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SELECTIONS FROM

THE BRONTËS

Being Extracts from the Novels of
Charlotte and Emily Brontë

EDITED BY

H. A. TREBLE

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PREFACE

THE reaction of modern times against what is usually called Victorianism—a reaction affecting such different writers as Dickens, Tennyson, and Browning—has led to general neglect of the once famous Brontë sisters and their work. *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Villette* are regarded nowadays as a somewhat overwrought and eccentric articulation of woman's earliest struggle for freedom from the bonds of mid-nineteenth-century convention. The masculine and half-sinister atmosphere, which even to us in these days of an almost complete emancipation seems to cling to their work, has helped to keep alive an early prejudice that placed *Jane Eyre* on a kind of Index Expurgatorius and condemned the work of Emily and Charlotte as an outburst of unwomanly passion. Time and changing custom have only emphasized the present neglect. True, the perverse criticism of to-day, habitually mistaking crudity for originality and eccentricity for genius in ancient and modern alike, has hailed *Wuthering Heights* as a psychological *tour de force*; but even that unique novel gathers dust on the book-shelf; it is a past and outworn triumph. While Jane Austen has been exalted—and rightly exalted—in modern critical judgment, the Brontës and George Eliot have for the most part had to give way before the more ephemeral smartness of women writers of to-day.

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Little apology, therefore, is needed for a book of extracts which have been chosen to represent the best elements in the work of Charlotte and Emily Brontë. The nature description, so finely reminiscent of the atmosphere of their bleak moorland home, the characterization, and the peculiar autobiographical interest which literary magazines have unnecessarily exploited during the past few years, have their place in this selection. It may indeed be claimed that the passages printed here are part of the best literature of the last century.

The Introduction owes, of necessity, much to Mrs Gaskell's *Life* and to the late Clement Shorter's work on the Brontës.

H. A. TREBLE

CROYDON
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INTRODUCTION

It is very difficult to approach, and almost impossible to interpret, the work of the Brontë sisters except by way of their life. Mrs Gaskell and, in our own time, the late Mr Clement Shorter have revealed to us as much as we need to know of their inner life and character. The parish register, with its familiarly laconic entries, fixes for us the land where they dwelt in body and, for the most part, in spirit:

Baptisms solemnized in the parish of Bradford and Chapelry of Thornton in the County of York[1]

When baptized	Child's Christian Name	Parents' Names		Abode	Quality, Trade or Profession	By whom the Ceremony was Performed
		Christian	Sur-Name			
1816 29th June	Charlotte daughter of	The Rev. Patrick and Maria	Brontë	Thornton	Minister of Thornton	Wm. Morgan Minister of Christ Church Bradford
1817 July 23	Patrick Branwell son of	Patrick and Maria	Brontë	Thornton	Minister	Jno. Fennell officiating Minister
1818 20th August	Emily Jane daughter of	The Rev. Patrick and Maria	Brontë A.B.	Thornton Parsonage	Minister of Thornton	Wm. Morgan Minister of Christ Church Bradford
1820 March 25th	Anne daughter of	The Rev. Patrick and Maria	Brontë	Minister of Haworth		Wm. Morgan Minister of Christchurch Bradford

[1] Taken from Clement Shorter's *The Brontës and their Circle*.

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It also reminds us of their descent from Patrick Brontë, "Minister of Thornton," a stern parish priest whom later investigation has taught us to admire rather than despise. Thus it records those two elemental facts, of countryside and home, which reveal themselves so clearly in the life and work of the daughters. Their Yorkshire was a land remote, bleak, unfriendly; and their spiritual outlook inherited something of its wild loneliness. Home, with its stern and religious discipline, threw them back on an introspective imagination that throve well on the rude romance of their surroundings. Perhaps, even, some slight Celtic strain in their father's blood bequeathed to his children that weirdness and belief in "fey" which characterizes all the novels. Even young Branwell, who caused father and sisters so much pain, had a portion of the heritage, which he but wasted, like a prodigal, with riotous living.

