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Physical and Linguistic Metamorphosis in *The Grey Woman*

"The Grey Woman"¹ is generally acknowledged to be one of Elizabeth Gaskell's finest and most powerful tales. As a story of mystery and terror in which a beautiful young miller's daughter, Anna Scherer, becomes prematurely transformed into an aged woman almost overnight, it is an intriguing blend of Gothic sensationalism and psychological probing. Yet, the extent to which Anna's negative physical metamorphosis is reflected in the equally dramatic linguistic transformations of the story is a factor which criticism has tended to overlook. This is surprising, since the poignancy and intensity of Gaskell's story, which anticipates preoccupations of a modernist nature in its exploration of existential estrangement, lies precisely in the woman's struggle to come to terms with her altered identity on a linguistic level.

The original manuscript of the story contains Gaskell's own brief acknowledgement that it: "[...] is true as to its main facts, and as to the consequence of those facts from which this tale takes its title"². John Geoffrey Sharps suggests that the realistic description of the opening sequence is derived from one of the author's various holiday visits to the Rhineland in which, to pass the time, the members of her party would exchange "the most frightening & wild stories [...] all true"³. This biographical

¹ *The Grey Woman* was first published in Dickens's periodical *All the Year Round* in 1861, before appearing in book form four years later.

² I am deeply grateful to Francesco Marroni for allowing me to consult his notes from the original manuscript of *The Grey Woman* which is now conserved in The John Rylands Library, Manchester.

³ John Geoffrey Sharps, *Mrs Gaskell's Observation and Invention*, Fontwell, Lindon Press, 1970, pp. 335-6. Sharps concludes that the events at the beginning of the story refer to her first visit of 1841.

basis serves as a realistic background to a story rife with gothic elements: an evil but fascinating brigand-leader who marries a German miller's daughter before rushing her away to his gloomy castle in which she is held a virtual prisoner; a violent death among the servants; a neighbour murdered for plunder; a case of mistaken identity resulting in murder; the tragic murder of the heroine's friend; the eventual capturing and decapitation of the evil husband and, finally, and most important of all, a young girl whose attractive features are rapidly transformed into those of an aged woman. Extrapolating the main events of the plot in such a way, however, belies the fact that the surface, textual level of the story is, from the beginning, conditioned by a strategy of prolepsis since all the most important information regarding Anna's story is anticipated in a synoptic account by one of the members of the family. As a result, the focus is upon the teller rather than the tale so that the real drama is seen to lie not on the story level as such, but within the recesses of the tormented mind of its main protagonist. At the same time, the incipit, rather than preparing the reader for the looming dramatic events, functions as a temporary foil. For the four neatly counterbalanced clauses of the opening sentence reflect the casual and objective tone of an external, or extra-homodiegetic I-Narrator (a middle-class female English tourist) who describes a moment during her travels in which she has stopped for rest and refreshment at a mill: "There is a mill by the Neckar side, — to which many people resort for coffee, — according to the fashion, — which is national in Germany"⁴ (divisions mine). In the narrator's commonplace observations, in which even the adjectives are markedly neutral, she also does not disdain to insert a teasingly ironic denial of touristy expectations of the picturesque: "There is nothing particularly attractive in the situation of this mill [...] (the flat and unromantic) side of Heidelberg [...] a well-kept dusty quadrangle [...] a garden full of willows, and arbours, and flower-beds not well kept [...]" (GW, p. 287). This unremarkable

⁴ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Gothic Tales*, Edited with an Introduction and notes by Laura Kranzler, London, Penguin, 2000, p. 287. All subsequent references refer to this edition under the abbreviation GW followed by page numbers in brackets.

