Theories of Creativity and the Saga of Charlotte Brontë

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Chapter Fifteen

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Creativity, I think we would all agree, is a fairly mysterious phenomenon. What exactly is it and why have human beings evolved in such a way that they can create abstract representations of their lived internal realities? And why are some people capable of creating art, literature, music, dance, while other people are not only incapable, but they even seem to lack the capacity to appreciate such creations? Is creativity—along with its manifestations in language—the quality that separates human beings from all other forms of life and, if so, what does this mean? Is the human brain hardwired to create, or does a particular gene enhance one’s ability to create? Is creativity the product of nature or nurture? Or is creativity ultimately a spiritual gift, a talent, a blessing that needs to be encouraged and supported in every human life? These are just some of the questions that have puzzled the numerous critics and theorists who have attempted to grapple with the issue of creativity over more than two millennia. And although I cannot offer a final or definitive answer to any of these questions, I will attempt to address these questions by looking at one case study of female creativity, that of Charlotte Brontë.

I would like to begin by exploring some of the dominant theories of creativity. First of all, it is necessary to say that traditionally, women’s creativity has been bracketed by their reproductive bodies. That is, historically women have found (or been forced to find) their creative outlet in the bearing and raising of their children. Maternity has been valued as the highest form of creativity available for women (read: the valorization of the Virgin Mary with the infant Jesus in her arms). Such an icon has been literally worshiped in Western civilization, while Japanese, Chinese, African, and Indian societies have fostered very much the same sort of iconography of and attitudes toward the idealized mother-woman. The historical record makes it clear that there has been a persistent focus on the female body in all attempts to understand women as creative, which has led the female to be seen as the subject of creative efforts by men, rather than the agent of creativity herself. Breaking free of objectification and becoming a creating subject in one’s own right has taken more years than many of us want to contemplate. It has been the exceptional woman—supported and driven—who has succeeding in creating art works that have endured and entered the literary canon.

To begin fairly close to the beginning, Plato believed that inspiration and “divine madness” were the roots of creativity, while Aristotle thought that creativity could be attained if one mastered the forms, the rules, to speak, of artistic production. Nietzsche synthesized these two different approaches by calling the first one “Dionysian” and the second “Apollonian,” and claiming that the creative process actually requires both types of inspiration: In his view, “[t]he Dionysian trance in-
volves a destruction of boundaries between self and others and a loss of the self in the world, the loss of everyday rules and order, and primitive states of rapture and transport. Its analogue is intoxication and its guiding principle is unity as opposed to Apollonian separation and analysis. The Apollonian phase of creation is seen as involving individuation: a tendency to order and understand, to give form and structure" (Martindale, 15).

The Apollonian/Dionysian approach to creativity—represented in the forms of two male gods—has been a particularly potent way of gendering creativity as male and excluding women by their very bodily reality. But this gendered approach to the subject was challenged and partially displaced by the advent of psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud made several attempts to explain creativity as a psychological process, most notably in his essay “The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming” (1908). Here Freud notes that the literary artist “does the same as the child at play; he creates a world of phantasy which he takes very seriously; that is, he invests it with a great deal of affect, while separating it sharply from reality” (45). All of these phantasies concern “His Majesty the Ego, the hero of all daydreams and all novels” (51). Literature for Freud consists in recording fantasies of self-aggrandizement, with the creation of the male epic hero compensating for the frustrations of the artist’s life. When there are many characters with one omniscient narrator, Freud claims that the minor characters are split off aspects of the dominant ego of the narrator (read: author). Further, he notes that the author “bribes” his reader with literary devices like symbolism, imagery, etc. that produce aesthetic pleasure so that the reader will participate in the author’s fantasy without recognizing it as such (54).

Another psychological approach to explaining creativity was proposed by Ernst Kris, who defined creativity as “regression in the service of the ego” (34). For Kris, this regression is similar to the type of thought found in dreaming or psychosis. After immersion in this initial stage, the creator uses logical or learned types of thought in order to complete the artistic product, thereby employing both the Dionysian and Apollonian modes outlined so many centuries earlier by Plato and Aristotle. Notice in this approach, however, how creativity becomes linked to either the unconscious mind or psychosis (madness). The divinely-possessed genius has always been sacred territory for the male; but one searches the historical record to locate a divinely-inspired creative FEMALE genius. The most famous nineteenth-century example of an imaginary female genius, of course, was Germaine de Staël’s Corinne, heroine of her eponymous novel. But as all of her readers know, Corinne was punished for her genius and her last act of creativity was to make a performance piece of her own death.

