

Autobiography as a literary genre signifies a retrospective narrative (in prose or verse) that undertakes to tell the author's own life, seeking to reconstruct his/her personal development within a given historical, social and cultural framework. While the genre claims to be non-fictional, in the Portuguese tradition it has been understood as inevitably constructive or imaginative, in nature and as a form of textual 'self-fashioning'. Aware of autobiography's focus on psychological introspection and a sense of historicity, the average Portuguese critic identifies the emergence of it, as a literary genre and critical term, with what has frequently been called 'the emergence of the modern subject' around 1800. As claimed by **Rousseau** for himself in 1782, authors wanted to represent a unique individual. QUOTE: "I am not made like any of those I have seen; I venture to believe that I am not like any of those who are in existence".

And, indeed, autobiography's central figure is very much that of a Romantic self-constitution and one grounded in memory. Being self-consciously reflected upon since St. Augustine's *Confessions*, the boundaries between fact and fiction are inevitably blurred, as Goethe's title *Poetry and Truth* aptly suggests. In the face of the inevitable subjectivity (or fallibility) of autobiographical recollection, the creative dimension of memory has come to the fore, increasingly challenging and subverting poetic practice, poetological reflection and genre theory alike. 'Gender sensitive' studies initially sought to reconstruct a specific female canon, addressing the issue of a distinct female voice of/in autobiography as more multidimensional and fragmented, and exposing autobiography's individualist self as a phenomenon of 'male self-fashioning'. As such, the publication of the collaborative volume

with the ambiguous title of *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell* in 1846, which alternates different poetic voices or *personae*, could be said to challenge or question the traditionally individualistic Romantic biography and also the supposed distinctiveness of male and female voices. As Charlotte Brontë stated in her *Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell* of 1850, QUOTE “Averse to personal publicity, we veiled our own names [...] the ambiguous choice being dictated by a [...] scruple at assuming Christian names positively masculine, while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because [...] authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice” (320).

The nineteenth century’s reaction to Romantic lyricism, exposing the illusory nature of the autonomous and unified subject, led gradually to an emphasis on a more hybrid and indirect poetic expression. Important forms such as the **dramatic monologue** would propose and explore a more complex, fragmented and contextualised representation of the subject, namely the pioneer work of some late Romantic and early Victorian women poets. It seemed a particularly useful form for a woman poet to develop, as it offered a means by which she could assume the position of the authoritative speaker. On the other hand, as the Brontës were aware of, with the growing separation of private and public spheres and the association of women writers with the personal and confessional, the assumption of a mask or persona might then be a strategy for self-protection. I quote again from Charlotte’s passage: “without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called ‘feminine’ [...] we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their [women’s] chastisement the weapon of personality” (320). **Isobel Armstrong** refers thus to the insistence on speaking in another woman’s voice, which she sees mainly as a disguise or protection against self-exposure.

It is widely known that Emily's poetry and only novel, *Wuthering Heights*, owe much to her lifelong passion for the Romantic tales of Sir Walter Scott and Byron's verse dramas and monologues. And the strengths in her works that Portuguese readers usually emphasise are also those that, according to them, inform the greatest Romantic poetry, being characterised by the same sort of transcendental mingling of the sensual and the spiritual. In her sister Charlotte's words, her poems had "a peculiar music", "wild, melancholic, elevating" (319). As **V. Cunningham and E. Mason** have argued, all the Brontës used Methodism to create their 'rhetoric of passion' through extremes of feeling, behaviour, and religious enthusiasm.

But the fact that the sisters use Romantic, elegiac and devotional devices to engender their dialogues should not be viewed as a source of disempowerment, feeble attempts at imitation. They should, instead, be perceived as a strategic re-appropriation of traditionally masculine formulae. As **Nina Auerbach** observes, Emily never collapses into the "self-luxuriance of Byronism, nor seeks the insurance of a stagnant, calm eternity of nature as does Wordsworth" (1985: 54). Nor is Emily's muse the silent reflection of herself that Shelley's and Wordsworth's is, but a vocal presence that forces her into dialogue with both the masculine poetic tradition and herself. Likewise, Anne is not simply a formulaic moralist and devotional poet. Rather, she engages William Cowper's and the church's sentiments and teachings with her own voice, as she disputes her sister Emily's unorthodoxy and struggles to relieve herself of the guilt and uncertainty caused by social and religious power structures.

