

*Learning to Imagine**Dinah Birch***Educational Change**

Changes in the theory and practice of education throughout the first half of the nineteenth century were intimately associated with contested interpretations of human progress and with divided views on the role of the imagination in the development of the individual. The roots of these educational conflicts ran deep, for the motives for establishing new models for learning were never separate from the political, economic and religious arguments of the period; and they were central to the varieties of late Romanticism that formed the literary culture of the period. The debates find complex and often divergent expressions in the writings of the Brontë siblings, emerging from the experiences of a family where education was both an inspiring ideal and the family business. For the Brontës, education was above all the means to the self-determination they craved, in both practical and creative terms. Congratulating W. S. Williams on his daughter's admission to the pioneering Queen's College in 1849, Charlotte Brontë is particularly forthright on the question. 'Come what may afterwards, an education secured is an advantage gained – a priceless advantage. Come what may it is a step towards independency'.<sup>1</sup> The family was not, however, of one mind in their understanding of what a condition of 'independency' might mean, and their disagreements reflected some of the sharpest disputes of their generation.

The pressure to manage ruptures in class and gender in an industrialising economy was often what stimulated the drive for educational reform. Schooling was widely seen to be key to moral and intellectual self-improvement, but it was also the bedrock of social cohesion and a necessary basis for the development of an effective workforce. These were among the fundamental tensions that shaped the educational arguments of the turbulent 1830s and 1840s, at a time when there was increasing

anxiety about the potential association between ignorance and insurrection, particularly among the working poor. An educated population was widely recognised as a necessary foundation for stability and progress, while teaching the ignorant was also understood to be an ethical or spiritual duty. Here the imperatives of economic and cultural politics overlapped with those of religion, as they often did in the Brontë family. Dr James Kay (later Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth), who became one of the most influential educational reformers of the nineteenth century, was convinced that withholding a serious education from the poor would increase the risk of revolution, a fear that was beginning to disturb the governing classes. His widely-read pamphlet on ‘The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes Employed in the Cotton Manufacture in Manchester’ (1832), later cited in Friedrich Engels’s *The Condition of the Working-Class in England* (1845), urged far-reaching change on the grounds of both principle and pragmatism:

If a period ever existed when public peace was secured by refusing knowledge to the population, that epoch has lapsed. The policy of governments may have been little able to bear the scrutiny of the people. This may be the reason why the fountains of English literature have been sealed – and the works of our reformers, our patriots, and our confessors – the exhaustless sources of all that is pure and holy, and of good report<sup>2</sup> amongst us – *have not been made accessible and familiar to the poor*. Yet literature of this order is destined to determine the structure of our social constitution, and to become the mould of our national character; and they who would dam up the flood of truth from a lower ground, cannot prevent its silent transudation. A little knowledge is thus inevitable, and it is proverbially a dangerous thing.<sup>3</sup> Alarming disturbances of social order generally commence with *a people only partially instructed*. The preservation of *internal peace*, not less than the improvement of our national institutions, depends on the education of the working classes.<sup>4</sup>

Many agreed with Kay, seeing the spread of education as a matter of both moral duty and social expediency. But there was no consensus as to the means by which this acknowledged good was to be achieved. Opinions on how an effective education was to be delivered were sharply divided. Quarrels about the conflicting responsibilities of church (or chapel) and state in supporting education were increasingly bitter. Reformers promoted widely divergent ideas as to what should be seen as a good school, or a competent teacher, or a worthwhile course of study. Kay’s primary appeal in warning of the dangers represented by an ignorant population is to the self-interest of his middle-class readers, but his

Biblical and cultural references to the ‘fountains of English literature’ and the ‘exhaustless sources of all that is pure and holy’ imply that the kind of education he assumes in his readers – and has in mind for the working classes – is not just the acquisition of literacy. ‘The poor man will not be made a much better member of society, by being only taught to read and write.’<sup>5</sup> Should schooling be designed to enable individuals to develop to their fullest human potential? And how far was it right that this potential for a measure of intellectual autonomy would be defined by social class? Should its aim be to fit young people to make the most efficient contribution to national prosperity, or perhaps simply to earn a living? Or was the real objective of education to impose conformity and inculcate discipline among growing children of all classes, ensuring that they would be content to accept the roles allocated to them within a settled social hierarchy? Could it, properly managed, deliver more than one of these objectives, or perhaps all of them? These questions were particularly pointed in the case of the Brontë family, where the responsibilities and privileges of gentility co-existed with the pressures of poverty and with the pressing need to use education as the means to secure an income, while extensive reading in Romantic poetry and fiction created a strong belief in the sustaining power and autonomy of the life of the imagination.

