

“Not yet settled”: Charlotte Brontë’s Anti-Materialism

By **Louise Penner**, University of Massachusetts, Boston

<1> Recent critical work on Charlotte Brontë and Victorian psychology by Sally Shuttleworth, Athena Vrettos, and others has suggested both Brontë’s keen interest in and access to knowledge of Victorian physiological psychology and its effect in shaping what they call her psychological realism. Brontë’s own painful affliction of the facial nerves, *tic douloureux*, would be reason enough for her to become acquainted with current work in the science of nerves and the relationship between the nerves and the brain. Shuttleworth, in particular, has richly documented Brontë’s access to current journals, particularly *Blackwoods*, the local Leeds newspapers, and other scientific and medical documents that she might have attained through the local Keighley mechanics institute. Using her archival research, Shuttleworth argues that references in Brontë’s novels to hypochondria, monomania, and other terms important to Romantic and Victorian psychological studies, make it extremely likely that Brontë had at least some current knowledge of work in field of physiological psychology while composing her novels.⁽¹⁾ But did Brontë herself accept the apparent implication of this scientific work that all references to mind, soul, and the spiritual life can in principle be eliminated in favour of talk of brain, nerves and matter? I would like to suggest that we look closer at the ways that various other kinds of literary, philosophical, religious, and scientific influences may have had an impact on her representation of individual psyches in distress. My readings of Brontë’s correspondence and her fiction, particularly her most psychologically complex last novel, *Villette* (1852), suggest that Brontë had access to and drew from resources that offered her less dauntingly materialist possibilities for interpreting the nature of the soul and the relationship between mind and body.

<2> I owe a debt to several previous critics’ work on Brontë and physiological psychology for the ways they have informed my reading of Brontë’s amazingly rich depictions of individual psyches, struggling to endure loss, to establish self-confidence in educational and vocational settings, and to make romantic and spiritual connections to others. But much of this work, including that of perhaps the most influential critics working in this area, Shuttleworth and Vrettos, includes claims that seem to be in places, if not at odds with, then insufficiently connected to evidence within the novels and correspondence of Brontë’s interest in other kinds of explanations of the workings of the mind or soul and its relationship to the body, particularly those that were more readily informed by metaphysical, religious understandings of the connections between mind, soul, and body.

<3> Critics pursuing Brontë's interest in Victorian physiological psychology have been rewarded for the close attention they've paid to the wonderfully elliptical narrative of the psychologically troubled Lucy Snowe in *Villette*. Vrettos sees Brontë's knowledge of current physiological psychology as the impetus for Brontë's departure from traditional depictions of the mind and nerves in earlier sentimental fiction. According to Vrettos, Brontë "links nervous sensibility to an emerging psychological realism" that makes the reader view illness as "a condition of narrative authority," rather than an expression of sentimental distress (Vrettos 59). In other words, the narrator, Lucy, "legitimize(s)" her narrative through appeals to the condition of her brain and nerves, each of which, readers are expected to believe, tell what Lucy perceives to be "the truth" about the characters and situations she observes. In *Nerves and Narratives: A Cultural History of Hysteria in 19th-Century British Prose*. Peter Logan links nervousness to narrative authority in both Romantic and Victorian novels, claiming that the novelists he examines create narratives that reflect two important views in Romantic physiological psychology: 1) the popular understanding (supported by scientists) that nervous sensibility was a middle-class phenomenon; and 2) scientists' increasingly materialist explanations of the relationship between observation and nervousness. According to Logan, "The nervous temperament consists in a new receptivity to impressions that are incorporated into the fibres of the nerves, taking on a new materiality as they become permanently etched in the body rather than passing through as transient sensations" (28). I'm taken with aspects of all of these provocative critical works, particularly Vrettos's reading of Lucy Snowe's seemingly damaged psychological health as being essential to the powerful narrative effects produced in scenes where she reads the pained or damaged psyches of other characters. But I wonder about too readily locating the origins of this portrait or any of Brontë's complex individual psychological portraits almost exclusively in Victorian materialist physiological psychology as Shuttleworth's and Vrettos's readings would encourage us to do.

<4> I do not wish to claim that materialist physiological psychology held no interest for Brontë; but I would like to suggest that in her representations of her characters' psychic states, thoughts, and feelings in her correspondence and her fiction, *Villette* in particular, she was in effect challenging the notion that minds, souls, feelings, and movement were all fully explicable through the empirical study of the brain and nerves alone. The readings I provide here of Brontë's investments in the work of medical, literary, and theological writers who offered alternative representations of the relationship between brain, mind, body, soul, and nerves, suggest that Brontë's portraits are better understood as being drawn from a variety of sources, both secular and sacred, as they inspired her ability to flesh out the particular aspects she wants to stress in each character, his or her faith, emotion, instinct, passions, etc. It's true that Brontë's novels are noticeably ambivalent about organized religion; but it is also true that Brontë provides little record of the scientific, medical, and spiritual sources she consulted in building these portraits of psychological instability and turmoil. This lack of direct evidence applies also to the physiological and psychological literature appealed to by Shuttleworth and Vrettos. I shall suggest that the interpretations I propose help broaden our view of the intellectual, theological, and scientific landscape from which Brontë drew.

