

Charlotte Brontë's fictional epistles

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Charlotte Brontë's Fictional Epistles

Steven Earnshaw

Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* is notable for its engagement with epistolarity. In particular, its ending finally resolves issues that the author has wrestled with throughout her fictional work and in some real-world correspondence. By bringing the reader's attention to the ontology of letters, *Villette* is able to foreground the primacy of writing, and to proffer it as a potential bridge between souls, as well as showing how the physical world is transcended by means of this ontology.

Keywords authorship, epistolarity, letters, names, *Villette*, writing

Charlotte Brontë's literary life is sealed at both ends with letters. Before she was published she sent letters and material to Robert Southey, the then poet laureate, and to Hartley Coleridge, looking for advice, appreciation, and criticism.¹ Her first novel, *The Professor*, opens with a letter from the protagonist to a former schoolmate, and her last published novel, *Villette*, ends with the possibility of a relationship continued at a distance and maintained by letters. The author's life has mainly been constructed through letters, from Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, published in 1857, just a couple of years after Charlotte's death, up to Juliet Barker's revised edition of *The Brontës* in 2010.² The fictional and the real abut each other in many places to the extent that there is overlap and meshing in the emotional, aesthetic and biographical aspects across Charlotte Brontë's letter writing and novels. This essay pays close attention to the particular ways she manages letters in the fiction, and the manner in which she attempts to wrest herself free of fictional epistolarity,

from the opening letter in *The Professor*, through what Marie-Antoinette Smith identifies as the ‘embedded epistolarity’ of *Jane Eyre* in its many direct addresses to the reader,³ to the complicated matter of letters in *Villette*. Charlotte does not write an epistolary novel, as her sister Anne does with *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, but she is certainly interested in the potential letters offer as a form of writing, amply attested to in the author’s letters that have survived, as well as in the fiction.⁴ The essay will argue that Charlotte Brontë became increasingly interested in an ontology of letters – the primacy of writing, a potential bridge between souls, the transcendence of the physical by the spiritual – culminating in the ambivalently happy ending of *Villette*.

Failed Letters, Fictionality and Authorship heading 1

The letter which opens her first novel, *The Professor*, begins:

THE other day, in looking over my papers, I found in my desk the following copy of a letter, sent by me a year since to an old school acquaintance:--

“DEAR CHARLES,

“I think when you and I were at Eton together, we were neither of us what could be called – popular characters: my own portrait I will not attempt to draw, but I cannot recollect that it was a strikingly attractive one--can you?”⁵

The remainder of the chapter uses the ruse of this letter to provide the reader with a potted history of the narrator, William Crimsworth: “I began to think of old times; to run over the events which have transpired since we separated – and sat down and commenced this letter” (*P*, p. 5). The chapter ends with this sign-off, as the narrator tells us:

To this letter I never got an answer; before my old friend received it, he had accepted a Government appointment in one of the colonies, and was already on his way to the scene of his official labours. What has become of him since, I know not.

The leisure time I have at command, and which I intended to employ for his private benefit, I shall now dedicate to that of the public at large. My narrative is not exciting, and above all, not marvellous; but it may interest some individuals, who, having toiled in the same vocation as myself, will find in my experience frequent reflections of their own. The above letter will serve as an introduction. I now proceed. (*P*, p. 12)

The whole chapter is striking because it lacks a certain narrative sophistication elsewhere evident in Charlotte Brontë's writing. It is a clumsy means of providing back-story and telling us about the character. By beginning with a letter it suggests to us we may be in for an epistolary novel, yet this is not the case. So we have a 'dead letter' at the start of the narrative, and a false step regarding literary form. The reasons for this are twofold: one to do with narrative form and mode, the other to do with the entanglement of the novel's narrative persona and Charlotte Brontë's authorial persona, 'Currer Bell'.

Charlotte Brontë argued in the Preface to *The Professor* that although the novel was her first intended fiction publication, she was no novice when it came to fiction-writing: 'A first attempt it certainly was not as the pen which wrote it had been previously worn down a good deal in a practice of some years' (*P*, p. 3). By this she was referring to her considerable literary endeavour prior to the novel, often linked to the imaginary world of Angria, and also including five novelettes.⁶ However, *The Professor* is her first attempt at a *published* novel, and the fact that she intends the story to be presented to the public means she has to approach her fiction writing in an altered fashion. As Margaret Smith notes in her Introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition, '*The Professor* has to meet an unfamiliar audience', and so 'the awkward device of a school-letter to a friend' is the result.⁷ In addition, at the time Charlotte is submitting her novel to the publishers in 1846, the epistolary novel format was

no longer a dominant mode for the novel. The point at which the epistolary form began to lose its cachet is sometimes located in Walter Scott's *Redgauntlet*, where the narrator states he will discontinue its use because it impedes the narrative flow (e.g. Favret, pp. 199–200).⁸

Charlotte had previously attempted to write in epistolary form in one of her tales but had given up by chapter eight, claiming that it was not possible to maintain 'the pitch of romance and reverie'.⁹ This may have been a consequence of the form, and *The Professor* does exist as a reaction against the exotic and Gothic nature of the Angrian tales. She most likely felt that opening with a letter seemed realistic and that the mediating nature of the letter form dampened any possible 'overheating' of the story, using what had been a negative feature of epistolarity in the tale in a positive way for *The Professor*.¹⁰ As Juliet Barker points out, the attempt at a 'plain and homely' narrative is not well executed in the opening chapters (p. 500). Of course, *Jane Eyre*, the next novel Charlotte writes, is full of the Gothic, itself a reaction to not finding a publisher for *The Professor*, which, according to Charlotte, potential publishers had regarded as too dull (*P*, 'Preface', p. 3).

