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EMILY BRONTË

WUTHERING HEIGHTS

AUTHORITATIVE TEXT
BACKGROUNDS
CRITICISM

THIRD EDITION

Edited by
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struggles with the text is also the result of his last attempts to suppress the supernatural by setting limits to the narrative. Lockwood is once again silenced and displaced as narrator. His position is usurped by a text that, because founded on disjunctive self-reading, repeatedly ironizes itself as "good book." Lockwood's conception of literature is one fiction among many that the novel narrates. It creates this fiction in order to excommunicate it, in order to define itself over and against that which it is not.

Wuthering Heights is an annunciation of excommunication, both a fabrication in language of the real world—of that which is outside language (ex-communication)—and then again an expulsion of the heretic from its own textuality. The outsider from that "real world" who enters the closed space of Wuthering Heights is peremptorily banished. Yet this excommunication of Lockwood is not simply an expulsion to a position so distant that he no longer threatens what one is tempted to conceive of as the true inside nature of fiction. Excommunication is also incorporation of what the text posits to be its other. Rather than allowing Lockwood to separate himself, it holds him in a relationship to itself of violent difference. It risks itself by allowing Lockwood's conception of fiction its apparent victory.

Wuthering Heights is (about) this struggle between fiction and non-fiction. The fictional space is not a home for fiction, securely bound off from the threats of a world that calls itself real. Fiction is always in exile from itself. It involves the elaboration of and repeated struggle with this other realm, a continual marking of the discrepancy between itself and that which claims to lie outside. At the same time that fiction defines itself as this disjunction, it renounces the possibility of absolute self-definition, not only because it can "define" itself only through its other but also because no delineating boundary can then be drawn—no limits set to the voracious realm of fiction. It is perhaps after all, not mere superstition that causes Lockwood to struggle against the dream-texts, for as the fictional work marks the discrepancy between itself and that which lies outside, it paradoxically threatens to incorporate all that is within its reach, to assimilate the "real" into its own fiction. Lockwood is genuinely at stake and this is indicated by the increasingly violent relationship of Lockwood and text in the course of his three dreams. His dreams go through him like wine through water: they write him and his language into their fiction.

The fabrication of Lockwood is the means by which *Wuthering Heights* speaks of its own textuality, and the relationship between Lockwood and the

ering Heights is "of all English novels, the most treacherous for the analytical understanding" (153). And she develops a cogent argument throughout her essay for placing this treachery on one side of an axis that defines *Wuthering Heights* variously as a tension between mythical imagination and civilization, between excess and limitation, between outside and inside, between otherness and consciousness. Although Van Ghent sees these "two kinds of reality" (165) intersecting in each of the characters, she is unwilling to extend this "breaking-through of a separating medium" (165) to the final outcome of the novel. On the contrary: she undermines the radicality first by reinscribing the text under the protective aegis of Lockwood's reassuring "dream-rejecting reason" (155) and lastly, in her closing passage, by maintaining that this boundary between excess and limitation had never actually been violated. Here this violation takes place such that limitation is inscribed within excess.

tale of Wuthering Heights is in turn the gap that makes a certian critical language possible—a gap here generated, perhaps only to close. But what does this alternate generation and closure imply? The implications are critical in several senses. The gesture of generating the disparity between Lockwood as narrator and the narrative fiction, of criticizing Lockwood's naiveté, necessarily falls prey to the very illusions it pretends to disparage. Although Lockwood's conception of language is a fiction created by the novel, one is forced, from a certain point of view, to take Lockwood literally, to pose at least the imaginative possibility of a language that means what it says and refers to a realm outside the insanity of its own self-reflection. Critical rhetoric depends on temporarily forgetting the madness copresent with the "knowledge" that all is language. This forgetfulness gives free play to a referent, that itself, after all, has pretensions to discursive truth. No less than Lockwood's, then, any reading is at stake in the novel's textuality. The enterprise becomes critical in yet another sense of the word—which brings us to the crisis of interpretation in the question of closure. In elaborating a commentary whose theoretical stance implicitly insists on remaining within the enclosure of *Wuthering Heights*, how does such a text fit it? Perhaps, too well. For such supplemental discourse may disrupt the limits of Lockwood's narration, but it is of necessity already accounted for as yet another fiction that the novel itself continues to fabricate.