The three sisters were born between the years 1816 and 1820 at Thornton in Yorkshire, and Charlotte, the first-born of the three, was the last of them to die, in 1855. Emily was just thirty when she died, and Anne only twenty-nine. The life of Anne makes the simplest and shortest chronicle. She lived it all, with a gentle charm and grace foreign to her sisters, within the bounds of her native county. Only two positions as governess—both faithfully described in *Agnes Grey*—punctuated her short life. *Agnes Grey* breathes a little of her gentleness; *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is merely her futile attempt to emulate the grim romance of *Wuthering Heights*. Her pathetic little poem

> I hop'd that with the brave and strong
> My portion'd task should lie

stands in similar contrast to Emily's defiant

> No coward soul is mine.

It may be, too, that Charlotte, portraying the virility and strength of Emily in Shirley Keeldar, described in

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Catherine Helstone her youngest sister's gentleness. We cannot but be glad, however, that Anne's name, which would else have been forgotten, has survived in the brighter glory of her sisters'.

The lives of Charlotte and Emily were more eventful. Up to Emily's death in 1848 they may be taken as one, though, except for the actual periods at the Haworth home and a brief nine months in Brussels, they were not lived together. But the chief experiences of life were common to the two sisters. They may be summed up briefly thus:

1. Early years at home at Haworth [1816–24].
2. School Life—
   (*a*) at Cowan Bridge (the "Lowood" of *Jane Eyre*) [1824–25].
   (*b*) at Roe Head: Charlotte, 1831–2; Emily, 1835.
3. Governess Life in England [1837–40]:
   Charlotte at Stonegappe and Harrogate; Emily for a few months at Halifax.
4. Life at the Pensionnat Héger, Brussels:
   Charlotte, 1842, 1843–44; Emily, 1842.
5. Later Days at Haworth [1844–48]:
   Visit of Charlotte and Emily to London, July 1848; death of Branwell, September 1848; death of Emily, December 1848.

To this brief summary, which is adequate to the outward life of Emily, must be added those experiences that made Charlotte's life fuller and richer than that of her sisters. An inexplicable charm drew to her, quite early in life, two lovers; the later years brought two more. The first two were curates, and the faint memory of them is perhaps enshrined in the curates of *Shirley*. One of the later lovers was an official in the firm of her publishers, and the other was the Rev. Arthur Nicholls, her father's curate, to whom she was eventually married. Recent years have brought to light a possible love-story which

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exceeded all the others in fire and devotion. Charlotte herself has told the tale in *Villette*—as the passionate love of Lucy Snowe for M. Paul Emanuel. It is said that during her second visit to Brussels in 1843 Charlotte *lived* the story which she has depicted with such power and desperate reality; that, in fact, Lucy Snowe was Charlotte Brontë and Paul Emanuel was M. Héger, the Professor of the Pensionnat. The facts matter but little here and, except as they shed a new light on *Villette*, are better left alone.

The later years, that brought her a husband, gave her also a distinguished friend. Thackeray had read and admired *Jane Eyre*, and in her visits to London in 1850 and 1851 its author benefited by his personal friendship. Nevertheless these later years had their sorrow, for the prodigality of Branwell and the death of her two sisters had left Charlotte very much alone. *Shirley*, which was published in the year after Emily's death, betrays a sadness and gloom prevailing in spite of a growing fame and prosperity.

Out of the brief and restricted life of Emily have emerged a few poems, notable for their fierce strength, and one novel, *Wuthering Heights*. That book is unique in English. Its importance and intrinsic worth have been variously estimated, simply because it is possible to regard it in two totally different ways. Let it be considered an *objective* book, one of the many attempts at romantic tragedy in English, and in spite of, or even because of, its crude strength, it remains a violent, hectic failure. But if it is thought of as a *subjective* book, a revelation of the soul of Emily, it may take the place which some critics have given it among the greatest works of women writers. And, after all, the subjective interpretation is probably the truer. It was Matthew Arnold who wrote of the "passion, vehemence, grief, daring" of this woman's soul[1], and no less a person than Charlotte who

[1] *Haworth Churchyard, April* 1855.

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pictured it in the life of Shirley Keeldar. The fierce, proud mental courage and physical rigour that fashioned the grim tale of Heathcliff and Earnshaw was characteristic of the woman who could sear the mad dog's bite with a hot iron. That incident, true of Emily and recorded of Shirley, affords some insight into the heart of both Charlotte and her sister; and we are left to postulate a subjective rather than an objective *Wuthering Heights*—a tale beaten, crudely enough maybe, out of the spiritual experience of her brief life.

