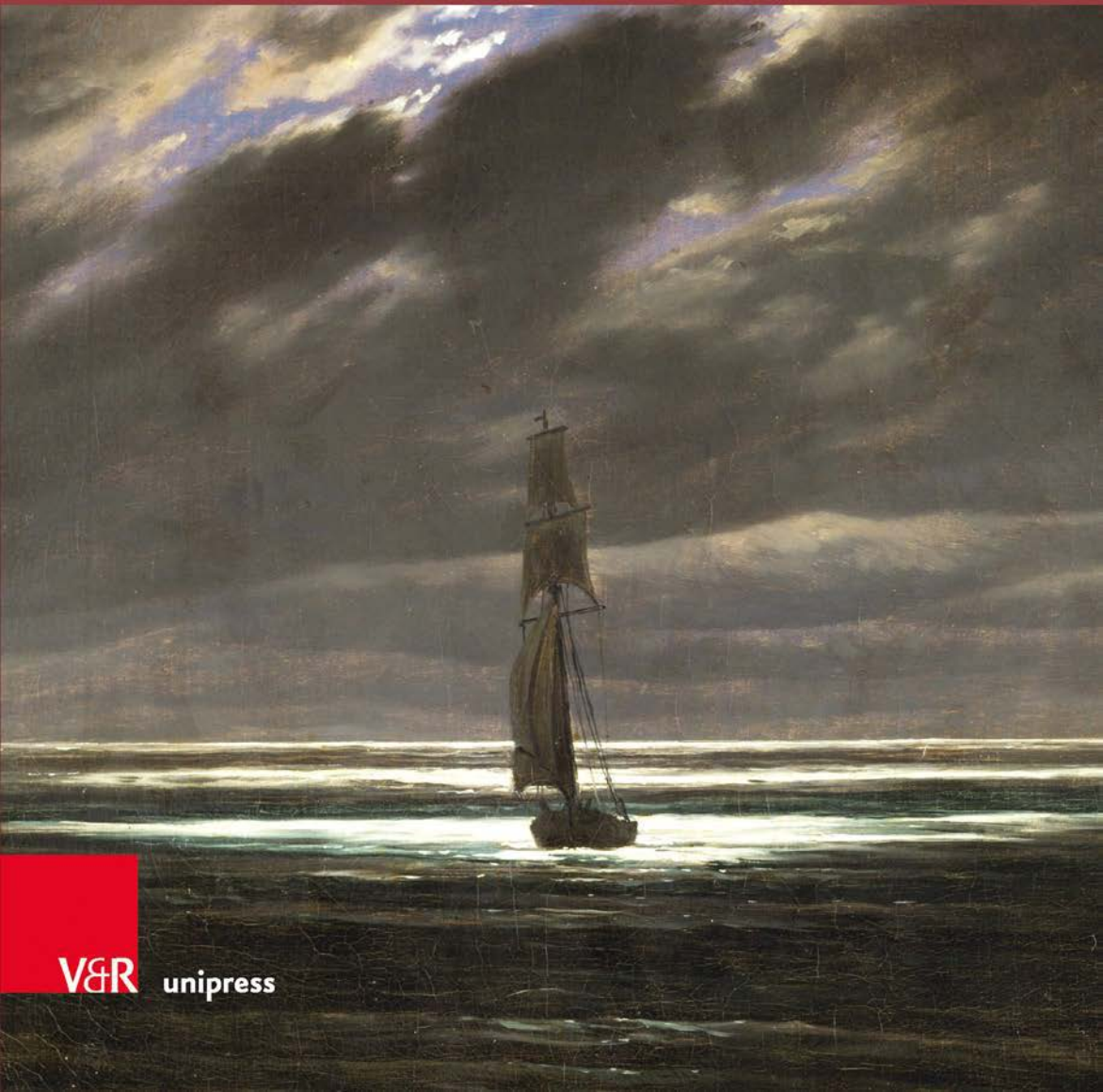
Olga Springer

Ambiguity in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*



V&R unipress

unipress

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194

Close Reading
Schriften zur britischen Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaft

Volume 3

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194

Olga Springer

Ambiguity in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

V&R unipress

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über https://dnb.de abrufbar.

Die vorliegende Arbeit wurde von der Philosophischen Fakultät der Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen als Dissertation zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades eines Doktors der Philosophie (Dr. phil.) angenommen.
Hauptberichterstatter: Prof. Dr. Matthias Bauer
Mitberichterstatterin: Prof. Dr. Ingrid Hotz-Davies
Tag der mündlichen Prüfung: 28. April 2017

Umschlagabbildung: Caspar David Friedrich, Seestück bei Mondschein auf dem Meer, 1827/28, Öl auf Leinwand, 25,2 × 31,2 cm, Bildnachweis: ullstein bild – Imagno
Druck und Bindung: CPI books GmbH, Birkstraße 10, D-25917 Leck
Printed in the EU.

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Verlage | **www.vandenhoeck-ruprecht-verlage.com**

ISSN 2198-9028
ISBN 978-3-8470-1119-4

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194

Contents

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194

Acknowledgements

With heartfelt gratitude to the scholars who inspirationally and kindly supported and accompanied this work throughout, and made sure it did not end in shipwreck: Prof. Dr. Matthias Bauer (Tübingen University) and Prof. Dr. Angelika Zirker (Tübingen University).

I would like to especially mention the late Prof. Dr. Inge Leimberg (Münster University), whose advice and support have been invaluable.

A special thank you goes to Prof. Dr. Ingrid Hotz-Davies (Tübingen University), Prof. Dr. Joachim Knape (Tübingen University) and Prof. Dr. Burkhard Niederhoff (Bochum University).

