

Oklahoma State University

“Oh, Drive These Cruel Doubts Away”:
The Scrupulous Conscience in the Poetry of Anne Brontë

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Introduction to Anne's Biography

Anne Brontë's status as a marginal writer within the Brontë family circle has been due to her work as a devotional writer, a label with not only literary but also personal significance of her own religious development as a poet. Her poems portray the nineteenth-century concept of religious melancholia and internal doubt manifesting into a psycho-religious condition of scrupulosity. Published in the 1920 collection of previously unpublished material from the original manuscript, Anne Brontë's poems from this period reflect her concern with the troubled, doubtful conscience progressing toward trust in God's grace and Christian sanctification. Taking into account Anne's Calvinist upbringing, the poems mirror her Methodist leanings in addition to the changing culture of the English church away from a strict, exclusivist doctrine of the Elect to the more mercy-inspired theology of the Wesleyan church. Anne's contributions to the Brontë collection include eight poems that express the soul transfixed with doubt and a poet preoccupied with a moralist vision distinct from her sisters' Gothic literary explorations. Anne's poetry reveals her speakers' hesitance to embrace Calvinist doctrine, perhaps revealing what her Methodist-leaning speakers would call the doctrine of the Elect as selective salvation. She is critical of Calvinism and sympathetic to the soul wavering between assurance and doubt of its salvation.

Scrupulosity is a psychological condition characterized by obsessive guilt and overwhelming concerns with religious issues and rituals. Modern psychiatrists categorize the syndrome as a variant of obsessive-compulsive disorder. The 19th century paradigm of scrupulosity, although characterized by melancholic tendencies once the condition has progressed, notes that scrupulous individuals express an anxious sensitivity toward real or perceived sin. The distinction between melancholia and modern depression lies in its expression

and theories of its origin. Diagnoses of melancholia emphasize the patient's internal temperament rather than positioning its origin from a fragile biochemistry. Personality, rather than neurological dysfunction, describes melancholia. Conceptually, melancholia originates from a patient's internal emotional orientation toward sadness, with a de-emphasis on environmental forces such as a patient's psychological history and parental upbringing as well as occupational conflicts. The etiology of modern depression acknowledges an intersected experience of neurology, personality, and interpersonal dynamics. Depression may result from patients' exhaustion from the condition, but modern physicians do not view a depressive episode as a catalyst for developing scrupulosity.

Sufferers of scrupulosity report intense preoccupations of fears of damnation and blasphemy, concerns with purity and moral behavior, as well as doubt over a perceived sin or moral failing. These fears and concerns are often so consuming, patients report intrusive thoughts that cloud their minds with distressing imagery. Further complicating modern diagnoses is the often-uneasy empirical task of defining the condition as a spiritual or mental disorder. Historically, the clergy encountered scrupulosity as a spiritual torment, not as a neurological disturbance. The disorder exemplifies the conflict between the mind and the soul, in which the modern, secular notion of the mind supersedes spiritual sickness once thought to be located in the soul. Although the twentieth-first century psychiatric community has identified scrupulosity in non-religious individuals, the clergy documented most cases prior to the nineteenth-century as spiritual conditions. Not until the advent of clinical categories of obsessive-compulsive disorder did scrupulosity shed its purely spiritual character. The disorder's classification moved from the confessional to clinical observations. For the purpose of this study, I will be using the two theoretical backgrounds of scrupulosity as a mental disorder and spiritual sickness to examine

the emotional sentiment of Anne's poetry and its relation to church history. I will be utilizing traditional religious texts on scrupulosity, as well as medical literature on obsessive-compulsive disorder, to deduce whether Anne exhibited scrupulous tendencies. However, the scope of this article is not to diagnose Anne with a 21st century medical label of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Instead, it is my intention to document possibilities of scrupulosity in Anne's poetry. The selected poems portray speakers with obsessive-compulsive tendencies that often depict them compulsively questioning their salvation; moreover, Anne's focus on lighting and environmental texture reflects an almost compulsive attention to exterior landscapes that mirror the speaker's preoccupation with light as a physical element likened to spiritual illumination. My focus is not to assign a fixed medical diagnosis, but to explore the influence of biography, the environment, and the theological climate of the English church on Anne's literary work. Any diagnosis is tentative, and only made to distinguish Anne as a devotional poet worthy of further investigation.

The nature of scrupulosity is closely associated with a troubled conscience, the performance of religious ritual, and a devastating sense of unattainable penance in the believer's spirituality. Scrupulous Christians experience a kind of obsessive irrationality. The believer ritualizes his or her faith to achieve a sense of emotional and mental stability; often rituals, such as reciting scripture obsessively or documenting one's sins in the confessional are makeshift constructions and coping mechanisms to ward off fear of God's judgment and damnation. Within modern psychological parlance, practitioners medicalize scrupulosity and assign the condition on the modern continuum of obsessive-compulsive disorder¹. Yet for writers and believers in early nineteenth-century England such as Anne Brontë, the lack of cohesion between scientific pathology and religious sentiment remained unexplored and unacknowledged within Protestant

circles. The priesthood, and most often that of the Catholic Church, encountered this malady in the parishes. Joanna Bourke explains that “for sincere believers, fearing the Christian deity was an appropriate response to His omnipotence—but for the scrupulous believer, an excessive fear of God ruined their lives, destroying peace of mind and confidence of spirit” (581). Yet the affliction is not primal fearfulness, but the aching belief of one’s own degeneracy and damnation. The scrupulous conscience is never at ease and in a continual state of creating rituals to appease one’s guilt. Documented cases of scrupulosity are evident in both religious writings and early psychological literature, prompting both religious communities and medical authorities to address the intersection of soul care and mental pathology. J.R.M Nolan contextualizes the history of the disorder, writing that “as long ago as the fifteenth-century St. Antoninus wrote: ‘Scruples often arise from a manic or depressive illness in which the imagination, and sometimes even the reason, are disturbed’” (355). If modern practitioners classify the disorder as symptomatic of a disturbed imagination, lay readers and literary critics can assess the effects on poets’ imagination and creative output.

Literature discussing Anne Brontë’s childhood and religious training indicates her sensitive conscience, a characteristic that distinguished her from her siblings. A comment from Charlotte reveals Anne’s unusual nature in the Brontë family: “When my thoughts turn to Anne” (Chadwick 173), Charlotte remarked years later, “they always see her as a patient, persecuted stranger,—more lonely, less gifted with the power of making friends even than I am” (Chadwick 173-174). Essential to understanding Anne’s psychology and sense of social isolation is Charlotte’s observation that explains the kind of distant role her younger sister occupied in the family. Charlotte’s language is illuminating. She describes Anne as “a patient, persecuted stranger” (Anne Brontë 10), constructing her sister through the rhetoric of sainthood, which

readers may or may not know as deliberate. Yet the effect of this description remains the same in revealing Anne as confined to the language of martyrdom. That Charlotte describes Anne in this manner suggests there was something unusual in her personality and role in the Brontë family. Unlike Charlotte's secular notions of womanhood, Anne's understanding of Christian femininity is bound to a code of piety that Charlotte stresses in her reflections on her sister. Conventionality, both religious and poetic, distinguishes Anne as a conservative stylist, but with radical spiritual leanings.

Nevertheless, Charlotte's opinions offer only limited, external perspectives on Anne's spirituality. For a deeper understanding of Anne's psyche, readings of her poems provide clues to what Charlotte termed her sister's "persecuted" state. Throughout the poems, there are undertones of a scrupulous conscience, weighing distraught emotions against rational certainties of salvation, and mini-narratives of spiritual doubt and weakened confidence in her sanctification. Each poem functions as a memoir of the soul suspended between doubt and liberation by intervention and recognition of the Divine. Still, scrupulosity is not so much seen through the poems' thematic content, but through more subtle characteristics, such as tone that borrows from the tradition of English hymnody, Anne's use of a destructive natural world to illustrate spiritual despair and awakening, and the poems' preoccupation with penance and self-accusation. Another commonality is Anne's admission of her guilt, which she theatricalizes for the sake of spiritual autobiography. Borrowing the language of evangelical confession, Anne's poems do not strictly follow the norms of devotional poetry. For while her verses do exalt the Creator, there is also an insular focus on the foibles of self-atonement and admissions of despair. Anne's devotional poetry is not so much oriented toward the Creator, but focused on the believer experiencing periods of doubt and spiritual illumination. A more accurate way to classify Anne's

poems would be to consider them as reflections on sanctification rather than records of moments of salvation. However, through her sincerity and the influence of hymns on the poems' structure, Anne individualizes her poems in ways that are inappropriate for congregational reading. Their simple, four-line stanzas make them easy for memorization and accessible for general, non-literary readers. They are autonomous in their structure since they detail one believer's thoughts and spiritual development and are dramaturgies of a writer working within and beyond the expectations of devotional literature. Lastly, the poems are incompatible with mass congregational reading by their honest admission of doubt and personal despair.

