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Being “Rightly Known”: Otherness and the Ethics of Reading
in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*

Tin Yan Grace Lee

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Being “Rightly Known”: Otherness and the Ethics of Reading in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*

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Master of Arts

Villette (1853), Charlotte Brontë’s last novel, is famously riddled with ambiguity: its narrator-protagonist, Lucy Snowe, avoids disclosing details about her childhood, fails to reveal to readers the identity of characters she recognizes from her past, and, at the end of the novel, refuses to confirm if her love interest, M. Paul, has died at sea after a storm. Believing Lucy’s ambiguous narrative style to be a tool she uses to train readers to better understand her, many critics have focused their efforts on trying to interpret Lucy’s silences and evasions “correctly,” thereby turning themselves into Lucy’s or Brontë’s “ideal” authorial readers. However, throughout her life, Lucy has resisted being read by people who assume they can fully know her and fit her into their worldview. Unwilling to impose her views on others, Lucy’s autobiography encourages readers to make their own meaning without deciphering how she intends for it to be read. In this way, she maintains that she is ultimately unknowable to her readers, just as they are to her, and preserves, rather than erases, the distance that exists between reader and author. By constructing an authorial reader who does not seek to think as Lucy does, *Villette* invites readers to enter into an ethical relationship with Lucy, one in which otherness is respected and intimacy is possible despite differences.

Keywords: ethics, reader response, otherness, authorial reader, narrator, silence, uncertainty, ambiguity, Charlotte Brontë

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Introduction

“Since the little puzzle amuses the ladies, it would be a pity to spoil their sport by giving them the key,” wrote Charlotte Brontë to her publisher William Smith Williams in response to some readers demanding to know what *really* happened at the end of *Villette* (qtd. in Gaskell 379). Indeed, ever since its publication in 1853, readers have been trying to figure out the puzzle that is Brontë’s last novel. *Villette* follows its protagonist and narrator, Lucy Snowe, on her lonesome journey to the fictional kingdom of Labassecour, where she finds employment as an English teacher at a boarding school and meets the passionate professor M. Paul Emanuel, her eventual love interest. As the author of a fictional autobiography, however, Lucy reveals surprisingly little about herself: she hesitates to disclose information about her appearance, her childhood, or characters important to her narrative. Most famously, at the end of the novel, she refuses to confirm if M. Paul, who has been away for three years and whose return promises happiness for her, has died in a shipwreck, creating what Alison Hoddinott calls “one of the most famously ambiguous endings in the English novel” (600). As unwilling as Brontë to give away the key to her story, Lucy is, as Hsiao-Hung Lee states, “a problematic text, a hidden puzzle” (59), and the main source of ambiguity in *Villette*.

Lucy’s tendency to conceal rather than confess has frustrated readers and critics alike since the novel’s publication. Julia Miele Rodas notes that Lucy has been variously described as “Hideous. Plaguy. Disagreeable. Manipulative. Frigid. Contemptuous. Passive-aggressive. Hostile” (129). This is because Lucy’s unwillingness to disclose information casts doubt on the events she does relate, leaving readers uncertain about whether the events truly happened, are lies, or are mere hallucinations. Instead of sharing all of Lucy’s secrets through her first-person narrative, readers find themselves facing an inexplicable other, and this sense of otherness often leads to feelings of being “cheated” (Rodas 129). As Mary Jacobus expresses, “Lucy lies to us.

Her deliberate ruses, omissions and falsifications break the unwritten contract of first-person narrative (the confidence between reader and ‘I’) and unsettle our faith in the reliability of the text” (42).

With the revival of ethical criticism in the 1970s and 1980s, however, unreliable narrators like Lucy began to be viewed in a more positive light. In *The Company We Keep*, which spearheaded the turn to ethics in literary criticism, Wayne C. Booth likens literary texts to “friends” or “gifts from would-be friends” (175). One of the criteria for evaluating the ethical quality of a text, according to Booth, is how strange or familiar it is to the reader; he clarifies, “It is not the degree of otherness that distinguishes fiction of the highest ethical kind but the depth of education it yields in *dealing with the ‘other’*” (195). Indeed, the term “ethics,” Patrocínio P. Schweickart and Elizabeth A. Flynn point out, now mainly refers to “one’s relationship with an other, to considerations of one’s duty with regard to someone or something outside oneself” (11).¹ Adopting the metaphor of reading as a textual encounter between “would-be friends,” critics engaged in ethical criticism consider one of literature’s most vital roles to be introducing the reader to the other, who, Emmanuel Levinas proposes, possesses a “radical heterogeneity” and cannot be assimilated to the self (36). Building on Levinas’s idea that the other is ultimately unknowable, Judith Butler explains that ambiguous or enigmatic texts facilitate an ethical training of the reader by asking them “to understand the limits of judgment and to cease judging . . . in a way that assumes [they] already know in advance what there is to be known” (208).² “[T]his suspension of judgment,” Butler asserts, brings readers closer to an ethics “that

¹ Schweickart and Flynn state that, while there are other definitions of ethics, the one given above has become the most prominent “under the influence of feminist criticism, postmodernism, and the work of Emmanuel Levinas” (11). It is this definition of ethics that I refer to in this essay.

² The example Butler uses here is Henry James’s *Washington Square*, which, like *Villette*, has an ambiguous ending that leaves the reader, “in a sense, exasperated, cursing, staring” (208).

honors what cannot be fully known or captured about the Other” (208). Agreeing with Butler, Dorothy Hales argues that the alterity presented by a literary text provides “a training in the honoring of Otherness, which is the defining ethical property of the novel” (189). From this perspective, a narrator’s unreliability is a sign of his or her alterity instead of an intentional breach of trust in the narrator-reader relationship, and it serves an important ethical function.

