Wesleyan University The Honors College

A Perverse Mood of the Mind: Subversive Realism in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

by

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Class of 2011

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors from the College of Letters

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2011

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments 3

Introduction: Critical Reception of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* 4

I. Lucy Snowe as a (Non)Realist Narrator:
Perverse Manipulations of Genre Expectations

Villette, Realist Conventions, and Lucy Snowe as Narrator 15

Lucy Snowe's Perversity and the Realist Subject 35

II. Doublings and Reflections:
The Perversion of the Reader in *Villette*

Paradoxical Language: Lucy as Speaking Subject 47

Mirroring and Doubling: Excess and Slippage of Meaning 54

Lucy and the Perversion of the Reader 76

Conclusion: The Self that Trembles 82

Bibliography 87

Acknowledgments

I am inexpressibly indebted and grateful to Professor Christina Crosby, who advised this project with sincerity, intelligence, and enthusiasm. Without Professor Crosby's invaluable critical insight and guidance, this work would not have been possible. The importance of our discussions over the course of this year extends far beyond this project, which I hope reflects the thought, excitement, and intellectual grappling of those meetings.

I would also like to thank the Wesleyan Writing Program and my thesis mentor, Laird Gallagher, for offering a fresh pair of eyes when they were needed.

Finally, I owe infinite thanks to my family, who I can never thank enough for their support, encouragement, and love.

Introduction

Critical Reception of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

"As a novel, in the ordinary sense of the word, *Villette* has few claims; as a *book*, it is one which, having read, you will not easily forget."[1]

-G. H. Lewes, 1853

"Never were thoughts so burnt into the soul [as in *Villette*]. When once read they are never forgotten. […] Charlotte Brontë thought to have benefitted her age—I fear she cursed it. Strange are the providences of God."[2]

-William Wirt Kingsley, 1860

"[Lucy] has never been truly recognized by any critic. […] She represents a type of woman before unknown to the realms of novel-land."[3]

-Susan M. Waring, 1866

The critical reception of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, published in January of 1853, indicates an initial trend of mixed admiration and disgust for the novel. A review published in *The Nonconformist* in March reads, "[In *Villette,*] a rare insight into human minds gives such a naturalness and truth to particular scenes as to make

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[1] G. H. Lewes, "*Ruth* and *Villette*," in *The Brontë Sisters: Critical Assessments*. Vol. 3, *Evaluations of the Novels: Jane Eyre, Shirley and Villette*, ed. Eleanor McNees (East Sussex: Helm Information Ltd, 1996), 607.
[2] William Wirt Kingsley, Review of *Villette* in McNees, *Critical Assessments*. Vol 3, 619, 622.
[3] Susan M. Waring, "Charlotte Brontë's Lucy Snowe," in McNees, *Critical Assessments*. Vol 3, 623.

up a wonderfully expressive representation of actual life."[4] Harriet Martineau, a friend of the talented author, begins her review, published in *The Daily News*, with a similar sense of praise. "Everything written by 'Currer Bell' [Charlotte's *nom de plume*] is remarkable," she explains. "She can touch nothing without leaving on it the stamp of originality."[5] G.H. Lewes' "*Ruth* and *Villette*", published in *Westminster Review,* was likewise appreciative of the special quality of the novel. "It is a work of astonishing power and passion," he writes. "From its pages there issues an influence of truth as healthful as mountain breeze."[6] From these praises, it is clear that a certain sense of awe surrounded the work of this "Currer Bell".

The reviews, however, were not all positive; in fact, most critics, after briefly acknowledging the enormous talent of the author and strange power of the novel, criticized *Villette* for its unsettling eccentricity. While intended as a compliment, G.H. Lewes' observation in the same article points to what many critics, including Lewes himself, saw as the shortcoming of Brontë's final novel. "*Contempt of all conventions in all things*," Lewes writes, "in style, in thought, even in the rate of story-telling, here visibly springs from the independent originality of a strong mind nurtured in solitude."[7] The reviewers' observations of the incredible accomplishments of Currer Bell and her novel are undercut by critiques of *Villette*'s disjointed structure, moments of poetic outbursts, and the displeasing narrator and protagonist, Lucy Snowe. These criticisms essentially address the extent to which *Villette* adheres to the

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[4] Review of *Villete, The Nonconformist* (March 1853), in McNees, *Critical Assessments*, Vol 3, 597.
[5] Harriet Martineau, Review of *Villette*, in McNees, *Critical Assessments*. Vol 3, 589.
[6] G. H. Lewes, "*Ruth* and *Villette*," in McNees, *Critical Assessments*. Vol 3, 607.
[7] Ibid. Emphasis my own.

conventions of nineteenth century realist autobiography and, consequently, the moral individual inscribed in and produced by these novelistic conventions.

Structurally, the plot of *Villette* was seen to be insufficient and unnecessarily interrupted by scenes of extremely figurative language and heightened emotion. A February review from *The Spectator* reads, "Of plot, strictly taken as a series of coherent events all leading to a common result, there is none."[8] In a harsher tone, the same *Nonconformist* review that had praised Brontë's portrayal of psychological experience, disapproves of the "deliberate queerness" of *Villette*, what the critic terms, "an unchecked flow of *perverse* humor."[9] In apparent preparation to summarize the novel, the reviewer dismissively explains, "We shall not attempt [Lucy Snowe's] history, even in outline; *it is really nothing*, save for strange coincidences and re-encounters, and a special tendency on the part of everybody to turn out to be somebody else known elsewhere by a different name before."[10] Further criticizing *Villette's* "nothing" plot, the *Nonconformist* reviewer belittles the technique of surprise used by Brontë. Having intended to provide examples of various moments of realization and recognition of characters within the novel, the reviewer decides, instead, that "it seems needless to bring forward details of which we could only say that they have no merit higher than had melodrama."[11]

The novel was subject not only to structural criticism, but also to stylistic reprimand from these contemporary reviewers. Many critics disapproved of the

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[8] Review of *Villete, The Spectator* (February 1853), in McNees, *Critical Assessments*, Vol 3, 592.
[9] Review of *Villete, The Nonconformist* (March 1853), in McNees, *Critical Assessments*, Vol 3, 597. Emphasis my own.
[10] Ibid., 599. Emphasis my own.
[11] Ibid.

frequent episodes of heightened emotional turmoil, such as the repeated storm sequences, usually written in highly figurative or poetic language. Even G.H. Lewes, in his largely complimentary article, claims, "Currer Bell has […] the fault of running metaphors to death […] thus making passages look mechanical and forced, which if more directly put before us would be very powerful."[12] The *Spectator* reviewer similarly writes, "Lucy Snowe's autobiography [is] so *pleasant* a book in all respects except the spasms of heart agony she is too fond of showing herself in."[13] These "less pleasing" stylistic sections, he argues, are "done at such length, with so much obscurity from straining after figure and allusion, as to become tedious and induce skipping."[14] The urge to "skip" the highly turbulent or strange portions of the text is clear in these reviews which, while they acknowledge some of the power of a novel as dark and complex as *Villette*, shy at the very "deliberate queerness" which gives it such force.[15]

Perhaps the most discomfiting element in a novel that appears to operate in a realist paradigm is the extreme depression, unreliability, and instability of the narrator, Lucy Snowe. While the extended metaphors of raging storms and crews lost at sea often "induced skipping" for the first reviewers of *Villette*, the novel's unusual narrator is so pained, indefinite, and even *immoral* that these critics frequently assert that she, the protagonist, is the most displeasing element of the work. "[Lucy Snowe]

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[12] G. H. Lewes, "*Ruth* and *Villette*," in McNees, *Critical Assessments*. Vol 3, 608.
[13] Review of *Villete, The Spectator* (February 1853), in McNees, *Critical Assessments*, Vol 3, 593. Emphasis my own.
[14] Ibid., 594.
[15] Inga-Stina Ewbank buttresses this claim, arguing, "The story certainly lacks a neat structural pattern […] but its unique power lies in that very lack" [Inga-Stina Ewbank, "Artistic Truth in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë," in *The Brontës*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 21].

allows us no respite," Martineau complains. She argues that the oppressive atmosphere of suffering that pervades the novel renders the book "almost intolerably painful."[16] In a letter to Mrs. Forester, Matthew Arnold slips from the narrator, Lucy, to the author, Currer Bell; "Why is *Villette* disagreeable?" Arnold wonders. Answering his own question, Arnold asserts, "Because the writer's mind contains nothing but hunger, rebellion, and rage, and therefore that is all she can, in fact, put into her book."[17] Hence, Lucy's dense, continual, and seemingly irresolvable suffering was distasteful for critics who were perhaps hoping for a narrative that allowed space for hope, resolution, and growth. *Villette,* however, is a novel that denies the forward progression of a typical autobiographical *bildungsroman*; the protagonist never grows or into a unified, self-aware subject, but instead remains something *else.* Importantly, however, *Villette*'s refusal of these expectations is not a complete rejection. The novel disappoints these expectations while nonetheless inducing readers to expect such a narrative; hence, we still use the term *bildungsroman* when speaking of *Villette*, even if it is qualified as a *perverse bildunsgroman*. It is precisely because Brontë manipulates realist conventions, because we as readers have such high expectations of a particular portrayal of life, that *Villette*, in its disappointing response to those expectations, is so disagreeable.

Lucy is a character and narrator who evades identification, as the author of a November review in *Dublin University Magazine* articulates. "In the delineation of the character and the heroine," the anonymous critic observes, "we cannot help

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[16] Harriet Martineau, Review of *Villette*, in McNees, *Critical Assessments*. Vol 3, 589.
[17] Matthew Arnold, Letter from Matthew Arnold to Mrs. Forester, 14 April 1853, in McNees, *Critical Assessments*. Vol 3, 610.

thinking there is displayed some inconsistency."[18] Similarly disappointed by Lucy's refusal to be present and stable within the text, the reviewer of *The Nonconformist* writes, "Constantly as she is before us Lucy's is the least realizable form, and the least interesting among the leading characters of the book."[19] However, while Lucy's reluctance or inability to "take form" or present a cohesive identity is highly criticized, it is a fundamental movement within the text and cannot be bracketed.

Contributing to the perversity of this strange narrative is the implied *pleasure* the narrator feels in her own suffering and refusal to cohere to norms of progress, growth, synthesis, and resolution. In a review published by *The Spectator*, an anonymous critic formulates the understated and timid hypothesis, "If it were not too harsh a word to be used of so good a girl as Miss Lucy Snowe, one might almost say that she took a *savage delight* in refusing to be comforted."[20] The use of the equivocal phrase "one *might almost* say" reveals the critic's hesitation to fully articulate the contradiction in his observation. Diminutively speaking of the "good" Lucy whom he has projected, the critic seeks to attenuate the subsequent claim that Lucy takes a savage delight in her own refusal to remedy her situation. Much more than harsh, however, this phrase indicates an excessive pleasure of the Other (the savage) experienced through Other's refusal, consciously willed or not, to strive to transform themselves into a self-actualized, productive, and moral subject. Confounded by the savage delight—might we say, *jouissance*—of Lucy Snowe, a self-professed "looker-

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[18] Review of *Villette*, *Dublin University Magazine* (November 1853), in McNees, *Critical Assessments*. Vol 3, 612.
[19] Review of *Villete, The Nonconformist* (March 1853), in McNees, *Critical Assessments*, Vol 3, 599.
[20] Review of *Villete, The Spectator* (February 1853), in McNees, *Critical Assessments*, Vol 3, 592. Emphasis my own.

on at life," the *Spectator* reviewer points to what other critics similarly saw as the immorality of a contradictory and inconceivable protagonist who revels in her own exalted depression.[21]

Highlighting the critical attention paid to the issue of morality in nineteenth century literary criticism, G.H. Lewes begins his review of the novel by asking, "Should a work of Art have a moral?"[22] The answer, according to many critics contemporary to Charlotte Brontë, is yes. The same *Nonconformist* reviewer who criticized *Villette* for the novel's "deliberate queerness" writes, "A work of art of the highest grade, which shall successfully represent the beauty, variety, and contrasts of life […] must be inwardly conceived by a distinct and sincere moral purpose."[23] This reviewer's main criticism of *Villette*, in fact, reveals the type of morality he believes should motivate a realist work of art. "[*Villette*'s] great defect," he explains, "is that excellence in life is nowhere to be found in the characters portrayed […] and had no place in the spirit or aims of Lucy herself."[24] The only characters exempted from this condemnation are Mrs. Bretton and Graham, the relatively flat components of the bourgeois family, of which Lucy can never fully be a part.[25] In *Villette*, the critic concludes, "There is a true transcript of many passages of life, but not of its worthiest

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[21] "A keen relish for dramatic expression had revealed itself as a part of my nature; to cherish and exercise this new-found faculty might gift me with a world of delight, but it would not do for a mere looker-on at life" [Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, ed. Helen M. Cooper (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 156].
[22] G. H. Lewes, "*Ruth* and *Villette*," in McNees, *Critical Assessments*. Vol 3, 602.
[23] Review of *Villete, The Nonconformist* (March 1853), in McNees, *Critical Assessments*, Vol 3, 600.
[24] Ibid.
[25] These characters represent the gendered, self-actualizing, moral, Protestant, and middle-class individual who is the hero of realist fiction in a growing capitalist society; it is precisely this conception of individuality which, I will argue, Lucy *perverts*.

or most genial aspects."[26] The supposed immorality of the novel, as perceived by these critics, almost exclusively focuses on the unsettling narrator, Lucy Snowe. William Wirt Kingsley, in an 1860 review of the novel, wrote, "The first thing that struck us unfavorably was the character of the autobiographer, Miss Snowe. She cannot with good reason plead modesty for hiding her worthy, estimable traits, and making glaringly prominent her unworthy, well nigh despicable ones. […] *Who wants such a character to tell us a story?*"[27] In a *Dublin University Magazine* review, the critic, responding to what he terms Lucy Snowe's "hardly natural" qualities, argues that every potentially redeeming moral aspect in the narrator is "in some degree marred and defaced by a species of morbid sensibility which seems strangely at variance with such attributes."[28]

In other words, he, and others, point to the very perversity of this narrator, to the strange pleasure she takes in her own passivity, silence, and pain. This pleasure is simultaneously combined with an intense desire to realize and become the moral, individualized subject so championed in these critiques. Lucy's own perversity, however, disallows her this possibility. In fact, it is this perversion, both in relation to her own desires and to the expectations of the nineteenth century realist novel, that gives *Villette* what George Elliot described as, "something almost preternatural in its power."[29] It is precisely because *Villette* is not a "pleasant" novel that we as readers

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[26] Review of *Villete, The Nonconformist* (March 1853), in McNees, *Critical Assessments*, Vol 3, 600.
[27] William Wirt Kingsley, Review of *Villette* in McNees, *Critical Assessments*. Vol 3, 619. Emphasis my own.
[28] Review of *Villette*, *Dublin University Magazine* (November 1853), in McNees, *Critical Assessments*. Vol 3, 612.
[29] George Elliot, Letter from George Elliot to Mr. & Mrs. Charles Bray, 11 June 1848, in *The Brontë Sisters: Critical Assessments*. Vol. 1, *Recollections, Obituaries, Early Studies, 1848-*

are drawn to, tangled up in, and enchanted by its own uncanny and threatening beauty.

In this project, I examine the ways in which Charlotte Brontë simultaneously calls upon and refuses realist representational conventions in order to produce a text that profoundly disturbs the stability of the self as a unified subject. The shock felt by many contemporary critics, who damned *Villette* for its immorality, indicates the unsettling yet seductive power of this text. In her critical work, *Charlotte Brontë,* Penny Boumelha admits, "*Villette* is among the strangest of the nineteenth century novels to read."[30] My argument in this essay is driven by the questions: *Why* is *Villette* such a strange and disturbing novel? How is this effect achieved through the narrative discourse? *What* does the novel disturb, and what are the implications of this destabilization, both in terms of representation and interpretation, as well as political, social, and ethical life?[31] In the first chapter of this work, "Lucy Snowe as a (Non)Realist Narrator: Perverse Manipulations of Genre Conventions," I analyze *Villette* in relation to conventions of nineteenth-century realist representation; viewing *Villette* through the lens of genre conventions, the perversity of the novel as an instantiation of and rebellion against realist representation and the conception of

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1943, Evaluations of Juvenilia and Poems, Writers on the Writing, ed. Eleanor McNees (East Sussex: Helm Information Ltd, 1996), 603.

[30] Penny Boumelha, *Charlotte Brontë* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 100.