In treating of Charlotte and her work we are on surer ground. The essence of her best and highest writing is autobiographical. Her life, which had three main periods, is recorded faithfully in her three chief novels. The greatness of *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* lies in that frank spiritual revelation of their writer; and if *Shirley* is less revealing, it is only because in that book Charlotte tried to be more objective in theme and character, and to picture her own life, as in a glass darkly, through the life of her sister. The other lesser novel, *The Professor*, which had to wait for a publisher, has a charm of its own as a miniature of what was to become a full picture in *Villette*.

That self-interpretation which we have seen to be the key-note of the work of all the sisters is evident in both the general treatment and the detail of the novels. It is interesting to look at the natural background and see therein the spiritual atmosphere of the revelation. Even Anne faintly pictures the cold and rainy gloom of her setting; but the passive Nature in her writings develops, with Charlotte, into animate being, throbbing with the writer's own heart, like the storm in *Lear*; and with Emily into a cruel, malignant, but impersonal thing that, in the remarkable opening chapters of *Wuthering Heights*, makes even the snow seem dark and sinister. But beyond that half-Shakespearean "first scene," there is in Emily's book but little deliberate nature-description—only that

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bleak background to the tragedy of the Heathcliffs, Earnshaws, and Lintons.

Charlotte differs from Emily in the degree of her power for nature-description, and partly in her attitude. To her, Nature was a more intimate thing, a sharer in human passions; there is about her work (as, indeed, there is about the work of such great artists as Shakespeare and Mr Hardy) a continual belief in, and exposition of, what has been called "the pathetic fallacy." But she had, too, in the descriptions themselves, the keen eye and sure hand of the artist. Various critics have praised that superb sense of colour and form which she betrays, half casually, in the description of the pictures which Jane Eyre showed to Mr Rochester:

> These pictures were in water-colours. The first represented clouds, low and livid, rolling over a swollen sea: all the distance was in eclipse; so, too, was the foreground; or rather the nearest billows, for there was no land. One gleam of light lifted into relief a half-submerged mast, on which sat a cormorant, dark and large, with wings flecked with foam....

It is worth noticing that that same love of pictures and their descriptions is reproduced also in both *Villette* and *Shirley*. Her eye—the artist's eye—made a faithful portrayal, even if the heart often lifted Nature up into imagination and passion. The tints were generally sombre and the landscape desolate. There is but little of spring and summer in any of the novels, and if by chance a warm June or July day creeps in, there is usually, far off or near, the threatening of thunder. Yet Charlotte can be tranquil with the beautiful sadness of winter. After the pain and sordidness of Lowood, with the kindly Mrs Fairfax and Thornfield Hall promising better things, she is in such a mood of tranquillity; and that second maturer part of Jane Eyre's life begins with what is nothing less than a January idyll:

> It was three o'clock; the church bell tolled as I passed under the belfry: the charm of the hour lay in its approaching dim-

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ness, in the low-gliding and pale-beaming sun. I was a mile from Thornfield, in a lane noted for wild-roses in summer, for nuts and blackberries in autumn, and even now possessing a few coral treasures in hips and haws, but whose best winter delight lay in its utter solitude and leafless repose. If a breath of air stirred, it made no sound here; for there was not a holly, not an evergreen to rustle, and the stripped hawthorn and hazel bushes were as still as the white, worn stones which causewayed the middle of the path. Far and wide, on each side, there were only fields, where no cattle now browsed; and the little brown birds, which stirred occasionally in the hedge, looked like single russet leaves that had forgotten to drop.

But the winds soon begin to ride through *Jane Eyre*. On the night before that broken wedding, the gale blows about the house, in wild and fearful harmony with Jane's dream. Even when she returns, long afterwards, to the blind and ageing Rochester at Ferndean, it was "just ere dark on an evening marked by the characteristics of sad sky, cold gale, and continued small penetrating rain."

