

THE “UNSEEN LAND OF THOUGHT”: MATERIALISING IMAGINATION AND CREATIVITY IN THE BRONTËS’ MINIATURE BOOKS

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THROUGH the construction of their miniature books, the Brontës’ demonstrate the critical, dynamic relationship between inert matter and imagination, as theorised by French philosopher Gaston Bachelard. To make the books, the children drew on the resourceful things around their home: a range of literary matter that stimulated their imaginations and of paper scraps that they used to materialise it. Constituting a significant part of their prolific anthology of juvenilia, the books were intended to be little magazines, scaled down for the set of toy soldiers that first inspired their tales of “Glass Town” society. Whereas much scholarship has focused on youthful writing as the apprenticeship of the adult author and the development of the author’s literary voice, in this essay I explain how Bachelard’s model of the “material imagination” (*Repose* 1) offers insights into the Brontës’ negotiation of the interior and exterior worlds. I discuss the form of miniaturisation, with scaling, as crucial to their cognitive understanding, imaginative creativity, and writing practices; I then describe how the books’ production fostered agency and revealed the energy or “*imago*” inherent in the creative process, to argue ultimately that the Brontës’ miniature books offer strong support for Bachelard’s views on the centrality of the material imagination in childhood.¹

The imagination might be considered by some to be a subsidiary human characteristic, only important in childhood and for adults practising the arts, yet Bachelard posits the material imagination as the “most primary of all human functions” (*Repose* vii).² Moreover, the *material imagination*, as he terms it, is a critical aspect of human consciousness that galvanises and sustains our engagement with the external world. In Bachelard’s view, the imagination engages with matter at a profound level: “the material imagination engages us dynamically. In the realm of the imagination, everything comes to life: matter is not inert” (*Will* 41). Imagination

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actually requires sensory responses to matter: “The resistant world lifts us out of our static reality, beyond ourselves, initiating us into the mysteries of energy. Henceforth we are awakened beings” (*Will* 14). The generation of energy is thus critical to Bachelard’s concept, with channelled energy fostering agency; for in acts of imagination, an essential tactile process occurs: “Hand and matter must become one in order to form the point of intersection for this *energetic dualism*” (*Will* 19, original italics). By harnessing inert things or materials, the imagination inspires the individual to action, thereby fostering potential, and all human development requires this dynamic transaction between the interior and exterior worlds. In Bachelard’s view, moreover, the process of imaginative miniaturization develops agency in especially powerful ways. Furthermore, intangible aspects of the individual creators are revealed through their construction of material things. As Bachelard asserts, “In studying material images we discover ... the *imago* of our energy. In other words, matter is the mirror of our energies” (*Will* 17). Bachelard’s theory of the material imagination thus invites us to view the Brontës’ miniature books as material objects that reflect not only their creators’ agency but also their lived experiences and inner lives.

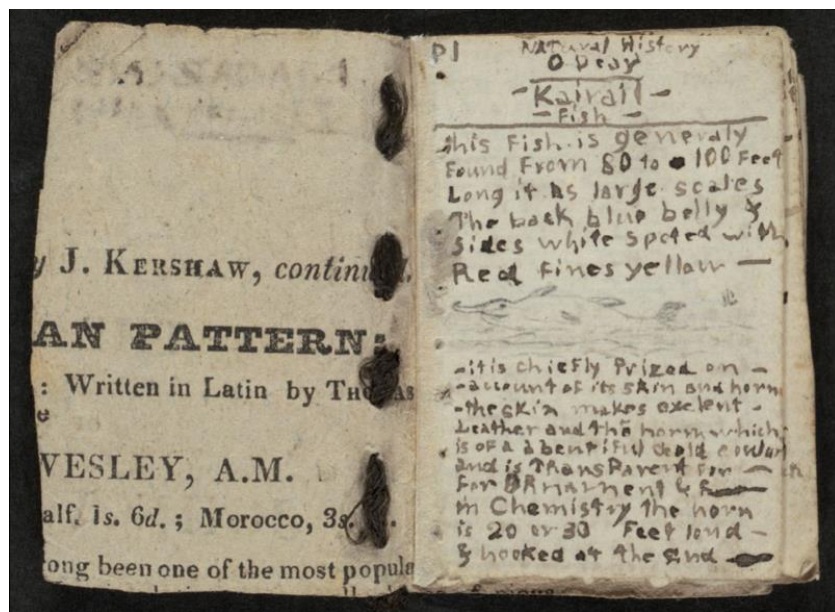


Fig. 1: P. Branwell Brontë, “Magazine,” January 1829, p. 1. Houghton Library MS Lowell 1 (8) (courtesy Houghton Library).