scene is enlivened by the good humour and kindness of the old miller whose "[...] loud musical voice [...] warm hospitality and rolling laughter of welcome" (GW, p. 287) dominate the opening sequence. Although an apparently minor linguistic detail, Gaskell had originally omitted the adjective "loud" and had simply written: "[...] his musical voice", which suggests a more romantic trait that is somewhat at odds with the man's lively, robust character and the change confirms an initial intent to play out the contrast between the rational middle-class narrator and the down-to-earth host who eagerly entertains his guests whilst cheerfully carrying out his farmyard chores. Yet, in spite of the air of familiarity and reassurance he radiates, it is with old Scherer that the first signs of disharmony emerge, in the contrast between his musical voice and the mournful tune he is whistling: "and, as he went, this great, prosperous, happy-looking man whistled softly one of the most plaintive airs I ever heard" (GW, p. 288). In her manuscript Gaskell had originally written: "and then left us, softly whistling [...]". The alteration from descriptive past to past tense significantly heightens the dramatic impact to create a disconcerting incongruity. This sudden note of disharmony is immediately followed by a reference to the miller's antipathy for the French which stretches back to the previous generations of his family and, as shall be seen, forms the sub-text of Anna Scherer's story:

His family have held this mill ever since the Old Palatine days; or rather, I should say, have possessed the ground ever since then, for two successive mills of theirs have been burnt down by the French. If you want to see Scherer in a passion, just talk to him of the possibility of a French invasion (GW, p. 288).

This sombre revelation is, in turn, reinforced by a violent storm in which "heavy splashes" fall through "the tender leaves of the thick leafy covering" under which the company are sheltered "as if they were tearing them asunder" (GW, p. 288). The storm is of functional importance for, as a result, the guests are allowed shelter in the miller's own house in which the I-narrator spies

the portrait of the beautiful young Anna Scherer. The definite transition from the reassuring, uneventful reality of the present world of the narration to a past mythical world of terror coincides with the moment the girl's identity and fate are revealed:

It is the likeness of a great-aunt of her husband's ... See! Here is the name on the open page of this Bible, "Anna Scherer, 1778". Frau Scherer says there is a tradition in the family that this pretty girl, with her complexion of lilies and roses, lost her colour so entirely through fright, that she was known by the name of the Grey Woman [...] (GW, p. 289).

In the miller's fragmented synopsis of Anna's story the effects of her experiences anticipate the actual events which produced them:

"Ah!" said he, his face changing, "the aunt Anna had a sad history. It was all owing to one of those hellish Frenchmen; and her daughter suffered for it — the cousin Ursula, as we all called her when I was a child. To be sure, the good cousin Ursula was his child as well. The sins of the fathers are visited on their children. The lady would like to know all about it, would she? Well, there are papers — a kind of apology the aunt Anna wrote for putting an end to her daughter's engagement — or rather facts which she revealed, that prevented cousin Ursula from marrying the man she loved; and so she would never have any other good fellow, else I have heard say my father would have been thankful to have made her his wife" (GW, p. 290).

By anticipating the outcome of the story without providing all the necessary explanations (the exact meaning, for example, of the sinister quotation from the Bible), Gaskell is free to focus exclusively on the subjective perspective of Anna's account to her daughter, Ursula. Though Anna's letters form the narrative from this point onwards, the fact that they are divided into portions (rather than parts) indicates a structural incompleteness that has suggestive overtones. For the discourse situation of the second

level of narration (that is, the letters of the intra-homodiegetic I-narrator Anna Scherer to her daughter) is inscribed within a larger framework in which the external I-narrator addresses an implied external addressee. Anna Scherer's narrative act is an attempt to put into perspective a series of events of which she was at the centre but over which she had absolutely no control. Whether it is an example of the most strikingly feminist aspect of Gaskell's fiction, as Terence Wright suggests, Anna, like so many of her female characters, is "situated where self-discovery and self-creation are essential"⁵. In fact, the whole story becomes nothing less than her attempt to express the difference between the image of her young self in the portrait and the Grey Woman she finally becomes⁶.

