

Material Interiority in Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor*

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READERS of *The Professor* (1845–46), the first complete novel that Charlotte Brontë wrote, have always considered it minor, ill-conceived, and un compelling. Rejected nine times by publishers and finally discarded by the author herself, the work appeared in print only posthumously, in 1857. Some critics have expressed gratitude for the novel's failure, which spurred Brontë to write the works for which she is renowned: *Jane Eyre* (1847), whose composition followed immediately upon *The Professor* and was intended as an antidote to it; and *Villette* (1853), which reworked much of its thematic material.¹ Yet to approach *The Professor*

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¹ For instance, Wendy A. Craik writes: “[Charlotte Brontë’s] first attempt, in a public, professional sense, at the novel . . . is undoubtedly minor. *The Professor* is not, within its limits, a failure; it has striking originalities and a few great scenes and passages, but it always remains on a lower level than her other three works. Smith and Elder were wise to reject it, and, since it drove Charlotte Brontë to write *Jane Eyre*, and since, had it been published, she could never have felt free to re-work and transmute its Belgian material and characters in *Villette*, readers must be grateful to them for doing so. *The Professor* must always remain the last read, as it was the last published, of the Brontë novels” (“The Brontës,” in *The Victorians*, ed. Arthur Pollard, vol. 6 of *History of Literature in the English Language* [London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1970], p. 146). Juliet Barker is similarly dismissive: “[The] determination to put Angria behind her and write about the real and the ordinary was somewhat marred in the execution. . . . Charlotte fell into

is not quite the exercise in desperation or antiquarianism that such a reputation might predict. At least one of its attributes merits attention: almost alone among Victorian novels written by women, *The Professor* has a sustained male first-person narrator.

It is tempting to explain this anomaly by way of Brontë's infatuation with Constantin Heger, the schoolmaster under whom she labored for two years in Brussels just before writing the novel. Unable to articulate overtly the passion she felt for her married Belgian "*maître*," Brontë, according to this interpretation, channeled her erotic blockage into fiction making. The tale—of a British man who travels to Brussels to teach English, where he marries a French-speaking student—would then embody the author's fantasy solution to her real-life frustration. Accordingly, in her introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition of the novel, Margaret Smith describes its plot as "a transcript of the author's experience rather pathetically brought to a happy conclusion by a piece of wish-fulfilment."² Such an explanation might be satisfactory were it not for the bizarre forms

her old bad habits of Gothic exaggeration. . . . Unable to write convincingly as a man, Charlotte retreated behind the comforting familiarity of the sarcastic and frequently flippant shell. In so doing, she destroyed the heart of the novel, for her central character is unreal. In her last novel, *Villette*, Charlotte was to prove that it was possible to have an embittered and uncharismatic but realistic first-person narrator" (*The Brontës* [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994], pp. 500–501). For accounts of the novel's inconsistencies and inadequacies, see Judith Williams, *Perception and Expression in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988), pp. 7–18; and Annette Tromly, *The Cover of the Mask: The Autobiographers in Charlotte Brontë's Fiction* (Victoria, B.C.: English Literary Studies, 1982), pp. 20–41. In her own evaluation of *The Professor*, however, Brontë stated: "the middle and latter portion of the work . . . is as good as I can write; it contains more pith, more substance, more reality, in my judgment, than much of 'Jane Eyre'" (Charlotte Brontë, letter to W. S. Williams, 14 December 1847; quoted in Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten, introduction to Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor*, ed. Smith and Rosengarten [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987], p. xix. Further references to *The Professor* are to this edition and are included in the text).

² Margaret Smith, introduction to Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor*, ed. Smith and Herbert Rosengarten (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), pp. xvii–xviii. Smith admits that this description is "baldly stated," and she judiciously situates Brontë's composition of the novel in a range of biographical and literary contexts. In a later suggestion, however, Smith perpetuates the biographical explanation: "In transforming her life into her art, Charlotte to some extent controlled its pain by making herself—or at any rate her first person narrator—the master. She attributes to William the inward qualities she had looked for in M. Heger" (p. xxiii).

of authorial identification that it requires. Under her male pseudonym, Currer Bell, Brontë puts the virtues of mastery, masculinity, and Englishness on the side of the narrator; the female writer seems to identify at once with teacher and student, man and woman, Englishman and foreigner. The hero of *The Professor*, in this reading, represents a strange alloy of the author and the object of her affections: collapsing desire with identification, Brontë seems to imagine that if she cannot *have* the master, then perhaps she can *be* him.

As inviting as it is to attribute the novel's masculine narrative voice to these psychobiographical circumstances, doing so risks preemptively laying to rest its most remarkable feature. For, whatever its causes, the work's peculiar narrative situation supplied Brontë the opportunity to imagine being a man, and in particular to wonder what it felt like to inhabit a male body. In pursuing a fantasy of male embodiment in *The Professor*, Brontë, I suggest, dramatizes the strangeness of the idea of *being inside any body* at all. Through the voice of the male narrator as well as through the novel's imagery, Brontë makes peculiarly vivid the taken-for-granted situation of human interiority—the idea that human subjects dwell in their bodies, and that bodies serve as vehicles or containers for invisible spiritual, psychological, or mental contents. By portraying in palpable terms the human body's enclosure of intangible subjectivity, she exploits the paradox of an immaterial soul, heart, or mind inhabiting the flesh. Pervaded by metaphors of entombment and boundary violation, the novel's language exaggerates and estranges the conditions of embodiment. In using the term “material interiority,” I mean to designate this literary depiction of ethereal inner qualities in a language of tangible objects, a practice that collapses dualistic conceptions of mind and body (or body and soul) by making subjective inwardness and bodily innards stand for each other.³

³ For related discussions of physiological conceptions of spiritual and psychological interiors in earlier periods of British literary history, see David Hillman, “Visceral Knowledge: Shakespeare, Skepticism, and the Interior of the Early Modern Body,” in *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Hillman and Carla Mazzio (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 81–105; Gail Kern Paster, “Nervous Tension: Networks of Blood and Spirit in the Early Modern Body,” in *The Body in Parts*, pp. 107–

Victorian culture at large worried over conflicts between a notion of the human interior as vaporous (the location of the soul) and the idea of it as material (the container of the viscera). The numerous cultural locations in which spiritual and substantial versions of human interiority competed amount to a catalog of characteristically Victorian preoccupations: they include, for example, phrenology, physiognomy, and mesmerism, in which inner moral and mental qualities found outward bodily expression; spiritual and intellectual crises, such as those recounted by John Stuart Mill and Harriet Martineau, in which body and mind battled; the inversion model of same-sex eroticism, which posited the body of one sex trapping the soul of another; and disputes over mortuary practices and the disposition of human remains. Physiological and metaphysical debates about the distinction between soul and mind, about the location of each, and about their links to the body (through nerves, a "vital principle," or other means) were eventually disaggregated into discourses of psychology, philosophy, and literature.⁴ As Michael S. Kearns has argued, a conception of the mind as a substantial entity was common to mid-Victorian proto-psychologists otherwise as diverse as William B. Carpenter, Alexander Bain, and Herbert Spencer (at least in his early work).⁵ *Embodied Selves*, a recent anthology of primary materials on Victorian psychology, richly documents the ways in which

25; and Daniel Cottom, *Cannibals and Philosophers: Bodies of Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2001).

⁴ See Rick Rylance, *Victorian Psychology and British Culture, 1850–1880* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), which outlines this process; and Edward S. Reed, *From Soul to Mind: The Emergence of Psychology from Erasmus Darwin to William James* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1997), which presents various nineteenth-century versions of materialism that "serve[d] to undermine the Cartesian separation of soul and body" (p. 6).

