

CHARLOTTE BRONTË AND ONE OF HER CRITICS



SO far as I am aware, no biographer or commentator has called attention to one episode in Charlotte Brontë's literary life, the facts of which I now lay before the readers of

THE BOOKMAN.

The *Christian Remembrancer*, a Church of England quarterly, contained in its number for April, 1853, an article entitled "New Novels by Lady G. Fullerton and Currer Bell." The Currer Bell novel, it is needless to say, was *Vilette*. The reviewer began his notice of *Vilette* with the following paragraph:

After threading the maze of harrowing perplexities thus set forth by Lady Georgiana, having followed her characters through their course of fatal mistakes and hairbreadth perils, witnessed their bursts of tragic passion, listened to their turgid sentiments, and felt the whole to be the offspring of a lively imagination, confined within too narrow a sphere of observation—a society removed so high above many of the real troubles of life that they must needs allow idleness and luxury to coin some for them—it is, we own, a relief to turn to the work-day world of *Vilette*. The rough winds of common life make a better atmosphere for fiction than the stove heat of the "higher circles." Currer Bell, by hardly *earning* her experience, has, at least, won her knowledge in a field of action where more can sympathise; though we cannot speak of sympathy, or of ourselves as in any sense sharing in it, without a protest against the outrages on decorum, the moral perversity, the toleration of, nay, indifference to vice which deform her first powerful picture of a desolate woman's trials and sufferings—faults which make *Jane Eyre* a dangerous book, and which must leave a permanent mistrust of the author on all thoughtful and scrupulous minds. But however alloyed with blame this sympathy has necessarily been, there are indications of its having cheered her and done her good. Perhaps, as it was argued of Gertrude, she has been the better for a little happiness and success, for in many important moral points *Vilette* is an improvement on its predecessors. The author has gained both in amiability and propriety since she first presented herself to the world—sour, coarse and

grumbling; an alien, it might seem, from society, and amenable to none of its laws.

In the *Christian Remembrancer* for October, 1853, under the heading "Notices," the following paragraph appears:

A letter from the author of *Vilette*, which claims at once our respect and sympathy, complains of a passage in our recent review of that work (April, 1853), which she says has been interpreted by some persons—not by herself, for this was not her own unbiassed impression—in a sense the remotest possible from our thoughts. We wrote in entire ignorance of the author's private history, and with no wish to pry into it. But her keen and vivid style, and her original and somewhat warped mode of viewing things, must excite speculation in her readers as to the circumstances of education and position which have formed both mind and style. Some grave faults in her earliest work we thought most easily accounted for by the supposition of a mind of remarkable power and great capabilities for happiness exposed to early and long trial of some kind, and in some degree embittered by the want of congenial employment. We refer our readers to the article in question, where not only is there no insinuation of "a disadvantageous occult motive for a retired life," but such a supposition is at variance with the whole line of suggestion, which tends to attribute what we must differ from in her writings to adverse circumstances, not to conduct. We will, however, distinctly state that we had no idea in our mind, and therefore could not desire to express any suspicion, of an unfavourable cause for a life of seclusion. We now learn with pleasure, but not with surprise, that the main motive for this seclusion is devotion to the purest and most sacred of domestic ties.

It is some time since I made note of this, but I had little hope of being able to recover the actual letter. However, in the *Christian Remembrancer* for July, 1857, there is printed a long and very able article on the life of Charlotte Brontë. In that article the letter in question is given in full as follows:

TO THE EDITOR OF THE *Christian Remembrancer*.

HAWORTH, NEAR KEIGHLEY, YORKSHIRE,
July 18, 1853.

SIR: I think I cannot be doing wrong in addressing you a few remarks respecting an article which appeared in the *Christian Remem-*

brancer for last April. I mean an article noticing *Vilette*.

When first I read that article I thought only of its ability, which seemed to me considerable, of its acumen, which I felt to be penetrating; an occasional misconception passed scarce noticed, and I smiled at certain passages from which evils have since risen so heavy as to oblige me to revert seriously to their origin. Conscious myself that the import of these insinuations was far indeed from truth, I forgot to calculate how they might appear to that great public which personally did not know me.

The passage to which I particularly allude characterises me by a strong expression. I am spoken of *an alien—it might seem from society, and amenable to none of its laws*.

The *G*— newspaper gave a notice in the same spirit. The *E*— culled isolated extracts from your review, and presented them in a concentrated form as one paragraph of unqualified condemnation.

The result of these combined attacks, all to one effect—all insinuating some disadvantageous occult motive for a retired life—has been such that at length I feel it advisable to speak a few words of temperate explanation in the quarter that seems to me most worthy to be thus addressed, and the most likely to understand rightly my intention. Who my reviewer may be I know not, but I am convinced he is no narrow-minded or naturally unjust thinker.

To him I would say no cause of seclusion such as he would imply has ever come near my thoughts, deeds or life. It has not entered my experience. It has not crossed my observation.

Providence so regulated my destiny that I was born and have been reared in the seclusion of a country parsonage. I have never been rich enough to go out into the world as a participator in its gaieties, though it early became my duty to leave home in order partly to diminish the many calls on a limited income. That income is lightened of claims in another sense now, for of a family of six I am the only survivor.