The urgency of these arguments was, in part, a consequence of the rapidity of industrial and urban development in early nineteenth-century Britain. This was a process that the Brontës experienced first-hand, as Patrick and Maria Brontë left the rural or provincial communities of their childhood and early youth to bring up their family in Haworth, a small industrial mill town in Yorkshire where smoking chimneys stood against the background of wild moors. The history of Haworth in the first half of the nineteenth century, as the town struggled to respond to the challenges of industrial growth, reflects the transformational forces that were sweeping through the country. From the perspective of the settled land-owning classes, traditional patterns of agricultural labour among the rural poor, punctuated by weekly attendance at an Anglican village church, had seemed to call for only the most rudimentary level of education. But the arrival of factories, mines and mills might call for different and more exacting levels of preparation for a competitive adult life for both workers and the expanding middle classes who owned and managed these new industrial ventures. Old social structures and the educational assumptions that went with them were fragmenting and the form that their replacements should take was far from clear.

### Educating Women

For Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë, these issues were further complicated by their status as young ladies. In the early years of the nineteenth century, working-class girls were thought to need even less in the way of serious education than their brothers. Anything beyond a basic instruction in religious principles – and perhaps in the essentials of literacy – would be redundant. But the Brontë girls were the daughters of a clergyman, and it had long been accepted that something more was necessary for young women with claims to gentility. As both the Anglican church and non-conformist sects began to take their social responsibilities more seriously in the early decades of the nineteenth century, the education of the wives and daughters of churchmen assumed a special importance not only because relative poverty often meant that (as was true for the Brontë sisters) they had to be especially careful to safeguard their status as ladies, but also because they would be expected to be in a position to teach the poor.<sup>6</sup> However, the question of what might be required for the education of women with claims to gentility was a matter of persistent controversy. In this respect, the immediate demands of a society undergoing rapid and fundamental change collide with the philosophical and political arguments that had first taken shape in earlier decades.

Here too, arguments would often turn on the competing claims of an instrumentalist view of education and a more aspirational model. Protests against the moral and intellectual triviality and practical futility of the education conventionally provided for middle-class women were longstanding. The first publication of Mary Wollstonecraft, the most eloquent and influential of an early generation of feminists, was a conduct book focusing on the issue of women's education. *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: With Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life* (1787) argued for rationality and a firm morality as the needful basis for the education of girls: 'Indolence and a thoughtless disregard of everything except the present indulgence make many mothers, who may have momentary starts of tenderness, neglect their children. They follow a pleasing impulse and never reflect that reason should cultivate and govern those instincts which are implanted in us to render the path of duty pleasant.'<sup>7</sup> Wollstonecraft went on to identify women's education as a central issue in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792):

The education of women has, of late, been more attended to than formerly; yet they are still reckoned a frivolous sex, and ridiculed or pitied

by the writers who endeavor by satire or instruction to improve them. It is acknowledged that they spend many of the first years of their lives in acquiring a smattering of accomplishments: meanwhile strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves—the only way women can rise in the world—by marriage.<sup>8</sup>

Wollstonecraft's arguments for a 'rational' education as an indispensable precondition for the progress of her sex were essential to her feminism and they continued to be important to the cause of progressive reform. But they were always accompanied by an insistence that reason would support the fulfilment of duty in a woman's life. She was no advocate for self-cultivation for its own sake. The exercise of reason would make women more responsible and productive as full and active members of society; it would not promote what she disapprovingly terms 'doting self-love'.<sup>9</sup>

