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## Primitive Minds

Anna Neill

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Neill, Anna.

Primitive Minds: Evolution and Spiritual Experience in the Victorian Novel.

Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2013.

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## CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S HYPOCHONDRIACAL HEROINES

*S* begin with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* because they are reluctantly realist. They share certain elements of Romantic-Gothic sensationalism: faux hauntings, scenes of physical and emotional incarceration, and barely navigable passageways that lead to episodes of horror or imagined horror. Both also depict the supernatural as a mental state brought on at once by the manipulative contrivances of others and by the effect of strained nerves. Each has a devout narrator whose perilous psychological condition is often shaped by fear of apostasy and whose heightened sensitivity sometimes gifts her with supernormal perception. Yet both novels temper their spiritualism with the demystifying forms of realist fiction: One subordinates its Gothicisms to the bildungsroman structure of moral growth and development, describing the heroine's struggle against her hostile environment and her endeavor to unite inner emotional and spiritual impulses with outer social forms; the other constantly subjects the spiritual states that

stimulate the Romantic imagination to medical scrutiny, observing how particular nervous conditions are likely to trigger religious experiences or to sustain the reign of fancy.

This highly material understanding of mental experience, however, does not obscure Brontë's recognition that spiritual feeling offers a release from the oppressive social restraints that seek to confine the female imagination. Linking her heroines' aberrant psychologies with the "lower" minds that she identifies in children and primitive or degenerate peoples, she invokes developmental principles from both mental and racial science precisely to articulate and spiritualize the longings and sufferings that in many ways outlast her heroines' willed efforts at self-improvement. Even as nervous illness becomes associated with incomplete development or a lower racial type, it offers an escape from the oppressive institutions and personalities that structure the lives of Brontë's young, unmarried, and impoverished English heroines. The formal tension between realist and Gothic-Romantic tropes thus points to the contested site of the European female body, which medical knowledge fails to discipline entirely. Mental science, this is to say, does not fully demystify episodes of spiritual transport, however closely affiliated with sexual passion or mental illness it shows them to be. These spiritual episodes validate the Gothic forms associated with a resurgent primitive mind. They do so even within the realist framework that offers an objective medical diagnosis of its first-person nervous, but self-scrutinizing, narrator.

Much has been said about the strained realism in Brontë's novels and its gender implications.<sup>1</sup> Gretchen Braun recently challenged Mary Jacobus's well-known argument that realist forms are linked to patriarchal oppression in the novel and that this realism is threatened by a not-fully-suppressed Romanticism. Braun proposes that, in recording the silences and evasions in quotidian female experience, Brontë articulates the trauma of self-loss in the experience of the socially marginalized woman.<sup>2</sup> Yet for other critics, realism remains the formal expression of the technologies of surveillance and control against which her heroines struggle. Sally Shuttleworth recognizes its "penetrative authority" as the alibi of medical and social "cures" for aberrant minds and behaviors, causing her character-narrators to shun the very narrative omniscience that they are charged with securing.<sup>3</sup> And Heather Glen, like Jacobus, sees Jane's combination of narrative omnipotence and egocentric determination unsettled by the precariousness of her identity, arguing that her Miltonic oscillations between self-assertion and self-annihilation keep alive "the aspirations of Romanticism in a changing nineteenth-century world."<sup>4</sup>

In what follows, I argue that Romantic and realist forms together represent the double consciousness of hypochondriasis. The symptomatic flights of fancy belonging to the disease mentally remove their sufferers from the painful material conditions of their lives, yet remain readable to them as aberrant states that render them worthy objects of medical attention. As Shuttleworth reminds us, the Victorian medical understanding of hypochondria included “melancholy foreboding” in addition to its now more narrow association with excessive anxiety about one’s own state of health.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the mind retains many of its reasoning powers even while it surrenders to wayward impulses, including reverie and rapture, and while it threatens to succumb to complete nervous collapse.<sup>6</sup> In one sense, then, the hypochondriacal mind-narrative is self-disciplining. Yet at the same time, it enables episodes of imaginative escape from the restricting circumstances of single, impoverished, female lives and the forces that silence and immobilize them. In the early Victorian language of mental development that parallels medical accounts of nervous disorder, the lower mind, which, like that of animals, knows nothing of its own workings, is temporarily ascendant over the higher mind, which observes and restrains its passions. The stuff of this more primitive nervous organization is the source of rapturous spiritual release.<sup>7</sup>

With a very different emphasis, Terry Eagleton has also shown how the formal tensions between Romanticism and realism in Brontë’s novels point to wider thematic contradictions. The competition between “preindustrial’ imaginative creativity” and depictions of “actual relations” in exchanges among people of different social classes in her work, he argues, points to the way in which she had to “negotiate the rift between imagination and ‘society.’”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Brontë’s fiction reveals two divided sets of values, with rationalism, self-determining individualism, and social protest ranked on one side against conservatism, religious submission, and piety on the other.<sup>9</sup> Eagleton situates Patrick Brontë’s low-church Evangelicalism, with its combined hostility to proletarian dissent and to High Church formalism, in the context of these class and cultural tensions. He also emphasizes how, as women, isolated and educated, and daughters of a clergyman, Charlotte and her sisters were especially oppressed by their ambivalent social status and by the tenets of Calvinism.<sup>10</sup>

As Eagleton stresses, Brontë is often critical of organized Christianity. From the hypocritical austerity of Brocklehurst in *Jane Eyre* to the sensual self-indulgence and relentless surveillance on the part of Catholic characters in *Villette*, the representatives of Christian faith often reinforce the heroines’ social exile or at best offer them only temporary emotional comfort and guid-

ance. Yet both novels are structured by determining (Christian and pagan) spiritual as well as material events in the protagonists' lives and minds. *Jane Eyre*, in particular, reads as a kind of spiritual biography. In one recent view, the story records Jane's gradual acceptance of Mosaic Law as she abandons her idolatrous adoration of Rochester and discovers a "renewed servitude to God."<sup>11</sup> A less traditional interpretation tracks Jane's growth as a Christian individual, by tracing how private spiritual experience leads the way to social transformation as Jane internalizes Christ's teachings about human equality.<sup>12</sup> Brontë's female narrators assume scriptural authority and make it a platform for social protest.<sup>13</sup>

Like Eagleton, these critics position the life of the spiritual mind within the landscape of changing social relations. However, Brontë's shifting depictions of religious experience and Christian institutions also engage Victorian debate about the spiritual or material origins of the mind, debate that itself spills into the formal terrain of Romantic and realist aesthetics. In her challenge to various confining and oppressive forms of religious and social authority, Brontë deploys the Romantic figure of the liberated imagination both to capture the experience of spiritual ecstasy (whether divine or demonic) and to rupture the confines of gender-determined social and religious duties and expectations. At the same time, her narrative is sensitive to the question of how imagination figures in a materialist understanding of the mind. Her "realism" embraces the physical processes that determine motive, meaning, and sense of self and detachedly observes the play between inner and outer worlds in the minds of her narrator-characters. Although at times this observing voice brings imaginative vision perilously close to madness, it does not ever entirely pathologize the imagination, which remains the instrument of emancipation from insidious, brutal, and seductive forms of oppression.

This tension between medical-scientific observation and imaginative liberation plays out across the mental terrain of dreaminess in both novels. In *Jane Eyre*, peculiar mental states associated with childhood assume concrete forms in the events that subsequently structure Jane's life, even while the narrator herself becomes increasingly able to manage the fears and fantasies that earlier dominate her child's mind. In *Villette*, much of the story is told by a narrator who inhabits a series of dream states, including "waking dreams" and "reverie." These haunt the realist media of minute observation and memory with a sense of unreality and confusion. Such interplay between dreaminess and the scientific study of it is especially pronounced in the realm of spiritual experience. The heroines' ecstatic spiritual states, whether manifest as mesmeric clairvoyance or Romantic pantheism, indicate their susceptibility to

nervous disorder. Both Jane and Lucy experience the might of God when in a state of physical and emotional exhaustion. Yet at the same time, nervous, dreamy spiritual vision transcends the “dry materialist views” of medical men like Dr. John.<sup>14</sup> Such states also challenge the emphasis shared by phrenology and Evangelical reformism on individual industry and moral restraint as the sole basis of mental health. The American psychiatrist Amariah Brigham observed in 1835 that religious excitement could “increase the action of one of the most delicate and important organs of the body,—one on which all the manifestations of the mind are dependent.”<sup>15</sup> Although excessive passion, like the revivalist enthusiasm that overtaxed the nervous system and turned healthy Christian minds into mad, magnetized subjects, is frequently the source of emotional torment and even self-loss for Brontë’s heroines, it also represents a route to the imagination and from there to a spiritual awakening that evades medical as well as ecclesiastical authority. Dreaminess, as she describes in “When Thou Sleepest,” (1837), ruptures the ordered patterns of thought that separate internal sensations from external things. The effect can be rapturous:

Sometimes, when the midnight gale  
Breathed a moan and then was still,  
Seemed the spell of thought to fail,  
Checked by one ecstatic thrill. (11.37–40)<sup>16</sup>

To suggest that Brontë relocates spiritual experience in the dreamy mental state and thereby liberates religious feeling from oppressive institutional forms is not entirely to return to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s association of madness with the woman writer’s act of defiance against the patriarchal confinement of her sex.<sup>17</sup> In *Jane Eyre*’s implied paralleling of the heroine’s unjust imprisonment in the red room at Gateshead with Bertha’s incarceration in the attic at Thornfield, the novel in fact confirms the real dangers of moral madness; the unchecked child’s imagination is one source of that infirmity and Bertha’s insobriety and sexual appetite is another. Gilbert and Gubar argue that the attic-bound “madwomen” of *Villette*—the monstrous, scheming Madame Walravens and the garret-haunting nun—appear to stand in for Lucy’s psychological incarceration and repressed rage.<sup>18</sup> Yet when Lucy does give voice to her feelings, we are usually invited to see these as signs of her nervous instability.

