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On William Crimsworth's First-person Narrative

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I

Jane Eyre, the masterpiece by Charlotte Brontë (1816-55), quickly became a best-selling novel when it was published by Smith Elder, Inc. on 16 October 1847. The book went through three editions within just six months and became so popular that it created a literary sensation dubbed 'Jane Eyre Fever'. In contrast, the first novel Brontë had hoped to publish, *The Professor* (1857), was humiliatingly rejected by publishers time after time.

In the end, *The Professor* was never published while Brontë was alive. It was finally published posthumously by Smith Elder, Inc. on 6 June 1857, 11 years after its completion, as it was considered that there would never be another novel written by her.¹⁾ At this time, Brontë's status as a popular novelist was already fully established, but the reputation of *The Professor* remained low, even after its publication, and the merit Brontë found in this novel was not always understood favourably by readers. Despite the fact that *The Professor* had been written earlier than *Jane Eyre*, *Villette* (1853), or *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) by Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-65), readers came across the book as Brontë's last published novel, which was not her original intention. Due to this, readers interpreted the content of the novel in relation to the author's peculiar biographical facts, one reason for its failure to become widely popular.²⁾ However, Brontë declares in the preface that

one of her purposes for writing *The Professor* was to break away from ‘Anglia’, the imaginary African nation about which she had been writing violent, passionate stories since childhood, and to pursue realism.

I said to myself that my hero should work his way through life as I had seen real living men work theirs – that he should never get a shilling he had not earned – that no sudden turns should lift him in a moment to wealth and high station ; that whatever small competency he might gain, should be won by the sweat of his brow ; that, before he could find so much as an arbour to sit down in, he should master at least half the ascent of ‘the Hill of Difficulty’ ; that he should not even marry a beautiful girl or a lady of rank.³⁾

From this passage in the preface, we can deduce the author’s determination as a novelist to set her work apart from the romantic style popular at that time by avoiding exaggerated expressions and by attempting to write as faithfully as possible to reality. Many critics criticised *The Professor*, but Brontë’s determination and confidence regarding the work never wavered. On the contrary, she confidently insists, comparing it with the more popular *Jane Eyre*, that ‘[the middle and latter portions of the work] contain more pith, more substance, more reality, in my judgement, than much of *Jane Eyre*’.⁴⁾ Reading this novel as ‘a novel depicting the real world’, as Brontë insists it to be, without preconceptions about her novels, it may be possible for us to freshly grasp the author’s argument on the social situation she perceived and understood at that time. To understand this argument, this paper will focus on the fact that *The Professor* was written as an autobiography of the protagonist, William Crimsworth. Writing an autobiography is never a vague and unconscious enterprise. It involves the author’s purpose or theme, as material carefully selected based on the relation thereto. On the contrary,

the method of 'narrative' known as the 'autobiographical style' has a great risk of unconsciously exposing the psychology of the narrator. This paper will examine what impressions the autobiographical narrative in *The Professor* has upon readers and will consider the 'realism novel' aspect on which Brontë insists.

II

The novel begins with a letter from the narrator and protagonist, William Crimsworth, to Charles, his friend from Eton. Charles, the recipient of this letter, is a character who should continue to appear and interact with William in the novel. However, he is not directly involved in the development of the story that follows and will never reappear to the readers. Furthermore, the letter itself also ends up being unanswered, as it is never read because it missed Charles, who had already been sent to a colony as an official. The letter is written in a highly self-centred manner, describing the writer's situation alone, without asking about the situation of the recipient. Based on these facts, many critics have considered the letter at the beginning of the novel to be a compositional flaw of the work and a manifestation of Brontë's immaturity as a writer.⁵⁾ On the contrary, however, the flaw of the letter at the beginning paradoxically creates the effect of attracting readers to the novel. Readers naturally feel uncomfortable with this awkward letter and ask the narrator for the answer to resolve their sense of discomfort. Why are you (the narrator) more interested in telling your story than in communicating with Charles? What was the intention of writing this one-sided letter that could be considered extremely selfish? By asking such questions, readers will be able to reduce their distance from the novel, and while seeking the answers, they will be drawn to the next page by the narrator, who cleverly guides them at the end of Chapter 1.

