

Reading *Wuthering Heights*

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How shall we read *Wuthering Heights*? Is it a symbolic tale of a transcendent love which far surpasses the dreariness of ordinary domestic experience, in the manner of the lines at the end of Emily Brontë's poem "R. Alcona to J. Brenzaida"—

Once drinking deep of that divinest anguish,  
How could I seek the empty world again?

Is it a novel whose realistic framing comments on and "places" such emotional extravagance and celebrates common sense, human community and the civilized values of eighteenth-century life—what Isabella calls in her post-honeymoon letter to Nelly, "the common sympathies of human nature"?<sup>1</sup> Is it what most of its first nineteenth-century readers thought it, "a powerful but imperfect book" which can't decide what kind of thing it wants to be?

I would like to suggest that what the novel seems to want to do is very like "the principal object" proposed for himself by Wordsworth in the "Observations Prefixed to *Lyrical Ballads*" (1800):

to choose incidents and situations from common life and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and, further and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature.

In *Wuthering Heights* I think these laws are to do with self-assertion or power and the close relation of love and death.

Are the incidents in *Wuthering Heights* "from common life"? A good deal of the book is concerned with inheritance of property, marriage, children and the conditions of domestic life and service. It is a claustrophobic world, shut in on itself and isolated by geography and weather as much as by emotional obsession. It is a world as lonely as the Haworth described by Mrs Gaskell in 1857 in her biography of Charlotte Brontë:

1 *Wuthering Heights*, Penguin English Library (1974), p. 173. All subsequent page references are to this edition.

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For a short distance the road appears to turn away from Haworth, as it winds round the base of the shoulder of a hill; but then it crosses a bridge over the "beck", and the ascent through the village begins. The flag-stones with which it is paved are placed end-ways, in order to give a better hold to the horses' feet; and, even with this help, they seem to be in constant danger of slipping backwards. The old stone houses are high compared to the width of the street, which makes an abrupt turn before reaching the more level ground at the head of the village, so that the steep aspect of the place, in one part, is almost like that of a wall. But this surmounted, the church lies a little off the main road on the left; a hundred yards or so, and the driver relaxes his care, and the horse breathes more easily, as they pass into the quiet little by-street that leads to Haworth Parsonage. The churchyard is on one side of this lane, the school-house and the sexton's dwelling (where the curates formerly lodged) on the other.<sup>2</sup>

Winifred Gérin in her biography of Emily Bronte maintains that there was a real life tale of the eighteenth century, recorded in diaries, which Emily Bronte knew when she was teaching at Law Hill.<sup>3</sup> This tale involved the adoption of a nephew by a rich farmer and wool manufacturer, the nephew's defrauding the legitimate heir of his inheritance, deliberately debauching another nephew and maintaining an inexplicable hold over his victims until they were ruined and he died of his excesses many years later. This could be the kernel of life experience from which the Wordsworthian treatment would begin.

The book opens bluntly at the very beginning of the nineteenth century with a narrator, Lockwood, who sets himself firmly in the eighteenth-century cult of sensibility: he sees himself as a recluse, too tender for this world, and we see him congratulating himself on his fine feelings and forcing himself on his landlord (twice). Lockwood is a type—a bachelor, complacently sure of his delicate sexual susceptibilities (he withdraws the moment the young lady at the sea-coast shows any sexual interest, and he rejects Nelly's hints of a possible marriage to the beautiful but slatternly younger Cathy) while overriding or dismissing the feelings of the women in question. Lockwood's function seems to be to present an awareness of the emotional climate and of the limitations of the previous century. He may, as Dorothy Van Ghent says, imply "the psychologically familiar" and so be a means of "placing" the supernatural events to follow,<sup>4</sup> but his complacency, ignorance

2 *The Life of Charlotte Bronte* (World's Classics), p. 3.

3 *Emily Bronte* (1971), p. 75 ff.

4 For an interesting discussion of the formal aspects of *Wuthering Heights* see Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel* (1961), p. 153 ff.

and self-satisfaction are constantly urged upon us (as in his comical mis-reading of the family arrangements at Wuthering Heights) and it is interesting that his treatment of the dream-child is the most sadistic action in a book full of male sadism.