Neither do I echo those feminist critics who recognize a paradoxical narrative empowerment in the episodes of passivity, immobility, and silence that afflict Brontë’s narrators, for these self-denying moments also encourage

the reader's diagnostic skepticism.<sup>19</sup> Instances when Lucy is unable to act or speak indicate immanent nervous breakdown, just as the narrative syncope they produce suggests she is an unreliable cartographer of the city, its institutions, and the various erotic relationships on which her story centers. Indeed, it is well known that Brontë's less-than-trustworthy narrators conceal feelings or withhold information about events in ways that seem indirectly or, passively, voice their repressed desires.<sup>20</sup> Lucy, in particular, portrays herself as the victim of others' self-interested scheming, yet she is, in her own way, as busy a watcher as Madame Beck. She deliberately withholds Dr. John's identity from the reader despite her own discovery of it rather in the way that Catholic characters control information and conceal identities. Even the more emotionally stable Jane, who asserts that her own mental health depends on her drawing a realist self-portrait "faithfully, without softening one defect,"<sup>21</sup> delivers a story shaped by repression of the passions that throw her into nervous shock as a child; a tale no more "plain" and "unvarnished" (186), then, than that Othello told to Desdemona.<sup>22</sup>

The reference to *Othello* is particularly revealing of Jane's nervous disposition, and it hints at the racial thinking behind Brontë's texts, which, as I suggest later in this chapter, sees heredity and climate together influencing the capacity for nervous self-development. Despite frequent exertions of "wholesome discipline" (188) on her fanciful imagination, Jane's narrative exposes her frustrated longing and its nervous consequences in the imperialist fantasies of combined loathing for and identification with the racial other. She depicts both her dark-haired rivals, Blanche Ingram and Bertha Mason, as New-World Africans with, respectively, "inflated and darkened" (200) or "fearful, blackened, inflate[d]" features (327), even as she invokes the language of slavery to describe the oppression of English women.<sup>23</sup> In this respect, Rochester's insistence that Jane's midnight visitor is a figment of her nervous imagination is (notwithstanding his motive for concealing Bertha's existence) not in itself so improbable. After all, Bertha's appearance comes on the heels of a nightmare, and an earlier "apparition," when the gypsy woman throws off "her" disguise revealing Rochester himself, leading Jane to ask "did I wake or sleep?" (233). Behind both Jane's distorted representation of Bertha and her barely suppressed feeling of their shared oppression, the narrative offers both an objective scientific diagnosis of the symptoms of psychological disorder and a developmental theory of race that conflates the inhabitants of remote geographical regions with those from different temporal zones.<sup>24</sup> Even in the light of day, Bertha has a "savage face" (327) with "shaggy locks," a "wild visage," and "red balls" that Rochester begs his audience to contrast with Jane's "clear eyes" (339). As Sharon Marcus has

argued, Jane's episodes of prescient reverie merge here with another kind of "abstraction" in the generalized representation of human physical and cultural differences essential to the movement of capital across the empire.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, even as the overly fanciful imagination helps to map the contours of empire in these stories, the critical recognition of such connections itself mimics the process of self-diagnosis and narrative realist restraint that characterizes one pole of the hypochondriacal text. What Marcus describes as the "displacement of an embodied self onto writing"<sup>26</sup> occurs with the detached reflections of the older and worldlier narrators observing the nervous habits of their younger selves. This correcting impulse is nonetheless countered in the novel by a Providential voice, in which, as Jane puts it, events can be seen to have unfolded according to "presentiments," "signs," and "sympathies" that register powerfully in the body. Lucy describes her flight from reason to "truant imagination" as a very physical experience: "Reason turned me out by night, in midwinter, on cold snow, flinging for sustenance the gnawed bone dogs had forsaken" (214), to be succeeded by "a softer spirit" who delivers her into the sensual delights of "eternal summer"—the aura of a vision of a "head amidst circling stars" in a "dwelling too wide for walls, too high for dome" (215).

Both novels explicitly link the unreliability associated with the body's nervous and dreamy tendencies to hypochondriasis, which involves above all a heightened sensitivity toward the body, whose symptoms seem "pregnant with future danger."<sup>27</sup> Jason Tougaw has shown how in free indirect discourse the hypochondriac's story is framed by that of the "physician" narrator.<sup>28</sup> Yet in Brontë's novels, the first-person voice represents both the patient's narrative and the physician's diagnosis. Jane experiences "hypochondriac foreboding" (320) when, in a "restless, excited mood" (318) and tormented by the previous night's visit from Bertha like "a foul German spectre" (327), she awaits Rochester's return before the wedding; Lucy projects her own mental turmoil both onto her description of the Belgian King, whose hypochondria, she says, is expressed in haunting visions as well as in melancholy, and the royal dreamer of the Book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar. Like these figures, both narrators allow the influence of precognition and Gothic apparition to partly shape their stories: Jane's reunion with Rochester is delivered by spiritual intuition; Lucy interprets others' words and actions within the labyrinth of malevolent motives and apparently supernatural influences that make up the Gothic landscape of Villette. At the same time, both narrators exercise realist restraint on their stories in the form of medical self-diagnosis, directly or indirectly inviting their readers to interpret their mental experiences as the result of nervous strain or excitement. "The Reader shall judge" (483)

Jane declares, whether her telepathic communication with Rochester was the effect of an overly stimulated imagination, and her more restrained adult mind looks back on the poor self-control she demonstrated in childhood and declares it a symptom of her then clearly overexcited mental state. Lucy self-consciously observes how she abandons reason to give “a truant hour to the imagination” (214), frequently confesses to being “constitutionally nervous” (343), and emphasizes how she finally “disdained hysteria” at the moment of her triumphant exposure of the ghostly nun as a worldly trick in “reality” and “substance” (439). Thus even as the episodes of clairvoyance, precognitive dread, or spiritual elevation point to the activity of the dreamy mind, that mind, hypochondriacally, preserves some objective awareness of the physical conditions that make such abnormal mental states possible. During such episodes, then, wild or undisciplined spiritual rapture and the scientific observing mind can comfortably, if curiously, coexist.

## I. HYPOCHONDRIASIS, SELF-CONTROL, AND THE EVOLUTION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The split awareness associated with hypochondria falls short of true madness because it preserves rational awareness of the mind’s irrational wanderings. Hypochondriasis, like the later-coined “neurasthenia,” was a cover-all diagnosis describing any nervous overextension or depression and was thought to diminish or even completely arrest certain mental functions, potentially leading to complete breakdown.<sup>29</sup> In the table of contents of *A Treatise on Insanity* (1837), James Prichard lists as “hypochondriacal illusions” those impressions that derive from a false judgment in turn traceable to the accumulation of images in the memory. Under the influence of morbid reverie, these images may assemble to “produce an effect similar to that of actual perception,” and while the patient is aware of their difference from external perceptions, he “is so intent upon his reverie” that internally generated scenes have a much more powerful effect on him than external ones.<sup>30</sup> Prichard stresses that this kind of hallucinatory experience does not amount to madness, since the patient retains much of the faculty of reason and can recognize the difference between internally driven and external impressions.<sup>31</sup> Lunatics, on the other hand, have no such awareness, although in the condition he describes as “moral insanity,” the practice of restraint can rehabilitate the mind enough that it becomes capable of correcting such error.<sup>32</sup> Other studies of the disease confirm this distinction between nervous disorders like hypochondria and insanity: In *Inquiry Concerning the Indications of Insanity* (1830), John

