

FRANCES BEARDSLEY CLARK'S DIARY: THE
RECORD OF A NINETEENTH-CENTURY
AMERICAN WOMAN

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NINETEENTH-CENTURY woman's fiction in America insistently urges the softening of God's rigidly patriarchal features. One thinks of the corpus of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' works, particularly *The Gates Ajar*, in which she attempts to purge Christianity of the oppressive Calvinism that dominates it.¹ Phelps presents us with deeply spiritual and heroic women through whom she expresses a vitally feminine view of God. Phelps' two great themes are 1) God is not an ogre whose sole function is to pronounce cruel judgements; he is possessed of the specifically feminine traits of mercy and tenderness toward his children; and 2) it is dangerous for women to marry: it *always* means their oppression, compromise, and downfall.²

Harriet Beecher Stowe precedes Phelps in presenting the reader with her feminine figures of salvation, little Eva and Simon Legree's mother.³ Jane Tompkins in her article, "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History," describes *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as "the *summa theologica* of nineteenth-century America's religion of domesticity, a brilliant redaction of the culture's

¹ Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *The Gates Ajar* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1868). Sometimes referred to as Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (Ward), this author is not to be confused with her mother, whose name she took in commemoration.

² The woman who dispenses spiritual wisdom in *The Gates Ajar*, for instance, is widowed; she is sickly and eventually dies, passing her spiritual gauntlet (and her daughter) onto Mary—who remains single. But more scathing commentary on the futility of marriage can be found in Phelps' *The Story of Avis* (James R. Osgood, 1877), and her *Dr. Zay* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1883). In the latter, Phelps' dark vision of marriage is expressed archetypally: the Orpheus myth, a descent-into-hell myth, becomes the centerpiece; the heroine, after she has been conquered by her ardent suitor, is objectified as a pathetic stalk of dying honeysuckle, pitifully clutching her oppressor.

³ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Boston and Cleveland: John P. Jewett and Co., 1852). For a full (though negative) discussion of little Eva as a Christ figure, see Ann Douglas' *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), pp. 1-13. For a counter discussion see Jane P. Tompkins' "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History," in *Glyph* 8 (1981):79-102.

favorite story about itself—the story of salvation through motherly love.”⁴ Tompkins astutely observes that writers such as Phelps and Stowe are reacting to a male social-structure. She contends that the “sentimental novel” is “a political enterprise, halfway between sermon and social theory, that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of its time.”⁵

Somewhere between the poles of oppression and reaction are average women whose diaries and letters are the record of their frustration—often left unresolved. Frances Beardsley Clark (herself a would-be writer) is such a woman. Her diary, into which she poured her sorrow, is a representative link in social transition.⁶

Frances Beardsley Clark's diary consists of irregular entries, made between January 1, 1837 through March 3, 1850. The diary is 152 pages in length, and consists of twelve sections. The longest entry spans nine months, the shortest, one day. The first entry (January 1 through July 17, 1837), written during Clark's seminary days, reflects upon her studies, student life, and sermons heard in church (of which she heard as many as three each Sunday). After her school days, she becomes sporadic in keeping her journal. She records her home-life with her parents in Utica, New York from February 26 to October 15, 1841; August 21, 1842; and January 30 to March 12, 1845. Her parents lived affluently; her father (1790-1860) was a lawyer, a New York State Attorney General (1836-38), a State Supreme Court justice from 1844, and served for several terms in Congress. In this period with her parents, Clark describes her domestic chores, her readings, visits, and her experiences in a variety of churches. The final entries of Clark's diary are written after her marriage (January 26, 1846) to Erastus Clark. In addition to the diary, there is a letter and some, unfortunately, illegible writing.⁷

The most striking feature of Clark's diary (besides the many fascinating, incidental issues she touches upon) is her attempt to externalize the self through keeping a journal. As a psychological

⁴ Tompkins, p. 81.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁶ The diary was given to Alexander Library, Rutgers University in 1974. It is from the Montagu Hankin Estate, now found in the Special Collections room of Alexander. There is no pagination for the text; I have, therefore, used Clark's dates within the text.

⁷ Donald A. Sinclair, comp. *A Guide to Manuscript Diaries and Journals* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 1980), p. 23. Some minor inaccuracies are found in this synopsis.

pilgrimage, the diary may be divided into two halves. The first, the longest, and by far the least interesting section, is restrained, polite, and official. Clark's voice is impersonal and affected, characterized by an adolescent archness. Her covert ambition was to become a writer. In February, 1837 she records,

Today I framed the resolution of paying much more attention to my composition than I formerly had done. . . . The greatest Authors we have would not have arrived at so much perfection unless they had practiced and paid a great deal of attention to Composition.

