

The ‘Martyrdom’ of Miss Charlotte Brontë

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Short though Charlotte Brontë’s TEFL career was – lasting little more than a year – she is not someone we can safely ignore when compiling a history of the profession. For one thing, she was the author of the first two TEFL novels – *The Professor* and *Villette* – or, as has sometimes been suggested, the same novel as if written by two completely different people. For another, the letters she wrote back home from Brussels are an indispensable source of information about the state of the ELT profession in the mid-nineteenth century and of the daily experience of working within it. And finally, her career provides a classic example of one of the recurrent themes of expatriate TEFL history – the close symbiotic relationship which exists between TEFLing and the creative writing process – for it is a truism that Charlotte would not have become the writer she did if it had not been for the two years she spent in Brussels, first as a student and then as a teacher.¹

One approaches Charlotte with some trepidation for it is hard to warm to her, either as a person or as a teacher. One of the kinder epithets applied to her by recent biographers is that she was ‘truculent’.² In this, her biographers have been part of a twentieth century revisionism which began in the 1920s and which reacted against the self-serving picture of herself which Charlotte had insinuated to Mrs Gaskell, who had then enshrined it in her tendentious and idealized biography – that of a saintly martyr, the ‘long-suffering victim of duty, subordinating her career as a writer to the demands of her selfish and autocratic father’.³ Some, such as Juliet Barker in her 1994 study of the Brontës, went right

¹ In this she can be considered alongside James Joyce, Wilfred Owen, Christopher Logue, Christopher Isherwood, Frank Tuohy, Anthony Burgess, John Fowles, Barry Unsworth, Tim Parks and many others who either expatriated themselves as TEFLers in order to become writers or became writers as a result of their TEFLing expatriation.

² From the title of Valerie Grosvenor Myer’s study.

³ Juliet Barker, *The Brontës*, London: Weidenfeld, 1994, p. xvii. There was nothing new in Barker’s denigration of Charlotte. The reaction against the idealized picture of Charlotte which was presented in Mrs Gaskell’s biography began with the publication of Charlotte’s letters to M. Héger in *The Times* in 1913. Mrs Gaskell had been aware of these letters, the story they told and the image of Charlotte that they had presented but had suppressed it in her book, writing to her publisher, ‘I cannot tell you how I should deprecate anything leading to the

over the top, presenting a picture of her as ‘a moping hypocrite, a projector of venomous blame and vicious self-loathing, a manipulative neurotic, a cold, devious, derivative, masochistic snob, a resentful, dirty-minded, castrating, hypochondriacal old maid.’⁴ Muriel Spark, whose standards were high, set as they were by Miss Jean Brodie, had a similar antipathy towards Charlotte, describing her five years as a reluctant and sulky governess in England as ‘little short of martyrdom, as much for [her] pupils and employers as it was for [her]’, and then summing up Charlotte’s final teaching position in Brussels in these terms:

The *Pensionnat Héger* in Brussels is the scene, and Charlotte, having gone there to study French and German, has now become an English mistress in this school for young ladies. Her employer, Mme Héger, has grown rather suspicious of the English teacher and spies upon her; Charlotte apparently cannot think why. She prefers M. Héger. The schoolgirls are ‘selfish, animal and inferior’. And we are further delightfully informed that ‘their principles are rotten to the core’. Charlotte’s colleagues hate each other, and she them. So her letters go on. One of her fellow mistresses, worse than the rest, acts as a spy for Mme Héger, is false, is contemptible, is Catholic. In fact they are all Catholic, and in fact, as Charlotte writes to Branwell, ‘the people here are no go whatsoever’. As the months proceed, Charlotte is giving English lessons to M. Héger, who seems well satisfied with her work, and gives her presents of books occasionally. Charlotte declares that his goodness towards her compensates for the ‘deprivations and humiliations’ which are her lot, but on which she is not explicit. But presently M. Héger takes to avoiding Charlotte, having first lectured her on the subject of ‘universal *Bienveillance*’. She, however, is no universalist; her *bienveillance* is focused on the object of her master whom she observes is ‘wonderfully influenced’ by his wife. With curious logic Charlotte now finds she can ‘no longer trust’ Mme Héger, and driven back to Haworth by that lady’s suspicions, proceeds to confirm them by writing a series of impassioned letters to M. Héger until he implores her to stop.⁵

publication of these letters’. Post-First World War iconoclasm of the Victorians, à la Lytton Strachey, did the rest. In 1929, Rosamond Langbridge wrote a ‘psycho-biographical’ study asserting that Charlotte herself was responsible for all her misfortunes. Other studies of that time referred to her ‘moping’, her ‘self-delusion’ and ‘self-pity’, her ‘hypochondria’, and to the fact that she was ‘neurotic’, ‘pathetic’ and bitter’. E. F. Benson’s 1932 biography attributed her periods of unhappiness to her constitutional ‘absence of charity’, ‘ungraciousness’ and ‘bleak censoriousness of others’ which prevented her from enjoying life ‘like a normal human being’. In a review of 1932, Rebecca West discussed Charlotte’s use of unreliable narrators and had attributed this to a defect of character: ‘She was so used to manipulating people’s feelings in life that she could not lose the habit in her art’. The above comments have been taken from a similarly unsympathetic account of Charlotte by Alice Spawls (‘If it weren’t for Charlotte’, *London Review of Books* 39:22, 16 November 2017, pp. 16-24).

⁴ This is a parody of Juliet Barker’s position in a review of her study by Susan Eilenberg.

⁵ Muriel Spark, ‘The Brontës as Teachers’, p. 13.

We might add that, on finally leaving Brussels and bidding farewell to Mme Héger, Charlotte is reputed to have said, *sotto voce*, *Je me vengerai* ('I will revenge myself'). 'There is nothing nice about the Brontës', confirms Terry Eagleton.⁶ We don't need reminding that as writers the Brontës, in Spark's words, 'gained ample revenge for all injustices real or imagined'. But there is method to Spark's malice, for the compelling theory that she constructs to explain the Brontës is that 'genius, if thwarted, resolves itself in an infinite capacity for inflicting trouble, or at least for finding fault'. And she concludes: 'perhaps the lesson to be drawn, for any writer with the necessary will of iron, who lacks only the opportunity to write, is that he should prove himself no good at anything else.'⁷ Charlotte Brontë had to fail as a teacher to become the writer of *Jane Eyre*.

Let us put some flesh on the bones of the above summary that Muriel Spark provided of Charlotte's Brussels career, at the same time attempting a more charitable interpretation of it.

In the summer of 1841, Charlotte had received a letter from the great friend of her schooldays, the adventurous Mary Taylor,⁸ in which she described her travels on the continent with her brother and sister. According to Charlotte,

⁶ Eagleton objected to their childlike sensibilities, their snobbery, their sense of entitlement, their disdain for the great unwashed, and the sadomasochistic power struggles which pass for human relationships in their works.

⁷ Spark, pp. 19–20.

⁸ One knows people through the friends they choose. It says quite a lot about Charlotte that Mary Taylor was her life-long friend and correspondent. In many ways the two were complete opposites. Mary came from a dissenting family, her father being a cloth manufacturer, whereas Charlotte was High Tory and Anglican. Mary was plain-spoken and rebellious, Charlotte conventional and obedient: at Roe Head, Mary had refused to learn by heart a book of *belles-lettres*, which she considered a ridiculous task and was sent to bed supper-less for a month as punishment for this disobedience, whereas Charlotte complied and won all the school prizes. Mary was adventurous, going first to Germany to study the language and music, supporting herself by teaching English and then emigrating to New Zealand where she made a living as a shop-keeper. She was a staunch feminist and in later life wrote articles on 'The First Duty of Women', arguing that there was no shame in a woman resisting marriage as an expedient and instead working for her own living. She and Charlotte were life-long correspondents and it is a great shame that Charlotte's letters to Mary have not survived. They would certainly have been more spirited and more revealing of herself than the letters she wrote to her other school friend and correspondent, Ellen Nussey, which are often somewhat commonplace. Mary Taylor had obviously obeyed Charlotte's widowed husband's instructions and had burned all the letters Charlotte had sent her. If these letters had survived they might well have radically changed our perception of Charlotte. Late in life Mary Taylor wrote a novel entitled *Miss Miles, or A Tale of Yorkshire Life Sixty Years Ago* (1890) in which critics have discerned Charlotte as

Mary's letter spoke of some of the pictures & cathedrals she had seen – pictures the most exquisite - & cathedrals the most venerable – I hardly know what swelled to my throat as I read her letter – such a vehement impatience of restraint & 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 boldly for a minute – I was tantalized with the consciousness of faculties unexercised – then all collapsed and I despaired.⁹

At this time the three Brontë sisters, together with Branwell, were hatching a plan to start their own school so that they could remain at home at the Haworth parsonage and no longer have to endure the indignities of being a governess in other people's homes. (There was a family precedent for this because their father had established a village school of his own in Ireland at the tender age of sixteen before moving on to Cambridge and better things.) Their aunt thought this a good plan and agreed to lend the necessary money. Why not kill two birds with one stone, Charlotte thought - go to the continent for a while to improve her French and learn some German in preparation for her future role and, at the same time, have the adventure of travel on the continent and all the wonderful cultural experiences Mary Taylor had so eloquently described? After all, she would soon be twenty-six and time was running out on her. Brussels was selected because it was cheaper than Paris, the schools had a good reputation, and because one of the Taylor sisters would be there at the same time, though at a posher finishing school.