Conolly argues that people of too-active and vagrant imagination, ranging from dreamy poets with a “vivid sense of things not present”<sup>33</sup> to medical men who confront the phantoms of their own fever and artists who fix their attention so long on internal images that they project those images over external objects of sensation, all experience defects of the understanding that do not amount to insanity.<sup>34</sup> John Barlow’s *On Man’s Power over Himself to Control Insanity* (1843), explores forms of mental illness where “the patient retains so much of the reasoning faculty that the delusions of the sense are recognized by him as such.”<sup>35</sup> He is thus capable of resisting the impulses caused by his delusions; his inner state is one of struggle between illness and reason. Similarly, Esquirol argues in *Mental Maladies* that, while hypochondriacs “have illusions which spring from internal sensations,” they “never attribute their misfortunes to causes that are repugnant to reason.”<sup>36</sup>

These accounts of hypochondriasis and its relationship to insanity overlap with the physiological study of dreamy states, including sleepwalking, waking dreams, and visions as well as ordinary dreaming. In *The Philosophy of Sleep* (1830), Macnish investigates the imbalance among mental faculties that occurs in states of partial sleep, such as reverie, daydreams, ennui, and hypochondriacally induced visions, as well as in full sleep, arguing that these states reduce certain powers of the mind while they elevate others. Both in ordinary dreaming and in partial sleep, the senses are either fully or partly inactive while certain thoughts and feelings, unrestrained by the faculties of reason and judgment, are given free rein. Thus the visionary phenomena of dreams must be understood not as they have been in the past as the work of spirits that “assault the soul in sleep” (52) but rather as an “unequal distribution of sensorial energy which gives rise to the visionary phenomena. One faculty exerts itself vividly without being under the control of the others,” thus giving rise to “the most extravagant thoughts” (53). During sleep or other states of reduced consciousness, there is limited or suspended activity in the regions of the brain and nervous system responsible for sensorial power, diminishing the body’s awareness of external circumstances even as it disables the faculty of reason. In waking dreams and visions, he proposes, imagination escapes the moderating influence of reason. Similarly, in sleepwalking, memory and imagination break free from judgment, even while some powers of volition, enabling the sleeper to go where he or she chooses, remain in play. Dreaminess is thus defined by diminished mental discipline and the greater or lesser failure of reason and judgment to prevail over the lower passions (186–207). Yet unlike Prichard’s moral madness, dreaminess here denotes a state that we all inhabit regularly in one form or another and over which active mental discipline exercises little command. While dreamy

minds habitually conjure up these visionary scenes and “imbue the most trite circumstances with poetical colouring” (277–78), they do not mistake illusion for reality. In contrast with those who suffer from spectral illusions, Macnish emphasizes, they do not mistake the impression created by the brain for one generated by external phenomena but are to various degrees aware that these images “exist only in their own imagination” (212).

Although Macnish is engaged in a medical study of dreams and dreaminess, he also reveals a Romantic attraction to the mental power they sometimes reflect. While dreamy visions are unequivocally the creations of an embodied mind, they also allow it to “mount the dizzy chariot” (277) even as that mind remains *aware* that it abandons reason to imagination. Having opened his chapter on waking dreams with the epigraph from *Lyrical Ballads*, Macnish begins by distinguishing between down-to-earth realist prose and the flights of imagination that are captured by poetry:

Those gifted with much imagination are most addicted to waking dreams. There are some men whose minds are so practical and so thoroughly prosaic, that they seldom get beyond the boundaries of absolute reality; others are so ideal and excursive, that they have a perpetual tendency to transcend the limits of absolute truth—to leave this “visible diurnal sphere” behind; and on the pinions of fancy, soar away into the regions of poetry and romance. Waking dreams are merely the effect of unbridled imagination. The faculty, when exercised under common circumstances, is kept in strict subordination to reason . . . which never for a moment permits it to suppose that the fictions it brings forth are realities. (136–37)

Even as he demystifies the illusory states of waking dream, situating these within the “wide empire [of dreamy effects] between awake and perfect sleep” (52), he identifies imagination’s liberation from reason, not as madness, but as the food of a Romantic mind. In a passage that allegorizes the dreamy imagination, Macnish describes its solitary journey through a sublime landscape in a way that will be echoed in Brontë’s narrative voices at their most Romantic pitch:

Now following the lone traveler in some narrow and venturous pathway, over the edge of the Alpine precipices, where a single slip is instant destruction, she tracks him alone by fitful flashes of lightening; and at length, struck by the flash, she beholds him tumbling headlong from rock to rock, to the bottom of the dread abyss, the victim of a double death. Or possibly she takes her stand on the jutting forehead of some bold terrific coast,

and eyes the foundering vessel straight below; she mixes with the spent and despairing crew; she dives into the cabin, and singles out, perhaps from the rest, some lovely maid, who, in all the bloom of recovered beauty, is voyaging back to her native land from the healing airs of a foreign climate, in thought just bounding over the scenes of her youth, or panting in the warm embraces of a father's arms. Such are waking dreams. (211)

Like Jane's extravagant musings on Bewick's birds or the paintings she draws from her "spiritual eye" (147) or Lucy's flights of imagination, these mental excursions liberate thought from the "stern and forbidding hues" of reality (*PS*, 210).<sup>37</sup> They reveal inaccessible landscapes and trigger Wordsworthian spots of time as they collapse the distance between domestic and foreign lands or rejuvenate the weary present with scenes from the past. In so doing, they soften the realities of—especially female—separation and loneliness. Macnish's Romantic admiration for the dreamy mind sometimes seems to overwhelm his scientist's interest in the brain's shifting patterns of activity, just as Lucy's infusions of spiritual meaning into a sublime landscape can rhetorically overpower the self-correcting diagnosis of nervous daydreaming that generally follow such episodes.

Nonetheless, both Macnish and Brontë stress the physiological basis of dreamy visions, which include prophecy and clairvoyant perception as well as poetic imagination. *The Philosophy of Sleep* was available to the Brontës through the Keighley Mechanics Institute Library, which additionally housed books by Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart and Esquirol's *Mental Maladies*. The collection also included phrenology manuals and essays on consciousness and the nervous system found in volumes of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, *Chamber's Edinburgh Journal*, *The Edinburgh Review*, and *Quarterly Review*; volumes on natural history, zoology, and plant physiology; George Cuvier's *Essay on the Theory of the Earth* (1813); and Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1833). The family's access to contemporary writing on natural and mental science through the library was complemented by Patrick Brontë's interest in science of the unconscious. He made notes on notes on sleep and nightmare that drew on Macnish's work together with William Buchan's *Domestic Medicine* (1784), frequently consulted in the Brontë household,<sup>38</sup> and was intrigued by the use of mesmerism and anesthesia as forms of medical intervention.<sup>39</sup>

Much of this eclectic reading in medical and mental science addresses how the competing influences of heredity, environment, and self-discipline could determine human success, including mental health. *Domestic Medicine* emphasizes that nervous affections, including hypochondria, can be con-

trolled through changes in the patient's environment.<sup>40</sup> "Nervous afflictions," Buchan argues, "arise more frequently from causes which it is, in a great measure, in our own power to avoid than from diseases or an original fault in the disposition."<sup>41</sup> For this reason, children, whose "nerves are more susceptible of irritation"<sup>42</sup> than adults, should be protected against confinement and bad air, as well as against overindulgence, thereby "erect[ing] an early fence around the disposition of [the] child."<sup>43</sup> Buchan's emphasis on climate and self-management suggests a source for the differences in character development between Jane and Bertha. Yet Bertha is also mad because she comes from generations of mad women. Esquirol identified a range of moral causes for mental illness, including excessive study as well as disappointed affection and other passions,<sup>44</sup> but argued that these were usually accompanied by hereditary, physical, and environmental influences. Similarly, in his *Essays on Hypochondriacal and Other Nervous Affections* (1817), John Reid (whose work may be playfully referenced in the naming of Jane's childhood nemesis "John Reed") emphasizes that nervous symptoms are not ever entirely under the control of the will or able to be sufficiently controlled by education and environment. While we may shun circumstances that are likely to aggravate a bias in the personality toward mental disturbance, and "guard against the approaches of mental malady,"<sup>45</sup> by cultivating self-control at a young age, diseases of the mind cannot be cured by either external or internal influence where there is "an hereditary propensity to inflammation and consequent distortion of the mental faculties."<sup>46</sup> Mental disorders that fall short of full madness also demonstrate limited susceptibility to environment. To demand that a person burdened by nervous depression become cheerful is like commanding an overheated person to be cold, even while, like Buchan, he recommends that hypochondriacs avoid isolation and excessive study, both of which may exacerbate the disease.<sup>47</sup>

In *Jane Eyre* especially, Brontë seems to invoke Reid's shifting emphasis on heredity and self-control in the etiology and history of nervous diseases. Here the bildungsroman narrative traces the heroine's journey out of childhood impetuosity and nervous susceptibility (which manifest in the red room as full hysterical collapse) into a mature state of mind in which she is frequently able to control her strongest emotional urges. This deliberately contrasts her with Bertha, who has supposedly succumbed to her violent and lascivious propensities. Reid opens his book by observing that the "savage, rustic, mechanical drudge, and infant, whose faculties have not had time to unfold themselves . . . may be regarded as machinery regulated principally by physical agents," whereas "man, matured, civilized, and by due culture raised to a his proper level in the scale of being partakes more of a moral

than an animal character."<sup>48</sup> Such confidence in the power of culture (both as nurture and as civilization) to correct the urges of nature, however, confronts two complicating developmental factors. The first is climate, which if too warm like that of the Caribbean enervates the moral senses or if too damp, like Lowood, compromises the health of the body. The second is heredity: For the Creole Bertha and her brother James, as well for Adele, the child of a loose woman, the promise of self-improvement seems feeble against the overwhelming influence of blood.