A very big thank you to the lecturers and doctoral students with whom I had the pleasure and privilege of working in the PhD network "Dimensions of Ambiguity" at Tübingen University, and to the university for supporting this thesis with a scholarship of the "Landesgraduiertenförderung Baden-Württemberg":

Prof. Dr. Matthias Bauer, Prof. Dr. Joachim Knape, Prof. Dr. Peter Koch, Prof. Dr. Susanne Winkler, Prof. Dr. Angelika Zirker, Prof. Dr. Esme Winter-Froemel, Felix Balmer, Melanie Feldhofer, Dr. Markus Ising, Dr. Thomas Susanka, and Dr. Nikola Wiegeler.

I would moreover like to thank my colleagues from the School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies at Dublin City University for their support: Dr. Angela Leahy, Dr. Áine McGillicuddy, Mr Jean-Philippe Imbert, and Dr. Brigitte Le Juez.

Many thanks to Ms. Marie-Carolin Vondracek of Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht and Prof. Dr. Norbert Lennartz, editor of the Close Reading series, as well as to Ms. Allison Hudson for proofreading.

Last but not least, my parents for their continued support.

Dublin, November 2019

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194

I. Introduction

1. *Villette* and Ambiguity: Starting Points

Villette is famous for its ambiguous ending. Readers have felt it to be a tantalizing, even irritating conclusion to Charlotte Brontë's final completed novel.[1] Like Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860/61) and Trollope's *The Small House at Allington* (1864), the ending leaves them wondering about the future of the protagonists.[2] Does M. Paul return to Lucy Snowe or is he killed in a storm raging on the Atlantic?[3] But even more than the question of whether the novel ends happily or sadly, the way in which this ending is achieved deserves critical attention. In a final gesture of self-control, the narrator admonishes herself: "Here pause. Pause at once. Trouble no quiet, kind heart: leave sunny imaginations hope" (42.496), paradoxically taking away hope while claiming to "leave" it to readers who are disposed to be hopeful ("sunny imaginations"). Ambiguity in *Villette* is not just a matter of alternative ways of reading its ending; it comes in many forms and is an all-pervasive feature, for it is inextricably linked with the narrator-protagonist's attempt at coming to terms with her own life: Lucy Snowe, narrator and character of her own story, is simulta-

1 Cooper provides this annotation about the ending in the Penguin edition of the novel: "In a letter to W. S. Williams discussing how two women had written to her asking for 'exact and authentic information respecting the fate of M. Paul Emanuel', Brontë wrote, 'I have sent Lady Harriette an answer so worded as to leave the matter pretty much where it was. Since the little puzzle amuses the ladies, it would be a pity to spoil their sport by giving them the key.'" (546n9; for the full letter see Brontë, "To W. S. Williams, 23 March 1853" 139).

2 An earlier example of an open ending is Edgar Allan Poe's novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), the final outcome of which has been perceived as unclear.

3 The ending makes it difficult for the reader to formulate a "finalized hypothesis" (a term used in Rimmon's study of ambiguity in Henry James's novels (10f.)) about the outcome of the novel, i. e. to state with certainty either of the following propositions: (1) M. Paul returns to Lucy. (2) M. Paul does not return to Lucy. This is the central example of a 'global' ambiguity in the text – both statements cannot be true at the same time. In the context of her study of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, Rimmon describes this persistent kind of ambiguity as "[…] a fact in the text – a double system of mutually exclusive clues." (Rimmon 12).

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194

neously revealing her life and hiding it – from the reader, as well as from herself. This can be described as an ambiguous narrative technique, examples of which will be analysed in chapter III.[4] Throughout the novel, Brontë presents to her readers a narrator/self in dialogue (and sometimes even in battle) with herself, drawing on the Gothic novel's concern with the dark side of human nature[5] (Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) is a (late) case in point) and anticipating modern literary representations of the self as a fluid construct characterised by contradictions and inconsistencies. To explore how this is done, and which kinds of ambiguity become manifest, are the aims of this thesis.

The term ambiguity will be associated with a range of interrelated phenomena, which all reflect the impossibility and/or the unwillingness to know and tell something in a univocal, definite, and straightforward manner, especially if the communication concerns the self and the inner life. This begins with the names of characters, and even with the name of the author. Charlotte Brontë called the way in which she hid her identity behind a pseudonym "ambiguous": In her "Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell" (1850), she refers to her and her sisters' use of gender-neutral pseudonyms as an "ambiguous choice" (xliv).[6] The names of Ellis, Currer and Acton Bell were supposed to avoid the prejudice that female writers were likely to encounter, i. e. stereotyping and contemporary expectations toward 'feminine' writing.[7] Brontë significantly uses the word in the existential context of identity, foreshadowing one of the central themes of *Villette*. The mutually exclusive potential meanings of the pseudonyms function as protection against bias, and as protection of the writers' artistic integrity.

4 The interplay of the perspectives of experiencing and narrating I is one of the literary ambiguities described by Bauer et al. as arising from the parameters of literary communication, of which the fictional autobiography presents a special case (31f.).

5 The most obvious Gothic echo in *Villette* is the nun; see ch. III.

6 "Averse to personal publicity, we veiled our own names under those of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell; the ambiguous choice being dictated by a sort of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names positively masculine, while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because – without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called 'feminine' – we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice; we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward, a flattery, which is not true praise." (xliv).

7 Despite publishing under the pseudonym and her explicit wish to be judged as a writer, not as a female writer, Brontë faced criticism along such lines once her identity was publicly known. Even George Henry Lewes judged her novel *Shirley* based on its author's gender in the *Edinburgh Review*, to which Brontë reacted in a letter to him. Griffiths comments on her written response to this criticism: "Brontë closes her letter to Lewes with an attempt to reinstate gender ambiguity, offering to 'shake hands with [him]', a traditionally male sign of colleagueship, and signing her letter Currer Bell." (52).

