

## *Introduction*

The language and categories used to articulate the self within each historical era offer a definitive key to cultural interpretation. From the ways a society draws the boundaries of selfhood, one can trace the dominant assumptions governing understanding of both social and psychological order. In each era there are significant shifts in these boundaries, altering, for example, the perceived relationship between visible form and inner quality, social formation and individual subjectivity, or the lines demarcating the normal from the pathological. Changes in the conventions governing the representation of character in the novel highlight, and contribute to, these transformations. Thus generalized references to physical appearance in the eighteenth-century novel are supplanted in the nineteenth by detailed delineations of external features; and the abstract qualities of mind attributed to earlier characters – the ‘true elegance of mind’ possessed by Austen’s heroines – give way to descriptions of physiological surges of energy within the Victorian protagonist. Critics working on the modernist novel have been quick to point out the very direct relationship which exists between formal innovation, and early twentieth-century theories of psychology. With reference to the Victorian novel, however, there has been, correspondingly, comparative silence – an eloquent testimony, perhaps, to the power of the realist illusion.

Nowhere has this tendency to consider novels in isolation from contemporary psychological discourse been more evident than in the domain of Brontë scholarship. The traditional critical image of Charlotte Brontë is that of an intuitive genius who seems to belong more to the Freudian than to the Victorian era.<sup>1</sup> In this double displacement of history, both Brontë and Freud are placed in a vacuum: Brontë is given powers of prophecy, and Freud is endowed with supreme originating authority – the preceding Victorian debates on female hysteria, the unconscious, and psychological drives are

miraculously erased. Recent innovative feminist scholarship has done little to remedy this situation, overturning accepted interpretations of Brontë's novels but keeping their component elements in place. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's celebration of Brontë's 'madwoman', for example, remains resolutely ahistorical, failing to take into account the ways in which Victorian psychiatric discussions of female sexuality had defined the framework both of normality and rebellion.<sup>2</sup> The aim of this study is to place Brontë's work firmly within the context of Victorian psychological discourse. Far from being a throwback to the Romantic era, or an anticipation of the modern, Brontë's fiction actively encodes the language and preoccupations of mid-nineteenth-century social, psychological and economic thought.

The term 'psychological discourse' is here being used in its widest sense: it includes not only the texts of medical psychiatry, and domestic manuals, but also the diverse range of formulations of individual subjectivity and agency to be found in contemporary social and economic discussion, from newspaper copy to popular self-help books. None of these domains of discourse can be considered in isolation: similar language and assumptions occur in very different arenas. Discussions of the bodily economy, for example, employ the same terms as economic debates on the circulation of energy in the body politic. In the more complex realm of metaphoric and metonymic transference, associative nexi of ideas shift between subject areas: descriptions of the city draw on the rhetoric of the female body, and analyses of political revolution mobilize the psychiatric language of insanity. Conversely, images of the industrial city and of disruptive political rebellion inform medical discussions of female physiological and psychological health. Causal links, or explicit connections are rarely drawn; meaning tends to inhere rather in the subtle processes of association operating on the margins of discourse.

For the Victorian novel which functioned metonymically to domesticate the social, using individual figures to explore wider social processes, this mechanism of associative transference is crucial. Brontë's novels prove no exception. Critical tradition, in ignoring this linguistic dimension, has tended to create a very depoliticized Brontë. While older studies applauded her grasp of the invariant principles of human psychology, more recent interpretations have lamented the fact that her focus on individual interaction obscures the workings of class and gender power.<sup>3</sup> Jane Eyre's comparison between herself and revolutionary workers thus becomes an isolated outburst, and the

structure of *Shirley* an unwieldy aberration. If attention is focused on the linguistic texture of the novels, however, a very different picture begins to emerge: the language of social and political debate actively informs the depiction of the individual psyche.