Accordingly, in February 1842 Charlotte and Emily, accompanied by their father, set off from Haworth for Brussels where the sisters had been enrolled as students at the Pensionnat Héger. This was a girls' boarding school run by a Mme Héger. Her husband, Dominic, taught at the nearby boys' school, the prestigious Athénée Royal, but was also employed by his wife to give some lessons to the more advanced students at her establishment. The influence on Charlotte of this gifted

one of the characters. Some of the dialogue has led them to speculate on what the two friends might have discussed in their letters, and whether exchanges such as the following might offer a clue:

'Maria', said the girl [Dora], 'if people knew that the women in the churchyards were alive – those in the coffins I mean – and were waiting for us to dig them up, do you think anyone would do it?'

'Dora do be quiet!'

'Answer!'

'Well of course they would.'

'No, they would not! They would say ladies do not want to get up – that they had all they wanted, and that men did not like them to get out of their graves.'

⁹ Letter to Ellen Nussey, 7 August 1841. In (ed.) Smith, p. 32.

and charismatic teacher, both emotionally and intellectually, marked her for life. The result was, in the words of Juliet Barker, that on her return to Haworth two years later,

[s]he had successfully undergone the rigours of an academic discipline imposed by M. Héger, emerging as a better and more powerful writer. And she had fallen in love for the first time – with a man who was the antithesis of everything that she had previously valued. M. Héger was as far removed as it was possible to be from Zamorna [one of the main characters in Charlotte's juvenile Angrian tales]: small, ugly, short-tempered and, above all, Catholic, he shared only his married state with the hero who had dominated Charlotte's imagination for so long. Her unrequited passion for him was to alter permanently and radically her vision of what the male hero should be. The future creator of Mr Rochester and Paul Emanuel was born.¹⁰

Charlotte's early impressions of Constantin Héger had not been particularly favourable. A few months into her stay she wrote an ironic description of him which also gives an indication of some of his eccentric teaching practices:

There is one individual of whom I have not yet spoken Monsieur Heger the husband of Madame – he is professor of Rhetoric a man of power as to mind but very choleric and irritable in temperament – a little, black, ugly being with a face that varies in expression, sometimes he borrows the lineaments of an insane Tom-cat – sometimes those of a delirious Hyena – but very seldom he discards these perilous attractions and assumes an air not above a hundred degrees removed from what you would call mild & gentleman-like he is very angry with me just at present because I have written a translation which he chose to stigmatize as peu correct – not because it was particularly so in reality but because he happened to be in a bad humour when he read it – he did not tell me so – but wrote the accusation in the margin of my book and asked in brief stern phrase how it happened that my compositions were always better than my translations – adding that the thing seemed to him inexplicable – the fact is some weeks ago in a high-flown humour he forbade me to use either dictionary or grammar – in translating the most difficult compositions into French this makes the task rather arduous - & compels me every now and then to introduce an English word which nearly plucks the eyes out of his head when he sees it.¹¹

Héger can't have found teaching the girls' classes particularly rewarding, but he soon saw in Charlotte (and Emily), older and more mature than the others, pupils of some promise. Emily didn't return for a second year at the *pensionnat*, but with Charlotte, Héger took considerable pains, directing her leisure reading, gifting her books and generally encouraging her.

At thirty-three, Héger was only eight years older than Charlotte. In addition to a mercurial temperament, he had had a somewhat Byronic and tragic past, which

¹⁰ Barker, p. 427.

¹¹ Letter to Ellen Nussey, May 1842. In (ed.) Smith, p. 36.

Charlotte might have guessed at, though probably didn't know the details of. At twenty-one, already married, he had fought on the barricades during the civil war between the Francophone Catholics and the Flemish Protestants which resulted in the creation of the Belgian state; two years later his wife and child had died of cholera. By the time Charlotte arrived at the school he had been married to his second wife, Zoë, for six years and was father of a young family. In possible defence of Charlotte and the embarrassing and long-lasting crush that she developed for M. Héger, there is evidence that he was flirtatious with his female students and that his classes had a distinct erotic charge such that Charlotte, in her innocence of continental ways, might have completely misread Héger's attentions. There were stories, told much later by former students, of kisses exchanged and of incidents suggesting improper advances made to them by M. Héger. Later, Héger seems to have treated the impassioned letters that Charlotte sent him with a Byronic disdain and negligence, using one as scrap-paper to write down the address of his shoemaker.¹²

Héger introduced Charlotte to a range of prose styles, on the basis of which she had to write *devoirs* in a similar style and in a controlled and disciplined manner. She must also be prepared to accept principled, if severe, criticism. Claire Harman, in her biography of Charlotte, has provided a useful summary of Héger's methods. Though they were newly arrived and with only a basic grasp of the language, Héger didn't bother with teaching the two sisters French grammar and the like,

but started immediately on examples of classic French literature, and more recent works from his wide and avid reading. His taste was for the Romantics of his own language – Lamartine, Hugo, Chateaubriand and the essayists Mirabeau and Delavigne, all of whose works he would declaim in sonorous tones – and his teaching method was the same as he used with generations of his pupils: he would read aloud a carefully chosen passage and meticulously analyse its effects in discussion with the students. Then they would choose or be set a topic for composition 'attuned to the same key, either grave or gay, of the model of excellence he had given, but of a sufficiently different character to make anything resembling unintelligent imitation impossible'. [...] At the end of an essay called 'Le Nid' ('The Nest'), which Charlotte wrote for him in April [1842], Héger – having extensively corrected and commented throughout – wrote the following trenchant comments:

What importance should be given to details, in developing a subject? –

Remorselessly sacrifice everything that does not contribute to clarity, verisimilitude, and effect.

¹² Sally Minogue, introduction to the Wordsworth edition of *Villette*, 1993, pp. xiv–xv.

Accentuate everything that sets the main idea in relief, so that the impression be colourful, picturesque. It's sufficient that the rest be *in its proper place, but in half-tone*. This is what gives to style, as to painting, unity, perspective, and *effect*.

Read Harmony XIV of Lamartine, *The Infinite*: we will analyse it together, *from the point of view of the details*.¹³

The first *devoir* Charlotte wrote for M. Héger has recently been discovered. Written a month after her arrival in Brussels, it is entitled '*L'Ingratitude*' and is a fable about an ungrateful young rat who leaves home and comes to a sticky end. Written in the style and using the vocabulary of the fables of La Fontaine and J. P. Florian, one must assume that it was the unadorned simplicity of these two writers which was the first French style Héger introduced his new students to. What Héger was providing for Charlotte was, in effect, a curriculum somewhere between a university stylistics course and a creative writing programme, though with the interesting (and, one assumes, productive) distancing effect of being conducted in and through a foreign language. Just like her letters to Héger after she had left Brussels, so her *devoirs* for him were able to say in French things she would never have dared say in English. One of these took the form of a '*Lettre d'un pauvre Peintre à un grand Seigneur*', in which she announced, '*Milord, je crois avoir du Genie*'.

Charlotte's writing up to this point had been prolific, but undisciplined and immature. It had amounted to some 180 poems, a novella, the draft of a novel, and numerous Angrian stories, all unpublished. In her Preface to *The Professor*, she had described some of these juvenilia as 'many a crude effort, destroyed almost as soon as composed'. However, she had sent samples of her writing to leading writers of the time, hoping for encouragement. The Poet Laureate, Robert Southey, wrote a kindly but discouraging letter back, acknowledging she had some talent, but warned her that seeking literary celebrity was unlikely to bring her any happiness in life: 'The day-dreams in wh[ich] you habitually indulge are likely to induce a distempered state of mind. [...] Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life: & it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure she will have for it.' Write for pleasure, he advised her, but 'not with a view to celebrity'.¹⁴ Charlotte's main literary activity from her teens until a year or two before she left for Brussels had not been writing for potential publication, but the private one of composing, in consort with Branwell, the fanciful stories set in the kingdom of Angria which were written in minute

¹³ Harman, pp. 145–6, 147–8. Héger's comments on Charlotte's essay are from Lonoff, p. 42.

¹⁴ An extract from Southey's letter is given in (ed.) Smith, p. 10, note 2.

script and bound in tiny volumes, little larger than a matchbox. These feature the Byronic Duke of Zamorna and his one-sided affairs with women whom he treats with amused and cynical contempt. The central female character is Elizabeth Hastings, 'a pale under-sized young woman dressed as plainly as a Quaker in grey'. A projection of herself and a forerunner of Jane Eyre? These stories are fascinating both in themselves and as early indications of some of the masochistic elements and imbalanced power relationships which became central in her mature writing, but they were intended as little more than a pastime and for personal entertainment. On returning to Haworth, Charlotte put all these early efforts behind her. In Brussels she had absorbed some completely new perspectives on prose writing. Furthermore, she had received acknowledgement of her talents and the encouragement to develop them (and from a *man*, for the first time). She had also returned with a calamitous and long-lasting crush on her former teacher, whose presence can be discerned in the various guises of Mr Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, Louis Moore in *Shirley*, and, most especially, Paul Emanuel in *Villette*. And she had returned with much to avenge.

Charlotte arrived back in Haworth in January 1844 and began planning her school. By November the idea was effectively dropped as no pupils could be found. Another failure. Was it a deliberate or a fortuitous one? Charlotte had returned to Haworth armed with an impressive diploma, complete with the seal of the *Athénée Royal*, which certified her competence to teach French. A 'card of terms' was printed for 'The Misses Brontë's [sic] Establishment for the Board and Education of a Limited Number of Young Ladies, The Parsonage, Haworth, near Bradford', at £35 per annum for full board and tuition.' The subjects to be taught were writing, arithmetic, geography, grammar and needle-work, with French, German, Latin, Music, and Drawing as extras, each at one guinea a quarter. Laundry was an extra, too. There was no extra charge for conversation with the irascible Reverend Patrick Brontë or for the *son et lumière* display of alcoholic, drugged-up Branwell having psychotic episodes and setting fire to the place. However, as a result of her unreciprocated affections for M. Héger and her supposed persecution at the hands of his wife, Charlotte had returned in a despondent frame of mind and lacked the earlier enthusiasm she had had for the project. Moreover, the sisters were advertising too late in the year, when parents had already placed their daughters elsewhere; anyway, their terms were on the expensive side, and Haworth, a cholera-ridden and windswept industrial village (it boasted 18 small textile mills) high on the Yorkshire moors, was hardly the place a responsible parent would want to send their precious daughter. Instead of the Haworth parsonage becoming an elite finishing school for young ladies, it turned into a bustling creative writing centre with Charlotte, if not headmistress

or course director, then at least its pushy impresario. The result was the *annus mirabilis* of 1847 with the publication of Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*, Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, and Anne's *Agnes Grey*.