The leisure time I have at command, and which I intended to employ for his private benefit, I shall now dedicate to that of the public at large. My narrative is not exciting, and above all, not marvellous; but it may interest some individuals, who, having toiled in the same vocation as myself, will find in my experience frequent reflections of their own. The above letter will serve as an introduction. I now proceed. (47)

On the face of it, the letter seems to have nothing to do with the main story of the novel; however, it not only creates an effect that attracts readers to the work, but is itself in fact a great clue to understanding the character of William. Although he has not written in a long time to Charles, his only friend at Eton, William addresses him with ‘You were a sarcastic, observant, shrewd, cold-blooded creature’ (39) and describes their friendship harshly, stating that there were no romantic elements in their relationship when they were at Eton. Based on this, readers can sense how William treats others and keeps them at a distance. In other words, he is not the kind of person to attempt to build relationships with others willingly, and even with the small number of friends he has, he would rather maintain cool and distant relationships than be intimate with people. This personal trait is even more clearly manifested in William’s relationship with his maternal uncle. The confrontation with his uncle has its origin in his anger at the uncle and others who treated his parents heartlessly, as they had strongly opposed the marriage between his father, a member of the emerging bourgeoisie, and his aristocratic mother. His anger reaches its peak with the following words of his uncle.

Lord Tynedale demanded sternly, ‘Whether I had thoughts of following my father’s steps and engaging in trade?’ ... such was the scorn expressed in Lord Tynedale’s countenance as he pronounced the word trade—such the

contemptuous sarcasm of his tone (40)

The words of William's uncle hurt his pride, and he immediately rejects every offer his uncle makes, leading him to choose the same profession as his father. However, even if utilitarian calculations were behind the offers made by the uncle and others, these people ultimately help William with his school fees so that he can attend Eton, a prestigious public school ; after he leaves school, they even offer to let him inherit their assets and the job of the vicar and marry one of their daughters. This offer is an indication that they have implicitly acknowledged that William is socially their worthy successor ; nor is it a bad offer for him either. His character has already been described by his landlady as being more than an average vicar.

She answered that she believed I was a very religious man, and asked Tim, in her turn, if he thought I had any intention of going into the Church some day ; for, she said, she had had young curates to lodge in her house who were nothing equal to me for steadiness and quietness. (55)

These words of the boarding house landlady reveal that William in fact possesses the qualities of a clergyman ; thus, his uncle's offer was very meaningful, as it suited his character. However, he denies his qualities to be like a clergyman's and coolly keeps his distance from his uncle and others, saying : 'A good clergyman is a good thing, but I should have made a very bad one'. (40) Readers can sense William's strong pride and individualistic stubbornness, contrary to the narrator's intention, when we read this opening letter objectively and without the narrator's one-sided interpretation.

III

The fact that he was a man was a major factor in William's ability to maintain his strong pride throughout, without compromising his own will, unlike Jane Eyre or Lucy Snowe. Unlike the main characters in Brontë's other novels, he was not born as an orphan. He chooses to live a lonely life by parting from his uncle and his brother Edward of his own accord. In other words, it was not an unavoidable fate but a free choice he made himself.⁶⁾ Furthermore, even when William is at a crossroads in his life, he gives the impression of taking up a new direction haphazardly, without thinking about the future, as he is taken over by strong emotion. However, William in fact firmly keeps his eyes on the path that will secure his future and is well prepared for his actions. When William, having left Eton, turns down his uncle's offer, it is undeniable that he is unconsciously considering whether he can turn to his brother Edward and work with him, because Edward has been following the career of a merchant as their father had. Additionally, when he leaves the town X, he has Hunsden's reference letter and the money he has earned and saved. He has no worries about becoming a penniless beggar like Jane, or suffering from anxiety and despair like Lucy. Furthermore, it is clear that he takes into account the presence and social influence of Vandenhuten when he leaves the school run by François Pelet. The fact is that William's success was largely due to the opportunities that businessmen such as Hunsden and Vandenhuten gave to him at times of crisis, rather than his own diligence. As we have seen, even if he chose to act based on his own will, the fact that he was able to open a way to support himself financially for the future is a clear difference from the situation of women who had to live in a highly restricted society.

