Reading as Relic: Innovative Mourning Techniques in Aurora Leigh, Villette, and the Life of Charlotte Brontë

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Reading as Relic: Innovative Mourning Techniques in Aurora Leigh, Villette, and The Life of Charlotte Brontë

Thesis directed by Sue Zemka

In this thesis, I examine three Victorian texts from within a 5-year period: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s verse-novel Aurora Leigh, Charlotte Brontë’s Villette, and Elizabeth Gaskell’s The Life of Charlotte Brontë. In reading each of these texts, I interrogate the possibility for textual materials and documents to function as relics and significant objects in the cultivation of productive mourning. I situate this analysis within the rich body of work on relic culture of the Victorian period, as well as affect and media theory of the twenty-first century and, most importantly, consider new possibilities for “reliquary acts” in reading and writing depicted in narratives of the 1850’s. Reading and writing in each text offer productive, active, and highly generative outlets to loss and death. I see these practices as highly innovative for their time, especially considering the relic culture of the nineteenth-century, which orbited around bodily and material objects like teeth, hair art, and death masks/portraiture. In the first chapter, I consider reading as a generative and affective response to loss, particularly as opposed to other reliquary objects offered to Aurora in the text, like a posthumously painted portrait of her deceased mother. In the second chapter, I consider writing and receiving letters as particularly affectively charged for their ability to generate sensations and bodily affects. In the final chapter, I move away from fiction to the genre of biography in Gaskell’s work on Brontë.
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CHAPTER I

In Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s 1856 verse-novel *Aurora Leigh*, memories and figments of her deceased parents are scattered throughout the text where they act as relics of the deceased figures and objects of potential significance to Victorian mourners. The library of Aurora’s father and a posthumously painted portrait of her mother present two distinct modes of mourning, one traditional (the portrait) and the other potentially highly innovative (the library). These experiences are detailed in Book I of the verse-novel and have enduring implications for Aurora’s future, particularly in the case of her father’s library. While the portrait of her mother proves crucial to Aurora’s comprehension of death and its impact on her position in the world, it remains a singular experience in the text. The portrait amounts to a viewing experience that is never again mentioned after its uncanny and lucid description in Book I. As Deborah Lutz recognizes in *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture*, the portrait of Aurora’s mother functions as part of a broader tradition in nineteenth-century mourning, one that deified and idealized visual images of the dead. Sometimes, the iconography of the deceased face or visage were memorialized in death masks (Lutz 72). More often, portraits were painted of the deceased figure, often after their death, to memorialize the moment of death. Later, photography would intervene in these traditions, disrupting the “cult of death” that flourished in the Victorian period, which created a massive economy of relics and icons representative of the deceased alongside it. The moment of death – ostensibly captured first in portraits and later in photographs – was particularly crucial for Victorians, as depictions of the posthumous body cultivated a sense of peace and presence at their earthly departure.

However, I wish to illustrate a deficiency in the portrait as it pertains to Aurora’s mourning process. Barrett Browning consistently challenges the ephemeral temporality around
death in *Aurora Leigh*, and particularly in the viewing of the portrait. In *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning amends the significance and economy of relics, presenting a method of mourning through her father’s library that is reparative, affective, and individualistic. Importantly, this mourning practice involves reading and therefore offers a continual and active return (to the deceased) for the living. Reading practices for Victorians have recently been described by scholars as affective and greatly felt, rather than interpretive (Ablow 3). Textual experiences in Victorian literature and especially throughout *Aurora Leigh* posit the act of reading as such: beneficial for the emotional response a reader might have. The library – and her creation of a father she builds from the memories engendered in each page – lingers long after *Aurora Leigh’s* introduction, unlike the portrait. Aurora, like other readers in the text, holds on to the library and utilizes a continual return to the text for the hopeful imagery and memories within their pages, accessed through a reading of each text. In each reading, semblances of her father and memories about him materialize for Aurora, allowing a sustained mourning that moves away from the synechdocal nature of bodily relics and the iconographic depiction of the dead in posthumous visual art. Her father’s library, on the other hand, becomes metonymic.

The library is related to Aurora’s father, but distinct from him and suggestive of future possibilities for Aurora, created in each and every reading of the books. The books continue to provide affective experiences for Aurora even after her father’s death, allowing the generation of a hopeful and productive future that is still ever influenced by the past, as in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s definition of “reparative reading” (139), which is a term I borrow and build upon to describe Aurora’s affective reading experiences. Affect, as I use it in this piece, refers to bodily sensations of feeling that Fredric Jameson differentiates from “emotions” writ large. While emotions often name “conscious states,” affect signals and represents bodily sensation or feeling
resistant to linguistic naming (42), something Aurora experiences during the reading of her father’s books. Reading affectively in *Aurora Leigh* ultimately allows for a replacement of the significance of bodily relics like hair and teeth. Reading as a reliquary activity effectively reimagines and creates those pieces of the body that could not be carried on from the grave, disrupting the significance of Victorians’ understanding of space, place, and time in mourning.

Here, I question and contend with the nature of texts and the active reading experience for its ability to provide hope, cultivate memory, and inspire futurity. I propose that, in doing so, Barrett Browning offers alternatives to traditional methods of mourning in the Victorian period. Mourning for Aurora becomes highly textual and active; more often, it moves away from the singular significance of time of death and location of the body, as she moves from Italy to England, to France and back again. Barrett Browning resists the portrait as an adequate mediator for grief and consolation, turning instead to textual artifacts for the engagement and possibility offered in the mind of the active reader. In bonding the textuality of books and traditional methods of mourning, Barrett Browning unites two central Victorian discourses, those of materiality and mourning. Although scholarly conversations on the two have intersected little, Barrett Browning visualizes a new method of mourning and grieving informed by the prominence and proliferation of textual materials in the period and the critical engagement and possibility of the reading mind.

Deborah Lutz, in her monograph *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture*, points to the potential importance of portraiture and explicitly visual artifacts in *Aurora Leigh* as objects capable of assisting in mourning. Lutz explores the Victorian cult of death betrayed in the proclivity for keeping relics of the dead, especially objects of or from the dead related to the body. Hair bracelets, locks of hair, teeth, and death masks are all objects of focus for Lutz. Often,
she turns to literary representations of these objects in order to exhibit their capacity to hold or recapitulate the “narrative” of a body (2). In chapter 3, “The Many Faces of Death Masks: Dickens and Great Expectations,” Lutz begins with the Victorian desire for “post-death art,” which often manifested in casts made from the posthumous face: death masks (75). Ultimately, Lutz moves the conversation from biographical information about Charles Dickens’s own response to the death of his loved ones to the many approaches to death in Great Expectations. First, however, Lutz gestures to the portrait of Aurora’s mother, which was done “after she was dead” (76) in order to illustrate the desire to maintain features of the dead in the name of the “popularity of aesthetics” (77) that marked Victorian relic and mourning culture. Lutz briefly describes uncanny sensations evoked from the portrait in Barrett Browning’s piece, but instead points to the portrait’s ability to encapsulate a spirit that “expands out of her restraining dress; uncontainable, it seems to float heavenward” (77). By all accounts, though, the death of Aurora’s mother is not coded positively in the Barrett Browning’s text, nor is the portrait of much value to a bereaved Aurora.

The effects of this disrupted, delayed, or potentially nonexistent mourning culminates in Aurora’s experiences with the portrait, which stay with Aurora longer than any actual memories of her mother. In viewing the portrait, the potential for a positive grieving process becomes tainted and obscured. Aurora’s young age at the time of her mother’s death is suggested throughout as a detriment in her mourning process; the epitaph on her mother’s grave, chosen by her father, reads: “‘Weep for an infant too young to weep much/When death removed this mother’” (I.104-5). The inscription seemingly bears more weight to the mothers and children that pass it by, rather than Aurora herself, as she was ostensibly “too young” to understand the profound loss of a parental figure. Moreover, the vague language of the epitaph – “an infant” and
“this mother” – point to a universal experience or loss rather than an individual one. The engraving “stops the mirth” (I.106) of the mothers and their children who pass by but fails to connect to Aurora or her mother in particular and, like her holistic mourning experience, fails to make a dent in her grief.

Aurora, according to the inscription, is deprived of a legitimate – that is, embodied – mourning experience, as she was “too young to weep”; in other words, too young to capably respond to the loss. In her mother’s absence, Aurora is left with a portrait of her mother painted after her death, ostensibly to facilitate mnemotechnic ties and the possibility for positive memory and affect even in the wake of death. However, Aurora says that the effect of the portrait “was strange” to her as a child (I.134) and describes the immediate observation and its enduring impression on her psyche.

And as I grew

In years, I mixed, confused, unconsciously,
Whatever I last read or heard or dreamed,
Abhorrent, admirable, beautiful,
Pathetical, or ghastly, or grotesque,
With still that face. (I.146-51)

Following this observation, Aurora cycles through mythological references that match the many versions of her mother’s visage mingled with her dreams: Medusa, a ghost or fiend, a dauntless Muse, and finally, perhaps her own mother (I.165). The last possible iteration or visualization of her mother’s portrait in the years after viewing could alternatively be her “own mother” or her “dead mother, without smile or kiss,/Buried at Florence” (I.168). The location or potential significance of her mother’s resting place provides very little comfort. Potentially a result of
Aurora’s move to England, the importance of the corporeal body in the corpse is displaced onto objects like the portrait and in spite of Victorian preoccupations with the crypt and final resting places of the dead.

Victorians were preoccupied with the grave and its association with the corporeal body and moment of death. Charles Dickens, according to Lutz, expressed a desire to be buried with his sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth (74), exemplifying the importance of not only the corporeal form after death, but also of the final resting place of a body. Jolene Zigarovich points to a comparable negative impact as a consequence of a vacant crypt or grave and the anxiety that an absent corpse would have prompted for mourners. A missing corpse and absent body stalls mourning because of the perceived importance of the final resting place of a corpse that Lutz also suggests (Zigarovich 21). The dependency on the corpse and its resting place, however, creates stasis instead of an ongoing and active mourning process. In both cases, the sight of burial is attached with supreme importance for its ability to hold and protect the posthumous body, especially the pieces of the body that could not be taken back into the realm of the living, like teeth or material artifacts could be. Aurora, however, is left stunted in her mourning and with only a portrait of her deceased mother – as Lutz also points out, painted posthumously – and attaches little to no significance to her mother’s final resting place.

