Autobiographical Anxieties in Female Self-Representation: *Jane Eyre* and *Bleak House*

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The female protagonist-narrators of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847)[1] and Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853)[2] may both be regarded as participating in the contested genre of female autobiography in their retrospective narrations. The eponymous heroine of *Jane Eyre* clearly designates herself as the narrator of her own life-story as the novel declares itself as an "Autobiography" on its title page. Jane herself asserts that she is purposefully writing and shaping her experience as she declares in the beginning: "this is not to be a regular autobiography" (*JE*, 91). Esther Summerson, on the other hand, does not proclaim her narrative as an autobiography. Nevertheless, the 33 chapters narrated by Esther which constitute approximately half of the novel's perspective, predominantly centre upon her life, prompting contemporary reviewers to attribute her narrative to that genre.[3] Their most significant similarity, however, is their concomitant approaches to the autobiographical form[4] and their inevitable negotiations with the conventions of feminine narration.[5]

Due to their respective autobiographical personas, critics have tended to dismiss Esther Summerson as comparatively anodyne in contrast to the rebellious, assertive and unconventional narrator-protagonist, Jane Eyre.[6] For example, Anny Sadrin observes that while Jane is "perhaps the best, illustration of the oppressed woman in the nineteenth century", Esther "who, although placed in similar circumstances, is a model of obedience and submissiveness" (Sadrin, 248). Indeed, while Jane appears to finally achieve her quest for independence as she seemingly assumes without inhibition the hitherto contested role of the self-proclaimed female autobiographer in order to constitute an idiosyncratic female *Bildungsroman*, Esther seems to quietly accept her fate with a seeming resignation as her narrative abides by the earlier conventions. Lacking Jane's ambition or passion, Esther appears to be a docile

and compliant woman whose narrative remains within the limits of what was considered to be in the nineteenth-century a "feminine" autobiography.[7] Such observations are certainly justifiable to a certain extent based on the conspicuous differences in the diction and content of their narratives. However, it can also be said that this has often obscured the fact that Jane's narrative also shares crucial similarities with Esther's narration. This paper seeks to show that Jane Eyre and Esther Summerson are much more similar than has been previously allowed in the covert ways in which their first-person narratives respectively grapple with the conventions of feminine narration and the contested genre of autobiography.

Esther Summerson: The Reluctant Autobiographer

In contrast to Jane Eyre who unapologetically declares her narrative to be an autobiography from the beginning, Esther seems determined to highlight the involuntary nature of her task of writing. Indeed, she repeatedly asserts the fact that this has been produced out of dutiful obedience to an external authority figure, rather than from her own volition: "I have a great deal of difficulty in beginning to write my portion of these pages, for I know I am not clever" (*BH*, 27). Moreover, she stresses her apparent bewilderment, as she incredulously observes in a self-deprecating tone, "It seems so curious to me to be obliged to write all this about myself! As if this narrative were the narrative of *my* life!" (*BH*, 40).

Esther's persistence in displacing discursive authority for her autobiographical narrative onto others points to her underlying anxiety towards the form. Women who are not so reluctant to pursue an authoritative voice tend to be vilified throughout the novel. In fact, in *Bleak House*, writing in any form that involves transferring a woman's voice to the public sphere, is shown to be indicative of egotistic, hypocritical self-indulgence that compromises femininity by distracting it from domestic duties. This is manifested in the caricatured depiction of the self-proclaimed "woman of business" (*BH*, 127), Mrs. Pardiggle, and by extension that of Mrs. Jellyby as well, whose ambitions to obtain a voice in the public sphere through their work instead of allowing their feminine influence to "gradually and naturally expand itself" (*BH*, 128) as Esther proposes, are shown to have dire consequences. Mrs. Pardiggle is a