<5> I've noted above that there is a difficulty in trying to reconcile scientific and religious explanations of psychic experience as they influence Brontë's fiction. A similar difficulty seems to arise in reading the works of many of those scientists making discoveries in physiological

psychology of reductionist and materialist tendency during the period. For, whatever their own innermost convictions might have been, they tended to leave open the possibility of metaphysical influences on the experiences of body and soul, thus avoiding the challenge of reconciling scientific and religious explanations. Take for example the words of Francois Magendie, author of a treatise that proved that the anterior and posterior spinal nerves have different functions—the anterior now understood to be connected with movement and the posterior to be connected with sensibility. His discovery came to be known as the Bell-Magendie law after Charles Bell in the England made similar discoveries; thus both he and his work were well known in England. In 1838 Magendie claimed,

The most sublime features of the human character are intelligence, thought, the passions, and that admirable faculty by which we are enabled to direct our movements, and communicate by speech. These phenomena are dependant upon the brain, and are designated by many physiologists as the cerebral functions. Other physiologists, sustained and inspired by religious creeds, regard them as belonging to the soul, a being derived from the Divine essence, of which immortality is one of the attributes. It would not be becoming in us to undertake to decide here between these two modes of contemplating this important subject; our object is science, not theology. Besides, we do not pretend to explain the acts of the understanding or the instincts; our object is to study them, and to demonstrate the physiological connection they may have with the brain generally, or with certain of its parts. (Magendie, 135-6; qtd in Young 82)

Bell, a devout Anglican, also tried to avoid charges of either materialism or anti-materialism. “They [attendees at his lectures] would have it that I am in search of the seat of the soul. [. . .] I wish only to investigate the structure of the brain, as we examine the structure of the ear and the eye” (qtd. in Richardson 31). In contrast to this, it strikes me that Brontë was interested precisely in explaining “acts of the understanding and the instincts” – explanations of a sort that both materialist and more neutral physiology sought to avoid. And further, it seems evident that she sought to provide just such explanations through her representations of her characters—that indeed she saw this ability as one of the chief achievements novelists could make, and that a kind language of the soul was required to understand and articulate these representations.

<6> As Shuttleworth notes, Brontë does not record in correspondence or journals her views on contemporary physiological psychology and its materialist challenge to dualist notions of a mind and soul. Some of the references Shuttleworth cites in Brontë’s fiction are, in fact, actually suggestive of Brontë’s having questioned them. Shuttleworth locates a reference to “the celebrated physiologist, Abernethy” (Shuttleworth 10) in Brontë’s 1829 account of planning to write a play with Branwell, which she wrote up in volume one of her *Tales of the Islanders* from her “Glasstown” juvenilia (Brontë *Early Writings*, 43). In fact there is no identification of which Mr. Abernethy Brontë intends to refer to in her list of the islander characters. There were two John Abernethys who published work that Brontë may well have known: the earlier Abernethy (1680-1731) wrote, in addition to sermons published in the 1740s and 1750s, works about “sickness of the soul,” including *A Christian and Heavenly Treatise Containing Physicke for the Soul*. Its title pages indicate that the pages inside offer descriptions of “diseases of the soule,” the “faculties affected,” “the causes,” “signs and symptoms,” Then “prognostics” and “remedies” are

offered. The work claims to be “very necessary for all those which are troubled in conscience” (Abernethy, front matter).

<7> A second John Abernethy (1764-1831) was a physiologist celebrated for attempting to, in Alan Richardson’s words, “reconcile the new physiology with orthodox religious conceptions of an immaterial soul” (25). His work was thus hardly typical of the physiological psychology of Brontë’s day, which tended toward Magendie’s course of neutral, but ultimately materialist, explanations of psychological conditions. Richardson’s impressive historical account of what he calls Romantic neuroscience, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*, details the struggle between materialist physiological psychologists and the “renewed opposition to materialism” they faced in the 1820s (24). Richardson explains,

the defense of the conscious and “superintending” ego, and the affirmation of a “quasi-divine” (“one and indivisible”) mind, reveal a significant area of ideological consensus among reviewers who generally take opposite political positions, liberals like Hazlitt and Jeffrey for once finding cause with the conservative writers for *Blackwood’s* and the *Quarterly*. (24)

While Shuttleworth and others cite Brontë’s beloved *Blackwoods* as a source for her information about the new physiology, it appears that journal was as much a resource for those, like Abernethy, most concerned with positing the existence of a soul independent of body, brain, and nerves and somehow reconciling physiological psychology with the notion of a soul not based in the brain and body. As the reference to “Mr. Abernethy” in her juvenilia would indicate, whether the name refers to the earlier or later writer, Brontë did admire those thinkers who tried to understand psychological states fully believing in their existence within in the soul.