My father is now in his seventy-seventh year; his mind is clear as it ever was, and he is not infirm, but he suffers from partial privation and threatened loss of sight; and his general health is also delicate, he cannot be left often or long: my place consequently is at home. These are reasons which make retirement a plain duty; but were no such reasons in existence, were I bound by no such ties, it is very possible that seclusion might still appear to me, on the whole, more congenial than pub-

licity; the brief and rare glimpses I have had of the world do not incline me to think I should seek its circles with very keen zest—nor can I consider such disinclination a just subject for reproach.

This is the truth. The careless, rather than malevolent insinuations of reviewers have, it seems, widely spread another impression. It would be weak to complain, but I feel that it is only right to place the real in opposition to the unreal.

Will you kindly show this note to my reviewer? Perhaps he cannot now find an antidote for the poison into which he dipped that shaft he shot at "Curren Bell," but when again tempted to take aim at other prey—let him refrain his hand a moment till he has considered consequences to the wounded, and recalled the "golden rule."

I am, Sir, yours respectfully,
C. BRONTË.

The critic goes on to say:

Though criticism was never more needed than in the case of Curren Bell, yet this is inevitably a sad book for critics. We do not blame ourselves for what has been said in our pages of the author of *Jane Eyre*. We could not do otherwise than censure what was censurable. Where would books get their deserts, how could judgment be given, if private considerations had weight to restrain independent public opinion? Critics would then be no better than partial friends. But such revelations as this book gives us are a lesson to weigh words. We should never forget that the unknown author has a known side; that he is not an abstraction. And here we are taught that the private side of a character may be in strong contrast to its public manifestation; that it needs rare discernment to form a true estimate of a writer from his works; and that the boldest, most fearless style, may emanate from a nature which has its sensitive, shrinking, timid side. We believe that all the critics thought they had a tolerably tough nature to deal with, that there was no need to sugar the bitter draught in this instance; and when a woman assumed a masculine tone, wrote as well or better than any man among them, and showed herself afraid of nothing, that gallantry and patronising tenderness which is commonly bestowed upon women was changed to gall. And now the administrators of the potion have to reflect on the private most feminine sorrows of this Amazon; of a patient life of monotonous duty; of the passionate hold the purest domestic affections had on her character; and which

among them, if he could rewrite his criticism, would not now and then erase an epithet, spare a sarcasm, modify a sweeping condemnation? We own it wounds our tenderest feelings to know her sensitiveness to such attacks; and when she sheds tears over the *Times* critique—of all things in the world to weep over—our heart bleeds indeed.

I have not succeeded at the date of writing to discover the authorship of the articles in question, though I have a clue. The *Christian Remembrancer* was published by Messrs. J. and C. Mozley, and one of the editors was Canon Mozley, the eminent theologian. In Dr. Mozley's letters, edited by his accomplished sister, Miss Anne Mozley, whose essays in the *Saturday Review*, *Blackwood's Magazine* and *Bentley's Quarterly Review* are still worth turning to, we find that Mozley announced, in a letter to his brother, dated January 1, 1855, that he has resolved to sever his editorial connection with the *Christian Remembrancer* on account of an important divergence from the High Church party. He says, "I do not think it right under such circumstances to have anything more to do with the editing of the *C. R.* What I have had, indeed, has been of an imperfect, irregular kind, and more belonging to

the practice of *amicus curiae*." He goes on, "I have written to Scott some three weeks ago to this effect." Scott is the Rev. William Scott, father of Mr. Clement Scott, the dramatic critic, and an active contributor to the *Saturday* in its early days. It is tolerably evident that Mr. Scott, who resided in London, was the active editor of the *Review*, and his connection continued for a considerable time at least after Mozley gave up his place on the staff. The *Remembrancer* survived well into the sixties. Perhaps the publication of these facts will bring additional information, which will be gratefully welcomed. It is tolerably clear that the two articles referred to in the *Christian Remembrancer* are from different hands. So much new Brontë matter has been brought to light lately that it is hardly possible to keep up with it. If I have been anticipated, let me plead ignorance as an excuse for this article. I know, of course, the slight allusions to the *Vilette* article in Mr. Shorter's *Charlotte Brontë and her Circle*, but they do not touch my point.

I am not aware that Charlotte Brontë on any other occasion wrote to an *editor* about any review of her books.

W. Robertson Nicoll.



PRELUDE

Not with the maddening tumult of the wind
 That sweeps with unresisting impulse rife,
 Nor fiercer flame, that leaves sad waste behind,
 But softly would I move along thy life;
 As 'mid still eloquence of woodland maze
 We stay the step, and silently pass nigh
 Where the imprisoning hush of twilight ways
 Shrines, dryadlike, the heart of Mystery,
 Lest the spell break we tread not all too near,
 But steal with trembling breath dim paths along—
 Finding the shadow than all light more dear,
 Finding the hush more sweet than any song;
 Thus, at its portal, 'twixt thy soul and strife,
 I would move softly, love, along thy life.

Virginia Woodward Cloud.