

WORLD'S CLASSICS



CHARLOTTE BRONTË

VILLETTE

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Edited by

MARGARET SMITH

and

HERBERT ROSENGARTEN

with an Introduction by

MARGARET SMITH

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INTRODUCTION

*Readers who are unfamiliar with the plot may prefer to treat
the introduction as an afterword.*

Villette was published in January 1853, rather more than three years after *Shirley* and five after the enormously successful *Jane Eyre*. *Shirley* had aroused, by comparison, only moderate enthusiasm, and it was hoped that *Villette* would repeat the triumph of *Jane Eyre*. The reviews did indeed contain high praise, but with an undercurrent of disquiet, and with considerable differences of opinion on the nature of the novel which was being praised. *The Examiner* of 5 February 1853¹ found a prevailing 'large spirit of humour and good feeling', with only occasional discords, whereas for Harriet Martineau, writing in *The Daily News* for 3 February, an 'atmosphere of pain [hung] about the whole', and there was 'not a touch of lightheartedness from end to end', humour only 'peeping' out in the proper names. *The Critic* admired a 'wholesome vein of sentiment', 'much quiet humour, a lively wit, brilliant dialogue'², yet *The Spectator*, while admitting that most of the characters were drawn with 'genial sympathy', found in the heroine almost 'a savage delight in refusing to be comforted', and a 'constant tormenting self-regard.'³ *The Guardian* of 23 February⁴ considered *all* Charlotte Brontë's novels too uniformly painful; nevertheless her characters, and M. Paul in particular, could be 'full of life and vigour', to be laughed at but loved and respected at the same time: 'We cannot help feeling he deserved a better fate than to become engaged to Lucy Snowe, and to be drowned at sea . . . before he could be married to her.'

¹ *The Examiner*, 5 Feb. 1853; review by Albany Fonblanque or John Forster.

² *The Critic*, 15 Feb. 1853, xii. 94-5.

³ *The Spectator*, 12 Feb. 1853, 155-6.

⁴ *The Guardian*, 23 Feb. 1853, 128-9.

A novel which could provoke such different reactions might seem at best enigmatic, at worst crucially flawed; but it is possible to see the comedy of *Villette* as an inseparable part of its ultimately sombre vision—and, partly for this reason, peculiarly congenial to the modern reader. It is precisely because the ‘morbid’ Lucy Snowe can appreciate the rich absurdity of human life that her encounters with Madame Beck and her school, with Ginevra Fanshawe, the Brettons, and above all with M. Paul Emanuel generate a pervasive comedy—highlighted in such chapters as ‘A Sneeze out of Season’ and ‘The Watchguard’. Because Lucy is also the narrator, and because her sense of the ridiculous is an integral part of her nature, the comedy is neither detachable nor incongruous; it is essential to the unity and to the cumulative power of the novel. For Lucy, at first observing the human comedy from what she considers a detached viewpoint, is repeatedly drawn into involvement with it—into an odd comradeship with her opposite, the ‘butterfly’ Ginevra, into the plot laid by Madame Beck to discover Lucy’s supposed affair with Dr John Bretton, into the comic friction caused by M. Paul’s suspicions on the same account, and finally into her deeply involving love for that ‘abrupt, whimsical’, absurd yet lovable little man himself.

The novel proceeds by a series of deprivations following these moves towards involvement. The more vital and expansive the comic interaction, the more wounding are the subsequent withdrawal and reaction. In Chapter 14, ‘The Fête’, for example, when Lucy, impelled by the whirlwind force of M. Paul, acts the part of a foppish lover and recklessly transforms the character, the comic mode is dominant. M. Paul fumes, abuses, scowls, harangues, demands—and is himself transformed from his ‘choleric and arbitrary’ self into a ‘vivacious, kind, and social’ being. Against such a background the contrary movement is felt with disturbing force. Within the chapter Lucy decides to

deny herself the 'keen relish' and delight in acting she has discovered, since it 'would not do for a mere looker-on at life', and after it she suffers the acute deprivation caused by her solitude in the 'Long Vacation'. It is a pattern that will be repeated, the oscillations between extremes becoming greater as the novel continues, so that by experience we become sensitive to the increasing emotional charge and realize what, in the final chapter, must inevitably follow Lucy's Eden-like happiness in M. Paul's acknowledged love.

