

The Cultural Significance of the Brontës, c. 1910-1940

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Leeds

School of English

February 2014

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Acknowledgments

There are many people who helped to make this thesis possible through their generosity, support, and kindness. Erin Flannery, of the University of Minnesota Press, sent me dozens of press releases relating to the publication of Oscar Firkins's work. Connie Geary of the Scottsville Museum in Virginia kindly supplied me with information about Virginia Moore and her rich and fascinating life, and also put me in touch with the author's son, Mr. John Moore. Mr. Moore, with a degree of kindness and interest that I could not have anticipated, transcribed passages from his mother's diary relating to Emily Brontë. Sarah Laycock, Library Research Assistant at the Brontë Parsonage Museum Library, patiently answered dozens of questions about the library's holdings, and Ann Dinsdale, Collections Manager, allowed me to see a recently discovered photograph of Patrick Brontë before it went on display! I am also grateful to Jean Rose of Random House Group Archive and Library.

Sincere thanks are due to my supervisors, Professor Francis O'Gorman and Dr. Julia Reid, who were a source of continuous guidance and support throughout the thesis, and who were incredibly kind during a family tragedy. I would also like to thank Professor Diane D'Amico of Allegheny College for her mentorship throughout the past ten years. Her expertise, enthusiasm, and encouragement, to a great extent, inspired my decision to pursue academia. It was in her seminar on the Brontës that I developed the germ of the idea that would become this research project.

I want to thank my family (Benjamin, Christopher, Joseph, and Papou), as well as my dear friends, Dr. Bethany Layne and Dr. David Ibitson, for their love, support, and encouragement throughout the writing of this thesis. Aunty Patsy and Aunty M patiently listened as I read them draft after draft; not only were they uncomplaining, but they were unfailingly supportive and believed in the project when I no longer did. My parents have also been extremely encouraging, and I want to thank them for their love and support. In particular, I want to thank my father, Ron, for his incredible ability to make me feel calm in the midst of thesis panic, and my mother, Denise, for introducing me to *Wuthering Heights* and kindling my interest in the Brontë family.

In late 2012, I lost my beloved grandmother, LaVerne M. Paraskos. My grandmother was one of the most important people in my life. She was the first to encourage and support my decision to pursue postgraduate study in the UK, and she did everything in her power to make it possible. Up until the week before she became ill, we talked almost every day. She told me stories about her experience of growing up in interwar America; I aired most of my ideas to her before I put them on paper; her last words to me were words of love and encouragement. This thesis is for Meemaw.

Abstract

This thesis explores the fictionalization of the Brontës by focusing on their cultural significance during the interwar period, when members of the family were first appropriated as characters in works of drama, poetry, and prose fiction. This interwar fictionalization occurred in England and the United States, where the family was widely discussed in journalism, fiction, and literary criticism. Yet, the process of their fictionalization began in the mid-nineteenth century, almost simultaneously with the sisters' second foray into print with the publications of *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Agnes Grey*. Thus, this thesis has a dual focus. It analyzes Brontë fictional biography as an interwar phenomenon, exploring its engagement with salient interwar discourses. However, it also traces some of the key preoccupations of Brontë fictional biography to the semi-fictional construction of the family in the nineteenth century. It explores the reasons for the emergence and sustained popularity of Brontë fictional biography during the interwar period, tracing the development of this subgenre of neo-Victorian fiction from the 1847 publication of *Jane Eyre* to 1939.

Chapter One provides an overview of Brontë fictional biography's intersection with interwar discourses surrounding gender relations and women's employment, family structures, national identity in the wake of the First World War, economic crises, interest in psychology, psychoanalysis, and heredity. Chapter Two discusses the significance of the ghost motif to fictionalizations of the Brontë family, focusing on fictional biography's antecedents in the nineteenth century. Chapter Three discusses the use of psychology and, especially, psychoanalysis in interwar attempts to understand the Brontës' identities. Chapter Four focuses on the motif of the Brontë group portrait in interwar fictional

biography, and its use as a lens to explore the psychology of the family. The thesis concludes with a consideration of the ethics of this biographical appropriation.

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Introduction

Perhaps no single scene in interwar literature better conveys the complexity of the Brontës' contemporary cultural significance than that of Flora Poste's uncomfortable encounter with Mr Mybug, at the provincial tea-room Pam's Parlour, in Stella Gibbons's *Cold Comfort Farm*. The novel, published by Longman's in 1932 and set 'in the near future',¹ is not about the Brontës or their literature, although Lucasta Miller and Faye Hammill suggest that *Wuthering Heights* (1847) provided inspiration for Gibbons's parodic portrayal of rural passions and antagonisms.² Yet, in this vignette, during which the pseudo-intellectual Mybug obtrudes his company on Flora and forces her to listen to the outline of his biography of Branwell Brontë, Gibbons parodies many of the distinctive features of the interwar period's engagement with the Brontë family.

Mybug's project, 'a psychological study, of course' (101), reflects the interwar tendency to characterize the Brontë family as dysfunctional and psychologically damaged. As I will demonstrate in Chapter Three, during the interwar period, various attempts were made, in scholarly articles, medical texts, biographies, and even editorials, to explain the Brontës' lives and literature according to psychological (typically psychoanalytical) theories. This mode of understanding their lives also permeated the many interwar fictional biographies written about the family, the analysis of which forms the core of this thesis. However, the closer interrelation of the psychobiographies and the fictional biographies is made apparent by Mybug's revelation of the two main strands of his study.

¹ Stella Gibbons, *Cold Comfort Farm* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 2. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

² Lucasta Miller, *The Brontë Myth* (New York: Anchor Books, 2005), p. 265. Faye Hammill, 'Cold Comfort Farm, D. H. Lawrence, and English Literary Culture Between the Wars', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 47 (2001), 831-854 (p. 835).

Not only does Mybug argue that Branwell, and not Charlotte, Emily, and Anne, wrote the Brontë novels. He argues that the proof of Branwell's authorship can be found in the absence of any reference to the novels in three letters he wrote to an apocryphal Aunt Prunty, whom, Mybug claims, Branwell never met but to whom he was incestuously attached. Mybug explains the misattribution of authorship as the result of the sisters' manipulation of their brother's misplaced affection. 'They were all drunkards,' Mybug claims,

but Anne was the worst of the lot. Branwell, who adored her, used to pretend to get drunk at the Black Bull in order to get gin for Anne. [...] Secretly, he worked twelve hours a day writing "Shirley", and "Villette"—and, of course, "Wuthering Heights". I've proved all this by evidence from the three letters to old Mrs Prunty. (102)

When Flora, reasonably, asks whether the letters refer to his writing *Wuthering Heights*,

Mybug retorts:

Look at the question as a psychologist would. Here is a man working fifteen hours a day on a stupendous masterpiece which absorbs almost all his energy. He will scarcely spare the time to eat or sleep. [...] Every scrap of his being is concentrated on finishing "Wuthering Heights". With what little energy he has left he writes to an old aunt in Ireland. Now, I ask you, would you expect him to mention that he was working on "Wuthering Heights"?' (103)

Mybug's explanation, which Flora recognizes as ridiculous, seems to be influenced by a bowdlerized reception of the theory of repression; it is a parody of the often confused, imprecise understanding and usage of psychological and psychoanalytical terminology and theory that appears in interwar Brontë psychobiographies. Yet, it is also essentially a fiction, constructed to fill what Mybug misperceives to be a lacuna in Branwell's letters: an avoidance of any mention of the novels he assumed the Brontë brother to have written.

In much the same way, the Brontës' interwar fictional biographers and psychobiographers approached the absences, or perceived absences, in the historical records of the family as opportunities to write into the void and develop theories that filled

the silences. Many of the fictional biographers playfully acknowledged the unknowability of the Brontës, and recognized that the mysteries of their lives were capable of a multitude of interpretations. The psychobiographers, on the other hand, tended to write from a position of scientific authority and with the intention of proving a theory that would explain the family, just as Mybug does. Yet, both forms of life-writing attempted to recreate what was not directly knowable from the assemblage of so-called historical fact. These included questions surrounding the complexity of the family's interactions and emotional attachments, the nature of Charlotte's relationships with Monsieur Heger and Arthur Bell Nicholls, and to what extent Emily could be considered a mystic. That Mybug's psychological interpretation is literally founded on nothing, on an omission which is not really an omission, suggests that Gibbons was commenting on both the strength of that cultural desire to more fully comprehend the Brontës' experience, as well as the extent to which the absence of information about the family necessitated the so-called factual biographers' and psychobiographers' reliance on speculation and imagination. As I demonstrate in Chapter Two, it was the mystery of the Brontës that first made them objects of sustained fascination in the nineteenth century and that led to the fictionalization of their experiences almost simultaneously with their second foray into print. For these reasons, this thesis also approaches interwar fictional biographies and psychobiographies as complementary efforts to explore the Brontës' identities.

Mybug's fictitious psychobiography reveals more than the problematics of observing rigid generic distinctions when approaching interwar writing on the Brontës, however. His assertion that *Wuthering Heights* is 'his book and not Emily's. No woman could have written that. It's male stuff' (102), and his extrapolation that all of the Brontë novels were written by Branwell, is only an extreme form of a contemporary critical

opinion. The claim that Branwell wrote *Wuthering Heights* was first put forward by William Dearden, writing under the pseudonym William Oakendale, in the *Halifax Guardian* in June of 1867. It was taken up by Francis Grundy in *Pictures of the Past: Memories of Men I have Met and Places I have Seen* (1879) and by Francis Leyland, who suggested, in *The Brontë Family With Special Reference to Patrick Branwell Brontë* (1886), that the novel was a collaboration between Emily and Branwell. During the interwar period, E. F. Benson also argued, in his biography *Charlotte Brontë* (1932), that *Wuthering Heights* was a collaboration between Branwell and Emily. Flora wryly observes that ‘There has been increasing discontent among the male intellectuals for some time at the thought that a woman wrote ‘Wuthering Heights’. I thought one of them would produce something of this kind, sooner or later’ (77). However, far from being the critical preserve of insecure male intellectuals, Alice Law’s non-fictional studies, *Patrick Branwell Brontë* (1923) and *Emily Jane Brontë and the Authorship of ‘Wuthering Heights’* ([1928]), as well as Clemence Dane’s play *Wild Decembers* (1932) and Kathryn Jean MacFarlane’s novel *Divide the Desolation* (1936), contributed to the currency of the idea that Branwell wrote some or all of *Wuthering Heights*.

While Flora might be mistaken in gendering this view of the sisters’ authorship as male, her observation of a contemporary denigration of female artistic capability, especially in relation to the Brontë sisters and within the subgenre of psychobiography, is astute. Hammill persuasively argues that Mybug’s perception of the Brontës is a parody of the Lawrentian view of women’s artistic and spiritual inferiority to men.³ However, his projected psychobiography is very much a reflection of the middlebrow, journalistic treatment of the Brontës’ inner lives and artistic experiences by the psychobiographers of

³ Hammill, pp. 840-843.

the interwar period, almost all of whom were women. Indeed, one wonders whether Gibbons had Rosamond Langbridge's 1929 psychobiography, *Charlotte Brontë: A Psychological Study*, in mind when she describes Mybug's belief that 'a woman's success could only be estimated by the success of her sexual life' (122), a sentiment akin to Langbridge's claim that a rejected woman was 'a superfluous being, pleased by nothing, pleasing nobody, having failed in the one thing that completes womanhood'.⁴

As I will demonstrate in Chapter Three, in their attempts to assert the distance between their modern present and the Victorian past, the Brontës' interwar psychobiographers tended to characterize Charlotte as a conventional Victorian woman, and to criticize what they viewed as her emotional and autobiographical, as opposed to creative, mode of writing; at the same time, pains were taken to establish Emily's unconventional rejection of Victorian femininity, and she was celebrated for what was deemed masculine in her personality and writing. Of course, this understanding of the sisters is historically inaccurate, based on clichéd views of the Victorian period and the mistaken conception that the Brontës, with the exception of Emily, were representatives of it. However, it reflects a contemporary characterization of women's writing as sentimental, conventional, autobiographical, and inferior to masculine writing. In reconstructing Emily as a masculine author, the psychobiographers, like Mybug, essentially refuse to accept that *Wuthering Heights* is the work of a woman. These views about women's artistic capability were by no means universally accepted. In Chapter Four, I analyze the way in which they were challenged through the fictional biographers' dramatizations of Branwell's painting of the famous Brontë group portrait. However, they pervaded the writing of men and women, modernists and middlebrow authors.

⁴ Rosamond Langbridge, *Charlotte Brontë: A Psychological Study* (London: Heinemann, 1929), p. 151. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

Mybug's attempt to prove Branwell's authorship by citing his alleged incestuous passion for his unknown aunt is also a reflection, albeit an inverted one in terms of gender, of the psychobiographers' reliance on the idea of sexual frustration to explain the sisters' writing. Mybug describes Aunt Prunty as 'the passion of his life':

Think—he'd never seen her. She was not like the rest of the drab angular women by whom he was surrounded. She symbolized mystery . . . woman . . . the eternal unsolvable and unfindable X. It was a perversion, of course, his passion for her, and that made it all the stronger. All we have left of this fragile, wonderfully delicate relationship between the old woman and the young man are these three short letters. Nothing more. (103)

In a similar way, Lucile Dooley and Rosamond Langbridge explained Charlotte's literature as the expression of an incestuous desire for her father, while Moore explained some of Emily's poetry as the expression of an incestuous desire for her sister Anne, and some of it as the expression of her lesbian passion for a pupil at Law Hill, where she worked as a teacher. Mybug's reference to the letters, which he characterizes as 'little masterpieces of repressed passion' (103), but which he reveals to contain such mundanities as questions about his aunt's rheumatism, her sick cat, and the weather, forms yet another facet of Gibbons's parody of contemporary interest in the Brontës. It echoes the impassioned debates surrounding Charlotte's relationship with Monsieur Heger that were sparked by the publication of four of her letters to him in *The Times* on 29 July 1913,⁵ brought to public attention again in 1919 with the publication of Marion Spielmann's *The Inner History of the Brontë-Heger Letters*.

As this brief episode demonstrates, the Brontës signified more to interwar audiences than the authorship of *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848); and, as the divergent views of Flora and Mybug indicate, what they signified was unstable and contested. For Mybug, the Brontë story was one of

⁵ See 'The Lost Letters of Charlotte Brontë', *The Times*, 29 July 1913, p. 9. Marion H. Spielmann, 'Charlotte Brontë's "Tragedy"', *The Times*, 29 July 1913, p. 9.

psychological disturbance and incestuous fixation, of masculine genius thwarted and robbed through the deceptions of women. Flora disbelieves Mybug's characterization of the sisters as vicious, talentless drunkards. She mocks the sexism of those men who could not accept that *Wuthering Heights* was written by a woman. Yet, her view of the sisters is ambivalent. She sympathizes with what she assumes to be their subjection, as women who lived at home, to unpleasant domestic responsibilities, musing that

it was not the habit of men of genius to refresh themselves from their labours by writing to old aunts; this task, indeed, usually fell to the sisters and wives of men of genius, and it struck Flora as far more likely that Charlotte, Anne or Emily would have had to cope with any old aunts who were clamouring to be written to. (104)

However, it is telling that Flora, a modern woman who seeks to control and arrange the lives of those in her domestic sphere, identifies Jane Austen and not one of the Brontë sisters as the nineteenth-century author she wishes to emulate.

This thesis explores the complexity of the cultural significance of the Brontë family during the period between the First and Second World Wars. The interwar period was a time of widespread fascination with the family's lives and literature, in both the United States and Britain, where they were debated and analyzed in biographies, psychobiographies, works of fiction, literary studies, newspaper editorials, and even travel writing. In her survey of women's middlebrow fiction, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (2001), Nicola Humble identifies the Brontës as one of the 'totemic Victorian literary families' of the period.⁶ *Cold Comfort Farm* is just one of the many interwar novels that treat the family and their literature with 'intimate familiarity'.⁷ While this thesis discusses the representation of the Brontës in each

⁶ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), p. 172. The other was the fictional March family of Lousia May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868).

⁷ Humble, p. 173. See, also, Alison Light's chapter on the influence of the Brontës' imaginative legacy on Daphne du Maurier's interwar fiction, 'Daphne du Maurier's romance with the past', pp. 156-207. Alison

of these genres, my focus is on the fictionalization of the family. As I have explained, I approach the interwar fictional biographies and psychobiographies as complementary efforts to uncover hidden parts of the Brontës' experience through imaginative speculation. However, this study privileges the fictional biographies for several reasons.

Firstly, the psychobiographies are a small subgenre of interwar Brontë biography; I have only been able to identify six publications in two decades. By contrast, no fewer than eighteen fictional biographies were published in the same period. Secondly, although only half of the psychobiographies were written by members of the psychiatric profession, even the more journalistic accounts of the Brontës' inner lives showed a familiarity with the theories of psychoanalysis, and often creatively combined various theories of the mind. Many of the fictional biographers made use of psychological and psychoanalytical principles, but their portrayals of the family were not circumscribed by the need to adhere to any theory of the mind or, indeed, to dramatize the psychological functioning and motivations of their characters.

Thirdly, the psychobiographers did not present their studies as works of fiction, but as attempts to uncover truths about their subjects' inner lives. Both Romer Wilson and Virginia Moore express their sense of how the judicious application of imaginative speculation to the facts of a life can impart a greater impression of reality than a bald enumeration of those facts. Wilson announces, somewhat arrogantly, 'I do not care how erroneous my statements of fact are, provided these statements draw forth clear and correct evidence from secret hiding-places'.⁸ Virginia Moore, on the other hand, acknowledges the extent to which any work of biography is shaped by the material available and, more

Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).

⁸ Romer Wilson, *All Alone: The Life and Private History of Emily Jane Brontë* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1928), pp. xi-xii. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

especially, by the perspective of the biographer who fashions these miscellaneous facts and dates and anecdotes into a form that resembles his or her understanding of a life. She admits:

The infrequent instances where, working by deduction, I have dared fill out a picture imaginatively announce themselves, since such liberties, unless trivial, I have taken pains to make obvious in the text. A biography is bound to be in some small degree constructional if it is to have value: otherwise it would be without interpretation and little more than a compendium. Besides, sources being full for some periods and sparse, with appalling blanks, for others, what, if not a responsible imagination, can do the necessary cohering?⁹

However, the fictional biographies, by their very nature, were not limited in the same way by the so-called facts of the family's lives. For, granting the fictionality of the psychobiographies, their authors were not at the same liberty to change the known chronology of the family's lives or to invent new characters, because their stated aim was to convey the truth. That is not to say that they did not do so. Moore's misreading of the penciled title 'Love's Farewell' led her to invent a Louis Parensell as a potential lover for Emily. Yet, these new fictionalizations were attempts at revising what the psychobiographers believed to be mistaken conceptions of the family's experience; they were attempts at recovering an unknown truth about the family.

Finally, as far as I have been able to determine, the Brontës only became the overt, acknowledged subjects of works of fiction during the interwar period. Although, as I have mentioned, the Brontës have been subject to various forms of fictionalization almost from the moment *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847, the emergence of Brontë fictional biography is a literary phenomenon of the interwar period. As Alison Light maintains, 'novels not only speak from their cultural moment but take issue with it, imagining new versions of its problems, exposing, albeit by accident as well as by design, its confusions, conflicts and

⁹ Virginia Moore, *The Life and Eager Death of Emily Brontë* (London: Rich & Cowan, 1936), p. xii. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

irrepressible desires'.¹⁰ By approaching these texts as products of their cultural moment and exploring the ways in which they engage with such salient interwar topics as Victorian inheritance, gender relations, economic crises and changes in employment, heredity, psychological theory, and the afterlife, one can begin to identify some explanations for the appearance of Brontë fictional biography in the period between the First and the Second World Wars. By situating these appropriations of the story of the Brontës' lives in relation to the works of the psychobiographers, but also to contemporary appropriations of the family's novels, including film adaptations, one can gain a better understanding of the wider cultural significance of the Brontës in the interwar period.

The immense popularity of the Brontës and the sheer volume of the fictional biographies were somewhat of a mystery even to interwar audiences. On 19 February 1933, Brooks Atkinson, citing the recent appearance in England and America of no fewer than nine plays portraying the lives of the Brontës, proclaimed to readers of the *New York Times* that 'suddenly every one appears to be writing a play about the Brontës'.¹¹ Atkinson expresses considerable perplexity at the reason for it, asserting that 'the cheerless geniuses of Haworth parsonage are no more and no less vital today than they have been for a long time'.¹² The same sentiments were expressed concurrently in one of these very plays by the American character, Elliott K. Emerson, in Rachel Ferguson's *Charlotte Brontë: A Play in Three Acts* (1933), who assures his English companions at the Parsonage Museum that 'there's no doubt but there's a big Brontë boom on just now'.¹³ His wife shares Atkinson's bemusement, replying: 'That's so. I don't altogether understand it, myself, but one must respect it' (18). In England and the US, and in little more than the span of a decade, there

¹⁰ Light, p. 2.

¹¹ Brooks Atkinson, 'Among the Brontës', *New York Times*, 19 February 1933, p. x1.

¹² Atkinson, p. x1.

¹³ Rachel Ferguson, *Charlotte Brontë: A Play in Three Acts* (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1933), p. 18. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

appeared M. B. Linton's *The Tragic Race* [1926(?)], J. A. Mackereth's narrative poem *Storm-Wrack* (1927), Alice Law's *Emily Brontë: A Drama* (1929), Rachel Ferguson's 1931 novel *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* and *Charlotte Brontë: A Play in Three Acts* (1933), Dan Totheroh's *Moor Born* (1931), Oscar Firkins's *Empurpled Moors*, published posthumously in 1932, Clemence Dane's *Wild Decembers: A Play in Three Acts* (1932), Emily Heaton's *White Windows* (1932), Sylvia Townsend Warner's short story 'Emily' (1932), Ella Moorhouse's *Stone Walls*, published in 1936 but written in 1932, Alfred Sangster's *The Brontës* (1933), John Davison's *The Brontës of Haworth Parsonage: A Chronicle Play of a Famous Family in Five Acts* (1934), Elsie Prentys Thornton-Cook's *They Lived: A Brontë Novel* (1935) (published in 1934 as *We Asked For Fame: A Biographical Novel*), Kathryn Jean MacFarlane's *Divide the Desolation: A Novel Based on the Life of Emily Jane Brontë* (1936), Mary L. Jarden's *The Young Brontës: Charlotte and Emily, Branwell and Anne* (1938), Elizabeth Goudge's *The Brontës of Haworth* (1939), Edith Ellsworth Kinsley's *Pattern For Genius: A Story of Branwell Brontë and His Three Sisters, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne* (1939). The frequency of these works, which resurrected the Brontës as living figures whose lives were played out on the stage and the printed page, belies Atkinson's claim. It demonstrates the vital presence of the family in the imaginations of American and British writers, readers, and theatregoers during the 1920s and 1930s.

Despite the quantity of these texts, they have received relatively little critical attention, with the notable exceptions of Patsy Stoneman's *Brontë Transformations: The Cultural Dissemination of 'Jane Eyre' and 'Wuthering Heights'* (1996) and Lucasta Miller's *The Brontë Myth* (2001). However, they are not subjects of sustained critical enquiry in either study, and Miller consistently dismisses these works as sentimental,

clichéd, historically inaccurate, nostalgic, and inferior to modernist literature. They are mentioned, in passing, in Robert Graves's and Alan Hodge's *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain, 1918-1939* (1940), but within the context of 'The Victorian revival [...] affecting the "legitimate" stage', rather than within the context of the wider interwar preoccupation with the Brontës' lives and literature; and, they are referred to, rather dismissively, as 'pseudo-historical plays',¹⁴ as if they represented nothing more than an attempt at historical mimicry.

There are many possible explanations for the neglect of interwar Brontë fictional biography. Alison Light, writing in 1991, refers to the 'astigmatism' with which the 'literary establishment in Britain' approached the literature of the interwar years.¹⁵ She argues that in the attempt to establish a literary canon, the writing of male elites, of the members of the 'Auden generation' and of Bloomsbury for example, were privileged, while the 'mainstream of English cultural life amongst the middle classes at home between the wars' remained 'relatively unexamined'.¹⁶ She further alleges that this astigmatism on the part of the authors of interwar literary history also occluded women's authorship, arguing that it

has been rendered almost exclusively in male terms: whether it be the doings of the right-wing aesthetes or the radicalism of the 'Thirties poets', the dying moments of English liberalism, the late flowerings of high modernism, or the making of social documentary and social realism—it has been male authors who are taken to represent the nation as well as those who are disaffiliated from it. This has been at least as true of commentators on the left as on the right: Eliot, Forster, Joyce, Auden, may be supplemented by Lawrence, Orwell, or more daringly by an Edward Upward or an Evelyn Waugh, but in most cases the reading habits of the majority of British people, let alone the women among them, are rarely mentioned.¹⁷

¹⁴ Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain, 1918-1939* (New York: Norton, 1994), p. 285.

¹⁵ Light, p. x.

¹⁶ Light, p. 6.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Light's understanding of the exclusion of women's writing and middlebrow writing from interwar literary history is shared by Maroula Joannou who argues, in *'Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows': Women's Writing, Feminist Consciousness and Social Change 1918-38* (1995), that

if the women writers discussed here have been omitted from literary histories it is not just because their competence has been questioned. It is because those histories themselves have often been framed in terms which have marginalised, disadvantaged or disqualified the woman writer.¹⁸

She cites Bernard Bergonzi's *Reading the Thirties: Texts and Contexts* (1978) and Samuel Hynes's *The Auden Generation: Literature and Coterie Politics in the 1930s* (1976) as examples of these exclusively masculine understandings of interwar literary culture.

Light's and Joannou's claims are echoed by Nicola Humble and Faye Hammill, who also argue that one of the primary reasons for the critical neglect of the vast quantity of interwar middlebrow writing is that most of it was produced and consumed by women.¹⁹

Two thirds of the fictional biographies were written by women. Moreover, they were written about women whose lives were, with few and brief exceptions, played out almost entirely within an English home. These texts focused on authors whose novels had vast popular appeal but had also been characterized (with the sometime exception of Emily's *Wuthering Heights*), by critics including Virginia Woolf and Q. D. Leavis, as autobiographical and appealing to the emotions rather than artistically sophisticated.²⁰

¹⁸ Maroula Joannou, *'Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows': Women's Writing, Feminist Consciousness and Social Change 1918-38* (Oxford: Berg, 1995), p. 8.

¹⁹ Humble, p. 2. Faye Hammill, *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture Between the Wars* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007), p. 7.

²⁰ See Woolf's 'Charlotte Brontë', *TLS*, 13 April 1916, p. 169. In *Fiction and the Reading Public*, Leavis compares Charlotte's writing unfavourably to Jane Austen's, describing *Jane Eyre* as 'a fable of wish-fulfilment arising out of experience' (237). She asserts the similarity between that novel and *Villette* before commenting 'Most bestsellers go on writing the same novel because it is the only one they can produce, and each variant of it is successively popular because the appeal of the commoner day-dreams is inexhaustible—they represent both for author and reader a favourite form of self-indulgence' (237). She strengthens that association between Charlotte and the contemporary bestseller with the observation that 'Charlotte was not master enough of herself to submit her day-dreaming to the discipline of structural organisation. But it is the

They were published at a time when, according to Light, many male modernists or so-called highbrow writers returning from the First World War (the very individuals Light views as shaping the literary canon) rejected and sought to distance themselves from England, domesticity, and femininity. The genre to which these works might most readily be ascribed is the middlebrow, a term that was coined in the 1920s and functioned, as Erica Brown and Mary Grover describe it, as ‘a nexus for prejudice towards the lower middle classes, the feminine and domestic and towards narrative modes regarded as outdated’.²¹ As Brown and Grover, Alison Light, and Nicola Humble have noted, the concept of the middlebrow is and was unstable, depending on the artistic and cultural assumptions of the person invoking it. Still, in an attempt to make meaningful comparisons and contextualize these unexplored texts, I refer to Humble’s generous formulation of the feminine middlebrow throughout the thesis. In their focus on the Brontës; in their marked interest in gender, the functioning and power structures of the family (specifically the eccentric family), the home, and the experiences of reading, authorship, and artistry; and in their adoption and adaptation of the intellectual trends typically associated with highbrow or avant-garde culture, Brontë fictional biography shares many of the features Humble identifies as characteristic of the feminine middlebrow.

Of course, in recent years, there has been increased critical interest in women’s fiction and middlebrow fiction of the interwar period, evident in the aforementioned publications of Light, Humble, Hammill, Joannou, Brown and Grover and their contributors. However, Brontë fictional biographies still tend to receive no more than a passing comment or a footnote in the few studies in which they are mentioned at all.

Charlottes Brontë, not the Emilies, who have provided the popular fiction of the last hundred years’ (238). Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1939).

²¹ *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920-1960*, ed. by Erica Brown and Mary Grover (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), p. 1.

Perhaps this is because, on the surface, these texts appear to be derivative of one another, reproducing a clichéd story of the Brontë family that revolves, melodramatically, around Branwell's thwarted passion and descent into alcoholism, Charlotte's loneliness and longing for love, Emily's mystical communion with the natural world, and the tragic deaths of the four adult siblings. Moreover, with the exception of Sylvia Townsend Warner, Rachel Ferguson, and perhaps Clemence Dane, these authors are, today, relatively unknown. Even in Nicola Humble's important study, Brontë fictional biography is not treated as a distinctive body of interwar literature. It is, therefore, necessary to begin by formulating a definition of this corpus of work, which I shall refer to throughout as Brontë fictional biography.

Brontë fictional biographies are creative reconstructions of the lives of the Brontës that integrate, to varying degrees, what may be termed the known facts of their lives, as well as imaginative speculation about those aspects of their lives that have not been inscribed in the historical record. While Stoneman refers to them as 'pseudo-biographical writings',²² I have adopted the term 'fictional biography' as the word 'pseudo' implies that these plays, novels, short stories, and poems are somehow counterfeits posing as straightforward biography, whereas they are less a bastardization of biography than a new genre developed to address its perceived limitations.

By wedding fact and fiction, these texts engage, although perhaps not by design, with the considerations raised by Virginia Woolf in 'The New Biography', first published in the *New York Herald Tribune* on 30 October 1927, and by Harold Nicolson in *The Development of English Biography*, also published in 1927 by the Hogarth Press, about the nature and purpose of biography. Woolf acknowledges the necessity, but also the almost

²² Patsy Stoneman, *Brontë Transformations: The Cultural Dissemination of 'Jane Eyre' and 'Wuthering Heights'* (London: Prentice Hall, 1996), p. 72.

insurmountable difficulty of transmitting the personality of a human being in a work of biography, of accessing ‘that inner life of thought and emotion which meanders darkly and obscurely through the hidden channels of the soul’ and making it cohere with fact.²³ Yet, she argues: ‘Let it be fact, one feels, or let it be fiction; the imagination will not serve under two masters simultaneously’.²⁴ The Brontës’ fictional biographers rejected as fallacy the idea that the story of a life must be told through either fact or fiction but not both, choosing instead to weld them together as Woolf would do one year later with the publication of *Orlando* (1928). Through their use of metafictional and metadramatic techniques, the fictional biographers drew attention to the fictionality not just of their own interpretations of the Brontës’ lives, but to the interpretations of the so-called factual biographers. The fictional biographers tended to portray the Brontës as mysteries to themselves and to one another, and through this emphasis on misunderstanding and unknowability, they rejected Harold Nicolson’s confidence in a ‘pure biography’ that was capable of conveying the truth of a subject’s existence, provided the biographer was detached enough to engage in a ‘scientific autopsy’, ‘a rigorous post-mortem’ examination of his subject.²⁵ Throughout the thesis, I emphasize the ways in which the Brontës’ fictional biographers engaged, often with great creativity and sophistication, with ideas typically associated with modernism. These include the possibility of interpreting identity, the constructedness of the historical record, psychoanalytic understandings of the mind and of artistry, the rejection of the idea that the purpose of art is the imitation of nature, and the relationship of modernity to the Victorian past.

²³ Virginia Woolf, ‘The New Biography’, in *Granite and Rainbow: Essays by Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1958), pp. 149-155 (p. 150).

²⁴ Woolf, ‘The New Biography’, p. 154.

²⁵ Harold Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1928), p. 15.

Brontë fictional biography must also be understood as neo-Victorian, reflecting, through their engagement with the Victorian past, the cultural anxieties of the moment of their production. Neo-Victorian literature, also sometimes termed Victoriana, Victoriography, retro-Victorian fiction, post-Victorian fiction, historiographic metafiction, historical fiction, and pseudo-Victorian fiction,²⁶ does not yet have a fixed terminology,²⁷ much less any definitive formulation of what is encompassed by any one of these terms. Given that the term ‘Victorian’ is, itself, multivalent, signifying more than the temporal parameters of Queen Victoria’s reign from 1837-1901, it is unsurprising that, as Marie-Luise Kohlke explains,

Neo-Victorian Studies is still in the process of crystallization, or full *materialization* so to speak; as yet its temporal and generic boundaries remain fluid and relatively open to experimentation by artists, writers, and theorists alike [...] What properly belongs *in* and *to* this emergent, popular, inter-disciplinary field of study remains to be seen.²⁸

However, like other aspects of the neo-Victorian, the moment of its inception has become a subject of contention as theorists attempt to crystallize those boundaries and create a meaningful and selective definition of what belongs to the genre.

While Andrea Kirchknopf situates its emergence in the 1960s,²⁹ Kohlke opposes this view, asserting that

where the novel is concerned, for example, neo-Victorian inception tends to be conflated somewhat too simplistically with the late 1960s, to coincide, according to

²⁶ Andrea Kirchknopf, ‘(Re)workings of Nineteenth-Century Fiction: Definitions, Terminology, Contexts’, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1.1 (2008) <<http://www.neovictorianstudies.com/>> [accessed 27 March 2010], 53-80.

²⁷ However, given the establishment of the online journal, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, and the recent publications of such critical studies as *Victorian Turns*, *NeoVictorian Returns: Essays on Fiction and Culture* (2008), edited by Penny Gay, Judith Johnston, and Catherine Waters; Ann Heilmann’s and Mark Llewellyn’s *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (2010); *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past* (2010), edited by Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham; and Louisa Hadley’s *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us* (2010), it seems likely that ‘neo-Victorian’ will become the standard term.

²⁸ Marie-Luise Kohlke, ‘Introduction: Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter’, *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1.1 (2008) <<http://www.neovictorianstudies.com/>> [accessed 27 March 2010], 1-18, (p. 1).

²⁹ Kirchknopf, p. 53.

individual critics' preferences, with the publication dates of Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969).

She also notes the critical inattention to 'earlier twentieth-century works already in conversation with the resurrected Victorians'.³⁰ However, the opinion that neo-Victorian literature only appeared after 1960 is asserted by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn in their recent book *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (2010), and it is accepted, but not analysed or queried, in Louisa Hadley's *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us* (2010). Interwar Brontë fictional biography is then necessarily, and rather arbitrarily, excluded from their definitions of the neo-Victorian on the grounds of publication date alone.

Heilmann and Llewellyn set forth their argument as follows:

While the last twenty years have seen a growth in the literary and cultural phenomenon now termed neo-Victorianism, it is necessary to remember that the birth of the genre in its broadest definition was itself almost simultaneous with the end of Queen Victoria's reign in 1901. Indeed, chronologically speaking everything after that key date is in an essential manner post-Victorian (though not neo-Victorian), even if it was only really with the work of authors like Jean Rhys in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) that a conscious articulation of the desire to re-write, re-vision and challenge the nineteenth-century's assumptions and dominance came about.³¹

This statement invites several important questions. Why is it necessary to abandon that 'broadest definition' of neo-Victorianism? Why is it undesirable to claim for neo-Victorian fiction any text that re-imagines the lives of the Victorians; that rewrites or adapts a Victorian text, perhaps in a different medium or for a different audience; or that creates a prequel, sequel or additional narrative based on a Victorian text? Perhaps most importantly, how can we be sure that fiction writers never rewrote, revised, or challenged the nineteenth century's assumptions and dominance until 1966? It is the decision to

³⁰ Kohlke, p. 3, 4.

³¹ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 9.

engage with the Victorian past that is the defining element of the neo-Victorian; for, whether the author seeks to expose and revise the perceived errors of the past or to present the period as a lost golden age, he or she is necessarily reflecting on the relationship between the past and the present, while simultaneously inviting readers to do the same. In the absence of an author's testimony, it is, in some instances at least, impossible to determine authorial intention. However, even if it was possible to ascertain that all those works that engage with the nineteenth century prior to 1960 fail to 'present a critique of our own enduring attraction to the materialist and expansionist cultural hegemony of nineteenth-century Britain in the popular imagination and public memory',³² that does not mean that they do not invite readers to perform such critiques for themselves. That is not to say that none evidences what Cora Kaplan describes as 'that self-consciousness that insists that I reflect on the complexity of what is at stake at any given point in my own time about my interest in the Victorian',³³ a statement which Heilmann and Llewellyn cite as the crux of their own definition of neo-Victorianism.

My conception of the location and significance of the neo-Victorian in literary and cultural history is broader than what Heilmann and Llewellyn deem that 'broadest definition' of the genre as historical fiction written after 1901. The death of Victoria provides a nominal ending to the Victorian period, allowing any work of fiction written after that date and set between 1837 and 1901 to qualify as historical fiction, or fiction that is set in an historical moment previous to that in which it is written. Yet, even a rigid adoption of the post-1901 definition misleadingly implies that the appearance of the neo-Victorian is a unique literary phenomenon. It implies that there is some more profound break in continuity between 1901 and 1902 than the end of one monarch's rule and the

³² Heilmann and Llewellyn, p. 8.

³³ Cora Kaplan, 'Fingersmith's Coda: Feminism and Victorian Studies', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 13 (2008), 42-55 (p. 53).

beginning of another's; it implies that this end effectively 'others' the Victorian period from the Edwardian, making it a past to which authors may imaginatively return and bringing about neo-Victorianism. According to that definition, a text written in 1901 but set in 1860 is somehow different from a text written in 1902 and set in 1860. This understanding of neo-Victorianism is extremely problematic.

If the neo-Victorian only emerged after the Victorian ended, then 1901 is an irrelevant historical marker for the definition. Writers including Charlotte Mew and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who published during Victoria's reign, later went on to write post-1901 historical fiction set in the Victorian period; one wonders to what extent they considered the Victorian past as remote from their Edwardian present. To distinguish early twentieth-century neo-Victorian fiction from Victorian historical fiction that re-imagines life in an earlier part in the 19th century is to erect an artificial barrier between works reflecting the same determination to return to the Victorian past in order to make artistic use of that historical moment.

One example of nineteenth-century fiction that enacts this purposed historical distancing is Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), in which it is used, as I shall argue in Chapter Two, as part of James's pastiche of the Brontës' lives and literature. James's narrator interrupts the framing device of his own account of Douglas's prologue to the governess's story with the statement that 'this narrative, from an exact transcript of my own made much later, is what I shall presently give. Poor Douglas, before his death—when it was in sight—committed to me the manuscript'.³⁴ This makes it impossible to determine the exact year in which the governess's experience at Bly took place. However, if one takes Douglas's narration to occur in 1897, the year in which *The Turn of the Screw*

³⁴ Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*, in *'The Turn of the Screw' and Other Stories*, ed. by T. J. Lustig (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p. 119. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text. All references made correspond to the New York Edition of 1908, except where otherwise stated.

was written, then the events at Bly took place in 1847, the year in which *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Agnes Grey* were published, and they were narrated to Douglas in 1857, the year in which Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* was published.³⁵

It is worth remembering, too, that early-twentieth-century commentators neither universally accepted 1901 as the end of the Victorian period nor agreed upon an alternative ending. In Chapter One, I query the well-known but problematic formulation that the First World War represented the end of the Victorian period. However, other end dates were suggested. Harold Nicolson claimed, in *The Development of English Biography*, perhaps with the publication of Lytton Strachey's *Queen Victoria* (1921) in mind, that 'Victorianism only died in 1921'.³⁶ In her essay 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', Virginia Woolf provocatively claimed that 'on or about December 1910 human character changed'.³⁷ Her statement is often taken to refer to the death of King Edward VII, although he died in May of 1910, and to Roger Fry's first Post-Impressionist exhibition at the Grafton Galleries. Fry's emphasis on form over content, his rejection of the idea that the aim of art was to imitate nature, had an affinity with Woolf's belief that the Edwardian writers Arnold Bennett, H. G. Wells, and John Galsworthy, who painstakingly described buttons, and villas, and factory conditions, failed to make their characters live.³⁸ Michael Whitworth argues that

Woolf's identification of the watershed as 1910, rather than 1900 or 1901, betrays a certain ambivalence about the Victorian novelists. It would appear that the death of

³⁵ I have derived this chronology from the fact that Douglas kept the governess's secret for forty years (118). I estimate that the events took place ten years previous to Douglas's knowledge of them because the governess was ten years older than Douglas; the events took place when she was twenty; and given that Douglas was in his second year at Trinity, I estimate that he was also around the age of twenty at the time he heard the tale.

³⁶ Nicolson, p. 145.

³⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1924), p. 4.

³⁸ Fry's theories will be discussed in Chapter Four in relation to the fictional biographers' dramatization of the production, reception, and significance of the Brontë group portrait.

King Edward VII and the Post-Impressionist Exhibition were the significant events, and not the turn of the century or the death of Queen Victoria.³⁹

However, he acknowledges the continued influence of the Victorian ‘sages’, Ruskin and Carlyle, as well as Walter Pater, on Woolf’s conceptualization of the self, perception, and modernity.⁴⁰ Similarly, Julia Briggs observes that ‘The question of who the Victorians were was [...] one that increasingly interested post-war society, in the process of defining its own comparative sophistication’.⁴¹ Woolf’s complex relationship with the Victorian past, and her sustained engagement with this question, are apparent in such diverse works as *Freshwater* (1923), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928), *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), *Flush* (1933), and *The Years* (1937). One significant feature of this thesis is its focus on the tensions but also, and at times more fruitfully, on the continuities between the Victorian and the interwar periods, in the works of the middlebrows and the modernists. In each chapter, I trace the development of a significant feature of interwar engagement with the Brontës, from the cultural preoccupation with the family, to the processes by which they were fictionalized, to the ways in which their identities and inner lives were understood, from its origin in the nineteenth century.

Still, the term neo-Victorian allows for a useful narrowing of the field of historical fiction to focus on those texts that, after the chronological close of the Victorian period in 1901, are set in the Victorian past. For that reason I define neo-Victorian literature as a subset of historical fiction, encompassing any text written after 1901 that re-imagines the

³⁹ Michael H. Whitworth, ‘Virginia Woolf, Modernism and Modernity’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Susan Sellers, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 107-123, p. 112.

⁴⁰ Whitworth, pp. 113-115.

⁴¹ Julia Briggs, ‘The Novels of the 1930s and the Impact of History’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Susan Sellers, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 70-88, p. 71.

Victorians, their lives, and their literature. I partially accept Mark Llewellyn's earlier, 2008 formulation of neo-Victorian literature as

those works which are consciously set in the Victorian period (or the nineteenth century [...]), or which desire to re-write the historical narrative of that period by representing marginalized voices, new histories of sexuality, post-colonial viewpoints and other generally "different" versions of the Victorian.⁴²

However, I also add to it the following caveats: firstly, that the writing of neo-Victorian literature can be an inherently conservative exercise, a means of nostalgically commemorating the past rather than taking issue with it, and secondly that neo-Victorian literature need not be set exclusively or even partially in the nineteenth century provided that the Victorian is a significant presence within the text, as it is in Ferguson's *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* (1931) or Brian Moore's *The Great Victorian Collection* (1975).

Chapter One begins with a consideration of the fraught nature of this cultural desire, in interwar England and the US, to return, through the media of prose fiction, drama, biography, and cinema, to the Victorian period. It explores some of the reasons for the immense popularity of the Brontës, as subjects in their own rights, and as conduits through which to access this past. As I have mentioned and as I shall have cause to reiterate throughout this thesis, the Brontës were subject to forms of fictionalization and imaginative speculation almost from the moment of their second entry into print; their celebrity was, to a great extent, generated and sustained by interest in the mystery of their identities. In part, interwar interest in the Brontës was an inheritance from the nineteenth century. Yet, the common understanding of the Brontës' experience was particularly amenable to interwar interests and needs, as I shall demonstrate in my analysis of the

⁴² Mark Llewellyn, 'What is Neo-Victorian Studies?', *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1.1 (2008) <<http://www.neovictorianstudies.com/>> [accessed 27 March 2010], 164-185, (p. 165).

fictional biographies' engagement with contemporary discourses surrounding gender relations, women's employment, the home, poverty, and creative inheritance.

Chapter Two explores the process of the family's fictionalization by analyzing the presence of the ghostly in interwar fictional biography and nineteenth-century proto-fictional biography. Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* was, perhaps, the work most directly responsible for the transformation of the Brontës from historical figures to fictional characters. However, her biography responded to and was influenced by the earlier attempts to detect and explain the Brontës' identities by reviewers and, crucially, by Charlotte's self-presentation. The chapter analyzes Gaskell's fictionalizing techniques, including her introduction of the supernatural into the Brontë story, and her legacy in the proto-fictionalizations of the nineteenth century. The chapter challenges Heilmann's and Llewellyn's understanding of the presence of the ghostly in neo-Victorian fiction as an act of mimesis, an attempt to recreate the preoccupations of the Victorian past, and instead demonstrates the peculiar association of the Brontës with the ghostly from the nineteenth century.

Chapter Three traces the development of interwar Brontë psychobiography from the nineteenth-century discourses surrounding the Brontës' genders, morality, and psychological functioning. It situates these studies within the context of interwar fascination with psychology and, in particular, with the theories of psychoanalysis. Yet, it views these texts, just as Chapter Two views the fictional biographies, as a legacy of those nineteenth-century reviews that attempted to reveal the Brontës' identities by interpreting their literary production according to theories of gender capability and gender transgression. Despite the tendency of most of the psychobiographers to associate (if not to actually state a causal relationship between) what they understood to be Victorian beliefs

about gender and the Brontës' psychological malaise, these studies betray significant continuities with the Victorian constructions of the Brontës' psychological functioning.

Chapter Four resumes the analysis of fictional biography, but maintains the focus on identity, gender, and familial relations from Chapters Two and Three. It analyzes the fictional biographers' dramatization of Branwell's creation of the iconic group portrait of his three surviving sisters. In doing so, the fictional biographers take up the psychobiographers' interest in comprehending the Brontës psychologically, and show it to be an impossibility. As with the preceding chapters, Chapter Four considers the way in which the portrait is used to engage with Victorian constructions of this facet of the Brontës' experience, beginning with a consideration of Elizabeth Gaskell's assessment of Branwell's painting, and tracing early twentieth-century responses to the portrait after its recovery in 1914. Placing these dramatizations within the contexts of contemporary modernist conceptualizations of gender inequality, the visual arts, and the impossibility of interpreting and transmitting personality, I argue that these middlebrow writers demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the unknowability of the human subject.

Although Harold Nicolson heralds the death of 'pure biography' at the end of *The Development of English Biography*, he ends his study on a note of possibility. He suggests that 'literature, by devoting itself to "impure" or applied biography, may well discover a new scope, an unexplored method of conveying human experience'.⁴³ It is the purpose of this thesis to demonstrate the ways in which Brontë fictional biography, and, to some extent, the psychobiographies which were on the same continuum of fictionality, sought to convey the richness and complexity of the Brontës' experience by eschewing the reliance on and adherence to fact that characterized what Nicolson termed 'pure biography'.

⁴³ Nicolson, p. 158.

Interwar fictional biographers and psychobiographers approached the Brontës imaginatively, fictionalizing their experience in an effort to humanize their subjects and see them in the round. In the process, they conveyed the cultural significance of the Brontë family to the interwar audiences that almost incessantly appropriated, analyzed, and reproduced them.

Chapter One

Brontë Fictional Biography of the Interwar Period: Key Themes and Contexts

Emerging during the late 1920s and developing throughout the interwar period, Brontë fictional biographies are among the earliest works of neo-Victorian fiction. Given that they continue to be written today, with the publication in 2010 of Juliet Gael's *Romancing Miss Brontë*, Jude Morgan's *Charlotte and Emily: A Novel of the Brontës*, and Laura Joh Rowland's *Bedlam: The Further Secret Adventures of Charlotte Brontë*, they constitute one of the genre's most enduring engagements with the Victorian past. There are, as previously mentioned, works of neo-Victorianism that predate the emergence of Brontë fictional biography, including Charlotte Mew's 'A White Night', set in 1876 but published in 1903, Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The Adventure of the Empty House' (1903), set in 1894, and Arnold Bennett's *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908), which begins in the mid-nineteenth century and ends in the decade following Victoria's death. However, the interwar period was a time of immense popularity for the neo-Victorian in both England and the United States.

Virginia Woolf's *Flush*, published in 1933, imagined the experience of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog, while her satire *Freshwater*, written in 1923 and revised in 1935, fictionalized her great-aunt, Julia Margaret Cameron, along with Tennyson, Ellen Terry, G. F. Watts, and Queen Victoria. Oscar Firkins, author of the Brontë fictional biography *Empurpled Moors*, also wrote a fictionalized account of the experiences of the Brownings and their maid in Italy, *Turnpikes in Arcady* (1932). Rudolf Besier's play *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1930) was performed on Broadway before being made into a film by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in 1934. In 1928, Carl Roberts published a controversial fictional

biography of Charles Dickens, *This Side Idolatry*, which portrayed the author in a decidedly unflattering light and was subsequently banned from the library in Portsmouth, the city of Dickens's birth.⁴⁴ The thirties saw the success of Susan Glaspell's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Alison's House* (1930), which is based on the life of Emily Dickinson. There were also numerous interwar adaptations of Victorian literature, for both the cinema and the stage. These include Master Film Company's *Daniel Deronda* (1921), Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1935), and Morgan Productions's *Mill on the Floss* (1937). Langdon Mitchell's *Becky Sharp*, which was performed at the Knickerbocker Theatre in New York in 1929, was made into a film by Pioneer Pictures in 1935. In December 1936, Katharine Hepburn played the role of Jane Eyre at the Colonial Theater in Boston, in Helen Jerome's stage adaptation.⁴⁵ As an example of the transatlantic exchange of interwar writing about and performances of the Brontës' lives and literature, the same play, which was 'given a preliminary run' the previous year at the Malvern Festival, was being performed in the Aldwych Theatre in London in 1937.⁴⁶ Contrary to the opinions of some theorists, it is evident that the neo-Victorian was a prominent feature of literary and performance culture throughout the interwar period. In order better to understand the vogue for works of Brontë fictional biography at this time, it is necessary first to explore the conditions which favoured the popularity, in the 1920s and 1930s, of the neo-Victorian in general, and which made a return to the Victorian past a significant cultural desire.

I. Re-imagining 'the Age which has just passed': Neo-Victorian Engagement in the Early Twentieth Century

⁴⁴ 'Portsmouth heals anti-Charles Dickens book rift', *BBC News*, 23 October 2011, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-hampshire-15421286>> [17 February 2012].

⁴⁵ E. F. M., 'Jane Eyre' Down in Boston', *New York Times*, 3 January 1937, p. x2.

⁴⁶ 'The Theatres', *The Times*, 25 January 1937, p. 10.

Lytton Strachey commences his preface to *Eminent Victorians* (1918) with the assertion that ‘the history of the Victorian Age will never be written: we know too much about it’.⁴⁷ Yet, the nature of his book, a collection of biographies revising the popular perceptions and eulogizing histories of prominent Victorian figures, seemingly contradicts his claim. Strachey, who was born in 1880, claimed to regard the Victorian period as ‘the Age which has just passed’,⁴⁸ a moment temporally so close to that during which he composed *Eminent Victorians*, published less than twenty years after Victoria’s death, and, moreover, so well documented that to consolidate all of the existing information about the Victorians into a definitive history of the period would be both needless and impossible. Yet, Strachey did not claim that there was nothing left to be said about the Victorians. Instead, he asserted that ‘it is not by the direct method of a scrupulous narration that the explorer of the past can hope to depict that similar epoch’, but by exposing facets of the period that had been neglected or even obscured. The new historian will,

if he is wise, [...] adopt a subtler strategy. He will attack his subject in unexpected places; he will fall upon the flank, or the rear; he will shoot a sudden, revealing searchlight into obscure recesses, hitherto undivined. He will row out over that great ocean of material, and lower down into it, here and there, a little bucket, which will bring up to the light of day some characteristic specimen, from those far depths, to be examined with a careful curiosity.⁴⁹

Strachey’s revisionist histories of Victorian luminaries, exposing their weaknesses and vanities, partake of the same impetus as those works of neo-Victorian literature, identified by Mark Llewellyn, which attempt to create a fuller view of the period by revealing what has been marginalized by past historians. However, the frequent citing of the publication of *Eminent Victorians* as ‘the Modernist moment of renegotiation with the Victorian past, the attempt at decisively “othering” Victorian life, society, and subjectivity from their modern

⁴⁷ Lytton Strachey, ‘Preface’, in *Eminent Victorians* (New York: Knickerbocker, 1918), pp. v-vii (p. v).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

counterparts',⁵⁰ is problematic. Strachey is more ambivalent about the question of whether the Victorian period has come to a definitive close by 1918 than such a view implies.

While he refers to it as 'the Age which has just passed', seemingly suggesting that it has recently ended, his claim that 'the history of the Victorian Age will never be written; we know too much about it' may be interpreted as a statement of its continuity, a suggestion that the Victorian period might not ever be made into a work of history because he and his contemporaries knew it too well, because it was still, in 1918, a present feature of their lives.

Years prior to the First World War, writers including May Sinclair contrasted what they perceived to be their distinctive modernity with the Victorian past. Even during Victoria's reign, individuals did not view themselves as living within a contained period of history in which mores were universally shared and static. Rather, the men and women of the Victorian period saw themselves as living within an evolving historical continuum, in which the values and tastes, even the cultural knowledge, of the present year differed from the previous and the next, despite the fact that they happened to be overseen by a single monarch. This is apparent in the anonymous observation in *Blackwood's*, in 1898, that the 'smug Mid-Victorian age, which was so prim, so inartistic, so suburban—in a word, so second-rate--[...] saw the birth of all our magnificent, advanced, *fin de siècle* movements'.⁵¹ It is also evident in the 1891 announcement of a retrospective exhibition, at the New Gallery, of the first fifty years of Victoria's reign. The writer explains that the exhibition, which was to feature portraits of deceased men and women considered significant to the nation's history,

is of interest because it contains not only the obvious names, such as SIR ROBERT PEEL and LORD BEACONSFIELD, but *names of men whose outward*

⁵⁰ Kohlke, p. 3.

⁵¹ 'The Medical Woman in Fiction', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, July 1898, pp. 94-109, p. 95.

presentment is forgotten by this generation—LORD CANNING and SIR GEORGE GREY, THOMAS CLARKSON and JOSEPH HUME, LORD JEFFREY and R. L. SHEIL.⁵²

Yet, however inaccurate this belief in the primacy of Strachey's text as the declaration of the death of the Victorian and the expression of the modern sense of difference from the past, his book represents a significant contribution to the war-time and post-war discourse of difference that, as Samuel Hynes explains, was widespread in England almost from the moment the First World War began.

In the same year that *Eminent Victorians* was published, the First World War, which represented a more significant and decisive severing of the modernist present from the Victorian past, came to an end with the enactment of the armistice agreement. The war engendered a widespread sense of rupture in the continuity of history, and, as Samuel Hynes notes, 'the nature of what had ended was variously defined, depending on what the writer most valued: the deaths of Socialism, Christianity, avant-garde ideas, and tradition were all announced and mourned for'.⁵³ Yet, this was not, according to Hynes and Jay Winter, because the magnitude of the changes wrought by the conflict made wartime and post-war society unrecognizable from those of the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Winter, for example, notes the post-war continuance of "'traditional" languages of mourning' and acts of memorialization for the dead of the First World War, derived from eighteenth and nineteenth-century traditions, images, and modes of expression,⁵⁴ while Hynes identifies the post-war survival of concerns surrounding women's rights, home rule for Ireland, and labour disputes, 'the social conflicts that had divided England before and during the 1914-1918 fighting'.⁵⁵ Instead, Hynes argues that the First World War ended the

⁵² 'Those same public benefactors who, during the', *The Times*, 7 August 1891, p. 7. Italics added.

⁵³ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined* (London: The Bodley Head, 1990), p. 3.

⁵⁴ Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 8.

⁵⁵ Hynes, pp. 354-355.

Victorian period primarily because of the strength of people's belief that it did so, a phenomenon he refers to as the 'Myth of the War'. He explains:

Even as it was being fought the war was perceived as a force of radical change in society and in consciousness. It brought to an end the life and values of Victorian and Edwardian England; but it did something more fundamental than that: it added a new scale of violence and destruction to what was possible—it changed reality. That change was so vast and so abrupt as to make the years after the war seem discontinuous from the years before, and that discontinuity became a part of English imaginations. Men and women after the war looked back at their own pasts as one might look across a great chasm to a remote, peaceable place on the other side. [...] This sense of radical discontinuity of present from past is an essential element in what eventually took form as the Myth of the War. I use that phrase [...] to mean not a falsification of reality, but an imaginative version of it, the story of the war that has evolved, and has come to be accepted as true.⁵⁶

One particularly sophisticated articulation of that sensation of irremediable difference between the pre-war past and the post-war present appears in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929).

Reflecting on her sense of the indefinable difference between the conversation of the mixed-sex luncheon party at which she is present and similar conversations held and overheard before the war, Woolf writes:

something seemed lacking, something seemed different. But what was lacking, what was different, I asked myself, listening to the talk? And to answer that question I had to think myself out of the room, back into the past, before the war indeed, and to set before my eyes the model of another luncheon party held in rooms not very far distant from these; but different. Everything was different. Meanwhile the talk went on among the guests, who were many and young, some of this sex, some of that; it went on swimmingly, it went on agreeably, freely, amusingly. And as it went on I set it against the background of that other talk, and as I matched the two together I had no doubt that one was the descendant, the legitimate heir of the other. Nothing was changed; nothing was different save only—here I listened with all my ears not entirely to what was being said, but to the murmur or current behind it. Yes, that was it—the change was there. Before the war at a luncheon party like this people would have said precisely the same things but they would have sounded different, because in those days they were accompanied by a sort of humming noise, not articulate, but musical, exciting,

⁵⁶ Hynes, p. ix.

which changed the value of the words themselves. Could one set that humming noise to words? Perhaps with the help of the poets one could.⁵⁷

The difference, she determines, is the absence of those sentiments that were both formed and reflected by the romantic poetry of the early-Victorian period, and which existed, she suggests, as a kind of undercurrent to the interactions of men and women.

Quoting from part one of Tennyson's *Maud* (1855) and Christina Rossetti's 'A Birthday' (1862), she questions the reason for the change:

why [...] have we stopped humming under our breath at luncheon parties? Why has Alfred ceased to sing

She is coming, my dove, my dear?

Why has Christina ceased to respond

My heart is gladder than all these
Because my love is come to me?

Shall we lay the blame on the war? When the guns fired in August 1914, did the faces of men and women show so plain in each other's eyes that romance was killed? Certainly it was a shock (to women in particular with their illusions about education, and so on) to see the faces of our rulers in the light of the shell-fire. So ugly they looked—German, English, French—so stupid. But lay the blame where one will, on whom one will, the illusion which inspired Tennyson and Christina Rossetti to sing so passionately about the coming of their loves is far rarer now than then. One has only to read, to look, to listen, to remember. But why say "blame"? Why, if it was an illusion, not praise the catastrophe, whatever it was, that destroyed illusion and put truth in its place? (23-25)

The crisis of the First World War might not have been singlehandedly responsible for the death of Victorian poetry and of the ability of men and women to believe in it, but it represented a line of demarcation between the Victorian past and the modernist present. Yet, for Woolf, as for Strachey and later Hynes, this line was permeable. After her initial observation that 'something seemed lacking, something seemed different' (18), she vacillates between assertions of continuity and difference: the post-war world was

⁵⁷ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), pp. 18-19. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

‘different. Everything was different’ (18); ‘one was the descendant, the legitimate heir of the other’; ‘Nothing was changed; nothing was different’; ‘the change was there’ (19).

Woolf acknowledges the widespread perception of post-war difference, but remains ambivalent about the real extent of those perceived changes to life and society.

Her assertion that the sentiment voiced in Victorian poetry was remote from the sentiment experienced by the men and women of the present, her claim that the sexes had ceased to hum the love poems of the Victorian poets, a notion which makes her ‘burst out laughing’ (21), is similarly playful. Woolf implies that it is because Victorian romantic poetry is no longer expressive of a state of feeling and relating that is actually experienced and enacted by the men and women of the interwar period that it has become a site of escapism and nostalgic longing. Contrasting the poetry of her present with that of the Victorian period, she writes:

In a sort of jealousy, I suppose, for our own age, silly and absurd though these comparisons are, I went on to wonder if honestly one could name two living poets now as great as Tennyson and Christina Rossetti were then. Obviously it is impossible [...] to compare them. The very reason why that poetry excites one to such abandonment, such rapture, is that it celebrates some feeling that one used to have (at luncheon parties before the war perhaps), so that one responds easily, familiarly, without troubling to check the feeling, or to compare it with any that one has now. But the living poets express a feeling that is actually being made and torn out of us at the moment. One does not recognise it in the first place; often for some reason one fears it; one watches it with keenness and compares it jealously and suspiciously with the old feeling that one knew. Hence the difficulty of modern poetry; and it is because of this difficulty that one cannot remember more than two consecutive lines of any good modern poet. (22-23)

Woolf characterizes the popular enthusiasm for Victorian poetry as an expression of desire to return to the literature of a time that is comfortingly familiar and yet foreign. She suggests it provides an escape from confronting the difficulties of the present and instead allows one to vicariously enjoy the expression of the now-extinct feelings and longings of the past, all the while seemingly dissociating that literature from the truth that it too

reflects feelings that were, at one time, ‘actually being made and torn out of’ their creators and readers.

