

THE JUVENILIA OF JANE AUSTEN AND CHARLOTTE BRONTE

Edited by Frances Beer. Markham: Penguin Books Canada Limited, 1986.

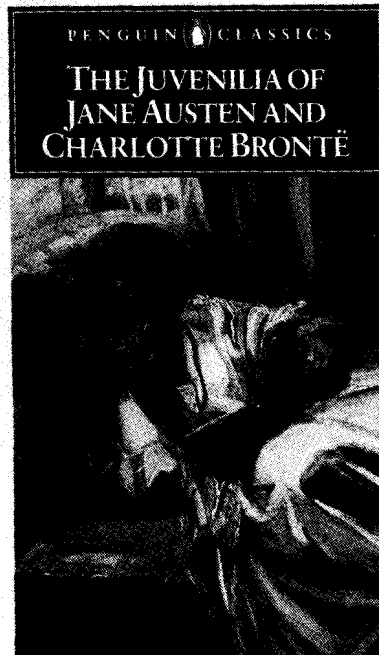
Anne Pilgrim

Two of the greatest novelists of the nineteenth century, Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë, were both daughters of clergymen, members of large families, and the precocious authors of extensive juvenilia begun around the age of twelve. No two bodies of writing could be more dissimilar, however: as Douglas Bush observed in his survey of Jane Austen's earliest works, her literary burlesques are "pieces of 'sense'... at the farthest pole from the Gothic 'sensibility' the young Brontës expressed"¹ in their childhood writings. Access to these texts has always been difficult, but this very welcome edition of the juvenilia by Frances Beer, in the Penguin Classics series, now makes it possible for the general reader to experience these works directly, to discover the significant patterns in them (as Beer's Introduction helps us to do), and perhaps most irresistibly of all, to detect the signs in each young girl of the woman who will pen such mature masterpieces as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre*.

It was Austen herself who made fair copies of her numerous youthful pieces and collected them into three notebooks loftily entitled Volume the First, Volume the Second and Volume the Third — thus carrying on in the spirit of parody which had been responsible for most if not all of the brief narratives, letters, plays and verse. These works reflect the audience for which they were intended, the sociable, intelligent circle of Austen family and friends, all great readers who were aware both of the attractions and of the absurdities of popular literature, and who were no doubt delighted to find themselves implicated in young Jane's stories, whether as the recipients of elaborate dedications or as characters: a "novel" in twelve chapters (running all of two pages) is called *The Beautiful Cassandra* in tribute to Jane's only sister, and dearest friend. Almost everything saved by Austen from the 1787-1793 period has been included in this Penguin edition, and the three pieces left out are those which bear the least on her development into a full-fledged novelist.

It would be depressing to discover merely a preternatural cleverness and

critical bent in Austen's juvenilia, and indeed the appeal of some of the earliest and briefest works is that they are entrancingly silly. My own favourite is a miniature comedy of manners, *The Visit*, in which the hostess discovers that the drawing room is short two chairs; blithely she suggests "if your ladyship will but take Sir Arthur in your lap, and Sophy my brother in hers, I believe we shall do pretty well." Released from their burdens by a call to dinner, the ladies find themselves handing about platters of liver and crow, and fried cow heel and onion. Bathetic



this may be; still one recognizes that the Austen family, who loved amateur theatricals and who had put on Sheridan's play "The Rivals" in their barn, would have relished Austen's perfect adherence to the conventions of the genre.

In a sustained narrative such as *Love and Friendship*, a novel in fifteen letters, Austen displays her budding skills as a fiction writer and as a satirist. The high epistolary tradition begun by Richardson in the 1740's had by the close of the century degenerated into the sentimental romance, filled with coincidences, discoveries, self-conscious responses to scenery, and exaggerated feeling of all kinds. Austen deftly mocks both works and characters through the words of her heroine Laura, who shares a long adventure with her bosom friend Sophia; in a moment of crisis, she records, "We fainted alternately on a sofa." In these juvenile writings, in fact, we find a whole gallery of characters exposed to ridicule;

superficial, affected, vain and materialistic, they are like pencil sketches for the morally defective characters of the later novels.

