

Exploring the ‘Romantic in Emily Bronte’s Poetry: An Analysis’

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Abstract

Taking off from the recent renewed interest in this elusive writer of a considerably meager output but with such an immense reputation. This paper is an attempt to place, and simultaneously to question, Emily Bronte’s position within the Romantic tradition of literary studies. Working the way through the relatively unexplored terrain of her poetry, the analysis seeks to suggest that the erstwhile *Gondal Chronicles*, from which her collected poems have been culled, pre-empts the magnum-opus, *WutheringHeights*, and therefore they can be used as intertextual converging points that pre-figure Emily Bronte’s romantic ramifications. Besides the insightful ways in which her poetry relates with the Romantic concepts of *WutheringHeights*, in itself, it is enough proof of her creative imagination.

Keywords: Emily Bronte, Romantic, poetry, Wuthering Heights, Gondal.

Before taking off into this explorative journey, it is imperative to delineate the paradigms of the path being taken, to mark the cornerstones so to say, so that the quest does not dissipate into one of futility—beginning a new but not arriving at a different location.

So, perhaps, the first move is to ask a seemingly redundant question—‘What then is romanticism?’ To my mind a random summing up in a 1949 art magazine best captures the frame within which I would like to proceed (needless to say this is not the only directionality): ‘Whether philosophic, theologian or aesthetic, it (Romanticism) is the revolution in the European mind against thinking in terms of static mechanism and the reflection of the mind to the thinking in terms of dynamic organism. Its value are change, imperfection, growth, diversity, the creative imagination, the unconscious’. Magazine of Art.XLII (Nov. 1949, 11). It follows then that Romanticism has very little to do with things popularly thought of as romantic, although love (various manifestations) and passions most definitely, play a major role in its dynamics. But it is ‘imagination’—palpable, multifaceted, heterogeneous creative imagination—which is at the center of any romantic discourse.

It is this imagination that the Romantics tend to define and present as the ultimate shaping power and synthesizing faculty which enabled them to reconcile differences and oppositions in the world of appearances be it of the outer Nature or the inner self. Early Romantics, Wordsworth in particular, largely directed his creative imagination to dwell on the outer Nature and then through its via media to home in the inner self, and the gradually the later Romantics worked out the dialogues between the inner and the outer. Emily Bronte belongs to the later emphasis factoring her own inner being to map out the shape of the outside world—piecemealing and the outer her religiosity to shape her poesies. In the process many niches and corners remain still embedded lending her work a mystic, unknown, unfathomable quality that has come to be defined as ‘Romantic’, and sometimes the exposition of the inner gets distorted and vitiated into eerie, gothic forms—once again an aspect of the ‘Romantic’.

Known mainly for her single novelistic venture *WutheringHeights* (1847), Emily Bronte’s creativity is shrouded in a real veil of anonymity, just as her life is. It is only recently that interest in her poetry has arisen albeit vicariously to substantiate the hypothesizing about the genius who produced a fiction of such stature that it has grown to be regarded as a classic.

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Little is known directly of Emily Bronte—all that survives of her own words about herself is two letters and two diary papers written when she was thirteen and sixteen, and two birthday notes written at twenty-three and twenty-seven. She died at the age of thirty. Almost everything that is known about her comes from the writings of others, primarily Charlotte, her writer sister, whose *Shirley* is all about what Emily would have been had she been placed in health and prosperity. Emily Bronte's poems even did not appear as separate publications but as part of the *Gondal Chronicles* that the Bronte children created to channelize their creativity. Her poems were dramatic speeches of the Gondal characters. In 1844 Emily went through these pieces destroying some, revising others, and writing new ones for a collection for which she titled some as well. Love, death, isolation, rebellion mark these poems and make the archival repositories of information about a lesser known but famous writer.

