The Priestcraft of the Book: Representations of Catholicism in Villette

Charlotte Brontë's novel Villette has been identified by critics as a vehemently anti-Catholic work. It cannot be denied that the novel contains many detrimental references to the institutional practices of Roman Catholicism, but by situating it within the wider field of anti-Catholic writing in the nineteenth century I would argue that negative aspects of certain characters and situations which are linked by their association with Catholicism are more stylistic and thematic than rhetorical – the result of a cultural perception of that particular religion, not an overt criticism of it. Rosemary Clark-Beattie writes: ‘Villette is perhaps the most moving and terrifying account of deprivation, of powerlessness, ever written.’ This statement provides a more fertile approach to the novel than that of the simple ‘anti-Catholic discourse’. It is useful in interpreting Brontë’s portrayal of Catholicism, in particular her representation of the nun. This chapter will aim to show that Brontë deployed current perceptions of Roman Catholicism to represent concepts such as isolation and surveillance which in Villette are more developed than in The Professor, Shirley and Jane Eyre.

When Villette was first published in 1853 it was generally well received by the critics, but its so-called anti-Catholic passages were offensive to...
some of its readers.\textsuperscript{3} As Charlotte Brontë wrote to her friend Miss Wooler

Brontë effectively dismisses the criticism that she is anti-Catholic as understandable but not true and therefore it does not trouble her conscience. In her review in the \textit{Daily News} 3 February 1853, Harriet Martineau, a friend of Brontë, observed that ‘Currer Bell goes out of her way to express a passionate hatred of Romanism.’ She saw this as something to be deplored at a time when ‘Catholics and Protestants hate each other quite sufficiently.’ Brontë was upset by her friend’s criticism of her obsession with love and the fact that she saw \textit{Villette} as a novel full of pain\textsuperscript{4} rather than by her surprised observation of the anti-Romanism from one who was normally so ‘large and liberal’ in her thinking. This suggests that her depictions of Catholicism in \textit{Villette} were a part of her literary, cultural and religious upbringing and that she employed them in the novel in a stylistic manner not as anti-Catholic rhetoric.

It is generally accepted that Brontë based \textit{Villette} on her time in Belgium at the Pensionnat Heger. From her letters to Ellen Nussey it is clear that whilst in Brussels she suffered from extreme loneliness and isolation which she mainly attributed to her ‘difference’ from the other inmates of the school:\textsuperscript{5}

There are privations & humiliations to submit to – there is a monotony and uniformity of life – and above all there is a constant sense of solitude in the midst of members – the Protestant, the Foreigner is a solitary being whether as teacher or pupil. (Charlotte Brontë, \textit{The Letters of Charlotte Brontë}, p. 315)

This trope of the ‘otherness’; of the Protestant in Catholic society runs through the whole of \textit{Villette} and is a useful device for expressing the suffocating atmosphere of a society whose religion views women in specifically designated roles and seeks to limit their activities by means of constant surveillance and control. Brontë understands the difference that exemplified the ‘freedom’ of the Protestant woman to bring about her own salvation by a response of faith rather than by ‘good works’. But