

IN SEARCH OF THE AUTHORIAL SELF: BRANWELL BRONTË'S MICROCOSMIC WORLD

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CHARLOTTE Brontë's early writings are now famous; those of her brother Branwell are less familiar even to Brontë aficionados. What is generally known of Branwell is the story of his eventual descent into drink and drugs, leading to his reputation as "a spectre in the Brontë story, in pathetic contrast with the astonishing achievements of his sisters," as the advertisement for Daphne du Maurier's biography of Branwell so poignantly puts it (Publisher's Blurb). Yet only a year younger than Charlotte, Branwell was both partner and often leader in the creation of events in the prolific writing project associated with their imaginative world of Glass Town and Angria. Since 2017 was the Bicentenary of Branwell's birth, it seems an appropriate time to reassess the brother of the Brontës and to celebrate his remarkable early creativity, rather than focus on the later tragic decline of this precocious child.

The surviving material objects from that childhood tell the story of the Brontës' early collaborative play, their imitation of print culture, and their production of magazines for an imaginary audience. Figure 1 displays the earliest extant writings of the famous Brontë juvenilia. They represent some twenty little hand-made booklets¹ with minuscule lettering and tiny illustrations. The open booklet in the centre, displaying pencil and watercolour sketches, is by Branwell: the earliest dated manuscript, written 12 March 1827 when he was nine years old. It contains pictures of his toy soldiers enacting the Battle of Washington and a few sentences describing the event. These were the wooden soldiers from the box of twelve that his father had given him as a birthday present and that he had shared with his sisters, an act that initiated the Young Men's play which eventually grew into the fictional saga of Glass

For abbreviations used in citations, please see list of works cited.

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Journal of Juvenilia Studies 1 (2018), pp. 3-19. doi:10.29173/jjs126

Town and Angria. It is significant that Charlotte's earliest story book, shown on the left in figure 1, is a present for her sister Anne, an illustrated story about a little girl of the same name, whereas Branwell has fashioned a "Battell Book," reflecting a fascination with military affairs that continued throughout his writing career. The physical object is a crude tiny hand-sewn booklet of eight pages (only 5 x 8 cm) with a cover of blue paper cut from a sugar bag. Paper was scarce and expensive at the parsonage, and the young Brontës practised recycling with an enthusiasm that would put most of us to shame. The other two booklets shown here are by Charlotte, written three years later: more sophisticated and even smaller (just over 5 x 3 cm, a matchbox size), with brown paper covers and minuscule script that imitates newspaper print. These are magazines initially fashioned to match the size of their audience, the twelve-inch toy soldiers. The tiny size of the print had the added advantage of rendering the contents of the manuscripts illegible to adult eyes, helping to maintain the secrecy of their shared imaginary world.



Fig. 1. The earliest miniature Brontë manuscripts (courtesy of the Brontë society).

When I first started working on these little manuscripts, most people viewed them simply as curiosities and wondered why I wasted my time on such insignificant "kids' stuff" (as one professor put it when I began my first job). Since then, interest in the Brontë early writings and especially their value has risen exponentially. In terms of current market value, a miniature booklet of twenty pages, written by Charlotte at fourteen, sold for £690,850 to a French investor in 2011, more than twice the pre-

sale estimate.² The Brontës would have been even more astounded by this sum than I was, and it is clear that different value factors are operating here from those discussed in this essay. No doubt the Brontë name and the rarity of the object played a part in the sale, but so too, perhaps, did the fact that juvenilia are now valued and seen as significant artefacts equal to letters and adult manuscripts. In this paper, however, I am more interested in the intrinsic value of these objects, both the tangible and intangible qualities associated with them: the secrecy implied by their tiny size, the toy soldiers as first audience, the literary models reflected in these booklets, the recycled materials used as covers that indicate household custom, the fictional authors and real authors, the creative practice demonstrated, and much more—including what we might term their microcosmic value.

The *OED* gives a number of related definitions for the word “microcosm,” but generally speaking a microcosm is a place, situation, or community, regarded as encapsulating in miniature the characteristic qualities or features of something much larger. In his early novel *Vivian Grey*, for example, Benjamin Disraeli refers to “The microcosm of a public school” to convey his belief that the English public school represents all the features in miniature of the larger community his protagonist strives to enter (1: 11). Originally, however, the term was used to refer to human nature or an individual human as representing the world or universe—hence its juxtaposition with the word “macrocosm” and its use in philosophical theories of the cosmos. G. K. Chesterton invokes this earlier meaning in his assertion that “Man is the microcosm; man is the measure of all things” (34). In this essay, I align the term with the concept of “paracosm,” a more recently coined word that is increasingly being used in relation to long-term, full-scale imaginary worlds created by children, in order to read Branwell’s microcosmic world—especially the paracosm he created with his sister Charlotte—as representative of the larger adult world from which (as children) they were excluded. Such an approach touches on questions relating not only to small things but also to such large ideas as representation, power, gender, and identity. In relation to Branwell specifically, I suggest that his frenetic literary output is a remarkable witness to early artistic talent, an energetic experimentation with modes of the authorial self, but that his paracosmic world also documents the way imaginative excess and misdirected creativity can handicap a promising young author.³

