

CHAPTER XIX

THE DEATH OF EMILY BRONTË

EMILY BRONTË is the sphinx of our modern literature. She came into being in the family of an obscure clergyman, and she went out of it at thirty years of age without leaving behind her one single significant record which was any key to her character or to her mode of thought, save only the one famous novel, *Wuthering Heights*, and a few poems—some three or four of which will live in our poetic anthologies for ever. And she made no single friend other than her sister Anne. With Anne she must have corresponded during the two or three periods of her life when she was separated from that much-loved sister; and we may be sure that the correspondence was of a singularly affectionate character. Charlotte, who never came very near to her in thought or sympathy, although she loved her younger sister so deeply, addressed her in one letter as ‘mine bonnie love’; and it is certain that her own letters to her two sisters, and particularly to Anne, must have been peculiarly tender and in no way lacking in abundant self-revelation. When Emily and Anne had both gone to the grave, Charlotte, it is probable, carefully destroyed every scrap of their correspondence, and, indeed, of their literary effects that she could find; and thus it is that, apart from her books and certain fragments, we know Emily only by two formal letters to her sister’s friend. Beyond these there is not one scrap of information as to Emily’s outlook upon life. In infancy she was with Charlotte at Cowan Bridge, and

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was described by the governess as ‘a pretty little thing.’ For three months she was at Miss Wooler’s school at Roe Head; but there, unlike Charlotte, she made no friends. She and Anne were inseparable when at home, but of what they said to one another there is no record. The sisters must have differed in many ways. Anne, gentle and persuasive, grew up like Charlotte, devoted to the Christianity of her father and mother, and entirely in harmony with all the conditions of a parsonage. It is impossible to think that the author of ‘The Old Stoic’ and ‘Last Lines’ was equally attached to the creeds of the churches; but what Emily thought on religious subjects the world will never know. Mrs. Gaskell put to Miss Nussey this very question: ‘What was Emily’s religion?’ But Emily was the last person in the world to have spoken to the most friendly of visitors about so important a theme. For a short time, as we know, Emily was in a school at Law Hill near Halifax—a Miss Patchet’s. She was, for a still longer period, at the Héger Pensionnat at Brussels. Mrs. Gaskell’s business was to write the life of Charlotte Brontë and not of her sister Emily; and as a result there is little enough of Emily in Mrs. Gaskell’s book—no record of the Halifax and Brussels life as seen through Emily’s eyes. Time, however, has brought its revenge. The cult which started with Mr. Sydney Dobell, and found poetic expression in Mr. Matthew Arnold’s fine lines on her,

‘Whose soul
Knew no fellow for might,
Passion, vehemence, grief,
Daring, since Byron died,’¹

culminated in an enthusiastic eulogy by Mr. Swinburne, who placed her in the very forefront of English women of genius.

I have said that there are no records of Emily, but

¹ *Haworth Churchyard, April 1855*, by Matthew Arnold. Macmillan and Co.

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there are the two scraps of 'Diary' that are published in their chronological order, and there are also a few fragments, all written in that tiny handwriting which the girls affected, and bearing various dates from 1833 to 1840. A new edition of Emily's poems should, by virtue of these verses, have a great interest for her admirers.¹ With all her gifts as a poet, however, it is by *Wuthering Heights* that Emily Brontë is best known to the world; and the weirdness and force of that book suggest an inquiry concerning the influences which produced it. Dr. Wright, in his entertaining book *The Brontës in Ireland*, recounts the story of Patrick Brontë's origin, and insists that it was in listening to her father's anecdotes of his own Irish experiences that Emily obtained the weird material of *Wuthering Heights*. It is not, of course, enough to point out that Dr. Wright's story of the Irish Brontës is full of contradictions. A number of tales picked up at random from an illiterate peasantry might very well abound in inconsistencies, and yet contain some measure of truth. But nothing in Dr. Wright's narrative is confirmed, save only the fact that Patrick Brontë continued throughout his life in some slight measure of correspondence with his brothers and sisters—a fact rendered sufficiently evident by a perusal of his will. Dr. Wright tells of many visits to Ireland in order to trace the Brontë traditions to their source; and yet he had not—in his first edition—marked the elementary fact that the registry of births in County Down records the existence of innumerable Bruntys and of not a single Brontë. Dr. Wright probably made his inquiries with the stories of Emily and Charlotte well in mind. He sought for similar traditions, and the quick-witted Irish peasantry gave him all that he wanted. They served up and embellished the current traditions of the neighbour-

