

Brontë: Class and Politics

Eagleton, Terry. *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës*, Anniversary Edition. 1975. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

For the Brontë sisters, being late Romantics meant belonging to at least two eras at once. They had been brought up by their autocratic Tory father on a diet of heroic deeds and mythological figures, taught to venerate the Duke of Wellington and to admire whatever was high-spirited and noble-minded. All this reflected the revolutions and counter-revolutions of the Romantic period, with its flamboyance and panache. It was one of those rare stretches of time in which one could sense history literally in the making, as from Paris to Boston the ground shifted tumultuously beneath men and women's feet and a whole new revolutionary sensibility was brought to birth. It is the age of Blake and Robespierre, Hegel and Jefferson, of startling new creations all the way from the poetry of Byron and Shelley to the American Constitution and the philosophy of Kant. It is also a post-Enlightenment period, in which the conception of men and women as rational, restricted animals is yielding to a view of them as passionate, desirous creatures whose true home is infinity. The creative imagination is on the loose, forming strange alliances with revolutionary politics.

To emerge, like the sisters, in the twilight of this epoch meant among other things to be nostalgic for a lost greatness. Like the novelist Stendhal, chronicler of the post-Napoleonic period in France, a precious glory has faded, as the poetics of insurrection and the melodrama of military conquest give way to the dull prose of everyday middle-class life. The creative or Utopian imagination now runs headlong into conflict with the harsh disciplines of the world's first industrial nation. There is a microcosm of this shift in the way that the sisters had to leave behind a childhood full of myth and romance in order to buckle down to the austere, soul-destroying regime of the Victorian governess.

At the same time, there was a certain satisfaction to be reaped for the Brontës from the fact that the more disruptive currents of revolution had been stemmed, and order and hierarchy restored. In early nineteenth-century England, a current of militant working-class discontent was violently quelled by a brutally authoritarian police state. It would be revived in the sisters' own lifetime, in the shape of the mass working-class movement of Chartism. As both free-spirited rebels and Romantic conservatives, the Brontës sym-

xvii

pathised with such dissent and feared it, resented authority and admired it. It is a classic lower-middle-class ambiguity, as this study tries to show. In some ways, the sisters can be ranked among those strange, oxymoron beasts, radical conservatives; and as such they belong to a distinguished literary lineage, all the way from John Ruskin and Joseph Conrad to T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence. The Brontës, then, inherit both the turbulent and traditionalist aspects of the age which precedes them. As I try to show, they are both rebels and reactionaries, pious conformists and passionate dissenters; and this is more than simply a temperamental matter. It reflects the contradictory history they lived through, as well as the conflictive vantage-point from which they lived it. It also shapes the inner structure of their novels. It is not just a sociological fact, but a formative influence on their sensibility.

If history was visibly in the making in the Romantic period (which is therefore the great age of the historical novel), so was it in the early decades of the Industrial Revolution. It was not just a question of cotton mills, rural enclosures, hunger and class-struggle, but of the crystallising of a whole new sensibility, one appropriate to an England which was becoming for the first time a largely urban society. It was a matter of learning new disciplines and habits of feeling, new rhythms of time and organisations of space, new forms of repression, deference and self-fashioning. A whole new mode of

human subjectivity was in the making, one which like the self-divided protagonists of Charlotte Brontë's fiction was both aspiring and frustrated, rootless and solitary yet resourceful and self-reliant.

The typical individual of the new social order, as Charlotte's heroines again reveal, was self-seeking and hard-headed, yet fragile and desperately exposed. It would be hard to think of a finer prototype of such individuals than three cultivated women who were compelled to work for their living in oppressive conditions. Largely unprotected, the sisters ventured out from the civilised enclave of their Yorkshire parsonage into a world in which, as governesses, they were forced to put their culture to work as a commodity. They were thus well-placed to chronicle the clashes between civility and brutality, culture and labour, self-expression and self-repression, which everywhere marked this new form of social existence. [...]

