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THE BRONTËS AS ARTISTS AND AS PROPHETS.

An Address delivered by Mr. J. Keighley Snowden, at the Annual Meeting, held at Sheffield, January 18th, 1908.

The reluctance that has drawn from your extreme courtesy a third invitation to address the Brontë Society is part of what one feels in being called upon to deal, in any critical way, with the young and splendid writers who were dear women. Were? Isn't it better to say, *are*? For me, Emily and Charlotte Brontë are not dead, but alive. It is as if they might hear us. . . I do not attribute this daunting sense of them to imagination. It is real—an effect of their work's vitality. This is their triumph. The sensitive passionate souls of the sisters passed into what they wrote, and still confront us, defiant, delicate; it is almost reasonable to say, conscious. Well, one must either speak the truth about their writings as one sees it, or be silent; and, now that their fame is established, now that nothing matters, I would rather have kept silence, reverently.

However, it has occurred to me that the Brontë Society may be wondering if its usefulness is not near an end for the same reason. The Society's main purpose in the beginning was to establish their fame more surely. Its main purpose now is of course educational. Is an interest in the Brontës adequate for any society as an educational purpose? Perhaps not. But one may state the causes of its intensity and endurance, and try to see, clearly, what the fiery spirit of their work should mean to the world. Test it in all ways first. They sit here listening, with sincere, pathetic eyes. But those eyes have never quailed; and, after all, the pure gold of any literature is not to be had and weighed but after a fierce assay. *They* know this, fearlessly.

What, then, has criticism to say of the work they did so young, with such sincerity? Hard things. I suppose there are not four other classical novels in the world that

have been found unsatisfactory from so many points of view as "Jane Eyre," "Shirley," "Villette," and "Wuthering Heights." The critic who holds that any fair and sane estimate of life is humourously balanced must reject them all but "Villette," and say of even this that it lacks warmth or that the balance is due to a sense of justice more than to humour. The others fret him with passionate intention, and with certain frank narrownesses. The realist—by whom I understand the critic insisting that, whatever stress there be of imagination and feeling, people in novels should act and speak as people would in life—the realist sides with the humourist; and for him "Villette," though true, is not a great book as modern novels go. Its realism seems to have quenched something. "Wuthering Heights" conforms to the letter of his law, but is widely false to the spirit. In "Shirley" the heroine and Caroline Helstone often talk like writing stylists, and so does Rose Yorke, rebuking her mother at twelve years of age. Jane Eyre argues with a melodramatic Rochester in the same *précieuse* diction, for which there is only this to be said, that it fits with her deportment. We are prepared for it by a school-girl conversation in which Miss Helen Burns, who is thirteen, remarks with great precociousness and elegance: "I have been wondering how a man who wished to do right could act so unjustly as Charles the First sometimes did; and I thought what a pity it was that, with his integrity and conscienciousness, he could see no further than the prerogatives of the Crown." At thirteen, Helen Burns laments her "wretchedly defective nature," and, in a passage of pulpit eloquence that any clergyman might envy, tells how "the pale human soul" shall "brighten to the seraph." In conception and execution alike, the story is naïve. For the critic who demands what is now-a-days called a yarn, "Jane Eyre," however, puts into the shade all else that either sister wrote; and he, for his part, cannot imagine that Charlotte—who produced it for the market—returned to soberer studies of her own free will: she must have listened fatally to George Henry Lewes. Caring less for humour and

realism in a novel than for the romantic, this critic finds that Charlotte's powers declined ; and that Emily's never attained to that mellowness of smooth performance which is agreeable to those who love a story for its own sake.

Nor may we dismiss the critics as mutually destructive. They will not presently, like the Kilkenny cats, have done. Each tells a part of the adverse truth, and the novels have to face the sum of these parts, not a difference or a quotient. From any technical point of view, however large, faults enough may be seen in each of the Brontë books to make material for an instructive essay. A volume of such essays might be terrible.

There is, however, another sort of critic, whose judgments are not technical. There is the publisher's reader. He tries to estimate selling value in the manuscripts he handles. Well, you know the history of "Wuthering Heights," "The Tenant of Wildfell Hall," and "The Professor." It is nothing out of the way. And, times having changed, and books with them, it is interesting to ask oneself if either of the four *important* books we are considering would be at once accepted now, as a first novel ?

