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CHARLOTTE BRONTË
JANE EYRE



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EDITED BY
Q. D. LEAVIS



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Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England
Penguin Books, 625 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10022, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 41 Steelcase Road West, Markham, Ontario, Canada
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

First published 1847
Published in Penguin English Library 1966
Reprinted 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971 (twice), 1972, 1973, 1974 (twice), 1975, 1976 (twice)
Introduction and Notes © Q. D. Leavis, 1966

Made and printed in Great Britain
by Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press) Ltd,
Bungay, Suffolk
Set in Monotype Bembo

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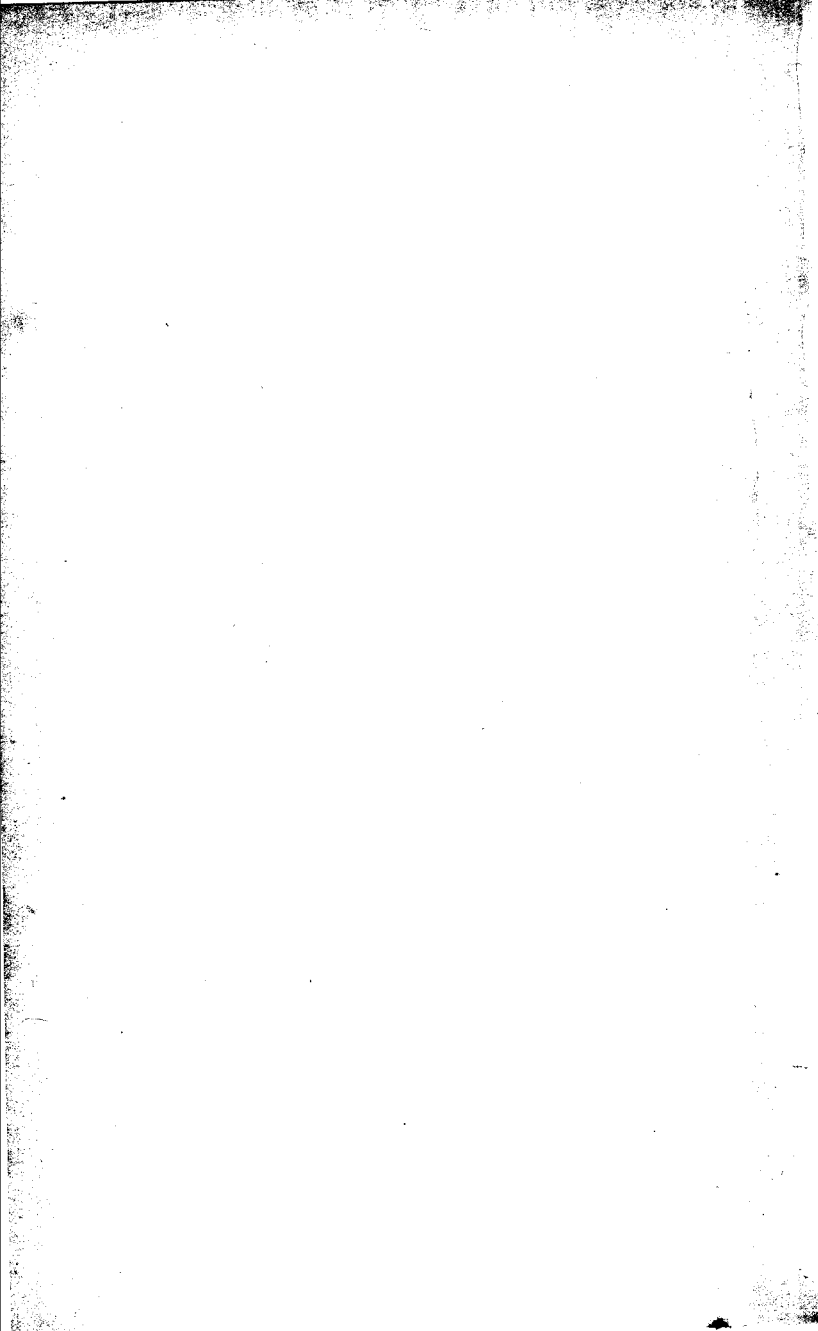
JANE EYRE

