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This Rustic Muse: Developing a Political Voice in the Poetry of Patrick Brontë

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ABSTRACT

This article examines a range of the Reverend Patrick Brontë's poetry—a much neglected body of work in Brontë criticism—and argues that it was here that Brontë was able to develop a political voice and a sense of literature as a vehicle for political exploration and debate. In considering Brontë's two collections, *Cottage Poems* (1811) and *The Rural Minstrel* (1813), in the contexts of the war abroad and industrial, economic and social unrest at home, this article explores what the poetry tells us about Brontë's political thinking, his relationship with political structures and hierarchies, and his anxieties about political cohesion and security. What emerges is a poet whose work, written under the guise of his 'rustic muse', offers fascinating interventions into contemporaneous political debates regarding poverty, industrialisation, the city, community, the place of religion in society, nation-state formation and the nature of liberty and equality more generally.

KEYWORDS

Patrick Brontë; poetry; politics; patriotism; nation state; security; community; religion

The Reverend Patrick Brontë's poetry constitutes a body of work which, for various reasons, has failed to receive sustained critical attention. His roles as curate and father of four remarkable children have, unsurprisingly, overshadowed his role as the writer of a wide range of poems that have often been dismissed due to their perceived limitations in content and form. Interestingly, these perceptions can be traced back to the initial reception of Brontë's poetic work upon publication. There are few extant reviews of his poetry, but in a brief response to his second volume, *The Rural Minstrel* (1813), in *The Monthly Review* for January 1814, the anonymous reviewer said that

Critics are sometimes accused of severity; but ... [i]f they are angry, it is because some author, presuming on talents which he does not possess, has given them a head-ache. Mr Brontë, conceiving himself to be a poet, will regard us as bad and perhaps as ill-natured critics because we happen to be of a very different opinion; but we are confident that our readers will not accuse us of badly or ill naturedly performing our office, if we with-hold our commendation. ('Review of *The Rural Minstrel*', 1814, 104)

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This is an astonishing dismissal. According to this reviewer, Brontë thinks he is a poet but he is not, and the journal's readers will undoubtedly agree. Indeed, as the reviewer asserts, Brontë's poetry is little more than 'head-ache' inducing and seemingly should be avoided. The scant reception history of Brontë's literary work has seen modern critics also tending to emphasise the limitations of his poetry. In *Selected Brontë Poems*, for example, Edward Chitham and Tom Winniffrith suggest that Patrick's poetry 'has nothing to commend it' except 'religious fervour' (1985 x), while in his biography of Patrick, Dudley Green states that his writings are 'uneven and clearly not of great literary merit' (2008, 180). In her biography of Charlotte Brontë, Claire Harman categorises Patrick's poetics as 'often risible' (2015, 12), while Janet Gezari, in her 2012 essay on the Brontë family's poetry, excludes any consideration of Patrick's poems, although she gives some attention to those of Branwell alongside her main focus on the sisters' works. Simon Marsden's consideration of the 'ecological apocalypse' in poems by Patrick and Emily (2021) and Eloise Quinn-Valentine's work on Patrick's 'Winter-night Meditations' (2020) are rare exceptions to this general history of critical and textual neglect.

In this article, I argue that the significance of Patrick Brontë's poetry may be more complex than the dominant history of dismissal and silence suggests. There is much of interest in Brontë's poems, both artistically and intellectually, and much that suggests we should give them more attention than they have received to date. Certainly, with the long view of history that we now have and which the first reviewer in *The Monthly Review* obviously did not; with our understanding of the shifts in thinking about the role of cultural production in the early nineteenth century; and with our increasing knowledge of Patrick Brontë's life and work, we can perhaps see different values, different emphases, in the poetry. In my focus here, I am particularly interested in how Brontë's poetry enabled the development of a political voice and a sense that literature might function as a vehicle for political exploration and debate. This poetic work occurred during a short period in the early 1810s, but it would lead Brontë to other forms of political engagement and, with time, contribute to the political thought and politically driven writings of his astonishing family.

Patrick Brontë's poetry was principally collected in two volumes: *Cottage Poems*, published in 1811, and *The Rural Minstrel: A Miscellany of Descriptive Poems*, published in 1813. Significantly, Brontë produced this work before coming to Haworth, principally while he was building his career as perpetual curate at St Peter's, Hartshead (a role noted on the title page of both volumes), although Bob Duckett has suggested that some of the poems with an Irish background might have been drafted before Brontë left Ireland in 1802 (2012, 240). The dating of the volumes' publication is particularly important when considering the political moment in which the poems were completed, ordered and sent for publishing, and in which they were subsequently read. The volumes were produced during a time of extended war (the Napoleonic conflicts would continue until 1815) and, domestically, a time of industrial agitation and economic tension. Brontë's witnessing of Luddite rioting around Hartshead—where working men from his parish attacked Rawfolds Mill near Cleckheaton as new machinery was being

introduced (see Green 2008, 59–60)—occurred while he was working on the *Cottage Poems* collection, for example, and, along with the wider European war, provides a crucial context for it. Indeed, a number of poems here and in *The Rural Minstrel* deploy a repeated structure in which an individual or community is called upon to turn to God, to overcome hardship and conflict through religious devotion and attention to humanitarian and collective interests. Such patterning can be read, I suggest here, partly as a response to the concern with socio-political disorder occurring around Brontë on a local, national and international level.

