What Kind of Book is "Cranford"?

GEORGE V. GRIFFITH

"That a book is a novel means anything or nothing; the practical question relates to its character and contents."¹

For so slight a thing *Cranford* is a problematic book. Everyone loves it, although no one is quite sure how it works or what it is. A glance at its printing history and the history of its critical reception confirms the problem. Whereas Mrs. Gaskell's other novels have seen no more than five or six editions, Cranford has appeared in no fewer than one hundred and seventy editions since 1853.2 Yet through the critical assessment and revaluation two troubling questions persist. The first is a generic question (is it a novel?), the second a question of narrative technique (what is the manner of its telling?). Cranford has been alternately labelled a novel or a collection of sketches. Generic labellers have consistently hedged, carefully tendering their descriptions with oddly hyphenated terms and a liberal sprinkling of the words "although" and "perhaps." Thus to a biographer what begins as a "story-article" became what "might be called a novel."³ To an eminent historian of the novel *Cranford* "happily perhaps is not a novel."⁴ To a chronicler of the short story form Cranford "though it has far more unity than a mere collection of stories about a single locale, is after all episodic and more truly belongs to the history of short fiction than some of her shorter pieces."5

A similar confusion characterizes the discussion of *Cranford*'s narrative technique. For one the novel is "practically structureless," at most "united by mood, spirit, and tone," and another dismisses its structural integrity with a left-handed compliment, tagging it "the best known example of the advantage to the writer of not needing to bother about structural organization."⁶ To one "the force of the novel lies in plot . . . not in character"; to another "the structure of the novel is based on characterization, not incident or plot."⁷ This confusion has come about because the genesis of the book and the method of its publication, its generic status, and its narrative technique have usually been considered separately.⁸ But the generic character of the book is inseparable from the manner of its telling and these in turn are a function of the method of its publication. When we consider these as a unit, we can make sense of *Cranford*, of how it works and of what it is.

Northrop Frye notes that the word "novel," "which up to about 1900 was still the name of a more or less recognizable form, has since expanded into a catchall term which can be applied to practically any prose book that is not 'on' something."9 This enlarging of the term "novel" has allowed many to consider *Cranford* a novel, although it was not so thought of by Mrs. Gaskell herself, who, in her first reference to the work in a letter, spoke of "a couple of tales about Cranford."10 Nor did Dickens seem to think of *Cranford* in novel terms, referring to Mrs. Gaskell's submission to Household Words in December 1851 as her Cranford "paper."¹¹ Without belabouring the wellknown story of the genesis of Cranford, it is nevertheless important to remember that were it not for Dickens's enthusiasm. Cranford may have remained only a few tales, or perhaps even less, as it actually began, a more or less non-fictional, personal essay of reminiscence about life in Knutsford. Titled "The Last Generation in England," the essay was published in a Philadelphia journal, Sartain's Union Magazine in 1849, then substantially revised to appear two years later as "Our Society at Cranford" in Household Words. Dickens was so taken by the piece ("I was so delighted with it that I put it first in the number," he wrote [Letters, II, 36]) that he requested more. Yet in this first tale Mrs. Gaskell had killed off the two most prominent characters and had clearly written to an ending. The penultimate paragraph begins "The last time I saw Miss Jenkyns was many vears after this," a clear signal of closure.¹² As Mrs. Gaskell revealed to Ruskin fourteen years later, "the beginning of 'Cranford' was one paper in 'Household Words'; and I never meant to write more" (Letters, No. 748). Cranford was never intended to be a novel, yet write more she did, all to Dickens's evident satisfaction.