All four surviving Brontë children wrote creatively, cultivating their literary skills in various forms that included poems, manuscripts, diary papers, and little books; a significant amount of their content involved fantasy worlds. Initially inspired by the set of twelve toy soldiers (The Twelves) that their father gave to Branwell, each child allocated their soldier an identity that corresponded to a prominent real-life figure; Charlotte chose the Duke of Wellington, while Branwell favoured Bonaparte (Barker

179). Their tales were initially created as the “Young Men’s Plays” (inspired by the soldiers), “Our fellows’ Plays” (derived from *Aesop’s Fables*), and “The Islanders’ Plays” (drawn from real-life politics) (Alexander, Introduction xiv). Elements of these plays were combined to form the foundation of Charlotte and Branwell’s complex saga of Glass Town and Angria; a fantasy world that centred around the Great Glass Town, later called Verdopolis, and later incorporated the dominion of Angria (Alexander and Smith 209). From 1831, Emily and Anne created the now largely lost world of Gondal (Bock 35–36).

While it is possible that Emily and Anne created miniature books, only Charlotte and Branwell’s are extant. Charlotte’s twelve surviving books each measure about 3.5 cm x 5.3 cm, while Branwell’s eight surviving books range from 3.5 cm x 5.3 cm to 15.8 cm x 19 cm (Alexander, “In Search” 18). As paper was expensive and scarce, they repurposed paper scraps from salt and sugar packets, potato sacking, newspaper, wallpaper, and old music sheets,³ in their attempts to emulate *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, their primary source of inspiration. The children were fascinated by their reading of current affairs, public figures and events, global explorations, history, geography, and supernatural tales in *Blackwood’s* and also in *Fraser’s Magazine*, *The Methodist Magazine*, and influential texts by Scott, Byron, Bunyan, and Milton, *Arabian Nights*, *Tales of the Genii* and Goldsmith’s geography book (Alexander and Smith 52–56). They selected and creatively refashioned this material into their writing, crafting their own worlds with material and immaterial fragments, thus reflecting Bachelard’s notion of imagination and matter awakening individuals to energy and agency.⁴

Miniaturisation: Scale, Space, and Process

THE SCALE of the little books is fundamental to the children’s handling of ideas, for as Bachelard argues, “the function of miniaturisation” intrinsically fosters agency (*Repose* 9); in this case, the immaterial, imaginative capacity for ideas was invigorated by the material, quantifiable, documentation of them in little book form. Bachelard’s term for acts of imaginative miniaturisation is “Lilliputian reveries,” a nod to Jonathan Swift’s novel *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) that incorporates worlds on both miniature and gigantic scales. Not only was the novel familiar to the Brontë children but Charlotte also portrays her character Jane Eyre envisioning a voyage to the “little fields, houses and trees, [and] the diminutive people” of Lilliput” (*Jane Eyre* 20). Here, writing in adulthood, Charlotte depicts her character Jane escaping by entering a storybook dream world that “Lilliputian reveries” make possible. In the case of the Glass Town stories, while the books are miniature, the magnitude of the fantasy world that Charlotte and Branwell design them for and depict within them is boundless. Bachelard explains this paradox with a quotation from Max Jacobs: ““The miniscule [*sic*] is the enormous! To be sure of this, all we need do is go and dwell there in our imagination” (9–10). The Glass Town chronicles were a never-ending game. Events

were frequently told, reversed, and reinvented, and characters could be unearthly, or metamorphosed, renamed, or resurrected from the dead in a way that can only transpire in make-believe. Although the books were miniature in size, the magnitude for creativity was enormous; nothing was out of bounds, the imagination was completely unregulated and unlimited.

