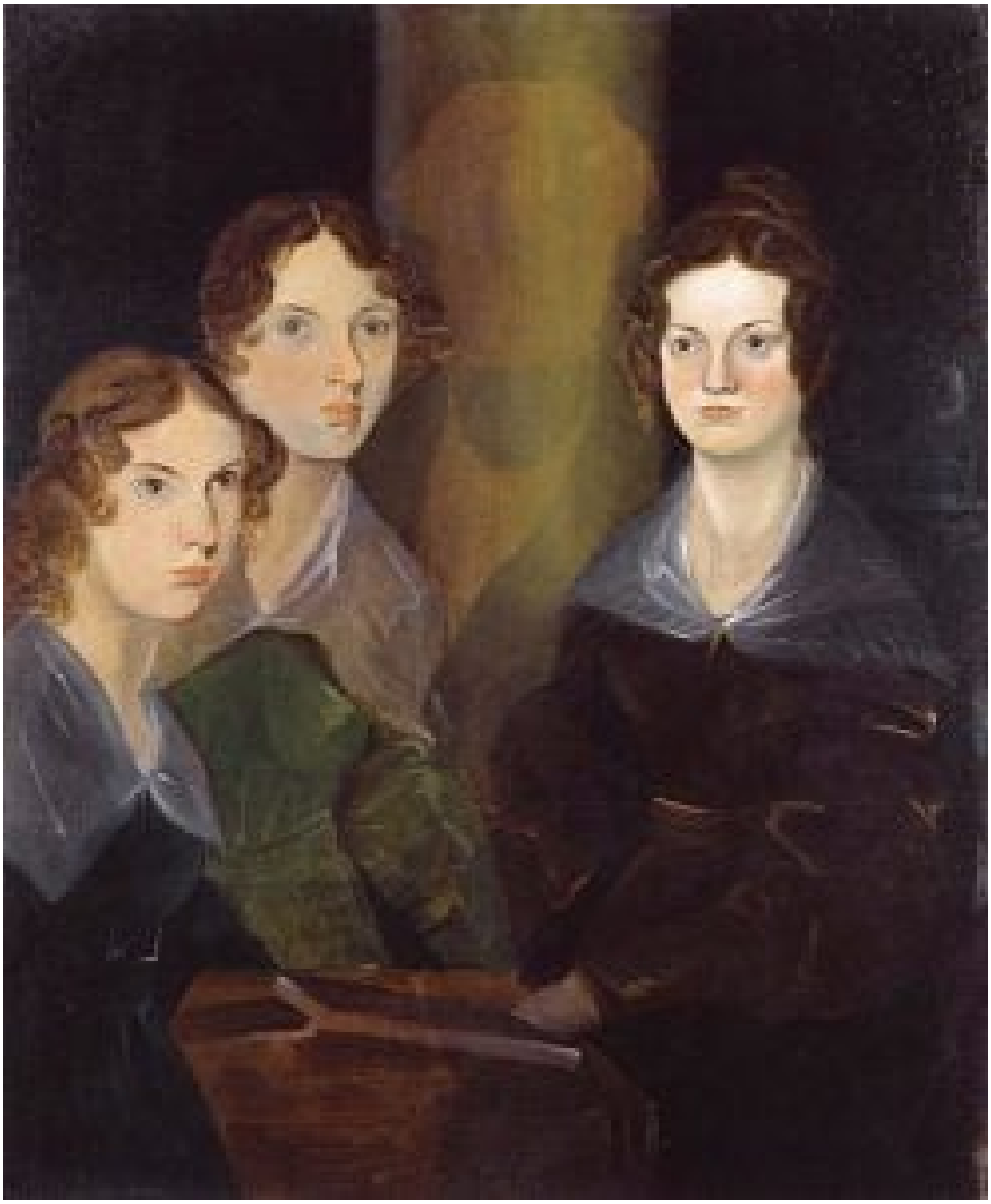
In Absentia: A Brief Note on The Poetry of the Sisters Brontë

by James Como (June 2022)