¹ See *The Complete Poems* by Emily Brontë, edited by W. Robertson Nicoll and Clement Shorter, published by Hodder and Stoughton in 1908.

hood for his benefit, as the peasantry do everywhere for folklore enthusiasts. Charlotte Brontë's uncle Hugh, we are told, read the *Quarterly Review* article upon *Jane Eyre*, and, armed with a shillelagh, came to England, in order to wreak vengeance upon the writer of the bitter attack. He landed at Liverpool, walked from Liverpool to Haworth, saw his nieces, who 'gathered round him,' and listened to his account of his mission. He then went to London and made abundant inquiries—but why pursue this ludicrous story further? In the first place, the *Quarterly Review* article was published in December 1848—after Emily was dead, and while Anne was dying. Very soon after the review appeared Charlotte was informed of its authorship, and references to Miss Rigby and the *Quarterly* are found more than once in her correspondence with Mr. Williams.

This is a lengthy digression from the story of Emily's life, but it is of moment to discover whether there is any evidence of influences other than those which her Yorkshire home afforded. I have discussed the matter with Miss Ellen Nussey, and with Mr. Nicholls. Miss Nussey never, in all her visits to Haworth, heard a single reference to the Irish legends related by Dr. Wright, and firmly believed them to be mythical. Mr. Nicholls, during the six years that he lived alone at the parsonage with his father-in-law, never heard one single word from Mr. Brontë—who was by no means disposed to reticence—about these stories, and was also of opinion that they were purely legendary.

It has been suggested that Emily would have been guilty almost of a crime to have based the more sordid part of her narrative upon her brother's transgressions. This is sheer nonsense. She wrote *Wuthering Heights* because she was impelled thereto, and the book, with all its morbid force and fire, will remain, for all time, as a monument of the most striking genius that nineteenth-

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century womanhood has given us. It was partly her life in Yorkshire—the local colour was mainly derived from her brief experience as a governess at Halifax—but it was partly, also, I am inclined to believe, the German fiction which she had devoured during the Brussels period, that inspired *Wuthering Heights*, although of this there is no real evidence.¹

Emily Brontë's life-story has been told by a latter-day writer of genius. But Miss Mary F. Robinson's little book² was written under great difficulties. She had access to no material other than that contained in the printed volumes. Some scraps of new information she did indeed obtain from the recollections of Miss Ellen Nussey and others who were then alive to remember the Brontë family. Miss Robinson built up a theory that Emily was more long-suffering, more tolerant of Branwell's continued viciousness than were her sisters. Yet in quoting a letter that Charlotte wrote to Miss Nussey on her return from a visit to Brookroyd she did not know that the '——' in the following sentence referred to Emily:—

¹ The most effective reply to Dr. Wright's book that I have seen was published in *The Westminster Review* for October 1895. The author, the late Rev. Angus Mackay, emphasised with effect the inconsistencies in Dr. Wright's account of the Brontë ancestry; and concerning the suggestion that Emily founded *Wuthering Heights* upon certain Irish family traditions, has the following pregnant remarks:—'The truth-loving Charlotte's account of the matter must necessarily be final. She might blamelessly have kept silence about the origin of *Wuthering Heights*, but she would never have deliberately misled us; and she tells us distinctly in her preface to her sister's book that the materials of *Wuthering Heights* were gathered in Yorkshire. Speaking of Emily's aloofness from all her neighbours, she says: "Yet she knew them; knew their ways, their language, their family histories; she could hear of them with interest, and talk of them with detail, minute, graphic, and accurate; but with them she rarely exchanged a word. Hence it ensued that what her mind had gathered of the real concerning them was too exclusively confined to those tragic and terrible traits of which, in listening to the secret annals of every rude vicinage, the memory is sometimes compelled to receive the impress. Her imagination, which was a spirit more sombre than sunny, more powerful than sportive, found in such traits material whence it wrought creations like Heathcliff, like Earnshaw, like Catherine." To all who really know Charlotte's character this is conclusive and final. Had both plot and characters been derived from the history of an ancestor these words would never have been written.'

² *Emily Brontë*, by A. Mary F. Robinson. The Eminent Women Series, edited by John H. Ingram. W. H. Allen and Co., 1889.

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I hear that he got a sovereign while I have been away, under pretence of paying a pressing debt; he went immediately and changed it at a public-house, and has employed it as was to be expected. — concluded her account by saying that he was ‘a hopeless being.’

