Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

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Charlotte Brontë's fourth and final novel, *Villette* (1853), chronicles the experiences of a novice teacher, Lucy Snowe, who must learn a great deal before, in her chosen professional capacity, she truly acquires virtue. Platonic themes of attention, recollection and reasoned reflection are amply represented in the process, a process that, for this protagonist, is beset by struggle and many challenges. Lucy is a solitary figure, unstable, and, where she travels to, entirely bereft of family, friends and community. After she arrives in a new country where she will become a novice teacher, Lucy suffers despair and dispossession and a great sense of rage. She rages significantly against an older man who is in fact an ultimately effective mentor to her. Her story is a stark and sometimes troubling one. What elevates Lucy's struggles above the plane of the merely personal is not only that they are psychologically rich and compelling and apt for occasioning readers to reflect. Lucy's struggles are also concerned with appreciation of beauty: in their regard for what is best and most beautiful, her struggles concern fundamentally what it is to grow and develop morally. The inner growth and progress of the novice teacher occurs as she confronts the complicated and at times confusing process of how to be herself and at the same time how to connect with, as well as to earn, in her world, the respect of both her students and her fellow teachers. In time, and with mentor support, Lucy acquires ways to channel her anger and to dismiss her ego. She oversteps herself and so can give due attention to the world around her, acknowledging its complexities. Before Lucy can herself become an effective teacher, she has to learn that attention is an ever-ongoing task, ever relational and ego-less.

Published just two years prior to her death at age 38, *Villette* is considered to be the most autobiographical of Brontë's four novels. (Her other novels are *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Shirley* (1849) and *The Professor* which was published posthumously in 1857, although completed in 1846.) *Villette* is considered by many to be superior to her earlier and arguably better-known work, *Jane Eyre*. *Villette* has been interpreted quite variously by literary scholars since the time of its publication. Some see in it chiefly themes of loneliness and social isolation, societal limitations, suppressed love, despair, longing and unexpressed

female yearnings for self-expression. (Among such interpreters are Allott 1974, Eagleton 1975, Gaskell 1975, Gérin 1967, Gilbert and Gubar 1979, Gordon 1994, Heilbrun 1989.) These interpretations point also to the limited employment opportunities that were available to Victorian women. Unquestionably the book is a powerful cause for reflection surrounding these themes and points. Yet *Villette* may also legitimately be discussed as a text about pedagogy — about education in its own right.

This paper undertakes this uncommon, and overdue, course of interpretation. Building in particular on the work of Menon (2003), it aims to explore further frontiers of reading *Villette*. It reconceives the novel as a study in the growth of pedagogical attention, and so marries it intellectually with the mid-twentieth century philosophical works of Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch. It argues that when *Villette* explores the tumultuous experiences of a young and inexperienced person's foray first into a foreign country and then into the utter foreignness of the school classroom, it at the same time critiques the average or everyday concept of pedagogy. In place of the average or everyday concept of pedagogy, it studies pedagogical attention exactly as it is understood by Weil and Murdoch. *Villette* exemplifies education as a "leading out" from the self by way of reasoned, carefully recollective and reflective self-examination.

Villette shows us a feisty, petulant and self-absorbed young woman who is ultimately transformed, partly by mentor support, but most chiefly through her own introspection and deeply considered reflection. Ultimately Lucy embraces humility and respect and rises to the difficult challenge of pedagogical attention, drawing herself into a condition that is at last beautiful, and so choice-worthy. This paper argues that, by the light of the philosophical writings of Weil and Murdoch, it is through *attention* that Lucy Snowe finally finds a way to balance her emotion and her reason, and finds a way to see herself as one among a community, rather than standing any longer aloof, insular and ostensibly self-reliant. The paper is organised into four sections. Section 1 connects the novel to the themes of *bildung* and pedagogical attention. Section 2 considers attention as 'method' and provides some contextual information. Section 3 analyses examples from *Villette* in the light of Weil's and Murdoch's ideas about attention, respect and humility, and Section 4 considers some connections between pedagogical attention and the authority of the teacher. A brief conclusion follows.

Section 1: *Villette* and pedagogical attention

Villette is a useful text to consider in an analysis of pedagogical attention since it depicts not only teachers and students, but (and possibly more importantly), a teacher as a student. This piquant novel concerns a passionate novice teacher who, not without being herself sharply and continually challenged by another, older teacher, comes, through attention, to develop herself and her craft. Because the novel is narrated through the recollections of Lucy Snowe, it conveys signal and clarion insights and reflections into her mental and emotional experiences. The novel is at times a frank and unflattering portrait of an anguished soul. We see Lucy's inner struggles and angry protests against some of the injustices and constraints of her time. We note Lucy's fears, failures and frailties, and her slow progress in pursuit of independent, professional standing as a teacher. Lucy's coming into her own in the end also provides opportunity for us to grow.

Villette is here considered an example of a Bildungsroman, a novel of character formation. The Bildungsroman is a literary genre concerned with the formation or moral growth (*Bildung*) of the fictional protagonist. In a Bildungsroman, character development is central. Swales (1978) insists that the Bildungsroman genre operates not as an extra-literary overlay, but "as a structuring principle within the palpable stuff of an individual literary creation" (p. 12). That is to say, the identifiable features of the Bildungsroman can operate *within* the imaginative literature itself, rather than as an imposed or overlaid structure, and that as a consequence, any seeming thwarting of reader expectation regarding the protagonist's forward progress can be seen, paradoxically, as a way of making true the genre's validity. Swales' position is relevant to the current paper's focus on pedagogical attention in *Villette*. As Swales explains (p. 12), the term Bildungsroman relates not only to the 'Bildung' of the protagonist, but also to the growth in understanding on the part of the reader as well. Swales notes further that this understanding of the Bildungsroman genre has implications for our reading of many nineteenth century novels, given the way that the Bildungsroman genre "transforms the traditional novel by investing it with a new psychological and intellectual seriousness' (p. 13). Swales notes that "in its finest examples, this novel tradition is never an unproblematic odyssey toward human wholeness" (Swales, p. 141).

Villette participates in the tradition of the Bildungsroman also since it emphasises not so much Lucy's achievement of an ultimate goal but rather the ways in which Lucy progresses. The novel illustrates Lucy's difficult journey towards what Weil termed "de-creation". Murdoch called the same accomplishment "unselfing". The idea is that the best way to progress oneself is to make selfhood significantly irrelevant. It is to grasp one's own context or situation, or the context or situation of other people, egolessly, and thus in a way that is no way specific to oneself. In a similar way, objectivity as attainment in any science, or the aesthetic pleasure that flows from that which is truly beautiful — beautiful not just to this or that eye but beautiful in fact, are ego-less accomplishments, as much devoid as possible of connection back to any particular self. Yet the irony is always that a best or most choice-worthy human life will include ego-less accomplishments like these. Lucy makes progress towards that ideal, from starting points that suggest that she would never achieve this. *Villette*, which charts the chronological change in Lucy's understanding of herself in relation to others, leaves open the question whether it is solely M. Paul who helps Lucy develop her inner self, whether she develops that entirely through her own inner reflection and contemplation, or whether the main point about Lucy's progress is that it can have been neither of these things in isolation from the other.

