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Romer Wilson's Experimental Biography of Emily Brontë (1928)

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Abstract:

The works of Romer Wilson, born in Sheffield in 1891, are nearly all restlessly experimental in form, tone or subject. Wilson attracted mixed reviews in life, and little critical attention after dying in 1930. Starting with a biographical sketch, the essay focuses on *All Alone – The Life and Private History of Emily Jane Brontë* (Chatto & Windus, 1928). This highly experimental psychobiography transforms the genre's conventions, drawing its truth not from Brontë's life but from her writings, and the sense of place the two shared. The stream-of-consciousness narration and obsessive interiority reveal as much about Wilson as Brontë, with frequent reflections on childhood, artistic creation and the nature of reality, resulting in an early hybrid of biography and autobiography. Wilson strongly identifies with Brontë, portraying them both as outside conventions, driven by hidden impulses, and producing an in effect proto-modernist Emily Brontë. The essay explores the often hostile reception for *All Alone* and argues for rediscovering Romer Wilson, a lost Yorkshire modernist.

Keywords: Romer Wilson, Emily Brontë, autobiography, biography, psychobiography, creativity, conscious, unconscious, modernism, Yorkshire

Despite its title, *All Alone – the Life and Private History of Emily Jane Brontë* (1928) is as much an autobiography of Romer Wilson herself as it is a biography of Emily Brontë. Furthermore, it is not a conventional

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memoir of either woman. Romer declared that she did 'not care how erroneous [her] statements of fact [about Emily] are, provided these statements draw forth clear and correct evidence from secret hiding-places'; and she discussed aspects of her own experience in relation to Emily's.¹ *All Alone* is rather a speculative, highly subjective exploration of the inner life of two writers, and of what Romer felt was a creative bond between them. That is not to say that Romer claimed to be the equal of Emily, but that, through both the Yorkshire heritage and the urge to write which they shared, she felt empathetic towards Emily. For that reason, for the purposes of this article, we accept Romer's portrait of Emily, while recognising that Brontë scholars – among whom we do not number ourselves – may dismiss it.

We learn little from *All Alone* of Romer's everyday life, pursuits or family background. This was a deliberate choice, as these were not important to her in the context. However, in the century since the book was published, there has grown a need for 'statements of fact' about Romer. For one thing, while in the 1920s she was an established author, with a place in literary circles, today Romer is long forgotten. We suspect that few reading this paper will know much about her, and to many even her name will be unfamiliar.² For another, some biographical information is necessary to understand the relationship which Romer perceived between herself and Emily. We aim here to place Romer in context, as a highly experimental modernist writer who, like Emily, was in part shaped by being a daughter of Yorkshire. Restoring Romer Wilson to the modernist canon contributes to an understanding of British modernist writing as not only a metropolitan phenomenon, but as also having regional and rural roots and interests, in this case stemming from a deep engagement with Romer's Yorkshire origins:

People who have not been born and bred as I was on the edge of the moors, the grim dark moors, of West Yorkshire do not know how the elements enter into ours [*sic*] existence and tear and grind upon the mind in that isolation.³

We note that Romer's Yorkshire modernism is not one resulting from any local modernist networks which some other articles in this special issue explore, but is very much an individual engagement, drawing on childhood memory, and in what is perhaps significantly her last creative work.

Romer started writing seriously as a student at Girton College, Cambridge around 1914. In a short professional life, before her death in 1930 at the age of 39, she published thirteen works, including

All Alone. After her death, her husband, the anthologist, Edward J. O'Brien (1890–1941), published a collection of her short stories, *Tender Advice* (Heinemann, 1935). This is not the place to consider her work (other than *All Alone*) in any detail, but an overview will help provide context:

- seven novels: *Martin Schüller* (Methuen & Co., 1918); *If All These Young Men* (Methuen & Co., 1919); *The Death of Society: Conte de fée premier* (Collins, 1921); *The Grand Tour of Alphonse Marichaud* (Methuen & Co., 1923); *Dragon's Blood: Conte de fée deuxième* (Collins, 1926); *Greenlow* (Collins, 1927); and *Latterday Symphony* (Nonesuch Press, 1927)
- a play: *The Social Climbers: a Russian middle-class tragedy in four acts, seen through Western eyes* (Ernest Benn, 1927)
- a novella: *The Hill of Cloves. A tract on true love, etc* (Heinemann, 1929, but written 1926/7)
- three anthologies of fairy stories, myths and folk tales for children: *Green Magic* (Jonathan Cape, 1928); *Silver Magic* (Jonathan Cape, 1929); and *Red Magic* (Jonathan Cape, 1930).

Romer's work is relentlessly experimental, varying in approach, tone and style. Even her anthologies of fairy tales are unusual, for although meant for children, they are 'strong stuff, real stuff and the biggest, fullest versions I could find without entirely outraging the proprieties'.⁴ Romer's work received mixed reviews, with praise for her early books and less attention thereafter. The critic Gerald Gould wrote of her first novel, *Martin Schüller*, a study of musical genius:

The book baffles the effort to 'place' it. It is apparently by a new writer, and a writer who belongs to no accepted school. It is abrupt, spasmodic, fragmentary; it has many of the effects, but not the total effect, of incoherence. It is original—and beautiful: the beauty is of no obvious or familiar kind, for it is at once checked and enhanced by a hardness, an irony.⁵

Gould's comment about the difficulty of 'placing' her work is perceptive and was echoed in reviews of her later works. Her third novel, *The Death of Society*, about the overwhelming nature of love, won the Hawthornden Prize for 1921. But Romer was largely ignored for most of the 1920s. On her death, her friend the poet Robert Nichols (1893–1944) wrote of his regret 'that [Romer's] imagination is so early extinguished, and while it was amongst us received so little recognition'.⁶ Who then was Romer Wilson of Yorkshire, who was both praised and overlooked?

