“Storytellers” in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Sylvia’s Lovers*

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Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Sylvia’s Lovers* (1863) is a story about a young woman called Sylvia Robson and her two lovers; Charley Kinraid, a specksioneer (harpooner) of whale fishing, and Philip Hepburn, a shopkeeper of a clothes shop. And the “structure of *Sylvia's Lovers*,” as Terry Eagleton says, “is primarily organized around a contrast between Hepburn and Kinraid” (19). Kinraid, promising Sylvia to marry her, is abducted by the press-gang, a party of soldiers in the 1790s who would conscript new recruits by force for the national army, then fighting against France. The only witness to the event, Hepburn, however, keeps it to himself, and succeeds to persuade Sylvia to marry him. When Kinraid returns to Sylvia, she realizes for the first time that Hepburn has been deceiving her. Sylvia cannot forgive Hepburn, but at the end of the novel, she has changed her mind, and has learned the importance of “forgiveness.”[1] Hepburn’s deceit to Sylvia is crucial enough to harm his reputation, but, as Arthur Pollard points out, he, none the less, contributes to Sylvia’s moral growth (Pollard 196-221).

Kinraid and Hepburn are also contrasted to each other in other points. Hepburn, regarding education as the most important factor for mental maturity, seems to be a somewhat pedantic character, and Kinraid is portrayed as a heroic, courageous sailor. Hepburn supports the press-gang as England’s safeguard against France, and Kinraid does not for any reason.

These differences, as many critics point out, are related to their social

position.[2] One is a shopkeeper, also good at banking business, who therefore represents a new type of modern capitalistic society, and the other is a sailor of whale fishing, who represents traditional society. Sylvia's father, who is a sailor turned farmer, also belongs to the latter class.

There is, however, another important difference between Philip Hepburn and Charley Kinraid or Daniel Robson, and this concerns the "storytelling". Both Daniel Robson and Charley Kinraid are a kind of narrator, borrowing from Walter Benjamin's term, a "storyteller", who tells his own experience to the others in the form of a story, while Philip Hepburn lacks this ability.[3] We should also notice that these two storytellers, Kinraid and Robson, are against the press-gang, and Hepburn, on the contrary, approves of it. And it is through one of the storytellers, Daniel Robson, that Gaskell represents one of the opinions about the press-gang in the 1790s. The storytellers in the real world, moreover, had a very important role for Elizabeth Gaskell when she was writing the novel. Gaskell referred to the "stories" of actual storytellers in order to write the novel. In fact, as we will see later, Gaskell adopted, in *Sylvia's Lovers*, the storyteller's art of narrating.

In this paper, I will try to read *Sylvia's Lovers* as a novel composed in the manner of the "storytellers" and to examine what characteristics are brought to the novel by Gaskell's following of the manner of the storytellers. We will find one of those characteristics in the portrait of Daniel Robson who participates in the insurrection against the press-gang.

Walter Benjamin, in his "The Storyteller" (1936), designates as "storyteller" a person telling "his or her own experience, or that reported by others." According to Benjamin, what the storyteller essentially does is to transmit "his or her own experience, or that reported by others" in the form of a story. It is difficult, from the modern point of view, to understand

the notion of transmitting one's own experience by virtue of storytelling. Benjamin suggests that the society which produces storytellers is a traditional, communal one in which personal experience is shared with the others more than in modern individualistic society. This is clearly shown by Benjamin, who points out that the typical storytellers are sailors, farmers, or artisans. The sailor narrates a tale "stamped with an aura of authority because it had come from afar"; the farmer's story "acquired this aura by virtue of the experience and wisdom of its teller—his ancestors had dwelled in the same region for countless generations, so that he was steeped in the lore of tradition . . ." (Wolin 219). In the society composed of such kind of people, one narrates personal experience to others, typically to children or apprentices, who, in turn, would have similar experiences in the future. In this way, "Experience . . . is passed from mouth to mouth," from generation to generation, and Benjamin regards this activity of "exchanging experiences" by virtue of "storytelling" as peculiar to a pre-modern society. It is this "ability to exchange experiences" that has diminished in modern life (Benjamin 83-93).[4]