xviii

The actual relations between landed and industrial classes in the Brontës' time were notably fluid and complex. It seems clear that, despite real clashes of political and economic interests, the distance between the classes was never unbridgeable. Even though the landed gentry tended not to marry into manufacturing families unless those families had achieved at least second-generation respectability, there was a considerable fusion of economic interests, as manufacturers bought up estates and landowners became deeply involved in industrial projects. John Marshall, a Leeds flaxspinner, bought land extensively in Cumberland, Lancashire and the North Riding and set up his four sons as squires; William Denison, a highly respected West Riding manufacturer, became a major landowner in Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire; the Wakefield Milnes family, owners of the second largest firm in the woollen industry, virtually withdrew their capital from trade to land at a crucial stage of the first period of industrialisation. On the other hand there were men like Walter Spencer-Stanhope, son of a woollen merchant and owner of 11,000 acres in Yorkshire, who became keenly engaged in West Riding industry. Landowners became promoters of turnpikes, canals, ports and banks, while the children of wealthy merchants who had bought land in the eighteenth century received such a fine education that they emerged as country gentlemen more genteel than the gentry themselves. Traditional landed society easily assimilated these rich merchant families; county families moved at ease with industrial magnates, and in the early decades of the nineteenth century a new osmosis between gentry and manufacturers took place, on the basis of a growing eighteenth-century alliance of interests. The landed gentry thus provided a kind of safety-valve for some of the pressure of new industrial wealth. The landed aristocracy, through its national and metropolitan political role, was inescapably confronted with the problems of the new society generated by coal, steam and iron; and since it was on the whole prepared to come to terms with these realities, the lower gentry-- more parochial and conservative than the aristocracy, but politically dependent on them-- had perforce to follow suit. The landed aristocracy increased in material strength and social standing throughout the nineteenth century, but at the same time the relative importance

5

of agriculture and the wealth of the landed class in relation to other classes suffered a sharp decline.

On the one hand, then, traditional aristocrats became industrial entrepreneurs on a considerable scale; on the other hand, the industrial bourgeoisie looked to traditional landed authority to stabilise property in the turbulent conditions created by the presence of a militant working class. The West Riding, with its combination of large estates and industrial centres, was of particular significance here: its population grew by 73 per cent between 1801 and 1831, but despite its industrial expansion it retained enormous estates. As the largest electoral constituency in the country, it had to

share power and territory with growing commercial and industrial interests; and indeed, if there had been a single manufacturing interest it might well have commanded a political majority. Earl Fitzwilliam, owner of a large South Yorkshire colliery, ironworks, and property in Sheffield, was the figurehead for a Whig party organisation in which the leading liberals of Leeds, Bradford and Sheffield had at least half a share in management; so that while the Whig aristocrats could still dominate Whig political interests in the West Riding, they could do so only on the terms of an alliance with the bourgeoisie. The patterns of political power seem exceptionally complex, and certainly not directly reducible to the expression of economic interests: traditional family loyalties sometimes counted for more than such interests when the mineowners, railway directors and town-planners among the West Riding gentry turned to politics. Earl Fitzwilliam, ideologically a free-trader, objected to the methods of the anti-Corn Law League and was a major opponent; but it seems plausible that those members of the gentry who had become industrialists were less apprehensive of bourgeois threats to the agrarian interest than were Southern corn-growing squires who were solely dependent on agriculture. (The two greatest Tory mineowners in England, the Marquis of Londonderry and the Earl of Lonsdale, were divided over the issue of repealing the Corn Laws.)

At the level of parliamentary politics, of course, the landowners retained control in the West Riding, all of whose MPs between 1830 and 1885, with the exception of Cobden and the Halifax carpet manufacturer Crossley, emerged from that class. Cobden

6

was returned to Parliament in 1847, on the initiative of Leeds free-traders who considered that the Whigs had failed to give their interests the weight they warranted; and his election caused deep indignation among many Whigs and all Tories, affronted as they were by the fact that he was a manufacturer and a non-Yorkshireman at that. When Cobden retired as M.P. in 1857, however, the traditional Whig position recovered with the election of an aristocrat. The pattern, then, was one of growing urban power, to which the Whig gentry ('the aristocratic representatives of the bourgeoisie', as Marx termed them) needed to adapt. Beneath the sporadic political confrontations between the two classes lay a steady convergence of interests, inherited from centuries of rapprochement between the industrial bourgeoisie and a capitalist landowning class with, as Frederick Engels remarked, 'habits and tendencies far more bourgeois than feudal'.

How then are the Brontës to be situated within this social landscape? [...]

