

Charlotte Brontë's novel *The professor* and Belgium

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1. Introduction

The Brontë sisters, Charlotte (1816-1855), Emily (1818-1848), and Anne (1820-1849), were highly accomplished 19th-century novelists who published their works under the pseudonyms Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell respectively. Emily and Anne died of tuberculosis in their early thirties and Charlotte died, at the age of thirty-nine, while she was pregnant. In addition to *The professor*, Charlotte wrote three other novels: *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Shirley* (1849), and *Villette* (1853), the latter also deals with her stay in Brussels.

According to Juliet Barker, Charlotte wrote her novel *The professor* most “likely in late 1844 or early in 1845” (Barker 1991, xiv). In 1847, Emily’s novel *Wuthering Heights* and Anne’s novel *Agnes Grey* were accepted for publication by “Thomas Cautley Newby, London” (Barker 1991, xvii), while *The professor* was rejected and, even though Charlotte submitted it eight more times to various publishers, it was rejected again and again. It was published only after her death when Charlotte’s biographer, Mrs. Gaskell, recommended it to her widower, Mr. Arthur Bell Nicholls, who then proceeded to edit the manuscript. It appeared “in June 1857 some time after Mrs. Gaskell’s biography *The life of Charlotte Brontë* was published” (Barker 1991, xxviii-xxix).

The professor’s first six chapters deal with the protagonist William Crimsworth’s life in England. After graduating from Eton, William is offered the position of clergyman. He declines and finds employment with his older brother Edward who owns a wool mill and lives on a beautiful estate in the industrialized Midlands. Edward despises his younger brother because he has been educated at Eton, nevertheless, gives him a position as “second clerk to manage the foreign correspondence of the House” (Brontë 1987 [1857], 18). When William is invited to Crimsworth Hall for “a large party given in the honour of the Master’s birthday” (Brontë 1987 [1857], 23), he encounters another mill owner, Mr. Hunsden; the latter is totally unlike his brother though equally opiated.

Though Mr. Hunsden befriends William, he indirectly causes William to lose his position at the mill, following an incident “[a]t a public meeting in the Townhall” (Brontë 1987 [1857], 44), where Hunsden denounces Edward, leaving the latter convinced that William has negatively influenced Hunsden. To help William, Hunsden suggests he seek a new career in Brussels and provides him with “a letter of introduction” (Brontë 1987 [1857], 54).

The next two hundred pages of the novel deal with William’s stay in Brussels, while the last eleven pages situate him back in England, with his Anglo-Swiss wife and their young son.

Obviously, we will limit our discussion to his stay in Belgium because we wish to know how William, the fictional character, views that country and its inhabitants. Indeed, the purpose of this paper is to draw comparisons between William’s view of Belgium with those of the author’s own personal experiences while she stayed in that country in the 1840s.

Charlotte Brontë arrived in Belgium on February 12, 1842, together with her widowed father Patrick and her sister Emily. In Brussels, the two women enrolled at the *Pensionnat*¹ Heger to improve their French. They returned home to Haworth at Christmas because the family’s caregiver, their aunt Branwell, had died. Emily remained in England, but Charlotte returned to Brussels on January 2, 1843, was made a teacher of English in exchange for free French lessons and room and board. She stayed in Brussels until January 2, 1844, when she permanently returned home. The director of the *pensionnat* was *Mme Heger*, but her husband, *Monsieur Heger*, was Charlotte’s teacher during her entire stay. As Juliette Barker points out:

The experience of the[se...] two years, both intellectually and emotionally, marked her for life. She had successfully undergone the rigours of an academic discipline imposed by Monsieur Heger, emerging as a better and more powerful writer. And she had fallen in love for the first time with a man who was the antithesis of everything she had previously valued [...]. He was small, ugly, short-tempered and, above all, Catholic [...]. Her unrequited passion for him was to alter permanently and radically her vision of what the male hero should be. (Barker 1991, 427)

Now, before turning to our discussion of William Crimsworth’s view of Belgium and its inhabitants, let us introduce some historical facts regarding Belgium in the 1830s and 1840s. Although once a region of great historical, economic, and cultural significance, especially during the Middle Ages, by the 19th century, when its fate was determined by the great European powers

¹ Boarding school.

following Napoleon's defeat in 1815, the region's glorious past was but a faint memory. An initial and brief union with the Netherlands failed, leading to Belgium's independence in 1830, with the first king of the Belgians, Leopold I, being sworn in on July 21, 1831. The Belgian society of this era was considered highly traditional, especially in the small villages and rural areas. Industrialization took place mainly in French-speaking Wallonia in the mid-1820s, and especially after 1830, while Dutch-speaking Flanders remained, for all intents and purposes, a relative backwater exhibiting rural and strongly Catholic tendencies. Political circumstances in the newly minted State strongly favoured the French language, which became initially the sole *de facto* official language of Belgium, dominating the newly recognized State's cultural life. Dutch-speaking Flanders, and its inhabitants, the Flemish, were very much relegated to second-class status.