The Brontë Sisters (digitally restored), Branwell Brontë, circa 1834

Not *exactly* neglected as poets, not completely unanthologized, and not without a following (modest but intense), the Brontë sisters are, as poets, largely marginalized. In my entire literary education, undergraduate and graduate, I was never assigned or, in the texts, came upon a Brontë poem. Certainly they were personally shy and chary of public attention, an exponential understatement. Yet so was Emily Dickinson. Perhaps they are simply overshadowed by others with whom, justly or not, they are grouped. Wordsworth & Co. do take up much of the Romantic oxygen. Moreover, whereas Wordsworth counsels poets to recollect their emotions in tranquility, the Brontës, Emily especially, combust largely in the present tense; the reader swirls along with the poet, who (in spite of a consistently strict meter), seems to be neither writing poetry nor recollecting anything but instead living everything before our eyes. Maybe just *too* wuthering?

Certainly the sisters' poetry is not of equal caliber, but the weakest, Anne, is sometimes very good, Charlotte even better, and the best, Emily, is routinely superb—often suited to the top rank of poets included in the English canon, from which as a poet she is absent. In any event, here my interest is not in the reason for their 'invisibility,'[1] a state they preferred (thus assuming the male pen names of Acton, Currer and Ellis Bell), especially since as novelists Charlotte and Emily, first under their pen names and then their real ones, achieved considerable fame. Rather the question is this: *as poets* do they deserve a higher regard than they've been afforded? Not that reputation is directly proportionate to merit: that is risible and we know it. Moreover once a verdict has been rendered by history, either actively or by mere silence, rehabilitation is a heavy lift. Still, the absence invites some pondering.

Charlotte and Anne are too often too regular, as though they were writing thirteenth-century songs: too often, but not

necessarily badly. Consider this stanza (as always, best read aloud) by Anne, the last of four from “A Reminiscence”; in thought it repeats the third:

To think a soul so near divine,
Within a form, so angel fair,
United to a heart like thine
Has gladdened once our humble sphere.

Here there is some charm and naïve sincerity, but, I think, little freshness (though ‘humble’ does work in contrast to ‘angel fair’) or striking metrical skill, and (alas) it is typical of Anne. What follows, though, is a bit different. In “Home” she takes her time (seven stanzas), contrasting a sun-dappled, open landscape through which “the wind of winter sighs” (a foreshadowing?) with home—but of what sort?

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

Not quite the sighing calm of the opening or of any home you might imagine. Then what?

Restore to me that little spot,
With grey walls compassed round,
Where knotted grass neglected lies,
And weeds usurp the ground.[2]

This home is more than curious: both wild *and* sheltered, perhaps revealing an inner landscape in which Anne wants it both ways, walled *and* battered. So she gets interesting, even if remaining metrically predictable. (I cannot blame her for Joyce Kilmer bouncing around in my head.) She is childlike, maybe childish—and much too confined. Nevertheless, her passion is genuine, and we should remember that the root of ‘passion’ is *passio*, suffering, which is where the sisters live—for reasons terrestrial and otherwise.

Charlotte seems more the thoughtful troubadour than her sister. “Presentiment” —not quite a ballad but a dialogue—could have come from the early sixteenth century.

Sister, you’ve sat there all day
Come to the hearth awhile;
The wind so wildly sweeps away,
The clouds so darkly pile.
That open book has lain unread,
For hours upon your knee;
You’ve never smiled nor turned your head
What can you, sister, see?