CHARLOTTE BRONTË

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INTRODUCTION

THE life of the author of *Jane Eyre* must be read in Mrs Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), one of the great English biographies. Though Mrs Gaskell had to make concessions to the prejudices and feelings of the living, though she did not know Charlotte personally till late in Charlotte's life after the deaths of all her relatives except old Mr Brontë, though her Victorian outlook and training made her excise and mollify a good deal, and though, most serious of all, we must doubt if she really understood in what the importance of *Jane Eyre* consists, still, the biography remains essentially valid. And it has the great advantage of Mrs Gaskell's intimate friendship with her sister-novelist, visiting each other and exchanging confidences as they did. A long, fascinatingly detailed letter Mrs Gaskell wrote in 1853 during her first visit to Haworth is indispensable (it is printed in the Introduction to the 'World's Classics' edition of the *Life*). In it she remarked on the 'pestiferous churchyard' which overhung the gloomy parsonage and into which 'one by one they [the children] had dropped off' - disease and premature deaths being only part, however, of the tragic story of the Brontës.

'A little, plain, provincial, sickly-looking old maid', is how George Lewes described Charlotte to George Eliot, 'yet', added the latter in her Journal, having been overwhelmed by the novels, 'what passion, what fire in her!' Mrs Gaskell saw deeper. She remarked the beautiful eyes and the sweet voice that counteracted the impression of plainness, and was profoundly moved by her personality:

In general there she sits quite alone thinking over the past. . . . She has the wild strange facts of her own and her sisters' lives, - and beyond and above these she has the most original and suggestive thoughts of her own: so that, like the moors, I felt on the last day as if our talk might be extended in any direction without getting to the end of any subject.

Charlotte's most intelligent school-friend (who figures in *Shirley* along with her extraordinary family 'the Yorkes') wrote to Mrs Gaskell after reading the *Life*: 'Though not so gloomy as the truth, it is perhaps as much so as people will accept without calling it exaggerated', adding that the reviewers do not seem 'to think it a strange or wrong state of things that a woman of first-rate talents, industry

and integrity should live all her life in a walking nightmare of poverty and self-suppression'. One might cite, as an instance of the kind of manly crassness Mary Taylor complains of, Kingsley's tribute to Mrs Gaskell: 'Well have you done your work, and given us the picture of a valiant woman made perfect by suffering.' It was just such Victorian attitudes about women, and such an assumption about the improving effects of filial duty, unhappiness, and deprivation, that made Charlotte write her novels, which all spring from the passionate need to demonstrate that a good life for a woman, no less than for a man, is a satisfied one.

Charlotte was born in 1816, and was therefore by no means the 'Victorian' product she is generally thought of as being. The third daughter of an Ulsterman who had gone to Cambridge University and settled as a parson in Yorkshire, she was motherless from early childhood, and by the premature deaths of her two elder sisters was left henceforth in charge of her younger sisters Anne and Emily and the brother Branwell. The four children doomed to isolation, constraint, and precocity because turned in on each other, were made companions in his reading by their father. When Charlotte went to her second boarding-school in 1831, aged fifteen, it was noted that she spoke with a strong Irish accent and that 'she said that she had never played and could not play' when the girls invited her to join in their games. An earlier, unhappy experience of school at a religious foundation provided the material for the Lowood section of *Jane Eyre* (see Notes): from this school the nine-year-old Charlotte was withdrawn after the deaths of her elder sisters, also pupils there. She remembered it all so faithfully that, when the novel was published anonymously, many Yorkshire readers recognized the teachers, the 'black marble clergyman' its founder, and 'Helen Burns' the suffering Maria Brontë. The four surviving children comforted themselves with a life of corporate fantasy in which their favourite hero Wellington figured with other real and invented characters (aristocratic and royal) in a Byronic ethos. Their father discussed politics (Tory) with them: they read his newspapers and his books, so they early took to literature; they wrote tales, fantasies, poems, journals, serial stories, and brought out a monthly magazine, like so many children. But with the Brontës the practice of creating a fictional day-dream world persisted into adult life, so that from being the most precocious of children they became retarded adults. Eventually Emily and Anne combined to produce a saga of the Gondals (of which only the poetry Emily wrote for

the characters to declaim survives), while Charlotte and her brother had their own country, Angria. Miss Fanny Ratchford has edited what survive of Charlotte's Angrian manuscripts; they show a feverish imagination providing what was lacking in the life of the parsonage, no doubt, but drawing on no first-hand experience whatever. In fact, they seem to me utterly without promise. Yet Charlotte was writing the latest of them not much before her first novel *The Professor*, half at least of which is strikingly realistic and founded on her own experiences (even though the narrator is a man) – *The Professor* is the authentic voice of the author of *Villette*, into which novel indeed it was later transformed.

