

ELIZABETH GASKELL – A WOMAN OF MANY NAMES AND “MES” AND THE PHALLOCENTRIC ORDER

Simona Catrinel Avarvarei, Assistant, PhD, ”Ion Ionescu de la Brad” University of Iași

Abstract: This paper approaches the way in which constructing and placing her ‘I’ within different systems of representation – Christianity, socialism, the Angel of the House, the Romantic artist with an eye for minute details, Elizabeth Gaskell seems near to Kristeva’s perspective upon a multi-positioning of the subject in language as sign of longing and becoming. She searches for her genuine ‘I’ whilst admitting its socially-split existence, a quest she would embark upon with her authorial self. According to the Tel Quel theory, Modernist writers exploit and celebrate the semiotic and intertextual energies, where the notion of a unique self – that of one’s own self – interpreted as coherent identity, is totally abandoned. With that, Gaskell stepped out of the canon, only to claim her place into it, the moment she admitted subordination to patriarchal authority.

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It seems that a woman of so many names and ‘mes’ could not confine herself to her *self*, nor could she be her *own woman* in the rather annihilating and narrowing sense implied by what authorship meant to Charlotte Brontë and alluded in a letter dated July 9th, 1853: ‘A thought strikes me. Do you, who have so many friends, – so large a circle of acquaintance, – find it easy, when you sit down to write, to isolate yourself from all those ties, and their sweet associations, so as to be your OWN WOMAN, uninfluenced or swayed by the consciousness of how your work may affect other minds; what blame or what sympathy it may call forth?’ (Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, p. 409). Three years earlier, in 1850, Elizabeth Gaskell meditated on a shifting sense of self, that proved a sound knowledge of her own mind and person, at the same time approaching her to the future perception Modernism would develop on the idea of the dissolution of the unitary *I*, as advocated by Julia Kristeva, at the same time pinning her down to the mighty patriarchal canon of submission: ‘[...] for I have a great number and that’s the plague. One of my mes is, I do believe, a true Christian – [only people call her socialist and communist], another of my mes 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 [sic] is pleased on its own account. How am I to reconcile all these warring members? I try to drown myself (my first self,) by saying it’s Wm [William Gaskell] who is to decide on all these things, and his feeling it right ought to be my rule. And so it is—only that does not quite do...I long (weakly) for the old times where right and wrong did not seem such complicated matters; and I am sometimes coward enough to wish we were back in the darkness where obedience was the only seen duty of women.’ (Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Letters of Elizabeth Gaskell*, pp. 108-109).

Constructing and positioning her ‘I’ within different systems of representation – Christianity, socialism, communism, the Angel of the house, the Romantic artist with an eye for minute details – Gaskell seems near to Kristeva’s perspective upon a multi-positioning of

the subject in language as sign of longing and becoming. She searches for her genuine 'I' whilst admitting its socially-split existence, a quest she would embark upon with her authorial self. According to the *Tel Quel* theory, Modernist writers exploit and celebrate the semiotic and intertextual energies, where the notion of a unique self – that of one's own self – interpreted as coherent identity is totally abandoned. With that, Gaskell stepped out of the canon, only to claim her place into it, the moment she admitted subordination to patriarchal authority. Nevertheless, we may contemplate Gaskell's *mes* from a pre-Modernist perspective, the moment we refer to Julia Kristeva and her belief that (in Modernist texts) the transposition of angles and perspective of what she refers to as '*signifiance*' begins to be self-consciously exploited and this inherently implied the very recognition of the fact that the subject is not identical to the 'I' that speaks. There is a certain concept of 'loss' behind the assumed authorial anonymity, as Roland Barthes assumes: '*Signifiance*', *unlike signification, cannot be reduced to communication, to representation, to expression: it puts the (writing or reading) subject into the text, not as a projection, not even as a fantasmatic one, but as a 'loss.'* (Roland Barthes, 'Theory of the text', p. 38).