Of course, this would fit with Brontë's wider politics, as difficult as they are to pin down precisely. Throughout his life, Patrick Brontë's political views were essentially Tory, with a strong commitment to the perceived stability associated with tradition, patriotism, the State, the Church and the Crown. Indeed, as Juliet Barker notes (1994, 3–4), it was Brontë's experience and knowledge of the revolutionary politics of the Society of United Irishmen, to which his brother William belonged, that led to his lifelong fear of uprising and revolt. However, these traditional tenets of Toryism were also tempered in an early-nineteenth-century manner by Brontë's championing of reform, his belief in the civil rights of the individual, and his desire to effect social change for those who are disenfranchised and marginalised. There have been some interesting critical discussions regarding how this complicated position might be defined. I often think that 'liberal Tory' seems to speak to where Patrick Brontë is situated, while Margaret Smith has called him an 'enlightened Tory' (1995, 3). In her discussion of Charlotte Brontë—who of all the children seems most to have subscribed to her father's Tory views—Marianne Thormählen uses the phrase 'radical Tory' to balance a commitment to the establishment and a commitment to individualism. (This is part of Thormählen's important argument that we should stop using the phrase 'staunch Tory' when speaking about the Brontës and acknowledge the 'conceptual fuzziness' of political categories at the time [2017, 1]). Certainly, Brontë's complex politics would lead him in some interesting directions. For example, he supported the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, organised a petition against slavery in 1830, and supported that landmark push for modernisation by the Whigs, the Great Reform Act of 1832. He would also write to newspapers on issues such as capital punishment and the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 (Green 2016, 203–6), often placing the desire for change above party political loyalties. As he wrote in a revealing letter to Elizabeth Franks in 1831, he pledged his allegiance to the State but also viewed 'moderate, or temperate reform' as 'an affair of conscience and judgement' (quoted in Green 2008, 189).

Given this, it is unsurprising that Patrick Brontë's complex political stance resonates throughout his poetry and offers a number of intriguing ways into it. As with many of his contemporaries—including William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Felicia Hemans—Brontë might be said to have worked in part with the Romantic model of poet as *vates* figure, a commentator upon contemporary socio-political issues and events. In contrast to these contemporaries, however, Brontë combined this with his role as clergyman and preacher-educator and clearly saw writing poetry on one level as part of his ministry. In the remainder of this article, I explore what this role and this neglected body of poetic work reveal

about Brontë's political thinking, his relationship with political structures and hierarchies, his anxieties about political cohesion and security in the nation, and his sense of the importance of literature in the turbulent political environment of the early nineteenth century. If, as Terry Eagleton argues in *Myths of Power*, the Brontës 'lived through an age of disruptive social change, and lived that disruption at a particularly vulnerable point' (2005, 7), then this disruption can certainly be felt in Patrick's poetry as well as his daughters' mature fictions, albeit in more covert and oblique ways.

Cottage Poems (1811)

Patrick Brontë's prefaces to his volumes of poetry are particularly interesting for what they tell us about his motivation, intended audience and habits of creativity. The preface to *Cottage Poems*, called the 'Advertisement', is especially telling in this regard, as might be expected from an author new to the literary scene. Here Brontë writes that his volume is 'chiefly designed for the lower classes of society' and consequently he has 'aimed at simplicity, plainness, and perspicuity, both in manner and style' (Brontë 1811, vii–viii). The idea that Brontë writes in simple, accessible language resonates with Wordsworth's aim of deploying the 'language really spoken by men', as he termed it in the 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (Brett and Jones 2005, 299). This was a radically new strategy in poetic diction can be connected to concerns with increasing egalitarianism in the Romantic period. Yet, while Brontë interestingly downplays the significance of his writing, referring in a diminutive manner to 'this little volume' and 'this little work' in a way that might suggest anxiety about critical judgement (vii, xiii), he is nevertheless keen to assert the originality of his approach, claiming not to have seen 'any work of exactly the same nature' (viii). As Brontë proceeds to emphasise, he recognises that 'poetry [is] a channel, through which ... powerful effect[s]' can be produced (x–xi), and he consequently seeks to use his own poetry as a means of 'illustrating and enforcing sacred truths' and thereby 'sav[ing]' his readers (x). In part, therefore, his poetry seems to be concerned with nothing less than the fight for the soul in interconnected social, religious and political contexts.

Given this, it is significant that the volume's opening poem is written for another man of the cloth. 'Epistle to the Rev. J— B—, whilst journeying for the recovery of his health' is addressed to Brontë's vicar at Dewsbury, John Buckworth, with whom, the poem records, he discussed 'heavenly themes' (line 47). Intriguingly for my arguments here, the work begins with seven stanzas reflecting Brontë's views on the value of poetry and what he calls his 'rustic muse' (line 1). This muse, he asserts, is not concerned with 'palaces, and courts of kings' (although this is not entirely accurate across the volume as a whole), but with the life of the cottager that Brontë seeks to delineate in 'simple, lowly views' using 'uncouth strings' (lines 7, 3, 9)—an image that gestures towards, while also undercutting, the power of the lyre, a classical symbol of poetry. It is this 'poor neglected muse' that is 'unheard, unknown', as Brontë terms it (lines 19, 22), which ushers in a volume that takes the cottage and all its socio-political, economic and moral significances as its key focus. Such an

emphasis on rusticity and the non-metropolitan might initially appear to downplay the direct political import of the volume, yet it effectively enables, as in the work of many nineteenth-century poets, a means of critiquing the political centre and practices of democratic exclusion from the perceived margins.

