Choseville: Brontë’s *Villette* and the Art of Bourgeois Interiority

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*The interior is not just the universe of the private individual; it is also his étui.*
—Walter Benjamin, “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century”

*Dialectical history is a history of the interaction between objects and subjects.*
—Barbara Johnson, “Passage Work”

*What you really collect is always yourself.*
—Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*

IN THE MANUSCRIPT OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË’S *VILLETTE* (1853), THE eponymous city is once called by a different name. Returning from a holiday gala, the narrator’s carriage makes a good deal of noise on the “flinty Choseville pavement” (Rosengarten and Smith, *Villette* 461n). Though Brontë corrected the mistake in pencil, scribbling “Villette” over “Choseville” in her copy of the first printing of the novel, the editors of the Clarendon *Villette* believe that “Choseville,” Thing City or City of Things, is a trace of an earlier draft (Rosengarten and Smith, Introduction xxxiv).¹ If so, *Villette*—or *Choseville*—may well be read as Brontë’s *Vanity Fair*, a novel grappling with the perplexing role of things in what D. A. Miller called “the whole *croce e delizia* of nineteenth-century interiority” (14).² Often interpreted as a paradigmatic psychological fiction, concerned chiefly with the ineffable qualities of inner life rather than the claims of the material world, *Villette* is nonetheless anxious about the mutual implications of persons and things. The novel challenges the romanticized image of Brontë as a provincial writer of the Yorkshire moors, a writer whose work could not be properly understood without a nostalgic visit to “Brontë country.”³ Published in the wake of

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¹ Published in the wake of
the Great Exhibition of 1851, it maps out the contours of interiority in a world newly captivated by the peculiar resonance of things. Though Brontë liked to think that her novel “touche[d] on no matter of public interest,” its conception of the psychological interior was significantly inflected by its setting in mid-century Thing City (Letters 3: 75). Villette places interiority in an intimate connection with object-filled interiors even as it hopes for an inner life that eludes the varied fetishisms of Thing City. This nostalgia for a more pristine and private form of psychological depth is, in turn, articulated in terms that reveal how entrenched persons are in the public empire of things. Villette constitutes an attempt to negotiate between a critique of commodity fetishism and a paradoxically fetishistic preoccupation with the traces and tokens of inner life. The novel suggests that the bourgeois subject, though it comes into being through its relations with things, is defined by the nostalgic notion that its true interiority has been lost under the pressure of things.

The City of Things

Though Brontë was reluctant to concede the pervasiveness of Thing City, her novels and letters betray not just anxiety about but fascination with relations between persons and things. She did much to cultivate the public image of a “retired wretch” and coyly insisted that Villette had nothing to contribute to the “topics of the day” (Letters 3: 74–75). Not exactly critical of metropolitan modernity, she still snobbishly disdained its relentlessly middlebrow character. Herself a middle-class writer, Brontë—like her protagonist, Lucy Snowe—jealously guarded an imaginary space of privacy, “a quiet nook, whence unobserved [she] could observe” (Villette 142). She saw herself as invested in what she once self-deprecatingly described as her “transcendentalisms” and found the spectacle of big-city entertainment “not much in [her] way” (Letters 3: 74, 2: 628). Like Jane Eyre, who resented being reduced to a “glittering . . . parterre” by Rochester’s sartorial fancy (354), Brontë built her public persona on condescension for the parterre in all its gaudy—that is, mass-cultural—forms. When her Cornhill publisher George Smith asked for permission to market her novels, she balked at the “large letters” of the advertisements and agreed only “under protest, and with a kind of Ostrich-longing for concealment” (Letters 3: 77). The public image of a withdrawn spinster was more than an attempt “to deflect attacks on her personal morality” (L. Miller 3). The self-imposed ostrich blindness protected her not only against “sexualized self-exposure” (Mermin 20) but also against exhibitions of a different sort: the perceived vulgarity of bourgeois culture that valued sensuously visual displays over and above more refined cultural expressions. Elizabeth Gaskell’s The Life of Charlotte Brontë (1857), which set the terms of Brontë criticism for decades to come, buttressed her reclusive public image by suggesting, in Virginia Woolf’s phrase, that “Haworth and the Brontës are somehow inextricably mixed” (Woolf 124). Literary historians have generally colluded with this mythology by preferring to read Villette as a late outgrowth of Romanticism rather than a novel whose immediate context was the Great Exhibition and the culture of things that coalesced around it. But by 1851, Brontë’s anonymity was a thing of the past, and she was herself on exhibit, being shown at literary salons as the person behind Jane Eyre; Haworth Parsonage was also becoming a tourist destination. Already in February 1850, Brontë was complaining to her publisher that “curiosity-hunters” were disturbing her peace and threatening her “incognito” (Letters 2: 350, 113). Her personal effects, ironically, became relics in a glass case, an exhibit for later generations of curiosity hunters. Woolf, who visited the Brontë Museum during a trip to Yorkshire, observed that “the most touching case [in the museum] is that which contains
the little personal relics, the dresses and shoes of the dead woman” (126).

In the late spring and summer of 1851, as she was beginning to sketch Villette, Brontë visited the Great Exhibition in the Crystal Palace (it had opened that May). In a letter to her father, Patrick Brontë, she wrote, “Yesterday we went to the Crystal Palace—the exterior had a strange and elegant but somewhat unsubstantial effect—The interior is like a mighty Vanity Fair—the brightest colours blaze on all sides—and ware of all kinds—from diamonds to spinning jennies and Printing Presses are there to be seen—it was very fine—gorgeous—animated—bewilder—but I liked Thackeray’s lecture better” (Letters 2: 625). That Brontë sees the Crystal Palace and Thackeray’s lecture as comparable options for spending one’s afternoon in the metropolis only amplifies her identification with the “Titan” whose novel was to her “as solemn as an oracle” (45). In every new letter on the exhibition, she tirelessly maintained that she “never was able to get up any raptures...‘on the subject’ and each renewed visit was made under coercion rather than of my own free will” (666). If, then, according to Walter Benjamin, “[w]orld exhibitions are places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish” (17), Brontë was a reluctant pilgrim to the commodity shrine. Yet she visited the display halls no less than five times, and the language of her plentiful correspondence again tells a story at odds with her explicit assertions. On 7 June she wrote to her father that she was “more struck” with the exhibition than on her first visit. Reluctantly but surely Brontë fell under its spell, her initial resistance eroded by the almost sublime “grandeur” of the place.

