"A Great Break in the Common Course of Confession": Narrating Loss in Charlotte Brontë's Villette

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“A GREAT BREAK IN THE COMMON COURSE OF CONFESSION”: NARRATING LOSS IN CHARLOTTE BRONTË’S VILLETTÉ

BY GRETCHEN BRAUN

“To be homesick, one must have a home, which I have not”: Lucy Snowe’s poignant assertion of her personal dilemma touches Villette’s core artistic problem, as well as Lucy’s social and psychic one.¹ The very extremity of Lucy’s loss—family, property, and, accordingly, social standing—prevents her from describing it in terms that might gain real sympathy within her social milieu. Not only does the intensity of her grief render her inarticulate, but her losses have diminished her social and economic worth almost to the point of invisibility. Any effort she might make to communicate her experience and gain empathy is severely compromised by her position as a penniless, redundant woman, at the bare edge of (though not entirely excluded from) social intelligibility and empathetic range. We find, emerging from a culture enthralled with, and perhaps in thrall to, domesticity, a novel whose female protagonist and narrator no longer has a family as the action of the story begins, who lacks the means, in terms of inheritance, to establish a new family through marriage, and who cannot even lay claim to the most basic requirement for security, namely, a stable habitation. Villette is, at its elusive center, a narrative of psychic and social placelessness and dislocation. Readers of Victorian novels are well acquainted with orphans seeking to make their way in the world, with young ladies looking to marry, and even with characters who unite these two categories in one protagonist. What makes Lucy’s story so different from those of literary peers like Elizabeth Gaskell’s Margaret in North and South, Charles Dickens’s Oliver Twist and David Copperfield, and Charlotte Brontë’s own earlier Jane Eyre is that the protagonist remains friendless and obscure at the novel’s close. Villette provides no validating closure to the attention it has lavished on Lucy Snowe for nearly six hundred pages, at least not in the terms novel-readers have learned to expect: no wedding, no substantial inheritance, no significant public achievement. As I observed above, in Villette, Lucy’s social and psychic dilemma is one and the same with Charlotte Brontë’s artistic one. How can a novelist construct a mean-
 meaningful narrative for a life story that falls outside the socially accepted boundaries of a story worth telling?

The text of *Villette* provides multiple clues that suggest the productiveness of reading both its narrative structure and its narrator-protagonist’s social and psychic dilemma through the structures of traumatic experience as theorized by scholars such as Cathy Caruth and Ann Cvetkovich. However, to this point, no critic has argued, as I propose to do, that a complex understanding of trauma can significantly explain *Villette*’s narrative structure as well as its subject matter. I want to stress that I do not propose to read back, or identify, symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as understood by clinicians today in Brontë’s protagonist or the author herself. Rather, I seek to employ modern theories of narrative structure to delineate how Lucy’s literally unspeakable loss defines the plot’s trajectory, requiring a different kind of storytelling that can articulate the psychic experiences of a socially marginalized subjectivity. I suggest that the narrative structures attendant on traumatic experience provide a model for understanding Lucy Snowe’s silences, repetitions, and obfuscations in a way that moves past the longstanding critical dichotomy that casts them as either an indication of oppression or a strategy for empowerment and instead explores how they both represent and enact a model of communication that seeks to render accessible experiences and perspectives generally considered “nonnarratable” in both Brontë’s contemporary culture and the traditional realist novel.

I. TRAUMA NARRATIVE AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY REALIST FICTION

We need to begin by defining trauma as a psychic, social, and narrative phenomenon and by distinguishing it from the Freudian concept of unassimilated loss, or melancholia. While there is not space here to consider all the possible distinctions between trauma and melancholia, the key differences, for the purposes of my analysis, are these. First, while melancholia is a refusal or inability to acknowledge the loss of a loved object, traumatic experience entails unwilled returns of the affects and/or physical sensations of loss or threat, which constitute unsuccessful but persistent attempts to comprehend it. Thus while melancholia tends to manifest itself in psychic stasis, traumatic returns produce psychic instability and destabilizing slippages. Further, traumatic experience does not necessarily involve the loss of a loved object outside the self. A near-death experience in war, natural disaster, or accident—in which the self is under direct threat of annihilation—is as likely, indeed,
probably more likely, to be traumatogenic as the death of a loved one. Psychic trauma is preeminently understood as a threat to the self so potentially damaging that the consciousness cannot comprehend it as it occurs and must wrestle with it belatedly. As previously noted, my understanding of trauma as a narrative phenomenon (related to, but not identical with, psychic trauma as a clinical phenomenon) has been most significantly influenced by the work of Cathy Caruth and of Ann Cvetkovich. Caruth locates trauma not in the nature of an event, but in the pattern of its reception, “the way its unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on.”4 Crucial to Caruth’s conceptualization of trauma is the idea that these unwilled repetitions can make accessible “a reality or a truth that is not otherwise available.”5 Cvetkovich, influenced by Caruth’s work but seeking to restore the historical specificity of traumatic experience, treats trauma “as a social and cultural discourse that emerges in response to the demands of grappling with the psychic consequences of historical events.”6 Cvetkovich shifts the study of traumatic experience away from the catastrophic (foregrounded by Caruth, whose work is heavily influenced by Holocaust studies) and toward the everyday. She moves, that is, beyond the clinical, to consider “how shock and injury are made meaningful, paradigmatic even, within cultural experience.”7 Cvetkovich’s historicized approach to psychic experience stresses that “trauma is affectively negotiated in culturally specific ways” and that “responses to trauma are often constrained by (normalizing) demands for appropriate affects.”8 Her belief that “access to institutions or cultural formations that make affective expression public is a class privilege” is particularly germane to my discussion of Lucy Snowe’s socially marginalized position as a penniless redundant woman in Victorian culture.9 For the purposes of my argument here, I define trauma as an overwhelming threat to bodily integrity and/or to the coherent, socially viable selfhood that enables psychic and cultural agency. I suggest that it produces variable but definable psychic, narrative, and cultural patterns resulting from the tension between the desire to tell and the desire to conceal the threat or psychic wound. My understanding of psychic trauma is further influenced by Laura Brown’s crucial division between the catastrophic (overwhelming and physically life-threatening events such as war, genocide, or natural disaster) and the insidious (everyday threats to or assaults upon the self-worth and/or safety of nondominant groups, as defined by categories such as socioeconomic class, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation).10

