

Narrative Voice and Gender in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*

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...For my own part, I vibrated all my life
between *Drumble* and *Cranford*...
Cranford (XVI. 219)

C*ranford*, Gaskell's second novel (1853), often referred to (particularly by her biographers) as reminiscent of the author's early days in the small provincial town of Knutsford and sandwiched between *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*, did not initially begin as a full-length work. Instead, it was "the final stage in a process of recollection, gradually transmuted into fiction" (Ug-low 279), which began as a short story entitled "The Last Generation in England" and subsequently appeared in *Sartain's Union Magazine* in July of 1849. Then, growing by instalments at Dickens's suggestion, it started being published irregularly in his *Household Words* between December of 1851 and May of 1853, thus reaching the length of a short novel.

The episodic structure of *Cranford*, which is not of the kind normally encountered in what has come to be known as the typical nineteenth century novel, has often been seen as being problematic to an understanding of the book, in that many critics generally seem to think of it as consisting of a "number of loosely-connected incidents with no underlying progression lending direction to the plot" (Wolfe 161) or, to use Martin Dodsworth's phrase, as "a series of disconnected lavender-and-lace sketches" (Dodsworth 136). However, as both Dodsworth and Wolfe suggest, this does not always appear to be so, if a more insightful examination of the novel's structural organisation and mechanisms is attempted.

Thus, in "Women without Men at *Cranford*," (the first serious attempt at a psychoanalytic approach to this novel), Dodsworth sees the novel as divided into two sections of unequal length, the first one dealing with Captain Brown's

invasion of Cranford's wholly feminine society and his 'accidental' death standing for feminine rejection of the male's role in the community, and the second representing an act of expiation on the part of the females for their guilt, through the reintroduction of men into their society.

Similarly, in "Structure and Movement in *Cranford*," Patricia Wolfe sees the novel as divided into two parts, "each dominated by one of the Jenkyns sisters who directs the narrative by force of her unique personality" (162), concluding that "the movement of *Cranford* demonstrates the limitless strength of the female when she overcomes her fear of male domination by concentrating her whole being on giving tenderness and understanding to mankind" (162).

Both critics, however, seem to ignore in their otherwise most insightful and illuminating essays another quite prominent unifying element in the novel which contemporary criticism on this particular work has never failed to underline (and emphasize), that of Gaskell's narrator.

True though it might be up to a certain point that the book lacks an explicitly central and effective unifying principle, a simple change of approach, one concentrating more on the function of its narrator rather than on the novel's theme and characters (by which statement I do not mean to devalue any such approach, for both theme and characters inevitably constitute an integral part of whatever kind of approach one attempts), would help resolve the controversy, for it is primarily by means of her narrator (and also through carefully controlling her function) that Gaskell smoothly leads her reader from chapter to chapter. And a very uncommon type of narrator this one is, indeed, for though initially "peripheral and only minimally a participant, she gradually develops into an individual and complete character with an actual personality, and eventually even a history" (Bonaparte 155). We as readers come to know her name, Mary Smith, only half-way through the novel, by which time – and in her capacity as a character – she seems to have gained both the respect of the Cranford ladies and some partial control over Miss Matty's (the novel's chief character's) affairs.

Mary Smith's doubly ambivalent and rather paradoxical position and function, first as both narrator and character of the novel and second, as both an insider and outsider of the community she depicts, becomes the source of a series of ideological, and, by extension, gender-related tensions operating throughout the text. Also, it inevitably becomes indicative of the inherent tensions and contradictions existing in the mind of the author, who, after all, has traditionally been seen as the main operating force behind the text, which, in turn, cannot but reflect such tensions and contradictions.

Moreover, if, in view of contemporary developments in the field of post-structuralist theory which has been strongly influenced by Derrida, Lacan, Foucault and others, we see a text's author as a linguistically constructed, non-unified subject, who is as much determined by the unstable and plurisignificant text she/he produces as the text is by him/her and the very ideology he/she is conditioned by, then, in Gaskell's text there are a lot of such parallels to be drawn. No mat-

ter whether it be a provincial (*Cranford*) or industrial/social problem (*Mary Barton*) novel, the tension is always there to betray not only a passionate woman with a vivid imagination, intense feelings and a strong as well as multi-faceted personality – a thing not to be openly encountered among the middle-class women of her time – but also a creature much divided by her diverse interests and various ‘mes’. This was the very term she used when she wanted to speculate on her different – and often – contradictory inclinations. In an early letter, Gaskell confesses to her close friend Eliza Fox, more commonly known as ‘Tottie’:

I have a great number [of mes], and that's a plague. One of my mes is, I do believe, a true Christian... another... is a wife and mother, and highly delighted at the delight of everyone else in the house... Now that's my 'social' self I suppose. Then again I've another self with a full taste for beauty and convenience which is pleased on its own account (*Letters* 108).