Romer was born Florence Roma Muir Wilson in 1891, in Sheffield, on the border between the counties of Yorkshire and Derbyshire. Sheffield was an important industrial centre, famous worldwide for steel and, for the majority of its inhabitants, dark, dirty and noisy. Roma, as she was known, had a very different experience of her native town, and it is this which makes the connection with Emily Brontë. She grew up in Fulwood, a settlement which climbs the hills above Sheffield, and remote from it in the late Victorian age. Beyond its hills lie the moors of the Pennines and the Peak District of Derbyshire, the kind of landscape which as we shall see plays a key part in Romer's Emily Brontë book. As Romer wrote at the beginning of *All Alone*:

West and north and south the moors hang above the West Riding of Yorkshire. They rise up bleak and black and brooding, a thousand feet, two thousand feet above the valleys. Empty and silent, without trees or lakes, without wide rivers, without grand impressive mountains, they roll away from this world.⁷

If the country around Fulwood connects Romer to Emily in Haworth, about sixty miles away, their specific circumstances separate them. Fulwood was affluent, home to some of Sheffield's great industrialists. Far from living in a draughty, unhealthy parsonage like Emily, where money was scarce, Romer's home was an old country house, made comfortable by her father's wealth. Her world was all upper middle-class ease and privilege, with a governess, holidays abroad, a car, parties, tennis, theatre visits, books, music and art.

This privileged existence was to an extent deceptive. The Wilsons were not as socially established or, according to an unpublished family memoir, as contented as they seemed.⁸ Arnold Muir Wilson, Romer's father, was a self-made man, who became one of Sheffield's most sought-after lawyers and a town councillor. He was by most accounts mercurial, ambitious, forceful, and the memoir suggests that the family was happier when he was away from home. In 1909, announcing a serious illness, he set off without his family on a world tour, ostensibly to recover, but he died soon after arriving in Canada. The death certificate lists the cause as general paresis, a condition caused by syphilis. How much of this Romer was told then or later, we do not know, but her father's illness and death must have damaged the whole family.

In 1911, Romer chose to read Law at Girton College, Cambridge, and started to write seriously. Two early manuscripts have survived: *Modern Degeneracy*, an unfinished, unpublished novella; and the outline of her second novel, *If All These Young Men*.⁹ During World War I, she was in London, doing war work but also presumably writing

If All These Young Men and *Martin Schöler*. It was perhaps around this time that Roma became Romer.¹⁰ She remained Roma to her birth family and her friends, but professionally she was Romer Wilson. From the early 1920s, she travelled widely in Europe before she and her husband, Edward O'Brien, settled in Switzerland, far from the Yorkshire of her childhood and of Emily Brontë's life. Romer's health declined after the birth in 1924 of their only child, Johnny, but she wrote and wrote, producing the majority of the works listed above.

In the context of new work on Yorkshire Modernisms, Romer's experimental biography of one of the most noted Yorkshire writers seems richly to deserve recovery and fresh interpretation. Discussion of Romer's work also contributes a particular Yorkshire strand to the critical conversation about modernism and life-writing so ambitiously developed by Max Saunders in his wide-ranging book *Self-Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (2010), which draws on literary writing from across Europe and the USA from the 1870s to the 1930s. It seems apt to begin by quoting one of *Self-Impression's* opening quotations from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde which in some ways applies well to *All Alone*: 'every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter'.¹¹ *All Alone* was written in Switzerland, but her only experiment with biography emphasised how deeply her Yorkshire origins mattered to its author and made a claim for Emily Brontë as her personal artistic double and as in effect an innovative predecessor. This claim impacts the genre/s of *All Alone* which doubles as a biography of Emily Brontë and an artistic autobiography of Romer Wilson, though in most ways, as noted already, it is not a memoir. Gertrude Stein, of course, wrote that 'Anything is an autobiography', expressing an idea somewhat like Wilde's cited earlier that any work will in some sense inevitably be about its creator.¹² As Max Saunders comments, distinguishing the genre terms 'autobiographical' and 'autobiography': 'reading something as "autobiographical" [...] is different from reading it as "autobiography"; its autobiographical dimension can be covert, unconscious, or implicit'.¹³ We argue that *All Alone* is not just autobiographical, but consciously and explicitly hybrid, with a balance of formal elements more or less biographical and more or less autobiographical, though the exterior overall form is presented as biography.

