

University doctoral (PhD) theses

**SILENT IN THE LIGHT AND SPEAKING IN THE DARK:
JOURNEYS OF THE SELF IN EMILY BRONTË'S POETRY**

**CSEND A FÉNYBEN ÉS BESZÉD A SÖTÉTSÉGBEN:
AZ ÉN UTAZÁSAI EMILY BRONTË KÖLTÉSZETÉBEN**

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1. The purpose and subject of the thesis

The purpose of the present thesis is to discuss Emily Brontë's poetry – an oeuvre of special position, which, in spite of the worldwide fame of her novel, quite rarely emerges as a subject of research. Comparatively scarcely studied in English-speaking countries, this poetry has received extremely little critical attention in Hungary. The most important reason of this lack of attention is that, as opposed to her novel, Brontë actually did not intend her poems to be *read*. She allowed very few poems to be published in her lifetime (which remained practically unknown then), and even after her death, only the fifth of her poetry came out, put in the shade by the success and richness of her novel. Also, before publication, the texts of the poems were severely changed, first by the author, then, after her death, by her sister Charlotte Brontë. The first critical edition took almost a hundred years to be composed, in 1941; the first edition which, in the absence of published texts, relied exclusively and consistently on the manuscripts, appeared in 1992. This latter volume, edited by Janet Gezari, is what I use in the present thesis.

In critical writings on the poems, I have frequently found essays still treating the poems in the “shade” of the novel, instead of considering it an oeuvre interesting in its own right. Thus, one of my purposes is to make this literally “hiding” poetry more widely known in my own country, and also contribute to the poems receiving the appreciation they deserve.

The subject of my thesis is the fate of the (human) self in Emily Brontë's poetry. I have chosen J. Hillis Miller's essay as a starting point, asserting that, although the speaker of each poem has a different personality, all of them share a common past of painful bereavement, isolating them from who or what they define as their Other, whether it is the beloved, a community, or a non-human (but not necessarily transcendent) form of existence. Miller puts these states into the category of being in exile, which makes Brontë's selves suffer, as they need another, external self for their happiness (sometimes for their bare survival), which they can never reach. In the absence of another fixed point, they use this isolation to define themselves as well as their place in the universe.

In short, the starting point of each poem is the Romantic conception of the self: the self waking from innocence to consciousness, and never able to return to innocence again. This is one reason why I consider Brontë's poetry as part of the Romantic tradition. The other reason is that these poems will mostly use the rhetoric of Romanticism as well as the results of Romantic philosophy. As mentioned previously, however, the above conception of the self is only the starting point, where each self sets out on their own particular journey. In my interpretations, I seek these journeys, from pain and loss to conscious renunciation, the desire

to escape, compassion, the repression of bereavement, death or the faith in resurrection. Again and again, the poems attempt to explore and use all the possibilities remaining for a self in an exile. The most characteristically Brontëan conclusion is the threshold-position, the most complete victory under the circumstances: in this case, the self is able to keep a balance and even mediate between two forms of existence, while (s)he neither remains in isolation nor is obliged to leave his/her isolated state.

2. Methods of research

Above all, the thesis uses close reading; not as a method of structuralism, but as that of deconstruction. As the special feature of this poetry is every text choosing different ways and solutions for the self, I intend to give each text the fullest attention. From among the theorists of deconstruction, mostly, but not exclusively I use Paul de Man's essays, primarily because these essays apply, make good use of, but also re-form close reading. Also, I keep comparing the poems to the contemporaneous philosophies which she may have known (mostly those of Edmund Burke and S. T. Coleridge). Every now and then, I refer to Brontë criticism, and also debate with it if necessary. In a few cases, I also apply the methods of theorists belonging to other theoretical paradigms, as deconstruction does not always help me interpret certain features of the primary texts.

A disadvantage of such reading is that I can deal with comparatively few poems; I must say, however, to its advantage that this way I can pay attention to everything within the selected texts, and construct reading methods which may also be useful in other readings. I always consider the rhetoric of the texts, as well as their subtle self-contradictions, the role of rhythm and rhyme, even phonetic features. No one has ever devoted such a detailed analysis to these texts. Comparing my results to those of other essays, this method of reading proves worth trying, because it reveals the traps laid in the reader's way to avoid their attention all the time. Apparent faults and contradictions disturbing any reading which remains on the "surface" (which does happen in Brontë criticism, unfortunately), rather appear to be results of a conscious and consistent work of subverting poetic tradition(s). This work of subversion draws a clearly visible pattern over Brontë's poetry.

I also need to add that I do not deal with the poems in a chronological order. First, such an arrangement can easily lead to a biographical reading, which is exceptionally dangerous in Emily Brontë's poetry, profoundly determined by role-play. Second, as Maureen Peck-O'Toole asserts, most poems have survived in fair copies, more than one poems on one page, which means that in most cases it is absolutely impossible to define their exact dates. Thus, I

arranged the poems according to structural, thematic, and rhetoric patterns, as well as to their relationships to other literary traditions.

