

THE DECONSTRUCTION OF SOCIETY IN CERTAIN FEMINIST NOVELS OF THE 1850's

Liana Borghi

« When woman does at length divest herself of all false notion of justice and delicacy, and gives to the world a full revelation of her suffering and miseries, — the histories of all other kinds of injustice and oppression will sink into utter insignificance, before the living pictures she shall hold up to the unwilling vision of domestic tyrants »¹

says Elizabeth Cady Stanton approvingly of Fanny Fern's controversial novel *Ruth Hall* (1854).

But as we know, notions of justice and delicacy may differ according to place and circumstance and feminist circles. So we are not surprised to find once again that something which could please in New York state failed to please in New England. Caroline Dall, co-editor of the *Una* with Paulina Wright Davis, intervened with typical heavy handedness on the side of Bostonian propriety. No matter how politically correct it might be to complain about the state of the patriarchy, family quarrels must not be publicized in thinly veiled autobiographical novels. And if truth be told, Sara Willis (alias Fanny Fern) was known in Boston for a « wayward, insolent; irritating and giddy Ruth who drove those about her to frenzy ». Not only was her book immoral because it as slanderous, it was a « very slovenly literary performance » besides. Nor was her other work any better. Dall found it so « full of smart “manly” wit and the sarcasm of a soured soul », that she had put it out of her children's reach. She concluded, in a somewhat more conciliatory tone, « let no one think us indifferent to her sufferings; we feel for them deeply; but heaven shield the cause from making a reformer, conscious or unconscious, out of a Fanny Fern »².

But Fanny Fern already was a reformer, as Ann (Douglas) Wood has pointed out. She refused a conventionally feminine façade and urged women, by word and example, to fight their way out of the home by using writing against the men that kept them there³. And this was the point. Dall, herself a

¹ *The Una*, Feb. 1855, 29.

² *The Una*, March 1855, 43-4.

³ In « The Scribbling women and Fanny Fern: Why Women Wrote », *American Quarterly* XXIII (1971), 3-24.

writer and reformer, rejected ultraism. Her criticism of Fanny Fern marked the fault that twenty years later would split the Movement over a complex political question involving proprieties into the more radical New York wing (separatist and liberationist), and the more emancipationist Boston wing, that enjoyed full male support.

Fern's aggressive plain speaking — aimed at raising awareness of the fact that usually the family was the first agent of woman's repression — jarred against Dall's more conventional belief that marriage and children were « women's destined and sacred lot » (though, ironically, many have surmised that Caroline Dall herself was the first agent of her husband's 31-year mission to the Indies)⁴. Dall's formal complaint, however, was that in *Ruth Hall* the author's experience had *not* been idealized « beyond all possibility of recognition ». A respectable family had been unmasked by the novel's self-styled victim and story-teller who was herself only perfunctorily clothed by two *noms-de-plume*: Ruth Hall and Fanny Fern. Not only was the hide-and-seek game undignified; the final dis/uncovery was indecent. The transformation of the mythical Fanny Fern into the common Sara Willis offended. In fact, it was Sara Willis's *visibility* that offended. Because she was viewed, like all women, as the daughter, the sister, the wife, the mother of, and her further transformation into a reformer's case-history allowed her family no cover and no redress. Dall could not forgive Fanny Fern her refusal to play the game of the feminine authoress according to the rules of discretion attached to it.

But according to Stanton the 7-year old woman's rights movement needed both respectability and visibility. Self-affirmation, out-spokenness, boldness and critical powers must have space even at the cost of offending traditional sensibilities. Gentility holds women back; gentility prevents women from looking for employment; gentility prevents them from competing with men, states Laura Bullard in her feminist novel *Christine*, published in 1856. Bullard would eventually become the editor of *The Revolution*, in 1870, during Susan B. Anthony's last attempt to save the paper⁵. In *Christine* she gives an illustration of gentility that must have looked familiar to many readers. Two distressed gentlewomen who won't admit to economic need arrange to have sewing delivered to their house after dark. And the work when ready is then also returned after dark without a bill. Their gentility is protected by the pretense of giving them « presents » for the work done. *Christine*, the novel's protagonist, finds the story a pathetic symptom of those social factors that lead women to consider paid labor shameful and degrading. She wants to lecture and change public opinion so that women may have as fair a field as men. If women are not confined to a few overcrowded and ill-paid but

⁴ See Barbara Walter, « The Merchant's Daughter: A Tale from Life », in *The New England Quarterly*, March 1969.