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194

From literary pseudonyms to the speaking names of literary characters: Lucy Snowe's name is a first indication of the psychological complexity of her character.[8] Her name was created according to the *lucus a non lucendo* principle[9], as Brontë explains in one of her letters: "Lucy" is related to light (lux)[10], "Snowe" evokes coldness. She writes about the choice of Lucy's last name to her editor: "A cold name she must have – partly – perhaps – on the 'lucus a non lucendo' principle – partly on that of the 'fitness of things' – for she has about her an external coldness." (Brontë, "To W. S. Williams, 6 November 1852" 80). While the quote clarifies that the name Lucy Snowe is based on both analogy (she appears externally cold) and contrast (she is internally passionate and fiery), it also tells us that Brontë was intellectually engaged with concepts like contrast and similarity, which recur throughout the novel. The fact that the name, unlike in her earlier novels, does not serve as the text's title, and that it is withheld by the narrator until the beginning of the second chapter, underlines its special meaning and suggests the close relationship between 'covering'[11], as implied in the connotations of snow, and revealing meaning, as implied in the connotations of light.

This etymological ambiguity indicates an intricate relationship between exterior appearance and interior reality, and indeed Lucy's self-references are often ambiguous, marking identity as one of the main themes of the novel: The very first time she mentions her own name is characterised by a contradiction when she "plead[s] guiltless of an overheated and discursive imagination" (2.12), yet compares the girl Polly to a ghost in the same breath, testifying to the very trait she denies to possess. A later reference to herself in the third person makes it indeed seem as though there are (at least) two separate identities attached to the "I" of the novel. Following a "strange and contradictory […] inner tumult" in response to Madame Beck's suspicion that Dr. John might have a secret love affair with her, Lucy describes her upset in terms of becoming someone else:

8 The pupils Angélique, who is "vain, flirting," and Blanche, who is "proud and handsome" (11.100), are clearly named ironically, underlining the point that exterior (in the form of the name) and interior (in terms of character) do not necessarily match.

9 "'An etymological contradiction; a phrase used by etymologists who accounted for words by deriving them from their opposites. It means literally 'a grove (called *lucus*) from not being lucent (*lux*, light, *luceo*, to shine)." (Brewer, qtd. in Smith, *Letters* 80n3). Angelika Zirker, referring to another Victorian instance of the principle, points out that *lucus a non lucendo* plays a role in making the mock turtle in *Alice in Wonderland* a melancholic character although there is the word "mock" in his name (*Pilger als Kind* 234).

10 Charlotte M. Yonge indicates the etymological relation of "Lucy" to light in the *History of Christian Names* of 1884 (132).

11 The connotation of snow as a cover is present in the novel when the aged narrator describes her now white hair as lying beneath a white cap "like snow beneath snow" (45).

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194

"Complicated, disquieting thoughts broke up the whole repose of my nature. However, that turmoil subsided: next day I was again Lucy Snowe." (13.119).[12]

The names of the novel are moreover related to ambiguity because Lucy, as well as John Graham Bretton, has more than one name – Ginevra Fanshawe, depending on her mood, calls Lucy "Timon" (21.233; 236), "Crusty," and "Diogenes" (9.89), which are but some of the "dozen names" (21.233) Ginevra bestows on her. Graham Bretton is known as "Graham" when he is a teenager in Bretton, and as "Dr. John" in Madame Beck's school, but also as "Isidore" (a playful epithet given to him by Ginevra), a doubling made particularly apparent by the fact that two adjoining chapters are each named after one of these (chs. 9 and 10).

The duality of English- and French-language cultures is reflected in the name Bretton. Apart from belonging to both a town and a family, it brings with it multiple associations: It is a near-homophone of "Britain" and "Breton", linking this English village with the French region of Brittany. The English-French link is confirmed when Lucy believes herself transported to Bretton in the middle of the novel, but is in fact still in Villette, momentarily making both cities interchangeable (see ch. 16). This connection between the two principal towns of the novel, which at first sight seem to be contrasted with each other but turn out to be linked by both opposition and similarity, is symptomatic of the frequent oscillations and transformations of meaning occurring in the novel. The seemingly clear-cut dichotomy of nationalities is undermined in subtle ways.

> Thus the Bretton family appears to contain as much of the Continent as it does of England: the Celtic races belong to the Continent as much as to Britain; Mr. Home feels more at home "settled amongst his maternal kinsfolk on the Continent" (87); and it is not clear which home his daughter Paulina longs for: "no furrowed face of adult exile, longing for Europe at Europe's antipodes, ever bore more legibly the signs of home sickness than did her infant visage" (Kent 69).[13]

The ambiguity of the town and family name "Bretton" suggests the problematic nature of the concepts of home and belonging in *Villette* (a theme again underlined by Paulina and her father's last name, Home), especially for Lucy, for whom the term is connected with anxiety and uncertainty in girlhood (see 1.6, the dreaded arrival of a letter from "home") and later only evokes feelings of alienation: "If I died far away from – home, I was going to say, but I had no home – from England, then, who would weep?" (6.50). The role of ambiguity in

12 Williams noted this: "'Lucy Snowe' is not quite the same as the protagonist. About a particularly bitter inner tumult, the latter can say, 'Complicated, disquieting thoughts broke up the whole repose of my nature. However, that turmoil subsided: next day I was again Lucy Snowe.'" (82).

13 Quotes from *Villette* in the Kent article refer to the 1979 Penguin edition.

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194

the names shows its relevance for the theme of identity in the novel. This aspect underlies this entire study but is especially prominent in chapter 2 about the phrase "I know not".