Yet, her claim that Victorian poetry provides a less fraught reading experience than modern poetry because it does not require the interwar reader to question his or her response to the text or relationship to the past is ironic. It is made by one who does not respond to Victorian poetry ‘easily, familiarly, without troubling to check the feeling, or to compare it with any that one has now’, but who is compelled to interrogate her own and her society’s relation to the past and its modes of expression after reading a passage from *Maud*. Again, Woolf demonstrates the way in which the Victorian past, its society and its literature is perceived to be without actually confirming those views. This way of regarding the past in relation to the present that Woolf observes is at the heart of two subcategories of neo-Victorian fiction: those more conservative texts that nostalgically commemorate the past by recreating it in an uncomplicatedly positive way, and those texts that utilize this sense of the past as a safe, familiar space in order to transpose into it the crises and anxieties of the present. It seems, then, that the First World War played a significant part in establishing that sense of difference between the post-war present and the pre-war past that created conditions favourable for the emergence and continued popularity of neo-Victorianism.

In interwar literature about the Brontë family, this longing to return to a prewar, prelapsarian Britain finds expression in Elizabeth Southwart’s guidebook, *Brontë Moors and Villages From Thornton to Haworth* (1923), as well as in Ferguson’s *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*. In language that evokes an innocent, rural, prewar Britain, Southwart laments the deforestation of Shillicake Wood, in Thornton, because of the wartime need for timber. Yet, for Southwart, the tragedy is not only the trauma sustained by the English

landscape as a result of the War, but the death of what she characterizes as an almost Edenic outdoor community of people whose entire lives, from eating to courting, were played out against the backdrop of the now-despoiled landscape. She writes:

It is now a memory only, of picnics, with a pot of tea from the whitewashed cottage in the clearing, or, if the needful penny were not forthcoming, as often happened when it took a fortnight to save so much, there was always water in the beck. A memory of droning bees and spiteful wasps, frightened beetles and busy ants, of bluebells and blackberries, and wild raspberries that made delicious puddings, and heps and haws, and burrs that stuck most usefully to the coats of pretty girls, thus making an opportunity for conversation when youth was shy. Of long, long days when the sun never set, and never a cloud but fleecy ones reached the sky, when the stones in the beck cut one's toes, and the sun-warmed water cured them again.⁵⁸

Despite her romanticization of the landscape, Southwart writes of a personal loss.

In contrast, Deirdre Carne, the narrator of Ferguson's novel, expresses a nostalgic yearning for a past she has never experienced, but which she is convinced was superior to her own present. She reveals:

I often long for an old nurse as well, because I adore the kind of bed-sitting-room they make for themselves; it always reeks of mid-Victoria and the Boer War. I wasn't alive in those days, but I have a very strong sense of them, and I can honestly say that I prefer them to our Georgian times. Besides, I know a family which has an old nurse who has seen the boys and girls grow up into fathers and mothers, and I cultivate the family because of having tea with Lucy. And her walls are thick with Militia photographs, and her work-box has a picture of the Great Exhibition on the lid, and there is a glass ball on the mantelpiece with a snow man in it, and you shake it and there is a storm of flakes and he waves his broom. And we have jam sandwiches which nobody else ever thinks of giving one, and the tea is tawny and heartening, and afterwards, we lose ourselves in fat albums and old German picture-books with coloured cuts of *Henny Penny* and the pancake, and I go home simply suffocated with the feel of bygone days.⁵⁹

Deirdre's reverie betrays a certain degree of class insensitivity, given that Lucy, a dependent who resides with her employers, is never described or endowed with human attributes, but merely figures as another pleasing object in the list of quaint Victorian

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Southwart, *Brontë Moors & Villages From Thornton to Haworth* (London: Bodley Head Ltd., 1923), p. 69-70.

⁵⁹ Rachel Ferguson, *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), p. 6-7. Further references to this edition are made after quotations in the text.

artefacts. When considered in connection with the Carne family's supercilious attitude toward the governess, Miss Martin, and Deirdre's advice to her sister, Katrine, against 'marrying out of our class' (161), her affection for the Victorian past seems to encompass not just its material remnants but also its mores, including its rigidly stratified class system. It would seem, then, that the text, in terms of its class assumptions, is an example of the neo-Victorian performing an ideologically conservative function.

However, there is another facet to Deirdre's emotional investment in the Victorian past. Within the list of Victorian relics she finds so beguiling are references to comforts specifically associated with childhood, including having a nurse, eating jam sandwiches, and looking at children's picture books. Throughout the text, Deirdre mourns the loss of her own childhood and seeks to relive it vicariously through her interactions with her younger sister Sheil, all the while engaging in infantile behaviours and fantasies, including playing with her sisters' toys and imagining that they lead independent lives. This emphasis on childhood pleasures in her explanation of why she prefers the Victorian period to her own present suggests that on some level, Deirdre perceives the Victorian past to be the cultural equivalent to her lost childhood. Despite Deirdre's enthusiasm for the Victorian, Ferguson's choice of language is revealing: the room 'reeks of mid-Victoria and the Boer War'; she and Lucy 'lose' themselves in the picture books; and by the end of the visit, Deirdre describes her sensation of being 'suffocated with the feel of bygone days'. However positive is Deirdre's view of the past, Ferguson's words are pregnant with the suggestion of smothering, death, and forgetting, implying that the comfort Deirdre derives from the Victorian, and her willingness to immerse herself so completely in Lucy's memories and photographs, are the expressions of an unhealthy desire to drown her consciousness of the present. What Deirdre seems to be trying, perhaps unconsciously, to

escape are the realities of adulthood and, more specifically, of adult sexuality. The extent to which her immersion within her internal world as well as her preoccupation with the Victorians offer protection from acknowledging her sexuality is revealed by Deirdre's admission that 'Three years ago I was proposed to. I couldn't accept the man, much as I liked him, because I was in love with Sherlock Holmes. For Holmes and his personality and brain I had a force of feeling which, for the time, converted living men to shadows' (4). Deirdre avoids marriage to a man she likes because she is in love (although she is careful to point out that it is a love of the mind, untouched by physical desire) with a fictional construct who is, moreover, characterized as aloof, impassive, and generally uninterested in women.

The tension between Deirdre's unquestioning preference for the Victorian past and Ferguson's revelation, through Deirdre's narration, of the ways in which it functions as an escape from reality, provide a critique of the kind of conservative neo-Victorian engagements that unequivocally present the past as superior to the present. The generic content of *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* represents a radical departure from the other strictly realist works of Brontë fictional biography discussed in this chapter; it is a disorienting combination of domestic novel, exploration of the pleasures and dangers of immersion within a world of fantasy, and fictionalization of the Brontës' afterlives, in both the literal sense of their presence in the text as ghosts and in the more subtle sense of their place within the cultural consciousness. However, many of the interwar fictional biographers provide similar critiques of their own culture's interest in, and desire to return to, the Victorian past; this is particularly apparent in their treatment of Branwell's group portrait, which will be discussed in Chapter Four.

As Strachey observed, the Victorian past was not temporally remote from his present. Several of the fictional biographers discussed in this thesis were born during the second half of the nineteenth century. Their childhood upbringings and educations were presumably imbued with mid-to-late-Victorian values and beliefs: Rachel Ferguson, born in 1892, was the granddaughter of the physician-extraordinary to Queen Victoria;⁶⁰ the American Oscar Firkins was born circa 1864, Sylvia Townsend Warner was born in 1893, and Winifred Ashton, who wrote pseudonymously as Clemence Dane, was born in 1888. Yet, the trauma of the First World War, the changes it effected on an international scale, and the enormous loss of British life, represented, even if principally in the imaginations of interwar society in England and the United States, an irrevocable and insurmountable separation of the perceived innocence of the Victorian past from the experience of the postwar present. The term neo-Victorian is paradoxical: etymologically, the addition of the prefix ‘neo’ to the term ‘Victorian’ suggests a new or revised version of the Victorian. At the same time, however, this revival of the Victorian is necessarily an act of looking backward, of returning to the past and imposing it upon the present. The conditions of the interwar period then, distanced from the Victorian past by the circumstances of war and societal changes, and yet near enough in proximity to it that it remained a vital presence within the cultural consciousness, were particularly propitious for the emergence of neo-Victorian literature.

In *Early Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation*, published in 1934, but based on lectures delivered at Oxford at the beginning of the decade, David Cecil positions the early 1930s as the first historical moment that is temporally and culturally distant enough from the Victorian to allow for an impartial assessment of the merits of Victorian novelists.

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Crawford, ‘Ferguson, Rachel Ethelreda (1892-1957)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press (2004) <<http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/article/56228>> [accessed 28 January 2010].

He maintains that heretofore ‘these writers have been under the cloud that inevitably obscures the heroes of an age just passed’.⁶¹ Patsy Stoneman characterizes this shift as less gradual and organic, pointing to an “‘ecstatic” apotheosis’ of English writers after the First World War, which she maintains ‘can be seen as part of a more or less systematic attempt to repair the damage done to national morale by stressing the “national heritage”’.⁶² Flora Poste, after being forced to listen to Mybug’s opinions on Shelley and the Brontës, views this widening appreciation of nineteenth-century authors as an unwanted but inevitable consequence of widening educational opportunities; she complains that

One of the disadvantages of almost universal education was the fact that all kinds of persons acquired a familiarity with one’s favourite writers. It gave one a curious feeling; it was like seeing a drunken stranger wrapped in one’s dressing-gown. (104-105)

Brooks Atkinson, however, attempts to explain the popularity of Brontë fictional biography on the stage as part of a wider vogue for plays, in both the United States and Britain, which reflect an interest in the shared transnational, rather than exclusively British, heritage of literature written in the English language. He suggests that ‘perhaps the success of “The Barretts of Wimpole Street” and the Pulitzer Prize for “Alison’s House” have sent the playwrights scurrying over their shelves in search of more literary material’.⁶³ The mere facts of their being English, Victorian, and literary, then, would seem to make the Brontës obvious figures of interest for interwar audiences of both countries. Yet, the circumstances of their lives made them an intrinsically relevant subject to interwar sensibilities.

II. Interwar Intersections: Popular Understandings of the Brontës and Contemporary Concerns

⁶¹ David Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation* (London: Constable & Co. Ltd., 1934, repr. 1943), pp. 3-4.

⁶² Stoneman, p. 74.

⁶³ Atkinson, p. X1.

That a work of biographical fiction portraying the lives of the Brontës could be made a vehicle for the exploration of the prevailing concerns of the interwar period is evident. However, the story of their lives, by which I mean both the historical records of their actions as well as unsubstantiated beliefs about what their lives were like, did not have to be substantially altered to make such an exploration possible. In both England and the United States, the interwar period was marked by economic recessions that led to mass unemployment. The result was not only the pervasion of poverty, but a substantial shift in the patriarchal organization of many families who saw their male heads of household unable to conform to the prevailing masculine gender role ideology that dictated that men must provide for their families. Concurrently, an increasing number of women in both countries became the principal breadwinners of their households.

Although the Brontës were by no means wealthy, it was well known that the family had the means to employ servants, with Tabby and Martha Brown frequently appearing in Brontë plays of the period. Still, the Brontës were often described during the interwar period as leading lives that were both economically and emotionally impoverished, which may have contributed to their popularity as subjects for fictionalization in light of the poverty experienced by many during this time. In 1929, the English biographer K. A. R. Sugden cautioned that ‘perhaps too much has been said about the poverty and simplicity of the life at Haworth at this time’.⁶⁴ Romer Wilson went as far as to supply an appendix, itemizing the Brontës’ probable expenditure and comparing it against their income in her psychobiography, *All Alone*; regardless of the accuracy of her calculations, the conclusion she draws is perceptive: ‘Charlotte’s continuous craving for independence and Mrs. Gaskell’s dramatic power have been responsible for the tradition of the Brontës’ poverty, I

⁶⁴ K. A. R. Sugden, *A Short History of the Brontës* (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), p. 12.

think' (288). Yet, newspaper articles in the United States continued to propagate the idea that the Brontës' home was a place of suffering and poverty, referring to it as 'the poverty-stricken, death-infested parsonage at Haworth',⁶⁵ and lamenting the 'nightmare of poverty and self-suppression' experienced by its inmates.⁶⁶ That the common view of the Brontës was similar in Britain is demonstrated by Rachel Ferguson's parodic treatment of the fallacious claims about the austerity of the Brontës' lives, including the belief that their diet consisted principally of potatoes. In both of her works of fictional biography, the characters' faulty understandings of nineteenth-century history lead them to make the anachronistic judgment that the Brontës should be pitied for not having had a Christmas tree, a custom that was not, according to John Storey, popularized in Britain until the *London Illustrated News* published a 'depiction of Queen Victoria's tree in December 1848',⁶⁷ when Charlotte would have been thirty-two years old.

The Brontë family was also one in which the women were perceived to be more successful than the men. Not only did Charlotte, Emily, and Anne distinguish themselves in the field of literature in a way that Patrick and Branwell did not, but the family witnessed the failure of Branwell, through alcoholism, drug abuse, and unemployment, to support himself as was expected of men during his own time as well as during the interwar period. These circumstances, in turn, opened up a number of avenues of inquiry into topics widely discussed during the interwar period, each of which figures in works of Brontë fictional biography. How does the success of the Brontë women affect their position within the household, as well as their relationships with Patrick and Branwell? How does one explain the success of the sisters in the face of the comparative failure of Patrick and

⁶⁵ R. Le Clerc Phillips, 'Brontë Letters Held in Museum', *New York Times*, 3 January 1926, p. XX4.

⁶⁶ Clair Price, 'Brontë Sisters' Home to Become a Museum', *New York Times*, 11 September 1927, p. X8.

⁶⁷ John Storey, 'The Invention of the English Christmas', in *Christmas, Ideology and Popular Culture*, ed. by Sheila Whiteley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), pp. 17-31 (p. 21).

Branwell to distinguish themselves in the field of literature? Are Charlotte, Emily, and Anne geniuses or craftsmen or even passive recorders of events they have witnessed? If they are geniuses, is it because they are gifted, possessing some unique quality of perception or capacity for inspiration, or is it attributable to their heredity or to their upbringing and environment? How is the concept of heredity applied to the Brontë family? If Charlotte, Emily, and Anne inherited their literary abilities, why were Patrick and Branwell failures?⁶⁸ How is the nature of creativity, which is, in the interwar period, associated not just with heredity, but also with psychological disorder, explained? How does success affect Charlotte's ability to choose a marriage partner, and how does Arthur Bell Nicholls react to Charlotte's writing once she is married to him? While Miller is correct in her assertion that many of these works of Brontë fictional biography are 'unconcerned with historical precision', she is misguided in her claim that 'the fictionalizations of the 1930s [...] were equally uninterested in what are now called gender issues'.⁶⁹ Instead, the manner in which the majority of the Brontës' fictional biographers explore these salient cultural topics hinges on their understanding and portrayal of gender relations within the family.

⁶⁸ This is not to suggest that either man was, in actuality, a failure, however such a subjective concept might be defined. However, during the interwar period, they were widely perceived to be so. James Crichton-Browne testifies that Branwell 'has been the target of a cockshy of opprobrious epithets, until it has become the popular conviction that he was merely a dull-witted profligate and confirmed drunkard who wasted his life, wrecked his home and darkened and perhaps shortened his sisters' lives. Almost all the Brontë writers have a passing stab at him: "unhappy," "ill-starred," "dissolute," "foolish," "depraved," "reckless," "sordid," "degraded," "vulgar," "debased," "diabolical," are a few of the adjectives applied to him'. ('Patrick Branwell Brontë: An Extenuation', in *Stray Leaves From a Physician's Portfolio* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, [1922]), pp. 72-86 (pp. 72-73).) While some biographers attributed some or all of *Wuthering Heights* to Branwell, throughout the interwar period, he was portrayed more or less in the way Crichton-Browne describes. In Emilie and Georges Romieu's *The Brontë Sisters*, and especially in Rosamond Langbridge's *Charlotte Brontë: A Psychological Study*, Patrick Brontë's authorship is treated with contempt. These authors mock his alleged self-importance, acquired through the publication of works which they characterize as worthless. In his continued literary pursuits, he is shown to neglect his four surviving children, failing to discern either the genius of his daughters or the bad propensities of his son.

⁶⁹ Miller, p. 168.

In the fictional biographies of the interwar period, the domestic sphere is central to the telling of the Brontës' lives. The home is the primary setting for each of these texts, and on the surface, this seems merely appropriate. The Brontës collectively spent most of their lives at Haworth Parsonage, with sojourns spent by the sisters as students, governesses, and teachers, and by Branwell as portrait artist, railway clerk, and tutor. Charlotte, Emily, and Anne wrote their novels under the roof of the Parsonage, and each of the Brontës, with the exception of Anne, died under it. However, by 1928, the significance of the Parsonage had shifted. It was no longer simply the home of the incumbent of the church or even the home of the Brontës, but had become, in a sense, the property of the people of England, an institution that represented the nation's contribution to the field of literature, and a public space where scholars and enthusiasts alike could view the Brontës' personal possessions in the location in which they were used and their manuscripts in the physical environment in which they were written.

The extent to which the conversion of the Parsonage into a public museum space would have been viewed in the light of a contribution to the preservation of the national heritage is indicated by the fact that the first museum established by the Brontë Society was referred to as the 'National Brontë Museum'.⁷⁰ It is also indicated by the earlier controversy generated by the alterations made to St. Michael's church in the nineteenth century. Thomas Wemyss Reid, author of *Charlotte Brontë: A Monograph* (1877), described the church as

the one great memorial in stone of one of the noblest and most touching stories connected with our English literature. It contains the precious dust of Charlotte and Emily Brontë; and so long as the names of those great women are remembered, it cannot fail to be regarded as one of the most interesting shrines of our native genius.

⁷⁰ 'National Brontë Museum', *The Times*, 20 May 1895, p. 11.

He concludes by expressing the hope that his countrymen will rally and protest what he considers to be the destruction of this symbol of English genius, ‘if it were only to show that all Englishmen are not indifferent to the preservation of a “national monument” so precious and so interesting as Haworth Church’.⁷¹ In 1927 the Parsonage was purchased by Sir James Roberts, a former resident of Haworth who professed to have known the Brontës, and was presented to the Brontë Society to be used as a permanent museum and library to house the collection of Brontë memorabilia that was formerly displayed in their museum above the Yorkshire Penny Bank.⁷² In 1928 the Brontë Parsonage Museum opened its doors to the public. Heretofore, the Parsonage was occupied by the incumbent of St. Michael’s church and was, therefore, largely inaccessible to the public, but the conversion of the residence into a museum and the restorations done in an effort to return it to its Victorian appearance meant that members of the general public were able to enter the Brontës’ home and, for the first time, see the rooms where the family lived and wrote, and where most of them died.

Without suggesting that the opening of the Parsonage Museum was somehow responsible for the production of these works of fictional biography (indeed the earliest fictional biographies predate it), the event and the resulting increase in tourism had a demonstrable effect on subsequent writings pertaining to the Brontës. Sugden associates the newly acquired intimacy with the Brontës’ domestic sphere, afforded by the opening of the museum, with the writing of works that fictionalize aspects of the Brontës’ lives. He uses this as a justification for writing yet another biography of the family in order to dispel some of these fictions:

First, the Old Parsonage at Haworth, the house which is the centre and cradle of their greatness, has now become accessible to the world, and for the first time the

⁷¹ T. Wemyss Reid, ‘Haworth Church’, *The Times*, 24 December 1878, p. 8.

⁷² ‘Haworth Parsonage: Offer to the Brontë Society’, *The Times*, 27 May 1927, p. 18.

ordinary visitor can wander at will through the rooms where they lived and died. Secondly, people are beginning to write fanciful tales about them, some almost under the guise of fiction, others obviously inventing things that have neither evidence nor probability.⁷³

This association of visits to the Parsonage, Haworth, and the surrounding areas, frequently termed ‘Brontë Country’ or ‘Brontë Land’ in travel literature,⁷⁴ with the creation of fallacious stories about the Brontës is also made by Ella Moorhouse who, in her preface to *Stone Walls*, cautions that ‘those who have paid mere casual visits to Haworth are at a real disadvantage when writing of the Brontës’.⁷⁵ Moorhouse, somewhat paradoxically, asserts that her purpose in writing a work of biographical fiction is to ‘deliver them afresh from fantastic unreality and to portray them as their letters, their lives, their writings, their surroundings reveal them’ (5); and she presents herself as one fit to write a realistic or truthful account of their lives by virtue of the fact that, as a native of the West Riding, her familiarity with the area in which the Brontës lived and in which their talents were developed surpassed that of the mere tourist.

It is the experience of the tourist to Haworth, however, and what that reveals about the popular perception of the Brontës as writers and cultural icons, which is explored and dramatized by Rachel Ferguson. In *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*, Herbert Toddington explains to Deirdre the significance of his experience of visiting the Brontës’ home:

I was really enchanted by the parsonage. Emily’s desk as she had left it, with her housekeeping books . . . and that flower group on the wall over which Charlotte stippled her eyes away . . . and the pencil marks in the upper room recording their heights—the wall-paper had to be removed before those were found. Why one is so fascinated I can’t imagine. It’s such a little time ago, and yet, one is compelled to enchantment . . . when I was a barrister, I used to walk all over London finding addresses where Dickens’ characters lived, and I shall never forget the moment

⁷³ Sugden, p. v.

⁷⁴ William Sharp, ‘The Brontë Country’, in *Literary Geography and Travel Sketches* (London: William Heinemann, 1912), pp. 168-197. Whiteley Turner, *A Spring-Time Saunter Round and About Brontë Land* (The Halifax Courier Ltd., 1913; repr. Wakefield: S. R. Publishers Ltd., 1969).

⁷⁵ Ella Moorhouse, *Stone Walls* (London: The Epworth Press, 1936), p. 5. Further references to this edition are made after quotations in the text.

when I came down Kingsgate Street, High Holborn and found the bird fancier's that Mrs. Gamp lodged over. (91)

Toddington's immediate association of the writers with the fictional characters in Dickens's novels suggests that on some level, he does not perceive the Brontës strictly as historical personages. Indeed, the manner in which Toddington frames some of the frequently repeated anecdotes surrounding the Brontë family demonstrates the extent to which he views them as participants in a preordained drama:

Isn't it artistically complete that there isn't a quotable line recorded of Anne? Wasn't there a sort of fate which ordained that she, of all the family, should be buried away from home, dying, meek, futile, on that Scarborough sofa . . . and Branwell, drugged and drunk, dying, erect, in his best suit, out of bravado? "My nerves! my nerves!" (90)

Yet, unlike the locations where Dickens's characters 'lived', the Parsonage is not merely a setting for the story of the Brontës' lives, but, as Toddington's references to the objects housed in the museum emphasize, a receptacle of the family's artefacts, of the physical evidence of their existence. Although Toddington professes to be unaware of the reason for his fascination with them, it seems that it is this sense of the Brontës as both real and unreal, historical personages and yet fictional constructs, that makes them, for him, a fascinating subject 'even if they'd never written a line' (90). Thus, the opening of the Parsonage Museum provides Ferguson with a plot device that enables her to expose the liminal position occupied by the sisters, not just in the mind of Sir Herbert but in the cultural consciousness of interwar English society as a whole. One cannot help but wonder to what extent Ferguson was acknowledging that this liminality fostered the production of works of Brontë fictional biography like her own.

Ferguson also utilizes the newly opened Parsonage Museum as the setting for the prologue of *Charlotte Brontë: A Play in Three Acts*. Although Chapter Four analyzes the metafictional aspects of the prologue, Ferguson also uses it to explore and contrast English

and American relationships to the Brontës. She establishes a dichotomy between the two families of tourists and, by extension, the two nationalities in terms of their knowledge of and attitudes towards the Brontës in particular and English culture in general, as well as in terms of the social and economic significance of that knowledge.

Given their assertion that the Brontës ‘didn’t care what they ate. They seem to have lived on potatoes’ (13), it is immediately evident that the English family possess paltry knowledge of the Brontës, consisting primarily of the frequently repeated but often inaccurate stories surrounding their lives that had been common cultural beliefs since the publication of Gaskell’s biography. By contrast, the American Emerson demonstrates a superior knowledge of the Brontës’ lives and literature, recommending Charles Simpson’s biography of Emily to the English family and correcting some of their more erroneous assumptions. The loquacious Emerson is a caricature of the overbearing and socially inept American, and the reader’s sympathy is directed towards the English family who, try as they may, cannot escape his attentions. Yet, however foolish Emerson and his wife may appear, they demonstrate a greater knowledge of and interest in English literary culture than do the English family, mentioning their trip to Philadelphia to see the Rockefeller manuscript of *The Professor* and expressing their surprise that the English family did not bother to see the Murray manuscript of *Jane Eyre* when it was displayed in Oxford Street in 1931. It may initially seem as though Ferguson sets up this exchange chiefly in order to expose and criticize the English family for the complacent attitude towards their own country’s literary productions that resulted in the acquisition of Brontë artefacts by wealthy American collectors including Rockefeller and Henry Bonnell. However, it soon becomes apparent that she is just as critical of the American family and the reasons for their interest in the Brontës.

Miller explains that from the end of the nineteenth century, Haworth and the surrounding area were marketed in English guidebooks as a relatively inexpensive holiday destination, and that ‘in the imagination of tired city-dwellers, the place Gaskell had considered so dreary and untamed had turned into a comforting rural idyll’;⁷⁶ interwar descriptions of Haworth as smoke-blackened or ‘bleak, wind-swept and unlovely’;⁷⁷ and even complimentary references to the district’s ‘fierce beauty’;⁷⁸ however, rather belie Miller’s claim. For the English mother and daughter, a visit to the Parsonage would have meant a cheap day out in the countryside. However, for the Emersons, the excursion signifies a substantial expenditure that demonstrates their wealth, especially given that they are able to undertake transatlantic travel during the midst of the Great Depression. Furthermore, while the economic status of the English family is not evident, Ferguson’s Americans flaunt not just their wealth, revealing that they recently traveled to Italy, but their cultural capital. Ferguson reveals the Emersons to be individuals who are interested in and who have acquired knowledge of the Brontës not because of an appreciation of their writings but because of the cultural cachet implied by such knowledge. Explicitly connecting Emerson’s acquisitiveness, pretension to high culture, and nationality, Ferguson has him announce to his companions: ‘My slogan is: When we Americans cease to own the capacity for wholesome enthusiasm for objects of history an’ high-class culture, we shall cease to be an up-an’-comin’ people’ (16).

Ferguson’s reference to Rockefeller’s possession of the manuscript of *The Professor*, and her evident unease at the attempts of these Americans to purchase Brontë relics, seem to be part of a wider concern about America’s relationship to British culture at this time. After Roberts’s purchase of the Parsonage, the British and American press

⁷⁶ Miller, p. 114.

⁷⁷ Phillips, p. XX4.

⁷⁸ Southwart, p. 3.

announced that the collection of Brontë manuscripts and relics owned by Henry Bonnell of Philadelphia was to be returned to the Parsonage.⁷⁹ Yet, comments made by Clair Price, the Haworth correspondent for the *New York Times*, to the effect that ‘the Brontë Society’s modest museum is to be enriched by the addition of the Brontë books and manuscripts bequeathed to it by H. H. Bonnell of Philadelphia’, and that the ‘people in Haworth say that the best of the mementos of Emily have gone to the Morgan library in New York’, seem fairly resentful of the fact that the relics of these English writers have fallen into the hands of wealthy Americans.⁸⁰ Ferguson thus parodies the American acquisition of the material artefacts of British culture, while at the same time lambasting the English for the complacent attitude towards their own culture that allows it to occur.

Clearly, the Parsonage was an important location during the interwar years and it is unsurprising that much of the action in the aforementioned texts should take place within its precincts. Yet, it is not the domestic sphere of the Parsonage but the domestic sphere in general that is central to the plot of *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*. The novel, which is principally set in the upper-middle-class home of the Carnes sometime after 1928, as evidenced by references to the Parsonage Museum, revolves around the domestic lives of Deirdre, Sheil, Katrine, and their mother. The family collectively engages in forging a fantasy world that parallels the fantasy worlds of Angria and Gondal created by the Brontë children. None of the action of the novel transpires within the Brontës’ home, yet the subject of their domestic life is continuously discussed by the Carne family and the Toddingtons; because of the combination of this fascination with the Brontës’ lives and the Carnes’ immersion in their world of fantasy, the Brontës are conjured and brought into the present to encroach somewhat menacingly on the Carnes’ domestic space. The setting of

⁷⁹ ‘Haworth Parsonage: Offer to the Brontë Society’, p. 18. ‘Brontë Relics: American Bequest to Haworth Museum’, *The Times*, 8 January 1929, p. 15.

⁸⁰ Price, p. X8.

these works of Brontë fictional biography within the home seems, therefore, to be not simply a matter of conforming to the historical record of the Brontës' lives, or a result of the opening of their former home to the public, but an authorial decision which also reflects a preoccupation, during the interwar period in both the United States and England, with the home and the dynamics of family life.

The nature of the British and the American family was substantially altered in the aftermath of the First World War. During the war, women's employment in the United Kingdom increased by about 1 ½ million, but as most of those jobs were temporary and, furthermore, as women were both removed from these positions to make way for returning soldiers and helped out of them by the postwar recession, there was no substantial increase in the number of female workers from 1911 to 1921, according to Peter Clarke.⁸¹ Many men returning from the war found themselves out of work as well, with the unemployment rate rising to between 7 and 8 percent from the mid to late 1920s.⁸² By 1921, with nearly 17 percent of the insured labour force unemployed and at risk of exhausting the welfare benefit they were entitled to collect based on past contributions to the system, the Coalition Government changed the nature of the welfare system in Great Britain by allowing workers to collect welfare benefits based not upon past but potential future contributions, and thereby created 'the dole'.⁸³ Unemployment continued to rise throughout the 1920s and 1930s, exacerbated by the United States stock market crash in 1929, and reached a level of 23 percent by 1933, although Clarke maintains that unemployment levels slowly fell after this.⁸⁴ Nicola Humble also argues that while many members of the middle classes in Britain were severely affected by economic hardship, 'prices fell and incomes rose in

⁸¹ Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-1990* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1996) pp. 94-95.

⁸² Clarke, p. 133.

⁸³ Clarke, p. 106.

⁸⁴ Clarke, p. 178.

the later 1920s and 1930s, and most historians agree that the middle class as a whole was actually better off in the inter-war years than it had been previously'.⁸⁵ However, she observes a recurrence to the topic of bourgeois poverty, of making and mending and saving money as opposed to actual hardship, in interwar and later works of feminine middlebrow fiction; the same representation of bourgeois poverty can be seen in Ella Moorhouse's *Stone Walls*, in which the Brontë sisters have the funds to travel to Brussels to study, yet have to make their shifts from old calico in order to save money.

However, the more serious impact of poverty and mass unemployment in Britain following World War One is also registered in several works of interwar writing about the Brontës. In the guidebook *Brontë Moors & Villages From Thornton to Haworth* (1923), Elizabeth Southwart anxiously assures her readers that Charlotte Brontë should not be considered to have been callous towards those who were out of work just because Robert Moore, the mill owner of *Shirley* (1849), was. She explains 'it is particularly unfair to take Robert Moore's view as representative of her own, as some have done'.⁸⁶ In Emilie and Georges Romieu's biography *The Brontë Sisters* (1931), first published in French and subsequently translated for an English audience, the sufferings of the poor do not just inspire Charlotte with momentary pity, but affect her so profoundly as to become a lifelong concern that would influence her portrayal of the hardships of factory labourers in *Shirley*. In a nightmarish passage that bears more resemblance to Disraeli's depiction of the work-deformed bodies of the denizens of Wodgate in his 1845 novel, *Sybil*, than to any scene in *Shirley*, they write: 'Now she sees these men, these hollow-eyed women, these rachitic children, bowed by early toil; she sees them exposed to acids and roasting alive round the

⁸⁵ Humble, p. 73.

⁸⁶ Southwart, p. 31.

furnaces: she will never forget them'.⁸⁷ In M. B. Linton's *The Tragic Race*, Charlotte is so dedicated to alleviating the sufferings of the poor of Haworth that, after dispensing presents to three needy visitors, she accompanies her husband 'to the old widow's cottage across the frost-bound moor'.⁸⁸ In the next scene, Charlotte appears as an angel; the un-ironic implication is that she sacrificed her life in the performance of charitable acts and was rewarded.

At the same time, there was a substantial demand for housing in the United Kingdom, from both the middle classes who aspired to home ownership and from the impoverished members of society who could not afford to purchase their own properties in the current economic climate. As a result, 'Labour directed subsidy towards municipal provision for rent to the working class, and in ten years the Wheatley Housing Act of 1924 produced over half a million "council houses"'.⁸⁹ By providing low-income families with homes and monetary support, the government in essence assumed the role conventionally filled by the male head of household. Light acknowledges the growing importance of the home and family to the British during the interwar period, noting that 'the need for new homes and discussions of housing policy (one of the main political issues in the period), housing design, and the growth of welfarism brought the working-class home into political life as never before',⁹⁰ while pointing to the popularity of the *Mrs. Miniver* columns as evidence of the interest taken in the domestic sphere by the general public.

By contrast, the 1920s seems to have been a time of comparative prosperity for the United States, although Mimi Abramovitz maintains that the effects of this prosperity were

⁸⁷ Emilie and Georges Romieu, *The Brontë Sisters*, trans. by Roberts Tapley (London: Skeffington & Sons, Ltd., 1931), p. 69. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁸⁸ M. B. Linton, *The Tragic Race: A Play About the Brontës* (Aberdeen: W. and W. Lindsay, [1926(?)]), p. 29. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁸⁹ Clarke, p. 146.

⁹⁰ Light, p. 137.

uneven.⁹¹ Yet, with the onset of the economic crisis in the United States, the traditional structure of American families was, as in England, upset. It seems that many women were able to retain the jobs they held during the First World War, with the proportion of women at work rising from 20.6 percent in 1900 to 25 percent in 1930.⁹² Moreover, although women also experienced unemployment during the recession, ‘rising female employment during the thirties was accompanied by more than an 8 percent drop in the labor force participation rate of men’,⁹³ largely because the jobs that women were likely to fill, including clerical and service positions, were less subject to cyclical unemployment. Many women thus came to supplant their husbands as the breadwinners of their households.

At the same time that the structure of the American family was undergoing this change, the conditions the government placed on would-be recipients of public benefit seemed designed to reward those whose families conformed to the conventional patriarchal model. As of 1931, the majority of recipients of mothers’ pensions, designed to provide for indigent families so that mothers could remain at home and rear their children, were widowed mothers, rather than abandoned, divorced, or unwed mothers, who were the least likely to receive aid.⁹⁴ Some state governors further distinguished between the so-called deserving and undeserving poor by sending inspectors to the homes of welfare recipients, whose benefits could be terminated due to ‘use of tobacco, lack of church attendance, dishonesty, drunkenness, housing a male lodger, extramarital relations, poor discipline, criminal behavior, child delinquency, and overt child neglect’.⁹⁵ As in the United Kingdom, the United States government was taking increasing responsibility for maintaining the families affected by the recession. However, unlike the British

⁹¹ Mimi Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1996), p. 217.

⁹² Abramovitz, p. 221.

⁹³ Abramovitz, p. 222.

⁹⁴ Abramovitz, p. 201.

⁹⁵ Abramovitz, p. 202.

government, the strictures that the US government placed on the receipt of welfare benefits suggest a desire to maintain the conventional structure of the family itself, rewarding women who had children within the bonds of marriage and encouraging them to remain at home to care for their children while the government stood in temporarily for the absent male provider.

During the 1930s, members of the general public also expressed fear about what they saw as the breakdown of the conventional American family and the displacement of the man from what they assumed to be his rightful position as head of household, and therefore ‘held [working] women responsible for male unemployment and for the family’s financial and emotional distress’.⁹⁶ At the same time, sociologists including William Ogburn, Joseph Kirk Folsom, and Mirra Komarovsky were conducting research about the structure of the American family and the ways in which it had been impacted by the depression, with many researchers concluding that the male’s position as head of household had been compromised by the dual effects of unemployment and women’s participation in the workforce.⁹⁷ Concern about the perceived disintegration of the patriarchal family structure in the United States and in England was not, however, unique to the interwar period, but may be viewed as an inheritance from the nineteenth century.

Victorian fears about families becoming dominated by working females, and about children growing to adulthood without having been properly nurtured, found expression in satire: from Dickens’s portrait of the pamphleteer, Mrs Jellyby, whose immersion in literary activity leads to a filthy house, neglected children, and a suicidal husband in *Bleak House* (1852-1853), to G. H. Lewes’s lament, writing under the penname of Vivian in *The Leader*, that ‘this is the “march of the mind,” but where, oh, where are the dumplings!

⁹⁶ Abramovitz, p. 223.

⁹⁷ Abramovitz, p. 225.

Does it never strike these delightful creatures that their little fingers were made to be kissed not to be inked?'.⁹⁸ An insistence that the patriarchal family structure was neither a universally viable option nor the paradigm of family organization is registered in Gaskell's 'Hand and Heart' (1855), in which the widowed Mrs Fletcher keeps a shop and takes in needlework to support herself and her child in the absence of a male provider, and yet manages to raise a morally and psychologically sound child who is a model for the other children in the story. In the same year in the United States, Minnie Myrtle, arguing for the education and training of women for their entry into the workforce, observed that 'if every man whose duty it is to support a family, fulfilled this duty, providing for the present and future, leaving to woman only her domestic duties', women would not need to work outside of the home. As this was an impossibility, however,

those who talk so eloquently about the duties of mothers to their children, and the necessity of their constant influence in the home, should see the hearth-stones deserted all day long by the mothers who go forth to beg for food and for work, leaving little ones to grow up without a single association connected with home but those of poverty, desolation and vice.⁹⁹

As these accounts demonstrate, the middle-class concept of the superiority of the family who practiced the doctrine of separate spheres, in which the woman remained at home to rear children and make the domestic space comfortable for the family while the man worked outside of the home and was the sole provider, was neither unquestioned nor was it as pervasive as some may have imagined. Still, during the interwar period the United States was, like Britain, focused on the disrupting effect of the economic strain on the structure of the family and the domestic sphere, and these concerns emerge in contemporary treatments of the Brontës' lives as well as their literature.

⁹⁸ Vivian, 'A Gentle Hint to Writing-Women', *The Leader*, 18 May 1850, p. 189.

⁹⁹ Minnie Myrtle, 'A Suggestion for Women', *New York Daily Times*, 7 Feb. 1855, p. 2.

III. Connective Threads: Middlebrow Fictions of the Brontës and Popular Constructions of the Brontës' Fiction

Although the primary focus of this chapter is Brontë fictional biography, the tendency, which persists to the present day, of writers and readers to consider the record of the Brontës' lives as providing the interpretive key to their texts calls for some acknowledgement and analysis of interwar adaptations of the sisters' novels. Almost from the moment of their publication in 1847, under the pseudonyms of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* have been viewed in the light of autobiographical fiction. Based on the known facts of the sisters' lives, there is no doubt that the novels were to some extent autobiographical. However the pervasiveness of a frequently facile insistence on the connection between the Brontës' lives and their works led Henry James to assert in 1905 that the 'image of their dreary, their tragic history, their loneliness and poverty of life [...] has been made to hang before us as insistently as the vividest page of *Jane Eyre* or of *Wuthering Heights*',¹⁰⁰ and to pronounce the resulting conflation of their lives with their literature 'the most complete intellectual muddle, [...] ever achieved, on a literary question' (64). His creative response to this conflation will be analyzed in Chapter Two.

The endurance of this 'muddle' throughout the interwar period is evident, however. Sugden speculates that, as Charlotte

had written four novels, all autobiographical, two dependent on her experience in Brussels, one drawn mainly from what she had dreamed and suffered as a governess, and one recalling her life as a vicar's daughter in a lonely country parish [...] It is probable that she did not possess the material for many more.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Henry James, 'The Lesson of Balzac', in *The House of Fiction: Essays on the Novel by Henry James*, ed. by Leon Edel (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1957), pp. 60-85 (p. 63). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁰¹ Sugden, pp. 108-109.

Similarly, Emilie and Georges Romieu claim, in reference to Charlotte's relationship with Monsieur Heger, that 'had it not been for this desperate love, Charlotte could not have written either *Jane Eyre* or *Villette*, her two autobiographical romances'.¹⁰² The writers of Brontë fictional biography, although in a slightly less reductive manner, also emphasize what they perceive to be the autobiographical nature of the Brontës' writing through their use of intertextuality. Miller claims that, after Mackereth's *Storm-Wrack*, 'many subsequent treatments had less sense of what literary critics call intertextuality'.¹⁰³ However, most of the works of fictional biography discussed in this thesis allude to events which occur in the Brontës' novels by depicting the Brontës, as characters, experiencing near identical events which the audience or reader is thereby led to assume were the catalysts for their writing.

In *Wild Decembers*, a play that takes its title from Emily's 1845 poem 'Remembrance', Branwell reveals to Emily his intention to write a novel based on the suffering he experienced as a result of the triangular relationship between himself, his lover Lydia Robinson, and her husband:

if she [Charlotte] knew what I was writing—if she knew I was putting the last three years on to paper, she'd have me locked up. [...] Myself—her—him—all here, Emily, in my head! And some on paper, too! Set in the moors. She's very delicate, you know: she's frail, my darling. She's such a fine lady. I've driven her over stony places and wuthering heights, I've let the wind break in her window-panes and the rain drown her in her bed, and when she has died of cold and torments like mine, I'll scoop her a grave in the granite, big enough for us both.¹⁰⁴

In addition to his use of the phrase 'wuthering heights', Branwell's language clearly evokes the content of Emily Brontë's novel, with its triangular relationship between Heathcliff, Catherine, and Edgar Linton and its setting in the moors. The broken window

¹⁰² Romieu, p. 140.

¹⁰³ Miller, p. 155.

¹⁰⁴ Clemence Dane, *Wild Decembers* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1932, repr. 1934), p. 50. Further references to this edition are made after quotations in the text.

panes evoke Lockwood's dream, in which the ghost of Catherine Earnshaw breaks the window in her old bedroom at Wuthering Heights, while the 'grave in the granite' Branwell envisages sharing with his lover seems to reference both Catherine's claim that her 'love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath',¹⁰⁵ and Heathcliff's wish to be buried with Cathy. An example of intertextuality that bears a closer resemblance to the original text it references, but which centres on an occurrence that seems to be entirely the product of the author's imagination, appears in *Stone Walls*. After Branwell returns to the Parsonage drunken and enraged, he attempts to force a knife into Emily's mouth, commanding her to 'eat this, swallow it' (64), to which she replies 'we won't use that one. It tastes of bad herring' (64). The scene is an obvious reference to Hindley's attempt to force a knife into Nelly's mouth in *Wuthering Heights*. Hindley, who is also drunk, uses the same verb as Moorhouse's Branwell, asserting 'I shall make you swallow the carving knife, Nelly' (65), and Nelly, in the same manner as Emily, refuses the knife on the grounds that 'it has been cutting red herrings' (65).

The perceived permeability of the boundary between the Brontës' lives and literature within English and American interwar culture is evident. Furthermore, the appropriation and adaptation of the Brontës' novels to suit a given historical moment or cultural perspective, from the 1860s stage adaptations of *Jane Eyre* that 'emphasized Jane's saintly virtue and her vulnerability' as a reaction against the controversial heroines of sensation fiction, to the 1966 Indian film adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, *Dil Diya Dard Liya*, has been well-documented by Patsy Stoneman who takes the processes and products of these transformations as the subject of her study *Brontë Transformations*.¹⁰⁶ Thus, interwar film adaptations of the Brontës' novels may be viewed as operating in

¹⁰⁵ Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. by Ian Jack (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p. 73. Further references to this edition are made after quotations in the text.

¹⁰⁶ Stoneman, p. 33, p. 156.

tandem with Brontë fictional biography to reflect and construct the popular cultural view of the Brontës as well as contemporary concerns. The interwar period saw the release of two important American film adaptations of Brontë novels: the first ‘talkie’ version of *Jane Eyre*, directed by Christy Cabanne in 1934, and William Wyler’s iconic *Wuthering Heights* (1939). When viewed through the lens of contemporary debates surrounding such sources of cultural anxiety as the perceived breakdown of the patriarchal structure of families and the hereditary transmission of mental illness, these films seem to have been intended to serve the ideological functions of shoring up male authority and providing an escape from topics perceived to be distressing to the classes who most frequently patronized interwar cinemas.

Lucasta Miller views the many omissions and infidelities to the original texts simply as the result of American film studios ‘conventionalizing their love stories to fit the expectations of cinema audiences’,¹⁰⁷ and in many ways, Christy Cabanne’s *Jane Eyre* is a retelling of Charlotte’s novel as a conventional love story.¹⁰⁸ Events including Jane’s experience in the Red Room, her relationship with Helen Burns and early experience of death, as well as the starvation and mental anguish suffered while wandering on the moors after leaving Thornfield Hall are excised, as are all instances of Rochester’s cruel emotional manipulation of Jane and his bizarre impersonation of an old gypsy woman. Rochester’s character is simplified into that of the conventional romantic male lead, who politely offers Jane an apology for his rudeness when he realizes that the woman he encountered when his horse fell was his niece’s new governess. Jane, although sometimes assertive, is transformed into a paragon of conventional womanhood whose maternal instincts are expressed through her concern for the children she teaches at Lowood and her

¹⁰⁷ Miller, p. 156.

¹⁰⁸ *Jane Eyre*, dir. by Christy Cabanne (Ben Verschleiser Production, 1934).

devotion to Adèle. Her physical beauty, as compared to Jane's plainness, is not merely evident to the audience but to the other characters as well, with Blanche Ingram enviously announcing, as Jane enters the room, 'Enter the beautiful governess'.¹⁰⁹

Yet, two seemingly inexplicable changes made to the original narrative can perhaps best be understood when viewed through the light of American anxiety about the economy, welfare, and the future of the male dominated family. In the film, Jane hears of the fire at Thornfield Hall from Sam Poole, a former servant in Rochester's household. Jane encounters Sam while serving soup to the needy at a place called 'Christ Mission of Lancaster', which is run by St. John, who plays a very minor role in the film and is not revealed to be her kinsman. Sam Poole, who is an habitual drunkard, is the only member of Rochester's household to be ejected after the fire and forced to rely on private charity for survival. At a time when many state governments withdrew welfare benefit from those who indulged in drink, this invention may have been intended as a warning to viewers that alcoholics would find themselves out of work during the recession, and, as undeserving poor, forced to rely on the soup kitchens, rather than the government, for subsistence. When Jane returns to Rochester, she finds him not, as in the novel, at his residence at Ferndean Manor, but inhabiting a caretaker's cottage near the ruined Thornfield Hall. If the film studio merely intended to transform *Jane Eyre* into a conventional romantic narrative, it seems odd that they would have altered Rochester's fortunes for the worse instead of allowing him to retain a privileged position as master of a stately home. Jane's decision to remain with the impoverished Rochester, to be his wife and to serve him in his blindness, seems to function, instead, as a piece of instruction for those women who found their

¹⁰⁹ Cabanne.

husbands out of work and their standard of living reduced to remain with their men and continue to view them as heads of household who were deserving of loyalty and respect.

While the 1939 *Wuthering Heights* is perhaps slightly more faithful to Emily's novel, it too reflects a preoccupation with the effect of poverty on the power relations between men and women, and ultimately presents avarice as the impediment to Cathy's and Heathcliff's love.¹¹⁰ Throughout the film, Heathcliff appears in an almost uncomplicatedly sympathetic light, with such acts of cruelty as his physical and emotional abuse of Isabella and his plan to exact revenge upon Hindley by keeping Hareton ignorant and cheating him out of his family property, omitted. Whereas in the original text, Heathcliff is manipulative even as a child, demanding Hindley's horse, for instance, when his own becomes lame and threatening to tell Mr. Earnshaw about Hindley's ill treatment in order to get his way, the film instead portrays Heathcliff as the innocent victim whose horse is stolen by Hindley. From Catherine's point of view, Heathcliff's only fault is his poverty, which she makes him feel keenly from the moment he arrives at *Wuthering Heights* and throughout the film. Yet, several significant alterations made to the dialogue in the novel suggest that Heathcliff's other fault, the one that leads directly to his misery, is his willingness to allow Catherine to dominate him.

When Earnshaw first reveals the ragged child to Cathy and Hindley, Cathy recoils from Heathcliff, observing with disgust, 'he, he's dirty'.¹¹¹ Earnshaw, disappointed by her lack of understanding and regard for the feelings of the orphan, admonishes her with the words 'oh no, don't make me ashamed of you, Cathy', and again, after Hindley refuses to allow Heathcliff to sleep in his room, Earnshaw explicitly explains to his children the importance of helping those in need, stating 'children, you may as well learn here and now

¹¹⁰ *Wuthering Heights*, dir. by William Wyler (Samuel Goldwyn, 1939).

¹¹¹ Wyler.

that you must share what you have with others not as fortunate as yourselves'.¹¹² As in the novel, Cathy and Heathcliff eventually develop a close adult relationship. However, whereas in the novel Catherine is content with Heathcliff prior to her stay with the Lintons, in the film Catherine's childhood disgust at his poverty becomes intensified over time, leading her to view it as evidence of his inadequacy as a man and to turn away from him and toward the wealthy Lintons prior to the injury that necessitates her stay at Thrushcross Grange. Catherine informs Heathcliff that he is an unfit companion for her because of his poverty, putting pressure on him to become wealthy and to provide for her. She tells him:

I shouldn't talk to you at all. Look at you. You get worse every day, dirty and unkempt and in rags. Why aren't you a man? Heathcliff, why don't you run away? You could come back to me rich, and take me away. Why aren't you my prince like we said long ago? Why can't you rescue me, Heathcliff?¹¹³

Heathcliff replies with an expression of devotion, of willingness to sacrifice his dignity and be treated as less than human so that he can remain in her presence, assuring her: 'I've stayed here and been beaten like a dog, abused and cursed and driven mad but I stayed just to be near you. Even as a dog. And I'll stay to the end. I'll live and die under this rock'.¹¹⁴ However, Catherine is heedless, her attention arrested by the faint sound of music from the Grange; she disregards Heathcliff's love, symbolized in the film by the solid and unchanging Penistone Crag, the place that they considered to be their castle as children, and instead chooses to ally herself with the artificial world of Thrushcross Grange. In what is a tacit admission of her power over him, Heathcliff does not confront Cathy or attempt to further impress upon her the gravity of his sacrifice, but obediently follows her to the Grange.

¹¹² Wyler.

¹¹³ Wyler.

¹¹⁴ Wyler.

From this point onward, not only does the acquisitiveness that Cathy demonstrated as a child (as when she rapturously asks Nelly at the start of the film what gift her father will bring her from Liverpool) become intensified, but so does her contempt for Heathcliff. When she and Heathcliff peer through the windows of the Grange, in complete contrast to her behavior in the novel, Cathy is covetous rather than contemptuous of the spectacle of Isabella's and Edgar's privileged lifestyle. After being bitten by the Lintons' dog, Catherine again urges Heathcliff to leave Wuthering Heights and earn money sufficient to support her: 'Go on, Heathcliff. Run away. Bring me back the world'.¹¹⁵ What began as an expression of her own weakness and need of masculine protection, has, seemingly because of Heathcliff's willingness to follow her unquestioningly, evolved into a command. When Cathy returns to Wuthering Heights after her leg is healed and finds that Heathcliff has disobeyed her, she becomes spiteful and in a reversal of her father's plea that she not shame him by her lack of charity, shames Heathcliff in Edgar's presence by telling him to 'Go and wash your face and hands, Heathcliff. And comb your hair, so that I needn't be ashamed of you in front of a guest'.¹¹⁶ Although in the novel Catherine expresses her concern that Heathcliff would be unable to support her if she were to marry him, she does so in what she mistakenly believes to be a private conversation with Nelly; she does not purposely set out to shame Heathcliff into believing that he is inferior because impoverished simply so that she can gratify her desire for a life of privilege. Instead, in Wyler's adaptation, Catherine is responsible, through her cruelty and greed, for her estrangement from Heathcliff, for the misery experienced by Linton, Heathcliff, and herself, and ultimately for her own death. Catherine's fate, then, functions as a strong warning for those women who would put unreasonable demands on men struggling during

¹¹⁵ Wyler.

¹¹⁶ Wyler.

the recession, and Heathcliff's bereavement functions as a warning for those men who, like him, were over-willing 'to crawl to her, whimper to be forgiven, for loving, for needing her more than my own life, for belonging to her more than my own soul'.¹¹⁷

In each of these adaptations, the male protagonists have been shorn of the violence and cruelty that so shocked the Brontës' contemporaries, and have been made to resemble more closely the conventional and less complicated heroes of popular romance than their literary predecessors. Wyler's Heathcliff is wronged by the coquettish Catherine, enduring her caprices and taunts throughout the film because of his devotion to her, and only expressing his anger through physical violence once, when he slaps Catherine after she thoroughly emasculates him with the pronouncement that 'thief or servant were all you were born to be, or beggar beside a road, begging for favors, not earning them, but whimpering for them with your dirty hands'.¹¹⁸

Cabanne's Rochester is also presented as a victim, enduring a loveless marriage and the burden of caring for a mentally ill wife. The extent to which Brontë's Rochester may be considered a victim of his circumstances is undermined both by his admission that he 'meant, however, to be a bigamist',¹¹⁹ and the ruthless, accusatory, and dehumanizing manner in which he speaks of Bertha's mental illness, which he identifies as hereditary madness and alcoholism but discusses as if she and her family were somehow culpable:

Bertha Mason is mad; and she came from a mad family:—idiots and maniacs through three generations! Her mother, the Creole, was both a mad woman and a drunkard!—as I found out after I had wed the daughter: for they were silent on family secrets before. Bertha, like a dutiful child, copied her parent in both points. I had a charming partner—pure, wise, modest: you can fancy I was a happy man. [...] You shall see what sort of a being I was cheated into espousing, and judge whether or not I had a right to break the compact, and seek sympathy with something at least human. (292)

¹¹⁷ Wyler.

¹¹⁸ Wyler.

¹¹⁹ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 291. Further references to this edition are made after quotations in the text.

In contrast, his cinematic counterpart defends his deception with the revelation that ‘the marriage is being annulled’ at the time of the wedding, and explains both his reason for keeping Jane in ignorance of Bertha, as well as Bertha’s condition and its effect upon him, in a way that demonstrates his compassion for both women. He plaintively assures Jane:

I wanted to spare you. Forgive me. I hoped it wouldn’t be necessary for you to know, but I was afraid of losing the only happiness that has come into my life after all these miserable years. I’ve done what I could for her, but the specialists have pronounced her mania incurable, hereditary. I kept her here in the care of Mrs. Poole rather than send her to an institution.¹²⁰

In what seems to have been a bid to make Heathcliff and Rochester more palatable characters for a cinema audience, which likely included individuals who had not read the novels, the adaptations transformed them into docile men who were more sinned against than sinning. A more unexpected point of correspondence between the two adaptations, however, especially in light of their sympathetic portrayals of Heathcliff and Rochester, is the mitigation, and indeed the romanticization, of the causes and symptoms of what may be termed Cathy’s and Bertha’s mental illnesses.

In Emily’s *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine’s death is brought about by an illness of body and mind that is precipitated by a period of deliberate self-starvation. Catherine, who earlier during her courtship with Edgar threatened to ‘cry myself sick’ in order to make him feel guilty for leaving in anger after she slapped him (63), again uses the threat of illness as a means of emotional manipulation when he insists that she terminate her relationship with Heathcliff. She instructs Nelly to ‘say to Edgar, if you see him again to-night, that I’m in danger of being seriously ill—I wish it may prove true [...] I want to frighten him’ (103), and in order to induce illness, refuses to eat from Monday until Thursday night. Angered by the thought that Edgar is not suitably concerned and contrite,

¹²⁰ Cabanne.

Cathy then changes tactics, and declares her intention to commit suicide by starving herself, provided that it would cause Edgar to suffer, telling Nelly ‘as soon as I learn how he feels, I’ll choose between these two—either to starve, at once, that would be no punishment unless he had a heart—or to recover and leave the country’ (107). Yet, while Cathy believes the choice between life and death is still open to her, starvation has already engendered a physical and mental illness which was, according to Nelly, ‘denominated a brain fever’ (118). Narrating the course of her illness to Lockwood, Nelly describes Catherine’s physical and mental symptomology as decidedly unpleasant. She is diminished in physical beauty, with her ‘thick entangled locks’ and ‘wasted face’ (106). Although her mental derangement is such that she expresses a confusion about her identity and a dependence upon Nelly that is childlike and pitiful, Catherine vacillates between this more docile state and that of a ‘maniac’s fury’ (114), childishly arranging the feathers from the pillow that she tore with her teeth just minutes before in an almost bestial manner, when ‘she increased her feverish bewilderment to madness’ (107-108).

The film also presents Catherine’s final illness as both physical and mental, with Dr Kenneth explaining her disorder to Isabella as ‘fever, inflammation of the lungs and something beyond that. I don’t know, I’d call it the will to die’.¹²¹ Kenneth’s melodramatic diagnosis implies that Wyler’s Catherine, like her literary predecessor, has taken an active role in bringing about her death. However, there is no indication that Catherine’s physical and mental deterioration are the result of spiteful self-starvation. Rather, the passivity Catherine demonstrates during her deathbed scene, the first and last time she appears on screen after her discovery of Isabella’s and Heathcliff’s elopement, suggests that her ‘will to die’ is instead an inability to continue to live in the knowledge that Heathcliff has

¹²¹ Wyler.

married Isabella and that she is ultimately responsible for it because of her rejection of him in favour of Edgar. In contrast to her unruly, violent, and manipulative behavior in the sick room of the novel, as when she threatens to ‘end the matter, instantly, by a spring from the window’ when Edgar mentions Heathcliff’s name (113), Wyler’s Catherine is now divested of the petulance that characterizes her behavior for much of the film and assumes a more submissive and gentle demeanor towards both Edgar and Heathcliff. She also maintains her physical beauty, her tidy nightgown and impeccable ringlets forming a sharp contrast to her literary counterpart’s matted hair and wild appearance. Even her mental confusion, which in the novel finds expression in what Nelly terms her ‘ravings’ (111) and in threats of suicide, becomes in the film the vehicle for the conveyance of her guilt and remorse at rejecting Heathcliff in the interests of becoming wealthy. Catherine becomes infantilized. As she reverts to the fantasies of childhood, insisting to Edgar that Penistone Crag is a castle on the moors and wistfully recalling ‘I was a queen there once’,¹²² she symbolically returns to the site of her rupture with Heathcliff, when at Penistone Crag she chose the comfort of a life at the Grange over his devotion to her, and rectifies it, becoming reconciled with Heathcliff and dying in his arms. Catherine is thereby redeemed through mental and physical illness.

Although it serves no such redemptive function, the symptoms of Bertha Rochester’s mental illness in the original text have been thoroughly mitigated in Cabanne’s *Jane Eyre*. The adaptation retains Bertha’s maniacal laughter, and such events as her setting Rochester’s bed alight, an action which is incongruous with the affectionate manner in which she regards him later in the film, as well as her destruction of Thornfield Hall. However, it omits many of the manifestations of madness that seemed intended to provoke

¹²² Wyler.

horror in the reader of Brontë's novel. These include rending Jane's wedding veil, stabbing Richard Mason, and her attack on Rochester, during which she 'grappled his throat viciously, and laid her teeth to his cheek' (293), after he reveals her as his wife to Jane. In the novel, Bertha is described in bestial terms by Jane, who refers to her as 'the clothed hyena' (293), and recalls that 'what it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it groveled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing; and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face' (293). Her physical attributes are also described as heavy, masculine, and hideous, with Jane noting her 'purple face' and 'bloated features', and observing that 'she was a big woman, in stature almost equaling her husband, and corpulent besides: she showed a virile force' (293). In striking contrast, Cabanne's Bertha is slender and attractive, although she has been made up to appear slightly haggard-looking with prominent dark circles round her eyes. Her clothing is tidy, her hair carefully arranged, and she wears a lace collar and earrings; she does not crawl about on all fours, but walks as gracefully as Jane, daintily holding up the side of her skirt as she ascends the staircase after setting Rochester's bed alight. Whereas Bertha's mental illness is such that she is rendered nonverbal in the novel, Cabanne's Bertha is articulate, revealing when she does speak her love for Rochester, her desire to be reinstated as his wife, and her very mild degree of mental confusion. Upon escaping from the attic and finding Rochester discussing wedding arrangements with the priest, she exclaims 'Edward, my husband! I've come such a long way. I've been looking for you everywhere', before becoming convinced that the wedding preparations signify that she and Rochester are going to be married again and pathetically asking Jane 'are you one of the wedding guests?'.¹²³

¹²³ Cabanne.

In both of these adaptations, the original textual representations of female madness have been transfigured; Bertha and Cathy are no longer dangerous, subversive women but examples of weak, dependent, docile femininity. The significance of this alteration is complex. It may initially seem as though a faithful reproduction of Catherine's malicious self-destruction would heighten sympathy for Heathcliff by making her death yet another injury she has inflicted upon him. In the same way, it would seem as though maintaining Charlotte's depiction of Bertha's near ferality would increase the audience's sense that Rochester is both commendable in his kindness towards her as well as justified in seeking to marry Jane before the annulment has been granted. However, both films were produced in the United States at a time of anxiety about mental illness, the costs of caring for the mentally ill, and the possibility that mental illness would be transmitted from generation to generation and thereby weaken 'the future health of American society'.¹²⁴ The mentally ill were, according to Robert Whitaker, frequently 'likened to "viruses," "social wastage," and "melancholy waste products"' by those who promoted eugenics.¹²⁵ It was illegal for them to marry in many states and, after the Supreme Court ruled it constitutional in 1927, they were forcibly sterilized.¹²⁶ It is conceivable, then, that the more violent symptoms of Cathy's mental illness were omitted in part because Cathy, who is played by Merle Oberon, is courted by two suitors and deemed 'lovely' by Nelly,¹²⁷ and the American film studio may have had reservations about presenting a mentally ill individual as sexually attractive, given the strictures placed on their rights to marry and procreate.