The significance of this idea for *Villette* is that rather than being a source of frustration, Lucy’s reticence, ambivalence, and even her deception—all signs of her unknowable otherness—can be read as ethically productive; they counterintuitively allow her to express herself in ways she otherwise cannot. Kristen Pond asserts that “Lucy’s silences can create an ethical way of encountering difference because silence proliferates meaning and preserves uncertainty” (773). By withholding information, Lucy invites readers to push past “the unethical impulse to assimilate the other’s difference into categories that are familiar and comfortable” and to identify with her despite the “differences that may exceed [their] understanding” (Pond 773–74). Lucy Hanks agrees, writing, “Instead of ‘evasions’ that antagonize the reader, [Lucy’s] silences can be read as the female writer’s reclamation of power within her narrative and use of the very means of oppression as a mode of meaning production” (443).³

In explicating how Lucy⁴ produces meaning, critics inevitably also describe her reader, the intended recipient of her narrative and the person who will be ethically influenced by her silence. This intended, or “authorial,” reader, Peter J. Rabinowitz explains, is created by the

³ In their seminal 1979 *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar interpret Lucy’s evasions as attempts to break free from patriarchal oppression and to gain control over her own voice and identity. Since then, however, many critics have pointed out that Lucy’s evasions *are* part of her voice. See, for example, Helen H. Davis’s discussion of “circumnarration” (203).

⁴ While Lucy is not to be conflated with Brontë, the actual author of *Villette*, it is her authorship of her autobiography that is pertinent to this essay.

author based on his or her assumptions about the audience's "beliefs, knowledge, and familiarity with conventions" (21). For this reason, the authorial reader is capable of responding perfectly to the demands of the text.⁵ Commonly assumed to be "the work's ideal interpreter" (Suleiman 8), the authorial reader differs from the actual reader, "the flesh-and-blood [person] who read[s] the book" (Rabinowitz 20), in that it is a mental or textual construct. In the process of reading, critics theorize, the actual reader learns to respond more competently to the text and thus goes through what Wolfgang Iser calls "a kind of transformation," becoming more like the authorial reader (*Implied* 30). E. D. Hirsch even asserts that it is the actual reader's ethical responsibility to "respect an author's intention" and to read a text as the author intends for it to be read (92).

Most critics of *Villette* agree with this conception of the reading process and argue that Lucy's narrative trains her readers, in Luann McCracken Fletcher words, "to read as Lucy—and Brontë—would have [them] read" (737). Brenda R. Silver observes that in the process of filling in the gaps left by Lucy's silence, Lucy's diverse readers merge into one as they learn to "perceive her on her own terms" (91).⁶ In other words, Lucy "creates an audience who learns to read her narrative" (Silver 104). Similarly, Hanks believes that the ambiguity of the ending of *Villette* allows Brontë to exclude the "relatively naïve reader" who can picture M. Paul's safe return and to appeal "to her ideal reader and takes them into her confidence" (449). Pond, too, argues that Lucy "pursues the ideal reader," a reader "who can go along with a story that does not fit into a traditional paradigm" (786). Envisioning Lucy's authorial reader as someone who

⁵ Iser describes a similar entity as an "implied reader" who "embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect" (*Implied* 34). The authorial or implied reader is not identical to the ideal reader, which Iser defines as a person who has "an identical code to that of the author" and is therefore "a structural impossibility" (*Implied* 28-29).

⁶ Iser sees gaps in a text as points for the reader to enter the narrative and make connections, thereby "creating the configurative meaning of what he is reading" (*Implied* 40). In this sense, leaving things unsaid is part of the author's "cunning stratagems to nudge the reader . . . into making the 'right' discoveries" (*Implied* xiv).

fully comprehends her alterity, who does not object to her gaps and silences, these critics believe that Lucy's narrative strategy leads her actual readers closer to this ideal.

However, I find the assumption that Lucy's authorial reader is someone who will come to share "an identical code" (Iser, *Act* 29) with her problematic. It suggests that Lucy envisions and constructs her narrative in such a way that the reader most capable of interpreting the text is one who agrees with her and comes to see and think as she does. In ethical terms, this implies an attempt on Lucy's part to collapse the distance between herself and her readerly others, the distance on which the ethical function of the novel is predicated. If Lucy's goal is to lead actual readers to "rightly know" how they should interpret her narrative and to exclude those who do not, then her narrative cannot act as "an agent of the reader's ethical education" (Hale 189), as doing so would eliminate the otherness it is supposed to teach readers to honor. Lucy's silence cannot, as Pond claims, invite "the other into an ethical relationship that respects rather than fears difference" (778), if it removes the difference between actual readers and Lucy. Even though Booth suggests "the most successful reading" occurs when the author and the authorial reader "find complete agreement" (*Rhetoric* 138), to see Lucy's authorial reader—the "ideal" towards which the actual reader works—as someone who agrees with her completely would undermine the ethical potential of the novel.

I submit that Lucy's authorial reader is not, as critics have suggested, someone who intuitively how she wants to be read and forms an interpretation of her accordingly but someone who, acknowledging Lucy's effort to accommodate otherness, responds to it by reading her in ways that do not pursue the removal of her difference and their own. Reflecting her conviction of the inviolable alterity of the other, Lucy's narrative presents ethical reading as a process that creates intimacy while preserving the otherness of herself and her readers, and the narrative

decisions she makes surprisingly maintain, rather than reduce, the distance between these two parties. To demonstrate this, I will first turn my attention to Lucy's lifelong experiences of reading and being read, on which her conception of an ethical reading is founded. Some of these readings are negative, alienating and antagonizing the other, while others are positive, allowing Lucy to form unexpected, fulfilling friendships. In experiencing both, Lucy learns the importance of letting the other remain other. I will follow this by exploring how Lucy's experiences of reading fictional others translate into her autobiography, through which she enters into a relationship with her actual readers. Understanding that "flesh-and-blood" readers will and, indeed, should read her in a variety of conflicting ways, Lucy proposes that ideality does not need to be sameness; it may, instead, depend on a willingness to concede that there are differences between the self and the other. By constructing an unusual authorial reader, one who paradoxically agrees with the author by not coming into complete agreement with her, *Villette* offers a new way to imagine the relationship of reader and author, one that anticipates many of the questions concerning the ethics of reading that would be put forward more than a century after Brontë's death.

