

## **'Anarchic passions / accepted restraints.' Does this adequately characterise the novels of the Brontës?**

A conception of Charlotte and Emily Brontë's narratives as constructed around a central dichotomy – which may be expressed variously as passion versus restraint, or the individual versus the conventions of society – is a commonplace in critical work on their novels. Carol Christ extends this dialectic to her analysis of the 'aesthetic conflict' which she perceives in the work of Charlotte between the conventions of romance and those of realism. Yet while Jane Eyre and Villette do admit of a dichotomy between the inner and outer realities, can we really understand this to correspond to one of passion and restraint? 'Anarchic' would seem an entirely inappropriate description of the presentation of passion within Charlotte's novels, while the world of Wuthering Heights cannot be said to operate within a larger set of societal restraints. If a simple dichotomy exists at all in these novels, it is that of well-directed and misdirected passionate energies; but the moral guidance must come from within, not without.

If 'anarchic' evidently misrepresents the long-enduring suffering of Caroline in Shirley, it is perhaps a more apt epithet for the younger Jane of Jane Eyre. Yet the 'resolute, wild, free thing' unable to control her passionate sense of mistreatment at the hands of the Reeds and at Lowood seems only a shadow of the later Jane: wildness is replaced by a witty confidence and, finally, the most fulfilling outlet for her feelings towards Rochester is not one of passionate, romantic adventure but one of selfless caring. In Villette Charlotte arguably fails to develop the more passionate side of Lucy, certainly in the public arena, so that while we may disagree with Ginevra Fanshawe when she says, 'You seem to me insensible both to pain and fear and grief', we can certainly understand her response. 'Anarchic' would seem perhaps to pertain most accurately to the nature of passion in Wuthering Heights, yet Cathy and Heathcliff's passion is anarchic only in the sense of being external to the realm of conventional morality. It wreaks havoc only when denied fulfilment: Heathcliff for Cathy is the only creature who can 'reconcile her to God and Humanity'. There is little anarchy of passion in any of the Brontë novels which is not the direct consequence of frustration.

Yet this frustration rarely takes the form of oppressive conventions, imposed 'restraints' which must be accepted if the protagonist is to reconcile herself to the world. The world of Wuthering Heights does not present the two settings of its main action as representing the anarchic force of passion and the restraint of decorum: neither Linton nor Isabella show 'restraint' that is not selfishly motivated. The force of restraint is demonstrated only through the voice of the narrator Nelly, who judges Heathcliff and Cathy as 'unprincipled' and 'diabolical'. Narrative restraint on the part of the author also characterises Jane Eyre and Villette: we only see Jane and Lucy submitting to Prudence and Reason, not the struggle within. The impassioned letter which Lucy writes to Graham Bretton never directly enters the narrative: we are only made aware that she tears it up. Within the texts themselves, however, 'restraint' – as represented by the harsh cruelty of Lowood or the iron self-denial of St John Rivers – cannot be imposed on the heroine: that which saves Jane from the

dangerous temptation of Rochester is not conventional morality but her own, personal sense of rightness. Likewise, restraint in *Wuthering Heights* does not function as the diametrical opposite to passion: it is not restraint or a response to decorum on Cathy's part which leads to tragedy but a deliberate denial of her self.

Far from pitting passion against restraint, the Brontë novels frequently demonstrate the civilising and restraining power of well-directed passion: Hareton loses his uncouth and barbaric attitudes under the younger Cathy's influence, and Rochester enjoys the healing effect of Jane's love. Where Cathy fails is in her misconception that life could be readily split into public and private spheres: *Wuthering Heights* does not admit of more than one mode of existence. Interestingly, Charlotte's novels, particularly *Villette* and *Shirley*, are characterised by precisely that split between 'the life of thought and that of reality': Lucy cannot easily bring the subjective part of her experience into the public realm of relationships and society, and this is perhaps why the narrative falls strangely silent as she makes a public commitment to M. Paul. Here, the public is anything but 'restrained'. The model of the young passionate protagonist who must learn to restrain her ideals in conformity to society is clearly an inadequate appraisal of the Brontës' work; neither are we presented with narratives which oscillate between romance and realism but a profound exploration of a new, psychologically orientated realism which problematises not just desire, but the relationship between the subject and objective worlds of experience.