2. Belgium as seen through William Crimsworth's eyes

After arriving in the coastal town of Ostend, William Crimsworth takes a diligence to Brussels and describes the Flemish landscape as he sees it through the window:

Green, reedy swamps, fields fertile but flat, cultivated in patches that made them look like magnified kitchen-gardens; belts of cut trees, formal as pollard willows, skirting the horizon; narrow canals, gliding slow by the roadside, painted Flemish farm-houses, some very dirty hovels, a grey, dead sky, wet roads, wet fields, wet house-tops; not a beautiful, scarcely a picturesque object met my eye along the whole route, yet to me, all was beautiful. (Brontë 1987 [1857], 56-57)

This passage is a typical example of the role that the narrator's mood plays when he judges what he sees in the world around him. In this case, even though he does not consider the landscape picturesque, he appreciates the view because he is looking forward to the adventures that await him in Brussels. Of course, it is true that Flanders is flat, but we cannot forget that the author hailed from the Midlands, Haworth, West Yorkshire, a small town in the middle of the moors that is by some accounts considered one of England's least attractive regions.

Upon arrival in Brussels, Crimsworth spends his first night in a hotel and while descending the stairs he encounters: "a Flemish housemaid, [... whose] face was broad [and] her physiognomy eminently stupid" (Brontë 1987 [1857], 58). This on-the-spot judgment seems very harsh but Charlotte Brontë, like many Victorian writers, dabbled in the pseudo-science of physiognomy (Tytler 2019):

“the art of judging character from facial features; facial expression, face; physical features generally” (Webster’s 1993, 400). Even today we can hear remnants of this 19th century habit in certain English expressions. Some examples are: ‘highbrow’ (intelligent); ‘stuck-up’ (condescending), the expression derives from the belief that people with upturned noses are contemptuous of others; and ‘thick-headed’ (unintelligent). By portraying her first-person narrator as a physiognomist, it became admittedly much easier for Brontë to instantly reveal the inner self of any character Crimsworth encounters.

When Crimsworth enters the hotel’s “public room” to have breakfast he overhears:

Two gentlemen seated by [the stove], talking in French, [it was] impossible to follow their rapid utterance or comprehend much of the purport of what they said – yet French in the mouth of Frenchmen, or Belgians (I was not then sensible of the horrors of the Belgian accent) was music to my ears. One of the gentlemen [...] accosted me in very good English – I remember I wished to God that I could speak French as well; his fluency and correct pronunciation impressed me for the first time with a due notion of the cosmopolitan character of the capital I was in; it was my experience of that skill in living languages, I afterwards found to be so general in Brussels. (Brontë 1987 [1857], 59)

Once again, our narrator bases his judgement on personal impressions or rather prejudices and is, as always, quite adept at expressing a negative opinion whether the circumstances warrant it or not. It is quite possible that the narrator’s dislike of ‘Brussels French’ mirrors the author’s first-hand experience of the city, which in the 1840s still counted a considerable number of Flemish speakers, if not a majority. Their manner of speaking French may not have passed the scrutiny of any so-called ‘purist’.

The narrator is much more generous when he describes *Monsieur Pelet*, the French instructor, modelled on the real-live person, i.e., *Monsieur Heger*, Charlotte Brontë fell in love with. As William states: “Mr. Pelet was no Fleming, but a Frenchman both by birth and parentage, yet the degree of harshness inseparable from Gallic lineaments was, in his case, softened by a mild blue eye and a melancholy, almost suffering expression of countenance; his physiognomy was *fine et spirituelle*”² (Brontë 1987 [1857], 63-64). According to Juliette Barker (1991, 427), *Monsieur Heger* was “small and ugly”, but clearly the narrator was quite capable to overlook those aspects given that he was impressed by Pelet’s intellectual and emotional qualities.

² Fine and spiritual.

But how does the narrator view the school's pupils? In general, he has scant regard for any of them regardless of their provenance but, since most of them were Belgians, or *Flamands* ('Flemish') as he calls them, he quickly makes it clear that he holds them in very low esteem! This is his reaction to the first student whom he asks to read. The student inquires: "Anglais ou français, Monsieur?"³ demanded a thick-set moonfaced young Flamand in a blouse. My God! How did he snuffle, snort and wheeze! All he said was said in his throat and nose, for it is thus that Flamands speak [...]" (Brontë 1987 [1857], 63-64).