To aid her in this intention, she resolves to begin sending her compositions to her father, whose exactitude would provide the stimulus to do her best.

But Clark reaches a turning point in her diary when she acknowledges her desire for an audience. The following passage, written on March 2, 1841, is the point of transition. After this passage, Clark begins to drop the pretentious, distancing techniques that characterize her early writing. In the following passage, after having visited a Mrs. Pickham's home, Clark acidly philosophizes on the frustration of feminine deportment. Here, for the first time, she begins to write personally:

Met two or three very pleasant and *intelligent* young ladies, something *bien rare* nowadays, blue stockings not very plenty—However in this age of criticism and ridicule, a lady is either [denominated] a fool, or a blue stocking—there is no happy “juste milieu”—if she says nothing she's a pretty piece of clay devoid of sense and reason. If she makes a sensible remark she is pedantic, blue, etc. and is instantly decried—a pretty piece of spite truly to decorate the pages of my journal.

Clark speaks laconically, with open resentment for the feminine plight, in which woman is damned both coming and going. But there is a self-consciousness in her writing, an awareness of her own cleverness in so pithily expressing her “pretty piece of spite.” There is the frank admission that her sentiment is intended to be as decorative as it is earnest. Yet, she amends her “pretty piece of spite,” apologetically adding,

If I judge wrongly the secret is in my own bosom, for probably these pages will never be *printed*, or read by other than the writer—

The “probably” sounds more hopeful than resistant; the emphasis on the word “printed” reveals Clark’s high esteem for authorship.

From these early passages, while she was ambitious to become a writer, she betrays no real talent. Ironically, her later entries are infinitely more interesting and artistic. Based on these later entries, it is not inconceivable that Clark might have developed her skills, and produced a work of some interest. But she chooses anonymity and self-reflection, partly because of a suspicion of fiction—which she felt, characteristically of the spirit of the age, had a debasing effect on the mind.⁸ But more importantly, Clark chooses not to pursue authorship because of her deeply rooted feelings of inferiority and insecurity. Her choice to write for herself only frees Clark to write much more personally and fiercely than her early entries would suggest her capable of. Once she dispenses with the idea of an audience, her writing becomes a fascinating exercise in catharsis. The diary becomes a way of objectifying and validating the self, a vehicle from which to view the terrain of her anxieties.

Even in the early entries, as comparatively dull as they are, Clark’s deference and self-effacement are evident. On January 9, 1837 she records the following:

This morning had my head examined by Mr. Grimes a phrenologist; He said I would have to labor harder than some persons in order to acquire a good education and said that I had more ambition than ability.

There is a conspicuous lack of editorial comment on Clark’s part—she seems to have readily acquiesced to the phrenologist’s rather demeaning vision of her. But this is characteristic of her deferential personality and her willingness to be subjugated to any male authority. Yet, despite her apparent lack of self-esteem, Clark is eager to achieve in school. She sees “education of the mind” (as opposed to education in domestic work) as a means of obtaining the right to form her own opinions and make her own choices. She is aware of the suffocation of womanhood, and writes feelingly of Queen Elizabeth, Pocahontas, and Deborah, all of whom she admired greatly. But Clark is too timid and accommodating. Though she claims to have “a large bump of self-esteem,” and “a lump of

⁸ See Clark’s February 1, 1837 entry: “The reading of history does not (like novels) debase the mind.” In later entries she incidentally refers with guilt to her inability to avoid reading novels.

combativeness,” in reality she has very little of either, as her willing acceptance of the phrenologist’s patently insulting remarks demonstrates. What little of these qualities she does possess, she thinks “desirable to be diminished.”

In addition to the low self-esteem which seems to have beset Clark, she seems also to have been overwhelmed with fear of, and preoccupation with, death. Her fears conspicuously surface when she leaves seminary, and returns home to live with her parents. On April 9, 1841, she writes,

Good Friday—the day of the crucifixion of our blessed Lord and Saviour. Oh! how unprofitably have I passed it. I may never live to see another. Oh my God give me [greater strength] and virtue so to pass everyday as though it were my last.

