

2nd paper

Sanity, Madness and the Nineteenth Century Family

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The genesis of my interest in the family as a symbol of Paradise, a haven from which one is exiled and to which one struggles to return, goes back far beyond my involvement with feminism or my first forays into the world of academic scholarship. It began with my childhood passion for "family" radio programs, and for books about the Bobsey twins, Anne of Green Gables, and the five March girls. I think I loved these entertainments because, in my memory, at least, they all portrayed the family as a place from which one could venture forth and have successes or mishaps, but where there was always love, be it in the form of congratulations or comforting, that you could count on.

I do not know at what point I began to realize that my own family did not conform to this image, but I do know that for years I carried around with me the unshakeable belief that my "exile" from my family was a situation that I could remedy if I would only swallow my pride and become a good daughter. With my coming into the feminist movement I began to see that my history was not one of private aberration, and that my fellow "you can't go home again" types who had left home under circumstances similar to mine were not simply a lunatic fringe living on the edge of a world where everyone gathered happily around the dinner table every night when the sun went down.

One thing that feminism gave me was a view of that dinner table, that pool of warmth from which I felt so irrecoverably excluded, from the point of view of the women whose role it was to put that supper on the table. I also read Laing and Esterson's study of ten women schizophrenics whose perceptions of what was going on around them within the family circle were constantly being refuted by the other members of their families. And as I came to understand how my role as the "house rebel" was shaped by my own family constellation, as well as by a larger set of societal constraints that define proper female behavior, I began to see my exile from the family dinner table as part of a network that spread its filaments over those women I envied no less than over those about whom I found myself thinking: there but for the grace of God go I.

But it was when I began to look into my own academic discipline, English and American literature, that I found yet another dimension to my experience as a member of a family. For in addition to a spacial dimension, a consciousness that experiences are shared by hundreds and thousands of women "out there," it is vital, I think, that women see their experiences and ideas as having a history, a temporal dimension that is also shared. Literature is a good place to look for this dimension, not because it examines it as such, but because much of the material out of which literature is made draws on beliefs and assumptions that are so much a part of the consciousness of an era that they can be dramatized without being explained.

Of course the family is a structure that has figured in literature from its earliest beginnings. And there were good studies of the family prior to the resurgence of interest in that institution that accompanied the rebirth of feminism in the late sixties. Yet it is the urgency with which women in that movement began to view the family as the core of their own socialization that changed the way that I and many of my colleagues and students are looking at the material with which we work as teachers and researchers.

One area that has proved a focus for much discussion among many of us in different fields has been the notion of the family as an evolving, rather than a fixed, unit of social organization. Historians, economists, anthropologists, and sociologists have found that there are significant differences in the definition of the family in different parts of the world, but also that, in Western societies in particular, equally important changes have taken place, not so much in its size and structure as in its function at different periods in time.¹

From the point of view of the woman's role within the family, the most dramatic and far-reaching of these changes came with industrialization, under which the family ceased to be a unit of production. For when in a given culture the home ceases to be a locus of production, so that work done in it cannot be a source of family income, women cannot play a role in the socialization of children at the same time that they

contribute to the family income and to their own support. Thus what was, in Western Europe prior to the seventeenth century, a fairly loosely defined division of labor, became part of an institutional structure. And as this happened, as Alice Clark has pointed out, the notion of women and children as dependents first made its appearance.²

But when work moved out of the home and into the factory the changes that took place in the character of work created the need for a new kind of home. Both agricultural work and cottage industry were essentially communal, both within the family and within the larger community. But the factory system attempted to turn human beings into parts of machines, and to refer to them in terms of the dismembered parts of their bodies (hands, for example) for the use of which the factory owners paid just enough to keep the worker alive.

In a country where men were accustomed to thinking of themselves as "free-born Englishmen," the fact that masses of people were coerced into accepting conditions previously achieved only under slavery must be regarded as no mean triumph for the capitalist class. And the transformation of the family from a place of production to a place of refuge from production was a key factor in making this acceptance a reality. Thus the definition of the family that is still operative today, that of a refuge from the competitive, impersonal, dehumanizing world of work, is coextensive with a particular form of economic

organization that, in shaping the family, shapes us all.

