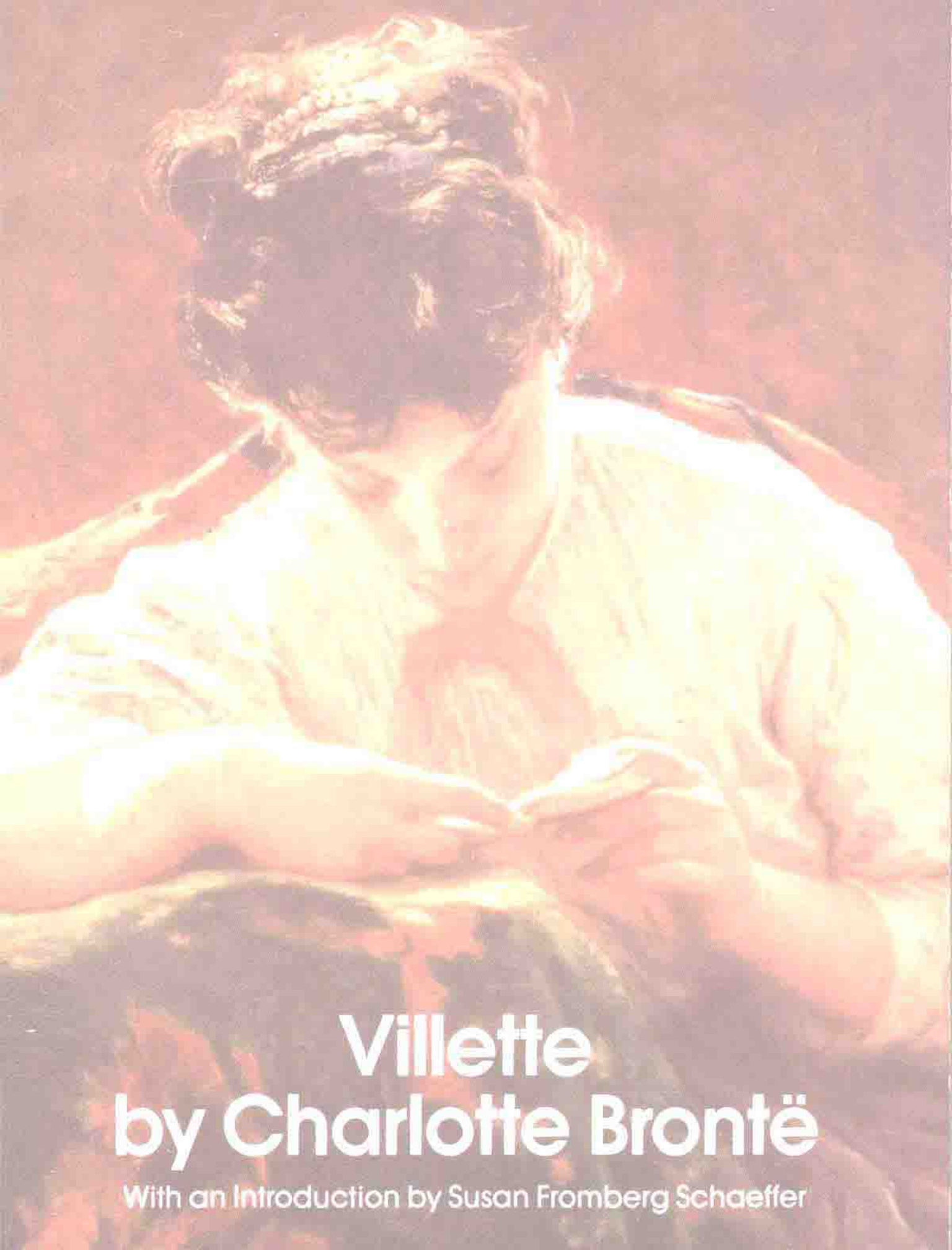


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Villette by Charlotte Brontë

With an Introduction by Susan Fromberg Schaeffer



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VILLETTE

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Charlotte Brontë

was born in 1816 in Haworth, Yorkshire. Her father, Patrick, a minister, enforced strict, often cruel discipline. But when Charlotte's mother died in 1821, the Brontë children were left mostly to themselves: they roamed the moors, wrote fantastic legends that they recorded in tiny handmade books, and read omnivorously. Charlotte particularly admired Wordsworth and Southey. In 1835 she became a teacher (later a private governess)—the only suitable occupation for "a lady," but one she detested. She studied under M. Hegier in Brussels, returning briefly as an English teacher at his school.