The subsequent publication of the remaining portions of *Cranford* points to its unique generic status. The sixteen chapters of the book form we now have were published in nine pieces at irregular intervals over a period of eighteen months between December 1851 and May 1853. They appeared as follows:

Dec. 13, 1851 — Chaps. 1-2 Jan. 3, 1852 — Chaps. 3-4 Mar. 13, 1852 — Chaps. 3-4 Apr. 3, 1852 — Chaps. 5-6 Apr. 3, 1852 — Chaps. 7-8 Jan. 15, 1853 — Chaps. 9-11 Apr. 2, 1853 — Chaps. 12-13 May 7, 1853 — Chap. 14 May 21, 1853 — Chaps. 15-16

Serialized regularly as a novel might have been, Cranford's sixteen chapters could have been printed in the weekly Household Words in only eight weeks at the rate at which Mrs. Gaskell began. Instead the nine pieces were stretched out over eighteen months, a remarkably long time in a weekly. During that period there were long silences, almost a year between the fourth and fifth printed segments. In that interval Mrs. Gaskell was writing a ghost tale, "The Old Nurse's Story," for the Christmas number of Household Words for 1852 and Ruth, a full length novel published conventionally in three volumes by Chapman and Hall in January 1853. The length and irregularity of this publication contrast strongly with the serial publication of North and South, which, despite the many well documented problems she had with the serialization of the novel, nevertheless appeared regularly between September 2, 1854 and January 1855.¹³

Pieced together by Mrs. Gaskell's biographers, all of this material about the genesis of *Cranford* has made the novel a generic puzzle to twentieth-century readers. It was not so to Victorians. With a firm sense of what a novel is, they treated these stories with the nearly dimissive consideration such ephemeral short pieces so self-evidently deserved. "What the novel, in contradistinction to other forms of literary art, specifically is, we shall not trouble our readers or ourselves to enquire," wrote

a British Quarterly Review essayist in an article on George Eliot.¹⁴ Another article in the same journal, in an obituary assessment of Mrs. Gaskell's work, had this to say of Cranford:

North and South was originally published in Household Words, as were also the delicious pictures of country-town life grouped together under the name of *Cranford*. Mrs. Gaskell has written many things of greater power and more vivid interest than these stories, but nothing that will better bear to be read over and over again. They are rich in her peculiar humour, her sense of fun, and warm throughout with her genuine womanly kindness. Akin to these are numerous short tales, contributed to various periodicals, amongst which we may instance as most striking, "Lizzie Leigh," "The Grey Woman," and "Mr. Harrison's Confessions," which have since been collected into volumes.¹⁵

In a thirty-page article this is the only time *Cranford*, so obviously not a novel, is mentioned. It was dismissed even more curtly in a *Fortnightly Review* article titled, appropriately, "Mrs. Gaskell's Novels."¹⁶

If *Cranford* is not a novel, nor is it a serial. Serial publication, made popular by Dickens with Pickwick Papers and subsequently used by most Victorian novelists, was a method of periodical publication of an extended prose narrative that eventually became in the hands of its skilled practitioners a narrative technique. The narrative thus published would still be characterized by unity of plot, character, and theme; it is just that its readers would experience it in parts before they could experience it as a whole. Breaking the narrative into parts necessarily affected the structure of the piece, particularly the plotting, and established a form of story telling in many cases uniquely Victorian. That Victorians were themselves aware of this is evident in a comment by a reviewer of Vanity Fair who expressed surprise at the flow of the narrative, "considering the periodical form of publication for which it was written, and which ordinarily demands an 'effect' of some sort at each monthly fall of the curtain."17 Of these characteristics of the serial, Cranford shares only one. It was published periodically. But it was not published regularly, it is not an extended narrative, and its parts indicate no striving after climactic effect. It does not, in short, exploit any of the advantages of periodicity, as was customary with serials. If we think of it as a serial, we do so mistakenly, confusing a narrative technique with a method of publication.

What then is Cranford? I propose to call it, at least in part, a short fiction series to distinguish it from a novel and especially from a novel published serially. The short fiction series is a periodically published group of short prose narratives which, when gathered together, gives the appearance of a unified "story," although the segments are so loosely connected as often to take on the autonomy of discrete short fictions. The difference between series and serial is simple but nevertheless important. In the latter the whole is always greater than the part. The serial is a fully plotted narrative which differs from the volume novel largely in the reader's periodical reading of its parts. These are therefore significant as they move the narrative toward its conclusion, those which fail to do so customarily being considered digressions or interpolations. Hence the serial is always writing toward an end. In the series, on the other hand, since the part is greater than the whole, the work is never conscious of an end. So although the parts may share locale, characters, narrator, may be unified tonally or thematically, they will not be bound together by the plotted sequence of an extended narrative. Unlike the parts of a serial, therefore, those in a series will not be shaped by periodical publication. There will be none of that dramatic curtain closing at the end of each part which Victorian readers came to expect. Furthermore, freed from the temporal rigidity of plot, the sequence of parts in a series is unimportant and the parts may often be rearranged with a casual freedom. Accordingly, the parts of a series tend to be more repetitive than sequential, the later parts often repeating the successful formula of earlier segments. All the parts, in sum, will have a characteristic independence.

