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**Between two Episodes of an Eastern Tale: Charlotte
Brontë as a Self-conscious Artist**

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Abstract

This article is a reaction against the Brontë criticism that tends to read Charlotte Brontë's works either within a biographical context or a reactionary objective framework. Both critical streams delay concurrence to the march of literary theory and criticism. Only recently have critics paid attention to Brontë's consciousness of her role as an artist. To this evolving direction in Brontë criticism I wish to contribute by examining the author's borrowing of a certain episode in an Eastern tale. Brontë's borrowing is significant because she ignores an episode that has obvious parallels with her protagonist's experience and chooses a second episode that seems to have none. The choice is indicative of a self-conscious attitude on Brontë's part and it addresses two types of reader. The first reader is familiar with the Eastern tale and Brontë exploits this fact to engage him in the act of creating the text. The second reader is a potential for a forthcoming reading of the tale. His activity would be an imaginative recollection of Brontë's novel in the future presence of the Eastern tale. Brontë's concern with her reader reveals her wish to draw attention to her skill and honesty as an artist. She works in deliberate awareness of self, text and

reader. She is a self-conscious artist whose consciousness critics have neglected over a decade.

Reading Charlotte Brontë's novel *Villette* as an act of self-conscious art that takes into account the reader's relationship with the text, is a relatively recent matter in the Brontë criticism. Both biographical interpretation and anti-biographical reaction to it have prolonged their sojourn in readings of this novel and delayed, almost a decade, an inevitable concurrence to the march of literary theory and criticism.¹ While biographical criticism has continued to emphasize Brontë's involvement in the text of *Villette* in a traditional manner, anti-biographical reaction has geared analysis toward objective scrutiny of textual elements and idealized Brontë's detachment from her text in a New Critical fashion.² Only recently have critics introduced without subjugation to, or fear of, biography discussions of Brontë's consciousness of her role as an artist into readings of *Villette*.³ To this recent trend in Brontë criticism I wish to contribute.

The reactionary attitude to biographical readings of *Villette* is exemplified by Robert Colby's assertion, early in the sixties, that *Villette* is Brontë's "literary not her literal autobiography" (39).⁴ Ironically, the statement points out the critics' inability to free themselves from biographical background in reading *Villette*. This failing has resulted in a continued appearance, up to the eighties, of biographically oriented pieces of criticism and in an inability of many objective pieces to maintain detachment from biography. Both types of readings emphasize text as an extension of the author's personal life and ignore it as an expression of an artistic consciousness that takes into account the reader's participation in the act of creating the text.⁵

Examples of biographically oriented studies of *Villette* that continued to make an appearance after Colby's statement are

Janice Carlisle's and Shirely Foster's source studies of the novel. ⁶ Carlisle traces the circumstances of Brontë's composition of *Villette* back to her reading of three autobiographical works published at a time when she was seriously considering further artistic output. According to Carlisle, the works that Brontë read at that time were: *The Prelude*, *In Memoriam* and *David Copperfield*. Carlisle claims that "these first-person narratives were all suited to evoke quite specific memories of her own experience" (410). And because *The Prelude* is the most influential of the three works, Carlisle goes on to affirm biographical affinities between Wordsworth and Brontë: "Like Wordsworth, Brontë had spent two crucial years on the Continent; like him, she found her enforced return to England a time of despair and disillusionment" (412). And equally traditional and personal in orientation, Foster's study is. According to this critic, Brontë has read Julia Kavanagh's novel *Nathalie* at a time when her "imaginative resources were at their lowest ebb" and the reading has "re-awakened her Brussels' memories" (183). Such memories find their outlet in *Villette*.

Examples of similar personal emphasis in supposedly objective pieces of criticism are numerous, but it suffices in passing to point out Mary Jacobus' study as an example of the type. While taking for granted Brontë's detachment from her novel by attacking any sign of defense of this author's "unmediated relationship" with her text, Jacobus cannot liberate her own assessment of *Villette* from biographical references. For example, she claims that some characters in the novel are "animated by a wish-fulfillment which it is surely justifiable to see as Charlotte Brontë's own" (238). Indeed, the frequent parallels drawn between Brontë and her protagonist, Lucy Snowe, in many other readings of *Villette* demonstrates the critics' inability to free Brontë criticism from biographical background and references. ⁷

However, more ironic than this failing of anti-biographical criticism, its success is. Success gives rise to an objective mode of analysis that attempts to annihilate Brontë's presence from the text altogether. This objective mode takes two major forms. It either picks up elements of style, theme, technique or character to scrutinize them away from Brontë's consciousness, or emphasize the author's detachment from the feelings and the experience of her protagonist as a sign of self-mastery and control. Needless to say that in the middle of objective handling of textual elements Brontë's consciousness is often neglected and her reader's presence is equally forgotten and with the emphasis on the author's detachment her awareness of reader-text relationship lies neglected.