These innovative genre aspects were supported by its publisher. *All Alone* was published by Chatto & Windus, a publisher with solid nineteenth-century successes behind it, but which, as the company's official history makes clear, had also made some more unusual

investments, bringing substantial rewards to the firm and the authors concerned.¹⁴ These wise decisions included the first editions in Britain of the works of Mark Twain, initially under dubious terms for the author but with later improvements. Significant decisions also included the riskier one to publish Algernon Charles Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* in 1866, when its author already faced allegations of immorality and even demands that he be prosecuted for obscenity.¹⁵ The firm's historian, Oliver Warner, argues that with this publication it had 'transformed' into a publishing house 'willing to finance and to market wares which possess inspiring, experimental, and even explosive qualities'.¹⁶ This tradition of considered risk-taking continued into the period between the wars, when the firm took on innovative and potentially controversial works, including from 1920s modernist or in other ways daring authors such as Richard Aldington, Aldous Huxley, Wyndham Lewis, and Proust, and later in the 1930s works by Samuel Beckett and Sylvia Townsend Warner. It seems significant that Chatto & Windus also published the first three biographies written by the innovative Bloomsbury Group biographer Lytton Strachey, which had marked interests in the psychology of their subjects, though they were also willing to debunk them rather than necessarily treating them as admirable as had previously been the usual biographical approach. These included *Eminent Victorians* in 1918, *Queen Victoria* in 1921 and *Elizabeth and Essex* in the same year in which they published *All Alone*. This suggests a considerable openness to new forms of biography, and indeed that the firm made a significant contribution to what was soon called 'the new biography', an innovation with strong roots in Bloomsbury, including Woolf's own analysis of the genre in her essay 'The New Biography' (1927). Warner saw the years after 1926 as marking a new period of innovation for the firm: 'fresh standards were apparent, policy was forward looking [...] the guiding spirits were Charles Prentice and Harold Raymond'.¹⁷ As Romer Wilson's correspondence file with Chatto & Windus shows, Charles Prentice (1881–1949) worked closely with her on both copyright issues arising from the complexity of the Brontë literary estate and on the design of *All Alone*, including the illustrations.¹⁸ Romer did not have any business correspondence with Raymond (though her husband, Edward O'Brien, did), but she instead worked in addition on *All Alone* with another Chatto & Windus partner, Geoffrey Whitworth (1883–1951).¹⁹

The cover design of *All Alone* suggested a reasonably conventional life with its nineteenth-century style line-drawing portrait of Emily Brontë within a white garland-like frame around which the book title flexes (and indeed the other illustrations, drawn from existing sources,

also seem suitable for a conventional biography). Perhaps Chatto & Windus thought the life was to be a conventional one, as some of their advertising might suggest, but given the outspokenness of the text and their experience this does not seem that likely. Romer wrote to Prentice suggesting she knew very well that it was not a conventional book: 'I hope you won't take fright when you do read Emily'.²⁰ From the opening pages of her Preface the text declared to her reader a sharply unconventional approach to biography, and brought specific (and idiosyncratic) meanings to the phrase 'Private History':

In conclusion, this life does not purport to be a Last Word upon Emily Jane Brontë's history. I know Emily herself now. I do not know all the events by any means which befell her, nor absolutely the order of those I have recorded. I know the main lines of her character, the most important part of her history. [...] I do not care how erroneous my statements of fact are, provided these statements draw forth clear and correct evidence from secret hiding-places. I have been as accurate as possible. A thin stream of inaccuracies weakly diluted with truth has been the source I have had to rely upon for the incidents of Emily's career.²¹

This makes a characteristically modernist distinction between mere outward 'facts' and an authentic sense of the real constituted by a more vital, private and less-knowable inner life of a unique subjectivity. Indeed, this resembles some of Woolf's responses to conventional biography (including the approach of her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, the first editor of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*) as noted by Anna Snaith.²² Max Saunders says of her work: 'Snaith is right to see Woolf's modernism as questioning "the linear, fact-based style of Victorian auto/biography"'.²³ In Woolf's own reflections on the differing qualities of Charlotte and Emily Brontë published in 1925, she saw a focus on the inwardness of her characters as a key element in *Wuthering Heights* itself:

She could free life from its dependence on facts; with a few touches indicate the spirit of a face so that it needs no body; by speaking of the moor make the wind blow and the thunder roar.²⁴

As the subtitle indicates, Romer's account prioritises Emily's private history over a 'public' one which consists of facts and events in the sequence in which they took place. These in her account, Romer immediately confesses, may not be summed up correctly for all time in a 'Last Word' judgement for eternity. The apparent provisionality in *All Alone* seems to be reinforced by the following sentence's admission of probable incompleteness in references to the events which befell

Emily, and the absoluteness of their order. Such 'errors' do not matter though because apparently they do not bear on the key inner narrative of Emily's 'Private History', which anyway has been underpinned in all existing conventional Brontë life-narratives by 'a thin stream of inaccuracies weakly diluted with truth'. It is notable that despite the lack of priority awarded by Romer to this type of accuracy, she is in fact and paradoxically not at all suggesting that her own narration of 'Emily' is provisional—for she is claiming a prophetic truth for her own insights: 'I know Emily herself now [...] the main lines of her character, the most important part of her history'. This point of certainty about the inner subjectivity is less typical of modernist writing than the statements of the provisional nature of the 'facts' about Emily. There is, though, a slight concession to 'outer' truth in the unemphatic 'I have been as accurate as possible'—and indeed we know from the Preface that Romer was careful to verify her quotations from what were then judged the best texts.²⁵ Nevertheless, her method as she explicitly states does not rely on evidence drawn from an accurate outer history—on the contrary errors in that field may even in her (somewhat mystical?) methodology reveal truths. As we have said, we do not claim any priority for Romer Wilson's approach to the Brontës—our focus is on Romer and her no doubt idiosyncratic artistic vision of Emily Brontë and Yorkshire as something richly appropriate to the focus in this special issue on Yorkshire Modernisms.²⁶

Romer's explicitness about her approach is sustained throughout *All Alone*. She makes clear and multiple references to a number of modernist themes and obsessions, which she argues apply aptly to Emily Brontë and often to herself as well. These include intertwined passages on self-consciousness and modern psychology, and from these Romer does not hesitate to modulate from her own brand of biography to markedly autobiographical streams of her own consciousness, comparisons of Emily and Romer's formative childhood experiences, the influence of place and childhood, and meditations on creativity, the artist, and inner and outer worlds. We explore these strands in *All Alone*, noting the central importance given to the Yorkshire moors.