⁵ Mari Jo and Paul Buhle, eds., *The Concise History of Woman Suffrage*, University of Illinois Press, Chicago 1978, 23. *Christina* was published by Dewitt and Davenport, in New York.

respectable positions like « teaching and the needle », she says, they will stop aiming for security in the guise of the first available husband – an argument used by many feminists then and later on.

Christine eventually marries her reformed fiancé but only after she has become a famous woman's rights lecturer and turned her home into a half-way house for girls. Her profession, which is fully accepted by her husband, originally raised tremendous opposition within her family circle. Indeed, in the middle of the novel, her Aunt Frothingham, worried that Christine's reputation might ruin the select academy which she runs, convinces Christine's father to intern his daughter in an asylum. Cunningly, they accuse her of having delusions of being the famous Christine Elliot, the woman's rights lecturer, and she is treated for this complaint. Thus Christine is doubly punished, for defying both privately and publicly her womanly role.

Although asylums, dungeons and convents are common in the sentimental novel, the use of such devices in feminist thesis novels is an innovation. Mary Wollstonecraft uses the asylum in *Maria* (1797) as punishment for the protagonist's feminist rebellion to her husband. Perhaps American feminist writers use it to stress the need for reform at a time when new legislation was being proposed. A visit to an asylum enables Fanny Fern to point out that a husband could get rid of his wife that way. Lois Waisbrooker, the free-lover, will employ an analogous plot to Bullard's in order to illustrate family prejudice against her spiritualist heroine in *Alice Vale* (1869).

The family's expulsion of the offending member is a constant device in the sentimental novel and recurs in the cautionary part of a feminist thesis novel. But in the normative part of a feminist novel family arrangements alternative to the patriarchal model are often suggested and described, if only by upholding the « feminine » values of kindness, generosity, acceptance, nurturance in parent/children relations. Christine's attitude toward her adopted daughter Rose is a model of intelligent and loving care that passes its test when Rose, who has also been trained to become a lecturer, falls in love with Dr. Eugene Russell and proposes to give up her career to marry him. Many years later, when women lecturers were no longer so shocking, Henry James would repropose the same dramatic situation in the Olive-Basil-Verena triangle in *The Bostonians* (1885). He then cast Olive, quite apart from possible sexual preferences, as a « bad mother » who will not allow her daughter to have her own identity but wants her to live through hers. In our novel, instead, all three characters vie in generosity, each ready to abandon her/his claim so that true inclinations may prevail. Rose, who does not want a leading role in society, chooses domesticity. Bullard gives no hint, as James does, that she may regret her choice. Her case is one of the first fictional examples of the marriage-career conflict that will become a frequent plot device in the post Civil War era, when more women enter the professions. But not until then and later will the protagonists have the option *not* to choose at all and to keep their jobs after marriage. In this and other ways *Christine* is a model

for its genre, because it portrays a woman who both lectures and stays married, and another who freely chooses marriage and domesticity as her vocation.

Fanny Fern's novel also attacks the non-feminist family – the kind that restrains instead of supporting. The sunny gaiety of her own rapport with her first child, and the less hearty but still most tender relation with the other two, is juxtaposed to the grim sadistic attitudes of her in-laws and to the lack of concern of her own relatives. When she is left a widow totally at their mercy, her resolution to fight them hardens. She will not be humbled into the meek obedient female full of duties and no rights they expect her to be. In one of her stories, «Never Despair», she exhorts her obviously feminine audience to hold on a little longer to the conviction that «noblest powers are never developed in prosperity». Significantly, she sees herself as a figure of ambiguous gender clothed in dusty armor, returning victorious from the wars⁶. Raising the young single-handed and earning the family's living clashes with the myth of true womanhood so ruthlessly enforced by public and private opinion. Ruth Hall, like Fanny Fern, parents the young and herself; she is both the giver of love and the giver of bread.

