"The Burning Clime": Charlotte Brontë and John Martin

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In Charlotte Brontë's last novel, *Villette* (1853), the heroine, Lucy Snowe, wanders in a daze through the central park during carnival night. Her description conjures up a hallucinatory world that contemporaries would have had little trouble recognizing as reminiscent of the vast theatrical landscapes of the Romantic painter and printmaker John Martin:

> . . . and where was I?
>
> In a land of enchantment, a garden most gorgeous, a plain sprinkled with coloured meteors, a forest with sparks of purple and ruby and golden fire gemming the foliage; a region, not of trees and shadow, but of strangest architectural wealth—of altar and of temple, of pyramid, obelisk, and sphynx; incredibly to say, the wonders and the symbols of Egypt teemed throughout the park of Villette.[1]

Lucy Snowe is not deceived for long by the theatrical tricks of the scene. She soon recognizes the insubstantial material out of which this dreamworld has been created: the structures are hollow stage sets made for the fête, deceptive props fashioned from timber, paint, and pasteboard; yet (she tells us) "these inevitable discoveries failed to quite destroy the charm, or undermine the marvel of that night." John Martin's paintings

[1] Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, ed. Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 655.

had the same hypnotic effect on Brontë herself and, although she eventually denounced, in intellectual terms, his artistic methods, she always retained an emotional affinity for his visionary designs.

This paper is about Charlotte Brontë's appropriation of John Martin's iconography. It will begin by exploring the early-nineteenth-century response to Martin's work and then try to trace the way in which Brontë's writings register this response in a gradual shift from her initial enthusiasm for Martin's landscapes toward a distrust of his illusive promises of grandeur. My aim is to locate Brontë's own imaginary world within a "Martinesque" frame in order to explore a major creative impulse of her pictorial writing, writing she described as "flushed with passion; shaded with grief; kindled with ecstasy,"[2] writing she came to eschew as "the ornamented and redundant in composition."[3]

It has long been known that the members of the Brontë family were interested in art and that John Martin was one of their favorite artists. Martin's prints hung on the Parsonage walls; a copy of one of his paintings made by Branwell Brontë still survives in the Parsonage Museum;[4] and since A. L. Rowse first mentioned a possible connection between Charlotte Brontë's drawings and those of Martin,[5] Brontë biographies have all made a passing reference to Martin. Winifred Gérin in particular identified certain brief passages in Charlotte Brontë's writing that were influenced by the painter. She even suggested that Martin's daughter Zenobia may be the prototype for Brontë's heroine Zenobia, if only in name.[6] But the dynamic relationship between their work extends beyond the simple use of pictorialism, the transposition of

[2] "Farewell to Angria," ed. Christine Alexander, in *Jane Eyre: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Criticism*, ed. Richard J. Dunn, 2d ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), p. 426.

[3] Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor*, ed. Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), preface, p. 3.

[4] "Queen Esther," December 1830 (discussed later in the text).

[5] See *The English Past: Evocations of Persons and Places* (London: Macmillan, 1951), pp. 157, 161.

[6] See *Charlotte Brontë: The Evolution of Genius* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 51.

landscape and architectural idiom. In Martin's work, Charlotte Brontë found an analogue for her own frustrating experience, and her response to his work significantly contributed to her personal development as an artist. A knowledge of Martin's practice, then, should allow us to reframe her early writings and to extend our ability to interpret her novels. For this reason I will begin with a brief survey of Martin's career and the contemporary response to his works.

Few people know of John Martin's work today, yet in the time of the Brontës he was almost a household name. It would be wrong, however, to think of him as part of the artistic establishment; he was known and loved for his role as heroic rebel—an image that appealed to the young Brontës and that reinforced the powerful hold Byron exercised on their hungry imaginations. Martin himself used the language of Byron: both were masters of the material sublime, both depended on the visual and spectacular for their effects, and both pandered to and shaped popular taste.

Like the Brontës' father, Martin had risen from humble origins in the provinces. With enormous energy and hard work he gained a position of eminence in London. He was born in 1789 at Haydon Bridge, the son of a Northumberland farm laborer; he left school at the age of fourteen and moved with his family to Newcastle, where he was apprenticed to a coach-builder to learn heraldry painting. A year later he became the pupil of Boniface Musso, a minor Italian painter, and followed him to London, where he was employed as a glass and china painter. Five years later, at the age of twenty-three, Martin boldly embarked on a career as a self-employed artist.

His first success was the wild, romantic landscape painting entitled *Sadak in Search of the Waters of Oblivion* (1812), which was hung in the Royal Academy and sold later for fifty guineas. This was the first of his many "literary" works, whose subjects ranged from biblical scenes such as *The Expul-*

sion of Adam and Eve to classical scenes like *Marcus Curtius* and *Clytie*. Perhaps the best-known to literary scholars is Martin's illustration of Thomas Gray's poem *The Bard* (1817), a depiction of "foaming flood" and wild, rocky landscape that accentuates the distance between an invader army in a ravine below and the defiant prophet-poet perched precariously on a promontory above. In this painting Martin caters to popular nationalistic and aesthetic taste.

One of the reasons for Martin's success was that he created eclectic pictures that amalgamated a number of contemporary concerns: political aspirations, new technological inventions, archeological discoveries of the period, evolutionary ideas (he reconstructed some of the first dinosaurs to be described), and the romantic idiom in literature. And he fused these images into vast, brilliantly colored canvases that dazzled and enchanted ordinary people who—like Lucy Snowe—were eager to escape their mundane and grime-smeared city lives. When his painting of *Belshazzar's Feast* (fig. 1) was first exhibited at the British Institution in 1821, the crowds were so excited that the painting had to be railed off, an unprecedented event at the time; and after the exhibition had closed, the painting was moved to its own private showroom where over five thousand people paid to see this novel work. Charlotte Brontë could be sure, when she later referred to this painting in her "Biographical Notice" to her edition of *Wuthering Heights* (1850), that her audience would be familiar with the image.[7]

Popular taste saw in Martin "the presence of a spirit which is not of the world—the divine intoxication of a great soul lapped in majestic and unearthly dreams";[8] he transported them to another world. Thackeray, more earthy and cynical than most, mocked the crowds of "grave old people, with chains and seals, [who] look dumb-foundered into those

[7] See her "Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell," in Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. Hilda Marsden and Ian Jack (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), appendix 1: Charlotte Brontë likens reviewers of the novel to the "Astrologers, Chaldeans, and Soothsayers" who cannot interpret the "writing on the wall"(p. 438); the reference is as much to Martin as to the Bible.

[8] Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *England and the English*, 2 vols. (London: Richard Bentley, 1833), II, 211.

FIG. 1. *Belshazzar's Feast,* 1821.

vast perspectives, and think the apex of the sublime is reached there."[9]

Martin's spectacular visionary designs created a new style, dubbed "Martinesque," and a public shocked by the novelty of his conceptions nicknamed him "Mad Martin," partly through confusion with his notorious brother, who escaped from a lunatic asylum to set fire to York Minster in 1829, at the height of Martin's artistic fame. The painter's own apocalyptic scenes of conflagration continued to bring him fame and fortune, more especially because he was able to popularize his name and works through his own large mezzotint engravings. Unlike most painters of his day, Martin (like Blake) mastered the art of etching and engraving early in his career and was able to take advantage of innovations in printing technology to create special dramatic effects. The introduction in the early 1820s of steel mezzotints (rather than the softer copper plates already in use) meant not only that more copies could be printed from a single plate and the price reduced—enabling people on limited incomes, like Patrick Brontë, to own their favorite

[9] "Picture Gossip: In a Letter from Michael Angelo Titmarsh," *Fraser's Magazine,* 31 (1845), 716.

pictures—but also that rich, velvety blacks and strong contrasts of light and dark could be produced, favoring artists of spectacle like Martin. He used the medium creatively, engraving many new designs directly onto the plates without the aid of preparatory drawings.[10] His twenty-four plates to Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1825–27) capture, as no earlier ones had, the grandeur and horror of Satan's underworld and the pastoral splendor of Eden. When his paintings fell into disrepute after his death in 1854 and were neglected (some even lost), it was his technically superior book engravings that kept his name alive.

In the 1830s Martin's visions extended beyond the aesthetic world of the London salon and art gallery. He met the challenges of the age in a series of engineering projects as grandiose as his paintings, designed to improve people's lives and to beautify the metropolis. These included a *Plan for Working and Ventilating Coal Mines*, which he submitted to the Select Committee on Accidents in Mines, and a series of plans for London's water supply and sewage disposal, which became a serious burden on his time and financial resources. Years after his death some of his suggestions were adopted, but with two-thirds of his time spent on engineering schemes it is little wonder that he failed to sustain his popularity as an artist at this time. At the end of his life he returned to the cataclysmic subjects that had made him popular, producing works like *The Last Judgement* and *The Great Day of his Wrath*, but by then "the Infinite" had become exhausted. Martin had found it difficult to control copyright of his prints, imitations had cheapened his style, and the popularity of his work almost destroyed his critical reputation, as it damaged Byron's; Byron's short lyrics and oriental tales have still not recovered, and art historians are only now beginning to recover Martin's eccentric genius after 150 years of neglect.

