

Haunted Childhood in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

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Ghosts are a phenomenon necessarily borne out of uncertainty: Do they exist? Whence do they come? In contrast, children are relatively easy to understand. We certainly know where they come from and their noise, coupled with the fact that they are often under one's feet, testifies to their empirical existence. Despite the fact, however, that we have all been children, what they have in common with ghosts is that we insist on treating them as 'other': foreign, different, to some extent unknowable. James R. Kincaid, in his controversial but influential study, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*, addresses the problematic issue of setting fully defined limits for childhood. For him, it is the relationship between subjectivity and conscious or unconscious projections of childhood that applies: 'My "child" [. . .] is not defined or controlled by age limits, since it seems to me that anyone between the ages of one day and 25 years or even beyond might, in different contexts, play that role.'¹

Two of the more complex issues explored in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) are what it is, precisely, that constitutes childhood and what makes children uncanny. As the central protagonist, Lucy Snowe, finds on facing little Polly in Chapter 2, 'When I say child I use an inappropriate and undescriptive term — a term suggesting any picture rather than that of the demure little person in a mourning frock and white chemisette, that might just have fitted a good-sized doll.'² This sense of the projection of uncanniness on to Polly, however, also works as an early piece of mirror identification, for though Lucy is several years older than Polly and, by the end of the book, Lucy is in her mid-twenties where Polly is in her late teens, Polly's main narrative function is to cast reflected light upon Lucy's past. In actuality, Lucy's frequently voiced criticism of Polly for her determination to hold on to childish ways, reminds us that Lucy's own partially erased family history leaves her, too, stranded in the role of abandoned child. Hence, in a second face-to-face encounter, this time with an 'adult' apparition, she considers, '[Was] that strange thing [. . .] of this world, or of a realm beyond the grave; or [was it . . .] only the child of malady, and I of that malady the prey[?]' (p. 333). As the phrase 'child of malady' implies, Lucy's own relationship to

¹ *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 5.

² *Villette*, ed. by Mark Lilly with introduction by Tony Tanner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 73. All further references are given in the text.

her past has become in some sense sickened, pathological, perhaps even 'haunted'.

It is important to stress here that, unlike many Victorian representations of ghosts, Brontë's depictions of actual phantoms in *Villette*, from the legend of the young nun buried alive for committing an act in breach of her vows, to the various manifestations of ghostly nuns elsewhere, these spirits (though they disturb and frighten Lucy) never come even close to scaring us. Right from the start, we recognize them as the work of an imposter, the various visitations conveying fakeness rather than fear. In effect, Brontë's ghosts are narrative decoys, distractions deflecting attention from something else and, in a variety of contexts, this 'something else' corresponds to a 'shadowing' of the other. Madame Beck, the proprietress of the establishment in which Lucy is given the role of teacher, is a spy who hides behind the role of the phantom, 'glid[ing] ghost-like through the house' (p. 136) in order to snoop through her employees' possessions. On one of the many occasions on which Lucy spies on Madame Beck spying on her, the latter enters Lucy's chamber after dark in a scene that closely mirrors that of Chapter 25 of Brontë's earlier novel *Jane Eyre* (1847). In that novel, Bertha Mason enters Jane's chamber on the eve of her marriage to Rochester, illuminating her supposedly sleeping face with a lighted candle. Peering closely at Jane's marriage trousseau, she lifts the veil from where it is hanging in the closet and, placing it over her own face, stares at her reflection in the glass before tearing the veil in two. Like Madame Beck's, Bertha's presence in the room and her reflected image are likened to a ghost's. Also similar are their respective objects of interest: the incomer's face, appearance, and clothing. Unlike Bertha, however, though Madame Beck's actions operate as both clandestine and unsettling, we never forget that Lucy's first encounter with her dismisses the uncanny: 'No ghost stood beside me, nor anything of spectral aspect; merely a motherly, dumpy little woman, in a large shawl, a wrapping-gown, and a clean, trim night-cap' (p. 127). As the words 'merely' and 'dumpy' here imply, while *Villette* treats childhood as an uncanny and indeterminate space of identification, mothers are affecting only when absent.

