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# Charlotte Brontë's City of Glass

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Hilda Hulme Memorial Lecture 1992



**Hilda M Hulme**

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The Hilda Hulme Memorial Lecture 1992

Charlotte Brontë's City of Glass

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Chairman: Professor Jacqueline Rose

# Charlotte Brontë's City Of Glass

## (I)

GLASS TOWN WAS THE CAPITAL of Angria, the fantasy country invented by the Brontë children in 1826, when Charlotte was ten. Passionate – and precocious – Tories, they named their father's gift of toy soldiers by the heroes of the day, imagined an African state for them, and wrote about it in miniature script in tiny handmade books. Charlotte's soldier was Wellington and Branwell's Buonoparte (less sensationally Emily's was Gravey and Anne's Waiting Boy). Charlotte's addictive fascination for the patrician hegemony established by Wellington's sons, particularly Arthur, later transmuted to Zamorna, rival of Northangerland, their wives, lovers and mistresses, lasted until she was twenty-three.<sup>1</sup>

I want to reflect upon Glass Town and what it suggests to us about the nature of glass in Victorian society, to mark a moment of resistance, a dissident moment, in Charlotte Brontë's mature writing and in the culture to which she belonged. I shall connect Glass Town, the glamorous metropolis of an imagined community, with that other glass structure which went deep into the consciousness of the time even when what it *meant* was the subject of fiercely competing interpretations, the Crystal Palace, as it was named by *Punch*, and the Great Exhibition of 1851. The glitter of Glass Town prefigures the Crystal Palace, or I will allow it to do so for hermeneutic purposes, considering it as a form of cultural anticipation or prolepsis. The main display feature of the Crystal Palace was a glass fountain, a virtuosic creation in which two kinds

<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Brontë's juvenilia are currently being edited. See Christine Alexander, *An Edition of the Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë*, 2 vols (vol II in 2 parts), Oxford, Shakespeare Head Press, 1987. An edition of the writings of Branwell Brontë is also in progress, edited by Victor Neufeldt. Christine Alexander's invaluable work has enabled this lecture to come into being.

of transparency interacted, falling water and solid glass. Compare the “pure crystal lustre” of Charlotte’s palace:

Ascending a flight of marble steps, you come to a grand entrance which leads into a hall surrounded by Corinthian pillars of white marble. In the midst of the hall is a colossal statue [sic] holding in each hand a vase of crystal, from which rushes a stream of clear water and breaking into a thousand diamonds and pearls falls into a basin of pure gold ...<sup>2</sup>

What are we to make of Angria and Glass Town? There are three common ways of responding to the fantasies. First of all, they appear to have a powerfully erotic motive, almost to the point of psychosis. “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”, she wrote to a friend in 1836.<sup>3</sup> A year earlier she had described herself as “quite gone” while she conjured the Duke of Northangerland in the school room. “I felt myself breathing quick and short” – but the description ends in half-realised anti-climax. “Miss Brontë, what are you thinking about?” said a voice that dissipated all the charm.”<sup>4</sup> Arousal and desire of this intensity, and its accompanying anguish, does not reappear until, with *Villette* in 1853, Charlotte created a phantasmagoric scene, when the drugged and alienated Lucy goes to the central park of the city in search of some understanding of her situation, a moment with which I will end my lecture. Nevertheless, the striking thing about Angria is the glee, confidence and sense of power with which it is described. Angria is a mimesis of a society, its buildings, functions, institutions, complete with publications and newspapers, which are so crucial to the formation of national identity in a modern state. The sheer pleasure of imitation is partly what drives the stories.

It is this prolific mimicry, often bizarre and macabre, which has led to another way of reading the tales, as an escape into the psychological space of fantasy and dream work. The sifting and disciplining of this inchoate, raw material, it is argued, provided a training ground for Charlotte’s real achievement, the published fiction. It is true that the fantasies have that combination of bald, stark, metonymic sequence and complexity which is characteristic of

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>3</sup> Letter of May 10 1836. Quoted by Christine Alexander, *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë*, Oxford, 1983, 144.

<sup>4</sup> Letter of December 19 1835. Quoted in Alexander, *Ibid.*, *Early Writings*, 140.

dream work, but it is for this very reason that their unlikeness to the mature novels is more noticeable than their affinities with them. The turmoil of codes, conventions, genres, myths, languages, voices, the lack of any generic contract with the reader, makes these stories un-novelistic. Newspaper report, periodical article, advertisement (for an assassin), joke book, statistics, war manual, technological handbook, travel story, historiography,

A third possibility is to think of Angria as a form of the political unconscious. Its name, unashamedly derived from “anger” and bespeaking violence, is a portmanteau word – Angle + Africa/America – and suggests the violence of the colonial project. Angria is a very violent place. Strangely, despite the abundant material on Africa which the Brontës would have known (*Blackwood's Magazine*, a periodical read by them, carried six articles on Africa in the late 1820s), the location of the stories is barely recognisable as Africa.<sup>5</sup> It is almost solely occupied by the British aristocracy, and the struggles of the Peninsula war are transposed to the tropics in the form of place names – Almeida, for instance – which reflect Wellington's triumphs. With the cursoryness of the unconscious, European aggression is mapped on to a colony. But, because Angria is Glass Town and Glass Town is Angria, there was actually no need for a fully Africanised context: as Asa Briggs reminds us, the Victorian city itself contained the colonial subject, the poor, who were represented as a dark continent of incipient violence, a black heart, the culture's other.<sup>6</sup> Though cities were being mapped at this time the maze-like streets of the poor were not; they were a blank space representing the unknown topography of the urban continent. The only representative of indigenous Africa in the tales was Quashia Quamina, Ashantee rebel and Wellington's adopted son, who was a military threat to Branwell and a sexual threat to Charlotte. “A swarth and sinewy moor intoxicated to ferocious insensibility had stretched his athletic limbs ... in a drunken sleep” on a “voluptuous ottoman” to seduce Mary Henrietta, Queen

<sup>5</sup> *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 19 (1826), 687–709; 20 (1826), 824–43; 872–92, James McQueen: 21 (1827), 315–29; 596–624, James McQueen: 23 (1828), 63–89, James McQueen. McQueen's articles, a study in colonial discourse in themselves (he speaks of “the dark and demoralised continent of Africa”), campaign to replace the immense sums in his view wasted on preventing the slave trade in Africa with the discipline of commercial trade. He is particularly interesting on the Ashantee wars, which culminated in 1824, accusing the Ashantee of violent cruelty: “SOME [prisoners] WERE RIPPED UP AND ACROSS THE BELLY, AND PLUNGING THEIR HANDS IN THEY TORE THE HEART FROM ITS SEAT, pouring the blood on the ground as A LIBATION TO THE GOOD FORTUNE OF THE ENGLISH!” (21 Jan. 1827), 326). He repeatedly returns to the theme of the degenerate Negro. After a change of policy in 1831 with the arrival of George Maclean as Governor of Cape Castle British trade increased fourfold by 1843.

