Charlotte Brontë to Robert Southey

[one of five essays on CB's letters on BBC radio 3]

CB is of course best remembered for *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, but she was also one of the great letter-writers in our language. My favourite of her letters was written on 16 March 1837 when she was 20 – going on 21. It's her reply to a warning from the Poet Laureate at the time, Robert Southey, that 'literature cannot be the business of a woman's life'.

Charlotte, together with her brother Branwell and younger sisters Emily and Anne, had been writing since their childhood, and addressing unknown readers was part of their fantasy life; it had shaped the miniature books – Charlotte's and Branwell's about their fantasy world called Angria – which they'd produced as children.

She first approached Southey in a letter written from the Brontë Parsonage in the village of Haworth, West Yorkshire, on 29 January 1837, a day when snow blocked the moors – perhaps keeping her indoors.

That letter has not survived, but quotations from it in Southey's reply six weeks later, on 12 March, reveal that she wrote to him in eagerness to open up to a poet she admired and to find a mentor who could be a channel to the world beyond their Parsonage.

Southey was then in his sixties. As well as poems with exotic settings, he had written a well-regarded life of Nelson; he had a public pension, and was satirised by his contemporary, Peacock, as 'Mr Feathernest'.
When CB wrote to him he'd been the Laureate for nearly a quarter of a century, since 1813, though he was far from the greatest poet of the day
if we think of Wordsworth, Shelley and the Brontës' hero, Byron. Southey is hardly read now, while Charlotte Brontë continues to be embraced by every generation – her honest, passionate voice speaks to us at once and with intense intimacy.

At the time that she ventured on a letter to Southey she was an unhappy, overworked teacher at a girls' boarding

school, Roe Head, in Yorkshire, where she had been a pupil. She took on the post in 1836 when the headmistress, Miss Wooler, offered it, because her father, the Revd Patrick Brontë, had a limited income of £200 a year. Her meagre salary relieved her father of her keep and paid for the education of her youngest sister, Anne, at Roe Head. She slept in a dormitory with her pupils; there was no privacy, and she was always on duty. If she took a walk, chattering pupils came too.
She had no vocation whatever for teaching. 'A dolt came up with a lesson. I could have vomited', she writes in one of the fragments of her Roe Head Journal. She's fuming because she so wants freedom to write, and this authorial longing, while she's beset by schoolmistress tasks, is her situation in the run-up to her letters to Southey.

Once, in the classroom, this longing overcomes her and she plunges into her Roe Head Journal with eyes shut, her words wavering across her page. She's literally shutting her eyes to her pupils as she records this scene: 'All wondering why I write with my eyes shut – staring,

gaping long in their astonishment. E. Cook on one side of me. E. Lister on the other and Miss Wooler in the background. Stupidity the atmosphere... asses the society.

What in all this is there to remind me of the divine, unseen land of thought, dim now and indefinite as the dream of a dream...'

The rebellious vehemence in the RHJ, a private and explosive release from the self- suppression expected from her as a model for her pupils, provided the fuel for her approach to Southey.

When the Brontës came together at the Parsonage for the Xmas vacation of 1836-7, their dreams and ambitions were restored; their hopes rose. Charlotte and her writing partner Branwell resolved to write to the reigning, Lakeland poets: Branwell to Wordsworth, Charlotte to Southey, and to enclose poems. They were filled with anticipation at the prospect of contact with these divinities of the imaginative life

– that same ‘unseen land of thought’ in which they had lived since childhood. Feeling the intimacy of writers and readers, they were leaping across barriers between strangers, hardly conceiving that barriers between poets could exist. Charlotte was innocently open about her ambition to be, she said, ‘FOREVER KNOWN’ as a writer. But their deities did not recognise appeals that exposed ambition quite so nakedly; the Brontës had no notion of playing the polite game of self-deprecation; their vaulting hopes were not boxed in the language of humility.

Wordsworth told Southey that he was ‘disgusted’ with Branwell’s letter, and did not reply. Southey responded to Charlotte as a ‘flighty’ girl’ in need of ‘a dose of cooling admonition’, as he describes her in a letter to Caroline Bowles.

Keswick [he heads his letter] March 1837

Madam,

...Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life, and it ought not to

be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure she will have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation. To those duties you have not yet been called, and when you are you will be less eager for celebrity...