It is also possible that the symptoms of Bertha's and Cathy's mental illnesses were mitigated with a view to making the stories less disturbing to interwar audiences in both

¹²⁴ Robert Whitaker, *Mad In America: Bad Science, Bad Medicine, and the Enduring Mistreatment of the Mentally Ill* (New York: Basic, 2002), p. 42.

¹²⁵ Whitaker, p. 56.

¹²⁶ Whitaker, p. 59.

¹²⁷ Wyler.

England and the United States. Wyler's *Wuthering Heights* was shown in British cinemas.¹²⁸ Based on a 1935 reference in the *Manchester Guardian* to a showing of 'the film version of "Jane Eyre"',¹²⁹ and the fact that by 1935, British films accounted for only about 20 percent of all films shown in Britain, with the majority of films imported from the United States,¹³⁰ it seems plausible that Cabanne's *Jane Eyre* also reached British audiences. During the 1930s, in Britain as in the United States, the unemployed and members of the working classes comprised a significant proportion of cinema audiences. According to Miles and Smith, in Britain,

Almost 50 per cent of cinema tickets were on sale for less than 6d: four out of every five tickets were on sale for less than 1/-. The unemployed could afford to go regularly. [...] It is small wonder, therefore, that cinema-going became such a central feature of working-class life, or that cinema was the biggest and most rapidly expanding form of mass entertainment in the 1930s.¹³¹

Going to the cinema was also one of the most popular recreational activities in the United States during the decade, with cinema attendance 'accounting for about twenty percent of all recreational expenditures and eighty percent of spectator amusements'.¹³² As Richard Butsch acknowledges, there has been considerable debate about the precise demographic of American Depression-era cinema audiences since the 1930s:

Contradicting Margaret Thorp's impression that the middle class predominated, community studies from the 1930s indicate heavier movie-going by lower classes. A study in San Francisco found that workers and clerks with income about one third of professionals spent over twice as much per year on movie-going. A 1936 *Fortune* survey found twenty-eight percent of the "prosperous," twenty-seven percent of the lower middle class, and nineteen percent of the poor went to the movies once per week. Sociologists W. Lloyd Warner and Paul Lunt found large numbers of workers in movie houses in the mid-1930s in "Yankee City." At least

¹²⁸ J. H. M., 'Wuthering Heights', *Manchester Guardian*, 26 April 1939, p. 13.

¹²⁹ 'Miscellany', *Manchester Guardian*, 1 August 1935, p. 7.

¹³⁰ Peter Miles and Malcolm Smith, *Cinema, Literature & Society: Elite and Mass Culture in Interwar Britain* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), p. 166.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹³² Richard Butsch, 'American Movie Audiences of the 1930s', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 59 (2001), 106-120 (p. 107).

some portion of the audiences were unemployed workers whiling away their idle hours.¹³³

It is evident that a substantial number of regular cinema-goers in the US and the UK were unemployed or members of the working class.

Yet, these were the very groups who were frequently considered, in both countries, to be more likely to be afflicted with mental illnesses than those of higher socio-economic status. Whitaker stresses the long history of the ‘overrepresentation of the poor among the “insane”’ in the United States,¹³⁴ and notes that in interwar eugenicist rhetoric, the mentally ill were often ‘lumped [...] together with a larger group of misfits—the poor, criminals, and mentally handicapped’.¹³⁵ According to Richard Smith, the unemployed of the United Kingdom had a higher instance of psychological disorder and physical illness than did the employed.¹³⁶ That the state of affairs was similar in the US is borne out by a 1938 report announcing findings that ‘unemployment and economic worry were among the factors causing mental illness and breakdown in as high as one-fourth of first admissions to mental disease hospitals during depression years, according to hospital superintendents’ estimates’.¹³⁷ The prevalence of the lower classes in cinema audiences; the tendency for those classes to be associated with the mentally ill or seen as somehow predisposed by genetics or social circumstances to develop mental illness; the fact that cinemas were marketed, in both countries, as providing a diversion from daily worries and that the element of escapism was likely a draw for those burdened by the effects of the

¹³³ Butsch, p. 109.

¹³⁴ Whitaker, p. 173.

¹³⁵ Whitaker, p. 52.

¹³⁶ Richard Smith, “‘Please Never Let It Happen Again’: Lessons on Unemployment From the 1930s’, *British Medical Journal (Clinical Research Edition)*, 291 (1985), 1191-1195 (p. 1194).

¹³⁷ ‘Urges Useful Employment as Mental Health Measure’, *The Science News-Letter*, 33 (1938), p. 220.

Depression,¹³⁸ may have made producers reluctant to dwell on a subject as controversial and as seemingly pertinent to their audiences as that of mental illness.

In marked contrast, not only the Brontës' psychobiographers but their fictional biographers demonstrated a fascination with the psychological functioning or malfunctioning of their subjects, portraying the family as profoundly troubled, both personally and in their familial relations. In *Stone Walls*, Moorhouse characterizes Branwell as a mentally ill and wildly unpredictable alcoholic, dramatizing his impotent attempts to murder his sisters while under the sway of delusions about Mrs Robinson, as well as his terrifying experience of hallucinations about devils and moving headstones. She presents the sisters' writings as records of their emotional sufferings, works that are chiefly inspired by such traumas as the deaths of Maria and Elizabeth, the humiliations endured while employed as governesses, and, most especially, Branwell's abusive behaviour. In *Wild Decembers*, Dane portrays Branwell as suffering so severely due to his almost pathological obsession with Robinson that he contemplates suicide. In *Empurpled Moors*, Firkins conceives of the relationship between Patrick and his children as one in which the elder Brontë inflicts such severe emotional cruelty and manipulation that his children are, as adults, unable to defy him and assert their own wills. Branwell's alcoholism and sexual promiscuity are shown to be the effects of Patrick's psychological abuse and domination, futile attempts to convince himself that he is able to experience and act on desire and to exercise some measure of control over his life. In Ferguson's *Charlotte Brontë: A Play in Three Acts*, the sisters are subject to painful, recurrent childhood memories about the loss of their elder sisters and the hurtfulness of their father's early rejection of them. Almost all

¹³⁸ Miles and Smith, p. 164. Butsch, p. 110.

of the works of Brontë fictional biography share this emphasis on domestic misery, psychological suffering, and mental illness.

In part, this can be explained by the frequent insistence throughout the interwar period, in standard biography, psychobiography, travel literature, literary criticism, and items in the popular press, that the Brontës' genius was inextricably linked to their supposed psychological malaise. In a *New York Times* review of Romer Wilson's *All Alone: The Life and Private History of Emily Jane Brontë*, R. L. Duffus refers to the study as 'the psychological or psychopathic biography', musing that 'the second adjective is no doubt better, for it appears that every one who ever amounted to much has had something dreadfully wrong inside'.¹³⁹ He then posits a lack of affection and attention during the Brontës' formative years as the reason for their psychological defects, explaining 'they grew up with little love or understanding from anybody, except such as they shared among themselves in their own childish loneliness. Perhaps that was why Charlotte and Emily became geniuses'. In language that evokes interwar fears about the infectious nature of genetically transmitted insanity, he adds that 'Branwell, himself touched or tainted with genius, drank, took drugs and went to the bad generally'.¹⁴⁰ Clair Price suggests that Charlotte's and Emily's inability to emerge psychologically unscathed from the trauma of their domestic situation signifies their genius, both becoming, as a result, 'feeble, nervous and drooping'. She then implies a correlation between Anne's normal psychological functioning and her lesser literary ability, explaining 'only Anne is said to have been normal. She had none of the strange power of her sisters, whose novels reveal the fiery souls that burned beneath their frightened exteriors'.¹⁴¹ David Cecil suggests that Charlotte's writing is the product of her unfulfilled sexual needs, that 'writing as she does

¹³⁹ R. L. Duffus, 'Emily Brontë Was Always Restless and Unhappy', *New York Times* (17 June 1928), p. 55.

¹⁴⁰ Duffus, p. 55.

¹⁴¹ Price, p. X8.

of the emotions of her own unsatisfied heart, Charlotte Brontë is most characteristically concerned to describe frustrated love'.¹⁴²

Similar understandings of the Brontës, their writing, and the psychologically distressing situations they were said to have experienced are reflected in the fictional biography of the period. Drawing from a long history of received wisdom, psychological theory, and literary convention, the roots of which extend beyond the Brontës' nineteenth century, interwar authors of Brontë fiction and nonfiction presented mental illness almost in the light of the inevitable accompaniment of mental giftedness. In part, too, it is a reflection of the popularity of psychoanalysis during the interwar period, and the pervasiveness of the Freudian explanation of the artist as neurotic. Llewellyn Jones, in his essay 'Psychoanalysis and Creative Literature', explains that 'We are all neurotic in so far as we have conflicts, repressed desires',¹⁴³ but the artist is able to sublimate his conflicts in the creation of his work of art. The conflicts expressed are those common to humanity, and the work of art has wide appeal because of this universality and the opportunity it affords viewers for the sublimation of their own conflicts.¹⁴⁴ It is an argument that Romer Wilson uses when she describes Emily's possession by the 'Dark Hero', which I discuss in Chapter Three, and what she characterizes as its universal appeal. It seemingly underpins Q. D. Leavis's aforementioned explanation of the popularity of Charlotte's novels: that, being reflections of unappeased desire, exercises in 'wish-fulfilment', 'each variant of it is successively popular because the appeal of the commoner day-dreams is inexhaustible—they represent both for author and reader a favourite form of self-indulgence'.¹⁴⁵ However, the fictional biographers' portrayal of the sisters' authorship is, in many instances, more

¹⁴² Cecil, p. 136.

¹⁴³ Llewellyn Jones, 'Psychoanalysis and Creative Literature', *English Journal*, 23 (1934), 443-452 (p. 443).

¹⁴⁴ Jones, p. 445.

¹⁴⁵ Leavis, p. 237.

diverse and nuanced than this implies. While there is an obvious emphasis on the influences of tragedy and family discord, the sisters' writing is also approached from the more practical standpoint of women's negotiation between the desire for meaningful employment and responsibilities to their families and homes.

In the fictional biographies, Emily's writing is invariably represented as the expression of her artistic vision. Her poetry and novel are not written for financial gain, or with a view to pleasing her readers, but to please herself; and, in those works that allege *Wuthering Heights* is a collaboration between Emily and Branwell, including Dane's *Wild Decembers* and MacFarlane's *Divide the Desolation*, Emily undertakes the responsibility in order to help Branwell because they understand one another and share an artistic language. This understanding of Emily's artistry, apart from the attribution of *Wuthering Heights* to Branwell, is most likely founded on Charlotte's well-known account, in the 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell', of the real Emily's unwillingness to have her poems published and her identity made known. Despite Emily's artistic integrity, she is shown in the fictional biographies to make concessions in order to please her family, not in terms of the style or content of her writing, but by allowing it to be published at Charlotte's insistence and against her conscience, by harnessing herself to Branwell's novel, and, in many texts, by undertaking despised household chores when she would rather be writing.

In Moorhouse's *Stone Walls*, for instance, Emily is uninterested in the sewing she is expected to do, and in Cook's *They Lived*, the thirteen-year-old Emily protests at being made to perform tasks for which she has no aptitude simply because they are expected of her as a woman; yet in both instances, Emily grudgingly does her duty. In *Divide the Desolation*, however, despite Emily's childhood resentment at being kept indoors and away from reading and writing by her household responsibilities, in particular by the

detested sewing, by the time Emily reaches the age of fifteen, her relation to housework has utterly changed. The narrator relates that ‘Her body’s toil she did not begrudge; that was an affair of the hands, not of the brain; it left the mind free to take its way with words, words that were at once the anathema and the passion of her life’.¹⁴⁶ Emily transforms what she once considered restrictive tasks into artistically enabling ones. She is still bound by the chores she must perform, but she has carved out a space within which she is free to pursue her own thoughts and compose new poems and stories. In part, this portrayal of Emily’s dedication to domestic chores, however personally distasteful, is likely derived from the historic fact that Emily chose to live at home when her sisters went to school or to work, and from Gaskell’s well-known accounts of her baking whilst learning German and of her attempt to continue to perform household labour even when she was dying. Yet, it might also be understood within the context of middle-class women’s increasing responsibility for domestic labour at this time due to the expense and difficulty of procuring and keeping servants: what was known as the ‘servant problem’. Humble demonstrates that middlebrow fiction reflects this increased responsibility, but also ‘claim[s] a woman’s ability to “home-make” as an art form, offering the middle-class housewife an imaginative allegiance with the bohemian creative artist as a compensation for the unfamiliar labour that is now to be her lot’.¹⁴⁷ In MacFarlane’s novel, the artist and homemaker are aligned, and Emily is made a model of authorship for those women who were responsible for domestic work and who might not have had, to paraphrase Woolf, a room of their own.

¹⁴⁶ Kathryn Jean MacFarlane *Divide the Desolation: A Novel Based on the Life of Emily Jane Brontë* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936), p. 63. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁴⁷ Humble, p. 130.

While not enough is known about these texts or their authors to determine their precise readership, Brontë fictional biography engages, as I have shown, with some of the key preoccupations of women's middlebrow fiction, as identified by Nicola Humble. They vary considerably in terms of their biographical accuracy and the sophistication and complexity of their representation of the Brontës, their familial and gender relationships, their psychological states, and their literature. However, Miller's claims that 'the middlebrow writers of the interwar period were not aesthetic theoreticians and remained stuck in cliché and convention', and that they 'were out of sync with the more sophisticated thinking of their contemporary Virginia Woolf',¹⁴⁸ are inaccurate. As Humble has observed, and as I demonstrate throughout this thesis, Brontë fictional biography engages with many of the ideas typically attributed to highbrow culture. A brief overview of the prices at which these works were advertised, in England and the US, demonstrates that they were marketed to an audience for whom the works of Virginia Woolf were at least monetarily accessible.

According to Jean Rose, Library Manager for Random House Group Archive and Library, which now holds the archives of William Heinemann Publishers, *Wild Decembers* was first published on 21 November 1932 and priced at 6 shillings a copy.¹⁴⁹ Taking Miles's and Smith's estimate that half of all cinema tickets sold for less than 6 pence in 1930s Britain, a copy of *Wild Decembers* would have been twelve times as expensive as the average cinema ticket. On the other hand, in 1930 Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, *The Voyage Out*, *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and the first volume of *The Common Reader* were advertised at 5 shillings each, 'in a cheap uniform edition' from the

¹⁴⁸ Miller, p. 153.

¹⁴⁹ Jean Rose, Email Correspondence, 30 April 2010.

Hogarth Press.¹⁵⁰ While the second volume of *The Common Reader* was advertised at 10 shillings 6 pence in 1932,¹⁵¹ nearly twice the price of Dane's play, if the buyer was content to purchase the less expensive Hogarth edition, the works of Dane and of Woolf were equally available to her. Oscar Firkins's *Empurpled Moors* was also published in the United States in 1932 at a cost of \$2,¹⁵² a little over eight times as expensive as the average cinema ticket, which Butsch maintains remained priced at around 23 cents from 1932-1939.¹⁵³ *Empurpled Moors* was sold for the same price as *Wild Decembers* in its Doubleday edition for the US market,¹⁵⁴ and for a price comparable to that of the second edition of *The Common Reader*, advertised at \$3 from Harcourt Brace, and to T. S. Eliot's *Selected Essays: 1917-1932*, advertised at \$3.50.¹⁵⁵ Of course, the prices of these works of fictional biography cannot be viewed as a reflection of their literary quality relative to Woolf's or Eliot's books, but there is no reason to assume that the likely middlebrow and middle-class audience consuming them were not reading these modernist texts as well. Nor is there any reason to assume that the Brontës' fictional biographers were not aware of the ideas that informed and shaped modernism, even if they were not directly received through modernist texts.

The precise cultural significance of Brontë fictional biography during the interwar period is difficult to determine. It seems that popular perceptions of the Brontës as impoverished and psychologically damaged were as alluring to factual and fictional biographers as their genius and the credit they did to the English national heritage at a time of economic crisis and national insecurity. Despite their popularity, the prices of these

¹⁵⁰ 'Display Ad 33—No Title', *Manchester Guardian*, 14 January 1930, p. 7.

¹⁵¹ 'Display Ad 76—No Title', *The Observer*, 16 October 1932, p. 9.

¹⁵² 'Keats, The Barretts, Et. All', *Westchester Features Syndicate*, 2 December 1932.

¹⁵³ Butsch, p. 108.

¹⁵⁴ 'Latest Books Received', *New York Times*, 15 January 1933, p. BR20.

¹⁵⁵ 'Display Ad 58—No Title', *New York Times*, 6 November 1932, p. BR14.

works relative to the prices of entertainments that were typically enjoyed by the working classes, including cinema, suggest that the texts and performances may have been monetarily inaccessible to what may be termed a lowbrow audience. An apt illustration of the difficulties of inferring a particular class of audience for Brontë fictional biography appears in an article in the *Manchester Guardian* reporting the outcome of a contest in which readers were invited to submit a letter, written in the voice of Emily Brontë, commenting on the adaptation of her novel into the 1939 *Wuthering Heights* film. The unnamed author of the article asserts that

all flights of historical fancy are dangerous matter. Only writers as polished and graceful as Mr. Maurice Baring can mix the old and the new and make Greek heroes or Roman Emperors as at home in modern speech and modern dilemmas as the painted Apostles are in the clothing of the Renaissance.¹⁵⁶

Yet, these letters, several of which are printed in the article, partake of the same impetus as works of Brontë fictional biography. They demonstrate, through the diversity of interpretations of Emily's personality and behaviour, the wide appeal of the Brontës as a subject for fictionalization for people of different geographical regions and, presumably, socioeconomic backgrounds, flouting the journalist's suggestion that the fictional recreation of the past is the preserve of established, well-educated, elite writers like Baring.¹⁵⁷ It is this democratic appeal which seems to account in some measure for the prevalence of Brontë fictional biography in the period between the First and the Second World Wars.

¹⁵⁶ 'Suggestions From Haworth', *Manchester Guardian*, 15 March 1939, p. 8.

¹⁵⁷ Robert Speaight, 'Baring, Maurice (1874-1945)', rev. Annette Peach, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, (2004) <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30584>> [accessed 25 May 2010].

Chapter Two

Nineteenth-Century Proto-fictionalizations: Charting the Path From the ‘Silent Country’ to the Interwar Séance

Each of the works of interwar Brontë fictional biography discussed in this thesis explicitly references the Brontë family as its subject. Even Sylvia Townsend Warner’s ‘Emily’, which initially keeps the reader in some suspense as to Emily’s identity by withholding her surname, eventually identifies the protagonist and her family as Brontës by the gradual revelation of their well-known characteristics and activities. In the very simplest of terms, two qualifications must be met in order for a work to be classified as Brontë fictional biography: it must be a work of fiction and its subject must recognizably be that of the life of one or more members of the Brontë family.¹⁵⁸ As far as I have been able to determine, the first text to fictionalize the family in this way is M. B. Linton’s *The Tragic Race* [1926(?)]. Yet, prior to this early twentieth-century resurrection of the dead Brontës on the stage and the printed page, where they appear as living figures made to act or emote in ways determined by their fictional biographers, the family was subjected to less corporeal forms of fictionalization, focusing not on their lives but on their lives after death.

During their own lifetimes and especially in the years following their deaths, the Brontës’ lives were imaginatively constructed and reconstructed in prose and poetry, fiction and that which purported to be nonfiction. It was after Charlotte’s death in 1855, however, that the Brontës began to reappear as spectral presences in works of English and American poetry that imagined the family’s existence in the afterlife. The first was

¹⁵⁸ I include Rachel Ferguson’s *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* in this category because it is saturated with overt and subtextual references to the Brontës’ lives, literature, and legacy; it interweaves Brontë lore and biography with fiction to create a complex work of fictional biography. Although the Brontës are, for want of a better term, ghosts summoned through the séance, they are able to speak, travel, and exert physical and moral force, and so possess the same vitality as the living protagonists.

Matthew Arnold's 'Haworth Churchyard', which appeared in May 1855, within two months of Charlotte's death. However, the majority of these poems were written or published during the final decades of the nineteenth century. Indeed, Arnold's elegy underwent substantial revision towards the end of the century, and reappeared in 1890 with an 'Epilogue' amending his original injunction to 'Sleep, O cluster of friends,'¹⁵⁹ with an acknowledgement of the unabated activity of these spirits:

Unquiet souls!
 --In the dark fermentation of earth,
 In the never idle workshop of nature,
 In the eternal movement,
 Ye shall find yourselves again!¹⁶⁰

Arnold's revision reflects what appears to be a tendency in this body of poetry to depict the spirits of the Brontës as increasingly active and 'unquiet', and to move further from elegiac commemoration of the dead and closer to ghost narrative and, as I shall argue, fictional biography as the century progressed. 'Haworth Churchyard' was followed by Emily Dickinson's 'Charlotte Brontë's Grave', published in 1896, but written around 1860;¹⁶¹ George Barlow's 'In Memory of Patrick Branwell Brontë, Genius', dated 1870; Francis William Lauderdale Adams's 'To Emily Brontë', published in 1887; Lionel Pigot Johnson's 'Brontë', dated 1890; and Harriet Prescott Spofford's 'Brontë', published in 1897.

Apart from the obvious difference, that they fictionalize the imagined afterlives rather than the lives of the Brontës, the ghostly poetry of the nineteenth century differs in several important ways from the fictionalizations of the interwar period. Interwar authors sometimes reduced the Brontës to stock characters, portraying Branwell as a violent

¹⁵⁹ Matthew Arnold, 'Haworth Churchyard', *Fraser's*, May 1855, pp. 527-530, (p. 530). (In. 178).

¹⁶⁰ Matthew Arnold, 'Epilogue', *Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold* (London: Macmillan, 1890), pp. 303-304 (p. 304). (In. 10-14). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁶¹ Miller, p. 103.

drunkard, Patrick as a selfish and stereotypical Victorian patriarch, and Charlotte as a simplified Jane Eyre figure, pining for the love of her ‘master’. However, care had been taken to individuate the characters and make them conform, at least in some respects, to standard biographical descriptions of the family. In these works of poetry, however, the ghostly Brontës are, for the most part, shorn of the attributes they possessed, or were said to possess, in life. Not only are the Brontës not named in the bodies of any of the poems, with the exception of Dickinson’s, but the siblings are sometimes treated as an indistinguishable conglomerate. They are described by Arnold as ‘a sisterly band’ and a ‘cluster of friends’;¹⁶² referred to as ‘royal sisters of the North’ in Johnson’s poem;¹⁶³ and transformed into the anonymous ‘three ghosts upon the stair!’ by the end of Spofford’s.¹⁶⁴ In contrast to the interwar fictional biographies, these poems are not concerned with the creation of biographically verisimilar portraits or with the imaginative exploration of lacunae in the Brontë story. Rather, they create a subjective, affective depiction of the Brontës in the afterlife, using the trope of haunting as a metaphor to describe the family’s continued cultural and personal significance after death.

The manner in which the trope of haunting is deployed varies from poem to poem. Yet, one striking similarity shared, more or less, by all of these poems is also the feature by which they differ most significantly from the fictional biographies of the interwar period: they are pervaded by speechlessness. In interwar fiction, the Brontës were ventriloquized, either with lines taken from their own novels, poems, letters, and diary papers, or with newly invented dialogue, but they were speaking, writing, communicant presences. This is

¹⁶² Matthew Arnold, ‘Haworth Churchyard’, *Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold* (London: Macmillan, 1890), pp. 299-303 (p. 302, 303). (ln. 81, 112). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁶³ Lionel Pigot Johnson, ‘Brontë’, in *Literature Online* <<http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>> [accessed 8 November 2013] (ln. 64). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁶⁴ Harriet Prescott Spofford, ‘Brontë’, in *In Titian’s Garden and Other Poems* (Boston: Copeland and Day, 1897), pp. 39-42. (p. 42, ln. 99). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

as true of their portrayal in the typical fictional biography that dramatized their lives as it is of those works that extended their dramatization to the family's lives after death. To my knowledge, only three works of interwar fictional biography feature the Brontës as ghosts. Yet, in each text, the departed make their presence known and their message understood.

In Linton's 'Prologue' to *The Tragic Race*, the ghosts of Charlotte and Emily appear on the stage before the play commences; the stage notes describe how

Through the weird intermittent flashes [of lightning] are seen two muffled figures hand in hand, the ghosts of Charlotte and Emily Brontë. They slowly walk along, unafraid, defying the battle of the elements. They disappear. Fierce music is heard merging into sad wistfulness then a healing calm. The storm abates. Bright sunshine pours upon the moor. (1)

The sisters initially function as a kind of silent chorus, alerting the audience to the fact that both will die in the course of the drama, but also preparing them for the ghostly Charlotte's ecstatic revelation at the close of the play: just as the spirit sisters endure the storm, and just as the storm is succeeded by sunshine and 'healing calm', there is a compensatory afterlife that succeeds the pain of sickness and death. In the final scene of the 'Epilogue', the luminous spirit of Charlotte returns to the parlour in the guise of an angelic messenger, 'clad in shining white robes', and this time verbally proclaims her message of hope to the audience: "Not fame, but love; not an end, but a beginning; not death, but victory" (31).

In Rachel Ferguson's *Charlotte Brontë: A Play in Three Acts*, Emily encounters the ghost of her dead sister Elizabeth offstage. Although the audience does not witness the haunting as in Linton's play, the truth of Emily's encounter is never called into question, and throughout the play, Emily acts as a medium through which an unnamed power foretells the fate of the family. While Emily does not relay any straightforward oral message from Elizabeth, the ghostly child communicates by leading her to the experiences that provide her with the material for *Wuthering Heights*. Emily describes the haunting to

Charlotte and Anne in language that evokes, chiefly in terms of her exclusion from the house and enforced exile on the moors, the appearance of the ghostly Catherine of Lockwood's nightmare:

Only to-day, I saw Elizabeth on the Withins. She was flitting along, always just ahead of me. Always just ahead. I ran. I burned to touch her, to fling my arms round her, to warm her against my heart. I ran until I fell, exhausted . . . and when I got home, she was there. Outside. Looking up at the windows. Always outside . . . in that cold. I can bear it. I love it. It is me and mine. But she was only eight years old. Only eight . . . she is still only eight years old.¹⁶⁵

Elizabeth, who only manifests for Emily out of doors, is also implicitly associated with the other supernatural experiences that occur on the moors. When her manuscript of *Wuthering Heights* is discovered by Charlotte, Emily explains: 'I was on the Withins, this afternoon, and the title came to me then. There are voices out there . . . that tell one what to do. . . . It's to be called *Wuthering Heights*' (49). One wonders whether Ferguson was implying that Elizabeth, running just ahead, led Emily to these voices, or even whether one of the voices was intended to be Elizabeth's. Regardless, Elizabeth's revelation of her spirit's confinement to the natural world means that, within the framework of the text, Emily is the medium through which Elizabeth communicates her experiences with readers of *Wuthering Heights*.

In Ferguson's *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*, the ghosts of the Brontës communicate in a variety of ways with the Carne family and their governess, Miss Martin. Charlotte inscribes harsh annotations on Deirdre's rejected manuscript. Several Brontës communicate through a table-turning séance, during which they demand that their auditors "'Remember Maria. Remember Elizabeth.'" "And remember Anne.'" (52), and permit them a visit to the Carnes' home in London. Finally, Charlotte and Emily, under the guise of their pseudonym Bell, physically pay a visit to Miss Martin, during which Charlotte

¹⁶⁵ Rachel Ferguson, *Charlotte Brontë: A Play in Three Acts* (London: Ernest Benn, 1933), p. 42. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

convinces her to abandon her unsatisfactory teaching position to pursue work with the clergyman she loves. On one level, the Brontës are the disruptive, mischievous poltergeists of more conventional ghost narratives. They affect the family's lives by terrifying the youngest daughter, Sheil, and threatening to take her '*back – in – time*' (53); they influence Deirdre to 'rend [...] in twain' the novel she so enjoyed writing (181); and, by frightening Sheil so badly, they threaten the family's tradition of shared make-believe, forcing the Carnes to adopt the Brontës into their 'Saga' in order to domesticate them and neuter their perceived threat. At the same time, the Brontës seem to return in order to control their posthumous reputation. They demand remembrance for Maria, Elizabeth, and Anne, the three sisters who are most frequently marginalized in interwar biographies, fictional biographies, and literary studies. By liberating Miss Martin and encouraging her to go to the man she loves, Charlotte challenges her prevalent portrayal, in works of interwar fiction and nonfiction, as a stereotypical Victorian prude who feels passion but refuses to act on it. Branwell, who dominates many of the most dramatic scenes in the interwar plays and novels, and who dominated accounts of the genesis of his sisters' novels almost from the moment of their publication, is essentially reduced to a state of futility and inarticulateness. Ferguson gives no indication of what he says to his companions at the bar, but emphasizes that 'He doesn't seem to go down a bit, though, and is always telling stories that nobody listens to' (48).

The sisters of Ferguson's novel are articulate ghosts. Yet, her use of haunting as a means of exploring the way in which the Brontës have been misunderstood and misremembered represents a departure from the more straightforward portrayal of the ghosts in Linton's play and in her own later play; and it represents a common thread between her work and the nineteenth-century ghost poetry. On the other hand, although the

nineteenth-century spectres were inarticulate, depictions of the family within this body of literature evolved, and as the century progressed, they were transformed from mute and inaccessible spirits to listening, noisy poltergeists, striving to communicate with the living.

Shortly after the appearance of Spofford's poem, the Brontës began to emerge in still more spectral, still less material form in several works of *fin-de-siècle* and early-twentieth-century prose fiction and drama that represent a separate but parallel development in the family's proto-fictionalization. Charlotte Mew's undated and posthumously published short story, 'Elinor',¹⁶⁶ Anton Chekhov's drama, *Three Sisters* (1901),¹⁶⁷ and May Sinclair's novel, *The Three Sisters* (1914),¹⁶⁸ have all been identified as works that fictionalize or take inspiration from some aspect of the Brontës' lived experience, and as such, may be viewed as variations of the *roman à clef*. The *roman à clef* is a work of fiction that takes for its characters living or once-living individuals, but, through the alteration or suppression of details including names, locations, dates, and events, obfuscates their identities. While the OED defines the *roman à clef* as applying

¹⁶⁶ In her 'Introduction' to *Charlotte Mew: Collected Poems and Prose*, Val Warner identifies 'Elinor' as Mew's 'fictionalized picture of Emily Brontë'. Warner proffers no evidence to support this claim. However, there are numerous correspondences between the title character of Mew's story and her characterization of Emily in her essay 'The Poems of Emily Brontë'. These include the shared qualities of self-sufficiency, strength, and almost unlimited pity and indulgence for the weakness of others, in addition to the shared spiritual connection with the natural world. Val Warner, 'Introduction', in *Charlotte Mew: Collected Poems and Prose*, ed. by Val Warner (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1981), pp. ix-xxii (p. xix). Charlotte Mew, 'The Poems of Emily Brontë', *Temple Bar*, CXXX (August 1904), (repr. in *Charlotte Mew: Collected Poems and Prose*, pp. 356-369).

¹⁶⁷ Donald Rayfield posits the Brontës as a likely source of inspiration for Chekhov's portrayal of the isolated, unhappy Prozorova siblings. He explains that 'In 1896 Anton had sent to Taganrog library a biography of the Brontë sisters: three talented, unhappy girls, stranded in Yorkshire; a despotic father; a mother they do not recall; a brother, once their idol, now a drunken ne'er-do-well. Chekhov's Prozorova sisters have much in common with the Brontës'. *Anton Chekhov: A Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000), p. 515.

¹⁶⁸ Both Lucasta Miller, in *The Brontë Myth*, and Patsy Stoneman, in *Brontë Transformations*, identify Sinclair's novel as containing fictionalized traces of the Brontës' lives. Miller, p. 247. Stoneman compares Sinclair's biography *The Three Brontës* (1912), in which the sisters emerge as conscious artists rather than morbid spinsters who wrote as compensation for sexual frustration, and the portrayal of the titular three sisters of her novel, who display Freudian neuroses. Sinclair was active in the field of psychoanalysis, and Stoneman views the two works as displaying a tension between 'the contradictory need in early twentieth century feminists for rational analysis of women's psychological disabilities on the one hand and, on the other, for feminist heroines who would rise triumphant above them'. Stoneman, p. 70.

specifically to the novel,¹⁶⁹ the etymology of the phrase invites a wider application, given that ‘roman’ refers to a tale or narrative. These narratives appropriate characteristics of the Brontë family and events from their lives, and work them into the fabric of what are represented as fictional characters and situations. The alteration of other characteristics, the changing of names and circumstances, functions to disguise these origins. Unlike the earliest *romans à clef*, these works did not come with a key. As a result, only readers with enough knowledge of the Brontës were and are able to perceive traces of them in the texts.

These manifestations of the family, present not as embodied characters or even as the recognizable spirits of the departed, but as immaterial, incomplete, and uncertain collections of characteristics reminiscent of the once-living Brontës, are ghostly. They invite comparison with the ghost poetry of the nineteenth century as well as with those interwar fictional biographies that feature the Brontës as spirits returned from the dead. Yet they remain distinct from both. The haunted quality of these *romans à clef*, their ability to summon the dead Brontës, depends on the ability of the reader or viewer to recognize the encoded traces of the family; these texts do not exhibit the ghosts in any literal way, and so the audience must, in a sense, come to the reading or viewing encounter already haunted by the Brontës.

The text that bridges the gap between these two bodies of literature is Henry James’s 1898 novella, *The Turn of the Screw*. In a work that is recognizably a ghost story, although not unambiguously or unproblematically so, James encodes numerous details derived from the Brontë family’s lives and literature. This collage of quotation forms one thread of the richly evocative tapestry of James’s novella, and functions as a comment on the afterlives of the Brontë family in the sense of the construction of their literary and

¹⁶⁹ ‘Roman à clef, n.’, *OED*, OUP (2010) <<http://0-www.oed.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/Entry/275179>> [accessed 16 December 2010].

cultural legacy, and the confusion between the two that James found so disturbing. I do not, of course, propose this interpretation as in any sense definitive; the extent of the body of criticism on *The Turn of the Screw* strikingly demonstrates the multiplicity of interpretive possibilities for this text. I am also aware that what I believe to be Brontë traces may merely be coincidental or unintentional, the result of the near continuous telling and retelling of the Brontë story that, as Miller perceptively argues, shifted the meaning of the Brontë family in the cultural consciousness ‘from the level of history to that of myth’.¹⁷⁰ The contortions of reasoning through which John Malham-Dembleby had to pass, in his discredited *The Key to the Brontë Works* (1911), in order to arrive at the conclusion that Eugène Sue’s *Miss Mary, Ou l’Institutrice* was a *roman à clef* presenting the story of Charlotte’s relationship with Monsieur Heger, provides an apt warning of the risks involved.¹⁷¹ However, James’s demonstrable interest in the Brontës; his own working practices as a writer of fiction; the way he conceptualized encounters with the past; his conviction of, in the words of Leon Edel, ‘how much it is nonsense to think of literature as coming exclusively out of life’;¹⁷² and most revealingly, the abundant references to the Brontës’ lives and literature within the text itself all demonstrate the validity of such a reading of *The Turn of the Screw*.

¹⁷⁰ Miller, p. 152.

¹⁷¹ Malham-Dembleby, who also maintains, on the basis of dubious textual correspondences, that Charlotte wrote *Wuthering Heights*, alleges the following similarities between Sue’s novel and Charlotte’s life and what he identifies as her writings: ‘Other extraordinary facts with which he [Sue] shows acquaintance are, that Charlotte Brontë had a sister Elizabeth at this school; that Helen Burns was her sister; that there was a West Indian girl at the school; that Charlotte Brontë was born on or about the 21st of April; that she might be called Kitty (Currer) Bell at home, but she must be called Catherine (Catherine Earnshaw); that Miss Brontë was the governess-daughter of an Irishman; that the original of John Reed was her brother and was no hero, and had shown strange signs of insanity during the last year or two, as it is now known he had at the time; [...] that Catherine’s (Catherine Earnshaw’s) rival was Isabella (Heathcliff’s [sic] wife—Madame Héger of the Rue d’Isabelle)’. John Malham-Dembleby, *The Key to the Brontë Works. The Key to Charlotte Brontë’s “Wuthering Heights,” “Jane Eyre,” and Her Other Works. Showing the Method of Their Construction and Their Relation to the Facts and People of Her Life*. (London: The Walter Scott Publishing Co., 1911), pp. 106-107.

¹⁷² Leon Edel, ‘The Two Libraries of Henry James’, in *The Library of Henry James*, ed. by Leon Edel and Adeline R. Tintner (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 1987), pp. 1-14 (p. 14).

The conditions favouring the emergence of these early proto-fictionalizations are perhaps less conspicuous than the cultural and economic reasons proffered in the previous chapter for the emergence of Brontë fictional biography during the interwar period. Despite the potentially limiting nature of the designation, and without at all implying that the mores of English and American society were the same or remained static throughout the six decades of Victoria's reign, both the authors of these works and their subjects were Victorian by birth and education. In some cases, the dates of their lives overlapped. This body of literature was composed prior to the First World War's (problematically) perceived severing of the Victorian past from the Modernist present. In the absence of significant historical or cultural distance between author and subject, the dual impetuses so often attributed to the production of the neo-Victorian, the desire to expose or revise the perceived inadequacies and abuses of the past and the desire to revisit and commemorate a time for which one is nostalgic, cannot as easily be applied to the texts in question. Most importantly, these nineteenth-century proto-fictionalizations of the Brontë story are inherently, materially different from twentieth-century biographical fiction in that they imagine the family solely in the form of revenants. Unlike the interwar fictional biographies, they do not simulate the family's corporeal reanimation in their writings, a process exemplified by the Sleeping Beauty metaphor employed by Emilie and Georges Romieu to dramatize the meaning of biography, which is life-writing: 'the authors [...], on a certain evening, pressed their faces against the window of a sleeping house. It woke suddenly, at this gesture, as though at the touch of a fairy wand, from its century of slumber'.¹⁷³ The difference between portraying the Brontës as bodiless versus bodily is

¹⁷³ Emilie and Georges Romieu, 'Prologue', in *The Brontë Sisters*, trans. by Roberts Tapley (London: Skeffington & Son, Ltd., 1931), pp. 9-14, p. 9.

significant. It implies that a different set of contingencies or motivations were at play in bringing about this early mode of fictionalization.

However, the proto-fictionalizations of the nineteenth century must be viewed as part of a continuum with Brontë fictional biography. Their exploration and representation of the spiritual circumstances of the family after death reemerged in the presence of ghosts, séances, and other forms of the uncanny in their interwar descendants. That does not mean, however, that interwar fictional biographers simply appropriated the ghost motif or mimicked the marked interest in the idea of the Brontës' spiritual survival after death that characterized the works of their nineteenth-century predecessors. Throughout the interwar period, in England and the United States, spiritualist beliefs in the ability of the dead to communicate with the living, and in an afterlife in which spirits retained some or all of the characteristics and affections they had in life, were extremely popular, just as they were in both countries throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. Georgina Byrne describes the permeation of spiritualist belief and rhetoric, in England, into what she terms the 'common culture', which represented and reflected the experiences of members from a variety of socio-economic, educational, and political backgrounds. She argues that, despite considerable mistrust of and objection to spiritualist practice, the Church of England itself eventually co-opted elements of spiritualist language to describe the afterlife:

the Church of England shaped what it presented as a Christian belief in the afterlife *in part* by engaging with the claims, the language and ideas of modern spiritualism that had become embedded in the common culture by the late nineteenth century. Over the course of the period 1850-1939 religious beliefs regarding the afterlife changed substantially, meaning that ideas dismissed as unorthodox in the 1850s had become part of mainstream Church of England teaching by the 1930s.¹⁷⁴

Similarly, Jenny Hazelgrove argues that spiritualism's 'power of persuasion was rooted in its ability to elicit and co-ordinate a variety of fugitive and fragmented supernaturalisms

¹⁷⁴ Georgina Byrne, *Modern Spiritualism and the Church of England, 1850-1939* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2010), p. 9.

buried in modernity'.¹⁷⁵ Spiritualism accommodated mainstream religious belief and traditional rural and folkloric belief in the supernatural, and 'matched expectations in heterodox pockets of Christianity where continuity between matter and spirit, earth-life, and afterlife was already assumed'.¹⁷⁶ Thus, Ann Heilmann's and Mark Llewellyn's interpretation of the motif of the ghostly in neo-Victorian fiction as an act of mimicry, 'a re-articulation of the Victorians' own fascination with séances, spectres, and other spookish things',¹⁷⁷ is insufficient to explain these interwar, neo-Victorian engagements with the Brontë family. After all, it is no more remarkable that interwar writers should imagine encounters with the spirits of the dead Brontës than that their nineteenth-century predecessors should have done so.

The identification of the tropes of haunting and mediumship as metaphors for the continued presence of the Victorian past and for attempts to conjure and recreate it in works of neo-Victorian fiction is an established feature of the critical field, appearing in Heilmann's and Llewellyn's *Neo-Victorianism*, Tatiana Kontou's *Spiritualism and Women's Writing* (2009), and *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction*, edited by Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham (2010). In both the nineteenth-century proto-fictionalizations as well as the interwar fictional biographies, the Brontës' haunting presences do function in this way. These ghosts invite readers to confront the presence of the past, and to question the reasons for the enduring cultural and personal appeal of the Brontë family. Yet, this is not enough to explain the ghosts in Brontë fiction. As this chapter will demonstrate, the Brontës were peculiarly associated with the ghostly and the supernatural, and this association was inseparable from the process of their transformation

¹⁷⁵ Jenny Hazelgrove, 'Spiritualism after the Great War', *Twentieth Century British History*, 10 (1999), 404-430, p. 411.

¹⁷⁶ Hazelgrove, p. 413.

¹⁷⁷ Heilmann and Llewellyn, p. 147.

from historical personages to fictional characters. As such, it is necessary to any understanding of interwar Brontë fictional biography to trace its development from its origins in the nineteenth century, to map the trajectory of the family's journey from 'the silent country' (69) of Arnold's elegy to the loquacity displayed in Ferguson's interwar séance.

I. Early Critics: Discerning the Ghostly Figure of the Author Behind the Text

Lucasta Miller identifies the interwar period, particularly the nineteen twenties, as the historical moment at which 'the Brontës had begun to break loose of their moorings in factual biography and start new lives as characters in plays, films, and novels',¹⁷⁸ but the Brontës were never moored in fact while they inhabited the public imagination. The process by which the sisters were transformed from historical personages to fictional characters began with their second foray into publishing, yet it was not the straightforward result of their having entered the public sphere.

The Brontës' assumption of the ambiguously gendered *noms de plume* Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell was, according to Charlotte's statement in the 1850 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell',

dictated by a sort of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names positively masculine, while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because—without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called "feminine"—we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice; we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward, a flattery, which is not true praise.¹⁷⁹

Ironically, this attempt to obscure and thereby obviate the question of gender in critical assessments of their work resulted in a continual recurrence to the subject in contemporary reviews; in the words of G. H. Lewes, Currer Bell's gender 'was somewhat hotly debated'

¹⁷⁸ Miller, p. 152.

¹⁷⁹ Charlotte Brontë, 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell', in Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. by Ian Jack (Oxford: OUP, 2008), pp. 319-324 (p. 320).

at this time.¹⁸⁰ Yet, given the controversy engendered by *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in particular, the public's interest in the authors' genders was not merely a response to the ambiguity of their pseudonyms. Charlotte's choice of title, *Jane Eyre, An Autobiography*, and the identification of Currer Bell on the title page as editor rather than author, invited readers to view the novel as not entirely fictional. That some reviewers believed *Jane Eyre* to be quasi-factual is demonstrated by the description of it in an anonymous review of 1847 as 'An autobiography, evidently in part founded on truth and experience, however much afterwards complicated, and coloured up by the editor'.¹⁸¹ All this fostered an intense curiosity about the identities of the three authors, a desire to learn who they were, how they were related, and whether they had actually experienced the shocking and disturbing situations about which they wrote. In the absence of biographical data, readers attempted to detect the genders, characteristics, and personal histories of the Bells through the content of their fiction; they tried to discern the ghostly figures of the authors behind the texts. This in turn led to the creation of the many speculative theories about their lives that represent the embryonic stages of their transformation into characters in works of fiction. It established the way in which the connection between the Brontës' literature and their lives would be conceptualized from the nineteenth century to the interwar period and into the present day.

In a letter of 23 October 1847 to William Smith Williams, literary advisor to Charlotte's publishing firm, Thackeray expressed admiration for *Jane Eyre* along with perplexity at the question of the author's gender, musing 'Who the author can be I can't guess—if a woman she knows her language better than most ladies do, or has had a "classical" education', before ultimately determining that 'It is a womans [*sic*] writing, but

¹⁸⁰ G. H. Lewes, 'Shirley: a Tale', *Edinburgh Review*, January 1850, pp. 153-173, p. 158.

¹⁸¹ Anonymous, 'Jane Eyre: an Autobiography', *New Monthly Magazine and Humorist*, November 1847, Literary Notices Section, p. 374.

whose?'.¹⁸² In contrast, the anonymous reviewer of the *Era* confidently asserts 'It is no woman's writing', explaining that, 'Although ladies have written histories, and travels, and warlike novels, to say nothing of books upon the different arts and sciences, no woman *could have* penned the "Autobiography of Jane Eyre"'.¹⁸³ Disagreement about the sex of Currer Bell quickly gave place to moralistic discussions of what was and was not suitable material for treatment by a lady novelist. The anonymous author of the April 1848 review of *Jane Eyre* in the *Christian Remembrancer* concedes that, although the novelist is a woman,

we cannot wonder that the hypothesis of a male author should have been started [...] For a book more unfeminine, both in its excellences and defects, it would be hard to find in the annals of female authorship. Throughout there is a masculine power, breadth and shrewdness, combined with masculine hardness, coarseness, and freedom of expression.¹⁸⁴

Yet, the reviewer posits, these unseemly aspects of the novel are surely the product of a life of adversity, for

If the authoress has not been, like her heroine, an oppressed orphan, a starved and bullied charity-school girl, and a despised and slighted governess (and the intensity of feeling which she shows in speaking of the wrongs of this last class seems to prove that they have been her own), at all events we fear she is one to whom the world has not been kind.¹⁸⁵

This attempt to explain the novelist's perceived coarseness was at least kindlier than Elizabeth Rigby's now infamous claim, in the *Quarterly Review*, that Jane's vulgarity of mind and alternating forwardness and coyness with Rochester meant that the novel could

¹⁸² William Makepeace Thackeray, 'Thackeray, from a letter', in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Miriam Allott (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 70.

¹⁸³ Anonymous, 'Jane Eyre: An Autobiography. Edited by Currier Bell. 3 Vols. Smith and Elder, Cornhill.', *Era*, 14 November 1847, Arts and Entertainment section, p. 9.

¹⁸⁴ Anonymous, 'Jane Eyre: an Autobiography. By Currer Bell. Second Edition. Smith, Elder and Co., Cornhill.', *Christian Remembrancer*, April 1848, section Art. IV., pp. 396-409, p. 396.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 397.

only have been written by an unconventional or disreputable woman, ‘one who has, for some sufficient reason, long forfeited the society of her own sex’.¹⁸⁶

The appearance of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* intensified public interest in the identity of Currer Bell and led a number of reviewers to assert that the three Bells were really one author publishing ‘under sundry disguises’.¹⁸⁷ This misconception was exacerbated by Thomas Cautley Newby, Emily’s and Anne’s publisher; Charlotte believed that he deliberately encouraged confusion as to the identities of the authors by conflating their works in advertisements in order to promote sales. Yet, the prevalence of this belief in the single authorship of the novels did not prevent other reviewers from treating Ellis and Acton as separate entities and subjecting them to the same manner of imaginative biographical speculation. Prefiguring the interwar psychobiographies that would create psychological studies of the Brontës based on readings of their novels, G. W. Peck performs a psychological evaluation of Ellis Bell based on the content of *Wuthering Heights*. In his review, he imagines Ellis as a young man from rural, northern England, who affects coarseness in his writing and interactions as retaliation for his exclusion from better circles of society. ‘It is evident’, Peck writes,

that the author has suffered, not disappointment in love, but some great mortification of pride. Possibly his position in society has given him manners that have prevented him from associating with those among whom he feels he has intellect enough to be classed, and he is thus in reality the misanthropist he claims to be.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Anonymous, ‘*Vanity Fair; a Novel without a Hero*’, *Quarterly Review*, December 1848, section Art. V.-1., pp. 153-185, p. 176.

¹⁸⁷ Anonymous, ‘Currer Bell’, *Palladium*, September 1850, pp. 161-175, p. 164. The inference that the Bells’ novels were the products of one author also appears in the anonymous review ‘Our Library Table’, *Athenaeum*, 25 December 1847, pp. 1324-1325. It is suggested that Ellis and Acton Bell are one author in the anonymous review, ‘*Wuthering Heights*’, *New Monthly Magazine and Humorist*, January 1848, Literary Notices section, p. 140. Charlotte felt the need to counter the claim in the ‘Note to the Third Edition’ of *Jane Eyre*, explaining ‘my claim to the title of novelist rests on this one work alone. If, therefore, the authorship of other works of fiction has been attributed to me, an honour is awarded where it is not merited; and consequently, denied where it is justly due’. Charlotte Brontë, ‘Note to the Third Edition of *Jane Eyre*’, in *Jane Eyre*, ed. by Margaret Smith (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p. 6.

¹⁸⁸ G. W. Peck, ‘*Wuthering Heights*’, *American Review*, 6 June 1848, p. 572.

A reviewer of *Agnes Grey* puts forth the amusing suggestion that Acton Bell seduced a governess in order to extract material for a novel, explaining:

We do not actually assert that the author must have been a governess himself, to describe as he does the minute torments and incessant tediums of her life, but he must have bribed some governess very largely, either with love or money, to reveal to him the secrets of her prison-house.¹⁸⁹

Another reviewer, after weighing the so-called masculine against the feminine elements of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, determines that

there is a bold coarseness, a reckless freedom of language, and an apparent familiarity with the sayings and doings of the worst style of *fast* men, in their worst moments, which would induce us to believe it impossible that a woman could have written it. A possible solution of the enigma is, that it may be the production of an authoress assisted by her husband, or some other *male* friend: if this be not the case, we would rather decide on the whole, that it is a man's writing.¹⁹⁰

If Acton was a man, he was presumed to be familiar with, if not a participant in, the kinds of debaucheries depicted in the novel; if a woman, she was presumed to be the consort of such a man, the emphasis created by the italicization of 'male' leaving readers to assume relations of a dubious nature.

In these contemporary reviews, the Bells were imagined as a single author, a collection of brothers and male relations, downtrodden governesses, fallen women, misanthropic rustics, chartists and levelers, heathens, Christians, and even rakes. They were part of a constantly evolving narrative in the English and American press. Though a great many of the suppositions proffered to clear up the mystery of authorship were fictions, they were at least based on their proponents' readings, however faulty, of the authors' texts. Francis Jacox's construction of an imagined dialogue between Currer Bell and her critics, in his 1852 review, represents something different. Jacox writes:

¹⁸⁹ 'From an unsigned review, *Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper*', in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Allott, pp. 227-28, p. 227.

¹⁹⁰ Anonymous, 'The Tenant of Wildfell Hall', *Sharpe's London Magazine*, July 1848, pp. 181-184, p. 184.

“We feel her power,” they say, “though we do not like her.” “*Like* me, forsooth!” we can suppose her to exclaim: “as if I wrote to tickle your palates, or provide matter for your albums, or quotations for your love-letters. Because I write a novel, am I to be herded with your Rosa Matildas? Because I please to write, must I write to please? When you like me, it will be high time for my pen to stop. It is to tell you things you like not, but wholesome for these times, that I use it at all. The true novelist must have something of the seer, and be in advance of the age. Like the romancers of Belgravia and Tyburnia as fast as you please, like the silver-fork school *ad libitum*; but I pray you have *me* excused. If you think me anxious to secure my bad book a place in your good books, you know not what manner of spirit I am of”.¹⁹¹

Unlike other reviewers, Jacox does not attempt to uncover and write the Bells’ history. Instead, he creates what he necessarily knows to be a new work of fiction, inscribing Currer Bell within the fictionalized framework of the real-life debates surrounding the propriety of her writing. By providing her with lines of his own composition, Jacox performs an act of ventriloquism, allowing his voice and his own opinions about Currer Bell’s personality and the manner in which she regards her critics to emanate from his fictional construction of her. He transforms the autonomous author Currer Bell into the ‘automaton’ that Jane Eyre refused to become.¹⁹² Unmooring the author from her factual utterances, her novels, prefaces, and letters, Jacox creates a fictionalized portrayal that prefigures the biographical fictions of the twentieth century.

The stories invented by Jacox and other critics remain distinct from, despite their connections with, both the proto-fictionalizations of the nineteenth century and the fictionalizations of the twentieth century; they were created in the absence of biographical knowledge about the family, and were attempts at uncovering the lives of the Bells rather than recreating the lives or imagining the afterlives of the Brontës. However, the atmosphere of speculation surrounding the authors’ lives, to which these reviews strongly

¹⁹¹ Francis Jacox, ‘Female novelists (No. III): “Currer Bell”’, *New Monthly Magazine and Humorist*, July 1852, pp. 295-305, p. 296.

¹⁹² Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. by Margaret Smith (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p. 253. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

contributed, was an essential component in the process of fictionalization. Charlotte's identity gradually became known after the deaths of her siblings and the publication of *Shirley*,¹⁹³ and during her 1849 visit to London, she revealed herself to Harriet Martineau as the author Currer Bell. By doing so, Charlotte necessarily exposed herself to the gendered criticism of those who felt *Jane Eyre* was coarse and unfeminine. In her effort to correct the erroneous and socially damaging assumptions about her own and her sisters' identities, and in the performance of what she called her 'sacred duty to wipe the dust off their gravestones, and leave their dear names free from soil',¹⁹⁴ Charlotte explained and excused her sisters' novels in ways that publically forged the already assumed connections between their lives and fiction. This laid the foundation for Gaskell's portrayal of the family in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, arguably the most important text in the process of the fictionalization of the Brontë story.

II. Raising the Ghost of a Scandal: Charlotte's Shaping of the Brontë Story

Charlotte vehemently protested when she believed her writing had been judged according to gender conventions rather than according to its quality as literature. Her well-documented anger when Thackeray publically identified her as Currer Bell, during a dinner party at his home,¹⁹⁵ and as Jane Eyre, during one of his London lectures on humour,¹⁹⁶ was a natural response, given her intense and habitual shyness among strangers and her dread of notoriety. Yet, it was also an expression of her dogged determination to keep her private life separate from her authorial identity and the literature she produced. Charlotte wanted her novels to be, like those of her male counterparts, judged on other criteria than gender normativity. She also wanted privacy in order to avoid being targeted for personal

¹⁹³ Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1994; repr. London: Phoenix, 1999), p. 610.

¹⁹⁴ Charlotte Brontë, 'Biographical Notice', p. 324.

¹⁹⁵ Barker, p. 643.

¹⁹⁶ Barker, p. 675.

censure by those who thought her writing unwomanly. She was furious when G. H. Lewes not only exposed to the world, but judged her writing on the basis of such personal information as her gender, her father's occupation, her geographical location, and even her childlessness in his 1850 review of *Shirley* in the *Edinburgh Review*.¹⁹⁷ It is, on the surface, all the more surprising, then, that Charlotte would insist that her sisters' novels (although not her own) were explainable and understandable only in relation to the circumstances of their lives.

In 1850, a second edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* was published, to which Charlotte contributed three biographical statements about her sisters: the 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell', the 'Editor's Preface to the New Edition of *Wuthering Heights*', and the prefatory note to 'Selections from Poems by Ellis Bell'. Throughout these documents, Charlotte emphasizes her own and her sisters' geographical and social isolation from well-educated, well-bred society, and, in the first two documents, makes it the excuse for their collective ignorance of having violated the standards of propriety when they wrote their novels. However, Charlotte all but allows herself to be eclipsed, refraining even from mentioning her first novel, *The Professor*, by name. She identifies the unacceptable elements of her sisters' works as the records of what they had been made to witness, while carefully avoiding any mention of the biographical origins of her own novels.

Charlotte describes *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, with its depiction of alcoholism, domestic violence, and adultery, as 'an entire mistake', and locates its origins in Anne's damaging experience of watching the degeneration of someone close to her. According to Charlotte, Anne

¹⁹⁷ Barker, pp. 612-614.

had, in the course of her life, been called on to contemplate, near at hand and for a long time, the terrible effects of talents misused and faculties abused; hers was naturally a sensitive, reserved, and dejected nature; what she saw sank very deeply into her mind; it did her harm. She brooded over it till she believed it to be a duty to reproduce every detail (of course with fictitious characters, incidents, and situations) as a warning to others.¹⁹⁸

She excuses the violent content of *Wuthering Heights* in a similar way. Although Emily had no ‘intercourse’ with the rough inhabitants of Haworth, she somehow heard the local gossip. In her ignorance of the wider world and polite society, she mistook their brutal behaviour for a reflection of the realities of life:

it ensued that what her mind had gathered of the real concerning them, was too exclusively confined to those tragic and terrible traits of which, in listening to the secret annals of every rude vicinage, the memory is sometimes compelled to receive the impress. Her imagination, which was a spirit more sombre than sunny, more powerful than sportive, found in such traits material whence it wrought creations like Heathcliff, like Earnshaw, like Catherine. Having formed these beings, she did not know what she had done.¹⁹⁹

The decision, if it could be called such, to record their limited and grotesque observations of life was represented by Charlotte in the light of an unfortunate mistake. Anne’s novel reflected a misguided attempt at moral instruction, and Emily’s novel contained the records of the violent local gossip of which her passive mind was ‘compelled to receive the impress’. In this way, Charlotte was able to exonerate her sisters while also reaping the benefits of the defense that they were ignorant and isolated, and all without having to make the concession of revealing much of her own life or anything about the genesis of her novels to a public who assumed her work was autobiographical.

Yet, if Charlotte insisted that her sisters did not invent what was deemed unacceptable in their fiction, she did not claim that they simply appropriated autobiographical material and inserted it into their novels without imaginative mediation.

¹⁹⁸ Charlotte Brontë, ‘Biographical Notice’, p. 322.

¹⁹⁹ Charlotte Brontë, ‘Editor’s Preface to the New Edition of *Wuthering Heights*’, in Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. by Ian Jack (Oxford: OUP, 2008), pp. 324-328, p. 326.

Charlotte exploited the redemptive possibilities of revealing the connection between her sisters' lives and literature. Yet, her representations in the 'Biographical Notice' and the 'Editor's Preface' also likely stemmed from her own ambivalence about the relationship between life and art. In her private correspondence, Charlotte expressed her sense of the connection between her life and her fiction in terms that were far from consistent. She admonished Ellen Nussey, in a letter of 16 November 1849, for drawing rigid connections between the fictional characters in *Shirley* and living individuals, explaining:

You are not to suppose any of the characters in *Shirley* intended as literal portraits—it would not suit the rules of Art—nor my own feelings to write in that style—we only suffer Reality to suggest—never to dictate—the heroines are abstractions and the heroes [*sic*] also—qualities I have seen, loved and admired are here and there put in as decorative gems to be preserved in that setting.²⁰⁰

However, less than a year later, in a letter of 3 April 1850 to William Smith Williams, Charlotte erases the boundary between life and literature. She not only refers to one of her father's curates as the fictional 'Mr. Donne', but jests about their collective reaction to being satirized: 'the very Curates—poor fellows! shew no resentment; each characteristically finds solace for his own wounds in crowing over his brethren'.²⁰¹

One explanation for Charlotte's contradictory statements is that her letters were addressed to two different audiences: one, a provincial female friend, and the other, a professional male employed in her publisher's firm. Gaskell reports that in girlhood, Charlotte cautioned Ellen against reading literature that she herself enjoyed, advising her to avoid 'the Don Juan, perhaps the Cain, of Byron, though the latter is a magnificent poem' (99); what Charlotte deemed appropriate for herself to read, she clearly deemed less appropriate for someone of Ellen's sensibility. Charlotte also initially kept from Ellen the secret of her authorship, even after Ellen confronted her about it, and despite having told

²⁰⁰ *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Margaret Smith, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), II, p. 285.

²⁰¹ *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, p. 376.

Mary Taylor and sent her a copy of *Jane Eyre*.²⁰² It appears that Charlotte was more cautious about the way in which she discussed her authorship with Ellen. She avoids the flippancy with which she admitted to satirizing the curates to Williams, and instead staunchly maintains that her inclusion of biographical detail was limited to the reproduction of the qualities she most admired in the people she knew, a claim that would perhaps have been more comforting to Ellen than the truth.

Perhaps another, less situationally-dependent reason for Charlotte's ambivalence about the extent to which she drew on her experiences and the people around her for the material of her fiction can be attributed to the influence that *Fraser's Magazine* had on her development as an author. The Brontë family subscribed to *Fraser's* in 1832 and, according to Carol Bock, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne modeled their dealings with publishers on the advice that *Fraser's* dispensed to young, aspiring authors. According to Bock, *Fraser's* frequently alluded to the importance of 'coming forward' as a new author, and presenting one's self to the public. 'The idea of "coming forward"', she explains

reflects the divided nature of the construct of the author in this pivotal decade of the 1830s. It draws on two contradictory notions inherited from the Romantics: first, the idea of the author as an original genius writing in solitude, untainted by the demands of the literary market; and secondly, the idea of the literary text as the verbal embodiment of a unique individual consciousness [...] in this view, writing itself is conceived of as an act of publicizing one's inner being.²⁰³

Charlotte's insistence on her own and her sisters' isolation from society and consequent intellectual independence, and her simultaneous claim that Anne's and Emily's experiences provided the substance of their literature, reflect this duality. Charlotte concludes the 'Biographical Notice' with the claim that

Neither Emily nor Anne was learned; they had no thought of filling their pitchers at the well-spring of other minds; they always wrote from the impulse of nature, the

²⁰² Barker, pp. 552-553.