Medical investment in the idea of the civilized or mature will as foil to the deterministic influences of heredity and climate drew on debates in the 1830s and 1840s over the material history of the mind. James Ferrier's lengthy "Introduction to the Philosophy of Consciousness" appeared in an 1838 issue of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, complaining that to make the mind an object of scientific investigation is to ignore a fundamental distinction between men and lower animals. Since animals are not capable of self-awareness and cannot "stand aloof in any degree from the influence to which [they are] subject,"<sup>49</sup> they have no self or moral agency. In particular, Ferrier attacks the "admirers of somnambulism and other depraved and anomalous conditions of humanity"<sup>50</sup> for focusing on unconscious processes that tell us nothing of the mind's powers or of man's free, moral nature.<sup>51</sup> In a similar spirit, the *Edinburgh Review* criticized Robert Chambers's anonymously published *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) for, in the style of phrenology, making a flesh-and-blood organ of the soul.<sup>52</sup> In Chambers's controversial account of evolution, mental phenomena "flow directly from the brain" and the "distinction between physical and moral is annulled, as only an error in terms."<sup>53</sup>

This idea that the very material structure of the mind is at the source of the human capacity to morally restrain or even reconfigure it is indeed at the heart of phrenology, which combines the concept of fixed, inherited traits with the principle of self-improvement. Phrenology proposed that the cultivation of particular mental faculties could actually restructure the brain. Sally Shuttleworth emphasizes how Brontë's novels tie phrenological knowledge to the literature on moral madness and nervous dysfunction through the doctrine of self-improvement. Phrenology claims that by following the principles of the physical and malleable mind and nurturing particular faculties, human beings can overcome the degenerative influence of an inherited tendency to insanity. Shuttleworth points out however, that the phrenological stress on self-management in Brontë's novels is tied to the narrator's tenuously unified self, which is always determined by a configuration of faculties and hence to Brontë's habits of narrative concealment.<sup>54</sup> The "real-

ist narrative of self-improvement” indebted to phrenological positivism can easily turn into a parable of moral madness as the mind becomes a scene of unbalance in which powerful energies remain undisciplined. Brontë’s recognition of the physical dimensions of mind, Shuttleworth proposes, is what lies behind the simultaneous impressions of helplessness and self-control in her narrators, whose behaviors are at once the sum of uncontrollable nervous activity and calculated mental restraint. In this way, “the secrets of the self are displaced from the spiritual to the physical domain,”<sup>55</sup> and physician displaces priest in the treatment of moral disorders.<sup>56</sup>

It is possible, however, to see Brontë’s novels allowing some narrative force to the spiritual experiences they describe, thus resisting the regulatory regimes of phrenology and psychiatric diagnosis that Shuttleworth argues constitute technologies of selfhood for her heroines. As we shall see, *Villette*’s refusal to entirely pathologize its narrator’s attraction to the Romantic sublime, like *Jane Eyre*’s unwillingness to surrender all experiences of rapturous self-loss to the diagnoses of medical science, suggests that we should also look to Brontë’s interest in the physiology of imagination and the dreamy mind as sources of a narrative energy that sometimes outsize the realist scrutiny and self-correction of nervous tendencies. Even as Brontë maps spirituality onto the terrain of the body, revealing the sensational and embodied origins of mystical expression, her narratives climax at least as much in moments of ecstatic union with a “good angel” (215) or a “Mighty Spirit” (*JE*, 484) as they do in the scenes of realist triumph, when Gothic mysteries are unmasked. The dreamy descriptions of arctic or stellar landscapes that inspire her heroines to see beyond the confines of their drab schoolteachers’ lives aesthetically outrun the “rude,” “groveling” and “repellent” real about which Lucy complains (*V*, 100).

In this respect, her novels reflect the Romantic-era brain science of Erasmus Darwin, Franz Gall, and Charles Bell, which emphasized the evolved or physical basis of mind precisely in order to investigate its powers, including those of the elevated imagination.<sup>57</sup> Lucy’s astral voyages combine Gall’s biological model of the brain as a shifting arrangement of fully and less-active faculties with Darwin’s account in *Zoonomia* of the effects of suspended volition and the exaggerated influence of internal over external sensations in dreaming.<sup>58</sup> Her moments of ecstatic transport echo Wordsworth’s transformation of “outward things” by excited Spirit, occurring in the dreamlike state in which a combination of external scenes and internal sensations suddenly take “possession of the faculties.”<sup>59</sup> Jane’s childhood and early adult reveries, like the visionary events of *The Prelude*, occur in an interaction between “the growing faculties of sense”<sup>60</sup> and the natural environment, reminding us that

the growth of the creative mind is organic as well as spiritual.<sup>61</sup> Such Romantic representations of mind recognize the confluence of physical forces that underlie that mind while simultaneously identifying the dreamy liberation of nervous energy that fuels creative greatness. They embed imaginative genius in mundane matter and observe its dangerous proximity to moral madness. Yet they allow the spiritual energies unleashed by the excited nervous system to imagine new psychic and social possibilities.

## II. RAPTURE AND REALISM IN *JANE EYRE*

Brontë's first published novel responds to medical investigations of consciousness and spiritual experience by exploring how primitive, undisciplined expressions of anguish rupture the higher mental configurations of the European adult. In so doing, the narrative discovers continuity between a material understanding of the mind and the direct apprehension of God, through which Brontë attempts to release morality from convention, religion from self-righteousness, and "the world-redeeming creed of Christ" from "narrow human doctrine" (*JE*, 5–6). In her Preface to the second edition, Brontë aligns herself with the prophet Micaiah as well as with Christ's denunciation of the Pharisees to emphasize the peril of revealing truth outside human conventions and laws. Along with her publishers and readers, she also thanks those reviewers who have encouraged her, including G. H. Lewes, who praised the novel for its depiction of "deep, significant reality" (although he went on to complain of her tendency to melodrama).<sup>62</sup> By invoking her reviewers' praise even as she defends the spiritual truths of the novel, Brontë implicitly links phrenological accounts of mind that enable her to depict its most obscure and subtle movements with the "spiritual eye" (147) that foresees events, endeavors to follow the true Christian path independently of convention and authority, and asserts its own ardent interpretation of scripture. In the novel itself, much of this spiritual work occurs in a dream or in a dreamlike state, suggesting that, despite Jane's developing capacity for self-control, the mind's path to God involves those regions of mental experience that remain ungoverned by the faculties of will and judgment.

Jane's first dreamy episode occurs in the red room in which she is unjustly confined as punishment for fighting back against her bullying cousin. This incident obviously prefigures Bertha's incarceration in the Thornfield attic, since it follows upon Jane's "mutinous" defiance of John Reed, and since her struggle like "a mad cat" (15) against her captors will be repeated in

Bertha's "convulsive plunges" (339) when Rochester restrains her. Both the mistreated English girl and the displaced Jamaican Creole woman are prey to "ungovernable excitement" (44). When Jane is alone in the dark room she is overcome by the fear that she might awaken the "preternatural voice" (20) of the dead Mr. Reed, and her "wild, involuntary cry" (21) is succeeded by a fit that sends her into complete unconsciousness. This "vision from another world" (21) belongs to what Macnish calls the "unbridled imagination" of waking dreams, indulged at the expense of judgment and therefore threatening "the maddest and most extravagant thoughts" (53). The older, narrating Jane, recognizes that her child's mind was "prepared . . . for horror" (*JE*, 21) and that the vision of ghostly light is a product of the uncontrolled imagination. Reason, she adds, was only a "precocious though transitory power" (19). Her reflections echo Macnish's observation that children are particularly susceptible to dread and the mental phantoms it generates, as well as Buchan's claims about the nervous predispositions of children (54).