As Juliet Mitchell has pointed out, the home has become a sphere for individual development to the precise degree that individual workers are denied such opportunities on the job.³ For the stone walls of the factory (or of the office, for that matter) do not a prison make if everyone inside those walls has a haven to withdraw to, a place where he can do what he pleases and where his needs are met. Of course the havoc, described so vividly by Engels, wrought upon the lives of the newly urbanized industrial army made for such intolerable living and working conditions that anything even remotely resembling the middle class domestic ideal was out of the question for a very large and inescapably visible segment of the population.⁴

It is not surprising, then, as these conditions worsened during the nineteenth century, that the pursuit of stability, domesticity, and the sure knowledge of ones parentage became an integral part of middle class culture during this period. To see the sudden growth of railways, mines, factories, and slums as a "fall," a loss of an earlier, socially integrated Paradise, is a vision found in nineteenth century writers of all political persuasions, however different might be their programmes for the recovery of that unfallen state. And it is to be found in novels no less than in the "purer" forms of social criticism.

Having looked at my own and other families through the

eyes, first of feminist writers like Firestone, and then of R. D. Laing and his followers, one of the first novels that struck me in a new way when I reread it was Frankenstein. First of all, the history of the Frankenstein family is itself an interesting one. They had been for many generations counsellors and syndics, distinguished members of the Geneva bourgeoisie (home of Calvinism) and respected public servants of the state. The father of Victor Frankenstein, narrator of the main story, had married late, having given his youth and middle age to the care of "the affairs of his country," presumably because he saw a split too wide for him to encompass between public and private life, as further evidenced by the fact that when he did become a husband and father of a family, he retired from public life entirely.

Thus in the very first paragraph of Victor's narrative, Shelley sets up the dichotomy between public endeavor and domestic bliss that is to widen as the story progresses. In the paragraph that follows, we see another example of a retreat from public life in Beaufort, Victor's father's friend, a man who "was of a proud and unbending disposition, and could not bear to live in poverty and oblivion in the same country where he had formerly been distinguished for his rank and magnificence."⁵ He obviously thinks (though the elder Frankenstein does not agree with him) that financial ruin disqualifies him from membership in the community of the elect, that a loss of money means a fall from grace.

In the case of Elizabeth, Victor's betrothed, the opposite is true. The daughter of an Italian nobleman whose devotion to the cause of his country's liberty had lost him his fortune, and a mother who died giving birth to her daughter, Elizabeth is returned to the state of grace into which she was born when she is taken from her ^{rustic} foster parents and brought in, through her adoption by the Frankenstein family, into the Paradise of bourgeois domesticity. Victor's mother was the main agent responsible for this gesture, being motivated in her passion for visiting the poor by the fact that she herself had dropped into the working class in order to support her self-exiled father, and had been rescued from this fallen state by marriage to Frankenstein the elder.

Thus Mary Shelley shows us, in the opening chapters of the Frankenstein narrative, how the respectability of bourgeois domestic life is a heaven built upon the not altogether unshakeable foundations of economic security. It is also, as she points out, a place of uninterrupted harmony. No word of anger is ever exchanged between Victor's parents, or between either of them and either of their two charges. The children, too, were "strangers to any species of disunion or dispute,"⁶ so that Elizabeth is to Victor and to the whole family "the living spirit of love to soften and attract," causing him to turn his temper and violent passions "not toward childish pursuits, but to an eager desire to learn."⁷

Yet in this haven free of strife there is much in Victor that cannot find expression, and it was this dynamic in the novel that I perceived clearly only after my own similar family experiences had been generalized for me through my work in the woman's movement. In my family the rule was: if you can't say something nice, don't say anything. And if Victor left home to make his mark on the world with none of the conscious bitterness that I took with me out into that world, yet he found, as surely as I did, that when those drives suppressed at home for the sake of sweetness and harmony did find expression outside the protective walls of home and family, "the living spirit of love" was not there to contain the destructiveness and self destructiveness they unleashed.

My intention here is not to press a parallel between Victor Frankenstein and myself. Yet as more and more women are going out of the home and trying to function effectively in the world of work, they are encountering their own versions of the murderous consequences of the split between home and work, between the supposed freedom of the housewife and the supposed independence of the working girl. Thus Victor's struggle embodies a fatal contradiction in the particular form of patriarchy that emerged with industrial capitalism, a flaw that undermines the well-being of women as well as men.

For what good to Victor is Elizabeth's power "to soften and attract" if he must leave it behind when he goes out into

the world? And if she cannot be a companion to him in his wanderings, why should he give the monster something that he, Victor, cannot have? Once Victor has been out in the world he becomes contaminated by it, and so can never really be united with the uncontaminated Elizabeth. To be joined with her, on the other hand, is to kill the pure thing that she is. So while he reveres her for her helplessness, her passivity, her ultimate patience, he also resents these same qualities because they cut her off from any form of active life, any sharing in his life outside the home. Had Victor not been so furtive in his desire for knowledge (and all knowledge is forbidden where one is allowed to say only "nice things") he might have allowed himself time to make a creature his own size, one who mirrored the whole of him, not just a part. But to do that he would have had to be a whole person outside the home, and also a whole person within it.

