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The Brontë Myth

Lucasta Miller

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About the Book

Since 1857, hardly a year has gone by without some sort of Brontë ‘biography’ appearing. These range from Victorian conduct books to Freudian psychobiographies, from plays, films and ballets to tourist brochures and images on tea-towels, from sensation-seeking penny-a-liners to meticulous works of sober scholarship. Each generation has rewritten the Brontës to reflect changing attitudes – towards to the role of the woman writer, towards sexuality, towards the very concept of personality. *The Brontë Myth* gives vigorous new life to our understanding of the novelists and their culture and Lucasta Miller reveals as much about the impossible art of biography as she does about the Brontës themselves.

About the Author

Lucasta Miller was educated at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford. After postgraduate research on Milton, she worked for a time in advertising before becoming a literary journalist. She was Deputy Literary Editor of the *Independent* and has reviewed for many publications including *The Times*, the *Daily* and *Sunday Telegraph*, the *TLS*, the *Independent on Sunday* and the *Economist*.

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For Ian
and in memory of my father

Lucasta Miller

The Brontë Myth

Preface and Acknowledgements

About ten years ago, when I was supposed to be working on a thesis about Milton, I used to find myself going home from the library and compulsively reading books to do with the Brontës. Their novels – which I had first read in my early teens – provided emotional nourishment, but the legendary tale of their lonely moorland lives, which had gripped my imagination even before I was old enough to read *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights*, seemed to offer the allure of a more escapist fantasy.

Around the same time, I read Terry Eagleton's *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës* (Basingstoke and London, 1975; 1988), and began to think more questioningly about the role the Brontës played not only in my own imagination but in culture at large. In his introduction, Eagleton remarked that

> The Brontës, like Shakespeare, are a literary industry as well as a collection of literary texts, and it would have been worth asking why this should be so and how it came about (p. xix).

A decade on, this book is my personal attempt to answer that question.

As critics have often recognised, the two most famous Brontë novels have become established not just as literary classics but as what might be called modern myths. Both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* have burst their generic

boundaries and found their way into mass culture through Hollywood, stage versions, television and even pop music. Yet what, for me, makes the Brontës so extraordinary is that unlike the authors of comparable modern myths – Bram Stoker, say, who wrote *Dracula* – the sisters themselves, plus their entire family, have become mythic figures in their own right. Since 1857, when Elizabeth Gaskell published her famous *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, hardly a year has gone by without some form of biographical material on the Brontës appearing – from articles in newspapers to full-length lives, from images on tea-towels to plays, films and novelisations.

Like *Jane Eyre*, like *Wuthering Heights*, the tragic story of the Brontë family has been told and retold time and again in endless new configurations. Cliff Richard may have starred as Heathcliff, but Sinead O'Connor has played Emily Brontë; *Wuthering Heights*, and more recently *Jane Eyre*, may have been adapted as operas, but the lives of their original creators have inspired ballets and a musical. George Eliot has never rivalled Maggie Tulliver in the imagination of readers. Thomas Hardy does not compete with Tess. Yet the Brontës of Haworth have become popular characters on a level with Jane Eyre and Rochester, Cathy and Heathcliff.

Henry James had a particularly suspicious attitude towards this 'romantic tradition' of the Brontë story, which he thought got in the way of serious critical appreciation of the sisters' works. He felt that their life history had 'been made to hang before us as insistently as the vividest page of *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights*', resulting in an unprecedented muddle in the public mind. My purpose is to trace the historical route by which the Brontë lives came to take on this unusual prominence and to show how years of cultural accretion have shifted the sisters' position in the collective consciousness from the level of history on to that of myth.

This book, therefore, is not so much a biography of the Brontës but a book about biography, a metabiography. Occasionally, when focusing on the sentimental excesses of the Brontë cult, it may even read more like an antibiography. But while I share Henry James's anxiety about over-emphasis on the Brontë story, that is not to say that I reject the biographical approach per se. The Brontës lives *are* legitimately fascinating, but their value lies less in the simple rehearsal of the story – however melodramatic it has been made to seem – than in the ways in which, as writers, these women transformed experience into art.

