Masked Atheism

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This chapter further develops the juxtaposition between Charlotte Brontë and Lady Georgiana Fullerton, from the commission of sin (idolatry, or erotic “creature worship”) to its consequences and punishment. For all their differences, *Jane Eyre* and *Lady-Bird* both posit the existence of a jealous God who violently, even vengefully, punishes violations of the First Commandment through sudden death (Maurice Redmond) and dismemberment (Rochester). Early nineteenth-century Evangelical tracts, such as those circulated by *Jane Eyre*’s Reverend Brocklehurst, instilled in an entire generation of children the terror of punitive, physical annihilation, whether in this world or the next. Writings by Brontë and Fullerton, however, whether fiction, autobiography, or correspondence, suggest that the most violent consequence of, and penalty for, sin (whether real or imagined) was the torture imposed by one’s guilt-stricken conscience: a disciplinary force more powerful and more determined than any Old Testament representation of outraged deity. As William James suggested as early as 1902, this theologically pessimistic worldview—a conviction of one’s unworthiness, the omnipresence of evil, and the likelihood of eternal
damnation—appears, from a modern, secular perspective, as a manifestation of severe pathology. James, in his famous Gifford lectures on “The Varieties of Religious Experience,” contrasted this “sick-souled” worldview with the increasingly popular orientation toward “healthy-mindedness,” which emphasizes, among other things, “getting away from the sin, and not groaning and writhing over its commission” (110; emphasis in original).

I include in this chapter on confession a few vignettes of the “sick-souled” worldview, as exemplified by Fullerton, Brontë, and other female contemporaries. A full understanding of the importance and controversial nature of confession in Victorian culture requires us to make a cultural leap into the mind-set of the “sick-souled.” Protestant Victorian opposition to the practice of auricular confession has been well documented by scholars, and although we may now consider Victorian arguments against confession quaint and outdated, Catholic confession seems to retain a sinister aspect even for many modern scholars. Taking the lead from Michel Foucault—who in *The History of Sexuality* (1978) describes the discourse of confession as an “internal ruse,” an “immense labor to which the West has submitted generations in order to produce [. . .] men’s subjection” (60), contemporary literary scholars have focused almost exclusively on confession’s potential to unnerve, frighten, or even horrify the average Victorian Protestant.1 This approach is classically exemplified by feminist readings of Lucy Snowe’s trip to the confessional in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*. Despite Lucy’s complex attitude toward Catholicism and the centrality of the confessional in her erotic and spiritual quest, critics tend to read Lucy’s confession to Père Silas as one more symbol of patriarchal domination in her suffocatingly narrow world.

1. Denis Paz’s *Popular Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian England* (1992) is surprisingly thin on the topic of confession, merely listing some examples of anticonfessional rhetoric without much analytical commentary. In contrast, John Shelton Reed’s *Glorious Battle: The Cultural Politics of Anglo-Catholicism* (1996) provides an excellent overview of anticonfessional sentiment in Victorian England, but Reed does not develop his passing speculation that confession’s threat to domestic authority “must surely have appealed to those who found parental and husbandly authority stifling” (201). Susan Bernstein’s *Confessional Subjects: Revelations of Gender and Power in Victorian Literature* (1997)—a study of the gender politics inherent in Victorian novelistic representations of confession—provides a similar historical background, but professes little interest in confession as a religious rite, preferring to focus on its appropriation as a pervasive, secular discursive practice. In her literary analyses, Bernstein does acknowledge confession’s potential as a site of cultural critique and an opportunity for liberating disclosure, but these possibilities are dwarfed by her overriding preoccupation with confession as “largely a site of [patriarchal] coercion” (1). More recently, Susan Griffin’s *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (2004), while mentioning Lucy Snowe’s ambivalent attitude toward the confessional, focuses almost exclusively on traditional anti-Catholic representations of confession through her analyses of British novels published well after *Villette’s* debut (1853).
But what do we make of the fact that female writers, even Protestant ones, were so fascinated with the confessional? That many Anglo- and Roman Catholic Victorian women confessed regularly? Finally, considering the virulence of anti-confessional rhetoric in the Victorian period, what might induce a woman writer “to have the boldness to defend, or even palliate” what H. J. Brockman referred to as the “foul satanic institution” of auricular confession?

To uncover some of the complexities of Victorian women’s attitudes toward confession, this essay examines Brontë’s Villette alongside an 1844 novel by Lady Georgiana Fullerton, Ellen Middleton. Fullerton, prior to her conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1846, wrote Ellen Middleton to argue in favor of the reinstatement of auricular confession in the Anglican Church. Although almost no modern literary criticism exists on Ellen Middleton, the novel made a sensational debut in both England and America. The novel’s portrayal of Ellen, an outwardly respectable and virtuous young lady contending with her inner demons of murderous aggression and sexual longing, riveted and enthralled Victorian readers. Despite the fact that Protestant and secular ideals of marriage designated husbands as women’s spiritual guides and superiors, Ellen cannot find salvation until she flees home for the confessional. Ultimately, Ellen Middleton challenges secular ideals of the home as a sacred space and makes a radical affirmation of the importance of women’s spiritual and moral autonomy. When placed alongside Villette, Ellen Middleton exhibits some striking, even ironic parallels with Brontë’s novel, despite the strident anti-Catholic over-
tones of the latter. In their respective, and at times contradictory, engagements with Catholic confession, both writers sustain a consistent criticism of Victorian domestic values.

"Her confessor, her priest, her God"

_Protestant Anxieties about Auricular Confession_

Even in an era suffused with religious controversy, the Victorian debate over the nature and purpose of auricular confession was remarkable for the passion that it inflamed. Since the time of the Reformation, the rite of confession had been, among English Protestants, one of the most feared and misunderstood sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholic Church had for centuries taught that serious sins could only be forgiven through the rite of confession, a confidential exchange between penitent and priest. After freely confessing his or her sins, the penitent would receive an absolution from the priest, who claimed his authority and power to forgive sins as Christ's representative on earth. To many nineteenth-century Protestants, this ritual suggested an illegitimate and dangerous exercise of ecclesiastical power. The debate over confession raged with heightened virulence at midcentury, in part due to the increasing visibility of the Roman Catholic Church in England. Even more alarming was the possibility that the ritual of confession could infiltrate the sacred confines of the Church of England itself. Supporters of the Oxford Movement in the 1830s and 1840s, in an effort to bring the Anglican Church more closely in line with its Catholic roots, urged for the reinstatement of auricular confession. While the controversy over confession raged among male preachers and tract writers, women also took part in the fray through domestic fiction, the genre deemed most appropriate for their sphere.

It is particularly illuminating to explore women's writing on confession, because the confessional controversy was fueled by anxieties about Victorian constructions of femininity, marriage, and domesticity. Opponents of confession often portrayed the ritual primarily as a means for Catholic priests to weaken, even destroy, the bonds between fathers and daughters, husbands and wives. Anti-Catholic propaganda assured men that to allow women to avail themselves of confession was to invite ruin and scandal:

4. The Anglican _Book of Common Prayer_ included a rite of confession, which became a linchpin of doctrinal debate. Supporters of confession used the rite to justify the reinstatement of confession, while opponents charged that the rite was meant to be used only in exceptional cases.
wives who rebelled against their husbands; daughters seduced and impregnated by evil Jesuits. William Hogan, in *Auricular Confession and Popish Nunneries* (1846), described the priest as “an incarnate fiend [standing] between man and wife, mother and daughter,” who violated “all the ties of domestic happiness and reciprocal duties” (58). Jules Michelet, whose *Priests, Women, and Families* (1845) was translated and widely circulated in England, painted a startling picture of the female penitent revealing to priests not only her own deepest secrets, but those of her husband, who would henceforth live in a “glass dwelling.” “How humiliating,” Michelet said, addressing the penitent’s husband, “[ . . . ] to be seen and followed into your most retired privacy, by an invisible witness [ . . . ], to meet in the street a man who knows better than yourself your most secret weaknesses, who bows cringingly, turns and laughs [ . . . ]” (11).