Away from Brontë's consciousness and in a purely objective preoccupation with stylistic devices in *Villette*, Robert Heilman, for example, explores Brontë's practice at "four identifiable nodes of style" (223).⁸ Nina Auerbach, for another example, traces Brontë's development "from romance to psychology from myth into modernism" by depending on objective critical categories that fail to investigate the working of the author's consciousness (342).⁹ And when Jean Blackall takes a more positive step in that direction, she undermines her laudable insights by similar subjugation to objective categorizing. According to Blackall, Lucy is "a reminiscent narrator" who does not "anticipate her own discovery for the reader" mainly because Brontë is "fulfilling that self-imposed allegiance to realistic representation characteristic of her attitude toward fiction" (1: 24). Similarly, when this critic asserts that Brontë is a "highly conscious artist rather than one given to spontaneous effusion," she uses the assertion only to explain Brontë's reaction to Dickens's heroine in *Bleak House* "who is a caricature of amiability and not a realistic perception of character formed by environment" (2:371). The attention that these critics pay to Brontë's text does not

venture into the realm of artistic consciousness.¹⁰ And their commentary on Brontë's manipulation of her text neglects her awareness of the reader in the text.

This oblivion of Brontë's consciousness takes a more intense form in the critics' over-emphasis of Lucy Snowe's role in *Villette*. In the midst of such emphasis Brontë's presence is often forgotten and her relationship with the reader remains undeveloped.¹¹ Lucy Snowe becomes "the supreme novelist" and an "exemplar of the Romantic artist who creates his own reality in an ambiguous universe" (Hoveler 30). To the same pedestal Carlisle also assigns Lucy when she claims that "Lucy's imagination," not Brontë's, "has Wordsworthian power and status" (423). Indeed, the extended argument around Lucy's reliability and unreliability as a narrator is part of the objective treatment of *Villette* that neglects the author's consciousness by failing to investigate her manipulative power behind her textual moves.¹²

Although the emphasis on Brontë's detachment, frequently encountered in critical assessment of *Villette*, denotes an improvement on the neglect she suffered in the midst of the critics' attention to Lucy Snowe and might suggest critical attention to her role as an artist, such emphasis is governed by the same fear of biography and avoids investigation of her involvement in *Villette*. Hence, it remains part of the prolonged objective treatment of the novel that neglects the author's sensitivity to the reader in her text.

Examples of the critics' commitment to the ideal of detachment are numerous. One of them occurs in Blackall's claim that "Charlotte Brontë reached a degree of personal detachment and artistic control unprecedented in her earlier works, despite the fact that she was dealing with autobiographically inflammable

materials" (1:27). Her consciousness of biographical influence underlines Blackall's laudable insights on Brontë and, early on, Brontë's "modernity" in treating first-person narrator in *Villette* (1:18). And the attention to Brontë's detachment continues in subsequent readings of the novel. Jacobus praises Brontë's "deviousness" and Carlisle applauds the author's efforts to hide herself behind alter-egos and criticizes her inability to achieve Wordsworth's detachment, his ideal of "emotions recollected in tranquillity" in the following terms: "That Brontë ever achieved such faith or such tranquillity in *Villette* seems to me very doubtful" (418).

The various modes of objective approaches to *Villette* continue up to the late eighties that begin to witness a transitional stage before the onset of recent attention to Brontë's consciousness of her role as an artist and of her awareness of her reader's presence in the text.¹³ Of this stage Janet Freeman and Gregory O'Dea are representatives. Although she falls into the pit of objective treatment when she emphasizes Brontë's detachment and applauds Lucy's, not Brontë's, "narrative restrain," Freeman approximates contemporary readings when she takes "Charlotte Brontë's absence . . . much more absolute than ours" as an "unmistakable sign of Brontë's commitment to her subject" (507). Brontë's detachment and involvement begin to converge, significantly, in a non-biographical context. There is also a sensitivity in this article to the reader's presence in Brontë's artistic perspective though negatively indicated through emphasis on his absence from the text.¹⁴

The attention to Brontë's concern with the reader's response becomes more explicit in O'Dea's reading of *Villette*. He writes of Brontë's employment "of defensive animosity with sympathetic affinity" for the purpose of producing "complex levels of narrative technique and reader reaction" (56). Yet O'Dea falls into the

common pit of objective criticism by giving Lucy Snowe power and independence from her author. He discusses Lucy's power of "intentional disorientation" of her reader and fails to account for Brontë's role in Lucy's act (48). The protagonist's move remains unreconciled with the author's disorientation of her reader or what O'Dea calls Lucy's "unconscious disorientation, of the reader" (47).

