

**GRACE IN THE ARTS:**  
**THE BRONTE SISTERS:**  
**A MINISTERIAL HOME WITHOUT**  
**MUCH *BLESSED ASSURANCE***

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I. INTRODUCTION

Charlotte Bronte [*BRAHN-tay*] wrote of her sister Emily in her obituary, “I have never seen her parallel in anything.”<sup>1</sup> As a matter of fact the very same eulogium could be applied to all three Bronte sisters—Charlotte, Emily, and Anne. Never in the history of literature have three sisters so distinguished themselves as such world-class authors. Some literature professors would probably class Emily’s *Wuthering Heights* among the top ten novels in English literature. Charlotte’s *Jane Eyre* is not to be rated far behind that novel.

Another unparalleled fact is that none of the trio of world-renowned sisters lived to be forty years old. Charlotte (1816-1855) lived to be 39, Emily (1818-1848) 30, and Anne (1820-1849) only 29, yet among the three of them seven of their novels were published—with two of them proving to be blockbusters. The great literary critic Matthew Arnold penned a poem entitled “Haworth Churchyard,” referring to where this remarkable family of authors was buried.

Charlotte Bronte met other celebrated contemporary English writers such as William Thackeray, Thomas Carlyle, and Matthew Arnold, as well as being friends with two well-known female authors—atheist Harriet Martineau and Unitarian writer Elizabeth Gaskell (who would become Charlotte’s first biographer). She was also a contemporary of female authors George Eliot, George Sand, and Jane Austen. (Austen’s novels Charlotte did not particularly admire.) Intriguingly, if we include the three Bronte sisters along with the last three named novelists, five of the six female authors felt compelled—in that male-dominated society—to assume masculine pen names in order to get their excellent

<sup>1</sup>Rebecca Fraser, *The Brontes* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1988), 317.

works published. (Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Bronte took the pseudonyms of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell, preserving the same initials of their first and last names, in order to secure publication.)

Whether we can classify the falsehood of Ellen Nussey (Charlotte's longest-lasting friend and pen pal) with the lies of the Egyptian midwives (in Exod 1:19) or not, we are indebted to Ellen for her falsity. In the last year of Charlotte's life, Ellen promised Charlotte's husband to burn Charlotte's old letters. However, Ellen relented this promise and later shared 300 of Charlotte's 500 letters to her with Charlotte's first biographer. The twenty-four year correspondence between these two friends has provided the bulk of documentary data about the Brontes for their biographical legacy, which constitutes the bulk of four volumes of their correspondence.<sup>2</sup>

Charlotte indicated that every morning her ministerial father carried a loaded pistol with him, and other reports circulated that he fired off a brace of pistols out of his window each day. Whether or not the latter tale is true, assuredly from this ministerial home certain shots were fired that were heard around the world—namely the unprecedented, yet secretive, blast of creative power released from that parsonage by means of some very *novel* novels. (The descriptive word “secretive” is employed here because their own brother—living at home before he died—never even knew that his sisters had rocked the literary world with their sensational books.

## II. A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

From 1738 (the year of his purported conversion or Aldersgate experience) until the year of his death (1791) John Wesley left a trail of impact upon England and world history that has rarely ever been equaled anywhere. Wesley first arrived in 1748 at Haworth, the village of the yet future Brontes. Wesley would participate there in services of the Church of Englander William Grimshaw. In fact, “John Wesley preached at Haworth in 1757, 1761, 1766, 1772, 1786, and 1790; and [his fellow (Calvinistic-oriented) evangelist] George Whitefield [pronounced WHIT-field]...preached [at Haworth] many times.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 477, 482, 489.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas J. Wise and J. A. Symington, eds., *The Brontes: Their Lives, Friendships, and Correspondence* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1932), I, 52.

Although William Grimshaw was not a Methodist, this Haworth minister of the Church of England was friendly to the Methodists. Grimshaw had been an excessive drinker and better on horse racing. This graduate of Christ's College at Cambridge "became a typical [Anglican] curate...until a long spiritual struggle culminated in a conversion experience in 1742."<sup>4</sup> He was converted through reading the Bible and John Owens on the subject of justification. Therefore, he became an Evangelical and evangelistic Anglican. In his twenty-one years at Haworth he transformed the countryside. John Newton, who penned our hymn "Amazing Grace" and wrote Grimshaw's biography, reported, "The last time I was with him was as we were standing together on a hill near Haworth."<sup>5</sup> Grimshaw had held the position that seventy years later the Bronte sisters' father (Patrick) would hold as an Anglican clergyman.

One of Patrick Bronte's mentors had been Charles Simeon, an eminent Evangelical Church of Englander, whose life history would later be edited by one of the most damaging of Christians (physically and spiritually) to the Bronte children (William Carus Wilson). Patrick Bronte had attended St. John's College at Cambridge for ministerial training. The well-known pioneer missionary Henry Martyn (Simeon's curate) wrote to the evangelical social reformer William Wilberforce in order to gain financial aid for young Patrick Bronte while he was at college. Patrick Bronte himself authored two religious novels and was known as an evangelical Anglican clergyman. He once wrote a poem in which he borrowed Wesley's hymn-phrase "a crucified God," presumably implying that Bronte believed in the full deity and humanity of Christ. Also he wrote to a Miss Burder (April 21, 1823), "An interest in Jesus Christ is the best interest we can have, both here and hereafter."<sup>6</sup> To *The Pastoral Visitor* (1815) he contributed two articles entitled "On Conversion." All of the preceding information thus far shows how the Bronte sisters were raised in the heartland of English Evangelicalism.

<sup>4</sup>John C. Pollack in J. D. Douglas, ed. *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), 438.

<sup>5</sup>Elsie Harrison, *Haworth Parsonage: A Study of Wesley and the Brontes* (London: The Epworth Press, 1937), 9.

<sup>6</sup>Wise and Symington, *Brontes: Correspondence*, I, 62.

Patrick Brontë's wife Maria died after nine years of marriage and the birthing of six children. She had been a Methodist prior to their marriage. Before their marriage she had written her husband-to-be of their prayers "ascend[ing] to a throne of grace, and through a Redeemer's merits [they will] procure for us peace and happiness here and a life of eternal felicity hereafter."<sup>7</sup> In a later letter she urged her future husband to be "successful in [his] evangelistic efforts for the salvation of souls."<sup>8</sup> Actually, Mrs. Brontë's preceding statements are among the clearest salvational statements found in the entirety of the Brontë family's written legacy. After their mother died, their aunt (Miss Branwell)—a Methodist—entered their home and contributed to the children's spiritual heritage. One Brontë biographer, Winifred Gerin, wrongly treated Aunt Branwell as a Calvinist rather than an Arminian.<sup>9</sup> Still today in the Haworth parsonage can be seen the girls' samplers with Bible verses stitched on them.

Two other Brontë sisters died early (Charlotte believed) as a result of poor nourishment and treatment in the girls' school run by a Calvinist named William Carus Wilson. The school is depicted in *Jane Eyre*, and Charlotte's depiction of it generated a lot of heated controversy among alumni because of her accusations.