But although *Ruth Hall* points out that patriarchal society is an outrage and women should take hold of their own lives, the short pieces that bring Fern money and fame sketch bathetic scenes of patriarchal life. The barb (the subtle debunking of her own myth-making) is hidden in the ease of the pen, in the iconography of sentimental womanhood, in the precise delineation of woman's sphere and of her influence. If we look closely at *Ruth Hall*, we see Fanny Fern exploiting most ably her own circumstances to produce a victorian success story, complete with the happy ending that confounds all enemies and delights all friends. But this rags-to-riches story also happens to be an accurate manual of how to succeed as an author by really trying. No triumph of self-righteousness could have been sweeter to the scribbling women readers than Ruth's last interview with Mr. Lescom, her first and very mean editor, when she turns the tables on him by applying his own business ethics («*friendship* has nothing to do with business») ⁷ and leaving him for a much better contract. Caroline Dall, «the merchant's daughter», who favored teaching because, since it did not pay well, it had the «power of converting material wealth into spiritual well-being», must have found this incident particularly distasteful ⁸.

Fanny Fern had no qualms about making money. Of the other novelists discussed here, Oakes Smith is genteel about her earnings, Bullard discreet, and Mary Nichols quite coy. But Fanny Fern is very proud and open about

⁶ James Partou, ed., *Fanny Fern. A Memorial Volume*, Gr.W. Carleton & Co., New York, 1873, 121.

⁷ Fanny Fern, *Ruth Hall*, Mason Bros., New York, 1855, 283.

⁸ *Walter*, 21.

her financial success. She shares with the others the conviction that economic independence and self-ownership are synonymous, but, of the four women, her symbol for the sense of power she derives from writing is the best.

In 1856, the year when skirts ballooned into crinolines and Fern signed her fabulous \$ 100 a column contract with *The Ledger*, she wrote a short story called « My Old Inkstand and I ». She addresses her inkstand – the same one she bought second-hand when she began to write – remembering those who humiliated her when she was poor and would be friends now that she is famous. Thanks to the inkstand, her little Nell, once tormented by the landlady, now has a hoop and stick, dolls, and a globe of gold fish. Thanks to the inkstand, Nell is fed and clothed and will feed herself by becoming a writer. The inkstand is Fern's dearest possession, her talisman treasured to the point that she capitalizes its name. In this post-freudian age, her affirmation of self through this symbol is clear. But one must point out that the symbol combines male and female characteristics. The pen (socially and culturally male) is mentioned only once in the story, at the beginning when she says: « I dipped my pen in your sable depths in the sky-parlor of that hyena-like Mrs. Griffin »⁹. Here the inkstand acquires a fertile feminine identity that is maintained throughout the text. The inkstand feeds, provides, protects. The pen is the agent – and business agent. In fact we can say that the pen that capitalizes the Inkstand also capitalizes on it. It is ultimately her own self that Fanny Fern capitalizes on in *Ruth Hall*, the self of a « new woman », both male and female in society's terms. Her shrewd intelligence relies on her own experience of female oppression to expose the difference between the public image of a respectable family and a private view of the same, between the moral façade of respectable magazines and the sharp practices of their owners, between the myth that women don't work and the reality of their need. But for this very reason *Ruth Hall* did not sell nearly as well as her short stories, and Fern found it expedient to revert to the saccharine product favored by the feminine fifties. *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio* sold 70,000 copies before the second series appeared. By 1856 she had already received 10,000 dollars in royalties¹⁰.

