POETRY AND POLITICS CONFERENCE
UNIVERSITY OF STIRLING
(12-16 July 2006)

The Political Dimension of the Poetry Written by the Brontës:
Dramatizing the Constructions of Class, Nation, Religion and Gender

Paula Alexandra Guimarães
University of Minho
Portugal
The Political Dimension of the Poetry Written by the Brontës:  
Dramatizing the Constructions of Class, Nation, Religion and Gender

Cecil Day-Lewis (1904-1972), Professor of Poetry at Oxford and Poet Laureate (1968), famously described the poetry of Emily Brontë as “A Passion for Freedom”:

Poets […] have their ruling passions – themes to which their poetry is constantly returning. Emily Brontë was all her life consumed by a passion for freedom. Not only does her work illuminate the idea of freedom, but it is also a classic example of the way poetry moves from the particular to the universal, […]

Perhaps less known, but more curious, is his definition of Poem. After defining Poetry, in all its diverse manifestations, as “a movement from the particular to the universal”, Day-Lewis significantly writes:

[…] A poem is a stone dropped into a pool: its waves go rippling and fading concentrically outwards, the impression it makes on the pool, on us, depending upon the size of the stone and the imaginative height from which it has fallen. The business of the poem is to set up that initial disturbance: what may happen afterwards is not its business, for a poem is not there to prove anything or convert anyone. Nevertheless, its effects may be considerable […]

In this simile he seems to point out that, in political terms, the Poem may not function as the trigger for what comes afterwards but uniquely as a ‘disturbing’ suggestion or ‘impression’. Therefore, it will probably not give its readers a statement about freedom but simply an ‘image’ of freedom, which can nevertheless be compelling.

We will not be concerned at this point with the latent contradictions of Day-Lewis’s considerations on Emily Brontë’s poetry, which he later on describes rather

---

2 Ibidem, p. 83 (my italics).
unjustly as “insulated” and as “not committed to universal freedom”.3 We will be much more concerned onwards with the vibrating social, political and religious context from which Emily and her sisters emerged, because we believe it contains many interesting models and precious clues for their writings (which are often of a contradictory nature).

We could hardly state, though, that the daughters of a poor Anglican parson at the beginning of the nineteenth century in a remote village of Yorkshire were raised, or prepared, to be committed to universal freedom. One brief look at the political atmosphere of this period would be enough to dampen our expectations in this respect:

By 1830 it was no longer bliss to be alive; nor was the time dawn. The Utopian dreams of human perfectibility which had grown up in the eighteenth century and seemed on the point of fulfilment when the French Revolution broke out had been undermined by the Reign of Terror, the dictatorship of Napoleon, the long years of war with the succeeding period of depression and social unrest, and by the speculations of Malthus. (HOUGHTON, 27)

Victorian society, particularly in the period before 1850, was shot through, from top to bottom, with the dread of some wild outbreak of the masses that would overthrow the established order and confiscate private property. After the Napoleonic wars, economic depression and a reactionary Tory policy had created the social and psychological atmosphere in which a whole generation of Victorians, including the Brontës, grew up.

Nevertheless, on a closer inspection of some ‘signs of the times’ and, more particularly, of some regions of England during the same period, one might obtain a more radical and dramatic picture. Social and political conflict is not immediately perceptible in the writings of the sisters but it unequivocally ‘informs’ them on a more subconscious, more metaphorical and, necessarily, deeper level:

[…] the growing bitterness of class feeling, often issuing in physical violence and repressive force, made the threat of revolution tangible and immediate to an extent unknown in England … today. From 1815 to 1850 the tension between what Disraeli

3 Ibidem, p.97.
called “the Two Nations” was almost constantly at the breaking point. […] The events after the passage of the Reform Bill recreated in a more ominous form (because better organized under the Chartists) the unrest and violence of the postwar period. The crisis came in 1848. In February revolutions burst out on the continent. In March there were riots in London, Liverpool, Glasgow, and other large towns. In April the government filled London with troops under the Duke of Wellington. […] In June the Houses of Parliament were provisioned for a siege. […] (HOUGHTON, 57-58)