The second reason William was able to maintain his pride is that he had a 'noble bloodline' by birth. Hunsden often points out that William has inherited

his character from his aristocratic mother more than his merchant father by saying : 'It is you, William, who is the aristocrat of your family'. (59) Hunsden's comment shows that unlike Edward, who inherited his father's job, William, who lost his parents at an early age, grew up in the aristocratic environment of Eton and formed his character based on that environment. It is true that William grew up in the aristocratic society of Eton until he was 20 years old, so he never experienced the outside world. Therefore, his identity became skewed towards being very aristocratic, even though his father's side of the family bore the lineage of merchants. In fact, the knowledge and education he gained at Eton play major roles in his life and lead him to success. For example, William is able to get a junior clerk's job at Edward's workplace thanks to his German and French skills, which he acquired at Eton. In addition to this linguistic ability, the education he received at Eton plays a major part when he becomes a teacher in Brussels. Additionally, he was able to rescue Vandenhuten's son when the boy was drowning partly due to his experiences swimming while at Eton. Thus, the education he received at Eton plays a major role in helping William out of difficult life situations. At the root, however, William respects the Protestant work ethic of 'Heaven helps those who help themselves',⁷⁾ favoured by the middle classes in the 1840s, and moves abroad intending to earn his own living to become an independent and self-reliant man, abandoning the blood ties with his brother and wealthy uncle.⁸⁾ Ironically, however, it is not his own efforts that save him from his plight and help him keep his pride in a foreign country but the benefits of having the aristocratic lineage he is supposed to have abandoned. As seen above, William cannot separate himself from his aristocratic identity, which helps him secure his future. Hunsden identifies this latent disposition of his from early on and points it out.

I told you that you were an aristocrat ... Now, if you'd only an estate, and a mansion, and a park and a title, how you could play the exclusive, maintain the rights of your class, train your tenantry in habits of respect to the peerage, oppose at every step the advancing power of the people, support your rotten order, and be ready for its sake to wade knee-deep in churl's blood. (69)

William completely denies Hunsden's comment that he possesses an autocratic personality and says, 'prejudice had twisted his judgement of my character'. (69) Being autocratic would certainly mean that he was of the same kind as Edward, with whom he was in conflict, and it is inconceivable that he was aware of having such an aspect in his character, considering that he hated Edward's character. Interestingly, however, when he gains absolute authority over his students as a teacher at Pelet's school in Brussels, Williams reveals the same autocratic personality as his brother, whom he hated so much, just as Hunsden has pointed out.

When I had brought my lesson to the lowest level of my dullest pupil's capacity ... a word of impertinence, a movement of disobedience, changed me at once into a despot. I offered them but one alternative—submission and acknowledgement of error, or ignominious expulsion. (98)

William's demeanour shocks the readers as he makes a complete turnaround from a man once disgusted by oppressive attitudes towards others and transforms himself into an autocrat. Although he struggled with the class differences in Britain and sought liberation from them in a foreign country, he reveals an autocratic attitude towards the weak, reminiscent of the British class system he himself suffered from and abandoned, when he gains power as a teacher and when someone

attempts to hinder him from exercising the power. We, as readers, question the behaviour of William, who has completely rejected Hunsden's view as a 'terrible prejudice', and become doubtful whether his narrative is entirely credible. This suspicion is further deepened by his description of Zoraïde Reuter.

