

# The Epistolary Discourse in 19<sup>th</sup> century Novels: *Bleak House, Jane Eyre and Cranford.*

Keiko Kawamura (川村 恵子)

“Can Jane Eyre be happy?” John Sutherland once teasingly asked if such an unconventional heroine could have made a harmonious couple with her ‘Blue Beard’ hero, Rochester<sup>1</sup>. Although this question is certainly beyond our scope, let us begin this paper with quoting a well-known passage in which the heroine Jane presents her own passionate profile.

“[W]omen feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a constraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.”(117)<sup>2</sup>

Whether or not this ‘feministic’ heroine lived happily ever after with her husband, it may only be speculated. Still, it is worth noticing that another Victorian writer, Charles Dickens, wrote *Bleak House* in 1853—five years after the publication of *Jane Eyre*—, and created a female character, Mrs. Jellyby, who appeared to have attained the above aspiration of Jane. Instead of “making puddings”, “knitting stockings” and “embroidering bags”, Mrs. Jellyby entirely devotes herself to the public life and tries to attest that ‘women need a career and a field for their faculties’. Totally neglecting her family, she dedicates her whole for the sake of missionary works—the general cultivation of the coffee-bean and the colonization of the natives of Borrioboola-Gha, on the banks of the Niger. However, as the scornful naming of ‘Borrioboola-Gha’ indicates, it is obvious that Dickens delineated this ‘unwomanly’ woman pejoratively and sarcastically. What Mrs. Jellyby’s ‘irrelevant’ ambition brings about is never happiness at the Niger but only devastating disorder in her own house and the utter desperation of her husband and children. In short, Dickens, through creating a woman who is, as it were, Jane Eyre’s successor, strongly admonished his contemporary female readers not to trespass over the boundary of the ‘womanly’ woman: they have to “confine themselves” to their own realm: they have to take care of their own sphere, that is, their home, not the banks of the Niger.

It is neither my contention here to tease Jane Eyre’s sincere declaration nor to accuse Dickens’s dogmatic male chauvinism. Rather, I would like to focus on the plain fact that Dickens flooded a huge quantity of ‘letters’ around this Mrs. Jellyby. The following is the scene where she is first introduced and talks with a man named Mr. Quale:

“This young man, besides having a great deal to say for himself about Africa, and a project of his for teaching the coffee colonists to teach the natives to turn piano-forte legs and establish an export trade, delighted in drawing Mrs Jellyby out by saying, ‘I believe now, Mrs. Jellyby, you have received as many as from one hundred and fifty to two hundred letters respecting Africa in a single day, have you not?’ or, ‘If my memory does not deceive me, Mrs Jellyby, you once mentioned that you had sent off five thousand circulars from one post-office at one time?’” (57)<sup>3</sup>

Every time Mrs. Jellyby is referred to, unimaginable quantities of letters are always accompanying her, and function to symbolize her total illogicalness and ineffective job-management. Furthermore, another female figure in *Bleak House*, Mrs. Pardiggle, whom Esther states “to be almost as powerful a correspondent as Mrs. Jellyby herself”, is judged by Mr. Jarndyce as one of “the people who did a little and made a great deal of noise” (*BH*, 124). These two women’s characterizations clearly bring out Dickens’s recognition of letters and letter-writing. It can be assumed that he identified the epistolary discourse with the ‘feminine’ illogicalness and rashness: Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle, who are not bestowed with the faculties of manipulating masculine and logical discourse, cannot achieve their ‘public’ enterprises properly. Instead, what they can do is only drown in ‘their own’ discourse, the letters, that will never provide them with public success.

Dickens’s recognition of epistolary discourse is consonant with one episode of a Victorian clergyman, who strictly ordered his wife and her corresponding friend to burn all the letters exchanged between them:

“Arthur has just been glancing over this note—He thinks I have written too freely...Men don’t seem to understand making letters a vehicle of communication—they always seem to think us incautious. I’m sure I don’t think I have said anything rash—however, you must burn it when read. Arthur says such letters as mine never ought to be kept—they are dangerous as lucifer matches—so to be sure to follow a recommendation he has just given ‘fire them’—or ‘there will be no more’ such is his resolve. I can’t help laughing—this seems to me so funny. Arthur however says he is quite ‘serious’ and looks it, I assure you—he is bending over the desk with his eyes full of concern.”(394)<sup>4</sup>

It is an interesting coincidence that ‘I’ in this letter is the mother of *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë. ‘Arthur’ is, therefore, her husband, Arthur Bell Nicholls. Examining ‘Arthur’s’ obstinate request and censorship along with Dickens’s deployment of the two female characters, we may reach a brief yet insightful observation: these two Victorian men—Dickens and Nicholls—appear to agree with each other in that they connected the letter with ‘femininity’.