As young adults in 1846 the three sisters combined to have a book of their poetry published. It sold a grand total of two copies. Then all three wrote novels, and two of them were immediately successful. The two (out of their seven publications) which attained lasting recognition were Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* (pronounced *ERR*) and Emily's *Wuthering Heights*.

Ironically, it was their brother, Branwell, who (as the only son) was expected to achieve fame for literature. Unitarian minister James Martineau had praised his poetry. However, Branwell proved to be an irresponsible, dissolute alcoholic and opium addict. He was dead at age 31 without ever having known that his three sisters had published books that would achieve world fame. During his terminal period Branwell sketched "funerary sculptures of himself consumed by the

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>9</sup>Elisabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth Century Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 52.

flames of hell.”<sup>10</sup> Though Branwell allowed his father to pray for him in his last period and though Charlotte later believed him to be at peace in heaven, there is no solid evidence to indicate that this minister’s son was a true Christian.

Charlotte watched Branwell, Emily, and Anne all die within nine months of each other. Each of the three women were distinctive in temperament. Emily and Anne, who were closest to each other, were polar opposites. Emily’s willfulness protruded itself in the never-to-be-forgotten personalities of the brutish Heathcliff and the irrepressible Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*. By contrast with Emily, Anne was the reserved, submissive, pliant, gentle youngest sister. She reminds one of the Beth-character in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. Charlotte struggled with her unattractive appearance and painful silence—despite her intellectual brilliance. The general impression given was that Emily was the least Christian in doctrine, and Anne seemed the most Christian in life-orientation.

In (what turned out to be) the last year of her life, Charlotte married her father’s curate (which was in American terms like being an assistant pastor), Arthur Nicholls. At first she was shocked at the unsuspectedness of his marriage proposal and declined it, but Nicholls’s longsuffering persistence paid off, and their year of marriage seems to have been happy. One of the people Charlotte discussed her engagement with was Catherine Winkworth, whose name appears in many hymnal indexes as the translator of numerous German hymns into English. She published over 300 German hymn translations (including that of the hymn “Now Thank We All Our God”).

### III. ANALYSIS OF THEIR NOVELS

Whereas Charlotte Bronte (thanks to Ellen Nussey’s falsehood mentioned earlier) left a legacy of perhaps 500 letters, the same Ellen declared, “So very little is known of Emily Bronte.”<sup>11</sup> Emily seemed to be like a boiling cauldron with the lid clamped down on top. Finally her smoldering mini-volcano erupted in her novel *Wuthering Heights* (which is the least patently autobiographical of the seven novels that the three sisters bequeathed to the world).

<sup>10</sup>Fraser, *The Brontes*, 253.

<sup>11</sup>Wise and Symington, *Brontes: Correspondence*, II, 273.

Literary critic Edward Wagenknecht indicated that “her novel stands alone in world literature,” noting that “Lord David Cecil [who also wrote on the Christian poet William Cowper] regards *Wuthering Heights* as the greatest of all Victorian novels.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Barry Qualls concluded, “There is nothing like *Wuthering Heights* in...19<sup>th</sup> century English fiction.”<sup>13</sup> Norman Sherry deduced, “Certainly it is the most finished of

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all the Bronte novels in its more complete artistic vision and in its superior fictional technique.”<sup>14</sup>

Analysts Gilbert and Gubar made the assessment, “That *Wuthering Heights* is about heaven and hell...has long been seen by critics...partly because Nelly Dean raises the questions: What is heaven? Where is hell? Perhaps more urgently than any other speech in an English novel.”<sup>15</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti commented in 1854 that *Wuthering Heights* “is a fiend of a book, an incredible monster...The action is laid in

Hell.”<sup>16</sup> Its lead male character (Heathcliff) is called an “imp of Satan” (ch. 5), “a devil” (ch. 13), “most diabolical” (ch. 19), and “a ghoul or a vampire” (ch. 34). Its one indisputable area of overlap with Christianity is that “the story of *Wuthering Heights* is built around a central fall.”<sup>17</sup> However, unlike Christianity, the novel offers no clear-cut, substantive doctrine of redemption.

<sup>12</sup>Edward Wagenknecht, *Cavalcade of the English Novel* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1943), 304, 314.

<sup>13</sup>Barry V. Qualls in *The Columbia History of the British Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 353.

<sup>14</sup>Norman Sherry, *Charlotte and Emily Bronte* (New York: Arco, 1969), 114.

<sup>15</sup>Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 253.

<sup>16</sup>Qualls, *Columbia History*, 373.

<sup>17</sup>Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman*, 253.

Emily Bronte seems to have been the least Christianly oriented of the three sisters. Although a negligible amount of data about her has survived outside of her one world-class novel, several surviving tidbits of information indicate her penchant away from Christian orthodoxy. Once their friend Mary Taylor mentioned that at Haworth someone asked her “what religion I was of,” trying to pin down her perspective. She replied that the answer to that question was between God and her. At that comment Emily Bronte exclaimed, “That’s right.” Mary Taylor later commented, “This was all I ever heard Emily say on religious subjects.”<sup>18</sup>

Biographer Rebecca Fraser wrote that Anne Bronte “distrusted Emily’s wild, wilful pantheism.”<sup>19</sup> Fraser then added that Emily’s poetic lines “left a Christian God out of the equation and [her sister] Anne...rejected Emily’s vision.”<sup>20</sup>

Emily penned the following two poetic lines:

“I’ll walk where my own nature would be leading:  
It vexes me to choose another guide.”<sup>21</sup>

Taken at face value, the lines are a declaration of independence from God. This view is confirmed in her poem “The Old Stoic” when Emily stated:

“And if I pray, the only prayer  
That moves my lips for me  
Is, ‘Leave the heart that now I bear,  
And give me liberty!’”<sup>22</sup>

Thus, one evangelical minister’s daughter evidently died entrenched in her own willfulness.

Anne Bronte wrote two books—*Agnes Grey* (1845) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). Although the English writer George Moore “champion[ed] Anne as the greatest of the [three] Brontes,” it remains

<sup>18</sup>Wise and Symington, *Brontes: Correspondence*, II, 275-76.

<sup>19</sup>Fraser, *Brontes*, 294.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>Wise and Symington, *Brontes: Correspondence*, II, 275.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

for most appraisers “doubtful whether either [of Anne’s novels] would be read now if Anne were not the sister of Charlotte and Emily.”<sup>23</sup>

George Moore eccentrically called *Agnes Grey* “the most perfect prose narrative in English literature.”<sup>24</sup> In *Agnes Grey* Anne transmuted her own autobiographical experience in serving as an English governess into novel form. Agnes Grey served as a governess for two high-class ungovernable children. Agnes also fell in love with a young Anglican curate, Mr. Weston, and married him. In real life Anne had a crush upon the curate Mr. Weightman who died suddenly.

*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* transmutes her brother Branwell’s real-life experience into fiction, but like Anne’s own thwarted love affair, Branwell’s hopes were torpedoed in real life. Branwell had a romance going (some said an actual affair) with his employer’s wife, and when his employer died, he threatened to disinherit his widow if she married Branwell. In the novel Gilbert Markham fell in love with a woman (Helen Graham) who appeared to be a widow, but turned out to be separated from her dissolute husband and who sought to redeem him (as no doubt Anne tried to do with her dissipated brother) before he died. Whereas Anne’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is concerned with a single man who can’t marry a woman because she’s officially married (secretly) to an immoral man, Charlotte’s main novel *Jane Eyre* is concerned with a woman who can’t marry a man because he’s officially married (secretly) to an insane woman.