What I do not claim to be able to do – as too many biographers have claimed in the past – is to sweep away all previous 'false' versions of the story and resurrect the 'true' Brontës in their place, as if the dead could be brought, definitively, back to life. Although recent scholars have made enormous progress in reclaiming the factual circumstances and historical background of the Brontës' experience, facts alone cannot provide the final word on a life, and there will always be a need for interpretation. I am only too aware that some people may trace my own reading of the Brontës – which emphasises their role as conscious and ambitious literary artists – to my background as a literary critic. Had I been a romantic novelist or a social historian I may have formed a very different image of them in my mind.

To acknowledge that all biographers have their own agendas and to reject the possibility of the definitive biography is not, however, to deny that there are rights and wrongs when it comes to life-writing. The history of the Brontës' posthumous lives is littered with examples of apocryphal stories and fantastical claims which can indeed be dismissed as mere 'myths' in the commonplace sense that they have no basis in documentary fact. Yet this book is also concerned with the idea of myth in a more subtle sense

of the word. Even a true story can become a myth by being endlessly repeated and woven into culture. To call an event in history mythic does not necessarily denigrate its reality or truth value. But it does acknowledge the penumbra of emotional, aesthetic and ideological resonances which have clustered around it.

Facts, then, can become mythic through the way in which they are packaged and perceived. That there were three – and not four or five – Brontë sisters is, for example, a historical fact. But the motif of the three sisters has a cultural mystique stretching back into fairytale, which unconsciously – or consciously, as when Ted Hughes calls them the 'Three weird sisters' after the witches in *Macbeth* – contributes to the sense of mystery which surrounds them. The historical accident by which three of Patrick and Maria Brontë's five daughters lived beyond childhood, grew up to develop literary talent, and became famous as a trio, melds at some level in the cultural consciousness with the atavistic magic associated with the idea of the three sisters.

As a group, Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë are collectively known as 'the Brontë sisters' and I therefore feel I ought to offer some explanation for why this book concentrates almost exclusively on the developing biographical image of the two elder sisters at the expense of the youngest. The reason is that Anne – who did not become the subject of a proper full-length life until a century after the first biography of Charlotte appeared – has never taken on the mythic stature of her sisters in her own right. Though she has by now been rediscovered, for most of her posthumous life she was regarded as very much the least interesting sister, mentioned, it seems, merely to make up the number three. Similarly, I have discussed the myths surrounding the sisters' father, Patrick, and brother, Branwell, only in so far as they impinge – which they often do to a large extent – on Charlotte and Emily. Although

these men have been enshrined, as one critic put it, in the Madame Tussaud's of the collective psyche, they would never have become famous if it had not been for the literary achievements of the women in their family.

This book has had a prolonged gestation, taking what seems like an age to develop from embryonic idea to finished text. Work on it was slowed down first by a full-time job as Deputy Literary Editor on the *Independent*, and then by four years of debilitating illness. Since I first thought about the topic, Brontë studies seem to have flowered into something of a golden age, and I have been lucky enough to be able to take advantage of the superb new scholarship which has emerged during the writing and researching of this book. In particular, I would like to mention the work of Lyndall Gordon, whose *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life* came out in 1994. Not only have I found her reading of Charlotte inspiring, but I also have to thank her for her friendship and generous support. Her unstinting encouragement, and her belief that I could finish this book even when I thought I would never manage to do so, did me so much good.

I am also indebted to Juliet Barker's *The Brontës*, another book published in 1994. The ambitious scope of Barker's research and her clear eye for historical detail make this a landmark biography which no subsequent writer on the Brontës will be able to ignore. Thought-provoking in a very different way was Stevie Davies's more literary *Emily Brontë: Heretic* (also 1994), whose approach to its subject's intellectual context chimed in with my own feelings about how we should read the woman dubbed the sphinx of English literature. I am also extremely grateful to Patsy Stoneman, who helpfully let me see some of her work in draft and whose book, *Brontë Transformations: The Cultural Dissemination of 'Jane Eyre' and 'Wuthering Heights'* (1996) analyses an unparalleled array of rewritings of the two most

famous Brontë novels. The critical zeitgeist does indeed seem to be moving in the direction of interest in the Brontës' reception and afterlife: in 2000, just as I was completing this book, the Brontë Parsonage Museum put on an excellent exhibition, 'A Passionate Response', featuring information on Brontë biographies and on adaptations of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, as well as the coat worn by Cliff Richard in his role as Heathcliff!