To myself, as a working writer, the acceptance of Charlotte's books at all, *as they stand*, is strangely hard to imagine. I will tell you why in a moment. Certainly, in these days of an overcrowded market, the publisher who should risk his money on even an unknown "Jane Eyre" would feel that he was indulging a rashness. "Jane Eyre" has unmistakably what is known as selling value ; once fairly under way, it is a great yarn ; but it starts too slowly, and is too much more than a yarn, to please the sort of publisher who would like it most on that account ; too ingenuous and too stilted for a publisher impressed sincerely by its wonderful quality. In any case they would want it to begin at the twelfth chapter. You must plunge *in medias res*. "Shirley" moves so quietly and so naturally, a panorama of real life without constructive principle or visible plot, that I

suppose no professional reader could nowadays feel anything but despair of its appeal—a despair intensified, not relieved, by the searching truth of its psychology and the wealth of its exquisite literary beauties. These are not selling qualities, and the publication of “Shirley” as a first book would be a quixotism. As for “Villette”—impossible! It is a novel for bilingual readers, and he would find it tame. Moreover, one hunts on a false scent for a hero, and in the end is disappointed—faults not now excused. Emily Brontë’s masterpiece might, on the other hand—I think it would—have an easier birth and kinder welcome now than killed her young ambition. Its energy is modern and tremendous. Its direct unhalting march is modern. But the temperamental strangeness of its atmosphere and people looks more morbid than it can have looked in those days of romanticism; and there is a great deal of dialect. In all likelihood, “Wuthering Heights” would have to go the round.

What does it signify? The immediate saleability of a book was never a measure of its true value; never can be: it is only a measure of culture and alertness in the reading public. Worse novels are published every year by thousands, not all of them at the author’s cost or risk. Novels illiterate and vicious pass the selling standard; banal and vulgar novels are sold by the hundred thousand copies. But is there nothing, then, in the judgment of a publisher’s reader? No author who is wise will say so. It does uphold against the newcomer some artistic canons of the time, if only because they happen to be canons of success. They have been arrived at in a keen competition of craftsmen. The art of making novels in all kinds has been so developed by this competition since the Brontës wrote, that one is obliged to admit the existence, in many classics, of defects from which the most trivial piece of work in the same kind is nowadays exempt. They endure, it seems, by virtue of qualities that have nothing to do with craftsmanship.

Such classics are like the works of certain old masters of painting, clumsy in design, or strange in colour, or faulty in drawing, but big with some human worthiness to which design, colour, and drawing are secondary. In admiring them well, what is our mental attitude? We do not blink their weaknesses: that would be to pay false worship and to harm ourselves and art: for we discern their strength truly when most critical. Whoever should say that Tintoret painted trees well would make us doubt that he had any true sense of the master's imagination and depth of soul. Trees are painted better by English art students. If Tintoret were painting nowadays with such unequal and rude execution, he would never become famous: probably Tintoret would starve, or take to screeving. What of that? If we ever have a re-incarnation of Tintoret in fact, his genius will of course assimilate the art of the new age, and produce trees nearly as good as anybody's.

But, with many fine exceptions, there is nowadays an immense manufacture of worthless novels; and, I am concerned at least as much for the art of fiction as for a just appreciation of the Brontës, when I attempt to judge their work by the best canons of the time. Consider frankly its defects of craftsmanship, and so arrive at a firm and illuminating estimate of its actual merits. It will be found, I think, that these are poetic and ethical rather than artistic.

Charlotte Brontë's estimate of Jane Austen helps us to our estimate of herself. Mr. Lewes has commended to her that placid worker as "One of the greatest artists, with the nicest sense of means to an end, that ever lived." She allows the nice sense of means to an end; but "Can there be a great artist without poetry?" she demands—and Mr. Lewes has no rejoinder. He should have written, she would say, "One of the greatest craftsmen." Her conception of a great artist is right; and if her own use of means to an end be wanting in skill, or if her purpose be something other than artistic, the poetry is always there. Emily's use of means to an end is

masterly, and in its rude compelling fashion unsurpassed. Moreover, Emily's purpose *is* artistic, not at all didactic or controversial. If Mr. Lewes had had the tact and insight to write to the other sister a letter of respectful homage on her strength of handling, we should have thought more highly of his critical acumen, though he had said with Charlotte that "Wuthering Heights" was sinister, dark and goblin-like. In Emily, at least, he might have recognised a great artist, a craftsman who was also a poet, a savage Michael Angelo of letters. But she wrought too much in the realm of imagination to be appraised by Mr. Lewes.