NANCY ARMSTRONG

Emily Brontë In and Out of Her Time†

Although she wrote but one novel, Emily Brontë continues to carry on a precarious relationship with a nineteenth-century intellectual tradition that consistently endorsed humanistic values, either by advancing the claims of the individual, or by maintaining those of the community. The temptation for readers is to stabilize this relationship either by seeing Brontë as a Romantic reactionary who rejected the kind of fiction coming into vogue during the 1840's or by aligning her work with the utilitarian tradition that gave rise to literary realism. In attempting to pin down the genre of *Wuthering Heights*, however, the problem has not been resolved. It has only become more apparent: if, as Terry Eagleton claims, a drably spiritless form of realism displaces the " 'pre-industrial' imaginative creativity" in Brontë's fiction, it is also true that "the real world" is eclipsed by an earlier Romantic form of the imagination, as J. Hillis Miller maintains.[1] How such politically and

† *Genre* XV (Fall 1982), 243–264.

1. Terry Eagleton, *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës* (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 12, and J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God* (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1963), p. 160. Also see Marilyn Butler's *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* (London: Oxford U.P., 1981), pp. 178–88, for an informative description of the Romantic counter-revolution to Enlightenment individualism during the 1820's.

philosophically hostile positions can coexist in her sister's novel is the very question Charlotte Brontë tried—and with no little success—to defer in her preface to the 1850 edition of *Wuthering Heights*. By describing the author as one who combined the skills of a budding regional novelist with the powers of a full-blown visionary artist, Charlotte made Emily's novel, in effect, *sui generis*, the interaction of a remote social milieu with a unique personal vision. From the earliest to some of the more recent of Brontë's readers, then, the effort has been to resolve the problem and not to clarify it.

Any attempt to classify the novel, even if this entails making it a kind unto itself, rests upon Heathcliff and how one describes his character. Most often such attempts proceed on the ground that he is full of meaning and that by finding the key to decode him one will also discover what familiar set of nineteenth-century categories makes the novel a coherent whole. To see Heathcliff in this way is to see him as a conventional mediator, however, and, if nothing else, the history of failed attempts at resolving the debate over the genre of *Wuthering Heights* testifies to the fact that this is precisely what Heathcliff is *not*. True, he calls forth and appears to validate both modes of Enlightenment thinking, those which continue to make themselves felt on into the nineteenth century in the conflict between utilitarianism and Romanticism, to name but one such manifestation. But in doing so, Heathcliff actually problematizes the literary categories that depend upon these oppositions, namely, the distinction between romance and realism. Thus it is due to the breakdown of such primary cultural differences in Brontë's fiction that the whole question of its genre arises.

* * *

* * * Through at least half of her novel, Heathcliff's rise into power dramatizes the apotheosis of the Romantic hero, his intrusion into and transformation of a convention-bound world. But at some point it becomes clear that Romantic conventions will no longer do as a way of negotiating the text and of understanding the world to which it refers. By making them manifest in an energetic new form, Heathcliff actually cancels out Romantic possibilities and reduces that system of belief to mere superstition. From this point on, not surprisingly, the novel proceeds according to norms and expectations that are much more characteristic of Victorian realism. The meaning of Heathcliff's desire for Catherine Earnshaw changes so as to place such desire beyond the bounds of middle-class thinking and therefore outside the discourse of domestic fiction. But just as certain as her awareness of change is Brontë's unwillingness to see this change as an improvement or gain rather than as a kind of trade-off, an exchange of psycho-sexual power for economic power in which each calls the value of the other into question.

By taking the conventions of an earlier literature as the subject matter of a new kind of fiction, she demonstrates that fiction could no longer be

written from the Romantic viewpoint and still be considered a novel. At the same time, the alternative offered to her as a novelist could not represent the totality of personal experience as she saw it. Out of this dilemma, we might imagine, came Heathcliff, who, in participating in both literary traditions, actually reveals the limitations of each. This is why he remains an enigma to readers, then, not because he is both noble savage and entrepreneur, but because he is ultimately neither. He only prefigures a time and discourse in which the boundary between self and society is no longer so necessary to the making of fiction.