The letters seem to hesitate between moral critique of and anxious fascination with the Great Exhibition. Brontë observes that the place resembled “a Bazaar or a Fair—but...such a Bazaar or Fair as eastern Genii might ‘have’ created. It seems as if magic only could have gathered this mass of wealth from all the ends of the Earth.” But she also admits that the viewer entering the display halls is “bewilder[ed]” and “subdued by some invisible influence,” herself becoming an unwitting part of the spectacle (Letters 2: 630–31). The correspondence provides, then, ample evidence of Andrew H. Miller’s theory that the passivity many of the early visitors to the exhibition felt was an instance of the “mental helplessness” or even the “shock” later understood as typical of subjective experience in modernity (58). But they also showcase the hypnotic power of the exhibition, as Brontë dreamily slips into an orientalist rhetoric that echoes the orientalism of the display. The imagery of bazaars and genii forms a predictable part of the ideology of global capitalist and colonial expansion of which the exhibition was an unabashed celebration. But it also reveals the foundations of this ideology in the fetishistic treatment of products of human labor as products of preindustrial magic, which both the exhibition and Brontë associated with the East.5 For to describe commodities as conjured up by a genie is to mask the movements of capital that really made things happen. To suggest that magic collected things from “all the ends of the earth” is to eclipse the geographic reaches of the empire that made Brontë’s hyperbole only somewhat fanciful.

Yet Brontë’s choice of similes over metaphors (“as eastern Genii might ‘have’ created,” “as if magic only”) attests that the identification of labor with magic was not complete or that the visitor retained a measure of critical detachment even though the terms she called on formed a part of the fetishism that Marx would critique sixteen years later. In “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof,” Marx explains that under capitalism the commodity becomes “a mysterious thing” that appears to have been created by magic fiat rather than produced by “men’s hands.” His critique of the fetishism of commodities recalls Brontë’s notion that the objects on display in 1851 were gathered “as if” by magic. To
understand how commodity fetishism works, Marx writes, we “must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race” (77). As Kevin McLaughlin points out, Marx follows Charles de Brosses and Friedrich Hegel in deriving the word *fetish* from the Portuguese *fe-tisso*, which means “magic.” In other words, for Marx, commodity “fetishism is magic” (McLaughlin 7), and commodities themselves are like objects conjured up by rubbing Aladdin’s magic lamp.7 Bronte’s ambivalence about the exhibition, then, makes for an interesting, if predictable, contradiction. On the one hand, the Crystal Palace is a “mighty Vanity Fair”—a phrase that marks her critical, even moralistic, stance. On the other hand, the terms in which her criticism is couched replicate the fetishism she distances herself from, demonstrating the exhibition’s affective scope and its capacity to render the viewer unable to maintain that critical distance.

In the mid-nineteenth century, *fetish* was a household word. In 1858 *Household Words* (a journal edited by Charles Dickens) published an anonymous article titled “Fetishes at Home.” Like Marx, the *Household Words* author found fetishism in the hearts of those who would rather see it as the province of “the untutored savage” (445). But fetishism was a doubly domestic phenomenon: not just an “African” but also an English problem (447), it was at ease in “a fetish villa protected by ... civilized fortifications of domestic privacy.” Defined as “a habit of attaching an extraordinary importance, if not a superstitious veneration, to articles of the most commonplace and homely description,” it could also be found on the home front in “a savage glare in the eye of my Lady Poodlecraft,” when “the delicate toes of her Italian fetish greyhound” were jeopardized (446). Lady Poodlecraft and “the despised African” notwithstanding (447), major Victorian writers were likewise in the habit of flinging accusations of fetishism at one another. As Catherine Gallagher explains, the closeness between materialist and fetishist worldviews makes for some significant anxiety among those who aspire to a materialist viewpoint. Materialist science views “all matter as in some state of relative vitality” (193), just as “fetishists” see human products as, in Marx’s words, “independent beings endowed with life.” Fetishism thus offers a “convenient scapegoat” for the concerns Victorian writers feel about “investing trinkets with significance” (Gallagher 209–10), a practice common to all realist narrative. The pervasiveness of (the discourse of) fetishism in the nineteenth century renders firm distinctions between terms like *thing, material object, and fetish* impossible. Under commodity culture, they all acquire the aura of the commodity and thus of fetishism. But what distinguishes the fetish as I intend to use the term is not so much its commodity character or essential thingness but its capacity to constitute the subject in a dialectical exchange between person and thing. As Peter Pels writes in an article much influenced by William Pietz, the fetish is “something that emerged historically to designate the process in which objects constitute subjects. It points to an aesthetic sensibility in which the direction of mutual influence of human subject and thinglike object can be reversed” (101). At the same time, as Pietz reminds us, “the fetish is . . . something intensely personal, whose truth is experienced as a substantial movement from ‘inside’ the self” (11).

