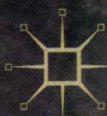# WRITING DEATH AND ABSENCE IN THE VICTORIAN NOVEL

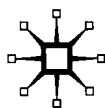*ENGRAVED NARRATIVES*

JOLENE ZIGAROVICH

WRITING DEATH AND ABSENCE IN THE VICTORIAN NOVEL

ENGRAVED NARRATIVES

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Also by Jolene Zigarovich

Sex and Death in Eighteenth-Century Literature (2012), Editor

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With regard to that momentous point—M. Paul's fate—in case any one in future should request to be enlightened thereon—they may be told that it was designed that every reader should settle the catastrophe for himself, according to the quality of his disposition, the tender or remorseless impulse of his nature—Drowning and Matrimony are the fearful alternatives. The merciful—like Miss Mulock, Mr Williams, Lady Harriet St Clair and Mr Alexander Frazer—will of course choose the former and milder doom—drown him to put him out of pain. The cruel-hearted will on the contrary pitilessly impale him on the second horn of the dilemma—marrying him without ruth or compunction to that—person—that—that—individual— "Lucy Snowe."

—Charlotte Brontë, Letter to George Smith;
Haworth, March 26, 1853

Victorian literature tells the story of loss; it uncannily evokes and embodies the dead, absent, and missing. Re-inventing Gothic and sentimental themes from their eighteenth-century forbears, the Victorian novelists seem to fetishize missing bodies, epitaphic texts, and the rhetoric of absence. The intruding loss of faith, individuation, and social identity created a yearning for definition and certainty, fictionalized by the ever-present sentimental deathbed or funeral scene. But at the same time, a persistent recognition of the unknowable, of uncertainty, led to the allegorizing of absence and loss. This book aims to uncover the disturbing pause in the Victorian fictional consciousness.

The epigraph that commences this chapter is a well-known anecdote concerning Charlotte Brontë's novel *Villette* (1853). The "momentous point" referred to in the epigraph is the fate of M. Paul Emanuel, Lucy Snowe's mentor and lover, who has been sent to the West Indies by conniving friends so that he cannot marry her. The novel ends with Lucy awaiting his return, but he never arrives. For

me, the epigraph illustrates the exact moment when enigma entered the Victorian novel. The tortuous ending of *Villette* was simply not acceptable. Brontë's readers were emphatically writing her publisher, George Smith, demanding explanation. Elizabeth Gaskell, Brontë's friend and biographer, records that Brontë truly meant the ending of the novel to be certain, yet to appease her father's desire to give a "happy ending" to *Villette,* Brontë veiled M. Paul Emanuel's death, which so frustrated her readers.[1] To their anxious queries, Brontë responded equally enigmatically to the publisher's reader, William Smith Williams: "Since the little puzzle amuses the ladies it would be a pity to spoil their sport by giving them the key."[2] Brontë relished the notion that only she held the key to the plot's puzzle and that M. Paul's fate would be immortalized in the murky waters of *Villette's* pages.

This anecdote raises several important questions for this study: How could the fate of an important Victorian character, the protagonist's lover in fact, not be narrated? What does it mean to have an enigmatic ending? And what happens when the mortality of a character is left in our hands? Instead of directly killing M. Paul herself, Brontë asks us to either "drown him" or "pitilessly impale him" to a marriage with Lucy Snowe. And like the frustrated Victorian readers of *Villette,* I find that today these alternatives are just as frustrating (and, in fact, inherently violent). Brontë's readers were, of course, accustomed to the justifiable deaths of Dickens's villains and the sentimental deaths of his angels. Instead of finding some form of power, creativity, or simply comfort in imagining the fate of a character on their own terms, Brontë's readers demanded certainty in death.

While other studies have focused on the aesthetic and semiotic purposes of the corpse in nineteenth-century art and literature, this study seeks to exemplify the notion of narrative lack by examining the more problematical position of the absent body. Texts that engrave absence ultimately place themselves in an ironic position—they must tell the peripheral story of those who cannot speak; they enact the attempt to decipher letters on the tombstone. Why do Victorian novelists see the narrative act as a series of textual murders and resurrections? How do we hear silenced voices, the voices of the texts' victims? What problems occur in the representation of lack? Without a corpse, what body is used for inscription? How can the reader be a spectator of the "Other"? Investigating these questions is the focus of *Writing Death and Absence in the Victorian Novel: Engraved Narratives.*

Similar to the eighteenth-century Gothic novel, which often withholds the natural explanation of supernatural occurrences until the

conclusion, the Victorian novel suspends the reader's knowledge about the return of the absent figure and leaves death often unexplained, which is a symptom of the text's attempt to purge, yet figure, the body and death (an attempt that ultimately fails). The Victorian novel traumatically suspends mourning and mortality as a temporary appeasement for religious doubt and the anxiety over the body and soul. In a metaphysical sense, we will find that a missing body can serve as a repository for fantasies about the preservation of the body's (and text's) wholeness. In mourning for something lost, these texts attempt to speak the unspeakable; they repeatedly present and perform loss. By shaping themselves around a blank space, an absence, these texts outline a loss of access to history, to language, and to representation in general. They point to events that can never be truly related, to continuous referrals of meaning, to mere imitations instead of realities. These liminal spaces of death are textual symptoms of cultural doubt, loss, and repression.

