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Villette

CHARLOTTE BRONTË



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

VILLETTE

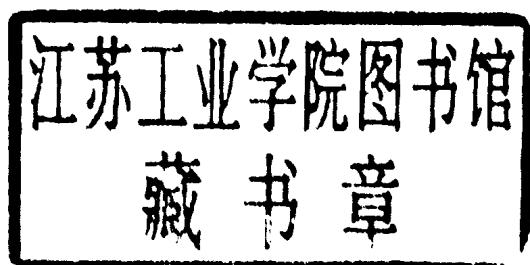


Charlotte Brontë

Introduction and Notes by

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write broad-ranging, jargon-free Introductions and to provide Notes that would assist the understanding of our readers, rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

KEITH CARABINE
General Advisor

INTRODUCTION

Villette is really two novels. One is encountered on first reading: a novel of false starts and ambiguous endings, of double names and double identities, setting the bourgeois English Protestant world typified by the Bretton (Briton) household against a different, Catholic bourgeoisie, that of Brussels/Villette, which holds the promise of change, thrill, love almost by virtue of its foreignness. This *Villette* offers Gothic excitements and Dickensian coincidences alongside its realism and caution of tone – a novel of some romance to offset its undoubted pain. If the reader wishes to experience this first *Villette* with innocence unalloyed, s/he should go straight to the first page of the novel, and save this Introduction for the end. Then s/he could go on to the second reading of the novel, the second *Villette*, a different novel entirely. For now, we *know* that the self-effacing narrator of the early chapters, whose name is not revealed

until the start of Chapter II, and whose antecedents we never discover, is in fact the heroine of her own story; we know that Bretton and its charms – not least of them John Graham Bretton – will reappear in a foreign land and lure Lucy with their promise of happiness; we know that happiness will be hers, but not the sunny golden variety found by Dr John and Polly; and we know, perhaps most importantly for our understanding of what kind of novel this is, that the nun is no supernatural being, no Gothic horror, indeed no hallucination born of Lucy's mental strain, but a mere disguise for a silly fop and a sillier love affair. We start this second reading knowing that our narrator withholds, deceives, distorts, teases; she is not translucent, as her name suggests, but opaque. Indeed, even as she reveals so much of herself to us, much still remains hidden and in doubt, especially in the novel's final page; in certain ways Lucy remains as opaque as her story's ending.

The dual personality of the novel is what principally distinguishes it from its nineteenth-century counterparts, and it produces effects of peculiar resonance in the late twentieth century; the fictional world of the Nun, the Banshee and the shipwreck collides with elements subversive of any fictional world whatsoever – unreliable narrator, self-reflexive narrative, participant reader, lack of closure – and from the collision rises a cry of anguish such as might issue from Munch's silent image.¹ For this is a novel deeply marked by suffering. Harriet Martineau indeed felt it to be 'almost intolerably painful'² in a judgement echoing that of Samuel Johnson on Cordelia's death in *King Lear*. The comparison with *Lear*, disproportionate as it may seem, can stand, because through this largely realist fiction the tragic weight of lone suffering is brought into the heart of an ordinary, bright, social world, where we can recognise it in all its banal horror. No Goneril and Regan here, only prying Madame Beck and Jesuitical Père Silas, to both of whom Lucy extends a narrative sympathy in which the reader is inevitably involved; yet both do their best to prolong Lucy's pain and deny her personal contentment. No blind chance or blasted heath, but the glossy indifference of those who are happy to those who are unhappy. Dr John's wanton boy carelessly raises Lucy's hopes and calls up her love, then as carelessly abandons her to tame and

1 Edward Munch's 'The Scream' (also variously translated as 'The Cry' and 'The Shriek'), though produced in 1885, seems prescient of certain twentieth-century horrors, personal and public.