Yet, while mothers (at least in their consolationist form) are absent, Lucy is perpetually surrounded by children in this novel: the little Polly of the opening chapters soon accedes to Madame Beck's daughters (Fifine in Chapter 10, Georgette in Chapter 11), not to mention the overly-demanding pupils of Madame Beck's establishment. In no way, however, are any of these individuals idealized Victorian stereotypes. At best they hinder, obstruct, and deny Lucy her autonomy: at worst they unsettle both her and us. Polly is a particularly disturbing character, described from the start as both strange and estranged from the rest of humanity. So acute is this strangeness that, at the start of the book, the reader struggles to gain any clear sense of who or what she is, or even her age. The furnishings introduced

to Lucy's chamber in Chapter 1, comprising 'a small crib, draped with white; and [. . .] a tiny rosewood chest' (p. 62), lead us to expect the arrival of a small infant. This expectation is partially upheld by her arriving in the form of a 'shawled bundle' (p. 64). Almost immediately, however, we are called upon to revise this initial perception as we discover not only that she can speak, but that she speaks in a peculiarly unsettling adult manner: 'Put me down, please [. . .] and take off this shawl' (p. 64). As the chapter develops, recurrent comparisons are made between Polly and dolls, and her clothing and doll's clothing, yet not in a manner that allows Polly to return to a 'safe' infantile image. Instead, this enforced and unsettling miniaturism recalls the trend (first initiated by the Victorians) to 'domesticate' the sprite or fairy, struggling to tame both by a reduction in stature to that of 'girl-child'. As fairy mythology cautions, however, such seemingly domestication may prove to be false, Polly's movements also, like Madame Beck's, being compared with those of 'a small ghost gliding over the carpet' (p. 92), and her presence in a room disturbing Lucy a great deal more than Madame Beck's: 'Whenever opening a room-door, I found her seated in a corner alone, her head in her pigmy hand, that room seemed to me not inhabited, but haunted' (p. 69). The question is, of course, by whom or what is the room haunted? Is the child herself a spirit (as the fairy connection suggests), or are both she and Lucy being haunted by the spirits of their dead mothers?

Lucy's own childhood is shrouded in mist. In lieu of parents she has a widowed godmother, Mrs Bretton, a woman who has married into an old, established and respectable family. As far as her own blood relations are concerned, Lucy's sole reference to them is as 'the kinsfolk with whom was at that time fixed my permanent residence' (p. 62). Never does she clarify whether these kinsfolk are parents, grandparents, or some other relation, nor does she communicate any reference to siblings. This omission raises more questions than are answered. The reason for Mrs Bretton's claiming her is made similarly unclear: 'I believe she then plainly saw events coming, whose very shadow I scarce guessed; yet of which the faint suspicion sufficed to impart unsettled sadness, and made me glad to change scene and society' (p. 62). In contrast, we learn quite a lot about Polly's background, being told from the start that Polly's mother has recently died, but no sooner is this acknowledged than the remark is further qualified by Mrs Bretton: 'The loss was not so great as might at first appear. Mrs Home [. . .] had been a very pretty, but a giddy, careless woman, who had neglected her child, and disappointed and disheartened her husband.' Indeed, she assures Lucy, 'So far from congenial had the union proved, that separation at last ensued — separation by mutual consent' (p. 62–63).

On the subject of separation, Lucy tells us on more than one occasion that she is haunted by her fourteenth year, the year in which she has to leave her Godmother's house and find her way in the world. Fourteen is also, of course, a year in which puberty frequently strikes, and though nothing so

corporeal is ever mentioned in this text, instead of adolescence opening up a world to Lucy, puberty seems to set a limit to Lucy's horizons. This is also, of course, the age at which Victorian theosophy claimed clairvoyancy (believed to be particularly acute in girl children) started to wane. Lucy's inability to fully leave this phase of her life behind enables her to retain an ongoing 'feel' for the uncanny, but restricts her access to fully-fledged adult sexuality. Hence, Lucy's character comes to rest at this threshold phase, identifying with a limbo-land defined in relation to children, while neither being one, having any, nor ever fully being allowed to distance herself from them. Her foundling status is reflected in the similarly peripheral relationship Lucy has with her adoptive family. Where they share the name of their town, Bretton, suggesting possible past nobility, Lucy remains unsure whether this is true, or mere coincidence. She only ever holds an outsider's perspective on this family, living in its midst, but as 'different'.

