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Depolicing Villette:

Surveillance, Invisibility, and the Female Erotics of "Heretic Narrative"

JOSEPH A. BOONE

"Villette reads like one long meditation on a prison break"

—Kate Millett¹

A scene occurs towards the end of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* that foreshadows, more than a century in advance, Michel Foucault's theories of nineteenth-century social discipline. In a sequence of events designed to confirm the reader's suspicion that the foreign city of Villette is a world in which surveillance is ubiquitous and inescapable, Lucy Snowe, the novel's narrator and a teacher at Mme. Beck's pensionnat for girls, is strolling in the school's enclosed garden with M. Paul Emmanuel, a teacher at an adjoining boys' academy, when the latter makes a confession that is as manipulative as it is revealing. Asserting in his typically irascible manner that the reticent Lucy needs "watching, and watching over,"² M. Paul reveals that he has taken this "duty" upon his own shoulders in the most literal manner possible. "I watch you and [the] others pretty closely, pretty constantly, nearer and oftener than you or they think," he proudly boasts, then points to a window overlooking the garden that serves as his covert "post of observation":

That ... is a room I have hired, nominally for a study—virtually for a post of observation. There I sit and read for hours together.... My book is this garden; its contents are human nature—female human nature. I know you by heart. Ah! I know you well.... (453)

In this world where everybody constantly watches everybody else, the greatest moments of private gratification, it would seem, involve violating the privacy of others. Moreover, as the example of M. Paul demonstrates, this is a transaction in which the spy, when not busily prying into somebody else's secrets, openly confesses his own: making sure that those spied-upon *know* that the spying eye has penetrated their inmost secrets becomes a perverse way of consolidating and displaying one's superior powers. In such an economy, knowledge counts for everything, as M. Paul's sigh of satisfaction—"I know you by heart. Ah! I know you well"—so aptly acknowledges.

Given this circuit of surveillance and voyeuristic delight, both the text and the foreign city that share the name of "Villette" manifest the earmarks of the

¹ *Sexual Politics* (New York: Avon, 1969), 146.

² *Villette* (1853; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 453. All further references to this work appear in the text.

modern disciplinary society outlined by Foucault in his monumental study *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Such a society, emerging in the early nineteenth century, maintains its power not by sovereign rule but by making *each* of its citizens an agent of surveillance and regulation: as we police each other, that is, we internalize the law and become our own policing agents.³ The secret “post of observation” that M. Paul maintains in *Villette* forcefully recalls one of Foucault’s key symbols of the newly emergent disciplinary society: that of the Panopticon or central watchtower, originally designed by Jeremy Bentham for use in contemporary penitentiaries, from which the victim of incarceration is subjected to an anonymous field of constant supervision: “He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication.”⁴ As we will discover, M. Paul’s “post of observation” is only one of many forms that the Panopticon takes in *Villette*.

The presence of such mechanisms of supervision raises the related question of how invested this novel, as a series of textual operations, might also be in analogous modes of regulation. This question is central to D. A. Miller’s influential *The Novel and the Police* (1987), which uses Foucault’s theories to argue for the complete entanglement of the Victorian novel in the disciplinary measures it represents.⁵ Consider, for instance, the passage I have just read: here we are, after all, looking down from our privileged positions as reader-observers and spying upon the private conversation of Lucy and Paul, as Paul confesses *his* spying activities to Lucy. And yet we only occupy our “superior” vantage-point by the good graces of Lucy, whose revelations and reticences as first-person narrator, themselves regulated by Brontë, in turn regulate *our* field of knowledge. Our privileged position outside and above the text, it turns out, is simultaneously the circumscribed space of our imprisonment within an even more encompassing system of textual constraints. The novel as genre, Miller would argue, depends on and is in fact defined by the totalizing effects of such reversible circles of confinement and circumscription. Powerful as such Foucauldian insights are, perhaps because they are so powerful, I find myself hesitating before a theory of narrative that sometimes seems to underestimate those pockets of resistance to which disciplinary power, textual or otherwise, inevitably gives rise and to neglect those subversive pleasures which such counterforces may inspire.⁶ In the following pages, therefore, I’d like to give space to the play of my hesitations, explore just how pervasive and self-regulating this Foucauldian economy of spied and spied-upon is, and see how deeply it infiltrates the thematic and textual operations of nineteenth-century fiction. This I will do by taking Brontë’s novel as my point of departure; for if

³ *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975, trans. 1977; New York: Vintage, 1979), 201-03.

⁴ Foucault, 200.

⁵ *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), viii.

⁶ For a view of how these points of resistance are sometimes submerged in Foucault’s writings, particularly when gender is at issue, see Frances Bartkowski, “Epistemic Drift in Foucault,” in *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, ed. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 43-58. Diamond and Quinby’s “Introduction,” ix-xx, usefully maps the benefits that might accrue from a combination of feminist and Foucauldian methodology.

ever there were a novel filled with spying eyes, knowing gazes, and significant glances, it is *Villette*.

But before pursuing this line of inquiry, I'd like to return to the scene I've already highlighted and make a point about the gendered nature of the surveillance it records. To do so is in part to suggest that feminist inquiries—while certainly not inimical to theoretical models of narrative indebted to Foucault—might have something more, or at least different, to say about the applicability of his insights concerning discursive social formations to novelistic formulations. For if the object of M. Paul's study is, as he claims, "*human nature*," it is, as his immediately following qualification betrays, quite pointedly "*female human nature*" that he gazes upon in the closed recesses of Mme. Beck's garden. A dynamics of erotic domination hence insinuates itself into M. Paul's description of the 'feminine' secrets disclosed by "yonder ... magic lattice" (454); this garden is a space to be penetrated, if not by M. Paul's phallic spy-glass, which he casually reveals he is in the habit of using, then by his secret forays into the garden itself. For as he taunts Lucy, "the garden itself is open to me": he alone possesses the key to a hidden door at its bottom, by means of which he can "come and go at pleasure" (455). Probing spy-glasses, master keys, magic lattices, bottom doors—the sexualized tenor of M. Paul's metaphors reminds us that the circulation of power in the disciplinary world sketched by Foucault, and amplified by Miller, is neither neutral nor neuter. To understand how its technologies of social control might impinge upon the textual operations of *Villette*, we thus need to understand how disciplinary power intersects with and is perhaps even destabilized by Brontë's representations of the psychodynamics of sexual difference.

The implications of this conflation of textual and sexual power for Lucy Snowe—as a writing woman—are only underlined by the metaphoric equation M. Paul proceeds to make between the (female) object of his study and texts: "*my book is this garden; its contents ... female human nature*" (emphasis added). Yet if this female geographical space is *his* "book," his text, by virtue of the male gaze, what is the status of the book that Lucy herself is writing and that we are reading? Are there ways in which Brontë casts Lucy's narration of her search for fulfillment so that it dodges the circuit of surveillance and counter-surveillance that constructs her world? Or is Lucy's narrative doomed to police itself when the possessive gazes of others fail? These are some of the questions I shall now attempt to address, first by detailing Brontë's representation of what Foucault would call a carceral society, then by tracing the maneuvers by which she bestows upon Lucy a cloak of willed invisibility that allows her, in her twin roles as actor and narrator, to negotiate an erotic and, I will be arguing, eventually *autoerotic* quest that depends, ultimately, on Lucy's control of the gaze. In so forcing us to question the continuities and discontinuities between modes of social surveillance and the eroticized gaze, Brontë's novel forms a stage upon which we can observe Foucauldian theory (en)countering its rejected other, psychoanalytic theory, an encounter mediated,

in the following pages, by feminist interrogations of sexual difference.⁷ In the wake of this meeting, I also hope to counter the assumption that novels are inevitably the victims of ideological representation (or, at least, that that is all there is to say about them), and to respond to more general feminist theories of narrative—such as Teresa de Lauretis’s—that assume an impasse between the dynamics of narrative desire and the representation of female desire in fiction.

I. Lucy under lock and key

In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault argues that the regulatory principles of the modern penitentiary were rapidly assimilated by a wide variety of early nineteenth-century social institutions, not least of which were schools. Indeed, from the moment that Lucy Snowe takes up residence first as governess and then as teacher in Mme. Beck’s Pensionnat de Demoiselles, she is beset by the sense that “[t]his was a strange house, where no corner was sacred from intrusion, where not ... a thought [could be] pondered, but a spy was at hand to note and to divine” (310). As Lucy sardonically comments after having observed her employer secretly searching her personal belongings,

madame had her own system for managing and regulating this mass of machinery, and a very pretty system it was ‘Surveillance,’ ‘espionage,’—these were her watch-words [S]he was sick, she would declare, of the means she had to use, but use them she must; and after discoursing, often with dignity and delicacy to me, she would move away on her ‘souliers de silence,’ and glide ghost-like through the house watching and spying everywhere, peering through every key-hole, listening behind every door. (135-36)

As Mme. Beck’s “ghost-like” surveillance suggests, she consolidates her power by becoming an invisible, all-seeing presence that is everywhere at once but seen by no one, not unlike Bentham’s model of the Panopticon. Thus it comes as no surprise to learn that she, like M. Paul, also occupies a “summit of observation” above the pensionnat’s garden, from which “open window” no “transaction” below is said to escape her watchful eye (182).