The issue was not, however, the preserve of radical thinkers. More conservative or religious figures were often equally dissatisfied with the superficiality of the education routinely provided for middle-class girls. Jane Austen was scathing about the pretensions of schools that preyed on ambitious families – establishments which, as described by Austen in 1815, 'professed, in long sentences of refined nonsense, to combine liberal acquirements with elegant morality and new systems – and where young ladies for enormous pay might be screwed out of health and into vanity'.<sup>10</sup> In her *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education, with a View of the Principles and Conduct Prevalent Among Women of Ranks and Fortune* (1799), the evangelical reformer Hannah More took an explicitly religious view of the need for a more rigorous approach to the education of young ladies. Like Wollstonecraft, she deplored the contradictions in a system that actively encouraged thoughtless behaviour in women, and then condemned them for their light-mindedness; 'It is a singular injustice which is often exercised against women, first to give them a very defective Education, and then to expect from them the most undeviating purity of conduct.'<sup>11</sup> More wrote with Christian purpose. Her views on women's education balance the nurturing activities that she defined as essential to womanhood with a recognition – essential to her evangelical principles – of the need for disciplined self-culture. Intellectual independence would enable women to carry out duties more effectively. For a woman, 'the great uses of study are to enable her to regulate her own mind, and to be useful to others'.<sup>12</sup> Like many among the legions of would-be educational authorities that followed her, she emphasised that her aim was not simply to theorise about women, but to suggest an



approach to their education that would 'qualify them for the practical purposes of life'.<sup>13</sup> One of these 'practical purposes' might be a capacity to teach. More's *Moral Sketches of Prevailing Opinions and Manners, Foreign and Domestic: With Reflections on Prayer* (1819) found its way into the library of the parsonage at Haworth, where it was heavily annotated by Patrick Brontë. More argued that women whose education had not been confined to 'useless accomplishments' could and should become educators: 'Ladies, whose own education not having been limited to the harp and the sketch-book, though not unskilled in either, are competent to teach others what themselves have been taught.'<sup>14</sup>

Women might be active as teachers either in the family setting or elsewhere, but it was widely assumed that the destiny of middle-class girls, or young ladies, was primarily domestic. Wollstonecraft's tart observation that their only means of rising in the world was through marriage remained largely true. Once married, their work would be in the home, where their responsibilities as the lofty guardians of morality would be combined with the mundane day-to-day duties of running a household. The work of a female teacher seemed a natural extension of this double identity, though in practice its uncertain social status gave rise to many of the dislocating tensions within competing models for the proper schooling of women.

### The Brontës as Teachers and Pupils

The transformative power of education lay at the heart of the lives and ambitions of the Brontë family. Born in 1777, Patrick Brontë escaped a background of rural poverty in Ireland by working as a teacher and then gaining the degree from the university of Cambridge that enabled him to launch his career as an Anglican clergyman. His commitment to education had provided him with intellectual and spiritual authority and a gentleman's profession. It was an impressive achievement. His work as an educator also won him a wife. He met Maria Branwell – the Cornishwoman he was to marry – in 1812 while acting as an examiner at the Wesleyan Academy, a school for the sons of Methodist ministers in Yorkshire. Maria was the niece of the headmaster. Much of Patrick's attraction for the warm-hearted Maria lay in his firm but affectionate authority as a teacher. Maria revered him as a man who would assume the role of a 'guide and instructor'<sup>15</sup> in her life. He was dependable, but his story of determined success in the face of adversity also gave him a heroic glow in her eyes. Not only was Patrick a teacher and a clergyman,

he also became a published author with a significant body of poetry and fiction to his name. The marriage was happy, but after giving birth to six children in quick succession Maria died (probably of uterine cancer) in 1821. After the loss of her mother and later of her sisters Maria and Elizabeth, Charlotte Brontë became the oldest survivor in the close family circle of four surviving siblings. She assumed, in part, the role of the children's lost mother. Like Maria Branwell, Charlotte came to see Patrick as a hero, who had built a life for himself and his family through his mastery of learning. She was determined to follow suit. Branwell, Emily and Anne were more ambivalent in their responses to their father's daunting example. These family dynamics figure largely in the Brontës' differing interpretations of the relation between the instrumental utility of educational discipline and the intrinsic value of imaginative autonomy.

