

# Desire and Slow Time: Reading Charlotte Brontë in the Information Age

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## I. "The Eternal Echoes of Electronic Spiritualism"

There is a secret bond between slowness and memory, between speed and forgetting. Consider this utterly commonplace situation: a man is walking down the street. At a certain moment, he tries to recall something, but the recollection escapes him. Automatically, he slows down. Meanwhile, a person who wants to forget a disagreeable incident he has just lived through starts unconsciously to speed up his pace, as if he were trying to distance himself from a thing still too close to him in time.

—Milan Kundera, *Slowness*

Milan Kundera's whimsical novel *Slowness* continually plays two worlds against each other: a frenetic present where lovers make the most of their busy lives, scurrying to find time for a quick weekend getaway, and a languid, pre-industrial past where lovers move at a more leisurely and a more sensual pace. In this passage, Kundera speculates on the near direct connection between speed and memory, how the frenetic pace of contemporary life—the demand always to be focused on the present and the many choices immediately before us—aids in blotting out both nostalgic thoughts about the past and wistful planning for the future. The speed of the present moment—the almost limitless options any moment offers us, especially if we are equipped with the right high-tech gear—both displaces the reveries of an older order and provides relief from anxieties associated with choosing and waiting. Hence the vision of the contemporary world Kundera satirically offers is a

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familiar one of harried information workers, conditioned to the instant communication and instant gratification of the computer screen—the forever present of cyberspace—seeking comparably intense, fleeting gratification in their own individual lives.

In other words, a familiar theme of the modern age, one that social critic John Ruskin echoed in the second half of the nineteenth century in complaining about railroad travel as a system “addressed to people who, being in a hurry, are therefore, for the time being, miserable.” It was inconceivable for Ruskin that anyone would elect such a mode of travel who “had the time to go leisurely over the hills and between hedges instead of through tunnels and between banks” (quoted in Schivelbusch 121). “The rapidity and variety of the impressions,” reported in a medical journal of 1862, “necessarily fatigue both the eye and the brain. The constantly varying distance at which the objects are placed involves an incessant shifting of the adaptive apparatus by which they are focused upon the retina; and the mental effort by which the brain takes cognizance of them is scarcely productive of cerebral wear because it is unconscious”(quoted in Schivelbusch 56). For Kundera, the speed of contemporary life—in part, the individual’s ability, via the new electronic network, to be everywhere, at once—represents a radical extension of this earlier practice, albeit now more often than not seen as a desired state: the individual enmeshed in the present, hence freed from history. Or in Kundera’s words, “The man hunched over his motorcycle [who] can focus only on the present instant of his flight”—a man “caught in a fragment of time cut off from both the past and the future . . . wrenched from the continuity of time . . . outside time . . . . [I]n other words, he is in a state of ecstasy; in that state he is unaware of his age, his wife, his children, his worries, and so he has no fear, because the source of his fear is in the future, and a person freed of the future has nothing to fear” (1-2).

The central issue here is the influence of new technologies of travel and communication on narrative, specifically, what happens to storytelling in such a world of infinite presents, a world where planning and memory, anticipation and regret, all seem unnecessary. And here Ruskin’s insight—that railroad travel “is in all its relations a matter of earnest business, to be got through as soon as possible”—points in the direction of our answer: that nineteenth-century railroad traveling is akin to contemporary “reading,” or surfing, on the Web in that in both cases, one forsakes a leisurely and hence presumably more enjoyable practice (of traveling or reading slowly—that is, for enjoyment) for something that is more

efficient. The new technology of the railroad reshapes us, as Ruskin notes, “transmut[ing] a man from a traveler into a living parcel” (quoted in Schivelbush 121). Or, as Schivelbush concludes, regarding the impact of the new global technology of the railroad, that “localities were no longer spatially individual or autonomous” but were instead all reduced to parts of a larger system for “the circulation of goods”: “From that time on, places visited by the traveler became increasingly similar to the commodities that were part of the same circulation system. For the twentieth-century tourist, the world has become one huge department store of countrysides and cities” (197). And perhaps literature itself, one huge database, with the students in our training being transformed, before our very eyes, from leisurely readers of texts, content to spend hour upon hour living in new fictional worlds, to high-tech information managers, able to seek out and assemble materials (all the more easily accomplished today via bookmarks), without necessarily having the time or the inclination to read them. On the web, as one wag has quipped, one bookmarks everything (for later) but reads nothing now.

In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray argues that the primary function of narrative remains largely untouched by technology—“Narrative beauty is independent of medium” (273), she writes; “the spirit of the bard is eternal and irreplaceable, telling us what we are doing here and what we mean to one another” (9). It is her thesis (her faith?) that surely the new technologies will foster new storytellers (*cyberbards*, she calls them) capable of using ever more powerful computer technologies to fashion ever more powerful narratives. But is it really sensible to expect powerful new narratives from an age so intent upon escaping the linearity—the dread, the waiting—of history itself? Or, put somewhat differently, what impact does the new global network have on the reading of the novels written in and presumably for of an older, more leisurely world? For present purposes, what is it like to read Charlotte Brontë in the new information age?

One place to begin answering such a question is with a consideration of a view of this new world offered by Spanish-born sociologist Manuel Castells. In *The Rise of the Network Society*, volume one of the three-volume *The Information Age*, Castells describes a world where historical progression falls by the wayside either because history has indeed already been fulfilled or, more likely the case, because it now seems irrelevant, with human fulfillment seemingly shaped more by the new technologies and immediate pleasures of the present than, as with the novelists of an

older generation (Charlotte Brontë most definitely included), by the deep, unfulfilled desires of the past. At the core of Castells's multi-volume treatise is the basic insight that technologies of production (both the industrialism of the last two hundred years and the new network society that emerged in the last twenty years) have a profound importance in shaping, not just how and (in the spirit of McLuhan) what we communicate, but the prevailing notion of the self as well. Or stated more directly, the prevalent sense of the self—either with Kundera's contemporary motorcyclist speeding to escape or, as will form the main subject of this essay, with Charlotte Brontë, shaping imaginative narratives of desire and slow time—emerges in no small measure as a means of coping with powerful, life-shaping, economic forces. For Castells all social groups today face what is essentially a lose-lose situation: get online and in the process transform oneself into a new present-focused entity or, like so many isolated nineteenth-century communities, face the stark realities of being off the line. Local stories, novels included, are often recountings of how individuals and groups continue to resist the latest technology, the new global network that is based more upon readily measured commodities than depth of feeling.

The argument, then, in its most basic form, is that novels prepare readers to cope with (either to flourish in or resist) a particular economic order—and that the novels of Charlotte Brontë reflect the particular importance that slowness (waiting, delay, and anticipation) played in her world. In the character of Lucy Snowe (the protagonist of her last and most compelling novel, *Villette*), Brontë was investigating, with the passion and intensity of a scientist, the question of how to live in an increasingly mobile industrial age—a world where men and women were often compelled to seek their own destinies, and a world where deep personal resistance (for women, often in the form of romantic love) was often seen as an essential component of emotional well being: the alternative to making the self as a smooth-functioning cog in a vast industrial system. The true self in the industrial age is one who resists being subsumed directly into the industrial system itself, at least at the level of worker, and who instead trains herself for a higher life (even higher management) by actively imagining other ways of being (or other modes of production). The dominant model of industrial culture—in business as well as narrative, in the personal as well as the institutional—is organic development, from simple to complex.

All this changes, Castells contends, with the transition from an industrial to a networked society, and presumably narrative will change as well (although not necessarily as optimistically as

Murray assumes) as we all learn to adapt to new economic demands. It is Castells's thesis that the new network society abandons the industrial model of contending with nature—and hence of the need to change the self in preparation for changing the world—for an entirely new model where information itself (something virtual not real) becomes the product of the new production process, creating the environment of instantaneous, global (but fundamentally virtual) interaction with the world. Here is the “spirit of informationalism” that for Castells forms the basis of “a new organizational logic” (152), one surely capable of radically altering traditional narrative: namely, that of the new “horizontal corporation”—what Castells defines as “a dynamic and strategically planned network of self-programmed, self-directed units based on decentralization, participation, and coordination” (166).

This new spirit is far less tolerant of resistance, far less willing to give the Lucy Snowes of the world space to nurture their fragile egos. The “spirit of informationalism” for Castells is most clearly defined by its ruthless demands to adapt to new information-based processes or be relegated to the dustbin of history: this new spirit, he writes, is none other than “the culture of ‘creative destruction’ accelerated to the speed of the optoelectronic circuits that process its signals” (199)—or as he refers in the sweeping and oddly moving conclusion to *The Rise of the Networked Society*, to “the network society” as representing “a qualitative change in the human experience” as compared to the “old sociological tradition” that saw human action as an attempt to alter or at least to comprehend the relationship between Nature and Culture: that is, to overcome or accept the limits of our desires. Castells cites the finding of northern Californian psychiatrist Raymond Barglow that the new dreamers he sees in therapy “express a sense of solitude experienced as existential and inescapable, built into the structure of the world . . . . Totally isolated, the self seems irretrievably lost to itself” (23).

What this new ethos so opposes, in other words and not surprisingly, is delay—the difficult, circuitous but emotionally rewarding journey that provides the basis for traditional narrative. “The networked society,” Castells concludes, “is characterized by the breaking down of rhythmicity, either biological or social, associated with the notion of a lifestyle” (446). One area of narrativity in which Castells sees the impact of this new technology is the open-ended, near timeless forms of New Age music, music whose slowness practically obliterates anxiety and, for Castells, not surprisingly finds some of its biggest fans among the information managers

of the new global economy. New Age music is an art form that Castells sees predicated on a relationship that escapes the ordinary historical ties (our relations with the folks down the block) in favor of the binary opposition between the moment and the eternal (between “me and the universe, the self and the net”). Instead of the anticipation and deferral of traditional classical music where an adagio movement is balanced by an allegro, New Age music opts for a new, postmodern timelessness, one that Castells describes as bringing together “within the same musical text a feeling of distance and repetition with the sudden surge of restrained sentiment, as blips of life in the ocean of eternity, a feeling often underscored by background sound of ocean waves or of desert’s wind in many New Age compositions.” What draws the new information workers to this music, Castells contends, is its ability to stimulate “the eternal echoes of electronic spiritualism,” to provide a palpable sense of the possibility “of the merger of all times, from the creation of ourselves to the end of the universe” (463)—a merger magically achieved, as if from some unseen switch of electronic circuitry.