It is not only the subject that is 'lost' within the threads of the text, we argue, but the assumption of an illusory masculine identity, practice that defined what we might refer to as '*geno-dimension*' [an allegory to Kristeva's '*geno-text*' as the process of generating the signifying system as signifying infiniteness] of the Victorian *écriture féminine*. This is what makes us consider Elizabeth Gaskell's decision, not to resort to the already consecrated male authorial stereotype, to embrace and define, within the image of loss, what Barthes defined as 'The Grain of the *new Voice*'. (my emphasis)

In many ways, the story of Gaskell's life oscillated between polarities opened by massive disparities - North and South, public and private life, social engagement and idyllic withdrawal, although, eventually, she fled from each and every one of them. I argue that the same vacillation accounts for the fact that she published her first novel anonymously, thus neither wholeheartedly rebelling against convention, as Alexis Easley (Alexis Easley, *First-Person Anonymous: Women Writers and Victorian Print Media, 1830-70*) suggests, nor defying it through a public claim of self-identity. If the reader was not familiar with the real name that hid behind Mary Barton, a certain delay in taking a decision on behalf of Mrs. Gaskell's seemed to account for the fact, which appears to contradict the thesis of her rebellion against the tyranny of the canon. This is what she wrote in a letter addressed to her editor, Edward Chapman, on 26 May 1848, '*If you have no objection, I should on reflection prefer no name being given as that of the author. I do not like assuming a name, although my desire for secrecy is as strong as ever*' (A. V. Chapple and A. Shelston, *Further Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, p. 39). Nevertheless, on 19 October the same year, Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell proposed *Stephen Berwick* as a pseudonym, but the suggestion came too late and what could have been her second sobriquet, following *Cotton Mather Mills* that appears on her first work of fiction, *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras* (1847), as well on other two stories, *The Sexton's Hero* and *Christmas Storms and Sunshine*, proved to have too short an existence.

The problem of an identity publicly assumed and the search of the name that would accompany her entire literary career mark an interesting point in what Mrs. Gaskell is concerned. First comes the reflection on the idea of anonymity, which would only echo the status women had in the times of the Patriarch, one that does not go beyond the blurry profile of a fluttering shadow, whose 'immateriality' appears to almost deny the attributes of individuality and uniqueness – hence the idea of '*no name*'; although, at first, she acknowledged her dislike of hiding behind male pennames, and in spite of the fact that she almost chose one, I argue that Elizabeth Gaskell, by preferring anonymity over a fictitious, male-gendered identity, was actually forging her own image, preparing to introduce her own

self to the world. With Mary Barton, she failed to articulate the will of having the shadowy, womanly existence publicly acclaimed, in an assertive exercise that would intertwine the inner logos of the self with its external acknowledgment, but this was only a milestone in the life of this *'high-profile woman of letters'* (Alexis Easley, *First-Person Anonymous*, p. 91).

The literary signature of her 'voice' seems to have undergone an equally intricate forge as her earlier choices of pennames or no name at all. Deidre D'Albertis, meditating on Elizabeth Gaskell's authorial mark, emphasizes the institutional conformity that accompanies her gender and summarizes her role: *'For much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, critics tended to refer to her as Mrs. Gaskell; only with the advent of feminist criticism in the late twentieth century did Mrs. Gaskell ultimately become canonized as 'Elizabeth Gaskell'* (Deirdre D'Albertis, 'The Life and Letters of E. C. Gaskell', p. 14).

It was precisely this form of reference 'Mrs.', canonical in itself, that justified Lord David Cecil's abrupt disparity between Elizabeth Gaskell and her equally famous contemporaries, the Brontës and George Eliot, *'her famous rivals'* who were not *'ordinary women'*: *'Ugly, dynamic, childless, independent, contemptuous of the notion that women should be confined to that small area of family and social interests which was commonly regarded as the only proper province of their sex; fiercely resentful of the conventions that kept them within it – at every turn they flout the standards which were set up before the women of their day. In the placid dovecotes of Victorian womanhood, they were eagles. But we only have to look at a portrait of Mrs. Gaskell, soft-eyed, beneath her charming veil, to see that she was a dove.'* (Lord David Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation*, pp. 97–98).