Elizabeth Oakes Smith is another woman who knew how to package her feminism. Her soft spirituality perplexed the more down to earth militants but, as Paulina Wright Davis wrote « She is not so ultra as some of us... we must accept her for what she is. We need every possible shade and variety of lecturers and workers in this great movements »¹¹. And *Bertha and Lily; or the Parsonage at Beech Glen*, published in New York, Boston, and Cincinnati and by two London houses in 1854¹², was favorably reviewed

⁹ Parton, 57.

¹⁰ In *Notable American Women*.

¹¹ Taylor Stohr, *Free Love in America. A Documentary History*, Ames Press, New York, 1979, 116.

¹² Mary A. Wyman, *Two American Pioneers. Seba Smith and Elizabeth Oakes Smith*, Columbia U.P., New York, 1927, 185.

everywhere. Like *Ruth Hall* and *Mary Lyndon*, it followed the autobiographical mode but in such a discreet, idealized fashion that Caroline Dall would have found Bertha's childhood memories quite to her taste. She would also have found no objection to Smith's treatment of economic questions. Money is always linked with morals at Beech Glen. This is a village where self-denial is the rule and sainthood as pervasive as the smell of the lilies.

It is, all the same, a subversive novel, a typical novel about woman's usurpation of clerical power in the best Anne Douglas tradition. Already from the start the gender boundary between the two main characters wavers. Parson Ernest Helfenstein blushes like a maiden and is dominated by his congregation. Bertha instead is the strongest of women. Her name can be interpreted with the aid of Caroline Dall, according to whose sources Bertha the Spinner used to ride (long before the Age of Temperance), with the distaff on her saddle, planting vines together with other women.

« Yes, it was Bertha of the Transjurane, who, about the middle of the tenth century, undertook this work; opened the old Roman roads; and, in defending her people against the Saracen hordes, first devised, it may be, the modern telegraph. A prolonged line from her Alps to the Jura is still set with the solid stone towers from which Bertha's sentinels warned each other »¹³.

Pioneer, inventor, builder, warrior, leader. The woman who rides, who spins, who plants grapes, who builds stone towers, who fights. A complete woman.

But Bertha is also a fallen woman. Lily is her illegitimate daughter. Now, the plausible plot development in such a case would show a good pastor leading a lost sheep back to the fold. But in this plot it is Bertha who helps Helfenstein develop spiritually, who saves him from an « unworthy » attachment, who organizes his parish for him, and eventually consents to marry him. And this is not a simple reversal of roles so much as a blurring of gender lines toward the feminine in accordance with Oakes Smith's philosophy¹⁴. Furthermore, the parson's name is not fortuitous. Ernest Helfenstein was Oakes Smith's *nom de plume* for the two years before she wrote the novel. The identification is intended. Bertha, the stone beacon and Ernest, the stone of help, are complementary, interchangeable, and so similar that their voices often blur in the text, which alternates passages from his and her diary. We will see later what conclusions we can draw from all this.

The use of diaries is an appropriate structural device. Oakes Smith, who from Congregationalist had become a Unitarian, in 1854 was still under the influence of transcendentalism. In this novel she makes a bold attempt to fictionalize Bertha's religious quest for the perception of an Emersonian everlasting now. Helfenstein finds the perfect icon for « the story of years

¹³ Dall, Caroline, *Woman's Right to Labor*, Walker, Wise & Co., Boston, 1860, 39.

¹⁴ See Smith's collection of essays *Woman and Her Needs*, published in 1851.

frozen in an instant » in Lily's daguerrotype « painted by the sun » (102)¹⁵. But Oakes Smith must deal with fictional techniques at a time when epifanies had not yet been theorized. As vehicles for inner time and space, the journals are her substitute for the stream of consciousness technique.