The conventional realism of the first extra-homodiegetic I-narrator seems to be set in deliberate contrast to the emotional intensity of the second intra-homodiegetic I-narrator (Anna Scherer), whose account takes over the rest of the story. In reality, certain discourse and textual features suggest a more disquieting interrelation between the two dimensions represented by the commonplace world of the present, and the past world of deceit and evil than seems initially apparent. First, the extra-homodiegetic I-narrator, who treads the ambivalent terrain of implicit/internal and real/external narrator, far from being the passive receiver of Anna Scherer's story is forced to become actively engaged in translating and transcribing the dispersed contents of her letters. Indeed, in re-writing (or indeed re-crafting) the story, she is responsible for its final form. Second, if the central issue of *The Grey Woman* is the recovery of a lost, or fading memory, (a process already evident with the present members of the Scherer family), it is ironically this narrator, a stranger and foreigner, who is granted the privilege of reviving Anna's 'voice'. The two dimensions of the external, everyday world and the mysterious underworld of menace and terror

⁵ Terence Wright, *Elizabeth Gaskell: 'We Are Not Angels'*, London, Macmillan, 1995, p. 210.

⁶ Eleven years pass between the portrait of Anna and her marriage to de la Tourelle.

are also instantly merged on a linguistic level in the opening description of the surrounding landscape: "[...] flowers and luxuriant creepers knotting and looping the arbours together [...]" (GW, p. 287). On a symbolical level, The adjective *luxuriant*, and the gerunds *knotting* and *looping* connote a hidden layer of complexity made up of an intricate web of connections and relations that will later characterise the spatial alienation of de la Tourelle's castle in which Anna eventually finds herself virtually imprisoned.

Given Anna's predominant character traits of passivity and submission, it is appropriate that the first portion of her letter begins, not with her own words, but those of her distraught daughter: "Thou dost not love thy child, mother. Thou dost not care if her heart is broken" (GW, p. 291). The bitter resentment of the girl's unfair accusation acts as the catalyst for Anna's written justification of her opposition to her marriage to the French artist Le Brun. When she actually begins to set down her own words, they reveal a woman hardened to a relentlessly cruel reality:

Ah, God! and these words of my heart-beloved Ursula ring in my ears as if the sound of them would fill them when I lie a-dying. And her poor tear-stained face comes between me and everything else. Child! hearts do not break; life is very tough as well as very terrible. But I will not decide for thee. I will tell thee all; and thou shalt bear the burden of choice (GW, p. 291).

So acute is Anna's distraught state that any direct verbal confrontation with her daughter would only become the cause of her death (*It would kill me to be questioned* (GW, 291). Though instigated by her daughter's accusations, Anna's letter-writing necessarily entails a one-way communicative transaction which deliberately avoids dialectics in the search for psychological solace and stability.

The tripartite structure of Anna's story is reflected on as many levels: First, it is divided into three portions; Second, Anna is victimised by three people, and third, she marries three times (although the second is the fake marriage to her woman servant

Amante). Her tortuous plight unfolds along the itinerary of this three-fold progression, with each stage representing a radical metamorphosis from the previous one⁷. Anna's narration picks up from the moment her ordeal is over and she returns with Ursula to her family who, having believed her to be dead, are now barely able to recognise the once beautiful girl behind her shockingly aged features. Ironically, the only way Anna can prove she is the same woman as the girl in the portrait is to point out the similarities between her younger self and her daughter: "I had to lead thee underneath the picture, painted of me long ago, and point out, feature by feature, the likeness between it and thee" (GW, p. 291). Not only is she virtually severed from her real identity, but the melancholic evocation of her childhood home also suggests an irretrievably lost idyll which renders final any possibility of re-affiliation with her family:

I recalled [...] the details of the time when it was painted; the merry words that passed between us then[...] the position of the articles of furniture in the room; our father's habits; the cherry-tree, now cut down, that shaded the window of my bedroom, through which my brother was wont to squeeze himself, in order to spring on to the topmost bough that would bear his weight; and thence would pass me back his cap laden with fruit to where I sat on the window-sill [...] (GW, p.291).

