

## Chapter V

### Conclusion

Mrs. Gaskell's novels are much more matter-of-fact than Charlotte's. They usually concern ordinary everyday events of the kind which often happen in peoples' lives. Cranford and Wives and Daughters tell the stories of people in fictitious country towns which both represent Knutsford. Characters are drawn exactly from real life from Mrs. Gaskell's observation of the behavior and lives of country-town people of every class. Mary Barton and North and South are about the problems of an equally varied selection of townspeople at that time. These books are sometimes moving but seldom deeply poetic. Charlotte's novels are romantic and highly original, for they deal with individual feelings, thoughts and emotions, so Charlotte's characters usually behave unexpectedly, which Victorian opinion sometimes refused to understand. Paul and Rochester are not like ordinary people. They represent **dream**-figures of the kind of masterful men Charlotte consciously or subconsciously admired. Her heroines are also romantic figures distracted by their personal griefs and frustrations, as in all the rest of her novels. Mrs. Gaskell would rather **elicit** our sympathy for people in amusing or unpleasant situations, such as those which often occur in Cranford where funny country ladies keep strict to old rules and conventions. Mary Barton, North and South and the others also avoid **over**-romanticism by describing the difficult situations arising between classes of people rather than the highly individual personal problems with which Charlotte is mainly concerned. In this Charlotte had something in common with Emily who created such characters as Heathcliff and Catherine and whose Wuthering Heights is full of poetic prose. However, Charlotte, although she possessed the same poetic imagination as her sister, tried to calm down her burning

vision in order to be more realistic and able to get along with the world well. Anyhow, compared to Mrs. Gaskell, Charlotte's poetic talent is obvious. Considering the verses with which Mrs. Gaskell thought it worth while to sprinkle Mary Barton, we shall see that they almost as unpoetic as her prose and very far from being great poetry (Though, of course, they may have been chosen only because they suit the context.)

" How little can the rich man know  
Of what the poor man feels,  
When Want, like some dark demon foe,  
Nearer and nearer steals !

We never tramp'd the weary round,  
A stroke of work to gain,  
And sicken'd at the dreaded sound  
Which tells he seeks in vain.

Foot-sore, heart-sore, he never came  
Back through the winter's wind;  
To a dark cellar, there no flame,  
No light, no food, to find.

He never saw his darling lie  
Shivering, the flags their bed;  
He never heard that maddening cry,  
'Daddy, a bit of bread !' "

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" Polly, put the kettle on,  
And let's have tea !  
Polly put the kettle on  
And we'll have tea. "

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" Oh ! 'tis hard, 'tis hard to be working  
The whole of the **live-long** day,  
When all the neighbours about one  
Are off to their jaunts and play.

There's Richard he carries his baby,  
And Mary takes little Jane,  
And lovingly they'll be wandering  
Through field and briery lane. "

Manchester Songs.

Some of Charlotte's own verse is quite moving; it is very far from being great poetry, but it does reflect a true poetic spirit. Naturally, it cannot be compared with Emily's.

Passion

Some have won a wild delight,  
By daring wilder sorrow;  
Could I gain thy love tonight  
I'd hazard death tomorrow.

Could the battle-struggle earn  
One kind glance from thine eye,  
How this withering heart would burn,  
The heady fight to try.

Welcome nights of broken sleep,  
And days of carnage cold,  
Could I deem that thou wouldst weep  
To hear my perils told.

Tell me, if with wandering bands  
I roam full far away,  
Wilt thou to those distant lands  
In spirit ever stray?

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The truest love that ever heart  
Felt at its kindled core,  
Did through each vein, in quickened start,  
The tide of being pour.

Her coming was my hope each day,  
Her parting was my pain;  
The chance that did her steps delay  
Was ice in my vein.

I dreamed it would be nameless bliss,  
As I loved, loved to be;  
And to this object did I press  
As blind as eagerly.

But wide as pathless was the space  
That lay our lives between,  
And dangerous as the foamy race  
Of ocean-surges green.

And haunted as a robber-path  
 Through wilderness or wood;  
 For Might and Right and Woe and Wrath,  
 Between our spirits stood.

I dangers dared; I hindrance scorned,  
 I omens did defy;  
 Whatever menaced, harassed, warned,  
 I passed impetuous by.

On sped my rainbow, fast as light;  
 I flew as in a dream;  
 For glorious rose upon my sight  
 That child of Shower and Gleam.

Still bright on clouds of suffering dim  
 Shines that soft, solemn joy;  
 Nor care I now, how dense and grim  
 Disasters gather nigh.

I care not in this moment sweet,  
 Though all I have rushed o'er  
 Should come on pinion, strong and fleet,  
 Proclaiming vengeance sore.

Though haughty Hate should strike me down,  
 Right, bar approach to me,  
 And grinding Might, with furious frown,  
 Swear endless enmity.

Charlotte Brontë"

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Similarly, Charlotte's prose is much more moving than Mrs. Gaskell's and it contains some fine and ardent poetic passages.

Mrs. Gaskell's prose is seldom poetic, except in those passages where she expresses her longing for the sights, sounds and smells of her beloved south country — the scene of her long years of youthful happiness. She does to some extent make up for her lack of deep poetic feeling by having a charming sense of humour which Charlotte lacks. She saw the weaknesses of the Granford ladies, but she kindly understood the reasons for their being peculiar and narrow. Yet, their actions and ideas are mirth-provoking, and the author did not hesitate to hold these

up for others to laugh at gently. She herself confessed that Cranford delighted her very much. She once wrote to Ruskin :

" And then again about Cranford ! I am so much pleased you like it. It is the only one of my own books that I can read again; but sometimes when I am ailing or ill, I take Cranford, and, I was going to say, ENJOY it (but that would not be pretty), laugh over it afresh. "1

Her books, especially Cranford and Wives and Daughters, show a gay humour and cheerful optimism, possibly because her life was so much less burdened than Charlotte's with tragedy. During her childhood, Mrs. Gaskell was well and kindly looked after; and when she grew up, she was happily married. She met with disappointments only twice in her life — when her father remarried and when her only son died — whereas Charlotte never in her life felt relaxed. As a child, the latter had to take care of her brother and sisters and her ailing father. She had to help to support her family by going out to be a governess — a position she abhorred. Later, she suffered from unrequited love and was left alone with her blind father by the deaths of her brother and sisters one after another. So her novels lack happy feeling.

