

Reading *Villette*
—On Charlotte Brontë's Duality—(2)

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A significant element of *Villette* is its Gothic atmosphere. The structure of *Villette*, however, is not Gothic per se. Rather, it is an oscillation, or ebb and flow, that Charlotte effortlessly achieves in proximity to Gothicism.

The following serves as an example. The episode of Ginevra's elopement with Hamal (a bogus ghostly nun) seems to be a replication of a scene from *The Monk*, in which Raymond and a bogus Agnes (*Agnes* who is assumed to be disguised as a ghostly nun turns out indeed to be a 'real' ghost) elope. The striking similarities in these two settings and situations accentuate their slight differences. The plausible fictional world of traditional, authentic Gothic literature is deconstructed with a mere handkerchief. While Lucy is walking along half unconsciously from the effect of opium poisoning, the handkerchief is abruptly waved at her from the window of a carriage driving at full speed. It is Ginevra that gaily waves the handkerchief as she elopes with Hamal, having recognized Lucy.

Such action is consistent with the shallow and flippant Ginevra. Yet some disparity is still sensed here, a disparity between two contrary notions: seriousness and flippancy. That is, the disparity is between the gullibility of

readers to believe in Gothicism (though such 'belief' may be a 'willing suspension of disbelief,'¹¹ as Samuel Coleridge so astutely discerned), and the flippancy with which the handkerchief is waved to shake the readers' convictions. Queer as it may sound, the more flippant the handkerchief seems, the more serious its function is to the reader. The world of Gothicism is shaken. This tiny ripple seems to prognosticate a duality between the Gothic and realism, and to presage a greater aftershock to come. Let us now turn to this aftershock.

The Mysteries of Udolpho, an eminent masterpiece of Gothic literature by Ann Radcliffe, consists of a grand-scale process that extends toward anticlimax. *Villette* exhibits a similar process, including, naturally, disclosure. In Charlotte's case, however, the disclosure is not only of Gothic mysteries but also of methodology. Lucy, after parting with her lover, Paul, inadvertently walks into a festival held in a park at midnight and there at last encounters one of her ghostly nuns. She hears the name 'Justine Marie' called out suddenly.

'Là voilà!' suddenly cried one of the gentlemen, 'voilà Justine Marie qui arrive!' . . . 'She comes!' cried Josef Emanuel. . . . Of that group, the coolest

must have 'held his breath for a time!' As for me, my life stood still. (562)

After this juncture the typical process of the Gothic novel unfolds for the protagonist. The ghostly nun is expected to appear any time. The ghosts that used to haunt Lucy begin to reappear within her consciousness. Charlotte's disclosure, however, doesn't follow in the manner of Radcliffe's, the latter of which nonpluses the reader by showing a disappointing anticlimax: a mere wax figure at the conclusion of the work. Charlotte herself appears to be tempted, though just for a moment, to play her own tricks on the reader by *postponing* the solution of the mystery. What Charlotte does first is to depict the appearance of the ghost that is fostered by Lucy's (that is, by the reader's) imagination.

. . . scarce would you discredit me, reader, were I to say that she is like the nun of the attic, that she wears black skirts and white head-clothes, that she looks the resurrection of the flesh, and that she is a risen ghost. (562-63)

At the critical moment, however, pursuit of the Gothic is abandoned. Just before the moment where solution of the Gothic mystery should occur, Charlotte manifests her identity as a writer. 'All falsities—all figments! We will not deal in this gear. Let us be honest, and cut, as heretofore, from the homely web of truth.' (563) The writer inserts a fatal crack in the Gothic layer by exposing the

fictionality of her fiction, or the deceptive tactics of her writing. After a continual weaving of distance between Gothic and realism, the author suddenly *entrap*s anticlimax in the web of a sheer Gothic atmosphere.

The abrupt restoration of realism from the Gothic reminds us of that famous revelation in Henry Tilney's speech in Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, which suddenly awakens Catherine Morland, a female Quixote, from Gothic stupor to the realities of her world: everyday life. 'Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians.'¹²

Charlotte tears off the superficial Gothic layer herself. Justine Marie ultimately turns out to be a harmless and amiable young girl completely different from the pale Nun Marie of legend. The menacing dark world of the Gothic is suddenly transformed into clear reality. The anticlimax is inserted at the climax of suspense. However, comparing Radcliffe's methodology again, Charlotte's anticlimax differs from her Gothic predecessor in spite of the similar appearance. While Radcliffe's Gothic romance, to quote Elihu Hubbard Smith's critical comment, 'appears the labor of Mountain, to bring forth a mouse,'¹³ it is not merely 'a mouse' that appears in Charlotte's fiction.