Opponents of confession argued that the procedure was not only invasive, but immoral. As Walter Farquhar Hook asserted in an 1848 sermon against confession, “[T]he Romanists are commanded to unlock their hearts to the priest, and persons of all ages and both sexes, standing before him in their *moral nudity*, are required to submit [ . . . ] to the most minute and searching questions as to their inmost thoughts” (24; emphasis added). Such arguments insinuated that priests’ questioning of female penitents about possible sexual transgressions (whether in thought or in deed) was tantamount to a moral rape, which would ruin women as effectively as any physical one. Indeed, many implied that proper women had no need of confession at all; the priests’ questionings would only plant the seeds of vice where none had previously existed. In an 1852 sermon, Thomas Hill Lowe reviled “the disgusting details of the minute questionings” to which priests subjected female penitents, “thus suggesting to their minds thoughts of evil, which otherwise would never have been harboured there, and making them familiar with images of pollution [ . . . ] and too often lead them on to the commission of open acts of impurity and sin” (11–12). Accordingly, anti-Catholic propaganda was rife with “real” accounts of women who had been seduced and impregnated by their confessors. Such lurid descriptions of the vile outcomes of confession can also be found in midcentury novels such as Catherine Sinclair’s *Beatrice* (1852), which hints at a sexual relationship between a young woman and her confessor. Bessie, with an “expression of abject terror [ . . . ] stamped on every feature,” confides to her Protestant friend that Father Eustace “comes

5. Defenders of confession insisted that priests exercised the greatest caution in questioning women and children; some denied that such questioning occurred at all. See *Letters on the Confessional* by T. M. McDonnell, and C. W. Russell, review of J. Michelet’s *Priests, Women, and Families*. 
[... ] every day for an hour to see me [... ] I must see him alone!—always alone!” (2:145).

Secret Desires of the "Sick Soul"

I want to assure you that however harassed by memory or anxiety you may be, I have (more or less) heretofore gone through the same ordeal. I have borne myself till I became unbearable by myself, and then I have found help in confession and absolution and spiritual counsel, and relief inexpressible. Twice in my life I tried to suffice myself with measures short of this, but nothing would do: the first time was of course in my youth before my general confession, the second time was when circumstances had led me (rightly or wrongly) to break off the practice. But now for years past I have resumed the habit, and I hope not to continue [to use] it profitlessly.

(emphasis in original)

In this 1881 letter to her brother Dante Gabriel, Christina Rossetti consoles him on his depressed state of mind, and hints that perhaps he might, like herself, benefit from a regular course of private confession. Anti-Catholic polemics against confession nearly always focused upon victimized female, rather than male, penitents, implying that women as the weaker sex were less susceptible of resisting either the sophisticated recruitment tactics or the sexual magnetism of charismatic Jesuit priests. Rossetti, along with female contemporaries of all denominations, demonstrated a deep fascination with confession; their interest with this rite seems to have derived, at least in part, from more complex cultural factors. Female virtue was the linchpin of Evangelical constructions of sacred domesticity, and, as many scholars have pointed out, cultural expectations of womanly perfection generated enormous psychological stress for thousands of conscientious middle-class women.

As autobiographies reveal, a popular method of moral training for Protestant girls and young women was an emphasis upon constant self-monitoring and the regular examination of conscience. While confessing transgressions outside the home was of course out of the question, children—especially girls—were encouraged to confess to their parents. Evangelical novelist Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna recalls in her autobiography how, as erring children, she and her brother “Never rested until [... ] we had encouraged each other to confession. We then went, hand in hand, to our mother, and the one who stood clear of the offence acknowledged it
in the name of the transgressor, while both asked pardon” (25). Similarly, Frances Power Cobbe, also reared in an Evangelical home, recalls

[. . .] once when I felt driven like a veritable Cain, by my agonized conscience to go and confess to [my mother] that I had said in a recent rage (to myself) “Curse them all!” Referring to my family in general and to my governess in particular! The tempest of my tears and sobs on this occasion evidently astonished her, and I remember lying exhausted on the floor in a recess in her bedroom, for a long time before I was able to move. (86; emphasis in original)

Elizabeth Missing Sewell’s account of her childhood confessions is presented far less nostalgically and is even painful to read. In her autobiography, Sewell, a High Church Anglican, implies that even as a child, the expectation for her to self-examine and confess encouraged in her “strange, scrupulous fancies” and “a morbid and over-strained conscience” (27). One day, after mocking her teacher, Miss Crooke, behind the latter’s back, young Sewell’s powerful sense of guilt deepens further, generating not one, but multiple confessions of wrongdoing. As Sewell recalls: “I became very miserable, from the thought of what Miss Crooke would say if she knew the full extent of my naughtiness. [. . .] The following afternoon, after going through my usual reading lesson, I turned round to Miss Crooke, and said aloud, so that every one might hear, ‘If you please ma’am, I called you a witch’” (26). Despite the punishment Miss Crooke metes out to Sewell as well as her classmates—weeks of remanded privileges resembling “a species of slow torture”—Sewell’s guilt lingers:

My conscience, however, went on working: having once begun to confess, the practice became a necessity, and I begged that I might be allowed to tell every day the things I had done wrong, because I felt so wicked. Miss Crooke at first treated me as a converted penitent, but by degrees she must have become alarmed. My confessions verged on the ludicrous, and the climax must have been reached when having received an order in common with my companions to mention if we saw any black beetles in the schoolroom, I made it a subject of confession that I had seen a black beetle crawl out from under a large bureau. (27)

Indeed alarmed, Miss Crooke informs Sewell’s mother, who in turn requests her daughter to “leave off all confessions, and not tell any one but herself my conscience worries” (27). While this admonition seems to have cured Sewell of the worst of her “scrupulous fancies,” she reports
being plagued, well into middle age, with a persistent “sense of guilt, and the dread of not being forgiven, and the being followed about [. . .] by a spectre of evil from which I could not escape” (39).

James, of course, would consider Sewell a perfect example of the “sick-souled” personality, with a conscience so burdened by moral scruples and guilt that it seemed distorted even to Sewell’s strict teacher and her pious mother. Today we might diagnose Sewell’s behavior as symptomatic of obsessive-compulsive disorder. More to the point, however, particularly significant is that Sewell suffered the tortures of an oversensitive conscience well into adulthood, as did Charlotte Tonna, who, early in her married life, took up the practice of writing down all her perceived transgressions: “I then made a little book, wrote down a list of offences, and commenced making a dot over against each, whenever I detected myself in the commission of one.” Tonna’s husband was not a religious man, and newly arrived in Ireland, she seems to have had no one else in whom she could confide. Her book “became a mass of black dots” before she gave up the practice in desperation, sinking into religious melancholia: “an abyss of gloomy despair” (Life of Charlotte Elizabeth 109).