Chapters three and four of *Cranford*, which formed the second published segment, offer an example of the integrity of the parts of a series fiction. The story of Miss Matty's emergence from the yoke of her now dead sister, this unit could well stand alone. It exactly resembles the first segment, all that Mrs. Gaskell intended to write, in the strength of its closure, the resolution of its conflict and themes. That it follows the death of Miss Jenkyns in the first segment does not bond it to that part completely, for the reader learns of Miss Jenkyns's death and of her domination of Miss Matty in a dramatic opening sequence which functions as exposition. That is all the reader needs to know to understand what the narrator sets up as the key problem of the story: "And so it was in everything. Miss Jenkyns' rules were made more strict than ever, because the framer of them was gone where there could be no appeal" (p. 26). How strict these rules were and how Miss Matty may now emerge from them is developed in two narrative lines — the story of Miss Matty's visit to Mr. Holbrook, and the story of her maid Martha and her lover. A former suitor of Miss Matty who had to be rejected because Miss Jenkyns thought him beneath the Jenkyns rank, Holbrook reappears to rekindle Miss Matty's love, only to die before anything can come of it. Thus she is defeated in love a second time. But in Martha she finds a redemption of sorts. Martha is prohibited by the terms of her employment to have "followers," and Miss Matty enforces the rule. After Holbrook's death, however, she sees in the prohibition her sister's thwarting of her love many years earlier, a prohibition for the sake of propriety only. "God forbid," she announces, "that I should grieve any young hearts," as she relaxes the ban on "followers" (p. 40). Thus Miss Matty finds her way out of the yoke of Miss Jenkyns in an epiphanic moment symbolic of her realization of self and love. The two narrative strands of the episode are fused and there is a very strong sense of closure. The narrative disengages from its particulars and rises to the abstract in this closing line: "Though Miss Matty was startled, she submitted to Fate and Love" (p. 40). Much like an apothegm, this line completely resolves the issues of the story and elevates the story's particulars to a level of general significance.

As a short fiction series, periodically published at a leisurely pace, never writing to a close, content with casual repetition, *Cranford* looks back to such predecessors as *The Spectator* and *The Tatler*. As a portrait of English village life, it belongs in the age of Crabbe and Goldsmith. Indeed two predecessors in prose narrative are close relatives: Mary Russell Mitford's *Our Village* and John Galt's *Annals of the Parish*. Mitford's book appeared first in *The Ladies Magazine* in 1819 and Galt's *Annals of the Parish*, although originally published in volume format in 1821, exactly resembles in its series character, his *The Ayrshire Legatees*, which appeared earlier the same year in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*.¹⁸ Like *Cranford* these other books are reminiscential, wistful chronicles of a changing way of life, written with an apparent need to record what was. Galt insisted on calling his works "theoretical histories."

As the leisurely life of the village inevitably succumbed to the more hurried pace of an industrial England whose villages were connected by train after the 1830's, however, so too did the narrative techniques suited to that pace also change. After the first two decades of the century, series gave way to serial as the more appropriate vision for the new age. One can see this shift in Dickens's early work. His first published sketch (1833), which he referred to as "the first of a series,"¹⁹ later became incorporated in *Sketches by Boz*, a kind of urban version of a series of village sketches. In *Pickwick Papers* the uneasy unity of the story of the Pickwick Club and the nine interpolated tales is evidence of the growing strength of serial narrative. By *Oliver Twist* the series disappeared entirely. Yet all were published periodically.