One of the most important Brontë projects to have begun to take shape in the 1990s is Margaret Smith's edition of *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, the first volume of which appeared in 1995 and the second in 2000 just in time for me to be able to take it into account. I feel very fortunate to have been able to rely on Smith's scholarship for letters up until 1851, not only because of her standards of textual accuracy but also for her fascinating footnotes. For letters after that period I have, as I explain in my bibliography, had to rely on the outdated Shakespeare Head Edition while acknowledging its inadequacies. Lastly, I want to thank the compilers of two book-length Brontë bibliographies which have proved invaluable in my search for source material: firstly, G. Anthony Yablon and John R. Turner, and secondly Anne Passel. Two other books I want to mention, both brilliant, which came out after I started working on *The Brontë Myth* and have been indirectly influential, are Janet Malcolm's study of Sylvia Plath and her biographers, *The Silent Woman* (1994), and Jonathan Bate's *The Genius of Shakespeare* (1997).

The staff of the British, London and Fawcett Libraries deserve my thanks, as do Rachel Terry and Ann Dinsdale of the Brontë Parsonage Museum in Haworth and Robert Parks of the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York. If I have ever felt tempted into adopting the cynical pose of the out-and-out demythologiser, I have made myself remember how extraordinarily moved I was when I first read and handled

the manuscript of one of Charlotte Brontë's diary fragments written while she was a young teacher at Roe Head. No amount of rationalisation can fully account for the magical sense of sharing in a private world, and of the past coming suddenly to life, which such experiences engender.

I would like to thank my agent, Bill Hamilton, and my publishers at Jonathan Cape, especially Philippa Brewster, who first commissioned this book in 1992, Dan Franklin, who continued in the most touching way to believe against the odds that it was ever going to materialise, and Jason Arthur. Owing to circumstances described below, I was unable to compile the bibliography or read the proofs myself; I thank Alexandra Butler at Cape and Myra Jones for doing this for me. I was also lucky enough to have the marvellous Douglas Matthews to compile my index, and Beth Humphries to copy-edit the manuscript. Pamela Norris read through the entire manuscript with her eagle eye and made many valuable and interesting comments. Colleagues and friends have also helped, whether by reading bits of the manuscript or offering advice, information or just encouragement, in particular, Juliet Carey, Donna Choo, Sarah Christie-Brown, Linda Kaye, Simone Ling, Michael Meredith, John Mullan, Rosie Parker, Fiammetta Rocco, Natasha Walter and Robert Winder. My brother-in-law, Mark Bostridge, deserves a special mention for having shared his long-held love of the Brontës with me.

The completion of this book has been overshadowed by two overwhelming events in my life. Just as the manuscript was about to be sent to the typesetters, my son, Oliver, was born; a couple of days after the proofs were returned my father was tragically killed, aged 59, in an accident. Both my parents were endlessly supportive during the writing of this book, but my father, who gave me a treasured first edition of Mrs Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, always encouraged me with an enthusiasm which it is almost too painful to

recall. I cannot express how sad I am that he will never read it.

My greatest debt is to my husband, Ian Bostridge, whose constant love and care have helped me so much.

1
To be for ever known

IF THE TWENTY-year-old Charlotte Brontë had been told that she would one day be a household name, that her picture would hang in a future National Portrait Gallery, and that pilgrims would travel to Haworth on her account from as far away as Japan, she would have been delighted but not altogether surprised. The image of the Brontës presented in Charlotte's own Biographical Notice of her sisters casts them as 'unobtrusive women' shunning fame.[1] Yet Charlotte's early ambition was not merely to write but 'to be for ever known'.[2]

By the time she died at the age of nearly thirty-nine in 1855, she had indeed become a celebrity. Two years later, with the publication of Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, she became a legend. Yet her journey from private individual to public persona was less straightforward than her naïve twenty-year-old self might have hoped. Instead of a triumphant progress out of obscurity into the 'light & glory' of literary renown, she would have to travel a tortuous route, characterised as much by evasion and self-effacement as by self-exposure.[3]

She soon realised that, as a woman writing in an age in which 'authoresses' were 'liable to be looked upon with prejudice', it was expedient to disguise herself under a male-sounding pseudonym if she was to make her work public.[4] In her novels, that pseudonym would give her the

freedom to use her own emotional life as the basis of her art, allowing her to revolutionise the imaginative presentation of women's inner lives. She was so uninhibited in her portrayal of the female psyche that her heroines shocked many of her contemporaries and were accused of unwomanly assertion, morbid passion, and anti-Christian individualism.