Although I have not found any explicit instruction to women to confess their sins to husbands, men’s roles as their wives’ spiritual superiors (as outlined in the sermons discussed in chapter 1) suggest that husbands, not parents, would be considered the most appropriate confessors for married women. And as Ellen Middleton illustrates vividly, not all husbands (if any) are cut out to be confessors for their wives. The spiritual isolation that Tonna suffers, as the wife of a man to whom she could not unburden her conscience, also permeates Fullerton’s Ellen Middleton, fueling its argument in support of auricular confession. As Rossetti’s letter, Sewell’s and Tonna’s autobiographies, and Fullerton’s novel suggest, many Victorian women craved formal auricular confession as a convenient, and completely secret, respite from the afflictions of the “sick soul.” As William James explains, perhaps a bit too blithely:

The Catholic practice of confession and absolution is in one of its aspects little more than a systematic method for keeping healthy-mindedness on top. By it a man’s accounts with evil are periodically squared and audited, so that he may start the clean pages with no debts inscribed. Any Catholic will tell us how clean and fresh and free he feels after the purging operation. (110)

Not surprisingly, both Fullerton’s and Brontë’s fictional engagements with confession appear to have been colored by the “sick-souled” personal-
ity of each writer and her own real-life experience with the confessional. In her brief autobiographical sketch, Fullerton recalls reading, at age fourteen, *Father Clement: A Roman Catholic Story*, a novel published in 1823 by the Evangelical writer Grace Kennedy. Despite the obvious anti-Catholic message of the novel, Fullerton recalls how the character of the Jesuit chaplain, whom Kennedy had intended to malign, excited her “admiration and sympathy”: “I sided entirely with the girl in the family, who was a devout Catholic, and wished that I could, like her, have gone to confession from Father Dormer, and thought how exactly I would have obeyed him” (Henry James Coleridge 21). For Fullerton, by all accounts a serious young woman who “from her earliest childhood [. . . ] dreaded sin” (Taylor 166), confession must have appeared as a potentially comforting and direct salve to the perpetual gnawings of her conscience—albeit an application which needed to be continually repeated. After her conversion to Catholicism, and when her life took a more markedly ascetic turn in middle age, Fullerton, according to her biographers, confessed twice a week (Coleridge 341).

Like Fullerton, Brontë possessed a painfully sensitive conscience, as well as an outsider’s fascination for the mystery of the confessional. In a late 1836 letter to her friend Ellen Nussey, Brontë expresses profound anxiety over the state of her soul:

> [T]he melancholy state I now live in, uncertain that I ever felt true contrition, wandering in thought and deed, longing for holiness, which I shall never, never obtain, smitten at times to the heart with the conviction that ghastly Calvinistic doctrines are true [. . . ]. If Christian perfection be necessary to salvation, I shall never be saved; my heart is a very hot-bed for sinful thoughts (qtd. in Gaskell 152; emphasis in original).

In a letter of 1843 to her sister Emily, Brontë describes how she made an actual confession to a Catholic priest in Brussels, an episode clearly reflected in Lucy Snowe’s confession in *Villette*. Although the priest initially refused the sacrament to a Protestant, Charlotte reports that “I was determined to confess, and at last he would allow me [. . . ]. I actually did confess—a real confession [. . . ] the adventure stops there, and I hope I shall never see the priest again. I think you had better not tell papa of this” (qtd. in Moglen 209n). Why Brontë chose to go to confession (and what she confessed there) remains a mystery, but her fictional recreation of this incident in *Villette* suggests—despite the anti-Catholic resonances of the novel—that the confessional could offer genuine, if dangerous, comfort to women in the midst of spiritual turmoil.
Although Brontë’s and Fullerton’s novels engage with a variety of mid-century arguments against the confessional, both writers seem to have been especially intrigued by the widespread accusation that confession was tantamount to idolatry. Although the Catholic Church taught that the priest in confession was merely a representative of Christ, Protestant writers such as H. J. Brockman regarded the priest’s role as a “substitution of the man-god for the God-man” and an “insult to His Divine Majesty” through “the idolatry involved in the act” (2). Yet as Fullerton’s novel suggests most emphatically, confession could actually help women avoid idolatry—that is, idolatry defined as an all-consuming passion for husbands that rivaled or even eclipsed women’s love for God. Fullerton was not alone in suggesting that marriage could become idolatry; Charles William Russell, a professor of ecclesiastical history at Maynooth College, wrote an essay for the Catholic Dublin Review in which he derided Michelet’s implication that “the wife should give her husband not only her body, her heart, and her love, but her soul above all; that she should make him her director, her priest, and even her god, for she must give him her soul, which God alone can claim” (463).

Whereas confession represented idolatry to many Victorian Protestants, it is the “sin” of idolatry that causes spiritual turmoil for both Lucy Snowe and Ellen Middleton, and the sin that sends each to the confessional. While it is impossible to know all the reasons Victorian women sought confession, it seems significant that both novels focus on a sin that is essentially sexual in nature. Anti-Catholic depictions of confession, in all their prurience, implied, or directly stated, that the entire transaction between female penitent and priest was sexually charged, and that priests questioned penitents most aggressively about sexual sins. Both Lucy Snowe and Ellen Middleton are passionate, energetic women trapped in societies that deem passion, energy, and sexuality as incompatible with female virtue. This psychic split generates enormous tension for each character, and confession helps each to reconcile the conflicting elements of her identity. While female idolatry, aggression, and sexual desire must be confessed and absolved within the confessional, two points bear emphasis: First, the practice of secret confession validates for each heroine the existence of a “secret” self at odds with her public persona; and second, the very existence of this fragmented self seems to receive absolution through confession, as much as any specific transgression. In a culture that divided women into angels or fallen creatures, the confessional was possibly the only realm in Victorian culture that recognized that female sanctity was not incompatible with real, constant struggles against natural human drives of aggression and sexuality.
Although the overt Tractarian sympathies of Ellen Middleton have led scholars of our own time to dismiss it as a mere “religious novel,” these religious preoccupations infused Ellen’s narrative with an emotional realism and psychological depth extraordinary for its period. The book’s vivid, unsparring depictions of Ellen’s guilt-ridden psyche resulted in an instant best seller. The novel drew rave reviews from such notables as Harriet Martineau, William Gladstone, Queen Victoria, and even Edgar Allan Poe. “A remarkable work,” wrote Poe of Ellen Middleton in his Marginalia, “and one which I find much difficulty in admitting to be the composition of a woman” (34). Despite widespread anti-Catholic sentiment—and the fact that even pious reviewers condemned overtly “preachy” novels—Ellen Middleton’s obvious religious sympathies did not detract from its widespread popularity. “The Puseyism of Ellen Middleton,” marveled a reviewer for the Catholic Rambler, “could not keep it out of the circulating libraries; and we suspect that few recent novels have been so much read by the more intelligent and critical class of novel-readers” (Stothert 17). Most remarkably, these “intelligent and critical” readers were apparently unfazed by the book’s strong argument in support of auricular confession. Yet, even if, in their lust for a good story, Fullerton’s readers overlooked its doctrinal fine points, the concept of confession is crucial to understanding its appeal. Ellen Middleton’s use of confession as a rhetorical and narrative strategy allows for one of the most compelling, sympathetic, and believable representations of a violent, passionate woman to be found anywhere in Victorian fiction. Because confession is the only discursive practice which allows Ellen to acknowledge the disparate shards of her fragmented subjectivity—virtuous niece, devoted wife, idolatrous lover, and jealous murderer—the reader receives Ellen’s entire story as a first-person narration from the penitent herself in the confessional.