Muriel Spark's theory, we have noted, was that Charlotte had to fail as a teacher in order to succeed as a writer. But had Charlotte failed as a teacher? It is hard to think of this plain, diminutive, shrinking and short-sighted person¹⁵ having the

¹⁵ I hope I will not be accused of 'lookism' for the following note, the content of which is mainly derived from Juliet Barker's far from sisterly biography. Descriptions of Charlotte's appearance at different points in her life paint much the same picture. Mary Taylor's first impression of Charlotte when she arrived as a pupil at Roe Head aged fifteen was of a misfit, of her plainness and her old-fashioned look: 'She looked a little old woman, so short-sighted that she always appeared to be seeking something, and moving her head from side to side to catch a sight of it. She was very shy and nervous and spoke with a strong Irish accent. When a book was given her, she dropped her head over it till her nose nearly touched it.' Mrs Gaskell, who knew her later in life, said that 'stunted' was the best word to apply to Charlotte and that she had 'a slight fragile body'. Mrs Martineau said that she was 'the smallest creature I have ever seen (except at a fair)'. Charlotte's usual expression, said Mrs Gaskell, 'was of a quiet listening intelligence; but 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. [...] I never saw the like in any other human creature. As for the rest of her features, they were plain, large, and ill-set; but, unless you began to catalogue them, you were hardly aware of the fact, for the eyes and power of the countenance over-balanced every physical defect. The crooked mouth and the large nose were forgotten, and the whole face arrested the attention. [...] Her hands and feet were the smallest I ever saw; when one of the former was placed in mine, it was like the soft touch of a bird in the middle of my palm.' George Smith, Charlotte's publisher who she was emotionally involved with until he married elsewhere and who is generally taken to be the model for Dr John in *Villette*, described her thus: 'I must confess that my first impression of Charlotte Brontë's personal appearance was that it was interesting rather than attractive. She was very small, and had a quaint old-fashioned look. Her head seemed too large for her body. She had fine eyes, but her face was marred by the shape of the mouth and by the complexion. There was but little feminine charm about her; and of this fact she herself was uneasily and perpetually conscious. [...] She would have given all her genius and her fame to have been beautiful. Perhaps few women ever existed more anxious to be pretty than she, or more angrily conscious of the circumstance that she was *not* pretty.' More succinctly, Smith described his impression of her when they first met to discuss *Jane Eyre* as of 'the plain insignificant governess'. Thackeray met her when she had become famous and wrote of 'the trembling little frame, the little hand, the great honest eyes'. Finally, the ever-disobliging Juliet Barker, described Branwell's portrait of the sisters when Charlotte was eighteen as showing her with a 'square-jawed [face], with a high forehead, large nose and prim mouth'. A sketch of a woman's head in Charlotte's school atlas done in 1843 whilst she was in Brussels has recently been identified as a self-portrait and is included in Harman's biography. It is a self-conscious and unflattering portrait featuring a large nose, prominent forehead, penetrating eyes, and a mouth 'twisted up to one side, hiding decayed teeth'. This was a significant discovery as hitherto there had only been two known portraits of her – the professional one by George Richmond and Branwell's amateurish group portrait of the three sisters. One shouldn't think badly of someone

physical presence to control a rowdy class of empty-headed young misses intent on disrupting her lessons – for that is how they appear, at least initially, in her novel *Villette*. The evidence is equivocal. Two girls who had been at the *pensionnat* during Charlotte's time, when interviewed much later, testified that as a student there Charlotte had been despised for being ill-dressed, sickly-looking ('*maigrelette*') and for being M. Héger's pet and a terrible swot, and then later, as a teacher, for her lack of authority. When she had trouble in the classroom, they said, 'instead of showing anger or amusement, [she] appeared greatly distressed and embarrassed' and would then call in M. Héger to read the riot act to the class and to threaten the worst offenders with expulsion. But her letters from Brussels tell a different story in conveying a growing sense of confidence, even triumph, in her English teaching. She and Emily had originally enrolled in the school as students but after the summer vacation there was an arrangement that they could continue with their studies, with free board, in exchange for Charlotte taking over the teaching of English from an unsatisfactory master, a Mr Wilson, who had had to be fired and for Emily teaching some music. The private English lessons Charlotte had already been giving to M. Héger and his brother-in-law had obviously shown she was up to it. These, according to Charlotte, had gone swimmingly: 'they get on with wonderful rapidity – especially the first [M. Héger] – he already begins to speak English very decently – if you could see and hear the efforts I make to teach them to pronounce like Englishmen and their unavailing attempts to imitate, you would laugh to all eternity'.¹⁶

for their appearance, but wasn't it very poor form of Charlotte to inflict her own plain looks on her heroines?

¹⁶ Frederika Macdonald, 'The Brontës at Brussels', *Woman at Home*, July 1894, pp. 286–7; cited by Harman, p. 160.



Portrait by George Richmond (1850), aged 34



Self-portrait (1843), aged 27

It is true that Charlotte had less fondness for her classes of finishing-school girls:

I teach & sometimes get red in the face with impatience at their stupidity – but don't think I ever scold or fly into a passion – if I spoke warmly, as warmly as I sometimes used to do at Roe Head [the school in Yorkshire where she had taught for three years] they would think me mad – nobody ever gets into a passion here – such a thing is not known – the phlegm that thickens their blood is too gluey to boil – they are very false in their relations with each other – but they rarely quarrel & friendship is a folly they are unacquainted with.¹⁷

These are not the words of a teacher out of her depth, but of someone firmly in control of her dour and unresponsive class and of herself. If Charlotte's tiny frame and plain appearance did not inspire much confidence or respect in her fashionable students, then her gaze and the ferocity of her expressions certainly did: Mrs Martineau talked of her 'blazing eyes'; Mrs Gaskell said that 'her eyes and power of the countenance over-balanced every physical defect'; and Thackeray captured the two sides to her when he described her as that 'fiery little eager brave tremulous homely-faced creature'. Indeed, the indications are that not only was she respected but she was well-liked, for when it became known, several months later, that she was leaving, Charlotte wrote that she 'was surprised at the degree of respect expressed by my Belgian pupils ... I did not think it had been in their phlegmatic natures'.¹⁸ And when she was back at Haworth, she was

¹⁷ Letter to Ellen Nussey, 6 March 1843. In (ed.) Smith, p. 40.

¹⁸ Letter to Branwell Brontë, 1 May 1843. In (ed.) Smith, pp. 41–2.

surprised to receive a packet of letters from her former pupils. Charlotte wrote back individual letters to each of the girls. To one of them, ‘My dear little Victoire’, obviously one of her favourites, who had written complaining of their new teacher and imploring Charlotte to return, she responded:

I cannot tell you my dear Victoire how much pleasure the packet of letters I received from the pupils of the first Class, gave me – I knew I loved my pupils – but I did not know that they had for me the affection those letters express – I only fear now that they will exaggerate my good qualities and think me better than I really am. It grieves me to hear that you are not quite satisfied with your present mistress – do not give way to this feeling – Be obedient, docile and studious and then I think she cannot fail to be kind to you –¹⁹

One assumes that Charlotte’s popularity was with the more serious and studious students, less so with the St Trinians trio who sat on the front bench and took every opportunity to discompose her.

As Muriel Spark well knew, there is a world of difference between actually failing at one’s job in the eyes of others and the feeling that one has failed in a more general sense: the apprehension that one is not cut out for the job, that one is wasting one’s time and energies on an undeserving cause, that one is living a false life. In a revealing letter, written whilst Charlotte was still working as a governess in England, she had expressed sentiments such as these:

what dismays & haunts me sometimes is a conviction that I have no natural knack for my vocation – if teaching only – were requisite it would be smooth & easy – but it is the living in other people’s houses – the estrangement from one’s real character – the adoption of a cold frigid – apathetic exterior that is painful.²⁰

So it was not so much the teaching which was the problem, but the bad faith involved in having to suppress one’s true feelings and assume a submissive presence whilst living under another’s roof.

¹⁹ Letter to Victoire Dubois, 18 May 1844. In (ed.) Smith, p. 48.

²⁰ Letter to Ellen Nussey, 7 August 1841. In (ed.) Smith, p. 33.



Branwell's portrait of the three sisters: left to right, Anne, Emily and Charlotte. Branwell has painted himself out.