Bertha refuses to live in or for the past. « To-day is the point of value », she says, « the past is but a causeway over which we pass to the present » (101-2). Her refusal to acknowledge time and history has a contingent reason. She dates all time from « *the lily times* », « the days of chastity » before her own (and Magdalen's) fall. And in this sense her time is typical woman-time, in that it looks for no referent outside personal history. At the moment of her social transgression she finds herself ostracized with no place to go and turns inward. She has internalized the world's rejection to such an extent that she must place herself beyond its reach in order to retain her sanity. And from now on time will be only the time of atonement and spiritual progress. Before she is ready to rejoin the world, Bertha must become perfect in her own terms, that is, superior where she has been cast down, untoucheable where she has been soiled, purest where she has been defiled. Therefore her own past must not touch her. Even her memory is entrusted to others. Her history is pieced together by Helfenstein. He records how John True, a faithful servant, saw her worshipped by Indians in a wigwam, blinded from crying and her hair white from the grief of betrayal; how her lover Underhill saw her in Italy, a proud Corinne spurning his adulterous love. Her reclaiming of her past begins after the death of Underhill, when she seems ready literally to build her new life over the remnants of the old. She begins to teach; opens an old letter that contains news of her daughter; and begins to talk of her childhood.

Both the refusal to submit to history and the wish to see herself as all spiritual appear to be the product of self-dramatization as well as of real need. But then, in this she is aided and abetted by her author who multiplies her attributes of sainthood lest we miss the point. Bertha's hair is white; her favorite flower is white – the lily, or rather the water lily, where the image of water cleanses and further purifies (159; 182). She is a vegetarian; she emanates a faint radiance; wears a halo (115); and occasionally levitates (162). She is also narcissistically beautiful, although she says that she takes great pleasure in her own beauty because « my body is but a medium by which the soul makes itself manifest to those about me » (48). And further, to illustrate the point that when the physical world is but an emblem of the spiritual world a rose is not a rose, she observes that a rose is « a symbol of the secret soul of true womanhood » (51). Bertha is Oakes Smith's incarnation of the new woman, but because even with her spiritual attainments she still carries the scars of her unhappy past, her daughter Lily is the true

¹⁵ *Bertha and Lily*, J.C. Derby, New York 1854. All page references are given hereafter in parentheses.

woman of the future (97). Helfenstein says that Lily is not a child but a soul; sees her as a Mignon, as a Miranda; he vows that she can be anything she wants when she grows up. Indeed she promise well: Lily has visions like her mother and is followed by a pet angel.

Now, before the arrival of these women, Helfenstein was a timid parson who had promised to deliver an honest sermon once a week for his money and not to meddle with the duties of the town officers (129). But he changes under Bertha's influence. His vocabulary increases as he shakes up his parishioners (73-4); he causes a rumpus by adopting three children from the orphanage; he begins to chafe under the power of village opinion. Finally, he decides that the parish regards him as a man regards his wife — as property — and rebels (129). « I will be chargeable to no one », he explains. « Mine own hands shall supply my necessities. Give your money to others. I will none of it. Rather let me perish than refrain to declare the whole oracles of God » (130). His parishioners love his new image, but soon personal complications cause him to slack off again. His cousin Julia alights one Friday at his doorstep. And as Helfenstein peeps from his window at her arched foot, the well turned ankle, « the white strip of stocking, the delicate frill, the pretty gaiter, fully exposed », even without waiting to see whether a short upper lip denotes pride, we know that this is the wrong woman for a parson (76). But he is quite captivated by her « magnificent femininity », although he realizes that her presence is not conducive to thought (148) and that he is losing sight of his new great plans (245). Julia is « a rose, a vine, a pomegranate », and he is madly in love with her. But because she also loves him, she gives him up to Bertha who has such an ennobling influence over him. Julia soon marries a very rich and very ugly man. Bertha and Ernest celebrate German-fashion their betrothal which we suspect will last forever. After all, there is no real reason why they should marry. They live next door to one another well looked after by servants; they already have children; and both have their own church. Yes, Bertha too. She has erected a temple over her lover Underhill's grave and there she lectures to the women of the congregation. She teaches botany and horticulture, housekeeping and dress reform as well as more weighty subjects. We shall leave her surrounded by a large audience, the maidens embroidering, the matrons knitting « in their improved costumes, garlanded with flowers, and their faces wreathed with content » (245). As we leave, already we can see Helfenstein's male parishioners coming in for the general lecture. Another rags-to-riches story, for church-going-women.