In 1846 Charlotte Brontë put together a joint volume of verse by herself and her sisters Emily and Anne. Published in 1846, under the pseudonym of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell, it sold only two copies. Undaunted, Charlotte completed *The Professor* which remained unpublished until after her death. But a kind note from one publisher encouraged her to finish *Jane Eyre*, her most famous work (1847).

In 1848 tragedy struck—her brother Branwell died in September, Emily in December, and Anne the following May, leaving a miserable Charlotte with her aging, sick father. Despite bouts of depression, she persevered, and wrote *Shirley* (1849) and *Villette* (1852). By now famous, Charlotte was courted by many friends. She took several trips to London, and on one visit met Thackeray, the contemporary whom she most admired.

Charlotte Brontë married Arthur Bell Nicholls, her father's curate, in 1854—a man she had once derided heartily. Lonely, still grief-stricken over the loss of her sisters, and beset by ill health, she died in March 1855, at the age of thirty-nine.

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Villette

"The Sharp Lesson of Experience": Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

I

Six children were born to Maria Branwell Brontë and Patrick Brontë, a clergyman of the Church of England: one son and five daughters, three of whom, Charlotte (1816–1855), Emily (1818–1848), and Anne (1820–1849), were to become important novelists of their day. Two—Emily and Charlotte—remain among the most influential and important of the nineteenth-century novelists. Their novels of people caught up in the storms of their own nature are part of every reading child's life. That their own lives were as tragic, if not more tragic, than those of their fictional characters is perhaps less known.

They were raised in Haworth, a small village in Yorkshire; this was the landscape immortalized by Emily Brontë in *Wuthering Heights*. What their lives might have been like had their mother not died in 1821, when Charlotte was five years old, Emily three, and Anne not yet one, no one can know, but from the time she died, death was no stranger to their household. They were brought up by their maternal aunt, Elizabeth Branwell, who sent all five of the girls to the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge in 1824. The two oldest girls, Maria and Elizabeth, were sent home the next year to die. (This school, with its harsh discipline and inadequate food, became the model for Lowood in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.)

Charlotte, Emily, and Anne returned to Haworth in 1825. There the three girls and their brother Branwell occupied themselves in literary pursuits. In the tiny handwriting that has since become so well known to scholars, they filled endless booklets with stories, poems, and essays. They invented their own fictional worlds. One of these, Angria, was the melodramatic land of heroic deeds and grand passions. The four children worked on these tales together and, in this world, seemed happy.

By 1846 the three girls, who had tried and failed to support themselves by teaching and taking positions as governesses, decided to try literature as a career. That same year they published *Poems* pseudonymously, under the names Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell. The book sold two copies. Undiscouraged, the

three sisters, each of whom had written a novel, submitted them. Emily's *Wuthering Heights* was accepted, as was Anne's *Agnes Gray*; only Charlotte's *The Professor* (originally titled *The Master*) was rejected. The publisher was, however, encouraging, and asked for a longer book. Within a month she submitted *Jane Eyre*. The publisher rushed the book into print, and only eight weeks later (in 1847) the novel appeared; it was a popular and critical sensation, and the future of the Brontë sisters seemed assured.

This literary success was followed by personal devastation. On September 24, 1848, Branwell Brontë died, and less than three months later, on the 19th of December, Emily was also dead. Anne fell ill, and hoping to save her, Charlotte took her to Scarborough and the sea air. On the 28th of May, Anne was also dead. In eight months, Charlotte Brontë had lost her brother and two sisters and returned to Haworth, where she kept house for her father, now isolated and almost blind. Ultimately, she married her father's curate (in 1854); within one year of her marriage, at the age of thirty-nine, she died as a result of complications of pregnancy.

The facts of her life cannot communicate the intensity of the tragedy, isolation, and despair that constantly stalked her. She seemed, in her house next to the churchyard, to inhabit the very landscape of death, "funeral bells so frequently tolling, and filling the heavy air with their mournful sound—and, when they were still, the 'chip, chip,' of the mason, as he cut the grave-stones in a shed close by."¹ Charlotte Brontë's friend, John Stores Smith, a fellow novelist who lived only a few miles from Haworth, described the village as "the most dead-alive melancholy-looking place it has ever been my lot to see. . . . The very houses seemed miserable, and if stones could look positively heartless, they did. . . . How anyone could live a lifetime there and not grow morbid, was incomprehensible. . . . The parsonage was a low stone house which occupied one corner of the graveyard. A field had evidently been set apart, and the founders of the church had said, 'In three fourths of it we will inter the dead, and in the other fourth we will bury the living.'"²

¹Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* [1857] (New York: Penguin, 1975).

