Emily Brontë and the Religious Imagination

Simon Marsden

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A Note on Texts

References to Emily Brontë's poems follow the texts and numerical sequence of *Emily Brontë: The Complete Poems*, ed. by Janet Gezari (London: Penguin, 1992). Gezari's edition distinguishes helpfully between poems as published in *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell* (1846) and manuscript texts. Poems identified by roman numerals appeared in the 1846 collection; Arabic numerals denote poems unpublished in Emily Brontë's lifetime or manuscript versions of poems published in 1846.

Other references to Emily Brontë's works are to the following editions:

WH Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, fourth edition, ed. by Richard J. Dunn (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2003). Throughout this book, I refer to the elder Catherine by the longer form of her name and to her daughter as Cathy.

Essays Charlotte Brontë and Emily Brontë, *The Belgian Essays*, ed. and trans. by Sue Lonoff (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996).

All biblical references are to the King James Version.

1

Introduction: Emily Brontë and the Death of God

This book examines the animating dialogues and creative frictions between Emily Brontë's writing and the texts, traditions and theological resources of Christianity. It reads *Wuthering Heights* and a selection of Brontë's poems in relation to theological concepts including natural theology, biblical hermeneutics, original sin, apocalypse and eschatology. Brontë's literary engagement with religious language is marked not only by representations of liberating numinous encounter, divine immanence and apocalyptic renewal but, also, by notes of uncertainty, despondency and absence. The world in Brontë's writing is both the site of immanent presence and the place from which God is absent. Focusing upon these notes of tension, this book does not attempt to 'claim' Brontë for either side of the faith/scepticism debate.[1] Rather than seeking to resolve Brontë's depictions of uncertainty and incompletion into secure positions of either belief or unbelief, I want to suggest that they are convergent with the renewed emphasis upon paradox, *aporia* and otherness that have characterized the postmodern 'return' of the religious in contemporary culture and theory. Brontë's writing is informed and animated by the religious discourses of its time and, particularly, by Romantic interpretations and appropriations of theological language, the legacies of which continue to influence contemporary theology. Bernard Reardon writes in *Religion in the Age of Romanticism* (1985):

> What . . . pre-eminently distinguishes the Romantic understanding of Christianity is its subjectivization of all religious truth, and this new attitude may, I think, be said to mark the beginning of that process of immanentizing religious reality which was characteristic of the nineteenth century in general and which, despite the neo-orthodox reaction, has continued through the

> present century as well. For the modern theologian, however orthodox he way mish to appear, finds the thought of *two* worlds worrying. Somehow or other eternal life has to be seen to be lived here and now, eternity itself to be a dimension of the present order of things, the basic Christian values rooted in this world, Jesus Christ to be the man in whom all men may see their own idealized reflection.[2]

Like her Romantic predecessors, Emily Brontë asks questions both of the theological orthodoxies of her time and of the emerging metanarratives of modernity. I will argue in this book that Brontë's persistent explorations of tension and uncertainty – her recognition that faith and despondency (to borrow the title of her first poem in the sisters' 1846 collection) are more intimately related than is often supposed – give her writing a particular resonance with the postmodern situation that has seen religion 'return' as the excluded other of secular modernity.

Religious readings of Emily Brontë's work were relatively common for more than a century after her death in 1848.[3] While many readers noted the unorthodoxy and individualism of Brontë's religious vision, she was often situated within mystical and other traditions of Christian spirituality, including the versions of intense feeling associated with Methodist discourses of religious enthusiasm. Since the 1960s, much of the best and most influential Brontë criticism has been predicated upon secular critical methodologies, a turn consistent with the theoretical directions of literary criticism more generally. As Gavin Hopps and Jane Stabler point out, 'literary criticism of the last few decades has been undoubtedly dominated by a range of theoretical movements which are clandestinely united in the silent refusal of the possibility of faith that precedes their diverse practices'.[4] Though a 'return' of the religious in contemporary culture and critical discourse is now widely recognized, many commentators remain uneasy about the implications of this development, which has coincided with a resurgence of religious fundamentalism. Yet if contemporary political contexts have lent a new urgency to concerns surrounding the place of religion in culture and criticism, the concerns themselves are not new. For many readers of the Brontës, religion has for some time been associated with patriarchal structures of oppression and authoritarianism, and with notions of received truth and doctrinal orthodoxy that are seen to threaten personal autonomy and