We said at the beginning that in this novel gender lines blurred toward the feminine. We saw this feminine define itself in spiritual terms, through the sublimation of the physical. And we have seen Bertha progress from the status of fallen woman to that of seer and teacher of the Beech Glen community. Her usurpation of Helfenstein's space is the result of a three-pronged strategy: her self-dramatization into sainthood; her infiltration of his con-

gregation; and her appropriation of his private life. Bertha mythologizes herself; sets up new standards in the community by example and by influencing the parson's preaching. She then claims Lily for her own before she realizes that indeed she is her daughter [« "lilies belong to me" – (here Lily kissed the speaker's hand) » (282-3)] and finally binds Ernest to herself through the solemn ceremony of betrothal. But the source of Bertha's imperial « I » is Elizabeth Oakes Smith, Helfenstein's *alias*, Bertha's mother, Lily's grandmother. She is author and subject matter. She is writer and text – an oceanic self.

The first woman lecturer on the Lyceum circuit, Elizabeth Oakes Smith late in life became the pastor of an independent congregation in New York State.

*

I find it deliciously ironical that *Bertha and Lily* portrays Mary Gove Nichols's ideal of a perfect marriage – a swedenborgian alliance of two souls – for no two authors can be further apart on the subject of marriage than Smith, the partisan of indissoluble marriage and sexual purity, and Nichols the free-lover.

In an article on divorce, Smith states that in an ordered society, in which she was a firm believer, bad marriages would not exist. Since only compatible people would marry, divorce would be unnecessary. The remedy for the present conditions is to marry late and with the greatest caution, she says, drawing a bitter lesson from her own life which had not, however, shaken her faith in the institution of marriage. « We need a higher estimate of the sanctities of marriage », she concludes, « not increased facilities for dissolving it »¹⁶.

Smith aspired to be a counsellor of souls whereas Nichols already was a counsellor of married women. In Nichols' experience women hid their unhappiness in marital life because they held sacred the idea of marriage. Her early life could be read as the story of her emancipation from this belief. *Mary Lyndon*, her autobiographical novel published in 1855, tells the story of her marriage in such a way as to demonstrate that marriage is a pernicious institution, that love should be free, and that divorce is a necessity. This conviction is the basis of all her criticism of society¹⁷. If my experience and that of other women teaches me that marriages are bad, and if society is based on marriage, how can society be good?, is the fundamental question raised in the novel.

The novel itself is little more than a picaresque account of Mary's life, from her childhood in « Sunny New England », where she grows up believing herself to be the ugliest child on earth because of flaxen hair, a squint, and a large nose, to her life in New York City where she opens a Grahamite

¹⁶ Stohr, 120.

¹⁷ *Mary Lyndon or, Revelations of a Life. An autobiography*, Stringer, New York, 1855.

boarding house and practices the watercure. Mary's changes map her quest for identity. The ugly girl humiliated by the mother, becomes the clever girl loved by the father, who vows she will be different from any one else. While still adolescent, she converts herself to Quakerism by reading an old school book. This new identity holds until she meets real Quakers. From then on she seems to loose the faculty to actualize fantasy life. In fact, the pressure to conform to the norms of the quaker community, into which she has married, is such that she constantly needs to adjust her point of view: how « they » see her and how she really is. This process of self-differentiation is characteristic of her; it first leads to an indictment of the Quaker community and it will later extend to an indictment of society at large. « They » see her as a women who will not conform to their norm; she sees herself as a true non-conformist, and them as self-righteous people who inflict violence by thwarting, repressing, and censoring. Her perception is influenced by her husband's behavior. Mean and lazy, he brutalizes her, sends her to work and takes her money. When Mary's father finally blackmails him into leaving her, he abducts their daughter Eva to a Quaker village. Mary will have to steal Eva back and cross into New York State to avoid local divorce laws.