Lucasta Miller's *The Bronte Myth* (2001), Juliet Barker's *The Brontes: A life in letters* (1997), Katherine Frank's *A Chainless Soul: A life of Emily Bronte* (1990) are some recent studies that recreate the woof and the warp of the elusive persona, Emily Bronte, jigsawing the puzzle of her life from the bits and pieces of her juvenilia—the childish entertainment shared with her sisters and brothers of creating elaborate and gory fantasy worlds in minuscule script on tiny scraps of paper which were remarkably preserved as the *Gondal Chronicles*. This revisioning of the life lived by Bronte children began with Elizabeth Gaskell's landmark *Life of Charlotte Bronte* (1857) and culminated into the formation of the *Bronte Society*, moving into unforeseen directions like the marketing of Emily Bronte Soap of an elusive fragrance of wild moors and the Bronte Natural Spring Water. All the rehabilitative projects have now canonized the Bronte sisters giving way to more and more studies, novels, plays, films—a satirical two-woman theatre piece called *Wuthering Looks* (1992), a novel called *The Brontes Went to Woolworth's* (1994), and a Warner Brothers movie *Devotion* (1946).

The extensive exercise has been to emphasize the aura of fame being built up about the intriguing life of an imaginative romance writer, Emily Bronte. It is not as if we are trying to invent facts, we only want to discover the deeper layers of a romantic ethos. Emily Bronte has, and understandably so, been placed within a tradition of eighteenth-century discourses on enthusiasm of both a poetical and religious nature since what she found in her father's library—the poetry of John Dennis and Edward Young—definitely influenced her young mind infusing it with a kind of spiritual sublimity and the idea of transport. To this received impetus she added her imaginative, passionate temperament and impregnated it with the themes she found around her own person—this resulted in a quaint romantic complex. There are marked strains of a preaching, didactic style resonating the American Methodist Jonathan Edwards and Barrows (1977) goes so far as to say that she manipulated Methodist hymn meter to create an anti-romantic genre. Marianne Thomahlen (1999) has traced theological implications in her poetry although she does acknowledge that hers is more akin to the Dickinsonian preoccupation with death rather than with religion.

However, modern critics are relatively unwilling to explore Emily Bronte's verse from an eighteenth-century perspective and position her assuredly within Romanticism. Although historically located between the Romantic and the Victorian eras, Bronte is rendered Romantic because of her temper and phrasing and considered pre-dated because of the ominous twilight infused with indistinct phantoms that envelop her world of poetry—"The Night of Storms has Passed" (1837) and "I See Around me Tombstones Grey" (1837). Her images recall the griming grisly specters in Blair's "The Grave" (1808) and the shadow shapes that howl amidst the midnight storm in Collin's "Ode to Fear" (1746). Indeed many of the Gondal's narrators speak as if they were products of the eighteenth century, engaging in epiphanic interludes, ecstatic visions and the sentimental outpourings replete with theological allusions.

Yet all said and done, Emily Bronte's poetic temperament steeped heavily on the side of Romanticism as these lines from "A Farewell to Alexandria" (1839) amply prove:

I've seen this dell in July's shine;
As lovely as an angel's dream;
Above, heaven's depth of blue divine;
Around, the evening's golden beam, (313)

Though we cannot reconstruct her as she was, from the sparse glimpses she gives us into the workings of her mind, but drawing inferences from her poems left behind one can see her preoccupation with the very same themes that recur in Keat's and Shelly's poetry.

Love is like the wild rose-briar
Friendship like the holly tree.
The holly is dark when the
Rose-briar blooms

But which bloom most constantly?(318)

For Emily love is a many faceted emotion, enbalmingbut heart-rending too—she can place it like an urn on a moving pedestal and see it rotate, now unhappy—

If grief for grief can touch thee
If answering woe for woe,
If any ruth can melt thee
Come to me now! (325)

And now yearning for a 'rich to die' moment:

Oh for the time when I shall sleep
Without identity!
And never care how rain may steep,
or snow cover me!(29)

..... Oh, for the day, when I shall rest,
And never suffer more! (28)

Despite the melancholic strain, what abounds in these poems is sweet lyricism as in 'Riches I hold in light Esteem'(1841) and 'A Day Dream' (1844). In 'To Imagination' (1844) Emily Bronte personifies imagination in the manner of the Romantics and 'How Beautiful the Earth is Still' (1845) is suffered with Romantic imagery 'No Coward is Mine' (1846) is undoubtedly her Romantic masterpiece.