What is driven into Lucy's consciousness here is not something as ambiguous as the supernatural but as real as Lucy's life itself: Paul, a real mortal. 'The "Antigua" [Paul's ship] was gone, and there stood Paul Emanuel.' (563) The

ghost lying hidden in the gothic darkness is now extinguished, having been pierced through by a shining ray of apperception. But perhaps the ghost is simply supplanted by another chimera. The unexpected pairing of 'Paul and Marie' stimulates Lucy's mind to solve this new riddle by presuming 'their marriage.' Even though at the moment the superficial Gothic layer is gone and the other layer, reality, which had been concealed by the Gothic atmosphere, is now exposed, Lucy faces a new conflict in the allegorical domain, that is, the 'Falsehood' that Paul is Lucy's lover and the 'Truth' that he is already someone else's *fiancé*. 'In my infatuation, I said, "Truth, you are a good mistress to your faithful servants! . . . Truth stripped away Falsehood and Flattery, and Expectancy, and here I stand—free!"' (566) During the conflict, Lucy is as brave as Emily St. Aubert, who has devoted herself to a routine of indefatigably uncovering veils at Udolpho in order to discover the *truth*. Now Lucy's truth, which should remove the Falsehood, comes also to strip Paul away from Lucy Snowe.

Allegory is one of Charlotte's characteristic literary techniques. What captures the reader's attention in this scene, however, is not so much the allegory as the ripples of potential latent in the conflict. Lucy is now liberated as a 'free' person. Yet it would be difficult to find a more miserable existence than Lucy's. Lucy is in reality embarrassed by her 'Freedom.' The duality, stemming from Gothic and reality, is ultimately converged in the personal duality of Lucy's

consciousness, that is, in the duality of her acquired 'Freedom' and desperate 'Misery.' Now that Lucy is liberated from Paul, that prison of her amorous longing, she makes *herself* into a prison. Lucy has to take 'freedom' back with her to her own bedroom in order to resign herself to it. 'Nothing remained now but to take my freedom to my chamber, to carry it with me to my bed and see what I could make of it.' (566) It is because of this situation that her encounter with *another nun*, 'a bolster,' appears plausible. It is indisputable that 'at length his [Paul's] nun was indeed buried' (565) as Lucy narrates. Now Lucy's own 'nun,' however, is destined to inhabit the pitch-dark of her heart. Her real feeling of bewilderment surpasses that caused by Gothic fear.

Having discussed duality conceived in both the Gothic atmosphere of *Villette* and Lucy Snowe's consciousness, I would like now to address the duality of the problematic ending of *Villette*. Duality, coupled with Charlotte's strategy of creating aftershocks, causes the work's uniqueness to become even more conspicuous by the novel's conclusion.

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.

Madame Beck prospered all the days of her life; so did Peré Silas; Madame Walravens fulfilled her ninetieth year before she died. Farewell. (596)

This paragraph in actuality contains some aspects of ‘double-voicedness,’¹⁴ to use Bakhtin’s term, because Charlotte distances herself from the language of her own work and speaks ‘as it were, through language, a language that has somehow more or less materialized, become objectivized, that [she] merely ventriloquates.’¹⁵ As a result, Charlotte’s discourse here ‘not only represents, but is *itself* represented.’¹⁶ The truth of the ending of *Villette* hangs suspended between life and death. Reader concern for the fate of Paul Emanuel as a major character is forcibly subordinated to that of minor characters like Peré Silas and Madame Walravens, who as obstacles to the protagonist’s happiness, have not been portrayed to elicit reader sympathy. From a rhetorical point of view, *paralipsis* (an alteration that consists in giving less information than should presumably be given in terms of the focalization code governing a narrative) is suddenly shifted to *paralepsis* (an alteration that consists in giving more information than should presumably be given in terms of the focalization code governing a narrative). There occurs a slight fissure, as it were, a quasi-anticlimax.

It may be worth pointing out in passing that Charlotte’s rhetoric reminds us of Jane Austen’s lukewarm treatment of the fate of one of her protagonists, Lady

Susan. Austen’s ambiguous attitude in dealing with the conclusion of *Lady Susan* seems a challenge even to the reader. After Austen focuses her narration on Susan’s happiness (or unhappiness), at the critical final moment she dodges the subject by substituting her sympathies for the person and costumes of a subordinate character for which readers have built little interest, Miss Manwaring.

Whether Lady Susan was, or was not happy in her second Choice—I do not see how it can ever be ascertained—for who would Take her assurance of it, on either side of the question? The World must judge from Probability. She had nothing against her, but her Husband, & her Conscience. . . . For myself, I confess that *I* can pity only Miss Manwaring, who coming to Town & putting herself to an expence in Cloathes [*sic.*], which impoverished her for two years, on purpose to secure him, was defrauded of her due by a Woman ten years older than herself. ¹⁷ (313)

Let us return to our main subject, Charlotte’s rhetoric: her tendency of ‘double-voicedness’ can be seen not only in her fiction but also in her epistolary writing

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With regard to that momentous point M. Paul’s fate, in case any one in future should request to be enlightened thereon, he may be told that it was designed that every reader should settle the catastrophe for himself, according to

the quality of his disposition, the tender or remorseless impulse of his nature. Drowning and Matrimony are the fearful alternatives. The merciful . . . will of course choose the former and milder doom—drown him to put him out of pain. The cruel-hearted will, on the contrary pitilessly impale him on the second horn of the dilemma, marrying him without truth or compunction to that—person—that—that—individual—Lucy Snowe.’¹⁸

