

Self-Communion

Anne Brontë



1900

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SELF-COMMUNION.

Self-communion

begun Nov. 1847

The mist is resting on the hill,
The smoke is hanging in the air,
The very clouds are standing still:
A breathless calm broods everywhere.
Thou pilgrim through this vale of tears,
Thou, too, a little moment cease
Thy anxious toil and fluttering fears,
And rest thee, for a while, in peace.

"I would, but Time keeps working still
And moving on for good or ill:
He will not rest for our stay.
In pain or ease, in smiles or tears,
He still keeps adding to my years
And stealing life away.
His footsteps in the ceaseless sound
Of yonder clock, I seem to hear,
That through this stillness so profound
Distinctly ^{distinctly} strikes the vacant ear.
For ever striding on and on,

SELF-COMMUNION

A POEM

BY

ANNE BRONTË

Edited by Thomas J. Wise



London: Privately Printed

1900

This is to certify

that of this book

Thirty Copies only have been Printed.

PREFACE.

THE following poem, now printed for the first time from the original Manuscript, was written by Anne Brontë in the winter of 1847–48. Its composition belongs, therefore, to the period which intervened between the publication of *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell* in 1846, and *The Tenant of Wildfield Hall* in 1848.

Self-Communion is not one of the juvenile essays, written in a microscopic hand, which were produced in considerable numbers by the Brontë children, and with which every Brontë student is sufficiently familiar. The poem is, on the contrary, a mature effort, and is by no means inferior to much of the work which Anne contributed to the joint volume of 1847.

The Manuscript is well and carefully written, as will be seen from a glance at the facsimiles of two of its pages which serve to illustrate the present book. It extends to nineteen crown octavo pages, the first seventeen and a half of which are devoted to the longer poem, the remaining two and a half being occupied by the forty *Lines*. Both *Self-Communion* and the *Lines* are initialed by Anne, and marked with the dates upon which they were severally completed. In the case of the former, Anne has added at the commencement, below the title, “*Begun Nov. 1847.*”

The holograph was recovered by the Rev. Arthur Bell Nicholls from among his wife's (Charlotte's) papers, and was preserved by him until some five years or so ago, when it passed with other Brontë documents into my possession.

THOMAS J. WISE.

SELF-COMMUNION.

SELF-COMMUNION.

“The mist is resting on the hill;
The smoke is hanging in the air;
The very clouds are standing still:
A breathless calm broods everywhere.
Thou pilgrim through this vale of tears,
Thou, too, a little moment cease
Thy anxious toil and fluttering fears,
And rest thee, for a while, in peace.”

“I would, but Time keeps working still
And moving on for good or ill:

He will not rest nor stay.

In pain or ease, in smiles or tears,
He still keeps adding to my years

And stealing life away.

His footsteps in the ceaseless sound
Of yonder clock I seem to hear,
That through this stillness so profound
Distinctly strikes the vacant ear.^[1]

For ever striding on and on,
He pauses not by night or day;
And all my life will soon be gone
As these past years have slipped away.
He took my childhood long ago,
And they my early youth; and lo,

He steals away my prime!
I cannot see how fast it goes,
But well my inward spirit knows

The wasting power of time.”

“Time steals thy moments, drinks thy breath,
Changes and wastes thy mortal frame;
But though he gives the clay to death,
He cannot touch the inward flame.
Nay, though he steals thy years away,
Their memory is left thee still,
And every month and every day^[2]
Leaves some effect of good or ill.
The wise will find in Memory’s store
A help for that which lies before
 To guide their course aright;
Then, hush thy plaints and calm thy fears;
Look back on these departed years,
 And, say, what meets thy sight?”

1. ↑ Cancelled reading:

So keenly strikes the vacant ear.

2. ↑ Cancelled reading:

And every passing night and day.

He pauses not by night or day;
And all my life will soon be gone
As these past years have slipped away.
He took my childhood long ago,
And then my early youth; and lo,
He steals away my prime!
I cannot see how fast it goes,
But well my inward spirit knows
The wasting power of time."