In his groundbreaking work, Terry Eagleton has very lucidly summed up the relevance of outward context (even to the point of ‘overdetermination’) in the lives and works of the Brontë sisters:

The Brontës lived through an era of disruptive social change, and lived that disruption at a peculiarly vulnerable point. Far from being sublimely secluded from their history, that history entered, shaped and violated the inmost recesses of their personal lives. […] so finely meshed were the strands which bound their history and biography into unity […] (EAGLETON, p.7)

To begin with, the dungeon theme or the theme of captivity is a recurrent one in the poetry of all three sisters. When used in its more literal sense, it seems to recreate the mass arrests of strikers and political activists during both the Luddite riots and the Chartist demonstrations. The Brontë captives, though often fictional or imaginary characters inserted in their juvenile stories, face the same predicaments as their more real counterparts. They are victimized by tyrant rulers, separated from their loved ones and their native places, sacrificing their personal liberty in exchange for collective freedom.

One of the first poems on this theme is Charlotte’s “A Wretch in Prison” (1830), spoken by Murry, one of the staff members of a fictionalized Duke of Wellington in her first story, *The Twelve Adventurers*. Apparently punished for insolent behaviour towards a military superior, this renegade laments his fate of captivity and yearns for the

---

4 “The theme had acquired increased significance in the late 18th century as a metaphor for all kinds of restriction and oppression, as is ubiquitous in Gothic literature. The Brontës began to use it early: the extremely deep dungeon of the ‘Palace School’, invented when Emily Brontë was nine (…) was re-created in Angria: […] In Gondal, dungeons lay beneath the North and South Colleges of the ‘Palaces of Instruction’, where the young nobility were educated, frequently imprisoned, and wrote poems on their prison walls.” (Derek Roper and Edward Chitham, *The Poems of Emily Brontë*, “Introduction”, p.11, n.16.)
freedom of the hunter in an indomitable nature: “Oh, for the noise of *Freedom’s voice* / Heard in the hunter’s cry, / […] Oh, for the rush, for *the bold free rush* / Of the mighty mountain breeze […]” (WINNIFRITH, ll. 13-14, 17-18, p.89). This very stereotyped dungeon poem is, nevertheless, a rare occurrence in Charlotte’s poetic output.

Emily Brontë, paradoxically the most reclusive of all the three women poets, would be the one to make a more intensive and extensive use of the conventional image of captivity, eventually perfecting this genre to the status of allegory or symbol. She probably knew Byron’s *The Prisoner of Chillon*, but the power of her own prison poems is of a different kind; besides, the dungeon theme provides the subject or setting for fourteen pieces and references in twelve more.

“Gleneden’s Dream” (1838) belongs to a group of eight poems related with the Gleneden family or clan, political opponents of the absolute Gondal monarchs, Julius Brenzaida and Rosina Alcona. Self-designated ‘Unique Society’, these fictional characters are, for the most part, political exiles or straightforward outlaws, for whom Emily seems to have had some interest and sympathy. Imprisoned for having murdered the king (his personal contribute to the liberation of Gondal), Arthur Gleneden reveals his “fever-dream” to the grim gaoler – the terrible devastation that his country has suffered at the hands of the despot:

[...]
Heaven, descending in a vision
Taught my soul to do and bear –
[...]

Over Death, and Desolation,
*Fireless hearths, and lifeless homes*
Over orphans heart-sick sorrows;
Patriot fathers *bloody tombs*;

Over friends that my arms never
Might embrace, in love, again –

---

5 It is perhaps significant that the year of 1838, ripe with political activity and namely the presentation of the “People’s Charter” (demanding universal male suffrage and parliamentary reform), was also the prolific period in which both Emily and Anne Brontë produced more poems, including poems about Gondal.
Memory pondered until *madness*  
Struck its poignard in my brain –  

[...]  
Still I saw my country bleeding,  
Dying for a Tyrant’s will –  

[...]  