Maria Frawley wrote: “Anne Bronte was more influenced by her [Methodist] aunt’s religious beliefs than were any of her siblings.”<sup>25</sup> Charlotte wrote to Margaret Wooler (March 24, 1849) concerning Anne, “at heart she is—I believe—a true Christian. She looks beyond this life, and regards her Home and Rest as elsewhere than on Earth.”<sup>26</sup> Charlotte said (on June 4, 1849) that Anne died “trusting in God.”<sup>27</sup>

Despite the preceding statements, the documentary evidence concerning Anne’s Christianity and concomitant assurance is not without

<sup>23</sup>Cornelius Weygandt, *A Century of the English Novel* (Freeport, NY: Books for Library Press, 1968), 109-110.

<sup>24</sup>Wagenknecht, *Cavalcade*, 315.

<sup>25</sup>Maria Frawley, *Anne Bronte* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 24.

<sup>26</sup>Wise and Symington, *Brontes: Correspondence*, II, 317.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

surprising contrary data. When Anne was ill in 1837, she “requested a visit with the Moravian minister James de la Trobe and discussed what he called ‘the main truths of the Bible respecting our salvation.’”<sup>28</sup> It is interesting that when Anne wished to discuss issues related to salvation, she did not turn to her evangelical minister father for assistance.

Charlotte testified concerning Anne, “I have said that she was religious [which in those days in England meant being a ‘Christian’], and it was by leaning on those Christian doctrines in which she firmly believed that she found support through...her last hour [with]...calm triumph.”<sup>29</sup> However, in retrospect one year (1849) after her “gentle, retiring” sister’s death, Charlotte wrote,

In looking over my sister Anne’s papers, I find mournful evidence that religious feeling had been to her much like what it was to [William] Cowper [pronounced *KOO-puhr*]...in a milder form...she waited at the foot of a secret Sinai...To me [that] seem[s] sad, as if her whole innocent life had passed under the martyrdom of an unconfessed physical pain.<sup>30</sup>

In one of Anne’s poetically composed hymns (called “The Doubter’s Prayer,” September 10, 1843) she wrote that “every fiend of Hell methinks/Enjoys the anguish of my heart.”<sup>31</sup> (These lines expressing her difficulty with Christian assurance were penned six years after her discussion with the Moravian minister about salvation.)

Another of Anne’s poems expresses her lack of assurance:

“Could I but hear my Savior say,  
‘I know thy patience and thy love;  
How thou hast held the narrow way,  
For my sake labored night and day,  
And watched, and striven with them that strove,  
And still hast borne, and didst not faint,’  
Oh, this would be reward indeed!”<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup>Frawley, *Anne Bronte*, 31.

<sup>29</sup>Haworth, *Hamilton Parsonage*, 41.

<sup>30</sup>Frawley, *Anne Bronte*, 20.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 80.

This poem obviously expresses a works-based (lack of) assurance. At odds with the above statements is Bronte biographer Elizabeth Gaskell's (Unitarian) record that Charlotte told her before death that Anne had said, "soon all will be well through the merits of our Redeemer."<sup>33</sup> One would hope that Anne did understand assurance in Christ on her deathbed, yet despite growing up in an evangelical home, Anne was obviously more than once troubled by questions about eternal life and assurance (as the title to this article intimates).

Of the three authorial sisters Charlotte was the oldest, lived the longest, and authored the most novels—four of them. *Jane Eyre* was Charlotte's unCinderella story in that the unbeautiful Jane receives two offers of marriage. It also has some parallels with the Old Testament account of Joseph in that (1) she returns to forgive the relative who mistreated her earlier in life, and (2) she rises to become first in her class.<sup>34</sup> Like Joseph, Jane also must confront a moral dilemma of a sexual nature, and she refuses to yield to it. For that refusal she must suffer for a number of years until finally a reversal takes place.

The then-contemporary reviews of *Jane Eyre* were highly diverse. One "thoroughgoing Evangelical, the...tract-loving Reverend Morgan, had written about *Jane Eyre* '...in the highest strains of eulogy!'"<sup>35</sup> In contrast, however, there ensued a great deal of backlash within conservative Christianity. Eleanor Rigby (in *The Quarterly Review* for 1848-1849) insisted that *Jane Eyre* was "the personification of an unregenerate...spirit who has a mere heathen mind."<sup>36</sup>

One evangelical writer of that time, Mrs. Guyton (known by the pen name of Emma Jane Worboise), felt the need to counteract the deleterious influence she saw in *Jane Eyre* by writing her own purified, more Christianized version of such a story. She borrowed (or stole!) practically the whole framework of *Jane Eyre* and called her more evangelical novel *Thornycraft Hall* (named after Thornwood Hall in *Jane Eyre*). Mrs. Guyton had attended the same evangelical girls' school that Charlotte Bronte had, and she felt compelled to defend its

<sup>33</sup>Fraser, *Brontes*, 325.

<sup>34</sup>Margaret Howard Blom, *Charlotte Bronte* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1977), 134.

<sup>35</sup>Fraser, *Brontes*, 356.

<sup>36</sup>Blom, *Charlotte Bronte*, 102.

headmaster (William Carus Wilson) as her “second father.”<sup>37</sup> In *Thornycroft Hall* Julia tells her cousin Ellen that her fiancée is not “the sort that insists on being ‘born again.’”<sup>38</sup> In the same book the author warned of “the suicidal folly, the utter madness of putting off to the last the awfully great question of one’s eternal salvation!”<sup>39</sup> Elisabeth Jay noted, “Once [Worboise’s characters’] conversion has taken place, Mrs. Worboise makes their new status crystal clear by allowing them to explain in some detail the way in which they had formerly relied on upbringing or works for the assurance of their faith.”<sup>40</sup> Of course, *Jane Eyre* has outsurvived Emma Worboise’s *Thornycroft Hall*.

Charlotte Bronte tried to place her second (and most feminist) novel, *Shirley*, in a setting of social ferment (concerned with factory workers who are being replaced by machinery). The book title *Shirley* even sounds like the name Charlotte. Charlotte transmuted her heroic sister Emily into the character of Shirley Keeldar, as well as putting Ellen Nussey and her sister Anne’s milder temperament into the character of Caroline Helstone. C.

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SHIRLEY [BY  
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S. Lewis wrote to his long-time friend, “I have just finished *Shirley*, which I think better than either *Jane Eyre* or *Villette*.”<sup>41</sup> Margaret Blom claimed, “*Shirley* is the first major novel of the feminist movement.”<sup>42</sup>

Charlotte wrote two books about her two years (1842-1844) spent overseas at school in Brussels—*Villette* and *The Professor* (which was actually written as her first book but not published until after Charlotte’s death). Edward Wagenknecht believed *Villette* to be Charlotte’s

<sup>37</sup>Jay, *Religion of the Heart*, 244-46.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 251.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 255.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 258.

<sup>41</sup>Walter Hooper, ed., *They Stand Together: The Letters of C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1979), 70.