woman obsessed with charitable work, or in Esther's term, "rapacious benevolence", at the expense of her familial duties (*BH*, 124). She is caricatured and almost de-sexed as "so very military in her manners" (*BH*, 128) and someone who is "always speaking in the same, demonstrative, loud, hard tone" (*BH*, 125). This is epitomized by the confident, "impassioned manner" in which she engages in "a quantity of printing, and promising, and proxying, and polling" (*BH*, 129), writing and disseminating letters and subscription-cards, and declaring multifarious public denominations for "the Women of England, the Daughters of Britain, the Sisters of all the Cardinal Virtues" (*BH*, 123) and so forth, without achieving much benefit for anyone. Indeed, Mrs. Pardiggle does not genuinely sympathize with the poor or care for her children, but aggressively manages her businesses for her own ultimate self-aggrandisement. As a result, she not only angers those subjected to her false benevolence, but also exhausts her children who are forced to participate in her tendentious scheming.

Mrs. Jellyby is similar to Mrs. Pardiggle in her obsession with philanthropic work in "Borrioboola-Gha" (*BH*, 53) and consequent utter negligence of familial, domestic matters of home. Her profuse letter-writing constantly immerses her in a disorderly mass of "correspondence with public bodies, and with private individuals anxious for the welfare of their species all over the country" (*BH*, 53). The harmful effects of her ambitious writings are implied by the fact that her endeavours only result in the chaotic disintegration of her family. This is exemplified in the disorderliness of the household and its unkempt appearance as the members of the family are neither served proper meals nor adequately groomed by their mother who is only concerned with her African projects. Esther observes that Mrs. Jellyby's room is "strewn with papers and nearly filled by a great writing-table covered with similar litter" (*BH*, 53) and her "dress didn't nearly meet up the back, and that the open space was railed across with a lattice-work of stay-lace–like a summer-house" (*BH*, 52). Her husband, Mr. Jellyby, is clearly distressed as he "sat in a corner with his head against the wall" (*BH*, 57), as are the unsupervised "unfortunate child" (*BH*, 54), Peepy Jellyby, who is mired in "bruises" and "dirt" (*BH*, 54), and her dejected daughter, Caddy Jellyby, worn and ink-stained by her role as amanuensis to her mother.

The caricature offered of the two businesswomen illumines several

points. Firstly, it shows the difficulty for women to articulate their professional ambitions or achieve any voice whatsoever in the public sphere without being ridiculed as self-indulgent, disruptive, and virtually wholly de-sexed. Secondly, and more significantly, Mrs. Jellyby's and Mrs. Pardiggle's clearly unsuccessful balancing of work and domestic duties imply that writing in any form conflicts with femininity. In fact, a comparison between Esther, Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby illuminates a certain pattern in the novel. While women who seek to participate in the masculine sphere of public business, and unapologetically write and disseminate their words in order to achieve this, such as Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby, are vilified as intrinsically obnoxious, those who remain firmly within the domestic sphere and/or abdicate from writing altogether, such as Caddy Jellyby, or disclaim any independent volition, such as Esther Summerson, are shown to be morally superior. It is indicative, however, that upon the novel's publication, it was Caddy Jellyby, a girl who abandons the pen entirely after her marriage to devote herself to domestic duties, rather than Esther, who was widely favourably received by critics as a woman embodying appropriate ideals of femininity.

Caddy Jellyby, who is forced to assist her mother's African projects as an amanuensis is first presented as "a jaded", "unhealthy-looking" (*BH*, 53) and "gloomy" (*BH*, 60) girl who appears to perpetually be in "a state of ink". (*BH*, 53) She has "ink stains on her face" (*BH*, 60) and is as unkempt as her mother, with "no article of dress upon her...that was in its proper condition or its right place" (*BH*, 53). Indeed, she appears to be literally and figuratively tainted by the "pen and ink" (BH, 221) which her mother has condemned her to use. It is made clear that Caddy finds no value in her ability to transcribe her mother's words and thus indirectly contribute to her endeavours to achieve public welfare in Borrioboola-Gha. Instead, she decries Mrs. Jellyby's hypocrisy: "'where's Ma's duty as a parent? All made over to the public and Africa, I suppose!'" (*BH*, 65). Moreover, she repeatedly claims that her mother uses her like "a slave" (*BH*, 219), thus emphasizing the strictly involuntary nature of her writing. Despising her mother's abnegation of her domestic duties that results in the disintegration of her family, Caddy emulates Esther instead, and longs to acquire the ability to effectively keep a domestic home together. When an escape from her predicament is finally achieved in the form of a marriage to Prince Turveydrop, Caddy completely abandons her previous role.

