Narrating the Individual and the Community in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*

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My reading of Elizabeth Gaskell's community narrative *Cranford* (1853) addresses the novel's idiosyncratic narrative form in terms of how it generates tensions between the individual and the community. *Cranford,* the text, and Cranford, the place, inform each other mutually through the mediation of Mary Smith, the text's communal, and thus, liminal narrator. As a narrator, Mary Smith operates in her capacity as an individual, detached observer/ recorder of her narrated world, as a distinct "I" addressing an urban, middle-class audience. As a character, however, she often resorts to the convenient all-inclusiveness of a "we," through which she becomes and speaks as part of Cranford's rural community in an attempt to recompense the text's characters for her ironic narrative stance and mild aggression. Caught between her dual role and structural positioning as both insider and outsider of the community she depicts, Gaskell's narrator holds a borderline position of in-betweenness, which renders the relation between the "I" and the "we" a deeply conflictual, but, at the same time, a mutually constitutive and transactional one.

Cranford (1853), Elizabeth Gaskell's humorous, gently ironic, episodic novel of gentility and custom, is a community narrative which depicts the fading way of life of the "Amazons," a community of unmarried, elderly ladies and childless widows, whose days are devoted to visits, card games and genteel gossip on the margins of a Britain rapidly changing from a rural to an industrial economy. The values of provincial Cranford are already outdated, threatened by the relentless forces of change, when Elizabeth Gaskell, via her narrator, Mary Smith—both an insider and an outsider of her narrated world—depicts them with what has often been termed ironic affection and an eye for the ridiculous.

A product of the mid-Victorian period, *Cranford* first appeared in serial form between December 1851 and May 1853 in Dickens's *Household Words*, following the tradition and publishing conventions of the periodical genre so popular at the time,[1] presenting, however, the reader with a somewhat problematic structure in terms of unity of form and plot design. The unusually loose (especially by nineteenth-century novelistic standards) structure of *Cranford* or, as many Gaskell scholars have liked to put it, its "lack of unity" has, of course, been much discussed by the ever growing Gaskell scholarship, which has mostly attributed it to the fact that *Cranford* did not initially appear as a full-length work. Indeed, it would never, as Gaskell herself admitted,[2] have been one in the first place, had it not been for Dickens's insistence upon her adding more numbers to the first one she submitted, on the one hand, and Gaskell's own developing professionalism, on the other. Thus, *Cranford*'s collection of stories, like the majority of Victorian prose works, was, as Hillis Miller notes, subject to those "physical, social and economic conditions of the printing and distribution of Victorian books, that is, the breaking of the text into numbered or titled parts, books or chapters, and publication in parts either separately or with other material in a periodical" (287), which by definition interrupted linearity and solid cohesion in the strict sense of the term.

Alternatively, *Cranford*'s lack of formal cohesion could partly be attributed to the fact that it can be classified as a typical nineteenth-century "narrative of community," displaying as it does some of the distinctive characteristics of this genre. In her extensive study of the genre, Sandra Zagarell maintains that in community narratives "the self exists . . . as part of the interde-

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1. *Cranford*'s publishing history is well known with Jenny Uglow aptly describing it as "the final stage in a process of recollection, gradually transmuted into fiction" (279). It began as a short piece entitled "The Last Generation in England," subsequently appearing in the American (Philadelphia) *Sartain's Union Magazine* in July 1849, and continued with "Mr Harrison's Confessions" published in *The Ladies Companion* between February and April 1851. Then it started being published irregularly as a series of sketches with the first one, "Our Society at Cranford," appearing in Charles Dickens's *Household Words* on 13 December 1951. For a detailed account of *Cranford*'s original conception and publication see Hilary Schor's *Scheherezade in the Market Place: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel*, where she emphasizes the relation between the emergence of the railways, which "revolutionized movement" (85), thus contributing towards the expansion of fast transport and the subsequent (hastier) modes of publication, which followed suit in order to match the changing pace of life.
2. She wrote to John Ruskin: "The beginning of 'Cranford' was *one* paper in 'Household Words'; and I never meant to write more, so killed Captain Brown very much against my will" (Chapple and Pollard 748).

pendent network of the community rather than as an individualistic unit . . . thus represent[ing] a coherent response to the social, economic, cultural, and demographic changes caused by imperialism, urbanization, and the spread of capitalism" (499). As regards the genre's formal elements, Zagarell informs us that unlike novels, by being rooted in process rather than in conflict and progress, community narratives defy linearity and ignore strict chronological sequence, espousing an episodic and hence fragmented mode of narration instead, with their participant mediator narrators seeking to bridge the gap between the community and the modern world (503).