Perhaps like Brontë herself, *Villette's* protagonist becomes a teacher more out of necessity than out of any particular sense of calling. Teaching is a profession for which Lucy appears rather ill-suited, both by temperament and by mental disposition. She is depressive, emotionally insecure, evasive and unreliable. She is subject to flights of fancy, and is not yet awakened to the power of reasoned thought. Lucy must come to a better understanding of her own self before she can lay claim to the role of a teacher able to attend to the needs of her own students. To achieve this level of understanding, Lucy's reason and emotion must be brought into better balance. Initially, Lucy is all emotion, too vulnerable and needy of being nurtured herself to be able to see her own deficiencies, including her own lack of respect and self-respect. Until Lucy has developed her capacity for true attention, she frequently appears to use her own energy to sabotage herself.

The importance in effort of attention in the sense due to Weil and Murdoch that I am here using, is established early in the novel. Lucy starts out not fully engaged with the world — her unfortunate life circumstances require her to attend to her basic needs for shelter and work ahead of other priorities, and these basic needs render her self-preoccupied, mistrustful

and disconnected. She is not only depressive and emotionally insecure but also, it becomes clear, pathologically evasive. As Menon (2003) notes, Lucy is presented as a self who is divided. Lucy herself declares "I seemed to hold two lives — the life of thought, and that of reality" (Brontë, 2004, p. 85). As many have previously noted, Lucy's surname emphasises her cold and frosty manner, which contrasts with her inner fury and fervour. She is subject to states of extreme emotional turmoil. She experiences tumultuous thoughts, passions, anxieties, and is unable to see (as her mentor teacher will do), the ways that these tendencies impede her growth.

At the start of the narrative Lucy, a single twenty-three-year-old English woman who, upon finding herself with neither employment nor any immediate prospects of work in England, resolves to travel to the continent to start a new life. Lucy has little experience of the world, and finds the ensuing sea voyage bewildering and arduous. Her luggage is lost when she arrives in Brussels and, although she is given directions to her intended destination (Villette, a fictional town in Brussels), it is night time and she loses her way. Fortuitously, Lucy finds herself outside her intended destination, a *pensionnat* (a private school for girls). Despite the late hour, Madame Beck, the school's director, proves not unsympathetic to Lucy's plight, and agrees to speak with her. Before making any decisions, however, she calls upon her cousin and teaching colleague, M. Paul, and instructs him to give Lucy his undivided attention. She asks him to make a phrenological reading of Lucy's character: "'I want your opinion. We know your skill in physiognomy; use it now. Read that countenance'" (p. 73). Although it is hinted that his reading is complex, he nevertheless recommends that Madame Beck take Lucy in: "Engage her. If good predominates in that nature, the action will bring its own reward; if evil – eh bien! ma Cousine, ce cera toujours une bonne oeuvre" [Oh well, Cousin, it will be a good deed anyway] (p. 74). By the nature of this response, M. Paul demonstrates his capacity for benevolence towards Lucy as a person in need.

In this way, M. Paul establishes an important pedagogical function in *Villette*. It is precisely because of his positive reading of Lucy's physiognomy that Lucy is admitted to Madame Beck's establishment in the first place. It is he who helps realise the possibility of Lucy's future. Without being granted entry to the school that evening, Lucy risked being lost to destitution. From their initial encounter, M. Paul demonstrates his ability to "read" Lucy generously and lovingly. (That his reading is by the supposed art of phrenology is an incorporation into the story of vogue presumed science at the time.) M. Paul's generous and

loving reading of Lucy connects importantly with the notion of attention as understood by both Weil and Murdoch, as really looking, "making those little peering efforts of imagination which have such important results" (Murdoch, 2001, p. 42). From their initial meeting, M. Paul continues to pay close attention to Lucy. He determines her potential as well as ascertains her weaknesses. He concludes from his reading of her that she needs to be encouraged to extend herself. As Lucy's mentor, M. Paul will later draw Lucy to discover herself what she is truly capable of. M. Paul has a positive impact on her life -- he guides her to improve herself and thereby to improve her happiness and her prospects. He awakens her to further her education because he judges that she is ready. He exemplifies the power of a teacher to open a mind.

The majority of the novel recounts, through Lucy's eyes, her struggles to find her way at Madame Beck's *pensionnat*, not only as a novice teacher, but as one whose challenge is to become a balanced and integrated person. Events include an account of Lucy's experience as an actor in the school vaudeville, her torrid first experiences as a classroom teacher, several occasions in which she is emotionally overcome by a spectral apparition, as well as a period of serious and complete mental affliction and breakdown. A significant portion of the book focuses on Lucy's social circumstances and her awkward, turbulent, and at times repressed, feelings for two male professionals who figure predominantly in her life, first Dr John, and subsequently her French literature teacher and eventual mentor, M. Paul. Of these two men, it is the literature teacher who emerges as the truer mentor for Lucy, the one who proves worthier of being (platonically) loved.

Section 2: Attention as method

Villette is a carefully plotted and crafted work, one that places considerable demands on the reader. The text of the novel is dense, poetic, and at times difficult. While largely written in English, various passages of the work are expressed in French. (Footnotes are provided that translate these various passages into English for us.) The novel is set largely in a French-speaking land, a land that thereby poses challenges of linguistic and cultural interpretation for both the English-speaking characters and the English-speaking reader. We are made to participate in Lucy's own feelings of foreignness and alienation. The novel is explicitly scholarly: there are frequent historical and literary allusions including to Greek sources, Shakespearian sources, as well as Orientalist and Biblical sources (also fully

footnoted). Lucy's narrative, like Plato's Socratic dialogues, is delivered retrospectively as a memoir structured around her sometime unreliable memories. Also like Plato's Socratic dialogues, the events of *Villette* take place in various places around the city and thus the wider precinct of the school — the civic theatre, the municipal garden, the public park. The wiser, older man who acts as a mentor teacher to Lucy sometimes epitomises stand-out educational thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, allusion to whose writings further mark this work as one that is fundamentally a novel of education.

Villette is an educative work in other ways as well. The work is structured in a way that presents the reader with discontinuities and ambiguities, features that demand careful attention. Like an aporetic Socratic dialogue, this novel perplexes us and ends leaving us with doubts still to be mulled over. We are thereby required to think matters through for ourselves, rather than to receive definitive clarity from the text. The novel appears to have been consciously designed to pose questions rather than to provide answers, and it is a work that requires several re-readings. (Mary-Anne Evans judged that to read *Villette* three times would be more profitable than to read just once each, as many other novels as could be read in the same amount of time.) The text contains many doublings, echoes, parallels, pairings, echoes and oppositions, all of which invite layers of interpretation. The reader, who operates within the limits of Lucy's remembered and reconstructed account, has sometimes to query the relationship between the details that Lucy provides, and other possible readings of events. To be called upon to read in this way, as it were *against* Lucy's narration, is a feature of the novel that goes to the very essence of pedagogical attention.