Biographical details of Anne's childhood suggest these feelings of spiritual inferiority which later surface in the poems. Elizabeth Langland notes how Anne, unlike the other Brontë children, "seemed most afflicted by a sense of her personal unworthiness" (3) which readers encounter in many of the poems by Anne's questioning and need for reassurance. Furthermore, her mother's death in 1821 "could account for her personal insecurity and doubt, for her preoccupation with life after death, for a sense of guilt and responsibility" (Langland 3) that reinforced in Anne a deep sense of penitence seen in "The Doubter's Prayer" and portrayed in the physical seclusion in "Fluctuations." Anne's poetry reflects an extension of these childhood insecurities, cloaked by religious sentiment, and betraying a scrupulous conscience that bears similarities to the personality and poetic work of 18th century poet and hymnodist William Cowper. I will later explore similarities of poetic structure and spiritual concerns in my discussion of Anne's "To Cowper" alongside Cowper's "Lines Written During a Period of Insanity." Family and acquaintances documented Anne as possessing poor health that impaired her delicate conscience by reminders of death. Her weakened physical and emotional state converged in a collapse in 1837 that appeared to have introduced her to profound spiritual

tensions and questioning. Burdened by physical illnesses that predisposed her to introspection and later depression, Anne's "spiritual and physical crisis intensified each other" (Langland 13) and she "'urgently requested' a visit from the minister of the Moravian church at Mirthfield, Reverend James La Trobe" (Langland 13). That Anne "urgently requested" the minister suggests she considered her body or soul to be in grave danger, and needed spiritual reassurance of some kind during her crisis in 1837. What exactly transpired during her meeting with the minister remains unrecorded, but this footnote in Anne's spiritual development provides insights into the poems' sense of personal urgency to acquire or reaffirm salvation.

The Medicalization of Sadness: Psychological Illness or a Disposition for Sainthood?

To understand Anne's religious poetics and concern with the Christian conscience, it is essential to define the nineteenth-century medical construction of religious melancholia and scrupulosity. Religious melancholia is a morbid lethargy, a sense of hopelessness, and despair toward one's spiritual state. Fears of damnation are a common symptom as well as introspection; literary critics and clinicians may regard this despair as a kind of depression depicted in the Psalms that address spiritual shortcomings and sinful inclinations. Religious writers have documented melancholia in Western Christianity centuries before Anne's poetry and classified the condition as an intermingling of spiritual and physical symptoms. As far back as the 12th century, German mystic Hildegard of Bingen recorded melancholia as a condition that encompassed "an onslaught of emotions such as sadness, despair, doubt, incredulity [that] accompanies this surfacing black bile" (Schiesari 155) within her medical observations that document the relationship between the body and the soul as intertwined to produce these symptoms. To the 12th century clinician, the sufferer's experience of melancholia is not confined to his or her neurochemistry, but originates in one's spiritual relationship with God and the

sufferer's consciousness of his or her own sinfulness. The believer realizes his or her inadequacy before a just and holy God, with a tendency to dwell on His judgments rather than his mercy.

Certainly modern readers could critique the melancholic and the scrupulous Christian for an exceptionally cruel and legalistic view of God's character, yet the quandary for clinicians and theologians is to correct an excessively fearful opinion of God while still affirming doctrines of his holiness and justice. Further complicating matters are theologians and literary critics who misappropriate melancholia with twentieth-first century notions of depression. Modern, secular psychologists characterize depression often through biochemical perspectives that stress brain dysfunction as the impetus for depression. The tradition of melancholic diagnosis, however, is far more theologically complex and rooted in Christian concepts of sin. Melancholia may produce physical symptoms of lethargy as well as mental suffering, but in religious circles has historically been viewed as symptomatic of spiritual conflicts within the sufferer, for "the melancholic is not just depressed (i.e., sad and despairing) but also skeptical, producing an affective nexus that leads the sufferer farther and farther away from God" (Schiesari 156). The key characteristic Schiesari identifies in her analysis is skepticism; the melancholic doubts God's goodness and may decline into poor compensatory behaviors such as apostasy or the legalism for which the scrupulous Christian is criticized.

In contrast to melancholia, scrupulosity in the Christian manifests fears of damnation, but the condition's etiology is far more obsessional and concerned with ritualized efforts of self-penitence than melancholia or modern concepts of depression. Scrupulosity may result from a melancholic temperament or may occur from the psychic and spiritual exhaustion of scrupulous rituals. The condition, therefore, is more cyclical in its effects and origins. Medical reports from the nineteenth century defined melancholy as a close associate of madness and characterized by

an “intensity of idea” (Berrios 299) and “that the mind is more strongly fixed on, or more frequently recurs to, a certain set of ideas than when it is in a healthy state...” (Berrios 299). The medical language of melancholy and scrupulosity during this period often characterize both conditions as lesser forms, or prefigures, to madness. Clinician “[Etienne] Esquirol (1820) sensed it: ‘the word melancholia, consecrated in popular language to describe the habitual state of sadness affecting some individuals should be left to poets and moralists whose loose expression is not subject to the strictures of medical terminology’” (Berrios 300). Interestingly, this diagnosis does not medicalize sadness in the same manner as modern psychologists might, but merely explains the disorder as an emotional condition that reflects the kinship of spiritual suffering that saints and poets share. Additionally, that Esquirol connects poets and moralists as prone to melancholic episodes appears in Anne’s own psychology and verse. The same sensitivity is evident in the moralist and the artist, both designations Anne embraced in her poetry. She did not view these roles as conflicting or compromises to her faith or artistic production, but as suitable roles to compose her devotional work. For “just as the penitent slips into a confessional, the author retreats into shame behind a religious interpretation of events and the conventions of spiritual autobiography” (Clark 62). This scenario that Clark describes is evident in Anne’s poem, “To Cowper,” which evolves the childhood religious narrative for more adult purposes to explore the religious and artistic influence of poets who composed before her.

Within Protestant literary and theological tradition, there have been recorded observations of scrupulosity, albeit described indirectly. These descriptions have emphasized its spiritual traits rather than its physical manifestations. Discussions about scrupulosity by Protestant writers have been mostly personal accounts rather than formal theological annotations, and center on issues of believers’ free will. The scrupulous Christian finds his or her conscience

besieged by an onslaught of tempting thoughts, trapped in a situation in which he or she feels oppressed by unwanted impulses, and wondering if these mental images are indicative of an unsaved soul. To the modern clinician of obsessive-compulsive disorder, temptation is indicative of obsessive neurochemistry. Scrupulous Christians interpret the onslaught of recurring mental imagery, some abhorrent and unsettling, as evidence of their degeneracy and possible damnation. Recorded in his journals in August 1848, Kierkegaard delineates the issue of sinful intention and obsessive pathology in the believer, explaining:

It is quite a particular form of spiritual tribulation when a man sins against his will, in the full sense of the word, haunted by the dread of sin; for example, when sinful thoughts come to him which he would more than willingly escape and does everything to avoid.... [In those cases] a man can truthfully say, I know that I did not occasion those evil thoughts, I know that I do everything I can to fight against them: consequently it is always against his will. (Fallon 75)

The motivation behind such thoughts is the determining factor in deciding the thought's sinfulness or innocence. The rituals, then, serve little purpose and instead it is God's decision alone and not the believer's ritual that determines a thought's sinfulness.

An industry of religious manuals in the Catholic Church effectively diagnosing the condition with instructions to remedy the disorder among the flock proliferated in nineteenth-century America and Great Britain. Unfortunately for Anne, British evangelicalism lacked widespread awareness of the condition and scrupulosity largely remained unaddressed in Protestant religious materials. This absence may account for Anne's separation even within her own family that Charlotte notes in her memories, a situation often reflected in her religious poems. The speaker in many of the poems is an isolated figure who confesses her sorrow in a

self-disclosing monologue or in a confessional stance before God. Catholic theologians recognized the condition as indicative of a Christian's misunderstanding of the doctrine of grace and "from the 1850s onward, the Catholic Church in both Britain and America had been moving in a more affective direction: not only did Jesus grow in importance, but God was being transformed from a punishing lawgiver towards a nurturing Father" (Bourke 583). Anne's Calvinistic upbringing in the 1820s, as well as the Protestant climate of England during the 1840s, likely did not expose her to such theological developments. She likely remained as isolated as her thinly veiled autobiographical speakers do in her poems. These developments within the Catholic Church, and absent in Protestant dominations, were not as condemning as perhaps some modern church historians may believe. A number of church authorities perceived scrupulosity as an indication of sainthood. Though a conscience was misinformed, it was also suggestive of a saint's passion for God. Priests interpreted the sensitive conscience as one not entirely disordered, but merely misdirected by incorrect theology or individual temperament. The sensitive poet could experience a misinformed conscience that could fuel a distorted imagination, in which the devotional poet could create a catalogue of images of God's judgment upon him or herself. Within a subset of Catholic circles, priests did not stigmatize scrupulosity as evidence of God's disfavor with a Christian. Instead, "scrupulous men and women suffered the pangs not of the damned, but of the saints. Books, published by the printers to the Pope, regularly justified themselves on the grounds that scrupulosity was a 'widespread and pernicious spiritual ailment'" (Bourke 581), an assessment that likely contributed to a sincere desire to comfort the afflicted, but could also have been part of an increasing approach to economically capitalize on spiritual afflictions.