<sup>42</sup>Blom, *Charlotte Bronte*, 160.

“masterpiece” and “a far more dazzling book than *Jane Eyre*,”<sup>43</sup> though this conclusion is very debatable. Although Charlotte emphatically and repeatedly denied it, it is obvious to analysts that she had a romantic crush on her Brussels tutor, Monsieur Heger, a married man. (Of course, it is this very notion that supplies *Jane Eyre* with its potent appeal.)

Margaret Blom summarized:

*Villette* is Charlotte’s brilliant attempt to confront eternal spiritual questions. Lucy [Snow]’s problem is that of Job—how is [one] to respond to what seems to be unjustified, inexplicable, and endless suffering...A statement of Miss Marchmont [in *Villette*] provides the philosophical framework for the entire novel: a life of pain teaches the essential truth that “we should acknowledge God merciful, but not always comprehensible.”<sup>44</sup>

From the preceding quotation it is apparent that Charlotte Bronte grappled with theological themes. But was this product of an evangelical minister’s home really a Christian? When the first biography (by the Unitarian Elizabeth Gaskell) on Charlotte appeared, Gaskell’s purpose was “to show [Charlotte] as a very noble, true Christian woman firstly.”<sup>45</sup> Literary critic Edward Wagenknecht claimed for the Brontes: “they are in possession of the greatest single discovery of the Romantic Movement, its affirmation of the essential meaning of Christianity, its unshaken conviction of the infinite value and significance of each individual soul.”<sup>46</sup> If Wagenknecht means that “the essential meaning of Christianity” is “the infinite value...of each...soul,” then orthodox Christians might well wish to debate that conclusion. Irrespective of that issue, however, is that we have leading literary people labeling Charlotte Bronte as a Christian. In the next section we will survey the doctrinal data available to us on Charlotte Bronte and her two sisters.

<sup>43</sup>Wagenknecht, *Cavalcade*, 310.

<sup>44</sup>Blom, *Charlotte Bronte*, 136-37.

<sup>45</sup>Fraser, *Brontes*, 385.

<sup>46</sup>Wagenknecht, *Cavalcade*, 316.

## IV. THEOLOGICAL SURVEY

## A. THE BIBLE AND CREEDS

In *Villette* Charlotte has her lead character (Lucy Snow) tell Monsieur Paul Emanuel (undoubtedly as Charlotte herself had told his own real-life Roman Catholic counterpart, Monsieur Heger) “that my own last appeal, the guide to which I looked, and the teacher which I owned, must always be the Bible itself, rather than any sect.”<sup>47</sup> Similarly, in a letter of December 6, 1836 (in which Charlotte is lacking in personal assurance) Charlotte declared, “I know the greatness of Jehovah. I acknowledge the truth, the perfection of his word. I adore the purity of the Christian faith.”<sup>48</sup> While the sisters don’t resort to such terms as “infallible Word,” etc., there is no reason to assume that Charlotte and Anne held anything other than an orthodox perspective on the truthfulness of Scripture.

Furthermore, Charlotte’s life-long best friend, Ellen Nussey, stated in *Scribner’s Monthly* (1871) that Charlotte’s “acquaintance with Holy Writ surpassed [all] others [at their girls’ school]...She was very familiar with all the sublimest passages, especially those in Isaiah, in which she took great delight.”<sup>49</sup> To Ellen Nussey, Charlotte had written (on May 10, 1836), “I know the treasures of the Bible. I love and adore them.”

Charlotte Bronte was well-informed with reference to various creeds and theological perspectives. She wrote to W. S. Williams (October 18, 1848), “...man, as he now is, can no more do without creeds and forms in religion than he can do without laws and rulers.”<sup>50</sup> (Apparently Williams was more liberal, for she groups him with Ralph Waldo Emerson the transcendentalist.) Charlotte wrote about the famed Matthew Arnold (whose father had been an orthodox Christian) in a letter to James Taylor (January 15, 1851), “I was given to understand that his theological opinions were very vague and unsettled, and indeed he betrayed as much in the course of conversation.”<sup>51</sup> Charlotte’s

<sup>47</sup>Charlotte Bronte, *Villette* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1909), II, 216.

<sup>48</sup>Wise and Symington, *Brontes: Correspondence*, I, 148.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 99.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 267.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 199-200.

theological astuteness is revealed by her Unitarian biographer Elizabeth Gaskell who remarked, “I have heard her condemn Socinianism, Calvinism, and many other ‘isms’ inconsistent with Church of Englandism.”<sup>52</sup> (How many pastors could identify what “Socinianism” is?)

#### B. GOD

There seems to have been nothing untraditional about Charlotte Brontë’s understanding of God. *Jane Eyre* affirms that “God is everywhere...[and we can know of] His infinitude, His omnipotence, His omnipresence.”<sup>53</sup> In answer to the question “What is God?” the girl Helen Burns in *Jane Eyre* answers, “My Maker and yours...I rely implicitly upon His power and confide wholly in His goodness.”<sup>54</sup> The child also tells Jane, “God is my father; God is my friend, I love him; I believe he loves me.”<sup>55</sup> With a mixture of both Latinate and rudimentary terms (in the two preceding quotations) Charlotte Brontë described some of the principal attributes of God. She also subscribed to the standard doctrine of the Trinity—in contrast to her initial biographer who was Unitarian. Though she drops few hints about Christ’s deity, a doctrine of the Trinity includes that corollary.

One pervasive theme in Charlotte Brontë’s works was the subject of God’s providence. Interestingly, when C. S. Lewis was an eighteen-year-old atheist, he wrote, “When God can get hold of a really first-rate character like Charlotte Brontë to torture, he’s just in his element: cruelty after cruelty without any escape.”<sup>56</sup> She believed her fate of suffering was “part of [God’s] great plan.”<sup>57</sup> Elsewhere she wrote, “Providence so regulated my destiny.”<sup>58</sup> To Miss Wooler, Charlotte penned, “The destiny which Providence in His goodness and wisdom seems to offer me will not...be...regarded as brilliant.”<sup>59</sup> To her editor George Smith she observed, “the doubtful future must be left with

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 137.

<sup>53</sup>Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Random House, 1993), 486.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 118.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Walter Hooper, *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, 175.

<sup>57</sup>Fraser, *Brontës*, 417.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 438.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 456.

Providence.”<sup>60</sup> When his daughter died (before age forty) Rev. Bronte (her father) placed the disappointment within “the inscrutable providence of God.”<sup>61</sup> Although Charlotte was not a Calvinist, she clung to the overriding providence of God.

#### C. SIN

Margaret Blom observed that “Charlotte’s assumptions about the nature of the human condition expressed in her depiction of [the imaginary world of] Angria [in her youthful writings] remain essentially the same in her adult novels and are in conformity with the Christian view that man is a fallen being in a fallen world.”<sup>62</sup> In a letter of January 30, 1850, Charlotte spoke of “traces of the ‘old Adam.’”<sup>63</sup> Emily Bronte’s bleak view of human nature in *Wuthering Heights* is certainly far more in accord with a Christian world-view than with the pantheism ascribed to her by Rebecca Fraser.