Speaking of her engagement, she proclaims to Esther, "'[O]ne great comfort is...that I shall never hear of Africa after I am married'" (*BH*, 221). In turn, she devotes herself to her domestic duties by learning "housekeeping things" such as "mak[ing] little puddings...and buying neck of mutton, and tea, and sugar, and butter" (*BH*, 231). After she detaches herself from the pen which had made her so miserable, Caddy "improved in...appearance" (*BH*, 217) and in temperament, becoming much "better-tempered" (*BH*, 231). It is significant to note that Caddy becomes noticeably happier and prettier, unstained by ink, after she completely relinquishes writing. It is almost as if she were purified once she has released the pen.

The juxtaposition of Caddy and Esther highlights the latter's ambiguous and problematic position. She is both a writer who narrates her retrospective life-story, thus an autobiographer, and a supposed role model as a dutiful, domestic woman to others such as Caddy Jellyby. For, despite Esther's persistent attempts to deny her active participation in her autobiographical narrative, she is undoubtedly the writer of her own life-story. Contemporary reviewers were not blind to this contradiction. The majority of critics pointed out the unrealistic characterization of Esther and the over-perfect portrayal of her goodness. They focused upon the fact that Esther's embodiment of feminine virtues is undermined by the very fact that she writes her life-story. The *Athenaeum* wrote, "Esther is...too preciously good, too perpetually self-present, and too helpful to every one around her to carry a sense of reality: nor are her virtues made more probable by the fact that she is the chronicler of her own perfection–though with disclaimers manifold" (*Athenaeum*, 54). The reviewer of the *Spectator* stringently points out Esther's profuse emphasis on "the simplicity of her nature" as "utterly untrue and inconsistent", because a genuinely simple girl "would not write her own memoirs" (*Spectator*, 57). At the same time, the same reviewer praises Caddy Jellyby as "the only female in the book we thoroughly relish" who is transformed from "a sulky, morose, overgrown child, to a graceful and amiable young woman" in a fashion that is "quite Cinderella-like, and as charming as any fairy-tale" (*Spectator*, 58).

It is not difficult to surmise that one of the reasons for the reviewer's preference for Caddy rather than Esther is due to the fact that she not only does not write her autobiography but also contentedly abstains from any writing at all after her marriage. Esther cannot entirely validate her self-representation as

an unassuming, domestic woman, precisely because her active engagement in writing about herself undermines any such claim. In other words, her self-proclaimed goodness is "tainted" by the ink from her writing. Nevertheless, Esther's endeavours to evade the categorization of her narrative and the contested role of autobiographer are justified, not only internally through the vilification of Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby, and the sanctification of Caddy Jellyby, but also externally, in the reviews of the novel itself, that imply that the authenticity of Esther's feminine virtues and even her fundamental reliability as a narrator are undermined by her participation in autobiographical writing.

Jane Eyre: Autobiographer/Amanuensis

Initially, the self-assertive autobiographer, Jane Eyre, hardly seems to share any similarities with the self-deprecating Esther Summerson. Nevertheless, her narrative shows that they both similarly grapple with an underlying anxiety towards the autobiographical form and the conventions of feminine narration. This is manifested in Jane's relinquishment of discursive authority and responsibility to external forces at pivotal moments of her life, including those in which she rejects Rochester's and St. John's proposed life-plans for her. The first example can be seen in her escape from the oppressive environment at Gateshead that is initiated by her open rebellion against her aunt, Mrs. Reed.