As a hyperactive site of regulatory supervision, the girls’ school on the secluded Rue Fossette might first seem an exception to the rule. But Mme. Beck’s establishment, the text almost immediately implies, is a microcosm of the state itself, embodying in the person of its ever-capable director the methods by which the larger social order maintains its power. Lucy is being only half-

⁷ Villette has attracted the attention of several brilliant feminist readings over the years; I have particularly profited by the analyses of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Karen Lawrence, Nina Auerbach, Nancy Miller, Patricia Yaeger, Brenda Silver (all cited below), and Mary Jacobus, *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). The perspective I offer here has been enriched by the responses this paper has solicited from audiences at SUNY-Albany, Brandeis University, the University of Southern California, and Harvard University’s Theory Seminar at the Center for Literary and Cultural Studies, as well by suggestions from or discussions with Deborah Nord, Susan Winnett, Hilary Schor, Marianne Hirsch, David Román, Nancy Paxton, Peter Manning, Tania Modleski, Walter Hughes, Ted Allen, Barbara Freeman, Marjorie Becker, and David Hirsch.

facetious when she declares that Mme. Beck "ought to have ruled a nation: she should have been the leader of a turbulent legislative assembly.... In her own single person she could have comprised the duties of a first minister *and a superintendent of police*" (137; emphasis added). And Mme. Beck, like any good superintendent of the police, commands a legion of subalterns to carry out her dirty work. "As Madame ... ruled by espionage, she of course had her staff of spies," Lucy reports, a staff which allows Madame to remain the ever-unruffled, amiable mistress of the situation, lodged at the center of her information-gathering bureaucracy, "plotting and counterplotting, spying and receiving the reports of spies all day" (135, 136).

If the similarity between Mme. Beck's pensionnat and the modern state is cinched by Lucy's reference to her mistress as "a little Buonaparte" (213),⁸ it is also true that Mme. Beck is not the only Napoleon in the world of *Villette*. Her capable kinsman and most valued schoolmaster, M. Paul—who, as we have already seen, occupies his own summit of observation—is another agent of disciplinary control whose "love of power" and "eager grasp after supremacy" has, according to Lucy, "points of resemblance to Napoleon Bonaparte" (438, 436). M. Paul ostensibly epitomizes a more legitimate face of discipline, that of the worthy judge whose "unerring penetration of instinct," "questioning eyes," and "ruthless researches" (423-24) are instruments of moral efficacy. It is ironic, then, that this champion of truth, while busily stripping away others' "florid veilings" of deceit (423), not only elects to censor Lucy's reading, but also attempts to prohibit her observation of unveiled female anatomy in the museum episode. Such actions indicate that M. Paul's exercise of authority is not so disinterested after all; for him, as for Mme. Beck, knowledge is most often a means of power and control. Hence the man whom Lucy calls her "self-elected judge" (386) turns out to be an incorrigible spy, one whose Jesuitical training, Lucy jests, has prepared him all too well to make good his avowed intention to "keep his eye on me" (387). Foucault's evocation of the century's new model of the police—"thousands of eyes posted everywhere"—finds its living embodiment in M. Paul, whose habit is "to wear eyes before, behind, and on each side of him" (310).⁹

We soon learn that the individual skills of M. Paul and Mme. Beck are subject to a yet greater supervisory agency: that of the Catholic Church, which keeps the budding friendship of the heretic Lucy and its faithful son Paul "under the surveillance of a sleepless eye" (503). Indeed, the confessional booth forms another version of the Panopticon, in spirit if not in architectural exactitude. For the "magic lattice" through which Paul says he spies on the school's grounds becomes, in Brontë's calculated refiguration, "that mystic lattice ... the sliding panel of the confessional," through which the Church probes M. Paul's mind and infuses its object with the injunction to self-discipline

⁸ If the comparison is not meant to be altogether flattering, the analogy nonetheless holds, for to the nineteenth-century imagination Napoleon epitomized the conjunction, from which the modern state was born, of the modern exercise of discipline with the power of the sovereign; hence Foucault's description of Napoleon as "the individual who looms over everything with a single gaze from which no detail, however minute, can escape" (217) describes Mme. Beck's ideal of perfect rule equally well.

⁹ Foucault, 214.

and repression (454, 503; emphases added).¹⁰ Nor is this exercise of unseen power restricted to the putative privacy of the confessional booth, as the Protestant Lucy learns when she goes to confession in a moment of despair and is afterwards followed into the streets by the priest to whom she has confessed, Père Silas, who “esteem[s] it his Christian duty” (258) to ferret out the details of Lucy’s identity and residence: detection undertaken in the name of “spiritual” discipline knows no bounds.

Beset as Lucy is by this world of incessant surveillance, she doesn’t refrain from using its techniques when they work on her behalf. Indeed, the keenly and quietly observant Lucy is as consummate a spy as Mme. Beck herself. A paradigmatic instance occurs her first night in Villette, when she discovers her new employer rifling through her possessions. Lucy feigns sleep less out of fear of being detected, however, than in order to outspy her observer: “I opened my eyes with precaution, for I own I felt curious to see how far her taste for research would lead her. It led her a good way ... I softly rose in my bed and followed her with my eye ... All this was very un-English: truly I was in a foreign land” (131-32). The subsequent pleasure that Lucy takes in remaining the unseen observer of Mme. Beck’s activities—“I will not deny that it was with a secret glee I watched her” (186), she reports on a subsequent occasion—only underlines the degree to which Beck functions not only as Lucy’s foil but as her double.¹¹ Moreover, like Mme. Beck, Lucy occupies her own Panopticon in the form of the children’s nursery—“my watchtower,” she writes, “[from] whence I ... made my observations” (138). And it is precisely within these quarters that the handsome young physician called in to attend to Mme. Beck’s children, Dr. John, increasingly becomes the object of Lucy’s not disinterested surveillance, as her phrasing over the course of three exemplary pages betrays. “Indeed, when you looked well at him ...,” she first surveys his comely appearance, ostensibly to explain the attraction he exerts on Mme. Beck. Within sentences, however, the fiction of Mme. Beck’s mediating eye has dropped out altogether (“I noticed,” Lucy says, then, “I noticed more,” 160); and, as Dr. John’s visits to the school accelerate, we find Lucy lamely protesting her equally accelerated surveillance: “It was not perhaps my business to observe the mystery of his bearing ... but, placed as I was, I could hardly help it. He laid himself open to my observation” (162-63). In Brontë’s

¹⁰ Foucault comments on the confessional as a productive, rather than repressive, site of nineteenth-century discourses of sexuality in *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction* (1976; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1980), 60-69. Brontë’s imagistic equation between “magic” and “mystic” lattices is also noted in Sally Shuttleworth’s “The Surveillance of a Sleepless Eye: The Constitution of Neurosis in *Villette*,” in *One Culture: Essays in Science and Literature*, ed. George Levine and Alan Rauch (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 320, which I discovered after completing my essay. Tracing the contemporary medical discourses informing Brontë’s representation of female psychological illness, Shuttleworth’s insightful essay tallies the many levels of Foucauldian supervisory discipline at work in the novel.