A second area of narrativity that Castells points to as being affected by the new global network is the altered conception of the life cycle itself, with the emergence of new technologies of reproduction and corresponding lifestyles that blur the traditional importance of marriage and human reproduction, historically among the most important markers of linear progression (how we plot our lives), in life and in novels. Even death, Castells adds, is being transformed, relocated from the saga of family life to the hospital: “Life is interrupted at the threshold of the last possible smile, and death becomes visible only for a brief, ceremonial moment, after specializing image-makers perform their soothing *mise-en-scene*” (454). The subsequent loss of mourning, Castells notes, is the price we pay “for accessing eternity in our lifetime through the denial of death” (454).

Instead of a world (and a music) of natural rhythm and the eternal sense of anticipation that forms the basis of Charlotte Brontë’s fiction, we are thrust into a new world that constantly flutters between the instantaneous and the eternal. Instead of the ethos of delay and anticipation—waiting all morning for the midday postal delivery—we have the new world of video monitor, through which we view everything, instantly and often without anticipation: Bleep! We hear and then the message “You have mail” repeatedly connecting us to the whole world without effort, without waiting, and without warning, hence reinforcing the dual all-or-nothing quality of modern life—at once being everywhere and being

nowhere, at one moment seemingly removed from all concerns, at the next instant thrust headlong into global activity. This is the new world of “split-second capital transactions, flex-time enterprises, variable life working time, the blurring of lifecycle, the search for eternity through the denial of death, instant wars, and the culture of virtual times, all . . . fundamental phenomena, characteristic of the networked society, that systematically mix tenses in their occurrence” (Castells 464). In other words, it is the medium of the monitor and the network that most of us know through television, a medium that, Castells contends, relocates all messages to “the reassuring mode of the home” (336) and in so doing renders harmless all messages no matter how gruesome. Here is what Castells refers to as “the price to be paid for a message to be on television”: namely, our having “to accept being mixed in a multisematic text whose syntax is extremely lax,” being part of a communication medium where “information and entertainment, education and propaganda, relaxation and hypnosis are all blurred.” This is a narrative form based on “*the integration of all messages in a common cognitive pattern*” (371): a world where “interactive educational programs look like video-games; newscasts are constructed as audio—visual shows; trial cases are broadcast as soap operas; pop music is composed for MTV; sports games are choreographed for their distant viewers” (371).

It is the goal of the network society, Castells argues, to reshape all narrative in its own image, to produce a new narrative form that captures the end of linearity, hence the end of history as it is “enacted in a circularity of computerized financial flows or in the instanteity of surgical wars” (476). It is this goal to produce an art form that “overpowers the biological time of poverty or the mechanical time of industrial work,” an art form where “cultural expressions are abstracted from history and geography, and . . . that interact with the audience and by the audience in a diversity of codes and values, ultimately subsumed in a digitized audiovisual hypertext” (476). And what better image of “a digitized audiovisual hypertext” than multi-channel cable television, with the selection and pace of the programming entirely regulated via the impulsive clicks of a remote control? The use of such devices today does not conform to any original intention—to allow users to avoid the dead moment of commercial announcements—but is instead almost entirely directed to the task of producing the greater pleasure found in enhanced tactile stimulation: to allow users to regulate the pace of narrative, to increase the flow of images and sounds, in order to attain a maximum level of stimulation; to allow

us to change channels in the middle of shows, if things slow down too much; to give us the power to make the television set jump with excitement. Remote controlled television is less visible, less stylish than techno raves, but is of far greater importance as the ubiquitous new nonlinear narrative form of the information age.

## II. "Torn by Seven Devils"

Why did she tell him that she hadn't brought the key?  
 Why did she not tell him right off that the pavilion was  
 no longer kept locked? Everything is composed, con-  
 fected, artificial, everything is staged, nothing is  
 straightforward, or in other words, everything is art; in  
 this case: the art of prolonging the suspense, better yet:  
 the art of staying as long as possible in a state of arousal.  
 —Milan Kundera, *Slowness*

From Castells's contemporary world of harmonic resolution without conflict—the tonic without the dominant—to Kundera's re-created eighteenth-century world of prolonged suspense. The movement is away from traditional narrative and toward a contemporary world freed by new global technology from the restrictions of local history, or at least a world where many have the illusion of such freedom. Yet our trip, in an odd way, is back from the ancient sounds of Celtic harps—back from their contemporary manifestation in the New Age music ubiquitous with the rise of the network society—and to the world of deep desire and agonizingly slow time that Charlotte Brontë so meticulously creates in her novels:

In my reverie, methought I saw the continent of Europe,  
 like a wide dreamland, far away. Sunshine lay on it,  
 making the long coast one line of gold; tiniest tracery of  
 clustered town and snow-gleaming tower, of woods  
 deep massed, of heights serrated, of smooth pasturage  
 and veiny stream, embossed the metal-bright prospect.  
 For background, spread a sky, solemn and dark blue,  
 and—grand with imperial promise, soft with tints of  
 enchantment—strode from north to south a God-bent  
 bow, an arch of hope. (*Villette* 117)

So muses the protagonist in Brontë's last and most personal novel, *Villette*, reflecting how the continent looked to a 25-year old on her first trip away from the dreary north of England.



In this passage, related in 1852, ten years after the time that Brontë herself first arrived in Belgium, we can see the ebb and flow of emotion that forms the core of this tale of a young woman's terrifyingly lonely but deeply passionate, life-enhancing experiences, first as a student and later a teacher, in Brussels, identified in the novel's title as "Villette"—600 enraptured but slow-moving pages of psychological introspection for Brontë's alter ego, Lucy Snowe, to realize that she is not in love with one man (the handsome, younger, and gentle Dr. John) and that she instead is deeply in love with another man (her professor, Monsieur Paul, "a man in whom there is much to forgive—much to 'put up with'"). The first lover, Dr. John, was based on her own publisher, the young and handsome George Smith, and described by Brontë as destined for a wife who is "young, rich and pretty; he must be happy indeed" (3 November 1852—all letters and other contemporary materials, unless otherwise stated, are from *A Life in Letters*); the second lover, Monsieur Paul was based on her own tutor in Brussels, Monsieur Heger, one of the first men in her life to recognize her literary talent and, although married, a man with whom she fell hopelessly in love.

*Villette* is a novel published in the height of Britain's industrial expansion—in 1853, two years after the opening of the Great Exhibition celebrating Britain's new economic might—by a woman who had spent her entire life in the industrial north of England, surrounded by little of the wealth but much of the hardships that industrialization had wrought. And yet this is a novel that deals with the great, although to some, unexpected theme of industrial culture, visible even in this one brief passage: not the physical miseries that industrialism had brought to the working classes (a topic that had informed Brontë's previous and generally less successful effort, *Shirley*) but the psychic miseries that industrialism, and its new freedoms, had brought to the middle class. Here was a group of readers now freed from many ties of tradition and commanded to take control of powerful new forces of production but only after taking control of their own inner lives. *Villette* then, like the other great mid-nineteenth century narratives (literary as well as operatic—including Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Verdi's *Aida*, and Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*), deals with the pangs of desire and with longing as both the great hope and the great burden in anticipating and planning for one's future. With Brontë, as with her famous contemporaries, there is only one great challenge, one overarching lesson in life: to acknowledge one's desires, and yet be prepared for the worst if they go unfulfilled. As Caroline

Helstone, another Brontë alter ego, ruminates in *Shirley*, "I shall live to see Robert married to some one else, some rich lady: I shall never marry. What was I created for, I wonder? Where is my place in the world?" (190). Likewise, the looming continent of Europe offered another such desire to Lucy Snowe—the prospects of a new life—and no sooner had her heroine expressed such great hope at the start of her first visit, then in the very next sentence, Brontë disrupts the sentiment, informing us that Lucy Snowe, seasick, "faltered down into the cabin."

Charlotte Brontë's life and novels reveal the nurturing and tempering of desire to be the true art of slowness in great Romantic narrative tradition—less in the flow of events (or the lack of events) that forms the plot than in the flow of thoughts within the principal character, less in action or even reaction, than in anticipation and, as with Brontë's protagonist, keen observation, even of the drab ("somewhat bare, flat, and treeless") Belgium landscape: "[S]limy canals crept, like half-torpid green snakes, beside the road; and formal pollard willows edged level fields, tilled like kitchen-garden beds. The sky, too, was monotonously grey; the atmosphere was stagnant and humid." Such uninspired scenery ("all these deadening influences") was no match for a young woman brimming with anticipation: "[M]y fancy budded fresh and my heart basked in sunshine" (*Villette* 122), in hopes of what the future may bring. In this nineteenth-century narrative, as in so many others, the hope is less for an adventure than for the possibility of finding the right person, the lure of a fulfillment, in other words, beyond practical constraints—and thus the source of feelings that had to be "well kept in check by the secret but ceaseless consciousness of anxiety lying in wait on enjoyment, like a tiger crouched in a jungle."

Here is desire that seeks fulfillment, in Nietzsche's famous phrase, beyond good and evil, and hence a sense of the future that can never be freed from an always looming sense of anticipation and possible, even likely, disappointment. And here is an immense inner struggle, related in the intense, often violent metaphorical language that consistently brings this static, almost plotless novel to life: "The breathing of that beast of prey was in my ear always; his fierce heart panted close against mine; he never stirred in his lair but I felt him: I knew he waited only for sundown to bound ravenous from his ambush."

How ironic then that Mary Taylor, Charlotte's lifelong friend and correspondent, would be so determined in her progressive beliefs as to lament that, in *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte had produced a narrative "having no doctrine to preach." "It is impossible to squeeze a moral

out of your production," she writes in a letter of 1848, believing, more as a reformer than an artist, that novelists should be more concerned with social reform than with personal growth: "Has the world gone so well with you," Mary Taylor asked her friend, "that you have no protest to make against its absurdities?" (24 July 1848)—likely thinking of problem novels about women's issues like her own *Miss Miles* (worked on as she was reading *Jane Eyre* but not published until 1890, and, interestingly enough, reclaimed in the 1980s by that other progressive, Janet Murray, before she turned her attention to new electronic narratives). Reform was in the air in the middle of the nineteenth century, and Charlotte Brontë was to feel her own inadequacies as an important "modern" writer in part through the reading of another protest novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. "You will see that 'Villette' touches on no matter of public interest," Charlotte herself had written her own publisher (30 October 1852). "I cannot write books handling the topics of the day—it is no use trying. Nor can I write a book for its moral—Nor can I take up a philanthropic scheme though I honour Philanthropy—And voluntarily and sincerely veil my face before such a mighty subject as that handled in Mrs. Beecher Stowe's work—'Uncle Tom's Cabin.'"