imaginative freedom. This book is written from a Christian perspective, but it does not seek to overlook or marginalize these troubling elements of religious ideology. It does, however, recognize that the horizons of religious thinking extend beyond the antagonistic frameworks within which contemporary public debates between faith and scepticism are often conducted and that many theologians are alert to and have much to say about the political, social and ideological concerns identified by secular criticism.[5] It also maintains that Christian theology is far more open to the creative play of the imagination than is often acknowledged by critical methodologies that have tended to rely upon more constrained notions of religious and doctrinal orthodoxy. As Andrew Tate observes, '[i]t is sometimes strategically easier to simplify matters of faith rather than to acknowledge ambivalences, differences and uncertainties. However, critical voices, on either side of the faith and scepticism debate, are keen both to give witness to their world view and to hear stories from radically different perspectives'.[6] One of the claims of this book is that religion need not be approached as a constrained and static body of received truth, but might rather be considered as a tradition – or a multiplicity of traditions – that is always involved in the active rereading and reinterpretation of its own sacred texts, language and theological concepts. Indeed, in the postmodern situation, the lines of demarcation between the sacred and the secular and between theology and other critical disciplines, always less clear than is often assumed, have come to seem ever more unstable.

In recent years, the metanarratives of modernity and secularization have themselves been exposed to renewed critical scrutiny. Not least among the surprising consequences of the postmodern situation has been a growing recognition that the assumptions of secular criticism and of modernity's 'death of God' narrative are no more immune to postmodern scepticism than are religious metanarratives. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has described the postmodern condition as 'the "re-enchantment" of the world after the protracted and earnest, though in the end inconclusive, modern struggle to dis-enchant it'.[7] The now widely acknowledged religious 'turn' in postmodern culture and theory is not a return to or of naïve, pre-modern belief but, rather, a new openness to what Graham Ward calls 'the re-evaluation of ambivalence, mystery, excess and *aporia* as they adhere to, are constituted by and disrupt the rational'.[8] The theologian John D. Caputo's suggestion that

'the distinction between theism and atheism is a little more unstable than people think, including most popes and bishops' reflects both a theological movement beyond the conceptual frameworks of onto-theology – the God of Enlightenment philosophy and theology; the God whose obituary was written by Nietzsche – and a renewed awareness of incompletion, *aporia* and otherness as aspects of faith rather than as unambiguous signs of its collapse.[9] '[I]t has for a long time been apparent', Gavin Hopps and Jane Stabler tell us, 'that whoever is supposed to have murdered God, firstly, seems to have got the wrong man and, secondly, appears to have done religion a favour':

> To think God outside of the protocols of onto-theology is to allow God to "be" unconstrained by the category of being. It is to throw open the idolatrously circumscribed horizons of finitude and to respect the irreducible otherness of the divine, by not limiting it in advance according to our own measure . . . The far-reaching implications of this change have yet to be fully registered in disciplines such as literary criticism, which have relied for some time on out-dated notions of theological orthodoxy. The fall of onto-theology, then, like the death of God, may be something of a "fortunate shipwreck" for the religious in that it heralds a beginning *as well as* an end.[10]

What are the implications of the theological 'turn' in contemporary theory for a reading of Emily Brontë's poetry and novel? In what ways might theology 'after the death of God' illuminate the works of a writer whose engagement with theological and spiritual concerns often takes her far outside of the doctrinal and institutional structures of established religious formulations? As the editors of a recent collection of essays on the post-secular imagination observe, '[l]iterature, like religion, has always implied a challenge to strict boundaries – between fantasy and fact, transcendence and immanence, the spiritual and the material'.[11] This book explores ways in which Brontë's writing engages with, challenges and disrupts these and other boundaries: between the sacred and the secular, presence and absence, faith and despondency, life and death, time and eternity. This introductory chapter examines the contexts of disenchantment and Romantic re-enchantment in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It surveys critical discussions of Emily Brontë and religion, and suggests that a view of Brontë as a theological heretic might be recuperated productively. The chapter concludes with a reading of Brontë's

essay 'The Butterfly' that introduces the central thematic and theological concerns of the subsequent analysis.