Such a miniature space, then, magnifies the possibilities inherent in creativity, precipitating an expansion of visions, ideas, and conceptualisations; in Bachelard's view, the more adept a person is at miniaturising the world, the more that person can possess it (Rabb 21). Moreover, as Susan Stewart argues in *On Longing* (1993), the space of the miniature book is an intimate one: in contrast with the large, abstract, area of the playground, the small space occupied by a toy allows a child to indulge in fantasy and secrecy (56). When Elizabeth Gaskell first encountered Charlotte's juvenilia, she remarked on the "immense amount of manuscript, in an inconceivably small space" (64). Of course, little books necessitate minuscule script, and given the short supply of paper, tiny script was economically advantageous. But it also prohibited adults from reading the contents.⁵ The small size of the books allowed them to be tucked away in the children's portable desk boxes (Alexander, "Juvenilia" 98). In both immaterial and material terms then, the creation of the complex saga of Glass Town, and potentially in the lost Angria and Gondal sagas as well, depended on the small, intimate space of the little handmade books, which permitted an infinite number of secret reveries that are materially unknown or inaccessible to adults.



Fig. 2. P. Branwell Brontë, Pages from "Branwell's Blackwood's Magazine," July 1829. Houghton Library MS Lowell 1 (9) (courtesy Houghton Library).

While there is an obvious practical component to children creating small-scale objects, and an unbounded imaginary one, the creative *process* of miniaturisation also engenders agency, and this too is evident in the Brontës’ miniature books, especially in Branwell and Charlotte’s miniature versions of *Blackwood’s Magazine*. Jack Davy and Charlotte Dixon, in *Worlds in Miniature* (2019), posit three components of the creative process by which such miniatures are produced: mimesis, scaling, and simplification (5). Mimesis is intellectual and imaginative, and entails a replication of the original or prototype; scaling results in a small variation of the original but does not require the same functionality; and simplification allows for the selection and omission of details, that can also reveal insights about the maker (6, 8–9). Because of scaling and simplification, a miniature is rarely identical to the original. Such differences, argue Davy and Dixon, allow the maker to simplify large and gigantic entities by reducing their qualities, including “ideological qualities,” to the microcosmic or domestic level (3). This is evident in the way the Brontës portray phenomena such as political ideologies, military agendas, and geographical regions, reducing them from the macrocosmic real world to the microcosmic within the pages of their magazines.

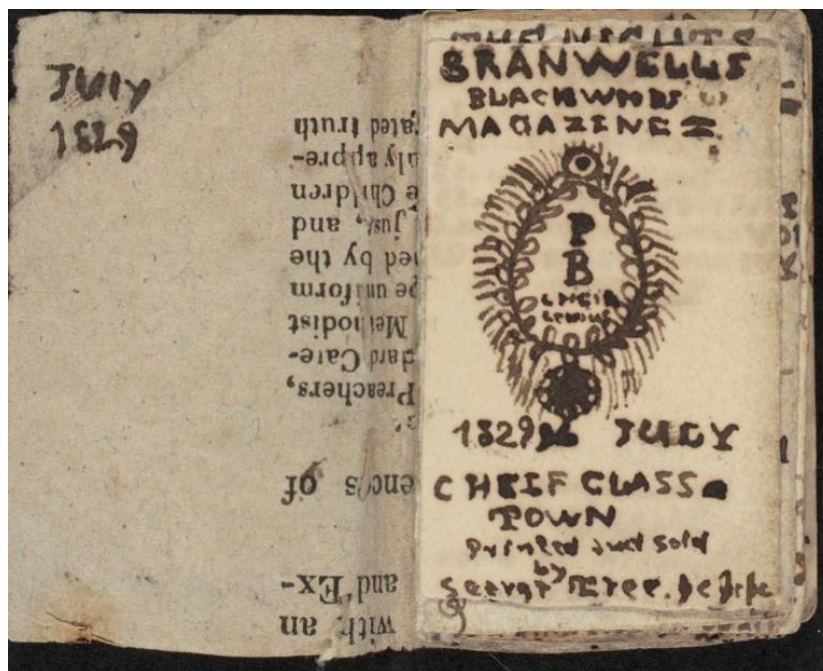


Fig. 3. P. Branwell Brontë, title page of “Branwell’s Blackwood’s Magazine,” July 1829. Houghton Library MS Lowell 1 (9), (courtesy Houghton Library).