⁵ See Kearns, *Metaphors of Mind in Fiction and Psychology* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1987), pp. 88–134. Rylance documents a key manifestation of the dualist controversy in his discussion of the debate between faculty psychology and associationism, over whether the human interior is fundamentally immutable or adaptive. He explains: "[faculty psychology] believed that the faculties of the human mind were innate and, though these faculties might be developed in experience, they were not constituted by it. The second school [associationism] . . . maintained the opposite view. For thinkers in this line, the mind was primarily created in experience and the role of innate ideas was negligible. Exchanges between these two positions dominated discussion and . . . controlled the development of psychological ideas for at least the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century" (*Victorian Psychology and British Culture*, p. 40).

nineteenth-century mental science, like literary writing of the period, situated subjectivity within a bodily frame, often portraying the interior with metaphors of objective form.⁶

Simultaneously established in and undermined by the body, such conceptions of interiority generated two main types of difficulties for Victorian fiction in general, and for Charlotte Brontë in particular. The first type concerns the influx from the world into the body, which occurs principally through the senses, the main channels of communication between surface and interior. Particularly relevant are the proximate senses of smell, taste, and touch, which literally bring the external world into or onto the body; equally important are the distance senses (hearing and vision) when they are felt to involve tangible contact between subject and object.⁷ The second class of difficulty, which concerns the outflow from the body to the world, is affiliated with dirt. The disparity between the soul, classically imagined as light and airy, and the viscera, held to be dark and disgusting, makes embodiment itself seem debased, devaluing nearly all matter that comes out of the body by casting it as filthy. Regarded too closely, the inside of the body degrades the human subject identified with it; taken together, the incorporation of external stimuli and the excretion of waste form a system of exchange between the world and the subject's interior, in material and immaterial terms alike.

⁶ See *Embodied Selves: An Anthology of Psychological Texts, 1830–1890*, ed. Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). Kearns shows that mid-Victorian psychological writing and novels alike lent the mind itself the properties of a substantial entity: “to receive sense impressions from the physical world, the mind had to have a physical component, and to respond to sublime and divine experiences, it had to have an immaterial, divine component. Since the mind was experienced as unified and indivisible, these demands were in conflict” (*Metaphors of Mind*, p. 135). Sally Shuttleworth writes that, unlike in earlier periods, “the novelist and physician shared similar ground in mid-Victorian culture. . . . They shared . . . the same central metaphors for their proceedings, drawn, pre-eminently, from the sphere of science: surgical dissection, and penetration of the inner recesses of mind and body” (*Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996], pp. 14–15). For an illustration of this point, see Richard Menke, “Fiction as Vivisection: G. H. Lewes and George Eliot,” *ELH*, 67 (2000), 617–53.

⁷ Phenomenology has advanced the case for the embodiment and materiality of the subject of perception and reason. Applying Maurice Merleau-Ponty's insights to the history of rational epistemology itself, Drew Leder lucidly deconstructs the dualist mind-body opposition upon which Cartesian rationalism is founded (see Leder, *The Absent Body* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990]).

In this essay I argue, first, that in *The Professor* Brontë both emphasizes and disrupts the idea of the body as container of the self. She does so by describing human interiors as metaphorically enclosed within material structures, which thereby come to stand for bodies. She dramatizes her conception of the interior by depicting practices that substantively alter the mind and the heart, such as attending school and falling in love. Through these experiences, which are shown to reach the interior through sensory vehicles, characters interact with one another and with the phenomenal world, and these encounters effect emotional and intellectual changes in them. We can understand the introjection of external material, when portrayed in concrete terms, as bodily penetration, but we ought not therefore contract it too quickly to the erotic—it might also be frightening, disgusting, exciting, or infuriating (although it is never emotionally neutral). While in *The Professor* Brontë distinguishes between male and female sexuality, moreover, we will find, in pressing on the metaphors she uses to depict selfhood, that gender does not wholly determine the relative permeability or imperviousness of characters' bodies. I do not thus mean to evade the gendered dimension of penetration, but rather to avoid prejudging the embodied particulars of a self on the basis of that body's sex. Like the gender flexibility that she enacted in adopting a masculine narrative voice, Brontë makes the relation between sexed bodies and material interiors relatively mobile within the plot and characters.

In contrast to the stereotype of inflexible Victorian sexual roles, whereby masculinity entails dominance and femininity entails submission, Brontë does not consistently align modes of domination and subjugation with gender. Her presentation of bodily invasion overlaps with psychoanalytic accounts of masochism, some of which have helped detach dominance status from gender. While theories of masochism illuminate Brontë's work, *The Professor* requires us to modify such formulations because in it Brontë insists on the untranscendably material basis of subjectivity and eros. She demonstrates that a range of intimate human relations (working, loving, fighting, teaching) partake of penetration: subjects resist or submit to the incorporation of variously aversive and attractive objects, and that which

is other than the self enters the self through processes that often painfully alter the subject.



The plot of *The Professor* (titled “The Master” until late in its career) closely parallels that of *Villette*, Brontë’s more directly autobiographical final novel, but with the crucial difference of the narrator’s gender. In an aggrieved first-person voice William Crimsworth tells his story, that of an Englishman descended from aristocrats who finds that he must earn a living. At the start of the tale he seeks out his brother, the owner of an industrial mill, who grudgingly agrees to hire him as clerk. When his employment and his relations soon become intolerable, Crimsworth travels to Brussels, where he is employed as an English teacher in adjoining boys’ and girls’ schools. As in *Villette*, the protagonist’s adventures abroad make up the bulk of the novel, supplying the occasion for him to deride French manners, Belgian nationality, Roman Catholic religion, and Continental schooling. Crimsworth is tempted by a romance with Zoraïde Reuter, the directress (as she is known) of the girls’ academy, but when he learns that she is already engaged to the director of the boys’ school, he repudiates her. Despite her own engagement, Mlle. Reuter grows jealous when, soon thereafter, Crimsworth meets and falls in love with an Anglo-Swiss young woman, Frances Henri, who is both a fellow teacher and his pupil in English. After some trials in their courtship, William and Frances marry and return to England to find bliss domestic, in both senses of the word.

At the level of metaphor, *The Professor* presents individual self-sustenance in terms of adamant self-enclosure. The narrator frequently portrays himself as figuratively encased within armor or confined in a building, a portrayal that renders his psychological interior spatial and morphological: being stuck inside himself is like being lodged within a structure. The missing link between the interior and the structure is his body, which both oppressively and protectively encloses the self. For example, Crimsworth describes receiving “blasphemous sarcasms . . . on a buckler of impenetrable indifference” from his

belligerent brother, and further notes: "Erelong he tired of wasting his ammunition on a statue—but he did not throw away the shafts—he only kept them quiet in his quiver" (p. 23). Concerned that a soft, pliable inside would be accessible to such barbs, Crimsworth exhibits extraordinary anxiety that others will pierce his armor or get under his skin. Instead of becoming strong and aggressive, however, he consistently makes himself hard and impervious. When he faces his female students for the first time, he recapitulates the imagery: "In less than five minutes they had thus revealed to me their characters and in less than five minutes I had buckled on a breast-plate of steely indifference and let down a visor of impassible austerity" (p. 86). By enclosing the protagonist within metaphorical armor, Brontë alludes to the idea of the human subject inhabiting the material container that is the body. The vulnerability of this carapace, however, disrupts any secure idea of enclosure, and embodiment comes to seem both a limit and a possibility for the self or soul immured within.

The novel's settings, both literal and figurative, evoke a cloistral darkness that enhances the reader's sensation of being lodged in a paranoid imagination with no possibility of escape.⁸ Pervasive architectural language makes bodies and buildings stand for each other; in addition to girding the protagonist in armor, the narrative extends such images to the edifices that enclose him. When he finds it impossible to stay at his teaching post in Brussels because of romantic tensions between himself and his employers, for instance, Crimsworth portrays himself as shut within rigid confines: "I seemed like one sealed in a subterranean vault, who gazes at utter blackness; at blackness ensured by yard-thick stone walls around and by piles of building above, expecting light to penetrate through granite and through cement firm as granite" (p. 195). This profoundly

⁸ Tromly associates enclosure imagery with repression (see *Cover of the Mask*, pp. 24–25). On repression, see John Kucich, *Repression in Victorian Fiction: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1987). In "Beloved Objects: Mourning, Materiality, and Charlotte Brontë's 'Never-Ending Story,'" *ELH*, 65 (1998), 395–421, Kate E. Brown supplies a fascinating analysis of the value of objects, in relation to bodies and mourning, in Brontë's early compositions.

dark conception of interior enclosure lies at the core of Brontë's notion of personhood, evoking through an objective metaphor the idea of the body as container of the self. When the narrative thematizes such breaks into and out of an edifice, moreover, it describes these ruptures as physically degrading. At the point when Crimsworth reaches the threshold of tolerance for his brother's insults, for example, he presents this convoluted figure: "the Antipathy, which had sprung up between myself and my Employer, striking deeper root and spreading denser shade daily, excluded me from every glimpse of the sunshine of life; and I began to feel like a plant growing in humid darkness out of the slimy walls of a well" (p. 30). The image of vegetal infection is itself strangely infectious: the negative faculty ("Antipathy") is the foliage that shades Crimsworth from light, but he too becomes a plant—not thriving (like the emotion, which absorbs the light and nutrients) but sickly, a plant that suffers for its unfortunate placement. Contained within himself, Crimsworth imagines himself entombed in a well; because he also regards such enclosure as an effective resistance to infiltration, however, it becomes a miraculous resource for him. Having traveled so far down, he can go only up—a sentiment epitomized in the novel's epigraph: "He that is low need fear no fall" (p. 4).⁹

