Quest for Her God: Emily Bronte's Christianity

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In Emily Bronte's poems and novel limitations of human existence are dramatized in the form of the inevitable separation of the lovers. If Augusta forsakes her loved one, it is not she who is actually to blame. Though Heathcliff accuses Catherine of marrying Linton, reaffirming their separation, she is not truly responsible for its occurrence. Their separation and the tragedy ensuing on it are predetermined by an inevitable necessity in the mortal world. Its ultimate cause is in the nature of human existence as it is established.

It may be inescapable for this Bronte to strike the reader as being infinitely melancholic. But full experience of her work discloses that "her imagination" is not "more sombre than sunny."[1] Although both her poems and novel deal initially with life on this earth, which is tragic to all appearances, behind the tragic darkness we catch beams of light coming from above. If we call, say, *Wuthering Heights* a tragedy, we should remember also that the tragic in the novel is so counterbalanced by the implicit assertion of hope that it is, in the final analysis, transformed into something other than a mere tragedy. Perhaps Emily Bronte's only novel can more properly be described as a comedy in the way that *Paradise Lost* is one, which moves from a state of division and turmoil to union and peace.

As with the development of *Wuthering Heights*, so with the growth of Bronte's inner life. Emily Bronte's youth, which ironically coincided with the better part of her life, was spent in quest of her God before anything else: aspirations to be one with the Universal Spirit were the most pronounced

feature of her inner experience. While we don't know what strife her soul may have had in the intervening years, it is certain that out of it she came victorious:

No coward soul is mine
No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere
I see Heaven's glories shine
And Faith shines equal arming me from Fear

O God within my breast
Almighty ever-present Deity
Life, that in me hast rest
As I Undying Life, have power in Thee

Vain are the thousand creeds
That move men's hearts, unutterably vain,
Worthless as withered weeds
Or idlest froth amid the boundless main

To waken doubt in one
Holding so fast by thy infinity
So surely anchored on
The steadfast rock of Immortality

With wide-embracing love
Thy spirit animates eternal years
Pervades and broods above,
Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates and rears

Though Earth and moon were gone
And suns and universes ceased to be

And thou wert left alone
Every Existence would exist in thee

There is not room for Death
Nor atom that his might could render void
Since thou art Being and Breath
And what thou art may never be destroyed. (H. 191)[2]

Written in the very last part of her career as a poet, this poem, often spoken of as the conclusion of the Bronte philosophy, gives us a complete idea of the spiritual peace she won at the end of her odyssey. Alone with Him who exists within her as a power, she seems happily at rest in and with the very essence of the Universe.

Emily Bronte's spirit was strongly independent. So was her religious attitude. In her letter to Mrs Gaskell Mary Taylor tells how Emily's religion was her own business:

> One time I mentioned that someone had asked me what religion I was of (with a view to getting me for a partisan), and that I had said that was between God and me. Emily (who was lying on the hearthrug) exclaimed, 'That's right'. This was all I ever heard Emily say on religious subjects.[3]

Besides her whole-hearted sympathy with Taylor, a Dissenter, in keeping God to herself, the scarcity of evidence of Bronte's religious position is all that is evinced here: not much should be gathered from this account. Nevertheless, what we see here is likely to be the first step to our penetration into Bronte's

religious thought because it makes irresistible our examination of the degree to which her God can be identified with Christian God.

Emily Bronte has never been fully dissociated from the label 'unchristian' or even 'antichristian' to this day. For the early reviewers of *Wuthering Heights* it was one of the most "repellent" books ever written, with Heathcliff "odiously and abominably pagan."[4] When Charlotte Bronte wrote as follows in her preface to the second edition of the same novel, she epitomized contemporary responses to the book:

> Heathcliff, indeed, stands unredeemed; never once swerving in his arrow-straight course to perdition, from the time when "the little black-haired swarthy thing, as dark as if it came from the Devil," was first unrolled out of the bundle and set on its feet in the farmhouse kitchen, to the hour when Nelly Dean found the grim, stalwart corpse laid on its back in the panel-enclosed bed, with wide-gazing eyes that seemed "to sneer at her attempt to close them, and parted lips and sharp white teeth that sneered too."...
>
> Whether it is right or advisable to create beings like Heathcliff, I do not know: I scarcely think it is....[5]

The same note of condemnation was repeatedly struck in later years, and Victorian England, after all, failed to come to terms with this "immoral" book.