> "What would uncle Reed say to you, if he were alive?" was my scarcely voluntary demand. I say scarcely voluntary, for it seemed as if my tongue pronounced words without my will consenting to their utterance: something spoke out of me over which I had no control. (*JE*, 39)

As she is immediately sent to Lowood after her outburst, it seems that Jane's yearning for liberty directly initiates her emancipation from the Reeds. However, the narrating Jane avoids acknowledging her part in achieving her flight from Gateshead; instead, she attributes her transgressive revolt against Mrs. Reed to an irrepressible external force that physically takes control of her instead of any wilful deliberation or malicious planning. In other words, she

uses her apparent loss of control to a greater force in order to avoid culpability for the controversial nature of her actions. Yet she is personally blamed by the Reeds, and also consistently disparaged at Lowood School; so certainly punished for her transgression.

This is repeated at the crucial moment in which Jane makes her decision to depart Lowood School. Her aspiration for freedom is clearly manifested in her determination to obtain a new occupation after eight years at Lowood, as she asserts, "I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer..." (*JE*, 93). She seeks to achieve her ambitions practically by advertising for the position of a governess in the local newspaper. However, Jane again does not acknowledge responsibility for the idea, and instead attributes it to another form of external agency:

> A kind fairy, in my absence, had surely dropped the required suggestion on my pillow; for as I lay down it came quietly and naturally to my mind: "Those who want situations advertise; you must advertise in the ____*shire Herald*." (*JE*, 94)

By thus displacing control to a "kind fairy", as both origin of the idea and as ultimate arbiter of her fate, Jane deflects attention from her clearly ambitious planning and pursuit of independence in the public, commercial sphere, qualities that were inimical to the conventions of feminine narration.

Jane's relinquishment of control can also be seen in her resistance towards Rochester and St. John who both seek to enforce upon her an appropriate life-course, as defined solely in relation to the convenience of their lives. Despite Jane's protestations against committing bigamy, Rochester claims that she must "become Mrs. Rochester–both virtually and nominally" (*JE*, 300) and save him from his marriage to his first wife, Bertha. St. John insists that Jane's path in life is to become a missionary's wife and accompany him to India, even when she proclaims that she would not be able to survive either a loveless union or the severe climate. In both cases, her own opinion in the matter is utterly ignored: she is to be bullied into becoming a self-sacrificing wife/helpmeet who will assist in achieving the personal or professional goals of her husband rather than pursue her own independence and happiness. Jane indirectly justifies her rejection of both their proposed life

paths by ascribing the moments of her decision-making to external forces, rather than to her own internal will or volition.

For example, Jane's decision to leave Thornfield and Rochester is not attributed to careful deliberation on her part, but rather to the guidance of a benign, natural, power equated with Mother Nature. After Rochester's confession of his attempted bigamy, Jane perceives the approaching moon through her bedroom window. This takes on "a white human form" which embodies the motherly mentor of her life as it orders her to "flee temptation" (*JE*, 314).

> I watched her come–watched with the strangest anticipation; as though some word of doom were to be written on her disk. She broke forth as never moon yet burst from cloud: a hand first penetrated the sable folds and waved them away; then, not a moon, but a white human form shone in the azure, inclining a glorious brow earthward...It spoke to my spirit..."My daughter, flee temptation!" "Mother, I will." So I answered after I had waked from the trance-like dream. (*JE*, 314)

Jane, by relinquishing control to the "white human form" of "Mother Nature", is able to recognise that submission to her master/fiancé is a form of "temptation", and so confirm the moral correctness of her choice to leave Rochester. Thus Jane is not only able to justify the abrupt abandonment of her previous duties, but also to conceal her unuttered motivation for rejecting his proposal: that is, in order to pursue the ideal of independence which had been threatened by Rochester's vision of her as a submissive and redemptive wife who would be able to nullify his sins.