In fact, the following comment of Virginia Woolf succinctly attests to this connection: “since no woman of sense and modesty could write books, Dorothy, who was sensitive and melancholy [...] wrote nothing. Letters did not count. A woman might write letters while sitting by her father's sick bed”(93)<sup>5</sup>. ‘The angel in the house’, while preserving sufficient modesty and

sensitivity, could try letter-writing, since that ‘light’ writing differs from other writings and never contradicts with her obligations. Moreover, a contributor to *Quarterly Review* in 1870 clearly encapsulated this point:

“[W]hereas many men’s epistles have suffered in point of ease and expression from their devotion to hobbies, or their inability to distinguish between a letter and a memoir or a missive, it seems as if female fingers had that lightness of touch, and the female instinct that tact to know when a topic is becoming wearisome, and that often-noticed grasp of conclusions, without regard of premises, which, more than elsewhere, find their proper scope on the written page. [...] [A]t any rate, it were easy to demonstrate that the essentials to success in this art are for the most part of such a nature [female nature]” (221)<sup>6</sup>

What these quotations implicitly suggest is never just the simple fact that women were considered to be more tactful than men in their letter-writing. Instead, these comments subtly betray the cultural ideology at that time: since the Victorian patriarchal ideology had discovered the explicit similarity between letter-writing and ‘femininity’ in terms of ‘rashness’, ‘passion’, ‘lightness’, ‘frivolousness’ or whatever, the repressive society vouchsafed ‘the angels’ a lenience that they might write letters. Put simply, the epistolary discourse may be regarded as a double-edged sword: on one hand, it endowed Victorian women with a precious opportunity to write and express themselves: on the other hand, however, it could narrow and circumscribe the range of female-writing by easily linking it to rashness or excess of emotion.

It is worth noticing that Charlotte Brontë would have been acutely aware of this ambivalent meaning of epistolary discourse. As a housewife, she was daily exposed to the remonstrance of her husband, that easily assimilated the ‘femininity’ with letter-writing. As a female writer, she had to write among the ‘patriarchal’ literary world, whose representative views have been quoted from its most illustrious writer, Charles Dickens. That is to say, both in her private and public spheres, Brontë should have been confronted by ‘unprobed’ yet ‘ubiquitous’ recognition that the letters *were* belonging to the ‘feminine’ realm of discourse. Given this situation, it would be fairly reasonable to assume that there must be some vacillation—or at least some self-consciousness—in Charlotte Brontë’s deployment of that discourse. Indeed, the very closing passage of *Jane Eyre* evidently justifies this observation:

“St. John is unmarried: he never will marry now. Himself has hitherto sufficed to the toil; and the toil draws near its close: his glorious sun hastens to its setting. *The last letter I received from him* drew from my eyes human tears, and yet filled my heart with Divine joy: he anticipated his sure reward, his incorruptible crown. *I know that a stranger’s hand will write to me next, to say that the good and faithful servant has been called at length into the joy of his Lord.* And why weep for this? No fear of death will darken St. John’s last hour: his mind will be unclouded; his heart will be undaunted; his hope will be sure; his faith steadfast. His own words are a pledge of this: —

“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!’” FINIS (*JE*, 441) (My Italics)

The critical point here is not only that *Jane Eyre* ends with a quotation from St. John Rivers’s letter; but also, or even more importantly, the letter replaces Jane’s voice and obliterates her figure. Because the novel directly quotes his letter, the final ‘I’ of the novel designates not the heroine Jane but St. John Rivers himself. It is not Jane but St. John, who assumes the ‘I’ position and thus glorifies himself by the strong words— “hourly *I* more eagerly respond”—in front of the readers at the very end of *Jane Eyre*. In other words, the final passage of this novel does not commemorate the culminating point of Jane’s growth and self-integrity. Rather, it finishes by being absorbed and diminished within the letter of a male character, St. John Rivers.

Add to this, the above quoted passage latently presents ‘another’ letter, which also intimidates Jane’s stable identity. She refers to a stranger’s letter from India, which will presumably inform her of St. John’s death, yet which has not arrived even at the closure of the novel. This eternal postponement of delivery reminds us of the two famous observations on the ‘letter’. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan wrote: “a letter always arrives at its destination”: “the sender [...] receives from the receiver his own message in reverse form”(52-3)<sup>7</sup>. Applying these remarks to the above stranger’s letter to Jane, it follows that the sender (the stranger in India) will receive from the receiver (Jane) his/her own message ‘in reverse form’. Indeed, if the stranger’s letter did arrive at Jane, the letter would witness the reverse situation of its own contents: even though the letter would tell that St. John has already been dead, it will come across a situation in which St. John’s voice and his ‘I’ statement are still *alive* in the text of *Jane Eyre*. On the contrary, then, what if the letter does not get there? In his commentary on Lacan’s essay, the philosopher Jacques Derrida countered: “a letter can always not arrive at its destination”(187)<sup>8</sup>. Provided that the stranger’s letter is lost within some space, in which a determinate meaning of words or letters is always displaced, Jane’s self-narration will have to acquiesce in the same destiny. For, her text of autobiography is going to be suspended in the air, slightly leaving an indeterminate anxiety that the letter not yet delivered can narrate what Jane does not expect. In so doing, this letter threatens and undermines the stability and credibility of Jane’s narration at the supreme moment of her narrative’s winding up. To summarize these analyses, it is quite clear that the letters in *Jane Eyre* do never exist as some discourse to which the heroine Jane can feel some affinity or kinship, but rather as some ‘dangerous’ discourse, which imperatively and pitilessly threatens her own voice or narration. Tellingly, this suggests that Brontë sets up the epistolary discourse as an authoritative space, which is definitely *unfeminine*, not to say masculine.

