

**Teacher, Author,  
Book, and Life:  
Charlotte Brontë**

**By Margret Buchmann**

This is a woman's story: a biographical and a fictional account of a woman driven to teach by duty, need, and fate. A "reluctant teacher," she had not always wanted to teach. An ordinary teacher, she was equally removed from the tradition of great teachers (e.g., Socrates, Jesus) and from literary caricatures of teachers (e.g., in Dickens's work). In her ordinariness, she reminds us of the many women who have entered teaching through chance and the press of circumstances. Her life dramatizes the tug and pull of human ties that left teaching the only way open to her. She was able to depict the ambivalent status of teaching and its place in her own life as a means to other ends—subsistence, independence, and advancement—through her genius. For, between life and fiction, this is the story of Charlotte Brontë.

Retiring of disposition yet given to a passionate inward life, this woman committed herself at an early age to what she saw as the monotonous business of instruction. With all her intensity, Charlotte Brontë retained "the manner, which (as the cramped gait of a released prisoner recalls the days of his captivity) reminds you that it was her sad business to instruct the young" (Sinclair, 1919, p. xiv). Looking only to herself, she rejected the idea of teaching even through her writing:

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I am no teacher; to look on me in that light is to mistake me. To teach is not my vocation. What I

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am, it is useless to say. Those whom it concerns feel and find it out. To all others I wish only to be an obscure, steady-going, private character. (Gaskell, 1857/1919, p. 286)

In her continuing struggles, this woman was abstracted from the common lot through dark and heavy trials. Never having been an ordinary child and cut off from society, the young remained a riddle to her. Wearing by teaching as a yoke that kept her from a vital life of imagination, she recoiled from it as a burden while still pursuing it as a career. Aside from her sense of duty, it is difficult to think of a more unsuitable candidate for the teaching role. Nor is it easy to see why some of her highest hopes should have centered on keeping a school. In trying to account for that choice and those hopes, my emphasis will be on Charlotte Brontë's affections, ambitions, and the painful constraints that led her to embrace the unwanted.

Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and Mrs. Gaskell's biography of its author, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, are the basis for my presentation. *Villette* is Charlotte Brontë's last work, and its heroine, Lucy Snowe, is a barely veiled portrait of its author. Based on Mrs. Gaskell's *Life*, my prelude follows Charlotte Brontë almost to Brussels, Belgium, the place of action in *Villette*. Here Lucy Snowe starts out as a nursery governess and progresses to a teaching position, dreaming of a school of her own. My epilogue returns to the author's life. Gathering up the events of her middle years, I will trace aspects of character and circumstance that yielded us *Villette*. Thus I am moving from life to text and back to life, realizing that biography, too, is a work of the imagination. As Henry James (1909) wrote,

the simplest truth about a human entity, a situation, a relation, an aspect of life, however small, on behalf of which the claim to charmed attention is made, strains ever, under one's hand, more intensely, most intensely, to justify that claim; strains ever, as it were, toward the uttermost end or aim of one's meaning. (p. xv)

### **Prelude: From Life to Fiction**

Charlotte was the third of six children born in almost as many years. Their father, not fond of children, was the Reverend Patrick Brontë. Born into an Irish farming family, Patrick Brontë opened a public school at the remarkable age of sixteen, severing all family ties to maintain himself "by the labour of his brain" (Gaskell, 1857/1919, p. 21). At 25, he entered a Cambridge college, where he received his B.A. degree and was ordained within four years.

At home, the Reverend Brontë was a towering presence, though he kept to himself in his study. The children likewise retreated to theirs, a small room without a fireplace. For years, they would be together there, developing a secret life of the imagination that was to leave its mark on all of them. Here they would read whatever they could find, discuss the politics of the day, write plays, and draw. Charlotte, at barely 13, made up a list of painters whose work she craved to see, including Titian, Raphael, Coreggio, Leonardo da Vinci, Vandyke, and Rubens. Mrs. Gaskell (1857/

1919) exclaims:

Here is this little girl, in a remote Yorkshire parsonage, who has probably never seen anything worthy the name of a painting in her life, studying the names and characteristics of the great old Italian and Flemish masters, whose work she longs to see some time, in the dim future that lies before her! (p. 56)

All in all, to each other, the children had none of the company natural to their age and station. Except for walking on the moors, their amusements were intellectual and sedentary. The girls said their lessons to their father who encouraged them to read. The kindly but rather narrow-minded aunt who came to the parsonage after Mrs. Brontë's death taught them little besides sewing and the household arts. The children's sex soon made for distinctions in their education and expectations, however. While the three oldest girls (from about ten to eight years of age) were sent off to Cowan Bridge, a charitable institution that, converted from a factory, was supposed to serve the daughters of the poor clergy, their brother stayed at home where his father taught him the classics. The girls meanwhile were learning "history, geography, the use of the globes, grammar, writing and arithmetic, all kinds of needlework" (Gaskell, 1857/1919, p. 38). With such an education, they were prepared to become good housewives, perhaps governesses.