Nina Auerbach picks up on this false family structure in *Villette*, claiming that the usage of names in relation to families and belonging consistently works to exclude Lucy as foreigner: "'Bretton of Bretton": the concord between person and place is so firm that the names are interchangeable.'³ This I would certainly accept, but where we differ is in our respective readings of this issue in relation to little Polly. Auerbach observes, 'Polly *Home* [. . .] also defines by her name a certain oneness with the world' (p. 204). Here, what Auerbach seems to have missed is what strikes me as being an explicit irony attendant in her naming, one most fully brought out in relation to Polly's mother who, of course, in becoming estranged from her husband, similarly starts to bear a fractured relationship to the patronymic 'Home'. Nor is this fractured relationship without its own symbolic ironies, for clearly Mrs Home (Polly's mother) is no longer 'at home' and nor is little Polly. Neither is this mother 'homely' (either in the sense of being domesticated or plain in appearance). In gothic terms we can extend this identification to claim that a woman who is not *heimlich*/homely must, by definition, be *unheimlich*/uncanny, and hence capable of haunting. As Lucy observes elsewhere, in relation to Polly, 'One would have thought the child had no mind or life of her own, but must necessarily live, move, and have her being in another' (p. 83).

Fittingly, it is via Polly's relationship with her own father that this shadow-self emerges, but through a reverse dynamic in which, far from estranging itself from him, it rarely leaves his side:

'And how is papa's little Polly?' [. . .]

'How is Polly's papa?' was the reply, as she leaned on his knee and gazed up into his face.

³ *Romantic Imprisonment: Women and Other Glorified Outcasts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 204.

It was not a noisy, not a wordy scene [. . .] but it was a scene of feeling too brimful, and which, because the cup did not foam up high or furiously overflow, only oppressed one the more. (p. 71)

This nauseating flirtatiousness is later reiterated in a scene highly reminiscent of this one, but the second time involving a literal rather than a figurative cup, as Polly/Paulina acts out with Dr John/Graham a role that his mother, Mrs Bretton, has earlier scathingly connected with Polly's own mother: 'as silly and frivolous a little flirt as ever sensible man was weak enough to marry' (p. 63).

She continued to look up exactly with the countenance of a child that longs for some prohibited dainty. At last the Doctor relented, took it down, and indulged himself in the gratification of letting her taste from his hand [. . .] and he prolonged it by so regulating the position of the cup that only a drop at a time could reach the rosy, sipping lips by which its brim was courted.

'A little more — a little more,' said she, petulantly touching his hand with her forefinger, to make him incline the cup more generously and yieldingly [. . .].

He indulged her, whispering, however, with gravity: 'Don't tell my mother or Lucy; they wouldn't approve.'

'Nor do I,' said she, passing into another tone and manner as soon as she had fairly assayed the beverage, just as if it had acted upon her like some disenchanting draught, undoing the work of a wizard: 'I find it anything but sweet; it is bitter and hot, and takes away my breath. Your old October was only desirable while forbidden. Thank you, no more.'

And, with a slight bend — careless, but as graceful as her dance — she glided from him and rejoined her father. (p. 365)

Graham, encountering this potential child-bride, plays children's games with her to reassure himself he can remain in control, babying her in refusing her wine in favour of imbibing 'dew'. Though the phrase 'disenchanting draught' is associated with Polly's desires here, it is Graham who acts as increasingly charmed (in both senses), the gradually tipping vessel imitating the shifting balance of power. Polly has merely been playing the child to lull Graham into the false belief that he can replace her own father in her affections. In setting the two men up in competition with each other she ensures that both will see only what she chooses to let them. Her victory is assured in Graham's lack of certainty over just how to court her: 'She did not again yield to any effervescence of glee; the infantine sparkle was exhaled for the night: she was soft, thoughtful and docile [. . .] I saw [Graham] hardly knew how to blend together in his ideas the dancing fairy and delicate dame' (p. 366).