If the above observation demonstrates that Charlotte Brontë was sufficiently noticing the ambivalent and ambiguous meaning of ‘epistolarity’, how about other Victorian female writers? In order to grapple with this matter, I would like to refer to Elizabeth Gaskell and consider her novel, *Cranford*, which was published in 1853. It is a matter of fact that *Cranford* is notable for its distinctive contrast to *Jane Eyre* in terms of its theme, setting, narrative structure, and reception from society. While *Jane Eyre* has customarily been regarded as the heroine’s pilgrimage, the narrative focus of *Cranford* is consistently situated in a sequestered village,

Cranford, where a 'womanly' narrator humorously describes the quiet lives of spinsters. It is said that Dickens was particularly delighted with this novel, and strongly encouraged Gaskell to expand the quantity, whereas he eschewed even to read *Jane Eyre*, deliberately ignoring his contemporaries' excitement toward that novel. In short, *Cranford* and *Jane Eyre* apparently have nothing in common, in that the former is permeated with a modest and 'feminine' air and the latter with a sensational and radically 'feministic' tone that subversively shook the public opinion at that time. In spite of all these differences, however, *Cranford* and *Jane Eyre* share a critical similarity: within both novels, the female narrator is estranged from epistolary discourse. Interestingly, Mary Smith, the 'feminine' narrator of *Cranford*, does not live in the village of Cranford, even though almost all of what she narrates and all of whom she meets in her narrative are deeply rooted on that place. She actually lives in Drumble, and "[has] vibrated all [her] life between Drumble and Cranford"(211)<sup>9</sup>. More arguably, her movements back and forth between Cranford and Drumble are frequently determined or heralded by correspondence. She leaves Cranford when she receives a letter from her father that harks her back. She returns to Cranford when a letter of its inhabitants calls her back. That is to say, the letters, which are not written by Mary but by others, detach and separate her narration from the centre of narrative. It is not Mary herself but the epistolary discourse of others, which arbitrarily decides Mary's position and thus influences her narrative perspective.

Additionally, *Cranford* provides another interesting point as to the discourse of 'letters'. The novel, in which anything particular or interesting rarely occurs, drives its plot forward by referring to correspondence around the inhabitants of Cranford. Mary the narrator frequently relies on those letters as valuable resources of her narration. Amidst those letters, the most important letter, which motivates the narrative into its denouement, is that from Mary herself to Aga Jenkyns. By means of this letter, the long separated sister and brother, Miss Matty and Peter, are eventually reunited and the peace is recovered at the village of Cranford. Despite this significant role of her own letter, it is interesting that Mary chooses not to copy it into her text. Far from it, she says that she "began to be very ashamed of remembering [her] letter to Aga Jenkyns, and very glad that I had never named my writing to any one" and also shows some hope that "the letter [to be] lost"(C, 203). Put simply, in the community of Cranford where many letters are daily exchanged, Mary conceals her own letter-writing and even desires to obliterate the existence of her letter at all. In addition to this crucial instance, it seems that Mary consciously avoids revealing her own letters in her text; even though she quotes other persons' letters repetitively and nonchalantly, not a single letter of her own is quoted in *Cranford*. Mary, whose narrative position is largely influenced by others' epistolary discourse, cannot textualize her own letters into her own writing. In this sense, it can be said that her novel-writing and her letter-writing are alienating one another. In the meanwhile, other persons' letter-writing definitely encroaches upon her narration and thus determines her position as a female narrator.