* * *

* * * When he is thrust upon the Earnshaws "as a gift of God, though its dark almost as if it came from the devil," when Nelly tells Heathcliff "he's fit for a prince in disguise," or when Catherine Earnshaw declares him to be "more myself that I am," the possibility is created for Heathcliff to become one of the Earnshaws in the manner of his heroic prototypes. But this is only because the Romantic assumptions are kept in play that he is—figuratively speaking—an aristocrat concealed beneath a barbarous exterior, that his desire has all the force of nature behind it, and that such a noble savage can eventually redeem the community by making manifest his desires within it.

But Heathcliff's character includes features besides those of a Romantic hero. These have an economic and political logic all of their own and acquire their rhetorical force from the association between gypsies and the laboring classes, a conception of man that stubbornly resists idealization. We should recall that *Wuthering Heights* was written against the background of swelling industrial centers and Chartist uprisings that had reached alarming proportions by the forties, as had the hoards of migrant workers who were newly arrived on the English social scene. Against such a background Heathcliff's Napoleonic features set him in direct opposition to the vested interests of the readership who would hardly be well served by any unleashing of popular energy or further democratizing of social authority. Simply by giving his character a particular point of origin in the slums of a major industrial city rather than leaving the matter open to more romantic possibilities, Brontë made her protagonist capable of acquiring whatever negative meaning adhered to such a potentially hostile social element. In a realistic schema it follows, therefore, that father Earnshaw is not humane but demented for picking up a child, "starving, and houseless, and as good as dumb in the streets of Liverpool" and taking it into his family. Heathcliff proves true to the worst implications of the type, furthermore, by enchanting the master's daughter, supplanting the legitimate son in the father's affections, and so breeding dissension in the family for a generation to come.

Brontë defers these obvious and timely possibilities for meaning, however, and allows her reader to sympathize with this character in defiance of middle-class norms. The novel begins by designating the year of its telling as 1801,

which is to move the events of the story backwards by several decades into the previous century. Moreover, the story of the family's dissolution and restoration unfolds, as Charlotte reminds us in her preface, on the "wild moors of the north of England." Much like Scott's settings, this remote landscape endows a contemporary crisis with all the trappings of an archaic one and summons up a context in which Heathcliff's insurgency seems to justify the emergence of middle-class power. One finds, for example, the Earnshaws exercising power over the hapless orphan in a manner reminiscent of the villainous aristocrats in earlier fiction. If old man Earnshaw's policies seem rather capricious ("A Nothing vexed him, and suspected slights of his authority nearly threw him into fits"), the next generation is clearly perverse. Hindley Earnshaw exercises power out of class anger, fraternal rivalry, and thwarted sexual desire. His aim is to obstruct legitimate desires, those to which one is entitled by nature rather than rank, and he succeeds in twisting Heathcliff's spontaneous desire for Catherine into a lust for vengeance. At Thrushcross Grange, on the other hand, one finds the other half of Brontë's fictional world governed by a conspicuously genteel breed, the man of sensibility. But the very refinement that makes both Lockwood and the Lintons before him so much at home in the parlor and library proves utterly useless, even debilitating, and just as destructive as open tyranny in dealing with the crises generated by Heathcliff's desire. Heathcliff may be relatively powerless without the cultural accountrements of a gentleman, but it is also true that men with little more than their education and good manners to fall back on founder stupidly amidst the social and emotional turbulence at Wuthering Heights. That such characters are virtually out of their element in the novel itself is demonstrated on more than one occasion, by Lockwood's pratfall in the Earnshaw's threshold, for instance, or by his failure to acknowledge his own desire for the young Catherine Earnshaw as well as the truth in his dream of her mother. The Lintons demonstrate this same order of false consciousness whenever events require them to restrain their emotions humanely or to respond with genuine compassion.