Through these metaphors of structural confinement Brontë affiliates psychological enclosure with physical entombment, showing both to be debasing. When early in the story William arrives at the factory town owned by his brother, the

⁹ The epigraph alludes to John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) and, more generally, to the Protestant practice of locating value in self-degradation—a tradition of which the novel's French-speaking Catholic characters are oblivious. On the basis of Martin Luther's writings, Norman O. Brown argues for links among Freudian analytic, Thanatos, the Protestant devil, and emergent capitalism, in ways that resonate with Brontë's concerns (see Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* [Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1959], esp. pp. 202–33). In her later work Brontë transforms psychological enclosure from metaphor into plot event, producing some of her most memorable scenes (Jane Eyre in the red room, Bertha Mason in the attic, Lucy Snowe in the deserted garret). Karen Chase supplies an analysis of Brontë's spatial metaphors of mind that is congenial to my own, including a discussion of Brontë's "tendency to transform concepts into conceits" (see Chase, *Eros and Psyche: The Representation of Personality in Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot* [New York: Methuen, 1984], p. 54).

place itself is a nauseous landscape pulsating with industrial of-fal: "the Mill was before us, vomiting soot from its long chimney and quivering through its thick brick walls with the commotion of its iron bowels" (p. 17). This excremental external landscape corresponds so closely with the narrator's internal one as to make it seem the dirt of the body's interior projected outward.¹⁰ Throughout the novel there is a fearful danger that the container will fail to keep the insides from spilling out or the outside from pressing in. The threat to interior integrity is especially worrisome when the protagonist encounters others; describing his resistance to his brother's abuses, for example, William states: "I had an instinctive feeling that it would be folly to let one's temper effervesce often with such a man as Edward. I said to myself, 'I will place my cup under this continual dropping—it shall stand there still and steady; when full it will run over of itself—meantime—patience'" (p. 20). Taking literally the term *understanding*, by imagining himself as standing under his brother's steady drip, William recognizes—well in advance of his professorial vocation—that intellectual comprehension entails being permeated: it is the infusion of one mental presence by another, which effects changes in both. The process is both liberating and dirtying.

In light of recent historical scholarship, these densely planted, sometimes suffocating metaphors for mental faculties might be attributed to extraliterary sources. In her important book *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (1996) Sally Shut-

¹⁰ As Catherine Robson has pointed out to me in conversation, when early in *Jane Eyre* the young protagonist retains traces of this (justifiably) paranoid self-conception, she also conceives of her mind as filthy: "All John Reed's violent tyrannies, all his sisters' proud indifference, all his mother's aversion, all the servants' partiality, turned up in my disturbed mind like a dark deposit in a turbid well" (Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Jane Jack and Margaret Smith [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969], p. 12). I am indebted to Kathryn Bond Stockton, "Heaven's Bottom: Anal Economics and the Critical Debasement of Freud in Toni Morrison's *Sula*," *Cultural Critique*, 24 (1993), 81–118, for a suggestive discussion of debasement, race, and anality in the context of Morrison's literary work and Freudian theory. In a provocative reference to Brontëan anality, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick cites a 12 April 1850 letter from Brontë to W. S. Williams: "what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of life and the sentient target of death" (Charlotte Brontë, quoted in Sedgwick, "A Poem is Being Written," in her *Tendencies* [Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1993], pp. 210–11). But Kearns reads this passage as referring to the heart (see *Metaphors of Mind*, p. 142).

Shuttleworth aligns the plot of *The Professor* with shifts in Victorian social relations, illuminating the ideological content (especially in class and gender terms) of the phrenological, psychological, and social-science discourse that runs through Brontë's prose. Through a discussion of social power that explicitly invokes the work of Michel Foucault, and an account of character evolution that implicitly relies on Freud, Shuttleworth charts a series of parallel developments: Crimsworth moves from effeminacy to masculinity, from being a superannuated aristocrat to a productive bourgeois, from living in paranoid isolation to achieving socially integrated disciplinary subjectivity, and from conceiving of femininity as degraded to seeing it as chaste.¹¹ On this model the line of influence runs from culture (here represented by psychological science) to the literary work: Shuttleworth shows how, by way of both *Zeitgeist* and a glancing familiarity with medical sources, Brontë absorbed and reproduced ideas that originated elsewhere. As an alternative, I propose that Brontë, with her uniquely literary tools, imagined the inside of the person as physically inhabiting the inside of the body in a way that resonates with other aspects of Victorian culture but is not determined by them.¹² Most dramatically in *The Professor*, Brontë's practice of precariously piling up objective metaphors gives vivid form to the idea of embodied human subjectivity, of an interior with the properties of a material entity.

An example can suggest what might be gained by extending an analysis of the interior beyond a historicist assessment of ideology. Early in the novel, while working for his brother, Crimsworth is assigned to translate some letters; following his usual practice, he guards his inner resources by shielding himself vigilantly against his brother's imagined examination: "I thought he was trying to read my character but I felt as secure against his scrutiny as if I had had on a casque with the visor down—or rather I shewed him my countenance with the confidence that one would shew an unlearned man a letter written in Greek—he might see lines, and trace characters, but he

¹¹ See Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, pp. 124–47.

¹² In his survey of Victorian philosophy, psychology, and literature, Kearns argues that "the language did not develop at the same rate in fiction and in psychology; new metaphors are quite visible in novels by the middle of the nineteenth century but do not emerge in psychological works until later" (*Metaphors of Mind*, p. 16).

could make nothing of them—my nature was not his nature, and its signs were to him like the words of an unknown tongue” (p. 21). Shuttleworth argues that the description in this passage refers to particular psychological methods of reading inner qualities from the surface: the scene “draws specifically on the discursive framework of phrenology which operated to legitimate the rising middle classes’ claims to social power. The semiotic system in play is not that of physiognomy where signs were open for all to read, but the more competitive system of phrenology: bodily form still articulates inner qualities, but the signs hold meaning only for the initiated, schooled in the rules of translation” (*Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, p. 128).¹³

While Shuttleworth’s placement of the scene within nineteenth-century scientific contexts is illuminating, the historical alignments of her reading obscure the peculiar ways in which the literary imagery renders material an enclosed interior. Brontë metaphorizes the speaker’s self, at first by portraying him as ensconced within a helmet, which contains his “character” and so stands in for his body; but then the image shifts (“or rather . . .”), and the body absented by the armor reappears, to show its face. Crimsworth immediately metaphorizes this “countenance” as well, however, and it becomes incomprehensible written language, which makes it as obscure as his invisible “character.” In portraying himself as an illegible character—both a person and a letter—Crimsworth thus condenses in himself the very work of translation that he performs: the scribal drudgery at which he labors becomes his body, both texts made obscure and difficult in order to keep them secure and inviolate. The passage alludes to a system of thought in which external features both dissemble and express interior re-

¹³ Shuttleworth, in equating “interiorized selfhood” (p. 127) with the mind as psychologists understood it, sets aside the soul, which for Brontë, with her intense religious affinities, was at least in equal measure the content of the self. On the religious body of the Victorian soul, see Kathryn Bond Stockton, *God Between Their Lips: Desire Between Women in Irigaray, Brontë, and Eliot* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1994). In “When the Soul Had Hips: Six Animadversions on Psyche and Gender in Nineteenth-Century Poetry,” in *Sexualities in Victorian Britain*, ed. Andrew H. Miller and James Eli Adams (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 1996), pp. 157–86, Herbert F. Tucker investigates the poetic domain of writing about the soul in nineteenth-century England, focusing on the paradox of representing as bodily that which, by definition, has no form. Like the poets he discusses, Tucker does not draw sharp distinctions among soul, spirit, and mind.

ality, but its overt mode of doing so is as much linguistic translation as phrenology. William's supervisor (literally, the one who overlooks his imagined visor) inspires his aggression because he is a reader—perhaps a reader of skulls, but more demonstrably a reader of texts. As he goes on to admit at the end of the passage, his brother is hardly illiterate and can “read both French and German” (p. 21); Crimsworth's hostility is thus all the more surprising for its frank unfairness. Instead of either contracting the scene to an instance of phrenological allusion or expanding it to an ideologically laden allegory, we can preserve its psychological complexity by observing how Brontë lends material form to selfhood and, at the same time, folds it back into specifically textual terms. Brontë here grapples with the very question of how flat, printed characters on a page generate an illusion of subjective depth, at once indicating profundity and denying access to it.