Charlotte's admiring devotion to her father meant that the concept of educational success that she internalised in childhood reflected the experiences of both her mother and her father. Like Maria Branwell, she was inclined to romanticise the relation between the powerful and benevolent male teacher and his grateful and adoring female pupil, an impulse which caused her much suffering when she fell in love with Constantin Heger, a married teacher she encountered in Brussels. Like Patrick, she identified the determined pursuit of success in education with personal fulfilment and professional opportunity. In Charlotte's case, however, this was a pattern that was shadowed with loss. Her experiences at the austere Clergy Daughters' School in Cowan Bridge in Lancashire, unforgettably recalled in her descriptions of Lowood School in *Jane Eyre*, left both physical and mental scars. Her two older sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, did not survive their time at the school, both succumbing to tuberculosis – the family plague that was also, in later years, to kill her two younger sisters, Emily and Anne. Charlotte's later years at Margaret Wooler's school at Roe Head, followed by work as a private governess and by her difficult but life-changing experiences as a pupil-teacher at the Pensionnat Heger in Brussels, provided the material of much of her mature fiction. Her developing use of this material reflects her ambivalent understanding of the educational institutions that had shaped so much of her early life.

*Jane Eyre* (1847) traces its heroine's steady progress from her passive and often unhappy years as a schoolgirl to her final identity as a woman for whom teaching had provided access to 'independency', security and finally romantic fulfilment. In Lowood School, Charlotte Brontë draws on her memories of both the Clergy Daughters' School and Roe Head. Her representation of Jane Eyre's later experiences as a governess draws on



her own largely unhappy and frustrating experiences as a teacher at Roe Head and the emotional intensity of her life at the Pensionnat Heger. But these were not her only experiences of learning. Her earliest formation as a pupil, like that of most middle-class girls of her generation, had been in the context of the family. As a daughter of the household, she was taught alongside her siblings by her father and aunt. This was as important to her adult identity – and that of her sisters – as her years in the classroom. The home education of the Brontë children was a conventional one in many respects, formed on traditional definitions of gender. Patrick Brontë had accepted the commonly held view that the rigours of a classical education were suited to boys rather than girls. In Patrick's didactic novel *The Maid of Killarney*, published in 1818, the pompous Dr O'Leary observed that 'The education of a female ought most assuredly, to be competent, in order that she might enjoy herself, and be a fit companion for man. But, believe me, lovely, delicate and sprightly woman, is not formed by nature, to pore over the musty pages of Grecian and Roman literature, or to plod through the windings of Mathematical Problems, nor has Providence assigned for her sphere of action, either the cabinet or the field. Her forte is softness, tenderness and grace'.<sup>16</sup> Dr O'Leary was not Patrick Brontë, and Patrick's girls received some tuition in Latin and ancient history. But he did choose to focus the home education of his son Branwell primarily on the classics while his daughters concentrated on reading and writing, scripture, sewing, geography, history, mathematics and a little French.

Though he felt that girls should not be educated in the same way as their brothers, Patrick's approach to his daughters' education allowed them liberal access to resources often denied to girls of their generation. He used standard textbooks like the Revd J. Goldsmith's lively *A Grammar of General Geography for the Use of Schools and Young Persons*,<sup>17</sup> Oliver Goldsmith's *History of England*, Charles Rollins' *Ancient History* and Richmal Mangnall's ubiquitous *Historical and Miscellaneous Questions*, but he also permitted all of his children to read Shakespeare and Byron in unabridged texts. As an accomplished poet with an enduring respect for the authority and vitality of poetry, he raised no objection to his daughters reading the poetry of Cowper, Campbell, Southey, Wordsworth and Scott. Periodicals – like the Tory journal *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (known as 'Maga') and *Fraser's Magazine* – gave the family access to provocative contemporary writing and acted as a source of information about the political controversies of the day. The cultural life of Haworth was active and the family frequently went to hear



religious speakers, lecturers and musicians. The children's home education equipped them with much richer and more challenging intellectual experiences than they would have encountered in most girls' schools of the period. Later, Charlotte's friend Mary Taylor wrote to Elizabeth Gaskell about Charlotte's exceptionally well-stocked mind and her eager appetite for learning:

She would confound us by knowing things that were out of our range altogether. She was acquainted with most of the short pieces of poetry that we had to learn by heart; would tell us the authors, the poems they were taken from, and sometimes repeat a page or two, and tell us the plot ... She picked up every scrap of information concerning painting, sculpture, poetry, music, &c., as if it were gold.<sup>18</sup>

