

## ‘Sunny Climes Beyond the Sea’:

### Travel and Imagination in Charlotte Brontë’s Juvenile Poetry

*My mind leads me to something new, to tell of forms changed  
to other bodies. Gods, inspire this poem I’ve begun [...] and  
from the first origin of the world spin my song’s fine thread  
[...] (Ovid’s Metamorphoses)*

*[...] I’ll travel away, far away,  
Where the dream in the darkness lies shrouded  
And grey.  
Time shall not chain me.  
Place not restrain me [...] (C. Brontë)*

In their earliest writings (known as the ‘juvenilia’), the four surviving Brontë children invented the “History of the Young Men” (1829) for Branwell’s toy soldiers.<sup>1</sup> These created characters, known as ‘The Twelves’, were

[...] a brave band of Englishmen who had sailed from England, fought against and slaughtered the Dutch on Ascension Island and then landed in the Kingdom of Ashantee on the coast of Africa. (Barker, 1995: 154)

Emily’s toy soldier became Sir William Edward Parry, the Arctic explorer who had just returned from his third expedition to find the North-West Passage. Anne’s one similarly turned into the more charismatic Sir James Clarke Ross, accompanying Parry on his expeditions. According to Juliet Barker, both explorers had featured prominently in *Blackwood’s Magazine* (*Idem*, 155). Charlotte, in her turn, chose to name her soldier

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<sup>1</sup> Both Charlotte and her brother, Branwell, recorded the origin of the story. On 5 June 1826, “[...] Papa bought Branwell some wooden soldiers at Leeds. When papa came home it was night, and we were in bed, so next morning Branwell came to our door with a box of soldiers. Emily and I jumped out of bed and I snatched up one and exclaimed, ‘This is the Duke of Wellington! [...]’” (Charlotte Brontë, *The History of the Year*, March, 1829; in Frances Beer’s *The Juvenilia*, Part I, p. 182).

after her hero, the Duke of Wellington, famously noted for the Peninsular Campaigns against Napoleon.

Very probably influenced by a review of T. Edward Bowditch’s *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee* (1819) in *Blackwood’s*, in which that British diplomat gives a detailed description of his meeting with the Ashantee chief and his tribe in African Ghana, the Brontës decided to place their Young Men on the west coast of Africa in the Kingdom of Ashantee.<sup>2</sup> They seem, besides, to have adopted not only its capital, Coomassie, but also at least two of its kings – Too Too and Quamina – as their enemies (Barker: 155).

Their newly colonized imaginary land, through which the rivers Gambia and Niger flowed, was divided into a confederacy of states, each belonging to one of the soldier-explorers, who recorded all sorts of data in stories and maps. Each state had its own capital (a Glasstown), but there was also Great Glasstown (or Verdopolis), a true metropolis, dominated by the Tower of All Nations, inspired in the biblical Tower of Babel. The city contained a fashionable aristocratic society and a low life based on pre-revolutionary France (*Ibidem*).<sup>3</sup>

Eventually, in 1833-34, these plays would develop into the more realistic prosaic, but also more complex, imaginary world of Angria. As Barker states, “real events impinged on the fictional world” (*Idem*,156), and sometimes these two became confused, as the Brontës daily moved from one to the other with practically no discernible difference. Therefore, travel, discovery and colonial settlement were, from

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<sup>2</sup> *Blackwood’s Magazine*, V, 1819, pp. 175-83, 302-10, in Juliet Barker’s ‘Notes to Chapter Six’ of *The Brontës*, p. 865, n. 58.

<sup>3</sup> “All life was here depicted, arts, learning, politics, fashionable and unfashionable scandal, thrown together in a potent brew that could never be matched in reality.[...] The battles were played out for real in the garden or on the moors, where the toy soldiers could shoot down their enemies with cannon [...] The parsonage cellars [...] could be turned into dungeons for political prisoners or cells for punishing naughty schoolchildren.” (*Idem*, pp. 155-6).

the beginning, contemporary staple materials with which the young Brontës constructed their imaginative writings, including a considerable portion of their poetry.

For Susan Carlson, the “Romantic Tale” describing how Glasstown was founded, symbolically depicts the children’s personal response to the repression and trauma they suffered (Carlson, 2002: 106).