Aurora encounters graves frequently much later in the verse-novel, prompting meditation on her parents’ death and the continual mourning she faces after their loss. In Book VII, Aurora reflects upon graves and their significance:

I would not visit, if I could,
My father’s, or my mother’s [grave] any more,
To see if stone-cutter or lichen beat
So early in the race, or throw my flowers,
Which could not outsmell heaven or sweeten earth.
They live too far above, that I should look
So far below to find them: let me think
That rather they are visiting my grave
Called life here. (VII.1144-1151)

Aurora’s condemnation of the deification of space and place in death points also to her understanding of grief and mourning as affective and externalized all around her, rather than confined to the location of the posthumous body. Although the library or portrait are not mentioned here, Aurora implicitly gestures to their significance in her mourning process as replacements for the grave. Although the grave, crypt, and corpse functioned for many textual and real Victorians as a place to reflect upon death and mourn, Barrett Browning reneges its usefulness in Aurora’s own process. In bodily sensations and the reading of her father’s library, Aurora creates a grave of her own in living, reversing the outcome of death to emphasize her parents’ ongoing influence in her life: they visit her. Her parents visit her, rather than her own potential and continued visits to their grave. Aurora gestures to the timeliness of the grave and nature’s relentless and damaging effect on the tombstone, not its ostensible timelessness, and points to her parents’ existence as “too far above, that [she] should look/So far below to find them” (VII.1149-50). The corpse or its final location offers no significance to a still grieving Aurora.

Innovative in this approach, Barrett Browning suggests a revision of Victorian mourning traditions in a move away from the physicality of the corpse. Although the portrait is not discussed after Book I, depictions of the grave become mimetic of its failed effect. Because
Aurora imagines her parent’s graves as aging and insignificant, she creates new ways of thinking about death and the continuation of the deceased in the lives of the living. Moreover, Barrett Browning acknowledges the state of impermanence in a decomposing corpse, mimicked later in the portrait. Rather than gesturing to and celebrating the finality of death, Barrett Browning describes ways to build a positive futurity in mourning through reading. The replacement of bodily or visual relics with her father’s library depends upon metonymy, or something separate and representative of the whole. A metonymic mourning process, rather than one that is iconographic (the portrait) or synechdocal (the grave), allows the futurity I name to flourish.

The long history of painting portraits of the dead can be traced back to the fifteenth-century and was an attempt to “portray death and the end of existence” (Linkman 12, emphasis my own). Barrett Browning challenges the ostensible “end” of existence that relics and memorials for the dead provided mourners, as both the portrait of Aurora’s mother and her father’s library bleed into the dreams and actions of the living, providing experiences of mourning that are either harmfully or restoratively affective and – more importantly – extends far into the conscious mind of the living. The dead body “could be viewed as precious and beautiful, a worthy recipient of tender loving care and a suitable subject for memorialization by the camera” (Linkman 14), but the body would still rest in its grave, complicating Victorian preoccupations on the spatial significance to the final resting place of a corpse. Lutz, quoting Walter Benjamin’s work on the aura, states, “The aura of an artwork such as a painting consists of its ‘presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be’” (7). Visual relics of the dead, like the aura, have a temporal connection to the deceased. What seems to interest Barrett Browning, though, is the futurity provided in death and how to encourage
hopeful experiences in its wake, rather than the memorialization the body itself or the “place where it happens to be.”

In *Time and the Moment in Victorian Literature and Society* (2012), Sue Zemka posits that “the senses of touch, sighs, and hearing are tethered to the temporal present in a way that memory, conception, and imagination are not. Mental Acts slide across the mind’s representation of past, present, and future. But we can only touch something in the here and now” (22). The here and now and the consistent scholarly and literary references to the grave, crypt, or corpse, seem to challenge Victorian understandings of the significance of the moment that Zemka describes in her chapter “A Brief History of the Moment.” The tactility of relics and their association to a specific body, moment, or physical place were crucial in the mid-Victorian mourning practices described by Lutz, but perhaps insufficient to match the power of “mental acts” described above. Reading as relic engages with the cognitive activities of “memory, conception and imagination” to provide an active and continual return to the body without a tactile or object-oriented experience. Furthermore, the aforementioned valorization of the dead – resulting in posthumous depictions of their bodies and faces – depended upon physical presence at the time of death and an understanding of the loss at hand, hence the importance of relics tied to the temporality of the body and the moment of death. Ultimately, this experience as such is lost to Aurora, who is left with only the portrait of her mother in lieu of other relics and objects. Even though the texts themselves function at some level as a relic, the object is not as significant as the possibilities presented in Aurora’s reading of the books.

Barrett Browning confronts the capability for traditional death relics to result in a positive mourning experience. Her interrogation of physical objects as relics and traditional vehicles for grieving – like death masks or portraits – also corresponds with the invention of photography.
Lutz argues that relic culture of the Victorian period effectively “had its decadence” alongside the invention and implantation of the photograph, even though photography would eventually erase and replace relic culture (7). Barrett Browning rejects the visual in favor of the textual for its possibility and function in mourning precisely at the time in which the new technology unfolded. The photograph, like and unlike painting, can only attest to the “what has been” (Barthes 85) and never the what could be. Reading, on the other hand, provides a phenomenology for imagining and creating something new or different than even the object at hand.

In the essay “The Phenomenology of Reading” (1969), Georges Poulet describes reading as a transformative act.

This is the remarkable transformation wrought in me through the act of reading. Not only does it cause the physical objects around me to disappear, including the very book I am reading, but it replaces those external objects with a congeries of mental objects in close rapport with my own conscious. (Poulet 55)

Poulet admits that reading “replaces those external objects with a congeries of mental objects in close rapport with my own conscious” (55). Within this admission, Poulet withdraws the ostensible significance of the book as object, placing significance instead in the cognitive experience of the reader. Moreover, in the act of reading, physical objects – including the book itself – are replaced with “mental objects” of the conscious mind. The portrait of Aurora’s mother provides only that: a portrait. The images resulting from her experience viewing the painting are lucid, but unproductive; awesome, but uncanny. For Aurora, her father’s books seemingly disappear – despite their ontological significance – and in reading, she imagines in its
place bodied features of her father. Reading his books cultivates a symbiotic exchange between embodied features of her father and the content of the books that allows mourning to extend playfully and hopefully into the future, rather than remain stunted in time like a portrait. Aurora asserts that, “Theophrast/Grew tender with the memory of his eyes,/And Aelian made mine wet” (I.712-714). Theophrast, a figure in her reading, changes as a result of the memory of her father’s eyes, and similarly, Aelian makes Aurora’s eyes wet with tears.

The portrait, not mentioned again after Book I, has a singular lasting effect on Aurora: her childish understanding of the “incoherencies of change and death” (I.171) nurtured by the presence of the portrait in her unconscious memory in later years. Preceding Aurora’s meditation on the portrait and its ill-effects, she transcribes the experience briefly and piteously, expressing that she “stared away her childish wits/Upon my mother’s picture (ah, poor child!” (I.175-6). Interestingly enough, Aurora inserts a retrospective on the portrait, identifying pity and sympathy with her childhood self. Instead of reflecting further on the portrait, Aurora continues to name its effects on her person, again representing the failure of this object to cultivate a productive experience. While Lutz might argue the association between Aurora and her mother’s portrait is constructive, as it first allows a bond to foster between Aurora and her deceased mother and later suggests the continuation of her presence even after death, there is ultimately nothing comprehensible in the portrait; there is nothing to be read in its countenance. The problem with portraiture here is unexpected, especially because the nature of affective experience is often attributed to visual and material arts, rather than textual ones (Jameson 42). If affect is concerned with the “body and its sensations” (42), according to Frederic Jameson, one would expect visual and material arts and sensory arts – such as music – to more explicitly evoke affective experiences. Perhaps a side effect of Barrett Browning’s
ekphrastic writing on the portrait, her description of Aurora’s visual and sensory experiences in response to the portrait are uncanny and confused. Even though the nature of the portrait becomes engrained in Aurora’s memory, the experience of viewing the portrait – “staring her childish wits away” – is highly passive and destructive, despite its visual and conventionally “affective” qualities. Moreover, the detrimental attributes of the portrait and their effects on her mental state remain, while the features of the portrait fall away.

Barrett Browning, rather than textualizing affect as such, points to object experiences as conducive to a sensual response and experience or not. In the case of the portrait, Aurora’s ruminations are highly lucid, as she names figures that mix and meld with the visual illustration of her mother’s face. Even so, the lucidity of the visual experience challenges the ostensible result of affect: bodily sensations that are often resistant to naming and linguistic identification (Jameson 27). In later responses to reading texts, Aurora’s responses are not as textually clarified; she fails to identify specific subjects and interlocutors, instead positing vague statements like, “Then, something moved me” (I.661). Life, she argues, “calls to us/In some transformed, apocalyptic voice,/Above us, or below us, or around” (I.674-76). Herein lies the description of her reading experience; vague recollections of great feeling and responses to sensory figures – “something” (I.661) or “it” (I.653) – surround the accounts of reading her father’s books. Her father continues to “give” to Aurora in her reading, and the pages reemphasize lessons he taught her in life and the texts become clarified by memories of his body, such as his eyes and tears (I.713). What he is “giving” is yet again opaque; what is clear, however, is the ability for reading to result in sensual, mnemotechnic, and affective experiences that are resistant to naming. The affective consequences of reading his books are significant and create space to remember her father and build a more hopeful understanding of her future; they
are also importantly described as bodied sensations. Although the state of affect in *Aurora Leigh* is perhaps not innovative on the level of the text, Barrett Browning asserts that reading emboldens affective and sensory (bodied) responses.

These affective responses are especially crucial, here, in mourning, but are also utilized in later depictions of reading by Marian, a victim of familial abandonment and poverty. Although the gaze is also utilized as a tool in affective reading, especially for Marian, whose “eyes outgrew her cheeks,” the portrait only incites “staring” and a muddled conscious state that haunts Aurora, rather than providing a platform and method for reparative and hopeful thoughts and actions in the future.