Let that pass. Charlotte's artistry is now in question as it appears to novelists and critics of this generation. She wrote two kinds of stories—what is known as the romantic "yarn," and the story of real life. Her preference was for the latter. Her first approach to a publisher was made with an example of it, "The Professor;" and she returned to it. She is best known for a single example of the romantic yarn. When "The Professor" was rejected and she began "Jane Eyre," it was because, as she says a little contemptuously, the publishers wanted "something more imaginative and poetical—something more consonant with a highly wrought fancy, with a taste for pathos." The story notion of a mad wife or relative confined in a secret chamber was in vogue: it may be found in one of the clever and forgotten novels of Miss Jewsbury, the friend of Mrs. Carlyle. Charlotte made the very most of it—with a depth and pure intensity of feeling that no writer of the time could match. It was a story notion strictly: in actual life, no such secret could be kept from the household, and nobody would suppose it could. This is what Leslie Stephen had in mind when he called "Jane Eyre" a baseless nightmare. Charlotte herself must have been very well aware of the flaw when she wondered "if the analyses of other fictions read as absurdly as that of 'Jane Eyre' always does;" and, in "Villette," the parallel episode of the pseudo-ghost is handled with a strict regard

for what is possible. But see how much more finely the nightmare is invested with proper circumstance and human meaning than that of "The Castle of Otranto" or "Frankenstein." What modern art has to say against this fantastic order of romance is not that it was naïve—art sometimes is—but that in spirit and execution alike it was bound to be in a measure insincere. Charlotte Brontë came nearest of anyone to being wholly serious with it; she made a step backward from Scott, however, and the wonder is that she is so little blamed for doing so. The true apostolical succession in romantic fiction is from Scott to Stevenson and Weyman and Hewlett. The true practice of the art is based upon a romantic way of seeing real events. It selects, distorting nothing, eschewing improbabilities. It selects romantic deeds and personages, paints romantic scenes with poetry and passion, but has a care that every scene and stroke of the detail shall be convincing. It is a practice much more difficult—more masculine.

How is the art of "Jane Eyre" at outs with it? I have mentioned Helen Burns's impossible precocity. I do not think it open to dispute that some of the conversations between Jane and Rochester are still more ludicrous. They have a schoolgirl air of mingled propriety and awfulness that is nowhere to be matched in any book accepted as a classic. Mr. de Selincourt has already said this. But more; the propriety is often priggish on Jane's part, and passion in the most tempestuous moments speaks in polished phrases. "Jane Eyre" is a very "young" book. That this fact does not explain all its imperfections, and that these were mainly due to Miss Brontë's following bad models with her critical faculty asleep or silenced, appears to me plain from the truth and fine womanliness of "Shirley," which came but two years later. Plain, too, from "The Professor," which is not so girlish either, though it came first. And I am very sure that Charlotte Brontë never desired to pin her reputation upon the only novel that commends itself to Mr. Chesterton. She indeed regarded "Jane Eyre" as an attack upon

conventionality; and the relentless study of bigotry in St. John Rivers, the strong plea that love is greater than any human doctrines, and the rehabilitation of the governess, must have made her glad, to the last, that she had written it. But she knew its faults as well as anyone, I think. In "Villette" there are no seventeenth-century bookish conversations. In either "Villette" or "Shirley" there is not an improbability that matters.

