



Four Letters: Deconstructing the Brontë-Héger Myth

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ABSTRACT

Out of many, only four Brontë-Héger letters have survived the test of time, all of them one-sided. Since these unfortunate gaps cannot possibly fill themselves, speculation has largely taken over the scholarship surrounding this complex relationship. Claire Harman, Sally Shuttleworth, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Margaret Smith are only a few exceptional scholars who have explored the contemporary obsession with this relationship. The intertextual discourse largely focuses on Charlotte Brontë as a hopeless romantic, an infatuated mentee struck down by first love—the judgment sometimes extending so far as to deem her a Victorian madwoman.

In this essay, however, I will be arguing that the intellectual relationship between Héger and Brontë is far more important to analyze than the romantic, as it gives us a justifiable reason to delve into the intimate contents of the letters. For a purpose other than gratifying curiosity regarding Brontë's private life, perusing the letters offers a fresh perspective to assess her fictional works. In a sense, her novels are given new life through the act of reimagining how and why she made certain literary decisions. What catalyzed Jane Eyre? In this case, who?

Constantin Héger directly influenced Brontë's empowerment as a female novelist, her urgency to improve, and dedication to the art of storytelling. "Her essays bid for his professional attention, a point too frequently missed by critics who treat her attachment to Héger as a romance rather than a writer's connection," mirrors Sue Lonoff in her study of Brontë's Belgian *devoir* essays (Lonoff 391). As a firm believer that personal writings often hold invaluable resources to enable the reader to distinguish the artist from their art, I intend to explore this further.

In this paper, I examine the letters chronologically, approaching them with much more than merely romance in mind, but the sentiments of a woman who was once taken seriously by an intellectual counterpart, embittered by the sudden deprivation of it.

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INTRODUCTION

“Farewell, my dear Master— may God protect you with special care and crown you with peculiar blessings,” a devastated Charlotte Brontë penned in 1845, concluding her last surviving letter to Constantin Héger, former teacher in Brussels and the unattainable object of her all-consuming passion (*Selected Letters*, 69). Three years prior, Charlotte and Emily Brontë had departed their secluded family parsonage in Haworth for the life-changing opportunity to teach English and music in Belgium, in exchange for board and tuition. Charlotte took on the complicated responsibility of organizing the logistics of their voyage. She was the sister “who felt the longing for ‘wings’— ‘such an urgent thirst to see— to know— to learn’” (Lonoff 388). Her willingness to expand as a woman writer paid off: she was the one whose writing, then and later, would be most traceably transformed by her Belgian experience.

Perhaps no one could have predicted that she would fall hopelessly for Héger, founder of the Pensionnat Héger, personal writing tutor, and— to her ceaseless despair— a happily married man with children. In May 1842, upon arriving to Brussels, she describes her first impressions of him to lifelong friend Ellen Nussey: “he is a professor of Rhetoric a man of power as to mind but very choleric and irritable in temperament— a little, black, ugly being with a face that varies in expression, sometimes he borrows the lineaments of an insane Tom-cat...” (*Selected Letters*, 36). But the man, despite his unfavorable aspects portrayed in her depictions, introduces Brontë to a world of intellectual stimulation. Challenging her to explore genres, experiment with the French language, and extricate her own unique literary voice, Héger provided the young woman with newfound artistic hope. No wonder, after departing Brussels, she became inconsolable enough to profess her innermost feelings on paper, however socially inappropriate, to a man who could not possibly reciprocate her affections.

Out of many, only four Brontë-Héger letters have survived the test of time, all of them one-sided. Since these unfortunate gaps cannot possibly fill themselves, speculation has largely taken over the scholarship surrounding this complex relationship. Claire Harman, Sally Shuttleworth, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Margaret Smith are only a few exceptional scholars who have explored the contemporary obsession with this relationship. The intertextual discourse largely focuses on Charlotte Brontë as a hopeless romantic, an infatuated mentee struck down by first love—the judgment sometimes extending so far as to deem her a Victorian madwoman.