Monkshaven, a town in the novel in which Charley Kinraid and Daniel Robson live, is the kind of society which Benjamin would regard as a typical society of "storytellers": apprentices of the whale fishery learned "navigation from some quaint but experienced teacher, half schoolmaster, half sailor, who seasoned his instructions by stirring narrations of the wild adventure of his youth" (*Sylvia's Lovers* 2).[5]

In Monkshaven, "some quaint but experienced" sailor, while teaching his apprentices navigation, narrates to them the experiences of "the wild adventure" in his youth, and we can easily guess that his experience would be likely to be that of the next generation when the latter, in turn, would go to sea. In this sense, these sailors are the storytellers who hand down their experience, in the form of stories, to the next generation. Charley Kinraid and Daniel Robson are similar storytellers, narrating their own

experiences in the whale fishing: their tales, for example, are about the experience of being engulfed by collapsing icebergs, being thrown in the winter sea, riding on the back of a whale they tried to catch, and so on. In the novel, those stories are represented in direct speech as is shown below:

> "A were a specksioneer mysel, though, after that, a rayther directed my talents int' t' smuggling branch o' my profession; but a were once a whaling aboard t' *Ainwll* of Whitby. An' we was anchored off t' coast o' Greenland one season; an' we'd getten a cargo o' seven whale; but our captain he were a keen-eye chap, an' niver above doin' any man's work; an' once seein' a whale he throws himself int' a boat an' goes off to it, makin' signals to me, an' another specksioneer as were off for diversion i' another boat, for to come after him sharp. . . ." (103)

Then, what are the characteristics of the "storytellers"? Benjamin contrasts "story" to "information," which is a peculiarly modern type of narration, especially seen in newspapers. It is easy to understand that "story" is closely related to the speaker's experience, because it is derived from his or her own experience. "Information", on the other hand, has nothing to do with the speaker's experience. "Information" is communicated only as information of an event, not as the speaker's experience of it. Nevertheless, in the case of "information", its author, who has not experienced an event, often forces his or her explanation of it on the readers. Seeing newspapers, we can find a review which explains some event, though its author has never experienced the event.

This tendency of "information" is in contrast with that of the "storytelling": with the stories of the storyteller, notes Benjamin, "the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them . . ." (Benjamin 88-89). "Information" forces its author's explanation of an event, though

the author has never experienced it, while the storyteller tries to convey only what he has experienced, so that the interpretation or explanation of his experience "is left up to" the listeners.

This, however, does not necessarily mean that the storyteller does not append any moral or useful advice to his stories. The "story always contains something useful—practical advice, a kernel of wisdom, or a conventional moral" (Wolin 219). But the moral or advice is, as it were, "contained" in the experience the storyteller conveys. In this point, Wolin's word, "kernel", is very appropriate, for the "story" is something like a "kernel", that is, a kernel of experience, from which the listeners can derive some useful advice or moral. The storyteller tries to hand down this "kernel" of his experience or of some others', not the explanation or interpretation of the experience, so that the interpretation or explanation of it is, as Benjamin says, "left up to the listeners." In other words, the storyteller tries to convey only what he has experienced or what some others have experienced, and does not force any explanation or interpretation of their experience on the listeners.

In *Sylvia's Lovers*, Philip Hepburn is portrayed as different from Kinraid and Robson. Their difference is not only in their trade, but also in the fact that the former lacks "the ability to exchange experiences." This is clearly shown in the scene in which Hepburn teaches Sylvia geography for her education:

> "Well, I'll bring up a book and map next time. But I can tell you something now. There's four quarters in the globe."
> "What's that?" asked Sylvia.
> "The globe is the earth; the place we live on."
> "Go on. Which quarter is Greenland?"
> "Greenland in no quarter. It is only a part of it." (108)

The information Philip gives to Sylvia is only derived from books or maps, so it is completely devoid of his experience. Through the whole novel, Hepburn is thus portrayed as the modern type of personality that lacks the "ability to exchange experiences" by virtue of storytelling.