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In Lucy Snowe’s case, there is both catastrophic trauma—the un-named disasters that result in the death of her entire family and her impoverishment—and insidious trauma, the subsequent daily strain faced by a fortuneless single woman attempting to keep body and mind together in a society that provides her few social or professional opportunities. While many Victorian plots are driven by events that might justly be termed traumatic in modern parlance, the majority of these do not, like Villette, employ a narrative structure shaped by trauma. I treat the contradictory directives of Victorian femininity as a threat to formation of a coherent, socially accepted female self and thus a potential cause of insidious trauma. I suggest that Lucy’s youthful experience of catastrophic trauma, which produces a narrative characterized by repetitions and evasions, allows Brontë to foreground the subtle daily suffering of the single woman without fortune. By investing narrative control in a traumatized consciousness, Brontë achieves a shift in perspective that allows her to redefine whose voices and stories matter in the mainstream novel and to address, through the indirect and circuitous route of trauma narrative, concerns that might be deemed either too trivial or too inflammatory if tackled directly, such as women’s legal and cultural handicaps in the labor market and the related plight of redundant women.

Implicit in my reading of Villette is a broader claim: that trauma theory, prominent in literary and cultural criticism in the 1990s, and perceived by some to have exhausted its explanatory potential, still has much work to do. Namely, as I argue, it provides a uniquely valuable critical lens through which to view the Victorian realist novel, a genre that trauma studies to date has largely neglected. Understandably, trauma studies most often focuses on literary and cultural texts with concrete links to extreme catastrophic loss and/or to symptomology typical of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, such as slave narratives, testimonies from the Holocaust and other experiences of genocide, stories of incest, and, recently, cultural responses to 9/11. Without denying the validity and importance of these applications, I seek to draw out those aspects of trauma theory that render it an equally apt framework to explore the complex cultural negotiations and aesthetic developments of a genre concerned, by contrast, not with extremes of human experience but instead with faithful rendition of the quotidian. Careful examination of the Victorian realist novel through the critical lens of trauma not only enables a fresh view of the genre’s narrative strategies, but further, it encourages a productive rethinking of some of the existing assumptions of trauma theory.
Trauma theory has several key points of connection with the development of nineteenth-century realist fiction. First, any theory of trauma—clinical no less than literary-critical—is inherently both a theory of narrative and a theory of social relations. Thus trauma theory knits together two crucial axes of development within the nineteenth-century realist novel: formal innovation and increasing social consciousness. Further, trauma theory, with its focus on uneasy yet inevitable intersections between inside and outside and between subject and object, can help elucidate the blurring of subject and object position that inheres in the process of novel reading. Peter Brooks has located the uniqueness of realist art and literature in “its desire to be maximally reproductive of the world it is modeling for play purposes.” Accepting this premise, I would suggest that the reading of realist fiction, which encourages strong identification with at least one fictional human consciousness represented in the discourse, is characterized by a productive tension between an imaginative sympathy with the character’s subject position (sharing his or her viewpoint) and an irrefutable awareness of his or her status as object (that very person with whom you sympathize was created to entertain you and will vanish when his or her utility has run its course). In addition to its relevance to this uncomfortable alliance between empathy and objectification, trauma theory, through its concern with psychic injury and narration of loss, calls attention to the destabilization, even the violence, inherent in any narrative. It obliges us to think about the consequences of that violence and the extent to which, by making ourselves witnesses to violence and injury, we place ourselves within their moral universe: in short, trauma theory makes us consider the ethics of narration.

Victorian novelists evince consciousness of this conundrum. The Victorian realist novel, at once committed to believable characters and attuned to their status as disposable entertainment, allows trauma studies a unique opportunity to consider the ethical dilemma of the auditor of a tale of suffering, whose curiosity about the story’s progress is inevitably at odds with his or her sympathy for the individual whose pain produced that intriguing narrative. William Makepeace Thackeray, whose narration repeatedly underscores the paradoxical fictionality and humanity of literary characters, foregrounds the problem when he shares with his readers the narrator’s inside knowledge that Becky Sharp and Rawdon Crawley, had they been wise enough to ask Miss Crawley’s forgiveness for their precipitate elopement, would have been spared the financial woes that fuel most of their subsequent misadventures. The narrator offers the following rationale for Becky and Rawdon’s
missed opportunity: “But that good chance was denied to the young couple, doubtless in order that this story might be written, in which numbers of their wonderful adventures are narrated—adventures which could never have occurred to them if they had been housed and sheltered under the comfortable uninteresting forgiveness of Miss Crawley.” Thackeray here highlights the fact that as readers of realist fiction, we are awkwardly poised between our sympathetic connection to a convincingly drawn human consciousness and our need for that consciousness to suffer destabilization, even loss, so that narration can proceed; otherwise, we would have no story to enjoy.

It is certainly not my intention to imply that all narrative is trauma narrative. My claim for the broad relevance of trauma theory to mainstream narrative theory rests not upon an attempt to broaden the definition of the traumatic but rather on the contention that we can learn much about the way narrative functions, both formally and culturally, from the study of how and why, as in the face of traumatic experience, it breaks down. Moreover, by obliging us to think through both the inherent violence of storytelling and the imperatives toward and limits to communication of subjective experience, trauma theory can help elucidate some of the key conflicts at the heart of the thematic and formal investment in social representation characteristic of nineteenth-century realist fiction. In turn, as I hope to demonstrate in my analysis of Villette, nineteenth-century realist fiction can help us parse the complex ethical position of the auditor or reader of the story of loss: the interrelation of sympathy for the sufferer, curiosity about her story, and desire to contain the disruption that her story of loss entails.

II. LUCY’S SILENCE: TRAUMA AS BOTH CONTENT AND FORM

Critical attention to the tension between withholding and disclosure in Villette generally casts Lucy’s reticence and social invisibility as either symptoms of her oppression, clandestine means of empowerment, or some fusion of the two. Mary Jacobus, in her influential reading, recognizes both the external socioeconomic factors that engender this pose and its strategic uses, calling Lucy’s invisibility both “a calculated deception—a blank screen onto which others project their view of her” and “an aspect of her oppression.” Feminist readings have focused on the relation of Lucy’s silence to her socioeconomic oppression and resultant stifled emotions. Other critics have shifted attention from the pain of Lucy’s self-suppression to its affective, social, or
narrative value. Whether positing Lucy’s self-suppression as a sign of social oppression or a means to power, critics have tended to treat the cause of her reticence as either self-evident or unfathomable. The very plausibility of competing arguments regarding the import of Lucy’s stifled desires and narrative withholding suggests the novel’s characteristic ambivalence, and points to the value of considering silence, either voluntary or socially mandated, not only as an indication of disempowerment or a strategy for the exercise of power, but also, as Foucault has proposed, a part of the discourse, rather than the marker of its limit.