This change in vision and in the narrative strategies appropriate to it has been the concern of historians of the short story form. Lionel Stevenson, in an effort to account for the absence of the genuine short story early in the nineteenth century, despite the presence of much short fiction, wrote of what he aptly called "the agglomerative impulse."20 This tendency to flesh out both plot and character in short fiction so that novels in miniature were always threatening to become novels in full was exhibited by all the major figures of the Victorian age and is typical, Stevenson notes, of periods of increasing cultural complexity. Wendell V. Harris explains the arrival of the short story genre late in the century by pointing to the dominance of the novel, whose function the century saw "essentially as the presentation of life in latitudinal or longitudinal completeness."21 In each case serial narrative technique was the more appropriate narrative strategy for the larger vision.

That some similar phenomenon of shift from series to serial

took place on a smaller scale in *Cranford* is evident in the structure of the book, for it provides us with an example of both narrative techniques. The first half of the book, chapters one to eight, the first four published parts, resemble a series fiction more than the remaining eight chapters of the book, the last four published segments, in which the signs of serial narrative are stronger. In subject Mrs. Gaskell wrote a book like those earlier ones and her format of periodical publication was also the same. But the age of the series had passed.

The external evidence to support this notion is the gap in time between the publication of the two halves of the book, which was more than twice as long as it took for either of the two parts themselves to appear. Chapters one to eight appeared in four months, chapters nine to sixteen in four months; between eight and nine, nine months elapsed. For internal evidence one must look at techniques of closure and at techniques of linking episodes.

Closure is strong in each of the four parts of the series half of the book. No question of plot or theme in the story is unresolved at the end, although the method varies from story to story. Resolution comes in one case with the death of the main characters (first story), in others with signals of a change in time. In that same first story, for example, the narrator ends with a reference to a time later than the events of the story ("The last time I saw"), and allusions in the tale to Pickwick Papers and A Christmas Carol signal to the reader the passing of six years from the ending of the events of the story to this reference. Other stories involve not a shift from present to future but from past to present. The second story, "Memory at Cranford," uses the device of reading old letters to tell a story of the distant past, then resolves the story by returning to the present and closing with a dramatic present scene. Another method of resolution is the elevation of a story's particulars to general significance in an abstract statement of theme, a technique used in the earlier analyzed second story and in the fourth as well. That fourth tale also uses a technique involving the ironic reversal of expectations established at the beginning of the tale. Titled "Visiting at Cranford" in its Household Words appearance, it is the story of Mrs. Jamieson, Cranford's arbiter of taste, and the impending visit of her sister-in-law, Lady Glenmire. In this engaging look at social snobbery in Cranford, Mrs. Jamieson puffs and everyone else scrambles in preparation for the great event. Lady Glenmire, however, turns out to be "far removed from the vulgarity of wealth" (p. 80), quite without the snobbish superiority that others expect. Hence Mrs. Jamieson receives her comeuppance, all of Cranford's expectations are overturned, and the story closes with the narrator's ironic remark that "we picked our way home with extra care that night; so refined and delicate were our perceptions after drinking tea with 'my lady'" (p. 80).

By contrast closure in the serial section of the book is necessarily inconclusive. Since each segment is less important than the whole, each must move the reader to the next. In these, then, issues are unresolved as the reader is propelled forward. The first of these, "The Great Cranford Panic in Two Chapters," is typical. The beginning is all expectation. There is a "very mysterious letter," an injunction to "take warning," and an announcement that "such a piece of gaiety was going to happen as had not been seen or known of since Wombwell's lions came" (p. 81). The source of all this expectation is "Signor Brunoni who was going to exhibit his wonderful magic in the Cranford Assembly Rooms" (p. 81). The end, however, is all irresolution. None of the issues raised here (Will Cranford be amazed? What will be its excitement? Is Brunoni a fraud? Who will be fooled?), none is settled in a long and diffuse story whose ending introduces yet an entirely new issue - the possibility of Peter's return. This occurs when Mrs. Brown reveals that she had met an Aga Jenkyns in India, allowing the narrator to speculate that this might be Peter. The story ends not with the abstract line that resolves but with an inconclusive and suspenseful line: "I would make further inquiry" (p. 111). The possible return of Peter and the impending bankruptcy of Miss Matty propel this serial though its four numbers, each number but the last ending in suspense.