By some general consensus, then, the only unifying principle of *Cranford* lies in the presence of its narrator, Mary Smith, who oscillates between two opposing worlds and discourses, those of urban, industrial Drumble (modelled on metropolitan Manchester), on the one hand, and those of rural Cranford (modelled on Gaskell's native Knutsford), on the other. It is thus around Mary's alternating departures and returns from capitalist Drumble to communal Cranford and consequently around her borderline position in the text that the novel's episodic form is structured. As she herself asserts in the last chapter of the novel, "[f]or my own part, I had vibrated all my life between Drumble and Cranford" (219).

By focusing on *Cranford*'s narrator's liminal positioning and communal voice, on her "I"/ "we" narrative mode, my reading will address the novel's ways of depicting tensions between the individual and the community as well as within the individual "I" itself. *Cranford* the text and Cranford the place mutually inform each other through the mediation of Mary Smith, the text's homodiegetic narrator. As a narrator, Mary Smith operates in her capacity as an individual, detached observer of her narrated world, as a distinct "I." As a character, however, she often resorts to the convenient all-inclusiveness (and submissiveness) of a communal "we," through which, she becomes (and speaks as) part of Cranford's community in an attempt to recompense her narrated world for the ironic stance and occasional rebellion she displays as a mediator to an urban, middle-class audience. In other words, there seems to be an asymmetry in the way *Cranford* the text and Cranford the place are interdependently related to each other through the mediation of Mary Smith, the narrator, and Mary Smith, the character, in terms of discursive conventions, ideology and narration. In the role of the narrator (and mediator), Mary Smith systematically adopts a humorous, and definitely ironic stance, occasionally tinged with mild aggression, towards her narrated world, something which materializes in her frequent asides (apostrophes) to her narratee. As one of the text's characters, however, not only does she partake of the very

same eccentricities, "elegant econom[ies]" (4) and daily practices of the depicted rural community ("Cranfordisms" is the term she uses to refer to them) that she habitually mocks, but she is also eager to impart their localized significance to an urban, middle-class readership, as if to release the tension of their effect on her by way of narrating them to a third party. Hence, *Cranford*'s narrative discordance, in the sense that the narrating "I" is at odds not only with its narrated counterpart (the narrated "I") by way of its occasional transmutation into a communal "we," but also with its narrated world (the Cranford community), as I shall be arguing throughout.

In her book *Fictions of Authority* Susan Lanser considers the mode of communal voice to be a "category of underdeveloped possibilities" (21) within the narratological paradigm, one that in her analysis counterbalances the individualist character of authorial and personal narrative voices and is primarily a narrative strategy adopted by women authors. She also contends that "[u]nlike authorial and personal voices, the communal mode seems to be primarily a phenomenon of marginal or suppressed communities . . . [one she] has not observed in fiction by white, ruling-class men perhaps because such an 'I' is already in some sense speaking with the authority of an [already] hegemonic 'we'" (21). In my reading of *Cranford*, I shall contend that Gaskell's construction of Mary Smith's communal practices is there to foreground the significance of the individual ego rather than to counteract it.