Branwell’s Miniature Paracosmic World as Microcosm

PARACOSMS are usually sophisticated alternative realities with their own history, culture, geography, politics, publications, and language. Although they need not reflect the larger real world, most of them inevitably do. Robert Silvey and Stephen MacKeith, in their seminal study “The Paracosm: A Special form of Fantasy,” define the paracosm as “a spontaneously created, but maintained and elaborated, imaginary private world” (24; see also Cohen and MacKeith 22). From this definition the “imaginary private world” might or might not be a microcosm, but in my view paracosms will always have microcosmic features, that is, will always reflect in some

way the larger real world. As MacKeith points out about the children he and Silvey examined, “Their imagination didn’t work in a vacuum” (22). Based on their study, Silvey and MacKeith list five types of paracosm, organized according to influence: these include worlds based on technology and the future; worlds centred on special places and communities, like schools or theatres; and others that rely on elaborate systems, documents and languages, rather like the Rowley world that the young Thomas Chatterton created with genealogies, maps and architectural drawings. In the Brontës’ case, their imaginary world does draw on this last type, but their Glass Town creation fits most squarely into the two most common categories identified by Silvey and MacKeith, namely worlds centred around toys and animals and worlds based on islands and countries.

Imaginary worlds arising from play with toys and animals are usually shared by a small family group. They comprise first the physical objects; then, as the children mature, their imaginations take over. As one of the paracosmists interviewed by Silvey and MacKeith said, “Once we realized we could draw and write about the characters, we were emancipated from the toys” (179). This was exactly the Brontës’ experience: the toy soldiers were gradually broken or lost, and their imaginative representatives continued the saga as heroes and authors, directed by their creators—the Brontës themselves. The second common type of paracosm, again significant in the case of the Brontës, involves islands, countries and their inhabitants, and has a heavy focus on stories, featuring some combination of history, romance and biography, that document relationships and the fate of special characters. When Emily and Anne Brontë broke away from their elder siblings’ influence, they established the world of Gondal based on rivalry between two islands and their powerful rulers. And the Glass Town and Angrian saga, created and continued by Charlotte and Branwell, involves history, romance and biography par excellence.

Perhaps the most important features of paracosmic play are that the invented worlds are private, seldom revealed to those outside the group, and that the worlds are consistent. The secrecy value of the Brontës’ miniature booklets has already been noted; neither their aunt (who ran the household when Mrs. Brontë died) nor their father had any idea of the explosively violent or sexual nature of the Brontë children’s early writings. At Roe Head school, Charlotte was tempted to reveal some of the little magazines to her friend Mary Taylor but thought better of the idea the next day since her siblings would see this as betrayal. When, as young adults, the Brontë sisters published poems relating to their sagas, they altered characters and place names to disguise their source. Even Branwell, the first published of the siblings (though his sisters never knew), was careful to mask Angrian references, although most of his eighteen poems published in newspapers were signed “Northangerland,” his favourite paracosmic pseudonym.

Both Charlotte and Branwell ensured the consistency of their imaginary world. When Branwell exuberantly kills off important characters in his manuscripts, Charlotte comes to the rescue and, in effect, resurrects them for the next stories (*Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë* 34); and when Branwell becomes bored with his inventions, such as the Glass Town magazine he edits, Charlotte takes over his initiative and keeps the publication going for several more years. It was Branwell, however, who

took a pride in systematizing their private world and maintaining a consistent political structure, features typical of paracosmic play. He documented in encyclopaedic detail, in neat lists, footnotes, sketches and maps, the geography, history, government, and social structure of the Glass Town Federation (and later, the new kingdom of Angria)—laying down the parameters of the imaginary world, ready for the drama, history, and military fiction he would write and illustrate (see fig. 2), and for the stories of high life and gothic romances that Charlotte favoured. From the age of ten, he was interested in architecture: his book with illustrations of “the most celebrated



Fig. 2. “Terror” by Branwell Brontë, aged twelve years, an early character study related to his interest in war (courtesy of the Brontë Society).

Public Buildings in London” is annotated with his opinions: St Paul’s Cathedral “capital,” the Bank of England “very Bad,” Somerset House “Tolerable,” and so on (Alexander and Sellars 422–23). He transposed versions of these into Glass Town, later sketching them in the margins of manuscripts.⁴ Branwell gained further

inspiration from his art lessons, using the copies he made (see, e.g., Alexander and Sellars 298, colour plate 12) as models for grand buildings like the Tower of All Nations and the Verdopolitan Parliament. (Glass Town is renamed “Verdopolis” half way through the saga.) His manuscripts note the heights of mountain ranges, the lengths of rivers, populations of cities, important churches, grand palaces, the country estates of the nobles, and even more humble sites such as the pubs and dens frequented by a Glass Town underclass of rogues, body-snatchers and murderers—all features that provide consistent context for discrete scenes and action in any number of related poems, plays, novelettes, satires, and serials written by the young Brontës.