Clark’s fear of judgement also curiously surfaces upon her return home. Passages like the following simply don’t occur in the relatively carefree days of her early entries. It can only be conjectured that at home she feared judgement and rejection so deeply that she extends that fear to God, framing her vision of God in terms of the reality of her everyday life. In June, 1841, she pleads,

Oh Lord grant me the assistance of thy Holy Spirit that I may in the language of our beloved pastor “keep an eye on my heart.” And help me to form and keep good resolutions. . . . oh may I this night begin to try to act as God has commanded.

The following day, her diary entry begins with the lament that,

All my good resolutions avail me nothing, today I have been almost utterly unmindful of him. Oh God! hast thou indeed taken thy Holy Spirit from me? Oh grant me strength to keep my feet in the path wherein they should walk.

Clark’s view of God (and later her husband) is deeply informed by her experience of an emotionally absent and unresponsive earthly father.⁹ His exactitude, rigidity, and lack of affection predisposes Clark to a Christianity composed of unremitting self-reflection and flagellation. Hers is a Christianity that insists on duty toward an absent and silently indifferent God, whose only reward is a lack of punishment.

Submerged in Clark’s diary entries is a deep sense of spiritual

⁹ Perhaps his political commitments kept him away from home; one can only conjecture.

abandonment, and yet, a profound sense of duty and submission. These feelings are reinforced and corroborated by the contemporary attitudes toward women, and opinions as to what is appropriately spiritual for them. Clark's view of herself is entirely consistent with the spiritual tenor of her society. In her diary (in an undated entry that falls between Oct. 16, 1841 and Aug. 21, 1842) she includes a quote from Sarah (Stickney) Ellis on the nature of woman's spiritual responsibility:

I am aware that amongst the generality of women, there is more religious *feeling* than amongst men, more observances of the ordinances of religion, more reading of the Scriptures, and more attention to the means of religious information.¹⁰

Yet, unimpeachable outward deportment, strictness, self-discipline, and feeling for duty are not enough; woman can still be damned. Clark is particularly susceptible to Mrs. Ellis' reasoning. The quote continues,

But let not the woman who sits in peace unassailed by temptation, in the quiet retirement of her own parlor, look down with self complacency and contempt upon the open transgressions of her erring brother. Rather let her weigh in the scale his strong passions, and strong inducements to evil, and it may be, strong compunctions too, against her own little bickerings, envyings, secret-spite, and some cherished idolatry of self; and then ask of her conscience which is farthest in advance to—rewards of the kingdom of heaven. . . . she [has] set afloat upon a winged whisper the transgression of her neighbor. . . .¹¹

The feminine problematic is one of suffocation. A woman, forbidden the lusty, masculine sin of open profanity, is under the greater condemnation for her sin, manifested in whispers. She is damned for sinning within her own mind, while her "erring brother" with his "open transgressions," advances heavenward. Clark, groomed for acceptance of this relentlessly frustrating role, readily assents to Mrs. Ellis:

¹⁰ Sarah (Stickney) Ellis, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits*, contained in *The Prose Works of Mrs. Ellis* (New York: Henry G. Langley, 1845). The quote comes from Chapter III, "Modern Education of the Women of England," p. 28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29. Quotations like this one emphasize how "dazzling" (to use Tompkins' adjective) and innovative the sentimental novelists were. Writers like Stowe and Phelps appear to adhere to Ellis' prescription, but very close to the surface of their works are themes and prescriptions that, by Ellis' standards, are anarchic.

I would by God's help to try and do my duty, I must not give way to morbid feelings. I must have *principle*, and strong *desire* to perform my duty in that state of life to which it rather please God to call me.

It is small wonder, laboring under the unflagging scrutiny of a graceless (and male) God, and deprived of the affectionate presence of an earthly father, that Clark feels "morbid," and lacks the "principle" and "desire" to "perform [her] duty." That "state of life to which it rather please God to call [her]" is the state of womanhood—for which she has inherently more guilt and spiritual responsibility.

Clark's depressions become increasingly acute. On Feb. 4, 1845, at the age of 23, she records her engagement to Erastus Clark, stating that she "*ought* to be happy" (emphasis mine), but strongly implying that she is not. In a particularly characteristic passage—written on October 25, 1846, nine months after her marriage—Clark refers to the "joys and sorrows of the holy Estate." Immediately following her intention to record some of her marital experiences, she unconsciously drifts into a very telling metaphor:

What a beautiful day this has been, one of those Indian Summery days—when the leaves crisp and crackle under your feet and the breath of forest comes with sweet perfume to refresh you. . . .