<sup>6</sup> Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, New Edition, Harmondsworth, 1968, 62.

of Angria.<sup>7</sup> Quashia is seen as a threat to white culture rather than the other way round.

The peremptory obliteration of Africa by European society and the insistent anxieties around the unknown and repressed “native” could well be described in Jamesonian fashion in terms of the violence and fears of the Victorian political unconscious. One hesitates to remain with this explanation alone, however, because the tales of Angria are so strenuous, so enquiring. They do not cede control to the phantasmatic representations of the unconscious. Rather, one might think of them as aetiological texts actively seeking to explain cause and effect in their culture, texts given over to imagining a polis, a society, a civic life, exploring what it is permissible to *desire* – and negotiating the conditions of access to that life through narrative invention. The tales are dialectical, not simply reflective of or even constructed by their culture but actively redefining and changing its categories. The reconstruction of meaning happens with the greatest intensity because these texts are experiments which constitute the archives of an emergent puberty. Sometimes inadvertently comic, bizarre, impassioned, sometimes over-impassioned, I want nevertheless to grant this formative material a careful reading.

In the presciently named Glass Town, glass, which Walter Benjamin saw, along with iron, as one of the most significant materials of the nineteenth century, is drawn into this exploratory project.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps named after that luxury of the rich, the greenhouse, which brings with it a new method of controlling the environment, Glass Town becomes a kind of conservatory in which new meanings can grow as well as creating forms of regulation and exclusion.<sup>9</sup> The subtle iconography of glass as one of the oldest artificial materials in the world, almost taken for granted, and yet one with the most innovative possibilities of the century, becomes a medium for thought in two stories which I shall look at shortly. These are ‘The Silver Cup’, 1829, and ‘The Green Dwarf’, 1833. But first, to provide a context for them, something must be said briefly about the civic life of Glass Town. What kind of cultural myth does it exemplify?

Glass Town glitters and is full of reflective surfaces. One of the earliest

<sup>7</sup> Christine Alexander, *Early Writings*, 148.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, Harry Zohn, transl., London (NLB), 1973, 158–9.

<sup>9</sup> Humphry Repton’s *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1803) included designs clearly intended for wealthy estates. Even when Joseph Paxton (1801–65) designed the Crystal Palace the greenhouse was still the privilege of the few, as Paxton’s earlier designs for Chatsworth suggest. See also May Woods & Areta Swartz Warren, *Glass Houses: a History of Greenhouses, Orangeries and Conservatories*, London, 1988.



descriptions of it uses the vocabulary of the Book of Revelation: "Out of the barren desert arose a palace of diamond, the pillars of which were ruby and emerald illuminated with lamps too bright to look upon." Mirrored in the Niger, its turrets are caught by the flashing river and the "glass that her harbour gives her."<sup>10</sup> Such Biblical imagery, drawn also from John Martin's *Illustrations of the Bible* (1835), is mixed with that of the Arabian nights and bizarrely fused with the great metropolitan landscapes of both London and the north. The Grand Hall, the Great Tower, Halls of Justice, Grand Inn, new Exchange and gaming houses owe something to the illustrations of *A Description of London*, owned by Branwell, while the heroic industrial cityscape of suspension bridges and mills conflates the massive civic building projects of towns such as Leeds, Liverpool and Bradford. Glass Town is a sublime composite of the nineteenth-century city.

But this city is hollowed out from below, resting on an underground complex of subterranean gothic caves, mined with caverns, sepulchres and prisons. With an extraordinary intuition of the stratified nature of the Victorian town, this is the place where the "rough visages" of the industrial poor are to be seen, at work *beneath* the glittering superstructure. In 1843 *Punch* was to carry a cartoon entitled 'Capital and Labour', showing the subterranean activity of labour while the wealthy lived on the urban surface.<sup>11</sup> This is the place where "thousands of human beings", giving out a "rancid" odour, "were ceaselessly hurrying to and fro", where Zamorna can shoot dead a troublesome workman "up on the spot", where body snatchers lurk, where prisoners undergoing state torture languish.<sup>12</sup> A thousand feet below the Tower of all Nations and three million inhabitants, the state dungeons reverberate sinisterly – in a brilliant conjunction of the law and the colonial terror it attempts to suppress – to the Africa ignored above ground:

a deep hollow boom that chilled the heart and brought the sweat drops of horror to the brow. This was the clam-clam sounding through underground passages a thousand miles in length, from the haunted hills of jibbel kimri.<sup>13</sup>

This imagined community is polyglot, full of immigrants and strangers of all kinds, particularly trading strangers – Ashantee, Irish, Turks, Spaniards, French

<sup>10</sup> Alexander, *Edition*, II, ii, 241.

<sup>11</sup> *Punch*, V, 1843, 49. Thanks to Amanda Kent for drawing my attention to this cartoon.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander, *Edition*, I, 139.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, II, i, 194.

and “bilious” Englishmen. The Angrian court has a stranger at its heart. The disruptive Zenobia, named after the famous conquering queen who challenged the power of Rome at the time of Aurelian, is an exotic and powerful woman (she is an expert in Greek and Sanskrit), and a highly transgressive figure. In love with Zamorna but married to his rival, Northangerland (Alexander Percy), she constantly unsettles the legitimate heirs. She agrees to open the coffin of her husband twenty years after his death, as if to displace the scene of phallic power: her heart is “black”; she assaults her husband. Her appearance and clothes – black locks, red velvet dress, black feather and turban, strongly suggest a Creole origin for her.<sup>14</sup> Thus the unincorporated Creole living at the centre of the court, one of the commonest Victorian anxieties, finds a place in the Angrian scene. And yet she is one of the most attractive and vibrant figures in the sagas.

