The Poetic Dilemma of the Brontës:  
Writing with and against Nature in the Early Victorian Period

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Throughout our history nature is portrayed as feminine and women are often thought of as closer to nature than men. Western patriarchal thinking is based on ‘dualism’: Mind is split from body, spirit from matter, male from female, culture from nature. Ariel Salleh believes that “the Man/Woman=Nature complex can be read as a collectively contrived compensation for lost wholeness of self, […] and for the lost knowledge of oneness.” (Ecofeminism as Politics, 43)

Other ecofeminists, like Judith Plant (Women and Nature), Vandana Shiva and Starhawk (The Spiral Dance), argue that there was a time before written history, in pre-patriarchal societies, when cooperation, not competition, was valued. During this period, female deities were widely worshipped and societies were more women-centred. They consider that most religions are patriarchal and mainstream religions are thought to portray God as a transcendent being, somehow beyond this world. Instead, they claim, goddess spirituality typically believes in an immanent Deity.

According to Riane Eisler (in “The Gaia Tradition …”), prehistoric societies worshipped the Goddess of nature and spirituality represented in ‘Venus figurines’ (Reweaving the World, 23). And throughout history the Great Goddess is revered under various guises: Isis in Egypt, Ishtar in Canaan, Demeter in Greece, the Magna Mater of Rome. In the earlier societies the world was viewed as the great Mother, a living entity who in both her temporal and spiritual
manifestations creates and nurtures all forms of life (26). In sharp contrast to later patriarchal religions, Eisler stresses, women were once priestesses.

[...] And it is Gaia, the primeval prophetess of the shrine of Delphi, who in Greek mythology is said to have given the golden apple tree (the tree of knowledge) to her daughter, the Goddess Hera. Moreover, the Greek Fates, the enforcers of laws, are female. And so also are the Greek Muses, who inspire all creative endeavor. (31)

In such societies, Eisler concludes, there is no need for a false dichotomy between a “masculine” spirituality and a “feminine” nature.

For Christine Downing, “the nurturing goddess is also the devouring one” (Mythological Images of the Feminine, 12). The fertility goddesses are always also goddesses of the underworld, the realm of death. “To die is to return to the receptive, generative mother. The earth is womb; [...]” (13). But the underworld, Downing adds, is also the realm of the soul, of the unconscious, where death and new vision are closed intertwined and where the goddess is the giver of dreams and omens (13). In fact, in the earliest traditions she is both feminine and masculine, representing an androgynous unity of opposites. As Downing puts it, “Once upon a time the goddess was thus the most potent exemplification of divine power.” (13)

Emily Brontë has become mythologized both as an individual and as one of the Brontë sisters. She has been cast as Absolute Individual, as Tormented Genius, and as Free Spirit Communing with Nature. In fact, nature with its perennial process of life and death, reflects the poet’s major internal conflicts and
has a universal appeal because it is elemental and timeless. The more concrete details of her poetry are evocative of the Yorkshire scene, true “essences of the spirit of place” (Stanford), in particular of the West Riding moors. And it is when Emily recalls the landscape of Home that her lyricism most soars:

   High waving heather 'neath stormy blasts bending
   Midnight and moonlight and bright shining stars
   Darkness and glory rejoicingly blending
   Earth rising to heaven and heaven descending
   Man’s spirit away from its drear dungeon sending
   Bursting the fetters and breaking the bars

   For Christine Gallant, the private myth of Gondal underlying Emily’s poetry is “a matriarchal mythology” (80). The Gondal compositions “seek the archetypal experience of the Feminine which, as C.G. Jung suggests, is associated with all that is emotional, maternal, and chthonic.” (81). Gallant suggests that Emily resisted the experience of the contemporary womanhood which others around her were obliged to undergo. The poet rambled around the moors with her huge mastiff dog when she wished and stayed up at night to write poetry.

   In a time span of ten or so years, Emily constructs the histories of Gondal’s dominant and passionate women, tracing the fortunes of the beautiful and tempestuous Queen Augusta who has a long succession of discarded lovers. For Gallant, this is “a mythic world emphatically excluding the real world known then by women” (83). In the face of external dissociation (separation from Nature through imprisonment, betrayal, treason or death) and inevitable extinction, the speaker tries ultimately to preserve the feeling or his/her capacity to feel (83).
Most of the poems’ images from nature show this effusion: “evening sheds its silent dew”, “winds sigh as you are sighing” and “Winter pours its grief in snow”.