(ROPER, ll.19-35, pp. 55-6)

In “The Absent One” (1839), Arthur’s brother, having returned home after the conflict (“we returned / Back to Desmond lost and mourned”) – grieves for his relative’s long absence and exhibits a profound recognition for the sacrifice Arthur has made for his family and his country (“Thou didst purchase by thy fall / Home for us and peace for all”). Nevertheless, he recognizes at the same time that “Dreadful was the price to pay!” by his family, now forever deprived of Arthur’s pleasurable company, himself deprived of his precious liberty (“One is absent, and for one / Cheerless, chill is our hearthstone / One is absent, and for him / Cheeks are pale and eyes are dim”). The poem ends, thus, with a note of familial and political solidarity.⁶

Although we have no certainties as to the sisters’ thoughts during this period, in the political campaign of 1841, which led to a comfortable conservative majority represented by Robert Peel, spirits were high and near riot in Haworth. The Liberals had managed to obtain the support of the mill-owners, who used the workers to fill their ranks; a band of Chartists joined the Tories in their attacks to the new Poor Law and some disturbances took place.⁸ While Charlotte and Anne were away working, Emily, completely absorbed in her imaginary world, seems to have been undisturbed by these

---

⁶ Roper and Chitham, pp. 75-76. The fact that Anne Brontë, to whom Emily was profoundly connected, had by this time (April 1839) left for Blake Hall as a governess may have influenced the writing of this melancholic composition.

⁷ The year of 1839, and a series of agricultural and commercial crisis in England and Ireland, conduced to the period known as “the hungry forties” (1839-43), during which the National Chartist Convention lead many strikes and demonstrations. In Haworth, the growing discontent manifested itself in a petition to demand the repeal of the Corn Laws and Patrick Brontë himself mobilised parish relief for the distressed population.

⁸ In her biography of the Brontës, Juliet Barker describes these events in some detail (Chapter Thirteen, p. 357).
excitements. But, in her apparent detachment, she allows us a few hints of a deeper discomfort not noticed at the surface; she writes in her ‘Diary Paper’ of 30th July 1841: “[…] The Gondalians are at present in a threatening state but there is no open rupture as yet […]” (BARKER, p. 358).

The following year, in which the Chartist petition is rejected for the second time, originating new strikes and tumults, the events at Haworth indicated a growing crisis. The accumulated despair of unemployed workers (starved and disease ridden) flared up in violence. Incited by the Chartist activists, thousands of factory workers took improvised weapons and marched over the Northern industrial cities, forcing mill owners to interrupt their production. In August, there was a gathering of nearly ten thousand Chartists in Lees Moor, near Haworth; Patrick Brontë tried, in vain, to dissuade the workers of his parish to participate. The army was called to arrest and, in some cases, to fire over the demonstrators; a group of resented workers sabotaged their employers’ machinery (by immobilising the boilers that moved the looms). A voluntary police force was formed (the ‘Anti-Plug Dragoon Regiment’) to prevent further actions. (BARKER, pp.401-402)

The prevalence of the theme of war (or of violent conflicts) had already been evident as early as 1837, namely in “A sudden chasm of ghastly light”. The speaker, a soldier in a conquering army, finds himself in the fallen, war-ravaged city of Tyndarum, surrounded by death, starvation and misery. He has survived the insanity of war and now he describes the destruction (containing hints of Brontë’s later concerns):

‘Twas over – all the Battle’s madness,
The bursting fires, the canon’s roar,
The yells, the groans, the frenzied gladness,
The death, the danger warmed no more

In plundered churches piled with dead

9 Local newspapers registered confrontations in Halifax, Huddersfield, Bradford, Todmorden, Bingley, Skipton and Keighley.
The heavy charger neighed for food
The wornout soldier laid his head
‘Neath roofless chambers splashed with blood.
[…]

