

Reading *Villette*

—On Charlotte Brontë's Duality—(1)

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The semantic structure of an internally persuasive discourse is *not finite*, it is *open*; in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal ever newer *ways of mean*. (Mikhail Bakhtin)

Charlotte Brontë has Lucy Snowe, the narrator and protagonist of *Villette*, remark as follows.

It seemed to me that an original and good picture was just as scarce as an original and good book . . . (274)¹

Where, then, lies the 'originality' in *Villette*? There are several elements to be considered. Duality, or to be more precise, 'contrasts,' which make the concealed duality conspicuous to the reader seem to comprise the 'originality' of Charlotte Brontë's methodology.

In a previous essay, I considered Charlotte Brontë's device of anticlimax (or falling action) in the process of shifting from the realm of reason inspired by the anticlimax of 'Cleopatra' to the domain of emotions and feelings.² In this essay, however, I will focus on the realm of reason in Charlotte Brontë, which is similar to that of Austen's anticlimax.

The first question I will address is Lucy's insightfulness, which tends to

undermine the legitimacy of the seemingly plausible remarks of others. Though it may sound paradoxical, it is Lucy's 'shadow' that makes her cognizance appear keen and profound. Lucy, the narrator and protagonist, is a *be-er* rather than a *do-er*; or to be more concrete, her existence as a character depends more on her perspicacity than on her inconspicuous actions, which render her an 'inoffensive shadow.'

Taking the first chapter, for example, we are aware of the protagonist's existence only through her own 'eyes' and 'voices,' which fervently narrate other characters exclusively. Her sole concern here seems to be everybody but herself. Yet it is the absence of 'Lucy Snowe' as a character that compels the reader to recognize her existence. 'He, I believe, never remembered that I had eyes in my head; much less a brain behind them.' (163) Being retrospective, Lucy describes her own existence, ignored by John Bretton, whose attention she desperately seeks in vain. While this naturally illustrates her reality of being a 'nobody' (393), it also indicates her existence as 'eyes' (an observer) and a 'brain' (a person of cognizance). Owing to her keen insight, her awareness enables her to formulate

layers of meaning richer than even her actions can produce.

For the protagonist, words are to be swallowed into the recesses of consciousness. This characteristic in Lucy is in striking contrast with the depiction of Charlotte's other female teacher, the orphan, Jane Eyre. Jane does not hesitate to demand that Edward Rochester, her literal master, admit their 'equality.'

' . . . Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless?—You think wrong—I have as much soul as you,—and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty, and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you. . . .'³

The position of the female teacher in *Villette* is in contradistinction with that of Jane Eyre. Lucy also attempts a question of John, and interestingly enough, the import of her question is nearly equivalent to Jane's. It is, however, a voiceless internal discourse that merely ends with something too pathetic to qualify as objectivity — something only her perspicacity enables her to sense.

. . . was it [John's estimate of Lucy] kind or just? Had Lucy been intrinsically the same, but possessing the additional advantages of wealth and station, would your manner to her, your value for her have been quite what they actually were? And yet by these questions I

would not seriously infer blame. No; you might sadden and trouble me sometimes; but then mine was a soon-depressed, an easily-deranged temperament—it fell if a cloud crossed the sun. Perhaps before the eye of severe equity, I should stand more at fault than you. (401)

Though it may sound paradoxical, the more Lucy swallows her words, the more she renders herself an existence impregnated with discourse. Internal discourse begins to be constructed within the inner recesses of her mind. It is her penetrating self-consciousness that makes this possible. It is because of her discernment that Lucy is able to become her own mistress. To take a simple example, though Ginevra Fanshaw seems to possess everything—youth, beauty, social position and so on—with which Lucy herself is not endowed, Lucy outwits, outmanoeuvres and generally gains advantage over her.

The following scene, for example, shows a victory for Lucy's superior cognition. Against challenging and malicious remarks made by Ginevra, Lucy's offensive and defensive struggle for a place to belong indicates the existence of her resolute and independent perception. In this case, it is not through Lucy's internal discourse but through her vocalized response (or rather, her 'revenge') that Ginevra's spiteful words are carefully repulsed by Lucy through her piercing insight.

‘I would not be you for a kingdom.’
 The remark was too *naïve* to rouse anger;
 I merely said:
 ‘Very good.’
 ‘And what would *you* give to be ME?’ she
 inquired.
 ‘Not a bad sixpence—strange as it may
 sound,’ I replied. ‘You are but a poor
 creature.’
 ‘You don’t think so in your heart.’
 ‘No; for in my heart you have not the
 outline of a place: I only occasionally
 turn you over in my brain.’ (215)

Ginevra’s whimsical, inciting remarks, which are intended to irritate Lucy, are thrown back at Ginevra in retaliation through the key word ‘heart’: ‘[I]n my heart you have not the outline of a place’. Lucy, who is in reality excluded herself and lacks her own ‘place,’ now excludes Ginevra—a provocative opponent—from her own consciousness. As Lucy admits, it may sound ‘strange.’ If we consider Lucy’s ‘heart’ or consciousness as the basis of her worldview, however, Lucy’s remark does indeed successfully hit the mark. Her intense apperception supports her own subjectivity, and becomes a flexible, mighty weapon with which to defend against assaults. Extreme loneliness (or to be more precise, the *consciousness* of feeling extremely lonely), as well as her lively mental exertions, which seem to compensate for the loneliness, probably generate her authoritative subjectivity, rendering herself her own mistress.