The first poem preserved by the teenaged Emily is the descriptive sketch of an uninhabited expanse of landscape seen from afar and with cosmic dimensions, the preamble to the arrival of man/womankind to her poetic universe:

Cold, clear, and blue, the morning heaven
Expands its arch on high;
Cold, clear, and blue, Lake Werna’s water
Reflects that winter’s sky.
The moon has set, but Venus shines
A silent, silvery star.

For Lawrence Lipking, this poem represents “the birth of an identity”; it “functions as a ‘birth stanza’ for A.G.A. and claims ‘her birthright as a daughter of Venus’” (98). The poet describes the cold English climate with Sapphic clarity and imagines the world dominated by an ascendant female star; no male progenitor of Augusta is mentioned (98-99). In fact, Venus presides over all great heroines of poetry, including Sappho, and the excerpt resembles a literal translation from the Greek (98-99).

Nature too seems often almost a separate character, usually with a maternal role. Gondal’s women act very much like the Jungian Great Mother, whose realm is the underworld and whose subservient male consorts always head for death after the consummation. She states that “Queen Augusta’s love usually has distinctly chthonic overtones”, namely because “her lovers frequently call on her from the grave”. Gallant sees, therefore, in Emily’s elegiac poem “Cold in the earth” Persephone’s epithalamion to Pluto after their separation (84).
Ultimately, Lady Augusta escapes to the underworld herself to become “the Dweller in the land of Death”. She is now imaged as the mother who “nourishes” her children through her body’s decay: the bee draws honey from “the heather-bells that hide my lady fair” and “the wild deer” feed from the enriched grass growing “above her breast”. Gallant believes that the personal poem “No coward soul is mine” expresses rather Emily’s desire for a unity as yet unrealized (with Nature) than her faith in a conventional God. The concluding lines of “Often rebuked, yet always back returning” epitomize, for Gallant, Emily Brontë’s search for the chthonic Feminine within herself: “The earth that wakes one human heart to feeling / Can centre both the worlds of Heaven and Hell” (89).

As Richard Benvenuto argues, a major problem of Emily’s poetry arises from a crucial principle of life; namely that “nature releases the soul from its confinement to itself, […] but while the physical world presents only what is material and visible, the soul yearns for the invisible and the spiritual” (61). Still, the magnanimity of the Holy Spirit is in Nature that never expires but esoterically reproduces itself in various forms – man being a metamorphosed particle of it: “And thou art now a spirit pouring / Thy presence into all -- / […] / A universal influence / From thine own influence free; / A principle of life, intense, / Lost to mortality.” (1848). In “No coward soul is mine”, the eternal Spirit is viewed through Nature: “Atom” and “Breath” are physiological terms being made into absolutes, and its actions resemble closely the ones being operated generally by Mother-Earth: “With wide-embracing love / […] Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates and rears”.

The poet’s perception of immortality is connected to her chthonian dimensions of time and space. There are many examples of poems where the physical grave is but the threshold or way out into a world of its own, where the soul unites with its true spirit, a shelter from all socially grounded strains. For instance, all the characters of the Gondal saga are given the chance of a reunion with their native land (and true self) at death, as in “Lines by Claudia”. In “Shall Earth no more inspire thee” and “I see around me tombstones grey” (1841), the lyrical speaker craves for “a Heaven more like this Earth” and is not willing to “leave our native home / For any world beyond the Tomb”. Ultimately, the poet’s thirst for a reunion with (Mother-) Nature can only be accomplished in death when the body gradually and literally merges with the soil whence it came (“rather on thy kindly breast / Let us be laid in lasting rest; / Or waken but to share with thee / A mutual immortality”).

Although Nature does seem to imprison the soul within the body, yet it affirms the poet’s belief that to man the act of existence alone remains more relevant than the notion of salvation after one expires. The traditional Christian conceptions of purgatory or hell are replaced by the idea of a lasting rest or a union with nature.