Jameson posits affect as “bodily feelings” and emotions as “conscious states” (32). Insofar as Barrett Browning imagines affective experience and response, she redefines the vehicles that are most likely to cultivate a sensory and bodily response. Because of this, Barrett Browning’s theorization of affect aligns with Eve Sedgwick’s classification of affective reading methods in her essay, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading: Or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You” (2003). Sedgwick posits two methods of reading: Paranoid reading, supported by a “hermeneutics of suspicion” and a deleterious desire to “expose” (127), and reparative reading, which allows the reader to respond hopefully and thoughtfully to loss. Sedgwick, like Barrett Browning, also emphasizes the future possibilities for the reparative reader, despite the loss and trauma of their past. Moreover, as Sedgwick also suggests, textual materials or – in the case of *Aurora Leigh* – textual relics of the death, rather than visual objects that signify the dead and their bodies, allow a more active mourning experience. Reading, in other words, presents an alternative to the Victorian fixation on relics of the dead. Representations of the body and its fragments left to the living, such as the portrait,
seem to only deter or complicate mourning, resulting in an uncanny and prolonged melancholia
(Freud 247). Textual objects, on the other hand, allow Aurora to regenerate and return to
memories of her father’s physical body. Reading affectively and interacting with textual
documents allows conventionally bodied “relics” of the dead – the aforementioned hair and teeth
– to become imagined by the reader, prompting highly imaginative and generative affective
experience.

Aurora’s relationship to reading, which becomes affectively coded and emotionally
generative, begins with the acquisition of her father’s library. Not only does Aurora receive the
books upon his death, but she also gestures to their importance during his life:

My father taught me what he had learnt the best
Before he died and left me—grief and love.
And, seeing we had books among the hills,
Strong words of counselling souls confederate
With vocal pines and waters—out of books
He taught me all the ignorance of men. (I.185-90)

Aurora, pointing to the affective education she received from her father, as he taught her “grief
and love,” also points to a unity of voices in the words from books and “vocal pines and waters.”
The gesture to vocal pines and waters is perhaps reminiscent of the landscape they inhabited in
Italy, as Aurora later compares the reading habits of the English to the nature of their cultivated
and “tamed” gardens (I.634). Her father’s library, even after his death, becomes a repository for
memory, which I will soon describe as embodied, but is first capable of condensing space and
place.
Barrett Browning, an “ardent reader” of William Wordsworth (Epstein Kobayashi 823), perhaps envisions and revises his poetic methods for storing and returning to memory for poetic inspiration provided in “Tintern Abbey.” Emily Epstein Kobayashi posits that, although Barrett Browning admired Wordsworth, she wished to expand his poetic vision “beyond the Lake District,” and into the urban boroughs of London (824). It’s possible, also, that Barrett Browning’s vision of poetic memory and futurity, in its London setting, requires a different repository for memory: the book or text itself. Wordsworth posits the memory and visualization of a specific place as crucial to the poetic process in the years preceding a visit there. Although Aurora’s original home, Italy, is lost to her in her journey to England (and furthermore, tied to the loss of her mother), Aurora instead places Wordsworth’s pastoral significance of place and mnemotechnic capacities in textual objects. In Wordsworth’s poem, he describes first the absence from a place and his subsequent return. Upon his return to the Abbey, he describes the familiarity of the forms and landscape and their influence in the years following his first visit:

Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:

But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,

In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,

Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart. (Wordsworth 415)

Wordsworth similarly sources future thoughts from his recollections of scenes, landscape, and moments from the past. Wordsworth’s memories of the Abbey and its landscape provide not only “food for future years” (416), but a sense of hopeful return connected to a specific physical place. Barrett Browning asserts a similar connection to her father through his library, an object
that – unlike Wordsworth’s Abbey – defies the limitations of space and location and follow
Aurora from Italy to England and through Europe. Again, the importance of textual objects in the
hopeful “return” to her father and his memory, brought alive again and again in the reading of his
books, offers an affective and sensory similar to but ultimately triumphant compared to the
sublime pastoral of the Romantic poets.

Interestingly, Barrett Browning provides a similar meditation on death in her poem “A
Dead Rose.” In the poem, Barrett Browning discusses the potential of the rose in its withered
after life to provide more life, more generation, than the animate rose. Although the rose, kept
“seven years in a drawer” is no longer “roseate,” Barrett Browning finally concludes that:

The heart doth owe thee

More love, dead rose, than to any roses bold

Which Julia wears at dances, smiling cold!—

Lie still upon this heart—which breaks below thee!

Barrett Browning claims that even though the bee would “shun” the rose in its present state, the
heart recognizes in it a kindred spirit. The affective in-between of the speaker’s relationship to
the deteriorated rose lends itself to a creation of the dead rose as a mnemotechnic device, much
like her father’s library. The rose, kept for seven years in a drawer by the speaker, provides – like
Wordsworth posits – a receptacle for memory and affective feeling, one that can be returned to.
Moreover, the sensation provided is embodied, as it’s the heart that still “smells” the fragrance of
the rose. While the rose is not indicative of a specific space or place, like Wordsworth’s abbey,
Barrett Browning again stresses the significance of interactive objects to provide affective
experience. She stresses the act of keeping and holding onto the rose, and in her rebuke of the
rose worn at dances – alive and roseate – the dead rose increases in value in each return to it.
Aurora initially personifies the verse-novel as a similar figure to the rose: an object that Aurora can return to “like a portrait for a friend, / Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it / Long after he has ceased to love you” (I.5-7). Not to stray from my explication of the portrait, what is important in this proposed encounter is the withheld nature of the object, a position the library also maintains as Aurora refuses to sell the collection and brings it with her throughout her travels. Keeping, holding, and interacting with these objects – dead or tied to the dead – provides Aurora with a viable mourning experience, one that encourages a continual return and acknowledgement of loss in order to move forward. The fleeting nature of the animate rose pales in comparison to the withered, dead rose, for it is the dead rose that provides the most possibility in its encounter.

Reading and engaging with the books allows Aurora to piece together memories of her father’s body and create a new resting place for his body, whose appendages haunt the pages of *Aurora Leigh* from the beginning. Like Poulet, reading can replace the actual objects surrounding the reading body with objects, memories, and manifestations of the conscious mind. The anxiety of a bodily lack is present in the portrait of Aurora’s mother, which fails to represent or reanimate the actual body of her mother, an important factor in the practice of keeping relics (Lutz 77). The pieces of the lost body also appear frequently in the beginning of Aurora’s narrative, as she frequently points to her “father’s hands” and their ghostly weight still felt upon her own body or hair. In the beginning, Aurora is adequately removed from the loss and death she faced in Italy, but still, “Catches [her] mother at her post / Beside the nursery-door, with finger up” (I.15-16), and still feels, “[Her] father’s slow hand” (I.20). As I’ve suggested, the portrait of her mother – although a visual representation of her face – fails to cultivate an appropriate affective response or allow mourning to occur. Instead, the image provokes uncanny dread in
Aurora that lasts throughout her life, present in dreams and mingled with conscious and unconscious thought. Alternatively, her father’s library functions as an object of the dead that occupies the space normally allotted to the bodily “relic.” Ultimately, the library and the interactive possibilities present even after his death allows grieving to take place actively and on Aurora’s own terms; like Wordsworth, Aurora can return to the books again and again and mine memories of her father, her education, and his bodily features. The active component in the library – reading – resists the fetishistic object relationship between a bodily relic and its owner. More importantly, the reading of his books allows Aurora to reconstruct pieces of his body, which replace and offer an alternative to traditional Victorian relics.
CHAPTER II

In the sense that reading is a recuperative and hopeful response to loss of various kinds, it is perhaps possible that the act of writing is an antagonistic force in the face of loss and death. The writerly impulse works endlessly to postpone death. Death, it has been said, is the “primal impulse” for autobiography (Zigarovich 19). Jolene Zigarovich makes this claim in regard to the next text I examine: Charlotte Brontë’s final novel *Villette*. Zigarovich ultimately argues that the narrator, Lucy Snow, writes to “prolong death” (19). In fear of annihilation, in the anxiety and drive to transcribe a life, the narrator, too, can never be fully textually realized. In other words, “While the narrator writes to forestall death, her every word carries her toward the threshold of silence” (19). Zigarovich optimistically posits the success of Lucy’s textual immortalization; however, I wish to exhibit a deficit in the narratological impulse of autobiography in *Villette*. It is not in the narrative that loss is evaded, and the self or subject is generated, but in extra-textual materials that puncture the linear narrative: letters.

Just like the ways in which letters might offer a more hopeful reading of Lucy’s ultimately stunted and ambiguous narrative, Barbara Johnson also looks to extra-textual or paratextual materials to provide a reading of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* as autobiography. Although Johnson foregrounds her argument with the admitted absurdity of an autobiographical reading of a text that includes not one, but three *male* autobiographies, she asks the question: “In a humanistic tradition in which *man* is the measure of all things, how does an appendage go about writing the story of her own life?” (4). Johnson argues for autobiography as an always-monstrous act, one whose impulse and desire to create a mirror for one’s self is predicated on the transgression of recognition from the other. Johnson’s willingness to look at peripheral motives and materials for constructive writing in *Frankenstein* is extremely valuable in the reading of
women writers’ work of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, especially, as I will illustrate, in *Villette*. In writing *Frankenstein*, according to Johnson, Shelley attempts (the only way she knows how) to tell the story of her life, to create a likeminded reader and viewer through several stories of men and a monster. By ascribing to traditional narrative form of the time and in maintaining an androcentric focus, Shelley actually rebels against dominant formal methods of the period. Most importantly, it is not within the holistic narrative that Shelley recuperates herself and her image, but in paratextual materials and biographical realities. Mary Shelley, in the Romantic period, lived “through its margins and folds” by nature of her connections to the literary *célibrity* that her mother, father, husband, and friends engendered (Johnson 4). Johnson documents Mary’s life and the losses that took place in the midst of her writing, such as the suicide of her half-sister and her husband’s former wife (Johnson 9). Brontë, too, experienced profound loss during the period in which she took a break from writing and during the creation of *Villette*, her final novel. Johnson also importantly points to paratextual materials as necessary in understanding the monstrous impulses and latent desire present in Mary Shelley’s narrative, positing that it is impossible to read the novel without this attention to para-narratological documents and text. The impulse to look beyond narrative, to extra-textual materials, is necessary for Johnson because of Mary Shelley’s environment, losses, and writerly circle.

