

“A Handful of Loose Beads”: Catholicism and the Fictional Autobiography in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*

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IN chapter 34 of Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853), Lucy Snowe provides a useful metaphor for how autobiographical narratives can find themselves caught in the middle of denominational divides between Protestantism and Catholicism. The elusive personal history of the devoutly Catholic M. Paul Emanuel troubles Lucy until it is narrated to her by his priest, Père Silas. When she learns of M. Paul’s extensive financial commitments to his late fiancée’s family and their implications for his future prospects, Lucy reflects on the haphazard nature of how she pieced together his story:

... 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

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rosary on the prie-dieu. Where lay the link of junction, where the little clasp of this monastic necklace? I saw or felt union, but could not yet find the spot, or detect the means of connection.¹

In this moment, Père Silas's narrative interference renders disjointed fragments of M. Paul's autobiography into a rosary: a unified physical object with a distinctly Catholic devotional purpose. While rosaries were not uncommon in some High Anglican circles in the nineteenth century, here the object signals Lucy's suspicion of Catholicism and what she sees as Catholic methods of manipulating independent incidents into convenient wholes. At the same time, however, it also piques her curiosity. Although the metaphor is her own, Lucy cannot fully grasp how Père Silas's narrative sleight-of-hand produces something unified. The disjunction between what Lucy sees and feels and her inability to rationalize those sensations appears throughout the novel. Her confusion reflects her larger struggle to understand how Catholicism theorizes the relationship between parts and wholes, individuals and communities, and autobiographies and collective narratives.

If we read this passage as indicative of a problem that preoccupies her through much of the novel, we can see Lucy confronting a way of engaging with life narratives that is simultaneously utterly foreign and deeply compelling to her. What is one to do, metaphorically speaking, with the "handful of loose beads" that make up an individual life? In her earlier novel *Jane Eyre* (1847), Brontë approached this question via the tradition of Protestant spiritual autobiography as a literary genre focused on the individual's spiritual development, mapped onto a teleological narrative of sin and repentance. In *Villette*, by contrast, she suggests that handfuls of loose beads cannot be so tidily arranged within the confines of an individual life narrative. In this essay I argue that Brontë looks to Catholic liturgical traditions and sacraments for other, more collective models for the fictional autobiography.

Lucy's metaphor of the rosary preserves her skepticism about this experiment: she cannot find the clasp. In this

¹ Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, ed. Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 569–70. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

moment, Lucy encounters a problem endemic to the fictional autobiography: the problem of narrating an individual life as a self-contained unit for producing meaning. This problem is exacerbated in Protestant literary traditions, since, as Brad S. Gregory argues, one of the unforeseen consequences of the Protestant Reformation was a shift away from understanding religious belief as a communal and public experience and toward locating religion within the individual's conscience.² The English autobiographical tradition, strongly informed by John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666) and popularized in the eighteenth century largely by Evangelical and Methodist writers, focused intently on what Linda Peterson calls the "hermeneutic" method—that is, writing concerned with "self-interpretation" over "narration or self-expression," and drawn from principles of biblical hermeneutics.³ In these English referential autobiographies, a strong bent toward carefully cultivated self-improvement often coded the genre as Protestant.⁴

Victorian fictional autobiographies are indebted to a similar set of literary and generic histories as their nonfictional counterparts, even as their status as fiction also implicates them in parallel conversations about the history of the novel.⁵ Heidi

² See Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2012), p. 21.

³ Linda H. Peterson, *Victorian Autobiography: The Tradition of Self-Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1986), pp. 3–4.

⁴ As Janice Carlisle notes, Brontë herself was a voracious reader of both fictional and referential autobiographies in the years between *Jane Eyre's* appearance and *Villette's* composition. She read Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849–50) while *Shirley* (1849) was being published, and later Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850), Robert Southey's *Life and Correspondence* (1850), Leigh Hunt's *Autobiography* (1850), William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1850), and, while composing *Villette*, William Makepeace Thackeray's *Henry Esmond* (1852). For more, see Janice Carlisle, "The Face in the Mirror: *Villette* and the Conventions of Autobiography," *ELH*, 46 (1979), 262–89.

⁵ As Heidi L. Pennington points out, no clear consensus exists on a definition of "fictional autobiography," even as it is a commonly employed and recognized term in literary studies (see Pennington, *Creating Identity in the Victorian Fictional Autobiography* [Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2018], pp. 12–13). I follow Pennington in using the term in spite of its attendant complications, and I take it to mean a retrospective first-person narrative that follows the life (or a portion of the life) of a fictional protagonist in largely chronological order. For a more detailed discussion about the historical division of these terms, see Pennington, *Creating Identity in the Victorian Fictional Autobiography*, pp. 39–66.

Pennington's recent monograph argues in particular for the distinct interpretive stakes of fictionality on constructions of the self, both of characters and readers. By remolding the conventions of both referential and fictional writing, Pennington says, "the fictional autobiography achieves its interpretive speciality: to make visible identity's narrative artifice" (*Creating Identity in the Victorian Fictional Autobiography*, p. 53). This claim runs parallel to one made about Brontë's work by Anna Gibson, who argues that while *Jane Eyre* emphasizes the coherence of the narrating self, *Villette* shows us a different vision of identity formation in which the individual is not a preexisting category, but rather "an assemblage of contiguous parts and processes."⁶ Pennington and Gibson both ultimately show that the process of self-construction in fictional autobiographies elucidates a larger modern understanding of the narrative process by which nonfictional selves are constructed.