Consider, for instance, “The Nights,” in Branwell’s magazine of July 1829 (Fig. 2), which parodies the long-running (1822–35) “Noctes Ambrosianae” feature in *Blackwood’s*, in which influential individuals engaged in lively debate. The actual debates took place at Ambrose’s Tavern, Edinburgh, and were reported in *Blackwood’s*;

Branwell's condensed version is set at Bravey's Inn, Glass Town, and mimics the swaggering tone of the original.⁶ The contents list (Fig. 2) is entirely Branwell's invention and features a mishmash of real-life characters, such as Napoleon and Wellington, who regularly featured in his reading, along with such fictitious others as Bravey, Gravey, and Genius. This simplified edition mimics cultural rituals and attitudes; furthermore, the emblematic image on the cover page (Fig. 3) mimics the format of the magazine's prototype, but features Branwell's initials in place of the original lithographic portrait. It also selects and embellishes factual content and omits some features. This enmeshment of actuality with make-believe is a trait that the siblings continued throughout their lives.

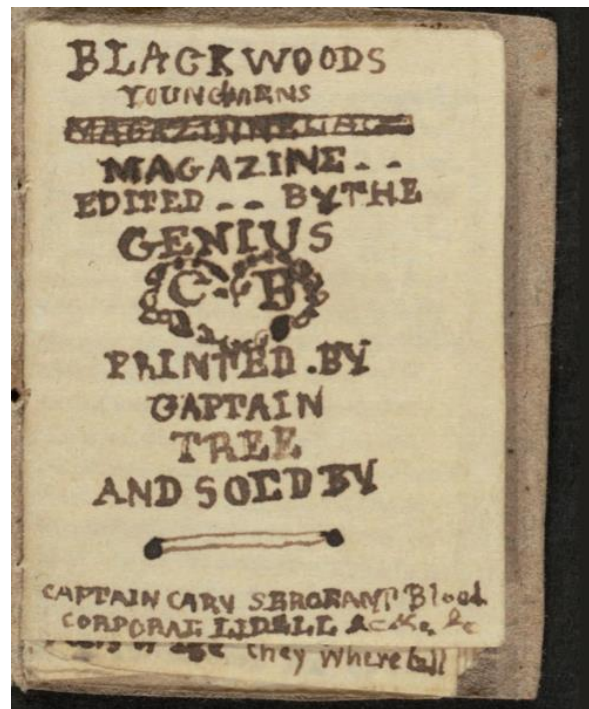


Fig. 4. Charlotte Brontë, title page of "Blackwood's Young Mens Magazine," August 1829. Houghton Library MS Lowell 1 (6), (courtesy Houghton Library).

Another instance where simplification of the original reveals personal insights about the maker may be found in Charlotte's August 1829 edition of the siblings' magazine (Fig. 4), which features "a true story by CB" that mimics the prototype magazine yet represents her reworked interpretations of historical events blended with fantasy stories and invented places. Here Charlotte incorporates Genii characters from her childhood reading and sets her story in the Duke of Wellington's Palace of Waterloo, in Glass Town, named after the famous historic battle.⁷ The edition includes Charlotte's narratorial voice emulating the Duke, reporting on the causes of war, and mimics advertisements, including one for Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, costing 10

shillings. Furthermore, Charlotte also replicates the “Noctes Ambrosianae,” in spirited response to Branwell’s previous two monthly editions. Her edition also demonstrates gendered differences in her imitation of the original format, as she feminises the publication by featuring her initials in a decorative heart emblem to replace the lithograph figure on the prototype. In contrast to Branwell, her narrative content tends towards feminine interests including romantic storylines. Both techniques proffer agency and the chance to express ideological qualities, also allowing Charlotte to metaphorically indulge in the masculine drinking and publishing worlds that her gender, age, and class, restrict her from.