Even in his own lifetime, however, Martin's popular acclaim had never been endorsed by the artistic establishment. Though his pictures were occasionally exhibited in the Royal

[10] See Michael J. Campbell, *John Martin: Visionary Printmaker* (London: Campbell Fine Art in assoc. with York City Art Gallery, 1992), for a fascinating and comprehensive review of Martin's printed works.

Academy, Martin complained that they were always badly hung, purposely hidden in an anteroom or in bad light, and he was never invited to become a member of that august body. Art critics like Charles Lamb and Thackeray led the attack on Martin's defective technique. In an essay entitled "Barrenness of the Imaginative Faculty in the Productions of Modern Art" (1833), Lamb refers pejoratively to Martin's "material sublime" that satisfies "our most stretched and craving conceptions of the glories of the antique world," and he adds that "it is a pity that they were ever peopled. On that side, the imagination of the artist halts, and appears defective."[11] A review of the 1837 exhibition at the Royal Academy dismissed Martin's painting *The Deluge* as "a large polished dark japanned tea-tray, over which some red ink and cream had been spilt and run into streaks. . . . It may be chaos indeed, but a japanned chaos. . . . We shall never see a deluge again, but if we were to see one, we are sure it would contradict Mr Martin."[12] It was the theatricality that so annoyed the Academy. They considered him vulgar: according to Thackeray, he was one of those showmen in the "theatrical-heroic class" of art ("Picture Gossip," p. 716). Constable accused him of being a painter of "pantomime"; Ruskin scorned him as a mere "workman" bent on "reckless accumulation of *false* magnitude."[13]

There is no doubt that Martin's paintings are utopian, grandiose, theatrical. He had said himself of *Belshazzar's Feast* that it was designed to "make more noise than any picture ever did before,"[14] and his offense was that he had succeeded. Its design was a daring exercise in architectural perspective and dramatic form. The massive columns stretch into the distance and the mystical writing that foretold King

[11] An essay originally in the *Athenaeum*, 12 January-2 February 1833, rpt. in *The Works of Charles Lamb*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, 2 vols. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1924), I, 756.

[12] "Exhibitions—The Royal Academy," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 42 (1837), 340.

[13] See C. R. Leslie, *Memoirs of Constable* (1843); and John Ruskin, "Preface to Notes on Prout and Hunt" (1879–80) (both quoted in Thomas Balston, *John Martin, 1789-1854: His Life and Works* [London: Gerald Duckworth, 1947], pp. 182, 215).

[14] Quoted by Mary L. Pendered, *John Martin, Painter: His Life and Times* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1923), p. 103.

Belshazzar's doom blazes from the walls of the hall, calculated by Martin to be a mile long. It is little wonder that *Blackwood's* referred to him as "the King of the Vast."[15] The nearest modern equivalents to his paintings are the gigantic spectacles of Cecil B. DeMille in such films as *The Ten Commandments*, or the massive enterprises of the earlier and greater D. W. Griffith in such sets as those of *Intolerance* (dubbed "a mad, brilliant, silly extravaganza" by the *New Yorker* in 1980).

The theatrical and cinematic are there in his technique; Martin always chose to represent the climactic instant, the set piece: the prophet Daniel interpreting those words of doom for King Belshazzar, "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin"; Sadak on the verge of reaching the waters of oblivion; the Deluge; the Fall of Babylon; Joshua commanding the sun to stand still; or Adam and Eve's expulsion from paradise. His paintings all focus on a central character or characters, but the figures are small, scaled down. The emphasis is on man overwhelmed by his environment. The setting is all-important. Martin pushes the eye back to the horizon: his dark foregrounds and sidewings of jutting rocks or colonnades force our view toward the vast perspective. Then he focuses his distant figure with a cascade of rain lit by lightning or with a ray of sunlight. Alfred Hitchcock always said that for the greatest impact the long shot should be saved for the climactic instant, and this is the formula Martin uses, not the standard heroic close-up recommended by Reynolds and endorsed by the Academy for history painting. It is not surprising that the artistic establishment sneered: this popular autodidact was a threat to the profession—an outsider, minimally trained, who used unorthodox techniques and who, in Constable's words, "looked at the Royal Academy from the Plains of Nineveh, from the Destruction of Babylon" (quoted in Balston, p. 181).

Yet to Bulwer-Lytton, that reliable indicator of popular taste, Martin was "the greatest, the most lofty, the most permanent, the most original genius of his age" (*England and the*

[15] "Noctes Ambrosianæ," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 32 (1832), 857.

English, II, 211). *The Edinburgh Review* for June 1829 confirmed his view:

> No painter has ever, like Martin, represented the immensity of space—none like him made architecture so sublime, merely through its vastness: no painter, like him, has spread forth the boundless valley, or piled mountain upon mountain to the sky—like him has none made light pour down in dazzling floods from heaven; and none has like him painted the "darkness visible" of the infernal deeps.[16]

The young Brontës were keenly aware of Martin's fluctuating reputation. They were able to read detailed reviews of his work, which featured regularly in discussions of contemporary exhibitions and in critical columns in provincial newspapers and national periodicals throughout the 1820s and 1830s. In 1831 the Brontës subscribed to the newly launched *Fraser's Magazine* and read in an early issue of Martin's "nauseating" landscape, "whose splendid hurly-burly and trick pass with the million for energy and grandeur."[17] But their initial exposure to his work was overwhelmingly positive, guided by their father's enthusiasm and by the favorable response to Martin in their favorite journal, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*.

From 1825 *Blackwood's* was lent to the Brontës by a local friend, and the family was still reading it in July 1841.[18] They caught the excitement of their favorite characters in *Blackwood's* "Noctes Ambrosianæ" for Martin's latest works, and they imitated *Blackwood's* spirited reviews in their own miniature magazines. In January 1827, for example, *Blackwood's* "Ettrick Shepherd" (James Hogg) asks, "did na ye notice the Prent o' Martin's Alexander and Diogenes? That Martin, to my fancy, 's the greatest painter o' them a', and has a maist

[16] Review of *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, *Edinburgh Review*, 49 (1829), 466.

[17] "The Suffolk Street Exhibition," *Fraser's Magazine*, 3 (1831), 680.

[18] See *The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships, and Correspondence, in Four Volumes*, ed. Thomas James Wise and John Alexander Symington, vols. 12–15 of *The Shakespeare Head Brontë* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell for the Shakespeare Head Press, 1932), I, 238.

magnificent imagination."[19] Two years later, possibly having just read the old numbers of the borrowed *Blackwood's*, Charlotte reviewed her own imaginary painting, of "the most sublime majesty," entitled "The Spirit of Cawdor Ravine." It looks forward to the surreal images of Jane Eyre's later paintings and has all the hallmarks of the "Martinesque": she notes that "the sky covered with dark clouds, the flood rushing from it and the flash of lightning, which almost dazzles your eyes, is sublimely awful and sets both in grand relief: the bright spirit standing on the rock . . . a more magnificent picture was never painted."[20] The artist is "Dundee," a fictitious painter of the sublime (later renamed "Sir Martin Dundee").

The Brontës both read and wrote about Martin, and they were physically surrounded by his images of sublime and visionary worlds. Mr. Brontë had purchased three large mezzotints by Martin: *The Deluge*, *Belshazzar's Feast*, and *Joshua Commanding the Sun to Stand Still*.[21] The paintings had been exhibited in London between 1816 and 1832, and the engravings made soon after.[22] There were few pictures on the walls of the Brontë home and these by Martin were especially large engravings (approximately eighteen by twenty-eight inches), which retailed from £2 12s 6d (proofs were dearer, between £5 and £6). Their purchase indicates the esteem in which Martin was held in that remote Yorkshire parsonage. The titles of two further framed engravings are recorded in the newspaper Bill of Sale on the death of Mr. Brontë: one is almost certainly Martin's print of "St Paul Preaching at Athens," a separate small plate from Westall and Martin's *Illustrations of the New Testament* (1836), and the other was probably a

[19] "Alexander and Diogenes" was engraved by Edward Finden for the 1827 issues of both *The Literary Souvenir* and *Friendship's Offering*, both of which the Brontës had access to.

[20] "Review of the painting of the Spirit of Cawdor Ravine," in *An Edition of the Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Christine Alexander, 3 vols. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987-), I, 64–65. Hereafter quoted in the text as *Edition of Early Writings*.

[21] Listed in the Catalogue of Sale after Mr. Brontë's death in 1861.