Her manner towards me had been altered ever since I had begun to treat her with hardness and indifference : she almost cringed to me on every occasion ; she consulted my countenance incessantly and beset me with innumerable little officious attentions. Servility creates despotism. This slavish homage, instead of softening my heart, only pampered whatever was stern and exacting in its mood. The very circumstance of her hovering round me like a fascinated bird seemed to transform me into a rigid pillar of stone. (157)

William is attracted to Zoraïde Reuter, the principal of the girls' school where he works as a part-time teacher. However, he discovers that she is already engaged to Pelet and that her interest in him is not serious but only a flirtation. Hurt by this, he seeks to regain his pride by treating Reuter autocratically, hoping to have her under his control somehow. With regard to the autocratic behaviour that he used to hate so much, he shifts the responsibility to Mlle Reuter and insists that it was not his fault by saying, 'Servility creates despotism'. This kind of attitude reminds readers that the narrator is developing a terribly self-centred narrative, which is far from honest and objective. Even though he abandoned the UK and travelled to a foreign country under the tenet 'Heaven helps those who help themselves', hoping to have a self-reliant life, he not only depends on the aristocratic lineage he was born into but also tends to 'play the exclusive, maintain the rights of your class', as pointed out by Hunsden. This is evident based on his transformation into an autocrat as soon as he gains a secure position as an English teacher and becomes

able to exist within the framework of social institutions in a foreign country. We can surmise from this behaviour that, far from completely abandoning the British ruling structure, he kept it in mind from the beginning, hoping to return to British society someday having transformed himself from a servant to a ruler. In fact, William returns to British society as a successful man. William establishes his social status as a teacher in Belgium, acquires a wife called Frances, manages a successful school with his wife and earns sufficient wealth to live in Britain. In the foreign land of Brussels, he attains the social position which he could not achieve in Britain and returns to England as a member of the gentry, despite being only in his 30s. William reconfirms his position in aristocratic society in his intent to send his son Victor, which means ‘the successful one’, to Eton when he returns to Britain.

IV

Britain is a ‘Promised Land’ (272) for his wife Frances, and any reader may expect the couple to live a happy life without any worries, as William has now secured the social status he lacked before. However, Daisy Lane, where they live, is in a quiet forest isolated from society, reminiscent of Ferndean in *Jane Eyre*, and their only contact with the outside world is through Hunsden, who lives nearby.⁹⁾ Furthermore, dark clouds are hanging over the family life he shares with his wife Frances and son Victor, caused by William’s authoritarian attitude as he imposes his views of life on the others and cannot or will not attempt to understand them.

First, William does not attempt to understand his son.

She [Frances] sees, as I also see, a something in Victor’s temper – a kind of electrical ardour and power – which emits, now and then, ominous sparks I call it the leaven of the offending Adam, and consider that it should be, if not

whipped out of him, at least soundly disciplined ; and that he will be cheap of any amount of either bodily or mental suffering which will ground him radically in the art of self-control. (289)

Rather than attempting to understand Victor, who has a sensitive disposition, William plans to forcibly correct it and send him to Eton on his own discretion. His attitude completely ignores Victor's feelings. He may consider it to be legitimate behaviour, but it must seem like that of a very selfish father from Victor's point of view. This self-centred attitude causes further dark clouds to hang over Daisy Lane, as we see in the following scene, where William does not hesitate to shoot Victor's dog Yorke.

