CHAPTER IV

A FOUNTAIN OF FAITH
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As planned, I love to call this chapter ‘A Fountain of Faith’, for the essence of the Brontë poetry is to be appreciated against the Victorian spirit of adventure, exploration, and expansion of material progress and prosperity, and of scientific advancement and revolution in thinking – all in a throng bringing about a sea-change in the habits of mind in general, and in man’s attitude to Christian faith in particular. Although seemingly all was well, yet something at the bottom was ailing the spirit. Body was fed fat, but the spirit starved. Gross materialism tended to be a threat to spiritualism. The senses seemed to subdue the essence as though man (the noblest creature created in God’s image) too had the same destiny as the following plants of the botanical world:

   The full-juiced apple, waxing over mellow,
   Drops in the silent autumn night.
   All its allotted length of days,
   The flower ripens in its place
   Ripens and fades, and falls...

If this process of nature is believed in respect of man to be holding true in its totality, then “Death is the end of life.” He could be thought of to be a creature devoid of the soul. It was meaningless to view him as partaking of the
divine spark. And so putting words into the mouth of the Lotos-Eaters, Tennyson rhetorically asks:

Is there any peace
In ever climbing up the climbing wave?

Ironically enough, it could be useless to think in terms of the upward nobility of the soul for the attainment of ‘peace’. Like ‘the Lotos-Eaters’, man drugged with the drink of mundane affluence tended to accept himself as one of “All things” that

... have rest, and ripen toward the grave
In silence, ripen, fall and cease.

There could be left nothing of man beyond his silence in the grave. He was as if unable to think of the peace that gives rise to the inward silence in which the soul begins to establish contact with the Eternal from which it remains sundered here in the body. It was then his greater inability to believe that here-after his soul would at all attain salvation in the Infinite. The celestial forgotten, all was terrestrial. And so in that state of inability and frustration he would surrender and say with the lotos-eaters: “Give us long rest or death, dark death.” What else the commercialised, dehumanised Victorian man could ask for? With all hope denied, his destiny was ‘dark death’, total damnation – the end result of his own making.
As the most representative poet of his age, Tennyson would not give only the dark and dismal picture of the milieu, but he would also feel spiritually constrained to shed "Tears from the depth of some divine despair," the divine despair caused by the lack of hope as referred to above. The days of faith he felt were "no more". But as a man of faith and the poet that he was, he had a corrective and creative role and responsibility to discharge. He would, therefore, very emphatically exhort his countrymen to

Ring out old shapes of foul disease;
Ring out narrowing lust of gold.

As if the exhortation did not work, he would also enthuse and moralize them to

Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart and kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land,
Ring out the Christ that is to be.

But how far and how long the Victorian man could inculcate in himself the valiance and freedom, to extend his larger heart and kindlier hand to remove with his property the poverty of the proletariat (there reigned then a spectacle of poverty amidst plenty) is more than obvious. So also we can only surmise whether or not such a Victorian man could remove the spiritual darkness of himself and his land, and establish the empire of faith in Christ.
But one thing is evidently clear, that in spite of the compromise suggested by Tennyson (as has been mentioned in the Introduction) and his praiseworthy efforts indicated here, there remained a fissure in the consciousness of the English culture to which Matthew Arnold was to give before long classic expression in his poetry, notably in ‘Dover Beach’.

A lover of sweetness and light, of integration and progression, Arnold was agonized at the loss of faith in the contemporary English society. He found the all-compelling science devouring religion, the advancing materialism replacing Christianity. So he recollects with a sense of loss that

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore
Lay like the folds of bright girdle furled.

The imagery of Sea first for faith in its fullness and secondly for a bright girdle fully furled round the earth holistically indicates that the world then was fully protected by and integrated with faith, that law and order, and spiritual harmony supported the world in its completeness, and that, above all, the planet enjoyed all-round spiritual light. But the Victorian world unfortunately saw the same Sea of faith receding and retreating, leaving the planet naked, unprotected. And so Arnold was sad to say

But now I only hear
It's melancholy, long, withdrawing roar
    Retreating.\footnote{4}

The Brontë sisters had nothing to do with the eternal note of sadness that Arnold heard from the ‘melancholy, long withdrawing roar’. Nor did they dread the ‘roar’ as if the Deity of faith itself was angry with the Victorians for their spiritual insensitiveness and religious poverty. Also, they did not feel the need for working out a compromise, either, as did Tennyson. Not that the sisters were unaware of the spiritual disintegration, but that they deliberately kept themselves tenaciously clung to a different stream of thought and experience, away from the main stream. Intact from the fretful din of urbanization and mechanization, the fountain they bathed in was self-generated, and so was the spiritual light they basked in.