In choosing Africa, the children are also finding what their textbooks described as the most savage land for their fantasy world, the place where ethics and rules did not exist, and barbarism ran wild. (*Ibidem*)

One of these textbooks is Reverend J. Goldsmith’s *A Grammar of General Geography*, on whose elaborate descriptions and maps, the Brontë children based themselves.<sup>4</sup> For them, the African continent represented not only the exotic and the unexplored, but also the site where they could re-enact the British dominion.

As Susan Meyer states in *Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women’s Fiction*, Charlotte Brontë “[...] as a young adolescent wholeheartedly embraced the British imperialistic vision [...] However as she moved out of adolescence into adulthood, her attitude [...] became more ambiguous” (Meyer, 1996: 29). She seems to have become progressively demoralized in relation to her own low status as a schoolteacher or governess. The male white characters of her stories become, consequently, more imperialistic, pompous and dissolute, while the native rebels are seen with more sympathy.<sup>5</sup> But, as Carlson argues,

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<sup>4</sup> Goldsmith’s *A Grammar of General Geography* had been published in London by Longman in 1823 and the copy at the Parsonage was heavily annotated by all the Brontë children. But they also owned other works, such as Thomas Salmon’s *A New Geographical and Historical Grammar*, Edinburgh, Willison & Darling, 1771. These provided obvious inspiration for the maps and place names of the fictional kingdoms they were soon to invent.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Wellesley (‘Albion’, Marquis of Douro, Duke of Zamorna, King of Angria), elder son of Duke of Wellington, is Charlotte’s main character. At first a clean-cut hero, he becomes a philanderer with high political ambitions. By 1838, Zamorna is actively the sadist, thus recalling Byron’s satanic extreme. In his turn, native Quashia Quamina, leader of the Ashantees, develops from a savage brute to a victim at the hands of Zamorna. See Frances Beer’s *The Juvenilia*, Part II, pp. 195-6. See also Carl Plasa’s “Miscegenation in the Ashanti Narratives” (in *Charlotte Brontë*, Chapter 1, pp. 1-28).

This culturally racist assumption that those with ‘black blood’ are more savage, passionate, and out of control, will continue to be part of Charlotte Brontë’s schema as an adult [...]. (Carlson, 2002: 109)

I would add that this is true, particularly with reference to women, and namely some female characters of Charlotte’s later Angrian narratives and poems.<sup>6</sup>

One of the first poetic compositions that she writes in collaboration with her brother, “Found in an Inn belonging to E.” (1829), is signed with the initials U.T. (Us Two) and it seems to address their exotic magic land, which is intimately personified, and to refer to their hero-explorers’ first sea-crossing. The tone, as expected, is markedly nationalistic:

[...]  
Cherished by a bright sunbeam,  
Watered by a silver stream;  
  
Thou art a palm tree green and fair  
Rising from the desert plain;  
[...]  
Then the rocking ship shall rest  
[...]  
Its flag [...]  
  
Blowing from Britannia’s shores  
O’er her roses red and white,  
[...]  
(ll. 3-6, 21-26)

By the end of 1831, at the age of 15, Charlotte would herself imagine in detail the African -Angrian scene in an ambitious landscape poem about a virgin land, echoing the first awed impressions of explorers at the newly-discovered territories:

[...] there is a land which the sun loves to lighten,  
Whose bowers are of myrtle, whose forests are palm,  
Whose shores the pure rays of the amethyst brighten,

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<sup>6</sup> It is the case of “The African Queen’s Lament” (1833), a short text which returns the reader to the Anglo-Ashanti conflicts and which contains the centre-piece poem “Last branch of murdered royalty”. Together they tell the tale of Quamina’s adoption by the Duke of Wellington, who kills the native’s father-king and causes the death of the grief-stricken mother-queen, a rebellious figure. But it is also the case of Zenobia Ellrington, a dark ‘bluestocking’, of another later heroine, Mina Laury (“Strong-minded beyond her sex...”), Zamorna’s dedicated mistress, and especially of the passionate, independent Elizabeth Hastings, a preview of Jane Eyre.

[...]  
The lion rules the forest and the eagle the air:  
Mankind is dominionless, portionless there;  
[...]  
His foot never trod on the green, [...]  
(ll. 1-3, 49-50, 53)

This imaginary land would also be forever symbolically associated to the Brontës’ childhood memories, in many later compositions, such as in “Lines on Bewick” (1832):

[...]  
We almost feel the joyous sunshine’s beam  
And hear the breath of the sweet south go by.  
  