In *Villette* the relief of a brighter Nature is withheld just as sternly and deliberately, except, perhaps, on the one occasion of Madame Beck's fête, when the sun did shine for a whole day while Lucy Snowe, ironically enough, sat imprisoned in the attic learning her part at the command of the excited and irate Paul Emanuel. Autumn is even more pitiless than it is in *Jane Eyre*. During that long vacation at the Pensionnat when October draws in, the raging storm and beating rain crush Lucy with a deadly paralysis. The tempest tosses her as a leaf and she is broken in its desolation. It is winter-time, with snow, while she dwells in the comfort of Mrs Bretton's love and Graham's stately kindness; but there is a "November drizzle" on the night when she returns to Madame Beck's. After that the atmosphere in *Villette* is electrically charged, like Paul Emanuel's mind and heart. There are few better things in the novels than that description of the thunderstorm which broke

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over Villette when Lucy had called at the house of Madame Walravens and Père Silas, and had heard the ancient love of her professor (see pp. 42–5). But the electric air is apparent often, both in and out of doors. It makes Lucy tremble a little when she is hiding her letters in the pear-tree from the prying eyes of Madame Beck and Monsieur Paul:

> The air of the night was very still, but dim with a peculiar mist, which changed the moonlight into a luminous haze. In this air, or this mist, there was some quality—electrical, perhaps—which acted in strange sort upon me. I felt then as I had felt a year ago in England—on a night when the aurora borealis was streaming and sweeping round heaven, when, belated in lonely fields, I had paused to watch that mustering of an army with banners—that quivering of serried lances—that swift ascent of messengers from below the north star to the dark, high keystone of heaven's arch.

There is Charlotte the artist again, painting this time a picture of wild flaming colour.

In *Shirley* Nature, like everything else, is more objective, less "personal." *Shirley* is, indeed, the most Yorkshire of all the novels, and its Nature is of the land rather than of the atmosphere. Hollow's Cottage, Briarmains, and "the extensive and solitary sweep of Nunnely Common" make a lone physical background, suggesting, however faintly, that mute, strong "presence" with which a later novelist was to endue Egdon Heath. Here, too, is that queer sense of irony which has been noted already in connection with Madame Beck's fête: it is a beautiful summer night when Moore's mill is attacked, and Shirley and Caroline Helstone watch the human tumult against the calm of starlit sky. But their unquiet, restless loves move with slow and troublous progress against the cold background of the countryside. The book is full of neutral tones, having but little of that vital description which characterizes *Jane Eyre*, and especially *Villette*. But here and there Nature becomes suggestively sad, as

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if it were in a ballad. Thus, when Moore and Yorke are immersed in their confessional of love and life at Rushedge, Yorke turns suddenly:

"The moon is up," was his first not quite relevant remark, pointing with his whip across the moor. "There she is, rising into the haze, staring at us wi' a strange red glower. She is no more silver than old Helstone's brow is ivory. What does she mean by leaning her cheek on Rushedge i' that way, and looking at us wi' a scowl and a menace?"

And over the subsequent scene of the attempted murder of Moore the same moon shines calmly, reflecting her blood-red light:

"What now?" Moore said, addressing his horse, which, hearing the ripple of water, and feeling thirsty, turned to a wayside trough, where the moonbeam was playing in a crystal eddy.

"Yorke," pursued Moore, "ride on: I must let him drink."

....A fierce flash and sharp crack violated the calm of night. Yorke, ere he turned, knew the four convicts of Birmingham were avenged.

It would not be unfair to either book to compare the Nature depicted in *Shirley* with that in *Wuthering Heights*: the crude strength of Emily balancing the finer artistry of Charlotte in framing the lone Yorkshire background for the story.

The treatment of Nature in the novels cannot be left without some reference to that suggestion of the supernatural which pervades the books. We are early introduced to it in *Wuthering Heights* in the cold white hand of Catherine Linton at the window, stretched out of the midnight snow. It rings through *Jane Eyre* in the wild, mysterious shriek of Rochester's mad wife; and it is conjured up less fearfully by that queer but powerful scene where Rochester, disguised as an old fortune-teller, drawls out to Jane Eyre astoundingly true words about her life and heart. In *Villette* it appears as the nun who steps conveniently out of the legend of the garden

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to frighten poor Lucy Snowe when she ascends to the attic, or walks quietly in the *allée défendue*. *Shirley*, perhaps, lacks it, unless we feel a supernatural foreboding all through the book, born of the whispering anger that surrounds Moore, the real centre of the story.