Although most critical reviews did not describe Ellen Middleton as a novel of religious controversy, anyone familiar with contemporary anti-Catholic literature would have recognized that Fullerton had written a direct rebuttal to the most popular and widespread arguments against auricular confession. In response to arguments that confession could weaken or destroy the bonds of marriage and family, Fullerton paints in

6. For other praise of Fullerton’s novel, see Coleridge, Life of Lady Georgina Fullerton, 155–58, 160–61, which quotes the 1844 review by Gladstone in the English Review as well as remarks by Queen Victoria and Harriet Martineau.
Ellen Middleton a portrait of a family rent apart by the weight of a single, unconfessed sin. The novel’s tragic heroine, Ellen Middleton, is a beautiful, intelligent, well-bred, and well-intentioned young woman who, at the age of sixteen, accidentally kills her cousin Julia in a fit of rage, knocking her off a staircase at the family estate. Guilt-stricken from the first moment, but terrified that her family will abhor and spurn her as a murderess, Ellen fearfully guards her dark secret throughout most of the narrative. Her situation becomes even more desperate when the adored and saintly Edward Middleton, her cousin, proposes marriage. Ellen considers confessing all to her beloved, but remains silent for fear of losing him. Shortly after the marriage, new complications arise for Ellen. A frustrated suitor, Henry Lovell—one who happened to witness Julia’s murder years beforehand—uses his knowledge of Ellen’s crime in order to manipulate her into accepting his passionate and selfish love. Although Ellen staunchly resists Henry’s advances, he forces her into incriminating situations, leading Henry to accuse Ellen of adultery. Heartbroken, Ellen flees to a faraway English cathedral town, where she contracts consumption and confesses her sad history (i.e., the entire flashback that comprises Ellen Middleton) to Mr. Lacy, the canon of the cathedral. She writes her confession after revealing by degrees to Mr. Lacy that she has something terrible to confess, as Mr. Lacy reads the service for visitation of the sick—the portion of the prayer book that supporters of confession held up as empowering Anglican clergymen to grant absolution to penitents. Mr. Lacy effects a reconciliation between Ellen and her family, and Ellen dies peacefully in Edward’s arms.

By making Ellen a highly sympathetic (and almost morally irreproachable) character who commits one horrible act in a moment of extreme anger, Fullerton refutes popular assumptions that women were naturally incapable of truly heinous crimes. Ellen is not, of course, the only depiction of a violent woman in mid-Victorian fiction, but her representation is a rarity in that her character is not rendered “monstrous” or “unnatural” by such an act. In Dickens’s fiction, for example, violent, heartless, or sexually aggressive women generally carry with them tell-tale signs of mental abnormality or illness: Great Expectations (1860–61) shows us Miss Havisham and her delusions, along with Mrs. Joe’s eventual imbecility; and, closer to the publication date of Ellen Middleton, Dombey and Son (1848) presents two related, mother-daughter pairs whose aggression and “unwomanliness” suggest that their female natures have, in one degree or another, all been warped beyond what God intended. In contrast, one violent act on Ellen Middleton’s part does not mark her as a mentally unstable or unfeminine being. While the novel’s depiction of the murder scene
clearly demonstrates that Julia's death is an accident, not murder, it also takes care to emphasize that Ellen retains her mental presence throughout the act and, therefore, bears moral accountability for the crime. In striking Julia, Ellen had not intended to murder her, but she makes no excuses for her deliberate act of violence: “I did not go mad,” she states, “for I had not an instant's delusion” (1:68). Fullerton’s portrayal of Ellen as natural, normal, and feminine in all respects other than her crime, suggests her belief in a universal fallenness: women could sin just as easily as men, and Ellen is no less a woman for having succumbed to her fallen nature.

Since the reader's identification with Ellen is made easier by the naturalism of the character's portrayal, the reader would likewise be able to imagine herself as capable of committing a great crime, and the psychological detail of the narrative invites the reader to partake of the same guilty tortures that Ellen suffers throughout the story. The reader is made to feel Ellen's guilt and, like her, to long for absolution: “I felt such an infection of criminality,” reported Harriet Martineau after she read the book (qtd. in Coleridge 161).

Ellen refuses to confess her crime for years because the possibility of discovery and punishment terrifies her. Equally painful, however, is her conviction that her crime has cut her off from all other human beings, and, most important, from God himself: “I dared not address God as I had done the day before,” she states. “I thought myself as of a guilty wretch, unworthy to live, unworthy to lift up her voice in prayer” (1:75–76). Only confession, by absolving Ellen's sin and removing her burden of guilt, can restore her to a sense of oneness with her Creator, and only in this way might Ellen, with a newly clean conscience, repair the intimate confidence she once shared with her aunt, one to whom “my heart had become as a sealed book” (1:257). Implicit in this passage is an argument that confession can actually repair familiar bonds rather than destroy them.

Ellen fears that a confession of guilt to her aunt would only estrange them further, and, for the sake of her marriage, she goes to great lengths to hide her secret from Edward as well. Ellen Middleton effectively argues that women should confess to priests rather than husbands. Certainly, Ellen's husband lacks nothing in holiness, but his excessive virtue—like that of St. John Rivers in Jane Eyre—renders him a rigid and unsympathetic character. His head filled with religious and romantic idealism, Edward invests both women and marriage with impossible expectations. For Edward, female violence or aggression is disgusting and completely incompatible

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7. Ellen insists throughout her narrative that her act was not premeditated: “I had not murdered my cousin. . . . [W]ithout thought, without intention, I had struck her” (1:76).
with his idea of pure womanhood—even when exercised for a presumably just cause. Furthermore, as he makes clear to Ellen shortly following their marriage, a far less serious offense on her part might diminish his love for her. “[A] fault in you,” he tells her, “would seem to me as a crime in another. [. . . ] To discover that you were not pure and good and true, beyond any other woman in the world, would be so dreadful to me, that I doubt [that] [. . . ] my love could survive” (3:9).

Because a confession of murder would clearly destroy Ellen’s marriage, she seeks to unburden her soul “to one who neither loved nor hated me” (1:209), for, if her husband loves her with excessive zeal for her virtue, Henry Lovell, the one man who witnessed her crime and knows her secret, loves her with a jealous ferocity that causes him at times “absolutely to hate me” (1:225). Henry, out of selfish love for Ellen, persists in his attempts to woo her even after she has married Edward. The love of both Henry and Edward for Ellen is tantamount to idolatry; although they cherish very different ideas of her, in neither case is the ideal approximate to the real, and in both this idolatrous desire drives Ellen one step closer to ruin. While Henry’s idolatry merits severe narrative retribution (he dies suddenly without a deathbed repentance), Edward’s fate seems surprising, considering his own significant role in bringing about Ellen’s ruin and untimely demise. He experiences the conventional bout of remorse and grief over his wife’s death, but, otherwise, he is never called upon to atone for his own injurious behavior.

Although several reviewers expressed dismay that Edward’s “bullet-headedness,” as Poe described it, escapes retribution, the novel identifies Ellen’s idolatrous passion—not Henry’s or Edward’s—as the great sin at the root of her novel-length confession, and, therefore, Edward’s sanctimonious behavior is left unpunished in spite of the novel’s disapproval. Ellen’s crime is murder, but what leads up to the act is her all-consuming hunger for human love. An orphan, Ellen spends her earliest years in the care of her distant and undemonstrative uncle. When Mr. Middleton takes a wife, however, Ellen’s adoration of her new aunt takes on “the exclusive nature of a passionate attachment” (1:52). Thus, when, in the moments before her death, Julia, Mr. and Mrs. Middleton’s daughter, suggests to Ellen that her aunt no longer loves her, it is the prospect of a seemingly loveless existence that goads Ellen into a violent rage.