What precipitated Charlotte into writing fiction that was based in real life was evidently the earthquake that going to study at Brussels occasioned. For after attempts to earn her living as a governess (for which she was peculiarly unfitted by her ignorance of normal children, her disabling shyness, and her yearning to be with her sisters), she persuaded the aunt who presided over the Haworth home to subsidize Emily and herself for a spell abroad to qualify them in French and German. Reading *The Professor* and *Villette* we may conclude that the shock for these very Protestant and Yorkshire-bred sisters at encountering the unimaginable culture of a Catholic boarding-school for the wealthy and aristocratic young ladies of Brussels, was what forced Charlotte out of her melodramatic, Byronic daydreams into examining her own identity and problems. She told Mrs Gaskell 'of her desire (almost amounting to illness) of expressing herself in some way'. When the sisters were home again and their plan of keeping a school in the parsonage proved hopeless, they turned first to publishing their poems in a joint volume and next to writing a novel each; *Jane Eyre* seems to have been started in August 1846 after *The Professor* had been rejected by several publishers.

Charlotte was the ambitious and energizing member of the sorority. She thought of literary fame as 'a passport to the society of clever people', her school-friend said, but 'When at last she got it, she lamented that it was of no use' – her sisters and brother were tragically dead and her sufferings had left her unable to bear society: 'She never criticized her books to me further than to express utter weariness of them, and the labour they had given her.' We can see that to write *Jane Eyre*, at least, must have been at the time a great joy as well as a relief of the pressures of her inner life and her aspirations. But, with that recurrent tragic pattern that made up her life, even the encouraging reception of *Jane Eyre* was spoilt for her, for *Wuthering Heights*,

Emily's bid for fame and fortune, got no recognition at that time: 'But Emily - poor Emily - the pangs of disappointment as review after review came out about *Wuthering Heights* were terrible,' wrote Mrs Gaskell in her letter from Haworth. 'Miss B. said she had no recollections of pleasure or gladness about *Jane Eyre*, every such feeling was lost in seeing Emily's resolute endurance yet knowing what she felt.' And within the year Emily died.

When *Jane Eyre* was published under a pseudonym ('Currer Bell') in October 1847, it attracted a great deal of admiration: Thackeray described it as 'the masterwork of a great genius'; next year, when it was in the third edition, the *Quarterly Review* referred to 'the equal popularity of *Jane Eyre* and *Vanity Fair*'. The critic G. H. Lewes thoughtfully advised Charlotte to study Jane Austen's novels and correct her shortcomings in the light of that great artist's practice. Charlotte had never read any Jane Austen, it appeared, but she was willing to learn. Having read *Pride and Prejudice* she wrote to explain to Lewes with admirable spirit why such a novelist could be of no use to her, indeed, by the light of what she was trying to do, was not a novelist at all. Her side of the correspondence between them is given in an abridged form in the *Life*. Charlotte rejects Miss Austen's work as 'only shrewd and observant', 'sensible, real (more *real* than *true*) but she cannot be great'; one sees there only 'a highly-cultivated garden but no open country'; she is 'without poetry'; 'Can there be a great artist without poetry?'

Obviously, in those two-hourly walks that the Brontë sisters took every night round the parlour table, 'like restless wild animals', while they discussed their plans and projects, a revolutionary theory of what a novel should be and could do had been arrived at by the authors of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. We may guess that it was the experience of the poetry of the Romantics and Shakespearian tragedy that had enlarged for them the idea of the novelist's function. I give this significant extract from Charlotte's correspondence in 1850 because Mrs Gaskell doesn't (she probably thought it would alienate the Victorian reader, with whom she was pleading Charlotte's case):

She does her business of delineating the surface of the lives of genteel English people curiously well. . . . What sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it suits her to study; but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of life and the sentient target of death - this Miss Austen ignores. She no

more, with her mind's eye, beholds the heart of her race than each man, with bodily vision, sees the heart in his heaving breast. Jane Austen was a complete and most sensible lady, but a very incomplete and rather insensible (*not senseless*) woman. If this is heresy, I cannot help it.