[31] This distinction is, in fact, a false binary. Representation, to borrow from Nancy Armstrong, is always already political; the novel as a narrative form does not reflect a pre-existing universe, but instead produces its own referent. Narrative representation is a process of subject formation. Thus, what is at stake in the play of perversion within the novel extends beyond literary hermeneutics to the conception of the individual and their relationship to a socially structured world. I discuss this in greater detail in my conclusion, "The Self that Trembles."

the moral individual inextricably tied up in this representational paradigm, emerges. In this chapter and the next, "Doublings and Reflections: The Perversion of the Reader," I explore the ways in which Lucy as a narrator and character is dispersed, multiple, and at play. Unable to be incorporated into linear narrative, Lucy must be read in the fissures, gaps, inconsistencies, or logical slips in the text. In this second chapter, I specifically explore the demands made of the critic in the reading of *Villette*; here, I propose that, in order to interpretively interact with a character and text that refuse to be reduced to a singular identity or meaning, the critic must immerse themselves in the *play* of the text. Asked to abandon the realist project of definitively reading a unified self onto the textual figure of Lucy Snowe, the critic must move between Lucy's multiple and refracted selves. This chapter attempts a critical reading of the novel through the movement of mirroring and doubling. In this reading, the critic cannot stand outside the text; the radical and subversive power of *Villette* lies in the implication and participation of the reader in Lucy's perverse narrative play. Thus, the reader becomes complicit in the strange movement of the text that threatens the stability of identity.

Finally, in "The Self that Trembles," the analysis shifts from this exploration of how Lucy Snowe disturbs the ideological foundations of realism and the modern individual, to an exploration of the constructive opening created through this disruption. If Lucy disturbs the understanding of the self as a single entity, what sort of new subjectivity emerges from this subversion? How is intersubjectivity re-imagined through a textual self that is not consolidated, but instead dissembles, multiplies, and trembles? Here, the issue extends beyond the individual into the realm

of the social. Is there a new possibility for an ethics of intersubjectivity produced through an understanding of selfhood as infinitely other within itself? In writing about a novel that undermines the authority of a single or stable interpretation, I believe that the task of the critic is to engender productive questions rather than to impose a false resolution. Thus, my theoretical commitments in this essay are concerned more with methods of reading, rather than defining the self; the value of a close reading of a novel such as *Villette*, then, lies in the ways in which this text confronts the critic not with answers, but with questions of representation and interpretation that allow the reader to conceive of the possibility of re-imagining the production of subjectivity. Therefore, by immersing ourselves in the subversive play of *Villette*, we, as readers, are presented with the threatening but radical possibility of inhabiting the margins of the intelligible, a space from which the limits of representation may be interrogated.

Lucy Snowe as a (Non)Realist Narrator

Perverse Manipulations of Genre Expectations

Villette, Realist Conventions, and Lucy Snowe as Narrator

> "To *say* anything on the subject, to *hint* at my discovery, had not suited my habits of thought, or assimilated with my system of feeling. On the contrary, I had preferred to keep the matter to myself. I liked entering his presence covered with a cloud he had not seen through, while he stood before me under a ray of special illumination, which shone all partial over his head, trembled about his feet, and cast light no farther."[32]
>
> -Lucy Snowe

> "*Villette* is a challenging and self-conscious novel that […] forces upon its reader the strangeness of narration itself, and raises questions about its own methods and possibilities of signification and representation."[33]
>
> - Penny Boumelha

The critical reception of *Villette* reveals the perverse contradiction that is the main problematic of this text. Due to *Villette*'s formal presentation as a three volume realist, autobiographical *bildungsroman,* the conventional question implicitly asked by the novel would be "Who is the protagonist, Lucy Snowe?" or "Who does Lucy become or grow into by the end of the novel?" These questions are literally and repeatedly asked throughout the text, not only by other characters but also by Lucy

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[32] Brontë, *Villette*, 196.
[33] Boumelha, *Charlotte Brontë*, 103.

herself. In an early crisis of purpose soon after her arrival in London, Lucy asks, "What was I doing here alone in great London? What should I do on the morrow? What prospects had I in life? What friends had I on earth? *Whence did I come? Wither should I go? What should I do?*"[34] Uncertain even of her past and anxious for her future, Lucy as a narrator is searching for herself rather than unveiling or demonstrating her identity to the reader. Lucy later turns to another character, Paulina Mary Home, one of her many "doubles" in the text, for answers. Having just revealed to the Home family her low status as a teacher, Lucy asks Polly, "What am I now?" to which she only receives the deceptively simple answer, "Yourself, of course."[35] Later, Lucy is asked the same question she put to Polly by the selfish and flirtatious schoolgirl, Miss Ginevra Fanshawe. Recently shocked to find that Lucy is, perhaps, "somebody" instead of the "nobody [Ginevra] once thought [her]," Ginevra demands, "Who *are* you, Miss Snowe?"[36] Instead of giving an answer, Lucy evades the question by returning another to Ginevra. "Who am I indeed?" she taunts. "Perhaps a personage in disguise." Her ambiguous response serves to further complicate, rather than resolve, the original question. This, however, is not out of pattern with most of the answers given to the persistent question of Lucy's identity. In recounting how different characters think of her, Lucy runs through a list of contradictory and divergent descriptions. "Madame Beck," she begins:

> esteemed me learned and blue; Miss Fanshawe, caustic, ironic, and cynical; Mr. Home, a model teacher, the essence of the sedate and discreet: somewhat conventional perhaps, too strict, limited and

[34] Brontë, *Villette,* 16. Emphasis my own.
[35] Ibid., 316.
[36] Ibid., 340-341.

> scrupulous, but still the pink and pattern of governess-correctness; whilst another person, Professor Paul Emanuel, to wit, never lost an opportunity of intimating his opinion that mine was rather a fiery and rash nature—adventurous, indocile, and audacious. I smiled at them all.[37]

The disjunction of these portrayals transforms them into a perversion of their own supposed function, to give a definitive answer to the question, "Who is Lucy Snowe?" These incongruous assessments mock those who purport to know the enigma, Lucy Snowe, by introducing the potential impossibility of a complete understanding of this protagonist. "What contradictory attributes of character we sometimes find ascribed to us, according to the eye with which we are viewed!" Lucy exclaims upon reflection. Strangely enough, Lucy decides, "If any one knew me it was little Paulina Mary."[38] Even Polly, however, is at a loss when it comes to Lucy Snowe. Several chapters later, Polly proves her own inability to answer the perpetual question of Lucy's identity in her statement, "Lucy, I wonder if anybody will ever comprehend you altogether."[39] However, by acknowledging the impossibility of a complete knowledge and understanding of a character so withdrawn, evasive, changing, and secretive as Lucy Snowe, perhaps Polly comes the closest of anyone to articulating the "truth" of this strange narrator.

The tension here is between this purposefully evoked and driving question of the novel, and the narrative's very refusal or inability to answer its own framing inquiry. Having been repeatedly confronted with the question of Lucy's identity, the reader expects to discover Lucy as she herself matures and becomes self-aware over

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[37] Ibid., 334.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., 471.

the course of the novel; we assume that we will serve as her companion and confidant in her journey towards self-realization. Charlotte Brontë, however, manipulates the reader's desire in relation to genre conventions by calling upon the sort of narrator, structure, and resolution that is typical of and desired in nineteenth century realist fiction only to thwart the expectations that accompany these conventions. Thus, it is jarring and uncomfortable when the reader discovers that both the narrator and the very language of *Villette* become impediments, rather than tools, in the quest to discover Lucy Snowe. As the reader approaches Lucy, she does not "take form," but recedes, dissembles, distracts, and escapes, undermining the hermeneutical *telos* of Lucy's "true" self.

In her article, "The Face in the Mirror: *Villette* and the Conventions of Autobiography," Janice Carlisle observes, "Lucy often treats the reader and his conventional demands for a gratifying story [quite] cavalierly."[40] Realist novels, in which a narrator oversees the logical connections of seemingly disparate instances and, at the close of the work, reveals the thread of meaning that unifies this sequence of events, have produced readers who expect and yearn for novels that are patterned by a narrator to be resolved. In *Villette*, however, Lucy, instead of emerging as a cohesive character at the end of the novel, remains an enigma. As readers, struggling to construct an identity for this strange narrator, we find ourselves confronted with a simultaneously incomplete and excessive system. The reader can never articulate or synthesize who Lucy is or becomes, largely because she fails to perform one of the primary functions of the realist narrator: that of synthesizing the information serially

[40] Janice Carlisle, "The Face in the Mirror: *Villette* and the Conventions of Autobiography," in *The Brontës*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 135.

provided within the narrative into a cohesive meaning or identity. Lucy is a narrator who paradoxically evades, deceives, confides, emotes, and withholds. The name "Lucy Snowe," in fact, seems to refer not to a single character or narrator, but to an excessive multiplicity of narration which points to a "character" who, more than doubled, is multiple, shifting, and without essence. Penny Boumelha, in her critical text, *Charlotte Brontë*, observes, "Although Lucy has a 'self', this cannot be characterized except by her name; on occasion, even her sex does not seem to be immutable. Our narrator-heroine functions more as a series, a dispersal, than as a fixed center. […] [She is] a character without definition, a name without identity, and a voice without origins."[41] The indeterminate nature of this character that is never at rest and never defined troubles the possibilities of realist representation in relation to a subject that is not self-identical, unified, or stable. The inconceivable nature of Lucy as a character points to the limits of representation within the realist text as well as a conception of the moral individual that is inextricably tied up with realist representational conventions. In this section, I explore the ways in which *Villette* both utilizes and subverts realist literary conventions; through this reading, I hope to indicate a possible opening towards a different ethics of subjectivity created by Lucy's disturbing narrative.

Although *Villette* could not, without some willful misreading on the part of the critic, be interpreted as a strictly realist novel, Brontë still insisted on the *truth* of the novel in its representation of the everyday psychological life of a protagonist as desperately alone as Lucy Snowe. In fact, Brontë repeatedly asserted that her books

[41] Boumelha, *Charlotte Brontë*, 115, 114.

were referential in that they represented what she claimed was a realistic experience of life. In her article "Artistic Truth in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë," Inga-Stina Ewbank emphasizes that "all through her four novels, Charlotte Brontë stresses the lifelikeness of her material, from the programme-declaration at the beginning of chapter 19 in *The Professor*: 'Novelists should never allow themselves to weary of the study of real life,' to the reminder near the end of *Villette* (chap. 34): 'Let us be honest, and cut, as heretofore, from the homely web of truth."[42] However, in the case of *Villette*, Charlotte Brontë's claims to realism are as complex as Lucy's claim, "I always, through my whole life, liked to penetrate the real truth."[43] While *Villette* is a prose-style, three volume fiction focusing on individual experience and everyday life, its adherence to realist conventions is troubled by this strange narrator who does not homogenize the mediums of space and time or reduce differences within the text to a final, overarching meaning or conclusion. In addition to the quasi-realist nature of the narrator, perhaps the most apparent confrontation with realist convention can be seen in the thematic and structurally Gothic elements of the novel. These motifs, most notably the Nun, are usually resolved by banal explanations that don't account for their huge symbolic weight within the text. The supernatural and heightened Gothic elements, however, such as the character of Mrs. Walravens, the setting of an enclosed school that formerly served as a convent, the darkly magical tinge surrounding highly Catholicized scenes, the strange and disturbing dream sequences, and many more, make classifying *Villette* as a traditional, domestic, realist autobiography unjustifiable. Ewbank argues that, while "in the main we are asked to

[42] Ewbank, "Artistic Truth," 13.
[43] Brontë, *Villette*, 514.

assent to the psychological realism of the novel […] [the] Gothic plot elements […] are used by Charlotte Brontë to achieve psychological realism of a kind previously unknown to the English novel."[44]

Ewbank hypothesizes that Brontë works towards not a singular truth, but "her two kinds of truth: realism and poetry; and again she achieves her best results when the two fuse: when psychological realism is arrived at by imaginative means."[45] This, however, is a tame description of the violent, frenzied, simultaneously ephemeral and physically imposing *truth* in *Villette*. After mistaking the appearance of "the Junta" as an undeniable sign that she has lost her love, Monsieur Paul, Lucy describes her masochistic and falsely liberating confrontation with "truth". Violently uniting herself with this falsehood she takes to be truth, Lucy, in ever more heightened language, crucifies herself on the "sovereign" fact of her abandonment. "No, I hastened to accept the whole plan," she exclaims, burdening herself with the unbearable pain of a wrenching untruth. "I extended my grasp and took it all in. I gathered it to me with a sort of rage and haste, and folded it round me, as the soldier struck on the field folds his colors about his breast. I invoked Conviction to nail upon me the certainty, abhorred while embraced, to fix it with the strongest spikes her strongest strokes could drive; and when the iron had entered well my soul, I stood up, as I thought renovated. […] In my infatuation, I said, 'Truth, you are a good mistress to your faithful servants! […] Truth stripped away Falsehood, and Flattery, and Expectancy, and here I stand—free!"[46]

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[44] Ewbank, "Artistic Truth," 15, 20.
[45] Ibid., 25.
[46] Brontë, *Villette*, 516.

Of course, the concept of truth is ironized in this and many other scenes of the novel; Lucy is an idol-worshipper, praising this misinterpretation of "the Junta's" gathering for the excruciating pain with which it penetrates her body, rendering Lucy not free, but even more entangled in her own depression and isolation.[47] Critiquing feminist readings of *Villette* that "have too uncritically depended on oppositions of surface and depth, illusion and reality, false and true consciousness," Christina Crosby, in her article "Charlotte Brontë's Haunted Text," articulates the radical work of the novel in relation to the concepts of truth and subjectivity in the realist paradigm.[48] "[*Villette*]," writes Crosby, "is a 'literature of consciousness' more in its *subversion* of the grounds of 'identity' and truth' than in its claiming of those grounds for women."[49] Crosby's hypothesis, implicitly in dialogue with that initial charge of the "deliberate queerness" of the novel, indicates what makes *Villette* so unsettling. The novel does not demand an equality between the sexes within the same system of hierarchical, binary opposition, "seemingly natural distinctions [which] are part of the same cultural configurations that construct woman as an auxiliary to man"[50] Instead, *Villette* dramatically undermines the very possibility of a representational system which favors a phallogocentric understanding of unified identity and indisputable fact. Hence, Crosby points to the radical demands that such a novel makes on its readers. The subversive nature of this narrative that is imbued with desperation,

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[47] Ewbank describes this image of masochistic truth in relation to the above quoted passage from *Villette*. "In this passage," Ewbank writes, "the frenzy of rhythm and imagery […] contradicts the direction which Lucy *wants* her feelings to take; and the total effect is one of a mind shattered and utterly disordered" (Ewbank, "Artistic Truth," 35). Here, then, we see another example of Lucy's perversity as a narrator.
[48] Christina Crosby, "Charlotte Brontë's Haunted Text," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 24, No. 4, Nineteenth Century (1984), 702.
[49] Crosby, "Haunted Text," 703. Emphasis my own.
[50] Ibid., 702.

desire, and longing, arises from a deeply and perversely pleasurable manipulation of the normative conventions of representation, morality, and identity in the novelistic form. In this section, I put *Villette* in dialogue with realist conventions in order to see the moments of transgression, transformation, and slippage in this relationship, and how these "border-crossings" potentially deconstruct notions of unified subjectivity in realist representation.[51]

In terms of conventional expectations, Lucy is a frustrating narrator. She withholds information from and even blatantly betrays the reader. The first major realization that Lucy has not been entirely forthcoming is the return of Graham Bretton from Lucy's childhood. Having referred to Graham as 'Dr. John' throughout the previous volume, Lucy finally admits that she had recognized him early on as the Graham of her childhood, but had said nothing to either Dr. John or the reader. Only revealing her secret when she is recovering from her nervous illness at the Brettons', Lucy admits, "this tall young man—this darling son—this host of mine—this Graham Bretton, *was* Dr. John. […] And, what is more," she adds, "I ascertained this identity scarcely with surprise. […] The discovery was not of today, its dawn had penetrated my perceptions long since."[52] The reader now realizes that a strange scene, several chapters back, was the moment of Lucy's discovery. "An idea new, sudden, and startling riveted my attention with an overmastering strength and power of attraction," Lucy describes. "I know not to this day how I looked at him—the force of surprise, and also of conviction, made me forget myself—and I only recovered wonted

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[51] My understanding of the logic of realism in the following section is largely based on Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth's critical work, *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel: Time, Space, and Narrative*.
[52] Brontë, *Villette*, 195.