One of my contentions in this essay is that this liberal self, often identified as a cornerstone of the Victorian fictional autobiography, should be seen alongside religious discourse. Where Peterson's work on Victorian autobiography clearly recognizes the biographical and thematic influence of spiritual autobiography as well as the formal and interpretive stakes of that influence, more recent criticism on the fictional autobiography tends to acknowledge a larger literary history without giving substantial consideration to the hermeneutic implications of religion on the novel. But, as recent scholarship in religion and the history of the novel has emphasized, investment in theological concerns in the nineteenth century was both broad and deep.⁷ As such, it makes little sense to distance the novel specifically from religion when we acknowledge religion's permeating influence on other areas of nineteenth-century writing and life. Lucy's use of the rosary as a vehicle

⁶ Anna Gibson, "Charlotte Brontë's First Person," *Narrative*, 25 (2017), 205.

⁷ While critics have generally been slower to recognize the influence of religion on the Victorian novel than on other genres of writing, recent monograph-length studies include Norman Vance, *Bible and Novel: Narrative Authority and the Death of God* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012); Amy M. King, *The Divine in the Commonplace: Reverent Natural History and the Novel in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2019); and Mark Knight, *Good Words: Evangelicalism and the Victorian Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2019).

to describe the process of constructing autobiographical narrative is just one such instance in *Villette* of religious practice shaping and commenting on literary form. A reading of the fictional autobiography that reconsiders its generic debt to confessional life writing thus has the potential to complicate teleological narratives of secularization in the history of the Victorian novel.

One such example of the permeating cultural influence of religion that is particularly relevant to autobiographical writing is the Victorian investment in the idea of fictional identification. As Rachel Ablow argues, one of the critical controversies of the nineteenth-century autobiographical novel is that the first-person narrator collapses all distinction between narrating self and reader. The intimacy of the autobiographical voice can thus be "a way to enlist our sympathies before we have a fair chance to evaluate its object."⁸ The implications of this trend for life writing were significance, since, as Andrew H. Miller says, "the idea that an exemplary other could express your life (your capacities for evil as well as for good) was essential to the social dynamics and moral psychology of high-Victorian writers and readers, providing a theological foundation" for the culture of striving and self-improvement grounded in a particularly Protestant, Evangelical sense of the individual self.⁹

Brontë herself engages this model of Protestant autobiographical writing that is heavily invested in the hermeneutic value of the individual life in her earlier novel, *Jane Eyre*. Rochester's narrative provides an example of the kinds of life writing commonly associated with the Protestant spiritual autobiography. His accounts of his own past life form an inset autobiography within Jane's larger narrative. Just as Jane aligns her "dear reader" with herself, Rochester conscripts Jane as a sympathetic audience for his own autobiography over a series of

⁸ Rachel Ablow, "Addressing the Reader: The Autobiographical Voice," in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel 1820–1880*, ed. John Kucich and Jenny Bourne Taylor, *The Oxford History of the Novel in English, Volume Three* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), p. 283.

⁹ Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2008), p. 21.

late-night conversations. His retrospective accounts of his time in the West Indies, his Continental indiscretions, and his secret marriage are regularly couched in the language of fiction. Rochester speaks in hypotheticals, telling Jane to “suppose” herself a spoiled boy, to “imagine” herself far from home, and to “conceive” of her mistakes there.¹⁰ He tells Jane he feels “as if [he] were writing [his] thoughts in a diary,” and makes her an “involuntary confidant of [her] acquaintances’ secrets” (*Jane Eyre*, pp. 167, 166). Later, when he reveals his history in full, Rochester chides Jane for pushing his narrative along, “as if answers in speech did not flow fast enough for [her], and [she] wanted to read the tablet of one’s heart” (p. 396). A reader’s identification with a first-person narrator in fictional autobiography follows a similar structure, since, as Pennington shows, assumed confidence and a provisional willingness for readers to believe the narrator’s representation and interpretation of events from the narrator’s own life is a precondition of fictional autobiography.¹¹

Within the mimetic boundaries of *Jane Eyre*, Rochester conscripts a similar rhetorical strategy by painting his own past as analogous to autobiographical fiction. He does not simply tell Jane that he has made these mistakes—he asks her to identify with them and to imagine that *she* has made them. He also borrows formally from the genre of confessional writing. The detailing of past sins to an addressed audience (conventionally God; in this case Jane) and anyone else who may overhear them (i.e., we the readers) is a staple of the spiritual autobiography as inaugurated by Augustine. In her next fictional autobiography, *Villette*, Brontë would take up this question of confession in different generic and denominational contexts, considering “confessional” writing not only as a literary-historical genre but also as a liturgical sacrament. In doing so, Brontë extends her formal experiments with the fictional autobiography by drawing from the creative resources afforded by the Catholic theological tradition.

¹⁰ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Jane Jack and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 273. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

¹¹ See Pennington, *Creating Identity in the Victorian Fictional Autobiography*, pp. 16–17.