At the same time, Jane's dreaminess calls up a specter other than that of Mr. Reed, namely, the "half fairy, half imp" phantom in the mirror, a "strange little figure" (18) that she divorces from the observing "I." Appearing out of one of Bessie's nighttime stories out of "lone, ferny dells in moors . . . before the eyes of belated travelers," it presages the fairy Jane that Rochester will later blame for scaring his horse and that he will invoke in his infatuated teasing of her during their courtship. Jane has, he says, "the look of another world" (143). This does capture her susceptibility to dreaminess as, at key moments, the sensorial powers that link her inner with her outer worlds appear to weaken. Sometimes this takes the form of a feeling of disconnection from her own memories, as when she first arrives at Lowood and "Gateshead and my past life seemed to float away to an immeasurable distance" while the present remains "vague and strange." (58). Sometimes a sudden change in awareness will precipitate a feeling of unreality, as when Rochester throws off his gypsy disguise and she asks, like the speaker of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale": "Did I dream still" (233). At other moments, she experiences a form of ego loss as when, having learned of Bertha's existence, she speaks of "Jane Eyre" as a remote third person, once again pale like the ghost-child in the looking glass (341). Rochester's accusations about pagan enchantment also seem to resonate in the "trance-like" sleep that she experiences on her last night at Thornfield. Dreaming that she is back in the red room at Gateshead, she once again sees the spectral light that, as a child she had expected to illuminate the ghost of Mr. Reed. This time, however, it reveals the spirit of the moon, who has replaced the child-Jane as the "white human figure" that meets her gaze.

Although Jane's dreamy states and experiences of spectral self-loss seem to draw her toward pagan spirituality, they are rapidly reconfigured as Romantic Christian mysticism. Alone on the heath, she seeks relief from "the universal mother, Nature" (172), but she is truly calmed by feeling God's presence in the sublime natural forms of the night sky. Looking up at the Milky Way, she feels "the might and strength of God." This revelation of divinity in the night sky invokes supernatural creation as it is laid out in the Book of Genesis. Such ecstatic intuition of God is also echoed in the final words of the novel from the Book of Revelations, "Surely I come quickly," and the response "Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus!" Although these words are given to St. John Rivers, they fill Jane's own heart "with divine joy" (521). St John also overwrites Jane's earlier cry to Rochester, "I will come" (483) with his repetition of St. John the Prophet's answer to Christ. Thus, even as the novel converts sexual back into spiritual energy in its concluding words, it also reminds us that Rochester and Jane are apparently united by divine fiat, both supplicating God before they hear the summoning or answering voice of the other. Jane's prayer then brings her close to a "Mighty Spirit" and her "soul rush[es] out in gratitude at His feet" (484). This is the summons and the answer, the direct communion of the soul with God, that Jane cannot properly hear or enact when it is communicated through Rivers's tyrannical will.

Rather than mediated by churchmen—whether in the form of Rivers's terrible devoutness or Brocklehurst's hypocrisy—this direct communion with God suggests the truth independent of convention, doctrine, and church or class hierarchy that Brontë invokes in her Preface. "Telling the truth" she announces at the beginning of chapter 12, means avoiding flattery, cant, and humbug. Yet "truth," in her narrative, is also opposed to "superstition" and Brontë's narrative realism depends on discoveries from mental science even as it describes from memory the heroine's moral and spiritual growth. Jane chastises her younger self for its proclivity to superstition. She notices her own experience of thrill at the Gothic mysteries of Thornfield, implying that such excitement is provoked by the stagnant and isolated life she has begun there and by the impoverished exercise offered to her faculties (130). When she hears Rochester's voice across the moorland, she apostrophizes superstition only to assert that this "is the work of nature" and not of witchcraft (483). The soul is not exalted at the expense of the body, as both Brocklehurst and Helen Burns, in very different ways, insist. Rather, soul can be located in the organization of the physical brain itself. The phrenological combination of faculties that constitute Jane's "peculiar" and "unique mind" (168) Rochester observes, enables natural sympathy

between the lovers and hence, ultimately, their telepathic communication. Jane announces her skepticism of palm reading and magical arts when she meets Rochester in gypsy disguise, declaring that he is “coming to reality” when he begins to ground his reading of her character in phrenology and physiology (229). When she searches for the inner voice that will speak directly to her at moments of painful indecision, she orders her “brain to find a response” and then observes how in sleep or near-sleep it discovers that voice. This suggests the work of mental energies operating outside will and reason and not “the agency of spiritual beings or specters that assault the soul in sleep” (*PS*, 52).

Even as she proclaims the novel as prophecy, then, openly identifying with Micaiah and closing with the voice of St. John the Prophet, Brontë naturalizes intuitive vision and clairvoyant perception as the work of the undisciplined and undeveloped dreamy mind. In a chapter of *The Philosophy of Sleep* titled “The Prophetic Power of Dreams,” Macnish declares the Book of Revelations “one magnificent dream” or “one gush of the Divine Spirit overflowing the mind of its author in sleep, and bringing the most distant ages in emblem before his eyes” (*PS*, 102). Mystical experience, he argues, must be seen to obey the fundamental laws of nature. In the novel, Rochester, of course, uses the science of sleep to disguise the truth about his imprisoned wife. When his guests inquire about the scream they hear from the attic, he blames a nervous servant who has “construed her dream into an apparition,” and he does the same to Jane when she reports Bertha’s ripping of the veil, protesting that in “half-dream, half-reality” Jane has “ascribed a goblin appearance” to Grace Pool.

Yet Rochester’s efforts to obfuscate the facts by insisting on the nervous habits of women do not automatically cast all the narrator’s descriptions of mental reverie in a skeptical light. Jane herself ascribes her feelings of foreboding to hypochondria (320), thus apparently concurring with Rochester’s diagnosis that she has a nervous disposition. Nevertheless, she prefaces her account of the dangers of premonition-laden dreams about sickly children with a passage that unites the Puritan interpretation of signs with the science of the mind:

Presentiments are strange things! And so are sympathies; and so are signs; and the three combined make one mystery to which humanity has not yet found the key. I never laughed at presentiments in my life, because I have had strange ones of my own. Sympathies, I believe, exist (for instance, between far-distant, long-absent, wholly estranged relatives asserting, notwithstanding their alienation, the unity of the source to which each traces

his origin) whose workings baffle mortal comprehension. And signs, for aught we know, may be but the sympathies of Nature with man. (254)

Here Jane elevates Bessie's folk superstition that dreams of children signify danger to oneself or one's kin from the realm of folk tradition into those of both Christian providence and mental science. The divinely arranged signs that illuminate Providence are potentially decipherable as natural mysteries, mysteries that as yet can be decoded only loosely through the principle of "sympathy" or the bonds among organic things, but which might eventually be fully unlocked.

In April 1850, Brontë acknowledged to her publisher George Smith "that there are certain organisations liable to anticipating impressions in the form of dream or presentiment I half believe."<sup>63</sup> What Rochester calls Jane's otherworldly character can be attributed to this kind of mental organization. She dreams nightly of a weeping infant before the news of John Reed's death is brought to her and again of a child whom she fails to protect on the night that Bertha appears beside her bed. The character's susceptibility to portentous dreams carries over into the narrator's half-conscious foretelling of events. She describes Mrs. Reed's dreaming of her son's "swollen, blackened face" (268) only to report, three chapters later, her younger self's horror at the "fearful, blackened inflation" (327) of Bertha's features. She depicts her wild defense against John Reed's violence in a way that foretells the physical struggle between Rochester and Bertha, as she "received him in a frantic sort" and, like Bertha, is pinned down at the arms before she is imprisoned in the red room. The sequence of events that incredibly restores her to biological kin appears to the character suddenly as a "chain that had been lying hitherto a formless lump of links . . . drawn out straight. . . the connection complete" (443). As narrator, her task is to lay out the connections in sequence for the reader who, she observes, cannot be expected to have her "intuitive perception" or to "understand by instinct how the matter stood" (443). Here the often moralizing distance that the narrator Jane maintains from her younger self disappears and a mental gap emerges instead between Jane and her less-prescient reader. The real revelation does not occur in orderly narrative sequence but in an intuitive flash, suggesting that the narrator's retrospective interpretation of the events of her life can occur in the less-than-conscious process of what Rochester jokingly calls "second sight" (283) as much as through reflective judgment and the tracing of her own inner moral growth.