Narrated by a much older Lucy Snowe (whose hair "which till a late period withstood the frosts of time, lies now at last, white, under a white cap, like snow beneath snow" (Brontë, 2004, p. 51), *Villette* is Lucy's reflection on her past and, with the benefit of hindsight, her account of its effects in shaping her life. The novel is a reconstruction of Lucy's memories, extending back as far as her early teens, although largely concentrated on her eighteen-month tenure as a novice teacher at Madame Beck's *pensionnat*.

As an account of a much earlier time in her life, there are times when Lucy's memory fails her, and she is simply unable to recollect the relevant details. Sometimes she declares "I remember no more" (p. 181). As Menon (2003) notes, it is entirely plausible that any person would find it difficult to reconstruct with complete accuracy an account of their past, particularly someone as originally unwell as Lucy. As the novel proceeds, however, various

inconsistencies in Lucy's account start to emerge and it becomes apparent that, for whatever reason, Lucy is not an altogether reliable narrator. Increasingly the reader realises that there is every reason to pay attention to detail, and to be on the look-out not only for possible slanted readings on Lucy's part, but also, for potentially telling omissions by Lucy of details that, had they been included earlier, would have been important and helpful narrative details. Brontë's reader must likewise attend with care, that is to say, read with attention, and sift and store information so as to create intelligent comprehension of the narrative. *Villette* is a novel that repeatedly calls on the reader to reflect on the reliability of the narrator who is telling the story. Indeed, to accept Lucy's "guiding" narrative voice uncritically and without thinking would be to fail entirely to notice what pedagogical attention is all about.

Menon (2003) observes that Lucy' tendency to neurotic or fearful fantasies not only impedes her progress and understanding of others, it also gets in the way of our understanding of her. That Lucy is not a forthcoming narrator becomes increasingly clear as the novel progresses. She neither delivers a straightforward story, nor works to establish an open and trusting connection with her reader. On the contrary, she admits she can be mischievous, teasing and ironic. Not only does Lucy misdirect the reader, she also admits to a spirit of mischievous play: "I liked, for instance, to see M. Emanuel [M. Paul] jealous; it lit up his nature, and woke his spirit" (p. 171). While Lucy's voice is human, it sometimes has a slightly sarcastic edge. Although she displays occasional flashes of humour, this can have a sardonic tone. When Dr John enjoins her to be ever cheerful, she retorts inwardly "No mockery in this world ever sounds to me so hollow as that of being told to *cultivate* happiness… Happiness is not a potato" (p. 278).

Gilbert and Gubar (1979, p. 416) note that Lucy is a persistently self-effacing narrator. She resists revealing herself to the reader and "often seems to be telling any story but her own." Lucy readily admits that she has a tendency towards secrecy and non-disclosure: "[I]t suited me to be alone — quite alone" (Brontë, 2004, p. 502). She expresses a preference to withdraw "to a quiet nook, whence unobserved I could observe …" (p. 156). Lucy conceals critical information, deflects our attention, masks details, and sometimes withholds from the reader critical information, only to reveal it some chapters further on. She never tells anything until she is ready, and it falls to the reader to detect these matters and to seek to clarify or revisit details previously obscured in the text. These features all serve to reinforce the importance of attention as a signal concept in this text.

Because Lucy alternates character names within a chapter — or sometimes even within a paragraph — the reader is potentially distracted, the attention momentarily diverted from the character's true identity. In another of her tricks, Lucy deliberately withholds a version of the name that would reveal more to the reader than she wishes to disclose. For example, she withholds from the reader for many chapters the fact that she first reconnects with Dr John at the coach station on her arrival in the town of Villette, as well as failing to mention that the two education appraisers who come to examine Lucy's writing skills are, coincidentally, the same two people who had harassed her on her first arrival. Lucy is infuriated at the reappearance of these two as her examiners, and it is this that motivates her to write for them an impassioned and pointed improvisation on the theme of "Human Justice" (p. 445). Yet whereas Plato's *The Republic* concerns Justice in the abstract, considered as a Form, Brontë, and Lucy, are drawn to consider Justice rather more concretely. They do not differ from Plato in holding that the subject of Justice is to be considered reflectively, by a rational consideration, but they are perhaps not on all fours with Plato regarding the abstractness of his thinking.

Although Lucy is very keen to observe others, she reveals that she dislikes it intensely when she has to submit to being observed herself. She does not like to find herself under someone else's gaze. It is not clear whether Lucy breaks M. Paul's eyeglasses accidentally or deliberately, but there is a suggestion that, if she can't stop his gaze upon her, she can nevertheless use other means to impede his ability to see her clearly (p. 362). She prefers to observe others from the side-line, in secret, and she does not herself wish for Madame Beck, M. Paul, or anyone else, to be able to read her countenance. She consistently avoids direct encounters — she hides in shadows, uses clothing, poor lighting, or means of disguise to conceal herself: "I kept rather in the shade and out of sight, not wishing to be immediately recognised" (p. 240). As Menon (2003) observes, Brontë's novel is so designed that despite Lucy's efforts at concealment of herself, she simultaneously reveals the harmful effects of this "bottling up" (p. 170) of her emotions on her mental and physical heath, and after some time, on her human functioning. Lucy's efforts to be aloof, private and separate, and her inclination to keep herself at a distance from others are for her at one point catastrophic.

During the course of the novel we learn a great deal about Lucy's spirit and strength of will, and also about her physical and emotional susceptibilities. She has an uncompromising personality and while she is a bright spark intellectually, ambitious for

intellectual development, she is also censorious, intolerant, and quick to judge. She is depicted as initially neurotic, mentally fragile and emotionally volatile. She uses isolation as a strategy to cope with her anxieties, but in her failure to make meaningful connections with others, she appears to lose entirely her sense of who she is herself. Lucy strains to withhold convulsive feelings and emotions and she suffers from an implied sexual agitation and frustration that threatens to destabilize her (see further, Menon, 2003). She is constitutionally uneasy and irritable and admits that she willingly inflicts unpleasant and difficult behaviour on others: “I continued silent and icy” (p. 540).

In Lucy, Brontë presents human characteristics that are real and unpleasant and ultimately self-limiting. In truth, Lucy displays various familiar yet unpleasant aspects of human personality. Because she has been in the beginning self-preoccupied and not always entirely pleasant, her capacity to connect with others, or to see the good in others, has been limited. Lucy has been someone who has yet to learn to give attention to a reality beyond her own self. Lucy has been subject to swings of mood, has been frequently melancholy and low spirits, and she has been one to tend to dwell on egotistical concerns. She has been unstable emotionally and, for most of the novel, appears to be on the verge of deep depression. She has suffered great terrors of the mind and her state at one time or another in her past is repeatedly described as “morbid”.

Lucy is frustrated not only by her own life circumstances, but also because of her own temperament. She has suffered great terrors of the mind and she describes her state at one time or another in terms of being morbid, or subdued by what she calls “that darkest foe of humanity – constitutional melancholy” (p. 238), a condition which today might well be diagnosed as clinical depression. Lucy is often frustrated by her situation. She both feels herself to be, and wants to be seen by others to be, a seriously active thinker. As her readers we encounter Lucy as a person who, in part through her own personality and behaviour, comes to experience much frustration in her life, including intellectual frustration. We see that too that she is in some ways, her own worst enemy.

