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Emily Brontë’s “No Coward Soul” and the Need for a Religious Literary Criticism

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For many years after her death, the genius and integrity of Emily Brontë’s works were commonly understood to rest on a religious foundation. In The Clue to the Brontës, for example, Grace Elizabeth Harrison wrote:

All the Brontës understood that quality of religious passion as the legacy of their father’s and mother’s own inheritance, but it is only in Emily that the thing stalks as itself, pure and untrammeled of the flesh. She had no earthly idols to confuse the issue . . . so that Wuthering Heights reads as a scrap of history torn from the communion of saints of old and flung in the face of the modern world, out of its context, to startle its dainty self-restraint. No one in Haworth Parsonage could have done that but Emily, for she had made that religious experience her very own and was twin sister to her father’s saints. (168-69)

Not only was Brontë widely viewed as a religious writer, she was frequently described as a mystic, and compared to John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila.1 Today, however, even the best Brontë scholars such as Stevie Davies, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar, are more likely to refer to Brontë as a “heretic” than as a mystic, and to describe Wuthering Heights as her “Bible of Hell” than as “a scrap of history torn from the communion of saints.”

This tendency to read Emily Brontë in ways that fail to see religious belief is characteristic of a broader shift in academic discourse. Ironically, it was in large part the Victorians themselves who instituted this cultural change, which resulted from controversies between religious and non-religious world views such as scientific materialism and rationalism, which in turn have led to today’s secularism. As Suzy Anger points out, “Tracing Victorian exegetical debate makes distinct the trajectory of her-
meneutics in the nineteenth century from theology outwards into secular interpretation” (23).

In the long nineteenth century, as Charles Taylor notes in *A Secular Age*, “the alternatives opened to unbelief are multiplied and enriched, prior to their diffusion to society as a whole” (377). This shift in what Taylor calls the “social imaginary” was due less to a Darwinian loss of faith in the literal truth of the Bible (which was already ongoing in Biblical Higher Criticism), than to Darwin’s intensification of an already-existing impersonal, scientific conception of the universe. This “disenchantment” of the cosmos and the rise of the “buffered self,” impermeable to supernatural forces, “opened the way to the kind of disengagement from [religion] which made exclusive humanism a possibility. . . . [and gave rise to] modern Western secularity, and the terms in which the struggles of belief and unbelief now occur” (41).

For many persons living in contemporary Western culture, unbelief is “not only easy, but even inescapable” (Taylor 25), and it tends to dominate the hermeneutics of literary studies, even when the writer herself holds a strong belief. That English literature of the long nineteenth century, a literature that is deeply engaged in religious questions, is read in ways that overlook or misinterpret this important aspect of its concerns, leaves criticism and teaching impoverished, not only as scholarship but as a model for public discourse.

A rigorous study of religious discourse will require that we revisit certain older, untheorized styles of criticism that took for granted a shared belief. But since we can no longer adopt a stance of naïve belief, we must develop new ways to discuss religion that meet the demands of contemporary scholarship and theory. In Taylor’s words, we have moved from an understanding of the world, “in which . . . spirits were just unproblematically there, impinging on us, to one in which they are no longer so, and indeed, in which many of the ways they were there have become inconceivable. Their not so impinging is what we experience naïvely” (30).

The purpose of this essay is not to deplore the loss of older ways of knowing, in which religion was central, but to suggest that we account for that older world view in a way that is not naïve, that does justice to the ways in which religion is inscribed in Victorian literature, and that accounts for the debate between sacred and secular in Victorian as well as contemporary epistemology.
The Need for a Religious Literary Criticism

The absence of a religious criticism is in many ways understandable and even commendable. It is based in many instances upon a sincere respect for the privacy and inviolability of religious belief, and a wish not to impose one’s own beliefs on others. Some critics feel that to expose spiritual experience to the harsh scrutiny of academic discourse might lead to a degradation of the sacred. As Jacques Derrida has said, “Scruple, hesitation, indecision, reticence . . . —this too is what is meant by religio” (30). And Dennis Taylor writes: “A great challenge to the discourse we seek is how to avoid the puritanism and intolerance and religious violence of the past, and regain some of the scope and power of older discourses” (12).

There are practical difficulties as well. As Marianne Thormählen notes,

[T]he scholar who sets out to remedy his/her profession’s comparative neglect of religion in the Brontë fiction faces a peculiar aggregation of difficulties. Not only is he/she working in, and inevitably affected by, an intellectual climate which affords little scope for religious enquiry, as well as little readiness to allow for the potential power of religious feeling and experience . . . ; the historical context itself is problematic, too: religious life in early nineteenth-century Britain was characterized by enormous complexity and variety which often threaten an investigator’s foothold. (2)

On the other hand, some criticism is characterized by a rejection of religion as a discredited and possibly destructive approach to the human predicament. Since roughly the 1960’s, such criticism has been inflected by what Hans Georg Gadamer calls “that dogmatism which refuses to see in religion anything other than the deception or self-deception of human beings” (207). It also accounts for what Jenny Franchot terms a “singularly biased scholarship,” which refuses “to engage extensively with . . . religious questions . . . as religious questions” (in Van Anglen 154).

It is true that secularism, as Taylor defines it, represents in many ways “an important achievement, a milestone in human history,” and that it is associated with values such as freedom of conscience, detached benevolence, and public opinion as a legitimating force (Taylor 255, 260). It should not be forgotten, however, that religion has been very often ei-
ther the source, or a site for parallel development, of these very qualities: “Re-invention, innovation exist on both sides [religion and exclusive humanism], and continuing mutual influence links them” (Taylor 258). Now major theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Terry Eagleton are beginning to address the gap that a neglect of religion leaves in our collective intellectual life.

Late in his career, in 1996, Derrida was moved to address the subject of religion. Upon being asked to name the discussion subject for a small gathering of leading European intellectuals, Derrida responded: “‘Religion’, a word dictated by who knows what or whom: by everyone perhaps, by the reading of the nightly news . . . , by the everyman we believe we see, by the state of the world, by the whole of what is as it goes” (38-39).