Many of Kinraid's and Robson's stories, in a sense, are about the same remote regions as in Hepburn's geography lesson. But Kinraid's and Robson's stories are different from Hepburn's information; they are closely related to themselves or to their experiences. This can be said not only from the fact that their stories are derived from their own experiences, but also from Sylvia's attitude towards their stories:

> Sylvia was still full of the specksioneer and his stories, when Hepburn came up to give his next lesson. . . . She was much more inclined to try and elicit some sympathy in her interest in the perils and adventures of the northern seas. . . . (107)

Sylvia does not, or cannot, distinguish Kinraid's stories from Kinraid himself: "Sylvia was still full of the specksioneer and his stories." It is difficult to tell which Sylvia prefers, Kinraid himself or Kinraid's stories, or, in other words, his experiences of "the perils and adventures of the northern seas." For Sylvia, Kinraid's stories are connected to himself or to his experiences.

We can see another characteristic of the "storytellers" in the attitudes of Sylvia and her mother towards one of Kinraid's stories. Kinraid tells them that in the sea near the south pole, his captain saw devils that were dancing in a fire burning in the crevasse of an iceberg (102). In reference to this supernatural story, the novel's proper narrator does not give any comment, suggesting that what the captain saw was only his illusion, or that he might be a superstitious person. We can only know the attitude of Sylvia and her mother who thoroughly believe in what Kinraid says. Of

course, they could have disbelieved it, just as Job Leigh in *Mary Barton* (1848) does not believe a sailor who tells him about a mermaid he saw on his voyage. It is clear that, as Benjamin says, "it is left up to" Sylvia and her mother "to interpret" Kinraid's story "the way they understand" it. On the other hand, Kinraid, the storyteller, does not force on Sylvia and her mother any interpretation or explanation of his story, only trying to convey what he experienced.

As I said, the novel's proper narrator does not give any explanation for Kinraid's seemingly supernatural story. This shows that Elizabeth Gaskell also followed the way the storyteller conveys his own experience, or that reported by others, without forcing any explanation on the listeners. This is, as Craik points out, one of the characteristics of *Sylvia's Lovers*: in her novel, "Elizabeth Gaskell is so sparing of authorial comment" that "no sense of a narrative persona is perceived" (Craik 150). Elizabeth Gaskell, like a storyteller, narrates only what Kinraid experiences without forcing any "authorial comment" on her readers. That Elizabeth Gaskell followed the way of the storyteller is further apparent in two episodes; one is in the last scene of *Sylvia's Lovers* and the other is in the actual process of her composition of this novel.

It is interesting to note that the origin of *Sylvia's Lovers* is referred to in the novel itself. In the last scene of the novel, a lady, who reminds us of the author herself, visits Monkshaven about fifty years later. The lady hears the story of Hepburn and Sylvia Robson from a "bathing woman" of the "Public Baths":

> Not long since a lady went to the "Public Baths" . . . [and] she sat down and had some talk with the bathing woman; and, as it chanced, the conversation fell on Philip Hepburn and the legend of his fate. "I knew an old man when I was a girl," said the bathing woman. . . . "She was a pale, sad woman, allays dressed in black. I can just remember her when I was a little child."

It would be easy to identify, from what the "bathing woman" says here, "an old man" as Kester, a farm-servant of the Robson family, and "a pale, sad woman" as Sylvia. The bathing woman, when she "was a girl," actually saw Sylvia in her person and also heard the story from Kester who literally experienced the part of the story he told. The lady hears the story of Sylvia from the "bathing woman" who heard it from Kester who had also experienced it. We can see, in this relay of a story "passed from mouth to mouth," the peculiar characteristic of storytelling, that is, the handing down of one's own experience or that reported by others.