It is important to note that between them the heads of these families possess all the features necessary for a benevolent patriarchy that could reward natural merit while preserving established traditions. The problem lies in combining the features of the Lintons and Earnshaws to make such a harmonious whole. When broken down into the components of a brutal tyrant and ineffectual gentleman, the socio-economic data of the novel create the double-bind situation that tears Catherine Earnshaw asunder. "Did it never occur to you," she explains to Nelly, "that if Heathcliff and I were married, we should be beggars? whereas, if I marry Linton, I can aid Heathcliff to rise, and place him out of my brother's power." Should she dare to enjoy immediate gratification, then Catherine would cut herself off from economic power. To acquire that power, however, she must forgo her desire for Heathcliff. An extraordinary act of sublimation or displacement of desire is

therefore the precondition for entering into relationships at the Grange. Such a conspicuous lack of a narrative means for harnessing desire and exhausting it productively within a domestic framework is all we are given to sustain the belief that Heathcliff alone can reconstitute the family along more tolerable lines. By the end of the century, to be sure, Freud would have formulated the narrative model for substitution and sublimation that could resolve this dilemma. But in the absence of the narrative logic for bridging this gap between intolerable cultural alternatives we are left with the Romantic doctrine which says that a poor and uneducated individual may "conceal depths of benevolence beneath a stern exterior."

But the Romantic critique of rigidly hierarchical thinking can itself become subject to a critique, especially when its logic unfolds within the structure of a novel. There is the irony that Heathcliff can retain his role as the hero of the tale so long as he remains virtually powerless, the unwitting object of pathos. This in itself constitutes a departure from Romantic prototypes whose rebellion appears to advance the general good and bring about social reform. There is the further irony as well that even as an object of pathos Heathcliff is ruthlessly cur-like and therefore incapable of submitting to paternal authority. (The more primitive fear of separation from the maternal figure is what ultimately regulates his desire.) Nelly cautions him that this antisocial nature of his must be concealed if he hopes to succeed in bettering his position. "Don't get the expression of a vicious cur that appears to know that the kicks it gets are its deserts, and yet hates all the world, as well as the kicker, for what it suffers," she tells him. That he can possess these bestial qualities while still serving as the protagonist through at least half of the novel—through all of the novel, according to some—is also what differentiates this character from historically later counterparts, the entrepreneurs of Dickens's and Thackeray's fiction, for instance.

Heathcliff can no longer serve as the mediator if the novel has redefined the problem that needs mediation. Originally, this problem is clearly a matter of how to satisfy the claims of the individual within the categories of the existing social order. Heathcliff's acquisition of power can indicate neither the triumph of the individual nor the affirmation of the community, however, much less some reconciliation of the conflict between the two, for these become historically discontinuous viewpoints as the history of his rise into power unfolds. The impedance of the individual's claims for the sake of preserving class boundaries only seems to be the central conflict which the narrative needs to resolve. Once competition has been injected into the system and power has emerged from below, value shifts immediately to those institutions that have been dismantled in the process, as well as to the fictions swept away by the harsh facts of the economic struggle his rise entails. What once served as the novelist's answer to problems posed by her cultural milieu has evidently become the problem itself, and having been redefined, the problem must now be resolved by some other means. It is no longer a matter

of how to gratify the individual in the face of social constraints; it has become a matter of how to maintain the values of the community in a competitive world.

In the second half of the novel, nature remains the repository of the authentic self and the constituent element in Heathcliff's character, but nature no longer serves as a source of benign possibilities. It resembles nothing quite so much as the inhumane battleground mapped out in Darwin's biology, the source of one's most perverse impulses as well as his will to power. As nature bares its teeth and claws at this point in the novel, the social order undergoes a corresponding change. A competitive principle rooted in the accumulation of capital provides the transforming agency that moves Heathcliff from the margins of society to its very center. Once there, he displays all the vices that have accompanied political power, the Lintons' sophistication, their veneer of civility, as well as the Earnshaws' brutality. It is money alone that empowers him to infiltrate the timeless institutions of marriage, inheritance, and property ownership and to shape these institutions to serve his own interests. Upon gaining possession of both the Heights and the Grange, Heathcliff initiates a new form of tyranny that undoes all former systems of kinship and erases the boundaries between class as well as between family lines.