The volume's second poem, 'The Happy Cottagers', is clearly representative of this approach. The poem is lengthy at thirty-four stanzas and follows the journey of a wanderer figure who becomes a commentator on both nature and society. This journey is at once physical and spiritual, serving as a compact version of the travel and education narrative that Brontë would use in his novella, *The Maid of Killarney*, published seven years later. Like many of Brontë's poems, 'The Happy Cottagers' is full of images of an idyllic—indeed, almost utopian—pastoral, described here as 'the lovely, rural scene' (line 50). One of Brontë's key poetic skills is his often beautiful depiction of precise natural details and his awareness of the sensory qualities of the changing seasonal landscape. Describing a spider's web in 'The Spider and Fly', for example, he notes 'The gossamers float[ing] on the air / The dew-gems twinkl[ing] in the glare' (lines 2–3), and in the poem simply called 'Winter' (from *The Rural Minstrel*), there is a startling depiction of the freezing quality of the season—'Stern winter's breath, locks up the flood, / Thrills through the nerves, and chills the blood' (lines 46–47)—which might be seen to foreshadow the visceral cold that can be felt in the Lowood sections of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). It is significant, too, that this celebration of nature in all its moods—which Emily Brontë would take even further in her poetry—can be read as a reaction against the growing industrialisation and impact of developing capitalist structures occurring around Patrick Brontë in the early-nineteenth century. What Nicholas Roe identifies as the practice of 'textual silences' in Romantic nature poetry (1992, 7)—where poetry about the freedom and benevolence associated with nature implicitly gestures towards the problems of industrialisation or the failure of political ideals—can clearly be felt in operation here. Consequently, in the face of what Brontë terms 'the black North' ('The Rainbow', line 5), nature is politicised by its associations with social and intellectual liberty and egalitarianism.

In 'The Happy Cottagers', this focus on nature leads the speaker to the first cottage of the volume:

I turned me round, to view
The lovely, rural scene;
And, just at hand, I spied
A cottage on the green;
 The street was clean,
 The walls were white,
 The thatch was neat,
 The window bright. (lines 49–56)

Juliet Barker has rightly spoken of the 'sanitized' nature of this kind of depiction (1994, 43), while Claire Harman terms it 'picturesque deprivation' (2015, 7). Yet we might read this emphasis on the pristine nature of the cottage as the key point. As so often in Brontë's work, the economically marginalised are portrayed as happy in their environs not because of their socio-political situation per se, but because of their spiritual devotion and belief in the Biblical assertion that the last in this life will be

first in the next. In this line of thinking, physical cleanliness reflects a moral cleanliness, of the kind seen in Felicia Hemans's later, particularly patriotic work, 'Homes of England' (1827). Repeatedly, this connection in Brontë's poetry is revealed in a scene where the wanderer joins a congenial cottage family and learns about their lived experiences and beliefs (a scenario that Duckett links to Brontë's own 'cottage meetings' with his parishioners [2012, 241]). The trope of the welcomed guest and the politics of hospitality are thereby established as the actions of democracy in these scenes, as the sharing of food and prayers becomes the opportunity for conversation and debate on socio-political and religious matters. In 'The Happy Cottagers', for example, this coming together ultimately leads to a discussion about the nature of Grace, rehearsing a common pattern in which the acknowledgement of political problems in society becomes connected with contemplation of what the next world has to offer.

Part of the politically driven conversation in 'The Happy Cottagers' involves an implied critique of war and governmental military strategies as the father recounts the death of his son, 'a martial youth' who 'for his country bled' (lines 107, 108). This focus on the impact of war abroad on families and communities back home seems particularly significant in the context of the ongoing war with France. Certainly, the effects would have been witnessed by Brontë in his work among his parishioners. Moreover, as Emma Butcher demonstrates in her insightful study *The Brontës and War: Fantasy and Conflict in Charlotte and Branwell Brontë's Youthful Writings*, the experience of the French Wars on the home front, as well as in the battlefield's 'fog of war' (2019, 54–57), would become a foundational source of inspiration for the children's Angria and Gondal productions. In Brontë's 'The Happy Cottagers', this discussion of the devastating impact of war subsequently leads to consideration of how meaning in life might be found:

In fame, some search for bliss,
Some seek content, in gain,
In search of happiness,
Some give the slackened rein,
To passions fierce,
And down the stream,
Through giddy life,
Of pleasures dream. (lines 249–56)

Fame, money, passion: Patrick Brontë's consideration of transitory value here appears to foreshadow Emily Brontë's 'Riches I hold in light esteem' (published in the sisters' *Poems* in 1846). But whereas Emily's poem rejects money, love and fame for the social and spiritual independence of 'a chainless soul, / With courage to endure' (Barker 1993, 61–62, lines 11–12), Brontë's poem seemingly inevitably emphasises the reward waiting in heaven. For as the cottager unquestionably believes, 'when he lays / This covering down, / He'll wear a bright / Immortal crown' (lines 269–72). Again, the afterlife is offered as the ultimate 'solution' to political issues in the temporal world, even while a commitment to family and community and a willingness to discuss differing perspectives are suggested as possible ways of attaining socio-political harmony.

