THE BRONTES

THE CAREERS of the three Brontë sisters — Anne, Charlotte, and Emily — conferred a sort of perpetuity upon the whole family. The father's eccentricities, once brought under scrutiny by the fame of the daughters, proved to be rich enough in detail to provide a good store of anecdote. There is, as with all of the family, always some question about what was truth and what fancy.

The Reverend Brontë was a failed writer. He had published *Cottage Poems* and *The Rural Minstrel*, and he certainly had the sedentary habits and wide range of peculiarities that might have assisted a literary career, but perhaps the Reverend was not able to take in enough from the outside to nourish his art. He carried a pistol around with him and sometimes when he was angry found relief by shooting through the open door. It was rumored that he cut up one of his wife's silk dresses out of regard for his strict standards of simplicity and seriousness. For his own part the Reverend Brontë disowned claims to flamboyance and said: "I do not deny that I am somewhat eccentric.... Only don't set me on in my fury to burning hearthrugs, sawing the backs off chairs and tearing my wife's silk gowns."

There were five daughters and one son in the Brontë family, and the father unluckily placed his hopes in his son, Branwell. It is only by accident that we know about people like Branwell who seemed destined for the arts, unable to work at anything else, and yet have not the talent, the tenacity, or the discipline to make any kind of sustained creative effort. With great hopes and at bitter financial sacrifice, Branwell was sent up to London to study painting at the Academy Schools. The experience was wretched for him and he seemed to have sensed his lack of preparation, his uncertain dedication, his faltering will. He never went to the school, did not present his letters of introduction, and spent his money in taverns drinking gin. It finally became necessary to return home in humiliation and to pretend that he had been robbed.

One story has poor Branwell visiting the National Gallery and, in the presence of the great paintings there, despairing of his own talents. This is hard to credit, since the example of the great is seldom a deterrent to the mediocre. In any case, nothing leads us to think Branwell lacked vanity or expansive ideas of his own importance. Also, the deterrent of Branwell's own

nature made any further impediments unnecessary. His nature was hysterical, addictive, self-indulgent. Very early he fell under the spell of alcohol and opium; his ravings and miseries destroyed the family peace, absorbed their energies, and depressed their spirits. He had to be talked to, watched over, soothed, and protected — and nothing really availed. Branwell destroyed his life with drugs and drink, and died of a bronchial infection at the age of thirty-one.

Perhaps the true legacy Branwell left the world is to be found in the extraordinary violence of feeling, the elaborate language of bitterness and frustration in *Wuthering Heights*. It is not unreasonable to see the origin of some of Heathcliff's raging disappointment and disgust in Branwell's own excited sense of injury and betrayal. Emily Brontë took toward her brother an attitude of stoical pity and protectiveness. Charlotte was, on the other hand, in despair at his deterioration, troubled by his weaknesses, and condemning of the pain he brought to the household. It is significant that Charlotte insisted Branwell did not know of the publication of his sisters' poems, nor of the composition of *Wuthering Heights, Jane Eyre*, and *Agnes Grey*. She wrote: "My unhappy brother never knew what his sisters had done in literature — he was not aware that they had ever published a line. We could not tell him of our efforts for fear of causing him too deep a pang of remorse for his own time misspent, and talents misapplied."

Still, in spite of every failure and vice, Branwell always interested people. The news of his promise and default seemed to have spread around quite early. Matthew Arnold included him in his poem "Haworth Churchyard," written in 1855, the year of Charlotte Brontë's death and two years before Mrs. Gaskell's biography. About Branwell, Arnold wrote:

> O boy, if here thou sleep'st, sleep well:
> On thee too did the Muse
> Bright in thy cradle smile;
> But some dark shadow came
> (I know not what) and interposed.

The emergence of the Brontë sisters is altogether a lucky circumstance and nothing is easier than to imagine all of them dying unknown, their works lost.

The father lived to be eighty-four, but, of the children, Charlotte's survival to thirty-nine seemed almost a miracle. Not even she, and certainly not the other two sisters, had the chance to do what they might have. This is especially distressing in the case of Emily. *Wuthering Heights* has a sustained brilliance and originality we hardly know how to account for. It is on a different level of inspiration from her poetry; the grandeur and complication of it always remind one of the leap she might have taken had she lived.

They are an odd group, the Brontës, beaten down by a steady experience of the catastrophic. The success of *Jane Eyre*, the fame that came to Charlotte, were fiercely, doggedly earned. She had struggled for independence not as an exhilaration dreamed of but as a necessity, a sort of grocery to sustain the everyday body and soul. Literary work and the presence of each other were the consolations at Haworth parsonage. There was certainly a family closeness because of the dangers they had passed through in the deaths of their mother and two older sisters. Haworth was a retreat; but part of its hold upon them was a kind of negative benevolence: it was at least better to have the freedom and familiarity of the family than the oppression of the life society offered to penniless, intellectual girls.

A study of the Brontë lives leaves one with a disorienting sense of the unexpected and the paradoxical in their existence. In them are combined simplicities and exaggerations, isolation and an attraction to scandalous situations. They are very serious, wounded, longing women, conscious of all the romance of literature and of their own fragility and suffering. They were serious about the threatening character of real life. Romance and deprivation go hand in hand in their novels. Quiet and repressed the sisters may have been, but their readers were immediately aware of a disturbing undercurrent of intense sexual fantasy. Loneliness and melancholy seemed to alternate in their feelings with an unusual energy and ambition.