The disenchantment of the world

The early nineteenth century in which Emily Brontë composed her poems and novel has been described as characterized by the secularization of the European mind.[12] While the rationalist epistemologies that gained increasing prominence in Europe from the seventeenth century onwards did not, except to a relatively small minority, seem inevitably to discredit theism, by the end of the eighteenth century they had produced a fundamental shift in attempts to articulate the relationship between God and his creation. In the empiricist accounts of natural theology that retained some intellectual credibility into the early nineteenth century, God had been subsumed into the processes of cause and effect by which the Newtonian universe was governed.[13] God as First Cause remained a defensible proposition for scientific philosophy, but the possibility that God might be encountered as immanent presence within the world seemed increasingly unstable. When Robert Chambers published his anonymous – and enormously popular – *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* in 1844, even God's status as primary instigator of the material world seemed perilous: belief in a divine First Cause must come, Chambers suggested, from unspecified 'other grounds' beyond the horizons of science.[14]

In parallel with a growing sense that theism might be extraneous to empiricist reason, developments within Christianity itself had contributed to the distancing of God from the material world. Alister McGrath has argued that the Protestant Reformation, with its emphasis upon the authority of the Bible in matters of belief and practice, yielded a tendency towards literal rather than symbolic readings that was applied to interpretations of the natural world as well as in biblical hermeneutics.[15] Christian apologetics and natural theologies in the age of Enlightenment placed increasing emphasis upon logical argument from creation to creator – the 'argument from design' – at the expense of sacramental readings of the world in which nature was allowed both to bear divine immanence and to point symbolically to a reality beyond itself. Keith Thomas claims in his influential study *Religion and the Decline*

of Magic (1971) that the gradual decline of belief in a world inhabited by spirits and magic had its origins in Protestant rejection of ritual practices that became associated with Roman Catholic superstitions.[16] If this is correct, then the disenchantment of the natural world that is often regarded as synonymous with secularization is at least in part a product of Protestantism itself: the privileging of a theological epistemology predicated upon God's self-revelation in the Bible evolved into the sense that God reveals himself *only* in the Bible. At the same time, the Protestant emphasis upon the individual conscience in matters of biblical interpretation, in parallel with the new ecclesiologies developed in the aftermath of the Reformation, participated in what Charles Taylor has called the great disembedding: the cultural shift in which collective beliefs and practices give way to a new individualism. Taylor writes:

> Embeddedness . . . is both a matter of identity – the contextual limits to the imagination of the self – and of the social imaginary: the ways we are able to think or imagine the whole of society. But the new buffered identity, with its insistence on personal devotion and discipline, increased the distance, the disidentification, even the hostility to the older forms of collective ritual and belonging; while the drive to reform came to envisage their abolition.[17]

The process of secularization is not a straightforward rejection of or loss of interest in traditional religion but, rather, a complex pattern of cultural and intellectual shifts that have at least some of their origins within Christian theology and ecclesiology. The transcendent God of eighteenth-century Deism, the builder of the mechanistic universe, was in many respects the creation of the same rationalist and empiricist epistemologies that would announce his death a century later.

What Hillis Miller has called the 'gradual withdrawal of God from the world' might therefore be understood in the context of the changed conditions of belief that emerged with the wider cultural and intellectual movement towards disenchantment.[18] In a secularizing culture, collective belief gives way to a new individualism, while the rationalist and literalist tendencies of Enlightenment thought displace symbolic readings of the natural world and thus problematize the epistemological status of the religious imagination. At the same time, denominational formulations and theologies proliferate as theologians, clergy and artists confront the need to articulate faith in new ways that might address and respond to shifting social and cultural conditions. Owen Chadwick has

described the development of a free market of ideas as an inevitable outcome of liberalism in the Romantic era and beyond. For Chadwick, secularization is the increasing toleration of beliefs and opinions that stand outside of the mainstream or majority opinion. The secular state is one in which all voices, all opinions, are permitted: in a free market of ideas, all opinions and beliefs are subject to the scrutiny and challenge of alternative positions.[19]