A further prominent aspect of *Villette* that confronts the reader with a puzzle is its title.[14] First of all, in contrast to the author's earlier published novels, *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Shirley* (1849), it does not bear the name of its protagonist, Lucy Snowe, although the text is a fictional autobiography like *Jane Eyre*. The feminine diminutive ending '-ette,' however, makes it resemble a woman's name at first glance, eroding the distinction between personal name and toponym. The diminutive moreover suggests that Villette is a small town. Yet this association is immediately questioned by the fact that it is a national capital, and Lucy (clearly ironically) refers to it as "the great capital of the great kingdom of Labassecour" (6.55). Brontë had Brussels in Belgium in mind when she wrote the novel, and clearly many details of Villette are based on Brussels, but she chose, significantly, not to give it this name. In the search for an interpretation of the multiple meanings of the title, the reader's attention is drawn to the chapter of the same name (chapter seven, "Villette"). This chapter is preceded by "London," in which the narrator describes in great detail the places she visits, and especially the City, which is her favourite part of town. Thus, before Lucy has arrived in Villette, a contrastive foil is introduced in the shape of London, a real city to be found on any map. Villette, on the other hand, is characterised by its name as a 'small town' in general, as the prototype of a town.[15]

An analysis of the chapter will provide an entryway into the text in its entirety and provide an outlook on the various kinds of ambiguity it features.

14 See for example Thomas, who claims that "*Villette* seems to be Brontë's choice for the title, not Lucy Snowe's […]" (567). He goes on to reflect on the consequences of the multiple names of some characters and concludes that "the text is partially concerned with […] the disguises and veils inherent in communication." (568).

15 The name moreover suggests that Villette can be read allegorically in the tradition of Plato's Republic and Bunyan's tellingly named city Mansoul: "The humanists took from the ancients a vision of civilized life essentially urban: only a city enabled man to realize his highest earthly potential. Citizenship involved allegiance to an external order but, more important, to an ideal state of being, a city within (see Plato, *Republic* 592B)." (Kern Paster 167). The city is "set apart from natural landscape by the geometry of its forms;" "as New Jerusalem, it symbolizes the goal of a Christian's earthly pilgrimage" (Kern Paster 167). This religious connotation of the city is both taken seriously and ironized in the portrayal of labyrinthine Villette with its street names referencing the muddy, low ground it is built on, a trait that symbolically represents uncertainty as lack of orientation and overview.

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194

2. Reading (the Chapter) "Villette"

Lucy leaves her native country and its capital for unknown new shores, and travels from London toward an "uncertain future" (6.56) in Labassecour. She arrives in Boue-Marine[16], a seaside town in Labassecour, and then continues to the capital. Throughout her journey and well after arriving, Lucy's mood oscillates between hopefulness and despair. This is in keeping with the existential experience of a single, friendless woman travelling by herself in an unknown country, and it is also representative of Lucy's entire life experience, characterised by ambiguity in the shape of uncertainty. This existential uncertainty is all-pervasive, beginning with the minutiae of everyday life when she does not know where breakfast is eaten in her hotel:

"It cannot be denied that on entering this room I trembled somewhat; felt uncertain, solitary, wretched; wished to Heaven I knew whether I was doing right or wrong; felt convinced it was the last, but could not help myself." (7.59 f.). In her foreign surroundings, she feels uncertain where her place should be, both in this small matter of the breakfast room and in general: Where must she go? What could her employment be? What is her place in the world?

During her passage across the channel by ship, Lucy meets an English girl, Ginevra Fanshawe, who casually mentions that she is a pupil at Madame Beck's school in Villette, and that Madame Beck is looking for a governess to her children. This chance remark, carelessly dropped by Ginevra, directs Lucy's next steps: "Breakfast over, I must again move – in what direction? 'Go to Villette,' said an inward voice; prompted doubtless by the recollection of this slight sentence uttered carelessly and at random by Miss Fanshawe, as she bid me good-bye'" (7.60). The question she asks herself, and the response of the "inward voice", illustrate Lucy's mode of taking action: Faced with uncertainty and in need of direction, she searches for an answer, and existential necessity ("I must again move") and fate (here in the unlikely form of Ginevra Fanshawe, who prances through the novel like a careless little dame Fortune) steer her in a certain direction. Variations of the question "in what direction?" recur throughout the novel, underlining its urgency, and emphasizing the allegorical overtones of the search for a literal, physical way. The word "direction" in Lucy's sentence can be understood both literally and figuratively – Lucy is implicitly asking for spiritual guidance as well as explicitly for geographical orientation, and this central doubleness occurs several times in the chapter. Lucy's search for direction culminates in the desperate question "what shall I do?" (15.159), an echo of Christian's cry "What shall I do?" (*PP* 11) at the beginning of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), and alludes less directly to Bunyan's

16 Sea-mud. Like all names of places and persons in Labassecour, this is a speaking name.

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194

spiritual autobiography *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666): "On this word I mused, and could not tell what to do" (*GA* 17).[17]

These questions point to the underlying metaphor of the journey, evoking *The Pilgrim's Progress* as an important allegorical intertext of *Villette*.[18] This link is first made explicit when the protagonist compares her visits in Bretton to Christian and Hopeful's rest by the river (see 1.6). Keeping this in mind and returning to the discussion of the meaning of the title,[19] it is plausible to read Villette itself as a type of Vanity Fair,[20] which besides the City of Destruction and the Celestial City, positioned as polar opposites at the beginning and the end of the text, is one of the three prominent cities of Bunyan's text. In the later *The Holy War* (1682), we also find a prominent example of a city, Mansoul. In its portrayal of the soul as a city, this text is an important predecessor of one of the central metaphors of *Villette*.