Her dark unhappiness quickly asserts itself, however, as she adds, "but the huge wind this evening portends a storm." In an entry made two days later (October 27, 1846) Clark continues the inadvertent metaphor of storminess as she surveys her life in a poignant passage. Her loveless childhood, which has precipitated her fear of abandonment by God, and which subsequently causes her marriage to become a curse, is painfully articulated:

I often wish I were a child again; when I see children playing so happily I can scarcely realize that I was once a child—but my youthful days were not happy. I was never loved as other children were. A dark cloud overshadowed my childhood. My confidence was never sought. No caresses, no kisses, no terms of endearment were mine—all, cold suspicion and distrust. Chilling glances and unkind tones.

It is with great, unintended subtlety that Clark uses the ordinary stormy weather of October, and internalizes it as a metaphor for her inner sorrow. Clark's storm of the soul is rooted in her child-

hood, but is, nevertheless, given fresh force by her marriage. Her husband, at first, seems to provide a shelter for her. She discusses the affectionate nature of her husband and his family. But on November 1, 1846 (five days after the last entry) Clark writes in a manner that belies her inadvertently pretended happiness:

There are hidden recesses in the human heart which no human sympathy can reach—earnest longings for something more than human love—a void which friend, neither Father, Mother, nor husband can fill.

Clark seems constantly to be escaping from her father and her husband to God. But her vision of God is framed in terms of these two. In a vicious cycle, she is driven back to them; and they, in turn, disappoint her afresh. Clark's unhappiness in her marriage, which she carefully and dutifully suppresses from herself, finally surfaces in this, her most powerful and poetic passage. It is written on January 2, 1847:

How wearily pass the hours when we are waiting for the coming of someone we love, how sadly pass the hours I wait for thee my much loved husband. . . . Oh! if he but knew the heart rending anguish I experience when he comes not at the appointed hour he surely would not do as he does—I scarcely know whether most I hope or dread his coming—Oh God grant that my fears may not be true—that any forebodings may be false. Oh! grant me strength to endure whatever thou in thy goodness may see fit to expose me. If the cup *is* bitter I must not shrink from it. . . . Unhappiness and sorrow have been appointed me from my earliest years. I must not repine—for some bright flowers of love and hope and tenderness have been intertwined in the dark wreath which was woven for me. Ah! yes and the brightest one of all has withered the first—the one in which I most delighted has caused me sigh and mourn almost that ever I or it had existence. . . .

One cannot fail to be touched by Clark's plight as a woman. Her indifferent father, her literally dreaded husband, and her God—who is the ultimate author of her bitterness, and has woven her this "dark wreath"—have combined in force against her in an inescapable triad of masculine oppression.

Clark refers to her husband as her "bright[est] flower of love" in whom she put all her trust. In addition to the fact that his rapidly waning love disappointed her fondest hopes, Clark was forced to

live far more modestly than she was accustomed to. One can only conjecture the reason Clark “dreaded” her husband; she records that he was out of work for some time—perhaps this indicates a profligate nature. Conjecture aside, Clark is obviously anxious. She continues the January 4th entry, once again, resorting to metaphor as a means of expressing her inner turmoil:

The wind howls wretchedly and I feel sad. Oh! so sad—It seems as though my heart would break—I have been married little more than eleven months but I feel too sad and sick to write more.

At the time of these January entries, Clark was pregnant, and probably did not know it. Shortly after the birth of her daughter, Clark dispenses with her journal, as if exchanging a written diary for a living one. On March 3, 1850, her final entry reads,

Eternity draws nearer and nearer and my care for the things of time is swallowed up in reflections on the importance the momentousness of those which pertain to death and Eternity—how earnestly do I pray that my darling Mary may lead a useful life and do many things which her mother has left undone.

Clark clearly aligns herself with her daughter in a female bonding. She ceases to externalize herself in the diary—Mary becomes Clark’s self-extension. At least as far as the diary takes us, Clark seems to have been unable to break out of her oppressive life. A letter, written in 1856, refers to Mary, but not to any other children. Perhaps this indicates the end of sexual relations with her husband. In any event, it would be interesting to read Mary Clark’s diary to see how well she fared.

Though Clark resisted (with limited success) all novels, her experiences under patriarchy are typical. She is the kind of woman to whom Stowe’s and Phelps’ works are addressed. Clark completed her last diary entry just two years before Stowe’s great work *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* became available, and eighteen years prior to Phelps’ *The Gates Ajar*. I like to believe that Clark’s experience of the religious/social themes that Phelps and Stowe explore enabled her to become an eager, receptive audience.