And in his 2003 work, After Theory, Eagleton writes,

Cultural theory as we have it promises to grapple with some fundamental problems, but on the whole fails to deliver. It has been shamefaced about morality and metaphysics, embarrassed about love, biology, religion and revolution, largely silent about evil, reticent about death and suffering, dogmatic about [undefined] essences, universals and foundations, and superficial about truth, objectivity and disinterestedness. (101-02)

A further sign of a burgeoning recognition of the importance of religion in literary discourse are two collections of essays entitled The Academy and the Possibility of Belief, edited by Mary Louise Buley-Meissner, Mary McCaslin Thompson, and Elizabeth Bachrach Tan (2000), and Victorian Religious Discourse: New Directions in Criticism, edited by Jude V. Nixon (2004). The challenge now is to find the language with which to discuss a subject so fraught with meaning, and to explore meanings that vary so considerably from one faith tradition to another.

Derrida suggests a simple paradigm by which we may discuss religious and spiritual matters with clarity, objectivity, and intellectual rigor: all questions of religion, he writes, can be divided into three areas. The first is the holy itself; the second is faith. In many cases, the two are inseparable: faith makes the holy present to us, and the holy, when apprehended, calls forth faith. The third subject, religion, encompasses the numerous and varied institutions that human beings have devised to define and express the holy and to promote faith. These institutions are always historically contingent. Derrida’s paradigm makes clear that the holy and faith are not to be confused with the various institutions that
have been established to promote them: “For if the concept of ‘religion’
implies an institution that is separable, identifiable, circumscribable . . .
its essential relation both to faith and to God is anything but self-
evident” (32-33). An appealing aspect of his paradigm is that it distin-
guishes between religious institutions, with all their imperfections and
historical contingencies, and their essential purpose, which is to create a
space in which human culture may encounter the holy.

Rudolph Otto’s classic 1917 work Das Heilige (translated as The Idea of
the Holy) provides a useful concept for the work of discussing the sacred
in ways that transcend the boundaries of particular faith traditions. Al-
though Otto favors Christianity, his analysis includes extensive and ap-
preciative scholarship in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam. Significantly,
Blake and Emily Brontë were Otto’s favorite English authors (xiii), and
his analysis clarifies much that is found in Brontë’s work. The holy is
more than the good, writes Otto; in fact, “Sanctus is not originally a moral
category at all” (52). Rather, the holy consists of elements that are the
same in all religions: “There is no religion in which [the holy] does not
live as the real innermost core, and without it no religion would be wor-
thy of the name” (6).

That innermost core, writes Otto, includes a sense of “creature-
consciousness” that is experienced as an utter “contrast to that which is
supreme above all creatures,” the divine, which “is felt as objective and
outside the self” (10-11). It includes the mysterium tremendum, a feeling of
awe or dread that is quite different from normal human fear. To illustrate
the unique quality of this awe, Otto asks us to consider the difference
between the fear we would feel at seeing a tiger crouching before us, and
the fear that we feel when we hear a ghost story: although in the second
case we are not at all threatened, the fear that is raised can be equally or
even more powerful, and is caused by the sense of mystery and awe that
humans feel in relationship to the mysterium tremendum.

Brontë’s Wuthering Heights expresses this sense of mystery and awe
to such a degree that Virginia Woolf wrote in 1916 that a “gigantic ambi-
tion is to be felt throughout the novel—a struggle half thwarted but of
superb conviction, to say something through the mouths of her charac-
ters which is not merely ‘I love’ or ‘I hate,’ but ‘we, the whole human
race’ and ‘you, the eternal powers . . .’ the sentence remains unfinished”
(164).

Today’s increasing interest in reclaiming religion as a legitimate field
of literary study is represented in Brontë studies by the appearance of
Marianne Thormählen’s 1999 The Brontës and Religion. Although she does
not discuss Emily Bronte’s mysticism, Thormählen provides substantial
scholarly documentation of the religious milieu that shaped the minds
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and imaginations of the Brontës. As Janet Larson notes, Thormählen “of-
fers needful instruction to modern scholars who have smoked out Brontë
heretics and rebels without any knowledge of the history of Christian
thought to judge them by” (134).

**Difficulties in Reading Emily Brontë as a Mystic**

When it comes to “smoking out” her religious views, Emily Brontë is
among the most challenging of the Victorians. One problem is a scarcity
of information. In *Emily Brontë: a Biography*, Winifred Gérin suggests that
Charlotte destroyed some of Emily’s writings and papers after her death
either to protect Emily from disapproval, or because Charlotte herself
found them too frightening or unconventional. The result was that
Charlotte “did not allow the authentic voice of Emily to be heard, except
in the already published works,” because “she never dared reveal the
source of her sister’s strength, the origin of her imaginative power.” After
all, writes Gérin, “A clergyman’s daughter should know better than to
hold direct communion with God” (263-64).

The second factor that obscures Brontë’s views is that at times she
disparages what Derrida terms “*religio,*” that is the conventional dogmas
and debates over creeds of her day, and this disparagement is misinter-
preted as a wholesale rejection of belief. As Thormählen points out,

> Both in their own time and in ours, the Brontës have been labeled “anti-Christian”—then censoriously, now
> approvingly. These opposite attitudes are actually rooted in the same critical perspective: “Christianity” . . . re-
> garded as inseparable from its earthly organization. (7)

The inability to distinguish between a powerful critique of religious in-
stitutions and a lack of faith has prevented many critics “from appreci-
ating the breathtaking freedom from prejudice and dogmatic restraint
with which all three [Brontës] examined their Christian doctrine and
ethics” (Thormählen 6-7).

The third barrier to full understanding of Emily Brontë’s spirituality
is the difficulty of discussing mysticism, a term that Barnstone rightly
says “has been cheapened to mean anything from mysterious, vaguely
religious, to hermetic symbolism and plain mystifications” (24). Mysti-
cism, however, is a specific phenomenon that can be clearly defined and
studied in scholarly ways. It is an ancient phenomenon that is “found in
both West and East, from the early Christian saints and neo-Platonism to
Indian Brahmanism and Persian Sufism. The complexity of cross-currents between these major movements is staggering” (Barnstone 26).