(ROPER, ll. 9-16, p. 42)

The last fictionalised poems written by Emily refer directly to the Gondalian civil wars, the bloody confrontations between Royalists and Republicans, the rivalry between previous friendly factions: from the separation between lovers and members of the same family to gratuitous acts of destruction and revenge. ¹⁰ This fictional emphasis on violence, one of the most relevant features of Emily’s work (namely, in Wuthering Heights), together with her continued interest in these subjects, should be seen and explained as an indirect result of the generalised fears of a revolution felt by the English population at this particular time.

The poem that predicts the occurrence of that conflict in Gondal reveals the dilemma of two lovers who face the future eventuality of finding themselves in opposed political and military sides (“One must fight for the people’s power / And one for the rights of Royalty”). He invites his female companion to take advantage of the present moment (“Come, the wind may never again / Blow as it blows now for us”) because love will soon enough give place to war and their respective families will fight in rival factions; the two of them will inevitably become enemies:

[…]
Seas of blood will have parted us
And you must crush the love in your heart and I, the love
in mine!
For face to face will our Kindred stand
And as they are so we shall be
Forgetting how the same sweet earth has borne and
nourished all –
[…]

¹⁰ The information that we have in this respect is very scarce and fragmentary. The records made by Emily and Anne Brontë in July 1845 give us only the following indications: (1) “[…] the Royalists who are hard driven at present by the victorious Republicans.” (2) “The Gondals are at present in a sad state; the Republicans are uppermost but the Royalists are not quite overcome – the Young Sovereigns with their brothers and sisters are still at the palace of Instruction […].” Roper and Chitham, ‘Appendix V. Gondal Records’, pp. 296-297.
And each be ready to give his life to work the other’s fall –

(ROPER, ll. 5-12, p.154)

The theme of love in time of fratricidal war, and of the insurmountable obstacles it has to face, is one of the most recurrent in Emily. A similar situation to the previous one occurs in the long and important composition “Julian M. and A. G. Rochelle” (1845), a dungeon poem with a difference. These two new young lovers belonging to inimical factions (“Frown my haughty sire, chide my angry Dame; / Set your slaves to spy, threaten me with shame”) only recognise themselves as old childhood friends (“To own from conquered foe, a once familiar name”) when the noble Julian inspects the prison dungeons of his castle and finds there, in chains, the beautiful and enigmatic Rochelle. But it is the sublime lament uttered by the young captive – a delirious speech describing her almost mystical experience of liberation through death (or the imagination) – that seems to have captivated the young captor himself. This freeing entity is described as assuming the form of a visitant, a supernatural presence who almost carries Rochelle’s soul away from the prison of her body:

[…] I am not doomed to wear
Year after year in gloom and desolate despair
A messenger of Hope comes every night to me
And offers, for short life, eternal liberty –

[...]
Then dawns the Invisible, the Unseen its truth reveals;
My outward sense is gone, my inward essence feels –
Its wings are almost free, its home, its harbour found;
Measuring the gulf it stoops and dares the final bound!

[...]
(ROPER, ll.65-84, pp. 178-9)

In the end, it is not Death who frees her but the Royalist Julian who falls in love. Earthly love seems, thus, to be above this compelling death wish in what their respective liberating powers are concerned.
It is significant that Emily Brontë dedicated her very last poem to Gondal and, more specifically, to the now obsessive theme of the war between Royalists and Republicans. “Why ask to know the date – the clime?” (1846) is a long and incomplete dramatic monologue spoken by a mercenary, enlisted voluntarily in the republican faction (“Enthusiast […] / My alien sword I drew to free / One race, beneath two standards fighting, / For loyalty, and liberty”). Emily’s poetically dire warning of what Disraeli’s “Two Nations” – a race divided by class – might lead to, becomes quite explicit as we progress through the poem. After describing the devastation caused by the fratricidal conflict, and the horrors that he himself witnessed and protagonised (“At first, it hurt my chivalry / To join them in their cruelty”), the hardened soldier-warrior is assaulted by a deep remorse. His speech contains a lucid critique to the latent human hypocrisy and its irrational wish for destruction, achieved through a subtle but powerful metaphor allusive to the harvesting (killing) season:

[...]
\textit{Men knelt to God and worshipped crime,}
And crushed the helpless even as we

But, they had learnt from length of strife –
Of \textit{civil war and anarchy}
To laugh at death, and look on life
With somewhat lighter sympathy.