Embedded in ‘The Happy Cottagers’ are also two key stanzas where the speaker, and by extension Patrick Brontë, explicitly states what this poem will *not* be about:

... don’t expect to hear
Of deeds of martial fame,
Or that our peasant mean,
Was born of rank or name,
 And soon will strut,
 As in romance,
 A knight, and all
 In armour glance.

I sing of real life;
All else, is empty show (lines 81–90)

Repeatedly in his poems and the prefaces (and more extensively in *The Maid of Killarney*), Brontë criticises the types of literature he sees emerging in the period—here the historicised romance plot, the tale of ‘martial fame’ (despite his love of Walter Scott) and, more widely, those works which, he goes on to argue in striking language, ‘pollut[e]’ and ‘fill ... the mind / With guilty stains’ (lines 93, 95–96). Only ‘real life’ is of significance, the poem asserts. In comparison, the ‘empty show’ of fiction is nothing but performative, endangering the healthy mind and body of the reader and, by implication, the body politic and the wider nation. It is an interesting argument given how much of Brontë’s literary work is clearly fictionalised. However, the claims made here suggest that whatever the mode of Brontë’s writing (pastoral, elegy, hymn, satire), there is an underlying concern with depicting ‘reality’ and voicing the socio-political issues he sees around him.

A more expansive consideration of the effects of political disenfranchisement and the mechanisms of developing capitalism and urban expansion in this volume can be found in ‘Winter-night Meditations’. Brontë originally published a version of this poem, titled ‘Winter Evening Thoughts’, as a stand-alone work in 1810, having composed it, as Duckett notes, for a ‘Day of National Humiliation for the war against France’ in February that year (2012, 239). Such days functioned as periods of fasting and prayer during times of national distress to mark a nation’s unity and solidarity. It is significant, therefore, that Brontë’s first published poem was politically motivated, even if the humiliation is not overtly mentioned in the work and despite the fact that he published it anonymously—perhaps anxious at this point about entering the literary marketplace as a poet reflecting upon contemporary conflict. Eloise Quinn-Valentine’s fascinating examination of the manuscript of the original poem leads her to conclude that ‘most of the alterations made in the second [version] ... are [only] simplifications of punctuation and standardisation of metre’ (2020, 838) and she proceeds to analyse the work principally in relation to the contemporaneous Peninsular War. Extending this, I would argue that Brontë’s placing ‘Winter-night Meditations’ as the fourth work in *Cottage Poems* also asks us to read it in dialogue with the surrounding politically driven poems and their wider socio-political concerns. Indeed, the varied ‘Meditations’ in the poem result in a series of loosely connected vignettes that become central to what can be read as the volume’s ongoing commentary on how to bring about political cohesion.

Throughout ‘Winter-night Meditations’, there is a particular emphasis on the hunger, cold and social exclusion experienced by the working classes, imaged through the naked and starving bodies of children and the bodies of adults ‘Worn out with labour, grief and care’ (line 14). This idea of the damaged and broken body symbolising a damaged and broken body politic would become foundational to nineteenth-century ‘Condition of England’ writing, aligning Brontë with more overtly political writers such as Anna Barbauld, Percy Shelley and Thomas Carlyle and looking forward to Charlotte Brontë’s own political work in *Shirley* (1849). In ‘Winter-night Meditations’, this is accompanied by a sharp critique of the ways in which those in power—here the monarchy and the government—have the potential to ‘corrupt the purest laws’ (line 31). While Brontë was clearly committed to Crown and State as concepts, he was nevertheless aware of the limitations of specific individuals and groups. And as the poem emphasises, this corruption was likely to be at its most damaging in the city, with its ‘sin-polluted streams’ (line 59) and seeming moral depravity. For at the heart of this depiction of the city, and at the heart of the poem both structurally and ideologically, is Brontë’s focus on the figure of the prostitute. Across fifty lines—a considerable portion of the poem overall—Brontë details how a young woman is seduced at a village fair by a ‘blithesome youth’ with ‘oily tongue, and wily art’ (lines 91, 93) and consequently moves to the city where she herself becomes the seducer in what Brontë suggests is a cycle of immorality:

The prostitute with faithless smiles,
Remorseless plays her tricks and wiles,
Her gesture bold, and ogling eye,
Obtrusive speech, and pert reply,
And brazen front, and stubborn tone,
Shew all her native virtue’s flown.
By her, the thoughtless youth is ta’en,
Impoverished, disgraced, or slain:
Through her, the marriage vows are broke,
And Hymen proves a galling yoke.
Diseases come, destructions dealt,
Where’er her poisonous breath is felt (lines 67–78)