As always, criticism has preceded and fostered creation. Here the idea of a novel, the novelist's ambition and the expression of it, are all curiously suggestive of D. H. Lawrence. Charlotte and Emily Brontë were evidently united in their determination not to write novels which give merely a surface imitation of life ('more real than true') nor to be satisfied with studying people in their social and intellectual character. They aimed at achieving through prose fiction something as serious, vital, and significant as the work of their favourite poets, which should voice the tragic experience of life, be true to the experience of the whole woman, and convey a sense of life's springs and undercurrents. To envisage such a possibility for the novel was at that date a critical achievement of the first order; to succeed, however unequally, in carrying it out was surely proof of great creative genius. In order to be great art their novels, these girls realized, must include 'poetry', necessarily employing a poetic method and evolving new prose techniques. This effort in due course led to the novel's becoming the major art form of the nineteenth century.

Yet though *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* have always been accepted as powerful and impressive, it is not as works of art that they are commonly thought of, rather as artless concoctions of uncontrolled daydreams. In the standard work *Early Victorian Novelists* Lord David Cecil describes Charlotte Brontë's novels as 'incoherent', alleging 'She has no gift of form, no restraint, little power of observation, no power of analysis' and that she holds up the 'narrative' to insert passages of poetic prose which have no function. This reaction to *Jane Eyre* seems to me to show an inability to read, to see what is in fact staring one in the face, for the novel is strikingly coherent, schematic (like *Wuthering Heights*) and, with a few lapses, thoroughly controlled in the interest of the theme. The theme has, very properly, dictated the form, and the theme is an urgently felt personal one, an exploration of how a woman comes to maturity in the world of the writer's youth. Charlotte always insisted that *Jane Eyre* was framed 'as plain and as small as' herself to prove to her sisters that a heroine could be interesting without being beautiful - 'but', she added, 'she is not myself any further than that'. This is not correct, for Charlotte's experiences at the Evangelical school and as governess were transferred

to Jane, and Jane's passionate desire for a wider life and richer and fuller experience was, we know, also her creator's.

I must protest also against a current idea that *Jane Eyre* belongs to the class of novels that Henry James called 'loose, baggy monsters' which, 'with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary' are without 'composition . . . that principle of health and safety' and therefore, though they may contain 'life', are wasteful and meaningless. *Jane Eyre*, like *Wuthering Heights* and *Anna Karenina*, is quite as deliberately composed as any novel in existence, but like them is a unique organic structure and therefore does not qualify for (or invite the use of) James's term of praise for the art of his own novels - 'triumphantly scientific'. The nature of the success *Jane Eyre* represents was recognized by the intelligent Mary Taylor, who wrote to her friend after reading the copy of *Jane Eyre* sent her: 'Your novel surprises me by being so perfect a work of art', adding: 'It is impossible to squeeze a moral out of your production' - thus putting her finger on another element in the art of Emily and Charlotte which proves their break with the novel as they had known it. In this respect their art is more emancipated than George Eliot's, who was startled and repelled as well as fascinated by *Jane Eyre*, and by *Villette* ('even more wonderful', she wrote).

James's objection to George Eliot (whether true or not), that 'instead of feeling life itself, it is "views" on life that she tries to feel', could never be made against Charlotte or Emily Brontë, whose novels surely exemplify his claim that 'the perfect dependence of the "moral" sense of a work of art' is 'on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it' and that the question to ask of a novel is: 'Is it valid, is it genuine, is it sincere, the result of some direct impression or perception of life?' *Jane Eyre* because of its theme demanded a new kind of organization not based on 'narrative' and we are not put in possession of the theme by a logical exposition. Nor, though the novelist is examining the growth of moral fibre, has the book a moralistic framework. ('Nor can I write a book for its moral,' Charlotte wrote in explanation to her publisher when frankly informing him of what he would consider her limitations.) Her object was to show how the embittered little charity-child finds the way to come to terms with life and society.*

* Though *Jane Eyre* seems to have been on the stocks before *Dombey and Son* could have reached her, it would be interesting to know if she had read of *Oliver Twist*, and of Smike and Nicholas at the Yorkshire school, which she

Part of the undertaking involved examining the assumptions that the age made with regard to women, to the relations between the sexes and between the young and those in authority; in addition, conventions of social life and accepted religious attitudes come in for radical scrutiny. A 'good' man like the Rev. Mr Brocklehurst is revealed as a hateful object, and a 'noble' character like St John Rivers is shown to be a terrifying egotist in disguise. The scrutiny that Emily Brontë directed at the inhabitants of Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights is often similar in its effects, and the two novels gain by comparative reading, Charlotte too having read *Wuthering Heights* first.