Mary Smith's introduction of her narratee to Cranford's habits and codes of communication materializes in a characteristically ambivalent way. Her narrative voice both sides with and differentiates itself from Cranford's eccentric regime by presenting the text's female protagonists as a select group of charming "angels with a twist" (Langland 113), on the one hand, and by apostrophizing a London narratee, on the other. In other words, Mary seems to be torn between acting as a disinterested ethnographer of Cranford, on the one hand, and an involved member of this idiosyncratic community, on the other:

> Although the ladies of Cranford know all each other's proceedings, they are exceedingly indifferent to each other's opinions. Indeed, as each has her own individuality, not to say eccentricity, pretty strongly developed, nothing is so easy as verbal retaliation; . . . . The Cranford ladies have only an occasional little quarrel, spirited out in a few peppery words and angry jerks of the head; just enough to prevent the even tenor of their lives from becoming too flat. Their dress is very independent of fashion; as they observe, "What does it signify how we dress here at Cranford when everybody knows us?"

> And if they go from home, their reason is equally cogent, "What does it signify how we dress here, where nobody knows us?" The materials of their clothes are, in general, good and plain, and most of them are nearly as scrupulous as Miss Tyler of cleanly memory; but I will answer for it, the last gigot, the last tight and scanty petticoat in wear in England, was seen in Cranford—and seen without a smile. I can testify to a magnificent family red silk umbrella, under which a gentle little spinster, left alone of many brothers and sisters, used to patter to church on rainy days. Have you any red silk umbrellas in London? (2)

As Borislav Knezevic puts it, "[i]n her asides to the readers, Mary is a vocal satirist of the town's ways" (411), but without ever radically questioning her depicted world. "Her actions," Knezevic further observes, "are restricted by her function as an observer and indeed they tend only to restore the conditions that existed before her arrival" (411). However, it is not without significance that, contrary to what Knezevic argues, Mary Smith eventually does, indeed, transcend her role as an observer, with her actions obeying the instinct of Mary Smith, the character, rather than the tactful dictates of a disinterested narrator. As a matter of fact, Mary will neither withdraw from Cranford nor end her narration before she secures in it the position of a new mediator. Interestingly, Mary's narrative strategies, as well as her final act of restoring "Peace to Cranford" (the phrase constitutes the title of the novel's last chapter) by staging Peter Jenkyns's—Miss Jenkyns's long-lost brother—"Happy Return" (which is the title of the novel's penultimate chapter), seem to run parallel to her text's urge for endings, on the one hand, and her wish to assert her own presence in and influence over it, on the other.

Mary's narrative position of ambivalence, then, along with the novel's structural organization, are based on Mary Smith's duality of roles, which seems to be informed by her compulsive urge for repetitive returns to Cranford. Although these impinge upon the normal flow of her life in industrial Drumble, she is unable to resist them once she is summoned back, despite the inconvenience that any such return may entail:

> Soon after . . . I took my leave, giving many an injunction to Martha to look after her mistress, and to let me know if she thought that Miss Matilda was not so well; in which case I would volunteer a visit to my old friend, without noticing Martha's intelligence to her. Accordingly, I received a line or two from Martha every now and then; and, about November, I had a note to say her mistress was "very low and

> sadly off her food"; and the account made me so uneasy that, although Martha did not decidedly summon me, I packed my things and went. . . . Miss Matilda looked miserably ill; and I prepared to comfort and cosset her. (51-52)

Mary's returns to Cranford always entail her active participation in the town's local affairs, a fact which requires her full compliance with the community's "rules and regulations" (2). It also causes her, however, to react against what she perceives to be Cranford's whimsically oppressive eccentricities, triggering, at the same time, her communal narrative strategies, which materialize in the transmutation of the individual "I" to the communal "we." It is in those instances of Mary Smith's narration that whatever is considered to be uncongenial to Cranford's "genteel" mode of perception of reality is ostracized from its linguistic repertoire and becomes repressed into its society's collective unconscious. It thus causes what one might call a "Cranfordian Imaginary" to emerge, which materializes in the community's inability (or refusal) to see things for what they are by resorting to the reassuring convenience of "sour grapeism" (4), disavowal and euphemism:

> Death was as true and as common as poverty; yet people never spoke about that, loud out in the streets. It was not a word to be mentioned to ears polite. We had tacitly agreed to ignore that any with whom we associated on terms of visiting equality could ever be prevented by poverty from doing anything that they wished. If we walked to or from a party, it was because the night was so fine, or the air so refreshing, not because sedan chairs were expensive. If we wore prints, instead of summer silks, it was because we preferred a washing material; and so on, till we blinded ourselves to the fact that we were all of us, people of very moderate means. (5)