The fact is that Branwell’s state at that time was such that Emily, being only human, could not possibly have been more tolerant—and rightly so—than her two sisters. Yet Miss Robinson’s account is worth quoting, the more especially as it contains an episode not treated elsewhere. Possibly the story was invented after *Jane Eyre* was written, but we will hope it is true:—

There was one woman’s heart strong enough in its compassion to bear the daily disgusts, weaknesses, sins of Branwell’s life, and yet persist in aid and affection. Night after night, when Mr. Brontë was in bed, when Anne and Charlotte had gone upstairs to their room, Emily still sat up waiting. She often had very long to wait in the silent house before the staggering tread, the muttered oath, the fumbling hand at the door, bade her rouse herself from her sad thoughts and rise to let in the prodigal, and lead him in safety to his rest. But she never wearied in her kindness. In that silent home, it was the silent Emily who had ever a cheering word for Branwell; it was Emily who still remembered that he was her brother, without that remembrance freezing her heart to numbness. She still hoped to win him back by love; and the very force and sincerity of his guilty passion (an additional horror and sin in her sister’s eyes) was a claim on Emily, ever sympathetic to violent feeling. Thus it was she who, more than the others, became familiarised with the agony, and doubts, and shame of that tormented soul; and if, in her little knowledge of the world, she imagined such wrested passions to be natural, it is not upon her, of a certainty, that the blame of her pity shall be laid.

As the time went on and Branwell grew worse and wilder, it was well for the lonely watcher that she was strong. At last he grew ill, and would be content to go to bed early and lie there half-stupefied with opium and drink. One such night, their father and Branwell being in bed, the sisters came upstairs to

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sleep. Emily had gone on first into the little passage room where she still slept, when Charlotte, passing Branwell's partly-opened door, saw a strange bright flare inside. 'Oh, Emily!' she cried, 'the house is on fire!'

Emily came out, her fingers at her lips. She had remembered her father's great horror of fire; it was the one dread of a brave man: he would have no muslin curtains, no light dresses in his house. She came out silently and saw the flame; then, very white and determined, dashed from her room downstairs into the passage, where every night full pails of water stood. One in each hand she came upstairs. Anne, Charlotte, the young servant, shrinking against the wall, huddled together in amazed horror—Emily went straight on and entered the blazing room. In a short while the bright light ceased to flare. Fortunately the flame had not reached the woodwork: drunken Branwell, turning in his bed, must have upset the light on to his sheets, for they and the bed were all on fire, and he unconscious in the midst when Emily went in, even as Jane Eyre found Mr. Rochester. But it was with no reasonable, thankful human creature with whom Emily had to deal. After a few long moments, those still standing in the passage saw her stagger out, white, with singed clothes, half-carrying in her arms, half-dragging, her besotted brother. She placed him in her bed and took away the light; then assuring the hysterical girls that there could be no further danger, she bade them go and rest—but where she slept herself that night no one remembers now.

Letter 315

TO ELLEN NUSSEY

November 23rd, '48.

DEAR ELLEN,—Whatever my inclination may be to let all correspondence alone for the present, I feel that to *you* at least I ought to write a line. I told you Emily was ill, in my last letter. She has not rallied yet. She is *very* ill. I believe, if you were to see her, your impression would be that there is no hope. A more hollow, wasted, pallid aspect I have not beheld. The deep, tight cough continues; the breathing after the least exertion is a rapid pant; and these symptoms are accompanied by pains in the chest and side. Her pulse, the only time she allowed it to be felt, was found to beat 115 per minute. In this state she resolutely

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refuses to see a doctor ; she will not give an explanation of her feelings, she will scarcely allow her illness to be alluded to. Our position is, and has been for some weeks, exquisitely painful. God only knows how all this is to terminate. More than once, I have been forced boldly to regard the terrible event of her loss as possible and even probable. But nature shrinks from such thoughts. I think Emily seems the nearest thing to my heart in this world. Miss Mary Robinson is just married to Mr. H. Clapham, a relation of the Sugdens. Mrs. Robinson is now Lady Scott. Her daughters say she is in the highest spirits. Write to me soon, dear Ellen, and believe me,
 yours faithfully,
 C. BRONTË.

Letter 316

TO ELLEN NUSSEY

[Undated.]