Yet another psychological approach to creativity can be found in The Artist by Otto Rank. This work explores the psychological sources of creativity, which Rank claimed were based in the productive use of childhood fears: “if ‘play’ is a mechanism which enables the child to cope with fear and ward off ‘unpleasure,’ then ‘normal adults’ can be seen to indulge in the same kind of play in ‘day-dreaming’ or ‘phantasizing’” (49-55). If Freud stressed the fantasy component of the creative act, Rank emphasized the traumatic aspects of the compensation instead. For Rank, artists reshape myths and legends in order to rid themselves of their own masochistic or sadistic feelings towards their parents, as well as others. There is no doubt
that Rank was primarily writing about artists as male, and there is no doubt that the highest form of art for Rank was the creation of dramas. The artist had the capacity to transform "infantile play" into "theatre play" or "egocentric daydream into thrilling novel." But what Rank most valued was the theater which was "the most direct kind of presentation (in which there is no mediating narrator) because it comes nearest the dream form and even borders closely on the action of the hysterical attack" (The Artist, 49-55). Artistic creativity was particularly valued by Rank because it allowed the dramatic staging of unresolved conflicts in the artist, so that the artist could "steer a course between internal pressures (the release of psychic energy) and external social and cultural forces which impinge upon his or her world" (Martindale, 80).

When we finally hear a woman talk about creativity we encounter a somewhat different narrative. In her book, On Not Being Able to Paint, Joanna Field (aka Marion Milner) says of the creative process: "It is surely through the arts that we deliberately restore the split and bring subject and object together into a particular kind of new unity . . . [T]he experience of the inner and the outer coinciding...is consciously brought about in the arts, through the conscious acceptance of the as-if-ness of the experience and the conscious manipulation of a malleable material" (13). Field's language smacks of Jungian categories as she stresses the need to bring together in balance what Jung refers to as the anima and animus. Field, like Jung before her, considers creativity to be both a temporarily transcendental process and a more enduringly therapeutic, personality-transforming activity. That is, creativity is an act of reparation, not a working out of fantasy or trauma, not a scream of pain or a shout of anger.

Object-relations psychoanalysts like D. W. Winnicott, Melanie Klein, and Heinz Kohut agree and also see creativity as a basic developmental end. By "creativity" they mean not only artistic creation, but also a wide range of experiences and activities (Kirschner, 189). Winnicott stated that "either individuals live creatively and feel that life is worth living or else they cannot live creatively and are doubtful about the value of living." Creativity for him is a necessary manifestation of being alive, but he also notes that one cannot create unless one's sense of self (what Freud calls the ego) is strong enough to allow such activity. Further, Winnicott claims that one can only achieve a secure sense of self through the mother's nurturance and care. And so we are back again to the central fixation on the mother, the "good-enough" mother or the part-object mother, the breast (Playing and Reality, 83-4). This is a fixation large enough for another essay, but suffice it to say that male artists have been privileged in a society that positions women as caretakers for the nurturance and maintenance of masculine fantasies (cf. Jouve).

More recently a critic like Camille Paglia has (rather notoriously) claimed that creativity is intrinsically male: "Man, the sexual conceptualizer and projector, has ruled art because art is his Apollonian response towards and away from woman." For her, women only create when their masculine side dominates. The female poets Paglia discusses—Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson—are in her opinion psychically androgynous, in fact, much more masculine in their psyches than feminine. With female commentators like this, women writers hardly need detractors (31).