The same strategies of denial and disavowal prevail when it comes to financial matters and all that is connected to them, as well as when the ladies' heroic efforts at concealing their impoverished state are comically unfolded before us:

> None of us spoke of money, because that subject savoured of commerce and trade, and though some might be poor, we were all aristocratic. The Cranfordians had that kindly esprit de corps which made them overlook all deficiencies in success when some among them tried to conceal their poverty. When Mrs Forrester, for instance, gave a party in her baby-house of a dwelling, and the little maid disturbed

> the ladies on 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, and talked about household forms and ceremonies 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 ruddy arms could never be strong enough to carry the tray upstairs, if she had not been assisted in private 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 the morning making tea-bread and sponge-cakes. (3-4)

Caught between her dual role as narrator and community member, Mary Smith, who elsewhere in the text refers to herself as "a well-to-do young lady" rather than an impoverished genteel woman, seems to double herself defensively by splitting into a controlling, ironic and critical narrator, on the one hand, and a contented, submissive and obedient child-character, on the other, a child who is often required, however, to assume the subject position of the daughter as carer—a standard role in Victorian Society—towards the childless ladies of Cranford. Notably, Mary is not only motherless (only her father is mentioned in the text), but also much younger than the ladies of Cranford, young enough, as a matter of fact, to be their daughter. She thus holds a borderline, ambivalent position characterized by mixed feelings of joy and grief. On a thematic level, this position of ambivalence is gradually reinforced by Mary's repetitive, often compulsive, returns to the rural land of Cranford from that of urban Drumble. On the level of narration, it materializes through her repetitive use of Cranford's linguistic conventions and phraseology. Phrases like "elegant economy" and "strict code of gentility" are often reiterated by the narrator, who, at one point, exclaims: "How naturally one falls back into the phraseology of Cranford!" (4). Although in her dual role she contributes significantly—materially as well as textually—to the development of Cranford the place and *Cranford* the text, Mary's self-conflict is only inevitable because of this very division. In fact, the Freudian concept of the double becomes relevant at several points in Gaskell's text, for hers is a text primarily based on repression, repetition and ambivalence. The two textual personas of Mary Smith the character as well as her double, Mary Smith the narrator,[3] often seem to function antithetically/ antagonistically, one might

3. This is a case of what Robert Rogers, in the context of his reading of Dostoevsky's

say, just like the concept of the narcissistic double both in its Freudian and in its post-structuralist version, and it is through Mary's declared fear of eyes, actually her own, looking back at her from the mirror, that the appearance of the double becomes manifest, as we shall see below. In his Lacanian interpretation of the double Mladen Dolar observes: "The double . . . is somebody who enjoys at the subject's expense. He commits acts that one wouldn't dare to commit, indulges in one's repressed desire" (139).

It is Mary Smith the narrator who undertakes this role in *Cranford*, indulging, that is, in her repressed desire, and who seems to function as Mary Smith's (the character's) double, for it is much more on the level of narration—replete as it is with her ironic comments and asides to the narratee—rather than on a thematic level that Mary's repressed opposition to Cranford's codes is allowed full expression. In the everyday proceedings of the community her role is mainly restricted (at least until before Mary Smith the character stages the return to Cranford of her replacement, Peter Jenkyns) to that of a mere onlooker, who is expected to comply uncomplainingly with Cranford's conventions. This is a subject position that Mary both agrees and refuses to endorse for herself, by both acting in compliance with the circumstances, that is, in accordance with Cranford's etiquette and the rules of feminine propriety, but also against them by being critical of its practices and rebellious as regards her assigned position in the community. At the same time, however, there are instances in the text where, as a character, Mary Smith displays a devotion to "the strict code of gentility" and to the numerous hysterical whims of the