Having lived in exile from the protective world of her family home, Anna is now obliged to recall all of the everyday *details* pertaining to her past life there in the desperate attempt to re-affirm her membership. But these, otherwise homely features, are merely enumerated in a static language that is indicative of

⁷ This tripartite division is also reflected in the fact that the story itself effectively contains three incipits: the first being the external narrator's opening description, the second the opening phrase of Anna's letter being her daughter's words and the third, the actual beginning of Anna's narration: "My father held, as thou knowest, the mill on the Neckar", being precisely the subjective correspondent of: "There is a mill by the Neckar-side (underlining mine)". Each incipit is distanced in time so as to increase the estrangement between the two narrative voices.

loss rather than recovery: the *merry words*, for example, remain unqualified, the position of the articles of furniture suggests a mathematical precision void of emotion, the father's daily habits are only referred to in a neutral way with no further qualification, and the cherry tree, a former source of merriment, no longer exists. Anna's recollection of herself sitting on the window-sill is particularly significant. For this liminal position of caution (in contrast with the daring conduct of her brother) is symptomatic of the passivity and weakness that lead to her ruin. This is not to suggest, however, that her fate is completely self-motivated. For the two central female figures of Babette Müller, her envious sister-in-law who, desirous to be rid of her rival in beauty, eagerly encourages Anna to accept an invitation to visit her old friend Sophie Rupprecht, and Madame Rupprecht, who virtually forces her into marrying the wicked de La Torable, both play key roles in the girl's downfall. It is indicative of her naivety at this stage that whilst Anna lays explicit blame for what happens to her on the former: "That Babette Müller was, as I may say, the cause of all my life's suffering" (GW, p. 292), she is at the same time oblivious of Madame Rupprecht's malicious manipulation of her.

Anna's initial delight in her re-acquaintance with her friend soon yields to dismay when she discovers that the Rupprecht household is the very antithesis of her own home ("[...] just the opposite of what it was at my father's house"; GW, p. 294). The transition from the natural life of her own home to the affected and artificial manners of the French court becomes an essentially upsetting experience:

The life in Karlsruhe was very different from what it was at home. The hours were later, the coffee was weaker in the morning, the pottage was weaker, the boiled beef less relieved by other diet, the dresses finer, the evening engagements constant. I did not find these visits pleasant (GW, p. 294).

In the stifling atmosphere of Madame Rupprecht's house, with its strict rules of social etiquette and severe prohibitions, Anna finds herself obliged to bow to the impersonal pressures of

social convention. Her first encounter with de la Tourelle occurs precisely during one of these moments of tension verging on boredom:

I thought I had never seen anyone so handsome or so elegant. His hair was powdered, of course, but one could see from his complexion that it was fair in its natural state. His features were as delicate as a girl's, and set off by two little *mouches*, as we called patches in those days, one at the left corner of his mouth, the other prolonging, as it were, the right eye. His dress was blue and silver. I was so lost in admiration of this beautiful young man, that I was as much surprised as if the angel Gabriel had spoken to me, when the lady of the house brought him forward to present him to me (GW, p. 295 — underlining mine).

Anna is immediately beguiled by what she perceives as de la Tourelle's utter delicacy — a deliberately deceptive trait and one ironically underscored by the explicitly female simile *like a girl's* and the absurd reference to the guardian angel Gabriel. The naivety of the language and its lingering on exquisite details, such as the *two little mouches* the man has applied to his face to enhance the overall effect of charm and grace, betrays the self-deception that leads to Anna's undoing. Furthermore, beyond the magnetic effect de la Tourelle initially exerts over the girl, emerge other very different elements that expose the falsity of his genteel behaviour, (such that her admiration dissipates the moment she perceives his compliments becoming exaggeratedly insistent). The deliberate ambivalence of the verb 'thought' (i.e. what she thought at the time or what she believed was the case) already suggests an awareness of the illusion. Likewise the adjective *lost* appropriately underlines Anna's own helplessness, and lack of moral mettle, the latter of which is now made to emerge as her principle negative trait. The terminology employed for the description of de la Tourelle insists on his affectations without for the moment hinting at his underlying brutality. His consequent courtship of Anna is as flattering as it is vacuous, and given the importance Gaskell always attributes in her fiction to the power of dialogue, it is significant that the whole episode is rendered in