In the preceding example the metaphor of the obscure text supplements the narrative's usual depiction of human interiors as structurally enclosed; the danger remains that someone else will reach inside and touch the immured subject. Having considered how in the novel's first phase Brontë depicts interiority, both in isolation and in conflict, I want to turn to the next phase, where she expands it to include romance. This shift coincides with the protagonist's move abroad (appropriately enough, to “the Low Countries” [p. 101]), where he opens himself to others; instead of dissolving, however, the conception of an enclosed interior intensifies. When Crimsworth assumes the post of English master in a Brussels school, he soon finds himself threatened again, but this time the danger emanates from a woman: the aggression of Zoraïde Reuter, directress of the neighboring girls' academy, is an overt erotic enticement for Crimsworth. His employer at the boys' school, M. Pelet, drives a probing question at the hero on the subject of her penetration:

“Did she find out your weak point?”

“What is my weak point?”

“Why the sentimental. Any woman, sinking her shaft deep enough, will at last reach a fathomless spring of sensibility in thy breast, Crimsworth.”

I felt the blood stir about my heart and rise warm to my cheek. (p. 93)

The narrative contravenes even the pretense of ordinary romance in this courtship game *manqué*: gender distinctions are thrown over in favor of the more salient order of penetration, which positions Mlle. Reuter and Crimsworth in respective roles of dominance and submission.

Penetration, as this passage suggests, is a capacious concept. For while it entails comprehension and “sentiment,” penetration also persistently retains the force of its physical meaning in the narrative’s metaphorical tissue. Crimsworth develops the image in his description of Mlle. Reuter’s seductive tactics: “I watched her as keenly as she watched me; I perceived soon that she was feeling after my real character, she was searching for salient points and weak points and eccentric points; she was applying now this test, now that, hoping in the end to find some chink, some niche where she could put in her little firm foot and stand up on my neck” (p. 89). Crimsworth again construes the psyche in architectural terms: the mind is a wall that his antagonist scales with her ingenuity. In allowing him to fantasize the directress pushing upon the fleshy embodiment that encloses him, the strangely distancing set of images lends material form to his subjectivity.¹⁴ By circulating such metaphors Brontë exaggerates, and thereby defamiliarizes, the idea of the body as container of interiority. Pressing on us the morphology of a body ordinarily taken to be merely expressive of, or epiphenomenal to, a deep, invisible essence, this language gives form to that which is usually construed *as* the form.

In preserving both meanings of “penetration,” Brontë’s rhetoric solidifies the usually amorphous corporeality of intellectual and emotional phenomena. The metaphors reach a cli-

¹⁴ The medical context that Shuttleworth supplies (see pp. 1–99) invites an interpretation of this scene as Mlle. Reuter’s phrenological reading of Crimsworth. Mlle. Reuter feels and probes Crimsworth’s mind in the way a phrenologist might manipulate the head, but psychological discourse cannot sufficiently account for Brontë’s bizarre extension of the metaphors.

max in this abortive flirtation when Zoraïde Reuter finally overcomes Crimsworth's resistance:

Me, she still watched, still tried by the most ingenious tests, she roved round me, baffled yet persevering; I believe she thought I was like a smooth and bare precipice which offered neither jutting stone nor tree-root, nor tuft of grass to aid the climber. . . . I found it at once pleasant and easy to evade all these efforts; it was sweet, when she thought me nearly won—to turn round and to smile in her very eyes, half scornfully, and then to witness her scarcely-veiled though mute mortification. Still she persevered and at last—I am bound to confess it, her finger, essaying, proving every atom of the casket—touched its secret spring and for a moment—the lid sprung open, she laid her hand on the jewel within; whether she stole and broke it, or whether the lid shut again with a snap on her fingers—read on—and you shall know.

(p. 105)

The image of a person as a cliff to be surmounted, while unusual, is not entirely strange. But Brontë imagines that cliff as smooth and barren of footholds—which, if one still holds the person in mind as the tenor of the metaphor, generates (negated) images of a character with ledges and tufts in him.¹⁵ This hyperbole has comic effects that are realized at the end of the passage, when Mlle. Reuter moves from climbing the narrator to probing him: in either case, she prospects for secret information, and the surprise is that she ultimately finds it within the morphologically ambiguous “casket.” When Mlle. Reuter reaches her hand into Crimsworth's boxlike being, within which lies the “jewel” of his selfhood, one wonders what exactly

¹⁵ Within the plot this scene violates Crimsworth's typical technique of protecting himself with impermeability. Yet its staging more than sufficiently enacts that strategy for the reader, as Brontë mimetically predicates revelation upon an aggressive withholding. In a gesture familiar to readers of *Villette*, in this paragraph Brontë deflects Mlle. Reuter's hostility onto Crimsworth, and from there it ricochets out onto the reader: he taunts us with his “wait and see.” Like Crimsworth's students, readers are again made to suffer his punitive tutelage elsewhere in the novel. Sometimes he gives a mimetic justification: “I turned; at my elbow stood a tall man . . . though just now, as I am not disposed to paint his portrait in detail, the reader must be content with the silhouette I have just thrown off; it was all I myself saw of him for the moment” (p. 24). At other points, his withholding is more overtly capricious: “Now, reader, during the last two pages I have been giving you honey fresh from flowers, but you must not live entirely on food so luscious; taste then a little gall—just a drop, by way of change” (p. 227).

she is doing. If she is metaphorically touching his heart, then why should the images be so concrete? When we read the passage more anatomically than metaphysically, the images become implausibly erotic or disgusting. If, in this erotically charged moment, that box is an opening low in the body, then the contours of the tightly guarded jewel it contains would, in physiological terms, have to be a point of stimulation hidden within flesh, such as a clitoris or a prostate. When the external form is penetrated in order to reach an internal being, the body cannot be fixed in terms of either gender or sexual position: in being opened, it displays features both female and male, anterior and posterior.¹⁶



While bodily penetration is Brontë's dominant metaphor for access to human interiority, an important psychological component of the process is the subject's willing submission. Such submission itself intensifies the pleasure in self-enclosure, as when William, in the scene that convinces him to seek his own fortunes outside of England, recounts being horsewhipped by his brother: "He flourished his tool—the end of the lash just touched my forehead. A warm excited thrill ran through my veins, my blood seemed to give a bound, and then raced fast and hot along its channels" (p. 43). To a post-Freudian reader such a passage begs to be understood in terms of masochism, that branch of psychoanalysis most attuned to the dynamics of psychic life in its corporeal inhabitation. Masochism theory cannot wholly explain such language, but it usefully addresses the paradox of satisfaction deriving from pain or discomfort. Brontë's work compels us to revise psychoanalytic conceptions of masochism in order to understand how the material form of subjectivity could be more fundamental to de-

¹⁶ Normalizing conceptions of gender and sexuality sometimes hamper Brontë critics in the face of such language. Irene Tayler, for instance, describes this passage as an error on Brontë's part (it is an example of "gender-inappropriate metaphor"), and despite Crimsworth's explicit attestation of pleasure, she reads these images as "couched in the figurative language of male seduction or rape" (see Tayler, *Holy Ghosts: The Male Muses of Emily and Charlotte Brontë* [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1990], p. 165).

sire than is gender, which both literary criticism and psychoanalytic theory have tended to treat as the crucial factor. In Freud's theory, sadism and masochism are complementary and reversible: turning an aggressive impulse onto the ego produces masochism; displacement of a masochistic drive onto an object results in sadism. Equally pertinent for *The Professor* is Gilles Deleuze's account, which insists upon the dissociation of masochism and sadism, treating them as two separate, incommensurable systems. For Deleuze both systems comprise a master and a slave, but the subject positions they posit are radically incompatible. Deleuze presumes a masculine masochistic subject, while the normative subject for Freud is female—or, to be more precise, for Freud masochism is a constituent of ordinary femininity.