What has not been so noted about the letter is that its addressee is somebody called Charles, which at this juncture in Charlotte Brontë's career is significant. The choice of the recipient's name is of a piece with Charlotte's general predilection for adopting male narrative voices, including the pseudonym she chooses to publish under, 'Currer Bell'. The choice of 'Charles' is a sign that she is still in the process of trying properly to establish how authorial and fictional personae will relate to each other. For instance, the name 'Charles' is the masculine form of her own name. She sometimes signed herself 'Charles Thunder' when writing to friends (*Letters* I, p. 151), 'bronte' being the Greek word for 'thunder', and her favoured narrator in her Angrian fiction is 'Charles Townshend' (Barker, p. 290). In writing to Hartley Coleridge she used the initials 'C. T.', no doubt standing in for 'Charles Townshend' once again, but also allowing her to make play of their possible interpretation as

‘Charles Tims or Charlotte Tomkins’ in further correspondence with Coleridge (*Letters* I, p. 237). So while to a new reading public both characters and fiction in *The Professor* are presented in a relatively straightforward fashion, and a name such as ‘Charles’ is hardly going to strike the Victorian reader as peculiar, privately the set up of the first chapter, entitled ‘Introductory’, is a complicated affair. Following the logic here, she has created a new male protagonist in the shape of William Crimsworth who explains himself to the trace of a prior fictional male character and narrator, who at the same time represents some kind of sublimation of Charlotte. It is perhaps no surprise that the letter fails aesthetically – it is in effect an attempt to sweep away a number of personal obstacles to publishing fiction, since she is no longer writing fiction for a select, private, sibling audience, but presenting both herself and her writing to the world. The rather unsuccessful use of a real-world writing medium (letter) in a fictional writing context, and one that suggests a veiled entry into the fictional world by the author, suggest the tangled nature of Charlotte’s relationship with writing, epistolarity, fiction and her own status.

The letter in the chapter ends with: ‘a servant conducted me to my bed-room; in closing my chamber-door I shut out all intruders, you, Charles, as well as the rest’ (*P*, p. 12). It would seem that Charlotte has written a fictional letter to a fictional self, in order to put that particular self to bed. Crimsworth himself makes a distinction between private letter-writing and the world of public narrative when he says: ‘The leisure time I have at command, and which I intended to employ for his private benefit, I shall now dedicate to that of the public at large’ (*P*, p. 12). In other words, he will give up letter-writing for fiction writing. It is a sophisticated private affair for Charlotte Brontë that does not translate well into the public sphere as she simultaneously hopes to introduce characters in a novel, and the character of an author, to the novel-reading public.

What is additionally peculiar about this, though, is that in Charlotte Brontë's non-fictional world letters are a significant form of writing, whereas her treatment of the letter in *The Professor* gives it only a perfunctory role. By this I do not just mean that in the real world we as readers find the letters from and to Charlotte in her lifetime important, for instance, as we might seek to construct a biography for Charlotte Brontë, or to understand her art in the context of her life. Charlotte wrote many letters, and on the evidence of the letters we have they appear to have provided her with a means of affective communication, a type of catharsis, and a means of trying to establish a literary career. The letters themselves are a form of writing which, like her imaginative fiction, she took great care over and expected others to take care over. Therefore, to use the letter form as Chapter One of her intended public writing career, only to dispense with the form by Chapter Two, further marks out 'letters' as a source of trouble for her.

Charlotte Brontë's relationship to letters, including the problem of letters as a form of writing, is raised in passing in *Shirley*, Charlotte Brontë's third novel.¹¹ The characters Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keeldar become good friends. But Caroline has a plan to move away and become a governess. Shirley tells Caroline that she is not cut out for such a 'desolate life', and that she would miss her if she left. Caroline says:

'I would write to you, Shirley'.

'And what are letters? Only a sort of pis-aller. Drink some tea, Caroline: eat something – you eat nothing; laugh and be cheerful, and stay at home'. (*S*, p. 242)

This snatch of dialogue highlights one of the features of epistolarity that will become crucial in *Villette*: physical separation. In *The Professor*, once the letter is dismissed, the rest of the novel is devoted to the coming together of two characters, William Crimsworth and Frances Henri. It does not matter that William Crimsworth is separated from Charles for they hardly

seem to have been friends at all. On the other hand, letters, if we are to believe Shirley Keeldar, are no substitute for personal presence; they cannot stand in for another person. The suggestion here is that letters are intrinsically desperate because it is a condition of their existence that addresser and addressee are prevented from being together. It would be easy to gloss Shirley's verdict in a biographical manner by saying that Shirley Keeldar is the fictional representation of Emily Brontë, who would appear to have had little time for writing letters. In that sense, letters are only a last resort because there are better things to do, such as walking on the moors or actually being with people. But taking the broader view, this brief fictional aside is a swing back from the 'dead letter' of *The Professor* to the possibility of the letter in novels as a perfect vehicle for the type of despair evident in *Jane Eyre*, and which will emerge even more strongly in *Villette*. However, *Shirley* is self-confessedly not that type of despairing novel. Rather like *The Professor*, it sets out to be anti-romantic: 'Do you expect passion, and stimulus, and melodrama? Calm your expectations; reduce them to a lowly standard. Something real, cool, and solid, lies before you; something unromantic as Monday morning' (*S*, p. 5).