For the Victorians especially, narrating death was important for the social and cultural understanding of absence, separation, and displacement in an ever-increasing chaotic and dismembered world. The Victorian obsession with death rituals has been liberally supported (with occasional disputes) in sociohistorical studies especially over the past three decades. It is relatively accurate to say that because "convention of social display, the physical immediacy of death, and romantic literary influences all helped lift normal taboos against death-related interest, the Victorians could actually relish death for its own sake."[3] Rapid industrialization and urbanization, along with the decline in faith and belief in the afterlife, resulted in attempts to invent performances of spiritual certainty, seen in the aestheticization of mourning rituals and the overall Victorian "cult of death." Although life expectancy improved, and urban life became crowded and mobile, the Victorians were able to become increasingly fascinated with death, especially as mourning developed into a function of social display. In a world of growing skepticism, the Victorians generally sought to bring culture into an intimate relationship with death. This movement can be seen as an attempt to embrace social and individual loss. Extravagant funerals, the rise of the undertaking business, and the growing spiritualist movement ironically included the private denial of death.[4] At a time when traditional faith and classical physics were under assault, spiritualists appropriated scientific materialism to depict the afterworld and express assurance in its existence.[5] In this sense, the Victorians grounded death in culture, masking its finitude by fetishizing its transcendence.

While many sought the evidence of life after death, the cult of mourning provided the materialistic displays (and extremes) of remembrance. Mourning jewelry, clothes, and elaborate decorations all emerged as public signs of loss.[6] The preoccupation with melancholy and "the beautiful death" was indeed fashionable, disguising the troubling doubts about the afterlife and the survival of the soul that scientific progress incited. The preference for elaborate funerary monuments and newly designed cemeteries not only contributed to sentimental graveside rituals, but also made the funeral director's services necessary for successful mourning. In *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology,* Michael Wheeler remarks, "In the Victorian Age, highly conventionalized social customs and funerary rituals eased the transition from the deathbed to the bed that is the grave."[7] And, of course, the body itself became the most important relic. In fact, the Victorians fetishized the corpse, creating material objects that were effigies not only *for* the dead but also *of* the dead, such as mourning cards, deathbed portraits or photographs, and hair lockets. The dead thereby became appropriated, marketed, and "produced" in these acts of memorial, and the display of the corpse took on a new significance. The "laying-out" of the corpse in the home during funeral preparations became a physical and social necessity. Secular rituals involved the washing, watching, waking, and viewing of the corpse. Funerary rituals surrounding the corpse thereby emerged, reanimating the dead in a controlled manner and at the same time enacting customs that could affect the fate of the dead person's soul. Ruth Richardson recognizes that at the time the 1832 Anatomy Act was passed (which allowed the use of corpses of the poor for dissection purposes), the belief prevailed that a strong tie existed between the body and the soul for a period of time after death. "The result was an uncertain balance between solicitude towards the corpse and fear of it," Richardson remarks.[8] Whether or not physical resurrection would actually take place, the protection of the identity and integrity of the corpse in the nineteenth century served as a metaphor for the possibility of providing a secure future for the soul.

Though by no means a homogenous experience, the Victorian cult of death was an undeniable sociohistorical and psychological response of a bereaved culture. While it may be a definitive reasoning most likely never to be agreed upon, we can at least determine that a combination of economic, psychological, and consumer interests spurred the Victorian cult of mourning. "It is arguable that the Victorian celebration of death was not so much a golden age of effective psychological support as a bonanza of commercial exploitation," argues David

Cannadine.[9] As the industry of death and mourning proliferated, the experiences of dying and mourning became public signs of material survival and moments of cultural fascination (shared in various forms and levels of expense by all classes). Underlying this embrace of death was an uneasiness about the rapidity of change. Anxieties regarding the moral, physical, and spiritual decay of people and culture were inevitably personified and figured in narrative. In the face of these anxieties, literature more profoundly became a form of consolation. "All this enthusiasm might be considered purely an interest in social display, a means for the middle class to prove both wealth and gentility, were it not for the spilling over of the phenomenon into literary taste," observes John Kucich.[10] Victorian sentiment conceived of death as a fetishized event. Narrative endings could be seen as a figure of assurance in a world of change and uncertainty, while deathbed and gravebed scenes, exhumations and resurrections, ghosts and figures of living death, populate the Victorian novel. Regina Barreca aptly remarks, "The pleasures of death...have long been the focus for all forms of Victorian literature."[11] The moment of dying reclaimed literary significance during the Victorian era, providing a fictional image of the ease of transition from this life to the next. Not only do these scenes provide a type of cathartic experience, where the survivor's own life is affirmed in the death of another, but also the anticipation for knowledge of death and the afterlife becomes fictionalized. These narrative representations of death can be seen as symbols of a destabilized culture as they attempt to stabilize that which is ultimately unknowable.