Maria, Elizabeth, and Charlotte Brontë could not do well at Cowan Bridge school, for "wild, strong hearts, and powerful minds, were hidden under an enforced propriety and regularity of demeanour and expression" (Gaskell, 1857/1919, p. 47). They were deprived in their intellectual lives, severely regimented, often half-starved and freezing, while living under cramped, unhygienic conditions. Ailing already, Maria was harassed because of her untidiness; during a fever epidemic at school she became dangerously ill. The eldest Brontë sister died of consumption at home and Elizabeth, the next, soon followed.

Charlotte returned home, only to be sent back to Cowan Bridge with her sister Emily. Why did Charlotte not remonstrate against her father's decision? Mrs. Gaskell believes that her "earnest vigorous mind saw, at an unusually early age, the immense importance of education, as furnishing her with tools which she had the strength and the will to wield, and she would be aware that the Cowan's Bridge education was, in many points, the best that her father could provide for her" (Gaskell, 1857/1919, p. 45). Due to their poor health, the girls did not stay another winter and nine-year-old Charlotte took up the duties of an eldest daughter in a poor parsonage. Her frame of mind had changed from brightness to hopelessness. Yet she was no dim personage. Shy, slight, with ill-assembled features, Charlotte Brontë impressed herself on people's memories. Mrs. Gaskell records her own impression of her "quiet listening intelligence"; however, "now and then, on some just occasion for vivid interest or wholesome indignation, a light would shine out, as if some spiritual lamp had been kindled...behind those expressive orbs" (p. 61).

In the years before Charlotte was sent to another school, the children produced

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vast amounts of writing—plays, poems, romances—which they bound and catalogued on the kitchen table. In imagining, their dreams shaded into superstitions, their thoughts into near obsessions. These juvenile productions document the comparative talents of Charlotte and her brother Branwell. Rev. Brontë's son was, by the family's decree, the child for whose brilliant career no sacrifice must be spared; yet his writing "achieves a dullness which makes it almost unreadable"; it is Charlotte's writing that, "for all its Gothic extravagance, is never safe to dismiss as merely tedious" (Lane, 1978, pp. 83-84).

Sent to the Roe Head school, Charlotte spent all her time studying, "constantly reading and learning; with a strong conviction of the necessity and value of education, very unusual in a girl of fifteen" (Gaskell, 1857/1919, p. 68). With its seven to ten pupils, this school was like a home and its gifted teacher, Miss Wooler, was loved and respected by all:

She had a remarkable knack of making them feel interested in whatever they had to learn. They set to their studies, not as to tasks and duties to be got through, but with a healthy desire and thirst for knowledge, of which she had managed to make them perceive the relishing savour. (p. 69)

Having completed her Roe Head education, Charlotte could teach her sisters and, with them, taught steadily at Sunday school besides. She was glad to be back home. Still, she returned to Roe Head in order to take her first job at school, for the family planned to promote Branwell's talents as a painter. Thus Charlotte announced to a friend:

I am going to be a governess. This last determination I formed myself, knowing that I should have to take the step some time...knowing well that papa would have enough to do with his limited income, should Branwell be placed at the Royal Academy, and Emily at Roe Head... I am sad—very sad—at the thoughts of leaving home; but duty—necessity—these are stern mistresses, who will not be disobeyed. (Gaskell, 1857/1919, p. 89)

Life at the parsonage was sufficiently monotonous ("An account of one day is an account of all" [Gaskell, 1857/1919, p. 78]), but Charlotte soon recoiled from the daily grind of teaching. "Nothing but teach, teach, teach, from morning till night" (Gaskell, 1857/1919, p. 95). School's numbing "bustle and confusion" (p. 94) preyed on her ceaselessly; she endured until the strain was too much and then returned to the parsonage. At home, Charlotte was free to write, read, draw, or follow her own thoughts over her needlework; she had abundant leisure due to the family's isolation. "This made it possible for her," explains Mrs. Gaskell, "to go through long and deep histories of feeling and imagination" (p. 134); yet, as a teacher, "all exercise of her strongest and most characteristic faculties was now out of the question" (p. 134). At night, the remaining Brontë sisters

put away their work, and began to pace the room backwards and forwards, up and down,—as often with the candles extinguished, for economy's sake, as not—their

figures glancing into the fire-light, and out into the shadow, perpetually. At this time, they talked over past cares, and troubles; they planned for the future, and consulted each other as to their plans. (p. 97)

These plans began to have a flavor of ambition as the girls grew into women and the hopes for their brother came to nought. They tested their promise as poets through daring though unsuccessful letters sent to literary figures.

It was clear that the sisters had to depend upon themselves, most heavily relying upon Charlotte. The Rev. Brontë was liberal and charitable with his small income; the aunt's annuity would go to others. Matrimony, without an all-consuming attachment, did not then enter Charlotte's scheme of life. The sisters could do nothing but return to teaching, which aggravated rather than solved their problems. As Mrs. Gaskell (1857/1919) points out:

The hieroglyphics of childhood were an unknown language to them...they had not the happy knack of imparting information, which seems to be a separate gift from the faculty of acquiring it; a kind of sympathetic tact, which instinctively perceives the difficulties that impede comprehension in a child's mind, and that yet are too vague and unformed for it, with its half-developed powers of expression, to explain by words. Consequently, teaching very young children was anything but a "delightful task" to the three Brontë sisters. With older girls...they might have done better.... But the education which the village clergyman's daughters had received, did not as yet qualify them to undertake the charge of advanced pupils. (pp. 112-113)

The Brontë sisters continued their fruitless attempts to brave the outside world, followed by retreats to their fixed and still center, the parsonage. Emily, however, ~~soon gave up teaching for good; staying at home, the author of~~ *Wuthering Heights* "took the principal part of the cooking upon herself, and did all the household ironing" (Gaskell, 1857/1919, p. 90). Anne developed pains in her side that recalled her sisters' last illness. Thus she also had to come home, not even finishing her education at Roe Head.