Evelyn Underhill defines mystical experience as an overwhelming, direct intuition or experience of the divine that begins in ordinary religious experience. Most people require the symbols of their particular religious traditions, such as narratives, art, music, and ritual, to raise awareness of the holy. This awareness is the first stage on the path toward mysticism. Underhill writes,

In illumination we come to that state of consciousness which is popularly supposed to be peculiar to the mystic: a form of mental life, a kind of perception, radically different from that of “normal” men. . . . [However] awakening to consciousness of the Absolute . . . does but reproduce upon higher levels those characteristic processes . . . does but adopt in a more drastic form the principles which all who would live with an intense life, all seekers after freedom, all true lovers must accept. (232)

It is this essential normality of mystical experience that inspired Teresa of Avila and Ignatius of Loyola to write guides to prayer that would show ordinary people how to develop richer spiritual lives (and both Interior Castle and The Spiritual Exercises continue to be widely read and followed today, five centuries later).

William James’s 1902 Varieties of Religious Experience represents a late-Victorian attempt to legitimize religion to an increasingly empiricist culture whose positivistic assumptions regarding the nature of reality were closing minds to important realms of human experience. He writes, “Mystical states. . . . break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness. . . . They show it to be only one kind of consciousness. They open out the possibility of other orders of truth” (414).

Another barrier to acceptance of the idea of Emily Brontë as a mystic is that mysticism is often associated with submission to religious institutions, whereas Emily Brontë is thought of as a resister of convention. According to Linda Peterson,

In most criticism of the [1990’s], Emily Brontë emerges as a resister, opposer, and questioner of patriarchy and its manifestations in Victorian literature and culture. While this may be a departure from earlier myths of Emily as a Romantic genius, a solitary artist in nature’s “wild workshop,” it is not actually a departure from the long-
standing biographical tradition of treating Emily as the most unconventional of the Brontë sisters. Emily’s personal unsociability and unconventionality become, in recent criticism, a writerly resistance to Victorian social mores, cultural ideologies, and (masculine) literary conventions. (346-47)

Critics who assume that religion is inherently patriarchal will conclude that it must be one of the “cultural ideologies” that Brontë opposed. For some nineteenth-century women, however, religion provided a base from which to resist religious and cultural convention. In her Strong Minded Women, Janet Murray describes religion’s capacity to support unconventional thinking for women of the nineteenth century:

Religion was perhaps the most important cultural force affecting the lives of the women. . . . Its effects are probably most apparent to us in the shaping of the conservative ideology of home. . . . [Yet] In addition to its emotional value, religion provided women with an intellectual and moral context that transcended the secular world in which they were so undervalued [and] . . . gave them a higher plane of values from which they could examine and judge social customs. (7-8)

Teresa of Avila, to whom Emily Brontë is so often compared, provides an example of the liberating effects of faith. In Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity, Gillian Ahlgren writes that, in her struggles with ecclesiastical authority (she was investigated by the Spanish Inquisition and her books were collected and burned), Teresa sometimes pretended to naiveté and belief in the inferiority of women in order to deflect criticism from her spiritual radicalism. But her true thoughts occasionally break through, as when she writes, in The Way of Perfection,

Isn’t it enough, Lord, that the world keeps us silenced . . . but you won’t hear our rightful petition? I don’t believe it . . . you are a just judge, not like the world’s judges, who, since they are sons of Adam, and are, in short, all men, there is no female virtue they don’t view as suspect. (Ahlgren 88)
As Catherine F. Smith has written, “to study mysticism and feminism together is to learn more about the links between envisioning power and pursuing it”:

Occult philosophy and religion have always formed a countertradition offering an alternative epistemology and a protest against prevailing orthodoxies. That countertradition may have been more congenial to women as thinkers, and to the development of feminist thought, than mainstream theology in any age. . . . By widening the intellectual history of modern feminism to include its share of mysticism. . . . we rediscover a special and neglected category of literary history. (186-87)

Brontë Criticism and Religion

A brief overview of Brontë criticism reveals that until the 1970s, the religious quality of Emily Brontë’s work was widely accepted. In *The Three Brontës* (1912), May Sinclair was the first to assert that Brontë’s poetry expresses mystical themes. A year later, in *Mysticism in English Literature*, Caroline Spurgeon wrote that,

[Brontë’s mysticism is seen] in her unerring apprehension of . . . the illusory quality of material things, even of the nature she so loved, together with the certain vision of the one Reality behind all forms. This, and her description of ecstasy, of the all-sufficing joy of the inner life . . ., mark her out as being among those who have seen, and who know. (82)

In *In the Footsteps of the Brontës* (1914) Esther Alice Chadwick wrote that “the spirit of the mystic broods over all she wrote and [the poems] provide food rather for the soul than for the intellect” (137). In 1927, Isabel Clarke asserted in *Haworth Parsonage* that “No Coward Soul” is “a magnificent profession of faith in the immortality of the soul,” and that “The Visionary” and “The Prisoner” “indicate very clearly and emphatically an actual mystical experience of a very pure, exalted and perfect kind” (87-88).

Irene Cooper Willis’s *The Brontës* (1933) cites Romer Wilson and Mary Robinson’s 1883 interviews of Charlotte’s friend Ellen Nussey and local villagers. According to these sources, Emily “had no definite religious views . . . but was deeply religious in feeling. She believed in an all-
loving, eternal Power who pitied human transgressions and granted rest, in the end, to all sinners” (119). This “deep, religiously felt tolerance,” writes Willis, took the place for Emily that a scientific understanding of human psychology occupies in the minds of readers today.