[...]
The \textit{crops} were garnered in the field –
Trod out, and ground by horse’s feet
[...]
And kneaded on the threshing –floor
\textit{With mire of tears and human gore}.

[...]
No harvest time could be more fair
\textit{Had} harvest fruits but ripened there.

[...]

(ROPER, ll. 4-26, pp.184-5)

A few months before her death (occurred in December 1848), Emily would return to the same subject and initiate the writing of another version (a much shorter and
incomplete one) of the previous poem, “Why ask to know what date what clime”. This does not only mean that the subject had got a considerable hold of her but that, in between the composition of two versions, something sufficiently important had happened to make her return. Coinciding with the social and political disturbances at home (Glasgow, Manchester and Birmingham), a Continental Revolution had broken out, beginning with Paris declaring itself a Republic. It is, thus, impossible not to associate the apocalyptic scenery anticipating those events, present in the original poem,

[..]
A red fire on a distant hill –
A line of fires, and deep below,
Another dusker, drearier glow –
Charred beams, and lime, and blackened stones
Self-piled in cairns o’er burning bones
And lurid flames that licked the wood
Then quenched their glare in pools of blood –
[..]

(ROPER; ll. 72-75, p. 186)

and the critique made to a humanity who is blood and power thirsty, implicit in both versions, but more direct and violently sardonic in the last one because it was based in a much more recent and close reality:

[..]
There dwelt our own humanity
power-worshippers from earliest time
Feet-kissers of triumphant crime
crushers of helpless misery
Crushing down Justice honouring Wrong
If That be feeble this be strong
Shedders of blood shedders of tears
Self-cursers avid of distress
yet mocking heaven with senseless prayers
For mercy on the merciless

[..]

(ROPER, ll. 2-11, p. 192)

The relevance of this composition in the culmination of Emily Brontë’s critical thought has been sporadically pointed out by people such as Jonathan Wordsworth, Mary Visick and Stevie Davies, after its having suffered a long period of neglect,
legitimised by a preconception of its author as detached and unworldly. To counter this, I will quote a passage from Stevie’s biography of Emily:

[...] Emily Brontë undoubtedly recognised the permanent antipathy of interests between the ruling classes and the ruled, each tribe, class, sect, party and gender struggling for power within the violent natural and social orders. It is possible that, having visited Manchester in August 1846, Emily had had her eyes opened to the evils of industrialisation. [...] Emily hurried home from the polluted air and the offence of mass misery and degradation [...] Re-entering Gondal, she closed the door behind her. [...] A new concern with the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed emerged. Nurtured on Scott, she had glamorised civil struggle in a theatre of heroic comradeship, romantic passion and pleasurable excitement. [...] But by 1846 she has evidently done some dramatic rethinking. A Shelleyan revolutionary ardour had entered her, but so too had her disenchanted with the failure of violent revolutions to achieve anything but blood-baths. (DAVIES, pp. 240-241)

After having looked (in a rather oblique manner) at the constructions of class and nation mainly through the fictional poetry of Emily, Eagleton’s famous study of the Brontë sisters will now serve as our starting point for the analysis of the way these women poets dramatised their contemporary constructions of religion and gender:

[...] They were, to begin with, placed at a painfully ambiguous point in the social structure, as the daughters of a clergyman [...]. They were, moreover, socially insecure women – members of a cruelly oppressed group [...]. And they were educated women, trapped in an almost intolerable deadlock [...] between imaginative aspiration and the cold truth of a society which could use them merely as ‘higher’ servants. They were isolated educated women, [...] and so driven back on themselves in solitary emotional hungering. [...] And if as this were not enough, they were forced to endure in their childhood an especially brutal form of ideological oppression – Calvinism. (EAGLETON, p. 8)

Given the insistence with which gender issues emerge in her work, Charlotte’s experimental poetry will constitute our main focus when addressing the woman question: creativity, isolation and emotional hungering. In its turn, Anne’s smaller but distinctive poetic output will be scrutinised for relevant religious issues and dilemmas.

One of the first compositions in which Charlotte introduces us to contemporary views on the role of women (“Song”) is paradoxically inserted in a fictional narrative

11 See J. Wordsworth in “Wordsworth and the Poetry of Emily Brontë” (Brontë Society Transactions, 16/82, 1972, pp. 85-91), Mary Visick in “The Last of Gondal” (Brontë Society Transactions, 18/92, 1982, pp. 75-85) and Stevie Davies in Emily Brontë: Heretic (pp. 240-47).
that she wrote in 1830. Sung by her imaginary character Marquis of Douro to his bride Marian Hume, the poem’s symbolism could easily apply to either one of the Brontë sisters in their concealed reclusion:

The pearl within the shell concealed
Oft sheds a fairer light
Than that whose beauties are revealed
To our restricted sight.

So she who sweetly shines at home
And seldom wanders thence,
Is of her partner’s happy dome
The blest intelligence.

The highest talents of her mind,
The sunlight of her heart,
Are all to illumine her home designed,
And never thence they part.

(WINNIFRITH, ll. 1-12, p. 132)

The intention of the male speaker (Douro) is to soothe Marian’s jealous feelings for his brilliant ‘bluestocking’ friend, Lady Zenobia Ellrington. But, as the poem contains no Angrian names or references, it appears to us as a more universal statement – one on the conventional role of the Victorian wife or the ‘Angel in the House’. In her dramatisation of female types (the intellectual and the angelic or homely), Charlotte (who is only fourteen) does not yet question such divisions or spheres.

But if we contrast “Song” with another fictional composition written more than ten years later, “The Wife’s Will” (published in 1846), we will notice a radical change in Charlotte’s depiction of the ideal feminine role. The speaker is now the woman herself (here unidentified) who, having waited a long time for her husband’s overseas return (probably from an Angrian colony, “After long absence wandering wide”) does not allow him to go back (“[…] I deemed no more / Thy step would err from Britain’s shore.”). This is also her first feminine character that refuses to stay at home alone and

---

expectant, being determined to accompany her husband in his enterprise, no matter what the difficulties or dangers:

[...]
‘Distance and suffering,’ didst thou say?
‘Danger by night, and toil by day?’
[...]
Hear me! I cross with thee the seas.
Such risk as thou must meet and dare,
I – thy true wife – will duly share.

Passive, at home, I will not pine;
Thy toils, thy perils shall be mine;[...]

(WINNIFRITH, ll. 37-44, p. 17)

This new autonomous feminine posture, and the ideal relationship between man and woman, would both be explored again in a poem titled “The Wood” (also published in 1846). Being a continuation of the previous, it becomes the realization of the wish expressed by the wife (“For now I have my natural part / Of action with adventure blent”), accompanying her husband in the dangerous crossing of the Channel during the wars between England and France. As in the previous poem, the woman’s speech obliterates that of her male companion (he is not heard at all); she postures herself as his equal not only in the common wish for freedom (for a worthy political cause: “Our aims are termed conspiracy?”) but in actual physical strength and power of resistance:

[...]
I am resolved that thou shalt learn
   To trust my strength as I trust thine;
I am resolved our souls shall burn
   With equal, steady, mingling shine;
[...]
Our lives in the same channel flow,
   Along the self-same line;
[...]
Know, then, it is my spirit swells,
   And drinks, with eager joy, the air
Of freedom – where at last it dwells,
   Chartered, a common task to share
With thee, [...]
[...]
(WINNIFRITH, ll. 43-61, p. 19)
In an important dramatic monologue of the same period, titled “Pilate’s Wife’s Dream”, Charlotte Brontë would analyse intimately, and in the first person again, the feelings of a woman forced to witness, in an impotent manner, to the cruelty of her sadly famous husband (Pilate) – “He robbed my youth – […] / He crushed my mind, and did my freedom slay”. But the poem includes a premonitory ‘dream-vision’ of the fate of Jesus and of the birth of a new religion – Christianity – to which this woman, plunged in the darkness of despair, is instantaneously converted. Charlotte seems, thus, to reflect indirectly about the woman’s role in religion, i.e., the need for her to have a more intervening role. Pilate’s wife is ironically transformed into an anonymous ‘profetess’, illumined by the creative vision of a new future for humanity, in whose speech the contrast between ‘light’ and ‘darkness’ has a deeply symbolic meaning (not only of revelation but also of emancipation):

[...]
Over against my bed, there shone a gleam
Strange, faint, and mingling also with my dream.

It sank, and I am wrapt in utter gloom;
How far is night advanced, and when will day
Re-tinge the dusk and livid air with bloom,
And fill this void with warm, creative ray?

[...]
Dreams, then, are true – for thus my vision ran;
Surely some oracle has been with me,
The gods have chosen me to reveal their plan;

I, slumbering, heard and saw; awake I know,
Christ’s coming death, and Pilate’s life of woe.

[...]
Our faith is rotten, all our rites defiled,
Our temples sullied [...]

[...]
I feel a firmer trust – a higher hope
Rise in my soul – it dawns with dawning day;

[...]
Oh, opening skies, I hail, I bless your light!

Part, clouds and shadows! Glorious Sun, appear!
Part, mental gloom! Come, insight from on high!
In spite of the strong faith, and the close identification with a religious ideal, that Charlotte’s poem conveys, the poetry of the Brontës as a whole is full of examples of religious conflict, dissention and doubt. This is partly due to the fact that it was difficult for them, as daughters of a curate and as poets, to conciliate the dogmas of evangelical faith with the requirements of the imagination. In *Myths of Power*, Eagleton states that “[…] The sisters’ evangelical environment aggravated this contradiction: Evangelicalism is at once grimly hostile to the creative imagination and neurotically stimulant of frustrated fantasy. […][p.11]. In fact, the strain of Puritanism characteristic of the period between 1820 and 1850 meant that a majority of the society remained under this psychological burden.

[...] Conscientious souls who tried to achieve a life of absolute purity and self-denial might experience an almost daily sense of failure, distressing in itself and frightening in its implications; or at least they were dismayed to find quite different ideals glaringly apparent in the world around them. [...] (Houghton, pp. 61-2)

A nature that was strung to the saintly (as Anne Brontë’s) or elevated to the heroic level (as Emily Brontë’s) found itself inevitably placed in a jarring world and would be pained by many things. On the other hand, with the widespread of Calvinist doctrines, the feeling of guilt was exacerbated: from listening to dismal sermons, Victorian children (including the Brontës) developed a morbid sense of sin and a propensity for nightmares. According to Juliet Barker,

At Roe Head both Anne and Charlotte, particularly the latter, were exposed to a double dose of Calvinism: from the pulpit of the Dewsbury circle of clergymen and, more insidiously, through Ellen Nussey. It is not surprising that both sisters underwent a religious crisis. [...] (Barker, p. 285)

Charlotte’s crisis derived from her desperate yearning to achieve that perfection of faith which would ensure her salvation and the fear that the battle was already lost because
she was a hardened sinner. But, of the two, Anne would not dispel her religious depression as easily; although she eventually ended up believing in the Moravian doctrine of universal salvation, from that moment onwards all her religious poetry would contain a trace of melancholy and a sense of personal demerit.