2 Review, *Daily News*, 3 February 1853, reprinted in McNees (1996), Vol. 3, p. 589

constrain her own passions as she can, passions he doesn't even understand. He stays happily oblivious of the pain he has wrought, goes on to a contented, successful, fulfilled life, basking in his wife's doll-like devotion as he once bathed in his mother's indulgent adoration; and Lucy forgives him, perhaps even continues to love him, open-eyed. In recounting the 'blessed' (p. 408) future life of Dr John and Polly, she gently reminds the – perhaps less forgiving – reader of her creed: 'I *do* believe there are some human beings so born, so reared, so guided from a soft cradle to a calm and late grave, that no excessive suffering penetrates their lot and no tempestuous blackness overcasts their journey' (p. 408). And not only these 'natures elect, harmonious and benign' (p. 408) meet this happy fate, but also the less benevolent and downright malign, as we learn from the penultimate line of the novel: 'Madame Beck prospered all the days of her life; so did Père Silas; Madame Walravens fulfilled her ninetieth year before she died' (p. 463). Well, that's life, Brontë seems to intimate here, and we remember Lucy's picture of Human Justice (her nicely ironic public-examination topic), 'a red, random beldame' who beats the 'weak, wronged and sickly' with her poker, and treats the 'strong, lively and violent' to a token menace followed by a 'liberal shower of sugar-plums' (p. 377). The irony here, which would be comic if it were not so savage, promotes an imaginative relish, the language spilling over in what by this stage we recognise as a characteristic tripartite structure. This is a picture that the late-twentieth-century reader well recognises, but it was a markedly unconventional one to paint in 1853, not least for the linguistic vigour with which the picture is painted.

Central to the tragic aspect of the novel is the final chapter (xv) of Volume One (in the original triple-decker publication), 'The Long Vacation'. The writing here, again, sets *Villette* apart from the fiction of its time, even from Brontë's own ground-breaking *Jane Eyre*. (Perhaps the difference was too much for her readership; though critically acclaimed, *Villette* did not achieve the spectacular popular success of *Jane Eyre*, which ran to three editions within six months.) Personal and individual as the pain is, bourgeois and social as the setting is, none the less in this chapter Lucy might as well be out on the heath in the storm with madness threatening. Indeed there is a storm, as often in this novel, which both echoes and aggravates her despair. But the writing does not depend on externals for its power. Lucy's distress is internal, mental, spiritual; at times her mental vertigo verges on the ontological, questioning

the very nature of the self in relation to existence. In consequence her universe can feel Godless, for, though she prays 'to Heaven for consolation and support', none comes, except the conviction that she must be among those for whom God ordains that they must 'deeply suffer while they live' (p. 144). Even as Lucy professes not to 'arraign the mercy or justice of God for this' (p. 144), her painful isolation argues against her, so that while she may accept, the reader, especially today's reader, may not. Robert Martin contends that in *Villette*, with its deep affiliation to Protestantism (amounting to a possibly offensive anti-Catholicism), and its extensive Christian reference and wider metaphor, 'there is a resurgence of Christian faith', a faith notably questioned in her previous novels.³ But the spiritual void so brilliantly evoked in 'The Long Vacation' speaks of a universe, blind and in chaos, in which nature itself is estranging and estranged – 'I too felt those autumn suns and saw those harvest moons, and I almost wished to be covered in with earth and turf . . . for I could not live on their light, nor make them comrades, nor yield them affection.' (p. 145) – in which the thought of other human beings and their comfort mocks rather than sustains, and in which God exists only by virtue of the suffering he inflicts. It is not surprising that Lucy, alienated thus from all that gives her world meaning, comes close to alienation from herself. Her 'peculiarly agonising depression' (p. 145) turns to night terror when, in the midst of sleeplessness, she has a dream which seems scarcely that: 'a nameless experience that had the hue, the mien, the terror, the very tone of a visitation from eternity' (p. 146). In this fearful state she has no hope for the future and engages with the prospect of death itself as a less dreadful alternative. Here again is the hallmark triplicate phrasing found where Brontë is particularly concerned to be exact to the full complexity and depth of an experience; while the reader can find her adjectival accretions relentless, here they are in perfect keeping with the remorseless nature of the agony she describes. This chapter is the most heavily revised of Volume One in manuscript, and Brontë continued to refine it at proof stage. A sustained, almost pitiless, account of a passage of despair, it has no equal in its own century, and few in our own – to which it speaks so fully.

