

84 Plymouth Grove

The Manchester home of Elizabeth Gaskell

(i)

In late March, early in the new century,
A lady entertains five men to tea
In a house she has helped to save.

Sitting in the sunshine of the Spring afternoon
They feel that this is right as
Elizabeth pours more tea, and tells them stories

Of a namesake who, a century and a half ago,
Served tea to those with enquiring minds
Who came through the smoke and mire of Manchester

To share her beauty, kindness and concern
And listen to her tales.

(ii)

This house pleased and shamed her -
Secluded in a leafy avenue, behind railings
At a sedate distance from the clattering carriages -

A world away from the untidy city
At the end of the street, which forced its way
Into her heart and onto her pages.

And when she left, Manchester caught up,
Gripped the house in a brick embrace
And built a new century around it; in which

Others would come to use its fraying rooms
To study, sleep and laugh.

(iii)

The afternoon moves gently forward
Recorded in the thoughts of the four who sit and listen
And the lens of the one who takes photographs.

Now the house is empty of occupants and uses,
Calm returns, and a stillness
Allows echoes of the past to breathe:

The trail of a crinoline in the hallway
The scampering of children on the stairs
And laughter in the drawing room

Rise as ghosts of a former purpose
Hidden in the air.

(iv)

Through the care of other women and men
The floorboards which supported the hurly – burly
Of family life and quieter creativity

Though thinned by time and neglect
Will again grow strong and resinous and
Gleam with lavender polish;

And this crumbling late Georgian husk
Of stucco, sash windows and classical mouldings
Will open its doors to the city

And be once more, for all those
Who lived and live here,
A home and place of renewal.

Philip Watts

22 April 2005