In *All Alone*, there are sixty-two uses of the related terms 'consciousness', 'unconsciousness', 'conscious', 'unconscious', which seems a high occurrence in a book of two-hundred and eighty-five pages. Not all usages are unusual, but many are, with a sustained and explicit focus on self-reflection and on modern psychology in connection with creativity and escape from the constraints of the conventional. The fourteenth chapter of *All Alone* is even titled 'On the Conscious and the Unconscious', and not surprisingly has

considerable consideration of those modes of being, including in its opening quotation appearing just below the chapter title, which sees Emily Brontë thinking at one point in terms of a negative mood of the unconscious: “To-day, I will not seek the shadowy region: | Its unsustaining vastness waxes drear.” EMILY JANE BRONTË.²⁷ This implies that on other days Emily will seek that ‘shadowy region’ with expectations of more positive qualities. Indeed, this is not the only way that Romer depicts Emily’s engagement with the unconsciousness, which is sometimes portrayed as liberating and at other times as desolating. In this case, it clearly offers a form of otherness in its ‘shadowy’ nature, but at this point it feels oppressive and unproductive. One notes too a similarity, as we shall see, with Romer / Emily’s characterisation of the Yorkshire moors, which are indeed constructed as a landscape invoking and/or belonging to the unconscious realm.

Not surprisingly the chapter goes on to provide further commentary on the conscious and unconscious. After a few pages, Romer reflects on the structuring of her own reflections in this section of *All Alone* itself: ‘This is a muddle of a chapter, but so is life as I see it, a fine muddle of the conscious and the unconscious’.²⁸ This seems a pragmatic but nevertheless acute insight on her part, for her ways of talking about the conscious and the unconscious and the relationships between the two are shifting and sometimes somewhat mystical, though that is perhaps only reasonable in grappling with modes of being and with descriptions necessarily at or beyond the categorisations of language. In another passage slightly earlier in this chapter ‘the words ‘dreary’ and ‘waste’ are applied not to the unconscious but on the contrary to a mundane world dominated by a certain kind of shared consciousness: ‘Between joy and melancholy lies a dreary waste, a limbo of discontent and greyness intolerable. Over this reigns other people’s common sense. There is no unconsciousness here nor heightened consciousness.’²⁹ This mundane waste associated with time passing and the tasks of daily life is seen as grinding the authentic down and grinding it ‘exceeding small’ until less than dust. Paradoxically, the only response Romer can see is to settle to hard work, though not creative work since there is no poetry in this mood. Romer sees Emily’s creativity as produced by complex interactions of the conscious and unconscious which that author herself never fully understands. Romer argues that Emily is ‘more conscious’ in ‘melancholy moods’: ‘And to the bitter end she will never write a line while the gay mood is upon her, but afterwards in the dark times she will write much.’³⁰ Creativity is clearly in Romer’s view not a product of happiness, which brings a completely uncreative unity of being. Such

moments bring Emily a certain consciousness that she is joyful, but never any creative awareness beyond herself: that comes only in the 'dark times' which follow them.

Romer places Emily's poetry, her 'lost Gondal writings' and *Wuthering Heights* as her most revealing works, those that give Romer conviction of knowing 'Emily herself', and whenever she discusses either of these she talks in terms of interactions between the conscious and unconscious and introduces her idea that Emily rehearsed throughout her life a 'dream-drama':

(I shall speak now as if Gondal were the entire work of Emily, which in one mood it certainly was, its deepest mood). Setting aside all psychoanalytic theories of the origin of dreams, it is not necessary here to go behind the conscious in seeking for the spring that releases the creative impulse.³¹

Of course, in the very gesture of setting aside 'psychoanalytic theories', Romer invokes them and their discourses (if in her own way rather than in any strict Freudian form), and this enables her to argue that Emily's inner psychic dialectic is the truest narrative of her life, manifested pre-eminently in some of her fictions:

Surely *Wuthering Heights* is not Emily's life? There will be many who say that, even after this slow and painful unwinding of her history. It is. It is her autobiography, the life of her soul on earth from that time when she was 'barely six years old' to the time when her poems were discovered.

Consciousness came to Emily in the form of Heathcliff, a dark waif of no clime, or country, or parentage.³²

From these confident analyses of Emily's life and works, Romer modulates readily into self-analysis and a formulation of her own universal theories of the relationships between dream-dramas and creativity: 'By a strict sequence of ideas I have passed from the complexity of the dream-drama to one of its central and underlying facts. I am on the borderline between the conscious and the unconscious'.³³ Romer here portrays herself as reaching a creative / critical epiphany which gives insight into a key liminal space which she has reached at this point of her project on Emily.

This emphasis on the authenticity of the inner life links to a number of other passages in *All Alone* which see the diminution of the real and vital through socialisation into the conventional bourgeois adult world:

We who write, who create, seek and seek for the pure experience. If we are able to look back to our youth we shall find it. Far from being

immature, experience was then most complete. With age, experience becomes lumbered with worldly trash, and dulled and dried. Between us and our youth, alas, lies the quagmire of adolescence, in which our early days are drowned and suffocated.³⁴

Here conventional adult life is a form of death-in-life, a journey away from pure experience, but one against which all struggle, some more, some less. The image of drowning and suffocating in the quagmire invokes the most negative aspects of the moor, though if adolescence is survived, only a less watery non-existence awaits, 'dulled and dried' and encumbered with 'worldly' valuables which have no true value.