Polly's uncanniness and its implied connection with the maternal is repeatedly underscored by references to and hints drawn from Victorian fairy-lore. It is Graham who first refers to her as a 'changeling' (p. 85), but the observation is reinforced by her father's later modulation of it into 'daughterling' (p. 363), before going on to opine: 'I would not answer for her being quite cannie: she is a strange little mortal' (p. 364). In literal terms, of

course, little Polly never changes, being as much 'an airy, fairy thing', a 'small, slight, white [. . .] winter spirit' (p. 357) in late adolescence as she was as a small child. This again takes us back to implied connections with her dead mother. One of the most powerful elements of traditional fairy lore relates to the abduction of nursing human mothers by fairies. The motive often cited for these abductions related to the inability of fairies to suckle their own infants. In areas where fairy lore was particularly strong, grieving children were, on occasions, told that a dead mother had actually been taken by the fairies, therefore feeding the child with false hopes that one day that mother would return. In the case of Polly's developing (or non-developing) characterization in *Villette*, it is as if, between Chapters 4 and 24, Polly has retreated from sight by searching out the same fairy 'barrow' or 'mound' to which her mother has adjourned 'in death', returning (as is customary) to find the human world changed, but the fairy herself eternally young. As Lewis Spence observes, 'The passage of time in the elfin world moves at a different tempo from that known to our own sphere [. . . becoming] greatly accelerated, in the view of mortals at least [. . .]. Human intruders who have penetrated to it find on their release that what seems a night has actually occupied a year of human time, or, in certain instances, a generation.'⁴

Quite aside from these potentially uncanny aspects of Polly's own characterization, the more obvious behavioural aspect of her relationship with her father is that it has become deeply damaged. In this context her father's plea, addressed to Mrs Bretton, 'Don't you find her pretty nearly as much the child as she was ten years ago?' (p. 363) carries along with it a hint of desperation. Child and parent clutch to each other so compulsively that Mr Home refuses to allow himself to see Polly's increasing maturity, a refusal she both permits and encourages, even though she privately claims to Lucy that she finds it stifling.

Despite Lucy's obvious distaste for Polly's tactics, she herself employs them to satisfactory effect at times. Their first encounter after Polly's return is brought to a halt by Mrs Bretton calling both to heel with the words 'Children, come down!' (p. 361) and Lucy's fiercest rivalries are with the narrative's two most child-like characters: little Polly herself and M. Paul's ward, Justine Marie. Both girl-women are also, of course, doubles for ghosts, a rivalry that might explain Lucy's earlier wish 'almost [. . .] to be covered in with earth and turf' (p. 230). Lucy, later repelled by the suggestion she might become paid companion to Paulina, assures herself she will never be a 'bright lady's shadow' (p. 382); but this assertion has already proved false in M. Paul's mischievous suggestion, at the end of Chapter 35, that the various apparitions of the Nun believed to be the ghost of his youthful sweetheart may be caused by the phantom's jealousy at their intimacy. Indeed, it is when the rivalry between Lucy and the living Justine Marie is at its peak,

⁴ *The Fairy Tradition in Britain* (London: Rider, 1948), p. 303.

and Lucy at her most childishly petulant, that M. Paul cannot resist proposing marriage.

That M. Paul has already been enticed by *this* Lucy is revealed in the nature of his parting gift to her:

It was before the white door-step of a very neat abode that M. Paul had halted. [. . .]

The vestibule was small [. . .] but freshly and tastefully painted; its vista closed in a French window with vines trained about the panes, tendrils and green leaves kissing the glass. [. . .]

Opening an inner door, M. Paul disclosed a parlour, or salon — very tiny, but I thought, very pretty. Its delicate walls were tinged like a blush; its floor was waxed; a square of brilliant carpet covered its centre; its small round table shone like the mirror over its hearth; there was a little couch, a little chiffonière; the half-open, crimson-silk door of which, showed porcelain on the shelves; there was a French clock, a lamp; there were ornaments in biscuit china; the recess of the single ample window was filled with a green stand, bearing three green flower-pots, each filled with a fine plant glowing in bloom; in one corner appeared a guéridon with a marble top, and upon it a work-box, and a glass filled with violets in water. [. . .] ‘Pretty, pretty place!’ said I. M. Paul smiled to see me so pleased. (pp. 584–85)

Note the wording of this passage, with its reiterated vocabulary of the diminutive (‘very tiny’, ‘very pretty’, ‘tinged like a blush’). As Lucy’s child-like response to this vision implies (‘Pretty, pretty place!’), M. Paul has procured her a doll’s house. It is at this point that Lucy finally comes closest to the little Polly of Chapter 2, who sits with her ‘toy work-box of white varnished wood [. . .] holding in her hands a shred of a handkerchief, which she [is] professing to hem’ (p. 73). Where ‘Papa’s little Polly’s’ play is aimed at the delectation of her father, here M. Paul hopes Lucy will ‘play house’ with him.

