

METAPHORS OF SPATIALITY

THE SPACE OF SPINSTERHOOD: LETTERS TO THE FEMALE MIDDLE CLASS EMIGRATION SOCIETY 1862-1882

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In 1862, two articles with similar and startling titles appeared in leading British journals. One was W.R. Greg's 'Why Are Women Redundant?'; in the other, the feminist writer Frances Power Cobbe asked disingenuously 'What Shall We Do with our Old Maids?'¹

That such articles were being written as part of the wider and more general nineteenth-century debate known as the Woman Question is only one of many indicators that the number of single women in Britain in the late 1850s and early 1860s had become a major social problem, as most of them had no means of supporting themselves, and that this problem had urgently to be addressed. Victorians, say one commentator, were 'sharply divided over a...basic question: are single women a problem because they cannot marry or because society makes it difficult for them to support themselves?' In addressing the issue W.R. Greg makes it clear that it's *middle-class* women we're concerned with here. '[F]emale servants do not constitute any part...of the problem we are attempting to solve', he writes, in italics. 'They are in no sense redundant' (Helsingier et al. 136-37).

One answer to the question 'What shall we do with our old maids?' was 'send them to Australia'; by the time these two articles were published, the first six of the governesses sent out by the Female Middle Class Emigration Society's colonial emigration scheme had arrived in Australia and were sending letters back to the scheme's founder, the energetic Maria Rye. Between 1861 and 1885 the Society assisted 302 women to emigrate in search of employment as governesses; almost half of them went to Australia. Of these, 53 wrote one or more letters back to Maria Rye or to Jane Lewin, the Secretary of the Society, and it is those letters with which this paper deals.²

It needs to be remembered that these letters are small if brightly lit windows on some very large patches of darkness. The Australian historian Patricia Clarke found out as much as she could about the women for her 1985 book on the letters, but in some cases there is no information available about how these women came to emigrate or what happened to them afterwards. Some of the letters hint at painful pasts; one can only guess at what might have happened to poor Louisa Dearnier to make her write on 1 June 1863 to Maria Rye:

if it is any consolation for you to feel that you have helped a fellow creature in distress you have most surely been made an instrument in God's hands to help me. I

did not feel it right to trouble you with a recital of my losses, bereavements, and struggles to maintain an honourable position; all of which it was my duty to bear with fortitude, but which I felt was crushing me...God will reward you for that kindness which falls like a sunbeam on the dreary pathway which it is God's will to allot to some of us.

Writing on 17 February 1862, Maria Barrow is full of gratitude for what sounds like deliverance: 'You have been the means of my finding a happy home earlier than I should have done & in this wide earth that is something'. And Laura Jones was obviously running away from someone: 'may I ask as a favour', she writes on 13 August 1869, 'that you will not answer any enquiries that may be made respecting me'; she repeats and underlines this request at the end of the letter and then two months later ends her next letter by saying 'If you will kindly...let me know whether any enquiries have been made respecting me? and by whom? I think it advisable not to sign my full name, in case my letter may fall into other hands than your own' (2 October 1869).

By 1861, when Maria Rye was formalising the Society and the first six governesses were about to leave for Australia in a kind of pilot scheme, the idea of Australia as a problem-solving device, and more specifically as a place to send superfluous members of society, seems to have been firmly entrenched in British minds. While the transportation of convicts to Australia had almost ceased, it remained a potent association. But the image of Australia as a hell on earth for the punishment of the guilty had been crossed at right angles, as it were, by the Eldorado image of the country's recent gold-rush past; and this palimpsestic image of Australia was being busily reinforced by British fiction, a trend which persisted almost through to the end of the nineteenth century. One way for a novelist of the period to deal with problematic characters was to send them to Australia, as Dickens does with the 'ruined' Little Em'ly and the financially hopeless Micawbers in *David Copperfield*, and as George Eliot does with the even more 'ruined' Hetty Sorrel at the end of *Adam Bede*. Thomas Hardy, Margaret Oliphant, Wilkie Collins, Anthony Trollope, Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Charlotte M. Yonge are among the many others who control some of their fictional characters by using Australia as either a dumping ground or a holding pen, a kind of psychogeographic unconscious from which the repressed will inevitably return to make trouble in the plot, in the form of characters like the wronged husband in *Lady Audley's Secret* or the returned convict Magwitch in *Great Expectations*. By the late 1850s, after the gold rush, Australia is also figured in Victorian fiction—sometimes in the same books, as with the two just named—as a place where one goes in order to make one's fortune.