Brontë, by contrast, does not associate masochism with one sex: with masochism, as with penetration, she eschews immutable gender positions in the novel. While in this respect her work conforms to neither Freud's nor Deleuze's theory, her account shares with Deleuze's the notion of a "scene" in which dominant and submissive roles are orchestrated by the submissive figure. At the same time, as in Freud's account, the roles are not fixed but reversible: the submissive figure may transform into the domineering one.¹⁷ The fact that Zoraïde Reuter

¹⁷ For Freud's formulations, see "'A Child Is Being Beaten': A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions" (1919), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, et al., 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953–74), XVII, 179–204 (further references to Freud's works are to this edition). Jean Laplanche supplies a helpful discussion of aggression as the instinct upon which, in the dimension of sexuality, sadistic drives are "propped" (see Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976], pp. 85–102). Among the three basic types of masochism that Freud delineates, one is "feminine masochism"—which is to say, femininity itself (see Freud, "The Economic Problem of Masochism" [1924], in *Standard Edition*, XIX, 159–70). Extending Freud's reasoning, Julia Kristeva, in her discussion of the maternal "abject," revalues the subordinated female term while maintaining its gender determinism (see Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1982]). For the Deleuzian account, see Gilles Deleuze, *Coldness and Cruelty*, in *Masochism*, trans. Jean McNeil (New York: Zone Books, 1991), pp. 9–138. Deleuze proposes that the subject of sadism is the male master (paradigmatically, Sade), while the slave in the sadistic scene is a feminine object unwittingly coerced for the master's erotic stimulation. The subject of masochism is the slave, also presumptively male; he must train the dominatrix who consents to punish him in the prescribed ways. For the most lucid and comprehen-

subjugates Crimsworth does not, in itself, essentially distinguish Brontë's novel from a conventional order of sexuality, which can accommodate masochistic practices (such as those of Sacher-Masoch himself). Instead, erotic relations in *The Professor* remain dynamic, a fluid positionality that stands against a static conception of gender or dominance status, either in orthodox terms or in simple inversion. As John Kucich has shown, the "reversibility of power [is] a primary condition for sexual love" in Brontë's novels, where "a privileged, eroticized kind of subjectivity . . . bears no direct relationship to social or sexual identity" (*Repression*, pp. 97, 109).¹⁸

These theories of masochism clarify some of the psychic contortions in Brontë's novel and suggest why inhabitation of a material interior should be so abasing as well as so pleurably penetrable. Like the reversible masochist of Freud, the novel's protagonist, once he is degraded by the object of his affections, turns to gain mastery over her. As he is "on the brink of falling in love" with Mlle. Reuter (p. 107), Crimsworth discovers (to the gratification of his appetite for humiliation) that she is betraying him with his employer, M. Pelet (see pp. 108–111). After eavesdropping upon them, Crimsworth savors the embarrassment of hearing himself abused: "But Zoraïde Reuter? Of course her defection had cut me to the quick? That sting must have gone too deep for any Consolations of Philosophy to be available in curing its smart? Not at all. . . . Reason was my physician; she began by proving that the prize I had missed was of little value" (p. 113). Despite this disavowal, the painful penetration ("that sting . . . too deep") cannot be so blithely

sive review of scholarship on masochism, see John Kucich, "Melancholy Magic: Masochism, Stevenson, Anti-Imperialism," *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 56 (2001), 364–400.

¹⁸ Kucich states that the "consequence of master/slave reversals is that they pluralize and confuse the configurations of power to such a degree that contest—which defines isolation and distance—becomes endless and illimitable, rather than being frozen in a permanent structure of relationship. The reversibility of mastery and slavery makes them transient positions of combat" (*Repression*, p. 106). While I largely concur with this analysis, it remains a question whether one should take it to mean that "no one is actually mastered," as Kucich concludes (*Repression*, p. 106). Janet Gezari addresses related concerns in a chapter on *The Professor* (see Garzi, *Charlotte Brontë and Defensive Conduct: The Author and the Body at Risk* [Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1992], pp. 30–58).

dismissed. When he determines to repudiate Mlle. Reuter, the woman he momentarily imagined he desired, Crimsworth unwittingly stimulates *her* desire both to attract and to rebuff him. To his dismay, he discovers that his tutelage in subjugation (first at his brother's factory, then at her school) has rendered him all too competent a master: like a self-vindicating dictator, Crimsworth explains that "servility creates despotism" (p. 129). Not quite blaming the victim, he now discovers the masochism in her, which generates in him a corresponding tyrant to tend to her needs: "This slavish homage, instead of softening my heart, only pampered whatever was stern and exacting in its mood. The very circumstance of her hovering round me like a fascinated bird, seemed to transform me into a rigid pillar of stone; her flatteries irritated my scorn, her blandishments confirmed my reserve" (p. 129). In complying with the novel's enclosure imagery, the stiffness that Crimsworth here exhibits in response to Mlle. Reuter's obsequiousness might be read less as an amorous erection than as the ossification induced by encountering another's assertive desire.

Mlle. Reuter thus comes to represent the type of masochist that interests Deleuze, for she cultivates in her partner the refusing master that her desire requires. Yet Crimsworth is not content to remain a consensual dominator, and he soon develops a full-fledged appetite for seeing her vanquished. His is not, however, a conventional form of Sadean domination either, for in repudiating Mlle. Reuter in favor of Frances Henri, Crimsworth displays a mastery that comprehends subjugation so well because of its perfervid identification with the slave:

Now it was precisely about this time that the Directress, stung by my coldness, bewitched by my scorn, and excited by the preference she suspected me of cherishing for another, had fallen into a snare of her own laying, was herself caught in the meshes of the very passion with which she wished to entangle me. . . . I had ever hated a tyrant, and behold the possession of a slave, self-given, went near to transform me into what I abhorred! There was at once a sort of low gratification in receiving this luscious incense from an attractive and still young worshipper and an irritating sense of degradation in the very experience of the pleasure. When she stole about me with the soft step of a

slave—I felt at once barbarous and sensual as a pasha—I endured her homage sometimes, sometimes I rebuked it—my indifference or harshness served equally to increase the evil I desired to check. (pp. 183–84)

Crimsworth chafes at finding himself Mlle. Reuter's master, yet he is surprised to discover that he enjoys it—not in spite of feeling demeaned by degrading her, but *as a result* of being brought so low. The sense of degradation—by which the master comes to imitate the slave—itself becomes enjoyable (“low gratification”), until there seems to be no top-pleasure at all. Recapitulating this dynamic by projecting it onto a national screen, the narrator imagines himself a “sensual” Oriental despot: exalted by rank and gender, he is at the same time deplored for his “barbarous” race.¹⁹

This depiction of erotic pain does not fit either the Freudian model, in which a gendered subject moves between masochistic and sadistic phases, or the Deleuzian, in which masochistic and sadistic scenes prescribe gendered positions of master and slave. With its indeterminate gender and variable position, the debased subject in Brontë's portrayal determines the course of action, despite being penetrated. In the Brontëan dynamic neither gender nor the dominance/submission axis arrests subjects in position, for each participant identifies with the other; power is ceaselessly abdicated in order continually to be reinvented. The erotic itself becomes another site at which to worry over the material status of interiority, for these relations suggest that human subjectivity has a fundamentally corporeal basis, grounded not in anatomical sex (which in Brontë's works is usually regarded as the foundation of characters' embodiment), but in the body's degraded substance. Materiality conceptually precedes and corporeally overwhelms the attributes of gender in this account of reshaping the interior. Erotic attachments between characters are masochistic not simply because they adopt a language of penetration but because, in

¹⁹ On imperial contexts for and thematics in Brontë's work, see Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 27–55, on *Jane Eyre*; and Firdous Azim, *The Colonial Rise of the Novel* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 147–71, on *The Professor*.

reaching and affecting the heart or the spirit, such connections occur across a tissue of embodied substance.