Jane Eyre, and its successor *Villette* (which while offering a different setting and different experiences from its predecessor is very similar in method and theme) seem to me perfectly clear and unmistakable in intention, though they have no continuity of plot and characters and do not answer the traditional requirement that a novel should entertain by telling a story. *Jane Eyre* moves from stage to stage of Jane's development, divided into four sharply distinct phases with their suggestive names: childhood at Gateshead; girlhood, which is schooling in both senses, at Lowood; adolescence at Thornfield; maturity at Marsh End, winding up with fulfilment in marriage at Ferndean. Each move leaves behind the phase and therefore the setting and characters which supplied that step in the demonstration – the novel is not an *éducation sentimentale* like *David Copperfield* but a moral-psychological investigation. A good deal of the effect of the book depends on the reader's making out associations, and the parts are not mechanically linked by a plot as in most previous fictions but organically united (as in Shakespeare) by imagery and symbolism which pervade the novel and are as much part of the narrative as the action.

One of the interesting and original features of the novel is the use made of literature – books are referred to for their symbolic meaning. No one can forget the striking opening of the book with its creation of cheerless November outdoors and a correspondingly wretched emotional climate for the unloved child within, taking refuge from a hostile world behind the curtain while consoling herself with Bewick's *British Birds*. The point of the detailed descriptions of some of

would have found congenial, and even helpful, in creating *Jane Eyre* and her sufferings. Where Charlotte Brontë is so superior to Dickens is in her creation of positives – the demonstration of the conditions for Jane's growth into full life and the possession of lasting happiness are entirely original and entirely convincing.

Bewick's text and wood-cuts will be lost unless we realize that this book provides the child with images of storm, shipwreck and disaster, Arctic desolation and Alpine heights, death and mysterious evil – images which seem to express her own bewildered sense of what life is like, since they correspond with her condition in the home of the Reeds, cruelly oppressed both physically and morally and above all suffering in her isolation from a passionate sense of injustice. She cannot, of course, explain this, but concludes: 'With Bewick on my knees, I was then happy: happy at least in my way.' The other books she draws comfort from in Gateshead are *Gulliver's Travels* – which she believed, as children do, to be factual and which seemed to show her that there are other kinds of life in the world that she could perhaps escape to – and the *Arabian Nights*, which introduces her to the idea of magic, that magic powers can transform the conditions of life. These three books represent the particular aspects of the life of the imagination that she goes to books for, so that when, at Lowood, Helen Burns offers her Dr Johnson's *Rasselas*, she looks it over and finding as she says no magic or fantasy or poetic imagery in it, rejects it. But *Rasselas* is symbolic of the kind of wisdom, a disenchanting stoicism and the acceptance of reality, which Helen Burns has to teach her. Two years after *Jane Eyre* was published came *Copperfield*, with the child David taking refuge from the miseries brought into his home by a stepfather in picaresque novels, where he could play at being 'a child's Tom Jones' and assume the dignity of a Smollet naval captain: 'They kept alive my fancy, and my hope of something beyond that place and time – they, and the Arabian Nights, and the Tales of the Genii.' Dickens's method in his novels until his last period seems curiously old-fashioned, and his tempo slack, compared with *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, which provide a new standard of achievement in fiction.

Jane's mind at the opening is truly what Arnold wrongly thought the mind of the author of *Villette* must be, one 'containing nothing but hunger, rebellion and rage'. Arnold prophesied that this would be 'fatal to her in the long run'. That it is not so to Jane (as it was to be to Dickens's Miss Wade) is because the child is capable of judging her experiences by a fine instinct for what makes for her own psychic health and happiness, thus making her able to face life more successfully after each experience. Each, therefore, initiates a new phase of being for her, because she has learnt something new about the possibilities of living and so can make a further demand on life. Her first