Time steals thy moments, drinks thy
breath,
Changes and wastes thy mortal frame;
But though he gives the clay to death,
He cannot touch the inward flame.
Nay, though he steals thy years away,
Thine memory is left thee still,
And ^{month and} every ~~passing~~ night and day
Leaves some effect of good or ill.
The wise will find in Memory's store
A help for that which lies before
To guide their course aright;

“I see, far back, a helpless child,
Feeble and full of causeless fears,
Simple and easily beguiled

To credit all it hears.

More timid than the wild wood-dove,
Yet trusting to another’s care,
And finding in protecting love
Its only refuge from despair,—
Its only balm for every woe,
The only bliss its soul can know;—

Still hiding in its breast.

A tender heart too prone to weep,
A love so earnest, strong, and deep

It could not be exprest.

Poor helpless thing! what can it do
Life’s stormy cares and toils among;—
How tread this weary desert through
That awes the brave and tires the strong?
Where shall in centre so much trust^[1]
Where truth maintains so little sway,
Where seeming fruit is bitter dust,
And kisses oft to death betray?
How oft must sin and falsehood grieve
A heart so ready to believe,

And willing to admire!

With strength so feeble, fears so strong,
Amid this selfish bustling through,

How will it faint and tire!
That tender love so warm and deep,
How can it flourish here below?
What bitter floods of tears must steep
The stony soil where it would grow!
O earth! a rocky breast is thine—
A hard soil and a cruel clime,
Where tender plants must droop and pine,
Or alter with transforming time.
That soul, that clings to sympathy,
As ivy clasps the forest tree,

How can it stand alone?
That heart so prone to overflow
E'en at the thought of other's woe,

How will it bear its own?
How, if a sparrow's death can wring
Such bitter tear-floods from the eye,
Will it behold the suffering
Of struggling, lost humanity?
The torturing pain, the pining grief,
The sin-degraded misery,
The anguish that defies relief?"

"Look back again—What dost thou see?"

“I see one kneeling on the sod,
With infant hands upraised^[2] to Heaven,—
—A young heart feeling after God,
Oft baffled, never backward driven.
Mistaken oft, and oft astray,
It strives to find the narrow way,

 But gropes and toils alone:
That inner life of strife and tears,
Of kindling hopes and lowering fears

 To none but God is known.^[3]
'Tis better thus; for man would scorn
Those childish prayers, those artless cries,
That darkling spirit tossed and torn,
 But *God* will not despise!

We may regret such waste of tears
Such darkly toiling misery,
Such wildering doubts and harrowing fears,
Where joy and thankfulness should be;
But wait, and Heaven will send relief.
Let patience have her perfect work:
Lo, strength and wisdom spring from grief,
And joys behind afflictions lurk!
It asked for light, and it is 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,

Leaning on Heaven the while:
Night's shades departing one by one,
It sees at last the rising sun,
And feels his cheering smile.
It all its darkness and distress
For light it sought, to God it cried;
And through the pathless wilderness,
He was its comfort and its guide.”

“So was it, and so will it be:
Thy God will guide and strengthen thee;
 His goodness cannot fail.
The sun that on thy morning rose
Will light thee to the evening’s close,
 Whatever storms assail.”

“*God* alters not; but Time on me
A wide and wondrous change has wrought;
And in these parted years I see
Cause for grave care and saddening thought.
I see that time, and toil, and truth,
An inward hardness can impart,—
Can freeze the generous blood of youth,
And steel full fast the tender heart.”

“Bless God for that divine decree!—
That hardness comes with misery,
 And suffering deadens pain;
That at the frequent sight of woe
E’en Pity’s tears forget to flow,
 If reason still remain!
Reason, with conscience by her side,
But gathers strength from toil and truth;
And she will prove a surer guide
Than those sweet instinct of our youth.
Thou that hath known such anguish sore
In weeping where thou couldst not bless,
Canst *thou* that softness so deplore—
That suffering, shrinking tenderness?
Thou that hast felt what cankering care
A loving heart is doomed to bear,
 Say, how canst *thou* regret
That fires unfed must fall away,
Long droughts can dry the softest clay,
 And cold will cold beget?”