consciousness when I saw that his notice was arrested."[53] Here, Lucy hints at her perverse style as a narrator; although she had an opportunity then to tell Dr. John what was meant by her strange stare, she "would not." She remained silent, and, moreover, took pleasure in the painful misunderstanding. "There is a *perverse* mood of the mind which is rather soothed than irritated by misconstruction," Lucy explains. "And in quarters where we can never be rightly known, we take pleasure, I think, in being consummately ignored."[54] Such moments of withholding or delayed revelation within the text are frequent, and seem to emerge from the joy of the information withheld, the power Lucy exerts over the reader and other characters through her secretiveness[55], or an inability to incorporate or articulate in language events so traumatic that they would rupture the narrative.[56]

Most memorable among those moments withheld for their own, private pleasure is the reading of Dr. John's long desired letter. The pages leading up to Lucy's sexualized breaking of the envelope's seal indicate the importance and anticipation of this event. Even before examining the letter, Lucy's heightened language makes the significance of a letter from Dr. John clear. "I knew it," she declares, "I felt it to be the letter of my hope, the fruition of my wish, the release from my doubt, the ransom from my terror." When she verifies that this is indeed the letter she has been waiting for, her joy is unmistakable. "I experienced a happy feeling—a

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[53] Ibid., 108.
[54] Ibid., 109. Emphasis my own.
[55] In *The Coherence of Gothic Convetions*, Eve Sedgwick argues, "Throughout the novel, when Lucy has power over other people it is most often the power of withholding her own language." [Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence Of Gothic Conventions* (New York: Methuen & Co., 1976), 120].
[56] Ironically, the very exclusion of these events is what renders the narrative structurally fissured, disjointed, and non-realist.

glad emotion which went warm to my heart, and ran lively through all my veins. For once a hope was realized. I held in my hand a morsel of real solid joy."[57] Waiting for a secret moment, Lucy steals away to the garret to enjoy her piece of joy in private, where "none would follow [her]—none interrupt," *including the reader*. Lucy brings us with her to the very brink of shared joy; she brings us into the attic, where "not even Madame herself" can penetrate, and builds our tension with hers at the moment of unveiling. "I took my letter," she narrates, "trembling with sweet impatience; I broke its seal."[58] And then: she stops. The reader is not permitted to see the letter itself, this sweet treasure that Lucy wishes to be entirely hers. Left in the same anxious suspense, the reader is privy only to Lucy's reaction, not the actual letter. All Lucy confesses is that, in reading the letter, "there was a fullness of delight in this taste of fruition—such, perhaps, as many a human being passes through life without ever knowing."[59]

Just as Lucy keeps the letter from the reader's sight, so she takes the reader into a Catholic church at the end of the first volume only to obscure her actual confession to the priest, Père Silas. The build-up to this desperate moment at the end of Lucy's "long vacation" is perhaps even more heightened than the pages before Lucy reads Graham's letter. Having fallen into a deep and hallucinatory depression when left over the holidays in what Graham later refers to as the "solitary

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[57] Brontë, *Villette*, 266. The letter, of course, does not come to represent any "real, solid joy" for this pitiable narrator. Instead, it becomes a symbol of the ever-painful "suspense" and hope, which torture Lucy.
[58] Ibid., 272.
[59] Ibid. Further highlighting the extreme importance of this letter, casually written by Dr. John, is her own self-description when searching for the lost note as a "groveling, groping, monomaniac" (Brontë, *Villette*, 274). Significantly, the Nun, an excessive and symbolic double of Lucy herself, *first* appears directly after Lucy reads the letter.

confinement" of the pensionnat, Lucy's suffering becomes overwhelming. Escaping her metaphorical tomb, Lucy, a staunch Protestant, walks the streets of Villette and, hearing the bells, is driven by her desperation to enter the Catholic church. Her subsequent confession, however, is excerpted and incomplete, described but not transcribed. All that we as readers know is that Lucy "showed [the priest] the mere outline of [her] experience," and that "the mere pouring out of some portion of long accumulating, long pent-up pain into a vessel whence it could not again be diffused—had done [Lucy] good."[60] Lucy's concealed confession presents a frustrating contrast between this narrative that obscures rather than unveils the "truth", and the reader's initial expectation of a literally *confessional* relationship with the narrator. "The parallel," writes Boumelha, "between religious and narrative confession is clearly implicit, and it is all the more striking, then, that Lucy withholds the confession itself."[61] Lucy's refusal to include the confession in the text reveals the partial nature of the narrative itself, which can never be a confession, but is necessarily a fiction, a deceptive representation. Additionally, the non-inclusion of momentous events such as the letter and confession is mirrored in the stylistic withholding that appears throughout the novel in the form of truncated moments or delayed introductions of characters.

These unknowable elements of the fabula, excluded from the text, point to the strangeness of Lucy's narration itself. Discussing the revelation of Dr. John as Graham Bretton, Eve Sedgwick, in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* articulates the effect of absented information. "[Lucy's exclusion of information] is so self

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[60] Brontë, *Villette*, 178-179.
[61] Boumelha, *Charlotte Brontë*, 107.

possessed," Sedgwick explains, "so *gratuitous*, not being particularly at the service of narrative suspense or formal resolution, that it seems to say the most that can be said about Lucy's ascendancy over the object of her language and silence." The "gratuitousness" of Lucy's stylistic and thematic withholding undermines the driving necessity and internal organization of the narrative itself. "For the gratuitousness of her not confiding one fact in the reader," Sedgwick argues, "is unsettling because it points to the *gratuitousness of her confiding anything at all.*"[62]

In fact, despite her position as the narrator and supposed architect of the text, Lucy often seems unwilling to narrate her own story, withholding information or using rhetorical devices in order to avoid unveiling any sort of complete, coherent, or truthful narrative. Instead, she is almost lost in her own narrative as she obsessively focuses on the lives of other characters, such as Paulina Home and Dr. John.[63] Additionally, Lucy never explicitly articulates what tragedy befell her family in the first volume, but resorts to metaphor, figuratively gesturing, "I will permit the reader to picture me, for the next eight years, as a bark slumbering through halcyon weather, in a harbor still as glass. […] However, it cannot be concealed that, in that case, I must somehow have fallen over-board, or there must have been a wreck at last. […] A heavy tempest lay on us; all hope that we should be saved was taken away. In fine, the ship was lost, the crew perished."[64] These highly figurative or "poetic" sections, which elude interpretation rather than lending themselves to meaning, are usually

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[62] Sedgwick, *Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, 122. Emphasis my own.
[63] In her article "*Villette* and the Conventions of Autobiography," Janice Carlisle observes, "As conventional autobiography, [the first three chapters of the novel, which focus on the interactions between Polly and Graham], are woefully inadequate. […] Neither the narrator's past nor present self is the ostensible subject here" (Carlisle, 139).
[64] Brontë, *Villette*, 39.

employed during moments of tragedy, loss, or upheaval within the novel. The prevalence of suffering in *Villette* and the unfortunate and depressing situation of Lucy's life indicate that hers is not a cheery or typical story. Ermarth argues that any narrative such as Lucy's, "Any move towards the *margins of experience* means accepting a distortion uncongenial to the realistic gambit."[65] Quoting J.P. Stern's *On Realism*, Ermarth elaborates, "Realism is confined to 'that fragile sphere we call civilized life … Its terms have no meaning at the catastrophic margins of experience or in the realm of Grace, where 'the system' breaks down and 'a man's time' is no more."[66] These excessive metaphorical passages, however, are located precisely at the tragic and 'catastrophic' margins of experience. Serving to obscure rather than illuminate this sphere, these heightened scenes indicate the pain of a narrator who does not adhere to the norms of the realist protagonist. As Heather Glen observes in her article, "*Shirley* and *Villette*", Lucy's "is the constricted first-person of one whose position is 'exceptional' […], unimaginable by those about her, invisible to the common gaze."[67]

This turn towards highly figurative rather than descriptive language, criticized in the contemporary reviews of the *Villette*, is reenacted throughout the novel, most notably in the storm scenes which culminate in the undecidable fate of Monsieur Paul, whose ship is caught in a storm that leaves "the Atlantic […] strewn with wrecks."[68] In this instance, however, Lucy refuses to even figuratively convey or

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[65] Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 35. Emphasis my own.
[66] Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus*, 35n48.
[67] Heather Glen, "*Shirley* and *Villette*," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, ed. Heather Glen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 135.
[68] Brontë, *Villette*, 546.

unequivocally verify her loss in the text. "Here pause: pause at once," Lucy writes. "There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. […] Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life."[69] The moment is truncated, and the responsibility of M. Paul's fate falls on the reader, who must decide, in the absence of narrative closure, if in this raging storm "the ship was lost." Penny Boumelha articulates the uncomfortable, strange, and unresolved finale in her argument that "the ending of Lucy's narrative is *most radical in its refusal to narrate*."[70] Hence, Lucy defers to the reader; the ending is doubled in that we as readers may choose for M. Paul to survive, or number his ship among those strewn across the Atlantic, never to return. However, the final pages of the novel are a 'double ending' in another sense. Images of storm and shipwreck have accrued a symbolic value over the course of the narrative by serving as a metaphorical depiction of Lucy's suffering, upheaval, and death, but also 'coming to life'. This is evident in scenes such as Lucy's description of her family's implied death and her confession, as well as the episode in which Lucy climbs out onto the window ledge of the school. Here, Lucy explains, "The tempest took a hold of me with tyranny: I was roughly roused and obliged to live."[71] In a seemingly contradictory experience, Lucy explains that storms "denote a coming state of the atmosphere unpropitious to life."[72] While the storm has taken on contradictory and even excessive symbolic value, it still reads on the literal level of the plot in the final scenes of the novel. As Penny Boumelha argues, the ending of the novel is "radically doubled in that it does not privilege event

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[69] Ibid.
[70] Boumelha, *Charlotte Brontë,* 109. Emphasis my own.
[71] Brontë, *Villette,* 121.
[72] Ibid., 43.

over metaphor, sequence over figure."[73] Hence, the storm, both literal and metaphorical, deathly and life-giving, is an irresolvable excess, a painful example of Lucy's refusal to unambiguously and straightforwardly narrate. The use of metaphor in the novel, then, becomes a device to *not* convey information to the reader, rather than a vehicle for expression, once again pointing to the "gratuitousness" of the narrative itself.

However, Lucy's stylistic withholding and use of heightened language do not simply indicate an effort on the part of the narrator to obscure or fragment a hidden, unified narrative. Rather, there is, in fact, no "complete, coherent, and true" narrative to unveil. The narrative representation of life as cohesive, patterned, and meaningful in realist fiction is not a replication of life, but a constructed pattern that produces the image of life as narrative. According to Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, the work of the narrator in realist fiction is to organize and represent the events of the novel in a way that implies continuity, causality, and linear progress through time. "The realistic narrator's function," writes Ermarth, "[…] is to homogenize the medium."[74] The narrator, in other words, homogenizes both space and time within the text, establishing a "realist consensus" between the text and the reader. In the realist novel, "fragmented time becomes a single Time which, however provisional, persistently holds out the possibility of rationalization to the perceptive seeker of similitudes."[75] Thus, in the realist novel, the narrator serves to homogenize time in order to establish the possibility of meaning within a rationalized system of representation. "The

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[73] Boumelha, *Charlotte Brontë*, 106.
[74] Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus*, 40.
[75] Ibid., 46.

consensus," explains Ermarth, "unifies time and rationalizes consciousness."[76] Lucy's narrative, however, is riddled with gaps, fissures, and chronological leaps. It is *not* continuous or cohesive. For example, the space between the first and second volume is an unknowable absence, secret even to our narrator. The first volume closes with the image of Lucy, having just left confession, fainting on the streets of Villette as a tempest rages overhead. The final sentences of the volume read, "I seemed to pitch headlong down an abyss. *I remember no more*."[77] Lucy opens the second volume, "Where my soul sent during that swoon *I cannot tell*. Whatever she saw, or wherever she travelled in her trance on that strange night, *she kept her own secret*; *never whispered a word to Memory, and baffling Imagination by an indissoluble silence*."[78] As a narrator, Lucy is unable to "[establish] the continuity of time," because this break is infinitely unknowable and indescribable; it refuses to be present, and therefore escapes the text, disturbing the process of "the rationalization of consciousness" which Ermarth cites as the work of the realist novel.[79]

Just as Lucy fails to homogenize the medium of time within the novel, so she refuses to perform the ultimate function of the realist narrator of reducing differences into similarities. In searching for an answer to the implied inquiry of the novel, "Who does Lucy Snowe become over the course of the work?" the reader hopes that Lucy will reveal herself as unified and coherent at the close of *Villette*. As readers in a realist paradigm, we do not expect to comprehend Lucy in any isolated moment, and

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[76] Ibid., 25.
[77] Brontë, *Villette*, 181. Emphasis my own.
[78] Ibid., 185. Emphasis my own.
[79] "By showing sight rationalized in [Renaissance] painting, or consciousness rationalized in the novel," Ermarth explains, "the realistic work mimes the act of system-making. What is represented is the act of rationalization itself" (Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus*, 34).

may be able to forgive what Lucy admits is the "pleasure in thinking of the contrast between the reality and my description."[80] Ermarth's explanation of serially constructed identity in realist fiction clarifies this leniency on the part of the reader. "In realism," writes Ermarth, "identity becomes series-dependent, which is to say that it becomes abstract, removed from direct apprehension to a hidden dimension of depth. In speaking of realistic identity," she clarifies, "I use the term *identity* to mean the oneness or the invariant structure by which we recognize a thing, by which we judge it under varying conditions to be the same."[81] Hence, the reader of realist fiction holds out the hope that, by the end of the novel, the narrator will reveal the "depth" of her character and resolve whatever tensions and differences had problematized the unification of that character earlier. If we adhere to Ermarth's definition, however, Lucy *does not have an identity*. The premises of realism, Ermarth explains, are necessarily *reductive* in that, in realism, "disagreement must be resolved so that the final picture or narrative achieves consistency in all its relationships."[82] While difference is necessary within the narrative, as the source of tension that drives the plot, these differences always exist to be reconciled. "Because differences are always concordable in realism," writes Ermarth, "the doubleness of character and ambiguity of events consistently hold out the promise of recovery and fruitful resolution."[83] Within a realist narrative, "given enough time, enough distance, any anomaly (so the premise goes) has its proper place in the final system."[84] In *Villette*, however, many differences remain irreducible. As readers, we are left with

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[80] Brontë, *Villette*, 264.
[81] Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus*, 5.
[82] Ibid., 36.
[83] Ibid., 51.
[84] Ibid., 58.

the sense that we are not excluded from Lucy's amused smile. At the end of the novel, these disparate performances are not reconciled into an "invariant, identifiable" Lucy, but still press against each other, each insufficient as a description of our perverse narrator.[85]

Finally, Lucy does not maintain control over her own narrative, undermining her authority as narrator and troubling realist convention. Past-tense narration, argues Ermarth, is the crux of the rationalizing process of realist fiction. "By the relatively innocent gesture of accepting past-tense narration," she explains, "we have accepted several more complex ideas: that time is a single continuum; that temporal continuities extend beyond arbitrarily limited horizons of the text; that events point beyond themselves to a coordinating system; that appearances are but aspects of hidden things."[86] In short, the futural position of the narrator in past-tense narration allows the narrator to coordinate meaning and solidify identity through the mnemonic act of memory. However, as we have already observed, *Villette* troubles what Ermarth describes as the logical consequences of past-tense narration: in this novel, time is disjointed; it is impossible to imagine Lucy's life beyond the close of the text because of the indeterminacy of the ending; binaries of surface and depth are deconstructed by Lucy's refusal to serially reveal herself. Although the majority of the book coheres to past-tense narration, these revolts against realist convention are solidified by Lucy's transition to present-tense narration in the final chapter of the

[85] Ibid., 46.
[86] Ibid., 42.

novel.[87] Bringing the reader with her to the anticipated moment of M. Paul's return from his self-sacrificing voyage, Lucy speaks in the present tense: "And now," she tells us, "the three years are past: M. Emanuel's return is fixed."[88] Caught in the repetition that Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe as the "horror of [Lucy's] life," Lucy tragically tells the reader, "The sun passes the equinox; the days shorten, the leaves grow sere; but—*he is coming*. Frosts appear at night; November has sent his fogs in advance; the wind takes its autumn moan; but—*he is coming*."[89] However, we experience the ominous storm, which "all sleepless watchers hear and fear," with Lucy.[90] In the present tense, there is the radical implication that the control, which the reader had assumed Lucy held over the narrative, is lost; her own powerlessness is revealed in this final, desperate storm. In present-tense narration, Ermarth argues, "There is no stable narrator standing safely outside the frame and implying the possibility of connections without every having to draw any in particular. The present tense," she continues, "*brackets out the future and the past*. […] *Any emergent patterns dissolve, and comparisons have uncertain foundation*."[91] Thus, this shift into

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[87] It is important to note that this present-tense is not the "actual present" of the narrator, but the historical present. Early on in the novel, Lucy parenthetically references the distance of time between herself as author and the text. "I speak of a time gone by," she explains. "My hair which till a late period withstood the frosts of time, lies now, at last, white, under a white cap, like snow beneath snow" (Brontë, *Villette*, 51). This white-haired author, however, is not the same narrator who speaks in the present tense at the close of the novel. The presence of Lucy's voice from multiple times further indicates that Lucy is not one, but multiple narrators, one of whom is 'stuck' in the wilderness of the historical present, one who is referenced beyond the definitive horizon of the text, and one who, through the majority of the novel, oversees the past-tense narration of the fabula.
[88] Brontë, *Villette*, 545.
[89] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 412; Brontë, *Villette*, 545. Emphasis my own.
[90] Brontë, *Villette*, 546.
[91] Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus*, 51. Emphasis my own.

the present at the close of the novel highlights the conditions that have determined Lucy's narrative throughout. Now literally wandering in what she had formerly called the "wilderness of the present," Lucy moves in a space (and temporality) that does not allow for the realist reduction of difference into similarity and meaning; instead, the tensions and contradictions are irresolvable.[92] At the close of the novel, the reader is not presented with a proper meaning and unified subject, but is instead confronted by and entangled in a field of irreducible difference, of what Christina Crosby describes as "a play of oppositions without resolutions, antithesis without synthesis."[93]

Lucy Snowe's Perversity and the Realist Subject

> "As that street door closed, a sudden amazement at my own perverse proceeding struck like a blow upon me. I felt from the first it was me he wanted—me he was seeking—and had I not wanted him too? What, then, had carried me away? What had rapt me beyond his reach? […] Yearning to listen and console, while I thought audience and solace beyond hope's reach—no sooner did opportunity suddenly and fully arrive, than I evaded it, as I would have evaded the leveled shaft of mortality.