Glass Town is in a state of constant urban expansion and upheaval, its civic spaces marked with exhilarating evidence of the history of building and land clearance as population and affluence grow together. Charlotte brilliantly accomplishes a move from past to present and back in an account of the Glass Town stadium, home of the Olympic games, creating a kind of circumstantial archaeology of modernity and layers of history within the grasp of living memory: houses now established were, at the start of the narrative of ‘The Green Dwarf’, “but newly built” and even “half finished”: the fourth side of the stadium, the heights of Frederick’s Crag, whose placename signifies an earlier king, was “a sombre forest”, now displaced by “splendid private dwellings”.<sup>15</sup> The stumps of newly cleared trees are still visible. Full of Byronic mourning, Zamorna turns to a frenzy of construction schemes after the death of his wife, supervising his own immortality by directing the construction of an arch or craning up “some vast block of stone or marble” for “uncreated squares and terraces” and “future mansions”.<sup>16</sup>

The intensely urban imagination which conjures Glass Town also sees it as the home of the crowd, a mass society of spectacle and public entertainment. The sense and pressure of numbers is everywhere, at the Olympic Games, which stages horse racing, wrestling and bull fighting, and at the public gatherings and shows arranged to display the Angrian monarchy. One such show in the County Field (Charlotte had a mastery of the authentic place name) attracts “the throng of eager multitudes”: “Immediately before me the numbers

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, II, ii, 279. The stream of consciousness prose is unique.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, II, i, 144.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, II, ii, 154.

without number, numberless, streaming, trampling, rushing and rattling along, and in a long line blackening the wide breadth of Stuartville Road ...<sup>17</sup> Glass Town is not a community except in the sense that it is envisioned as the home of thousands, abstracted as the masses and incapable of being visualized individually.

Finally, the Angrian chronicles tend to reverse nineteenth-century history. Wellington was "elected" King in 1829: but he was of course to be instrumental in passing the 1832 Reform Bill. The Ashantee are defeated in Angria, but in reality they were an organised trading state (trading in guns and slaves) and inflicted a terrible defeat on the British in 1824. George Maclean negotiated peace in areas of West Africa by 1831, but Angria was permanently at war.

These reversals should make us cautious about turning Glass Town back into some kind of empirical reality from which it is supposedly derived. The city is a unique creation made from components of the known. These have been re-configured – and re-imagined through fantasy – to make an extraordinary alternative urban and industrial world where the categories of nineteenth-century culture can be questioned and new kinds of experience are possible. These reimaginings are made concretely, through a response to the material environment, and this is where glass comes in.

I shall turn back to Angria and to Charlotte's tales shortly. I shall think about them as belonging to a larger poetics of glass for the nineteenth century which needs to be developed rather more fully at this point.

At once an archaic and a modern material, glass is an invisible element in our lives, noticed only when it is absent. In Mrs Gaskell's *North and South* (1855), the narrator comments on the dead look of the Mill-owner Thornton's affluent living room, which lacks the pieces of glass which create the same relief as water in a landscape. Seemingly invisible though it is, to subtract the mass production of glass from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would be unthinkable, for glass touches all areas of our culture. For the nineteenth century, transparency and translucency – in the environment and in the things we use – was a new visual and bodily experience. As Fourier was quick to see, glass could transform city life and literally alter our relation to the outside world by covering arcades, and from the construction of buildings to the manufacture of glass beads (beads exported to the very area of Africa in which Angria is set), new technologies released, not simply new commodities into being, but new

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, II, ii, 253.

ways of experiencing the world.<sup>18</sup> As it became possible to mass produce it and above all to make sheet glass in larger pieces, and with the removal of the glass tax in 1845, glass became a formative element in people's lives. We can read a building like a text, Ruskin said, but it is also necessary to read the materials out of which buildings were constructed and the conditions of their production. When you looked through a window in the mid-nineteenth century, whose panes could never be larger than four foot in size, you looked through melted sand which came from Lancashire or Bedfordshire, chemicals, and the breath of an unknown artisan.<sup>19</sup> The artisan himself would be unlikely to view the world from this vantage point. The beauty of glass and its translucency gives rise to allegory, metaphor and symbol in nineteenth-century texts, but glass, hardened in a fleeting moment, can also become the form as well as the content of experience, shaping perception, with an epistemological function. It is a unique instance of the interdependence of materials and subjectivity – and the fragility of both – at a particular moment in time.

There are a number of ways of considering glass as a cultural artefact in the nineteenth century, both through the processes by which it was made, and its function when its final, brittle state is reached.

Glass was made by processes halfway between a mechanised technology and an atavistic craft, requiring the infernal furnaces of early industrial processes which Blake recognised so well. But it was also *worked*: process is its essence; viscous, hot and pliant, technically a malleable liquid which becomes solid as it is swung round the body, as crown glass was, or turned on a rod and shaped by the breath as it cools, as sheet glass required, it blurs the distinction between industrial material and art object.<sup>20</sup> In turn, questions of agency and control arise. Are we shaping or being shaped by, dominating or being dominated by, this process? The actual slavery of its large scale production cannot be dissociated from the conceptual puzzle of power and control prompted by the making of glass, the ambiguous relationship between the delicate glass object and its maker. The aesthetic object and the industrial artefact are alike because

<sup>18</sup> For developments in glass manufacture and technology in the nineteenth century see F.J.T. Maloney, *Glass in the Modern World*, London, 1967. See also J. Home Dickson, ed., *Glass: A Handbook for Students and Technicians*, London, 1951.

<sup>19</sup> Henry Chance, 'On the Manufacture of Crown and Sheet Glass', *The Principles of Glass-Making*, ed., H.J. Powell, London, 1883, 107–8, gives a detailed account of the ingredients of glass, which was principally manufactured by blowing until quite late in the century. Plate glass had been invented but it was too expensive to make until new processes emerged at the turn of the century. What enabled blown glass to be made in large quantities was improvement in furnace construction (112).

<sup>20</sup> Chance describes the skills required for making sheet glass, *Ibid.*, 121–7.

the same questions arise from them.

The window, most often the final state of the glass partition, a vertical opening in a wall, was at the interface between two antithetical spaces. These were the interiority from which we look out, the private world of the bourgeois subject, and the public space outside it. The vertical window and the mode of seeing which it conditioned, which seemed so inevitable to those who looked out from it, was to be the subject of a bitter ideological dispute between Le Corbusier, who favoured the horizontal window, and Perret, who did not.<sup>21</sup> This struggle for the gaze became complicated because people began to look *in* as well as out, as windows became increasingly the medium of display. Looking, and the several kinds of not always compatible desire generated by it, is a deeply problematical nineteenth-century experience.