Ginevra's "slight sentence," which prompts Lucy's inner voice to say "'Go to Villette'" (7.60), contains a meaningful lexical ambiguity: A sentence is both a syntactical unit and a judgment pronounced by a court of law.[21] A chance, "careless" remark by a stranger, a seemingly trivial piece of information, becomes a fateful 'order' to Lucy and a signpost on her path of life, which is in keeping with the power of the inward voice and with the roles fate and providence play in this chapter and in the text in general.

Lucy's orientation in the new, unknown world around her takes place step by step: The direction given by her inward voice, "'Go to Villette,'" is by no means the solution to her dilemma. "Who Madame Beck was, where she lived, I knew not; I had asked, but the question passed unheard" (7.60). Here we encounter one of the equivalents of Ovid's phrase "nescio", "I knew not", a signature of Villette's narratorial voice:[22] Lucy is confronted with an uncertainty – she does not know where Madame Beck's school is.

17 "There are constant references to Bunyan, constant askings of 'Whence did I come? Whither shall I go? What should I do?' […]" (Qualls 75).

18 Qualls describes *Villette*'s "allegorical realism" (70) and underlines its connection with the narrator's psyche: "[…] in the somber drama of Lucy Snowe, the romance world is reduced to the subterranean level of the novel; it becomes a part of the narrator's inner self." (70).

19 See above.

20 This reading is also suggested by the later transformation of the park into an actual carnival in chapters 38 and 39.

21 The language of the law, and the notion of justifying oneself before some judicial authority, appears in a conspicuous place when Lucy uses it the first time she mentions her own name: "I, Lucy Snowe, plead guiltless of that curse, an overheated and discursive imagination; but whenever, opening a room-door, I found her seated in a corner alone, her head in her pigmy hand, that room seemed to me not inhabited, but haunted." (2.12). See also ch. II.

22 The relevance of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to *Villette* and to ambiguity in general is discussed below. Chapter II provides an analysis of the instances of "I know not" in the novel.

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194

The allegorical mode of speaking has already been introduced through the allusions to *The Pilgrim's Progress*. It is a central mode of expression in the novel, and it enables Lucy to communicate her personal experience. The reader encounters the allegorical mode again, for example, when Lucy resorts to the image of "the wide and weltering deep"[23] (7.60), where she finds herself when she decides to travel to Villette. The fact that she uses water imagery is significant since one of the central allegories of the novel takes the form of the shipwreck.[24]

The canals along which the road of the carriage lies are compared to "half-torpid green snakes." In this case, the allegory portrays Lucy's ambivalent state of mind: she enjoys the journey from Boue-Marine to Villette despite bad weather and the monotonous landscape – "[…] yet amidst all these deadening influences, my fancy budded fresh and my heart basked in sunshine." (7.61). Her mood is contrasted with her actual circumstances, and the ensuing allegory adds another layer of complexity; Lucy's light-heartedness is kept in check by an underlying anxiety about what she may expect in Villette:

> These feelings [optimism despite unpropitious circumstances; OS], however, were well kept in check by the secret but ceaseless consciousness of anxiety lying in wait on enjoyment, like a tiger crouched in a jungle. The breathing of that beast of prey was in my ear always; his fierce heart panted close against mine; he never stirred in his lair but I felt him: I knew he waited only for sundown to bound ravenous from his ambush. (7.61)

The metaphorical phrase "kept in check" prepares the allegory, which presents the tiger not as an uncontrollable wild animal within but as a control mechanism – the wild animal lies in wait to keep enjoyment at bay. Light-heartedness and anxiety keep each other "in check" in Lucy's soul; the opposing forces of her soul exist in mutual restraint. Thus, the tiger allegory illustrates Lucy's inner, existential uncertainty. The text oscillates between realistic narration and allegory, and the literal level of the allegory, the image, is taken quite seriously. The allegorical passages also draw attention to the multifaceted nature of the text in its interplay of literal and figurative levels of meaning, forming another source of potential ambiguity.

The allegorical passages representing the inner life remind the reader that *Villette* is a self-reflective text – the narrative is both part of the narrator-protagonist's reflective process and its result. Even in moments of true enjoyment, the opposite of light-heartedness lurks in the back of Lucy's mind; another example occurs when Lucy is on her way to the concert with the Brettons and, driving through the brightly-lit streets of Villette, must think back to the school,

23 As the editors of the Oxford World's Classics edition note, this is an allusion to James Beattie's poem *The Minstrel* (1771).

24 See ch. V.

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194

"where, as at this very hour, it was my wont to wander all solitary, gazing at the stars through the high, blindless windows, and listening to the distant voice of the reader in the refectory, monotonously exercised upon the 'lecture pieuse'" (20.208).[25] These gestures of retraction and of reconsideration characterise the narrative stance and contribute to the impression of Lucy's double presence even beyond the context of the fictional autobiography: these thoughts not only occur to her while reflecting on her own role in retrospect (i.e., while narrating), but they are tied to the consciousness of the experiencing I.