Edward Chitham claims that, in contrast with her sister Emily, Anne Brontë “brings the transcendental down to earth in a manner that is archetypically Christian” (Introduction to The Poems, 42). Earth, in itself, did not thrill Anne and the poet’s references to the earthly realm become progressively imbued with negative feelings. This is made clear in two important later poems: “The Three
Guides” (1847) and “Self-Communion” (1848). In the first, faced with three possible attitudes to life, Anne rejects the ‘Spirit of earth’ by considering it “stony-hearted”, “unbelieving, deaf, and blind”; this entity is nature as interpreted by rationalist thought and as spokesman of positivism, to which the poet replies:

How could I bear to walk for aye,
With eyes to earthward prone,
O’er trampled weeds, and miry clay,
And sand, and flinty stone.

In the second poem, Earth is a hard and cruel mother who does not tend for her weaker creatures (including the poet herself) and is indifferent both to their pains and the inexorable passage of time to which they are subjected:

O earth! A rocky breast is thine –
A hard soil and a cruel clime,
Where tender plants must droop and pine,
Or alter with transforming time.

Looking back to her childhood years, Anne (whose own mother had died when she was only two years old) recalls “A young heart feeling after God”, “With infant hands upraised to Heaven”. In her early search for a guiding light, the poet significantly does not look inside herself nor to outward nature but to the heavenly sphere and to God the Father. Surprisingly, in one of her hymns in the evangelical tradition of Isaac Watts (1843), Anne had described an immanent divinity through a series of contrasting natural images, which closely resembles Emily’s own:

Eternal power of earth and air,
Unseen, yet seen in all around,
Remote, but dwelling everywhere,
Though silent, heard in every sound.

Anne was obviously aware that nature played an important part in the harmony of the whole, and it also represented a major role in the saga of Gondal that she shared with Emily. Anne shared instinctively Emily’s delight in the wilder aspects of nature and, when she hears the north wind blowing, it seems to speak to her in a familiar language of that blissful time. In Anne’s Gondal poetry, as in Emily’s, nature is not infrequently glimpsed through prison bars or remembered in the vaults of a dungeon:

That Wind is from the North, I know it well;
No other breeze could have so wild a swell.
Now deep and loud it thunders round my cell, 
[...]
I know its language; thus it speaks to me –
'I have passed over thy own mountains dear,
Thy northern mountains –
[...]
When thou, a young enthusiast, 
As wild and free as they, 
O’er rocks and glens and snowy heights 
Didst often love to stray. 
[...]
The sweet world is not changed, but thou 
Art pining in a dungeon now, 
Where thou must ever be;

In the more mundane sphere of their everyday life both Anne and Emily, when called on to exchange the freedom of their native hills for the schoolroom routine at Roe Head, must have viewed their new environment very much as a prison.
Anne’s devotion to her native landscape remains one of her recurrent themes. It was during the years she spent near York, in the midst of lush, open country, that she first realised the full extent of her commitment to the moors and hills of her childhood. In a poem called “Home” she deliberately contrasts her present mild and sheltered abode with the bleakness of the moors round Haworth, to affirm her devotion to the latter:

[...]  
But give me back my barren hills  
Where colder breezes rise:

Where scarce the scattered, stunted trees  
Can yield an answering swell,  
But where a wilderness of heath  
Returns the sound as well.

[...]  
Restore to me that little spot,  
With gray walls compassed round,  
Where knotted grass neglected lies,  
And weeds usurp the ground.

More characteristic of Anne’s attitude to nature is the poem “In Memory of a Happy Day in February” (1842), in which nature is beautiful above all because it is God’s creation, and it is not of such vital importance as the inner world of the spirit:
I knew there was a God on high
By whom all things were made.
I saw his wisdom and his power
In all his works displayed.

But most throughout the moral world
I saw his glory shine …

Anne came increasingly to depend on her religion for the inner strength she so much needed. A series of poems based on William Cowper’s hymns record her withdrawal even from nature for meditation and prayer. “Cowper’s Protestantism”, however, “recognized the profundity of the cosmos and everything in the Creation”, he “too visualizes God mastering Nature but engaged with it, not separate or antagonistic” (Chitham, 1999, 133-136). The natural world, human beings and God are inextricably interrelated in ways that cannot be fathomed by reason alone; therefore, for Chitham, “there is no essential conflict between Nature and God” in all the Brontës.

In Charlotte Brontë’s earliest verse juvenilia the supernatural was closely allied with the world of nature, especially the effects of season, weather and time of day. But even in later poetry we can notice the power and originality of nature imagery, especially the one connected with the sea.