<8> Let’s, however, take for a moment what must have been, for Brontë, the most compelling case for materialist models of physiological psychology—that of her friend Harriet Martineau. Around the time that Brontë was writing *Villette*, she began a friendship with Martineau to whom she had sent an (apparently unsolicited) copy of *Shirley*. Their friendship blossomed after they finally met in 1849 in London, an encounter memorialized by Martineau in her 1855 autobiography.⁽²⁾ One of the major events in that friendship was the publication of Martineau’s *Letters on the Laws of Man’s Social Nature and Development* in 1851. In the book, Martineau and her co-author, Henry George Atkinson, published their correspondence on subjects including, perhaps most controversially, Atkinson’s atheism, their shared beliefs in the material basis of mind, the need to apply Baconian principles of observation to the study of psychology, and the ability of phrenology and mesmerism together (“phreno-mesmerism,” as they called it—Atkinson and Martineau 19) to provide just such a method of observation. Martineau describes how Bell’s discovery of the different functions of the motor and sensory nerves had prompted phrenology to incorporate mesmerism into the scientific observation of the body. In phreno-mesmerism, the mesmerized subject would be asked to point to the regions of the brain and nerves affected when asked to think about particular motions or sensations, thus making internal workings of the brain and nerves observable to the (so to speak) naked eye of the observer. Both Atkinson and Martineau, in endorsing phreno-mesmerism, despair of the simplistic and reductive

phrenology currently being practiced by lesser physiological psychologists at least in part for the ways it might undermine materialist explanations of mind-body relationship.

<9> According to Martineau, Brontë's response to her friend's views as expressed in the book shows a mind clear and direct about her instinctual revulsion to materialist explanations of the mind, yet eager to find goodness in her friend's beliefs and to embrace Martineau's agnosticism. Martineau first describes Brontë as having been impressed by the "tone of calm power in all that [Atkinson] wrote" in his "three letters about the distribution of the brain"—letters which categorically deny the existence of a soul that is anything but the product of the material workings of the brain (Martineau 362). Brontë then, according to Martineau, requested a copy of the book on its completion, but worried that Martineau's readers would "start away [from Martineau] . . . affrighted" (Martineau 362). Here Martineau describes Brontë's later, more considered, response to the completed book at length,

A month afterwards she wrote, "Having read your book, I cannot now think it will create any outcry. You are tender of others:—you are serious, reverent and gentle. Who can be angry?" This appreciation, from one who declared (as she did to me) that our doctrine was to her "vinegar mingled with gall," was honourable to her justice and candour. And so was the readiness with which she admitted and accepted my explanation that I was an atheist in the vulgar sense, — that of rejecting the popular theology, — but not in the philosophical sense, of denying a First Cause. She had no sympathy whatever with the shallow and foolish complaint that we were "taking away people's faith." (Martineau 362)

Brontë's appreciation of the manner in which Martineau addressed such a vitally important subject (You are tender of others:—you are serious, reverent and gentle") reflects her own sense of Martineau's delicacy and courage in making public her views about materialism and agnosticism—views that would threaten the worldviews of people like herself. Her reaction also shows her to be eager to sustain her faith in the face of the challenges posed to it by the obvious materialist implications of phreno-mesmerism. Of course these scientific challenges to her faith came at the same time that the Anglican Church was dealing with charges involving corruption and idleness, matters Brontë addressed through her curate characters in *Shirley*.

<10> Given her own frequent references to phrenology, particularly in *Jane Eyre*, Brontë must have blanched at Martineau's description of earlier simple phrenology as no better than fortune telling: "Phrenologists were dogmatizing and fortune-telling with strange incaution, and disgusting people by their presumption and blundering, while the subject was yet in its infancy." (Atkinson and Martineau 24) The critique here ironically (though almost certainly unintentionally) evokes *Jane Eyre*'s fortune telling scene; though it doesn't include a phrenological reading, the scene does involve Rochester attempting to produce information he desires from Jane by claiming to read accurately Jane's palm and face while dressed as a gypsy. Jane's disgust with the manipulation, under the guise of fortune telling and reading the signs of the body, is evident. And the fortune teller scene bears out Martineau and Atkinson's materialist explanation of phenomena: ["W]e require no supernatural causes when we can recognize adequate natural causes inherent in the constitution of nature" (Atkinson and Martineau 7). Arguably, the novel's Gothic scenes in the red room and the third floor of Thornfield work to

dispel the notion of supernatural causes as well. We should not, of course, forget that the disembodied voice of Rochester that reaches Jane impossibly in Morton shows us Brontë's insistence on the immaterial connection between Jane and Rochester's souls. Nor should we forget that earlier novel's apparent faith in the older phrenology in its multiple descriptions of St. John Rivers, Rochester, Bertha Mason, etc.

<11> The relative paucity of scenes in *Villette* involving "simple" phrenology, in contrast to *Jane Eyre*, for example, would make it appear that the later novel reflects the influence of Martineau's and Atkinson's critique of early phrenology and/or Brontë's recognition that phrenology could be so closely linked to materialist notions of soul. Martineau's insistence on the importance of the nerves and the brain, particularly those parts of the brain not visible to the eye anywhere but in a post-mortem, as the key sites in tracing human sensations and motions seems to echo in *Villette*. Martineau laments that "[in the past] almost every organ seems to have been honored and glorified before the brain; and especially the heart. How long will the word Heart stand in our parlance for soul, affections, sensibility, and conscience?" (Atkinson and Martineau 43). Brontë appears to have a similar sensitivity about her selection of words in describing the psychic states of her characters and her word choices do echo Martineau's in key places. For example, Martineau describes "a friend" who once described to her being in a condition of "sentience acute while wholly incapable of motion" who had a "narrow escape from being buried alive" (Atkinson and Martineau 43). Assuming her daughter dead, the sick woman's mother began crying over her, but she still didn't move; only when her mother began "swathing her in a sheet" did she "as the sheet came up and up" finally "ma[k]e a desperate effort" to open her eyes and tell her mother, "don't smother me" (Atkinson and Martineau 44).