discovery is that moral courage can make a stand against moral oppression and gives one power. Her efforts conquer the nursery and win over Bessie the nursemaid, who alone at Gateshead stands, like Nelly Dean at Wuthering Heights, for the normal unrefined tradition of human kindness,* expressed here chiefly in singing folk-songs and touching ballads and telling the children folk-lore – then ‘the afternoon lapsed in peace and harmony’. Upon this Jane gains a psychological victory over the gorgon aunt; we notice the truth of the pathetic precariousness of the child’s enjoyment of her triumph and sense of power – an insight new in English fiction. This first stage of emancipation from the thralldom of the family and custom ends with the introduction of Mr Brocklehurst, the ‘black marble clergyman’ who brings the bogy of hell-fire religion and a new oppression, the Evangelical attitude to life, into the child’s world (a long while before Arthur Clennam bore his witness to it as the enemy). When Jane arrives at his school as an outlaw from Gateshead, ‘Rain, wind and darkness filled the air’, and as she enters, the door in the wall is locked behind her, for nine years more.

Jane has now to face the same conditions (the injustice and self-righteous callousness that characterized life in Charlotte Brontë’s England) and start all over again in a larger unit, a working community, specifically religious in that it is governed by the doctrines of Mr Brocklehurst, whose creed she loathes and instinctively disbelieves. There are, however, two other representatives of religion whose influence is attractive to her because they are kind and morally impressive. The first is Helen Burns, who exemplifies an ideal of Christian practice (Mr Brocklehurst’s practice is a mockery of the ideal): turning the other cheek, forgiving one’s enemies (both are new and unacceptable ideas to Jane) and enduring meekly in this world in the confidence of a glorious rebirth in Heaven – which involves, Jane notes, despising the life here below. Helen is seen absorbed in *Rasselas* on the first two occasions Jane tries to get into touch with her; the argument of that impressive book is of course that only a resigned stoicism will enable us to bear up against the conditions of life. This Jane feels is inadequate to her expectations and she rejects *Rasselas* (the symbolism is plain) and Helen’s example, for ‘in the tranquillity she imparted there was an alloy of inexpressible sadness’. Helen is doomed to early death, and her religious philosophy is

* Bessie’s name ‘Leaven’ is clearly to convey that she is the ‘little leaven that leaveneth the whole’.

attuned to the recognition – we may deduce that the writer means to imply that such a religion is a death-willing one, for it turns away from and rejects life. Jane loves and admires Helen but she cannot be like her. She is too hungry for life. However, she is obliged to recognize the superiority of Helen's religion as strategy in the psychological warfare that, at Gateshead, she had found life must be.

The second influence is the significantly named Miss Temple, who embodies the best contemporary tradition of the lady. She is a pious and gentle soul in whom religion and love are restrained by training, custom, and social habit: she represents that ideal of the women novelists, the 'well-regulated mind'. Jane accepts Miss Temple's authority completely, for Miss Temple provides love and cherishing, food for body and mind. But when Miss Temple leaves the school her influence vanishes overnight, leaving Jane a prey to her dissatisfactions and her hunger. The account of how her repressed nature reasserts itself and how she seems to grow in stature and humanity as she throws off Miss Temple's yoke is striking psychologically and rendered in magnificent prose (Chapter 9). Jane thirsts for 'real knowledge of life'; longing to 'surmount the blue peaks' on the horizon, she finds 'all within their boundary of rock and heath seemed prison-ground, exile limits'. Like Christian in *Doubling Castle* she suddenly realizes that it lies with herself to escape into freedom. That the tranquillity of Jane's second Lowood self was merely superficial is proved when we see the paintings she shows Mr Rochester, at which she had worked all through the vacations at Lowood – 'To paint them,' she says, 'was to enjoy one of the keenest pleasures I have ever known.' These pictures of her inner life turn out to be versions of the old images from *Bewick*: the Polar regions, the cruel sea, shipwreck, isolation, death, and despair.*

Though as a governess at Thornfield Jane acquires at once a function, dignity, and affection, and something like a home, she is still dissatisfied. Looking through the gates and gazing from the roof of Thornfield she is restless for a fuller life than tending someone else's child: 'I believed in the existence of other and more vivid kinds of goodness.' Mr Rochester appears, in mid-winter, in thrilling circumstances to them both, to complete Jane's initiation into the existence of 'more vivid kinds of goodness', which are the experiences of love and marriage. The scene of the meeting (as strangers ignorant of each

* We know that originally Charlotte thought of Art as her likely career, until she ruined her eyes by copying engravings and had to confine herself to writing.