

LIVED AND LIVING SPACES IN BRONTËS' YORKSHIRE

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Abstract: This paper may be read as a voyage in and voyage out through a most sacred space for the English literature, a genuine "lieu de mémoire" (Nora, 1984-1992), Brontës' homeland of Yorkshire. (Re)visiting what Henri Lefebvre refers to as the "perceived space" ('le perçu') of everyday life, will only pull us into the "lived space" ('le vécu') of the imagination which not only transcends but has the power to (re)dimension the balance of popular 'perceived space' and official 'conceived space'. At this crossroads, space acts as both an active participant in the shaping of stories, influencing the human characters, or as endowed with human pneuma. Few other places from the English literary geography match the magnetism and mystery of the Brontës' land, and nowadays, the modern reader seeks not only the literature the three sisters authored, but also the harsh winds and undulating heaths that budded it.

Keywords: women's writing, spatial constructions, homeland

The starting point of this paper is to be found in Michel Foucault's essay – "Des espaces autres"-, authored in 1967 which, among other ideas, claims that whereas the nineteenth century stood under the sign of a historical perspective, "*l'époque actuelle serait peut-être plutôt l'époque de l'espace*" (Foucault, 1982). The frontier between the two dimensions, historical and spatial is far from being clearly marked throughout Brontës' Yorkshire, in itself a place where the landscape meets the geography of the heart. Charlotte, Emily and Anne seem to have magically captured the lines of the genuine horizons of Haworth, *limited* and *limiting* in their undulating projection, with the infinitely borderless perspectives of their legendary cultural heritage, evermore magic since it bore the signs of Ireland and Cornwall, lands filled with fairy tales and mysteries. When their mother passed away, Charlotte aged five, Emily three and Anne, only one year old at the time, had to deal with a solitary parent and an austere aunt for company and guidance and an isolated helmet as cradle of their imagination and soul. The world, blurry and enigmatic in its contours, whose trails and roads had never been visited but only envisaged, was soon to be discovered through the "*imaginative playing-out of fantasies*" (Pollard, 1993, p. 146) which minutely and delicately tuned the Brontë children dreams and longings.

Seclusion, as metaphor for building individual spheres of identity that seem to 'float' suspended within their own time dimension adjacent to the common flow of things seems to be a constant in the story of the Brontë family. We refer here to a *geographic seclusion*, isolated as their destinies had been in the moors of Yorkshire, *scholarly seclusion*, the intimacy of their father's reading room moulded itself better upon the inner structure of the children than the rigid, gloomy educational system that had only sown death among them, *gender seclusion*, since Acton, Currer and Ellis Bell were masks adopted to make Charlotte, Anne and Emily's voices heard and their fiction accepted by the society of the time, and *self seclusion*, as the very core of each and every of their destinies, a form of utmost peculiarity of some most fragile inner structures, supported only from within, from the magic world of their Celtic heritage.

The Brontës took refuge in their imaginative epics that coloured the long hours spent not in an equally stern a precinct as the atmosphere they grew up in, for it was not in the nursery but in the study-room where they would visualize the ways of the outer world. Thus,

Charlotte and her brother, Branwell, created the magical lands of Angria, whereas Emily and Anne ruled over the island of Gondal. Having limited personal contact with other people, dwelling in a rather secluded village, furthermore confined as they were to the demanding and rather stifling embrace of the only room of the house where children were least expected to spend their time, nourished their unusual intelligence and sensibility that came to flood some of the most exquisite pages of English literature. Once confined to the precincts of their house, with very few people to talk to, they were a world to themselves.

Emily, the “*most self-contained*” (Pollard, 1993, p. 147) of the Brontë children, simply could not exist but surrounded by the moors of Haworth and caressed by the whimsical winds of a *locus mundi* almost defiant of the laws of time and space. In 1824, Charlotte and Emily were sent to school at Cowan Bridge, an episode that would leave a deep wound on their life and soul, for it was there where the eldest sisters, Maria and Elizabeth encountered their untimely death. Charlotte recorded these tragic events and her own feelings in the description of the Lowood Institution in *Jane Eyre*, where Helen Burns told the story of her elder sister Maria, and the image of Brocklehurst reflected through Jane’s eyes tells us how the authoress remembered Reverend William Carus Wilson, the founder of Cowan Bridge School, which brought back only bad memories to her. For Charlotte, he represented a dark, evil force, a ‘black pillar’ she held responsible for the death of her two beloved sisters, due to his drive to austerity and his obsession with sin, punishment and damnation. A similar comparison is further continued in connection with Reverend St. John Rivers, whom she describes as a cold, icy, reserved man of the cloth much in the same manner as Brocklehurst.

In 1835, when Charlotte returned as a teacher to the school she graduated, Roe Head, Emily accompanied her as a pupil, but such was her unhappiness that she returned home only three months later.