Back in Haworth, an independent person at last after the travails of Brussels, Charlotte began writing a series of pathetic, needy and increasingly desperate letters to Héger, 'my master', 'the only master I ever had', in which she describes her respect for him, the indebtedness she feels, and her need for continued contact with him. She complains of his failure to reply and that 'day and night' she can 'find neither rest nor peace – if I sleep I have tormenting dreams in which I see you always severe, always saturnine and angry with me'. Using the vocabulary of her Angrian tales, she describes her inability to get *mastery* over her thoughts, that she is a *slave* to memories and fixed ideas, which have become *tyrants* over her mind, and to those people who say "she is raving", her *revenge* is to wish them a single day of the *torments* she has been suffering for so long. The last of these letters, as far as we know, was written in November 1845. By then she must already have begun work on *The Professor*, which tellingly had the original title of *The Master*. We know that in April 1846 she was offering the novel for publication and that on the day the manuscript was returned to her, rejected – 25 August 1846 – she began writing *Jane Eyre*. But she persisted with *The Professor*, believing it to be less flawed and more commercial than the publishers insisted, and took to writing letters to them answering their objections to the novel, but to no avail since by August 1847 it had been rejected seven times. In a bitter Preface to *The Professor*, written after the success of her later novels, she explained that her plan had been to write a novel, which was 'plain and homely' and true to the realities of ordinary life, rather than one that was fashionably sensational with 'a passionate preference for the wild, wonderful, and thrilling – the strange, startling, and harrowing'. She aimed, she said, at a (Biblical) realism:

I said to myself that my hero should work his way through life as I had seen real living men work theirs – that he should never get a shilling he had not earned – that no sudden turns should lift him in a moment to wealth and high station; that whatever small competency he might gain should be won by the sweat of his brow; that, before he could find so much as an arbour to sit down in, he should master at least half the ascent of ‘the Hill of Difficulty’ [of John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*]; that he should not even marry a beautiful girl or a lady of rank. As Adam’s son he should share Adam’s doom, and drain throughout life a mixed and moderate cup of enjoyment.

Charlotte’s aim might have been *realist*, but the question is whether the resulting product is *probable* or *credible*.

Charlotte’s hero is William Crimsworth and the novel is his first-person narration of the events of his life as seen from the standpoint of comfortable retirement back in England after a successful TEFLing career in Brussels. William recounts that he lost his parents young and was sent away to boarding school. On leaving Eton his well-off maternal uncles discuss his future with him: they suggest that he go into the Church and they offer him the choice of several livings at their disposal, with marriage to one of their unappetizing daughters thrown in as an inducement. William says he lacks the necessary calling and turns them down. He is reminded that he has no private income and so university and establishing himself in one of the professions is out of the question. Does he want to end up as a tradesman like his late father, they sneer. William is piqued and says he is not too proud for that: if it was good enough for his father, it is good enough for him. So he contacts his older brother, whom he has not seen since early childhood and who is now a prosperous northern industrialist. He asks him for a job. The brother employs him as a lowly clerk and, jealous of William’s privileged education and posh southern accent, treats him in a demeaning manner. William works selflessly for his brother and stoically puts up with the non-stop humiliations his brother devises for him. He lives quietly and frugally in local lodgings and has no social life. But he is not a happy bunny. A slight acquaintance, a Mr Hunsden who, like William’s brother is a local big-shot, sees what is happening and doesn’t like it one bit. A gruff guardian angel who turns up at odd points in the novel, he engineers William’s dismissal from his position, tells William that he is the aristocrat of the family and not cut out to be a tradesman, and suggests he goes abroad to make his fortune. He furnishes William with a letter of introduction to a business colleague in Brussels and as a result William gets a job as a teacher of English and Latin at Monsieur Pelet’s establishment. His first lesson, during which he is observed by the Principal, provides us with a seemingly authentic glimpse of the state of the art of ELT in the mid-nineteenth century:

‘Commencez!’ cried I, when they had all produced their books. The moon-faced youth (by name Jules Vanderkelkov, as I afterwards learned) took the first sentences. The *livre de lecture* was *The Vicar of Wakefield*, much used in foreign schools, because it is supposed to contain prime samples of conversational English. It might, however, have been a Runic scroll for any resemblance the words, as enunciated by Jules, bore to the language in ordinary use amongst the natives of Great Britain. My God! How he did snuffle, snort, and wheeze! All he said was in his throat and nose, for it is thus the Flamands speak; but I heard him to the end of his paragraph without proffering a word of correction, whereat he looked vastly self-complacent, convinced, no doubt, that he had acquitted himself like a real born and bred ‘Anglais’. In the same unmoved silence I listened to a dozen in rotation; and when the twelfth had concluded with splutter, hiss, and mumble, I solemnly laid down the book.

‘Arrêtez!’ said I. There was a pause, during which I regarded them all with a steady and somewhat stern gaze. A dog, if stared at hard enough and long enough, will show symptoms of embarrassment, and so at length did my bench of Belgians. Perceiving that some of the faces before me were beginning to look sullen, and others ashamed, I slowly joined my hands, and ejaculated in a deep *voix de poitrine*, ‘Comme c’est affreux!’

They looked at each other, pouted, coloured, swung their heels; they were not pleased, I saw, but they were impressed, and in the way I wished them to be. Having thus taken them down a peg in their self-conceit, the next step was to raise myself in their estimation – not a very easy thing, considering that I hardly dared to speak for fear of betraying my own deficiencies.

‘Ecoutez, messieurs!’ said I, and I endeavoured to throw into my accents the compassionate tone of a superior being, who, touched by the extremity of the helplessness which at first only excited his scorn, deigns at length to bestow aid. I then began at the very beginning of *The Vicar of Wakefield*, and read, in a slow, distinct voice, some twenty pages, they all the while sitting mute and listening with a fixed attention. By the time I had done nearly an hour had elapsed. I then rose and said, ‘C’est assez pour aujourd’hui, messieurs; demain nous recommencerons, et j’espère que tout ira bien.’

With this oracular sentence I bowed, and in company with M. Pelet quitted the schoolroom.²¹

We might pause here to take stock. *The Professor* is a very rum story and scholars tell us that in these introductory chapters, Charlotte, in order to achieve a sufficiently ‘masculine’ and plausible back-story for William, was recycling elements from one of Branwell’s Angrian tales about vicious brotherly conflict. However, Charlotte then softens the effect by giving William some of her own characteristics: in particular, she makes him long-suffering and short-sighted. As far as his looks are concerned, we are told that he is a poor specimen compared with his brother – puny and with irregular features – and in his relations with his

²¹ *The Professor*, Chapter 7.

brother his submissiveness borders on the pathological. At the same time, paradoxically, he is ‘patrician’ and an old Etonian. In a way this is plausible – one does come across old Etonians in the TEFLing world, but they are invariably on their way down, not, as in William’s case, on the up, or else they are slumming it for masochistic reasons. George Orwell was one such, teaching English in Paris for the equivalent of six shillings a week at a time when you could live on a shilling a day - ‘if you know how – but it is a complicated business’. Sebastian Cresswell-Turner was another old Etonian – in his case slumming it, with ill-grace, in a commercial language school in Rome.²² But this is by the by. Let us resume the tale, since now we come to the important part – William’s TEFLing career and his love life.

William shows himself to be a severe but just teacher of Belgian youth, for whom he has contempt, describing his pupils as having ‘short memories, dense intelligence, feeble reflective powers’ and strong ‘animal propensities’. There is a pomposity in his speech which is matched by his priggish attitudes. He suspects M. Pelet, and continentals in general, of having lax morals and being mentally depraved, which he attributes to the pernicious effects of Catholicism. Apart from *not* being ‘a bigot in matters of theology’, he reminds us of his other good qualities: that he never lingers over painful and necessary tasks, that he never puts pleasure before business, that he abhors licentiousness, that vanity is the least of his defects, and so on. Nor will he let us forget that he is short-sighted and physically unattractive: he sees himself in the mirror with ‘a thin, irregular face [...] with sunk, dark eyes under a large, square forehead; complexion destitute of bloom or attraction, [...] no object to win a lady’s love.’

Next door to M. Pelet’s establishment for boys is Mlle Reuter’s *pensionnat de demoiselles*. William is invited to teach English there for four afternoons a week in addition to his work for M. Pelet. He is as severe with the ‘conceited coquetry and futile flirtation’ of the young misses as he was with M. Pelet’s dense and impertinent youths. Mme Reuter, an astute businesswoman in her late twenties, begins toying with William, exploring possible weaknesses in him. He finds her, though not conventionally pretty, ‘a fascinating little woman’ and begins acting in a gallant manner towards her, reasoning to himself that marriage to an Englishman (and a Protestant to boot) would help Mlle Reuter overcome the continental and Popish defects in her character: she would come to ‘acknowledge the superiority of right over expediency, honesty over policy’ and so develop some ‘integrity’. However, one night William overhears from his bedroom window a conversation in the garden of the girls’ *pensionnat*. He recognizes the

²² See Wilson, *The Experience*, p. 6.

voices as those of M. Pelet and Mlle Reuter. They are discussing their forthcoming marriage – and him. Mlle Reuter joshes M. Pelet that he is jealous of William because William is head over heels in love with her. But, she continues, don't worry - 'Crimsworth could not bear comparison with you either physically or mentally; he is not a handsome man at all'. William is appalled at this calumny and goes to bed 'something feverish and fiery'. But he is nothing if not blunt and direct. At work he intimates to each that he has overheard their conversation and thereafter he adopts a distant and cold attitude towards them, 'a hardness and indifference', while continuing his teaching as normal. But there is an unintended consequence of this: Mlle Reuter is turned on by William's new hauteur and she begins 'cringing' to him, 'hovering' around him, 'flattering' him, and adopting a manner of 'slavish homage'.

At this point, I think we need to take a short break to cool down. It will be noted that Charlotte has transferred to William her own physical attributes, also her vicar's daughter's primness and priggishness, and her insular prejudices,²³ and she has transferred to Mlle Reuter's behaviour her own cringing and slavish behaviour towards M. Héger. This would be highly amusing if it were a farce or a comedy of manners, but it is all deadly serious. We now rejoin the novel at the point where there is a new woman in William's life but, short-sighted as he is, he is not yet aware of this new love interest. (I do wish he would stop reminding us of his myopia – we got the point early on.)