The lady's position, in terms of her relationship to the storyteller, corresponds to Gaskell's position when she wrote *Sylvia's Lovers*. In fact, *Sylvia's Lovers* was composed of the stories which Gaskell had heard from people who had actually lived in the age of whale fishing and the press-gang, or those of the next generation who had learned about the age directly from the former. Many of the sources of *Sylvia's Lovers*, according to A. W. Ward and J. G. Sharps, are the stories of such a kind of people, whom she happened to see when she visited Whitby in 1859 (Sharps 373-421; Ward xvi-xxviii). Gaskell composed *Sylvia's Lovers* from the stories those people told her as their own experience or as that reported by the former generation. Gaskell, in turn, handed down their stories or their experiences to her readers.

For example, one of the most important sources for whale fishing portrayed in *Sylvia's Lovers* was derived from William Scoresby. Scoresby published, in 1820, *An Account of the Arctic Regions with a History and Description of the Northern Whale Fishery*, which was based on his own, or his father's, experience of whale fishing. And many episodes involving Charley Kinraid's and Daniel Robson's experience of whale fishing, in fact, are taken from the book (See especially Scorceby 2: 340-368). The stories

Charley Kinraid and Daniel Robson tell as their own experiences in *Sylvia's Lovers* are derived from the stories which William Scoresby narrates in his book as his own experience or that of those heard from his father. In this point also, we can say, Gaskell followed the way of the storyteller who conveys "his or her own experience or that reported by others."

Then, what tendencies are given or incorporated into *Sylvia's Lovers* by Elizabeth Gaskell's following of the manner of the storytellers. One of them can be inferred from Benjamin's explanation of the "storyteller". The storyteller conveys his own experience in the form of a story, but he then tries to convey only what he has experienced, without forcing his explanation or interpretation of his experience on the listeners.

Therefore the fact that Gaskell followed this way of the storyteller might also lead to a similar tendency in the novel; that is, the experience of the people living in the age of whale fishery or the press-gang would be represented as a kind of story independent of the author's comment or explanation. In fact, this tendency is, in a peculiar rather than straightforward way, shown in the portrait of Daniel Robson when he participates in the insurrection against the press-gang.

One day, the officials of the army try to conscript new recruits by ringing the fake fire-bell and then luring people to it (256). Daniel Robson, along with other people, provoked by this unlawful scheme, attacks the headquarters of the press-gang, to save the captured people.

In contrast with Daniel Robson, the novel's narrator seems to approve of the press-gang. The reason is that the conscription is required to defend England against France's invasion:

> Not all the dread of an invasion by the French could reconcile the people of the coast to the necessity of impressments. . . . For in the great struggle in

which England was then involved, the navy was esteemed her safeguard; and men must be had at any price of money, or suffering or of injustice. (249)

Elizabeth Gaskell also seems to share this opinion, and this is indicated by a scene in *Cranford* (1853) in which one character plausibly states the fear, in about 1800, of France's invasion (Cranford 91). Gaskell also dose not approve of any violence even if it is appealed to for realizing the benefit of people. John Barton's murder and commitment to the strike in *Mary Barton* (1848) or the uprising of the working-class in *North and South* (1855) is, in either case, negatively represented.

The novel's narrator analyzes the character of Daniel Robson just before the riot breaks out. This analysis seems to show only an aspect of Robson's character, but its only aim is to indicate that he is the kind of person likely to participate in a riot: "Daniel was very like a child in all the parts of his character. He was strongly affected by whatever was present, and apt to forget the absent. He acted on impulse, and too often had reason to be sorry for it; . . ." (247).