As has been shown, while Dickens and Nicholls discovered a close connection between femininity and 'epistolarity', Brontë and Gaskell rather perceived an estrangement between the two. Although it is hardly possible to draw some conclusion from this small quantity of samples, the tight time-linkage of the three novels would justify to assume that the deployment of epistolary discourse differed from male to female in the Victorian age. More importantly,

considering and noticing which of these two perceptions was dominant at that time, the insufficiency of this estimation would be immediately apparent. Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell lived among the repressive society, in which women's novel-writing or verse-making was considered to be imprudent, equivalent to neglecting their 'female' duty or trespassing over the boundary of 'the angel in the house'. Being circumscribed in this restriction, what those female writers—and all the contemporary women—procured was the lenience that women might write letters, in the cost of the humiliating label that their writing was akin to letter-writing in its rashness, irrationality or whatever. Needless to say, this connection between femininity and epistolarity comprises an imminent danger to female writing, and Brontë and Gaskell would have acutely noticed it. If they too readily accepted the association and attached themselves to the discourse of the letter, it could circumscribe the possibility of female-writing, by degrading and endangering their logicalness or rationality. That is to say, epistolary discourse, the so-called 'feminine écriture', was not a rose-colored sphere in which the female writers—and ultimately all the women at that period—could emancipate their voices. Rather, it would be an ambivalent and unfathomable language, which on some occasions turns its favorable face to women, and which on other occasions threatens and degrades their writing. Confronting this situation, female writers of that period, I think, could not but hesitatingly approach the 'letters', always fearing the 'authoritative' and 'pitiless' aspect of that discourse.

Before closing this paper, I would like to return to the question that I have asked in the very beginning: "Can Jane Eyre be happy" after she puts down her pen to write? I want to stress less that this question is still unanswerable than that Jane ends her writing *before* she receives the stranger's letter. As *Jane Eyre* is Jane's own autobiography, she should have been able to decide where to put an end to her writing. As her writing has long traced her life, moreover, there must have been no need for her to close her writing in a hurry. In other words, Jane could have been waited for the arrival of the letter, or could have been confirmed its contents, if only she desired to do so. Nonetheless, she ends her writing with an uncertain anticipation for the arrival of the letter as well as for its probable contents. This, I believe, implicitly represents Jane's uneasy or subordinate relationship with the epistolary discourse. Although she could surmise about the stranger's letter, she might not be thoroughly convinced by her own estimation. It is, in other words, that she would subconsciously sense some anxiety that her life and writing might be undermined by others' letters and letter-writing. Yoked by that anxiety, Jane deliberately ends her autobiography before the letter arrives. Taking these factors into account, it is no longer possible to accept the long lasting axiom about this novel: *Jane Eyre* is not a simple and clear-cut feminist myth, in which the heroine embraces her 'self'-realization through her self-narration: instead, her self-narration and her story of female *Bildungsroman* are though stealthily yet certainly undermined by the epistolary discourse. Even in its very ending, Jane's self cannot savor its perfect happiness. Leaving an anxiety and being burdened by an uncertainty, both of which are derived from the as yet unrarrived letter, Jane has gone from the eyes of the readers. What is left behind is, and what we readers could only see is just the overlapping shadows of the two female narrators: one is that of Jane Eyre, whose self-narration is threatened by the other's epistolary discourse: the other is that of Charlotte Brontë—and presumably, those of the many contemporary women—who could not but struggle to write their own 'letter', within others'

intimidating epistolary discourse.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sutherland, John. *Can Jane Eyre be happy?: More Puzzles in Classic Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre: Complete, Authoritative Text With Biographical and Historical Contexts, Critical History, and Essays from Five Contemporary Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Beth Newman. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996.

All the pages are given after quotations from the text and hereafter it is referred in abbreviated form as 'JE'.

<sup>3</sup> Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*. Ed. Nicola Bradbury. London: Penguin Books, 1996.

All the pages are given after quotations from the text and hereafter it is referred in abbreviated form as 'BH'.

<sup>4</sup> Barker, Juliet. *The Brontës: A Life in Letters*. Woodstock and New York: The Overlook Press, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. London: Hogarth Press, 1931.

<sup>6</sup> Davies, James. "Letter-Writing" *The Quarterly Review*. 129. July. (1870): pp. 220- 244.

For more contemporary articles which refer to this connection, see Bray, Joe. *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness*. London: New York: Routledge, 2003. He defines the discourse of letters as an unchecked and a "feminocentric"(1) realm. Or, also see Favret, M. A. *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. pp. 1-15. This book maintains that letter-writing is considered to be an unchecked and uncensored rash writing, which can betray its writer's innermost—and particularly "feminine"(10) self.

<sup>7</sup> Lacan, Jacques. "Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"." Trans. Jeffrey Mehlman. *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida & Psychoanalytic Reading*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988. pp. 28-54.

<sup>8</sup> Derrida, Jacques. "The Purveyor of Truth". Trans. Alan Bass. *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida & Psychoanalytic Reading*. pp. 173-212.

<sup>9</sup> Gaskell, Elizabeth. *Cranford/ Cousin Phillis*. Ed. Peter Keating. London: Penguin Books, 1986.

All the pages are given after quotations from the text and hereafter it is referred in abbreviated form as 'C'.