With this theoretical background in mind, I would like to begin my examination of Charlotte Brontë by asking if creativity is the product of internal conflict or
the imagination’s method of dealing with external forces imposed upon the individual? By using trauma theory as one explanation for creativity, I will argue that Brontë’s novels are the creations of an author who created protagonists who then vicariously enacted and reenacted Brontë’s own psychic script: betrayals and disappointments in her mother, and later in both her father and the father’s surrogate, her French instructor Constantin Heger. Brontë accessed melancholy as a source for her creativity; she worked out individual conflicts, and forged textual representations that figured as objectifications of her sufferings. And suffering works creatively by inflicting itself upon the individual through external forces that then become manifest as internal trauma. Brontë began her adult writing career in heavy drag. That is, she assumed the ponderous and humorless persona of William Crimsworth and relived in all its masochistic misery her teaching apprenticeship in Brussels under the alternatingly attentive and stern tutelage of M. Constantin Heger and his wife. When Brontë recast that frustrating pedagogical experience in her first adult novel, The Professor (written 1846; publ. 1857), she chose to position herself as a male tutor infatuated with “his” employer, Mlle. Zoé Rueter, characterized by Crimsworth as a bright shiny apple, the apple that tempted Eve to eat in the garden of Eden: in other words, the very embodiment of sexual temptation (ch. 12; p. 96). The “apple” as in the “apple of one’s eye” will recur as an expression in both Jane Eyre and Villette, but at this early stage of her writing career the use of the apple suggests that food and forbidden sexuality are intertwined in Brontë’s imagination in a particularly potent manner. Later, of course, we learn that wounds (as in attempting to soothe pain through food) are also an integral part of the recipe she was attempting to concoct in order to reshape and thereby conquer her pain.

Mlle. Reuter is Brontë’s first unflattering portrait of her rival and nemesis Madame Heger, although the good Madame will appear later metamorphosed into the persecutory Miss Scatcherd in Jane Eyre and the spying Madame Beck in Villette. While flirting outrageously with Crimsworth every evening in her enclosed garden, Rueter was all the while secretly engaged to the male director of the neighboring school, one M. Pelet, a spiteful portrait of M. Heger himself as a womanizing foreigner, willing to condone even adultery as part of his marriage of convenience to a corrupt (read: Catholic and foreign) woman. All this appears as just so much literary wish-fulfillment on Brontë’s part, pathetic and desperate if it were not also so sad. But the wound that we begin to recognize in Brontë is first displayed in The Professor as the gaping hole of loss, desertion, betrayal and abandonment by not one parent, but two. In mourning the loss of Pelet and Reuter as idealized parentsubstitute/lovers, Brontë establishes the leitmotif that will continue to haunt both her life and her novels: the death of the mother followed by the emotional withdrawal of the father into a shadowy authoritarian figure, harsh in his judgments and parsimonious in his bestowal of love.

Charlotte Brontë hungered all her life for love, and we can see this hunger as a form of insatiable longing and frustrated desire displayed over and over again in her four major novels, not to mention the obsessively compulsive and neurotic “juvenilia” that consumed her writing life until she was thirty years old (cf. Hoeveler and Jadwin, 16-33). Brontë began using food imagery to embody her characters’ emotional needs and to cauterize their wounds in The Professor, and she continued the device throughout her writing career. In fact, her final novel, Villette, is a
much more sophisticated, self-conscious, and self-critical rewrite of her earlier version of the same story in *The Professor*. Throughout all her novels Brontë told and retold narratives of abuse and sagas of pain, all ending in stylized and more or less unrealistically triumphant conclusions, endings that in fact do not begin to elide the agony that has been on display throughout each of these texts.

One might ask, however, why is it important to recognize in Brontë’s novels the enactment of personal as well as social or historical trauma? Does such a reading change our interpretation of Brontë or her works? Gilbert and Gubar (336–71), as well as most recent critics of Brontë, have tended to privilege her supposedly liberal feminist agenda, asserting that her works can be read as social, political, cultural, or religious analyses of middle-class women’s position in mid-nineteenth-century British society. But I would assert that Brontë’s fictions provide one test case for revealing the cognitive value of trauma as a source for literary creativity. In her novels Brontë opened and dissected the wounds of her childhood and early adulthood. She used her fiction as a form of therapy, reshaping and replaying her life and its major crises almost as if she were turning an object around in her hand, looking at her wounds from different angles in order to understand and thereby control them. All of this is to say that literature is written by individuals in the grip of fantasies and pain who then externalize their particular complexes of fantasies onto the characters in their works.

This observation leads us once more to Freud. In *Interpretations of Dreams*, Freud claims that a dream is not a fantasmagoria, but a text to be deciphered, and he observes that it is in the very nature of sexuality to have a traumatic effect on the ego; therefore, he justifies the connection between sexuality, trauma, and defense. For Freud, fantasies are the conscious articulations of a lack, a loss of the psychic plentitude we experienced in childhood, while in both fantasies and dreams the ego dominates and determines all the actions and consequences so that the lack is denied. Most fantasies, therefore, center on scenarios of self-aggrandizement and are structured around a narrative in which the ego regains a protective home, loving parents, and autoerotic objects suitable for affection. As we will see, Brontë’s heroines do struggle toward establishing an idealized family of their own, with Jane extravagantly succeeding where Lucy only partly does.