Mlle Reuter has asked William to admit a new girl into his class. She is the shy and rather plain girl who teaches lace-making in the school. Though she has never had a formal education, she says she wants to learn some English so as to get a better position elsewhere. She sits at the back of the class, attentive and conscientious, coming in and out of focus depending on whether William has his spectacles on or off that day. He notices that the qualities of perseverance and sense of duty appear to be highly developed in her. From this he deduces that she is probably not Belgian. One day, during a reading lesson, he notices her pronunciation – 'the voice was a voice of Albion'; in another lesson he was surprised by a lengthy, imaginative and largely correct guided composition she has written on the subject of Alfred and the cakes. After the lesson ('spectacles on nose') he decides to quiz her. It turns out she is nineteen and that her name is Frances Evans Henri, her father having been a Swiss pastor and her mother English. Both are long dead and she now lives with an elderly aunt, supporting the two of them with her lessons and by repairing old lace. Her great ambition,

²³ But not her opium dependency. See Harman, pp. 94–5.

she tells William, is to improve her English to native speaker standard and to go to England so that she can live amongst Protestants again. William begins to take a special interest in her and gives her the sort of training M. Héger had given Charlotte – reading the English classics and writing summaries and compositions based on them. William is demanding and severe with her (though he stops short of spanking her) and Frances thrives on this. She begins to blossom and fill out, such that ‘a plumpness almost *embonpoint* softened the decided lines of her features’ and she developed ‘a lightness and freedom of movement which corresponded with my ideas of grace’. Mlle Reuter, sharp as ever, has noticed all this and one day Frances is absent from class. She has not actually been dismissed, Mlle Reuter says, but it was decided that a change would be in Frances’s best interests and in those of the school. No, she doesn’t have her address.

We are now just over half-way through the novel and Charlotte reassures us of the essential realism of her novel. ‘Novelists should never allow themselves to weary of the study of real life’, she confides to the reader.

William decides to scour the whole of Brussels and to seek Frances out. Eventually he finds her – in the Protestant Cemetery – where else? - attending the grave of her recently deceased aunt. He learns of Mlle Reuter’s duplicity and of the fact that Frances has landed on her feet by getting a job teaching at the English school. They begin spending time together, though still in a master/pupil relationship. William can discern only one fault in Frances – the regular complaint of all Englishmen abroad - that she cannot make a proper cup of tea. That is, apart from the fact that she will occasionally lapse into French when they are conversing. For this the just punishment, he decrees, is that she must read aloud to him several pages of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. (Later, when they are married - spoiler alert here - the ‘chastisement’ for such ‘wilfulness’ will have been increased to a one-hour ‘dose’ of reading Wordsworth aloud, something most of us wouldn’t wish on our worst enemy.)

William has determined he will marry her. But there is a problem – he doesn’t have a ‘competency’. For, with the forthcoming marriage of M. Pelet to Mlle Reuter and in order to avoid future embarrassments, he has resigned both his teaching positions. What is he to do? Charlotte reminds us that in real life ‘the man of regular life and rational mind never despairs’, and William is a man of this ilk. He scratches his head and suddenly remembers that on a school trip whilst working at M. Pelet’s, he had dived into the water (wearing his spectacles that day, no doubt) and saved a boy from drowning. No big deal in itself, an easy task for an Etonian wet bob, but much lauded by the Belgian bystanders as an act of supreme heroism. What if he went round to this boy’s father, ‘rich, respected, and

influential', to seek his advice on how to obtain a new position? He would do this, in true Samuel Smiles *Self-Help* spirit, 'not so much to be helped as to be put into the way of helping myself'. And in no time at all he is recommended for the post of Professor of English at one of the most prestigious Brussels colleges at a salary three times that which M. Pelet had been paying him and with such light duties that he can easily make the same amount again by giving private lessons.

William is now in a position to go round to Frances's lodgings – he has been avoiding her for several weeks because of his financial distress – to tell her the good news and to finally pop the question. Outside the door he stops to listen to Frances reciting a poem she has written, as one does, about her feelings for her severe and unforgiving 'Master'. It is a poem which tells of the 'gratitude' felt by an 'obedient' student to her 'stern' and relentlessly demanding 'Master', whose 'anger fiercely flamed' at the slightest mistake she made but who eventually reveals his affection for her. (This poem of wish-fulfilment, which goes on for four pages, is one Charlotte wrote in Brussels about her feelings for you know who.) William goes in and they meet, as they 'had always met, as master and pupil'. The text of the poem is on the table and he reads it, making marks in the margin with his pencil. Then, with an impulse he could not control, he has Frances on his knee, 'placed there with sharpness and decision, and retained with exceeding tenacity', a masterly move indeed. She readily consents to live with her 'Master' always and to be his wife. But she has a condition – she will not be a mere housewife but will continue working as a teacher. These practical negotiations over, 'a novice in the art of kissing', she gives him a peck on the forehead. William marvels that his 'life's treasure' is someone who is neither beautiful nor rich nor 'even accomplished', but someone who demonstrates 'the superiority of moral worth over physical charms'.

Thereafter it is all downhill. William instructs his wife in 'how to make a cup of tea in rational English style'. He draws his professorial salary and uses the prestige of his academic position to make a fortune teaching private pupils. They prosper but Frances becomes concerned about the disparity in their earnings – her husband is earning seven times more than she is. She proposes that she starts her own school. The school quickly becomes one of the most successful and fashionable in Brussels, attracting not just the cream of Belgian society but also the county set from England, and the fees are priced accordingly. Frances no longer calls her husband 'Master', but the more intimate 'Monsieur'. As the result of hard work, frugality and clever investments, in only ten years they are in a sound enough financial position to sell up and retire to England. Frances sees England, the Chosen Land, for the first time. They have a son, Victor. He will soon be going to Eton where, William nostalgically recalls, 'his first year or two

will be utter wretchedness'. Regarding Frances, William complacently considers how lucky it was for her that she had married him rather than your common-or-garden TEFLer: how lucky it was for her that she hadn't married 'a profligate, a prodigal, a drunkard, or a tyrant'. Frances readily concurs with her Master.

Charlotte could never understand why no publisher, even when she was an established and celebrated writer, would take *The Professor* on. (It didn't help that she submitted the novel in the original wrapping that had been used for its first submission so that all subsequent publishers could see the history of its rejections.) But she knew it was something of a curate's egg (curates and their eggs she well knew from the Haworth parsonage); but she wouldn't give up and worked at the novel, on and off, for several years in an attempt to remedy some of the defects that publishers had pointed out. In 1847, in the wake of the favourable reviews given to *Jane Eyre*, she wrote to her editor W. S. Williams (he who had provided *Jane Eyre* with its punctuation), acknowledging some of the weaknesses of *The Professor* but saying that it contained writing as good as anything she had ever done:

I found the beginning very feeble, the whole narrative deficient in incident and in general attractiveness; yet the middle and latter portion of the work, all that relates to Brussels, the Belgian school &c. is as good as I can write; it contains more pith, more substance, more reality, in my judgement, than much of "Jane Eyre". It gives, I think, a new view of a grade, an occupation, and a class of characters – all very common-place, very insignificant in themselves, but not more so than the materials composing that portion of "Jane Eyre" which seems to please most generally -²⁴

The Professor is clearly a flawed novel: it begins badly with the clumsy use of the device of a letter to tell William Crimsworth's back-story; then, with its first person narration, the author never convincingly inhabits the voice of a male character; the attempt at realism – at capturing the mundane, unstructured nature of everyday life – often results in a lack of flow and an incoherent bittiness; and, perhaps most tellingly, the characters are formulaic, wooden and scarcely credible. In addition to its artistic defects, *The Professor* is an *unpleasant* novel which emits a bad smell and, as more than one critic has pointed out, creates 'an antipathy towards its author'. The hero's lack of any saving graces, his 'masterly' behaviour towards Frances, his sanctimoniousness, and his complacent and insular prejudices make him a repulsive character, and Frances's self-abnegation, submissiveness and hero-worship of her 'master' are certainly over the top, even by Victorian standards. The problem is that Charlotte's experiences in Brussels, which had resulted in her precipitous departure, were still far too fresh in her mind

²⁴ Letter to Messrs. Smith, Elder & Co. 24 September 1847, in (ed.) Smith, p. 87.

and the novel was written in a state of moral confusion and with a disordered view of human emotions and the workings of the world. It requires little imagination to see that William and Frances are hysterically distorted projections of M. Héger and herself. I don't imagine many people read the novel nowadays other than literary scholars and Brontë completists, and that is how it should be. It is not an experience I would recommend and one which I have spared the reader by providing my (admittedly tendentious) summary of its plot.

However, our interest is not so much in the novel's literary merits or demerits but in what Charlotte described to her publisher as the accurate and novel picture that the novel gives of 'a grade, an occupation, and a class of characters' - in other words, its depiction of expatriate TEFLing and of its 'common-place' and 'insignificant' practitioners. As a document of the teaching practices, conditions, attitudes and economics of this up-and-coming occupation, the novel can scarcely be faulted.