Understandably, the focal point for criticisms of Catholicism in *Villette* tends to be Lucy's fever-induced visit to a Roman Catholic confessional at the conclusion of Volume I. The confession scene features in many analyses of the novel, read variously as indicating Lucy's traumatized recalcitrance to narrate her past (Gretchen Braun), a metonym for the panoptic ideological control that surrounds the Pensionnat (Joseph A. Boone), or an analogue for the Gothic undertones that threaten to disrupt the novel's tentative realism (Emily Walker Heady).¹² While this scene remains enigmatic, critics generally agree about two things: first, that Lucy's confession is an act of narrating, and bears some relation to her complicated position as arguably the quintessential unreliable narrator of Victorian fiction; and second, that the scene is inextricably enmeshed with the novel's ambivalent understandings of Catholicism and religious belief at mid-century. Surprisingly, however, these two concerns have usually been treated as discrete problems. In contrast, I see them as mutually constitutive, not just for the confession scene but for *Villette's* generic experiments with the first-person narrator of fictional autobiography.

While some Anglican clergymen had continued to hear confessions after the Reformation, the act was no longer considered sacramental or requisite for the forgiveness of sins. Instead, Anglican consensus (insofar as any existed) saw private confession to a priest as optional, to be undertaken when penitents believed it would ease their guilt or distress. By the early nineteenth century, the sacrament had largely fallen into disuse. The Oxford Movement, and especially E. B. Pusey, brought the question of auricular confession

¹² See Gretchen Braun, "A Great Break in the Common Course of Confession': Narrating Loss in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," *ELH*, 78 (2011), 189–212; Joseph A. Boone, "Depolicing *Villette*: Surveillance, Invisibility, and the Female Erotics of 'Heretic Narrative,'" *Novel*, 26 (1992), 20–42; and Emily W. Heady, "'Must I Render an Account?': Genre and Self-Narration in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 36 (2006), 341–64.

back to public attention in the 1830s and 1840s. Pusey and other Tractarian luminaries, including John Henry Newman, began to participate in the sacrament as penitents and confessors.¹³ Objections to auricular confession were manifold and largely propagated by anti-Catholic writers. Theological arguments often posited that allowing a priest to stand as an intermediary for the forgiveness of sins ran the risk of making grace hierarchical, since the ability of every individual to access divine forgiveness of sins with only Christ's intercession (i.e., without a priest) was one of the cornerstones of the Reformation. Consequently, some commenters felt that the reintroduction of auricular confession was a step toward undoing that Reformation and plunging the Anglican Church back into the age of indulgences and abuses of clerical power. Others objected on social grounds, most notably criticizing the potential sexual overtones between a male confessor and his female penitent.¹⁴ As Anna Hartman and Maureen Moran have both argued, confession threatened dominant Victorian divisions of domestic and public space: a penitent speaking of sins to someone outside the home undercut Victorian separate-spheres ideology.¹⁵ The theological and social objections bled into the nationalistic, and detractors figured confession as un-English, a symbol of the creeping influence of Roman Catholicism in the Anglican Church. All of this occurred as Catholic Emancipation, the Oxford Movement, Newman's conversion, and the restoration of the Catholic ecclesiastical hierarchies unsettled the notion of England as a distinctly Anglican nation.

¹³ Newman wrote of hearing penitents at St. Mary's before his conversion; Pusey began hearing confessions in 1838, and later went to confession regularly himself, visiting John Keble for his first confession in 1846 (see Geoffrey Rowell, "The Anglican Tradition: From the Reformation to the Oxford Movement," in *Confession and Absolution*, ed. Martin Dudley and Geoffrey Rowell (London: SPCK, 1990), pp. 108–9, 111–12). Pusey defended the practice in his 1846 Oxford University sermons, published as *The Entire Absolution of the Penitent*. For more, see Rowell, "The Anglican Tradition," pp. 91–119.

¹⁴ See Rowell, "The Anglican Tradition," p. 109.

¹⁵ See Anne Hartman, "Confession as Cultural Form: The Plymouth Inquiry," *Victorian Studies*, 47 (2005), 535–56; and Maureen Moran, *Catholic Sensationalism and Victorian Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 2007).

While critics are accustomed to contextualizing *Villette* amid the waves of anti-Catholic rhetoric that swept England in the 1830s and 1840s, one controversy around auricular confession merits specific reference: the Plymouth Inquiry.¹⁶ In 1852, the year prior to *Villette*'s publication, a Tractarian minister named George Rundle Prynne was accused of misusing the sacrament of confession to ask sexually explicit questions of his female penitents. Pusey and the Bishop of Exeter, Henry Phillpotts, were quick to defend Prynne and eager to uphold the private nature of auricular confession. However, a tribunal was called, and the inquiry moved beyond ecclesiastical structures, eventually involving lawyers who cross-examined some of the penitents and required others to reproduce their confessions in writing. In spite of Pusey's protests, journalists also insisted on reporting the contents of confessions in the periodical press. This investigation, as Hartman has demonstrated, shows how confession became kindling for larger cultural anxieties about public and private space, female sexuality, and national character in 1852 and epitomized many of the pervasive fears of auricular confession in the Anglican church.¹⁷ When *Villette* emerged into this milieu the following year, then, Brontë's suspicion of the confessional must have looked familiar to many readers, who had recently witnessed a highly public debate about the autobiographical narration of one's past in specific relation to the denominational divides between Protestants and (Anglo-)Catholics.