²⁰³ Carol A. Bock, 'Authorship, the Brontës, and "Fraser's Magazine": "Coming Forward" as an Author in Early Victorian England', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 29 (2001), 241-266 (p. 246).

dictates of intuition, and from such stores of observation as their limited experience had enabled them to amass.²⁰⁴

Her statement exemplifies the uneasy balance struck between attributing to her sisters the Romantic mode of literary composition, that of the lone genius whose writing is the spontaneous outpouring of inspiration, and the mode of the writer who transforms life into art by drawing on her own experiences and observations, and who thereby exposes some of herself when she ‘comes forward’ before the world.

Whatever Charlotte’s intentions may have been, she associated the controversial elements of her sisters’ writing with the circumstances of their lives. In doing so, she set the agenda for Gaskell and subsequent biographers who would approach their novels as thinly disguised autobiographical documents. Yet, this was not all. Charlotte claimed that Emily recorded gossip, reproducing the brutalities and scandals of people she never met. Remarkably, however, she implicitly revealed to the world that Anne’s novel recorded the brutalities and scandals of a member of their own family. Charlotte adamantly maintained that her sisters had virtually no contact with the outside world and only limited contact with the rustic inhabitants of their village. Furthermore, if one considers that Charlotte’s friendship with Harriet Martineau was considered unseemly and was opposed by Miss Wooler, Ellen Nussey, and her own father on the grounds of Martineau’s overt atheism,²⁰⁵ it is inconceivable that, in a work intended to defend her sisters, Charlotte would have claimed that Anne maintained any kind of relationship, ‘near at hand and for a long time’,²⁰⁶ with one who had Huntingdon’s faults, unless it was a family member whom she could not have forsaken. Thus, it was Charlotte who revealed, before Gaskell’s biography made it a central feature of the Brontë story, that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* contained a

²⁰⁴ Charlotte Brontë, ‘Biographical Notice’, p. 324.

²⁰⁵ Barker, p. 709.

²⁰⁶ Charlotte Brontë, ‘Biographical Notice’, p. 322.

veiled fictional portrait, or *roman à clef*, of one troubled and destructive member of the Brontë family.

III. Gaskell, Gloom, and the Ghostly

Charlotte's defense of her sisters, her claim that their works were the records of suffering, would provide the model for Gaskell's portrayal of all their lives as haunted by loneliness, tragedy, scandal, and death. As previously discussed and as I shall have cause to reiterate, Gaskell's biography was essential to the development of Brontë fictional biography. It was the source from which most interwar fictional biographers derived not only the material for their accounts of the family's lives, but their model for explaining the sisters' literary production in terms of autobiography. Yet, the influence of Charlotte's version of the family's history, on Gaskell and other contemporaries, should not be underestimated; it was evident even prior to the publication of *The Life*. Charlotte's emphasis on family tragedy and cryptic reference to Branwell's degeneration reappear, for instance, in Arnold's aforementioned 'Haworth Churchyard' as well as Harriet Martineau's unsigned obituary in the *Daily News*. Despite being generically different, these two commemorative texts essentially tell the same story of mourning and misfortune, and reveal that, within weeks of Charlotte's death, the popular understanding of the topography of the family's lives was already becoming crystallized. Martineau's gothic reference to the family's home as 'a living sepulchre' and ghostly description of Charlotte as one 'who so lately stole as a shadow into the field of contemporary literature', 'henceforth haunting only the memory of the multitudes whose expectation was fixed upon her',²⁰⁷ have obvious affinities with Arnold's ghost poem; and the seeds of both can be traced back to Charlotte's sombre records of suffering and loss.

²⁰⁷ Harriet Martineau, 'Death of Currer Bell', *Daily News*, 6 April 1855, Birth, Death, Marriage Notices, p. 5.

When Gaskell came to write her seminal biography, she, like Martineau, adopted and amplified her subject's rhetorical strategy. Charlotte's statements and Gaskell's *Life* are, in many respects, strikingly similar. Both are public acts of mourning and commemoration. They are the literary equivalents of funerary monuments, and both actually invoke the physical memorials of their dead subjects. Charlotte refers, at the end of the 'Biographical Notice', to her duty to 'wipe the dust off their gravestones',²⁰⁸ while Gaskell transcribes, at the end of the first chapter, the inscriptions on the family's memorial tablets in St Michael's Church, thereby making her heroine's impending death an ever-present feature of the biography. The two sets of texts were also written for broadly the same reasons. Just as Charlotte had attempted years earlier, Gaskell sought to exonerate all the sisters, but Charlotte especially, from accusations of coarseness, immorality, and unwomanliness. The methods she employed, drawing sympathy for the sisters by explaining elements of their fiction as the records of their damaging experiences, were derived from Charlotte's example.

However, the biographer went further than her subject, stressing what she saw as the biographical origins of almost all the Brontë novels. Once again amplifying Charlotte's claims, Gaskell made Branwell's alcoholism and vice the excuse for all three sisters' familiarity with whatever was deemed objectionable in their novels. She transformed Charlotte's brief, veiled reference to her brother's detrimental effect on Anne into a sensational account of family suffering brought about by Branwell's alleged affair with Lydia Robinson: 'Now let us read,' writes Gaskell, 'not merely of the suffering of her guilty accomplice, but of the misery she caused to innocent victims, whose premature deaths may, in part, be laid at her door' (212). It is no wonder Robinson threatened legal

²⁰⁸ Charlotte Brontë, 'Biographical Notice', p. 324.

action for libel. If, however, Gaskell had done this and no more, perhaps *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* would not have been more successful in recuperating the reputations of the Brontë sisters than were Charlotte's biographical notices.²⁰⁹ Gaskell's signal success in achieving her mission to 'make the world (if I am but strong enough in expression,) honour the woman as much as they have admired the writer,'²¹⁰ may be attributable to her transformation of her subject from a once-living author, known principally by her writings, into the heroine of a semi-fictionalized narrative of almost unremitting suffering that would, as Miller astutely observes, 'compete with the [so-called] impure Brontë novels for popular attention and win'.²¹¹

Writing to Harriet Anderson on 15 March 1856, nearly one year after receiving Patrick's commission to write the life of his daughter, Gaskell acknowledged the difficulties she faced in what was, for her, the new challenge of writing a biography: 'I never *did* write a biography, and I don't exactly know how to set about it; you see I have to be accurate and keep to facts; a most difficult thing for a writer of fiction'.²¹² It must be stated that although *The Life* is, and was at the time of its publication, acknowledged to be grossly inaccurate in many respects, Gaskell repeatedly expressed her intention to give the public as truthful an account of her subject's life as was consonant with her recuperative biographical agenda and with the circumstance that Charlotte's father and widower were

²⁰⁹ Lucasta Miller suggests that Charlotte's biographical notices did not have the desired effect (p. 29). She cites G. H. Lewes's delightedly scandalized response to the news that the novels he deemed so coarse were written by a clergyman's daughters, in his review of the new edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* ('Wuthering Heights', *Leader*, 28 December 1850, p. 953). Barker also discusses the 'public appetite for Brontë scandal' that was apparent in many of the obituaries of Charlotte, and which motivated Ellen Nussey and Patrick Brontë to petition Gaskell to write an authorized life (pp. 778-782).

²¹⁰ *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. by J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), p. 345, 31 May 1855.

²¹¹ Miller, p. 63. My insertion.

²¹² *Further Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. by John Chapple & Alan Shelston (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 155.

still living.²¹³ Her recognition of the tension between her desire to be truthful and her simultaneous urge to stray from the facts demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the instability of the perceived boundary between biography and fiction. More significantly, in terms of charting the process of the Brontës' fictionalization, it reflects the intensity of the imaginative sympathy Gaskell had for her subject. Charlotte Brontë fired Gaskell's imagination prior to their first meeting, when she only existed as the elusive Currer Bell; during the course of their brief friendship; and after her death, as Gaskell immersed herself in the task of understanding and reconstructing Charlotte's life.

Gaskell was a participant in the mass speculation surrounding the identity of Currer Bell. Writing to Eliza Fox on 26 November 1849, she asked 'do you know Dr Epps—I think you do—ask him to tell you who wrote Jane Eyre and Shirley'.²¹⁴ Charlotte had applied to Dr Epps, through William Smith Williams and George Smith, for advice about Emily's illness.²¹⁵ It is an indication of the intensity of Gaskell's curiosity that she attempted to intrude on the author's privacy in this way, given that she complained bitterly, less than a year earlier, of those who attempted to discover her own identity as the anonymous author of *Mary Barton* (1848).²¹⁶ In the absence of sufficient information, Gaskell, like the Brontës' early critics, partially satisfied her curiosity by approaching

²¹³ Gaskell risked, and in the case of Robinson incurred, accusations of libel in order to tell what she believed to be the truth about the Brontës' suffering. See letters 314 (pp. 416-418, 2 October [1856]), 326 (pp. 428-431, 26 December [1856]), and 328 (pp. 431-434, 29 December 1856) in *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*. All are addressed to her publisher, and demonstrate Gaskell's awareness of the risks of discussing living people. After publication of the biography, Gaskell complained bitterly to Ellen Nussey: 'I *did* so try to tell the truth, & I believe *now* I hit as near the truth as any one *could* do. And I weighed every line with all my whole power & heart, so that every line should go to it's [*sic*] great purpose of making *her* known & valued, as one who had gone through such a terrible life with a brave & faithful heart'. *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p. 454, 16 June [1857].

²¹⁴ *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p. 90.

²¹⁵ Barker, p. 572.

²¹⁶ Gaskell remarked to her publisher, Edward Chapman, 'I can scarcely yet understand how people can reconcile it to their consciences to try and discover what it is evident the writer wishes to conceal'. *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p. 65, 7 December 1848.

Charlotte's novels as lenses through which to view their author. Writing to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth on 14 May 1850, Gaskell reflected:

I have been so much interested in what she has written. I don't mean merely in the story and mode of narration, wonderful as that is, but in the glimpses one gets of *her*, and her modes of thought, and, all unconsciously to herself, of the way in which [sic] she has suffered. I wonder if she suffers *now*.²¹⁷

What she gleaned from reading Charlotte's fiction, and what further excited her curiosity, was her impression of the author as a woman who had suffered.

Charlotte confirmed and even exceeded Gaskell's expectations when the two met for the first time at the home of the Kay-Shuttleworths, in August 1850. Gaskell was already inclined to be a sympathetic auditor, and her letters recording their meeting reveal that Charlotte spoke about subjects calculated to excite her sympathy, including the loss of all five of her siblings and her mother, her loneliness and isolation in Haworth, and her fears about dying alone. Furthermore, Charlotte's exhibition of intense shyness at the prospect of a visit to the Arnolds at Fox How;²¹⁸ her physical frailty, which Gaskell attributed to semi-starvation at Cowan Bridge;²¹⁹ and what Angus Easson terms her childlike helplessness, 'in its physical and social disadvantages,'²²⁰ all concretized the way in which Gaskell regarded her for the remainder of her life and after her death: as a heroine nobly contending with the tragedies of life.

As Jenny Uglow observes, 'Charlotte Brontë's life already fell easily into the patterns of Gaskell's fiction, with its suffering daughters, profligate son and stern father, and its emphasis on upbringing and environment, female endurance and courage'.²²¹ It is no wonder that while Charlotte lived, Gaskell's imaginative sympathy, coupled with her

²¹⁷ *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p. 116.

²¹⁸ *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p. 127, [c. 25 August 1850].

²¹⁹ *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p. 128, [c. 25 August 1850].

²²⁰ Angus Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 130.

²²¹ Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 399.

philanthropic leanings, led her to treat the author almost as the tragic heroine of one of her own novels, whose life could be forcibly fashioned into a happy ending. Discussing *Villette* with Lady Kay-Shuttleworth, Gaskell again expressed her conviction that Charlotte's fiction was the record of painful experience:

I believe it to be a very correct account of one part of her life; which is very vivid & distinct in her remembrance, [...] in looking back upon it all the passions & suffering, & deep despondency of that old time come back upon her. Some of this notion of mine is founded entirely on imagination; but some of it rests on the fact that many times over I recognized incidents of which she had told me as connected with that visit to Brussels.²²²

It is suggestive of the shape the biography would eventually take that Gaskell proceeded, from Charlotte's incidental revelation that some of the events of the novel corresponded to her life, to imagine a semi-fictional account of the writing process as a painful drawing on the memory of past suffering. She does not, for instance, imagine that Charlotte invented some of the sufferings of Lucy Snowe for artistic purposes. Just as suggestive is the question Gaskell poses: 'What would have been her transcendent grandeur if she had been brought up in a healthy & happy atmosphere'.²²³ As she admitted to herself and her correspondent, no one could know. Yet, that did not prevent Gaskell from assuming the role of benevolent author and, rather haplessly, attempting to rewrite and redress what she saw as her subject's wrongs. For instance, in the hope of securing Charlotte new friends and a healthy climate, Gaskell arranged for her to be invited to several homes; privately, Charlotte complained of being treated like an invalid.²²⁴ Gaskell again benevolently interfered when Charlotte and her father were at odds about Arthur Bell Nicholls's proposal. Under the impression that the only obstacle to their engagement was Nicholls's poverty, she contrived, with the help of Richard Monckton Milnes, for Nicholls to be

²²² *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p. 228-229, 7 April 1853.

²²³ *Ibid.*

²²⁴ Barker, p. 673.

offered a choice of two lucrative curacies;²²⁵ he accepted neither in order to remain near Charlotte. Gaskell's sense of responsibility for Charlotte, her belief in her own ability to control Charlotte's unruly life and rearrange it into the pattern of happiness, is perhaps nowhere more evident than in her lament to John Greenwood after Charlotte's death: 'it is no use regretting what is past; but I do fancy that if I had come, I could have induced her,-- even though they had all felt angry with me at first,--to do what was so absolutely necessary, for her very life'.²²⁶

Despite her best intentions, Gaskell was unable to change the course of Charlotte's life or save her from an early death. Instead, she used her skill as a novelist to create a sanitizing and sanctifying narrative, the convergence of her admiration and affection for Charlotte, her intense pity for her subject's suffering, and her abiding belief that all three of the sisters' novels were the thinly veiled records of their tragic experience. Gaskell's reply to the mercifully unnamed Elizabeth Rigby typifies her use of novelistic skill, throughout the biography, to achieve her recuperative agenda. With a series of rhetorical flourishes, Gaskell creates a vivid portrait of Charlotte as a romantic, misunderstood genius, beset by suffering, bereaved of her dearest companions, and yet humbly and heroically reliant on God:

Who is he that should say of an unknown woman: "She must be one who for some sufficient reason has long forfeited the society of her sex"? Is he one who has led a wild and struggling and isolated life,--seeing few but plain and outspoken Northerners, unskilled in the euphuisms which assist the polite world to skim over the mention of vice? Has he striven through long weeping years to find excuses for the lapse of an only brother; and through daily contact with a poor lost profligate, been compelled into a certain familiarity with the vices that his soul abhors? Has he, through trials, close following in dread march through his household, sweeping the hearthstone bare of life and love, still striven hard for strength to say, "It is the Lord! let Him do what seemeth to Him good"—and sometimes striven in vain, until the kindly Light returned? If through all these dark waters the scornful reviewer have passed clear, refined, free from stain,--with a soul that has never in all its

²²⁵ Barker, pp. 745-746.

²²⁶ *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p. 337, [12 April 1855].

agonies, cried “lama sabachthani,”—still, even then let him pray with the Publican rather than judge with the Pharisee. (282)

Such highly-wrought appeals to the reader’s sympathy, coupled with her delineation of a cast of major and minor characters, minutely described domestic and natural settings, and dramatic account of the development of genius against the backdrop of inexorable and unremitting family tragedy lend a novelistic quality to *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* that has been acknowledged by a number of contemporary critics, including Uglow,²²⁷ Barker,²²⁸ Miller,²²⁹ Easson,²³⁰ and Enid Duthie.²³¹

The semi-fictional quality of *The Life* and the role it played in enshrining the Brontës in the cultural consciousness were not lost on nineteenth-century readers. G. H. Lewes congratulated Gaskell on creating a preeminent narrative with the emotional force to rival a work of fiction, enthusing in his letter of 15 April 1857: ‘fiction has nothing more wild, touching and heart-strengthening to place above it’.²³² Lewes’s pronouncement proved to be farsighted. It invited the question of whether he included the Brontës’ novels in those works of fiction that compared less than favourably to Gaskell’s biography. Forty years later, Mary Augusta Ward would take up this question of whether Gaskell’s narrative had supplanted the Brontës’ novels; she would ask whether the Brontës continued to hold public interest because of the quality of their fiction or because of the semi-fictional quality of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. Ward reproduces, in order to counter, the arguments of those who believed the Brontës’ continued fame was the product of Gaskell’s biography:

Mrs. Gaskell, herself an accomplished novelist, wrote an account of these lonely girls on a Yorkshire moor, struggling with poverty and consumption, developing genius in the very wrestle with death, taking the heaven of fame by violence, and

²²⁷ Uglow, p. 407.

²²⁸ Barker, p. 829.

²²⁹ Miller, p. 67.

²³⁰ Easson, p. 130.

²³¹ Enid L. Duthie, *The Themes of Elizabeth Gaskell* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1980), p. 189.

²³² Uglow, p. 429.

perishing in the effort. She showed them to us oppressed by poverty and by daily contact with a vicious brother, and yet, through it all, remaining dutiful, loving, and virtuous, as the good English public likes them to be: she describes their deaths—the piteous deaths—of two of the sisters in the very moment, or on the very threshold, of success, and, finally, her narrative brought us to the death of Charlotte herself—Charlotte snatched from happiness and from motherhood, after one brief year of married life: and so skillful is the telling, so touching the story, that the great English heart goes out to it.²³³

However, her refutation, that ‘if the Brontës live, their books live also’, for ‘Charlotte Brontë *is* Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe. You cannot think of her apart from what she has written’,²³⁴ is a non sequitur. It testifies to the persuasiveness and endurance of Gaskell’s autobiographical explanation of the sisters’ novels, and shows the extent to which she was responsible for shaping popular understandings of their experience. Moreover, Ward’s belief that Charlotte was the incarnation of her fictional characters betrays the influence of another facet of Gaskell’s transformation of her subject into the heroine of a new work of semi-fiction: her appropriation of the language of Charlotte’s novels to narrate the story of her life.

Gaskell’s recourse to this mode of writing Charlotte’s life can be explained by a variety of factors. Charlotte and Anne admittedly transformed aspects of their experience into the material of their fiction. As Linda Peterson notes, ‘the models for a woman author’s life were few, and none distinguished’;²³⁵ Gaskell was a novice biographer, and in the absence of appropriate models, it is not surprising that she would draw on her long-held belief that the Brontës’ novels were straightforwardly autobiographical. Furthermore, Charlotte’s life was brief. It was, with the exception of a few visits to London, played out in the domestic rather than the public sphere, and this, combined with the recentness of her

²³³ Mrs Humphry Ward, ‘Introduction’, in *Jane Eyre* (New York and London: Harper Brothers, 1899), pp. ix-xxx (p. x-xi).

²³⁴ Ward, p. x.

²³⁵ Linda H. Peterson, ‘Elizabeth Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*, ed. by Jill L. Matus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 59-74 (p. 59).

death and the fact that she was survived by her father, widower, and friends, meant that the already scant materials from which Gaskell could fashion her biography were further limited. Patrick astutely acknowledged the implications of these circumstances in a letter of 23 January 1856:

Mr Nicholls, and I often think of what you <so> have so obligingly <undertaken> enter'd on, of what the public, will expect from you, on whatever subject you may write; and of the few facts, and incidents, you have of a biographical nature,--we so frequently talk over, and meditate on these things, that we are forced at last, to solve the difficulty, by saying that you must draw largely on the resources of your own mind—My Daughter had that to do, in no small degree, in the works which she gave to the world--...I often think that if you would write a running critique on her works, as well as her life—it would be highly popular, and render your task easier, by an accession of subject matter—. ²³⁶

Patrick's statement is significant for several reasons. Firstly, he anticipated the semi-fictional form the biography would likely take, associating the process by which Gaskell might flesh out her material with the inventive process by which Charlotte wrote her fiction. Secondly, he suggested that Gaskell write a critique of Charlotte's novels in order to minimize the need for imaginative invention; it was not the first time he made this request.

When Patrick invited Gaskell to write the biography, he asked her to include a critical commentary on Charlotte's novels.²³⁷ George Smith, who intended to publish *The Professor* immediately after the publication of *The Life*, also asked for a critique of that novel. Gaskell, however, was deeply ambivalent about the moral and aesthetic merits of the Brontës' novels. She states, for instance, in *The Life*, that she 'disliked Lucy Snowe' (412); admitted to Anne Shaen, in regard to *Jane Eyre*, 'I don't know if I like or dislike it. I take the opposite side to the person I am talking with always in order to hear some

²³⁶ Barker, pp. 786-787.

²³⁷ John Lock and Canon W. T. Dixon, *A Man of Sorrow: The Life, Letters and Times of the Rev. Patrick Brontë 1777-1861* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1965), p. 493.

convincing arguments to clear up my opinions',²³⁸ and informed Lady Kay-Shuttleworth that she 'disliked a good deal of the plot of Shirley'.²³⁹ Gaskell similarly refused to write the appreciation of *The Professor* because of her knowledge of its autobiographical origins in Charlotte's intense emotional attachment to Monsieur Heger, her married literary instructor. She even refused to edit the novel on the grounds that it could jeopardize her own reputation, explaining to Smith: 'I could not undertake the editing (which would to a certain degree seem like my sanctioning it,) after receiving M. Hègers confidence, & hearing her letter if, as I fear,--it relates to him'.²⁴⁰ It is unsurprising that she refused, given her intention to honour her deceased friend. Yet, Gaskell did not marginalize Charlotte's authorship, as Miller and other critics have accused her of doing.²⁴¹

Paradoxically, Gaskell's uneasiness about the propriety of Charlotte's novels resulted in a strategy of representation that kept her subject's fiction always to the fore. Under the impression that Charlotte's novels were the records of personal tragedy, and no doubt aware of the redemptive possibilities of revealing this to the public, Gaskell appropriated the language of various passages in her subject's novels for the purpose of describing people Charlotte knew and events she had witnessed. In this way, Gaskell was able to make it appear as though Charlotte based her fictional characters on people she knew and events she experienced, whereas in actuality, it was Gaskell who based her understanding and characterization of these individuals on her reading of Charlotte's fiction. The influence of this way of viewing the Brontës' lives as inseparable from their fiction can be seen in Ward's confused sense of the interchangeability of Charlotte and her fictional heroines, and it set the precedent for those works of interwar fiction that allowed

²³⁸ *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p. 57, ?24 April 1848.

²³⁹ *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p. 116, 14 May 1850.

²⁴⁰ *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p. 401.

²⁴¹ Miller, p. 99.

the content and language of the Brontës' novels to determine the contours of their portrayal of the family's lives. Gaskell's retroactive grounding of Charlotte's life in her literature ultimately had the effect of transforming Charlotte from the author into the heroine of each of her novels.

An important example of Gaskell's use of Charlotte's fiction to narrate her life, and of the subsequent conflation of the two, occurs in her discussion of Charlotte's experience at the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge. In this instance, Gaskell is able to garner sympathy for her subject by making Jane's sufferings Charlotte's, while at the same time defending her against the controversy that erupted when readers recognized in Lowood a fictionalized portrait of the Clergy Daughters' School. On the surface, Gaskell is cautious about endorsing Charlotte's portrayal of the institution, beginning her account with the noncommittal statement: 'because the evidence relating to it on each side is so conflicting [...] it seems almost impossible to arrive at the truth' (51). However, her assertions that 'Helen Burns is as exact a transcript of Maria Brontë as Charlotte's wonderful power of reproducing character could give'; that, like Helen Burns, Maria 'had faults so annoying that she was in constant disgrace with her teachers, and an object of merciless dislike to one of them, who is depicted as "Miss Scatcherd" in "Jane Eyre,"'; and that 'Not a word of that part of "Jane Eyre" but is a literal repetition of scenes between the pupil and the teacher' (56), belie any pretense of impartiality.

In addition to these more direct claims to the effect that Jane's experience at Lowood was a reflection of Charlotte's experience at Cowan Bridge, Gaskell also subsumed the language of Charlotte's narrative within her own authorial voice. In her capacity as the authorized biographer, chosen by Charlotte's survivors to write the story of her life, Gaskell (at least initially, before the lawsuits were threatened) enjoyed a certain

degree of credibility. She was thus able to subtly corroborate Charlotte's fictionalized portrayal by making it the substance of her own record of her subject's life. Gaskell's description of the food at Cowan Bridge, for instance, closely echoes Charlotte's description of mealtimes at Lowood. Her account of one particularly unwelcome dinner, 'a kind of pie, or mixture of potatoes and meat [...] which was made of all the fragments accumulated during the week' and which, comprising 'Scraps of meat from a dirty and disorderly larder, could never be very appetizing' (54-55), appropriates the language of Jane's description of the same meal: 'I found the mess to consist of indifferent potatoes and strange shreds of rusty meat, mixed and cooked together [...] I ate what I could, and wondered within myself whether every day's fare would be like this' (51). Gaskell claims that

girls, who were schoolfellows with the Brontës, during the reign of the cook of whom I am speaking, tell me that the house seemed to be pervaded, morning, noon, and night, by the odour of rancid fat that steamed out of the oven in which much of their food was prepared. (54)

Here, her language mirrors another passage in *Jane Eyre*: 'The odour which now filled the refectory was scarcely more appetizing than that which had regaled our nostrils at breakfast: the dinner was served in two huge tin-plated vessels, whence rose a strong steam redolent of rancid fat' (51). Finally, although the wording is not quite so similar, Gaskell's account of Carus Wilson's response to the teachers' complaints about the quality of food is clearly derived from Brocklehurst's remonstrance against Miss Temple's substitution of bread and cheese for the uneatable burnt porridge. Gaskell relates that:

when he heard of them, his reply was to the effect that the children were to be trained up to regard higher things than dainty pampering of the appetite, and (apparently unconscious of the fact, that daily loathing and rejection of food is sure to undermine the health) he lectured them on the sin of caring over-much for carnal things. (55)

He is clearly of a mind with the fictional Brocklehurst, who insists:

Should any little accidental disappointment of the appetite occur, such as the spoiling of a meal, the under or the over dressing of a dish, the incident ought not to be neutralized by replacing with something more delicate the comfort lost, thus pampering the body and obviating the aim of this institution; it ought to be improved to the spiritual edification of the pupils, by encouraging them to evince fortitude under the temporary privation. (63)

In this way, Gaskell not only demonstrates her theory that Charlotte's fiction was based on her tragic life, but actually transforms Charlotte into the suffering Jane and Maria into the saintly Helen Burns.

Perhaps the most striking instance of this transformation of the Brontës into the characters of their fiction occurs in a description of cruelty inflicted on Maria. Although there is no literary parallel in *Jane Eyre*, Gaskell still uses the names of its characters to refer to the real-life participants:

poor Maria moaned out that she was so ill, so very ill, she wished she might stop in bed; and some of the girls urged her to do so, and said they would explain it all to Miss Temple, the superintendent. But Miss Scatterd was close at hand, and her anger would have to be faced before Miss Temple's kind thoughtfulness could interfere; so the sick child began to dress, shivering with cold, as, without leaving her bed, she slowly put on her black worsted stockings over her thin white legs (my informant spoke as if she saw it yet, and her whole face flushed out undying indignation). Just then Miss Scatterd issued from her room, and, without asking for a word of explanation from the sick and frightened girl, she took her by the arm, on the side to which the blister had been applied, and by one vigorous movement whirled her out into the middle of the floor, abusing her all the time for dirty and untidy habits. (56-57)

In this way, Gaskell forcefully, but cautiously, conveys the opinion that Charlotte's scathing portrayals of the school, its teachers, and especially William Carus Wilson are the records of the intense physical and emotional suffering that she and her sisters withstood while at Cowan Bridge, and not a fabrication or even an augmentation of the truth for the purposes of adding interest to her narrative. She blurs the perceived boundaries between fiction and life-writing by clothing what was allegedly an event in Maria's history in the

language of *Jane Eyre*, thereby simultaneously inscribing the Brontës in their own works of fiction and creating a new scene in that novel. She fuses Charlotte's fiction to her life.

The influence of Gaskell's novel-like narrative of family tragedy and her leveling of the distinction between the Brontës' lives and literature, between what they were and what they created, is apparent in the fictionalizations of the interwar period and the proto-fictionalizations of the nineteenth century. However, Gaskell effected the semi-fictionalization of the family in a third way. She infused her biography, a purportedly factual text, with the supernatural. It is this facet of *The Life* that appears to be responsible for the gradual association of the Brontës with the ghostly in general, and for the specifically spectral quality of the proto-fictionalizations of the nineteenth century. There were, of course, aspects of the family's writing and experience that invited this association with death and ghostliness. Charlotte included sham hauntings in *Jane Eyre*, with Jane's misperception of a visitation from Uncle Reed in the red room, and in *Villette*, with the appearance of Alfred de Hamal dressed as a ghostly nun. The ghostly appearances of Cathy and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, however, are more ambiguous. While they are never verified as the returned spirits of the dead, they are never discounted as figments of the imagination. In one sense, *Wuthering Heights* is a novel about hauntings: Cathy is haunted by her estrangement from Heathcliff; Heathcliff is haunted by the memory of the injuries done to him as a child, by his desire for revenge, and by the intensity of his longing for Cathy; and Nelly Dean, who narrates most of the story, is haunted by the brutality that took place between the Earnshaws and the Lintons. The Brontës' personal circumstances, the fact that their home overlooked a graveyard and that Patrick outlived his wife and all six of his children, also contributed to the sense that, apart from literary production, the defining features of their lives were death and mourning. Gaskell's

inclusion of several ghost stories in *The Life*, however, seems to be as much a reflection of her own enduring interest in the genre as a reflection of the Brontës' circumstances.

Gaskell was a writer of ghost stories, some of which appear to have been inspired by the Brontës and their fiction. Miriam Allott argues that the ghostly child in Gaskell's 'The Old Nurse's Story', published in the 1852 Christmas number of *Household Words*, was influenced by the ghostly Catherine of Lockwood's dream,²⁴² and while collecting material for *The Life*, Gaskell began another supernatural story, 'The Poor Clare', which, Uglow argues, 'seized on something hidden in the life Elizabeth was planning to write. It is the story of a gentle and pious girl, Lucy, haunted by a sexual double'.²⁴³

In the early chapters of the biography that delineate the environment and customs of Haworth and the West Riding, Gaskell repeats several stories of ghosts and the supernatural. She relates the tale of a young girl who was seduced and impregnated by her brother-in-law, mistreated by her father, and forced into a marriage so miserable that she 'died while even yet a child':

The tale went, that passers along the high-road at night time saw the mother and young daughter walking in the garden, weeping, long after the household were gone to bed. Nay, more; it was whispered that they walked and wept there still, when Miss Brontë told me the tale—though both had long mouldered in their graves. (45)

Although she initially discounts it as 'a specimen of the wild stories afloat in an isolated village' (44), Gaskell concludes the tale with a statement that seems to affirm or at least consider the possibility of its truthfulness: 'The strong feeling of the country-side still holds the descendants of this family as accursed. They fail in business, or they fail in health' (45). Similarly, Gaskell embeds her supernatural tales of Hammond Roberson's communion with 'black demons' after tracking down the Luddites (86), and of Captain

²⁴² Miriam Allott, 'Mrs. Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story": A Link Between "Wuthering Heights" and "The Turn of the Screw"', *Notes and Queries*, 8 (1961), 101-102.

²⁴³ Uglow, p. 399.

Batt's postmortem appearance at Oakwell Hall, in a series of facts about boarding schools and woollen mills. All of this fosters the sense that the Brontës existed in an eerie, semi-wild village that was dislocated from the more civilized parts of England and where the supernatural existed side by side with the more prosaic occurrences of life. Yet, in one remarkable passage, Gaskell supernaturalizes the Brontës themselves. She employs all three of her fictionalizing techniques at once to create a ghost narrative about the Brontë family that emphasized their suffering and, at the same time, explained and excused one particularly sexually-charged scene in *Jane Eyre*. Describing Charlotte's agonizing loneliness and longing for her dead sisters, Gaskell explains:

All the grim superstitions of the North had been implanted in her during her childhood by the servants, who believed in them. They recurred to her now,--with no shrinking from the spirits of the Dead, but with such an intense longing once more to stand face to face with the souls of her sisters, as no one but she could have felt. It seemed as if the very strength of her yearning should have compelled them to appear. On windy nights, cries, and sobs, and wailings seemed to go round the house, as of the dearly-beloved striving to force their way to her. Some one conversing with her once objected, in my presence, to that part of "Jane Eyre" in which she hears Rochester's voice crying out to her in a great crisis of her life, he being many, many miles distant at the time. I do not know what incident was in Miss Brontë's recollection when she replied, in a low voice, drawing in her breath, "But it is a true thing; it really happened." (318-319)

Jane Eyre was, of course, written and published prior to the deaths of Emily and Anne, but by prefacing her reference to that text with a tragic description of Charlotte's bereavement, Gaskell once again retroactively and anachronistically locates the origins of Charlotte's fiction in the events of her life. Jane hears Rochester's disembodied voice at a moment of crisis, when she is on the brink of accepting St John Rivers's offer of a loveless marriage and a life of self-abnegation and Christian service in India; the voice, which has an almost orgasmically physical effect on Jane, resolves her uncertainty and enables her to reject his offer. The emotional and sexual bond between Jane and the man who tried to trick her into a bigamous marriage is thus sanitized by Gaskell. It becomes, instead, a fictional

representation of Charlotte's communication with the spirits of her beloved sisters, of a bond of sisterly love that is strong enough to transcend the barrier between the living and the dead. The air of gloom and ghostliness that Gaskell cultivates throughout the biography has the effect of making the supernatural and macabre a part of the topography of the family's lives, as much a fact of their existence as the mills and moors.

IV. 'There are three ghosts upon the stair!': On the Threshold of Fictional Biography

There are several factors, apart from the influence of Gaskell's biography, that likely favoured the emergence of the ghostly Brontë proto-fictionalizations, as opposed to standard fictional biography, during the nineteenth century. Arnold wrote the first Brontë ghost poem as an act of commemoration prior to the publication of *The Life*. Many of his Elegiac Poems, in the 1890 edition of *Poetical Works*, feature references or addresses to the ghosts of his subjects, so it is not unreasonable to suppose that this was not an uncommon way to imagine encounters with the legacy of dead authors, or that other poets might have followed his example in writing their own ghostly commemorations of the Brontës.²⁴⁴ It is also possible that authors who wished to explore the family through the medium of fiction chose to depict them as spectral presences or to disguise their fictionalizations, as in the cases of Mew, Sinclair, Chekhov, and James, because there were individuals still living who knew the Brontës intimately. Patrick Brontë lived until 1861 and Arthur Bell Nicholls lived until 1906, eight years after the publication of *The Turn of the Screw*. Unlike Patrick, who complied with requests for samples of his daughter's handwriting by 'cutting up her letters into small squares' and mailing them to Brontë

²⁴⁴ Although she does not discuss the nineteenth-century association of the Brontës with death and the ghostly, for a fuller discussion of nineteenth-century memorial poetry, the erection of gravestones and enactment of funerary ritual, and the negotiation of the competing claims of the poet's survivors and readers, see Samantha Matthews's *Poetical Remains: Poets' Graves, Bodies, and Books in the Nineteenth Century* (2004).

enthusiasts,²⁴⁵ Nicholls demonstrated a profound desire to protect his wife's privacy. While Charlotte was still alive, he insisted that Ellen Nussey burn her letters after reading them.²⁴⁶ After her death, he was deeply opposed to the idea of a biography, and throughout the writing process, Gaskell complained about what she saw as his interference. He initially refused to part with the Richmond portrait, and was reluctant to part with other manuscripts. He was also extremely chagrined to find that Charlotte's letters would be printed. In an angry letter to George Smith, he described the biography as 'a source of pain and annoyance to me', 'a proceeding utterly repugnant to my feelings', and 'little short of desecration'.²⁴⁷ An act of fictionalizing Charlotte, of giving her lines to speak and attempting to explore those aspects of her life that were not accounted for, or that were deemed too sensitive to discuss, in standard biography, while Nicholls and others who had known her were still alive might well have been viewed as an unconscionable violation of privacy and an act disrespectful to the memory of the dead. At the same time, those who wished to write a standard biography of the family may have felt the market was somewhat crowded. Three important biographies, Gaskell's *Life*, Thomas Wemyss Reid's *Charlotte Brontë: A Monograph* (1877), and Clement Shorter's *Charlotte Brontë and Her Circle* (1896), were published at roughly twenty-year intervals. Shorter's reviewer asserted, and would-be Brontë scholars might have feared, that

we have a book which leaves the next Brontë historian—if another Brontë historian there can ever be, which we take leave to doubt—with scarce as much as a possibility of finding a chance feather with which to decorate his cap.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁵ Miller, p. 110.

²⁴⁶ Anne Taranto, 'Introduction', in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Anne Taranto (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2005), pp. xv-l (p. xl).

²⁴⁷ Barker, p. 795.

²⁴⁸ Anonymous, 'Art III-The Brontë Letters', *Quarterly Review*, 28 (1897), 27-34, p. 29.

The ghost poem or the *roman à clef* provided the space to creatively explore facets of the Brontës' lives, or what had become accepted as facets of their lives in the wake of Gaskell's fable-like biography, without the need to adhere to facts.

However, the influence of Gaskell's biography on the emergence of Brontë proto-fictional biography cannot be overestimated. In the years following the publication of *The Life*, five of the six aforementioned Brontë ghost poems were written or published, and Arnold's elegy, first published shortly after Charlotte's death, underwent a significant revision that intensified the activity and asserted noisiness of his previously silent and passive Brontë ghosts. At the same time the proto-fictionalizations were being written and published, at least two spiritualists claimed to have made contact with the spirit of Charlotte Brontë. In 1872, Harriet Beecher Stowe 'claimed to have managed a two-hour conversation with Charlotte in a gossipy seance, a "weird and Brontëish" chat, she proudly confided to George Eliot, in which Charlotte had given "a most striking analysis" of Emily'.²⁴⁹ Twenty years later, an alleged spirit photograph of Charlotte was printed in Thomas Slaney Wilmot's *Gleams of Light and Glimpses Thro' the Rift* (1893) **[Figure 1]**, and again in *Twenty Photographs of the Risen Dead* (1894); Wilmot explains that 'the touched-up negative, from which this plate was taken, revealed a glorified angel from earth, with messenger Spirits in her train; she gave her name as Charlotte Brontë'.²⁵⁰ This re-imagining of Charlotte as an angelic messenger is clearly derived from the popularization of Gaskell's novelistic account, which cast Charlotte in the light of a Christian heroine who was devoted to her family and her duty, and who, in the face of terrible losses, placed her faith in God. Its legacy can, in turn, be seen in Linton's aforementioned portrayal of Charlotte as a shining spirit, returning to earth to proclaim a

²⁴⁹ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists From Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977), 106.

²⁵⁰ Thomas Slaney Wilmot, *Gleams of Light and Glimpses Thro' the Rift* (London: E. Allen, 1893), p. 285.

message of hope and love. The pervasiveness of the popular association of the Brontës with the ghostly, itself a testament to the influence of Gaskell's novelistic and supernaturalizing account of family suffering, is further indicated in the conclusion drawn by the anonymous reviewer of Shorter's *Charlotte Brontë and Her Circle*. Despite the fact that the work in question was a collection of letters, interspersed with remarkably neutral and objective commentary that avoided sentimental, novelistic, or supernatural touches, the reviewer concluded that:

life is infinitely more interesting than literature, and the picture which the book gives us of Charlotte Brontë fighting with death for the life of her two loved sisters, and with a worse fate than death for the soul of her unhappy and dissolute brother, fascinates and holds us more than all the records of her literary travails and triumphs. The battle is so fierce, the agony and the despair of it are so terrible and so real, that we find it difficult to persuade ourselves that it is all ended, and can readily understand why the spirits of the unhappy dead are believed to return to the scenes of their sorrows and to re-enact the tragedies in which there they bore a part. No imaginative reader of Mr. Shorter's book could visit the Haworth Parsonage without feeling, as he turned the handle of a door which opened into an empty room, some sense of intrusion upon an unseen company,--without fancying that his entrance had been the signal for the sudden dispersion of startled ghosts.²⁵¹

The reviewer's observation, that it is the Brontës' experience of death and suffering that fascinates and kindles the imagination of the reader, and that leads him to imagine, and indeed to fictionalize, the Brontës as still-suffering ghosts, is perceptive. It mirrors the trajectory of Gaskell's own journey from experiencing imaginative sympathy for what she believed to be the unknown author's sufferings, to creating a novelistic, semi-fictionalized narrative of family tragedy, a selectively and artistically shaped story of lives that were defined by loneliness, death, and mourning, and that were punctuated by encounters with the supernatural. The remainder of this chapter discusses Gaskell's legacy in the form of the deployment of the trope of haunting in Brontë proto-fictionalizations. The poetry analysis traces the proto-fictionalizations' gradual approach to fictional biography, as the

²⁵¹ 'Art III.-The Brontë Letters', p. 34.

century progressed, in terms of the transition from the passivity, aloofness, and speechlessness of the ghostly Brontës in the earlier poems, to the acquisition of agency and speech in the later poems. The chapter concludes with a discussion of *The Turn of the Screw* as a proto-fictionalization that owes its existence to and yet attacks the legacy of the semi-fictional *Life of Charlotte Brontë*.

Both Matthew Arnold, in ‘Haworth Churchyard’, and Lionel Pigot Johnson, in ‘Brontë’, exhort the dead Brontës to rest, which implies the poetic construction of an afterlife in which the dead are not merely active but can be reached by the words of the living. However, this appears to be merely a matter of convention, a call for peace and rest to succeed lives that were perceived as overshadowed by tragedy and trauma, and in each poem the Brontës are described as both silent and deaf to human communication. In Johnson’s poem, any noise associated with the Brontës refers to communications made in the past. He describes Emily as one ‘Whose soul conversed with vehement nights’ (10), and although he uses the present tense to announce ‘Your [Charlotte’s and Emily’s] mighty music storms our heart’ (2), this music was ‘blown forth’ long ago (1); it is the reverberation of the music that sounded with the publication of their novels. In their present state, the sisters are ‘Silent and sleeping’ and ultimately unreachable (60). Arnold similarly emphasizes the impassible barrier between the living and dead in terms that evoke a kind of aural obstruction. Charlotte’s ear is ‘earth deafen’d’ (36), an expression Arnold later repeats in order to more fully convey his inability to reach her:

Console we cannot, her ear
Is deaf. Far northward from here,
In a churchyard high ’mid the moors
Of Yorkshire, a little earth
Stops it for ever to praise. (50-54)

Arnold provides yet another proof of his conception of the total separation between the living and the dead when he imagines the sisters' reunion in the afterlife, where they will for the first time 'Hear with delight of thy [Charlotte's] fame!' (87). Despite his repeated direct address to the family, for Arnold, the siblings have traversed 'the path | To the silent country' (68-69), where the sounds of earth and life cannot penetrate. Still, his appended 'Epilogue' demonstrates that, if he did not revise this idea of the impossibility of communication between the dead Brontës and their living readers, he did revise his conception of their silence and restfulness, ultimately pronouncing them 'Unquiet souls!' (10).

In Dickinson's posthumously published 'Charlotte Brontë's Grave', there is a similar emphasis on the muteness attendant on death. However, in this instance, it functions as a comment on Charlotte's post-mortem cultural transformation from a self-determined, communicant author to the silent, passive subject of the communications of others. Dickinson conveys this transformation by employing and reversing the myth of Philomela. Variations of the myth exist, but the basic outline, according to Ovid, is as follows. Philomela was raped by her brother-in-law, Tereus. After threatening to expose him, Tereus imprisoned Philomela and cut out her tongue. Philomela wove the story of her attack into a tapestry, sent it to Procne, and was rescued. In revenge, the sisters killed Tereus's son and fed him to his father. Philomela and Procne fled, pursued by Tereus, and the gods transformed the sisters into a swallow and a nightingale. In some accounts, the speechless Philomela was transformed into the swallow and Procne into the nightingale. However, in Ovid's and most subsequent accounts, it is Philomela who becomes the nightingale; the OED confirms that 'Philomel' has become 'A poetic or literary name for:

the nightingale (in allusion to the myth of the maiden Philomela's transformation into that bird)',²⁵²

Philomela's voice was stolen in life, and only restored through the shedding of her human body and her transformation into a new being: a bird of song. This transformation, involving the loss of humanity and the restoration of what was taken in life, has obvious parallels to popular, compensatory ideas about the afterlife. However, in her poem, Dickinson subverts both the Philomela myth and the notion of the restorative Brontëan afterlife that features in Arnold's and Johnson's poems, where the siblings are encouraged to rest after the trauma of their lives. Instead, she describes the loss of the 'nightingale[']' voice upon her death,²⁵³ when she is transformed from Currer Bell, the author who is known through and for her song, to the silent, lamented, and sung-for corpse of the woman Charlotte Brontë. Dickinson's first stanza imagines her subject's resting place:

All overgrown by cunning moss,
All interspersed with weed,
The little cage of "Currer Bell,"
In quiet Haworth laid. (1-4)

This description of an outdoor grave does not appear to be simply a mistake about where Charlotte was buried, as was the case in Arnold's poem. Dickinson read *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* in late 1857,²⁵⁴ and could not fail to be aware of Charlotte's interment in the family vault at St Michael and All Angels. Rather, it appears to be a symbolic rendering of Charlotte's post-mortem place in the nineteenth-century transatlantic cultural consciousness. The word 'cunning' has several definitions, including the more common

²⁵² 'Philomel, *n.*', *OED*, OUP (2013) <<http://0-www.oed.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/Entry/142466#eid30772614>> [Accessed 1 December 2013].

²⁵³ Emily Dickinson, 'Charlotte Brontë's Grave', *Literature Online* <<http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>> [accessed 8 November 2013] (ln. 12). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

²⁵⁴ Wendy Anne Powers, 'Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson: Parallel Lives on Opposing Shores', *Brontë Studies*, 32 (2007), 145-150 (p. 148).

‘able, skilful, expert, dexterous, clever’,²⁵⁵ but ‘cunning’ can also refer to the steering of a ship.²⁵⁶ The imagery of the overgrowth of moss and weed evokes a sense of the smothering or choking of the ground that surrounds Currer Bell in death. If cunning is taken to imply both ingenuity and purposed steering to bring about some end, then, taken together with the image of the smothering growths surrounding the dead writer, we can perhaps read this stanza as a comment on the way in which the skillful ideological constructions of Charlotte’s life smother and supplant the voice of the writer. The use of the word ‘quiet’ in the final line of the stanza seems to support this interpretation. One wonders if Dickinson had Gaskell’s biography in mind. By the time Charlotte enters heaven, she has been transformed from the singing nightingale to the silent listener, upon whose ‘puzzled ear’ (18) ‘Soft fall the sounds of Eden’ (17).

Francis Adams’s ‘To Emily Brontë’ and George Barlow’s ‘In Memory of Patrick Branwell Brontë, Genius’ seem to represent a turning point within this body of literature. In neither do the Brontës decisively communicate with or receive the communications of the living, yet these texts imply, without confirming, the advent of both. Adams’s poem is a worshipful invocation to Emily. It begins with a prayer of thanks and praise, an acknowledgement of the enduring influence of Emily’s ‘spirit’ on his life,²⁵⁷ and proceeds with a supplication for her continued support as he confronts the possibility of death:

O mine archangel, O my perpetual love
of strength with sweetness, stay, stay with me still!
And let me, if my steps are lending fleet
to that great Peace which I have learned to long for,

²⁵⁵ ‘cunning, *adj.*’, *OED*, OUP (2013) <<http://0-www.oed.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/Entry/45866?isAdvanced=false&result=4&rskey=Tr1DH5&>> [accessed 3 December 2013].

²⁵⁶ ‘cunning, *n.2*’, *OED*, OUP (2013) <<http://0-www.oed.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/Entry/45865?isAdvanced=false&result=3&rskey=Tr1DH5&>> [accessed 3 December 2013].

²⁵⁷ Francis William Lauderdale Adams, ‘To Emily Brontë’ in *Literature Online* <<http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>> [accessed 8 November 2013] (ln. 2). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

even as thou didst—let not my Song’s note fail. (5-9)

Adams suffered from tuberculosis and eventually committed suicide because of it,²⁵⁸ and this poem chiefly reveals Emily’s personal significance to him as a fellow writer and sufferer who was thought to have bravely confronted death. Yet, it importantly demonstrates that Emily was being remembered culturally as one who experienced a mystical yearning for death. It contributes to that popular interwar understanding of Emily as passively suicidal that appears in Ferguson’s *Charlotte Brontë*, Romer Wilson’s 1928 psychobiography, *All Alone: The Life and Private History of Emily Jane Brontë*, and Virginia Moore’s *The Life and Eager Death of Emily Brontë* (1936). While Adams assigns the dead Emily no lines of response, the prayer-like nature of the poem implies that she is construed as a listening, if not a communicant, subject.

In Barlow’s poem, the reverse is true. The ghostly Branwell is not a listening subject, but he communicates a warning to other men:

A poor pale finger-post he seems to stand,
Saying to men that follow in his wake,
[...]
‘One of two courses, brothers, you must take:
Either for emptiness yourself forsake,
Or hold your whole self in tenacious hand.’²⁵⁹

However, the communication made is not Branwell’s own, but Barlow’s. Barlow interprets Branwell’s chief cultural significance to be his function as a warning to other men of the dangers of excess; in much the same way, Charlotte was held up as a model of femininity and virtue in the girls’ didactic biographies of the nineteenth century. Still, Barlow’s assignment of lines, the meaning which his subject ‘seems’ to convey, is clearly prototypical of the later fictional biographies.

²⁵⁸ Meg Tasker, ‘Adams, Francis William Lauderdale (1862-1893)’, *DNB, OUP*, 2004 <<http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/article/114>> [accessed 27 October 2013].

²⁵⁹ George Barlow, ‘In Memory of Patrick Branwell Brontë, Genius’, in *Literature Online* <<http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>> [accessed 8 November 2013] (ln. 9-14).

In her 1897 poem, ‘Brontë’, Harriet Spofford’s description of the process by which the ghostly sisters materialize neatly encapsulates the progression from inaccessibility and mutism to communication that is apparent in this body of poetry as a whole. With each succeeding stanza, the ghosts of Anne and Emily assert their presence more forcefully, and acquire a greater ability to communicate with and manipulate Charlotte, until the barrier between the dead and the living is finally eroded. Anne and Emily begin as ‘Two hovering wavering shapes and pale’ (25), before gaining in distinctness and visibility. The sisters grow in power, and Spofford describes the process of their sinister encroachment on their living sister, increasing Charlotte’s despair and willingness to die as they make their presence more palpably known. They progress from exciting her general sense of their presence:

She feels them stealing nigh and nigher
To take the last flash of the fire,--
Woe to that house of gloom and dearth,
There are two ghosts beside the hearth! (60-63),

to emitting inarticulate sound: ‘Far off soft voices seem to fall, | Soft footsteps falter through the room’ (68-69). They next take control of Charlotte’s body, staying and moving her hand:

The gentle cunning fails her hand,
[...]
The needle poised, the pencil prone,--
Pale fingers moving with her own,-- (73-77)

Spofford’s description strongly evokes the popular, contemporary spiritualist practice of automatic writing, whereby mediums temporarily relinquished control to spirits who guided their hands to reveal spirit messages. Yet, this scriptural haunting is also peculiarly similar to Charlotte’s inscription of Deirdre’s manuscript in Ferguson’s *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*. Still, in contrast to the fictional biographies of the interwar period, the

reader is given no indication of the message conveyed by the soft voices or guided writing. Finally, Anne and Emily take full possession of Charlotte, haunting her from ‘within her heart!’ (90), as well as from without. After this conquest, Anne and Emily essentially function as siren-like figures. Their soft voices increase in strength and clarity, and they lure Charlotte to her death, calling her away from what Spofford views as a life of love and happiness with Arthur Bell Nicholls:

Oh, love was sweet, and life was dear,--
 But, hark! those voices, strong and clear,
 They wail, they call, she must not stay—
 Out, to the open, and away!
 Oh, love past death and death’s despair,
 There are three ghosts upon the stair! (94-99)

Although the sisters’ message is still unclear, although it is still mediated by the description of the author rather than given directly to the reader, their voices are potent and dangerous.

Spofford’s sisters, unlike the aloof, sleepy ghosts of Arnold’s and Johnson’s poems, relentlessly pursue the sister they have left behind. They are no longer mute, as in Arnold’s, Dickinson’s, Johnson’s, and Adams’s poems; in contrast to the seeming communication of Barlow’s spectral Branwell, their ability to speak is incontestable. Similarly, the uncertainty surrounding Emily’s responsiveness in Adams’s poem is entirely absent from Spofford’s portrayal of the sinister, jealous ghosts who haunt Charlotte, increase the burden of her grief, and entice her to follow them in death. Spofford’s poem must be viewed as part of the prehistory of a work like Ferguson’s *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*, in which the dead sisters cause the frightened Mrs Carne to cross herself, and their obscure threat to take Sheila is taken so seriously that the family cut short their Yorkshire holiday and retreat to London with the child. Nicola Humble argues that during the interwar period,

The stress is on the Brontës as gruesome relics: although they are depicted in middlebrow women's fiction with a gossipy familiarity and intimacy, their fascination lies as much in their *distance*—in the gap between their world of damp, graveyards, and repression, and the bright modernity of the years after world war one. Throughout these novels there is a jokey attempt to keep the Brontës in their place, to ward them off, but they keep returning. As such hauntings suggest, the Brontës function for the feminine middlebrow as both inspiration and warning: they serve as a model of the potential of the feminine creative imagination, and the power of intense familial bonds to both license and support it, but also as a grotesque example of the limitations of the domestic environment as a source of women's identities.²⁶⁰

Spofford's poem reveals that the Brontës were viewed in precisely this way at least twenty years before the First World War's perceived severing of the Victorian past from the interwar period's 'bright modernity', and full thirty years before the appearance of Brontë fictional biography. Spofford seems to appropriate the aforementioned passage in *The Life*, in which Gaskell transforms the sexually potent call of Rochester to Jane into Charlotte's encounter with the ghosts of her sisters. While Gaskell's interpretation stresses sisterly love, Spofford conceptualizes the bonds between Charlotte and her family as gruesome and fatal.

The nineteenth-century ghost poetry must be viewed as the precursors to the interwar fictional biographies, and as the progeny of Gaskell's *Life*. They indicate a trajectory along which nonfactual writing about the Brontë family progressed, from the elegiac commemoration of subjects who were figured as passive, silent ghosts, to the frightening supernatural narratives imagining the activities of spirits on the brink of eloquence. Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* is also haunted by the Brontës. Characteristics of the family, incidents from their lives, and passages from their literature have been fused together with the supernatural. In practice, it mirrors what was done by Gaskell in the creation of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. In effect, it reveals the fallacy of

²⁶⁰ Humble, p. 183.

Gaskell's construction, and of subsequent popular understanding, of the family's lives and literary experience. James's threatening ghosts, Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, are silent, like the ghosts of the proto-fictionalizations; but their silence functions, like the silence in Dickinson's poem, as an eloquent reproof. It demonstrates the extent to which the popular understanding of the family's lives, as derived from Gaskell's semi-fictionalized narrative, silenced their authorial voices and displaced them in favour of focusing on the air of supernatural tragedy that had come to surround the family.

James was deeply interested, for many years, in the Brontë family and in conceptualizations of the relationship between their literature and their lives. In a letter of 22 February [1880] to Thomas Sergeant Perry, James recounts the excitement of his meeting with Thomas Wemyss Reid:

There were Wemyss (pronounced Weems) Reid a remarkably nice fellow, editor of the principal paper in the North, the *Leeds Mercury*, and author of that interesting little Monograph on Charlotte Brontë published a year or two ago. He told me some very curious unpublished facts about the Brontë family; and offered some day to lend me some 750 letters of Charlotte, addressed to her friend E. N. and containing the whole history of her life. A terrific offer!!²⁶¹

The letter reveals James to have been a reader of contemporary Brontë biographies. But it also reveals his excitement at the prospect of handling the relics of the family and being privy to their secrets. It reveals him to have shared, to some extent, in that widespread Brontë enthusiasm of his contemporaries, in England and America, which, in its more intense forms, manifested throughout the latter half of the century in pilgrimages to Haworth and the collecting of such physical remains as writing samples and items once owned by the Brontës.²⁶²

²⁶¹ *Henry James Letters*, ed. by Leon Edel, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1975), II, p. 275.

²⁶² For an account of the nineteenth-century development of the tourist trade in Haworth, see Miller, pp. 108-112.

James also read and reviewed Shorter's *Charlotte Brontë and Her Circle*, which featured a collection of Charlotte's previously unpublished letters, accompanied by letters from her correspondents and Shorter's commentary. James pronounced the work

so far from being a book to dismiss in a phrase that its fullness of suggestion bore, to my perception, on the very fact that the decisive word about the unhappy family it commemorates has still to be written. It gives us afresh the image of how much their unhappiness was the making of their fame. In the presence of that sore stress on the one hand, and of a sounder measure, on the other, than we had as yet been able to take of some matters that it is important to disengage from the glamour of pathos, we receive a forcible lesson on the art of not confounding things. It is very true that the lesson may well leave a reader wondering whether, especially as regards Charlotte, a yet happier thought than to try to utter the decisive word be not perhaps to let silence, still more decisively, descend. The danger of course is that silence won't!²⁶³

James deems Shorter to have presented a more measured account of the tragic lives of the Brontë family. Indeed, by largely confining himself to the quotation of Charlotte's letters, Shorter gives his subject's voice primacy. He avoids the maudlin excesses and fatalistic assertions of biographers who represented the family's lives as overshadowed by almost unremitting misfortune; and he allows Charlotte to emerge as a conscious and creative artist, rather than a mere recorder of family tragedy. Still, as I think James perceptively implies, Shorter's work contributes to that sense of the Brontës' lives as dominated by tragedy simply by including letters in which Charlotte records her experiences of sickness, death, and mourning, as well as loneliness, personal dissatisfaction, and artistic frustration. James seems to imply that the Brontës' experience really was so tragic, and this tragedy so appealing to the reading public, that any biographical account, however objective, would facilitate the impression that the salient feature of the family's lives was tragedy and not literary production. This, presumably, explains his call for silence. Far from being, as Oscar Cargill suggests, a ploy to 'post himself on Shorter's taste',²⁶⁴ an attempt to

²⁶³ Henry James, 'London', *Harper's Weekly*, 6 February 1897, pp. 134-135, p. 135.

²⁶⁴ Oscar Cargill, 'The Turn of the Screw and Alice James', *PMLA*, 78 (1963), 238-249 (p. 249).

ingratiate himself with Shorter as editor of the *Illustrated London News* and thereby secure the publication of his future works in that paper, James's sensitive assessment of the significance of Shorter's work reflects his enduring interest in the Brontë family. It foreshadows the concerns that he would later articulate in private, to his friend Mary Augusta Ward, publically, in 'The Lesson of Balzac', his 1905 lecture to the Contemporary Club of Philadelphia, and in disguised form, in *The Turn of the Screw*.

In 1898, the year *The Turn of the Screw* was serialized in *Colliers Weekly*, Ward was asked by George Smith to write introductions to the Haworth Edition of the Brontës' novels. William Peterson reproduces a letter written by Ward to Charles Eliot Norton, dated 16 November 1899, in which Ward claims that her controversial 'advocatus diaboli' in the preface to *Jane Eyre* was partly a record of her debate with Henry James two years previously. If Ward's statement is accurate, then their discussion took place in 1897, the year in which James reviewed Shorter's *Charlotte Brontë* and, crucially, the year in which he wrote *The Turn of the Screw*. She writes of the preface:

It has brought me into some hot water with the Brontë worshippers. . . . Oddly enough the advocatus diaboli whose remarks in the *Jane Eyre* preface have displeased some, represents a long wrestle with Henry James on the sands of Grange [Lancashire] two years ago. He used most of the arguments I have reproduced & tried to meet, and what are not his are Leslie Stephen's and Andrew Lang's. It seemed to me that one might as well—nay that one must grapple with them. But the proceedings appear to have scandalised a few [...].²⁶⁵

Peterson convincingly isolates what he believes to be James's contribution by 'subtract[ing] all traces of Andrew Lang and Leslie Stephen',²⁶⁶ as well as those statements that are recognizably Ward's. What he finds is the passage already discussed as evidence of Gaskell's influence in shaping popular understandings of the Brontë family. It is a sentiment that echoes that of James's review of Shorter's book: 'that the fame of the

²⁶⁵ William S. Peterson, 'Henry James on "Jane Eyre"', *TLS*, 30 July 1971, p. 919.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Brontë sisters depended more upon the story of their tragic lives than upon the artistry of their novels'.²⁶⁷

This does not, however, mean, as Peterson implies it does, that James was suggesting the Brontës were undeserving of fame on the grounds of literary merit. In fact, in 'The Lesson of Balzac', he uses the word 'genius' in his comparison of the sisters to Jane Austen, noting that their circumstances reflect 'a case of popularity (that in especial of the Yorkshire sisters), a beguiled infatuation, a sentimentalized vision, determined largely by the accidents and circumstances originally surrounding the manifestation of the genius' (63). Rather, James's argument, which, incidentally, he believed Ward misunderstood, is that the public had as yet been unable to form any kind of objective critical estimate of the quality of the sisters' work because the discourse surrounding their literature constantly, and inappropriately, recurred to the story of their lives, as if that provided the sole key to the appreciation and understanding of their novels and the sole justification for their fame.