Similarly, Jane also attributes her decision to refuse St. John's proposal to accompany him to India as a missionary's wife to an uncontrollable and inexplicable natural force. At the moment in which she is nearly persuaded to become his wife, Jane entreats a higher power to endow her with an answer, as she pleads to Heaven, "Show me, show me the path!" (*JE*, 409). This is followed by Rochester's telepathic voice that "did not come out of the air–nor from under the earth– nor from overhead" but somehow reaches her (*JE*, 409).

> I saw nothing: but I heard a voice somewhere say–"Jane! Jane! Jane!"

> Nothing more. "Oh God! What is it?" I gasped. I might have said, "Where is it?" for it did not seem in the room–nor in the house–nor in the garden: it did not come out of the air–nor from under the earth–nor from overhead. I had heard it–where, or whence, for ever impossible to know! (*JE*, 409)

Jane's previous decision to leave Thornfield was seemingly promoted by Mother Nature's guiding words; here she similarly ascribes her choice to refuse St. John's holy mission to "the work of nature" (*JE*, 410).

Jane's covert negotiations with the conventions of feminine narration that indicate her underlying autobiographical anxieties are perhaps most apparent in the ending of the novel, where she presents herself in an entirely different role: not of assertive self-fashioning through autobiography, but as faithful amanuensis/helpmeet to the authoritative men she had previously rejected, her other suitor, St. John and her crippled husband, Rochester. It bears noting that Jane ends her narrative not with her own words, but by transcribing St. John's supposedly last letter to her before his imminent death.

> "My master," he says, "has forewarned me. Daily he announces more distinctly,–'Surely I come quickly!' and hourly I more eagerly respond,–'Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus!'" (*JE*, 441)

Although Jane predominantly focuses on her own tribulations, and the development of her feelings in her autobiography, she ends her narrative by shifting its focus to St. John's conviction of his impending death and his faith in his "master" in "[h]is own words" (*JE*, 441). She thus enacts in a certain way, St. John's wish for her to spread his words of faith as a missionary's wife, a self-sacrificing role she had initially refused. At the same time, Jane also similarly emphasizes her dutiful devotion to her husband, Rochester, as his amanuensis in the last few pages of the novel. Indeed, she insists that she has become and still remains to be Rochester's "right hand", willingly writing letters on his behalf "to his dictation" (*JE*, 439). As Jane claims that she has been married for ten years and that she was already writing for Rochester at the "end of the two years" (*JE*, 439) after the accident by which he recovers his eyesight, it can be deduced that Jane has been tirelessly fulfilling these duties for her husband for at least eight years. This revelation is significant as

it enables Jane to present herself as not an audacious woman capable of shaping and giving expression to her own life-story, but, in the final scenario, as a devoted wife to Rochester who has not only acted as "the apple of his eye" (*BH*, 439) but has also concomitantly taken the pen for her husband during most of her married life by writing on his behalf. By thus indicating, albeit briefly, Jane's ability to balance her potentially conflicting roles as public autobiographer and private wife/helpmeet/amanuensis, her life-narrative appears to pre-empt any criticism against its "unfeminine" impropriety.