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#### D. CONVERSION

On the question of entering eternal life one could wish for clearer and more comprehensive communication from the Bronte sisters, especially in the form of personal testimony. Their father published a journal article entitled “On Conversion” (which is difficult to obtain). Rev. Bronte’s friend William Morgan also wrote about conversion. Morgan stressed three points: (1) a variety of experiences may lead up to conversion; (2) great fear “is not a sure sign and proof of repentance and faith;” and (3) “the question...as to the means by which any soul is converted is not of [as much] importance as [is] the evidence of it.”<sup>64</sup>

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 459.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 485.

<sup>62</sup>Blom, *Charlotte Bronte*, 58.

<sup>63</sup>Wise and Symington, *Brontes: Correspondence*, III, 204.

<sup>64</sup>Jay, *The Religion of the Heart*, 60.

In *Villette* a Miss Marchmont tells Lucy Snow that her deceased husband had said, “I am dying in Paradise,” and she concludes that her husband “was with God.” Next, Miss Marchmont speaks of “preparing...for reunion” with her husband, and she wavers if “small is [her] chance of salvation.” Then Miss Marchmont asks Lucy what she thinks: “Be my chaplain and tell me [about salvation],” but Lucy is dumbstruck and offers no answer. But in the morning Miss Marchmont was found dead.<sup>65</sup> Sadly, Lucy (Charlotte’s character) had had nothing clear to say about the subject of salvation.

In the same novel Lucy weighs the externals and rituals of Roman Catholicism. She “thought of sin and sorrow,...of mortal depravity ...[and] the future arose in view, then...[she] only longed to cry: ‘God be merciful to me, a sinner!’” Immediately she concluded, “When I had so spoken, so declared my faith, and...widely severed myself from” Monsieur Emanuel, he noted that they had that same one-line prayer (from Luke 18:13) in common.<sup>66</sup>

*Jane Eyre* includes a number of passages relevant to the question of salvation. Early in the book the child Helen Burns (about to die and probably representative of Charlotte’s older sister who did die at a young age) says that “there is no merit in [her] goodness.”<sup>67</sup> Later before death Helen tells Jane “I am very happy...I believe; I have faith: I am going to God.”<sup>68</sup> In her statements, however, there is no explicit reference to Christ as the object of her faith.

Mrs. Reed had treated Jane Eyre miserably when she was a child. Years later Jane was called back to a dying Mrs. Reed who still hates her. Yet the adult Jane says to Mrs. Reed, “You have my full and free forgiveness; ask now for God’s [forgiveness] and be at peace.”<sup>69</sup> Once again there is no mention of Christ or (this time) of personal faith in Him.

In her discussion with the Rev. St. John [pronounced *sin jin*] Rivers, Jane Eyre exchanges comments germane to salvation. Rivers seems to merge his plan for being a missionary with “my foundation laid on earth for a mansion in heaven...[exchanging] the hope of heaven for

<sup>65</sup>Bronte, *Villette*, 47.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 219.

<sup>67</sup>Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, 80.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 118.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 358.

the fear of hell.”<sup>70</sup> Odd statement for a Calvinist minister! Later he says to Jane, “I am simply, in my original state, stripped of that blood-bleached robe with which Christianity covers human deformity.”<sup>71</sup> In another moment Rivers declares, “I believe; and I believe the Gospel.”<sup>72</sup> (One only wishes he would be clearer about what the “Gospel” is.)

At the climax of *Jane Eyre* (when Jane is reunited with the now-blind Mr. Rochester), Rochester says he’s “an irreligious dog” and confesses: “I did wrong.” However, now that he has “pass[ed] through the valley of the shadow of death” and experienced God’s “chastisements,” his pride is abated. He admits, “I began to experience remorse, repentance, the wish for reconcilment to my Maker. I began to pray...brief prayers...but very sincere.” Then he adds, “I supplicated God that...I might...be...admitted to that world to come.”<sup>73</sup> This is presumably Rochester’s (or Charlotte Bronte’s account) of a conversion experience. Once again the absence of any mention of faith in Christ for eternal life raises questions for a student of the New Testament.

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One more excerpt from Charlotte’s novels seems worth quoting in relation to the subject of salvation because it seems quite Arminianly-tinted. In *Villette* the reader is exhorted: “Sufferer...march onward...our cross [is] our banner. For our staff we have [God’s] promise...; for present hope His providence, ‘who gives the shield of salvation...;’ for final home His bosom...; for crowning prize a glory...eternal. Let us so run that we may obtain....”<sup>74</sup> Is she speaking here to a Christian who needs prodding toward faithfulness, or is she indicating that only if people strive will they in the end be saved? Once more, the reader is left in significant ambiguity about how to receive eternal life.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 561.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 563.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 672-73.

<sup>74</sup>Bronte, *Villette*, 240.

## E. ROMAN CATHOLICISM

Although Charlotte Bronte may have been murky about answering the question: “What must I do to be saved?” she was unequivocal in her stance concerning Roman Catholicism. Her personal experience with Catholicism came from direct involvement over two years in a Catholic girls’ school in Brussels.

Charlotte stated (in a July 1842 letter), “. . .I consider Methodism, Dissenterism, Quakerism, and the extremes of high and low Churchism foolish but Roman Catholicism beats them all.”<sup>75</sup> (Yet she immediately offered this disclaimer: “At the same time. . .there are some Catholics who are as good as any Christians can be to whom the Bible is a sealed book and much better than scores of Protestants.”<sup>76</sup> To Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte wrote, “I doubt not there are [very good people] among the Romanists, but the system is not one which should have such sympathy as yours.”<sup>77</sup> Atheist Harriet Martineau accused Charlotte in *Villette* of “attacking Popery ‘with virulence.’”<sup>78</sup>

In *Villette* the Protestant Lucy Snow has numerous discussions with the Catholic Paul Emanuel. She speaks of the essence of Romanism involving “each mind. . .being reared in slavery. . .”<sup>79</sup> In a mood of mental turmoil Lucy (the Protestant) decides to enter the nearby Catholic Church and make confession (as Charlotte herself did). She feels mentally relieved from her confession. The priest tells her, “our [Catholic] faith alone could. . .help you. . .”<sup>80</sup> He urges her to return, but she admits to herself that she’d “as soon have thought of walking into a Babylonish furnace” in regard to this “papish superstition.”<sup>81</sup> Later the two meet and the priest says he “coveted” for her “the only true faith” to remove her from “heresy.”<sup>82</sup> Lucy will give no allegiance to “saint-worship.”

Later Lucy picks up “a theological work” that “preached Romanism; it persuaded to conversion. The Protestant was [summoned]

<sup>75</sup>Wise and Symington, *Brontes: Correspondence*, 267.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 268.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 58.

<sup>79</sup>Bronte, *Villette*, 158.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 204.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 205.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 183.

to turn Papist, not so much in fear of the heretic's hell, as on account of the comfort...Holy Church offered...."<sup>83</sup> Paul Emanuel had left Lucy this literature. As a follow-up she says to him, "I am not unChristian, I am not dangerous;...I would not trouble your faith; you believe in God and Christ and the Bible, and so do I."<sup>84</sup> The disturbing part of this conversation is that although she is convinced of his theological wrongness, she offers no positive alternative to him by way of evangelism. Rather, she "would not trouble [his] faith."