But this feature, wherever and however it comes, is part of something deeper in the nature of Emily and Charlotte. To the two sisters romance seemed to spell the ugly, the sinister, even the grim. The "supernatural solicitings" are but the outward reflection of the romantic presentiment of an overshadowing evil. There is a queer, and perhaps accidental, illustration of this in three of the novels, *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Shirley*, in each of which so homely and familiar a thing as a dog seems to appear with some foreboding of disaster to come. It appears, even more clearly, in some of the characters themselves—Heathcliff's brutality, Rochester's ugliness, Mrs Yorke's angularity, Madame Beck's silent steps and spying eyes. Some of this dark romance is the result of a lack of humour. The bleak greyness of the novels becomes, in itself, unnatural, unrelieved as it is by the sunshine with which a Shakespeare and a Hardy would both brighten and intensify their tragedy.

That "masculinity" of thought which had its outward expression in the assumed names of the sisters—Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell—was apparent particularly in their characterization. Their portrayal of Nature is unfeminine, of human nature, less feminine still. Emily hardly draws characters at all. She personifies hatred and bitterness, fierceness and revenge; hews her Heathcliff and Earnshaw out of stone, violently and crudely, but leaves them with a certain terrible strength. Charlotte, artist as she was, had nothing of the skill for delicate miniature which so characterized Jane Austen. The two greatest characters of her novels are but two pictures of the same living woman, and that woman Charlotte Brontë herself. Here we have the essence of what has

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been called her "spiritual biography." It is interesting to trace in the characters of Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe those essential qualities of mind and heart that belonged to the writer herself; to set the other men and women of the novels in the light of the two governesses who served faithfully at Thornfield and at the Rue Fossette, but had so strong and passionate a soul behind the patient service. Plain, simply dressed, governess in the house of Rochester, teacher of English in the school of Madame Beck—that is the background for the workings of the heart. So parson Brontë's daughter lived unassuming, sturdily independent, decided in love and hatred, at school and home, as governess in England and at the Pensionnat des Dames. The outward and the inward flame she has portrayed in two different degrees and in two different scenes. There is an almost dogged steadiness, broken by grief and pain after the dramatic wedding scene, in Jane Eyre's love for Rochester. But the dour Northern passion becomes a fierce burning flame in Lucy Snowe's love for Paul Emanuel. The two descriptions build up the one character.

But if the novelist could picture herself with truth and vigour, she had some difficulty with the characters which she grouped around her. In the main, it is true, they are from life; but they are often curiously warped and even unjustly drawn. Perhaps it is natural for a woman to falter in portraying another woman. Even the minor characters, like Mrs Reed in *Jane Eyre*, Ginevra Fanshawe and Zélie St Pierre in *Villette*, Hortense Moore and Mrs Yorke in *Shirley*, are overdrawn by that rather bitter prejudice which seemed to possess Charlotte—the same prejudice that made a Lowood out of the merely gloomy and colourless Cowan Bridge. The truth is that Charlotte, like most "strong" women, was as deficient in real sympathy as in humour. When she tries to be tender, she is merely patronizing, as in the picture of Caroline Helstone. With her, quiet force could cover a multitude of sins. There is more than a trace of admira-

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tion in Lucy Snowe for Madame Beck. All the cat-like, spying methods of Madame seem to be condoned for the sake of that iron strength with which she ruled everybody, from her kinsman Paul down to "*la portresse*." And that admiration, characteristic of Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe alike, is reflected objectively in the picture of Shirley. Shirley is Charlotte's symbol of womanhood; a description of Emily; but more than that—a personification of that masculinity which is typical of both sisters. Caroline Helstone is the Victorian woman, working her sampler, pining for love, wondering at Miss Keeldar, her friend. But that friend knows no convention. To be "Shirley Keeldar, Esq." is a fond yet serious imagination of her mind. She bursts those bonds which fettered other women to a tradition of sweet, inactive simplicity. With one swift tumultuous torrent she overwhelms the amazed Mr Sympson—personification of that foolish masculine authority which could no more curb the woman's will than a few rioters could stop the onward progress of Moore's machines. She flings Donne into the street for presuming upon the mere fact that he was a man. Even Moore is humbled to the dust by the woman whom he thought to honour by what she deemed his paltry love. Jane Eyre, Lucy Snowe, Shirley Keeldar are true characters; but they are also the mouthpiece of that woman's longing for emancipation which had its fulfilment about eighty years afterwards, in our own times.