In despair, Charlotte went back to Miss Wooler's school to be, in her own words, "engaged in the old business—teach, teach, teach" (Gaskell, 1857/1919, p. 106). She felt this return a terrible strain, for it confined her to uncongenial work and deprived her at once of the company of those she loved, of any chance for improving her—and their—lot, and of her privacy and freedom. And when she later worked as a private governess she suffered even more; as she wrote to Emily: "I could like to be at home. I could like to work in a mill. I could like to feel some mental liberty. I could like this weight of restraint to be taken off" (p. 117). Yet, after some rest at home, Charlotte again resolved "to force myself to take another situation when I can ~~get one, though I hate~~ and ~~abhor~~ the very thoughts.... But I must do it" (p. 122).

*Wanting the Unwanted?*

It was in this context that the great scheme of starting a school—at home—was

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mooted; the Brontë sisters judged that, with minor alterations to the house, a few pupils could be lodged and taught at the parsonage. Given their experience of children as “the troublesome necessities of humanity” (Gaskell, 1857/1919, p. 134), it seems strange that this project should be heralded as a fervent hope. But note the desirable outcomes of keeping school. Independence was vital to Emily and Charlotte; they also felt duty-bound to relieve their father of their support. Seeing the downward career of their brother, on whom they might have relied, only strengthened their sense of duty and necessity. Their approaches to literary figures showed that they had ambition. The sisters wanted to make something out of their unoccupied talents, and Charlotte, in particular, desired to get on in life.

What was crucial about their school project was that it would allow the sisters to be with one another. Seeing her older sisters die at Cowan Bridge had made Charlotte’s affections for the younger ones fiercely protective. “To have a school,” Mrs. Gaskell (1857/1919) concludes, meant for Charlotte to “have some portion of daily leisure, uncontrolled but by her own sense of duty; it was for the three sisters, loving each other with so passionate an affection, to be together under one roof, and yet earning their own subsistence; above all, it was to have the power of watching over those two whose life and happiness were ever to Charlotte far more than her own” (p. 140). When inquiring into their chances of success, however, it became evident that, to attract pupils, the sisters needed a better education.

Charlotte’s ideas about what this might mean were hazy. Yet in her response to an intimation of higher things, more was bound up than necessity, duty, or even love; “a fire,” she confided to a friend, “was kindled in my very heart, which I could not quench. I so longed to increase my attainments—to become something better than I am” (Gaskell, 1857/1919, p. 143). When another friend described paintings and cathedrals in Brussels, Charlotte wrote: “I hardly know what swelled to my throat as I read her letter; such a vehement impatience of restraint and steady work; such a strong wish for wings—wings such as wealth can furnish; such an urgent thirst to see, to know, to learn; something internal seemed to expand bodily for a minute” (p. 139).

This confluence of longings, needs, and duties sent Charlotte to Brussels, the Villette of the novel, once her eager, persuasive letter to their aunt had secured the necessary means. In this letter, the glimpse of unstirred powers accounts for its glowing, exalted tone; her justifications are soberly utilitarian—though daring enough to invoke the father’s example in defense of his daughters’ schemes. Charlotte explained how she expected to live cheaply in Brussels and get a superior education, acquiring French, German, and Italian, as well as helpful social connections:

these are advantages which would turn to real account, when we actually commenced a school; and, if Emily could share them with me, we could take a footing in the world afterwards which we can never do now.... I feel an absolute conviction that, if this advantage were allowed us, it would be the making of us for

life. Papa will, perhaps, think it a wild and ambitious scheme; but whoever rose in the world without ambition? When he left Ireland to go to Cambridge University, he was as ambitious as I am now. I want us **all** to get on. I know we have talents and I want them to be turned to account. I look to you, aunt, to help us. (Gaskell, 1857/1919, p. 142)

The aunt could not refuse, and Charlotte was launched on this grand adventure, promising herself to do “my best to make the utmost of every advantage that shall come within my reach “ (p. 144). Emily came along to give their school project a real chance of succeeding. On their return the sisters hoped to come to the parsonage to stay, and stay together. In *Villette*, Charlotte is transformed into the orphaned Lucy Snowe, whose progress we will follow.