So what would we learn about Victorian-style expatriate TEFLing if we were to rely on William's account of his experiences? We might note the following:

- The only English language oral practice is reading aloud around the class, with correction of pronunciation by the teacher. There are no communicative activities. There seems to be only one register taught – a high literary one. When William quizzes Frances in English he has no idea of how to modify his English so as to make himself comprehensible.
- Teacher-talk is always in the students' native language. William had to demonstrate to M. Pelet that his French was good enough to give instructions to the students and to generally conduct the lesson.
- Apart from reading aloud, all other practice is through the medium of writing, especially in the form of dictation and guided composition exercises based on the reading texts: 'I dictated certain general questions, of which the pupils were to compose the answers from memory, access to books being forbidden'. Marks are given for spelling and grammatical correctness. On this basis each pupil is given a class rank ranging from the best to the worst.
- Feedback, at least when provided by William, takes the form of tearing up a poor pupil's work without comment and reading aloud to the rest of the class the work of the best pupil, thereby inciting an outbreak of envy and bitchiness among the girls.
- Reading texts tend to be classics of English literature. We noted how William's first lesson was reading from Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*. We are told that this particular book was 'much used in foreign schools, because it is supposed to contain prime samples of conversational

English’. A further reason for choosing English classics was that they served as models of good style and also because their content presented sound ‘English’ principles. William, in his teaching of Frances, remarked that he ‘made instruction in English a channel for instruction in literature’, but it was equally a channel for instruction in English values.

- All classes are teacher-centred with the teacher, from his raised platform, in complete control of everything which happens. The classes are large, arranged in serried ranks of desks. William equates pedagogic skill with crowd control, for which his aptitude is praised by both his employers. The only pupils who seem to benefit from the lessons and to make any progress are the occasional studious and plain little girls sitting at the back, such as a certain Sylvie or the afore-mentioned Frances. Despite obvious disparities in linguistic level amongst the students, the teaching is of a one-size-fits-all nature and the activities employed are the time-honoured ones for first language teaching - for example, *dictées* (which, incidentally, are still much favoured in French schools). Order is largely maintained by imposing a sufficient, but not excessive degree of boredom on the class. There is no concession to such modern fads as *learner-centredness*, *individuation*, *rapport* or *pacing*.
- Neither the teacher nor the pupils are supposed to derive any pleasure from their work. The teacher is little more than a technician or a policeman, responsible for the efficient administration of exercises and the prevention of public disorder. He would be perplexed if it were put to him that his job might involve elements of performance-art, music-hall, song-and-dance, clowning, mime or stand-up – in other words, that his job required a degree of artistry, empathy and the need to please and entertain an audience, rather than mechanically going through a dreary, time-honoured routine.
- There is no indication as to what the goals of the English lessons are. For the Belgian boys at M. Prlet’s academy, is English being taught for its future usefulness in business and trade? At Mlle Reuter’s *pensionnat*, where the girls are of various nationalities, is English being learned for social, travel and leisure purposes? These would seem reasonable goals but, whatever specific outcomes might be intended, the teaching materials and methods are singularly ill-suited to meet them. Perhaps English is being taught because it is simply one school subject amidst all the others, something which is taught because it is customarily taught without questioning how or why.
- At all events, William’s pupils are hardly worthy of the precious gift which is being bestowed upon them in the form of the English language. The boys, being Belgian, are little better than animals, and the girls, being girls and being Catholic, are dishonest, hypocritical and fickle. In both cases they are ill-equipped to respond to the rational and sound moral principles that the English

language embodies, and this explains their unresponsiveness to the lessons and the lack of progress they make. If they were but English and Protestant, the learning of the language would come naturally to them.

- On the plus side, schools are equipped with the latest educational technology. William was pleased to note that in his classroom there ‘was a large *tableau* of wood painted black and varnished; a thick crayon of white chalk lay on my desk, for the convenience of elucidating any grammatical or verbal obscurity which might occur in my lessons, by writing it upon the *tableau*; a wet sponge appeared beside the chalk, to enable me to efface the marks when they had served the purpose intended.’
- Regarding salaries, Charlotte is very informative. We learn that William was employed by M. Pelet at one thousand francs per annum, with board and lodging thrown in. William later learned that these were very good terms for Brussels, ‘instruction being extremely cheap there on account of the number of teachers’. In a letter of 1844, Charlotte helpfully supplied the information that the exchange rate was approximately 25 francs to the pound.²⁵ This would put William’s basic salary at £40 p.a., which was little more than a governess in England would be earning and less than many an expatriate governess: Mr Rochester, for example, paid Jane Eyre £30 p.a. and later she was to earn £30 p.a. teaching at a village school, whereas Claire Clairmont went to Moscow in 1823 on what her brother considered the miserly salary of £75 p.a. A study of advertisements in *The Times* in the 1840s indicates that the average annual salary expected by a well-qualified governess was between £30 and £40, though some exceptional ones could command as much as £100.²⁶ But those who advertised in *The Times* were at the top end of the market: Charlotte’s annual salary as a live-in governess near Leeds in 1841 was nominally £20, but with deductions for laundry it had dropped to £16. To put these figures into some perspective, it has been calculated that a middle-class family in

²⁵ ‘I have just been offered a position as principal teacher in a large boarding school in Manchester, with a salary of £100, i.e. 2,500 francs a year – I cannot accept it’. Letter to M. Héger, 24 July 1844. This approximate rate of exchange is confirmed by other sources from the time.

²⁶ Bea Howe, *A Galaxy of Governesses*, London, 1954, p. 115. The salary range was very wide. There were some pitiful governesses who were prepared to work for nothing, just to have a roof over their heads, whereas at the other end, ‘in 1844, Sir George Stephen found one governess who was paid £400 a year, three who were paid £300, several who earned £200, and many with a salary of £80’. (Brandon, p. 19.)

England at that time would struggle on an annual income of only £100,²⁷ and that a senior clerk would expect to earn around £150 p.a. William considered himself well-off and in a position to marry when he landed the Brussels college job of £120 p.a., but that was less than half what an Anglican clergyman or a middle-ranking civil servant would be earning back in England. It is only when William was on an improbable £320 a year (8,000 francs), as a result of all the private students he had accumulated, that he was ahead of the game and earning more than he would have had in England if he had accepted his uncles' offer of a vicar's living. So a TEFLer's financial situation in the 1840s was not very different from that of today, with very wide disparities in salary depending on where one worked and who for, but with the average salary being somewhat below what would be paid to someone in England doing a job which required an equivalent educational background and degree of literacy and a comparable level of responsibility. Then, as now, supply far exceeded demand.

- Charlotte certainly knew what she was talking about when she provided William's and Frances's salary details, but one must take with a pinch of salt her knowledge of the entrepreneurial side of TEFLing. It seems highly improbable that the Crimsworths would have been able to retire comfortably to England after only ten years of running Frances's school. The career of Claire Clairmont's married brother, Charles, had a similar successful trajectory to that of William's – he had his own school in Vienna, he enjoyed Imperial family patronage, he had more fashionable private pupils than he could fit into a day, his daughters augmented the workforce, and he had written a series of profitable textbooks – yet after more than thirty years of hard work he still needed to rely on handouts from Claire to keep going and then dropped dead penniless, still in his prime. Admittedly, Charles had had a mistress on the quiet and that hadn't helped. Obviously he had lacked the Crimsworths' straight-laced Puritan morality, their ambition and sheer acquisitiveness. But even so I don't believe that that explains their disparity in fortunes. The improbability is also that of the 'patrician' old Etonian William, the man not cut out to be a tradesman, suddenly becoming a successful TEFL entrepreneur, a networking wheeler-dealer, and achieving what his creator had so notably failed at – acquiring his own school.

²⁷ In 1845, £100 a year was 'barely sufficient to provide what is required for the family in the shape of lodging, food and raiment'. (J. A. Banks & Olive Banks, *Feminism and Family Planning in Victorian England*, London, 1965, p. 28.)

Let us turn now to *Villette*, which is a reworking of some of the material of *The Professor* but which was written ten years after Charlotte had left Brussels. Thus it is a novel which had been composed with the advantages of a greater degree of distance and detachment from her powerful experiences *chez* and immediately *après* the Héger *pensionnat* and with a better awareness of some of the ways in which *The Professor* had gone wrong. Also, there had been a series of transformative events in Charlotte's life, far more calamitous than her crush on Héger had been and which had resulted in a more sombre and more universalist vision of life. Most notable of these, after her return from Brussels, were her recurrent worries about the health and behaviour (in Branwell's case) of her siblings coupled with the effects this concern had had on her own physical and mental health, and then the traumas of the deaths, within the space of less than a year, of all three of them. From these experiences grew a more generalized apprehension of the role of suffering in human life and a mode of expression which had a Biblical reference and resonance, and these are prominent among the mature features which distinguish *Villette* from *The Professor*.

Villette is an acknowledged classic of English literature, but as a TEFL document it is somewhat wanting. But it would be remiss of me, having been so harsh on *The Professor*, if I did not first say a few words about *Villette* *qua* novel before undertaking the more mundane task of considering it as a mid-nineteenth century document of TEFL attitudes and practices. *The Professor*, as we have seen, is the story of William's successful TEFL career, his finding of a worthy mate, and a demonstration of how a firm character and sound principles can overcome adversity and the wickedness of others. It is plot-driven, focusing on events and the external, and its hero, confident of his own rightness in all things, is not much given to self-reflection. *Villette* is the antithesis of this, being a novel of the inner life, a psychological novel which explores the turbulent and often morbid states of mind of a plain young woman, Lucy Snowe, outwardly unassertive and self-effacing, in the course of her humdrum and rather uninteresting life as a teacher, a character who embodies the expression that 'still waters run deep'. When the manuscript was finally delivered to Charlotte's publisher, he was disappointed by its lack of topical interest and of excitement and, fearing for its lack of success with the general public, offered her the same terms she had received as a first novelist. Many readers had hoped for the thrills of *Jane Eyre* and were disappointed by what one reviewer sneeringly described as the plodding drabness of its plot, which had been sacrificed in favour of the many 'violent emotions of the heart' of so uninteresting a character as 'a Teacher in a Girls' School at Brussels'. However, the novel did have a limited commercial success and there were some laudatory and perceptive reviews; one such acknowledged 'the book's

strange evanescent qualities, the trance-like movement between states of mind rather than scenes', and another talked of its author's 'passionate heart to feel, and the powerful brain to give feeling shape', comparing Charlotte to George Sand. But *Villette* was a demanding novel and not to everyone's taste. It was ahead of its time, anticipating some modernist, even post-modernist techniques which its readers were unprepared for, and it disturbed for being radically subversive of certain established norms and expectations – 'too subversive to be popular', said the feminist critic Kate Millett.