[22] "Belshazzar's Feast," 1826 and 1832; "Joshua Commanding the Sun to Stand Still," 1827; "The Deluge," 1828.

pirated version of Martin's "Destruction of Pharaoh's Host," retitled *Passage of the Red Sea.*[23]

We know, too, that the Brontës had access to a substantial amount of other visual material, their chief source being engravings in Annuals and illustrated books. Their own copies, in pencil and watercolor, of prints by Turner, Finden, Landseer, and Allom confirm their exposure to popular visual texts.[24] They regularly borrowed from the Keighley Mechanics' Institute Library, which Mr. Brontë joined in 1833, eight years after it was founded. The Library catalog boasts copies of all the major contemporary journals, including the popular new Annuals that the Brontës were among the first to borrow and purchase.[25] John Martin was one of the fashionable artists whose engravings increased the demand for these decorative little books, so adding to the dissemination of artworks to remote places in the provinces.

Between the years 1826 and 1839, while Charlotte Brontë was busily engaged in writing her juvenilia, Martin supplied over twenty-seven designs for annuals and journals from his now famous paintings. Most of these were available to the Brontës, and we know that specific engravings had a profound effect on them. In 1828, for instance, they were able to see a small line engraving by E. J. Roberts of Martin's *Sadak in Search of the Waters of Oblivion* (fig. 2), originally painted in

[23] Not to be confused with Martin's own "Passage of the Red Sea," a small plate from Westall and Martin, *Illustrations of the Bible* (London: Edward Churton, 1835). Martin never made independent engravings of either "St Paul Preaching at Athens" or "Passage of the Red Sea." Mr. Brontë's copy of the latter was probably the larger version (suggested here) of "Destruction of Pharaoh's Host" from Martin's *Illustrations of the Bible* (London: published by John Martin, 1831–35), a piracy made by S. Lucas, undated, published in Paris (see Balston, pp. 285–91). It is also possible that Mr. Brontë's copy was not of Martin's engraving at all, since G. H. Phillips's engraving of Francis Danby's *The Passage of the Red Sea* was also widely available at the same time.

[24] See Christine Alexander and Jane Sellars, *The Art of the Brontës* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), which includes a detailed catalog of Brontë paintings and drawings.

[25] They owned at least three copies: *Friendship's Offering* (1829), *The Literary Souvenir* (1830), and the *Forget Me Not* (1831); see Christine Alexander, " 'That Kingdom of Gloom': Charlotte Brontë, the Annuals, and the Gothic," *Nineteeth-Century Literature*, 47 (1993), 414.

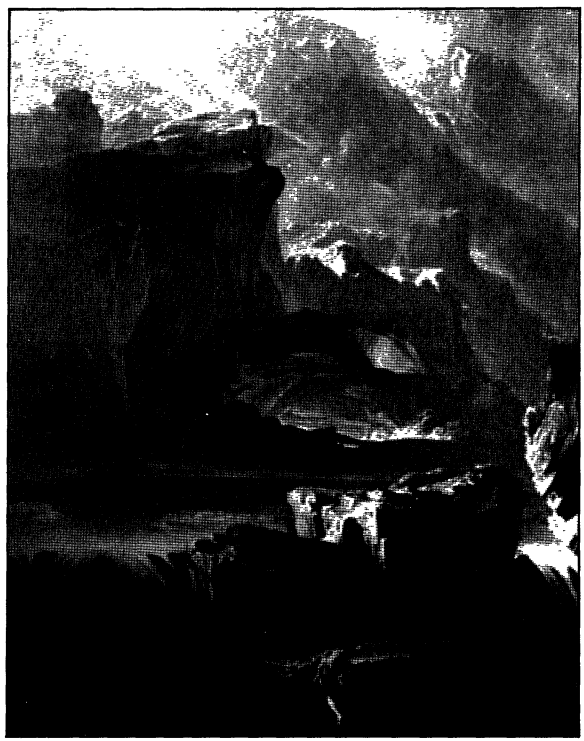

FIG. 2. Engraving by E. J. Roberts of Martin's *Sadak in Search of the Waters of Oblivion,* originally printed 1812.

1812.[26] It appeared in the Annual entitled *The Keepsake,* accompanied by a tale ("The Deev Alfakir") and a poem ("Sadak The Wanderer: A Fragment"), both anonymous (though the latter is by Shelley). The original story came from another source read by Charlotte Brontë at about this time: the tale of "Sadak and Kalasrade" in James Ridley's *Tales of the Genii* (1764).

In the *Keepsake* version Sadak is a Persian nobleman, a world-weary thinker who longs for forgetfulness. He is duped by a clever Sultan, who abducts his wife and tricks Sadak into volunteering to go in search of the Waters of Oblivion, which the sultan intends to make Sadak's wife

[26] The large mezzotint engraving of this painting was not made until 1841, by John Martin himself together with his son Alfred (see Campbell, p. 181).

drink in order to force her to comply with his evil wishes. The painting has all the exotic romanticism of the tale: it involves a single explorer, perilously placed in an overwhelming, apocalyptic landscape of turbulent waters and volcanic forms. The following year, Charlotte Brontë appears to be recalling this scene when she writes in one of her earliest stories:

> I found myself encompassed with clouds and darkness. But soon the roar of mighty waters fell upon my ear, and I saw some clouds of spray arising from high falls that rolled in awful majesty down tremendous precipices, and then foamed and thundered in the gulf beneath as if they had taken up their unquiet abode in some giant's cauldron. (*Edition of Early Writings*, I, 20)[27]

Emily Brontë, too, is thought to have been influenced by both the Martin engraving and the anonymous text in *The Keepsake*. Derek Roper has recently put forward the view that Sadak—"surnamed Al Hahjim or the Philosopher"—may have suggested the Philosopher of Emily's poem "Enough of thought, Philosopher!", with his hunger for oblivion and his outstretched arms.[28]

There is an interesting play here of layered intertextuality. Martin's painting of Sadak was a response to the literary text of Ridley, yet the painting—in turn—was quoted by numerous writers. Robert's engraving had been commissioned specifically for *The Keepsake*, and the accompanying story had been written later to "illustrate" the engraving, though Shelley's poem on the subject had been composed some time earlier. It seems clear that it was not only Shelley's text and "The Deev Alfakir" but also the engraving that caught hold of the Brontës' imaginations.

Martin's "literary" illustrations constantly reinforced texts with which the Brontës were already familiar—scenes from the Bible, and from Milton, Shelley, and Byron in particular. They would have known that Martin glossed his vision of

[27] The affinity between Martin and this scene was first recognized by Gérin, pp. 43–44.

[28] Private correspondence with Derek Roper, editor of the forthcoming volume of Emily Brontë's poems, to be published by Oxford Univ. Press, 1995.

Deluge by reference to "that sublime poem," Byron's *Heaven and Earth*, and that he relied on Byron's drama *Sardanapalus* (as did Delacroix) for his image of self-destruction in the *Fall of Ninevah*. *Belshazzar's Feast*, too, has affinities with Byron's vision of *Belshazzar*. By the time Martin illustrated *Manfred* (1837), a text that is constantly "quoted" in their early writings, the young Brontës were well acquainted with Martin's visual analogues of their favorite poet. When Charlotte Brontë eventually saw an original Martin painting at the 1850 Summer Exhibition of the Royal Academy, it was Thomas Campbell's poem "The Last Man" that she saw illustrated in "a grand, wonderful picture . . . showing the red sun fading out of the sky, and all the soil of the foreground made up of bones and skulls."[29]

Martin materialized the romantic and the heroic; and, like Byron, both his work and his person became associated in the popular mind with the romantic idiom. He joined the pantheon of Brontë heroes, like Wellington and Byron, who were appropriated and re-created in their early stories and even in their lives. The Brontë children were eager for heroes, for role models, and here was someone whose imagination was as bizarre and uninhibited as their own. Here was someone whose fantasy worlds had led to fame and fortune.

Branwell Brontë, in particular, hoped to follow in the footsteps of men like Martin, an artist from the north of England who had made good in London. One of Branwell's earliest paintings is a copy of Martin's "Queen Esther" (fig. 3), made at the age of thirteen from Finden's engraving in the *Forget Me Not* Annual of 1831.[30] Branwell had some talent and high hopes but minimal technical training. He took lessons

[29] Letter to Patrick Brontë, 4 June 1850, quoted in Wise and Symington, III, 116. Charlotte Brontë had read Campbell's poem (written in 1823) as early as 1834, when she recommended his poetry to Ellen Nussey in a 4 July 1834 letter (see Wise and Symington, I, 122).

[30] The watercolor is dated December 1830, in the Brontë Parsonage Museum. See the *Forget Me Not: A Christmas, New Year's, and Birthday Present for 1831* (London: R. Ackermann). The Brontës copied four other plates from the same volume: Roman figure with lyre, on title page (copied by Charlotte); "An Italian Scene," painted by G. Barrett and engraved by A. Freebairn (copied by Charlotte); "The Disconsolate," painted by H. Corbould and engraved by C. Rolls (copied by Emily and Charlotte); and "Bessy Bell and Mary Gray," painted by J. R. West and engraved by W. Finden (copied by Charlotte).