Our childhood days return again in thought,  
We wander in a land of love and light,  
[...]  
(ll. 33-34)

Travelling to and from the new Angrian territory, the aristocratic explorers are occasionally faced with all types of perils, especially at sea. These haunt the dreams of their beloved ones (usually brides or wives who are left behind). This is the case of a 1833 poem titled “Lord Edward and his Bride”, in which the “gentle lady bright” (l. 5) has a premonitory vision of her “love’s proud battleship” being “Tossed wildly on the storm-dark deep” to “A wrecked and shattered hull” (ll. 23-26). At this earlier poetic stage, Charlotte pictures the sea as man’s realm and ‘home’ as woman’s *locus*; recurrent ‘parting’ becomes, therefore, a permanent source of tension.

In three narrative-related later compositions (1837) about an unnamed sailor’s wife, Charlotte would deal less conventionally, *i.e.* in the feminine, with this restlessness for travel. In “The Wife’s Will”, the woman feels the impending departure of her husband William (“We must once again, / Ere long, be severed by the main!”, ll. 27-28) and is reluctant to let him go again “After long absence, wandering wide” (l.14). Although she doesn’t want to break the charm of that moment in which they are together, she cannot restrain her emotions. If professional duty commands him to leave

his "own hearth", her heart imperiously commands her to go with him this time: "I cross with thee the seas" (l. 40). She formulates her feminine determination as an unbreakable oath, since all the prospective dangers and suffering of the journey pale in comparison with her present lone and anxious life: "Such risk as thou must meet and dare, / I [...] will duly share.// Passive, at home, I will not pine" (l. 41-43).

In "The Wood", we find the confirmation of her oath to accompany her husband in his dangerous voyage and thus to escape her waiting fate, "Cast forth on the wide world with thee" (l.19). The poem describes the moment of rest of the "weary travellers" in a "sequestered forest glade" of Normandy and their fear that they may be killed for conspiring against England ("spies around us roam"). This narrative pause examines in more detail the woman's unshakable resolution to pursue a cause not her own. Thus, in that "gipsy-halt beside the way", the wife reiterates to her husband her courage in spite of adversities: "Remember, I have crossed the deep / And stood with thee on deck, to gaze / On waves that rose in threatening heap" (ll. 64-66). The symbolism of the sea points to the double meaning, the metaphor of life (also of marriage) as a 'crossing'.

The poem "Regret" is concerned with describing this same woman's contradictory feelings at the moment she leaves the overseas land, "Farewell, dark and rolling deep! / Farewell, foreign shore!" (l.18), to return to her home by herself, "My bark is homeward bound" (l. 16). Apparently her experience abroad has not been as satisfactory as she had expected, though the maritime metaphor she uses to describe her womanly predicament is only vaguely indicative of the difficulties she encountered: "Mid the unknown sea of life / I no blest isle have found; / [...] through all its wild waves' strife" (ll. 13-15). Having left her homely realm for an adventurous love, now she does not hesitate to leave the man she loves to return to "The house where I was

born”, whose “very memory comes / O’ercharged with tender tears” (ll. 2, 7-8). This in spite of the fact that she is conscious of what ‘home’ implies: “[...] its silent rooms / Were filled with haunting fears” (ll. 5-6).

Brontë’s insistence on this nineteenth-century dilemma of whether to sail abroad or to stay behind is recurrent in other compositions, threatening to transform itself into a tortured obsession – the feminine sense of the lack of a proper place or cause. In “Mementos”, another poem of 1837, we find the Angrian narrator vaguely alluding to exotic elements treasured up but long forgotten in a stately Hall, haunted for years: “These fans of leaves, from Indian trees – / These crimson shells, from Indian seas” (ll. 9-10). These relics from the past seem to tell a tale of passion and grief in colonial wilds and they haunt and determine the female descendant’s own life and character:

[...] passion  
Surged in her soul with ceaseless foam,  
The storm at last brought desolation,  
And drove her exiled from her home.  
(ll. 189-92)

The symbolic images of the soul’s submersion are mingled with the more palpably real ones of travelling and sea-crossing: “She crossed the sea – now lone she wanders” (l. 196). The daughter of heart-broken Mary Percy and remorse-torn Zamorna, the product of an accursed relationship and herself “a spirit worn with sighing”, fulfils her doomed fate:

[...]  
Like all whose hopes too soon depart;  
Like all on whom have beat, unsheltered,  
The bitter blasts that blight the heart  
[...]  
(ll. 206-208)

If ‘home’ for this autobiographical character is associated with the site of an unspeakable past of feminine pain and suffering, to run away to exile doesn’t seem to resolve the drama at the heart of her being either: “She will return, but cold and altered” (l. 205).