Glass as blown object and glass as the screen of the vertical window are particularly relevant to the two stories I shall discuss, but a poetics of glass, which would also have to relate to a politics, would need to go beyond these two areas into at least five others. It would have to consider the issues of representation bound up in the reflective surface of glass and the cultural meaning given to the way our bodies are reflected, returned to us from the environment and interact with it in ways that cannot be controlled – that is why water, and the inadvertence and randomness of the simulacra it makes, is the correct analogue of glass. This is different from the appointment we make with a mirror.

In both cases the reflecting surfaces screen what is behind them and dissolve the solidity and self-evidence of form. The economic move from luxury to cheapness, enabling the widespread popular use of glass objects, its large scale production and reproduction, its use value and exchange value, would be another area of exploration.<sup>22</sup> In different ways glass provides the cultural and scientific infrastructure with a means of display and the control of vision.<sup>23</sup> The new possibility for spectacle opened up by shop windows, exhibitions and public places would extend to the image thrown on glass, the magic lantern, the diorama, the camera – all those gadgets which became the culture industry,

<sup>21</sup> See Bruno Reichlin, 'The Pros and Cons of the Horizontal Window. The Perret – Le Corbusier Controversy', *Daidalos: Berlin Architectural Journal*, 13 (Sept. 1984), 65–78.

<sup>22</sup> Ruskin condemned both the slavery of the operative, whose strength is "wasted into the fineness of a web, or racked into the fineness of a line" and the mechanical accuracy achieved by mass production: "Our modern glass is exquisitely clear in its substance, true in its form, accurate in its cutting. We are proud of this. We ought to be ashamed of it". E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, eds, *The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols, X, London, 1903–12, *Stones of Venice*, II, 193, 199.

<sup>23</sup> See Thomas Richards, 'The Great Exhibition of Things', *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle 1851–1914*, Stanford, 1990, 17–72.

changing intersubjective relations. The lens, through microscope and telescope, expanding or contracting objects, changing their closeness or distance and enlarging epistemological space as a consequence, is another object which transforms consciousness.

“It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided but the men”, Ruskin wrote, describing the making of “utterly unnecessary” glass beads:

They are formed by first drawing out the glass into rods; these rods are chopped up into fragments of the size of beads by the human hand, and the fragments are then rounded in the furnace. The men who chop up the rods sit at work all day, their hands vibrating with a perpetual and exquisitely timed palsy, and the beads dropping beneath their vibrations like hail.<sup>24</sup>

A poetics of glass would not forget that Ruskin regarded the manufacture of glass as a test case of the nature of work in his society. Consuming work makes play impossible, and the lack of play means the lack of art, he thought. Only a “grotesque” consciousness remains, incapable of true resistance and consumed by loss and desire and pathologically obsessed by death, incapable of representing its world except through a distorting glass of misrecognition which produces a “disturbed dream”. Interestingly, the Brontë children were found to be incapable of playing ordinary games like Hunt the Slipper on social occasions.<sup>25</sup> But what kind of play is our first story, ‘The Silver Cup’ of 1829, and is it a product of grotesque consciousness?

Charlotte writes as a male author. It is her first story about a woman, and it is brief. Lady Caroline Dunally, mother of two girls and a boy, “given to use her tongue”, has a quarrel with her husband, Captain Henry Dunally, when he purchases an expensive silver cup without consulting her.

‘100 guineas! Am I asleep or awake?’

‘You ought to know best yourself.’<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Ruskin, *Stones of Venice*, 197. Ruskin accused those of buying the beads of being engaged in the slave trade. The reference is pointed. Under the West African section of the Great Exhibition Forster and Smith displayed “Ashantee glass armlets; the glass obtained by melting European beads”. Robert Hunt commented that the beads probably came from Birmingham as trade in beads was “very high”. *Official Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations*, 1851, xiv.

<sup>25</sup> Christine Alexander, *Early Writings*, 25.

<sup>26</sup> Alexander, *Edition*, I, 71.

Violent anger is aroused again by a seemingly unconnected incident. Her youngest daughter, Cina (Sinner?) deliberately smashes a precious glass ship with a parasol:

There was in the library a miniature ship composed entirely of glass and made with the utmost skill and ingenuity. The ship was kept in a beautiful rosewood box, inlaid with brass, of which either Captain or Lady Dunally always kept the key ... Lady Dunally entered ... and beheld her favourite Cina seated on the rich Persian carpet and busily engaged ... in smashing the beautiful ship to pieces and about to crack the delicate masts and cordage. [Cina] gave a laugh like an idiot.<sup>27</sup>

The story ends with the disobedience of the son, Henry, who goes to see the public hanging of his uncle, his mother's brother. Lady Caroline is ostracised by her friends, and then forgiven.

The enigmatic, and in this case poignant, starkness and complexity of dream work is certainly here. The two year old Cina seems to be both double and rival of her mother. Charlotte was in her fourteenth year, and it is as if puberty returns to an oedipal moment of violent separation and self-inflicted destruction – in order to cut the “cordage” of attachment to the mother. Caroline's children seem freer than she. The male child, Henry, survives the violence of the law at the hanging and is not confined to domestic space. It is striking that buying and selling recurs in these stories, and anxieties about reproduction and exchange, both of children and goods, is evident. But these descriptions do not account for the violent anger, the frustration and anguish, of the tale. To do so it helps to consider what objects in the story are made of.

The nature of a material itself can become significant in determining meaning. There are two feminine symbols in the story, the embossed silver cup bought by the husband and moulded from without, and the delicate fragility and brittleness of the glass ship, formed from within by the motion of breath. Most arresting is the *invisibility* of the glass vessel, not only a container within a container, but made out of a virtually invisible medium in comparison with the silver cup, which circulates in the world of commodity. The material itself poses the question which is being asked here. The transparent object is unnoticeable because it can be seen through. Furthermore, it belongs to the private sphere and it presents a doubly overdetermined nature to the outside world: what is invisible becomes opaque, what is transparent is *too* clear and disappears as a

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

medium. Yet a ship is capable of motion. The second problem arises from the extent to which that potential can be fulfilled. Charlotte writes of the white sails of the mercantile ships gliding softly in the breeze of Glass Town harbour. But a sail blown from the wind differs from the fixity of glass inwardly shaped by alien breath.

Breakable, invisible, a highly elaborate and delicately worked aesthetic object enclosed in a box whose key is not wholly yours, a glass vessel petrified into rigidity, incapable of the motion its original is made for – the fractured ship begins to negotiate not only a powerful desire and longing but also a series of questions about the conditions of Lady Caroline's experience and subjectivity, about the conditions of her access to the social world, the Glass Town polis.