Since this young man is from Flanders and therefore his native tongue is Flemish, it is not surprising that he speaks French with an accent. But William, the 'purist', is having none of it and considers him very much inferior. Given that the author was from West Yorkshire where people spoke English with a strong regional accent, the narrator's comments may be surprising to some, but in fact very much reflect the social standing and attitudes towards regional dialects at the time, not only in England but also in Belgium. As an aside, it appears that Charlotte, like her brother Branwell, spoke with an Irish accent which they must have inherited from their Irish father (Holland 2016, 223). Further, it would have been highly unlikely that she would have spoken the Queen's English given the very isolated surroundings in which she grew up and, in addition, she almost certainly spoke French with an English accent.

Our narrator shares the contempt for the Flemish with *Monsieur Pelet* even though the latter goes further than William. For example, Pelet remarks about his workers that "these were only Flemish" and the narrator comments that with them: "his manner was invariably dry, stern and cool." Crimsworth agrees that: "Flamands certainly they were, both had true Flamand physiognomy, where intellectual inferiority is marked in lines none can mistake [...]" But, even so, he does not think that *Monsieur Pelet* treats them correctly because: "still they were men and in the main honest men [...] and I could not see why their being aboriginals of the fat, dull soil should serve as a pretext for treating them with perpetual severity and contempt" (Brontë 1987 [1857], 69). Even though, on this occasion, the narrator is more generous than *Monsieur Pelet*, Charlotte Brontë's naturalist's instincts which the author shared with certain other nineteenth century writers inclined Crimsworth to regard people as products of their soil.

One evening, the narrator is invited to have dinner with *Monsieur Pelet's* mother and there he encounters *Madame Reuter* whose daughter is the director of the girls' school situated next to *Madame Pelet's* school. This is how the narrator describes their conversation: "How do you like Belgium, Monsieur?"

³ In English or French, Sir?

asked [Madame Reuter] in an accent of the broadest Bruxellois⁴." And he adds: "I could now well distinguish the difference between the fine and pure Parisian utterance of Monsieur Pelet, for instance, and the guttural enunciation of the Flamands" (Brontë 1987 [1857], 73). Of course, given his preference for the Parisian French that *Monsieur Pelet* speaks – in social terms, the variant, that then like today, had the most cultural capital –, he immediately makes clear which kind of French he looks down on, and soon finds out why he has been invited to this dinner. It is because *Madame Reuter* wants to know if he will be a suitable teacher in her daughter's school for young girls.

During their discussion, the narrator makes a puzzling judgment, but it is not the only one. After he makes a flattering remark to *Monsieur Pelet's* mother, the latter reacts as follows: "Quel charmant jeune homme!"⁵ However, "Madame Reuter, being less sentimental, as she was Flamand and not French – only laughed again" (Brontë 1987 [1857], 74). I assume that in this case the adjective 'sentimental' means 'easily affected' but, if that is so, its meaning must have changed considerably in the last two hundred years; something that must also have been the case for certain national manners. For example, when after having met *Mademoiselle Reuter*, Crimsworth gets up to leave, he decides to "hold out" his "hand, on purpose, [even] though [he] knew it was contrary to the etiquette of foreign habits." At that moment: "she smile[d] and said: 'Ah! C'est comme tous les Anglais,'⁶ but gave me her hand very kindly" (Brontë 1987 [1857], 80-81).

On one occasion the narrator's comments leave one wondering if Charlotte Brontë could distinguish between Flemish and Dutch art. This is how Crimsworth describes one of his students: "Eulalie was tall and very finely shaped, she was fair, and her features were those of a Low-Country Madonna; many a "figure de vierge"⁷ have I seen in Dutch pictures, exactly resembling hers [...] (Brontë 1987 [1857], 85). But then again, it is possible that since the author never visited that country, she assumed that Flemish and Dutch art were quite similar. However, Eulalie is an exception, in most cases Crimsworth's opinion of the *Bruxelloises* ('female inhabitants of Brussels') is quite negative. Consider his rather harsh description of Adèle Dronsart:

Not far from Mdlle. Koslow sits another young lady by name Adele Dronsart: this is a Belgian, rather low of stature, in form heavy, with broad waist, short neck and limbs, good red and white complexion, features well

⁴ Inhabitant of Brussels.

⁵ What a charming young man!

⁶ Ah! Just like all the English.