Sometimes, the decision to leave is prompted by an individual, insurmountable personal crisis at the heart of woman, as in “Frances” – a barely disguised fictional poem written around 1843, when Charlotte was 27 and recently broken-hearted from her stay in Brussels. The composition, a dramatic monologue, might have been inserted in her novel deriving from this experience abroad, *Villette* (1853) and refer to Lucy Snowe’s alienated feelings. Nevertheless, the context seems to fit closer into the Angrian scenario of female confinement (“The close air of the grated tower / Stifles a heart that scarce can beat”, ll. 13-14). In fact, the woman ‘glides’ like a ghost “along the dusky walls / [...] the black oak rafters grim” (ll. 11-12) of the grey mansion because she is incapable of sleeping. She describes her mind and soul as being under “The yoke of absolute despair” (l. 43), apparently due not only to universal indifference and unrequited love, but mostly to the long deprivation of her wishes and the limitations imposed upon her existence:

[...]  
Life I must bound, existence sum  
In the strait limits of one mind;  
  
That mind my own. Oh! narrow cell;  
Dark – imageless – a living tomb!  
[...]  
(ll. 63-66)

Apart from its insistence in the description of extreme psychological suffering at the feminine prospect of a ‘death-in-life’: “Who can for ever crush the heart, / Restrain its throbbing, curb its life?” (ll. 45-46), the poem is remarkable for its unexpected



outcome of against-all-odds feminine determination and courage. Asking herself “Must it be so? Is this my fate?” (l. 73), this woman deals at first with the vague possibility of a heavenly reward for her sufferings and deprivations (“my mental wreck”), again recurring to the symbolic sea imagery: “Oh! leaving disappointment here, / Will man find hope on yonder coast?” (ll. 85-86). But in revealing that her lover’s affection had suddenly withdrawn and he himself had departed (“He careless left and cool withdrew, / [...] His course, for distant regions bending”, ll. 166, 171), she implies that a similar course is ultimately open to her as well:

‘He, when he left me, went a-roving  
To sunny climes beyond the sea;  
And I, the weight of woe removing,  
Am free and fetterless as he.’  
[...]  
(ll. 205-208)

The female speaker finds herself quite as capable of meeting the adventurous journey’s requirements as any man. Therefore, at dawn Frances leaves “behind full many a mile”, looking for

‘New scenes, new language, skies less clouded,  
Strange foreign towns, [...]  
New forms and faces, [...]  
New pictures to the mind may give.’  
(ll. 209-213)

Charlotte would dramatize again the feelings of a woman condemned to a lonely and interminable waiting in “The Letter”, originally an 1837 poem. This time, a young wife, engrossed in her epistolary ritual, expresses her love and yearning for her husband (“loved though stern”) who is detained in a faraway British or Angrian colony (it is not clear). Although the location in which she finds herself suggests an English setting (“the expanse of that green park”, “England’s shore”, ll. 47, 80), and historical context (“Remote colonial wilds detain / Her husband”), the physical traits of both characters –

male and female – are unequivocally Angrian (“Her long curls”, “dark spheres”; “Black Spanish locks, a sunburnt cheek”, ll. 44, 61).

Carl Plasa hints that an element of tension is introduced when inadvertently the “band of crystals bright” (l.7) adorning her neck “Falls glittering at her feet” (l.10). Glass is a primal signifier of colonial power within Charlotte’s imaginative saga (Glasstown, Verreopolis) and, for Plasa, there seems to be a symbolic questioning of the colonial enterprise in which the husband is involved, foretelling even a colonial death (Plasa, 2004: 37). Also the trope of solar decline present in the poem’s sunset may be doubly ominous: representing the fading of colonial power and of marital love (*Idem*, 38).

Sometimes, Charlotte deliberately associates the Angrian imperial mission in Africa with real historical facts, namely with the Crusades. In “The Red Cross Knight”, of 1833, she evokes the image of Richard Lion-heart and of his holy mission in Palestine (“The Lion King of Christendom / [...] a great and glorious birth / Broke forth on Afric’s night”, ll. 30-33) as her inspirational muse, in order to eulogise a new Angrian colonial hero. His name is Gifford and he is a famous explorer, “Whose life has been one martial dream / Against the Saracen” (ll. 39-40). The implications of this comparison between the two men being that there would always be a noble purpose (the religious conversion) to justify “earthly loss”, “blood” and “carnage” (ll. 45-46). In fact, hero-worship of soldiers, missionaries and martyrs, and the Empire’s perpetuation through them, would prevail in Charlotte’s compositions of this period.