FIG. 3. Branwell Brontë's painting of Martin's *Queen Esther,* copied 1830.

and spent a short time as a portrait painter in Bradford, establishing friendships with artists like Leyland, Cousens, and Geller. Leyland had studied under Haydon, a friend of Martin's and like him excluded from the Academy, and Geller had studied under Martin himself. Such contacts fueled Branwell's artistic ambitions.

Charlotte Brontë, too, harbored the ambition to become a visual artist, but she had no intention of adopting Martin's grandiose style in paint. It seems likely that she thought of becoming a miniaturist, painting tiny portraits, scenes, and flowers for ornamental use. Her extreme short-sightedness and her large number of surviving pencil and watercolor portraits suggest this possibility. The two pencil drawings, detailed copies of engravings, that she exhibited at the 1834 Leeds exhibition for the Royal Northern Society for the Encouragement of the Fine Arts confirm her preference for working in miniature.[31]

[31] The items she exhibited were "Bolton Abbey" and "Kirkstall Abbey," both listed in *A Catalogue of the Works of British Artists, in the Gallery of the Royal Northern*

But Charlotte's method of studying engravings in minute detail in order to copy them (a habit described by Lucy Snowe in *Villette* [p. 577]) meant that she had an intimate knowledge of both the large Martin engravings on the walls of her home and the small illustrations in the Annuals she owned and borrowed from local libraries. Her school friend Mary Taylor recalled that "whenever an opportunity offered of examining a picture or cut of any kind, she went over it piecemeal, with her eyes close to the paper, looking so long that we used to ask her 'what she saw in it.' She could always see plenty, and explained it very well."[32] Charlotte Brontë was skilled in translating pictures, and it was through pictorial media that she first conceived of her own imaginary world.

John Martin's paintings reinforced the Brontës' habit of creating imaginary worlds. The pinnacle of his career coincided with the period during which they began writing, in minuscule script, their little volumes of stories and poems centered on the imaginary African kingdom of Glass Town and its later satellite, Angria. This "web of waking visions," as Charlotte Brontë called it, originated during childhood play; it was elaborated upon during the twilight hours of secret "bed plays" and discussed in family conferences that resulted in the four children dividing into partnerships based on their preferences for style and subject. Theirs was a fantasy as inclusive and surreal as Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Their commitment to this alternative universe was total: Charlotte's written contribution alone exceeds in quantity the sum of all her published novels.

This imaginary world had originally been inspired by Branwell Brónte's twelve wooden toy soldiers, who (in the saga) colonized an area of central Africa around the delta of

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Society, for the Encouragement of the Fine Arts, 1834 (Leeds: printed by R. Perring, Intelligencer Office, Commercial Street, 1834), p. 24 (copy in the Leeds Public Library).

[32] Quoted in Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Alan Shelston (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), pp. 130–31.

the Niger, under the leadership of a fictitious re-creation of the Duke of Wellington. The new society rapidly divided and established itself into four kingdoms, ruled by the favorite characters of the four Brontë children, who as Chief Genii presided over the destinies of their creations. Each kingdom had its own capital, modeled on the federal capital, the Great Glass Town—a city of marble pillars, solemn domes, splendid palaces, and mighty towers, raised not by mere mortals but by "supernatural power," a city suggesting the grandiose perspectives of Martin's lost cities of the ancient world: Babylon, Nineveh, Pompeii, and Herculaneum. Brontë draws the comparison herself in an early love story entitled "Albion and Marina" (1830):

> the Glass Town, of whose splendour, magnificence and extent, power, strength and riches, occasional tidings came from afar, wafted by the breezes of the ocean to Merry England. But to most of the inhabitants of that little isle it [beheld] the character of a dream or gorgeous fiction. They were unable to comprehend how mere human beings could construct fabrics of such a marvellous size and grandeur as many of the public buildings were represented to be; and as to the Tower of All Nations, few believed in its existence. It seemed as the cities of old Nineveh or Babylon with the temples of their gods, Ninus or Jupiter Belus, their halls of Astarte and Semalt. These most people believe to be magnified by the dim haze of intervening ages and the exaggerating page of history, through which mediums we behold them. (*Edition of Early Writings*, I, 290–91)

The element of unreality here associated with the Glass Town is also a feature of Martin's gigantic imaginary scenes in which he sought to delineate the splendor of ancient architecture by amalgamating Classical, Egyptian, and Indian styles. Martin himself had written in his descriptive catalog to *The Fall of Nineveh*: "The mighty cities of Nineveh and Babylon have long since passed away. The accounts of their greatness and splendour may have been exaggerated. But, where strict truth is not essential, the mind is content to find delight in the contemplation of the grand and the marvellous."[33] Mar-

[33] *Descriptive Catalogue of the Picture of The Fall of Nineveh by John Martin* (London, 1828); quoted in Balston, p. 107.

tin's "visions of antiquity" were exercises in the sublime, providing unlimited scope for the young architects of the utopian civilization now expanding on the west African coast.

After 1831 Emily and Anne Brontë formed their own mythical world of Gondal, few manuscripts of which still exist; but Charlotte and Branwell continued to write about the African Glass Town saga for another eight years, until Charlotte was twenty-three. They developed an elaborate world of aristocratic intrigue based on the rival factions of their favorite characters: the Duke of Zamorna (son of the Duke of Wellington) and Alexander Percy, Lord Northangerland (based on the Northumberland Percys).

In Charlotte Brontë's manuscripts the focus is on her hero, Zamorna. His Byronic character, political machinations, and sensual encounters—legitimate and otherwise—are recounted in a series of lengthy manuscripts written in minuscule print. While her brother chronicled the development of Angria as a nation—the parliamentary debates and business deals, the civil wars precipitated by the satanic Percy and the external conflicts with the neighboring Ashantee tribes—Charlotte Brontë reveled in "soap-opera" romance. Increasingly influenced by Byron and by newspaper gossip of his affairs, she became intimately involved in the predicament of her heroines and their fascination for her aristocratic hero and his new kingdom of Angria.

There were many literary and visual influences that contributed to this Glass Town or Angrian saga (as it has been variously called),[34] but Charlotte and Branwell in particular were hungry for color and emotional drama, for the kind of imagery John Martin could provide. It is clear from her early writings that Charlotte Brontë preferred the melodrama of Gothic romance, the exotic trappings of aristocratic life, and the sublime in landscape.[35] As early as 1830, when she was fourteen years old, she complained of the bleak, perfunctory nature of her sister Emily's version of their fantasy world,

[34] For a discussion of other influences, see Christine Alexander, *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), pp. 11–26.

[35] See Alexander, " 'That Kingdom of Gloom': Charlotte Brontë, the Annuals, and the Gothic," pp. 409–36.

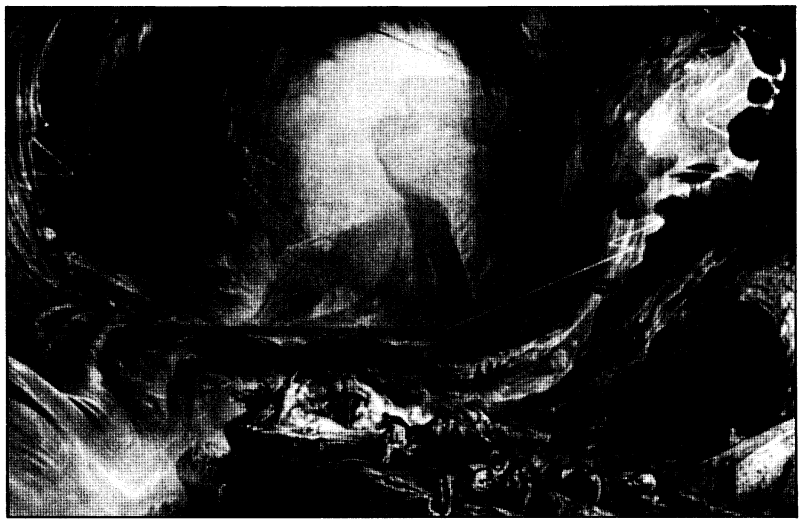

FIG. 4. Engraving of *The Deluge,* 1828.

which closely resembled the Yorkshire scene with its "nasty factories," "tall black chimneys," women in brown stuff gowns and skies "of dull hazy colourless hue."[36] By contrast, Charlotte's scenes were crowded with splendid palaces, hoary woods, rushing torrents, towering mountains, and the grand gestures of noble figures surrounded by luxurious drapery.

Martin reinforced the drama of nature and human response. In "The Search After Happiness" (1829)—Charlotte Brontë's adaptation of Johnson's *Rasselas*—her heroes are subjected to a landscape recognizably "after" Martin's engraving of *The Deluge* (1828) (fig. 4), which she saw every day on the parsonage walls. They are perched "upon the top of a rock which was more than a thousand fathoms high. All beneath them was liquid mountains tossed to and fro with horrible confusion. . . . Above them was a mighty firmament, in one part covered with black clouds from which darted huge and terrible sheets of lightning" (*Edition of Early Writings*, I, 46).[37]

The pastoral landscapes of Glass Town also echo Martin's biblical images. Charlotte Brontë was familiar with his

[36] "A Day at Parry's Palace," in *Edition of Early Writings*, I, 230.