Moreover, the extremely detailed descriptions of Lucy's inner life create some instances of ambiguity, often because her descriptions rely on negative formulations. Since the linguistic form of the negation invariably contains the positive as well (in the shape of 'no/not/nor + positive formulation/aspect'), negations in general may be said to be ambiguous, evoking the opposite of what they state while negating it. An illuminating example is Lucy's response to the peculiar power she sees in Madame Beck when the headmistress challenges her, while still in the role of nurse, to become a teacher:

> Power of a particular kind strongly limned itself in all her traits, and that power was not *my* kind of power: neither sympathy, nor congeniality, nor submission, were the emotions it awakened. I stood – not soothed, nor won, nor overwhelmed. It seemed as if a challenge of strength between opposing gifts was given, and I suddenly felt all the dishonour of my diffidence – all the pusillanimity of my slackness to aspire. (8.78)

The parallelisms outline Lucy's emotions *e negativo*. In the confrontation with Madame Beck's "particular" power, she feels challenged to action. The "opposing gifts" are especially relevant to ambiguity, and indeed, Lucy is spurned on instead of discouraged by the headmistress's seeming opposition to trying her hand at teaching (Madame Beck's strategy might be described by the anachronistic term "reverse psychology"; see 8.78 for the full dialogue). The "opposing gifts" may refer to the two tendencies contending within Lucy when she makes her decision, i.e. her ambition and her "pusillanimity." In a subtle anticipation of later psychomachic scenes,[26] both forces are embodied in the dialogue by Madame Beck and Lucy respectively, with an additional layer of complexity added by the fact that their roles change – first Lucy hesitates in the face of the challenge, then Madame Beck (seemingly) tries to deter Lucy from entering the classroom.

25 See also ch. II. Lucy and M. Paul's final evening together is an exception – a moment when Lucy exists only in the "now" (41.492) of their final communion.

26 See ch. V.

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194

To return to the chapter "Villette", the atmosphere around Lucy is marked by uncertainty: Arriving in the "unknown bourne"[27] (7.61) of Villette in utter darkness, Lucy discovers that her trunk has been lost and that she lacks knowledge of spoken French to inquire after it.[28] Both the darkness and her inability to communicate underline her position as a stranger in unfamiliar surroundings. She is literally unable to even try to resolve her uncertainty by simply asking after her luggage, resulting again in the desperate question "*What* should I do?" (7.62). Her effort at communicating nonverbally immediately results in a misunderstanding: the conductor takes the suitcase Lucy chose for her little pantomime and is about to put it back onto the carriage. The misunderstanding now proves fortunate because this suitcase belongs to a young gentleman, who promptly reacts to the conductor's trespass. Lucy hears that he is English and asks him to inquire after her luggage, which as it turns out has been left behind in Boue-Marine.

The seemingly slight incident with Lucy's trunk foreshadows the important symbolical role that containers of all kinds play in her story, e. g. her writing-desk and the shell-encrusted box containing the watchguard she makes for M. Paul. Moreover, her luggage recalls the "great burden"[29] on Christian's back, which slows him down on his path to the Celestial City until it falls off. Yet losing the trunk is not a relief to Lucy; on the contrary, it causes problems for her – the allusion is thus part of the ambiguity. Lucy's possessions are lost and she arrives without them in Villette, signalling that a new phase of her life is beginning and that she may become someone else in the course of her time there.

The text contains a cue for the interpretation of the box: "My first business was to get my trunk: a small matter enough, but important to me" (7.61). The statement gives a clue to the reader that the narrator may regard items as important that appear unremarkable, and that we should pay attention to them. The

27 The phrase alludes to *Hamlet:* "something after death, / The undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveler returns" (3.1.78–80). The Oxford World's Classics edition comments: "this echo of Hamlet […] hints that Lucy is entering on a kind of posthumous existence in Labassecour." (Explanatory Notes 502).

28 "And my portmanteau, with my few clothes and the little pocket-book enclasping the remnant of my fifteen pounds, where were they? I ask this question now, but I could not ask it then. I could say nothing whatever; not possessing a phrase of *speaking* French: and it was French, and French only, the whole world seemed now gabbling round me" (7.61 f.).

29 "He [Christian, OS] ran thus till he came at a place somewhat ascending; and upon that place stood a cross, and a little below, in the bottom, a sepulchre. So I saw in my dream, that just as Christian came up with the cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders, and fell from off his back, and began to tumble, and so continued to do till it came to the mouth of the sepulchre, where it fell in, and I saw it no more." (*PP* 32). The burden alludes to the Christian notion of deliverance from sin through Christ's sacrifice (*PP* 25) and to the Psalter: "For mine iniquities are gone over mine head: as an heavy burden they are too heavy for me." (38:4).

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194

diminutive form of the title, *Villette*, has already made us aware that small things are significant in this novel.

After the problem with her trunk has been settled, Lucy is again asking herself the question that can be called her signature in this chapter: "Meantime what should I do?" (7.62). As she tells the young Englishman who asks about her plans, "'[…] I don't know where to go'" (7.62). Now, for once, Lucy is not left to her own resources to find a way out of her situation, but is accompanied by a guide figure: the young man shows her the way to a "respectable inn" (7.62).

Her guide leads her through the park and then describes the remainder of the way to her. The word "direction" is picked up again here, this time by the young man: "'[…] with my direction you will easily find it [the inn, OS].'" (7.63) At this point, Lucy has had the chance to take a closer look at him and notices that he is handsome and that "[t]here was goodness in his countenance, and honour in his bright eyes" (7.63). Lucy obviously feels more than common gratitude to the young stranger (and possibly even falls in love with him a little) when she follows him without hesitation and mistrust through the darkness: "Not the least fear had I: I believe I would have followed that frank tread, through continual night, to the world's end" (7.63).[30] This blind trust in her guide is soon at an end, however, when he leaves her to finish the final part of her route by herself, and she loses her way in the dark and empty streets.

Lucy is harassed by some ruffians, and she soon "no longer knew where [she] was" or "where to turn" (7.64). In the darkness, she has difficulty recognising anything around her: "On I went, hurrying fast through a magnificent street and square, with the grandest houses round, and amidst them the huge outline of more than one overbearing pile; which might be palace, or church – I could not tell" (7.63 f.) This is a stark contrast to the many moments of recognition in the equally unknown London, whose places are nevertheless familiar to Lucy by their names in a general way.