Clearly, both Lucy’s inability or unwillingness to assert herself and her withholding and misdirection as narrator are indicative of her socioeconomic subjugation as well as, ironically, of her use of that position as a means of control. Yet Lucy’s pattern of reticence, in both story and discourse, is not only uniquely motivated, but also thematically and formally crucial to the novel. Her silences coalesce around feelings of loss: affective and social bonds severed by death or rejection or her related renunciation of developing bonds. Certainly Lucy derives some satisfaction from this behavior, but her taste for it was formed through an experience of profound loss and alienation at a young age. Lucy’s strategic withholding of speech and emotion, as both protagonist and narrator, is itself a mode of communication that employs negation to turn traditional narrative and social forms back on themselves. Her youthful experience of loss coupled with its socioeconomic consequences makes her particularly qualified to tell a story about the possibilities and limits of contact between self and other, between psychic reality and social and material reality.

It is, I suggest, the traumatic nature of the experience and related affective response that Lucy withholds which renders so powerful her alternating impulses to divulge and conceal. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar observe that “the horror of her life, indeed, is the horror of repetition,” a painful “fragmentation within” that returns unbidden. The dynamics of trauma narrative provide an insight into the logic of Lucy’s repetitions, both their agonizing psychic effects and their confusing and unsettling narrative ones. A comparison with Jane Eyre is helpful in illustrating how an originary trauma dictates not only the events, but also the aesthetic form, of Villette. Far more conventional in structure, Jane Eyre knits together the marriage plot and the religious quest, uniting (however uneasily) the earthly and the spiritual reward. We follow Jane’s progress through a metaphorically charged landscape as she learns to interpret the moral signs and negotiate
the social challenges and is finally rewarded with felicitous marriage to a chosen suitor. Jane, like Lucy, has lost her family and fortune, fallen into the care of distant relations, and been obliged to earn her own way through the world without beauty or connections to aid her. Yet unlike Lucy, Jane never conceals the details of her misfortunes, relating her youthful trials in an open, self-assessing manner, always keeping the reader's focus on her own actions and reactions. Even when reporting instances when she supposedly loses mental control in a transport of fury or spiritual fervor or a swoon of illness, Jane, as a narrator, is precise and matter-of-fact with regard to her own conduct. The disordered consciousness in the novel, Bertha Mason, is never a subject in her own right, only the object of other people's anxieties and hostilities. Her role, as a character, is wholly utilitarian; she is an obstacle, both psychic and practical, that must be overcome. At the climactic moment, she is killed off to facilitate the upward arc of Jane's personal and spiritual development.

*Villette*, in contrast, places the disordered consciousness in the narrator's role. In this novel the “madwoman” who lingers in the attic is not only shaping the way we see her, but the way we see other characters, and the way the story is told. As with the previous novel, the narrator/protagonist's quest is complicated by a prior loss. But whereas *Jane Eyre* traces a steady, mythologized progression of personal development from the journey's beginning at Gateshead to the reunion with long lost family at Marsh End, *Villette*'s plot, along with Lucy's emotions and fortunes, oscillates and repeats, always circling back to the earlier tragedy whose details the narrator will not share. It draws upon the established narrative forms of the marriage plot, wherein the process of a young lady's education closes with the mature choice of marriage to a chosen suitor, and the male ambition plot, wherein the worthy but penniless young man establishes himself as a gentleman through ingenuity and diligence. But it disappoints the reader who expects the steady progression and satisfying closure common to these models. This sense of uncertainty depends as much on the evasive, circular, and at times seemingly exaggerated narration as it does on the events of the story themselves. The instability of Lucy's consciousness renders her mundane surroundings fantastical: while Jane relates Gothic horrors in a steady tone and domesticates her eerie dreams with folklore interpretations, in Lucy's narration it can be difficult to pinpoint where the real events end and the symbolic hallucinations begin. (Her waking vision of the dormitory beds as haunting “spectres” in the midst of a bout of depression and her opium-addled perceptions of the
fête in the public park are prime examples [V, 232]. Further, the manipulative and evasive Lucy reports and critiques the actions and feelings of others to convey her own history and desires (the opening interlude with Polly at Bretton, for instance), while concealing from both the reader and the other characters the source of the grief that triggers her periodic outbursts and fuels her latent hostility. The resulting narrative is, to borrow a phrase Paul Emmanuel applies to Lucy herself, “at once mournful and mutinous” (V, 310).

The central narrative problem of Villette lies in Lucy’s inability to square psychic experience with material reality. The disjunction between her powerful desires and emotions and her socially limited means to act upon or express them provides narrative tension even as it produces a seemingly wandering, circular, and actionless plot. The protagonist/narrator’s marked divide between psychic and social/material realms originates in her mysterious bereavement, which, prior to the novel’s main action, separates her forever from what has been her only source of both affection and social standing, her family, leaving her active and ardent mind, devoid of social outlets, to turn on itself.

Early in the novel, contrasting her intense and painful emotional life with her mundane social and material one, Lucy explains that she “seemed to hold two lives—the life of thought, and that of reality” (V, 140). Yet the commencement of her teaching duties at Madame Beck’s pensionnat requires Lucy to focus her mental powers on an immediate interpersonal goal. She finds that the challenge of maintaining order, respect, and productivity in daily and very public interactions with students and colleagues obliges her to bring the psychic and the social realms into contact to an extent her previous employment as an invalid’s companion did not. As Lucy masters French and her professional life develops, she grows more eager for a social connection that would allow her not only selectively to draw upon her psychic life, but to validate it fully.