Elsewhere in *All Alone*, the language of modern psychology and psychoanalysis is equally explicitly invoked:

In after life, Emily certainly had a prison complex, as I believe it is called. Rules and regulations, anything that suggested prison, threw her into a frightful state — prison, prison — it is all through her poetry — dungeons, thrall.³⁵

I have often been told by one who understands these things that the seraph-comforter of dreams and poetry is always to be traced back to some actual memory of maternal protection [...]. There is a fiercer craving where the mother is dead or never known, or dimly known.³⁶

One notes the rather different language of personal emotional conviction at the opening of the first passage before the modulation to what is presented as a systematic knowledge of human behaviour. In the second passage the tropes of dream and literature are seen as close allied, with the particular trope of 'seraph-comforter' and the absent mother-protector seen as key for Emily. Though dependent on this psychoanalytic discourse, the prose nevertheless suggests that Romer is not an insider to it and gratefully receives help from those who are: 'as I believe it is called' and 'I have often been told by one who understands these things'.

The quotations explored so far focus on complex interactions between consciousness and the unconscious and how they facilitated Emily's writing. However, Romer develops too a line of argument which focuses on a forced consciousness which denies the unconscious, and which she particularly links to Charlotte Brontë:

Charlotte's vices were inability to yield an inch and a horrid partiality for tampering with the lives of others. [...] She thought meanwhile that she was a creature of submission [...]. When women talk a deal about submission I doubt but they are of the domineering sort, of the eating-up sort, husband-ogresses. There is too great a disparity between their

self-abasement and the God-like husband of their dreams for truth. Such lowliness and such heavenly height can never mate. The wives that creep in the fiction of their imaginations about their husband's feet get hold of a Twelve Tables of the Law made out of stone with which they rise and club their poor god on the head if he dares to step down off the pedestal which they have arranged for him.³⁷

This constructs Charlotte as a powerful enforcer of outward convention and of expectations of conventional gender identities as understood by Victorians. However, she is also seen as lacking insight into the underlying psychic dynamics of her enforcing role, and as in reality deploying her apparent submission to utterly dominate and control her apparent god-husband. While strongly supporting the rightness of patriarchy Charlotte actually transforms it into a powerful though self-denying matriarchy: it is she who wields the patriarchal law. This (Lytton Stracheyesque?) critique of Charlotte is sustained throughout *All Alone* which sees her as a figure who does not achieve her own potential vision and who works hard to suppress Emily's vision:

The real Emily was contrary to all that Charlotte struggled for. Charlotte struggled to accept, Emily refused. Charlotte tried her utmost to conform to the world as it presented itself to her, the world of normal everyday men and women. With this world Emily had nothing whatever to do. Charlotte had a sense of 'right,' she knew what was right and could not cease to try and inflict her code on others. Had she not taught Emily and Anne the rudiments of French and grammar? Even so she tried to teach them the A.B.C. of this world.³⁸

Codes, grammars and alphabets are here made into symbols of all the systems which regulate much more unpredictable impulses into a consciously felt and completely shared 'sense of right'. This is a tragic conflict between the sisters, and between different conceptions of existence. Indeed, Romer earlier portrays the socialising force of education as the destroyer of Charlotte's own 'natural impulses', using an unusual metaphor, 'What she might have become had the octopus of education not strangled her natural impulses, [...] But the octopus of education is a terrible blood-sucker, a squeezer out of human juices'.³⁹ Elsewhere in *All Alone* Romer refers to 'this pest of education' and says that the light it seems to offer is 'the phosphorescence of putrefaction'.⁴⁰

Romer argues that Charlotte repeatedly tries to make Emily into what she should be according to her pattern of the world. Charlotte's novel *Shirley* is, says Romer twice, a kind of faked life of Emily:

We do not know how much Charlotte knew of Emily's childhood. Shirley, who is said to be Emily, is not introduced to us until she is twenty-one. One feels that like Emily's poems, Shirley is Emily edited by Charlotte and cut down.⁴¹

Romer returns to this analysis:

Shirley is a strange book. It is tempered with discretion and verisimilitude — Charlotte's ideal autobiography. Take all the facts and details of a life, remove incongruous time and place to shake down the action, stir the facts and details about, guarantee that all will more or less come right in the end, lost mothers return, the heroines marry, put in no fictitious characters, and you have *Shirley*.⁴²

This seems an explicit self-referential contrast to the procedure of *All Alone* as a more genuine 'private history' of Emily, one where she will not be 'edited' and 'cut down', where time and place are not ideally re-ordered, and where everything will not come out right in the end, at least, according to ordinary narrative expectations. The use of the word 'autobiography' in the passage is curious — surely if Romer is right this would be a 'biography' of Emily, but perhaps her life is so much edited that it becomes more Charlotte's telling of her own ideal life? Perhaps there is some awareness here of the ways in which *All Alone* itself partakes of both biography and autobiography?