So when her pseudonym began to slip and her real identity became known in literary circles, Charlotte had to seek out a new sort of protective 'veil' to distract attention from the unacceptable elements of her fiction and deflect attacks on her personal morality.[5] She found this in her social persona as the modest spinster daughter of a country parson, disingenuously insisting to those she met on the literary circuit that she bore no more than a fleeting external resemblance to the rebellious Jane Eyre. Unlike the French novelist George Sand (1804–76), who wore men's clothes and took a stream of high-profile lovers, Charlotte never sought a bohemian lifestyle. Sand's novels, with their frank portrayal of female desire, may have influenced her writing,[6] but Charlotte the clergyman's daughter was not prepared to sacrifice her respectability. She was well aware that she lived in a society where 'publicity … for a woman … is degrading if it is not glorious' and where the line between celebrity and notoriety was perilously thin.[7]

If Charlotte Brontë was her own mythologiser, she invented two distinct and conflicting myths, the second designed to deflect attention from the first. One was the positive myth of female self-creation embodied by her autobiographical heroines, Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe, who forge their own sense of selfhood in conflict with their social environment. The other, which eventually inspired the saintly heroine of Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, was a quiet and trembling creature, reared in total seclusion, a martyr to duty and a model of Victorian

femininity, whose sins against convention, if she had unwittingly committed any, could be explained away by her isolated upbringing and the sufferings she had endured. Both had their elements of truth in aspects of Charlotte Brontë's private character, but both were imaginative constructs, consciously developed.

Charlotte's perception of the writer's self as material for mythology derived from her Romantic inheritance, as did the lifelong belief in her own genius which enabled her to achieve what she did in literature against the odds. Her youthful faith in writing as a route to immortal fame had been established early on in childhood. Because of the way her public image was moulded after her death, her family has, over the past century and a half, been primarily remembered for its tragedies. But what made her able to transform herself into one of the major novelists of the nineteenth century was the fact that she grew up steeped in literature, defining herself as a writer from a very young age. Charlotte was five when her mother died and eight when she was sent to the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge, where her two elder sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, contracted the tuberculosis that killed them. Yet within a year or so of these damaging experiences, she had recovered sufficiently to form an intense bond with her three surviving siblings, Branwell, Emily and Anne, in boisterous imaginative games fuelled by the literary tastes their father encouraged. Like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who talked metaphysics with his infant son Hartley, the Reverend Patrick Brontë took a Romantic interest in his children's development and encouraged their precocity.

Charlotte and Branwell later recorded how their 'plays' began in 1826 with the present of a box of toy soldiers. In real life, death had intruded as an arbitrary force. In play, they could take control when, as four gigantic Genii, they held the power of life and death over the diminutive wooden

men. Soon, they began to make tiny magazines for the soldiers, writing out their own compositions in microscopic script. This scribblemania continued long after they had outgrown the toys which had originally inspired it until it became a purely literary adventure. By the time they were into their teens, their understanding of the term ‘Genius’ was more metaphorical than it had been, but no less potent. Eventually, the siblings split off into two separate camps, Charlotte and Branwell chronicling the history of the imaginary kingdom of Angria while Emily and Anne invented their own fantasy world, Gondal.[8]

At an early age, the young Brontës formed a habit of treating writers as heroes. In one game, played when they were aged between seven and eleven, each had to pick an island and its chief men.[9] Their chosen leaders included literary figures such as Sir Walter Scott, J. G. Lockhart, Leigh Hunt and ‘Christopher North’ (John Wilson) of *Blackwood’s Magazine*, who were clearly believed to be as powerful as a man of action like the Duke of Wellington, who was also selected.[10] Though Emily’s and Anne’s early prose has not survived, Angria and its predecessor Glass Town are vividly documented in Charlotte’s and Branwell’s voluminous juvenilia, which reveal their fantasy world as a place where writers were important figures.