More recently, Charles Taylor has offered three related but distinct definitions of the secular state. The first concerns the emptying of theistic reference from public spaces: in the modern secular state, it is possible to participate fully within political and public life without encountering God. In its second definition, secularity describes the perceived lack of relevance ascribed to religion by individuals. Clearly, a nation might be regarded as largely secular in this second sense despite retaining some religious forms – an established Church, for example – in its public life. The third definition of secularity, Taylor explains,

> [W]ould focus on the condition of belief. The shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.[20]

To describe a nation or community as secular in this third sense is not to say that religion is absent from its public and political institutions (though this might be the case) or that its members no longer hold theistic beliefs (though this might be true of some or many). It is, rather, to say that religious belief is exposed to and challenged by alternative construals of reality and of human flourishing. In a secular age, individuals are free to hold religious beliefs but are unable to regard them as self-evident or unproblematic. Theistic belief can no longer be held naïvely but must rather be understood as one of several alternative positions and as by no means the most 'obvious' or 'natural' way of interpreting reality. The individual believer must negotiate between positions of engagement – in which beliefs are seen as describing ontological realities – and disengagement, in which those same beliefs are understood to participate in a range of competing positions, the very diversity of which presents a formidable obstacle to the regarding of a religious or theistic worldview as self-evident.[21]

The experience of a world disenchanted by the secularizing tendencies of modernity is articulated in the well-known unweaving of the rainbow in John Keats's poem 'Lamia' (1820). Keats dramatizes the tensions between symbolic and demythologized readings of the natural world and indicates that what is at stake in this encounter is the question of what constitutes legitimate truth:

> There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
> We know her woof, her texture; she is given
> In the dull catalogue of common things.
> Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
> Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
> Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine –
> Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made
> The tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shade.[22]

Some popular readings of Keats' poem have seen in it the rejection of scientific explanation in favour of the preservation of mystery.[23] Such readings fail to penetrate beyond the categories of empiricist modernity and thus reproduce the same epistemological horizon that the poem interrogates. The poem's argument is not that mystery can be preserved only as long as scientific explanation is deferred; it is not a rejection of empiricism as a legitimate source of truth. Instead, it articulates the suspicion that something important has been lost at a cultural moment when the empirical and rational have come to be regarded as the only legitimate sources of truth. As Alister McGrath has pointed out, the poem suggests that materialist philosophy has denied symbolic readings of the natural world and thus emptied the 'haunted air' that was once perceived by imaginative vision; the rainbow, interpreted in terms of scientific materialism, is no longer allowed to point to anything beyond itself.[24] The unweaving of the rainbow is not a critique of reason or of scientific knowledge but, rather, a representation of the ways in which empiricist modernity is perceived to have effaced the legitimacy of other ways of experiencing and engaging with the world.

Romantic re-enchantment

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, both theology and the natural sciences came increasingly to regard the world as a closed system operating

according to fixed physical laws. God could still be regarded as the original lawgiver, but the notion of divine presence and activity in the world was rendered increasingly problematic both by rationalist philosophy and by theologies that emphasized God's status as the source of order. Deism retained God's role as instigator of the material universe while also distancing the wholly transcendent creator from the creation. In this context, the Evangelical revivals of the eighteenth century, characterized by a strong emphasis upon personal experiences of the Holy Spirit, can be understood as responses to the modern intellectualizing of faith and to the perceived distance between creator and creation introduced by rationalist versions of Christian theology. The evangelistic successes of the Wesleys, in particular, were characterized by manifestations of intense religious feeling and powerful experiences of personal conversion. Karen Armstrong notes, however, that Evangelicalism broadly endorsed 'the Enlightenment concept of "belief" as intellectual conviction' and thus perpetuated 'the Enlightenment separation of the natural from the supernatural'.[25] The Romantic philosophies that emerged late in the eighteenth century, in contrast, regarded as intolerable the disenchanted world of modernity. Romanticism responded to the Enlightenment movement towards disenchantment with a renewed emphasis upon imaginative, emotional and spiritual experiences available in the natural world; it aspired towards the re-enchantment of nature. If Romantic radicalism raised both political and theological challenges to orthodox Christianity, particularly where the churches were seen to be most closely associated with oppressive and undemocratic political establishments, Romantic intimations of the sacred and sublime in the world could also revitalize religious faith with new experiential and creative life.[26]