The sister (Emma) answers Jane, lamenting the cold of November and the troubling silence in the garden: “O Jane, what sadness fill the mind on such a dreary day?” And in spite of Jane’s attempt at perspective, Emma answers, “The peaceful glow of our fireside/ Imparts no peace to me./ My thoughts would rather wander wide/ Than rest, dear Jane, with thee” —and predicts her own death. Finally, “Jane sits upon a shaded stile,/ Alone she sits there now … she’s thinking of one winter’s day,/ A few short months ago,/ When Emma’s bier was borne away/ O’er wastes of frozen snow.” Then the sadness deepens, all the portentousness brought home, miserably:

She’s thinking how that drifted snow
Dissolved in spring’s first gleam,
And how her sister’s memory now
Fades, even as fades a dream.

And so poor Emma is *utterly* gone, from both heart and mind.

That such a cold truth can be so casually, even if truthfully, stated, rather than sorely lamented, especially coming after a portrait of deep sisterly concern, is almost sociopathic, not least because it comes within “spring’s first gleam.”

But what of the deaths of Charlotte’s actual sisters? Anne died second, from consumption (as did they all) and with much

suffering: “Calmly to watch the failing breath/ Wishing each sigh might be the last;/ Longing to see the shade of death/ O’er those beloved features cast.” Not cold, but removed, calm, resigned, and with considerable inner strength:

Although I knew that we had lost
The hope and glory of our life;
And now, benighted, tempest-tossed,
Must bear alone the weary strife.

Amidst the ‘tempest’ (a worn image: we want more) I wonder: What hope and glory does the poet mean? And just here, in silence, is strength: may we not fill in the Resurrection that follows suffering on our own? Charlotte *already* knew of the loss, because of the lingering illness that betokened death inevitably. In the event, Charlotte is by no means posturing, merely stoical.

Little in Charlotte’s poetry is celebratory. As with the three, very much is elegiac, never more so than in “On the Death of Emily Jane Brontë.” The verse is a bit more complex than in most of her other poems, with five six-line stanzas (aabccb, each with two tercets) and with many a line running into the next:

My darling, thou wilt never know
The grinding agony of woe
That we have borne for thee.
Thus may we consolation tear
E’en from the depth of our despair
And wasting misery.
The nightly anguish thou art spared
When all the crushing truth is bared
To the awakening mind,
When the galled heart is pierced with grief,
Till wildly it implores relief,
But small relief can find.

“Grinding’, ‘tear,’ ‘wasting’, ‘galled’, along with internal rhyme—these gather to add conviction to the last line, though we note that so far the poem has been about the poet. Ah, but “small relief can find” is *not* the final line. Here is the last stanza:

Then since thou art spared such pain
We will not wish thee here again;
He that lives must mourn,
God help us through our misery
And give us rest and joy with thee
When we reach our bourne!

Charlotte cannot wait. Unsentimental and realistic, she is finally prayerful, certainly hopeful, and she knows her role, which is to mourn, unto that lovely final word. My impression is that, having felt so strongly and suffered so dearly during life, death is what it promises: a portal opening from strife. There is no talk of glory *per se*, but there is a sense that the wild harshness of life will be redeemed; that is, though still wild, not harsh; rather, exciting.

The verse is skilful, notwithstanding a slipped beat here and there, and the imagery is fitting, sometimes striking, rarely worn. Yet one wonders: something is going on in there. That is, when one reads these poems *seriatim* a thought creeps in: these days, might the sisters be found in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, for depression if nothing else? (And I think: should not their … disturbance … get them *into* the canon, not keep them out?) Or is their vision one of a higher realm, making them impatiently resigned, not pathological? After all we do know that spiritual formation requires strife, what comes before the Resurrection.

Which gets us to Emily, whose poems are easily available. Her best-known poem is simple and compelling: seven very regular, four-line stanzas (abab, cdcd, etc.) and is no less than a prayer:

No coward soul is mine
No trembler in the word's storm-troubled sphere:
I see Heaven's glories shine,
And faith shines equal, arming me from fear.