In the most mature (chronologically and artistically) of these early sketches, Austen has also created some spirited and positive characters with whom she, and the audience, may freely identify. Maria Williams, who exists in a single letter, has the wit and the courage to stand up to the rude hectoring of a Lady Greville (as Elizabeth Bennet will later defy that ultimate snob, Lady Catherine de Bourgh), and Georgiana Stanhope, in *The Three Sisters*, declares her refusal to consider marriage to a vulgar suitor with three thousand a year, "were beggary the only alternative." It is in *Catharine, or The Bower*, an unfinished novel of some 40 pages which Beer considers "the *pièce de résistance* of her juvenilia," that we find a developed and sympathetic heroine, and much more of literary value besides. Kitty is the prototypical motherless girl, under the care of an inadequate guide and guardian and thus forced to make her way into society, learning from her own well-intentioned mistakes. She is intelligent and observant, but instead of allowing her to narrate in letters Austen has at last given herself full control over the story, as a third-person narrator who can both register Kitty's emotions with immediacy and relay Kitty's observations on the failings of those she encounters in language that is — for a sixteen-year-old author — astonishingly taut and witty. Unlike most of the pieces of juvenilia, which Cassandra Austen rightly described in after days as "trifles," *Catharine* gives solid proof of Austen's essentially creative genius, and while we may certainly regret that she dropped it at such an early stage, we may console ourselves with the knowledge that she went on to write six complete novels that are even better.

For the reader, turning from Jane Austen's juvenilia to Charlotte Brontë's means a move away from the cool and rational into a superheated atmosphere of passion and intrigue; for the scholar and editor it involves the necessity of addressing daunting textual problems as well. Here are no collected fair copies, but a conglomeration of original manuscripts, notorious for their tiny size and for the microscopic handwriting which allowed Brontë to cram 20,000 words into a doll-sized volume. Many have yet to be published, or even to be transcribed into readable form, and the sheer quantity of writing poured out between 1829 and 1839 (more than that in all four of her later

novels put together) makes both selection and discussion extremely difficult.

Unlike Austen's trifles, written on her own for public amusement, Brontë's protracted stories are part of a collective fantasy marked by repression, loneliness and secrecy. After the deaths of their mother and two older sisters, the four surviving Brontë children found escape from the drear reality of the Haworth parsonage in another world altogether, that of African kingdoms; Emily and Anne invented Gondal, while Branwell and Charlotte immersed themselves in the public and private history of Angria. For Charlotte the fantasy-writing became little less than an addiction, which was continued through her days as governess and teacher until she was 23, and even then was renounced with difficulty. The Angrian saga is ultimately one story much reworked, and Beer has selected carefully from its wealth and complexity, so that we have samples of prose from almost every year in the 1829-39 decade, and at least an impression of continuity, though there is in fact a heavy emphasis on material written after 1836, when Charlotte was already twenty and outgrowing the unrestrained romanticism of her first compositions.

While Branwell sketched out the course the Angrian wars and rebellions would take, Charlotte preferred in her instalments to fill in the characters' private conflicts and study their motivations. Her

imagination was caught most of all by the central figure, the Duke of Zamorna, a Byronic hero (unlike the skeptical Austen, Brontë was clearly all too susceptible a reader) who is anguished but ever tyrannical, over male antagonists, over his wives, and over a whole string of mistresses who revel in their submission to him. As a hero-villain he is obviously antecedent to Mr. Rochester, and enthusiasts of *Jane Eyre* will find many other features in the Angrian tales familiar, such as first-person narration, the metaphors habitually drawn from landscape and weather, and the direct appeals and commands to the reader. The language here can seem ungoverned by sense: Zamorna's emotions make fire in his veins "and his wild blood boils from his heart and back again like a torrent of new-sprung lava." Equally, the domestic scenes seem ungoverned by moral scruples as the adolescent girl writes with placid acceptance of Zamorna's repeated adulteries and betrayals. Need and desire are not curbed by duty, as they had to be in Brontë's own life and at least superficially in the novels she was to submit to Victorian public scrutiny.