However, most of the book is narrated by Nelly Dean and our method of reading must depend a great deal on the way in which we see her. Lockwood sees her as Wordsworth's version of Juliet's Nurse—"having studied for an interval, with a fist on either knee, and a cloud of meditation over her ruddy countenance, she ejaculated—'Ah, times are greatly changed since then!'" (p. 74). But we can hardly trust Lockwood's perceptions. Can we trust hers?

Nelly is not a neutral narrator. She dislikes Heathcliff and Cathy and pities the milksop Lintons and the child Hareton. She interferes in the action of the story, most seriously during Cathy's illness when she fails to perceive or to tell Linton how seriously Cathy is disturbed, or to credit Cathy's ability to will herself to death (p. 157 ff.). Nelly is aware of her action here, for she says, "I should not have spoken so, if I had known her true condition, but I could not get rid of the notion that she acted a part of her disorder" (p. 159).

Nelly is impatient with Cathy's "tantrums" and certainly perceives that it is hardly possible to be married to one man while avowing eternal loyalty to another. Marriage is a property-right, the man's ownership of the woman and his access to her property and to her capacity to produce an heir, as both Heathcliff and Edgar Linton see, though Cathy does not. Cathy wants to be free to exercise her own will and when she senses the limitations placed on her by her female nature in the impending birth of the child she wills herself to death. (It is also true that she now realizes that she cannot have Heathcliff, but that seems to me to be more related to her perception of Heathcliff as part of herself—"I am Heathcliff"—the unfettered male part, than to any need for sexual relationship with Heathcliff.) It is the mutilation of herself which she cannot tolerate—her dwindling into a wife and mother.

To what extent is Nelly, too, caught in Lockwood's complacent eighteenth-century rationalism? Her language and the construction of her sentences are very often of an eighteenth-century form. For instance, the opening of Chapter 12 is very Lockwood-like indeed:

While Miss Linton moped about the park and garden, always silent, and almost always in tears; and her brother shut himself up among

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books that he never opened; wearying, I guessed, with a continual vague expectation that Catherine, repenting her conduct would come of her own accord to ask pardon, and seek a reconciliation; and *she* fasted pertinaciously, under the idea, probably, that at every meal, Edgar was ready to choke for her absence, and pride alone held him from running to cast himself at her feet; I went about my household duties, convinced that the Grange had but one sensible soul in its walls, and that lodged in my body. (p. 158)

Of course, Emily Bronte has given us a reason for the literariness both of Nelly's version of things and of her language (p. 103) and there is a good deal of self-consciousness about narrators (e.g. "She is, on the whole a very fair narrator, and I don't think I could improve her style," says Lockwood—p. 192) so that we are often reminded to take note of the sensibility and of the language of the teller—of the teller's command of fact and language.

In using a countrywoman as narrator I think Emily Bronte is also thinking of Wordsworth's view of the peasants' unsophisticated and therefore more truthful perceptions. Not that Bronte sentimentalizes Nelly. She obviously does not (even if Lockwood does) and she uses the vituperative and spiteful Joseph to indicate another aspect of the simple life.

There is an interesting passage at the beginning of Chapter 11 in which Nelly's attitude to the supernatural is carefully charted. At the beginning of the passage Nelly speaks of "meditating on things in solitude" (p. 147). She then recounts an incident in which she was walking in the countryside past a sand-pillar closely associated with memories of her childhood which brought back to her "a gush of child's sensations"—the very emotions and perceptions of childhood, just as in Wordsworth's "spots of time" in the *Prelude*. She has a vision, "as fresh as reality" of Hindley as a child: "My bodily eye was cheated into a momentary belief that the child lifted its face and stared straight into mine!" Nelly is carefully placing this as a psychological phenomenon producing an apparent effect on the senses. She then links it with a superstitious fear of death strong enough to drive her to Wuthering Heights to see what is happening and there she sees the real child Hareton as if he were a vision—"the apparition had outstripped me", but on "further reflection" she recognizes him as Hareton who, however, is "elf-locked" like any changeling or fairy-child. The power of the mind to produce sense impressions, "both what we half-perceive and what create" as Wordsworth says, is faithfully observed. Nelly, the childless domestic servant, imagines children, her early companions and the sons of others. Her

combination of superstition and common sense and the unusual capacity for reflection produced by her isolation and by the circumstances of her upbringing are all necessary aspects of her perceptions as the teller of most of the tale.