Irrespective of her knowledge of this “Catholic condition,” Anne’s poems do reveal a concern with the development of the conscience that is distinctively her own. Anne’s contributions to the Brontë poetry collection feature scrupulous tendencies in action from childhood to adulthood. In “To Cowper,” Anne explores the relationship of the adult reflecting on herself as a child reader. She imagines herself as a child who mistakenly believes she understands Cowper’s suffering, yet the speaker as a child is ignorant of true spiritual pain. The poem’s setting evokes a bedtime ritual, in which a young Anne encounters Cowper through reading and deciphering the poetic text before her. Yet this Anne is not a literary critic; as a child, she responds to Cowper’s poetry sentimentally, crying over his verses. She remembers the telepathic communication they shared, spoken with the “language of my inmost heart” (“To Cowper” 5). Her later realization of the poet’s suffering awakens in her a greater sense of sympathy for others and provides perspective for her theatricalization of spiritual grief. Anne’s moralistic visions of child instruction and its implications for artistic and spiritual compassion and understanding are evident in the poem’s literary scene of a child reading. With dutiful attention she would “read them o’er and o’er again,/With floods of silent tears” (“To Cowper” 3-4), which by emphasizing the repetition of her reading, Anne not only evokes her kinship with the poet, but how reading continually influences the adult artist. In addition, Anne’s own self-absorbed afflictions deepen an understanding of Cowper’s despair that contributes to the poem’s discussion of her speaker’s lost innocence. She explains how as a child she “did not know the nights of gloom,/The days of misery:/The long, long years of dark despair,/That crushed and tortured thee” (“To Cowper” 13-16). Cowper’s poetry for the young speaker is no longer a collection of pastime reading, but a look into a distressed soul. “To Cowper” is a fitting preamble to Anne’s contributions as a thematic introduction to her possible scrupulosity. Cowper as a

fellow Christian and poet parallels Anne's own troubled conscience in her later poems. Both poets composed their work within a Calvinist paradigm that contrasted with the evolution of Methodism that emphasized a greater degree of spiritual democracy than the more exclusionist concept of the Elect. As poets who wrote and worshiped (or in Anne's case critiqued) within Calvinist circles, Anne and Cowper would have possibly spiritually flourished from a less hierarchal model of church doctrine and headship. Their poems appear conventional by their structure as opposed to Romantics such as Coleridge and Wordsworth, yet Cowper and Anne's interest in the psycho-dramatics of interior experiences of faith and mental turmoil mark them as more experimental than readers might first assume. Undoubtedly, Anne and Cowper's poems are individualistic in ways that Methodism would encourage. Their poems are open to emotional displays of faith, seek democratic ideals of congregational engagement, and reject a strict Calvinist interpretation of free will.

Evolutions of Calvinism to Methodism: Nineteenth-Century English Church

History

Contextualizing Cowper and Anne's private religious crises are denominational changes in English churches that signaled shifts from predominantly Calvinist theology to the 1739 rise of Methodism in London. With its greater emphasis on redemption and mercy, Methodism appears to have been an attractive doctrine for Anne as a woman prone to periods of guilt over her sinfulness and indecision over her salvation. Anne's memory of Cowper's own despair may have provided eerie similarities and premonitions between herself and the poet. Her crisis in 1837 could have inspired many of her poems' thematic concerns later composed in the 1840s. Methodism also seemed to have provided an artistic as well as a religious opportunity for Anne's poetry, as it was a "movement that emphasized personal experience, but was also infused with a

set of personal and communal disciplines as a means to a better life” (Hempton 31). These private and collective disciplines characterize Anne’s devotional poetry in terms of her conformity to the genre. She employs simple imagery and readable stanza arrangements, but the poems’ concerns are far more private than the accompanying lyrics to popular hymns. Methodist doctrine’s emphasis on personal revelation aids Anne’s poetic vision well, for just as the Methodist believer relies on personal interactions with God through prayer, the poet seeks private visions to communicate through verse.

Anne’s poems are both private and communal, exposing her scrupulous conscience unexpressed in Calvinist circles. This peripheral silence unaddressed in Protestant theology and pastoral counseling explains the solitary nature of Anne’s poems. Often her speakers are physically and emotionally isolated, which reflects Anne’s psychological turmoil and segregation from other believers. The poems are miniatures of an individual soul who finds Methodism alluring and assuring to her troubled conscience. However, it is not that Calvinism as a doctrine is resistant to concepts of grace and mercy, but only that in Anne’s experience of Calvinism the denomination seems to have provided her little ease in times of spiritual crisis. Methodism’s attention to God’s compassion offered Anne hope during her spiritual crises. In her study, “Anne Brontë and Her Bible,” Marianne Thormählen writes how Anne engaged in a personal and literary Bible study, marking relevant passages that for her held private and theological significance (342). She appears to have been a conscientious and dutiful lay scholar who notated her Bible seeking comfort and possible artistic inspiration from Old Testament poetic forms. Many of Anne’s poems such as “The Doubter’s Prayer” and “Despondency” borrow the rhetoric from the Psalms. Anne’s speakers grieve over their weakened faith and

ruminate on their past transgressions as they appeal to what appears to be a distant God, a god preoccupied with the affairs of other believers.

In terms of larger views of English society, Methodism offered an appealing counterpoint to Calvinism by its emphasis on God's mercy and its democratic method of evangelism. Essentially, "Methodism offered a plain gospel to a plain people, who, in the mass, were unwilling to embrace either the grim selectivity of Calvinism or the unemotional urbanity of Universalism" (Hempton 83), offering an alternative to the spiritual exclusiveness of the doctrine of the Elect. Unlike Calvinism, in which Anne would have had to relinquish her efforts of self-improvement and submit to a fatalistic Biblical interpretation, Methodism offered a measure of control in working out her salvation. Salvation, then, is not a matter of pre-determination by God, but a matter of free will oriented toward an individual developing a relationship with God. With regard to larger societal religious patterns, Methodism offered a degree of spiritual hope for those who considered themselves damned and forsaken. The denomination's increasing popularity in England was also due to its "emphasis on disciplined self-improvement, and its willingness to place itself in the way of special providences that was peculiarly well positioned to make advances among the populations of Britain and North America" (Hempton 11). The denomination's stress on self-improvement could have proven attractive to Anne's psychological state. For a scrupulous Christian bound to almost ritualistic self-doubt, Methodism's tendency toward self-improvement perhaps offered Anne a degree of self-control even as it enchained her to scrupulous examination of her soul.

Biographical Context: William Cowper's Artistic Influence and Representations of Melancholy

Examining Cowper's biography illuminates similarities between the poet and Anne's upbringing and spiritual life that would have an influence on Anne's composition of "To Cowper." Anne expressed an affinity with Cowper's own spiritual conflicts, devoting a poem extolling the poet's virtues amidst his psychic suffering. She seems to have recognized resemblances between them in temperament and concern with spiritual matters. Furthermore, the simple meter of Cowper's poems provided a rhythmic template for Anne's own devotional poetry. Cowper himself was a hymn writer with a large catalogue of texts. His spiritual life and biography seemed to have inspired Anne's poems discussing sanctification that she memorializes in "The Doubter's Prayer" and in "To Cowper." Cowper's upbringing was largely uneventful until 1786 when he experienced a psychotic break that resulted in an institutionalization at Nathaniel Cotton's asylum at St. Albans. Biographers have only conjectured the exact medical nature of Cowper's breakdown, yet a number of biographers believe religious melancholia exacerbated Cowper's insanity, arguing, "The principal cause of Cowper's melancholy lay in examining mysteries to discover its own condemnation" (Cowper 16). If this introspection, intensified by a poetic temperament, did factor into Cowper's mental decline, the episode bears significance to Anne's own experiences with doubt and a resulting religious crisis that occurred in 1837. In addition, Cowper's decline seems to have introduced certain moral dilemmas for Anne on the nature of God's goodness and provision. Kimiyo Ogawa introduces this problem by claiming that "if Cowper were truly good, but believed himself to be damned, there could not have been anything more perplexing, and his suffering expressed in his poems must have exacerbated not only her 'morbidly delicate religious conscience'²⁵ but her moral convictions" (6). This "morbidly delicate religious conscience" is code for scrupulosity itself, in which the conscience is trapped between recognition of the soul's degeneracy and accepting God's grace

that is accompanied by obsessive dwelling on past shortcomings. Anne recognizes Cowper's charity and purity in her poem, "To Cowper," and asks, "Are *these* the symptoms of a heart/Of heavenly grace bereft—/For ever banished from its God,/To Satan's fury left?" ("To Cowper" 37-40) that is captured in a strangely vocal line accentuated by the italicized "*these*" that brings to mind the congregational rhetoric Anne would later explore in "A Word to the 'Elect.'" "

In response to Cowper's sufferings, Anne composed her homage "To Cowper," a poem that recognizes the ethical and artistic problem of self-absorbed confessions masquerading as devotional poetry. The poem highlights the perception of one's unworthiness rather than focusing on Christ's atonement and mercy. The poem departs from the other verses through its orientation that focuses not only on the speaker's relationship with God, but on that of the fellow saints progressing toward sanctification amidst spiritual pain. Although the poem documents the relationship between two poets and believers, the exchange is private, not set within a congregational environment. In this manner, the poem reinterprets the genre to explore a child's spiritual and psychosocial development during literary activities. Readership for Anne is a prerequisite for kinship between poets and their readers who do not yet realize their sainthood. Yet the poem not only alludes to Cowper's periods of melancholia, but also foreshadows Anne's own obsessional torment that finds greatest expression in "The Doubter's Prayer" and "Fluctuations."