The most important questions arise because the glass vessel is *blown*, made of matter and breath, not moulded from without like the silver cup. There is a delicate ambiguity here: a miraculous freedom is granted by the way glass holds breath and motion in itself, affirming the power *within*. On the other hand – and in this context it is worth remembering that in the gendered division of labour glass was blown by men and packed by women – this could be seen, not as an internal energy but the consent to passivity, even to an intrusive violation, as the Inner being is given form by alien force. Such troublingly contradictory ways of imagining identity and the world could be avoided by a religious writer, such as Christina Rossetti, who thought of blown glass as the body and soul fused into being. “Now God's grace moulds us from within”, she wrote in *Time Flies* (1885), and she hints at a creative sexual relationship with God:

Such a contour, a curve, an attitude if I may so call it, did here or there one of these old glasses exhibit, as a petrified blossom bell might retain, or as flexibility itself or motion might show forth if these could be embodied and arrested.

Inert glass moulded from within caught the semblance of such an alien grace.<sup>28</sup>

Interestingly, Rossetti writes of ancient glass, whereas Charlotte's story is full of the sense of a modern commercial world. She is ambivalent about it, but the fractured vessel is no more archaic than the 300,000 sheets of glass, all produced by techniques which moulded them “from within”, which were to be required for the Crystal Palace. Boxed and confined, Caroline is unable to take up the new social space being made by the transformation in technology.

<sup>28</sup> Christina Rossetti, *Time Flies: A Reading Diary*, London, 1885, 134. Thanks to Cath Burlinson for this reference.



The Angrian tales are fascinated by the taboo on a casket, and this helps to place the distress around the glass ship. We have already seen how the transgressive Zenobia – referred to as “A masculine soul in a female casket” – promises to open her husband’s coffin.<sup>29</sup> “The Secret” (1833) concerns two caskets, one legitimately owned, and used for storing her drawings, by Marion Hume, wife of Zamorna, and one owned by Lord Ellrington (Northangerland), which appears to hold the secret both of Marion’s incest and bigamy. Formerly married to his dead son who seems to have returned, she might also be Northangerland’s daughter. She attempts to rob this casket, and to do so has to be disguised and declassed, dressed as a servant in cloak and straw bonnet. Her night journey puts her at risk from her own husband and his drunken friends, who will assume she is a prostitute, and finally from Ellrington himself: “This is the blade I wielded in my youth, when I killed Negroes for Wellington”<sup>30</sup> The plot is resolved but Marion’s extreme vulnerability, in terms of family, class and gender, is not. Figured by the smashed vessel in ‘The Silver Cup’, vulnerability is here emphasised by the three “secrets”, the mismatch between the legitimate representations stored in the first casket with the sinister material in the other, the necessity to negotiate all family arrangements through men, and the threat of the immigrant’s return. The Irish Brontës knew that Irish immigrant children were then starving in the streets of Liverpool, or packed into underground cellars.<sup>31</sup> The boundaries of kinship and class are fragile: Henry, in ‘The Silver Cup’, cannot be prevented from straying into the streets.

‘The Green Dwarf’ is more complex than the other tales. It is important here because it uses the trope of the woman at the window.

Her elbow rested on the little work table beside her, and her full, dark eyes were fixed with an expression of deep melancholy on the blue and far-distant mountain boundary, which appeared through the open lattice.<sup>32</sup>

This is Lady Emily Charlesworth (an adopted daughter of her uncle), who elopes with the wrong man, Percy (Northangerland) instead of St Clair. She

<sup>29</sup> Alexander, *Edition*, II, ii, 279.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, II, i, 289.

<sup>31</sup> *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* carried three articles on emigration in the late eighteen twenties: 20 (1826), 470–8, John Galt; 23 (1828), 191–4; 615–20, William Johnstone. There were five articles on the state of Ireland – almost as exasperating to *Blackwood’s* as the state of Africa: 20 (1826), 527–41; 21 (1827), 61–73, Horatio Townsend; 22 (1827), John Wilson; 237–9; 23 (1828), 351–61.

<sup>32</sup> Alexander, *Edition*. I, i, 158.

is confined to a gothic building whose windows – we are told this twice – are “unglazed”. She is discovered by accident after the male actions have been played out. These actions are structured round three acts of betrayal and repeatedly figure stolen rewards, of which Emily is the first. They take place in the massive public spectacles of the Olympic games and the theatre of the Ashantee wars in the context of wholly male competition. Percy cheats Emily’s love, St Clair, both at the Olympic Games and during the Ashantee campaign, persuading St Clair’s adopted son and servant to work for the Ashantee for the reward of gold chains and a collar and aggrry beads (glass beads used as currency). The anxieties around competition, exchange, and the spoils of war are compounded by the fear of miscegenation: Quashia, heir of the Ashantee leader but Wellington’s adopted son, also betrays the Angrian overlords to the Ashantee, an event puzzling because he does not speak or look “like the other blacks”, not having flat or thick lips.<sup>33</sup>

The male disputes are all solved triumphantly through the law, but Emily’s situation is not – it is almost as if she has no legal identity, and her adopted status aligns her with the white servant and the black Quashia. The story’s often tortuous parallelisms align her with those of uncertain standing, people hard to classify, whose dubious moral action makes them outsiders.

Emily’s position at the window of the country house at the start of the tale puts her already at the boundary of legitimate desire – the “mountain boundary” hints at the limits she longs to transcend. When she is placed in the gothic prison with its “unglazed” windows it is as if she slips into a fatally permeable identity where there is no clear dividing line between self and world, inside, outside. She slips out of the subject position associated with the bourgeois world where the window defines and limits identity while it guarantees the autonomy of the self which looks out upon a world it can order. She also falls

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, II, i, 192. The habitual racism of the Angrian sagas is much more uneasy in this tale than in others. Later, in an absolutely unambivalent and violent political speech, Zamorna vows “the extirpation, the rooting up, the radical destruction of Quashia and his Africans. I shall not account our work done there till every drop of Ethiopian blood [*sic*] be shed and dried up in the sun that first scorched it. We must leave none to darken our own hereafter! Root and branch must they be cut off! Utterly and forever must they be done away with!” (II, ii, 308). The Ashantee bribe which St Clair is accused of accepting consists of a “splendid” cloth, and, packed in the ubiquitous casket, “five double gold chains, each two yards long, a collar, and a pair of bracelets of the same costly metal, several ornaments in aggrry beads, and an amulet in a gold case blazing with the finest diamonds” (193). West African wealth, represented as a bribe for betraying loyalty to the British, is exaggerated by fantasy here. Prescient in that objects of the same kind were displayed in the 1851 Exhibition, Charlotte greatly overestimates the luxury of these artefacts. The Angrian sagas in fact mask trading relationships with Africa, but this story suggests unease about them, again reversing the relationship of exploitation by casting Africans as tempters.

outside (literally) the possibility of the transcendental gaze beyond, which assumes the omnipotence of the looking eye. When the supremacy of the vertical window was challenged by Corbusier, the argument was not only about the new construction techniques which made it obsolete, but about the ways a window could make you *see*. The horizontal window precluded “the scene of mute monologues and dialogues, of reflections on one’s own position between the finite and the infinite ...”<sup>34</sup> It precluded the universalising of individual desire. Perret celebrated the reassuring relation to garden, street, sky, offered by the vertical window. “The horizontal window is not a window at all ... A window, that is man himself.”<sup>35</sup> But, as Emily’s experience demonstrates, not ‘woman herself’.