¹¹ One page later Brontë makes the analogy explicit, when the visit of Dr. John to the pensionnat leaves Lucy searching for a “key” to the “riddle” of his demeanor “almost as sedulously as Madame had sought a guide to useful knowledge in my toilet drawers” (187). When Lucy receives her first letter from Dr. John, it is appropriate that she is figured as “gliding” through the schoolrooms and “mounting noiseless” (323) to the dormitories as she searches for a private space in which to read it, her ghostlike movements parodying those of Mme. Beck, her erstwhile sister in surveillance. For two influential perspectives on the doubling functions of these women, see Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 408-09, and Nina Auerbach, *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 103, 110-13.

psychodramatic rendition of the “very un-English” and “foreign land” of *Villette*, cold-minded surveillance, the internal mechanism of the self-policing society diagnosed by Foucault, reveals its other face as warm-blooded voyeurism.¹²

As the examples of Mme. Beck, M. Paul, and Lucy make clear, the quintessential instrument of surveillance and discipline in the world of this novel is the gaze itself: eyes are everywhere—even in Lucy’s private garden, where “the eyes of the flowers” have “gained vision” (183). The complexity of interpretation generated by this network of covert and caught glances is epitomized in the Concert episode of chapter 20, an event to which Lucy has been escorted by Dr. John and his mother. While the singers and musicians assemble on stage, a second drama unfolds in the royal box in the balcony above Lucy, where she reads the mute “spectacle” of the king’s melancholia engraved on his brow (291); Dr. John, meanwhile, witnesses yet another “spectacle” when he catches Ginevra Fanshawe, the current object of his adoration, ridiculing his mother from afar (294). One is not quite sure where the stage ends or the audience begins in this theatre of intercepted gazes, which is indeed Brontë’s point; *anyone* is liable to become the unwitting spectacle to another’s observation in this world of blurring boundaries.¹³ This potential volatility and interchangeability is, of course, a hallmark of the disciplinary society as Foucault envisions it; by making everyone agents of a mobile, diffuse power that circulates among a plurality of “subsidiary authorities,” this system creates subjects who, in Foucault’s words, assume responsibility for their own subjection; held captive by the ideal of a larger but unseen policing power we become our own best jailers.¹⁴

Hence, complementing surveillance as a mode of social control is the everpresent threat of imprisonment or incarceration, which is manifested throughout *Villette* in the series of stifling enclosures that mark Lucy’s precarious negotiation of the competing paths of desire and duty, of expression and repression. One might simply tally all the images of constriction or interment that characterize Lucy’s various living abodes, from the “[t]wo hot, close rooms” she occupies near the beginning of the novel to the “walled in and guarded” recesses of Mme. Beck’s pensionnat (348), within whose confines Lucy

¹² It might be noted that Dr. John, a physician with an unflappable belief in his ability to penetrate to the innermost truths of all his patients, including Lucy, is another of the text’s emblematic agents of disciplinary supervision, embodying the new power of the nineteenth-century medical institution analyzed by Foucault in *The Birth of the Clinic* (London, 1973); see Shuttleworth, 314-15.

¹³ For an excellent analysis of Brontë’s motifs of theatre and spectacle, along with their destabilizing propensities, see Joseph Litvak, “Charlotte Brontë and the Scene of Instruction: Authority and Subversion in *Villette*,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 42 (Winter 1988): 467-89. The world of *Villette* abounds in grand spectacles and dramatic set-pieces, including, in addition to the Concert chapter which I have just mentioned, the school play in which Lucy performs on Mme. Beck’s birthday fête, the performance of the legendary Vashti to which Dr. John takes Lucy, Lucy’s trip to the museum where the Cleopatra is on display, and the various impromptu theatricals, as it were, enacted on the estrade or before the school examiners in the classrooms of Mme. Beck’s academy. As Litvak demonstrates, the school play in which Lucy (half) cross-dresses as a man is a particularly vivid example of the dissolution of the normative boundaries separating actor and audience, those who see and who are seen (478-81); for as Lucy discovers the “private” drama that is unfolding in the audience, and its parallel to the triangular “public” drama being enacted on stage, she modulates her role until she (like her costume) is playing on both sides of the boundary at once.

¹⁴ Foucault, 21, 202-03.

fancies herself a “long-buried prisoner,” a “maniac or an idiot” gone “mad from solitary confinement” (356).¹⁵ Domestic incarceration becomes more than a metaphor when M. Paul literally locks Lucy in the attic of the pensionnat to study for her role in the school play. Notably, this garret prison provides the setting for Lucy’s first sighting of the ghostly nun rumored to haunt the school. And, according to legend, the nun’s sexual transgressions have made her the victim of actual incarceration: she has been “buried alive” in the school’s garden “for some sin against her vow” (172). This hint of sexual punishment vividly serves to remind Lucy of the necessity of disciplining her own wayward and perhaps “sinful” desires; hence her decision to bury her treasured letters from Dr. John on the very spot where the nun was interred. The most that can be hoped of this never-realized love, Lucy muses in yet another image of containment, is that Dr. John still maintains a little closet marked Lucy’s Room in the “goodly mansion” of “his heart”; as for herself, she confesses, “I kept a place for him, too—a place of which I never took the measure.... All my lifelong I carried it folded in the palm of my hand” (555).¹⁶

This symbolic act of self-repression—whereby we become our own best disciplinarian—attests, like all these images of enclosure, to the marks of the prison that Lucy has borne her entire life; yet, paradoxically, these same images also bespeak the intense desire to maintain a private space untouched by the external world that imprisons us in its rules and regulations. This tension between incarceration and the desire for privacy, moreover, is central to D. A. Miller’s *The Novel and the Police*. For Miller argues that the entire, covert project of the nineteenth-century novel is to confirm the bourgeois novel-reader in his or her identity as a free “liberal subject,” and that the novel does this by creating for the reader the *illusion* of a sheltered or private space, an “outside” or “elsewhere,” to the totalizing operations of institutionalized power. In fact, as Miller brilliantly demonstrates, the novel’s obsessive thematizing of the policing of the boundaries between good and evil, inside and outside, the domestic and the carceral, is precisely a strategy to imply that there *is* an alternative realm—the reader’s bourgeois-liberal realm—free of the police and the criminal sphere they patrol. The catch in this ideological gambit is that the privileged “categories of the individual, the inward, [and] the domestic,” only recreate with ever discreet ploys those disciplinary powers they claim to disavow; likewise, “*the very practice of novelistic representation*”—

¹⁵ During the “Long Vacation” sequence, moreover, the school literally becomes a mental asylum (another of Foucault’s carceral establishments) as Lucy, left in charge of a helpless cretin, moves toward total nervous collapse; imagining herself “*prisoned with some strange tameless animal*” (229; emphasis added), she finds herself as much inmate as keeper, possessed by her own mental demons. Even the pastoral scene of Lucy’s convalescence, La Terrasse, where her soul “re-enter[s] her *prison*”—the body—“with pain” (237; emphasis added), is figured as another kind of enclosure: a “very safe *asylum*” (244; emphasis added) is the unintentionally ambiguous phrase Mrs. Bretton uses to describe its womb-like insularity.

¹⁶ The imprisoning potential of these dwelling places, literal and figurative, also finds expression in an analogous series of images in which enclosure becomes a deliberate (if generally unsuccessful) means of keeping potentially disruptive, subversive emotions under lock and key. For example, having awakened to the “keen relish” of acting during Madame’s birthday fête, Lucy immediately decides this longing “must be put by,” and so she “fasten[s] it in with the lock of a resolution that”—so she claims—“neither Time nor Temptation has since picked” (211). Likewise, Lucy’s object in going to confession is to pour out her “long pent-up pain” into a contained “vessel from which it could not be diffused” (254); and of the treasured memory of Dr. John’s unconscious assistance to her the night of her arrival in Villette, she thinks, “it was a pleasant thought, laid by in my own mind, and best kept there” (306).

the emphases are Miller's—itself merely “reinvent[s]” the “policing powers” it pretends to censure.¹⁷

Deferring for the moment the question of whether “the very practice of ... representation” in nineteenth-century fiction is as unitary as Miller's formula implies, it is nonetheless clear that his theory raises serious questions about Lucy's attempt to maintain any kind of private space hidden from the world's knowledge and free from the constraints of power—if only a place “folded in the palm of my hand.” Such a theory also calls into question Lucy's attempt, both as subject of her narrative and as its author, to construct an identity resistant to the social pressures that surround and define her as an unmarried woman. To say as much, however, is to make explicit what the preceding images of enclosure, imprisonment, and containment have thus far only implied: that issues of sexuality, repression, and selfhood create an especially coercive bind for the *female* subject in a disciplinary society that is simultaneously a patriarchal one.