This oscillation between, on the one hand, the letter as the sign and physical manifestation of despair, and, on the other, the fictional letter as aesthetically and emotionally outmoded, is, I think, an indication that the author is unsure of the use of the form precisely because it straddles the world of fiction – letters in literature and the possibility that a work of fiction can be made out of letters – and the partial constitution of her own world through letters where she expresses emotions similar to those apparent in the novels, in a style similar to those in the novels, and, in the letters to M. Heger, with a life episode which is transmuted into the novels. It is evident that form so dear to her in her own life cannot at this point in her publishing career migrate across to fiction, even though she would have had numerous examples of successful epistolary fiction to draw on from literary history.

What the reader of *Shirley* would not have known at the time of its publication is that there is something of a crisis in Charlotte Brontë's use of the letter as a form of writing, which brings into play the connection between her self, her authorial persona 'Currer Bell', questions about what kind of novel she is writing, gender, and the publishing world. Charlotte Brontë wanted to add a Preface to *Shirley* which would be in the form of a letter to an actual reviewer who had been disparaging about *Jane Eyre* and about the novel's author. It is full of heavy, relentless sarcasm. It begins: 'The Public is respectfully informed that with this Preface it has no manner of concern, the same being a private and confidential letter to a friend' ('A Word to the "Quarterly"', 29 August 1849, reprinted in *Letters II*, p. 242). When her publishers say that they do not want to publish the Preface, she replies that it is Currer Bell responding, not Charlotte Brontë: 'Believe me, my dear sir, "C. Brontë" must not here appear; what she feels or has felt is not the question—it is "Currer Bell" who was insulted—he must reply' (letter to W. S. Williams, ?31 August 1849, *Letters II*, pp. 245–6; p. 246. William Smith Williams was the reader at her publisher, Smith, Elder, with whom she built up a friendly correspondence). Here is another complicated blurring of the distinction between private and public writing forms: intending openly to publish a 'letter' at the beginning of a novel, but telling the reading public that they need not concern themselves with it; arguing in private that it is her public pseudonym, not herself as author, who writes and responds. There is a sense of the writer desperately wanting it both ways: a heartfelt response from Charlotte Brontë, for which the letter is the usual vehicle, but under the protection of the pseudonym. When the publishers absolutely refused to print the Preface, Charlotte moved her criticism into the novel itself (Barker, p. 607). We should also note that the pseudonym is now not merely operating as a kind of genderless author-figure, but is cast in the mode of an 'old bachelor', that is, presenting Currer Bell to the audience as having a definite gender and character.

It is also in this period – a time when Charlotte has lost two sisters and a brother in the space of nine months – when she declares in a letter to Williams (29 August 1849) that it is writing which has taken her out of despair:

Whatever now becomes of the work – the occupation of writing it has been a boon to me—it took me out of dark and desolate reality to an unreal but happier region—The worst of it is my eyes are grown somewhat weak and my head somewhat weary and prone to ache with close work. You can write nothing of value unless you give yourself wholly to the theme—and when you so give yourself— you lose appetite and sleep—it cannot be helped—. (*Letters II*, p. 241)

***Villette* heading 1 (italic)**

These observations about letters, novel writing, authorship, and despair lead us on to the role of letters in *Villette*, Charlotte Brontë's last completed novel.¹² It is in this novel that I think she finds some accommodation for her conflicting relationship to these elements.

An incident in the first part of the novel is a comic use of letters, which echoes the play of 'name' and 'author' we saw at the beginning of *The Professor*, and continues to suggest an overlap between letters in fiction and her letters to friends. As the heroine Lucy Snowe makes her way over on the boat to Belgium, she is aware of the stewardess talking to her son:

She professed to be writing a letter home—she said to her father; she read passages of it aloud, heeding me no more than a stock—perhaps she believed me asleep. Several of these passages appeared to comprise family secrets, and bore special reference to one 'Charlotte', a younger sister who, from the bearing of the epistle, seemed to be on the brink of perpetrating a romantic and imprudent match; loud was the protest of this elder lady against the distasteful union. The dutiful son laughed his mother's correspondence to scorn. She defended it, and raved at him. They were a strange pair. (*V*, p. 112)

A letter to someone called ‘Charlotte’ is not an innocent incident, and would in another novel be treated as metafictional. But the echoes again are the sense of a character writing to the author, a joke at the time since the author’s name on the book is still ‘Currer Bell’, although the world by now knew that behind Currer Bell was Charlotte Brontë. Perhaps, too, it is an indication of greater comfort with the female persona, ‘Charlotte’ rather than ‘Charles’.¹³ The content of the letter is a neat, commonplace vignette. But note also that Lucy is in effect eavesdropping, spying, carrying out what she passes off as harmless surveillance. ‘Perhaps she believed me asleep’, Lucy says, but by the end of the novel we might wonder if perhaps Lucy allowed the stewardess to believe her asleep.

Having subliminally connected the reader and the fiction once more to the authorial persona via a letter, it is in Chapter 21, entitled ‘Reaction’, that we are thrust fully into the significance of letters for Lucy Snowe, and given an insight into their preferred ontology. Lucy has been staying with Dr John for a while but now has to return to the Pensionnat.

‘Keep up your courage, Lucy. Think of my mother and myself as true friends. We will not forget you’.

‘Nor will I forget you, Dr John’.

My trunk was now brought in. We had shaken hands; he had turned to go, but he was not satisfied: he had not done or said enough to content his generous impulses.