From the beginning the Brontës were aware that their creation was fictional, a further pre-requisite of the paracosm. They acknowledged this by inventing special roles for themselves as fictional creators, distinguishing their actual role as child authors from their role as manipulators of supernatural and other unlikely narrative action. Realising their god-like powers over the imaginary world, they named themselves Chief Genii, creators of the Glass Town with ultimate authority over events and special responsibility for protecting their particular chosen country and its leader. Branwell was especially keen on the power this gave him in the “play” with mere mortals, his invented characters. He combined the idea of the Greek Gods on Mount Olympus (a motif from his lessons in the Classics) with the genii from the *Arabian Nights* and with representations of God from the Bible: the Chief Genii appear on clouds amidst thunder and lightning, with the trumpet-like voice of God, or on splendid ethereal thrones before which the Glass Town mortals are often blinded and fall down “as dead.” Unlike his sisters, Branwell made a point of stamping his new authoritative image on the title pages of many of his early manuscripts, illustrating his authority as “Mentor,” a figure of justice, in a colophon (as in fig. 3). The Chief Genii lend perspective to the narrative process and allow the young writers to play with their role as authors, intervening in events and disrupting the “normal” lives of their characters. Written as the saga is from the point of view of the Glass Town characters, the fictional narrators are only vaguely aware that there are huge creatures (the Brontës themselves, disguised as Genii) who read their minds and control their fate. The Genii are formulated as guardians of the land, protectors and often arbitrary judges; a creative device that works well until “Chief Genius Brannii” decides to run amok and has to be restrained. He appears to have disliked the role of protector, preferring to go on the rampage now and then, uttering “the horrible howl” of his “war-cry” (*EEW* 1: 39). So Charlotte eventually steps in and formally expels all the genii in her poem, “The trumpet hath sounded” (11 Dec 1831, *Poems* 91–93), modelled on Byron’s “The Destruction of Sennacherib,” giving us a good example of the collaborative rivalry between brother and sister.

This awareness of creative power, irrespective of gender, is a new sensation for the motherless children. It is inherent in their very first written records. When we read Charlotte’s “History of the Year” we sense the excitement of possession and control:

Next morning Branwell came to our door with a box of soldiers. Emily and I jumped out of bed and I snatched up one and exclaimed, "This is the Duke of Wellington! It shall be mine!" When I said this, Emily likewise took one and said it should be hers. When Anne came down she took one also Branwell chose "Bonaparte." (*EEW* 1: 5)

Branwell had already invented and documented earlier "plays" with previous sets of toy soldiers, but until Wellington appeared Charlotte and her sisters had shown little interest in their brother's military manoeuvres or invented lands. Pre-empting her brother's usual leadership role, Charlotte composed what she calls "A Romantic Tale" about the voyage of the twelve adventurers or "young men" (the toy soldiers), who discover the coast of Guinea and, after fighting the local Ashantee tribes, elect the Duke of Wellington as their leader and acquire a vast tract of west Africa centred around what is now Ghana and Nigeria. Their federal capital of Glass Town/Verdopolis is at the delta of the Niger. (The later kingdom of Angria is situated to the east.)