II. Undercover operations

To begin, then, to unravel the ways in which Lucy's gender affects her position in a society based on supervisory discipline, I would like to turn, first, to her investment in remaining as invisible as possible in this world of innumerable eyes, and, second, to her participation, as first-person narrator, in recreating insofar as words allow this invisibility on the level of narrative structure. Without a doubt, Lucy's favorite position in social situations is to remain the unnoted but all-seeing observer; at Mme. Beck's birthday fête, for example, Lucy withdraws to a quiet nook “whence unobserved I could observe” (211). Is this simply an attempt to retain the power of the panoptic gaze for herself, or does Lucy's willed invisibility simultaneously serve other functions? An answer, I would suggest, is implicit in the response Lucy makes to Ginevra Fanshawe's consternated query, “Who *are* you, Miss Snowe? ... But are you *anybody*?” “who am I indeed? Perhaps a personage in disguise,” Lucy teasingly replies (392-94), at once supplying an answer, but an answer that defers direct “meaning.” As such, Lucy deliberately figures herself as a “*cypher*” (445), a seeming non-entity not worth the bother of one's attention, an in-significance that does not signify. But this very figure, as Karen Lawrence has noted, is itself a disguise, a covering, one that allows Lucy to “pass” unimpeded before a world of exacting judges.¹⁸ For Lucy's most characteristic feature, as she readily admits, is a “staid manner” which she likens to a “cloak and hood of hodden gray; since under its favour I had been enabled to achieve with impunity and even approbation, deeds that if attempted with an excited and unsettled air would in some minds have stamped me as a dreamer and zealot” (104). Just as Lucy hides her zealous dreams from disapproving minds, she also literally disguises her physical being, constantly representing herself as “a mere

¹⁷ Miller, ix-x; 5; 63; 16-18; 82; 20.

¹⁸ Lawrence's “The Cypher: Disclosure and Reticence in *Villette*,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 42 (Winter 1988): 448-50, offers a superb analysis of Lucy's manipulations of her signifying functions and her use of rhetorical figures as “coverings.”

shadowy spot on a field of light" (200), as one "dressed in this same gown of shadow" (200) and "thin as a shadow" (350). One effect of this deliberate self-effacement is to confirm the sense of existential aloneness that has pervaded Lucy's life from its earliest years—thus she envisions herself forever "thinking ... my own thoughts, living my own life in my own still, shadow-world" (185).

Inhabiting a "shadow-world," of course, inevitably incurs a certain psychological cost: to retreat behind a mask of invisibility and coolness is to court the dangers of masochistic self-negation and self-deception, as well as to risk the stasis of non-life, of a plotless existence. Invisibility, even as a defense against the imprisoning gazes of others, can also become another kind of prison, a self-imposed life-sentence. Such neurotic disassociation marks the younger Lucy's first naming of herself in the text (which, tellingly, takes the form of a plea before a hypothesized jury) as she declares, "I, Lucy Snowe, plead guiltless of an overheated imagination" (69)—a claim the reader soon realizes could not be further from the truth. Yet, as Brontë goes on to demonstrate, this willed invisibility, this veneer of imperturbability, is not merely symptomatic of neurosis; it also heralds a strategic psychological mechanism designed to shelter Lucy from greater oppression and discrimination, not only as one who has faced tremendous loss and unspoken pain, but especially as a woman whose physical appearance has already rendered her "invisible" in the eyes of most men—an appearance, Lucy wryly comments, exciting "just that degree of notice ... given to unobtrusive articles of furniture, chairs of ordinary joiner's work, and carpets of no striking pattern" (162). To lack a "striking pattern," however, is not to be without designs altogether. Rather, as Lucy's strategic invisibility itself attests, her "cloak and hood of hodden gray" is part of a design, one that provides her with a mode of psychic survival while affording her some unexpected benefits: "in quarters where we can never be rightfully known, we take pleasure, I think, in being consummately ignored" (164). And, indeed, beneath her shadowy demeanor Lucy bides her time, waiting to know and "be rightfully known," which will also mean not only to see but also to be seen. But until Lucy chooses that moment, subterfuge serves her cause best.

The consequence, as Lucy expresses it towards the novel's end, is that "Who[ever] wills, may keep his own counsel—be his own secret's sovereign.... [M]y whole inner life ... was still mine only" (545). While one might question—precisely on the grounds that Miller has sketched out—Lucy's assumption of a *privatized* "inner" realm that can be possessed, her statement nonetheless usefully suggests the strategic doubleness embedded in her first-person narrative, which "keeps its own counsel" at the same time, paradoxically, that it *publicly* documents in writing the materials of her "inner life." Tantalizingly, it also echoes an earlier statement Lucy makes in deciding to withhold from her godmother the inner trials that have led to her nervous collapse: "so the half-drowned man keeps his own counsel *and spins no yarns*" (254; emphasis added). But while it is true that Lucy never reveals to her concerned friends—or her readers—the long-buried childhood traumas that underlie her adult fears of isolation and deprivation, it is not true that the "half-drowned" survivor that is Lucy "spins no yarns." Rather, as Karen Lawrence has suggested, Lucy turns to

self-articulation *in writing* precisely in order to counter being “misread” in person and hence to control, in at least this medium, *how* one signifies.¹⁹ In the process Lucy tells her tale so that it also signifies *differently*, and the result is an indirect and circuitous narrative trajectory that creates, in the face of apparent subjection, an unprecedented degree of freedom for its subject.

Lucy’s narration is, to say the least, devious from the onset, beginning with her initial strategy of displacing herself, as subject of her narrative, from its center; by focusing on Paulina, the newcomer to the Bretton household, as if she were the novel’s true subject, Lucy in effect goes “under cover,” remaining as inscrutable as possible. Then, in a move typical of this elliptical narrative, the shift at the beginning of chapter 4 reveals that the entire Bretton episode has been a kind of false start; the novel begins again, this time with the narrator at its center. But as the well-known metaphor of the “shipwreck” that Lucy employs to explain her loss of family in this passage illustrates, this beginning is just as duplicitous in its way as the Bretton episode was, employing a metaphorical figure—“picture me ... as a bark slumbering through halcyon weather” (94)—to cover over the blank of eight years that Brontë leaves forever unexplained: we are denied knowledge of what really happened, of who Lucy’s kindred ever were, whether she were always an orphan, before becoming (in Brontë’s subtle continuation of the metaphor) the “half-drowned” survivor who chooses, in this instance, to spin “no yarns” (254).

These uncertain narrative beginnings give rise to two related, equally destabilizing, narrative functions or strategies. First, this radical lack of narrative origins, of an “original” home, inaugurates Lucy’s quest into an unknown for which there is no necessary end, no teleological finality.²⁰ In the process, the “uncertain future” (117) that has always faced Lucy as a “placeless person” (102) becomes an effect of the narrative as well, as it traces a trajectory whose direction increasingly swerves out of the reader’s grasp, frustrating one’s ability to predict either its evolution or its outcome. Second, this existential and textual uncertainty is mirrored in the conspicuous gaps and lacunae, “the stilly pause[s],” that disrupt the linearity of Lucy’s retrospective telling: “Unbroken always is this blank: alike entire and unexplained” (349). The narrative’s most infamous reticence—one for which many readers have yet to forgive Brontë—involves Lucy’s suppression of her knowledge of Dr. John’s identity as her childhood companion Graham Bretton; hence the reader is forced to assume the position of Dr. John himself, who has also been left in the dark. “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,” Lucy states, “I ... preferred to keep the matter to myself. I liked entering his presence covered

¹⁹ Lawrence, 453. See also Brenda R. Silver, “The Reflecting Reader in *Villette*,” in *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, ed. Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland (Hanover, New Hampshire: University of New England Press, 1983): 90-111, on Lucy’s strategic reeducation of the reader.

²⁰ Following her original displacement to Bretton—already a movement away from “home”—Lucy moves further and further into uncharted realms, both geographically and existentially speaking: first to London, then, by means of an archetypal night-sea journey, to the kingdom of Labassecour and its capital city, Villette. Encountering otherness out of necessity as a foreign traveller and daring the forbidden become hallmarks of Lucy’s subsequent quest: she constantly depicts herself as “venturing out of what I looked on as my natural habits” (222), venturing beyond limits, into the “allées défendues” of the world.

with a cloud he had not seen through" (248). Lucy's language returns us to the issues of disguise and sight, silence and speaking, that we have seen to be intrinsic to a disciplinary order. But with a critical difference. For by means of her gesture of simultaneous withholding and disclosure, Lucy not only eludes Dr. John's judgment; she also double-crosses those policing readers who would prefer to categorize, compartmentalize, and fix her identity within the realm of the knowable. We are forced, uncomfortably, to admit that Lucy's confessional first-person perhaps does not confess *all*.²¹

If Lucy's narrative confesses any truths, then, they are unorthodox ones. All the indirect, elliptical strategies that she uses to unfold her story inscribe what she in her own words calls a "heretic narrative" (235), a narrative that works against the authorizing agencies that would discipline her life and normalize its telling. Significantly, this phrase occurs as Lucy looks back at her experience at confession and contemplates the consequence had she accepted Père Silas's invitation to return to his house for further instruction in the "true faith": "Did I, do you suppose, reader, contemplate venturing again within that worthy priest's reach? ... the probabilities are that had I visited Numero 10, Rue des Mages, at the hour and day appointed, I might just now, *instead of writing this heretic narrative*, be counting my beads in the cell of a certain Carmelite convent on the Boulevard of Crecy in Villette" (235; emphasis added). At this moment Lucy explicitly defines her entire narrative enterprise as *transgressive*: in writing her life Lucy indeed continues to confess, but in contradistinction to her Confessor's orthodox desires, confesses a heretic narrative. And however elliptical or disjointed or perverse Lucy's text might *appear*, it nonetheless bespeaks her refusal to be silenced, to let her story "venture" forth only to die within the mute walls of a conventual cell—a specifically female form of incarceration if ever there were one.