She has one or two poems in which the speakers are, in fact, colonizing men. Instead of suffering, as women do, the consequences of the colonial struggles in which their mates are implicated, they exploit colonialism for their own particular ends. “The Missionary” (composed around 1845) is spoken by a man simultaneously moved by his

faith and by the wish to depart from his land. The fate or experience of the British missionaries abroad, especially in India, seems to have fascinated Charlotte as much as the stories of martyred saints. The poem opens already on board the ship that will take him to his far off destination, and from whose deck he has one last glimpse of the English coast he wishes to leave behind: “England’s shores are yet in view, / [...] I cannot yet Remembrance flee” (ll. 16, 19). Yet he demonstrates an almost uncontrollable wish to move far away, to break all bonds with his native country, to forget certain affections, in order to ‘cultivate’ a new existence:

Plough, vessel, plough the British main,  
Seek the free ocean’s wider plain;  
[...]  
Unbind, dissever English ties;  
Bear me to climes remote and strange  
Where altered life, [...]  
[...]  
Shall stir, turn, dig, the spirit’s soil;  
[...]  
Mere human love, mere selfish yearning,  
Let me, then struggle to forget.  
[...]  
(ll. 1-2, 5-15)

The past, though, cannot easily be forgotten since this man has sacrificed the love of a woman in order to pursue his personal and professional ambitions, as Charlotte’s succession of strong images also suggest: “Smouldering, on my heart’s altar lies / The fire of some great sacrifice, / [...] The sacred steel / But lately struck my carnal will, / [...] What I renounced with soul-felt pain” (ll. 32-33, 34-5, 39).

Although this missionary’s ultimate motivation may be morally superior, the real effect of his action is the ruining of the abandoned woman’s hopes, only implicitly referred to: “I dared thy tears, I dared thy scorn / [...] / I could not – dared not stay for thee!” (ll. 51, 54). As the missionary tries to justify his life choice in the second part of the poem – the demonstration of his religious calling, his vocation as a new crusader or

martyr, the spreading of the Christian faith among the oppressed people of India, whose souls live in utter darkness – Charlotte’s vehement and engaged tone suggests a feeling of sympathy and identification with his ideals. It is perhaps no coincidence that Carl Plasa refers to this poem as a “Brontëan passage to India” (*Idem*, 45).

More interesting and revealing may be, on the one hand, to trace Charlotte’s poetic evolution to a more intimate analysis of the meaning of her imagined land. And, on the other, to analyse her descriptions of the actual moments in which she steps from the real to the imaginary. In the poems alluding to both processes (written mostly between 1835 and 1837), words such as ‘travel’ or ‘voyage’ assume a metaphorical connotation because they refer to a visionary act or a purely imaginative one. In the impossibility of a real escape into the exotically foreign, the subject’s mind comes in rescue and literally becomes that *place* which is unattainable.

In the poem titled “Retrospection” (1835), in which a nineteen-year old Charlotte first reflects upon the joint creative activity of the young Brontës (“We wove a web in childhood, / A web of sunny hair”, ll. 1-2) and wonders if with the years it has faded or rather expanded its glow, she concludes that the ‘spring’ (another creation-related metaphor) had, in fact, transformed itself into “An ocean with a thousand isles” (l. 27). It is at this critical retrospective moment, when she is away from Haworth – exiled “[...] in that mirthless lifeless room, / Cramped, chilled, and deadened by its gloom” (ll. 71-72), that she realizes the power of her ties with the imaginary, which literally comes to her rescue: “[...] that bright darling dream, / [...] had shot one kindling gleam” (ll. 73-74) and “[...] borne me to my moorland home” (l. 78).

But ‘home’ proves to be just a momentary stop where her travelling mind detains itself, the mere but vitally necessary passage-way for the much remoter and fantastic destination to which she is bound – Angria, her childhood *locus*. In this mental

travel, her dream deepens into a “vision’s spell” (l. 83) and Charlotte literally plunges into it:

[...]  
Its lands, its scenes were spread before me,  
In one short hour a hundred homes  
Had roofed me with their lordly domes,  
And I had sat by fires whose light  
Flashed wide o’er halls of regal height,  
[...]