indirect discourse so as to drive home the point of the couple's complete lack of communication. Thus, the irony of the twice repeated expression: "[T]he conquest I had made", since in no way does Anna directly encourage de la Tourelle, rather she merely succumbs unthinkingly to his devilish traits as if drugged by the mindless conventionality of the whole situation. The uncertainty of Anna's feelings during de la Tourelle's courtship is a reflection of his paradoxical effect on her: "And yet I never quite felt at my ease with him. I was always relieved when his visits were over, although I missed his presence when he did not come" (GW, p. 296). His evil influence necessarily presents itself in a deliberately false guise and is only perceived once it is too late for her to pose any resistance. After protesting against her sudden engagement to him, Anna is harshly reprimanded by Madame Ruprecht:

I learned from Madame Ruprecht that she had written to my father to announce the splendid conquest I had made, and to request his presence at my betrothal. I started with astonishment. I had not realized that affairs had gone so far as this. But when she asked me, in a stern, offended manner, what I had meant by my conduct if I did not intend to marry Monsieur de la Tourelle [...] what could I do but hang my head, and silently consent to the rapid enunciation of the only course which now remained for me if I would not be esteemed a heartless coquette all the rest of my days? (GW, p. 297).

Indirect discourse again undermines the power of words to reinforce the alienating effects of social conventions for Anna as she naively allows her destiny to be settled in order to avoid a social condemnation her youthful mind exaggerates out of all proportion. On the textual level, the young girl's extremely negative qualification of marriage in the sentence preceding her invitation to the Rupprechts — "[...] I had no notion of being married, and could not bear anyone who talked to me about it" (GW, p. 293) — already anticipates her opposition to her betrothal to de la Tourelle which is chillingly conveyed in the extended noun-phrase: "the rapid enunciation of the only course which now remained for me". Once the three central male protagonists

(Anna's father, her brother and de la Tourelle) are eventually united before her, the latter's hostility becomes plainly explicit:

He was very polite to them; put on all the soft, grand manner, which he had rather dropped with me [...] But he a little scoffed at the old fashioned church ceremonies which my father insisted on; and I fancy Fritz must have taken some of his compliments as satire, for I saw certain signs of manner by which I knew that my future husband, for all his civil words, had irritated and annoyed my brother (GW, pp. 297-298).

This passage deftly articulates the psychological uncertainty of Anna's feelings towards de la Tourelle as well as the ambiguity he evokes to those around him. The first clause registers her objective awareness of his civil behaviour, but the phrasal verb (*put on*) immediately following unmasks its insincerity, the lexical items *soft* and *grand* being consequently invested with a bitter irony. His mocking reaction to her father's desire for a church ceremony, ironically contrasts with Anna's previous comparison of him to the Angel Gabriel and her brother's detection of the sarcasm behind his words not only exposes the show of pretence de la Tourelle barely manages to conceal but also emphasises his hostility (further marked by the crescendo of increasingly strong modifiers *rather [...] a little [...] irritated*). The eventual agreement which ensues between the men bears all the cold formality of a business transaction: "But all the money arrangements were liberal in the extreme, and more than satisfied, almost surprised my father. Even Fritz lifted up his eyebrows and whistled" (GW, p. 298). The whole episode exposes a masculine complicity surrounding material wealth that transcends any feelings of compassion for Anna as a person and degrades her as an object of possession. Indeed, it is only after this encounter that Anna fully realises the horrible extent of her loneliness: "I alone did not care about anything. I was bewitched — in a dream, a kind of despair. I had got into a net through my own timidity and weakness and I did not see how I could get out of it" (GW, 298). The emphatic *I alone* not only expresses her despair more forcibly than its alternative 'only I', but the adjective *alone* points to a

psychological as well as physical isolation. Nevertheless, even as the mature (and, as such, presumably wiser) narrator of her own story, Anna's sense of her situation still hovers between laying the blame on the inexplicable (*I was bewitched*) and on her own self (*through my own timidity and weakness*).