With an eye to symmetry in this collection, Beer has chosen as the final Angrian text an extract from the 1839 manuscript *Henry Hastings*, believing that both it and Austen's *Catharine* show their authors to be "recognizably on the threshold of their first mature work." In the final year

or two of her juvenilia, Brontë was moving in the direction of realism, of presenting the familiar: the African landscape began to exhibit moors, dales and manor-houses. More importantly, in her portrayal of Elizabeth Hastings she showed interest in a new kind of heroine, one in the Frances Henri/Jane Eyre/Lucy Snowe mold: slight and pale in appearance but strong in character and intensity of feeling; willing to rely on teaching as a means to independence, and on her own moral conscience as a guide through life. She bears a distinct resemblance to her creator, not least in her passionate loyalty to a degenerate brother (by this time Branwell, a failed artist, had added opium to his vices of idleness and drink). The move to realism is made explicit in Brontë's brief *Farewell to Angria*; wistful yet determined, she declares she will abjure mental excitement, abandon "that burning clime where we have sojourned too long," and turn instead to "a cooler region where the dawn breaks grey and sober."

With its lengthy Introduction and copious notes — including the invaluable bibliographical Note on the Text — this is a truly scholarly edition. I can think of no better introduction to, or complement to, a study of the mature novels.

¹ Douglas Bush, *Jane Austen* (New York: Collier, 1975), p. 43.

LA LETTRE AÉRIENNE

Nicole Brossard. Montréal: les éditions du remue-ménage, 1985.

Lynn Lapostolle

À l'automne 1985, les éditions du remue-ménage publiaient un recueil de douze textes de Nicole Brossard écrits entre 1975 et 1985. Dix ans de réflexion féministe, dix ans d'une démarche personnelle sans concession dans un même livre. Pour moi — ou face à moi? — il s'agit d'une écriture qui procède directement de la séduction et de l'excitation. Je ne peux m'arrêter à une lecture passive de ces textes et j'aime bien que les choses viennent me chercher comme ça. M'entraînent...

Ici, dans les limites du compte-rendu, il n'y aura pas vraiment discussion sur les propositions que l'auteure nous fait. Je voudrais surtout présenter chacun des textes de façon brève afin de donner un aperçu de la réflexion.

L'importance de la pensée et de l'oeuvre de Nicole Brossard est à mon avis indéniable. Toutefois, je sais que bon nombre de femmes trouvent son écriture difficilement accessible. *La lettre aérienne* me semble donc une production qui a au moins deux raisons d'être: elle rend accessibles des textes que nous n'aurions autrement pas sous les yeux — et sous la main — en plus d'être un outil précieux pour toutes celles qui n'arrivent pas à lire — malgré toute leur bonne volonté — la fiction et la théorie-fiction de l'auteure, prises de façon indépendante, sans autre éclairage.

Parmi les textes présentés, des textes de conférences, des textes inédits, d'autres publiés dans une revue ou une anthologie. Comme les quelques textes déjà publiés ailleurs ne sont pas faciles à trouver, l'entreprise est d'autant plus justifiée.

Il serait peut-être utile de préciser ici qu'étant donné l'éventail de textes et la destination particulière de chacun, il ne faudrait surtout pas s'attendre à lire ces textes comme on lit un texte. Plusieurs

d'entre eux ont été lus lors de conférences; il est donc normal que certains éléments se recourent. Toutefois cette situation est avantageuse dans la mesure où elle permet justement de suivre le cheminement de l'auteure, en plus de faire ressortir les éléments essentiels de son oeuvre, et d'ajouter des couleurs, voire des nuances à notre compréhension.

Le tour d'horizon que je propose me semble nécessairement, et malheureusement, réducteur. Il me semble utile parce qu'il présente tout de même certains aspects relevés. D'autre part, j'ai choisi d'y inclure le premier paragraphe de chacun des textes; comme il s'agit d'essais, ils sont généralement révélateurs quant au contenu qui suit ou, du moins, de l'esprit qui s'en dégage.

L'équipe des éditions — ou Nicole Brossard elle-même — a eu une idée originale: chacun des textes est suivi d'un extrait d'un de ses ouvrages de fiction. J'ai indiqué ici le titre de l'oeuvre dont l'extrait est tiré. Question de vous mettre l'eau à la bouche...