That these clashing images of punishment and reward were uppermost in the minds of Maria Rye and of her sometimes desperate protégés becomes clearer and clearer as one reads through the entries in the Society's letterbook. What they couldn't know about was the invisible prohibition articulated by Edward Said in the Introduction to *Culture and Imperialism*: 'The prohibition placed on Magwitch's return', he says, is not only penal but imperial: subjects can be taken to places like Australia, but they cannot be allowed a 'return' to metropolitan space, which, as all Dickens' fiction testifies, is meticulously charted, spoken for, inhabited by a hierarchy of metropolitan personages. (xvii)

If Said is right and you really can't go home again, then one can't help wondering what happened to poor Rosa Phayne, perhaps the most desperately miserable of all the governesses sent to Australia under Miss Rye's scheme. Writing to Miss Lewin on 18 May 1871 to inform the Society of her intention to return to England, she asks—rather optimistically, under the circumstances—for help in getting a job on her return. '[T]his Country...feels like a prison to me, only without the ignominy', she writes,

no books, no society, nothing improving, everything retrograde—conversation, scandal & gossip...I am quite determined to return home...Can you, & if so will you help me in this? I should very much like to be in or near London, having an intense admiration, if not love, for the metropolis of the world'.

Obviously this epistolary history of expatriated governesses is a rich field for feminist, for postcolonial and for new historicist readings; while I have tried and will go on trying to make gestures towards those theoretical frameworks and while they obviously underlie my concerns, the focus of this paper is textual and will be on the content of the letters themselves.

What I want to argue is this: that many of the letters, as documents with a variety of communicative and discursive functions, are internally inconsistent in a way that makes some of them seem—in content if not expression—almost incoherent, and that there are two reasons for this. One is that much of the information and emotion that was there to be conveyed existed outside the discourses available to genteel nineteenth-century middle-class single womanhood and was therefore barely able to be thought, much less to be coherently expressed—although it found its way out as best it could, often in the form of Biblical rhetoric: the trope of Christian resignation in particular gets a real workout in these letters, and is frequently used to smother violence of feeling. Annie Hunt, lamenting the death during her voyage of the fiance whom she had travelled to Australia to marry, wrote 'I strive to say, God's will be done' (11 October 1869).

The other reason for the incoherence of these letters is that the women who wrote them occupied not just one but several kinds of liminal space, where their future was uncertain, their feelings chaotic, and their status unknown often even to themselves. As travellers they were frequently uncertain about whether they were emigrants or visitors, and, as world citizens, about whether they would stay British or become 'colonial'. As single women and almost certainly virgins, they were themselves figured as blank spaces; they occupied that vastly uncomfortable and invisible female territory between being a child and being an adult woman taking her appointed place as wife and mother in a social structure whose organising unit was the patriarchal family.

And, as governesses, they were in the truly problematic state of what one influential essay calls 'status incongruence'. M. Jeanne Peterson, writing in 1970, observed that

The employment of a gentlewoman as a governess in a middle-class family served to reinforce and perpetuate certain Victorian values. But inherent in the employment of a lady was a contradiction of the very values she was hired to fulfill. The result was a situation of conflict and incongruity for both the governess and the family... Victorian parents sought a woman who could teach their daughters... genteel accomplishments... they sought a gentlewoman. But the new ethos of the ideal woman was that of a woman of leisure... One sensitive observer of the Victorian social scene made the following assessment of a governess's situation: 'the real discomfort of a governess's position in a private family arises from the fact that it is undefined. She is not a relation, not a guest, not a mistress, not a servant—but something made up of all. No one knows exactly how to treat her'. (4-5, 9-10)