(ll. 84-87)

After indulging in a long and varied succession of rapturous but fragmentary scenes, where she herself mixes with her fictitious characters, the speaker suddenly comes to a halt as her *reverie* is abruptly interrupted by a student at Roe-head’s school-room. In the prose manuscript that follows the poem, Charlotte confesses: “I was quite gone. I had really utterly forgot where I was and all the gloom and cheerlessness of my situation.” (Winnifrith, 1984: 190).<sup>7</sup>

In “The Ring” (dated May 1837), a fictional poem spoken by one of Charlotte’s most charismatic Angrian heroines, we can witness a very similar process of feminine mental or imaginary escape. Mary Percy, exiled by her own husband (the perfidious Duke of Zamorna) at the “forest mansion” of Alnwick, expresses her feelings of solitude and confinement – the restlessness of her mind – much in the same terms as her creator:

Well, as I stood a thousand dreams  
Into my restless mind came thronging  
[...]  
I felt impatient that my life  
Was so unmarked, unloved and fated  
[...]  
While all day long my heart and eye  
Traversed a hundred regions over  
In city domes, neath open sky,  
Wandered and watched a viewless rover – [...]

(ll. 43-53).

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<sup>7</sup> This composition constitutes excellent evidence of the nature of Charlotte Brontë’s imagination, which is very much a visual one. “Her ability to visualize approached hallucination, as she herself notes in journal entries. She did not just conceive of her Angrian characters. They appeared before her, she heard their conversations, and her feet ‘trod the ... shores’ of their kingdom.” ( Sue Lonoff, *The Belgian Essays*, Introduction, p. xxxvii).

It is again a flash of light, this time coming from Mary’s hand ring, which “like a wand” wakes her memory and, in a vision, places “[...] so fair a scene” before her (l. 72). She actually sees herself under “that glorious region, / [...] plummy tropic headlands stretching / [...] The noble, fertile, Western Marches” (ll. 76-86) of her early youth’s homeland.

Another poem of 1837, titled “Marian”, constitutes a mixed or hybrid combination of personal and fictional elements. The speaker (presumably, Charlotte) fondly recollects the faded memory of another of her feminine creations (Marian Hume, “her who loved and died”, l. 14) forever departed, as a means to escape the moments of ‘exile’ (“far from hope and home”, l. 22). It is by looking “upward to the plain / Of heaven expanding wide (ll. 15-16) – “To that pure source of rays” (l. 28) that life and death’s mysteries may be revealed. The speaker claims, in fact, to have found in the “impending heaven” “A whole world’s mystery” (ll. 31-32) and that is, in part, owing to the bright thoughts her creation has roused, which she significantly compares to “[...] a pleasant isle / Cresting life’s sea with sunlit pile” (ll. 49-50). Here, Charlotte deliberately associates her imaginary land with Heaven and the mystery of creation, indirectly equating her creative powers with God’s.

In the last composition of 1837, exiled Charlotte (“so lone, so far”, l. 11) is again transported to her imaginary land simply by evoking the name of the river that crosses it – the Calabar: “A single word – a magic spring / That touched, revealed a world, / [...] That deepest feelings stirred” (ll. 1-4). That “unbridled torrent” or stream which travels through Angria is also a symbol of its creator’s chaotic imagination.

The theme of the exile (man or woman, real or fictional) is a haunting one in the poetry of the Brontës.<sup>8</sup> Someone who, for political, religious or professional reasons, is

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<sup>8</sup> Many of the characters created by the Brontës, especially in the collaborative Gondal sagas of Emily and Anne Brontë, are frequently subject to banishment from their native land due to political and/or

forced to leave his / her homeland, and is transported to remote, forlorn places, seems to constitute a fit image for the women poets’ personal predicament. One can, furthermore, find a correspondence between the Brontës’ feelings of remoteness at Haworth and their lives as teachers and governesses away from home. Paradoxically, whether they choose to stay or are compelled to leave, they remain as ‘exiles’. But while for Emily Brontë the Belgian venture took her out of her environment and language and it was mostly an experience of ‘uprooting’, for Charlotte it meant the discovery of the ‘promised land’ – the site of much-hungered intellectual and affective fulfilment.<sup>9</sup> Compared to this ‘land’, “Haworth seems such a lonely, quiet spot, buried away from the world [...]” (Barker, 1995: 432).