Lucy's own confession reproduces some of these concerns in the novel. This scene tidily articulates denominational difference in Lucy's limited recorded dialogue: at the moment

¹⁶ Brian Wilks speculates on some of the potential Catholic and Anglo-Catholic influences on Brontë while composing *Villette* (see Wilks, "Villette: The Biblical/Theological Impulse," *Brontë Studies*, 37 [2012], 332–38). Michal M. Clarke gives a useful overview of the critical history of reading anti-Catholicism in *Villette* from its publication forward (see Clarke, "Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, Mid-Victorian Anti-Catholicism, and the Turn to Secularism," *ELH*, 78 [2011], 967–89). Rosemary Clark-Beattie also reads the confession scene as a part of Lucy's flirtation with Catholicism and Catholic aesthetics, and productively contextualizes it within the virulent anti-Catholicism of 1840s and 1850s England (see Clark-Beattie, "Fables of Rebellion: Anti-Catholicism and the Structure of *Villette*," *ELH*, 53 [1986], 821–47).

¹⁷ See Hartman, "Confession as Cultural Form," p. 536.

when penitents would traditionally begin their confessions by saying “Bless me father, for I have sinned,” Lucy says instead, “Mon père, je suis Protestante” (*Villette*, p. 226). If one follows the prescribed scripts for auricular confession, then, Lucy implicitly positions her Protestantism in place of her sins as the subject of confession. The conversation that follows between Lucy and Père Silas in the confessional does not record the details of Lucy’s confession, but Lucy admits that “the mere relief of communication in an ear that was human and sentient, yet consecrated—the mere pouring out of some portion of long accumulating, long pent-up pain into a vessel whence it could not be again diffused,” does her good (pp. 226–27). Lucy compounds descriptors of her improved mental state, saying that she hopes to be “consoled,” “soothe[d],” “comfort[ed],” and “solaced,” and that she finds “relief” (pp. 225–27). This sense of consolation indicates that Lucy has been the beneficiary of at least one of the ostensible benefits of auricular confession: a lightened conscience. Beyond simply participating in the sacrament, however, Lucy also repurposes its structures. Here, Lucy-as-narrator effectively co-opts the sacramental seal of confession to obscure even “the mere outline of [her] experience” as she presents them to Père Silas (p. 226). By her own metaphor, Lucy’s narrativized confession cannot “be again diffused” when contained within the vessel of the confessional. Lucy thus ensures that her narrative is doubly obfuscated, both by refusing a direct account and by burying the contents of her disclosure in the confessional. As a narrator, she uses the sacrament of confession to cover over her autobiographical confession, narrating her story in a way that necessarily makes it unrepeatable. She thus replicates and repurposes the structures that the penitents of the Plymouth Inquiry were obligated to break when their confessions were written down and recounted in the press.

Before Lucy leaves the confessional, Père Silas declares to her: “It is my conviction that these impressions under which you are smarting are messengers from God to bring you back to the true church. . . . Protestantism is altogether too dry, cold, prosaic for you” (*Villette*, p. 227). Lucy refutes this assertion repeatedly and emphatically throughout the novel, and never

converts to Catholicism, ultimately preferring what M. Paul calls the “severe charm” of her native religion (p. 713). Even as Lucy rejects Catholicism, however, Catholic sacraments and structures can give us a more specific vocabulary to discuss Lucy’s negotiation of the autobiographical form, especially since this scene, and indeed the novel, are replete with instances of accounting for (or, in Lucy’s case, refusing to account for) one’s past life and experiences. Although she is eager to dismiss Catholicism and persistently considers it heretical, Lucy links her narration to Catholic-coded vocabularies of confession, thus mapping her experience not into the formal conventions of Protestant spiritual autobiography, but onto shared liturgical and sacramental experience.



Lucy’s conversation with Père Silas repurposes the structures of auricular confession for the uses of fictional autobiography. The scene also highlights the tensions between Catholic- and Protestant-coded genres of self-reflection. We can see these generic tensions playing out at other points in *Villette*, especially in Lucy’s metafictional reflections on recounting life stories, both others’ and her own. Lucy’s metaphor of M. Paul’s life as a rosary—individual incidents strung together into coherent biographical narrative—is one such moment. Another comes when Lucy confronts M. Paul and narrates his own story back to him. Lucy tells the same story twice, in two different generic forms. At first, she recounts a dream. In this dream, she says, she sees a priest, a lady, and a servant. The old woman “was become morose—almost malevolent; yet *somebody*, it appears, cared for her in her infirmities—*somebody* forgave her trespasses, hoping to have his trespasses forgiven” (*Villette*, pp. 586–87; emphasis in original). Autobiography here conforms not to the individualistic spiritual autobiography, but to the much older dream vision. Characters are not defined as particular individuals, but as types, as *somebody*. Motive is attributed not to teleological genre, but to the forgiveness of sins as presented in the scriptural and liturgical language of the Lord’s Prayer. While the dream vision is

nonspecific and does not name Père Silas, Madame Walvrens, or M. Paul, M. Paul recognizes his own situation in Lucy's account, admitting that Lucy has "entered into [his] secrets" (p. 587).