A simple proclamation, that, of a grand truth: if one see God's glory one need not fear, as a benighted coward might. The next stanza calls to the Deity, exclaiming that Life rests in her "As I—undying Life—have power in thee!" The current runs both ways, reciprocally. Moreover "Vain are the thousand creeds/ That move men's hearts: unutterably vain … To waken doubts in one/ Holding so fast by thine infinity:/ So surely anchor on/ The steadfast rock of immortality." That is why, if "the universe ceased to be,/ And Thou were left alone,/ Every existence would exist in Thee." And so—just why no soul be coward—

There is not room for Death.
Nor atom that his [*third person now*] might could render void:
Thou—THOU [*back to second person*]art Being and Breath,
And what THOU art may never be destroyed.

The entire second line is unfortunate, both unnecessary and confusing, and the fourth is not only repetitive but jejune. Coming at the end one can only say, 'really?' The anti-climax makes the tide withdraw. And yet, the faithfulness certainly remains, thus vindicating the first line.

Their poems speak of a reckoning after a strife-strewn life, the first, purgative, stage, of spiritual formation. Each of the sisters seems to know this, and each has a wild, unbounded hope for the next stage. Did either ever make it to the second, illuminative, stage? Well, they were unwavering in their faith that a third stage, the unitive resolution, awaited them. Maybe they were already there. We see this in Emily's greatest poem, "The Prisoner," a dialogue between a jailer, his visitor, and an inmate.

If Cathy Earnshaw were crafty enough, there on the heath or propped high in her secret rocky promontory, she might have written it herself.

In the dungeon-crypts idly did I stray,
Reckless of the lives wasting there away;

The visitor soon converses with a prisoner. “I have been struck,” she said, “and I am suffering now;/ Yet these are little worth, your bolts and irons strong;/ And, were they forged in steel, they could not hold me long.” The jailer, referring to his master, reminds the prisoner that she will not go free. She answers, “A messenger of Hope comes every night to me,/ And offers for short life, eternal liberty.” There follows a rapturous description of that messenger and his arrival, “when joy grew mad with awe.” She briefly describes both her inner and outer suffering, but adds “Yet I would lose no sting, would wish no torture less;

The more that anguish racks, the earlier it will bless;
And robed in fires of hell, or bright with heavenly shine,
If it but herald death, the vision is divine!

Conversation halts. “We had no further power to work the captive woe” –

Her cheek, her gleaming eye, declared that man had given
A sentence, unapproved, and overruled by Heaven.

What we’ve heard earlier of the prisoner remains true:

The captive raised her face; it was as soft and mild
As sculptured marble saint, or slumbering unwean’d child;
It was so soft and mild, it was so sweet and fair,
Pain could not trace a line, nor grief a shadow there!

Emily, especially, is fierce, the fiercest of the three. She, more than the others (but they, too), understand intimately the root of ‘passion’, and though it excites, there is more to

eternity than that. But no matter. These sisters were profoundly and undeniably religious, and their faith was both the source of passion and (learned from their patient, calm, and suffering pastor father) their comfort. Here is the final stanza (of five) from "The Visionary":

> Burn, then little lamp; glimmer straight and clear—
> Hush! A rustling wing stirs, methinks, the air:
> He for whom I wait, thus ever comes to me;
> Strange Power! I trust thy might; trust thou my constancy.

That is the voice that earns our attention, merits re-visiting, and so ought to be around and about, this Brontë voice, utterly unique, its appeal unsettling.

That we do not matter to them should not matter to us.

[1] *To Walk Invisible* is the title of a film about the pre-famous sisters in a household that included their good but increasingly ill father and their sorry brother Bramwell.
[2] Anne's and Charlotte's poems are taken from *The Best Poems of the Bronte Sisters*, Dover, 1997. Emily's are from *Collected Poems: Emily Bronte*, derived from *Poems of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell*, Smith & Elder, ed. Charlotte Bronte, 1850.

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James Como's new book is *Mystical Perelandra: My Lifelong Reading of C. S. Lewis and His Favorite Book* (Winged Lion Press).