*Life's Schooling Imagined*

Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways!...the Heart...is the Mind's Bible, it is the Mind's experience, it is the teat from which the Mind or Intelligence sucks its identity. (Keats, 1954/1968, p. 267)

At 23, Lucy Snowe is without home, friends, or guidance, unclaimed by anyone. Looking at her past, she reflects, “I had wanted to compromise with Fate: to escape occasional great agonies by submitting to a whole life of privation and small pains” (Brontë, 1853/1963, p. 34). Now she makes up her mind to wander, boldly making for London where “my spirit shook its always-fettered wings half loose; I had a sudden feeling as if I, who never yet truly lived, were at last about to taste life” (p. 43). But reaction sets in quickly:

What was I doing here alone in great London? What should I do on the morrow? What prospects had I in life? What friends had I on earth? Whence did I come? Whither should I go? What should I do?...but I did not regret the step taken, nor wish to retract it. A strong, vague persuasion that it was better to go forward than backward, and that **I could** go forward—that a way, however narrow and difficult, would in time open—predominated over other feelings. (pp. 42-43).

This persuasion impels her to go to the Continent, and chance brings her to Villette (in reality, Brussels), and to Madame Beck's school for girls.

On board her ship, Lucy's revived ecstasy of freedom gives way to fears. Still, she travels on to Villette, “with no prospect but the dubious cloud tracery of hope” (Brontë, 1853/1963, p. 64), trying to find her way to Madame Beck's establishment where an English governess is wanted. On her arrival, Lucy's luggage and money are lost. She cannot speak French, but a handsome young Englishman helps her; and she follows him, “through the darkness and the small soaking rain. The Boulevard was all deserted, its path miry, the water dripping from its trees; the park was black as midnight. In the double gloom of trees and fog, I could not see my guide; I could

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only follow his tread. Not the least fear had I. I believe I would have followed that frank tread, through continual night, to the world's end" (p. 59).

Ringling the doorbell at Madame Beck's, Lucy is soon waiting "in a cold, glittering salon, with porcelain stove unlit, and gilded ornaments, and polished floor" (Brontë, 1853/1963, p. 60). Madame Beck inspects her gravely, taking Lucy's sudden appearance as evidence of the intrepidity of Englishwomen. She does want a nursery-governess for her own children and seems satisfied with Lucy's account that she has left her country to gain knowledge, and her bread. There is some intrepidity, as well, in Madame Beck's decision to hire her without references. When eating her late supper, Lucy Snowe reflects: "Surely pride was not already beginning its whispers in my heart; yet I felt a sense of relief when, instead of being left in the kitchen, as I half anticipated, I was led forward to a small inner room" (p. 63).

#### *Safety in Obscurity*

Looking after her charges, hearing their English lessons, working on Madame's dresses and the children's clothes, Lucy observes her employer and the whole establishment. There are about 100 day pupils, a score of boarders, four teachers, eight masters, six servants; and the administrative machinery runs pleasantly and smoothly. Behind it all is Madame Beck, a supremely capable woman; nobody, Lucy avers, "could have browbeaten her, none irritated her nerves, exhausted her patience, or over-reached her astuteness" (Brontë, 1853/1963, p. 70). Lucy notices the pupils' air of physical well-being; they seem to learn without pain or oppression. It was the teachers and masters who were "more stringently tasked, as all the real head-labour was to be done by them, in order to save the pupils" (p. 71). The spacious house has an ancient walled garden that draws Lucy into its shadows when no one is around:

The turf was verdant, the gravelled walks were white; sun-bright nasturtiums clustered beautiful about the roots of the doddered orchard giants. There was a large berceau, above which spread the shade of an acacia; there was a smaller, more sequestered bower, nestled in the vines which ran all along a high and grey wall, and gathered their tendrils in a knot of beauty, and hung their clusters in loving profusion about the favoured spot where jasmine and ivy met and married them.  
(pp. 102-103)

Through practice in the daytime and study at night, Lucy is learning French. Otherwise, she resigns herself to her position—not with contentment, to be sure, as the work is not to Lucy's taste nor of interest to her. Yet she has food, shelter, and time to follow thoughts that lure her "along the track of reverie, down into some deep lull of dreamland" (Brontë, 1853/1963, p. 129). Madame Beck disturbs this precarious peace with the offer to have her governess take over an English class. Lucy is dismayed; she dreads the boisterous girls and her French, the medium of instruction, is poor. Perhaps most of all, she fears hoping for more than an absence



of suffering; there is safety in the obscurity and half-death of her life. Yet when Madame Beck says, "Will you go...backward or forward?" (p. 74), Lucy rises to the challenge.

*Taking Charge*

Madame Beck has warned Lucy that she will be on her own. Almost young women, her pupils expect an easy victory over the English nursery governess. Lucy considers, "I knew I looked a poor creature, and in many respects actually was so, yet nature had given me a voice that could make itself heard, if lifted in excitement or deepened by emotion" (Brontë, 1853/1963, p. 76). Since she cannot yet scold in French, she singles out one of the class leaders and reads her English composition loudly and scornfully. Having dispatched another mutineer into a closet, Lucy proceeds to English dictation, in a composed and courteous manner. The girls do not seem displeased and Madame Beck, who has secretly been watching, judges that she will do.