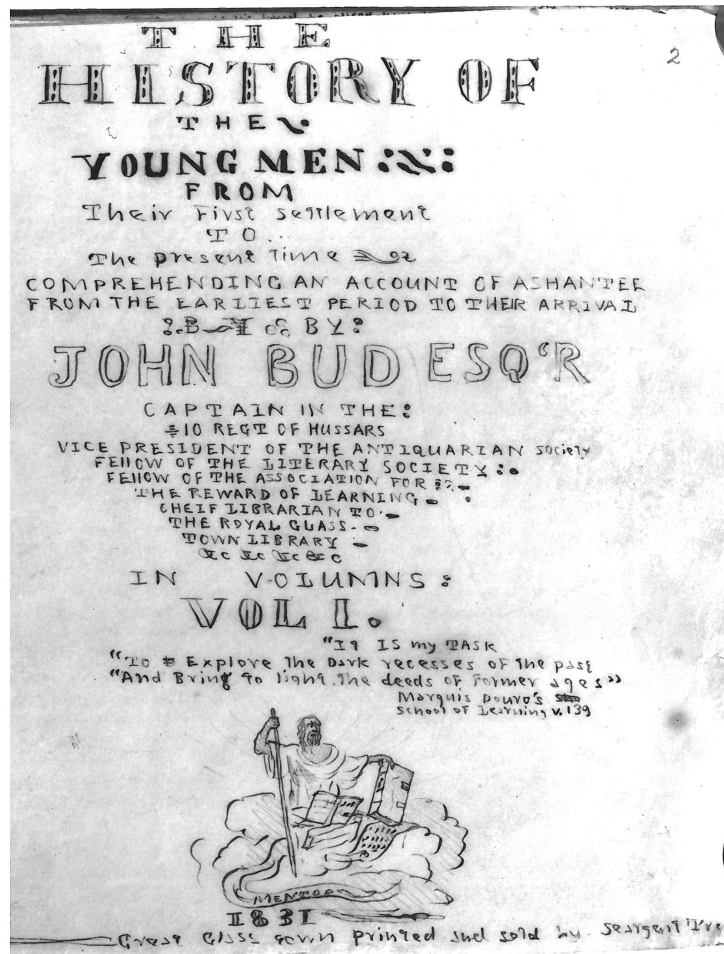


Fig. 3. Title page to Branwell Brontë's *The History of the Young Men*,

15 December 1830–7 May 1831; reproduced from the *Juvenilia Press* edition edited by William Baker, with others (2010).

Not to be outdone by his sister, and in an effort to reassert control over the destinies of his toy soldiers, Branwell writes what he calls a “real” history, correcting his sister’s version and laying down the physical and historical context from his point of view. He grandly titles it *The History of the Young Men from Their First Settlement to the Present Time* (15 December 1829–27 May 1831), and takes particular care over the title page and credentials of the author Captain John Bud, the eminent Glass Town political writer and historian, one of Branwell’s several pseudonyms (fig. 3). Branwell wrote eighteen pages in extraordinarily neat minuscule printing, laying out his pages like a contemporary history, with headed summaries of “Contents” for each chapter and elaborate footnotes (fig. 4). It is notable that Branwell, as the only son, seems to have had privileged access to better quality lined paper (and later bound notebooks), for what he considers an important work, whereas Charlotte uses mainly recycled, unlined, poorer-quality paper of smaller size. The very length of the title, and the carefully-imitated title page based on print culture at the time, suggest the business-like, almost obsessive way in which Branwell contradicts much of Charlotte’s fantasy and records instead “exact” dates, battle manoeuvres, government procedures, and business activity. As we have seen in the case of the Chief Genii, rivalry and the power of the author become central features of the Brontë paracosm, both in relation to the creator siblings and amongst the leading heroes and authors of the Glass Town and Angrian saga.

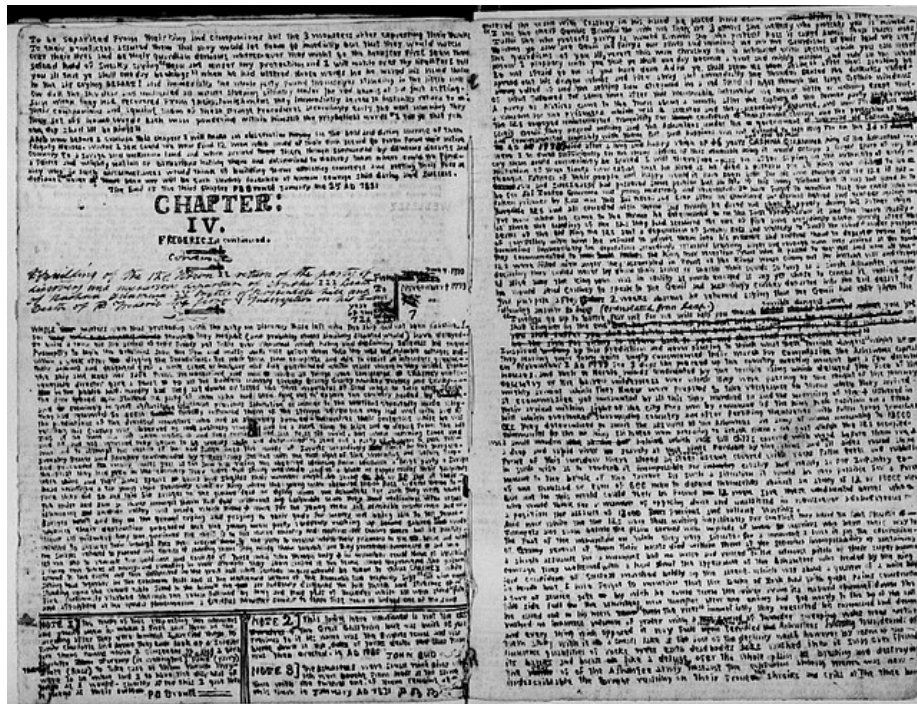


Fig. 4. Manuscript page of Brunnell Brontë’s *History of the Young Men*; reproduced from *Juvenilia Press* edition (2010), p. xxii.

Branwell's *History of the Young Men* is a good example of an ostensibly "small world" encapsulating the features of something larger. Unlike later manuscripts, the "History" features undisguised references to the British armed forces and their command of the seas. In fine colonial style, the Twelves under Branwell's control set out deliberately to found a colony in Africa, reflecting British and European land grabs of the period. En route they land at Ascension Island where they engage in fierce battle with the Dutch garrison and manage to annihilate it. In West Africa, they encounter a group of Ashantee, capture and ransom prisoners in exchange for land, trade rights, and peace; but eventually the Ashantee declare war on the British colonists, who in turn destroy the Ashantee capital and massacre its inhabitants. When the authorities in England hear of the Young Men's success, they request a leader for the British troops against Napoleon. Arthur Wellesley is sent; he defeats Napoleon and returns to Glass Town as the heroic Duke of Wellington, who is then elected King of the federation. Branwell is creating here his own miniature version of the Peninsula Wars and mapping onto his African colony the names and battles associated with the two greatest heroes of the day. In subsequent manuscripts, he continues to reconfigure European colonial aspirations, inventing republican uprisings inspired by Napoleon and by demagogues from his "Frenchyland." There is little parallel, however, between Branwell's scenarios and actual historical fact, which can often be boring for an exuberant twelve-year-old boy. Skirmishes between British troops and Ashanti were seldom reported in the years of the early juvenilia since there was a long-standing peace at the time,⁵ but Branwell made sure that the action in his narratives was especially bloody and frequent. Thus the saga reflects the child's own version of early nineteenth-century affairs, constituting a microcosm in which the child can play out fantasies of power.