What to many may have seemed a fragmentation of personality produced by divergent claims, Gaskell celebrates as a multiplicity of selves. As Elizabeth Langland observes in her book *Nobody's Angels*, “although [Gaskell] speaks of being plagued by her ‘mes’, the letters present a picture of a woman comfortable with the concept of multiple selves, with the fluidity of identity and subjectivity to which her life gives rise” (115).

It is to be expected, then, that the literary Gaskell, too, emerges out of this multiplicity of selves, a fact which has not passed unnoticed by those critics interested in her work. Thus, John Lucas in *The Literature of Change in the Nineteenth-Century Provincial Novel* states that:

There is a marvellously anarchic force at work in Mrs Gaskell's fiction. The official side of her, liberal, pious, incuriously middle class, pleads for a very complacent notion of reconciliation and tries to fashion art so as to reveal its pattern. But an endlessly rewarding unofficial side keeps pushing this pattern awry, revealing different patterns of inevitability, of antagonism, misunderstanding, hatred (13).

Cranford is, indeed, one such textual site where narrative ambivalence and paradox resist any easy categorization of its text into a neat and/or fixed type of narrative, because of “Gaskell's installation of a key figure (Mary Smith) who is able to represent both narrative authority and its revocation” (Dolin 200).

Though often (de)valued as little more than a nostalgic idyll of village life, in recent years *Cranford* has often been interpreted as a feminine if not a feminist utopia (Lanser 241) and not simply as that part of Gaskell's work “that has often been used to denigrate her fiction as escapist” (Morgan 85). One immediately notices Gaskell's privileged treatment (by way of introduction) of the Victorian spinster – a figure much enmeshed in cultural stereotyping – in the famous opening lines of the novel, where an initially detached narrator, who is

soon to become a participant, informs her narratee that, “In the first place, Cranford is in possession of the Amazonas; all the holders of houses *above a certain rent* are women” (*Cranford* x; italics mine).

Not only is the stereotypical image of the physically and emotionally deprived old maid openly subverted, it is also replaced by a different one, that of the self-sufficient, independent and, most importantly, financially adequate and emotionally fulfilled mature woman, whose carefree ways and small foibles are the result of her single and childfree state, both of which allow her to socialize freely, take good care of herself and indulge in the decoration of her home and garden. Thus, we are subsequently informed that:

For keeping the gardens full of choice flowers... for frightening away the little boys who look wistfully at the said flowers... for rushing out at the geese that occasionally venture into the Gardens... for deciding all questions of literature and politics... for obtaining clear and correct knowledge of everybody’s affairs in the parish... the ladies of Cranford are quite sufficient. ‘A man’ as one of them observed to me once, ‘is so in the way in the house!’ (*Cranford* x).

This sense of sufficiency was far from being the case even with the well-to-do middle-class Victorian woman with a husband and children, whose endless duties and responsibilities could hardly allow her time enough to devote to herself. Even though the narrator’s slightly ironic tone in these opening lines is definitely there to alert the reader’s attentiveness to a not altogether innocent stance on her part, the fact remains that the Cranfordian spinster’s position is far from being depicted as disadvantageous, for the implication here is that it is she, rather than her married – and for this reason socially respectable – counterpart that can enjoy the luxury of some relative independence and control over her life. In conventional societies, moreover, the spinster, both as a historical subject and as a literary representation, “stands outside of possible relational schemas and resists any comfortable assignment to binary thinking” (Doan 4) and as such within the symbolic system, she is defined by absence, for, so it is deemed by societal conventions, that she lacks a primary relationship with a man to fulfil her role as wife and mother.¹

However, there seems to be no such explicit implication (at least in the beginning of the narration) with respect to the Cranford ladies, whose power and sufficiency seem to emanate from this very absence of a male regulating presence in their community. The aging unmarried ladies and childless widows who populate the small provincial town of Cranford, should normally be expected to have a gloomy tale to tell, given one’s conventional understanding that such lives are empty and trivial. Yet, as the narrative progresses one can attest to the fact that its narrator, whose Cranfordian part is, after all, the only one that we as readers ever come to know fully, finds its subjects neither risible nor morbid. They are, however, humorous in ways which “permit the narrative

to relax [and] to avoid grimness" (Gillooly 884), without underestimating its producers, the Cranford ladies, whose small enclave is "women's sphere become hegemonic" (Gillooly 884).

