

'I come before you as an author only'

By James Reston, Jr.

IN HER ESSAY on "The Art of Biography," Virginia Woolf compared the form of biography to the poem or the novel and suggested that by using facts the biographer could do more to stimulate our imagination than the novelist or the poet, save the greatest among them.

"For few poets or novelists," she wrote, "are capable of that high degree of tension which gives us reality." The biographer's art, Woolf concluded, is to present "the creative fact" or the "fertile fact"—as opposed to all facts of the subject's life—and thereby "shape the whole so that we perceive the outline" of the character.

The fertile facts that Margot Peters wants to present in her biography of Charlotte Brontë, the author of *Jane Eyre*, add up as much to a political point as a human one: the biographer is intent to show the dreary lot of the brilliant, artistic woman in the Victorian age. "The Victorian woman was supposed to feel only complacency, love, and subservience," writes Peters in her introduction, and then she states her purpose: "Charlotte Brontë's life and art were both an eloquent protest against the cruel and frustrating limitations imposed upon women and a triumph over them. Seen from this angle the facts of her life fall into a new pattern, and it is this pattern that these pages propose to explore."

When Peters has finished her

Unquiet Soul: A Biography of Charlotte Brontë, by Margot Peters

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arrangement of facts, she leaves the reader on the political point with which she began. "Charlotte Brontë fully understood but did not often agree with conventional notions of womanhood. . . . Women need the same scope for their talents and energies as men do. It is cruel to deprive them of it, or to laugh at their efforts to improve their lot. Her life was a frustrating yet productive struggle between living dutifully, and yet, as a woman of genius, unconventionally." After all the marvelous detail that precedes it, this didactic and heavy-handed point is hardly the way to end.

But the ending does little to impair this fascinating and well-written book, for if biography is the forum to prove a case—and that is my problem, particularly if it is a political case—Peters has certainly done it here.

38 Tormented Years

The biography divides nicely into two clearly defined parts. With richly documented letters and remembrances, the first takes us through the development of this remarkable woman and remarkable family. The father is the austere

parson of the Haworth Anglican Church; the mother, "in true 19th-century style," bears six children in seven years and then dies; two daughters die in early childhood in the cold, damp Yorkshire climate, amid the poverty of the parson's life, with the poor sanitation and poor medicine of Haworth; later, two more daughters, Emily and Anne, die at ages 30 and 29, but after considerable literary achievement in collaboration with Charlotte; closely thereto, the only Brontë son, Branwell, who has been coddled and indulged as the sole male sibling beyond his limited talent and even more limited maturity, dies of opium and disappointment at the age of 31.

The best that can be said of this is that Branwell, Emily, and Anne exceeded the average life expectancy of Haworth residents: 25.8 years. This leaves only Charlotte, to live on to the ripe old age of 38 tormented years.

Life of Morbid Fantasy

Physically, Charlotte Brontë is unattractive: small, nearsighted, plain of face, "almost ill-featured," but possessing beneath her wire glasses eyes that are large, reddish brown, serious, and glowing. Her homeliness faced her with the plight of the old maid in Victorian society, a lot in the order of things then as lowly and contemptible as the schoolmaster and the parson. But as infuriating as Charlotte's slights are to her biographer, this state

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leads to the inner, lonely life of Charlotte Brontë, a life of morbid fantasy, of erotic imaginings, of sentimentality, of guilt and fears of damnation, which in turn become the stuff of her fiction. It leads as well to a strength and independence of mind, an immunity to cant and hypocrisy, and a strong critical sense.

But she is resigned to be single. Once, in refusing an offer of marriage by a man she barely knew, she wrote: "I have no personal repugnance to the idea of a union with you, but I feel convinced that mine is not the sort of disposition calculated to form the happiness of a man like you. It has always been my habit to study the characters of those amongst whom I chance to

be thrown, and I think I know yours and can imagine what description of woman would suit you for a wife. The character should not be too marked, ardent, and original, her temper should be mild, her piety undoubted, her spirits even and cheerful, and her personal attractions sufficient to please your eyes and gratify your just pride."

The Profession of Letters

The second part of the biography deals with Miss Brontë's literary life, and the story is thoroughly engrossing.

Together the three Brontë sisters, stymied at the profession of teaching, forced into such pursuits as governessing, decide to publish a book of verse under the male pseudonyms of Currer Bell, Ellis Bell, and Acton Bell. They launch into the profession of letters, even though Charlotte has been discouraged early by a poet of the "coarser sex" from pursuing so "perilous a course" for a woman. "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be," the poet writes and warns that persisting could induce a "distempered state of mind." But persist they do as the Bell brothers, and it results in *Wuthering Heights* and two other novels. But with *Jane Eyre*, fame comes in a blast, and England speculates on who Currer Bell is, and of what sex.

"If *Jane Eyre* be the production of a woman," one review proclaims. **Continued on Page 10, Column 4**