The process of miniaturisation requires selecting and comprehending aspects of the prototype for replication, which consequently fosters a greater understanding of it (Davy and Dixon 3). Moreover, the functionality and details are chosen entirely without the need for meeting any required standard. In creating their miniature books, the Brontës adeptly selected threads of real-life sociopolitics from *Blackwood’s* in a manner that indicates a sophisticated comprehension of contemporaneous society, including the macrocosmic concept of world exploration and imperialism. They even became colonisers, as their fictional society of Glass Town was set on a seized African island; thus their story was shaped by the imperialist reports often featured in *Blackwood’s*. Christine Alexander traces the specific catalyst to a June 1826 article and map in *Blackwood’s* on Denham and Clapperton’s explorations in Africa, explaining the siblings metaphorically followed through on the author’s advice regarding the most favourable site to claim (Introduction xvii). Also replicating imperial attitudes, Charlotte’s “Two Romantic Tales” book (28 April 1829) narrates the “Voyage of Discovery” in which The Twelves (the toy soldiers) journey from England to the South Atlantic to seize control of the country Ashantee, present day Ghana, and “set about building a city” (Brontës 6, 8, 501). In 1831, Branwell produced a map that replicated the *Blackwood’s* map of the June 1826 article, but he augmented the original map to include Glass Town and other fictional lands and islands, including Ross’s and Parry’s.

Agency and the *Imago* of Energy

BEYOND the value of its sociocultural, political, and geographical content, *Blackwood’s Magazine* acted as a template for Charlotte and Branwell’s writing practices, one that afforded them discernible narrative agency. They mimicked its satirical techniques and imitated much of its content, style, methods, formatting, typeface lettering, contents page, and advertisements, as well as feature matter. In so doing, moreover, the miniature books materialise the *imago*, the unseen energies, of Charlotte and Branwell. They disclose the development of individuality and independence, youthful aptitude and malleability, their capacity to absorb, assimilate, express ideas, and negotiate the adult world, often through appropriation and imitation.⁸ They also

manifest the competitive rivalry and collaborative nature of their writing, for example, through their own versions of *Blackwood's*, and in the way they responded to one another's content with verve and ingenuity.

Just as *Blackwood's* presented pieces by various regular authors and editors, so the young editors adopted pseudonymised voices and identities. In "The History of the Young Men" (1831), for example, Branwell adopts the pseudonymised voice of Captain John Bud, and he also copies the magazine's print and editing format. Moreover, Charlotte had the freedom to assume a male authorial voice as Captain Tree, followed by that of his rival Lord Charles Wellesley, and she also wrote poetically as the Marquis of Douro; after writing as Captain John Bud, Branwell penned as Young Soult "the rhymers" (Alexander, Introduction xv). In these ways, Charlotte and Branwell imitated many of the authorial qualities of *Blackwood's* and became editorial agents. This template also afforded them creative license and the freedom to metaphorically act out in ways that were impossible in real life. For example, in "Second Vol of Tales of the Islanders," Chapter II (6 October 1829), a Glass Town school rebellion is reported in detail, outlining the four armed, fighting parties encamped in grounds nearby among the trees, in a ravine, and the summit of a rock (Brontës 20–21). The rebels eventually surrender, after the Duke of Wellington threatens to set his several thousand blood hounds on them (Brontës 22).

The little Brontë books also reveal vibrant portraits of their authors' lives, perceptions, and activities because they are handmade, not manufactured possessions. As such they engender an intimacy between observer and creator; or, to put it another way, they serve as a portal, providing insights on Parsonage life that reveal the material and immaterial elements of the Brontës' lived experience. Similarly, Emily and Anne's diary papers provide glimpses of domesticity, merging commentary about their inhabited space with their imagined space. The diary papers evoke an image of the children crafting the ephemeral scraps and threads of their lives—forming permanent testimony of their childhood play. As Bachelard states, "In studying material images we discover ... the *imago* of our energy. In other words, matter is the mirror of our energies" (*Will* 17). This is perhaps especially true in the case of handmade books; Kathryn Sutherland perceives manuscripts of youthful writing as being "sticky with their writers' presence" (qtd. in Higgins),⁹ and I would suggest that this presence can be considered the *imago*: the normally imperceptible elements of a person made manifest. In juvenilia, the minutiae of the creative processes linger on the page as a haunting residue of childhood play. Such residue in the Brontë books includes errors, blots, doodles, misspellings, and clumsily scrubbed out writing. These handmade markings are not inert; they are traces of lived experience, moments of being that are frozen in time—the Brontës' childhood materialised.