Yet her interactions with students and fellow teachers do not alleviate Lucy’s core dilemma of inability to articulate her loss. When during a school vacation she finds herself alone and without an intellectually challenging task set before her, she concedes to the reader that “My spirits had been gradually sinking; now that the prop of employment was withdrawn, they went down fast” (V, 228). Lucy’s collapse is triggered not simply by an episode of relative solitude and intellectual dormancy—both circumstances to which she has been long accustomed—but by the combination of those circumstances and the knowledge that all the teachers and students with whom she has shared her new life in

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Villette have a home to return to, whereas she has none. As she falls ill, beset by hallucinatory visions and an excruciating nightmare about the dead, the Protestant Lucy finally, without any deliberate plan that she shares with the reader, seeks relief in a Catholic confessional. Thus commences the process by which Lucy attempts to bring psychic reality into meaningful relation with social and material reality through communication with a sympathetic interlocutor. While Lucy herself does not initially understand what she is trying to do, only that the internal pressure of her psychic life has become unbearable, Brontë structures the novel around the vacillating movement this impulse entails. The plot traces Lucy’s halting yet persistent attempts to form a relationship of affective reciprocity, attempts which correlate not only with a desire to articulate and move beyond her painful history, but also with her efforts to forge a social identity that commands respect and enables active participation in society.

At this juncture it is necessary to outline in more depth what witnessing entails. Kelly Oliver, drawing on Shoshanna Felman and Dori Laub’s work on Holocaust testimony and Mae Gwendolyn Henderson’s analysis of the black female literary tradition, develops a model of witnessing—an interaction with the other that is defined by responsibility and “response-ability” rather than subordination—as the means by which agency can be recuperated for victims of oppression and domination, who have undergone the traumatic experience of extreme objectification.22 Oliver regards this type of interpersonal interaction as crucial to establishing individual agency, asserting that, “Having a sense of oneself as a subject and an agent requires that the structure of witnessing as the possibility of address and response has been set up in dialogic relations with others.”23 However, while it is key to the renewal of agency following traumatic oppression, witnessing is also problematic. Paradoxically, according to Oliver, even as the performance of giving testimony, of speaking and being heard, affirms the victim as a subject, the content of that testimony, which is the story of his or her oppression, reinscribes the victim’s objectification, producing pain and shame.24 Further, since being an object implies being inarticulate, there are inherent difficulties in describing the process of objectification from the victim’s point of view.25 And for those victims who are members of groups oppressed and excluded by the dominant culture, there is the additional problem of credibility; their testimony is always considered suspect.26 Nonetheless, Oliver insists that, “Bearing witness works-through the trauma of objectification by reinstituting subjective agency as the ability to respond or address oneself.”27 What is at stake
here is not just the possibility of telling a story of traumatic experience, or even of asserting one’s needs and opinions, but the very capacity to maintain and validate one’s own perspective and thus a coherent individual identity.

While there is no direct link between Lucy’s catastrophic trauma (loss of family and fortune) and any systemic or governmental form of oppression, the financially, socially, and professionally limited position of a single woman without fortune in the Victorian era certainly worsens her experience of grief and poverty and contributes to what we might call the insidious trauma that afflicts her as she tries to make her way in a world not friendly to redundant women. Isolated by her anomalous social status, Lucy seems gradually to intuit that forging a meaningful psychic bond with another is a crucial step toward recouping her sense of coherent self and agency. Villette’s central plot follows Lucy’s cautious advances toward and painful reverses from men who might serve as her witness and help bridge the psychic and social divide, with the more conventional love stories of the rivals Ginevra and Paulina, neither of whom sees herself as Lucy’s rival, braided in for comparison as auxiliary plots. One cannot overstate the significance of the way these bright beauties are made foils to plain, poor Lucy, whereas Lucy herself is the center of the novelist’s attention and the reader’s emotional investments although not the story’s imagined world. A few comparisons will intensify our shock at this reversal: it would be as if Emma exists to deepen our understanding of Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax, or Lizzie Bennet to heighten the pathos of Charlotte Lucas. By shifting the focus of narration from a search for a husband to a search for a witness, Brontë allows a woman not distinguished by wealth, beauty, illustrious heritage, or sparkling wit to make her perspective as central in art as it is peripheral in society. Thus, the novel is Lucy’s story of her attempts to tell her story, and her discovery that it is far easier to tell a conventional story of romance, like Ginevra’s or Paulina’s, than to share an experience of loss, such as her own. There are two layers to Lucy’s task of witnessing: her actions and words as a character within her own narrative, seeking an empathetic connection, and her choices as a narrator, attempting to convey her experience to readers.

It is worth considering at length why Lucy repeatedly seeks a male interlocutor, when it might seem a woman would better understand the nuances of her social position and psychic experience. Sharon Marcus posits female friendship as central to the construction of normative Victorian femininity and suggests that, by cultivating traits such as self-
effacement, altruism, and sweetness, it reinforced qualities valued in wives even as it provided women a relationship in which they could assert agency, compete, and show affection in ways they could not around men. Noting the dismay with which contemporary reviewers received Lucy Snowe’s hostility toward other women, Marcus further suggests that Lucy’s inability to form female friendships contributes to her failure to marry, because in Victorian novels, bonds of friendship with women frequently help female protagonists develop romantic relationships with men. Indeed, in striking contrast with Jane Eyre, who learns the self-regulation and capacity for affection she needs for marriage through a series of formative female friendships, Lucy Snowe expresses varying degrees of scorn for and mistrust of all her female peers.

Yet the difference lies not entirely in Lucy’s perception. In the later novel, Brontë has constructed a world devoid of any nurturing and considerate Bessie, Helen Burns, Miss Temple, or Rivers sisters. Lucy’s stay with Miss Marchmont sets up the pattern, which repeats throughout Villette, wherein women are so absorbed in their own emotional lives and/or socioeconomic interests that they are either unable to perceive or unwilling to respond sympathetically to one another’s troubles. Madame Beck, of course, takes note of Lucy’s character and emotional state in a purely instrumental way, to determine how useful or hazardous Lucy might be to her own plans. Even Lucy’s apparent friends among the novel’s female characters display insensitivity to her sadness and the awkwardness of her social position that is at times startling. Both Ginevra and Paulina revel in their romantic good fortune—which is clearly the result of their socioeconomic status—in their confidential conversations with this lonely woman who has lost her fortune and chances of a respectable marriage. The only female character we meet whose position is analogous to Lucy’s, the genteel yet fortuneless Zélie St Pierre, is her aggressive competitor for Paul’s attention. And of course, Lucy herself demonstrates little sympathy for other women and girls, not only behaving with cold reserve or sardonic, even caustic verbal aggression toward them much of the time, but also manipulating their lives in her narration to communicate her own emotional state to the reader. All female interactions in Villette are governed by pragmatic considerations: how is she useful to me, and how is she a threat? Repudiating the dominant ethos of female amity, the novel suggests that under its contemporary socioeconomic system, where women must barter looks and fortune for emotional as well as financial security, a thinking woman cannot truly view her
peers as other than rivals, and thus cannot share with them a genuinely disinterested, respectful sympathy. Given this context, it is not surprising that Villette's one attempt at witnessing between women goes badly awry.