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the theme of Brontë's first great literary success, and perhaps the most popular English novel of all time—namely, the passionate pursuit of the self—had a whiff of reaction even in its own day:

[W]hile Adèle played with the nurse, and Mrs. Fairfax made jellies in the store-room. I climbed three stair-cases, raised the trap-door of the attic, and having reached the leads, looked afar over sequestered field and hill, and along dim sky-line—that then I longed for a power of vision which might overpass that limit; which might reach the busy world, towns, regions full of life I had heard but never seen. (*Jane Eyre* 70)

Even in these most famous lines, we can see some of the internal complexity, even confusion, within this passionate author, for as her two great novels, *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, both suggest it is finally not travel itself that the heroine really desires—not a broader experience of the world at large that the heroine craves (as Mary Taylor seemed to in boldly traveling to New Zealand to earn her living and at nearly sixty years of age climbing Mont Blanc)—but only the *opportunity* afforded by travel (in *Jane Eyre* mostly imag-

ined, in *Villette* a short trip to Brussels) for seeking happiness in a way that disturbed so many of Brontë's contemporary readers: that is, by finding and securing the one true love that complements one's own life.

Such a deeply romantic nature—this faith in the ideal of an all-powerful love, one strong enough to subsume the artist's own expansive ego—seemed to disturb Mary Taylor as it did the activist and novelist Harriet Martineau, Brontë's most radical literary acquaintance. Martineau, whom Brontë first met in 1849, bitterly criticized *Villette* in print for presenting, almost in Balzacian fashion, female characters whose "whole conception and action" are dominated by "one tendency, or one idea": "All the female characters, in all their thoughts and lives, are full of one thing, or are regarded by the reader in the light of that one thought—love." "It is not thus in real life," Martineau scolds her erstwhile friend. "There are substantial, heartfelt interests for women of all ages, and under ordinary circumstances, quite apart from love" (review in the *Daily News*, 3 February 1853).

At Charlotte Brontë's core as a person and writer is a fierce passion, far beyond the Christian piety of St. John Rivers, that knows a realm beyond the ordinary, that truly believes that someone like Jane can be called from afar. The art of living, as Brontë wrote to her young publisher and would-be lover, George Smith, is always to reach beyond one's limits, one's self: "Whatever your present self may be—resolve with all your strength of resolution—never to degenerate thence—Be jealous of a shadow of falling off. Determine rather to look above that standard and strive beyond it. Everybody appreciates social properties—and likes his neighbour for possessing them—but perhaps few dwell on a friend's capacity for the intellectual or care how this might expand, if there were but faculties allowed for cultivation and space given for growth" (8 July 1851). To be in love, in other words, even with a paragon, is not enough; the only worthy love is one with an ever-present capacity for transcendence: another capable of offering the lover the possibility of an otherworldly, even preternatural fulfillment. "Lucy must not marry Dr. John," she had written to Smith a year before he was to choose a young pretty wife over her (and to her deep consternation). Dr. John "is far too youthful, handsome, bright-spirited and sweet-tempered; he is a 'curled darling' of Nature and of Fortune; he must draw a prize in Life's Lottery; his wife must be young, rich and pretty; he must be made very happy indeed."

Thus while there is surely much else in women's lives, and in men's as well, than desire, it is the shaping of that desire that does

completely dominate Brontë's narrative world—as her protagonists, at times ever so carefully, at other times almost recklessly, negotiate the boundary between what the heart wants and, in Max Weber's famous metaphor, the iron limits, the “mechanized petrification,” of industrial culture: the temptation and, for many, the requirement, that we exercise due “care for external goods” (182). At the heart of our misery—and, by extension, Brontë's art as a novelist—is the stricture, elucidated by Freud in his valedictory treatise, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, against any form of sexual expression apart from the “solitary, indissoluble bond between one man and one woman” (52), a concern that Harriet Martineau was likely hinting at in complaining of how the novel “leaves the reader under the uncomfortable impression of her having either entertained a double love, or allowed one to supersede another without notification of the transition” (3 February 1853).

Yet it is precisely a kind of sexuality, one not limited to the physical and altogether more properly expressed as *love*, that Charlotte Brontë with all her rebellious spirit—and the rebellious spirit of the entire Romantic century—does so very much endorse: “If man or woman should be ashamed of feeling such love,” she answered Martineau in a private letter of 1853, “then is there nothing right, noble, faithful, truthful, unselfish in this earth” (January/February 1853). The entire episode entails a replaying of the complaint about crudeness first raised by critics with *Jane Eyre*, the suspicion that so disturbed Brontë herself—the insecure and determinedly proper parson's daughter—that there is a palpable sense of actual physical desire underlying so much of the exchanges between Jane and Rochester, a complaint that Harriet Martineau countered in the retort, for which Charlotte was ever grateful and fond of quoting: “*I have ever observed that it is to the coarse-minded alone—“Jane Eyre” is coarse*” (to Margaret Wooler, 14 Feb 1850, emphasis added).

It is in such a world that passion has to be properly channeled, that there can be no practical life without constant, ongoing planning—in part entailing at a character's deepest level, the re-directing of desire itself. Nineteenth-century narrative, therefore, is best understood as a road map for deep living: both for exploring the possibilities of the self and for coming to terms with the limits that while imposed from without are, like Lucy Snowe's crouched tiger, always felt from within. For avid readers of Charlotte Brontë, there is only one grand theme in all her work—the shaping and channeling of desire, a theme that is itself inextricably linear in following the ebb and flow of expectation and disappointment. Deep

reading, like deep living, is both a preparation for and a reflection on, difficult choices we all face in the real world.

The pattern here is simple and inexorable: wanting and waiting, the shame of the want intensifying the anguish and, perversely, the delight of the wait. “And will Graham really write?” I questioned, as I sank tired on the edge of the bed” (*Villette* 307), significantly making writing itself the essential metonymic substitute for some more intimate, more transgressive contact—significant since slow time is finally a product of writing itself, both its relentless linearity and its key element of narrative delay: having to wait for what one wants. The part of the narrative, in other words, where there is no traditional story, no battle between characters—where there is instead only slow time, the inward struggle of the narrator to deal with her own fate. “Where the bodily presence is weak and the speech contemptible,” asks Brontë’s alter ego, Lucy Snowe, “surely there cannot be error in making written language the medium of better utterance than faltering lips can achieve?” (307). “To write or not to write,” is for Brontë herself equally important as its more famous variant—especially for Lucy Snowe in *Villette* as she contemplates the letters to and from the beloved and goodhearted Dr. Graham.

“Those who live in retirement, whose lives have fallen amid the seclusion of schools or of other walled-in and guarded dwellings,” Brontë muses in *Villette*, reflecting on the psychic trials of her own correspondence with these two men, “are liable to be suddenly and for a long while dropped out of the memory of their friends, the denizens of a freer world”:

Unaccountably, perhaps, and close upon some space of unusually frequent intercourse—some congeries of rather exciting little circumstances, whose natural sequel would rather seem to be the quickening than the suspension of communication—there falls a stilly pause, a wordless silence, a long blank of oblivion. Unbroken always is this blank; alike entire and unexplained. The letter, the message once frequent, are cut off: the visit, formerly periodical, ceases to occur; the book, paper, or other token that indicated remembrance, comes no more. (*Villette* 348)

How closely these words echo Brontë’s own desperate winter of 1845, after leaving Belgium, and returning to Haworth, with no prospects other than to wait the daily mail. She becomes manic

and then depressed while awaiting responses to her letters from Monsieur Heger, aggravated by the fact that her beloved correspondent has ordered her not to write but once every six months. Meanwhile the waiting becomes too intense—the ultimate slow time, and the ultimate, if cruel, play of desire. She writes (8 January 1845) begging for just a small sign of his affection: “I would not know what to do with an absolute and complete friendship—I am not used to such a thing—but once you showed me a *little* interest when I was your pupil in Brussels—and I cling on to preserving that *little* interest—I cling on to it as I cling on to life . . .” She then declares her intention of sending this letter without first rereading it, haunted as she is by “the vague feeling that there are cold and rational people who would say on reading this—‘she is raving’—The only revenge I would wish on such people is a single day of the torments I have suffered for eight months—we would see then if they did not rave too.” Then 10 months later (18 November 1845), she confesses being unable to forget her former teacher: “I have done everything, I have sought occupations, I have forbidden myself completely the pleasure of speaking about you—even to Emily, but I cannot conquer either my regrets or my impatience—and that is humiliating—not to be master of one’s own thoughts, to be a slave to a regret, a memory, a slave to a dominant and fixed idea, which tyrannises the spirit.”

This is a pattern that she repeated, although less violently, with her publisher George Smith, Dr. Graham’s real-life model. Charlotte ends her emotionally charged albeit profoundly indirect 1851 letter to Smith (the one in which she urges him to become a deeper person and hence more worthy lover than was in his nature) by telling him that she will not expect a return letter for some three months and then after that she hopes to “extend this abstinence to six months for I am jealous of becoming dependent on this indulgence” (8 July 1851)—no doubt a promise to herself openly made in the letter as a means of fending off disappointment. In any case, the complex play of words and emotions at the end of her letter replay her most basic conflict between acceptance and desire, highlighted by reference to the most striking images in her work—violence and submission: Write me if you must, she says, for I cannot bring myself to forbid it: “I cannot say *never write* without imposing on my real wishes a falsehood which they reject—and doing to them a violence to which they entirely refuse to submit.”