‘Lucy’, – stepping after me – ‘shall you feel very solitary here?’

‘At first I shall’.

‘Well, my mother will soon call to see you; and, meantime, I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ll write – just any cheerful nonsense that comes into my head – shall I?’

‘Good, gallant heart!’ thought I to myself; but I shook my head, smiling, and said, ‘Never think of it: impose on yourself no such task. *You* write to *me!* – you’ll not have time’.

(V, p. 306)

This seems simple enough. The Bretttons are Lucy's only real friends in the town, and to be holed up in the Pensionnat will be miserable. Their conversation around setting up an exchange of letters is polite, with a typical implication that the man is busy and the woman is idle, and that this particular female character, Lucy Snowe, is self-effacing. But Lucy then goes on to a mental anguish, where she pits her self against the voice of Reason. "And will Graham really write?" I questioned, as I sank tired on the edge of the bed' – and she knows that he undoubtedly will write, if only once. Here is a crucial line: "But if I feel, may I *never* express?" (V, p. 307). It is not just the wish for a communication from Graham, it is that writing provides her with the emotional outlet. Here is the apparent significance of letters in the world of Charlotte Brontë transferred into her fiction, and the correlation between writing letters and writing fiction. It is a long way from that use of the letter at the start of *The Professor*, which seemed a betrayal of the letter form. Here Lucy articulates what she believes a letter to be: the vehicle for expressing emotion.

There is *more* than just emotion, however, involved in the significance of the letters, which Lucy is yet to realise. At this point, though, Lucy is unable explicitly to conceive of them in any way *other than* emotion. Although she has the opportunity to stay with the Bretttons and be in the presence of Dr John, she chooses to be physically distant. In doing this it could be argued that the pain is lessened because she is not in close proximity to the man she has feelings for. This is partly true, but more significantly she ensures that if there is to be a relationship it will be *epistolary*, and this makes sense: she wants to be away from Dr John because it is only through the medium of writing, which within the novel could only be through the medium of letters, that she can fully express herself (where full expression for Lucy is here 'emotion'). At the level of the novel form, it is therefore tempting to say that it is this novel that has a similar status to the letters that Charlotte Brontë writes. Although similar

emotions and emotional dynamics are displayed in *Jane Eyre*, they are not tied to writing. In *Villette*, they most certainly are, which is why the letter and its ontology become important: the letter bespeaks physical separation and emotional content mediated via the medium of writing, although the fixation on ‘letters as emotion’ distorts what Lucy will finally come to accept as their true ontology, since ‘emotion’, as we shall see, is not everything.

A letter does come, finally, after a couple of weeks: ‘A letter! The shape of a letter similar to that had haunted my brain in its very core for seven days past. I had dreamed of a letter last night. Strong magnetism drew me to that letter now’ (V, p. 317). Her object of affection has been transformed into a letter, into the dream of a letter, and as if by magic the letter appears. But for a lady to receive a letter and read in private is difficult at the best of times in the nineteenth century, doubly so in the Pensionnat where Madame Beck and M. Paul continually spy. It is Rosine, the portress who first has hold of the letter, and then M. Paul has the letter to give to Lucy. She can only look at it: ‘I knew it, I felt it to be the letter of my hope, the fruition of my wish, the release from my doubt, the ransom from my terror. This letter M. Paul, with his unwarrantably interfering habits, had taken from the portress, and now delivered it himself.’ She is deliriously happy: ‘I held in my hand a morsel of real solid joy: not a dream, not an image of the brain, not one of those shadowy chances imagination pictures, and on which humanity starves but cannot live’ (V, p. 317). The prose is packed with the associations the novel has built up around letters – this is food, nourishment, and the writing is real, it is not imagination. In doing this the novel once more puts writing at the heart of things, as if it is writing itself which is the ultimate reality. Having distanced Dr John, both for herself and the reader, he is replaced with a letter – much better than having Dr John physically present. The letter is ‘the wild savoury mess of the hunter, nourishing and salubrious meat, forest-fed or desert-reared, fresh, healthful, and life-sustaining’ (V, p. 318) – not the way a letter is normally described. She does not ‘consume the venison’ immediately

but locks it away, going back to the class and feeling that a fairy tale has come true. ‘And this letter, the source of my joy, I had not yet read: did not yet know the number of its lines’ (V, p. 319). When a little later M. Paul asks if she has read her letter, and she says no, he asks if she is perhaps saving it, as he when a boy ‘used to save a peach whose bloom was very ripe’ (V, p. 321). The truth of the guess makes her blush, but she only can only whisper to him: ‘do not leave me under a mistake. This is merely a friend’s letter. Without reading it, I can vouch for that’.¹⁴ Thus, it is the form of the letter rather than the writing itself that Lucy urges M. Paul and ourselves to believe significant. And yet, even knowing that the writing has no value, a reader empathising with Lucy may still be curious to know exactly what the ‘cheerful nonsense’ is, but forced to wait to read the contents of the letter, a suspense that helps to magnify the importance of letters.

What’s in the letter? Heading 2

Lucy finally discovers a place where she can read the letter alone. It is in the *grenier*, the attic. The letter is not written out for us, but is described. It is good natured, joking, brings to mind their shared experiences over the summer, so Lucy tells us. It gives her happiness, if only momentarily, because she knows it is shallow. The contents of the letter are unimportant, it is the fact of the letter, the *form* of the object rather than its content, which matters to Lucy and which she fetishizes. And then she sees a nun and faints, and when she comes round the author of the letter is there, so that the writing is (temporarily) replaced by original presence. But it becomes clear that this primary physical presence is actually secondary to the act and fact of writing, for the letter cannot be found, and Lucy becomes a little hysterical, ‘Oh, my letter!’ Dr John teases her, asks her if it is his letter she is missing. He says it is worthless, not something she should really be worried about losing.