The narrator explains that Robson has a child-like character and often acts "on impulse." Another reason for Robson's commitment to the insurrection is analyzed in this way:

> He was never exactly drunk, for he had a strong, well-seasoned head; but the craving to hear the last news of the actions of the press-gang drew him into Monkshaven nearly every day . . . and a public-house is generally the focus from which gossip radiates; and probably the amount of drink thus consumed weakened Robson's power over mind, and caused the concentration of thought on one subject. (253)

The narrator points out that the main cause of Robson's weakened

power over mind is his recent habit of drinking, and shows Daniel's poor mental state before he participates in the insurrection. It is clear that the narrator tries, by explaining the character of one of its participants, to explain also the nature of the insurrection itself. Its essential nature is an act of impulse, just as one of its participants, Daniel Robson, has an impulsive character and has his power of reason weakened by alcohol. In a word, the insurrection is negatively characterized as an act of impulse, or a mindless response.

It is often seen that insurrection against a nation or colonial rule is characterized as an impulsive action or a mindless response, especially in the narratives and documents of the government side. Ranajit Guha, for example, points out this tendency in many documents about Indian popular insurgency: though "insurgency . . . was a motivated and conscious undertaking on the part of the rural masses," it was usually explained as "a sort of reflex action, that is, as an instinctive and almost mindless response to physical suffering of one kind or another . . . ," so that other causes such as "the peasants' consciousness or their will or reason could be rarely paid the due regard. . . . The omission is indeed dyed into most narratives by metaphors assimilating peasant revolts to natural phenomena: they break out like thunder storm, heave like earthquakes, spread like wildfires, infect like epidemics" (Guha 2-3).

An example of such metaphors comparing revolts to natural phenomena is found in Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four* (1880), in which the Indians of the Great Mutiny in 1857 are compared to "bees": "The whole country was up like swarm of bees" (Doyle 146). Certainly, Doyle implies that the mutiny was "a sort of reflex action" or "an instinctive and almost mindless response" just as bees are provoked by sticking a rod into their hive.

Elizabeth Gaskell also uses a similar comparison with "bees" in *Sylvia's Lovers* to describe the people who are going to attack the

headquarters of the press-gang: ". . . men clustered like bees; all pressing so as to be near enough to question those who stood nearest to the planning of the attack" (259).

Though it is difficult to confirm that Gaskell uses the simile to indicate the negative aspect of the insurrection, the insurrection itself, none the less, is unequivocally shown as an impulsive action, especially as represented by one of its participants, Daniel Robson, who is portrayed as having an impulsive character.

It is important, however, that the reader does not necessarily follow the narrator's explanation of the insurrection or of the character of Daniel Robson. In defiance of the narrator's negative portrait, Robson retains the distinction of being one of the characters who express their own view or ideology.

The reason for Robson's objection against the press-gang is most clearly stated in his argument with Philip Hepburn, who supports it as England's safeguard against France. Hepburn also approves of the press-gang because it is sanctioned by the law, which "is made for the good of nation, not for your good or mine" (40). Daniel Robson, on the other hand, cannot accept the press-gang which snatches away his neighbours and sailors of whale fishing, and insists that Hepburn misunderstands the notion of the law: "Laws is made for to keep some folks fra' harming another. Press gang and coast-guard harm me in my business . . ." (44).

Hepburn, who thinks that the press-gang is required to defend England, or that the "law is made for the good of nation," clearly gives the people of England precedence over the people of Monkshaven. But the difference between them is crucial. While "the people of England," for Hepburn, are essentially conceived from the idea of the nation, "England", that is, the ideal, the people of Monkshaven, on the other hand, are the *real* people Hepburn and Robson meet or talk with daily. Daniel Robson implies that Hepburn attaches more importance to the former because he

makes much more of the idea of nation than daily relationships with his neighbours: "I am a man and you're another, but nation's nowheere, nation, go hang" (41).

Daniel Robson, after he has committed the insurrection, criticizes Hepburn for the same reason; Robson accuses Hepburn of disregard for the family one of whom has been abducted by the press-gang: "Wives an' little 'uns may go to t' workhouse or clem for aught he cares" (271). It is clear, from his argument, that Robson's objection to the press-gang is founded on his own logic or his sound reason, not on his impulsive passion as supposed by the novel's narrator.