The episode in which the crippled spinster Miss Marchmont tells Lucy of the tragic romance that arrested her youthful potential establishes both the attraction and the hazard of an attempt to unburden the injured psyche. One evening Lucy, who is serving as Miss Marchmont's paid companion, notices her employer is feeling strangely revived. Miss Marchmont then makes Lucy the passive confidant of her youthful hopes, the tragedy that destroyed them, and her reckoning with God's inscrutable ways. Feeling improved in health and spirits, Miss Marchmont goes to bed resolving to be a better woman to prepare for a celestial reunion with her saintly dead lover, and implying that one of her good deeds will be writing the penniless Lucy into her will. Then Miss Marchmont dies. Were it not for this dénouement, Miss Marchmont's recounting of her youthful trauma and its impact on her life and character would seem to demonstrate only the positive, healing power of witnessing. Yet in depicting both its vivid yet momentary relief, and its mortal consequences—Lucy implies that Miss Marchmont's heightened awareness and excitement are linked to the fit that kills her—Brontë demonstrates the paradox of witnessing, acknowledging both its urgency and its potential danger. Reliving her brief happy courtship produces an evanescent euphoria for Miss Marchmont, but reliving the horror of seeing her lover mortally wounded and reflecting on the intervening years of meaningless pain produces a more substantial and damaging self-knowledge, wherein Miss Marchmont reflects on her failure to turn her personal pain to any productive public or spiritual end. Witnessing is indeed transformative, but that self-transformation can end in total self-negation. Miss Marchmont's fragile identity cracks under the weight of self-examination and self-assertion, as emblematized in the final breakdown of her worn body. And Lucy, inheritor of this experience, is left simultaneously tempted by the relief, albeit temporary, such unburdening seems to provide, and repelled by its potential link to self-annihilation. Even as she moves toward dialogue and away from solipsism, Lucy's ambivalence about affective connections is persistently registered in her tendency to maintain close relationships characterized by either overt combativeness within the story (as with Paul and Ginevra) or covert sarcasm within the discourse (as with Graham and with Paulina whom she at one point likens to a lapdog). She prefers a few intimate friends to a
crowd of casual companions, but the more intense the bond, the more she maintains a sort of affective buffer through her own rancor.

In spite her ambivalence about sharing her story of loss, as Lucy's self-enforced dividing line between the psychic and social begins to blur, she, as she saw Miss Marchmont do, seeks external social validation for her internal affective life. It is crucially significant that the first two potential witnesses to whom Lucy turns, but whom she will finally reject as unsuitable, are a priest and a doctor, who in Foucault's understanding of confession serve as ministers of surveillance and control. As Cvetkovich suggests, "The audience for the story is crucial to its effects, and some stories serve the interests of their listeners at the expense of the teller." As I proceed through analysis of the three potential witnesses whom Lucy seeks in succession, I will consider how the expectations and cultural or personal investments of each man influence both the kind of story Lucy can tell and her affective response to sharing some portion of her traumatic experience.

Lucy's confession to the priest, whom she later identifies as Père Silas, Paul's old tutor, is the first attempt to speak the truth of her experience that she relates to the reader. Both the hierarchical, formalized nature of the confession ritual and Lucy's double sense of her own foreignness in this environment, and of the priest's unfamiliarity with her perspective, hinder the development of any empathetic rapport. As I have already discussed, Lucy's confession to the priest is precipitated by her isolation and resultant deep depression when the exodus of teachers and students returning to their families over a long vacation leaves her all but alone in the pensionnat, plunging her back into memories of what she has lost and disrupting her fragile psychic balance. Given her resolute Protestantism and open scorn for the Catholic church, her willingness to seek sympathetic dialogue in a priest's confessional indicates the extremity of her desperation. Yet readers expecting a climactic revelation will be disappointed; the priest solves nothing, and the reader learns little.

The first point to consider is that Lucy's confession is actually spoken in French, a language in which she never feels comfortable with her powers of articulation. Thus, in addition to the obstacles to communication inherent in the relation of traumatic experience, there is an added layer of difficulty. Her confession to the priest is related as follows:

I said, I was perishing for a word of advice or an accent of comfort. I had been living for some weeks quite alone; I had been ill; I had a
pressure of affliction on my mind of which it would hardly any longer endure the weight.

“Was it a sin, a crime?” he inquired, somewhat startled.
I reassured him on this point, and, as well as I could, I showed him the mere outline of my experience.

He looked thoughtful, surprised, puzzled. “You take me unawares,” said he. “I have not had such a case as yours before: ordinarily we know our routine and are prepared, but this makes a great break in the common course of confession. I am hardly furnished with counsel fitting the circumstances.” (V, 233–234)