Johnson’s explication of Shelley’s work, her narrative process and production, might be more helpful in the following chapter, where I examine Elizabeth Gaskell’s posthumous biography of Charlotte and other textual documents – letters and prefaces – written by Charlotte. Even so, Johnson’s theoretical impulse to examine biography, lived experiences, and texts outside the boundaries of narrative is essential in reading *Villette* as a text that produces a hopeful generation of text and narratives of the self. *Villette* has frustrated readers and scholars
ever since its publication. Jolene Zigarovich in particular reads *Villette* as autobiography, as
Brontë faced the death of numerous family members during the period she wrote the novel. Lucy
Snowe, the narrator and protagonist of the novel, also faces profound (but unnamed and
undocumented) loss. Although there are a few symbolic indications scattered throughout the text –
her mourning habit, for example – there is no confirmed or documented death recounted in the
text, except for that of Miss Marchmont.

The event of death, however, is the principal instigator of the narrative. After her
mistress’s death, Lucy notes that she is “once more alone” (36) and must seek a new situation,
ultimately leading her to the town of *Villette*. The “once more alone,” that triggers Lucy’s
sojourn to France is significant in that the absence of family or friends, as a consequence of
death, gives the reader perhaps the only clue to Lucy’s subjectivity. The narrative subject, the
“I,” is marred by death and absence that has preceded the aloneness. The reader can only
presume, from this documented death and the other undocumented tragedies of her life, that it
has been a corporeal and tragic death that has allowed the events of the novel and Lucy’s life to
unfold. The absence in the text, that of the primary trauma, lends itself to a novel that is the very
antithesis of Victorian narrative. Much like Shelley in *Frankenstein*, who disrupts the ostensible
domesticity in women’s narratives, Brontë unsettles the linear and transparent nature of the
Victorian *bildungsroman*, which is demonstrated in her earlier novel *Jane Eyre*. Even *Aurora
Leigh*, an innovative novel but a (verse) novel nonetheless, succumbs to the hopeful and ideal
end goals of narrative through the fulfillment of the marriage plot. Even a supplemental catharsis
or resolution transpires in the text in Aurora’s return to hopeful and affective objects, especially
in the reading of her father’s library.
Similar, though, to Barrett Browning’s tactics in *Aurora Leigh*, Brontë employs para-narratological methods in order to respond to loss in events and activities that are described in the narrative but thoroughly removed from it. For Aurora, it is the reading of her father’s library that functions as a generative and hopeful reprieve from the unknown present and past trauma. Reading also functions as a helpful foil to the business of writing, which Aurora records diligently as a woman “living by her pen.” Similar, then, Lucy also employs some forms of writing as an escapist tactic, like Aurora “writing her story for her better self,” (I.4) as a departure from writing for the uninformed and unsympathetic masses. The impulse to transcribe or transform loss through the act of writing or the formation of narrative is exhibited in *Villette*, but not through its central plot. Even while some scholars have argued that Lucy’s silence is a powerful act of resistance to the prototype of the Victorian novel, especially because of its rigid expectations for women authors, I refuse to read the narrative so optimistically. Rather, I look to the letters in the text and their hopeful and reparative impulses to think about writing outside the boundaries of traditional narrative as a reparative act. Like Barbara Johnson’s reading of *Frankenstein*, I argue that looking to the contingent texts of the narrative allows for a reading of writing that generates futurity and affective response. In particular, I posit Lucy and Polly’s relationship with letters as hopeful praxis. Moreover, that these letters transcend their functional and objective status, transforming into tangible bodies that also translate to opportunities for each respective recipient. Letters allow a recuperative mental space to respond to loss and build something tangible in its wake; although it ultimately fails in Lucy’s correspondence with Graham, I look to Lucy’s continued relationship with the letters in their “death” as the only legitimate burial and closure that takes place in the text, despite the numerous bodily deaths that
take place. Letters transmogrify, allowing their affective components to extend to the realm of
the body and subjectivity.

Moments of encounter with textual, written materials – as opposed to the story itself –
offer the most uncanny and reflexive affective responses. Johnson’s willingness to describe
women’s narratives as in the realm of unheimlich, rather than the home or domestic realm, is also
significant in reading the disjunction between expected narrative and the reality presented in
and Narrative Elision in Villette,” tackles the unsung trauma of the visual, which effectively robs
Lucy of an identity from the outset of the novel. For Brent, another scholar attempting to tease
out the significance of the lacks in Villette, the explanation for the stunted and aborted narrative
is translated by examining the realm of visual experience over the manifestation of the text.

Rather than beginning with the “I,” Lucy spends the first several chapters of the novel
depicting events around her, a departure from first-person Victorian narration. Even in her
previous novel, Jane Eyre, there is a meticulous compulsion to describe the early moments of
existence, not uncommon for this style of narration in the period. Barrett Browning, too, in her
depiction of Aurora’s life, makes several temporal jumps in order to establish significant early
events in Aurora’s life before returning to the present moment in which Aurora writes towards
the future. Lucy, however, acts as a mirror for the events around her – primarily those of John
Graham and Polly – only for the figures to arrive much later in the narrative as dynamic players
in Lucy’s narrative. According to Brent, it is only at the moment that Graham recognizes Lucy
(long after her own recognition of his identity), that she can enter the novel’s “social world” and
act, “more like a proper nineteenth-century heroine” (102). In this moment of visual recognition,
the narrative is also plunged into textuality. Brent briefly elucidates the significance of this
moment, but ultimately argues for its failure in opposition to the realm of visual images. First, however, Brent explicates the shadow of opportunity offered in the letters. Rather than hazy images of Graham that Lucy continually fails to grasp or obtain, “the word, paradoxically enough, provides referential sustenance—a genuine, tangible “morsel” of Graham” (102). For Brent, Lucy’s attachment to the letters symbolizes her failure to grasp the visual image of Graham, allowing her to assign massive significance to the letters. Less than strictly visual, the letters become concrete morsels; offering a substitute for the unstable whimsy of his image.

At the moment Lucy decides to read the letter, after holding it all day, after letting it occupy a physical and mental relationship to her body, she first encounters the ghostly Nun. Brent asserts that this moment – where Lucy finally reads the letter and then immediately encounters the visage of the nun – crumbles the possibility of the linguistic realm, partially due to the fact that the text of the letter is never recorded for the reader and, according to Brent, does not exist. Straying from the importance of the linguistic or visual realm, however, allows a reading of the letters that privileges their embodied significance and affective qualities. In holding, receiving, and reading the letters, Lucy is allowed a corporeal presence that is often surprisingly lacking in the novel. The letters, like Aurora’s father’s books, allow the creation of a body in the conscious mind, one that can never actually be attained but rather restored or generated anew in the mind of the reader or writer. The letters, first of all, provide the only tangible image of Graham’s unattainable physical form. Perhaps even more importantly, the reading of the letters leads to an awareness in Lucy of her own body, a body that is often masked or placed in the foreground even though the narrative is narrated by her. The letters not only create the possibility of Graham’s body and a relationship to her own, but also permit Lucy to imagine and create a cognitive space dedicated to positive affects like hope and love. Although
these feelings are eventually crushed, they carry on (through letters) in the relationship of Graham and Polly, which eventually results in marriage. In the courtship of Polly, Graham’s letters fulfill their expected epistolary potential: to act as a segue into a relationship, marriage, and consummation.

Unlike Brontë’s first published novel, *Jane Eyre*, *Villette* relies much more on an understanding of space and place to ground its setting, rather than an individual body or identity. The lack of Lucy’s bodily presence throughout the narrative, especially in the beginning, is a jarring paradox of the first-person narration. With a first-person narrator, the reader can assume a bodily presence through the text, but Lucy purposefully obfuscates her body in favor of her mind (even though her mind is similarly concealed from the reader). There are few moments of corporeality in the text, and almost none that offer a whole and complete image of any single person. When these moments perforate the narrative, they are often unwilling and uncanny. For example, when Lucy is convinced to take the role of a student in the play to be performed at Madame Beck’s Fête. As a demand from M. Paul, Lucy must play the part of a man in the play. Lucy, however, declines the original costume and makes her own alterations. Lucy posits that she likes “some of the objects” but not all of them and “the things must not be forced upon [her]” (127). Lucy carefully selects only certain garments and describes the way she wears her hair and dress. Lucy, in the performance and through this awareness of her own body, also subsumes the role of Graham, an audience member and the object of her desire. Although she begins with wholesome goals in her costume, she eventually and easily assumes a masculine role. The reader is presented with a fractured image of Lucy’s body – her as a man – which is later revoked as substantial or substantive. Despite the brief pleasure this performance or roleplay brings Lucy, it is not long-lasting. That night, she was “lifted in a trance to the seventh heaven” (129), only to
disapprove of her actions and the performance during the following day. The image or body she cultivates in this moment is revoked only pages later, leaving the reader again with a corporeal absence.

Lucy continually relies much more on an inner and mental dialogue, rather than her physical relationship to people and the world around her. Even during her illness, when she leaves the Pensionnat, the primary concern is only the fatigue of her mind. The letters, however, provide a tactile and cognitive setting for Lucy to plunge into the realm of the bodily and the sensual. Lucy held in her hand, “a morsel of real solid joy: not a dream, not an image of the brain, not one of those shadowy chances imagination pictures, and on which humanity starves but cannot live” (223). Receiving the letter also becomes consumptive, as Lucy analogizes the hunt and assumes the role of the successful hunter. She asks the reader, “Did I read my letter there and then? Did I consume the venison at once and with haste, as if Esau’s shaft flew every day?” (223). Lucy, who often documents feelings remote from hunger, experiences a new awareness and understanding of her body and its needs. While Aurora generates images of her father’s body in the reading of his library, Lucy develops a keener sense of her own body and its relationship to the world through the beginning of this correspondence.

