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Division into Parts: Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* and the Serial Instalment

The evenings were rather difficult to fill up agreeably.
Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (1854–5)¹

At the opening of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*, the protagonist Margaret Hale faces a problem with temporality. After living with her fashionable aunt in London and sharing the education of her cousin Edith, Margaret has returned, on Edith’s marriage, to her parents’ small parsonage in Helstone in the New Forest. Provincial domestic time, however, is difficult to adapt to. In the evenings, her mother tends to complain about the ‘unhealthy’ climate of the area, about Mr Hale’s parochial duties that often take him out of the house, or about the family’s lack of money. Margaret responds with demonstrative inattention: ‘On such evenings Margaret was apt to stop talking rather abruptly, and listen to the drip-drip of the rain upon the leads of the little bow-window. Once or twice Margaret found herself mechanically counting the repetition of the monotonous sound’ (21). Margaret breaks off disagreeable conversation to do nothing, but empty time in *North and South* tends to fall into a structure. The dripping raindrops on the window are at first a generic background noise, yet they gradually turn towards an unexpected sort of measurement – one that carves a rhythm (‘drip-drip’) out of that generalized passing of time. Margaret finds herself suddenly in this rhythm, hypnotized into ‘mechanical’ counting. Her instinct, then, is to fill time and to measure it, to trace a rhythmic structure onto unspecified duration.

Although *North and South* is a book about loss (of a home, of loved ones, of old social structures), Gaskell is not merely concerned with the contrast between a lost past time and an unmoored present time. Rather, Gaskell’s interest is with time as it passes. Time is given texture

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by narrative strategies of filling, counting, and measuring. Domestic
time, in *North and South*, is noted and experienced as a meantime
between upsetting events, a time when experiences may be discussed,
contemplated, and assessed.² This domestic meantime may be event-
less, but it has the potential to be recuperative for the novel’s characters,
who must sort their fraught memories into comprehensible narratives.
When violent events happen, they are often shockingly sudden and dis-
ruptive, and so Margaret Hale and the other main characters need what
I call domestic meantime to make sense of their pasts. The ‘drip-drip’ of
the rain is just a precursor to the novel’s intense interest with time as it
passes. Whereas so far in the present study, I have been at pains to tease
out domestic time from its contexts and show what it is made of, in this
chapter I want to emphasize how enmeshed this temporality truly is. In
*North and South*, domestic time can rarely be absolutely separated from
psychological time, bodily time or the rhythms of language. In what
follows, I argue that the serial divisions made in the weekly publication
of *North and South* contribute significantly to the production of this
recuperative meantime. Gaskell’s way of dividing her story into parts
draws into focus the rhythmic recurrences of time to think – not only
for the characters and but also for Gaskell’s readers.

Margaret, a parson’s daughter with aristocratic connections, finds
that her promised Eden in Helstone is of short duration. The first shock
comes when Henry Lennox, a successful London solicitor, misunder-
stands her friendliness and proposes marriage to her. Soon afterwards,
her father’s religious doubts prompt him to leave the church and uproot
the small family to a grim northern factory town, Milton. Here Margaret
faces a series of confrontations with John Thornton, a self-made cotton
manufacturer who takes Classics lessons with Mr Hale. Margaret instead
bestows her sympathies on the working-class Higgins family. Her loyal-
ties are challenged when the town erupts into strike action and rioting.
In a moment of danger, Margaret defends Thornton and is herself struck
by a stone meant for him. Thornton proposes to her, but she rejects
him, ashamed that her actions should be interpreted as love. In a side
plot, Margaret’s younger brother Frederick, who is in exile after a naval
mutiny, braves the risk of a court martial so that he can visit his dying
mother in Milton but is recognized. Thornton, who remains in love
with Margaret, sees her with Frederick and is mistakenly convinced that
she has a lover.

While, as many have noted, the narrative structure of *North and South*
bears some resemblance to Jane Austen’s 1813 novel *Pride and Prejudice*
(here contrasting the feudal and aristocratic social structure of the South