The conceptual paradox of the fetish consists in its uncertain status: it is both commonplace (all commodities are fetishized) and rare (Pels 107–14). Bronte remarks on “the unique assemblage of all things . . . this mass of wealth from all the ends of the Earth” that underscores its mysterious appeal (*Letters* 2: 630–31). But on a subsequent visit she notes also that the halls were crammed with “the most
remarkable *curiosities*” (650; my emphasis). What she discerns about the Palace is, then, its resemblance to a cabinet of curiosities, a “unique assemblage” whose logic is peculiar only to itself. As later commentators observed, the exhibition “had at its root a single conception: that all human life and cultural endeavor could be fully represented by exhibiting manufactured articles” (Richards 17). But the principle of representation by means of objects was hardly a nineteenth-century invention: it shared much with the more ancient philosophy of the Wunderkammer, which also relied on “the notion of a correspondence, more or less arcane or magical in nature . . . between the microcosm and the macrocosm” (Mauriès 43). The exhibition was not only “a mighty Vanity Fair” but also a special kind of “interior” (Brontë, *Letters* 2: 625), “a world in miniature” (Mauriès 69). We could say that for Brontë it constituted a magical metonymy of the world at large: in it, the external world of things appeared to have been magically corralled into an interior space. The Crystal Palace was voracious (the *all* of the sentence above registers both fascination and dread), having devoured indiscriminately “[w]hatever human industry has created.” Brontë conceived of it as a greedily fetishistic space that contained and miniaturized the world by incorporating a sea of things. Her fetishistic rhetoric proves that even she could not escape the exhibition’s “invisible influence.”

**Fancy Work: Interiority in the Parlor**

The letters, which fuse critique, anxiety, and fascination, throw into doubt Brontë’s alienation from her immediate historical context. Her ambivalence about what she witnessed in the Crystal Palace was rooted in the way commodity culture invaded the preserves of her privacy, transforming her name into a marketing gimmick (“large letters”). *Villette*, though it reworks the plot of her first, then-unpublished, novel, *The Professor*, dramatizes the complexities of her response to the Great Exhibition.\(^8\) The novel is pervaded with a sense of longing for a more pristine and sharply delineated world of persons untouched by things—which it associates with what we might call deep interiority: privacy, anonymity, and reserve (Kuczich).\(^9\) But it also shows things—commodities, furniture, ornaments, the whole bazaar of Choseville—to be fundamental to the constitution of persons even in a novel that fears and scorns the thingness of things.

The distance between the novel’s putative place-names provides a fine measure of its ambivalence: “Villette” and “Choseville” name its contrasting registers. Villette, “little city,” is a place apart, anonymous, diminutive, and self-referential, claustrophobically focused on Lucy’s interiority. Choseville, however, is a public place, a modern and disorienting forum for *flânerie* and ventures to concerts, museums, and brilliant festivals. Lucy, the novel’s first-person narrator, belongs to both dimensions. When she succumbs to a nervous breakdown, the novel falls into its most psychological register. But shortly thereafter, as she recovers at La Terrasse, Choseville reappears as the pivot of Lucy’s identity, and the psychological turns out to be shot through with fetishized things.

At the close of volume 1, Lucy, suffering in isolation, experiences a “fever-fit” (167). Though she likes to play up her singularity—the “shades of peculiarity” (108) that thrive in her “own still shadow-world” (118)—the novel’s plot continually challenges the boundaries of her subjectivity. She recovers from nervous illness seemingly because she is able to see herself as part of an assemblage of objects that evoke the past. Fleeing from the summer solitude of Madame Beck’s boarding school, which suddenly seems to be “crushing as the slab of a tomb” (160), Lucy psychically relives the fate of the ghostly nun of the local legend, who was “buried alive” under a similar “slab” of stone in a “vault” under a tree (106). But the city only deepens her “solitary confinement” (185): it has become a labyrinthine trap
that “inmeshe[s] [her] in a net-work of turns unknown” (163). The grip Villette has on Lucy is such that the only way for her to get “without the city-walls” (163) is, it seems, by means of unconsciousness. But leaving Villette is no guarantee that the City of Things shall be left behind. She falls unconscious in the street and is carried, insensible, to a suburban villa called La Terrasse. As volume 2 opens we learn that the narrator has been relocated, like “Bedreddin Hassan, transported in his sleep from Cairo to the gates of Damascus” in The Thousand and One Nights (167). Disoriented, she imagines that a genie must have intervened or the nurse spiked her drink with some “Genii-elixir” (168). Oriental tales are, it would seem, Brontë’s figure not just of commodity fetishism but of the unconscious as well—a conjunction far from coincidental, as both occupy an imaginary space.10 In fact, as Lucy gradually recovers consciousness, she fantasizes that she had been “borne . . . over land and ocean, and laid . . . quietly down beside a hearth of Old England” (167), like one of those commodities Brontë thought had been collected from “all the ends of the Earth” by “supernatural hands” and deposited in the Crystal Palace (Letters 2: 631).

The surroundings to which Lucy is thus transported are, at first glance, prosaic: as she opens her eyes she registers merely “the complete fact of a pleasant parlour” (166). But its description, bristling with fantastically ornamented objects, reads like some interior decoration manual on drugs (that is, infused with a “Magi-distillation” [168]), throwing the parlor’s “fact[ual]” stodginess into question:

Hardly less plain was it that my brain was not yet settled; for, as I gazed at the blue arm-chair, it appeared to grow familiar; so did a certain scroll-couch, and not less so the round centre-table, with a blue covering, bordered with autumn-tinted foliage; and, above all, two little footstools with worked covers, and a small ebony-framed chair, of which the seat and back were also worked with groups of brilliant flowers on a dark ground. . . . Upon the mantel-shelf there were two china vases, some relics of a diminutive tea-service, as smooth as enamel and as thin as egg-shell, and a white centre-ornament, a classic group in alabaster, preserved under glass. (166)