Charlotte’s early-established belief in the writer as an exceptional individual derived from her sophisticated childhood and teenage reading and continued into adulthood. During the 1820s and 1830s, *Blackwood’s Magazine*, and later *Fraser’s*, formed the core of her cultural education.[11] Unlike today’s magazines, these periodicals were not mere ephemera but would have been kept and reread like books. They offered a mix of poetry, fiction, satire, criticism, philosophy, history and political commentary, often sustained to book-like length. *Blackwood’s*, in particular, turned its contributors into cult

figures, such as James Hogg, ‘the Ettrick Shepherd’. A serialised ‘Gallery of Literary Characters’ in *Fraser’s* during 1832 reinforced the celebrity status of the writer. Steeped in the fall-out from the Romantic movement, these magazines fostered the belief that poets were not mere linguistic craftsmen, but privileged souls whose personalities were as important as their actual literary output. One *Blackwood’s* article on Byron in 1828 casually refers to ‘Great Poets’ as ‘the Chosen Few’.[12] Another, two years later, also on Byron, describes famous poets as ‘fixed stars’ forming their own ‘celestial clubs’.[13]

In their imaginary city of ‘Glass Town’, Charlotte and Branwell could aspire to join this heavenly clique by writing poetry and prose under the pseudonyms of their favourite characters. These alter egos were, without exception, men. As Christine Alexander points out, writing was regarded in the Brontë household as ‘very much a male domain’.[14] At this stage, Charlotte had no conscious anxiety about unquestioningly identifying herself with the power and privilege of her narrators, who were male simply because she had few female models to emulate (there was no Jane Austen, for example, on the Parsonage shelves). The conflict between her gender and her desire to write would only become explicit later, particularly when she made contact with the real-life world of professional letters. Even so, it still provoked latent tensions in her juvenilia which would not be finally exploded until *Jane Eyre*, in which she used a woman’s voice. Charlotte’s best mature fiction is remarkable for the subjective intensity of its female first-person narrators, but in her juvenilia she tended to adopt the pose of a cynical and detached male narrator. Something held her back from total engagement, except as a voyeur.

When thirteen-year-old Branwell threw himself enthusiastically into the character of Young Soult, an

inspired poet, fourteen-year-old Charlotte could only stand back and mock in a satirical drama, *The Poetaster*. Soult is turned into Henry Rhymer, a drunken coward who writes trite little verses about his own Orphic powers, stamps his foot, and treats his social superiors with absurd flattery one minute, insults the next. When Lord Charles Wellesley, Charlotte's cynical alter ego, reads Rhymer's effusions, he can hardly contain his giggles. Rhymer ends up being kicked out of the room by another of Charlotte's cynical alter egos, the Angrian prose author Captain Tree. Rhymer responds by murdering the unfortunate Tree, but is reprieved on the gallows when Tree is magically brought back to life.[15]

There is no doubt that Branwell at this age could be infuriatingly bumptious and probably deserved everything he got. Yet the very mercilessness of Charlotte's attack suggests how threatened and excluded she felt by her brother's confident identification with the poet who knows that after his death he will become (quoting the *Blackwood's* article on Byron of a few months before) 'a fixed star ascending to the heaven of literature and there establishing its glory, in the midst of poets which are its fellows, to all eternity'.[16] This is Henry Rhymer speaking in Charlotte's satire, but his words sound remarkably similar to her own Romantic ideals. Indeed, his Keatsian belief that true poetry comes as naturally as the leaves to the tree – 'The thoughts should come spontaneously as I write or they're not the inspirations of genius'[17] – is almost identical with the credo earnestly expressed by Charlotte thirteen years later. In an essay written while she was studying in Brussels in 1843, she argued that for the true poet 'inspiration takes the place of reflection' and that 'the man of genius produces, without work'.[18] If the teenage Charlotte found her brother's posturing unbearable, it was because she would herself have liked to identify with the high Romantic conception of the man of genius, but felt

prohibited from giving herself fully to the fantasy because she was a girl.