Glass Town as Microcosm of Literary Culture

IF WE return to the little magazines by Branwell, we can see the precocious child imitating various writers and journalistic practice of his day, announcing and playing out his authorial ambitions at the age of eleven. The magazine was Branwell's idea, inspired by the family's favourite *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, and he immediately claimed his authority as owner and editor in the title: *Branwell's Blackwood's Magazine*. Only three of the issues under his editorship survive (in the Lowell Collection at Harvard), for January, June, and July 1829,⁶ but it is clear from internal references that other issues were produced by him until August that year when he turned his attention to producing a Glass Town newspaper, *The Monthly Intelligencer*. At that point he handed the editorship of the magazine over to Charlotte, contributing occasionally but soon complaining of the "frivolity" and "Foolish romances" that had replaced his previous "soberness" and "gravity" ("Lines Spoken," *EEW* 1: 94–95). A poem in the November monthly issue of the magazine expresses his scorn at Charlotte's efforts to preserve his superior content and discussion. It is a typical example of his

early poetry, written at the age of twelve in the voice of Sergeant Bud, one of his pseudonyms and a lawyer:

Lines Spoken by a Lawyer on the Occasion of the Transfer of
This Magazine

<p>All soberness is past and gone, The reign of gravity is done, Frivolity comes in its place, Light smiling sits on every face.</p> <p>Gone is that grave and gorgeous light, Which every page illumined bright; A flimsy torch glare in the stead Of a bright golden sun now fled.</p> <p>Foolish romances now employ Each silly, senseless girl and boy; O for the strong hand of the law To stop it with its powerful claw.</p>	<p>At night I lay my weary head Upon my sofa or my bed; In the dark watches of the night Does flash upon my inward sight,</p> <p>Visions of times now pass'd away, When dullness did the sceptre sway; Then to my troubled mind comes peace, Would those bright dreams did never cease.</p> <p>Thus sang a lawyer in his cell, When suddenly the midnight bell Rang out a peal both loud and deep, Which told it was the hour of sleep.</p>
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WT⁷ Nov. 20, 1829
(*EEW* 1:94–95)

Verses 4 and 5 are heavily based on Wordsworth's poem "Daffodils" and his idea of emotion recollected in tranquillity; but the emotion recollected here is Dullness (a clear reference to Pope's *Dunciad*, which Branwell knew well at an early age), and the "bright dreams" the lawyer recalls are "visions of dullness." There is surely an irony here, which suggests that Branwell, although he thinks little of Charlotte's romances, is also laughing at his speaker and probably himself as an assiduous imitator of scholarly and editorial practice.

This imitation is an important aspect of *Branwell's Blackwood's Magazine*, which vividly reflects the contemporary literary scene.⁸ The young Branwell makes every effort to imitate his model in format, content, style, and tone. The title pages are crude imitations, set out with decorative colophons and publication details; they are followed by contents pages, and advertisements appear at the back. As in *Blackwood's* original, Branwell includes poems, articles on travel, natural history, letters to the editor, prose fiction, literary notices, and reviews. Charlotte contributes a two-part fictional serial called "The Enfant," and Branwell experiments with the various genres mentioned, playing with a variety of character types as pseudonyms for different authors of contributions in different genres. Essentially, he is trying out different literary hats, searching for the best fit; or, to put it more conventionally, he is searching for his authorial voice. As Victor Neufeldt points out, even in his earliest manuscripts Branwell "fully revealed his ambition to become the poet and man of letters" he encountered in the pages of *Blackwood's* (OCB 73).

In a book review, for example, Branwell plays a double act: as Sergeant Bud, the serious scholarly lawyer, he writes to himself as editor (Chief Genius Bany) describing

an event “of great importance to the world at large,” namely, that Chief Genius Taly (Charlotte) has given him a copy of the Scottish poet James Macpherson’s so-called translation of *The Poems of Ossian* (1819).⁹ Branwell already knew from reviews in *Blackwood’s* about the controversy over the authenticity of these poems, which were purported to be by Ossian, the son of the mythical Irish leader Fingal, and translated from Gaelic. Branwell enthusiastically enters the debate on the side of authenticity and displays a precocious imitation of Macpherson’s pseudo-scholarship. For instance, he pompously states, in the guise of Bud, that

... upon an attentive perusal of the above said works I found they were most sublime and exelent I am engaged in publishing an edition of them in Quarto—3 vols—with notes and commontrys &c I am fully convinced that it is the work of OSSIAN who lived a 1000 years ago—and—of no other there is a most intense anxiety prevailing amongst literary men to know its contents in a short time they shall be gratified for it will be published on the first of July, 1829. (*BB Works* 1: 14; see also *BBM* 12)

This unedited transcription displays the mismatch between Branwell’s advanced knowledge of the editorial world and ability to imitate style on the one hand, and his ignorance or disregard of punctuation, spelling and the like on the other. This disparity continues more or less throughout his juvenilia, suggesting his speed of invention and composition, and his impatience with the mechanics of writing.