It is true that the present century, particularly after the 1920s, has seen critics increasingly in favor of the novel, till at last it is commonly acclaimed as a masterpiece of fiction. But this is by no means because Bronte was reinstated as Christian, but because critics ceased to speak in terms of whether her novel is Christian or unchristian; the new century had a different standard to

judge a work of art, by which what is "pre-moral" in *Wuthering Heights* was generally appreciated.

Overshadowed like this by the more arresting discussions of whether Bronte is immoral or pre-moral, contemporary or timeless, social or cosmic, at no time in the history of the Bronte criticism has her true religious identity been deservedly pursued. The result is that the old label produced by the Victorian identification of morality with Christianity is left over: today still Bronte is, if religious categorization is to be made, felt to be unchristian.[6] Whether this is actually the case with her or not is a matter for debate. Yet, it is undebatably true that when a quest for God, as we have seen, was a major concern of her heart, Emily Bronte won't come into her own until the true facts of her religion are disclosed.

To the narrator of "The Butterfly," the most metaphysical of Bronte's essays in French, the whole creation seems as if it were a mistake, a machine for bringing forth only evil. In the ugly caterpillar which hunts the lives of others till its own life is hunted he sees a "sad image of the earth and its inhabitants." All created beings seem to him to be engaged in a constant act of murder in order for themselves to live on. The recognition that "life exists on the principle of destruction" darkens his thought so much that he cannot but wonder why "we celebrate the day of our birth, and we praise God that we entered such a world," why God did not annihilate man immediately after his first sin.

The next moment, however, when the speaker sees a butterfly fluttering through the trees, his perspective changes radically. He is suddenly aware that just as there can be no butterfly without a caterpillar, so there can be no "eternal realm of happiness and glory" without this insane world and its gradual exhaustion of the allotted measure of evil. Solaced by this realization, he concludes his soliloquy with the apocalyptic picture of the final transformation of the world:

> God is the God of justice and mercy; then, assuredly, each pain that he inflicts on his creatures, be they human or animal, rational or irrational, each suffering of our unhappy nature is only a seed for that divine harvest which will be gathered when sin having spent its last drop of poison, death having thrown its last dart, both will expire on the funeral pyre of a universe in flame, and will leave their former victims to an eternal realm of happiness and glory.[7]

There is no room for disclaiming that the God mentioned here is Christian God and that this essay as a whole expresses a Christian view of the creation. In reminding us that we are, as mortals, no mere cosmic accidents, whose lives have no meaning, in asserting that our earthly existence is the inevitable and necessary prelude to that "eternal realm of happiness and glory" Bronte's vision of nature as it is expounded here matches the traditional Christian description of the state of humanity, the state after the fall and before the new birth. No less noteworthy in the present context can be the fact that the traditional doctrines of the original sin, its outcome and the ultimate salvation offer the essay the very base of its thematic structure.

Another thing that is to be observed here is how deeply Bronte's religious mind is colored by the two forms of Protestantism which were around the sisters to influence them, Evangelicalism and Methodism. One glimpse of these influences at work is given by Mrs Gaskell. She shows the Rev. Bronte asking one of his daughters (Maria, the oldest) "what was the best mode of spending time," and being answered, "By laying it out in preparation for a happy eternity."[8] The Evangelical insistence on the rejection of all pleasure now for the sake of eternal pleasure in heaven could not be more succinctly expressed. With her consciousness (or over-consciousness) of man's exile from heaven, his natural depravity,[9] and the inevitability of "each

suffering of our unhappy nature," Emily Bronte too when writing "The Butterfly" seems to be obsessed with the Evangelical beliefs in the inherent corruption of the mortal world and the fear of God and hell and the need for a saving relation to God.