Much of this humour is the result of an exaggerated interest and meaning invested in the minutest details of daily life. The novel seems to brim over with engaged life, for everything in this small female community matters intensely, since meanings are fluid, emerging moment by moment, thus producing valuable cultural capital for the ladies who are society's semioticians. One can hardly fail to notice, moreover, that their behaviour demonstrates that they are far from naive semioticians, prey to the belief that signifiers and signifieds, signs and their referents all collapse in some determinate way. Instead, as Langland observes, "they are alive to the play of the signifier, and they endlessly accommodate aberrations within their signified practice" (122). Thus, they observe, "What does it signify how we dress here at Cranford, where everybody knows us?" And if they are away from their community, their reason is equally cogent: "What does it signify how we dress here, where nobody knows us?" (*Cranford* 2) The arbitrariness of the sign, of how things signify, is not beyond the grasp of these antiquated ladies, as it is not beyond the grasp of the narrator either, for the whole community (including its mediating narrator) is in full awareness of being involved in the endless play of signifiers and signifieds. Thus, we are informed that:

When Mrs. Forrester gave a party... and the little maiden disturbed the ladies in the sofa by a request that she might get the tea-tray out from underneath, everyone took this novel proceeding as the most natural thing in the world... as if we all believed that our hostess had a regular servants' hall, second table, with housekeeper and steward, instead of the one little charity-school maiden, whose short arms could never have been strong enough to carry the tray... if she had not been assisted by her mistress, who now sat in state, pretending not to know what cakes were sent up, *though she knew, and we knew, and she knew that we knew, and we knew that she knew that we knew, she had been busy all morning making tea-bread and sponge cakes* (*Cranford* 4, italics mine).

Meaning that is always in the process of being created is what we encounter in the everyday practices of the ladies, who seem to collaborate in one another's machinations, in their scripting of a middle-class scenario, in which they skilfully participate as fully accomplished actors. As for the narrator, she is doubly involved in the game, both as a director of her own narrative (through which she directs her narratee's sympathies and expectations) and as a character participating in the game that she is telling us about. *Cranford* the novel and *Cranford* the place are, to quote Elizabeth Langland again, "worlds structured by women's signifying systems: Calling and visiting, teas and dinners, domestic economies, charitable activities and management of servants" (117) and the narrator is quite

explicit about it throughout the novel.

Cranford, with its cultural capital, contrasts explicitly with the neighbouring city of Drumble, a world marked by expanding material capital based on factories and production, money and investments. This seems to be a topos of what Kristeva terms 'linear time' and stable meanings, where masculinity operates as a determining force, since "it is distinguished by traits specific to that socio-cultural ensemble, and, as such, its identity is constituted according to the time of the line, the time of progress, history, linear development and projects" (Chanter 68). The former appears at first glance to be a site of stability and stagnation (and thus conforming to the static model of the Kristevan 'cyclical time'), even a trifle moribund, whereas the latter a place of worldliness and lively activity, a contrast that seems to confirm Raymond Williams's observations on this so very primal and familiar dichotomy between what, since ancient times, has come to be known as the country and the city. He observes that:

'Country' and 'city' are very powerful words, and this is not surprising when we remember how much they seem to stand for in the experience of human communities... On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful, hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation. A contrast between country and city, as fundamental ways of life, reaches back into classical times. (1)

It is according to this very dichotomy between the country (governed by female temporality, which is fluid and non-linear) and the city (clearly operating according to the laws of economic and political activity and thus conforming to the linear time-model) that the narrator's function operates in *Cranford*. Living most of the year with her father, a businessman in Drumble – "a city modelled on Manchester and associated with the emergent industrial economy" (Miller 150) – Mary Smith stays with the Cranford ladies only occasionally; as Hilary Schor observes, we only see her "holiday self" (299) in the novel. However, the fact that Mary alternates between Drumble and Cranford places her in the ambiguous position of both an outsider and a native, a strategy on the part of the author which permits her to cultivate a distinct narrative tone of affection mingled with gentle mockery, but also a marker of her bicultural conscience. "How naturally one falls back into the phraseology of Cranford!" (*Cranford* 4) the narrator exclaims; however, there are two Mary Smiths, for each of whom a different phraseology (and ideology) exist, the result being that one does indeed have the sense of "two selves ironically interleaved into the narrative" (Dolin 201).