²John Stores Smith, quoted in *Jane Eyre*, introduction by John T. Winterich, (New York: The Heritage Press, 1942), ix-x.

Except for a brief period in Belgium, where she studied at M. Hegier's *pensionnat* (believed to be the model for the school she described in *Villette*), her escapes from Haworth, at school or as a governess, brought only intense misery. Yet she held firmly to life. When her second novel, *Shirley*, was interrupted by the death of her two sisters, she buried her dead, finished the book, and began her third, *Villette*. Of this period, she wrote, "Still, I can get *on*. But I do hope and pray that never you, or any one I love, be placed as I am. To sit in a lonely room—the clock ticking loud through a still house—and have open before the mind's eye the record of the last year, with its shocks, sufferings, losses—is a trial" (letter of 1849). This "trial"—a string of bereavements and disappointments leading to the most extreme isolation and loneliness—brought with it severe depression, nervous anguish, and physical illness.

The Life of Charlotte Brontë, the standard biography, by her friend, Elizabeth Gaskell, is a remarkable portrait of an astonishing woman. Brontë's life was "unadventurous" in the ordinary sense of the word; in another, truer sense it was a grand adventure, desolating and ennobling, a voyage through storm after storm, which tested and proved a nature that refused to give up, to lose hope, to fail to find value, a nature whose first instinct was to reject what was not valuable and to cherish what was.

In her literary career, this instinct led Brontë to reject the Victorian concept of the ideal woman who had, in herself, no intrinsic worth whatever:

The woman is the priestess of home, and she puts herself into it and its affairs and conditions. Her talents and tastes have given her a natural ordination to this holy office. She is most herself and most satisfied, and useful when the affairs of her home occupy chiefly her mind and heart. If she goes out into the world to engage in any of its affairs, she does it for the benefit and in honor and love of her home. What she does for the world is done at arm's length and from her home as her office—headquarters—fortress. Men will wander half their lives without a home and seem happy, but women are seldom without a home of some sort . . . Woman's worth to man comes partly from her strong home instincts. She anchors and holds him from roving, keeps him at one place and one thing, civilizes him and applies his great powers to civilizing uses. . . . She in-

clines to civilization, loves her home. . . . She utilizes, completes and puts him in such orderly ways as best to use his power and promote his higher interests.³

No Brontë heroine ever began to conform to such a model, much less aspire to it. Friendless and alone, Lucy Snowe, like Jane Eyre before her, is left to make her way alone in a friendless world. Like Robinson Crusoe's, her fate will become a thing of her own creation. When Charlotte Brontë removed her heroines from the home, she loosened the constrictions that bound a woman to her stove and cradle, and launched an inquiry into the nature of feminine experience that was to change the course of modern fiction. She would not always be praised for what she had done.

Shortly after *Villette*'s publication, in 1853, Matthew Arnold wrote, "Miss Brontë has written a hideous, undelightful, convulsed, constricted novel . . . one of the most utterly disagreeable books I have ever read. . . . Her mind contains nothing but hunger, rebellion, and rage."⁴ This judgment seems extraordinary, coming as it does from Matthew Arnold, who is today best remembered for the concluding stanza of "Dover Beach," a stanza that, had it been used as an epigraph for *Villette*, would seem almost *too* apt:

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

As a chronicle of one woman's life on the "darkling plain," *Villette* is an amazing book. The difference between *Villette* and "Dover Beach" is at once the difference between poetry (which

³G. S. Weaver, D.D., *The Heart of the World*, (Baltimore: Hill and Harvey Publishers, 1883), 37.

⁴Howard Lowry, ed., *Letters to Arthur Hugh Clough*, 21 March 1853. (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), 132.