In the chapter preceding “The Letter” in Villette, Lucy finally resolves to leave the home of Graham and his mother, where she has spent several weeks recovering from a long illness. It is here that the possibility of the letter – its physical form and emotional possibilities – are presented or foreshadowed as consumptive and bodily in Lucy’s departure. Graham, upon Lucy’s “mournful and mutinous” departure (217), retorts that she looks, “like one who would snatch at a draught of sweet poison, and spurn wholesome bitters with disgust” (217). Lucy responds, in short, that it would be, “Better, perhaps, to die quickly a pleasant death, than drag on
long a charmless life” (217). Graham, recognizing now Lucy’s attachment to him, rejoins that, “you should take your bitter dose duly and daily, if I had the power to administer it; and, as to the well-beloved poison, I would, perhaps, break the very cup which held it” (217). Although playful in their banter, the topic is of great seriousness to Lucy, who grieves at the removal of her friends and return to the Pensionnat. Graham’s rebuttal on Lucy’s proclivity for death insinuates his own power over her melancholy, as he could dually administer the dose of poison daily, or alternatively, break the cup and withhold the poison.

As I have considered books and reading for their affective capabilities and effect on readers, it’s interesting to note Lucy’s own maligning of reading in general, especially as a preface to the receipt of the letters. Lucy, accordingly, “dearly like[ed] to think [her] own thoughts; [she] had great pleasure in reading a few books, but not many” (219). Even so, her own thoughts are largely withheld from the reader, as she chooses to primarily account the events around her and vague dialogues between certain senses in her brain, such as “Reason.” Lucy, also occupying a space of unreliability, continually withholds valuable information from the reader, such as her early recognition of Graham in Dr. John. Lucy recounts that her own understanding of his identity occurred, “several chapters back” (162), and she had “preferred to keep the matter to [herself]” (162), meaning apart from Graham and, more significantly, the reader of her narrative. Lucy recognizes a distance between her own feelings and experiences and the events or sensations relayed in most literature or even the events occurring in her own life. This distaste for novels and her own perplexing participating in the act of writing narrative also alludes to the importance of the letters as textual materials of significance outside of the realm of the novel. Lucy doesn’t take seriously her own forays in reading, nor the act of actually writing a novel, which is betrayed in the uncaring and withholding affect toward the external
reader. The “real life” depicted in the novel is as insignificant as the novels or books she does not enjoy reading, but the letters provide a simultaneously fantastic and potentially legitimate realm for experience or pleasure.

In “dearly liking” her own thoughts, most books have little value, and the letters are introduced as a textual object that allows the direct engagement with her own thoughts and experiences. The self-interrogation offered in the letters, a process that configures Lucy’s bodies and those around her, is presented as implicitly separate from the reading of books. Aurora, too, differentiates the reading of her father’s books from the reading of other, less significant textual artifacts, like letters. During the often-documented scene wherein Lucy receives the first letter, Lucy’s narrative collapses into a sensational and affective reprieve, much like Aurora’s highly embodied and sensorial experience reading her father’s books. In fact, the chapter is titled “Reaction,” and only the following chapter is titled “The Letter.” The first letter from Graham, which “haunted [her] brain in its very core for seven days past” (222), is the fulfillment of an affective desire Lucy has had, one that she envisions in her brain and dreams prior to its arrival in her hands. As Karin Koehler has argued, Lucy’s reception of the letter and its relationship to her physical body certainly falls in line with epistolary traditions and the significance of letters to eighteenth and nineteenth-century readers. Koehler, however, argues that Lucy’s relationship to Graham’s letters effectively resists eighteenth-century conceptualizations of the letter, particularly the importance of its materiality and ostensible relationship to the corporeal body (Koehler 137). Koehler posits that the letters, which “punctuate” the narrative, enact the “growing resistance against the intimate association of letters and bodies, so that correspondence comes to be envisaged and depicted in increasingly less material terms” (137) as the novel progresses to its end.
Throughout the text, Lucy grapples with the lack of a body and the creation of a new body in texts and objects. Despite the hopeful possibilities of the epistolary exchange, Lucy eventually buries her letters in the chapter “A Burial.” Since bodies and their parts were precious to mourners, as the body became a link in a metonymic chain, gesturing to or becoming, as Deborah Lutz posits, “the thing itself” (20). Of course, one of the central problems of Villette in the Victorian context is the lack of a viable corpse or bodily relic, even after corporeal death and several ostensible deaths of the self or subject. Lucy goes through several near-death experiences and illnesses of the body and mind. At the end of volume one, Lucy describes a descent into “an abyss” (150). Upon the start of the next volume, Lucy picks up the narrative by stating, “Where my soul went during that swoon I cannot tell … She may have gone upward, and come in sight of her eternal home, hoping for leave to rest now, and deeming that her painful union with matter was at last dissolved” (153). Lucy then describes an angel reanimating her unwilling body and returning to Earth. Lucy seems to have little regard for bodies and her body in particular. In the same breath, she refers to it as the “life-machine,” and her return to consciousness a “racking sort of struggle” (153). This near-death experience that she describes reifies her distaste or despondency toward the body, despite its importance in death and Victorian reliquary tactics. The various dead in the text, including the possible death of M. Paul, are never fulfilled for mourners through the acquisition of relics, especially not those of the body. Rather, written texts and letters seem to step in for the body and replace its significance in mourning. This is not surprising considering Lucy’s veneration of writing, narrative, and textual creation, and her clear distrust of corporeality.

Although writing death and writing about loss is a specific genre, especially for Romantic and early Victorian poets, the letters between Graham and Lucy (and even the narrative itself)
are not participants in this tradition. To write about death or to memorialize the body in textual inscription is to “sacralize figures,” which often meant “creating intimate epigraph poems that embody death, hold or inscribe remains” (Lutz 45). Although I return to this subject in the subsequent chapter, I want to stress the difference between writing about death and writing around or through it. There is also a pronounced difference between explorations in “thing theory” and Victorian fixation on particular material objects. Although the letters are objects, Lucy’s relationship with reading and writing the letters is particularly active and generative. The fact that the content of the letters is never displayed for the reader may, on the one hand, provide evidence for their status as important objects. However, in not sharing the content with the reader, the object-status of letters is mutilated, as letters are ostensibly only as important as the words or feelings they convey, not cultivate. In *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning depicts a corresponding experience in the reception of Lady Waldemar’s letter to Aurora. Aurora posits that she, “tore the meaning out with passionate haste / Much rather than I read it” (VIII). In the following section, however, Aurora provides the content of the letter for the reader because of its significance to the plot and fulfillment of the marriage plot. Even so, the letter is privileged for its affective and virtually mystic capabilities of transferring meaning to the receiver through touch and context without reading it.

When the objects cease to fulfill their hopeful affective possibilities, she buries them. Lucy doesn’t hold onto the letters, like one might hold onto the letter of a lost loved one, but rather buries them and, with them, “a grief” (Brontë 277), even further separating the letters from their objective and practical purpose as artifacts or relics. Lucy, at the end of the epistolary exchange with Graham and the discovery that Madame Beck has been reading the letters, first hides them. In realizing that eyes other than her own have read and examined the letters,
something even the reader is never allowed, Lucy is also blighted with the fact that “never more would letters, such as she had read, come to [her]” (274). She references “Hope” as a corpse, noting that she “closed the eyes of [her] dead, covered its face, and composed its limbs with great calm” (275). Still, there is the matter of the letters. In the death of Hope – what the letters once represented to Lucy in their future possibilities – the letters are treated as a relic or last vestige of this emotion or body that hope has obviously generated, since the affect is also imagined as a corpse. The letters literally take on the form of a body, but Lucy resists the temptation to hold onto them as one might do with hair or keepsakes of a deceased beloved: “The letters, however, must be put away, out of sight: people who have undergone bereavement always jealously gather together and lock away mementos: it is not supportable to be stabbed to the heart each moment by sharp revival of regret” (275). Lucy appears keenly aware of the reliquary culture of her day and resists the possibility of a keepsake of her dead. Rather, the letters finally become the body itself, and she puts it to rest in the first and only burial in the text. For here, she has not lost a body, but a feeling or tie to future possibilities and happiness that she once pondered.

The letters do not take on the quality of a belonging or piece of the body, but rather the body itself. She describes “interring” the letters in their hole, and once finished, portrays herself as resting, “leaning against the tree; lingering, like any other mourner, beside a newly-sodded grave” (277). The interment of the letters disrupts and intervenes in mourning techniques of the period, as letters of the dead were often maintained; in returning to these letters, readers could also envision or return to the idea of the deceased. Lucy, in an absence of corporeal death, reverses the ostensible trajectory of objects, reneging their capability to provide affective return
and solitude in the future. There is no significance in the letters beyond reading or holding them, venerating the physical and embodied act itself over the status of the object.

During the early phases of Polly and Graham’s relationship, Lucy reflects on the vestige of the letters and the once hopeful possibilities they offered. She again returns to the place of the burial – although the objects themselves are buried, Lucy ultimately describes “a passage of feeling therein buried” (339). She wonders if this feeling, a friendship only “half marble and half life” (339), is dead. If not dead, it is at least buried. The inability to bury a corpse, to lay something tangible to rest, interrogates and interferes with the material status of the letters. Rather than objects, like a body that is buried, the feeling they once evoked at times remains. The feeling is also, as a result of the burial, related to a specific time, place, and still living person. The affective significance of the letters is brought new life during the early courting of Polly by Graham, which also takes place through letters. First, though, Lucy reflects on the possibility of an early burial. Had she buried something living, something tangible? Had she been “too hasty?” (339). Herein lies the difficulty with replacing a body with an object, a relic, or something synechdocal of the whole: it can never truly be laid to rest.

Although Deborah Lutz posits that it is in the “reading” of relics that a new body is formed, Lucy’s attempt to create a body through the letters and later put it to rest ultimately fails in the context of Victorian mourning and relic culture. Although Lucy conceives of the letters – and supposedly the feeling and body that they represent – as buried, she describes the possibility of a live-burial, dreaming sometimes of an “unquiet tomb” and “hair, still golden and living, obtruded through coffin-chinks” (339). Lucy ultimately puts to death not only the symbolic body of Graham, but also puts an end to the ostensible pleasure a text may allow.
Polly, shortly after Lucy’s reverie at the burial, describes the first letter she herself has received from Graham. The documentation of reading the letter and writing its response is highly eroticized in the narrative, offering Lucy to occupy the space of the voyeur to Polly’s own epistolary exchange with Graham, perhaps gesturing to the “unquiet tomb” of her burial. The living hair Lucy imagines “obtruding through coffin-chinks” manifests in Polly’s epistolary exchange with Graham, and through Lucy’s position as interlocutor. At the moment her own hope and potential future is buried and laid to rest, Polly breathes new life into letters and their hopeful prospects.