At M. Paul's prompting, Lucy recounts the story again, this time as a generic spiritual autobiography, which she titles "The Priest's Pupil." This second tale is openly fallacious. Lucy tells him,

"There was the pupil's youth, the pupil's manhood—his avarice, his ingratitude, his implacability, his inconstancy. . . . so thankless, cold-hearted, unchivalrous, unforgiving!"

". . . he underwent calamities which one did not pity—bore them in a spirit one did not admire—endured wrongs for which one felt no sympathy; finally, took the unchristian revenge of heaping coals of fire on his adversary's head." (*Villette*, pp. 587–88)

Lucy's sarcasm in recounting M. Paul's life of duty and charity involves her as a creative agent in the process of autobiography: the story may not be *true*, but its telling positions her not as diary, amanuensis, or captive audience (as was the case in *Jane Eyre*), but as coauthor. Here Lucy constructs a story that fits into the formal constraints of the Protestant genre of spiritual biography, "indicat[ing] the heads of Père Silas's chapters" (p. 588). In telling a tale that is so openly fictional, however, Lucy recognizes that this genre is not the appropriate vehicle for truth-telling in this case. The story, focused on one individual, neglects the nuanced reasons for M. Paul's profound ties to Justine-Marie's family. The sarcastic spiritual biography and dream vision place M. Paul's story within Lucy's control and signal her creative willingness to move between genres and denominational affiliations as a narrator.

When narrating her own life experiences rather than M. Paul's, Lucy is less willing to offer biographical detail, but she similarly experiments with various generic structures for organizing and interpreting stories. Among the most common anti-Catholic criticisms of auricular confession was that the sacrament had potential to render forgiveness transactional and to

absolve the individual of the need to change actions or behaviors, since future sins could simply be similarly confessed and absolved by penance.¹⁸ But Protestant Lucy approaches her life as a register of debts when she renounces her desire for Dr. John. As she reflects,

It is right to look our life-accounts bravely in the face now and then, and settle them honestly. And he is a poor self-swindler who lies to himself while he reckons the items, and sets down under the head—happiness that which is misery. Call anguish—anguish, and despair—despair; write both down in strong characters with a resolute pen: you will the better pay your debt to Doom. Falsify; insert “privilege” where you should have written “pain;” and see if your mighty creditor will allow the fraud to pass, or accept the coin with which you would cheat him. Offer to the strongest—if the darkest angel of God’s host—water, when he has asked blood—will he take it? Not a whole pale sea for one red drop. I settled another account. (*Villette*, pp. 523–24)

While Lucy is here discussing her suffering rather than the commission of sins as one might in a confessional, the larger context of reckoning with a desire that she now deems misplaced puts this episode in conversation with other moments of confession in *Villette*, especially since Lucy’s biblical allusions to blood and the satisfaction of sins link her accounting to substitutionary atonement.¹⁹ Lucy’s ledger evidences her attempt to account for the experiences of her life within individualistic frameworks. Her brutal honesty figures pain, anguish, and despair as cosmic debts, and her advocacy for an unrelenting realism in “settl[ing] accounts” reflects a Protestant commitment to individual moral responsibility. On closer examination, however, this episode also reveals two

¹⁸ See Thomas Tentler, “Confession,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand, 4 vols. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), I, 401–4.

¹⁹ The web of biblical allusions in this passage is dense and tangled. God as a creditor to whom sinful humanity owes a debt is a common metaphor, and is the basis of the satisfaction theory of atonement first propagated by Anselm of Canterbury. The imagery around “the darkest angel of God’s host” and “blood” alludes to Passover. According to Exodus 12, the Angel of Death takes the first child of any house whose doorposts are not marked with blood, sparing the Israelites who have marked their doors accordingly. The “pale sea for one red drop” reinforces this allusion to the Exodus story, where Egyptians drowned in the Red Sea in pursuit of the Israelites.

problems. The first is metafictional, since any savvy reader of *Villette* will note that Lucy cooks the books in her own autobiography. Lucy's tendency to call things what they are not, or to omit mentions of her own pain and misfortune, gives the lie to her hypothesis that accounting for one's life can truly be accomplished in isolation. This account book in some ways resembles the confessional, where a penitent can list her sins and receive in recompense both shrift and absolution. But, when removed from conversation with another human, Lucy becomes both debtor and accountant.

The second problem introduced by Lucy's metaphor of a ledger of a "debt to Doom" similarly returns us to the novel's larger critiques of Protestant individualism as a method of accounting for a life narrative, since, unlike her earlier visit to the confessional, it brings Lucy no solace. As she settles accounts and declares her intention to be unrelentingly honest in her self-assessment of her feelings for Dr. John, Lucy laments her isolation. She asks herself,

... is there nothing more for me in life—no true home—nothing to be dearer to me than myself, and by its paramount preciousness, to draw from me better things than I care to culture for myself only? Nothing, at whose feet I can willingly lay down the whole burden of human egotism, and gloriously take up the nobler charge of labouring and living for others? (*Villette*, pp. 522–23)

Lucy craves a sense of belonging in a community larger than herself and articulates that craving in a type of confession. While she records this unfulfilled desire as simply one among the many misfortunes of her life in her metaphorical register, the solution is unsatisfying, since, as Zoe Lehmann Imfeld writes, "An act of confession and penance ultimately requires forgiveness in order to be actualized, a step that relies on others."²⁰ We see the relational nature of confession in the alternate name for auricular confession in the Catholic

²⁰ Zoe Lehmann Imfeld, "Thrashing between Exoneration and Excruciation": Creating Narratives in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*," in *Theology and Literature after Postmodernity*, ed. Zoe Lehmann Imfeld, Peter Hampson, and Alison Milbank (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), p. 189.