In **Emily Brontë's** personal poetry, particularly in "**Plead for Me**" (1844), we see her oscillating between viewing herself and crediting her muse or "god" of Imagination as being the matrix of her poetic power. Emily's identification with her Gondal heroine, Augusta

(A.G.A.), enables her to challenge the dissenting voices of the patriarchal world that dictate and limit her creative and personal expression. Their proclaimed preference and identification with such traditionally feminine and Romantic elements as the earth, the night, the moon and stars, in much of her poetry contrasts with the more fundamentally male elements of fire, sunlight, rulership and action, depicting the chasm and disruption felt between the feminine and masculine principles of the inner and outer worlds. Critics such as **Homans and Tayler** think that it depicts the struggle to choose between the inner, feminine realm of poetic inspiration and the outer, patriarchal world of expression and action.¹

In Emily's more personal poetry, where the Romantic *topoi* of Nature and the Mind occur, we find an introspective projection of the self, in which the poet literally speaks to or argues with herself, or an imaginative exchange with an element of nature, such as the heath, the wind or the stars. "In "**Loud without the wind was roaring**" (1838), for example, it is the dislocated "brown heath" ("scattered and stunted", "half-blighted"), that the speaker of the poem casually spots, that seems to address Emily in her exile from home, thus symbolically establishing a powerful correlation between the confined status of the two: "The grim walls enfold me / I have bloomed in my last summer's sun" (ll. 57-8) . Also in "**The night wind**" (1840), this natural element is personified as a male lover and given a significant name, "The Wanderer", because he tries to woo the subject with his breathings and murmurs: " 'O come,' it sighed so sweetly / 'I'll win thee'gainst thy will'" (ll. 27-28). But, in spite of the attractions of the night and the sweet insistence of the wind, whose "kiss grew warmer still", Emily shows an unprecedented resistance to both in her final reply: "go gentle singer, / Thy wooing voice is kind / But do not think its music / has power to reach my

¹ Margaret Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* (104-29). Irene Tayler, *Holy Ghosts. The Male Muses of Emily and Charlotte Brontë* (18-71).

mind” (ll. 17-20). In “**Shall Earth no more inspire thee**” (1841), it is not only the wind that addresses and tries to captivate her but the personification of Nature itself, “I know my mountain breezes / Enchant and soothe thee still” (ll. 9-10). But, in spite of the reference to Emily’s pantheistic creed, this earthly entity seems to guess that the poet’s previously exclusive idolatry of nature is being changed in favour of another power in her own mind.

In “**My Comforter**” (1844), Emily addresses a new entity in a particularly difficult moment of her life, a mental faculty that she describes as being “concealed within my soul” and that she compares to a “light” that “lies hid from men” (6-7). And six months later, in “**To Imagination**”, she would even pay a heartfelt tribute directly to that same creative faculty, which she addresses and characterises as a confiding and friendly voice:

When weary with the long day’s care
And earthly change from pain to pain
And lost and ready to despair
Thy kind voice calls me back again –
O my true friend, I am not lone
While thou canst speak with such a tone!
(ll. 1-6)

The wonderful world to which Emily is once again seductively called is described also as a profoundly intimate *locus* (“the world within”, “within our bosom’s bound”), which contrasts sharply with “The danger and guilt and darkness” of the outer real world (ll. 13-18). She, thus, expresses a High Romantic concern in existential issues and creative freedom.

Conversely, **Anne Brontë**’s poems seem to a Portuguese scholar ‘occasional’ poetry in an eighteenth-century tradition, with a terse and archaic yet simple vocabulary and style. They are also moral and didactic, near not just to the folk tradition but also the Protestant tradition of the chapel hymns. Yet, a large class of Anne’s poems consists of spiritual or

emotional autobiography and we will find many first-person poems, and many in which the poet engages in introspective argument. In Chapter 17 of *Agnes Grey*, her first and most autobiographical novel, Anne would express her views on the motives for poetic composition QUOTE: “When we are harassed by sorrows or anxieties, or long oppressed by any powerful feelings which we must keep to ourselves, [...] *we often naturally seek relief in poetry* [...] in *our own attempts to give utterance* to those thoughts and feelings [...]”.

Therefore, it seems a fairly safe assumption that during the period after 1840 Anne saw poetry as a means of self-expression. And Agnes herself confesses that QUOTE “when suffering from homesick melancholy, I had sought relief twice or thrice at this secret source of consolation” and that “I still preserve those relics of past sufferings and experience, like *pillars of witness*”. Much of Anne’s early poetry is modelled – unconsciously perhaps – on Wordsworth’s. Many of the lyrics deal with highly autobiographical events, with the plight of a young girl growing to maturity and feeling the pangs of leaving family and friends, experiencing her first love, confronting the majesty of nature and the vagaries of human society.