Reading Unethically: Discomfort and Resistance

In *Scenes of Reading*, Nancy Cervetti proclaims that "*Villette* is all about reading" (71). Whether it is Lucy observing the people around her, or other characters watching Lucy, acts of reading the other fill the pages of the novel. Many of these readings fail ethically because they are rooted in a desire to confirm one's prejudices rather than to know the other. Projecting one's assumption of what the other should be onto the other, such readings do not respect the other's difference from the self. Lucy often feels uncomfortable, angry, and defiant when being read in this manner. Informing Lucy precisely how she does not want to be read and offering readers

examples of unethical readings, these negative experiences of being read must act as the starting point of any study of Lucy's relationship with her readers.

In many ways, *Villette* incorporates the idea that people, like books, have inner lives that need to be deciphered from the outside, an idea that, Sally Shuttleworth argues, corresponds with "the concomitant rise of medical psychiatry as a science" in the nineteenth century (9).

Proposing that the "book of the self was not laid open for all to read" (Shuttleworth 9), this concept highlights the unknowability of the other, reflecting a distance between people that necessitates acts of reading. In particular, Lucy exemplifies the model of a concealed self. Leaving England after an unspecified loss and traveling to a foreign country where she lives among strange people who speak a language she doesn't understand, Lucy exists as an outsider throughout most of the novel and, therefore, remains a closed book to those around her, just as they are to her. Furthermore, Lucy is intensely private and prefers to keep her thoughts and emotions hidden. For example, after realizing that a certain "Dr. John" whom she discovers in Labassecour is in fact Graham Bretton, the son of her godmother and a person she knew well in her youth, Lucy does not disclose this knowledge to her readers for a few chapters. She explains this odd choice, saying, "To *say* anything on the subject, to *hint* at my discovery, had not suited my habits of thought, or assimilated with my system of feeling. On the contrary, I had preferred to keep the matter to myself" (245, emphasis original). True to her "habits of thought" and "system of feeling," Lucy also refuses to reveal her identity to Dr. John when she realizes he hasn't recognized her. "There is a perverse mood of the mind which is rather soothed than irritated by misconstruction," Lucy admits, "and in quarters where we can never be rightly known, we take pleasure, I think, in being consummately ignored" (165). In short, when the "perverse mood" hits, especially when she believes she cannot be "rightly known" or accurately

read by another person, Lucy's tendency is to close down rather than to open herself to a potentially flawed reading.

Despite Lucy's wish to stay hidden, however, her "closed-book" character both begs to be read and all but ensures that she will be read inaccurately or incompletely. Not surprisingly, Lucy often finds such attempts to read her invasive and presumptuous. One of the most persistent readers of Lucy is M. Paul, who is called upon to read Lucy on the night she arrives at the city of Villeite. Having lost her luggage and her way, Lucy is desperate to find lodging for the night when she knocks at Madame Beck's door and begs for a roof and a job. Because Lucy has no references and speaks no French, Madame Beck is wary, fearing she'll read Lucy's character incorrectly. So she consults her cousin M. Paul, skilled in physiognomy, to decide if she should take Lucy in. "Read that countenance," Madame Beck demands (131). Lucy recounts this most literal experience of being read: "The little man fixed on me his spectacles: A resolute compression of the lips, and gathering of the brow, seemed to say that he meant to see through me, and that a veil would be no veil for him" (131). Whether Lucy wants to be unveiled does not matter; her value and her fate depend on M. Paul's reading of her. Knowing this, Lucy calls M. Paul the "vague arbiter of [her] destiny" (132), showing her uneasiness at being placed in the vulnerable position of being completely under the mercy of M. Paul's viewing eye. At the same time, Lucy rejects the idea that her true character may be revealed through a reading of her face. M. Paul overly short reply to Madame Beck's request—"I read it" (131), meaning Lucy's countenance—makes the premise of physiognomy sound absurd. Lucy also notes that M. Paul never directly answers Madame Beck's question about whether she is "bad or good" (132); he says she is "of each kind" (132), a "judgment" Lucy finds to be "indefinite" at best (132). Thus,

Lucy believes that M. Paul's reading, despite leaving her feeling exposed and powerless, fails to unveil her; it is an invasive but inaccurate attempt to get to know her.

Nevertheless, M Paul becomes convinced that he has read Lucy accurately and completely, in large part because he sees what he wants to see in her: a distasteful foreignness that represents everything he is not. He declares, "I know you! I know you! . . . I scrutinized your face once, and it sufficed" (224). Fixed in his first impression of Lucy, M. Paul continues watching her through his critical lens. While he conjectures that there is both good and bad in her after their first meeting, for a long time afterwards, all M. Paul can see in Lucy is the bad. Judging her to be one of the most "peculiar English women" he has met (270), he finds fault in her perceived lack of femininity, her intellect, as well as her Protestantism. In every way, Lucy defies M. Paul's conception of what a woman should be, and so he renounces her intellect as a "freak of nature" (427), her tenacity as "devilish pride" (430), and her rejection of the Catholic tract he gives her as accompanied by "Lucifer[']s" smile (491). These words signal M. Paul's view of Lucy as someone entirely opposite to his belief system and his aversion to Lucy's otherness. As a result of this aversion, M. Paul's reading of Lucy frequently comes with judgment and unsolicited advice on how she should conduct herself, causing her to turn away because "his presence utterly displeased" her (303). This shows how an unethical reading, built on one's conviction in the correctness of one's views, can lead to feelings of antagonism between the self and the other.