“My hour of torment,” Brontë writes in *Villette*, “was the post-hour. Unfortunately, I knew it too well, and tried as vainly as assiduously to cheat myself of that knowledge; dreading the rack of

expectation, and the sick collapse of disappointment which daily preceded and followed upon that well recognised ring" (350). Here is the suffering of slow time—the existential agony of waiting more in the spirit of Kafka's Hunger Artist than a genteel nineteenth-century novelist:

I suppose animals kept in cages, and so scantily fed as to be always upon the verge of famine, await their food as I awaited a letter. Oh!—to speak truth, and drop that tone of a false calm which long to sustain, outwears nature's endurance—I underwent in those seven weeks bitter fears and pains, strange inward trials, miserable defections of hope, intolerable encroachments of despair. This last came so near me sometimes that her breath went right through me. I used to feel it like a baleful air or sigh, penetrate deep, and make motion pause at my heart, or proceed only under unspeakable oppression. The letter—the well-beloved letter—would not come; and it was all of sweetness in life I had to look for. (350)

"Life wastes fast in such vigils," Brontë writes about the depression that so weighed down Caroline Helmstone, the alter ego of her second published novel, *Shirley*:

[V]igils during which the mind — having no pleasant food to nourish it — no manna of hope—no hived-honey of joyous memories—tries to live on the meagre diet of wishes, and failing to derive thence either delight or support, and feeling itself ready to perish with craving want, turns to philosophy, to resolution, to resignation; calls on all these gods for aid, calls vainly—is unheard, unhelped, and languishes. (340)

Brontë's narrative goal in *Villette* is, not just to describe her own depression, but to slow down the readers' world so that this barely moving world of memory, anticipation, and regret mirrors their own, so that we too see and feel what it is like to confront the depths of one's being.

Yet surely one would think that one of the great benefits of writing fiction is the opportunity it affords authors to give a more pleasing form to their own bitter experiences, to pen the happy resolution that their own life may lack. Who could possibly deny a writer



that luxury—to have a happier ending in narrative than in life itself? But the problem here is also obvious and unyielding: that narrative art itself, as Brontë was to learn through years of apprenticeship writing adolescent historical romances, has its own demands. And first and foremost of these demands is honesty—a lesson Brontë was to learn from many sources, including a memorable exchange of letters she had as an aspiring twenty-one year old with the then Poet Laureate of England, Robert Southey. It was Southey who repeated to the youthful Brontë the warnings she had already heard from her father and other friends, that “the day dreams in which you habitually indulge are likely to induce a distempered state of mind” (March 1837)—a criticism that she would later hear repeated by the critic G. H. Lewes, who in writing Brontë to praise *Jane Eyre* felt compelled to warn the author to “beware of Melodrame and . . . to adhere to the real” (6 November 1847).

And who is there in *Villette* to answer Lucy Snowe’s plea to be allowed to write the man she loves and to rapturously await his replies? Not Southey or Lewes, but that shadowy figure of conscience Brontë names Reason, who then warns Lucy Snowe: “At your peril you cherish that idea, or suffer its influence to animate any writing of yours!” “But if I feel, may I *never* express?” Lucy Snowe asks Reason; only to be answered by Reason in a single word: “*Never!*” (307).

In this passage, Brontë presents us with an interior monologue on anxiety, dread, and slow time in which Lucy Snowe plays “[t]his hag, this Reason” (an antagonist who would “not rest unless I were altogether crushed, cowed, broken in and broken down”) against “her soft, bright foe, our sweet Help, our divine Hope”—that is, the Imagination. Brontë casts this deeply embedded psychological struggle between the inexorable demands of reality and the pangs of desire in the form of a classic fairy-tale battle between a cruel step-mother (“vindictive as a devil”) and a nurturing fairy god-mother. Is it any wonder, she asks, that at times all of us must flee Reason—that we “rush from under her rod,” that we “shall and must break bounds at intervals, despite the terrible revenge that awaits our return”? She obeys Reason, Lucy tells us, out of fear, not love: “Long ago I should have died of her ill-usage: her stint, her chill, her barren board, her icy bed, her savage, ceaseless blows, but for that kinder Power who holds my secret and sworn allegiance” (308) The melodramatic and metaphoric struggle continues:

Often has Reason turned me out by night, in mid-winter, on cold snow, flinging for sustenance the gnawed

bones dogs had forsaken. sternly has she vowed her stores held nothing more for me—harshly denied my right to ask better things. . . . Then, looking up, have I seen in the sky a head amidst circling stars, of which the midmost and the brightest lent a ray sympathetic and attent. A spirit, softer and better than Human Reason, has descended with quiet flight to the waste—bringing all round her a sphere of air borrowed of eternal summer; bringing perfume of flowers which cannot fade—fragrance of trees whose fruit is life; bringing breezes pure from a world whose day needs no sun to lighten it.

In a pattern that we will analyze in greater detail in the fourth section (“The Last Fairish”—on the homecoming motif in *Shirley*), there is in Brontë an opposing allegorical spirit to Reason, here softened and transmogrified into the maternal spirit of Hope, the bearer of sustenance, “Divine, compassionate, succourable influence!”: “My hunger has this good angel appeased with food, sweet and strange, gathered amongst gleanng angels, garnering their dew-white harvest in the first fresh hour of a heavenly day; tenderly has she assuaged the insufferable tears which weep away life itself—kindly given rest to deadly weariness—generously lent hope and impulse to paralysed despair” (308). And with much-needed food comes equally needed rest: “‘Sleep,’ she said. ‘Sleep, sweetly—I gild thy dreams!’” (309). The next morning the refreshed and chastened Lucy Snowe “fell into a deep argument” with herself “on life and its chances, on destiny and her decrees.” Thinking more clearly now, that is, less battered by uncontrollable desires, she made for herself “some imperious rules”—namely, to prohibit (“under deadly penalties”) all thoughts of worldly happiness: “hushing the impulse to fond idolatry, checking the longing outlook for a far-off promised land whose rivers are, perhaps, never to be reached save in dying dreams, whose sweet pastures are to be viewed but from the desolate and sepulchral summit of a Nebo” (309-10). The conflict is thus resolved for Lucy Snowe, at least for the time being, as one suspects it was for Brontë herself, with the torturous yearning of slow time giving way to the normal, faster rhythm of everyday life: “By degrees,” Lucy continues, “a composite feeling of blended strength and pain wound itself wirily round my heart, sustained, or at least restrained, its throbbings; and made me fit for the day’s work. I lifted my head.”

The slowness of time itself—the ebb and flow of manic anticipation and deep, abiding disappointment—is at the very core of

Charlotte Brontë's life and work, and, as already noted, is vividly reflected in the ebb and flow of the actual letter-writing that was so crucial to her own emotional life as well as that of her protagonist in *Villette*: the careful planning out of what to say ("when two sheets were covered with the language of a strongly adherent affection, a rooted and active gratitude") and, even more excruciating, awaiting the return letter and the possibility it offered that one's warm feelings were indeed reciprocated. "Nobody ever launches into Love," Brontë has her heroine chastise herself, "unless he has seen or dreamed the rising of Hope's star over love's troubled waters" (335). In other words, the familiar forces of Reason and Hope are back at work: "Feeling and I turned Reason out of doors, drew against her bar and bolt, then we sat down, spread our paper, dipped in the ink an eager pen, and, with deep enjoyment, poured out our sincere heart" (334-35). Writing is the great reward, but also, in its honesty it encourages, the source of greatest mortification:

[W]hen, then, I had given expression to a closely clinging and deeply honouring attachment—an attachment that wanted to attract to itself and take to its own lot all that was painful in the destiny of its object; that would, if it could have absorbed and conducted away all storms and lightnings from an existence viewed with a passion of solicitude—then, just at that moment, the doors of my heart would shake, bolt and bar would yield, Reason would leap in vigorous and revengeful, snatch the bull sheets, read, sneer, erase, tear up rewrite, fold, seal, direct, and send a terse, curt missive of a page. She did right. (335)

A true battle of the soul, albeit one fought over the agonizing slow nature of letters: that is, what to say, what to hope for, what answers to expect, not just in correspondence with a dear friend (too dear, perhaps—or not dear enough), but in life itself?

"When I first began to write," she answered Lewes's rebuke about Melodrama in *Jane Eyre*, "so impressed was I with the truth of the principles you advocate that I determined to take Nature and Truth as my sole guides and to follow in their footprints; I restrained imagination, eschewed romance, repressed excitement." Working thusly once can produce something "soft, grave, and true," she continued, revealing to us the drama of slow time, but is this ever enough—to produce only the triumph of truth, totally hiding its

life-serious battle with desire? “Then, too,” she concludes in defense of her higher art and deeper sense of herself, “Imagination is a strong, restless faculty which claims to be heard and exercised, are we to be quite deaf to her cry and insensate to her struggles? When she shews us bright pictures are we never to look at them and try to reproduce them?—And when she is eloquent and speaks rapidly and urgently in our ear are we not to write to her dictation” (6 November 1847)?

In June 1851, on a trip to London, Charlotte Brontë had the opportunity to look into another deeply divided soul during a visit to the French Theatre to see the celebrated actress Rachel. “A wonderful sight—” she wrote Ellen Nussey, “terrible as if the earth had cracked deep at your feet and revealed a glimpse of hell” (24 June 1851). What so captivated Brontë (“transfixed me with wonder, enchained me with interest, and thrilled me with horror”) was quite possibly the recognition that a real person (like herself) possessed dangerous passions not ordinarily seen by others: “The tremendous force with which she expresses the very worst passions in their strongest essence forms an exhibition as exciting as the bullfights of Spain, and the gladiatorial combats of old Rome, and (it seemed to me) not one whit more moral than these poisoned stimulants to popular ferocity” (Gaskell 463). A picture of Brontë in conflict, mesmerized by a depth of amoral feeling that a good Anglican and parson’s daughter should find repulsive. “It is scarcely human nature that she shows you,” Brontë continues; “it is something wilder and worse; the feelings and fury of a fiend.” And at the end of her description, the good Anglican daughter wins out: “The great gift of genius she undoubtedly has; but, I fear, she rather abuses it than turns it to good account.”

When Brontë incorporated this experience into her last novel, *Villette*, she captured all of her conflicted fascination. Rachel transformed into Vashti “was a marvellous sight: a mighty revelation. It was a spectacle low, horrible, immoral” (339), while continuing the martial imagery of her earlier letter: “Swordsmen thrust through, and dying in their blood on the arena sand; bulls goring horses disembowelled, made a meeker vision for the public—a milder condiment for a people’s palate—than Vashti torn by seven devils: devils which cried sore and rent the tenement they haunted, but still refused to be exorcised”:

I had seen acting before, but never anything like this:  
never anything which astonished Hope and hushed  
Desire; which outstripped Impulse and paled

Conception; which, instead of merely irritating imagination with the thought of what might be done, at the same time fevering the nerves because it was not done disclosed power like a deep, swollen winter river, thundering in cataract; and bearing the soul, like a leaf, on the steep and steely sweep of its descent. (341)

In the persona of Vashti, Brontë was celebrating an artist with the power to imagine the liberating effect of desire, and hence of transgression generally—with the power to see through her own repression to the wondrous world of all things hidden. This is the author who dismisses the liberalism of John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor, even on the issue of women's rights, noting in regard to an essay by Taylor that Brontë mistakenly attributed to Mill that while his "head" is well intentioned, "I feel disposed to scorn his heart—You are right when you say that there is a large margin in human nature over which the logicians have no dominion—glad am I that it is so" (20 September 1851). As she had written a few years earlier in her first mature novel, *The Professor*, "There are impulses we can control, but there are others which control us, because they attain us with a tiger leap, and are our masters ere we have seen them. Perhaps, though, such impulses are seldom altogether bad; perhaps reason, by a process as brief as quiet, a process that is finished ere felt, has ascertained the sanity of the deed instinct meditates, and feels justified in remaining passive while it is performed" (Ch. 23). Such impulses, if "seldom altogether bad," are both profoundly grounded in history, tinged as they are with an almost gothic terror of what lies ahead.

