

Mitsuharu Matsuoka, ed., *Society and Culture in the Times of Elizabeth Gaskell: A Bicentennial Commemorative Volume*. Hiroshima: Keisuisya, 2010, pp. xxxvi + 684. Hardback ¥7,500, ISBN 978-4-86327-109-8.

Literature holds a mirror up to nature, and literary criticism tries to hold yet another mirror to reflect upon what is reflected. This book under review is an ambitious attempt to create such a critical mirror, exploring Elizabeth Gaskell's works and the early Victorian period. What emerges is anything but a static object. As J. Hillis Miller observes in his foreword, 'early Victorian novels are not just a constative or representational mirroring of their contexts but have a performative power in enforcing or even creating social assumptions'. If this "mirroring" has to show the bidirectional dynamism between Gaskell's works and their surrounding social milieu, the book should be regarded as neither a mere study of Victorian culture nor a simple analysis of her works. Rather it aims to stand at the intersection between those two approaches and to witness what results from the blending of one with the other.

Let us see how the book confronts such a difficult challenge. It consists of six parts, each of which is divided into five chapters. An introduction is added to survey the broader history of the Victorian period. Part One, 'The Society', focuses on social problems of the time: educational debates, the reality of 'the two nations' in Manchester, the liquidity of class with the rise of middle classes, and the nation undergoing fervent waves of colonialism and imperialism. In Chapter 1, Alan Shelston takes up the topic of Victorian education, which was undergoing 'considerable development'. His discussion shows its gradual change, its 'interaction with social class', and its potential to 'fit the individual to social rules'. All these points are excellently demonstrated by his close analyses of Gaskell's life and works. In Chapter 5, Miwa Ota treats Gaskell's delineation of 'nature', pointing out how it develops from a predominantly eclogue to georgic mode; the former separates nature from the buzz of society, whereas the latter is a form combining both of them, trying to find some intermediate sphere, in which physical labour in nature can console people's minds and bodies. The generic balance is evocative of Gaskell's personal situation, which was always swaying between home and profession, and is also consonant with the Victorian age, which was alternately glorifying and suspecting the merit of industrialization. The 'Society' part thus reveals the position of her works: centrally situated as a meeting point of Victorian individuals, their culture, and the complex vibrations of the time.

Part Two, 'The Age', sheds light on various levels of Victorian innovation: science, religion, postal mail, childhood and laissez-faire. These chapters, explicating great traditions in many strata of the society, consider how Gaskell's idiosyncratic profile as a writer is connected with them. Chapter 7 on religion, for instance, is not satisfied only with the discussion of Gaskell's Unitarianism. It draws attention to her *multifariousness* – the diverse genres, styles and topics of her fiction – and juxtaposes it with her approach to religion, 'which never stipulates any single

creed'. Through scrutinizing such 'hybridism' in Gaskell, Takao Tomiyama concludes that it renders her fictional world rich, deep and even 'postmodern'. The following Part Three, 'Life', further enables us to map the 'hybrid, postmodern Gaskell' in the vast landscape of the Victorian period. The five chapters respectively take up 'clothing', 'eating', 'housing', 'recreation', and 'sickness', drawing on a variety of social and cultural materials. In Chapter 15 on sickness, Akiko Takei deals with wide-ranging resources from De Quincey, Dickens, Chadwick, Engels to the 18th-century medical journal *Domestic Medicine*, illustrating the actual lives of the time.

Part Four explores Gaskell's world in terms of 'Gender'. In Chapter 17, Mitsuko Suzuki considers 'wrongs of women', such as being 'confined', 'frozen to death', 'starved' and 'educationally repressed'. Not restricting itself to these abusive scenes in the works of Gaskell, the discussion introduces a broader scheme of 'historical novels', comparing her delineation with that of Sydney Owenson. The other four chapters line up the topics of 'female bonds', 'prostitution', 'mission', and 'paternalism'. The chapter on 'female bonds' does not limit its scope in Gaskell's female characters, but rather inclusively looks at male and female characters, focusing on those who can share feminine and maternal feelings. The chapters of 'prostitution' and 'mission' also explore the overlapping spheres of masculinity and femininity; 'prostitution' was a realm in which the Victorian ideal of "the angel in the house" and the contemporary reality of male sexual practices intersected, and 'mission' was a realm through which Victorian women could have access to the public, male sphere. By all these discussions, the 'Gender' part meticulously reveals how male and female spheres are attracting and repelling each other in Victorian culture, and how Gaskell was writing in the midst of those swirls.

Part Five, 'Genre', approaches the *Scheherazade* writer's protean profiles: gothic novels, romance, historical novels, mystery and theatrical elements. Whereas the first three genres have been traditionally accepted as central to Gaskell's career, the others would seem to be incompatible with her received image. Chapter 24 indeed admits that 'none of her works can be called an authentic mystery'; nevertheless through analysing the formation of Victorian self and connecting it with the age of 'anonymisation', Hideo Kajiyama claims that her works are comprised of many such points of germination. Resisting the pressures of an age in which any person could be "The Man of the Crowd", mysteries always characterise their protagonists with some secret, which works to form their unique identities. Such presentation of secrecy can be found in Gaskell's short stories, such as "The Old Nurse's Story", "Right at Last", and "The Grey Woman". The following Chapter 25 takes up an apparent incompatibility between Gaskell and theatricality. Ryota Kanayama's close reading of *Cranford* clarifies how the existence of Mary Smith functions to create a meta-theatrical effect. The last Part Six, 'the Author', similarly reconsiders Gaskell's works along with ostensibly *irrelevant* factors. In Chapter 26, Midori Niino discusses 'autobiography', even though Gaskell never tried one. The analysis successfully overturns that absence, showing that her novels and short stories hide many attempts at her self-fictionalisation.

These brief outlines would suffice to indicate the varieties of perspectives and the richness of the critical “mirroring” in this book. Even more impressive is that these 30 chapters and the introductory one are written by 31 different contributors, including three English scholars: Alan Shelston, Joanne Shattock, and Patricia Ingham. It goes without saying that unifying the approaches of so many participants is extremely difficult. If all the contributors’ ways of argument were akin to one another, the regularity would make the “mirroring” quite dull and opaque. If, on the other hand, all the discussions were disjunctively different from one another, nothing would be reflected but distorted visions. It is encouraging to see the book has achieved its goal; while the variety of scholars provides the mirror with depth, width and clarity, most of their arguments function to vivify how literary works and their societies are alternately creating one another, weaving the warp and weft together. Moreover, the “mirror-book” also shows its value in its framing part: the index and the chronology. The index is particularly excellent, testifying to the editor’s assiduous efforts, and is likely to become a helpful source of study for many students on Victorian literature. And these merits of the book naturally tell us what is desired to follow. Not only Gaskell but also those other Victorian writers who have rarely been discussed in Japan – Letitia Elizabeth Landon, Bulwer Lytton to name a few – have to be put in front of similar mirrors; those future reflections would return their lights upon this book, and would further illuminate Gaskell’s unique figure and profile.

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Source: *The Gaskell Journal*, No. 25 (2011): 124-26.