## (II)

Charlotte’s juvenilia interrogate and test out social and cultural meanings, but in 1851, when Glass Town came to Hyde Park, complete with a police force of four hundred, there was no such tentativeness. The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations, housed in Joseph Paxton’s “palace made o’ windows” (as Thackeray’s poem in *Punch* described it), was seen by the *Times* to be a greater spectacle than any previous coronations or public celebrations.<sup>36</sup> 1,848 feet long, 408 feet broad, 108 feet high, it took 293,655 panels of 4 foot long glass. Eighty men put in 18,000 in one week, one man put in 108 in one day. Trees were roofed in, but true to Charlotte Brontë’s prescience, a clump was felled. From May to October there was an average daily attendance of nearly 43,000 and a total of 6 million visitors. The exhibition popularised the excursion and the day trip and led to an influx of foreign visitors – as Thackeray’s poem put it, “Injians and Canajians”, “Asians and European”. Half the building was taken up by British exhibits, half by the rest of the world. Angria’s mass society had arrived.<sup>37</sup>

There had been other exhibitions, but this one was greeted with triumphalism and an attempt to consolidate national identity round British manufacturing power. R.H.Horne commented, in *Household Words*, that “industrial excitement” had superseded “revolutionary excitement”: “It looks as though England had said to the continental nations – “Pause awhile to take breath after

<sup>34</sup> Reichlin, *Op. Cit.*, 73.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>36</sup> Thackeray’s verses on the Crystal Palace appeared in *Punch*, 20, 1851, 171.

<sup>37</sup> For these figures see *The Great Exhibition: A Commemorative Album*, C.H. Gibbs Smith (Compiler), London H.M. Stationary Office, 1950, 32–4.

your barricades, and the putting to flight of your kings, and consider whether a good round of industrious work will not show us all whereabouts we are.”<sup>38</sup> At the same time the Exhibition provoked violent controversy. The subtext of commentaries is that it marked a break, a radically new conception of the real. There is a sense of cultural shock. An exhibition defamiliarises everything: a new plough, and the stuffed elephant specially brought from Saffron Walden were equally dreamlike. Dickens, despite his probable collaboration with Horne, wrote privately of the “bewilderment of the public” and the “boredom” and “lassitude” experienced in the Exhibition. He spoke of a school trip, “the greater part wetting their forefingers and drawing a wavy pattern on every accessible object ... One infant strayed ... He was found by the Police at night, going round and round the Turnpike, which he still supposed to be a part of the Exhibition ... When his mother came for him in the morning he asked, when it would be over?”<sup>39</sup>

Ruskin’s deep antipathy to the Crystal Palace was publicly expressed. He called it a “greenhouse larger than ever greenhouse was built before”, a “magnified conservatory”, “sparkling in space”.<sup>40</sup> Glass architecture was an impossibility, not because its elements were “multiplicable”, but because it abstracts human labour. “This law is imperative, universal, irrevocable. No perfect or refined form can be expressed except in opaque and lustreless matter ... you can never have any noble architecture in transparent or lustrous glass”, he wrote.<sup>41</sup> We cannot *see* the glass building: if we can see through it, it might as well be invisible: it has no form, no boundaries, its visual effect is shifting and indeterminate. On other material the “impressions” of “human labour”, creative work on the world, are “legibly expressed upon it forever”, but glass conceals labour or reflects only mindless “bodily industry”.<sup>42</sup>

Ruskin’s ethical concern that buildings should be inscribed by individual effort, the unique aura of those who built them, is akin to Charlotte Brontë’s exploration into the possibility that glass, rather than being shaped, shapes us. The actual process of glass making does not solve this question: glass both exhibits and conceals the evidence of bodily labour. In his treatise on crown

<sup>38</sup> Charles Dickens, with R.H. Horne, ‘The Great Exhibition and the Little One’, *Household Words*, 5 July 1851, in *The Uncollected Writings of Charles Dickens: Household Words, 1850–1859*, 2 vols, Harry Stone, ed., London, 1969, I, 319–29, 320.

<sup>39</sup> *Letters of Charles Dickens* (Pilgrim Edition), Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson, Nina Burgis, eds, Oxford, 1988, 6 (July 1851), 429.

<sup>40</sup> Ruskin, *Op. Cit.*, IX (*Stones of Venice*, I, (Appendix 17), 456.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 455.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 456.

and plate glass later in the century, Henry Chance, whose firm made the glass for the Crystal Palace, describes how plate glass is blown into four foot cylinders, split and flattened. It goes through the hands of ten workmen before it ever gets to the skilled blower. The blower works on

a stage or frame of wood, erected over a large pit or well about ten feet deep, and these parallel stages are sufficiently apart to enable each blower to swing his pipe to and fro in a vertical plane, that the glass may run freely out, as the phrase is, to the required length. When the glass has been sufficiently heated in the blowing furnace, it is brought out and swung round in a vertical plane, and also backwards and forwards, and the blower at the same time, by blowing down the pipe, constantly, keeps the lengthening cylinder full of air. Uniformity of substance and of diameter is chiefly secured by the skill of the workman, who, when he finds the metal running out too freely, holds the cylinder vertically above his head, still keeping it well filled with air.<sup>43</sup>

Sixteen kinds of human flaw had to be excluded from the process: on the cylinder nine kinds of blemish could be produced by the founder, gatherer, skimmer, and the blower himself (“on this abortion the flattener chances to have exerted his most exquisite skill”); a flattener can mark a perfectly blown piece of glass with seven kinds of defect.<sup>44</sup> The purity of glass, for Chance a near miracle, was inhuman to others.