In a study of the culturally encoded space of the typical Victorian parlor, Thad Logan writes that the “governing idea” in contemporary interior decoration treatises was that of “superfluity” but adds that “the very collection of objects that in one sense constitute[d] the Victorian home also threaten[ed] it: superfluity turns the home into a museum” (9). To some extent, such surplus of narrative details (as opposed to ornamental details in interior decoration manuals) can be understood as part of the reality effect theorized by Roland Barthes, where the plenitude of seemingly insignificant notations serves to signify the real (148). In the realist novel, such aesthetic “detailism” (Schor 141), which allows trivial items to receive particular attention, always verges on fetishism—even when it does not reach the proportions it does, for instance, in Dickens (Gallagher 207-08; Simpson 46-68). But in Villette the description of the chamber does more than foster the reality effect; in fact, its minutiae have something of an unreality effect on Lucy’s psyche, both founding and “confound[ing]” her sense of self (169). The rhetoric of sumptuous material detail and its reliance on the language of museological display—where “relics” are “preserved” and arranged in “a classic group”—recall “such a Bazaar or Fair as eastern Genii might ‘have’ created.” The place of Lucy’s awakening is a “small cabinet—a cabinet with sea-green walls” (168; my emphasis), where she is, as it were, reborn to consciousness in the midst of a magical collection of things, a sort of Wunderkammer, crammed with objects that are commonplace and dreamlike at once.11 In addition to their role in the reality effect, the objects in the parlor thus have what
could be called a subjectivity effect on Lucy’s reconstitution as a subject of memory.12

Reading the scene of Lucy’s return to consciousness, Heather Glen notes that in it the “self is experienced less as subject than an object” (226).13 When Lucy recovers, she indeed appears as a sort of museum object, while the actual objects in the parlor are personified as her “acquaintance” and a “toilette table [is] dressed, like a lady for a ball, in a white robe over a pink skirt” (166, 168). Furniture and parlor bric-a-brac play a pivotal role in how Villette represents the problem of subjectivity. As Lucy’s identity disintegrates at Madame Beck’s, “the ghostly white beds were turning into specters” (160). When she begins to recuperate at La Terrasse, furniture can be discerned only in uncertain “glimpses,” and everything she casts her eyes on turns “spectral” (165). The furniture in the sea-green cabinet of her awakening fluctuates between reality and unreality: “these articles of furniture could not be real, solid arm-chairs, looking-glasses, and wash-stands—they must be the ghosts of such articles; or . . . there remained but to conclude that I had myself passed into an abnormal state of mind” (168–69). In this passage, Lucy’s interiority is linked to the parlor by a paradoxical principle of mutual exclusion, where the reality of the furniture implies the unreality or “abnormal[ity]” of the mind, and vice versa. And yet the presence of these questions suggests that the furniture is vital to the recovery of Lucy’s identity even though the mind and the furniture throw each other into doubt. Villette works through the metaphor of the mind as a kind of inner parlor or drawing room, but its elaboration of the idea is far different from John Locke’s familiar notion in the Essay concerning Human Understanding that the mind is at birth like an unfurnished room—the “dark Room . . . not much unlike a Closet wholly shut from light, with only some little openings left” (163; bk. 2, ch. 11, par. 17)—to be filled with objects by means of experience. First, Lucy herself appears as a piece of furniture in the parlor of her mind. Lucy’s identity, reflected not in a mere looking glass but in a “gilded mirror . . . between two windows, curtained amply with blue damask,” is similarly “spectral,” yet another item in an extensive list of the room’s furnishings: “In this mirror, I saw myself laid, not in bed, but on a sofa. I looked spectral” (166). The “dis-tempered vision” of the furniture seems to “haunt” her (169), even as it begins to dawn on her that the house belongs to her godmother, Mrs. Bretton. The second, more significant difference from Locke consists in the role Villette attributes to the objects that fill the room of the mind: they are, one would like to say, constitutive of the room itself. The parlor of the mind is never unfurnished, and the mind is a room only insofar as it is cluttered with historically specific objects. Pietz quotes Michel Leiris’s work on “true fetishism”:

The “true fetishism which remains at the base of our human existence” is here called “a love—truly amoureux [infatuated]—of ourselves, projected from inside to outside and clothed in a solid carapace which imprisons it within the limits of a precise thing and situates it, like a piece of furniture [meuble, a movable property] which we can use in that strange, vast room called space.” (Pietz 11)

The “true fetishism” is, then, the fetishism of furniture, where meubles, objects or furnishings, exteriorize the subject and are passionately invested with meanings for the reason that they are the subject’s projections. What hesitant sense of identity Lucy is able to re-establish owes to the furniture and the parlor whatnots—the little pictures, the ornaments, the screens, the worked chair” (167)—which startle her into a remembrance of things past. It was Marcel Proust, Benjamin remarked, who first “grapple[d] with the enigma of the nineteenth-century interior” (216).

One of the objects that anchor Lucy’s memory is a certain “pin-cushion made of
crimson satin, ornamented with gold beads and frilled with thread-lace,” bearing the initials of her godmother, Louisa Lucy Bretton, “formed in gold beads, and surrounded with an oval wreath embroidered in white silk” (169). Though it is an otherwise trivial thing, Lucy recalls the pincushion a number of times in different contexts (168, 169, 181). That the pincushion should prove to fasten Lucy’s identity is, perhaps, less than surprising. It serves as that “material object” in which the “past is hidden”: “The past is hidden somewhere . . . beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling” (Proust 42). But Lucy’s pincushion is more than a madeleine that lets lost time flow vividly before one’s eyes. The pincushion functions not only as a prosthesis of memory but also as an axis around which Lucy’s subjectivity gets reconstituted. Lucy recovers not just the memory of “lost” events but her self-identity. In a sense, the pincushion is another gilded mirror, whose gold beads reflect Lucy back to herself. The initials “L. L. B.” precipitate memory because they remind her of her own name and of her emotional ties to others: the initials surround her name with the loving wreath of her godmother’s first and last names and form a sort of hieroglyphic, signifying in a semantic but also in an aesthetic way. In the pincushion, personal identity is materialized, and its materiality entails a psychological (emotional, familial) being. One of the themes that define the fetish is, writes Pietz, the “subjection of the human body . . . to the influence of certain significant material objects that, although cut off from the body, function as its controlling organs at certain moments” (10). Though Pietz’s formulation seems excessively anatomical (like Freud’s idea of the fetish), his emphasis on the embodiment of the person and the power of the object over “self-identity” helps clarify Lucy’s relation to the red satin pincushion (10).14

Such relations to significant objects were far from singular and characterized an entire culture. The pincushion—an object imbued with a social value and a nostalgic aura—acquires a fetishistic significance because Lucy’s relation to it is not entirely singular; it is the locus of that “inscription, displacement, reversal, and overestimation of value” that characterize the fetish as a historical, social object (Pietz 9).