James's argument in 'The Lesson of Balzac' is worth quoting at length:

The romantic tradition of the Brontës, with posterity, has been still more essentially helped, I think, by a force independent of any one of their applied faculties—by the attendant image of their dreary, their tragic history, their loneliness and poverty of life. That picture has been made to hang before us as insistently as the vividest page of *Jane Eyre* or of *Wuthering Heights*. If these things were "stories", as we say, and stories of a lively interest, the medium from which they sprang was above all in itself a story, such a story as has fairly elbowed out the rights of appreciation, as has come at last to impose itself as an expression of the power concerned. The personal position of the three sisters, of the two in particular, had been marked, in short, with so sharp an accent that this accent has become for us the very tone of their united production. It covers and supplants their matter, their spirit, their style, their talent, their taste; it embodies, really, the most complete intellectual muddle, if the term be not extravagant, ever achieved, on a literary question, by our wonderful public. The question has scarce indeed been accepted as belonging to literature at all. Literature is an objective, a projected result; it is life that is the unconscious, the agitated, the struggling, floundering cause. But the fashion has been, in looking at the Brontës, so to confound the cause with the result that we cease to know, in the

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

presence of such ecstasies, what we have hold of or what we are talking about. (63-64)

This fashion is reflected in Andrew Lang's article, in which he deems Charlotte's novels mere autobiographical transcriptions and reflections of her desire for love, 'day-dreams and memories rather than stories'.²⁶⁸ Lang's designation of her work as 'day-dreams' at least allows Charlotte a greater claim to imaginative creation than Edmund Gosse, who insists that not only the content but the very structure of the Brontës' novels were entirely dependent on their life experience; for Gosse, nothing associated with the Brontës could be considered in the light of conscious artistic creation:

Neither Charlotte Brontë [...] nor her sisters [...] possessed such mechanical skill in the construction of a plot as could enable them to develop their stories on a firm epical plan. They usually preferred the autobiographic method, because it enabled them to evade the constructive difficulty.²⁶⁹

Leslie Stephen's conflation of Charlotte's life with her literary creation was so extreme that he essentially viewed them as interchangeable; the books were not so much novels as exceedingly thinly veiled autobiographies. His choice of the word 'incarnated' powerfully conveys his view of the indistinguishability of Charlotte, the woman, the creator, the cause, from the text, the created, the result:

In no books is the author more completely incarnated. She is the heroine of her two most powerful novels; for *Lucy Snowe* is avowedly her own likeness, and *Lucy Snowe* differs only by accidents from *Jane Eyre* [...]. All the minor characters [...] are simply portraits, and the more successful in proportion to their fidelity. The scenery and even the incidents are, for the most part, equally direct transcripts from reality. And, as this is almost too palpable a peculiarity to be expressly mentioned, it seems to be an identical proposition that the study of her life is the study of her novels. More or less true of all imaginative writers, this must be pre-eminently true of Miss Brontë. Her experience, we might say, has been scarcely transformed in passing through her mind. She has written down not only her feelings, but the more superficial accidents of her life. She has simply given fictitious names and dates,

²⁶⁸ Andrew Lang, 'Charlotte Brontë', *Good Words*, December 1899, pp. 236-240, p. 239.

²⁶⁹ Sir Edmund Gosse, *A Short History of Modern English Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1898), pp. 354-355.

with a more or less imaginary thread of narrative, to her own experience at school, as a governess, at home, and in Brussels.²⁷⁰

Of the above mentioned texts, James owned copies of Gosse's and Stephen's, and he owned no fewer than twenty-three books written by Lang, so it is not unlikely that he was familiar with Lang's article.²⁷¹

James reacted against a body of criticism, of which these texts are representative examples, which clearly had its origin in Gaskell's semi-fictionalized *Life of Charlotte Brontë*. In their retelling of the Brontë story, these authors, like Gaskell, placed greater significance on their experience of suffering than on their literary creation, assuming that the latter was dependent on the former for its existence. They insisted that details of Charlotte's and her siblings' lives, personalities, and public and private experiences could be found through the careful reading of their novels. They perceived the Brontës' fiction to be of greater documentary than aesthetic value. In his capacity as critic, James openly objected; in his capacity as a writer of fiction, his objection took the form of *The Turn of the Screw*, at once a work of fiction and a complex work of metacriticism demonstrating the fallacy of this exclusively biographically-dependent view of literary creation.²⁷²

James saturates his narrative with details appropriated from the Brontës' lives, but also, importantly, from their novels, for as he complained, the two were viewed as equivalent 'stories'. Like Anne Brontë, James's unnamed governess is 'the youngest of several daughters of a poor country parson' (119). She is twenty years old when she

²⁷⁰ Leslie Stephen, 'Charlotte Brontë', *Hours in a Library* (London: Smith, Elder, 1892), Vol. III, pp. 1-30, (p. 7).

²⁷¹ See the inventory of Henry James's library in Leon Edel and Adeline Tintner, *The Library of Henry James* (pp. 15-67).

²⁷² Chris Baldick defines metacriticism as 'the examination of the principles, methods, and terms of criticism either in general [...] or in the study of particular critics or critical debates', usually implying 'a consideration of the principles underlying critical interpretation and judgement'. 'Metacriticism', in *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 3rd edn, (Oxford: OUP, 2012) <<http://www.oxfordreference.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780199208272.001.0001/acref-9780199208272>> [accessed 21 November 2013].

becomes a governess, the same age at which Anne became governess to the Robinsons at Thorp Green. T. J. Lustig, in his discussion of textual variations between the versions of *The Turn of the Screw* appearing in *Colliers*, *The Two Magics*, and the New York Edition, reveals that initially, reference was made to the governess's father's 'eccentric habits'.²⁷³ This might be an allusion to the now-discredited eccentricities attributed to Patrick Brontë by Gaskell, including the restriction of his children to a vegetable diet, his burning of the children's coloured boots, and his destruction of his wife's silk dress. Aspects of the governess's description of the physical characteristics of Peter Quint tally with Gaskell's description of Branwell, chiefly his physical attractiveness, red hair, and whiskers: 'He has', she tells Mrs Grose, 'red hair, very red, close-curling, and a pale face, long in shape, with straight good features and little rather queer whiskers that are as red as his hair' (146). Branwell was tutor at the home of the Robinsons, and Quint is described as assuming the privileges of that role in his relationship with Miles; Mrs Grose tells the governess: 'they had been about together quite as if Quint were his tutor—and a very grand one' (163-164). Miles's dismissal from school occurs at the start of the holidays, as does Branwell's dismissal from the Robinson household; and in both instances, a letter arrives, detailing the reasons, but the contents are not revealed to the reader. The governess reports that "'They go into no particulars. They simply express their regret that it should be impossible to keep him'" (128-129), while Gaskell reports that 'he [Branwell] had received a letter from Mr.--, sternly dismissing him, intimating that his proceedings were discovered, characterizing them as bad beyond expression' (211). Finally, aspects of the governess's account of Quint's death seem to evoke the way in which Gaskell and subsequent biographers discussed Branwell's alleged degeneration. The governess relates:

²⁷³ T. J. Lustig, 'Variant Readings', in *The Turn of the Screw' and Other Stories*, pp. 259-266, (p. 264).

The limit of this evil time had arrived only when, on the dawn of a winter's morning, Peter Quint was found, by a labourer going to early work, stone dead on the road from the village: a catastrophe explained—superficially at least—by a visible wound to his head; such a wound as might have been produced (and as, on the final evidence, *had been*) by a fatal slip, in the dark and after leaving the public-house, on the steepish icy slope, a wrong path altogether, at the bottom of which he lay. The icy slope, the turn mistaken at night and in liquor, accounted for much—practically, in the end and after the inquest and boundless chatter, for everything; but there had been matters in his life, strange passages and perils, secret disorders, vices more than suspected, that would have accounted for a good deal more. (152)

If the language is unpacked, the steep slope from the public house evokes the steep slope, described by Gaskell as well as most subsequent biographers, from the Parsonage and the Black Bull, the public house Branwell patronized, to the village below. Furthermore, the phrases 'fatal slip', 'a wrong path altogether', and 'the turn mistaken at night and in liquor', taken out of context, seem very much like descriptions of degeneration that might be applicable to the Brontë brother.

James's possible literary borrowings from the Brontës include the framing device, in which the narrator repeats the story Douglas read to him from the diary of the heroine. It is very much like the framing device in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, in which Gilbert Markham transcribes his wife's diary for Halford; in each case, a woman's private account of a painful and terrifying experience is the means for cementing a bond of friendship between men. The governess asserts that 'In going on with the record of what was hideous at Bly I not only challenge the most liberal faith—for which I little care; but (and this is another matter) I renew what I myself suffered' (169). It is markedly similar to Anne's statement in the 'Preface to the Second Edition' of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. She attests to the truth of her narrative and reveals the pain which the writing of it occasioned her:

As the story of 'Agnes Grey' was accused of extravagant over-colouring in those very parts that were carefully copied from the life, with a most scrupulous avoidance of all exaggeration, so, in the present work, I find myself censured for

depicting [...] those scenes which, I will venture to say, have not been more painful for the most fastidious of my critics to read, than they were for me to describe.²⁷⁴

James's reference to the battlements at Bly, which evoke the battlements of Thornfield in *Jane Eyre*, and the governess's seeming allusion to the concealment of Bertha Rochester in her question – 'Was there a "secret" at Bly—[...] an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement?' (138) – reveal *Jane Eyre* to be an additional hypotext. Furthermore, the governess's first encounter with the ghost of Miss Jessel seems to evoke Jane's imaginative reading experience as a child at Gateshead. The governess takes Flora to the lake, which they imagine to be 'the Sea of Azof' for the purposes of their geography lesson (154), while Miles has been left 'indoors, on the red cushion of a deep window-seat; he had wished to finish a book' (153). Jane also secludes herself in a window seat, the draperies of which are also red. There, she reads Bewick's *History of British Birds*. She describes illustrations of seas, oceans, and scenes of the supernatural, which terrify her, and even when their content is not explicitly supernatural, she reads a supernatural, haunted quality into the image: 'The two ships becalmed on a torpid sea, I believed to be marine phantoms' (9). It is as though James has here divided Jane who, like Flora and Miles, is an orphan, into a male and female child.

The Brontës' literature was thought to provide greater insight into their lives, and to be capable of revealing, as Malham-Dembleby hoped, facts that had not yet been discovered by biographers or corroborated by documentary evidence. On the other hand, the experience of the family, especially Charlotte's alleged longing for love and Branwell's alleged sexual and domestic transgressions, were believed to supply both the motive for writing and the content of the texts. In *The Turn of the Screw*, James essentially does what critics, biographers, and the general public had long insisted the Brontës did: he takes the

²⁷⁴ Anne Brontë, 'Preface to the Second Edition', in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), pp. 3-5 (p. 4).

details of the family's lives and transforms them into the material of fiction. His method of combining the constituent components of the family's lives, however, results in a work that bears, superficially at least, no resemblance to the life of any member of the family, in that no Brontë ever fought with ghosts for possession of a child. *The Turn of the Screw*, although imbued with Brontë facts, is not a fictional biography of the Brontë family or a reflection of their lived experience, and in this way, James demonstrates the falsity of the view that the Brontës' novels are merely fictionalized autobiographies.

To my knowledge no one has yet suggested that *The Turn of the Screw* is a conscious and purposed fictionalization of aspects of the lives and literature of the Brontë family, functioning as a comment on the cultural and critical construction of their legacy. However, several critics have observed evidence of the influence of the Brontës' novels, notably *Jane Eyre*, on James's text. Critics who have observed evocations of the Brontës' novels include Stoneman and Miller, Miriam Allot, Oscar Cargill, Shoshana Felman,²⁷⁵ and Jacqueline Banerjee.²⁷⁶ Adeline Tintner, although she makes some connections between *The Turn of the Screw* and Charlotte's life, focuses more on connections between the novella and *Jane Eyre*.²⁷⁷ Instead, I argue that James's main Brontëan literary source of inspiration was Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, a novel which, at its heart, is concerned with the central themes of *The Turn of the Screw*: infantine corruption and the education of children. Charlotte, in the literary memorials of 1850, revealed *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as a sort of *roman à clef*-cum-fictionalized autobiography, encoding the downfall of a family member and Anne's response to it. Gaskell, in turn, revealed that fallen individual to be Branwell. It is unsurprising that, if James sought to explore the

²⁷⁵ Shoshana Felman, 'Turning the Screw of Interpretation', *Yale French Studies*, 55/56 (1977), 94-207.

²⁷⁶ Jacqueline Banerjee, 'The Legacy of Anne Brontë in Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw"', *English Studies*, 78 (1997), 532-544.

²⁷⁷ Adeline Tintner, 'Henry James's Use of "Jane Eyre" in "The Turn of the Screw"', *Brontë Society Transactions*, 17 (1976), 42-45 (pp. 42-43).

confusion between the Brontës' lives and literature, he would centre his literary appropriation on the text allegedly recreating the downfall of the brother who, according to Gaskell, was responsible for the sisters' so-called coarseness. Ultimately, Miss Jessel and Peter Quint are the ghosts or the memories of a suffering governess and an allegedly degenerate man, whose class-crossing affair brought disgrace on his partner and threatened the corruption of the children in their care. They are, in the essentials of their situations (although obviously not in their more sinister qualities) the characters into which Branwell and his sisters were reduced by the semi-fictionalizing account of Elizabeth Gaskell and the subsequent popular understanding of the family.

Gaskell's emphasis on suffering and its relationship to Charlotte's and her sisters' fiction, along with her recurrence to the topics of death, mourning, and the supernatural helped to transform the Brontës from real people into characters in works of prose fiction, poetry, and drama. Yet, she was aided by the fact that, prior to the publication of *The Life*, little was known about the family, and that in the biography itself many aspects of the family's lives could not be fully discussed. This fostered and sustained an air of mystery about the Brontës that encouraged people to speculate about the truth, and to create their own fictions in order to satisfy their curiosity. Gaskell's influence, particularly in terms of her introduction of the supernatural into the Brontë story, can be seen in the ghostly proto-fictionalizations and the interwar fictional biographies that feature the Brontës as spirits returned from the dead. However, it is also evident in the development of the professedly scientific Brontë psychobiographies, another manifestation of interwar fascination with the Brontë family that has its roots in the nineteenth century. Interwar Brontë psychobiography attempted to explain the interiority and the creativity of the Brontë family using the methods of psychologists and psychoanalysts. The authors of these texts often attempted to

distance themselves from Victorian constructions of the Brontë family, particularly Gaskell's. Yet, their emphasis on the connection between the Brontës' creativity and suffering is clearly derived from Gaskell's semi-fictionalization of the family in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. Their attempt to determine the 'truth' about the Brontë family by means of their novels is derived from the critical discourse Gaskell inherited from Charlotte and the nineteenth-century reviewers. The following chapter explores the representation of the Brontë sisters in interwar psychological studies as an analogue to their representation in Brontë fictional biography.

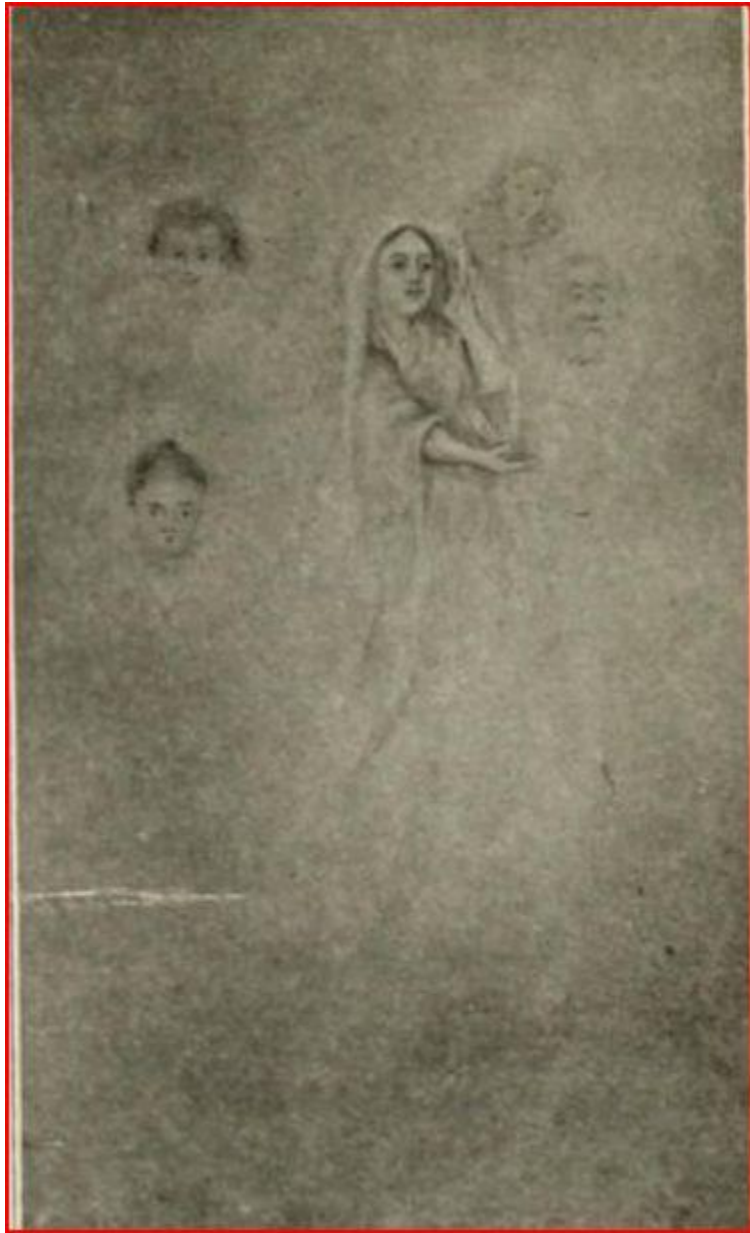


Figure 1. ‘Charlotte Brontë’, reproduced and enlarged from Thomas Slaney Wilmot’s *Gleams of Light and Glimpses Thro’ the Rift*, (1893).

Chapter Three

Analysing the Character of the Woman of Genius: The Brontës, Gender, and Psychological Theory, From Gaskell to Freud

Throughout the nineteenth and in the first decade of the twentieth century, gender was the dominant discourse within which the Brontës were discussed. As we have seen, early reviewers mined the Bells' novels to glean clues to their genders. Elizabeth Gaskell's seminal and semi-fictionalizing *Life of Charlotte Brontë* was designed with the purpose of disproving and, where she could not disprove, excusing the coarseness and unwomanliness with which her subject was charged. Her method was a dual emphasis on Charlotte's experience of suffering and her superlative fulfilment of the feminine roles of 'the *friend*, the *daughter*, the *sister*, the *wife*'.²⁷⁸ In the wake of Gaskell's biographical recuperation, Charlotte, the author accused of coarseness, blasphemy, and an unseemly preoccupation with romantic love, began to appear in didactic biographical anthologies as a model of submissive, domestic femininity for young women to emulate.²⁷⁹ Chapters about the author were given titles suggestive of her womanly, hearthside qualities, including 'Charlotte Brontë [sic], the Worthy Daughter', which appeared in the anonymous American publication *Women of Worth: A Book For Girls* (1863), and 'The Patience of Genius', which appeared in W. H. Davenport Adams's English anthology *Stories of the Lives of Noble Women* (1888). The influence of this reconstruction of Charlotte's character is also apparent in contemporaneous adaptations of *Jane Eyre*, the novel by which she first gained the reputation for being unfeminine. In her survey of nineteenth-century stage adaptations of the novel, Patsy Stoneman detects a similarly marked emphasis on the conventionally

²⁷⁸ *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p. 370, 6 September 1855.

²⁷⁹ According to Lucasta Miller, Charlotte's identity was fashioned in this way from the 1860s until at least the 1880s. See pp. 90-95.

feminine attributes of chastity, charity, and womanly dependence in portrayals of Jane Austen dating between the 1860s and 1880s.²⁸⁰ Both Charlotte and Emily were later appropriated as examples of a seemingly more artistically, emotionally, and economically independent type of womanhood during the *fin de siècle* and the first decades of the twentieth century, but the earlier emphasis on sexual purity was still in evidence. Charlotte Mew and May Sinclair celebrated Emily and Charlotte as independent, single women artists, despite the fact that Charlotte married after the publication of her novels. In her undated *roman à clef*, 'Elinor', Mew fictionalizes Emily as the eponymous heroine whose spiritual self-sufficiency enables her to reject her lover and die independently. In *The Three Brontës* (1912), Sinclair similarly insists on Charlotte's intellectual and artistic independence, rejecting the notion that her style and content were in any way dependent on Monsieur Heger's tutelage. In 1908 Charlotte was again claimed by early twentieth-century feminists as an ally in the cause of female suffrage when they marched under a banner inscribed with her name during a procession to Albert Hall.²⁸¹ In each instance, the known details of the Brontës' lives were selectively assembled, arranged, and interpreted in such a way that the sisters were made to fit (or, in the case of some early reviewers, assumed to deviate from) the criteria of the particular type of womanhood being advocated.

Each of these types of womanhood reflects a certain historically and culturally determined concept of what a woman is or should be, mentally, morally, and behaviourally; each type identifies as womanly the qualities that describe the artificial and temporary categories of gender as opposed to the enduring characteristics of biological sex. Implicitly connected to many of these gendered interpretations of the Brontës was the

²⁸⁰ Stoneman, p. 39.

²⁸¹ Anonymous, 'Women and the Suffrage', *The Times*, 15 June 1908, p. 9. For a fuller discussion of some of the ways in which Charlotte and Emily were utilized as models by women writers, suffragists, and advocates of women's employment, see Miller pp. 104-108, and 130-133.

attempt to understand the sisters psychologically, to explain why they were what they were and why they did what they did. Gender normativity, morality, and mental health were, for many Victorians, interconnected concepts. When nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century commentators questioned whether the writings and recorded actions of the sisters could be reconciled with what they deemed the appropriately feminine mind (whether that mind was thought to belong to an Angel in the House or a New Woman), the answer would influence their perception and representation of Charlotte, Emily, and Anne as morally and psychologically healthy or unhealthy.

During the interwar period, fictional and nonfictional modes of life-writing betrayed a similar fascination with the interpretation and portrayal of the inner lives of the Brontë family. Yet, whereas prior to the First World War, understandings of the family's psychological health were often mediated through a culturally specific construction of appropriately gendered, moral behaviour, interwar writing on the Brontës tended to subsume gender and morality within what it characterized as a more neutral and scientific psychological discourse. Many interwar psychologists and psychoanalysts redefined what their lay Victorian predecessors termed sinful or immoral behaviour as evidence of mental illness or unresolved psychological conflict, for which patients deserved no more blame than if they were subject to physical illness. Yet, in their attempts to favourably contrast what they considered their own progressive modernity against the Victorian past, interwar Brontë psychobiographers were far from unbiased.

Rather than attempting to understand the Brontës' psychological functioning and familial interactions in terms of their unique experiences and circumstances, or by placing them within their early-to-mid-nineteenth-century historical context, most of these writers were seemingly more concerned with using the family as a vehicle for pillorying a

caricatured version of the Victorian past. Most recast those attributes so highly valued by their nineteenth-century predecessors as indicators of moral and psychological health, including the sisters' acts of self-sacrifice, filial piety, and Christian humility, as evidence of masochism, Freudian parent fixation, or, more generally, what they characterized as the psychologically damaging effects of Victorian values. On the other hand, those facets of the sisters' experience that were criticized by nineteenth-century commentators, in particular Emily's self-sufficiency and her reputed rejection of conventionally feminine behaviour, were celebrated as examples of a precocious rejection of the values of their time.

The picture of the Victorian past that emerges from the majority of these interwar texts is incorrect, simplistic, and clichéd. The period is caricatured as sexually repressed, hobbled by the dictates of decorum, and dominated by the patriarchal order as represented by the clergy and the Victorian father. Despite the fact that the Brontës spent less than half their lives under Victoria's reign, the family, with the exception of Emily, are taken as representatives of it. Even Virginia Moore, who rightly acknowledges the uniqueness of Patrick's educational and parenting techniques, especially in regard to the intellectual independence he fostered in his daughters, defines Charlotte as a stereotypical Victorian woman, 'a passionate little Philistine, a natural-born conventionalist and conformist, a lover of rules' (51). Ironically, given their mistrust of and disdain for Victorian values and practices, this metonymic use of the Brontës as representatives of the period is a continuation of the Victorian practice of using the sisters as representatives of various types of womanhood. Yet, interwar psychobiographers were also indebted to their Victorian predecessors for much of the material on which they based their interpretations of the family.

Most relied on Gaskell's *Life*, a text written with the intention of making Charlotte appear conventionally feminine and moral to Victorian readers who knew of her principally through her controversial novels. Gaskell was selective about those details of the family's lives that she chose to include. She shaped her narrative to stress Charlotte's womanly concern for the members of her household, dramatizing her heroine's acts of nursing and conscientious performance of household chores. Yet, as discussed in detail in Chapter Two, Gaskell also sought to gain sympathy for the sisters by presenting them as sufferers. As she explained to George Smith, in justification for her refusal to excise the passages pertaining to the alleged affair between Mrs Robinson and Branwell,

I should not have told it but to show the life of prolonged suffering those Bronte girls had to endure; & what doubtless familiarized them to a certain degree with coarse expressions, such as have been complained of in W. H & the Tenant of Wildfell Hall.²⁸²

Gaskell's insistence on the writer's conventional femininity, Christian faith, and experience of suffering actually indicates how unique and unconventional were Charlotte's thoughts and experiences, and what a challenge they posed for her biographer. Despite their mistrust of elements of Gaskell's biography, the interwar writers in question accept, on the whole, Gaskell's construction of Charlotte as a conventional Victorian woman. Moreover, misinterpreting the significance of Gaskell's emphasis on suffering, they claim a causal relationship between Charlotte's conformity to Victorian standards of femininity and morality and her experience of psychological suffering. This chapter charts the development of a psychological discourse surrounding the Brontë family that began almost simultaneously with the publication of their first novels and that flourished during the interwar period. It explores how the minds of the Brontë family became, in interwar culture, a contested space, highlighting the tensions, but also, and perhaps more

²⁸² *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p. 432, 29 December 1856.

revealingly, the continuities between interwar and Victorian psychological theory and, by extension, gender beliefs.

**I. 'Likely to produce a distempered state of mind': The Brontës and
Nineteenth-Century Psychological Assessments of Women's Authorship**

Even in the early phase of her writing life, prior to publication, Charlotte's work and desire to write were judged according to gender expectations for women. Her aforementioned justification for writing under an androgynous pseudonym, that she and her sisters 'had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice',²⁸³ was in fact well-founded. Gaskell records Robert Southey's letter of 1837, in reply to Charlotte's request for his opinion of a writing sample. In it, he made the now notorious pronouncement that, even for a talented woman, 'Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be' (117). In part, this is an assertion of the propriety of a sex-based division of labour that places women in the home to care for the family while men pursue careers. While he encourages Charlotte to write poetry for her own enjoyment and improvement, he discourages her from devoting her life to literary work because it would necessitate the neglect of the domestic duties incumbent on womanhood; as he explains, 'The more she [woman] is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation' (117). Yet, Southey's advice also has a psychological dimension. He expresses his concern that

The day dreams in which you habitually indulge are likely to induce a distempered state of mind; and in proportion as all the ordinary uses of the world seem to you flat and unprofitable, you will be unfitted for them without becoming fitted for anything else. (117)

The fantasies with which Charlotte is consumed, and which find expression in her writing, are, Southey cautions, 'likely' to be the cause of either mental derangement or

²⁸³ Charlotte Brontë, 'Biographical Notice', p. 320.

dissatisfaction with her prescribed domestic role as a nineteenth-century woman. In this way, Southey associates women's pursuit of authorship as a profession with psychological malaise and the neglect of their moral duties to their families.

As discussed at length in the preceding chapter, ten years later, after the publications of *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Agnes Grey*, many reviewers attempting to solve the mystery of the Bells' identities were unsettled by the thought that the novels could have been written by women. Unable to reconcile what they believed to be the qualities and capabilities of the female mind with what they deemed the coarseness and masculine character of the novels, some critics were only able to conceive of them as, if not the work of men, collaborations between men and women. In a sense, even Gaskell embraces this judgment. She distances the sisters from what was considered coarse and brutal in the novels, namely the actions of Rochester, Heathcliff, and Huntingdon, by presenting them not as emanations from the minds of the three women but as transcripts of the actions of the men around them.²⁸⁴ In light of Gaskell's exculpatory biographical agenda, her decision is understandable. The sisters wrote graphically about violence, drunkenness, and sexual expression outside the bounds of marriage. Each of these would, if actually perpetrated by a woman, have been considered evidence of deviation from gender and moral conventions. Yet, for some segments of the Victorian psychiatric

²⁸⁴ Defending Charlotte from the assumption that she wrote with self awareness and intentionality, Gaskell explains: 'I do not deny for myself the existence of coarseness here and there in her works, otherwise so entirely noble. I only ask those who read them to consider her life,--which has been openly laid bare before them,--and to say how it could be otherwise. She saw few men; and among these few were one or two with whom she had been acquainted since early girlhood [Mary Taylor's brothers],--who had shown her much friendliness and kindness,--through whose family she had received many pleasures,--for whose intellect she had a great respect,--but who talked before her, if not to her, with as little reticence as Rochester talked to *Jane Eyre*. Take this in connection with her poor brother's sad life, and the out-spoken people among whom she lived,--remember her strong feeling of the duty of representing life as it really is, not as it ought to be,--and then do her justice for all that she was, and all that she would have been (had God spared her), rather than censure her because circumstances forced her to touch pitch, as it were, and by it her hand was for a moment defiled' (401).

profession, they may also have been considered symptomatic of the form of mental illness termed moral insanity.

In *A Treatise on Insanity and Other Disorders Affecting the Mind* (1835), J. C. Prichard defines moral insanity as a form of partial insanity comprising ‘a morbid perversion of the natural feelings, affections, inclinations, temper, habits, moral dispositions, and natural impulses, without any remarkable disorder or defect of the intellect or knowing and reasoning faculties, and particularly without any insane illusion or hallucination’.²⁸⁵ The pith of this definition is the assumption that there are certain natural, correct, and essentially human modes of thinking, feeling, and behaving which connote sanity. However, as demonstrated by the following example, what Prichard deems ‘natural’ and therefore sane thoughts and behaviours are principally those that conform to the culturally constituted ideas surrounding appropriately gendered behaviour at this time. He describes how

A female modest and circumspect becomes violent and abrupt in her manners, loquacious, impetuous, talks loudly and abusively against her relations [...]. Sometimes she uses indecent expressions, and betrays without reserve unbecoming feelings and trains of thought. Not unfrequently persons affected with this form of disease become drunkards. (25)

In this instance, Prichard’s diagnosis of moral insanity seems largely to rest on the woman’s deviation from nineteenth-century bourgeois gender expectations that define women as gentle, quiet, discreet, loyal to family, chaste in thought and action, and sober.

According to Elizabeth Fee, Prichard’s formulation of a category of insanity that was not dependent on the presence of cognitive impairment or hallucination, but on nonconformity to gender, class, and social expectations, remained influential throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century. ‘Psychologists’, she claims,

²⁸⁵ James Cowles Prichard, *A Treatise on Insanity and Other Disorders Affecting the Mind* (Philadelphia: Haswell, Barrington, and Haswell, 1837), p. 16. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

took the image of ideal bourgeois character and redefined it as not simply virtuous, but as mentally healthy and as morally “sane.” The opposite character traits were defined as not simply *vicious*, but as mentally and morally “insane.” Over time, the Victorian psychologists constructed a theoretical view that stands midway between evangelical religion and modern social psychiatry.²⁸⁶

Sally Shuttleworth also writes about the nineteenth-century medical policing of female behaviour and the female bodily economy, and the assumptions by which it was underpinned:

Woman, with her constant predisposition to hysteria, is a figure of radical instability. As in the social economy, surface order rests on a precarious balancing of forces, ready to be disrupted and thrown into convulsions at the slightest disturbance of equilibrium.²⁸⁷

Elaine Showalter also argues, although problematically, in *The Female Malady*, that contemporary gender expectations shaped both the definition and treatment of mental illness in women, claiming that ‘Victorian doctors imposed cultural stereotypes of femininity [*sic*] and female insanity on women who defied their gender roles’.²⁸⁸ Of course, Showalter’s representation of the Victorian period is not value-free. She perpetuates a clichéd view of what she characterizes as the period’s sexist beliefs about gender and mental illness. She refers, for instance, to ‘the patriarchal character of the Victorian age’,²⁸⁹ and ‘the hypocrisy and repressiveness of Victorian social codes’,²⁹⁰ as if all Victorians were in agreement about gender, morality, and mental health, and, moreover, maintained that concordance for nearly sixty-four years. That is not to say, however, that her account does not reflect the experiences of many Victorian women who were diagnosed with and treated for psychological problems, or the views of members of the psychiatric profession

²⁸⁶ Elizabeth Fee, ‘Psychology, Sexuality, and Social Control in Victorian England’, *Social Science Quarterly*, 58 (1978), 632-646 (p. 633).

²⁸⁷ Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 76.

²⁸⁸ Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago Press, 1987, repr. 2001), p. 86.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

and the wider community. Without implying, as Showalter does, that women's deviations from gender expectations were considered indisputable proofs of insanity, (and without suggesting that men's behaviour was not similarly subject to gendered expectations), it is evident that one thread of Victorian psychiatric discourse did associate the two.

Regardless of whether the Bells were ever seriously suspected of suffering from moral insanity or some other form of mental illness on the basis of their alleged coarseness and unwomanliness, it is telling that as late as 1912, May Sinclair defended Charlotte against what she considered to be accusations of immorality and mental instability by attesting to her subject's appropriately 'feminine mind'. Countering Margaret Oliphant, who deemed Charlotte's alleged preoccupation with finding a mate unseemly, and Clement Shorter, who implied that it was morbid, Sinclair explicitly associated Charlotte's moral and psychological health with her conventional femininity. Far from being inappropriately or pathologically interested in the question of sex, '[h]er letters to Ellen Nussey', Sinclair argues, 'reveal the workings of Charlotte's feminine mind when applied to "the sex problem"; a mind singularly wholesome and impersonal, and singularly detached'.²⁹¹ As a feminist with an abiding interest in psychology and psychoanalysis, Sinclair clearly wished to distance the Brontës from the idea that they wrote out of sexual frustration, and that their creativity was the neurotic's compensation for being barred from marriage and motherhood. Still, it is interesting that her view of the Brontës as deliberate, morally and mentally healthy artists intersects with the more conservative Victorian ideal of the sexually pure woman.

Elizabeth Gaskell employed a similar argument more than fifty years earlier. As part of her biographical agenda, Gaskell sought to deflect attention from the criticism that

²⁹¹ May Sinclair, *The Three Brontës* (London: Hutchinson, 1914), p. 66. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

there was something obsessive and psychologically unhealthy about Charlotte's portrayal of passion. She wished to disprove the allegations of those who, like Harriet Martineau, believed Charlotte's 'heroines love[d] too readily, too vehemently, and sometimes after a fashion which their female readers may resent', and were 'morbid in passion'.²⁹² Thus, Gaskell, in an astounding act of indelicacy, printed excerpts from letters revealing Charlotte's disgust at the romantic overtures of James Taylor and her ambivalence about Arthur Bell Nicholls. She further dissociated Charlotte from the experience of romantic passion by bringing Branwell's development of alcoholism forward in the Brontë chronology; in this way, she was able to account for her subject's intense emotional suffering in the face of Heger's gradual withdrawal of affection. It was Gaskell's continued emphasis on Charlotte's and her family's emotional suffering that undoubtedly led to the pronouncement of the anonymous author of the *Examiner* review: 'inasmuch as it discusses sick minds almost without admitting that they are unsound, it is itself likely to be regarded by the inconsiderate as an unhealthy book'.²⁹³ Perhaps to obviate the same criticism, this two-page review makes no fewer than nine references to what the author deems the collective mental illness of the Brontë family.

Throughout the review, which does not feature criticism of Charlotte's or her sisters' novels or poetry, nearly all the biographical events recounted are accompanied by some reflection on the abnormality of the Brontës' mental and domestic functioning, making it seem as though *The Life* was less a biography of a woman of genius than an account of the sorrows of one mentally ill family. Without referencing Prichard's work, the reviewer's description of the causes and effects of the Brontës' psychological ill health recapitulates Prichard's theory of moral insanity, particularly in descriptions of the

²⁹² Martineau, 'Death of Currer Bell', p. 5.

²⁹³ Anonymous, 'The Life of Charlotte Brontë, Author of 'Jane Eyre,' 'Shirley,' 'Villette,' &c.', *Examiner*, 11 April 1857, pp. 228-229, p. 228. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

family's perverted impression of the outside world and emphasis on inheritance and upbringing as the chief determinants of mental illness.

The reviewer describes the Brontë household as afflicted with organic physical and mental illness: from their mother, the children 'inherited a tendency to bodily disease [...] and from their father they inherited unwholesome minds' (228). While there may have been an element of truth to his claim, the reviewer offers no evidence to support it, and seems, instead, to draw his conclusion from Gaskell's implications that such was the case. The Brontës' domestic environment, encompassing the ways in which the family relate to one another and the behavioural patterns learned as a result of Patrick's parenting, is described as functioning concomitantly to exacerbate the children's inherited tendency to mental illness, ensuring that they become psychologically damaged adults.

Patrick's lack of interest in his children, the reviewer claims, causes their dependence on themselves and one another for amusement and affection, and results in their creation of and immersion within a world of fantasy. While the reviewer concedes that the Brontës' childhood fantasy play is 'proper to their time of life', it is, in their case, 'heightened by a diseased activity of brain', and 'hearing of little else but the strong Tory politics on which their father could be obstinate in talk, [they] took eagerly the Duke of Wellington for their Haroun Alraschid, and built up out of the newspaper their fairy dreams' (228). Given his assertion that fantasizing is 'proper' or natural to this phase of the children's development, it might seem that their play is only somewhat pathologized, and this not due to the practice but to the inherently 'diseased' quality of the participants. However, as Sally Shuttleworth demonstrates, citing Harriet Martineau's *Household Education* (1849) and James Crichton-Browne's 'Psychical Diseases of Early Life' (1860), children's natural propensity to indulge in imaginative play was, at this time, not only

viewed as akin to lying. It was also viewed as a practice that, if left unchecked, could be a precursor to mental illness or an inability to adapt to the demands of adult life. Quoting from ‘Psychical Diseases of Early Life’, Shuttleworth explains that Crichton-Browne

was one of the first voices to reverse the verdict that a child could not suffer insanity. Childhood, with all its imaginative projections, becomes instead the very definition of insanity: “Monomania, or delusional insanity, we believe to be more common during infancy and childhood than at any other period of life.” Imaginative “castle building” is denounced as a “pernicious practice”: “much mental derangement in mature life, we believe, is attributable to these reveries indulged in during childhood”.²⁹⁴

Following Crichton-Browne’s reasoning, the Brontë children’s conflation of fact and fiction, their interweaving of real people, including the Duke of Wellington, with imaginary events, would have been an even stronger determinant of mental illness than purely imaginative play. In their case, the boundary between the real and the imaginary was blurred in a way that contemporary and later writers on child psychology found disturbing. At the same time, any claim on the children’s part that their fictionalized Duke experienced an adventure that his original did not share would involve, in the strictest sense, telling lies.

Through his continued neglect during the children’s adolescence, Patrick is also held responsible for causing ‘the great grief of Miss Brontë’s life’: Branwell’s opium and alcohol addictions, his alleged seduction by Mrs Robinson, his subsequent suffering and infliction of suffering, and his early death. The reviewer explains that, after the deaths of Maria and Elizabeth,

there was no sorrow in Miss Brontë’s life worth mentioning that did not spring from the unwholesome family condition. The most pressing grief to her was the wreck of her brother. He was the one boy in the house, motherless and almost fatherless, for Mr Brontë’s solitary habits shut him away from his son when character was forming. (228)

²⁹⁴ Sally Shuttleworth, ‘The Psychology of Childhood in Victorian Literature and Medicine’, in *Literature, Science, Psychoanalysis, 1830-1870: Essays in Honour of Gillian Beer*, ed. by Helen Small and Trudi Tate (Oxford: OUP, 2003), pp. 86-101, p. 95.

Unsupervised by his father, Branwell not only ‘learn[ed] dissipation’ from his village companions but failed to learn, because Patrick did not teach him, what was necessary for his development as a man. Branwell’s susceptibility to seduction and destruction by his female employer, the reviewer implies, is an indication of his unmanliness; it was, after all, a reversal of the more typical accounts of and fears about the governess’s seduction by her male employer. With evident disdain, the reviewer relates how Branwell, ‘Entering a family as tutor, [...] was seduced, we are told, by its wanton mistress, and then flung aside to die. He must have been but a weak youth indeed of whom that can be said’ (228).

Within the context of contemporary psychological thought about appropriately gendered behaviour, Branwell’s obsessive, self-destructive love for Lydia, indicative of his unmanly and effeminate lack of self-control, would also have been indicative of psychological degeneracy. Patrick, then, is charged with engendering the sorrows, failures, and mental illnesses of his family, passing on to them his hereditary taint and failing to give them the attention, affection, and guidance they required to become well-adjusted adults. In the reviewer’s assessment, Charlotte’s and her family’s misery was not the product of the misfortunes that beset them (he mentions the Cowan Bridge episode as ‘no doubt, a bad experience’ (229), however), nor of any unkindness they experienced from the outside world, but of their own diseased brains and bodies, which caused them to perceive and react in ways that healthy individuals would not. ‘This’, the reviewer claims,

was the true sorrow, and this was the whole sorrow of Miss Brontë’s life,--domestic sickness, bodily and mental. Of the world without her home, though she distrusted it and for a long time shunned it, few persons have had less reason to complain.
(228)

It is a sentiment he voices five times within the text.

Gaskell does explore, albeit in a more sensitive and subtle manner, the psychological functioning and malfunctioning of the Brontës. After all, her account forms the basis for the reviewer's pathologization of the family. She frankly acknowledges Charlotte's life-long tendency to depression, and recounts in great detail the events of the Brontës' childhood in order to intimate the probable emotional and behavioural effects of Patrick's parenting on his children's development.²⁹⁵ As she explains, following her catalogue of Patrick's alleged controlling and violent behaviour within their household, 'I have named these instances of eccentricity in the father because I hold the knowledge of them to be necessary for a right understanding of the life of his daughter' (44). In her detailed discussion of the children's literary fantasy play, the same subtext of the risk to mental health, present in the *Examiner* review, would have been evident to contemporary readers. Moreover, Gaskell does not merely imply, but twice explicitly acknowledges the precariousness of the children's hold on reality during imaginative play. She prefaces one excerpt of the juvenilia with the observation that it approaches 'the very borders of apparent delirium' (69). She prefaces another with the assurance that Charlotte's 'strong common sense', combined with the salutary duties of housekeeping, studying, and caring for her younger siblings, ensured that 'while her imagination received powerful impressions, her excellent understanding had full power to rectify them before her fancies became realities' (70-71). Gaskell also recounts other periods and causes of Charlotte's psychological disturbance: from the deaths of her elder sisters and her own damaging experience as pupil at Cowan Bridge; to the emotional difficulty involved in breaking from

²⁹⁵ Gaskell's claims about Patrick's domestic peculiarities (his cutting up of his wife's silk dress, burning of his children's coloured boots, and enforcement of an ascetic diet of potatoes) were so well-known by the interwar period that they were a stock element of the Brontë story. Rachel Ferguson parodies the sometimes heated debates surrounding Patrick's parenting in the prologue to her 1933 play, *Charlotte Brontë: A Play in Three Acts*, allowing an American character to provide the following explanation for Patrick's habit of taking meals alone: 'You want to realise that Reverend Brontë was a flatulent subject' (14).

the fantasy world of Angria; to the depression she experienced while in Brussels and in the months following her return; to her disappointment in Branwell, and her grief and loneliness in the wake of the bereavements of 1848-1849.

Perhaps most importantly, Gaskell consistently portrays Charlotte's interior life as overshadowed by an always uncertain struggle between mental health and mental illness, a struggle which is itself construed as part of a wider conflict between perceived duty and desire. One characteristic example of the association she so often makes between Charlotte's moral health and psychological malaise is her description of Charlotte's agonized decision to remain in Brussels. Carefully avoiding all reference to Charlotte's increasing attachment to Monsieur Heger as a possible reason for her unhappiness and desire to leave Brussels, Gaskell casts Charlotte's decision to remain in the light of self-sacrifice. She misleadingly intimates that Charlotte is solely motivated by her determination to aid her family. By remaining in Brussels to learn German, Gaskell claims, Charlotte would improve her chances of establishing a successful school at Haworth and thereby financially supporting her family and ensuring that she and her sisters could remain at home to care for their aged father. Evoking the concept of the Christian soldier who must battle against sin and temptation for the health of his soul, Gaskell uses the language of warfare to narrate the trajectory of Charlotte's psychological struggle:

The strong yearning to go home came upon her; the stronger self-denying will forbade. There was a great internal struggle; every fibre of her heart quivered in the strain to master her will; and, when she conquered herself, she remained, not like a victor calm and supreme on the throne, but like a panting, torn, and suffering victim. Her nerves and her spirits gave way. Her health became much shaken. (192)

In this instance, as in others, Gaskell employs the rhetoric of renunciation and self-sacrifice to account for the causes of Charlotte's emotional suffering. She portrays her subject as

one who denies her own desires and forfeits her emotional wellbeing for what she believes to be the good of others.

Still, there is an element of percipience in the reviewer's suggestion that Gaskell's readers might have thought her too reticent in her discussion of the family's alleged mental pathology. Rosamond Langbridge, discussing the above mentioned passage in *Charlotte Brontë: A Psychological Study* (1929), was unconvinced by Gaskell's proffered reason for Charlotte's depression:

It is at this stage of the letters home that even the guileless mind of Mrs. Gaskell betrays some uneasy qualms as to how she shall account for the gathering clouds of depression and morbidity which nothing, not even a consciousness of her own integrity can wipe away from Charlotte's correspondence. We see Mrs. Gaskell's tranquil brow puckering [...] while she puts forward as first reason the immense "internal struggle" (I am quoting from the *Life*) which Charlotte had to undergo in the battle between home-sickness and a desire to learn German before she went home! (124-125)

Lucasta Miller, writing in 2001, acknowledges the presence of a psychological discourse in *The Life*, but suggests that it lies under the surface, proposing in a tentative, qualifying manner that it 'might have prompted alert readers to wonder whether Gaskell was dropping hints about Charlotte's mental health'.²⁹⁶ In the years following the publication of *The Life*, numerous attempts would be made to reinterpret, add to, and amend the psychological portrait of the Brontës first put forward by Gaskell.

Perhaps this revisionist drive owes something to the suspicion expressed by the *Examiner* reviewer, that:

The very recent date of a large part of the story of Miss Brontë's life, with the fact that her father is still living,--an old man whose children are all dead,--may have acted [...] prejudicially on Mrs Gaskell's book. It may have obliged her to leave much truth essential to the right perception of the life described to be inferred rather than absolutely learnt from her recital. (228)

²⁹⁶ Miller, p. 135.

This sentiment was echoed twenty years later in an 1877 review of Swinburne's *A Note on Charlotte Brontë* and Thomas Wemyss Reid's *Charlotte Brontë: A Monograph*, in which the reviewer claims that

One advantage is possessed by Mr. Reid over Mrs. Gaskell—that whereas she was writing her memoir of the “foremost woman of her age” within a few months after the woman had been laid in her grave, and was thus crippled in her attempt to paint an accurate picture of a remarkable life, he has the softening haze of twenty years between him and the close of that life.²⁹⁷

However, the sense that there was more to be said about the Brontës, that there were omissions in Gaskell's account, that there were gaps in the historical record that invited speculation, and that the surfacing of previously unknown letters and manuscripts or the publications of new biographical interpretations invited further comment seemingly underpins the whole body of post-Gaskell Brontë literature, and not just those works with a specifically psychological perspective. In interwar fictional and nonfictional biography, newspaper items, and literary criticism, there is an evident tendency to explain the family's literary production, temperament, and behaviour in terms of psychological pathology, and to offer psychological interpretations of the peculiarities of the family's characters. This emphasis on psychological functioning is the product of a confluence of factors that include not just contemporary interest in psychology, but the specific qualities associated with the Brontës and the stories surrounding them at this time.

The roots of this tradition of mapping the minds and personalities of the family extend from the Victorian period, beginning with the construction of the Brontës' identities and novels, in early reviews and particularly in Gaskell's *Life*, as morbid and melancholy. One of the earliest psychological studies of Charlotte Brontë, appearing in 1858 in the *Journal of Psychological Medicine and Mental Pathology*, demonstrates a greater reliance

²⁹⁷ Anonymous, 'Charlotte Brontë', *The Times*, 2 November 1877, p. 4.

on Gaskell's biography than on any recognizable psychological theory to interpret its subject's personality. The author quotes excerpts from *Jane Eyre*, following Gaskell's example in deeming Charlotte's novel a 'psychical transcript of herself';²⁹⁸ more frequently, he appropriates passages from Gaskell's *Life*, allowing the biographer's account of the various stages in Charlotte's history to stand, largely unmediated, for the psychological study it claims to provide. Yet, apart from the considerable influence of *The Life*, interest in the psychology of Charlotte and her family is consonant with the fact that the Brontës, themselves, demonstrated an interest in psychology. As Sally Shuttleworth observes, Charlotte 'actively encodes' the language of contemporary psychological discourse in her fiction.²⁹⁹ So, too, does Anne in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, in which Helen ironically declares herself 'an excellent physiognomist' before marrying the abusive Huntingdon,³⁰⁰ and Huntingdon uses phrenology to excuse his irreligiousness. While *Wuthering Heights* includes just one reference each to physiognomical readings and monomania, Shuttleworth observes that the text also 'register[s] a world of struggling, conflicting energies, but these are not defined with the psychological detail to be found in Charlotte Brontë's work'.³⁰¹ In addition to their use of specific psychological terminology, one central concern of each of the sisters' novels is the representation of subjective experience, more generally. It is significant that a shared feature of the Brontës' novels is their dramatization of their characters' negotiations between public life, dictated by

²⁹⁸ Anonymous, 'Charlotte Brontë—A Psychological Study', *Journal of Psychological Medicine and Mental Pathology*, ed. by Forbes Winslow (London: John Churchill, 1858), vol. XI pp. 295-317, p. 300.

²⁹⁹ Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë*, p. 2.

³⁰⁰ Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, ed. by Stevie Davies (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 136.

³⁰¹ Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë*, p. 245.

societal norms, and the inward thoughts and desires that the sisters believed must be suppressed in order to function within society.³⁰²

By 1897, not just the content but information about the creative processes of the Brontës' writing was being used to illustrate psychological principles and to elucidate a psychological identity that went beyond mere gender identification or recapitulation of the material of Gaskell's biography. In an anonymous review of a short story collection by Mrs Hungerford, the author points to the psychological interest attached to the author's account of the genesis of her writings; the reviewer expresses surprise that Hungerford, who, he claims, is not a genius, reported experiencing the same kind of spontaneous inspiration that was experienced by geniuses including Charlotte Brontë and Sir Walter Scott.³⁰³ This coincides with what both Showalter and Shuttleworth identify as a wider nineteenth-century practice whereby 'literary texts [...] were routinely invoked by nineteenth-century psychological texts as forms of case studies'.³⁰⁴ It is, however, worth being cautious about overstating the complementarity of literary and medical discourses. Helen Small refers to 'the complex ways in which medical theory and practice remained independent of, yet also partly shaped by, literary models of insanity', yet she argues that 'historians have used literature too simply as a social complement to the institutional story'.³⁰⁵ The practice was, however, continued into the early twentieth century by Freud, in 'The Theme of the Three Caskets' (1913), and by Ernest Jones, in 'The Oedipus-

³⁰² Even Catherine Earnshaw, who typically makes her desires known, as when she orders her husband to accept her friendship with his despised rival Heathcliff, shares this characteristic of Brontë heroines to some extent. Nelly relates how she mistakenly believed Cathy to be unmoved by the beating and punishment of Heathcliff: 'I waited behind her chair, and was pained to behold Catherine, with dry eyes and an indifferent air, commence cutting up the wing of a goose before her'. It soon becomes clear, however, that Cathy is attempting to conceal her anguish from her brother and the Lintons, and Nelly observes how 'She lifted a mouthful to her lips; then, she set it down again: her cheeks flushed, and the tears gushed over them. She slipped her fork to the floor, and hastily dived under the cloth to conceal her emotion' (52).

³⁰³ Anonymous, 'Recent Novels', *The Times*, 16 April 1897, p. 8.

³⁰⁴ Shuttleworth, 'Psychology of Childhood', p. 90. Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p. 90.

³⁰⁵ Helen Small, *Love's Madness: Medicine, the Novel, and Female Insanity, 1800-1865* (Oxford: OUP, 1996), p. 38.

Complex as an Explanation of Hamlet's Mystery: A Study in Motive' (1910). This last not only explained the play according to a Freudian theory. It undertook to psychoanalyze Shakespeare, himself, based on a biographical reading of the content of his play, in a way that prefigured those interwar psychological assessments of the Brontës that were based on biographical readings of their fiction and poetry. Given the enduring influence of Gaskell's portrayal of the family's lives as overshadowed by emotional suffering, the introspective, psychological content of their literature, and the endurance, into the interwar period, of the Victorian psychiatric practice of using literary examples as case studies to explain psychological principles, it is not surprising that the family and their works were subjected to psychological scrutiny. Nor is it surprising that this scrutiny should intensify during the interwar period, a time of widespread popular and professional interest in both psychology and the Brontës.

II. 'The dour Brontës ache to be psychoanalyzed': A Convergence of Interwar Preoccupations

This psychologically-inflected body of literature coincides with and reflects contemporary interest in the functioning and power structures of the family, and in psychology and the increasingly popular psychoanalytic theory, which were employed to explain these structures. Freud's writings about infantile sexuality, childhood fantasies about origins, the development and dissolution of the Oedipus complex, and the ultimate need of the child to liberate himself from the control of his parents demonstrate the immense importance of the family to Freud's conception of the psychological development of the individual. At this time, the popular perception of the Brontë family was that it included three women whose needs, sexual and otherwise, were subordinated to those of their father and brother, and who wrote as compensation for the absence of real satisfactions; a son who, though lauded

by his family as a genius, could not succeed; and a domineering father who, in some accounts, exercised such control over his children's lives that he forbade them to eat meat or wear coloured boots, and who tried to exert control over his surviving adult daughter's sexual choice by opposing her marriage. Of course, this view is ultimately derived not from scholarly research or such primary sources as letters and journals, but from Gaskell's selective inclusion and purposed interpretation of the facts of the family's lives.³⁰⁶ Still, it conformed to existing prejudices about the Victorian family and about the Brontës in particular, and so it seems to have been often unquestioningly accepted and even exaggerated in the interwar period. It is not surprising, then, that Arthur Pollock, in his review of Dan Totheroh's *Moor Born*, declared that 'the dour Brontes [*sic*] ache to be psychoanalyzed'.³⁰⁷ Pollock praises what he views as Totheroh's avoidance of Freudian or other psychological theory in his characterization of the family; he claims that, in contrast, 'Mr. O'Neill', who incorporated psychoanalytic theory in works including the three-part play cycle *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), 'would have made Freudian monsters out of all three sisters, father and brother'.³⁰⁸ This indicates both the growing influence of Freudianism on the writing and analysis of literature as well as the sense that the Brontës were particularly tempting subjects for psychoanalytic exploration.

While some of Freud's works appeared in English translation prior to the outbreak of the First World War, Hynes, Overy, Showalter, and Gay all associate the burgeoning

³⁰⁶Gaskell provides the following account of the family's opinion of Branwell in his youth: 'He was very clever, no doubt; perhaps, to begin with, the greatest genius in this rare family. The sisters hardly recognised their own, or each others' powers, but they knew *his*. The father, ignorant of many failings in moral conduct, did proud homage to the great gifts of his son' (100). The Brontë family clearly seem to have expected Branwell to achieve success in some field. However, Gaskell's exaggerated claims about the family's belief in his genius seem designed to make his descent into alcoholism, debt, and chronic unemployment more devastating to his sisters and father; to highlight the morality and self-control of the sisters in contrast to the self-indulgence of their debauched brother; and to make it seem as though Patrick had more faith in the abilities of his son than in the daughters who achieved literary fame.

³⁰⁷ Arthur Pollock, 'Display Ad 119', *New York Times*, 8 April 1934, p. X2.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

popularity of psychoanalysis with the cessation of the war,³⁰⁹ when the technique was employed to treat shell-shock cases and there appeared ‘a flood of Freud-in-translation, thirteen volumes between 1919 and 1925’.³¹⁰ Hynes and Overy both describe a pervasive sense, in postwar England, that the war had created a civilization in crisis, ‘a damaged nation of damaged men, damaged institutions, and damaged hopes and faiths’.³¹¹ Freudian theory, which asserted that ‘We are all neurotic in so far as we have conflicts, repressed desires, which we deal with as best we may: by sublimation, by acting out, by flight from the world’,³¹² was congenial to the sense of general malaise and widespread anxiety about the state of civilization. Its insistence that all individuals had instincts that had to be repressed in order to conform to the demands of civilization and thereby ensure its survival meant that the theory was presented as something useful not only to the individual shell-shock case or neurotic, but to an understanding and preservation of civilization as a whole.

Psychoanalysis was initially received more enthusiastically by the intellectual and cultural elite than by middlebrow audiences in England and the United States. Within Bloomsbury, Alix and James Strachey underwent analysis with Freud, became lay analysts, and devoted their working lives to the translation of Freud’s works into English.³¹³ Leonard Woolf, in his writings on politics, and John Maynard Keynes, in his writings on economics, drew on Freud’s theories about the irrational unconscious, demonstrating their applicability to many areas of human endeavour, as opposed to just the individual therapeutic context.³¹⁴ Although Virginia Woolf was initially critical of psychoanalysis and what she viewed as its reductive approach to the complexities of the

³⁰⁹ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined* (1990), Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age* (2009), Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady* (1987), Peter Gay, *The Freud Reader* (1995).

³¹⁰ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined* (London: The Bodley Head, 1990), p. 365.

³¹¹ Hynes, p. 353.

³¹² Llewellyn Jones, ‘Psychoanalysis and Creative Literature’, *English Journal*, 23 (1934), 443-452 (p. 443).

³¹³ Barbara Caine, ‘The Stracheys and Psychoanalysis’, *History Workshop Journal*, 45 (1988), 145-169.

³¹⁴ Ted Winslow, ‘Bloomsbury, Freud, and the Vulgar Passions’, *Social Research*, 57 (1990), 785-819.

human mind, the Woolfs' Hogarth Press took over publication of Freud's works in English in 1924. According to Stephen Watt, 'By the 1910s and certainly by the 1920s, psychoanalysis was a topic of considerable discussion in American intellectual life'.³¹⁵ Despite outward resistance to Freudian theory, social scientists at the University of Chicago's Social Sciences Division incorporated psychoanalytic theory into their plans to promote social adjustment, or adaptation to the new demands of society.³¹⁶ Modern playwrights, including Eugene O'Neill, Susan Glaspell, and Alice Gerstenberg were, like their British counterparts, experimenting with the techniques of psychoanalysis in their plays.

However, in his survey of forty-three English general interest journals published between 1920 and 1925, all of which were aimed at middle-class readers, Dean Rapp demonstrates that, despite widespread criticism of the theories and their derivatives, psychoanalysis was popular among a broader section of the population than just the cultural elite. He contends that 'The British press both reflected and contributed to the increased public fascination with psychoanalysis and its derivatives'.³¹⁷ The application of psychoanalytic theory to such diverse fields as literary analysis, economics, political theory, and social engineering, and the controversy it generated among both medical professionals and the general population, contributed to its cultural currency. It helped to create a climate of interest in psychological theory, in general, in England and the United States during the interwar period. Its ubiquity in public discourse is attested to by Llewellyn Jones, who announced in the *English Journal* that 'the name, if not the work, of

³¹⁵ Stephen Watt, 'Modern American Drama', in *The Cambridge Companion to American Modernism*, ed. by Walter Kalaidjian (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 102-126, p. 112.

³¹⁶ Edward J. K. Gitre, 'Importing Freud: First-Wave Psychoanalysis, Interwar Social Sciences, and the Interdisciplinary Foundations of an American Social Theory', *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 46 (2010), 239-262.

³¹⁷ Dean Rapp, 'The Reception of Freud by the British Press: General Interest and Literary Magazines, 1920-1925', *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 24 (1988), 191-201, (p. 192).

Freud is known to all of us',³¹⁸ and by Raymond Mortimer, who claimed in the *New Statesman* that

We are all psycho-analysts now. That is to say that it is as difficult for an educated person to neglect the theories of Freud and his rivals as it would have been for his father to ignore the equally disconcerting discoveries of Darwin.³¹⁹

Yet, while the name of Freud, his assertion of a dynamic unconscious, and his tracing of 'the origins of neuroses in sexual fantasies, [and] the roots of adult erotic life in childhood sexuality',³²⁰ may have been 'known to all of us' in interwar England and America, there is a haziness about the exact content and terminology of his theories that is apparent in much of the non-specialist writing invoking psychoanalysis at this time. This is particularly true of interwar psychological assessments of the Brontës, which, with the exception of James Crichton-Browne's 1922 study 'Branwell Brontë: An Extenuation',³²¹ are demonstrably influenced by psychoanalysis.

In *Early Victorian Novelists*, for instance, David Cecil offers the following tongue-in-cheek explanation for interwar interest in the literature of the Victorian period, in contrast to what he views as the Edwardian distaste for it. He elides the distinction between the psychologist and psychoanalyst, and confuses the subconscious, which term Freud rejected,³²² with the unconscious, writing:

The last age, like a relation, is too close for a man to be able to view it with the detachment necessary for criticism. Why this should be is not clear. Can it have a

³¹⁸ Jones, p. 443.