The problematic nature of M. Paul's early reading of Lucy is further reflected in his secret observation of her, readings that allow him to construct her character in a manner that fulfills his expectations and assumptions without her contestation. Madame Beck runs her *pensionnat* on "surveillance" and "espionage" (137), and M. Paul participates in this system by

renting a room that watches over the school's garden.⁷ "There I sit and read for hours together," he admits, but by "reading," he means "watching Lucy": "My book is this garden; its contents are human nature . . . I know you well" (436). When Lucy discovers that M. Paul has been spying on her, she admonishes him, saying, "Discoveries made by stealth seem to me dishonourable discoveries" (436). They are invasive and one-sided, preventing the observer from developing an accurate understanding of the observed. Allowing him to believe he has full knowledge of her, M. Paul's surveillance of Lucy prevents him from seeking to form an impression of her that is not based on his presumptions; it is, Amanda Anderson asserts, "[a] fundamentally limited form of power, [which] mistakes evidence for knowledge" (53).⁸ Thus, Lucy complains that M. Paul has "a vigilant, piercing, and often malicious eye," noting that "he could not be brought to accept the homely truth, and take me for what I was" (427). Instead, his intention is to prove a "fixed idea" (427) he has about her, which takes precedence over learning the "homely truth" of Lucy's character. Unwilling to accept Lucy for who she is, M. Paul has invented an image of her based on his assumption of what she should be, essentially obliterating her otherness by replacing it with something he feels he understands.⁹

Despite her hatred of this type of unethical reading, Lucy starts the novel doing the very same thing, reading others in secret and projecting upon them her own version of who they ought

⁷ Madame Beck is not above going through people's belongings, spying on them with mirrors, and eavesdropping on conversations, to get the information she wants. As Lucy remarks, the school she runs "was a strange house, where no corner was sacred from intrusion, where not a tear could be shed, nor a thought pondered, but a spy was at hand to note and to divine" (302).

⁸ Here, Anderson is referring to Madame Beck's system of surveillance, the "immutable purpose" of which is to find "shortcomings" in the objects under her gaze (135). Watching Lucy secretly to prove his assumptions of her, M. Paul looks for the same "limited form of power" (Anderson 53).

⁹ Dr. John, whose impression of Lucy never moves beyond an "inoffensive shadow" (388), also replaces the real Lucy with an image he has created in his mind. She expresses "extreme weariness" of this reading of her, saying, "[it] was the coldness and the pressure of lead" (388). Her words prove the crushing distress an unethical reading can cause the other.

to be. For the first three chapters of *Villette*, Lucy, a self-professed “looker-on at life” (210), lurks in the background and watches little Paulina, who has come, like Lucy, to stay with the Brettons. She confesses that she has gained “amusement” from this “study of character” (94), an admission that Lee claims reduces the younger girl to “a ‘text’ to be read and analyzed” (66). Lucy’s observations of Paulina are certainly “voyeuristic in nature” (Lee 66), not much different from M. Paul’s surveillance of her. Indeed, Lucy’s first reading of Paulina embodies many of the same characteristics of M. Paul’s reading of her. This is perhaps most evident when Lucy defines herself as the opposite of the little girl. Twice when Paulina displays homesickness, Lucy expresses disapproval, saying “I, Lucy Snowe, plead guiltless of that curse, an overheated and discursive imagination” (77), and “I, Lucy Snowe, was calm” (86). Not only is Lucy’s definition of herself against Paulina tinted with condescension, but, confident in the superiority of her view, Lucy proceeds to tell Paulina she needs to hide her “likes and dislikes” (98) and to exercise “self-command” (99)—in short, to become more like Lucy.¹⁰ Based on her own biases, Lucy’s first reading of Paulina only succeeds in finding fault in the other, flaws that Lucy deems must be removed.

Lucy’s initial reading of M. Paul is equally critical. For a great part of the novel, M. Paul appears irredeemably disagreeable to Lucy, an other who differs from her in every meaningful way. She describes him as “a harsh apparition, with his close-shorn, black head, his broad, sallow brow, his thin cheek, his wide and quivering nostril, his thorough glance, and hurried

¹⁰ Many critics have noted that different characters in *Villette* act as extensions or doubles of Lucy. Anderson, for instance, states that some characters “have the air of shadow selves haunting the narrator” (49). Janice M. Carlisle also argues that in *Villette*, “each of the major characters becomes an objectified version of Lucy’s personality or experience . . . a hall of mirrors in which . . . they serve as facets reflecting the affective truth of Lucy’s life” (279). Lucy’s early reading of Paulina demonstrates how the projecting of the self onto the other can lead to the unethical practice of demanding the other to conform to the self’s value system.

bearing” (196). Her far-from-favorable impression of his appearance impacts her assessment of his character, and she concludes that he is a “dark little man . . . pungent and austere” (196). Unable to see past her prejudice, Lucy shows no intention of understanding or honoring M. Paul’s difference from her. For instance, when M. Paul tells Lucy that it is inappropriate for her, an unmarried woman, to look at a sexualized painting of Cleopatra, Lucy “assured him plainly [she] could not agree in this doctrine, and did not see the sense of it,” and then concludes: “A more despotic little man than M. Paul never filled a professor’s chair” (272). Until she is able to see him in a comprehensive way, beyond the irritable and capricious man she thinks he is, M. Paul remains an undesirable and inapproachable other to Lucy.

Unethical readings of the other, as the examples above demonstrate, fail to honor the other’s alterity. Instead, they expose the other against their will, overlook crucial parts of their character, and work to change who they are. In order to fit the other into the self’s value system, these readings seek to remove the other’s otherness by superimposing over it a vision of what they “should” be: more Catholic, in M. Paul’s perception of Lucy, or more stoic, in Lucy’s perception of Paulina. Finding these experiences painful and aggravating, Lucy often evades and even misleads those trying to read her, even as she imposes the same pain and aggravation on others. Anderson points out that Lucy “reacts to those who intrude their powers of scrutiny upon her by attempting to shield or distance herself, wary of the perpetual threat of failed intimacy and the acute potential of misrecognition” (48). Thus, instead of allowing Lucy’s observers to gain a better understanding of her, their unethical acts of reading in fact alienate her, just as she alienates others with her inaccurate readings of them. In both cases, a failure to allow others to remain other hinders the development of meaningful relationships.

Reading Ethically: Evolution and Uncertainty

In the repeated process of being read unethically, Lucy is not only frustrated by these insincere attempts to know her, but she also develops an awareness of her own unknowability as she believes people who read her this way fail to uncover her true self. Realizing the limit of others' ability to know her, Lucy is forced to face the limit of her own ability to know others. She begins to reevaluate her assessment of people and to accept them, including the parts of them that she does not fully comprehend. Over the course of the novel, Lucy's readings evolve to display an ability to change her perception of people rather than attempting to change them to fit her own perception, demonstrating what she considers a more "fair" and "justifiable" (134) means of knowing the other.¹¹ Allowing the other to remain other, such readings foster relationships between Lucy and other characters despite the differences between them.