Lucy’s experience in the cabinet is at the outset visual, specular: her eyes blink, “baffled” by the sensation of déjà vu or uncanny repetition when she realizes that “ten years ago shone reflected in that mirror” (168, 169). But as the scene develops, tactile sensations vie for primacy with visual ones. The pincushion is an artifact of Lucy’s domestic labor, and the chamber is crowded with objects that she made “stroke by stroke, and touch by touch” (166). The tangibility of the pincushion is somehow critical to Lucy’s subjective reconstitution. When she “examine[s]” the “cipher” of her godmother’s initials, the process is as tactile as it is visual, almost as though she were reading the embroidery in Braille. In fact, tactility constitutes an important aspect of Lucy’s thorough intimacy with these objects (167). It is as though touching could heal her “distempered vision” (169): her eyes ache at beholding a pair of hand screens she made as a schoolgirl, but the screens help her recall hours she spent working on them, an experience she now reassuringly repeats by holding them “in these fingers, now so skeleton-like” (166). That Lucy is able to hold the pincushion, running her fingers over the embroidery, reminds us that objects are not produced by supernatural hands or conjured up by otherworldly creatures in oriental drag. But this should not be construed to mean that Lucy recovers her memory because she is able to overcome a fetishist fantasy. Even though her relation to the pincushion fluctuates, it is still a material object that enables her, as it were, to recall herself. Instead of confronting Lucy with the actual Louisa Lucy Bretton as soon as possible—her godmother is, after all, only a room away—Brontë makes the
reconstruction of her identity hinge on a miniature red satin substitute.

The pincushion is a tool and product of ornamental sewing known to the Victorians as fancy work; it alludes to a whole set of relations between “femininity, time, and work” (Logan 165). It also highlights less benign aspects of the self’s dependence on the fetish object. Earlier in the novel, Paulina, Lucy’s childhood companion at Bretton, is busy with fancy work:

When I say child I use an inappropriate and undescrptive term—a term suggesting any picture rather than that of the demure little person in a mourning frock and white chemisette, that might just have fitted a good-sized doll—perched now on a high chair beside a stand, whereon was her toy work-box of white varnished wood, and holding in her hand a shed of a handkerchief, which she was professing to hem, and at which she bored perseveringly with a needle, that in her fingers seemed almost a skewer, pricking herself ever and anon, marking the cambric with a track of minute red dots; occasionally starting when the perverse weapon—swerving from her control—inflicted a deeper stab than usual; but still silent, diligent, absorbed, womanly. (15-16)

The scene includes a particularly willful needle wielded by that caricature “little woman,” Paulina (16); the minute red dots of Paulina’s blood on the fabric echo the deep red satin of Lucy’s pincushion. The “perverse weapon” Paulina brandishes underscores the perversity of the entire tableau. At first glance, the fancy work may demand to be read in terms of feminine masochism: fancy work is a site of wounding, and Paulina’s “diligence” and “perseverance” point to a pleasure in suffering in the name of femininity. But it is Lucy’s presence as narrator that turns the needle into a “skewer” that “inflicts” on Paulina the sadistic violence whose source must be Lucy. The “perverse” affect of the passage is without a doubt Lucy’s, as she uses the adjective to describe her own moods (99, 340). Paulina’s interiority—signaled by her utter absorption in the work—is strangely mechanical and unreflective by comparison. The assonance of persevere and perverse points to the equally close connection between absorption (interiority) and perversity and locates both in a culturally charged object denoting female domestic labor. When Paulina is courted by Dr. John several years later, she is still mute and still absorbed in fancy work, her “quick needle and pretty golden thimble [being] busily plied by the lamplight” (291). But now the fetish character of the perverse little object is displayed for all eyes to see: the “gilded glance” of her thimble beckons to Dr. John, “as if it had been . . . the golden head of some darting little yellow serpent” (291). At La Terrasse, then, the pincushion still works as a restorative, but when it returns later, it does so as an object of nostalgia, strangely emptied out of its perversity.

The Person, a Cabinet of Curiosities

In Walter Benjamin’s The Arcades Project, the “bourgeois interior” stands for the private individual’s “places of dwelling” as opposed to his workplace. It constitutes a “condition of nineteenth-century existence” (220) but belongs to “the universe of phantasmagoria” (14), a category of spectacular manifestations of commodity culture that encompasses, among other things, shopping arcades, panoramas, and world exhibitions. The person, reduced to a mere symbol “to juggle with in books and heavy registers” (227) by the bureaucratic apparatus, “compensate[s]” for this “absence of any trace of private life” by compulsively leaving such “traces” in the interior: “Indefatigably, he takes the impression of a host of objects; for his slippers and his watches, his blankets and his umbrellas, he devises coversets and cases. He has a marked preference for velour and plush, which preserve the imprint of all contact” (20). But what seems to begin
merely as a way to carve out a private space becomes, in Benjamin's writings, a category of the private individual's consciousness. The interior, like a cocoon spun "in a dense fabric... about oneself" (216), comes to define the individual's interiority and becomes his "universe" and his "étui" (20). We could say that for Benjamin the person not only occupies this parlor but also is like a parlor, the person's inwardness another phantasmagoria, a mighty Vanity Fair.

