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A word about Charlotte Brontë and her critics

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RESUMO: Trata-se de apresentar alguns comentários sobre a influência exercida por críticos e resenhistas de escritores vivos sobre o processo de elaboração desses autores. A partir de algumas considerações sobre o papel e a função do crítico literário, são narrados alguns aspectos da relação entre a escritora vitoriana Charlotte Brontë com seus críticos e editores.

It is the mark of an educated man to look
for precision in each class of things just
so far as the nature of the subject admits.
ARISTOTLE, *Nichomachean Ethics*

The choice of an excerpt from the *Nichomachean Ethics* as the epigraph to this paper agrees with my ideas about what literary criticism can do to help us in the undertaking of a text.

I believe precision should be ceaselessly pursued, but never at the expense of the text. The real purpose of literary criticism should be to add new and enriching dimensions one's reading of a book. After being strongly impressed by the reading of a work, I usually move to criticism expecting to find a learned and friendly voice that shares my enthusiasm for that book, and that may induce me into further levels of appreciation.

A good piece of criticism should be as valuable as a good piece of literature. It widens one's reading, establishing a number of connections that might not be grasped otherwise. Usually, the better the critic, the more subtly this is done, leaving the reader frequently under the impression that he, and not the critic, has made the new discovery.

I believe a good critic should possess both, a wide academic learning and the common-sense never to approach the text he focuses as a *pretext* to display this learning. Brazilian literary critic Antonio Candido talks about the importance of treating each text according to its own nature, instead of using external procedures that might not entirely apply². Candido stresses the importance of freedom used as a *method*: to

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² Antonio Candido de Mello e Souza, *A educação pela noite*. São Paulo: Ática, 1989. pp. 129-30.

come and go, to move forwards and backwards, to walk around the problem and register each of its angles, as a working procedure. It is important for the critic to move slowly, approaching facts and ideas as an endlessly new experience to the mind.³

On the other hand, there are some characteristics related to the critical tradition that I consider detrimental to one's reading. Sometimes they are present in the work of renowned critics. The first sentence in F. R. Leavis' *The Great Tradition*, for instance, starts with the statement *The great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad.*⁴

These are certainly four great novelists, but Dr. Leavis does not add to my reading by being so dogmatic. On the contrary, he even runs the risk of raising a bias in his reader against those writers. I would call this attitude an unnecessary overexposure of the critic, and I believe it as detrimental as its extreme opposite, the lack of a personal opinion presented in the critical reasoning. In such a meticulous matter, all kinds of excess seem dangerous. Very radical attitudes, disproportionate specialized attention paid to technicalities and minutiae, can prove as harmful as the critic's lack of control regarding the different theoretic trends to be followed. If too much passion in applying a certain technique can spoil the work, intellectual coldness, on the other hand, can prove even more harmful. It does not agree with the idea of the critic as the warm enthusiastic friend who is willing to share the pleasure of a literary text with us.

So much for the preliminary considerations. They might now be followed by an instance of how much the work of a living author – Charlotte Brontë in our study – can be influenced by her contemporary critics and reviewers.

Jane Eyre is Brontë's first published novel, still it is deeply influenced by the opinion of Victorian critics. If we consider the *Juvenilia*, the author had been writing for at least twenty years when she started *Jane Eyre*. Brontë had already explored the wild pleasure of unchecked waves of emotion in the *Angrian Tales*. She had, later, realized that to achieve some sort of artistic and social recognition, the undomesticated substance of her text must be developed into a more 'civilized' and elaborate material. The arabesque plots are less perceptible in the poems. Charlotte's first attempt at publication, the *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell*, proved, on the whole, a successful experience. After months of anxious expectation the sisters got their first forceful review, from the *Critic*, stating that

...It is long since we have enjoyed a volume of such genuine poetry as this.
(...) Here we have good, wholesome, refreshing, vigorous poetry — no sickly affectations, no namby-pamby, no tedious imitations of familiar strains, but original thoughts, expressed in the true language of poetry.
(...) The triumvirate have not disdained sometimes to model after great masters, but then they are *in the manner* only, and not servile copies. We

³ Antonio Cantido, quoted in Davi Arrigucci Jr, *Movimentos de um leitor: ensaio e imaginação crítica em Antonio Candido. Folha de São Paulo*, 23.11.91.