Brontë implies that Lucy’s intellectual energies need to be restrained and brought in order if she is to maximise her own human potential. Lucy must learn to contain her emotional responses and better balance her emotions with her capacity for reason. In this sense, Lucy’s character calls to mind Plato’s story of *Phaedrus* in which Socrates recounts an allegory of reason as charioteer driving two horses. Plato’s effort is to explain to his audience

his notion of a divided soul needing to be held to be one. Socrates explains that the soul can be likened to the "natural union of a team of [two] winged horses and their charioteer. The gods have horses and charioteers that are themselves all good and come from good stock besides, while everyone else has a mixture" (*Phaedrus* 246 in *Plato Collected Works* (Ed. J. M Cooper), p. 524). Socrates explains that whereas the gods have horses that work in equal harmony with the charioteer, everyone else has in their team of two horses only one horse, honour-directed spirit, that tends to be beautiful and naturally obedient to reason, whereas their second horse, pleasure and appetite-directed, is by nature unmanageable, and needs to be worked upon to become tempered and restrained. The charioteer's effort must be to sweep through the sky with the two horses all as a unit. It is this fine balance between knowledge and self-knowledge that Lucy must, and ultimately does, achieve. By the close of the novel, Lucy's pedagogical attention is established.

It must be acknowledged that Lucy's life contains many setbacks. She has no family and no familial ties. Possibly due to some previous tragedy in her life, she has neither parents nor siblings. A shipwreck in her early life is mentioned but beyond the brief details that "I must have fallen overboard…the ship was lost, the crew perished" (Brontë, 2004, p. 39), no further facts are provided. Lucy has been mentally fragile and emotionally volatile. Brussels is an unfamiliar place to her geographically, culturally, socially, and linguistically. Lucy has been uprooted and homeless: "To feel homesick I would need to have a home" (p. 307).

Lucy's suffering in the absence of human companionship or contact is reminiscent of Weil's own suffering. (For biographical details on Weil's life see further Fielder, xiv-xxvi in Weil, 2009.) Lucy observes that "the world can understand well enough the process of perishing for want of food: perhaps few persons can enter into or follow out that of going mad from solitary confinement" (p. 303). Weil summarises such an experience of extreme suffering or affliction thus: "Suffering, teaching and transformation. What is necessary is not that the initiated should learn something, but that a transformation should come about in them which makes them capable of receiving the teaching" (Weil, 1997, p. 135). Weil considers that suffering such as this can help to form us as attentive, loving and humble beings. This connects with Lucy's depressive experience of solitude during the school vacation.

During the long school summer break, Lucy suffers from a lack of intellectual stimulation or a sense of human connection. It is likely that the lack of contact either with other people or with any intellectual connections to the arts and literature that school life had

provided for her, precipitates her into a state of deep depression: “I wanted companionship, I wanted friendship, I wanted counsel. I could find none of these in closet, or chamber, so I went and sought them, in church and confessional” (Brontë, 2004, pp. 206-7). It is also during this period that Lucy is called upon to provide complete care and assistance for a “poor, deformed and imbecile pupil” for several weeks (p. 172). It seems that this additional demand on Lucy, on top of her isolation and loneliness, is what precipitates a major breakdown. She later describes the time she spends caring for Marie Broc as nothing short of “terrible”. She reflects that when during the extended holiday period she was alone with Marie Broc, the “strange deformed companion”, a state of “sorrowful indifference to existence often pressed on me — a despairing resignation to reach betimes the end of all things earthly” (pp. 173-4). Lucy experiences fear, resentment and resistance towards her charge who “rarely spoke, and would sit for hours together moping and mowing and distorting her features with indescribable grimaces, it was more like being prisoned with some strange tameless animal, than associating with a human being” (p. 174). When she later tells M. Paul that it was “terrible” to be alone with Marie Broc, he admonishes her sternly and calls her an “egotist” (p. 227). While he admits that Marie Broc is a difficult and demanding person, he tells Lucy that although Marie Broc’s unfortunate situation may stir negative sentiments, by the light of any thoroughgoing consideration, it calls for leniency and empathy:

> Her personal appearance, her repulsive manners, her often unmanageable disposition, irritated his temper and inspired him with strong apathy...On the other hand, her misfortunes constituted a strong claim on his forbearance and compassion — such a claim as was not in his nature to deny. (Brontë, 2004, p. 227.)

In this instance, M. Paul further demonstrates his capacity to give attention to another in just the meaning intended by Weil. Weil reminds us that true attention helps us to see what we are otherwise disposed to overlook completely: attention means to consider what another person is “going through” (Weil, 2009, p. 64). However, in this situation it is Lucy who is herself also a suffering person. In the condition she is in, she is utterly unable to show fellow-feeling to Marie Broc as another suffering person. Lucy says that “a want of companionship maintained in my soul the cravings of a most deadly famine...I almost wished to be covered in with earth and turf” (Brontë, 2014, p. 175), and “I had a pressure of affliction on my mind of which it would hardly any longer endure the weight” (p. 178). Weil reminds us that “as for those who have themselves been mutilated by affliction, they are in no state to help anyone at all, and they are almost incapable of ever wishing to do so. Thus, compassion for the afflicted

is an impossibility" (Weil, 2009, p. 69.) In her own affliction, Lucy loses all sense of dignity and purpose, and she is totally devoid of goodness:

> [I]ndescribably was I torn, racked and oppressed in mind. …galled was my inmost spirit with an unutterable sense of despair about the future. Motive there was none why I should try to recover or wish to live; and yet quite unendurable was the pitiless and haughty voice in which Death challenged me to engage his unknown terrors. (Brontë, 2004, pp. 176-177.)

Rorty (1989, p. xvi, cited in Menon, 2003) also comments upon the importance of "…the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers…[S]olidarity is created by increasing our sensitivity to particular details of the pain and humiliation of the other, unfamiliar sorts of people." To understand Lucy, we have to see her as herself a suffering person — someone who, given her own turmoil, is as yet unable to show care for others. Because of her own desperate situation, Lucy is largely insensitive to the difficulties of other people. It is only as part of her recovery from this dark time that we see Lucy start to make some small progress in respect of her ability to give attention to others and to master her own inner turmoil.

Section 3 Links to Weil and Murdoch

In this example, we see further links to the writing of Weil who describes such affliction as a devastating experience, "an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death, made irresistibly present to the soul by the attack or immediate apprehension of physical pain" (Weil, 2009, p. 68). Only once Lucy realises that there really *is* no answer to her distress does she begin to demonstrate a subtle change in perspective, and demonstrate a slight change in her readings of the world. The occasion of Lucy's crisis comes at the end of Volume One of *Villette*, indicating that this is indeed intended to be a turning point in the novel. It is following this major crisis that Lucy quite literally finds herself in a situation that is both familiar and yet entirely unfamiliar (the relocated household of the Bretton family). It is following this crisis that she resolves to bury her ultimately uninteresting letters from Dr John, and it is also following this crisis that she is finally able to countenance a different reading of the 'spectral' nun, although it will appear before her several further times.