But, in the way of nineteenth-century novels, Volume Two succeeds Volume One, and hope springs freshly from despair. We have already had two new beginnings within the space of Volume

3 Martin (1966), p. 147

One, first with Miss Marchmont and second with the move to Villette, but in the three-part publishing structure of the nineteenth-century novel, a new volume provides a particularly significant new beginning. So in Chapter xvi negation gives way to affirmation as Lucy, willy-nilly, engages with existence again. Brontë distances herself from this engagement in a strikingly modern way: 'the faculties soon settled each in its place; the life-machine presently resumed its wonted and regular working' (p. 153). Lucy will not, she could not, plumb such horrors again; they have proved survivable. But they remain deep in the reader's imagination, and of course in her own, even as the friendly sunshine of Dr John's disposition plays on its surface awhile, and aids her recovery. For recover she does, and this is as central to the power of the novel as was her collapse. If despair is the watchword of Volume One, benevolence is that of Volume Two, the central structural plank of the novel. And Lucy's return to health, to life, to her at-oneness with herself, is remarkably expressed in fictional terms through her almost literal return to the comfort and security briefly known in the past. Waking in a strange room, she finds it none the less strangely familiar; the domesticity of her recognitions (a blue armchair, a table, two footstools) is completely in keeping with the solidity, the very ordinariness, which is to be the key to her comfort and her restoration. If there is bathos here, it is deliberate, and deeply true. For all it needs, it seems, to save Lucy from the chill waters of despair is what as human beings we all hope for, indeed expect: the society of some others who love us and whom we love, the comfort and security of a home, the belief that these will still be there even when we are absent from them. These are symbolised on Lucy's reawakening by the transplantation of her early Bretton home, where her visits, we recall, 'resembled the sojourn of Christian and Hopeful beside a certain pleasant stream' (p. 2), into the foreign climate of Villette. The innocent past *can* return and Lucy can take up residence in it, can feel the reviving warmth of bourgeois comforts which, for her, are as spiritual as they are material. And this home is peopled: 'When I had said my prayers, and when I was undressed and laid down, I felt that I still had friends' (p. 165). However much she may temper this sense of security with poignant reminders not to be importunate – 'Do not let me think of them too often, too much, too fondly' (p. 165), which recalls her earlier prophetic advice to the child Polly about Graham: '... don't fret, and don't expect too much of him, or else he will feel you to be troublesome, and then it is all over' (p. 27) – moderation is not her *forte*, while it is the very essence of the Bretton

household. In one of the multiple ironies of the novel, the domestic beneficence which brings Lucy back to life is too mild and too bland ever truly to suit her, though it contains what she most desires. But once she desires, she desires excessively; the image of stoicism and moderation she may be, but it is a forced moderation, bred out of passion. All this she knows about herself (as, on our second reading, do we), and so even as she begs herself not to want too much, she knows both that she will, and that she will suffer for it.