In the novels of Charlotte and Anne there is a firm grasp of social pressures and forces; they understand from their own experience that opportunities for independence were likely to be crushing in other ways to the essential spirit and the sense of self. In *Wuthering Heights* the characters are struggling with an inner tyranny, a psychic trap more terrible than the cruelty of society. The characters feed upon themselves and each other. They are set apart, without relation to anything beyond. The young people of the two families have only the trap of each other and the tyranny of the past. The

sweep of existence is stripped of the environmental and the particular. In the same manner, the sense of place, the moors, the houses, are spiritual locations. There is a scarcity of scene painting, even though the sense of place is very strong, as a cell or a dungeon would be. The moors provide the isolation, the loneliness, and the removal that are essential to the story. So even nature is negative, serving to relieve the characters of the expectations of a usual society, of interdependence. It is a created, imagined world, as removed from the governess-novels of the other sisters as any world could be.

Catherine, in *Wuthering Heights*, is nihilistic, self-indulgent, bored, restless, nostalgic for childhood, unmanageable. She has the charm of a wayward, schizophrenic girl, but she has little to give, since she is self-absorbed, haughty, destructive. What is interesting and contemporary for us is that Emily Brontë should have given Catherine the center of the stage, to share it along with the rough, brutal Heathcliff. In a novel by Charlotte or Anne, Cathy would be a shallow beauty, analyzed and despaired of by a reasonable, clever and deprived heroine. She would be fit only for the subplot. There is also an unromantic driven egotism in the characters, a lack of moral longings, odd in the work of a daughter of a clergyman.

Emily Brontë's poetry is constricted by its hymn-tune rhythms and a rather narrow and provincial idea of the way to use her own peculiar visions. The novel form released in her a new and explosive spirit. The demands of the form, the setting, the multiplication of incidents, the need to surround the Byronic principals, Cathy and Heathcliff, with the prosaic — the dogs, the husbands, the family servants, sisters, houses — the elements of fact lift up the dreamlike, compulsive figures, give them life. The plot of *Wuthering Heights* is immensely complicated and yet there is the most felicitous union of author and subject. There is nothing quite like this novel with its rage and ragings, its discontent and angry restlessness.

Wuthering Heights is a virgin's story. The peculiarity of it lies in the harshness of the characters. Cathy is as hard, careless, and destructive as Heathcliff. She too has a sadistic nature. The love the two feel for each other is a longing for an impossible completion. Consolations do not appear; nothing in the domestic or even in the sexual life seems to the point in this book. Emily Brontë appears in every way indifferent to the need for love and companionship that tortured the lives of her sisters. We do not, in her

biography, even look for a lover as we do with Emily Dickinson because it is impossible to join her with a man, with a secret, aching passion for a young curate or a schoolmaster. There is a spare, inviolate center, a harder resignation amounting finally to withdrawal.

The Brontë sisters had the concentration and energy that marked the great nineteenth-century literary careers. When *The Professor* was going the rounds of publishers, Charlotte was finishing *Jane Eyre*. The publication of the *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell* was just barely a publication. A year later only two copies had been sold and the book received merely a few scattered, unimportant notices. Still, it was an emergence, an event, an excitement. Emily had at first resisted publication and was so guarded about the failure of the book that we cannot judge her true feelings. No discouragement prevented the sisters from starting to work, each one, on a novel. The practical side of publication, the proofs, the letters to editors, the seriousness of public authorship were an immensely significant break in the isolation and uncertainty of their lives.

The Brontës had always had a sense of performance, of home performance in their Angria and Gondal plots and characters. And some of them quite early felt their gifts could reasonably claim the attention of the world. Branwell wrote high-handed letters to the editor of *Blackwood's Magazine* saying, "Do you think your magazine so perfect that no additions to its power would be either possible or desirable?" He sent off a note to Wordsworth suggesting, "Surely, in this day when there is not a writing poet worth a sixpence, the field must be open, if a better man can step forward." Wordsworth noted the mixture of "gross flattery" and "plenty of abuse" and did not reply.

Charlotte posted a few poems to Southey. He was not discourteous but delivered the opinion, "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation."

Absolute need drove the Brontë sisters. They were poor, completely dependent upon their father's continuation in his post, and without hopes of anything were he to die. They did receive a small legacy upon the death of Aunt Branwell and they looked upon the income with awe and intense gratitude. But it was not in any sense a living. The sisters were not beautiful, yet their appearance can hardly be thought a gross liability. Their natures, the

scars of the deaths of their mother and sisters, their intellectuality, and their poverty were the obstacles to marriage.

There was also perhaps some disappointment in their father and brother that weighed on their spirits. Branwell's imperfections were large and memorable; the father's were less palpable. He was not a rock — at least not of the right kind. When Charlotte finally married his curate he refused to perform the ceremony and indeed gave up altogether the duty of marrying persons. The Brontë household was in fact a household of women, women living and dead. The sense of being on their own came very early. Each sister felt the weight of responsibility in an acute and thorough way.