This is a particularly unsettling depiction that quickly leaves behind any understanding of the reasons why the woman is out on the streets. That empathy towards ‘fallen women’ pushed into prostitution found in texts such as Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848) and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856) seems all but absent here. Indeed, while the corrupting male is dealt with in a few lines then expelled from the poem, the seduced woman is poured over and dissected so that ‘vice’ (line 103) becomes aligned with her rather than her abuser. For Brontë, therefore, as with William Blake in ‘London’ (*Songs of Experience*, 1794), the prostitute functions as the dominant symbol of the modern urban space and its perceived moral dangers—the challenge to established religion, the breaking down of the institution of marriage and the suggested spread of sexually transmitted disease (the implicit interconnectedness of ‘Hymen’ and ‘Diseases’ in consecutive lines here is particularly pertinent). In many ways, this is a surprisingly reactionary reinforcement of those gendered double standards that Anne Brontë would later dismantle so

powerfully in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). Indeed, while Brontë names the prostitute in his poem 'Maria'—retrospectively an odd choice given its links with his future wife as well as the Virgin Mary—he generally seems unable to deal effectively with individuals in his poetry and tends to rely on perceived (and, as here, problematic) stereotypes.

Significantly, the remainder of 'Winter-night Meditations' moves out from the focus on the prostitute to address the nation as whole, emphasising the effective collapse of civilisation should 'sin' continue to be harboured:

O! Britain fair, thou Queen of isles!
Nor hostile arms, nor hostile wiles,
Could ever shake thy solid throne,
But for thy sins—thy sins alone,
Can make thee stoop thy royal head,
And lay thee prostrate, with the dead. (lines 117–22)

The combination of 'Colossal England', 'Fair Scotia' (Scotland) and 'Brave Erin' (Ireland) identified in the poem (lines 123, 125, 129) has the potential, Brontë argues, to surpass all other nations. This is evidenced by the image of the 'solid throne' (line 119)—a rather nominal concept given George III's mental illness and the election of the Regent in the year that *Cottage Poems* was published—and by the endorsement of what seems to be a particularly Anglocentric God. As Brontë stresses, however, the nation will only achieve cohesion if the population embraces religion. Without this, Britain will be a 'bloody plain' (line 150) dominated by personified abstractions—'Bribery', 'Corruption', 'Dissension', 'Anarchy' and 'Grief' (lines 145–49)—which anticipate those associated with the socio-political entropy in Shelley's 'The Mask of Anarchy', written in the wake of the Peterloo Massacre in 1819. As the poem's final stanza highlights, 'No state is free from care, and pain, / Where fiery passions, get the rein' (lines 244–45), a pertinent phrasing at a time of ongoing concern about national security.

The reference to 'Brave Erin' in 'Winter-night Meditations' also draws a connection with the poem that Brontë placed at the centre of the *Cottage Poems* volume: 'The Irish Cabin'. Speaking to Brontë's complex relations with his Irish background—his brother William's involvement as United Irishman in the 1798 Battle of Ballynahinch; his own commitment to the Anglo-Irish Union and the transfer of legislative power to Westminster; his ongoing anxiety about disorder in Ireland (as evidenced in his treatment of Whiteboyism in chapter eight of *The Maid of Killarney*); and his reverence for the Irish Duke of Wellington (Avery 2016, 473; Barker 1994, 3–4)—'The Irish Cabin' draws effectively upon traditional cultural tropes and, again, the socio-political idea of the cottage that motivates the volume overall. The opening stanza effectively constitutes a frame-tale where the speaker, a harpist, asks us to hear how 'Erin's wild harp sooth[es] the ear' and to 'ponder each line' of his narrative (lines 5, 8). Replaying part of 'The Happy Cottagers', the harpist recounts how a typical Brontë wanderer figure is invited out of the cold into 'the Cabin of Mourne' (line 44) in the mountainous area of County Down. Here, in another hospitality narrative, the wanderer shares food and prayers and listens to the cottager recount his contentment with a life of simplicity and meaningful work. As

noted above with ‘The Happy Cottagers’, such an assessment of what constitutes a consequential life, outside the trappings of hierarchical status and what Carlyle would later term the cash nexus (1839, 66), is crucial to the politics of the collection overall, as is the poem’s use of the conversion narrative familiar to both Evangelical work and Brontë’s other writings (most obviously in the Anglican-unionist drive of the denouement in *The Maid of Killarney*). Ultimately this will lead, the harpist emphasises, to the assurance of transcendence after death, in ‘a bright palace, above, / ... endlessly clothed with life’ (lines 126–27). What is different from ‘The Happy Cottagers’, however, is that this ‘poor cottager’s lot’ (line 169)—founded in faith and the rejection of those ‘Dissensions’ and ‘wild prodigality’ (lines 198, 199) that, in Brontë’s thinking, threaten the development of communities and nations—is offered as a model for Ireland overall, as a different way of living that will secure the status of ‘Fair Erin’ and make it nothing less than ‘The Gem of the Fair British Crown’ (lines 193, 208). In his important study *Western Winds: The Brontës’ Irish Heritage*, Edward Chitham has pointed to Thomas Moore’s *Irish Melodies* (1807) as a possible influence on Brontë’s poetry (2015, 117). Certainly, ‘Winter-night Meditations’ functions here with the same kind of ‘soft’ (cultural) power as Moore’s work via Brontë’s exploration of the developing politics of Ireland and, by implication, his vision of Britain’s potential stability more widely.