In his next magazine issue for July, Branwell writes under his own initials (“PBB”) a “Review of Buds Commentary on Ossian” that has just appeared in “29 vols Folio,” and amusingly admits his dismay to his imaginary readers that there are so many volumes to review. He describes the layout of the edition and quotes a passage from Book 1, composing his own detailed notes from his copy of the original, before giving up in exhaustion: “This is one of the most long winded Books that have ever been printed. We must now conclude for we are dreadfully tired. July 1829 – PBB” (*BBM* 31–32).

Commentary on Ossian appears again in “Nights,” Branwell’s equivalent of *Blackwood’s* famous dramatised dialogue “Noctes Ambrosianae.”¹⁰ The “Noctes” was a series of fictitious conversations between imaginary and real literary figures, who purportedly met for heavy drinking dinners at Ambrose’s tavern, an actual inn located near *Blackwood’s* office in Edinburgh. (It seems that Branwell learnt early that good conversation and inebriation go hand in hand.) Some characters in these conversations are pseudonymous figures, able to write scurrilous comments under the protection of anonymity—boisterous and often libellous writing that provided a vigorous model for the budding Glass Town authors. Branwell’s favourite contributors to “Noctes” were John Wilson, who appears as the cantankerous editor “Christopher North,” and James Hogg, whose public persona as “the Ettrick Shepherd” was well-known. With genuine writers like Byron and De Quincey, these intoxicated literati discuss politics and the latest books, providing a vital opportunity for readers like the young Branwell to enter imaginatively into their dynamic literary

life. It is no wonder he created his own “Noctes” and aspired to become part of their lively world. Life in literary Edinburgh would have sounded considerably more exciting for a lively young boy than the Haworth Parsonage.

Again, Branwell adapted the real-life, larger literary model to the microcosmic Glass Town situation. He renamed his “Nights” “Military Conversations” since the interlocutors are all ex-military men (derived from the original toy soldiers). His version takes place in Bravey’s Inn and evokes the same masculine culture of camaraderie and intellectual conversation that Branwell read of finding at Ambrose’s tavern. The Duke of Wellington and his military cronies discuss the various newspapers available in the Glass Town, newspapers that Branwell himself was busy “editing.” They converse on topics as varied as the latest parliamentary bills or the American wool trade. Bud reads part of his commentary on Ossian’s *Poems* and is challenged by the Marquis of Douro, until Napoleon suggests they sing rather than argue. Like their *Blackwood’s* originals they are noisy and quarrelsome, with hissing and shouting of toasts to the “prosperity of GROG!” and liberty (*OCB* 19).

From *Blackwood’s*, Branwell and Charlotte derived a model of literature as active interchange and rivalry. Stories about the same event could be told by different characters from various viewpoints and still have validity. As Sergeant Bud, Branwell could criticise Charlotte’s editorial policy and, as Lord Charles Wellesley, Charlotte could satirise Branwell’s poetry as excessive effusions. Branwell’s poetic persona at this time is “Young Soult,” the Rhymer, fictitious son of one of Wellington’s major adversaries in the Napoleonic wars. This was a voice through which Branwell could espouse republican ideas as the early Romantics had done and counter his heroes in the Tory *Blackwood’s* club.

Branwell’s Obsession with His Paracosmic World

IN FACT, until the age of 14 (1831), Branwell thought of himself chiefly as the Glass Town poet Young Soult (*OCB* 74). He was consciously building an image of himself as poet. In 1829 alone, in addition to his magazines, a newspaper and a two-volume travel book, he wrote at least 34 poems (or verse fragments), including an attempt at Latin verse and a verse drama (*OCB* 74). This is a remarkable output for a twelve-year-old who was also painting, learning the flute, and probably also learning the organ by this time. Other personas also proliferated, with Branwell impersonating not only the prose writers “Captain John Bud” and his son “Sergeant Bud” but also the demonic incarnation of Chief Genius Bany, an evil little man called S’death who acts as the familiar to Branwell’s new hero Alexander Rogue (alias Alexander Percy: see fig. 5). Percy is a revolutionary and a pirate who, by marrying Lady Zenobia Ellrington, gains a title that is later elevated to Duke of Northangerland.¹¹ In 1831 Branwell then set about inventing Northangerland’s biography, a preoccupation that gripped him for the remainder of his writing life.

By his mid-teens, Branwell had become obsessed with his Rogue/ Percy/ Northangerland creation, with developing Percy’s Byronic personality, his political machinations, and his ambiguous mentor relationship to Charlotte’s hero the Duke

of Zamorna and King of Angria. The mercurial Young Soult disappeared, and Branwell adopted a series of personas who chronicle the entangled fortunes of Northangerland, Glass Town and the new kingdom of Angria. He wrote in turn as Captain John Bud, Captain Sir John Flower (Viscount Richton), Henry Hastings (a formerly admired but now disreputable poet), and Charles Wentworth. By the age of eighteen, Branwell was enmeshed in a sprawling history of nearly 300 pages, written in neat minuscule script and involving intrigue, murder and heartbreak, all more or less instigated by Northangerland.