³¹⁹ Raymond Mortimer, 'New Novels', *New Statesman*, 28, April 1923, pp. 82 and 84, p. 82.

³²⁰ Peter Gay, 'Introduction', in *The Freud Reader*, ed. by Peter Gay (London: Vintage, 1995), pp. xiii-xxix (p. xvi).

³²¹ Crichton-Browne, whose career spanned much of the Victorian as well as the interwar period, rejected psychoanalysis and other talk-based therapies in favour of the moral management techniques of the nineteenth century. He offers as explanation of Branwell's alcoholism and alleged madness, certain environmental, behavioural, and physical causes including the absence of his mother in infancy, his unchecked habits of intemperance, and the presence of what he terms phthisical insanity, the first symptom of Branwell's tubercular state. Michael Neve, 'Browne, Sir James Crichton- (1840-1938)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, OUP, 2004 [<http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/article/32122>, accessed 4 January 2013].

³²² Gay, p. xiii.

Freudian explanation, some huge mass Oedipus complex against the father's generation? Perhaps the psychologists could explain it for us. How pleasant if they should divert their attention for a moment from the dingy problems of the individual sub-consciousness!³²³

Pollock, as part of his aforementioned praise of Totheroh and attack on the practice of incorporating psychological theory in works of literature, confuses psychiatry with the more specific psychoanalysis, noting that in its avoidance of Freudian theory, *Moor Born* 'never approaches secondhand psychiatry'.³²⁴ This conflation of psychoanalysis with other psychological theories, and confusion about terminology, may owe something to the fact that, as Overy observes, the 'response to shell-shock helped to fuel a growing public appetite for information on psychology of all kinds',³²⁵ and not just the popular and controversial psychoanalysis. Perhaps, in the course of their dissemination to lay audiences, in newspapers and the general interest journals referenced by Rapp, for instance, different strands of psychological theory became fused and confused in the popular imagination.

Lionel Trilling also acknowledged the pervasive influence of Freud on the production and analysis of literature at this time. However, he does not allow that popular understandings of psychoanalytic theory had the potential to offer new insights and interventions into psychiatric discourse. Instead, Trilling views these readings as representing a confused and inaccurate understanding of Freudian theory that contributed to popular misunderstanding. He asserts that 'in one form or another, frequently in perversions or absurd simplifications, it has been infused into our life and become a

³²³ David Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation* (London: Constable, 1934, repr. 1948), pp. 4-5.

³²⁴ Pollock, p. X2.

³²⁵ Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain Between the Wars* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), p. 144.

component of our culture of which it is now hard to be specifically aware'.³²⁶ Perhaps some of the seeming confusion about, and evident divergence from, aspects of Freudian theory in those works with a vaguely psychoanalytical bent is a reflection of the contemporary popularity of an eclectic perspective on psychological matters, which made it possible to modify or omit aspects of existing psychoanalytic theory and combine it with other theories of the mind. As Rapp notes, the English general interest 'press most preferred the English eclectic psychologists and psychotherapists'. While accepting 'Freud's theory of the dynamic unconscious, as well as some of his principal mental mechanisms and his stress on conflict', they 'rejected his determinism, de-emphasized the role of sexuality, freely borrowed from Jung and Adler, and remained respectful of moral and religious beliefs'.³²⁷ Rapp also notes that the same was true of America, where 'such eclecticism was equally attractive, not only amongst the popular expositors of psychoanalysis, but also in psychiatry, where the eclectic school dominated'.³²⁸

It is important, too, to remember that Freud's work did not exist in a vacuum, but had its origins in nineteenth-century psychology, medicine, philosophy, and narrative. As Trilling observes, Freud's theories must be viewed as the expression of a long accumulation of thought about the functioning of the mind:

when we think of the men who so clearly anticipated many of Freud's own ideas—Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, for example—and then learn that he did not read their works until after he had formulated his own theories, we must see that [...] what we must deal with is nothing less than a whole *Zeitgeist*, a direction of thought. For psychoanalysis is one of the culminations of the Romanticist literature of the nineteenth century. If there is perhaps a contradiction in the idea of a science standing upon the shoulders of a literature which avows itself inimical to science in so many ways, the contradiction will be resolved if we remember that this

³²⁶ Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951), pp. 38-39. The quotation is taken from the chapter 'Freud and Literature', which is based on material first published in 1940.

³²⁷ Rapp, p. 197.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*

literature, despite its avowals, was itself scientific in at least the sense of being passionately devoted to a research into the self.³²⁹

It is perhaps worth reiterating here that the majority of the Brontës' interwar psychobiographers based their professedly scientific interpretations on Gaskell's biography, a semi-fictional narrative of the development of Romantic genius against the backdrop of almost unremitting tragedy and suffering. Elizabeth Fee identifies some of psychoanalysis's more specific inheritances from Victorian psychiatry. In addition to their shared emphasis on the influence of childhood experience and upbringing on the development of mental disorder, Fee notes that psychoanalysis and the nineteenth-century formulation of moral insanity both 'incorporated a theory of regression with individual and social components—and both addressed a conflict between the demands of civilized morality and individual instincts, a conflict resolved morally and politically in favor of civilization'.³³⁰ Perhaps most importantly for its bearing on the Brontës, psychoanalysis also perpetuated the nineteenth-century 'somatic medical model that traced correlations between women's behaviour and stages of the reproductive cycle'.³³¹ Despite the fact that after the First World War some returning soldiers received psychoanalytic treatment for hysteria, the disease was still considered a predominantly feminine disorder, signifying women's irrationality, emotional sensitivity, and subjection to the caprices of their sexual organs and urges.³³² Some migration of ideas between psychoanalysis and older, more

³²⁹ Trilling, p. 34-35.

³³⁰ Fee, p. 642.

³³¹ Fee, p. 639.

³³² Michael North makes a compelling argument that interwar society, in the US and UK, perceived itself to be facing a crisis of gender, whereby women consciously eschewed the emotional sensitivity traditionally ascribed to them in favour of taking on careers, while at the same time, men returning from the front had experienced emotional suffering on a scale that feminized them and made them hungry for the emotional and aesthetic satisfaction that career women were withholding. North observes these fears in the popular press, and in both modernist and middlebrow literature. This tends to confirm that many segments of society, both reactionaries and the avant-garde, perceived women's natural psychological character to be much the same as its formulation in the nineteenth century. *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (New York: OUP, 1999), pp. 179-191.

familiar, and perhaps more widely accepted psychological theories is unsurprising then, and is evident in the Brontë literature of this period.

Lucile Dooley's 'Psychoanalysis of Charlotte Brontë, as a Type of the Woman of Genius' (1920) and 'Psychoanalysis of the Character and Genius of Emily Brontë' (1930) appear to be the only interwar psychological studies of the family written by a practising psychoanalyst and published in professional journals. With the exception of these exclusively psychoanalytic interpretations, and Crichton-Browne's aforementioned study of Branwell, the psychological literature written about the Brontës at this time is popular and journalistic rather than technical or scholarly. It is characterized by the combination of a vaguely psychoanalytic perspective that is, probably for the above mentioned reasons, often imprecise in its language and understanding of Freudian theory, and the eclecticism that allowed for the incorporation of other strands of psychological discourse as well as the authors' own idiosyncratic opinions about the Brontës and psychological development. Between 1920 and 1936, no fewer than six psychological studies of the Brontës were published in England and the US, including both of Dooley's essays, Crichton-Browne's chapter on Branwell in *Stray Leaves From a Physician's Portfolio* (1922), Romer Wilson's *All Alone: The Life and Private History of Emily Jane Brontë* (1928), Rosamond Langbridge's *Charlotte Brontë: A Psychological Study* (1929), and Virginia Moore's *The Life and Eager Death of Emily Brontë* (1936).

Despite their differences of approach, however, what unites these texts at an ideological level is their shared undervaluation of feminine aesthetic experience and creation in favour of an ideal of masculine artistry. This might seem paradoxical given that of the six works in question, five were written by women. Moreover, they were written about women who were famous for their literary achievement, however much the romance

of their private lives added to that fame. Nonetheless, Wilson and Moore both strive to demonstrate that their subject is psychologically and therefore artistically more male than female. Langbridge, who presents an inaccurate and clichéd view of the Victorian past as peopled by women who choose to be victims and men who choose to be tyrants, is so critical not just of what she misleadingly characterizes as Charlotte's conventional Victorian femininity, but of women in general, that one wonders why she chose Charlotte as a subject for a full-length study. She scatters the text with observations on women's irrationality when it comes to sex relations, explaining that 'Women are grown-up children, and what they *want* to be there Is' (112-113), and, as already mentioned, describes a scorned woman as 'a superfluous being, pleased by nothing, pleasing nobody, having failed in the one thing that completes womanhood, an outcast from all happiness and consolation' (151). For Langbridge writing in 1929, not only is a woman's worth dependent on her ability to secure a heterosexual union, but she is deemed an incomplete being if she does not, a curious stance for a woman who repeatedly attacks what she considers to be Victorian misogyny.

In his study of Branwell, Crichton-Browne endorses the nineteenth-century view of men's and women's physical and mental difference. He repeats the anecdote, reported by Gaskell, about Patrick's experiment of letting his children speak from behind a mask, but adds the following commentary on the significance of Branwell's response:

When, at seven years of age, his eccentric father put him behind a mask, in order that he might speak freely and without timidity, and asked him which was the best way of knowing the difference between the intellects of men and women, he replied (and his reply displayed wisdom that should be insisted on to-day): "By considering the differences between them as to their bodies".³³³

³³³ James Crichton-Browne, 'Patrick Branwell Brontë: An Extenuation', in *Stray Leaves From a Physician's Portfolio* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1922), 72-86, (p. 74). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

He also invokes this theory of sex-based intellectual difference to diminish the childhood artistic achievements of Charlotte, Emily, and Anne and to elevate those of Branwell. He explains that

not only was he painting at this time, but pouring forth, as bounteously as his sisters, poems, tales, adventures, tragedies, not inferior in quality to theirs, and which, allowing for the greater precocity of their sex, might be regarded as of even higher significance. (75)

According to his formulation, a woman's accomplishment was necessarily of less worth and significance than that of a man of the same age and ability.

Yet, despite his asserted rejection of psychoanalysis, Crichton-Browne's insistence on the correspondence between anatomical and intellectual difference is not uncongenial to the slightly later theory put forward by Freud in his 1925 paper 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes'. In this paper, Freud hypothesizes that when a female and male child view one another's genitals, it causes the development of the Oedipus complex in the female and the destruction of the complex in the male. Whereas the male child's perception of the female as castrated causes him to abandon his incestuous desires, and results in the development of the superego, the female child, perceiving herself to have been castrated, blames her mother for her lack of a penis, replaces her mother with her father as love-object, and eventually substitutes her desire for a penis for a desire to have her father's child. It is because there is no incentive for the dissolution of the Oedipus complex in the female, Freud claims, that they are morally inferior to males; he explains that:

for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men. Their super-ego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men. Character-traits which critics of every epoch have brought up against women—that they show less sense of justice than men, that they are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life, that they are more often influenced in their judgements by feelings of affection or hostility—

all these would be amply accounted for by the modification in the formation of their super-ego which we have inferred above.³³⁴

Although Freud does not argue that women's moral inferiority is an inherent feature of their femaleness, he does argue that it is an inevitable one.

Crichton-Browne's view of women as psychologically inferior to men because they lack a penis is, therefore, not far removed from Freud's view that women are psychologically inferior because they are aware of that lack. Crichton-Browne's theoretical orientation, his commitment to the theory of moral management and declared rejection of the theories of psychoanalysis, distinguishes his study from the other works of psychobiography discussed here. However, his reliance on nineteenth-century beliefs about sex-based psychological difference is a point of commonality between his text and the other studies. Even Lucile Dooley, who identifies both subjects as geniuses, qualifies Charlotte's genius as feminine and explains her writing not as an expression of conscious artistry but as the symptom of a pathological desire for her father. Despite her use of modern Freudian theory and terminology, her studies are underpinned by the nineteenth-century view of women as controlled by their sexual and reproductive urges. Clearly, despite seizing the innovative theories of Freud and his fellow psychoanalysts, these texts demonstrate an indebtedness to nineteenth-century accounts of the Brontës and perspectives on gender and psychological functioning; and they underscore psychoanalysis's own indebtedness to the nineteenth century.

These views of the sisters' work, and its relationship to their psychological and gender identities, are seemingly part of the wider contemporary characterization of women's writing as, in the words of Michael North, 'passive, sentimental, and essentially

³³⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes', in *The Freud Reader*, ed. by Peter Gay (London: Vintage, 1995), pp. 670-678 (p. 677).

conformist',³³⁵ linguistically conventional and nostalgic, and often inferior in artistic merit to the modern literature which was characterized as masculine. North identifies this view as current among the modernist avant-garde, including James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway, and the middlebrow, and among both men and women. The Brontës were extremely popular at this time; and during the nineteenth century, great pains had been taken to prove Charlotte's conventional Victorian femininity, so that she was viewed as something of a symbol for both women's writing and Victorian writing during the interwar period. It is, therefore, understandable that the so-called feminine aspects of her mind and writing should be subject to criticism at this time. So, too, is the fact that women writers, in particular, would attempt to distance themselves from her mode of writing.

Rachel Ferguson dramatizes this rejection of the Brontës as models for contemporary women authors in *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*, in which the ghostly Charlotte has a greater affinity with the Carnes' downtrodden, gauche, and unimaginative governess, Miss Martin, than with the narrator, Deirdre, a popular journalist and aspiring novelist. Alison Light observes that, earlier in the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf also rejected the qualities typically associated with women's writing, and self-consciously tried to distance herself from this allegedly emotional, melodramatic style of authorship that seemed to belong more to the Victorian past than to Woolf's present.³³⁶ Light explains:

³³⁵ North, p. 179.

³³⁶ The subtlety and complexity of Woolf's engagement with ideas surrounding feminism, women's writing, matrilineal literary inheritance, androgyny, and gender and sexual difference, in addition to the fact that she frequently reconsidered and renegotiated her opinions, make it difficult to make a case for her advocacy of androgyny as the ideal of the woman writer. It is clear, however, that Woolf thought of Charlotte Brontë's writing in terms of emotionalism, autobiography, and femininity. Her opinion is similar to that expressed by her father, as discussed in Chapter Two. On the centenary of Charlotte's birth, Woolf writes: 'she is herself the heroine of her own novels, and (if we may divide people into those who think and those who feel) that she is primarily the recorder of feelings and not of thoughts'. Virginia Woolf, 'Charlotte Brontë', *TLS*, 13 April 1916, p. 169. For a detailed discussion of the complexity of Woolf's feminism and of the variety of responses to it, see Laura Marcus, 'Woolf's Feminism and Feminism's Woolf', in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Susan Sellers, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 142-179.

she knew that women writers, “authoresses and poetesses”, were frequently patronized, infantilized as emotional creatures, read solely in terms of their autobiographies or dismissed as “artless” [...] Travelling abroad she soon dissociated herself from those writers whom she met, the faded remnants of the late-Victorian literary life, such as Janet Ross or Alice Meynell (“who somehow, made one dislike the notion of women who write,” Virginia observed in her journal, travelling in Florence in 1909).³³⁷

On the other hand, at a time when, according to North, Ernest Hemingway felt the need to justify his commendation of Gertrude Stein by describing her writing and thinking as masculine, it is unsurprising that female writers who identified with Emily would strive to emphasize what they viewed as her own masculine mental qualities. All of this may be viewed as part of what Nicola Humble, in her work on women’s middlebrow fiction, identifies as the broader interwar trend of celebrating the unwomanly woman who possesses so-called masculine qualities, including bravery, emotional restraint, and practicality, while denigrating women who are represented as stereotypically feminine. Her observation of a ‘combination of a notional feminist politics with an almost visceral contempt for women in general’ in women’s interwar middlebrow fiction has its correlative in the middlebrow psychobiographies of the Brontë family.³³⁸

This gendered criticism provides yet another demonstration of the indebtedness of interwar theories about gender, psychological health, and art, to the theories of some of their Victorian predecessors. In the interwar period, no less than in the nineteenth century, the sisters’ writings were judged according to the standard of contemporary psychological views of gender capability. The early Victorian criticism of the sisters’ supposed failure to conform to conventional gender expectations for women was replaced by interwar criticism of their supposed failure to deviate from them, but the premise was the same. Women’s psychological makeup, their intellect, experience, and facility for creative

³³⁷ Alison Light, *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants: An Intimate History of Domestic Life in Bloomsbury* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008), p. 60.

³³⁸ Humble, p. 206.

expression, were viewed as unequal to the demands of writing. The difference lies in interwar writers' rejection of those nineteenth-century constructions of the family's psychological identities that presented the sisters' psychological health as dependent on their femininity and Christian morality, instead interpreting both to be causes of psychological illness and suffering.

Lucile Dooley cites May Sinclair's biographical study, *The Three Brontës*, as an influence for her later psychoanalytic interpretation of Charlotte's attitude toward children and motherhood, and admiringly acknowledges the text as having 'come very near to the psychoanalytical view of Charlotte Brontë's character, if not of her genius'.³³⁹ Although *The Three Brontës* makes no direct reference to psychoanalysis, it employs some psychoanalytic theory and terminology, as when Sinclair refers to the 'innocent and unconscious' passion Charlotte entertained for Heger.³⁴⁰ Nor does it define itself as a specifically psychological biography; indeed, in its credulous treatment of Emily's alleged mysticism, for instance, it bears more similarity to the populist and sentimental Brontë biographies and fictional biographies than to these interwar attempts at an objective, scientific unraveling of the complexities of the family's minds.³⁴¹ However, her focus on the family's psychological functioning is clearly set forth by her statement, in the introduction to the first edition, of the supreme importance of subjective experience to the Brontës' artistic development. She explains her divergence from other writers on the family as a matter of her prioritization of the events of the inner life as opposed to the outer:

³³⁹ Lucile Dooley, 'Psychoanalysis of Charlotte Brontë, As a Type of the Woman of Genius', *American Journal of Psychology*, 31 (1920), 221-272 (p. 221). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

³⁴⁰ Sinclair, 'Introduction to Second Edition', in *The Three Brontës* (London: Hutchinson, 1914), pp. i-x (p. ii).

³⁴¹ The exception is, of course, Virginia Moore's *The Life and Eager Death of Emily Brontë*, in which, in addition to discussing Emily's psychological development, she argues that her subject was a mystic.

If I have been inclined to undervalue certain things—"the sojourn in Brussels," for instance—which others have considered of the first importance, it is because I believe that it is always the inner life that counts, and that with the Brontës it supremely counted.³⁴²

Sinclair's interest in the 'inner life' is reflected in her exploration of psychological states in much of her fiction,³⁴³ as well as her involvement with the founding and running of the eclectic Medico-Psychological Clinic of London. The clinic, founded in 1913, was, according to Theophilus Boll, the 'first and, until [...] 1920, the only public clinic in Great Britain making use of psychoanalytic therapy as a psychological medicine'.³⁴⁴ It also provided the first school in England for training in psychoanalytic therapy through its establishment of the related but separate Society for the Study of Orthopsychics Laboratory.³⁴⁵ Sinclair's quasi-professionalization in the field of psychoanalysis, and her application of some of its theory and terminology to the family; her influential discussions of the psychological causes and effects of the family's literary production; and her insistence on the connection between Charlotte's gender, psychological functioning, and literary output, make *The Three Brontës* an important foundation text for the later psychological discussion of the family in the interwar period.

Like Sinclair, Romer Wilson makes no direct reference to Freudian theory or psychoanalysis in her 1928 biography. Yet, she demonstrates a Freudian awareness of the importance of Emily's early childhood, and traces her subject's development of psychological complexes to childhood experiences. For instance, Wilson associates the recurrence of orphaned and outcast male children in Emily's poetry, and the creation of

³⁴² Sinclair, 'Introduction to First Edition', in *The Three Brontës* (London: Hutchinson, 1914), pp. 1-5 (p. 3).

³⁴³ Max Saunders, 'Sinclair, Mary Amelia St Clair (1863-1946)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, OUP (2007) <<http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/article/37966>> [accessed 23 August 2012].

³⁴⁴ Theophilus Boll, 'May Sinclair and the Medico-Psychological Clinic of London', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 106 (1962), 310-326 (p. 312).

³⁴⁵ Boll maintains that Sinclair 'coined the word "Orthopsychics"', p. 316.

Heathcliff, with what she believes to have been the childhood psychological trauma of Emily's rejection by her father. Quoting from the scene in *Wuthering Heights* in which Earnshaw tells the child Cathy he cannot love her, Wilson claims that Emily experienced a similar repulse, resulting in her sense of emotional orphaning and creating an irreparable breach between father and daughter: 'Outcast, the poor creature creeps away and weeps frightful tears in the dark, in secret; and on that night the father dies in the child's heart, and it is she who has killed him' (20). The traumas sustained in childhood, coupled with her sense of the unfairness of Branwell's position of privilege as the only male child of the household, results in, as Wilson describes it, Emily's possession by the Dark Hero, a powerful outcast male figure that represents her sense of herself. Put another way, Emily rejects her feminine identity and mentally transforms herself into a strong male character in order to contend with her perceived rejection by her father and supersession by her brother, both representatives of so-called Victorian patriarchy. Wilson associates this psychological malaise and the periods of melancholy during which Emily felt particularly rejected by her family with her periods of greatest literary productivity.

Romer Wilson, the penname of Florence Roma Muir Wilson, was a fiction writer who studied law at Girton College, Cambridge. She seems not to have had any psychoanalytic training, and, with the exception of *All Alone*, not to have written any other biographical or psychological study.³⁴⁶ However, her picture of Emily's emotional states and psychological development received praise from the practising analyst Dooley, who refers, in her own study of Emily, to 'the deep intuitive understanding displayed by Romer Wilson'; Dooley notes that although their studies differ, she found 'some theories similar

³⁴⁶ George Malcolm Johnson, 'Wilson, Florence Roma Muir (1891-1930)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, OUP (2004) <<http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/article/56950>> [accessed 2 September 2012].

to her own'.³⁴⁷ Wilson's biography, which pieces together a portrait of Emily's inner life from the internal evidence of her literature, also influenced the American writer Virginia Moore's *The Life and Eager Death of Emily Brontë*, in which Moore, following Wilson, claims that the outcast boy of Emily's poetry as well as Heathcliff were psychologically autobiographical portraits of Emily herself.

Moore, however, extends Wilson's view of Emily as psychologically hermaphroditic, but with dominant masculine qualities. She suggests that not only was Emily primarily psychologically male, but that she might have been 'a member of that beset band of women who can find their pleasure only in women' (189), a homosexual. She argues:

Psychology says that, when not physically caused, such a predilection is in most cases mentally fixed by the early adoration of a parent or one who takes the place of a parent. In Emily's case this would have been Maria, the one who mothered her when she passionately needed a mother [...]. When Maria died Emily would have instinctively searched for another as nearly like Maria as possible—and in default of others settled on Anne, a sort of diminished Maria. But, as she grew older, she would have wanted, without knowing exactly why, to love and to be loved by someone not her sister, someone more nearly matched to her own mental and spiritual nature. (195)

Moore's reasoning seems to be based on Freud's discussion of 'inverted' sexual orientation in his essay 'The Sexual Aberrations', one of the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, first published in 1905 and subsequently expanded.³⁴⁸ Her suggestion that Emily's childhood attachment to Maria as a mother substitute may have resulted in her inversion concords with Freud's theory that inversion is often the result of an experience in infancy. Her reference to Emily's masculine cast of mind as evidence of inversion also

³⁴⁷ Lucile Dooley, 'Psychoanalysis of the Character and Genius of Emily Brontë', *Psychoanalytic Review*, 17 (1930), 208-239 (p. 208).

³⁴⁸ All quotations are taken from the 1910 English translation by A. A. Brill. As it is impossible to ascertain whether Moore read this essay, let alone which edition or translation she might have read, I have chosen to quote the 1910 English edition as, according to Peter Gay, it contains the first appearance of the footnote referenced, which would have been reproduced in subsequent editions. Gay, p. 243.

corresponds with Freud's theorization of the psychological characteristics of female inverts.

Freud discredits the theory that inversion, in general, is always accompanied by psychic hermaphroditism, noting that 'in men the most perfect psychic manliness may be united with the inversion'.³⁴⁹ However, he maintains that female inversion is often accompanied by the presence of masculine qualities of mind, explaining:

psychic hermaphroditism would gain in substantiality if parallel with the inversion of the sexual object there should be at least a change in the other psychic qualities, such as in the impulses and distinguishing traits characteristic of the other sex. But such inversion of character can be expected with some regularity only in inverted women. (8)

Freud reiterates the connection between a masculine cast of mind and female inversion, asserting that '[t]he conditions in the woman are more definite; here the active inverts, with special frequency, show the somatic and psychic characters of man and desire femininity in their sexual object' (11). Moore's supposition of Emily's fixation on her surrogate mother also seems partially influenced by Freud's further explanation, in a footnote, of the genesis of inversion:

In all the cases examined we have ascertained that the later inverts go through in their childhood a phase of very intense but short-lived fixation on the woman (usually on the mother) and after overcoming it they identify themselves with the woman and take themselves as the sexual object; that is, following narcissism they look for young men resembling themselves in person who shall love them as their mother has loved them. (11)

Freud here refers to male inverts. However, he does not at all times make this explicit, using the general term 'inverts' rather than differentiating according to sex. He also claims that inverted men as well as inverted women frequently seek out sexual partners with feminine psychological characteristics. Thus, it would not be unreasonable to suppose that

³⁴⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Three Contributions to the Sexual Theory*, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Company, 1910), p. 8. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

Moore drew on this explanation for her own theory of Emily's inverted desire for a woman who would love her as her sister-mother had loved her.

Despite what seems to be an endorsement of the Freudian theory of the mechanism of homosexuality, elsewhere Moore betrays only a loose understanding of psychoanalytic theory and terminology. For instance, she incorrectly uses the term repression, which according to Freud described an unconscious process, when describing Emily's active suppression of emotions; she writes:

Meanwhile she who had repressed her desire (like a proud servant banking coals) was in love. Hopelessly in love from the evidence. At first she tried to put it out of mind, but that was useless, so she faced it: she brooded over what can only be interpreted as an actual scene. (167)

In direct opposition to Freud's atheism, but in keeping with Sinclair's earlier biography, Moore also perpetuates the theory that Emily was a mystic who factually communed with 'the Absolute' (152). Yet, Moore's insistence on the reality of Emily's spiritual experience, and on its importance to her psychological development and motivation, seems not to be a mere repetition of the sentimental excesses that accompany so much of the interwar writing on Emily. It appears, instead, to be evidence of Moore's interest in Jungian psychoanalysis, which departed from Freudian theory in, among other things, its acceptance of spiritual reality, and in anthroposophy, the spiritual movement started by Rudolf Steiner. According to Connie Geary of the Scottsville Museum,³⁵⁰ Moore is said to have visited Carl Jung at his home in Zurich. She also owned a copy of his 1937 *Psychology and Religion*; according to Moore's friend, the late Dr Charles Fry, Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia, it 'was filled with her notes on Eastern versus Western religion'.³⁵¹ The exact date of Moore's interview with Jung is

³⁵⁰ Virginia Moore was a member of the board of directors of the Scottsville Museum, which holds an incomplete collection of her writings.

³⁵¹ Connie Geary, Email Correspondence, 15 August 2012.

unknown. There appears to be no physical record of the meeting, and the author's son, John Moore, informed me that he has no recollection of his mother ever having mentioned Jung, nor does the alleged visit appear in her diary.³⁵² However, Geary speculates that the meeting occurred sometime before 1952, possibly during her travels to Europe during the 1930s or 1940s; she also notes that it was during a trip to Italy in 1936 that Moore was introduced to anthroposophy. John Moore also traces his mother's interest in what he terms 'mysticism' to the early 1930s, following her divorce from the poet, critic, and anthologist Louis Untermeyer.

The Life and Eager Death of Emily Brontë is now perhaps best remembered for Moore's misreading of the title of the poem 'Love's Farewell' as 'Louis Parensell', and her suggestion that the name may have been that of Emily's lover. Juliet Barker holds the biography up as a cautionary tale, demonstrating the dangers of attempting to interpret a life on the basis of the internal evidence of the subject's writings. She explains that in contrast, she has allowed Anne and Emily to remain 'shadowy figures' because it is 'preferable to fanciful interpretation of their fiction. Virginia Moore's misreading of "Love's Farewell" as "Louis Parensell", resulting in an elaborate theory about Emily's secret lover, is a dire warning as to where such a method can lead'.³⁵³ Lucasta Miller, who describes Moore as the author 'who committed perhaps the greatest biographical gaffe in the history of Brontë studies',³⁵⁴ also criticizes the biographer for 'the hubris of her boast that she had discovered the "irreducible [*sic*] Emily"'.³⁵⁵ Moore was, however, more tentative about the possibility of Emily having a male lover than either Barker or Miller acknowledges, introducing the evidence with the far from certain claim that 'we have

³⁵² John Moore, Email Correspondence, 23 August 2012.

³⁵³ Juliet Barker, 'Introduction', in *The Brontës* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1994; repr. London: Phoenix, 1999), xvii-xx (p. xviii).

³⁵⁴ Miller, p. 270.

³⁵⁵ Miller, p. 274.

found a way, though difficult, to believe that perhaps, in spite of all contrary evidence, it was a man, after all, whom she loved' (201-02). Despite the now evident limitations of her biographical approach, Moore's mistake and her consequent hypothesis about Louis Parensell are less significant to her portrayal of Emily than the inversion theory, to which she remains committed throughout the biography. Moore's sensitive view of homosexuality as a valid sexual orientation that could be innate as well as acquired, which is akin to the sentiment expressed by Freud in his 1915 addition to 'The Sexual Aberrations',³⁵⁶ and her sophisticated, progressive, and psychoanalytically influenced treatment of what she believed to be Emily's inversion, have been overshadowed by her better known mistake in a way that epitomizes the current dismissive attitude toward interwar Brontë literature.

Despite their uneasy relationship with the concept of the feminine genius, Dooley, Wilson, and Moore, like Sinclair, attempt to enter sympathetically into the psychological conditions of their subjects. Sinclair demonstrates an evident affection for the three sisters, criticizing the breach of Charlotte's privacy occasioned by Marion Spielmann's 1913 publication of her letters to Heger in *The Times*; defending Charlotte against insinuations, from Margaret Oliphant and Clement Shorter, that she was pathologically preoccupied with finding a husband; and expressing sympathy for the Brontës' sufferings and admiration for their genius. Although writing as a medical professional, Dooley, too,

³⁵⁶ Freud explained that 'Psycho-analytic research is most decidedly opposed to any attempt at separating off homosexuals from the rest of mankind as a group of a special character. By studying sexual excitations other than those that are manifestly displayed, it has found that all human beings are capable of making a homosexual object-choice and have in fact made one in their unconscious. [...] On the contrary, psycho-analysis considers that a choice of an object independently of its sex—freedom to range equally over male and female objects—as it is found in childhood, in primitive states of society and early periods of history, is the original basis from which, as a result of restriction in one direction or the other, both the normal and the inverted types develop. Thus from the point of view of psycho-analysis the exclusive sexual interest felt by men for women is also a problem that needs elucidating and is not a self-evident fact based upon an attraction that is ultimately of a chemical nature'. Freud, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality', in *The Freud Reader*, pp. 239-292 (p. 245).

expresses her personal fascination with the Brontës' lives and genius.³⁵⁷ Like many other interwar Brontë biographers, Dooley deems Emily to have possessed greater genius than Charlotte. However, she is unique in her appreciation of Charlotte's rigorous examination of psychological functioning in *Villette*, claiming, albeit with a problematic generalization about the Victorian period, that 'Her work in spirit belongs to the present more than to her own time, inasmuch as it sets forth psychological truths that are recognized now as they were not in 1850' (270). Wilson is critical of what she characterizes as Charlotte's conventional femininity, but this seems to be a rhetorical strategy to establish Charlotte as a foil for Emily, who possesses the masculine quality of mind, the psychological hermaphroditism, which Wilson maintains is essential to genius. She explains that, although

Gifted with extraordinary powers of observation, memory, and insight into character, Charlotte is devoid to my mind of poetic insight. She cannot see the wood for the trees, cannot grasp the Grand Idea, she has not that male streak in her without which no woman is a supreme artist, was not hermaphrodite as the great artists are. Male singleness of heart and female one-with-earthiness—conception of heaven, and oneness with life, these two things seem to me absent in Charlotte, but all of Emily. Heaven in this sense comprises Hell; life, the wind, animals, dark and light, actual being as against knowing. Being Creation, and Knowing the Creator, that is the Grand Idea. (103-04)

Wilson was a novelist and poet, and her desire to identify herself with Emily, the genius and so-called psychological hermaphrodite, is evident throughout the biography. It appears in such details as her assumption of a penname that was, like Emily's Ellis Bell, androgynous; the pains she takes to establish that she, like Emily, and in contrast to the bulk of humanity, felt singularly at home on the Yorkshire moors; and, most strikingly, her

³⁵⁷ Very little information about Dooley is available. However, it seems, from the partial bibliography of her work available through the Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing digital archive, that she had an interest in applying psychoanalytic theory to the issue of the origins and manifestations of genius. Although the studies of Charlotte and Emily seem to be the only works she, herself, wrote on the subject of artistic genius, she wrote many reviews of psychoanalytic studies of geniuses in the fields of the arts, politics, and religion. *Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing* <<http://www.p-e-p.org/>> [accessed 12 August 2012].

cultivation of a masculine narrative persona that is almost identical to her construction of Emily as the ‘Dark Hero’. It is exemplified by her assertion that:

Foreigners rarely wander here, but I, who belong to these parts, like to be alone on the moors, for I know myself then and walk with myself, hand in hand. I am a hero, my own hero, the man whom no one knows. (4-5)

Similarly, Moore identified with Emily’s artistic genius as well as with what she believed to be her mysticism. Her son recalls his mother making the comment, ‘much later [after the publication of the biography], [...] that Emily was both the highest and the deepest thinker of the Brontë sisters’. He also relates the following anecdote:

the only mention [of the Brontës] in her diary is after the book’s 1934 publication, where she refers to a dream in which she saw a “woman with raven-black hair and a very white skin and a lavender-rose mouth and great power and straightforwardness of expression—I had a feeling she might be Emily Bronte”.³⁵⁸

The dream is suggestive of the extent to which Emily gripped Moore’s imagination.

In marked contrast, Rosamond Langbridge is curiously contemptuous of Charlotte in *Charlotte Brontë: A Psychological Study*, even as she argues that her subject’s psychological functioning is the product of heredity and childhood experiences beyond her control. Langbridge is at pains to establish Patrick as the author of all Charlotte’s and her siblings’ sorrows and psychological afflictions, referring to him as ‘the invariable blot on all the pages of Charlotte Brontë’s life’ (223). However, she betrays what seems to be almost an antipathy toward her subject, accusing Charlotte of prudery, bigotry, provinciality, and spitefulness, as in the following explanation of the psychological foundations of her adult relationships:

Fear and condemnation of herself striking root deeper with her increasing years, it is obvious that, much as tramps throw stones at rich men’s cars, and a child slaps another child for having toys it cannot have, Charlotte’s spiritual discomfort began to vent itself more and more in severe and superfluous criticism of other people’s liberty. (164)

³⁵⁸ John Moore. John Moore cites 1934 as the first publication date of the biography in America, but I have not been able to locate any information about this edition, or, indeed, any edition published prior to 1936.

Comparing Charlotte to the tramp and the child, both agents of irrational rage, jealousy, destruction, and violence, Langbridge casts her subject as both victim and perpetrator.

Patsy Stoneman interprets the apparent contradiction between the sympathetic anger Langbridge expresses on Charlotte's behalf, in her discussion of Patrick's parenting and the other antecedents which resulted in her pathological behaviour, and her concurrent contempt for that behaviour and for Charlotte herself, as an expression of 'the mixture of exasperation and fascination with the Brontës which was characteristic of the interwar period'.³⁵⁹ However, it is difficult to make the case for Langbridge's 'fascination' with her subject. Little information about Langbridge is available, but it appears as though, apart from this psychological study, the Irish-born poet and fiction writer did not write any other work about the Brontës. Each of her fellow Brontë psychobiographers insists on the genius of his or her subject, and devotes a significant portion of the study to an exploration of the psychological qualities and events that helped to shape that genius. In contrast, Langbridge offers the ambivalent judgment that 'if she had not genius of intellect, [Charlotte] had great genius of character' (160), despite consistently pillorying that character for its morbid self-consciousness and intolerance of others. The biography itself is riddled with inaccuracies, and not only repeats, but embellishes, some of the most extreme stories surrounding Patrick's alleged domestic abuses. In her account of his destruction of his wife's silk dress, for instance, she offers the following speculation on the significance of the dress to Mrs Brontë: 'What matter if it were the only nice silk dress that she had ever had, perhaps her wedding dress!—the apple of her womanly eye! No, he would be firm' (15).

Langbridge does not even evince a fascination with psychology. She makes several psychoanalytically influenced interpretations of the significance of childhood or of the

³⁵⁹ Stoneman, p. 72.

symbols in Charlotte's writing, but demonstrates an evident confusion not just about psychoanalytic terminology, including repression and the unconscious, but even about the distinction between sadism and masochism. She unfavourably compares what she believes to be the Victorian approach to explaining personality, as if psychological theory and biographical practice remained static for sixty-four years, to that offered, as she sees it, by modern psychology; this is the result of her adherence to the clichéd and over-generalized view of the Victorian reticence about sexuality.³⁶⁰ She explains:

Victorian psychology only skimmed the surface of these unkind discoveries, as a gnat skims a standing pool of water. How should Mrs. Gaskell know that Charlotte's own powers of psychology were extremely incomplete? For Charlotte was not the least aware that all these finicking protestations of exorbitant requirements in the opposite sex, composed the smoke-screen of her disappointment, and that her carping and her railing merely proclaim her as a woman who had longed to charm, had failed to do so, and was now wreaking her unconscious vengeance on the sex which had denied her charm. (196)

Yet, Langbridge's discussion of Patrick's domestic behaviour is obviously indebted to the first edition of Gaskell's *Life*, and her sense of its psychological impact on his children differs very little from the sentiments expressed in the 1857 *Examiner* review. Her assertion that Charlotte's 'mind, body and health suffered' for her lack of a lover also seems to draw on nineteenth-century ideas about the causes of hysteria (6); it is part of what Stoneman sees as a wider interwar trend of reverting to 'the cruder nineteenth-

³⁶⁰ It is worth mentioning, however, that even E. F. Benson, who importantly refutes some of the common misconceptions of the Victorian period, including the idea that its mores remained relatively static until the First World War, perpetuates this clichéd view of the Victorians as sexually repressed. Comparing what he characterizes as the sexually progressive attitudes of the present to those of the past, he writes: 'certainly, on general principles, there is a great deal to be said in favour of any besom that sweeps away the cobwebs of Victorian conventionalism, which harboured such dusty rubbish as the axiom that no nice girl knew anything about anything till she was married, and that if she remained a spinster she continued to believe that babies were found under the gooseberry bushes of the kitchen-gardens of married couples'. This demonstrates how tenacious were such ideas about the Victorian period, even among the well-educated. E. F. Benson, *As We Were: A Victorian Peep Show* (London: Longmans, 1930), p. 23.

century analysis of the Brontë sisters as women who wrote because they lacked “normal” satisfactions’.³⁶¹

Like Arthur Pollock, Langbridge acknowledges the allure of the Brontës as subjects for psychoanalytic study, exclaiming ‘What a feast of exploration for the modern psychoanalyst is here in these harrowing records of suppressed and crippled childhood!’ (27). However, she seems doubtful that psychoanalytic theory could sufficiently explain the extent of the Brontës’ psychological disturbances:

in the morbid over-stimulation of mind and spirit, the under-feeding of the body, the lack of natural laughter, natural outlet, natural noise, here is a catalogue to compose complexes more far-reaching and more deeply-seated than most analysts and confessors have to unravel and oppose. (27)

What Langbridge is most fascinated with is neither the psychological functioning of Charlotte and her family, nor the promise of contemporary psychology or psychoanalysis to explain character or resolve psychological disturbance, but with exposing what she considers to be the psychologically damaging effects of Victorian cultural ideology. Her seemingly paradoxical position of sympathy for and anger towards Charlotte can be understood as part of the wider tension in her limited view of the Victorian period. She vacillates between anger at what she mistakenly considers to be the oppressive Victorian, male-dominated, Christian society that terrorized children with the threat of sin and Hell and that victimized women by impressing upon them the need to defer to men, and at the victims themselves, whose acquiescence, Langbridge claims, enabled that system to continue.

Langbridge establishes an artificial distinction between the modern biographer, who, she maintains, acknowledges the constructedness of ideas surrounding the concept of morality, and the Victorian biographer, symbolized by Gaskell, who colludes with the

³⁶¹ Stoneman, p. 71.

patriarchy by writing a biography that sanctifies Charlotte for her acceptance of her father's and her culture's decree of feminine self-sacrifice. 'Nowadays', Langbridge explains,

instead of prostrating ourselves before Mrs. Gaskell's whitewashed image, on whose snowy garment scarce one fleck of dust appears, we feel inclined to scrutinise more closely the nature of many of these martyrdoms; for, after all, there are two kinds of self-sacrifice: the first weighed, considered, then deliberately embraced as something imperatively needful for the general good; the second placidly incurred through morbid inability for criticism or self-protection. The large community of martyred mothers, wives and daughters come second under this head, and to this band of compulsory saints Charlotte belonged, not from clear choice, but from astigmatised [*sic*] necessity. Her long catalogue of moral miseries was compiled, not so much by Act of God or by the pressure of heredity, as from filial piety, that stagnant blight on character and judgment which mildewed the Victorian era, visiting alike both child and parent. Every agony she endured may be traced back directly to the man whom she most probably thought of as the Author of her Being, to her revered Papa. To his doors must be laid the ruined health and fortunes of all his children—the broken nervous systems bred by chronic underfeeding and coercion; the hopeless crippling of self-confidence, due to the Christian discipline beneath which their spirits struggled like ants beneath a heavy stone; the monotony of their existence, which enfeebled powerful personalities and inspirations, the morbidity and sadness of their lives and work. (4-5)

Patrick, as clergyman, is made to embody the prerogatives and demands of this deeply problematic conceptualization of the so-called patriarchy as well as of Evangelical Protestantism.³⁶² In a gross exaggeration of the clichés surrounding Evangelicalism, Patrick is accused of enforcing the same ascetic principles of self-denial and distrust of the inherently sinful flesh as Carus Wilson, with Langbridge asserting that 'the discipline at

³⁶² In the interests of assembling information about the author's background, it is interesting to note that, although less extreme in the measures it suggests for curbing the pernicious desires of the flesh, the sentiments Langbridge attributes to Patrick Brontë are similar to those expressed by her father, the Reverend Frederick Langbridge. In his children's book, *The Top of the Ladder* [1884], Frederick Langbridge stresses the imperative need for self-denial in order to reach the Kingdom of Heaven. While he does not suggest that children should be deprived of food or physical comforts, he stresses their inherent susceptibility to sinfulness, and portrays life as a continuous battle for the soul against selfishness. Describing as sinfulness what the interwar psychologist or psychoanalyst would describe neutrally as psychological phenomena, he explains that 'all the bad thoughts and wishes that come out of you are of the flesh. Selfishness, greediness, impurity, anger, all the low, cruel feelings that we share with the beasts—that belong to the lower part of our nature, our fleshly bodies—these we call the flesh'. And he warns that 'when you are tempted to keep for yourself the choicest fruit, the largest slice; when you are tempted to turn over and sleep just half an hour longer; [...] on these, and on all similar occasions, be sure that this enemy is stealing upon your flank: grasp sword and shield, look to the Captain, and prepare for combat to the death'. Frederick Langbridge, *The Top of the Ladder* (London: Cassell & Company, [1884]), pp. 37-38, p. 38-41.

Haworth under dear Papa [...] was scarcely less crushing than the régime of Cowan's Bridge itself' (20). Her false claim that Patrick all but starved his children, derived from an anecdote reported in the first edition of *The Life*, was already losing credence in the interwar period. Rachel Ferguson's comically inept but well-read American tourist heatedly refutes the story in *Charlotte Brontë: A Play in Three Acts*, asserting: 'That potato story is a rightdown fabrication. The Brontë girls got that story made about 'em from a hired girl they fired from the Parsonage who had it in for Reverend Brontë' (13).³⁶³ In his 1932 biography, *Charlotte Brontë*, E. F. Benson also complains about the persistence of the potato story and other anecdotes about Patrick's alleged abusive conduct towards his family, explaining:

these stories are believed by many Brontë students to this day, for regardless of the fact that she [Gaskell] cancelled them, as being untrue, biographers who have followed her have had no hesitation in disinterring such discredited stuff from her unexpurgated editions and giving it renewed currency with comments.³⁶⁴

Langbridge's attempt to portray this distorted view of Patrick's behaviour as representative of Evangelical principles of conduct is just as misguided. Ian Bradley, who discusses the lavish dinners hosted by Evangelicals, argues that despite their emphasis on the importance of self-denial, 'very few of them were teetotallers', and they were not abstemious when it came to food.³⁶⁵

Langbridge's uninformed and vitriolic attack on the Brontës as supposed representatives of the Victorian and the Evangelical indicates that her interest in the family only extends to their fitness for use as object lessons, illustrative of what she deems the

³⁶³ In the play, however, it is unclear whether Patrick actually consigned the children to a vegetarian diet. Emily complains 'Oh, they never thrashed us, but marks indelible have been left on our half-fed, stunted bodies' (42). However, as she includes in her list of sufferers herself, Charlotte, Maria, and Elizabeth, but not Anne or Branwell, it is entirely possible she was referring to the semi-starvation she and her sisters endured at Cowan's Bridge and not at the hands of their father.

³⁶⁴ E. F. Benson, *Charlotte Brontë* (London: Longmans, 1932), p. 15. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

³⁶⁵ Ian Bradley, *The Call to Seriousness: The Evangelical Impact on the Victorians* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976; repr. Oxford: Lion Hudson PLC, 2006), p. 25-26.

psychologically crippling effects of Victorian gendered learning and Evangelical Protestantism. ‘Perpetual and unreasoning Fear’, she claims

is the groundwork of Evangelical Protestantism: Fear of Beauty, fear of criticism or comparison, fear of initiative and fear of self-expression. [...] It is, therefore, not surprising that the most salient factors of Charlotte’s life and character were ingrained timidity and fear. Not only her life and character, but all her writings show the impress of deep Fear. Fear paralysed her health and crippled her powers of attraction and her sympathies. She was afraid of strangers, of the impression that she made, of all new undertakings. She was starved for Beauty, and terribly afraid of it. (158)

Langbridge’s misconceptions about Patrick’s parenting, Evangelicalism, and Victorian culture lead her to ignore, perhaps deliberately, the significance of Patrick’s role in fostering his children’s creativity and interest in literature and the visual arts. Far from being ‘starved for Beauty’ and impressed with the sinfulness of self-expression, Charlotte and her siblings were given the opportunities to enjoy both due to their father’s liberal beliefs about education and the arts. In contrast to many Evangelicals who disapproved of reading fiction, Patrick purchased novels and poetry for the household, and permitted his children to use the circulating library at Keighley. According to Charlotte’s letter of 4 July 1834, addressed to Ellen Nussey and reprinted in *The Life*, he also permitted his children to read the works of Shakespeare and Byron; Charlotte’s injunction, ‘Now don’t be startled at the names of Shakspeare [*sic*] and Byron. Both these were great men, and their works are like themselves’ (99), indicates how morally dubious both authors were considered to be, and attests to the intellectual freedom Patrick encouraged at the Parsonage. Patrick was also, by his own admission, interested and involved in his children’s early literary play. The following statement demonstrates Patrick’s desire to foster his children’s self-expression, his appreciation of their intellectual and creative precocity, and, given that the children invited him to participate in their imaginative play, the extent of their trust in this man who was frequently characterized as a cold and harsh parent. He relates:

When mere children, as soon as they could read and write, Charlotte and her brother and sisters used to invent and act little plays of their own, in which the Duke of Wellington, my daughter Charlotte's hero, was sure to come off conqueror; when a dispute would not unfrequently arise amongst them regarding the comparative merits of him, Buonaparte, Hannibal, and Caesar. When the argument got warm, and rose to its height, as their mother was then dead, I had sometimes to come in as arbitrator, and settle the dispute according to the best of my judgment. Generally, in the management of these concerns, I frequently thought that I discovered signs of rising talent, which I had seldom or never before seen in any of their age. . . . A circumstance now occurs to my mind which I may as well mention. When my children were very young, when, as far as I can remember, the oldest as about ten years of age, and the youngest about four, thinking that they knew more than I had yet discovered, in order to make them speak with less timidity, I deemed that if they were put under a sort of cover I might gain my end; and happening to have a mask in the house, I told them all to stand and speak boldly from under cover of the mask. (46-47)

Patrick also engaged a drawing instructor for his children, and Charlotte, by her own admission, had the freedom to employ her time, after giving lessons to her sisters, in drawing, reading, and writing; as she tells Nussey in a letter of 21 July 1832,

In the morning, from nine o'clock till half-past twelve, I instruct my sisters, and draw; then we walk till dinner-time. After dinner I sew till tea-time, and after tea I either write, read, or do a little fancy work, or draw, as I please. (91)

Each of the preceding examples appears in the first edition of *The Life*, meaning that Langbridge, who frequently criticizes Gaskell's biographical approach, could not but be aware of them.

Although she anachronistically and problematically compares Patrick's parenting practices to those of Victorian fathers more generally, Virginia Moore acknowledges the uniqueness and progressiveness of Patrick's habit of discussing adult topics, including politics, with his male and female children, and she stresses the air of freedom it created within the household:

Mr. Brontë never tempered the wind for his lambs; their soft curling wool might have been flayed off their backs, for all of him—but they were hardy, they developed. The knottiest political problems were discussed in their presence—indeed *with* them, as if they were Mr. Brontë's peers, as they were. Branwell might have had this undilute [*sic*] education in many an early-Victorian home; but for girls it was rare. Charlotte and

Emily, profiting by unrestriction [*sic*], gave no especial thanks; they took freedom for granted, like native air, and so did not inhale it into their lungs shallowly, with suspicion, but unconsciously, in easy draughts, and were the more deeply impregnated. (61-62)

Although Lucile Dooley views Patrick as the cause of Charlotte's and her siblings' neuroses, she, like Moore, credits his unusual parenting with creating the conditions that allowed the children to develop their artistic expression. She explains that

the untrammelled intellectual stimulus of that unusual home, free from many conventional restraints, furnished the means of self-expression and the chance to achieve work of an artistic merit that procured for two of them lasting fame. These same influences, combined with a poor heredity, produced neuroses or other disease in all. (270)

In suggesting that he limited his children's self-expression, Langbridge's portrayal of Patrick is thus clichéd even in comparison to other works of interwar Brontë psychobiography, most of which present him as responsible for Charlotte's and her siblings' psychological malaise.

Ironically, many of the most significant examples adduced by the Brontës' interwar psychobiographers, in the interests of revising what they implicitly, and often explicitly, represented as the outmoded Victorian conception of the family's minds, have their foundation in the psychological commentary provided by Elizabeth Gaskell and other nineteenth- and early twentieth-century commentators. Sinclair, Dooley, Wilson, Moore, and Langbridge utilize psychological theory, and psychoanalysis in particular, to explain the conditions that allowed the Brontës to produce works of genius; to speculate about the impact of family life on creative ability; and to detect evidence of the sisters' psychological functioning and malfunctioning in their novels and poetry. While there are evident differences between their approaches and results, the main source of the similarity of their content is their shared reliance on *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, not just for the events of the family's lives, but for Gaskell's interpretation of their significance. Gaskell's

aforementioned treatment of what she characterizes as the Brontës' difficult childhood, the psychological dangers of Charlotte's adolescent fantasizing, her alleged preoccupation with love, and her continual self-denial provide the contours for the psychological studies of the interwar period. In particular, the chain of association Gaskell forges between Charlotte's upbringing, her abnormal sensitivity, the compensatory motivation of her artistry, and her frequent artistic transcription of life events would prove influential. This association is exemplified by Gaskell's discussion of Charlotte's experiences as a teacher at Roe Head, and it resonates throughout the literature of the interwar period.

Gaskell quotes from a letter, addressed to her by Mary Taylor, on the subject of Charlotte's recourse to fantasy as compensation for boredom and unhappiness while teaching. Mary relates that

She seemed to have no interest or pleasure beyond the feeling of duty, and, when she could get, used to sit alone, and "make out." She told me afterwards, that one evening she had sat in the dressing-room until it was quite dark, and then observing it all at once, had taken sudden fright. (106)

Gaskell breaks the continuity of Mary's letter to insert the famous passage of *Jane Eyre* in which the child Jane suffers a fit and subsequent collapse after taking fright in the red room; she assures her readers that there was 'No doubt she remembered this well when she described a similar terror getting hold upon Jane Eyre' (106). In the passage quoted, explicit reference is made to Jane's shaken nerves prior to the collapse: 'prepared as my mind was for horror, shaken as my nerves were by agitation, I thought the swift-darting beam was a herald of some coming vision from another world' (106). If, as Gaskell claims, Charlotte's experience provided her with the material of her art, then the reader must assume that Charlotte's own nerves were shaken prior to this experience of fright. Gaskell thus connects Charlotte's nervous sensitivity with her receptivity to artistic inspiration in a manner consonant with what Shelley Trower, in her study of the Aeolian harp as a

Coleridgean metaphor for artistic consciousness, describes as the Romantic idea of the artist's nerves as both sensitive and responsive to external stimuli. Trower, however, identifies a shift in this idea of vibrating nerves at the end of the eighteenth century, from one of inspiration and artistic creation to one of mental pathology. She explains that

As medical writers increasingly viewed nervous vibrations as a cause of pain and illness, sensitivity and harmony began in literary descriptions around the turn of the century to give way to trembling and convulsions, the vibratory movements of nervousness and suffering.³⁶⁶

Gaskell's representation of Charlotte's mental state combines both the earlier and the later views of nervous vibrations to create a portrayal of artistic but also pathological sensitivity.

In a less accusatory way than expressed by the *Examiner* reviewer, Gaskell too portrays Charlotte as one who is abnormally sensitive, susceptible to mental suffering, and easily and deeply affected by what might have been viewed by others as inconsequential. She supports this view by quoting from a letter in which Charlotte herself expresses keen awareness that her 'miserable and wretched touchiness of character' allows 'things that nobody else cares for, [to] enter into my mind and rankle there like venom. I know these feelings are absurd, and therefore I try to hide them, but they only sting the deeper for concealment' (109-110). This idea that the Brontë family was afflicted with a sensitivity of mind or constitution that would have made them unhappy regardless of any circumstances external to that of their functioning as a family was clearly influential in the interwar period. It resurfaces even in Elizabeth Southwart's guidebook, *Brontë Moors & Villages From Thornton to Haworth*, in which she asserts that

If indeed that little family at the parsonage had nothing but tears and heartbreak, without a smile or a moment's joy, the village was not wholly to blame. They were physically frail, and they had an absorbed, and studious, though unjustly abused father, who, not without reason, found it difficult to understand this strange brood around him. They were abnormally sensitive, things which to a healthy girl would

³⁶⁶ Shelley Trower, 'Nerves, Vibration and the Aeolian Harp', *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, 54 (2009) <<http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/038761ar>> [accessed 21 January 2013] (para. 2 of 31).

have meant temporary annoyance were to them positive torture—the price often paid for nerves so ready to vibrate. (109-110)

However, whereas the *Examiner* reviewer for the most part passes over the issue of the Brontës' literary production, mentioning Charlotte's genius at several points, but asserting that 'of her genius it is superfluous to speak' (228), Southwart explicitly links the family's mental abnormality with their capacity for artistic production. Their 'nerves so ready to vibrate', which make them susceptible to mental suffering, are here presented as an indication of artistic sensitivity in a way that is indebted to Gaskell's treatment of Charlotte's nervousness.

However, once more taking up Mary's letter, Gaskell makes the connection between Charlotte's artistry and mental pathology even more explicit. She quotes Mary's description of the psychological aftermath of Charlotte's frightening experience: "From that time," Mary adds, "her imaginations became gloomy or frightful; she could not help it, nor help thinking. She could not forget the gloom, could not sleep at night, nor attend in the day" (106-107). In the third edition, Gaskell follows this passage with the insertion of another paragraph from Mary's letter, one which makes Charlotte's habit of fantasizing appear not just to disturb her peace of mind and ability to concentrate, but actually to dangerously weaken her grasp on reality. Mary seems to describe Charlotte's experience of an auditory hallucination while fantasizing alone:

She told me that one night, sitting alone, about this time, she heard a voice repeat these lines:

'Come thou high and holy feeling,
Shine o'er mountain, flit o'er wave,
Gleam like light o'er dome and shieling.—'

There were eight or ten more lines which I forget. She insisted that she had not made them, that she had heard a voice repeat them. It is possible that she had read them, and unconsciously recalled them. They are not in the volume of poems which the sisters published. She repeated a verse of Isaiah, which she said had inspired them, and which I have forgotten. Whether the lines were recollected or invented,

the tale proves such habits of sedentary, monotonous solitude of thought, as would have shaken a feebler mind. (443)

If the strength of Charlotte's mind was, as Mary suggests, the only preventive for the development of some more severe mental illness or the loss of her reasoning faculties, Gaskell reveals that this strength of mind was precarious, dependent as it was on Charlotte's vigilance and self control.

Gaskell quotes Charlotte's letter, of the same period, to Ellen Nussey, in which, as Lyndall Gordon interprets it, she expresses her sense of guilt and growing anxiety about the habit, which she does not explicitly name, of fantasizing.³⁶⁷ She confides

I have some qualities that make me very miserable, some feelings that you can have no participation in—that few, very few, people in the world can at all understand. I don't pride myself on these peculiarities. I strive to conceal and suppress them as much as I can; but they burst out sometimes, and then those who see the explosion despise me, and I hate myself for days afterwards. (109)

Charlotte's response to the concerns Southey articulates about her wellbeing has the same texture as this letter to Nussey, possibly indicating the immediacy in her mind of what Gordon characterizes as her distressing struggle to decide whether to remain in or to extricate herself from her childhood fantasies. As before mentioned, Southey cautions, in a vein similar to that of Crichton-Browne's 'Psychical Diseases of Early Life', that habitual fantasizing could become addictive, leading the fantasist to develop a greater investment in the fictional world and to lose her moorings in the real. Charlotte responds with the same protestations that she 'carefully avoid[s] any appearance of pre-occupation and eccentricity' (119), and that she tries to 'deny' herself the pleasures of fantasizing. Charlotte's fears about the morality of her investment in the world of fantasy and about appearing peculiar or preoccupied with it seem to betray an understanding of the symptoms

³⁶⁷ For a detailed discussion of Charlotte's fears about her continued reliance, while a teacher at Roe Head, on the Angrian fantasies of childhood, see Lyndall Gordon's *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994; repr. London: Vintage, 1995), pp. 52-67.

of moral insanity, and a fear lest she be thought afflicted with it. Prichard, who often notes that the morally insane have peculiar behavioural and personality traits that mark them out from the sane, also records the findings of a M. Georget, who claims

that individuals predisposed to mental disease by a faulty education or by previous attacks, have often continued for a long time, or perhaps even during their whole lives, to attract observation by caprices in their deportment, by something eccentric in their manner and habits of life, by an ill-regulated fondness for pursuits of the fancy, and the mere productions of the imagination. (23)

Yet, even if contemporary readers were unfamiliar with the late eighteenth/early nineteenth-century understanding of nervous vibrations or the symptomatology of moral insanity, Gaskell's association of Charlotte with the poet William Cowper could leave no ambiguity about the biographer's sense of her subject's mental instability and its relationship to her art. Gaskell immediately follows Mary's letter with the observation that 'there is a despondency in some of her [Charlotte's] expressions, that too sadly reminds one of some of Cowper's letters' (107). She thereby links, as artists, Charlotte, with her depressive states, religious melancholy, and experience of what she considered to be divine messages, with a poet whose mental sufferings and extreme religious melancholy led to periods of insanity and to multiple suicide attempts.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁸ While clearly implying a degree of mental imbalance, Gaskell's comparison of Charlotte to Cowper may have also been intended to enhance the sense of Charlotte's Christian devotion that is cultivated throughout the biography. George Cheever's suggestively titled *Lectures on the Life, Genius, and Insanity of Cowper*, published just one year prior to Gaskell's *Life*, refutes the idea, which must have been widespread enough to require a refutation, that Cowper's 'religious anxiety' was responsible for, or a manifestation of, his bouts of mental illness and multiple suicide attempts. He explains that Cowper's writings 'show that religious anxiety had nothing to do with exciting Cowper's derangement, or producing it at its origin, or exasperating it when developed; but, on the contrary, that the suicidal despair, which was the result of a complication of distresses of mind, heart, sensibilities, and nervous system, from which all religious impressions were absolutely excluded, was itself, when God had spared his life, the overruled and merciful occasion of his first salutary, deep conviction of sin; was indeed the cause of an entire change in the position of his being, such a change as brought him at length to a calm, submissive resting on the bosom of his Saviour, a release from darkness into the light of heaven, and a serene enjoyment and exercise both of reason and faith'. Charlotte's religious melancholy might therefore have suggested to Victorian readers that although she did experience mental anguish, her faith in God and fear of offending him were additional safeguards against becoming insane. George B. Cheever, D. D., *Lectures on the Life, Genius, and Insanity of Cowper* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1856), p. 126.