However, the criticism that followed the publication of *Jane Eyre* proved otherwise. Although the novel presents a different model of female authorship in which Jane appears to balance her public role with that of a devoted and dutiful domestic wife, it was nevertheless, widely criticized for its unfeminine coarseness that was declared to be evident in both the plot and narrative. A reviewer in *The Christian Remembrancer* declared that "[t]hroughout there is masculine power, breadth and shrewdness, combined with masculine hardness, coarseness, and freedom of expression" (*Christian Remembrancer*, 17) in *Jane Eyre*.[8] Lady Eastlake criticized it as a work "stamped with a coarseness of language and laxity of tone" (Eastlake, 41). As I have pointed out earlier, even Esther Summerson was not invulnerable to similar criticism of impropriety, despite her comparatively self-effacing narrative. In other words, due to the deep-rooted prejudice against women who dared to write about their lives in the public sphere, Jane Eyre and Esther Summerson's struggles with the contested conventions of the genre of autobiography to evade criticism do not entirely succeed. This is further reinforced by the shadow of one woman who remained exempt from such accusations: Caddy Jellyby, the woman who abnegates from writing at all to immerse completely herself in domestic duties after her marriage. Her sanctification as the ideal woman is an ominous indication that only through complete abdication of the scribbling, tainting pen could female narrators and women writers ensure their immunity from the threat of debilitating criticism against their self-representations.

Notes

1 Charlotte Brontë. *Jane Eyre*. Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1996. Hereafter all

references are to this edition and shown as *JE*.

2 Charles Dickens. *Bleak House*. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2003. Hereafter all references are to this edition and shown as *BH*.

3 In his unsigned review of *Bleak House* in the *Spectator*, George Brimley declared of Esther's narrative that "[h]er unconsciousness and sweet humility of disposition are so profound that scarcely a page of her autobiography is free from a record of these admirable qualities" (*Spectator*, 57).

4 Fleishman defines autobiography as public narrative primarily concerned with "the creation of selfhood" (Fleishman 1979, 216). This suggested a strong egotism on the part of the writer towards social recognition, exhibitionism and vanity, which was considered less acceptable for a woman than a man because these qualities were incompatible with Victorian notions of feminine propriety.

5 The concept of feminine narration has been extensively explored by feminist narratologists such as Robyn Warhol, Susan Lanser, Kathy Mezei and Alison A. Case. In my use of the latter term, I refer to Alison A. Case's definition in which she asserts that "[f]eminine narration...is characterized by the restriction of the female narrator to the role of narrative *witness*; that is, by her exclusion from the active shaping of narrative form and meaning" (Case, 4), a quality that "derive[s] from and exemplifi[es] broader cultural strains of gender ideology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which associate femininity with passivity and lack of discursive authority" (Case, 5). This necessarily posed problems for the female writer or the first-person narrator of her own autobiography; a literary form that requires the writer to purposefully structure their narrative for the desired effect or goal of "an integrated image of self" (Fleishman 1983, 14). Women writers who, nevertheless, ventured to write autobiographies were compelled to negotiate with the restrictive genre by tailoring the form and content of their life-writings in various ways to accommodate gender expectations of submissive self-effacement and domesticity so as to pre-empt the threat of criticism. See Peterson (1999), 1-27. See Frerichs (1979) for a detailed study of the ways in which one such woman, Elizabeth Sewell, deflected such criticism. For studies of women and autobiography in the nineteenth-century, also see Smith (1987), Gagnier (1991), and Corbett (1992).

6 Many critics viewed Esther and Jane as contrasting figures. Ellen Moers asserts that Esther "stands opposed to the abrasive and egotistical orphan girl, Jane Eyre" (Moers, 22). Robert Newsom states that the novels are entirely different, claiming, "*Bleak House*...can be read as virtually an anti-*Jane Eyre*" (Newsom, 99).

7 For an analysis of the female narrators in *Bleak House* and *Armadale*, see Case (125-46), who also asserts that Esther's narrative follows the model of feminine narration and that it is "a conservative revision of *Jane Eyre*" (132). Although I concur with Case that Esther's narrative adheres to the convention of feminine narration, I seek

to offer a different reading in which Esther and Jane are not entirely opposites, but rather share similarities in their negotiations with the complexities of the autobiographical form.

8 The reviewer of *The Christian Remembrancer* deemed that "a book more unfeminine, both in its excellence and defects, it would be hard to find in the annals of female authorship" (*Christian Remembrancer*, 17).

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