In the wingspan lies the greatness of floating among the lofty peaks and the delicate whitish fluttering that roams over mansion rooftops. The harsh epithets that Lord Cecil – most uninspiringly – resorted to have a powerful opposing effect on the softness of destiny and vocation Elizabeth Gaskell did come to epitomize. In one of her letters she argued that even unique endowments, such as those of Charlotte Brontë's, cannot compensate for a woman's duty to perform her part as the Angel of the Hearth. Even though *'she must not shrink from the extra responsibility implied by the very fact of her possessing such talents,'* no other person *'can take up the quiet regular duties of the daughter, the wife, or the mother, nor can she drop the domestic charges devolving on her as an individual, for the exercise of the most splendid talents that were ever bestowed'* (Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, p. 259). The catalytic agent of these thoughts must hide behind Gaskell's Unitarian upbringing, as she was the born the daughter of a Unitarian minister and she later became the wife of one. One of the key values this religious community, one George Eliot herself held most dear, the education was equally imparted to both men and women who were encouraged to cultivate independence of thought and self-regulating morality. Unitarians were constantly concerned with establishing literary, philosophical as well as scientific societies, charity schools for girls and boys, just as they were much involved in printing, publishing, and book selling businesses. It was also an Unitarian voice, William Johnson Fox's, which uttered, in 1834, words that not often sprang from the lips of men: *'Man has placed them [women] in degrading circumstances, and through them the degradation has recoiled upon himself. In his disgust at female pretension, (not a jot worse than male pretension; and either, only disgusting because unfounded) he has crippled female intellect, and thereby enfeebled his own. In training a dependent, he has lost a companion. In the passing admiration of superficial accomplishment, he has foregone the permanent advantage of solid attainment. [...] In claiming science, politics, philosophy, and all the higher regions of thought for himself, and warning off intrusion by placarding them with the word unfeminine, he has deprived himself of the best sympathy, the most efficient aid, the mightiest stimulus, and the*

noblest reward of his own most honourable toils.' (G. Sherwood, *The Monthly Repository of Theology and General Literature*, p. 642). Furthermore, Coral Lansbury points out that: '[...] *to be born a woman in the Victorian era was to enter a world of social and cultural deprivation unknown to a man. But to be born a woman and a Unitarian was to be released from much of the prejudice and oppression enjoined upon other women.*' (Coral Lansbury, *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis*, London, p. 11).

Could this be the answer to Mrs. Gaskell's will to become acquainted with the world and let the world know her true name and identity, furthermore strengthened by the indelible mark of social appropriateness and dutiful bondage? Such rhetoric seems to dilute its core if we consider the fact that Unitarian women enjoyed greater freedom of action in comparison to other Victorian women, whose role as mothers and wives seemed to embrace a totally different perspective. Unlike strict Evangelicals, Anglican and Dissenting devotees, Unitarian ladies breathed at ease through not so tight a corset, hence Gaskell's lightness of heart and tone. The Angel of the House is not merely the prisoner inside the walls, the ethereal shadow predestined to shallow endeavours and illusory trifles; she becomes part of the complex family system that turns people into social beings. Inclusion defines the mathematical algorithm that brings together, no longer separating, no longer isolating. Patsy Stoneman argues that: '*Given the Unitarian emphasis on self-government based on careful early training, it follows that mothers, and all those who care for children, preside over the foundations of the polity.*' (Patsy Stoneman, 'Gaskell, gender and the family', p. 134).