When he brings out the letter, which he has been hiding in order to have his fun with her, Dr John suggests that she has seen a nun because the letter has put her into a heightened emotional state, so there is some parallel between the earlier scene when she seems to dream a letter into existence, and here where she seems to conjure up the author of the letter from thin air. The letter is thus associated with emotion, as Lucy believes a letter should be, but it is a consequence of desire rather than reality, of ‘wishing’ emotion rather than ‘discovering’ it to be the case. The ideal ontology of the letter is as yet to be realised.

One of the noticeable features in this and the following chapters which are concerned with the letters is the manner in which the narration presents the material to us. In Chapter 21, ‘Reaction’, when the letter first appears, it is described at a distance as it passes through the hands of Rosine, the portress, and then M. Paul. In the following chapter, entitled ‘The Letter’, we are given Lucy’s opinion of the letter. Then at the opening of the Chapter entitled ‘Vashti’ (Ch. 23), Lucy tells the reader that the letter has brought sunshine and nourishment to the dim, dank, misty dell she has metaphorically inhabited. She declares ‘A new creed became mine – a belief in happiness’ and informs us that the first letter now has four companions. She leaps forward to a later time (but not necessarily the time of current narration) when she looks back and can say of them that ‘they were kind letters enough’: ‘Time, dear reader, mellowed them to a beverage of this mild quality’ (V, p. 334). The unspoken is that there is no lover’s content, and overall there is something curious about this refusal to give us verbatim anything of Dr John’s letters to Lucy. Managing them for the reader in this way is suggestive of an idea that letters – certain letters – must remain private: a manipulation of the *meaning* of letters *in a novel* as writing within writing.

What we do get in the ‘Vashti’ chapter is access to Lucy Snowe’s soul when previously she has hidden her self from us (for example the letter in Chapter 12 that Dr John intercepts creates emotions in Lucy which she does not elaborate upon). ‘Does the reader,

remembering what was said some pages back, care to ask how I answered these letters: whether under the dry, stinting check of Reason, or according to the full, liberal impulse of Feeling? / To speak truth, I compromised matters' (V, p. 334). She writes two types of letter, one from the heart, and the other the type of letter more appropriate as to a friend. It is the friendly one that goes to Dr John. This is once more writing as a cathartic activity, letters as conventional emotional outlet, but the 'true' letters, the letters from the self and soul, 'poured out' from a 'sincere heart', are kept private. Having held off Reason for as long as she and Feeling can do so, 'the doors of my heart would shake, bolt and bar would yield, Reason would leap in, vigorous and revengeful, snatch the full sheets, read, sneer, erase, tear up, re-write, fold, seal, direct, and send a terse, curt missive of a page. She did right' (V, p. 335).

Lucy does mention that 'I did not live on letters only', for Dr John does visit her, and one of these visits is to the theatre to see Vashti, the actress. Here we learn, amongst other things, that Lucy can see certain limitations in Dr John. There is a fire at the theatre, which leads to the throwing together of Dr John and his wife-to-be, Paulina. At the start of Chapter 24, we are told that there are no more communications from Dr John, and that the emptiness which Dr John's five letters keep at bay now overwhelms Lucy, with 'a stilly pause, a wordless silence, a long blank of oblivion' (V, p. 348). She is as a hermit, and tries to embrace hermit ways. With a pertinent indirect reference to her name, she finds herself in a 'snow-sepulchre' against which all she can do is hope that there will be spring at the end, even though the hermit always knows that there may be no resurrection. She textualises the lack of communication from Graham: 'Following that eventful evening at the theatre, came for me seven weeks as bare as seven sheets of blank paper: no word was written on one of them; not a visit, not a token' (V, p. 349). Turning time and loneliness into an image of what has not been written continues to impress upon the reader how central the activity of writing is to Lucy's lived experience.¹⁵

She responds by forcing herself to understand that this is the inevitability of life, and attempts a variety of strategies to endure through the blankness. But the worst thing of all is waiting for letters: ‘My hour of torment was the post-hour’ (V, p. 350) and to compensate she keeps returning to correspondence she received from Dr John: ‘In the very extremity of want, I had recourse again, and yet again, to the little packet in the case – the five letters’ (V, p. 350). When a letter does come, which she presumes to be from her one and only correspondent, on closer inspection she sees it has ‘a pale female scrawl, instead of a firm masculine character. I then thought fate was *too* hard for me, and I said, audibly, “This is cruel”’. Unlike the novel’s treatment of Dr John’s letters, we are given this letter in full. It is from Dr John’s mother, and is replete with how popular and busy her son is. The letter has no lover’s content, rather like Dr John’s letters as we have had them described to us. It does forewarn Lucy that she will receive a visit, but the letter is unnecessary as a means of furthering the plot. It is there as an instrument of cruelty and of finally killing off Lucy’s affair with Dr John’s letters, since it is not a letter from him, and signals that she is about to meet somebody from her past, who will, although she does not know it yet, seal her fate with respect to Dr John, once and for all. As Lucy puts it, ‘Now, a letter like that sets one to rights!’ (V, p. 356), and Lucy tells us she is ‘composed’, but the associated imagery is once more of starvation and extreme loneliness: ‘The world can understand well enough the process of perishing for want of food: perhaps few persons can enter into or follow out that of going mad from solitary confinement’ (V, p. 356). This and the next chapter establish Polly, now a Countess, as the focus of Dr John’s affections, and Lucy is aware that her time in relation to Dr John is at an end. This leads to a chapter headed ‘A Burial’ (Ch. 26).