"Author's heroines," says Caroline Helstone, "are almost as good as an authoress's heroes." "Not at all," says Shirley; "women read men more truly than men read women."

That is a piece of Charlotte's self-revelation, both as novelist and as woman. She had a certain pride in reading men's hearts, and a sure confidence in her diagnosis. Her father's latest curate and M. Héger of Brussels afforded her equal practice in her peculiar art. There is a special interest, therefore, in the men of the novels. Three stand

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out particularly—Mr Rochester, M. Paul Emanuel, and Gérard Moore. They make a strange trio; and the woman who portrays them reveals in herself a queer love of that mingled gloom and passion which marks her heroes. Rochester is ugly of frame and darkly passionate of heart; Paul Emanuel is well-nigh laughable in the violence of his hate and love; Gérard Moore is as grim and rigid as one of his own machines, and as unhuman, till the combined force of Shirley and a bullet humanizes him for the love of Caroline Helstone. It was doubtless her own strong will and masculine independence that caused her to depict men thus. She admires in men (and perhaps in women) a mental strength that is apt to verge on brutality. Physical strength does not satisfy her; Malone in *Shirley* is dismissed, for all his muscle, as lightly as the little effeminate Sweeting. It is curious to observe how even the secondary characters have some share of that mental resolution she admires so much. The ending of *Jane Eyre* is almost lyric with the asceticism of St John Rivers:

> He entered on the path he had marked for himself; he pursues it still. A more resolute, indefatigable pioneer never wrought amidst rocks and dangers. Firm, faithful, and devoted,...he labours for his race; he clears their painful way to improvement; he hews down like a giant the prejudices of creed and caste that encumber it. He may be stern; he may be exacting; he may be ambitious yet; but his is the sternness of the warrior Greatheart, who guards his pilgrim convoy from the onslaught of Apollyon.

But, for all this, he has not the passion to satisfy Jane Eyre's love; for that she has to return to Rochester of the scarred face and blinded eyes. So, in the later novel, Graham Bretton, as boy and man, stalks up and down the pages as a kind of guardian angel to Lucy in loneliness, tempest, and fire. But his love rewards her with only a few casual letters, which she leaves mouldering in the old pear-tree when the fire of Emanuel has set her heart

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aflame. In *Shirley* the situation changes a little. For a while Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe mislead us and themselves as to their true lovers; but this misleading amounts, in Shirley, to a dramatic perversity. It is an unexpected *dénouement* when Shirley's strength of mind is conferred on Louis Moore's aesthetic sentiment, and Caroline's gentleness on Gérard's proud imperious will.

But of all Charlotte's men Paul Emanuel is the most interesting because he is the most human. Both Rochester and Moore have something of the monster about them; but if we dig deep beneath the wayward eccentricity we find a man in M. Paul. For once, with the "austere regard," the burning passion, there is evident, if only fitfully, a touch of tenderness in Lucy's passion for her professor. *Villette* is, after all, the greatest evidence for the conjectured Héger love-story. Lucy Snowe's love is a matter of Charlotte Brontë's heart rather than a figment of her imagination. It is no wonder, then, that Emanuel is drawn with an intensity of truth, a vividness born of the experience of a woman naturally passionate and strong in mind and spirit. True, the exaggeration is so great as sometimes to become ludicrous. Paul moves and speaks like a fury. He raves in the class-room, storms up and down the garden and in the hall, shouts his invectives against England and Englishwomen when Lucy brings him nothing at his birthday fête. But where Rochester and even Moore are coldly sinister figures, Emanuel is moved by an excitable, childlike humanity, which makes us love him as we should love a wayward boy. His excesses are too often the strong petulant reaction to the lofty independence of "Mademoiselle Lucie" for us to give him anything but sympathy. And here and there the simple *naïveté* has in it a streak of gentleness which Charlotte portrays in no other character, not even in herself as Jane Eyre or Lucy Snowe.