The worries that afflicted genteel, impoverished women in the nineteenth century can scarcely be exaggerated. They were cut off from the natural community of the peasant classes. The world of Tess of the D'Urbervilles, for all its sorrow and injustice, is more open and warm and fresh than the cramped, anxious, fireside-sewing days of the respectable. Chaperones, fatuous rules of deportment and occupation drained the energy of intelligent, needy women. Worst of all was society's contempt for the prodigious efforts they made to survive. Their condition was dishonorable, but no approval attached to their efforts to cope with it. The humiliations endured in their work of survival are a great part of the actual material in the fiction of Charlotte and Anne Brontë.

It seems likely that there was a steady downward plunge by alliances with the poorer classes on the part of the desperate daughters of impecunious gentlefolk. And some resolved to move upward, like Becky Sharp, the daughter of a dissolute painter and an opera-singer mother. Becky Sharp had "the dismal precocity of poverty" and the heedless shrewdness of the bohemian world. She spoke of herself as never having been a girl: "...she had been a woman since she was eight years old." Becky Sharp is the perfect contrast to Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe, the heroine of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, two girls with an almost extinguishing sense of determination and accountability. In the Brontë sisters there is a distinctly high tone and low spirit; they retained something of the Methodism of their mother and of the aunt who raised them. Even Branwell, with his flaming indulgences, is a sort of prototypical parson's son who exchanged every prohibition for a license.

Charlotte Brontë wrote: "None but those who had been in a position of a governess could ever realize the dark side of respectable human nature; under

no great temptation to crime, but daily giving way to selfishness and ill-temper, till its conduct toward those dependent on it sometimes amounts to a tyranny of which one would rather be the victim than the inflicter." To be a lady's companion was even worse for a young woman; the caprice and idleness of the old fell down like a shroud upon the young.

Schools had always been traumatic and even murderous for the Brontë children. The two older daughters, Maria and Elizabeth, were sent to the Clergy Daughters' School, an institution especially endowed for girls like themselves who could expect to have to make their own way. It was sponsored by such well-known people of the day as Wilberforce and Hannah More. But the school was, nevertheless, a cruel place — cold, with inadequate, dirty food, and overworked, tyrannical teachers. The children took long freezing walks to church and sat in their cold, damp clothes all day. There was tuberculosis throughout the school, and the condition led to the death of Maria when she was twelve and Elizabeth when she was eleven. Emily and Charlotte were only six and a half and eight years old when they joined their older sisters at the school. They watched with horror and the deepest resentment as the older girls fell ill and were sent home to die.

The mother of the Brontës had died of cancer after bearing six children in seven years. All of these griefs and losses formed the character of the survivors: the religious earnestness of Anne; the withdrawn, peculiar nature of Emily; the stoical determination of Charlotte.

For the sisters, and even for Branwell after his failure as a painter, life seemed to offer nothing except the position of governess or tutor in a private family. This was a hard destiny. The children exploit and torment; the parents exploit and ignore. The social and family position of a governess was ambiguous and led to painful feelings of resentment, envy, or bitter acceptance. The young women who went to work in the houses of the well-to-do were clever and unprotected; one quality seemed to vex their charges and employers as much as the other.

The teacher-governess in fiction is likely, because of the intimate family setting in which she is living her lonely life, to fall into an almost hysterical, repressed eroticism. Henry James noticed the tendency of the governess to be "easily carried away." Both Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe are superior, gifted girls, very much like Charlotte Brontë herself. They are bookish, forthright, skeptical, inclined to moralizing and to making wearisome, patient efforts to

maintain self-esteem and independence. They are defenseless, cast adrift, and yet of an obviously fine quality that shows itself in a tart talent for down-putting retorts. Under the correcting surface they are deeply romantic, full of dreams, and visited by nightmares. They feel a pressing, hurting need for love and yet they work hard to build up resignation to the likelihood that they will have to live bereft of the affections so much wanted. Need and sublimation play back and forth like a wavering light over their troubled consciousness. By these pains they grew into sharp observers, ever anxious to control and manage a threatening despair.

From being a lowly governess in a private house one could hope to rise to the position of a teacher in a boarding school. And beyond that there was the wish to have a school of one's own — that was the hope of the Brontës as they faced their lack of money and the scarcity of possible husbands. Emily hated everything to do with women's education as she knew it in her own day and looked upon her home with its freedom and familiarity as an escape from school. Even for Charlotte, the idea of her own school was a goal but it was not her heart's desire. Instead it was a heavy charge to be thought of as propitious only by comparison with other possibilities.

Governesses were expected to give a shallow training to the young but were not ordinarily allowed the authority or respect that would make the training possible. In Anne Brontë's novel, *Agnes Grey,* the young pupils are so cruel and selfish the book was thought to be an exaggeration. In almost the first meeting with her charges the governess is taken to see a trap set for birds. When she remonstrates with a young pupil about this cruelty he is indifferent; she calls upon the authority of the parents and the boy says:

> "Papa knows how I treat them [the birds] and he never blames me for it; he says it is just what *he* used to do when *he* was a boy. Last summer he gave me a nest full of young sparrows, and he saw me pulling off their legs and heads and never said anything; except that they were nasty things and I must not let them spoil my trousers...."