Romer clearly sees Charlotte as the enemy and identifies with Emily to the extent that what she herself feels must be what Emily felt. Thus, reflections on childhood and moors in *All Alone* merge into a joint experience for 'Emily and me':

Up there, on a bright June day or a sparkling winter morning, to Emily and to me — [...]. Visions rose up there more real than reality, fires kindled in the soul that burnt the light of common day to ashes.⁴³

Equally, *All Alone* is quite content to switch between Emily's private childhood stories and those of Romer, though hers seem a degree less gothic-romantic, as in the eleventh chapter of *All Alone*, 'Childish Pastimes', which opens with quotations from the two Brontës: "I am the Duke of Wellington." CHARLOTTE BRONTË and "Yes — I could swear the glorious wind | Has swept the world aside." EMILY JANE BRONTË'. Romer then links these to her own childhood imaginations:

When I was six or thereabouts and my sister five, I became the aunt, and my sister the mother, of four imaginary, intelligent and talking cats. [...] The cats had for a father a fictitious man, Sir Edward Compton, Admiral of the Dutch Fleet. He wore a short pointed beard, and was a drunken

and dissipated character. He used to pay surprise visits to his wife and feline family and startle them by peering in at a window at night with a drunken leer on his face. [...] I can see Sir Edward's dissipated face peering in at a certain dream-passage window to this day.⁴⁴

This is certainly individual and idiosyncratic, and up to a point innocent, though the cross-species fatherhood and disruptive and sudden visits of this drunken and sexually threatening adult male introduce an element of danger against which the childhood home is clearly not securely proof (clearly Sir Edward still recurs in the adult Romer's 'dream-drama'). This comparison of her own childhood dreamlike narratives to those of her subject is certainly not part of the usual repertoire of biography. Then from this undoubtedly autobiographical segment, Romer modulates swiftly to what is clearly claimed as a shared in spirit experience with Emily:

In winter the moors are other-worldly. [...] Night closes in before four o'clock, closes in like death, in narrowing circles of gloom [...]. It is well to be off the moor by then, well to flee from the ghosts of lost travellers, for every year travellers are lost on the moor; from goblins, from ancient terrors of the Roman Road; monstrous Druid shapes.

It is grand, strange, frightening to be born and bred in a house against the moor, to dwell in an outpost of this world on the threshold of another [...].⁴⁵

We are back with the otherness attributed to the unconsciousness in which the moors contain human-like but not human beings and are a liminal place between worlds or modes of being.

For Romer the moors are the elemental identity of Yorkshire. Again, she uses Charlotte as opposed to what she and Emily share:

For the most part our moors are as bare as the back of your hand. Charlotte said that those who seek beauty there 'must bring it inborn: these moors are too stern to yield any product so delicate.' That may be the opinion of many. I will not attempt to disclaim 'the drear prospect of a Yorkshire moor.' [...]

The moors are primeval; perhaps that is why they repulse many folk and are meaningless to others. The old primeval passions wake there still, with the old monotony and timelessness, that cares nothing for an hour or a million years. The moors care nothing for you or me as you or me, nothing at all. They know neither time nor man.⁴⁶

The moors are beyond conventional categorisation and temporality, and the source of ambivalent but sometimes liberating visions though also losses of personality.

As Romer's comment to Charles Prentice in her letter suggests ('I hope you won't take fright when you do read Emily'), she was perfectly aware that her book was not a standard approach to a Brontë biography.⁴⁷ She refers to another aspect of this awareness in a letter to Prentice: 'I expect letters of wrath from every Brontyite in the country having damaged Charlotte's halo considerably'.⁴⁸ If she felt some anxiety about the reception of her book, we think it may also be true that like many another modernist artist she felt that a degree of rejection and controversy might also evidence its originality and its independence from orthodox opinion. She also knew it would not be the only new Brontë book coming out so that controversy was likely: 'The Brontë market is very lively just now, and will be more lively directly my book is out'.⁴⁹

Romer's expectations about the lively market and potential hostility were indeed matched by the book's mixed reception. In his posthumous appreciation of her, Robert Nichols recorded some disappointment on her and his part with the response to her book as well as expressing his own sense of its inventiveness and high quality:

It was most shamefully ill-treated by the press which, by and large, exhibited little comprehension of the method and purpose of the work, and no apprehension whatever of its profound merits as a psychological study of a nature peculiarly difficult to penetrate.⁵⁰

On 14 June 1928, the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewed four recent Brontë books, of which one was *All Alone*. Of the other three works one was a new edition of *Wuthering Heights* (Knopf), with an introduction by Valentine Dobrée, one a book by Isabel C. Clarke titled *Haworth Parsonage – a Picture of the Brontë Family* (Hutchinson) and the final book an astrologically-informed study by Maud Margesson called *The Brontës and the Stars* (Rider). Romer Wilson was perhaps unlucky that *All Alone* was reviewed with the astrological study for the unidentified reviewer had a great deal of fun pairing these two works while dealing with the other two by more usual critical criteria. The reviewer was thus able to pursue what they clearly thought an amusing comparison of what they characterised ironically as an older and a newer 'science':

The special pleading of an astrologist is quickly detected nowadays because the wider assumptions of the science are unconvincing to us: more tempting [...] is the science which Miss Romer Wilson exploits, psychology. One might fairly say of her book that confidence about generalities, which, whatever their theoretical validity, are not relevantly applied, has made it, with all its novelistic ingenuity, and vivid zestful speciousness, as fantastically misleading as if she had pinned her faith

to the stars. [...] Miss Wilson starts from the particularly unfortunate hypothesis that Emily Brontë was like herself, carrying this so far that in many of her pages one hardly knows whether it is of herself or her heroine she is writing.⁵¹