Lucy's unorthodox narrative stratagems—her silences, her disguises, her willful misconstructions; in sum, her undercover operations—are thus crucially related to the larger artistic question that faces her as narrator (and, by extension, Brontë as Lucy's creator) of female representation and self-representation. For Lucy, the question becomes one of how to represent the female as *subject* without risking her immediate objectification by the privileged male gaze, that ubiquitous instrument of surveillance in a patriarchal society.²² The "Cleopatra" and "Vashti" chapters offer linked but

21 The reticences characterizing Lucy's elliptical narration are abetted, furthermore, by the self-consciously teasing games she plays with the reader: "Cancel the whole of that, if you please, reader" (117-118), she playfully enjoins us at one point; "But stop—I must not, from the faithful narrator, degenerate into partial eulogist" (272), she parodies her role as narrator at another. The general instability of the narrator/reader relation is mirrored, furthermore, in the tendency of the line separating Lucy's experiencing and narrating selves to blur indiscriminately. It is precisely this slippage that gives rise to the complementary inversion of the text's blanks and lacunae—those fissures or gaps through which the emotional subtext of Lucy's narrative unexpectedly and unpredictably erupts, daunting us, for once, with its *lack* of reticence: "Oh, my childhood! I had feelings; passive as I lived, little as I spoke, cold as I looked ... I *could* feel" (175); "Oh!—to speak the truth, and drop that tone of false calm which outwears nature's endurance" (350). Tony Tanner offers a perceptive commentary on these self-reflexive narrative moments in his Introduction to the Penguin edition, 45-46.

22 Much recent feminist work, particularly on the cinema, has focused on the male gaze and the possibilities of its being repossessed by women. For a range of opinion, see E. Ann Kaplan, "Is the Gaze Male?", in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 309-27; Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1986); the various essays in *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*, ed. Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment (Seattle: The Real Comet Press, 1989); and Beth

contrasting perspectives on this problem. If the nude painting of Cleopatra that Lucy views in the museum is a blatantly unrealistic male representation of female flesh put on display for all viewers, the riveting stage performance of Vashti is an audacious attempt at female self-representation in which the actress deliberately usurps the gaze by displaying a transgressive "spectacle" of female desire, "disclos[ing] power like a deep, swollen, winter river, thundering in cataract" (341). The risk of such openly defiant self-representation, Lucy knows, is to incur Dr. John's sobering reaction: "He judged her as a woman, not an artist" (342). And although Lucy too holds ambivalent feelings about Vashti's flaunting of convention, her immediate comment is that this night has been "marked in the book of my life ... with a deep-red cross" (342). Lucy's metaphor points, I would suggest, to the degree to which the writing of *her own text*—"the book of my life"—simultaneously encodes and discloses, through its double-cross of indirection, an equally turbulent, unmeasured current of female erotic passion.

III. Emotional bondage; or, the chains of love

As part of Lucy's attempt to represent herself as the desiring subject of her heretic narrative, her story insistently also raises the question of her desire for others. In attempting to evade the regulatory mechanisms of a social system that polices female passion, however, Lucy as acting subject also remains invisible to those whom she loves, and so risks never being loved. In this light, it is fitting to turn to Lucy's two affairs of the heart, which Brontë uses to dramatize, in an especially condensed form, the problematics of surveillance and detection, power and hierarchy, incarceration and freedom, that traverse the represented world of this novel and that spur Lucy's strategies of self-representation.

Lucy's hidden passion for Dr. John Bretton reveals itself, as I have already noted, in her meticulous observation of his every movement. Her gaze, however, remains powerless as long as *he* does not recognize her; it is his vision that holds power in Villette's world. Hence his manly knowledge becomes at once the source of his sexual attractiveness to Lucy, as well as a disturbing sign of the inherent inequality in their relationship: "I often felt amazed at his perfect knowledge of Villette," Lucy says as he takes her about town, "a knowledge not merely confined to its open streets, but penetrating to all its galleries, salons, and cabinets: of every door which shut in an object worth seeing ... he seemed to possess the [magical] 'Open! Sesame'" (273). The phallic connotations of this commanding potency become even more apparent in one of the novel's most suggestive passages, Lucy's description of the quickening effect that Dr. John's

Newman, "'The Situation of the Looker-On': Gender, Narration, and Gaze in *Wuthering Heights*," *PMLA* 105 (1990): 1029-41. In addition to the examples I cite here, the question of self-representation is intrinsic to the scenes in which Lucy encounters her image in mirrors: note the moment in chapter 14 when Ginevra and Lucy stand side-by-side before the looking glass; or in chapter 20 when Lucy unexpectedly catches a glimpse of herself in her pink dress at the concert hall: "Thus for the first, and perhaps only time in my life, I enjoyed the 'giftie' of seeing myself as others see me. No need to dwell on the result. It brought a jar of discord, a pang of regret" (286).

sunny rays have on “the starved hollow” that is at once a symbol of her hidden inner life and of female sexuality:

Conceive a dell, deep-hollowed in forest secrecy; it lies in dimness and mist: its turf is dank, its herbage pale and humid. A storm or an axe makes a wide gap among the oak-trees; the breeze sweeps in; the sun looks down; the sad, cold dell, becomes a deep cup of lustre; high summer pours her blue glory and her golden light out of that beauteous sky, which till now the starved hollow never saw. (335)

Yet because Dr. John is blind to Lucy’s passion, never seeing in her anything more than, in his own words, “a being inoffensive as a shadow” (403), she can only participate in his desires vicariously, as the intermediary or “third” who facilitates *his* affairs of the heart. Hence it is a sign of Lucy’s growing capacity to be an active subject in the plot of her own desire when she refuses his seductive appeal that she serve the office of go-between in his courtship of Paulina Home, as she has previously, and painfully, served in his flirtation with Ginevra Fanshawe. “No, I could not,” she replies with “an inward courage, warm and resistant” (404-5; Brontë’s emphases). In turn, when Paulina attempts to draw Lucy into a triangular relation with herself and her now-declared lover by asking Lucy how Dr. John appears to her eyes, Lucy refuses the gambit by answering in charged language, “I never see him. I looked at him twice or thrice about a year ago, before he recognized me, and then I shut my eyes”; and as Polly presses Lucy to explain more, Lucy reiterates, “I mean that I value vision, and dread being struck stone blind” (520; Brontë’s emphases). Significantly, it is Lucy who now chooses “not to see,” whereas previously Dr. John has failed to see her. That the symbolic culmination of this subplot thus returns to the issue of the gaze only underlines the importance of visibility and invisibility to the gendered dynamics of power in the society in which Lucy lives.

Emancipated from one illusory love, Lucy moves into an increasingly erotic alignment with her fellow teacher, M. Paul. This character’s chauvinism and love of power have given many critics pause; does Lucy simply install a domestic version of the police in her life by falling in love with this beady-eyed despot? As M. Paul’s surveillance of Mme. Beck’s garden of feminine flowers has already indicated, this man penetrates secret spaces with a sexual energy—and with a violence—that even exceeds Dr. John’s skill in opening the hidden doors of Villette’s society. “As usual he broke upon us like a clap of thunder,” Lucy routinely reports of his entrance into the girls’ schoolroom, “with his vehement burst of latch and panel” (317). Nor is once ever enough for M. Paul: “the two-leaved door split (as split it always did for his admission—such a word as ‘open’ is inefficient to describe his movements) and he stood in the midst of us” (415). Just as M. Paul holds sway over the entire female pensionnat, so too he continually insinuates himself, in the most sexually suggestive manner possible, into Lucy’s most private spaces, her desk included. “Now I knew, and had long known,” Lucy confides, “that that hand of M.