Writing was an escape from this kind of servitude. In addition to their unusual gifts, the perils of their future created in the sisters a remarkable professionalism. The romantic aspects of their achieving anything at all have

been inordinately insisted upon and the practical, industrious, ambitious cast of mind too little stressed. Necessity, dependence, discipline drove them hard; being a writer was a way of living, surviving, literally keeping alive. They worked to get their books published; they worried about contracts, knew the chagrins and misunderstandings of authorship. Emily was disappointed in the inane reception of *Wuthering Heights*; Charlotte's first novel, *The Professor*, was turned down everywhere. (In fact, the crossed-out publishers' addresses on the manuscript showed her perseverance even if they were somewhat dampening to the receiver.)

In addition to the professionalism of the sisters, there was an unexpected inclination in the family to create scandal. Charlotte's books aroused a sense of unease in the reader and outrage in those people and institutions from real life she used in her stories. There was an oddly rebellious and erotic tone to the imaginings and plot developments of the little governesses.

Mrs. Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* is one of the great English biographies. The two women had been friends, and some months after Charlotte's death in 1855 the Reverend Brontë asked Mrs. Gaskell to compose a memoir of his daughter. The book appeared in 1857 and the author rushed off to Rome for a holiday. Her celebration was soon disturbed by protest. Threats of legal action forced her to make alterations and deletions in the second edition and it was not until almost fifty years later that the original version could be read again.

Mrs. Gaskell's aim had been a true record of her friend's life with some underlining of Charlotte Brontë's "noble" character in order to counteract the accusations of "coarseness" and unruly emotionalism leveled at *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. She suppressed certain findings — the most important was the real truth about Charlotte's experience in Belgium and her falling in love there with M. Heger. She rushed forward with certain other details, such as the truth about the Clergy Daughters' School and, more important, an account of Branwell's relation or infatuation with Mrs. Robinson.

Branwell had gone as a tutor to the Robinson family, where his sister Anne also held a post. He fell in love with Mrs. Robinson, and was turned out of the house by the husband. There was nothing for Branwell to do except to return to Haworth in love and in disgrace, filled with impetuous longings and hysterical hopes. Mr. Robinson was somewhat older than his wife and soon died. When the news reached Branwell he allowed himself to believe he

would now be sent for by his beloved. Instead Mrs. Robinson sent a courier with quite another message, one saying untruthfully that her husband had left her money in his will only on condition that she never see Branwell again. The news was given to Branwell at the Black Bull and here is Mrs. Gaskell's account of his feelings:

> More than an hour elapsed before sign or sound was heard; then those outside heard a noise like the bleating of a calf, and on opening the door, he [Branwell] was found in a kind of fit, succeeding the stupor of grief which he had fallen into on hearing that he was forbidden by his paramour ever to see her again, as if he did, she would forfeit her fortune. Let her live and flourish! He died, his pockets filled with her letters.... When I think of him, I change my cry to heaven. Let her live and repent!

Mrs. Gaskell's work is written with perfect sympathy, an experienced and inspired feeling for detail, and the purest assurance of style. Naturally it did not please in every respect. The father endured but made a list of deeds and traits wrongly attributed to him; Mr. Nicholls, Charlotte's husband, was pained to have Mrs. Gaskell reveal so fully Charlotte's early lack of enthusiasm for his proposal of marriage. Some have defended Emily from a rather bleak portrait by the author; servants gave a happier and healthier account of the parsonage diet than that found in the biography. Out of the withholdings on the one hand and the rash unfoldings on the other Mrs. Gaskell created some vexations for herself and left room for the efforts of future scholars.

Her biography is not only about Charlotte but contains the life of the entire family and certainly, appearing early as it did, gave a tremendous lift to the literary fortunes of the sisters and a boost to the "Brontë story." The book, in addition to being a marvelous work in itself, records the basic material: the town of Keighley, the Haworth parsonage, the anecdotes of home and school, the deaths, the letters, the poignant gifts and hard work of the sisters.

Winifred Gérin, a contemporary Brontë scholar, has spent seventeen years studying the life of the family and has lived for ten years in the village of Haworth. She has taken the family one by one: *Anne Brontë,* 1959; *Branwell*

Brontë, 1961; *Charlotte Brontë: The Evolution of a Genius*, 1967, recently reissued; and in 1971 her final volume, *Emily Brontë*. Of these volumes the most interesting is the study of Charlotte Brontë. She lived longer than the others and her life was more filled with incident.

Mrs. Gérin does her work in a capable and thorough Brontë Society manner. She is an enthusiast, and rather exuberant and traditional in matters of style, and thus there is a good deal about "the beloved moors." She knows what is known at the moment and knows it so surely that she convinces us everything has been discovered, found, filed. In matters of interpretation she is not daring but tends more to an insistence on certain small points. In *Emily Brontë* a mystical, mysterious genius is sketched and colored, but no one and no amount of fact can give flesh to Emily Brontë's character. She is almost impossible to come to terms with, to visualize. At one moment — more violent in Mrs. Gaskell, toned down in Mrs. Gérin — Emily is brutally beating her dog about the eyes and face with her own fists in order to discourage him from his habit of slipping upstairs to take a nap on the clean counterpanes. At another time she is a reverent, pantheistic brooder.