Cowper speaks of his own suffering that mirrors Anne's in his autobiographical poem, "Lines Written During a Period of Insanity." Tentatively believed to have been written in 1773, the poem is a veiled autobiographical rendering of Cowper's despairing mental state that would culminate in his admittance to Nathaniel Cotton's asylum. The poem utilizes imagery of executions and punishment to reinforce Cowper's despairing opinion of his soul. Monologue

merges with a dire theology, in which the speaker laments his impending punishment before a cruelly just God. He confesses he can “scarce endure delays of execution” (Cowper 2), revealing his suicidal impulses in metaphors that communicates sin’s criminality. Cowper leaves the sin unspecified, yet there is indication he perceives it as a betrayal of Christ. The speaker exists in an insulated state, for “man disavows, and Deity disowns” (Cowper 9) him in an evocation of a kind of purgatorial state of waiting for his spiritual destination which he believes to be Hell. It is the state of unknowing that torments the speaker. He is “weary, faint trembling with a thousand terrors” (Cowper 14) and the very fact that Cowper numerates his “terrors” suggests a scrupulous conscience ritualizing and categorizing mental images and accusations of its own depravity. Still, the poem may only be half-truthful. Cowper is only willing to disclose his “terrors” indirectly and never with the kind of naked confessionalism polite readers may find repulsive or unsettling. For the sake of discretion, Cowper does not articulate the sin aloud. Nick Rhodes considers that Cowper’s poems are “never indecorous” (15) for “even ‘Lines Written During a Period of Insanity’ for all its oneiric profusion of imagery, its hellish privacy, is careful to clothe the experiential horror in appropriate English Sapphics” (15). Like Anne’s verses that are patterned in memorable four line stanzas, Cowper’s stanza arrangement in “Lines Written During a Period of Insanity” reveal madness, but an organized madness nonetheless. Moreover, Cowper’s hesitation to expose this secret sin is more than a stylistic choice. His unwillingness to reveal the actual sin perhaps implies the scrupulous believer’s shame toward his or her disorder. This reluctance is especially problematic for the Protestant Christian given the absence of a confessional where the congregant may reveal his or her sin privately. Cowper and Anne’s Protestantism denied them a forum to disclose their doubts unless on the page and their

reluctance to reveal the nature of their temptations and desires suggests a scrupulous conscience retreating inward.

The Poems of Curren, Ellis, And Acton Bell: Anne's Contributions to Devotional Literature

Anne's contributions to the devotional genre provide telling counterpoints to her sisters' more Gothic verses. Rather than expanding on the Gondal and Angria fantasy of her childhood, Anne composes her poems to be more than ornamental discussions of her fantasy kingdom. Her sisters' private fantasy kingdoms appeared to have offered little spiritual or intellectual growth for Anne's devotional verse. For Anne, poetry serves both instructive and deductive functions. Yet if modern readers see Anne's artistic vision as less visionary than her sisters, a secular notion of the imagination informs their view. The imagination is not just a vehicle to explore the fantastical, but to discover her subjects' spiritual terrain. Relationships between herself and God provide just as much imaginative material as the politics and social hierarchies of these speculative kingdoms. As part of the Glass Town Federation, Anne's literary construction of Gondal suggest even these early literary efforts distinguished her from her siblings artistically. Christine Alexander notes that as "Anne matured and gained a greater experience of the outside world than Emily, she seems to have deliberately distinguished, in a way that Emily never did, between the fantasy she wished to retain for Emily's sake....and her relationship with God" (x1). This lack of fantasy, however, does not marginalize Anne as a poet. Instead, Anne's imagination is rooted in spiritual and psychological spheres. Anne's focus on scrupulosity in the Christian exhibits an interest in the disordered imagination. Aberrant thoughts and spiritual experiences take the place of military coups and diplomacy. Considering these private, psychological influences, Anne's poetry exemplifies and exceeds 19th century conventions of devotional verse. In terms of structure, Anne models her poems after the simple pattern of hymns. Usually

composed of four line stanzas, Anne's poems are in common time. Often stanzas are written in lines of four, contributing to the idea of the poems as four part harmony hymns. Nevertheless, the subject material is not as worship focused as traditional hymns. The poems address a Christian's internal impressions and experiences. Doubt, despair of past sins, and feelings of inferiority are all topics for consideration.

Dated August 2, 1844, "Fluctuations" describes the speaker's psychological experience of doubt. Anne explores this situation by representing the speaker's indecision with the fluctuating atmosphere. She evokes images of the movement of planets and slants of light as vehicles of spiritual illumination. Unlike the other poems, "Fluctuations" expresses both pagan and Christian themes of doubt and personal revelation, as well as detailing the supernatural forces at work in speaker's hope against the despair denoted in the poem's night atmosphere. Even the poem's title refers to the speaker's unstable emotional state that is alternatively hopeful and despairing. Anne equates physical sightlessness with spiritual darkness when she asks about the heavenly body she observes, "is it the Moon again?" ("Fluctuations" 32), revealing the darkness and her hope for a heavenly body's illumination. Atmospheric shifts and sightings of planetary bodies appear in this verse, as the weather "fluctuates" between day and night. This atmospheric changeability emphasizes how the sun, moon, and stars reflect the speaker's inner psychological state by their luminescence that represents hope in the darkened landscape. Moreover, the planets' obscurity highlights the speaker's encroaching sense of despair when her sight is compromised. The moon is a comforting, strangely pagan figure that seems to counteract Anne's devotional vision, yet the poem still contains Christian undertones of redemption.

The speaker's fragile psychological state is transfixed on fleeting, insubstantial moonlight. She cries out that "now—that light is gone!" ("Fluctuations" 16) in a manner that

signifies the environment's terror. A chilling isolationism repeatedly manifests itself in Anne's overall poetic structure as the stanzas wax and wane in the speaker's assessment of the impending darkness. Anne fragments the poem's armature, interlocking the speaker's doubts and despair. cursory readings of the poem may suggest a romanticized view toward the speaker's suffering. Readers imagine the speaker superimposed on the landscape (perhaps even the moors where Anne spent her childhood and early adulthood). "Fluctuations" is more classicist both in imagistic and tonal capacity than the collection's other poems. Images of the moon and planetary rotations remind readers of British pagan mythology and ancient practices of star charting. Yet these allusions to classical poetry contribute to an atmosphere of physical alienation that removes the poet from her Christian ethos. A closer inspection reveals the poem as an expression of Anne's position as an evangelical Christian removed from British romanticization and pagan classicism. This emphasis on alienation and shadows as a representation of spiritual abandonment appears in the following lines: "And I was darkling left,/All in the cold and gloomy night" ("Fluctuations" 18-19). Anne's personification of herself as a "darkling" reveals engaging folkloric history. In 1882, folklorist Abram Smythe Palmer in his *Folk-etymology: A Dictionary of Verbal Corruptions Or Words Perverted* explains darkling is a deviation from the Old English adverb corresponding to the phrase "in the dark," (92) but its more modern context is that of an adjective. (Keats uses darkling in his "Ode to a Nightingale" as a term of endearment. With that history in mind, Anne's usage ironically refers to herself as cast out in the dark, yet the word implies a God who responds to the seeking Christian). Anne employs the more modern adjectival usage, and while remembering her apprenticeship and work as a devotional writer, her usage of darkling suggests her sinful nature that colors the poem with quasi-religious undertones and an atmosphere of penitence.