In a short poem of 1840, “Retirement”, Anne describes the critical moment in which she formulates the wish to isolate or remove herself from worldly cares and to elevate her soul to God: “One hour, my spirit, stretch thy wings, / And quit this joyless sod, / Bask in the sunshine of the sky, / And be alone with God!” (CHITHAM, ll. 9-12, p.77). This wish of spiritual epiphany or liberation can be compared to some compositions of Emily due to the contrast established between the spheres of the earthly and the heavenly, the real and the imaginary, the public and the private.

This attempt would be made more dramatic in “Despondency” (1841), given that Anne experiences a great despair originating in her own flaws. She reveals a profound personal dissatisfaction in her work and, above all, in the purity of her soul (“My feet have gone astray, / […] My sins increase, my love grows cold”) and her religious devotion (“Faith itself is wavering now”). This heavy awareness leaves her literally prostrated and incapacitated and, in turn, the resulting lethargy affects her creative spirit, paralysing it:

I have gone backward in the work,
    The labour has not sped,
Drowsy and dark my spirit lies,
    Heavy and dull as lead.

How can I rouse my sinking soul
    From such a lethargy?
How can I break these iron chains,
    And set my spirit free?

[...]

13 In a letter to Ellen Nussey dated from 1836, she writes: “[…] that power of self-denial, that hallowed and glowing devotion, which the first saints of God often attained to […] longing for holiness which I shall never, never obtain – smitten at times to the heart with the conviction that your Ghastly Calvinistic doctrines are true – darkened in short by the very shadows of Spiritual Death!” (Juliet Barker, The Brontës, p. 284).
But instead of directing her appeal to the “God of Visions” of Emily, in her wish for liberation, Anne turns directly to the representative of God on earth: “Lord Jesus, save me lest I die, / And hear a wretch’s prayer” (ll. 35-36).

In “To Cowper” (1842) and in “A Word to the Calvinists” (1843), Anne describes the development of her religious thought, from harrowing doubt to a belief in universal salvation. In that poet, she finds the irrefutable proof of Calvinist fears equivalent to her own (“The language of my inmost heart / I traced in every line – / My sins, my sorrows, hopes and fears / Were there and only mine”) and she understands and identifies with his long suffering (“The long long years of dark despair/ That crushed and tortured thee”). Before the superior virtues and aspirations of a Cowper, Anne feels her own to be insignificant and small:

[...]
Yet should thy darker fears be true,
If Heaven be so severe
That such a soul as thine is lost,
O! how shall I appear?

(CHITHAM, ll. 37-44, p. 84-5)

In the second poem, Anne attempts to ‘deconstruct’ the basis of the Calvinist creed by means of a sarcastic rational justification, questioning the incongruence of the doctrine of predestination or ‘election’ in face of the Christian idea of a just and merciful God:

You may rejoice to think yourselves secure,
You may be grateful for the gift divine,
[...]
But is it sweet to look around and view
Thousands excluded from that happiness,
[...]
And wherefore should you love your God the more
[...]
Because He chose to pass the many o’er
And only bring the favoured few to Heaven?
Say does your heart expand to all mankind
And when you looking on your fellow men
Behold them doomed to endless misery,
How can you talk of joy and rapture then?
May God withhold such cruel joy from me!

(CHITHAM, ll.1-24, p. 89)

There can be no doubt, from the poems we have analysed, that notwithstanding the multiple coercions, divisions and contradictions present in the lives of the Brontës, the prevailing image that emerges from their writings is one of ‘universal freedom’ (including ‘universal salvation’) or, at least, a reaching out after this ideal. Whether we look at Emily’s war and prison poems, Charlotte’s confined and constrained Angrian heroines or Anne’s prayers of doubt, we find in each and every one of the poets a private ‘wish for wings’, for individual freedom, but also for a generalised equality without the barriers of class, genre and creed.
Works Cited