A good deal is made in this book of the emotional strains between Emily and Charlotte. Charlotte's indiscretion in reading the Gondal poems when she found them lying open on a table is more damaging to the sisters' friendliness in Mrs. Gérin's account than in others. There is no doubt about Emily's reserve, her hesitation about publication. Still it seems worthwhile to remember that she did help with the preparation of the book of poems and its failure did not deter her from pressing on with her novel *Wuthering Heights* nor from sending that to a publisher and even writing him about her work on another novel, never finished and now lost.

Mrs. Gérin is very interesting in her presentation of Emily's feeling for Branwell — the most dramatic and deep emotion of her life if we have pieced that life together properly. Quite convincingly, she thinks that Emily's awkward, difficult nature, her own inability to find a life for herself outside her father's house, made her more sympathetic with the defenses and failures of her brother. Whether the sympathy, the tacit acceptance of responsibility for Branwell came from the absence of other claims in her life we cannot know. His sufferings over Mrs. Robinson were taken at face value by the family, anxious like himself to have some frame into which to put his appalling indulgences, his decline into delirium tremens and utter debilitation

of body and spirit. They were willing to believe that his had been a fatal love, a curse.

Emily Brontë's life was as narrow as she could make it; her effort was to reduce her daily prospects and she had far fewer friends than Charlotte. She was away from home only four times: twice in boarding school, once as a teacher, and later in Brussels with Charlotte. All of these "experiences" were painful and abandoned with eagerness. Some of the trouble lay in her unbending nature. She was "stronger than a man, simpler than a child." There was no hope, in Emily Brontë, for conventional feminine behavior, plausible attitudes and manners. In certain ways she seems more damaged and suffering than her sisters, more doomed to solitude and to an inwardness somewhat frightening.

The blindness to the critics to *Wuthering Heights* is perhaps not an unexpected adversity for a work of such brilliant, troubling force. It was called "a disagreeable story," and pronounced "gloomy and dismal." Another reviewer wrote, "We know nothing in the whole range of our fictitious literature which represents such shocking pictures of the worst forms of humanity." When the strength and newness of the book were acknowledged, its power was called "a purposeless power." Charlotte Brontë was perplexed by it and in her introduction to a new edition printed after Emily's death said, "Whether it is right or advisable to create beings like Heathcliff, I do not know: I scarcely think it is." The unremitting tension of *Wuthering Heights* was at variance with Charlotte's mixture of romantic elements and didactic realism.

The last years of Emily Brontë's life are distressing to think about. Her writing stopped and nothing remains from the years 1846 to 1848, when she died at the age of thirty. It is not known whether she destroyed her papers or whether Charlotte, too much bound by her own clarity and reasonableness, judged the unprinted papers not worth preserving. Mrs. Gérin believes Emily's "voices" disappeared. Her work, leaning more upon inspiration than that of her sisters, less subservient to the dominion of the will, might well have slipped into a pause at the end.

There was also her draining dedication to Branwell. "Long after all the Brontë family were dead Emily's goodness to Branwell in his degradation was still village talk. Stories abounded of her waiting up at night to let him in and carry him upstairs when he was too drunk to walk." Branwell was like a

pestilence. He slept all day and stayed up half the night raving. Once he set the bed on fire when he was deeply drugged. “Happening to pass his open door and see the flames, Emily shot down to the kitchen for a ewer of water, before anyone else had recovered from the shock or been able to rouse the supine Branwell.” After this the father took Branwell to sleep in his room.

When Branwell died, there was immediately an inexplicable downward rush to death for Emily also. She had, according to all reports, been healthy, but she never went out again after Branwell’s funeral and three months later she herself was dead. During the interval she spoke hardly at all, would not give consideration to her failing body. Charlotte was appalled by “the great emaciation, her breathlessness after any movement, her racing pulse...her exhausting cough.” Emily refused medical care, yielding only to Charlotte’s frenzy of fear on the last day. When the doctor finally arrived she was dead.

Charlotte’s account of Emily’s death is intensely moving:

> Emily’s cold and cough are very obstinate.... Her reserved nature occasions me great uneasiness of mind. It is useless to question her; you get no answers. It is still more useless to recommend remedies; they are never adopted.... Never in all her life had she lingered over any task that lay before her, and she did not linger now. She sank rapidly. She made haste to leave us. I have seen nothing like it; but indeed, I have never seen her parallel in anything.

There may have been a suicidal feeling in Emily’s essential nature. In her poems and in her novel, death appears more perfect than life; it stands ahead as the ultimate liberty and freedom. “Thou would’st rejoice for those that live, because they live to die....”

When Mrs. Gaskell was preparing her life of Charlotte Brontë she went to Brussels to call on the Heger family. Mme. Heger refused to see her but she spoke with M. Heger and, so it is thought, saw the love letters Charlotte had written him. She did not record either the feelings or the letters in her account of Charlotte, even though the falling in love, the extreme suffering endured because of this love were central experiences in Charlotte Brontë’s life and in her work. Perhaps Mrs. Gaskell had given her word not to reveal the contents

of the letters; more likely it was her own feeling of respect for Charlotte, solicitude for the “image” that made her wish to glide over the whole thing softly and swiftly. This left room for later diggers, and the love affair gets all the attention from them that it failed to receive from Mrs. Gaskell.