At such points the knowledge acquired from a first reading informs our understanding of the novel, and leads us to a harsher judgement on those surrounding Lucy than she permits herself. Perhaps too we look at Lucy a little harder; some readers find her too self-pitying, her martyrdom a sort of inverted arrogance. In this way Brontë also keeps a certain ironic distance from her narrator and inserts her own judgements, though she always leaves room to extend, adapt or overturn a position. Indeed the novel is about the process of judging, and as first readers we have had an early warning against misjudgement when we initially assume that the central character will be Polly/Paulina. We take as little notice of the nameless narrator in the first chapter as those around her, and Polly is our focus. Only gradually is it borne in upon us that Lucy is to carry the story forward, and that Polly is (as we think) to disappear from it. As we were wrong about Lucy's effacement, so we will be wrong about Polly's disappearance, and gradually we learn to tread more warily and make fewer summary judgements. Thus the flibbertigibbet Ginevra unexpectedly wins our respect because she seems truly to care for Lucy, and perhaps more so because Lucy truly cares for her, albeit in curmudgeonly fashion. Paulina never quite grows up, petrified into childishness by the early parting from her father; but Lucy likes her, and shows us why we might like her too (p. 347). Mrs. Bretton seems the model of equanimity, incapable of disturbance, yet she betrays in her letter to Lucy a frank admiration for the charms of her son that is almost erotic (p. 254); the point here is not so much that she feels it but that she avows it, and to someone she knows will share it. Her letter is full of the acknowledged desire of a lover to talk about the one loved – foreshadowing the more acceptable desire of Paulina to talk of Dr John to Lucy (pp. 397–8). Lucy is, however, a more reluctant recipient of Paulina's 'confidences which left her lips, sweet honey, and sometimes dropped in my ear – molten lead.' (p. 398). Indeed she registers protest to both Paulina and Dr John as they seek her complicity in their mutual admiration, but it is only to the reader

that she confesses the extent of her pain, and she maintains a constant fairness to her tormentors, recognising that both are in their way more innocent than she is. In these insights and extensions of understanding, and not only from Lucy's viewpoint, Brontë constantly surprises the reader into empathy. In this way she imperceptibly leads us to a readerly generosity, a refusal of prediction, which persists to the last page, where even the fate of M. Paul, and so of Lucy too, is left up to whether we have 'sunny imaginations' (p. 462) or no.

Finally, however, we do stand back from the novel as Lucy cannot, and here surely Brontë guides our view. Dr John perhaps comes in for the sternest scrutiny, and adjectives which elsewhere might be laudatory begin to carry a deprecatory tarnish. 'Golden', 'sunny', 'supple', 'cheerful', 'bland', 'benignant', 'blithe', 'blessed', 'suave' come to bespeak surface rather than depth, and in the end John Graham Bretton is seen to be shallow. One of the earliest epithets Brontë uses of him, 'faithless-looking' (p. 11), comes back to haunt him. She has Lucy retract its implication as soon as she has used it, emphasising that the perfidy is a matter of appearance rather than actuality. But Dr John does prove faithless to Lucy, and there is even at times a certain venom in the appraising eye the author casts on him. 'Cool young Briton!' (p. 242) realises Lucy at Vashti's turbulent theatrical performance, a remark which marks the start of her withdrawal from him, moments before the fatal event which will instigate his much fuller withdrawal from her – the fire, and the consequent remeeting with Paulina. But while that night marks 'a deep-red cross' (p. 243) on Lucy's book of life, the fire turns out to be no more than a brief flare: 'Next morning's papers explained that it was but some loose drapery on which a spark had fallen, and which had blazed up and been quenched in a moment' (p. 247). This dry chapter-ending is characteristic: an ordinary event, presented in full realist fashion, is invested with multiple significance; and while Brontë's metaphors can jar the modern reader, and occasionally obscure more than they reveal, at their best they carry their full symbolic freight without sacrificing anything of their realism. Bathos is again Brontë's technique in this example, evident in that mundane reference to newspapers. But the metaphorical work has already been done, in the inflamed and inflammatory language of the chapter. Lucy, Snowe in name only, burns in response to Vashti, while Dr John stays 'cool'; Vashti's emotional heat virtually sets the theatre alight whereupon John shows 'cordial calm' (p. 243). Similarly Lucy sits firm in the fire

while Paulina is knocked down, almost crushed; her childlike weakness can allow John his strength. For him Lucy would have proved too strong, too hot; a small fire, soon put out, is Dr John's portion. It is, in its quiet, laconic way, a cruel judgement.