Out of this dissolution of boundaries, however, a new division emerges. Catherine regards the change in Heathcliff as a splitting away of his socio-economic features from his emotions, a division that has drained away all his sensuality and lent a spiritual quality to their passion. "That is not Heathcliff," she insists, "I shall love mine yet; and take him with me—he's in my soul." Whenever it is that one finally makes the equation between Heathcliff's sexual desires and his worldly ambition, between his ambition and gross bestiality, it is then that the romance of individualism is punctured, the essentially competitive nature of Brontë's protagonist demystified, and the politics underlying sexual desire in the novel exposed. Accordingly, Heathcliff becomes the opponent and not the proponent of middle-class values. What residue still clings to him of earlier prototypes—noble savages, fiery rebels, and plucky rogues alike—is abruptly placed in the past or relegated to the realm of memory and fiction. This is none other than the bewildering situation into which Lockwood stumbles at the beginning of the novel, one where character cannot be understood unless one has the history of relationships that Nelly's gossip provides.

The kind of world that will come into being under Heathcliff's domination is what Catherine Earnshaw tries to make the bedazzled Isabel Linton recognize:

> "Tell her what Heathcliff is—an unreclaimed creature, without cultivation; an arid wilderness of furze and whinstone. I'd as soon put that little canary into the park on a winter's day as recommend you to bestow your heart on him! It is deplorable ignorance of his character, child, and nothing else, which makes that dream enter your head. Pray don't imagine that he conceals depths of benevolence and affection beneath a stern exterior. He's not a rough diamond—a pearl-containing oyster of a rustic—he's a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man. . . . I know he couldn't love a Linton; and yet he'd be quite capable of marrying your fortune and expectations. Avarice is growing with him a besetting sin."

In no uncertain terms does Brontë equate the Romantic doctrine of presence with "ignorance," a view of character which says that surface features point to meaning beyond the material manifestations of the self. The kind of fiction arising from this older notion of language, the self, and the world seems to fall into oblivion at this point in the novel, leaving the reader with a tangible sense of what the world is like with no spirituality in it. * * * This failure of Romantic conventions to represent adequately the relationships comprising her narrative is Brontë's way of acknowledging the fact that fiction could no longer be written from a Romantic viewpoint and still be considered a novel.

So it is that in the second half of the novel, the conventions of earlier literature, thus dismantled, become the subject matter of a new kind of fiction. The structure of social relationships erected from the ruins of the old calls forth a cast of characters much more in line with Victorian norms and expectations. Not unlike those of Dickens and Thackeray, for that matter, Brontë's fictional world fast becomes a veritable bestiary of predators and victims wherein only the latter retain some vestige of their humanity. Conventionalized behavior rather than impulse or desire seems to be the true mark of one's character. Capitalism replaces a belated feudalism as the chief source of villainy, and competition is treated as a fact of life that converts sentient beings into objects in the marketplace. At the same time, an idealized notion of the long-banished aristocracy, still conveniently remote from a society operating according to the *laissez-faire* principle, comes to serve as the repository of ethical value. But Dickens and Thackeray do not change from one historical frame of reference to another. For all the inconsistencies swarming about in their cultural milieu, they operate consistently from within Victorian categories and paradigms. Brontë's novel, on the other hand, appears to fall into their world from another of necessity, as the idealist categories of Romantic discourse break down. Out of the pieces of earlier fiction then comes a new kind of narrative art where value no longer resides in the claims of the individual but rather in the reconstitution of the family. The result is that problems are posed and questions asked in one set of literary conventions that cannot be answered by the other, which is to say what most critical readings strive to deny, that this is an essentially disjunctive novel.

* * *

It is not true that one manner of distributing wealth amends or complements the other in this novel. Quite the contrary, when brought together

in Linton Heathcliff, these forms of social authority prove mutually undercutting, contradictions surface, and the literary machinery that once reconciled them is thoroughly dismantled. We find, for example, that all the Gothic devices of abduction, rape, incest, and necrophilia enabling Linton to marry his cousin against her will are engineered by common law and empowered by acquired wealth. This is to foreclose any possibility of sweeping away the injustices of a degenerate aristocracy by the coming in of a new social order. A version of the middle-class hegemony itself is what perverts established traditions in the second half of Brontë's novel and brings Gothic devices to the service of realism instead of romance.