This is the reason for which Elizabeth Gaskell introduces the reader to '*each man in his home environment in order to suggest that the qualities which characterize them are produced within the family.*' (*The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*, p. 136). Nevertheless, although Unitarian women would cultivate their intellect, despite the fact that they were dynamic and strong-minded, they did not entirely rejected the supremacy of the patriarchal canon, the moment they would believe that their husbands had the right to take the lead in the marriage – a thing Gaskell admittedly believed in, an attitude she would cultivate in her heroines' profile. This ongoing stepping in and out of the norm interlaces the threads of a journey that would take the reader both onto the realm of private as well as public life; I argue that Elizabeth Gaskell sketches a *social self*, one that roams around the northern industrial towns of England and constantly defines its profile both within the surrounding walls of stately or humble lodgings and the roar of machines and voices in sooty streets. It is this social self that breathes in her novels which, echoing the Unitarian values of becoming, rebels against the clear cut separation of spheres, genders and systems of reference. The crossing over, the reaching onto the other, the cultivation of nurturing capacities is what opens the private sphere onto the spirit of the world, fusing its sensitiveness with the suffering, deprivation and challenges that exist outside one's threshold. Strict, rigid, male-centred hierarchies suffocate and alienate any emotion and trace of humanitarism, whereas peripheries, with their infinitely diluted centrism, have not yet lost the capacity to care and care about.

With Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell begins a journey which stays under the dramatic sign of exploring a double estrangement; it is not only the realm of the female self that is minutely scrutinized from the militant perspective of women's movement campaign for socially-acknowledged positions for (educated) women within the field of labour, since it is also the remote, dark corner of *the other side* represented by the 'work people' of industrial Britain which is equally offered a chance to 'speak out'. Although she lacked George Eliot's intellectual refinement, Dickens's social range or the Brontës's fine insight into self and soul, Elizabeth Gaskell reversed symbolically Shakespeare's famous words put into the mouth of his correspondingly famous character, Mark Antony - '*Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend*

me your ears' - into an allegorical shift of articulating what used to be, up to that very moment, unarticulated utterance. She became 'anxious to give some utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people; the agony of suffering without the sympathy of the happy, or of erroneously believing that such is the case' (Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life*, pp. 37-38), and continues her thoughts arguing that 'at present they seem to me to be left in a state, wherein lamentations and tears are thrown aside as useless, but in which the lips are compressed for curses, and the hands clenched and ready to smite' (Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life*, p. 38).

Mrs. Gaskell heightens the sense of exclusion and powerlessness of marginalia identities which, under an *écriture féminine*, end up translating their weakness somatically, for it is the tear which comes first and only after that the will to 'speak out' as epitome for the desire to 'persuade and transform' (Hilary M Schor, *Scheherazade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel*, p. 43). This almost 'biologic' sense of utterance is carefully marked by Mrs. Gaskell who correlates the rough whispering and 'curses' of aching bodies with a phonemic, embryonic stage of language rather than a semic one that operates as 'pure sound and self-expression' (I. Kreilkamp, *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller*, p. 57). The curse functions not only as crippled language, pushing rationality aside, but also as sign of social paralysis – Gaskell believes that the social problems of her time reflected not only discontinuities in the logic of action, but also blockages in communication, which, if overcome, could have instilled peace and harmony between rich and poor, men and women, master and servant, *north* and *south*, agora and gynoeceium, marketplace and parlour. 'Speak to your workmen as if they were human beings. Speak to them kindly' (Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, p. 175). It is with infinite kindness of heart that she speaks of these new identities, forged at a crossroads of lodging and factory, parlour and outskirts, for throughout this chapter I would like to emphasize how the high improbability of a past subjunctive ('as if they were') became the challenge dropping off Gaskell's nib who pledged to find that (*social*) self, regardless of gender, class and education that would make isolated spheres meet in a common locus where real stories come to life. With the delicate touch of a miniaturist, Mrs. Gaskell plays with the boundaries, permeating them and redefining their outline.

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