Freud would later resort to an explanation that he called “primal fantasies of phylogenetic endowment,” claiming that all fantasies are not individual, but traces of a racial or primeval experience. For Freud the primal fantasies that recur in all individuals—and by extension, the human race—are all narratives of origin: the primal scene and voyeuristic fantasies, the upsurge of sexuality with its concomitant fantasies of seduction, the origin of the difference between the sexes and its manifestation in the fantasies of beating and castration (qtd. Laplanche and Pontalis, 22). Clearly we can chart these fantasies within the narrative of *Jane Eyre*, a novel that takes us from the primal scene (the Red Room), through seduction scenarios (the Rochester and St. John proposals), to finally a variety of female and male beating and castration fantasies (Jane’s public humiliation as a liar, the aborted wedding and Rochester’s maiming by fire). *Jane Eyre’s* popularity and longevity as a novel, I would claim, have been based precisely on the very intense psychic power of these explicit fantasy-formations, while *Villette’s* more compromised status results from its failure to conform to and use these same fantasies.
With Freud’s theories in mind I would suggest that the original childhood traumas for Brontë were the death of her mother, the emotional withdrawal of her father, and the sudden deaths of her two older sisters. But the second wounding, the “adult” version of the same trauma—the sexual rejection by M. Heger and the emotional distancing that both Heger and his wife imposed on her—was even more psychologically devastating, a trauma so severe that she was compelled to reenact it over and over again in her fiction, mingling and transmuting her pain with the imagery of food rejected and consumed, food sought and expelled. Like someone in the grip of an alternately compulsive need to binge and purge, Brontë depicts over and over again heroines who can never experience satiation and who hunger endlessly for a food that is actually love and a love that has been displaced and represented as food.

In fact, one is tempted to wonder if Charlotte Brontë on some level did not blame her father for the deaths of her two elder beloved sisters at Cowan Bridge School, the prototype for Lowood. Much is always made of the Reverend Patrick Brontë’s swift removal of Charlotte and Emily from the school, but his action and paternal concern were just too little and too late for poor Elizabeth and Maria Brontë. The deaths of her two elder sisters in the typhus epidemic that swept through the school could only have reactivated the wound of desertion and abandonment that Charlotte suffered initially when her mother died and left Charlotte motherless when she was five years old. And later, when she understood her mother’s reproductive history, did she not blame her father for her mother’s death at such an early age? The critic and biographer, of course, can never know the answers to these questions, but what strikes one as odd is that no one has even dared to pose the questions in relation to the anger that surges throughout Brontë’s novels. Surely the amount of rage and hatred that is displaced onto the Reverend Brocklehurst and the self-absorbed curates in Shirley has to arouse our suspicions about Brontë’s attitude toward her own father. Surely her obsession with slashing and burning men in clerical collars cannot fool us into believing that Charlotte, like her sister Anne, was a totally devout catechist. And finally her decision to marry the Reverend Arthur Nicholls can be seen less as an act of affirmation than an attempt to deny, consciously and unconsciously, her rage against her own father and the legacy he had left her as an absent signifier.

We can also, however, read the melancholy of both the young Jane and Lucy in light of Julia Kristeva’s work Black Sun. For Kristeva, the melancholic mourns not a lost object, but the failure to find an acceptable object for her sadness because she has not been able to separate fully from her mother. The psychic loss cannot be appropriately symbolized because it has never actually taken place. The melancholic, however, has one positive response to this psychic impasse; she possesses the capacity to turn the loss into a gain, as it were, through the manipulations of language and art in which absence and presence interact so that the control of linguistic signs in the pursuit of an ideal form—some type of art—substitutes for melancholic loss. Art and language heal melancholia through their endless capacity to put signifiers into interplay in a sort of infinite fort-da game. The reeling back of the body of the dead mother and controlling the loss through another telling of the tale—modified and slightly revised over and over again—constitutes the core of the Brontë ur-text. Recall that in The Professor, William Crimsworth is able to...
establish his own family only after he comes into the possession of the portrait of his long-dead mother. Or consider how Jane gains two surrogate mothers when she recovers her Rivers cousins, Diana and Mary. And finally, the heroine of Shirley, Caroline Helstone, achieves her marital happiness only after discovering her long-lost mother Mrs. Pryor, the governess of Shirley. Mothers keep being resurrected in Brontë's first three novels, but the powerful fantasy of death denied is very noticeably absent in Villette. The closest Lucy comes to finding a mother occurs when Madame Walravens approaches like some wraith from hell, some phallic and perverse mother intent on eliminating Lucy's existence, not saving her for marital bliss with Paul. Brontë is a creator of a series of fantasy- formations that we recognize as novels, but I would claim that what she is actually doing is excavating her own psychic underworld, her own unresolved traumas and wounds.

