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Emily Brontë's Poetry.

THE recent Centenary of Charlotte Brontë has reminded us of her sister Emily's poetry which has perhaps not been sufficiently appreciated. Probably this is to be accounted for from the fact that her poetry is largely suggestive. But that it has charm and imagination was seen by Matthew Arnold, who wrote of Emily Brontë—

> How shall I sing her? whose soul
> Knew no fellow for might,
> Passion, vehemence, grief,
> Daring, since Byron died—
> That world-famed son of fire—she who sank
> Baffled, unknown, self-consumed;
> Whose too-bold dying song
> Stirr'd, like a clarion-blast, my soul.

There is one characteristic note in Charlotte's introduction to her sister's poetry which cannot be overlooked—the reference to Emily's love of liberty: "Liberty was the breath of Emily's nostrils, without it she perished." She longed for the moors—

> For the moors, where the linnet was trilling
> Its song on the old granite stone;
> Where the lark, the wild skylark, was filling
> Every breast with delight like its own.

And Emily Brontë loved life, and shrank from death. Though her outlook was often sad, she could face conflict. She wrote—

> No coward soul is mine,
> No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere;
> I see Heaven's glories shine,
> And faith shines equal, arming me from fear.
>
> Though earth and man were gone,
> And suns and universes ceased to be,
> And Thou wert left alone,
> Every existence would exist in Thee.
>
> There is not room for death,
> Nor atom that His might could render void
> Thou—Thou art Being and Breath,
> And what Thou art may never be destroyed.

Lord Haldane regards this poem as one of the greatest in any language. The standpoint is immeasurably beyond the ordinary standpoint. It was written just before she died, "when the mists of death were almost gathered upon her brow, when she, a country girl, brought up in a country vicarage, under the traditions of

Christianity, might well have turned to the ordinary consolations which weaker spirits require, the ordinary props which are needed by those who have to enter the River. Not so Emily. The first words that break from her show her as utterly disdainful of doctrine as of doubt,—she had a faith in her greater than could be expressed by any creed."

There is one poem, "A Little While," which illustrates her deep desire for the sympathy of those she loved when she was distant from them, possibly when she was living at the Brussel's school, though her sister Charlotte says the poem was written when Emily was in her sixteenth year. Judging from internal evidence the former supposition would appear the more probable. Its strength of dictum and solidity of thought are remarkable—

A little while, a little while,
The weary task is put away.
And I can sing and I can smile,
Alike, while I have holiday.

Where wilt thou go, my harassed heart—
What thought, what scene invites thee now?
What spot, or near or far apart,
Has rest for thee, my weary brow?

There is a spot 'mid barren hills,
Where winter howls, and driving rain;
But, if the dreary tempest chills,
There is a light that warms again.

The mute bird sitting on the stone,
The dank moss dripping from the wall,
The thorn-trees gaunt, the walks o'ergrown,
I love them—how I love them all!

A heaven so clear, an earth so calm,
So sweet, so soft, so hushed an air;
And, deepening still the dream-like charm,
Wild moor-sheep feeding everywhere.

That was the scene. I knew it well;
I knew the turfy pathway's sweep,
That, winding o'er each billowy swell,
Marked out the tracks of wandering sheep.

Even as I stood with raptured eye,
Absorbed in bliss so deep and dear,
My hour of rest had fleeted by,
And back came labour, bondage, care.

Among the poems published in 1846 is one on "Death," and is a striking example of her remarkable facility of expression. What a wealth of imagery there is in the following stanzas—

Leaves upon Time's branch were growing brightly,
Full of sap, and full of silver dew;
Birds beneath its shelter gathered nightly;
Daily round its flowers the wild bees flew.

Sorrow passed and plucked the golden blossom;
Guilt stripped off the foliage in its prime;
But, within its parent's kindly bosom,
Flowed for ever Life's restoring tide.

Cruel Death! The young leaves droop and languish;
Evening's gentle air may still restore—
No! the morning sunshine mocks my anguish—
Time, for me, must never blossom more!

Strike it down, that other boughs may flourish,
Where that perished sapling used to be;
Thus, at least, its mouldering corpse will nourish
That from which it sprung—Eternity.

It may be said that Emily Brontë exhibited the visionary side of life, that she was one who "dreamed dreams." And yet she was far from unpractical. This is seen by the part she took in home-work. Loving the moors as she did, it must have required a firm determination to accept what life offered her at times; and when we find her doing rough, and what is usually considered menial work in the kitchen, we can hardly regard her as the same individual whose imagination knew few restraints. For, as it has been well said, she wrote "wildly, passionately, because she could not help herself."

In Emily Brontë's approach to nature she resembled Meredith in one respect—she realized that man must build his future upon his past; but, apparently, she did not experience the joy of living so manifest in Meredith's poetry. It is true she hoped, she longed for something more, somethimg better—

Be still, reviving hope doth say,
Departed joys 'tis fond to mourn,
Think every storm that rides its way
Prepared a more divine return.

Was Emily Brontë nearer the spirit of Wordsworth than that of Meredith? Possibly, because like Wordsworth she saw the distant realization of her hopes, though "through a glass darkly." In one respect, however, she resembled Meredith; she believed that in order for man to grow both physically and intellectually, he must go into the fields and woods, "where the trees, unlike human children in great cities, grow to fulness of their stature, where the wild, shy things run free, where the birds sing to no audience, and the flowers are beautiful for beauty's sake."

It is curious to observe that Charlotte Brontë destroyed all records of her sister Emily except her poems—and, of course, "Wuthering Heights." After Emily's death she published a selection from Ellis and Acton's poems, and wrote for it a preface giving to Emily the precedence in the temple of fame. Yet Lockhart declared that Charlotte's poems were better than Emily's. This is not the opinion of critics at the present day. Charlotte herself, in a letter to Mrs. Gaskell, writes of the volume of poems she was sending her friend: "I do not like my own share of the work, nor care that it should be read; Ellis Bell's I think good and vigorous, and Acton's have the merit of truth and simplicity. Mine are chiefly juvenile productions, the restless effervescence of a mind that would not be still."

Yes, Emily's work stands incomparably higher in the realm of verse than Charlotte's. Whether we consider the poem, composed, it has been said, when she was but sixteen, or the last poem she ever wrote, we recognize the immense gap between the respective merits of the sisters' poetry. Charlotte speaks of Emily's poems as "wild, melancholy, elevating." They are mainly occupied with the stern aspects of Nature, and the austere aspects of life: "the moon, the stars, the night, and the night-wind, the outcast mother, the prisoner, the wanderer from the fold—sorrow, ruin, sin, death. It is true, they sing also of brighter things and moods, of summer and the song of birds, and the thousand lyres of the heather in June, of day-dreams, of hope, of fancy, but they are mostly shadowed by the darker things of the human lot, and the nature they know is that of the Haworth Moors. They are not pessimistic, but they certainly are austere rather, and distinctly stoical."

Dr. Bruce calls Emily "the laureate of the moors,—wild, passionate, fearless, and for a time at least, though not to the last, sceptical and agnostic." He thinks she would have been a happier woman if she had sought communion with God and her fellow-man, and that she was self-reliant and independent almost to a fault. But he fails to see that though "she preferred apostrophizing her own fancy and imagination and addressing the howling wind and the cold stars in poetic rhapsodies, to opening her heart in prayer to God," she had a Wordsworthian vision of Nature, whom she regarded as a teacher whose wisdom we can learn, and without which, all things are "unutterably vain."

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