The precedent set by Gaskell for the association of the Brontës' psychological malaise and instability, their perception of life experiences, and the transformation of those perceptions into works of literature is discernible in the psychobiographies of the interwar period. In what seems an evident appropriation of Gaskell's claims about the autobiographical nature of the red room scene, Romer Wilson claims that the passage was actually Charlotte's record of Emily's traumatic childhood experience. Wilson maintains that the repetition of the imagery of bondage and imprisonment in Emily's poetry is a reflection of this childhood experience of being imprisoned in the room in which her mother died and her subsequent development of a prison complex. She explains:

I believe that Aunt Branwell, in a misguided attempt to correct Emily, shut the poor child up one winter's afternoon in the room where Mrs. Brontë had died. The light began to fail, and Emily began to think of the mother she could not remember. I believe she dreaded to imagine the dead returned, angel-dead her mother would be to her. A natural beam from some transient lamp carried through the churchyard pierced the un-curtained windows. Emily shrieked and had a species of fit in the midst of which Maria came to her, and in her half-consciousness Maria's form and tender words seemed the fulfilment of a vision. Maria's voice had the strange cadence of a voice heard through dreams. (29-30)

Although she prefaces her speculation about the process of Emily's imprisonment, semi-loss of consciousness, and subsequent dream-like encounter with Maria with the defense that the idea was originated by 'an eminent psychologist' (27), and that part of her theory has been supported by another individual familiar with psychological theory, 'one who understands these things' (29), as she does not divulge the identities of these experts, Gaskell's biography remains a likely source.

Similarly, although she employs, in a vague and largely incorrect way, some of the concepts associated with psychoanalytic theory, including repression, the symbolism of dreams, and, more broadly, the possibility of reading elements of a literary text symbolically in such a way as to perform a psychoanalytic reading of its author,

Langbridge also seems to be following Gaskell's precedent. However, Langbridge escalates the import of Gaskell's claims about *Jane Eyre*, and represents the novel as less a consciously produced work of art than an unwittingly produced record of psychological trauma. She explains that:

Jane Eyre, that most poignant and autobiographical of all her books, is full of indications of the mental terrors she endured, which, repressed with Brontë harshness, broke out in harrowing dreams and nightmares which pursued her all through life, and rife with morbid imaginings of hidden wraiths and spectres. I feel sure that Rochester's mad wife was the expressed symbol of a morbid dread of Mme. Héger's [*sic*] spying and Charlotte's jealousy of her. It will be remembered how Madame used to haunt the Brontë's [*sic*] bedsides when she thought they were asleep, overlooking their small possessions, and peeping in the pockets of the dresses they had laid aside; and I believe the fear of being spied upon, and the knowledge of these nocturnal visits coupled with the instinctive fear which is in rivalry, bred subconsciously in Charlotte's brain, producing the insane image of Mrs. Rochester, who visited Jane's bedside on her wedding-morning, and hung over her with goblin gestures and grimaces as she woke. (158-59)

Yet, a more surprising potential inheritance from Gaskell is Langbridge's claim that Charlotte, Emily, and Anne suffered from a sexual fixation on their father and brother.

It is possible that Langbridge's theory is partially derived from Lucile Dooley's psychoanalytic study of Charlotte, written nine years prior to her own. Aware of Gaskell's interpretation of the red room scene (242), Dooley reads *Jane Eyre* as a subconscious expression of Charlotte's frustrated desire not for Monsieur Heger or for some ideal male lover, but for her father. Dooley traces Charlotte's neurosis, self-repression, and habitual feelings of inferiority, to a father complex, explaining:

This infantile fixation upon him, strengthened and stiffened by the narrow circumstances of her life and by each succeeding shock, grounded in a quick and sensitive nature, proved an effectual barrier, ever afterward, to normal adjustment to an external world, and normal growth of the deepest emotion of the soul up to new and more serviceable objects. (231)

It is because of this father complex, Dooley claims, that Charlotte falls in love with Heger, a man who shares his emotional unpredictability, among other characteristics, and who is

similarly unavailable to her. When Heger ceases to write to her on her return to Haworth, she is denied the opportunity of self-expression that the correspondence provided her, and, Dooley argues, a ‘fresh conflict [...] rent her, demanding a repression that was almost beyond her strength’ (255) (Dooley views this conflict as part of the original father complex). Charlotte’s frustrated impulses ultimately find vent in her literary productions.

As Dooley explains:

The pent-up emotional energy which was denied outlet here must necessarily find other outlet, or destroy the unity of the personality to which it belonged. It is this emotion, this energy of love and life, the mating and reproductive urge, brought to its maturity by the experiences the woman had just passed through, that was transmitted to her work. (255-56)

In Dooley’s assessment, Charlotte ‘found her full power through the blocking up of all normal paths to satisfaction and happiness’ (256).

However, if Langbridge used Dooley’s work as a model for her own, she evidently entirely misunderstood Dooley’s view of the mechanism of Charlotte’s fixation on her father. Dooley explains this as a result of Charlotte’s childhood attempt to supply the place of her dead mother, and to act as wife to her father and mother to her siblings, including Branwell. She writes:

Her after life, however, would be proof enough, to one who has studied the neurotic type to which she so fully conforms, that her feeling toward her father and sisters and brothers was precociously developed, that she projected herself into a somewhat grown-up situation albeit in a perfectly childlike way, and that she suffered from strong conflicts ever afterward because this situation was too firmly fixed to melt and flow into the wider forms that should come with growing life. She was little wife and mother, in feeling, and yet she was repulsed by the distant coldness and self-absorption of the chief object of her solicitous love and care. (229)

Without recapitulating any of this explanation, Langbridge claims that Charlotte and her sisters developed not infantile, but adolescent fixations, and she extends the scope of their pathological love to include Branwell. ‘In Freudian terms,’ she writes,

both Branwell and their father had so obsessed their adolescent minds, that nothing short of a complete upheaval in time, space and scene could accomplish a “transfer” of affection to any other man. It is at least significant that of these three passionate souls two of them died unmarried and apparently unwooed, while the third waited till she was nearly forty to change her maiden state. (82)

It seems, rather, that Langbridge’s theory is rooted not in Dooley’s study or even in modern psychoanalytic theory, but in Gaskell’s aforementioned insistence that Charlotte’s and her sisters’ male characters were drawn from the life.

It is worth repeating that Gaskell connected Charlotte’s writing, even that which was perceived to be coarse, to her life experience by portraying her subject as a sort of amanuensis to her own brother, to Mary Taylor’s brothers, and to the rough men of Yorkshire, explaining:

She saw few men; and among these few were one or two with whom she had been acquainted since early girlhood, [...] who talked before her, if not to her, with as little reticence as Rochester talked to Jane Eyre. (401)

As part of her biographical strategy of fusing Charlotte’s life to her fiction, discussed in Chapter Two, Gaskell also fostered a connection between Patrick Brontë and the Reverend Helstone of *Shirley*; she appropriates the lines of the novel to describe the characteristics of her subject’s father, and attributes to him some of Helstone’s peculiarities, including his disdain for marriage. Even in her analysis of Charlotte’s reply to Hartley Coleridge, whom she mistakenly identifies as Wordsworth, Gaskell forges a link between the male characters of Charlotte’s novels, and, in this instance, the male narrative voice Charlotte assumes, and the men around her, particularly her brother. Explaining that Charlotte wanted to encourage her correspondent to think she was male, Gaskell writes:

in consequence, possibly, [she] assumed something of the flippancy which was likely to exist in her brother’s style of conversation, from whom she would derive her notions of young manhood, not likely, as far as refinement was concerned, to be improved by the other specimens she had seen, such as the curates whom she afterwards represented in “*Shirley*”. (142)

Following Gaskell's example, Langbridge explains the male characters in the novels of all three sisters as their obsessive reproductions of the characteristics of the two most important men in their lives:

it seems that into the composition of any man who was to find favour in Charlotte's fault-finding eyes, there must inevitably enter two well-known brands of perfect masculinity, the Rev. Patrick and the Branwell Brontë brand, for the heroes of every Brontë novel are a blend of either one man or the other, or a mixture of the two. All have the pettifogging tyranny of the Victorian father, and the Victorian only son. As Mr. Rochester is transcendental Branwell, with his "coarse" bygone amours and theatrical remorse, his Olympian damns and virile thunderings, so St. John Rivers in his tyrannical evangelism, his cold, harsh dominance, his torpid Christian love-making is Mr. Brontë *père*; while the horrible John Reed is once more the incipient Branwell—Branwell in his too-well-remembered part of spoilt and favourite child. Heathcliff is Branwell, the sweet Mr. Weston of *Agnes Grey* is Anne's conception of her revered papa; the monstrous Huntingdon of *Wildfell Hall* the ever-useful Branwell (as Charlotte herself tells us), while both the heroes of *Villette* and the *Professor* are of the popular Papa-Branwell-Héger blend. (82-83)

Undoubtedly, Gaskell would have been horrified to learn that her identification of Patrick and Branwell as two of the principal models for the sisters' male characters, intended as part of her defense against accusations of immorality and sexual preoccupation, would later be used by Langbridge to support her theory of the sisters' incestuous fixation on the men of the Brontë household.

In the psychological assessments of the Brontës published during the interwar period, the desire to revise the nineteenth-century view of the psychological functioning of the family is evident. The discoveries of Freud and the attendant popularization of psychoanalysis and other forms of psychology may be viewed as catalysts for the writing of many of these works. However, another important motivation, as demonstrated by the majority of the Brontës' interwar psychobiographers, was the opportunity to reject what they perceived to be the values of the Victorian past and the criteria by which psychological health was defined. On the other hand, the influence of Victorian psychological ideas about the nature of women and their ability to write are evident in

these works, and perhaps the most discernible influence on these texts is Elizabeth Gaskell. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, and the nineteenth-century psychological perspectives by which it was underpinned, provided the groundwork for the psychological interpretations of the interwar period. This uneasy negotiation between a rejection of the Victorian past and an indebtedness to it is characteristic of the general interwar engagement with the Brontës. With little understanding of the distinctive characteristics of the family, of their writing, or of the time in which they lived, interwar writers imagined the Brontës as representatives of a clichéd version of the Victorian. The legacy of this metonymic view of the Brontës is evident today, even in those works attempting to demythologize the family. Writing in 2001, Lucasta Miller claims that

It was exactly the combination of romantic tragedy with ordinariness which made Charlotte so accessible a heroine, as her experiences really did mirror those of thousands of readers, even if her literary talents were unique. Because Gaskell had marginalized Charlotte's writing, which made her extraordinary, in favor of her domestic life, which was comparatively unremarkable, it was possible to see her as an Everywoman.³⁶⁹

Miller's view of Charlotte's life as representative of Victorian women's domestic experience is flawed by the same uncritical acceptance of Gaskell's account of Charlotte's conscientious prioritization of household and caring duties to literary work that is evident in interwar psychobiography. In the same way, her belief that *The Life* marginalizes Charlotte's writing reflects not a critical engagement with the biography, which stresses Charlotte's preference for writing over the domestic duties she feels a moral obligation to fulfill, and which consistently presents her writing as a vocation rather than an occupation, but a simplistic view of Gaskell's work as a Victorian biographer.

³⁶⁹ Miller, p. 99.

Chapter Four

Portraiture, Perception, and Posterity: Re-visioning the Group Portrait in Interwar Brontë

Fictional Biography

In his 1932 biography, *Charlotte Brontë*, E. F. Benson considered the effects of a seemingly very different form of interwar engagement with the Brontës, the hagiographic:

A fervour of excitement, almost a religious enthusiasm, seems often to inspire the pens of those who write about the Brontës, and we find that under the spell and fascination of their subject they are apt to become a little careless about facts and very prolific in fancy. Usually they select one of the sisters as the particular object of their adoration: there are Emily-ites; there are Charlotte-ites; there are, faintly and less fervently, Anne-ites, each of whom sets up a golden image of its goddess and omits the feet of clay. In a minor degree there are those who espouse the cause of the unhappy brother Branwell, and seek to sponge off a little of the blackness with which all the rest unanimously daub him. But this partisanship, with all its fanatical suppressions and inventions, tends to defeat its own object, and, instead of elucidating, only succeeds in piling up round the object of its devotion cartloads of apocryphal rubbish which were better away, and while it decks the adored image with highly coloured robes of splendour, obscures its figure and its face. Charlotte and Emily alike lose all power of movement under the hieratic robes into which they have been thrust: they have become, in certain of these books, as doll-like as Madonnas decked out for ecclesiastical festival by Sisters of Charity, and, under this pious decoration of rouge and jewels and haloes, are stiffened into immobility. (x-xi)

In addition to obscuring the details of the family's lives and falsifying the historical record, Benson argues, the hagiographical agenda pursued by many Brontë biographers had a constraining effect on the sisters themselves. It silenced their voices, denied them the expression of their unique individuality, and ultimately transformed them from complex human subjects into mute and mythic representations of femininity, into golden goddesses and 'doll-like [...] Madonnas'. As demonstrated in the preceding chapter, the Brontës' interwar psychobiographers sought to remedy the more laudatory portrayals of the family by representing them as victims and perpetrators of what they deemed the psychologically damaging beliefs of the Victorian past. However, they rendered the family in ways that

were just as reductive and limiting. In their efforts to favourably contrast the attitudes of their own present, the psychobiographers portrayed the Brontës as representatives of a clichéd and predominantly false view of the Victorian period. The sisters, particularly Charlotte, were removed from their pedestals and regarded not as goddesses worthy of worship but as icons reflecting the emotional suffering and mental disease wrought by Victorian culture. Benson's metaphor of the transposition of the once-living Brontës into inanimate art objects, to describe the obfuscating and stultifying effects of those works of biography that sought to render the family according to predetermined types, is particularly felicitous; it illuminates a key preoccupation of the interwar engagement with the Brontës.

In contrast to the interpretive fixities offered by those overtly venerating or debunking modes of biographical representation, the Brontës' interwar fictional biographers offered a more fluid approach to exploring the psychological identities and experiences of the family. Perhaps counter-intuitively, this is achieved through their fictionalization of Branwell's creation of the now-iconic Brontë group portrait [**Figure 2**], a work that inscribed the bodies of his siblings on canvas, and, as the only known group portrait of the three surviving sisters, decisively determined the way in which posterity would visualize them. It may seem as though this use of portraiture to reveal aspects of the psychological characteristics, relationships, and functioning of the family represents a return to Victorian modes of understanding the mind through the interpretation of the appearance of the body, as in the pseudoscientific methods of physiognomy or phrenology, for example. However, the purpose to which the portrait is put in these works of fiction reflects a more decisive rejection of Victorian psychological belief than is apparent in the interwar psychobiographies.

As discussed in the preceding chapter, those works relied on Victorian constructions of the mind even while they employed the contemporarily popular theories of psychoanalysis. Ironically, given their determination to distance themselves from it by discrediting it, they reflect as much continuity with as divergence from the Victorian past. In contrast, the Brontës' fictional biographers seem to take as their starting point Elizabeth Gaskell's assertion of the psychologically revelatory qualities of the portrait in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, the Victorian text that codified what Lucasta Miller terms 'the Brontë myth', and that provided the basis for most of the fictionalizations of the interwar period. Yet, rather than overtly rejecting Gaskell's interpretation, the fictional biographers allow their characters to attempt to operate within the framework of her Victorian belief in the transparency of human character in order to demonstrate the unreliability of her approach. In each of the texts discussed, emphasis is placed on the unnarratability, due to the inherent unknowability, of the mind of a human subject, and this is achieved through the motif of the flawed or frustrated portrait.

The National Portrait Gallery was admittedly 'established with the criteria that the Gallery was to be about history, not about art, and about the status of the sitter, rather than the quality or character of a particular image considered as a work of art'.³⁷⁰ By virtue of its presence in that institution, the Brontë group portrait was, and arguably is, viewed in the light of an historical document, an object that adds to our collection of facts about the family. Yet, in the fictional biographies, it functions as a symbol of misunderstanding and uncertainty. It is presented as a work of fiction as opposed to fact. In this respect, the Brontës' fictional biographers demonstrate a more nuanced and sensitive understanding of the relation of the family to questions of psychology, identity, and historical significance

³⁷⁰ 'Gallery History', National Portrait Gallery, <<http://www.npg.org.uk/about/history.php>>, [Accessed 20 June 2013].

than did the factual biographers, who implied that the Brontës were ultimately knowable, through Freudian theory, the collation of historical records, or other means. Despite their middlebrow status, these texts share the Modernist understanding of the self as fragmented and unknowable, and of the historical record as shaped by reticence, loss, destruction, and the selectivity of the historian. Their approach to narrating the inner experience of the Brontë family is conceptually, if not stylistically, akin to that of the narrator of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), itself part novel, part fictional biography of Woolf's friend and lover, Vita Sackville-West, and part exploration of the conventions and limitations of biography. Meditating on identity, consciousness, and memory's ability to upset one's experience of time as linear, the narrator observes that

if there are (at a venture) seventy-six different times all ticking in the mind at once, how many different people are there not—Heaven help us—all having lodgement at one time or another in the human spirit? Some say two thousand and fifty-two. So that it is the most usual thing in the world for a person to call, directly they are alone, Orlando? (if that is one's name) meaning by that, Come, come! I'm sick to death of this particular self. I want another.³⁷¹

Human personality is, as Woolf playfully exposes, complex, shifting, multiplicative, and sometimes unfathomable even to its possessor, let alone to outside observers. The fictional biographers of the interwar period share this view. They reject the assumption that a two-dimensional image could reflect psychological truths, as Gaskell and some of her contemporaries believed, or what may be termed biographical certainties, as the Brontës' factual biographers implied. They deny that the group portrait ultimately reflects anything more than Branwell's impression of the physical appearance of his sisters, mediated by the idiosyncrasies of his own psychological functioning.

By portraying the siblings as unknowable to one another and to posterity, they create the literary analogues of Basil Taylor's contemporaneous painting, *The Brontë*

³⁷¹ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, ed. by Rachel Bowlby (Oxford: OUP, 2008), pp. 293-294.

Sisters, painted prior to his suicide in 1935 [Figure 3].³⁷² Taylor's painting makes no attempt at naturalistic representation. With one sister in profile, one facing away from the viewer, and the third painted without any discernible facial features, he provides no clues to the individual identities of the three figures. The purpose of his painting is not documentary. Instead, it offers an impression of the sisters' experience; it evokes three inscrutable women, detached from one another, leading separate existences, yet forced together, in the centre of the canvas, by the circumstances of their lives. They are hemmed in by their home, the tombstones, the moors, and the sky in a way that visually mirrors Branwell's proposed portrait of his sisters in Dan Totheroh's *Moor Born* (1934), in which he declares his intention to 'paint you outdoors this time, the moors all around you . . . hemming you in . . . binding you, almost'.³⁷³ Taylor's painting shares the distinctive features of the sisters' portrayals in the fictional biographies of the period. This chapter analyzes the significance of the Brontë group portrait to interwar audiences. It traces discussions of the portrait from Gaskell's defense of its physiognomical accuracy, to the twentieth century's gradual disillusionment with her judgment, to the fictional biographers' sophisticated and self-reflexive use of the portrait as a symbol of misunderstanding and uncertainty that ultimately upsets the reader's sense of what is knowable about the family.

I. 'The likenesses were, I should think, admirable': Gaskell's Faith in Branwell as Physiognomist

Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* provides the earliest published description of the Brontë group portrait, painted by Branwell around the year 1834. She begins with a

³⁷² Although the exact date of the painting is unknown, it was painted sometime during the interwar period, given that Taylor was born in 1902 and died in 1935.

³⁷³ Dan Totheroh, *Moor Born* (New York: Samuel French, 1934), p. 25. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

relatively objective account of the content of the painting, the costume and appearance of the sitters, and the quality of execution:

It was a group of his sisters, life size, three-quarters' length; not much better than sign-painting, as to manipulation; but the likenesses were, I should think, admirable. I could only judge of the fidelity with which the other two were depicted, from the striking resemblance which Charlotte, upholding the great frame of canvas, and consequently standing right behind it, bore to her own representation, though it must have been ten years and more since the portraits were taken. The picture was divided, almost in the middle, by a great pillar. On the side of the column which was lighted by the sun, stood Charlotte, in the womanly dress of that day of jigot sleeves and large collars. On the deeply shadowed side, was Emily, with Anne's gentle face resting on her shoulder. (102)

The description continues, however, in what might seem a more subjective strain:

Emily's countenance struck me as full of power; Charlotte's of solicitude; Anne's of tenderness. [...] I remember looking on those two sad, earnest, shadowed faces, and wondering whether I could trace the mysterious expression which is said to foretell an early death. I had some fond superstitious hope that the column divided their fates from hers, who stood apart in the canvas, as in life she survived. I liked to see that the bright side of the pillar was towards *her*—that the light in the picture fell on *her*: I might more truly have sought in her presentment—nay, in her living face—for the sign of death in her prime. (102)

Gaskell proffers the portrait as a text in which can be read not merely the personalities but the fates of the sitters. However, apart from her admittedly 'superstitious' reading of the painting's composition, her claims that the painted faces of the three women conveyed truths about their pasts and clues to their futures engage with what was then considered the scientific discourse of physiognomy.

The theory of physiognomy, the pseudoscience asserting that such interior qualities as character, morality, and intelligence could be divined through the observation and interpretation of external appearance, was, according to Sally Shuttleworth, popularized in England in the late eighteenth century by translations of the work of Johann Caspar Lavater.³⁷⁴ Its endurance as a valid psychological perspective well into the nineteenth

³⁷⁴ Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë*, p. 59.

century is extensively documented by Mary Cowling in her study *The Artist as Anthropologist* (1989), in which she demonstrates that physiognomy, as well as phrenology, were ‘beliefs to which the majority of people, including artists, subscribed at the time’.³⁷⁵ Indeed, the belief that the human face could be read in such a way as to reveal the qualities and content of the mind figures in both Charlotte’s and her biographer’s novels. In *Villette* (1853), Lucy Snowe is hired as *gouvernante* at Madame Beck’s *Pensionnat* on the recommendation of M. Paul, who performs a physiognomical reading of her countenance;³⁷⁶ while in Gaskell’s 1863 novel, *Sylvia’s Lovers*, Sylvia discovers the extent of Philips fears about the likelihood of her father’s being hanged by ‘looking at him as if her looks could pierce his soul’ and reading ‘his thoughts as though they were an open page’.³⁷⁷

However, what is most significant about this act of ekphrasis is not Gaskell’s statement of faith in the theory of physiognomy. It is her faith in Branwell’s ability to successfully perform physiognomical readings of his sisters’ faces, to look at them in such a way as to penetrate the secrets of their inner selves and to transmit those findings into the portrait with a degree of accuracy that would enable a viewer to make the same interpretations. Throughout the biography, Gaskell’s delineation of the sisters’ characters thoroughly concords with the qualities she perceives to be present in the painting: Emily’s power, Charlotte’s solicitude, and Anne’s tenderness. Her admission of her mistaken attribution of significance to the column and ray of light, as well as the interjection of the contradictory ‘nay, in her living face’, might indicate a degree of ambivalence about the suitability of relying on portraiture as a hermeneutic key to the interpretation of a human

³⁷⁵ Mary Cowling, *The Artist as Anthropologist: The Representation of Type and Character in Victorian Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 4.

³⁷⁶ Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, ed. by Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten (Oxford: OUP, 2000), pp. 65-66.

³⁷⁷ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Sylvia’s Lovers*, ed. by Andrew Sanders (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p. 301.

being, given the risk of misinterpretation by both artist and viewer. However, Gaskell identifies as ‘superstitious’ not the practice of reading faces, but her attempt to read objects and their arrangement as offering prophetic truths about the sitters. It is significant that she does not delete her claim that Charlotte’s ‘presentment’, the visual depiction of her face and figure on the canvas, reveals that she is marked for an early death. That she allows this claim to stand suggests that the interjectory ‘nay’ is not intended to discount but to extend that statement of faith in the reading of faces. Gaskell’s lament is not that she misinterpreted the meaning present in Branwell’s depiction of Charlotte’s face. Rather it is the expression of a two-fold realization. In her attempt to interpret the painting, rather than seeking for symbolic significance in compositional elements, she should have immediately sought for meaning in the image of Charlotte’s face; moreover, it was unnecessary to consult the painted face for truths about Charlotte’s mortality when she had access to the living woman, whose face, had she read it, would have corroborated the physiognomical truths of the painting.

A further proof of Gaskell’s commitment to the theory of physiognomy occurs later in the biography, when she subjects a portrait of Branwell, presumably the medallion sculpted by Joseph Bentley Leyland, to the same physiognomical scrutiny as the group portrait. Here, as before, her interpretation of the personality traits conveyed by this representation of Branwell corresponds with the way she characterizes him throughout the biography. ‘I have seen Branwell’s profile’, she writes,

it is what would be generally esteemed very handsome; the forehead is massive, the eye well set, and the expression of it fine and intellectual; the nose too is good; but there are coarse lines about the mouth, and the lips, though of handsome shape, are loose and thick, indicating self-indulgence, while the slightly retreating chin conveys an idea of weakness of will. (138)

This, combined with her endorsement of the physiognomical accuracy of the group portrait, confirms Gaskell's Victorian faith in the revelatory capabilities of the visual representation of the human form,³⁷⁸ provided one is able to read the image correctly. For Gaskell, as for her contemporaries, 'The scrutiny to which the painted face and figure were subjected was a habit borrowed from life itself. In art, faces were read as they were in life; and in life, everybody read faces'.³⁷⁹

II. No Longer a 'judge of [...] fidelity': The Portraits' Rediscovery, the Erosion of Faith in Gaskell's Judgment, and the Influence of Modernism

The group portrait and other Brontë portraits, real and imagined, feature prominently in the fictional biographies of the interwar period. However, in the majority of these texts the portraits, all of which are either painted or envisioned by Branwell, are unequivocally represented as images grossly distorted. This is not shown to be entirely due to a lack of technical proficiency on Branwell's part, although that is a common feature of the texts. Rather, Branwell's failure is most often presented as the outcome of the way in which, in the words of Laura Mulvey, his 'determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly'.³⁸⁰ In most of these texts, Branwell has become emotionally estranged from one or more of his sisters, either through his arrogance, cruelty, and unpredictability, or as a consequence of his addictions to alcohol and opium. As such, his artistic portrayal of them is not informed by any understanding of their personalities, but is mediated by the assumptions he makes about them according to their outward, socially prescribed demeanour; his conception of himself as a man and an artist;

³⁷⁸ This is not to suggest that the theory of physiognomy as well as more general, populist theories about reading faces were universally accepted. Kate Flint identifies several examples of the 'continuing interrogation of the certitude with which the surface of the body rendered character legible' in *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 17.

³⁷⁹ Cowling, p. 9.

³⁸⁰ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989, repr. 2009), pp. 14-27 (p. 19).

and his beliefs about woman as sexual other. Charlotte, Emily, and Anne are made to passively model for their brother, and are, in some texts, even observed and painted without their knowledge or consent. In most of the texts, they are denied any influence over the ways in which they are represented on the canvas. When they criticize the paintings, or fail to recognize themselves, their opinions are disparaged and conflict ensues resulting in Branwell's refusal to acknowledge their requests and alter the paintings, or his outright destruction of them.

In part, the recurrence of the portrait can be explained by the topicality of Brontë portraits at the time. The group portrait, along with the fragment of another group portrait painted by Branwell, of which only Emily's face in profile survives [**Figure 4**], was discovered in a cupboard in Ireland in February 1914, at the home of Arthur Bell Nicholls's second wife, Mary.³⁸¹ After being concealed from public view, first by Charlotte and then, for more than half a century, by Nicholls, who was determined to protect his own and his first wife's privacy, the paintings were sold to the National Portrait Gallery. They were placed on display in March 1914, 'becoming', as the anonymous author of Mary Nicholls's obituary significantly expresses it, 'the property of the nation'.³⁸² In the midst of the conflict of the First World War, the discovery of the portraits constituted an important addition to the collection of Brontë artefacts that were accessible to the nation and that signified its superior contribution to the field of literature. As demonstrated in Chapter One, the later acquisition and conversion of the Brontës' former home into a museum by the Brontë Society was framed in much the same way.

However, more than fifteen years after their discovery, the group portrait and fragment were still being debated by Brontë enthusiasts. In 1929, Charles Simpson

³⁸¹ 'The Brontë Sisters. Recovery of Long Lost Portraits', *The Times*, 5 March 1914, p. 7.

³⁸² 'Death of Mrs. A. B. Nicholls. The Last Link With the Brontës', *The Times*, 2 March 1915, p. 5.

included in his biography of Emily a ‘Note on the Portraits’, in which he puts forward a rather complicated argument that the fragment represents Anne rather than Emily. In the note, Simpson reproduces a photograph of an engraving of another group portrait of the Brontës, commonly known as the ‘Gun Group’, on which, he claims, Ellen Nussey had written each of the sitters’ initials under his or her portrait. Because the figure Nussey identified as Anne corresponds, more or less, to the fragment found by Mary Nicholls (in addition to the fact that Esther Chadwick made the same identifications on the testimony of people who, according to Simpson, ‘knew them and identified the portraits’),³⁸³ Simpson argues that the recently discovered fragment was originally part of the ‘Gun Group’. He attributes what he considers to be the misidentification of Emily as the subject of the fragment to a statement made in Clement Shorter’s 1897 article, ‘Relics of Emily Brontë’, for *The Woman At Home*. Shorter’s article features a photograph of what appears to be a reproduction of the intact group portrait that was later discovered at Nicholls’s home, and includes commentary by Nicholls identifying the figure on the left as Anne. Simpson argues that

By some mistake, presumably Clement Shorter’s, this statement made by Mr. Nicholls was also taken to refer to the “Gun” group, and, mainly on the strength of it, the *right hand* figure in the “Gun” group was selected and reproduced as a portrait of Emily in the Haworth Edition of *Wuthering Heights*.³⁸⁴

Mary Nicholls, Simpson claims, made the false identification of the portrait fragment based on its correspondence to the image incorrectly identified as Emily in the Haworth Edition.

Both E. F. Benson, writing in 1932, and Virginia Moore, writing in 1936, take up this debate about the portrait fragment; Benson straightforwardly claims that it represents

³⁸³ Charles Simpson, *Emily Brontë* (London: Scribner, 1929), p. 203.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Emily, while Moore offers a mystical-cum-physiognomical argument in favour of Emily that will be discussed in fuller detail later in the chapter. The debate also features in at least one work of interwar fictional biography. Without going so far as to argue that the portrait fragment represents Anne, the American tourist, Elliott K. Emerson, in Rachel Ferguson's *Charlotte Brontë: A Play in Three Acts*, references Simpson's biography and takes up another thread of his argument, asserting that 'there's a missin' likeness' of Emily Brontë that 'was given to one o' their old servants' (15).³⁸⁵ All this demonstrates the continued currency of the topic of Brontë portraits throughout the interwar period. The importance of the portraits as part of the national heritage; the relative recentness of this discovery that allowed people, for the first time, to form their own judgments about the group portrait without reliance on Gaskell's interpretations;³⁸⁶ the continued debate, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, about the identity of the subject of the portrait fragment; and the fact that as of 1926, the publication year of what appears to be the first work of Brontë fictional biography, the paintings had been on display for nearly twelve years, allowing the public

³⁸⁵ The missing likeness to which Emerson refers is the portrait of Emily sold by Martha Brown, which subsequently became untraceable. Simpson argues in his note that the portrait fragment found by Mary Nicholls is not the same as that once owned by Brown. Although Simpson does not claim that the portrait of Emily is still in the village or even in existence, Emerson believes that he, the avid relic-hunter, is capable of finally bringing it to light.

³⁸⁶ As previously stated, Clement Shorter's 'Relics of Emily Brontë' provides a photograph of what appears to be a copy of the original group portrait; a comparison of the photograph to the original painting reveals inconsistencies in the outlines of the figures and exaggerations of aspects of the original image, including the highlights on Charlotte's fichu. Furthermore, Shorter identifies the figure on the right not as Charlotte, but as 'Their Aunt, Miss Branwell'. (Clement Shorter, 'Relics of Emily Brontë', *The Woman at Home* V (1897), 906-912, p. 910). Esther Alice Chadwick's *In the Footsteps of the Brontës*, published in 1914, just prior to the reappearance of the group portrait and fragment, also includes an illustration described as a photograph of the group portrait [**Figure 5**]. However, once more, inconsistencies with the authentic group portrait suggest that it was instead a photograph of a copy of the group portrait. Therefore, although some readers may have been familiar with the general appearance of the portrait prior to 1914, through the copies printed in these publications, it was only after the painting was placed on display in the National Portrait Gallery that masses of people were able to gain access to the original image and compare it with Gaskell's description.

to become thoroughly familiar with them,³⁸⁷ all go some way towards explaining why they play such a central role in the fictional biographies of the interwar period.

However, the reasons for the virtual uniformity of the way in which the group portrait and other Brontë portraits are used in these works, functioning as sites of familial rupture and symbols of misunderstanding, might best be understood within the context of the innovations and experimentations of Modernism. Virginia Woolf's quasi-biographical fictions, *Orlando* and *Flush* (1933), parodied the conventions of factual biography, highlighted the selectivity of the biographer, and playfully narrated the unnarratable nature of their subjects' experience. These works ultimately gesture towards the impossibility of pinning down and observing, let alone dissecting and explaining, something as elusive, multiplicative, and ever-shifting as the concept of identity. In the field of visual art, the first two decades of the twentieth century saw the 'chief' Modernist break with the European tradition of representational art in the arrival of Cubism.³⁸⁸ The first major exhibitions of modern art took place in London, in 1910, and New York, in 1913, and exposed audiences to what was then viewed as the radical work of the Post-Impressionists.³⁸⁹ The interwar period also saw the publication of the aesthetic theories of

³⁸⁷ Both the group portrait and the fragment of Emily were frequently reproduced in works of Brontë literature throughout the interwar period, adding to the likelihood that the Brontës' fictional biographers, and their readers, would have been familiar with them. Reproductions of one or both images appear in: Romer Wilson's *All Alone* (1928), Charles Simpson's *Emily Brontë* (1929), K. A. R. Sugden's *A Short History of the Brontës* (1929), Emilie and Georges Romieu's *The Brontë Sisters* (1931), E. F. Benson's *Charlotte Brontë* (1932), Virginia Moore's *The Life and Eager Death of Emily Brontë* (1936).

³⁸⁸ Glen Macleod, 'Modernism and the Visual Arts', in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. by Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 2011), pp. 245-267, p. 247.

³⁸⁹ In 1910, Roger Fry organized the notorious and much maligned 'Manet and the Post-Impressionists' exhibition at the Grafton Galleries in London. Philip Burne-Jones, son of the Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones, characterized the exhibition as 'the egregious collection of canvases at present disfiguring the walls of the Grafton Galleries', and his sentiment was shared by a number of other commentators in *The Times*. (Philip Burne-Jones, 'The Post-Impressionists', *The Times*, 17 November 1910, p. 4). In 1913, Post-Impressionism and Cubism arrived in the US at the 'International Exhibition of Modern Art', often referred to as the 'Armory Show', in New York City. In contrast to the generally negative response to the exhibition at the Grafton Galleries, it seems the 'Armory Show' was a success. The *New York Times* reported a statement made by the lawyer, John Quinn, at the exhibition's press dinner: 'In the nineteen days that it has been open, [...] nearly 50,000 persons have visited the exhibition in the Sixty-ninth Regiment Armory. There

Roger Fry and Clive Bell, both of whom rejected the premise that art must aim at representation, and instead emphasized the importance of form over content. Glen Macleod observes that ‘Modernist writers often patterned their literary experiments on parallels drawn from the visual arts’.³⁹⁰ However, his description of Synthetic Cubism’s collage technique strikingly resembles the practice of the majority of the Brontës’ middlebrow fictional biographers. According to Macleod, the Cubists’ incorporation of real objects into their works of art ‘breaks down the boundaries between art and life, causing the viewer to ponder various kinds and degrees of artifice’.³⁹¹ In much the same way, the fictional biographers often admit in their prefaces to interweaving speculations about the Brontës’ experiences with letters, poetry, and prose written by the family. The Brontë portraits are an integral part of that pastiche. Through this technique, they call attention to the constructedness of their own accounts of the family’s lives and invite speculation about the constructedness of other texts that incorporate these historical documents, including so-called factual biography. Finally, throughout the interwar period, Modernist writers continually negotiated the relationship between their present moment and the Victorian past in works including Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* (1918), Fry’s *Vision and Design* (1920), and Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929).

As Nicola Humble demonstrates throughout her study, the middlebrow writers of the interwar period absorbed and reproduced, in popular, accessible ways, the preoccupations, theories, and stylistic practices of highbrow culture. It is fitting that the

have been sold over 160 works of art, and the association has entered into a contract with the Chicago Art Institute, by which a major part of the works exhibited here will be exhibited in Chicago’. (‘50,000 Visit Art Show: Armory Exhibit a Big Success, Press Dinner Guests are Told’, *New York Times*, 9 March 1913, p. 32). However, the title of an interview with the artist Kenyon Cox, ‘Cubists and Futurists are Making Insanity Pay’, avers the presence of a reactionary American response not unlike the English response to ‘Manet and the Post-Impressionists’. (‘Cubist and Futurists are Making Insanity Pay’, *New York Times*, 16 March 1913, p. SM1).

³⁹⁰ Macleod, p. 245.

³⁹¹ Macleod, p. 251.

family's fictional biographers should make use of the Brontë group portrait, an iconic representation of three sisters who were, themselves, made to function as icons of the Victorian period, in such a way as to upset assumptions about the family. It is unsurprising that these writers, who eschewed conventional biography and its reliance on historical fact to tell the story of a life, should subvert both the nineteenth-century assumptions of Elizabeth Gaskell, who claimed the portrait was psychologically revelatory, as well as the assumptions of those contemporaries who believed that the portrait revealed something more than Branwell's view of his sisters.

Each of the texts discussed formulates the psychological underpinnings of Branwell's relationship with his sisters in much the same way, using the production of portraiture as an avenue into psychological enquiry and an interrogation of the cultural meaning of the Brontës in the interwar period. This is significant, as much for what it reveals about the relative uniformity of the way in which the Brontës' familial interactions were conceived of at this time as for what it reveals about the richness and complexity of this body of literature that has been largely neglected due to its popular, middlebrow status. Lucasta Miller, who consistently expresses a dismissive view of the fictional biographies, claims that 'The middlebrow writers of the interwar period were not aesthetic theoreticians and remained stuck in cliché and convention', that they 'were out of sync with the more sophisticated thinking of their contemporary Virginia Woolf, who was hyperaware of the intellectual problems of biography'.³⁹² However, even Nicola Humble's sensitive analysis of Brontë fictional biography as a subset of women's middlebrow fiction does not fully explore the significance of its treatment of the Brontës in relation to psychology and the cultural construction of identity.

³⁹² Miller, p. 153.

In their use of Brontë portraiture, these texts engage with what Humble identifies as some of the characteristic concerns of women's middlebrow fiction, including gender, the home, the family, and, in particular, the eccentric or dysfunctional family. Yet, while Humble rightly acknowledges the extent to which the Brontës functioned as a paradigm of the dysfunctional family in interwar middlebrow writing, she seems to accept this view as a reflection of historical fact, rather than as one significant thread of the quasi-fictional Brontë narrative that began almost simultaneously with the sisters' second foray into print. Humble speculates that:

It is perhaps because the positive images of domestic harmony offered by *Little Women* seem ultimately unrealizable to the modern middlebrow—though the more attractive for that unattainability—that the antithetical familial model of the Brontës holds such sway, offering a means of exploring the neurotic entanglements of family life for women.³⁹³

Her assertion of the comparable position occupied by the Brontë family and the fictional March family of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), in the interwar imagination, is perceptive. However, Humble does not acknowledge the extent to which the belief that the Brontës were psychologically damaged is a part of the liminal position they occupied in interwar culture, straddling the line between fact and fiction. This view of the Brontës as the neurotically entangled family is, as discussed in the previous chapter, a construct. It is based, to a large extent, on Gaskell's manipulation of the facts of the family's lives to create a narrative of suffering; on interwar authors' clichéd views of Victorian morality and social codes, and simultaneous desire to promote, by contrast, what they characterized as the more enlightened views of their present; and on the convergence of interwar interest in the Brontës with interwar interest in psychological functioning and psychoanalysis.³⁹⁴

³⁹³ Humble, p. 176.

³⁹⁴ That is not to imply that the Brontës did not experience psychological suffering or disturbance, but to acknowledge the constructedness of this view of their lives as dominated by mental illnesses and unconscious conflicts and desires.

Humble also does not consider the relationship between the fictional portrayal of the Brontës as a dysfunctional family and the body of nonfictional contemporary writing on their mental health. As such, she does not take into account the ways in which some interwar fictional biographers acknowledged the constructedness of this view of the Brontës as neurotic by creating a network of textual associations between the so-called factual psychobiographies and other works of fictional biography. The two most overt examples of this intertextuality appear in Rachel Ferguson's more metafictional treatments of the Brontës' lives. In *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*, Deirdre asks Sir Herbert Toddington if he believes the family 'were degenerates' (91). Toddington replies with what appears to be a reference to Romer Wilson's psychobiography, *All Alone*, 'No more than I believe the lady who published a book trying to persuade us that Emily was spiritually hermaphroditic' (91). In *Charlotte Brontë: A Play in Three Acts*, the Clergyman's assessment of Charlotte's psychological state, that 'She was morbid about herself and her looks, and yet a driving manager' (21), seems to reference both Rosamond Langbridge's *Charlotte Brontë: A Psychological Study* and Wilson's biography. Langbridge emphasizes what she views as the pathological nature of Charlotte's beliefs about her appearance and ability to inspire love, explaining 'It was M. Héger's [*sic*] indifference to her [...] which made her harp so morbidly on her appearance for the remainder of her life' (75); Wilson, who characterizes Charlotte as meddlesome and views the sisters' fictional characters as reflections of their selves, maintains that Emily kept Charlotte at a distance because 'Lucy Snowe would have tried to manage Heathcliff' (126). Humble's decision not to explore this facet of the fictional biographies is especially surprising given that she identifies 'a determined intertextuality' as one of the key features of women's middlebrow fiction. As she explains, these 'novels continually refer to other

novels, with the effect that an intricate network of connections is built up between texts'.³⁹⁵

It is also surprising that Humble does not acknowledge the extent to which fictional biographers referenced the avant-garde ideas of Modernism in this context, given that the appropriation and adaptation of so-called highbrow culture is also a significant feature of her understanding of the middlebrow.

Overall, Humble's assessment confines itself to an identification of the themes of psychological illness and familial dysfunction in interwar Brontë fictional biography. In contrast, I argue that the presence of these themes, embodied in the symbol of the group portrait, is not merely a reflection of contemporary perceptions of the Brontës. It is a tool employed by the fictional biographers to highlight the idea of misunderstanding more generally, and the manner in which they use the portrait demonstrates their engagement with the ideas and developments of Modernism. These works invite readers to reflect on the vast amount of information that is unknown about the Brontës' lives, as compared to the relatively small amount that is knowable through historical facts and documents. They invite readers to consider the extent to which what is believed about the family is a narrative that fills in the gaps in the historical record with convenient fictions. Through their use of intertextuality (by which I mean both their references to works of so-called factual biography and their incorporation of the Brontë group portrait, in particular, as well as the letters, poetry, and prose of the family), the fictional biographers allow fact to enter into their fiction, thereby calling into question the extent to which fiction enters into those works purporting to be factual.

Contrary to Miller's claims, in their treatment of artistic motivation and creation, and of the visual reproduction of the human form, the authors of these works were at the

³⁹⁵ Humble, p. 47.

forefront of the aesthetic, as well as psychological, theorizations of their time. Branwell's portrayals of his sisters are shown to be necessarily fantastic rather than naturalistic, so that these authors radically undermine Gaskell's claims about the portrait's verisimilitude and psychological revelation. Yet, they also demonstrate a profound mistrust of physical appearance and its visual representation as vehicles for the conveyance of what might be termed the true nature of an individual, a position that was considerably in advance of some interwar psychological and physiological discourses surrounding the correspondence between body morphology and character.

III. 'Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses': Fiction, Feminism, and the Rejection of the Physiognomer's Gaze

The persistence of belief in various derivative forms of physiognomical theory, throughout the interwar period, is observable in scientific and lay communities, in professional journals, and in the pseudoscientific Brontë psychobiographies. A 1926 report appearing in the *American Science News-Letter* attests to the ingrained nature of such beliefs. It offers the following explanation of findings that subjects were unable to determine intelligence, emotional characteristics, and social position based on a series of photographs of men:

The reason why a human being's face cannot be accurately rated in character and intelligence by the observation method [. . .] is traced to the fact that each person carries about in his mind type pictures of what a king, a criminal, or a scholar should look like. These mental pictures, or stereotypes, Dr. Rice explains, are made up to a considerable degree of superficial earmarks such as the cut of the hair, the mode of wearing collar and tie, and similar details of appearance.³⁹⁶

Two years later, Donald Laird reports, in the same journal, the persistence of phrenological and physiognomical beliefs in many levels of society. Laird notes that phrenological readings were offered at fairs, carnivals, and circuses, and that magazines advertised the services of those offering physiognomical readings of photographic portraits. He wryly

³⁹⁶ 'Character and Faces', *Science News-Letter*, 11 December 1926, p. 171.

notes that even US senators and school superintendents were not immune to the allure of these pseudoscientific theories. ‘To the scientist,’ he writes,

phrenology, physiognomy, graphology, and the other ologies dealing with character reading are of little concern, except as widespread superstitions. I think these are vicious superstitions, though, since they are blocking the road for real progress of scientific discovery in the field.³⁹⁷

However, he concludes this article disparaging the older attempts at detecting character through the outward signs of the body by claiming that such mental disorders as manic depression and schizophrenia can largely be determined by observing the height and build of a patient’s body.

In *Charlotte Brontë: A Psychological Study*, Langbridge performs a kind of pseudo-physiognomical reading of a photographic portrait of Patrick Brontë, seemingly in order to corroborate her poor opinion of him as the author of his children’s miseries. In this description, she associates his physical features and the expression he gives to them with cruel and tyrannical propensities. She writes:

His head is as narrow and as mercilessly upright as his creed; his mouth is clinched upon unbending resolutions to get the upper hand of everyone, and his rheumatically hands are gripped, one feels, on the least movement of his family out of his control. His nose is ferreting out his stern duty to everybody’s private business, and his eyes, bigoted, ignorant, and shrewd, are the eyes of a man who sees nobody’s arguments unless they are his own. (8-9)

She later endorses the theory of physiognomy more explicitly in her explanation of the affinity between Charlotte and Heger, writing: ‘We watch them meeting, and detect in their two physiognomies certain equivalents and likenesses which make for mutual recognition and attraction, and end, often enough, to judge by the similarity of feature in newspaper photographs of brides and bridegrooms, at the altar or the registry office’ (95).

³⁹⁷ Donald A. Laird, ‘Reading Character May Soon Be Possible’, *Science News-Letter*, 28 July 1928, pp. 44-46 + 49-50, p. 45.

Following Gaskell, Emilie and Georges Romieu use Leyland's sculpture to alert readers to the outward signs of Branwell's personality and character. In a biography with such a strong undercurrent of sexuality underpinning discussions of the Brontës' experiences, interiority, and even family relationships, it is unsurprising that Gaskell's description of the portrait also becomes thoroughly sexualized. What Gaskell described as Branwell's 'handsome' features, the Romieus describe as his 'corrupt and effeminate beauty' (64), and her reference to his weakness of character and coarseness is transformed into a suggestion of sexual degeneracy. Although Branwell is shown in this biography to have a voracious appetite for women, the biographers seem to hint, in their description of his Greek beauty, at the possibility that Branwell also had homosexual preferences:

The portrait reveals a curly-haired youth with languorous eyes and delicate features. The nose is classic in line—such as to have recalled to the Reverend Brontë the Greek beauty of his own young manhood. But the chin is lacking in energy, and the indeterminate mouth betrays sensuality, weakness of will, instability. (64-65)

For the Romieus, the portrait is used as a tool to corroborate their highly sexualized view of the Brontës.

Virginia Moore also makes a passing comment about the psychological significance of Emily's full lips and the disconcerting effect she believes it had on Emily's teacher. Rather contradicting the premise of her own text, which is an analysis of Emily's character, Moore writes: 'her mouth was full—a passionate mouth; people whose natures can be measured and analyzed do not have mouths like that—as the spinster Miss Wooler may have been vaguely but uncomfortably aware' (102). Later, in her 'Note on the Portrait of Emily Brontë', in which she refutes the misidentification of the portrait fragment of Emily as an image of Anne, Moore reserves for her last and most convincing

argument the correspondence between the qualities of Emily's soul and the facial contours of the portrait, explaining:

Fourth and last, if the soul, as I believe, forms its own body, this single portrait, alone among the portraits of the Brontë sisters, *deserves to be Emily*, for here only, through Branwell's inexperience, shine the power and poetry which were her inalienable characteristics. (369)

Clearly, the same beliefs that underpinned the popularity of phrenology and physiognomy in 1857 held some sway during the interwar period, in both the scientific community and in popular culture. Its application to the Brontës in the psychobiographies of the interwar period is marked.

Yet, the fictional biographers were not just in advance of contemporary popular psychological theory in terms of their rejection of physiognomy and related concepts of the legibility of character. After all, in their constructions of the gender relations of the Brontë family, these interwar authors created a series of object lessons illustrative of Virginia Woolf's feminist psychological 'looking-glass' theory of the function women perform for the male psyche. Woolf muses, in *A Room of One's Own*, on the universal human need for self-confidence in order to survive the 'arduous, difficult, [. . .] perpetual struggle' of life (59), and she moves from this observation to the theory that human progress is dependent upon men's ability to maintain their self-confidence by perceiving women to be their inferiors. 'Women', she writes:

have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice his natural size. Without that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle. The glories of all our wars would be unknown. We should still be scratching the outlines of deer on the remains of mutton bones and bartering flints for sheepskins or whatever simple ornament took our unsophisticated taste. Supermen and Fingers of Destiny would never have existed. The Czar and the Kaiser would never have worn their crowns or lost them. Whatever may be their use in civilized societies, mirrors are essential to all violent and heroic action. That is why Napoleon and Mussolini both insist so emphatically upon the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge. That serves to explain in part the necessity that women so

often are to men. And it serves to explain how restless they are under her criticism; how impossible it is for her to say to them this book is bad, this picture is feeble, or whatever it may be, without giving far more pain and rousing far more anger than a man would do who gave the same criticism. For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished. How is he to go on giving judgement, civilising natives, making laws, writing books, dressing up and speechifying at banquets, unless he can see himself at breakfast and at dinner at least twice the size he really is? (60-61)

According to Woolf, it is at breakfast and dinner, within the home and at the hands of the family, that this gendered learning takes place and is reinforced; men's ability to play their parts in the larger world is dependent on their ability to view the women in their home circle as their inferiors.

The family's fictional biographers appear to draw on the historical fact of the Brontës' early belief in Branwell's talent and hope for his success as an artist, as well as more generalized, popular beliefs about the Victorian privileging of male children.³⁹⁸ It is as though they imagine, without actually dramatizing, a childhood in which Branwell has been conditioned, either through his immediate family or through nineteenth-century society, to believe that he is destined for greatness and that he is superior to his sisters by virtue of his sex. Thus, as an adult, he continues to cling to the belief that he has internalized, despite all evidence to the contrary. As he indignantly tells his sisters, in response to Charlotte's offer to help him financially in Ella Moorhouse's *Stone Walls*, 'as I'm the only son I expect I shall have to do the big thing in the end' (18). When Charlotte, Emily, and Anne criticize his paintings, they cease to magnify their brother, showing him instead a reflection of his own mediocrity and thereby effecting the painful erosion of his ability to believe in himself. Branwell's excessive anger and destructiveness in some of

³⁹⁸ Of course, the idea that Patrick privileged Branwell over his sisters is extremely problematic. Not only did Patrick ensure that each of his daughters received some formal education, preparatory to entering employment as teacher or governess. He also ensured that all of his children, and not just Branwell, received art lessons from John Bradley. Patrick also allowed his daughters to study in Brussels, and reposed enough trust in Charlotte's abilities to allow her to travel to Brussels unchaperoned when she returned after her aunt's death.

these plays is, in keeping with Woolf's postulation, the result of his inability to withstand the trauma of the criticism of those whom he is accustomed to believing inferior to himself.³⁹⁹

Despite the fact that in those texts dramatizing the production of the portraits, Branwell is consistently portrayed as unwilling or unable to understand his sisters, he is not consistently portrayed as abusive or even as a failure in all aspects of his artistic endeavour; he is presented as co-author of *Wuthering Heights* in Clemence Dane's *Wild Decembers* (1932), Elsie Thornton Cook's *They Lived* (1935), and Kathryn Jean MacFarlane's *Divide the Desolation* (1936), for example. In most texts, he is represented as something of an anti-hero rather than a villain. Perhaps this is because familial misunderstanding is a central theme in most of the Brontë fictional biographies published at this time, and all members of the family, with the general exception of Emily, are implicated. In *They Lived*, the group portrait is only mentioned twice in passing. It is not a significant feature of the text, however Cook makes it clear that the portrait is flawed, describing how 'Branwell stood frowning before his easel, vainly trying to catch Charlotte's elusive expression'.⁴⁰⁰ Branwell cannot capture Charlotte's likeness, but Charlotte is also unable to understand Branwell, excluding him from the project of novel-writing because she falsely assumes that his alcoholism, drug addiction, and despair at the loss of Lydia Robinson have rendered him incapable of writing. Because of this

³⁹⁹ In their conception of the self-defeating behaviour that leads Branwell to destroy or abandon his paintings, they also intuit and dramatize another important facet of the historical Branwell Brontë's aesthetic experience that would not be proven until more than twenty years after *Stone Walls* and *Divide the Desolation*, the latest of the texts discussed, were published. It was not until 1958 that infrared photography revealed that the pillar Gaskell had hoped was prophetic of Charlotte's survival was instead very likely an aborted self-portrait of Branwell. Just as the factual Branwell Brontë painted himself out of the group portrait, preventing the preservation of his image, along with those of his sisters and other eminent Britons, in the National Portrait Gallery, his fictional counterparts destroy their paintings, failing to develop artistically and make, like the Brontë sisters, a lasting contribution to British culture. 'Pictures Under X-Ray, The Case of the Missing Skull', *The Times*, 1 July 1958, p. 5.

⁴⁰⁰ Elsie Thornton Cook, *They Lived: A Brontë Novel* (London: John Murray, 1935), p. 32. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

misunderstanding, she is also barred from Emily's confidence, never learning the secret that *Wuthering Heights* was co-authored by Branwell.

Even in Oscar Firkins's *Empurpled Moors* (1932), which makes no reference to the portrait, misunderstanding is the central theme of the play. Not only do the siblings misinterpret one another's feelings regarding Branwell's affair with Mrs Robinson, but they find it impossible to make sense of their own feelings. Charlotte and Anne both articulate their experience of simultaneous contradictory emotions. Justifying her all-night vigil outside Mrs Robinson's bedroom door, Anne seems to describe an act of self-deception that temporarily shielded her from acknowledging the illicit sexual activity she believed to be taking place within; she tells Charlotte 'I knew it was strange. But I thought it was natural'.⁴⁰¹ Later, Charlotte reveals to Emily her ambivalence about Branwell's affair, telling her: 'I would have given my right hand to stop it; but I would also have given my right hand to have it happen' (153). Most revealingly, Branwell is unable to explain the reasons for his dissipations when pressed by his sisters for an answer. 'Should I tell you of things that I hardly grasp myself?', he asks them, 'You are women, you are sensitive, you write, and yet you could not understand it. [...] There is something not me—not me, you understand me—that finds release through me' (143-144). He continues:

When I go to the Black Bull, other feet than mine tread the path before me—yes, and they outrun mine. At the table other lips than mine approach the cup—taste it more eagerly than I. Other hands than mine clasp the dicebox—*with my fingers*; and eyes that are neither mine nor my companions' watch hungrily the resulting score. [...] I am the flue by which passions that are not mine reach the surface, find their escape, blackening the track by which they go. They sustain and urge, and all at once they let me fall. (144)

⁴⁰¹ Oscar Firkins, 'Empurpled Moors', in *The Bride of Quietness and Other Plays* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1934), pp. 119-154 (p. 125). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

The question of why Branwell was unable to establish himself as a writer or painter,⁴⁰² why his life was marred by dismissal from several positions, by alcoholism, and allegedly by opium addiction, while two of his sisters (Anne is almost always viewed as inferior to Charlotte and Emily) achieved success and fame, was one that occupied the writers of the interwar period. Was it the result of his own selfishness and self-dramatization, as May Sinclair claims in *The Three Brontës*? Was it because Patrick stifled him as a child, as Rosamond Langbridge suggests in *Charlotte Brontë: A Psychological Study*? Or was Branwell the victim of ‘madness’, brought about by disappointed love, lack of self-control, and incipient tuberculosis, and exacerbated by Charlotte’s and Anne’s unsympathetic response to his misery, as James Crichton-Browne alleges in his 1922 study ‘Branwell Brontë: An Extenuation’? In opposition to the psychobiographers, Firkins refuses to supply an answer. Instead, he emphasizes Branwell’s psychological ambiguity and complexity. Firkins seems to imply that if Branwell is unable to understand his compulsions to drink, philander, and gamble, outside observers, including his three sisters but also factual biographers, stand no chance of unraveling the mystery.

Emphasis on the unknowable nature of the Brontës and, therefore, on the possibility of multiple interpretations of their lives and experience is admittedly at the heart of Firkins’s play, as it is at the heart of the fictional biographical agenda more generally. As Firkins explains in the ‘Author’s Note’, the play ‘makes the whole Robinson matter incidental to the evocation of an unverified but vivid possibility in the characters of the three sisters’ (121). This possibility is the sisters’ acceptance of Branwell’s affair, insofar

⁴⁰² Of course, the idea that Branwell was a failure is somewhat simplistic. Although he never achieved the same levels of success as Charlotte did in her lifetime, and as Emily and Anne did posthumously, Branwell did publish his poetry in local newspapers, including the *Halifax Guardian*. According to Juliet Barker, he was also competent in Latin and Greek. However, the romantic story of his failure, degradation, and suffering, first put forward by Charlotte in the ‘Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell’ and later codified by Gaskell in *The Life*, was an integral part of most accounts of the family’s lives, both fictional and factual, in the interwar period.

as it is an act of self-assertion and rebellion against their father's domination and cruelty. In this text, as in most other fictional biographies, Branwell underestimates the psychological complexity of his sisters. He mistakenly believes them to be both passionless and prudish, and, assuming that they condemn his relationship with Robinson, Branwell is ultimately unable to assert his will and leave with her. Branwell's lack of resolve, his inability to act on his desire in the face of what he believes to be his sisters' opposition, leaves Patrick free to punish him by setting him up as a spectacle of scorn. Ordering Branwell, in a 'voice [that] bristles with command and menace' (149), to bid farewell to Mrs Robinson, Patrick demonstrates the extent of his control over Branwell. He ultimately frames Branwell as weak and emasculated in a way that parallels Branwell's framing of his sisters in the portraits that feature in the other fictional biographies. In each circumstance, the object of the gaze is controlled and his or her image or reputation is determined by another.

Each of the members of the Brontë family might be guilty of misunderstandings. Yet, in the majority of these texts, Branwell's misunderstanding of his sisters stems from underlying feelings of superiority over them. He assumes that they are prudish, as in *Stone Walls*, artistically inferior, as in *Charlotte Bronte: A Play in Three Acts*, or conventionally feminine, as in *Empurpled Moors*. He is complacent in his role as observer and interpreter, confident that he understands what he views as his sisters' uncomplicated minds, and in each instance, he fails. Thus despite the fact that Charlotte is sometimes characterized as shrewish and meddling, despite the fact that authorship of *Wuthering Heights* is sometimes shared between Emily and Branwell, it is possible to view these texts as having a feminist agenda. This possibility becomes particularly plausible when they are compared with the overtly misogynistic analyses of the interwar psychobiographers, who, as discussed at

length in the preceding chapter, attributed both the sisters' supposed psychological malaise as well as their creative impulses to unsatisfied sexual and maternal needs.

Several of the fictional biographers, including Oscar Firkins and Ella Moorhouse, both of whom employ symbolic sexual imagery that is suggestive of the psychological states of their characters, betray evidence of familiarity with Freudian ideas. Yet, they remain wedded to the concept of the unknowability of their subjects and to the possibility of multiple interpretations of the psychological significance of the events of their lives. Their rejection of Branwell's reductive interpretation of his sisters' interiority can be compared to Woolf's rejection of what she viewed, at this time, as the reductive nature of psychoanalysis's claims to the universal application of its theories. As she writes, in her review of J. D. Beresford's *An Imperfect Mother* (1920),

the new key is a patent key that opens every door. It simplifies rather than complicates, detracts rather than enriches. The door swings open briskly enough, but the apartment to which we are admitted is a bare little room with no outlook whatever. [...] In becoming cases they have ceased to be individuals.⁴⁰³

The fictional biographers dramatize Branwell's objectification of his sisters, in the dual senses of his inability to view them as more than types of womanhood and of his reduction of their complex beings into two-dimensional art objects that merely reflect the way he sees or needs to see them. They demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the processes by which, under the gaze of portrait artist or physiognomer, 'Not only is the individual transformed into a material object to be defined and controlled through observation; selfhood is predicated on the social interaction of the gaze'.⁴⁰⁴ Branwell's role as artist and amateur physiognomer has clear affinities with the role of the psychologist or psychoanalyst, but it also aligns him with the audience or reader who observes the family as their lives play out on the stage or between the pages of a fictional biography. Thus, the

⁴⁰³ Virginia Woolf, 'An Imperfect Mother', *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 March 1920, p. 199.

⁴⁰⁴ Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë*, p. 60.

nature of our interest in the Brontës is also questioned. Do we approach them with a set of preconceived ideas about their lives or about the period in which they lived, as Branwell does? Do we believe that the family is ultimately comprehensible, and that we can arrive at the truth of their experiences, as the psychobiographers did? Do we scrutinize the details of their lives because we are fascinated with their texts and, in Benson's words, 'want to see these books in the round'? (vii). Or, do we have a prurient interest in the love lives of Branwell and Charlotte and in the almost endlessly repeated accounts of the family's domestic misery?