On publication, *Jane Eyre* was greeted by reviewers as a wonderfully 'natural' and 'real' depiction of emotional life. Its appeal, I would suggest, was less that it managed to capture as never before the inner workings of the mind, than that it incorporated into the novel contemporary psychological discourse, thus offering the dual appeal of familiarity and originality, and establishing a reassuring sensation of realism. With the depiction of a heroine's psyche that follows the rise and fall of physiological energies, and of a romantic engagement which is less of a harmonious union between souls than a power struggle that centres on the ability of each partner to read, unseen, the hidden secrets of the other, we are clearly in new novelistic territory. Such terrain was to be found, however, in the context of medical and economic debates, and in the fields of psychiatry and the popular sciences of physiognomy and phrenology. As Foucault has argued, the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of a new economy of individual and social life, centered on the regulation of the forces of the body and controlled through surveillance.<sup>4</sup> A new interiorized notion of selfhood arose and, concomitantly, new techniques of power designed to penetrate the inner secrets of this hidden domain.<sup>5</sup> Psychiatry and phrenology emerged as sciences, dedicated to decoding the external signs of the body in order to reveal the concealed inner play of forces which constitute individual subjectivity. Brontë's novels operate within this paradigm. When Rochester asks Jane to read his character from his brow, or Crimsworth scathingly notes the horrendous propensities indicated by the cranial configuration of one of his pupils, we are not being introduced to mere esoteric details, tangential to the novel as a whole. Such references are not epiphenomenal, but are rather constitutive elements of the social, psychological and economic framework which structures the novels.

Brontë's interest in phrenology has drawn the attention of several critics in recent years, but in conflating the science with physiognomy, and thus reducing its doctrines to a mere interest in external appearance, they have failed to take account of its social functions, and thus emptied the terms of social and political relevance.<sup>6</sup> In tracing the impact of phrenology on Brontë's fiction, this study will explore its social role, as the basis of a popular self-help movement,

and its position within the wider framework of Victorian psychological debate. The discourse of psychology in mid-nineteenth-century Britain did not function as a monumental, invariant structure. Heated arguments arose concerning the conflicting claims of competing models, but perhaps the most significant conflicts, which were internal to the theories themselves, were never explicitly articulated, obscured from view by their very centrality. Contradictions within the ideologies governing the expansion of industrial capitalism were focused and played out in the domain of psychology, pre-eminently in the sphere of gender.

While always crucial to the ideological formation of society, theories of gender division took on in the nineteenth century a near unprecedented power and importance, metonymically projecting and condensing the contradictions of wider social debate. The ideological separation of public and private, work and home, which underpinned the rise of the Victorian middle classes, was predicated upon a fundamental division between male and female spheres. Furthermore, economic ideologies of the free, independent agent, the self-controlled actor in charge of his own destiny, were supported and sustained by theories of gender division which contrasted male self-control with female subjection to the forces of the body. Medical science presided over this increasingly rigid demarcation of gender roles, lending and indeed deriving prestige and authority from its involvement. The growing body of literature on the powers of self-control was complemented by the rise of gynaecological science which emphasized the uncontrollable processes of the uterine economy. Psychiatry, or as it was then known, mental science, was another emergent area of knowledge which similarly focused on female hysteria and insanity and the unstable processes of the female body. This study will explore the diverse ways in which these two conflicting models of selfhood, of mental control and physiological instability, are played out in Brontë's fiction, heightening and intensifying the erotic struggles for control which centre on the issue of legibility, on decoding and penetrating the secrets of the other.

While placing a very unFoucauldian emphasis on gender and economic power, this work is nonetheless indebted to the ideas and methodology of Foucault, particularly in the sphere of discourse theory. In considering the relationship between Brontë's fiction and Victorian psychological discourse, I have tried, however, to move beyond the notion of a general textual economy, operating largely

within disciplinary boundaries, in order to construct a more precise, localized picture of how contemporary theories percolated through to the people of Haworth. As far as records permit, I have attempted to build up an in-depth picture of reading patterns in the parsonage and surrounding community, examining library holdings, periodicals and lectures delivered on the local circuit. I have also looked at the crucial role of the local press in transmitting contemporary notions of psychology, whether in the graphic sexual details often included in trial reports, or in the assumptions encoded in advertisements for medical remedies. My aim has been to break down the hierarchical model which envisages 'official' scientific pronouncements being gradually diluted as they are passed down the cultural chain and to substitute in its place a more dynamic, interactive model which takes into account the social and economic conditions underlying the diverse formulations and specific appropriations of psychological concepts.

The limitations of ahistoricist approaches to Brontë's works are not to be countered by generalized appeals to an overarching, undifferentiated cultural domain. Combining close textual analysis with historical specificity of reference, this study also extends investigation of the textual economy beyond narrow disciplinary boundaries, pursuing it in all the dimensions of its relevance, from newspaper copy and fiction to medical tracts. Brontë's own writing formed an integral part of this wider textual economy. In tracing the relationship between her work and contemporary psychological discourse I will not be charting a process of passive absorption, but rather investigating the ways in which Brontë, as a female writer, both assimilated and challenged Victorian constructs, interrogating received notions, exploring their contradictions, and breaking the bounds of contemporary discourse in the complex structures of her fiction.