### III. "The Ultimate Victory of the VCR"

By slowing the course of their night, by dividing it into different stages, each separate from the next, Madame de T. has succeeded in giving the small span of time accorded them the semblance of a marvelous little architecture, of a form. Imposing form on a period of time is what beauty demands, but so does memory. For what is formless cannot be grasped, or committed to memory. Conceiving their encounter as a form was especially precious for them, since their night was to have no tomorrow and could be repeated only through recollection.

—Milan Kundera, *Slowness*

There is an oft-repeated story about a distant and ancient people that at times of crisis renewed itself by retreating to a clearing deep in the woods, and there reciting a sacred chant while performing a ritual dance—and from the combination of these three factors, the clearing, the chant, and the dance, they received the strength to confront their most pressing problems. Then over the years, the people lost track of the clearing, but recited the chant and performed the dance in any isolated spot they could find. Then over time, they forgot the dance and could only recite the chant—until the day when they also forgot the chant. And what had they left, then, in times of crisis? Only to gather together as a people and tell this story of who they used to be.

Storytelling and narrative generally, French philosopher Paul Ricoeur contends, are a means of structuring the evanescent present, of lengthening, hence enriching time—of adding slowness to life in the way precisely opposite to Kundera's extinguishing of memory. "Everything that is recounted occurs in time," Ricoeur argues, "takes time, unfolds temporally; and what unfolds in time," he continues, "can be recounted"—that is, understood in the peculiarly human fashion open to us, by which in the most human way of knowing, we make the strange around us (and when are we not surrounded by the strange?) familiar by comparing it to that which we already know. For Ricoeur, the key concept of narrative is plot: the artificial construction of events so that they become deeper, even, as is so often the case with Charlotte Brontë, when the events themselves are painful (in part a source of the masochism so prevalent in Brontë's narratives). "Nothing," writes Ricoeur, "is an event unless it contributes to the progress of a story." An event, he continues, "is not only an occurrence, something that happens, but a narrative component" ("On Interpretation" 140)—that is, something with meaning relevant to past and future actions arranged according to the linearity that is a lifetime. The sequencing of events via narrative arrangement—plot—thus becomes for Ricoeur the one necessary element in the defining human experience of trying to make sense of our worlds, that is, of interpretation.

Narrative, for Ricoeur, has its source, as it does for Brontë, in the estrangement that defines our basic existential condition: the condition of being intimately, one might say, agonizingly aware of being thrown into a world we can never fully know, and thus being separated from the very start from our own life story—from its beginning (something which we can never fully recover) as well as from its end (something which we can never witness). There is no self-understanding, Ricoeur argues, that does not start with this fun-

damental condition of estrangement and that in turn does not go forward without our having to interpret the world around us, in part by placing events into story form. “Self-understanding,” Ricoeur notes, “is an interpretation; interpretation of the self, in turn, finds in the narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged form of mediation; the latter borrows from history as well as from fiction, making a life story a fictional history or, if one prefers, a historical fiction, interweaving the historiographic style of biographies with the novelistic style of imaginary biographies” (*Oneself* 114n). As such, the interpretation of life and the interpretation of language—including grappling with its fundamental linearity of both, and hence, of waiting itself—are for Ricoeur “the primary condition of all human experience” (“On Interpretation” 151).

Narrative then takes on the primary quality of otherness—a world related to, but different from, ordinary experience. And here is one of the main threats to reading—and hence to the necessary deepening of our interpretative powers—in the new electronic age: the lessening of the space between the ordinary and the special, between the realm of waiting and imaginative experience. (And are not waiting and imagination two names of the same phenomenon?). It is this lessening of tension, this decline in our collective capacity to wait (and wonder) that Marxist theorist Walter Benjamin saw as the principal threat to that most basic human form of communication: storytelling. “It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions,” laments Benjamin in his essay, “The Storyteller,” were taken from us: “the ability to exchange experiences” (83). What is under threat in the modern world, according to Benjamin, is a concern with a sense of the larger purpose of life, what he calls wisdom or “the epic side of truth.” And what supplants wisdom is that eponymous term for our own age, *information*—the many representations of the world (facts, lists, tag-lines, sound bites, even opinions) that are immediately understandable on their own terms and hence, unlike wisdom, are stripped of all claims of a distant authority. It is the world of the McLaughlin Report and its rapid-fire assessment of our most pressing issues—a world where the only sin is not to be glib, or, conversely, to be boring, another word for straining an audience’s capacity to wait. Information, Now—the two terms are practically synonymous, whereas Wisdom is best represented as a voice from afar, speaking from an imagined and imaginative world, and, in the past, often conveyed to us through the strange words of the storyteller.

“Critique wants to slow capitalism” (59) writes Ben Agger in his trenchant analysis, *Fast Capitalism*—just one of a large number of

critics who see the current pace at which people consume information as the source, not the cure, of our ignorance, and thus who implicitly question just what it is we will be gaining through the expense of putting all students online. Agger calls this fundamental shift from the slow capitalism of Marx (“when books could not only stand apart from the world but also comprehend its totality and thus begin to remake it”) to the instant news and analysis of the present, “a crucial symptomatic of millennial oppression” (10). Agger is blunt in characterizing this new world of fast capitalism: “People do not read, cannot read; their reading is done for them by texts lacking covers and critical distance from their topics” (11). What is needed instead of postmodernist critique, which Agger sees as only “ap[ing] these tendencies by endorsing them profoundly” (11), is the re-establishment of the traditional boundary between text and world, a boundary that Agger sees as crucial for preserving “critique’s utopian imagination” (3).

For Agger then there is only one crucial question of our day: namely, what is the fate of aesthetic distance in the information age, or, we might add, what is happening to the joy of slowness? In neither case do prospects seem very good, responds literary critic Peter Brooks, who sees contemporary students as “only too willing to short-circuit the aesthetic, and to perform any kind of reading, including the ideological, that you indicate to them” (160). That is, not to wait and imagine but to jump right in—to give their opinion in the manner of the audience-participation talk shows that have proliferated on television and the call-in shows that have proliferated on radio the last ten years, shows that mimicked the instantaneous exchange of information (or opinion) even before the global network the Internet has become. “What is more difficult for [students],” Brooks concludes, “—and hence more necessary—is *to slow up the work of interpretation*, the attempt to turn the work into some other discourse or system, and to consider it as a manifestation of the conventions, constraints and possibilities of literature” (160; emphasis added). Brooks’s position here, like Agger’s, is reminiscent of Sven Birkerts’s, widely disseminated in his 1994 collection, *The Gutenberg Elegies*, and which he reiterated in an online debate with Janet Murray where he argued that reading “counters the momentum of daily living, mends the dissociated self by creating a field, a protected area—*by enforcing duration*” (emphasis added). Birkerts, Brooks, and Agger are all contemporary critics of what seems to be a growing form of cultural hyperactivity; meanwhile, one can trace a similar concern with the loss of slowness in a much earlier American social critic, Thorstein Veblen, whose



writings at the last turn of the century revealed his equally strong ties to the slow world of Marxist critique praised by Agger. Of special note here is Veblen's 1914 monograph, *The Instinct for Workmanship*, with its protracted analysis of the decline of craftsmanship in the modern world.

Veblen's *Instinct for Workmanship* skewers an emerging managerial class that he saw as narrowly and wrongly focused on rationalizing industrial processes in order to maximize profits. For Veblen, one of the defining battles of the modern age was between the innate human joy of slow and careful production (described in the monograph title as "the instinct for workmanship") and a new entrepreneurial class (future MBA's) intent on abstracting the processes and the fruits of labor—the conflict between those who work slowly to create beautiful and useful objects, hence the world of human culture (the raising "the life of mankind from the brute to the human plane" [37]), and those interested only in trading that work as quickly and as profitably as possible. For Veblen, we are at our best—most human—when working slowly, an enactment of a core "proclivity for taking pains" (33) that Veblen sees at the root of all worthwhile human endeavors. Yet with the growth of managers, the workers become lost, enmeshed, in a larger, inherently abstract system that essentially negates the need for workmanship. The worker, no longer engaged in craft, becomes—in the spirit of Chaplin's factory worker in *Modern Times*—"an attendant, an assistant, whose duty it is to keep pace with the machine process" (306). Perfection is no longer seen as the "perfection of manual workmanship" but of the manufacturing process itself, so achieved when manual labor can be entirely dispensed with. The craft of baking is lost to the managerial skills of managing a bakery—a process that Veblen sees in much the same manner Manuel Castells sees in *The Information Age*, as totally global in its sweep: "Within the effective bounds of Christendom no one can wholly escape or in any sensible degree deflect the sweep of the machine's routine" (311). Either one appears on the McLaughlin Report and becomes a celebrity commentator, and hence an active player on the political scene, or one writes books that may probe deeply into our problems but which few people will ever read.

It is for Veblen, as it is for Castells, a global process that leaves us all with a simple either-or choice: join or be swept aside. It is the process that David Hawkes refers to as "the progressive domination of exchange over production, a process which instigates the hegemony of representation over reality" (190), and hence of the instant and universal over the laborious and the local. "Today,"

Hawkes continues, “the production of things is far less profitable than the exchange of the representations of things—bigger fortunes are made by transferring figures across computer screens than by building factories”—and often with junk bonds and third world debt, or, in Hawkes’s words, wealth that is “completely divorced from character” (191).