The naturalization of prophecy and second sight as productions of mental disposition and nervous organization positions spirituality and mysti-

cal insight in early-century theories about heredity and environment. These theories recognized heritable physiological characteristics as features of race difference—the effect of monogenetic organic variation from an original type rather than, as the proponents of polygenesis argued, evidence of multiple human origins.<sup>64</sup> In his *Researches into the Physical History of Man* (1813), Prichard stressed that characteristics unique to particular races are determined by cultural or climatic circumstance—determined by isolation or migration—and that these characteristics are generally hereditary.<sup>65</sup> Europeans (particularly women) transplanted into hot countries or descended from those who underwent such migration, he proposed, become debilitated and susceptible to disease.<sup>66</sup> Like Prichard, arguing that all human beings are descended from a single pair, William Lawrence and Thomas Hodgkin both proposed that differences in human type are the effect of inherited changes brought about through exposure to new climates.<sup>67</sup> In what he identified as a theory of “natural selection” that preceded Darwin’s, Patrick Matthew proposed in 1831 that “a change of seed, that is, a change of place . . . [is] indispensable to . . . more sturdy growth and health”<sup>68</sup> and that there is “a power of change under a change of circumstances [in] living organized matter, or rather [in] the congeries of inferior life, which appears to form superior [life].”<sup>69</sup> He suggests that natural mechanisms of organic dispersal (change of place under favorable circumstances) can account for the superiority of the British “Caucasian breed” of human being, which maintains its sturdy growth through its “wide move across the Atlantic” where the “old breeds” of conquered countries sink “before the vigor of new immigration.”<sup>70</sup>

*Jane Eyre’s* bildungsroman form together with the phrenological readings Jane and Rochester make of each other emphasize the principle of individual development. Yet, at the same time, narrative allusions to the influences of environment and heredity pull against the themes of self-control and self-determination, juxtaposing the frail nervous states of the Jamaican Creole characters with Jane’s ability to flourish even in adverse circumstances. Jane thrives at Lowood despite the terrible conditions and seems to grow with the “sweetest luster” (91) of spring, while so many of her classmates die of typhus and Bertha and Richard Mason succumb to the malignant influence of Jamaica. The latter has a “tame, vacant expression,” (220) attributable to his life in the tropics, while his sister’s moral indigence and mania is inherited from her mother and implicitly native to Creole ethnicity. Rochester pleads that his past, degenerative behavior should be attributed to “circumstances,” rather than to his “natural bent” (159), and asserts that Jane can claim no credit for her mental strengths, which are only the work of “Nature” (158). Bertha comes “of a mad family; idiots and maniacs through

three generations" (337); her youthful surrender to lust and intemperance only weakened her already innately frail faculty of reason. Jane, whose capacity for moral growth contrasts her with Bertha, pleads for the latter that she "cannot help being mad." Rochester admits that she is "singularly incapable of being led to anything higher, expanded to anything larger" (353). At the same time, "her character ripened and developed with frightful rapidity" (353). This confluence of inherited characteristics and innate developmental tendencies makes her Jane's opposite, since the latter, as Rochester has deduced from studying her face and brow, has powerful faculties of judgment and reason, which exert control over the passions, thus partly determining her own destiny by disposing her to follow her conscience or that inherent "inward treasure, born with [her]" (233).

Nevertheless, even as an adult, Jane is susceptible to "hypochondriac foreboding" (320), and, like moral madness, hypochondriacal nervousness is associated with a tendency to fall into mental states that escape the discipline of the higher faculties. Her innate "inward treasure" or self-disciplining moral compass surrenders to dreamy episodes that are especially likely to occur in an environment of confinement or isolation, or when she is threatened with these. One such circumstance is the terrible prospect of sexual enslavement as Rochester's mistress, when her fear manifests as an auditory hallucination; another accompanies the prospect of a life of exile as a missionary's wife—a life that St. John tries to impose on her and that she shakes off when she hears Rochester's voice on the heath. The dreamy apparitions she conjures at such moments are not managed by the rational observing faculty of the self. If they are the effect of "excitement," then that is, uncharacteristically, for the reader, not the narrator herself, to "judge" (383). What that reader is likely to conclude is that they are expressions of "the spiritual eye" (147) as she says of her surreal paintings, and as such they belong to a lower mental state in which the terrified imagination is ascendant and the governing faculties of reason and judgment suspended.<sup>71</sup> In her lower mind, Jane finds the means to liberate herself from the circumstances that threaten her as a single woman without the protection of her family and, paradoxically, the opportunity for greater self-definition.

In the final chapter of *A Treatise on Insanity*, Prichard investigates the ecstatic affections, describing the "obscure phenomena" of the mind ranging from simple daydream, in which there is a "voluntary abandonment of the mind to the leading fancy,"<sup>72</sup> to the luminous vision of the clairvoyant. While the perspective of the latter, which, like God, can penetrate the secrets of nature and see into the future or across any physical distance, defies all existing knowledge by observation and experiment and therefore cannot be

subjected to proof,<sup>73</sup> we must assume that the answers lie in the natural powers of the mind and that such phenomena cannot be attributed to either miracle or some mysterious additional sense. The effects of animal magnetism, for instance, can probably be traced to the energies of the emotions and the imagination.<sup>74</sup> The visions associated with ecstatic somnambulism or trances, “are like those of a maniac or demented person,” since the visionary scenes generated in the paroxysm blend with realities after the event. It is probable, he suggests, that impressions stored deeply in the memory merge with the creations of fancy when they are excited by the paroxysm.<sup>75</sup> Thus ecstatic states must be considered pathological and are closely related to disorders such as epilepsy and hypochondriasis as well as to madness.<sup>76</sup>

*Jane Eyre* at once recognizes the physical origins of ecstatic religiosity with their disturbing proximity to madness and affirms direct knowledge of God. Jane’s clairvoyant powers, I have argued, have a natural origin in the dreamy state, where imagination and sympathy are liberated from the restraining influences of the higher powers. Yet Jane’s story is mediated by scripture. She quotes Luke 2:19 in recording how she “pondered” the mystery of her clairvoyant communication with Rochester “in [her] heart” (516), and invokes the Song of Songs as she invites him to walk in the clear morning air. Most pointedly, she ends her narrative, not with the description of domestic bliss that her future holds but with the death of St. John Rivers and the quotation from Revelations. Although these words are given to Rivers, whose domestic tyranny is earlier linked to his reading from the Apocalypse, they also belong indirectly to Jane, who, in reading them, feels her heart fill “with divine joy” (521). The “fantastic dream” of St. John of the Apocalypse invokes, not the fire and brimstone of her cousin’s reading or of Brocklehurst’s threats but the ascendancy of Jane’s own spiritual powers at the very moment that she rejects St. John Rivers’s authority and as in prayer seems “to penetrate very near a Mighty Spirit” while her “soul rushed out in gratitude at His feet” (484).

In 1851, Brontë urged Harriet Martineau to mesmerize her. She told James Taylor that while she was not a convert to mesmerism, she had heard stories of its success and could not discredit everything she had been told. She also reported that “it was inferred in time I should prove an excellent subject.”<sup>77</sup> Yet she was distressed by the “avowed atheism and materialism” of Martineau and Henry George Atkinson’s *Letters on the Laws of Man’s Nature and Development* (1851), whose “declaration of disbelief in the existence of God or of a future life” filled her with “instinctive horror.” “If this be Truth,” she told James Taylor, “man or woman who beholds her can but curse the day he or she was born.”<sup>78</sup> In this book, Atkinson responds to Martineau’s

questions about the nature of mind but emphasizes that man is not essentially different from the lower animals, but only a fuller development of the “same fundamental nature or cause” (*Letters* 16). Mind is therefore not, some “brilliant existence” independent of the earthly environment of the brain (16). What we call “me” is “a thinking feeling substance” (132); sympathy, clairvoyance, and *prévoyance* are being traced by science to their place in the brain (123); and God, Martineau proposes, “is a projection of [our] own ideal faculty (217) or, as Atkinson argues of ecstatic visions, the creature of dreams and fantasies whose impressions are confused with realities (53). Where the *Letters* close by condemning organized religion as “demoralizing hypocrisy and cant” (290), Brontë’s novels discover God through the peculiar mental talents of a devout mind, even as they recognize that God is encountered through a lower mind, vulnerable to hypochondriacal disturbance. Brontë respiritualizes material, evolutionist accounts of the mind and, in so doing releases her heroines from the patriarchal social structures with which mental science is often complicit.

### III. VILLETTE: DEMONIC IMAGINATION AND THE REPELLENT REAL

In *Villette*, the heroine’s ecstatic inspiration again feeds on scripture, only this time through the figure of the Apostle Paul. Like Paul, Lucy is exiled and often without friends; every journey leads her into the “vastness and strangeness” of a “wilderness” (38). In London, she sleeps homeless and friendless, not coincidentally, “in the shadow of St. Paul’s” (40). Her sufferings, from the abuse and deception she experiences in her early journeys to the final possibility of the death of her fiancé M. Paul, might be said to echo those of St. Paul and the verses from Corinthians 2:

In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren;

In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and in thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness (2 Cor.: 24–29)

Such suffering (which Lucy also identifies with that of Job [48]) inspires the Pauline language that opens chapter 38: “who gives the shield of salvation, whose gentleness makes great” (410). For Paul, salvation is to be found by dressing in the “armour of God” (Eph. 6: 11–13). Yet this identification

with Paul is profoundly unstable. It is not Lucy who bears his name, but her younger rival, Paulina, the child who prays “like some Catholic or Methodist enthusiast,” yet who, when grown, becomes an “agent of God” without any excessive suffering (408). Despite the Protestant emphasis on Pauline justification by faith, the other namesake of the Apostle in the novel is the Catholic Paul Emmanuel, who accuses Lucy of worldliness and the “pride and self-will of Paganism” (283). Lucy’s identity as a Christian sufferer is displaced by Paul Emmanuel’s own story of sacrifice and diminished by the unsuffering goodness of Paulina, who not only finds earthly happiness but also earns “the blessing of heaven above” (409). She lives, in fact, the life that Lucy offered the reader as an “amiable conjecture” about her own future: “a bark slumbering through halcyon weather, in a harbour still as glass . . . face up to heaven . . . in a long prayer” (29). Meanwhile, Lucy’s mental anguish, far from confirming her union with Christ, is more often expressed as a vulnerability to the miseries of the “rude real” (100). Moreover she reveals her repressed and projected jealousy of Paulina when she describes the latter’s sewing thimble as “the golden head of some darting yellow serpent” (272). Jane realizes her own spiritual yearnings in part by becoming Rochester’s guide and in part by displacing these yearnings onto St. John Rivers. Lucy, whose own name points to her troubled relationship with God, slips gradually away from her identification with St. Paul and becomes increasingly unsuitable as a Protestant spiritual mentor either to the pupils whom she half despises or to her Catholic lover.