Story content aside, human activity and transactions bring a vitality of their own to the script. Bachelard states that "the hand at work elevates the subject to a higher plane, to an enhanced or *dynamized* level of existence" (*Will* 19). In Bachelard's terms, then, the dynamic hand brings forth the imaginative force; it is the hand that engages

with matter and produces sensations and reveries, the hand that materialises the imagination. The hand also labours to produce the content, and in the Brontës' case, it labours to cut and stitch the tiny pages too. As Stewart notes, the phenomenon of micrographia indicates craft and discipline; when the size of the product is diminished, the labour (of the hand) invested is multiplied, and so is its significance (38–39). This investment is evident in Branwell's rapid composition of minuscule script; its indecipherable letters, deficient punctuation, and ink blots (Alexander, "Introduction" xlvii) reveal the intense labour of production as well as the energetic compulsion to write. Stewart's remarks on the nostalgic and authentic significance of manuscript handwriting in eras when print has diminished the practice are also relevant here (39). This appears to have been Emily's understanding; in *Wuthering Heights*, Lockwood's "immediate interest kindled ... for the unknown Catherine," an interest prompted by her "pen-and-ink commentary" and "excellent caricature" (24). These notes "scrawled in an unformed, childish hand" render Lockwood intrigued by the *imago* of the invisible person behind them (24). We may, similarly, read such inscription as Branwell's as authentic matter that mirrors and immortalises its author's energies and thereby leaves a residual aura.

Creative Energy: A Lifelong Experience and Practice

WHILE writing her biography, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), Elizabeth Gaskell received a large package from Charlotte's widower, Arthur Bell Nicholls, containing much of the Brontë juvenilia; she was the first person to encounter it outside the family (Alexander, Introduction xiii). Her account remarked on Charlotte's "wild weird writing," asserting that "when she [Charlotte] gives way to her powers of creation, her fancy and her language alike run riot, sometimes to the very borders of apparent delirium" (71); similarly, she deems Charlotte's 1830 list of books to be "curious proof how early the rage for literary composition had seized upon her" (66). As Charlotte's creative escapism did not conform to the disciplined behaviour expected of a young lady, Gaskell excused it as the "curious" outcome of an isolated childhood, fortunately tempered by Charlotte's common sense and duty: "while her imagination received vivid impressions, her excellent understanding had full power to rectify them before her fancies became realities" (Gaskell 73). Yet in a letter, Gaskell privately opined that the miniature books "give one the idea of creative power carried to the verge of insanity"; likewise, Branwell's rapid scrawl implies the same lack of control (Alexander, Introduction xiii). Gaskell's comments reflect an important dimension of the Brontës' lived experience at the parsonage: the ways in which their imaginative childhood activity channelled energy. However, Bachelard's ideas on the centrality of imagination offer an important alternative to Gaskell's criticism of Charlotte's sometimes riotous writings.

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In terms of material culture, the Brontë books are child-formed rather than child-used objects; they embody the mind and actions of the child, including their collaborative play and intense mania to write. The Brontë girls were taught rudimentary domestic skills such as plain sewing, religious instruction, standard reading, writing, drawing, and music, in preparation for predetermined roles,¹⁰ while Branwell received the classical education given to boys. Yet all four were channelling their intellectual and physical energy away from these orthodox learning practices, into their secret “bed plays,” as Charlotte referred to them, and the creative compulsion for “scribomania,” as she described the juvenilia (qtd. in Alexander and Smith 277). Their alternative occupations resulted in these cut, stitched, and inscribed miniature books.