In this state of puzzlement and disorientation, Lucy at last reaches a flight of stairs as described by her guide, and descends them. She believes to have finally found her inn, but the house in question turns out to be Madame Beck's school. She is now directed by Providence and Fate: "About a hundred thoughts volleyed through my mind in a moment. Yet I planned nothing, and considered nothing: I had not time. Providence said, 'Stop here; this is *your* inn.' Fate took me in her strong hand, mastered my will; directed my actions: I rung the door-bell" (7.64). Lucy, alone and friendless in a foreign city, is counselled by these two allegorical companions, who literally show her which path to take and "direct" her actions. However, it is difficult to place a benign providence in the world presented in

30 A topos in love poetry. The *OED* quotes *A new English dictionary on historical principles (N.E.D.):* "I would go with him to the world's end." ("end," n., I.1.a).

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194

Villette. Providence is evoked, but there is no certainty about any benign guidance in the novel, just as Bunyan's text is evoked but there is no certainty about the applicability of its providential account.

We encounter another ambiguity in the fact that Lucy's weakness, her inability to speak French, is now the reason she is even permitted into Madame Beck's school.

> "May I see Madame Beck?" I inquired.
> I believe if I had spoken French she [the servant answering the door; OS] would not have admitted me; but, as I spoke English, she concluded I was a foreign teacher come on business connected with the pensionnat, and, even at that late hour, she let me in, without a word of reluctance or a moment of hesitation. (7.64)

Lucy's arrival at the school is portrayed as a fateful event, in which the doors of the school open for her as if a higher power had interfered in her favour: she is meant to arrive at the school. Then the man who will become the man of Lucy's life has his first appearance on the scene: M. Paul is summoned by his cousin and employer Madame Beck in order to read Lucy's countenance. His "verdict", too, is such that Lucy cannot fail but get her chance in the school: "Engage her." (7.67). M. Paul argues that the action will bring its own reward if good predominates in Lucy, and if not, that it will still have been a good deed to take her in. The chapter thus ends on a temporary certainty for Lucy – she is saved from the "hostile street" for the time being and may find permanent employment in the school if she proves herself useful to Madame Beck.[31] M. Paul's clear statement "Engage her" is the third strong, short imperative the reader encounters in the chapter: her inward voice tells Lucy: "Go to Villette." (7.60); Providence commands: "Stop here; this is *your* inn" (7.64), and M. Paul finally decrees: "Engage her" (7.67). The course is set for her future in Villette.

The vague possibility initially hinted at in Ginevra's utterance is now realised for Lucy – despite miscommunications and other difficulties, she arrives at her destination. In correspondence with the ambiguous nature of the power that made her seek and find Mme Beck's school, Lucy has arrived at a destination that is both the end of her journey and a temporary abode on the road, an "inn." The word suggests the biblical quote "here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come" (Heb. 13:14). Lucy's arrival in Villette is thus presented in a framework of (partly literalised) biblical allusions, which are also ironised. Lucy has not found a "continuing city" in Villette, but literally "a small town," bustling and mercantile. Yet her life there also holds the promise of real fulfilment, in the shape of her relationship with M. Paul. Complete uncertainty, expressed through various questions and refrain-like statements of not knowing, rules the pro-

31 The scene is discussed in ch. IV in the context of the oracle motif.

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194

tagonist's experience of life side by side with an almost supernatural sense of certainty when it comes to some existential decisions.

Like the protagonist-narrator herself, the reader cannot know yet where the path will take her, but s/he has received some clues as to which direction to look and where to find points of orientation. In this reading of the chapter "Villette", several themes have become evident, which will each be treated in one section in the order suggested by their appearance in the novel: Lucy's favourite expression, "I know not", which can be found in this chapter as well, is traced throughout the text in the second section. In the third part, "Who is Lucy Snowe?", the ways of asking this question in the text and its possible answers will be explored. The fourth section deals with the notion of the oracle, i. e. the (im)possibility of overcoming the uncertainty of the future. The fifth section is devoted to readings of the allegorical passages of the book and to a discussion of their relevance as expressions of Lucy's inner life.

Ambiguity is first and foremost considered a dynamic concept for the purpose of this study – dynamic both in the sense of taking into consideration its historically diverse nuances of meaning (adopting a diachronic perspective), and its association with changing and oscillating meanings in the novel (synchronic).[32]

3. An Image of Ambiguity

The allegorical scenes and their link to self-reflection stress both the importance and the difficulty of representing the inner life in Lucy's narrative. The paintings featured in the text, as visual artistic representations of reality, hold a comparable position as 'readable' objects. The novel features a number of paintings – the most remarkable ones are those Lucy sees in the gallery of Villette, and the portraits of Graham and Justine Marie. The latter "[falls] away with the wall and let[s] in phantoms" (34.391) in the shape of Madame Walravens, and the phantom also embodies Lucy's jealousy of (the younger) Justine Marie, indicating the power of paintings to evoke an emotional response. These paintings and their significance to the theme of ambiguity will be discussed later; for now I want to focus on a seemingly minor appearance of a painting, which is directly connected with ambiguity through one of its attributes: the "dreary religious painting darkening the wall", which Lucy notices while waiting for Ginevra when she leaves the dinner-party at the Home de Bassompierres' hotel (see ch. 27). The scene marks the moment when Lucy stands at a figurative crossroad: reacting to

32 The notion of hope is an example of this kind of ambiguity and will be discussed in detail in the Conclusion.

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194

Graham's attempt at using her as the go-between to advance the budding love between himself and Paulina, she turns away from the young doctor: "With a now welcome force, I realized his entire misapprehension of my character and nature. He wanted always to give me a rôle not mine" (27.318). Just as Lucy is about to reply decisively to his "soft, eager" (27.318) entreaty, M. Paul interrupts the dialogue with a "hiss" (27.318) into Lucy's ear, claiming that he knows that Lucy's calm exterior at this moment hides passionate emotions: "'vous avez l'air bien triste, soumise, rêveuse, mais vous ne l'êtes pas; c'est moi qui vous le dis: Sauvage! la flamme à l'âme, l'éclair aux yeux!'" (27.318). While Graham misreads Lucy entirely, M. Paul observes her closely and unsparingly confronts her with his quite accurate findings, as Lucy admits herself.[33] However, she is pained by the events of the evening, and when M. Paul makes a peace-offering by addressing her on her way out, she rebuffs him (see 27.319). He follows her into the vestibule and tries to make amends for his behaviour.