Even important new technologies like the telephone, the typewriter, and the automobile, Veblen sees as advancing business (the sale of products) rather than their production. It is business, and not necessity, Veblen wryly notes, that is the true mother of invention. Once invented and in place, creations such as the automobile or the new global network become regulating forces, the very necessities, of our lives: “The more serious consequences, especially such as have an institutional bearing, have been enforced by the inventions rather than designed by the inventors” (317n). The result for Veblen is an underlying and unavoidable tension in modern life between the dictates of systems (manufacturing or networked) and fundamental human needs such as the instinct for workmanship that answer to a far older and slower clock: “In all the various people of Christendom there is a visible straining against the drift of the machine’s teaching, rising at times and in given classes of the population to the pitch of revulsion” (318). Key aspects of life lying outside the “scope of the machine’s logic” (338) get omitted, including basic questions of teleology: “This modern technology is a technology of mechanical process; it looks to and takes care of a sequence of mechanical action, rather than to the conditions of its inception or the sequel of its conclusion” (338).

The processes at work determining the new world, Veblen reminds us here—as Max Weber so brilliantly portrayed in the ‘iron cage’ allusion in the conclusion to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*—are often profoundly at odds with the most basic desires of the human heart, including, Veblen was one of the first to argue, the time and space to devote oneself to making things that work well, that is, to perfecting a craft. This is the theme that Castells plays with throughout *The Power of Identity* (Volume II of *The Information Age*), described in the title of Chapter 2 of that volume as “The Other Face of the Earth: Social Movements against the New Global Order.” Castells’s goal here is to provide a common basis for explaining the growing appeal of such highly diverse social groups as the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, the American militia movement, and the Japanese cult, *Aum Shinrikyo*. For Castells, this is the world that “refus[es] globalization for the sake

of capital and informationalization for the sake of technology," a world much closer to a novelist's, where "dreams of the past, and nightmares of the future, inhabit a chaotic world of passion, generosity, prejudice, fear, fantasy, violence, flawed strategies, and lucky strikes"—a world summed in a three-word sentence: "Humanity, after all" (71).

Castells, like Veblen, is a great ironist of world history—and hence, also like Veblen, a defender of the nineteenth-century realist narrative tradition. Neither writer, therefore, offers contemporary readers, especially those sold on the new global network, the uplift and happy ending they so desperately demand. Hence, neither writer can hope to prosper in the world they so astutely dissect. Both Veblen and Castells know that modern readers want to be told a very different story, want a narrative that entails not just the end of waiting, but ultimately, as we have seen with Castells's analysis, the end of history as well. Therefore, it is no coincidence that one of the most widely discussed books of the 1990s was Francis Fukuyama's 1992 study of Western liberal democracy, a work with the shockingly frank title, *The End of History and the Last Man*. Fukuyama's world view is the antithesis or, perhaps more accurately, the complement, of Castells's postmodern networked world, for in Fukuyama the present is presented as the complete and total, and more significantly, the rational, completion of a pattern of understanding of the past first laid out by Hegel, a pattern in which all world history is seen in terms of the building of a civic society that offers all individuals maximum chance to fulfill themselves, not just politically and economically but, in a twist that Fukuyama takes from Alexandre Kojève, a twentieth-century interpreter of Hegel (and makes Fukuyama more than an apologist for global capitalism), in terms of Platonic *thymos*, of recognition of the special spiritedness of each person's selfhood. Fukuyama's point, so completely at odds with apocalyptic postmodernity, is not that the world is perfect or that there will not continue to be bursts of historical change involving progress and relapse, but that in the governing institutions of Western liberal democracies we have arrived at a final, hence a universal and ahistorical state—one no longer in need of, hence subject to, continual reform: "We cannot picture to ourselves a world that is essentially different from the present one, and at the same time better. Other, less reflective ages also thought of themselves as the best, but we arrive at this conclusion exhausted, as it were, from the pursuit of alternatives we felt had to be better than liberal democracy" (46). Fukuyama does acknowledge alternatives to liberal democracy but sees these large-

ly as dangerous nineteenth-century idealizations, from both the left and the right, of a more perfect state, in whose pursuit, Fukuyama believes, humanity has committed the worst bloodshed of the twentieth century.

With Fukuyama, we are at the last reel of the film—and, surprisingly (or perhaps not, given his optimism), it turns out that we have been watching a very different film from what so many know from their own experience of the cataclysms of this century. Fukuyama's film is not the horror of progress mocked by Benjamin in his famous aphorism about Klee's painting of an angel "irresistibly propelled . . . into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress" (258). Nor is it the juggernaut described by contemporary British sociologist Anthony Giddens: "a runaway engine of enormous power," one which "crushes those who resist it" and which "threatens to rush out of our control and which could render itself asunder" (139). Rather it seems that we have been watching a Western, where each country in the global economy is finally reduced to a wagon in that long overland trail: "Rather than a thousand shoots blossoming into as many different flowering plants, mankind will come to seem like a long wagon train strung out along a road" (338). The attack on multiculturalism is deliberate for Fukuyama sees that the individual societies (or wagons) of the world as fundamentally alike: "while they are painted different colors and are constructed of varied materials, each has four wheels and is drawn by horses, while inside sits a family hoping and praying that their journey will be a safe one. The apparent differences in the situations of the wagons will not be seen as reflecting permanent and necessary differences between the people riding in the wagons, but simply a product of their different positions along the road"—along the road to Western liberal democracy, that is. Fukuyama's is a strikingly retro cinematic image of a future with which all veteran film buffs are comfortably familiar:

Some wagons will be pulling into town sharply and crisply [the societies who have made it], while others will be bivouacked back in the desert, or else stuck in ruts in the final pass over the mountains. Several wagons, attacked by Indians, will have been set aflame and abandoned along the way. There will be a few wagoners who, stunned by the battle, will have lost their sense of direction and are temporarily heading in the wrong direction, while one or two wagons will get tired

of the journey and decide to set up permanent camp at particular points back along the road. Others will have found alternative routes to the main road, though they will discover that to get through the final mountain range they all must use the same pass. But the great majority of wagons will be making the slow journey into town, and most will eventually arrive there. (338-39)

The pass, of course, through which all must maneuver in order to reach safe haven, is liberal democracy. Here, then, is an escape from the tension of waiting as much as an end to history itself. There is slowness in Fukuyama, in other words, but only that of the electronic dirge from *Hearts of Space*—that is, a slowness stripped of all tension, all anxiety.

The one thing that Fukuyama, Castells, and Veblen all share is a sense of the either/or nature of our basic choices in this new technological age. Either individually or collectively we all have only a limited choice: either we can adopt to the logic of the new electronic media or we can resign ourselves to falling out of the mainstream, perhaps still present in society but (in Castells's words) "weakened unless [we] recode [ourselves] in the new system" (375). Yet where Veblen expresses grave misgivings, and Castells aloof skepticism, Fukuyama seems only to offer Chamber-of-Commerce uplift on the "tremendous homogenizing power" of new global economy to overcome regional differences: "The attractive power of this world creates a very strong predisposition for all human societies to participate in it, while success in this participation requires the adoption of the principles of economic liberalism. This is the ultimate victory of the VCR" (108).

A new world order, in other words, not of readers but of viewers, and each with an index finger poised on fast-forward.

#### IV. "The Last Fairish"

Why has the pleasure of slowness disappeared? Ah, where have they gone, the amblers of yesteryear? Where have they gone, those loafing heroes of folk song, those vagabonds who roam from one mill to another and bed down under the stars? Have they vanished along with footpaths, with grasslands and clearings, with nature?

—Milan Kundera, *Slowness*

Why are we so confident, Kundera chides us, that we moderns are the beneficiaries, and not the victims, of progress? As all readers of Charlotte Brontë know, there is little smugness in her work, little sense that the future will offer much to offset present dread. Brontë's teleological conservatism seems to be a part of her own Tory upbringing, a suspicion of uncontrolled change reflected in her father's politics (activist and socially oriented as it was, for so staunch a Church of England supporter), in her own idolization of the Duke of Wellington, and in her love of Sir Walter Scott's nostalgic portrayals of the past. Brontë's conservatism, aesthetic as well as political, however, was not untouched by serious connection to one of the momentous events in contemporary English history, as she grew up with the tales of the Luddite rebellion of her father's early years as a clergyman in what was to become openly rebellious Yorkshire. In 1831, the fifteen year-old Charlotte attended and later taught at a school overlooking the very fields where, only nineteen years earlier, local workers, suffering terribly due to a severe decline in the international woolen market, openly amassed for military style training as part of a violent revolt against their deplorable and, for many, increasingly life-threatening working conditions. These desperate workers directed their grievances at the one change that they could plainly see: the new framing machines that were being imported into the area by manufacturers.

Inspired by the semi-mythical hero from Leicester, Ned Lud, these workers, calling themselves Luddites, began a series of military raids on local mills and the 'progress' these mills represented—attacks reflecting the deep alienation that Castells sees as the basis for fringe, often violent political groups across the world, those that depict the enemy as some vague 'new world order.' Here is how Charlotte Brontë recounted the grim situation in Yorkshire in *Shirley*, her one historical novel that, although written in the late 1840s, is set in the time when "certain inventions in machinery were introduced into the staple manufactures of the north, which, greatly reducing the number of hands necessary to be employed." Just then, she notes, with many workers unemployed, there was a bad harvest. "Distress," she continues, "reached its climax":

Endurance, overgoaded, stretched the hand of fraternity to sedition. The throes of a sort of moral earthquake were felt heaving under the hills of the northern counties. But, as is usual in such cases, nobody took much notice. When a food-riot broke out in a manufacturing

town, when a gig-mill was burnt to the ground, or a manufacturer's house was attacked, the furniture thrown into the streets, and the family forced to flee for their lives, some local measures were or were not taken by the local magistracy. A ringleader was detected, or more frequently suffered to elude detection; newspaper paragraphs were written on the subject, and there the thing stopped. As to the sufferers, whose sole inheritance was labour, and who had lost that inheritance—who could not get work, and consequently could not get wages, and consequently could not get bread—they were left to suffer on, perhaps inevitably left. (62)

At the time, the most eloquent voice of protest against the treatment of these workers was a young member of the House of Lords—an aspiring although still unknown poet who was aligning himself with radical Whig sentiments—who made his first speech in Parliament on this matter. It was Lord Byron who spoke with characteristic irony of the “blindness” of the workers who, “instead of rejoicing at these improvements in the arts so beneficial to mankind, conceived themselves to be sacrificed to improvements in mechanism” (Sale 68n, 96-98).