Those who believe that Charlotte Brontë's greatest gift was the power to write a fascinating story hold that, in doing these later books, she had missed her way. Well, she chose with her eyes open. I think she was true to her character in the choice, if not to a purely artistic ideal; and I doubt very much if a resolve to spin yarns for their own sake, even in a modern realistic manner, could have given us the spontaneous and splendid self-realisation of "Shirley," a book to which Mr. Meredith and the whole feminist movement owe much of their inspiration. But, says Mr. Chesterton, "Jane Eyre" is the unique novel in English literature of the nineteenth century "where the dangerous life of a good person was thoroughly expressed." I do not know that "thoroughly" is the best word; "exorbitantly" seems to me a better one; but I do suppose that Mr. Chesterton puts a finger there upon the secret of the book's popularity and very life. The heroine is good beyond all expectation. She is so good, that, if Rochester had not been vain egregiously, as well as an unlicked cub grown rather monstrous—or if he had even been convincingly presented from the first, his secret told us—the popular verdict must have been that she is righteous overmuch. His look of undesirability balances Jane's priggishness and school propriety; otherwise the terrible plight of the man, chained to a vampire, and loving Jane at last with his whole despairing nature, would have made even the prudes aware that what is called a woman's "goodness" may in certain crises be selfish and petty. One is tempted to quote the preface: "Conventionality is not morality; self-righteousness is not religion." But, for the sake of the yarn, Jane acts

conventionally in the crisis. She runs away, leaving Rochester to his intolerable fate; and there is even a suggestion that his blindness, the consequence of an act of splendid heroism, was meant by Providence to "chasten" him for infidelity to the vampire. Was it so meant by Charlotte Brontë, the Providence who arranged it? Absurd! It is part of the yarn.

If, as she held, pure love is greater than human doctrines, it is greater, too, than human laws; and Jane Eyre's goodness would have been far nobler, if less popular, had she done what love in its highest expression must always make us do—forget ourselves for another. Why is Rivers introduced, but to bring this knowledge home to us? Even in a missionary enterprise she cannot forget herself for *him*; and, called by a supernatural voice, she goes back to her lover. But the conventions are still respected, the vampire wife having by that time perished. It is a vastly ingenious plot on melodramatic lines; and, as I have said, it is wrought out with extraordinary feeling and imagination. These give to the story a certain greatness. But these, by themselves, are never passports to popularity. In the case of "Jane Eyre," they do not seem to have been passports even to realism; and my own judgment of this story is that its naïvetés and unnatural notes might have ultimately killed it in spite of all, if it had not said so much for "goodness." The bold attack upon a certain type of bigot, sincere in every word of it, is only incidental; yet it is the content most characteristic of Charlotte Brontë as a moralist.

Let me not be thought contemptuous of selling value in a work of fiction. It is another term for readableness. The first business of a novel, whether yarn or story of common life, work of art or work of morals, is to get itself read. But there are various kinds of attractiveness. Turn now from "Jane Eyre" to "Shirley" and "Villette," and see how modern canons are applied to judge the selling value of these.

For a story of common life the canons are stricter than for a yarn. Its interest must depend wholly upon

treatment, and therefore, in modern practice, such a story commonly begins in a striking way, so as to enlist our interest at once in its chief character or characters, and to distinguish these from the rest. They are seen passing through some definite phase or experience. All the incidents, all subordinate figures, all detail, are introduced and ordered with a view to the definite purpose. They make for a definite ending. It has been found possible, by these means, to arrest and keep attention for studies of life that are true to the most normal experience, and that point their own morals. But in Charlotte Brontë's time there was no such craftsmanship of realism; and, in differing ways, "Shirley" and "Villette" fail to consult the ease and pleasure of the reader by such means. "Villette" is autobiographical; "Shirley" I have called a panorama. We go to them first either because we have been assured that it is very well worth our while, or because we are honestly studious. They are caviare to the general.

But what a feast for the lover of literature is "Shirley!" Its fresh outlook and its beauty of feeling are priceless. And what a wise and graceful mind informs the story of Lucy Snowe! More craftsmanship might have made them better known, and especially sixty years back; but now that they are accepted classics, the lack of it is not complained of. The craftsmanship, such as it is, has the great merit of being characteristic, like that of all spontaneous art. Why is the hero slow to appear, and slower still to reveal himself completely? Because Charlotte Brontë was not a woman who loved at sight, but had first to see her lover critically, and then to esteem him. Why, indeed, do all her people grow upon us in the same way? As she avowed, her sense of character was not quite intuitive, not rash; and I believe her interest in exact and full appreciations was one of the main causes why she wrote. However, in a book, the method of slow revelation has drawbacks unless it be used for some particular purpose of a plot. It fogs the undiscerning reader, suspends and baffles her sympathies, and has led