Charlotte and Branwell, the two elder Brontë siblings, had a close and competitive relationship. They took the lead in the children's precociously active engagement with the issues of the day. It was Branwell who, at the age of eleven, initiated the miniature family journal, 'Branwell's Blackwood's Magazine', which first introduced the idea that writing for the public was an ambition that could become a reality. Later, Charlotte took over the production of the tiny journal, renaming it 'Blackwood's Young Men's Magazine' and providing it with a more imaginative range of subjects. The two younger girls, Emily and Anne, formed their own alliance within the intense family life of Haworth Parsonage. All four children participated in the construction of elaborate fictional worlds, where their reading in literature, history and politics was reflected in the narratives of Gondal and Angria. For the Brontë family, the boundary between the processes of education and creativity were always porous. They had absorbed the traditional values and practical skills communicated in the lessons provided by their father and aunt, but their early writing allowed them the freedom to challenge those values and create their own forms of narrative.

In this sense, education enabled the children to achieve their own imaginative autonomy. As the three Brontë girls grew, however, it became increasingly clear to their father that the nature of their education could not sensibly be dictated entirely by the needs of their personal development, or even their qualifications to succeed in a competitive marriage market. Like their brother Branwell, they would have to become financially independent. The family income, dependent on the salary that Patrick could earn as perpetual curate at Haworth, was scanty (£170 p.a.) and there could be no guarantee that the girls would acquire security

through finding a prosperous husband. This was a widely shared concern among the rising middle classes in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Harriet Martineau's *Household Education* (1849) emphasised the need for young women to experience a wide-ranging and rigorous curriculum, pointing out that 'female redundancy'<sup>19</sup> was a growing threat to their future security:

In former times, it was understood that every woman (except domestic servants) was maintained by her father, brother or husband; but it is not so now. The footing of women is changed, and it will change more ... What we have to think of is the necessity – in all justice, in all honour, in all prudence – that every girl's faculties should be made the most of, as carefully as boys'. While so many women are no longer sheltered, and protected, and supported, in safety from the world (as people used to say) every woman ought to be fitted to take care of herself.<sup>20</sup>

One of the reasons for Patrick's luckless decision to send his daughters to the Clergy Daughters' School was that the syllabus would equip the girls with the accomplishments expected of teachers, or governesses – the only profession that could reasonably be expected to provide them with a livelihood while maintaining their status as gentlewomen. The prospectus of the school made it clear that it was prepared to cater for this requirement, increasingly common among hard-pressed clerical families looking to equip their daughters to make their own way in the world: 'If a more liberal Education is required for any who may be sent to be Educated as Teachers and Governesses, an extra charge will probably be made.'<sup>21</sup> The school had a distinguished list of patrons – including Hannah More and William Wilberforce – and though the fees were exceptionally low at £14 per year, this was partly because they were subsidised by charitable donations. Patrick paid the extra required to educate the girls and prepare them to teach. Throughout their early lives, it was understood that Charlotte, Emily and Anne would be equipped to earn their living as teachers, either in schools or as private governesses working for families. Though Branwell was educated with different objectives in mind, he too followed his father in working as a tutor for a well-to-do family. For good or ill, it was understood that education, the family occupation, was the natural destiny and resource of the Brontë family.

These circumstances established significant tensions in the minds of the young Brontës. On the one hand, their faith in the values they had absorbed from their reading, the aspirational culture of Haworth and the example and teaching of their father was strong. These features were particularly marked in Charlotte's development as a young woman.

The disciplined acquisition of a carefully-regulated and well-informed mind of the kind that a serious education could provide would be the key to their status in the world and their prospects for advancement. On the other hand, the material of their education, particularly when it took the form of independent reading and writing, argued for a more autonomous form of self-determination. The rebellious poetry of Byron and Scott, those two great favourites of the Brontë household, did not encourage the children to think of meek obedience and social conformity as the highest points of human achievement. A steady application to study was a potent model in their lives, but so too was Romantic self-determination.