The method of linking episodes is another internal sign of the difference between series and serial. Here one looks to the beginning of each episode to discover that in the series, the links between the stories will be weak or absent, in the serial quite strong. There is a complete break, for example, between the second and third episodes with no effort to provide a transition. Where an effort is made, the result is often a simple chronological signal, and that as often an inexact one. The fourth story opens "one morning" (p. 60), an appropriately ambiguous bridge between two stories whose events share no chronological relationship. Their order could be reversed without damage. That Mrs. Gaskell was aware of the weakness of these links is clear in the elaborate fiction that opens the fifth number, the first to appear after the long break. It too is a time signal and an inexact one:

Soon after the events of which I gave an account in my last paper, I was summoned home by my father's illness; and for a time, I forgot, in anxiety about him, to wonder how my dear friends at Cranford were getting on, or how Lady Glenmire could reconcile herself to the fullness of the long visit which she was still paying to her sister-in-law, Mrs. Jamieson. When my father grew a little stronger I accompanied him to the sea-side, so that altogether I seemed banished from Cranford, and was deprived of the opportunity of hearing any chance intelligence of the dear little town for the greater part of that year. (p. 80)

The unspecified "soon after" with which this number opens is necessary only because the reader reads the episode "after," since there is again no chronological relationship between the events of episodes four and five. But that reading is certainly not "soon after." Hence this elaborate fiction about the narrator (a selfeffacing character of no particular significance anywhere else in the book) is more an account of Cranford's appearance in Household Words than it is an account of the events of the story. She proceeds to relate that she received a letter from Miss Matty "late in November" (p. 81), a reference that brings story time up to real time (the number appeared in January) and thus maintains the fiction of Cranford's appearance in Household Words. The next three numbers, by contrast, open with the clear transitions typical of the serial. Neither a fiction about the narrator (who again disappears) nor any temporal reference is needed since the transitions are provided by the continuing plot. Five, for example, closes with the possibility of Peter's return and six

opens a little more than two months later in *Household Words* with the question: "Was the 'poor Peter' of Cranford the Aga Jenkyns of Chunderabaddad, or was he not?" (p. 111). The last two numbers open similarly with plot references.

What might be called the internal links between stories references, that is, which occur other than at the beginning or end of stories - also demonstrate the difference between series and serial. In the series these links unify by referring back to characters or incidents of earlier segments, but they tend to be largely superfluous or parenthetical as in "(as I think I have said before)" (p. 61) or "whom I have named before" (p. 63) or "the little charity school girl I have named before" (p. 78). These impose a kind of unity on the otherwise independent numbers of the series, but they are not references whose meaning is necessary in order to understand the matter of the moment. In the serial section, on the other hand, the internal links tend to look ahead, not back, as in all the references to Peter and to Miss Matty's bankruptcy. These foreshadowing devices are possible in the serial half of the novel because of the plot which joins the numbers together. The unity they provide is less an arbitrary imposition than it is an outcome of the story.

Careful plotting was not at this time Mrs. Gaskell's strength, although by the end of the decade she was writing to an inquiring author, insisting on the need to "study hard at your plot," for it is the foundation of the novel (Letters, No. 540). Nor was she encouraged at this time by Dickens, whose requests for Cranford "papers" were invitations to a series. Indeed as a periodical editor Dickens did not himself come to accept the long serial in his journals until the end of the decade. As late as 1856 he was writing to Wills of his reluctance to serialize a long novel, Collins's Dead Secret: "Now as to a long story itself, I doubt its value to us. And I feel perfectly convinced that it is not one quarter so useful to us as detached papers. . . . " (Letters, II, 801). When he did finally commit himself to the serial publication of novels in his magazines, it was announced as an editorial change in All the Year Round following the conclusion of his own Tale of Two Cities: "We purpose always to reserve the first place in these pages for a continuous original work of fiction,

engaging about the same amount of time on its serial publication as that which is now completed."²² It is clear, then, that we must look to narrative technique as well as form of publication to understand a work. Periodical publication was not necessarily serial technique.

The Household Words episodes of Cranford were gathered together, revised slightly, and published in a single volume by Chapman and Hall in 1853. An effort to revive the series was made in November 1863 in All the Year Round with the publication of "The Cage at Cranford," an independent short fiction whose opening line, complete with an inaccurate date and apparently untroubled over the ten-year gap since its last appearance, asked ingenuously: "Have I told you anything about my friends at Cranford since the year 1856?" (p. 168). The revival was not successful; the book's time and techniques had passed.