Lucy's growth as a more ethical reader is apparent in the change in her perception of Paulina over the course of the novel. On the night before little Paulina leaves, young Lucy reads her "sleeping countenance" and thinks to herself, "How will she get through this world, or battle with this life? How will she bear the shocks and repulses, the humiliations and desolations, which books, and my own reason, tell me are prepared for all flesh?" (98-99). Here, Lucy's worry for Paulina and her estimation of what lies in the future of the young girl are rooted entirely in her own knowledge (from "books" she's read) and "reason," which she sees no ground to question. In a few years and after being subjected to a few superficial readings herself, Lucy becomes a lot less certain about her ability to assess others. For example, after saving Paulina from a fire at the theater, Lucy, who has not yet recognized her friend as the now-grown

¹¹ When Lucy finds Madame Beck going through her belongings to find out more about her, she says, "The end was not bad, but the means were hardly fair or justifiable" (134). This shows that Lucy is not opposed to the act of reading, or being read by, others, which is necessary if the self and the other are to enter into a relationship. She is opposed to unethical means of doing so.

Paulina, returns with her to the hotel she and her father are staying at. There, she is able to observe the girl closely, paying special attention to her beauty and her facial expression: “[H]er lip wore a curl—I doubt not inherent and unconscious, but which, if I had seen it first with the accompaniments of health and state, would have struck me as unwarranted” (335-36). The same impression is quickly repeated, as Lucy says, “[S]he looked pretty, though pale; her face was delicately designed, and if at first sight it appeared proud, I believe custom might prove it to be soft” (336). Declaring “I doubt not” and “I believe” in the present tense, Lucy again exhibits a sense of certainty in these statements, but unlike those made in her earlier years, this certainty now lies in the disparity between a person’s appearance and inner self, and in Lucy’s recognition of her own potential to misread others. The older, narrating Lucy is able to acknowledge her own biases and mistakes in her judgements.

Near the end of her tale, Lucy again reevaluates her reading of Paulina. She writes, “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. And often, these are not pampered, selfish beings, but Nature’s elect, harmonious and benign” (509). Not only does Lucy overthrow her initial prediction of Paulina’s life, but she admits that it was inaccurate because of her own prejudice and even jealousy: she saw Paulina as “pampered,” “selfish,” and ill-equipped for the world, but these conclusions turn out to be untrue. Seeing the flaws in her reading of Paulina also enables Lucy to see that she and Paulina share more than she has previously realized, and she says, “[T]here are certain things in which we so rarely meet with our double that it seems a miracle when that chance befalls”

(349).¹² Thus, Lucy's changed perspective, which leaves room for uncertainty and errors in her act of reading, in fact allows her to get closer to understanding the other. This better understanding forms the basis of Lucy's admiration of Paulina, as she professes, "Intimate intercourse, close inspection, disclosed in Paulina only what was delicate, intelligent, and sincere; therefore my regard for her lay deep" (444).

The ability to change one's reading is, therefore, crucial if one wishes to enter into an ethical relationship with the other. This is especially true for Lucy and M. Paul, whose relationship is stormy and fraught with misunderstandings, as neither person starts out with a particularly flattering reading of the other. Friendship (and later, romance) between them is possible only as Lucy adjusts her perception of M. Paul. Failing initially to see the good in this man so different from herself, Lucy only changes her mind after multiple encounters with M. Paul that end in a negation of her previous reading of him. For example, after a bitter fight, Lucy finds M. Paul at her desk, leaving her some books. Lucy is touched by this action, and she says, "My heart smote me: as I bent over him, as he sat unconscious, doing me what good he could, and I daresay not feeling towards me unkindly, my morning's anger quite melted: I did not dislike Professor Emanuel" (416). Through her quiet observation, Lucy discerns that M. Paul is in fact forgiving, generous, and holds no ill will towards her. This new reading allows her to discover that, likewise, she feels no animosity towards him. On another occasion, Lucy watches as M. Paul looks at his students with a "pleasant countenance" (454); he has arranged for them to have breakfast outside one summer morning, and, calling his students his "tyrants" and himself

¹² Paulina has expressed many times that for her, Lucy is "always Lucy Snowe" (357), even though she does not "comprehend [her] altogether" (498). Her willingness to accept and honor Lucy's otherness leads Lucy to declare, "If any one knew me it was little Paulina Mary" (373).

their “slave” (454), he lets them seat him wherever they please. Lucy, who frequently compares M. Paul to Napoleon Bonaparte because of his “tyranny” (422), revises her reading of him because of this playful reversal of roles, musing, “[A]t the worst, it was only his nerves that were irritable, not his temper that was radically bad; soothe, comprehend, comfort him, and he was a lamb” (455). Thus, Lucy’s willingness to adjust her reading of M. Paul helps her see past his usual tyranny and replaces her previous unpleasant experiences with him, giving room for feelings of affection to develop.

As Lucy’s increased understanding of M. Paul leads to affection, these feelings, in turn, allow her to accept him in his entirety. At the end of the novel, Lucy reflects on her changed perspective of M. Paul, saying, “Once—unknown, and unloved, I held him harsh and strange; the low stature, the wiry make, the angles, the darkness, the manner, displeased me. Now, penetrated with his influence, and living by his affection, having his worth by intellect, and his goodness by heart—I preferred him before all humanity” (564). Allowing M. Paul’s influence to change her and her censorious reading of him, Lucy is finally able to see past his exterior and appreciate the goodness of his character. When M. Paul presents her a house that she may run her own school, Lucy again brings up the analogy between him and Napoleon, calling him her “king” (560). While M. Paul has not changed (and, indeed, continues to remind Lucy of Napoleon), Lucy’s perception of him has. She no longer associates him with tyranny but with generosity. Lucy’s final declaration of love—that she loves M. Paul as a “[m]agnificent-minded, grand-hearted, dear, faulty little man” (561)—shows that, for Lucy, an ethical reading of the other should enable the self to accept the other as he or she is, including both their merits and faults.