Winifred Gérin’s biography gives the fullest account we have of the years at the school in Brussels. The suppressed and then recovered letters are interesting above all as a picture of the pitiable emotional strain endured by a young, inexperienced girl in her efforts to make a life for herself. For the rest, the story of Charlotte Brontë’s letters is like some unfortunate, fantastical turn in one of her own plots. They are very earnest, agonizing documents, overheated, despairing, and intensely felt.

The existence of the letters is itself strange. We are told that M. Heger, supposedly entirely without fault or investment in Charlotte’s passion, tore them up and threw them in the wastebasket. His wife, very brisk and firm in dispatching Charlotte when she sensed her infatuation, for some reason reclaimed the poor letters, thriftily pasted and gummed them together again. Mrs. Gérin has the odd notion that this was done for “evidence,” but it is impossible to see the need for evidence in a case always presented as unilateral — that is, a deep, passionate crush on Charlotte’s part for a man who had no interest whatsoever in her and gave her no reason to hope. In any case, in 1913 M. Heger’s son presented the documents to the British Museum.

Charlotte and Emily Brontë went to Belgium to study French and other subjects in order to prepare themselves for their destiny as teachers. Emily stayed only one year, and when their aunt died, went home gladly in order to run the house for her father. Charlotte returned for a second year to the Pensionnat Heger, where they were studying — going this time as a teacher of English rather than as a pupil. In her decision to return, an anxious fascination with M. Heger certainly played a part, perhaps even the whole part. She wrote about it: “I returned to Brussels after Aunt’s death, against my conscience, prompted by what then seemed an irresistible impulse. I was punished for my selfish folly by a total withdrawal for more than two years of happiness and peace of mind.”

Falling in love with M. Heger laid the ground for the emotional intensity and recklessness in Charlotte Brontë’s novels. She experienced to the fullest a deep, scalding frustration. The uselessness of her love, the dreadful

inappropriateness and unavailability of its object, turned out to be one of those sources of pain that are also the springs of knowledge. Her misery caused her to examine her whole life, to face what lay ahead; and if she found little to be optimistic about, at least she knew how to think deeply, and in a new way, on the condition of loneliness and deprivation. This was important because the condition was then and is always shared by so many. Her familiarity with it was awful.

Reprieve came with the success of *Jane Eyre* and her other books. This novel and the later one, *Villette*, are powerful images of nineteenth-century female feeling. Lucy Snowe and Jane Eyre encourage at every point an identification with Charlotte Brontë herself. The two governesses are orphans, a prudent way of establishing the depth of their desolation. Anne Brontë's novel *Agnes Grey* is somewhat unusual among governess stories in that the girl has both her parents and sets out on her work to help deteriorating family finances. Most governesses in fiction are strangely alone, like sturdy little female figures in a fairy tale. They walk the roads alone, with hardly a coin in their pockets; they undergo severe trials in unfamiliar, menacing places and are rescued by kind strangers. Shadows, desperation, and fears are their reality, even if they go in for a litany of assurances of their own worth and sighs of hope that their virtues will somehow, in some manner, stand them in good stead.

At the Pensionnat Heger in Brussels, Charlotte Brontë — alone, proud, disturbed in mind — was thrown into the middle of an unbalancing family life. She could no more have resisted falling in love with the husband than Branwell could have denied the presence of Mrs. Robinson. At the Heger establishment life was heightened by the fullness and diversity of the responsibilities the couple had undertaken. There were children, domestic engagements, pupils, a school to be run; serious work for both husband and wife as teachers and managers; an important role in the life of the town; relatives, roots, bustle, worries, newness. Charlotte entered this life as if she had suddenly walked upon a stage and begun acting out a part whose limits and privileges had not been decided. One moment she was a family member; the next she was an excluded, ignored employee, a visitor from a foreign country.

In *Villette*, Lucy Snowe suffers a nervous breakdown when she is left alone in the large, empty school at vacation time — an insensitivity perhaps

on the part of the family, but one not always easy to avoid. In real life, during the second year at the school, Charlotte Brontë seemed to have suffered the same lonely anguish and frustration as her heroine, the same sense of abandonment. In the book and in life, the undertow of hysteria and threat was very real.

When she returned to Brussels as a teacher in the school, Charlotte Brontë felt the improvement in her position as a pleasure. Her advancement was further enhanced by the beginning of English lessons in the evening for M. Heger and his brother-in-law. There is no question that the teacher greatly liked this new sense of power and accomplishment — and she cherished the pupil as much as the trust. The wife soon sensed, in the way of wives and headmistresses, the disturbances and storms of an infatuation. The lessons were stopped. This enraged Charlotte Brontë for every possible reason. First it underscored her powerlessness: *that* no amount of intelligence, skill, or hard work seemed to alter. The lessons represented self-esteem, competence, and a chance to be near M. Heger.