To turn the contemporary world into such a nightmare is to invert the procedures of earlier Gothic Fiction and anticipate the sensation novels that came into fashion during the 1860's. By developing the character of Hareton Earnshaw, however, Brontë hit upon what may be considered a typically Victorian way out of the dilemma of a world thrown open to competition. Heathcliff's aggressive individualism plays itself out in a psychotic nightmare and historical cul-de-sac, but, as this becomes apparent, the story of an upward aspiring hero begins anew in an epicycle of the plot that originally brought Heathcliff into power. The second time around the emergence of power from below, so to speak, bears with it no traces of rebellion against paternal authority. Rather than unleashing popular energy, this protagonist's rise entails the harnessing and exhaustion of subversive forms of desire. Hareton Earnshaw is quite literally a noble savage, for one thing, and although he, like Heathcliff, originally occupies a servile position, his rudeness cannot be construed as the gross sensuality of the laboring classes. It is the natural vigor of "the ancient stock." Much like the boy heroes spawned by Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown*, Hareton's rough and readiness lends itself readily to acculturation through the persuasive power of a pretty girl and the influence of the written word. His mastery of the two houses and not Heathcliff's, significantly, signals an amalgamation of the ruling classes where there had been grave division (all their intermarriages having proved fatal). Nor does this unification entail any dissolution of social boundaries, but rather a situation, as Joseph calls it, where "the lawful master and the ancient stock had been restored to their rights." While Hareton's rise into power does represent the reform of an intolerably authoritarian society along more humanitarian lines, this reform is accomplished by means of a return to the past which restores the lines of inheritance and reconstitutes the family as it was prior to Heathcliff's intervention.

This kind of narrative resolution obviously won the immense popularity it did during the 1850's because it revised the fictional struggle between the bourgeoisie and the old aristocracy to accommodate later Victorian norms. The same middle-class interests could no longer be served by a fable in which the ruling class was defeated in the course of an industrial revolution. Quite the contrary, the struggle must now be represented as that of an entrenched middle class allied with the old aristocracy and beleaguered by

the barbarians who were clambering to get in. The benevolent patriarchy towards which Brontë's narrative moves by reshuffling the features of character, reversing the relationships among individuals, and playing their story backwards and forwards ultimately denies the optimistic individualism that first set it in motion.

In contrast with the other characters in the novel, it is Heathcliff who embodies the contradiction produced as the novel shifts its frame of reference from one side of some historical faultline to the other. Once we dissolve the text back into this large context, it becomes clear why he seems to be several characters even though his name and competitive nature never vary. Against the background of a too rigid class structure where the individual appears to be radically undervalued, even such negative terms for the gypsy as "imp," "fiend," or "devil" can only recall his Romantic prototypes and lend him a positive value. By the 1840's, however, middle-class intellectuals were giving up on the individual as the guarantee of a reality superior to that designated by material facts. As Heathcliff's triumph over the institutions which had been oppressing him turns into something on the order of a reign of terror, it seems clear that the individual's desire has been overvalued to the detriment of the community. Desire loses its salutary power, value is reinvested in traditions that bind family and class, and Heathcliff's demonic features, as the factor disrupting these traditions, take on an ominously literal meaning. A resolution for the novel is grounded on revisionary principles where love is no longer to be equated with natural desire, nor the community with nature itself:

> The intimacy between Hareton and young Cathy, thus commenced, grew rapidly, though it encountered temporary interruptions. Earnshaw was not to be civilized with a wish; and my young lady was no philosopher and no paragon of patience; but both their minds tending to the same point—one loving and desiring to esteem, and the other loving and desiring to be esteemed—they contrived in the end to reach it.

If this were truly the mediation and final note it seems to be, however, it is difficult to imagine readers having all that much trouble placing *Wuthering Heights* squarely within the mainstream of Victorian literature. After all it is not that unusual for the protagonist of a novel to violate social boundaries as Heathcliff does. What is more, the social climbers of the fiction of the thirties and forties tend to differ from their earlier counterparts in this significant respect: lacking a pedigree, they cannot penetrate the old squirarchy without destroying it. Thus Heathcliff joins ranks with such characters as Dickens's Oliver Twist, Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, Mrs. Gaskell's Mary Barton, and Thackeray's Becky Sharp in this respect. For they also threaten to become usurpers, criminals, or tyrants in their own rights by pursuing individualistic goals, and their demonic features must also be neutralized before the social tensions in these novels can convincingly give way to social cohesion.