<12> It's hard not to imagine that this image influenced Brontë's rather harrowing portrait of the life of Lucy Snowe, which makes reference to live burial and sentience without movement more than once. The legend of the Nun details the story of a poor nun being "buried alive for some sin against her vow" (*Villette* Ch. 12: 172). And the chapter in which Lucy is left alone in the former convent school to tend to "the cretin" –a person apparently without sentience and incapable of much motion--is titled "Buried Alive." Lucy's account of struggling with her own passionate feelings invokes the same imagery of life in death. Lucy writes, "Oh, my childhood! I had feelings: passive as I lived, little as I spoke, cold as I looked, when I thought of past days, I *could* feel. About the present, it was better to be stoical: about the future - such a future as mine - to be dead. And in catalepsy and a dead trance, I studiously held the quick of my nature" (*Villette* Ch. 12: 175). Ironically, Lucy manages to "studiously" hold back her nature "in catalepsy and a dead trance," reminding us, of course, of the difficulty of trusting Lucy's self-descriptions and of Martineau's description of her "friend's" experience of just such a "dead trance." And, finally, toward the end of the novel, as Lucy incorrectly believes that M. Paul will succumb to the efforts of Madame Beck, Madame Walravens, and Pere Silas to force him to leave for the West Indies without visiting her and prior to his marrying Justine Marie, she makes a desperate effort to resist the "Secret Junta" (as she calls her three persecutors) and protests to M. Paul against those who would force her to bury her feelings for him (*Villette* Ch. 38: 558).

<13> The ways that Brontë includes references and allusions to figures involved in both materialist and non-materialist explanations of mind in her correspondence and fiction leaves us

with an unsettled picture of her own thoughts about the mind-body or soul-body relationship. But her influences were not just philosophers and medical scientists. While she creates in *Villette*'s narrator, Lucy Snowe, an intense and exacting observer of other's appearances and behaviours, she also infuses into Lucy's descriptions language that implies not only Lucy's own psychic distress, but also a kind of moral instinct about the souls of others, an instinct whose origins we might locate in Brontë's literary influences as much as her scientific or philosophical ones.

<14> One example of a place in which Brontë's psychological portraits may too hastily be interpreted through the rather narrow lens of Victorian physiological psychology appears in a scene in which Lucy Snowe recognizes what she identifies as the "Hypochondria" of the King of Labassecour. I don't question Vrettos's claim that in this scene Lucy appears almost involuntarily to reveal her own neuroses as she recognizes the feelings of others; but the careful reading of minds and/or souls (whether healthy or sick) was something Brontë wrote about long before her portrait of Lucy in *Villette* and in language similar to that she uses in her descriptions of Lucy's soul reading. For this ability to read souls that she ascribes to Lucy was a key feature of the literature that Brontë most admired. Writing to her friend Ellen Nussey on July 4th of 1834, Brontë asserts that "all [novels] are worthless after Scott" (*Letters* 1: 130). In an earlier letter (January 1833) to Nussey, she explains that Scott "exhibits a wonderful knowledge of human nature as well as surprising skill in embodying his perceptions so as to enable others to become participators in that knowledge" (*Letters* 1: 121). Embodying her perceptions of mental states certainly appears to have been a goal, if not *the* goal in her fiction, and something she strove to undertake in her personal interactions as well. Writing to Nussey again on June 19th, 1834, Brontë writes (in gratitude for the receipt of Nussey's most recent letter):

I know my own sentiments, because I can read my own mind, but the minds of the rest of man and woman-kind are to me as sealed volumes, hieroglyphical scrolls, which I can not easily either unseal or decipher. Yet time, careful study, long acquaintance overcome most difficulties; and in your case, I think they have succeeded well in bringing to light, and construing that hidden language, whose turnings, windings, inconsistencies and obscurities so frequently baffle the researches of the honest observer of human nature. . . . I have long seen "friend" in your mind, in your words in your actions, but NOW distinctly visible and clearly written in characters that cannot be distrusted, I discern true friend. (*Letters* 1: 128)

<15> Readers of *Villette* will recognize here the same language Lucy Snowe uses to describe her impressions of the King whom she observes sitting in the royal box of Labassecour at a performance. Lucy sees "the strong hieroglyphics graven as with iron style on his brow" and, as if reading the minds of the entire audience simultaneously, sees quickly that she is the "only soul" who recognizes the king as a hypochondriac (Ch.20: 289).(3) Vrettos's idea that Lucy recognizes and sympathizes with a fellow sufferer here, and that her reading of the king's suffering is facilitated by her recognizing that she herself is hypochondriac, are both entirely convincing to me. But Vrettos's further claim that "Lucy's neurosis thus leads her to perceive herself as both an inviolable text and a creative interpreter" who only extrapolates from her own neuroses to see others' seems to me less convincing (65). Brontë's admiration of Scott and her interest in reading the hidden language of friendship in her letter to Ellen Nussey, described in such similar terms to the scene in which Lucy diagnoses the King as a hypochondriac, suggest an

interest in reading inner psychic states that are unconnected to neuroses; within the novel, Lucy's reflections on others' psychological states are by no means limited to fellow sufferers—as we'll see, she is equally insightful when describing Miss Marchmont and Madame Beck.