W. S. Williams, the usually discerning reader for the publishing firm of Smith, Elder, oddly unaware of these swings of mood, was 'a little disheartened by the tranquillity' of the first and second volumes of *Villette*,⁵ yet Charlotte Brontë did not deny his 'strictures': 'I do not think the interest culminates anywhere to the degree you would wish', she wrote. 'What climax there is does not come on till near the conclusion; and even then I doubt whether the regular novel-reader will consider the "agony piled sufficiently high" (as the Americans say).'⁶ However, her later comment in the same letter in effect subverts the notion of tranquillity: 'Unless I am mistaken the emotion of the book will be found to be kept throughout in tolerable subjection.' Subjection implies the conquest of a rebellious faculty, and Charlotte, in asserting this control, is really admitting the strength of the emotions that had to be controlled. The truth is that *Villette* is *about* subjection, repression, confinement; and the feelings repressed, all the stronger for their repression, are the very stuff of the novel. Here, even more than in *Shirley*, Charlotte is aware of the inadequacy of language to convey feelings and the intricate affinities and disharmonies of human relationship; comments on its inadequacy occur at crises of feeling and attempted

⁵ C. Brontë to George Smith, 20 Nov. 1852; BPM MS SG 76. (See p. xxi for abbreviations used in this edition.)

⁶ C. Brontë to W. S. Williams, 6 Nov. 1852; *LL*, iii. 17-18.

repression. In 'The Casket', Lucy—solitary in the midst of numbers at the pensionnat—fears her feelings: 'in catalepsy and a dead trance, I studiously held the quick of my nature', and dreads the tempest which 'took hold of me with tyranny: I was roughly roused and obliged to live . . . too resistless was the delight of staying with the wild hour . . . pealing out such an ode as language never delivered to man' (and this is in Chapter 12, in the 'tranquil' first volume).⁷ The passage is followed by one of the most violent of Lucy's efforts to exert control. Her metaphors, a sign of her desperate need to 'express the inexpressible', deliberately shock by their excess—she drives 'a nail through' the temples of her longings, yet they are 'but transiently stunned, and at intervals would turn on the nail with a rebellious wrench'. The metaphor goes beyond the story of Jael and Sisera to which it alludes, yet draws on all the associations of that primitive heroic treachery and triumph.

At the opposite extreme, when Lucy is 'overpowered' by the proved reality of M. Paul's 'silent, strong, effective goodness' towards her, she again reminds us of the impossibility of communicating feeling in words: '“Monsieur, monsieur, you are *too* good!” In such inadequate language my feelings struggled for expression: they could not get it; speech, brittle and unmalleable, and cold as ice, dissolved or shivered in the effort.'⁸

Charlotte Brontë, of course, is eloquently expressing a failure to express on the part of the character she has created; or rather Lucy the mature narrator is made to interpret for us her own past experiences. The author is doubly distanced from the young Lucy—and perhaps only in this way could Charlotte both convey and seek to control emotions deriving from her own past, from her two years at the Heger pensionnat in Brussels, and their aftermath on

⁷ p. 134.

⁸ p. 607.