⁷ Depictions of the Virgin Mary.

chiselled and regular, well-cut eyes of a clear brown colour, light brown hair, good teeth, age not much above fifteen, but as full-grown as a stout young Englishwoman of twenty. This portrait gives the idea of a somewhat dumpy but good-looking damsel, does it not? Well, when I looked along the row of young heads, my eye generally stopped at this of Adele's; her gaze was ever waiting for mine, and it frequently succeeded in arresting it. She was an unnatural-looking being – so young, fresh, blooming, yet so Gorgon-like. Suspicion, sullen ill-temper were on her forehead, vicious propensities in her eye, envy and panther-like deceit about her mouth. In general she sat very still; her massive shape looked as if it could not bend much, nor did her large head – so broad at the base, so narrow towards the top – seem made to turn readily on her short neck. She had but two varieties of expression; the prevalent one a forbidding, dissatisfied scowl, varied sometimes by a most pernicious and perfidious smile. She was shunned by her fellow-pupils, for, bad as many of them were, few were as bad as she. (Brontë 1987 [1857], 99)

In the 19th century, Belgium was a very Catholic country, and the narrator demonstrates a strong disdain for that religion. Interestingly, Charlotte Brontë was the daughter of Patrick Brontë, an Anglican clergyman, who was Irish and known not to be prejudiced. Charlotte, however, may have had a complex relationship with Catholicism, even facing criticism for anti-Catholicism during her lifetime for her depiction of that religion and its followers in her novel *Villette*, an accusation she herself found to be unjust (Clarke 2011). Whatever the case may be, her narrator, Crimsworth, has no difficulty ascribing the negative characteristics of his female students to the fact that they are Catholics. As he comments:

I know nothing of the arcana of the Roman-Catholic religion and I am not a bigot in matters of theology, but I suspect the root of [the female students'] precious impurity, so obvious, so general in popish Countries, is to be found in the discipline, if not the doctrines of the Church of Rome. I record what I have seen – these girls belonged to, what are called, the respectable ranks of society, they had all been carefully brought up, yet was the mass of them mentally depraved. (Brontë 1987 [1857], 98)

Somewhat later, the narrator again invokes the impact that natural surroundings can have on a character's personality but, in this case, he emphasizes the deleterious effect that the climate has had on the people's character:

[...] below [Mlle. Trista] were seated a band of very vulgar, inferior-looking Flamandes, including two or three examples of that deformity of person and imbecility of intellect whose frequency in the Low Countries would seem to furnish proof that the climate is such as to induce degeneracy of the human mind and body [...]. (Brontë 1987 [1857], 101)

His remarks can only raise one's eyebrows given that England and the Low Countries have very similar climates. Their proximity results from the fact that both are battered by the same waves of the North Sea.

Nevertheless, one of his students is quite different but, unfortunately, she is not healthy and worse than that, she is a devout Catholic:

The least exceptional pupil was the poor little Sylvie [; she] was gentle in manners, intelligent in mind, she was even sincere, as far as her religion permitted her to be so, but her physical organisation was defective [...] and then, destined as she was for the cloister, her whole soul was warped to a conventional bias [...]. She was the model student of Mademoiselle Reuter's establishment; a pale, blighted image where life lingered feebly but whence the soul had been conjured by Romish wizard-craft! (Brontë 1987 [1857], 104)

This gentle soul is sincere and intelligent and, obviously, these are significant attributes but, sadly, in the narrator's eyes, this sickly girl intends to become a Catholic nun and that will certainly lead to her ruination!

Not long after Crimsworth becomes a teacher for *Mademoiselle Reuter*, he begins to entertain the idea that she might be a suitable marriage partner, despite her Catholicism. He reasons that:

Even if she be truly deficient in sound principle – is it not rather her misfortune than her fault? She had been brought up a Catholic – had she been born an Englishwoman and reared a Protestant – might she not have added straight integrity to all her other excellencies? Supposing she were to marry an English and protestant husband, would she not, rational and sensible as she is, quickly acknowledge the superiority of right over expediency, honesty over policy? (Brontë 1987 [1857], 109)

Clearly, Crimsworth believes that, since he is a Protestant, he might be able to change her character in a positive manner. Unfortunately, for him, one evening, he overhears *Mademoiselle Reuter* chatting with *Monsieur Pelet* in the garden below his room and learns that she intends to marry the Catholic *Monsieur Pelet*, because he is much superior to William Crimsworth, her English teacher.