<16> This idea of a hidden language for reading inner mental and spiritual states, which Brontë expresses in her letters to Nussey, may seem fanciful; but her notion of decipherable and indecipherable psychic states is something that Brontë links elsewhere to her own fervent effort to control and conceal from others her own conflicting instincts toward rebellious social critique and toward a religiously inflected attitude of calm and tolerance. She writes to Ellen,

If you knew my thoughts; the dreams that absorb me; and the fiery imagination that at times eats me up and makes me feel Society, as it is, wretchedly insipid you would pity and I dare say despise me. But Ellen I know the treasures of the Bible. I love and adore them. I can see the well of life in all its clearness and brightness; but when I stoop down to drink of the pure waters they fly from my lips as if I were Tantalus. (*Letters* 1: 144)

Desire for the reassurances faith offers seems in conflict with her competing desire to challenge the values of her social and religious milieu (since, after all, social life in Haworth circulated around the Anglican church). How we interpret “the well of life” in this passage is to some extent unclear. But it is clear that, despite her objections to the Anglican Church, her fervent wish to receive some sense of satisfaction in the psychic and spiritual comforts offered by her private study of the bible is just as important to her as giving vent to her “fiery imagination” in some form of overt social critique.

<17> The myriad biblical references in her novels also suggest that her representation of souls and the relationship between bodies and souls was filtered through her own struggle to sustain her faith in the face of materialist challenges from natural science and medicine as well as the critiques of the Anglican Church that she detailed in *Shirley*. And perhaps unsurprisingly Brontë's own books include both scientific medical and metaphysical interpretations of the relationship between the soul and body, mind and brain. Among the small number of books bearing Brontë's handwritten name and still housed at Haworth Parsonage is that of a contemporary of the later Abernethy's. Brontë's 1791 edition of Isaac Watts's *The Doctrine of the Passions, Explained and Improved* provides an example of a text invested in what we might call, for want of a better term, religious psychology. Watts's effort (initially published in 1732) to “make a diligent inquiry into the nature of these mingled powers of flesh and spirit, to take a survey of them in a comprehensive view and draw them into a little system,” struck me as reflecting a genuine interest in the debates about physiological psychology of the eighteenth century (Watts, Preface). Watts's work also seems in places particularly evocative of Brontë's descriptions of the passions, affections, and intuitions of her narrators and characters in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*.

<18> Brontë would not, of course, have been the first literary figure to have been intrigued and distressed by the growing movement toward materialist explanations of psychic states. Coleridge, one of Brontë's beloved romantic poets, turned away from David Hartley's materialist and associationist psychology when he decided Hartley's theory left no place for the existence of

the soul (Richardson 41). Coleridge's later 1828 writing "On the Passions" worked, as Richardson describes, "toward a physiological psychology that gives primacy to mind and makes body its expression" (43). Watts, like Coleridge, looked to sustain some concept of the primacy of the mind or soul while also understanding its connection through the spirit to the body.

<19> Religious studies scholar Thomas Dixon helps provide an historical framework for understanding Watts's work and perhaps by extension Brontë's attitudes toward the mind-body relationship as well. He posits a shift in nineteenth-century psychology when the theological models of psychology traceable to St. Augustine, Watts, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, and Joseph Butler, give way to a kind of neutral psychology (to be distinguished from atheistic or anti-theological) psychology akin to the attitude that I located in the passage from Magendie. For example, in theological psychology, such as Jonathan Edwards's *Treatise Concerning Human Affections* (1746), "the passions" are passive, the "affections" are active. Thus from his point of view passions are "symptoms of man's fallenness," involuntary "impressions made on the soul by the animal spirits" (Dixon 301). "Affections" on the other hand were thought to be "signs of man's relatedness to God," active inclinations of the will independent of the body (Dixon 302). Dixon opposes these theologically informed psychological theories to the later, more strictly empirically based studies of Alexander Bain, Charles Darwin, and William James, where all mental states are passive reactions to the outside world, mere happenings. The opposition Dixon proposes between earlier and later psychologists is imperfect, as he acknowledges. He locates the turning point toward physiological psychology as occurring around 1820, after the publishing of Thomas Brown's lectures in the *Philosophy of the Human Mind* originally delivered in Edinburgh and claims that when this neutral psychology replaces the older theological categories of "passions" and "affections" then all sorts of psychic states, "involuntary appetites, passions and commotions of animal nature as well as moral sentiments and voluntary emotions," all get "lumped" together under the umbrella term "emotions" (Dixon 302). Whether or not Brown was the *first* psychologist to substitute the neutral, umbrella term "emotion" for the older religiously inflected language of the "passions" and "affections," Dixon's observation about the shifting connotations of such terms is, however, intriguing and illuminating with respect to Brontë's texts. Both Watts and Brontë caution against emotional extremes related either to religious or secular passions (for sex, power, money, asceticism, etc) invoking similar terms.