Not every nineteenth-century petty-bourgeois intellectual was a Brontë. The Brontës lived through an era of disruptive social change, and lived that disruption at a peculiarly vulnerable point. For from being sublimely secluded from their history, that history entered, shaped and violated the inmost recesses of their personal lives. Indeed, so finely meshed were the strands which bound their history and biography into unity that one needs, to interpret their

7

situation, to draw on a concept which Louis Althusser has borrowed from Freud-- that of 'overdetermination'. By 'overdetermination', Althusser seeks to describe the way in which major contradictions in society never emerge in 'pure' form; on the contrary, they act by condensing into complex unity an accumulated host of subsidiary conflicts, each of which conversely determines the general contradiction. The Brontës situation is, I believe, overdetermined in precisely this sense. The major historical conflict which this book selects as its focus-- that between landed and industrial capital-- is sharpened and complicated for the Brontës by a host of subsidiary factors. Their situation is unique, certainly-- but unique in its classical condensing of an unusually wide range of historical

tensions. They happened to live in a region which revealed the friction between land and industry in peculiarly stark form-- starker, certainly, than in a purely agrarian or industrial area. The same part of the country, as we have seen, witnessed working-class struggle at an extraordinary pitch of militancy, and in that sense too highlighted certain 'typical' historical trends. These pervasive social conflicts were then peculiarly intensified by the sisters personal situation. They were, to begin with, placed at a painfully ambiguous point in the social structure, as the daughters of a clergyman with the inferior status of 'perpetual curate' who had thrust his way up from poverty; they strove as a family to maintain reasonably 'genteel' standards in a traditionally rough-and-ready environment. They were, moreover, socially insecure *women*-- members of a cruelly oppressed group whose victimised condition reflected a more widespread exploitation. And they were *educated women*, trapped in an almost intolerable deadlock between culture and economics-- between imaginative aspiration and the cold truth of a society which could use them merely as 'higher' servants. They were *isolated* educated women, socially and geographically remote from a world with which they nonetheless maintained close intellectual touch, and so driven back on themselves in solitary emotional hungering. At certain points in their fiction, indeed, that loneliness becomes type and image of the isolation of all men in an individualist society. And as if all this were not enough, they were forced to endure in their childhood an especially brutal form of ideological oppression-- Calvinism.

In the unique imaginative formation of the Brontës, then, social, sexual, cultural, religious and geographical issues fuse into an overdetermined unity. It is for this reason that we can trace in their very 'eccentricity' the contours of a common condition, detect in their highly specific life-style the unfolding of a general grammar. In a society where banishment from a centre seemed a general experience, the Brontës' 'eccentric' situation begins to seem curiously typical.

We need, however, to be rather more precise about their ambiguous social standing. Their father, Patrick Brontë, was the son of a poor Irish peasant family who had fought their way from cabin to cottage to tenant-farm; he himself was by turns blacksmith, linen-weaver and schoolmaster, and finally blazed a trail to Cambridge and Anglican orders. Marx's general characterisation of the petty bourgeoisie-- 'contradiction incarnate'-- seems in his case peculiarly apt. His bigoted poem *Vision of Hell*, for instance, is socially radical, dooming to torment the clergy, bailiffs and landlords who exploit the poor; yet as Tom Winnifrith points out, his adoption of the name 'Brontë', boasts of aristocratic Cambridge friendships and cryptic hints of noble ancestry show how calculatedly he cut his roots, to become a fiercely anti-Luddite reactionary. His Low Church Evangelicalism reproduced his social ambivalence in religious terms, equally hostile as it was to proletarian Dissent and upper-class formalism. At Haworth too, there was the influence of the rigidly conformist Aunt Branwell, uneasy in the dour conditions of Yorkshire, fastidiously regretting the superior Cornish stock from which she came. A crisis of social identity, then, was endemic in this Tory, socially respectable but none too affluent family; Patrick Brontë could finance a fitting education for his daughters at Cowan Bridge school but mainly because of its special provisions for the children of clerics.

The sisters' entry into Cowan Bridge school and then Roe Head marks the moment of their traumatic break from the imaginative freedom of the parsonage to an inflexibly disciplined, harshly restrictive regime. That crucial transition from sheltered settlement to crippling social pressure haunts their novels as a kind of primordial Fall, a spiritual rupture impossible to erase from memory. From here on, the sisters move into an exhausting confrontation with practical necessity which only Charlotte was to survive.