Fig. 5. "Northangerland, Alexander Percy Esq.," pen and ink sketch by Branwell Brontë, c. 1835, aged eighteen (courtesy of the Brotherton Collection, Leeds University Library).

The multiple characters Branwell impersonated can become confusing. Charlotte began by laughing and ended by worrying about her brother's frenetic activity and divided interests. Her 1834 caricature of her brother as Wiggins brilliantly captures his exaggeration, boastfulness, and ambition in an extended portrait, illustrating his

“almost insane devotion to all celebrated characters in Verdopolis” and his excessive enthusiasms, especially for music and pugilism (*EEW* vol. 2, pt. 2: 109). Wiggins not only kicks his heels into the air and stands on his head at the sound of the organist playing Handel, but also imagines his own tombstone with these words:

As a musician he was greater than Bach; as a Poet he surpassed Byron; as a painter, Claude Lorrain yielded to him; as a rebel he snatched the palm from Alexander Rogue’ [alias the republican Northangerland], ... as a traveler De Humbolt, Ledyard, Mungo Park, ... never braved half his dangers or overcame half his difficulties. He civilized Australia; he founded the city of Wigginopolis in New Zealand. (*EEW* vol. 2, pt. 2: 250–51)

“Patrick Benjamin Wiggins” was actually a would-be artist, another fictional incarnation first created by Branwell himself, a self-deprecating persona through whom he ominously laughs at his own pretensions to art.

It was at this time that Branwell, despite his poetic ambitions, was planning to become a professional portrait painter and to enter the Royal Academy Schools. In preparation, he painted the famous crudely-executed portrait of his sisters (Alexander and Sellars 225 and colour plate 24), together with numerous other paintings and sketches; but although he had the ability to capture a likeness, he must have been aware of his lack of technical skill. In Branwell’s Angrian novelette, “The Wool Is Rising,” Wiggins appears as a mere colour grinder to the famous painter Sir Edward de Lisle (*BB Works* 2: 60). In his depiction of Wiggins Branwell mocks his own thick mat of red hair, his slight stature that would look ridiculous in the boxing ring, his face with its “freckled visage and large Roman nose,” and his inarticulate response when addressed by someone of importance. It was becoming clear that the confidence of his fictional characters deserted Branwell in any public situation, and he would either stammer or adopt an inappropriate bravado derived from Northangerland and his cronies to boost his confidence. The line between his public and private personas was beginning to blur. He seems to have found it impossible to concentrate on a single purpose or to wean himself from his Angrian personalities and his increasing identification with Northangerland: two problems which I suggest may have been related.

Northangerland had been in the making from his earliest incarnation as Rogue, the renegade hero of the early saga. He develops into a powerful demagogue, revolutionary and politician from a mix of Branwell’s passion for Napoleon, for Milton’s Satan and for the Byronic Hero (see *OCB* 345–46). He plays havoc with relationships, destroying marriages and political alliances. Through Northangerland’s machinations, Branwell complicates the Angrian saga, extending it by a series of wars that Charlotte uses as background for her romances and character studies. Northangerland takes centre stage in all Branwell’s manuscripts, many of which probe the recesses of his duplicitous mind. His troubled psychology and various alter egos owe much to James Hogg’s portrayal of the doppelganger, a concept that fascinated Branwell. In poetry and prose, Branwell explores Northangerland’s atheism and

amorality, his restless energy, and his inability to maintain a loyalty or stable relationship for long. Needless to say, he has three wives and a variety of mistresses, with legitimate and illegitimate children.¹²

Northangerland is also a poet, ostensibly responsible for most of Branwell's long philosophical poems that explore the meaning of life. Branwell's later writing is beyond the scope of this essay, but it should be noted that from the age of twenty he revised many of his earlier poems, divorcing them from their original Angrian context and noting that they are "transcribed" by "P. B. Brontë" (OCB 76). Most of his later poems are "public pieces meant for publication" (OCB 76), although he continued to explore Angrian themes in an English setting. He also translated six odes of Horace that were later praised and privately published in 1923 by the playwright, poet, and critic John Drinkwater (OCB 170).

It is significant, however, that it was under the old pseudonym "Northangerland," as mentioned above, that Branwell made his first attempt at publication in the real world at age eighteen. He sent his poem "Misery" to *Blackwood's*, whose editor failed to answer him, an omission that is hardly surprising given the onslaught of "frequent missives and impassioned appeals" that followed the poem (Alexander, "Readers" 54). The opening sentences of one of his letters provides an example of what he wrote:

Sir, Read what I write. And would to Heaven you would believe in me, for then you would attend to and act upon it! I know myself so far as to believe in my own originality, and on that ground I desire admittance into your ranks. And do not wonder that I demand so determinedly: for the remembrances I spoke of have fixed you and your Magazine in such a manner upon my mind that the idea of striving to aid another periodical is *horribly repulsive*. My resolution is to devote my ability to you, and for God's sake, till you see whether or not I can serve you, do not coldly refuse my aid (Alexander, "Readers" 54–55)

The bombastic tone and swagger we see here is not the Branwell Brontë lacking in self-esteem, but the created personality "Northangerland," whose voice the timid young writer would never have used in an actual meeting with the editor of *Blackwood's*. A year later Branwell wrote to Wordsworth in a similar tone, asking him to pass judgement on another poem ("The Struggles of Flesh with Spirit") because he wished "to push into the open world" as a poet (10 Jan. 1837; OCB 551). Wordsworth, apparently disgusted by Branwell's excessive flattery and brash dismissal of other contemporary poets, declined to answer. The brilliant assumption of pseudonymous voices that had enabled the precocious young writer was now proving a decided handicap to the aspiring poet; and although Branwell signed many poems in his own name, Northangerland was never far away.