In this essay, however, I will be arguing that the *intellectual* relationship between Héger and Brontë is far more important to analyze than the romantic, as it gives us a justifiable reason to delve into the intimate contents

of the letters. For a purpose other than gratifying curiosity regarding Brontë’s private life, perusing the letters offers a fresh perspective to assess her fictional works. In a sense, her novels are given new life through the act of reimagining *how* and *why* she made certain literary decisions. What catalyzed *Jane Eyre*? In this case, *who*?

Constantin Héger directly influenced Brontë’s empowerment as a female novelist, her urgency to improve, and dedication to the art of storytelling. “Her essays bid for his professional attention, a point too frequently missed by critics who treat her attachment to Héger as a romance rather than a writer’s connection,” mirrors Sue Lonoff in her study of Brontë’s Belgian essays (French *devoirs*) (Lonoff 391). As a firm believer that personal writings often hold invaluable resources to enable the reader to distinguish the artist from their art, I intend to explore this further.

A LEGACY OF LETTERS

Deborah Lutz’s “Fugitive Letters” chapter of *The Brontë Cabinet* paints a gorgeous image of Victorian letter writing. “The deliciousness of a letter had to do, in part, with its ability to hold a spiritual or physical portion of the self... her letters to Héger feel this way— as if she has sacrificed some part of herself to write them, has posted a pound of flesh” (Lutz 127, 148). Removed from Brussels, letter writing was the only way to remain in contact with her creative influence, since Madame Héger had grown in suspicion of her infatuated rival. Besotted with Héger, it is only natural that Charlotte poured *everything* she possibly had— every meager ounce of frustration, devotion, and uncontrollable ardor—into the small margins of those papers.

Discovery of these writings led to deep judgment of Charlotte’s reputation. When assembling Brontë’s biography, close friend Elizabeth Gaskell undertook the writing of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* with a specific purpose in mind: to defend Charlotte from further public condemnation (Easson 1). “I appeal to that larger and more solemn public,” she writes, “who know how to look with tender humility at faults and errors; how to admire generously extraordinary genius, and how to reverence with warm, full hearts all noble virtue” (Gaskell 454). It is the biographer’s job to strategically cherry-pick what to include in a life story, and after reading *Villette*—Brontë’s 1853 novel portraying an imaginary student-professor romance— and realizing how derivative of Brontë’s real life it was, Gaskell’s initial impulse was to conceal. This would protect not only Charlotte’s posthumous reputation, but also the reputations of Monsieur and Madame Héger. Both she transformed into characters, instigating a moral dilemma in the mind of the biographer (Easson 2).

Gaskell's inclination to whitewash extended further than just Charlotte's published novels to include her one-way declarations of love. The four letters were written over the span of two years, adhering to Héger's rule that she be allowed only two correspondences per year, every six months. It is hard for readers not to feel overwhelmed by the confidentiality of the correspondences. "She clearly wrote them in desperation and intended them for his eyes alone," asserts Claire Harman in a British Library article ("An Unrequited Love?"). Gaskell's *The Life* dissects the letters and highlights Brontë's "constant battle with personal desire, in opposition to the apparently natural selflessness expected of 'proper' women, and the corporal consequences that appear to accompany such psychological struggle," confirms Meghan Hathaway in a review of the biography (Hathaway 673). Reading the letters in chronological order, they become increasingly frantic, impassioned, and anguished. As Brontë figuratively tears herself apart out of emotional anguish, Héger literally tears up her letters, which were fished out of the garbage (later) by Madame, who "stitched them together for preservation purposes"—likely in case something incriminating were to happen (Popova).

Four decades after Brontë's passing, the recovered letters were shown to Frederika MacDonald, also a former pupil, by Héger's daughter. Just as Elizabeth Gaskell did, MacDonald leaned toward secrecy and whitewashing, concerned about severe judgment and misinterpretation: "fearing that the public wouldn't understand that the now-famous novelist's feelings for her former tutor weren't an 'ordinary improper affection' but 'a consuming sentiment burning down self-respect and self-restraint.'" (Popova). After reading the letters herself, however, MacDonald found that her initial perceptions of Brontë as "wholesome Victorian goddess of feminine domestic duty" had changed into someone bold, brash, and stunningly unapologetic (Popova). Such a transformation is worthy of critical analysis, posing questions as to *why* the letters seem to paint more detailed portraits of Charlotte's character, and *how* they go about doing so.