When Charlotte does write in a non-satirical poetic voice, we find her bewailing the fate of the ‘neglected genius’ who dies unrecognised:

> None can tell the bitter anguish
> Of those lofty souls that languish,
> With grim penury still dwelling:
> Quenched by frowns their sacred fire,
> All their powers within them swelling,
> Tortured by neglect to ire.[19]

It may be written in the voice of the Angrian Marquis of Douro, but this poem reflects Charlotte’s angry sense of her own unacknowledged worth. In it, she goes on to address Genius as a ‘Spiritual essence, pure, divine’ which purifies the vision of the favoured mortals to whom it is given.[20] Though awkwardly expressed here, the faith she held at fourteen in the God-given origin of her artistic creativity would change little as she matured.

Through her early reading, Charlotte absorbed the influence of two distinct types of Romanticism, both of which informed her view of what the creative writer ought to be. On the one hand there was the visionary Romanticism found in her poem on the neglected genius. This enshrined the imagination as the ‘divine faculty’[21] which enabled the gifted individual to see beyond appearances into spiritual reality and was ultimately derived from Wordsworth, Coleridge and lesser figures such as John Wilson of *Blackwood’s*.[22] When Wilson exhorted ‘visionaries’ to apply their transcendent imaginations to a sublimely craggy landscape, Charlotte would have seen herself as included in the invitation.[23]

Charlotte quotes Wordsworth and Coleridge in her juvenilia, but in her prose writing she was less interested in their aesthetic than in chronicling the political and amorous intrigues of the Angrian scene. As a result, the two authors she most admired in her late teens, and whose impact on her writing is most apparent, were Scott – she believed all other novels after his were 'worthless' – and Byron.[24] Scott's legacy can be seen in her stories of abducted damsels and civil war, Byron's in her obsession with the amours of her aristocratic hero, Zamorna. Both writers were among the biggest celebrities of their age and would have informed Charlotte's idea of what it was to achieve literary success.

Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) was, as Carlyle put it in a review of Lockhart's biography of 1837–38, 'like some living mythological personage, and ranked among the chief wonders of the world'.[25] Lord Byron (1788–1824) had not only been the most famous poet of his day, but had notoriously lived out his private life on the public stage. His glamour and fame were reinforced by Thomas Moore's biography of 1830, which was devoured by the Brontë children.[26] In a review, Macaulay commented on the interchangeability of the writer and the work, suggesting that Byron had consciously set out to become a legend:

> He was himself the beginning, the middle, and the end of all his own poetry – the hero of every tale – the chief object of every landscape. Harold, Lara, Manfred, and a crowd of other characters, were universally considered merely as loose incognitos of Byron; and there is every reason to believe that he meant them to be so considered.[27]

After her death Charlotte Brontë would come to rival Byron in personal fame. But in her early prose fiction she was not so much trying to be Byron as to look through the keyhole

on to Byronic scenes of aristocratic seducers and swooning ladies in glittering silks.[28] Her contact with Byron's life and works (including his sexy *Don Juan*, which she had read herself by the time she was eighteen, but which she advised her ladylike friend Ellen Nussey to avoid)[29] exposed her to the frank literary portrayal of sexuality which would re-emerge, in modified form, in her adult novels to upset many readers of the 1840s and 1850s.

Instead of plunging directly into this *risqué* world of Angrian amours, Charlotte habitually described it through the eyes of a noncommittal narrator, 'Charles Townshend'. This was a safety valve designed to prevent her from getting too involved. For she was beginning to feel increasingly guilty about her reliance on this secret fantasy life, which jarred more and more with the social identity she was expected to develop as the demure daughter of the local parson, whose duties included organising tea parties for Sunday school teachers who would never have suspected what was going on in their young hostess's mind.