But if Quaker spirituality turns out to be all sham and attachment to ritual, Mary's is not. As Nichols put it elsewhere, « a new thought has dawned upon the world – that of fidelity to one's self ». She would later come to realize that « the day that I was able to say, I owe no fealty to a husband, or any human being, I will be faithful to myself, was my first day of freedom »¹⁸.

From now on her life must express this belief in order to express her new self. She becomes a professional reformer lecturing on physiology, health, dress, and woman's rights. She has learnt the water-cure from her father, whose hobby is the shower-bath. Now she makes it into a business. She feels called upon to uproot women's diseases.

A married woman without a husband, a woman lecturer, a vegetarian, a woman who wears bloomers, a woman who earns her own living, a no-government woman, a woman who believes in and upholds divorce – Mary Nichols is a free-lover.

When *Mary Lyndon* appears, the *New York Times* reviews it with an article that raises a controversy on the subject of Free Love. By the end of the controversy Nichols is firmly linked with « the championship of Socialism, or of Universal Libertinism and Adultery ». She is in good company; with her are listed George Sand, Fanny Wright, Margaret Fuller, Flora Tristan, and Ernestine Rose, all women who have broken through the conventions of their time¹⁹.

¹⁸ Nichols, T.L. and Mary S. Grove Nichols, *Marriage*, Self-published, New York, n.d., 197 and 265.

¹⁹ « The Free Love System », reprinted in *Littel's Living*, Age, vol. 64, X, 1855.

I believe that there was, and indeed there still is, a consensus among the experts on Free Love to consider Mary Nichols a clever opportunist with a flair for self-dramatization and for selling quack remedies. There are traces of this in *Mary Lyndon*, which is not only an *apologia pro vita sua* but also a good advertisement for her business. As a seller of water-cure and sundry remedies for women's complaints, she needs to convince the public of her personal experience and expertise. So she gives details on diet and sickness; hints of venereal diseases and abortion, of sexual disfunctions and marital incompatibility; accounts of pregnancies and of the evil effect of «vigils, tight-lacing and tea drinking»²⁰. She sides throughout with those reformers who would give women reproductive control as well as legal control over their lives.

The novel also contains satirical descriptions of Alcott and his associates at the time of Fruitlands, and of the Stephen P. Andrews circle in New York City. The observer-narrator moves through them because at the time when the story takes place Nichols was not one of the in-group in any reform circle. Although she gives a tongue-in-cheek account of their activities, it strikes the reader that she seldom passes judgement. She seldom juxtaposes what people do with what they ought to do, but is always on the look-out for this trait in others. She likes to point out the difference between theory and practice, principles and their application, and above all the difference between women's lives and the value that society assigns to them. She straddles issues, always alert to the chance of making her presence felt. But her values are clear: she praises honesty, assertiveness, and industry. She is non-violent, kind to animals and children. And she will not be owned. She opposes all forms of coercion – the baby's swaddling clothes, public opinion, social repression.

At the moment when it becomes clear that the observer-narrator is formulating the concept of Individual Sovereignty, Mary Lyndon and Mary Nichols merge. Mary's spontaneous anarchism, confirmed by many trials, had come under the influence of the ideas of Josiah Warren and Andrews at the time when her novel closes. Mary would make those ideas the theoretical framework of her campaign for reproductive rights and free love. Her platform proposes an independent woman «sustaining herself and bestowing herself in love upon the man who seems in her judgment to be most divinely hers... doing this without reference to law or public opinion... competent to decide who shall be the recipient of her love and the father of her babe». Only when women and all who are enslaved have the right to self-ownership and individual responsibility there will be true freedom²¹.

²⁰ *Mary Lyndon, op. cit.*, 61.

²¹ *Marriage, op. cit.*, 191.