To signal Lucy's capacity for moral progress and improvement, Brontë employs a metaphor of forward movement to imply her "improving" or ascending trajectory. For

example, when Lucy goes to visit a friend to find out about possibly heading to London, she is moved by the natural phenomenon of the Aurora Borealis, whose energy literally inspires her to "go out hence" (Brontë, 2004, p. 49). A further occasion takes place the following evening. From her London hotel bed, Lucy hears the chimes of St Paul's Cathedral (whose name and cultural associations anticipate the presence of her future teaching mentor). Lucy reports that she experiences a "strong, vague persuasion that I was better to go forward than backward, and that I *could* go forward (p. 52). A subsequent example occurs when Lucy responds to Madame Beck's question to Lucy when given the opportunity to enter the classroom as a teacher, whether Lucy will go forward, or backwards. Despite her misgivings, Lucy declares her resolve to proceed "En avant" (p. 86).

The metaphor of Lucy's forward momentum, her *Bildung*, connects with Murdoch's notion of moral progress as incremental, on-going, evolving (Murdoch 2001, p. 76). Attention, as detailed by Murdoch, is a process that is "endless" (p. 23). Murdoch calls us to recognise the importance of attention as central to our moral vision of the world. "More than simply looking", Murdoch says "attention is the characteristic and proper mark of an active moral agent" (p. 35). Murdoch argues that *attention* is what enables us to see and behave in the light of moral considerations. Attention develops our sensitivity to those around us. Attention is the means by which we are able to factor in wider considerations than just our own.

Lucy's task of learning to see things 'as they really are', calls for on-going attention to detail, and to looking more carefully at what is in front of her. Her repeated apprehension of a ghostly nun offers further links to Murdoch's notion of attention. The spectral nun occurs at various times in the novel, including in the attic (when Lucy is preparing her lines for the theatrical performance), in the garden, and in the dormitory. These apparitions cause Lucy considerable emotional distress, but are subsequently explained away as a coincidence that involves a childish prank by a young man who is pursuing Ginevra. In hindsight, Lucy comes to understand that her apprehensions of the ghostly nun, while very real to her at the time, are explicable in terms of coincidence and a silly prank. The repeated appearance of Lucy's ghost connects to Lucy's susceptibility to thoughts of fantasy (as opposed to imagination). For Murdoch, fantasy is the opposite of imagination. Murdoch warns that humans are too readily distracted by thoughts that are fanciful, inward-looking, self-limiting: "Any story which we tell about ourselves consoles us since it imposes patterns upon something which might

otherwise seem intolerably chancy and incomplete" (Murdoch, 2001, p. 87). Murdoch reminds us of the need to keep the attention "fixed upon the real situation and to prevent it from returning surreptitiously to the self with consolations of self-pity, resentment, fantasy and despair. She notes too that "[i]t is a *task* to some to see the world as it is…we act rightly 'when the time comes' not out of strength of will but out of the quality of our own usual attachments and with the kind of energy and discernment which we have available" (p. 89).

In order to grow in understanding both of herself and of the world, Lucy's task is to attend better to contexts, and to widen the way she reads situations. Lucy has to be prepared to rise above her own individual perspective. To do this, she has to accept there may be other readings, other ways of seeing. This realisation does not come easily to Lucy, for she has a habit of viewing the world very much in terms of her own strategies for concealment. She is initially a poor reader of others — not only of M. Paul, but also of her students as well. She views them in terms of her own cultural and national prejudices and makes no effort to understand them as individuals. She initially describes her own students in terms derisory — as creatures in need of being trained and subdued: "I never knew them rebel against a wound given to their self-respect: the little they had of that quality was trained to be crushed, and it rather liked the pressure of firm heel, than otherwise" (Brontë, 2004, p. 92). For Lucy at this point in her development as a teacher, classroom teaching is a battle, a form of combat to eliminate the voices of her students, rather than an opportunity for her to develop her art or craft. Lucy finds teaching frightening and tiring, at least until she finds her way. Initially she is constricted, controlling, and overbearing. She withholds herself from her students and is fearful and anxious. Lucy cannot give her attention to her students until she is herself fully well.

Lucy's disrespect for others extends to the wider community of Villette as well. She is as uncomplimentary and patronising towards the European culture of Labassecour as she is to her own pupils. Perhaps in part due to her own sense of physical displacement and her own insecurity, Lucy sets herself pridefully apart from the local people. She considers herself culturally superior in all respects. When she observes M. Paul deliver a patriotic public speech to the local people she observes coolly, and with some conceit: "Who would have thought the flat and fat soul of Labassecour could yield political convictions and national feelings, such as were now strongly expressed?" (p. 344). Lucy has such misplaced sense of her English superiority over the culture she has entered that she carries a powerful sense of

herself as “above” the people she is now living among. In this regard, Lucy appears to perpetrate the arrogance of English colonists brought into contact with people of a different and unfamiliar culture.

Lucy’s lack of cultural sensitivity resonates with Spivak’s observation that nineteenth century English literature embodies an English imperialist view, thereby perpetrating “the production of cultural representation” and “axioms of imperialism” (Spivak, 1985, pp. 243-244). This is not to say that Brontë herself held such views, and on the contrary, while it is possible to read Lucy’s account as English imperialist, the clear invitation to the reader is to think again. Lucy’s cultural attitudes underscore her lack of respect for others, a lack of respect that, while it lasts within her, will impede her as a teacher. In this way, Lucy’s foibles and her eventual surpassing of them bring to mind Murdoch’s account of attention as the ability to relate to others. Murdoch tells us that “we can only understand others if we can to some extent share their contexts. (Often we cannot)” (Murdoch, 2001, p. 31). Seen in this light, Lucy’s need for attention is of key importance to her own ongoing education.

Lucy does ultimately manage to forge an identity for herself as a thinking person, although perhaps not quite in the way that she expects. Lucy achieves this in no small measure due to the pedagogical attention that is bestowed on her by her French literature teacher, M. Paul himself. Of all the characters in the novel it is M. Paul, Lucy’s colleague and eventual mentor teacher, who epitomises the kind of attention and regard for others as understood by both Weil and Murdoch. M. Paul’s attention combines aesthetic, moral and epistemological dimensions, and he embodies Murdoch’s well-known account of attention as a “just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality…the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent” (Murdoch, 2001, p. 33). The theme of M. Paul’s generous reading of Lucy, counterpointed with Lucy’s difficulty in reading others, provides important links to the philosophy of Simone Weil.

Weil’s epistemology is founded on the concept of reading, and her account of reading informs an understanding of Lucy Snowe. Weil uses the metaphor of “reading” to describe the way that we make sense of what we apprehend in the world. She argues that all our experiences of the world (whether actual or through interpreting text), involve “reading”, since to experience is to interpret, which is to “read” the world. Weil acknowledges that to read carefully calls for considerable effort, and that, if done thoughtfully, is the means by which we shape thought to develop our conceptual understanding and moral awareness. Weil

cautions that we may we read a situation, or a person, incorrectly. So may we ourselves be misread. Weil observes too, that "[w]hen dealing with documents it is necessary to read between the lines, allow oneself to be transported entirely, with a complete forgetfulness of self, into the atmosphere of the events recalled, keep the attention fixed for a very long time on any little significant details and discover exactly what their full meaning is" (Weil, 2002, p. 222).