Peterson is quoting Elizabeth Sewell's 1865 study of women's education, in which that rhetorical repetition of the word 'not' indicates the negatively defined nature of the liminal. The metaphor of single women in general and governesses in particular being defined by negativity in terms of space is one which recurs frequently in both nineteenth- and twentieth-century commentary. Martha Vicinus, writing in 1985, observes rather alarmingly of the Victorian spinster that

spatial limitations and lack of privacy were characteristic of the situation of the genteel single woman... Single women could not be given a place of their own within the family because they were ancillary to their mother or married sisters, and because their state was considered temporary. To give them space—and independence—was to admit not only their failure in the marriage market, but also their family's. Unmarried daughters were therefore expected to be invisible... At times it seemed as if the only space freely allotted to a spinster was the grave. (14)

Almost 150 years earlier Charlotte Brontë had complained in a letter to her sister Emily that 'a

private governess has no existence, is not considered as a living and rational being' (Gordon 78).

And, speaking of Charlotte Brontë, if by 1861 the idea of Australia existed as a powerful literary construct then the same seems to have been equally true of the idea of the governess, and for this Charlotte Brontë and her sister Anne must be held at least partly responsible. Novels like *Jane Eyre*, *Agnes Grey*, *Shirley* and *Villette*, published in the late 1840s and early 1850s, represented the life of the governess as the Brontë sisters had experienced it. By 1861, two book reviews in the *Athenaeum*—one in February, one in August, and both obviously by the same anonymous reviewer—were poking fun at what had apparently, in the intervening years, become a literary stereotype:

Are governesses the ill-used race which it is now the fashion to consider them? The despairing governess...cries and sighs her way through this book... [but] we believe that [her] mind was brought to this morbid state by reading the exaggerated pictures of a governess's life which are now so much disseminated. (*Athenaeum* No. 1736)

That's the February review; in August, reviewing a different novel, the reviewer is at it again: A governess in a novel is invariably a poor, miserable, nervous creature; given over to the scorn and contempt of her fellow mortals....Instead of taking any interest in the progress of her pupils...[this heroine] spends her time in watching who shakes hands with her and who does not—whether she has a fire in her room, and whether the servants treat her with respect. If she is asked to join the family circle in the evening, she is a victim because she does not engross the attention of the whole party....If, on the other hand, the lady of the house hints that [she] may prefer to have her evenings to herself, she employs an hour in writing some verses, called 'The Cry of the Broken-Hearted'....Now, there can be no doubt, that a governess has what the maids call 'a great deal to put up with': but who could not—in whatever station of life they may be placed—find something to complain of if they chose to set about it systematically and make a trade of it? Why don't the cooks of England rise in a body and write pamphlets...? (*Athenaeum* No. 1764)

The answer to this last question might be the classic 'Because cooks know their place'. Governesses did not, precisely because the place of governesses was unknowable. So, not only armed with but also partly constructed by the conflicting and contradictory models of Australia and of life as a governess that were circulating in contemporary British literary culture, Miss Rye's Australian governesses wrote their letters home. However hard they found it to get work and however homesick they became, most of them are amazed and delighted by the fact that people are actually nice to them: almost all of these letters contain the word 'kindness', used to describe either employers or new Australian friends. Peterson argues that 'emigration of the English governess served to reduce the conflict for her' because it involved an escape 'to a place where status would be less ambiguous and less painful and where there was more chance of marriage and a permanent resolution to incongruence' (16-17). The Australian critic Marion Amies, writing 18 years later in the same journal, agrees with this; citing 'evidence from colonial sources' among which she includes these letters, Amies argues that:

emigration did allow a degree of resolution for some governesses. Under pioneering conditions and on outback stations the ideal of leisured womanhood was modified to encompass the imperative of work so that the governess was no longer outside the ideal. In literary portrayals her sexuality was acknowledged and, provided she was willing to adapt to bush ways, she was welcomed as one of the family and sought after as a settler's wife. (537-38)

What these letters chart is that process of resolution or, alternately, its failure. They are attempts to negotiate the chaotic and unmapped terrain between different and often conflicting roles, discourses, expectations, genres and desires.