#### F. CALVINISM AND ARMINIANISM

Rev. Patrick Bronte (the Bronte sisters' father), wrote to Rev. J. C. Franks (January 10, 1839) concerning a replacement curate in his parish church, "I could not feel comfortable with a co-adjutor who would deem it his duty to preach the appalling doctrines of personal Election and Reprobation...and the enforcement of final perseverance as an essential article of belief."<sup>85</sup> His daughter (Charlotte) likewise opposed such a version of Calvinism. A Bible-quoting servant named Joseph (in *Wuthering Heights*) "is linked with hypocrisy" by Emily Bronte.<sup>86</sup>

#### G. ASSURANCE

As is indicated in the title of this article, these three famed female authors who were raised in an evangelical (Arminian) Anglican minister's home each had bouts with lack of spiritual assurance. The subject was not without precedent in their mindsets, for their clergy father wrote to Miss Burder (on July 18, 1823), "...I trust you possess in your soul a sweet peace and serenity answering from communion with the Holy Spirit, and a well-grounded hope of eternal felicity."<sup>87</sup>

To Mrs. Franks (on July 6, 1835) Charlotte wrote, "Amidst all the...trials of this mortal life, we have still the glorious conviction on our minds that we may have our hope immovably anchored in heaven...and I trust this blessed consideration will be a never-failing source of comfort to you..., especially at that last hour when you will step out of time into eternity."<sup>88</sup>

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 208.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., 214.

<sup>85</sup>Wise and Symington, *Brontes: Correspondence*, 169.

<sup>86</sup>Sherry, *Charlotte and Emily Bronte*, 133.

<sup>87</sup>Wise and Symington, eds., *Brontes: Correspondence*, 63.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., 131.

Despite the preceding paragraph, a letter dated one year later (1836) to her best friend paints a different story. Charlotte wrote,

I have stirrings of conscience...I may be in utter midnight, but I implore a Merciful Redeemer that if this be the real dawn of the Gospel, it may still brighten to perfect day....Do not think I am good....I am in that state of horrid, gloomy uncertainty....I would...be old, gray-haired...if I could only thereby ensure the prospect of reconciliation to God and Redemption through His Son's merits.<sup>89</sup>

Charlotte's statement sounds as if she has serious doubts if she is a real Christian. In yet another letter to Ellen Nussey in the same miserable year for her (1836, when Charlotte was functioning unsuitably as a governess) she penned,

I keep trying to do right...but I still every instant find myself going astray....I abhor myself, I despise myself. If the doctrine of Calvin be true, I am already an outcast....When I begin to study on the subject, I almost grow blasphemous, atheistical in my sentiments....<sup>90</sup>

In still a similar vein Charlotte wrote to Ellen Nussey (December 6, 1836) that she was uncertain that:

I have ever felt true contrition..., longing for holiness which I shall never, never attain—smitten at times to the heart that \_\_\_\_\_'s Calvinistic doctrines are true—darkened in short by the very shadows of spiritual death! If Christian perfections be necessary to salvation, I shall never be saved....<sup>91</sup>

There is a good deal that is obscure and confusing in the last two paragraphs just quoted. Had she imbibed the notions of William Cowper the Calvinist, who irrationally believed himself to be not part of the elect (“an outcast”) and so to be doomed? Her Calvinistic school master (William Carus Wilson) wrote tracts scaring children, intimating that if

<sup>89</sup>Wise and Symington, eds., *Brontes: Correspondence*, I, 140.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., 143.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., 147.

they were caught in a sin when they died, they would go to hell. (But is this notion inherent in any standard strain of Calvinism?) Actually Arminian Wesleyanism promoted the idea that one had to have “Christian perfections” if one would be “saved” (basing this view on such texts as Heb 12:14b and 1 John 3:6 and 9). Whatever the reasons were, Charlotte Bronte suffered a good deal from a lack of clear-cut Christian assurance.

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Many literary critics hold that Charlotte based her character Caroline Helstone partly on her sister Anne. In *Shirley* the author narrates,

Caroline was a Christian [but] it seemed to her that [her prayers] were unheard...She believed, sometimes, that God had turned His face from her. At moments she was a Calvinist, and sinking into the gulf of religious despair, she saw darkening over her the doom of reprobation.<sup>92</sup>

Shortly after the preceding description, the writer’s prescription for Christian assurance seems to be: “Let whoever grieves still cling fast to love and faith in God; God will never...finally desert him. ‘Whom He loveth, He chasteneth.’ These words are true and should not be forgotten.”<sup>93</sup>

In *Agnes Grey* Anne Bronte in her own way raised the issue of assurance about possessing eternal life. A poor cottager named Nancy finds herself troubled about her spiritual condition. She says, “I want to have my sins blotted out, and to feel that they are remembered no more against me.” The visiting high church Anglican clergyman tells Nancy to go to church, to bring her prayer-book, to stand and kneel at

<sup>92</sup>Charlotte Bronte, *The Complete Works of Charlotte and Emily Bronte* (New York: Avenel Books, 1981), 619.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 619-20.

the appointed times, to take the Lord's supper often, to practice the sermons "an' it 'ud be all right." She asks the minister if (because she derives no sure comfort that way) he thinks she's "a reprobate."

After this tragic attempt on the part of the high Anglican minister to provide the discouraged woman with assurance, the curate Mr. Weston visits Nancy. Weston explains to Nancy that the other clergyman didn't mean that his recommendations were "the whole of a Christian's duty." He likens her sins to a "large sack" on her back before "a narrow doorway." To Nancy he asks, "I dare say, [you] have no sins that you would not gladly throw aside if you know how?" She concurs. At that point the more tolerant curate tells her about the "great commandment" of Matt 22:37-40. She balks at her ability to love God and certainly to love her neighbor. Weston assures her that "if God so loveth us, that He gave His only begotten son to die for us, we ought also to love one another." He urges her to do "all the good [she] can through life," to "dwell in love, that He may dwell in us." Later as Weston read the Bible to Nancy, "it seemed like...a new light broke in on [her] soul."<sup>94</sup> Certainly this is no clear-cut case study of *how* to inform a person about how to enter and enjoy eternal life. There is no mention of saving faith and negligible mention of Christ as the source of eternal life. No wonder Anne Bronte sought out a Moravian minister so as to discuss "the main truths of the Bible respecting...salvation."<sup>95</sup> Yet *Agnes Grey* was written eight years after that spiritual interview with the Moravian minister, and Anne still seemed very unclear about explaining salvation and assurance.

Charlotte claimed that Anne was "leaning on those Christian doctrines in which she firmly believed" as she neared death.<sup>96</sup> Yet a year after Anne's death (1849) as Charlotte reviewed Anne's papers, she discovered "mournful evidence that religious feeling had been to [Anne] much like what it was to [the despairing poet William] Cowper."<sup>97</sup> Anne had written assurance-lacking poems entitled "The Doubter's Prayer" and "To Cowper." While Charlotte and Anne were much closer to evangelical Christianity than Emily Bronte was, both of

<sup>94</sup>Anne Bronte, *Agnes Grey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 90-94.

<sup>95</sup>Frawley, *Anne Bronte*, 31.

<sup>96</sup>Harrison, *Haworth Parsonage*, 41.

