

‘Visions Rise, and Change’: Emily Brontë’s Poetry and Male Romantic Poetry

MICHAEL O’NEILL

Harold Bloom once wrote that ‘Criticism is the art of knowing the hidden roads that go from poem to poem’.¹ His phrasing is poetic in its suggestiveness: the ‘knowing’ concedes or affirms itself to be an ‘art’, and rhymes itself with the ‘hidden roads that go’, as though the critic’s effort should be put into tracing secrets ‘hidden’ along what are, at the same time, ‘roads’. This essay will seek to walk down ‘roads’ leading from the work of the male Romantic poets into the imaginative hiding-places of that strangest and most haunting of literary *oeuvres*, the poetry of Emily Brontë. It will do so in the light of the conviction that the originality of Brontë’s individual talent emerges most clearly when set in relief against the major tradition — male Romantic poetry — that made it possible.

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Valuable perceptions have been offered by other critics on this subject. For example, Francis O’Gorman notes that ‘Emily Brontë’s poetry is in persistent negotiation with its Romantic inheritance’.² Again, Shelley’s west wind, according to Winfred Gérin,³ gusts into Emily Brontë’s ‘Aye there it is! It wakes tonight’, a poem which first appeared in published form in 1850, where it was printed by Charlotte Brontë with changes and additions.⁴ In proof of her assertion, Gérin quotes the lines, ‘And thou art now a spirit pouring / Thy presence into all’ (13–14), along with the account of the ‘thou’ as ‘A universal influence / From Thine own influence free — / A principle of life intense / Lost to mortality’ (17–20). Her suggestion of Shelleyan influence is also relevant to lines such as these: ‘Yes I could swear that glorious wind / Has swept the world aside’ (9–10). Brontë’s wind blows with an even more transformative power than Shelley’s, sweeping ‘the world aside’.

It belongs to a poetic scenario in which such power pours, not through the speaker, but through an addressed ‘thou’ whose ‘altered cheek’ (5) can be interpreted as evincing imaginative transformation, a thou who is seen by the speaker as a vessel for

inspiration. The poem affirms the force of such inspiration with succinct directness, as the 'thou' becomes 'a spirit pouring / Thy presence into all'. Brontë's echoic reworking of biblical phrasing ('I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh', Acts 2: 17) suggests that the 'spirit' is an immanent 'presence' rather than a transcendent entity. The recipient of inspiration has, indeed, turned into its agent, the influenced changed into a source of influence: 'A universal influence / From Thine own influence free' (17–18).

Such an 'influence', an unmoved mover of others, may be Brontë's tribute to Shelley; but it expresses, too, her desire to attain a similar condition of 'universal influence'. The poem moves between admiring spectator and an admired alter ego, between homage and self-assertion. Its diction may seem unguarded, but its syntax is canny. The intuition of 'a spirit pouring / Thy presence into all' speaks of an unbounded influx of spiritual 'presence'. Yet the stanza is elusively and loosely tied to the lines, already quoted, that open its predecessor: 'Yes I could swear that glorious wind / Has swept the world aside'. 'Yes', as at the start of the final stanza of Keats's 'Ode to Psyche', 'Yes, I will be thy priest' (50),⁵ commits itself, but it concedes a willed element in the commitment, while 'could swear' allows for what follows to be read as speculation rather than asserted reality.

Brontë's modes of incorporating Romantic visions often have a qualified feel. This is not to state that she undercuts such visions, but rather to argue that she contextualises them, enters them under the sign of hope, wish, desire. They emerge and return to shadowy lyrical narratives, sometimes associated with a never wholly reconstructable Gondal saga, sometimes not, compelling our imaginations, not always demanding conceptual assent. Poem after poem spins stories of voices, spirits, ghosts, sometime promising 'angel comfort' ('If grief for grief can touch thee', 11). Yet the 'mist' which permits the promise of 'golden visions' to seem more than fallacious is soon 'half withdrawn' so that invoking the longed-for 'thee' seems 'too late' and 'The barren mountain-side lies bare', even if memory of 'Thy darling shade' is still 'cherished' ('It is too late to call thee now', 5, 8, 5, 1, 6, 10). The evenness of the four-square hymnal forms accommodates a ricocheting between longing and stoic disappointment or acceptance: changes that are signalled by jerky reversals of syntax, conjunctions such as 'but' and 'yet', paradoxes ('But rapture made me weep', for instance, the fourth line of 'That wind I used to hear it swelling'), the interplay of tenses, the cry of feminine rhymes against the discipline of their masculine counterparts. Wind sweeps, heather sways, shadows pass — but the heart persists in its feelings, chording them in orchestrated, complex, endlessly enigmatic ways.