The novel was too much even for some of Charlotte's staunchest allies. Her fellow-novelist Harriet Martineau wrote a review complaining about Lucy being in love with *two* men, the blandly handsome and cheerful Dr John and the fiery and ugly Paul Emmanuel, the Héger figure of the novel; she further complained of the treatment of love in the novel, both of the kind and the degree of this love, feeling it did a disservice to women to portray them as abject slaves to a single emotion. Thackeray was less dismayed than amused 'to read the author's naïve confession of being in love with 2 men at the same time; and her readiness to fall in love at *any* time' and described the novel as 'plaguey'. Sally Minogue, one of Charlotte's modern editors, has well summarized some of the subversive and modernist features of the novel which so discomfited early and even some modern readers: 'its daring 'double-love' which raised the eyebrows of contemporaries'; its dwelling on male beauty and female desire; its blurring of male and female lines when Lucy, half-man, half-woman, makes love to Ginevra on the stage as she cannot – quite – off it; its placing of the woman, and a plain woman at that, at the centre of her own story, her satisfaction dependent on the absence of a man rather than his presence, and on the presence of work rather than its absence; its sense of the abyss yawning below the social inanities of existence. More than this, it is 'the earliest English novel which seriously contemplates lasting unhappiness for its heroine'. Even the heroine's name is found to be problematic: its virginal coolness belying its bearer's passionate sexual yearnings, and its translucence at odds with the opaqueness of her character. In this respect, it is worth noting that for some time Charlotte had been undecided as to whether to call her Lucy Snowe or Lucy Frost, and she had other reservations about her main character, telling her publisher, whilst she was still struggling with the novel and perhaps with a certain wry irony, 'I am not leniently disposed towards Miss Frost – from the beginning I never intended to appoint her lines in pleasant place'. A further problem are the (post-) modernist technical features: the use of an unreliable narrator who sometimes holds back important information from the reader and at other times confusingly slides into omniscience; the difficulties inherent in a self-reflexive narrative and its appeals

to the participant reader; the toying with the reader, for example, in setting up Gothic expectations (the ghostly nun and the malevolent dwarf in the shape of Mrs Walravens), only to dash them by showing them to be pranks or commonplace misunderstandings and illusions; the novel and early use of stream-of-consciousness; and the lack of closure with the puzzle of the ambiguous double ending of the novel.

In the words of one of Charlotte's biographers, *Villette* 'reached psychological depths never attempted in fiction before and became, unwittingly, a landmark in the depiction of states of mind and self-perception, a thoroughly, peculiarly and disturbingly *Modernist* novel'. Another critic, Lucy Hallett-Hughes, has elegantly summarized *Villette* as

an astonishing piece of writing, a book in which phantasmagorical set pieces alternate with passages of minute psychological exploration, and in which Brontë's marvellously flexible prose veers between sardonic wit and stream-of-consciousness, in which the syntax bends and flows and threatens to dissolve completely in the heat of madness, drug-induced hallucination and desperate desire.²⁸

Below, for those not already familiar with the novel, is a taster of Charlotte's use of the interior monologue, a dense and discomfiting paragraph in which the syntax does indeed 'bend and flow and threaten to dissolve'. This is from a scene where Lucy, who attends M. Paul's French classes, has been told that 'on the next public examination-day I should engage – foreigner as I was – to take my place on the first form of first-class pupils, and with them improvise a composition in French, on any subject any spectator might dictate, without benefit of any grammar or lexicon'. This is her reaction:

I knew what the result of such an experiment would be. I, to whom nature had denied the impromptu faculty; who, in public was by nature a cypher; whose time of mental activity, even when alone, was not under the meridian sun; who needed the fresh silence of morning, or the recluse peace of evening, to win from the Creative Impulse one evidence of his presence, one proof of his force; I, with whom that Impulse was the most intractable, the most capricious, the most maddening of masters (him before me always excepted) – a deity, which sometimes, under circumstances apparently propitious, would not speak when questioned, would not hear when appealed to, would not, when sought, be found; but would stand, all cold, all indurated, all granite, a dark Baal with carven lips and blank eye-balls, and breast like the stone face of a tomb; and again, suddenly, at some turn, some sound, some long-trembling sob of the wind, at some rushing past of an unseen stream of electricity, the irrational demon would wake unsolicited, would stir strangely alive, would rush from its pedestal like a perturbed Dragon, calling to its votary for a sacrifice, whatever the hour – to its victim for some blood or some breath, whatever the

²⁸ *The Telegraph*, 21 April 2014.

circumstance or scene – rousing its priest, treacherously promising vaticination, perhaps fillings its temple with a strange hum of oracles, but sure to give half the significance to fateful winds, and grudging to the desperate listener even a miserable remnant – yielding it sordidly, as though each word had been a drop of the deathless ichor of its own dark veins. And this tyrant I was to compel into bondage, and make it improvise a theme, on a school estrade, between a Mathilde and a Coralie, under the eye of a Madame Beck, for the pleasure and to the inspiration of a bourgeois of Labassecour!²⁹

By this point in the novel we know Lucy well enough not to be surprised by the unexpected directions in which her mind travels or by the range and originality of her metaphoric reference. The vocabulary might seem archaic and abstruse for a largely untutored twenty-three-year-old (*vaticination*, *ichor*, etc.), but this, of course, is only the verbal representation and translation of the visual, auditory and tactile images and their accompanying sounds and rhythms which are rapidly passing through Lucy's fevered mind. The central (Proustian) sentence of 257 words chronicles Lucy's inner world as her thoughts travel along a seemingly inexorable logical path, beginning with a sober awareness of her own limitations and unreadiness, as a shy and inarticulate person, for the public task she has been set; then, her expression of the inadequacies, at the best of times, of her creative imagination; this leads into a fugal personification of the 'Creative Impulse' in the form of a frenzied and disjointed sequence of images of archaic deities, 'intractable' and 'capricious', of which she is the servant, not the master; finally, seemingly exhausted by this parade of callous and fickle visionary emanations, there is a return to the reality of the present with Lucy's disgust at the indignity of the task imposed on her and the commonplace audience she is supposed to entertain. This is a brilliant, condensed and profoundly ambiguous piece of writing which one assumes must have taken Charlotte considerable effort, though its skilful and exact punctuation she probably left to her over-worked and put-upon publishers, having once remarked to them that she found such tasks 'puzzling' and that their 'mode of punctuation [is] a great deal more correct and rational than my own'. We note the multi-sensory evocation of the sullen and fickle deities, a flickering procession of images suggestive of Easter Island figures, Aztec human sacrifices, Grecian sibyls, ferocious Roman animal-gods, even Dr Frankenstein's galvanizations. We note the use of sound and rhythmic effects as the archaic visions take hold: the dotted, frenzied, accelerating crescendo as the grammatical units get shorter and shorter, acoustically harsher and harsher, as an expression of mounting terror before relaxing, their energy seemingly exhausted, into hypnotic assonances. We also notice the ambiguity of the sentence, a doubleness characteristic of the novel as a whole: Is Lucy

²⁹ From Chapter 29. Wordsworth edition, pp. 333–4.

experiencing a genuine panic attack in the shape of a completely irrational dissociative fugue or is it all playful ironic hyperbole? And like all good nightmares, if this indeed be one, it is a knotted contradiction, since Lucy's supposedly impoverished and unwilling imagination is represented by a virtuoso imaginative display. It was disturbing passages such as this that caused Mrs Gaskell to enquire of her friend if she ever wrote under the influence of drugs, a suggestion categorically denied by Charlotte, though we do know that she was not averse to putting her characters into drug-induced states (for example, Lucy in Chapter 38). (There is compelling evidence that in her earlier employments as governess and then school teacher in England, Charlotte had often been doped up to the eye-balls on the opiate laudanum.)

Villette is less revealing as a TEFL novel than *The Professor* since it is far more concerned with Lucy as a student of French and her developing sympathetic relationship with her teacher, the irascible, mercurial and domineering M. Paul Emanuel, than it is with her role in the school as a teacher of English. In fact, she gives only two lessons in the whole novel – her first and one which could well be her last. This latter is when she is asked to take over M. Paul's class, of which she is one of the members, just before his departure for the West Indies, and the pupils are as upset about losing their favourite teacher as Lucy is, though she dare not show it publicly:

The noise, the whispering, the occasional sobbing increased. I became conscious of a relaxation of discipline, a sort of growing disorder, as if my girls felt that vigilance was withdrawn, and that surveillance had virtually left the class. Habit and the sense of duty enabled me to rally quickly, to rise in my usual way, to speak in my usual tone, to enjoin, and finally to establish quiet. I made the English reading long and close. I kept them at it the whole morning. I remember feeling a sentiment of impatience towards the pupils who sobbed. Indeed, their emotion was not of much value; it was only an hysteric agitation. I told them so unsparingly. I half ridiculed them. I was severe. The truth was, I could not do with their tears, or that gasping sound; I could not bear it. A rather weak-minded, low-spirited pupil kept it up when the others had done; relentless necessity obliged and assisted me so to accost her, that she dared not carry on the demonstration, that she was forced to conquer the convulsion.³⁰

Here we recognize the stiff upper lip of the English governess and TEFLers will recognize the situation of having to fall back on one's hard-won experience so as to maintain a display of normality when one feels least like teaching. Soon after this lesson, Lucy will leave Mme Beck's *pensionnat* to take up the running of her own school, secretly set up for her by M. Paul's generosity.