Her educated tone and easy habit of allusiveness as narrator of her story contrast sharply with the different tone she adopts as a character. For instance, al-

though she faintly ridicules Deborah's anachronistic Johnsonian taste for the pompous, she herself often seems to assume something of it in her own text, especially at such moments when her humorous, yet explicit, criticism of those ladies' ways clashes with that other half of hers, her Cranfordian self, which declares allegiance to Cranford's provincialism. Thus, she never fails to point out Miss Matty's bad spelling or her tendency to begin "many sentences without ending them, running them one into another, in much the same confused sort of way in which written words run together on blotting-paper" (*Cranford* 114). However, her own text seems to be both Johnsonian and Cranfordian. Thus, remembering the announcement of Lady Glenmire's marriage to Mr. Hoggins, she writes: "the contemplation of it, even at this distance of time, has taken away my breath and my grammar, and unless I subdue my emotion, my spelling will go too" (160). The irony here is double, for it is directed both at the spinsters' reception of the unexpected news and also at herself and her own style while in the act of writing and in the very process of narration. Similarly, when it comes to matters of taste, the city again seems to overpower the country in the narrative. The narrator's patronizing tone is too conspicuous to be missed, as is her action as a character. When, for instance, Miss Matty asks for a sea-green turban, all she gets from Drumble is "a pretty, neat, middle-aged hat... just like the caps all the ladies in Cranford are wearing", so as to be prevented from "transfiguring her small, gentle, mousy face" (*Cranford* 115). As for Mary Smith, she addresses her narratee (who, no doubt, is assumed to be sharing the same bourgeois background as herself)² with self-confidence and strong conviction about the righteousness of her initiative: "I had rather she [Miss Matty] blamed Drumble and me than disfigured herself with a turban" (116).

The fact remains, however, that although Mary Smith comes from and literally belongs to that outside masculine world of commercial Drumble, whose ideological conditioning and influence seem to have largely shaped a significant part of her consciousness, "she writes not of where she lives but of where she visits, the life of which so clearly brings life to her mind and heart" (Morgan 86). Thus, we never see or know her in it, because what she considers significant in her narrative takes place in her relation to the feminine world of Cranford. In this way, she almost completely avoids the markers of autobiography, for she says almost nothing of her life outside Cranford except when it comes to marking events like her father's illness that summon her back to Drumble. Even when she is away from Cranford, the facts of her individual life are suppressed in favour of the communal life that reaches her in letters and reports. It is clear, then, that "as a textual figure", to use Lanser's words, "the narrator exists only in and through Cranford" (Lanser 242). Although, on the one hand, her syntax is that of an outsider (fond of and somewhat bemused by the ladies, but, up to a point, ideologically allied with her narratees), on the other hand, she almost immediately claims a place inside Cranford. Thus, her initially homodiegetic 'I' soon turns into a communal 'we', and whereas in the beginning the 'I' pronoun prevails in the narrative – e.g. "One of them observed to me once... I will answer for it... I can testify to... I imagine... I shall never forget" (*Cranford* 1-3) – it almost immediately shifts to 'we' – e.g. "we

had a tradition... we kept ourselves to short sentences of small talk... we none of us spoke of money" (*Cranford* 2-5).

This is indicative of the narrator's purpose, "to articulate Cranford to Drumble" (Lanser 242) to explain "its rules and regulations" (*Cranford* 2), its values and eccentricities and thus to come to speak "not only for the community but as the community" (Lanser 242). In the process, as has already been pointed out, she herself becomes the ground on which the clash of cultures gets under way, since this project of mediation demands of the narrator the implicitly contradictory authority of both knowing Cranford well enough to represent it faithfully, and also to be outside it enough for her judgement of Cranford to be reliable for her Drumble (London?) narratees. Thus, this narrator alternating between 'I' and 'we' that Gaskell constructs – a communal narrator whose borderline position is built into her identity as a character – undertakes the task of acting both as Cranford's interpreter and as its advocate in her dual capacity as both narrator and character of her text.

Creating her narrative mainly from Cranford women's private forms (their letters, stories, conversations and gossip), the narrator ends up with a text representing this community's discursive practices, a text which is highly informed by the codes and practices of an all-female Cranford society. Yet, while in the process of mediation, she seems to be torn between two extremes: her own bourgeois background largely shaped by a capitalist, male-dominated world of economics and production (after all, she is her father's daughter, as there is no mention whatsoever of a mother throughout the narrative), and that quite different one of Cranford, whose "elegant economies" are informed by a system of exchange based on cooperation and communal practices rather than on competition and individualism.³ Thus, although on the one hand she refers to her father's letter as "just a man's letter... [which] was very dull, and gave no information beyond that he was well, that they had a good deal of rain, that trade was stagnant, and that there were many disagreeable rumours afloat" (*Cranford* 168), on the other she attempts to dissuade Miss Matty from exchanging her sovereigns for the farmer's notes upon the bank's failure, by implicitly opposing Miss Matty's implicit belief that private and public identities are continuous and identical: "I am ashamed to say, I believe I was rather vexed and annoyed at Miss Matty's conduct in taking the note to herself so decidedly... [and] something possessed me to ask Miss Matty, if she would think it her duty to offer sovereigns for all the notes of the Town and Country Bank she met with" (*Cranford* 177). Mary Smith, then, seems to realize that if Miss Matty were to follow the ethical dictates behind her altruistic action in the store, she would undoubtedly ruin herself, and although the narrator feels ashamed for posing this question so bluntly to her, she does begin a campaign to prevent Miss Matty from sacrificing herself in order to pay the debts of the failed bank, an act quite unthinkable in the circles of the capitalist society, whose product she, Mary, is.