The British Library's digital collections archive contains scanned copies of Brontë's letters, though Margaret Smith's *Selected Letters of Charlotte Brontë* include translated English versions. Observing the manuscripts with keen attention-to-detail, there is evidence that the letters, later pieced together by Madame Héger for preservation purposes, were heavily refolded, stained, and tampered with. According to Claire Harman, one of Charlotte's letters contains penciled-in addresses of local tradesmen in Héger's area. "Héger [must have] used Charlotte Brontë's heartrending *cri de coeur* as a piece of scrap paper," she concludes ("An Unrequited Love?"). No matter the agonizing depth of her expressions, and no matter how miserable she became, there was never a chance for a Brontë-Héger

union. His long silences—one letter every six months—spoke for themselves, causing Brontë to withdraw further into herself, completely deprived of the voice that once guided her to write loudly and well.

In the next section, I will endeavor to examine the letters chronologically, approaching them with much more than merely romance in mind, but the sentiments of a woman who was once taken seriously by an intellectual counterpart, embittered by the sudden deprivation of him.

CLOSE READING: TO CONSTANTIN HÉGER, 24 JULY [1844]

July 24, 1844 marks the first of Brontë's four remaining letters. She begins with a direct vindication: "I am well aware that it is not my turn to write to you" (*Selected Letters*, 50). Despite these circumstances, Brontë immediately seizes the opportunity to contact Héger through a traveling acquaintance, making it clear that she sees the correspondence as a necessity—one worthy of breaking Héger's biannual rule. Here, she displays quite an admirable streak of stubbornness.

All things considered, the letter is exceptionally polite. She first expresses concern for the state of his physical health, vividly imagining the exhaustion of managing an educational institution. "I would rather remain six months without hearing from you than add an atom to the burden," she writes, with a tone of tangible sincerity (*Selected Letters*, 51). She vows complete forgiveness for his silence, responding to his lack of response with acceptance that feels authentic. Suddenly, she interrupts herself with a strange promise: "Ah Monsieur! I once wrote you a letter which was hardly rational, because sadness was wringing my heart, but I shall do so no more" (*Selected Letters*, 51). Since no earlier letters still exist prior to this one, there is no context to this statement. We can infer, however, that Charlotte had previously written a more devastating letter before this one was sent.

My main argument takes its shape in the next few segments of this letter. Brontë transitions into a discussion of language: her fears of forgetting the French she learned with Héger, her ceaseless dedication to practicing it daily, and her concern for reuniting with him having lost her spoken proficiency. "When I pronounce the French words I seem to be chatting with you," she muses, intermingling the notions of language and personhood (*Selected Letters*, #). Here, she expresses her view of French as being an extension of Héger himself. This amalgamation is why I, along with other scholars, view the Brontë-Héger relationship as one defined not by carnal lust, but a desire for *cerebral* connection.

Brontë then discusses how, despite being offered a paid position as principal teacher in Manchester, she must stay with her father in Haworth and therefore must reject it. Industrious as ever, she tells Héger about possibly opening a school with her sisters at the family parsonage. “I fear nothing so much as idleness— lack of employment— inertia—lethargy of the faculties— when the body is idle, the spirit suffers cruelly,” Brontë writes (*Selected Letters*, 52). Fully aware that taking on the responsibility of opening a boarding school at the parsonage may very well fail, she accepts the challenge as a form of distraction— a method of staying occupied as to avoid falling into the depths of rumination. It is interesting to note that, in order to escape the misery of emotional and intellectual unfulfillment, Brontë still relies on the exercise of her mental faculties. She remains devoted to literature and instruction as conduits for liberation. If her eyesight were not a barrier, she professes: “I would write a book and I would dedicate it to my literature master—to the only master I have ever had— to you Monsieur” (*Selected Letters*, 52).