Charlotte speaks of school-life as 'wretched bondage; Emily, of whom Charlotte wrote that 'Liberty was the breath of [her] nostrils', found the deadening routine of Roe Head unendurable and went finally to teach near Halifax, working, according to Charlotte, equally intolerable hours. The Brontës' one break for freedom-- their plan to establish a school of their own where, as Winnifrith remarks, 'they would not be subservient to anybody but where men of wealth would be subservient to them as they sent their daughters there'-- foundered for lack of capital and social contacts. All three women, then, were directly trapped in the educational machinery set up by the rich to exploit the sons and daughters of the 'genteel' poor; and this drastically tightened the social contradictions latent in their domestic context. Becoming a governess meant moving into a higher social circle, as well as a glad opportunity to exercise one's intellectual talents; but it also meant entering that desirable society precisely as a servant, as socially subservient to the very men and women to whom one felt culturally superior. The sisters moved physically into the class to which they 'spiritually' belonged-- the cultivated society of Miss Branwell's nostalgic memories, the 'ancient family of which Patrick spoke-- only to suffer an acute sense of rejection and inferiority. Some of the families who employed them had remote but real connections with their own: Charlotte was for a time tutor to the daughters of the Sidgwicks, wealthy manufacturers who knew her somewhat, but Mrs Sidgwick simply ignored her. The crisis of self-division which this generated is clear enough in the Sidgwick family's comment that if they desired Charlotte to come to church with them she felt commanded like a slave, whereas if she were not invited she felt like an outcast dependant. As Tom Winnifrith comments, 'In view of these links it is scarcely surprising that the sisters should have expected to have been treated like friends of the family, and it is scarcely surprising that when they were treated like governesses they felt bitterly hostile to the class which so despised them. Charlotte's two closest friends at Roe Head were Ellen Nussey, whose family, Tory to the core, had been local landowners for centuries, and Mary Taylor, daughter of a long-established radical, Nonconformist and feminist manufacturing family; yet these friendships gave her no entry to the circle of which the Nusseys and Taylors were part. (It is not difficult to see

in that dual allegiance, experienced by Charlotte at a crucially formative moment, one source of that contention between the conflicting ideologies of conservative gentry and progressive bourgeoisie which provides a significant historical 'base' to her fiction.)

The Brontës' traumatic transition from the protected enclave of the parsonage, where exotic fantasy was allowed free rein, to the hard exigencies of a working world, has a representative rather than a purely personal significance. In that particular movement can be traced the shape of a more general historical phenomenon: that of the Romantic imagination being beaten down by society, stifled and shackled by mechanistic routine, hammering hopelessly at external limits, It is a contradiction between imagination and society of which Charlotte herself was acutely aware: she writes in a letter to Ellen Nussey of the 'fiery imagination that at times eats me up and makes me feel society, as it is, wretchedly insipid.. . .' The sisters evangelical environment aggravated this contradiction: Evangelicalism is at once grimly hostile to the creative imagination and neurotically stimulant of frustrated fantasy. The Brontës social isolation produced a similar effect, spurring the imagination to astonishing achievements but thrusting it back broodingly on itself in the absence of any fulfilling realisation.

In the Brontës' careers as governess, then, the historical frictions I have outlined were fleshed, realised and brought home as immediately personal experience. They felt, on the one hand, a fierce petty-bourgeois bitterness for those idle gentry whose pampered offspring they were required to enlighten; they experienced on the other hand a patronising distaste for the vulgar philistinism of the

nouveau riche. Because they came of a professional rather than a commercial family they were able to feel culturally superior to the arrivistes around them; but that feeling was constantly shot through with a blunt, exasperated criticism of the traditional gentry which relates them to the plain, taciturn, hard-headed world of the old yeomanry and the new industrial capitalists.

11

We find in the Brontës, then, an abnormally stark opposition between a kind of 'pre-industrial' imaginative creativity, feeding off the resources of myth, archetype, rhetoric, melodrama, and the felt pressures of a drably spiritless society to which that imagination must either tortuously adapt or suffer extinction. [...]

That the Brontë sisters were compelled in real life to negotiate the rift between 'imagination' and 'society' seems to me crucial

12

for an understanding of their fiction. There was, on the one hand, the simple imperative to earn a living-- the need for energy and drive, the respect for whatever was hardy, shrewd and stoical, the fellow-feeling for the victimised and dispossessed, the contempt for all that was pampered and parasitic. And yet, conversely, there was the admiration for that civilised delicacy which was where you spiritually belonged, a fascination with the genteel coupled with a distaste for the brash and pushing. That ambiguity was structural to the Brontës' social situation, estranged as they were at once from the rough life on their Haworth doorstep and the gentility in their neighbourhood. But I am claiming, too, that embodied in those personal deadlocks were wider historical conflicts, between the ideologies of landed gentry and bourgeoisie, which I have outlined as the 'deep structure' of the novels themselves. One particular complication within that structure is worth raising at this point. It is easy to see how the sisters' respect for the shrewd, hardy and energetic calls into play the identifiably bourgeois values of a progressive world; yet in a sense those values also refer nostalgically backwards, to the dour, settled milieu of the traditional Yorkshire yeomanry. Between these two classes in the West Riding there existed a certain community of sensibility; the yeomanry, like the radical Whig manufacturers, had traditionally a 'spirit of equality and republican independence' which linked them in common antagonism to the conservative, jealousy exclusive and hierarchical gentry.

13