The same fears of lost love which prompt Julia’s death also prevent Ellen from revealing to anyone her own part in the accident. Hence she creates a situation in which her guilt feeds on itself and becomes all-engrossing. Ellen’s conviction that she deserves punishment stokes her growing love for her cousin Edward, who, although ignorant of Ellen’s crime, is none-
theless unsparing in his constant correction and criticism of her smallest faults. “From a child I had been afraid of Edward,” she notes; “I felt in his presence as a criminal before his judge; his sternness was justice, his kindness was mercy” (2:7). Throughout the novel Edward represents for Ellen a divine and wrathful father figure, in addition to his role as her lover and husband. These two aspects of Edward's character become so intertwined in Ellen's psyche that his harsh moral chastisements begin to seem almost indistinguishable from lover's caresses: “Reprove me as often and as severely as you please,” Ellen asks Edward immediately after their engagement, “treat me harshly when I deserve it: I shall never be weary of your reproof, nor complain of your severity” (2:252; emphasis in original). All tortures—physical as well as emotional—that Ellen might suffer at Edward's hands are nothing compared to the prospect of losing him and his love: “His words of love,” she recalls, “sunk into my heart, like the rain of heaven on the scorched and burning sands of the desert, as I gave utterance to the long-subdued and deeply-tried passion of my soul, prostrate in spirit before him, living in the light of his eyes, and almost longing to die in his presence, and by his hand, ere aught in earth, or heaven, should divide us” (2:214; emphasis added).

Ellen's passionate desire is represented as a wild, unregulated force which brings harm not only to herself, but to others. Ellen, convinced of her unworthiness, resolves never to marry Edward. Yet passionate desire defeats her good intentions. In an extraordinary scene involving a rabid dog (seeming to symbolize the madness of Ellen's passion), Ellen suddenly decides to marry Edward after all (2:165–66). Yet her consent to Edward's proposal is tantamount to committing another crime, which the text represents as a second murder. Ellen's repressed, guilty awareness of this fact expresses itself through a horrifying nightmare the evening before the wedding. Ellen sees herself standing before the altar as a bride, but the priest begins to read the burial service:

[T]he book in his hands grew larger and larger, and the words “For the

8. A scene remarkable for its Freudian implications. Edward, in the course of protecting Ellen from the dog, is left with a bloody bite on his hand; Ellen seizes his hand and sucks the poisoned blood from the wound:

[As I] pressed my lips again on that hand [ . . . ] there was such a suspension in my soul of everything but deep, boundless, inexpressible love, which thrilled through every nerve and absorbed every faculty, that I could have wished to die in that state of blissful abstraction. . . . The blood had ceased to flow; the task of love was over, and still I knelt by Edward's side; still his arm supported my head; still he murmured words of tenderness in my ear. (2:165–66)
Burial of the Dead,” stood out in bloody letters, and seemed to rise from the page. I looked up into the priest’s face [... ] the thin lips moved, and said—“Julia’s murderer—Julia’s murderer!” And then the book and the altar were gone, and a coffin stood in its place; and the same voice said, “Open it!”—and the lid rose, and there was a corpse in its shroud. [... ] I looked and it was Edward. Over and over again, during the night, I awoke in speechless terror; and when I went to sleep again, the dream haunted me anew. (2:280–81)

Although the novel criticizes Edward’s unrealistic expectations of Ellen, this passage places the greatest blame for the fatal marriage once again squarely on her shoulders: the marriage is “fatal” in that Edward’s unknowing espousal of a murderess jeopardizes not only his earthly happiness, but the welfare of his immortal soul.

Ellen’s macabre dream also suggests, however, an alternate reading, which figures Ellen not as so much as a murdereress, but as a victim of her own marriage. Marriage in this as in many other “religious” novels is portrayed as a compromise in terms of one’s religious life, in that marriage signals the advent of sexual relations between husband and wife.9 In this case, however, Ellen’s foreboding about marriage in her dream, amid her repeated declarations that she wishes to die in Edward’s presence or at his feet, could prefigure her own spiritual and emotional strangulation as the wife of a man who makes his love contingent upon her virtue, one who demands complete, unquestioning submission in every matter, and who even reads all her letters.

Far more than a subconscious affirmation of Ellen’s guilt, this dream is one of the novel’s more explicit warnings of the potential spiritual dangers of matrimony and domesticity. Such pointed critique—expressed here and elsewhere throughout the book—seems enabled through the rhetorical practice of confession, which, whether religious or secular, as Susan Bernstein points out, allows women in Victorian novels to articulate their own social victimization (2). In Ellen Middleton, not only does confession form the structural framework of the novel itself, but it also offers apparently the only rhetorical vein in which Ellen can legitimately critique the social, religious, and literary conventions that have contributed to her ruin: Victorian ideals of angelic women; Evangelical notions of female religious subordination; and—most insistently—the selfish, destructive

9. As St. Paul warned his followers in Corinth, “the married woman is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please her husband,” an admonition he delivers “to promote good order and to secure your individed devotion to the Lord” (1 Corinthians 7:34–35).
emotions which masqueraded in popular fiction as true love and salvation for women. As Bernstein also notes, however, Victorian representations of confession tend to recast women as transgressors rather than as victims (5). Despite all the ways in which Ellen is harmed by popular ideals of gender, love, and matrimony, she must, the novel insists, be held personally accountable for her moral failings—in particular, her destructive hunger for human love. Ellen’s confession and absolution in a distant cathedral town presumably save her soul, but not her life: her subsequent death from consumption ultimately seems no different from the narrative retribution accorded to most other sexually and violently transgressive women in Victorian fiction.

Admittedly, it would be hard to imagine Ellen both repentant and alive at the novel’s conclusion. If Ellen’s critical voice cannot be sustained outside the confessional, neither, really, can Ellen herself. Absolution is to provide Ellen with “great depths of repose” (3:25) but “repose”—considering the heights of mental torment Ellen reports experiencing throughout her tale—is hardly something we come to associate with her character. From a reader’s standpoint, in fact, it is worth considering whether Ellen’s repentance and the repose that it offers are so desirable after all. In her guilt-ridden and unresolved state, Ellen’s suffering invests her character with a tremendously engaging originality and vividness; more significant, as a sinner whose staunch refusal to confess alienates her from God and humankind alike, Ellen takes on the aura of a Byronic hero. She is not so majestically independent in her torment as Manfred or Childe Harold, but the association seems significant, particularly in light of her creator’s adolescent crush on Lord Byron, a “strange infatuation,” reported Fullerton in her autobiography, that “lasted nearly a year” (Coleridge 25). Cast in a Byronic light, Ellen’s suffering—the direct outcome of her self-imposed exile from virtuous humanity, resulting from her deliberate choice to remain (throughout most of the book, at least) unrepentant—serves no lofty spiritual purpose, as it does for so many other Victorian heroines. Yet this “ unholy” suffering still suggests an autonomous, even masochistic, self-mastery, one certainly at odds with Victorian norms of femininity.

Ellen’s long-deferred confession does, however, restore her to the realm of Victorian womanhood. Whereas Ellen’s fierce reticence eventually leads Edward (who mistakes her mysterious behavior for adultery) to cast her from their home, her confession facilitates her return to the domestic sphere. Despite the novel’s construction of confession as a safe haven from potential domestic tyranny, Ellen’s confessor, Mr. Lacy, arranges for her also to confess to, and beg forgiveness from, Edward and her aunt. So much for the secrecy of the confessional. The gesture does effect a recon-
ciliation between Ellen and her family, providing her with the spiritual and emotional tranquility that she craves, although the confession ultimately silences her critical voice, recontains her dangerous (albeit energizing) impulses, and strips her character of its heroic, Byronic appeal. In the end, Ellen Middleton represents a most paradoxical—yet entirely comprehensible—attitude toward sin and evil. Just as Fullerton, in her youth, “dreaded sin” yet was fascinated by the scandalous Byron, Ellen Middleton upholds the value of confession and spiritual renewal—all the while inviting the reader, throughout most of Ellen’s narrative, to experience vicariously the glamour of unregenerate evil. This fascinating tension raises Ellen Middleton above “mere” novels of religious controversy and renders it an important contribution to Victorian fiction at midcentury.

