

Emily Bronte

DISCovering Authors, 2003

[In the following essay, Gerin discusses Bronte's poetry and *Wuthering Heights*.]

Emily Bronte's reputation might appear at first sight disproportionate to her meagre output: one novel and 193 poems. Their quality, however, is unique, so visionary and powerful as to rank her indisputedly among the writers of genius.

Few influences on her writing can be traced. She was a very private person, rejecting such contacts with the world as were offered her through her sister Charlotte and her London publishers. Though her work has many affinities with the English Metaphysical poets, Traherne and Vaughan in particular, there is no evidence that she ever read them. Her reading was, on her own showing, very limited, very desultory, and without method. She reproached herself repeatedly in her diary papers for the want of "regularity" in her studies. She knew the Romantic poets, Wordsworth especially, and Shakespeare, whom she often quotes. She had little schooling, falling ill whenever sent from home. All the source of her health and happiness, and the inspiration of her writing, were the moors that stretch 20 miles round about her home, Haworth, where she spent her whole life. Her intimate knowledge of the moors at all seasons of the year, and of the wildlife inhabiting them, gave her all the stimulus she needed to enrich her imagination and inspire her writing.

The nature of her poetry and of her one novel—*Wuthering Heights*—is profoundly metaphysical, nourished by the visions that she undoubtedly experienced and was able to describe with all the clarity of facts perceived. The following lines are drawn from a poem about a young captive who awaits her liberator. As with much of her poetic imagery, the awaited visitant is not a corporeal but a spiritual presence.

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 which kill me with desire....

But first a hush of peace, a soundless calm descends;

The struggle of distress and fierce impatience ends;

Mute music soothes my breast—unuttered harmony

That I could never dream till earth was lost to me.

Then dawns the Invisible, the Unseen itself 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!

Oh, dreadful is the check—intense the agony

When the ear begins to hear and the eye begins to see;

When the pulse begins to throb, the brain to think again,

The soul to feel the flesh and the flesh to feel the chain!

The religious terminology of much of Emily Bronte's poetry does not obscure the fact that hers was no conventional religion (despite her father's calling). So far as her intensely personal beliefs can be defined, she was a Pantheist, seeing all life as One—the Visible and the Invisible, the human, the elemental, the animal and vegetable all imbued with the same spiritual forces.

She made a marked distinction between her personal and her Gondal poetry by transcribing them in two separate and clearly marked notebooks. Through the Gondal poems runs a dramatic Saga relating to the royal houses of Angora and Almedore, who contended for the thrones of the island kingdoms of Gondal and Gaaldine, the location of the drama; the principal theme is the love-hate relationship binding the Queen of Angora, Augusta Geraldine Almeda, to her various lovers, primarily Julius Brenzaida. Under cover of this scenario, begun in childhood, Emily Bronte found the substitute identities and the adventurous actions lacking in her life, the freedom that her spirit craved. Freedom was, for her, a precondition of life. As she wrote in one of her personal poems:

And if I pray, the only prayer

That moves my lips for me

Is—"Leave me the heart that now I bear

And give me liberty.

Yes, as my swift days near their goal

'Tis all that I implore—

Through life and death, a chainless soul

With courage to endure."

The situations of which she wrote in the Gondal poems, often describing passionate love relations, led her early readers to suppose them autobiographical, revealing a real-life love affair. Their true context in the Gondal Saga, however, has dispelled this notion for good (the known circumstances of her life leave no room for such a

relationship), though the "love-poems," like the famous lament "R. Alcona to J. Brenzaida" (which opens "Cold in the earth"), when placed in their right context, are seen to resemble the subject of *Wuthering Heights* so closely as to show the overall unity of her creative work.

For years before the writing of *Wuthering Heights*, the Gondal poems dealt with an orphan boy, "black of mien, savage in disposition," passionately involved with a fair girl, his superior in social standing, the very situation of Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw in the novel. Emily Brontë's belief in the indissoluble nature of earthly love, first treated in the poems, found its complete expression in the novel, where even the separation of death is shown as powerless to sever a spiritual connection. Catherine Earnshaw gives utterance to this credo early in the novel when Heathcliff runs away and she is urged to forget him and make a suitable marriage with Edgar Linton: "... my great thought in living is [Heathcliff]. If all else perished, and *he* remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger; I should not seem a part of it.... My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath.... Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff!" Catherine's faith is shown as justified in the novel's end where Heathcliff even desecrates her grave so as to be buried with her; and their ghosts are ultimately seen, wandering freely together upon the hillside. The death of Heathcliff, self-induced by his longing for Catherine, is one of the most powerful and daring climaxes in English fiction.

The boldness of the conception that man is the master of his own fate is matched by her last poem, "No coward soul is mine." Addressed to the "God within my breast," she makes her declaration of faith in the universal nature of the soul inhabiting each individual:

Though Earth and moon were gone

And suns and universes ceased to be

And thou wert left alone

Every Existence would exist in thee

There is not room for Death

Nor atom that his might could render void

Since thou art Being and Breath

And what thou art may never be destroyed.

That is the metaphysical message of *Wuthering Heights*: the indestructibility of the spirit. Such a subject was so far removed from the general run of Victorian fiction—it belonged, if anywhere, to the gothic tradition, still being followed by Mary Shelley with her *Valperga* (1823) in Emily Brontë's childhood—that it explains the novel's failure when first published. Only two critics, Sydney Dobell and Swinburne, praised it (in 1850 and 1883 respectively), too late to bring recognition to the author in her lifetime.

The book's curious and lasting appeal rests upon a number of qualities: the unflagging excitement of the plot; the wild moorland setting and the splendour of the descriptions; the originality of the characters; the unearthly, not to

say ghostly atmosphere created by the interplay of the elements in the affairs of men; the homely background of the old house, The Heights, in which the decaying fortunes of the Earnshaw family are—literally—played out, gambled away, by the last of the line. The author's close familiarity with the local rustic types, the fiercely independent hill-farmers living about the moors, enabled her to create the old curmudgeon Joseph, the general factotum to the family, with both humour and fidelity: his permanent ill-humour and girding condemnation of his associates as all destined for Hell fire, faithfully portrays the primitive attitudes left in the wake of the Methodist Revival in Yorkshire; and acts as a counter-balance to the gothic atmosphere of much of the plot and the high romanticism of the larger-than-life hero and heroine, Heathcliff and Catherine. In creating such a character as Joseph, Emily Bronte showed that, undoubted visionary as she was, she also had her feet firmly planted on earth.

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2003 Gale.

Source Citation:

Gerin, Winifred. "Emily Bronte." *DISCovering Authors*. Detroit: Gale, 2003. *Gale Student Resources In Context*. Web. 13 Apr. 2011.

Document URL

<http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/suic/CriticalEssayDetailsPage/CriticalEssayDetailsWindow?displayGroupName=Critical-Essay&prodId=SUIC&action=e&windowstate=normal&catId=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ2101202065&mode=view&userGroupName=las86157&jsid=83a7d065204f842196f64510952cc7a6>

Gale Document Number: GALE|EJ2101202065