And so what, then, is Cranford? Not a novel, except in our enlarged sense of the term, not fully a serial, despite its periodical publication, in part a series resembling some books of a few decades earlier, Cranford was a work in whose first number there appeared, ironically, a key to the problematic character of a book with its heart in two centuries. There Miss Deborah Jenkyns and Captain Brown debate the merits of Dr. Johnson and Dickens. When Captain Brown asks Miss Jenkyns if she has read Pickwick Papers the narrator notes, parenthetically, "(They were then publishing in parts)" (p. 8). Miss Jenkyns pronounces it "vulgar, and below the dignity of literature, to publish in numbers," to which Captain Brown asks: "How was 'the Rambler' published, Ma'am?" (p. 9). As a book about English village life, Cranford was a book of its time, a last hurrah to a departing way of life and to the narrative techniques of an earlier age and a reluctant welcome to a new age and a new vision. Both Miss Jenkyns and Captain Brown would have found something in it to love.

NOTES

¹ British Quarterly Review, 45 (1867), 143.

² According to Miriam Allott, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1960), p. 26.

- ³ Angus Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 97, 100.
- ⁴ Ernest A. Baker, *The History of the English Novel*, 9 vols. (London: H. F. & G. Witherby Ltd., 1924-1938), VIII, p. 89.
- ⁵ Wendell V. Harris, British Short Fiction in the Nineteenth Century (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979), p. 65.
- ⁶ Annette B. Hopkins, *Elizabeth Gaskell: Her Life and Works* (London: John Lehman Ltd., 1952), p. 350; J. McVeagh, "Notes on Mrs. Gaskell's Narrative Technique," *Essays in Criticism* 18 (1968), 467.
- ⁷ Martin Dodsworth, "Women Without Men at Cranford," Essays in Criticism 13 (1963), 133; Patricia A. Wolfe, "Structure and Movement in Cranford," NCF, 23 (1968), 162.
- ⁸ One exception is Margaret Tarratt, "Cranford and 'the Strict Code of Gentility'," Essays in Criticism, 18 (1968), 152-63, although Tarratt's argument is finally a thematic one and is not duplicated by mine.
- ⁹ Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 304.
- ¹⁰ The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell, eds. J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), No. 110. I follow the editors' numbering of the letters in subsequent references to this edition, which will be cited in the text as Letters.
- ¹¹ The Letters of Charles Dickens, ed. Walter Dexter, 3 vols. (London: Nonesuch Press, 1938), II, 361. Subsequent references to this edition will be cited in the text as Letters.
- ¹² Elizabeth Gaskell, Cranford, ed. Elizabeth Porges Watson (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 22. Subsequent references to this edition will be cited by page number in the text.
- ¹³ On the problems of serialization in North and South see Annette B. Hopkins, "Dickens and Mrs. Gaskell," Huntington Library Quarterly, 9 (1946), 357-85 and Dorothy W. Collin, "The Composition of Mrs. Gaskell's North and South," Bulletin of the John Rylands Library Manchester, 54 (1971), 67-93.
- ¹⁴ "George Eliot," British Quarterly Review, 45 (1867), 141.
- ¹⁵ "The Works of Mrs. Gaskell," British Quarterly Review, 45 (1867), 411.
- ¹⁶ W. Minto, "Mrs. Gaskell's Novels," The Fortnightly Review, 24 (1878), 353-69.
- ¹⁷ Fraser's (September 1848), 322.
- ¹⁸ I discuss Galt's work in "John Galt's Short Fiction Series," Studies in Short Fiction, 17 (1980), 455-62.
- ¹⁹ The Letters of Charles Dickens, Volume One 1820-1839, The Pilgrim Edition, eds. Madeline House and Graham Storey (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 32.
- ²⁰ "The Short Story in Embryo," *English Literature in Transition*, 15 (1972), 261-68.
- ²¹ "Vision and Form: The English Novel and the Emergence of the Short Story," The Victorian Newsletter, 47 (1975), 8.
- ²² All the Year Round, 2 (1856), 95.