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[92] "My mind, calmer and stronger now than last night, made for itself some imperious rules, prohibiting under deadly penalties all weak retrospect of happiness past; commanding a patient journeying through the *wilderness of the present,* enjoining a reliance on faith—a watching of the cloud and pillar which subdue while they guide, and awe while they illume—hushing the impulse to fond idolatry, checking the longing-out look for a far-off promised land whose rivers are, perhaps, never to be reached saved in dying dreams, whose sweet pastures are to be viewed but from the desolate and sepulchral summit of a Nebo" (Brontë, *Villette*, 257. Emphasis my own).
[93] Crosby, "Haunted Text," 703.

> Well, my insane inconsistency had its reward. Instead of the comfort, the certain satisfaction, I might have won, […] here was dead blank, dark doubt, and drear suspense."[94]
>
> -Lucy Snowe

> Perverse, *adj.*
> 1. a. Of a person, action, etc.: going to or disposed to go against what is reasonable, logical, expected, or required; contradictory, fickle, irrational
> b. Of a thing or event: adverse, unfavorable, untimely: unexpected, unpredictable. Now *rare*.
> 2. a. Contrary to what is morally right or good; wicked, evil, debased.
> b. Contrary to an accepted standard or practice; incorrect, mistaken, wrong, unjustifiable, contradictory, distorted.
> 3. Obstinate, stubborn, or persistent in what is unreasonable, foolish, or wrong; remaining set in a course of action in spite of the consequences.
> 4. *Law.* Of a verdict: against the weight of evidence or the direction of the judge on a point of law.
> 5. Sexually perverted.[95]
>
> -*Oxford English Dictionary*

Lucy's turn to the present tense in this disturbing and radically doubled ending of an ambiguous death/marriage indicates the truly strange power of *Villette*. Having called upon and utilized realist conventions, Brontë invokes the reader's normative expectations of narrative only to disappoint. The result of this manipulation of the reader's desire for synthesis and unitary meaning is a subversion of these expectations themselves. These realist conventions of representation, and the conception of the moral individual which is inextricably tied up in representational norms, are challenged by the *perverse* play and character of the narrator, Lucy Snowe. She does

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[94] Brontë, *Villette*, 427.
[95] *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "Perverse," accessed April 7, 2011, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/141672?rskey=sQT1dP&result=2#eid.

not *reject* the realist style as a narrator and character, but instead uses these conventions to show their own representational limitations. It is precisely because Lucy operates within the general structure of a realist *bildungsroman* that she is able to disturb the readerly expectations of forward progression, organization, synthesis, and resolution that emerge from this genre. This shift to the present tense, as discussed above, also makes ambiguous the agency or intentionality of Lucy Snowe in relation to her own narrative perversion. Hence, it is important that Lucy does not outright reject the standards of representational realism, but instead calls upon them and even intensely desires the sort of resolution they promise; for this reason, Lucy problematizes these expectations within their own representational schema, revealing the truly threatening and subversive potential of perversity.

A useful metaphor and motif for this relationship is that of the act of unveiling. Lucy repeatedly utilizes the image of the veil, or the secret, as a motivation within the text, only to reveal that there is precisely *nothing* to be unveiled; there is no secret behind the veil, no true, coherent story or identity waiting to be revealed. In the scene of the confession, Lucy uses the confessional doors as a veil, "hiding" the true nature of her confession. However, she later claims, "As to what I said, it was no confidence, no narrative."[96] Similarly, Lucy brings the reader to the point of opening the letter, only to reveal *nothing*. In a literal and climactic scene of "unveiling," Lucy rips the shrouds of the spectral Nun that has haunted the narrative as an indeterminate and excessive symbol of desire and repression. Confronting "the old phantom—the Nun," Lucy "defied spectra," and tore down the ghostly veils only to reveal them as

[96] Brontë, *Villette*, 207.

mere veils; the banal explanation is that they were a costume for the young fop de Hamal to enter the school in order to court the coquettish Ginevra Fanshawe. However, the revelation that, after so much yearning for explanation, on the part of both Lucy and the reader, there is no *one* behind the veil, speaks on a register much higher than the banal. In this orgasmic moment, Lucy exclaims, "I tore her up—the incubus! I held her on high—the goblin! I shook her loose—the mystery! And down she fell—down all round me—down in shreds and fragments."[97] The Nun never yields herself as anything but shreds and fragments. "Thus, the nun 'is' *nothing*," Christina Crosby argues. "It cannot be adequately defined. […] It is a ghostly signifier haunting a novel which is 'about' a successful search for identity and authority."[98] Hence, the metaphorical and literal veils in the novel serve to motivate what the reader and Lucy imagine will be a successful, teleological search for hidden identity; the moment of unveiling, however, radically undermines the entire premise of this hermeneutical quest and the conception of the individual as interior and hidden. The veils in the novel reveal precisely the *nothing* of the Nun and of Lucy. At the end of the novel, the veils that had driven the reader to discover the "real" Lucy Snowe lie on the ground in shreds and fragments that refuse to be reconstructed and sutured into a coherent whole. The perversion of this narrative lies in the image of the veil and the secret that, once revealed, is shown to be a constructed fiction; there is no *actual* complete, coherent, and true Lucy to be unveiled. Instead, the realist representation of life as cohesive, patterned, and meaningful is shown not to be a replication of "life," but an imaginary and imposed pattern that produces a

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[97] Ibid., 519.
[98] Crosby, "Haunted Text," 709.

narrativized conception of life. By the end of *Villette,* the reader, having been confronted with a series of betrayals and irresolvable contradictions, realizes that Lucy's novelistic confession was, in fact, "no confession, no *narrative*," but something else entirely. [99] It is, I argue, this strange and perverse movement between convention and subversion that makes Lucy's narrative so disturbingly threatening.

The strength of the word *perverse* as a description of Lucy's narrative style lies in the moral and normative elements of the term. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "perverse" as "disposed to go against what is reasonable, logical, expected, or required." Hence, it is already clear from this initial definition that there is an element of perversity in Lucy's failure to fulfill the expectations of a typical autobiographical, realist narrator, as discussed in the preceding section. The subsequent definition provided by the OED, however, elucidates the subversive power of perversity in its simultaneous acknowledgment and rejection of what is societally considered to be good: "contrary to what is *morally right or good; wicked, evil, debased*." Here, the crucial connection between normative expectations and morality is exposed. By willingly and pleasurably going against what is normatively "the good", Lucy passes into the realm of immorality. She takes on the terrible fury of the actress, Vashti, whose "evil forces bore her through the tragedy, kept up her feeble strength." Lucy describes Vashti's performance as simultaneously "a marvelous site: a mighty revelation" and "a spectacle low, horrible *immoral*," later declaring, "That night was already marked in my book of life, not with white, but with a deep-red cross."[100] In

[99] Brontë, *Villette*, 207. Emphasis my own.
[100] Brontë, *Villette*, 286, 289. Emphasis my own.

light of the connection between Vashti and Lucy, *The Spectator* reviewer's terror at Lucy's *savage delight* takes on a moral tone.

Here, an investigation of what is at stake in the ethics of realist representation will begin to articulate the threat of Lucy's perversity. Returning to the critical reception of *Villette*, the accusations of immorality point to the transgressive elements of this novel and protagonist. The *Nonconformist* reviewer argued that Lucy's failure to strive for "excellence in life" left the book morally displeasing, while William Wirt Kingsley recoiled at Lucy's "unworthy" and "despicable" traits. Similarly, a *Dublin University Magazine* review pointed to Lucy's personality as unnatural and morbid. A *Christian Remembrancer* reviewer even attacked the novel for its "outrages on decorum, the moral perversity, the tolerance, nay indifference, to vice."[101] These critics' disgust at the strange character of Lucy Snowe indicate that Lucy's failure to conform to realist expectations of *character*, in the dual meaning of the word as a fictional figure and the moral make-up of a living individual, is a potentially threatening and subversive shortcoming. In his article "'Getting On': Ideology, Personality, and the Brontë Characters," Rick Rylance explores the relationship between the Victorian valorization of self-motivated individuals who possess "character" and Charlotte and Emily Brontë's problematic protagonists; Rylance's description of what type of person can conform to the model of "getting on" provides a basis for a description of the Protestant, bourgeois, and gendered subject that, I

[101] Quoted in Rick Rylance, "Getting On': Ideology, Personality, and the Brontë Characters," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, ed. Heather Glen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002),164.

argue, is championed in realist fiction.[102] Rylance defines the term "getting on," established in the 1840s, as "making a success of one's life, building a career, finding a place in the mainstream of society, often from beginnings that were disadvantageous or isolated."[103] The term "getting on" was part of a widely popular vocabulary of character in a growing, capitalist England. "Character," Rylance explains, "represents the moral and psychological condition to which readers should aspire. It is the motor of industry and civilization, for to be civilized is to be industrious."[104] The discourse of character centered on the *individual* and his (here I purposefully use the masculine pronoun) strength of will to overcome obstacles and "suppress self-doubt."[105] Self-determination is an essential aspect of the moral individual, Rylance further explains. "It is part of the myth of 'character' in the Victorian period," he writes, "that those who succeed are 'self made."[106] In other words, the figure of Graham Bretton is the self-actualized, professional, bourgeois individual with *character*. He is not aristocratic, but made a success of his life from, if not disadvantaged, relatively modest roots. He is active, young, and focused on his

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[102] Along with several other critics of representational realism, Frederic Jameson connects the increasing popularity of the novel with economically organized social relationships in market capitalism. The rise of the novel, Jameson argues, coincided with "the emergence of the new bourgeois subject" [Frederic Jameson, "The Realist Floor Plan," in *Narrative/Theory*, ed. David H. Richter (New York: Longman Publishers, 1996), 320].
[103] Rylance, "Getting On," 148.
[104] Ibid., 150.
[105] Ibid., 151. Rylance also explains the gendering of this discourse, which led to my purposeful use of the masculine pronoun, *his*. "This vision of 'character," Rylance writes, "is a distinctly *male* discourse. […] [The typical person who could 'get on'] would be young, energetic, and *male*" (Rylance, "Getting On," 151, 149). The 'feminine' version of this aspiration was marriage.
[106] Ibid., 155.

individual achievements.[107] It is significant that the majority of the critics exclude figures such as Graham, Polly, and Mrs. Bretton from their venomous attacks of immorality; these characters, unlike Lucy Snowe, conform to normative realist and bourgeois expectations of subjectivity.

Lucy, on the other hand, only perversely participates in the economy of 'getting on'. Lucy does not find a place in the *mainstream of society*, but instead inhabits its margins; she is an inconstant, unresolved and contradictory multiplicity of character and narration. Far from embodying the self-determining individual, or even adhering to the limited feminine version of "getting on" by pursuing a successful marriage, Lucy perversely acts against her own desire for these normative representations. This impenetrable character is, as *Dublin University Magazine* put it, "hardly natural" because she is not, in the strict sense, an individual, but is always deferred, multiple, and contradictory; her selfhood is always at play, denying any sort of unitary character or attribute that could be statically naturalized into her "identity." Penny Boumelha, in a discussion of the various subject positions typically assigned to women in nineteenth century realist fiction, argues that Lucy, in contrast, "will be among those who do not fit […] squarely within the representational conventions of the mid-nineteenth century."[108] Lucy, unlike Graham, is not a self-actualizing individual; torn between passivity and violent outbursts of emotion, Lucy is only sporadically able to exercise her will to control Imagination with Reason, despite her assertion that Reason usually wins the fight. Hence, she is frequently perverse in that

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[107] Rylance description of the "heartlessness of male 'character', posited on a belief in self-determination and the irrelevance of others," in fact, perfectly describes the attitude of Dr. Graham Bretton (Rylance, "Getting On," 151).
[108] Boumelha, *Charlotte Brontë,* 105.

she goes "against what is reasonable, logical, expected, or required." Similarly, she acts perversely, and even admits her own perversity, when she allows herself to be misunderstood. Returning to Lucy's recognition of Dr. John as Graham Bretton, we see Lucy explicitly go against what would be *reasonable*, which would be to expose herself as the Lucy Snowe of his childhood; Lucy, however, enjoys her anonymity. Directly acknowledging the perversity of this pleasurable secrecy, Lucy explains, "there is a perverse mood of the mind which is rather soothed than irritated by misconstruction."[109] This same stubborn refusal to vindicate herself is apparent in Lucy's silence on M. Paul's birthday when, although she had prepared a gift, she allows him to believe that she had, in fact, ignored this expectation. In explanation, Lucy tells us, "The reader, not having hitherto had any cause to ascribe to Miss Snowe's character the most distant pretension to perfection, will be scarcely surprised to learn that she felt *too perverse* to defend herself from any imputation. […] I kept, then, both my box [her gift for M. Paul] and my countenance, and sat insensate as any stone."[110] Lucy's masochistic pleasure in these moments in which she acts contrary to her own goals and desires, read as perverse both in that she remains in "a course of action in spite of the consequences" and in the strangely painful and sexualized pleasure she experiences in these episodes. In a climactic scene, Lucy's perversion overpowers her will and literally dominates her. Although Lucy knows that M. Paul is at the pensionnat, looking for her, she does not announce herself, but remains still and silent. Hearing him leave disappointed, she is appalled at her own masochism. "A

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[109] Brontë, *Villette*, 109.

[110] Ibid., 377. Emphasis my own. Also significant in this passage is the strange distance Lucy puts between herself as narrator and herself as perverse actor through the use of the third-person. The frequent turn to third-person narration, in fact, indicates once again that there are multiple, and not one, Lucy Snowes.

sudden amazement at my own perverse proceeding struck like a blow upon me," she tells us. "I felt from the first it was me he wanted—me he was seeking—and had I not wanted him too? What, then, had carried me away? What had rapt me beyond his reach?"[111] Hence, the threat of Lucy's perversity is intensified by her own lack of control; just as her move to the present tense at the close of the novel causes the reader to lose faith in her omnipotence as a narrator, so her masochistic perversion indicates a violent, imposing, and disruptive element of the power of perversion.