From an Object Relations perspective, Lucy’s relationship to her own missing family background can in part be intuited by her fascination with domestic interiors, for she is a character strikingly affected by furnishings and their layout. One of the first things we learn about Mrs Bretton’s house, for example, is that her furniture is ‘well-arranged’ (p. 61), an observation projecting onto her surroundings the wish-fulfilment fantasies of stability, balance, and harmony an otherwise abandoned child might be expected to hope for from a surrogate family unit. In this sense Polly is again seen as a threat, her arrival first being signalled by the reorganization of Lucy’s bedroom furniture. Most important of all from this perspective, however, is the scene in which the ‘adult’ Lucy falls into a fever at Madame Beck’s, walks out into the streets, loses consciousness, and reawakens to find herself surrounded by the rearranged objects of that past:

As I gazed at the blue arm-chair, it appeared to grow familiar; so did a certain scroll-couch, and not less so the round centre-table, with a blue covering, bordered with autumn-tinted foliage; and above all, two little footstools with worked covers, and a small ebony-framed chair, of which the seat and back were also worked with groups of brilliant flowers on a dark ground. [. . .]

Strange to say, old acquaintance were all about me, and 'auld lang syne' smiled out of every nook. (p. 238)

As George Speaight observes of Victorian interior design, during this period rooms typically became 'submerged beneath a vast accumulation of feminine ingenuity. Objects were coated [...] tables were painted [...] footstools were covered'.⁵ Consider that Speaight's remarks are to be found within his *History of the English Toy Theatre* and we realize Lucy's positive response here is not just to the familiar, but, as with that she makes to the interior of M. Paul's 'dolls'-house', the diminutive. As Object Relations theorists note, for children, 'things represent human beings', while 'the projection of good feelings and good parts of the self [are] essential for the infant's ability to develop good object relations'.⁶ In Lucy's case, the positive aspects of this vision ward off the negative, but the stress the passage places upon the 'worked' nature of that interior and the various 'covers' it includes does not fail to remind us, once again, of the artifice of this substitution and those unknown aspects of what lies beneath the over-writing of Lucy's past. The larger journey Lucy has undergone in order to get here also introduces a more ambivalent tack. Waving goodbye to the 'bad mother' (Madame Beck), she sets out on a semi-deranged quest that leads her into a church in which she briefly dallies with a similarly 'bad father', Père Silas. Fleeing that false relationship, she eventually reawakens into this place of originary substitution, a process described as a form of second birth: 'The returning sense of sight came upon me, red, as if it swam in blood; suspended hearing rushed back loud [...] consciousness revived in fear: I sat up appalled, wondering into what region, amongst what strange beings I was waking' (p. 237).

In actuality Lucy's wish is to retreat from these surrounds, regretting the clarity of her vision and going on, with self-confessed alarm, to muse that 'these articles of furniture could not be real, solid arm-chairs, looking-glasses, and wash-stands — they must be the ghosts of such articles' (p. 241). Reminding ourselves of the fact that, in this novel, the ghost has the status of the decoy, the presence of these objects as phantoms suggests they act, in their unexpected presence, as a telling reminder of objects lost. In other words, they substitute for memories of the unknown and unknowable dead (her parents). Observing that, at first, 'a wall was not a wall — a lamp not a lamp', what Lucy not only does not but cannot say is what those objects represent instead, no forms pre-existing in phantasy to give shape to such longing. The whole vision is one of simultaneous loss and return, the return of the remembered past reinvoking her silenced origins.

⁵ *History of the English Toy Theatre*, p. 89; cited in Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 114.