Her language, here, is intriguing. She refers to Héger as her master, establishing a sense of hierarchy and power typical between men and women of varying class in the Victorian age. Literally, Héger has power over her in society. Yet, in these letters, she also assigns him personal power on the basis of artistic influence. The scholarly grasp he has on Brontë— commanding her creative input and, consequently, output—is immeasurable. However, Brontë expands: “A literary career is closed to me— only that of teaching is open to me— it does not offer the same attractions— never mind, I shall enter upon it...” (*Selected Letters*, 52). It is clear that she idealizes becoming a successful writer, although barriers exist. This imaginary book is a hypothetical manifestation of her desire to be fruitful with her creative mind, and possibly, to dedicate that fruit to her greatest teacher.

The letter closes with Brontë inquiring about Héger’s five children and their mother, a swift way of tying up her sentimental ramblings politely and sincerely. She signs, “Your grateful pupil,” emphasizing her status as one of his devoted students (*Selected Letters*, 52). Perhaps she could have finished with a much more personal proclamation, but instead, she keeps it simple: honest gratitude.

Brontë then emphasizes that she wishes for a letter only if it is sincere and not out of pity. “Do as you please, Monsieur,” Brontë instructs, afraid of being a burden to him (*Selected Letters*, 52). What she wants is equal reciprocation, not obligation. She wants to be seen, for Héger to engage with her at the same level as he did in Brussels. She confirms this with the following: “Oh it is certain that I shall see you again one day—it really has to be—for as soon as I have earned enough money to go to

Brussels I shall go—and I shall see you again if it is only for a moment” (*Selected Letters*, 52). She views reuniting with him as a necessity, even if for a fleeting instance. Perhaps it invigorates her to envision Héger viewing her with the same expository eye: not just reading her work, but *finding* her in it.

CLOSE READING: TO CONSTANTIN HÉGER, 24 OCTOBER [1844]

This second letter, written exactly three months later despite Madame Heger’s six-month rule, begins with a similar beginning as the former: delivery by fortuitous chance through an acquaintance. “I am afraid of boring you,” she begins, explaining why her letter will be shorter than the last (*Selected Letters*, 55). This worry may have stemmed from what she reveals next: “For all those six months I have been expecting a letter from you, Monsieur—six months of waiting—That is a very long time indeed! Nevertheless I am not complaining...” (*Selected Letters*, 55). Ironically, though, there is more than a hint of complaint underneath her words. It is clear that she has grown much more frustrated at his silence, expressing a desire to receive even the shortest of replies. “However short the letter may be I shall be satisfied with it— only do not forget to tell me how you are,” she entreats (*Selected Letters*, 55). In the last letter, she did not ask for a response, but this time, she does— though her expectations have not been met.

Her familial accounts are much shorter in this letter, as she only briefly mentions her father’s condition, sisters’ involvement in caretaking, and brother’s decline in a singular sentence. Since he did not reply to her previous documentations of family life and hardships, she does not bother with expressing them this time.

“I am counting on soon having news of you— this thought delights me for the remembrance of your kindness will never fade from my memory and so long as this remembrance endures, the respect it has inspired in me will endure also,” Brontë states (*Selected Letters*, 56). What I find most compelling about this ending is how removed it is from overly affectionate, romantic language. Instead, she expresses her unfeigned desire to devote herself *mentally* to him, in response to his past benevolence toward her. She expresses nothing that could possibly offend Madame, only confessing that she would like to know the state of Héger’s health and wellbeing, to be updated on his life. She emphasizes his kindness rather than anything of amorous nature, which leads me to believe that the loss of his guidance was more devastating than losing an impossible romantic match.