Is the cruelty and bitterness to be found in *Villette* Charlotte Brontë's own rather than that of her created narrator, Lucy? Certainly it is difficult in places to separate their positions, and the relationship between fiction and reality, never straightforward, is particularly vexed in the case of *Villette*. There is no doubt that the formative events of Brontë's life in the Pensionnat Heger in Brussels in 1842-3 (ten years prior to the writing of the novel) are the imaginative basis for *Villette*. Many episodes from that period are given exact fictional counterparts, most notably M. Heger's intellectual flirtation with his pupil, down to the evocative detail of his smoking his cigar into her desk, mimicked in the portrait of M. Paul; and Charlotte's dark night of the soul in her own long vacation, and her subsequent confession in a Catholic church. The Lucy/Paul relationship, being both successful and non-adulterous, is of course markedly different from Charlotte's with M. Heger – though both, probably, were unconsummated. The pain of her eventual rejection by Heger goes rather into the fictional relationship between Lucy and Dr John, most obviously in the treasured letters he sends her and their symbolic burial. For while George Smith, Brontë's publisher, was in part the model for Dr John, the affectionate and relaxed letters they exchanged have none of the air of desperation we find in Brontë's to Heger. These leave no doubt of the strength of her feeling for him, and strongly suggest that at some stage he encouraged that feeling. None of his letters to her survive but Rebecca Fraser in her biography of Brontë intriguingly provides two pieces of evidence of Heger's flirtatious tendencies with his pupils. One is a letter from Mme Heger to a former pupil reminiscing familiarly about his once having kissed this pupil and made an illicit declaration of feeling to her; Madame's tone is utterly secure and indeed indulgent. The second is a letter from M. Heger to another English pupil written in his eighties, well after Charlotte's death.⁴ If his letters to Charlotte had the same playful, semi-erotic edge, they must have been hard to resist. But his continuing to flirt with others, even by letter, after wounding Charlotte as he knew he had, looks like selfish irresponsibility. 'Faithless' comes to mind. Reading Brontë's repeated and

4 Fraser (1988), pp. 189-90

unanswered letters pleading for just 'crumbs' of comfort from her 'master'⁵ is more painful than any fiction – particularly when we learn that Heger used the margin of one of these sad missives to note down the address of his shoemaker. Feet of clay indeed. Mme Heger, by contrast, cared enough to retrieve the torn-up pieces and sew them together; only her jealous watchfulness preserved the evidence of Charlotte's consuming love.

Our intimate knowledge of Brontë here has, however, served her badly; many critics, including recent feminist ones, have seen *Villette* at least in part as the fictional fulfilment of the author's own desires.⁶ Brontë had been rightly furious with Thackeray when he had introduced her as 'Jane Eyre' to his mother at a public lecture, and he it was again who first elided Lucy Snowe with her author: 'The poor little woman of genius! I can read a great deal of her life as I fancy in her book, and see that rather than have fame . . . she wants some Tomkins or another to love . . .'⁷ Such crude readings of *Villette* as autobiographical, even where they are given a psycho-analytic gloss, are reductive both of the life and of the art. Whatever her personal investment in the novel, Brontë's larger aim was to speak, not of her particular life, but of life in general, perhaps of aspects of life which she was peculiarly fitted through her experiences to understand, aspects not commonly dealt with in the fiction of her day. She defends her particular brand of realism against the rather more conventional expectations of her publisher, George Smith, and his colleague, William Smith Williams, both of whom voiced some criticisms of *Villette* as they received it volume by volume. Brontë seems always to have been tart about criticism, but in this case her defence rises above the personal. To Williams' objections that the first two volumes lacked excitement, she concurs that 'the regular novel-reader' (a haughty phrase which includes him) will not find 'the colours dashed on to the canvas with the proper amount of daring' but avers that they must take what they get: ' . . . my palette affords no brighter tints; were I to attempt to deepen the reds, or burnish the yellows, I should but botch'. To Smith's objections of inconsistency in the development of Dr John,

5 Wise and Symington (1980), Vol. 2, p. 23. The history of Brontë's relationship with M. Heger, and her surviving letters, can be found in Volumes One and Two of the *Letters*.