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novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, terms "doubling by division . . . [a] kind of representation [which] typically expresses ambivalent feelings, the conjunction of which (particularly when hostility is repressed) is so intolerable that the ambivalence is dealt with defensively by decomposing the loved and hated father into two separate and seemingly unrelated persons" (5). In the case of *Cranford*, it is mainly the loved and hated deficiently maternal figures of the Amazons, but also the paternal figure of Mary's own father (whom she also both nurses, entertains and criticizes when she is away from Cranford), that constitute the source of ambivalence for the narrator, who projects her conflictual emotions onto her text. On a deeper level, one can also detect, as it has often been suggested, Gaskell's own consideration for, but also her anxiety about and hostility towards the paternal, literary figure of Dickens, which materializes through her frequent allusions to his own literary output in subversive ways. According to Rogers, moreover, doubling "may be subjective or objective. Both represent conflict, but subject doubling represents conflicting drives, orientations, or attitudes without respect to other people, whereas object doubling displays inner conflict expressed in terms of antithetical or incompatible attitudes towards other people" (5). Clearly, *Cranford* displays the properties of both subject and object doubling because of Mary Smith's structural positioning within the text, as both narrator and character.

ladies, as well as being equally eloquent about her own reaction to and rejection of them in an attempt to show her frustration at the way she is being treated by the ladies and to articulate her own individuality and separateness from them. She is often called on to assume the sacrificial position of the daughter-carer towards the Amazons, while at the same time she is being subtly maltreated as a child. For instance, although she generally succumbs to Miss Matty's whimsical "cha[riness] of candles" (59) by preferring to "scorch [her]self with sewing by firelight," she does not fail to express her annoyance at her "compulsory blind man's holiday" (59), so when she has the chance to, she acts accordingly, that is by lighting a candle the moment Miss Matty falls asleep. Similarly, the narrator mildly expresses her displeasure when Miss Betty Barker, the former milliner, throws a party for the ladies, to which she is also invited. Here, once again, one cannot fail to notice how she is being treated by her hostess, that is, by being seated separately from the rest of the ladies (as if she were a child) together with Carlo, the honourable Mrs Jamieson's dog: "Miss Barker provided me with some literature in the shape of three or four handsomely-bound fashion-books ten or twelve years old, observing, as she put a little table and a candle for my especial benefit, that she knew young people liked to look at pictures" (94). On other occasions, however, especially on matters of taste, Mary acquires the upper hand in the world of the Amazons such as, for instance, when she imposes her own will on Miss Matty when, instead of the sea-green turban she has been asked to bring her from Drumble, all she gets her is an ordinary cap:

> I was very glad to accept the invitation from my dear Miss Matty . . . and most particularly anxious to prevent her from disfiguring her small, gentle, mousey face with a Saracean's head turban; and accordingly, I bought her a pretty, neat, middle-aged cap, which, however, was rather a disappointment to her. . . . It was in vain that I twirled the cap round on my hand to exhibit back and side fronts: her heart had been set upon a turban, and all she could do was to say, with resignation in her look and voice—"I am sure you did your best, my dear. It's just like the caps all the ladies in Cranford are wearing, and they have had theirs for years, I dare say. I should have liked something newer, I confess—something more like the turbans . . . Queen Adelaide wears." . . . But, for all that, I had rather that she blamed Drumble and me than disfigure herself with a turban. (115-16)

Another token of Mary Smith's attempt at controlling the Amazons is when she is once again in the right place at the right time to impose her own

standards of proper dressing, by acting as Miss Matty's knowledgeable judge of good taste, when it comes to the latter's choice of silk for a new gown: "I had offered, it is true, to send to Drumble for patterns, but she had rejected my proposal, gently implying that she had not forgotten her disappointment about the sea-green turban. I was thankful that I was on the spot now, to counteract the dazzling fascination of any yellow or scarlet silk" (166).