When he articulates his "formula for the interior," Benjamin quotes from Søren Kierkegaard, who writes, "The art would be to be able to feel homesick, even though one is at home" (qtd. in Benjamin 218). Kierkegaard's sentiment echoes Lucy's—"To be home-sick, one must have a home" (363)—but with a difference. In such a paradigm of the bourgeois interior, the affect of longing would be detached from, even at odds with, an actual situation of plenitude. Art would be artifice, as if such feelings could be cultivated like a form of interior decor. Even though Benjamin asserts that his project is "less on the trail of the psyche than on the track of things" (212), the formula he quotes from Kierkegaard defines the subject in terms of an affect. To be a bourgeois subject—to have an interiority—is, according to this formula, to feel nostalgic. But the relation of this affect to its material conditions is difficult; there is no straightforward equivalence between psychology and material being. In On Longing, Susan Stewart reads bourgeois nostalgia ultimately as a form of false consciousness, but Benjamin's fragmentary statements are not as easy to decode in Marxist terms. Nostalgic affect is alienated insofar as it is cut off from the economic situation of the paradigmatic homesick subject. But the "traces" that persons imprint on their domestic surroundings complicate the apparent simplicity of the relation to material objects. These traces are undoubtedly material, yet their motivation appears to be psychological: they are a compensation for the losses borne by the subject. This is to say not that the subject is psychological before it is material but rather that Benjamin persistently avoids reducing one to the other and keeps psychology and materiality in constant reciprocal play. As Barbara Johnson writes, "[T]he economic and the psychological experiences of the human being are analogous, but somehow the discrepancy between inner and outer reality in part defines what it means to be human" (96–97). Benjamin comes close to suggesting that the bourgeois individual cocoons himself in a false consciousness of the bourgeois home, but he never actually reduces the individual to the parlor, keeping the analogy alive as an analogy. Psychology and economics inform each other, but they are not identical.

Brontë's novel was written when the culture was drawing such parallels between interiority and the interior. It was a pressured analogy even as it developed. As Deidre Lynch argues in The Economy of Character, interiority was an "artifact of a new form of self-culture" that developed in the eighteenth century (126). Villette, which according to Joseph Allen Boone is the "pivotal (proto)modernist fiction of interiority" (34), offers an interesting challenge to a history of the novel that sees interiority as an artifact of consumer culture, because it seems so firmly to believe in the reality of psychological depth as the defining feature of the person. Villette is written at a moment of historical crisis when the bourgeois interior seems so unquestionably real that it is possible to imagine oneself, in a fit of cultural nostalgia, as in danger of losing interiority—literally, losing one's mind—under the pressure of things (meubles). But psychological interiority is always a lost object, something one imagines one used to have in a more pristine, less object-ridden, form. Villette nostalgically affirms interiority but does not escape its location in Choseville. Its model of subjectivity shows the subject coalescing at the point of threat it nostalgically imagines itself as experiencing under commodity culture.
Brontë’s *Villette*, where diffuse homesickness amounts to an art form, elaborates on these themes by mounting a nostalgic defense of interiority at a moment when the genre of the novel has no need to defend its claims to the terrain of psychology. In Brontë, the novel feels homesick while being at home. But Lucy is frequently homeless, like “a placeless person in debt” (43), under a double burden of dispossession. The subject of her autobiographical narrative, she is the model of that “*croce e delizia* of nineteenth-century interiority,” which is here thrown into sharp relief by her displacement from bourgeois domesticity. Her capacity for interiority in the face of material deprivation, an absolute test of Victorian inwardness, does not imply, however, an opposition between psychological depth and material things (though it often gets misread as such). From the beginning of the narrative, home—the place of interiority in all its guises—is an object of the narrator’s unquiet idealization and longing. Lucy begins her tale with the “handsome house” of her godmother, Mrs. Bretton of Bretton, who not only bears the name of her birthplace but is, like the house she occupies, “still handsome” (5). Thoroughly idealized, the Bretton house is a place “where Sundays and holidays seem always to abide,” a place where persons and things mirror each other. But Mrs. Bretton’s dwelling is a substitute home: while it can be visited and enjoyed, “twice a year, and well I liked the visit” (5), it does not allow full identification. In fact, it is set up in such a way that its loss becomes inevitable, insofar as the “large peaceful rooms, the well-arranged furniture” are critically linked to Lucy’s condition of being “[o]ne child in a household of grown people [and] usually very much made of” (5). Soon, the idyllic narrative is disrupted in a classic way: the arrival of another child, Paulina Mary Home, guarantees the loss of that condition of being “a good deal noticed” that constitutes a vital aspect of the idealization of home. Lucy’s surrogate home is, then, made unhomely by a motherless child named Home, whose expression compels Lucy to observe that “no furrowed face of adult exile, longing for Europe at Europe’s antipodes, ever bore more legibly the signs of home sickness than did her infant visage” (12). But Paulina’s nostalgia only crystallizes or doubles Lucy’s later affect, when Lucy cryptically intimates that “there must have been wreck at last” in her own family home. Without giving the reader as much as a glimpse at her situation, she becomes, traumatically, it seems, homeless. But the status of her narrative remains uncertain; the vision may be an extended metaphor of more abstract losses or a metaphoric rendering of a broken home. Whether it constitutes the originary event or its belated repetition is likewise impossible to determine: “I must have somehow fallen over-board, . . . there must have been wreck at last” (35). Home is, then, a site not only of longings and idealization but also of trauma and division. It is nostalgically represented as a place where the well-arranged furniture reflects a peaceful oneness, a symbiosis of interiority with the interior. But this symbiosis is disrupted or even underwritten by a pattern of “wreckage” that makes it necessarily a lost object—an object of nostalgia proper. The pattern of wreckage challenges the idealization of the domestic interior as the place of interiority and interrogates the place of material fragments in the construction of psychological interiority.