The work of Charlotte Brontë clearly has much in common with that of her sisters. All three explore the experience of social marginality, and the constraining effects of gender ideology. Phrenology, and the culture of self-control are foregrounded in Anne's work, while *Wuthering Heights*, like *Jane Eyre*, charts the histories of its protagonists through an economics of energy flow. Heathcliff, that figure who so appalled Charlotte, is nonetheless an alternate embodiment of Bertha: an imaginative projection of what may happen if the energy of the oppressed is harnessed and controlled in the service of aggressive individualism and upward mobility. As Charlotte's negative

responses to both *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* suggest, however, there were also very strong differences between her work and that of both sisters. More timid than Emily in some ways, more radical in others, she was also more openly confrontational, as her devotion to the social satire of Thackeray suggests. Rather than treat the writings of the Brontës as different manifestations of one local voice, I have chosen to focus on Charlotte's fiction and to trace through, from the early writings to *Villette*, the different forms of her involvement with contemporary psychological thought.

The first section of this book is a study of aspects of Victorian psychology, chosen initially and framed with reference to their significance for Brontë's work, but possessing relevance for all mid-Victorian writing. While no one writer brings together these psychological strands in quite the same way, or with quite the same intensity, they all play a significant role in the evolution of Victorian fiction. In Dickens, for example, one finds a similar economics of energy, and concern with the fragmentation of the mind, while George Eliot develops Brontë's preoccupation with surveillance and the interiorized space of selfhood. Medical theories of nervous disorder and the workings of the female body feed through, in various forms, into virtually all the fiction of the period.

What renders Brontë's work so significant, with regard to Victorian psychology, is the way in which she so powerfully condenses and explores in her work the dominant paradigms of her era. Writing as a woman, with few social prospects, and outside any socially supportive intellectual milieu, she is placed very differently to either Dickens or Eliot: her very marginality serves to heighten and expose the contradictory formulations of contemporary culture. Eagerly subscribing to ideals of self-help, and inborn talent, she is then paralysed by her sense of social impossibility, and by cultural and medical constructions of female instability and powerlessness. Her fierce desire for social justice is also at odds with her familial allegiance to a Conservative social stance. The resulting fiction draws its imaginative energy from the ways in which it wrestles with cultural contradiction, operating always within the terms of Victorian thought, but giving rise, ultimately, to new ways of expressing and conceptualizing the embodied self.

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PART ONE

*Psychological discourse in the Victorian era*

## CHAPTER I

*The art of surveillance*

In a crucial scene in *Villette*, Dr John directs onto Lucy Snowe the interpretative gaze of medical science: ‘I look on you now from a professional point of view, and I read, perhaps, all you would conceal – in your eye, which is curiously vivid and restless; in your cheek, which the blood has forsaken; in your hand, which you cannot steady’.<sup>1</sup> He speaks with unshakeable authority, calmly confident of his professional ability to reveal the hidden meaning of Lucy’s inner state. As text, Lucy opens herself up to his readerly skills. Every outer sign becomes an active invitation to his interpretative penetration. The exchange presents a literal enactment of the metaphorical structure of western science: male science here unveils female nature, piercing through her outer layers to reveal her hidden secrets.<sup>2</sup> Within this wider historical framework, however, the scene possesses a more immediate specificity, drawing attention to the new theories of subjectivity which arose in the nineteenth century. Selfhood no longer resided in the open texture of social act and exchange, but within a new interior space, hidden from view, inaccessible even to the subject’s own consciousness. Nor was inner self necessarily legible from or immanent within outer sign. The book of the self was not laid open for all to read; specific knowledge and skills were required to decode its language.