One of the first things that strike the reader is that most of these letters don't know what they are really about; they are letters that don't understand themselves. The occasion for most of them is the return of some or all of the money loaned by the Society or, alternatively, an

explanation of the failure to do so. In addition it's clear that Miss Rye had asked the governesses to give their general impressions of the country and, more specifically, to report on the availability of jobs, or rather what they all politely and suggestively call 'situations', for more potential emigrating women. In the process of fulfilling these functions the governesses frequently expressed their feelings about the situation in which they found themselves. They are writing, as I argued earlier, not from one but from several liminal zones; not from the margins, but rather from what might be called the debatable ground.

It's not surprising, then, that many of the letters display a kind of incoherence of genre. Some are at once business and personal letters, using indiscriminately the rhetorical conventions of both; many start out as brief and formal letters about money, letters of thanks or apology which then suddenly turn in on themselves to become either fulsome hymns of praise and thankfulness or diatribes of bitterness, complaint and reproach, interspersed in both cases with bursts of what can only be called travel writing. Maria Barrow, writing on 17 February 1862, might be speaking for most of these women when she says thoughtfully in closing 'Excuse this odd letter it is not the kind I meant to have written you or that you ought to have, but somehow I find quite a difficulty in concocting epistles at present'. The real reason for this difficulty is that the ideal letter she feels she ought to write is one that cannot be written from the matrix of social, psychic and geographic spaces in which she finds herself.

It is mainly in their 'travel writing' aspect that the writers of these letters negotiate the fact of being in Australia and their own relation to it. Travel writing is an exoticising genre which constructs its topic as Other, its writer as identified with the home audience, and its subject matter as whatever makes the new place different from home. But these writers, floundering among their own pronouns, often seem very unsure where they stand in their divisions of countries into the categories of Home and Away, and of populations into the categories of Us and Them. I should add, too, that all talk of Us and Them refers to the 'colonials', that is the white Australian-born, as opposed to the new English arrivals; out of a total of 123 letters, only 2 mention the Aboriginal population at all, and then only in passing.

Gertrude Gooch, one of the first six to be sent out and apparently intending to stay in Australia for good, wrote in February 1862 in a way that shows how much slippage there was between thinking of oneself as a stranger and thinking of oneself as belonging:

There is a great deal to learn to become fitted for active life here. Australian Ladies are very different to English & they dislike as they term it our particular ways, one thing the climate is so very different they are certainly very indolent & untidy...Australians are keen & very quick & fair judges of English people...you meet with very few quiet patient girls here, they like no trouble nor will they take any about anything. The floor is the place for everything & it is no use making yourself unhappy because they will not acquire English manners for they do not like them and you can soon see the difference in an English & Australian Lady but it is very natural...I am certain it will be a long while before I see the Old Country again, perhaps never, I love it as ever, but I can earn more money here & I expect always find something to do, there are enough of us at home, I...cannot yet believe I am 1700 miles away from Old England.

To opt firmly for identification with either Home or Away—having first, of course, decided which is which—is the path most of these women follow, ending up in either the first or the second of the three 'migrancy positions' outlined by Paul Carter: Australia is represented by them as either 'just like home' or 'nothing like home'. 'Both intellectually and emotionally', says Carter,

migrants lack a *tertium quid*, a third position that avoids the arbitrary wilfulness of the other two stances. But what form would such a third position take, and how would it be achieved? We can guess that it would not try to reduce the local to a variation of life elsewhere, nor treat the local as exotically strange, as a world apart from the world...An authentically migrant perspective would, perhaps, be based on an

intuition that the opposition between here and there is itself a cultural construction, a consequence of thinking in terms of fixed entities and defining them oppositionally. It might begin by regarding movement, not as an awkward interval between fixed points of departure and arrival, but as a mode of being in the world. The question would be, then, not how to arrive, but how to move. (100-101)

Perhaps it's not surprising that the governess who most closely approximates Carter's ideal is not English but French; Mademoiselle Cécile Nagelle was clearly already experienced in migrancy before she ever arrived in Australia. Or perhaps it's just that moving is what she likes best; '[some] don't care for the voyage', she says '—they dread it—but I think it is splendid' (14 May 1877).