Her new employment awakens numbed hopes and ambitions:

My time was now well and profitably filled up. What with teaching others and studying closely myself, I had hardly a spare moment. It was pleasant. I felt I was getting on; not lying the stagnant prey of mould and rust, but polishing my faculties and whetting them to a keen edge with constant use. Experience of a certain kind lay before me, on no narrow scale. (p. 77)

Villette is a large cosmopolitan city and Lucy's pupils are of different nationalities and ranks in life. She means to succeed and will not be thwarted in this attempt to better her lot by the girls she thinks ignorant, lazy, and often stupid and unprincipled as well. Lucy finds that patience interspersed with robust sarcasm works in teaching.

One of her pupils is the young lady who told Lucy about Madame Beck's during their boat passage. Ginevra is charming but selfish and indolent, exercising her faculties mostly when she wishes to shine before men; the English physician in attendance at Madame Beck's feels her appeal. Lucy observes this tall young man with a cleft, Grecian chin, fine profile, and genial though disquieting smile; "there was something in it that pleased, but something too that brought surging up into one's mind all one's foibles and weak points: all that could lay one open to a laugh" (Brontë, 1853/1963, p. 92). After a while, Lucy remembers him as the helpful guide on her arrival in Belgium.

With his fair looks and sunny temper, Dr. John becomes a "golden image" (Brontë, 1853/1963, p. 94) to Lucy. Under cover of her own "gown of shadow" (p. 128), Lucy rivets her attention on this man, suffering a further recognition which evokes the past. Dr. John is her godmother Bretton's son; Lucy's memories disturb her uncertain repose:

Oh, my childhood! I had feelings: passive as I lived, little as I spoke, cold as I

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looked, when I thought of past days, I **could** feel. About the present, it was better to be stoical; about the future—such a future as mine—to be dead. And in catalepsy and a dead trance, I studiously held the quick of my nature. (p. 105)

A violent storm evokes the tempest deep within: “I did long, aching...for something to fetch me out of my present existence, and lead me upwards and onwards. This longing, and all of a similar kind, it was necessary to knock on the head” (pp. 105-6).

#### *Painful Knowing*

As Lucy withdraws to her garden bower, another man comes into her life. She had met Monsieur Paul, the literature professor, at Madame Beck’s and knows that he is dedicated to teaching. In the summer, there is a school fête, with a play that he directs. M. Paul wants Lucy to take over the part of a pupil who has fallen ill, overriding her fears and scruples. Lucy notices that he cannot bear the thought of having the project fail; she wonders: “On me school triumphs shed but a cold lustre...how it was that for him they seemed to shine as with hearth warmth and hearth glow. **He** cared for them perhaps too much; **I** probably too little” (Brontë, 1853/1963, p. 152).

Performing in the play, Lucy grows in self-knowledge and feels her powers stirring: “Cold, reluctant, apprehensive, I had accepted a part to please another: ere long, warming, becoming interested, taking courage, I acted to please myself” (Brontë, 1853/1963, p. 138). M. Paul recognizes Lucy’s passionate desire to triumph. He promises to be her friend and will assist her in the public examinations of students that follow the summer fête. “After all, you are solitary and a stranger, and have your way to make and your bread to earn; it may be well that you should become known” (p. 153).

The year is at an end and school breaks up for the long vacation. Now that Lucy is alone and all necessity for daily exertion removed, nervous exhaustion sets in. Her courage, resolve, and reason falter. Teaching has proved a mere “prop,” an outward support that kept Lucy from falling, yet incapable of sustaining her inwardly. Hence looking forward, “was not to hope,....spoke no comfort, offered no promise, gave no inducement to bear present evil in reliance on future good” (Brontë, 1853/1963, p. 154).

Is hope a false idol? Lucy wanders through the hot September days, beyond the city gates: “A goad thrust me on, a fever forbade me to rest; a want of companionship maintained in my soul the cravings of a most deadly famine. I often walked all day, through the burning noon and the arid afternoon, and the dusk evening, and came back with moonrise” (Brontë, 1853/1963, p. 156). Sleepless and wrung with anguish, she falls prey to despair. At its climax, Lucy feels that her trial “must now be turned by my own hands, hot, feeble, trembling as they were” (p. 158). But she collapses and knows nothing more.

*Shelter From the Storm*

On awakening, Lucy fears she is delirious, for her knowledge of things around her is uncanny: "I knew...the green chintz of that little chair; the little snug chair itself, the carved, shining black, foliated frame of that glass" (Brontë, 1853/1963, p. 166). There is the picture of a smiling boy whose penetrating eyes belong to Dr. John. Everything reminds Lucy of the past, of her godmother's house; and the woman who enters is Mrs. Bretton herself. The living room transports Lucy back to England: "How pleasant it was in its air of perfect domestic comfort! How warm in its amber lamplight and vermilion fire flush!" (p. 170). During tea, recognition is effected on all sides. And, if John Bretton marvels at his failure to recognize Lucy, he also marvels at her failure to claim their old acquaintance. Still, she accepts their shelter: "My calm little room seemed somehow like a cave in the sea. There was no colour about it, except that white and pale green, suggestive of foam and deep water.... When I closed my eyes, I heard a gale, subsiding at last" (p. 179).