Virginia Woolf said “*It is as if she could tear up all that we know human beings by, and fill these unrecognizable transparencies with such a gust of life that they transcend reality. She could free life from its dependence on facts; with a few touches indicate the spirit of a face so that it needs no body; by speaking of the moor make the wind blow and the thunder roar*” (Boyd, 1983, p. 93). The scenery of Haworth, its atmosphere, the character of its inhabitants and the stories among and about them, have all deeply infused the fabric of the Brontë novels. In the case of Emily the attachment turned almost into a passion. *‘The night is darkening round me, / The wild winds coldly blow; / But a tyrant spell has bound me / And I cannot, cannot go. / The giant trees are bending / Their bare boughs weighed with snow, / And the storm is fast descending / And yet I cannot go. / Clouds beyond clouds above me, / Wastes beyond wastes below; / But nothing drear can move me; / I will not, cannot go (Brontë, Often rebuked, yet always back returning, pp. 46-7).*

She could hardly live away from Haworth. She never left it without suffering in health, and some of the most impressive lines of her powerfully imaginative poetry bear witness to the strong hold its wild hills and moors had upon her: *‘I’ll walk where my own nature would be leading, / It vexes me to choose another guide, / Where the grey flocks in ferny glens are feeding; Where the wild wind blows on the mountain-side. / What have those lonely mountains worth revealing? / More glory, and more grief, than I can tell, / The earth that wakes one human heart to feeling / Can centre both the worlds of Heaven and Hell’ (Brontë, The night is darkening round me, p.122).*

It seems that the whole world of Emily, real or imaginary, though there seems to be a frail boundary between the two, is constantly permeated by this dualism between Up and Down, Imprisonment and Freedom, Wind and Stillness, White and Greyish-black, Heaven and Hell itself. Moreover, heaven, hell and death are constant presences in Emily Brontë’s

literature. She was more familiar with death than most people, even in the nineteenth century, living as she did in one of the unhealthiest places in England, a rural town with a mortality rate that equalled that of the most crowded towns. Juliet Barker notes that during the seven and half- months of Emily's mother Maria Branwell Brontë's final illness, there were sixty three burials in Haworth (Barker, 1996). So common a presence and inexorable a reality death has become to Emily that in a letter Charlotte Brontë wrote to a London specialist only ten days before her death, it is claimed that: "*Her resolution to contend against illness, being very fixed she has never consented to lie in bed for a single day – she sits up from 7 in the morning till 10 at night. All medical aid she had rejected – insisting that Nature shall be left to take its own course...*" (Krugovoy Silver, 2002, p. 94). It is as if for Emily nature would not be true to its real self had it not told the story of the wildest of emotions, the intensest love, annihilating hatred, anguishing agony or suffocating grief: "*Cold in the earth, and deep snow piled above thee! / Far, far removed, cold in the dreary grave! / Have I forgot, my only love, to love thee, / Severed at last by time's all-severing wave?*" The world she paints is not so much a realm of the *living*, but of *lived* feelings and overwhelming impulses and forces that spring from her most powerful and rich inner nature. It is in this spiritual difference where one has to look for the uniqueness of Emily's *écriture* compared to her siblings. Unlike her sisters, Charlotte and Anne, who populated their novels with faces and places that crossed the trajectory of their lives at a certain moment, Emily bestowed immortality only upon scenery, as the only genuine projection of her inner self. Howarth was nothing but the inmost cradle of the only place she really enjoyed dwelling – her Gondal island where she would feel, as she confessed, "comfortable and undesponding" (Birthday Note, 31 July 1845).

It is in her *écriture* where Emily actually comes to live, passionately, intensely, heedlessly almost, burning down to her very last cell; and it is this purifying, unifying fire that brings her, not just her self-reflected characters, to come to meet and melt with her own true and most genuine self. 'Stronger than a man, simpler than a child, her nature stood alone', these are the very words of very elder sister, Charlotte, referring to Emily's exceptionality that also applies to her amazing soul.

Wuthering Heights is a novel of extraordinary power, going far, with her poems, to justify the opinion of Arnold, that "...and She – (How shall I sing her?) – whose soul / Knew no fellow for might, / Passion, vehemence, grief, / Daring, since Byron died, / That world – fam'd Son of Fire; She, who sank, / Baffled, unknown, self-consum'd; / Whose too-bold dying song / Shook, like a clarion-blast, my soul".

Exceptionality is not only an attribute of Emily, for all the Brontës continue to exert an almost indefinable fascination. Should it be because of their unique literary embroidery, enhanced by their almost ethereal presence, difficult to capture in real patterns, should it be because they poured infinite sensitivity into writing at a time when literature was nearly exclusively a man's job, the answer refuses to offer itself. Like most great writers, the Brontë sisters made the best use of their outward experiences as well as their own imaginations.

The Brontës did not enjoy the chance to see much of the world, nor could they develop complex relations, managing only to interweave rather loose relations, failing to reach the other line of the horizon, had it not been for the extraordinary power of their mind and their most exquisite sense of imagination. If men writers of the same period came into the closest contact with life, the Brontë girls could only gaze at it through the narrow windows of their secluded, rectory house.

However, the 'windows' were wide open inwardly, as they saw the world through the inner eyes of their most special sensitiveness. Paraphrasing the title of Huxley's most famous

novel *Eyeless in Gaza* the Brontë sisters might have been *eyeless in Haworth* though it was this special *blindness* of theirs that found its reflection in the endless turmoil of the heart.

Their Celtic roots, the freshness of their early age bloomed in their extraordinary sense of writing which brought a touch of colour, freedom and warmth, never to be faded, never to be equalled.

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