The choice between ‘Matrimony’ and ‘Drowning’ is critical to determining happiness. Charlotte confesses that both cases are ‘fearful alternatives,’ which may also be called *strange alternatives* if we consider the two choices. According to Charlotte, those who choose ‘Drowning’ are ‘the merciful’ while those who prefer ‘Matrimony’ are ‘the cruel-hearted.’ There is a slight fissure in the declaration at the end of *Villette*, ‘Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope.’ The meanings here begin to quaver; to which group does ‘quiet, kind heart’ belong: ‘the merciful,’ or ‘the cruel-hearted’?

Even in her personal letters, the author maintains a posture of duality (a rather aggressive and challenging duality), but this might be owing to her *thoughtfulness*. As to Paul’s fate, she declared in a letter written at the time: ‘Since the little puzzle amuses the ladies, it would be a pity to spoil their sport by giving them the key.’¹⁹ Charlotte’s consideration of her readers can be understood as either harmlessness or abandonment. Either way, readers are

attracted, charmed and dazzled, as well as lost.

This problematic ending of *Villette* has stimulated and roused various arguments among critics. For example, while Terry Eagleton remarks, ‘In the end, *Villette* has neither the courage to be tragic nor to be comic,’²⁰ he does realize its ‘alienation-effect,’ as he says, ‘. . . the ending of *Villette* with its sudden alienation-effect, destroys at a stroke that innocence, that pretence of a fiction unconscious of its own fictionality.’²¹ He shows even more insight when he sees through Charlotte’s disclosure of her fictionality.

. . . the veil stripped from the novelistic pose. Yet fiction is exposed for what it is only to be endorsed, relied on, reinstated: the novel has recourse to its own fictional status in order to half-evade the outcome threatened by its ‘real’ subject-matter. . . . The ending, then, half-suppresses tragedy while simultaneously protesting against such a maneuver. It confesses the emptiness of the tactic while emotionally investing in it, displaying both the falsehood and propriety, the urgency and impotence, of the move it makes.²²

Eagleton also perceives the duality in Charlotte’s treatment of Paul’s destiny of life or death. That is, the author’s suppression of tragedy suggests that it is rather ‘the paucity of such a tactic’ that we are expected to read under the surface of Charlotte’s pious appeal to ‘fancy.’ It is significant that Eagleton takes up the term

‘sunny imagination’ as a kind of impetus, a key word with which he starts an investigation into the duality of Charlotte’s strategies as well as the duality of meaning.

‘Sunny imaginations’ might indeed prompt such a reading; for ‘sunny’ is associated in this novel with the Brettons’ life-style, and so evokes the secret *Villette* is on the side not of sunniness but of catastrophe and despair; so it is odd, almost oxymoronic, to find this phrase in the penultimate paragraph.²³

At the end of *Villette*, Lucy is silent. Even internal discourse does not exist here. If there exists a *force of inertia* in the process of reading action, then the notion of ‘sunny,’ which is associated with Bretton by Eagleton, has already been subverted by Lucy in her internal discourse.—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—.

In this essay, I have discussed from the viewpoint of ‘duality’ Lucy’s consciousness, Charlotte’s new Gothic and the problematic ending of *Villette*. This has led to a consideration of the reverberations conceived in such duality. Eagleton indicates the ‘paucity’ of Charlotte’s tactics, which seems to have some subtle connection to the consequent reverberations. It is not in spite of such ‘paucity’ but because of it that we sense the duality in these reverberations. It is also

here that Charlotte’s ‘internally persuasive discourse’²⁴ lives in unfettered freedom.

Notes:

11. Samuel Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, vol. 2, edited by James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 6.
12. Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion, The Novels of Jane Austen*, vol.5, edited by W. R. Chapman (1923; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 197.
13. Elihu Hubbard Smith, *The Diary of Elihu Hubbard Smith* (28 June 1796), edited by James E. Cronin (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1973), p. 182. Though I do not necessarily agree with his opinion, it is undeniable that *The Mysteries of Udolpho* gave such an impression to Radcliffe’s contemporary and still tends to give a similar impression to some degree today.
14. Bakhtin, p.356.
15. *Ibid.*, p.299.
16. *Ibid.*, p.336.
17. Austen, ‘Lady Susan,’ *The Novels of Jane Austen*, vol.6, edited by W. R. Chapman (1954; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p.313.
18. Brontë, ‘To George Smith,’ 26 March 1853, *Correspondence*, vol. 4, pp. 55-56.
19. Brontë, ‘To W. S. Williams,’ March 1853, *Correspondence*, vol. 4, p. 54.
20. Terry Eagleton, *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of The Brontës*, 2nd edition (1975; Houndmills: Macmillan, 1988), p. 73.
21. *Ibid.*, p.92.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*
24. Bakhtin, p.346.