As already noted, de la Tourelle's courtship of Anna is conducted in indirect discourse on the textual level. When he is eventually attributed direct discourse it is in the form of a detached and formal admonishment to his newly wedded wife:

Henceforth, Anna, said he, 'you will move in a different sphere of life; and though it is possible that you may have the power of showing favour to your relations from time to time, yet much or familiar intercourse will be undesirable, and is not what I can allow (GW, p. 299).

The convoluted expressions and passive constructions of de la Tourelle's cold-hearted discourse contrast sharply with the warm and affectionate words of Anna's father: "If my child is unhappy — which God forbid — let her remember that her father's house is ever open to her" (GW, p. 299). Yet, even the miller, in addressing his daughter, disturbingly shifts from the intimate *thou* to the impersonal object pronoun *her*, as if to formally sanction their separation on a linguistic level. Indeed, in marrying de la Tourelle⁸, Anna loses not only her family but also her nationality so that consequently everyone now speaks of her as "being a Frenchwoman" (GW, p. 299). Thus, from the idyllic world of her home at the mill, to the stifling formality and confinement of Madame Rupprecht's urban dwelling, to the dreary isolation of de la Tourelle's castle, in which she arrives after a two days journey, Anna's social exile, which coincides with the first stage of her metamorphosis, is complete. Her exilic state is also extended to the confines of de la Tourelle's castle itself, the two parts of which — the Chateau — a dreary and "raw new building [...] hastily run up for some immediate

⁸ It is worthwhile observing that Gaskell also deletes several times in her manuscript the words *my husband* which she substitutes with *M de la Tourelle*.

purpose" (GW, p. 299), and the old castle, strong and picturesque but unassuming, are connected by an intricate series of passages and unexpected doors that operate as the objective correlatives of his own secretive and devious nature. The spatial and temporal division characterised by the two buildings reinforce the decidedly estranged relationship between husband and wife. Consequently, Anna, forced to occupy the salon which is completely separated from the rest of the building, is strictly forbidden to enter de la Tourelle's chambers in the old part of the castle. As a result, she experiences feelings of mystery and terror which, far from being incited by the supernatural elements of a typical gothic tale, are actually the product of her own suppressed imagination:

But when, in the gloom of an autumnal evening, I caught my own face and figure reflected in the mirrors, which showed only a mysterious background in the dim light of the many candles which failed to illuminate the great proportions of the half-finished salon [...] I trembled in silence at the fantastic figures and shapes which my imagination called up as peopling the background of those gloomy mirrors (GW, p. 300).

The iterative nature of the passage, with its chiasmatic link of lexical items (*gloom [...] mirrors [...] mysterious [...] background [...] background [...] gloomy mirrors*) reflects, in a circular pattern, the obsessive self-absorption of Anna's fear.

Anna's state of paralysis is only interrupted by the arrival of her maid and companion Amante, whose importance in the story cannot be overestimated. It is she who organises the escape from de la Tourelle's castle and helps Anna create a new identity during their hiding, and it is she who first approaches Dr Voss, the man Anna eventually marries. However, contrary to the writer's intentions, the obvious sexual connotation of her name⁹ cannot go unnoticed. Significantly, Amante's positive qualities (which represent the very antithesis of de la Tourelle's deviousness and falsity) compensate for those lacking in Anna's

⁹ "Amante" is the Italian word for lover.

husband: "She was tall and handsome [...] and somewhat gaunt [...] she was neither rude nor familiar in her manners and had a pleasant look of straightforwardness about her [...]" (GW, pp. 302-3). The fact that Amante not only provides the female warmth and companionship Anna desperately lacks, but also, by later assuming a male disguise, literally replaces de la Tourelle as her fantasy husband, may suggest a lesbian attraction (on the subconscious level of play), but it also, more importantly, underlines the power of female solidarity against male victimisation¹⁰. Unlike Anna, Amante is fearless in her dealings with de la Tourelle, to the extent of outwardly manifesting her scorn. Thus, for the first time in the story, Anna overcomes her state of isolation to establish a real relationship with another based on complicity and trust. That she is happy to relinquish all her responsibility to Amante, however, (precisely as she does earlier with her sister-in-law) is confirmation of a personality inclined to passivity and apathy. However, after her fatal errors with Madame Rupprecht and de la Tourelle, her reliance on Amante eventually leads her to regain her trust in humanity.