The diction that opens Lucy’s confession—“perishing for”—suggests starvation, want of emotional nourishment. However, these words, like the rest of what Lucy relates that she spoke to the priest in the course of her confession, are not in quotation marks, whereas his responses are. In her narration of the event, Lucy paraphrases her actual words spoken at the time. What the reader receives not only contains gaping factual omissions but also is offered in a mediated form. In this mediated or diluted manner, Lucy relates to the reader those brief sections of her confession that address what precipitated her current crisis and how it makes her feel, but not the nature and certainly not the details of her grief, loss, or transgression. Even her reporting of her response to the priest’s question of whether the source of her pain is a crime or a sin—“I reassured him on this point”—does not conclusively tell the reader whether she answered in the positive or the negative, though it does suggest the latter. Lucy employs the priest’s responses—given in quotation marks to signal exactitude—to manipulate the reader’s understanding. On a concrete level, the priest’s surprise demonstrates that the circumstances of Lucy’s pain are unique, as one can assume that an elderly priest has heard a wide range of human experience and spiritual trouble narrated to him in the confessional. One suspects, based on her reference to memories of the “well-loved dead” as she begins her spiral into depression (V, 231), that the missing story within the narrative concerns the tragedy of Lucy’s early life, and perhaps also some intimation of her hopeless infatuation with Dr. John. There is, however, no conclusive evidence in the text. Such omissions serve to deepen mystery. But beyond establishing the seriousness of her plight and building readerly anticipation for a revelation she ultimately never makes, what does Lucy’s rhetorical obfuscation in the above-quoted passage accomplish? Why might Lucy seek out a priest to whom to confess her innermost pain and then decline to share her confession with the reader?
Perhaps an answer can be found in the complex nature of traumatic experience. Explaining the resistance of survivors who hesitate to speak of the traumatic event, Caruth states, “beyond the loss of precision, there is another, more profound, disappearance: the loss, precisely, of the event’s essential incomprehensibility, the force of its affront to understanding.” By reducing the ethically and emotionally obscene event—the event so totally unacceptable that it cannot be assimilated—to a comprehensible narrative, the survivor feels he or she is conceding something, giving in to the trauma. Taken in this light, Lucy’s narrative evasion can be seen not as unnecessary coyness, but as the manifestation of unbearable psychic pain. Moreover, the priest, however sympathetic, must necessarily fail as a witness for trauma because he cannot allow himself to be changed by Lucy’s testimony; it is his professional and spiritual duty to convert her to his worldview, not to validate and empathize with hers. He can only comprehend the moral valence of her dilemma, and if her problem is no crime or sin, his forgiveness cannot help her. Lucy’s confession to the priest ultimately has no healing power—a fact Brontë underlines by having her heroine collapse with physical illness shortly after leaving the church. She has rehearsed the story of her personal loss and concomitant social marginalization in a context that can only lead to institutional judgment, not social validation. Having experienced the renewed pain of this failed attempt at relief, Lucy avoids repeating the failure by not relating it to the reader, and thus indicates the total unacceptability of her suffering.

At first glance, Dr. John Graham Bretton seems a more promising potential witness for Lucy than does the priest. Their shared youthful history and shared culture ensure she will experience none of the formality and distrust inherent to any attempt this fiercely Protestant Englishwoman might make to speak her truth in a foreign Catholic confessional. Further, due to family connections, Graham must surely already know at least the outline of Lucy’s experience of loss, which should smooth the way for their communication. In a limited way and for brief periods, Graham’s company does bring relief from her loneliness. Certainly Lucy longs for communication with Graham and cherishes the breezy visits and letters that, however sparsely, nourish her affectively “famished” consciousness, so long deprived of substantive sympathy (V, 324). Nonetheless, she is canny enough to discern that this favorite son of fortune diffuses his good nature as unthinkingly “as the ripe fruit rewards with sweetness the rifling bee” (V, 452). Graham lacks both the motive and the requisite humility to enter into the feel-
ings of one less advantaged than himself. His response to Lucy’s sorrow, most significantly when he is summoned to attend her collapse at the pensionnat following a sighting of the ghostly nun, is to listen, assess, and advise—sympathetically, but as a superior immune to or removed from the pressures that afflict the patient and kinswoman. Lucy insists that in this instance Graham’s conduct in soothing her fears is nothing short of “heroic” (V, 327). Yet the similes she employs to convey its effect reveal her consciousness that his kindness can be only of a passive sort, careless of its object and involving no reciprocity. She claims that he was “as good to me as the well is to the parched wayfarer—as the sun to the shivering jay-bird” (V, 327). As such language shows, there is an inherent emotional inequality to the relationship—it is a crucial life-source to Lucy, yet a passive, casual, unsought contact for Graham. The individual who can serve as witness for the trauma victim must be willing to be transformed by her testimony, and must be receptive and perceptive enough to help the victim recuperate an image of herself as an active agent while still acknowledging the severity of the psychic wound that has damaged her sense of agency. Graham is so carelessly unperceptive that he fails to notice that the woman he fondly dismisses as “quiet Lucy Snowe,” whom he makes the audience of his love conquests and seeks to employ as a go-between, has been hopelessly smitten with him since childhood (V, 403). However much she wishes it to be otherwise, Lucy knows better than to share more intelligence of her suffering with Graham than he, in his professional capacity, requests in order to evaluate and treat her. As a provider of temporary relief, Graham is far more helpful than the priest; yet, again, the impossibility of affective reciprocity prevents the relationship from meeting Lucy’s need. For Lucy, the communication and the need must go both ways.

Paul has two key points of connection with Lucy’s experience: he has suffered a tragic loss, and he is her professional colleague. Yet unlike the women with whom she shares similar connections, he is not her direct competitor. Because a male professor and a female teacher are neither considered to be on the same intellectual level nor eligible for the same professional positions, Lucy and Paul are never in direct social or economic competition, however much they might verbally spar. Because they work side by side, however, Paul both understands the professional challenges Lucy faces and appreciates (and cultivates) her growing competence. It has been noted that Villette opens with its heroine’s entry into the labor market rather than the novelistic convention of entry into the marriage market. As professionalism is
crucial to Lucy’s growing capacity for self-assertion, the importance of this connection with Paul should not be underestimated.

The still more crucial link, however, is the shared experience of loss and grief. Many at the pensionnat perceive Lucy’s unhappiness, but only Paul treats her suffering with respectful concern; to others, it is merely an inconvenient quirk of the Anglaise, along with her purported learning. Throughout the novel it is Paul who, out of sympathy rather than, like Graham, professional duty, or, like Madame Beck, self-interest, looks after Lucy’s physical health and intellectual development. In contrast with Graham, Paul takes a notably active interest in her well-being. He quite literally feeds the pining and slender Lucy as well as nourishes her intellect with books, lessons, and conversation. Upon finding her in tears, midway through the narrative, Paul attempts, kindly although without success, to draw out the cause of her grief. 35 Much later we learn, through the Madame Walravens episode, that Paul’s sensitivity toward Lucy’s suffering originates in his direct empathy with her situation; he, too, lost the hopes of his youth when his fiancée, forbidden to marry him by her wealthy parents, faded into an early death during her novitiate at a convent.