The following verses conform to the poem's religious nature, albeit more allusively. In a possible reference to the star of Bethlehem, the speaker relates how "a little star/Shone forth with trembling ray" ("Fluctuations" 21-22). Superimposed above the landscape, the image of the star returns to Anne's fascination with heavenly bodies that reinforces the poem's concern with the environment mirroring the speaker's internal state. This star, this "trembling ray" ("Fluctuations" 22) is the mutable force of the poem. It appears as an indecisive, fleeting planetary body readers speculate may symbolize as weakened Christian faith. Anne's speaker is like an astronomer of the soul who charts the heavenly bodies for light and direction in her psychologically darkened world. But if readers believe the star's guidance is tantamount to Christ-like assurance, Anne proceeds to disrupt this interpretation. For she "smiled," ("Fluctuations" 27) and "yet trembled while [she] gazed—/But that soon vanished too!" ("Fluctuations 27-28). The dying star signifies not only decay and obliteration, but also nature's inability to keep its self sustained apart from a divine power. Stars and comets appear and vanish which again contribute to the poem's concern with unstable landscapes. Furthermore, the "earthly meteor" ("Fluctuations" 25) that "blazed/The gloomy darkness through" ("Fluctuations" 25-26) is a continuation of the planetary theme, yet each planetary orbit promises light and hope for the speaker, but ultimately leaves her disappointed. This disappointment reveals the futility of pagan worship for the soul longing for Christian assurance. Each marking of the intruding environmental darkness represents the pagan's misplaced devotion to the creation, rather than to the Creator. Ironically, the absence of God only reinforces that His presence is needed. The Christianized Anne unveils herself when the speaker beseeches "Kind Heaven!" ("Fluctuations" 33) to "increase that silvery gleam" ("Fluctuations" 33) and illuminate her surroundings.

The collection's next poem, "Despondency" (1841) adheres to the more traditional pattern of devotional poetry that reflects Anne's psycho-religious struggle with Christian growth and sanctification. She recounts that she has spiritually "gone backward in the work" ("Despondency" 1), revealing a sense that her efforts for spiritual self-improvement are futile, that she is regressing rather than developing her faith. Represented more by the stanza arrangement rather than its tone, Anne's despondency is structural rather than ornamental. The break between lines four and five emphasizes the speaker's labored, fractured thoughts and speech, with thoughts that are "heavy and dull as lead" ("Despondency" 4), which characterizes her depression. If we look at the typical hymn structure, "Despondency" contradicts the practice of flowing, legato lines, and instead represents the speaker's persistent struggle to renounce her sinfulness in halting phrasing. The speaker's self-awareness is accompanied by the numbing effect of the scrupulous conscience exhausted by legalism. Her despair, then, is that she emotionally feels nothing. She feels an affect toward her faith she recognizes with both an objective and subjective fear. She understands this emotion as an "an earnest grief, a strong desire,/As now I cannot feel" ("Despondency" 15-16). Lacking emotional sensation, this line reveals Anne's melancholic tendencies as spiritually rooted rather than originating from a more modern notion of a chemical imbalance. Depression, particularly for those with a strong religious bent, is not a matter of neurological brain chemistry gone awry, but resulting from a separation from God and an artistic temperament. At seventeen, Anne's tender conscience morphed beyond a spiritual eccentricity. An illness in 1837 thrust a realization of possible death and damnation on Anne, who in her chaos, demonstrated either a distrust or aversion to Calvinism offered through its clergy. This episode appears to be the first documented experience of Anne's spiritual crises:

More important is the religious crisis that accompanied her bodily collapse. No doubt, the spiritual and physical crisis intensified each other. At this ebb, Anne Brontë ‘urgently requested’ a visit from the minister of the Moravian church at Mirthfield, Reverend James La Trobe. The Moravian religion focused on pardon and peace; it recognized the possibility of doubt and failure even in the redeemed. (Langland 13)

The illness appeared to have a profound impact on Anne’s spirituality that would provide useful artistic material. She remembers, “There are have been times when I have mourned/In anguish o’er the past” (“Despondency” 9-10), which implies a scrupulous conscience ruminating on past transgressions. This self-excoriating memory mirrors the poem’s introduction when the speaker talks of having “gone backward” (“Despondency” 1). Additionally, Anne understands time as cyclical and reveals the scrupulous conscience obsessing on past sins. Instead of conceptualizing time as linear, which allows for sanctification despite the sinner’s transgressions, Anne remembers events that condemn her. Her excessive rumination parallels the anxiety episode in obsessive-compulsive disorder, in which the sufferer mentally rehearses a past fault or an anxious episode, and therefore creates a physical ritual to counteract the fear. The poem operates in a repetitive, inconclusive structure that mimics the scrupulous thoughts. Her obsession with memories inform Anne’s understanding of time and forgiveness. She thinks of God as predetermining her state as a Christian as though He turns a clock backwards to remind her only of her faults and not her state of grace. The scrupulous conscience is a conscience that cannot forget. Whether it is sensitive biochemistry or a mistaken understanding of theology that hinders the conscience, Anne’s fluctuating emotions highlight a distressed soul. Unlike the personification of her soul as inert lead that is immobile from guilt, Anne later actively

characterizes herself as a repentant prodigal who raises her “suppliant hands on high,/While tears fell thick and fast” (“Despondency” 11-12). The speaker’s soul vacillates between a melancholic, inert state to expressing the tormented, anxious ruminations of a scrupulous Christian. Her pose, with hands upraised, not only communicates the fluctuating desires of a Christian, but also contains allusions to Methodism’s greater openness to emotion as an indication of genuine repentance and worship. Christian worship is not confined to recitations of correct theology, but expressed through the heart and the body.

The speaker confesses her renewed love and faith, “As if my heart would never cool,/Or wander back again” (“Despondency” 23-24) before ruminating in the next stanza, “how many times/My feet have gone astray!” (“Despondency” 25-26). Not simply the Holy Ghost, but phantoms of past sins, dominate her experience of faith. Her love blighted by memories of past failures, the speaker’s tender conscience constantly reminds her of her past. The speaker’s soul vacillates between doubt and assurance represented by the structural fluctuation of the stanza arrangement. The poem concludes with the speaker emotionally exhausted from her indecision. She is drained from her past obsessing and proclaims that “I cannot weep, but I can pray” (“Despondency” 33), an action that appears to contradict her previously emotionally deadened response to faith. It is as though the speaker reverts to a Calvinist position of restrained emotion. Rather than the characteristically Methodist response to spiritual conviction through weeping, the speaker’s desire for prayer exhibits a return to communicate to God in acceptable forms.

Finished in 1842, and in contrast to the public settings of devotional verse and romanticized encounters with Christianity, “In Memory of a Happy Day in February” differs from the other poems by its autobiographical setting. Here, the poem has a specific location in the time of year betwixt winter and spring. Like its predecessor “Fluctuations,” this poem’s

environment alternates between despairing mundaneness and spiritual hopefulness. The landscape is desolate, full of withered grass and wild, unrestrained wind. The poem perhaps references Anne's post as a governess in April of 1839 at Blake Hall in Ireland. Finding the instruction of her rebellious pupils difficult, scholars have conjectured that these incidents abroad provided the dramatic material for her first novel, *Agnes Grey*. Yet the title of the poem is somewhat misleading. The speaker is not so much concerned with happiness as she is with illumination, of joy that "shone direct from Heaven" ("In Memory" 24). This "joy" is heavenly knowledge of God's favor on her. Also noteworthy is Anne's memorialization of the day in the title that reads like a diary entry or a letter home as she records time and preserves memories. The poem may very well serve as a poetic time capsule of her experiences as a governess in Ireland by documenting what at first appears to be an alienating landscape until the sun intervenes as a reminder of God's providence. She writes how she was "alone, for those I loved/lived far away from me" ("In Memory" 5-6), written in memories that focus on physical as well as emotional distance. Even though Anne is an exile, her isolation enables her to discern the false charm of creation. She asks, "Was it the smile of early spring/That made my bosom glow?" ("In Memory" 9-10), in the same manner that echoes back to the doubts in "Fluctuations." Doubt extends not only to religious affairs, but also to the sensory experience of the natural world. She doubts whether it is spring or an internal spiritual awakening that gives her joy. This doubt, characteristic of a tender conscience, fluctuates between identifying the source of joy as internal or external. Furthermore, this doubt reflects Anne's theological preferences between Calvinism and Methodism. The Calvinist Anne thinks of divine revelation as an external force that imparts grace on her. By contrast, the Methodist Anne considers divine revelation as an inward, emotion-based response. It is the difference of perceiving God as operating through

active or passive verbs. These differences for a scrupulous conscience portray a God who is either receptive to a Christian's efforts or operating under a predetermined set of expectations for a believer. The question of whether one can negotiate with God is often the scrupulous Christian's greatest concern. Liberated from the doubts of her more religious poems, Anne is less concerned with appeasing God as much as experiencing Him.