Brontë signs the letter “Your very devoted pupil,” mirroring her first letter (*Selected Letters*, 56). Maintaining the teacher-pupil relationship, she replaces “grateful” with “devoted,” adding a level of passion that is not necessarily romantic, but a statement of loyalty. In what appears to be a postscript, she adds: “I have just had bound all the books that you gave me when I was still in Brussels” (*Selected Letters*, 56). It is my conviction that this is her attempt to bring him closer, to make him real, to unite their minds without his acquiescence. There is something hauntingly beautiful about her dedication to preserving literature in order to preserve the mere fibers of a relationship Héger refuses to acknowledge. It parallels a recurring theme in *Jane Eyre*: the power of the written word to manifest, tether, and abide.

CLOSE READING: TO CONSTANTIN HÉGER, 8 JANUARY 1845

Unlike the two letters we just examined, this one begins with a refreshing twist: an introductory narrative. Again, Brontë breaches the six-month directive. Brontë begins immediately with a detailed catalogue of real-life events: “Mr. Taylor returned, I asked him if he had a letter for me— ‘No, nothing.’ ‘Patience’— I say— ‘His sister will be coming soon’— Miss Taylor returned ‘I have nothing for you from M. Héger’ she says ‘neither letter nor message’” (*Selected Letters*, 58). By doing this, she inserts Héger directly into the reality of a moment, as if to showcase how immensely painful it was to be let down yet again, unfulfilled and deemed, through her own eyes, as unworthy.

Though she has given her best effort to not succumb to this luckless event, she comes to a realization: “But when one does not complain, and when one wants to master oneself with a tyrant’s grip— one’s faculties rise in revolt— and one pays for outward calm by an almost unbearable inner struggle” (*Selected Letters*, 58). We can sense that Brontë has had enough. She has implored him for nothing but scraps of his attention, for even the most inconsequential of correspondences, to no avail. Hereafter, all hell breaks loose; her anger becomes unhinged, as she writes:

I know that you will lose patience with me when you read this letter—You will say that I am over-excited—that I have black thoughts etc. So be it Monsieur—I do not seek to justify myself, I submit to all kinds of reproaches—all I know—is that I cannot—that I will not resign myself to the total loss of my master’s friendship—I would rather undergo the greatest bodily pains than have my heart constantly lacerated by searing regrets. If my master

withdraws his friendship from me entirely, I shall be absolutely without hope—if he gives me a little friendship—a very little—I shall be content—happy, I would have a motive for living—for working. (*Selected Letters*, 58)

The language she uses is irrefutably hopeless. Tortured by self-deprecating notions of worthlessness, Brontë finally releases her long-endured suffering in a manner that resembles an internal monologue— a stream of consciousness that has exceeded the limits of rational control.

In the next section, Brontë conveys the depths of her misery. She writes, “You showed a little interest in me in days gone by when I was your pupil in Brussels— and I cling to the preservation of this little interest— I cling to it as I would cling on to life” (*Selected Letters*, 58). Nowhere does she conflate this “interest” with sexual or romantic attraction; instead, Brontë declares that, if Héger were to resurrect the scholarly interest he took in her back at the Pensionnat, then she would be satisfied enough to power through her nadir. She has not yet abandoned all hope but appears to be rapidly approaching it— clinging tightly to the threads.

She concludes the letter with her thoughts on the uncertainty of silence, wishing that Héger would outwardly renounce her devotion rather than perpetuating her seemingly endless wait. As human beings, it is natural to yearn for truth in totality, to be faced with a tragic guarantee than perpetual questioning, and Brontë displays this. She writes, “One suffers in silence so long as one has the strength and when that strength fails one speaks without measuring one’s words too much” (*Selected Letters*, 59). I imagine, with great empathy, that Brontë already knew that she had spoken too much, carried on a whim by her anxious spirits, and that she found it too tiresome to take anything back. This mimics the iconic scene in *Jane Eyre* when the heroine proclaims her experiences of injustice to her aunt: “How dare I, Mrs. Reed? How dare I? Because it is the truth” (*Jane Eyre*, 35).

Unlike the other letters, the third one ends with a kind, yet impersonal, closing remark. She does not sign off as “Your devoted pupil” or “Your grateful pupil,” opting instead for a simple “C B”— cold initials (*Selected Letters*, 59). Why is that? I imagine it as a combination of sorrow, quiet fury, and jadedness: feelings surpassing the need for elaboration.