There were three ways of considering the abstracting and dehumanising nature of the Crystal Palace. Dickens (with Horne), Dostoevsky and William Whewell, Master of Trinity, represent these three very different discourses of abstraction.

Dickens and Horne concentrate on the mechanisation promised by the display. Abandoning the categories of the exhibition itself, they speak of a frightening population growth which doubles every 52 years, and which only mechanised production can sustain. The machine which sows an acre of turnips in five minutes, “the farm engines, such as the compound plough, the harrow, the clod-crusher, the revolving sub-soiler (some of them looking not a little alarming, like instruments of torture for the Titans)”, the strength, velocity and minute precision of these massive tools, and the plenitude they

<sup>43</sup> Chance, *Op. Cit.*, 127.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

will produce, are celebrated energetically.<sup>45</sup> But the proliferation of innumerable mechanical aids begins to look a little nightmarish, and there is more than an element of satire here: the clock which works for four hundred days suspended in water, the “ostracide (grand and killing term for the easy oyster opener)”, the masticating knife for dyspeptic persons, artificial hands, all these take on a surreal nature as if the exhibition were a massive provider of prosthetic aids.<sup>46</sup> For Dickens trade must be the outcome of the Crystal Palace. He attacks China, also holding a small exhibition in 1851, for refusing to participate actively in world trade.

Dostoevsky’s furious reaction to the Crystal Palace is the exact antithesis of Dickens’s optimism. To him, it is a product of the rational and utilitarian Socialist order which exterminates the dialectic of desire. His hatred of it is a response to Chernyshevsky’s *What is to be Done?*, which envisaged a rational utopia in which machines were to be slaves. In this utopia the moral order is as self-evident as the nature of the material needs to be satisfied, and thus the end of *wanting* is presupposed as an ethical condition. The seemingly rational transparency and abstraction of the Crystal Palace epitomises these positivist values:

You believe in the Crystal Palace, eternally indestructible, that is, in something at which you cannot secretly stick out your tongue, or make gestures of defiance. But perhaps the reason I fear this Crystal Palace is that it is crystal and that it is eternally indestructible and that you cannot even stick your tongue out at it.<sup>47</sup>

The regulation of desire through commodity quells dissent (hence the reiteration of that carnivalesque gesture of bodily defiance, sticking out the tongue). What offers itself as transparent is really the stone wall of a deterministic materialism. This fails to recognise the necessity and importunity of irrational needs. “To be too conscious is an illness, a genuine full-blown illness”.<sup>48</sup> The present order, in which blood flows like champagne, is not rational: therefore, “What has led you to conclude that it is absolutely *necessary* for human desire to be altered?”<sup>49</sup> Dostoevsky’s argument is not simply that to be fully human is

<sup>45</sup> Dickens and Horne, *Op. Cit.*, 323.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

<sup>47</sup> Fedor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, Jane Kentish, transl., Oxford and New York, 1991 (The World’s Classics), 35.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

to desire (man is a creature on two legs and “ungrateful”): it is that the antithesis which describes suffering as deprivation and happiness as prosperity leads to a one-sidedness in which the rational account of need describes every other kind of need as “caprice”. Commodity and the coercive spectacle which ensures its perpetuation are abstractions because they are believed to be transparently obvious universal norms of human want. They manufacture alienation by reducing dissent to pathological desire. Dostoevsky’s affirmation of caprice does not represent the extremity of individualism but the refusal of dissent to be pathologised – even when his own dissent cannot escape from the structure it describes.

Whewell’s discussion of the taxonomy of the exhibition has neither the triumphalism of the Dickens/Horne article nor Dostoevsky’s fury. Probably the most searching philosophical account of the exhibition, it is an essay in cultural theory which proposes that the exhibition represents, and will itself bring about, a fundamental change of consciousness. Many of Whewell’s conclusions are disturbing, though he himself is hopeful, calmly registering the shock of an epistemological break. The exhibition marks a crucial moment, the time for extending our ideas of art to all the material artefacts produced by a culture. A scientific analysis of the “laws of material nature” which operate when mind is “stamped upon matter”, is necessary.<sup>50</sup> New taxonomies and classifications – he instances Bentham and Cuvier as revolutionisers of modern categories as an example of the kind of change he envisages – will come into being, literally reorganising lives. The exhibition exemplifies two fundamental changes to the structure of experience, the occurrence of *simultaneity* in space and in time.

The exhibition is described in terms of enchantment, magic and seduction (dream and commodity seem to be closely allied in imagery at this time), where a Calypso island and a crystal frame concentrate the material productions of the whole world. Space is transcended because raw materials, machinery and manufactured articles from everywhere on the earth are brought together into a single area. This must mean the obliteration of a now anachronistic account of knowledge. We can no longer work with the model of the human subject as individual researcher who can independently arrive at a total understanding of the world. The old forms of discovery are obsolete: Whewell describes the frustration of individualistic enterprise, as one area of research changes while another is being investigated. New knowledge will evolve, not based on the knowledge of one man only but those which arise from an understanding of synchronicity. The photograph is the model of this new epistemology:

<sup>50</sup> William Whewell, ‘On the General Bearing of the Great Exhibition on the Progress of Art and Science’, Inaugural Lecture, Nov. 26 1851, 2.

different spaces and nations seen simultaneously arrested at different stages of development will alter our perceptions. By annihilating space we annihilate time, and thus diachronic modes of seeing cease to exercise their power upon us. “By annihilating the space which separates different nations, we produce a spectacle in which is also annihilated the time which separates one stage of a nation’s progress from another.”<sup>51</sup> By thinking of a gaze which can travel a little faster than light, we can see history synchronically. In an extraordinary vision of the subject as ultimate spectator, Whewell describes the simultaneity of history. If we “go but very little faster than light itself”:

we shall overtake successively the visual images of all successive events, and see them as truly as a distant spectator (and what spectator is not more or less distant?) sees what passes before his eyes. We might thus see now what is passing around us, and the next minute, by rushing to the borders of the solar system, where the images are still travelling outwards, see the first inhabitant of this island placing his foot upon its coast; and in the intermediate distances we should successively overtake and see, with our bodily eyes, in inverted order, the events of English, Norman, Saxon, Roman, and British times; and we might mark, at each period, the food, the clothing, the arms, the tools, the houses, the machines, and the ornaments of the various times.<sup>52</sup>

The Great Exhibition has already made such time travel almost a “visible reality”, and Whewell sees three consequences arising from this. First, the world will be democratised because “the machine with its million fingers works for millions of purchasers”<sup>53</sup> We cannot rival the archaic beauty of the fine arts of, say, oriental cultures, but what can be manufactured can go to the many rather than to the few. Secondly, because the world will be organised according to the categories of the Exhibition, raw materials, machinery, manufactured objects (including fine art as a subcategory), actually the categories of capital, the possibility of standardisation arises: a “settled common language” which departs from the “Babel” of different forms of measurement and classification,

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 6–7.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.



must emerge, epitomised by the standardised screw.<sup>54</sup> Lastly, the infinite possibility of the “wealth” of the vegetable world as raw material will be recognised, processed and refined in many forms.