IF WE are looking for an explanation for Branwell's eccentric behaviour and increasing inability to distinguish himself from Northangerland, we might turn again

to the characteristics of the paracosm. Cohen and MacKeith point out that developmental problems associated with the idea of “being in a world of one’s own” can develop from long involvement in an imaginative world (1). Longevity is a prime characteristic of paracosms, and a classic disadvantage is that some children use them as a protective escape mechanism, hindering the ability to distinguish between reality and fiction. This kind of imaginative world has been labelled a “post-traumatic paracosm,” a response to long-term trauma (Barry M. Cohen 533). Certainly, records suggest that Branwell in particular had been traumatised by the death of his eldest sister Maria, who had been a “little mother” to him as a small child after the death of his mother (Barker 139–40). Whatever the reason, Angria and its disruptive protagonist Northangerland seem to have developed into an escape mechanism for Branwell, who found it hard to cope with ordinary life and the expectations placed upon him as an only boy. Although Charlotte eventually managed to wean herself away from their imaginary world at the age of twenty-three, Branwell continued to write under its influence (though to a lesser extent) until his death at the age of thirty-one.

Despite this possible pathology, however, the evidence of Branwell’s early magazines, poetry and histories suggest that his initial motivation was not simply an escape from reality. The early writings I touch on here suggest a playful, agile young mind stimulated by stories he has read, by classical legends of discovery, by war and politics, by the reading of newspapers and magazines—a mind keen to engage with the world despite his youth. For such a child, there is no better way to explore life than to invent a microcosmic world over which he can exercise power and explore situations usually beyond his control. And in Branwell’s case in particular, Glass Town and Angria allowed him to channel his creative agency, to play the author and to explore his literary expectations in life.¹³

NOTES

1. The earliest booklets were produced in the years 1829–30. There are twelve early booklets of Charlotte’s juvenilia extant (each measuring approx. 3.5 x 5.3cm); and eight by Branwell (ranging in size from 3.5 x 5.3cm – 15.8 x 19cm). In subsequent years the hand-made booklets gradually became larger in size.
2. My transcription of this manuscript, made in Paris soon after Sotheby’s sale, will appear as an appendix in *EEW*, vol. 3.
3. Some material in this essay is drawn from my previous publications. Rather than quote myself, I simply indicate sources in the relevant footnotes.
4. See, for example, the image “Mansion” surrounded by text, in Branwell’s “The Politics of Verdopolis,” by Captain John Flower, 15 Nov. 1833 (Alexander and Sellars 305).
5. Not until 1874 did the British occupy Kumasi, capital of Ashanti (*OCB* 24).
6. First published 1995 (*BBM*).
7. “WT,” signifying “We Two,” suggests that Charlotte as editor and amanuensis insisted on being acknowledged, although the tone and attitude are clearly those of Branwell. See *EEW* 1: 94.
8. Discussions of Branwell and *Blackwood’s Magazine* here are drawn from my essays. See especially *OCB* 60, 41–48, and 227–81.
9. The juvenilia are a tantalizing mix of actual and fantasy events. Branwell’s copy of *The Poems of Ossian* (1765), received for his tenth birthday in June 1829, still exists in the Brontë Parsonage Museum.

10. Discussion derived from *OCB* 47.
11. See Branwell Brontë. *The Pirate*. Edited by Christine Alexander, with Joetta Harty and Benjamin Drexler, Juvenilia Press, 2018.
12. The trajectory of Alexander Percy/Lord Northangerland's development is traced throughout *The Early Writings of Charlotte* (1983). More recently, Victor Neufeldt, editor of Branwell's manuscripts, has built on this in a two-part article, "Branwell Brontë's Alexander Rogue/Percy."
13. "Paracosms certainly seem to explore the child's expectations of life" (Silvey and MacKeith 195).

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<i>BBM</i>	Brontë, Branwell. <i>Branwell's Blackwood's Magazine</i> . Edited by Christine Alexander, assisted by Vanessa Benson, Juvenilia Press, 1995.
<i>BB Works</i>	Brontë, Branwell. <i>The Works of Patrick Branwell Brontë</i> . Edited by Victor A. Neufeldt, Garland, 1997.
<i>EEW</i>	Brontë, Charlotte. <i>An Edition of the Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë</i> . Edited by Christine Alexander, Basil Blackwell, 1987–92. 2 vols. Vol. 3 forthcoming.
<i>OCB</i>	Alexander, Christine and Margaret Smith. <i>The Oxford Companion to the Brontës</i> . Oxford UP, 2003.

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