CLOSE READING: TO CONSTANTIN HÉGER, 18 NOVEMBER 1845

We arrive at the final letter, where Brontë begins with relief: “I can write to you again without breaking my promise”

(*Selected Letters*, 67). This time, her letter is not transported by spur-of-the-moment chance; enough time has passed between correspondences according to Héger's rules.

"Imagine for a moment," she writes, "that one of your children is separated from you by a distance of 160 leagues, and that you have to let six months go by without writing to him, without receiving news of him," placing Héger into a hypothetical situation and forcing him to consider her feelings of abandonment (*Selected Letters*, 67). Neglected and deeply hurt, Brontë tells Héger that, despite her efforts to forget him, doing so is impossible. As if her last letter could not have been more intensely heartbreaking, this one takes it to a different level, as she proclaims: "When one has suffered this kind of anxiety for one or two years, one is ready to do anything to regain peace of mind" (*Selected Letters*, 67). Brontë is willing to push boundaries for him, remaining steadfast in pursuing pipe dreams. While it is easy to remark that she should just give up altogether, I believe that to do so would be to dismiss the profundity of her devotion— not just to Héger, but to cultivating her authorial voice. "Why cannot I have for you exactly as much friendship as you have for me— neither more nor less?" (*Selected Letters*, 67). Charlotte Brontë may not actually be focused on the existence of unfulfilled romance, but on the possibility of losing an indescribable bond of mentorship.

After updating Héger on her father's health, describing his loss of sight and her new responsibilities to read and write for him, Brontë begs Héger for a favor: "Monsieur, I have a favour to ask you: when you reply to this letter, talk to me a little about yourself—not about me... In a word, tell me what you will, my master, but tell me something" (*Selected Letters*, 68). She inquires into the personal details of his life: his children, travels, career, and experiences as a father and teacher. Here, the despair is palpable. Charlotte is irrefutably begging— not for Héger's love in return, but for anything at all: stories that do not concern her, updates about mundane affairs, any sort of fallen crumb she can collect from his table, extending the metaphor even further. Now, she demands the following from him:

Your last letter has sustained me—has nourished me for six months—now I need another and you will give it me—not because you have any friendship for me—you cannot have much—but because you have a compassionate soul and because you would not condemn anyone to undergo long suffering in order to spare yourself a few moments of tedium. To forbid me to write to you ,to refuse to reply to me—that will be to tear from me the only joy I have on earth—to deprive me of my last remaining privilege—a privilege which I will never consent to renounce voluntarily. (*Selected Letters*, 68)

If Brontë were to receive a letter, it would practically be equivalent to receiving nourishment of the body and soul—a communion. There is a certain sensuousness to it, but one that reads in a manner less sexual and more spiritual: a cure for wasting. She describes her "overwhelming misery" as potent enough to ruin her appetite, ability to sleep, and, therefore, cause her to resort to the following lament: "I pine away" (*Selected Letters*, 68). Closing her confessions, she does not wish Héger well this time; instead, she simply signs her name. This is an act of extinct hope.

The contents of the letters above, and to this point, were all written in French. However, in the final section, Brontë suddenly shifts to English, her mother tongue. The result is a return to the discussion of literature and love as being in a marriage of concepts:

You will perceive by the defects in this letter that I am forgetting the French language—yet I read all the French books I can get ,and learn daily a portion by heart—but I have never heard French spoken but once since I left Brussels—and then it sounded like music in my ears—every word was most precious to me because it reminded me of you—I love French for your sake with all my heart and soul. (*Selected Letters*, 68–69)

We arrive at the final, documented farewell, and it is one fitting for the discussion of the Brontë-Héger relationship. Only through language and *because* of language is she able to find something of value in Héger's teaching, and later, his inimitable influence on her writing. Brontë's concern with losing her proficiency in French is linked to her concern over losing him for good, of never receiving words of affirmation that her endless devotion ever mattered to him again.