Paralleling Lucy’s growth, M. Paul also learns to accept Lucy’s otherness over the course of the novel. Like Lucy, M. Paul possesses a sense of self-awareness that allows him to

continuously reassess and adjust his reading of others,¹³ and Lucy, the ultimate other to M. Paul, provides him ample opportunity to do so. In the beginning, M. Paul's constant censure of Lucy causes her to hate his ability to see her. She says forcefully, "I could have exulted to burst on his vision, confront and confound his 'lunettes'" (427). Then, at one point, she does break M. Paul's spectacles, prompting him to cry out, "You are resolved to have me quite blind and helpless in your hands!" (399). The accident symbolizes how Lucy upsets the way M. Paul sees the world; without the usual lenses through which he reads others, he loses his bearings and must, like Lucy, cope with a newfound uncertainty in his judgment. Instead of being blinded, however, M. Paul is gradually able to see Lucy in a new light. Just as Lucy's reading of Paulina, M. Paul's reading of Lucy goes through a process of transformation, most evident in his change of attitude towards her religion. Being a devout Catholic, M. Paul considers Lucy's Protestantism "unchristian" and "dangerous," and he "pleaded" and "argued" with her to give it up (491). In response, Lucy says, "I could not argue . . . but I could talk in my own way—the way M. Paul was used to—and of which he could follow the meanderings and fill the hiatus, and pardon the strange stammerings, strange to him no longer. At ease with him, I could defend my creed and faith in my own fashion; in some degree I could lull his prejudices" (491). At the end of this exchange, M. Paul leaves "not satisfied" and "hardly . . . appeased" (491), as he continues to want to convert Lucy. Nevertheless, the time M. Paul has spent with Lucy enables him to understand her "strange stammerings" and to allow his prejudices be lulled, enough to "partly . . .

¹³ Once, realizing he has misread Lucy out of jealousy, M. Paul admits to her, "I have my malevolent moods" (225). This capacity to self-reflect prompts M. Paul to discard his previous reading and to want to know Lucy better—to turn her from "a stranger" to someone "known" (225).

perceive” her point of view (491). His acknowledgement of and attempt to understand Lucy’s otherness pave the way to his eventual acceptance of the same.

M. Paul’s willingness to accept Lucy despite her religion is necessary for a relationship to flourish between them. When Lucy reaffirms her faith in Protestantism to M. Paul, he yields to her speech and says, “Believe, then, what you can; believe it as you can; one prayer, at least, we have in common” (495). This pronouncement of common ground amidst differences comes at a moment when Lucy believes she has “widely severed [herself] from him” and brings her great comfort, and she calls it “one sweet chord of harmony in two conflicting spirits” (495). At the end of the novel, M. Paul is able to further avow his determination to let Lucy stay other, as he says, “Remain a Protestant. My little English Puritan, I love Protestantism in you. I own its severe charm. There is something in its ritual I cannot receive myself, but it is the sole creed for ‘Lucy’” (566). M. Paul’s recognition that Protestantism, something deeply threatening for him, may be something of value to Lucy allows the two to build a relationship in spite of their differences. In respecting the distance Lucy places between them, M. Paul draws closer to Lucy.

Hence, a reading that effectively aids in the cultivation of a relationship between the self and the other is contingent on maintaining uncertainty, not only the uncertainty of the other, but also the uncertainty of one’s ability to fully and accurately read the other. The person performing the reading must be prepared to find differences that contradict their views and to make changes to their reading accordingly. As C. Namwali Serpell claims, “Uncertainty’s very vitality comes from a continually thwarted will to know” (18). A sustained effort to learn about the other in spite of constant frustration, whether from the other’s inviolable alterity or the possibility of one’s misreading, is essential in the process of ethically reading the other.

Lucy and Her Readers: Mutual Honoring of Otherness

Having conceptualized what an ethical reading looks like through her experiences of reading and being read, both unethically and ethically, Lucy invites actual readers to read her through her autobiography “What, exactly, are readers to do with Lucy’s invitation?” Pond asks, reflecting on this fact. “What does our participation require?” (786). For many critics, the answer is that it requires readers to learn to respond to the text, structured to teach them to correctly read Lucy. Hanks argues, “The reader’s role in the novel’s development is ultimately mediated by the narrative voice” (449), which Lucy uses to appeal to her audience. Fletcher also asserts, “In the final analysis, this ‘heretic narrative’ which insists theoretically on our freedom to choose necessarily limits some of our options by its own construction” (741). We must become, in other words, an ideal reader by giving up our desires for closure or understanding. We must change to become more like Lucy.

However, given the emphasis Lucy places on the preservation of otherness in a relationship, it seems self-contradictory that the authorial reader she imagines would be someone who thinks as she does. For the text of *Villette* to promote ethical readings that do not demand conformity between the self and the other, it requires a reader who does not seek to fully know the author. In fact, as Lucy believes it is unethical to assume one has full knowledge of the other, her text not only “[places] limits on both the characters’ and readers’ knowledge” of her (Pond 773), but she limits her own knowledge about the reader as well: her reading of the reader is always uncertain. This sense of uncertainty is sustained throughout the text, as Lucy highlights how the gaps left by her reticence may be filled in multiple ways. Carol Bock explains that in putting together her story, Lucy uses “narrative strategies [that] convey her understanding of the interpretive experience” (130), which, as she has learned, “may result, not in a definitive interpretation, but in an understanding that encompasses divergent meanings” (147). To

communicate Lucy's belief that the act of reading can and should yield multiple conclusions, her narrative demonstrates that it has ample room for them, and that, indeed, it is structured for a reader who can make these "divergent meanings." Lucy's refusal to clearly specify how she wants to be read, then, signals her vision of authorial readers who are willing to maintain the distance between Lucy and themselves.