In this chapter we are returned to the five letters, and reminded that they are locked up three times. Nevertheless, they go missing, but on this occasion Lucy is less worried than she was at the missing letter. She guesses that Madame Beck has taken them as part of her system

of surveillance and will soon return them. Lucy discusses with her openly the ‘borrowing’ of the letters, and Madam says that there will be no more need to look over them because, on the basis of the letters, the English do not need surveillance. This would confirm that the letters have no revelatory content, they do not give us access to the heart of the correspondents, as the epistolary form in fiction has so often been primed to do. Such interiority has now moved to the novel proper. As part of her grieving process, Lucy must hide the letters once and for all, and at the same time, she can bury ‘Hope’, which is what the letters have come to stand for, and which she casts as ‘sacred’ objects (V, p. 378). Remember, in all this, that the letters themselves simply have no content – she is burying ‘mere friendly letters’ (V, p. 379); in her heart she craves love, and under this aspect the letters are tokens of nothingness, of despair. It is the novel itself which has the emotional content, and so at this point ‘letters’ would seem to be a writing form without content. But, as we shall see, this is merely the prelude to realising a superior ontology of letters later in the novel, for the letters from Dr John have in effect been unworthy of her emotional and *spiritual* being, and Lucy herself has been guilty of wilfully mis-apprehending them.

There is nowhere in the Pensionnat safe enough for the documents, but then she is inspired as to what to do as she looks over the garden to the ‘allée défendue’, a small path which is forbidden to the pupils: ‘One great old pear-tree – the nun’s pear-tree – stood up a tall dryad skeleton, gray, gaunt, and stripped. A thought struck me – one of those queer fantastic thoughts that will sometimes strike solitary people’ (V, p. 379). She tells us her elaborate method of burying the letters.

What I wanted was a metal box which might be soldered, or a thick glass jar or bottle which might be stoppered or sealed hermetically. Amongst miscellaneous heaps, I found and purchased the latter article.

I then made a little roll of my letters, wrapped them in oiled silk, bound them with twine, and, having put them in the bottle, got the old Jew broker to stopper, seal, and make it air-tight. While obeying my directions, he glanced at me now and then suspiciously from under his frost-white eyelashes. I believe he thought there was some evil deed on hand. In all this I had a dreary something—not pleasure—but a sad, lonely satisfaction. The impulse under which I acted, the mood controlling me, were similar to the impulse and the mood which had induced me to visit the confessional. (V, p. 380)

It is noticeable that Lucy goes to extreme lengths to bury the letters. Linking it with the visit to the confessional suggests the ritualism of Roman Catholicism, which is forbidden to Lucy. There is something about the fact of the letters, rather than their written meaning, which crosses a religious boundary. She is burying many associations when she interments them, but also alerting the reader to something beyond physical passion or attraction, which these letters may at one point have signified. The burial of the letters is bound up with the burial of a part of her self, and at the same time is an encounter with her self in an illicit religious realm.¹⁶ But it also points to Lucy's and the novel's development in relation to letters: Lucy's actions are disproportionate in terms of the writing content, which has been sublimated into the writing that constitutes the novel.

This linking of the forbidden, Catholicism, self, soul, and letters takes us to the end of the novel. From this juncture we now see a convergence of form with content, of a resolution into an ideal ontology of letters. The letters have been permanently hidden from us, have been a force of attraction as artefacts without content. There is a teasing of the reader here as there is throughout the novel, as Lucy hides things from us while apparently giving us her self through her impassioned outbursts on loneliness.

The remainder of the novel then is concerned with how Lucy Snowe ‘thaws’ in her attraction to M. Paul Emanuel. All is going well in that they seem destined to be happily married. But M. Paul has to sail away to manage some business.

‘He did not like leaving me in the Rue Fossette; he feared I should miss him there too much—I should feel desolate—I should grow sad—?’

This was certain; but I promised to do my best to endure.

‘Still’, said he, speaking low, ‘there is another objection to your present residence. I should wish to write to you sometimes: it would not be well to have any uncertainty about the safe transmission of letters; and in the Rue Fossette—in short, our Catholic discipline in certain matters—though justifiable and expedient—might possibly, under peculiar circumstances, become liable to misapplication—perhaps abuse’.

‘But if you write’, said I, ‘I *must* have your letters; and I *will* have them: ten directors, twenty directresses, shall not keep them from me. I am a Protestant: I will not bear that kind of discipline: Monsieur, I *will not*’.

‘Doucement—doucement’, rejoined he; ‘we will contrive a plan; we have our resources: soyez tranquille’. (V, pp. 583-4)

There is an explicit alignment of the private, individual nature of letters and Protestantism, and the public, social scrutiny of Catholicism which breaches the letter in its role as conveyor of the soul. No wonder that Lucy buries the letters from Dr John – they have none of this religious, soulful aspect; they have the form but not the content of spirituality. Now, with M. Paul, the letters will have an appropriate spiritual aspect, as we will see.