The minor characters need but little comment. They are also, for the main part, actual pictures. It is interesting

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to notice, in the three chief novels, how Charlotte's firm will and independent mind fall back, now and then, upon a comfortable, familiar homeliness—as if she would rest a little from the outward turmoil and stress. So Jane Eyre warms to Mrs Fairfax as she sits, quietly reminiscent, the cat on her knee; Lucy Snowe is happy and content with Mrs Bretton to wait upon her during the days of nervous prostration; Caroline Helstone braves the valley of the shadow of death in the soft, but unknown, mother-love of Mrs Pryor. That escape from the passionate is particularly apparent in *Shirley*. Here Mr Yorke, Mr Hall, and even old Helstone (the somewhat unjust picture of Patrick Brontë) at once tone down and throw into relief the wilder elements in the tale. We are again reminded of the later novelist, who, in a grander and more skilful way, set the dark passions of Troy and Boldwood against the steady calm of Gabriel Oak.

The reference to Mr Hardy leads on naturally to a comparison and a contrast. He shares with Charlotte and Emily Brontë a love of melodrama. It is as dominant in *Far from the Madding Crowd* or *The Mayor of Casterbridge* as it is in *Jane Eyre*. It becomes a defect, an offence against art, in his work as well as in that of the Brontës. But it is also as natural to him as to them. He is of the West, they of the North; he depicts, in scenes made sometimes unnaturally vivid, the poignancy of sorrow; they, in similar scenes, depict its crude, bare hardness. His heritage is of Wessex, theirs of Yorkshire. There is a geographical difference of attitude to grief and tragedy. Yet that is not all. Mr Hardy had a supreme gift which neither Charlotte nor Emily Brontë ever had. A careful reading of all the Brontë novels will not discover a solitary gleam of true humour. There is a wry turn of language sometimes, especially in Charlotte, a kind of intellectual smile—no more. But Mr Hardy has the heart-felt elemental humour of Shakespeare; he re-creates and revivifies the spirit of Peter Quince, Bully

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Bottom, and Autolycus. In the Brontës not only is there little gentleness; there is no laughter of the heart.

It is profitable, too, to compare the work of the sisters with that of two other women novelists of their century—Jane Austen and George Eliot. Jane Austen painted upon a tiny canvas; her work was exquisite in its detail. She had a wonderful sensitiveness to little things. Life, as she knew it, lay within the confines of an English village. Above all, she watched and depicted the humour and irony of that world which she had made her own. Charlotte Brontë, painting with fiercer strokes on a wider mental canvas, lacked completely that exquisiteness of touch and thought which has secured for Jane Austen the highest place among women novelists. Now and then in *Shirley* there is the attempt at satire—in the curates and the Sympsons; but we are left sighing for Mr Collins and Mrs Bennett. It seems strange that the woman who in the preface to *Jane Eyre* expressed so great an admiration for the satire and humour of Thackeray should herself be devoid of both. But the remark of Scott about her littleness of interests while England was shaken by the Napoleonic wars throws light upon Jane Austen's genius. Her littleness was, after all, the essence of greatness. Charlotte Brontë is the lesser novelist because she had no eye for those fine points which make the comedy or tragedy of character. In her girlhood days she, like Shirley, had turned her eyes away from the men about her to give an odd, pompous love to "Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington." She could see only the broad outlines of character, as if she surveyed it from afar.

George Eliot stands, perhaps, a little nearer to the Brontës. She has humour, it is true; and her novels have a softer, a southern aspect that contrasts strongly with the cold moorland atmosphere of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. Her humour itself gives her more pathos, more humanity. Nowhere among the Brontë characters is there a Hetty Sorrel, or a Maggie Tulliver, or such an

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idyll as Silas Marner's love for Effie. Yet there are traces, even outside her deliberate "preaching," of that sense of tragic evil and brooding sorrow that marks Charlotte's work; and a hint of that austerity with which both Emily and Charlotte faced life and destiny.