Both writers, being Victorians and, after all, women, moralize tiresomely, though Charlotte is seldom as much concerned with moral purpose as with her characters and her story. She is essentially a novelist, rather than a thinker or social reformer. She always tells stories — quite original ones — in such a way as to fascinate the readers with exciting incidents and vivid scenes. Her dialogue is occasionally tedious, especially when she tries to be clever and to preach to the reader, because then she does not speak from the heart. Her

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1 quoted in Elizabeth Gaskell by Gerald De Witt Sanders

dreadful habit of breaking off the narrative to sermonize the reader is shared by Dickens, Thackeray and almost all the writers of her time ——— it was the fashion ——— so we cannot blame either Mrs. Gaskell or Charlotte for having the same weakness. Charlotte is perhaps a little less certain than the Unitarian minister's wife of God's goodness, for there were so many times in her life when it was hard to believe in the existence of a just and loving God; so her pleas that we patiently accept God's will are less tiresome than those of the rather **self-satisfied**, comfortable and happy Mrs. Gaskell. It was easy for her to have a complete trust in God who seemed to let her down so seldom. In Ruth, she tells us the result of prayer is the following words :

" It sometimes seems a little strange how, after having earnestly prayed to be delivered from temptation, and having given ourselves with shut eyes into God's hand, from that time every thought, every outward influence, every acknowledged law of life, seems to lead us on from strength to strength. It seems strange sometimes, because we notice the coincidence; but it is the natural, unavoidable consequence of all, truth and goodness being one and the same, and therefore carried out in every circumstance, external and internal, of God's creation "1

According to Mrs. Gaskell, God always helps us and answers our prayers, if we really trust in His mercy and strive to be good. That is one reason why her characters usually get what they deserve at the end, good or bad. Charlotte's main defect is that she is rather too prolix, but that was a common failing in those days ——— people liked it, publishers demanded it and the reader had much more time to spare.

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1 quoted in Elizabeth Gaskell by Gerald De Witt Sanders

Charlotte, with her limited knowledge of life, is inclined to romanticize too much because she concentrates on depicting emotional intensity, which is subtle, strong and original; but few genuinely poetic writers avoid this pitfall — if it really is a pitfall. On the whole, the reader may prefer Charlotte's slightly over-romanticized version of life to Mrs. Gaskell's more prosaic one, just because the former so often lifts us up to poetic heights. Indeed, most people, as Charlotte found after The Professor had been refused six times, preferred something sentimental, pathetic and tender, something wild and thrilling. Her subsequent books, consequently, became more romantic and poetic, especially Jane Eyre, in which Charlotte created two figures — Rochester and Jane — who belong to a type of character completely new to the literary world.

Incidentally, both writers play with and are attracted by supernatural phenomena. Mrs. Gaskell was brought up in surroundings where superstitions and legends were believed and told ~~to one~~ another. She used to write about these old beliefs, such as that the new moon or a shooting star might bring bad or good luck. She writes in a letter to Mary Howitt :

" Moreover, I know a man who has seen the Fairies and tells the stories in the prettiest possible way. And if you were on Alderley Edge, the hill between Cheshire and Derbyshire, could not point out to you the very entrance to the cave where King Arthur and his Knights lie sleeping in their golden armour still the day when England's peril shall summon them to her rescue."<sup>1</sup>

This interest in legends, ghost stories and supernatural manifestations occurs constantly throughout her work. Charlotte is also superstitious but she assures us that her supernatural

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<sup>1</sup> quoted in Elizabeth Gaskell by Gerald De Witt Sanders.

events — such as Rochester's call and so on/are based on her own experience of such things. In Jane Eyre, Jane, the narrator, describes :

" Presentiments are strange things ; and so are sympathies; and so are signs; and the three combined make one mystery to which humanity has not yet found the Key. I never laughed at presentiments in my life, because I have had strange ones of my own. Sympathies, I believe, exist ----- and signs, for ought we know, may be but the sympathies of Nature with man. "

Charlotte makes Jane believe, as her elders did, that to dream of children was a sure sign of trouble. Before her wedding day, she really dreams of a child, and her marriage to Rochester is interrupted.

This common interest in superstitions merely highlights the fact that both writers were in some ways typical women of their time — yet, in other ways, how untypical ! To Mrs. Gaskell belongs the honour of being one of the very first women to strike a blow in defense of the miserable victims of the early and mid-Victorian industrial system. Furthermore, she had a sense of humour much more reminiscent of the Twentieth Century than of the Nineteenth. In many respects she was a kind of revolutionary, gentle but firm, against various sorts of Victorian tyranny. Charlotte is, of course, the greater figure. Her deep, heart-felt passions lifted her high above the narrow restrictions of her life; and her skill as a writer enabled her to clothe those (generally noble) passions in words which will never be forgotten. Elizabeth Gaskell was one of the forerunners of that long line of English writers who fought for social justice, as her work is chiefly of interest in the context of her period. Charlotte wrote of poignant tragedies of the spirit — tragedies so interwoven with life that they will probably be with us until the end of the world.