While a frustrated junior teacher at Roe Head (the kindly boarding school where she had been a pupil in her teens, not the notorious Cowan Bridge of her childhood), Charlotte's habit of escaping into vivid voyeuristic daydreams – often erotic, as when she conjured up the image of a heaving-chested African warrior sprawling lasciviously on the sumptuous couch of a beautiful queen – became all the more intense, as did her guilt about them. Sometimes her lurid visions dissolved into ambitious fantasies of her own literary talents. Scribbling in almost illegible script in the *ad hoc* journal she kept at the time, she described the intensity of the feeling:

> Then came on me rushing impetuously. [*sic*] all the mighty phantasm that this had conjured from nothing

> to a system strong as some religious creed. I felt as if I could have written gloriously – I longed to write.[30]

At Roe Head, Charlotte experienced an often frantically suppressed sense of conflict between her outward self – the dutiful young teacher – and her secret inner dreams. This conflict at work reflected a similar contradiction in her home upbringing. On the one hand, her father, the Reverend Patrick Brontë, expected his daughters to behave as model churchwomen, concerning themselves with parish duties and behaving with the appropriate decorum. Yet, on the other, his own career proved that it was possible to break away from the station into which one was born and make a life of one's own choosing. Himself a published poet, Patrick offered his children a tangible example of the potentialities of self-creation. As a young man, he had symbolically shed his humble Irish background at Cambridge University: on arrival he was registered at St John's College under the name of 'Branty', but this was soon crossed out and replaced with the more flamboyant 'Bronte', possibly in imitation of Nelson, who had recently been made Duke of Bronte by the King of Naples.[31] Through the transforming power of books, Charlotte's father had been able to adopt a completely new class identity as a Church of England cleric. This gave an edge to her own ambition.

Charlotte must have been very ambitious indeed, for while on holiday from Roe Head in December 1836, she found the courage to write to the Poet Laureate, Robert Southey (1774–1843), enclosing some of her own poems and confessing her desire to be for ever known. In her private writings so far she had usually chosen to be the passive observer of her Byronic heroes rather than allowing herself to pose as the man of genius. Yet in her first attempt to make contact with the public, professional world of letters, she explicitly acknowledged her covert hope of being

recognised in her own right for her talents.[32] Southey – himself a remnant of the Romantic vanguard Charlotte admired – was generous enough to write back a substantial letter. But though well meant, his response was dispiriting. While he conceded that she had 'the faculty of Verse', the core of his message was unequivocal: 'Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life: & it ought not to be'.[33]

What seems to have troubled him most about Charlotte's letter was her frank ambition to be publicly acknowledged. His attempt to dampen her naïve enthusiasm – he was embarrassed to find himself described as 'stooping from a throne of light & glory' – is understandable.[34] Having mellowed into respectable middle age he had long since abandoned the Romantic idealism of his own youth.[35] Even so, one gets the feeling that he might have considered a lust for fame more excusable in a young man than in a girl. Once she had buckled down to her 'proper duties' as a woman, he advised, she would be 'less eager for celebrity'.[36]

Southey's response to her plea for recognition confirmed Charlotte's fear that her passion for writing was something socially unacceptable, to be concealed. As it was, she had kept Angria a secret outside her own family, though in moments of religious guilt, she would hint to Ellen Nussey – whom she had met at Roe Head and who was to remain a lifelong friend – that she was eaten up by the unhealthy workings of her 'fiery imagination'.[37] So when the Poet Laureate himself questioned the legitimacy of her ambitions and daydreams, she tried to make the effort to suppress them. In her reply to his letter she reassured him: 'I carefully avoid any appearance of pre-occupation, and eccentricity, which might lead those I live amongst [i.e. at Roe Head] to suspect the nature of my pursuits.'[38] She admitted that she would rather be writing than sewing or teaching, but, she added dutifully, 'I try to deny myself'.[39] The double meaning

– does she simply mean ‘resist temptation’ or is there an implication of ‘erase myself’? – speaks for itself.

Though Charlotte may have been chastened enough by the poet to write ‘Southey’s Advice To be kept for ever’ on the envelope to his next letter – a brief acknowledgement of her reply which urged her to ‘endeavour to keep a quiet mind’ – she did not accept his verdict for long.[40] Instead, she kept on writing in the hope of one day embarking on a literary career, which she saw as an escape route from the drudgery of teaching, either in a school or, far worse, as a governess in a private family – the only employment opportunity then open to most women of her class. The real difference made by Southey’s letter was that in future contacts with the literary world she would be careful to ‘deny’ her real name, which the Poet Laureate, ironically, had suspected of being made up (which in a sense it had been by her father). As an author, she would never attempt to publish as ‘Charlotte Brontë’.