"I want to tell you all"

Confession in Villette

Among the many differences between Fullerton’s Ellen Middleton and Brontë’s Villette, most striking is the novels’ divergent treatment of the relationship between human love and divine love. In contrast to Ellen Middleton, which piously affirms the primacy of divine love over potentially idolatrous human passion, Villette shows Lucy Snowe finding salvation only through the love of M. Paul Emmanuel. Yet, despite the ultimate emphasis in Villette on the transcendent potential of human love—as opposed to the distant, uncertain comforts of a future paradise—the Catholic rite of confession still plays an important symbolic role in Lucy’s erotic redemption.

Most critics have overlooked the multivalent significance of the confessional in Villette, preferring to read Lucy’s confession to Père Silas as, for example, one more symbol of patriarchal domination in the web of surveillance that confines her.10 Although the novel does suggest that confes-

10. Many critics agree with Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s assessment that confession is at best an unsatisfactory solace for Lucy, who “can only confess that she does not belong in this narrow space which cannot contain her,” a realization that contributes to Lucy’s growing conviction that “the church is a patriarchal structure with the power to imprison her” (415). Analyses that deal specifically with the topics of confession and anti-Catholic rhetoric in Villette take a similar stance. Rosemary Clark-Beattie defines Lucy’s entire relation to others as “an ongoing resistance both to the temptation of the confessional and the power embedded in the confessor” (824). Although acknowledging Helen Moglen’s apt observation that, in confession, Lucy acknowledges “the necessity of recognizing a part of herself too long rejected and denied” (Charlotte Brontë 209), Susan Bernstein concludes that “textual rebukes of the religious rite of
confession can be employed to manipulate and control women, confession also represents for Lucy Catholicism’s most compelling aspect: its acknowledgment and understanding of female desire, in contrast to the austerity of English Protestantism, which recognizes only pure angels or corrupt whores. Catholicism, however, would still have Lucy repress these desires; ultimately she chooses a different “confessor,” the Catholic layman M. Paul, who will, through his own passion for Lucy, “absolve” her of the necessity of hiding her less angelic self. In choosing a confessor who stands outside the auspices of institutionalized religion—one who fosters her tendency toward human idolatry—Lucy remains, unlike Ellen, to the very last page a rebel and a heretic.11

Unlike Ellen Middleton, which upholds auricular confession as a refuge for guilt-stricken women, a spiritual oasis removed from the prying eyes of fathers, husbands, and lovers, Brontë’s Villette presents it, in many ways, in a manner similar to contemporary anti-Catholic novels. Brontë’s depiction of confession, as a site for unlawful and destructive surveillance, is hardly an original one. Yet Lucy’s attitude toward confession is far more nuanced and ambiguous than that demonstrated by the virtuous Protestant characters of more conventional anti-Catholic fiction. During her lonely “long vacation” (227) in Villette, Lucy acts upon her desperate need to confess to another human being—insisting, however, that her “confession” is not a revelation of sin but simply the acknowledgment of her silent sufferings: “I said, I was perishing for a word of advice or an accent of comfort. I had been living for some weeks quite alone [. . . ] I had a pressure of affliction on my mind of which it would hardly any longer endure the weight” (233). Lucy’s confession does bring her relief: “The mere pouring out of some confession all underline the institutional subordination of women to patriarchal rule” (71). Most recently, Diana Peschier’s 2005 study of anti-Catholicism in Charlotte Brontë’s fiction also echoes conventional readings of the confessional in Villette: “Bronte extends the image of the confessional as presenting danger for Lucy Snowe who is vulnerable because of her loneliness and her repressed sexual feelings” (160).

11. Lucy’s longing for confession and absolution does not end with her visit to Père Silas but persists to the final page of the novel. This spiritual and religious dimension of Lucy’s quest has also been overlooked by critics, who generally read religious references, scenes, and characters either in terms of Lucy’s struggle with patriarchy or as mere metaphors for self-development. “[T]he central problem in [Villette] is not denominational or religious but psychological,” asserts Kate Lawson (53). Although, like Moglen in Charlotte Brontë, Lawson acknowledges confession’s attractiveness to Lucy as “a place where emotion and desire may be safely expressed” (56), her emphasis on its “psychological” benefits overlooks Lucy’s desperate need for religious counsel and spiritual cleansing. Similarly, Peschier argues that “when [Lucy] goes to make her own confession she is using the confessional more as a psychiatrist’s couch than as a channel for the forgiveness of her sins” (158). What neither Lawson, Peschier, nor Moglen considers, however, is that, in the context of Victorian evangelicalism, Lucy’s craving for human love is a sin, and a formidable obstacle to holiness and personal salvation.
portion of long accumulating, long pent-up pain into a vessel whence it could not be again diffused—had done me good,” she acknowledges. “I was already solaced” (234). Unfortunately, however, Lucy’s confessor immediately seizes upon his exclusive knowledge of her plight to gain for his church yet another convert. “You were made for our faith,” he states, “[D]epend upon it our faith alone could heal and help you—Protestantism is altogether too dry, cold, prosaic for you” (234). Although Lucy would sooner “walk into a Babylonish furnace” than make a return visit, she admits that had she returned to him on the following day, “I might just now, instead of writing this heretic narrative, be counting my beads in the cell of a certain Carmelite convent in the Boulevard of Crecy in Villette” (235).

Why does Lucy admit to this startling inclination to Catholicism and to the rigors of monastic life? Possibly because Catholicism at least acknowledges—and consequently, in some fashion validates—Lucy’s overweening desire. Although scholars have long speculated about the possible contents of Lucy’s confession, when this scene is examined in the context of Villette as a whole, little doubt remains that Lucy’s “dreary, desperate complaint” (258) centers upon her crushing loneliness and her desperate hunger for love. Although she insists that her revelation is no sin, female desire is continually represented as a potentially destructive force. The clearest embodiment of this danger is not a rabid dog, as in Ellen Middleton, but Madame Beck’s violent and ungovernable child, who is appropriately named Desiree:

This was a vicious child. [. . .] Amongst her other endowments she boasted an exquisite skill in the art of provocation, sometimes driving her bonne and the servants almost wild. She would [. . .] wantonly tear their best caps and soil their best shawls; [. . .] she would smash articles of porcelain or glass—[. . .] plunder the preserves, drink the sweet wine [. . .]. (157–58)

In her response to Desiree’s antics, Madame Beck in turn embodies the Catholic Church and its attitude toward the sins confessed by female penitents. As Lucy describes the confessions of her wayward young charges, she notes that “the priest heard unshocked and absolved unreluctant” (145). For the Church, surveillance and control are enough. In a like man-

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12. My thanks to Nicole Knapp, a friend and fellow graduate student at Indiana University, who helped me appreciate the significance of this easily overlooked character and passage in Villette.
ner, Madame, when told of Desiree’s latest transgression, simply states that “Desiree a besoin d’une surveillance toute particulière [Desiree needs a very special watch kept on her]” (158).

Although on the one hand Lucy resists the control that the Catholic Church would assume over her most private longings, on the other hand the very fact that it recognizes her sexuality as normal (albeit potentially dangerous) seems to provide her with some measure of consolation. The Catholic Church admits, despite its sinister intentions in the novel, a complex, well-rounded view of female human nature, in the midst of a culture which recognizes only angels, whores, or madwomen. For example, when Dr. John brings Lucy to the art museum, she is greeted by two images that underscore society’s rigid, impermeable distinction between two kinds of women—purely sensual and wanton “slug[s]” as represented by the grossly voluptuous Cleopatra, as opposed to the “cold and vapid,” “bloodless, brainless nonentities” Lucy so despises in the flat depiction of a virtuous wife and mother, as represented by a series entitled *La Vie d’une femme* (340, 277–78).

