

Katherine Inglis, “Ophthalmoscopy in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*.” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 15.3 (2010): 348-69

Katherine Inglis’s intelligent article maximises her scrupulous research into nineteenth-century ophthalmoscopy to advance a reinvigorated reading of the language of sight in *Villette*. Inglis eschews the arguably worn themes of vision and surveillance, drawing attention instead to the ways in which Brontë engages with the phenomenological experience of sight and nineteenth-century understandings of the embodied eye. This critical refocus facilitates an argument of real theoretical weight. The article’s disquisition into *Villette*’s dialogue with Victorian optics makes a significant contribution towards moderating the enthusiasm with which, in some quarters, theories of panopticism have been applied to nineteenth-century literature. It demonstrates comprehensively that Jeremy Bentham’s theory of the Panopticon was but one of several discourses of vision current in nineteenth-century thought.

The main historical contexts underpinning the article are the significant advancements in optical technology and medical knowledge which had, by the mid-nineteenth century, given rise to a new understanding of the human eye. Innovations such as the ophthalmoscope, invented in 1850 by Hermann van Helmholtz, facilitated a deeper understanding of the eye and promoted new awareness of its imperfections and fallibility as a sensory organ. Inglis locates *Villette* in an associated climate of growing scepticism about the power of the human eye, and shows the novel to be implicated in the development of this scepticism. As she herself admits, she is not the first Brontë scholar to draw attention to the influence of nineteenth-century optics on this novel; she gives due credit to Heather Glen’s *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History* (2002). Glen has highlighted Brontë’s emphasis on the physiology of heroine Lucy Snowe’s faulty perception; Lucy is often confused or overwhelmed by the inability of her eyes to process and sort the impressions which assail them. Although Inglis acknowledges her debts to Glen, she advances a bold and independent argument. Contextualising Brontë’s emphasis on sight as struggle in the specifics of contemporary optometry leads her to question Glen’s emphasis on Lucy’s passivity. For Inglis, Lucy’s dazzlement brings her power as well as pain, enabling her eventually to evade the systems of surveillance at Madame Beck’s *Pensionnat*.

Inglis’s cogent argument is structured around three nineteenth-century instruments designed, as she puts it, “to look into, perforate, and enhance the human eye” (352): the ophthalmoscope, the stylet and Monsieur Paul Emmanuel’s spectacles. The ophthalmoscope created a close and intimate relationship between examiner and examinee which, Inglis persuasively claims, Brontë uses as the model for visual relationships in *Villette*. The characters in the novel are often configured as examiner and patient, staring into each others’ eyes and inflicting mutual damage with light rays. Surveillance is “unable to withstand the destructive, transformative effect of this proximate gaze” (360). The intensity of proximity, Inglis observes, is figured through a textual concern with embodied marks. She traces this concern to the stylet, by which name both a nineteenth-century surgical instrument and writing implement were known. The optical device with the most complex connotations, however, is Paul Emmanuel’s pair of spectacles. This commonplace item profoundly complicates the patterns of vision and power at play in the novel. The glasses, as Inglis explains, “represent Paul’s unique ability to move between systems of optical control, to survey

and withstand surveillance, to dazzle without fearing that his look might be returned, to see *through* as well as survey” (363).

Paul Emmanuel’s spectacles are integral to Inglis’s refreshing claim for Lucy’s acquisition of agency. She shows the moment in which Lucy accidentally smashes Paul’s glasses to initiate a climax in which the heroine is liberated from both the proximate stare and surveillance. Strengthening her thesis by adroit comparison with the recovery of Rochester’s sight at the end of *Jane Eyre*, Inglis suggests that the optical pain and confusion Lucy suffers are incorporated into a therapeutic narrative, in which “Pain brings clarity, transparency supersedes opacity, and intervention restores agency” (367). Lucy’s climactic breakdown in front of Madame Beck may well owe as much to the poetic culture of lachrymosity epitomised by Tennyson’s “Tears, Idle Tears” (1847), as to optical surgery. Nonetheless Inglis’s scientifically-inflected recasting of Lucy as survivor is plausible as well as beguiling, and allows her to move beyond stale disagreements about the novel’s ambiguous ending. The real point, Inglis seeks to convince us, is not whether Paul Emmanuel has survived the shipwreck but that Lucy Snowe has survived her perceptual weaknesses to narrate her story. This original handling of a well-known literary conundrum makes the article an exciting new addition to the field.

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