Hence, Lucy is not merely an immoral figure in representational realism, but also one tragically overcome by the dominating force of perversity. Her lack of pure intentionality transforms her into a frenzied and threatening character, like that of the "maenad" actress, Vashti.[112] The terrifying element of Lucy's perversion lies in her lack of control as well as the possibility that her view is not as "marginal" as it would appear. In her article "*Shirley* and *Villette*," Heather Glen argues that, although Lucy's "is a story obscured from 'the strong and prosperous', it is […] more representative than theirs."[113] Further defending this interpretation, Glenn asserts, "[*Villette*] is not an artless rendition of narrowly personal experience, but a carefully crafted configuration of a different kind of relation to a sharply realized social world."[114] Lucy's re-imagined relationship between the individual and society, in fact, posits a kind of "subjectivity" that subversively undermines the bourgeois, realist individual and indicates the power of *Villette* and representation in general in terms of subject formation. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "perversion" as

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[111] Ibid., 427. Emphasis my own.
[112] Ibid., 287.
[113] Glen, "*Shirley* and *Villette*," 135.
[114] Ibid., 143.

"that which is considered to be unacceptable or *socially threatening*."[115] Hence, Lucy's perversion of the realist conception of identity as "the oneness or the invariant structure by which we recognize a thing, by which we judge it under varying conditions to be the same," has subversive implications beyond the psychological individual to the normative relations of society. Returning to Rylance's article on Victorian notions of character, the ideological weight of this conception of identity becomes clear. "It is important to recognize that what was attractive in ideas of 'character' for Victorian readers is not a mere matter of doctrine," Rylance explains. "The appeal is an *imaginative* [read: ideological] one: an expression of hope, a sense of self-respect and independence of the aspirant reader, and a *language with which to legitimate behavior*."[116] Hence, the danger of Lucy's perversion in relation to identity in representational realism lies in the possibility that this very perversion may make a *different* imaginative appeal to the reader, thereby revealing the initial interpellation of the reader within a realist paradigm as an imaginary relationship. If *Villette* offers a persuasive challenge to the moral individual in realist fiction, then there arises the need to consider the limits of realist representation. Therefore, as Heather Glen argues, *Villette* is "a powerful, 'painful' challenge to that national story of prosperity and contentment being publicly celebrated, ostentatiously proclaimed in the England in which it was conceived."[117]

Lucy's strange narrative style and contradictory character are perverse precisely because they are not a *rejection* of realist convention, but a pleasurable,

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[115] *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "Perversion," accessed April 7, 2011, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/141678?redirectedFrom=perversion#eid.
[116] Rylance, "Getting On," 153. Emphasis my own.
[117] Glen, "*Shirley* and *Villette*," 144-145.

possibly uncontrollable, and potentially destructive turn to that which realist representation cannot incorporate. Lucy's perversion points to what realism necessarily abjects in order to posit and understand itself as a cohesive, structured, and ordered *whole*. By pointing to the act of abjection in representation, *Villette* threatens the structure of a representational paradigm that seeks to reconcile difference into sameness, multiplicity into unitary meaning, and refracted self into singular identity. Additionally, *Villette*'s concern with the limits of representation draws attention to the *act* of representation itself, revealing realism as a set of representational conventions that, rather than referring to a pre-existing individual and their relation to society, in fact *create* this conception of reality. By subverting realist representation and the individual subject championed therein, *Villette* forcefully implies that a new sort of subjectivity could be incorporated in and created by different modes of representation.

Various questions arise from this conclusion: *Is* the novel persuasive in this way? If so, *how* does it come to wield so much power over its readers? How does the narrative act on and with the reader? Importantly, to what extent is the reader *complicit* in Lucy's perversion? These and other questions that address the hermeneutical relationship between reader and narrative are the driving inquiries of the subsequent chapter, in which I explore the ways in which Lucy, through a specular play of mirroring and doubles, tempts, confronts, befriends, and alienates the reader.

Doublings and Reflections

The Perversion of the Reader in *Villette*

Paradoxical Language: Lucy as Speaking Subject

> "'But if I feel, may I *never* express?'
> '*Never!'* declared Reason."[118]

Confounded by Lucy's inconsistency and surprised to find that they are in the same "social sphere," Ginevra Fanshawe *begs* our strange narrator to solve the riddle, to *unveil* the secret of her identity. She pleads, "Who *are* you, Miss Snowe? […] *Are* you anybody?" Lucy's evasive responses ("Who am I indeed? Perhaps a personage in disguise," and "I am a rising character") frustrate the young schoolgirl. Ginevra, here allied with the reader in her curiosity, believes that Lucy intentionally withholds her "true self," that her strangeness is the result of a purposefully hidden secret identity. Once uncovered, Ginevra supposes, Lucy will be "revealed" in her entirety. Hence, Ginevra seriously proposes, "Do—*do* tell me who you are? I'll not repeat it."[119] The paradox here, however, is that there *is* no isolated, interior, and unified "Lucy Snowe." Lucy does not fall into the conception of identity as cohesive self-sameness; instead, there are radical breaks in her character, secrets that her soul "never

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[118] Brontë, *Villette*, 255.
[119] Ibid., 341-342.

whispers" to memory. Ginevra's insistence on Lucy's ability to simply *tell* the young student who she is reveals Ginevra's own misunderstanding of a character who is, in fact, dispersed, multiple, and contradictory. Secretly smiling at the naïve demands of Ginevra, Lucy inwardly laughs at the "ludicrous tenacity [with which Ginevra adhered] to the wise notion of an *incognito* she had got hold of."[120]

However, refracted through other points in the novel in which Lucy laments that she does not *possess* any secret self that could be expressed in language, the light, mocking tone in which Lucy responds to Ginevra's inquiries becomes "almost unbearably painful."[121] Lucy's attraction to Graham and admiration for Paulina suggest that she wishes she could embody the sort of conventional and stable individual that these two characters respectively represent. When Lucy re-encounters Polly in the second volume, now a young woman instead of a child, she notes, "Her eyes were the eyes of one who can remember; one whose childhood does not fade like a dream, nor whose youth vanish like a sunbeam. She would not take life, loosely and incoherently, in parts. […] She would *retain and add*; often *review from commencement* and so grow in *harmony* and *consistency* as she grew in years."[122] Paulina reinforces this observation and verifies that she does conform to Ermarth's definition of identity in realism when she tells Lucy, "The child of seven years lives yet in the girl of seventeen."[123] Lucy, in contrast, often claims to not remember her childhood, or, through the use of extremely figurative language, implies that what she does remember cannot be incorporated into a linear narrative of self-realization. For

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[120] Ibid., 342. Emphasis my own.
[121] Harriet Martineau, Review of *Villette*, in McNees, *Critical Assessments*. Vol 3, 589.
[122] Brontë, *Villette*, 306-307. Emphasis my own.
[123] Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus*, 5; Brontë, *Villette*, 307.

example, when Lucy recounts what is commonly interpreted as the death of her parents, she relies on the metaphor of shipwreck. "All hope that we should be saved was taken away," she writes. "In fine, the ship was lost, the crew perished." This scene, however, is distinct from her return to consciousness at the beginning of the second volume. While, upon awakening in the Brettons' home, Lucy claims that she cannot account for the space between volumes because she *does not remember* what transpired; here, Lucy admits that she "*too well* remembers" this traumatic time in her past.[124] Lucy's memory, whether uninformed or overly burdened, does not allow her to "retain and add" to her narrative. Because Lucy's movement as a character is perverse, non-harmonious, and inconsistent, the novelistic overview of which Polly is so capable is unavailable to Lucy.

Lucy's inability to integrate her life into a narrative structure does not, however, indicate that she does not *desire* a relationship with her own identity and past that would enable her to express herself in language. Rather, the primary struggle of the novel can be seen as Lucy and the reader's thwarted but desperate attempts to write a unified self onto the textual figure of Lucy Snowe. Hence, Lucy's direct assertion that Paulina is her double is more indicative of Lucy's own wish to be, like Polly, one who grows in "harmony and consistency" than of any substantial similitude between the two women.[125] Later, when Paulina tells Lucy of the love between herself and Graham, Lucy highlights the difference between her life and the lives of the lovers. "I think it is deemed good that you two should live in peace and be

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[124] Brontë, *Villette*, 39. Emphasis my own.
[125] In this reunion scene with Paulina, Lucy thinks, "There are certain things in which we so rarely meet with our *double* that it seems a miracle when that chance befalls" (Brontë, *Villette*, 308. Emphasis my own).

happy," Lucy tells Polly. "Some lives *are* thus blessed. […] Other lives," she continues, now indicating the painful chasm between her own and Polly's experience, "run from the first another course. Other travelers encounter weather fitful and gusty, wild and variable—breast adverse winds, are belated and overtaken by the early closing winter night."[126] Lucy sees herself as one such figure occluded in storm. Far from being able to recount her past in a structured and logical progression, Lucy can only create an erratic, discontinuous, and excessive text in which she is de-centered and dispersed. One of the "vanquished" in life, Lucy's language is, as Reason harshly reminds her, stamped with "pain, privation, and penury."[127]

Instead of a constructive vehicle for expression, language, for the reader as well as Lucy, becomes a paradoxical impediment. Although the only way for the reader to access Lucy is through language, through her own textual construction, the inadequacy of this symbolic system of signs is repeatedly highlighted throughout the novel. Often, Lucy admits that there are no existing words available to her that would convey her feelings. When Miss Marchmont asks for Lucy's opinion on her heartbreaking story of young loss, Lucy remains silent. "This question I could not answer," she admits. "I had no words."[128] Similarly, when Lucy attempts to account for her trip to the confessional as a steadfast Protestant, she indicates the literally *inexpressible* extent of her depression. "I cannot put the case into words," she explains. "My days and nights were grown intolerable; a cruel sense of desolation

[126] Ibid., 418.
[127] Ibid., 255.
[128] Ibid., 46.

pained my mind."[129] Again, recalling how she was wrenched by pain during the days she waited for M. Paul to visit the school and say his farewells, Lucy tells the reader, "As to that week of suspense, with its blank yet burning days, which brought from him no word of explanation—I remember, but I cannot describe its passage."[130] Just as she is unable to linguistically express feelings of unimaginable darkness, so her pleasure also exceeds the limits of language. When M. Paul finally reveals that, contrary to what Lucy had believed, he had been thinking of her during his silence, arranging for her to have her own school, Lucy finds language a crude and insufficient tool to convey her joy. "In such inadequate language my feelings struggled for expression," she explains. "They could not get it; speech, brittle and unmalleable, and cold as ice, dissolved or shivered in the effort."[131] Sitting down to serve M. Paul a simple meal on the balcony of her new school, Lucy admits, "I took a delight *inexpressible* in tending M. Paul."[132]

Underlying all of her conversational interactions with Monsieur Paul, of course, is the fact that, in "reality", Lucy is supposedly speaking *French*. The dialogue, however, is left half translated, often even switching languages in mid-sentence. For the monolingual reader, as well as for Lucy, who must learn French upon arrival, the bilingual world of *Villette* as text and fictional town is a stumbling block. When Lucy, on her first night in Villette, realizes that her luggage has been left behind, she is confronted by her own status as an alien. Unable to question the driver about her trunk, Lucy admits, "I could say nothing whatever; not possessing a phrase

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[129] Ibid., 206.
[130] Ibid., 489.
[131] Ibid., 537.
[132] Ibid., 538. Emphasis my own.

of *speaking* French: and it was French, and French only, the whole world seemed now gabbling round me."[133] Additionally, the partial translation forces the reader to acknowledge the *constructed* nature of the novel; the reader of *Villette* is not carried away into a fictional world, but constantly reminded of the processes of representation and interpretation, both by the thematization of language as barrier and Lucy's repeated addresses to the reader.[134] Already in the first chapter, Lucy foregrounds the act of interpretation and puts herself in the position of a reader when she asks herself, "Of what things were these the signs and tokens?"[135] As readers, we can never "get past" the textuality of our heroine and the intermediary role of language. Ermarth, while not directly making an argument about language, explains that, in realist fiction, "something is forever intruding between the object and our grasp—atmosphere, point of view, distance, angle—so that our knowledge, always distant from direct apprehension, is always mediate rather than immediate."[136] Reinterpreting Ermarth's statement as a reference to textuality itself, the paradoxical nature of language in narrative is brought to the fore. As symbolic system of signs, language is the condition for intelligibility and communication, and is in fact the *only* tool we have to approach a character that, rather than preceding the text, is created by and lives in the language of the novel.[137] However, we can never "access" Lucy

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[133] Ibid., 68.
[134] For example, Lucy highlights the distance between the narrator and the character who, having first arrived at Madame Beck's school, is phrenologically examined by Monsieur Paul. Lucy parenthetically prefaces this scene, "(I shall go on with this part of my tale as if I had understood all that passed; for though it was then scarce intelligible to me, I heard it translated afterwards)" (Brontë, *Villette*, 73).
[135] Brontë, *Villette*, 8.
[136] Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus*, 33.
[137] In her discussion of novelistic characters, Catherine Gallagher argues, "Competent readers understand that the seemingly intimate revelations of the character's depths are also

through language; the signifier replaces and displaces her. Additionally, Lucy points to the incomplete nature of language, indicating that the existing symbolic structure in which she operates is inadequate. Just as certain relations to the self are unimaginable in a paradigm of realist representation, so, as Lucy repeatedly asserts, some feelings and experiences are *inexpressible,* are beyond the limits of language.

Lucy's treatment and thematization of language and interpretation highlight the perverse and paradoxical medium of language in any text as not only the condition of intelligibility but also that which necessarily comes between the reader and the narrator; Lucy points to the limiting aspects of language, while also, as a speaking subject and interpreter of signs, acknowledges the constitutive role of language in subject formation. Drawing on these issues that are highlighted in the text, Penny Boumelha argues, "The novel's emphasis upon the interpretation of 'signs and tokens' throws sharply into relief [the] *unreadability* of its heroine."[138] However, Boumelha's description of Lucy as "unreadable" is problematized by the position of the reader. Is Lucy, in fact, "unreadable"? Does Lucy's unreadability lie in her textual representation or, instead, on the side of the critic who seeks identity, stability, and a unified meaning? How can a reader hermeneutically approach a character that is resistant to conventional realist criticism? Rather than positing Lucy as *unreadable*, I argue that, while this strange narrator's textual evasions seem to undermine the critical work of interpretation, there is, in fact, a radical and subversive demand being

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revelations of its textual nature. […] Despite representational tactics that give the impression of layers and plenitude, characters are 'peculiarly delimited' as textual beings" [Catherine Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality," in *The Novel*, Vol. 1, *History, Geography, and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 356, 358].

[138] Boumelha, *Charlotte Brontë*, 114. Emphasis my own.

made on the reader as interpreter. Instead of seeking similitudes, patterned meaning, and coherence, the critic of *Villette* is asked to read *difference*.

In this chapter, I attempt a reading of Lucy Snowe as it emerges from the play of mirrored differences and unstable doublings among characters. By examining the play of refraction and doubling, I am also turning to the more traditionally "Gothic" elements of the text, which provide an opening to discuss the transgressive movement of "border crossing" in *Villette* between the self and the other, the earthly and the supernatural, and convention and subversion.[139] Following Christina Crosby's hypothesis that, in *Villette*, "signification—the making and reading of identity and of all meaning—is as much a matter of specular play as it is of unveiling proper meanings," I hope to shift the stance of the interpreter from one who seeks to discover a complete, hidden "truth" within the text to one who looks for refracted, multiple, and dynamic meanings. Only by immersing ourselves as critics in this specular play of refraction can we interpretively interact with the non-essential multiplicity of this disturbing narrator, Lucy Snowe.

Mirroring and Doubling: Excess and Slippage of Meaning

> "Without any force at all, I found myself led and influenced by another's will, unconsulted, unpersuaded, quietly over-ruled. In short the pink dress went on, softened by some drapery of black lace. I was pronounced to be en grande ténue, and requested to look in the glass. I

[139] Highlighting the fertility of Gothic conventions, Eve Sedgwick writes, "The issue of what constitutes the character—what internecine superposition of a length of word, the image of a body, a name, and on the countenance, an authenticating graphic stamp—had never before the Gothic been confronted so energetically in those terms" (Sedgwick, *Coherence of Gothic Convention*, 170).