Charlotte replied with a propriety that soothed Southey, but her letter reverberates with veiled sarcasm:

IN THE EVENINGS, I CONFESS I DO THINK, BUT I NEVER TROUBLE ANYONE ELSE WITH MY THOUGHTS.
I CAREFULLY AVOID ANY APPEARANCE OF PREOCCUPATION AND ECCENTRICITY, WHICH MIGHT LEAD THOSE I LIVE AMONGST TO SUSPECT THE NATURE OF MY PURSUITS.

The verbal glide of her response to Southey was her first public performance

of a role she was to make her own: hiding undaunted creative fire under **the public mask of perfect docility**. She reassured Southey that her daily duties as a teacher did not allow ‘A MOMENT’S TIME FOR ONE DREAM OF THE IMAGINATION.’

There’s an extraordinarily switch from the uncontained candour of her initial letter to a **sophisticated ambiguity** in the evenness of ‘IN THE EVENINGS, I CONFESS, I DO THINK...’ Present-day audiences hear the tartness undetected by Southey , and never fail to laugh. It could be said that in March 1837, Charlotte forged a voice to carry beyond her age.

Her letter expands on her compliance with womanly duty: I HAVE ENDEAVOURED NOT ONLY TO OBSERVE ALL THE DUTIES A WOMAN OUGHT TO FULFIL, BUT TO FEEL DEEPLY INTERESTED IN THEM.

And here comes another apparent confession: she doesn’t always succeed in being ‘deeply interested’, FOR

SOMETIMES WHEN I'M TEACHING OR SEWING I WOULD RATHER BE READING OR WRITING; BUT I TRY TO DENY MYSELF...

Here again we can detect a covert tartness. Ostensibly, she will try to obey Southey's view that a woman should not give her time to reading or writing. It's a caricature of obedience to a prevailing notion that a woman should not presume to exercise her mind.

This is not only Southey's notion; it's an old-established view of what was fitting, if we recall how in ***Pride and Prejudice***, the insistently proper Miss Bingley ridicules Eliza Bennet for being a reader, as though for a woman to be known for reading was to be pretentious and therefore unworthy of Mr Darcy's attentions.

Crushing as Southey was, CB responds with **humour and cool control**. There is no fret in her letter; instead she appropriates Southey's grave manner and returns it to him in more polished form. She ends the letter with an assured flourish of abjection: Her tone reflects his

politeness in squashing her, as she asks him to allow her to grovel:

‘ALLOW ME’, she says.
‘ONCE MORE ALLOW ME TO THANK YOU WITH SINCERE GRATITUDE. I TRUST I SHALL NEVER MORE FEEL AMBITIOUS TO SEE MY NAME IN PRINT; IF THE WISH SHOULD RISE, I’LL LOOK AT SOUTHEY’S LETTER, AND SUPPRESS IT.’

This letter is a flawless performance open to **contradictory interpretations**. Southey was mollified by the veneer of subservience. ‘You have received admonition as considerately... as it was given,’ he replied promptly on 22 March. Yet as Charlotte Bronte distilled the feminine cant required by Southey,

she was manifesting a conspicuous literacy that took command of the forms within which women of her time must live. If she was not to communicate through the high form of poetry (though Southey, she reminds him, ‘KINDLY ALLOWS’ her to

write for her private amusement) she could still communicate through the form of the letter.

She deals her words like blades, sculpting the model of nonentity as it takes shape under the injunctions of the Laureate who reserved creativity for men alone. She mimics the accents of submission. She does not fail to observe her obedience to a righteous father. ‘I TRY TO DENY MYSELF; AND MY FATHER’S APPROBATION AMPLY REWARDED ME FOR THIS PRIVATION.’

Her first, heady letter to Southey had implied her mental release from consuming duties. She had wished for an authoritative sanction of an alternative future. She had sought a **literary father** or guide. Then, at Southey’s signal, she switched from ‘I am a poet who desires to be forever known’ to ‘I am the dutiful daughter of a clergyman.’ Sustaining these **alternative selves –** the gifted enthusiast and the girl who did not presume to think by day – she **could slide from one to the**

other with practised, almost professional facility: a play of legitimate utterance versus secret script – the secret, minute script of her Angrian booklets. Utterance is smooth, logical, and drives to a point of consensus with Southey and society at large; it reproduces polite phrases.

But writing, as a serious activity from which women are barred, throbs with an energy that deviates from the Victorian image of a lady as delicate and passionless.

She **did take seriously** Southey's warning to calm down. Like the young **Florence Nightingale**, she feared that dreaming would unfit her for life. Southey may, in fact, have advanced her withdrawal from Angria, a romantic dream-world too out of touch with the real world of her mature fiction. She wrote on his letter:

'Southey's advice to be kept forever. My twenty-first birthday. Roe Head, April 21, 1837.'