Brontë herself is not without irony in depicting the plight of these workers, who, after all, were her very neighbors: “It would not do to stop the progress of invention, to damage science by discouraging its improvements; the war could not be terminated; efficient relief could not be raised. There was no help then; so the unemployed underwent their destiny—ate the bread and drank the waters of affliction.” But she also reaches beyond irony to a level of basic human understanding: “Misery generates hate. These sufferers hated the machines which they believed took their bread from them; they hated the buildings which contained those machines; they hated the manufacturers who owned those buildings” (62).

*Shirley* may well be the least successful of the three novels Brontë published in her lifetime but in some ways it more boldly reflects the basic interplay of desire and slow time. At the core of this work is a keen and constant sense of the slow passage of time, and how its movement regulates, reveals, even animates the play of desire—the ever-present, relentless dramatic movement between hope and resignation—that so defines Charlotte Brontë's genius, although, as in all Brontë's novels and letters, there is more (far more) of the arduous journey than of the comfortable arrival.

It is the difficulty of the journey, in other words, the years in the wilderness, that makes the homecoming—or at least the image of the homecoming—all that more compelling, especially in Charlotte Brontë's works, where the lack of splendor, even misery, of the present—as it is for the eighteen year old Caroline Helmstone in *Shirley*—is so often compared to a distant more heroic world. Our lives before eighteen, Brontë notes, take place in a different, more heroic world:

[I]ts inhabitants half-divine or semi-demon; its scenes are dream-scenes; darker woods and stranger hills, brighter skies, more dangerous waters, sweeter flowers, more tempting fruits, wider plains, drearier deserts, sunnier fields than are found in nature, over-spread our enchanted globe. What a moon we gaze on before that time! How the trembling of our hearts at her aspect bears witness to its unutterable beauty! As to our sun, it is a burning heaven—the world of gods. (121)

"We wove a web in childhood," exclaimed Charlotte Brontë in a poem composed at age nineteen: "A web of sunny air; / We dug a spring in infancy / Of water pure and fair!" (*Selected Poems* 9). How can the present compete with memory? Where a progressive would turn to future hopes to mend the world, to right past wrongs, Brontë in true romantic fashion echoes the sentiments of the Neapolitan philosopher, educator, and linguist, Giambattista Vico, the arch antirationalist who championed the rough but noble wisdom of the past over the refined, elegant reflections of the present—preferring what he called the ancient "barbarism of sense" versus the modern "barbarism of reflection."

"The other day I passed up the Hollow," the narrator of *Shirley* informs us in the novel's conclusion, "which tradition says was once green, and lone, and wild; and there I saw the manufacturer's day-dreams embodied in substantial stone and brick and ashes—the cinder-black highway, the cottages, and the cottage gardens; there I saw a mighty mill, and a chimney, ambitious as the tower of Babel" (599). It is not surprising that *Shirley*, the novel of local times and social change, should end nostalgically, with a vivid evocation of an earlier and happier age, a Carlylean contrast of past and present, as the old housekeeper Martha reminisces about how "different" the Hollow was when she was little, "when there was neither mill, nor cot, nor hall, except Fieldhead, within two miles of it":



I can tell, one summer evening, fifty years syne, my mother coming running in just at the edge of dark, almost fleyed out of her wits, saying she had seen a fairish (fairy) in Fieldhead Hollow; and that was the last fairish that ever was seen on this country side (though they've been heard within these forty years). A lone-some spot it was—and a bonnie spot—full of oak trees and nut trees. It is altered now." (599)

Altered now, indeed! The true romantic waiting we experience in Charlotte Brontë, then, often is for that which can never exist—the “dream-scenes” filled with “darker woods and stranger hills, brighter skies, more dangerous waters”—precisely because it has already occurred, in our distant memory of childhood, if it occurred, even there.

What is the source of knowledge? asks Nietzsche, the great critic and expounder of the Romantic temperament—and he might as well be asking, What is the source of love? “Nothing more than this: something strange shall be traced back to something familiar.” The new person fated to fill the role of departed or separated lover—the person whose original love was so encompassing, so perfect that it needed no name. “Is our need to know [or to love, one might add] not precisely this—need for the familiar, the will to discover among all that is strange, unaccustomed, questionable something which no longer disturbs us? . . . Is the rejoicing of the man of knowledge [or the person in love] not precisely the rejoicing of the feeling of security re-attained?” (68).

Brontë may have lived in an age that generally worshipped the past as a source of pre-Oedipal comfort for people condemned to make their way in a world marked by constant strife, but she was also a human being that suffered the intense personal loss of her mother at age five and then at age nine an older sister acting who was acting as surrogate mother. “Such was her [Caroline Helstone’s] aspiration,” Brontë describes in a key psychological passage in *Shirley*, for a vision of her own mother: “unknown, unloved, but not unlonged for”:

‘Oh, that the day would come when she would remember her child! Oh, that I might know her, and knowing, love her!’

. . . . The longing of her childhood filled her soul again. The desire which many a night had kept her awake in her crib, and which fear of its fallacy had of

late years almost extinguished, relit suddenly, and glowed warm in her heart: that her mother might come some happy day, and send for her to her presence—look upon her fondly with loving eyes, and say to her tenderly, in a sweet voice:—

‘Caroline, my child I have a home for you: you shall live with me. All the love you have needed, and not tasted, from infancy, I have saved for you carefully. Come! it shall cherish you now.’ (316-17)

A few chapters later in *Shirley*, Caroline is indeed miraculously reunited with her mother, the governess Mrs. Pryor. “But if you are my mother,” Caroline exclaims, “the world is all changed to me. Surely I can live—I should like to recover—” and the passage continues with naked honesty, Brontë’s heart laid bare:

‘You *must* recover. You drew life and strength from my breast when you were a tiny, fair infant, over whose blue eyes I used to weep, fearing I beheld in your very beauty the sign of qualities that had entered my heart like iron, and pierced through my soul like a sword. Daughter! we have been long parted: I return now to cherish you again.’

She held her to her bosom: she cradled her in her arms: she rocked her softly, as if lulling a young child to sleep.

‘My mother! My own mother!’

The offspring nestled to the parent; that parent, feeling the endearment and hearing the appeal, gathered her closer still. She covered her with noiseless kisses:

she murmured love over her, like a cushat fostering its young.

There was silence in the room for a long while. (410, emphasis added)

Is all human rejoicing, Nietzsche suggests, “not precisely the rejoicing of [this] feeling of security re-attained?” (68). Is the silence of resolution here not the perfect counterpart to slowness: a celebration of entitlement to what we had but lost?

### V. "The Tortuous Path"

Speed is the form of ecstasy the technical revolution has bestowed on man. As opposed to a motorcyclist, the runner is always present in his body, forever required to think about his blisters, his exhaustion; when he runs he feels his weight, his age, more conscious than ever of himself and of his time of life. This all changes when man delegates the faculty of speed to a machine: from then on, his own body is outside the process, and he gives over to speed that is noncorporeal, nonmaterial, pure speed, speed itself, ecstasy speed.

—Milan Kundera, *Slowness*

"Time," Ricoeur writes, "becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence" (*Time and Narrative*, 52). If as Ricoeur suggests, there is no "self-understanding which is not *mediated* by signs, symbols, and texts," then the level of self-understanding and our sense of the richness of life can never be enriched without a corresponding set of rich (slow-going) signs, symbols, and texts. In such connection between narrative and self-understanding, we can more clearly see the need for slowness—for the value of the arrival, often in the form of a homecoming—is directly connected to the length and intensity of the journey itself. To arrive at our destination without a journey, to arrive at self knowledge without a trial of the spirit, is a phantasm—albeit, as Kundera speculates above, a phantasm of delight, near ecstasy, that the contemporary world seems to offer those, like the motorcyclist, well positioned to enjoy the latest fruits of technology: in this case, the thrill the speeding driver feels of losing one's identity in the rush of the present—in speed itself—and hence, considered in a somewhat different context, the thrill in finally escaping the anticipation of slowness and the inexorable demands of anxiety.

It is such an escape into a speeding present that Castells sees as possibly the one alluring phantasm of the new electronic age: that the autonomous self which was fostered by two thousand years of Western technology (as part of a struggle to master the emotions as a key step in controlling the world) is now being seriously undermined by the facile, instantaneous operation of new computer networks, or, as psychiatrist Raymond Barglow reports, "technology is helping to dismantle the very vision of the world that it fostered"—

namely “the notions of sovereignty and self-sufficiency that have provided an ideological anchoring for individual identity since Greek philosophers elaborated the concept more than two millennia ago” (23). Such isolated individuals feel the sense of being cut adrift, while strongly wishing for a final return to some earlier, vaguely pre-Oedipal state—described so eloquently in *Jane Eyre* as feeling oneself “quite alone in the world, cut adrift from every connection, uncertain whether the port to which it is bound can be reached, and prevented by many impediments from returning to that it has quitted” (59). Slowness in Brontë, as in most nineteenth-century narrative, is a product of waiting . . . waiting for that which will never come in no small measure because it has already been.

According to Veblen, we live in an age where workmanship—the instinct to produce a well-crafted essay à la Strunk and White, an object with intrinsic aesthetic value, and hence truly an imaginative work—“comes to be confused with salesmanship” (349). It is an age of hustle and sales, an age where “tact, effrontery and prevarication have come to serve as a standard of efficiency, and unearned gain is accepted as the measure of productiveness” (349). This “price system,” Veblen laments, again like Castells’ s information age, has the power to “[intrude] into the most intimate and secret workings of the human spirit and contaminates the sense of workmanship in its initial move” (350). Narrative for Veblen, therefore, must function, as it does for Ricoeur and Benjamin, and hence for Charlotte Brontë, as a primary means of connecting us with our otherwise suppressed primitive origins and thus as a vehicle for the deep resistance we feel when compelled to give up what we see as the entitlement to live at a slower and seemingly more natural pace: “Neither the manner of life imposed by the machine process, nor the manner of thought inculcated by the habituation of its logic, will fall in with the free movement of the human spirit, born, as it is, to fit the conditions of savage life” (334).

How strange it may be for some to hear such a positive reference to the “savage life,” echoing as it does Brontë’s and Vico’s shared vision of “darker woods and stranger hills, brighter skies, more dangerous waters.” It was Vico who articulated the belief that “progress” would inevitably entail discord, confusion, and dissension—“that ultimate civil disease” characterized by lack of purpose (where the people “cannot agree on a monarch from within, and are not conquered and preserved by better nations from without”) and where people think only of themselves, what Vico describes as “liv[ing] like wild beasts in a deep solitude of spirit and will.” How then to escape the “base savagery, under soft words and embraces”

that defines our modern enemies (Veblen's salesmen perhaps) but to return to an earlier, truer form of existence: "And the few survivors in the midst of an abundance of the things necessary for life naturally become sociable and, returning to the primitive simplicity of the first world of people, are again religious, truthful, and faithful. Thus providence brings back among them the piety, faith, and truth which are the natural foundations of justice as well as the graces and beauties of the eternal order of God" (*New Science* 423).