[37] An affinity first noted by Gérin, pp. 43–44.

concept of Eden as an English landscape garden, widely publicized in his plates for *Paradise Lost* (1827) and the later *Illustrations of the Bible* (1831–35), and the African estates of the Glass Town nobles are often verbal equivalents to his Eden.

It would be tedious to quote all her references to Martin's pictorial texts, yet so close are they that for many years one of his plates was thought to have been painted by Brontë herself to illustrate her verbal scene (fig. 5). Displayed in the Brontë Parsonage Museum as Charlotte's and frequently published as her representation of "The Bay of Glass Town," it is actually a hand-colored lithograph entitled "The Temptation," torn from *The Sacred Annual*, a now-rare book that the Brontës possibly owned.[38] We have no evidence of when the Brontës acquired *The Sacred Annual*, but this unusually picturesque work by Martin seems to have inspired many of the early idyllic descriptions of the Glass Town scene and the surrounding Verdopolitan valley.

In such descriptions the characters gaze on "grand and beautiful prospect[s]," which they interpret for the reader on picturesque principles. The narrator's eye moves always from the foreground where he stands to the city in the middle distance, dominated by the central palace, whose brazen gates and massive walls are surrounded by "the majestic stream of the Guadima, whose banks were bordered by splendid palaces and magnificent gardens" (*Edition of Early Writings*, I, 45). Beyond lies the Verdopolitan valley and, always in the distance, the blue mountains disappearing into a Claudian haze of infinity:

> The background was closed by lofty, peaked mountains whose azure tint almost melted into the serene horizon, and all was faintly

[38] "The Temptation," from the fourth edition of *The Sacred Annual: Being the Messiah, a Poem, in Six Books, by Robert Montgomery* (London: John Turrill, 1834); a source first identified by Michael Campbell of Campbell Fine Art, London. I am grateful to him for discussions we have had and for his help in identifying certain Martin engravings. It is likely that the Brontës owned a copy of the fourth edition, since Charlotte Brontë made a watercolor copy of another illustration from the same volume, viz., A. B. Clayton's hand-colored lithograph "The Atheist Viewing the Dead Body of his Wife" (see the London *Times*, 11 August 1984, p. 3). Both Branwell and Charlotte were influenced by this picture in their descriptions of the death of Mary Percy (see Alexander, *The Early Writings*, pp. 154–55).

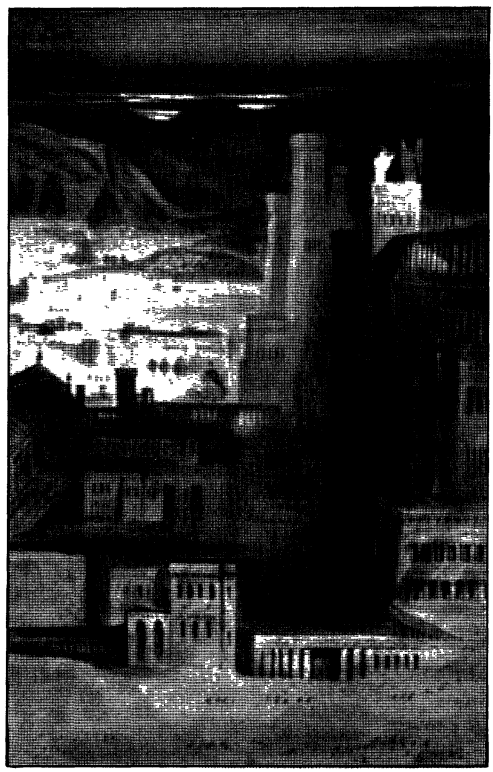

FIG. 5. "The Temptation," hand-colored lithograph, in the fourth edition of *The Sacred Annual,* 1834.

> seen through a mellowing veil of mist which enhanced instead of depreciating the charms of this earthly paradise. (*Edition of Early Writings*, II, part 1, 51)

So consistent are such passages in stories often five years apart that they read like set pieces based on this single Martin illustration. And they are couched in pictorial terms, as if Brontë is "reading" the visual image before her.

John Martin's *Fall of Babylon* (1819) (fig. 6)[39] expresses even more clearly its shared iconography with the city of Glass Town (or Verdopolis, as it becomes in manuscripts writ-

[39] Rediscovered in private ownership in Sweden (see the London *Times*, 9 December 1982, p. 12); engraved 1831.

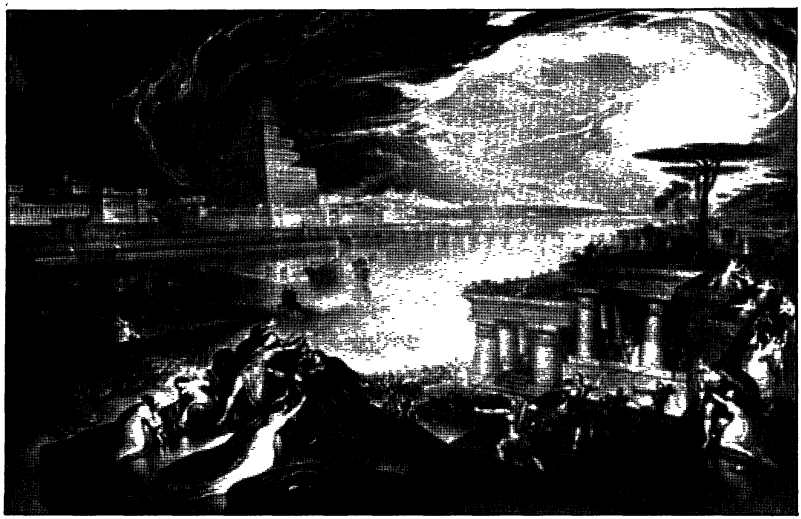

FIG. 6. *The Fall of Babylon,* 1819.

ten after 1830), suggesting perhaps an origin for the name itself in the "glass-like," translucent reflections of the fairy-tale structures on the banks of the Euphrates. Like Babylon, Glass Town is a magnificent capital:

> the Queen of the Earth, who looks down on her majestic face mirrored in the noble Niger and sees the far reflection of her valley and her turrets caught by the flashing Guadima and flung with beauty unimaginable on the glass that her harbour gives her. (*Edition of Early Writings*, II, part 2, 241)

The "Tower of Babylon," a central feature of Martin's views, is appropriated by Brontë as the "Tower of All Nations," formerly the "Tower of Babylon." It dominates the Great Glass Town and may owe its name not only to Martin's visual image but to his "mad" brother's notoriety as the self-styled "anti-Newtonian . . . Philosophical Conqueror of All Nations."[40] The tower appears again in Martin's illustration to Psalm 137, "By the Waters of Babylon" (1835), a source for Brontë's simi-

[40] Ruthven Todd, "The Imagination of John Martin," in his *Tracks in the Snow: Studies in English Science and Art* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), pp. 97–98.

lar lament: a poem in which she compares the defeated Ashantee tribes to the Jews in captivity.[41] In Martin's engraving we see the Babylonian equivalent of her River Guadima, its banks bordered by hanging gardens and the city beyond dominated by its massive tower.

The purported decadence and sophistication of Babylon had an ambivalent appeal for Charlotte Brontë; like Martin, she equated her fictitious Babylon with Victorian London. Glass Town becomes a city of vice and corruption but also a Mecca for the arts and high society. The ambivalent moral world of her Byronic aristocrats could be suitably accommodated within the frame of Martin's limitless visionary structures. And the mystical nature of Babylon in the Book of Revelation would also have appealed to Brontë as it did to Martin.

The sheer scale of Martin's architectural designs is repeated in the "wonderful size" of the Glass Town:

> fortified by walls of 3 hundred feet in height, with towers of 9 hundred at every interval of one mile. In the midst was a tower 6,000 feet high situated in an area 3 miles broad. The king's palaces were of radiant white marble, richly ornamented with massive silver imagery and the architecture was the soul of nobleness, grandeur, magnificence and elegance combined, and all the other dwellings were majestic and beautiful likewise. The public buildings were resplendent with grace, symmetry, majesty and proportion. (*Edition of Early Writings*, I, 138–39)

This reads like one of the carefully documented descriptions in the catalogs that accompanied Martin's architectural designs, in which the exact proportions of buildings were listed to show his detailed knowledge of contemporary archaeology and ancient sources.[42]

In later juvenile manuscripts Glass Town is surpassed in

[41] See "O Hyle thy waves are like Babylon's streams," in *The Poems of Charlotte Brontë: A New Text and Commentary*, ed. Victor A. Neufeldt (New York: Garland, 1985), p. 104.