> did so with fear and trembling; with more fear and trembling, I turned away."[140]
>
> -Lucy Snowe

In *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel*, Ermarth briefly examines the use of repetition and reflection in realist narrative. "Repeated images," she explains, "like those of prisons, webs, rivers, mirrors quietly insist on the similitudes between apparently disparate things. Without calling attention to themselves, they invite the reader to levels of generalization about patterns of experience that are higher than any reached explicitly by either the narrator or the characters."[141] The repeated image of the mirror in *Villette*, however, does not quietly insist on similitudes in the viewing subject, but rather, disturbingly suggests the dispersion, de-centering, and inconsistency of the narrator and her character doubles. In other words, mirroring acts as a Gothic element of the text, more threatening than stabilizing. Rather than serving to reflect back the image of the "self" to the viewer, the mirrors in *Villette* return specters, doubles, and strangers; instead of solidifying meaning and identity, these refracted images send characters down a metonymic chain that blurs rather than clarifies the distinction between self and other. "These doubles and reflections," Christina Crosby argues, "admit of no essential identity waiting to be uncovered, and characters slip about, barely held in place by the weight of literary and logical convention."[142] The play of refraction in this novel, which Janice Carlisle calls "a hall of mirrors," disturbs the search for a unified self or single set of meanings within the

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[140] Brontë, *Villette*, 232.
[141] Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus*, 82.
[142] Crosby, "Haunted Text," 710.

text; instead, mirror images are incomplete, spectral, and *productive.*[143] Never at rest, these mirrored doublings continue to multiply, creating an *excess* of meaning within a text haunted by its own radical instability. This dynamic multiplicity troubles the work of the realist critic, who seeks a patterned and moral system meaning. As Penny Boumelha explains, "what emerges from this plethora of interpretations is the *inadequacy of interpretation itself*."[144] Discussing the excess of meaning produced by figures such as the Nun and the actress, Vashti, Boumelha points to the radical nature of *Villette* in relation to conventional critical interpretation. "Excess," she argues, "is always threatening, here, with storm and flood, to *overwhelm* the line of nineteenth century realist narrative, with its appropriate drives towards sequence, causality, and typicality."[145] What this radically overwhelming novel demands, then, is a style of interpretation open to the excess of the refracted and de-centered subject.

Throughout the novel, the pain of seeing oneself strangely reflected in the mirror is emphasized. As early as the second chapter, the violence of being forced to look into a mirror is introduced when Graham, playfully capturing and hoisting the young Polly up into the air, coincidentally positions her directly opposite her own reflection. "She saw herself thus lifted up on high, in the glass over the fireplace," Lucy describes. "The suddenness, the freedom, the disrespect of the action were too much."[146] Similarly, it is only when Madame Beck catches a glimpse of her own reflection that Lucy, knowing the fearsomeness of the image that returns her own gaze when she is confronted with mirrors, feels pity for the scheming headmistress.

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[143] Carlisle, "Conventions of Autobiography," 146.
[144] Boumelha, *Charlotte Brontë*, 103. Emphasis my own.
[145] Ibid., Emphasis my own.
[146] Brontë, *Villette*, 21.

After a visit from Dr. John, Madame Beck "sighed; a single, but deep sigh. […] She got up; as she passed the dressing table with a glass upon it, she looked at her reflected image. […] Never had I pitied Madame before," Lucy admits, "but my heart softened towards her, when she turned darkly from the glass. *A calamity had come upon her*."[147]

Lucy's chance encounter with her own mirror image when attending a concert with Graham and Louisa Bretton illustrates the estrangement produced through the mirrored representation of the viewing subject. Turning a corner in the corridor with her two companions, Lucy sees another group, "a handsome middle-aged lady in dark velvet; a gentleman who might be her son […] [and] a third person in a pink dress and black mantle," approach the threesome. For a moment, Lucy believes these figures to be strangers and thus receives "an impartial impression of their appearance." The impression, however "was hardly felt and not fixed, before the consciousness that I faced a great mirror […] dispelled it: the party was our own party."[148] Lucy does not see her inverted image as a mere double of herself, but as an anonymous *third person*, a stranger. Having made an impartial judgment on the appearance of this alien figure, Lucy's realization that this third person was in fact her own self "brought a jar of discord."[149] In response to this scene, Heather Glen compares the conception of the self and society that unfolds in *Villette* with that of *Vanity Fair*. Quoting Thackeray, Glen writes, "The world is a looking glass […] and gives back to every man the reflection of his own face.' But *Villette*," she argues, "has

[147] Ibid., 115. Emphasis my own.
[148] Ibid., 234.
[149] Ibid., 234.

no such confidence in a morally meaningful universe. That which this narrator confronts is less instructive than disconcerting. […] This scene," Glen powerfully concludes, "makes a sardonic riposte not merely to Thackeray's saw, but also to those for whom the point of such narratives as hers lies in their revelation of the heroine's *moral growth*."[150] The crucial tension here is similar to that discussed in the previous chapter. The growth of this strange narrator is erratic, non-linear, and incoherent; it is precisely a *perversion* of the sort of moral growth championed in nineteenth century realist fiction. Instead of returning the reflection of one's own face, mirrors in *Villette* return something *else*, a something that, rather than supporting, disturbs the process of cohesive subject formation.

In *Villette*, an image of alterity within the mirror provokes terror when the reflection is uncanny, displacing what was once familiar and rendering it strange. As Lucy is recovering at the Brettons' from the nervous ailment that drew her to confession, she experiences the horror of a past partially rendered in the mirror of the deeply familiar but painfully misplaced bedroom. "Bretton! Bretton!" she cries, "and ten years ago shone reflected in that mirror. And why did Bretton and my fourteenth year haunt me thus? Why, if they came at all, did they not return complete?"[151] In her article "*Villette* and the Conventions of Autobiography," Janice Carlisle argues, "To return to the past, as Lucy literally does here, is to journey into a world that is spectral because it is dead, a world that calls into question the stability and sustainability of one's identity."[152] However, the truly frightening and destabilizing element of Lucy's

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[150] Glen, "*Shirley* and *Villette*," 144. Emphasis my own.
[151] Brontë, *Villette*, 189.
[152] Carlisle, "Conventions of Autobiography," 135.

fractured past, uncannily reflected back to her ten years later, is not its death, but its *life in death*. For Lucy, the past, like her buried letters from Graham, lies in an "unquiet tomb," painfully rupturing the present.[153] The past, never properly laid to rest, haunts the text because it is not truly *dead*; unable to murder her past by incorporating it into a patterned narrative of her life, Lucy leaves the slab of the tomb ajar, allowing these specters to be thrown back in the reflection of the mirror.

However, the past is not the only phantasm that haunts the narrative. Lucy herself leads a *death in life*, constantly struggling between her desire for death and the compulsion to live. During the long vacation, Lucy admits, "even to look forward was not to hope: the dumb future spoke no comfort, offered no promise, gave no inducement to bear present evil in reliance on future good. *A sorrowful indifference to existence often pressed on me*—a despairing resignation to reach betimes the end of all things earthy."[154] Contrastingly, when Lucy eyes the conspiring "secret Junta" of Madame Walravens, Madame Beck, and Père Silas, she defiantly tells the reader, "They outnumbered me, and I was worsted and under their feet; but, as yet, I was not dead."[155] However, while she is not dead, neither is Lucy entirely *alive*. Upon first awakening in the Brettons' home, La Terrasse, Lucy catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror. "I looked spectral," Lucy says. "My eyes larger and more hollow, my hair darker than was natural, by contrast with my thin and ashen face."[156] Recognizing her own childhood drawings in the room, she recalls how she had labored over them with

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[153] "Was this feeling dead? I do not know, but it was buried. Sometimes I thought the tomb unquiet, and dreamed strangely of disturbed earth, and of hair, still golden and living, obtruded through coffin-chinks" (Brontë, *Villette*, 401).
[154] Brontë, *Villette*, 173. Emphasis my own.
[155] Ibid., 508.
[156] Ibid., 186.

"a tedious, feeble, finical, school girl pencil held in these fingers, now so *skeleton like*."[157] While still in England, however, tending for Miss Marchmont, Lucy sees herself in the glass, "in my mourning-dress, a faded, hollow-eyed vision." Here, although she already describes herself as a "hollow-eyed vision," Lucy has not yet resigned herself to "the end of all things earthly." "The blight," she explains, "was chiefly external: I still felt life at life's sources."[158] The moment of symbolic death, then, occurs when Lucy becomes an alien, leaving her native country for the mysterious continent, without a word of speaking French to aid her in her transition. Lucy describes her channel crossing, "Down the sable flood we glided; I thought of *Styx*, and of *Charon rowing some solitary soul to the Land of the Shades*."[159] The fictional French town of *Villette*, then, becomes the wandering ground for the half dead who, having crossed the river Styx, are no longer among the living. Instead of reaffirming her identity, the reflection of her spectral image in the Brettons' home implies that Lucy herself is a ghostly narrator. Like the Nun, she is a "remainder," one who had once felt life at life's sources, and can now only affirm that, as yet, she is not entirely dead. Both Lucy and the Nun, denied the resolution of a true death, a second death, haunt the discourse, itself moving in the ambiguous space between life and death.[160]

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[157] Ibid., 187. Emphasis my own.
[158] Ibid., 41.
[159] Ibid., 56. Emphasis my own.
[160] The difference between Lucy and the Nun in this example, however, is that, while they both exist in a space between two deaths, each is respectively denied the death that the other is granted. While Lucy has arguably died a symbolic death upon becoming an alien, the Nun, having suffered a physical death, a death in the Real, is unable to achieve a symbolic death, and therefore appears as a phantasm.

Lucy's failure to definitively murder her own passion when burying Graham's letters further highlights the threat of this liminal space of the not-dead, not-living, while also connecting her with her future fiancé, Monsieur Paul. Lucy describes the dual necessity of burying the once pleasurable letters, "I was not only going to hide a treasure—I meant also to bury a grief. That grief over which I had lately been weeping, as I wrapped it in its winding-sheet, *must be interred*."[161] Lucy explains that the mood that had compelled her to casket her letters was the same as that which drove her to the confessional, a mood that Charlotte Brontë, in a letter to her literary advisor, William Smith Williams, describes as "no impetus of healthy feeling [but instead] the semi-delirium of solitary grief and sickness."[162] The scene of burial is refracted back through that of the confession, wherein Lucy naïvely believed, "the mere pouring out of some portion of long accumulating, long pent-up pain into a vessel *whence it could not again be diffused*—had done me good."[163] However, the burial, like the confession, is troubling in that it cannot, in fact, successfully contain the grief that Lucy had hoped to repress. Acknowledging this funerary ritual as a *live* burial, Lucy asks, "Was this feeling dead? I do not know, but it was buried."[164] Monsieur Paul has his own buried passion, his beloved nun, Justine-Marie, who literally passed away. However, through a metonymic slip, the deceased Justine-Marie is conflated with the legendary Nun, supposedly buried alive in the "forbidden path" of the pensionnat, once a convent. "The legend went" Lucy tells us, "unconfirmed and unaccredited, but still propagated, that this [pear tree, Methuselah]

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[161] Brontë, *Villette*, 328. Emphasis my own.
[162] Charlotte Brontë to W. S Williams, 6 November1852, in *Selected Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 210.
[163] Brontë, *Villette*, 179. Emphasis my own.
[164] Ibid., 401.

was the portal of a vault, imprisoning deep beneath that ground, on whose surface grass grew and flowers bloomed, the bones of a girl whom a monkish conclave of the drear middle ages had here buried alive, for some sin against her vow."[165] Supposedly, Lucy continues, you can catch a glimpse of slab beneath the pear tree, marking the Nun's burial place. In an act that unquestionably ties her buried passion both to her Catholic confession and the legendary Nun, Lucy inters her precious jar of letters in a hole beneath Methuselah, covering that hole with a slate which she secures with mortar; thus, this burial is a double of the first and legendary burial of the Nun, and reads as a ritual re-enactment, despite Lucy's original dismissal of the legend as "romantic rubbish."[166] The connection between the letters, Lucy's traumatic past, Monsieur Paul's Justine Marie, and the legendary Nun who haunts the pensionnat, ensures that none of these symbolically loaded figures rest in peace; instead, they trouble the text, returning in the fissures of the discourse as disconcerting phantoms.

M. Paul's own buried grief, Justine Marie, died shortly after withdrawing to a convent to become a nun, implicitly expiring from longing heartbreak over her denied love, Monsieur Paul. Just as Lucy buried a grief along with her letters, so Monsieur Paul buried his passion. Passion, he explains to Lucy, "died in the past—in the present it lies buried—its grave is deep-dug, well heaped, and many winters old: in the future there will be a resurrection, as I believe to my soul's consolation; but all will be changed then."[167] The link between M. Paul's Justine-Marie and the buried Nun in the garden, however, produces a resurrection that, contrary to what M. Paul

[165] Ibid., 188.
[166] Ibid., 329, 118.
[167] Ibid., 383.

had assumed, does not rise "for heaven," but instead threatens the stability and coherence of identity and narrative. The buried nun of the garden is doubled in the specter of the Nun who first appears to Lucy in the attic, where she has secluded herself to read Graham's first letter. Reading this letter that had "haunted [her] brain in its very core for seven days past," Lucy is interrupted by another presence in the garret, "a figure all black or white; the skirts straight, narrow, black; the head bandaged, veiled, white."[168] "This I vow," Lucy continues, "I saw there—in that room—on that night—an image like—a NUN."[169] While the Nun haunts the narrative through the threat of her reappearance and her doubling in other characters, the specter of the Nun appears to Lucy in her ghostly form only three times in the novel. First, in the garret, the attic room where M. Paul had imprisoned her to learn her lines for the *vaudeville* and where she had gone to take private pleasure in Graham's letter. The second and third times both occur in the hypersexualized and symbolically loaded space of "l'allé défendue," first directly after the burial, while Lucy is "lingering, like any other mourner before a newly-sodden grave," and second when Lucy and Monsieur Paul are in the alley together.[170]

In fact, the crucial point of connection between M. Paul and Lucy is the spectral Nun. Both haunted by an undead past, M. Paul and Lucy are the only characters who actually *see* the Nun. When, in the allé défendue, it is revealed that both have seen things "unaccountable" wandering the garden, M. Paul asserts that this phantasm reveals their connection. "I knew somehow before you told me," M. Paul

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[168] Ibid., 265, 273.
[169] Ibid., 273.
[170] Ibid., 329.

exclaims. "I was conscious of a rapport between you and myself. […] We are alike—there is affinity."[171] However, M. Paul does not so much point to the likeness between himself and Lucy as dominate and overwhelm her own identity by claiming that she was produced in his image. "Do you see it, mademoiselle, *when you look in the glass*?" he asks. "Do you observe that your forehead is shaped like mine—that your eyes are cut like mine? Do you hear that you have some of my tones of voice? Do you know that you have many of my looks? I perceive all this, and believe that you were born under *my* star."[172] Paul, then, has augmented Lucy's mirrored image; denying that it could return her own reflection, M. Paul imposes his own image onto Lucy's. Established from his first appearance as omniscient, M. Paul claims to know the students "all by heart."[173] When M. Paul is assigned the task of reading Lucy's physiognomy upon her arrival at Madame Beck's doorstep as a stranger, Lucy notes, "A resolute compression of the lips and a gathering of the brow, seemed to say that he meant to see through me, and that veil would be no veil for him."[174] However, as discussed in the previous chapter, the *veil,* rather than obscuring a true self to be discovered, operates as a motivating device. It is, as Eve Sedgwick argues, "the locus of the substitution of one person for another," the space for metonymic play.[175] Just as the Nun dissembles into shreds and fragments when Lucy tears down her veil, so Lucy, despite M. Paul's oppressive surveillance, remains a mystery "to be feared."[176] Thus, although Lucy finds pleasure in being dominated by the stormy and

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[171] Ibid., 407.
[172] Ibid. Emphasis my own.
[173] Ibid., 403.
[174] Ibid., 73.
[175] Sedgwick, *Coherence of Gothic Convention*, 149.
[176] Brontë, *Villette*, 462.