There is a patronising and superior (masculine?) tone here (Romer 'exploits' psychology), and a clearly articulated disbelief in this psychological project as carried out in *All Alone*. Nevertheless, the review is not the result of inattentive reading—on the contrary there are acute observations about Romer's experiment, including understanding the creative drive of its narrative and the blurring of biography and autobiography. While essentially a disbeliever in *All Alone*, the reviewer does proclaim some features of the book remarkable in their own way: 'Of the three monographs on the Brontës, Miss Romer Wilson's, which concentrates on Emily, alone attains to significance [if] rather in the intention than the result'.⁵²

There were a number of reviews which shared this disbelief in the principles and techniques of *All Alone*, as well as some by Brontë experts ('Brontyites') which focussed on issues of accuracy. However, there were reviews which understood the innovation in Romer's Emily book. The most admiring and perceptive was by R. L. Duffus in the *New York Times*. The reviewer placed *All Alone* firmly in the category of emerging new forms of biography at that time:

This is the psychological or psychopathic biography. The second adjective is no doubt the better, for it appears that everyone who ever amounted to much has had something dreadfully wrong inside. The defects of the method are that the evidence is always circumstantial and always incomplete. Instead of statues on pedestals or homely figures in slippers and smoking jackets we see silhouettes thrown vaguely against a background of flame and darkness. But the defects of the method are possibly also its virtues, for it may thus come nearer to the realities of human life. [...] It takes a poet and a mysticist to do this well, and Romer Wilson is both these things [...] At times one is not certain that her biographer's reactions are not more interesting than Emily's [...] She approaches her story, significantly, from the moors [...] It can only be said that here is a very beautiful book if one is content not to understand fully'.⁵³

As well as giving a context for *All Alone* in a new kind of biography, this also has an acute sense of the idiosyncratic merits of Romer's experiment, including again her hybrid autobiography and biography and the emphasis on a mysterious inner rather than obvious outer life. We note also that the (comically characterised) conventional biography

here seems always to be about *men* (the ‘smoking jacket’), whereas Romer’s new biography seems well-adapted to a female subject. As we have seen already, Romer was not the only modernist deeply interested by biography. Hermione Lee in her *Biography—a Very Short Introduction* (2009) drew attention to Virginia Woolf’s engagement with biography and its difficulties: ‘at the heart of Woolf’s critique of the genre is her sense that the inner life we all lead is never adequately reflected in biography’ for, as Woolf wrote, the subject/s are ‘rather under life size [...] and as they move we shall arrange them in all sorts of patterns of which they were ignorant’.⁵⁴ Romer Wilson clearly shares Woolf’s concern that the inner life may be absent in biography, though a critical reader could say that Romer does indeed impose patterns of her own—but she would presumably counter this with her conviction that she is *revealing* genuine patterns of which Emily herself was indeed not conscious. Woolf noted in the same essay, ‘The Art of Biography’ (1939), that biography was discovering new forms in the early twentieth century, specifically seeing Lytton Strachey as greatly developing ‘its new liberties’.⁵⁵

Romer was not the only Yorkshire-born novelist to be interested in the Brontës—the once well-regarded and best-selling Yorkshire writer Phyllis Bentley (1894–1977) wrote two Brontë biographies in 1947 and in 1960 and her memoir *O Dreams, O Destinations—an Autobiography* (1962) quite obsessively sees the Brontës as models for what seemed her own at first unlikely aspiration to be a writer. Indeed, in an article she claimed that ‘the aspiring young novelist’ was uniquely encouraged in the three Ridings by ‘cheerful philistine comments such as “Aiming to be a Brontë then, are you?”’.⁵⁶ However, Romer was the only Yorkshire writer to apply the new possibilities of modernism and the new biography to one of the Brontës. *All Alone* was Romer’s last completed creative work, written while she was suffering from the cancer which killed her in January 1930. We might usefully at this point refer to Max Saunders’ observations about the supplementarity of a writer’s autobiography ‘usually thought of as a kind of afterword to a writer’s career; a coda’.⁵⁷ Romer in this work indeed contributes a coda to her oeuvre which sees her very origins as a writer in an iconic female Yorkshire writer and in the strangeness and imaginary potential of their shared moorland landscape. Romer, despite her in many ways cosmopolitan writing career, took Emily as a fundamental role-model for herself as a Yorkshire proto-modernist hero-writer against the submission of an infinite ‘I’ to convention, and radically to claim a potential subjectivity completely outside sociability, the theocentric universe, perhaps gender, and time itself:

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. Nor do I care now that no one knows him. Alone on the moor I care for neither God nor man, but only for myself, who have always been I from the time when other folk called me a child, and before that, always, back to the beginning, if eternity ever began'.⁵⁸