Evidence of Bronte's debt to Methodism can be found most notably around these words: ". . . when sin having spent its last drop of poison,. . . ." Given the context, this can safely be taken as based on that idea already voiced in a poem antedating the essay by three years: "All doomed alike to sin and mourn/Yet all with long gaze fixed afar,/Adoring virtue's distant star" (H. 112). Here we see what is to become one of the central ideas in Emily Bronte's religious philosophy, the inevitability of sin and suffering, and in this, though she does develop his theory by condemning "all" men "alike to sin and mourn," Bronte reveals herself indebted to the Calvinistic Methodist, George Whitefield, who said: ". . . God intends to give saving grace, through Jesus Christ, only to a certain number; and. . .the rest of mankind, after the fall of Adam, being justly left of God to continue in sin, will at last suffer that eternal death which is its proper wages."[10]

After these observations we have made, it is freshly impressive how Emily Bronte's deeper feelings were dominated by the religion to which she was subjected, so strongly does her mind appear to be bound up with the Christian outlook, traditional and Victorian. But the real truth of her religion is not so simple as this. It is impossible to think that such an independent spirit as Bronte could be entirely devoted to the creeds of the churches. Closer study of the essay will surely show that as is the case with any writing by Bronte, it is not without the impress of her uniqueness.

As Tom Winnifrith reports, the spiritual world in early and mid-Victorian England was filled with voices "taking eternal punishment for granted and waxing eloquent on its terrors."[11] These voices came from both Methodism and Evangelicalism to trouble the Bronte sisters. One can easily be reminded

of how intensely Charlotte Bronte disliked this doctrine by her portrayal of the Evangelical schoolmaster Robert Brocklehurst, who instills in little Jane the fear of "burning there [in hell] for ever."[12] The Rev. Carus Wilson, model for the fictional Brocklehurst, to whose sinister influences both Charlotte and Emily were exposed, was not the only one who frightened the sisters with this notion, nor was he the most conspicuous. It is the Rev. Patrick Bronte himself who must bear the most obvious responsibility for all the terrors that disturbed his children. Under the full influence of the then fashionable two religious movements, he was only too eager to stress the eternal damnation of the wicked soul. To the children who had been engrossed in the creation of heroes and heroines of Byronic villainy a doctrine which said that evil thoughts were signs of impending damnation must have come as a great terror and impediment.

Now Emily Bronte defies this. In her philosophy, if it is true to say that no men can be kept from sin and suffering here below, it is equally true to say that no souls suffer any more torment after death:

Shall these long, agonising years
Be punished by eternal tears?

No; *that* I feel can never be;
A God of *hate* could hardly bear
To watch through all eternity
His own creations dread despair!

The pangs that wring my mortal breast,
Must claim from Justice lasting rest;
Enough, that this departing breath
Will pass in anguish worse than death.

If I have sinned, long, long ago
That sin was purified by woe:
I've suffered on through night and day;
I've trod a dark and frightful way. (H. 133)

Corresponding with the last paragraph of the essay, this poem embodies a conviction that through suffering on this earth the woe sin brings one removes its power over the next world, though in claiming merely "lasting rest" after death it is one step behind the essay. While for Bronte in "The Butterfly" one is not only saved from eternal punishment in death, but he attains a realm of everlasting happiness and glory. Thus objecting to a doctrine the established churches have imposed on her, Bronte bends it to her own way of thinking. It is in a God who promises man an endless joy to be had with death that she proclaims a full measure of trust.