Lucy's reading of her world is, by definition, partial. Lucy is very keen to read others, but she is very reluctant to be herself read by others. Yet, as Weil reminds us, without proper attention, we are all disposed to read from an egotistical perspective. Weil reminds us that "what we expect from others depends upon the effect of gravity upon ourselves; what we receive from them depends on the effects of gravity upon them" (Weil, 1997, p. 45). This puts into context Lucy's need to accomplish attention, and her need to develop in herself the capacity to attend to others in a benevolent way. Lucy is initially only able to read her context in terms of her own survival, and she tends to read others in terms of their potential risks to herself. She finds it impossible to detangle love from secrecy or possessiveness. She mistrusts people and tends to impute negative readings on her encounters with virtually all others — her employer, immediate colleagues, other teachers on the staff, the students she is to teach, and people in the wider community.

Whereas M. Paul is readily disposed to give a positive reading of Lucy's character, it does not come naturally to Lucy to read others with equal generosity. This is made evident in the many conscious omissions in Lucy's narration. She later admits that she omits small and repeated acts of kindness by M. Paul precisely in order to depict him as an extreme, even tyrannical personality. M. Paul, by contrast, reads others from a centre of generosity, and thus open-mindedly, in a way that admits fallibility and allows for other possible readings. Over time, the quality of Lucy's reading of her situation becomes more positive and more flexible. Whereas she initially considers Monsieur Paul "A dark little man…pungent and austere…a harsh apparition, with his close-shorn, black head, his broad, sallow brow, his thin cheek, his wide and quivering nostril" (Brontë, 2004, p. 142), later she sees him in a considerably more favourable light: "I know not that I have ever seen in any other human face an equal metamorphosis from a similar cause" (p. 355). To the reader, however, it appears that it is only Lucy's perception of him that has been transformed. With time, she comes to interpret and to better comprehend the sources of her own mysteries. Gradually Lucy shows herself

capable of more reflective thought, and more readily able to see that it is meaningful to take an interest in the welfare of others. “Such transformations as these”, says Murdoch, “are cases of seeing the order of the world in the light of the Good and revisiting the true, or more true, conception of that which we formerly misconceived” (Murdoch, 2001, p. 93).

Bronte makes it clear that Lucy’s learning through attention is slow going. Lucy is demonstratively far less attentive in her reading of Monsieur Paul, and far slower to deliver a positive assessment of her colleague, than he is of her. Lucy continues to be a harsh critic of M. Paul for the majority of the novel. She accuses him of delivering histrionic lessons, of being a teacher who “apostrophised with vehemence the awkward squad under his orders” (Brontë, 2004, pp. 142-143). On one occasion, Lucy discovers him at her desk, and immediately assumes he is rifling through her things, but then acknowledges that he is simply leaving her some more material to read, as he has done on previous occasions. Lucy also misconstrues M. Paul’s requirements for attention in his class, alleging that his demands for attention merely reveals vanity on his part. She reports that he hated sewing in class, considering it “a source of distraction from the attention due to himself” (p. 269). Later she repeats her complaint that “M. Paul owned an acute sensitiveness to the annoyance of interruption, from whatsoever cause, occurring during his lessons” (p. 359). It falls to *Villette’s* reader to consider whether M. Paul’s strictures for attention in his classes are actually unreasonable or actually reasonable, and whether, or why, Lucy deliberately casts him in a poor light. Lucy’s repeated fault-finding in Monsieur Paul sometimes unwittingly throws light on flaws or dispositions that appear to be very much more her own: “He quelled, he kept down when he could, and when he could not, he fumed like a bottled storm” (p. 170).

In her essay entitled ‘Love of the order of the world’, Weil reminds us of the need to look carefully, and to take time to read a situation in order to consider *other* possible interpretations, rather than to seize upon our first or initial assumption. She recommends that we resist hasty readings or rushed conclusions, and that we take care to look to a more measured approach that invites further reflection and time to consider a fuller or more informed understanding. This approach, which is effectively a readiness to accept (and expect) contingency, coupled with a willingness to realign one’s thinking or to adjust one’s view, is something that Weil terms a “transformation” (Weil, 2009, p. 100.) At the heart of this process is attention.

Section 4: Attention, respect and humility

For much of the novel Lucy describes M. Paul in negative or forbidding terms — as when she reports that "[his cloak] hung dark and menacing, the tassel of his bonnet grec sternly shadowed his left temple; his black whiskers cured like those of a wrathful cat; his blue eye had a cloud in its glitter" (p. 170), or when she notes that M. Paul's complexion betokens his fiery mood. Thereby Lucy, or Brontë, brings negative ideas to the reader's mind, by implication and by association, and only slowly does the reader become aware that these details may be at odds with other aspects of M. Paul's behaviour. Consequently Lucy, or Brontë, both perplexes and challenges the reader. Lucy is as cautious and ungenerous with important details of her story as she is ungenerous with her hand-made gift for M. Paul, which she withholds for no clear reason, despite his obvious mystification and disappointment. (See further p. 377.) (For further discussion of the trustworthiness of the narrative voice in *Villette*, see Menon, 2003).

A feature of Lucy's misreading of M. Paul is her judgement of him as proud. She draws this conclusion, failing to recognise that what she takes to be his pride (which he manifests as self-respect) as an important element of his humility. Her repeated mis-readings of M. Paul are almost humorous: When she sees him at a charity concert she mutters "What business had he there? What had he to do with music or the conservatoire — he who could hardly distinguish one note from another? I knew that it was his love of display and authority which had brought him there" (p. 237), little realising his stature within the Villette arts community. M. Paul's is not a self-effacing type of humility, but humility in the form of a clear sense of purpose, a sense of self-respect, with its automatically accompanying respect for others, and an understanding of both his capabilities and his limitations. M. Paul's humility concerns, in short, a "selfless respect for reality" (see Murdoch, 2001, p. 93).

M. Paul's humility is a feature of his curiosity about the world and his openness to education. He is constantly open to learn new things, and he shows Lucy that humility — the capacity to admit that we don't know — is really the only way that we can open ourselves to see new things. He admits to Lucy that he is capable of himself being mis-read, for he can admit to himself mis-reading others. If, on occasion, Paul's demands of his students seem to them unreasonable, he at the same time conveys motivations that are entirely sincere. He shows by his life and his life choices the truth of his commitments to others.