<20> Dixon claims that our contemporary view of the earlier theological psychologists too often mistakenly represents them as rigidly supporting the idea that the passions must be held under the iron control of reason. Quoting from Watts's 1746 *Discourses of the Love of God, and Its Influence over All the Passions*, Dixon notes that Watts's notion of psychology promoted a "'warm affectionate religion' that guarded against two undesirable extremes—overzealous 'abuses of the passions' and cold rationality" (Watts *Discourses*, ix-x; Dixon 301). This view is compatible with Brontë's unattractive portraits of women who, like the Cleopatra figure in *Villette* and Celine Varens and Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, are represented as appetitive, "intemperate and unchaste" (*Jane Eyre*, Ch. 27: 306). Helen Burns's quiet endurance of Lowood's physical humiliations as she stoically awaits the time when she will put off this corruptible flesh, advising Jane that she (Jane) suffers because she "think[s] too much of love of human beings" (*Jane Eyre* Ch.8: 69), presents an example of Christ-like hero whose "affections," in Watts's and Edwards's terms, are not tempered by passions inflicted on the soul from the flesh. When Helen tells Jane that she (Helen) has not "qualities or talents to make [her] way very well

in the world” (*Jane Eyre*, Ch. 9: 81), we sense that Helen’s pre-occupation with the health of her soul for the next world has participated in furthering the destruction of her physical health (“mak[ing her] way”) in this world. Jane, who uses the language of both physical and spiritual starvation and nurture throughout her narrative, signals to us that she will need to be better able to tend to the needs of both her body and soul than Helen was if she is to find happiness in this world as well as the next. Brontë shows us Jane’s aversions to the extremes represented in the female characters (asceticism on the one side and overindulgence of bodily, material desires on the other) that surround her as a record of Jane’s psychological development. St. John Rivers’s fervent desire to conquer and convert souls to Christianity inspires Jane’s admiration; but she also reacts to his efforts to colonize her own soul in a loveless marriage with a kind of physical revulsion. Brontë provides a wonderfully evocative description of Jane’s psychic state as she considers accepting Rivers’s proposal: “My Iron Shroud Contracted around me” (*Jane Eyre*, Ch. 34: 404).

<21> As in *Jane Eyre*, Lucy in *Villette* identifies herself with and against other female characters as she illustrates her psychological development. And again, the vocabulary is revealing as to the sources that inform Brontë’s psychological portraits. For example, Lucy’s language in describing her interest in working as a companion to Miss Marchmont early in the novel exhibits the kind of language Watts uses in advocating for a middle-ground between reason and passion for the health of the soul. While at first Lucy laments the isolation that a life as companion to an elderly woman would entail, after observing Miss Marchmont for a short time, she recognizes a psyche that she can admire,

[a] vein of reason ever ran through her passion: she was logical even when fierce. Ere long a growing sense of attachment began to present the thought of staying with her as companion in quite a new light; in another week I had agreed to remain. (Ch. 4: 96)

The metaphor of reason as the vein that runs into passion presents a gentler view of the opposition between reason and passion than we often see in contemporary dismissals of religious psychological thought, as the product of passions insufficiently controlled by reason.⁽⁴⁾ Notice too that Bronte here employs characters in order to illustrate these abstractions—the same strategy that she admires in her hero Scott.

<22> Lucy describes herself as admiring a different kind of psyche in Madame Beck, whose skills at surveillance she respects: “Wise, firm, faithless; secret, crafty, passionless; watchful and inscrutable; acute and insensate - withal perfectly decorous - what more could be desired?” (*Villette* Ch. 8: 137). Lucy’s choice of words here --“Faithless,” “passionless,” and “insensate” — is revealing. “Insensate” in particular certainly doesn’t mean that Lucy thinks Madame Beck is destitute of “physical sense or feeling,” nor is she “lacking in sense or understanding,” but she is insensate in the sense of being “wanting in mental or moral feeling, devoid of sensibility” (*O.E.D.*). Lucy’s conclusions about Mme Beck are generated from her observations, but they imply a deeper penetration into something like the soul of Madame Beck than the theologically-neutral psychology of the Victorian physiological psychologists that Shuttleworth and Vrettos would see as having influencing Brontë’s characterization. Emotions were, for the physiological psychologists, defined primarily as mental feelings, but the physical disturbances

and correlates of the feeling were the things that the natural scientists of the mind could observe. And emotions thus, according to Dixon, came to be reducible to their observable physical components.

<23> Brontë uses the term “emotion” most often in connection with Lucy’s descriptions of Polly — descriptions which, of course, illuminate Lucy’s feelings as much as they do Polly’s. Observing Polly’s distress at being left by her father at the Bretton home, Lucy’s observations of Polly lead her to conclude of the stoic-seeming child that, “She went through, in that brief interval of her infant life, emotions such as some never feel; it was in her constitution: she would have more of such instants if she lived. Nobody spoke. . . . I, Lucy Snowe, was calm” (*Villette* Ch. 79). Polly’s emotions in this scene are imagined by Lucy: outwardly, we’re previously told, Polly is stoic. The claim that “it was in her constitution,” might suggest the embodied nature of Polly’s experience of “emotion” — but what exactly is the “it” referred to here? Is “it” the ability to suffer or the ability to endure suffering? Watts’s instruction that “the soul that governs its affections by the sacred dictates of reason and religion, and keeps itself at a proper loose from every creature, stands much less exposed to the injuries and sorrows of life, and is better prepared to part with all earthly comforts at the call of providence” here seems to be illustrated in the figure of little Polly, whose mind Lucy knows and illustrates particularly well, despite the radically different trajectories of their life stories (Watts, Preface).