Emanuel's was on intimate terms with my desk; that it raised and lowered the lid, ransacked and arranged the contents, almost as familiarly as my own" (430)—and the tell-tale evidence of his ransacking is none other than the "masculine" scent left by his cigars. What is a blatant attempt to police Lucy's privacy, however, also has another side: Paul invades Lucy's desk to leave her the books and pamphlets that stimulate as they validate her intellectual ambition. And it is this intellectual reciprocity that ultimately differentiates Lucy's relation with Paul from that with Dr. John, leading to an imagistic reversal that transforms Lucy into the penetrator of M. Paul: "his mind was indeed my library," Lucy says, "and whenever it was opened to me, I entered bliss" (472). It is now Paul who is "open" to Lucy's entrance, he who serves as static threshold or portal through which her quest for knowledge leads.

The role M. Paul plays in goading Lucy's "ambitious wishes" (440) for intellectual advancement retroactively explains many of his other acts of seeming tyranny: under the guise of impatience and irascibility, he seeks to stimulate Lucy into an active realization of her own powers. To say as much does not explain away M. Paul's perversities or paternalism, but points to a simultaneous level of signification at work not only in his complex psyche but also in Brontë's narrative design. It is M. Paul's demand that Lucy act in the school play, for example, that, in spite of its blatant aura of sexual violation ("the doors burst open ... two eyes ... hungrily dived into me") and its resultant temporary imprisonment in the attic, awakens Lucy to her potential as (in all senses of the phrase) an acting subject: "I acted to please myself.... A keen relish for dramatic expression revealed itself as part of my nature" (211). And despite her proclamation afterward that she has locked this desire away, the fact is that "dramatic expression" and "relish," in their best senses, come to define her subsequent encounters with M. Paul. She proves herself the consummate actress in deliberately tempting his outbreaks; her vaunted coolness, formerly the sign of her emotional alienation, increasingly serves the task of erotic play: "I had a certain pleasure in keeping cool, and working him up" (277).

In addition, M. Paul's fiery temper complements the "fire" that he, alone among Lucy's acquaintances, perceives under the surface of her calm exterior. "I know you!" he says after her performance in the school play: "I watched you ... What fire shot into the glance! Not mere light, but flame" (226). Hence, although the disconcerting gaze that Paul all too frequently levels at Lucy seems a gross violation of her privacy, one product of his surveillance, paradoxically, is to free the light *in her own eyes*—"What fire shot into the glance!"—and as such Brontë recasts the gaze as this female subject's self-empowering property. Lucy's reappropriation of the gaze triggers another key imagistic reversal, as, having just bested M. Paul in one of their verbal bouts, she thinks to herself, "You are well habituated to be passed by as a shadow in Life's sunshine; it is a new thing to see one testily lifting his hand *to screen his eyes*, because you tease him with *an obtrusive ray*" (421; emphases added).

It is crucial to emphasize that these imagistic reversals—whereby Lucy becomes the penetrator of Paul, her "coolness" a form of personal contact rather than alienation, and the "rays" of her gaze blinding—do not simply attest to

her usurpation of the “male” position. Rather, they participate in the unsettling of assumed categories and oppositions that runs throughout the text and that is inherent in its elliptical mode of narration. And these continual slippages in signification illustrate one way in which the diffusion of power into multiple conduits in the Foucauldian schema may also work to break that very system down—in this case, by making possible a multifaceted mode of signifying, and hence of being, that, gradually embraced by Lucy, allows her increasingly to avert male objectification. This destabilizing tendency is present everywhere, even, tellingly enough, in the garden scene I earlier cited as a textbook example of Foucauldian social discipline. For the view from M. Paul’s covert “post of observation” above the girls’ garden in fact uncovers a spectacle that overturns the hierarchy of seer/seen he is attempting to impose on the sexes: what he sees are Mme. Beck’s charges acting not “like” girls but rather even “the most reserved ... romp[ing] like boys” (454). Similarly, his secret forays into the garden via the agency of his key—ostensibly a sign of his phallic superiority—involve both a descent from his tower *and* the traversing of a sexual divide that effectually strips him of his claim to masculine, distanced authority. Once on Lucy’s turf, that is, he must walk side by side with her, and as such the hierarchy of high/low is also overturned: it is Lucy who, in condemning his spying activity, now maintains a “*high* insular presence,” M. Paul complains, and he whose ravings have plummeted him to the (low) level of “a *third-rate* London actor” (455; emphases added).

Having preserved her “insular presence” in the face of M. Paul’s onslaughts, and having recuperated, at least partially, the powers of activity and sight through their reciprocal exchanges, it is appropriate, finally, that Lucy likewise finds her voice through dialogue with her newly declared lover in chapter 36: “that night M. Paul and I talked seriously and closely.... I could talk 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” (513). Lucy’s description of her speech—meandering, stammering, full of hiatuses—should remind us of the very methods by which she inscribes her subjectivity into her written, heretic text. Thus if M. Paul has become an adept reader of Lucy’s verbal text, it is not because he has insidiously penetrated it, as in the case of his earlier comment, “My book is this garden,” but because his and Lucy’s dialogic interchange of ideas has made possible an analogous interchange of dialogic selves. Lucy presents herself to be read, finally, by one who will not misinterpret her (in)significance, nor overlook her (in)visibility.

This is not to say that imbalance disappears entirely from M. Paul and Lucy’s love-relationship. Despite the partial truth in Paul’s declaration that “we are alike—there is an affinity” (457), there remain between the lovers irreducible differences, especially those involving power and submission in love—and these are differences that, given prevailing gender constructions, Brontë if not Lucy seems to find insurmountable. For, however much the understanding established by Lucy and M. Paul points to a new ideal of reciprocal adult love, one that simultaneously acknowledges the complexity

and contradictions inherent in all passion, Brontë draws back from testing their relationship in the “real” world of middle-class marriage, as M. Paul’s apparent drowning at sea at novel’s end so powerfully attests. But if the bonds of heterosexual love remain, for Brontë, potentially incarcerating, this does not necessarily mean that the woman like Lucy who remains unmarried is doomed to a life without eroticism. For the prison of nonsexuality assigned to single or chaste Victorian women is not the fate of Lucy Snowe or her passion; the “deep-red cross” marked in her “book of life” covertly reveals—as I will now attempt to show—something rather different and more dangerous.

IV. Out of bounds

The dramatic growth in self-confidence that ensues from Lucy’s relationship with M. Paul is, of course, part of the larger movement toward relative autonomy that her narrative traces. I have already noted how Lucy’s psychological trajectory is imagistically represented as a continual venturing forward into further reaches of the unknown; this ceaseless movement, echoed in the text’s “heretic” narrative structure, is accompanied by expressions of yearning for liberty, emancipation, and independence from the constraints of a disciplinary society that, as we have seen, attempts to enforce Lucy’s subjection. Inscribing this desire to become a free agent, an actively questing subject, into her text, Lucy, I will now suggest, writes into her “book of life” an autoerotic voyage of self-discovery that potentially stands outside the incarcerating erotics of its courtship plots and thus reconfigures female desire as Lucy’s imaginative property.²³ For if total autonomy or “freedom of self,” as Foucault would remind us, remains an impossible bourgeois myth, autoerotic fulfillment creates within this writing subject a space that, if not free of the police, is neither a prison. In face of the immensely dark yet moving, ever equivocal portrait of depression, deprivation, and rage that makes *Villette*, on some level, so uncompromisingly “modern,” I will risk a deliberately *euphoric* reading of the novel’s final chapters in hopes of revealing a dimension of Lucy’s courageous resolve in confronting her ultimate aloneness that has hitherto escaped critical attention.