In his study of the Romantic sublime, Thomas Weiskel argues that Romanticism responded to the secularizing direction of Enlightenment rationalism by relocating the divine within the material world. The natural sublime represented both a reaction against an increasingly unstable theology of absolute transcendence and an attempt to reverse the modern separation of spirit from matter:

> If the only route to the intellect lies through the senses, belief in a supernatural Being finds itself insecure. God had to be saved, even if He had to marry the world of appearances. And so, in the natural sublime, He did.[27]

The Romantic imagination recuperated elements of Christian sacramental theology, refiguring the natural world as the site of possible encounter with immanent spirit. Romanticism privileged the state of heightened imaginative perception described by Wordsworth as 'that serene and blessed mood'

> In which the affections gently lead us on,
> Until, the breath of this corporeal frame,
> And even the motion of our human blood
> Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
> In body, and become a living soul:
> While with an eye made quiet by the power
> Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
> We see into the life of things.[28]

Wordsworthian seeing requires the suspension of the physical senses: it is with the body 'asleep' and the natural eye made quiet that the poet sees into the fuller life of reality. Yet this mode of heightened imaginative perception remains elusive. 'To speak truly,' writes Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'few adult persons can see nature'.[29] John Ruskin – an inheritor, like the Brontë sisters, of both Evangelical and Romantic traditions – similarly describes the scarcity of spiritual and imaginative perception: '[h]undreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion, – all in one'.[30]

The aspiration towards integration, the attempt to see the finite and limited as part of the infinite, was at the heart of Romantic readings of Christianity. For William Blake, religion was the perception of the infinite that transcended the finite horizons of the physical senses and of reason. 'He who sees the infinite in all things', Blake argues, 'sees God'.[31] Coleridge was similarly willing to describe the perception of the finite as part of the infinite as an experience of the divine: it is God 'Diffus'd thro' all, that doth make all one whole'.[32] The attempt to see beneath the surface of things, to glimpse the infinite life that permeated and united the material world, reflected the Romantic aspiration towards union and integration, an experience of nature that resisted the separation of nature and the supernatural. Bernard Reardon writes:

> We might then say that the essence of romanticism – if determination of its "essence" be possible at all – lies in the inexpugnable feeling that the finite is not self-explanatory and self-justifying, but that behind it and within

> it – shining, as it were, through it – there is always an infinite "beyond," and that he who has once glimpsed the infinity that permeates as well as transcends all finitude can never again rest content with the paltry this-and-that, the rationalized simplicities, of everyday life . . . Again and again in Romantic thought we encounter this sense of the coincidence of the finite and the infinite. In all things finite the infinite is present, latent, and the part is meaningless without the whole.[33]

Romantic notions of divine immanence resisted the distant, wholly transcendent God of Deism but, as the work of the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher demonstrates, the Romantic aspiration towards encounter with an indefinable other could be situated within the traditions of Christianity. In *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (1799), Schleiermacher describes the essence of religion as the experience of oneself as part of the infinite, distinguishing it from the doctrinal frameworks that are 'extraneous parts' rather than religion itself[34]:

> Religion's essence is neither thinking or acting, but intuition and feeling. It wishes to intuit the universe, wishes devoutly to overhear the universe's own manifestations and actions, longs to be grasped and filled by the universe's immediate influences in childlike passivity . . . Metaphysics and morals see in the whole universe only humanity as the centre of all relatedness, as the condition of all being and the cause of all becoming; religion wishes to see the infinite, its imprint and its manifestation, in humanity no less than in all other individual and finite forms.[35]

Schleiermacher's theology grounds religious epistemology in the intuitive perception of the eternal. Religious feeling begins in the pre-rational consciousness and is only later to be acted upon by the reason. This experience, however, is always to be interpreted in the context of the Christian revelation. Christ remains for Schleiermacher the supreme example of the consciousness of absolute dependence upon God and the means of entry into the Christian communion within which that experience is most fully developed: no one, he argues in his important work of systematic theology *The Christian Faith* (1822; revised edition 1831), 'can wish to belong to the Church on any other ground'.[36]

Some Romantic thinkers, of course, did not wish to belong to the Church on any ground at all.[37] In the work of Percy Bysshe Shelley, orthodox religion is often figured as the antithesis of encounter with the numinous presence that he calls the Power: the 'still and solemn power of many sights' of 'Mont Blanc'.[38] In