One of the poem's striking qualities is its narrative pattern and its use of memory. By incorporating questions to further her narrative, Anne refers to the scrupulous conscience through her questioning and doubting. Rejecting her past pleas for self-forgetfulness, Anne ironically asks to remember the day. Anne's speaker divorces memory from scrupulous ritual, instead celebrating the day when she cries, "Oh, let its memory stay with me/And never pass away" ("In Memory" 3-4). She allows time to flow unhindered by regrets or past shame. Critics could interpret Anne's longing for memory as a respite from scrupulosity—the poem is an anti-scrupulous poem, and one that focuses on Anne's assurance of God's love for her. Unlike in "Despondency," in which obsessional memory is a potential indication of scrupulosity, memory in "In Memory of a Happy Day" is less accusatory and condemning to Anne's speakers. The speaker on Anne's theoretical Irish highlands utilizes memory to foster a specific kinship with environmental and elemental forces. The speaker's focus on wind, rain, and sun reflect journeys and observations outside of church spaces that reminds readers of Methodist practices of outdoor evangelism. Additionally, Anne associates memory not as obsessional torment, but as reminders of God's grace.

Nonetheless, Anne's environment recedes into the poem's background as her speaker turns more introspective. She writes that this realization is "sweet, but neither sun nor wind/Could raise my spirit so" ("In Memory" 11-12) which suggests her awakening is spiritual.

Nature reminds her of divine love, but does not personify the divine. The poem exemplifies older notions of devotional poetry, but transplants this spiritual awakening outside the church and into the natural world. Her speaker is alone on the moors communing with God, no intercessor present, or confined to a physical church. The poem is also a conversion narrative documenting the speaker's spiritual awakening, but one that focuses on sanctification as much as the initial decision. Her tendencies to rely on emotion appear to align more closely with Methodist conversion experience. Phyllis Mack argues that "Methodists were preoccupied by questions about the origin and nature of feelings and the transference of feelings from one person to another" (15). These considerations were likely pertinent to Anne as a poet. Anne evokes the day on the moors as an emotionally charged experience, but also one with intellectual inclinations. The speaker remembers she experienced a "rapture deep and strong,/Expanding in my mind" ("In Memory" 15-16) that suggest her realization was imaginative or occurring in her mental landscape. Identifying the experience as "rapture" both exemplifies and undercuts the word's religious meaning. The word evokes spiritual realization, but the speaker locates faith "expanding in [her] mind," which is the opposite situation of scrupulosity as a condition that confines the mind to ritualizing.

Anne's emphasis on emotion reappears when she claims she "felt there was a God on high/By whom all things were made" ("In Memory" 25-26) in a statement that reveals her assurance through sentiment rather than theology. Unlike Calvinism's emphasis on theological knowledge and repentance on a believer's status with God, Methodism seems to have provided Anne license to explore the state of her heart in relation to God. And like the poet who observes the natural world around her for inspiration, Anne explains how she "saw His wisdom and His power/In all His work displayed" ("In Memory" 27-28). Anne equates spiritual understanding

with light, as though faith reveals a God's goodness in His Creation. The speaker remarks how "deep secrets of His providence/In darkness long concealed,/Unto the vision of the soul/Were graciously revealed" ("In Memory" 33-36), which again links physical sight with the illumination of His presence. Rebecca Styler explains how much of Anne's spatial orientation in her poems exposes her emotional states by utilizing "figures of ascent, sky, sunshine, light, warmth and *expansion* [emphasis mine]. The opposing world, the state of alienation, is associated with earth, coldness, darkness, and confinement" (Styler 52). The speaker's expansion in her mind is realization of her faith in God's mercy. Given scrupulosity's obsessive focus on ritualizing to abate anxiety episodes, when the speaker narrates how the rapture expanded in her mind, it is as if her mind is liberated from the restrictions of endless doubting. Anne completes the poem with an allusion to Moses, writing that "I longed to view that bliss divine/Which eye had never seen;/Like Moses, I would see His face/Without the veil between" ("In Memory" 45-48). The allusion accentuates a kinship between Anne and the Israelite prophet. Burdened by a tender conscience and her unstable self as a Christian, Anne perhaps identified with Moses's doubt as God's appointed leader.

Of all the poems in the collection, "The Doubter's Prayer" is perhaps the most autobiographical. Rather than simply extolling God's virtues, the poem mimics the simple, hymn-like quatrain yet details the ambiguity and doubt of Christian sanctification. This experience of Christian doubt is accompanied by a kind of self-consciousness of the speaker's spiritual condition. Furthermore, Anne's examination of God as a being inaccessible to the human sensory experience gives the poem a quality of physical distance between herself as a depraved sinner and a just, holy God. Anne describes God not with the characteristics he possesses, but those that He does not have. Within her doubting mind, He is a vacuous, shapeless

force who is “unseen, yet seen in all around” (The Doubter’s Prayer 2) in a description that denotes God’s inaccessibility because of her degenerate nature. This “unseen” God is one who reveals Himself to other believers, yet appears distanced to her troubled conscience. Her self-consciousness magnifies when she continues that He is “remote, but dwelling everywhere,/Though silent, heard in every sound” (The Doubter’s Prayer 3-4), again suggesting He conceals Himself from her. Anne is deaf, dumb, and blind to His presence, as if her neurochemistry is shattered. Moreover, Anne’s focus on doubt’s deadening of the senses parallels the bio-spiritual implications of scrupulosity. In her spiritual crisis, her senses are muted from depression and suggest that an overly sensitive conscience can influence the mind. In the preface of the 1850 edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, Charlotte recognizes this distance interposed between her sister and God. She remarks how Anne’s religious sensibilities captured the attention of divine forces, and how:

Without rendering her a prey to those horrors that defy concealment, it subdued her mood and bearing to a perpetual pensiveness; the pillar of a cloud glided constantly before her eyes; she ever waited at the foot of a secret Sinai, listening in her heart to the voice of a trumpet sounding long and waxing louder. (Brontë V)

Charlotte communicates Anne’s spiritual suffering with Old Testament references to Mount Sinai and “pillar[s] of a cloud” that depict Anne as some Israelite prophet, whose sensitivity to God’s presence compels her to speak (or write) her visions. And Anne’s depression continues to linger. The poem’s first stanza begins with a depressed state before returning to a more passionate middle section. Unlike the simple verses of devotional literature that focus on the worship of God, Anne’s poem is far more personal than typical examples of the genre. That

Anne even admits a propensity to doubt reveals a confessionism not fitting for the pulpit or the choir loft. In the poem's middle stanzas, she forsakes the contemplative tone for the naked, confessional cry for faith in a doubting mind. As if readers are eavesdropping on a private moment of prayer, Anne describes her "soul [that] ascends in prayer" ("The Doubter's Prayer" 11) that reaches for this inaccessible God. Anne breaks this contemplative moment by her passionate cry with the line, "Oh, give me—give me Faith" ("The Doubter's Prayer" 12) which shocks the reader from the singsong, quatrain structure into a display of passion found in moments of intense communion with God. The hyphen functions almost like a breathless pause during an agonized appeal. No longer following the structure of church music, Anne then breaks the chorus and reveals the extent of her doubt. This disjointed line illustrates a soul tormented by intense doubt and desire for spiritual fidelity. As the poet consumed with scrupulous impulses, Anne alludes to the hymn form to render a Christian preoccupied with church literature and paradoxically, to explore the relationship between personal confession and church genres, as well as the private, doubting conscience. Owing to Anne's virtuous life, her fascination with guilt and damnation may appear as a purely emotional response to Calvinist doctrine. Modern readers therefore must consider the emphasis on virtuous living even as it is:

Hard for us, present-day citizens of a secular world, to understand how a mere girl who obviously led a particularly blameless life, and who managed to persuade herself that God's mercy will extend even to the worst villains, could accuse herself of sinfulness the way Anne Brontë did, and torment herself with doubt of her ultimate salvation. (Thormählen 342)

When readers contextualize Anne's religious upbringing as well as the personal tragedies of the Brontë family (such as the premature death of her mother, which the sensitive Anne may

have interpreted as a punishment) a narrative of guilt emerges. In many respects, “The Doubter’s Prayer” represents the weary striving of an adult, Biblically literate woman with the interiorized fears of a young child who equates God as a parental figure. Anne’s desire to alleviate her doubt is not contingent on congregational approval or even religious sentiment, but a wish to form a distinctly evangelical relationship with God—one that is characterized by a close, almost paternal relationship. This evangelical experience of communion with God emphasizes Christianity’s possibility to recreate human, parental relationships that have been lost through death. Evangelicalism in Anne’s poetry begins to take on a medical purpose as well. Within Anne’s devotional work, scrupulosity is now a distinct Protestant ailment. She confesses her faith is fragile when she exclaims that “while [she] clasp[s] it to my breast,” (“The Doubter’s Prayer” 19) she “often feel[s] it slide away” (“The Doubter’s Prayer” 20). Her admission indicates the double-minded, demoralizing scrupulous moment of doubt overwhelming her faith. Rather than merely accepting doubt as a normal aspect of Christian experience, Anne reverts to her notion of doubt as a test of her spiritual sincerity. The poem concludes with formal theological response that affirms Christ’s divinity as Anne requests for God to provide a “shield of safety o’er my head” (“The Doubter’s Prayer” 47) and a “spring of comfort in my heart” (“The Doubter’s Prayer” 48), with these two requests highlighting her desire for mental and emotional peace.