“Nay, but ’tis hard to *feel* that chill
Come creeping o’er the shuddering heart.
Love may be full of pain, but still,
’Tis sad to see it so depart,—
To watch that fire whose genial glow
Was formed to comfort and to cheer,
For want of fuel, fading so,
Sinking to embers dull and drear,—
To see the soft soil turned to stone
 For lack of kindly showers,—
To see those yearnings of the breast,
Pining to bless and to be blessed,
Drop withered, frozen one by one,
Till, centred in itself alone,
 It wastes its blighted powers.

Oh, I have known a wondrous joy
In early friendship's pure delight,—
A genial bliss that could not cloy—
My sun by day, my moon by night.
Absence, indeed, was sore distress,
And thought of death was anguish keen,
And there was cruel bitterness
When jarring discords rose between,^[4]
And sometimes it was grief to know
My fondness was but half returned.
But this was nothing to the woe
With which another truth was learned:—
That I must check, or nurse apart,
Full many an impulse of the heart

And many a darling thought:
What my soul worshiped, sought, and prized,^[5]
Were slighted, questioned, or despised;—

This pained me more than aught.
And as my love the warmer glowed
The deeper would that anguish sink,
That this dark stream between us flowed,
Though both stood bending o'er its brink;
Until, at last, I learned to bear
A colder heart within my breast;
To share such thoughts as I could share,

And calmly keep the rest.
I saw that they were sundered now,
The trees that at the root were one:

They yet might mingle leaf and bough,
But still the stems must stand alone.
O love is sweet of every kind!
'Tis sweet the helpless to befriend,
To watch the young unfolding mind,
To guide, to shelter, and defend:
To lavish tender toil and care,
And ask for nothing back again,
But that our smiles a blessing bear
And all our toil be not in vain.
And sweeter far than woods can tell
Their love whose ardent bosoms swell

With thoughts they need not hide;
Where fortune frowns not on their joy,
And Prudence seeks not to destroy,
Nor Reason to deride.

Whose love may freely gush and flow,
Unchecked, unchilled by doubt or fear,
For in their inmost hearts they know
It is not vainly nourished there.
They know that in a kindred breast
Their long desires have found a home,
Where heart and soul may kindly rest,^[6]
Weary and lorn no more to roam.
Their dreams of bliss were not in vain,^[7]
As they love they are loved again,
And they can bless as they are blessed.

O vainly might I seek to show
The joys from happy love that flow!
The warmest words are all too cold
The secret transports to unfold
Of simplest word or softest sigh,
Or from the glancing of an eye

To say what rapture beams;
One look that bids our fears depart,
And well assures the trusting heart.
It beats not in the world alone—
Such speechless rapture I have known,
But only in my dreams.

My life has been a morning sky
Where Hope her rainbow glories cast
O'er kindling vapours far and nigh:
And, if the colours faded fast,
Ere one bright hue had died away
Another o'er its ashes gleamed;
And if the lower clouds were grey,
The mists above more brightly beamed.
But not for long;—at length behold,
Those tints less warm, less radiant grew;
Till but one streak of paly gold
Glimmered through clouds of saddening hue.
And I am calmly waiting, now,
To see that also pass away,
And leave, above the dark hill's brow,
A rayless arch of sombre grey.”

“So must it fare with all thy race
Who seek in earthly things their joy:
So fading hopes lost hopes shall chace,^[8]
Till Disappointment all destroy.
But they that fix their hopes on high
Shall, in the blue-refulgent sky,

The sun’s transcendant light,
Behold a purer, deeper glow
Than these uncertain gleams can show,

However fair or bright.
O weak of heart! why thus deplore
That Truth will Fancy’s dreams destroy?
Did I not tell thee, years before,^[9]
Life was for labour, not for joy?
Cease, selfish spirit, to repine;
O’er thine own ills no longer grieve;
Lo, there are sufferings worse than thine,
Which thou mayst labour to relieve.
If Time indeed too swiftly flies,
Gird on thine armour, haste, arise,

For thou hast much to do;—
To lighten woe, to trample sin,
And foes without and foes within

To combat and subdue.
Earth hath too much of sin and pain:
The bitter cup—the binding chain^[10]

Dost thou indeed lament?

Let not thy weary spirit sink;
But strive—not by one drop or link

The evil to augment.

Strive rather thou, by peace and joy,
The bitter poison to destroy,

The tyrant chain to break.^[11]

O strive! and if thy strength be small,
Strive yet the more, and spend it all^[12]

For Love and Wisdom's sake!"