her return to Haworth in 1844–5. Lucy's stormy relationship with M. Paul reflects Charlotte's attraction to her teacher, M. Constantin Heger, as her distrust of the dissembling Madame Beck reflects her comparable attitude to Madame Heger. A novel embodying such elements might well be disturbing, in spite of its alleged subjection of feeling; and *Villette*, written some eight years after the return from Brussels, undoubtedly is disturbing. Matthew Arnold, notoriously, thought it contained nothing but 'hunger, rebellion and rage'. Yet *The Professor*, based on much of the same material and composed in the main only two years after the return, is almost totally lacking in such disquieting qualities. Its hero is confident, determined, and fortunate, surviving a brief period of 'Hypochondria' (Charlotte Brontë's term for nervous depression) to make a calmly satisfying marriage with the heroine. Both characters keep their selfhood intact, secure from uncongenial intrusion; self-analysis is limited, and neither is emotionally damaged by past experience. One would have expected *The Professor*, even with a wish-fulfilment conclusion, to be a more turbulent work than the later novel. It was very near in time to the tortured letters Charlotte wrote to M. Heger from Haworth: 'Je me suis efforcée à ne pas pleurer à ne pas me plaindre—Mais quand on ne se plaint pas et qu'on veut se dominer en tyran—les facultés se révoltent—et on paie le calme extérieure par une lutte intérieure presque insupportable. Jour et nuit je ne trouve ni repos ni paix';⁹ 'j'aime mieux subir les plus grandes douleurs physiques que d'avoir toujours le cœur, lacéré par des regrets cuisants.' ('I have forced myself not to cry or complain—But when one doesn't complain, and wants to impose tyrannical self-control—the faculties revolt—and one pays for external calm with an almost unbearable interior struggle. Day and night, I find neither rest nor peace'; 'I

⁹ C. Brontë to Constantin Heger, 8 Jan. 1845, BL Add. MS 38732 D.

would rather suffer the most intense physical torments than have my heart always lacerated by stinging regrets.') In November 1845, when she had probably already begun to write *The Professor*, Charlotte begged M. Heger to write to her again, for his silence was cruel: 'j'ai la fièvre—je perds l'appétit et le sommeil—je dépériss.'¹⁰ ('I have a fever—I lose appetite and sleep—I waste away.') Such language is faintly reflected in Frances Henri's letter to her 'master' in *The Professor*—'I am heart-broken to be quite separated from you'—but its imagery of unbearable conflict, laceration, sharp pain, fever, and death is characteristic not of *The Professor*, but of *Villette*. Yet the equally essential and abundant comedy of *Villette* is also lacking in *The Professor*, as are the sustained passages of heightened, almost surreal, imaginative power which mark the high points of the later novel.

The difference between the two cannot be simply 'explained' by Charlotte Brontë's personal experiences between 1846 and 1852, nor by the practical skills gained through the writing and publishing of two full-length novels; as she wrote in *Villette*, the 'Creative Impulse', was for her, as for Lucy, 'the most intractable, the most capricious, the most maddening of masters'.¹¹ But her life during the intervening years did profoundly affect the way she looked back on the Brussels experience, and added, too, new events and personalities which were to be interwoven with the earlier strands. Before Charlotte went to Brussels, her life had sometimes been lonely and frustrated, especially during her periods of governess-ship, but there had always been a background of family intimacy and a shared world of the imagination. Even during her second year in Brussels, she could confide in a letter to Branwell that when she was 'in the great Dormitory alone', she always recurred 'as fanatically as ever to the old ideas the old faces & the old

¹⁰ C. Brontë to Constantin Heger, 18 Nov. 1845; BL Add. MS 38732 C.

¹¹ p. 447.

scenes in the world below';¹² that is, to the world of Byronic heroes and heroines in the imaginary land of Angria that she and her brother had created. Brussels meant, on the one hand, a widening of horizons in culture and literature, on the other, much solitude and an increasing concentration of feeling upon M. Heger. Haworth on her return seemed heavy and lifeless, as if 'we were all buried here'; her father was almost blind, she herself feared loss of sight, and her plans for a school at the Parsonage came to nothing—partly owing to the presence there after July 1845 of the disgraced Branwell. His degradation and his infatuation with the wife of his former employer inspired in Charlotte an indignant repulsion, while at the same time she resented her own inability to master her obsessive longing for a response from M. Heger. Nevertheless, if she felt 'buried', there was still a hope of resurrection; the image of burial had not yet acquired the associations which were to make it such a potent metaphor in *Villette*. Her most urgent desire in 1844–5 was for achievement, for an assertion of strength of will which would compensate for her narrow life and provide a moral antidote to the idea that she was a slave to her longing for her 'master'. *The Professor*, completed and fair-copied by 27 June 1846, reflects her revulsion from her slavery, which she counteracts by the creative mastery of writing; and it provides vicarious satisfaction by a portrayal of fulfilment.