Victor is expelled from the garden of bourgeois domesticity because he has a secret which makes him an outsider and which, growing unchecked outside its walls, takes on a life of its own whose consequences Victor cannot control. In Great Expectations, too, we have a secret which Pip keeps from his family: the stealing of food and a file for the convict he meets at the site of his parents' graves. Secrets in both novels seem to brand their owners as criminals, and in both cases the punishment and the crime are one: exile from the magic circle of domesticity. Yet Frankenstein differs

from Pip in that he claims to have experienced the Paradise before he lost it. As Hillis Miller points out, in his brilliant study of Dickens' world:

Great Expectations, like most of Dickens' novels, does not begin with a description of the perfect bliss of childhood, the period when the world and the self are identified, and the parents are seen as benign gods whose care and whose overlooking judgement protect and justify the child.⁸

So Pip's determination to find a place for himself inside the magic circle of Satis House comes not from a sense of loss but rather from the knowledge that he was an outsider from the beginning, that he has never even seen a likeness of his father, nor of "Goergiana, wife of the above," and so is guilty (as the poor are guilty) of the crime of being one of the "have-nots."

Throughout most of the book, Estella appears in Pip's eyes to represent the apex of "having." It is only after he has made his impassioned, Heathcliffe-like declaration to her ("You are part of my existence, part of myself . . .")⁹ and she has submitted without resistance to Miss Havisham's final scheme of revenge that he sees the emptiness of everything that he has envied in her for so long. For she, deprived of that nurturant maternity whose absence in his own childhood Dickens resented so fiercely, is as much a "have-not" as Pip is. He is seduced into thinking otherwise by the fact that he meets her in Satis House, that place where he plays the role of child for the first time, and whose name meant,

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"when it was given, that whoever had this house could want nothing else."¹⁰ Its mistress, Miss Havisham, actually does want nothing else, which is why Pip makes her the source of the fortune by which he sees himself transformed into a "have" like Estella. This creature who has stopped time may seem a strange form for a nurturant mother to take, yet at the level of fantasy the first prerequisite of Edenic Bliss is the power (presumably on the part of the mother-goddess) to stop time.

So Estella and Pip have, in the figure of the woman who watched over them as they "played," as children, a common mother, just as they have a common father in Magwitch, the convict who says to Pip, "Look'ee here, Pip, I'm your second father. You're my son—more to me nor any son,"¹¹ only to be revealed, at a later point in the story, as Estella's actual father. So it is that their common "family tie" ends up being not the source of their respective "great expectations," as Pip had hoped, but represents instead a common origin in what is, both metaphorically and literally, the underworld.

In Frankenstein, the function of the family is one of splitting and restricting. By outlawing all behavior not conducive to harmony, the bourgeois family perpetuates itself by producing divided selves, each half desperately searching for a magic someone with whom a union can take place that will end the split. But the bourgeois family does more than simply limit and divide its members. Florence Nightingale anticipated Laing by a hundred years when she said:

The family uses people not for what they are, nor what they are intended to be, but what it wants them for. . . . If it wants someone to sit in the drawing room, that someone is supplied by the family, though that member may be destined for science, or for education, or for active superintendence by God, i.e. by the gifts within.¹²

If bourgeois parents use their children for purposes they have determined, then Magwitch and Miss Havisham are bourgeois parents writ large, and the disillusionment that accompanies Pip's coming of age is nothing less than a discovery that parenthood does not exist to promote the interests of the child. His view of Miss Havisham as an adopted mother had been entirely distorted by these expectations:

She had adopted Estella, she had as good as adopted me, and it could not fail to be her intention to bring us together. She reserved it for me to restore the desolate house, admit the sunshine into the dark rooms, set the clocks a-going and the cold hearths a-blazing, tear down the cobwebs, destroy the vermin--in short, to do all the shining deeds of the young knight of romance and marry the princess.¹³

Pip assumed, in other words, that Miss Havisham was motivated by a wish to give to himself and Estella what she had never had: the timeless domestic Paradise of which her own rule in Satis House was a grotesque inversion.

But a belief in the reality of the knight and the princess is the core of the ideology that the family transmits from one generation to the next. Moreover, it does so precisely on the terms that Miss Havisham and Magwitch transmit it to their "children." I first heard the message articulated in my first

consciousness raising group, and it has come up innumerable times in discussions with women since then. The message is: I couldn't have it, but you can. And behind that apparent generosity, behind the sacrificial stance through which bourgeois parents bind their children to them with hoops of guilt, lies the real nexus that keeps the family together: I couldn't have it, so you can't either.