For the eldest sister, it is this ‘home’ which is now implicitly equated with exile, as the 1847 poem “The Orphan Child” inserted in *Jane Eyre* seems to testify: “Why did they send me so far and so lonely, / Up where the moors spread and grey rocks are piled?” (ll. 5-6). Here, the meaning of the word ‘exile’ would widen in order to enclose ‘life’ itself as a long, weary and dreary way for the lonely ‘traveller’ (ll. 1-4), on his journey to the ‘home’ of rest – Heaven (ll. 19-20). The pervasive vision of life as a ‘pilgrimage’, and of its final heavenly reward, may thus explain the recurrence of this religious metaphor in the poetry of the Brontës.<sup>10</sup>

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amorous rivalry and strife. These outcast rebels (usually ‘Republicans’) either literally rot away in forlorn dungeons or pine over their doomed fates in isolated isles, yearning for their dear ones and the fields of home.

<sup>9</sup> The two sisters became students, in their twenties, at the Pensionnat Heger in Brussels, to which they came at the start of 1842 as already prolific writers of juvenilia and where they encountered a professor “who also broke the mold”, Constantin Romain Heger. Under his talented supervision, they wrote some extraordinary *devoirs* (essays), amongst whom Charlotte’s “Lettre d’un Missionnaire, Sierre Leone, Afrique” (now disappeared) and “Sacrifice of an Indian Widow” (1842). According to Sue Lonoff, “Unlike Charlotte, Emily never wanted wings that could carry her away from Haworth; [...] She had no desire to give up her juvenilia, [...] In fact, she drafted Gondal poems in Belgium” (*The Belgian Essays*, Introduction, p. xxvi).

<sup>10</sup> This metaphor of life as a ‘journey’ is present mostly in the religious and didactic poetry of Anne Brontë, namely in “Views of Life”, “The Three Guides”, “Self-communion” and the hymn “The Narrow Way”. Emily Brontë also broaches the subject in poems such as “Far away is the land of rest”, “Faith and Despondency” and other poetic fragments.

Charlotte actually wrote a poem titled “The Pilgrimage” (June 1837), in which she not only uses the travel metaphor to repeatedly describe man’s difficult life on earth: “[...] that mournful vale of tears/ which saw thy weary wandering” (ll. 7-8), “All rough the path, all dim and grey/ [...] The lonely wastes through which we go” (ll. 11-12), but also the symbolic image of ‘crossing’ to characterise death: “One stream to cross, one sable flood, / Silent, unsounded, deep and dim” (ll. 17-18). Again, the implicit recompense for every enduring wanderer or pilgrim here below lies waiting in “Beulah’s bowers, the home / That waits thee [...]” (ll.13-14) that is “on the shore of Heaven” (l. 21). In the poem that Charlotte would later on dedicate to the death of her sister Emily (December 1848), the poet – deprived of her closest companion – sees herself already as a solitary pilgrim, “Looking forth with streaming eye / On life’s lone wilderness”. She quotes possibly Cowper in the despair of her prospects:

‘Weary, weary, dark and drear,  
How shall I the journey bear,  
The burden and distress?’  
(ll. 16-18)

In her youth, Charlotte had been particularly interested in the biblical story of St. John in the Island of Patmos, as her poem with the same title fitly testifies. Written circa 1832, after she had left Roe Head as a student, the composition reintroduces the themes of exile and captivity – common poetic motives in the brontëan sagas:

The holy exile lies all desolate  
In that lone island of the Grecian sea.  
And does he murmur at his earthly fate,  
The doom of thralldom and captivity?  
(ll. 1-4)

The answer is ‘No’. In spite of this apostle’s captive and forlorn state, he doesn’t seem to complain and he sleeps peacefully in his dungeon. The narrator wonders if, in his



slumber, the saint’s “soul” is “[...] on some far journey gone / To lands beyond the wildly howling wave” (ll. 11-12) or if “[...] to his freed soul is it once more given / To wander in the dark, wild, wilderness” (ll. 21-22). The answer points rather to a visionary experience of revelation and liberation: “From his eyes a veil is rent away” (l. 25). This metaphysical dimension of the confined mind and the soul’s liberation would be especially well-achieved in poetic terms by Emily Brontë.