Graham’s hand is like himself, Lucy, and so is his seal – all clear, firm, and rounded – no slovenly splash of wax – a full, solid, steady drop – a distinct impress: no pointed turns harshly pricking the optic nerve, but a clean, mellow, pleasant manuscript, that soothes you as you read. It is like his face – just like the chiseling of his features: do you know his autograph? (350).

Lucy, and her readers, are forced to relive the primal exchange between herself and Graham and witness the similar generation of a body through letter-writing. In Polly’s exchange with Graham, letters take on a more traditional meaning in the context of the period, as the letters lead to marriage and consummation.

In the short exchange of letters between Polly and Graham, she is ultimately found out by her father, who is at first troubled to hear of the correspondence and its content. The letters have served their purpose to unite and bind, as Mr. Home announces, “Be married, Polly! Espouse the red whiskers. Cease to be a daughter; go and be a wife!” (404). Here, letters have fulfilled their traditional and central goal: to begin and fulfill a courtship. The letters assume a transformative role, as she evolves from a daughter to a wife. Polly is plunged from the textual realm into the
space of the body, noted by Lucy as she witnesses the three – Polly, Graham, and Mr. Home – sitting under a tree. Not the great Methuselah that Lucy laid her own letters to rest under, but at the palace at *Bois l’Etang*. Here, in Polly’s handiwork, Lucy observes the transformation:

Paulina sat between the two gentlemen; while they conversed, her little hands were busy at some work; I thought at first she was binding a nosegay. No; with the tiny pair of scissors, glittering in her lap, she had severed spoils from each manly head beside her, and was now occupied in plaighting together the gray lock and the golden wave. The plait woven – no silk-thread being at hand to bind it – a tress of her own hair was made to serve that purpose; she tied it like a knot, prisoned it in a locket, and laid it on her heart.

(407-8)

At first, Lucy thinks she sees Polly “binding a nosegay.” According to the Oxford English Dictionary, A nosegay was a typical artifact in the period, consisting of “A bunch of flowers or herbs, especially ones having a sweet smell; a small bouquet, a posy. Also: an imitation or representation of this” (OED). A nosegay could also be a commonplace book, meaning that – like a bouquet of different flowers – it would function as a collection of pieces or fragments of texts, photos, or other artifacts created for the pleasure of the creator. In *Aurora Leigh*, Marian Erle is also depicted binding a nosegay. Rather than flowers making up the composition, “nosegay” metaphorizes the scraps and fragments of texts she collects that bring her pleasure or reprieve:

But [Marian] weeded out

Her book-leaves, threw away the leaves that hurt,

(First tore them small, that none should find a word)

And made a nosegay of the sweet and good
To fold within her breast, and pore upon

At broken moments of the noontide glare. (III.1005)

Later on, Lady Waldemar also refers to Aurora’s poetic endeavors as “making a nosegay of her words.” What I mean to suggest here is that the word was no doubt used in practice to refer to textual documents and that, perhaps, Lucy first perceives Polly’s handiwork as a textual act: that of binding together a “nosegay.” Soon, however, it is revealed that Polly has cut a lock of hair from each man – her father and future husband – and binds each piece together with a lock of her own hair. In this act, Lucy observes Polly move from the realm of the textual to that of the body in binding together hair, fulfilling the purpose of the letters that is left unfulfilled for Lucy.

The closing of the novel surprisingly ends with hope. M. Paul presumed dead, lost in a shipwreck, Lucy bids farewell to her reader: “Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror … Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life” (462). In Polly’s happy resolution, a marriage that is withheld from Lucy in both Graham and M. Paul, Lucy finally uses the narrative to supply the reader with a semblance of hope. As a means of transitioning into the final chapter, I want to point to an early moment in Elizabeth Gaskell’s The Life of Charlotte Brontë. Before she delves into the early life and landscapes of Brontë’s childhood, she begins at the end, with the death of Charlotte and the rest of her family. In their former church, Gaskell notes tablets to the right of the communion-table, bearing the names of each of Charlotte’s deceased family members. Here, their remains rest, in inscriptions rather than entombed. Gaskell, after transcribing the inscriptions of Charlotte’s mother, father, and siblings, interrupts herself:
…When the first memorials were written down, the survivors, in their fond affection, thought little of the margin and verge they were leaving for those who were still living. But as one dead member of the household follows another fast to the grave, the lines are pressed together, and the letters become small and cramped. After the record of Anne’s death, there is room for no other. (Gaskell 16)

Out of order, then, the record and transcription of Charlotte’s own death and identity are pressed into the picture. Much like letters function in *Villette* – peripherally and narratologically inconsequential – the memorialization of Brontë’s own life takes on a similar function. Looking to narrative as a means of writing a life, reading towards a hopeful future, or constructing a life depends upon paratext and writing outside of this form.
CHAPTER III

Elizabeth Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* opens with, as I have already mentioned, the memorial plaques of Charlotte and her family. There is no body to speak of, and the grave or corpse of Charlotte is hardly mentioned, if at all, throughout the entire biography. Instead of an anxious attempt through narrative to retrieve or regenerate the image and possibility of the corpse, Gaskell uses the textual and memorial objects left behind in order to cement Brontë’s persona and status. The body of the biographical subject is clearly beyond reach in the writing of biography, allowing texts to continually replace the body in a chain of meaning. Gaskell is particularly interested in how objects, texts, and letters construct not a body per se, but an idea of a significant figure whose life was shrouded in isolation and little notoriety due to myriad factors. Charlotte, too, recognizes the danger of a failed or aborted legacy, which is ultimately exhibited in a biographical notice included in a posthumous edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* published in 1857. The goal of biography is not necessarily to reinvigorate or exhibit the lost body but replace it. In the biographical notice and preface to her sister’s novels, Charlotte attempts to reconfigure her sisters, but not their bodies or their lives. Charlotte is primarily interested in depicting their literary significance and potential textual transcendence, despite death. By using facts and occurrences of their lives, Brontë argues for their importance as distinctive and unique literary figures. Gaskell, too, seems tuned into the urgency of solidifying the life of an author and positioning their literary works in the greater trajectory of their lives. The impulse to write biography is also a clear desire to exhibit literature as autobiography, as both Brontë and Gaskell urge contemporary readers to consider the literature as especially valuable when read in the context of each author’s lived experiences.
The opening of the biography is particularly confusing for its attention to the memorial plaque of Charlotte’s deceased family and eventually, herself. Gaskell, in some regards, begins at the end of Charlotte’s life, only to meticulously comb through her letters and life experiences in subsequent chapters. However, this opening is crucial in understanding how and why textual objects come to replace the significance of the deceased person or body. In beginning with an engraved object, Gaskell elucidates the inherently textual motivations of biography as a genre. Biography as a genre begins with the fact of the death of a real person, setting the task of recreating, memorializing, and mourning that person. Of course, as I have exhibited in previous chapters, the loss of a person (and as a result, their body) is a primary motivator for collecting relics like hair, teeth, or objects of deceased loved ones. Also as I have argued for, textual and literary objects seem to offer an increasingly more fruitful avenue for imagining a future without the person the reader or writer has lost. In beginning with the act of death in a textual document, beginning at the end does not necessarily mean beginning with the corpse or gravesite, but with the figurative idea or image of a memorial that can be salvaged or imagined by future readers. In this case, the memorial is textual, albeit marginalized in the greater context of Charlotte’s familial legacy. The act of squeezing Charlotte’s name and the date of her death is a deeply haptic and emotive task, foreshadowing the task of writing the biography to come.

The function of biography, according to writings by Gaskell and Brontë herself, is clearly to translate textual, written remains into a literary celebrity whose reputation is solidified. A contemporary example of the ways in which writers are biographized is the 2014 text *Barbara Johnson: A Life with Mary Shelley*, which contains Barbara Johnson’s theoretical writing of author Mary Shelley, who Johnson wrote on frequently throughout her career. The text is – in many ways – a biography and memorial of Johnson itself, compiled after her death by friends.
and colleagues. In Johnson’s career-long writing “with” Mary Shelley, contributors of the text attempt to exhibit the gravity of Johnson’s writings on Mary Shelley and, moreover, her own significant “entanglement” with the life and writing of Shelley (xi). In writing the ways in which Johnson wrote with Shelley, Cathy Caruth also elucidates the text as an example and opportunity for future women writers and scholars to write with Barbara Johnson (xii). In this theoretical text, I find the writerly impulse of biographical preservation, memorialization, and futurity as exceptionally poignant. I also find the model provided in this text as crucial for understanding earlier biographical accounts of literary figures and writers. All that remains of a writer after their death are the various textual materials they’ve left behind, providing an unending and everlasting avenue for future writers to read and write with them. That is precisely the task at hand in Gaskell’s text, evidenced in her attention to textual materiality from the outset in the plaque memorializing and effectively epitomizing Charlotte.

Texts continually replace the body in a chain of meaning through the genre of biography, leading to unending opportunities for readers to read and write the life of a figure who has passed. The continuation of a legacy, especially for an author originally shrouded in ambiguity for much of her life, means textual recuperation and preservation. Posthumous “conversations” with Brontë that Gaskell engages in, as well as the conversations Brontë has with her own deceased sisters, model ways in which the writer can remain significant after death and provide a legacy and avenue for other writers, critics, and readers. The impulse to preserve and continue these conversations is, I could argue, the primary reason for writing biography. This desire, to an extent, overshadows the need for corporeal closure in gravesites and bodily relics.