"The Butterfly" ends with the promise of the glorious hereafter. This 'happy ending' and the uniqueness of her conclusion may combine to give its readers the impression that Bronte is thoroughly pleased with this interpretation of the creation. The truth is, however, that we have at least one strong reason for deciding to the contrary. For had her feelings been in complete harmony with this interpretation, she surely would not have written such poems as "The Prisoner" and "No Coward Soul."

The darkest meaning of her theory of purification by woe is that in the present life we are doomed to sin and suffering, no matter what we do; heaven being reserved for future, our earthly existence is eternally accursed. It is only too natural as well as inescapable that this consciousness should lead to a sense of limitations of the mortal world and even to the glorification of death, because death is the only possible way out of that inevitable sin and woe. This psychology that was apparently strong in Bronte at this stage of her thinking life is more clearly externalized in "Portrait: King Harold on the

Eve of the Battle of Hastings," another of her Brussels essays, where the writer's preoccupation with death as a liberator is dramatized.

In peace Harold is kept prisoner by his court, by the political system and chain of power of which he is at once the head and the victim: ". . . of all his people he is the least free, a creature without courage to act or think for himself, . . . knowing that his body is actually a prisoner, with his kingdom for prison and his subjects for guards." In his palace, that is, he would be entirely passive, dependent on the machinations of his ministers and the pleasures of his people. But the battlefield, "without palace, without ministers, without courtiers, without pomp, without luxury," has transformed Harold from King to hero, a national symbol upon whose fate and strength rest the safety and existence of his people. His emotions purified by the importance of his cause, Harold becomes larger than life: "A soul divine, visible to his fellow men as to his Creator, gleams in his eyes." Now he is beyond the reach of any mortal power. "Death alone can gain victory over his arms. To her he is ready to yield, for Death's touch is to the hero what the striking off his chains is to the slave."[13]

We have here two characteristically Brontean phenomena. One is her use of war as a bringer of death. In spite of the fact, it should be remembered, that Gondal is a world where an abundance of deaths of all sorts are died, suicide is few and far between: its only obvious example is that shown by Fernando De Samara, who upbraiding Augusta for her treachery "go[es] to prove if God, at least, be true." (H. 85) It seems that even in the wild extravagance of her imaginary creation Bronte's religious mentality held suicide to be the last thing to be exhibited. Now if suicide should be reserved, then war is decidedly the next best thing, because it leads coveters of death like Harold and a great number of Gondal characters to not a suicidal yet as active a death. It is more than symbolic that Bronte the essayist picks out the moment immediately before the outbreak of a battle to dramatize the truly

liberating event of a prisoner's life.

This takes us to the second thing peculiar to Bronte, that is, the image of the soul in prison. That Bronte saw the imprisonment of the soul as an inescapable and ever-threatening condition of life can be evidenced by the frequency with which this theme recurs in her works. This particular perception is the natural and inevitable development of her own theory, which she was bound to go through, if only to lead herself to a greater vision. In her theory as it stands now the contrast between the mortal and immortal worlds is an undeniable reality: this contrast takes the form in her picture of the infinite distance between the apparently Godforsaken state of fallen man and the blessed state in heaven with the ever-present joy of intimacy with God. If there is any touch with Him to be felt here below, ironically enough it is in His promise of the happy hereafter, or, to be exact, in our belief in that promise. Emily Bronte can never be satisfied with this, and her dissatisfaction finds expression in the recurrent image of imprisonment or exile.

As will be generally agreed, the thematic structure of Bronte's novel and poems is that of a pilgrimage, in which we follow the soul's ascent from captivity to liberty; from prison to freedom. It is impossible to say that her struggle for liberty came to a close with her philosophy as propounded in the essays, for it was still to receive an important development to see its completion: true liberty, after all, was not attained until in her last days when she wrote *Wuthering Heights* and "No Coward Soul." It is with this recognition in mind that we should think about the last phase of Emily Bronte the philosopher.