"O I have striven both hard and long^[13]

But many are my foes and strong.

My gains are light—my progress slow;

For hard's the way I have to go,

And my worst enemies, I know,

Are these within my breast;

And it is hard to toil for aye,—

Through sultry noon and twilight grey

To toil and never rest."

"There is a rest beyond the grave,

A lasting rest from pain and sin,

Where dwell the faithful and the brave;

But they must strive who seek to win."

“Show me that rest—I ask no more.
Oh, drive these misty doubts away; [14]
And let me see that sunny shore,

However far away!

However wide this rolling sea,
However wild my passage be, [15]
Howe'er my bark be tempest-tost,
May it but reach that haven fair,
May I but land and wander there,
With those that I have loved and lost;
With such a glorious hope in view,
I'll gladly toil and suffer too.

Rest *without* toil I would not ask;
I would not shun the hardest task:
Toil is my glory—Grief my gain,
If God's approval they obtain. [16]

Could I but hear my Saviour say,—
'I know thy patience and thy love;
How thou hast held the narrow way,
For my sake laboured night and day,
And watched, and striven with them that strove;
And still hast borne, and didst not faint,'—
Oh, this would be reward indeed!”

“Press forward, then, without complaint;
Labour and love—and such shall be thy meed.”

April 17th 1848

A. B.

1. ↑ Cancelled reading:
What shall it do with all that trust.
2. ↑ Cancelled reading:
With infant hands upheld to Heaven.
3. ↑ Cancelled reading:
To none on earth is known.
4. ↑ Cancelled reading:
When angry passions rose between
5. ↑ Cancelled reading:
For things I worshiped, sought, and prized.
6. ↑ Cancelled reading:
Where heart may bask and spirit rest.
7. ↑ Cancelled reading:
They have not lived nor hoped in vain.
8. ↑ Alternative reading:
So lying hopes false hopes shall chace.
9. ↑ Alternative reading:
Did I not tell thee, long before.
10. ↑ Cancelled reading:
This bitter cup—that binding chain.
11. ↑ Alternative reading:
The cruel bonds to break.
12. ↑ Cancelled reading:
*O toil! and if thy strength be small,
Toil yet the more, and spend it all.*
13. ↑ Cancelled reading:
O I have toiled both hard and long.
14. ↑ Alternative reading:
Oh, drive these gloomy mists away.
15. ↑ Cancelled reading:
However bleak my passage be.
16. ↑ Cancelled reading:
*Nay welcome labour, grief, and pain,
While God's approval I can gain.*

LINES.

LINES.

Believe not those who say
The upward path is smooth,^[1]
Lest thou shouldst stumble in the way
And faint before the truth.

It is the only road
Unto the realms of joy;^[2]

But he who seeks that blest abode^[3]
Must all his powers employ.

Bright hopes and pure delights
Upon his course may beam,
And there, amidst the sternest heights,^[4]
The sweetest flowerets gleam;—

On all her breezes borne,
Earth yields no scents like those;

But he, that dares not grasp the thorn,
Should never crave the rose.

Arm, arm thee for the fight!
Cast useless loads away:
Watch through the darkest hours of night;
Toil through the hottest day.

Crush pride into the dust,
Or thou must needs be slack;
And trample down rebellious lust,
Or it will hold thee back.

Seek not thy honour here;
Waive pleasure and renown;
The World's dread scoff undaunted bear,
And face its deadliest frown.

To labour and to love,
To pardon and endure,
To lift thy heart to God above,
And keep thy conscience pure,—

Be this thy constant aim,
Thy hope and thy delight,—^[5]

What matters who should whisper blame,
Or who should scorn or slight?—

What matters—if thy God approve,
And if, within thy breast,
Thou feel the comfort of his love,
The earnest of his rest?

April 17th 1848
A. B.

1. [↑](#) Cancelled reading:
The Heavenward path is smooth.
2. [↑](#) Cancelled reading:
That leads to perfect joy.
3. [↑](#) Cancelled reading:
But they who seek that blest abode.
4. [↑](#) Alternative reading:
And there, amid the wildest heights,
5. [↑](#) Alternative reading:
Thy prayer and thy delight.

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