⁴ F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980.

see, for instance, here and there traces of an admirer of Wordsworth, and perhaps of Tennyson; but for the most part the three poets are themselves alone; they have chosen subjects that have freshness in them, and their handling is after a fashion of their own.⁵

This first publishing transaction presented three problems, however. The first is that the Brontës had to pay all the money they had inherited from their aunt for the publication of the book. The second is that within one year of publication only two copies had been sold. The third is that Charlotte was not happy with the quality of her poems. In a letter to Mrs. Gaskell, written some years later, she would write, *I do not like my own share of the work, nor care that it should be read. (...) Mine are chiefly juvenile productions; the restless effervescence of a mind that would not be still.*⁶

Hoping for a better result, Charlotte then started writing her first novel, *The Professor*, aiming at putting the Angria phase behind and writing about the common life of common people. In the preface to the novel, she tells us how difficult the task has proved, *In many a crude effort destroyed almost as soon as composed I had got over any such taste as I might once have had for the ornamented and redundant in composition — and had come to prefer what is plain and homely.*⁷

As it seems, the result was that in order to avoid one extreme she fell into the other: *The Professor* was considered too dull, and was refused by six consecutive publishing houses. It was only when the manuscript was read by Mr. William Smith Williams, from Smith, Elder & Co., that the possibilities of that novel were first seen under a favorable light. Mr. Williams wrote Brontë a letter acknowledging the presence of 'great literary powers' in the novel. Still, he stressed the fact that the want of varied interest prevented a possible publication because the novel would not sell well. The letter was reassuring, and even Brontë had to recognize that *It declined, indeed, to publish the tale, for business reasons, but it discussed its merits and demerits so courteously, so considerately, in a spirit so rational, with a discrimination so enlightened, that this very refusal cheered the author better than a vulgarly-expressed acceptance would have done.*⁸

Thus encouraged, and having received an expression of willingness from Smith, Elder & Co. to examine any further text written by her, it took Charlotte only some months to write *Jane Eyre*, which was immediately accepted, along with *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, for publication.

This episode is relevant for two reasons. The first is that it evinces, from the start, what is going to remain one of the constant stylistic preoccupations of Charlotte Brontë, the search of a balance between the dimensions of poetry and prose to be found in her

⁵ Anonymous review in the *Critic*, 4 July 1846. In: Juliet Barker (ed.) *The Brontës: selected poems*. London: J.M. Dent, 1993. p. 148.

⁶ Charlotte Brontë to Elizabeth Gaskell, 26 Sep. 1850: MS MA 2696 R-V, pp. 2-3, Pierpont Morgan. In: T.J. Wise and J.A. Symington, *The Lives, Friendships and Correspondence of the Brontë Family*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Shakespeare Head Press, 1933. 4 vols.

⁷ Charlotte Brontë in the preface to *The Professor*. London: J.M. Dent, 1985.

⁸ Judith Barker. *The Brontës*: London: J.M. Dent, 1984. p. 215.

work. The second significant aspect is the relevance of the relationship between Brontë and her reviewers in the shaping of what was to become her mature style.

In spite of the great acceptance of *Jane Eyre* both by critics and reading public — the first edition was sold out in less than three months — some of the reviews depicted it as a highly 'improper' book. The *Spectator* is the first to refer to the *low tone of behavior in the Bells' books: In each, there is the autobiographical form of writing; a choice of subjects that are peculiar without being either probable or pleasing; and considerable executive ability, but insufficient to overcome the injudicious selection of theme and matter.*⁹

Jane Eyre, *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* were published together, as a three volume collection written by the brothers Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. Therefore, reviews frequently referred simultaneously to the three novels. Besides invariably discussing the possible sex of the authors, the critics recurrently complained about the coarseness of the writing, the immorality in the thematic choice, the use of poetic prose, the lack of religious endurance, and the indecorous intensity of feeling. Such items were equally attributed to the work of the three sisters.

Charlotte was hurt at the charges set against her novel, and even more grieved because of the negative reception — both on the part of the critics and on the part of the reading public — of the works by Anne and Emily. Still, she kept reading the reviews and trying to find a means of atonement with critical opinion. Mrs. Gaskell remarks that she *carefully studied the different reviews and criticisms that had appeared on Jane Eyre, in hopes of extracting precepts and advice from which to profit.*¹⁰

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⁹ Unsigned review, *Spectator*, 18 Dec. 1847, p. 1217. In Miriam Allott (ed.) *The Brontës: the critical heritage*. p. 218.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Life of Charlotte Brontë*. London: J.M. Dent, 1984. p. 215.