Humility is a key element in Weil and Murdoch's understanding of attention. On their view, humility involves being other-regarding, and is, they acknowledge, the most difficult of

virtues. M. Paul's conduct towards Lucy draws together themes of attention, duty and humility. His admonishments to Lucy regarding her academic pursuits align with Weil's belief in the need for humility. When he cautions Lucy not to become too keen on her own success, Lucy inwardly mimics his admonishments with sarcasm: "What did it matter whether I failed or not? Who was I, that I should not fail like my betters? It would do me good to fail" (Brontë, 2004, p. 396). Lucy frequently asserts that her mentor finds fault with her simply in order to put her down, whereas seen in a different light, M. Paul registers as someone concerned that Lucy not get too caught up in her own success. As Weil comments, "we do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them" (Weil, 2009, p. 62). M. Paul recognises in Lucy her potential and her spirit, and he wishes to respect Lucy's autonomy. His patient attentiveness towards Lucy is reminiscent of Weil and Murdoch's account of attention as a commitment to watch, not to look for anything, but simply to wait and watch. M. Paul tells Lucy that in his view, she needs "keeping down", "watching" and "watching over" (pp. 402, 403). He reminds her "I watch you and others pretty closely, pretty constantly, nearer and oftener than you or they think" (p. 403). Yet when M. Paul explains to Lucy that he watches over all the students through his window (Brontë, 2004, p. 403), she is quite outraged, and effectively accuses him of snooping: "The knowledge it brings you is bought too dear, monsieur; this coming and going by stealth degrades your own dignity" (p. 405). M. Paul's response to Lucy's outrage is to laugh heartily at what he calls her own "high insular presence" and the "hauteur" of her judgments against him (p. 405). Against his humility, we are reminded of Lucy's urge to humiliate.

The contrast between M. Paul's humility and Lucy's attempted humiliation calls for further comment. Whereas the concept of 'humility' has a profoundly positive meaning, the concept of 'humiliation' has a profoundly negative connotation. How can this be possible? The answer may relate to the two opposing conceptions of respect that are implied. According to the former concept, self-respect requires equal respect for others, and according to the latter concept, self-respect does not require equal respect for others. Humiliation is an act that a person with self-respect of the former kind is incapable of perpetrating, and it is an act that is effective only against a person whose self-respect is of the latter kind. While Lucy attempts to humiliate M. Paul, his self-respect comes from an ineluctable equal respect for others, and so he is immune, and she is not at all liable to succeed in her attempts. This is partly because M. Paul already possesses humility. It is mostly because the variety of

humility that would result from any “successful” act of humiliation (a variety that we in fact never use the word ‘humility’ to name) is irrelevant to anyone of M. Paul’s character.

It is only very late in the novel that Lucy herself comes to countenance the possibility of a positive reading of M. Paul. While Lucy finds many faults with her teacher in the early and middle parts of the novel, and while she conveys these in no uncertain terms, her view of M. Paul changes completely once it is revealed to her that M. Paul has, like Lucy, endured considerable personal tragedy and loss in his life. When Lucy learns from Père Silas the tale of ‘the priest’s pupil’, she learns that M. Paul has had a dark past (p. 450). M. Paul is revealed as someone capable of mistakes and misjudgement and someone who has had to confront, and respond to, ethical challenges. She learns that M. Paul continues to provide financial support to the family of his dead fiancée from twenty years earlier, as well as to his own former mentor, the Jesuit priest Père Silas — at considerable financial sacrifice to himself. Against Lucy’s earlier mis-readings of M. Paul as despotic and overbearing, there has been ample alternative evidence in the text to show him in quite different light, as someone who pursues good actions without seeking anything in return. This realization on Lucy’s part leads us to a consideration of the relationship between Lucy as trainee teacher, and M. Paul as her pedagogue, in her growth towards pedagogical attention.

M. Paul is an authority figure in the novel in the double sense that he is highly knowledgeable about French literature, and that he is a presence commanding complete if often critical attention in the classroom. M. Paul is also an authority in the sense meant by Peters (1966) — he is an agent for change: “Paradoxically enough, a teacher must both be an authority and teach in such a way that pupils become capable of showing him where he is wrong. The teacher is an agent of change and challenge as well as of cultural conservation. (Peters, 1966, p. 261.) M. Paul’s capacity for generous readings of others set alongside Lucy’s tendency to be both ungenerous and partial in the way she reads others, provides important further links to the philosophy of both Weil and Murdoch. They see attention as the true foundation for relations between people — friends, teachers, students, fellow travellers, people in need. To pay attention means to really look and listen without pre-judgment or prior assumptions. Weil reminds us that our capacity for attention is what helps us to discriminate illusion from reality: “In our sense perceptions, if we are not sure what we see, we change our position while looking, and what is real becomes evident. In the inner life, time takes the place of space” (Weil, 1997, p.174). She reminds us that virtue is the

disposition to do the right thing for its own sake. This, Weil argues, requires compassion, humility, and a subdued ego: “The desire to discover something new prevents people from allowing their thoughts to dwell on the transcendent, undemonstrable meaning of what has already been discovered” (Weil, 1997, p. 184).

Both Weil and Murdoch talk of attention in terms of the ability to look with empathy at another person. They also talk of the value of intellectual study, attention to the works of literary or artistic genius, as routes to attention. Weil reminds us that the “love of our neighbour in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him “‘What are you going through?’ It is a recognition that the sufferer exists… as a man, exactly like us, who was one day stamped with a special mark by affliction” (Weil, 2009, pp. 64-65).

M. Paul shows a genuine concern for the realities of Lucy’s predicament, as well as for her general well-being. He is mindful of her situation and encourages her to work to improve her lot through further education. Nevertheless, he is not afraid to admonish Lucy for her excesses of emotion and her lack of humility. He tells her in no uncertain terms that she is a “young, she wild creature, new caught, untamed” and he admonishes her to “take your bitter dose duly and daily” (p. 259). Weil also talks of ‘taming’ the beast in us all, and recommends that we seek to subdue our basic instincts in order to find an orientation towards goodness. (See further Little, 1988, p. 120-122.) Lucy is infuriated by his admonitions, and receives his advice in silence, but hers is the silence of sullen resistance and anger, not of acceptance (see p. 147). Ultimately, however, when Lucy arrives at a considerably changed view of her situation, silence with M. Paul has become something that she cherishes: “no words could inspire a pleasanter content than M. Paul’s wordless presence” (p. 385).

Like Socrates, Monsieur Paul does not so much convey or pass on knowledge to his disciple Lucy, as enable her to better understand herself. Like Socrates, M. Paul enjoys oral exchange and dialogue: “M. Paul was not a man to write books; but I have heard him lavish with careless, unconscious prodigality, such mental wealth as books seldom boast; his mind was indeed my library, and whenever it was opened for me, I entered bliss” (p. 422). In physical terms, M. Paul, like Socrates, is outwardly unremarkable. Both are teachers who demand attention from their students, and in both cases, there is a suggestion that if there is if not an *erotic* dimension, there is more than a hint of *agape* in the relationship. M. Paul’s mentorship of Lucy (perhaps following the example of Rousseau’s *Emile*), includes both academic and moral guidance. M. Paul embodies the Platonic notion that to give academic

instruction and to support the formation of another person's moral character is the truest and best basis for love. He reminds her that she needs to develop herself and make something of her abilities. He sees the good in her at the same time as he poses challenges, the latter frequently balanced by small acts of kindness or confidence in her, details which are often omitted until later in the story. His friendship towards Lucy is not motivated by charity, nor self-gain, but is a response that is linked to the discipline of attention. He insists that he sees their friendship in terms of reciprocity, which, in Weil's terms, is "a miracle by which a person consents to view from a certain distance, and without coming any nearer, the very being who is necessary to him as food" (Weil, 1977, p. 370). Weil elevates friendship to the highest level. She reminds us of the active quality of friendship: "Friendship is not to be sought, not to be dreamed, not to be desired; it is to be exercised (it is a virtue)" (Weil, 1977, p. 361).