poor critics to say that Charlotte Brontë's men were not well seen by herself. Mr. Chesterton prefers the superficial pen of Jane Austen in this respect. Mr. de Selincourt, while sensible that Charlotte's "conception of her *dramatis personæ* is nearly always true," thinks that the manner she chooses to reveal them is not only crudely inartistic but false to life. The manner, I think, is true to life. That is why it is inartistic. In the case of Rochester, which Mr. de Selincourt has especially in mind, that fantastic look of the man is due to his false position, which is unknown to the reader. We have not, in English literature, a novelist whose grasp of his *dramatis personæ* is more absolute. Their inmost secret, their subtlest mutabilities of mood and action, are known to that searching gaze, as well as their outward aspect and the effects they make upon each other. They are not, all of them, known sympathetically; the means her scrutiny has used are often coldly analytical; but you must trust her insight. The mischief is that you are required to do so; the undiscerning reader sees a character behave inexplicably, or provokingly; and, of all Charlotte Brontë's faults of craftsmanship, this is the most damaging. The early and decorative fault of endowing people with artificial speech is by comparison venial. Happily, we have consented to look at life without misgivings as she pictures it.

Why, again, has "Shirley" no structure, no real story plot? Because Charlotte Brontë's way, in life itself, is to be a quiet observer, letting it go by: she is satisfied passively to interpret its hidden passions, to feel its beauty, and to meditate its meanings. Emily of the masculine will and imagination works equally in her own manner, a very different one. The truth is, these Brontë sisters are so interesting as women that one is best pleased to have it so. The interest in their books is autobiographical chiefly; and they are true to themselves in craftsmanship and all things. It is the secret of their greatness. All the faults we can find help us to prize what remains impeccable.

Well, what do they mean to us ? What is the Brontë Society's educational stock ?

There is all they had to say for women . . . In this connection I think it fair to dissociate Charlotte Brontë from the militant sisterhood who sometimes claim her as a prophetess and leader. Her attitude to our sex is critical, but passive always. Shirley Keeldar calls herself "Captain," and takes her own way with a pretty air of mannishness, but she is never unfeminine for a moment, never stormy, or egregious, or ungraceful. And Shirley, the liveliest type of womanly independence in the books, is not Charlotte herself, but "Emily in happier circumstances." In respect of sex attitude, Charlotte's habit is rather seen in Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe. She wrote "Shirley" in chivalrous defence of womanhood against misprizing egotistical man, who in those days, and in Yorkshire, stood very much in need of her satiric handling; and there is one figure at least, that of Mr. Sympson, who, being seen from the outside only, and in a state of mind that Americans know as "hopping mad," has an air of caricature. But she accepts Robert Moore after all. And she utterly submits, in "Villette," to the kind-hearted tyrannies of M. Paul Emanuel, which are even more eccentric than Mr. Sympson's. It is not for a notion of equality in the sexes that Charlotte Brontë contends, I think she tried to set us far too high. "Nothing ever charms me more," says Shirley, "than when I meet my superior. The higher above me, so much the better; it degrades to stoop: it is glorious to look up." And of man in the abstract, "I would scorn to contend for empire with him—I would scorn it. Shall my left hand dispute for precedence with my right?" No: we go to Charlotte Brontë's books to see ourselves with the clear eyes of a conscientious woman, for whom love is the greatest good in life but who can only love where she esteems highly. Her glance is piercing, and for injustice, folly, or humbug it is quite inexorable: she breathes defiance oftener than she sparkles fun: but she does us good like a medicine, and threatens nothing harmful.

I do not say she is judicial. Charlotte Brontë frankly takes the side of her sex. But, for a *parti pris*, it is fairly taken. The writing quality forfeited in some degree by championship is humour, and that loss is nearly all we have to regret in it. Some poverty of humour, a strenuous note of seriousness, at times a certain want of good spirits and happy tolerance, cause her realism to be classed below that of the greatest writers of fiction. It is sad to find no downright hearty laughs; her very smile, when it is not beautiful with pity, has an air of quiet malice; she does not live so warmly as to feel perfectly indulgent. For her supreme gift is to feel keenly, as Emily's is. A fuller and more diversified contact with life than Emily's has compelled her to find accommodations; but this, alas! while dulling poetry has not made her quite serenely optimist. She needed happiness: happiness of a kind came too late. To Emily, whose need was even greater, it never came.