In 1947, Phyllis Bentley described Emily as “At once practical and mystical, perfectly clear and immensely profound, capable of including the worldly sheep and the scintillating star in the perception that the God of Life animates both” (89). And in 1953, Margaret Lane’s The Brontë Story compared Brontë’s accounts of mystical experience with St. Teresa’s and concluded,

There seems no doubt that Emily Brontë, alone at night in the little closet-like bedroom . . . , did achieve something of the same experience, though her account of it—marvelously expressive and perhaps the closest description of mystical experience that we have—does not precisely identify the union achieved as being with God. The Unseen, the Invisible, a messenger of Hope—she avoids the conventional religious terms, and seems to feel that the spirit of her communion is too huge and abstract to be pinned down by any name. (257)

Then, roughly forty years ago, Brontë’s criticism changed course. In The Brontë Myth (2001), in a chapter delightfully entitled “The Mystic of the Moors,” Lucasta Miller describes that hermeneutic shift:

Emily’s very shadowiness would contribute to the fashion first popularized by Sinclair for calling her a mystic, a term whose echoes of “mystery” and “mystique” would add to its appeal. Recent biographers have tended to dismiss or underplay the idea that her writings were the result of personally experienced trance states or moments of ecstatic oneness with the divine. Yet this view, presented in a resolutely unhistorical framework, remained a common assumption into the 1970’s. (251)

Miller’s view is that since the 1970’s, a more “enlightened” criticism has sloughed off the idea that Emily was a mystic, an idea that Miller equates with “sentimentalizing her as childlike and naïve.” For Miller, the idea that Brontë was a mystic is based on a widespread tendency to interpret her writings in terms of the merely personal, rather than recognizing the
J. Hillis Miller’s *The Disappearance of God* (1963) marks a watershed in the history of religious criticism. In his preface to the 2000 edition, Miller states that “it is a severe limitation of literary and cultural study today that a good bit of it tends not to interest itself much in what might be called the religious or ontological dimension.” This limitation is of course the direct result of the phenomenon that Miller studies, Western culture’s sense of “the disappearance of God” from the world (xi). Miller’s chapter on Brontë has been enormously influential, but unfortunately, much of the complexity and ambiguity of his approach has been lost as critics stress those parts of his chapter that emphasize Brontë’s sense of God’s “disappearance.” Because Miller’s analysis encompasses both the darker and the more faith-filled elements of Brontë’s vision, at times his analysis seems to contradict itself. Of Brontë’s essay, “The Butterfly,” for example, he writes early in his chapter,

> For Emily Brontë, created beings can only be related to one another destructively. . . . Nature is like a patternless maze created by a madman. Its insanity lies in the fact that the good of one part is the evil of another part. Therefore no coherent moral judgment can be made of any action or event. (164)

And yet, thirty pages later, Miller will assert of this same essay that Brontë’s “Butterfly” represents an eschatology in which the “all the sin and suffering of man and the animal world, through being endured and worked out to their better end, will be transfigured into the happiness of heaven” (200). This is hardly the “patternless maze created by a madman” that Miller terms it.

In his brief discussion of mysticism, Miller stresses Brontë’s recognition of the temporary and insufficient quality of the experience, and implies that she shared the Methodists’ view that, because union with God can be experienced fully only after death, “any experience in this world which is like union with God is another step on the broad way to destruction” (184). For Brontë, he writes, only two paths are open to humanity, both evil: either to seek “idolatrous fusion with some other person or [image], in place of the impossible fusion with God,” or to immerse oneself in the world, a path that leads to separation from God (185-86).

Although he dismisses the possibility of reading Brontë as a mystic, Miller provides an excellent analysis of the religious elements of
Wuthering Heights. As with “The Butterfly,” this discussion too first stresses the novel’s dark vision: “Each man’s life, like that of any other creature of nature, is merely a sequence of violent acts done or suffered, and it ends in death” (165). Later, however, Miller provides a more hopeful reading. In discussing the Rev. Jabes Branderham’s sermon, for example, Miller calls it a “dramatization” of a certain aspect of Protestantism, in which “Enmity and hatred are the only relations between man and man” (189). Miller reads the scene as an ironic commentary on religio, and supports his reading by recounting the parable in Matthew 18: 21-22 on which Branderham’s sermon is based, a parable which Miller states, “establishes a connection between the relations of man and man and the relations of man and God” through forgiveness:

In Wuthering Heights Emily Brontë shows that society, left to itself, gets more and more hollow and artificial, until finally the churches are all empty and God has disappeared. Only a recovery of God will make possible a renewal of society. (209)

On the whole, Miller does justice to Brontë’s writings, in which the psychic, social, moral, and spiritual realms of human life are intertwined or fused in all their power for both good and evil. Unfortunately, it is Miller’s discussion of the darker elements of Brontë’s vision, of a God of wrath or the Creator as madman, rather than of a God whose recovery “will make possible a renewal of society,” that has been too often adopted by critics as representative of her entire perspective.

After publication of Miller’s book in 1963, the tide of critical opinion turned against the idea that Emily Brontë was religious. In their important and influential Madwoman in the Attic (1979), for example, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar entitle the Emily Brontë chapter “Looking Oppositely: Emily Brontë’s Bible of Hell,” and stress her rejection of Christianity: “Emily Brontë, in other words, is not just Blakeian in ‘double’ mystical vision, but [in] the belief that the state of being patriarchal Christianity calls ‘hell’ is eternally, energetically delightful” (255). Other critics conflate Brontë’s concept of the imagination with the transcendent itself. Juliet Barker, whose magisterial 1994 The Brontës will long stand as the definitive biography, disputes Brontë’s reputation as a mystic on this premise. Although Brontë is frequently compared to Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, she writes, “their experience is essentially different in that it is centred on union with God” while Brontë’s “God of Visions” is a personification of the imagination (482). In Women Writers and Poetic Identity (1980), Margaret Homans takes this line of reasoning a step further,
arguing that by conflating mystical and imaginative experience, many commentators miss the fact that “In [Brontë’s] poems the poet is obliged, unwillingly, to value possession [by the masculine-identified literary imagination] by characterizing it as transcendence.” For Homans, a “distorted and distorting fixation on the extremes of hyperbolic transcendence” destroys the poems’ authenticity (130; 161).