M. Paul has to go away for three years, and it is during this physical separation that Lucy says she is happiest. She builds up a school for which he has provided the initial outlay. What sustains her in these three years are the letters she receives from him: ‘A generous provider supplied bounteous food’; ‘By every vessel he wrote; he wrote as he gave and as he

loved, in full-handed, full-hearted plenitude'; 'his letters were real food that nourished, living water that refreshed', and counts herself rare in the world to have received such letters (V, p. 594). Thus, the ontology of letters, which is one of physical separation, is no longer one that signals despair, but one that augurs the best relationship possible between a man and a woman.

These letters save Lucy at the end of *Villette* since they embody true spirituality – the nourishment is spiritual, not physical or sexual.¹⁷ Hence the symbolism of the name of the boat in which her master sets sail: *Paul and Virginia*, Paul and the virgin (and perhaps Lucy's being cast in this role is foreshadowed by her association with a nun). Dr John's letters were the wrong kind, they were 'dead letters' from the start in this scheme of things, hence their burial. Here it is no accident her lover's name is Paul, and that the focus is on letters, where they act as a form of communion. With the emergence of Paul's letters – *Paul's letters*, *Pauline epistles* – Lucy finally places herself at the centre of this imaginative, religious, intelligent, relationship.

Nevertheless, the ending is famously ambivalent. The final section places the reader in an unclear time-scheme. We are simultaneously at the end of the three-year wait, when M. Paul is sailing back to Lucy, and at a period much later than that, where Madame Beck and Père Silas have prospered 'all the days' of their lives, and Madame Walravens lives to see ninety years of age. Despite these certain outcomes, Lucy does not unequivocally declare that M. Paul returns. Instead she mentions a seven-day storm, not subsiding until 'the destroying angel of tempest had achieved his perfect work', and then appears to leave it up to readers to decide whether M. Paul returns or not.

Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great

terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life. (V, p. 596)

In other words, if you are predisposed to be optimistic, M. Paul did indeed return and all is well. The implication of course is that if you are pessimistic, then M. Paul perished, and this reading is possible as well since the boat's name refers directly to the novel *Paul et Virginie* (1788), in which lovers are separated and communicate by letters before Virginie dies at sea in her attempt to return to Paul.¹⁸ There was some correspondence with Charlotte Brontë from readers asking for 'exact and authentic information respecting the fate of M. Paul Emanuel!' to which Charlotte replied that she had worded her responses 'to leave the matter pretty much where it was. Since the little puzzle amuses the ladies, it would be a pity to spoil their sport by giving them the key'.¹⁹

A more significant interpretation is that the ending suggests both the real Paul (living) and the biblical Paul (dead). At the end of the Acts of the Apostles, Paul (as a prisoner) is shipwrecked on Malta. However, he foretells: 'And now I exhort you to be of good cheer: for there shall be no loss of *any man's* life among you, but of the ship' (Acts 27. 22). The open ending then becomes a test of faith for the reader: if we believe the Bible, we know that Paul is saved; if we are non-believers who lack the truth of religious imagination, Paul is drowned. There is an added irony, given the anti-Catholic nature of the novel, yet a transcendence of religious difference by both Lucy and M. Paul, in that the biblical Paul is setting sail for Rome (Acts 27–28). Remember also that it is a letter which ends *Jane Eyre*, when St John Rivers predicts his own death as the close to his India missionary work (*Jane Eyre*, p. 458). But that ending appears to subordinate the romantic bond between Rochester and Jane to the higher spirituality of St John, which is not quite in keeping with the general tenor of the novel. The ending of *Villette*, where it melds writing, spirit and love in the exchange of letters between M. Paul and Lucy, is thus perhaps more aesthetically justified. To rely on ambivalence deliberately affords at least two triumphs: the lovers are rendered unknowably timeless, and writing itself is the medium through which characters and readers experience the world at its profoundest.

Notes

1. Charlotte Brontë sent poetry to Southey, 16 March 1837, and opening chapters of a novel to Coleridge, December 1840; Brontë, *Letters* I, pp. 168–9 and pp. 236–7, draft only extant. All subsequent references to Charlotte Brontë's correspondence are from this edition: *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Margaret Smith, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995–2004); hereafter *Letters*.
2. Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (London: Dent, 1971); Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* (London: Hachette Digital [Little, Brown], 2010).
3. Mary-Antoinette Smith, 'Becoming Jane: Embedded Epistolarity in Jane Eyre's Writing Herself into Being', *Cycnos*, 25 (2008). <<<http://revel.unice.fr/cycnos/index.html?id=6169>>> accessed 10/07/14.
4. It should be pointed out that Linda S. Kauffman in *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986) sees *Jane Eyre* as having the strongest relationship with Charlotte Brontë's letters to M. Heger, and focuses on the 'metamorphosis of the rhetoric of passion from an authentic amorous epistolary discourse into the work of fiction with the closest parallels to that genre' (p. 170).
5. Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor* (London: J. M. Dent, 1969), p. 5.
6. '120 stories and other prose pieces' between 1829–1841, 'Chronology', *Letters* I, p.77. See Christine Alexander's 'Angria Revalued: Charlotte Brontë's efforts to free herself from her juvenilia', *AUMLA*, 53 (1980), 54–63.

7. Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor*. Introduction by Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 8; hereafter *P*.