Twice Lucy's age, M. Paul is an older, wiser teacher who is instrumental in Lucy's development. M. Paul can be fiery, impatient, he reproves Lucy, admonishes her, and ultimately he draws out Lucy's innate talents. Through attention he helps Lucy to reconnect with her true self. Lucy learns from M. Paul's pedagogical attentions to her, how to be attentive to others. M. Paul detects in Lucy not only great potential, but also a tendency towards self-denial in the name of virtue, a tendency which he strongly discourages. He is curious about her. He genuinely learns from Lucy and sees in their connection the possibility a true friendship. As a result of M. Paul's interest in her educational progress, Lucy comes to a place of better balance, where she has room for both reason and emotion.

M. Paul is unsentimental in his dealings with Lucy. He admonishes Lucy, reminding her of the importance of good judgment: "I think your judgement is warped — that you are indifferent where you ought to be grateful — and perhaps devoted and infatuated, where you ought to be cool as your name" (Brontë, 2004, p. 383). He advises Lucy to avoid self-promotion as well as egotistical pursuits, including vanity about her dress and appearance — he suggests to her critically that she sometimes tries to be too clever. M. Paul tells Lucy that passing exams is not so important since study is a worthy goal in itself. He encourages Lucy to think for herself. He teaches her by imparting knowledge, modelling, and developing in Lucy her capacity to look at things in new ways, so that her powers of rational thought are developed. He upholds the importance of critique, debate and argument, and shows Lucy how to modulate her mind away from a reliance on emotion and towards more measured and

reflective responses. M. Paul understands Weil's maxim that the most important part of being a teacher is "to teach what it is to know" (Weil, 1977, p. 364). He develops Lucy's intellectual interests, widens her reading experience, and urges her to develop her mind. He encourages her to improve her knowledge of mathematics, and arranges for her to take examinations. He gives Lucy's written work detailed attention, and leaves in her desk writing material that he judges she will enjoy reading (Brontë, 2004, pp. 380-381). Against Lucy's partial and constantly critical view of her mentor teacher, M. Paul can be seen to be a dedicated teacher, organised in both manner and classroom delivery.

In time, Lucy learns to accept other readings of her world, particularly although not exclusively, in relation to M. Paul. The conflict that appears to present the greatest obstacle to their continued friendship is the tension between his Catholicism and her Protestantism. Even here, M. Paul is instrumental in showing Lucy that this difference can be ultimately a point of respect between them both. Monsieur Paul is not afraid of difference, and wants Lucy to maintain her Protestant faith despite the fact that her beliefs are not in keeping with his Catholic views. He tells Lucy that such differences in their religious convictions are differences to be cherished, not to be stifled, and he reassures her that he welcomes her ideas and convictions. He shows Lucy that to be open to different ideas and opinions is the way to develop and progress. Once again, his attention to Lucy links to the educative theme of the novel.

Concluding comments

Villette explores the suffering of an apprentice teacher in her struggles to become worthy to teach. Lucy's educative progress involves not only her cognitive engagement in academic study, but also her development of sensitivity towards others, and growth in her ability to see herself as a member of a community. Initially, Lucy resists the attentions of her mentor teacher and she rebuffs him at every turn. M. Paul's persistent interest in Lucy's progress goes to the heart of his function as pedagogue. M Paul sees in Lucy a complex and genuinely good person, capable even of teaching M. Paul, through her passionate ways — and he persists in efforts to set up a purposeful dialogue between them. M. Paul detects in Lucy her spirit and potential, and, because he has the capacity to truly feel for others, he walks alongside Lucy first as her colleague, and then as her mentor teacher. Gradually, through many small acts of attention, he draws her out of herself. He is a serious scholar

perhaps along the lines of Murdoch's observation that a "serious scholar is also a good man who knows not only his subject but the proper place of his subject in the whole of his life" (Murdoch, 2001, p. 94). Gradually Lucy becomes more social, less neurotic. She comes to an understanding that educative power and attention does not have to be coercive or cruel. As Lucy grows in attention, so too does her capacity to "build up structures of value" around her (Murdoch, 2001, p. 36). M. Paul's part in her progress is not something that can be fully explained. Lucy's final state of self-awareness is far removed from her earlier self-preoccupation, uncertainty and insecurity. She finally indicates that she finds purpose, value and meaning in her role as a teacher who lives in relatively mundane and humble circumstances. If Lucy recalls the influence of her former mentor teacher on herself, she is likely also to call to mind her own slow progress. Given her newfound understanding of humility, this should enable her to better attend to the needs of her own students.

Lucy's progress in this regard resonates with Weil, who supports the Platonic view that the teacher's role is to bring out what is already latent in the student, and that the student literally unfurls under the guidance of the teacher. Weil considers that the purpose of teaching is "not that the initiated should learn something, but that a transformation should come about in them which makes them capable of receiving the teaching" (Weil, 1997, p. 135). Weil tells us that education, "whether its object be children or adults, individuals or an entire people, or even oneself — consists in creating motives. To show what is beneficial, what is obligatory, what is good — that is the task of education" (Weil, 2002, p. 188). R. S. Peters (1973, p. 98) also argues that education "involves essentially processes that introduce people to what is valuable in an intelligible and voluntary manner and that creates in the learner a desire to achieve it, this being seen to have its place along with other things in life". He further argues that "the job of the educator is not simply to build on existing wants but to present what is worth wanting in such a way that it creates new wants and stimulates new interests" (p. 105).

In *Villette*, Lucy's self-education is portrayed in just this way. In no small part through M. Paul's interventions, Lucy comes to value her own progress, and to see education as valuable in itself, and a route to improve the quality of her life and the lives of others. Ultimately Lucy finds that she has a professional role that suits her. She is in a position to work not simply for an income, but more importantly, with a sense of meaning to her life. Lucy's satisfaction at the close of the work is not that of self-congratulation for her own achievements, but is a rather more subdued 'Murdochian' celebration of her discovery of the

nourishment of human connection, friendship, and a newfound quiet sense of her capacity to cope, even despite the likely death of her friend and mentor: “The secret of my success did not lie so much in myself, in any endowment, any powers of mine, as in a new state of circumstances, a wonderfully changed life, a relieved heart…Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said” (Brontë, 2004, pp. 544 - 546). At the novel’s close, Lucy’s anxiety is replaced by a calmer bearing. She is self-respecting and has a sense of vocational purpose. She is no longer uprooted, and she has the capacity to see things from the point of view of the other.

Brontë’s novel reminds us of the power of the nineteenth century multi-volume novel as a forum for moral education and as an avenue for the presentation of ethical ideas. This is a work that demonstrates the limits of parochialism and insularity, and shows the value of human connection. *Villette* explores ideas of humility, empathy and understanding another’s plight. It acknowledges that education involves debate and challenge and that for our minds to be open to ideas, we must be ready to submit even our most deeply-held convictions to challenge, change, and revision. The novel shows that an ability to respond to and integrate the needs and interests of others is fundamental to education in the broadest sense.

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