These divided ambitions became particularly evident in the experiences of Charlotte and Emily as pupils in the Pensionnat Heger, a girls' school in Brussels. Charlotte was the driving force in the scheme to study overseas and her primary motivations were practical and professional. If she and her sisters were to establish a successful school for girls, as she hoped they might, they would need a competitive advantage; for, as Charlotte wrote to her aunt, 'schools in England are so very numerous, competition so great, that without some such step towards attaining superiority we shall probably have a very hard struggle, and may fail in the end'.<sup>22</sup> She and Emily would need the polish that fluent French and an understanding of Continental manners and culture could provide. She also saw the experiment as an emulation of her father's spirit and courage: 'When he left Ireland to go to Cambridge University, he was as ambitious as I am now.'<sup>23</sup>

Emily was a partner in the sisters' plan to found a school, but there is no evidence that she or Anne shared Charlotte's enthusiastically practical commitment to the project. Speculating on the family's future in her diary in 1841, Emily's imagined picture of the new school has the air of a rosy fantasy: 'we (i.e.) Charlotte, Anne and I – shall be all merrily seated in our own sitting-room in some pleasant and flourishing seminary, having just gathered in for the midsummer holydays.'<sup>24</sup> Neither Emily nor Anne seem to have been greatly disappointed when the proposed school failed to attract pupils (though Anne recalls the scheme in the successful family school for girls that she describes in *Agnes Grey*), and the plan was abandoned. Even Charlotte, who had initiated the scheme, was quickly resigned to its collapse. The school that might have provided the sisters with the independence they needed did not come into existence, but the legacy of the professional education that Charlotte and Emily acquired in Belgium remained a powerful force in their lives and writing.

The prospectus of the Athénée Royal, the fashionable boys' school in Brussels where Constantin Heger taught, described an establishment with values very different to those of the Clergy Daughters' School: 'The instructor must activate the thinking of his student, develop his intelligence, rectify his judgement, arm him with good principles, and set before those precious materials that provide him with the record of the human spirit: after that, it is up to the student to build the edifice.'<sup>25</sup> Heger's wife Zoë Parent-Heger was head teacher at the Pensionnat Heger, where middle-class girls were taught. Her school operated on more cautious principles, making the inculcation of good behaviour and religion the primary selling points for prospective parents, rather than the active self-determination advocated by the Athénée Royal. Constantin Heger combined his duties at the Athénée Royal with a post as professor of rhetoric and literature in his wife's school, where he helped to design the curriculum. He was able to import some of the innovative educational methods of the Athénée Royal into his practice at the generally more conservative Pensionnat Heger. He encouraged critical independence in his pupils, reading passages aloud from French texts to his pupils and then analysing 'the parts with them, pointing out in what such and such an author excelled, and where were the blemishes', following with an assignment in which they were to express 'their own thoughts in a somewhat similar manner'.<sup>26</sup> Both Emily and Charlotte benefited from this stimulating regime, but Charlotte found the disciplined self-examination that it encouraged, together with the expansion of her range of reading, particularly useful to the development of her writing. Heger took her work seriously, praising its strengths and berating her if an assignment was below par. For Charlotte, the fusion of personal interest and intellectual challenge represented in Heger's teaching was overwhelmingly attractive, and she became deeply attached to her teacher. Reflections of this unreciprocated passion emerge repeatedly in her fiction – in Frances Henri's devotion to William Crimsworth in *The Professor*, Jane Eyre's love for Edward Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, Shirley Keeldar's marriage to Louis Moore in *Shirley*, or Lucy Snowe's adulation of Paul Emmanuel in *Villette*. This recurrent motif amounts to more than the obsessive recollection of a frustrated love. In each case, personal growth within an educational context culminate in both emotional and social fulfilment. The converging elements of Charlotte Brontë's varied educational experiences, intended to make her a teacher, gave her the confidence and the skill to become a writer.

Emily, habitually self-contained and self-protective, was less driven by the urge to make a public mark in the world than Charlotte. The education that meant most to her lay in her private reading and in the close creative relationship that she developed with her younger sister Anne. It is hardly surprising that her own brief attempts to teach, in Miss Patchett's school at Halifax, were unsuccessful, for 'she could not easily associate with others'.<sup>27</sup> Her writing makes little reference to the experiences of formal schooling. Yet in *Wuthering Heights* Emily tacitly concedes that the social and imaginative identity of her characters is formed by their experiences as children. Their real education is of a kind that most often takes place outside the schoolroom. For her, as for Charlotte, social considerations sit alongside an imaginative imperative in her interpretation of educational priorities. Heathcliff is denied a gentleman's education by Hindley, and it is this deprivation that leads to Catherine Earnshaw's resistance to becoming his wife. 'It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff, now', she tells Nelly Dean, despite her conviction that 'he's more myself than I am'.<sup>28</sup> Later, after leaving the Heights and mysteriously acquiring something of a gentleman's polish, Heathcliff attempts to deprive Hindley's son Hareton of an education as he had once been deprived. When Nelly encounters Hareton as a small child, she is met with 'a string of curses'. Nelly offers the boy an orange:

'Who has taught you those fine words, my barn,' I inquired. 'The curate?'