Sylvia Plath called in her journals “monuments of the moment”) and prose (whose aim is to imitate and, by imitating, create a whole world); it is also the difference between male and female perception. Matthew Arnold gives us an unforgettable image, an outline of a world virtually impossible to live in, and stops there. In this respect, “Dover Beach” is profoundly masculine-hearted. *Villette* explores, even anatomizes, the darkling plain; it does this with great honesty and particularity, finding truths in activities not normally considered important—embroidery, choosing a dress—and in this it is particularly feminine. In its refusal to find happiness where none is to be found, its determination to show how, even in the absence of assaults from outside, a sufficiently damaged personality will assault and defeat itself, *Villette* is also “almost intolerably painful to read.”⁵ Written before psychoanalysis came into being, *Villette* is nevertheless a psychoanalytic work—a psychosexual study of its heroine, Lucy Snowe. Written before the philosophy of existentialism was formulated, the novel’s view of the world can only be described as existential. Books are often described as “ahead of their time.” *Villette* was—and is—such a book.

“Thus, there remained no possibility of dependence on others; to myself alone could I look.” (p. 32) So says Lucy Snowe as she sets out to make a life for herself. In the end, she will prosper, open a school of her own, own a home of her own, become financially independent: a kind of nineteenth-century career woman, self-made. She will not find this enough. “Is there,” she will ask, “nothing more for me in life—no true home—nothing to be dearer to me than myself, and by its paramount preciousness, to draw from me better things than I care to culture for myself only? Nothing, at whose feet I can willingly lay down the whole burden of human egotism, and gloriously take up the nobler charge of labouring and living for others?” (p. 346) In 1854 Charlotte Brontë was to explore with exceptional acuteness the need for a room of one’s own as well as the emptiness of that room when it has no one but oneself inside it. In portraying the struggle between M. Paul and Lucy Snowe, she illumines the struggle for power between men and women and offers a possible solution to it. Over one hundred and thirty years later, we are

⁵Harriet Martineau, *Daily News*, 3 February 1853. Reprinted in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Miriam Allott (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 172.

only beginning to approach these issues with the depth of understanding Charlotte Brontë brought to them.

II

The rise of feminism and the psychoanalytic movement have conspired to focus attention on Brontë's *Villette*, until recently, a novel known rather than read, one of the "other" novels by the author of *Jane Eyre*. It was Auden who said he could think of many books that were unjustly forgotten, but none that was unjustly remembered. The passage of time and the shift in contemporary interests have brought *Villette* to center stage. Today it is read and discussed more intensely than Charlotte Brontë's other novels, and many critics now believe it to be a true masterpiece, a work of genius that more than fulfilled the promise of *Jane Eyre*. The unending fascination of the novel lies not only in its power to entrance the reader, but in the remarkable complexity of its heroine, Lucy Snowe.

In Lucy Snowe, Charlotte Brontë has portrayed a heroine so radically divided that to many critics and readers she actually appears schizophrenic.⁶ Lucy Snowe insists she does not have an "overheated and discursive imagination" (p. 9); she is not "artistic," nor is she a "sudden and dangerous" nature, "*sensitive* as they are called." She insists she is ruled by reason, prefers peace to stimulation, and experiences excitement only as a "disturbance." Her ambition is to hold the quick of her nature "in catalepsy and a dead trance." (p. 102) She is, or so she would have the reader believe, a model of repressed, rational womanhood.

When the rule of reason and repression fails, "certain accidents of the weather" suffice to awaken her other, inner self. Storms, she says, "were almost dreaded by me, because they woke the being I was always lulling, and stirred up a craving cry I could not satisfy. . . . The tempest took hold of me with tyranny. . . . I could not go in: too resistless was the delight of staying with the wild hour, black and full of thunder." (p. 102) This outbreak of the wild, stormy self is not tolerated long by the repressed, rational one. "This longing, and all of a similar kind," says Lucy Snowe, "it was necessary to knock on

⁶Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 416.

the head; which I did, figuratively, after the manner of Jael to Sisera, driving a nail through their temples. Unlike Sisera, they did not die: they were but transiently stunned, and at intervals would turn on the nail with a rebellious wrench; then did the temples bleed and the brain thrill to its core." (p. 103)

This spectacle of a nature at war with itself is at the very center of *Villette*. Lucy Snowe will reject the companionship of other teachers at the *pensionnat* in Labassecour, where she finally establishes herself, but her solitude will eventually lead her to break down and to wander out into a storm from which she will take refuge in a church confessional. Throughout the narrative, she will often speak of the extreme mental suffering that plagues her, leaving her sleepless and without appetite, and frequently contemplating, although shunning, suicide. Yet the *cause* of this suffering is obscure, and many critics have complained that it is really inexplicable, "mysterious," and unmotivated unless one sees Lucy's predicament as the problem of a woman attempting to live in a constricting society that demands the repression of a stormy inner self. Charlotte Brontë wrote *Villette* in the middle of the nineteenth century, when a woman's position was so anomalous that George Eliot wrote, "The woman question [appears] to overhang abysses, of even which prostitution is not the worst."⁷ But "the woman question" is not at the heart of Lucy's dilemma, nor at the heart of *Villette*. That women have difficulty making their way is everywhere evident; yet the novel presents woman after woman who, in one way or another, does manage to make her own way. Madame Beck, for example, is a widow who founds her own very successful school and moves, as an unattached woman, in the highest circles of her society. She is clever enough to bend the rules of society to her purposes, and Lucy eventually will follow in her footsteps, starting her own school, achieving financial independence, security, and even prosperity.