As Lucy realizes the distance between herself and the other and becomes aware of her unknowability, she makes an effort to remind her reader of theirs. Using phrases like "the reader may suppose" (165), "the reader may perhaps remember" (450), and "[t]he reader may believe it or not" (326-27), Lucy indicates that she conceives of the reader in uncertain terms and acknowledges that even as the narrator, she cannot fully know or control how the reader will react to her tale. Lucy's narrative is therefore offered with the awareness that she will be read in multiple, conflicting ways, as she expresses, "What contradictory attributes of character we sometimes find ascribed to us, according to the eye with which we are viewed!" (372-73). Nevertheless, Lucy "smiled at them all" (373). Intending her narrative to be read "divergently," Lucy anticipates and includes the assorted interpretations her narrative may receive. For example, she prefaces her account of seeing the ghost of a nun by writing, "Say what you will, reader—tell me I was nervous or mad; affirm that I was unsettled by the excitement of that letter; declare that I dreamed; this I vow—I saw there—in that room—on that night—an image like—a NUN" (316). Instead of presenting her own experience as fact and only fact, Lucy opens the possibility that the reader may interpret it as a hallucination or a delusion and recognizes their equal validity as interpretations of her vision.

In another instance, after describing the despair and suffering she feels when left alone in the *pensionnat*, Lucy says,

Religious reader, you will preach to me a long sermon about what I have just written, and so will you, moralist: and you, stern sage: you, stoic, will frown; you, cynic, sneer; you, epicure, laugh. Well, each and all, take it your own way. I accept the sermon, frown, sneer, and laugh; perhaps you are all right: and perhaps, circumstanced like me, you would have been, like me, wrong. (226)

Here, again, Lucy acknowledges that the reader may take different forms as they're not "like [her]," and they may come to conclusions that diverge from hers. Not only does Lucy respect their right to do so, but she also concedes that their interpretations are as likely to be "right" as her own. In both of these examples, Lucy's perspective is presented last, alongside the other readings; unable and unwilling as a narrator to demand a unified reading from her reader, Lucy submits her own view as just one of the many ways of understanding her narrative. Lucy's inclusion of possible readings from a reader she cannot fully know, in Anna Clark's words, "ignites the potential for multifarious readings and responses" (372).

In indicating the uncertainty she feels about the reader, Lucy also signals her own unknowability. Throughout the text, Lucy draws attention to the information she withholds, checking the assumption that the interiority of the narrator is always available to the reader. Upon reaching London, she writes, "My reader, I know, is one who would not thank me for an elaborate reproduction of poetic first impressions; and it is well, inasmuch as I had neither time nor mood to cherish such" (109). Later, at a concert she attends with Dr. John, she again says, "On the concert I need not dwell; the reader would not care to have my impressions thereanent" (286). In both instances, Lucy imagines a reader who does not want information from her, and she also professes that even if the reader does, she may still refuse to reveal her thoughts as her "time" or "mood" dictates; in this way, Lucy withholds information with seemingly "disdainful

recalcitrance” (Tromly 62). As Rachel Ablow summarizes, “What makes *Villette* especially strange, however, is that its secrets are never revealed, and yet the novel never suggests that they cannot be spoken. Instead, the narrator very deliberately informs us that she simply chooses not to describe them”; she then adds that *Villette* can feel “passive-aggressive, implying as it does that the reader is not worthy of the story it has to tell” (72). However, Lucy’s narrative only feels passive-aggressive if the reader views her as a source of secret truth to which they are entitled. She is not “an enigma in need of explanation,” in other words, “until her readers desire her to be one” (Clark 363). Emily W. Heady argues that in *Villette*, Brontë is writing against “modes of narration [that] demand that [Lucy] move her inside spaces outward, ultimately to make visible what ought to be unseen” (351). By stepping back from the traditional role of the narrator as informant and insisting that her interiority is unknowable, Lucy indicates that her authorial reader is someone who will refrain from looking to her for a correct way to read her.

The text of *Villette*, then, asks for a reader who will take responsibility to make their own meaning out of Lucy’s narrative. This transfer of responsibility from narrator to reader is evident in several places in the novel. Talking about Dr. John, Lucy says, “Reader, if in the course of this work, you find that my opinion of Dr. John undergoes modification, excuse the seeming inconsistency. I give the feeling as at the time I felt it; I describe the view of character as it appeared when discovered” (261). Lucy here points out that her assessment of Dr. John is entirely subjective and changes as her opinion changes over time. Her opinion may even be self-contradictory, as she admits later: “The reader is requested to note a seeming contradiction in the two views which have been given of Graham Bretton [Dr. John]” (266). By insisting that the reader take note of the discrepancies in her reading of Dr. John, Lucy emphasizes that “she is ‘not reliable,’ that she is silent where intimate knowledge is required” (Rodas 129), and that the

reader must step in to construct that knowledge as and if they choose to do so. In another memorable instance at the end of the novel, Lucy writes, “M. Emanuel was away three years. Reader, they were the three happiest years of my life. Do you scout the paradox? Listen” (565). The “listen” here is a red herring, however, as Lucy does not actually proceed to explain why she feels happiest during the three years M. Paul is away; the paradox remains a paradox. Presenting contradictory, even mutually-exclusive scenarios, the text draws attention to the moments when the reader must make their own interpretations.

Of course, there are also times in the novel when just the opposite is true, when Lucy addresses the reader in terms that seem to allow little room for them to read her narrative in conflicting ways. About her past, she writes, “I will permit the reader to picture me, for the next eight years, as a bark slumbering through halcyon weather, in a harbour still as glass” (99), but she quickly disturbs this idyllic picture, saying, “However, it cannot be concealed that, in that case, I must somehow have fallen overboard, or that there must have been wreck at last” (99). Likewise, regarding whether M. Paul returns safely from his trip abroad, Lucy says, “Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. . . . Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life” (568). Lucy’s reassurance that there is hope for a happy reunion between her and M. Paul is feeble as it follows a detailed description of the tremendous storm at sea that might have swallowed his ship. Fletcher claims that this “open-endedness” is illusory because “[w]hile Lucy as narrator can suggest and we as readers can entertain the picture of ‘union and a happy succeeding life,’ we cannot apply this reading *to the text*” (742, emphasis original). Indeed, Lucy’s words make it hard for the reader to imagine that the beginning and the ending of her story contain something other than unspeakable tragedy.