> . . . the thing that irks me most is this shattered prison, after all. I'm tired, tired of being enclosed here. I'm wearing to escape into that glorious world, and to be always there; not seeing it dimly through tears, and yearning for it through the walls of an aching

heart; but really with it, and in it.[14]

> . . . heaven did not seem to be my home; and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth; and the angels were so angry that they flung me out into the middle of the heath on the top of Wuthering Heights; where I woke sobbing for joy.[15]

Both these wishes are the first Catherine's. The whole drama of *Wuthering Heights* comes down here. The opposition of the two wishes is the cause of the tremendous storm that swirled over the fictional moors, and when it was appeased, the two opposites were harmonized. This is the symbolism with which Emily Bronte presented the evolution of her thought. But how could the seemingly irreconcilable opposition of the yearning for "that glorious world" and the disenchantment with heaven ever be reconciled? And what is the meaning of that ultimate reconciliation?

Bronte's earlier world is that of the unavailability of God, a realm where contact between God and man is lost. When this is the case, all one can do is to aspire for heaven where union with Him is promised. Bronte failed to find her heart's repose in this. Not that she was impatient and could not wait for death to take her to the promised bliss. The idea of this world being Godforsaken was something she could never bring herself to accept.

Now the second quotation has been frequently taken as strong ground for affirming Bronte's departure from Christianity in favor of some pre-Christian belief. Yet this way of reacting to the passage is by no means doing justice to its true purport, nor should we attach too much weight to the literal meaning of the heroine's disenchantment with heaven. The real message of the passage is that the reconciliation of our antithesis is possible only if "that glorious world" is attained not in heaven but on this earth. By this Bronte is not denying heaven in the orthodox Christian sense; Catherine's disillusionment is

nothing less than a dramatic symbolification of the author's true aim, which was to restore the availability of God here and now, to establish the relationship between God and man as it should be in this world.

For Bronte in her later years God, besides being a transcendent deity living above human activities, had to be an immanent being, pervading everything and living in and with it, like the soft wind blowing over the heath. To the mind of this Bronte the way Victorian Christianity, with its emphasis on rituals and complicacy of theologies and absolute transcendence of God, was institutionalized was the root of man's isolation from God. What Catherine and Heathcliff did with their truly existential love, with a search for their own version of salvation, was, after all, to liberate Christianity from its enslavement to religious institutionalism and thereby regain communion with God in this present life.

What about the salvation of Bronte's own soul? Did she really feel what she expressed in *Wuthering Heights?* Was she with a sense of triumph when she was through her pilgrimage? No doubt she was. We have at least one piece of poem to testify to it in that great credo of hers with which we began our consideration (see pp. 124–5). Here she enjoys "Heaven's glories" with as great immediacy as possible, instead of expecting them in the future, for hers is "ever-present Deity" breathing in the depths of her soul. Clearly enough, in enjoying heaven as a present reality she obliterates barriers between heaven and earth, thus making our earthly existence part of eternity. What is striking in this credo is that God is possessed by her in a most existential way: He comes to her as Power to live by and in, shielding her from any fear imaginable in this world of woe. No more does she have the fear of death: now that she is one with Being and Breath, wherever are death's sting and victory?

Emily Bronte has been not infrequently called a pantheist. The mistake of this definition is now obvious: the fifth and sixth stanzas of our poem will

refute it most forcibly. True, her God is immanent, present now in the depths of her spirit as well as everywhere in nature. But at the same time, He is transcendent and exists utterly beyond this world: "Thy spirit animates eternal years/Pervades and broods above." However ubiquitous, God can never be identified with the creation with which He lodges.

Though Earth and moon were gone
And suns and universes ceased to be
And thou wert left alone
Every Existence would exist in thee

Eternally different is God from His works, for He "changes, sustains, dissolves, creates and rears."