Such qualifying is typical of Romantic writers. In Shelley's *Epipsychidion*, clearly a poem of importance for Brontë, he anticipates the discovery in 'Aye there it is! It wakes tonight' of 'A principle of life intense / Lost to mortality' when he asks Emily, the poem's anima figure, to 'blot from this sad song / All of its much mortality and wrong' (35–36).⁶ Shelley's plea contains with itself the recognition that 'mortality and wrong' are hard to erase. Brontë's 'principle of life' is at once akin to a Platonic idea and close to a scientific abstraction, one that is 'Lost to mortality', a way of putting it that appears to play on a locution such as 'Lost to the world' and has the paradoxical effect of bringing 'loss' to mind. To be 'Lost to mortality' may be to transcend its imperfections too easily, and it is not quite the case that we identify wholly, as

Irene Tayler argues, with the 'visionary' who feels 'mortality' 'only as an impediment'.⁷ This 'principle of life' borrows the phrase used by Mary Shelley in her 1831 Introduction to *Frankenstein* to describe the issue which engaged Byron and Shelley in the 1816 Geneva conversations that led to the writing of *Frankenstein*.⁸ And yet Brontë delights in making this 'principle' 'intense' in a way that demolishes demarcations between the material and the spiritual as it calls to mind Shelley's own evocation in *Epipsychidion* of 'the intense, the deep, the imperishable, / Not mine but me' (391–92). What looks like a straightforward dualistic split in the final stanza between 'prisoned soul' (22) and earthly 'mould' (23) in the final stanza is a projection into the future of a glimpsed overcoming of 'mortality' through post-Shelleyan vision in the present. Yet the structure of the poem is itself a kind of verbal prison, even if one longing to break down the linguistic walls and bars that construct it.

To emphasize Emily Brontë's reworking of Romantic themes and tropes is simultaneously to recognise that Brontë is an unplaceable poet, who resists our categorizing endeavours. If, as Emma Mason observes, it is possible to see Brontë 'as a Romantic whose poetry accords as much with the sentiment of *Night Thoughts* as *Mont Blanc*',⁹ one would wish to add, straightaway, that Brontë is highly unlike Edward Young or Percy Bysshe Shelley, and, *pace* Mason, far more unlike Young than Shelley, even as her individuality enmeshes itself in and emerges from an intricate play of affinity and difference. Angela Leighton is at least half-right to speak of the poems as 'both prolific in pronouns and oddly impersonal', and she is wholly correct to say that the poetry's personae refuse simply to play the gendered roles designated for them by some fine critics such as Margaret Homans and Irene Tayler.¹⁰ But she is half-wrong to find the poems 'oddly impersonal' since the pressure of the personal (not necessarily the autobiographical) makes itself felt in the very longing to escape from constrained notions of identity.

'No Coward Soul is Mine' is a poem that declares Brontë's sense of absolute difference. The opening speaks of what Brontë's soul is not, and yet difference asserts itself in and through a series of relations, including those brought to mind by the echoes of Christianity and Romantic poetry. Religious terms pervade and brood over the poem, but are used as though they mean something new and unique. So, the 'God within my breast' (5) expands into the next line's 'Almighty ever-present Deity' (6), with a retrospectively triumphant air: that, the line says to us, is what it means to speak of a 'God within'. It means that an 'ever-present Deity' resides in the self. The self serves as a point of 'rest' for the 'Life' (7) that is at once within and all-pervasive. It is itself a mode of 'Undying Life' which has a 'power' (8) that is actualized in and through the thee addressed by the poet. Brontë's syntax suggests a balance between 'I' and 'thee' (8), but it is a balance that topples in favour of the self, even as that self's grasp of its identity is inseparable from its cohabitation with 'ever-present Deity'.