Church, where it is sometimes referred to as the Sacrament of Reconciliation, implying in its name two parties. Like confession, Lucy's account book allows her to reflect on past experiences; unlike confession, it does not acknowledge the importance of an interlocutor to affect any meaningful mediation. This lack becomes clear in the scene: when Lucy finishes settling her accounts, she speaks aloud a farewell to the absent Dr. John. Close by, M. Paul responds: "Good night, mademoiselle; or, rather, good evening" (*Villette*, p. 525). Lucy speaks "good night" as a terminal farewell to an unrequited love; M. Paul offers it back to her as a greeting, and the beginning of a conversation.

Lucy's attempt to settle her own accounts without an interlocutor finds a counterpoint in her eventual moment of reconciliation with M. Paul. As Moran has argued, *Villette* sets up M. Paul as an alternative, chosen confessor for Lucy—one who, like Père Silas, can listen with compassion but who, unlike the priest, does not have designs on bringing Lucy over to Rome.²¹ Where Père Silas tells Lucy that she was "made for our faith" (*Villette*, p. 227), M. Paul tells her, "Remain a Protestant. My little English Puritan, I love Protestantism in you" (p. 713). This statement of unreduced religious difference, however, is only possible after Lucy and M. Paul talk extensively about the divergences in their respective doctrines. In a moment of confrontation that she imagines might sever their growing intimacy, Lucy declares to M. Paul,

That when I thought of sin and sorrow, of earthly corruption, moral depravity, weighty temporal woe—I could not care for chanting priests or mumming officials; that when the pains of existence and the terrors of dissolution pressed before me—when the mighty hope and measureless doubt of the future arose in view—*then*, even the scientific strain, or the prayer in a language learned and dead, harassed with hindrance a heart which only longed to cry—

"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (p. 611)

To her surprise, M. Paul responds:

²¹ See Moran, *Catholic Sensationalism and Victorian Literature*, pp. 101–2.

“Whatever say priests or controversialists,” murmured M. Emanuel, “God is good, and loves all the sincere. Believe, then, what you can; believe it as you can; one prayer, at least, we have in common; I also cry,—‘O Dieu, sois appaisé envers moi qui suis pécheur!’” (p. 611)

Lucy and Paul share little in this passage, but the common basis for their respective faiths is the recognition and confession of sin as part of a process of self-reflection. The quotation, repeated in English and French, positions both Lucy and M. Paul as the tax collector of Luke 18. In this passage, a Pharisee performs his righteousness ostentatiously and fasts and tithes publicly; the tax collector humbles himself, and Jesus declares him, rather than the Pharisee, justified. The foundation of Lucy and M. Paul’s interdenominational relationship, then, is a shared acknowledgment of their own shortcomings.²²

The final scene of reconciliation between Lucy and M. Paul comes late in the novel, between M. Paul’s revelation of the schoolhouse he has rented for Lucy and his proposal of marriage pending his return from the Caribbean. Like so many of the most weighted scenes in *Villette*, it centers on an instance of reported but not recorded speech. Lucy, normally reserved, now communicates easily: “I spoke. All leaped from my lips. I lacked not words now; fast I narrated; fluent I told my tale; it streamed on my tongue. . . . the whole history, in brief, summoned to his confidence, rushed thither truthful, literal,

²² Clarke reads this scene as indicative of *Villette*’s cosmopolitan conceptualization of a multinational, religiously plural secularism, and ultimately concludes that Brontë seeks to efface the differences between Protestantism and Catholicism in favor of a broader, pluralistic European Christianity that might even expand to encompass non-Christian religions (see Clarke, “Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*, Mid-Victorian Anti-Catholicism, and the Turn to Secularism,” pp. 982–83). While I agree with Clarke’s identification of a call for religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue in *Villette*, collapsing the substantial theological disagreements between Lucy and M. Paul risks eliding the novel’s more ambitious project of considering what it might mean to engage sincerely with religious difference. A more nuanced reading of cosmopolitanism and religious pluralism in *Villette* comes from Daniel Wong, who claims that Lucy’s interactions with M. Paul and Père Silas show how unassimilated religious difference can become the quality that makes cosmopolitan engagement possible, rather than an intractable obstacle to meaningful communication (see Wong, “Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* and the Possibilities of a Postsecular Cosmopolitan Critique,” *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 18 [2013], 1–16).

ardent, bitter" (*Villette*, pp. 708–9). This scene is the novel's counterpoint to Lucy's unrecorded confession. Here, too, Lucy pours forth her experience, desires, and emotions to a Catholic man. Here, too, she receives comfort and solace. But instead of being met with confusion and a desire to efface religious difference by seeking Lucy's conversion, M. Paul responds to Lucy's narrative with recognition and acceptance. As Lucy says, "he forgot his own doctrine, he forsook his own system of repression when I most challenged its exercise. I think I deserved strong reproof; but when have we our deserts? I merited severity; he looked indulgence. . . . I was full of faults; he took them and me all home" (p. 709). As a surrogate confessor, M. Paul circumvents Lucy's expectations of Catholicism, offering "indulgence" not in response to a corrupt bribe, but as a genuine expression of grace. Lucy's narration to M. Paul in this instance again excludes the reader from any firm knowledge of Lucy's past or her interiority. But the climactic narration of her autobiography takes the form not of confessional life writing, but of auricular confession, inaccessible to readers in its details but based on a sacramental structure that dislocates any claims of Protestant individualism.