An even more apparent incoherence characterises the letter-writers' own sense of their social and sexual status—precisely because, as discussed earlier, the position of a governess in that regard was incoherent to start with. As far as class identification is concerned, some express their ladyhood by bemoaning the implicitly contrasting vulgarity of colonial ladies; others lay claim to gentility by detailing their own various forms of helplessness: their physical fragilities, their incompetence in money matters, and the fact that if their dear brother (or uncle or male cousin) had not been there to meet them then they really do not know *what* they should have done alone in this strange land. Louisa Geoghegan writes of Australian employers in a tone of faint and friendly contempt precisely because she regards them as too vulgar to realise they ought to be socially contemptuous of *her*: the life of a governess, she writes,

is a totally different life from what it is at home. In *nearly* every instance you are looked on as the Intellectual Member of the Establishment—you are the constant companion & associate of the Lady, considered—I might say indulged in every way & your only difficulty is to civilize the children... (12 August 1868)

While they are positively garrulous about their social status, the subject of their sexual status is one upon which they are almost wholly silent. When Maria Rye was organising the scheme in 1861, she argued that single ladies would have a good chance of marrying if they went to Australia. The subtext, or one subtext, of Rye's reasoning was that with any luck these 'surplus', 'superfluous', 'redundant' women would quickly be married off in a country where wives were presumably in demand and potential husbands not at all fussy; it's an assumption which underlies the rationale of the whole scheme and yet it's an issue upon which all of the single women maintain a silence which is painful, ladylike and total. Only two of the Australian correspondents mention it at all, and one of those is married and can presumably therefore speak of it without compromising herself. The other, the cheerful and competent Annie Davis, writes of her plans to provide for her own old age, and adds 'I am aware there is an idea in England that young and accomplished Governesses soon marry in this land, that is a mistake at least nowadays...it should be looked on as the exception and not the rule' (17 June 1864).

Each of these 'governess letters' is what A.S. Byatt has called, in another context, 'the matrix for a surmation of texts and codes'.³ But it needs to be remembered that these letters were written by real people, and from within that matrix you can often hear a clear voice, unambiguously cheering or weeping or thinking. The letters from the apparently manic depressive Rosa Payne are full of genuine anguish—'I am so unhappy, for my family are very poor, and I am wretched out here alone' (June 1872)—but she stops waiting for just long enough to make this arresting observation: 'in Bush life there is great charm....I have seen more of life, of the springs of action in people in their ways, and peculiarities than I ever did in my life before & I have travelled & seen much' (25 March 1870).

And to finish, there is the cheering spectacle of Miss Barlow, whose first name may or may not have been Nancy, and who obviously welcomed the opportunity that emigration gave her to resolve the inconsistencies and incongruities of her life as a governess in England—an identity she rejects completely in this letter, embracing her new place in life with something approaching glee. She has opened a school in the bush, which is clearly keeping her

overworked, but her letter is full of exuberance. 'I like Bush life very much', she writes on 24 June 1863,

I have only twice been in to Melbourne since I came...It is now the depth of winter a delightful change after the hot winds, my household scrubbing and rubbing used to be rather trying at those times; I am getting quite a Colonial woman and fear I should not easily fit into English ideas again, can scrub a floor with anyone, and bake my own bread and many other things [that would horrify] an English Governess...

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Notes

- 1 In *The Nation* and *Fraser's* respectively.
- 2 Letterbook of the Female Middle Class Emigration Society: AJCP microfilm. All subsequent quotations of the letters refer to this manuscript.
- 3 In *Possession*, Byatt is actually talking about the self: 'Narcissism, the unstable self, the fractured ego, Maud thought, who am I? A matrix for a surruration of texts and codes? It was both a pleasant and an unpleasant idea' (251).