<sup>97</sup>Frawley, *Anne Bronte*, 20.

them gave murky presentations of the essential Christian message in their publications, and both experienced a roller coaster ride of emotions with reference to personal assurance.

#### H. THE CHURCH

We have already observed that Charlotte gravitated away from either low or high church Anglicanism and disdained Quakerism, Methodism, and especially Catholicism. Her Anglican father was said to be on good terms with the Baptist and Wesleyan churches in the village of Haworth. She wrote of the high Anglican viewpoint with irony as follows: "The present successor of the apostles, disciples of Dr. Pusey and tools of the propaganda...[commend] undergoing regeneration by nursery-baptism in wash-hand basins."<sup>98</sup> She called her husband-to-be a "Puseyite" (a formalist).

In *Villette* Charlotte spoke of attending the Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Episcopalian Churches while in Brussels. She wondered at the "unimportant character of the differences between these three sects, at the unity and identity of their vital doctrines. I saw nothing to hinder them from being one day fused into one grand Holy Alliance, and I respected them all."<sup>99</sup> In *Shirley* she referred to "the Dissenting and Methodists schools, the Baptists, Independents, and Wesleyans," distinguishing between Methodists and Wesleyans.<sup>100</sup> Charlotte thought the Methodists whom she knew to be too fanatical. She referred to the "mad Methodist magazines" of her childhood. In *Shirley* she spoke of "the Methodist chapel...in the thick of a revival."<sup>101</sup> They engaged in roof-shaking singing "such as a very Quaker might feel himself moved by the spirit to dance to."<sup>102</sup> In such Wesleyan groups one might witness "shouts, yells, ejaculations, frantic cries, agonized groans."<sup>103</sup> While Charlotte thought the high church Anglicans overly ceremonial, she was obviously not at home with such emotional overwroughtness among dissenters.

<sup>98</sup>Bronte, *The Complete Works*, 445.

<sup>99</sup>Bronte, *Villette*, II, 215.

<sup>100</sup>Bronte, *Complete Works*, 596.

<sup>101</sup>*Ibid.*, 449.

<sup>102</sup>*Ibid.*, 515.

<sup>103</sup>*Ibid.*, 517.

## I. THE FUTURE

When Charlotte Brontë's friend, the "avowed atheist" Harriet Martineau co-authored a book espousing naturalism, it included Martineau's "disbelief in the existence of God or a future life."<sup>104</sup> In *The Professor* Charlotte wrote that "Religion...says that in another world, another life, he shall meet his kindred again. She speaks of that place unsullied by sin..., unembittered by suffering...Eternity, Immortality,...the heavenly hills all light and peace—of a spirit resting there in bliss."<sup>105</sup> The doubting child Jane Eyre acknowledged that her friend Helen Burns would be "taken to the region of spirits, if such region there were."<sup>106</sup> When Helen is asked by Jane if "there is such a place as heaven," she replies, "I am sure there is a future state."<sup>107</sup> On the last page of *Agnes Grey* Anne Brontë referred to "the glorious heaven beyond, where [we] may meet again, and sin and sorrow are unknown."<sup>108</sup>

As a governess working with ungovernable children, Anne also spoke about hell. To a boy who roasted birds alive or fed them to a cat, she (through the voice of her character Agnes) spoke to the cruel child of "where wicked people go when they die, and if you don't leave off torturing innocent birds,...you will have to go there, and suffer just what you have made them suffer."<sup>109</sup> Emily's *Wuthering Heights* (with its brutishness) certainly has references to heaven, hell, Satan, etc.

In Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* a deathbed conversation occurs between Helen Graham and her dissolute husband. Her husband groans, "If there be really life beyond the tomb, and judgment after death, how can I face it?" He hopes there is "nothing after" this life. When she speaks to him of possible "joy and glory after" this life, he asks, "Are we not to be judged according to the deeds done in the body? Where's the use of a probationary existence, if a man may spend [life] as he pleases, just contrary to God's decrees, and then go to heaven with the best...by merely saying, 'I repent'?"

<sup>104</sup>Fraser, *Brontës*, 392.

<sup>105</sup>Brontë, *Complete Works*, 1132.

<sup>106</sup>Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 114-15.

<sup>107</sup>*Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>108</sup>Brontë, *Agnes Grey*, 198.

<sup>109</sup>*Ibid.*, 18.

To this his wife urges, “But if you *sincerely* repent–.” When he says that he wishes she could go with him to “plead for” him, she replies, “it cost the blood of an incarnate God, perfect and sinless in himself, to redeem us from the bondage of the evil one; let *Him* plead for you.” In the aftermath Helen Graham reported that her husband “still [could not] trust, or...comprehend.”<sup>110</sup> By presenting Christ’s redemptive death for sinners, Anne has perhaps come closest anywhere in the Bronte corpus of publications to explaining the foundation of the gospel. However, there is still no explicit mention of trusting in Christ in order to receive eternal life.

In Charlotte’s most Catholic-oriented novel, *Villette*, she noted concerning “purgatory:”

that a Catholic who had lost dear friends by death could enjoy the unspeakable solace of praying them out of purgatory. The writer [of the article] did not touch on the firmer peace of those whose belief dispenses with purgatory altogether, but I...preferred the latter doctrine as the most consolatory.<sup>111</sup>

Despite what has just been culled from the sisters’ writings about heaven and hell, there also exists in their novels and communications the unquestionable view that they endorsed universalism. Charlotte Bronte wrote to Margaret Wooler (February 14, 1850):

I am sorry the Clergy do not like the doctrine of Universal Salvation; I think it is a great pity for their sakes, but surely they are not so unreasonable as to expect me to deny or suppress what I believe the truth!<sup>112</sup>

Undoubtedly Emily, who seems to have been the least orthodox of the three sisters, would have concurred with Charlotte in this viewpoint.

In *Jane Eyre* Charlotte’s Helen Burns tends to point in the direction of Universalism. Helen speaks to Jane of “the time” of “putting off our corruptible bodies, when...sin will fall from us...and only the spark of

<sup>110</sup>Anne Bronte, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 445-46.

<sup>111</sup>Bronte, *Villette*, II, 208.

<sup>112</sup>Wise and Sumington, eds., *Brontes: Correspondence*, I, 75.

the spirit will remain...pure as when it left the Creator—perhaps again to be communicated to some being higher than man—perhaps to pass...from the pale human soul to brighten to the seraph!” Helen goes on to say that this life-principle will certainly “never...be suffered to degenerate from man to fiend.” Her clincher is: “I hold another creed, which no one ever taught me and which I seldom mention...for it extends hope to all.”<sup>113</sup> Although Helen’s statement raises many questions as to meaning, this must be what Charlotte was alluding to in her letter about Universalism to Margaret Wooler of 1850.