Villette's most marked moment of generic experimentation is, of course, its ambiguous conclusion. This conclusion reflects Brontë's ongoing interest in the relationship among Catholicism, fictional autobiography, and self-reflection. *Villette's* reimagining of the typical moment of autobiographical "resolution," I argue, solves a problem that Brontë sets out in *Jane Eyre* but fails to resolve under Protestant generic models of spiritual autobiography: the problem of understanding repentance and reconciliation as confined to an individual life narrative. Where *Jane Eyre* relies on an extradiegetic moment of repentance to integrate Rochester's narrative into the generic confines of spiritual autobiography, *Villette* instead turns to the language of eschatology—the theological doctrine of last things—to lay out an autobiographical

conclusion that decenters the Protestant individual as the subject of autobiography.

In *Jane Eyre*, the conclusion of Jane's narrative conforms to the generic structure of the Protestant spiritual autobiography as outlined by Linda Peterson: Jane renounces her idolatry of Rochester, spends three days and nights in the countryside wilderness, and is ultimately returned to a reformed Rochester. As Marianne Thormählen notes, Rochester is unable to make his earlier inset autobiography fit within the confines of a confession narrative because it lacks a moment of repentance.²³ That moment, however, comes after the fire. When Jane returns to Rochester, he reveals his changed position:

"Jane! you think me, I daresay, an irreligious dog: but my heart swells with gratitude to the beneficent God of this earth just now. He sees not as man sees, but far clearer: judges not as man judges, but far more wisely. I did wrong: I would have sullied my innocent flower—breathed guilt on its purity: the Omnipotent snatched it from me. I, in my stiff-necked rebellion, almost cursed the dispensation: instead of bending to the decree, I defied it. Divine justice pursued its course; disasters came thick on me: I was forced to pass through the valley of the shadow of death. *His* chastisements are mighty; and one smote me which has humbled me for ever. You know I was proud of my strength: but what is it now, when I must give it over to foreign guidance, as a child does in its weakness? Of late, Jane—only—only of late—I began to see and acknowledge the hand of God in my doom. I began to experience remorse, repentance; the wish for reconciliation to my Maker. I began sometimes to pray: very brief prayers they were, but very sincere." (*Jane Eyre*, p. 571; emphasis in original)

Rochester's language is replete with biblical allusions and is strikingly incongruous with the Rochester of previous volumes in both topic and tone. If understood in terms of continuity of character, this speech from the blustery Rochester seems odd. If we think formally about the genre of spiritual autobiography, however, it makes more sense: Rochester openly admits his

²³ See Marianne Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), p. 76.

error in trying to deceive Jane—"I did wrong." He names his sins of "stiff-necked rebellion" and pride. He acknowledges "Divine justice" in disasters, seeing them as "chastisements" designed by "the hand of God." And, most significantly, he articulates his "remorse, repentance; the wish for reconciliation to [his] Maker." Unlike almost everything else Rochester has said about his past up to this point, this passage could be lifted from a spiritual autobiography: it is the missing piece of his earlier attempts to narrate his past, and its inclusion in the novel's penultimate chapter gives a belated formal closure to at least one part of Rochester's autobiography.

A careful reader will notice, however, that Rochester's repentance is partial: there is no mention of his attempts to "sully" Jane, nor of his dealings with Bertha or any of his other actions. The novel also signals that Rochester's story is incomplete by denying him the narration of its conclusion. The entirety of Rochester's retrospective plot is presented in his voice, minus the noticeable omission of the fire and Bertha's death. The narration of those events is given over to a character so minor as to be unnamed: the innkeeper at the Rochester Arms. As Kristen Pond has argued, this account of not just the fire, Bertha's death, and Rochester's injuries, but also of Jane's engagement and flight, narrated back to her by a stranger, introduces a sense of estrangement and distance into an autobiographical narrative that has otherwise held readers more or less in lockstep with Jane's first-person perspective.²⁴ When Rochester loses the ability to talk about both Bertha and his past under the guise of fictional identification and the power to keep his marriage secret, he also forfeits control of the narration of his own life story. The omission of a formally satisfying moment of repentance implies that if the problem of accounting for past actions cannot be resolved in Rochester's spiritual autobiography—within the confines of an individual life—we might also question the possibility of the genre successfully resolving the question in its frame narrative.

²⁴ See Kristen Pond, "Becoming a Stranger to Oneself: Estrangement and Narrative Voice in *Jane Eyre*," *Brontë Studies*, 41 (2016), 205–15.