Gaskell’s biographical account of Charlotte is also analogous to Charlotte’s own concerns for a failed or aborted literary legacy, which must be recuperated in biography and
biographical work. The drive to preserve or generate the idea of the literary figure or celebrity presents itself not only in Gaskell’s work, but also within Charlotte’s biographical documentation of her sisters. I find this document, included as the preface of the 1850 edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, particularly clarifying in understanding Gaskell’s own methods of memorializing through the genre of biography. The preface is itself significant for being the first formal document to address the gender of each writer, as prior to that point, each woman published under pseudonyms. Most importantly, in the assembling of this edition, Charlotte also sought to identify and distinguish each writer as individuals, rather than a collective unit. For Charlotte, this was a crucial pursuit in upholding the memory of her sisters as they were and for what they produced in their lives. Even so, with the goal of constructing and identifying individual authors, Charlotte does not seek to corporealize or materialize either figure. Although the desire to distinguish each writer as a unique and distinctive person undergirds the preface, Charlotte first and foremost strives to distinguish each as unique writers and literary craftsmen. In doing so, the authorial body is obscured while a new body comes into focus: that of the text. What a literary text amounts to, for Charlotte, is the drive to memorialize each literary figure in writing biography. According to Charlotte, the homogenizing of each unique author by critics and readers also lent itself to a harsher reception from critics due to its publication after *Jane Eyre*.

Critics failed to do [Emily and Agnes] justice. The immature but very real powers revealed in *Wuthering Heights* were scarcely recognised; its import and nature were misunderstood; the identity of its author was misrepresented; it was said that this was an earlier and ruder attempt of the same pen which had produced *Jane Eyre*. Unjust and
grievous error! We laughed at it at first, but I deeply lament it now. Hence, I fear, arose a prejudice against the book. (Brontë xi)

Here, Charlotte implies the significance of authorship and identity in literary production. She does not figure Emily as a body, but a “pen,” replacing the body of the writer for the object used to form the text. For if the writer of *Jane Eyre* had been the same writer of *Wuthering Heights*, the novel would undoubtedly be misunderstood. *Wuthering Heights*, she writes in the preface, was “hewn in a wild workshop, with simple tools, and homely materials” (xxiv). This description’s meaning is twofold: not only is Charlotte urging readers to understand the troubling content of the text in terms of the circumstances of its creation, but also to describe the author herself. In describing the birth of the novel, Charlotte also forms an image of the author of great significance to the comprehension of the novel and its merits. She also importantly focuses on the circumstances of its productions and the tools used to generate the text. The place of creation – the “wild workshop” – and the homely materials at work to create the novel are placed figuratively above the body of the novelist, despite Charlotte’s efforts to separate each body from each other.

The goal of biography is not to reinvigorate or recover the lost person but replace it with their crowning literary and textual achievements. There is a distinct glimmer of futurity in this preservation, an avenue for generative activity and progress that is originally foreclosed in death. Like in *Aurora Leigh*, reading and writing offer a recuperative avenue to generate the idea of a person lost in order to impact the future of those remaining and those yet to come. I move now to the potential significances of place in the life of a writer and how this might be factored into biographical accounts. A sense of place, especially for Emily Brontë, seemed to have particular
impacts on her literary works and the ways in which her texts formed unique bodies and figures separate from her own writerly persona.

The significance of place also appears to replace the function of the body, as Emily’s upbringing and location – as well as her inability to thrive elsewhere – is attributed to the particularities of her novel. Charlotte writes fondly of Emily’s disposition with regards for her inability to remain at school and away from home, writing that, “My sister Emily loved the moors. Flowers brighter than the rose bloomed in the blackest of the heath for her;—out of a sullen hollow in a livid hill-side, her mind could make an Eden” (Gaskell 104). The generative potential of Emily’s mind, capable of creating an “Eden,” is also crucial to the command of her literary work. This image is further mirrored in Charlotte’s preface and within her description of Emily’s writing and its final form. Charlotte describes the text of *Wuthering Heights* itself as a novel that has qualities of a monument at first and eventually: a body.

The statuary found a granite block on a solitary moor: gazing thereon, he saw how from the crag might be elicited a head, savage, swart, sinister; a form moulded with at least one element of grandeur—power. He wrought with a rude chisel, and from no model but the vision of his meditations. With time and labour, the crag took human shape; and there it stands colossal, dark, and frowning, half statue, half rock; in the former sense, terrible and goblin-like; in the latter, almost beautiful. (Brontë xxiv)

The novel itself is embodied, molded by the writer – figured only through a pronoun – erasing the significance of the writerly figure or body. In the generation of a textual body – the novel – the writer is obscured, only to be reimagined in later accounts and the retrieval of textual materials. As a result, biographical writing and fiction are disparate for their divergent configurations of the novelist. The statuary that begins the passage certainly refers to the novel
itself. The writerly process, here, is described more like a sculptor modeling human form.
Without a model, the sculptor uses only his meditations. In time, the crag “takes human shape,”
exhibiting the potential for narrative to mimic or represent a physical body, such as portraiture or
sculptors present in their own mediums. The text itself importantly and figuratively replaces the
writerly body, standing on its own as a creation or person that lives on even when the author
ceases to exist. This textual body, in some ways, supersedes the legacy of the literary figure.
What becomes crucial in the biography of literary figures, at least for Gaskell and Brontë, is
preserving and perhaps contextualizing the literature they produced. Nevertheless, the idea of the
writer – which Brontë and Gaskell seek to memorialize – remains significant for its meaning to
the hermeneutics of reading and the solidification of the author as an important and timeless
figure. In describing the writerly process as such, Brontë also importantly paves the way for the
genre of biography to flourish, as the authorial subject and their presence is purposefully
obscured in accounts of fictional writing by the subject.

In the writing produced after Emily’s death, Charlotte attempts to surround and ground
Emily’s mind and abilities within her circumstances and physical atmosphere. This method is
also taken up by Gaskell in her biography of Charlotte, as she infuses meaning within the
physical surroundings and location of Charlotte’s early life. In a particular passage, Gaskell
provides a commentary and anecdote on the mournful conditions and sounds of Charlotte’s time
in Haworth. Gaskell remarks that there was an unusual amount of deaths in the “wet and rainy”
winter of 1833, which tainted the usual tranquility of their walks. The moors were “spongy,” and
walks polluted by the “funeral bells so frequently tolling” and the “‘chip, chip’ of the mason, as
he cut the grave-stones in a shed closeby” (95). Gaskell then remarks on the familiarity these
scenes would have bred for passersby and occupants of Haworth and the contrast between these
quotidian circumstances and Charlotte’s own affect: “One of her friends says:—‘I have seen [Charlotte] turn pale and feel faint when, in Hartshead church, some one accidentally remarked that we were walking over graves’” (96). Gaskell pays inherent respect to Charlotte’s comprehension of and affects regarding death, which reappears in a letter written after Emily’s death:

‘Emily suffers no more from pain or weakness now. She never will suffer more in this world. She is gone, after a hard, short conflict. She died on Tuesday, the very day I wrote to you. I thought it very possible she might be with us still for weeks; and a few hours afterwards, she was in eternity. Yes; there is no Emily in time or on earth now. Yesterday we put her poor, wasted, mortal frame quietly under the church pavement. We are very calm at present. Why should we be otherwise? The anguish of seeing her suffer is over; the spectacle of the pains of death is gone by; the funeral day is past. We feel she is at peace. No need now to tremble for the hard frost and the keen wind. Emily does not feel them.’ (Gaskell 279)

Gaskell, in the above passage wherein Charlotte experiences sensations of pain at walking over or disrupting a grave, parallels the later sentiments of Charlotte’s affects surrounding death. While there is no Emily “in time or on earth now,” Charlotte attaches significance to the moment of writing her prior letter, which was a Tuesday and the day of Emily’s death. The importance of the corpse, however, is refuted in the statement: “There is no Emily in time or on earth now” (279). Her “mortal frame” ceases to maintain or emit significance and the pain of death is described as a mere “spectacle” whose time has thankfully passed.

The ostensible “spectacle” of death returns not only in Charlotte’s description of Branwell’s death and corpse, which I discuss shortly, but also in Roland Barthes’ Camera
In theorizing the effect of photography and what it might be “in itself,” and whether or not photography existed or has “a genius of its own” (3), Barthes describes the initial discomfort of the spectatorship of viewing photography. In short, Barthes describes two principal roles in photography: the Operator (the photographer), the Spectator (ourselves), and the target (the person or thing photographed) (9). Barthes latches on to the root of spectator and the reticent specter of the idea of “spectacle.” In the retention of this word, according to Barthes, there is something dangerous about the position of viewing a photograph. The relationship to “spectacle,” “adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead” (9). Barthes also describes photography as proleptic, as in it is always already foreshadowing the death of the subject or “target” in the photograph. Even if they are living now, the spectator is allowed space to imagine a later point at which the figure in the photograph ceases to exist. This danger – the return of the dead beloved and their corpse – is spectacularized by the nature of spectating, the voyeurism of viewing. Charlotte, too, embodies a close relationship to the voyeur or witness of death. Unlike Barthes’ theorization of photography’s impact on death and its role in creating the “spectacle” of death, biography interferes in the inherent preservation that allows this spectacle to occur. The act itself, the “spectacle of dying” is laid to rest with Emily and eventually the rest of her family in writing letters to loved ones, rather than preserved in an image.

The idea of the spectacle of death returns in an account of Branwell’s death, which preceded Emily’s, and is similarly spectacularized in a letter written by Charlotte. Here, however, she explicitly describes the posthumous corpse of her brother as “the final separation” from him (275). Charlotte states that the “spectacle of his pale corpse” gave her “more acute bitter pain than [she] could have imagined” (275). Here, Charlotte witnesses a detachment
between the meaning of a person and their body. The corpse itself, or the “mortal frame” of
Emily’s deceased body takes on painful associations for Charlotte and leads to an altered state of
body and mind. For each family member, the death of Branwell brings into being acute bodily
pain, discomfort, and illness, even foreshadowing the illness and eventual death of Emily. Death
even alleviates or erases the memory and impact of Branwell’s vices, and, at the time of his
death, Charlotte writes that the family remembers “only his woes” (275). In the loss of a loved
one, the corpse ceases to transmit meaning to mourners, reminding them only of the pain and
“spectacle” of death and the lifeless body. Moreover, this is something that they need not be
reminded of. There is no desire to see the body again in Brontë and Gaskell’s accounts. These
affects and sensations are characterized as particularly human, especially in Gaskell’s description
of Emily’s dog: Keeper. When Keeper came home after the burial service, “he lay down at
Emily’s chamber door, and howeled pitifully for many days” (280). The dog extends the
spectacle of death, while the remaining family members, loved ones, and mourners quickly
transmogrify the body to memory and the objects left behind.

