? To you—to the clergy perhaps, but not to us millowners. They hate us more than ever” (291). This can be read both as a concession to the rights of the workers to rage against their circumstances and as a recognition of the inevitability of the riot as part of the natural order of things—a storm that is “sure to break at last” (291). When the storm does break, it is Shirley and Caroline who record its slow buildup, the noise of the soldiers riding toward the mill to assist the mill owner, the impatient scream of William Farren’s child breaking the “night-hush” (322), the voice of Farren himself reinforcing the workers’ hate for Moore and the competing voice of Joe Scott, the misogynist employee of Moore who resents Shirley’s ownership of the mill and refuses to listen to her opinions regarding the unjust treatment of the suffering mill hands because she is a woman (328). Filtered through Shirley’s mocking rejoinders, Brontë implicitly aligns Scott’s biblical-citation warning against women’s usurpation of men’s power with Moore’s failure to listen to both women and workers: “Let the woman learn in silence, with all subjection” (328).

Like Shirley, Moore’s workers refuse to suffer in silence, responding to the inhumanity of their circumstances with violence and contempt. Again it is the women whose “efforts to listen” (335) convey the imminent danger and the extent of the workers’ brutalization by circumstances beyond their control. Both women, and by implication the reader, register every “muffled sound” (336) as the rioters steadily approach, as the narrative voice informs us: “Those who listened, by degrees, comprehended its extent. It was not the tread of two, nor of a dozen, nor of a score of men: it was the tread of hundreds” (337). Armed with a pistol, the two women ultimately leave the safety of the house so they can creep closer to the road and distinguish the voices that “broke the hush of the night” (337). “We *must* hear this,” urges Shirley, an imperative to know that must, in turn, confront the grim reality of their own precarious fates at the hands of the rioters when they overhear a murderous exchange that challenges both the reader’s and the women’s liberal sympathies (337). Firmly in their resolve to warn Moore, they speed across the fields under cover of darkness only to arrive too late to do anything but hear the “rioters’ yell” and watch the event unfold in a famous scene that is worth quoting at length:

A crash-smash-shiver stopped their whispers. A simultaneously-hurled volley of stones had saluted the broad front of the mill, with all its windows; and now every lattice lay in shattered and pounded fragments. A yell followed this demonstration—a rioters’ yell—a North-of-England—a Yorkshire—a West-Riding-clothing-district-of-Yorkshire rioters’ yell. You never heard that sound, perhaps, reader? So much the better for your ears—perhaps for your heart; since, if it rends the air in hate to yourself, or to the men or principles you approve, the interests to which you wish well, Wrath awakens the cry of Hate: the lion shakes his mane, and rises to the howl of the Hyaena: Caste stands up, ireful, against Caste; and the indignant, wronged spirit of the Middle Rank bears down in zeal and scorn on the famished and furious mass of the Operative Class. It is difficult to be tolerant—difficult to be just—in such moments. (344)

Chaotic, disordered syntax conveys the women’s shock as they look down at the chaos below. Safely concealed, they are nevertheless implicated and affectively compelled by the inchoate sounds and sights that inundate their senses. Brontë’s reliance on caesura throughout this scene drives home the riot’s fracturing of the normal order of things—of space, of time, of assumed

hierarchies, of species, and of morality. By directly addressing the reader—“You never heard that sound, perhaps, reader?”—Brontë also demands complicity and active engagement in the event of the riot. She invites the reader to summon the auditory effect of the “Yorkshire rioters’ yell,” its visceral effect, and imagine being the target of that yell. While readers may have been fortunate enough to elude the violence of the times in which men ravaged by poverty were temporarily transformed into wild beasts, she implies that her novel requires that they project themselves into the ethical dilemma faced by her characters, in which the limits of bourgeois tolerance are tested by the intolerable effects of capital and war on working bodies.

NORTH AND SOUTH

Contrasting with Gaskell’s stated intention in the preface to *Mary Barton* to write from the perspective of a working-class subject, *North and South* responds to the labor disputes of Milton, a fictional stand-in for Manchester and the Preston strike of 1853–54, through the middle-class ethos of Margaret Hale.¹⁹ Margaret Hale mediates between the mill workers and the seemingly intractable mill owner John Thornton, who ultimately concedes, although pessimistic about the outcome, the need to engage and negotiate, rather than violently suppress, future strike action that will consequently become “not the bitter, venomous sources of hatred they have hitherto been” (432). Writing to a friend about the purpose of the novel, Gaskell described it as “a spur to inactive thought and languid conscience” about the rights and duties of workers.²⁰ But it also, and more fundamentally, dramatizes the transformative potential of rebellion, both of workers and of women, against the rigid regulatory constraints of middle-class domestic and political economy.