This covert dimension of Lucy’s erotic quest is summed up in the revelatory voyage she undertakes the night of the festival occurring in the city’s park as part of its annual celebration of liberation from foreign invasion. Roused from her bed by an opiate that Mme. Beck has administered in hopes of putting her to sleep, Lucy imagines a specific quest whose psychosexual contours are stunning in their clarity. First, she hallucinates a vision of the park by moonlight; then her imagination fixes with feverish intensity on a huge, circular stone basin lying among its alleys: “*that basin I knew*, and beside which I had often stood—deep-set in the tree-shadows, brimming with cool water, clear, with a green, leafy, rushy bed” (547; emphasis added). As Brontë’s evocative language suggests, this is a coded vision of female sexuality, and as

²³ I owe a debt of gratitude here to Ruthanna Hooke’s excellent insights into the novel’s psychosexual and autoerotic dynamics in her seminar paper, “Keeping the Secret: Lucy Snowe’s Narrative in *Villette*” (May 15, 1986).

such it becomes the secret object of Lucy's own quest. Its representation also echoes the image of the marshy forest dell, "deep-hollowed in forest secrecy" (334), that Lucy has earlier associated with her sexuality. Now, however—and this is the crucial difference—Lucy does not wait for a "storm or ax" to cut the swathe that will admit the sun's "golden light." Disavowing the penetrative imagery of male conquest, she decides to seek out the basin herself: she has become the actor in her own imaginative erotic quest, searching out her own desire. Thinking that the park must be locked at this hour, she wonders if she can force an entry on her own, at which point she remembers—as Brontë tellingly phrases it—"a gap in the paling," a "narrow irregular aperture," through which a "*man could not have made his way ... but I thought I might: I fancied I would like to try, and once within, at this hour the whole park would be mine—the moonlight, midnight park!*" (547; emphases added). The psychosexual intensity with which Lucy imagines travelling through this symbolically female landscape is maintained in the account of the actual voyage to the park that follows. Discovering the festival-in-progress when she arrives at the Park, her "vague aim" remains to find the stone basin, with its clear depth and green lining:

of that coolness and verdure I thought, with the passionate thirst of unconscious fever. Amidst the glare, and hurry, and throng, and noise, I still secretly and chiefly longed to come on that circular mirror of crystal, and surprise the moon glassing therein her pearly font. (551)

In that "circular mirror" that is also her sexuality, where Lucy will see her own reflection, gaze to gaze, she imagines also seeing the reflected moon—which Brontë's novels repeatedly associate with female sexuality—a "glassing moon" whose "pearly font" replaces the ray of the masculine sun that she envisions in the earlier image of the hollowed-out forest dell. Previously, Lucy has lamented that "the orb" of her single life is "not to be so rounded," that for her "the crescent-phase must suffice" (451). Now, on the brink of autoerotic realization, that image is totally rewritten; the "glassing" moon that blends with her reflection is supremely full, "in an element deep and splendid" (547).

In establishing Lucy as the desiring subject of her own autoerotic quest, this episode also provides a fascinating gloss on theories relating sexual difference to narrative's "deep" or mythic structures. For instance, in a widely influential chapter in *Alice Doesn't*, Teresa de Lauretis locates a paradigm for all narrative desire in the Oedipal myth, which leads her to hypothesize that the position of the questing hero, the subject who motivates the transformations that create narrative movement, is always, symbolically and morphologically, *male*. Because of "the inherent maleness of all narrative movement," de Lauretis despairs, *female* desire can never be represented as the moving force, the motor, of narrative; the female protagonist's story will always remain a question of *his*—the man's—desire. *Villette*, I would suggest, calls this theory

into question.²⁴ Not only in Lucy's imagined quest for that "rushy basin," that circular mirror, which will quench her "passionate thirst," but in her "heretic" role as narrator, she defiantly becomes *the* questing hero, *the* desiring actor, who also becomes the motive force, indeed the subject in both senses of the word, of her own narrative and its quest for meaning.

What happens as Lucy ventures into the spectacular realm of the festival reigning throughout the park, moreover, confirms this sense of her new-found agency and subjectivity. For the climax of Lucy's emotional crisis occurs not when she detects M. Paul and his youthful charge, Justine Marie, in what she mistakenly assumes is a romantic tryst, but seconds later when she *refuses* to be an onlooker to her own pain and renounces the roles of spy and voyeur with the defiant statement, "I *would* not look" (566; Brontë's emphasis). Upon returning to the pensionnat, she confronts for a final time the Nun's ghost, this time laid out in her very bed. Literally ripping the veil from *this* illusion, she discovers the hoax that has been played on her:

I defied spectra. In a moment, without exclamation, I had rushed on the haunted couch; nothing leaped out, or sprang, or stirred; all the movement was mine, so was all the life, the reality, the substance, the force.... I tore her up—the incubus!... And down she fell—down all round me—down in shreds and fragments—and I trode upon her. (569)

Disembodying the artifice of the nun, this false mirror of her sexuality, Lucy in effect *embodies* herself, taking as her province "life," "reality," "substance," and "force"; laying to rest the ghostly machinery of dead, repressive desire, she has become the quintessential acting subject: "all ... movement was mine."

The vast difference between the textual erotics of Lucy's narrative and that of conventional romantic fiction is only confirmed by *Villette's* ambiguous ending, in which, as I have already noted, M. Paul's return to Lucy is forestalled indefinitely by his apparent drowning at sea. Brontë's metaphoric language of storm and shipwreck circles us back to the equally ambiguous use of the same imagery to launch Lucy's venture into the unknown in chapter 4; the uncertain grounds from which this narrative has arisen are thus mirrored in the radical uncertainty of its ending. As such, *Villette* also rewrites the "oedipal" structure of those many classic nineteenth-century fictions organized around the search for the proper ending—the right narrative death, in Peter Brooks's terms—that will return the plot to the original quiescence from which it arose.²⁵ In contrast, there *has never been* a quiescent beginning for Lucy, for whom homeless "origins" have been vexed from the start, and the ending she writes to her narrative *only continues* this process of disturbance by frustrating the normative reader's desire for the quiescence of closure, for a final detection and supervision of meaning.

²⁴ De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 106-24; the quotation is from 108. I also comment on these issues in "Of Fathers, Daughters, and Theorists of Narrative Desire: At the Crossroads of Myth and Psychoanalysis in *The Man Who Loved Children*," *Contemporary Literature* 31 (Winter 1990): 514-41.

²⁵ Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 102-04.

As part of its effort to evade the constraints associated with a disciplinary world-view and novelistic order, then, *Villette* proposes an alternative textual and sexual economy, one in which “pleasure” and “narrative desire” stand in a very different relation to its questing subject and the subject of her quest. That difference has already been figured in Lucy’s choice of a transgressively “heretic” narrative over the plotlessness of a life spent wordlessly counting her beads in a Carmelite cell. The image of counting beads—coupled with that of the controlling gaze—returns toward the end of *Villette* to provide yet one more striking instance of the gulf separating conventional narrative structures and Lucy’s quite unconventional strategies for writing her female subjectivity into being. This occurs when Père Silas takes it upon himself to attempt to drive a wedge between Lucy and M. Paul by telling Lucy an admonitory tale, “quite a little romantic narrative” (484), about the prior commitments that supposedly make it impossible for Paul to marry anyone. As Lucy summarizes her encounter with Père Silas, what initially only seem artless little incidents, “a handful of loose beads,” suddenly “drop pendant in a long string,” a perfect rosary of intent, when “threaded” by the chance glance she catches from Père Silas’s “quick-shot and crafty” gaze: “I caught that glance, despite its veiled character; the momentary gleam shot a meaning which struck me” (486). Now, the metaphoric “clasp” that holds this “monastic necklace” (486) together, Lucy discerns, is none other than M. Paul, since the covert ‘end’ or ‘aim’ of Père Silas’s narrative design is to warn Lucy away from him.²⁶

This is the very clasp, however, that is ultimately missing from *Lucy’s* heretic narrative, which ends with M. Paul’s *absence*; and the result, significantly, is that Lucy’s narrative “unstrings” the authoritarian logic of what Susan Winnett has succinctly described as the oedipal “Masterplot that wants to tell us in advance where it is that we may take our pleasures and what must inevitably come of them.”²⁷ The unpredictabilities and perverse pleasures of Lucy’s heretic narrative, rather, engender the construction of a resolutely independent female subject whose mental and autoerotic health—as opposed to her depressive anxieties—depends, finally, on her refusal to be pinned down, either by possessive men or by prying readers. This is not to say that Lucy is “free” of the prison—that is, of all those forces, social, psychological, rhetorical, that seek to curtail her desires—but that the very act of refusal, emboldened by the act of movement, creates an alternative subjectivity in which terms like “freedom” and “imprisonment” come less to designate an absolute boundary than an ever-shifting series of contiguous relations. Continually swerving out of our grasp just when we think we have her, Lucy thus weaves a space both within and outside her text that becomes definitive

²⁶ Lucy’s metaphoric description of Père Silas’s narration is worth quoting in its entirety: “all these little incidents, taken as they fell out, seemed each independent of its successor, a handful of loose beads; but threaded through by that quick-shot and crafty glance of a Jesuit-eye, they dropped pendant in a long string, like that rosary on the prie-dieu. Where lay the link of junction, where the little clasp of this monastic necklace?” (486). When M. Paul’s name is finally brought into the conversation, a few exchanges later, Lucy reports, “A brief silence fell. The spring of the junction seemed suddenly to have become palpable; I felt it yield to pressure” (487).