Paul is able to help Lucy recover her sense of agency without denying the weight of her grief, and further, he shows willingness to be changed by her experience rather than simply expecting her to adjust her perceptions to his. Paul’s interpretation of Lucy’s temperament and behavior is perhaps no more accurate than Graham’s, but the key difference is that Paul’s misinterpretations ascribe activity, competence, and self-assertion to her. She may not really be learned or intellectually ambitious, and she certainly does not play the coquette to Graham Bretton, but by reacting to Lucy as if she were in a position of power, Paul helps her imagine herself in a position of power. Paul’s unique perception of Lucy’s capacity for passion and assertion is figured metaphorically as his sensitivity to the flames beneath her icy demeanor. Lucy insists that she “had feelings: passive as I lived, little as I spoke, cold as I looked, when I thought of past days, I could feel” (V, 175). Of all her acquaintance, only the “fiery” Paul Emmanuel correctly interprets the warmth of both love and rage in Lucy’s grief, saying, “I see on your cheek two tears which I know are hot as two sparks, and salt as two crystals of the sea” (V, 225, 310). His language echoes the sea and shipwreck metaphors Lucy herself employs to describe her pain, further underscoring their connection. Over the course of their relationship, we see the positive effect of Paul’s affirmation of Lucy’s capacity for agency. She is increasingly assertive, saving money
to start her own school and taking Paul into her confidence in this plan, and standing up to the wheedling of Père Silas and the bullying of Madame Beck when they oppose her interest in him. Why, then, does Lucy persist in concealing the details of her pain from Paul, even after she has developed her capacity for self-assertion, and even after their engagement?

It is tempting to argue that simple ingrained habits of misogynist culture are the primary obstructions to communication. Although Paul declares to Lucy that “we are alike,” it is unclear if he can ever understand an intellectual woman as other than what he calls, in an outburst, a “‘lusus naturae,’ a luckless accident, a thing for which there was neither place nor use in creation, wanted neither as wife nor worker” (V, 457, 443). There are some aspects of Lucy’s experience that she gradually learns to share with Paul, but she makes clear that he never quite appreciates the dilemma of a woman who cannot bear supporting or decorative roles and seeks to define herself as an autonomous individual. However, I would ascribe the ultimate impasse in communication to a difference in their experience of grief and loss. No degree of personal sensitivity on Paul’s part could alter the fact that Lucy’s bereavement involves social and economic consequences that his does not. Paul manages to overcome the financial straits caused by his father’s business failure through industry and professional achievement, eventually finding himself affluent enough to charitably support his dead fiancée’s mother and grandmother when her family falls into ruin and disgrace. Lucy, left destitute as well as bereaved at the loss of her family, likewise hopes to earn both social respect and financial security through work. However, the employments open to a genteel woman—lady’s maid, lady companion, governess or schoolteacher—command neither social status nor significant financial reward. The marriage market, which requires bartering of the beauty, fortune, and connections that Lucy does not have, remains by far the most sure and respectable way for a woman to provide for herself. Even the measure of security she attains as director of her own school at the novel’s close owes more to Miss Marchmont’s bequest than to Lucy’s work, in spite of her diligence and skill; it is a reward parcelled out by the author, not the society.

Paul appears to believe, and not unreasonably, that his loss is like Lucy’s, and that therefore he can connect with and comprehend her grief. But his loss, however painful, is not stigmatizing. Brenda Silver notes that “the effects of Lucy’s solitude” are most evident “in the loss of social status that accompanies her loss of family, a clear indication
of the interconnected role of class and gender in determining a person’s development—and worth.”36 Lucy’s loss of family, like that of any fortuneless woman, affords her, if anything, the kind of pity that has its roots in fear of the object’s social stigma. What Paul cannot fully comprehend, Brontë implies, is the shame of being considered a burden to society that, for so many of her contemporary women, deepens the pain of loss. As Charlotte Brontë wrote to her friend W. S. Williams in 1849, “Your daughters—no more than your sons—should be a burden on your hands: your daughters—as much as your sons—should aim at making their way honourably through life. . . . Believe me—teachers may be hard-worked, ill-paid and despised—but the girl who stays at home doing nothing is worse off than the hardest-wrought and worst paid drudge of a school.”37 For Brontë, no degradation and penury of humble employment could surpass the pain of being a “burden” to others, but she well knew, writing Villette after years of schoolteaching followed by her more satisfying, but equally gendered, experience of authorship, a woman’s aspirations in the public sphere were, to her contemporary society, dubious at best. Lucy’s ambitions, unlike Paul’s, will never be celebrated, at best tolerated, and as a penniless, bereaved woman, she cannot be the charitable hero, like him, only the object of charity, like Justine Marie’s mother. Lucy cannot find a means to communicate to Paul the full force of her experience of loss, to share with him her perspective. While Lucy herself appears to believe that had her fiancé lived, the perfect communion would have been achieved, Brontë, in snatching Paul away, seems to suggest that the socially imposed inequality of their suffering precludes genuine affective reciprocity.

While Brontë ultimately grants her narrator-protagonist no adequate witness within the novel’s imagined world, Villette seeks to create, in the reader, a consciousness receptive to the redundant woman’s dilemma. By linking the denial of witnessing to the denial of a much more socially legible narrative goal, an anticipated marriage, Brontë’s novel couches the desire for psychic reintegration in terms to which her contemporary readers could affectively respond. There are two layers to Lucy’s task of bearing witness: her actions and words as a character within her own narrative, seeking an interlocutor, and her choices as a narrator, attempting to convey to an audience that craves closure the terrible weight of uncertainty. The psychic disorder produced by Lucy’s overwhelming experience of loss allows and indeed requires Brontë to re-order traditional narrative forms in ways that render accessible to readers the narrator-protagonist’s socially marginalized perspective.

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Narrating Loss in Charlotte Brontë’s Villette
NOTES


2 I am drawing upon Cathy Caruth’s essays in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1995), the collection which she edited, and her *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1996), as well as Ann Cvetkovich’s more recent *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2003). I will later explain how my inquiry synthesizes aspects of both Caruth’s and Cvetkovich’s perspectives on traumatic experience.

3 Here, of course, I am employing D. A. Miller’s term, which he defines thus: “the ‘narratable’: the instances of disequilibrium, suspense, and general insufficiency from which a given narrative appears to arise. . . . [It] is thus opposed to the ‘nonnarratable’ state of quiescence assumed by a novel before the beginning and supposedly recovered by it at the end” (*Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981], ix). Therefore, when I describe Lucy’s experience as a penniless, redundant woman as nonnarratable within the conventional realist novel, I mean to imply not only that it is difficult for Lucy to describe or emotionally painful to discuss, but that it would be considered too static and uneventful an existence to warrant storytelling.