The previous transitional stage in Brontë criticism gives way to full discussion of Brontë's consciousness of her role as an artist in the nineties. Its onset is signaled by references that distinguish between Brontë and her protagonist, Lucy Snowe. Syd Thomas, for example, asserts that "*Villette* is not *Lucy Snowe, An Autobiography*. *Villette* appears to be Brontë's choice for the title not Lucy Snowe's" (567). True to his "important distinction," Thomas overthrows Lucy from her pedestal when he becomes "skeptical" of her "analytical abilities" (572). In his reading, Lucy becomes as helpless as the reader in an equal subjugation to Brontë's manipulative power and control: "Charlotte Brontë writes another story than the one Lucy Snowe tells" (568). In bringing this other story out to light, Thomas reveals hidden facts about the inhabitants of *Villette* that escape the reader's attention because they are unknown to Lucy Snowe. The result of this double act of narration is the presence of "double understanding" operating in *Villette* "Lucy's and the reader's" (570). The argument of reliable versus unreliable narrator, Thomas, thus, resolves into a case of "deliberate . . . equivocation in the text" (570) and into a testimony to Brontë's power of creating a "narrative strategy of unconscious revelation" (575). Brontë becomes, in his argument, a self conscious artist who subjugates both text and reader to her manipulative power and control.

The attention to Brontë's consciousness of her role as an artist finds echoes in other critics of the nineties. Francesca Kazan treats the issue in an almost "art for art's sake" fashion when she

claims that "description in *Villette* defies its supposed function ---that of making something somehow visible to the reader" (547). Description, thus, becomes more of a "frame, " "like those gilded baroque creations so common to nineteenth century paintings, where the frame seems to compete with what it contains" (550). Furthermore, descriptive passages, Kazan asserts, are "placed there almost at authorial whim for the pleasure of display" (549). Such activity on Brontë's part "gives the reader a freedom to fantasize and to poetize the object" (549). And in "doing so the reader is turned from being a reader and a listener into a contemplator" (549). Brontë becomes, in recent assessments of *Villette* , a self-conscious artist who wishes to draw the reader ' s attention to, and to involve him in, her act of creation.

Other signs of the critics' interest in Brontë as a self-conscious artist are present in their discernment of art related themes in *Villette* . Thomas, for example, shows Brontë as concerned in the novel with the question of communication: "the text is partially concerned with the disguises and veils inherent in communication" (568). Kazan, for another example, considers her as mainly "problematizing the act of representation" (544). In short, Brontë ' s self-effacing attitude, implied in the critics ' emphasis on her submissive concurrence to realistic and conventional methods of narration, finally changes in recent criticism into self assertive presence . Brontë figures as a self-conscious artist voicing the artist's dilemmas and manipulating her text in a way that involves her reader in those dilemmas .

Within this evolving direction in Brontë criticism I propose to investigate Brontë ' s borrowing of an Eastern tale from the Arabian nights: "the story of the vizirs Nur ed-Din and Shems ed-Din" (Gerhart 19) . ¹⁵ Posed between two episodes of miraculous transportation of the tale ' s protagonist, and wishing to indulge her heroine in a similar luxury, Brontë ignores the first episode of

obvious parallels with Lucy's moves and chooses the second even though it seems to have no affinity with Lucy 's case . The choice is curious and deserves attention not only because it would illuminate us on Brontë' s act of artistic creation, but also because it would throw light on her awareness of reader-text relationship during her act of writing *Villette* .