Many of Anne’s poems, even the short ones, develop a logical inward dialogue or argument. Often we hear two or more inner voices quietly and rationally discussing alternative views or courses of action, then reaching a conclusion which takes all into account, but gives one greater prominence. In the personal poems at least, the sincerity of the voices is unquestioned, and the poet engages in introspective argument or soliloquy. In the fictional poems, the different contending voices (dramatic monologues) that can be heard, belong either to male or female characters, beings constrained by separation, war,

imprisonment or family opposition. As in Emily, they are often used to dramatise the situation of the poet herself, namely **“The North Wind”** (1838).

That wind is from the North, I know it well;
No other breeze could have so wild a swell.
Now deep and loud it thunders round my cell,
 Then faintly dies,
 And softly sighs,
And moans and murmurs mournfully.
I know its language; thus it speaks to me –
 (ll. 1-7)

In its inspired speech, the personified wind evokes the prisoner’s homeland and childhood (“the cherished land / Of thy nativity”), but it fulfils the role of tragic chorus when it reminds Alexandrina of her doomed status QUOTE: “The sweet world is not changed, but thou / Art pining in a dungeon now, / Where thou must ever be” (ll. 21-23).

If during the late thirties Anne collaborated fully in Emily’s Gondal saga, from 1840 until 1845 she lived a double life, most of the time fulfilling her duties as governess at Thorp Green. Her work became progressively concerned with religion, with an inner discussion by which she would try to come to terms with her life in exile and with thoughts of unfulfilled love.² A good deal of her personal verse is, thus, usually aimed at reconciling the opposing demands of reason and feeling.

Around 1845, in the allegorical poem **“Views of Life”**, Anne would dramatise the conflicting or even antagonistic forces of her life: the alternate speech of the voice of Experience and the voice of Hope before a third one, that of Youth. The dialogic form of the poem, following the classic style, is intended to illustrate a major human dilemma through argumentation. In **“The Three Guides”** (1847), the poet deals with the conflicting voices

² Anne’s first extant poem dates from 1836 and it has a Gondal background. But at the end of the following year Anne suffered a religious crisis combined with a severe illness, and in 1840 began producing religious poetry. In the early part of 1840, the lively presence of the new curate, William Weightman, seems to have had some effect on Anne.

and philosophies of the spirits of Earth, Pride and Faith. The first represents or symbolises an insensitive and exacerbated realism (“unbelieving, deaf and blind”) which contrasts with the proud powers of ecstasy and dream of the second (“so far above their fellow men”), while the third leads ultimately to salvation (“Thou pole-star of my darkest hours”). At the end of 1847, Anne would start her most ambitious poetic project, where she summarises the greatest issues of her life under the dialogic form of a revealing debate. “**Self-Communion**” is thus built in the form of a dialogue between two distinct voices – reason and feeling – each presenting their respective arguments and allowing the subject to explore, through an introspective self-reflection, his past, present and future life. At the end, Reason seems to condemn the subject’s weakness and lack of wisdom: “O weak of heart! Why thus deplore / That Truth will Fancy’s dreams destroy?” (ll. 271-2).

Like the work of other women poets of her period (namely, Augusta Webster), **Charlotte Brontë**’s monologues suggest the fractured female subject (or fragmented self) produced by Victorian gender ideology. The form itself allowed a close psychological analysis of the self, something of importance for Charlotte. The rise of the new school of mental science, namely psychology, mental pathology and mesmerism had a great impact in Victorian writers, and Brontë is known to have had a keen interest in the latter. Her speakers are frequently disturbed or placed in extreme situations that somehow test their emotional sanity. But **Dorothy Mermin** (1986) states that, in contrast with male monologists like Browning, the poet and the dramatised speaker in their poems often tend to blur together. In Brontë’s monologues irony is more used for her male speakers and identification for her female ones. As **Glennis Byron** states, in contrast with male monologists, the majority of women’s dramatic monologues draw upon the technique of ‘inhabiting the conventional’ in

order to expose it. While Charlotte had always been interested in analysing historical figures (both male and female), she became progressively more interested in portraying conventional women like herself.