A very distinct Romantic quality in Emily Bronte's poetry is mysticism and one can trace all the three stages of it—purgation, illumination and union with God—in her poetry. Ellen Moers (1977) believes that for Bronte the expanse of the moors created oceanic feelings so typical of mysticism. In 'High Waving, Weather, 'neath Stormy Blast' (1850) her mysticism is very pronounced, there is both her unerring apprehension of values, of the illusory quality of material things, even of the nature she so loved, and a certain vision of the one Reality behind all forms of life. This, and her description of ecstasy, of the all suffering joy of the inner life of one who has tasted this experience, mark her out as a true mystic. According to many critics one can see that Bronte knows that ordinary things hold the secret of the universe and that she has a sense of the continuousness of life and the oneness of God and man as expressed in 'No Coward Soul is Mine.' And in 'Remembrance' (1845) she extols the spirit:

Cold in the earth, and fifteen wild Decembers
From those brown hills, have melted into Spring.
Faithful, indeed, is the spirit that remembers
After such years of change and suffering! (23)

Like Emerson her imagination is transcendental, she can see deeply, intuitively into the presence of things:

O God within my breast,
Almighty ever-present Deity
Life, that in me has rest,
As I, undying life, have power in Thee
Vain are thousand creeds
That move men's hearts: unutterably vain,
Worthless as withered weeds,
Or idlest forth amid the boundless main. (360)

In one of her poems Bronte chooses the God within in favor of human-centered desires:

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 be
 And thou wert left alone,
 Every existence would exist in Thee. (361)

Her Romantic imagination parallels Coleridge's here. But in her most powerful she seems to be inspired by Shelley and Keats and yet her romanticism is not confined but grew gradually into a new perfection. Had she lived to be forty she would have been able to fulfill the promise that her earlier creativity holds. She had a lot to contribute to the romantic ethos, no dearth of the imaginative impulse, but time became a casualty. Her pathetic family conditions, her own stern self disciplined life were no deterrants to the flowering of her imagination—for those who live by imagination and find the real world empty of delight there is a supreme joy in filling its emptiness with the creations of their own mind. This can be seen in every poem she wrote and of course in *Wuthering Heights*. Her acquaintance with human nature as it existed outside herself was of the slightest, but within her imagination there lay a fertile teeming world to be captured and put to fancy:

And like myself lone, wholly lone,
 It sees the days' long sunlike glow;
 And like myself it makes its moan
 In unexhausted woe.
 Give we the hills our equal prayer;
 Earth's breezy hills and heaven's blue sea;
 We ask for nothing further here
 But our own hearts and liberty (327)

Since Emily Bronte wrote so little in her short life, it is difficult to appraise her work's magnanimity but there is no denying that there is in her store of creativity a rare power that forces one to forge relations with the unequalled masters of romantic aspirations—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelly and with those precursors who heralded the romantic impulse. Echoes from Gray find ample reverberations:

Well, some may hate and some may scorn,
 And some may quiet forget thy name,
 But my sad heart must ever mourn
 Thy ruined hopes, thy blighted fame! (319)

OR

Riches I hold in light esteem
 And love I taught to scorn
 And lust of fame was but a dream
 That vanished with the morn. (138)

What, however, is remarkable is the pronounced note of energy and sincerity accompanied with a subtle sonorous quality in her romantic imagery with which she portrays her passions, emotions, imagination. It is as though she were brought up to feel that certain forms of verse were the patterns of her inner being and she poured her emotions into them with such captivating honesty, that one can feel with her, for her:

Yes, holy be the resting place,
 Wherever those may'st lie;
 The sweetest winds breathe on thy face,
 The softest of the sky. (335)

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