³⁰ From Chapter 38. Wordsworth edition, p. 411.

Lucy's first lesson at the pensionnat, like her last, was one where she had to fill in for someone else. Mme Beck had originally employed her as a nursery governess for her three children and had observed one of Lucy's English lessons with them: 'Désirée, the eldest girl, was reading to me some little essay of Mrs Barbauld's, and I was making her translate currently from English to French as she proceeded, by way of ascertaining that she comprehended what she read: madame listened'. Soon thereafter, Mr Wilson, the English master, again failed to turn up for his lessons (not the first or the last time a Mr Wilson would be so remiss), and Mme Beck prevailed upon Lucy to take over his class for the morning, suggesting the easiest thing would be to do a dictation with them. The ensuing lesson is a recycling of the first lesson William Crimsworth had given to the girls at Mlle Reuter's establishment in *The Professor*. We have the same three trouble-makers sitting on the front row, intent on disrupting the lesson. Originally called Eulalie, Hortense and Caroline, they are now ironically given the virginal and angelic names of Blanche, Virginie and Angélique. Disgusted at being taught by a mere *bonne d'enfants*, they provoke a 'revolt of sixty against one'. But Lucy is more than a match for them. She follows William's example by publicly humiliating Blanche – aka 'Mademoiselle de Melcy, a young baronne – the eldest, tallest, handsomest, and most vicious' of the three – by summoning her to the estrade, slowly reading her dictation, and then tearing it up. The revolt partially quelled, Lucy notices a girl at the back of the class who 'persevered in the riot' and who advantageously was sitting near the door to the book closet. Lucy advanced up the room, 'looking as cool and careless as I possibly could, in short, *ayant l'air de rien*; I slightly pushed the door and found it was ajar. In an instant, and with sharpness, I had turned on her. In another instant she occupied the closet, the door was shut, and the key in my pocket'. Luckily the girl was a Catalonian, a person of no consequence, unpopular with her fellows; Madame Beck approved, and

From that day I ceased to be nursery-governess, and became English teacher. Madame raised my salary; but she got thrice the work out of me she had extracted from Mr Wilson, at half the expense.³¹

'I shall never forget that first lesson,' says Lucy; I suppose none of us ever forget our own first lesson; and I suppose we all also have moments of *l'esprit d'escalier* from our classroom experiences when one later thinks, 'I wish I had said or done such-and-such'. One can't help thinking that Charlotte was indulging in one such reverie when she dreamt up Lucy's treatment of poor Dolores.

³¹ This lesson concludes Chapter 9. Wordsworth edition, pp. 67–72.

Lucy's views of her students are not very different from William's. The Belgians, in particular, she found oily, glib, hypocritical and deceitful and attributed this to the pernicious effects of Catholicism. These sentiments reflect Charlotte's own, who, in a letter to Ellen Nussey, had written:

If the national character of the Belgians is to be measured by the character of most of the girls in this school, it is a character singularly cold, selfish, animal and inferior – they are besides very mutinous and difficult for the teachers to manage – and their principles are rotten to the core – we avoid them – which is not difficult to do – as we have the brand of Protestantism and Anglicism upon us.³²

Lucy quickly learnt that she could not rely on Mme Beck for any assistance in maintaining discipline since her employer was a skilled politician who courted popularity with the pupils, ruling the school surreptitiously through surveillance and the use of spies, discretely dispensing with the services of unpopular or incompetent teachers. Charlotte's characterization of Mme Beck, as of Mlle Reuter, was clearly based on her highly prejudicial study of Zoë Héger's character and methods. When Mrs Gaskell was researching her biography of Charlotte in 1856 she went over to Brussels to meet the Hégers. M. Héger was politeness itself and happy to talk to her about his teaching methods, his memories of Emily and Charlotte, and to show her some of their *devoirs*. He also showed or read her a selection of Charlotte's letters to him and from these Mrs Gaskell deduced the general drift of things between them but decided to keep mum in her biography. Mme Héger, who had read *Villette* in a pirated French translation, refused to meet her. Obviously, like Queen Victoria, she had not been amused.

Because of Mme Beck's reluctance to get involved in anything which might involve any nastiness with the pupils, Lucy had to find her own way of dealing with her boisterous but indolent teenage pupils, deploying methods somewhat more subtle and guileful than William's uncompromising and humourless severity:

Imprimis – it was clear as the day that this swinish multitude were not to be driven by force. They were to be humoured, borne with very patiently: a courteous though sedate manner impressed them, a very rare flash of raillery did good. Severe or continuous mental application they could not, or would not, bear; heavy demand on the memory, the reason, the attention, they rejected point-blank. Where an English girl of not more than average capacity and docility, would quietly take a theme and bind herself to the task of comprehension and mastery, a Labassecourienne [i.e. a Belgian] would laugh in your face, and throw it back to you with the phrase, - 'Dieu que c'est difficile! Je n'en veux pas. Cela m'ennuie trop.' A teacher who understood her business would take it back at once, without hesitation, contest, or expostulation – proceed with even exaggerated care

³² Letter to Ellen Nussey, July 1842. In (ed.) Smith, p. 38.

to smooth every difficulty, to reduce it to the level of their understandings, return it to them thus modified, and lay n the lash of sarcasm with unsparing hand. They would feel the sting, perhaps wince a little under it, but they bore no malice against this sort of attack, provided the sneer was not *sour* but *hearty*, and that it held well up to them, in a clear light and bold type, so that she who ran might read, their incapacity, ignorance, and sloth. They would riot for three additional lines to a lesson; but I never knew them rebel against a wound given to their self-respect: the little they had of that quality was trained to be crushed, and it rather liked the pressure of a firm heel, than otherwise.³³

In her handling of her pupils and in other respects, Lucy is a far more sympathetic character than the leaden William. Another respect in which the two differ is that Lucy expresses a vocation for her job, whereas one felt that William was only making the best of an otherwise rather demeaning situation in his characteristically uncomplaining way. It is true that William also had scruples, one reason why he resigned from the employ of M. Pelet and Mlle Reuter, but as a TEFLer he is always conscious of the bottom line: we learn a considerable amount about the economics of being a TEFLer in Brussels from him, practically nothing from Lucy. We remember that William happily accepted a position at three times his previous salary, whereas Lucy turns down a similar salary increase. This was for a position which involved the undemanding task of becoming a young girl's companion, a position which would have allowed her to escape her punishing nine-to-five teaching routine. Expressing similar sentiments to those that Charlotte had earlier confided to Ellen Nussey, Lucy informs the reader:

I declined. I think I should have declined had I been poorer than I was, and with scantier fund of resource, more stinted narrowness of future prospect. I had not that vocation. I could teach; I could give lessons; but to be either a private governess or a companion was unnatural to me. Rather than fill the former post in any great house, I 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. Rather than be a companion, I would have made shirts, and starved.³⁴

Above all else, Lucy values her independence; also, being a teacher gives her dignity and status: she is on the up, almost a member of the professional classes: 'I am a rising character: once an old lady's companion, then a nursery-governess, now a schoolteacher'.

Lucy liked her fellow teachers little better than William had liked his. In fact, hers and William's seemed indistinguishable, and very similar to those Charlotte had

³³ From Chapter 9. Wordsworth edition, pp. 74–5.

³⁴ From Chapter 26. Wordsworth edition, p. 278.

described in one of her letters: one was a ‘narrow thinker, a coarse feeler, and an egotist’; another, ‘a Parisienne, externally refined – at heart corrupt’; a third was ‘characterless and insignificant’, but avaricious. However, Lucy seemed to have a soft spot for the German teacher: hale and hearty, back-slapping, and who ‘habitually consumed, for her first and second breakfast, beer and beef’; one assumes she was a Protestant. And then, of course, there was M. Paul Emanuel, whom she initially described as ‘a dark little man [...] pungent and austere [...] a harsh apparition, with his close-shorn, black head, his broad, sallow brow, his thin cheek, his wide and quivering nostril, his thorough glance and hurried bearing’. Thereafter Lucy variously refers to him as irritable, fiery and grasping, a terrible exhibitionist, intolerant, choleric and arbitrary, a spy, a waspish little despot, Jesuitical, and more besides. Throughout the novel the two are at loggerheads with misunderstandings on both sides until Lucy learns of his back-story, begins to see his soft side and witnesses his discrete generosity. He then becomes ‘my dear little man a stainless little hero’ and, towards the end of the novel, she relates how her feelings for him have changed: ‘Once – unknown and unloved, I held him harsh and strange; the low stature, the wiry make, the angles, the darkness, the manner, displeased me. Now, penetrated with his influence, and living by his affection, having his worth by intellect, and his goodness be heart – I preferred him before all humanity.’ Similarly, M. Paul’s feeling for her: he is the only one in the *pensionnat* who, from the beginning it turns out, had really understood and appreciated her. There is even a religious rapprochement: Lucy begins to appreciate in him ‘the self-denying and self-sacrificing part of the Catholic religion’ and he becomes her ‘Christian hero’, whereas he, writing from his exile in the West Indies, admonishes her to ‘remain a Protestant. My little English Puritan, I love Protestantism in you. I own its severe charm’. Let’s hope, for the sake of Christian ecumenicalism and European peace and harmony, that the two were eventually reunited, as was their fondest wish. But who knows what really happened? At all events Lucy, like all good Victorian heroines, came into a legacy, her school flourished, and M. Paul’s absence were ‘the three happiest years of my life’.

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