This particular incident of the bank's collapse and of Miss Matty's subsequent financial ruin constitutes, however, a definite (and decisive) point in the narrative when the narrator does indeed succeed in establishing herself as an

unequivocal member of the community, managing at the same time to maintain the authority of her judgement. This is the pivotal moment when the narrator acquires both a name and a fair amount of influence over Miss Matty's, and, by extension, over Cranford's affairs, in that she appears to turn, even momentarily, from a mere mediator to a full and leading participant in the community, by taking it upon herself to restore Miss Matty's ruined finances back to normal in the Cranford way (that is, by transgressing good business sense, class hierarchies and the rules of free enterprise), with her father paradoxically complicitous to it. It is also a moment when the narrator's ideological shift towards Cranford's feminine mentality and practices is obviously extended towards the text's narratee, who is 'persuaded' to accept Cranford's values and shed Drumble (London?) loyalties. The battle between what Nina Auerbach calls "a co-operative female community and a commercial warrior world that proclaims itself the real one" (*Communities of Women* 87) is one that seems to be won in favour of the former in the narrative, not only in terms of Miss Matty's survival, but also in terms of the narrator's consciousness, which seems to align itself openly with Cranford's ways and logic.

Although the narrator begins by echoing her father, whose way of thinking is "as clear as daylight" (*Cranford* 199) – by imploring, for instance, Miss Matty's servant Martha to "listen to reason" (182) when, after Miss Matty's financial ruin, the latter is perfectly willing to continue offering her services for free (interestingly enough, Martha dismisses reason as simply "what someone else has got to say" [182]) – she (the narrator) together with the rest of Cranford's females end up saving Miss Matty, both by putting their own communal strategies into use (they agree upon enhancing Miss Matty's now scanty annual income by each contributing an amount of their own), but also by endorsing Miss Matty's policy of insisting and ensuring that her tea-selling shop will operate on a non-competitive basis only:

Miss Matty, as I ought to have mentioned before, had had some scruples of conscience at selling tea when there was already Mr. Johnson in the town... and, before she could quite reconcile herself to the adoption of her new business, she had trotted to his shop... to tell him of the project... and to inquire if it was likely to injure his business. My father called this idea of hers 'great nonsense' and 'wondered how tradespeople were to get on if there was to be continual consulting of each other's interests, which would put a stop to all competition directly'. And, perhaps, it would not have done in Drumble, but in Cranford it answered very well; for not only did Mr. Johnson kindly put at rest all Miss Matty's scruples... but I have reason to know he repeatedly sent customers to her, saying that... Miss Jenkyns had all the choice sorts. (205)

One might call this an instance of an unparalleled or extreme altruism far removed from reality, simply because such things are unlikely to happen in real

life. Yet, as Susan Morgan observes “realism in fiction has never been so simple a matter as to be measured by what has happened or probably would happen in life”⁴ (85) and Gaskell’s construction of a bicultural narrative voice ultimately comes to endorse this, despite its biculturalism. Hence, the narrator’s position side-by-side with Miss Matty when it comes to getting to grips with the narrator’s father’s handling of things and his so very ‘real’, square logic:

Miss Matty and I sat assenting to accounts, and schemes, and reports, and documents, of which I do not believe we either of us understood a word; for my father was clear-headed and decisive, and a capital man of business, and if we made the slightest inquiry, or expressed the slightest want of comprehension, he had a sharp way of saying, ‘Eh? Eh? It’s as clear as daylight. What’s your objection?’ And as we had not comprehended anything of what he had proposed, we found it rather difficult to shape our objections; in fact, we never were sure if we had any... And I am sure to this day I have never known. (198-199)

However, it should be noted that even the narrator’s father – a blatant example of the Victorian bourgeois patriarch – cannot remain untouched when he realizes that Cranford’s communal strategies have worked, for he is reduced to ‘feminine’ muteness and tears, “brushing his hand before his eyes as I spoke” (199), and, like Miss Matty at her most confused, unable to “get a tail to [his] sentences” (199). Thus, he too is momentarily Cranfordised, a fact which compels the narrator to defend him simply for having “come over from Drumble to help Miss Matty when he could ill spare the time” (199). However, in response to her father’s comment that Miss Matty’s “simplicity might be very well in Cranford, but would never do in the world”, the narrator once again seems to take sides with Miss Matty’s Cranfordian logic, when she notes, “And I fancy the world must be very bad, for with all my father’s suspicion of every one with whom he has dealings, and in spite of all his many precautions, he lost upwards of a thousand pounds by roguery only last year” (206).