In Villette we might ask, what are we to make of Lucy's overdetermined reaction to the identity of Justine-Marie on the night of the fête and her later hysteria when she attacks the lifeless costume of a nun left on her spinster's bed. Both suggest all too clearly Freud's definition of hysteria: the hysterical suffers from a psychic trauma whose origin she does not know or has repressed, yet which has remained as a memory trace in her psyche. Freud labels these memories "pathogenic," and he notes that hysterical patients suffer from incompletely abreacted psychical traumas. Secondly, the gap in conscious knowledge between the trauma and the partial memory of it causes what Freud calls the "hysterical conversion," that is, the somatization of conflictual unconscious representations. According to Freud, "hysterical symptoms are nothing other than unconscious fantasies brought into view through 'conversion,'" all of which is another way of saying that the body is compelled to act out its psychical overload either through excitation (tears, fits, hallucinations) or various forms of inhibitions (melancholy, paralysis, catatonic depressions). The gap, then, between knowledge about the trauma and the ability to process it consciously, constitutes the very origin of hysteria (qtd. Laplanche and Pontalis, 26-8).

The theories of Nicolas Abraham are also, however, relevant here, particularly his notion of the "phantom," which he labels an "invention of the living" designed to objectify "the gap that the concealment of some part of a loved one's life produced in us. The phantom is, therefore, also a metapsychological fact. Consequently, what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others" (287). Brontë would appear throughout her novels to be haunted by the death of her mother, but it is also possible to suggest that she is actually haunted by the gap in her very living father's consciousness, his secret guilt over the fate of his wife replayed in the fiction as the secret that Rochester hid in the attic or the secret that M. Paul hides in the Walravens' den.

The case studies of Nicholas Abraham have identified this syndrome and his description bears an uncanny resemblance to the metapsychological dynamics of Brontë's female characters and their fictional father-figures. For Abraham, the essence of trauma is the fact that children are haunted by the unresolved and secret sexual and psychic histories of their parents in such a way that the children themselves come to embody the tombs that are enclosed within the psyches of their parents, whether living or dead (289). Brontë's endless repetition of the essentially same story in all of her adult novels, not to mention the monotony of the juvenilia, suggests what Freud would recognize as a displacement and recapitulation of the
death instinct. I would claim that the persistently self-haunted quality of Brontë’s novels reveals less about the political and cultural climate of nineteenth-century Britain than it does about her own personal and familial saga of pain. Virtually every character in Villette has been wounded, emotionally traumatized, or has suffered some severe loss in his or her life, and yet those people all limp on through life, and sometimes those lives are very long indeed. Again we can recall Freud’s query about trauma: is trauma to be understood as the direct and immediate brush with death or is trauma the experience of surviving that near-fatal disaster and yet to be forced to relive it repeatedly in dreams and painful memories?

In Brontë’s case, she conceals the initial wound—her mother’s death, her father’s guilt, and her own survival—only to have the original lack, the primordial trauma, reactivated when Heger decisively rejects her and closes her out of his familial circle. Brontë was able to triumph in Jane Eyre through the conscious manipulations of fantasy-formations that position the orphan heroine as the victor over her own and her father-lover’s castration and mutilation. But by the time she wrote Villette, Brontë stood virtually alone within the shattered shell of her family circle, propping up her craggy, guilty, and increasingly delusional father. Fantasy-formations were no longer adequate, even as fictional refuge. There could be no marriage and children for Lucy and M. Paul because there could be no escape from the series of traumatic losses that Lucy (as well as Brontë) had suffered throughout her life. The tomb and the phantoms of lost loved ones that had haunted Brontë throughout her life finally closed in on her. The tragic irony, of course, is that Charlotte was determined to deny her past and marry yet another small-time curate. She was destined, one is tempted to say compelled, to relive her mother’s fate and she did so in alarmingly short order.