In the introduction of the 1850 edition of *Selections from Poems of Acton Bell*, Charlotte provides evidence for Anne’s possible scrupulosity. Charlotte herself discovered “mournful evidence that religious feeling had been to her but too much like it was to Cowper” (Brontë V) in an uncanny spiritual connection between her unassuming, outwardly virtuous sister and the “mad” poet. Charlotte was likely aware of Anne’s devotional reading, and was perhaps even

conscious of Anne's artistic and spiritual respect for Cowper. The domestic reading situation conjured in Anne's poem, "To Cowper" may have drawn these parallels more distinctly in Charlotte's mind. Charlotte admits her sister appeared "sad, as if her whole innocent life had been passed under the martyrdom of an *unconfessed physical pain*" [emphasis mine] (Brontë V), an observation that implies a secret conflict within Anne's body or mind. This private wound may have indicated not only a tender conscience, a condition more abstract and one historically sanctioned in the church before psychiatry, but perhaps psychological or even neurological pain. Within the paradigm of 19th century notions of depression, Charlotte's comparison of Anne to Cowper suggests a mental conflict had accompanied her sister's short life and poetic vocation. Still, Charlotte qualifies her memory of her sister with the explanation that whatever the nature of Anne's physical suffering, it was in a "milder form" (Brontë V) than Cowper's even as she admits Anne possessed a "too tender conscience" (Brontë V).

Observations from the Moravian minister, Reverend LaTrobe, provide even more discussion on Anne's deteriorating mental state during her illness in 1837. He remembers Anne was suffering from both physical and spiritual torments, explaining how she was:

Suffering from a severe attack of gastric fever, which brought her very low, and her voice was only a whisper: her life hung on a slender thread...I found her well acquainted with the main truths of the Bible respecting our salvation, but seeing them more through the law than the gospel, more as a requirement of God than His gift in His Son. (Chadwick 382)

The minister's impressions coincide with Charlotte's memories of Anne's temperament, and provides context for her poems' dramatic structure. Many of her poems, particularly the eight works discussed here, feature a speaker spatially isolated from others. No direct mention of

family or friends appears, nor are there references to her worshiping in a body of believers.

Isolation, however, is not simply a device to display Anne's introverted personality. Instead, the speaker's isolation reflects the experience of scrupulosity. Confined to its anxious obsessions, the scrupulous conscience operates imprisoned by its fears of damnation and efforts to appease its anxiety through its rituals. These rituals may be quietly private, such as Anne questioning her faith, or they may be outlandishly pathological characterized by endless trips to the confessional. Hindered by doubts, the scrupulous believer feels segregated from more assured Christians. The only mention of a body of believers is the Calvinists Anne critiques in "A Word to the 'Elect.'" Otherwise, her speakers are isolated geographically and allude to environments shrouded by physical darkness.

Scholars first attributed "There Let Thy Bleeding Branch Atone" to Emily, believing the poem to have been written around 1845 before later assigning the verse to Anne. Structurally, the poem is close to a hymn in its title and meter. Anne also thematically connects the poems with her preoccupation with nature. She refers to the cross as a branch, not as an instrument of punishment. It may seem the choice is insignificant, until readers recognize that her word choice indicates the Tree of Life. Instead of concentrating on the cross, Anne focus on the "bleeding branch" both obscures the crucifixion and communicates a more positive representation of the crucifixion. Even though this "bleeding branch" still communicates the horror of Christ's death on the cross, the image of the tree expresses the cross's restorative, regenerative effect on sinners' transgressions absolved through Christ's sacrifice. Anne asks that "there let thy bleeding branch atone/For every torturing tear" ("There Let Thy Bleeding" 1-2). This "torturing tear" perhaps implies scrupulous tendencies or a melancholic disposition. "Torturing" implies her pain has been constant and unremitting. She then asks, "shall my young sins alone,/Be everlasting

here?" ("There Let Thy Bleeding" 3-4) in a phrase that suggests the tree reminds her of her sins, as if burnished in the wood. In addition, that the speaker refers to these sins as "young" suggest she is an older speaker reflecting on youthful disgraces or indiscretions. The question concerns whether or not sin is fixed on one's character or if it can be totally absolved, both in reality and in the speaker's memory. At a cursory reading, the question seems innocuous enough, until readers realize it perhaps personifies the scrupulous conscience repeatedly concerned with blotting out one's sin. The sin feels as though it is a mark that cannot be removed; it stands embroidered on the tree or a mark reminding the speaker of her shame. The poem then turns away from its hymn-like reverence. The speaker asks, "Who bade thee keep that carved name/A pledge for memory?" ("There Let Thy Bleeding" 5-6). This "pledge for memory" etched on the tree personalizes God's commitment to the sinner despite her transgressions. The image, like the tree substituted for the cross may seem innocent or even incongruent with Anne's message. However, when readers consider the carving is almost reminiscent of a lover's etching on a tree, the poem loses its static attribution to hymns, and briefly enters into the realm of love poetry. A kind of call and response pattern develops in the poem. The speaker addresses this etching, expressing an almost a nihilist desire for oblivion, arguing the etching on the tree exemplifies the "oblivion [that] ever came/To breathe its bliss on me" ("There Let Thy Bleeding" 7-8). Readers may also wonder if Anne refers to Cowper's despair in the following lines when she recalls the "the 'wilder maze/Of mad hours left behind" ("There Let Thy Bleeding" 9-10). Anne's speaker seems to be free of past scrupulous tendencies, as the "'wilder maze" represents the torturing, circuitous labyrinth of scrupulosity "left behind." The image corresponds with insinuations of a private mental prison. The "mad hours left behind" ("There Let Thy Bleeding"

10) demonstrate the most explicit indications of disrupted mental wellbeing than the previous poems.

Anne's criticism of Calvinism is most prominent in "A World to the 'Elect,'" a poem that exposes not only the unsympathetic adherents of predestination, but also convey Anne's private distaste for the doctrine. The poem contains oblique references to the doctrine of Universal Salvation that portray Anne as a religious radical, irrespective of her traditional poetic forms that deliver her theology. Concerning the doctrine of Universal Salvation, Anne revealed in a letter to the Reverend David Thom how she "cherished it from [her] very childhood—with a trembling hope at first, and afterwards with a firm and glad conviction of its truth" (Orel 121). Anne's comments reveal thoughtful insights into her method of determining theological truth. While the letter appears to support the theory that Anne was a seeker of truth via intellectual treatises, if childhood observations can reveal her temperament and religious sensibilities, it appears her fragile sense of doubt contributed to her acceptance of Universal Salvation. She continues to write how this theology was a "consoling creed" (Orel 121) in which "we see how liable men are to yield to the temptations of the passing hour; how little the dread of future punishment" (Orel 121). These "temptations of the passing hour" could theoretically be the scrupulous conscience and its preoccupation with obsessive rituals to abate anxiety.

Prominent in the poem is Anne's humanitarian approach to salvation. She does not define her understanding of Christianity as a religion based on exclusion. God is not a petty judge, but a merciful god. Anne questions her Christian brothers and sisters' very compassion and sincerity, for "is it sweet to look around, and view/Thousands excluded from that happiness?" ("A Word" 7-8), as the God they worship is not their supporter, but their judge. Anne's speaker adopts the vocal register of an apostle exhorting his flock. The "thousands excluded" evokes images almost

of an aerial view of people excluded from heaven's gates. The speaker conjures a sense of spatial distance in her description of those excluded from God's grace. Her authoritative tone distances her from the Calvinists she chastises. The "elect" emerge in the poem as a collective entity removed from individual dissent or personality. Anne "elects" them for critique and church discipline. Secular readers could even interpret Anne's criticism as inflexible itself, potentially even unchristian. But for Anne, the threat of Calvinism cuts much deeper than an esoteric debate. When readers remember her letters to the Reverend Thom as well her religious crisis in 1837, a clearer picture of Anne's theology develops. The poem shifts from congregational reproach to a more personal memory. The speaker writes, "There lives within my heart/A hope, long nursed by me" ("A Word" 35-36), with this "hope" pertaining to Anne's desire to alleviate a sensitive conscience that had propelled her to seek other denominations besides Calvinism. That this hope was "long nursed" alludes to Anne's crisis at seventeen. Autobiography clarifies Anne's desire for a merciful God extending grace through Universal Salvation.