⁶ Melanie Klein, *The Writings of Melanie Klein*, 3 vols (New York: Free Press, 1975), III, 9; cited in William Veeder, 'Who is Jane? The Intricate Feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman', *Arizona Quarterly*, 44.3 (1988), 40–79 (pp. 45, 44).

In fact, what makes this sequence of scenes genuinely disruptive is what happens beforehand. Chapter 16, which coincides with the second volume of the original edition, opens with a projection of the self through a split lens: 'Where my soul went during that swoon I cannot tell [. . .] she kept her own secret; never whispering a word to *Memory*, and baffling *Imagination* by an indissoluble silence' (p. 237). As my italics suggest (particularly in conjunction with Brontë's use of upper-case lettering), 'Memory' and 'Imagination' call attention to the presence of the first-person narrator (me and I) which forms the first syllable of each. Nevertheless, though this is an assertion of the self, as the passage continues it seems increasingly to speak of another, dearly departed, feminine subject: 'She may have gone upward, and come in sight of her eternal home, hoping for leave to rest now, and deeming that her painful union with matter [*mater?*] was at last dissolved' (p. 237). Turned away from Heaven's gates, the duality to which that weary traveller is bound can once more be read as either the self (split into Soul and Body) or self in relation to other (Mother and Child): 'An angel may have warned her away from heaven's threshold, and guiding her weeping down, have bound her, once more, all shuddering and unwilling, to that poor frame [her child], cold and wasted, of whose companionship she was grown more than weary' (p. 237).

This is not the first time Lucy has been subjected to a splitting of the self, and this is a dynamic in part required by the narrative structure. As is commonly the case with Victorian novels dealing with childhood and its effects, this is a retrospective, first-person narrative the voice and persona of which ghosts her own character as played out within the text. On occasions we are encouraged to be reminded of this ghosting, such as at the beginning of Chapter 23, when Lucy in her guise as older, wiser narrator, observes in relation to Graham's letters, 'I [re]read them in after years' (p. 334). This aside tells of an only partially told past comprising the 'three times in the course of [Lucy's] life' when such events have happened to her before: that partial telling again reinforcing the elements of the past that remain shrouded in silence. Yet other such ghostings are inbuilt into the naming process as a number of characters are attributed two names. Where the central protagonist is Lucy in English, Lucie in French, M. Emanuel is at times M. Paul, and Dr John begins the novel as Graham, only becoming Graham again once Lucy is brought into contact with her younger past. It is in relation to childhood that this duality seems clearest and, in the following passage, it coheres in a splitting in which the star-gazing Lucy of the fictive present projects an unspoken past onto the night sky:

A moon was in the sky, not a full moon but a young crescent. I saw her through a space in the boughs over-head. She and the stars, visible beside her, were no strangers where all else was strange: my childhood knew them. I had seen that golden sign with the dark globe in its curve leaning back on azure, beside an old

thorn at the top of an old field, in Old England, in long past days, just as it now leaned back beside a stately spire in this continental capital.

Oh my childhood! I had feelings: passive as I lived, little as I spoke, cold as I looked, when I thought of past days, I *could* feel. About the present, it was better to be stoical: about the future — such a future as mine — to be dead. And in catalepsy and a dead trance, I studiously held the quick of my nature. (p. 175)

In Object Relations terms this simultaneous and unconscious splitting of the 'I' into self and other is referred to as a construction of the False self which, according to Donald Winnicott, can be brought about by 'difficulties in early mother–baby interactions'.⁷ In *Villette* this False self may also be seen as another aspect of the phantom as decoy, the True self 'dwindling' while failing to become fully nourished. It is telling, for example, that Lucy's response to her own reflection is frequently non-recognition or dislike: 'A gilded mirror filled up the space between two windows, curtained amply with blue damask. In this mirror I saw myself laid, not in bed, but on a sofa. I looked spectral' (p. 238). Another manifestation of this characteristic, as noted by several critics of Brontë's narrative, is that Lucy appears to have little sense of her own true (or 'True') character. Hence, for example, though she repeatedly asserts she is not of the personality type to entertain occult speculations, such are frequently voiced by her. And though she equally repeatedly claims only a novice's appreciation of aesthetics, the framing of her image within the mirror, as described above, is pure theatre. So, three sheets of glass, two transparent, one reflective, all three surrounded by a rich cloak of damask, set up the sense of seeing 'through a glass darkly'. This allusion and its popular Victorian connection with clairvoyancy and superstition then becomes enhanced, in the subsequent paragraph, by Lucy once again paying detailed attention to various *objets d'art* around the room, perceiving them as familiar, and then connecting that familiarity with 'the[ir] peculiarities, [. . .] flaws or cracks'. In Object Relations terms, this again seems resonant of her flawed family relationships, but as far as Lucy is consciously concerned the vision takes place in her mind's eye, leading her to associate the moment with the skills of what she calls 'any *clairvoyante*' (p. 239). It is her use of the word 'any', rather than the less loaded indefinite 'a', which strikes us here because it seems to turn her comment into one of self-reflection. Though Lucy is, as we have seen, anything but clear-sighted, the comment serves to perpetuate the obvious gothic connections.