Between the writing of *The Professor* and *Villette*, Charlotte achieved fame as an author. Outwardly, 'Currer Bell's' life became fuller and richer, for she read more books, enjoyed discussing them in her letters, visited London, Scotland, and the Lake District, gained the friendship of her publisher George Smith and his mother, met and talked with Thackeray and other famous writers, and stayed with Mrs Gaskell and Harriet Martineau; but for the woman

¹² C. Brontë to Branwell Brontë, 1 May 1843; BL MS Ashley 161.

Charlotte Brontë there was much lonely sadness. Branwell, Emily, and Anne Brontë died within nine months in 1848–9; Charlotte could share her inner life fully with no one, and the contrast between the happy fulfilment of other lives and the frustration of her own oppressed her. Her visits to friends provided only a temporary alleviation, and an unnamed fear—presumably that she would succumb to the same disease as her sisters,—was like a ‘canker’. Her state of mind and the imagery used to describe it in the letters of 1850–2, when she was planning and writing *Villette*, recur in the novel. There, Lucy Snowe, outwardly cool and controlled, inwardly fights against Fate, her ‘permanent foe, never to be conciliated’; Lucy’s creator, on 7 August 1850, writes to her friend Ellen Nussey that subjugation to her fear is a ‘cruel and terrible fate’; to keep her nervous system in ‘rational strength and coolness’ she has to forbid her friends and her father to mention fears ‘for the realization or defeat of which’ she has no possible power to be responsible.¹³ This feeling of helplessness against destiny, ‘the fate indeed of him whose life was passed under a sword suspended by a horse-hair’, is not present in *The Professor* or *Jane Eyre*, and is evaded by an unconvincing piece of melodrama in *Shirley*; but it is, paradoxically, the source of *Villette*’s power, for there it is the real fear, relentlessly faced and analysed, which haunts Lucy.

Not surprisingly, the editing of her sisters’ novels and poems towards the end of 1850 increased Charlotte’s depression. The consequent pain and ‘haunting’ she describes in her letters again anticipate the crises of *Villette*; on 23 October 1850 she writes that she is angry and surprised that she does not grow ‘accustomed or at least resigned to the solitude and isolation of my lot . . . The reading over of papers . . . brought back the pang of bereavement . . . for one or two nights I scarcely knew how

¹³ C. Brontë to Ellen Nussey, 7 Aug. 1850; *LL*, iii, 133.

to get on till morning—and when morning came I was still haunted with a sense of sickening distress.’¹⁴ In *The Professor*, the solitary hero is rather exhilarated than depressed by the challenge of making his own way; in *Villette*, the worst horror of Lucy’s solitude in ‘The Long Vacation’ is her dream of ‘loss upon loss’: ‘Methought the well-loved dead, who had loved *me* well in life, met me elsewhere, alienated.’¹⁵

Apart from its association with her sister, the story and the mood of *Wuthering Heights* deeply impressed Charlotte, for in re-reading and editing it, she had to concentrate on every word. She wrote to W. S. Williams that its power filled her with renewed admiration; ‘but yet I am oppressed . . . every beam of sunshine is poured down through black bars of threatening cloud.’¹⁶ The intimation in *Wuthering Heights* of a force of feeling which threatens sanity, the idea of haunting, the sustained poetic intensity, must have impressed the imaginative artist in Charlotte; but in addition the elder Catherine’s divided allegiance to two contrasting lovers (of no special relevance to Charlotte on her first reading of the novel in 1846–7) must now have had an emotional interest; for her second strong attraction, that to George Smith, had developed in the intervening years. Dr John Bretton in *Villette* is confessedly modelled on Smith, and Charlotte was to show her heroine drawn both to the civilized, kindly, worldly Bretton and the ‘savage’, passionate M. Paul. The result was a more complex novel in every way than the thin narrative line of *The Professor*, though it must be admitted that *Villette* lacks the seamless structural perfection of *Wuthering Heights*. Smith himself criticized the ‘want of perfect harmony’ between Bretton’s ‘boyhood and manhood; the angular abruptness of his change of sentiment towards Miss Fanshawe’, and Charlotte

¹⁴ C. Brontë to Ellen Nussey, 23 Oct. 1850; *LL*, iii. 173.