Amante's entrance at the beginning of Portion II coincides with a metamorphosis on the discourse level, marked by an acceleration in the narrative which, until this point, is characterised by Anna's brooding reflections of self-torment. Naturally, in recounting the terrifying events which involve her witnessing her husband, whom she has discovered to be none other than the leader of a band of brigands called les Chauffeurs, dragging the murdered body of his neighbour, Sieur de Poissy, into their house while she is hidden under a table, Anna (or the external I-narrator?) alters her style accordingly. There occurs a metamorphosis on the textual level which parallels her increasing hysteria and, as such, dramatically contrasts with the relatively controlled phraseology of the first half of the story:

¹⁰ John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, London, Vintage, 2004 (1969), p. 156. Fowles' sense of the tender relationships existing between women in the Victorian period as being ascribable far more to "the desolating arrogance of contemporary man than to a more suspect motive" may be directly applicable to the relationship between the two women in Gaskell's story.

Now, now was my time, if ever; and yet I could not move. It was not my cramped and stiffened joints that crippled me, it was the sensation of that dead man's close presence. I almost fancied — I almost fancy still — I heard the arm nearest to me move; lift itself up, as if once more imploring, and fall in dead despair. At that fancy — if fancy it were — I screamed aloud in mad terror, and the sound of my own strange voice broke the spell [...] The sound of her [Amante's] voice gave me strength; I walked straight towards it [...] Where I was, where that voice was, I knew not; but go to it I must, or die. The door once opened — I know not by which of us- I fell upon her neck¹¹, grasping her tight, till my hands ached with the tension of their hold (GW, pp. 315-316).

Parataxis now takes over as the dominant clause structure, in marked contrast with the heavy subordination that characterises the first two portions of the tale. This metamorphosis on a linguistic level, of course, appropriately reflects the restless existence of the two women who are on the run and in hiding from de la Tourelle, and the high frequency of ellipsis and lexical repetitions further intensifies the dramatic crescendo of the subsequent events. The first shelter the women find is, ironically, a store-room at the house of a miller, whose master is none other than the murdered *Sieur de Poissy*. In spite of the women's terror at being discovered by de la Tourelle and his gang, (who also appear in the house in search of them) the description of the commonplace objects of this environment exert a comforting therapeutic effect after the terrifying impersonality of de la Tourelle's castle: "There was bedding piled up, boxes and chests, mill sacks, the winter store of apples and nuts, bundles of old clothes, broken furniture, and many other things" (GW, p. 321). It is here that Amante disguises herself as a man by trimming her hair and "cutting up old corks into pieces such as would go into her cheeks" (GW, p. 323) and that Anna allows her to transform her own features in such a

¹¹ Gaskell's original phrase was "I fell into her arms [...]". In the original manuscript "into" and "arms" are deleted and replaced by "upon" and "neck" which convey a decidedly more violent impact.