"inexorable" M. Paul, she acknowledges to herself that, concerning her identity, "he happened to be entirely mistaken."[177] It is directly after M. Paul has replaced Lucy's image with his own, in fact, that the Nun is literally and violently *birthed* into the forbidden alley, angrily passing the haunted pair. "For some minutes amongst the wood and leafage a rending and heaving went on," Lucy explains. "At last, the struggle ceased. What birth succeeded this travail? What Dryad was born of these throes? […] Instantly into our alley there came, out of the berceau, an apparition, all black and white. With a sort of angry rush—close, close past our faces—swept swiftly the very NUN herself! *Never had I seen her so clearly.*"[178]

Strangely, it is only when Lucy's own image has been consumed by another, M. Paul, that she is able to see her ghostly double most clearly. Additionally, it is unclear why the specter is *angry* after this birth; while she acts as Lucy's double, or rather, a projection of Lucy's repressed desire, she also represents M. Paul's deceased lover. Thus, it is left ambiguous whether her anger is directed towards Lucy, in the form of jealousy for M. Paul, or if she instead intends to interrupt M. Paul who, after asserting the self-samenesss between himself and Lucy, seems about to continue his imperialistic campaign by asserting, "I mean to make it out: it has baffled me so far, but I mean to follow up the mystery [of the Nun]."[179] The Nun's ambiguous anger is one manifestation of her symbolic excess; neither intentionality nor consistency can be read into the Nun, because, to borrow once more from Christina Crosby, the Nun

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[177] Ibid., 396, 170. This quote is interesting in that Lucy herself does not know "who she is," only that M. Paul is misguided in his assertion that Lucy can be said to *be* one person at all. M. Paul's conclusions from his "reading" of Lucy's physiognomy are troubled by her own vacillation, dispersal, and inconsistency within the text.
[178] Brontë, *Villette*, 408. Emphasis my own.
[179] Ibid.

is "an excess, a remainder left over in the division of meaning, a remainder which slips through one's fingers."[180] In her article "Charlotte Brontë's Haunted Text," Christina Crosby persuasively argues that the Nun is, in fact, the "agent of indeterminacy" in *Villette*.[181] The play of undecidability surrounding the image of the Nun is produced through the multiple and necessarily incomplete explanations given of her identity. The Nun "is" the legendary medieval nun who was buried alive for a sexual sin; she is also M. Paul's buried Justine Marie, who has returned to haunt her old love, as well as the young, living Justine-Marie whom Lucy envies. Additionally, the Nun is a double of Lucy, both a literal specter externally haunting her, as well as psychic projection of Lucy's own repressed desire, a vision that "came out of [her] brain, and is now gone in there, and may glide out again at an hour and day when [Lucy] does not look for her."[182] Finally the banal "revelation" of the Nun's "true" identity comes when Lucy reads the note that Ginevra sends after having eloped with Colonel de Hamal. Ginevra explains that her suitor had donned the costume of a nun in order to enter the school under the guise of a woman. This explanation, however, is woefully inadequate considering the symbolic weight already gathered around the figure of the Nun. A symbolically over-heavy figure, the Nun "is" not any of the characters and is neither male nor female, but instead serves as the locus of the play of strange mirroring and metonymic slippage between characters. Hence, the Nun is

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[180] Crosby, "Haunted Text," 709. This argument is in dialogue with M. Paul's provocative hypothesis, "Whether this nun be flesh and blood, or something that *remains* when blood is dried and flesh wasted, her business is as much with you, [Lucy], as with me" (Brontë, *Villette*, 408; Emphasis my own).
[181] Crobsy, "Haunted Text," 703.
[182] Brontë, *Villette*, 278.

an agent of indeterminacy because she provokes a disturbing movement within the text, a play of refraction that reveals the instability of identity and gender.

The first metonymic slippage linked to the Nun is that between Dr. John/Graham and M. Paul, the only characters with whom Lucy shares the secret of her ghostly visitor. While Brontë characterizes these men as near antitheses, they share an intimate commonality in their knowledge of the Nun, a shared knowledge that is perhaps what drives Lucy's attraction for both men. Graham appears directly after the first appearance of the Nun, who emerges as Lucy is reading Graham's letter in the "sepulchral" garret.[183] This secret space, however, relates not only to Lucy's near sexual enjoyment of Graham's letter and the frightening appearance of the Nun, but is also the place where, earlier, M. Paul literally imprisoned Lucy in order that she my learn her part for the *vaudeville*. Reluctant to share what she had seen for fear of being considered insane, Lucy nevertheless tells Graham about the ghostly Nun; the only other person to whom she confesses the secret of this spectral visitation is the man who later replaces Graham as the ostensible object of her love, M. Paul. The second appearance of the Nun further conflates these two men. In the chapter "A Burial," Lucy inters this same letter, along with four others, in hopes of laying to rest her passion for Graham. Her gravesite, however, is that of the legendary medieval nun, whose burial, like that of the letters, is motivated by the need to repress sexual desire. However, this gravesite is also metonymically linked to the grave of M. Paul's Justine Marie, who he believes is the spirit of the ghostly visitor. The Nun's third appearance, in which she rushes past M. Paul and Lucy in the allé défendue, leads M.

[183] Ibid., 227.

Paul to believe that the Nun, in fact, haunts the couple, as is evidenced when he worriedly asks Lucy, "No good living woman—much less a pure, happy spirit—would trouble amity like ours—n'est il pas vrai?"[184] There are, however, two spirits in "unquiet tombs" that haunt the pair. The first is the spectral Nun, who reads as both the medieval sinner and M. Paul's lost love, for whom he still holds a place in his heart, while the second is Lucy's undead passion for Graham. Just as Lucy's love for Graham haunts the connection between her and M. Paul in the third volume (Lucy admits: "I kept a place for [Graham] […] a place of which I never took the measure. […] All my life long I carried it folded in the hollow of my hand—yet released from that hold and constriction, I know not but its innate capacity for expanse might have magnified it into a tabernacle for a host"), so M. Paul's continued affection for his lost Nun is evidenced when Lucy sees him in the allé défendue, her metaphorical grave, "digging in the wet mold amongst the rain-laden and streaming shrubs," as if in an effort to exhume his entombed nun. "He would dig thus," Lucy explains, "in frozen snow on the coldest winter day, when urged inwardly by painful emotion, whether of nervous excitation, or sad thoughts, or self-reproach."[185]

Serving not only as the hinge of oscillation between Graham and M. Paul, the Nun also initiates sliding between Colonel de Hamal, Lucy, and Ginevra. A short time after Ginevra mysteriously disappears from the pensionnat, Lucy receives a letter that Ginevra believes will "explain" Lucy's run-ins with the Nun. "Alfred [de Hamal]," Ginevra writes, "has seen so much of you during the last few months, that he begins to feel quite friendly towards you. He hopes you won't miss him now that

[184] Ibid., 452.
[185] Ibid., 505, 459.

he's gone." She diminutively continues, "He begs to apologize for any *little trouble* he may have given you. He is afraid he rather *inconvenienced* you once when he came upon you in the grenier."[186] After recalling Lucy's encounters with the Nun—which, in truth, were more than a little troubling—Ginevra stops her teasing and definitively admits that de Hamal had dressed up as the ghostly figure so as to court the young coquette. "M. le Comte de Hamal was the nun of the attic, and […] he came to see your humble servant," Ginevra explains, repainting the highly Gothic scenes of ghostly visitations with the mere fumbles of her clumsy suitor.[187] Finally, Ginevra admits that she herself left the Nun's costume propped in Lucy's bed, awaiting Lucy's return on the night of her opium walk. Completely oblivious to the horrific power Lucy experiences in destroying the specter—"the incubus! […] the goblin!"—Ginevra instead guesses that Lucy, "insensible to both pain and fear and grief," one whom Ginevra believes "feels nothing," was unaffected by the image of the Nun, awaiting her in her own bed.[188] This assumption is not surprising, but only an extension of Ginevra's usual opinion of Lucy, whom she variously calls Timon, Diogenes, Grandmother, crosspatch, old Crusty, and, in this letter, "my dear cynic and misanthrope."[189] In fact, the strange intimacy between Ginevra and Lucy seems, on the surface, inexplicable; while Lucy does not respect Ginevra's need for male admiration, Ginevra finds Lucy to be drab, hopeless, and stern.

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[186] Ibid., 523. Emphasis my own.
[187] Ibid., 523.
[188] Ibid., 519, 524.
[189] Ibid., 525. The inconsistency of Lucy's behavior as a character and the differing perceptions of her personality become clear when Ginevra's opinions are compared, for example, with those of M. Paul, who believes that Lucy, one who needs "checking, regulating, and keeping down," is "too airy and cheery—too volatile and versatile—too flowerly and coloury" (Brontë, *Villette*, 402, 371).

The unlikely and even antagonistic intimacy between Ginevra and Lucy, however, can be explored through the figure of the Nun and her impersonator, de Hamal. The character of de Hamal not only provides a physical, if inadequate, explanation of the Nun's appearance, but also serves as Lucy's double in her strange relationship with Miss Ginevra Fanshawe. This is first apparent in the provocative scene of the *vaudeville* in which, due to the last-minute disappearance of the intended actress, Lucy is forced by M. Paul to play "a disagreeable part—a man's part—an empty-headed fop's."[190] Refusing to entirely assume a man's wardrobe, Lucy "[retains her] woman's garb [and] […] merely assumed, in addition, a little vest, a collar, and cravat, and a paletôt of small dimension."[191] Thus ambiguously gendered, Lucy plays the role of the fop who must woo the young flirt, a role quite appropriately assigned to Ginevra. While Lucy admits, "It was not the crowd I feared so much as my own voice," she quickly finds, that, in assuming the voice of the male seducer, she is *possessed* by the role.[192] As de Hamal rivals with Dr. John over Ginevra's attention, so Lucy, noticing Graham in the audience, "rivaled and outrivaled" him on stage. However, she does not merely *act* the part of de Hamal, the fop, but herself experiences a romantic longing for Ginevra in this pleasurable and excessive performance. "Without heart, without interest," she explains, "I could not play [the role]. It must be played—in went the yearned-for seasoning—thus flavored, I played it with relish."[193] More than flavored, Lucy's performance is *charged*, as she and Ginevra go beyond themselves, each seemingly overcome by the sexualized

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[190] Brontë, *Villette*, 148.
[191] Ibid., 154.
[192] Ibid.; "Between the acts," Lucy explains, "M. Paul told us he knew not what possessed us. […] I know not what possessed me either" (Brontë, *Villette,* 155).
[193] Brontë, *Villette*, 155.

exchange. "I know I acted as if wishful and resolute to win and conquer. […] My longing was to eclipse […] Dr. John." Lucy admits. "Ginevra seconded me; between us, we half-changed the nature of the *rôle*."[194] After the performance, Lucy "retired into" herself once again; disturbed to find that, although she had accepted the part to please M. Paul, "ere long, warming, becoming interested, taking courage, I acted to *please myself,*" Lucy reprimands herself. Deciding that her newly discovered "relish for dramatic expression […] would not do for a mere looker-on at life," *i.e.* one dead-in-life, she vows never again to indulge herself in such uncontrollable pleasure.[195]

Ginevra, perhaps perceiving Lucy's extreme, yearning pleasure in assuming the role of her seducer, drags Lucy to the "great looking glass" in the dressing-room. Ginevra wishes to view the mirror with Lucy in order to compare herself against her unfortunate companion. She has faith that the mirror will reassuringly return her own image; "I know I am beautiful," she explains. "I feel it, I see it—for there is a great looking glass in the dressing-room, where I can view my shape from head to toe."[196] Willingly submitting herself to Ginevra's self-praise at her own expense, Lucy passively explains, "Without resistance, remonstrance, or remark, I stood and let her self love have its feast and triumph."[197] However, Ginevra's desire for affirmation is rebuked; having thoroughly enjoyed her own inverse image in contrast with that of Lucy, she verbally interprets their reflection. "Just listen to the difference of our positions," she demands of Lucy, "and then see how happy am I and how miserable

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[194] Brontë, *Villette*, 154.
[195] For Ginevra, on the other hand, "such scenes were her triumphs—she was the child of pleasure" (Brontë, *Villette*, 156).
[196] Brontë, *Villette*, 159.
[197] Ibid.

are you."[198] After her elaboration of the painful differences of circumstance and appearance between herself and Lucy, however, Ginevra is disappointed and peeved by Lucy's response, "Miss Fanshawe, hapless as I am, according to your showing, sixpence I would not give to purchase you, body and soul."[199] Ginevra's method of consolidating and reaffirming her identity through a comparative mirror-play with Lucy Snowe is flawed, however; she is not comparing herself to a complete, self-realized individual, but one who, inconsistently moving between her various performances, is overwhelmed, possessed, and dominated. Ginevra mistakes Lucy's reflection as a stable image of self, against which she may confirm her own good-fortune; instead, she finds herself confronted with the image of one who is simultaneously the Nun, her suitor, de Hamal, and M. Paul.

Identity and its conventional markers become unstable in *Villette*; they are dislodged and put in play, are involved in a movement that undermines any sort of essentialism of selfhood. Perhaps the most obvious identity marker that Brontë de-naturalizes by showing it's own instability is that of gendered difference. Again, the spectral Nun provides an evocative opening to a discussion of multiply-gendered subjectivity. The Nun "is" the nun of the convent, M. Paul's Justine Marie, Lucy's spectral other, and the young de Hamal. The image of the medieval nun, buried alive for her own sexuality, is a highly gendered image; the distinctly feminine characterization of the Nun, based on the division between monks and nuns according to sexual difference, is reinforced by legendary nun's forbidden expression of feminine *sexuality*. However, the Nun of the garret is "actually" a man, Colonel de

[198] Ibid., 160.
[199] Ibid., 161.

Hamal, who has assumed the chaste appearance of the nun in order to penetrate the confines of the pensionnat and seduce Ginevra. This dualism, however, of the Nun's external feminine appearance as a veil, hiding the masculine self, is still flawed. While de Hamal is a male suitor, his "masculinity" is questioned throughout the novel. When Ginevra first identifies de Hamal in the crowd, Lucy mentally describes him: "He was a straight-nosed, very correct-featured little dandy. I say *little* dandy [because] his lineaments were small, and so were his hands and feet; and he was so pretty and smooth, and as trim as a *doll*: so nicely dressed, so nicely curled, so booted and gloved and cravated."[200] Later, spotting de Hamal in the museum, eyeing the Cleopatra, Lucy notes, "what a very finished, highly-polished little pate [his] was! What a figure, so trim and natty! What *womanish* feet and hands!"[201] De Hamal's *feminine* appearance is reinforced by the direct comparison Lucy draws between this suitor and his rival, Dr. John. "His face and fine brow were most handsome and manly," Lucy remarks. "*His* features were not delicate, not light like those of a woman."[202] Hence, the binary opposition between surface and depth, as well as between masculine and feminine, is troubled. The Nun "is" not male or female, and neither does her "feminine" exterior hide a secret, "masculine" interior. Rather, the surface play between masculine/feminine reveals these hierarchical, binary oppositions as unstable; neither term can stand on its own, but is already inflected through the other.

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[200] Ibid.
[201] Ibid., 229. Emphasis my own.
[202] Ibid., 164.

This gender slippage, facilitated by the Nun, is perhaps most disturbing in the image of the actress, Vashti. More than a provocative mixture of masculine and feminine traits, Vashti truly disrupts the logic of the binary by exceeding it. "For a while—a long while—I thought it was only a woman, though an unique woman, who moved in might and grace before this multitude." Lucy admits as she watches Vashti's performance. "By-and-by," Lucy explains, "I recognized my mistake. Behold! I found *upon* her something *neither of woman nor of man*: in each of her eyes sat a devil."[203] Hence, Vashti's gendered subjectivity is something *other*, something inexpressible. Additionally, her gender is not projected from within herself but instead plays on the surface; it is not within but *upon* her. Her transgression of the normative binary division of gender and refusal to reify an interior/exterior binary places Vashti in the realm of *perversion*. Vashti's performance, Lucy confides, "was a spectacle low, horrible, *immoral*."[204] Socially threatening and immoral, Vashti cannot be contained or described in conventional representation, but must instead occupy the position of a *demon*. Vashti, one who "belong[s] to storm, [is] wild and intense, dangerous, sudden, and flaming."[205] She is, like Lucy, locked in a struggle with the suffering of exile.

Both Vashti and the Nun, perhaps the most symbolically *excessive* figures of the text, serve as Lucy's doubles. Each refracted through the other, the actress and the Nun are opposed but still connected. Just as Lucy and the Nun move in the space

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[203] Ibid, 286. Emphasis my own.
[204] Ibid., 286. Emphasis my own.
[205] Ibid., 288. Lucy describes Vashti as a fallen angel, one exiled from heaven: "Her hair, flying loose in revel or war, is still an angel's hair, and glorious under a halo. Fallen, insurgent, banished, she remembers the heaven where she rebelled. Heaven's light, following her exile, pierces its confines, and discloses their forlorn remoteness" (Brontë, *Villette*, 287).