To borrow Homans’ paradigm, some criticism that seems to acknowledge the religious dimension of Brontë’s poetry characterizes as transcendent phenomena that are actually immanent, and that originate in either nature or the psyche. As William James wrote of transcendent-alism, “It is only transcendentalist metaphysicians who think that, without adding any concrete details to Nature, or subtracting any, but simply calling it the expression of absolute spirit, you make it divine just as it stands” (508-09). Similarly, transpersonal psychology offers a theory of spirituality that resonates with the language and ideas of religious discourse, but is rooted in the immanent, in what Michael Washburn describes as “a deep psychic core (or deep psyche), which is inherited and, therefore, universal to the species” (1). Although he consistently employs terms such as transcendent, numinous, awakening, love, connection, and union, for Washburn the origins of these experiences are unknown, and it is possible that “the sacred power to which the religions of the world have prayed and in which they have rejoiced” is “a this-worldly energy that arises from a biological ‘below’” (90).

Let us turn now to a specific example of the need for a religious literary criticism by examining the radically differing ways in which critics have read Emily Brontë’s “No Coward Soul.”

“No Coward Soul”

Emily Jane Brontë was born on July 30, 1818. Her earliest dated poem, “Will the day be bright or cloudy?” was written when she was seventeen and is followed by about 200 surviving poems and fragments. Of these, about 70 are thought to be excerpts from the Gondal narratives that Emily and her sister Anne began together as children. Whether a poem is a Gondal poem or not is a distinction without a difference in Brontë’s case, for she regularly used dramatized monologues to express a variety of emotional and spiritual conditions.

Brontë’s most productive years were 1838 and 1839, during which she wrote fifty of the 200 extant poems. This productive period began during her unhappy stay at Law Hill, and it is in this period that the first of her “visitant” poems was written, “Ill come when thou art saddest” (143).³ It concludes,
Listen ‘tis just the hour
The awful time for thee
dost thou not feel upon thy soul
A Flood of strange sensations roll
Forerunners of a sterner power
Heralds of me.

In her 1971 biography, Winifred Gérin writes that “The theme treated here for the first time . . . was to become central in her poetry and in her development as a human being. It is of more importance than any single fact in her life.” Whereas in Brontë’s earlier poetry, the imagination had resided within, now it is a presence, a visitant, coming from without. From this point on, the visitations become increasingly frequent. In their totality they represent a “profound spiritual experience” that culminates in the last but one of her poems, “No Coward Soul,” the only poem that directly addresses God (Gérin 86-87).

During the next ten years Brontë’s poetry improved, as Derek Roper notes, “not only in technique but in imaginative power” (Poems 11). Her poems of human love take on increased psychological complexity. The dungeon theme, which, Roper points out, begins rather crudely in “O God of heaven! the dream of horror” (No. 7), takes on full spiritual significance and power in such poems as “Silent is the House” (No. 123), in which the dungeon is both source of the suffering that will bring about the soul’s release, and also metaphor for the soul’s confinement in the body (Roper 270 n. 165-92).

Although Brontë wrote fifty poems in 1838-39, only three complete poems survive from the last three years of her life, that is from 9 October 1845 to her death on 19 December 1848: “Silent is the House,” “No Coward Soul,” and “Why ask to know the date the clime?” (Nos. 123, 125, 126). Various explanations have been suggested for this apparent loss of creativity: that she was concentrating on Wuthering Heights; that she was put off by Charlotte’s pressure to publish, or by the harsh reviews of Wuthering Heights; that she had lost her desire to live (Irene Taylor calls Wuthering Heights, one long “suicide note” [103-04]); that she was no longer able to summon her visions (Gérin 246-49); that her imagination had been “poisoned” by Branwell’s degradation and drunken ravings (Gérin 245); or finally, that she did write, but that her writings, including the manuscript of a new novel, were destroyed by Charlotte (Barker 579).

Whatever the reason for the scarcity of poems in the last years of Emily Brontë’s life, we must be grateful for these three. Surrounded as they are by silence, they speak all the more poignantly and eloquently of the state
of Emily’s mind and spirit at the end of her life. Their power and excellence are testimony that she was in these years at the height of her powers as a poet. When read in sequence, they reveal a pattern of ideas that move first, from an expression of mystical experience, to a direct address to the Deity who has been experienced, and finally to a poem that may represent what Brontë believes to be the effects of such experience in human life: absolute and unconditional forgiveness.

“Silent is the House” is the last of Brontë’s “visitant” poems, following in the path laid out by earlier poems such as “The Night Wind” (79), “Ay there it is!” (85), “My comforter” (103), and “To Imagination” (108). Sometimes referred to as one of the best descriptions of mystical experience written in English, “Silent is the House” was excerpted and published as “The Prisoner” in 1846, and as “The Visionary” in 1850. In this poem, the prisoner Rochelle describes her visions:

“Yet, tell them, Julian, all, I am not doomed to wear
“Year after year in gloom and desolate despair;
“A messenger of Hope comes every night to me
“And offers, for short life, eternal liberty—

“He comes with western winds, with evening’s wandering airs,
“With that clear dusk of heaven that brings the thickest stars;
“Winds take a pensive tone and stars a tender fire
“And visions rise and change which kill me with desire—

“Desire for nothing known in my maturer years
“When joy grew mad with awe at counting future tears;
“When, if my spirit’s sky was full of flashes warm,
“I knew not whence they came from sun or thunder storm;

“But first a hush of peace, a soundless calm descends;
“The struggle of distress and feirce [sic] impatience ends;
“Mute music sooths my breast—unuttered harmony
“That I could never dream till earth was lost to me.

“Then dawns the Invisible, the Unseen its truth reveals;
“My outward sense is gone, my inward essence feels—
“Its wings are almost free, its home, its harbour found;
“Measuring the gulf it stoops and dares the final bound!

“O, dreadful is the check—intense the agony
“When the ear begins to hear and the eye begins to see;
“When the pulse begins to throb, the brain to think again,
“The soul to feel the flesh and the flesh to feel the chain!