3. Results

A) Locating the oeuvre in literary history:

In my thesis, I insert Emily Brontë's poetry into the tradition of Romanticism, also regarding the ways this poetry may change the same tradition. Compared to the works of Wordsworth and Coleridge, and, to a lesser extent, those of Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, this oeuvre turns out to use Romantic conceptions of the self, Romantic interpretations of dreaming and vision, as well as of nature, fragmentation, the sublime and the beautiful, and Romantic rhetoric. Also, the poems are sometimes revealed to rewrite such classics of English Romanticism as "Ode to the West Wind" or "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal." Similarly to the Romantics, Brontë creates her own private mythology, and then writes a significant part of her poems as a poetic role-play, in the name of characters in the Gondal saga, elaborated by herself and her sister Anne Brontë.

She diverts from English Romanticism in her use of the dichotomy of imagination and fancy: although she consciously applies Coleridge's phrasing when talking about fancy, she applies the same phrasing to imagination, too; she practically identifies the two with each other, and considers both as unreliable. When, however, she uses Coleridge's words defining imagination, and does it seriously, then, emphatically, she does not refer to imagination but another power, very different in quality.

B) Separating Brontë's oeuvre from mystical tradition:

Brontë criticism will frequently find connections between her oeuvre and mystical (literary and spiritual) tradition; even though there is little evidence, in the absence of private letters, diaries, or exact quotations, as to which mystical tradition she might have been related to. Even the insertion of the oeuvre in the context of Romanticism should encourage the reader to find connections between mystical tendencies greatly influencing Romanticism and Brontë's poetry. If, however, Nathalie Sorensen's definition is taken seriously (it should be, as she is a critic who most conscientiously and consistently elaborates on the mystical reading of this oeuvre), that is, her claim that the texts are about the direct knowledge of another form of existence and the complete union with that existence; then, it turns out that Brontë diverts from this tradition as often as she applies its strategies.

Close readings reveal that these poems mostly use certain elements of the mystical tradition in order to contradict them and renounce the mystical union. Features of love or natural mysticism¹ appear most frequently in the oeuvre. The self generally desires to unite with his/her beloved or the landscape or receives a possibility to do so; if (s)he is successful, (s)he can open his/her boundaries and receive perfection and happiness in exchange for losing him/herself. Yet: there is only one poem, “High waving heather” which takes the possibility of a mystical union seriously, and even this poem ends with the self either remaining outside the union of natural forces or melting among them at the price of becoming fragmented.

“The Night-Wind” is a curious interpretation of the mystical tradition, with a human self and the wind enamoured with the human being talking to each other. In their relationship, nature wins: taking over the human voice and cancelling the human will, in a subtle but still violent way it draws the human self into itself. The text keeps referring to the differences between its own universe and the literary tradition of mysticism; in the last stanza, however, it draws a strict line between itself and mystical literature. The highest and fullest peak of mystical union should be death – here, however, death is defined as the final separation of humanity and nature; a power which will repair the broken boundaries of the self, at the price of thrusting him/her to eternal solitude. In turn, a perfect counterpoint to the mystical tradition appears in the pair of “The night is darkening round me” and “I’ll come when thou art saddest.” In the first poem, the human self witnesses the union of natural forces, but closes his/her boundaries and chooses absolute solitude over a union with the landscape. In the second one, the human self is not even allowed to speak; his/her desperate situation only shown by the dramatic monologue of an unknown power. The speaker promises his/her arrival to take place in the near future, to be followed by his/her union with the human soul, but the human self hardly desires that; on the contrary, (s)he dreads the speaker.

C) The interpretation of love, death, and solitude in Brontë’s poetry:

In the interpretation of every poem I discuss how the self understands their isolation (which, on a textual level, sometimes appears as the text struggling with its fragmentedness), and how they define their relationship to who (or what)ever they consider their Other. Also, I analyse how they search (or refuse to search) for possible ways to transgress the boundaries of their existence and reach the Other, parallel with their struggle to understand themselves.