Though by implication the nation state disappears in Whewell's analysis, his failure to think about the relations of power subsisting in this new world, his acceptance of the terms of the market, his reduction of the common language to the bathos of the standardised screw, and his privileging of vegetable materials in comparison with other raw materials, seriously impairs his vision and limits his powerful originality. One of the earliest materialist analyses of culture, his is also strangely idealist and abstract. He celebrates this abstraction where others feared it.

### (III)

My experiment with a poetics of glass ends with Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), where, at the end of the novel, Glass Town, and a variant of the Crystal Palace Exhibition, come to the city of Villette. They burst in upon the novel in phantasmic representation in the great fete in the park, to which Lucy goes in a drugged state. She has been driven by suffering to an almost pathological condition. She is looking for a stone basin and the water which creates its crystal glass surface (an image characteristic of the subtle, barely noticed presence of glass in the nineteenth-century text). Implicitly she is looking for an undistorted identity and sexuality, but she never finds them. I have called this episode a moment of resistance, a dissident moment. It could, perhaps, too easily suggest the “disturbed dream” and consuming desire which Ruskin identified as the experience of the oppressed, “grotesque” consciousness of his society, irrevocably damaged by the division of labour, of which the glass bead makers are the symbol. However, Lucy fights against the “disturbed dream”, both her own and that of the community, implicitly refusing its ideologies. The episode vindicates the “caprice”, as Dostoevsky would have called it, of her actions.

When Lucy enters the park she is astonished to find the massively crowded spectacle of an official carnival in progress. It is a fete to celebrate the failure of a revolutionary uprising (it is hard to place: 1848, or possibly 1830). Like the social control exercised by the carnival of industry at the great Exhibition, it celebrates the survival and continuity of the middle class. At the same time, Whewell's principle of synchronicity is in operation – almost all the important

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

characters in the novel are concentrated in the park. And the same principle of surreal simultaneity works in space also, as a mix of Afro-Egyptian images – the primal scene of Charlotte’s early writing – converges with bourgeois European Villette. In a dreamlike display of pasteboard scenery and brilliant light, Lucy finds herself:

In a land of enchantment, a garden most gorgeous, a plain sprinkled with coloured meteors, a forest with sparks of purple and ruby and golden fire gemming the foliage; a region, not of trees and shadow, but of strangest architectural wealth – of altar and of temple, of pyramid, obelisk, and sphynx; incredible to say, the wonders and symbols of Egypt teemed throughout the park of Villette.<sup>55</sup>

(Does this owe something to the famous flax mill at Leeds, built in 1840 with an Egyptian facade and a replica of Cleopatra’s needle?) The narrative accomplishes a double deconstruction. First, Lucy has been haunted throughout the novel by outsiders to Europe – the Cleopatra in the art gallery, Vashti, the actress, who resembles Zenobia of the Angrian cycle, herself figured as Cleopatra. Europe’s other is presented with typical Angrian violence and beauty in the park, but Lucy recognises her affinity with these figures and the repressed energies with which she identifies. Secondly, as an outsider not only to Villette’s colonial outsiders but also to the city’s own bourgeois spectators of the fete, she is placed in a way that exposes the manner in which colonial space is reappropriated (and trivialised) as *spectacle* with all the carelessness of assured power by a privileged class. Villette’s exploitative use of these images is not housed in glass. They are naked, and so there is no perception that they are mediated in any way. The relationships of power in the novel emerge clearly. True to Whewell’s understanding of the synchronic, but sharper in their implications of exploitation, different exotics converge in the novel: the Afro-Egyptian display is the context for Lucy’s discovery from the conversation she overhears that Paul Emmanuel is to be in charge of his family’s West Indian estate.

Lucy sees everything with agonising clarity, but there is one figure with whom she identifies where her understanding is not so clear. Dressed in a straw bonnet and cloak, she is indistinguishable from the lower classes. Dressed exactly like her predecessor, Marion Hume, in the Angrian story, ‘The Secret’, she could, like her, be mistaken for a prostitute. At one point Dr John,

<sup>55</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (1853), Tony Tanner, ed., 1979 (Penguin Books), 550.

the exemplum, seemingly, of middle-class rectitude and secure values, comes curiously towards her, but she raises a supplicating hand and he withdraws. Lucy is convinced that Dr John has recognised her. Did he? or did he come forward with the intention of accosting her? The limits of Lucy's consciousness as well as her longings are apparent here.

Lucy's supplicating gesture of dismissal is actually a moment of resistance, almost of power. In dismissing Dr John she is dismissing a bourgeois world which both fascinates and repels her. Here Charlotte realigns her conservatism through Lucy. The energies and images of Glass Town are summoned to make a critique of the myths of the middle class, which Lucy herself is only too prone to mythologise as "nature's elect". Escaping from Madame Beck, she struggles against the "disturbed dream" of the Beck world. The whole fete sequence is a "caprice" in which Lucy, Ruskin's desiring subject, refuses to allow her desire to be managed. She refuses to let herself and her passions be abstracted. She refuses to want what the Anglo-continental and the Belgian families both want – possessions, privilege, comfort, commodities, the private space of the family, its manufactured sexual innocence.

Excluded, Lucy is forced to be on the outside looking in, to see middle-class life from the wrong side of the vertical window. But this gives her some insights. She sees that this life is framed: she sees through the constructed (and protected) interiority of the bourgeois subject. She sees a world glassed in, while its people are unaware of the transparent walls around them.

HILDA HULME MEMORIAL  
LECTURE IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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| 1986 | Professor Barbara Hardy | <i>The Narrators in 'Macbeth'</i>                           |
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| 1989 | Stanley Ellis           | <i>Local Speech in Writing: Surely<br/>Nobody reads it!</i> |
| 1990 | Professor Helen Vendler | <i>Ways into Shakespeare's Sonnets</i>                      |
| 1991 | Dr Rosemary Ashton      | <i>Dickens, George Eliot and George<br/>Henry Lewes</i>     |