They can't have it, Dickens concludes, because it doesn't exist. "Hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow," Pip and Estella leave the ruined Eden whose possession had once been all Pip's hope. The world lies all before them now, filled with all the evil that has been expelled from Eden, but there is nowhere else for them to go. The place they leave is not an Eden of abundance where a person can want nothing, but a ravaged, deserted shell from which the life has been sucked. It is ironic, I think, that Dickens, who became so famous as a creator of "family reading," and Mary Shelley, who wrote to exhibit "the amiableness of domestic affection and the excellence of universal virtue," should yield such a bleak vision of the powers of the domestic ideal. Yet I think this is their letter to the world, and what lies all before us still is the working out of its implications.

What I would like to suggest, in concluding, is that one of its implications directly affects both the way the ideas of this paper were generated, that is, through collective discussions with scholars (both teachers and students) at

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the school where I work, and the way it is being presented at a conference whose common denominator is not a single academic discipline but rather an interest in combining feminism with scholarship. I have one colleague, for example, who is writing her dissertation on the bourgeois family in Blake and Milton. She was one of the people who shared a house with me this year, and in addition to recommending many valuable books and articles to me, she discussed very freely with me the ideas she was working on for her thesis, so that by now I would have a difficult time distinguishing my ideas from hers.

The problem is that the acceptance of her dissertation depends on her being very clear on what ideas belong to her and what ideas she has gotten from other people, and her survival as a scholar depends very much on her marketing the ideas she claims as hers before anyone else can claim them (i.e. by getting them into print) ahead of her. Obviously the dissertation ("an original contribution to scholarship") is an extreme instance of how the scholarly world works in a way that is completely antithetical to anything I understand as feminist. Yet while we sit here enjoying the feast we have made for each other, that world of diminishing "employment opportunity," as it is called, that marketplace that we have expelled from these rooms for the day, has no respect for what is going on here now.

I have another colleague who is also generous with her

ideas, and who gave me very gladly the reference to that wonderful quote from Florence Nightengale that I read just a moment ago. I hesitated to ask her about it, since if I were a "real scholar" in that deadly graduate school sense that we have all learned so well, I would have come across it myself. She came across it while doing research for a book that has not yet found a publisher, but from which I heard her read a chapter at a feminist colloquium. Yet she has tenure, which makes her just a little more secure than my other friend who is writing her dissertation. My question is: how can we function as feminist scholars when those differing degrees of security exist and must be contended with?

I am certainly not putting forth an original idea when I say that the scholarly world is to a real community as military music is to music. It resembles, rather, a network of highly stratified patriarchal families where siblings gather round the dinner table and there is not enough to go around. This situation has been accepted, generally speaking, because we have learned not to complain when there is not enough. Think, after all, of the starving teachers in Declining Enrollment U. where they just fired everyone without tenure. Besides, department meetings are not held around the dinner table. They are held in "the real world," which is supposed to be riddled with competition. I wish I could end with some solutions to

a problem that bears down upon us professionally as well as personally, but if I have at least sketched out its dimensions as I see them, then perhaps we can use some of our time together to pool ideas and strategies for the coming fight: the one that will change nothing less than everything.

Footnotes

¹See Peter Laslett, "Size and Structure of the Household in England over Three Centuries (Population Studies, Vol. 23, 1967, 199-223); E. A. Wrigley, ed., An Introduction to English Historical Demography (London, 1966); Peter Laslett, ed., Household and Family in Past Time (London, 1972).

²Alice Clark, Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1968), 12-13.

³Juliet Mitchell, Woman's Estate (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), p. 152ff.

⁴Frederich Engels, The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844 (New York: International Publishers, 1968); Henry Mayhew, London Labor and the London Poor, 4 Vols. 1968 (New York: Dover Books, 1971).

⁵Mary Shelley, Frankenstein (New York: Dell Publishers, 1965), 30.

⁶*Ibid.*, 35.

⁷*Ibid.*, 37, 36.

⁸J. Hillis Miller, Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels (New York: Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1969), 251.

⁹Charles Dickens, Great Expectations (New York: The New American Library, 1963), p. 391.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 66.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 345.

¹²Florence Nightengale, "Cassandra," published in Ray Strachey, The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain (London, 1928, repr., New York, 1969), p. 406.

¹³Dickens, op. cit., p. 252.