The body is, however, immortalized in writing and the writing connected to them in life.
Emily leaves behind her novel, and according to Gaskell, Branwell dies with his pockets filled
with “old letters from the woman to whom he was attached” (275). Written documents inundate
the scene of death and its subsequent activities, such as the documented act of writing to a loved
one to inform them of a death or in the biographical notices and biographies that are written
posthumously. The body ultimately gives way to the text.

It’s curious that the word I apply to Villette’s narrative – stunted – is also a term applied
by Charlotte to her own figure and form, according to Gaskell. Gaskell does take some time to
describe Charlotte’s physical frame, both as it was perceived by others and herself. While
Charlotte described herself as “stunted,” Gaskell focuses on her “peculiar” eyes, “of which I find it difficult to give a description, as they appeared to me in her later life” (74). She briefly describes their shape and color and then moves to their effect, “a light would shine out, as if some spiritual lamp had been kindled, which glowed behind those expressive orbs. I never saw the like in any other human creature” (74). Charlotte’s eyes have a mystic effect on Gaskell, an effect and feeling that can be carried beyond the grave and past the degeneration of the body. The reader of Gaskell’s biography is left wondering if the “spiritual lamp” has been extinguished in her death, but in Gaskell’s documentation, the light seemingly extends into the narrative of the here and now, even while the eyes cannot. In documenting this effect of her physical body, Gaskell immortalizes the light and the feeling, rather than the eyes themselves. Gaskell also evades the problem of the corpse and unanimated body in her chronological account of Charlotte that is shockingly grounded in particular moments and places. By grounding her account of Charlotte’s life in the church monument and then retroactively moving through the events of her life, Gaskell takes advantage of a perceived temporality to describe Charlotte’s life and legacy. Although the past tense utilized by Gaskell is in part due to the chronology, it also maintains echoes of a life or a body that ceases to exist.

The discomfort of the past tense employed, though, is mediated by Gaskell’s format. Gaskell effectively erases the deceased corporeal body in beginning not with a grave, but with a material memorial. She is then free and capable to walk the reader through Charlotte’s life and writing, even while suggesting physical features that are no longer, like her eyes. Rather than beginning with the corpse or the grave, Gaskell begins the biography with an object – a memorial – and only evokes the grave and its mourners at the close of the text. Here, Gaskell commits “the memory” of Charlotte Brontë to the readers (429), and only after criticizing the
public who “judges harshly because they have only seen superficially and not thought deeply” (429). Thinking deeply is a result of reading the biography, of carefully considering the textual artifacts that remain after Charlotte’s death. Only these are capable mourners, like the few who gather at Charlotte’s funeral. For Gaskell, there is a clear disjunction between engaging with a life and its remaining artifacts and seeing the body for what it is during life.

The memorial that Gaskell opens with, mentioned in the previous chapter, places Charlotte as she was in life: the last of her family remaining, and potentially even immortal in some aspect, as there was no space held for her own plaque. The family, inscribing names and dates as their loved ones passed, left “little margin” for those remaining. This passage not only engenders Charlotte’s life with a certain textuality and suggests the significance of these textual memorials and monuments, but more importantly, reading this passage and the memorial allows a new conceptualization of death to take place. I am very interested in how evocative the plaque itself and Gaskell’s description of it as means to begin the biography is, but I am unsure of its significance. On the one hand, Gaskell’s description of this object clearly reinforces the fetishistic status of memorials and monuments in the Victorian cultural imaginary. Moreover, the plaque itself – like the biographies I discuss – replaces the body of the deceased, allowing a concrete object for the mourner to return to that is grounded in space and place, but also resistant to degeneration. Anxieties surrounding the gradual loss of the corpse – and, therefore, the figure itself – ostensibly informed the flourishing relic culture of the period, but it also allowed a fetishistic attitude to flourish surrounding the place of burial and the corpse itself. Not necessarily for its meaning as a decomposing object, but for its relationship to a specific place and time. The disruption of this temporality, as argued by Zigarovich, had immense impact on mourners, which is clear in literature of the period. A plaque, on the other hand, submits to the
significance of temporality. I also would argue that it resists the inclination to consider it as a fetishized object, for a description of the plaque begins, rather than concludes the biography, alluding to its hopeful possibilities for mourners. As such, the placing of the memorials and their inscriptions undeniably evoke the temporality of the living. Despite the entirety of a family quickly chasing each other to the grave, as Gaskell writes, the timelessness of the living is generated in the lack of space for Charlotte’s memorial and also in Gaskell’s transcription of her life. Gaskell configures not the lost body, but the memory of a person and their re-justified position in death: Gaskell carves a new space, a new monument, for Charlotte.
CONCLUSION

I began this project as a result of reading Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s verse-novel, *Aurora Leigh*, in a graduate seminar on Victorian Poetry. The text fascinated me for its depth, its literary soul; what George Eliot, in her 1857 review of *Aurora Leigh* in the *Westminster Review*, called its “melody, fancy, and imagination—what we may call its poetical body—is everywhere informed by a soul, namely, by genuine thought and feeling” (Eliot 408). I was particularly interested in ways in which reading and writing in the text were written as affectively charged and highly emotive. As I started the first chapter, I struggled to identify how to place these textual acts in the context of Victorian culture and, moreover, which texts to add to this analysis. I was eventually introduced to Deborah Lutz’s monograph, which details the proliferation of relics and relic culture in the Victorian period and exhibits how these objects are represented in literature of the period. While I had already decided to write on the “reparative” reading practices at work in the verse-novel, I soon discovered other objects perhaps more relevant to reliquary practices of the nineteenth-century presented in Barrett Browning’s work. For one, Lutz writes briefly on the posthumously painted portrait of Aurora’s mother and its effects during her mourning process. Even so, Lutz figures these experiences as highly positive and reminiscent of death masks and death art produced after the death of a loved one. As a result of Lutz’s reading of the portrait, I endeavored to put it in conversation with the library of Aurora’s father and her continual reading of these books and their role in generating a hopeful future.

I was particularly interested in putting this conversation on relics and mourning in the context of twentieth and twenty-first century affect theory, such as work by Eve Sedgwick and Fredric Jameson. Moreover, I was curious as to how reading generated images or visages of the lost body, similar to how relics recalled not only the memory, but the body of the deceased. How,
I wondered, could reading or writing textual materials similarly generate a lost body? This question became increasingly complicated as I moved from *Aurora Leigh* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* to Elizabeth Gaskell’s biography of Brontë. Locating the body, especially that of the deceased author, was an onerous task. So much work done in fictional narratives, as I have exhibited, is work that generates ephemera of the body and its sensations. Reading and writing in *Aurora Leigh* and *Villette* prove essential to creating the central subject of a narrative, especially in response to loss or trauma and in the process of mourning. In the biography, however, the body is intentionally obscured. Even though biography must always begin with a death, the biographer is tasked with evading the uncomfortable reality of the corpse. A body cannot or should not be generated in the act of biography. In that case, what is?

I find the generation of biography through textual remnants and documents left behind as extremely evocative. Moreover, what objects come to be constituted as textual “remains,” such as the plaque or the gravestone. Textual remains that solidify a persona or figure in history also, as I have discovered, lend themselves to the threads of hopeful futurity I gesture to in the first chapter. The opportunity to read or read *with* literary figures who are no longer alive, just like Aurora reading the books of her deceased father, elucidate the possibilities for texts that literally transcend the ostensible importance of the body. Even though the body remains a significant focus and force in my first two chapters, the final chapter ultimately gestures to the possibility for texts – no matter their medium – to preserve an idea of a person that carries on into the future. Unlike bodily relics, which always reinforce the corporeal materiality of the deceased, textual objects allow interactions for generations of readers and writers, exhibited in Gaskell’s work and tangentially through my theoretical comparison to *A Life with Mary Shelley.*
I want to take a brief moment to consider some oversights or unresolved threads present throughout the piece. Thinking about textual objects and documents as relics, not for their status as objects but for the possibility they offer to mourners, is perhaps the most significant thread throughout each chapter. At times, I no doubt decry the status of images and visuality in favor of textuality. Although I discuss photography and portraiture throughout, extending this work to the later decades of the nineteenth-century and towards the advent of photography would be quite an easy way to disprove or at least complicate what I describe in this project. While Deborah Lutz has argued that photography would eventually “replace” the status of reliquary objects in the economy of mourning, it could easily be argued that Barrett Browning produces a prescient model for the possibilities photography offers in the portrait of Aurora’s mother. In chapter one, I chose to dichotomize the portrait and the library in part because of the work by Lutz celebrating the status of the portrait in her discussion on death masks of the Victorian period. Although not nearly present enough in the chapter, I also found engagement with textual objects and the practice of reading as formative and reparative not only for Aurora, but for Marian and Romney, two figures that eventually became excluded from the chapter as a result of my focus on mourning.

The threads of Romanticism in the piece – particularly in the first chapter with my inclusion of William Wordsworth – provide a means of tracing the poetic literary history of death writing, memorialization, and affective reading that I did not adequately follow up on. Victorian poetry in general offers a large body of poetical work on memorial, death, and the business of writing, which are all latent threads of significance in each chapter presented here. In considering textual objects and genre – books for the possibilities offered in their reading, letters for their impact on the body, and the genre of biography – material and relic culture often took
the place of other significant critical inquiries, especially those of women writers, poets, and the larger history of memorializing loss through writing.

In examining these four primary texts, there is also an implicit and significant time period that received little *explicit* attention in the previous chapters. While not explicit, the texts were in part chosen for their place in time, and there is no doubt an association to be excavated here. For one, each piece read here was published within a single decade of the Victorian period, and all written by women writers. In the future, it could be quite productive to ask the question: why this decade? A more historicist approach to the work here, especially considering the rich reliquary culture of the period, could provide more answers as to why these pieces were constructed with such similar models and ostensible goals of reading and writing. Moreover, as I tend to the question of genre in the final chapter, I found myself unable to explicate the crucial matter of *Aurora Leigh*’s genre and Barrett Browning’s innovation in writing a verse-novel. The question of genre with regards to the verse-novel is perhaps crucial in this piece, although there is not nearly enough time spent dissecting its impact on the effects of reading and mourning in *Aurora Leigh*. The *Bildungsroman* and *Künstlerroman* are both genres at work in the texts analyzed here, inflecting the significance of the subject and the presence of an authorial body that are so crucial to the piece.