Nelly embodies, I think, those aspects of human nature which preserve and develop the self by social relationship and rational control of emotion and perception. In being tied to ordinary duties and obligations in a way that Lockwood, say, is not, Nelly is also able to exercise her sympathies and, by proxy, her motherly virtues. (Both motherhood itself and sexual relationship are denied her by social status and geographical position.) Cathy and Heathcliff (and the Lintons) show no development of this sort: they remain, essentially, grown children. By learning and using the language of her social superiors Nelly maintains her command over their stories and over the attention of Lockwood and of the reader. It is the same method that Hareton applies to turn himself from a servant into Cathy's social equal and accepted lover.

Nelly's attitude to death seems to me important. In the presence of Cathy's dead body Nelly overcomes and is conscious of overcoming the censoriousness of her moral nature—"one might have doubted, after the wayward and impatient existence she had led, whether she merited a haven of peace at last. One might doubt in seasons of cold reflection, but not then, in the presence of her corpse. It asserted its own tranquillity, which seemed a pledge of equal quiet to its former inhabitant" (p. 202). It is the human body itself which suggests this possibility of peace, not any religious belief (which rather suggests punishment) or any notion of moral justice. Nelly sees human life as a struggle, death as the end of struggle and that in itself as a reward.

The questions of eternal life and of the human relationship to time keep recurring in the book with its insistence on historical time—1801 (p. 45); 1500 (p. 46); 1802 (p. 336); "a seven months' child" (p. 201); "some thirteen years after the decease of Catherine" (p. 218), and so on—and its hints at another dimension in which the soul exists. This other dimension is partly at least also a literary one—as in the "demon lover" and "goblin" aspects of Heathcliff, the fairy-tale suggestion of Heathcliff's first appearance as a child, in the dream of the child Cathy which comes to Lockwood at the beginning of the book and in the ghost tales of the appearances of Cathy and Heathcliff at the end. It is also partly a psychological dimension as in Heathcliff's belief in ghosts and his apparently willed death which seems linked with

imaginary projections of the dead Cathy. Surprisingly, it is hardly ever conventionally religious. Perhaps the implication is that it is the human imagination in its dreams and beliefs and ballads and stories which frees itself from the necessary restrictions of the social world and wanders among the exhilarating terrors of this other dimension. For no one in the book has happy dreams.

In trying to see *Wuthering Heights* in a Wordsworthian perspective I do not mean to diminish its achievement, only to clarify its nature. I am trying to argue that Emily Bronte is not an unconscious writer (in Charlotte Bronte's view, "Having formed these beings, she did not know what she had done"<sup>5</sup>) but aware of what she is doing. What she is doing is not in the manner of the realistic novel nor in the manner of the romance but in the manner of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*. Its haunting quality comes from its appeal to subconscious desires, especially in women, for freedom, power and control over themselves and their means of expression. One of Emily Bronte's special gifts, I think, is to embody "the primary laws" of woman's nature not of "our nature" seen chiefly as male. The novel is full of dreams. There is Heathcliff, so passionately devoted to Cathy, so incapable of betraying or forgetting her, seeing his revenge on other men in terms of their property (in a world in which women are propertyless and themselves are the property of others).<sup>6</sup> There is the freedom Cathy asserts to marry one man and love another; to have her way no matter what the cost to others (never to submit, never, as a woman should, to put anyone—let alone everyone—before herself); to will herself to death rather than become a mother. There is the dream of savage children, male and female, unreconstructed by soap or education or the maternal hand; and the complementary dream of the maternal woman who transforms the savage man into her devoted civilized slave (though the conventional nature of this dream seems to account for the tepid quality of the episode between the second Cathy and Hareton). All these are female dreams and they still speak to the subconscious level of our nature which does not want to submit, to become Nelly Dean, powerless and pious, stepmother of everybody and teller of other people's stories in other people's language.

5 Gaskell, *Life of Charlotte Bronte*, p. 278.

6 The servant Zillah says to Nelly of young Cathy after the appropriation of her money by Heathcliff—"And what will all her learning and her daintiness do for her now? She's as poor as you, or I—poorer" (p. 326).