MY DEAR ELLEN,—I mentioned your coming here to Emily as a mere suggestion, with the faint hope that the prospect might cheer her, as she really esteems you perhaps more than any other person out of this house. I found, however, it would not do ; any, the slightest excitement or putting out of the way is not to be thought of, and indeed I do not think the journey in this unsettled weather, with the walk from Keighley and walk back, at all advisable for yourself. Yet I should have liked to see you, and so would Anne. Emily continues much the same ; yesterday I thought her a little better, but to-day she is not so well. I hope still—for I *must* hope—she is dear to me as life—if I let the faintness of despair reach my heart I shall become worthless. The attack was, I believe, in the first place, inflammation of the lungs ; it ought to have been met promptly in time. She is too intractable. I *do* wish I knew her state and feelings more clearly. The fever is not so high as it was, but the pain in the side, the cough, the emaciation are there still.

Take *care* of yourself, dear Ellen, for the sake of all who have any affection for you. I believe these influenza colds are most insidious things. I think I scarcely need make a reference to the absurd rumour about the fortune, etc. In what it had its rise I do not know. I am not aware that we have a relation in the world in a position to leave a handsome fortune to anybody. I think

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you must have been mistaken in saying that the Miss Woolers spread so groundless a report, they are not such gossips.

Remember me kindly to all at Brookroyd, and believe me,
 yours faithfully, C. BRONTË.

Letter 317

TO W. S. WILLIAMS

December 7th, 1848.

MY DEAR SIR,—I duly received Dr. Curie's work on Homœopathy, and ought to apologise for having forgotten to thank you for it. I will return it when I have given it a more attentive perusal than I have yet had leisure to do. My sister has read it, but as yet she remains unshaken in her former opinion: she will not admit there can be efficacy in such a system. Were I in her place, it appears to me that I should be glad to give it a trial, confident that it can scarcely do harm and might do good.

I can give no favourable report of Emily's state. My father is very despondent about her. Anne and I cherish hope as well as we can, but her appearance and her symptoms tend to crush that feeling. Yet I argue that the present emaciation, cough, weakness, shortness of breath are the results of inflammation, now, I trust, subsided, and that with time these ailments will gradually leave her. But my father shakes his head and speaks of others of our family once similarly afflicted, for whom he likewise persisted in hoping against hope, and who are now removed where hope and fear fluctuate no more. There were, however, differences between their case and hers—important differences I think. I must cling to the expectation of her recovery, I cannot renounce it.

Much would I give to have the opinion of a skilful professional man. It is easy, my dear sir, to say there is nothing in medicine, and that physicians are useless, but we naturally wish to procure aid for those we love when we see them suffer; most painful is it to sit still, look on, and do nothing. Would that my sister added to her many great qualities the humble one of tractability! I have again and again incurred her displeasure by urging the necessity of seeking advice, and I fear I must yet incur it again and again. Let me leave the subject; I have no right thus to make you a sharer in our sorrow.

I am indeed surprised that Mr. Newby should say that he is to publish another work by Ellis and Acton Bell. Acton has had quite enough of him. I think I *have* before intimated that that author never more intends to have Mr. Newby for a publisher. Not only does he seem to forget that engagements made should be fulfilled, but by a system of petty and contemptible manœuvring he throws an air of charlatany over the works of which he has the management. This does not suit the 'Bells': they have their own rude north-country ideas of what is delicate, honourable, and gentlemanlike.

Newby's conduct in no sort corresponds with these notions; they have found him—I will not say what they have found him. Two words that would exactly suit him are at my pen point, but I shall not take the trouble to employ them.

Ellis Bell is at present in no condition to trouble himself with thoughts either of writing or publishing. Should it please Heaven to restore his health and strength, he reserves to himself the right of deciding whether or not Mr. Newby has forfeited every claim to his second work.

I have not yet read the second number of *Pendennis*. The first I thought rich in indication of ease, resource, promise; but it is not Thackeray's way to develop his full power all at once. *Vanity Fair* began very quietly—it was quiet all through, but the stream as it rolled gathered a resistless volume and force. Such, I doubt not, will be the case with *Pendennis*.

You must forget what I said about Eliza Lynn. She may be the best of human beings, and I am but a narrow-minded fool to express prejudice against a person I have never seen.

Believe me, my dear sir, in haste, yours sincerely,

C. BRONTË.

Letter 318

TO W. S. WILLIAMS

December 3rd, 1848.

MY DEAR SIR,—Your letter seems to relieve me from a difficulty and to open my way. I know it would be useless to consult Drs. Elliotson or Forbes: my sister would not see the most skilful physician in England if he were brought to her just now, nor would she follow his prescription. With regard to Homœopathy, she has at least admitted that it cannot do