way as to eradicate any sign of beauty: "I let her dye my fair hair and complexion with the decaying shells of the stored-up walnuts, I let her blacken my teeth, and even voluntarily broke a front tooth the better to effect my disguise" (GW, p. 323). This fake metamorphosis is a necessary purification process for Anna, who becomes stripped of the beauty which has been her undoing. Analogously, her fake marriage to Amante prepares the terrain for her real metamorphosis and marriage to Dr Voss at the end of the story. Amante's death appropriately liberates Anna from de la Tourelle (who is later captured and decapitated) and brings to an end the exilic dimension of her fictional life. But it is not quite sufficient to sanction her re-acceptance into the world of social convention. Whether through a final irony or justified fate, Anna's reconciliation with society can only be possible through her own social 'death'. For not only do her features undergo such a transformation as to render her completely unrecognisable: "my yellow hair was grey, my complexion was ashen-coloured, no creature could have recognized the fresh-coloured, bright-haired young woman of eighteen months before [...]" (GW, p. 339) but, just as she became a Frenchwoman in marrying de la Tourelle, she finally loses all trace of her real identity in marrying Dr Voss: "The few people whom I saw knew me only as Madame Voss; a widow much older than himself, whom Dr Voss had secretly married. They called me the Grey Woman" (GW, p. 339). The attribute is doubly significant. For not only is the colour grey suggestive of lifelessness and death, but also, as a compound colour in which black and white are co-present, but in which neither are dominant, it appropriately designates Anna's lack of autonomy and moral direction. Unlike most of Gaskell's female characters, she desperately requires the powers of self-assertion. It is a final irony, therefore, that precisely at the moment in which she loses her name she manages to muster the strength to find self-expression through the power of the written word. In this sense, her letters represent an ultimate desperate attempt to give voice to a personality that until that moment has only been acted upon by others.

If Anna learns any lessons from her experiences it can only be that she has been the main source of her woes. First, her beauty

not only rouses the jealousy of her sister-in-law but also attracts an evil-doer like de la Tourelle. Second, her lack of moral fibre renders her easily prone to the negative influence of others. Thus, her warning to her daughter not to marry the Frenchman le Brun, who is none other than Sieur de Poissy's son, is an act of moral cleansing which compensates for her previous lack of courage in failing to report de la Tourelle's crime. Yet, any possibility of Ursula's compliance with Anna's desire stops short at her initial outburst, since she disappears altogether from the narrative no sooner her words are uttered and the reader is left with the sole impression of a girl who remains the innocent victim of her mother's tragedy. If the sins of the fathers fall on their children, it is evidently the latter who pay. Not only, but Gaskell's inability to provide a reassuring conclusion is highlighted by the fact that Anna's desperate message has only been partly retrieved, its final words being the sudden simple stark sentence revealing Ursula's lover's name, Maurice de Poissy. Therefore, just as the reassuring voice of the first I-narrator dissolves into a covert presence behind Anna's letters to completely relinquish control of the narrative, so is Anna offered no other form of salvation than the elimination of her natural identity.

Convegno Internazionale
“Darwin e l’immaginario scientifico/ Darwin and Scientific Imagination”

L’11 e il 12 novembre 2009 avrà luogo, presso la Sala di Rappresentanza del Rettorato dell’Università degli Studi di Milano, in via Festa del Perdono, il Convegno Internazionale “Darwin e l’immaginario scientifico”, promosso da Carlo Pagetti, in occasione del duecentenario della nascita del grande scienziato britannico e centocinquant’anni dopo la pubblicazione de *L’origine delle specie*.

Il convegno intende esplorare i rapporti tra Darwin e i linguaggi dell’immaginario letterario e scientifico in una prospettiva interdisciplinare, che coinvolge studiosi di varia estrazione intellettuale. Accanto ai docenti dell’Università degli Studi di Milano (Giorello, Iamartino, Maffi, Oppizzi, Orestano), vi sono anche specialisti provenienti da altre sedi universitarie italiane e straniere (Beer, Boncinelli, Fabietti, Fortunati, Di Michele, Di Pace, Marroni, Palusci, Parrinder, Suvin).

I lavori delle tre mezze giornate in cui si articola il convegno saranno presieduti da eminenti accademici nell’ambito filosofico e scientifico.

Il programma articolato sarà inviato entro il 22 ottobre prossimo.

L’organizzazione del convegno è affidata ad Alessia Oppizzi
(alessia.oppizzi@unimi.it)

Altre informazioni sono reperibili sul sito
<http://users.unimi.it/darwinimmagscien/>

Milano, 12/10/2009