Time passes between rest, dreams, and the company of people whose bland and genial temper comforts Lucy. She fears her eager heart, praying, "let me be content with a temperate draught of this living stream: let me not run athirst, and apply passionately to its welcome waters" (Brontë, 1853/1963, p. 176). Lucy ponders the differences between herself and Dr. John. His nature is not, as her own, at war with his destiny and labors. Fate, she thinks, has smiled on this man: "I often saw him hard-worked, yet seldom over-driven, and never irritated, confused, or oppressed. What he did was accomplished with the ease and grace of all-sufficing strength" (p. 194). Her "golden image" of him becomes tarnished, though, by observing Dr. John at home, where he shows "consciousness of what he has and what he is; pleasure in homage, some recklessness in exciting, some vanity in receiving the same" (p. 195).

When the Brettons take Lucy to a concert, she is thrilled to see the festive audience, a choir of white-robed girls, and a dazzling chandelier: "Pendant from the dome flamed a mass that dazzled me—a mass, I thought, of rock-crystal, sparkling with facets, streaming with drops, ablaze with stars, and gorgeously tinged with dews of gems dissolved, or fragments of rainbows shivered" (Brontë, 1853/1963, p. 207). Lucy also sees M. Paul who helps to organize the choir's performance. Earnest and intent, the professor obviously loves displaying his authority; his superfluous vigor endears him to Lucy. She avoids his eyes, unwilling to have the future overshadow this radiant moment; the professor reminds her of Madame Beck's walled-in garden and echoing classrooms.

Lucy had encountered the professor out of school on another occasion, when wandering through a picture gallery by herself, "happy, not always in admiring, but in examining, questioning and forming conclusions" (Brontë, 1853/1963, p. 196). She thinks little of "several very well executed and complacent-looking fat women [who] struck me as by no means the goddesses they appeared to consider them-

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selves” (p. 197). Shocked at finding Lucy alone, M. Paul marches her toward a flat didactical series on women: a prim pale girl clutching a prayer book; a veiled, praying bride; a young mother bent over puffy babies; and a widow in her conventional black. Lucy feels scorn: “What women to live with! insincere, ill-humoured, bloodless, brainless nonentities!” (p. 200). In upbraiding her, the professor’s acerbity contrasts with the sunny temper of Dr. John, “from **him** broke no irritability which startled calm and quenched mirth....beside him was rest and refuge” (p. 222). But Lucy must return to school.

*Brighter Prospects*

Just as on the night of her first arrival, Lucy stands before Madame Beck’s house again in darkness and rain. Seeing her tears, Dr. John promises to write. As she is “getting once more inured to the harness of school, and lapsing from the passionate pain of change to the palsy of custom” (Brontë, 1853/1963, p. 236), Lucy receives her first letter, delivered by the jealous hands of M. Paul. She takes her treasure to the attic where she is haunted by the apparition of a veiled nun. Almost beside herself, Lucy confides her superstitious terrors to Dr. John who, “at once exercised his professional skill, and gratified his natural benevolence, by a course of cordial and attentive treatment” (p. 253). Her source of comfort runs dry when Dr. John falls in love with Pauline, a delicate, well-connected girl of appealing grace. Valuing Lucy as a woman acting on her own behalf, Pauline’s father makes her the offer of being his daughter’s well-paid companion. Yet—rather than taking such a position—Lucy “would deliberately have taken a housemaid’s place, bought a strong pair of gloves, swept bedrooms and staircases, and cleaned stoves and locks, in peace and independence” (p. 298).

Things are beginning to look brighter. Appreciating her English teacher, Madame Beck removes small constraints on Lucy’s freedom, who goes out more, takes German lessons with Pauline, and visits at her father’s grand house. Watching her closely, M. Paul accuses Lucy of being worldly, not content with her serious calling. She declares herself, with some irony, as “a rising character: once an old lady’s companion, then a nursery-governess, now a school-teacher” (Brontë, 1853/1963, p. 308). M. Paul starts being her professor, leaving tokens of his attention among Lucy’s things: volumes of the classics, magazines, and romances. She learns that his fierce airs hide a heart of strong affinity to the weak: “in its core was a place, tender beyond a man’s tenderness; a place that humbled him to little children, that bound him to girls and women...rebel as he would” (p. 337).

Yet Lucy finds that, when her “faculties began to struggle themselves free, and my time of energy and fulfillment came; when I voluntarily doubled, trebled, quadrupled the tasks he set, to please him as I thought, his kindness became sternness” (Brontë, 1853/1963, p. 351). M. Paul accuses Lucy of intellectual pride and a desire for unfeminine knowledge. But Lucy feels rising within her a knowledge all her own, rooted in the imagination; she does not see herself as a

seasoned scholar: “the knowledge was not there in my head, ready and mellow; it had not been sown in Spring, grown in Summer, harvested in Autumn, and garnered through Winter” (p. 401). Proud of her, yet perhaps also wishing to see her fail, M. Paul urges Lucy to undergo a public examination.