Brontë combines obdurately enclosed inwardness with convoluted gender identifications throughout the novel, making it difficult for us to ascribe to Crimsworth any psychological development toward something like sympathy, with either other characters or the reader. As the novel advances, however, Brontë both pursues the material representation of interiority and expatiates on new and varied forms of debasement, penetration, and masochism. In building on Crimsworth's relations with his brother and with Mlle. Reuter, these dynamics become increasingly interactive, principally through channels of romance and pedagogy. An oddly *intersubjective* inwardness develops in Brontë's depiction of Crimsworth's courtship of and marriage to his pupil Frances Henri, for the peculiar reason that the novel's site of identification, as it progresses, partly shifts to her. The change in the location of abjection is accomplished so smoothly because of the powerful identification between William and Frances: like him, Frances is a teacher, and she assumes his old traits of reserve and self-denial, discipline and weedlike tenacity. By the time he encounters her in his Belgian classroom, William is no longer presented as "a plant growing in humid darkness"; now he is the suave horticulturist who brings her up and out. She in turn takes on the characteristics of his immature self, and as *her* inwardness receives narrative attention, he exfoliates it:

To speak truth, I watched this change much as a gardener watches the growth of a precious plant and I contributed to it too, even as the said gardener contributes to the development of his favourite. To me it was not difficult to discover how I could best foster my pupil, cherish her starved feelings and induce the outward manifestation of that inward vigour which sunless drought and blighting blast had hitherto forbidden to expand. Constancy of Attention—a kindness as mute as watchful, always standing by her, cloaked in the rough garb of austerity and making its real nature known only by a rare glance of interest, or a

cordial and gentle word; real respect masked with seeming imperiousness, directing, urging her actions—yet helping her too and that with devoted care. (p. 148)

Crimsworth portrays his favored pupil in the same language of gardens and nourishment that he had earlier used to describe himself.²⁰ He is the agent of Frances's blossoming who helps externalize her inner qualities, yet even as he assists her he keeps up the guard on his own interior: each is veiled to the other and yet visible beneath the veil. The identification between them creates the impression that their relations occur between two phases—one inchoate, the other advanced—of a single subject. The fact that the relationship takes place virtually within a single consciousness contributes to the story's vaunted inwardness.²¹

Crimsworth molds Frances into the woman that he wants her to be, and his effort is successful largely because, in so doing, he makes her into the woman he has already been. Evidence for William's immature femininity abounds in the novel's early phases. In describing himself by contrast with his brother (who, as if to secure his own masculinity, is surrounded by "a group of very pretty girls with whom he conversed gaily"), William says: "I looked weary, solitary, kept-down—like some desolate tutor or governess" (p. 23). Such is the prototypical Brontë heroine, and such is Frances Henri too, when she eventually appears. The fact that she has two men's names lends credence to the notion that she, in turn, is an immature male heroine. Brontë

²⁰ This reduplication of the protagonist occurs yet again at the novel's end, with the appearance of Crimsworth's son. In describing this child's response to the death of a favorite dog, Crimsworth repeats the garden-and-graveyard imagery that he had employed to portray first his own growth and then that of his wife: "I saw in the soil of his heart healthy and swelling germs of compassion, affection, fidelity—I discovered in the garden of his intellect a rich growth of wholesome principles—reason, justice, moral courage promised—if not blighted, a fertile bearing. . . . Yet I saw him the next day, laid on the mound under which Yorke [the dog] had been buried, his face covered with his hands" (p. 265). With the analogy between human growth and crops that bat-ten on feculent corpses, Brontë demonstrates how development comes about through incorporation of aversive matter.

²¹ Helene Moglen notes the similarity among the novel's characters and supplies a biographical explanation: "[Brontë] divides herself among the three central figures—Crimsworth, Frances, and Hunsden" (*Charlotte Brontë: The Self Conceived* [New York: Norton, 1976], p. 87).

makes gender itself seem volitional, practically determined by the exigencies of particular narrative configurations rather than affixed to either anatomical sex or a character's dominance or submission. Like the female author who adopts a male narrative voice and masculine pseudonym, the characters in the novel at times seem capable of choosing their gender.

With the emergence of the romance between William and Frances, the novel turns to what appear to be standard heterosexual relations, but it does not thereby diminish the threat that contact between them might be perilously penetrating for both parties. When the two lovers reunite after a painful separation, for example, the master, discovering his student rooted in the earth of a cemetery, approaches her unseen from the rear:

I put on my spectacles and passed softly close behind her. . . . while bending sullenly earthward beneath the pressure of despondency, while following with my eyes the track of sorrow on the turf of a grave-yard, here was my lost jewel dropped on the tear-fed herbage, nestling in the mossy and mouldy roots of yew-trees!

. . . I loved the tones with which she uttered the words:

“Mon maître! Mon Maître!”

I loved the movement with which she confided her hand to my hand; I loved her, as she stood there, penniless and parentless, for a sensualist—charmless, for me a treasure . . . personification of discretion and forethought, of diligence and perseverance, of self-denial and self-control. (pp. 167–69)

William admires Frances for those qualities of mind—of a well-defended, carefully shielded mind—that reflect him back to himself. Her value appears in virtue of the contrast (or, perhaps, the tantalizing contact) she makes with the fetid atmosphere surrounding her. He discovers the gemlike Frances emerging from the graveyard's putrescent matter much as Mlle. Reuter had earlier located a pleasure-giving “jewel” buried within him. Like Frances, this jewel cannot be reached without the dirt (imagined to surround it) contaminating the penetrator. In adapting the penetration imagery to Frances, William installs in her the same interior depth that marks him as an embodied subject. While the story might here appear to conform to the normative heterosexuality of the marriage plot, this institution

is nearly unrecognizable in the embodied form that Brontë lends it with these objects.

Frances's submission is the goad to William's desire, yet her "self-control," the sign of her desirability, serves magically to control *him*. Unlike Mlle. Reuter, whose penetration Crimsworth found intolerable and whose submission he thought repellent, Frances dominates him through her very self-degradation. Their romantic relations are not organized by traditional alignments between masculinity and dominance, yet neither do they conform to Sacher-Masoch's scene, wherein a phallic dominatrix rules over (even as she is ultimately motivated by) her devoted male slave. As Crimsworth indicates, he, the master, is held in thrall to his pupil, who in turn derives pleasure from being dominated by him:

The reproofs suited her best of all: while I scolded she would chip away with her pen-knife at a pencil or a pen; fidgetting a little, pouting a little, defending herself by monosyllables, and when I deprived her of the pen or pencil, fearing it would be all cut away, and when I interdicted even the monosyllabic defence, for the purpose of working up the subdued excitement a little higher, she would at last raise her eyes and give me a certain glance, sweetened with gaiety, and pointed with defiance, which, to speak truth, thrilled me as nothing had ever done; and made me, in a fashion (though happily she did not know it), her subject, if not her slave. (p. 177)

The mutual infliction of pain—he chides in order to excite her, she defies so as to captivate him—elaborates the relations between master and pupil. Frances actually makes the permanent institution of pedagogy a condition for her acceptance of William's proposal. Her insistence that the intercourse of husband and wife replicate that of teacher and student, while it nominally affirms supposedly ordinary, Freudian-style feminine masochism, also functions emphatically to enslave him:

"Monsieur désire savoir si je consens—si—enfin, si je veux me marier avec lui?"

"Justement."

"Monsieur sera-t-il aussi bon mari qu'il a été bon maître?"

"I will try, Frances."

A pause—then with a new, yet still subdued inflexion of the voice; an inflexion which provoked while it pleased me; accompanied too by a “sourire à la fois fin et timide” in perfect harmony with the tone:

“C’est à dire, Monsieur sera toujours un peu entêté, exigeant, volontaire—?”

. . . My arm, it is true, still detained her, but with a restraint that was gentle enough, so long as no opposition tightened it.

(pp. 223–24)²²

Perversely insisting upon speaking French (as she does whenever she wishes to irritate—and then to be punished by—William), Frances coerces him so he will submit to controlling her. “Provoked while it pleased”—this is how a Brontëan marriage is sustained. And sustained it is: “give me a voluntary kiss,” he commands after she accepts his proposal (p. 226). Ten years later, it continues: “She rarely addressed me in class, when she did—it was with an air of marked deference—it was her pleasure, her joy to make me still the Master in all things” (p. 252). Although such language could be read as exemplifying patriarchal control, it encodes a far more flexible, counternormative dynamic by virtue of the gender-inverted narration, the unstable power relations in the eroticism depicted, and the persistently material form taken by the intersubjective contact.²³



Through its plot of a master marrying his student, *The Professor* merges the realms of working, teaching, and loving; as all three activities fundamentally entail relations between self and body, they also overlap in representing ethe-

²² “Monsieur wishes to know if I agree—if, in short, I wish to marry him?” “Exactly.” “Will Monsieur be as good a husband as he has been a professor? . . .” “. . . smile at once shrewd and bashful. . . .” “That is, Monsieur will always be a little obstinate, demanding, willful—?” (my translation).