“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 devine [sic]—”

Sometimes cited as evidence of a suicidal longing for death, the final passages reflect rather Brontë’s grasp of the fearful but joyous crossing that must be made into another dimension of existence if one is to experience the spiritual life fully. The passage reveals three of the marks of mystical experience that William James described: first a “noetic quality,” in that such states “are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect.” Secondly, the mystical experience is always transient. And thirdly, in the mystical state, “the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power” (371-72).

The next poem in this final series of three is “No Coward Soul,” dated January 2, 1846:

No coward soul is mine
No trembler in the world’s storm troubled sphere
I see Heaven’s glories shine
And Faith shines equal arming me from Fear

O God within my breast
Almighty ever-present Deity
Life, that in me hast rest
As I, — Undying Life, have power in thee

Vain are the thousand creeds
That move men’s hearts, unutterably vain,
Worthless as withered weeds
Or idlest froth amid the boundless main

To waken doubt in one
Holding so fast by thy infinity
So surely anchored on
The steadfast rock of Immortality

With wide-embracing love
Emily Brontë and Religious Criticism

Thy Spirit animates eternal years
Pervades and broods above,
Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates and rears

Though Earth and moon were gone
And suns and universes ceased to be
And Thou wert left alone
Every Existence would exist in thee

There is not room for Death
Nor atom that his might could render void
Since Thou art Being and Breath
And what thou art may never be destroyed.

This poem, Brontë’s only direct address to the deity, expresses the mystic’s sense of the immensity and grandeur of the Divine—Otto’s *sacrum tremendum*. The poem conveys a recurrent theme of mystical writers, the overwhelming sense of the Oneness of all—self, creation, and God: “Every existence . . . exist[s] in thee.” “No Coward Soul” shows that the “thousand creeds” of organized religion are “vain” to shake the speaker’s faith—not that there is no faith—and gives the fullest statement, as death approached, of Emily Brontë’s “Credo.”

When read as the culmination of a continuously evolving spiritual journey that may be traced through Brontë’s works, from “The Butterfly” to the “Visitant” poems and *Wuthering Heights*, “No Coward Soul” is Brontë’s crowning achievement, as both poem and as statement of faith. Her *oeuvre* includes works that treat of hope, faith, and forgiveness, while others reflect on the moral and spiritual effects of isolation, alienation, and absence of love. In this poem, earthly and Heavenly elements are knit together into a single all-encompassing whole, a cosmic fabric that contains not only “the thousand creeds,” now insignificant, but also suns and moons, atoms and universes, time and eternity, and Death and Immortality. In “No Coward Soul” the immanent and the transcendent merge, and the Oneness of all creation finds its fullest expression.

Matthew Arnold wrote of “No Coward Soul” that its “too-bold dying song / Shook, like a clarion-blast my soul” (“Haworth Churchyard,” *Fraser’s*, 1855). Emily Dickinson asked that the poem be read at her funeral (Gezari 10).

However, debates over Brontë’s mysticism and religious views, as well as an increasing tendency in contemporary culture to assume a secular point of view, have led to widely disparate readings of this poem. Stevie Davies, for example, has published three books on Emily Brontë
and is fully cognizant of the scholarship of the past hundred and fifty years. Nor can she be dismissed as having a mind closed to spiritual reality, as her description of “No Coward Soul” in *Emily Bronte Heretic* demonstrates:

> Wherever Emily Brontë is, there also is God. The poem has a quality of out-of-doors: no church could hold it. The roof would blow off. The punctuationless lines flow like a mighty wind annihilating boundaries between self and world, subject and object, human woman and divine power. That high wind is generated in part by Christianity itself, an extreme development of the Gospel idea of the body as ‘temple of the Spirit’, but more powerfully by an adaptation of German Romanticism.

Davies captures the extraordinary power of this poem, and is right to say that it draws on spiritual forces that “no church could hold,” for the feeling it expresses far exceeds the ordinary domain of doctrine and ritual. But then, surprisingly (except that her invocation of German Romanticism might have led us to expect it), she continues, “The contemptuous and retaliatory thrust of ‘No coward soul’ is defensive; its heroic stance secures itself against neediness by ‘Holding fast,’ ‘surely anchored’ on ‘steadfast rock’ to which she clings angrily” (144-45).

Davies misreads a religious spirit that overflows doctrinal boundaries as hostility to religion itself. And when she writes of *Wuthering Heights* that “A violent God created and then rejected man, making him as violent as himself,” she conflates, as Brontë might say, the creature with the Creator (140-42). Jill Dix Ghnassia’s *Metaphysical Rebellion in the Works of Emily Brontë* (1994), similarly interprets “No Coward Soul” to mean that Brontë acknowledged no god except self, and concludes that, despite resemblances to John of the Cross, she was a “mystic without God” (113).

Let us examine for a moment the process by which critics attain such readings. Both Davies and Ghnassia use “The Butterfly” to establish their reading of “No Coward Soul.” Juliet Barker wrote of “The Butterfly,” that “This could hardly be a more eloquent statement of Christian belief” (389). Brontë’s conclusion even provides the essay’s meaning:

> That the creature should not judge the Creator, [the butterfly] is the symbol of the world to come. As the ugly caterpillar is the origin of the splendid butterfly, so this globe is the embryo of a new heaven and a new earth
whose beauty at its most poor will infinitely exceed your mortal imagination. . . . God is the god of justice and mercy; then certainly . . . each suffering of our unfortunate nature is only a seed of this divine harvest which will be gathered when sin having expended its last drop of poison . . . [will leave] an eternal empire of happiness and Glory— (Davies 251)

And yet, despite Brontë’s statement that “this globe is the embryo of a new heaven and a new earth,” Davies concludes that “Emily’s ‘Butterfly’ came subversively like a messenger from the underworld of social suppressions to condemn the Creation” (123). For Davies, the essay posits “a universe constructed upon ‘a principle of destruction’ and the corruption of human nature” (241). Gnhassia also concludes that in “The Butterfly,” Brontë “sees that the order of creation is one of murder and destruction” (190).