I devote three separate chapters to interpretations of love, solitude, and death, but other chapters refer to all the three problems, too, and the poems categorised under the above titles

¹ Nature in Brontë’s poetry can be interpreted as a power in its own right, a totality prior to human existence; and also as a sign system of secondary importance for another, transcendent form of existence. Usually, the two interpretations do not exclude each other in individual texts.

are also interconnected. Love, death, and solitude are most powerfully correlated in the love poems; the self in all love poems has to face the loss of the beloved, and it is mostly death that causes the loss leading to solitude. Still, because of their unique rhetoric features (and for structural reasons, too), I decided to discuss the three subjects separated, even if in some cases they may occur in one poem, inseparable from each other. In “R. Alcona to J. Brenzaida,” for instance, the speaker (a Gondal character) is still suffering from the death of her beloved, fifteen years before. Her only chance to escape her solitude would be death, so she desires to die, but consciously renounces to unite with her beloved in this way. Repressing the beloved and her own desire, she constructs her individual personality, which will make her a member of society; she, however, does not see that as a triumph but as a judgement. “If grief for grief can touch thee,” a profane prayer, creates a unique love rhetoric: the self does not expect a reply to his/her monologue, because instead of trusting his/her words to reach the Other, (s)he trusts the free flow and exchange of emotions. While saying the prayer, the borderlines of the self become blurred and permeable, thereby forcing the Other to open his/her boundaries in a similar way.

Solitude, even pain may become the source of a new power, like in “And myself lone wholly lone” and “Sympathy.” In both cases, solitude and living in exile are the preconditions for beings (both human and natural) helping each other and draw strength from their shared pain. Should they be identified with each other, they would only be able to notice pain, not to support each other from the outside – thus, in these poems, the borderlines of the self do not open up, and real help is not based on contact but resemblance (metaphor). If, on the other hand, the self tries to draw strength from him/herself, (s)he inevitably fails, as in the alternative world constructed from figures in “Hope,” which will not provide consolation for the self but deepen his/her solitude.

Death emerges in the most various forms in the oeuvre. It may appear as a cultural construction, part of time and history; in this sense, it can even become gendered: in “Julian M. and A. G. Rochelle,” it is a masculine rival for Julian, guarding his beloved jealously from death; in “A Farewell to Alexandria,” it is feminine, a surrogate mother for the child Augusta is about to murder. The enigmatic text of “A sudden chasm of ghastly light” elaborates on two interpretations of death, after the logic of apocalypses: one belongs to the human world and history, while the other is the destruction of both human time and the first death. Opposed to both, “Death” draws a strict line between the human world, comprehensible and defined by culture; and death, a radically different, alien power. Death may mean annihilation, either as a source of terror (“I’ll come when thou art saddest”) or as a source of happiness, the end of all earthly pain (“The Philosopher”); it may mean the highest kind of liberty (“Aye there it is!”

“And like myself lone wholly lone,” “Julian M. and A. G. Rochelle”); or the ultimate closing of the boundaries of the self (“The Night-Wind,” “In the earth, the earth thou shalt be laid”); or even the precondition of a rebirth (“Sympathy,” “No coward soul is mine”)

Few selves in Brontë’s poetry is capable of finding harmony and, if they cannot get rid of pain, at least manage to keep it low; even fewer can end up triumphant over solitude and suffering. Yet, examples of the latter do appear in the oeuvre now and then: the speakers (all of them are speakers!) who find the so-called threshold-position. This is what happens to the second speaker of “A sudden chasm of ghastly light,” the speaker who only looks on and does not wish to melt into the landscape in “High waving heather,” the seer in “The Philosopher,” at least two speakers of “Aye there it is!,” the speaker of “No coward soul is mine,” and probably also that of “The night is darkening round me.” Those who find the threshold-position also willingly stop on the borderline of two realms, belonging both to their own realm and the other, or rather to neither; creating a delicate balance, and drawing surprising strength from their situation.

D) Rhetoric 1. – The open pronouns of Emily Brontë:

The attempts to break, keep or use the isolation of the self, enlarged on above, are accompanied by, helped by, or enhanced by her characteristic rhetoric. The most special and conspicuous among these is her use of pronouns. An unusual feature of an oeuvre in English, she is able to avoid all reference to gender, whenever she chooses, even in the third person singular; when, in turn she only refers to the self as “I” or “thou,” then, in most cases, it is utterly impossible to decide which sex and/or gender they belong to. Thus, her oeuvre leaves gender codes almost completely out of consideration, and also calls attention to their being cultural constructions. “I” and “thou” will regularly exchange places, too, but not always indicated by quotation marks; all the more so because Brontë will frequently and consciously fail to punctuate her texts. Thereby the poems create possibilities of mediation, role-play, and subversion of tradition hardly ever found in other oeuvres.

E) Rhetoric 2. – The rhetoric of Romanticism used and modified:

Last but not least I also analyse the ways Brontë’s poetry applies and subverts some elements of the rhetoric of Romanticism. Very frequently, she uses allegory and symbol and pairs in much the same way as Coleridge does. Then, however, she does not follow Coleridge’s judgement of the two, so much so that de Man’s famous “The Rhetoric of Temporality” might as well have been written about Brontë’s poetry.