In the situation at the Pensionnat, Charlotte is very much like one of her heroines: a poor, clever teacher, rushing to fall in love with the master. The world the governesses inhabit, in the novels and in life, is a place of exclusion. These observant, high-minded, emotional women are desperate in the midst of a worldly social comedy that does not for a moment take them into account. Anne Brontë is thought to have fallen in love with a gay, flirtatious young curate, William Weightman, but this love was a secret suffering, a mute, hidden torment.

Poverty is the deforming condition in love, as the Brontës see it. Poverty makes you unable even to admit your love; in *Villette* poverty turns Lucy Snowe into Dr. John’s confidante and pseudo-sister; it is unthinkable that he should have romantic interest in her even though he obviously values her highly, but merely in a restricted, excluding manner. During Mr. Rochester’s flirtation with the shallow Miss Ingram, Jane Eyre assesses her own values and yet can only express them in a negative evaluation of her rival. About Miss Ingram she thinks:

> She was showy; but she was not genuine; she had a fine person, many attainments, but her mind was poor.... She was not good; she was not

> original. She advocated a high tone of sentiment; but she did not know the sensations of sympathy and pity....

Sympathy, pity, intelligence, goodness, genuineness — these are the charms Charlotte Brontë wishes to impose. There is something a little overblown in the heroine's hope to press virtues upon men who are conventional, and even somewhat corrupt, in their taste in women. The heroine's moral superiority is accompanied by a superiority of passion, a devotion that is highly sexual, more so we feel than that of the self-centered and worldly girls the men prefer. (This same sense of a passionate nature is found in George Eliot's writing.) Charlotte Brontë's heroines have the idea of loving and protecting the best sides of the men they are infatuated with: they feel a sort of demanding reverence for brains, honor, uniqueness. Mr. Rochester, M. Paul, and Dr. John in *Villette* are superior men and also intensely attractive and masculine. Girls with more fortunate prospects need not value these qualities but instead may look for others, money in particular. That is the way things are set up in the novels.

When she arrived in Brussels, Charlotte Brontë was twenty-six and M. Heger was thirty-three. His wife was a few years older. The school, from the evidence of *Villette*, was a battleground of sexual conflict, intellectual teasing, international and religious contraries, and feminine competition. It was a stimulating and unnerving scene. Unconscious wishes drifted through the halls.

Anything irregular in men fascinated Charlotte Brontë. Leslie Stephen may say that "Mr. Rochester has imposed himself on many," but the fact is that Rochester is a creation of great originality and considerable immoral charm. He is a frank and sensuous man for whom the author feels a helpless admiration. He has had a daughter by a mistress and many other affairs. He has an insane wife up in the attic and yet he proposes marriage, or rather marriages, once to a selfish and ridiculous creature and then to Jane Eyre. Of course the idea of a bigamous alliance must be forsworn and Jane flees; still the notion is a beguiling one and has pressed up through the dream life of the author. She had thought of every maneuver for circumventing those stony obstructions of wives who would not remove themselves.

At the Pensionnat Heger, the lessons stopped, trouble grew between

Charlotte and Mme. Heger. Mrs. Gérin believes the wife, according to the convention of Europeans, cleverly, quietly worked to isolate Charlotte and to contain, without scandal or disruption, her overwrought emotions. If we can project the actual wife into the fictional creation of Mme. Beck, the headmistress in *Villette*, we can see that Charlotte had thrust herself against a powerful, interesting woman:

> ...looking up at Madame, I saw in her countenance a something that made me think twice ere I decided. At that instant she did not wear a woman's aspect, but rather a man's. Power of a particular kind strongly limned itself in all her traits, and that power was not *my* kind of power; neither sympathy, nor congeniality, nor submission, were the emotions it awakened. I stood — not soothed, nor won, nor overwhelmed. It seemed as if a challenge of strength between opposing gifts was given, and I suddenly felt all the dishonor of my diffidence, all the pusillanimity of my slackness to aspire.

The two women had some sort of quarrel. (Mrs. Gaskell offers religious difference; Mrs. Gérin insists that it was love for the schoolmaster.) Charlotte gave notice, which was, to her surprise, accepted even though M. Heger intervened and she finished out the term. Then she returned to Haworth and to a long frenzy of love and yearning. The suffering seemed to mount. She wrote letters and pitifully waited for answers. There were answers, supposedly merely advice on starting schools; when she later married, Charlotte destroyed the replies. The mood of the correspondence on her side is painful. "To forbid me to write to you, to refuse to answer me, would be to tear from me my only joy on earth."

The last appeal went out, delivered by the hand of a friend going to Brussels. Charlotte Brontë waited six months for a reply that never came. She had written:

> ...I tell you frankly that I have tried meanwhile to forget you, for the remembrance of a person whom one thinks never to see again and whom, nevertheless, one greatly esteems, frets too much the mind; and when one has suffered that kind of anxiety for a year or two, one is

> ready to do anything to find peace once more. I have done everything; I have sought occupations.... That, indeed, is humiliating — to be unable to control one's own thoughts, to be the slave of a regret, of a memory, the slave of a fixed and dominant idea, which lords it over the mind. Why cannot I have just as much friendship as you, as you for me — neither more nor less? Then should I be tranquil, so free — I could keep silence then for ten years without an effort.

Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe are plain girls. They are touched by every disadvantage and must rely upon intelligence and a measure of ironical self-assertiveness to make an impression upon the world. They have dignity and make a trembling effort to hang on, even to win out. But how are they to do this? Both Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot are hard on the whims of beautiful women; it seems such a pity only pretty girls are able to win that fine, complicated hero the heroines and the authors would like for themselves. But women of intelligence learn resignation. Deprivation and renunciation are sisters. Susceptibility, emotionalism flare up, but duty and common sense and practicality finally keep disaster in check.

In Charlotte Brontë's novels a curious sophistication seems to be the property of the heroines without their even being entirely conscious of it. They understand certain worldly matters, especially those of a crypto-sexual nature. Lucy Snowe's thoughts on a painting in the Brussels museum shocked the novel's hero:

> It represented a woman, considerably larger I thought, than the life.... She was, indeed, very well fed; very much butcher's meat — to say nothing of bread, vegetables and liquids.... She lay half-reclined on a couch — why it would be difficult to say; broad daylight blazed around her; she could not plead a weak spine; she ought to have been standing or at least sitting bolt upright. She had no business to lounge away the noon on a sofa.... Then for the wretched untidiness surrounding her, there could be no excuse. Pots and pans — perhaps I ought to say vases and goblets — were rolled here and there on the foreground; a perfect rubbish of flowers was mixed amongst them, and an absurd and disorderly mass of curtain upholstery smothered the couch and

cumbered the floor. On referring to the catalogue I found that the reproduction bore the name, Cleopatra.

Humiliation is the companion of Lucy Snowe and Jane Eyre. The humiliation has to do with the insupportable greatness of their own responsiveness and the tendency of others simply to forget that these prying, analyzing recorders are just as alive and full of claims as they are themselves. For this reason there is a double-edged quality to the characters and this is part of the hold they have on our interest. Something about them is unexplained; they do not entirely understand themselves and they are, for all their brightness and energy, on the edge of nervous collapse.

Independence is an unwanted necessity, but a condition much thought about. All of one's strength will be needed to maintain it; it is fate, a destiny to be confronted if not enjoyed. Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* addresses itself to the regrets and consolations of lonely women, to the stoicism and patience they try to command. In her life and in her novels you are always dealing with a nettled complication of moods and traits, resolutions and lacks, ambitions and insecurities. The weight of family losses bore down upon her and there is actually something in her of an orphan, the condition she chose for her heroines.

Yet she was enormously energetic and her life was rich with friendships. *She* went back to Brussels and it was Emily who was pleased to stay at home. Charlotte's fictional characters are a defense of herself, of her qualities, and an embodiment of her fantasies. In life, at thirty-nine, she married her father's curate, a nice and devoted man for whom she felt little of the passion experienced long ago in the case of M. Heger. However, familiarity seemed to increase her husband's charms; she liked him better when she saw him in his youthful environment, with those he had grown up among and who cared about him. Then Charlotte Brontë came down with tuberculosis and the complications of pregnancy. She died, on the brink of domestic contentment if not romantic fulfillment.

The Brontë sisters have a renewed hold upon our imagination. They were gifted, well-educated, especially self-educated, and desperate. Their seriousness and poverty separated them forever from the interests and follies

of respectable young girls. It was Charlotte's goal to represent the plight of plain, poor, high-minded young women. Sometimes she gave them more rectitude and right thinking than we can easily endure, but she knew their vulnerability, the neglect they expected and received, the spiritual and psychological scars inflicted upon them, the way their frantic efforts were scarcely noticed, much less admired or condoned.

How to live without love, without security? Hardly any other Victorian woman had thought as much about this as Charlotte Brontë. The large, gaping flaws in the construction of the stories — mad wives in the attic, strange apparitions in Belgium — are a representation of the life she could not face; these gothic subterfuges represent the mind at a breaking point, frantic to find any way out. If the flaws are only to be attributed to the practice of popular fiction of the time, we cannot then explain the large amount of genuine feeling that goes into them. They stand for the hidden wishes of an intolerable life.

Wuthering Heights is free of these failures because Emily Brontë did not think of the lovers in any usual domestic terms. Their feeling can never be consummated and brought down to routine and security. The novel is on a plane higher than those of the other sisters, since it is not bound by the daily, the ordinary — a thirst for the usual arrangements of life without the possibility of achieving them except as the result of outlandish interventions and accidents. Jane Eyre is always saving Mr. Rochester — when he falls from his horse, when there is a fire, when he is stricken with blindness. This is the circuitous path to dominance imagined by a luckless girl. *Wuthering Heights* is close to the regressive, to the anarchy of instinct; but Charlotte's books understand the need sometimes to fall back upon a dour superiority of mind and will.

All of the Brontë sisters carried about with them the despondency of their class and situation. We are astonished by what they would *not* endure. They rejected the servitude of fixed attitudes and careers, the slavery of poorly paid work; they resented the insufferable indifference of shallow people to the effort and exigency of those less fortunately placed. The sisters seized upon the development of their talents as an honorable way of life and in this they were heroic.