The mill workers begin rioting in the final pages of chapter 21 of the novel as Margaret threads her way toward Thornton’s mill “through the irregular stream of human beings that flowed through the Milton streets” (171). Absorbed by her concern for her ailing mother, the catalyst for her decision to walk to the Thornton’s house for a water bed, it only slowly dawns on Margaret that the “stream” of people that has absorbed her has become “an unusual heaving mass of people” that appeared not to be “moving on, so much as talking, and listening, and buzzing” (171). By the time she reaches the main thoroughfare of Marlborough Street, which leads to Thornton’s house and mill, she hears “the first long far-off roll of the tempest;—saw the first slow-surfing wave of the dark crowd come, with its threatening crest, tumble over, and retreat, at the far end of the street, which a moment ago, seemed so full of repressed noise” (172). Contrasting with the strike-silenced mill, the “ominous gathering roar” and “deep-clamouring” of the approaching multitude drives Margaret toward Thornton’s house. Once inside, the volume increases, the “din of angry voices raged behind the wooden barrier, which shook as if the unseen maddened crowd made battering-rams of their bodies” (174). Driven wild by the sound of Thornton’s “well known and commanding voice,” the gate crashes down and the rioters flood the mill yard and Margaret registers a collective shift in their voices: “the fierce growl of low deep angry voices” murmur ferociously and more dreadfully than “their baffled cries uttered not many minutes before” (176).

At this point, prompted by “intense sympathy,” Margaret moves from passive reverie to active intervention, demanding that Thornton overcome his rational recoil and recognize the

¹⁹ Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), xxxv. All subsequent references to *North and South* will be to this edition and given in parentheses in the text.

²⁰ Elizabeth Gaskell to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth, 16 July 1850, in *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, ed. J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), 119.

common humanity that he shares with the “wild beasts” roiling below, as he calls them (177). We process the scene and how Margaret processes the scene from multiple angles. Scanning the crowd, Margaret sees a clog threateningly raised and rushes down to protect the “pale” resolute Thornton, as he stands alone staring down the “inarticulate . . . troop of animals” (178). In the only sequence of direct exchanges between individual workers and Margaret and Thornton in the entire riot scene, Margaret calls out in a voice rendered hoarse by emotion: “Oh, do not use violence! He is one man, and you are many.” And then again: “Go! . . . The soldiers are sent for—are coming. Go peaceably. Go away. You shall have relief from your complaints whatever they are” (179). To which one “fierce threatening” voice from the crowd replies: “Shall them Irish blackguards be packed back again?” This prompts Thornton’s defiant reply: “Never, for your bidding!” Instantly the “storm breaks,” precipitating Margaret’s final heroic effort to prevent him from being “smitten down,” but her embrace, as we know, is not enough to subdue the “reckless passion of the savage lads” caught up in the “cruel excitement [of] the riot” (179). Margaret’s vulnerable body, her forehead grazed by a flying pebble, ultimately succeeds in silencing the crowd as none of her words have done, and Thornton opportunistically drives the message home with enough force to finally break the riot’s momentum:

“You do well!” said he. “You have come to oust the innocent stranger. You fall—you hundred—on one man; and when a woman comes before you, to ask you for your own sakes to be reasonable creatures, your cowardly wrath falls upon her! You do well!” They were silent while he spoke. They were watching, open-eyed and open-mouthed, the thread of dark-red blood which wakened them up from their trance of passion. (179)

While this speech is undoubtedly smug and paternalistic, this scene ultimately undermines paternalism as a model of ethical response by staging a dramatic and revelatory dismantling of Thornton’s previously laissez-faire assumptions about the unqualified good of the invisible hand of the market and its brutal indifference to the suffering of the workers it exploits.

This essay began with a simple aim, to explore the parallels, without eliding the differences, between Badiou’s optimistic account of the historical riot’s truly revolutionary potential and the nineteenth-century novel’s transformation of an earlier “time of riots” into an imaginative catalyst for thinking about and challenging the limits of liberal reformism. By repeatedly dramatizing the moment when the organized crowd transforms into the anarchic energy of the riot, nineteenth-century novelists simultaneously imagined the failure of the central tenets of liberal progress and individualism while testing the novel’s capacity to transform representations of the immediate chaos of competing social interests into a more optimistic insistence on a better, more humane world. As Gaskell’s ethical ambitions for *North and South* suggest, a reflective ethos that she shared with both Dickens and Brontë, the industrial fiction of their own “time of riots” took the form of an open-ended philosophical project that, not unlike Badiou’s account of the rebirth of history in our present “time of riots,” required readers to move beyond “inactive thought” to an informed and political engagement with the rights of the “inexistent of the world” (56). While none of these nineteenth-century writers shared Badiou’s idea of the historical riot as a sustained revolutionary force for change, the riot nevertheless serves in their novels as a potentially transformative catalyst for imagining alternatives to the dehumanizing progress of capital and the unfettered ascendancy of the liberal subject. A