I have considered Lucy’s intense awareness inversely to her inconspicuous

behavior. What is even more important to notice here is that Lucy’s consciousness is never fixed but demonstrates fluidity. Charlotte criticizes Jane Austen for her lack of ‘passion’ and she herself probably attempts to depict ‘what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through.’⁴ It is not, however, only passion that she actually describes, but something which surely belongs to the realm of the intellect. Charlotte’s intellect probably enables her to maintain a certain detachment from what she does. The value system begins to waver at the critical moment it takes root. As I have discussed in an earlier essay, Charlotte occasionally reveals a technique that is very similar to that often used by Austen, namely, intentional anticlimax, as seen in Charlotte’s renaming of Cleopatra ‘the Lioness.’⁵ It is the disparity in intellect and logic, rather than in feeling, that the rhetoric of this anticlimax endows the reader with *pleasur*. This kind of disparity mainly occurs in the internal discourse of the protagonist.

Before entering this discussion, I will quote here a very similar situation found in *Jane Eyre* to provide comparison with *Villette*. Charlotte apparently reveals, or rather, deliberately expresses detachment toward, a kind of intellectual distance in Jane’s innocent remarks in a conversation she holds with Brocklehurst.

‘No sight so sad as that of a naughty child,’ he [Mr Brocklehurst] began, ‘especially a naughty little girl. Do you know where the wicked go after death?’

‘They go to hell,’ was my ready and orthodox answer.

‘And should you like to fall into that pit, and to be burning there for ever?’

‘No sir.’

‘What must you do to avoid it?’

I deliberated a moment: my answer, when it did come, was objectionable: ‘I must keep in good health, and not die.’⁶

Under the pretext that Jane is merely an innocent child, the author unintentionally (or at least, apparently unintentionally) inserts detachment. In spite of (or is it because of?) the seriousness of the scene, the disparity here undermines the serious atmosphere. ‘What must you do to avoid it?’—Brocklehurst’s leading question is well-spoken, plausible, even glittering. Jane, however, turns her opponent’s battery away from herself by answering innocently, ‘I must keep in good health, and not die.’ The simple honesty of her response undoes the scheming Brocklehurst. Thus, it is not Jane’s mischievousness but Brocklehurst’s authority that sinks into oblivion.

The same thing can be said about Lucy Snow in *Villette*. The helpless, impotent protagonist devises a similar anticlimax in the middle of a serious scene. John Bretton seems occasionally merciless or cruel to Lucy, who is suffering from hunger for love to such a degree that she begs him for ‘the crumbs [of love] that fall from the rich men’s table.’⁷ Actually, however, it is Lucy’s pathetic love toward John that biases his response to her and renders it so cruel-seeming. In either case, the ‘misery’

Lucy feels is undeniable. She can, however, transcend the misery, thanks to the anticlimax her keen cognizance generates and the detachment that is acquired as the result of such anticlimax. This function of Lucy’s awareness works effectively even when confronting John, with whom she is deeply enamored and whose cruel indifference causes her distress. Consider the following.

The ghostly nun, who haunts the atmosphere of Lucy’s feeling of absolute solitude, conflates with Gothic uncanniness, always hovering throughout this fictional world. The ghost may be read as a key concept in *Villette* and also as a symbol of Lucy’s fretfulness and frustration. Even in a dialogue between Lucy and John discussing the ghostly nun, anticlimax is inserted, or should I say, rather, stratified by ‘(dialogized) monologue,’⁸ to use Mikhail Bakhtin’s terminology.

John, never acknowledging Lucy’s claim that she *has witnessed* the ‘Nun,’ concludes with mockery that it was simply a spectral illusion resulting from her mental conflict. Because of his refusal to understand and share her feelings, Lucy herself seems reduced to an ‘inoffensive shadow’ (403) just as is the ‘Nun.’ Even in this symbolic and significant scene, however, Lucy’s internal discourse has a superb effect. First, John as a doctor condescendingly advises her to ‘cultivate’ happiness and a cheerful mind as the cure and preventive against such an illusion.—‘Happiness is the cure—a cheerful mind the preventive: cultivate both.’ (330) In the face of this advice Lucy

becomes silent. For Lucy, no longer an innocent child like Jane Eyre, taciturnity is the usual state. However, it does not mean that she lacks language; on the contrary, her consciousness overflows with discourse. It is in her inner discourse that Lucy becomes loudly unequivocal.