²³ In spite of Brontë’s manifest identifications with the narrator, Judith Mitchell attributes a stereotyped misogynistic male psyche to the narrator: “*The Professor* is in fact a novel of domination, . . . of fear of the feminine and the resulting obsessional need of the male to control both Self and Other” (*The Stone and the Scorpion: The Female Subject of Desire in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy* [Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994], p. 32).

real interior qualities by means of material form. We have seen how, in the arena of romance, erotic contact takes invasive metaphors, and how mental contact is itself imagined as erotic. In the register of pedagogy, Brontë's language of debasement and penetration is particularly pronounced, even apart from the erotic dimension realized in the teacher/student liaison.²⁴ In Crimsworth's description of his male Belgian pupils, for instance, they threaten him with immovable obstructions to the flow of knowledge:

Their intellectual faculties were generally weak, their animal propensities strong; thus there was at once an impotence and a kind of inert force in their natures; they were dull, but they were also singularly stubborn, heavy as lead and like lead, most difficult to move. . . . they recoiled with repugnance from any occupation that demanded close study or deep thought; had the abhorred effort been extorted from them by injudicious and arbitrary measures on the part of the professor, they would have resisted as obstinately, as clamorously as desperate swine; and though not brave, singly, they were relentless, acting en masse. (p. 67)

The teacher presents instruction as a process by which he forces intellectual matter against the students' resistant musculature. Like so much else in the novel, it is a filthy interaction, befouling master and pupil alike. Yet having established the repellently obdurate nature of this swinish, subliterate "mass," Crimsworth expounds not on the need for aggressive force to manage them, but instead on the value of moderation to pedagogy:

It was necessary then to exact only the most moderate application from natures so little qualified to apply; to assist, in every prac-

²⁴ More than in most *Bildungsromane*, the aims announced in *The Professor* are deliberately pedagogic: the narrator takes pains to detail "the system [he] pursued with regard to [his] classes," for such "experience may possibly be of use to others" (p. 67). The narrative is at points explicitly didactic, as when Crimsworth states: "My narrative is not exciting and, above all, not marvellous—but it may interest some individuals, who, having toiled in the same vocation as myself, will find in my experience, frequent reflections of their own" (p. 14). Still, the narrator-as-teacher has his sadistic impulses as well (for example, when he taunts his readers). Cathy Shuman discusses other sorts of embodied models for Victorian pedagogy (banker and midwife) in *Pedagogical Economies: The Examination and the Victorian Literary Man* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2000), pp. 158–69.

licable way, understandings so opaque and contracted; to be ever gentle, considerate, yielding even, to a certain point, with dispositions so irrationally perverse;—but, having reached that culminating point of indulgence—you must fix your foot, plant it, root it in rock—become immutable as the towers of Ste. Gudule, for a step—but half a step further, and you would plunge headlong into the gulph of imbecility—there lodged, you would speedily receive proofs of Flemish gratitude and magnanimity in showers of Brabant saliva and handfuls of Low-Country mud.

(pp. 67–68)

Through their superfluity of repugnant objective metaphors, these passages portray instruction as a struggle between a master and students who physically resist comprehending him. Confronted by their implacable hardness, the teacher must be harder still: to get learning into their heads is a battle of wills, enacted as one of brute strength. When the metaphor shifts, Crimsworth endures the risk of falling into the putrescent “gulph of imbecility,” replete with Flemish ordure. The dialectic continues one turn further, for he fears that in not being understood (penetrated) by the students, he will be materially infected (penetrated) with the foulness of their idiocy. Pedagogy thus amounts to Crimsworth’s debasement of himself down to the lowest position he can tolerate, identifying with the students (who are lower even than that) and then asserting his mastery over them. “Having thus taken them down a peg in their self-conceit,” he states, “the next step was to raise myself in their estimation” (p. 64).

Try as he might to dominate his charges, Crimsworth turns out to be enslaved by them. The rhetoric of his pedagogical approach to his male pupils resonates strikingly with the language of his female love-objects toward him, showing in another register how Brontë subordinates gender to other kinds of distinctions in this novel. Crimsworth repeatedly conceives of himself as standing above his students, in a posture echoing that which Mlle. Reuter assumes with respect to him: with a foot planted on the neck of the inferior, exacting obedience. The connection to Mlle. Reuter, along with the fact of Frances herself being a student, ensures not only that romance and pedagogy are always close together, but also that, here too, the means to mas-

tery is through degradation. Deleuze's discussion of the relation between pedagogy and masochism is instructive in this context:

[Masochism] is all persuasion and education. We are no longer [as in sadism] in the presence of a torturer seizing upon a victim and enjoying her all the more because she is unconsenting and unpersuaded. We are dealing instead with a victim in search of a torturer and [one] who needs to educate, persuade and conclude an alliance with the torturer in order to realize the strangest of schemes. . . . [The masochist] is essentially an educator and thus runs the risk inherent in educational undertakings.

(*Coldness and Cruelty*, pp. 20–21)

Contrary to the implications of a language in which *professeur* is synonymous with *maître*, Deleuze's masochist is the teacher who instructs a dominatrix in the lessons of his pain. Yet just as with romance, so too with pedagogy does Brontë's material imagery make the structural positions (now of teacher and student) reversible. For even if at first glance Crimsworth looked like a pedant, far from the Deleuzian educator-as-masochist, the relations between teacher and student make these roles as fungible as those of master and slave.

When his teaching takes him before a class of female students, Crimsworth both identifies with and expresses desire for them. His gender identifications and dominance status are so mobile that his approach to his female pupils, although more erotically charged than with the boys, again shows mastery and subjugation to be transmutable. In striving to differentiate his own abasement from that of his female pupils, Crimsworth points out that he sees more, and worse, of his charges than others do:

Know, O incredulous Reader! that a master stands in a somewhat different relation towards a pretty, light-headed, probably ignorant girl that occupied by a partner at a ball or a gallant on the promenade. . . . he finds her in the schoolroom, plainly dressed, with books before her; owing to her education or her nature books are to her a nuisance and she opens them with aversion, yet her teacher must instil into her mind the contents of these books—that mind resists the admission of grave information, it recoils, it grows restive; sullen tempers are shewn, dis-

figuring frowns spoil the symmetry of the face, sometimes coarse gestures banish grace from the deportment while muttered expressions, redolent of native and ineradicable vulgarity, desecrate the sweetness of the voice. . . . in short, to the tutor, female youth, female charms are like tapestry hangings of which the wrong side is continually turned towards him, and even when he sees the smooth, neat, external surface, he so well knows what knots, long stitches and jagged ends are behind that he has scarce a temptation to admire too fondly the seemly forms and bright colours exposed to general view. (pp. 119–20)

At once lowering himself beneath his students and lording his superiority over them, Crimsworth distinguishes his interest in the girls from that of a deluded suitor (“a partner at a ball”), with whom he nonetheless claims a right to compete. Teaching morphologically approximates lovemaking, as the master “must instil” knowledge “into [the student’s] mind” and thereby supply an antidote to external vulgarity and coarseness. According to the tapestry simile, the teacher sees behind or below his charges, confronting regions of neglect ordinarily hidden from sight; the unappealing backside comprises ignorance and bad temper, while the pleasing “external surface” includes fashion, accomplishment, and *politesse*. Like the plants and architectural elements, the tapestry introduces a metaphoric object for the person’s fleshly existence, suggesting in its unappetizing connotations the debasement consequent upon subjective embodiment itself.



Gazing upon such deceptive figures might promise an onlooker some hygienic distance from them, for vision ordinarily offers spatially remote, disembodied authority. And indeed (as more famously in *Villette*), discipline is maintained in the Belgian academy by means of “a building with porous walls, . . . a false ceiling; every room . . . has eye-holes and ear-holes, and what the house is, the inhabitants are, very treacherous” (*The Professor*, p. 145). Thanks largely to the authority of Foucault’s discussion of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, critics have often associated modern disciplinary power

with visual modes of domination.²⁵ Yet we might instead consider how in *The Professor* Brontë presents vision as one among many bodily sensations, challenging the sensory hegemony of distanced looking. Visual consumption in the novel is no less wholly embodied than other forms of apprehension, for while Mlle. Reuter's *pensionnat* symbolizes her deceitfulness ("what the house is, the inhabitants are"), Brontë, in describing the academy, reverses the procedure of metaphorizing a character as a building: here she animates the schoolhouse itself, portraying it as a body replete with ocular and auricular organs. Instead of opposing embodied authority, surveillance comes to seem corporeal: Brontë begs the question whether the "eye-holes and ear-holes" in "every room" are holes *for* the eyes and the ears or the bodily holes that *are* the eyes and the ears. Looking (unseen) and listening (unheard) are less a detached means of control than an elaboration on the dynamics of one person's insides being penetrated bodily by another.²⁶

²⁵ Shuttleworth emphasizes the disciplinarity in Brontë's surveillance thematics: "Crimsworth's language underscores the interdependence of theories of interiorized selfhood and external structures of surveillance. His sense of the primacy of a pre-existent realm of selfhood is illusory. As Foucault has argued, the modern interiorized subject is itself actively produced by the internalization of the social structures of surveillance" (*Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, p. 127). Heather Glen describes the correspondence between Brontë's writing and Victorian surveillance: "This imagery of looking and being looked at runs throughout the novel. . . . In an extraordinarily precise and consistent way, Charlotte Brontë seems to be exposing and articulating the logic of a whole society—a society whose essential dynamics are the same as those that Jeremy Bentham had sought to enshrine and objectify in his great plan for a 'Panopticon' some fifty years before" (Glen, introduction to Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor*, ed. Glen [London: Penguin, 1989], p. 18). In her illuminating discussion of the novel's insistence on antagonism, refusal, and negation, however, Glen eschews reading it as wholly controlled by disciplinary thinking.