The cry for happiness, heard in all their work as an undertone, and uttered frankly in many passages of great beauty, seems to me to be very specially a Brontë note; and I think it is the tragic contrast between their capacity for it and the incompleteness of their lives that has won for them so many lovers. The cry has a sharpness as if they had foreseen the end. We feel an ache of tenderness for them, greater than for either Keats, or Shelley, or Chatterton. It makes critical estimates a heavy business, to be done reluctantly. When I consider the absence of any such joy of labour in "Villette" as abounds in "Shirley," and remember the disenchantments and the griefs endured before it was written, and that nothing followed it, Charlotte Brontë's last years appear extremely grey. One likes to think that she did know happiness before she died. But it was terribly brief, and, however consoling, it had not the ecstasy of her imagination. As for her work, its vital force had ebbed as it had gained sobriety, balance, and technical excellence. The fiery and pure spirit seems to have burned its frail envelope, as Emily's had done seven years earlier.

What have they left to us, these rare spirits, exquisitely immature? Work so sincere that we are as near to them as lovers can be ever. Their very faults—Emily's her aloofness; Charlotte's her bias, and Puritanism, and preaching seriousness—their very faults endear them. We see these faults as the defects of noble qualities. They are women who have suffered much because the world will not arrange itself to the great pattern of their ideals and sharp desires; and doubtless they and all of us were happier if we smiled at it. But is the world to be without its martyrs and its prophets? Theirs is a divine discontent, by which we are to learn how the world may be made a habitation easier to smile in. They suffer for our sakes. These dear women, delicate and passionate idealists, have done what I take to be a priceless thing for an age in which conventional faiths were to crumble fast away. They put us in contact with great Nature—a Book of Revelations of which the glory is imperishable and the comfortable promise sure;—and they have done this in passages of pure and musical English, poetic and searching prose, that persuade us of the truth of their meaning by its beauty. It is not a message to those who are happy and sure already. It is not a message to the Philistines. It is an auricular sweet message to the chosen, in doubt and in adversity. For Charlotte, Nature has sunny tears and a soft lap; for Emily, that mystery of spiritual meaning which assures her that nothing dies, nothing is inexplicable.

Vain are the thousand creeds
That move men's hearts : unutterably vain :
Worthless as withered weeds,
Or idlest froth amid the boundless main,
To waken doubt in one
Holding so fast by thine infinity.

So much poetry is nowhere else, in English writers of fiction, to be found with such an unsparing critical outlook and such sincerity of self-expression as in the Brontës. Remark, that sincerity and the critical spirit put them in touch with modern thought inseparably; and then consider, if you please, the question I asked at first, and

whether their educational force is likely to be soon exhausted. Their note, as Dr. Robertson Nicoll feels it, is "fortitude." Well, freedom and perfect honesty of thought, scorn of untruth and of injustice, demand that note in all who see the shams and cruelties of men and yet keep faith in beauty, honour, love, and a great design. The demand will not abate. It grows. I am glad that no horn-eyed person has attempted a synthesis of Charlotte Brontë's intolerances and prepossessions, her scepticisms and her beliefs, with a view to claim her for this or that political class or sect of Christian worshippers in her time. It may yet be done, doubtless. They are probably not reconcilable, these prejudices, and in any case the attempt would be unintelligent. What we honour and prize, alike in her and in her stronger sister, is the fearless, delicate spirit, true to itself as well as to the higher hope. Freedom's battle is bequeathed to ourselves.

Lyrical and heroic souls, in their own day they stood in the van of it, to give succour and to fight with equal helpfulness. This is why they will not be forgotten. This is the reason for a cult of Brontë worshippers, who keep their praise alive and spread their spirit.

FIFTEENTH

ANNUAL MEETING OF THE BRONTË SOCIETY.

The Fifteenth Annual Meeting took place at Harrogate, on Saturday, January 23rd, 1909.

The Members' Business Meeting was held at 3-30 p.m., in the Spa Concert Room, Mr. Butler Wood presiding. The Annual Report and Balance Sheet were submitted and adopted.