It gradually becomes clear, then, that Cranford’s object is to absorb men without absorbing what are perceived to be at once male, capitalist and urban ways. It should not be considered mere coincidence or accidental, then, that those few males who are permitted to enter (even temporarily) its territory seem to differ considerably from their ordinary bourgeois counterparts. In this respect, then, Captain Brown, Mr. Holbrook, Signor Brunoni, Dr. Hoggins and above all Peter Jenkyns all seem to share a preference for feminine values, in that they display, each in their own way, an explicit rejection of what Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* has referred to as “men’s larger values” (76-77). Thus, Captain Brown, who has scandalously pronounced his poverty in a loud voice to the ladies of Cranford, does not manage to articulate even a whisper of it to Lord Muleverer, whose life he has saved and who might help relieve his distress; and Miss Matty’s former suitor, Mr. Holbrook, stubbornly holds to his

yeoman habits (he insists on being addressed as Mr. Holbrook, yeoman, rather than Thomas Holbrook, *Esq.*), persistently disdains all refinement and indulges in the pleasures of reading poetry rather than accumulating capital. Similarly, Mr Hoggins, the village doctor, is content with wearing the same old pair of muddy leather boots or dining on bread and cheese, as is Signor Brunoni with his life of endless wanderings and his hand-to-mouth existence. Above all, and more conspicuously than all the others, Peter Jenkyns's act of dressing up as his eldest sister pretending to nurse a baby and his subsequent life of adventure strikes instinctively at the repressive life his oppressive father has imposed on the family, proving that he is more comfortable with women than with men.

Peter's ambivalent position and his key role in the narrative deserves some further discussion at this stage, for it is mainly in his person that 'the play of the signifiers' as well as the challenge to paternal rule (but also a subsequent espousal of it) are dramatized. Also, the fact that he functions "as a figure for the narrator" (Gillooly 896) – it should be noted that he owes his *deus-ex-machina* reappearance in the novel to Mary Smith's initiative, that is her letter and her authorship – is again an indication and a manifestation of much ideological tension on the part of the narrator, precisely because Peter is depicted as occupying two opposing subject positions, namely that of the feminised male and that of his antithesis, the strong, adventurous, all-male naval officer. What he has suffered at home because of his anti-conformist ideas and masquerading, his rank as a lieutenant allows him to inflict freely and 'legally' upon those colonized by a British bourgeoisie against whose restrictions and ideology he appears to be fighting while in the motherland of Cranford.

As the youngest of the family's children and as the only boy, Peter is the one who bears the weight of paternal expectations. Sent to "win honours at Shrewsbury school, and carry them thick to Cambridge" (*Cranford* 70) and after that to settle into a clerical living provided by his aristocratic godfather, "Poor Peter" succeeds only in establishing himself as "captain of the school in the art of practical joking" (70) and is forced to return to Cranford, where, even under the strict supervision of his father, his joking becomes much bolder, extending even to his own family. Through gross physical parody (which in itself seems to be evocative of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque), Peter not only challenges his father's authority, he also troubles, destabilizes and confuses gender categories by the unstable meanings his practical joking suggests. Thus, Peter, who prefers dressing as a woman, thereby announces his identity and position within society, just as his sister Deborah with her helmet cap declares herself her father's female counterpart and his logical heir.

Peter, who in addition to his penchant for practical joking also loves performing identities (one of which is the oriental one of Aga Jenkyns), further destabilizes cultural encodings by inducing the ladies to think of him as "the arrival from India, [who tells] more wonderful stories than Sinbad the Sailor" (*Cranford* 219). Thus, by appearing "so very Oriental" (219), Peter once again appropriates the status of an 'other' to blur boundaries, identities, signifiers and signifieds.