As **Cornelia Pearsall** has suggested, a monologist “seeks a host of transformations – of his or her circumstances, of his or her auditors, of his or her self, and possibly all these together, in the course of and through the monologue” (36). This central idea is applied by Charlotte in most of her monologues, and her male and female speakers invariably go through the important process thus described. In the more autobiographical monologues Bronte reflects precisely on the confined existence and limited experience of more conventional middle-class women like herself. In “**The Teacher’s Monologue**” (1837), the poet-speaker seems to depart from her own feelings as a teacher at Roe Head to digress on the meaning of her own present existence. In spite of its title, the poem is more of a soliloquy because there is no auditor. The first part emphasises the memory of and yearning for those that she left behind at home (Haworth), comparing those blissful times to a wearisome and hopeless present. The second part is a digression on the nature of her present poem, whose tone of hopelessness the speaker claims to affect her spirits and creative powers (“In vain I try; I cannot sing; / All feels so cold and dead”). The “dreary delay” in her self-fulfilment both as a woman and as a writer, and the fear that “Life will be gone ere I have lived” seem to paralyse the speaker, who questions the purpose of an existence made only of work, grief and longing (“Is such my future fate?”). In her focus on individual subjectivity, Charlotte shifts from a self-centred poetic ‘I’ to heroines whose subjectivity is both at the centre of the text and, yet, is shown to be fundamentally fragmented and tortured.

This realization is again dramatized in an 1843 poem entitled “**Frances**”, about the depressed state of mind and desperate circumstances of a woman. Although the first nine quatrains are written in the omniscient third person singular, ‘she’, the remaining ones (48 in all) are in the first person, thus seeming to suggest the form of a soliloquy or monodrama. This is the poignant complaint of a woman that is deprived of love and a life fulfilment, and who asks “Must it be so? Is this my fate?” This lack of hope in the possibility of human bliss seems to reflect Charlotte’s very recent experience in Brussels (namely her unrequited love for Mr Heger). But it may also constitute a preview of the depressed protagonist of her last novel *Villette*, Lucy Snowe. The speaker of the poem is alone and there is no auditor as such; her words are addressed “To solitude and to the night”. But it is clear that the monologue enacts a very critical and decisive moment in her life: she is an insomniac that, unable to sleep, quits her “restless bed”. Oppressed by her “inward pain”, she “wrings her hands” and is unable to breathe. Going out into the moonlit night, she finally gives vent to her grief, complaining of unrequited love (“Unloved – I love, unwept – I weep”) and of limitations to her intellect (“Life I must bound, existence sum / In the strait limits of one mind”). It is significant that she compares her present mind to a “dark”, “imageless” “narrow cell” – “a living tomb”. Yet, in the end, the poet not only introduces the element of emancipation in her rewriting of woman’s (hi)story but diagnoses and prescribes her own personal ‘cure’ in the process. For the Portuguese critic, her advantage lies in that to counter this potentially destructive inward looking subjectivity, Brontë strives to return her heroines to society, seeking validation and experience in the public sphere or world.

Of the four full-length **novels** that Brontë wrote, no less than three (*The Professor*, *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*) are significantly composed in the form of autobiography (going from

a masculine narrative to a later female discourse). Thus, except for *Shirley*, she did not choose omniscient or third-person narration, which can be considered the mainstream of novel writing. Her distinctive and marked preference for the first-person narrative perspective in telling stories, which is also the one usually adopted in the dramatic monologue, was already profusely evident in her juvenile writings. The vital sense of truth that is suggested by (an intense) first-person narration has often led her readers to identify Brontë with the heroines of her novels (Jane and Lucy), thus contributing to their immediate success. In spite of being written after the official Romantic Period, *Jane Eyre. An Autobiography* is fully Romantic for a Portuguese readership as it relates to the influence of the Romantic Poets (especially Byron), to the innovative use of poetic prose, to the wider space granted to the fantastic, to imagination, to the expression of feeling in its own right. Brontë's commitment to the unconscious is reflected everywhere in the novel, resting on a consistent mythical foundation beyond the limits of verbalization, touching her reader on other levels than the exclusively rational aspects of communication.

Brontë clearly takes from the Romantics a fascination with the inner life, but in her novels and poetry shows that for women already living a buried life, further retreat into the self generates blank inertia and madness. While seeing that Brontë draws on tropes inherited from male-authored Romantic literature in her writing, her Portuguese readers are aware that she also problematizes certain Romantic constructs and ways of seeing. They understand that her treatment of Romantic concepts like the self and nature are revised not simply from a Victorian perspective but from one that is specifically woman-centred. In her classical Introduction to the 1966 Penguin Edition of *Jane Eyre*, Q. D. Leavis claims that the Brontës aimed at achieving through prose fiction something as serious, vital and significant as the

work of their favourite poets, which should voice the tragic experience of life, be true to the experience of the whole woman, and convey a sense of life's springs and undercurrents.

Thank You!