Lucy’s exam does not begin auspiciously. Despising the pompous examiners, she is mortified at having to show herself an ignoramus in the systematic branches of knowledge. While she does better on topics of general information, Lucy’s hour comes when writing about justice. Seized by a vivid idea, her indignant words come pouring. After this ordeal, M. Paul becomes her friend in earnest; his manner stays mild as they spend hours talking. Lucy reveals her continuing dreams of freedom and advancement. Opening a day school would be the next step in her career. This is no brilliant prospect and Lucy is not drawn to the work it entails, but having a school of her own would give Lucy independence and an object in life.

Though Lucy thinks this friendship fraternal, M. Paul’s Catholic relations see it in another light. They plan to send him to the West Indies on family business, scheming to keep the friends apart before M. Paul’s departure. In growing distress, Lucy waits for him to say goodbye. An opiate administered to calm her rouses her mind to feverish activity: “The classes seem to my thought, great dreary jails...filled with spectral and intolerable Memories, laid miserable amongst their straw and their manacles” (Brontë, 1853/1963, p. 451). Fleeing from the school, Lucy wanders through Villette, experiencing its life and lights in a delirium of opium and pain, apprehending the cast of characters in her emotional life in an apotheosis of the imagination that brings clarity and release.

Knowing that she loves, Lucy recognizes her proud freedom as an illusion. Happily, M. Paul manages to see Lucy before leaving, and the lovers go for a long walk, stopping before a small house in Villette’s suburbs. They enter a parlour that Lucy perceives ecstatically:

Its delicate walls were tinged like a blush; its floor was waxed; a square of brilliant carpet covered its centre; its small round table shone like the mirror over its hearth.... The lattice of this room was open; the outer air breathing through, gave freshness, the sweet violets lent fragrance. (Brontë, 1853/1963, p. 485)

Another room is stocked with benches, desks and a blackboard, a teacher’s chair and table, and sturdy plants on the window sill. M. Paul hands Lucy advertisements for a day school that bears her name; he hopes she will live and work in this house, while waiting for him. We do not know that M. Paul will return, for sailing across oceans is dangerous. But the teacher has her work, her independence, and his letters. Her enterprise flourishes, changing in time from a day school to a boarding school. Lucy concludes: “The secret of my success did not lie so much in myself, in any endowment, any power of mine, as in a new state of circumstances, a wonderfully changed life, a relieved heart” (p. 493).

**Epilogue: From Fiction to Life**

Whenever life touched her there was tragedy. And yet it may be doubted if the world could have spared one of her pangs. It could certainly not have given her in exchange anything more ardent, more productive, than that aching joy of loving. (Sinclair, 1919, xiv)

Did Charlotte Brontë ever open a school? Did she find freedom, and a relieved heart? Let me begin with the simpler question. In the company of Emily, Charlotte studied for a year in Brussels “with the same avidity that a cow, that has long been kept on dry hay, returns to fresh grass.” (Gaskell, 1857/1919, p. 152) Married to the head of their school was a M. Héger, the M. Paul of Charlotte’s novel. This professor taught his two extraordinary pupils French through the study of literature. Under his inspired, if autocratic direction, the sisters worked with deep satisfaction until they were recalled to England on the death of their aunt.

Charlotte went back to Brussels by herself, teaching English and learning German, and living “from day to day in a Robinson-Crusoe-like sort of way, very lonely” (p. 172). To her, teaching was drudgery or, at best, conscientious exertion; as she wrote in *The Professor*: “She liked to learn, but hated to teach; her progress as a pupil depended upon herself...on herself she could calculate with certainty; her success as a teacher rested partly, perhaps chiefly, upon the will of others” (Brontë, 1857/1948, p. 125). Still Charlotte carried on, needing her small salary to live and the new learning for their future school. She returned to the parsonage when her father seemed to go blind. To promote their school, M. Héger gave Charlotte a teaching certificate, sealed with the seal of his college.

Parting from her teacher was a lasting grief. Above all things Charlotte now craved hard work and a stake in life; the thought of not making any progress was unbearable. Yet the school project had to wait, at first, because of Rev. Brontë’s poor health. Then, no pupils could be found. Making their home unfit for strangers, Branwell’s moral and mental decline (due to multiple addictions) put an end to his sisters’ plans. Charlotte’s “honest plan for earning her own livelihood had fallen away, crumbled to ashes; after all her preparations, not a pupil had offered herself; and, instead of being sorry that this wish of many years could not be realised, she had reason to be glad” (Gaskell, 1857/1919, p. 189). Contemplating outside work she wrote:

Leave home!—I shall neither be able to find place nor employment, perhaps, too, I shall be quite past the prime of life, my faculties will be rusted, and my few acquirements in a great measure forgotten. These ideas sting me keenly sometimes; but, whenever I consult my conscience, it affirms that I am doing right in staying at home, and bitter are its upbraidings when I yield to an eager desire for release. (p. 216)

The Brontë sisters’ dreams had failed, their efforts proved barren. Their

circumspect life plans had come to nothing. The parsonage had become a sad and frightful place. To all appearances defeated, the sisters reconstructed their hopes, obeying their deepest impulses. In a movement of return and transcendence that affirmed their mutual love, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne reverted to a life of imagination, finding freedom and salutary work in writing. Since teaching was, to them, a matter of duty and necessity, and not of intrinsic enjoyment, one might say that the force of circumstances which originally compelled them to teach saved them, this time, from being and living in a false position. They hoped to make some money through writing, but this work would sustain them, no matter what.