> He [M. Paul, OS] looked at my shawl and objected to its lightness. I decidedly told him it was as heavy as I wished. Receding aloof, and standing apart, I leaned on the banister of the stairs, folded my shawl about me, and fixed my eyes on a dreary religious painting darkening the wall. (27.320)

The "dreary religious painting darkening the wall" may be a Catholic work of art – and thus, in Lucy's mind, a falsehood trying to appear as the (spiritual) truth. The fact that the painting 'darkens' the wall suggests a type of ambiguity in classical rhetoric: *obscuritas*, or darkness, a *vitium* resulting from excessive brevity.[34] Both *obscuritas* and its counterpart, *perspicuitas*, derive their names from dark and light respectively, and the scene plays with the notions of literally dark and dark in meaning.[35]

Obscuritas is a rhetorical device that occurs in two modes, according to Quintilian: unintentional *obscuritas* hinders the imparting of the speaker's message, but intentionally used it may underline and strengthen his purpose. The former mode of *obscuritas* results from the disproportionate use of the

33 "'Oui; j'ai la flamme à l'âme, et je dois l'avoir!' retorted I, turning in just wrath; but Professor Emanuel had hissed his insult and was gone" (27.318).

34 "But we must be equally on our guard against the obscurity which results from excessive abridgement, and it is better to say a little more than is necessary than a little less" (Quintilian 4.2.44).

35 "[C]lassical Latin *perspicuitās* transparency, lucidity, […] *perspicuus:* clear, evident" (*OED Online*, "perspicuity" n.); "Anglo-Norman and Middle French *obscurité*, *obscureté*, *obscurté* absence of light; […] classical Latin *obscūritās* darkness, dimness, lack of clarity, unintelligibility, the condition of being unknown or unnoticed" (*OED Online*, "obscurity" n.). The last part of the etymological information – "being unknown or unnoticed" is already relevant here in the context of Graham Bretton's inability to know Lucy, and will be explored further in ch. II on the recurring phrase "I know not".

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194

virtus of *brevitas*, which conflicts with the demands of *perspicuitas*.[36] The definition of *obscuritas* itself is thus based on contrasting it with the concept of *perspicuitas* or clarity. The second mode also works by contrasting the true with the false, but also by mixing these two concepts: a falsehood is depicted as a truth. *Obscuritas* and the related/resulting *ambiguitas* move somewhere between the 'poles' of true and false, light and dark, clear and obscure, without being exclusively one or the other.

The speaker who intentionally resorts to *obscuritas* presents the false as the true; he has to make his audience take an untruth for the truth to achieve persuasive impact. Consequently, there is no (intentional) *obscuritas* that does not employ some features of *perspicuitas* in order to heighten the effect of its sister device on the audience:

> Palpability, as far as I understand the term, is no doubt a great virtue, when a truth requires not merely to be told, but to some extent obtruded, still it may be included under lucidity [perspicuitati, OS]. Some, however, regard this quality as actually being injurious at times, on the ground that in certain cases it is desirable to obscure the truth. This contention is, however, absurd. For he who desires to obscure the situation, will state what is false in lieu of the truth, but must still strive to secure an appearance of palpability for the facts which he provides. (Quintilian 4.2.64–65)

In itself, *obscuritas* does not say anything about either the truth or untruth of a statement – it only refers to the form of the speech: the linguistic means used to express something.[37] This aspect of *obscuritas* is reflected on two levels in the vestibule scene: the religious picture "darkening the wall" probably does so because it is a work of art painted to illustrate the Catholic doctrine, not unlike the four small paintings of a woman's life by the name of "La vie d'une femme", which Lucy describes with the same attribute, "dreary."[38] They displease Lucy first of all because of their lacking artistic value ("'quels laids tableaux!'") and because they show women as "insincere, ill-humoured, bloodless, brainless

36 "If the *virtus* of *brevitas* in the sense of intellectual-linguistic *detractio* […] is overdone, then the *virtus* has turned into the *vitium* of κακοζηλον […]. 'Too little' conflicts with three 'virtutes': with *narratio aperta* […], *narratio probabilis* […], and *narratio ornata* […]" (Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric* 146, § 309).

37 A present-day definition of obscurity associates the term "with the study of language and literature and the principles of reading and reception" (Mehtonen 9): "Marks of obscurity are: an elliptical style (loose syntax; anacoluthon; asyndeton *qq.v.*), recondite allusion and reference, archaic or ornate language, private and subjective imagery, and the use of the words and phrases from foreign languages." (Cuddon's *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Penguin 1982; qtd. in Mehtonen 9).

38 "Setting down a chair with emphasis in a particularly dull corner, before a series of most specially dreary 'cadres'. […] They were painted rather in a remarkable style – flat, dead, pale and formal. […] All these four 'Anges' were grim and gray as burglars, and cold and vapid as ghosts." (my emphasis)

ISBN Print: 9783847111191 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847011194