No mockery in this world ever sounds to me so hollow as that of being told to *cultivate* happiness. What does such advice mean? Happiness is not a potato, to be planted in mould, and tilled with manure. Happiness is a glory shining far down upon us out of heaven.(330)

Here is a cruel comparison between the doctor, 'a cheerful fellow by nature,' to quote his own description, and the patient, Lucy, who has to struggle to get rid of 'an illusion,' that is, her melancholy. The former inquires of the latter, '... Lucy, was she a pretty nun? Had she a pretty face? You have not told me that yet; and *that* is the really important point.' (332) Lucy's illusion is destroyed in one blow by his questions and incomparable, cunning sarcasm. As a consequence, Lucy's own existence seems to be annihilated.

There is, however, room for argument on this point. We shall now look more carefully into the process of Lucy's being driven into 'an inoffensive shadow.' This 'shadow' launches a counteroffensive in her internal dialogue: 'Happiness is not a potato, to be planted in mould, and tilled with manure.' It is possible for us to sense from Lucy's internal discourse a radiance dazzling enough to cloud even John's

'shining glory' owing to the effect of rhetoric. Even though this observation is uttered silently in her subconscious and contains the negative 'not' ('Happiness is *not* a potato'), the association of the two words 'happiness' and 'potato' is so unexpected, so original that it succeeds in undermining the legitimacy of John's counsel. It is through such anticlimax and objectivity that Lucy manages to maintain her equilibrium herself. Through the process of undermining the legitimacy of John's counsel, Lucy's sheer misery is transformed into laughter, and surely into strength.

Leaving this discussion aside for a moment, let us turn to E.B. White's insightful observation about laughter (snickering), which might be considered related to Charlotte's way of dealing with laughter. White made an interesting comment on the conflict between emotion and sense of humour.

The conflict [between emotion and a sense of humor] is fundamental. There constantly exists, for a certain sort of person of high emotional content, at work creatively, the danger of coming to a point where something cracks within himself or within the paragraph under construction—cracks and turns into a snicker. Here, then, is the very nub of the conflict: the careful form of art, and the careless shape of life itself. What a man does with this uninvited snicker (which may closely resemble a sob, at that) decides his destiny. If he resists it, conceals it, destroys it, he may keep his

architectural scheme intact and save his building, and the world will never know. If he gives in to it, he becomes a humorist, and the sharp brim of the fool's cap leaves a mark forever on his brow.⁹

Charlotte may, of course, 'keep [her] architectural scheme intact and save [her] building' here. We also still see extreme revenge, or rather, Lucy's retaliation, the same kind of retaliation as seen in Jane Eyre, mentioned above.

It is, however, not only her revenge that the reader notices here. We certainly can sense Lucy's subjectivity and her independent mind, outlined with the same discernment with which she outwits, outmanoeuvres and gains advantage over Ginevra Fanshaw.

It is even more significant to notice the effect of laughter caused by such anticlimax. She never 'resists it, conceals it, destroys it,' but rather bestows on laughter a critical function. Paradoxical as it may sound, the reader speculates that laughter itself is preventing laughter from escaping; laughter is kept strictly under control in *Villette*. It is probably her layers of consciousness, filled with the fluidity of comedy, that prevent laughter from intruding at the critical moment into *Villette*, which is intended as a serious piece of fiction.

For example, readers don't feel like laughing when they eventually discover that their protagonist has not been grappling with a *real* ghost, but simply with a bolster. The reason why there cannot be any comedy in that disparity is

because 'the reader is in a sense one with Lucy. Everyone is a Lucy Snowe maintaining Gothic elements in the depth of their heart'¹⁰ as I have discussed in a former essay. It is probably owing to her layers of consciousness that we are gradually assimilated into Lucy's internal world in both feeling and thinking. Detachment, disparity — whatever definition we may choose for it—the stratified consciousness constructed by the author's skills as a common cognition is shared by the reader.

This article is the English version of "Charlotte Brontë's Duality in *Villette*" of my book in Japanese: *Weaving Fiction: British Female Literature, Radcliffe, Austen and C. Brontë* (Tokyo:Eihosha, 2002), with some revisions. *I am grateful to Ms. Jenine Heaton for revising my English, though needless to say, any inadequacies are all my own.

1. Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, edited by Mark Lilly (London: Penguin, 1985). Page numbers for quotes in this paper appear in parentheses at the end of quotes.
2. Michiko Soya, 'Villette: Gothic Literature and the "Homely Web of Truth"', *Brontë Studies*. vol. 28, pt.1(Brontë Society, 2003), pp.15-24.
3. Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, edited by Q. D. Leavis (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 281.
4. Brontë, 'To W. S. Williams.' 12 April 1850. *The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships & Correspondence*, vol. 3, edited by T. J. Wise and J. A. Symington (1933; Philadelphia Pennsylvania: Porcupine, 1980), p. 99.
5. Soya, pp. 15-24.
6. Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 64.
7. Brontë, 'To M. Heger.' 8 January 1845, *Correspondence*, vol. 2, 22.

8. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson et al. (1981; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), p. 345.
9. E. B. White, 'Some Remarks on Humor,' *Essays of E. B. White* (1934; Harper & Row, 1975), pp. 244-245.
10. Soya, p. 24.