Focusing primarily on early passages that describe the speaker’s dark mood before the butterfly appears, Davies and Gnhassia establish an interpretation of Brontë’s philosophy that they then deploy to support their reading of “No Coward Soul.” Their arguments rest particularly on two passages: “O God within my breast” and “Vain are the thousand creeds,” and overlook many passages that require a radically different interpretation.

The poem opens with a “No” that is not a rejection of God but rather of fear: “No coward soul is mine.” The speaker refuses to cower before the “world’s storm troubled sphere,” because “I see Heaven’s glories shine / And Faith shines equal arming me from Fear.” As in so many of Brontë’s works, it is inspiration, represented as light (“I see Heaven’s glories”), that makes vision or perception possible (“And Faith shines equal”). “[A]rming me from Fear,” may be an allusion to St. Paul’s “shield of faith”: “So stand your ground . . . always carrying the shield of faith so that you can use it to quench the burning arrows of the Evil One” (*New Jerusalem Bible*, Eph. 6.16).

The next stanza opens with the line, “O God within my breast,” which for Davies evokes a Romanticism that emphasizes “solitary genius, accountable to no one, transgressing the boundaries of sanction and taboo” (146). Thus, “Out in the open . . . [Brontë] not only commits but brags the sin of pride” (143). For Davies, “No Coward Soul” is a “self-deifying” poem (xiii). However, the image of a God residing within the self is a familiar religious trope, from Epictetus through Augustine and Teresa. It is the reason that Oliver Davies entitled his study of mysticism *God Within*. 
Lisa Wang provides six Biblical sources for the image of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, most notably Christ’s own words, “abide in Me and I in you” from John 15.4 (165; 172, n. 36). Augustine’s *Confessions* also reveals how much “No Coward Soul” owes to Christian tradition. For example, when Brontë writes, “every Existance would exist in thee” she echoes Augustine’s: “And since I too exist, how can I ask you to come to me, who would not exist if you were not already in me?” and “Since nothing that is can exist without you, do all things that exist hold you?” (31).

Teresa of Avila’s *Interior Castle* is entirely structured on an extended metaphor, in which the soul is a vast castle, holding many mansions, in the center of which dwells the Deity. Those who through prayer enter the outer rooms of the castle will hear the voice of God calling from the center.

In Brontë’s third stanza, the words “Vain are the thousand creeds” have suggested to some readers a wholesale rejection of religious teachings and of belief in a deity. We do well here to recall Derrida’s distinction between “religio” as historically contingent institution, and faith itself, and indeed, the next stanza must be read to complete the thought: “Vain are the thousand creeds . . . To waken doubt.” Thus, although all the Brontë sisters critique religious institutions as flawed— “A brotherhood of misery,” Emily calls them in “My Comforter”—these creeds cannot obscure the deeper truth, the reality upon which the speaker’s faith is anchored: “thy infinity” and “The steadfast rock of Immortality.”

Although the poem clearly states that the multiplicity of creeds cannot shake the speaker’s faith in God, Davies and others read the stanzas to refer to the impossibility of self-doubt: “Doubt is the operative word against which the whole poem fortifies itself, giving notice of its intent not to trade views, accept influence, even of a benign and rational sort. Outsiders’ truths would threaten autonomy” (144-45). Ghnassia says of the same passage that “Her dismissal of the ‘thousand creeds’ as ‘worthless’ places her outside the mainstream of Christian thought” (198-99).

Judith Farr, one of the minority of recent critics who read Brontë as religious, captures the distinction between institution and faith that this passage makes when she writes:

[Themes of religious orthodoxy reveal . . . that for Emily Brontë religion was an expression of what she called the “undying Life” within: the mingling of one’s own spirit with the freedom of God . . . whose chthonic powers are . . .]
move the universe, are grander than codes or commandments, and “may never be destroyed.” (92)

Regarding the idea that the “thousand creeds” of modern religious life may waken doubt, William James observed that those who have not been favored with revelations that authenticate any particular faith tradition, “must stand outside them altogether and, for the present at least, decide that, since they corroborate incompatible theological doctrines, they neutralize one another and leave no fixed results.” And yet, James goes on to say, these conflicting faith traditions do not negate the reality of a higher order: they are indispensable for the individual because they make the experience of higher union possible (504-05).

The fifth stanza flows with an energy and uplift that is heightened by contrast with the holding-firm quality of the fourth—“holding fast,” “anchored on,” “steadfast rock.” This energy is supplied by a series of verbs, all of which are modified by the idea of God’s “wide-embracing love.” With that love, the divine spirit “animates,” “pervades,” and “broods above / Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates, and rears.” The image of the Holy Spirit as dove who “broods above” is common in Christian iconography and is found in Charles Wesley’s hymn, “Come Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire”: “Expand thy wings, celestial Dove, / Brood o’er our nature’s night; / On our disordered spirits move. / And let there now be light” (Wang 172, n. 37), as well as in Milton’s Paradise Lost, in which a “dove-like spirit” is seen “brooding over the vast abyss” (Williams 146). It recurs in Gerard Manley Hopkins’ tender image of the Holy Ghost in “God’s Grandeur”: “Because the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! Bright wings.” Brontë’s fifth stanza concludes with “Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates, and rears”—a line that closely parallels Augustine’s “[C]hangeless in changing all things; . . . active always, always at rest, you acquire without lacking, you support, fill, and protect; create, raise, and complete” (33).