This interiorized model of selfhood laid the foundations for later Freudian theory which still dominates our understanding of subjectivity. Its historical emergence was marked by the concomitant rise of medical psychiatry as a science, but as today its ramifications were not restricted to the specific interactions of doctor and patient, but profoundly altered cultural understanding of the self, and the rules of social interaction. In Brontë’s fiction the power dynamics implicit in the exchange between Dr John and Lucy form part of a wider pattern of interpretative struggle. William Crimsworth in *The Professor*

fearlessly presents his face before his tyrannical brother, feeling 'as secure against his scrutiny as if I had had on a casque with the visor down'.<sup>3</sup> On a less overtly conflictual plane, Jane Eyre's erotic struggles with Rochester are initiated by her phrenological reading of his brow, a scene which is then countered when Rochester, disguised as a female gypsy, reads Jane's forehead. St John later takes up the struggle, attempting 'to read my face, as if its features and lines were characters on a page' and examining Jane 'like a physician watching with the eye of science an expected and fully-understood crisis in a patient's malady'.<sup>4</sup> In each case power resides with the figure who can unveil the hidden secrets of the other whilst preserving the self unread. Supreme interpretative authority, however, as the latter image of St John suggests, is vested symbolically in the figure of the doctor who enshrines his judgments within the hallowed domain of science.

As a literary character, the doctor takes on new prominence in the Victorian era, playing a crucial role in later sensation fiction, usually hovering in the wings, waiting to diagnose the incipient signs of latent insanity or mental disorder.<sup>5</sup> Although Brontë waited until her final novel to offer her first fully fledged portrait of a doctor, her preoccupation with medical knowledge and power is evinced in her earliest writing. In one of the first known pieces of early writing, Charlotte chose as one of her heroes, alongside the Duke of Wellington, the celebrated physiologist, Abernethy. Anne and Branwell further endorsed the prestige of medical science by including a famous physician in their three choices.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the infamous Dr Hume Badry, noted for his devotion to the savage art of dissection, makes frequent appearances within the corpus of early writing, figuring as an inhumane repository of scientific authority who displays 'as much feeling as a stone'.<sup>7</sup> While less of a macabre figure than Dr Hume Badry, the golden-haired Dr John is nonetheless a disturbing presence, threatening mental, rather than physical integrity. Lucy fears the dissecting power of his gaze: 'my identity would have been grasped between his never tyrannous, but always powerful hands' (p. 416). For all its expressions of humane concern, Victorian psychiatry still operated a system of control which was all the more powerful for its covert form.

The authority with which Dr John is endowed held a peculiar significance for Brontë. His name, John Graham, is drawn from the text which held the place of secular Bible in the Brontë household:

*The art of surveillance*

11

Thomas John Graham's *Domestic Medicine*.<sup>8</sup> Virtually every page of this work has been annotated by the Reverend Brontë, offering a moving testimonial to the rigid regimen which governed the life of the household. Patrick records not only his family's physical ailments and the remedies employed, but also his preoccupation with the threat of nervous disease and insanity. Mind and body were subject to minute scrutiny and medical intervention. Patrick threw his whole weight of patriarchal endorsement behind the authority of the medical word. As Foucault has argued, the Victorian preoccupation with control did not emanate initially from a desire to discipline the working classes; the Victorian middle classes were obsessed with the health and regulation of their own minds and bodies.<sup>9</sup> Brontë's novels work within and against this framework of obsession, exploring the implications of this rhetoric of control in all its physical, psychological and social aspects, looking in particular at its effects in the domain of gender.

On the surface, Brontë does not seem an obvious candidate for an interdisciplinary study of Victorian psychological discourse. Unlike her contemporaries, George Eliot or Wilkie Collins, for example, she did not explicitly record her indebtedness to contemporary scientific theory.<sup>10</sup> Nor, as far as we know, did she commence writing her fiction armed by extensive reading in scientific and medical texts. Yet, her novels are permeated by the psychological language and theory of the time, the texture of her fiction belying the myths of her social and cultural isolation. For anyone interested in the inter-penetration of literature and science, Brontë's work offers an interesting challenge: to trace the interconnections with wider psychological discourse one must move outside the mainstream of intellectual culture to plot the subtle pathways of exchange and appropriation which operate within the wider textual economy.

Brontë's fiction shared with Victorian psychiatry a preoccupation with the realms of excess: with the workings of insanity and nervous disease, and the unstable constitution of female identity. Threats to incarcerate characters in lunatic asylums abound in the early writings, matched by frequent displays of insane behaviour, which often arise, significantly, when the boundaries of gender have been destabilized. Charles Wellesley, narrator of the 1834 story, 'The Spell, An Extravaganza' asks us to imagine the early writings' dashing hero, Zamorna, 'a crowned maniac, dying dethroned, forsaken, desolate, in the shrieking gloom of a mad-house'.<sup>11</sup> Brontë's