Though indulging in a life of adventure in India, in the course of which he even rises to the level of lieutenant in the ranks of the British Navy (a textual move constructed by the narrator to serve, perhaps, as an act of compensation for Peter's previous feminisation and thus strike a reassuring balance between two strikingly opposing gendered subject positions), Peter finally smoothly re-enters Cranford's elegant economies as a positive and revisionary figure, which facilitates the social interactions and cooperation upon which its entire existence depends; and it is all Mary Smith's doing, for it is due to her pulling of some strings – her act of writing and sending a letter (a signifier in itself) which, in turn, determines the outcome of her narrative – that Cranford finally acquires Peter, its capital male (?) presence, who, in much the same way as the narrator, vacillates between a female and a male ethic. Yet, despite his espousal of a male ethic, which is depicted, after all, as being both temporary and inflicted upon him by the paternal law, Peter's return to Cranford and his subsequent establishment in this all-female motherland tends to place him, I would say, within the maternal (female) rather than the paternal (male) realm.

But there is also another dimension to Peter's narrative positioning in *Cranford*, which further confirms his predilection for female values: the fact that he refuses to play the go-between between Holbrook and his sister, Miss Matty, when he teases her about playing her cards very badly in letting Mr. Holbrook slip through her fingers, thus implying that he might once have carried out such a role in Matty's life and laughing that she wanted her brother to assume such a role: "You must have played your cards badly, my little Matty, somehow or another – wanted your brother to be a good go-between, eh, little one?" (*Cranford* 222)

Thus, Peter refuses to endorse that ancient patriarchal practice according to which women are exchanged between men as commodities in order to ensure the "smooth workings of man's relations with himself, or relations among men" (Irigaray 172).

As Elizabeth Langland rightly observes, "Not only does Cranford question the proposition of a 'larger world' inhabited and dominated by men, but it also troubles gender categories" (126), for the narrative makes it quite explicit that Cranford's selection or rejection of males is based not on their biology, but on their values. In this way the narrative can be seen as considering gender to be a cultural rather than a biological construct.

Like other Victorian novels, Gaskell's *Cranford*, though written in the realistic mode, does indeed offer a complex definition of the real, one that insists on the profound interdependence of the private and public realms, one that also envisages for everyone a feminine future better than the masculine present and past. This Gaskell successfully conveys by continually juxtaposing two diametrically opposite worlds: that of Drumble, with its laborious accumulation of capital, and that of Cranford with its recycled resources. Moreover, Gaskell's communal narrator constructs an episodic narrative which moves like an act of memory, overturning linear chronology by giving distant and near events equal weight (with a lot of backwards narration and flashbacks), virtually a cyclical narrative or

a 'centric' one, to use Joseph Boone's term in *Tradition Counter Tradition and the Form of Fiction*,⁵ which disrupts the causality of linear narration, displaying a distinct 'enfolding' quality clearly advocating Kristeva's model of 'cyclical time' and her own, as well as Showalter's, postulation of a third generation of feminists (within which Gaskell would fit, indeed), whose non-essentialist positioning would seek to reconcile male with female values, without necessarily excluding the one at the expense of the other. Hence, *Cranford*'s non-linear resolution, according to which its narrator will continue to "vibrate between Cranford and Drumble", between the all female, non-competitive world of the idyllic province and that of the male capitalist city, between two worlds that remain separate and mutually incomprehensible. The fact that Mary Smith does not take up permanent residence in Cranford reminds us, as Lanser notes, "that she is still her father's daughter and that Cranford is no permanent motherland" (246). "All it [Cranford] can do", as Patsy Stoneman argues, "is make the best of the little space allowed it" (91).

Critical to the history Gaskell is proposing, finally, is what Tim Dolin calls "the powerful ubiquity of the narrating present... The moment of recounting, of bringing into voice, [which] imparts the past into utterance with an immediacy that is startling and sometimes violent" (202). This is the quality that invests the "old things" of the novel with a sense of perfect preservation, as for instance in the old letters of the Jenkyns sisters: "There was in them a vivid and intense sense of the present time, which seemed so strong and full, as if it could never pass away" (*Cranford* 60). In this respect, then, Gaskell could be seen as experimenting (in much the same way as modernist writers, such as Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*, were to do later) with the tension between utterance and event, by exploring ways of clearing a space for narration. Moreover, the narrator's ageless condition, and, in all aspects, unchanged status throughout the text as well as the prevailing present mode of narration, point to a narrative time sequence (a 'proto-modernist' one, if one might be allowed the use of such a term), in which past present and future are not to be perceived as distinctly antithetical and mutually annulling chronologies, but merely as aspects of a single chronological model, thus confirming what Paul Ricoeur refers to as the "illusion of sequence, [one] that escapes the dichotomy between the chronology of sequence and the a-chronology of models" (165).