Though decoys and falsity typify the gothic in this novel, this is not to imply that the occult has no genuine influence. As Lucy listens to the storm raging around Miss Marchmont's house in Chapter 4, the gothic manner in which the passage is expressed, coupled with her description of the storm itself as 'a voice near [. . . the] house' (p. 97), strongly implies that portents are in the air. Though, at this stage, it is unclear precisely what it is that

⁷ David E. Scharff and Jill Savege Scharff, *Object Relations Family Therapy* (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1987), p. 45.

threatens, the companion piece to this storm is the cataclysm at the novel's end, one that brings the earlier portent (if not M. Paul's ship) home:

The skies hang full and dark — a rack sails from the west; the clouds cast themselves into strange forms — arches and broad radiations; there rise resplendent mornings — glorious, royal, purple as monarch in his state; the heavens are one flame; so wild are they, they rival battle at its thickest — so bloody [. . .] I know some signs of the sky; I have noted them ever since childhood. God, watch that sail! Oh! guard it!
(p. 595)

Again, then, childhood is invoked here, but only to close doors upon a story that refuses to be told. What happened in childhood to familiarize Lucy with the terrors of the elements and why is it that it is specifically childhood terror that is resurrected here at the point at which the storm threatens her only hope of full adult sexuality? Robert Newsom is harshly critical of those who dare to interpret the ending of *Villette* ambiguously: 'Readers of any discernment at all will not fail to recognize that M. Paul perishes',⁸ but surely he is missing the point. Brontë's ending is as shrouded in cloud as the skyline because, as with earlier passages in the novel when realism is subjugated to surrealism (such as the fever scene and return to consciousness), outlines blur to allow Lucy's haunted past greater relief. In categorically refusing to state the fate of M. Paul, Brontë ensures that his fate recedes beyond the limits of the horizon, allowing the fate of the masses to come into view instead: 'That storm roared frenzied for seven days. It did not cease till the Atlantic was strewn with wrecks: it did not lull till the deeps had gorged their full sustenance [. . .] a thousand weepers, praying in agony on waiting shores, listened for that voice, but it was not uttered' (p. 596).

From here on the 'dolls'-house' becomes a souvenir, and not just one of unattained adult romance. On the contrary, as Susan Stewart points out, souvenirs usually connect us with reconstructions of childhood, false versions which we control, shape, sift, rewrite. In that sense it is a perfect place at which to leave Lucy, for this is the only type of childhood she has ever had. When Stewart continues by observing, 'The souvenir is by definition always incomplete [. . . its] partiality [becoming] the very source of its power' (p. 136), the word 'souvenir' itself could substitute for Lucy's past. Such erasure also explains the almost satirically false anti-climax which prevents what would otherwise have had to be a capitulation to consolation: 'Madame Beck prospered all the days of her life; so did Père Silas; Madame Walravens fulfilled her ninetieth year before she died. Farewell' (p. 596). Here, accompanying Madame Beck and Père Silas (the 'bad parents' of the text), stands 'Cunegonde, the sorceress! Malevola, the evil fairy' (p. 481), grandmother and cause of death to the novice, Justine Marie. Present here,

⁸ 'Villette and Bleak House: Authorizing Women', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 46.1 (1991), 54–81 (p. 58).

in their signing off, as a grotesque toast to the good/bad health of the false family-unit, the three collectively preside over that living death which is haunted childhood in this text.