"between two deaths," Vashti also becomes spectral. "Scarcely a substance herself," Vashti "grapples to conflict with abstractions."[206] The climactic moment of her performance, in which Vashti's "convulsing, […] perishing mortal frame [battles] with doom and death," is *truncated*. A fire erupts in the theater, and the performance ends as she is in the process of dying; hence she, like Lucy and the Nun, is left in the liminal space between life and death. She moves in the margins of experience, a defiant and violent specter. Penny Boumelha compares Vashti and the Nun to the characters of Polly, Miss Marchmont, Madame Beck, Ginevra, and Justine Marie, arguing that the latter set represents the "known and knowable narratives of woman."[207] Vashti and the Nun, however, are the figures that, in their extreme unknowability, point to the impossibility of complete comprehension as a condition of subjectivity; this renders the two spectral figures, Vashti and the Nun, the most powerful of Lucy's doubles. "If Lucy, in exile from such [knowable] stories, is to have doubles," Boumelha argues, "then the truest ones, it seems to me, are Vashti and the Nun. [They share] a 'female self' […] that is not encompassed or displayed by narrative."[208] Vashti and the Nun are crucial figures in *Villette*'s 'ghost plot', which Boumelha describes as "the novel's attempt to convey Lucy's 'female self' in the interstices and resistances to rational, daylight plot"[209] After Vashti's performance, Lucy vows, "That night was already marked in my book of life, not with white, but with a deep-red cross."[210] Additionally, in her final attempt to find a unified self in her mirrored reflection, Lucy does not encounter her own image, but is instead

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[206] Brontë, *Villette*, 287.
[207] Boumelha, *Charlotte Brontë,* 116.
[208] Ibid., 116-117.
[209] Ibid., 108.
[210] Brontë, *Villette*, 289.

confronted with the Nun. Lucy begins her opium-induced wanderings through Villette in search of "that circular mirror of crystal," the pond in the park.[211] However, by this point in the novel mirrors have already been shown to disperse rather than consolidate the self, and Lucy's recognition that this reflective glass is an *imperfect* mirror, "tremulous and rippled," indicates that this last search for a unified self will end in fragmented images of her own metonymic doubles, refracted throughout the novel.[212] Indeed, upon arriving to the park, Lucy does not see her own reflection, but instead encounters Justine-Marie, a metonymic double of her own ghostly Nun. "Hitherto I had seen this specter only through a glass darkly," Lucy explains. "Now I was to behold it face to face. I leaned forward: I looked."[213]

Lucy and the Perversion of the Reader

> Perversion, *n.*
> […]
> 3. *Geom*. The formation of the mirror image of a figure or object; the image itself.
> Cf. Enantiomorph, *n.* Now *rare*
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> 1881 J.C. Maxwell <u>*Treat. Electr. & Magn.*</u> II. 415 They are geometrically alike in all respects, except that one is the perversion of the other, like its image in a looking glass.[214]
>
> -*Oxford English Dictionary*

[211] Ibid., 502.
[212] Ibid.
[213] Ibid., 512.
[214] *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "Perversion," accessed April 7, 2011, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/141678?redirectedFrom=perversion#eid.

Earlier in this chapter, I argued that the excessive play of surface mirroring in *Villette* undermines the project of the traditional realist critic. Revealing the self as incomplete, unstable, and multiply refracted through the Other, the movement of doubling and mirroring in *Villette* produces a text that, by "refusing to yield up meaning," subversively challenges the notion that the critic interprets the text in order to *unveil* a singular, true meaning buried therein.[215] Instead, the novel demands a style of interpretation that does not reduce differences to similitude, but instead opens itself up to the specular play of refracted, partial, and dynamic meanings in *Villette*.

Through a critical approach that is able to read the subject as de-centered, dispersed, and unfixed, however, the reader of the novel becomes deeply implicated in the *perverse* movement of the text. No longer able to imagine ourselves as mere observers of the text, registering and recording the play of signification within the novel from the outside, we, as readers, are forced to acknowledge the movement of our own refracted image in the narrative. The doubling of characters within the novel is truly unsettling when it becomes clear that we as readers are participating in the structure of doubling in *Villette*; we are concretely interpellated throughout the novel in the form of Lucy's direct addresses to the reader, and by continuing to read and become increasingly entangled in the narrative, we have responded to the call. *We* are one of Lucy's refracted and spectral doubles, haunting the novel with our non-presence.

Throughout the novel, Lucy establishes a simultaneously antagonistic and sympathetic relationship with the reader. Her often alienating judgments of the reader

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[215] "[In La Terrasse], it is the refusal [of the objects] to yield up their meanings which is the center of narrative concern" (Glen, "*Shirley* and *Villette*, 141).

indicate the distance and implied hostility between reader and narrator. In an exemplary passage, Lucy rails, "Religious reader, you will preach to me a long sermon about what I have just written, and so will you, moralist; and you stern sage; and you, stoic, will frown; you, cynic, sneer; you, epicure, laugh. Well, each and all, take it your own way."[216] Manipulating her assumptions about the reader, Lucy uses these assumptions as a justification of her narrative style of evasion and withholding. "My reader, I know," she explains, "is one who would not thank me for an elaborate reproduction of poetic first impressions."[217]

Lucy's antagonism, however, is combined with an implicit alliance between herself and the reader. From the first chapter, Lucy establishes herself as an interpreter of signs, acting throughout the novel as a reader within her own narrative.[218] Still confused during her recovery at La Terrasse, Lucy explains, "I looked. The plot was but thickening; the wonder culminating."[219] Similarly, while attending a concert with the Brettons, Lucy tries to read the "hieroglyphics" of Hypochondria graven on the forehead of the melancholy king.[220] The text is scattered with questions such as "What did it signify?" that indicate Lucy's position as a reader within the text.[221] The play of doubling between Lucy and the reader is uncannily reinforced when, in a unique instance, Lucy grammatically equates herself with the reader, referring to the reader and narrator together as "we." Observing the secret Junta during her opium-wanderings, Lucy writes, "*We* have looked at the city belle;

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[216] Brontë, *Villette*, 173.
[217] Ibid., 51.
[218] On finding new furniture in her bedroom at the Brettons', Lucy asks herself, "Of what are these things the signs and tokens?" (Brontë, *Villette*, 8).
[219] Brontë, *Villette*, 191.
[220] Ibid., 238.
[221] Ibid., 402.

we have cursorily glanced at the respectable old uncle and aunt. Have *we* a stray glance to give to the third member of this company? Can *we* spare him a moment's notice? *We* ought to distinguish him so far, reader; *he has claims on us*."[222]

However, the implications of the critic's acquiescence to *Villette's* demand that it be read as a hall of mirrors, rather than a linear, realist narrative, are radical and subversive. By immersing ourselves in the play of refraction within *Villette* as one of Lucy's mirrored doubles, we as readers literally become a *perversion*. *The Oxford English Dictionary* cites one, now rare, meaning of the word *perversion* as, "the formation of the mirror image of a figure or object."[223] The modern meaning of the word as that which is normatively transgressive and "socially threatening," therefore, etymologically evolves from the uncanny reflection of the one's own inverse image in the mirror. Simultaneously hailed as Lucy's antagonist and ally, the reader becomes the perverse mirror image of this disturbing narrator. The truly subversive threat of the novel, then, lies in its transformation of the reader and the consequent destabilization of the ideological hold of modern individualism. Highlighting the processes of representation by directly addressing the reader and thematizing issues of reading and interpretation, Brontë emphasizes the *fictive* process of subject formation through narrative, specifically, the kind of imaginary relationship to the Real (re)produced through novelistic fiction. The reader's sense of loss and sadness at the close of this unresolved novel, then, is not only caused by our empathy for Lucy Snowe, but also the loss of our own faith in the conception of unified selfhood,

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[222] Ibid., 513. Emphasis my own.
[223] *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "Perversion," accessed April 7, 2011, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/141678?redirectedFrom=perversion#eid.

teleological narrative, and meaningfully patterned events. Like Lucy, the Nun, and Vashti, we become *ghosts*; having witnessed the novel's subversive blow to the realist consensus, the reader wanders in the margins of experience, in the liminal space of the half-dead, half-living. As Lucy grieves over her buried letters, so the reader, denied the comfort of narrative resolution and re-affirmation of the value of the moral individual, "lingers, like any other mourner, beside a newly-sodden grave."[224] The undead corpse that the reader mourns, however, is its own troubled conception of subjectivity.

In reading *Villette*, we as critics first posit ourselves as ghost-hunters, chasing after the Nun, Lucy, and Vashti in order to exorcise all indeterminacy from the text. However, the process of moving through the narrative is one of *perversion*; the novel *does* something to its readers. Seeing our own mirrored image in the text ruptured, fissured, metonymically sliding, and perverse, we, like Lucy, turn away with "fear and trembling."[225] We realize that we have become ghosts ourselves, specters caught up in the play of disconcerting mirroring; deeply complicit in the narrative's perverse movement, we can no longer posit ourselves as the novel's exorcists, but instead as one of the phantoms we had hoped to bracket. At the close of the novel, the reader, along with Lucy and M. Paul, who remains ambiguously buried (alive) at sea, are denied the resolution of our own death. Instead, we are subsumed in the "wilderness of the present," from which point, interpretation, if it is still possible, becomes multivalent, dynamic, and radically subversive. For this reason, *Villette* continues to haunt us; the novel's *preternatural power*, the reason why it so strongly offends the

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[224] Brontë, *Villette*, 329.
[225] Ibid., 232.

protestant-realist protocol of accounting for oneself as a fully living, unified, moral subject, lies in its own *spectrality*, in its haunting narrative that produces readers who, instead of growing into individualized subjects, become phantoms themselves. Expectations of similitude, reducible difference, morality, and *telos* are all here subverted through the perverse play of metonymic sliding in this novel, this "hall of mirrors," *Villette*.

Conclusion

The Self that Trembles

> "I tremble because I am still afraid of what already makes me afraid and which I can neither see nor foresee. I tremble before what exceeds my seeing and my knowing although it concerns the innermost parts of me, right down to my soul, down to the bone, as we say. Inasmuch as it tends to undo both seeing and knowing, trembling is indeed an experience of secrecy or of mystery."[226]
>
> -Jacques Derrida, *Gift of Death*

> "I believe that this life is not all; neither the beginning nor the end. I believe while I tremble; I trust while I weep."[227]
>
> -Lucy Snowe

In her 1866 review, "Charlotte Brontë's Lucy Snowe," Susan M. Waring describes the power of Brontë's final novel. "Trembling about the mouth which tells of tears that are ended," Waring writes, "*Villette* stands upon its pedestal the master-piece of its author."[228] In the two preceding chapters, we have explored the simultaneously seductive and threatening work of this captivating and ghostly *bildungsroman*. Part of the immense force of the novel, both pleasurable and dangerous, lies in the way in which the narrative seduces the reader into entering the

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[226] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 55.
[227] Brontë, *Villette*, 401.
[228] Susan M. Waring, "Charlotte Brontë's Lucy Snowe," in McNees, *Critical Assessments*, Vol. 3, 624.

realist consensus, thereby positioning the reader within the normative expectations of realist representation, only to undermine this consensus with its own language. The reader is lured into a false comfort; in a move that creates a "jar of discord," Charlotte Brontë perverts realist conventions, revealing the instability of the representational system. However, *Villette* is not a rejection of conventional realism, but a strange subversion of the normative practices of representation; it is simultaneously an instantiation and refusal of the realist consensus and a hermeneutical project that seeks to assimilate and make sense of disparate elements. The manipulation of the reader's conventional expectations is *subversive* because it gestures towards the limits of the hermeneutical project of realism and the valorization of the moral individual therein. The event of the novel is this *insult* to the normative demands of modern subjectivity, entangled in and produced by realist representational practices. By thematizing the conventions and processes of representation, this perversion reveals the ideology that supports these conventions as imaginary, rather than natural, fixed, or essential. The radical consequence of this move is the opportunity that it creates for a different mode of representation, one that does not insist on similitude and resolution, but instead is open to the dynamic play of difference.

By exploring the subjects of mirroring and the metonymic sliding of doubled characters in *Villette*, we have approached the text through its own restless inconsistency. Interpreting the novel from within the play of refracted meaning, we have explored the demands *Villette* makes on the critic and how these demands differ from those made within conventional realism. Immersed and complicit in the structure of mirroring and doubles in *Villette*, the critic has no safe place from which

to interpret the text, but is instead already implicated and affected by its destabilizing movement.[229] The critic, by participating in the play of meaning and reflection, becomes the perverse image of the narrator, Lucy Snowe. Hence, the reader moves, with Lucy, at the margins of the intelligible within the realist paradigm.

This orientation of the novel and reader towards the limits of realist representation is important because it provides a marginal space, by disturbing the logic of the realist consensus, from which to view the process of representation and the production of notions of selfhood and society through literature. Hence, the novel steps beyond its own apparent boundaries and, by challenging a representational mode that privileges the unified, bourgeois, and moral subject, resonates in the political and ethical realms of intersubjectivity. In her critical work *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong argues that representation and politics are inextricably linked through the process of subject formation. "Modern culture," Armstrong explains, "depends on a form of power that works through language—and particularly the printed word—to constitute subjectivity."[230] Therefore, the realist consensus is not only a literary consensus between the author and the reader, but is a hegemonic understanding of the world with normative weight and consequence in relation to subjectivity and social formation. Hence, although Charlotte Brontë claimed, in a letter to her publisher, George Smith, that "*Villette* touches on no matter

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[229] While this is true of representation and interpretation in general, my argument is that *Villette* forces the critic to become aware of their own involvement in the text through Lucy's abdication of narrative authority, antagonistic comments towards the reader, and alliance with the reader.

[230] Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 25.

of public interest," the transgressive perversion of the novel reverberates beyond the lonely subjectivity of Lucy Snowe.[231]

This analysis allows us to denaturalize the modern individual by showing this conception of identity to be a product of representation rather than its pre-existing referent. The possibility that *Villette* creates, then, is that a different sort of subjectivity, one that is never resolved, that is infinitely other-within-itself, may emerge from a shift in representational practices. The perverse play in *Villette* begins to open a linguistic space for a new subjectivity by indicating that there is a conception of the self, as seen in Lucy Snowe, that is only imperfectly and symptomatically expressed in the ruptures of the realist narrative; thus, *Villette* highlights the restrictive work of representational conventions by gesturing towards the limit of what can be said and thought within this shared consensus.

Having shown the destabilization of the modern, Protestant, bourgeois individual, the question then becomes: what sort of self begins to come into play through the perverse movement of this disturbing and seductive novel? Lucy, having failed to evolve into a unified subject, instead becomes a self who *trembles* before "what exceeds […] seeing and […] knowing although it concerns the innermost parts of [the self]."[232] Moving between her refracted, multiple, and dynamic doubles, Lucy trembles at her own indeterminacy; she trembles at her self, a self that is unspeakable and unimaginable. At the close of the novel, Lucy has lost control over her own narrative by abandoning herself to the wilderness of the present. "Standing forever in

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[231] Charlotte Brontë to George Smith, 30 October 1852, in *Selected Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 208.
[232] Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 55.

a continuous actual present," writes Ermarth, "that has no concreteness or measurable change and consists only of remembering, the narrator has no perceptible identity."[233] In between convention and subversion, Lucy is this narrator who has lost the reassurance of the realist linear chronology whose futurity provides the possibility of creating a meaningfully patterned narrative. Shaking in anticipatory and repetitive trembling, Lucy has no identity, but is not yet dead. Her self is a "secret" because it cannot be expressed in language; the self behind the veil, however, is not a self, but is only the movement of trembling.

However, Lucy does not tremble alone; she has pulled her perverse double, the reader, into this liminal space of the trembling specter. The feeling of deep sadness, of heartbreaking loss that we experience in closing the novel is not only an expression of our empathy for the textual figure of Lucy Snowe, but also a grief over our own loss. Having stepped beyond the realist consensus, we also experience a sort of symbolic death, a loss of *faith* in the teleological journey towards a stable self and unified meaning. The question for further study that emerges from this theory of the trembling self, then, becomes an ethical one. Is there a space for ethics between trembling selves? How does the destabilized, spectral, and trembling subject have an ethical relationship with the social world? The question, as Jacques Derrida writes in *The Gift of Death*, becomes "the question of the self: 'who am I?' no longer in the sense of 'who am I' but 'who is this 'I' that can say 'who'? What is the 'I' and what becomes of responsibility once the identity of the 'I' trembles *in secret*?"[234]

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[233] Ermarth, *Realist Consensus*, 85.
[234] Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 92.

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