Mary's relation to the female community of Cranford could be said to display aspects of the relation to the mother as described by object relations theory. As is well known, at the core of object-relations stands the mother, who occupies the central role in the formation of the child's psychic world and whose presence and participation in the child's gradual unfolding of personality is instrumental. "With the advent of object-relations theory," according to Janice Doane and Devon Hodges, "the mother, long delegated to the wings of psychoanalytic thought, moved to center stage; her role in the child's development was emphasized to the point where her authority and power far exceeded that of the all-powerful father" (7). For Melanie Klein, in particular, the pre-Oedipal relationship between the baby and its mother is crucially important for the future development of the adult individual. This is "a relationship of projective identification within which the human subject both projects itself onto the mother and re-identifies with her" (Minsky 7), a relationship, in other words, within which the as yet underdeveloped infantile self is undifferentiated from the mother's own. Furthermore, "this first bond," according to Klein, "[which] already contains the fundamental elements of an object relation . . . for the breast, towards which all his [the infant's] desires are directed, is instinctively felt to be not only the source of nourishment but of life itself" (211).

The shifting of Mary Smith's position into the alternate roles of the caring daughter, and neglected child, and her occasional contentment with and self-denying devotion to the Cranfordian code, on the other, are strongly evocative of Melanie Klein's "paranoid-schizoid position" (216), whose distinctive characteristic is the infant's perception of the mother's breast as divided into two opposing phantasies: the good breast, idealized as all-giving, and the bad breast as its withholding counterpart. This first phase/ position of Klein's theory is characterized, like *Cranford*, by fragmentation and splitting, which are schizoid, as well as by the paranoid delusion that the persecuting object will invade the ego in order to annihilate both the ideal object and the self. This position is soon to be superseded by the "depressive" one, "when the infant progressively integrates his feelings of love and hatred and synthesizes the

good and bad aspects of the mother [as] he goes through states of mourning bound up with feelings of guilt" (218).[4]

Conflict and ambivalence in *Cranford* is to be detected not only between the individual and the community, but within the individual "I" as well. A critical scene in the text, I would like to argue, one which serves as a prototype for a subsequent repetition, is that in which Mary Smith admits that her "pet apprehension [is] eyes" by picturing herself "seeing eyes looking at [her] and watching her every time [she] go[es] up to [her] looking glass when [she] is panic-stricken" (138). The scene is repeated at the Cranford Assembly Rooms just before Signor Brunoni's (the foreign, unfamiliar conjuror who, interestingly, turns out to be not so foreign after all, for he is none other but the domestic and thus familiar Samuel Brown) performance commences. Here there is no mirror, but only a stage curtain/ screen, which seems to come to life rather uncannily, when "in weariness of the obstinate green curtain that would not draw up, but would stare at [her]" (122), Mary Smith is suddenly aware of "two odd eyes, seen through holes, as in the old tapestry story" (122). Both scenes are rather enigmatically informed by the acts of gazing and vision and they constitute a moment of intense self-consciousness for *Cranford*'s "I" narrator, but also one of confusion and uncertainty about the eluding thing, that which neither Mary Smith nor the narratee ever get to see for what it is because it is but an absent presence, a gaping hole, the fantasy of desire which is never to be fulfilled:

> I would fain have looked round the merry chattering people behind me [but] Miss Pole clutched my arm and begged me not to turn, "for it was not the thing." What the thing was, I never could find out, but it must have been something eminently dull and tiresome. However, we all sat eyes right, square front, gazing at the tantalizing curtain, and hardly speaking intelligibly. . . . At length the eyes disappeared—the curtain quivered—one side went up before the other, which stuck fast; it was dropped again, and, with a fresh effort, and a vigorous pull from some unseen hand, it flew up, revealing to our sight a magnificent gentleman in the Turkish costume, seated before a little table, gazing at us (I should have said with the same eyes that I had last

4. For Klein, it is this phase, rather than the Oedipal one, that constitutes the most decisive moment in the development of human identity, for if at this stage the infant manages to establish a "good object," then good feelings will prevail and the transition from phantasy to a complex reality will most likely be a smooth one, just like the necessary separation from the mother.