Although it is true that Lucy is reticent and evasive about her past, it is not true that she evades it entirely, nor is it true that the sources of her present misery must remain a mystery to the reader. Although she does not describe specific events of her childhood and young womanhood, she does describe the pattern of them. Asked by her godmother how she came to Villette,

⁷*The George Eliot Letters*, 7 vols. Gordon S. Haight, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954-55), 5:58.

she tells us, "I had to recur to gone-by troubles, to explain causes of seeming estrangement, to touch on single-handed conflict with Life, with Death, with Grief, with Fate." (p. 169) All the tragedies of Lucy Snowe's early life take place offstage, but they are, nevertheless, *named*. To Lucy Snowe, these tragedies are so immense, so overwhelming, that *all* she can do is name them. The tragedies that leave her orphaned, friendless, and penniless are always indirectly evoked, referred to as sea voyages in which the entire crew and the captain are lost; her life without those she has loved becomes the life of a storm-tossed passenger from a shipwreck, whereas people who live happier lives are compared to people on board large, secure ocean-going vessels. If Lucy does not go into detail about the events that so deform her psychic life, it may be because she does not want them known. She may not even want them understood. When, at the end of the novel, she must describe the real shipwreck that destroyed her hopes for a happy married life, she evokes the storm that took everything from her, and then, in an extraordinary passage, abruptly breaks off her narrative.

Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life. (p. 474)

The storm is described, but the shipwreck is not. It is only mentioned. The death of M. Paul at sea is not even mentioned, yet we know it occurred, and we can estimate the emotional cost of that tragedy. "Wherever an accumulation of small defences is found, whether surrounding the prude's virtue or the man of the world's respectability, there, be sure, it is needed," says Lucy Snowe (p. 297), giving us an excellent idea of how we are to read her "heretic narrative." Defenses conceal weaknesses, as graves and thick bottles conceal things that are buried. But though a defense may hide, it is not necessarily impenetrable, just as, though something is buried, it is not irretrievable.

Deserted and sleepless during the "long vacation," Lucy has a crucially important dream, one that precipitates her breakdown:

Amidst the horrors of that dream I think the worst lay here.

Methought the well-loved dead, who had loved *me* well in life, met me elsewhere, alienated: galled was my inmost spirit with an unutterable sense of despair about the future. Motive there was none why I should try to recover or wish to live; and yet quite unendurable was the pitiless and haughty voice in which Death challenged me to engage his unknown terrors. . . . That evening more firmly than ever fastened into my soul the conviction that Fate was of stone and Hope a false idol—blind, bloodless, and of granite core. (p. 152)

When she thinks that the dead have turned away from her, Lucy, who has borne up under so much, gives way to thoughts of suicide and finally breaks down. Through this dream, and in countless other ways, Brontë makes it clear that Lucy Snowe's true allegiances do not lie with the living but with the dead.

Lucy Snowe quickly touches on her early life and even more quickly turns away. "People who have undergone bereavement," she says, "always jealously gather together and lock away mementos: it is not supportable to be stabbed to the heart each moment by sharp revival of regret." (p. 282) It is not supportable, but it happens. Whether Lucy wills it or not, she *must* remember the past. It erupts in the terrible dream she has before her breakdown, when the well-loved dead turn into their opposites. It emerges suddenly when, in response to M. Paul's kindness, she falls to playing with the handkerchief he has lent to her: "For some reason—gladdened, I think, by a sudden return of the golden glimmer of childhood, roused by an unwonted renewal of its buoyancy . . . I fell to playing with the handkerchief as if it were a ball. . . . The game was stopped by another hand than mine." (p. 232) It is not true, as some critics have said, that to be a Brontë heroine one must first be an unloved child. To be a Brontë heroine, one must have been a happy and well-loved child, only to lose both love and those one loves.⁸