Anne's interrogative rhetorical structure demonstrates her intense, personal vehemence against her Calvinist "congregants." This vocal styling is reminiscent of Christ's rhetorical patterning in the Gospels when interacting with the Pharisees. She questions, "Is yours the god of justice and love?/And are your bosoms warm with charity?" ("A Word" 19-20) that points to the congregants' hypocrisy that suggest the social consciousness of more liberal authors of religious tracts. Anne's scenario mirrors Mathew 23:27 when Christ laments, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness" (*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*). Even more controversially than Anne's masculine tone is the implication that charity toward one's fellow man, and not simply theological adherence, determines a Christian's

salvation. In this respect, it is useful to examine Anne's theological orientation as aligned with those on the periphery of the elect. Her speaker advocates for those excluded from the entry of a Calvinist heaven. A description of Mr. Hatfield, the minister in *Agnes Grey*, contains an unflattering portrait of the clergy that couples well with the speaker's disapproval in "Word to the 'Elect.'" Although there is no explicit evidence in the text, readers can assume Mr. Hatfield is a Calvinist or at least sympathetic to Calvinist doctrine. In his sermons, he stresses:

Obedience to the clergy, the atrocious criminality of *Dissent*, [emphasis mine] the absolute necessity of observing all the forms of godliness, the reprehensible presumption of individuals who attempted to think for themselves in matters connected with religion, or to be guided by their own interpretations of Scripture.

(Anne and Charlotte Brontë 132-133)

This "criminality of Dissent" explains Agnes's, and by extension Anne's, distrust of evangelical hierarchies separating the clergy from congregants. Anne's emphasis on personal revelation found in "In Memory of a Happy Day" contradicts the notion of church environments as the only venues imparting spiritual knowledge. Church, at least one guided by Mr. Hatfield, is a location that can constrict a believer from personal spirituality and accountability. Anne associates the parish with a courtroom operating under regulations, where the clergy ascribe delinquency to religious liberty. Particularly for a scrupulous conscience, this environment is a toxic one. Imprisoned by guilt-driven impulses and internal regulations, the scrupulous conscience mirrors Mr. Hatfield's restrictive parish. The physical church body reflects the scrupulous conscience restricted by its own anxious laws and rituals of mindless Scripture memorization or uncharitable social "service."

Like the speaker in “Fluctuations” and “In Memory of a Happy Day,” Anne’s anti-Calvinist speaker is concerned with spatial placement. Her audience possesses souls that are “earth-born” (“A Word” 5), a phrase that should emphasize commonality between Calvinists and those excluded from the fold. In Anne’s mind, just as God will redeem all souls, all men and women are products of a sinful earth in need of regeneration and illumination, like the speaker with pagan musings in “Fluctuations.” The speaker in “A Word to the ‘Elect’” likens God’s grace to the handiwork of a blacksmith who can mold grace to the armature of unbelievers, for “even the wicked shall at last/Be fitted for the skies;” (“A Word” 43-44). Anne emphasizes spatial placement not only to portray condemnation and salvation, but also regeneration. The speaker references flight as a metaphorical state of resurrection of bodies that signifies even the wicked can ascend to heaven under a more egalitarian approach to salvation. The wicked achieve redemption “when their dreadful doom is past,/To life and light arise” (“A Word” 45-46) in a description that accentuates Anne’s belief in Universalism and again reveals her preoccupation with physical illumination as a code for spiritual insight. Additionally, Anne relies on the language of improvement that reveals her Methodist learnings. Again, God is a metalworker, a person who refines the wicked to be fit for His kingdom. Sinners in Anne’s mind are never beyond redemption, for “when the cup of wrath is drained,/The metal purified,/They’ll cling to what they once disdained” (“A Word” 51-53) who are like the wicked souls “fitted for the skies.” This image of wicked souls prepared to ascend to heaven echoes the wishful hopes of a scrupulous conscience. For like the speaker in “To Cowper,” if even the wicked can be allowed into heaven, perhaps there is still hope for Anne’s soul.

The final poem, “Self-Communion” is similar to “Fluctuations” through its use of physical environments and spatial locations to personify the speakers’ scrupulous tendencies.

Again, the darkened environment evokes the speaker's mental and emotional confusion. The speaker relates how "the mist is resting on the hill; the smoke is hanging in the air" ("Self-Communion" 1-2), which parallels the darkened, obscured atmosphere in "Fluctuations." The poem's emphasis on darkness and fog signify not only Anne's interior, doubtful landscape, but also could biographically indicate the weather patterns of the moors of her childhood. The absence of houses is just as crucial as other landmarks, which contributes to the speaker's sense of exposure. In all of the poems, with perhaps "Fluctuations" as the exception, there is a sense of the world as being so geographically vast the speaker cannot map the land. Coincidentally, these massive landscapes parallel the landscape of the soul, especially the scrupulous conscience. Traditionally conceived as existing in the believer at the intersection of mental and religious pathology, scrupulosity appears in Anne's poems as undefined territory. The condition is a netherworld suspended between psychiatric disorders and religious dysfunction. As texts informed by modern psychiatry, the poems' cartography illustrates the scrupulous conscience as one occupying the space between spiritual and mental pathology. The settings of the poems, however, are truly rural and isolated, with no mention of towns or even neighboring homesteads. Compounding this isolation, the speaker refers to herself as a "pilgrim" ("Self-Communion" 7) with "anxious toil and fluttering fears" ("Self-Communion" 7), in coded allusions to a believer grappling with a tender conscience. This pilgrimage is as much internal as it is external.

The speaker's meticulous recordkeeping of time reflects the scrupulous believer's concern with exactness to lessen anxiety. There is also a sense of anxiety that time continues despite any clock, for it "keeps working still/And moving on for good or ill" ("Self-Communion" 9-10) like a phantom who glides silently with "footsteps in the ceaseless sound/Of yonder clocks I seem to hear" ("Self-Communion" 15-16). The speaker does not see the apparition of time

influencing the seasons, but she does hear some echo confirming its presence. Readers can assume references to the chiming clocks confirm a countryside church setting. Anne is haunted by the church, even in the remote countryside. There is a sense of resignation and even the earlier melancholia experiences. The speaker links melancholia responses to physical aging and later death, not necessarily with spiritual torment. This phantom “took my childhood long ago,/And then my early youth” (“Self-Communion” 23-24), associating melancholia with nostalgia toward childhood like her speaker in “To Cowper.” Given Anne’s sensitive temperament, the speaker’s obsession with time and decay emerge when she claims time “drinks thy breath” (“Self-Communion” 29) and “gives clay to death” (“Self-Communion” 31). This phantom “drinking thy breath” evokes the practice of Christian communion. Even more revealing of the speaker’s psychology is the fact that she associates communion with time draining her breath away as she awaits death—a death of her concern with her self as a sacrifice to God. Considering the pulpit scene in *Agnes Grey*, the institutional church and its memorials remind the scrupulous speaker of her inadequacy before God. The poem’s title, “Self-Communion” alludes to both the practice of communion and Anne’s emphasis on the individual “communing” with himself or herself in private reflections on one’s spirituality. The speaker focuses on the self, which much like the overly confessional speaker in “To Cowper,” gives the poem a restrictive, almost claustrophobic atmosphere like the scrupulous conscience imprisoned by its fears.

Anne’s eight devotional poems explore the experience of a tender conscience wrestling between faith and pathological doubt. By incorporating spatial patterns that comment on isolation, Anne personifies the scrupulous Christian. Her descriptions of physical spaces accentuate the isolation of scrupulosity and magnify the disparity between doubtful and assured

believers. Additionally, her homage to Cowper's poetry, particularly to his verse composed during his mental decline and religious crisis, reveals a kinship between herself and her older artistic influence. Their work displays an attention to moments of spiritual crisis, which document their own landscape apart from emerging English Gothic verse. In the case of Anne, critics have interpreted her poetry as weak imitations of her sisters' poetry, excessively moralistic, and naïve in their descriptions. Closer examinations of her catalogue reveal poems varied in their psychological treatment of the Christian conscience. Her criticism of Calvinist theology, particularly of the doctrine of the Elect, positions her not as a conservative poet, but a poet with a radical religious sensibility evident in her study of Universal Salvation. Her interest is not surprising given others' impressions of her sensitive temperament and the religious crisis in 1837, an episode with eerie similarities to Cowper's nervous breakdown years earlier. The eight poems detail similar dramatic scenes of a speaker obsessively taking account of her shortcomings, reflecting the scrupulous conscience weighing real and perceived sins. Although Anne's verses do not portray the Gothic sensibilities of her sisters, they do exhibit their own windswept, God-haunted landscapes. The poems demonstrate the tension between doubt and faith, personified by the physical environments, and document a conscience suspended and examined between medical and spiritual pathology. In this respect, Anne's poems are modern verses that describe the intersection between nineteenth-century psychology and the English church.

Endnote

1. In their second footnote of their overview of scrupulosity, Chris H. Miller and Dawson H. Hedges refer to scrupulosity's history in the church. They note how "a number of famous religious figures and authorities, including Martin Luther, Augustinus Gemelli, St. Ignatius, and St. Liguori seemed to have suffered from the disorder and, in combination with many others such as the French confessor R. P. Duguet, attempted to develop coping mechanisms and solutions (Greenberg et al., 1987; Van Ornum, 1997, Santa, 1999)" (1043).

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