<24> Lucy’s denial of her own feelings, in claiming herself entirely calm in this scene, of course draws the reader’s attention to Lucy’s own fragile physical and mental state by the very act of seeming to offer reassurance of it. Her self-portrait is a veil that Brontë already is beginning to let us penetrate. By showing us these two attempts to mask psychic pain in one scene, Brontë prompts us to think that Polly’s story narrates some of the unnarrated parts of Lucy’s own story. But understanding how Lucy’s conversations with and commentaries about Polly provide the reader with a deeper picture of the passions, instincts, appetites, and affections of Lucy requires that we do more here than one might think: we cannot simply assume that Lucy’s readings of Polly’s psyche are *either* just a projection of her own neuroses *or* simply an amateur materialist reading of Polly’s outer signs of psychic distress.

<25> One of the richest passages in the novel for speculating about Brontë’s beliefs about materialist or anti-materialist models of mind comes in her amazing description of Lucy’s psychic state following her night-time, “guideless and reckless, urged and drugged” ramble through the park and streets of Villette (Ch.38, 534). Madame Beck’s failed attempt to incapacitate Lucy with drugs creates a scenario in which Brontë might seem to be suggesting some kind of material basis to Lucy’s mind or soul. The example of intoxication is brought up again and again by Atkinson, in particular, in supporting his materialist understanding of the mind; the following passage from *Villette* seems to confront directly this question about the origins of mind and soul and is worth quoting at length:

Where my soul went during that swoon I cannot tell. Whatever she saw, or wherever she travelled in her trance on that strange night, she kept her own secret; never whispering a word to Memory, and baffling Imagination by an indissoluble silence. . . . I know she re-entered her prison with pain, with reluctance, with a moan and a long shiver. The divorced

mates, Spirit and Substance, were hard to re-unite: they greeted each other, not in an embrace, but a racking sort of struggle. The returning sense of sight came upon me, red, as if it swam in blood; suspended hearing rushed back loud, like thunder; consciousness revived in fear. . . Still half-dreaming, I tried hard to discover in what room they had put me; whether the greater dormitory or one of the little dormitories. . . . A gilded mirror filled up the space between two windows, curtained amply with blue damask. In this mirror I saw myself laid, not in bed, but on a sofa. I looked spectral; my eyes larger and more hollow, my hair darker than was natural, by contrast with my thin and ashen face. . . . Hardly less plain was it that my brain was not yet settled; for, as I gazed at the blue armchair, it appeared to grow familiar[.] (*Villette* Ch. 16: 237)

On the one hand, Lucy's narrative insists on the utter separation between an independently existing body and soul. At the same time, Brontë has shown us time and again the unreliability of Lucy's own claims about her psychic states. When Lucy sees herself in the mirror here, a fabulous moment of Lucy's resistance to self-recognition, she insists she is "half dreaming," but able to associate the "spectral" vision of herself that she sees with her visible paleness. She concludes that "Plain[ly]" her brain is "not settled." It is tempting to read these words as illustrating Brontë's adherence to a materialist, brain-based model of mind. The material drug acts on the functions of the brain and nerves thus causing her delusive imagination to wander. But it seems to me equally, if not more, likely that Brontë is personifying the idea of the "movements" of the bodily spirits acting on the soul, a view compatible with the theological psychology of Watts, Abernethy, and others.

<26> Similarly, Brontë's account of Lucy's physical and psychic suffering in response to a fierce storm might also suggest an interest in brain-based models of the mind and soul. Lucy describes her reaction to the storm using a biblical analogy:

I did long, achingly, then and for four-and-twenty hours afterwards, for something to fetch me out of my present existence, and lead me upwards and onwards. This longing, and all of a similar kind, it was necessary to knock on the head; which I did, figuratively, after the manner of Jael to Sisera, driving a nail through their temples. Unlike Sisera, they did not die: they were but transiently stunned, and at intervals would turn on the nail with a rebellious wrench; then did the temples bleed, and the brain thrill to its core. (Ch. 12: 176)

Shuttleworth reads this scene as "captur[ing] the physiological and psychological experience of socially inflicted repression (the term 'thrill' carried the medically precise meaning, in the mid-nineteenth century, of 'vibratory movement, resonance, or murmur'.)" And further, she argues, the scene "undermine[s] traditional divisions between external social process and inner mental life, revealing their fictional status" (241). While I don't wish to counter the argument that Lucy's depiction suggests a physical experience of excitement as her mind reacts to the storms, I do see significance in Lucy's claim that the storms "obliged[e] her to live" despite her wish to be "fetch[ed] out of her "present existence" and "le[d] upwards and onwards." The "thrill" that Shuttleworth describes as a passive, material, bodily response to Lucy's feelings of repression is actually depicted by Lucy as an active response to the effort to repress the excitement generated by the storm. One might as easily read the passage as reflecting the stirring of Lucy's body at the

efforts of the soul to repress the passions, here represented as having been aggravated by the stirring of the physical senses in response to the storm. On this reading, it seems unlikely that Brontë intends the scene to “undermine divisions between social processes and mental life.”