Lucy does quest for a home in the more general affective sense, as she asks, “[I]s there nothing more for me in life—no true home—nothing to be dearer to me than myself. . . .?” (361). But Lucy’s desire is only imperfectly fulfilled when she is offered a travesty of the home she wished for: a perfect little schoolroom that meshes the private with the professional, almost parodic in the way it copies Madame Beck’s pensionnat in miniature form. The schoolhouse is a gift from Paul Emmanuel, and as such it approximates Lucy’s ideal of something “dearer to me than myself.” What
Lucy is left with is more properly a bourgeois interior than a “home”—it is a home in which she must remain “homesick”—for the object dearer to her than herself will never be found there. At the end of the narrative, Lucy is only marginally less “placeless” than at its outset, and the well-arranged furniture, as much as it evokes the idealized space of her lost childhood, is emptied out and reduced to nothing but itself, a dollhouse. The well-arranged furniture represents an ambivalent site for psychic life: in the sea-green cabinet it is vital to self-identity, but ultimately it is shown to be deeply problematic in its reliance on idealization and nostalgia. The schoolroom at the end of the narrative subordinates psychic life only insofar as it constitutes a nostalgic space of longing: insofar as it is not enough. *Villette*, with its miniaturized title (Little City), could well be read as a novel about life in a dollhouse, where Lucy is the puppet master, pulling the strings of her collection of dolls (similarities between Brontë and her literary idol, Thackeray, the puppet master of *Vanity Fair*, are many). It is in this sense that Lucy’s dollhouse of Villette corresponds to Stewart’s idea that the dollhouse constitutes the locus of the nostalgic mode and represents interiority as “within within within” (61).

Though Lucy recovers her senses only by locating herself amid the furniture of the parlor, she is concerned throughout the narrative about being reduced to the status of “unobtrusive articles of furniture, chairs of ordinary joiner’s work, and carpets of no striking pattern” (98). Indeed, the novel is a protest against being regarded as a “passive thing” (104). While Lucy apprehends herself as a *meuble*, she cannot bear to be one. She resists not so much becoming commodified as she does becoming an “unobtrusive” piece of furniture, an “ordinary” chair or carpet. In her own words, she would not mind being looked at “as men do look on what is the apple of their eye” (280). She fudges the lines between person and thing and instead aligns interiority with becoming a more remarkable kind of thing—a rarity or curiosity. Thus when Monsieur Paul reproaches her for her “wicked fondness for worldly vanities” (333), for being too decked out in “colifichets” and “babioles,” she is amused rather than horrified: “it is a new thing to . . . tease him with an obtrusive ray” (334). She does not mind when Paul “gathers up all [her] poor scattered sins of vanity, [her] luckless chiffon of rose-colour, [her] small fringe of a wreath, [her] scrap of ribbon, [her] silly bit of lace, and calls [her] to account for the lot” (334). It is preferable to strike Paul with an “obtrusive ray” than remain an “unobtrusive” piece of furniture. Rhetorically, she seems to disown the ornaments by calling them “luckless” “small” “scrap[s]” and “silly bit[s],” signaling how precarious she considers the link between her sense of self and the “lady’s things” she wears. To be sure, one way to invent interiority is to proclaim to have no investment in material things at all. But her complicated relationship to these material fragments speaks volumes about the difficulty of distinguishing between interiority and “lady’s things.” The desire to “obtrude” on the eyes, a symptom of her need for recognition and thus of her psychological depth, is much like a desire to be a curiosity.

Paulina, Lucy’s distant relative and partial “double” (278), helps articulate the novel’s nostalgic view of the relation between interiority and material objects. She is, from the beginning, “most unchildlike.” Her capacity for interiority, for emotion and its containment, is so great as to seem uncanny, transforming her into “a small ghost gliding over the carpet” (34). Her unusual silence is the hallmark of her deep interiority: she “feel[s], without pouring out her feelings in a flux of words” (290). The image of Paulina getting “all she want[s]” by merely being close to her father (14), however, complicates the meanings of her interiority. The spectacle of desire completely satisfied in “a trance of content”—and satisfied by Paulina’s “nestl[ing] against [her
father]” (14)—marks her interiority as problematically feminine and “one-ideal” (12): the child “seemed to feel by his feelings: to exist in his existence” (25). In Paulina, interiority (self-containment) and identification (with another) are not in any opposition.

Dr. John, puzzled by Paulina’s quaintness, remarks that she is like a “perfect cabinet of oddities” (27). In comparing her to a cabinet of curiosities, the novel finds the most poignant image of the relation between interiority and material objects in the nineteenth century. According to the OED, a cabinet is a “room devoted to the arrangement or display of works of art and objects of vertu,” “a museum,” a “case for the safe custody of jewels, or other valuables” and a “secret receptacle” or “treasure-chamber” (“Cabinet”). The cabinet of curiosities represents interiority as simultaneously removed from and constituted by the world of things. In the cabinet, Brontë finds a figure that makes interiority akin not just to a parlor but to a premodern museum, a secret space that contains valuable objects arranged as if for display. Villette is indeed preoccupied with the concept of the cabinet, imbuing it with a range of meanings. Cabinet is first encountered as a foreign concept, an alien word connoting interiority and enclosure. When Lucy enters Madame Beck’s pensionnat, she is led through a “small inner room termed a ‘cabinet’” (68). But predominantly, cabinets in Villette as well as nineteenth-century fiction in general signify secrecy and perversion. They are conceived as feminine spaces to be penetrated by the masculine gaze. Strangely, Lucy finds herself in the masculine position of a voyeur in relation to one such cabinet early on. Walking in a corridor, she hears “a giddy treble laugh” issuing from “the little cabinet” by a “door half-unclosed” (103). Later, she presents Dr. John’s “perfect knowledge of Villette; a knowledge not merely confined to its open streets, but penetrating to all its galleries, salles, and cabinets: of every door which shut in an object worth seeing, of every mu-

seum, of every hall, sacred to art or science, he seemed to possess the ‘Open! Sesame’” (198). As Emily Apter notes, to the writers of the Encyclopédie the cabinet meant an intensely private space, but by the fin de siècle it constituted a “fetishistic space of perversion,” marked by an erotic obsession with things (43). When the obsession concerns a person, the person is “so remote . . . that he or she [is] reduced to the status of an inanimate object or fetish substitute” (56). In Villette, such textual slippages reveal latent connections between the nature of subjective interiority and affective and erotic investments in things.