6 Moglen argues this position most thoroughly, and Gilbert and Gubar, Gordon, Jacobus and Keefe all commit themselves to it at some stage.

7 Letter to Lucy Baxter, 11 March 1853, reprinted in Orel (1997), p. 106

and in the change of tack in Volume Three, with the focus on M. Paul, she rebukes: 'The spirit of romance would have indicated another course, far more flowery and inviting . . . but this would have been unlike life, inconsistent with truth – at variance with probability.'⁸ Both men are firmly smacked down, and we feel here Brontë's real authority as an artist. *Villette* undoubtedly draws on personal love and pain, but (unlike the rather leaden *The Professor*, written in 1846 in the immediate aftermath of the Brussels events) it transforms these into the imaginative representation of so much more: what it is to be; what it is to desire not to be; what the self is, and how its relation to other selves moderates and qualifies it; how chance externals, of appearance and economics, affect what we are. Thackeray's self-satisfied reduction of all this to a desire for 'some Tomkins', like later readings of the novel in terms of its author's neuroses, misses the greatness of *Villette*.

In the last three chapters of Volume Two these searching questions about existence are once more brought to the fore. Paulina artlessly, but also thoughtlessly and callously, expresses surprise at Lucy's occupation as schoolteacher; indeed she is surprised that she needs an occupation at all. Her 'Well, I never knew what you were, nor ever thought of asking: for me you were always Lucy Snowe' (p. 266) betrays a supreme incomprehension of the way in which identity can be shaped by accidents of birth. At the same time Paulina's indifference to materialist dimensions of identity answers to that proud sense of self for which Lucy has struggled through all the pain of the long vacation, a selfhood which may have emerged from the specifics of her social and economic isolation but which seems to her, and indeed to the reader, to go deeper than economics, history or culture. Paulina, and even her apparently wiser father, try to co-opt Lucy, offering her three times her current salary to be Paulina's companion and teacher. But Lucy knows, what Paulina in her attempt to help Lucy doesn't, that, thus paid, she would not remain 'always Lucy Snowe'; her identity depends precisely on her independence from those with whom she might have personal relationships, on the very poverty for which she is pitied. Ginevra, for all her shallowness, never makes the Bassompierres' mistake; she knows full well that any relationship she has with Lucy depends on Lucy's indulgence of her rather than vice versa, and she is intrigued by Lucy's impenetrability and unknowableness. In Chapter xxvii, the final

8 Wise and Symington (1980), Vol. 4, p. 17 and pp. 22–3 respectively

chapter of Volume Two, she asks, more directly than even Lucy herself, ‘“Who *are* you, Miss Snowe?”’ (p. 287), goes on to ponder whether “‘ . . . you really are the nobody I once thought you’ ” (p. 288) and finally moves to the ostensibly metaphysical, “‘But *are* you anybody?’ ” (p. 289). And though in one way her questions are, like Ginevra herself, stolidly physical (since they pertain to class and position, and so finally, in the resolutely bourgeois society of the novel, to money), they also reflect a curiosity about how Lucy can exist on the very margins of society, where she is, paradoxically, also a threat to it. Soon that question can turn into something more abstract, and more pressing, as Ginevra’s italics suggest. The fear of invisibility which pervades the creation of Lucy, most acutely described when Lucy encounters ‘a stilly pause, a wordless silence, a long blank of oblivion . . . seven weeks as bare as seven sheets of blank paper’ (pp. 245), is a fear of non-existence itself, when existence seems to depend on the recognition of others. Lucy combats this by deliberately making herself *less* visible, and creating herself almost entirely within. Only we, as readers, are privy to that creation, and know its instability and frailty, but also its profound strength. When, in Chapter xxvi, Lucy faces her apparent demon, the nun, and demands, ‘Who are you? and why do you come to me?’ (p. 277), she shows that strength. Alone, unaided, her love buried and a cold moon shining, she faces down her visitant, just as she looks hard at her own reality. The time has come for her to move forward.