Nevertheless, contrary to what one would expect, Lucy's narration—"the layering of one statement with its negation" (Springer 106)—in fact allows, rather than restricts, the reader's choices in their reading. As Serpell explains, "When an initial image or event is replaced or denied in reading . . . this effects a layering rather than an outright deletion"; even when the event is found to be untrue, it "still [hangs] around in the reader's mind, just under the sign of negation" (42-43). Since Lucy does not confirm what happened in her youth or to M. Paul, the positive scenarios she offers are never fully repudiated, and her ambivalent statements keep open multiple possibilities for the reader to consider. Moreover, the imperative verbs Lucy uses in these statements ("pause," "listen"), rather than directing how the reader should read her narrative, have the opposite effect of showing her inability to do so. When Lucy imagines the sky to be "an arch of hope" and then immediately stops herself and says, "Cancel the whole of that, if you please, reader" (121), she forwards a possibility that the reader cannot, or need not, erase from their minds. Olga Springer argues that Lucy's demand makes the reader realize that they are "unable to cancel anything since [they have] no influence over the narrative" (106), but the reverse is also true. Once a narrator decides to include a sentence in the text, he or she no longer has control over what the reader does with it. As the words "if you please" indicate in Lucy's request, only the reader can decide if they want to give her metaphor of hope significance; she is no more capable of "canceling" it from their minds than she is of "permitting" them to think in a certain way or "pausing" their train of thought. Lucy's commands, then, generate opportunities for the reader to think independently, even divergently, from the narrator.

In every way, the text of *Villette* shows that Lucy is engaging in conversation with an authorial reader who recognizes the irreducible distance between Lucy and themselves. For Lucy, the uncertainty that arises from this awareness of the other's essential alterity is a

necessary condition for an ethical relationship to develop. Serpell defines uncertainty as “the quality or ‘state of not being definitely known’ or ‘the state or character of being uncertain in mind.’ Drifting between reader and text, uncertainty invokes both” (9). Acknowledging Lucy’s effort to preserve this sense of uncertainty, the authorial reader responds to the moments in the text where divergent meanings are encouraged, when they must make their own interpretations without looking to Lucy for the right answers. To “rightly” know Lucy, then, refers not to a correct way but to an ethical way of knowing her, one that allows Lucy to stay unknowable and her otherness to be respected and maintained. Therefore, to answer Pond’s question at the beginning of this section, Lucy’s invitation for actual readers to participate in her narrative does not require them to share all of her views. Instead, it encourages readers to freely draw their own conclusions and asks that they respect Lucy’s right to do the same. In doing so, actual readers draw closer to the authorial reader of Lucy’s text.

Conclusion

Theorizing an ethical relationship between the self and the other, Levinas asks, how can the self “enter into relationship with an other without immediately divesting it of its alterity? What is the nature of this relationship?” (38). The question of how the self, with its impulse to assimilate the other, may enter into this kind of relationship is especially pertinent when considered in connection with literary texts, each one of which offers readers an opportunity to come into contact with the other. It is generally assumed that for an encounter to be ethical, readers must respond “to the ‘hailing’ performed” by a text by submitting to its alterity—in short, by becoming its authorial reader, the reader the text desires and, perhaps, cultivates (Hale 189). We honor the text’s otherness by becoming the reader the text has in mind.

But an attempt to turn the self into the other, to transform from actual to authorial reader, is just as unethical as an attempt to turn the other into the self; both try to remove the inviolable

otherness that exists between the two.¹⁴ In particular, the expectation that, through the construct of the authorial reader, the author will tell the reader how exactly to read a text can cause the reader to feel resentment when that expectation is not met. This was the case for Matthew Arnold, who asked in 1853, “Why is *Villette* disagreeable?” He answered, because it is filled with “hunger, rebellion and rage” which “no fine writing can hide . . . thoroughly” (93). An early review of *Villette* agreed with Arnold, complaining that there are “disagreeable rents” in the text that “[make] you aware that it is a drama, and not a fact; that it is an author writing a very fine book, and not scenes of life developing themselves before you. To be *désillusionné* in this manner is disagreeable” (537). Expecting to sympathize, if not completely identify, with the narrator as she shows them how she wishes to be read, Arnold and this reviewer find it “disagreeable” when Lucy makes no effort to hide her evasiveness, duplicity, and refusal to disclose—that is, her complete and utter otherness—from her readers. They wish to enter into a different kind of readerly relationship, one that brings them closer to an other who refuses to close the distance between them. Lucy desires no such thing. Throughout her life, Lucy has experienced the discomfort of being read in ways that attempt to expose her against her will or to make her into something she is not, and she rejects these experiences as unhelpful and infuriating. She has learned, instead, that an ethical reading is a continual process of acknowledging one’s own inability to fully know the other and accepting the other’s alterity despite this inability. For Lucy, the difference that exists between herself and her readers cannot and should not be minimized; it must be preserved for her narrative to facilitate an ethical reading.

¹⁴ As Levinas argues, “possessing, that is, of suspending the very alterity of what is only at first other, and other relative to me, is the *way* of the same” (38). He then adds that, “in limiting the same the other would not be rigorously other: by virtue of the common frontier the other, within the system, would be the same” (39). In other words, any attempt to define the other against the self or vice versa, “by virtue of the common frontier” between the two, removes the essential quality of the other, which is its otherness.

In imagining an authorial reader who does not seek to become an ideal reader, Lucy offers one possible way an ethical relationship between the author and the reader may take shape, where the distance between the two is not collapsed. Rather than being a smokescreen that leads readers to know how she really intends her narrative to be read, Lucy's reticence checks their assumption that they are entitled to a full knowledge of her and allows readers to make their own meaning out of the uncertainty she presents. Instead of weakening Lucy's narrative authority, these rhetorical moves establish the importance of respecting the other's otherness, a viewpoint the reader must entertain even and especially when they disagree with her. Thus, Lucy's confidence in her own narrative authority is most evident when she acknowledges the right of her readers to read her divergently; as she states, "I make no doubt, the world is very right in its view, yet believe also that I am not quite wrong in mine" (381). Readers willing to know Lucy "rightly" by acknowledging her perspectives while maintaining their own—those who do not feel the need to see things as Lucy does or think as she thinks—paradoxically do become the ideal interpreters she seems to envision. Their reward for suffering such "disagreeableness" is initiation into an ethical relationship with her, one built on the mutual respect of the other's otherness and unknowability.

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