Like Jane, however, she is subject to episodes of dreaminess, as when she finds herself in a state of “lonely calm” which can “steal meaning from the page, vision from [her] eyes, and lure [her] along the track of reverie, down into some deep dell of dream-land” (121). Such reverie is sometimes moderated by the more rational awareness of the narrator who contrasts her visions with the external realities that her character would like to escape and can observe how she is “snatched . . . back to consciousness” (121). Yet even as narrator, Lucy is often directed by an inner voice, one that tells her, in the absence of friends or home, to “go out hence” (37); she hears the sound of the wind as something “almost articulate to the ear” heralding apocalyptic flood, fire, and disease (32). As she tells her story, she dwells on the dreamy episodes that mix daydream with clairvoyant powers of sight, such as the vision of Europe spread out “like a wide dream-land far away” (49) or that release her from the pain of her circumstances by conjuring up ideal figures or “angels” (100) to dull her longings and fears. Like Jane waking from her rapturous experience on the heath to the cold reality of hunger, Lucy is startled out of her dreams by the external senses that make her aware of the

activity around her. This is an awareness of the real, "all evil, grovelling and repellent" (100). She observes that she seems to "hold two lives—the life of thought and the "life of reality" (68).

For Jane, these two lives eventually become simultaneously livable. She achieves both earthly and spiritual fulfillment: In her union with Rochester she vicariously experiences the delights of the senses, as his sight is restored and he can appreciate the ordinary as well as the beloved objects around him; in her closing identification with St. John, she can give free rein to her ecstatic affections. Lucy, on the other hand, claims she can limit herself to satisfying the most primitive wants of the body so as to indulge the "necromantic joys of fancy" (68). What she represses here is of course the very need for sympathy, whose fulfillment, for Jane, joins the ecstatic life of the mind with the mundane wants of the body, including those of sexual desire. Later, when she is made companion to the cretin, whom she describes as a "strange tameless animal," Lucy states quite openly her need for communication with a "human being" and she hides from the natural elements that she cannot make "comrades" "nor yield them affection" (144–45). In a feverish state, she imagines that sympathy between lovers could sustain "a fine chain of understanding . . . through a separation of a hundred leagues—carrying across mound and hollow, communication by prayer and wish" (145). Lucy's lack of shared sympathy with any other human being transforms what should be ecstatic devotion into necromantic fancy. Without sympathy, her hypochondriacal despair reaches a pitch, and her formerly dreamy visions now become demonic: a "nameless experience that had the hue, the mien, the terror, the very tone of a visitation from eternity" (146). The nightmares that oppress her while she is left alone in Villette during the summer vacation are then rekindled at the theater when she witnesses the demoniac possession of the actress Vashti, something that is at once marvelous and mighty, low and immoral.

Lucy lurches between the miseries of the material world and the spiritual torments of a mind strained by physical illness. These competing levels of awareness in turn are attached to the competing generic forms of realism and Gothic. Vashti's incarnation of the fallen Lucifer is a projection of the demonic obsessions that haunt Lucy herself. Moreover, the Gothic twists and turns in the novel, from the appearances of the "ghostly" nun to the confusing narrow streets of Villette map in the external world the mysteries and terrors of Lucy's internal landscape. Hence, when she is lost in the old part of the city, Lucy loses consciousness and falls into a state of suspended animation (172). Meanwhile Dr. John, the man of science, can pilot these streets with ease and "penetrate . . . every door which shut[s out] an object worth

seeing" (185). Although the visitations of the ghostly nun turn out eventually to be a hoax, she carries enormous psychic weight for Lucy, signifying, in medical terms, her own nervous condition, which Dr. John also penetrates as he speculates that she simply saw something that impressed her imagination. Lucy is less sure that she has had a hallucination of the presence of the nun, but she does link the latter's appearance with her own tendency to "romance and unreality" (235). Indeed, until she is exposed at the end of the novel, the nun herself embodies the unnavigable double life of a narrative that straddles Gothic romance and realism, raising the competing possibilities that she is either a thing "beyond the grave" or else "a child of malady" (235).

There are moments in the story when it seems that the sheer aesthetic power of Romance will win out over realism. By transcending the limits of the body in her performance, "convulsing a perishing mortal frame" (243), Vashti too is an immortal spirit, one who fills Lucy with fascinated terror. More than just another incarnation of the nun, however, Vashti is an artist. In one of the first moments that she allows herself to be critical of Dr. John, Lucy notices that his reaction to the actress is callous, because he judges her as a woman rather than as an artist. It was, Lucy declares, "a branding judgment" (242), reducing to the objectifying mark of the professional eye what for Lucy has the power to tear the soul out of its earthly chamber. Vashti's Romantic genius has a magnetic effect on Lucy, drawing her into a Shelleyeian sublime where the mind abandons the mundane directives of hope and desire and discovers spiritual union with a "power like a deep swollen, winter river, thundering in cataract, [which bears] the soul, like a leaf, on the steep and steely sweep of its descent" (242). Yet medical sense ultimately prevails. When Vashti's artistic rage apparently reaches such a pitch that it sets the theater on fire (reviving the figure of Bertha Mason) it is superseded by Dr. John's authoritative calm, which in turn renders Lucy still and sensible, "neither hindrance nor incumbrance" (244).

Oscillating between wild Romantic imagination and calm realist awareness, Lucy is at once vicarious artist and nervous subject. Her indifference to the Rubenesque "Cleopatra," in all her bulky glory, and her disgust at the paintings representing the four stages of a woman's life from coquette to widow contrast with her enthusiasm for the truth of Flemish paintings that capture Nature's power in a landscape, or that reveal genius in a portrait artist. M. Paul, who shares her taste, nonetheless accuses her of an interest in the "Cleopatra," thereby provokingly associating her with de Hamal, the womanish man of sense who is drawn to voluptuous forms. As poor a reader of Lucy's character as M. Paul, driven by his own obscure passions, appears to be at this moment, he is nonetheless right that Lucy cannot completely

abandon herself to her visions or transcend the mundane truths of the flesh, as can the Satanic-heroic Vashti. When, in sleep, or dreaminess, she allows "a truant hour to Imagination" (214), she is brought soundly back to the realm of the senses: She hears the sound of rain on the windows, feels the cold of the morning air, tastes the "ice-cold" of water (215). The daylight of the senses banishes Imagination, whose province is dreams, whose "flowers cannot fade" and whose "day needs no sun" (215).

The tensions between Romantic Imagination with all its Gothicisms, on the one hand, and the realist awareness operating variously through reason, "groveling" materialism, or medical science, on the other hand, are themselves pathologized as evidence of Lucy's hypochondriasis. In *Villette*, the spirit that declares, as Rivers did through Jane, "I come" (199) is the specter of Hypochondria. Lucy recognizes her own silent suffering and nervous melancholy in the face of the King. She accepts Dr. John's diagnosis of hypochondria as the source of her nervous fever and syncope, although she dislikes discussing the subject of her nervous health with him. Like his real-world medical colleagues, John Graham prescribes cheerful society and exercise. Yet however willing Lucy may be at times to follow Dr. John's lead and practice self-diagnosis with the hope of improving her mental health, she resists his firmly realist stance on the nature of mental phenomena. Not only does she give Hypochondria an allegorical power that "on that stage" (199) anticipates the spectacle of Vashti, but she also associates it with vision and prophecy, donning Nebuchadnezzar with the title of "imperial hypochondriac" (255) even as she reaches for a simile to convey the nervous agony of solitary confinement. As a hypochondriac, she is at once vulnerable to the ungoverned force of the imagination and, at the same time, a calm observer of her own delirium. This is true, not just of the character, whose partial insanity is balanced by the shame that comes with self-awareness, but also of the narrator. Lucy-narrator at one moment reaches for the sublime heights of unfettered imagination and at the next becomes the cool diagnostician who can at once speculate on the nervous origin of what she thinks she sees and assemble her account of events so that the everyday causes of apparent mysteries will be resolved.