6 Cvetkovich, 18.

7 Cvetkovich, 19.

8 Cvetkovich, 26.

9 Cvetkovich, 81.

10 Feminist therapist Laura Brown usefully develops the concept of insidious trauma, which she credits to her colleague Maria Root, in her article “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective On Psychic Trauma,” collected in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 100–112. The central contention is that contrary to previous models focused on combat trauma and other catastrophic circumstances, there can be “traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit” (107). Brown argues for a greater attention, from both therapists and lawmakers who confront psychic trauma, to the social (and socioeconomic) contexts in which events triggering psychic distress take place: “Simple bereavement may not be simple if this death happens after too many others; job loss may be traumatic when occurring in the context of extreme economic scarcity” (110). The concept of insidious trauma is particularly useful for thinking about the at times difficult to quantify psychic impact of social forces such as sexism, racism, and homophobia.

11 Caruth asserts, “Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (*Unclaimed Experience*, 4). When I discuss trauma in the context of narrative fiction, I am interested mainly in the way a novel’s gaps, evasions, and repetitions can serve to communicate what a more straightforward narrative could not. I do not mean to imply that any work of fiction containing a catastrophic or tragic event is a trauma narrative.
I am, of course, aware that *Villette* is not universally considered to be squarely within the realist tradition. Notably, Mary Jacobus reads *Villette* as a novel in which Gothic and Romantic modes, which Jacobus aligns with latent feminism, fight to find articulation within a realist mode which she identifies with the dominant (patriarchal) culture. Of the novel’s Gothic elements, linked to the uncanny, Jacobus argues that, “The effect of this uncertainty in Charlotte Brontë’s novel is to challenge the monopolistic claims of realism on ‘reality’—to render its representations no less fictive and arbitrary than the Gothic and Romantic modes usually viewed as parasitic” (*Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism* [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986], 45). While I certainly acknowledge that *Villette* contains some elements clearly drawn from the Gothic tradition (the phantom nun, madame Walravens as witch), I feel it is crucial to consider that the discourse locates them within Lucy’s consciousness. The nun is a schoolgirls’ ghost story and Ginevra’s suitor in a costume, and madame Walravens is a nasty old crippled lady. It is within Lucy’s consciousness—and thus within the novel’s symbolic framework, not the events of its story—that they attain supernatural status. The innovative psychological realism of *Villette* lies in its scientifically informed and culturally sensitive delineation of a damaged consciousness—Lucy’s—through which Brontë shifts the way the reader perceives what is ultimately a relatively mundane bourgeois Victorian milieu.


Jacobus, 44, 45.

Considering *Villette* in the context of its composition, Helene Moglen has drawn parallels between Brontë’s experiences and those of her protagonist, and has characterized the novel as a study in the pain of repression. See Moglen, *Charlotte Brontë: The Self Conceived* (Madison: The Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 190–195. Moglen links Lucy’s “will to repression” with her status as “anesthetized survivor” of whatever disaster killed her family and connects this “neurosis” to narrative indirection (199), aligning Lucy’s movement toward more direct self-expression with greater self-awareness and health. Likewise, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in a reading sensitive both to Lucy’s psychic pain and its socioeconomic dimension in her status as a redundant woman, identify patriarchal constraints that silence Lucy, and measure her progress toward wholeness and autonomy in the way she “has learned to speak with her own voice, to emerge from the shadows” by the novel’s climax (*The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2000], 434). Implicit in both of these interpretations, I would suggest, is an equation of socially mandated self-suppression, in terms of emotion or speech, with the stunting of a possible and desirable fullness of identity.

John Kucich posits Lucy’s reserve as continuous with that of a range of Brontë protagonists, from the juvenilia onward, and argues that from an aesthetic standpoint, this “repressive solitude” of character enables Brontë to explore “the heightened inwardness of her reticent protagonist-narrators,” an interiority contingent upon “the refusals and self-negations of her narrative personae” (*Repression in Victorian Fiction* [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987], 77). In addition to its literary value, Kucich claims, such repression of desire empowers the protagonists within the novels’ imagined worlds, allowing them to “convert self-negating impulses into self-containing ones,” thus facilitating the maintenance of a cohesive self by establishing a boundary between self and other while defining the self in relation to others (78). Karen Lawrence, charting
Lucy’s “dual impulses to be overlooked and to signify” both within the story’s action and the narrative discourse, notes that her very invisibility within the novel’s imagined world affords her a privileged access to the lives of others which empowers her to develop skill as observer and interpreter (“The Cypher: Disclosure and Reticence in Villette,” Nineteenth-Century Literature 42 [1988]: quotation is from 449, see also 451). Similarly, Ivan Kreilkanp casts narrative reticence as a form of power, arguing that, “Lucy acquires value by refusing to narrate” (Voice and the Victorian Storyteller [New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005], 145).

33 In The History of Sexuality: An Introduction. Vol 1. (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), Michel Foucault argues that, “Silence itself—the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies” (27).

25 Gilbert and Gubar, 412.
26 For the park scene, see V, 549–552.
27 Moglen outlines how Lucy, as narrator, manipulates the story of Polly’s youthful sorrow in order to communicate her own emotional state (197–199).
28 In Witnessing: Beyond Recognition (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2001), Oliver outlines the significance of “response-ability” in relation to the broader concept of responsibility as follows: “Subjectivity as the ability to respond is linked to ethical responsibility. Subjectivity is responsibility: it is the ability to respond and to be responded to. Responsibility, then, has the double sense of opening up the possibility to respond—response-ability—and ethically obligating subjects to respond by virtue of their very subjectivity itself” (91).
30 It is noteworthy that Miss Marchmont and Paulina Home, the two female characters who have the least need to worry about money and have never known want, most closely approximate real generosity: Miss Marchmont through her charity work and deathbed desire to help Lucy, and Paulina Home in her refusal to treat Lucy as less than a peer despite their divergent socioeconomic fortunes since their childhood companionship.
31 See V, 510.
32 Cvetkovich, 93.
33 Caruth, Trauma, 154.
35 See V. 311. This incident occurs following the major breakdown that culminates in convalescence at La Terrasse, but prior to Lucy’s encounter with the actress Vashti that marks the beginning of her increasing self-assertion. The immediate context of Lucy’s grief is her separation from Graham and her godmother; the implication is that
her intensity of grief at this separation is fueled by her history of being cut off from loved ones in more permanent ways.