We have seen the narrator's following comment about Robson's character: "He acted on impulse, and too often had reason to be sorry for it. . . ." The narrator tries to imply that Robson joined the insurrection because "he acted on impulse." This explanation, however, cannot convince us, for Robson does not acknowledge that he "acted on impulse" and therefore is "sorry for it." On the contrary, he proclaims that he would do the same again in a similar situation: "A'm noane sorry for what a did, an' a'd do it again to-neet, if need were" (272).

Therefore according to Robson's own explanation, we may doubt the explanation of the novel's narrator that Robson's commitment to the insurrection owes much to his impulsive character or his loss of reasoning power caused by alcohol. His action is founded on his own logic, or motivated by his clear political views. The insurrection is also supported by a lot of people in Monkshaven, and Robson's view of the press-gang is also shared by those people: "The rescue of the sailors was a distinctly popular movement . . ." (283). In *Sylvia's Lovers*, the view or ideology of Daniel Robson, and of a lot of people in Monkshaven who object to the press-gang, is not replaced by those of the novel's narrator who approves of it.

This co-existence of two different views or ideologies about the press-

gang in *Sylvia's Lovers* seems to have a close relationship to Elizabeth Gaskell's adopting the manner of the storyteller. As I have said, Elizabeth Gaskell directly or indirectly heard the stories of the people who had actually lived in the age of the press-gang, and some of them, like Daniel Robson, must have actually resisted it. For example, Perronet Thompson, who, according to A. W. Ward, gave Elizabeth Gaskell the information about the popular resistance to the press-gang around the coastal region of Yorkshire, was still in the 1850s against any impressment, and regarded himself as an inheritor of the anti-press-gang movement of the 1790s (Ward xxvi-xxvii).

The views of Thompson, or of the people living in the 1790s, about the press-gang were different from those of Elizabeth Gaskell, who seems to have regarded it as a safeguard for England. When she was writing *Sylvia's Lovers*, however, Gaskell did not distort or replace those people's views, by transforming their experience into some fiction that could have supported her political view. Of course, it is natural that Gaskell expressed her own opinion through the voice of the novel's narrator, and the narrator sometimes explains Robson's activity for the benefit of her opinion. But Robson's words or his experience itself have such a strong distinction as would make the narrator's explanation doubtful. Therefore, it is certain that Elizabeth Gaskell, in *Sylvia's Lovers,* makes room for "their" views, for those who had lived in a different age or culture from her own, and who had different opinions about the press-gang. Gaskell, in this point also, followed the way of the storyteller, conveying the experience of the people in the age of the press-gang, without forcing, on her readers, her explanation of their experience or of their views. Elizabeth Gaskell was one of the followers of the "storytellers," and this made *Sylvia's Lovers* more inclusive, rather than exclusive, of different views or opinions.

Notes

1. Many critics have noticed the theme of "forgiveness". See Pollard 198, 211, 217; Sharps 399; Sanders xiv; Foster xxii; Ward xxxii- xxxiii.
2. For the difference between Hepburn and Kinraid in terms of the society they belong to, See Eagleton 18-19; Gerin 216; Craik 180; Sanders xiii.
3. Schor notices the importance of the narrator-character in the novel. She emphasizes the fact that the narration in the novel is exclusively occupied by male characters such as Daniel Robson, Kinraid, and Hepburn. Therefore, she does not distinguish Kinraid or Robson from Hepburn. My point is that the former are the storytellers, but the latter is not. See Schor 157-162.
4. The theme of "The Storyteller" is usually treated as a discussion about the difference between the modern experience and the pre-modern one. For Benjamin, the transformation of the "storyteller" into the "novelist", who is "the solitary individual" creating a story only from his or her own imagination, is also one of the symptoms of the loss of the "ability to exchange experiences." See Wolin 218-226; McCole 275.
5. Subsequent citation from this edition will be noted parenthetically.

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