Like *Jane Eyre*, *Villette* allows a space of time to pass extradiegetically. Largely unacknowledged among the different factors we ought to consider in comparing these novels' respective endings, however, is how the infamous final pages of *Villette* lay out an alternative interpretive method grounded in eschatology for constructing the individual subject of the fictional autobiography. Ablow and Pond both read Lucy's refusal to recount M. Paul's death and her own past as a deliberate narrative strategy, unsettling what we as readers think we know about the autobiographical voice and the fictional self behind it.²⁵ These claims can extend even further when we consider their theological implications. The final pages of *Villette* leave us uncertain about the fate of M. Paul. But more than that, they use the language of theology to strip the Protestant fictional autobiography to its barest bones. Lucy leaves readers with type and genre, convention and expectation, rather than substance or claims of narrative truth. Rather than fulfilling the generic mandates of the Protestant autobiography by providing a clear narrative of conversion and individual virtue rewarded, Lucy labels these conventions as explicitly fictional constructs, telling her readers to "pause at once" and to "picture a union and a happy succeeding life" (*Villette*, p. 715). Morally suspect characters like Madame Beck, Père Silas, and Madame Walravens are permitted these endings; Lucy and M. Paul, however, can have them only in "sunny imaginations" (p. 715).

In so refusing the formal closure afforded by Protestant models of autobiography, *Villette's* conclusion reflects the novel's larger interest in structural and ecclesiological understandings of narrative. We can see this focus in Lucy's conflation of M. Paul with Christ. This correlation has been present throughout *Villette*. Paul Emanuel's name indicates the typological connection, since Emanuel is one of the titles given by the angel Gabriel to Jesus and means "God with us." But in the novel's final pages, the association takes on a specifically eschatological tone as Lucy describes M. Paul's return in language

²⁵ See Ablow, "Addressing the Reader," pp. 282, 287; and Kristen Pond, "The Ethics of Silence in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," *SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 57 (2017), 771–97.

reminiscent of the Second Coming of Christ. She quotes Revelations 1:7 twice in as many sentences—"he is coming"—and alludes to Luke 12:39–40, which cautions followers of Jesus to be ready, "for the Son of man cometh at an hour when ye think not." Lisa Wang argues that the eschatological themes in *Villette* constitute a narrative in their own right, and structure Lucy's relationship to loss. As Wang sees it, Lucy's psychological journey comes into clearer relief when her grief and personal development are understood as part of a search for a hidden God. Wang explains:

What is at stake here is not merely the happiness of one woman, but of "thousands"; the "agony" is not that of one mourner, but of an entire world tormented, a universe disordered. And the disorder pictured is not simply a pathetic fallacy, for the novel's use of such apocalyptic imagery here at its very close brings to the most shattering of Lucy's many losses a profound religious significance.²⁶

In describing the (non)return of her fiancé with typological and eschatological language, Lucy depersonalizes her own narrative, making herself one among many awaiting Christ's return, rather than a particular individual or the self-contained subject of autobiography. Lucy's waiting is thus tied to communal confessional practices of collective anticipation—practices that, while not unique to the Catholic Church, are emphasized by Catholicism's strong ecclesiastical and liturgical traditions.

The conclusion of *Villette* posits that the fictional autobiography need not be constrained by the individual narrative of sin, repentance, and forgiveness, and that a proper narrative understanding of past error must be part of something larger

²⁶ Lisa Wang, "Unveiling the Hidden God of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," *Literature and Theology*, 15 (2001), 353. Wang cites George B. Caird, who advocates for a broader definition of eschatology than a strict denotative usage might suggest. Caird writes: "rather than treating eschatology as just one of the doctrines of the creed or of the departments of Christian theology, we should think of eschatological language as capable of being adapted to many purposes. . . . the highly metaphorical and symbolic language of eschatology can be used by transference to describe all sorts of other experiences and situations" (G. B. Caird, *New Testament Theology*, ed. L. D. Hurst [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994], pp. 246–47; quoted in Wang, "Unveiling the Hidden God of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," p. 343).

and more systematic. In *Villette*, Catholic sacraments and liturgical traditions provide creative resources for imagining autobiography beyond the Protestant individual. Brontë never embraces Catholicism, and it is obvious but significant to note that Lucy and M. Paul's interdenominational marriage remains only an imagined happiness. But when we read the conclusion of *Villette* in conjunction with that of *Jane Eyre* and the forced assimilation of Rochester's narrative to the generic constraints of the spiritual autobiography, we can see a tentative movement toward a more theologically capacious model of life writing—a model of truth telling that positions the individual not as the “loose bead” of Lucy's earlier metaphor, but as part of a rosary of collective narratives and religious traditions.

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ABSTRACT

Amy Coté, “‘A Handful of Loose Beads’: Catholicism and the Fictional Autobiography in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*” (pp. 473–494)

This essay considers the influence of confession as a Catholic liturgical sacrament and as a literary genre informing the fictional autobiography in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853). In her earlier novel *Jane Eyre* (1847), Brontë used the tradition of Protestant spiritual autobiography as a literary genre focused on the individual's spiritual development. *Villette*, written as it was at the height of a wave of anti-Catholic sentiment in England in the 1840s and 1850s, has understandably been read as a nationalistic rebuke of Catholicism. This essay complicates this narrative, and shows how Brontë looks to Catholic liturgical traditions, most notably the sacrament of confession, to trouble the generic conventions of the Protestant spiritual autobiography and, by extension, of fictional autobiography.

Keywords: Charlotte Brontë; *Villette*; confession; Catholicism; fictional autobiography