As the literature attempted to unfold the mysteries of death, in the end it could only admit that death is always a mystery; that it produces gaps and voids (what Garrett Stewart terms "devices to approximate the evacuation"); that, despite the attempts of narrative and figuration, gaps and voids are incapable of being filled. The nineteenth-century crisis of death and faith revealed the inaccessibility of metaphysical truth and the implications of this skepticism for the writing and reading of texts. And this problematic is exactly the position that Brontë places her readers in and that she exploits in *Villette*: the inaccessibility of death, closure, and ultimately truth.

Writing Death and Absence in the Victorian Novel: Engraved Narratives seeks to illustrate how the Victorian novel, by attempting to narrate the unnarratable, represents and perpetuates nineteenth-century anxieties and fascinations regarding death and the body. Representations of death are inherently paradoxical: they seek to present a lack. In relation to the works of Charlotte Brontë, Charles

Dickens, and Wilkie Collins, this book argues that the absence of the corpse doubly signifies the unspeakable, the unknowable. As a result, mourning is suspended, burials are incomplete, and others must repeatedly tell the story of the corpse in order to attain some sense of narrative closure. In essence, missing corpses in fiction signify textual trauma and narrative hysterics, and in a larger context, the novels that portray them embody the foundation of Victorian ideologies regarding mortality and mourning.[12] This investigation will show how the nineteenth-century novelist foregrounds novel writing (itself an act of resurrection of ideas), how the paradox of textual "presence of absence" manipulates notions of life and death in the novel, and ultimately how the reader is destined to fill the textual gaps that stand in for death. To demonstrate this dynamic, we will examine moments in the Victorian novel where deaths are missing and textual fissures or graves remain, waiting to be embodied.

I

While Elisabeth Bronfen, Carol Christ, Carolyn Dever, and others have illustrated the significance of the female corpse as an artistic muse in Western culture, Garrett Stewart, J. Gerald Kennedy, and Alan Friedman have demonstrated the significance of the death scene in the literature and its deconstructive ramifications, and Colin Davis depicts the return of the dead in film, examines Holocaust testimony, and links the work of Derrida with psychoanalytic thought, *Writing Death and Absence in the Victorian Novel* notes the complicated difference in representation when there is no supernatural ghost, no dead body to muse upon, and in some cases, no death scene to describe.[13] While I employ narrative theory, as Dever, Stewart, Davis, and others do, my project proposes a narratology of desire, return, and embodiment (versus tracing the plotting of death or Gothic reanimation). New historicist studies, such as Catherine Gallagher's *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel*, argue for a political representation of the dead body, and certainly contribute to my argument, but my project calls for a rethinking of Victorian history in terms of narrative embodiment. Mary E. Hotz's *Literary Remains: Representations of Death and Burial in Victorian England* argues from a new historicist perspective that Victorian burial reform is covertly commented on in the novel, and makes a pertinent observation regarding the politics of the dead body. Recent books on Gothic fiction, such as Kelly Hurley's *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration*

at the Fin de Siècle, look at the body (not necessarily the corpse) in different ways. Gothic bodies are distinct representations of a chaotic and transformative "abhuman" or monstrous identity. Such representations are indebted to descriptions found in nineteenth-century biology and social medicine, evolutionism, criminal anthropology, and degeneration theory. Studies on the spectral in Victorian literature, as seen in the works of Vanessa D. Dickerson, Julian Wolfreys, Nicola Bown, and others, also employ a Gothic framework as a point of departure for poststructuralist readings of haunted texts, which certainly intersects the theoretic underpinning of my project.[14] Though the literature I discuss here does not involve the supernatural, the metaphorical supernatural that has penetrated recent literary and cultural theory can help us better comprehend forms of loss and return (whether literal, historical, and so on).[15] My interest is not only in how authors embodied the loss of a stable and unified human identity but also in how plots and language attempted a reunification. Employing narrative theory and poststructuralist concepts of writing premature death and rhetorical absence, *Writing Death and Absence in the Victorian Novel* uncovers cultural anxieties embedded within the literature itself. As yet, no competing books have focused on the role of the missing body, provided a full interpretation of the dead-alive plot, or argued that embalming and epitaphs are covert narrative figures.

With no knowledge of the grave, no body to venerate, and no relics to touch, survivors of the missing are left with the most fertile imaginations. And without the ability to enact the cultural insistence of mourning upon the corpse, the text itself becomes the manifestation of suspended mourning, while the absent figures become the "floating signifiers" of the instability of language and representation. Without a corpse, most often a spectral metaphor must immediately replace the absent signifier. The figurative phantom is therefore a textual compromise (and embalming): it points to death while also rejecting the certainty of annihilation. In these signifying gaps the narrative paradox emerges, where the Victorian novel anticipates the modern novel in raising problems of identity, self-consciousness, naming, and language.

Philosophers of language and literary texts, largely influenced by thinkers such as G. W. F. Hegel, Sigmund Freud, Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, and Jacques Derrida, have relatively recently begun to pursue the intimate connection between death and the written word. As a result of these investigations, "the graveyard, the tomb and particularly the epitaph have assumed a new importance in both philosophy and literary criticism."[16] Through the fiction of Charlotte