Yorke accompanied Mr. Hunsden one day to X – and was bitten in the street by a dog in a rabid state. As soon as Hunsden had brought him home, and had informed me of the circumstance, I went into the yard and shot him where he lay licking his wound. (286)

Victor tearfully protests against William's action, saying '[Yorke] might have been cured – you should have tried – you should have burnt the wound with a hot iron, or covered it with caustic. You gave no time ; and now, it is too late – he is dead !' (287). As Victor claims, there were indeed many options to take before carrying out the cruel act of shooting. Above all, to shoot the dog dead without a word of explanation is an extremely selfish action that gives no consideration to the feelings of his son, who adored the dog. What led William to take such a cruel action ? It was not whimsical egotism, but rather deeply connected to his nationalistic personality. Victor's pet Yorke was a gift from Hunsden and was named after him. Hunsden has a reformist ideology : as he

states, 'we are reformers born, radical reformers' (80). In contrast, William, as mentioned, always has a British sense of morality deep in his heart and has an aspect of the nationalist who clings to the British virtues and is proud to be British. Therefore, Hunsden's ideology is a very dangerous idea that would deny William's identity, and he cannot let his son get close to him. This subconscious awareness motivated William to carry out the cruel act of shooting Yorke dead. Victor, who has no way of knowing about his father's one-sided belief, naturally hates him. In the end, Victor apologises for his rebellion against his father, but only because Frances persuaded him to do so; it does not mean that William has restored his authority as a father. Here we can see one of the dark clouds hanging over the family relationships in *Daisy Lane*.

Second, William does not attempt to truly understand his wife Frances. Unlike the time when she was teaching sewing at Reuter's school, Frances begins to reveal an ideology radical for women of that time as the novel nears its end, conveying a sense of presence that eclipses the main character. When Frances accepts William's marriage proposal, she tells him that she wants to continue working as a teacher after they get married, to live a self-reliant, independent life.

I must act in some way I have taken notice, monsieur, that people who are only in each other's company for amusement, never really like each other so well, or esteem each other so highly, as those who work together, and perhaps suffer together. (251)

It can be said that the desire to be self-reliant and independent was a radical idea at the beginning of the 19th century, considering that women were required to be 'the angel in the house', the ideal 'perfect wife' who would devote herself to supporting her husband, occupying herself with household chores and raising

children. William cannot hide his bewilderment at her assertion. He argues that he has attained a position that enables him to earn enough, based on the belief that 'There is something flattering to man's strength, something consonant to his honourable pride, in the idea of becoming the providence of what he loves ...' (250) ; she, therefore, does not need to go out to teach or work herself too hard. He maintains a position of domination to sustain his pride as a patriarch. He eventually agrees that Frances's argument is legitimate and allows her to do what she wants, but that does not necessarily mean that he has seriously understood and accepted her independence, as he asks her for a kiss in return. The fact that William does not give Frances a permanent position as a career woman shows his lack of sincerity. William returns to Britain with Frances based on the excuse that it is her 'Promised Land', insisting that 'Mammon was not our master' (280), when he is only in his mid-30s – the prime of his life – and Frances's management of the school is on the right track. William's decision to make Frances live in Daisy Lane, which is in a dense forest and isolated from society, means that he cuts off her path to independence and, at the same time, demands that she take up her original gender role as 'the angel of the house', putting her under his control once more.¹⁰⁾ However, William never fully succeeds in understanding Frances or keeping her under his control. She praises Lucia, Hunsden's former lover, for her progressive actions in having the strength not to be bound by conventions and to unleash her talent from social restrictions. William responds with 'My sight was always too weak to endure a blaze, Frances' (285), unable to hide his bewilderment. Based on these episodes, we can conclude that the dark clouds hanging over Daisy Lane symbolise William's anxieties that he cannot fully understand or control his wife.

V

The author, Charlotte Brontë, was antagonistic towards the roles and duties women were forced to assume based on the conventional British social structure. William's contempt towards the conventional ideas of British society and his thirst for 'freedom' strongly reflect these authorial feelings. However, when we re-read this work with a focus on William's narrative, as discussed above, we can see that not only is his initial rebellious stance completely absent at the end, but he himself is trapped in the system of conventional ideas. While this reflects the author's desire for a free society where nobody would be oppressed, as well as her pessimism at her desire not being realised in the real world, it also shows that carrying out actions contravening social conventions is not something easily achieved in reality. However, the author did not completely abandon her beliefs in the face of the obstruction of reality. Brontë still expresses her contempt for the conventions of British society by including lurking anxieties in the ending scene of Daisy Lane. Through William's narrative, Brontë faithfully expresses the irreconcilable contradiction that one must fit within the framework of conventional ideas to live, even when rebelling against them, because, in reality, it is extremely difficult to put this sense of rebellion into practice. In this sense, the ending of *The Professor* reminds readers that it is a realist novel that reflects the social situation of that time, as stated in the preface.