Like the revelation about Rochester's mad wife in the attic, the real events behind mysterious happenings shift from the realm of the supernatural to the activity of the mind. Ghostly apparitions and sinister intrusions upon Lucy's privacy turn out to be nothing more than the work of romantic and Jesuitical conspiracy, yet they have an afterlife in Lucy's bewitched perceptions that, stimulated by a drug supposed to sedate her but rouses her imagination, infuse everyday scenes with a sense of "mystery" and the "ghost[ly]" (434).

Under the sway of an opiate whose effects seem only to mimic her spontaneous nervous episodes, Lucy wanders like an invisible onlooker through “a strange scene, stranger than dreams,” a “land of enchantment” (423). She secretly watches her friends, not with the eye of the realist observer but as a dreamy bystander watching figures in a pageant like Prospero’s, who will suddenly “vanish like a group of apparitions” (424). Although, in her detachment, she feels she “penetrates to the real truth” (435) and that “there is a kind of presentiment that never is mistaken” (436), she arrives at false conclusions about the arrangement of characters in the scene she observes. Finding that the ghost of M. Paul’s former love, that other nun—Justine Marie—is merely reincarnated in her namesake, the ward of M. Paul, she is swayed by figments of her imagination as she misconstrues the relationship between M. Paul and the young Justine Marie, thus playing her own part in the romantic-comic “sylvan scene” (436) before her. This in turn hearkens back to her performance in the play at the *École*, when she became absorbed in the part “as though lifted in a trance to the seventh heaven” abandoning her customary role as “mere looker-on at life” (129).

That her apprehended “truth” is bound up with imagination’s figments is a reminder of how little trust can be placed in a narrator who habitually withholds key pieces of information from her readers. Just as she fails to tell us when she recognizes Dr. John as the John Graham from her childhood, she gives no hint that her coming disclosure is a product of the dreamy mind and that it will lead her into error. In fact she seems to treat the reader as an unwelcome intruder on her dreamy episodes—one who, like M. Paul, coerces her into a particular form of writing and threatens to discredit her strange turns of fancy. Of that reader, she asks wearily, “must I tell . . . ?” (447), as she introduces her account of the strange events of the *fête*. Yet as a hypochondriac, like her character, Lucy-as-narrator is also a reasoning observer of her own ecstatic episodes. As she describes the series of memories and impressions feeding her presentiment that Justine Marie will somehow rise from the dead, she asks:

Ah! when imagination once runs riot where do we stop? What winter tree so bare and branchless—what wayside, hedge-munching animal so humble, that Fancy, a passing cloud, and a struggling moonbeam, will not clothe it in spirituality, and make of it a phantom? (433)

Such self-consciousness, with its down-to-earth account of presentiment as a phantom of the brain also releases the reader from any obligation to heed the “signs in the sky” (462), which portend M. Paul’s likely death at the end

of the novel. This final refusal to divulge essential facts paradoxically pays homage to the creative imagination even as it highlights the hypochondriacal origins of Lucy's narrative and announces that "man cannot prophesy" (460). Indeed, hypochondriacal imaginings are the stuff of autobiographical art, as memories from key moments in our lives, "when reviewed, must strike us as things wildered and whirling, dim as a wheel spun fast" (454). Unlike Paulina, who claims to remember every moment of her childhood in exquisite detail, Lucy freely admits that she cannot recall experiences from the early days of her life and translates this imperfection of memory into the narrative syncope that may eliminate the ten minutes following M. Paul's gift of a schoolroom, or the several days of unconsciousness that she spends in the Bretton household. The realist check on hypochondria's flights of fancy does not quell the ecstatic imagination any more than Lucy's alternately Pauline and Miltonic episodes of spiritual transport are silenced by the mundane sensualism or accumulation of worldly knowledge through surveillance that she associates with Catholicism.

Yet there is a profound loneliness to Lucy's dreamy states, and we are left with a strong sense that she will remain unmarried and childless. This reader intuition has its roots in the pronounced mental difference between her and the happy and reproductively successful Paulina, whose intellectual talents put her firmly on the side of science even before she marries John Graham. The child Polly loves the book the older John shows her for its wonderful illustrations of the wide world and the deep history of species—painting everything from "wild men" (24) in faraway countries to mammoth bones; the natural wonders of the past being once again associated with the geographically remote primitive of the present. In this scene of hers and Lucy's childhood, the union of Dr. John and Polly is plotted. Her wonder at all he can tell her about natural history and geography resurfaces when the grown Paulina/Polly pulls an old book of his from the shelf and her looks of delighted recognition confirm at once her remarkable power of recall and her faithfulness to Graham himself. Paulina, Lucy tells us, "loved the Past" (270), meaning, presumably, not just the past of her own life but also, given the reading matter that inspires it, the deep past whose traces can be found in both dead and living evidence from the present.

Through the success of this marriage, the novel quietly articulates connections among the rational mental faculties, successful attachment, and the future progress of the European bloodlines. Paulina's "scientific turn" (3) is inherited from her father, Mr. Home, who in turn derived it from a maternal uncle. While Home himself made an unsuccessful match, falling for a beautiful but irresponsible woman from whom he formally separated, their

daughter chooses a man who, Home remarks, is descended from a Highlander chief, and whose “tongue of wile and the brain of wile, are all come down [to him] by inheritance” (406). (Matthew praises the Scots among the “native[s] of the north of Europe [who have] a superior development of person, and a much longer reproductory life than the native of the south.”<sup>79</sup>) This man of science and this scientifically minded woman, well-matched in their mental precision, will produce “healthy and blooming” offspring who will, Lucy assures, grow up “according to inheritance and nurture” (409). Despite his earlier infatuation with the coquettish Ginevra Fanshawe, he has a native clear-sightedness that protects him against pursuing a union that will lead, as it did for Home, into emotional decline. Dr. John will prove a good father because he “does not with time degenerate; his faults decay[], his virtues ripen[]” (408). The positivist cast of mind, which Comte argued in 1844 represents the last social-evolutionary stage of human intellectual progress, is specifically linked here with heritable qualities of mental and physical strength and is explicitly contrasted with the degenerate mind and body. Oblique references to the uncivilized world—the “wild men” of Graham’s book and M. Paul’s fatal mission to the West Indies—do not threaten to link the hypochondriacal heroine with the savage degenerate as powerfully as they do in *Jane Eyre*. Yet Lucy’s episodes of spiritual ecstasy are so impenetrable to the scientific mind, as she explains to Paul, that she is implicitly, by her own reckoning, developmentally inferior to Graham and Pauline. Moreover, their story, which Lucy carries chronologically beyond the endpoint of her narrative, is entirely legible, where her own is left unfinished and obscure. As unfruitful as she herself is reproductively unsuccessful, Lucy’s narrative portrays nothing, as Brontë confessed, of public interest or a philanthropic or moral scheme, and its characters are as unrounded as its plot seems often unreal.<sup>80</sup>

For all its self-conscious allusions to narrative failure, however, *Villette*, like *Jane Eyre*, refuses to succumb to the tyranny of the real. After the publication of *Jane Eyre*, Brontë wrote a hurt letter to G. H. Lewes, responding to his criticisms of melodrama and improbability. She protests that in her earlier writing, she had taken “nature and truth as [her] sole guides . . . restrained imagination, eschewed romance, repressed excitement.” The result, she observed, was that publishers complained of a deficiency of “startling incident” and “thrilling excitement.” “Then too,” she goes on,

Imagination is a strong, restless faculty, which claims to be heard and exercised: are we to be quite deaf to her cry, and insensate to her struggles? When she shows us bright pictures, are we never to look at them, and

try to reproduce them? And when she is eloquent, and speaks rapidly and urgently in our ear, are we not to write to her dictation?<sup>81</sup>

Jane observes that such eloquence of the mind's eye is not equaled in the execution by her artist's hand. Brontë lamented that the "colours dashed onto the canvas" lacked "the proper amount of daring."<sup>82</sup> Yet despite the difficulties in realizing through art what is inspired by imagination, "the *real* should be sparingly introduced in pages dedicated to the *ideal*."<sup>83</sup> Lucy's and Jane's dreamy, spiritual attraction to the ideal may be disciplined by the restraining influence of the will, yet both characters manage nonetheless to protest their social confinement by linking stories of psychic struggle with the triumphant imagination. They do so though the diagnosis of hypochondria—that strange complaint in which reason maintains some foothold within the body-driven, interior landscapes of premonition and ecstatic vision. This lower, automatic nervous organization, invoked by Brontë in the image of writing to nature's "dictation," will become the source not only of clairvoyant vision but even social transformation in two novels by Charles Dickens.