¹⁵ p. 197.

¹⁶ C. Brontë to W. S. Williams, 27 Sept. 1850; *LL*, iii. 165 (as 29th).

agreed that he had 'hit two points at least' where she was conscious of defect.¹⁷ Another major difference from *Wuthering Heights* is evident in Charlotte's insistence that her reader should be 'permitted a taste of unalloyed pleasure' in sunshine unthreatened by 'black bars of . . . cloud'. She uses the images of sun and cloud throughout the novel, so that the titles of Chapters 37 and 38 simply bring into focus a constant balancing of light and dark, warmth and cold, peace and storm. Bretton, his mother, and Paulina de Bassompierre are creatures of sunshine, Lucy and M. Paul belong to the storm, and the two natures are ultimately incompatible; but Lucy as narrator steps outside the bounds of the immediate story to underline the reality of happiness for some: 'Some real lives do . . . actually anticipate the happiness of Heaven . . . I *do* believe there are some human beings so born, so reared . . . [that] no tempestuous blackness overcasts their journey.'¹⁸

Within these symbolic general patterns, however, there is considerable subtlety in characterization. Only the worst of the pupils in Madame Beck's school, and perhaps the malevolent, dwarfish Madame Walravens, are painted in unrelieved black, and in complete contrast to the heroine. In almost all the other characters Lucy Snowe can see facets of her own nature: in the child Polly, 'trembling like a leaf . . . but exercising self-command'; in Miss Marchmont, who gave Lucy 'the power of her passions, to admire, the truth of her feelings to trust'; and most subtly in Madame Beck, who is Lucy's most formidable enemy, and yet has qualities of feeling and self-control which Lucy understands and applauds. As she analyses her reactions to others, Lucy seeks to understand herself, and realizes how that self is reflected from and modified by her contacts. The inner drama of this analysis is tragi-comic. Bretton finds Lucy 'inoffensive as a shadow', handicapped by 'over-gravity in

¹⁷ C. Brontë to George Smith, 3 Nov. 1852; BPM MS SG 75.

¹⁸ p. 546.

tastes and manner—want of colour in character and costume', whereas M. Paul charges her with 'being too airy and cheery—too volatile and versatile—too flowery and coloury'.¹⁹ From such differences arises the comedy of the absurd, as in 'The Watchguard', with M. Paul's eloquent abuse entertainingly conveyed ('yet, how I behaved to him! With what pungent vivacities—what an impetus of mutiny—what a "fougue" of injustice!') But after the comedy follows Lucy's 'communion with her own mind', in which, stirred by the preceding outward drama to recognition of its real meaning for her, she reflects, and feels, and analyses.

This drama within the mind, as in Charlotte Brontë's other novels, often derives from the tense conflict of opposing forces of reason and feeling, mundane common sense and heightened imagination, which threaten to fragment the self; and the tensions are conveyed in images of nourishment and starvation, garden and desert, growth and enclosure, fire and ice, and other intricately related metaphors. Real and imaginary food and drink, and the lack of them, figure almost obsessively; but they are tellingly used, with humour as well as bitterness. They serve, for example, to contrast Lucy's relationships with Dr Bretton and with M. Paul. John Bretton's letters are for Lucy a 'crust from the Barmecide's loaf. It did not nourish me: I pined on it, and got as thin as a shadow', whereas M. Paul's letters were 'real food that nourished, living water that refreshed'.

In 'Fire and Eyre: Charlotte Brontë's War of Earthly Elements', David Lodge pointed out that Jane Eyre found 'the meaning of life' in preserving a 'precarious equilibrium between opposing forces', especially those of cold and heat: extremes of both are death to her.²⁰ The war continues—an internecine conflict—in *Villette*. It had been foreshadowed even in *The Professor*, where the hero combined an outward

¹⁹ pp. 394 and 420.