The reference to a pure religious fervour recurs in later compositions of Charlotte, namely in “Long since, as I remember well”. Probably written in 1836, it recalled her childhood in these terms: “A thousand early thoughts and dreams / Of heaven and hope were mine” (ll. 25-26). The speaker wants to establish a contrast between her “dreams in infancy”, when she “[...] felt a blind but ardent glow / Of love for piety” (ll. 79-80), and her present visions, which are pagan and “fever the blood in its flow” (l. 172). She proceeds to describe the customary process that will transport her to her imaginary realm, in which vivid and eloquent scenes rapidly succeed one another:

When I sit in a quiet and cheerful room  
Watching the firelight play,  
My thoughts will wander far from home  
A thousand miles away.  
[...]  
Scenes that no word can give [...]  
They stir, they breathe, they live. [...]  
They speak, I hear the tone,  
[...]  
(ll. 177-180, 250-254)

She recognizes, besides, the alien regions where her creations have moved so far, as if she had walked the very same tracks herself: “I know their parks, their halls, their towers / The sweet lands where they shine” (ll. 265-7).

In another poem of this period, called “But once again, but once again”, Charlotte realizes that it is time to say farewell to her imaginary youth heroes and

landscapes (“We must part, we must part”). She feels unable to carry out her intention, though, due to the intrusion of “The old [...] hallowed sound” (l. 38), a strain that descends “From the lone moor” (l. 29) and “fills the sky / Above my native hill” (ll. 43-44). The power of its influence in the speaker is so overwhelming that her spirit is immediately carried away, not to “that strange home” (l. 59) but to more distant regions, beyond mere physical time or place:

My soul delivered to thy might  
Shall fleet to realms divine.  
[...]  
I’ll travel away, far away,  
Where the dream in the darkness lies shrouded  
And grey.  
Time shall not chain me,  
Place not restrain me,  
[...]  
(ll. 51-2, 61-4)

The implication is that homeland music (“a requiem sweet, profound”) triggers her imaginative current, which in turn is responsible not only for the happiness she feels but, more importantly, for the creation of her poetry itself:

‘Tis the wakener of a hundred dreams  
With joy, with glory fraught.  
‘Tis the loosener of a thousand streams  
Of poetry, of thought.  
[...]  
(ll. 45-48)

It is, thus, in the impalpable realm of poetic creation that she expects to encounter once again (one last time?) her imagined characters. In particular, her all-time favourite Zamorna, whom she compares to the “self conceived light” of the sun and to whom she pays a heart-felt tribute as to a male muse (in its vital inspirational powers):

I owe him something. He has held  
A lofty burning lamp to me,  
[...]

And he has given a steady spring  
To what I had of poetry.  
[...]  
He’s moved the principle of life  
Through all I’ve written or sung or said,  
[...]  
(ll. 136-7, 142-3, 150-1)

I believe that Zamorna has gradually come to embody more than Charlotte’s ‘muse’. He develops from a simple idol to a true God, in whose “wide abode” – a “structure vast” – Charlotte’s “grand dream” resides, and whose “light” (for he is a “revolving beacon”) leads her on “resistlessly, / Ascending high or wandering far / Or diving deep in sullen sea” (ll. 173-6).

These images of visual bedazzlement and of devastating idolatry have connotations both of splendour and annihilation.<sup>11</sup> Through them and the travel metaphor (she is a bark in the sea of life), in which Turnerian dazzle, storm and shipwreck are strangely combined, we witness in fact Charlotte’s Imaginary becoming not only her guiding ‘light’ but life’s moving force itself.

In her “Farewell to Angria”, a prose manuscript dated from 1839, in which she takes leave of “those who peopled my thoughts by day, and not seldom stole strangely even into my dreams by night”, Charlotte had already seemed to be very much aware of the blinding or annihilating luminescence of her creations and to feel the urgent need for contention and sobriety. The climatic metaphors in her statement enhance further its symbolic significance:

[...] I long to quit for awhile that burning clime where we have sojourned too long – its skies flame, the glow of sunset is always upon it. The mind would cease from excitement and turn now to a cooler region where the dawn breaks grey and sober, and the coming day for a time at least is subdued by clouds. (Beer, 1986: 366-7)

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<sup>11</sup> “Indeed, the complexities of ‘dazzle’ – its challenge to perceptual mastery, its connotations both of splendour and of annihilation, as well as, more particularly, the blinding light of the sun – were in early Victorian England being pondered in another medium by an artist by whom Charlotte seems to have been deeply stirred [...] ‘Who can read these glowing descriptions of Turner’s works without longing to see them?’ she had written [...]” (in Heather Glen’s *Charlotte Brontë. The Imagination in History*, Epilogue, p. 285).

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