The central difficulty of such a life then becomes interior, psychological: a problem of relationships between areas of the psyche, rather than a practical or external one. How can "sensitive natures" surmount the experience of acute loss? It is this problem that is at the heart of *Villette*, city of buried nuns, built

⁸Rachel Brownstein, *On Becoming a Heroine*, (New York: Viking, 1982), 180.

on the bones of its heroic martyrs. It explains Lucy Snowe's "schizophrenic" nature. It explains her "perverse" behavior toward both John Graham Bretton and M. Paul, and why she ends her narrative married to neither. It explains why she, like Miss Marchmont, so loves memory; memory is all she has. It also explains the seemingly peculiar narrative structure of *Villette*. In Lucy Snowe we see loss so acute that it causes the "moral paralysis" and cowardice of which Lucy herself complains. It prevents or at least dangerously delays any forward motion—any flight from a tragic life to a happier one—so that even after Lucy flees England, she can only take her past with her. She cannot escape it. *Villette* is finally about bereavement so acute and constant that it causes a loss of trust in the world, loss so severe that it troubles "the very lines of your features" and harasses "your nerves into the fever of habitual irritation." (p. 361)

The course of *Villette* appears to be linear, but while its events move *forward* in time, every forward motion is also an excavation of things past, so that linear action is only linear in appearance. The movement of the novel is in fact cyclical, almost circular. And this is very striking in light of Lucy Snowe's determination to flee as quickly and as far from her home as she can, driven as she is by an "unutterable loathing of a desolate existence past [that] forbade return." (p. 45) Fleeing her home for London, and London for Europe and Labassecour, she seems to be flying—not forward, but back to the companions of her fourteenth year. The first man she meets in Labassecour, an Englishman who helps her rescue her trunk, is, unknown to her, John Graham Bretton, introduced to the reader in the novel's first chapter, when Lucy was fourteen. Thus, as her circle appears to widen it really narrows: Paulina Mary will turn out to be the little Polly she met in Bretton, just as M. de Bassompierre will be revealed as Mr. Home, whom she met as Polly's father.

When Lucy Snowe awakens at La Terrasse, her room seems uncannily strange because it is *not* strange.

Where was I? Not only in what spot of the world, but in what year of our Lord? For all these objects were of past days, and of a distant country. Ten years ago I bade them good-by; since my fourteenth year they and I had never met. . . . Reader, I felt alarmed! . . . These articles of furniture could not be real solid arm-chairs . . . or if this were denied as too wild an hypothesis—and, confounded as I

was, I *did* deny it—there remained but to conclude that I had myself passed into an abnormal state of mind; in short, that I was very ill and delirious. . . . Bretton! Bretton! 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? (pp. 159–161)

This “return” of Bretton, which to Lucy seems a movement back in time to her fourteenth year, is also an eruption of the past into the present, a remarkably ingenious way of showing how in Lucy’s mind, as in all minds, the present and past exist simultaneously and interpenetrate; so that, while Lucy believes it is better to go forward than backward, forward motion may paradoxically be taken as a step backward, just as backward motion may actually indicate progress. And this step back in turn indicates a growing strength, a newfound ability to step into the past in order to deal with the “unutterable loathing” and “desolation” of it and lay it finally to rest.

John Graham (Dr. John) and his mother, Louisa Bretton, give the measure of what life has taken from Lucy Snowe. Of naturally cheerful, even dispositions, “which are better than a fortune to the possessor” (p. 3), they are above all else *rooted*; they are the Brettons of Bretton, members of a family so long in residence that they may well have given their name to their ancient town. (This doubling of names indicates security of a very high order; Brontë will resort to this device again, when she establishes little Polly in the Hôtel Crécy of the Rue Crécy.) The Brettons’ life is not without tragedy, but these events befall them at a relatively advanced age when their personalities are already formed. As Lucy tells us, they can struggle and overcome adversity without noticeable damage to themselves. They are like turtles; wherever they go, they take their homes with them. And they do this—can do it—because like Paulina Mary (or little Polly) they “loved the Past.” (p. 278) Their past and their present are continuous; no obstacles in their past paralyze them and prevent them from fully inhabiting their present and confidently looking forward to their future. This is not possible for Lucy, in whose past too much has gone wrong. In her life there is, as M. Paul is to put it, a break in the web. This is a conclusion Lucy herself will come to when she ventures to prophecy about the course Paulina Mary’s life will take: “‘As a child I feared for you; nothing that has life was ever more