The final volume of *Villette* brings the happiness that Dr John advised her to cultivate. Certainly, as she trenchantly says, ‘happiness is not a potato’ (p. 233); but the good doctor is not so wrong. Lucy has cultivated herself, and M. Paul sees what she really is – not a ‘nobody’, not a ‘somebody’, but an independent self. His best gift to her is not his love, but his absence; she can have him, through the now-familiar device of his letters, but also have herself. Lucy’s joyful three years in her own house – rooms of her own, both occupation and home, that home always missing before – may scarcely seem like having her cake and eating it. But *Villette* never gives us what we expect. Quite its most brilliant surprises are left to the last few pages, first with the revelation of the nun’s identity, and then with the double ending. When Lucy shakes apart the ‘nun’ on her bed, Brontë dismantles for good the Gothic framework she had depended on in *Jane Eyre*: ‘I tore her up – the incubus! I held her on high – the goblin! I shook her loose – the mystery!’ (p. 439). Again we feel Brontë’s linguistic pleasure in this act of destruction, the

dramatic syntax and punctuation ironically echoing the very inflation she is stylistically puncturing. (This comic deflation is something the novel excels in, witness Lucy's forensic debunking of the portrait of Cleopatra.) The final indignity for the nun, and for the Gothic, is to be mundanely bundled up and stuffed under Lucy's pillow – upon which 'I deeply slept' (p. 440). The despatch of M. Paul to a fate determined by the reader's imagination is a further sign of Brontë's impatience with the conventions of her chosen form. Again she rounds on the happy ending of *Jane Eyre*, reminding us that only 'sunny imaginations' picture 'union and a happy succeeding life' (pp. 462–3). Since 'sunny' is Dr John's adjective, we feel the shadow of Brontë's disapproval on such an ending. Still, she leaves us the choice, with a lack of closure which looks forward to the modernism of the twentieth century.

Other modernist features abound in *Villette*: its daring 'double love'⁹ which raised the eyebrows of contemporaries; its dwelling on male beauty and female desire; its blurring of male and female lines when Lucy, half-man, half-woman, makes love to Ginevra on the stage as she cannot – quite – off it; its placing of the woman, and a plain woman at that, at the centre of her own story, her satisfaction dependent on the absence of a man rather than his presence, and on the presence of work rather than its absence; its sense of the abyss yawning below the social inanities of existence. These qualities made many of Brontë's contemporaries uncomfortable – especially the men. Thackeray called the novel 'plaguey',¹⁰ and Matthew Arnold felt that 'the writer's mind contains nothing but hunger, rebellion, and rage';¹¹ for him these were faults. It took twentieth-century feminist criticism to convert them into virtues. Kate Millett gives probably the earliest feminist account, and still one of the finest, of *Villette*, acutely characterising it as 'too subversive to be popular'.¹² *Villette* will continue to disturb and subvert, not only through its revolutionary examination of female identity, but in its representation of the shifting nature of *human* identity, its hiddenness, the final unknowableness of one human being to another. That it is able at the same time to make the reader feel the deepest sympathy both for those who float easily on life's surface and for those who struggle bravely with life's pain is Charlotte

9 Martineau, cited above

10 Letter to Mrs Procter, 28 March 1853, quoted in Gordon (1995), p. 283

11 Letter to Mrs Forster, 14 April 1853, quoted in Allott (1973), p. 93

12 Millett (1977), p. 140

Brontë's consummate achievement. Certainly, it was the novel I reached for to calm mind and body in an actual storm, the hurricane of 1987; by candle and gasfire light I reached back to Brontë's century – and she reached forward to mine.

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