Brontë’s final stanza invokes a nature that is transitory until it is transformed through union with the divine into something eternal: “There is not room for Death / Nor atom that his might could render void / Since thou art Being and Breath / And what thou art may never be destroyed.” Death is expelled from the universe, because the atoms that make up the world exist as part of the divine cosmos. As so often with Brontë, physiological terms, such as breath, a common metonym for life, take on spiritual meaning, as wind and breath both suggest the Holy Spirit in traditional religious texts such Genesis 1.2, in which the wind or breath of God sweeps over the waters of the deep before the Creation of the world. As Gérin eloquently states of “No Coward Soul,”
By 1846, on 2 January, when she wrote her Credo, she had discovered, as she believed, that the life within her was invulnerable, not to be touched by Time or alteration, indestructible, even by death. This proclamation of her faith marks the high-water mark of Emily’s spiritual progression from the visionary girl who received fleeting glimpses of eternity to the assured mystic who believed she had attained to as complete a union with the soul of the universe—the ‘Eternal Heart’ she once called it—as temporal life allowed. Only death could bestow the crown of everlasting Life. (246)

In addition to traditional Christian writings, one other intertextual source for “No Coward Soul” may have been the Stoic philosopher Epictetus. Margaret Maison traces Brontë’s title to a poem by Hester Chapone that appears at the beginning of a book of Epictetus’ works that the Brontës almost certainly knew. Chapone’s poem states at one point: “No more repine, my coward Soul! / The Sorrows of Mankind to share” (231). Chapone’s speaker rejects Stoicism in favor of Christianity because, Chapone writes, Stoicism relies on a “‘God-like all-sufficient human mind’” that the Stoic fails to recognize as “‘foul, weak, ignorant, and blind.’” Brontë’s poem “The Philosopher” expresses a similar polarity between intellectual and spiritual enlightenment. Again, however, “No Coward Soul” is read to mean that Brontë’s deity is the self: where Chapone asks, ironically, “‘Within myself does Virtue dwell?’” Janet Gezari maintains that Brontë’s “No Coward Soul” answers “‘That’s right,’” and “never risks locating [the poem’s] authority outside the self” (133-34).

Chapone’s point is that the soul should not fear (“No more repine, my coward soul!”) to partake of the common human experience of sorrow and pain, since God Himself endured them. In “No Coward Soul” Brontë has adapted not only Chapone’s phrase, but the idea that the courage to face “the world’s storm troubled sphere” derives from Faith in that God, not in the self.

Conclusion

Readings of “No Coward Soul” as irreligious represent a much larger and pervasive phenomenon: literary theory’s discomfort with the religious language and traditions in which the authors we study were steeped. For example, although Ghnassia writes truly that Brontë’s “re-
reflective temperament and her preoccupation with the meaning of human existence, . . . God’s creation, . . . Heaven, and other-worldliness generated a propitious terrain for the growth of her philosophy,” she concludes that “Emily Bronte has the courage to say ‘no’ . . . to God’s screams from His wuthering heights” (xii). This is hardly the God of “No Coward Soul” whose “wide-embracing love” animates and sustains every atom of the universe.

Other examples of the need for a religious literary criticism include John Maynard’s analysis, which concludes, “But the failure of institutional religion raises no issue of Victorian faith, only a stronger sense of true belief—in self” (205). John Hewish warns against what he terms a “facile interpretation” of the poem as “orthodox,” and states: “The line of descent of the attitude here is perhaps from Bruno through Spinoza and German and English romanticism; it is the pantheist feeling for life and nature, the permanent romantic apotheosis of consciousness.” (88) And Meg Harris Williams interprets the life within, the “Being with the Breath of Immortality” as the “creative principle” (145).

Such readings of “No Coward Soul” are partially accounted for by the fact that some of its religious allusions are no longer well known, and are therefore interpreted to suggest meanings that remain firmly in the domain of the immanent: thus “God within” comes to mean “I am God.” But a religious literary criticism would interpret the poem in terms of its many intertextual allusions and a better understanding of religion as possible ground for creativity, heterodoxy, and metaphysical insight. In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray wrote that the world is a mirror, and gives back to the viewer the face he or she presents to it. The same is true of literature: a hermeneutics that is based on a secular understanding of the nature of reality tends to assume that the same understanding predominates in Victorian literature, at least in its “superior” examples.

Secularism, as Charles Taylor describes it, relies on an interpretation of human life in immanent terms—“evil” for example becomes “illness” and therapy replaces spiritual forms of healing. In addition, secularism has altered our social imaginary; belief in an enclosed, purposeful, benevolent cosmos is confronted by a different epistemology that envisions not a cosmos but a universe governed by the laws of physics, bordered by infinite space and darkness, and very possibly meaningless. Another characteristic of increasing secularism is that our values tend to be more anthropomorphic; that is, human flourishing is seen as the highest good, and we are far less likely to subscribe to the idea that suffering and sacrifice are justified on transcendental grounds. Finally, our increasing tendency to distrust extremes of devotion, such as “enthusiasm” and “fa-
naticism,” extends of course to increased distrust of something called “mysticism.”

At the same time, in Victorian life and still increasingly today, a growing body of perspectives is filling the place once held almost exclusively by religion: transcendentalism, political ideologies, transformational psychology, even ecology. Although these alternative systems of belief provide much insight into the world, they leave out a dimension of life that all the world’s religions address. William James writes,

> The further limits of our being plunge, it seems to me, into an altogether other dimension of existence from the sensible and merely “understandable” world. Name it the mystical region, or the supernatural region, whichever you choose. So far as our ideal impulses originate in this region (and most of them do originate in it, for we find them possessing us in a way for which we cannot articulately account), we belong to it in a more intimate sense than that in which we belong to the visible world. (506)

Rather than operating on a naïve either/or polarity, literary criticism must seek a hermeneutics that considers religion in relationship to secular epistemologies. As Viswanathan has written recently, while religion’s place in modern life “has engaged historians, sociologists, and religious scholars for a long time, yielding a vast and proliferating body of work, . . . the field of literary studies has not witnessed a corresponding breadth of scholarship” (466). This is the grand project that the Victorians embarked upon; through their writings, they challenge us to carry the work forward.

**Notes**

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1 Critics who have compared Brontë’s poetry to the writings of John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila include Ghausia (1994) and Arnedillo (2002). Critics who discuss Brontë as a mystic include Sinclair (1912), Spurgeon (1913), Clarke (1927),

Josephine Butler, for example, well-known Victorian feminist, published a life of St. Catherine of Sienna, and regarded Christ as the liberator of women (Mathers 133).

Passages from Emily Brontë’s poems are taken from the Roper and Chitham edition and numbered and dated according to Roper’s system. Roper and Chitham have faithfully reproduced Brontë’s distinctive spelling and punctuation, which are retained here.

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**Works Cited**