Notes

1. Romer Wilson, *All Alone—the Life and Private History of Emily Jane Brontë*, Preface, pp. xi–xii. All references to *All Alone* are to the first edition (Chatto & Windus, 1928). There is an eBook edition (Sharpe Books, 2020).
2. Biographical material is relatively limited. To date official records, reviews of Wilson's work, some personal and business correspondence and some family papers and photographs have been located and underpin this paper. We continue to search for more material.
3. Romer Wilson, letter to Messrs Chatto & Windus, 25 July 1927. There are 40 letters written by Romer Wilson between 1927 and 1929 in the Chatto & Windus archive, University of Reading Special Collections. File CW 12/40, Letter 2.
4. Romer Wilson, letter to Robert Nichols, 10 August with annotation '1928' in pencil. One of an autograph collection of twenty-two letters from Wilson to Nichols held at Trinity College, Oxford. File reference: OM36/32j.
5. Gerald Gould, 'The Story of a Genius', *Common Cause*, Friday 18 October 1918, p. 314.
6. Robert Nichols, 'Romer Wilson—A Personal Note', *The Adelphi*, November 1930, p. 131.
7. Wilson, *All Alone*, p. 1. It should be noted that while Sheffield is now in the county of South Yorkshire, in 1928 it was in the West Riding, as Wilson wrote.
8. The 'unpublished family memoir' was written by Elizabeth Muir Wilson, who was very young when her aunt Romer died. An extract covering Romer's life is deposited in the archive of Girton College, Cambridge: 'Family Ties: The Deardens, and the Muir Wilsons', circa 2020?, Reference Code: GBR/0271/GCPP Wilson 4/1. As it appears to be one of the few sources for Romer Wilson's childhood, it is quoted here but with reservations, as official and newspaper records indicate that it is not always factually accurate. Where possible, it has been verified with, for example, census records.
9. *Modern Degeneracy* and the outline of *If All These Young Men* are in the archive of Girton College, Cambridge. Reference: GBR/0271/GCPP Wilson 1.
10. There is not the space in this article to explore Roma / Romer, but we note that the change of name raises the issues of gender ambiguity, perceived advantages of male over female authors etc.
11. Cited by Max Saunders in *Self-Impressions: Life-Writing, Autobiographical Fiction and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 1. The quotation is taken from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, edited by Michael Patrick Gillespie (W.W. Norton, 2006), p. 9.
12. Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (Random House, 1937), p. 5; cited in *Self-Impression*, p. 2.
13. Saunders, *Self-Impression*, p. 5.

14. Oliver Warner, *Chatto & Windus: a Brief Account of the Firm's Origin, History and Development* (Chatto & Windus, 1973), pp. 2–6.
15. Warner, *Chatto & Windus*, pp. 6–8.
16. Warner, *Chatto & Windus*, p. 7.
17. Warner, *Chatto & Windus*, p. 19.
18. Romer's letters to both Prentice and Whitworth are included in the Chatto & Windus archive in the University of Reading Special Collections. File CW 40/12 Romer Wilson.
19. University of Reading Special Collections. File CW 40/12 Romer Wilson.
20. University of Reading Special Collections. File CW 40/12 Romer Wilson, Letter 6, 12 November 1927.
21. Wilson, *All Alone*, Preface, pp. xi–xii.
22. Anna Snaith, 'My Poor Private Voice: Virginia Woolf and Auto/biography', in *Representing Lives: Women and Auto/biography*, ed. Alison Donnell and Pauline Polkey (Macmillan, 2000), pp. 96–104, pp. 96–7.
23. Saunders, *Self-Impression*, p. 439.
24. 'Jane Eyre' and 'Wuthering Heights' from *Virginia Woolf: Collected Essays, Volume 1*, ed. Leonard Woolf (Hogarth Press, 1966), pp. 185–90.
25. Wilson, *All Alone*, Preface, pp. xi–xii.
26. Wilson, *All Alone*, Preface, pp. xi–xii.
27. Wilson, *All Alone*, p. 88.
28. Wilson, *All Alone*, p. 94.
29. Wilson, *All Alone*, p. 93.
30. Wilson, *All Alone*, p. 92–3.
31. Wilson, *All Alone*, p. 156.
32. Wilson, *All Alone*, p. 265.
33. Wilson, *All Alone*, p. 161.
34. Wilson, *All Alone*, p. 26.
35. Wilson, *All Alone*, p. 42.
36. Wilson, *All Alone*, p. 29.
37. Wilson, *All Alone*, p. 61.
38. Wilson, *All Alone*, p. 245.
39. Wilson, *All Alone*, p. 104.
40. Wilson, *All Alone*, p. 106.
41. Wilson, *All Alone*, p. 34.
42. Wilson, *All Alone*, p. 102.
43. Wilson, *All Alone*, pp. 76–7.
44. Wilson, *All Alone*, p. 68.
45. Wilson, *All Alone*, p. 70.
46. Wilson, *All Alone*, pp. 75–6.
47. CW 40/12, Romer Wilson, letter to Charles Prentice, 12 November 1927.
48. CW 40/12, Romer Wilson, letter to Charles Prentice, 20 February 1928.
49. CW 40/12, Romer Wilson, letter to Charles Prentice, 7? [handwriting unclear] February 1928.
50. Nichols, *The Adelphi*, November 1930, p. 130.
51. Unidentified reviewer, 'The Brontës', *Times Literary Supplement*, No. 1376, p. 446. *TLS Centenary Archive*: <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200224414/TLSH?u=tlssacc&sid=bookmark-TLSH&pg=10&xid=0b579493>; accessed 30 August 2025.
52. *Times Literary Supplement*, No. 1376, p. 446.

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53. R. L. Duffus, 'Emily Brontë was Always Restless and Unhappy', *New York Times*, 17 June 1928, p. 55. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1928/06/17/94143707.html>; accessed 9 March 2023.
54. Hermione Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2009.), pp. 80–81.
55. Virginia Woolf, 'The Art of Biography' (1930) from *Virginia Woolf: Collected Essays*, Volume 4, ed. Leonard Woolf (Hogarth Press, 1967), pp. 221–228, p. 223.
56. Phyllis Bentley, 'Yorkshire and the Novelist', *The Kenyon Review* (Gambier, Ohio: Kenyon College, 1968), Volume 30, p. 514.
57. Saunders, *Self-Impression*, p. 516.
58. Wilson, *All Alone*, pp. 4–5.