²⁷ Winnett, “Coming Unstrung: Women, Men, Narrative, and (the) Principles of Pleasure,” *PMLA* 105 (May 1990): 516.

of her very being;²⁸ as such she anticipates Teresa de Lauretis's description, in work published since *Alice Doesn't*, of the contemporary feminist subject-position: "the subject that I see emerging from current writings and debates within feminism is one that is at the same time inside *and* outside the ideology of gender, and conscious of being so, conscious of that twofold pull, of that division, that doubled vision."²⁹ Ever-changing, elusive, provisionally autonomous: Lucy constructs within her narrative a mobile self that escapes confinement by the authorities of discipline epitomized in Père Silas, a self that refuses those conventional images of Victorian womanhood which would render her only an object and not a subject, and a self that rewrites the regulatory devices of traditional narrative by seeing through, as it were, the ruse of the male gaze that threads them together.

V. Renegotiating the police

With Lucy's heretic subversiveness as subject and narrator in mind, I would now like to return to D. A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* and take one last look at its Foucauldian reading of Victorian fiction. In making this return the final stage of my argument, I am aware of certain ironies: first, that I may seem to be creating a kind of circular narrative of oedipal origins-and-returns of precisely the type that, I have been arguing, the female erotics of Lucy's desires and Brontë's text displaces; second, that this return to novelistic theory via *Villette* may seem to reduce "Lucy"—or, more precisely, questions about female subjectivity—to the position of inconsequential third in a triangulated relation between male critics without whom Lucy, no doubt, can happily exist. My hope, however, is that these final pages result in something less pernicious: precisely by returning to theories of imprisonment after looking at the specific twist *Villette's* example gives them, I hope to create a space in which Lucy—manipulator of language and a not unable literary theorist in her own right—may emerge with the last word.

The nineteenth-century novel, Miller concludes, depends on the *subjection* of the subject, whose subjectivity depends on a "game of secrecy"—a game whereby the self's "defining inwardness," precisely that which the subject thinks has been kept inviolate or secret, is actually always already in the hands of the police.³⁰ Yet Lucy's defining inwardness and sense of self, it strikes me,

²⁸ The deconstructive and Lacanian implications of Brontë's representation of Lucy's identity as unstable and shifting are well illustrated in Christina Crosby's "Charlotte Brontë's Haunted Text," *SEL* 24 (Autumn 1984): 701-15. Lawrence notes, however, that Lucy's elusiveness should be differentiated from a Lacanian reading of absence or lack that "sees woman as unrepresentable"; rather, Brontë has chosen to present "the enigma of Lucy Snowe ... as a complex, shifting nexus of meaning and deferral of meaning that, like the sign itself, never refers to an ultimate and stable identity" (455). In a similar vein, Nancy Miller notes that Lucy anticipates the Lacanian subject, insofar that as a "female writing subject" she "also resides elsewhere, in the 'field of language' that constitutes her otherness to herself," in "Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing, and the Reader," in *Feminist Studies / Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 116.

²⁹ De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 10.

³⁰ Miller, 220, 200. This policing function is most obviously demonstrable in omniscient narrations which presuppose "a fully panoptic view of the world [they] plac[e] under surveillance" (23); but it is equally present, Miller argues, in first-person narration, where the confessing voice of the "secret subject," by disclosing the always already "open secrets" of his

participates in a rather different “game of secrecy,” one in which the police must also learn to play by *her* rules. Foremost, the narrative strategies whereby her voice never fully discloses or confesses itself maintain for Lucy a conditional “freedom” (epitomized in her mobility of being) and consequently (in de Lauretis’s phrase) a “doubled vision” that together are constitutive of both her subjectivity and her desires. At the same time, these very narrative strategies inscribe a shifting self that we can only come to “read” and “know” in a way that is radically non-appropriative: the reader who intuits *why* Brontë has created a fictional heroine whose identity is rooted in continual deferral or postponement of meaning, I would submit, is automatically disbarred from becoming a (trustworthy) agent of the police.

Likewise, I would submit that there is a subtle but important distinction to be maintained between Miller’s definition of the illusory “sheltered space” occupied by the so-called liberal subject and “the elsewhere of meaning”³¹ that Lucy, no conventional subject at all, inhabits. First of all—and this is, I think, a measure of Brontë’s perspective as a woman who has suffered privation and sexual oppression first hand—*Villette* never assumes an unconditional “outside” to, or total escape from, ideology, as do the texts discussed by Miller. If Miller’s quintessential subject knows himself “only when he forgets or disavows his functional implication in a system of carceral restraints,”³² Brontë’s Lucy never forgets those branding marks, even in assuming the position of narrator of her life story. Second, Miller’s equation of this “elsewhere” or “outside” with the domestic realm, however true of many Victorian fictions, has little to do with the ontological realities of the private spaces nurtured within Lucy’s narrative. For the trajectory of her experience, beginning with her radical dislocation from any sense of home as “origin,” has always been *away from* the domestic; that realm is left for the Dr. Johns and Paulina Homes of the world to police and populate, in happy if insipid matrimony. Rather, the existential realm that Lucy comes to occupy might best be symbolized in her actual dwelling-place at novel’s end, the school/residence that M. Paul bequeathes her before sailing away: this is a space that is at once public and private, a space that fulfills Lucy’s professional ambitions and that she comes to claim as her true and most happy home, a space which, in effect, disenables the very language of “in” and “out” upon which the power of a male-dominated disciplinary order depends.

Hence, for all the insight with which Miller elucidates the infinitely complex workings of disciplinary constraint and surveillance in our fictional and social lives, the same rich complexity seems to be denied the categories of the individual, the inward, and the private against which are posited the agents of the law; collapsing these values—the individual, the inward, the private—into a monolithic one-dimensionality becomes a way of insuring their

inner privacy and enclosing them within the pages of a book, guarantees his subjection within the prison of his very telling (200-7).

31 Here I am drawing on the contrast between Miller’s use of the phrase, “sheltered space” (76), and Lawrence’s “elsewhere of meaning” (457).

32 Miller, x.

infiltration by the novelistic police. A similar sleight of hand is involved in the fact that Miller primarily bases his theory on extended readings of three male novelists, Dickens, Trollope, and Collins; in the process the enterprise of women novelists becomes the "open secret" (to play on Miller's wording), the secret non-subject, of his account. One result, then, of bringing a text like Brontë's to bear on Foucauldian-based analysis is to illuminate the degree to which a narrative poetics like Miller's may sometimes engage in its own kind of policing—a policing of fiction's subversive potentialities that ends up reinforcing the very binarisms of public and private, in and out, that his argument otherwise eloquently sets out to deconstruct. I do not mean to deny the immense impress of ideology on the form and content of the nineteenth-century novel. Nor do I mean to imply that Lucy Snowe or Brontë can ever entirely escape society's rules or their internalization of its maxims. But I would suggest that if heteroglossic voices, as Bakhtin has shown, comprise fictional narrative, then the novel, relative to other modes of discourse, may create a space—however minimal, compromised, or "imaginary"—for dissent, self-interrogation, and subversive dialogue with those totalizing systems of power which inculcate the values of a disciplinary social order.³³ In our excitement over discovering the Foucauldian prisons lurking in so much novelistic discourse, I would like to make sure we don't forget this dialogical dimension of fiction. The way in which Brontë's narrating Lucy strings together—or unstrings—the narrative of her desires, creating a text that continually swerves out of our control, creating a message that, for its time and place, is indeed heretic, creating a self that remains seen and unseen, brilliantly attests, to use Patricia Yaeger's term, to the emancipatory potential embedded in the very work that Brontë's textual strategies undertake to *do*.³⁴ If Lucy can outwit the police—if only as a life-long, text-long effort—we reader-critics owe it to her to continue the work of depolicing *Villette* by reconceptualizing, in our theories of narrative, the unorthodox possibilities of a "heretic" narrative that we, however well trained in the arts of academic discipline, can never entirely encompass or subdue.

³³ For a similar viewpoint, see Robert Caserio, "Supreme Court Discourse vs. Homosexual Fiction," *SAO* 88 (Winter 1989): 267-99, which comments on *The Novel and the Police* in light of the distinctions between fictional and nonfictional modes of narrative discourse that, Caserio argues, Foucauldian analysis at times blurs. See also Beth Newman's distinction of her argument from Miller's on the basis of her interest—similar to mine—in the "gendered and intersubjective" rather than strictly institutional "gaze," which she argues renders the "machinery of surveillance" in nineteenth-century novels "limited rather than total" (1040).

³⁴ See Yaeger's reading of *Villette* in *Honey-Mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 44-51, which details how Brontë's appropriation of Romantic poetic language in the park episode—particularly the imagery of Keats' "Hyperion"—creates a multivoicedness that attests to the possibilities, rather than constrictions, that exist in the play of language for the woman novelist.