While objects in the cabinet were thought of as representative specimens, the cabinet also relied on the principle of rarity, of wonders and marvels. The collector had a special fondness for hybrids of all kinds: objects that crossed boundaries between life and death or between art and nature. The cabinet of curiosities was a way of investing objects with special significances; the historian Patrick Mauriès writes that “the founding secret” of cabinets of curiosities was their intention to “inscribe [objects] within a special setting which would instill in them layers of meaning” (25). In Villette, the cabinet of curiosities, then, connotes the Great Exhibition and displaces it in favor of a more archaic collection that was on the decline (cabinets flourished in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries). The cabinet is indeed an odd metaphor to use after 1851. The Great Exhibition belongs to the era of public displays, the great age of the national museum; a Wunderkammer, on the other hand, is essentially preindustrial, a private, even secretive, collection. The objects in a cabinet seem to be held apart, to fall outside of the systems of exchange. Though, according to Jean Baudrillard, even collectibles belong to the capitalist system of objects, it is nonetheless important that the curio cabinet gives the impression of being a survival of an older, premodern era. At mid-century, interiority itself was becoming fetishized; it was
the object of a nostalgic longing for a time before the Great Exhibition and the British Museum, a time of the Wunderkammer, when collections of things were still private affairs. The cabinet of curiosities is, then, an intensely nostalgic figure of interiority. It acknowledges not only that the bourgeois interior is cluttered with things but also that this clutter consists of curiosities, fetishes really, hidden and imbued with intensities of meaning and power, like Lucy’s pincushion but unlike “unobtrusive articles of furniture and chairs of ordinary joiner’s work.” The cabinet of curiosities, a collection of buried treasures, is the text’s most accurate image of the state of the bourgeois interior at mid-century, imagined as it is as a nostalgic collection of things.

NOTES

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1 In another place the manuscript contains a partial relic of Choseville: Brontë began to write “Choseville” but crossed out “Chos” and wrote “Villette aristocracy” instead (Rosengarten and Smith, Villette 305n).

2 Though Brontë modeled the narrator’s journey after John Bunyan (Dolin xix), her idea of Vanity Fair was equally influenced by William Makepeace Thackeray, her undisputed literary idol. In a letter written after she read the March 1848 installment of Vanity Fair, Brontë admits that “Thackeray is a Titan... Thackeray is unique: I can say no more[,] I will say no less” (Letters 2: 45).

3 This essay is part of a larger critical effort to de-mythologize Brontë studies. See Lucasta Miller’s The Brontë Myth.

4 In her “poetics of glass,” Isobel Armstrong connects the Glass Town of Brontë’s juvenilia to the Crystal Palace (5). But it is only recently that Heather Glen read Villette as “filled with objects” and “pleasurable spectacle” (Glen 207, 214). Against the exhibition’s “ideal of authoritative overview,” Villette offers “a subtly ironic commentary on the limitations of [the bourgeois] world” (Glen 229, 227, 237).

5 Gary R. Dyer writes in his discussion of the “bazaar topos” that “English bazaars were sites of conflict among cultural and moral values.” Such places “evoked images that the upper- and middle-class English observer feared” (196–97).

6 According to McLaughlin, this derivation is erroneous, and fetish comes instead from the Latin factitio, or “man-made” (6–7). William Pietz suggests a more circuitous linguistic history, where fetish originates in the pidgin word fetasso, itself a development from the Portuguese feticho, meaning “magical practice” or “witchcraft,” which in turn derives from Latin facticius, or “manufactured” (84).

7 Glen points out that the exhibition was “part of the Enlightenment project of rational demystification” (218), but it is equally important that Brontë’s rhetoric in the letters is one of mystification rather than demystification and that Brontë does not participate in the Enlightenment project with any consistency, even though in Villette she demystifies apparent mysteries (e.g., the mystery of the nun).

8 Brontë completed The Professor in 1846; it was published posthumously by Smith, Elder in 1857.

9 Michel Foucault questions the notion of deep interiority as a secret hidden within. For example, in History of Sexuality (1976), the analysis of the “repressive hypothesis” suggests that interiority is a ruse of power. By garrulously exploring its own psychological depths, the modern subject only furthers its alienation. For a reading of Brontë’s conception of interiority in the context of Foucault’s work, see Joseph Allen Boone; and John Kucich.

10 Marx, to be sure, argues that the fantasies involved in commodity fetishism are politically retrograde but acknowledges the grip they have on the real.

11 One of the obsolete meanings of cabinet—used in Villette (198)—is “a museum, picture-gallery” (“Cabinet”).

12 This paper constitutes an implicit response to Nicholas Dames’s claim that in Villette the faculty of memory is absent, because of Brontë’s adherence to phenological theory (76–124). Dames’s reading is invaluable in the way it uncovers the presence of the signifying body in Brontë, but it does not account for the fact that the entire narrative is told as a massive, retrospective exercise in memory-work.

13 Glen then develops an argument that focuses on Brontë’s myopia and the visual bafflement of the exhibition (226).

14 Logan insists that parlor ornaments are not fetishes, but she may do so because, out of a concern to maintain the theoretical viability of the concept of fetishism, she relies on a strictly psychoanalytic meaning of the term (103–04).

WORKS CITED