Away from the Sea of faith which was being experienced as receding in the national and international consciousness, the Brontë sisters enjoyed their ‘fountain of faith’ flowing ceaselessly and perennially in the humble Parsonage in the Haworth village, situated in the isolated corner of Yorkshire in the northern part of England. I call it a ‘fountain’ because it is slender in size and spatially limited, but again it is something whose perenniality speaks of its life-giving attributes as though it flows from the heart and soul of the Creator. And then it is a ‘fountain of faith’, the faith which implies the living reception of religious belief which ensures our eternity in the bosom of the Eternal. Naturally, Emily Brontë believes
To reach, at last, the eternal home –
The steadfast, changeless shore.\(^5\)

And we may like to hear on Faith something more authentic and authoritative from the Bible:

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.\(^6\)

If one attempts a definition of faith, he would only demean and belittle it, and yet this beautiful definition from the book of Hebrews is a suitable one for the believers in general and for the Brontë sisters in particular. As women of faith, they hoped for the incorruptible spiritual world and they sought to attain it. Though it was not visible to their physical eye, with their spiritual eye they could experience the world beyond. It was this experience which could enable them to sustain the afflictions of this temporal, terrestrial world, and did set their minds for the celestial world. They had a strong conviction of the celestial world and things not seen. Not to have seen ‘things’ is the inability, deficiency of the individual person, not of ‘things’. The ‘things’ not seen do exist. The sisters had experienced the existence of such “things-not-in-themselves” but by their “phenomena”.\(^7\)
The sisters experienced more of pain and sorrow than joy or happiness in their brief life on this earth. The suffering turned them to gain wisdom, which was a hard-learnt lesson, for “It [wisdom] cannot be taught, each must learn it for himself through his own folly and out of the bitterness of his own end. It is the understanding of the relationship of the particulars to the whole, and this understanding is achieved only when the whole comes into view — that is to say, at the end. It is the sense of what is important and unimportant, of proportion, of what is ultimately rewarding, and it is to be gained only when it is “too late” to change anything, but when there is still time for forgiveness, for contrition, and for leaving everything in God’s hands.”\(^8\) As for the sisters, wisdom was occasionally gained through ‘folly’, but mostly through ‘pain and suffering, and this brought them to the realization of what was important and rewarding. This is explicitly expressed in Anne, who says:

Let patience have her perfect work;
Lo, strength and wisdom spring from grief,
And joys behind afflictions lurk!
It asked for light, and it was heard;
God grants that struggling soul repose
And, guided by His holy word,
It wiser than its teachers grows.
It gains the upward path at length,
And passes on from strength to strength.\(^9\)
Anne believed that grief and afflictions would give birth to strength, wisdom and joy. So what is expected in a believer is patience and strength – physical, moral and spiritual. The lines quoted above have an allusion to the Bible, where the psalmist says:

Your commands make me wiser than my enemies,  
For they are ever with me.  
I have more insight that all my teachers,  
For I meditate on your statutes.  
I have more understanding than the elders,  
For I obey your precepts.

It is faith that gave them strength and courage. They believed in the transforming power of God that consists in His ‘commands’, ‘statutes’ and ‘precepts’, and corresponds with the psalmist who says again:

If your law had not been my delight,  
I would have perished in my affliction.\textsuperscript{10}

God alone gave them knowledge, wisdom, and changed their personal life.

The sisters’ understanding of faith and religion is closest to Martin Luther’s definition of faith. The father of Protestantism defined that: “faith was not primarily belief in the church’s dogmas but rather a whole-hearted trust in the divine grace and love revealed in Jesus Christ... faith is not the belief that
God exists, that he is three in one, and so on, but is an attitude of trust and self-commitment to him.”¹¹ The sisters did rely on God with a strong personal conviction. Being deeply rooted in God, they remained unshakable when tried by life’s trial.

Their writings exhibit an enormous manifestation of faith. It made them submissive and resigned to the sufferings of this world but not without hope to receive the greatest reward which is eternal life. Faith is tacitly manifested in their personal life and actively in their communion with God. It was faith that held them, strengthened and sustained them. For shaping them to such a life of devotion and loyalty, the credit can be accorded to their parents, who indeed were true believers. Edward Chitham comments: “Both parents were genuine, unswerving believers in this dimension; neither their lives nor the books of any of the children can be understood without realizing it.”¹² Charlotte’s own words confirm her upbringing:

I – who upon my mother’s knees,
    In childhood, read Christ’s written word,
Received His legacy of peace,
    His holy rule of action heard;
I – in whose heart the sacred sense
    Of Jesus love was early felt;
Of His pure, full benevolence,
    His pitying tenderness for guilt;
His shepherd-care for wandering sheep,
For all weak, sorrowing, trembling things.
His mercy vast. His passion deep
Of anguish for man’s sufferings.¹³

Jesus’ ‘legacy of peace’, His love, His benevolence, His pitying tenderness, His passion – all these are guaranteed to us in the form of the lasting relationship that exists between the shepherd and the sheep. It is a relationship of mutual trust and responsibility which symbolically finds a similar expression in Blake’s ‘The Shepherd’:

How sweet is the shepherd’s sweet lot!
    From the morn to the evening he strays;
He shall follow his sheep all the day,
    And his tongue shall be filled with praise.