The interwar fictional biographers dramatize the way in which Branwell's flawed portraits of his sisters allow him to determine and control the way in which they are perceived by posterity, while also making the audience reflect on their own complicity in that process. They anticipate the essence of Laura Mulvey's twentieth-century theorization of the objectifying male gaze and the way it captures, frames, and mediates women, an apparent outgrowth of Woolf's theory that men see in women what is necessary for the preservation of their egos. The seed of this idea, which is an implicit rejection of Gaskell's claims for the truthfulness of the group portrait, was apparent almost from the moment of the portraits' rediscovery. Yet, the specific manifestations of Brontë portraiture in interwar fictional biography are also indebted to the influence of Modernist aesthetic theory.

IV. The Brontë Group Portrait and the 'Social Emotions'

As early as 1914, opinions expressed in the press about the quality of the portraits and what they might reveal about the physical and psychological characteristics of the family evidence the widening distance between interwar assessments and Gaskell's nineteenth-century view of the group portrait's significance. The anonymous account of the discovery of the portraits, for example, simultaneously reflects an unwillingness to break with

Gaskell and her Victorian faith in the physiognomical accuracy of the group portrait and a growing scepticism about the extent of Branwell's artistic ability and the resemblance of the sitters to his representations of them. Referring to Gaskell's discussion of the group portrait in *The Life*, the author asserts that 'for their presence at Haworth, as well as for their quality as likenesses, we have the unimpeachable evidence of Mrs. Gaskell'.⁴⁰⁵ Yet, as the article continues, the author's statement of unwavering faith in the biographer's judgment is gradually retracted. After quoting her description of the portrait, the author puts forward a tentative expression of doubt about her reading of the painting only to immediately withdraw it, writing: 'The art of the picture is so very elementary that it would be hard to "read in" so much character unaided, but with Mrs. Gaskell as a guide we may accept the epithets without demur'.⁴⁰⁶ Ultimately, however, the author does demur. Yet, despite this uncertainty about the correctness of Gaskell's particular interpretations, the author wholly affirms the general practice of making interpretations about an individual's personality, past life, and future state based on the artist's visual representation of her person. In a manner strikingly similar to Gaskell's, the author performs a physiognomical reading of the portrait fragment of Emily, declaring that the image must be an accurate, lifelike depiction on the grounds that he sees in the painting the psychological characteristics he believes Emily to have possessed in life. He reasons that:

Whether or not Mrs. Gaskell's estimate of the group, as likenesses, was too high, there can be no doubt that in the profile we have Emily to the life, the true embodiment of that intensity, that concentration, that passion which gave us "Wuthering Heights"; that tenderness to which we owe the poems; and that fragility which made her fall, at 30 years of age, an easy victim to disease.⁴⁰⁷

The reviewer even amplifies the tenor of Gaskell's interpretation, expressing his certainty, as opposed to her indecision, about the extent to which the signs of Emily's susceptibility

⁴⁰⁵ 'The Brontë Sisters. Recovery of Long Lost Portraits', p. 7.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

to consumption and early death are, through Branwell's artistry, made visible in the painting.

Nearly sixteen years later, the author of 'Portraits and Posterity', an anonymous article published in *The Times*, writes in a far less confident tone about Branwell's prowess as a portrait artist, the likelihood that his portraits resemble his sitters, and the very possibility that portraits, painted or photographic, can capture and transmit to posterity the character or even the unique visible contours of the sitter. The writer uses Sir Peter Lely's portraits as an example of the way in which paintings that must once have seemed highly individuated to both artist and sitter appear, after long passage of time, merely as indistinguishable representatives of their historical moment. He concludes that 'even photographs grow more and more alike in time, and we have in our mind a kind of composite daguerreotype of the sitters in the daguerreotype age'.⁴⁰⁸ His assertion that 'BRANWELL BRONTË'S insignificant portraits of his sisters are of universal interest just because we hope that they are some approach to a photograph',⁴⁰⁹ is, therefore, an implicit rejection of Gaskell's belief in the revelatory qualities of the group portrait. On the surface, the author's statement appears to be an expression of hope that the portraits might at the least provide an accurate delineation of the sisters' external characteristics. Yet, given his view of the limitations of photographic portraiture, it is an acknowledgement that the images reflect nothing more than the period in which they were painted. They are simply signifiers of the nineteenth century.

Despite his overall conviction of the inadequacy of portraiture to represent a human being, the reviewer seems to express a preference for those aiming at the naturalistic representation of the human form, noting that 'a contemplation of many modern portraits

⁴⁰⁸ 'Portraits and Posterity', *The Times*, 30 April 1930, p. 17.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

makes one think highly of photography'.⁴¹⁰ Still, this popular, journalistic assertion of the historical, as opposed to aesthetic, significance of the Brontë portraits has clear points of commonality with the aesthetic theories put forward by the painter, critic, curator, and historian Roger Fry in *Vision and Design*. Fry's championing of the Post-Impressionists, his privileging of form over content, and his rejection of the assumption that art should aim at representation resulted in the acquisition of a controversial reputation as, in the words of the reviewer Arthur Clutton-Brock, 'a doctrinaire revolutionary, a kind of Lenin, in the theory and practice of painting'.⁴¹¹ Yet, the essence of his theories clearly filtered into the treatment of portraiture in the middlebrow Brontë fictional biographies.⁴¹²

In 'The Ottoman and the Whatnot' and 'Art and Science', both of which were first published in the *Athenaeum* in 1919 and subsequently reprinted in *Vision and Design*, Fry distinguishes between works of art and 'would-be works of art' on the basis of the emotion elicited by the contemplation of the object.⁴¹³ Discussing the difference between intellectual and aesthetic creative impulses, Fry argues that what he terms 'subject pictures' often fail to satisfy aesthetic desires. This is either because the chief concern of the artist is to represent the subject rather than to create form, or because, even if this is not

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ Arthur Clutton-Brock, 'Vision and Design', *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 December 1920, p. 881.

⁴¹² I am not claiming that all or indeed any of the fictional biographers here discussed read or attempted to incorporate elements of Fry's work. Literature does not exist in a vacuum, and it is entirely possible that, if not directly influenced by Fry, these writers were aware of the same debates and developments that facilitated his work. Yet, there is no reason to suppose that the middlebrow fictional biographers were unaware of Fry's theories. As already mentioned, his Post-Impressionist exhibition was discussed in *The Times*, and *Vision and Design* was issued by the Phoenix Library in 1928, the year of its inception. Chatto & Windus's Phoenix Library offered cheap, yet selective, reprints of contemporary literature, and brought the works of writers including Roger Fry, Clive Bell, Lytton Strachey, Wyndham Lewis, and Sylvia Townsend Warner to a broader demographic, 'distinct from those who would have borrowed the books from subscription libraries or bought them at the higher published prices'. Andrew Nash, 'Sifting out "Rubbish" in the Literature of the Twenties and Thirties: Chatto & Windus and the Phoenix Library', in *The Culture of the Publisher's Series, Volume One: Authors, Publishers and The Shaping of Taste*, ed. by John Spiers (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), pp. 188-201, (p. 194).

⁴¹³ Roger Fry, 'The Ottoman and the Whatnot', in *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1928, first published in revised edition 1925), pp. 39-46, (p. 41).

the case, the audience's awareness of the subject distracts from an appreciation of the form, thereby eliciting aesthetic as well as non-aesthetic responses. He explains that:

in so far as the artist's curiosity remains a purely intellectual curiosity it interferes with the perfection and purity of the work of art by introducing an alien and non-aesthetic element and appealing to non-aesthetic desires; in so far as it merely supplies the artist with new motives and a richer material out of which to build his designs, it is useful but subsidiary. Thus the objection to a "subject picture," in so far as one remains conscious of the subject as something outside of, and apart from, the form, is a valid objection to the intrusion of intellect, of however rudimentary a kind, into an aesthetic whole. The ordinary historical pictures of our annual shows will furnish perfect examples of such an intrusion, since they exhibit innumerable appeals to intellectual recognitions without which the pictures would be meaningless. Without some previous knowledge of Caligula or Mary Queen of Scots we are likely to miss our way in a great deal of what passes for art to-day.⁴¹⁴

The responses to these paintings are not aesthetic but intellectual, dependent on the artist's encoding of information and the audience's ability to recognize and decode it.

Fry describes the elicitation of a similar emotional response when confronted with another variety of the 'would-be' art object: historical objects made with other than purely utilitarian intentions. According to Fry, objects 'can either affect our aesthetic sensibilities or they can become symbols of a particular way of life. In this aspect they affect our historical imagination through our social emotions. [...] And somehow the works of each period come to stand for us as symbols of some particular and special aspect of life'.⁴¹⁵

This metonymic significance, Fry argues, only attaches to objects belonging to historical periods sufficiently removed from the present, about which 'precise and detailed knowledge must have faded from the collective memory, and the blurred but exquisite outlines of a generalization must have been established'.⁴¹⁶ The early part of the Victorian period, prior to the 1880s, he maintains, is just far enough removed from the present for its objects to have taken on the quality of historical suggestiveness.

⁴¹⁴ Roger Fry, 'Art and Science', in *Vision and Design*, pp. 79-84, (pp. 80-81).

⁴¹⁵ Fry, 'The Ottoman and the Whatnot', p. 41.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

Both of these concepts of extra-aesthetic emotional response converge in the fictional biographers' assessments of the Brontë group portrait, providing yet another example of the way in which these middlebrow texts reflect the intellectual trends of Modernism while, in the words of Humble, 'combining them with a mass accessibility and pleasurable appeal'.⁴¹⁷ For the anonymous author of 'Portraits and Posterity', the group portrait's only claim to importance is that it encodes, so posterity hopes, information about the physical characteristics of the sisters. The fictional biographers dash these hopes. In their texts, the portraits are unlike the sitters. The reason for their unlikeness is ultimately attributable to what Fry refers to as the intrusion of the intellect into a would-be work of art. Although no anachronistic expectations are placed on Branwell, and his expressed aim in most of the texts is naturalistic representation, it is his intellectual misunderstanding of his sisters that renders him unable to portray them accurately. Branwell's intellectual assessment of his sisters, his perception of them as his inferiors, as unremarkable, or even as models for images of other women, interposes itself between him and them, resulting in a distorted image.

Within these texts, Branwell's portraits are almost uniformly deemed to fail on artistic grounds because he cannot make them resemble his sitters. This value placed on representation is clearly at odds with Fry's emphasis on form. Still, it seems possible to read the fictional biographies, themselves, as illustrations of Fry's concept of the historical fantasies, or 'social emotions', aroused by the contemplation of a would-be art object. Based on their treatment in the texts, the portraits are only viewed as important because of their association with the Brontës, and not because they provide any information about the sisters' appearances, let alone any insight into their lives. The physical portraits, then, are

⁴¹⁷ Humble, p. 29.

implicitly viewed by the fictional biographers as objects that are merely capable of, in the words of Fry, ‘affect[ing] our historical imagination through our social emotions’.⁴¹⁸ The paintings can only elicit vague, generalized ideas about the Brontës and, because the Brontës were often inaccurately portrayed as metonymically representative of the Victorian, about the period in which they lived. The fictional biographies actually show the workings of Fry’s claim that such emotions can only be aroused when precise knowledge of the period or subject has been lost and replaced with a generalized fantasy. These texts acknowledge that the Brontës are unknowable, that precise knowledge of their inner experiences is not simply impossible to retrieve from this historical distance but was not fully known and understood even by themselves, even as they attempt to fill that lacuna with historical fictions.

Each of the texts may be said to encode this concept in its content and structure. However, it is Rachel Ferguson’s *Charlotte Brontë: A Play in Three Acts* that seems to provide the most explicit and self-conscious exploration of the consequences of the experience of these ‘social emotions’ in relation to the Brontës. Fry describes this affective response to historical objects in terms that are evocative of a mystical experience, explaining that ‘as we recede [from the object, through historical distancing] there comes a period of oblivion and total unconsciousness, to be succeeded when consciousness returns by the ecstasy, the nature of which we are considering’.⁴¹⁹ His claim that the objects, themselves, have the power to ‘conjure up in us’ certain historical ideas seems almost to cast them in the light of fetish objects, capable of independently arousing the emotions of and exerting control over the individuals who contemplate them.⁴²⁰ Fry describes in impersonal terms the process Benson found so troubling in its application to the Brontës.

⁴¹⁸ Fry, ‘The Ottoman and the Whatnot’, p. 41.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid, p. 40.

⁴²⁰ Ibid, p. 41.

In Benson's estimation, the Brontës, themselves, have become the objects that arouse these ecstatic, quasi-religious experiences. Indeed, Benson actually uses the word 'object' to describe the way the sisters are frequently regarded, explaining that 'this partisanship, [...] only succeeds in piling up round the object of its devotion cartloads of apocryphal rubbish' (xi). Like Fry, he employs the language of mysticism to describe the nature of the feelings they elicit.

Ferguson's play dramatizes this fetishistic view of the significance of the Brontës in the person of her American tourist, Elliott K. Emerson, who alerts his companions to his various affective responses to details of the Brontës' lives. He tells them, for instance, how his 'heart swelled' as he thought of the composition of the sisters' novels in the Parsonage parlour (16), and later asks a fellow tourist, after looking at the books the Brontës made in childhood, 'Don't it make your blood boil, padre, when you picture those motherless kiddies' (19). For Emerson, in the absence of the Brontës themselves, the items once owned by the family seem to take on a quasi-religious significance, becoming second class relics. When his wife asks him to make an offer to purchase Emily's writing desk, he expresses the impossibility and, one would assume, the sacrilege of such a plan with the words 'Why, the Brontës have *touched* that desk!' (14). Yet, as Ferguson demonstrates, this fetishistic view of the Brontës also has a more worldly obverse side, which severs the family from their work and historical context, and reduces them to collectible objects; this forms the subject of Ferguson's prologue.

Ferguson's *Charlotte Brontë: A Play in Three Acts* departs from other contemporary works of Brontë fictional biography in terms of her more overt use of metafictional techniques to tell the story of the Brontës' lives. Unlike the other plays mentioned thus far, each of which commences with a scene set in the Parsonage,

Ferguson's play begins with a comedic prologue set in the newly opened Parsonage Museum of the early 1930s, with its glass display cases, souvenirs, and tour guides. This mediation of her portrayal of the Brontës disrupts the sense of realism that is cultivated in the other texts. Based around a discussion between English and American tourists who voice such numerous and disparate views regarding virtually all aspects of the Brontës' lives, from the quality of Patrick's parenting to the nature of Charlotte's attachments to Monsieur Heger and Arthur Bell Nicholls, the prologue encourages the sense that Ferguson's play is just one more interpretation of the family's lives, without any pretension to factuality. In addition to fostering the sense of a multiplicity of interpretative possibilities, however, the prologue also disrupts the illusion, fostered by the more conventional structures of the other plays, of observing, in the words of Laura Mulvey, 'a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy'.⁴²¹ Instead, the audience, watching the Brontës' lives unfold on the stage in the later acts of the play, are aligned with the tourists of the prologue, who view the remains of the Brontës lives through the glass display cases; they both occupy the position of observer. Ferguson draws attention to the partiality and artificiality of her portrayal of the Brontës in much the same way that the contemporary neo-Victorian novelist, Michel Faber, uses the device of direct address to the reader in *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) to, in the words of Heilmann and Llewellyn, pose 'fundamental intellectual questions about the ethical standpoint of the author and reader in relation to the notion of temporality and the "knowable" nature of an historical period'.⁴²² One of the principal

⁴²¹ Mulvey, p. 17.

⁴²² Heilmann and Llewellyn, p. 15.

ways in which Ferguson reinforces the insistence on the complicity of the audience is through the tourists' discussion of visual representations of the Brontës.

While touring Emily's bedroom, the American man tries to engage the English family in a discussion about Emily's self portrait and Brontë portraits in general. He tells them:

I have at home in Ohio a reproduction of the self portrait with dog done by Emily herself. One of the three authenticated likenesses in existence. What gets me is what's become o' that other likeness young Branwell did of Emily—[...] it is a known fact that there's a missin' likeness right here in this village. It was given to one o' their old servants an' it riles me it ain't been found. I tell you . . . if I had another three days in Europe instead've sailin' Friday, I'd find that likeness if it cost me my last cent. And it would be "the Emerson Brontë." That'd be great. (14-15)

Emerson's sole motivation for locating the missing portrait of Emily is the prospect of ownership of the rights to her image, and in his fantasy, the title affixed to the portrait effaces Emily's name and replaces it with his own. He and his wife later make reference to their purchase of Brontë 'postal cards' on sale at the Parsonage, 'includin' the Richmond likeness 've Charlotte which used to hang right here outside on the staircase wall' (16). And finally, he reveals to the English family that 'it isn't so much the notion of these Brontës havin' sat all over the Parsonage takes our fancy as the ability to check up on rock-bottom souvenirs' (17). His materialistic view of the importance of the Brontës, as a collection of objects and bits of information that confer a cultural cachet on their possessor, extends to his discussion of Branwell's group portrait.

Rather than exploring the content of the portrait and attempting to discover what Branwell's representation of his sisters might reveal about the family, Emerson cannot penetrate further than its surface, interpreting the physical condition of the portrait as evidence to support his attack on the character of Arthur Bell Nicholls. He states, accusingly:

Look what you let happen to Branwell's likeness of his sisters. You let this Arthur Bell Nicholls take it over to America rolled up all anyhow an' get itself overlooked in a cupboard until his wife found it among the junk, so there are four cracks clear across the canvas, an' there they are, cracks an' all, in your National Gallery to this day. He was a sap, that Reverend Nicholls. I mean, it riles one. What a sensible girl like Charlotte saw in him beats me. (17)

As previously noted, the portrait was taken to Ireland and not, as Emerson complains, to America. It is possible that this is a simple mistake on Ferguson's part. However, given the author's note, in which she reveals exactly what she has fabricated, refers to the sisters' school prospectus in the Parsonage Museum as one of her sources of information, and asserts that 'wherever possible, the known sentences spoken by the Brontës have been used, verbatim' (6), it seems that Ferguson's knowledge of the Brontës was specialized enough to make such a mistake unlikely. It also seems unlikely that Emerson would be unaware that the portrait was found in Ireland, given his knowledge of the other circumstances of the portrait's discovery, in addition to the various other facts with which he beleaguers the English family. His insistence that Nicholls was responsible for folding the portrait also seems to be evidence of his, and Ferguson's, familiarity with one of the first reports of the portrait's discovery, in which the anonymous author makes the same accusation.

The author reports that, while clearing out a cupboard, a servant of Mary Nicholls found the bundle of paintings; 'Mrs. Nicholls bade her untie them, and from the one there emerged the picture of Emily and from the other, actually folded in four—oh the barbarism of Charlotte's husband!—the group of the three sisters'.⁴²³ As such, it seems entirely possible that the mistake is intended to be Emerson's, and to function as an accidental articulation of his own desire to purchase and take back with him to America the relics of the family. Ferguson undermines Emerson's assumptions about Nicholls by portraying him

⁴²³ 'The Brontë Sisters. Recovery of Long Lost Portraits', p. 7.

as a sympathetic husband who encourages Charlotte in her literary pursuits. In one of the final scenes of the play, she draws the audience's attention to the extent of Emerson's mistake by recalling his name in a different context; while Charlotte is on her deathbed, Nicholls reads 'Emerson's essays' to Patrick (79), who is, at this stage in the play, incapacitated by blindness, suffering from a spiritual crisis brought on by Charlotte's illness and impending death, and entirely reliant on his son-in-law for both his material needs and emotional support. She also absolves Nicholls of responsibility for the creases in the painting by including a scene during which Anne and Charlotte fold Branwell's paintings and put them in the cupboard because, in their grief at his passing, they 'cannot bear to see them' (59). Emerson cannot see past the damage done to the canvas and so, although he has memorized facts about the Brontës, he cannot interpret their actions correctly and see them as they were any more than the English family whose knowledge is outdated, or Branwell who, as in most of the other plays, cannot see past his sisters' physical exteriors.

Although Ferguson's play is perhaps the most overt and playful in its methods, each of the plays rejects the very possibility that one human being can be fully understood and rightly portrayed by another, a position suggesting a degree of anxiety about the production of Brontë fictional biography itself. By presenting Branwell's portrait as a flawed image, one that inspires discordance and functions as a symbolic site of rupture between the siblings, these authors demonstrate a sophisticated and self-reflexive awareness of the problems inherent in any attempt to represent and interpret human subjects, even while the act of creating a fictionalized portrait of the family suggests a drive to remedy the omissions of standard biography. In their rejection of Gaskell's assessment of the portrait, they challenge and revise the Victorian urtext of the Brontë

story and, by dramatizing the pleasures and dangers of the gaze, they call into question their own and their audience's fascination with the Victorian past and the images that signify it.

Rachel Ferguson's *Charlotte Brontë: A Play in Three Acts*, Clemence Dane's *Wild Decembers*, Alfred Sangster's *The Brontës* (1933), John Davison's *The Brontës of Haworth Parsonage* (1934), Kathryn Jean MacFarlane's *Divide the Desolation* (1936), and Ella Moorhouse's *Stone Walls* all dramatize the historical fact of Branwell's failure as a portrait artist, and attribute this failure primarily to his inability to understand his subjects psychologically. Branwell cannot understand his sisters, and so his visual portrayals of them are nothing more than projections of his own erroneous beliefs about their characters. In Davison's play, Branwell has an almost delusional sense of his talent as an artist, explaining his failure to secure a place at the Royal Academy as entirely owing to their prejudice against his poverty, and asserting that 'the preliminary exams. would have been easy; I know as much about anatomy as a surgeon [...] I'd have taught *them*, never mind them teaching me'.⁴²⁴ Branwell's claim is belied, however, by the later revelation of his failure to establish himself as a portrait artist in Bradford, a failure his father attributes to his inability to understand his sitters; Branwell, Patrick observes, 'is a poor judge of character; that's probably why he failed so miserably as a portrait painter' (28). In *Stone Walls*, Branwell exhibits the same inflated sense of his talents, claiming 'I'm an artist born, but a godforsaken station at Luddenden Foot or a schoolroom of brats is all I get' (19), despite the fact that, as his sisters remind him, he has already squandered opportunities to establish himself as a painter in Bradford as well as London. When he holds the portrait of his sisters up for scrutiny, Emily asserts 'It is *bad*; Charlotte looks like a particularly stolid

⁴²⁴ John Davison, *The Brontës of Haworth Parsonage: A Chronicle Play of a Famous Family* (London: Frederick Muller, 1934), p. 12. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

version of good Queen Anne [...] Anne never in her life looked so glum; [...] I can't judge myself, but I look like a deaf-mute!' (22). In this play, as in most interwar fictional biographies, Emily is able to comprehend the psychological workings and the unspoken desires of her family. Her ability to see them as they really are extends in many of the plays to an almost preternatural ability to foresee their fates and her own. As such, Moorhouse implies that Emily's assessment of the painting is to be trusted. Branwell's depiction of his sisters as dull, impassive, and inexpressive is shown to be merely a reflection of his own misogyny, in the same way that Gaskell's reading of the portrait as revealing Emily's powerful nature, Charlotte's solicitude, and Anne's tenderness, seems to be a reflection of her desire to corroborate her interpretation of them as such in the biography. Branwell's lack of self-understanding and his belief that by virtue of his sex he is intellectually and artistically superior to his sisters prevent him from recognizing their capacity for artistic self-expression, and, as a result, he fails as an artist.

In the first lines of *Wild Decembers*, Branwell expresses frustration at his inability to paint Charlotte accurately. Yet, in contrast to his characterization in most other works, Branwell is keenly aware that it is due to a lack of understanding between Charlotte and himself. He complains 'I shall never get Charlotte. [...] She isn't a prig. She isn't a staring miss. And yet look what I've made of her. It's her fault. She sits there and defies me, damn her!'.⁴²⁵ However, he follows this with the rather plaintive line 'I wish she'd come back' (2), and throughout this first act, Branwell laments the estrangement between himself and Charlotte. In this text, Charlotte is unknowable and un-paintable to Branwell because she deliberately distances herself from him. Although his portrait of Charlotte is a failure, Dane's notes reveal that his portraits of Anne and Emily are not, and that their 'brother can

⁴²⁵ Clemence Dane, *Wild Decembers* (London: Heinemann, 1932), pp.1-2. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

catch a likeness' (2). Dane also allows him, in contrast to Moorhouse's and Davison's plays, a measure of success in his literary attempts; she dramatizes the creation of *Wuthering Heights* as a collaboration between Branwell, who is too ill from the effects of alcoholism to finish the novel, and Emily, the only sister who rightly understands his nature.

Dane portrays Branwell sympathetically, but she neither endorses nor condemns the gaze to which he subjects his sisters. Instead, *Wild Decembers* exhibits a preoccupation with the nuances and complexities of the gaze, dramatizing acts of surveillance, voyeurism, and attempts at penetration through the reading of texts as well as faces. In a manner similar to Ferguson's, Dane's emphasis on looking draws attention to the audience's own observation of the family. Although Branwell does not, in contrast to his portrayal in Moorhouse's play, act in a brutal or overtly threatening manner toward his sisters, his immersion in erotic fantasy about Lydia Robinson results in a way of looking at Emily that effaces her identity and reduces her to a sexual object. Revealing to Emily why he has been watching her through the window without her knowledge, he explains 'When you're sitting with your back to me and the light on your hair, I can pretend that I'm watching her from the terrace at Thorp Green' (48-49). The pleasure or satisfaction he derives from this covert act of looking is scopophilic, voyeuristic, and quasi-incestuous. Yet, again in contrast to Moorhouse's play, in which Branwell attempts to force phallic objects including a knife and a bottle of liquor into his sisters' mouths, he is not characterized as dangerous or sexually abusive.

Perhaps what may be termed Dane's neutral handling of the way Branwell looks at Emily is in part a product of the broader interwar trend of portraying the relationship between the two siblings as particularly close. Emily is often identified as the only sister

who understands and sympathizes with Branwell's addiction and emotional distress, and the relationship between the siblings is sometimes shown to be sexually charged or even bordering on the incestuous. This is true of biographies including Emily and Georges Romieu's *The Brontë Sisters*, and fictional biographies including *Stone Walls*, J. A. Mackereth's *Storm-Wrack: A Night With the Brontës, 184—* (1927), and especially MacFarlane's *Divide the Desolation*, in which the siblings share a sadomasochistic childhood relationship within which Emily rejoices that Branwell 'cared enough to be furious with her—to hurt her' (22). For those readers familiar with Brontë poetry, the title of Dane's play, *Wild Decembers*, would also serve to reinforce the sense of emotional and intellectual intimacy between the siblings who share a poetic language; the phrase appears in both Emily's poem, 'Remembrance', and Branwell's poem, 'Caroline'.⁴²⁶

Branwell's untroubled substitution of Emily for Lydia Robinson may, however, also indicate that Dane was influenced by May Sinclair's theory of Branwell's pathology. In her study, *The Three Brontës*, Sinclair, who was far less sympathetic than Dane towards Branwell, his psychological malaise, and his artistic and sexual frustrations, accused him of being 'a degenerate, as incapable of passion as he was of poetry' (41), and of wallowing 'voluptuously in the torments of frustration' (42). In her opinion, Branwell's devastation at the termination of his alleged affair with Robinson began as a self-indulgent dramatization of his one-sided, insincere feelings, and became a pathological obsession. He was, in Sinclair's estimation, not passionately in love with Robinson, but in love, so to speak, with the emotions called forth by the belief that he was in love and that he had been thwarted from being with his lover. He was, Sinclair writes, 'a monstrous egoist. He was not interested in his sisters or in his friends, or really in Mrs. Robinson. He was interested only

⁴²⁶ Romer Wilson includes the following quote from Branwell's 'Caroline' in her chapter on 'The Death of Maria': 'we, at rest together, | Used to lie listening to the showers | Of wild December weather'. At least as early as 1928, it was known that both siblings used this phrase. Wilson, p. 44.

in himself' (31). Branwell's substitution of Emily for Lydia suggests that, within the framework of Dane's play and in concordance with Sinclair's theory, Lydia is chiefly important to Branwell insofar as she functions as a canvas onto which he is able to project his fantasies. With her back turned to him and her face hidden from view, Emily performs the same function, allowing Branwell first to fantasize about Lydia and then to dramatize his fantasy in poetic language. Yet, contrary to Sinclair's belief, Branwell is, in Dane's play, capable of loving Emily and of maintaining a relationship with her. It seems, therefore, that Dane's sympathetic portrayal of Branwell, her allowing him to generate the germ of the story of *Wuthering Heights* despite his inability or refusal see his sisters as they are, has more to do with the fact that she democratizes the gaze.

Deviating from Mulvey's theorization of the gaze as, primarily, the process by which men derive pleasure from looking at women, in Dane's play, it is Charlotte who defends the act of looking. After learning of Branwell's dismissal from his position with the Robinsons, she tells Anne:

I don't condemn him for his frantic folly—the folly of looking, the folly of lingering, loving. You say she's a worthless creature, a showy creature. If she caught his eye I don't blame Branwell for being a fool, like other fools. (37)

In the preceding act, Charlotte determines to leave Brussels due to her fears about the intensity of her love for her teacher, and, immediately following this pronouncement on Branwell's behaviour, she betrays her hope that some misadventure of Madame Heger's had necessitated Monsieur Heger's writing to her himself. Charlotte's understanding of Branwell's 'frantic folly' is the result of her own experiences of the pleasures and pains of looking at and fantasizing about the object of her affection.⁴²⁷ Yet, her understanding only

⁴²⁷ Interestingly, Charlotte's defense of looking, and her acknowledgement that it yields both pain and pleasure, echoes Jane Eyre's experience of gazing at Rochester: 'No sooner did I see that his attention was riveted on them, and that I might gaze without being observed, than my eyes were drawn involuntarily to his face: I could not keep their lids under control: they would rise, and the irids would fix on him. I looked, and

extends so far, and she follows what seems to be an expression of sympathy for a fellow sufferer with a statement of condemnation: ‘But to betray his folly—I can’t forgive him that’ (37). Thus, in *Wild Decembers*, Branwell’s ability to succeed, to some extent, as both a literary and a visual artist is not hampered by his inability to see Charlotte as she is or by his act of imagining Emily as she is not, just as Charlotte’s literary ability is not hampered by her inability to understand Emily, her refusal to understand what she deems distasteful in Branwell’s behaviour, or her subjection of Monsieur Heger to her own gaze.

Ferguson does not allow the audience to witness the production of this group portrait, but implicitly comments on its accuracy by commencing the first act with Branwell’s attempt to draw a different portrait of Anne. As in the other plays, Branwell is unable to portray his sister accurately because he does not understand her, but in this instance, Ferguson allows the audience to anticipate the failure of the portrait before Anne removes all doubt by pointing out its flaws. Calling Anne to him to inspect his work, Branwell asserts his desire for fame as an artist. When Anne replies with a disavowal of its pleasures, Branwell asks ‘Dislike fame? Hah! Thank your stars, then, that’ll be spared you. But the portrait, the portrait! Don’t you think I have rather caught your little mousey expression?’ (27).

Branwell perceives his youngest sister as timid and unremarkable, yet Anne, as Acton Bell, would become infamous for her graphic depictions of alcoholism, spousal abuse, and adultery in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Although Anne is frequently portrayed in interwar fictional biographies, including Ferguson’s, as the most gentle, submissive

had an acute pleasure in looking,—a precious, yet poignant pleasure; pure gold, with a steely point of agony: a pleasure like what the thirst-perishing man might feel who knows the well to which he has crept is poisoned, yet stoops and drinks divine draughts nevertheless’. This appears to be another instance of the intertextuality that characterizes this body of literature. If so, it is more subtly and sophisticatedly deployed in Dane’s text than in most other works of Brontë fictional biography; rather than straightforwardly portraying the Brontës experiencing an event that occurred in one of their novels, Dane realistically portrays Charlotte as expressing a sentiment that the real Charlotte Brontë must have at least considered in order for it to appear in her novel (174).

sister, she was described by May Sinclair as possessing ‘an immense, a terrifying audacity’. ‘And’, Sinclair writes, ‘not only was Anne revolutionary in her handling of moral situations, she was an insurgent in religious thought’ (44). In 1923, Walter Haydon, who submitted to the *Times Literary Supplement* a previously unprinted letter of Anne Brontë to the Reverend David Thom, noted, in reference to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, that ‘Miss May Sinclair, in her introduction to the edition of the story published in 1914, very aptly describes it as the “first presentment of that Feminist novel which we all know.”’⁴²⁸ Despite the tendency for fictional biographers to portray Anne in much the same way that Branwell sees her in Ferguson’s play, as unassuming and ‘mousey’, there was, at this time, a competing view of Anne as a proto-feminist. Anne delivers her criticism of the portrait with extreme timidity, first assuring Branwell: ‘You are very, very talented, Bran’ (27), and only afterward suggesting ‘I think, perhaps, the lower lip is a little too full’ (28); it is possible that Ferguson intended this scene to demonstrate that Anne’s outward demeanor was not necessarily an accurate reflection of her subjectivity.

When Anne identifies the inaccuracy of the image, Branwell, as in other plays, becomes furious and destroys the picture. Throughout this play, Branwell chases after fame and fortune, devoting more time to fantasizing about the fruits of artistry, adopting the pose of an artist, and, as Emily contemptuously puts it, ‘discourse[ing] on art to ploughmen’ (47), than to working consistently at his painting. This act is set in 1846, about twelve years after the painting of the group portrait, and after Branwell already had the benefit of private art lessons and the experience of working as a portrait painter in Bradford; as Anne bravely reminds him when he claims to have received no support from his family in his artistic endeavours, ‘Father gave us all lessons. They were very expensive.

⁴²⁸ Walter Haydon, ‘A Letter of Anne Brontë’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 21 June 1923, p. 422.

Two guineas an hour. And you had those weeks of study in Bradford, and you had those months in London' (28). Thus, Branwell's inability to paint Anne's portrait accurately now, after years of instruction and experience, implies that the earlier group portrait was similarly flawed.

The extent to which Branwell's portrayals of his sisters function as reflections of his own misperceptions of them is epitomized by his short-lived determination to paint Charlotte, as he tells Arthur Bell Nicholls, 'standing there where the lamplight falls on her hair . . . grave and austere as a Florentine Madonna' (31-32). Branwell's gaze frames Charlotte not in the image of the Madonna, but in the tradition of a body of images of the Madonna that were, necessarily, merely reflections of male painters' fantasies about what this paragon of womanhood might have looked like. This is in keeping with Branwell's lack of understanding of his sister's personality. However, the comparison of a living woman to a graven or sculptural representation of the Madonna is also a motif found in Victorian literature, where it often signifies the beholder's inability to comprehend the inner nature of the object of his gaze.

In Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, Mary Cave, the woman unsuccessfully sought in marriage by Mr Yorke, is described by the narrator, in relation to the way she is perceived by her more reverent suitors, as 'a girl with the face of a Madonna; a girl of living marble; stillness personified', and 'beautiful as a monumental angel'.⁴²⁹ Even after death, Mary is described by the narrator in sculptural terms as though she were a funerary effigy, 'a still beautiful-featured mould of clay left, cold and white, on the conjugal couch' (46). Mary is uncommunicative with Yorke, revealing nothing of her inner self to him, and so his love

⁴²⁹ Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley*, ed. by Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p. 45. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

for her, his belief that she is a perfect woman, is a fantasy predicated on her physical appearance and her calm demeanor. As the narrator explains:

No matter that, when he spoke to her, she only answered him in monosyllables; no matter that his sighs seemed unheard, that his glances were unreturned, that she never responded to his opinions, rarely smiled at his jests, paid him no respect and no attention; [...] for him Mary Cave was perfect, because somehow, for some reason—no doubt he had a reason—he loved her. (45)

This likening of Mary to a succession of sculptural and sacred art objects signals the inability of Yorke, and the other men who pursue her, to regard her as an individual with a unique interiority. Instead, Mary functions as beautiful and impassive receptacle of male fantasy and desire.

In Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), George Talboys writes of his new wife Helen, who later disguises herself as the eponymous Lady Audley, 'Her eyes are as blue and as clear as the skies on a bright summer's day, and her hair falls about her face like the pale golden halo you see round the head of a Madonna in an Italian picture'.⁴³⁰ George's association of Helen's hair with the Madonna's halo suggests an inability to distinguish between physical beauty and morality, and functions as an ironic comment upon his failure objectively to perceive his wife, with her mercenary and latent murderous, bigamist, and arsonist tendencies. The narrator of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) implicitly comments on the inappropriateness of this practice of comparing a living woman to an artist's representation of the Madonna by expressing her sense of the incongruity of the Madonna, as she is portrayed in Raphael's paintings, as a model for mothers. The narrator discusses the unrealistic nature of his portrayals, observing that the qualities of these interchangeable images of feminine docility, with their

⁴³⁰ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, ed. by David Skilton (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p. 261.

seeming absence of personality and volition, were incompatible with the actual demands of motherhood:

I have often wondered whether those early Madonnas of Raphael, with the blond faces and somewhat stupid expression, kept their placidity undisturbed when their strong-limbed, strong-willed boys got a little too old to do without clothing. I think they must have been given to feeble remonstrance, getting more and more peevish as it became more and more ineffectual.⁴³¹

The experience of the Madonna, who, according to the doctrine of The Immaculate Conception, was conceived without original sin and who, as Marina Warner notes, was ‘as mother [...] exempt by special privilege from intercourse, from labour, and from other physical processes of ordinary childbearing’,⁴³² is alien to that of any other woman; as a model of womanhood, she is impossible to emulate. The inappropriateness of the comparisons made between female characters and images of the Madonna signals the inability of these male characters to understand their female counterparts; it represents a rejection of the practice of attempting to understand or explain one woman by means of her resemblance to another.

Given the metadramatic nature of the play, it is possible that Ferguson referenced this method of indicating inaccurate feminine interpretation and representation on the part of male characters; it has the effect of calling attention to the fact that the Branwell of her play is also a consciously constructed character and not a facsimile of an historical figure. At the same time, Branwell’s projected portrait replicates, and is perhaps intended to function as a comment on, the way in which the historical Charlotte Brontë had often been appropriated and made to represent various types of womanhood, rather than viewed as an

⁴³¹ George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p. 14.

⁴³² Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), p. 192.

individual with a unique and multifaceted personality.⁴³³ The association of Ferguson's Charlotte with the Madonna as she is described in the Bible, however, and not merely with two-dimensional visual representations of her, is no less incongruous. Charlotte's articulation of discontent with the subservient position she has been made to occupy as governess to the children of people she indignantly terms 'purse-proud vulgarians' (29) contrasts markedly with the Madonna's humble acceptance of the fate God has chosen for her, with the words 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word'.⁴³⁴ More generally, Charlotte rails against her circumstances, forming schemes for the improvement of her life and the lives of her family; this is consistent with her characterization in the majority of interwar writing on the Brontës, both fictional and non-fictional. Yet, despite the many disappointments she is shown to have experienced by this point in the play, which are not limited to the mortifications she suffered as a governess, but include her damaging relationship with Monsieur Heger; the failure of her plans for the establishment of a school at the Parsonage; and the commercial failure of *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell* (1846), Ferguson's Charlotte Brontë is neither grave nor austere. She is not the woman who emerges from Gaskell's biography, damaged by a childhood in which she never 'experienced caresses or fond attentions' (149) and an adulthood in which 'the hard cruel facts, pressed down, by external life, upon [her] very senses' (259), a view of Charlotte that was virtually ubiquitous at the time of Ferguson's writing. Instead, Ferguson subverts the prevailing characterization of Charlotte by allowing her readers and viewers to witness Charlotte exchanging banter with Branwell, singing and

⁴³³ Lucasta Miller surveys some of the ideological uses to which the story of Charlotte's life had been put in the years following her death, including her portrayal as a model of ideal Christian and domestic femininity in the mid-Victorian biographical anthologies written for the instruction of young girls (pp. 88-95), and her later portrayal, during the *fin de siècle* and the First World War, as an example for women who sought employment outside of the home (pp. 106-108).

⁴³⁴ Luke 1. 38.

playing the piano in a transport of joy at the receipt of one of Heger's letters, and sardonically jesting about her mistreatment by a former employer: 'Oh, she hated me more than that! Fifteen pounds a year and my washing should merely have provoked a mild dislike' (41).

Perhaps the most significant way in which Charlotte's character and behaviour diverge from those most commonly associated with the Madonna is in terms of her sexual identity. Charlotte is unable to define the nature of her attachment to Heger. She assures Arthur Bell Nicholls that 'It was not a physical thing; he is an ugly man and I am a plain woman' (62), but, when asked whether the letters she wrote him were love letters, replies 'I don't know. I don't know. I was his pupil. He was—my master' (63). Emily's expression of exasperation, 'Oh, Christ, I wish I could tell you you were free to go to this man, however shamefully and immorally' (44-45), suggests that she perceives a sexual dimension to Charlotte's attraction to their former instructor. Charlotte insists on the intangible, cerebral nature of their relationship. Yet, her claim that 'his mind couldn't let my mind alone, nor mine his. I could have told whether he was in the room or not if I were blindfolded!' (62) seems pregnant with the suggestion of sexual arousal, given that Heger's presence in a room results in physical sensation. Still, despite the suggestions that Charlotte was in love with or sexually attracted to Heger, it is significant that Ferguson allows the quality of Charlotte's feelings to remain ambiguous to Charlotte, herself, if not to Emily. By doing so, she addresses the question that is raised by the English girl and taken up by the clergyman in the prologue, 'What I want to know is: was Charlotte in love with Heger?' (22), with a demonstration of the complex and indefinable nature of certain human relationships. By dramatizing the confusion and indecision of her fictional construct of Charlotte Brontë, Ferguson implicitly calls attention to the impossibility of

reaching a complete understanding of, much less of accurately and fully recreating the life of, an historical personage, through either factual or fictional biography.

Unlike other Brontë fictional biographers, including Alfred Sangster and Dan Totheroh, Ferguson presents the sisters' literary pursuits as purely motivated by the need for artistic self-expression, rather than for fame or financial security. Despite the necessity for the sisters to work and contribute to the household income, Charlotte explicitly disavows any financial motivation for writing, demanding of Anne when she reverts to the commercial failure of their poetry, 'Did you write yours for money? Or Emily? Or I?' (49). Charlotte's writing is portrayed as a vocation rather than an occupation, and this distinction, according to Helena Michie, also carried sexual connotations that would be evident to a Victorian observer such as Branwell. She explains that

Because vocation, unlike other forms of work, was not immediately or necessarily justifiable in terms of family, because the artist often felt a need that went beyond earning a few pennies to support an ailing mother or an unemployed husband, the call to artistic endeavor was often perceived as a call away from family.⁴³⁵

This 'Stepping out of the family', Michie argues, 'was, of course, seen as a step into the sexual wilderness'.⁴³⁶ As in most other works of interwar Brontë fictional biography, Branwell is not aware, in Ferguson's play, that his sisters have published. He is by no means certain that Charlotte has experienced some form of romantic attachment. He is, therefore, not entirely at fault for his failure to recognize the sexually potent, perhaps even transgressive, nature of Charlotte's artistry or relations with Heger; after all, Charlotte and her sisters do not take Branwell into their confidence. However, Branwell's inability to perceive his sisters' capacity for artistic creation, his failure to see them as anything more than the passive objects of his artistic male gaze, is not the result of his ignorance about

⁴³⁵ Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies* (New York; Oxford: OUP, 1987), pp. 62-63.

⁴³⁶ Michie, p. 63.

their activities but an extension of his generally misogynist belief that women are inherently incapable of artistry. Replying to Charlotte's statement that she is able to work despite the noise made by Patrick's shooting, Branwell replies by establishing a sex-based distinction between what men and women, what he and Charlotte, are capable of: 'All women's instincts are domestic. But when one's trying to make an artistic life—' (30). Branwell's association of Charlotte with the image of a Florentine Madonna not only ignores but denies the possibility of her sexual expression, and this is especially so given that the Madonna is perhaps most readily associated with virginity. Although the painting never comes to fruition, Branwell's mental composition of the portrait of Charlotte in the style of the Florentine Madonnas necessarily entails the superimposition of the costume and attributes commonly associated with the Madonna over the body of his sister. It constitutes an erasure of Charlotte's unique identity and her reduction to a mythic type of womanly perfection.

In each of these plays, portraiture is used self-reflexively to demonstrate the impossibility of interpreting and representing, through the medium of paint or language, a human subject in such a way that his or her whole self is revealed. The fictional biographers of the interwar period rejected Gaskell's faith in the psychological revelations of Branwell's portrait, as well as the confidence with which she asserted that she could offer the reader of her biography 'a right understanding of the life of my dear friend, Charlotte Brontë' (17). They challenge and revise the Victorian urtext of the Brontë story, even as they demonstrate their reliance on her account for the material of their fiction. In this respect, these works demonstrate that, more than twenty years prior to the widely accepted date of the emergence of neo-Victorian fiction, interwar writers utilized portraiture in much the same way that Heilmann and Llewellyn describe the function of

spectrality in neo-Victorian fiction, ‘as a reflection of our inability to recapture the Victorians, and the impossibility of see(k)ing the “truth” of the period through either fiction or fact’.⁴³⁷

Yet, the fictional biographers also challenge the biographical interpretations and sureties offered by contemporary psychobiographers including Lucile Dooley, Romer Wilson, Rosamond Langbridge, Virginia Moore, and James Crichton-Browne. Their dramatization of the unknowability of the Brontës, not just from their own historical vantage point of the 1920s and 1930s but from the vantage points of the members of their own family circle, indicates that the neo-Victorian agenda is subordinate to the broader themes of the impossibility of comprehending another human and of recreating a human life, regardless of the historical period in which it was lived. It is as though, in their use of fiction to tell the story of the family’s lives, the fictional biographers achieve what Roger Fry described as the aim of the Post-Impressionists. Fry explains, in the preface to the catalogue of the second Post-Impressionist exhibition in 1912, which was subsequently reprinted in *Vision and Design*, that the reason so many people misunderstand the art of the Post-Impressionists is due to their expectation that the purpose of art is to recreate reality:

The difficulty springs from a deep-rooted conviction, due to long-established custom, that the aim of painting is the descriptive imitation of natural forms. Now, these artists do not seek to give what can, after all, be but a pale reflex of actual appearance, but to arouse the conviction of a new and definite reality. They do not seek to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life. By that I mean that they wish to make images which by the clearness of their logical structure, and by their closely-knit unity of texture, shall appeal to our disinterested and contemplative imagination with something of the same vividness as the things of actual life appeal to our practical activities. In fact, they aim not at illusion but at reality.⁴³⁸

Aware that they cannot recreate a human life, aware that an assemblage of known or accepted facts cannot represent all that a life means, these writers have turned to fiction.

⁴³⁷ Heilmann and Llewellyn, p. 144.

⁴³⁸ Fry, ‘The French Post-Impressionists’, in *Vision and Design*, pp. 237-243, (pp. 238-239).

They essentially invent experiences which, as far as anyone is aware, never occurred in the lives of the family, in order to create the impression of life, filling in the silences in the historical record with their impressions of what the siblings might have thought or felt.



Figure 2. Patrick Branwell Brontë, 'The Brontë Sisters' (Anne Brontë; Emily Brontë; Charlotte Brontë), 1834. © National Portrait Gallery.



Figure 3. Basil Taylor, 'The Brontë Sisters', undated. © Leeds Museums and Galleries (Leeds Art Gallery) UK/Bridgeman Images.



Figure 4. Patrick Branwell Brontë, Emily Brontë (Anne Brontë; Emily Brontë; Charlotte Brontë), 1833. © National Portrait Gallery.



ANNE, EMILY AND CHARLOTTE BRONTË
From an oil-painting by Branwell Brontë, circa, 1840

Figure 5. ‘Anne, Emily and Charlotte Brontë’, reproduced from Esther Alice Chadwick’s *In the Footsteps of the Brontës*, (1914).

ConclusionGlass and the Brontës

In the final scene of Rachel Ferguson's *Charlotte Brontë: A Play in Three Acts*, a delirious and dying Charlotte wanders from her sickroom into the parlour of the Parsonage, where her husband and father have been discussing her life, fame, and impending death. Patrick has just articulated his complex feelings about Charlotte's literary work and authorial persona, a mixture of fatherly pride in her achievement and a hounding, torturing need for his daughter to be celebrated, noticed by wealthy and important people, and paid handsomely for her novels. Patrick is distraught at the anticipation of the loss of his last surviving child, and he remains haunted by his feelings of culpability for sending Maria and Elizabeth to the cheap school that, to his mind, caused their deaths. Yet, so strong is his need for affirmation of Charlotte's fame, so strong is his yearning for the money and security that attend it, that in the midst of his grief he orders his son-in-law to go to the window, for he'd 'like to know there were crowds waiting news of her outside' (83). Charlotte enters immediately after this pronouncement. In her illness and confusion, her mind wanders back to Thackeray's dinner party and the harrowing experience of being scrutinized by his guests, and she utters the pathetic words: 'People . . . such a crowd. Must I speak to them all, Mr. Smith? Good evening. Mr. Thackeray is kind. Why do they stare at me? I'm not a show. It's abominable' (83).

Charlotte's words are an indictment of all those who, throughout the drama, have attempted to obtrude their presences on her, to scrutinize her, to benefit from the reflected glory of association with her, but who are ultimately uninterested in knowing her for herself. They include the readers who request interviews and autographs, and the pilgrims

who hound the sisters through the streets of Haworth; they have, as Charlotte complains, ‘ignored our poems, but now that we are “successful” they want to know us’ (59). They include the reviewers who pry into the details of the Brontës’ lives, seemingly not to better understand the authors, but to acquire more material with which to criticize them. They include the lion-hunter Thackeray, who is eager to display his elusive and mysterious guest, but both ignorant of her personality and contemptuous of it when it becomes apparent in her shyness and taciturnity. Perhaps most glaringly, they include Mrs Chute, who attends the party in the hopes of poaching Thackeray’s eminent guest, yet cruelly ridicules Charlotte behind her back: ‘Did you ever see such a gown? And *mittens!*!’ (75). For each of these individuals, Charlotte is an object of curiosity because she is famous and sought-after. She is a spectacle.

For Patrick, Charlotte’s words are a revelation. In his anxiety for her success, literary and financial, he attempted to prevent her marriage to the unremarkable Arthur Bell Nicholls, hoping that she would secure a more impressive husband; and in the moments before her final entrance, Patrick accuses Nicholls of preventing Charlotte from writing. Charlotte’s helplessness, her expression of fear at being placed in public situations in which she is expected to perform, and Nicholls’s affectionate and sympathetic nursing impress Patrick with what I have identified as a key theme in the fictional biography of the interwar period: the extent to which members of the Brontë family do not know one another. In this play, as in others, Patrick does not know his child. This is further emphasized by the fact that, throughout her last illness, Charlotte does not recognize Patrick until he has this epiphany and there is greater understanding between them.

In Chapter Four, I analyzed the significance of the fictional biographers’ dramatization of the production and reception of the Brontë group portrait. I demonstrated

that portraiture was used metafictionally to highlight this issue of familial misunderstanding and discord, and to reveal the impossibility of understanding, capturing, and reproducing the identity of a human subject, through the visual arts, fictional biography, or so-called factual biography. I conclude the thesis with a brief consideration of a separate but related motif that figures in a variety of ways in interwar writing about the Brontës: glass. In hoping to find crowds assembled outside his windows, Patrick transforms the glazing of the Parsonage into the glass of the telescopic lens or museum display case, a medium through which his unwilling daughter can be observed by the curious; and he transforms his daughter into a specimen to be studied. His hopes, if realized, would represent a kind of culmination of the ‘show’ that Charlotte finds so ‘abominable’. In *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (2008), Isobel Armstrong writes of the dialectical nature of glass as both a physical barrier and a medium, through which light is transmitted and on the surface of which light is reflected; objects seen through a piece of glass can be distorted, but they can be brought into greater clarity, through the microscopic or telescopic lens for instance. This conclusion explores glass and the evocation of its sometimes opposing properties in relation to interwar attempts to conjure and reconstruct the Brontës in fiction and non-fiction.⁴³⁹

Charlotte’s desire for privacy and Patrick’s unwitting desire for that privacy to be scopically violated by Brontë fans irresistibly evokes the Parsonage Museum of Ferguson’s prologue. As discussed in Chapters One and Four, the comedic prologue functions metadramatically. It reminds the audience of the fictitiousness and partiality of this

⁴³⁹ Heilmann and Llewellyn suggestively discuss the motif of glass in works of twentieth- and twenty-first-century neo-Victorian fiction. Their treatment of the glass display cases of the museums in A. S. Byatt’s *The Children’s Book* (2008) most nearly touches the concerns of my own analysis. However, their focus is on the relationship between glass and spiritualism, and on the novelist’s desire to mimic or reflect the ghostly preoccupations of his or her Victorian subjects. As discussed in Chapter Two, this departs from my own understanding of the significance of the Brontës’ relationship to the ghostly. Furthermore, none of their glass-related analyses addresses the issue of biographical appropriations. See pp. 143-173.

interpretation of the family's lives, but also self-consciously addresses the factual commodification of the Brontës, in which both Ferguson and her audience play a part. The tourists are ciphers, representing those who read about, write about, or otherwise consume or reproduce the Brontës as cultural commodities, on both sides of the Atlantic, during the interwar period. As demonstrated in Chapter Two, the historical Charlotte Brontë, on whom Ferguson's fictional construct is based, deeply resented the attempts of reviewers, pilgrims, and lion-hunters to intrude on her privacy. With her tourists peering into display cases, discussing such private matters as Patrick Brontë's flatulence and the sincerity of Charlotte's love for her husband, Ferguson's prologue forces its audience to confront the extent to which, by reading or watching the play, they too are violating the family's privacy and turning Charlotte into a 'show'. In the newly opened Parsonage Museum of the 1930s, both historically and within the specific context of Ferguson's prologue, glass was employed as a tool of conservation.⁴⁴⁰ It protected the material artefacts of the Brontë family from deterioration, preserving them for the study and appreciation of future generations; and, by allowing their possessions to be seen by scholars and the curious alike, it facilitated the assembly of a material history of the family that could potentially provide greater insight into their lives. Yet, the transparent double barrier erected between the viewer and the artefact, and between the artefact and its original owner, could result in distortion, dislocation, and a loss of meaning, as the responses of Ferguson's tourists to the items under glass demonstrate.

⁴⁴⁰ Ferguson's American tourist, Emerson, also refers to the exhibition of the Murray manuscript of *Jane Eyre* in Oxford Street in 1931. According to David McClay, the John Murray Archive Senior Curator at the National Library of Scotland, the exhibition was historical, and the manuscript would, in all likelihood, have also been placed under glass. It appears, from his statement, that placing valuable books and manuscripts under glass was common practice: 'In the rest of the catalogue there are references to glass display cases or glass fronted book cases etc. There may have been some open displays on tables but this would have been the less valuable book material as opposed to rare books or original manuscripts'. David McClay, Email Correspondence, 27 January 2013.

As discussed in Chapters One and Four, the American tourists are principally interested in visiting the Parsonage Museum for the cultural cachet it will confer and for the opportunity of acquiring souvenirs to show off to others. Although Elliott K. Emerson makes a number of sentimental remarks about the Brontës' poverty, suffering, and genius, it is evident that, for him, the family's chief significance lies in the collectability of their former possessions. Ferguson demonstrates the extent to which this is facilitated by encasing the artefacts of the family in glass. After angrily leaving the Museum, Emerson and his wife return for a final souvenir, a snapshot in front of a glass case displaying the little books the Brontës created in childhood. Emerson directs his wife: 'Stand in back that case, Edna. Put your hand on it, so', and asks the tour guide: 'I suppose you wouldn't let my wife hold one o' those little books?' (20). He instructs her to 'Look a little more serious, Edna. Remember you're standin' right where Emily breathed her last. There! Fine! (*Tipping the GUIDE.*) We got to hustle if we mean to eat at Keighley' (20). In this one spectacular instance, the Brontës' writing is shorn of its meaning, reduced to props in a photograph, while the site of Emily's death is transformed into a backdrop for the posturing of a family of tourists. It is as if the visual, material evidence of the Brontës' existence somehow beguiles the eye of the tourist, rendering him unable to empathize with the sufferings of a real family, even as he intellectually acknowledges the connection between the location and Emily's death. The decision to place the Brontës' manuscripts under glass literally and metaphorically severs the audience from the authors' voices. It shifts the locus of meaning from the manuscripts' content to their exterior, transforming them into objects that can only be appreciated visually. The children's manifestations of literary precocity and Emily's death, the devastating effects of which Ferguson dramatizes, are dislocated from the family in which they occurred; separated from their human context

and from the humans who view them, they are rendered as commonplace as the Emersons' lunch.

The glass display cases of the Parsonage Museum simultaneously allowed interwar visitors an unprecedented closeness to the remains of the Brontës and interposed a barrier that could, as in the case of the family's writings, result in a loss or obfuscation of meaning. This duality provides an apt metaphor for the reconstruction of the Brontës' minds and lives in the psychobiographies that form the subject of Chapter Three. As I demonstrated in Chapter Two, the quasi-fictional *Life of Charlotte Brontë* was shaped by Gaskell's imaginative sympathy for her subject, but also by the paucity of material with which she had to write a life; by her sense of the necessity for reticence in writing about living people; and by her desire to honour her deceased friend by sanitizing her controversial reputation. The historical distance between the interwar psychobiographers and their subjects, and the changed and changing perception of what was acceptable for discussion in a biography, meant that it was possible to explore aspects of the family's lives that were glossed over or avoided by Gaskell. This historical and cultural distance; the 'gossipy familiarity and intimacy' that, as Humble demonstrates, characterized interwar engagement with the Brontës;⁴⁴¹ and the importance of sex to psychoanalysis's explanation of psychological development and dysfunction converged in the writing of the Brontë psychobiographies. The result was that those aspects of the Brontës' lives that Gaskell was at pains to avoid or conceal (namely Charlotte's relationship with Heger and any hint of sexual experience or expression) were placed under a metaphorical microscope lens.

In their attempts to map the minds of the family and to probe the depths of their secret drives and desires, the psychobiographers tended to magnify what might well have

⁴⁴¹ Humble, p. 183.

been the Brontës' emotional sufferings or mental illnesses to the point of gross distortion. In the hands of the psychobiographers Lucile Dooley and Rosamond Langbridge, Charlotte's affection for her family was construed as the expression of an incestuous desire for her father and brother. The fact that Charlotte remained unmarried until she was in her late thirties was used, by Dooley, as evidence to support the theory that she had a pathological desire to be impregnated with her father's child. Heathcliff was transformed, in Romer Wilson's and Virginia Moore's biographies, from the conscious creation of an artist to the reflection of a defense mechanism, a male alter-ego Emily created in order to cope with her feelings of rejection. This magnification of a narrowed focus on the family's alleged pathology had, like the display cases of Ferguson's prologue, a distorting effect; as I argued in Chapter Three, it dislocated the Brontës' psychological functioning and relationships from their wider nineteenth-century context, but also from the unique circumstances of the family in which they developed.

Clearly, there is a certain degree of prurience in the psychobiographers' attempts to explore the secrets of 'the sultry little closets of their corseted Victorian hearts' (84), as Langbridge suggestively expresses it. As I demonstrated in Chapter Two, the mystery surrounding the Brontës, the fact that very little was known or knowable about their lives, was one of the reasons that they became a subject of sustained fascination; from the early reviewers, to Elizabeth Gaskell, to the proto-fictional biographers of the *fin de siècle*, to the interwar biographers, fictional biographers, and psychobiographers, resolving the mystery of the Brontës, shedding new light on their experiences and literature, was at the heart of the encounter. Yet, if the literary and metaphorical glass that surrounds the Brontës is transparent, if it lays the family bare before the interwar gaze, the Brontës themselves functioned as mirrors, reflecting the preoccupations of the period that analyzed,

appropriated, and reproduced them. The psychobiographers' reconstruction of the Brontës' psychological landscape reflects nothing so clearly as the interwar interest in psychoanalytic explanations of the mind.

In England and the United States, the Brontës' lives and literature were approached as so many mirrors held up to the concerns of interwar society. The thread that runs through this thesis is the attempt to understand the reflections in the glass. The fictional biographers' dramatization of Branwell's relationship with his sisters illustrated the workings of Virginia Woolf's theory that men relate to women as mirrors that reflect magnified versions of themselves. But, they did more than this. Through their fictionalization of Branwell's flawed portraits of his sisters, the fictional biographers implicitly aligned themselves with Branwell as artists attempting to capture a likeness of the entire family; they acknowledged the extent to which any attempt to see the family as they were, to understand the entirety of their experience and to resurrect or reconstruct it, was impossible. Yet, their awareness of the inevitable distortions in the glass was enabling rather than limiting. They recognized that historical records were shaped by loss, reticence, and the perspective of the recorder, among other things, and that a list of so-called facts could not sum up what it is to be human. This granted the fictional biographers the freedom to imagine possibilities in the lives of the Brontës that had the potential to forcefully remind readers of the family's humanity. It is remarkable how often glass is invoked in these moments of possibility and humanization: William Weightman stepping through the Parsonage window for a midnight tryst with Emily in Alfred Sangster's *The Brontës*; Branwell projecting his sexual fantasy as he voyeuristically gazes at Emily through the window in Clemence Dane's *Wild Decembers*; Emily's recognition, in Kathryn Jean MacFarlane's *Divide the Desolation*, that if she served as a mirror to

Branwell, he also served as a mirror, reflecting the positive qualities she could not appreciate in herself. Rachel Ferguson even uses glazing, in *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*, to playfully but powerfully reiterate both the unknowability and the humanity of the Brontës. The appearance of the unrecognized ghost of Branwell Brontë, ‘that red-haired boy staring in over the curtains’ of the sitting-room window at the uneasy Miss Martin (74), itself perhaps a reference to the red-haired Peter Quint’s appearance to the governess outside the dining-room window at Bly, invites the question: if we, like Miss Martin, were somehow confronted with the Brontës, would we know them? Or, would the accumulated biographies, fictional biographies, literary studies, adaptations, displays and museum catalogues cloud our vision?

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