<27> Brontë’s investments in careful observation of psychological states are rich, complex, and clearly drawn from a multitude of sources in correspondence and in her fiction, particularly *Villette*. Her struggle and desire to engage with the beliefs of her friend Martineau and to reconcile them with less strictly materialist ideas about the relationship between body and soul appear to be a key influence on Brontë’s psychological portraits in this last, most unsettling novel. Though, as others have noted before me, Brontë provides scant record of the sources she consulted, whether scientific (especially in the area of physiological psychology), medical, or spiritual, in creating the elliptical narrative voice in *Villette*, I hope we will nonetheless feel ourselves compelled to resist the urge to simplify the explanatory mechanisms we use to describe the intellectual, theological and scientific, influences from which Brontë drew in creating her narrative. I read her novels as efforts to exhibit the same kind of “wonderful knowledge of human nature” that she admired in Scott’s novels, particularly his skill at “embodying . . . perceptions” in characters “so as to enable others to become participators in that knowledge” (*Letters* 1: 121). I do hope that the effort to draw attention to these other interpretive possibilities suggests the value of looking back, even at the risk of muddying the picture, and struggling to decipher the hieroglyphs of Brontë’s narrators and characters.

Endnotes

(1) See especially Sally Shuttleworth’s chapter “The Haworth Context,” in *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*: 19-33.(^)

(2) Martineau’s diary extracts and obituary for Brontë are included in *Lives of Victorian Literary Figures II: The Brownings, The Brontës and the Rossetis by their Contemporaries. Vol. 2: The Brontës*. Ed Marianna Kambani, 351-72.(^)

(3) In Victorian parlance, and in references the *Oxford English Dictionary* locates as far back as 1628, hypochondria referred to “a morbid state of mind, characterized by general depression, melancholy, or low spirits, for which there is no real cause” (*OED*).(^)

(4) Jane Wood interestingly sees the one of the functions of Miss Marchmont’s character as being to represent a body that demonstrates the physical effects of spiritual and romantic disappointment. “[H]er loss [of her fiancé] is displaced onto her crippled frame” (Wood 50 n. 65).(^)

Works Cited

Abernethy, John. *A Christian and Heavenly Treatise Containing Physicke for the Soul. 1. The diseases of the soule are largely described, 2. The faculties affected are shortly touched, 3. The causes are distinctly set downe, 4. The signes and symptomes are particularly specified, 5. The prognosticks are plainly pointed out, 6. The remedies are methodically prescribed : very necessary for all those which are troubled in conscience.* London: Iohn Budge, 1615.

Atkinson, Henry George, and Harriet Martineau. *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature and Development.* Boston: Josiah Mendum, 1851.

Christine Alexander, ed. *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë.* Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1983.

Brontë, Charlotte. *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, Vol 1: 1829-1847.* Ed Margaret Smith. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1995.

----- . *Jane Eyre* [1847]. Ed. Margaret Smith. Intro. Sally Shuttleworth. New York: Oxford UP, 2000.

----- . *Villette* [1853]. Ed. Mark Lilly. Intro. Tony Tanner. New York: Penguin, 1979.

Dixon, Thomas. "Theology, Antitheology, and Atheology: From Christian Passions to Secular Emotions." *Modern Theology*. 15.3 (1999): 297-330.

Logan, Peter Melville. *Nerves and Narratives: A Cultural History of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century British Prose.* Berkeley, CA: U of California Press, 1997.

Martineau, Harriet. "Diary Excerpts" and "Obituary for Charlotte Brontë" in *Lives of Victorian Literary Figures II: The Brownings, The Brontës and the Rossettis by their Contemporaries.* Vol. 2: The Brontës. Ed Marianna Kambani. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004. 351-72.

Richardson, Alan. *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind.* New York: Cambridge UP, 2001.

Shuttleworth, Sally. *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology.* New York, NY: Cambridge UP, 1996.

Vrettos, Athena. *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture.* Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1995.

Watts, Isaac. *Discourses of the Love of God, and Its Influence on All the Passions; with a Discovery of the Right Use and Abuse of Them in Matters of Religion* 3rd ed. London: Oswald and Buckland, 1746.

----- . *The Doctrine of the Passions, Explained and Improved: or, a brief and comprehensive scheme of the Natural Affections Of mankind, attempted in a plan and easy method; with an account of their names, nature, appearances, effects, and different uses in human life. To which are subjoined Moral and Divine Rules for the regulation or Government of them.* W. Phorson, 1791. [1732]

Wood, Jane. *Passion and Pathology in Victorian Fiction*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2001.

Young, Robert. *Mind, Brain, and Adaptation in the Nineteenth-Century: Cerebral Localization and Its Biological Context from Gall to Ferrier*. New York: Clarendon Press, 1970