Soon, thereafter, his luck changes. A new student by the name of *Mademoiselle Henri* is introduced to his English class. William decides, without providing pedagogical justification, that he will treat her as harshly as he can. As he remarks on the first day: "I stood behind her and could not read in her face the effect of my not very civil speech." Also, *Mademoiselle Henri* leaves the room immediately when the class is over and, therefore, he can not tell "whether her physiognomy" betrayed "any sensitivity in [her] face [...]" (Brontë 1987 [1857], 117).

Some time later, *Mademoiselle Henri* tells him that she is the daughter of a Swiss father and an English mother but, since both have died, she is now living with her aunt in Brussels. It is her dream to move to England one day because as she explains:

I long to live once more among Protestants, they are more honest than Catholics; a Romish school is a building with porous walls, a hollow floor, a false ceiling; every room in this house, Monsieur, has eye-holes and ear-holes, and what the house is, the inhabitants are, very treacherous; they all think it lawful to tell lies, they all call it politeness to profess friendship where they feel hatred. (Brontë 1987 [1857], 145)

The narrator's new friend states her opinions very succinctly and, not surprisingly, they are in line with William's thinking: Catholics are dishonest and treacherous; they are also liars who are filled with hatred.

Not long thereafter, his student, whose full name is Frances Evans Henri, stops coming to class, and Crimsworth, since he does not know her address, decides to look for her everywhere in Brussels. One Sunday he undertakes a long walk:

I had crossed the Place royale⁸ and got into the Rue Royale,⁹ thence I diverted into the rue de Louvain¹⁰ – an old and quiet street [...] and then strolled on towards the porte de Louvain.¹¹ [...] I turned up a by-path to the right, I had not followed it far ere it brought me [...] into the fields amidst which, just before me, stretched a long and lofty white wall [...]. I turned the angle of the wall, [...] I approached upon great iron gates [...] I had no occasion to apply for the key, the gates were open [...]. I saw objects on each hand which, in their own mute language of inscription and sign, explained clearly to what abode I had made my way. This was the

⁸ Royal Square.

⁹ Royal Street.

¹⁰ Louvain Street.

¹¹ Gate of Louvain.

house appointed for all living; crosses, monuments, and garlands of everlasting announced: "The protestant Cemetery, outside the gates of Louvain."
(Brontë 1987 [1857], 165-166)

It is here that he encounters Frances who is kneeling at the grave of her aunt who has recently died. From a historical point of view, what is striking about the narrator's description is the extent to which the city has grown. At the time that the novel was written this cemetery – which no longer exists – was less than a mile from the *Porte de Louvain* which is not far from the city centre.

3. Conclusion

What conclusions can be reached from the way Charlotte Brontë depicts Belgium and specifically Brussels and its inhabitants? First, it is clear that Charlotte was a woman of her time, influenced by the dominant thinking and prejudices of a literate person living in the heart of the British empire. Second, however, the work also mirrors her own personal experiences and internal struggles, as can be judged from the following lines:

Belgium! name unromantic and unpoetic, yet name that whenever uttered has in my ear a sound, in my heart an echo, such as no other assemblage of syllables, however sweet or classic, can produce. Belgium! I repeat the word now as I sit alone near midnight. It stirs my world of the past like a summons to resurrection.
(Brontë 1987 [1857], 60)

And third, her work also represents the social hierarchy and prejudices of Brussels' society itself, where the Flemish were seen and treated as second-class citizens.

The professor reflects the work of an emerging author, rather than a mature one. There is no doubt that eventually she became a skilled novelist, but I suspect, and I may not be the only one, that her pejorative comments about Catholic Belgium and the Flemish were to a certain extent the result of her unrequited love for *Monsieur Heger*. Just as our male narrator shares many characteristics with Charlotte Brontë, *Monsieur Pelet* and *Mademoiselle Reuter* are distorted portraits of *Monsieur* and *Madame Heger*. The narrator turns the latter into a treacherous double-dealer because, presumably, the author felt that *Madame Heger* had deliberately stood between herself and her husband. In addition, Charlotte's problematic relationship with this couple probably goes a long way towards explaining her critical attitude towards many things Belgian.

And then again, since the country had only been independent for slightly more than a decade, the author, proudly British, probably considered the

country and its inhabitants less sophisticated than and very much inferior to the inhabitants of that 'imperial' nation called Great Britain.

Finally, this is definitely not Charlotte Brontë's best novel which is probably the reason why it was rejected so often. But it does make clear that Brussels and its inhabitants had a lasting impact on her, because in her later and much superior novel *Villette*, published in 1853, she deals again with her stay in Belgium's capital and provides another long list of jaundiced comments about its culture and its people.

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