Cottage Poems is undoubtedly a fascinating volume which sees Brontë examining a range of contemporary political issues—poverty, industrialisation, the city, prostitution, community, the place of religion in society, the nation state, what will become known as the Irish Question, war, national security and the nature of liberty more broadly—and democratically addressing them in accessible language. Despite Brontë suggesting that poetry is his ‘humble task’ (Brontë 1811, xiii), it might be argued that he used *Cottage Poems* to speak to his historical-political moment in important ways. Interestingly, the volume’s final poem, ‘The Cottager’s Hymn’, marks a shift not only in form (to the hymn) but also in perspective by giving the voice fully to the cottager rather than someone else speaking for them. The collection therefore finishes with an emphasis on the necessity of developing and asserting a political voice in order to achieve individual and national agency, a concern that would be central to both Brontë’s subsequent writings and those of his children.

The Rural Minstrel (1813)

Two years later, in 1813, Patrick Brontë published his second volume, a collection of eleven poems titled *The Rural Minstrel: A Miscellany of Descriptive Poems*. As with *Cottage Poems*, *The Rural Minstrel* was printed and sold by P. K. Holden in Halifax and appeared under Brontë’s own name, ‘for the author’, an indicator, Chitham argues, that Brontë paid for the publication himself (2015, 119). It was also sold by Crosby & Co. in London as well as by booksellers in Leeds and York (Duckett 2012, 241), so it had the potential to achieve a decent readership. As I noted above with regard to the response in *The Monthly Review*, however, the volume struggled to find an appreciative critical audience. When set alongside some of the other poetic works published that year—Byron’s *The Giaour*, Scott’s *Rokeby*, Percy Bysshe Shelley’s

Queen Mab—this might come as no surprise. Yet, as with Brontë's first collection, there are a number of interesting political ideas and issues addressed in *The Rural Minstrel* that sit tellingly in dialogue with the work in *Cottage Poems*.

The preface to *The Rural Minstrel* opens with a bold claim for England being the true land of moral poets (significantly Brontë names England rather than Britain, despite his love of Scott and Moore). However, Brontë proceeds to argue that, as good as these poets are, their works are often 'too voluminous and obscure, for the majority' (Brontë 1813, ix). He consequently seeks to make a space for his own work by suggesting that a volume of poems is needed which approaches its subjects with greater clarity and which is sold at an affordable price for the working classes (there are interesting issues raised here about aesthetic and economic 'value' and their interconnections). The resulting collection is written, Brontë declares, in what he calls his preferred 'irregular metre' (xi), which he believes is 'best calculated for poems of a descriptive nature' (xii). Certainly, a number of the poems in this volume are characterised by rapidly shifting metres as well as an energy and experimentation that, several critics have noted, are more developed than in *Cottage Poems* (Alexander and Smith 2003, 322–23; Green 2016, 200). Yet the idea of these as solely 'Descriptive Poems', as Brontë terms them in the volume's title, is somewhat misleading and possibly a conscious downplaying of what he sought to achieve as he entered a literary marketplace dominated by the likes of Wordsworth and Coleridge. For while there is much description in these poems—often thoughtful, detailed and sensuous description—this is never the end point. Rather, the description almost invariably leads to analysis and exploration of ideas. In a Patrick Brontë poem, a tolling church bell or a reflection in the water or a spider's web are never just a bell, a reflection or a web. Certainly, this strategy is key as Brontë's poems appear to continue to address, albeit perhaps more covertly than in *Cottage Poems*, political issues such as tradition and stability, national development, community and faith, and those structures of democratic exclusion that render specific groups invisible. In the context of the deepening Napoleonic Wars, the simultaneous War of 1812 with America, political tensions in the government at home, and agrarian distress caused by falling corn prices (the Corn Laws would be implemented in 1815), these political concerns give more cohesion to the works in *The Rural Minstrel* than the term 'Miscellany' in the volume's subtitle might suggest. Because of the limitations on space, I focus here on three specific examples which, I would argue, are also the most developed poems in the volume.

The Rural Minstrel opens with an arresting piece, 'The Sabbath Bell', which in several ways establishes a regular pattern deployed throughout. The bell in the title is both a call to church and, tellingly, a warning to attend to the fleeting nature of life in preparation for the second coming. Consequently, the narrative moves through various stages, opening with a focus on benign nature and some of the established tropes of Romanticism ('Perched on the milk-white thorn, the linnet sweetly sings' [line 16]), before the voice shifts to the 'monitory' tombs whose dead are imaged 'accost[ing]' the living (lines 76, 77) with their warning:

Soon, soon, shall you die,
And mouldering lie,

The earth, your cold bed,
And your cover, a stone (lines 85–88)

The short couplets here gesture towards the severity of the message and the inevitability of the ‘cold bed’ of the grave replacing the warmth of mobile life. Brontë’s engagement with the growing discourses of the Gothic and the grotesque can clearly be felt at moments like this, and certainly he is never coy about focusing on bodily decay. (In ‘Verses sent to a Lady on her Birth-Day’ in *Cottage Poems*, for example, he details the beauties of the woman’s face only to remind her that ‘the worm in lazy coil, / May soon prey on this putrid spoil’ [lines 22–23].) Subsequently, ‘The Sabbath Bell’ moves beyond the individual grave to something akin to a verbal enactment of the end of days:

... soon through the air,
The Judge Eternal, will descend, with glory crowned,
Whilst the loud trumpet, sounding through the vast profound,
When heaven, and earth, have fled,
Will summon, quick and dead,
To hear the final sentence passed (lines 92–97)

This vision is a frequent one in Brontë’s poetry—here emphasised in the longer lines ushering in the Day of Reckoning—and links to Brontë’s often compelling use of the religious sublime. Nature might be benign and consolatory on earth, but all worldly things will pass and the final judgement will be upon us. As Simon Marsden intriguingly argues, ‘Patrick’s apocalypticism allows material existences to be read as a collection of signs that point to the eternal, but it also renders those existences transient’ (2021, 546). Indeed, as suggested in some of the most astute work in *Cottage Poems*, while Brontë’s poetry might emphasise ways of shaping political stability on earth, the dominant trajectory is towards the ultimate stability and cohesion of the Christian afterlife. Only there will ‘vain ... degenerate man’ (‘The Sabbath Bell’, line 103) and the temporal political world achieve true renewal and the potential of the utopian New Jerusalem.

The Rural Minstrel contains several poems like ‘The Sabbath Bell’ that centre on warnings from those on the brink of death or voices that seem to come from the grave. This is, of course, a key part of Brontë’s aesthetic, balanced on the threshold between eighteenth-century and Romantic models of poetry. However, there are other registers in the volume too, which might be read as addressing political ideas in complementary ways. The poem ‘Kirkstall Abbey’, for example, a 164-line work, has an intricate beauty about it as Brontë celebrates the ruined medieval monastery built next to the River Aire, north-west of the developing industrial hub of Leeds. (Again, this poem can be read as implicitly gesturing towards the industrial Other as one of Roe’s ‘textual silences’.) Technically, the work purposely foregrounds its engagement with an established set of Romantic tropes and concerns. The subtitle, ‘A Fragment of a Romantic Tale’, for example, asserts the poem’s alignment with not one but two contemporary forms: the poetic fragment—a form that, as Anne Janowitz argues, is linked to ideas of incompleteness and the limits of language (1999, 480)—and the Romantic tale of the kind found in narrative poems by Wordsworth, Coleridge and Byron. Moreover, the poem draws upon the (by now) well-established associations of

the ruin with the transience of all human structures (since only nature will ultimately survive), and the complex sense of the remnants of a past that is gone but that also disrupts and intervenes in the present. In this respect, Wordsworth's 'Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey' (1798) appears to be a particular influence. Both Kirkstall and Tintern Abbeys were Cistercian communities so also haunting these ruins is the violent religio-political history of the sixteenth-century Dissolution of the Monasteries, with its modalities of oppression and exclusion. Brontë is therefore able to use the setting to generate reflection on the subtle relationships between art / poetry, religion and politics.

In the poem, Kirkstall Abbey is at once a site of emotional renewal—those who have suffered loss or despair will be drawn to the peace here, we are told—and a point of potential spiritual transcendence, for faith can fly from the Abbey 'To regions far beyond the sky' (line 133). Indeed, the ruin—which was frequently reproduced by Romantic artists such as Thomas Girtin, John Sell Cotman, J. M. W. Turner and Charlotte Brontë herself (see Alexander and Sellars 1995, 203–204; 229–230)—appears to be directly linked to a type of otherworldly music that resonates around the scene at night:

Now rose; now fell;
With cadence sweet, and soft melodious swell,
Such notes as angels play,
Where basking in eternal day,
In full celestial choir,
They touch the golden wire,
And hallelujahs sing,
To their Almighty King,
Whilst every heavenly sound, in wondering silence hears,
The more than music of the sweet harmonious spheres. (lines 23–32)

The music's intensity can be heard here in the extended sentence that stretches across ten lines, the protracted final couplet pushing even further at the limits of the poem's form. The source of this 'more than music', as Brontë calls it, might be 'a tuneful shepherd', a pilgrim or 'some unearthly being' (lines 35, 39), but whatever it is—and Brontë purposely refuses to pin it down—the musician functions as the spirit of the place, seemingly linking human love with God's divine love, the individual with a past community, and (problematic) political history with the promise of a utopian future. For what the experience at the Abbey at night enables, through the ruin, nature and art, is a temporary—and, significantly, only temporary—escape from the quotidian realities and problems of political modernity. The experience of the music is transcendental but, like the ruin and the form of the poem itself, it remains fragmentary and incomplete. Indeed, as the music 'slowly die[s] away' with the arrival of morning (line 154), it is left to the shepherd who passes by the Abbey to attest to the song, just as the shepherd boy at the end of *Wuthering Heights* (1847) attests to the presence of Catherine and Heathcliff's ghosts on the moors, both situations functioning as telling links between socio-political realities and the otherworldly. This remarkable poem, then, operates on many fascinating levels. It is often read biographically as a reflection on Patrick Brontë's relationship with Maria since, as Green has documented (2016, 201), Kirkstall Abbey is thought to be the

location where Patrick proposed to her. Alongside that reading, however, we might also interpret the work as engaging with a number of those key political issues—the outsider figure, the centrality of history to the political present, and the means of addressing and / or transcending socio-political structures—that Brontë's poetry addresses elsewhere, albeit at times in a more covert manner.