For he hears the lamb’s innocent call,
    And he hears the eye’s tender reply;
He is watchful while they are in peace
    For they know when their shepherd is nigh.¹⁴

Though they lost their mother at their tender age, the knowledge of God was imbibed in them by their father and aunt Miss Branwell, who were staunch believers. But the aunt’s religious discipline was sometimes rather harmful than helpful.
Their faith tested by bereavement, sickness, loneliness and frustrations ultimately reached refinement. As gold whose genuineness is tested and purified in fire, so were they tried, and did prove their worth. It transformed them from vulnerable humans into strong beings. Emily Brontë speaks about this transforming power of God and expresses:

Why did I doubt? In God's control
Our mutual fates remain;
And pure as now my angel's soul
Must go to Heaven again.¹⁵

She believed that when the soul of a believing man leaves his body it would be in a purified form and would go to heaven in its pure form like that of an angel. Until then we as believers remain alienated souls emerged from the one super sensible soul, called God. By awakening and purifying the essence in us we establish communion with Him here, and reach Him hereafter. Such a conviction was strongly held on by Polonius.¹⁶

The main sphere of their literary creativity is restricted to their faith and belief which was their personal experience. But what they experienced was a universal experience and can be identified with every individual's. The expression of faith and hope in their verses is like a sweet fragrance for the posterity to enjoy its sweetness. Though their life was beset with trials and obstacles and they had to cross hurdles after hurdles, the pain and suffering
could not extinguish the flame of hope in them. Life’s trial for them was a means of spiritual development and refinement because it put them on a higher plane and convinced them to hold on to their faith. And ever since then their poetry as a fountain of faith has been quenching the spiritual thirst of the thirsty humanity in this fallen world. The ascent up from the fallen world is possible only by revitalizing the essence in us which otherwise remains usually dormant.

Out of their trials and suffering flowed the fountain of faith. This fountain flowed in its purest form, uncontaminated by the outside world of industrial din. It dwelt in their heart which was the seedbed and the perennial source of hope. This fountain did not at all dry but ceaselessly flowed on generating faith and hope until they breathed their last. The sisters’ ultimate concern was for their spiritual essence. They believed that man is ultimately a spiritual being and cannot live without God, because “He [God] has set eternity in the hearts of men.”17 This is the reason why man yearns for God, and cannot live without God. The psalmist says:

As the deer pants for streams of water,
So my soul pants for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?18
Like the psalmist, the sisters yearned for God and express their desire to unite with God himself. This is explicit in Anne who says:

I knew that my Redeemer lived  
I did not fear to die;  
I felt that I should rise again  
To immortality.

I longed to view that bliss divine  
Which eye hath never seen,  
Like Moses; I would see His face  
Without the veil between.  

Anne is a true believer who had a personal relationship with God. These lines speak of her total trust and dependence on God and also the reason for her hopefulness. She longed to view that ‘bliss divine’ and to see Him face to face in the eternal world, for she was confident that ‘I [she] should rise again to immortality.’

The sisters’ view of religion was not based on tradition and convention but on personal conviction and experience, for faith can be classified into two types – Institutional faith and Personal faith. They did not believe in Institutional faith which is based on such traditions and is regulated
accordingly. The personal faith on the other hand is that faith which is generated in the heart and is purely from within. Thus, faith without personal conviction is hollow.

Like the women of their age, the Brontë sisters were going through a paradigm shift of new ideas, new freedom and new opportunity. But in the current of ‘newness’ their choice was God. They found strength and comfort in their relationship with the living God. The three sisters in their distinct individual way expressed their personal faith. While doing so they also expressed the most fundamental question of the Christian faith which concerns itself with salvation. They also talk about contrition, repentance and forgiveness in Christ. They were also concerned about the inner personality which is also called the divine quality in man. Emily Brontë in particular and the three sisters in general were interested in this subject and believed in the immortality of the soul.

Anne accepts the sinful nature of man but at the same time she believes in the redemptive power of God, which is salvation. She expresses her submission:

*Oppressed with sin and woe*  
*Oppressed by many a mighty foe,*  
*But I will not despair.*
With this polluted heart,  
I dare to come to Thee,  
Holy and mighty as Thou art;  
For Thou wilt pardon me.  \(^{20}\)

Man, created in the image of God, was in a state of innocence and holiness but his disobedience marred his relationship with God and alienated him from Him. It is only natural for man that he is soiled and ‘polluted’ here. But the loving and merciful God is ready to forgive anyone who seeks Him. The holy and mighty God pardons us.