²⁰ David Lodge, *Language of Fiction* (1966, rpt. 1979) 143.

cool rationality with an inner warmth of feeling and imagination. In Lucy Snowe the extremes are greater; her name (first Snowe, then Frost, then Snowe again because Charlotte felt, obscurely, that she must have a name to suit her *external* coldness) hints at her careful cool reserve, concealing rather than revealing her real personality; but both cold imagery and often the literal cold of the weather are used to show that coldness is alien to her; it is rarely refreshing, and it can be icily penetrating or paralyzing, 'blanched' or deadly. The white beds of the deserted, silent dormitory become spectres with 'death's heads, huge and snow-bleached', Reason 'frostily' touches Lucy's ear with 'chill blue lips', disciplining her longing for an 'expansion' of feeling towards Dr John. Reason's message is that Lucy should lock herself up and remain dormouse-like in the snow-bound 'hole of life's wall', to be called either to kindly resurrection or to have the frost get into her heart and 'never thaw more'. The cold in *Villette* is an active force: Lucy realizes that she is excluded from Dr John's love as she sits with the favoured Paulina looking at the 'austere fury of the winter-day . . . That passion of January so white and so bloodless'. Lucy tries to bury her grief along with his letters, but his continuing failure to understand her weighs upon her with the 'coldness and the pressure of lead'.

Yet throughout the novel there is a building up of the opposing power of fiery heat. Fire in *Villette* can be threatening and dangerous; we are aware especially of fiery energy seeking release from control. A key image in the early chapters is the volcano—the 'subtle, searching cry' of the wind before Miss Marchmont's death is associated with 'disturbed volcanic action in distant parts of the world', and Lucy is compelled, 'goaded, driven, forced, stung to energy'. In 'The Long Vacation', Lucy's 'strange fever of the nerves and blood' forces her to find release in confession. In association with M. Paul, however, fire can take on his beneficent force, can enliven, and so reveal to

Lucy unexpected facets of her own character. That 'able, but fiery and grasping little man', who can 'fume like a bottled storm', from the beginning of his acquaintance with Lucy sees the corresponding fire and urgency in her: 'I . . . saw a passionate ardour for triumph in your physiognomy. What fire shot into the glance! Not mere light, but flame; je me tins pour averti.'²¹ At first—and indeed in many of the key scenes through the greater part of the novel—he seeks to control and repress Lucy, so that theoretically he is in alliance with her own cool reason: 'One ought to be "dur" with you. You are one of those beings who must be *kept down*.'²² Yet it is he who constantly kindles Lucy's hidden fire, rousing her to a release of emotion by stirring her to protest, and so provoking her into insight into the 'drawn battles' between impatience and justice within his own nature: '[M. Paul's] passions were strong, his aversions and attachments alike vivid; the force he exerted in holding both in check, by no means mitigated an observer's sense of their vehemence.'²³ So Lucy comes to realize and Paul to declare the affinity between them in the chapter called 'Fraternity.'²⁴ When Lucy's restraint also is violently broken by her fear of separation from him, and not until then, there can be resolution. It is conveyed in a sentence in which the prose-rhythm combines with the imagery to show the victory of flame in Lucy shattering, in a sudden irruption of energy, the paralysis of ice: at first the name of her supposed rival, Justine Marie Sauveur, 'freezes' her, but then: 'The name . . . stirred me up, running with haste and heat through my veins . . . a fermenting excitement, an impetuous throe, a disdainful resolve, an ire, a resistance of which no human eye or cheek could hide the flame, nor any truth-accustomed tongue curb the cry.'²⁵ Lucy's inability to express herself vanishes, and as Paul responds to the love

²¹ pp. 191–2.

²² p. 191.

²³ p. 254.

²⁴ p. 510.

²⁵ p. 611.

she reveals in her 'warm, jealous, and haughty' mutiny, we seem to be moving, as in *Jane Eyre*, to quiet equilibrium. Instead, there is the tragic reversal. The final fire and violence in this novel are those of the storm: the heavens are one flame—but afterwards there is the ultimate negation of flame, when the sun's 'light was night to some!' If Charlotte Brontë leaves 'sunny imaginations hope', she does so in the deliberately unreal terms of hypothesis—'Let it be theirs . . . Let them picture—', and with a final laconic admission that the forces of evil prosper.