As their genius asserted itself, the lives of the Brontë sisters became divided between the roles of women and authors. No stranger to this division, Mrs. Gaskell (1857/1919) points out that the duties belonging to each role were “not opposing each other; not impossible, but difficult to be reconciled”; (p. 238) moreover, men and women are differently placed, for:

When a man becomes an author...[he] takes a portion of that time which has hitherto been devoted to some other study or pursuit; he gives up something of the legal or medical profession in which he has hitherto endeavored to serve others...and another...lawyer, or doctor, steps into his vacant place, and probably does as well as he. But no other can take up the quiet, regular duties of the daughter, the wife, or the mother. (p. 238)

After Branwell's death, Charlotte's sisters died in agonizing, rapid succession. Only writing was left to Charlotte, who eventually became a famous author. When her work stood still, she was haunted by memories and morbid imagination. At times, her loneliness was unbearable. As she remarked in *Villette*, “The world can understand well enough the process of perishing for want of food: perhaps few persons can enter into or follow out that of going mad from solitary confinement” (Brontë, 1853/1963, p. 273).

Charlotte Brontë was angered when critics judged her work by feminine standards. She confronted the position of women:

A few men, whose sympathies are fine and whose sense of justice is strong, think and speak of it with a candour that commands my admiration. They say however—and, to an extent, truly—that the amelioration of our condition depends on ourselves. Certainly there are evils which our own efforts will best reach; but, as certainly there are other evils—deep-rooted in the foundation of the social system—which no efforts of ours can touch: of which we cannot complain; of which it is advisable not too often to think. (Gaskell, 1857/1919, p. 313)

At almost 40, Charlotte Brontë married her father's curate. Nor did she, at first, appear to love Mr. Nicholls, who had known her for years as the mainstay of a household with many afflictions. When her suitor declared himself, he was fearing rejection and shaking with the power of his feelings; characteristically, Charlotte could not remain unmoved. Rev. Brontë's opposition subsided when he recognized

### *Charlotte Brontë*

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how earnestly his curate joined his daughter's wishes to comfort him in his old age. Speaking rather drily of her marriage, Charlotte explained that "the demands of both feeling and duty will be in some measure reconciled by the step in contemplation" (Gaskell, 1857/1919, p. 392). The curate expected his wife to share in his work, and the clergyman's daughter was aware of her duties. Her new life thus left little time for writing. Yet happiness came to Charlotte Brontë in discovering her husband's character, which itself unfolded in tenderness under the influence of happiness. It is hard to bear the thought that she died, pregnant and consumptive, after less than a year of marriage.

#### *Careers and Good Lives in the Balance*

Charlotte Brontë's death cut short a career in which genius had finally gained freedom and recognition. Had she lived, however, and born children, how much time might there have been for her writing? Still, does it follow that her family should have made no claims on her, treating the demands of genius, instead, as absolute and overriding? Such a conclusion would presuppose a singleness of value scheme or, at least, neat value hierarchies rather than multiple, conflicting commitments. More frequently than women, men have been able to fashion lives in line with such assumptions, while other people, often women, smoothed their path, taking over conflicts and obligations that streamlined lives cannot encompass. Nor does it follow that such single-minded lives must be good lives. Below the surface of feminist questions arising from Charlotte Brontë's life and fiction lie questions concerning an adequate and penetrating vision of human life. The point of these questions can be captured in the distinction between personal **good** and **personal** goodness.

If maximizing personal good were the issue, Charlotte Brontë's continuing struggles to subdue her self and her longing for freedom and advancement, her attempts to obey and reconcile filial duty, sisterly affection, and necessity—mostly through taking on the teaching role for which she was unfit—must be shrugged off as wasteful and foolish. Why did she stay in teaching until forced out by fate? Had she cut herself loose from her family, seeking self-realization with the daring determination evident in the school project, she might have avoided the pains of a false position, in which her nature and genius were at war with her labors. But if it is personal goodness that matters, this woman's struggles have justification and meaning.

Life and choice are simpler, at a cost, where the tug and pull of human ties and conflicting obligations are set aside and the eternal shortcomings of inclusive value schemes can be avoided. Note, however, that—to the extent that one's life is controlled, self-contained and harmonious—one's existence can also become impoverished and brittle. The geniality of a person supported by others and not harassed by conflicts is nevertheless attractive; Lucy Snowe felt the benign appeal of Dr. John's sunny temper, while seeing its dependence on his nature, nurture, and



good luck. Both the doctor and the professor had a sense of entitlement not belied by circumstances and endowments, although the doctor's character may have suffered from lacking vulnerability. Fate and uncongenial circumstances account for part of the tragedy in Charlotte Brontë's story, even more tragic in life than in fiction. Yet another part was due to her deeply feeling resonance to a world of discordant values. Although this is the world of ordinary moral life, the quality of her response in it—as daughter, sister, author, and wife—make good Mrs. Gaskell's claim that Charlotte Brontë was a woman of extraordinary genius and noble virtue, though a reluctant teacher.

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