The conviction of sin did not drive her to despair or self-loathing but to repentance and confession. She sought forgiveness from Him and expresses:

My God (oh, let me call Thee mine,  
Weak, wretched sinner though I be).  
My trembling soul would fain be Thine;  
My feeble faith still clings to Thee.

Her God is a compassionate God whom she could own. The perennial faith in her helped her to cling to Him, and her love of Him sustained her. She therefore surrenders herself to Him and places herself in His hands, requesting Him to deal with her as He decides and elects. She stresses the simple and austere purity of the relationship in an humble and direct attitude of love and trust. She perceives genuine piety in her soul- surrender rather than in the
strictures of the institutionalised faith. As a devotee of any order, she willingly yields herself to His grace and takes shelter in his loving kindness. When we destroy our own little self and replace it by perfect confidence in God, He will save us. This is what Anne submissively believes in, for God asks of us (devotees) total self-giving, and gives us in return the purified spiritual strength to qualify ourselves for His graciousness and love, and eagerness to take us back to Him. He is waiting, ready to take possession of us, if we only surrender and open our heart to Him exposing our weakness. It is not only our ascent to God but His descent as well to us, that builds the relationship. She further continues in the same vein of humility:

I cannot say my faith is strong,
    I dare not hope my love is great;
But strength and love to Thee belong:
    Oh, do not leave me desolate! 21

Anne Brontë was all the time aware of her little faith, but a faith as small as a “mustard seed” can with His love and strength move mountains. Paradoxically, it is the small faith which is the great faith, the faith that rests on God’s free grace. Only His grace can help us to be virtuous. Then some of us are elected for heaven, not because we deserve it, or we are good, but because God’s grace is bestowed on us. No other justification except God’s unmotivated choice can be given as to why some may be saved and others may
not be. St. Augustine advocated it, Anne believed in it, with the addition that she also believed in universal salvation.

Anne positively speaks about the gracious act of divine forgiveness. A sinless man would never know of God's grace and redemptive power but a repented sinner experiences the forgiveness of God and His acceptance. Redeeming grace is shown on the cross when Jesus said to one of the criminals crucified with Him: "Today you will be with me in paradise."\(^{22}\) Anne expresses the power of His grace explicitly:

Then those hands outstretched to save me
    Seemed to call me back again;
Those eyes did so implore me
    To once more let reason reign.\(^{23}\)

While salvation, which is the greatest gift of God is an open invitation, it is again exclusively for those who believe and accept. "For it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God." The offer however is universal. Emily Brontë, like Anne, also trusts in the merciful God and says:

No; that I feel can never be;
A God of hate could hardly bear
To watch through all eternity
His own creations dread despair.\(^{24}\)
Since He is a loving God, He does not hate anyone, nor does He want to see anyone perish. This demolishes the concept of eternal damnation.

Anne Brontë and Emily Brontë were strong upholders of the concept of 'Universal Salvation'. Anne’s poems, ‘A Word to the Elect’ and ‘To Cowper’ are anti-Calvinist poems. She out rightly rejects the Calvinist doctrine of Election, which believes in predestination, that God elects some to salvation and some to reprobation and damnation. Such a God would be a partial and unjust God. Such act would also fill the ‘Elect’ with spiritual pride. Anne speaks of this danger:

You may rejoice to think yourselves secure;
You may be grateful for the gift divine –
That grace unsought, which made your black hearts pure,
And fits your earth-born souls in Heaven to shine.

The unmerited grace or grace unsought would be dangerous because man would not strive for perfection whereas God desires in us: “that we may present every man perfect in Christ.”

Again she focuses on the damned:
But is it sweet to look around, and view
    Thousands excluded from that happiness
Which they deserve at least as much as you -
    Their faults not greater, nor their virtues less?

And wherefore should you love your God the more,
    Because to you alone His smiles are given;
Because He chose to pass the many o’er,
    And only bring the favoured few to Heaven?

Under such situation we would be constrained to see God as a terror and a tyrant, and the question of atonement would never arise. Therefore, grace and salvation which is the theme of the New Testament would be made meaningless.

Sometimes a question is raised as to why quiet, gentle, pious Anne would occasionally fall into fits of religious doubt and crises. The usual answer to the question is that she did so because of the gloomy influence on her of her gloomy aunt Miss Branwell. We are traditionally told to view her (the aunt) as constitutionally gloomy and of an arid temperament, dogmatically expounding her Methodism as a religion of fear rather than of love, as though she understood the truths of the Bible more through the law than through the gospel, more as a requirement from God than His gift in His son. But then, another question arises as to why should Patrick Brontë at all allow his darling child to be so governed, indoctrinated, influenced? – especially when he