'Damn the curate, and thee! Gie me that,' he replied.

'Tell us where you got your lessons, and you shall have it,' said I.

'Who's your master?'

'Devil daddy,' was his answer.

'And what do you learn from Daddy?' I continued.

He jumped at the fruit; I raised it higher. 'What does he teach you?'

I asked.

'Naught,' said he, 'but to keep out of his gait – Daddy cannot bide me, because I swear at him.'

'Ah! And the devil teaches you to swear at Daddy?' I observed.

'Aye – nay,' he drawled.

'Who then?'

'Heathcliff.' (p. 97)

Here, the association between Heathcliff's demonic rebellion and the rejection of the publicly-sanctioned education identified with the social and spiritual values of the church could hardly be more apparent. Asked whether the curate teaches him to 'read and write', Hareton replies

that 'the curate should have his – teeth dashed down his – throat, if he stepped over the threshold. Heathcliff had promised that!' (p. 98). Heathcliff is a grotesque reflection of everything that Patrick Brontë, the dutiful perpetual curate of Haworth, is not. Catherine's daughter, a less mutinous version of her mother, is later able to woo Hareton with a domestic education that, like Charlotte Brontë's numerous depictions of the relation between teacher and pupil, is heavily eroticised. This is a kind of private learning that does not take place in a classroom, but it is only through its benign agency that the ancient bitternesses can begin to resolve themselves. Again, Nelly is the observer: 'I perceived two such radiant faces bent over the page of the accepted book, that I did not doubt the treaty had been ratified on both sides, and the enemies were, thenceforth, sworn allies' (p. 280). Emily's model for education rests on an independent inwardness that defies the regulation of the publicly affirmed and often religious values that dominated its institutional delivery.

Anne Brontë, whose development as a writer was formed by complex interactions with her siblings, is consistently concerned with education as it is enacted both inside and outside the home. She was not involved in the bold experiment of acquiring a continental education in Brussels, and in some respects her perspectives on the processes of moral education that dominate both *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* remain largely English in their emphasis. Like Emily, she is not interested in the school-room as a location for fiction. Her uncompromisingly didactic novels ('All true histories contain instruction'<sup>29</sup>) insist on the primacy of a home education that is built on values of honesty, sympathy and charity. Anne has no truck with the seductions of the ambiguously attractive and quasi-Byronic heroes who figure in the novels of her sisters. For her, the inner life of the imagination must be mediated through the committed practice of evangelical religion. Her protagonists, Agnes Grey and Helen Huntingdon, do not waver in the confident self-belief derived from faith, which carries them safely through a sea of oppression, injustice and misfortune.

In this sense, Anne's novels might seem to be less emotionally and formally complex than those of her sisters. What gives them their distinctive force is the extent to which Anne is prepared to attack the social and cultural context in which the domestic education she describes takes place. Anne's interpretation of the cynical values that high-minded young women encounter when they lose the protection of their childhood homes was influenced and informed by her own difficult experiences as a teacher and governess. Her fiction is scathing in its condemnation of the hypocrisy and cruelty that seem to her to dictate the behaviour of both the rising

middle class and the established aristocracy – the groups endowed with the financial resources that enabled them to dominate the social hierarchy. This is particularly true of Anne's first novel, *Agnes Grey* (1847), where the inexperienced but resolute Agnes is exposed to a protracted demonstration of the coarse self-interest of those who suppose themselves to be her natural superiors. Agnes's situation as a poor clergyman's daughter working for her living as a governess, endowed with the status of gentility without the economic resources to support her position, is a familiar example of the ambivalent position of the governess, frequently explored in mid-Victorian fiction.<sup>30</sup> Agnes, however, is no meek victim of her circumstances. Despite the abuse she suffers at the hands of her coldly unsympathetic employers, her sturdy resilience is more than equal to the challenge of her position. She is finally rewarded with the hand of the worthy curate Edward Weston, who despite his modest circumstances is understood to be a far more desirable figure than the ineffectual curate who repeatedly fails to deliver an education to the Earnshaws and the Lintons in *Wuthering Heights*. Of all Patrick's four surviving children, it was Anne who had most actively assimilated the evangelical values of Haworth parsonage.