The significances of places—the cottage, the churchyard, the abbey ruin, the city street—are obviously central to Brontë's poetry, as they would be to the poetry of his children (especially Emily and Branwell). These are spaces that can focus and engender political debates about class, economics, belonging, (in-)security and the nation in times of national and international distress. In the final poem of *The Rural Minstrel*, 'The Harper of Erin', Brontë again deploys place and its associations in ways that consolidate many of the political ideas that his work overall considers. Here the harper—who in part recalls the harper of 'The Irish Cabin' in *Cottage Poems*—is situated 'High on a rock' overlooking 'sweet Killarney's shore' (line 3), the area of great natural beauty in County Kerry famed for its topography of mountains and lakes. As Chitham notes, Brontë never went to Killarney (2015, 118), although interestingly, Charlotte Brontë did when on her honeymoon with Arthur Bell Nicholls in 1854 (Harman 2015, 338). The area was a key tourist destination in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries and attracted many writers and artists who represented it through a range of cultural productions. In Brontë's poem, this cultural production is represented by the playing of the harp and the emphasis on singing, both well-established allegories for the writing of poetry. As with the volume prefaces, 'The Harper of Erin' reflects more widely on the role and purpose of art in the early nineteenth century. For while the harper details the beauties of the landscape—ironically when he says he is not going to sing of them (lines 11–18)—he increasingly emphasises that the ultimate subject of song / music / poetry should be 'highest themes divine' (line 28), identified here as the crucifixion ('the fatal wood, / Stained with his pure atoning blood' [lines 40–41]) and Christ's second coming, depicted, as so often in Brontë's poetry, through images of geological upheaval ('Before his presence, rocks and mountains flow' [line 81]). Art is therefore not only a means of addressing issues in the political world but also a means of aspiring to rise above them. Indeed, the speaker argues that such spiritually driven creativity will enable the singer-poet's enraptured soul 'To aim its flight, beyond the glowing skies' (line 111), a near-echo of the 'regions far beyond the sky' described in 'Kirkstall Abbey' (line 133). However, the quasi-mystical experience detailed here, like that in 'Kirkstall Abbey' and those in Emily Brontë's 'The Prisoner' and 'Stars' (both published in *Poems*, 1846), is impossible to sustain and the poem ends with a return to the temporal world and to the harpist wandering home with the resolution to 'tune his harp, another day' (line 119). That, significantly, is the last line of the poem and of the volume overall—a promise for art (song / poetry) to be revived again in the near future and, by implication, for it to be deployed to call for socio-political change on earth in preparation for the final resolution of all political tensions in the afterlife. Moreover, what Patrick Brontë leaves us with here is a work of considerable geopolitical significance. For while the harpist is specifically situated in Killarney, he is, as the poem's title asserts, 'The Harper of Erin', singing for his country and its

future. Indeed, the poem works hard to promote the importance of faith, art, engagement with nature and understanding of tradition as key to the ongoing development of modern Ireland. Further, by extrapolation and in the context of the work in *The Rural Minstrel* overall, this final poem might be read as providing a model for pursuing political and national stability more generally as many nineteenth-century countries continued to struggle with nationalism and the ideas and practices of state formation.

Conclusion

Patrick Brontë himself rarely ‘tune[d] his harp, another day’, rarely wrote another poem, after the publication of *The Rural Minstrel*. He composed the odd occasional verse, such as *The Phenomenon* in 1824, but his literary creativity and political engagement subsequently turned to prose in *The Maid of Killarney* (1818), which Melissa Fegan has insightfully read as a version of the Irish national tale (2025, 193–96), and his political letter writing and petitioning. However, Brontë’s poetry is a fascinating body of work, not always of great aesthetic worth but undoubtedly of important cultural significance, including for what it has to say about a range of contemporary socio-political issues. At the core of both *Cottage Poems* and *The Rural Minstrel* might be found a concern with maintaining the stability of the nation in the face of war abroad and industrial, economic and social unrest at home. In its repeated recourse to disenfranchised figures, Brontë’s poetry highlights the issues of political marginalisation and democratic exclusion that society should address. Under the guise of his ‘rustic muse’, the individual poems appear to reflect upon the multiple, often interconnected, ways of potentially achieving political cohesion and equality, including education for all; charity and cooperation; a commitment to the loving and respectful family; a commitment to community; hard work (of the social and religious kind rather than the monetised kind associated with developing industrial capitalism); a willingness to engage with different viewpoints; and a strong and unwavering Christian faith. For Patrick Brontë, political progress was clearly grounded in gradual change and reform rather than the uprising and revolution associated with much of the Continent. And as the frequent images of harpists, singers and minstrels across these two volumes suggest, it is in part the role of the poet to speak of such issues, overtly or covertly, with reflection and scrutiny. Certainly, in its commitment to exploring what might constitute a more democratic and well-regulated nation state, Patrick Brontë’s poetry offers an intriguing insight into the tense political world of the early nineteenth century.

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