The style of the Brontës needs but little comment. *Wuthering Heights* is as crude in its language as it is in theme. There are in it the petulant strokes of the painter with an eye for colour, but none of the niceties of the artist who cares for harmony and beauty of form. We have noted that Charlotte had that very sense of artistry which Emily lacked. The Nature passages already quoted exemplify to the full her observance of Nature and her skill in expression when she set out to describe what she saw. In such descriptions, and, indeed, throughout her books, she had a virility of style and an aversion from the merely passive which give to some of the chapters an unreal, exaggerated force. That love of "active" language is reflected in her abundant use of French, not only throughout *Villette*, but also here and there in *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*. It was a love which, having its origin in her own passionate spirit, was naturally intensified during her Continental sojourn. Hence we find that the purely narrative parts of the novels move quickly. There is a swift and sure description at the moment of climax or crisis—Rochester and Jane Eyre at the altar, Paul Emanuel's birthday, the fight at Hollow's Mill. Nevertheless, the three chief novels are long and slow in the development of plot. They are full of what we should call to-day psychological explanations, philosophic deductions, presented usually in those confidential "asides" and appeals to the reader which were so beloved of Victorian writers. Thus the natural force of language, at its strongest and best in the simple narrative, too often spends itself in moral and philosophic argument. George Eliot's habit of preaching, which spoils for us the artistry of *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss*, forms an

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obvious parallel to Charlotte's persistent commentary on character and incident. It is, perhaps, interesting to note how the stern Christianity of the Haworth days often inspired Charlotte to enrich her dullest philosophies with references to the grimmer stories and characters of the Old Testament. But that love and knowledge of the Bible were perhaps as natural to her as they have been to every great prose-writer in English since 1611.

The Brontës are experiencing to-day that reaction of criticism which has been the fate, in turn, of most of the Victorian writers. George Eliot and even Thackeray and Dickens have suffered eclipse with them. Only the passing of years can bring the clear vision and the just estimate, and we can feel that something at least of the strange genius of Charlotte and Emily will remain for the reckoning of posterity.

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BIBLIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

1. *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell.* London, Aylott and Jones, 8 Paternoster Row, 1846. This was the title of the first published work of the sisters. The book was printed at their own expense, and only two copies were sold. Remainder copies were afterwards bound up by Messrs Smith and Elder. In modern times *The Professor* and the *Poems* are usually printed together in one volume (e.g. *The World's Classics* edition). Except for the intrinsic worth of one or two of Emily's poems, this collection is of interest only as the early work of genius that developed later in another direction.

2. *Jane Eyre* was sent to Messrs Smith and Elder on their courteous rejection of *The Professor* (probably as being too short for success in the days of the three-volume novel). The MS. was "read" by Mr W. S. Williams, the firm's official reader, was immediately accepted, and was published in October 1847. There was at once much speculation concerning the identity of the author, and many violent criticisms were hurled at its so-called "bad taste." These criticisms Charlotte answered in the Preface to the second edition, in which she also paid a tribute to the work of Thackeray.

3. *Wuthering Heights* by Ellis Bell and *Agnes Grey* by Acton Bell were published together as a three-volume novel by Thomas Newby in December 1847, three months after *Jane Eyre* had made the pseudonym of "Bell" famous.

4. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by Acton Bell was published by Newby a year before Anne's death in 1848.

5. *Shirley* was submitted to Messrs Smith and Elder, the publishers of *Jane Eyre.* Much of the novel was written during the troublous year 1848, when both Branwell and Emily died and Anne began to sicken. Mr Clement Shorter prints one or two interesting letters of Charlotte to Mr Williams, the reader, concerning the novel, referring, e.g. to the question of title: shall it be *Hollow's Mill*, *Fieldhead*, or *Shirley*? It was published by Smith and Elder in 1849.

6. *Villette*, which represents the recasting of the original *The Professor*, was published by Messrs Smith and Elder in 1852.

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7. *The Professor*, a Tale by Currer Bell, in two volumes. Smith Elder & Co., 65 Cornhill, 1857. Charlotte's rejected first novel was published two years after her death, with a note by her husband, the Rev. Arthur Nicholls.

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