All in all, *Cranford* does appear to be writing an alternative story that, as Coral Lansbury remarks, "operates by another order altogether" (72), thus discrediting any attempt at positioning its text into that category termed 'conventional female writing'. It is certainly no accident that the healing qualities of its highly unconventional text, as well as its affectionate recalling of well-loved eccentricities, made it Elizabeth Gaskell's favourite among her books. Shortly before her death, in 1865, she wrote to John Ruskin: "I am so pleased you like it. It is the only one of my own books that I can read again; – but whenever I am ailing or ill, I take 'Cranford' and – I was going to say, enjoy it! (but that would not be pretty!) laugh over it afresh!" (*Letters* 747).

Notes

1. See also Nina Auerbach, *Romantic Imprisonment: Women and Other Glorified Outcasts* and, by the same author, *Woman and The Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*.
2. As Vineta Colby argues, "The single most striking feature of the major Victorian novel is its essentially bourgeois orientation. Its values, its subjects and its principal characters are drawn from middle-class life. It is domestic by the standard dictionary definition of the word 'domestic' – 'of or pertaining to a particular country', as this type of novel tends to be local, even provincial... as it deals almost exclusively with human relationships within small social communities... and as it draws its subjects mainly from the daily life and work of ordinary people: courtship, marriage, children, earning a living, adjusting to reality, learning to conform to the conventions of established society and to live within it tranquilly, if not always happily" (4).
3. As Elizabeth Langland observes, "Instead of the conspicuous consumption and waste of a 'vulgar' economy, the 'elegant' economy bases itself on recycling resources, old dresses, pieces of string, ends of candles, old notes and receipts. It privileges exchange over consumption: the newspaper circulating among the ladies early presages the way more substantial resources will circulate among them to protect their world, their ways, and their privilege. This Cranfordian 'elegant economy'... calls into question the stability of currency as a signifier. Indeed Cranford points to the instability of money as a sign; it is just one interpretable sign among many."
4. In *Criticism and Ideology*, Terry Eagleton further argues on the subject: "The text, we may say, gives us certain socially determined representations of the real cut loose from any particular real condition to which those representations refer. It is in this sense that it is self-referential, or conversely... refers to 'life' or the 'human condition', since if it denotes no concrete state of affairs, it must denote either itself or states of affairs in general" (74).
5. According to Joseph Boon, "if *Cranford's* narrative is cohesive, its unifying principles derive more from the circumscribed stasis associated with spinsterhood than from precepts of conventional narrative linearity" (296). Also, in her essay "Humour as Daughterly Defense in *Cranford*", Eileen Gillooly argues that *Cranford*, "strung and knotted together by the association and repetition of trope and event, loosely tied by episodic moments rather than driven by inexorable plot, stands as an attempt to connect with the lost source of nurturance, the preoedipal mother... Put another way, in being preoedipal, non-linear, non-phallogocentric, the narrative denies the authority of the Law that has superseded the mother's presence" (903-904).

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Αφηγηματική φωνή και φύλο στο *Cranford* της Elizabeth Gaskell

Άννα Κουστινούδη

Για τη γυναίκα μυθιστοριογράφο της Βικτωριανής Αγγλίας του 19ου αιώνα το αφηγηματικό κείμενο αποτελεί ένα από τα ελάχιστα –αν όχι το μοναδικό– διαθέσιμο πεδίο δημόσιας έκφρασης. Επιπλέον, η εκάστοτε αφηγηματική τεχνική, όπως και η αντίστοιχη

αφηγηματική φωνή που δομείται και υιοθετείται από τη συγγραφέα συχνά αντανάκλα προσωπικές συγκρούσεις και αβεβαιότητες στην προσπάθειά της άλλοτε να απορρίψει και άλλοτε να αποδεχτεί επιβεβλημένες πατριαρχικές δομές και στερεότυπα και να αυτοπροσδιοριστεί ως υποκείμενο. Στο *Cranford* της Elizabeth Gaskell η λειτουργία του αφηγητή και της αφηγηματικής φωνής εμπίπτουν στην κατηγορία εκείνη που αποκαλείται «αφήγηση κοινότητας», περίπτωση κατά την οποία ένας από τους κύριους χαρακτήρες της διήγησης αναλαμβάνει και το ρόλο του αφηγητή/τριας, αντιπροσωπεύοντας έτσι μια ολόκληρη κοινότητα, η οποία στην περίπτωση του *Cranford* αποτελείται σχεδόν εξ' ολοκλήρου από γυναίκες. Μέσω του διπλού της ρόλου, η αφηγήτρια και χαρακτήρας Mary Smith λειτουργεί, συχνά με χιουμοριστικά αντιφατικό τρόπο, ως πηγή και ως τόπος ιδεολογικών και άλλων συγκρούσεων μέσα σε ένα πραγματικά πολυφωνικό κείμενο, το οποίο θα μπορούσε να χαρακτηριστεί έως και πρώιμο νεωτερικιστικό.