When, three years later, she sent some fiction to the well-known writer Hartley Coleridge (son of Samuel Taylor and nephew of Southey) for his comments, she signed herself ‘C. T.’ – after ‘Charles Townshend’, one of her Angrian *alter egos*. The pseudonym gave her the freedom to let rip when he wrote back an unflattering reply. Her second letter to him is bursting with frenzied sarcasm and swaggering contempt for the man who had failed to give her the encouragement she craved. (Her fury at being snubbed may have been exacerbated by the fact that earlier that year Hartley Coleridge had responded to a similar letter from Branwell by praising his poetry and inviting him to spend a day with him.)[41] Coleridge had suspected his correspondent was a woman, but, C. T. reminded him with a swipe at male authors in general, ‘Several young gentlemen curl their hair and wear corsets – Richardson and Rousseau – often write

exactly like old women – and Bulwer and Cooper and Dickens and Warren like boarding-school misses.'[42]

The tale Charlotte sent to Hartley Coleridge derived from the Angrian saga. Though she disguised its origins by relocating the action in the more realistic West Riding of Yorkshire, it remained rooted in the artificial world of high society intrigue, complete with the Byronic anti-hero who still dominated her imagination.[43] Coleridge's criticisms were probably valid. At this stage in her literary apprenticeship Charlotte had not yet learnt to get inside her protagonists and create the sustained psychological portraits which characterise her mature work. She did not come into her own as a novelist until she developed the confidence to base her fiction on her own emotional experience and to enter her creations empathetically rather than hovering voyeuristically outside them.

The influences which would enable her to make this creative leap were not English. In 1840 Charlotte discovered George Sand, the French writer who had created her own female form of Romanticism in novels which put women's erotic passion centre stage. In the 1832 preface to *Indiana*, Sand had described her heroine as 'desire at odds with necessity ... love dashing her head blindly against all the obstacles of civilisation'.[44] The story is unashamedly about forbidden sexual relationships, one consummated, one endlessly deferred. It includes no anatomically explicit descriptions of sex, but leaves the reader in no doubt as to when the act is taking place. Though her writing would never be as voluptuous as Sand's, such 'wicked' reading (as she put it) would enable Charlotte to legitimise her focus on women's passion in her mature novels.[45] But the most important influence on her development was her decision to leave Haworth for the Continent in search of new intellectual experiences.

In 1842 Charlotte went, with her sister Emily, to study French and German at the Pensionnat Heger, a girls' school in Brussels whose headmistress was married to one of Belgium's finest teachers of literature, Constantin Heger, a professor at the Athénée Royal. Southey and Hartley Coleridge had dismissed her ambitions, but here, for the first time, at the age of twenty-five, Charlotte met a high-powered literary man who actively encouraged her talent for writing while challenging her intellectually. Under Heger's instruction, she and Emily produced French compositions which were subjected to rigorous critique, not merely as language exercises, but for their style and content. Heger expected his pupils to develop their own prose by emulating that of famous authors, and he made Charlotte think hard about the technical side of writing.

Heger also gave Charlotte a forum in which to explore her own feelings about creativity. With him, she debated the subject of genius. In one essay, 'Letter From a Poor Painter to a Great Lord', Charlotte dramatised her own quest for recognition in the defiant voice of an artist who wanders through Romantic forests, poor, but confident that he possesses 'a few grains of that pure gold which is called Genius'.[46] Rather than mocking the self-belief of the aspiring artist – as she had mocked Branwell's pretensions all those years before in the character of Henry Rhymer – she poured all her own hopes into the sincere ambition of the struggling young painter.

Where Charlotte wanted to believe that great art was the product of intuition alone, Heger insisted that study and experience were just as crucial. The fact that his tuition yielded such results suggests that his classical emphasis on craft and hard work was in reality as important to Charlotte's artistic development as her own more Romantic belief in spontaneous inspiration. She did not abandon that belief, but she modified it in the light of Heger's teaching,