Agnes's triumphant vindication in *Agnes Grey* bears the marks of fictional wish-fulfilment, for Anne's own experiences of working as a governess had been unhappy and no consoling curate had appeared to offer an escape. Charlotte, who had also found the daily demands of a menial teaching post to be onerous, sardonically referred to her sister's work as 'the Land of Egypt and the House of Bondage'.<sup>31</sup> Anne's second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, a more ambitious and complex work than the relatively slight *Agnes Grey*, concedes the scale of the challenge that confronts principled young women as they attempt to find their way in an unprincipled world. Helen Huntingdon is, in her own account, culpably naïve and more than a little vain and priggish in her belief that the example of her own Christian life will be sufficient to turn her husband away from his dissolute habits. 'I shall consider my life well spent in saving from the consequences of his early errors, and striving to recall him to the path of virtue'.<sup>32</sup> After learning, painfully, that she can have no influence over her husband's debauched behaviour, Helen removes herself and her young son from the marital home. Refusing the supposed sexual duties of a wife, she affirms her primary identity as that of a mother, tasked with the moral responsibility of rescuing Arthur from the corrupting influence of his father: 'henceforth, we are husband and wife only in the name ... I am your child's mother, and *your* housekeeper – nothing more' (pp. 260–1).<sup>33</sup> Helen works to support herself through her talents as an



artist after she has succeeded in escaping from her marital home. In this respect she becomes one of the very few women with claims to gentility in the fiction of the Brontë sisters who attempt to establish themselves in any profession other than teaching. Nevertheless, she considers her priority to be the education of her son, not making a name for herself as a painter. Having failed to teach her husband, she is determined to teach Arthur. Like Emily Brontë's young Hareton, Arthur seems likely to be degraded by the deliberately debasing instruction of his drunken and self-indulgent father, who taught him 'to tipple wine like papa, to swear like Mr. Hattersley, and to have his own way like a man, and sent mamma to the devil when she tried to prevent him' (p. 296). In *Wuthering Heights*, Hareton is rescued from his fallen condition, and educated, through his love for the younger Cathy. Little Arthur is also saved from the dismal fate of his father by a loving woman (both Hindley and Arthur Huntingdon are destroyed by alcohol), but in his case it is the patient tuition and example of his mother, and not that of a lover, that enables him to fulfil his human potential. Like Emily, Anne believed that the education that would finally matter most would take place in the context of a loving home and not in the institutional surroundings of the classroom.

Each of the three Brontë sisters was committed to the educational ideals that they had absorbed as children, but each arrived at a different interpretation of those ideals, reflecting their divergent aspirations and experiences as adults. The Brontës were not isolated from the political and cultural controversies that defined contemporary debates about the nature and purposes of education. Their family circumstances made them particularly sensitive to the tension between an externally focused instrumental view of education and the more introspective definitions of an education that would support the autonomy of the imagination in private, and sometimes secret, processes of creativity. These tensions were often painful, for each of the sisters knew from their own experience that the high principles of education were widely different from its uncomfortable practice for spirited young women compelled to earn a living in lowly positions as teachers. While teaching at Roe Head, Charlotte recorded her frustration in a fiery journal entry:

I had been toiling for nearly an hour. I sat sinking from irritation and weariness into a kind of lethargy. The thought came over me: Am I to spend all the best part of my life in this wretched bondage, forcibly suppressing my rage at the idleness, the apathy and the hyperbolic and most asinine stupidity of these fat headed oafs and on compulsion assuming an air of kindness, patience and assiduity? ... Just then a dolt came up with a lesson. I thought I should have vomited.<sup>34</sup>

Charlotte, Emily and Anne had every reason to understand that the social status and financial security of young, middle-class women would often depend on their work as pupils and teachers and that this work could confirm and extend their influence in the world. But the deepest allegiance of the three sisters was given to the inward education of the self as it was nourished by solitary reading and reflection and expressed through their literary creativity. Though the sisters repeatedly wrote about differing patterns of education and their consequences, they finally found the fulfilment and success that meant most to them in their work as poets and novelists and not as professional teachers. It was in their writing that they were able to develop the full measure of their human independence.

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