[42] Martin's extravagant architecture is based on a mixture of Egyptian, Indian, and Babylonian styles derived from a combination of contemporary drawings of India by the Daniells, accounts of biblical sites, archaeological descriptions compiled by the artists and scholars who accompanied Napoleon in the Egyptian Campaign of 1798, and descriptions by biblical scholars and classical historians such as Herodotus.

grandeur by Adrianopolis, the imperial capital of Angria built by the Duke of Zamorna to commemorate his new position as monarch. Martin, as "Sir Martin Dundee" (*Edition of Early Writings*, II, part 1, 368–69), appears among the artists commissioned to serve the new city, whose buildings increasingly reflect the historical Martin's structural fantasies—his "Bridge over Chaos,"[43] for example, like blocks of chiseled lava hovering "over the foaming Deep high Archt" and resembling a new nineteenth-century railway viaduct receding into a tunnel;[44] or his visionary plans for an underground sewage system for London. The picture of the young King of Angria directing operations on a vast scale, a tiny figure on the scaffolding, silhouetted against the sky as he watches his monumental city rise, has a hallucinatory quality:

> Everywhere the tall figure of the slender youth . . . might be seen passing along with commanding tread and bearing, controlling all around him like the sovereign spirit of the storm. Sometimes that shape appeared lofty against the sky, standing on a thread-like scaffolding, a blue abyss of air on each side, before and behind the skeleton erection of an unfinished palace, honeycombed with arches, and vast beams flung across as the divisions of state chambers, between voids that might turn the head of a cabin-boy giddy. And here the monarch walked as fearlessly as an eagle hangs, poised above his eyrie. (*Edition of Early Writings*, II, part 2, 154)

Martin's dreamlike urban architecture is used by Charlotte Brontë to express the grandiose plans of the Angrian monarch and his increasingly devious ambitions. His city becomes an icon of increasing license through which the young author is at pains to express a personality spiraling out of control. The images she turns to are undoubtedly those of Milton, powerfully visualized by John Martin. The new palace has all the architectonic pride of Martin's illustration of Pandemo-

[43] Engraving in John Martin, *The Paradise Lost of John Milton* (London: Septimus Prowett, 1827), illustrating Book 10, ll. 312 and 347; see Alexander, " 'That Kingdom of Gloom': Charlotte Brontë, the Annuals, and the Gothic," pp. 417–18.

[44] Martin, in depicting this tunnel, may have been recalling Brunel's abortive scheme for a tunnel under the Thames, begun in 1825 (see Marcia R. Pointon, *Milton and English Art* [Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1970], p. 185. Chapter 4 of this work contains a detailed discussion of Martin's illustrations to *Paradise Lost*).

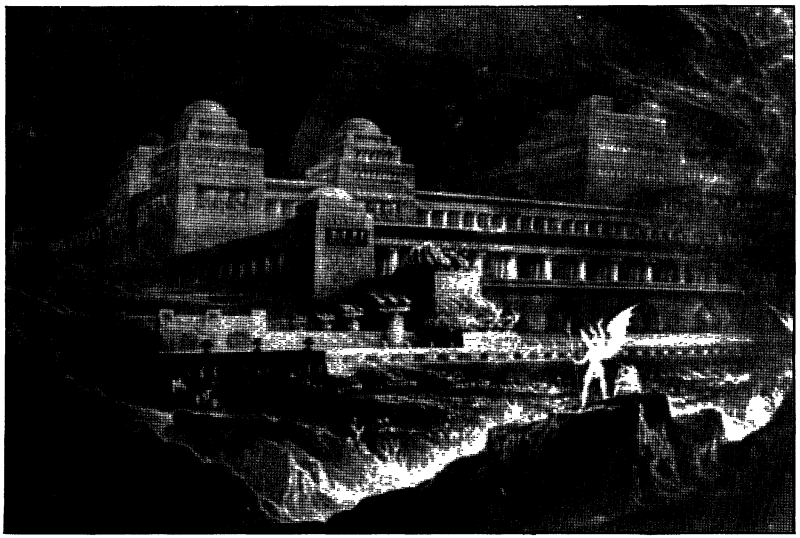

FIG. 7. Martin's illustration of Milton's Pandemonium.

nium (fig. 7) in its handling of height and perspective, inspiring (we are told) "ideas of boundless grandeur":

> What seemed solemn, vast, undefined, as the hoary cone of Caucasus ere long settled down into an edifice of mason's work. It stretched indeed far away and ascended to a sublime height, but still its limits were well and clearly outlined. A mighty row of marble pillars, pale and gleaming as ice, receded in their grand perspective before me. Their eternal basements, their giant shafts, their gorgeous capitals, the long, long, high-uplifted cornice that ran above them, were all of the purest, the noblest Grecian moulding. All breathed of Ionia in her loftiest times. (*Edition of Early Writings*, II, part 2, 266)

Here we might recall, too, the massive architecture in *The Fall of Ninevah* (fig. 8), which dwarfs the foreground drama of Sardanapalus, who is about to terminate not only his own life of voluptuousness (a word Brontë uses for Zamorna) but also the lives of his concubines and royal household. When Charlotte Brontë read a critique of this work in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* for July 1828, she undoubtedly saw the possibilities of reframing her hero and his world in

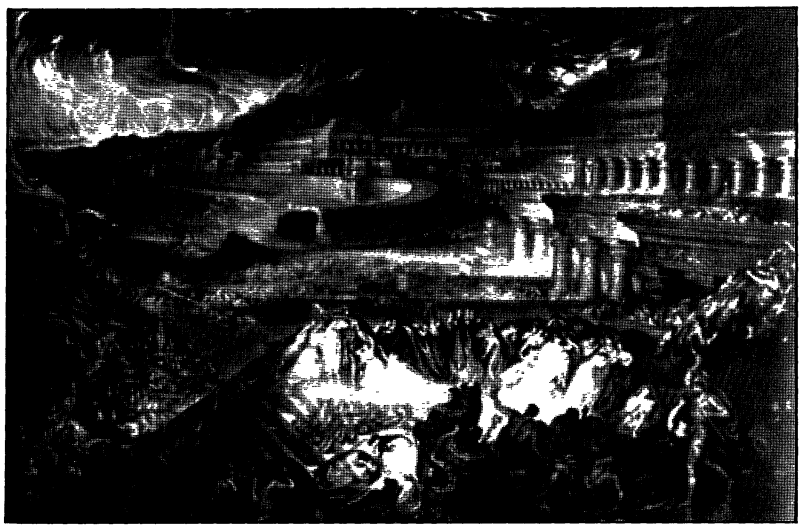

FIG. 8. *The Fall of Ninevah,* 1828.

terms of this dazzling conflagration of egotistical destruction.[45] She planned an equally cataclysmic end to her empire: she wrote of "the fearful magnificence" that "told of overgrown dominion" and "the prophetic eye" that could read "coming destruction" (*Edition of Early Writings*, II, part 1, 326). Adrianopolis remained unscathed in the surviving manuscripts, but the possibilities suggested by *The Fall of Ninevah* brood over later episodes in the saga.

Zamorna and his royal court gradually become "magnificently voluptuous." By 1834 the eighteen-year-old Charlotte Brontë was focusing entirely on her conception of aristocratic society, emphasizing the melodramatic in contrast to her retired life in a provincial parsonage. Her heroines are draped in the gorgeous robes, glittering jewels, and waving plumes we see in Martin's *Queen Esther*, *Belshazzar's Feast*, or *The Fall of Ninevah*.[46] The grand postures, the outstretched

[45] See "Martin's Fall of Ninevah," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 24 (1828), 36–37. Like Martin, Brontë would have read Byron's *Sardanapalus* (1821).

[46] Brontë would have seen only engravings, but she would have read in descriptions in *Blackwood's* and *Fraser's* of the vibrant colors of the originals; see, for example, "Exhibitions—The Royal Academy," p. 340.

arms are repeated in the theatrical behavior of Zenobia Ellrington or Alexander Percy.

In "High Life in Verdopolis" Charlotte Brontë's hero becomes an oriental despot with a "basilisk's fascination" for women, a "haughty serpent, concealing under his glittering and crested pride a sting of such deadly venom" (*Edition of Early Writings*, II, part 2, 17). His changing, vengeful moods, his cynicism, Byronic pride, and defiance of conventional morality now become standard in every manuscript. Zamorna still maintains the early Wellingtonian glamour in war, but it is the fatal magnetism of the Byronic hero that fascinates Brontë. Her heroines are equally mesmerized. In all but name they play concubine to his Sardanapalus, displaying their allegiance to him by dressing in uniform black satin with scarlet flowers—"a splendid bouquet for Beelzebub, a magnificent regiment of Lucifer's own raising" (*Edition of Early Writings*, II, part 2, 342).