The act of borrowing occurs in *Villette* after the "long vacation" when Lucy falls unconscious on the doorsteps of a church in *Villette* and revives to find herself in the Bretton house. Assuming herself to be in England, Lucy speculates on her transportation in the following manner:

I thought of Bedriddin Hassan, transported in his sleep from Cairo to the gates of Damascus. Had a genius stooped his dark wing down the storm to whose stress I had succumbed and gathering me from the church-steps, and ' rising high into the air,' as the eastern tale said, had he borne me over land and ocean, and laid me quietly down beside a hearth of Old England? (240)

Brontë ' s lack of concern with parallels between Lucy ' s case and that of the tale ' s protagonist rests in the fact that Lucy is transported from a scene of suffering and deprivation into a scene of love, warmth and friendship, while Hassan is transported from a scene of love and consolation, the bed of his bride in Cairo, to a city unknown to him then, Damascus. He loses through transportation home and love to years of homeless rambling in that city. And the question that raises itself is why did Brontë make Lucy ' s home-coming to the Bretton house a parallel to Hassan ' s homelessness?

The question becomes more pressing in the presence of the first episode in the source that Brontë ignores despite its obvious

parallels with Lucy's moves.¹⁶ Crying the loss of father, home and position in the Caliph's court Hassan falls unconscious on his father's tomb, an event that recalls Lucy's distressful fall on the doorsteps of the church. A demon and a demoness content over the beauty of Hassan and his cousin in Cairo who is to be wed to a deformed hunchback. "So they carry him to Cairo to the wedding, partly to compare beauties, and partly to provide the girl with a worthier match" (Gerhart 297). There, he replaces the hunchback as a bridegroom for his cousin. In short, Hassan in the first episode is transported, just like Lucy, from a scene of loss and deprivation to a scene of love and fulfillment. All stress in both cases is relieved on transportation. However, Brontë ignores these parallels with the first episode and chooses the second. Hassan's transportation to homelessness in Damascus becomes her parallel to Lucy's reunion with the Brettons.

The curious choice brings into question not only Brontë's understanding but also her use of her source. Was Brontë's reading of her source so casual as to make her pick up the wrong episode? Was she simply interested in the miraculous act of transportation as to ignore other factors such as corresponding details and accuracy in presentation? Or did she make a deliberate artistic choice, for reasons of her own, a choice that could throw light on her relationship with both reader and text?

Textual signs that surround the act of borrowing testify to the presence of an artistic design and a choice that services the design and requires the reader's participation in it. It is part of Brontë's design that Lucy's emotional attachment to Graham Bretton remains unfulfilled. The choice in the Eastern tale should prefigure this lack of fulfillment for the reader early on. Hassan's homelessness in Damascus, in the second episode, becomes Brontë's subtle parallel to Lucy's emotional alienation from Graham Bretton.

The true light in which Lucy's miraculous transportation into the Bretton house should be viewed, then, is one of temporary reunion that will end in a painful realization that Graham Bretton is not in love with her. A lifelong feeling of alienation from his heart will soon develop: Lucy's transportation into the Bretton house is, therefore, an initiation into a state of homelessness in relationship to that family. The temporary state of warm friendship that she will first enjoy on that reunion will have the effect of intensifying the pain of separation and the subsequent alienation:

The change was right, just, natural; not a word could be said, but I loved my Rhine, my Nile; I had almost worshipped my Ganges, and I grieved that the grand tide should roll estranged, should vanish like a false mirage. I wept one sultry shower, heavy and brief.
(379)

The parallel with Lucy's alienation is, then, Hassan's homelessness when he is removed from his bride's bed into the cookshop in Damascus. The first episode of introduction to Cairo is, despite surface affinities, no parallel to Lucy's experience. Furthermore, Cairo is ultimately going to be Hassan's home in a way that the Bretton house is not to Lucy. Hassan will return, after years of homeless rambling in Damascus, to his wife and son (conceived on his wedding night and born during his absence). Hence, a borrowing of the first episode would have introduced Lucy to Cairo, Hassan's final home, while Brontë's borrowing of the second has introduced Lucy to Damascus, Hassan's city of homeless alienation from wife and son. The parallel to Damascus is the Bretton house. It is Lucy's Damascus not her Cairo. Brontë has observed these subtle parallels and preferred to preserve them in the act of writing *Villette*.

Brontë's choice addresses two types of reader. The first is a reader pre-exposed to the Eastern tale and the second is a potential reader for future exposure. For each Brontë has preserved, through her peculiar choice, a special form of interaction with her text. The first reader Brontë engages in game of subtlety that involves his foreknowledge of the Eastern tale in the act of reading, and the process of understanding, *Villette*. For the passive involvement of the second reader Brontë preserves a conscientious borrowing that would change his passivity, on a future exposure to the Eastern tale, into a form of imaginative participation in the text of *Villette*.