During the late 1840s, novels were dramatically opened toward the real world ; there was a historical change in terms of literature in which novels that dealt with the social situation of the time attracted attention, replacing historical novels and *Bildungsromane*.¹¹⁾ Brontë has been regarded by many critics as 'our first subjective novelist'.¹²⁾ However, apart from this recognition, we can reappraise her first novel *The Professor* as a pioneering work that reflects her interest in how to

capture reality from her early stages as a novelist.

*This paper is a significantly revised version of my paper '*The Professor* as an Autographical Novel: Realism as Seen in William Crimsworth's Narrative', published in the March 2006 essay collection from the New Language and Culture Research Association.

Notes

- 1) *The Professor* was rejected by every publisher a total of nine times, led by Smith Elder, which would later publish all works by Charlotte Brontë.
- 2) The view that the *raison d'être* of *The Professor* is connected with Brontë's later novels is found in most book reviews at that time, such as *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, *Athenaeum* and *Examiner*. The common view among critics at the time was that while *The Professor* was a significant work in terms of studies on novelists, it was simplistic and immature as an independent work of art.
- 3) Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor*, ed. Heather Glen (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1989) 37. Hereafter, the numbers in parentheses in this paper indicate the page numbers in this text.
- 4) Thomas James Wise & Alexander Symington, ed. *The Brontës : Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence, in four volumes* (Oxford : Shakespeare Head Press, 1980) vol. 2, 161.
- 5) Charles Burkhardt, *Charlotte Brontë : A Psychosexual Study of Her Novels* (London : Gollancz, 1973) 52.
- 6) Terry Eagleton, *Myths of Power : A Marxist Study of the Brontës* (London : Macmillan, 2005) 34. Eagleton points out that the various kinds of anguish seen in Jane and Lucy are not apparent in the case of William, as the novel is concerned with how he achieves his ambitions, unlike *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*.
- 7) Samuel Smiles, *Self-help, with illustrations of conduct & perseverance* (London : J. Murray, 1916) 13.
- 8) Heather Glen, Introduction, *The Professor* (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1989) 10. Glen argues that the spirit of 'earning one's living to become an independent person' goes beyond a reflection of the author's personality, as it is deeply related to the spiritual climate of Britain, especially northern England, during the first half of the 19th century.
- 9) Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Michael Mason (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1996) 338. Edouard Fairfax de Rochester points out that Ferndean is in such an unhealthy place that he cannot even let Bertha live there, saying 'I possess an old house, Ferndean Manor, even more retired and hidden than this, where I could have lodged her safely enough, had not a scruple

about the unhealthiness of the situation, in the heart of a wood, made my conscience recoil from the arrangement’.

- 10) Frances is unhappy that she earns less than her husband William, saying, ‘I am not satisfied’, returned she: ‘you are now earning eight thousand francs a year ... while I am still at my miserable twelve hundred francs. I can do better, and I will’ (271). Therefore, if she had continued to run her school in Brussels, she would certainly have strived for and realised success. Frances’s success was likely to place her in a relationship of equals with William in terms of economy, and he was in danger of losing his authority as a husband. This is why he moved to the socially isolated Daisy Lane with her when he was in his prime (his mid-30s).
- 11) Such novels include *Sybil* (1945) by Benjamin Disraeli (1804-81), *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855) by Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-65), *Hard Times* (1845) by Charles Dickens (1812-70) and *Felix Holt* (1866) by George Eliot (1819-80).
- 12) David Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1948) 88.

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