²⁶ On the exaltation of visibility in this period of European culture, as well as its subsequent dethroning, see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1993), whose exhaustive notes chart the extensive critical literature on visuality. For discussions of "haptic visuality," a mode of looking that has tactile qualities, see Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2000); and Karen Jacobs, *The Eye's Mind: Literary Modernism and Visual Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2001). Compelling examples of Foucault-inflected discussions of disciplinarity in Brontë include Joseph Litvak, *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1992); and Bette London, "The Pleasures of Submission: *Jane Eyre* and the Production of the Text," *ELH*, 58 (1991), 195–213.

In this imaginative landscape, the human interior can be materially reached through even the most apparently insubstantial contact. In the passage quoted earlier in which Crimsworth describes his professional crisis as making him feel “like one sealed in a subterranean vault, who gazes at utter blackness,” he goes on to console himself with the knowledge that “there are chinks, or there may be chinks in the best adjusted masonry; there was a chink in my cavernous cell; for eventually I saw, or seemed to see a ray; pallid indeed, and cold, and doubtful, but still a ray, for it shewed that narrow path which Conscience had promised” (p. 195). If the body that encloses the self is a building, then it is not entirely sealed shut: sight itself is a means of egress and contact. As if to substantiate a mistrust of distance vision, both William and Frances (like the author herself) are nearsighted (see pp. 34–35, 191). This myopia impedes the lures of disembodied surveillance; figuratively, these characters, like the blind, read with their hands. Just as the porous schoolhouse bodies forth Mlle. Reuter’s capacity for spying, so too Crimsworth’s short sight (like so much else about his body) finds a vivid architectural inhabitation. Upon learning that a boarded-up window in his bedroom faces onto the garden of the girls’ school, William reports:

the first thing I did was to scrutinize closely the nailed boards, hoping to find some chink or crevice which I might enlarge and so get a peep at the consecrated ground; my researches were vain—for the boards were well joined and strongly nailed; it is astonishing how disappointed I felt—I thought it would have been so pleasant to have looked out upon a garden . . . to have studied female character in a variety of phases, myself the while, sheltered from view by a modest muslin curtain. (p. 65)

The blind window gives substantive form to the protagonist’s own dimness of vision: his search for a “chink or crevice” in the boards (echoing Mlle. Reuter’s distinctly haptic probing of him) extends the structural elaboration of his body. His self inhabits a body that is like a building; by analogy, his body inhabits a building that is itself like a body. Modesty moves metaleptically from the person of the narrator (or from the “female characters”) to become an attribute of the curtain. Such a displace-

ment serves modestly to indicate that, were the master to spy the female students, it would be tantamount to sexually violating them. Probing with the eyes shades into other penetrations, as we learn from the narrative's violently tactile metaphors for sight. Like loving and teaching, this embodied account of looking mutually implicates subject and object, because it gets inside both.



My dual interests in this essay, in the form of the interior and in the sensory channels for reaching it, indicate the critical approaches in relation to which I have situated the argument. On one hand, my analysis accords with the type of psychoanalytic theory that supplies a basis for conceiving of subjective inwardness in material terms. The Freudian model of the perception/consciousness/unconscious system (which Freud outlines most fully in *The Ego and the Id* [1923]) presents the ego as “first and foremost a bodily ego,” as precisely contiguous with the boundaries of the body.²⁷ In making use of the psychoanalytically derived concept of masochism, I have aimed to apply its insights about psychic arrangements among eroticism, domination, and embodiment, while eschewing its prescriptive dimensions, which locate such practices in perceived perversions that emerge from dysfunctional family dynamics (such as a failure to resolve the oedipal complex). Further, in focusing intensively on the language of particular scenes, I have resisted accounting psychologically for plot lines or character evolution—a usual (and often unarticulated) psychoanalytic approach that essentially retraces a novel's plot in order to expose its developmental logic.²⁸ I have instead sought to use psy-

²⁷ “The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface” (Freud, *The Ego and the Id* [1923], in *Standard Edition*, XIX, 26). Didier Anzieu fully elaborates the theoretical and psychological consequences of this proposition in *The Skin Ego*, trans. Chris Turner (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989). On the embodiment of ego, see also Laplanche, *Life and Death*; and Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986).

²⁸ For examples of oedipal strands in readings of *The Professor*, see John Maynard, *Charlotte Brontë and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 72–92; and Gezari, *Charlotte Brontë and Defensive Conduct*, pp. 30–58.

choanalysis as a tool for exploring the psychic and symbolic dimensions of Brontë's material presentation of the inside.

At the same time, my interest in the embodiment of subjectivity puts into practice some phenomenological methods for attending to depictions of sensory experience and interiority. Merleau-Ponty's theory that subjects and objects are mutually and reversibly constituted through bodily perception supplies a means of approaching the dynamic account of the interior that Brontë presents.²⁹ This argument stands against a type of reading that frequently devolves from Foucault—one that, like psychoanalysis, occasions interest in the literary representation of the body but tends to subsume such depictions to overarching claims for surveillance and disciplinary subjectivity. Such scholarship has exposed the ideological construction of conceptions of the body, understanding ideas about human interiority to follow from corporeal regulation and normalization. Yet for all the revelatory power of Foucault's reversal of Enlightenment dualism—condensed in the epigrammatic statement that modernity is signaled by the soul becoming “the prison of the body”—this mode of criticism sometimes loses track of the material substance in the representation of both, because the discursive operations of power are found always (and instantly) to succeed.³⁰ I have resisted assimilating bodily signification into a predetermined set of ideological

²⁹ Martin Jay supplies a helpful framework in which to understand Merleau-Ponty and the subsequent critiques of his phenomenology (see *Downcast Eyes*, pp. 263–328). Elizabeth Grosz articulates many of the useful features, as well as the limitations, of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology for an analysis of gender and sexuality: “For Merleau-Ponty, although the body is both object (for others) and a lived reality (for the subject), it is never simply object nor simply subject. It is defined by its relations with objects and in turn defines these objects as such—it is ‘sense-bestowing’ and ‘form-giving,’ providing a structure, organization, and ground within which objects are to be situated and against which the body-subject is positioned” (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* [Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 1994], p. 87).

³⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), p. 30. Comparing Foucault and Merleau-Ponty, Gail Weiss argues: “body images . . . are themselves subject to social construction . . . [and are the] disciplinary effects of existing power relationships as well as sources of bodily discipline. . . . On the other hand, too strong an emphasis on the social construction of our body images runs the danger of disembodiment by presenting them as merely the discursive effects of historical power relationships” (*Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* [New York: Routledge, 1999], p. 2).

mechanisms, aiming instead to stay with the verbal particulars for evoking embodied experience, and emphasizing its intersubjective aspects and the fungible quality of identity formations. By dwelling on some of the perplexing weirdness of these representations, we may discover possibilities other than assigning them to a grand narrative of oedipal anxiety or disciplinary coercion.

In presenting the self as physically inhabiting the body, Brontë conceives of a human subject actively engaged in palpable, reciprocal exchange with the world, including other embodied subjects. Through the body's sensory channels and orifices, the material world comes into and goes out of the self, altering and affecting mind, soul, and heart. These processes generate a self at once bounded in the body's material substance and open to being changed and reshaped. The interior being is both inextricable from the flesh and mutable; its identifications (masculine or feminine, dominant or submissive, master or student) shift fluidly, while it remains fundamentally embodied. In this literary performance the senses open the subject to the world, allowing the interior to be imagined as both material and ethereal, physical and metaphysical; the body that encloses the subject is mutually constitutive of its mental, emotional, and spiritual contents.

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