Yet Catholicism cannot, in its institutional auspices, help Lucy. Having recognized the physical and sensual desires possessed by *all* men and women, the Jesuitic Catholics of Villette pamper and indulge the cravings of the body in order to control the mind and the spirit. As Lucy states of Madame Beck’s system of education, “Each mind was being reared in slavery; but, to prevent reflection from dwelling on this fact [. . . ] the CHURCH strove to bring up her children robust in body, feeble in soul, fat, ruddy, hale, joyous, unthinking, unquestioning. ‘Eat, drink and live!’ she says. ‘Look after your bodies; leave your souls to me’” (195–96). Lucy’s vision of herself as a nun suggests, moreover, that, rather than stamping out her desire, this most sensual of faiths would sublimate it, turning it into an eroticized yet otherwise wholly immaterial worship of God the Father and Son—a life that would be for Lucy tantamount to a live burial, as the legend of the nun and the pear tree suggests. In reaction against the gross sensuality of Catholicism, Lucy clings to the austere faith of her childhood. Still, Protestantism is, as Père Silas aptly notes, a faith “too dry, cold, prosaic” for her. Lucy’s “strange, self-reliant, invulnerable creed” (512), as M. Paul describes it, seems to provide her little or no consolation; she “went by turns, and indiscriminately, to the three Protestant Chapels of Villette” (513). Lucy’s church attendance may reinforce her Protestant

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13. Lucy explains that Madame Beck’s house was presumed to have been a convent in former times, and she describes an old pear tree in the garden that, according to legend, sheltered “the bones of a girl whom monkish conclave of the drear middle ages had here buried alive, for some sin against her vow” (172).
identity, but her detached wanderings from one chapel to another suggest that she has found no community, no human connection, at any one chapel in particular.

Unable to find succor through either Catholicism or Protestantism, Lucy ultimately finds her redemption through an “erotic faith” (to borrow Robert Polhemus’s term) which, heterodox as it is, nonetheless seems more Catholic than Protestant. While in Ellen Middleton Catholicism is an antidote to human idolatry, in Villette its most attractive aspects—its understanding of an integrated human nature and its emphasis upon absolution through confession—are incorporated through Lucy’s idolatry. Although Lucy at first clings to the redemptive possibilities of her love for Dr. John, his attitude toward her reflects the blindness of English Protestant culture at large: even if Dr. John could see Lucy (he describes her, as a spinster, as virtually invisible, “a being inoffensive as a shadow” [403]), he could never help her reconcile body with spirit. Laboring under “an entire misapprehension of my character and nature,” Dr. John attempts to treat Lucy’s natural human desire as an illness.

Despite Lucy’s horror of rendering herself vulnerable to the surveillance of Madame Beck and Père Silas, she cannot be redeemed until her soul is laid bare before one who will understand and absolve her desire. In contrast to Dr. John, who “did not read my eyes, or face, or gestures” (404), M. Paul, with his prying eye and penetrating insight into Lucy’s character, can redeem her. Unlike the vast majority of Lucy’s fellows, “who have something else to do than to read hearts and interpret dark sayings,” a neglect allowing her to “be [her] own secret’s sovereign” (545), M. Paul makes it his business to read the depths of Lucy’s soul, starting with the contours of her physiognomy. As he peers at her face, Lucy recognizes that “he meant to see through me, and that a veil would be no veil for him” (128). Indeed, M. Paul prides himself on his intimate, privileged knowledge of everyone dwelling in Madame Beck’s establishment. Trained by his Jesuit upbringing in the art of espionage, M. Paul points out to Lucy his special observation post above the garden, boasting: “My book is this garden; its contents are human nature—female human nature. I know you all by heart” (453). That post, a small room with a lattice, calls to mind what Lucy later describes as “that mystic lattice [ . . . ] the sliding panel of the confessional” from which Catholics “were under the surveillance of a sleepless eye” (503). Just as the Catholic priest reads the deepest secrets of the human heart in the sacrament of confession, M. Paul sees beyond women’s feminine exteriors, uncovering in them what society might deem unforgivable—acts of violent aggression, displays of appetite. “[M]y pupils,” he states, “those blondes jeunes filles—so mild and meek—I have seen the most reserved—romp
like boys, the demurest—snatch grapes from the walls, shake pears from
the trees” (454). While nearly all Lucy’s acquaintances regard her as, at
best, meek, retiring, and devoid of spirit, M. Paul insists to her that “you
want so much checking, regulating, and keeping down” (452).

Mere surveillance, however, is not sufficient for redemption. In the con-
fessional, the Catholic priest represents Christ, yet, according to Catholic
teaching, even Christ in all his omniscience will not absolve sin until the
penitent expresses sincere recognition of and repentance for her transgres-
sion. For this reason, as long as Lucy remains resistant to M. Paul’s gaze,
his spying is mere espionage and a mode of surveillance that is at once
manipulative and unreliable. On the basis of his observations of Lucy’s
considerable erudition, for example, M. Paul becomes convinced that she
is well versed in classical languages. This false impression is corrected only
after he clumsily and cruelly attempts to extract from Lucy a confession
of her knowledge in front of his two learned but boorish colleagues—a
confession that would serve only M. Paul’s selfish desire to impress his
fellow scholars. Yet, despite her professed horror at these manipulative
tactics, Lucy is no innocent victim. She actively participates in countersur-
veillance, and her own failures also threaten the precarious trust existing
between herself and M. Paul. During the midnight festival, for example,
Lucy, who is spying from a distance on M. Paul, Madame Beck, and their
party, becomes convinced that she has stumbled upon the deepest secret
of M. Paul’s heart. Lucy’s unreasoning desire—along with the information
she has gathered from Père Silas regarding Paul’s eternal devotion to the
dead Justine Marie—leads her to believe that the young girl at Paul’s side,
his ward and Justine’s namesake, is also his intended bride.

Snared in a tangle of espionage, suspicion, and secrecy, neither Paul
nor Lucy can freely love until each has made a voluntary and sincere con-
fession of desire to the other. While Ellen Middleton dies hoping to reach
paradise, Lucy seems to attain it on earth—however briefly. Her redemp-
tion relies upon the attainment of full truth and knowledge in regard to
her lover; in this regard, at least, her heterodox paradise fits St. Paul’s
description of heaven, where “then [we shall see] face to face [. . . ] then I
shall know even as also I am known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Just as Christ
promised to prepare heavenly dwellings for his apostles, Paul leads Lucy
to her long-awaited home—in this case her new house in the Faubourg
Clotilde. Immediately upon entering the house, Paul feeds Lucy—an act
significant for its resonance of the Holy Eucharist but also indicative of
the way in which Paul’s love has reconciled Lucy’s physical hungers with
her spiritual longings. Appropriately, the meal is simple—rolls, fruit,
chocolate—refreshing, but not cloying, to the body as well as the spirit.
The union of body and soul is further emphasized by the date of this event: 15 August, the Catholic feast of the Assumption, commemorating the day on which Christ lifted up the Virgin Mary, body and soul, into heaven. According to Catholic tradition, Mary was, among all human beings, the only one entitled to the privilege of immediate bodily resurrection, as she was conceived without sin.

Lucy’s salvation, of course, is contingent upon confession: she must reveal to Paul the extent of her love for and devotion to him. As they walk toward the new house and school, Lucy obtains from Paul something tantamount to an absolution of what, for Lucy, has long marked her as doomed by Fate in her quest for erotic love: the deficiencies of her physical appearance:

"Do I displease your eyes much?" I took courage to urge: the point had its vital import for me.