> seen through the holes in the curtain) with calm, condescending dignity, "like a being of another sphere." (122)

It is during these two gazing moments that the uncanny surfaces steeped in its double meaning as something both familiar and unfamiliar, reassuring and threatening, just like the Amazonian world of *Cranford*. If, as Freud argues in his essay, "*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*" (347), then its disconcerting effects certainly appear at a critical moment in Gaskell's text (halfway through, in Chapter 10, which is aptly titled "The Panic") again in the form of the double, which in this particular scene is surely evocative of the Lacanian "mirror stage." The gazing experience of Lacan's mirror stage, which is both pleasurable and threatening for the human subject, is also constitutive of the subject's formation of her/ his sense of self (of the "I"), not least because the mirrored self gives rise to the subject's conflicting sense of its own totality and omnipotence, but also of its irremediably fragmented otherness. For Lacan, the mirrored self is the first other both in terms of time and importance. He argues that identification with one's image in the mirror—the "specular I"—takes place prior to identification with the other I, namely the "social I" ("The Mirror Stage" 5). According to this logic, the "specular I," which totalizes pre-ego fragments, contradicts one's emergent self (associated with the "social I") and constitutes evidence that identity is by definition self-alienating and that the agency of the ego is from the start located in a "fictional direction," thus immersing the subject in the "*function of méconnaisance* that characterizes the ego in all its structures" (6). In Gaskell's text, this uncanny experience of Mary seeing eyes (indicative of the appearance of the double) both behind her and before her, looking out of the darkness or through an "obstinate" green screen, is founded on an unconscious recognition of herself in the form of the Other, a recognition, moreover, which is reinforced by the implication that the eyes that she fears are her very own reflected back to her either from within the looking glass or through the curtain. Thus, Mary Smith both sees/ narrates and becomes a vulnerable object to be seen from all directions, one who is being "looked at in the spectacle of the world" (Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts* 75), existing in and determined by the intertwined webs of vision and desire.

Psychoanalytic theories of the double suggest that the double gives form to an early phase of narcissistic rage[5] that, having become unbearable to the

5. In his essay "Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis" Lacan further explicates the notion of aggressivity as this characterizes the subject:

mature self, has long since been surmounted, mastered and, hence, repressed. Such being the case, the appearance of the double in the narrator's mirror stands for a return of this primary aggression, which is jubilantly celebrated by the "specular I" (the ego-ideal), but is split off and rejected by the "social I" (the ego) as something alien to it, which thus becomes projected onto the other. So, what Mary sees in the mirror is partly her own fear of herself, her own self-aggression, which she projects outwards onto the Amazons in her capacity as a character and transforms into irony and humour in her capacity as narrator. Thus, by occupying the liminal status of both the insider and the outsider in terms of her relation to (as a character) and narration of (as a narrative agent) *Cranford*, she holds the position of what Lacan terms "the extimate," his own version of the uncanny, which signifies the blurring of boundaries between inside and outside, familiar and unfamiliar, self and other. According to Robin Lydenberg, "[t]he complex relation between inside and outside, domestic and foreign, familiar and unfamiliar reflects both the paradoxical nature of the uncanny and something about the origins of the speaking subject and of narration" (1082). This is exactly the relationship between Mary Smith and Cranford the place, but, also, *Cranford* the text, which becomes to her a locus both familiar and unfamiliar, domestic and foreign, just like her own reflection in the mirror. As a result, her narration becomes what Lydenberg terms "a supplementary extimate that both sustains and alienates subjects inside and outside their life stories" (1083).

In the final analysis, despite Mary Smith's declared communal narrative position, her oscillation between an "I" and "we" mode of narration, and despite her indebtedness and commitment to the community, it is the individual (the "I") rather that the community (the "we") that finally becomes the most privileged, and, paradoxically, the least reliable party (because of its own self-division and liminal position) in the text upon which the community depends for its recording and textual survival. The community, in turn, is also constitutive of Mary Smith's narrative authority for it has furnished her with the raw material necessary for the recording of her narrative by way of its traumatic inscription into her memory, thus rendering the relation between the

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> There is a sort of structural crossroads . . . to which we must accommodate our thinking if we are to understand the nature of aggressivity in man and its relation with the formalism of his ego and his objects. It is in this erotic relation, in which the human individual fixes upon himself an image that alienates him from himself, that are to be found the energy and the form on which this organization of the passions that he will call his ego is based. (19)

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