Typically Brontë compacts, without confining, a Romantic expansiveness in 'No Coward Soul'. Her quatrains, whose first and third lines are trimeters, and second and fourth pentameters, reverse the usual order of alternation, moving from shorter to longer lines, giving less a diastolic/systolic effect of contraction and expansion than of a recurrent and resilient process of possible sinkings and determined rallying. The third and fourth stanzas dramatise a dialogue between faith and doubt that recalls

the Shelley who, in 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', places his trust in a self-shaped deity. Brontë dismisses 'the thousand creeds / That move men's hearts' (9–10) as 'Vain' (9), 'unutterably vain' (10). The only thing that is ineffable (unutterable) about such 'creeds' is their 'vain' emptiness.

The question is begged, though: what is the difference between such 'creeds' and Brontë's doubt-repelling trust in 'thy infinity' (14)? How does the poet prevent her intuition of Godhead from being deconstructed as (say) a form of displaced 'inner light' Protestantism? She does so through a poetry that points up its individual handling of religious and poetic discourses, partly by conceding that it is motivated by the need for sureness. Such a concession communicates through the assertiveness of the lines claiming the speaker is 'So surely anchored on / The steadfast rock of Immortality' (15–16). There the mixture of traditional Christian image (hope as an anchor underpins the use of 'anchored') and resonant abstraction ('Immortality') almost behaves as though it were offering a commonplace comfort. But it does not quite do so. The comfort is available only to 'one / Holding so fast by thy infinity' (13–14), where the holding on speaks of tenacity but also of a dangerous exhilaration, as of someone holding on for dear life.

The speaker is un-anchoring herself from traditional religious belief and alerting us subliminally to the daring construction of a homespun faith in which to believe. A similar effect is created by the way in which 'So surely anchored on' puts so much weight on the weak preposition and weaker rhyme-word 'on', making us aware of the burden being sustained by that 'steadfast rock'. The syntax that allows stanza 3 to be end-stopped, until we need to find a subject for the infinitive that opens stanza 4, 'To waken doubt in one' (13), is part of a poetry which, like Shelley's, allows affirmation to co-exist with, and even be animated by, the prospect of the wakened doubt which it denies.

Janet Gezari notes a reworking of Coleridge's account of the Secondary Imagination in *Biographia Literaria* as a force which 'dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate' in the fourth stanza's homage to a 'Thy spirit' (18) that 'Pervades and broods above, / Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates and rears' (19–20).¹¹ It is typical of Brontë to imagine agency — those verbs inflect one another — as a simultaneous process. Her 'creates' goes one better, as Gezari observes, than Coleridge's 'in order to recreate'.¹² In what Derek Roper notes is an echo of *Adonais* 375–78, where Shelley writes of a 'Power' (375) 'Which wields the world with never wearied love, / Sustains it from beneath, and kindles it above' (377–78),¹³ Brontë speaks of a 'wide-embracing love' (17) which 'Pervades and broods above, / Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates, and rears' (19–20). Brontë crams her verbs together as though to pervade, brood, change, sustain, dissolve, create, and rear — some of which point in different directions — occupied the same space. In so doing, she suggests that her poetry sees the manifold works of the imaginative spirit (with which one begins to identify her 'thou') as equally significant to the degree that they evince a refusal to yield sovereignty over life and death. They speak of a humanist and intuitively pantheist faith that looks through death, but they speak, too, of a proto-Yeatsian recognition that, as he puts it in 'Lapis Lazuli', 'All things fall and built again, / And those that build them again are gay'.¹⁴ As she reprises a post-Shelleyan longing to address a being thought of as within and yet other, Brontë performs the quintessentially Romantic act of incarnating her perceptions in her poem's verbal unfolding.

In the poem's penultimate stanza —

Though Earth and moon were gone
 And suns and universes ceased to be
 And thou wert left alone
 Every Existence would exist in thee . . . (21–24)

she breathes into being what she describes: the relationship between the self and the 'thou' that acts as guarantor of 'Every Existence' (24). The 'thou' contains within itself all being; it is an endlessly metamorphic essence that permits 'Existence' to be, that sets up a possibility of continued existence against the singleness whose mournful rhyme sound carries over from the 'one'/'on' rhyme of stanza 3 in 'gone' and 'alone'. Brontë's conception is of an ever-changing, always abiding 'principle of life'.