8. For discussions of the epistolary novel, and epistolarity, see: Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982); Shari Benstock, 'From Letters to Literature: *La Carte Postale* and the Epistolary Genre', *Genre* 18 (Fall 1985): 257–95; Mariaconcetta Costantini, Francesco Marroni and Anna Enrichetta Soccio, eds, *Letter(s). Functions and Forms of Letter-Writing in Victorian Art and Literature* (Rome: Aracne, 2009); Mary A. Favret, *Romantic Correspondence. Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Amanda Gilroy and W. M. Verhoeven, eds, *Epistolary Histories. Letters, Fiction, Culture* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000); Linda S. Kauffman, *Discourses of Desire*; Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel* (New York: AMS Press, 1980); Nicola J. Watson, *Revolution and the Form of the British Novel, 1790-1825: Intercepted Letters, Interrupted Seductions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Barbara Maria Zaczek, *Censored Sentiments. Letters and Censorship in Epistolary Novels and Conduct Materials* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1997).

For an excellent recent and significant discussion of *Villette* and letters see Tamara S. Wagner, 'Containing Emotional Distress: the Elusive Letter Novel in *Villette*', *Brontë Studies*, 36.2 (April 2011): 131–40. Wagner's focus is on the way in which the epistolary novel 'haunts' *Villette*, and tracks Lucy's emotion (or lack of it) in relation to letters. I would argue that *Villette* is rather the resolution of problems around writing, epistolarity and transcendence of the physical. Where Wagner identifies a suspension or deferral of desire in

the dynamics of physical separation, I would see it more as a reaching for spiritual ascendancy that overcomes the physical, as I go on to discuss.

Other work on Charlotte Brontë and letters includes Charlotte Borie, ‘La correspondance de Charlotte Brontë: coulisses du style et de l’écriture’, *Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens* (April 2008), 367–377; Mary Jacobus, ‘*Villette*’s Buried Letter’, *Essays in Criticism* 28.3 (1978), reprinted in Mary Jacobus, *Reading Women* (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 41–61; Jessica Brent, ‘Haunting Pictures, Missing Letters: Visual Displacement and Narrative Elision in *Villette*’, *Novel*, 37:1–2 (2003 Fall–2004 Spring), 86–111.

9. Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1995), p. 291; hereafter Barker.

10. I utilise Altman’s ‘working definition’ of epistolarity as ‘the use of the letter’s formal properties to create meaning’ (p. 4).

11. Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); hereafter *Shirley*.

12. Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (London: Penguin, 1985); hereafter *Villette*.

13. The novel does also have a Charles – an uncle of Lucy’s (V, p. 108). Lucy is told she is like her Uncle Charles – another in-joke. Her second uncle is called ‘Wilmot’, a nod towards John Wilmot, the Second Earl of Rochester and the most likely name behind the hero of Jane Eyre, so there is a further connection with these private jokes around names, novels, and authors.

14. Like Jane Eyre, Lucy Snowe is without parental control, which allows for Lucy to receive letters from men (Dr John, and later M. Paul himself) in circumstances which would normally have been censored by the patriarch. M. Paul is almost in that position, but would be overstepping bounds to insist on seeing the contents as a father might do. Such normal monitoring is evident towards the end of the novel when Paulina and Dr John write to each other, and this passage demonstrates the conventional exchange of letters between lovers: Dr John excites his recipient with his missives, writing the kind of letters Lucy once desired, while the female recipient must insist on his not writing such letters, while such feminine demurring continues to provoke the cycle. The father eventually asks Lucy if his daughter ‘receives letters’; Lucy confirms it, but says the content of the epistles is entirely decorous (V, pp. 464–7 and 521–2). This more conventional use of amatory epistles also suggests a more conventional Lucy in the guise of her alter ego, Paulina. Letters here stand in for the female body, which have to be controlled by males, a feature of the epistolary novel, such as in Richardson’s *Pamela* and *Clarissa*. In *Villette* the later free exchange of letters between Lucy and M. Paul is entirely counter to this tradition.

15. For a discussion of Charlotte Brontë and ‘loneness’ see Sharon Connor, “‘Loneness’ in the Letters of Charlotte Brontë”, *Brontë Studies*, 33.1 (July 2008), 91–6, esp. pp. 91, 94.

16. For a different reading of the episode, see Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 427.

17. There is a conjunction of possible redemption, letter, spirituality and the battle between Catholicism and Protestantism at the end of one of Charlotte Brontë’s Belgian essays, ‘Anne Askew’, regarding the life of the Protestant martyr. Anne can escape the rack if she signs a

letter disclaiming her Protestant faith. ‘Half dazed by the torture and tempted to end her sufferings Anne begins to sign the letter but, remembering that only the body can die, she returns voluntarily to the rack, declaring “I am a Protestant”’ (Barker, p. 386).

18. Jacques-Henri Bernadin de Saint Pierre, *Paul and Virginia* (1851), trans. by Helen Maria Williams, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/10859/pg10859.txt> <<accessed 16 March 2015>>.

19. A MS fragment ‘in Charlotte Brontë’s hand’ reads: ‘The Author of “Villette” begs to inform Dr. W: that the catastrophe of that work is left to the imagination and taste of the reader. The lover of tragedy will decide one way; the cheerfully disposed will take the opposite view’ (*Letters* III, p. 345). The letter to W. S. Williams is 23 March 1853: ‘The note you sent this morning from Lady Harriette St. Clair is precisely to the same purport <of> as Miss Mulock’s request – an application for exact and authentic information respecting the fate of M. Paul Emanuel!! ... I have sent Lady Harriette an answer so worded as to leave the matter pretty much where it was. Since the little puzzle amuses the <lady> ‘ladies’ it would be a pity to spoil their sport by giving them the key. <?too soon>.’ *Letters* III, pp. 138-9.

Notes on Contributor

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