Her later heroine Shirley (1849), who mirrors the attitude to nature and the vitality of her sister Emily, introduces the supernatural in the shape of the promised mermaid, the haunting archetypical image of the woman half seen through the waves. Shirley establishes a connection between the romantic vision and the question of woman’s role and woman’s nature. In the novel, Shirley is
inspired to elaborate her own vision of nature: “Eve when she and Adam stood alone on earth” and the mother of the Titans, who bore Prometheus. “Her Eve is, thus, not the temptress but the universal mother, the life force, Titan source of vitality, daring and courage” (Duthie, 171). But Shirley herself is significantly characterised as “[…] a thing made of an element, -- the child of a breeze and a flame, -- the daughter of ray and rain-drop, -- a thing never to be overtaken, arrested, fixed” (Chap. 36).

Nature personified had also been one of the archetypical figures in Charlotte’s early poetry, namely “The Violet” (1830), modelled on Thomas Gray’s “The Progress of Poesy” and on his poetic image of Nature as a poet’s muse. This image, Irene Tayler writes, “gripped Charlotte’s imagination with the force of revelation” and she “devotes forty-four lines to evoking a full vision of the goddess” (140). To the poet’s invocation (“Nature, unveil thy awful face! /To me a poet’s power impart”) appears finally “A shape more beauteous than the morn”

A woman’s form the vision wore;
Her lofty forehead touched the sky;
Her crown, a rugged mountain hoar
Where plume-like trees waved solemnly.

The poet can see that her figure’s belt is a river and that moon and stars bind her hair. In her solemn speech, she grants Charlotte’s “high request”, but in terms appropriate to the humble position of the recipient: her poet’s wreath will be the “lowly violet” and not the laurel reserved for greater (male) talent: “Like modest worth half seen half hid”.

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Nevertheless, the ‘muse’ who according to Charlotte gave life to “all I’ve written or sung or said” soon became, in those early years, a distinctively male one – the fictional Duke of Zamorna, hero and king of Angria – a god-like creature, the embodiment of power and creative intelligence and of Charlotte’s “grand dream”. And, in fact, “throughout Charlotte’s early work the godlike powers of both storm and sunshine are regularly assigned to the character Zamorna” (Tayler, 119). In a composition of 1836, the poet pictures this very Byronic character as a “star […] intensely burning” with “self-conceived light”

Blending in red – as the sun
But deepening only the blue gleam
In which a white clear orb it shone
A gem upon the brow of doom,

In indicating her debt, including her poetic powers, to this natural male source (“I owe him something”, “he has given a steady spring / To what I had of poetry”), Charlotte is clearly reversing the literary tradition of the female muse and personifying her creative imagination.

Furthermore, in the same composition, Charlotte (like Emily herself) acknowledges another natural, but fundamental, source for her ‘song’ or her creative powers – homeland.

From the lone moor descends that strain,
From glen and heathery hill,
And as I hear that voice again
I scarce can wish it still.

[…]  
’Tis the rush of sound that fills the sky
Above my native hill.

‘Tis the wakener of a hundred dreams
With joy, with glory fraught.
‘Tis the loosener of a thousand streams
Of poetry, of thought.

As for her sister, ‘homeland’ is not just an exhilarating physical place/space but a privileged locus of affectionate bonds, where the ‘world within’ and the ‘world without’ – natural reality and creative imagination – are freely allowed to fuse or merge and become finally harmonised in the subject.

Just us and those we’ve famed in dreams,
Our own divine creations,
These are my soul’s unmingled themes;
I scorn the alien nations.

Charlotte’s “alien nations” represent both the real and the metaphorical locations associated with coercion, strife and gloom or sorrow, being rejected here for the “land of love and light” of their childhood; they thus stand for both their forced exile as teachers and governesses and their existential condition as adult beings.

To conclude, it is significant that in order to ascertain or question the expansion of the Brontës’ web of childhood in her poem “Retrospection” (1835), Charlotte had used only natural analogies or metaphors of weaving, cultivation and organic growth. Here, the basic elements of air, water and earth or “sod” have been mingled to form, respectively, a vast woven cloth, “an ocean with a thousand isles” and “a mighty tree” touching “eternity”—all of them productive symbols of the siblings’ boosting creative imagination and of the primordial interconnectedness of Nature and Text:
We wove a web in childhood,
A web of sunny air
We dug a spring in infancy
Of water pure and fair,

We sowed in youth a mustard seed,
We cut an almond rod;
We are now grow up to riper age –
Are they withered in the sod?