Symbol belongs to the desire and possibility of the mystical union, especially if it entails fear. Symbolic language is based on illusions; consequentially, if the self manages to use symbolic language to name the power of nature or the transcendental, they will lose their power and the borderlines of the self remain intact. The self's own world and poetic space, in turn, is allegorical: based on renunciation, fragmentation, and may equally lead to humility and pride; in most cases, it proves stronger than its Other.

Prosopopeia and Romantic irony are both applied in an outstandingly original way in the oeuvre, precisely because of its unique interpretation of death. The danger of prosopopeia lies in its symmetrical structure: as the speaker addresses and gives voice to an entity which is absent or even dead, the situation of speaker and addressee may easily be reversed. As, however, in Brontë's poetry death rarely appears unambiguously as a source of fear, the fear of death disappears from her prosopopeia, which opens special possibilities; most conspicuously in "Death," whose speaker, addressing death without a trace of fear, is ready even for self-sacrifice, and thus may become able to defeat death. Irony produces a double self and leads to pain, madness, and death; if, however, the self starts the journey in despair and loses the fear of death because of that, then irony may even turn out to be a means to bring rebirth into the universe of the poem, as it happens in "Sympathy."

Conclusion:

The starting point of my thesis is that Emily Brontë's poetic oeuvre is defined by the self being in exile, bereaved of what (s)he considers necessary for survival; but also that this state, although shared by all poems, results in different journeys for the self. The poems selected for the thesis are representative pieces of the oeuvre, and they help the reader explore the most characteristic journeys for the self, from renunciation and repression to the possibility of resurrection. As I use close reading, mostly in the ways deconstruction uses it, for discussing the texts, in every analysis I am able to trace which traditions the poems join and which ones they subvert. The discussions unfold the journeys of the self, with all their hardships, bodily or spiritual pain, and destruction or triumph, and they also identify Brontë's poems as belonging to the late period of Romanticism, but definitely not belonging to the mystical literary tradition. The readings also analyse the language of the poems in detail. Brontë's use of pronouns and figures allows the reader to explore new relationships between the speakers or the self and the outside world, as well as new possibilities of dialogue. Indirectly, these investigations prove that Brontë's poetry, if compared to her novel, is hardly of secondary importance: indeed, it very much deserves critical attention in its own right.

Publications and conference papers

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1. Essays published in the field of the thesis:

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Vol. 6. Nr. 1. (2005) 184-200.

“Én és te és semmi más – avagy változatok a hiányra, a vágyra és a vágy hiányára
Emily Brontë költészetében.” [I and Thou and Nothing Else – or, Variations on Absence,
Desire, and the Absence of Desire in Emily Brontë’s Poetry.] István Bitskey and Mihály Imre
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futár* című regényében.” [Death in Modernity, Death in the Carnival. Writing and Rebirth in
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Conference of Undergraduate Studies (TDK), Szeged, Hungary, 2001: “Miszticizmus, a misztikus szubjektum, a misztikus vizitáció és a misztikus látomás megjelenése és ellentmondásai Emily Brontë költészetében” [The representation and the contradictions of mysticism in Emily Brontë’s poetry]—second prize

Forum of Young Researchers, Debrecen, Hungary, 2003: “Keresztény (?) allegória és szimbólumiatlan szimbólum Emily Brontë ‘I’ll come when thou art saddest’ című versében.” [Christian (?) Allegory and Unsymbolic Symbol in Emily Brontë’s poem ‘I’ll come when thou art saddest’]

The Eighteenth Century Now: Recent and Future Directions, York, Nagy-Britannia, 2006: “Eternal Liberty in the Dungeon Crypts: The Collision of the Gothic and the Romantic in a Poem by Emily Brontë”

HUSSE Conference, Szeged, 2007: “Separation and consolation in the poetry of Emily Brontë”

6. Other conference papers:

Conference of Undergraduate Studies (TDK), Veszprém, Hungary, 2003: “A megkerült futár. Karnevál, modernség és nyelviség Rejtő Jenő *Az ellopott futár* című regényében” [The Messenger Found. The Carnavalesque, the Modern, and the Linguistic in Rejtő Jenő’s novel *The Messenger Purloined*]—first prize

Conference of PhD-Students and Young Researchers, Komárom, Slovakia, 2003: “Halál a modernségben, halál a karneválban. Írás és újjászületés Rejtő Jenő *Az ellopott futár* című regényében.” [Death in Modernity, Death in the Carnival. Writing and Rebirth in Jenő Rejtő’s novel *The Messenger Purloined*]

HUSSDE Conference, Piliscsaba, 2004: “The Guardians of Words. The role of mediation and the power of the spoken word in W. B. Yeats’s *At the Hawk’s Well*”

HUSSE Conference, Veszprém, 2005: “Shining Waters and Shining Flowers. The desire of poetry in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*”

15th Conference of British and American Studies, Temesvár, 2005: „Distance and Intimacy: The Comedy of Madness in Robert Burns’s ‘Tam O’Shanter’”