Of the three sisters, Anne seemed to be the most overt about the doctrine of universalism. Edward Wagenknecht said she “disbelieve[d] in eternal damnation, and said so frankly.”<sup>114</sup> Maria Frawley spoke of Anne’s “reaction against the Calvinistic notion of a ‘spiritual elect’ and corollary desire to believe in universal salvation.”<sup>115</sup> These were highly radical views in those times, for Anne’s challenge of the standard view of divine judgment in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, “proclaiming her faith in salvation for all [came] at least ten years before Dean Farrar [Anglican Dean of Canterbury] defended so heretical a notion.”<sup>116</sup> (In his 1877 book *Eternal Hope* Farrar “questioned the doctrine of eternal punishment, provok[ing] great controversy.”<sup>117</sup>

Unlike Harriet Martineau who abandoned religion and Elizabeth Gaskell, who eventually sloughed off her Unitarianism (to her ministerial brother James Martineau’s chagrin), Charlotte clung to her conviction about immortality. She observed concerning Harriet Martineau’s co-authored book that “it denies us our hope of immortality and quietly blots from man’s future heaven and the life to come.”<sup>118</sup> When Emily and Anne died within the same period, Charlotte wrote to a Mr. Williams (1848), “Had I never believed in a future life before, my sisters’ fate would assure me of it. There must be a Heaven or we

<sup>113</sup>Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, 82.

<sup>114</sup>Wagenknecht, *Cavalcade*, 315.

<sup>115</sup>Frawley, *Anne Bronte*, 11.

<sup>116</sup>Winifred Gerin, *Charlotte Bronte* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 357.

<sup>117</sup>F. L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 494.

<sup>118</sup>Gerin, *Charlotte Bronte*, 459.

must despair—for life seems bitter, brief—blank.”<sup>119</sup> (Of course, this approaches the subject of the afterlife from an experiential rather than a revelational viewpoint.)

## V. CONCLUSION

While (of the three sisters) Emily Bronte leaned the most toward heterodoxy, of her we know the least personally. Her *Wuthering Heights* is the least autobiographical of all seven of the Bronte sisters' novels. Rebecca Fraser called Emily a pantheist, and in Emily's one recorded comment on religion she preferred to retain privacy about her specific views.

Charlotte and Anne's religious views tended toward traditional Christian viewpoint overall, derived from their upbringing in an evangelical Anglican Arminian parsonage. Their books and letters reveal nothing eccentric in their comments about God's attributes and triune nature. Despite being friends with her Unitarian biographer (Elizabeth Gaskell), Charlotte maintained her own trinitarian position. Nor does she affirm anything other than a traditionalist view of Scripture.

Their father's reference to a “crucified God” and Anne's allusion to “the blood of an incarnate God” imply belief in the theanthropic person of Christ. Their mother's reference to “a Redeemer's merits,” and Anne's indication of the need of a “sinless” Christ “to redeem us from the bondage of the evil one” carry overtones of an orthodox view of Christ's cross-work. Charlotte mentioned being reconciled to God and having “Redemption through [God's] Son's merits.”

Wherever the sisters comment about sin, evil, the devil, etc., they operate within the parameters of Christian orthodoxy. *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* are certainly novels which lend themselves to pre-evangelistic discussion because they are anything but relativistic about the subject of right and wrong.

The one subject where the sisters deviate most obviously from standard evangelical theology is that all three evinced a leaning toward universalism. In arriving at this position they seem to have preceded the soon-coming liberalism of the clergy on this point. Anne Bronte,

<sup>119</sup>Ibid., 384.

considered the meekest of the three sisters, seems to have been the most vociferous on the subject.

For those who are committed to the New Testament's evangel, the most disturbing concern will invariably be that the sisters do not seem to be clear about how to receive eternal life. When Anne was wrestling experientially with such issues, she called for a Moravian minister (rather than her own Methodist aunt or Anglican father) to discuss "salvation." Nevertheless, we have no transcript or summation of that conversation, so we don't know what transpired in her soul. However, the conversation certainly gave her no certainty for she continued to wrestle for years afterward with personal assurance. In Anne's fictionalized deathbed conversation in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* the dying non-Christian is urged to "sincerely repent" as the only condition explicitly mentioned for possessing eternal life.

Charlotte's few books also contain passages where the occasion is ripe for telling an individual how to experience eternal life. *Jane Eyre* offers at least three such occasions. Perhaps the clearest is when the child Helen Burns tells Jane, "I believe; I have faith: I am going to God." However, in John 14:1b Jesus was imperatival: "you believe in God, *believe also in Me*" (NKJV). *In what* does Helen "have faith?" The dying Mrs. Reed is told: "ask...for God's [forgiveness] and be at peace." But does this urging really fulfill the condition of Acts 16:31? Mr. Rochester speaks of wishing to be reconciled to God and praying sincere prayers to "be admitted to that world to come." At this point wouldn't an informed Christian want to inform Rochester that by believing in Jesus Christ, anyone may receive eternal life?

In *Villette* two more evangelistic opportunities present themselves. Miss Marchmont asks Lucy Snow to be her chaplain and inform her about salvation. Lucy is dumbstruck, and Miss Marchmont is dead the next morning. The Protestant Lucy later tells the Roman Catholic tutor Paul Emmanuel that he too "believe[s] in God and Christ and the Bible," so she won't "trouble his [Catholic] faith." What an opportunity she had to explain the essential difference—that salvation is by grace alone through faith in Christ (Eph 2:8-9).

When one is unclear about salvation, logically one is going to be unsure about assurance. The Bronte biographers make it clear that Anne and Charlotte both suffered at times from a lack of Christian assurance. There was a breed of Calvinism in the Brontes' childhood that evidently

contributed heavily to this lack of assurance. Their Calvinistic schoolmaster William Carus Wilson wrote a document entitled *The Children's Friend* (1826) in which an eleven-year-old girl dies. The conversation runs as follows:

“Sarah, are you happy?”

“Yes, very happy, Sir.”

“And what makes you happy?”

“Because Jesus Christ died to save me and he will take me to heaven.”

“And he will save all men?”

“No, Sir, only those that trust in him....”

[If the conversation stopped there, an Evangelical might say, “Amen.”]

However, Wilson went on to tell about the girl's virtues, industriousness, neatness, prayers, etc. Then she is asked if she wants to die. To this the girl answers: “Not yet,” because “I should wish to have time to repent, and be a better child.” Wilson's comment after the girl died was “I bless God that he has taken from us the child of whose salvation we have the best hope from this school!”<sup>120</sup> (Note the wishful phrase “the best hope.”) There is no real spiritual security in this version of Calvinism. And the biographer reports, “Of Maria Bronte's [the three girls' older sister in Wilson's school] salvation Mr. Wilson had no such clear conviction.”<sup>121</sup> Even Wilson later acknowledged the Helen Burns of *Jane Eyre* was in real life Maria Bronte.

In the *Methodist Magazine* (April 1810)—either a Calvinistic Methodist or one quoting a Calvinistic view—the writer states,

Some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation....  
 Since salvation is impossible except to the elect none, before they  
 are confident of their salvation, have any certain ground for  
 believing that their salvation be even so much as possible....

Ironically, by this means only the assured (who “are confident of their salvation”) could be assured (“have any certain ground...”)! No

<sup>120</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>121</sup>Ibid., 14.

wonder Wilson—with his heavy doses of hell-and-fear preaching—kept children from understanding clearly that they could presently have an assurance of eternal life that wasn't grounded in their good behavior. These views Charlotte called “ghastly Calvinistic doctrines,” and Anne was left “in permanent doubt of her salvation.”

How much better to be able to sing confidently:

“Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine;  
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine....”