EARLY ROOTS

A fascinating article by Sue Lonoff on Charlotte Brontë's Belgian essays analyzes her fixation on the mentor-lover relationship from early childhood through a psychoanalytic lens. Similarly, Alexandra Mullen traces similar ideas within Brontë's juvenilia— works from childhood— serving a younger version of Charlotte "obsessively [rehearsing] violent feelings, returning over and over to certain characteristics, themes, and patterns"— patterns such as male domination, warring romances, and "proud, independent women who nonetheless abase themselves for the masterful men" (Mullen 438). Scholar Patricia Menon proposes an argument in the same vein: Brontë's themes, such as grief, social rules, family, independence, and love, were already innate in her girlhood writing, suggesting that

Héger was only “a disaster waiting to happen, a man to whom she was predisposed to respond by long-ingrained patterns of fantasy” (Menon 85).

In Héger, she found the response to her call. Both sympathetic and demanding, he possessed a masculine spirit that mirrored Brontë’s childhood fantasies of heroism. He had fought on the Brussels barricades in 1830 and possessed a commanding, militaristic spirit, likely appealing to Charlotte’s tastes as an embodiment of her early fictional characters. Charlotte had been searching for “an agency beyond the self that would free her from the confines of a Yorkshire education and deliver her emotionally from Angria” (Lonoff 389). Under Héger’s instruction, she dedicated herself to a new genre—his genre—influenced largely by the French Romantics. Working one-on-one with him, she finally received the intellectual guidance she longed for, finding a voice less reliant on her lifelong, imaginary obsessions. Héger’s mentorship contributed to the maturation of Brontë’s creative work.

Menon describes the intensity of Brontë’s creative process under Héger’s instruction as follows: “Text and margin: the intimacy of their words lying together, the erotic charge of striking a spark in another’s receptive mind— for Charlotte in her late twenties, who longed for a marriage of true minds and who was also (in Harman’s words) ‘love-starved and sensual’” (Mullen 440). Brontë would write, and Héger would provide insight. I do not claim that Brontë did not feel sexual or romantic attraction to Héger, because there is plenty of evidence that she did: in her novels, characters, and letters (Holland). However, as Menon claims, “even the forbidden nature of the attraction, however humiliating or painful she felt it, was characteristic of the form of love to which she had so long retreated in fantasy” (Menon 86). The dynamic was present from the beginning; Héger just made it real.

CONNECTION TO LITERARY WORKS

“The byplay between art and life is too intermeshed,” claims Claire Harman in an article analyzing Brontë’s unrequited love and its resemblance to her novels (“I Pine Away”). Sally Shuttleworth, in her book *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, argues against sentimental readings that have largely defined Brontë as a purely romantic writer. Instead, Shuttleworth “[suggests] she should be celebrated rather for her ability to trace through the internal psychological dynamics of Victorian competitive individualism” (Shuttleworth 245). She is not alone in this analysis. While English literature critic George Henry Lewes claims that the lives of Jane Eyre and Charlotte Brontë are practically interchangeable— “not, perhaps, in the naked facts and circumstances, but in the actual suffering and experience” (Mullen 435)— Harman

contests this, suggesting within her biography *Charlotte Brontë: A Fiery Heart*, that Brontë was more driven by suppressed rage than romance. (*A Fiery Heart*, 12).

Brontë must have felt anger, Harman suggests, not only at her inability to be with Héger, but more so at “the directionless waste of ‘her strong feelings,’ ‘her intellectual passions,’ and ‘her own spiritual vitality and unfettered imagination’” once he ceased to correspond with her (*A Fiery Heart*, 13). He is widely acknowledged as being a real-life foil to Rochester, but more than that, Charlotte’s validation that language, literature, and intellect could take on a human form. Her brief time at Brussels changed her emotional landscape into something unrecognizable, and when it disappeared, so did the ease of invention that came naturally to her in that environment (Holland).