The game of subtlety in which Brontë engages her first reader depends on stimulating his mental powers and reawakening his knowledge of the Eastern tale for participation in the act of creating *Villette*. Pre-exposed to Hassan's homeless rambling in Damascus, Brontë's first reader is more than likely to anticipate Lucy's forthcoming alienation from Graham Bretton. He will not take Lucy's introduction to the Brettons at its face value. In placing this subtle demand on his mental faculties, Brontë turns her reader from a passive recipient of surface affinities and easily accessible details into a participant in the act of creation. Such active participation in the text of *Villette* will find its reward in the subsequent textual revelations of the novel. The reader's prefiguration of Lucy's future will be accurately realized during his act of reading *Villette* and Brontë's power as a subtle guide of her reader will then be discovered and appreciated.

Contrary to this successful game of subtlety, a choice of the first episode would have misled the reader into believing that the Bretton's is going to be Lucy's home, the way Cairo is to Hassan. Brontë would have abused her authority as an artist if she allowed a blind enslavement to surface details to distort her reader's anticipations of Lucy's future relationship with Graham Bretton. The unraveling of Lucy's story would have also contradicted, and disappointed, all false assumptions and anticipations. Brontë

figures as an artist fully aware of her obligations toward her reader and sensitively responsive to his needs and expectations.

Brontë's conscientious borrowing that she has preserved for the second reader would stimulate his imagination and reawaken his memories of Lucy's story in the presence of the Eastern tale. In this reversed form of active and imaginative participation in the text of *Villette*, this second reader will also discover another aspect of Brontë's power, her careful choice and conscientious borrowing. True to the situation in her act of borrowing, Brontë will receive in her reader's future reading of the Eastern tale full appreciation for her skill and honesty as an artist.

The two types of reader-text involvement that Brontë generates through her subtle choice and conscientious borrowing thus disclose not only her willingness to secure her reader's active participation in, or imaginative recollection of the text, but also her desire to draw this reader's attention to her skill and honesty as an artist.

Notes

1 Susan Suleiman (1980) identifies this march as a "shift in perspective" of 'literary theory and criticism' and discusses it in terms of an emergence of a reader oriented criticism. My contribution starts there but attempts to carry the issue to the realm of artistic consciousness where authors deliberately and self-consciously engage the reader in the act of creating the text.

2 Traditional in Guerin is historically and biographical oriented interpretation of literary texts and New Critical reaction to

it is objective interpretation that assumes the autonomy of the text and its independence from external matter especially the author's personal life.

3 "Recently" in my investigation and theorizing refers to the early nineties, though I find Gilbert and Gubar an exception to this, for their phenomenological reading of *Villette* appeared in 1979.

4 Even this anti-biographical reaction to *Villette* is late in coming into being for the New Critical movement begins in the early thirties.

5 Consciousness in this article takes Georges Poulet's meaning of pure mind and when a sense of deliberateness is involved I use the word "awareness".

6 Carlisle's is dated 1979 and Foster's 1982.

7 Examples of Lucy's identification with Brontë could be found in Carlisle and in Gilbert and Gubar.

8 This article is not Heilman's sole assessment of *Villette*, but the reason I quote it is to give example of this type of reading of the novel.

9 This article is also not Auerbach's sole response to *Villette* but I use it to give example of this type of objective handling of the novel.

10 Gilbert and Gubar (1979) are an exception to this theorizing for their phenomenological reading of the novel' claims that "Brontë produces not a literary object but a literature of self-consciousness" (439).

11 Even Gilbert and Gubar are no exception to this theorizing for their casual reference to "Brontë's anxiety about the effect of

her creativity on herself and others" (433) remains undeveloped in this article.

12 Robert Martin, Earl Kines and Mary Jacobus are some of the critics who see Lucy as unreliable and Carlisle comes into her defense by considering her an alter-ego that Brontë hides herself behind.

13 Needless to remind the reader of Gilbert and Gubar's exceptional position in this historical context.

14 Susan Suleinan emphasizes critical attention to the reader in the text not the author's sensitivity to the reader.

15 Despite Harold Bloom's attack on source hunters that has driven me away from source study when I wrote my dissertation on Charlotte Brontë, I think now that even source study can be developed and incorporated in this shift of critical perspective.

16 Gerhardt lists this story as one of the tales that occur in the original and, unlike the "orphan tales," remain unchanged. Hence, the details about first and second episode that I bring in and depend upon are correct.

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