What of another of Bronte's definitions, that which styles her a mystic? To be sure, she was one. "No Coward Soul" cannot have been written by anyone but a mystic. We have traced the development of Bronte's religious thought and now are about to conclude that only toward the end of her life was her philosophy completed and that *Wuthering Heights* and H. 191, both written two years before her death, are proclamations of the truth she had reached. This is not to say that not until her philosophy was fully established was Bronte the mystic visited by God. Not only is it unrealistic, but the evidence shows the contrary was true. Yet, it must be admitted that her earlier mystical experiences could not have brought half as much joy and rest to her heart, enslaved as she was by "enough of thought" (H.181)[16] coming from her religious background. In a most essential way, her struggle for liberty was a struggle out of Victorian Protestantism and her final assurance of God's presence within her breast, her consciousness of victory over it:

Vain are the thousand creeds

That move men's hearts, unutterably vain,
Worthless as withered weeds
Or idlest froth amid the boundless main

To waken doubt in one
Holding so fast by thy infinity
So surely anchored on
The steadfast rock of Immortality

The 1840s, which saw the reception of J. H. Newman into the Roman church, was the starter of a spiritual crisis that characterizes the Victorian age. Contemporaneous with the shocking defections of the 1840s and 1850s, another kind of apostasy was beginning to emerge, a scepticism which later Victorians were to call 'agnosticism.' In the face of the decay of Protestantism and the onrush of scientific findings any true Christian's urgency was to keep God from disappearing. It is precisely in this context that Emily Bronte should be set. We cannot know whether this mystical poet, endowed with special freedom and independence of spirit, felt it her mission to show on behalf of the troubled minds of her day how faith should be between God and each individual. Perhaps not. But her achievement was nothing short of that of a God's missionary.

Notes

1. Charlotte Bronte, "Editor's Preface to the New Edition of *Wuthering Heights,*" ed. David Daiches (The Penguin English Library, 1972), p. 39.
2. C. W. Hatfield (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Emily Jane Bronte* (Columbia U., 1941). All references to Bronte's poems in this essay are to this edition.
3. T. J. Wise and J. A. Symington (ed.), *The Brontes: Their Lives, Friendship, and Correspondence* (Penn., 1980), vol. I, p. 137.
4. Melvin R. Watson, "*Wuthering Heights* and the Critics," reprinted in Alastair Everitt

(comp.), '*Wuthering Heights*: An Anthology of Criticism' (London, 1967), p. 41.

5. Charlotte Bronte, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
6. This is particularly true, it may be said, of the Japanese students of Emily Bronte, though more noteworthy is the trend that they generally pay little attention to the religious implications of her writing.
7. Emily Bronte, "The Butterfly," *Five Essays Written in French*, trans. Lorine White Nagel (Texas, 1948), pp. 18-9.
8. Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Bronte* (The Penguin English Library, 1977), p. 94.
9. Bronte's awareness of this particular trait in humanity is specially notable in all the essays but "Portrait."
10. John Gillies, *Memoirs of Rev. George Whitefield* (New Haven, 1834), p. 632. It is to be contended that the dissimilarity between Bronte and Whitefield in this respect is no less significant than the similarity. I plan to take up this subject in my next article to give it a full consideration.
11. Tom Winnifrith, *The Brontes and Their Background* (Macmillan, 1973), p. 35. For the description of this paragraph, I am indebted to Winnifrith. See Chap. 3 of the same book: 'Heaven and Hell.'
12. Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre* (The Penguin English Library, 1971), p. 64
13. Emily Bronte, "Portrait: King Harold on the Eve of the Battle of Hastings," Nagel (trans.), *op. cit.*, p. 12.
14. Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights*, Daiches (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 196-7.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 120-1.
16. This poem, where a "Philosopher" who is fatigued with the thought of the divisions and conflicts of "Three Gods within this little frame" is enlightened by a "Seer" who has seen a Spirit that turns out to be the unity of the three, is, in my view, of considerable importance in that it depicts Bronte's inner self at the point where it begins to get away from the creeds of the time in favor of her own intuitive apprehension of God.