He stopped, and gave me a short, strong answer—an answer which silenced, subdued, yet profoundly satisfied. Ever after that, I knew what I was for him; and what I might be for the rest of the world, I ceased painfully to care. (583; emphasis in original)

Although Paul’s response brings Lucy one step closer to redemption, it also suggests that his salvation is at stake. By coyly withholding the exact content of Paul’s response from the reader, Lucy endows his revelation of his physical attraction to her with the status of a secret confession.

The notion of Paul confessing to Lucy has the potential to overturn the power dynamic which Lucy (and undoubtedly, so many Victorian readers) abhorred: the control wielded by male priests over female penitents in the confessional. But Paul cannot convincingly take on the role of penitent, for, as a man, his desire is not perceived as sinful or transgressive. Therefore, although Paul obviously must unfold his heart to Lucy in order to elicit disclosures in turn, the climax of the afternoon in Fauborg Clotilde resides in Lucy’s dramatic and passionate confession, one which goes far beyond the protestation of sisterly devotion she had made previously:

“I want to tell you something,” I said; “I want to tell you all.”

“Speak, Lucy; come near; speak. Who prizes you if I do not? Who is your friend, if not Emmanuel? Speak!” (590–91)

As Paul’s mention of his surname calls to mind Christ and the means by which a Catholic priest derives from him the authority to absolve sin in the confessional, Lucy narrates to Paul all the heartrending details of her trip to
the park: her drug-induced state, her obsessive spying, her reason warped by passion, her fierce jealousy of a simple schoolgirl. The dark torrent that pours out of Lucy’s soul surprises her: “Warm, jealous and haughty, I knew not till now that my nature had such a mood” (591). Paul, however, careful student of human nature that he is, reveals that he knows Lucy better than she herself does. Rather than be shocked or offended by Lucy’s disclosure, he embraces her. “I think I deserved strong reproof,” she states, “but when have we our deserts? I merited severity; he looked indulgence. To my very self I seemed imperious and unreasonable. [ . . . ] [H]e gathered me near his heart. I was full of faults; he took them and me all home” (591).

Lucy’s “sins” have been forgiven, but her absolution differs drastically from the one Ellen Middleton receives at the end of her narrative. Although, in *Ellen Middleton*, female desire and appetite are natural, not warped or monstrous, elements of female nature, these cravings disrupt the social order and destroy both self and others and, hence, must be strictly regulated and controlled. The desire itself may be natural, but any failure to rein in this desire for the love of God and one’s fellow human beings is a transgression against divine law, and the errant woman (or man) must confess and renounce this sin in order to maintain a close relationship with God. In *Villette*, however, Lucy never alludes to a close union with God—nothing, at least, analogous to the sacred tie that Ellen Middleton longs to restore through confession. Lucy, through her confession, receives not so much absolution for her desire as a validation that this desire is, when accepted by another, no sin at all.

Lucy, who invests human love with divine transcendence, might seem, from a modern secular perspective, to have achieved a satisfactory reconciliation between the competing demands of flesh and spirit. This idyll does not last, however. In a plot development that has long baffled readers, M. Paul dies in a shipwreck. Feminist critics sometimes interpret Paul’s death as a necessary condition for Lucy’s full maturation as an autonomous being: “There was no man in Lucy’s society,” argues Kate Millett, “with whom she could have lived and still been free” (40). Yet the spiritual and religious integrity that Brontë and her female contemporaries craved is largely incompatible with twentieth- and twenty-first-century notions of freedom and empowerment. For all the radical individuality of her heroines, Brontë herself expressed a constant fear that her actions and beliefs might contradict a higher, divine will. Indeed, her letters reveal a woman no less preoccupied with the perils of human idolatry than Fullerton herself: “Why,” lamented Brontë to her friend Ellen Nussey, “are we to be divided? Surely it must be because we are in danger of loving each other too well—of losing sight of the Creator in idolatry of the creature” (qtd.
in Gaskell 146; emphasis in original). Considering, then, that Lucy’s situation as she narrates her story parallels that of the aged Miss Marchmont, tragically bereaved of a man whom she thinks of “more than of God,” to the extent of committing blasphemy (101), M. Paul’s death could be read (unattractive as such an interpretation seems today) as a divine condemnation for Lucy’s sin of idolatry. In this sense, therefore, Villette, like Ellen Middleton, is a novel-length confession—one made, however, by an unrepentant sinner, an outcast and a heretic.

This chapter’s juxtaposition of Brontë’s Villette with Fullerton’s Lady-Bird highlights how controversies over spiritual authority and auricular confession could help writers articulate concepts of female identity and vocation and represent the challenges women confronted in reconciling spiritual integrity with popular domestic ideals. As in the comparative analysis of Jane Eyre and Lady-Bird in chapter 1, Brontë’s and Fullerton’s novels, considered in tandem, also challenge simple dichotomies of “religious” versus “secular” fiction. Within the context of Ellen Middleton, readers gain a deeper understanding of the profoundly religious elements of Villette. Conversely, an analysis of the presumably conservative Ellen Middleton with Villette unveils a radical critique of domestic ideology within Fullerton’s text. Once more, Fullerton’s social critique could be considered more powerful and effective than Brontë’s. While both women frustrate the marriage plot in killing off a major character, the “painfulness” of Fullerton’s fiction (a quality which irked her reviewers) resides in her staunch refusal to compromise women’s spiritual integrity with romantic sentiment or readerly expectations.14 Ellen cannot love both Edward and God; God, it seems, jealously takes her to His bosom in the final pages. Lucy’s God, in taking M. Paul, may be all too similar to Ellen’s. Nonetheless, by clinging to earthly love at her soul’s peril, Lucy epitomizes a dilemma facing so many female Victorian readers: the difficulty of accommodating an otherworldly, more traditional religious worldview represented by Fullerton’s fiction, with the temporal expectations, demands, and desires imposed by an increasingly secular society.

Brontë’s and Fullerton’s engagements with auricular confession, like their “sermons” on marriage, once again demonstrate how the religious debates of the day spilled well beyond male clerical circles. Protestant male preachers and tract writers insisted that auricular confession victimized women and destroyed homes, but both Fullerton and Brontë, ironically,

14. While John Henry Newman would likely have approved of the arguments made in Ellen Middleton in support of confession, he reported that the novel “distressed” him: “I hardly know whether I ought to have read it. [. . .] I wish people would not write sad things—they make ones [sic] head ache; there are sad things enough in the world” (Newman qtd. in Sugg 129).
present the confessional (in one way or another) as a potentially liberating space for women. The one element tying together all these Victorian texts on confession is an acknowledgment of the fragility and precariousness of the middle-class British home. Asserting, like Jules Michelet, that a few feminine whispers in the ear of a Catholic priest transforms a man’s castle into a “glass dwelling” hardly demonstrates confidence in the strength or solidity of the domestic establishment. Home is also a fragile entity for Fullerton and Brontë, but confession, in their novels, shores up the home rather than threatens it. Ellen Middleton, an orphan, is driven to murder when her cousin challenges her primacy in her aunt and uncle’s establishment; later she is exiled from her marital home by a rigid, vengeful husband. Only confession can restore her to home and Edward. For Lucy Snowe, also an orphan, “home” remains an abstract concept throughout much of Villette. So traumatic are her memories of her earliest home that Lucy conceals them from readers. She longs for a home with Graham Bretton and his mother, but is denied it. As in Ellen Middleton, confession in Villette does not carry one away from home, but brings one toward it. Only after confessing her love for M. Paul does Lucy receive her little house and school, her paradise on earth, soon to be marred by the act of a vengeful, jealous God.