Romantic parallels to the writing here (that point up Brontë's originality) include the first line of Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind', 'O, wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being', a troubled gale of a line that is mimetic of nature's wildness and the longing for inspiration, a desired in-breathing. In the last stanza's final lines — 'Since thou art Being and Breath / And what thou art may never be destroyed' (27–28) — the alliterative marriage between 'Being' and 'Breath' is evocative of the way in which a poet's breath creates as well as bears witness to being. It is that sense of 'Breath' being given to a distinctive notion of 'Being' that explains the poem's power and recognition of imaginative danger: 'what thou art may never be destroyed' is a line that confirms its meaning each time it is spoken. The line's very existence bears witness to a mode of being that poetry makes available, much as Shelley's lines at the start of the final stanza of *Adonais* — 'The breath whose might I have invoked in song / Descends on me' (487–88) — animate, with each reading, a renewed sense of inspiration flowing through the syllables.

Stellar splendours of the firmament of time, Romantic poets might also be metaphorically addressed in the closing lines of 'No Coward Soul'. The Shelleyan image of the superiority of stars to the sun, repeated throughout his work and dominant in *Adonais* and *The Triumph of Life*, underpins 'Stars'. Here Brontë lyricizes the symbolic narrative at the heart of *The Triumph of Life* as, like Shelley, she describes the longing for another state brought on by experience of one that the poet-visionary finds profoundly alienating. In *The Triumph of Life*, Rousseau's encounter with the 'shape all light' (352) mingles waking and sleeping, stars and sun, creativity and destruction all at once. At one moment the shape tramples out Rousseau's thoughts in the way that the sun blots out the stars, 'Making the night a dream' (393); at the next, after she herself has been effaced by a crueller, cruder light, the shape is a star erased by the sun. 'Stars' compellingly adapts Shelleyan image patterns for its own perspective.

The poem illustrates Brontë's ability to use the lyric self to enact a drama of visionary desire in the face of what are felt to be near-insuperable obstacles. In 'The Prisoner (A Fragment)', a poem whose title hints that it is excerpted from and reworking a longer Gondal piece, 'Julian M. and A. G. Rochelle', the poetry divides between a speaker who is a tyrannical yet empathizing captor and a female prisoner, who speaks of nightly visitings from a 'A messenger of Hope' (35). The poem's lyric plot centres on division and sundering, on one hand, and longed-for, near-mystical healing union, on the other:

He comes with western winds, with evening's wandering airs,
 With that clear dusk of heaven that brings the thickest stars.
 Winds take a pensive tone, and stars a tender fire,
 And visions rise, and change, that kill me with desire.
 (37–40; quoted from 1846 version)¹⁵

For all her uniqueness, Brontë places herself here firmly in a line that runs from Wordsworth, Byron and Shelley through to Yeats. 'Then dawns the Invisible' (49) recalls the close of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (CHP) IV with its sense of the Ocean as 'the throne / Of the Invisible' (1644–45), and 'The wandering outlaw of his own dark mind' (CHP, III, 20) shadows the stanza quoted above; he is almost conjured up, muse to Brontë's imaginings.¹⁶ The instability that is potent in Byron — the shifts of mood, so that one moment Harold 'could watch the stars / Till he had peopled them with beings bright / As their own beams' (CHP, III, 118–20) but the next becomes 'a thing / Restless and worn, and stern and wearisome' (CHP, III, 127–28) — finds a microcosmic, telling echo in the verbal shift of 'visions rise, and change'. As those 'visions' give way to their loss, Wordsworth comes to mind, the poet who plays variations on themes of seeing and blindness in 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality'. For Brontë, it is when the light of sense is turned back on again that she fails, or her captive fails any more, to see the invisible world. Yet that failing to see, that return to sense, is conveyed with striking power.