To others, including later her friend and fellow-novelist **Mrs Gaskell**, Charlotte gave out that Southey, though 'stringent', had been 'kind and admirable' and had done her 'good' in showing her the path of duty. Even to herself, at times, she played out the role of slave-to-duty, as in a poem called 'Teacher's Monologue', written shortly after her letter to Southey, on 12 May 1837:

In vain I try. I cannot sing
All feels so cold & dead...

At 21, youth's 'rejoicing ardour dies'. Life stretches out as blank 'toil'.

In practice Charlotte Bronte's **natural sense of duty** was not in question – it was not an act. It was responsible, heartfelt. She was dutiful to Papa, to Aunt Branwell who took her mother's place after she died, and to everyone with any claim on her.

Her scrupulousness in her relationships

makes her especially appealing as a person, unlike the self-absorption of many writers. And this consideration for others was deliberately propagated by Mrs Gaskell in her *Life of CB* (published in 1857, two years after CB's death). For the Victorians, this image of selfless and suffering duty was an effective antidote to CB's reputation for passion which some Victorians thought 'coarse' – unladylike.

CB did not carry out what she'd said to Southey: no one, not even the Laureate, could stop her becoming the writer she was made to be. A mere two months after her letter to Southey, in May 1837 she returned to her dream world,
and in the late 1830s she developed the fictional character she was to make her own in Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe:

the governess or school-mistress who behaves with the impeccable self-effacement that Southey had recommended, but inwardly is in ferment because her fiery nature is at odds with her snowy manner.

In the Victorian age, nice women were

quiet women. The utterance of Jane Eyre was explosive for the novel's first readers, especially **Jane's defiant eloquence** in declaring her soul to be equal to that of her employer Mr Rochester. **Emily Brontë** goes in for a similar claim in a poem where she declares the divine spirit is her 'slave' and 'comrade' as well as her 'king'. These visitations of the divine spirit are happening precisely because she does <u>not</u> practice Christian meekness. This is no coward soul; nor is CB's, appearing to hear but in practice refusing to condone what Southey had recommended: the self-silencing expected of a lady. Refusing to falsify a woman's nature, CB's art rebels against submissiveness to a gender code based on female passivity.

In writing to Southey, it hadn't occurred to her to hide her female identity; in the realm of imagination, gender hadn't seemed an issue. A vital lesson to be learnt from their exchange was the necessity to conceal her female identity. When, eventually it came to publication in 1846, she devised an ambiguous pen-name, **Currer Bell**, to throw a veil over a writing woman.

Southey was the first of a series of potential and real mentors. In her mid-twenties, in 1842-43, there was a real mentor, her French and German teacher **M.Heger** in Brussels. In one of her increasingly sophisticated devoirs for Monsieur (as she called him), she has a ringing message – actually, a repeat of her message to Southey, that she must be forever known. But this time she channels it through a male persona writing a fictional letter to a patron: ‘Milord, I have genius.’

After the publication of *Jane Eyre* in 1847, the critic, **George Henry Lewes** offered himself as a mentor, and we might contrast the young CB’s façade of submission to Southey’s gendered resistance, with her later refusal of gender bias from Lewes. He did a keen review of *Jane Eyre*, and Charlotte Brontë was glad

to correspond with him

– until they fell out over his review of her next and more overtly feminist novel *Shirley* (1849) as the flawed work of a woman. Outed as a woman, she felt betrayed.

Lewes eventually met Charlotte Brontë at Mrs Gaskell's in 1853. Afterwards he described her to **Marian Evans (later George Eliot)** as 'a little, plain, provincial, sickly-looking old maid', which is to say he did not choose to elicit, as others did, the glow of her eyes and the charm of her tartness.

Marian Evans paid no attention, for she was overcome by Brontë's new novel, *Villette*, 'a still more wonderful book than *Jane Eyre*. There is something almost preternatural in its power.' Here was a teacher, Lucy Snowe, who goes beyond what a plain, provincial woman is deemed to be: a nobody.

'Who are you?' people wonder when her gifts become manifest. Lucy's reply is telling: 'I am a rising character.'

The word 'rise' goes back to a word

Charlotte Brontë set down in a novella of 1839. *'Resurgam'*. I will rise. In a letter she drafted the following year to Hartley Coleridge, son of the poet, she speaks of 'my rising talent', but teasingly will not reveal if she is a young gentleman or a young lady. Southey's dose of cooling admonition called out Charlotte Brontë's will 'to walk invisible' as the great writer she knew herself to be.