For the Brontë sisters, the imagination that was cultivated in childhood became a vital lifelong aspect of their identities that was always entangled with real life, that validate Bachelard’s claim of the imagination being the most primary human function. For instance, Emily’s 1845 diary paper reveals how accessing the imaginative creativity of the childhood interior world distracts from the mundaneness of the exterior world and has the power to take the individual beyond themselves to a new place, rank, and even gender:

... returning to Keighley Tuesday evening sleeping there and walking home on Wednesday morning— ... during our excursion we were Ronald Macelgin, Henry Angora, Juliet Angusteena, Rosabelle, Ella and Julian Egramon, Catharine Navarre and Cordelia Fitzaphnold escaping from the palaces of Instruction to join the Royalists who are hard driven at present by the victorious Republicans—The Gondals still flourish bright as ever (Diary Paper 30 [31] July 1845, in Brontës, *Tales of Glass Town* 490)

Both Emily and Anne’s diary papers, written jointly in 1834 and 1837, then separately in 1841 and 1845, merged fiction with reality in all but the first paper. Emily’s diary anecdote from July 1845, above, reveals how their childhood creativity continued to vividly penetrate their everyday experience, and their deep investment in the affairs of these imaginary worlds many years after conceiving them. Emily wrote the above passage at the age of twenty-seven years; at the same time twenty-five-year-old Anne’s paper recorded the Gondals being “in a sad state the Republicans are uppermost but the Royalists are not quite overcome” (Brontës 492). Branwell also valued these years of reveries. In a later letter to *Blackwood’s* editors, Branwell said the magazine produced “divine flights into that visionary region of imagination” (Alexander, “Readers and Writers” 57), proof that their childhood reveries stimulated a creative energy that endured.

Charlotte's Roe Head Journal (1836), written aged twenty and teaching away from home, similarly conveys her drive for imaginative "scriblomania." On a page beginning "I'm just going to write because I cannot help it," Charlotte records:

Wiggins might indeed talk of scriblomania if he were to see me just now, encompassed by the bulls ... Stupidity the atmosphere, school-books the employment, asses the society. What in all this is there to remind me of the divine, silent, unseen land of thought, dim now, & indefinite ... There is a voice, there is an impulse that wakens up that dormant power, ... an impetuous current through the air is heard at this moment far away on the moors at Haworth. Branwell and Emily hear it ("Roe Head" 165–66)

Charlotte conceives her imagination as a "land" or realm and finds emotional security and agency in accessing this inner world that compels her. Like Emily, Charlotte also reveals how she negotiates the mundane exterior world by dwelling in a dream world. This endeavour has the capacity to compress space and time: it diminishes the significant distance from Roe Head to Haworth and even shrinks the span of years passed, taking Charlotte back to the intimacy of her childhood world as well as to her current family and home. Charlotte later struggled to abandon this "unseen land"; in her "Farewell to Angria" she admits, "[I]t is no easy thing to dismiss from my imagination the images which have filled it so long. They were my friends & my intimate acquaintance" (Brontës 314). As Bachelard posits, the imagination is the "most primary of all human functions"; no better evidence can be found than in the Brontës' very existence.

NOTES

- ¹ In general, see Alexander and McMaster, *The Child Writer*. On the Brontës, see Alexander's extensive scholarship.
- ² Bachelard distinguishes a material imagination and a formal imagination; according to his formulation, only the material imagination engages with matter. In contrast, the formal imagination is not engaged with matter and is not as deep.
- ³ Sarah Laycock (Brontë curator), correspondence received, April 2022.
- ⁴ On Charlotte Brontë's imagination, see especially Alexander, *Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë*, Blackwell 1983, and Heather Glen, *The Imagination in History*, Oxford UP, 2002.
- ⁵ The Brontës are not the only authors who made pocket-sized publications in their youth. See Alexander and McMaster, Introduction, *The Child Writer* 1–7.
- ⁶ See Maynes-Aminzade 30.
- ⁷ The palace is a fictional construct; however, design plans were once mooted. See Derek Linstrum.
- ⁸ On Charlotte's narratorial roles, see Alexander, "Play and Apprenticeship: The Culture of Family Magazines," *The Child Writer* 31–50.

⁹ Kathryn Sutherland is referring to the Honresfield Collection, including the Brontës' work. See Higgins.

¹⁰ The curriculum for the Clergy Daughters' school included needlework (Gardiner 34). Aunt Branwell insisted on the girls sewing charity clothing (Gaskell 95).

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