For a visual equivalent to this Glass Town Satan it is difficult to bypass Martin's melodramatic rendering of the ambivalent beauty of Milton's fallen angel, seen for example in the engraving of "Eve's Dream—Satan aroused" (fig. 9) for *The Paradise Lost of John Milton* (Book 4, l. 813). Brontë clearly appropriates this arrogant Satan for her own imprint of "insatiable ambition and fiery impetuosity":

> Fire and light! What have we here? Zamorna's self, blazing in the frontispiece like the sun on his own standard! . . . he stands as if a thunderbolt could neither blast the light of his eyes nor dash the effrontery of his brow. . . . Oh, Zamorna! What eyes those are glancing under the deep shadow of that raven crest! They bode no good. . . . All here is passion and fire unquenchable. Impetuous sin, stormy pride, diving and soaring enthusiasm, war and poetry are kindling their fires in all his veins, and his wild blood boils from his heart and back again like a torrent of new-sprung lava. Young duke—Young demon! (*Edition of Early Writings*, II, part 2, 92–93)

Above all it was the theatrical rhetoric of Martin's paintings—the dramatic posturing of his figures and the maelstroms of thunder and lightning that flashed across his canvases—that fired the imagination of the young Charlotte Brontë.

FIG. 9. Martin's engraving of "Eve's Dream—Satan aroused," for *The Paradise Lost of John Milton,* 1827.

Zamorna and the Angrian dreamworld became an obsession: it finally took hold of Charlotte Brontë's adolescent mind, blurring the distinction between fantasy and reality and bringing a kind of emotional and spiritual sustenance to her lonely, restricted life as a governess. As she describes in an early poem,[47] the young Brontës had woven around themselves a protective web, an exclusive mythology that allowed them to live life vicariously and to act out roles that personality (in the case of Branwell) and gender (in the case of the girls) disqualified them from pursuing. For Charlotte Brontë, however, the tension between dream and reality became unbearable. The conflict between her puritanical conscience and that luxurious "other" manifested itself in an adolescent religious crisis that Martin's iconography appears to have powerfully reinforced.

[47] "We wove a web in childhood," 19 December 1835; in *Edition of Early Writings,* II, part 2, 379.

Martin's imagery became associated in Brontë's writing with sexual desire and with the unacceptable in High Art. In 1831 *Fraser's Magazine* had condemned the extravagant passion, the "ultra-magnificence" of the Brontës' favorite, *Queen Esther*: "We do not say that painters of this class never shew us nature; but then it is almost always nature in hysterics," said the reviewer ("The Suffolk Street Exhibition," p. 680). Brontë was well aware that, despite his popularity, Martin remained beyond the pale. All his life he had wanted desperately to be a success in academic terms, but he was never admitted to the Royal Academy. When his *Last Judgement* sequence was exhibited after his death in 1854 (Charlotte Brontë survived him by only a year), *The Art-Journal* stated that Martin's highly charged imagination reveled "amid the wildest fancies till it extended into the region of burlesque, and almost into that of profanity"; his influence was "most unhealthy."[48] Even before his death Martin's works had been frequently associated with disease and madness.[49]

When Charlotte Brontë came to reject her early writing at the age of twenty-three, she did so in terms that suggest its identification with the perverted or melodramatic excesses of Martin's works. She rejected her fantasy as one rejecting the "hot, foxy hue" of *Belshazzar's Feast*,[50] with all its implications of sexual luxury and satanic pride. She speaks of her "burning clime" where she has "sojourned too long"; she invokes its flaming skies—"the glow of sunset is always upon it" ("Farewell to Angria," p. 427). Glass Town and Angria had become a forbidden "world below," even "the infernal world" (*Jane Eyre*, pp. 409, 413). Brontë came to see Martin's influence as "unhealthy," almost "profane," epithets she read in unfavorable reviews of his work and appended to her own "bright darling dream."

The Roe Head Journal, written by Charlotte Brontë during the years 1835 to 1838, when she was a teacher at Miss Wooler's school, records her painful guilt over her obsession

[48] "The Pictures of the Late John Martin," *The Art-Journal*, n.s. 1 (1855), 195.

[49] See, for example, "The Suffolk Street Exhibition," p. 680.

[50] See Richard and Samuel Redgrave, *A Century of British Painters*, ed. Ruthven Todd (London: Phaidon Press, 1947), p. 395.

with Glass Town and Angria. Away from home and subjected to an enforced routine, she longed for the freedom to write, to return to her Angrian fantasy. She tells how in rare moments of quiet her thoughts would wander back to Haworth and Angria. She was hungry for emotional and mental stimulation. But she was also fastidious: her conscience would not allow her to indulge in dreams without a growing sense of guilt.

Moreover, she felt that the nature of these dreams was "unhealthy," sinful. She became increasingly frightened of what she called her "morbidly vivid realizations."[51] One can only speculate as to their precise nature, but we know that they were part of her Angrian fantasy and that they were vivid enough to cause her to pant (as she records). Their interruption would make her feel physically sick. She explains in her journal: "All this day I have been in a dream, half miserable and half ecstatic: miserable because I could not follow it out uninterruptedly; ecstatic because it shewed almost in the vivid light of reality the ongoings of the infernal world" (p. 143). She records how the sound of distant church bells then whirl her away to Angria, her mind flooding with images of Verdopolis. But an unsuspecting pupil interrupts this vision and she writes angrily: "But just then a dolt came up with a lesson. I thought I should have vomited."

It seems that she came close at this time to some kind of mental breakdown. Her friend Mary Taylor, observant but unaware of the Angrian world, later told Elizabeth Gaskell that at this time Brontë's "imaginations became gloomy or frightful; she could not help it, nor help thinking" (*Life*, p. 161). Angria was now "infernal," "the world below," to be expiated in confession; but she could not betray this secret world, known only to her family. She came near to revealing the truth on 10 May 1836 when she wrote to another friend, Ellen Nussey: "If you knew my thoughts; the dreams that absorb me; and the fiery imagination that at times eats me up

[51] "All this day I have been in a dream," ed. Christine Alexander, in *Jane Eyre*, p. 416.

and makes me feel Society as it is, wretchedly insipid, you would pity and I dare say despise me" (Wise and Symington, I, 139).

Her guilt about the sensuality of the Angrian fantasy now took the form of religious melancholia. There is a kind of despair that seeps through all her writing at this time. In a semi-autobiographical poem she agonizes over whether her supplication to Christ is motivated by a contrite heart or merely by her inward agony.[52] She yearns for her childhood dreams of heaven when she was blindly pious, unconscious of evil, uncontaminated by such influences as Byron and Martin. Sinful terrors plague her mind, spectral visions foretell her death in the poem, and the church tower bears down on her spirit like an awful giant. She is afraid to pray. She speaks of the "ghastly power" and "grinding tyranny" of her thoughts. She feels profoundly guilty of her deep need to create and acutely aware of the licentious nature of the artistic vision she has created.

If Martin can be seen as contributing to the profanity of Angria, then, paradoxically, he can also be seen as reinforcing Charlotte Brontë's sense of guilt. His illustrations were grandiose, luxurious, and defiant, appealing to the melodramatic in her; but they can also be seen as appealing to her puritanical tendencies. Here we need to recall Martin's radical rewriting of the relative scale of man to nature, compared to conventional history paintings of the time. His posturing—for all its grand setting—was essentially a puritanical attitude, with man subordinated to architecture and landscape, solitary and supplicating, with arms uplifted (like Joshua or the last man) beneath an overwhelming sky, or cringing (like Adam and Eve) beneath overwhelming landforms. His Sardanapalus is dwarfed by the immensity of the conflagration he has set in process: Martin's painting records not one man's deliberate act of self-destruction (as Delacriox's image did) but the demise of an empire, precipitated not by warring armies (though they reaped the victory) but by the unexpected flooding of the River Tigris,

[52] See "Long since as I remember well," c. January 1836; in *Poems*, pp. 171–81.

which destroyed the ramparts of the city. The traditional voluptuary has been transformed by Martin—as he was by Byron—into a hero, but he is doomed (the painting tells us) by the force of nature.

Schooled by a mother descended from the Protestant martyr Nicholas Ridley, Martin was reared under a strict puritanical creed. His paintings suggest that all he saw and experienced was related to biblical precedent. Even his pagan themes, like *Sadak in Search of the Waters of Oblivion*, express the ambivalence of man's quest for the fulfillment of a dream, the possible futility of his struggle against the overwhelming odds of his environment, the self-indulgence of the effort to preserve an Angrian dream in "the face of this world's desolate and boundless deluge."[53]

In Martin's painting Sadak hangs in the balance between here and eternity, between the glory of achievement and despair. He is a hero with a quest but he is also a midget, marooned in a fiery landscape. When we readjust him—a tiny figure—to life-size in our mind's eye, the landscape becomes overwhelming. As Martin himself said, "the *great* becomes *gigantic*, the *wonderful* swells into the *sublime*."[54] Sadak is the artist trying to grasp at Vision through execution. The waters of Oblivion serve as a Holy Grail, Sadak's predicament becomes a desperate struggle for the survival of a dream and for personal advancement in circumstances beyond his control. Shelley's poem, which accompanied the engraving Brontë saw, neatly expresses this quest:

> Onward, Sadak, to thy prize!
> But what night has hid the skies?
> Like a dying star the sun
> Struggles on through cloud-wreaths dun
> From yon mountains shelter'd brow
> Bursts the lava's burning flow:
> Warrior! Wilt thou dare the tomb
> In the red volcano's womb![55]

[53] "Well, here I am at Roe Head," ed. Christine Alexander, in *Jane Eyre*, p. 410.
[54] Catalog to *The Fall of Nineveh*; quoted in Balston, p. 107.
[55] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Sadak the Wanderer," in *The Keepsake* (1828), p. 118.