PERSONAL AND LITERARY EMPOWERMENT

In the Pensionnat, Héger “did more than repair-work on her phrasing; he would add and replace words to elucidate ideas and burnish an image or analogy... He urged her, as well, to acquire control, to know when to rein in or run free (Lonoff 394). Recognizing Brontë’s talents, he offered criticism and suggestions that pushed her to improve, empowering her to chase perfection rather than become complacent. His advice, according to Alexandra Mullen in her article “Charlotte Brontë: Insurrection and Resurrection,” was described as “practical ... but lofty in spirit”— offering much to consider and expand upon (Mullen 439).

At the end of an essay called ‘Le Nid’ (‘The Nest’), which Brontë wrote for him in April 1842, Héger penned the following advice, showing deep engagement:

What importance should be given to details, in developing a subject? – Remorselessly sacrifice everything that does not contribute to clarity, verisimilitude, and effect. Accentuate everything that sets the main idea in relief, so that the impression be colourful, picturesque. It’s sufficient that the rest be in its proper place, but in half-tone. That is what gives to style, as to painting, unity, perspective, and effect. Read Harmony XIV of Lamartine, The Infinite: we will analyse it together, from the point of view of the details. (*A Fiery Heart*, 184)

In another Belgian essay, Brontë writes, “the man of genius produces, without labor”— to which Héger immediately objects (Lonoff 395). Though he may agree with her assertion that an intellectual human being is equal to a prolific creator, he does not agree that this happens

without effort. It is this dialogic interaction that fuels her to reconsider her own philosophies.

Héger provided a challenging counter to her idealistic musings. Additionally, through “synthetical teaching,” or the act of reading accounts of the same person or event and making a reader trace the points of agreement and disagreement, Charlotte began to grow in confidence of her abilities: “[calling] called into play her powers of analysis, which were extraordinary, and she very soon excelled in it” (Gaskell 434).

When Héger asked Brontë to give regular English lessons on Friday afternoons to him and his brother-in-law, she was allowed to “assume authority at last, [showing] her mettle as a teacher...on terms of equality, a rare opportunity for any woman of the period” (*A Fiery Heart*, 203). No doubt did she take this encouragement as validation that she was taken seriously by him, given a chance to reverse roles with her teacher. For a young woman consumed with aspiration to become a successful writer, it is easy to imagine how electrified she must have felt in that moment.

CONCLUSION

On January 23, 1844, Charlotte wrote a letter to Ellen Nussey, stating:

I suffered much before I left Brussels—I think however long I live I shall not forget what the parting with Monsr Héger cost me—It grieved me so much to grieve him who has been so true and kind and disinterested a friend—at parting he gave me a sort of diploma certifying my abilities as a teacher—sealed with the seal of the Athenee Royal. (*Selected Letters*, 47)

She does not mention romantic attraction but emphasizes the irreplaceable value of his friendship and mentorship instead. Perhaps it was the encouragement, praise, and affirmation she pined for all along—because it came from the teacher whom she desired to emulate.

So much of who Charlotte Brontë was, aside from the voice behind *Jane Eyre*, *Villette*, *Shirley*, *The Professor*, and other miscellaneous writings, is left to imagination. Reading through the four Brontë-Héger may feel intrusive—a breach of privacy inflicted upon a person no longer able to defend themselves— but I argue that it is vital to understanding her passions.

In an 1847 letter written for G.E. Lewes, who was preparing to write a review of *Jane Eyre*, Brontë writes (in her pseudonym C Bell): “Imagination is a strong, restless faculty which claims to be heard and exercised, are we to be quite deaf to her cry and insensate to her struggles?” (Pfordresher). In her own

words, Brontë gives imagination a feminine gender, alluding to the moments in *Jane Eyre* that are not necessarily direct translations of the events in her own life, but the “‘bright pictures’” of those she longed for (Pfordresher). Constantin Héger offered her a lens to observe those bright pictures, and, even further, to believe in their merit.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The publisher is committed to transparent and bias-free research. To ensure that all publications are as open as possible all authors, reviewers and editors are required to declare any interests that could appear to compromise, conflict or influence the validity of the publication. This process is designed to reinforce the readers’ trust in the research data.

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