In Vico we see an older, romantic view of the world—one characterized by a natural order, if not the straight line of progress of Enlightenment historiography, then the cycles of progress and decline, journey and return—the cycle of the phoenix itself—that so characterizes romantic narrative. This is a pattern where the goal and the starting points of a journey are often the same, often hidden in Wordsworthian fashion by the limits of memory itself. We thus live haunted by the possibility that what we most desire in life, like the protagonists in Brontë's *Shirley*, resides most vividly in some world of sensuous memory and escape from which we have long been cast. Brontë's eponymous heroine imagines one such encounter, a shipboard dream as "I am . . . walking by myself on deck, rather late of an August evening, watching and being watched by a full harvest-moon." Something suddenly rises from the surface, then sinks and rises again: "

I think I hear it cry with an articulate voice: I call you up from the cabin: I show you an image, fair as alabaster, emerging from the dim wave. We both see the long hair, the lifted and foam-white arm, the oval mirror brilliant as a star. It glides nearer: a human face is plainly visible; a face in the style of yours, whose straight, pure (excuse the word, it is appropriate),—whose straight, pure lineaments, paleness does not disfigure. It looks at us, but not with your eyes. I see a preternatural lure in its wily glance: it beckons. Were we men, we should spring at the sign, the cold billow would be dared for the sake of the colder enchantress; being women, we stand safe, though not dreadless. She comprehends our unmoved gaze; she feels herself powerless; anger crosses her front; she cannot charm, but she will appal us: she rises high, and glides all revealed, on the dark wave-ridge. Temptress-terror! monstrous likeness of ourselves! Are you not glad, Caroline, when at last, and with a wild shriek, she dives?' (*Shirley* 249)

"If we were men," Shirley continues, "we should spring at the sign, the cold billow would be dared for the sake of the colder enchantress." Yet, as women, we hold back ("safe, though not dreadless"): "She comprehends our unmoved gaze; she feels herself powerless; anger crosses her front; she cannot charm, but she will appal us: she rises high, and glides all revealed, on the dark wave-ridge." Then the strange conclusion of this startling vision of self-awareness, the recognition that we are far more than we know, far more than we are ever comfortable admitting: "Temptress-terror! monstrous likeness of ourselves! Are you not glad, Caroline, when at last, and with a wild shriek, she dives?" To brave our fate without fear—to see ourselves for who we are—is one of Brontë's great lessons.

"When man understands he extends his mind and takes in things," wrote Vico almost three hundred years ago, describing a process by which humans extend their control of the world through reason and science. "But when he does not understand," Vico continued, "he makes these things of himself and becomes them by transforming himself into them"—that is, by imagining, re-living their stories (*New Science* 130), or, in other words, by changing, enlarging our own view of the world through that most basic form of knowing, storytelling. And in the storyteller's art, the basic pattern of human experience and human learning—our primal narrative—is that of the journey, where we begin in confusion thrust into a hostile world, a place that does not yet seem to be our home, and are then forced to make our way, not just forward to truth, but back to some level of security we all feel was our original due in the world. "In fact," Vico writes in his fifth Inaugural Oration "nature has unhappily established that we, by the impetuosity of our mind, fall into error and are brought around to that truth which we are born to reach by a direct path only by a tortuous one" (*Humanistic Education* 111).

"The Tortuous Path"—could there be a better title for a study of the artistry of Charlotte Brontë and for what her mid-nineteenth-century novels have to tell a new millennial age? Here at the juncture of two millennia are we not in need of relearning that rapture and bliss are inseparable from dread and disappointment? It is only at the climax of *Villette* that we learn that the greatest of all punishments is often waiting itself . . . suspense:

I waited my champion. Apollyon came trailing his Hell behind him. I think if Eternity held torment, its form would not be fiery rack, nor its nature despair. I think

that on a certain day amongst those days which never dawned, and will not set, an angel entered Hades—stood, shone, smiled delivered a prophecy of conditional pardon, kindled a doubtful hope of bliss to come, not now, but at a day and hour unlooked for, revealed in his own glory and grandeur the height and compass of his promise: spoke thus—then towering, became a star, and vanished into his own Heaven. His legacy was suspense—a worse boon than despair.” (542)

Once again, the raw agony of life itself, the impulses that “attain us with a tiger leap”—and how very different from the free play of the spirit, the sense of unlimited choice (in the contemporary world so readily offered by sprawling suburban malls) that a postmodern world seems to offer us in exchange for our dread. Is not such choice, as offered by cyber-critic Allucquère Rosanne Stone for her own daughter, an escape from the dread of limits, from slowness itself: “Soon Tani will be developing an active sexuality,” she writes, “and I find myself wondering which sexuality will claim her, or whether she will have the courage to choose or to improvise one for her own. And if she does, how wide a spectrum of desire will her choice be able to encompass” (168)? Is not such rendering of the personality to the level of consumer a profound repudiation of the romantic notion of fate being another name for temperament—that life is little more than a struggle to find what is so well hidden from ourselves: who we really are?

“A person freed of the future has nothing to fear,” writes Milan Kundera, describing the archetypal postmodern protagonist—or perhaps only the fear of the contemporary shopper (akin to Stone’s fear for her daughter), not making the best selection, in part by not availing oneself of all the colors and styles so freely offered in the new global market. “We are not living in a global village,” Castells observes—not living in a single world shared by all—but living instead in a world of myriad designer stores, what he calls “customized cottages globally produced and locally distributed” (341)—akin to the “huge department store of countrysides and cities” (197) that Schivelbush sees as the logical result of spread of railroads in the nineteenth century. “The nets are spaces of transformation, identity factories in which bodies are meaning machines” (180), concludes Stone, blurring the distinction between commodities generally and our own bodies, hence bolstering the long-sought illusion that we are all truly free, if only we were strong enough to admit it—free finally from the sting of death

itself. By fostering such an illusion, Castells concludes, “the ultimate subversion of the lifecycle is accomplished,” as is the subversion of traditional narrative, one might add, and life becomes what Stone seems to suggest it should be for her own daughter, not a grand narrative of deep introspection (searching for what is there but hidden) but something more modern (that is, postmodern): “this flat landscape punctuated by chosen moments of high and low experiences, in the endless boutique of customized feelings” (Castells 451). Could it be that we really are embarking on a new millennium, a world akin to Fukuyama’s end of history (“the last man”), where Nature itself (and hence the marking of time that signals Nature’s inexorable advance and our own mortality) is seemingly subsumed under network control—what Castells refers to as “a purely cultural pattern of social interaction and social organization” (477), where, freed from the constraints of Nature, we finally get to decide just what it is we want, just who it is we are?

A new millennium, indeed, and a decidedly post-Brontë one. “The refusal of closure,” Janet Murray writes, “is always, at some level, a refusal to face mortality. Our fixation on electronic games and stories [and, one might add, the new global electronic music] is in part an enactment of this denial of death” (175). It is difficult to remember that Murray (herself a student of Charlotte Brontë, although one as interested in Brontë’s more forward-looking acquaintance, Mary Taylor) is here attempting to praise the openness of hypertext narrative, especially its ability “to revel in the a sense of endless transformations.” Truly nothing so underscores the power of technology to shape expectations than the fact that today we have post-Brontë literary critics who celebrate narrative forms that “offer us a chance to erase memory, to start over, to replay an event and try for a different resolution.”

For Brontë’s heroines, unlike those of us living in the new networked world of Stone, Murray, or Castells’s, fiction remains as relentlessly, as grimly determinative, as the only life she knew in dreary, isolated Yorkshire villages and moors—a world that carried off her mother when she was only five, her two older sisters when she was nine, her adored younger brother and two younger sisters when she was thirty-three. “Never may you or any one I love, be placed as I am,” Brontë writes her friend Ellen Nussey (14 July 1849) just months after burying her three siblings in a span of eight months: “To sit in a lonely room—the clock ticking loud through a still house—and to have open before the mind’s eye the record of the last year with its shocks, sufferings losses—is a trial.” Gaskell, who visited Charlotte at Haworth for four days in 1853, saw some-



thing of these nighttime vigils for herself as well as hearing stories from a family servant, Martha Brown of the three sisters walking around the table in the parlor after evening prayers (“till near eleven o’clock”). “Now my heart aches,” Martha concluded, “to hear Miss Brontë walking, walking on alone” (*The Brontës* 740). And even as Gaskell was attended to her room for the evening, Charlotte would return to the parlor for her solitary walk—or as Gaskell describes the scene in her biography: “But it was dreary to write without any one to listen to the progress of her tale,—to find fault or to sympathise,—while pacing the length of the parlour in the evenings, as in the days that were no more. Three sisters had done this,—then two, the other sister dropping off from the walk,—and now one was left desolate, to listen for echoing steps that never came,—and to hear the wind sobbing at the windows, with an almost articulate sound” (380-81).

Our children, argues Janet Murray, who are more comfortable with the technology than adults, would seem to perceive narrative differently as well: Unlike adults, Murray concludes, “They are impatient to see what is next” (10). Charlotte Brontë, who wrote about her final heroine, Lucy Snowe, that “I never intended to appoint her lines in pleasant places” (to George Sith; 3 November 1852), finally has a far different, less optimistic, although one can argue, far more passionate, view about herself, about the future, and hence about narrative itself. Whereas a contemporary reader of narrative such as Allucquère Rosanne Stone looks at life and narrative under the spell of technology and sees only infinite possibilities (computer networks as “spaces of transformation, identity factories in which bodies are meaning machines” [180]), Brontë looks at life and at narrative and sees only limits: namely, the relentless procession of life and death, softened only by the agony of faint hope and the distant dream of some sort of a possible return to what surely was once a better, more secure world. If Keats is the exalted poet of slowness, rapturously describing the “foster-child of silence and slow time” in the opening lines of his great ode, then Brontë is its heroic chronicler, the “hard-pressed captain” described by Virginia Woolf as “summon[ing] her powers together” (29), the writer who is most clearly aware of the pangs and the limits of human desire, the writer for whom the passage of time is best represented by the utter quiet of a house at night, disturbed only by the loud ticking of the human heart.

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