The individual is pitted against overwhelming forces and salvation lies not necessarily in triumph but in the dignity of struggle.

Martin's daring apocalyptic visions, his dramatic posturing and defiant Miltonic Satans had allowed Brontë to both sustain and articulate her own "bright darling dream"; but the message expressed in his vast designs and puny human forms was a potent reminder of the reality of her position—the position of the penniless single woman struggling to realize an artistic dream in the face of a hostile reality.

Martin's fiery furnaces guarding the grail of achievement provide an analogue for Brontë's predicament during the years of her early writings. She had a deep need for her Angrian vision: it was the source of her imaginative power, the medium by which she could write and so escape "this wretched bondage," her life as a teacher. At the same time, she felt that her "web of waking visions" threatened her sanity and placed her beyond the reach of true art.

Yet she had decided to make writing her career. Patently unsuited to teaching and having been forced by financial considerations to relinquish her dream of becoming a painter,[56] she began in earnest to seek direction as a writer. At the age of twenty she wrote to Robert Southey for advice, describing her "visionary world" and boldly stating her "ardent desire 'to be for ever known' as a poetess."[57] His well-known reply, warning against her indulgent "day dreams" that are "likely to induce a distempered state of mind," reinforced the guilt she already felt about her "infernal world" and the nature of her literary efforts; but his admonition that "literature cannot be the busi-

[56] See Christine Alexander, *Charlotte Brontë's Paintings: Victorian Women and the Visual Arts, Hancock Lecture* (Canberra: Australian Academy of the Humanities, 1993), pp. 21–25.

[57] Margaret Smith, "The Letters of Charlotte Brontë: Some New Insights into Her Life and Writing," in *Conference Papers* (The Brontë Society and The Gaskell Society Joint Conference, 1990), p. 63.

ness of a woman's life, and it ought not to be" went unheeded. She continued the Angrian saga, writing furiously but with a more critical eye on her work: the African romances were now undercut by a cynical narrator; an assertive heroine (Elizabeth Hastings, precursor to Jane Eyre) began to emerge; and her Angrian heroes dwindled into stout Yorkshire squires. In 1840 she again tried to assess the merit of her work by sending Hartley Coleridge the draft of a "demi-semi novelette," in the hope that he might judge it worthy of publication. His reaction reinforced Southey's earlier view: he censured her florid style and her proliferation of fanciful characters, and he intimated that her story was not "likely to make an impression upon the heart of any Editor in Christendom." Brontë admitted that "their glaring attire and fantastic features" were better suited to the *Lady's Magazine*, which flourished forty years earlier, than to the literary establishment she now hoped to influence. She determined to "commit them to oblivion with several tears and much affliction."[58]

Her formal rejection of the Martinesque in her writing appears in the preface to her first novel, *The Professor*, yet Martin's message of the dignity of human struggle remains. She states that "my hero should work his way through life as I had seen real living men work theirs. . . . As Adam's Son he should share Adam's doom—Labour throughout life and a mixed and moderate cup of enjoyment" (preface to *The Professor*, pp. 3–4). She admits to her reader that *The Professor* was not a first attempt at realistic writing: "in many a crude effort destroyed almost as soon as composed I had got over any such taste as I might once have had for the ornamented and redundant in composition" (p. 3). The public voice of the aspiring writer had no wish to be labeled with Martin's epithets, as a creator of "pantomime." Her novel was to be "plain and homely," devoid of Angrian excesses. The Martinesque was to be repressed in her novels in the name of High Art.

Yet the heroines of Brontë's novels all maintain the defiant postures of Martin's puny figures, asserting their individuality against overwhelming odds. They record Brontë's

[58] Quoted in Fran Carlock Stephens, "Hartley Coleridge and the Brontës," *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 May 1970, 544.

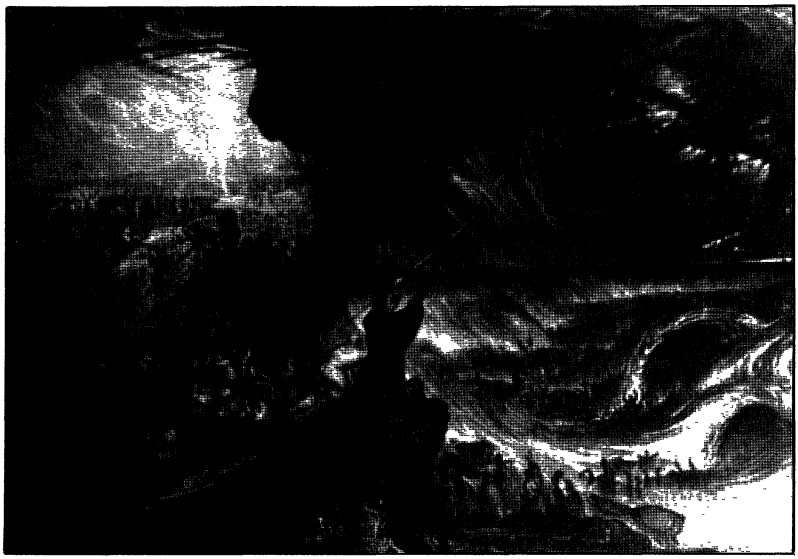

FIG. 10. "Destruction of Pharoah's Host," from Martin's *Illustrations of the Bible,* 1831–35.

own struggles as a writer and as a woman, forced to repress her imaginative desires. Her most powerful image for this predicament—between creative energy and its diabolical or sexual possession—is expressed in *Villette,* the last of her novels, in the figure of Vashti, the actress whose "magian power" and "prophet-virtue" is celebrated in imagery that identifies Vashti with Martin's "Destruction of Pharoah's Host" (fig. 10), one of the engravings Brontë saw constantly on the walls of her home:

> Let Paul Peter Rubens wake from the dead, let him rise out of his cerements, and bring into this presence all the army of his fat women; the magian power or prophet-virtue gifting that slight rod of Moses, could, at one waft, release and remingle a sea spell-parted, whelming the heavy host with the down-rush of overthrown sea-ramparts. (*Villette,* p. 371)[59]

Vashti is as frail as "that slight rod of Moses," but her emotional energy is devastating. It allows Lucy Snowe vicari-

[59] See also n. 23, above.

ous revenge for her own frustrating reality. At one stroke Vashti will devour the conventionally sensual women or ministering angels of Victorian society whom Lucy so despises and replace them instead with a "frenzy of energy" expressed in "movement royally, imperially, incedingly upborne" (p. 370), like Martin's Queen Esther. But Vashti is also the female version of Martin's fallen angel—"insurgent, banished, she remembers the heaven where she rebelled." That same shaft of light by which Martin highlights his defiant yet solitary figures beams down on Brontë's Vashti: "Heaven's light, following her exile, pierces its confines, and discloses their forlorn remoteness." The dark, uncontrolled self she represents is ultimately self-destructive and will further alienate Lucy from her fellow human beings.

Vashti embodies the same qualities as Martin's canvases: the compelling "vision" and "sensation" that drew an admiring public, the lurid colors of "a rushing, red, cometary light" (p. 371), and the images of a "profane" and deep emotion out of control. The passion-starved Lucy is momentarily swept into Vashti's fiery furnace, into the hell she represents, as an escape from frustrating reality. For Lucy, Vashti "disclosed power like a deep, swollen, winter river, thundering in cataract, and bearing the soul, like a leaf, on the steep and steely sweep of its descent." If Lucy is not to be swept away by what she refers to as the "necromantic joys of fancy" she is forced to suppress, then she must maintain a Christian fortitude against the tempestuous seas of life.

Martin's visual texts provided Charlotte Brontë with a language and a grammar within which she could locate her own rebellious visions and through which she could eventually articulate her own concept of art and the role of the artist. The Academy's derogatory verdict on Martin's choleric canvases was enough to warn her against imaginative excess and to reinforce established literary views of the need for restraint in art. Throughout her writing career Charlotte Brontë strove to maintain the realistic vision that in an 1848 letter to W. S. Williams she called "a faithful allegiance to Truth and Nature" (Wise and Symington, II, 243) and to eschew her apparently "bad habit" of seeing everything

through a frame of "coloured glass." The Martinesque was repressed but not suppressed: it surfaces in her novels—like the drowned figure in Jane Eyre's prophetic painting—in episodes of emotional crisis: in the red room at Gateshead, the fire at Thornfield, the lurid skies of shipwreck that threaten the happiness of Lucy Snowe, the fantasy world of the fête in Villette, and in the livid performance of Vashti.

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