In her discussion of 'Remembrance', Irene Tayler sees loss (of Lucy, say, or poetic glory) as driving Wordsworth towards community and Brontë further towards isolation.¹⁷ Certainly Brontë collapses time, whereas in the wide stanzaic tracts of 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', time yawns, allowing us the occasional glimpse backwards towards 'that immortal sea / Which brought us hither' (166–67).¹⁸ Wordsworth's rhythms rock to and fro; Brontë's sustain great pressures as they stay in the one place: a place in which the poet learns how 'existence could be cherished, / Strengthened, and fed without the aid of joy' (23–24). This is 'existence' as something close to unaccommodated psychic survival rather than the 'Existence' which 'exist[s] in thee' of 'No Coward Soul',¹⁹ and 'without the aid of joy' is almost a rebuke to the older Romantic poet for whom 'joy' was a cardinal principle of being. And yet the poem as a whole speaks of poetry's rewarding compulsion to engage with and itself be a form of 'that divinest anguish' (32) known about most profoundly by those male Romantic poets (especially Wordsworth and Shelley) who experienced thoughts that lie too deep for tears and conceded in their most affecting work that our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

Notes

¹ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 96.

² Francis O'Gorman, ed., *Victorian Poetry: An Annotated Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), p. 220.

³ Gérin, *Emily Brontë: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 154.

⁴ My text is based on the poem's manuscript form as printed in Emily Jane Brontë, *The Complete Poems*,

ed. by Janet Gezari (London: Penguin, 1992). This edition is used for all quotations from the poetry. The paper uses the manuscript versions of the poems rather than the 1846 or 1850 texts, unless specified otherwise.

⁵ Quoted from *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. by Miriam Allott (London: Longman, 1970).

⁶ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Major Works*, ed. by Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). For discussion of

- the influence of Shelley’s *Epipsychidion* on Emily Brontë, see Edward Chitham, ‘Emily Brontë and Shelley’, in Edward Chitham and Tom Winnifrith, *Brontë Facts and Brontë Problems* (London: Macmillan, 1983), especially pp. 60–64.
- ⁷ Irene Tayler, *Holy Ghosts: The Male Muses of Emily and Charlotte Brontë* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 44.
- ⁸ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: The 1818 Text: Contexts, Nineteenth-Century Responses, Modern Criticism*, ed. by J. Paul Hunter (New York: Norton, 2002), p. 171.
- ⁹ Emma Mason, ‘Emily Brontë and the Enthusiastic Tradition’, *Romanticism on the Net*, 25 (February 2002), para. 2.
- ¹⁰ Angela Leighton, ‘The Poetry’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, ed. by Heather Glen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 64, 66.
- ¹¹ *Complete Poems*, p. 279.
- ¹² Gezari, *Last Things: Emily Brontë’s Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 132: ‘In Brontë’s poetic universe, living forms may be newly created, not just created as in Coleridge’s’.
- ¹³ *The Poems of Emily Brontë*, ed. by Derek Roper with Edward Chitham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 271.
- ¹⁴ *Yeats’s Poems*, ed. and annotated by A. Norman Jeffares with an appendix by Warwick Gould (1989; London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 413.
- ¹⁵ For a fuller reading, see my chapter, ‘Emily Brontë, Arnold, Clough’, in Michael O’Neill, ed., *The Cambridge History of English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- ¹⁶ George Gordon, Lord Byron, *The Major Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- ¹⁷ Tayler, p. 34.
- ¹⁸ William Wordsworth, *The Major Works*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- ¹⁹ For an analogous assertion of indifference to former happiness, see Emily Brontë’s ‘Lettre d’un frère à un frère’ (‘Letter from One Brother to Another’) in *The Belgian Essays: Charlotte Brontë and Emily Brontë*, ed. and trans. by Sue Lonoff (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 165.

Notes on contributor

Michael O’Neill is Professor of English at Durham University. His most recent publications include *The All-Sustaining Air* (Oxford University Press, 2007), a study of Romantic poetry’s influence on poetry since 1900; *Wheel* (Arc, 2008), a collection of his own poems; and, as editor, *The Cambridge History of English Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), for which he wrote chapters on Emily Brontë, Matthew Arnold, and Arthur Hugh Clough.

Correspondence to: Professor Michael O’Neill, Dept of English Studies, Durham University, Hallgarth House, 77 Hallgarth Street, Durham DH1 3AY. Email: m.s.o’neill@durham.ac.uk

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