

ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

The Brontë Novels

W. A. Craik



The Brontë Novels

First published in 1968, this reissue of Dr. Craik's critical appreciation of the completed novels of Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë is seminal for the way in which it shifts emphasis away from the Brontë family biography towards a detailed critical analysis of the novels themselves.

Separate chapters are given to each of the seven novels. The author's aims and techniques in each are assessed and Dr. Craik shows what light the books throw on each other, how they are related to the novels of the Brontë's predecessors, and how the Brontë novels compare with their great contemporaries in the nineteenth century novel.

'An excellent book ... It is written with a clarity of expression and a quickness of perception that should ensure it a long and useful life.' – *English*

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to my husband

INTRODUCTION



Historically speaking, there were four Brontës (the family of the Rev. Patrick Brontë, rector of Haworth) – Charlotte, Patrick Branwell, Emily Jane, and Anne; for the student of the English novel, there are three – Charlotte, Emily, and Anne; for the reader of poetry there is only one – Emily. I am concerned only with the second group, and with them only as the authors of their published, complete works, that is, with seven novels: Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte Brontë's *Professor*, *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, and *Villette*, and Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

The Brontës have the misfortune of existing as a single entity, as though they wrote in collaboration, or as though what is true of one of them is true of all. The grounds for their doing so are biographical; they were a closely-knit family, four years only separated Charlotte Brontë the eldest from Anne the youngest; they spent much of their lives secluded at Haworth, in a seclusion voluntarily (for Emily at least) made greater than it need have been, restricted further by a chronic shortage of money and by ill-health; they all ventured into teaching in private families and disliked it; and were all cut off by death before reaching middle age. Robert Martin remarks

It would be an unimaginative mind that was unstirred by the lives of the Brontës, and it would require a heart more steadfast than most of us would care to own to be unmoved by pity for them.¹

The remark and the response are legitimate, just as they would be with many other writers who suffered great personal loss, poverty,

¹ *The Accents of Persuasion*, Faber & Faber, 1966.

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or illness, such as Tennyson, Thackeray, Keats or Swift. Yet these writers do not draw from us a response to themselves and their own lives in the way the Brontës do, which moves us even before reading what they write, and colours our response to the writing itself. The Brontës' biography does them disservice with the reader, and invites him to read them in ways which, while not wrong, may prevent him from seeing properly what are their individual merits, or indeed what are their purposes in writing at all.

It is easy to suppose that their purpose is no more than personal emotional release, either a compensation for a constricting existence for Emily Brontë, or a fantasy reliving of an unsatisfying life for Charlotte and Anne. Charlotte and Anne offer the reader two supports for the idea: they write in the first person, thus inviting him to equate the narrator with the author, and they draw freely upon people and incidents from their own lives, thus inviting him both to belittle the skill that can recognizably render the actual, and to read the novels as autobiography, assuming that because a character or event is based upon a real one, the way the author uses it must tally with life at all points. When put like this it seems that only a naïve reader could be so duped; that so many readers are so constantly duped, notably with Charlotte Brontë, is a measure of her power in making life serve the ends of art.¹ However, to make a critical estimate of the achievement one must recognize what is happening, and examine how it is brought about. I have concentrated on the novels themselves therefore, and on what light they throw on themselves and on each other, have examined the evidence they provide for their own merits, the terms in which they present themselves, how far they adhere to their self-imposed conditions, how far they reveal and carry out their aims; how far these conditions and aims are those of earlier novelists known to the Brontës, or those of their contemporaries, and how in a final estimate the Brontë novels compare with their great coevals in the nineteenth-century novel. A second concern of the book has been to consider

¹ F. R. Leavis who is 'tempt(ed) to retort that there is only one Brontë' recognized her 'remarkable talent that enabled her to do something firsthand and new in the rendering of personal experience, above all in *Villette*'. (*The Great Tradition*, Chatto and Windus, 1948.)

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Anne Brontë as seriously and thoroughly as her sisters, on her own terms as a writer, and to assess her place as an independent novelist, not merely as an interesting minor appendage.

I have tried therefore to put personal pity for the authors (if indeed one may presume to pity) on one side, and to draw upon biography only when it serves one of these ends; when, for example, what each writer selects out of their mutual experience, and how she uses it, reveals her purpose in writing. Similarly I have not dealt with the poems¹ or with the various unfinished fragments of stories and of the last novel, *Emma*, by Charlotte Brontë, or with the vast body of the juvenile writings; these things supply very valuable contributory evidence of what goes into the novels, but are not valid as evidence of the stature of the novels themselves.

Since the sisters had written for each other all through childhood, and listened to and commented on each other's work whilst it was in progress, they necessarily learned from and influenced each other, with results plain in the published novels. It would be convenient therefore to discuss them chronologically, in the order in which they were composed. Unfortunately the exact order cannot be certain, some were written concurrently, and (a more serious objection to the method) such an order could cut across the more vital progress of the individual writer. I have adopted a compromise. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, one of the earliest, and by the least impressible writer, comes first, followed by Charlotte's novels in the order in which they were written (which is not, unfortunately, that either of importance or interest), and last Anne, in the position she always occupies and – though she is as original as Charlotte and in some ways as unimpressible as Emily – in a last estimate, merits.

In quoting from the novels I have used the text of *The Shakespeare Head Brontë*² and all chapter references are to this edition. In the footnotes I have given, at the first mention of all other works, the full bibliographical reference, and thereafter used a short title; the full titles are given in the bibliography. References to secondary sources have been kept to a minimum in the interests of concentrating

¹ Magnificent though many of Emily Brontë's poems are, and necessary though they would be to a study of her as a whole.

² Ed. T. J. Wise and J. A. Symington, Oxford, 1931.

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on the novels. The bibliography itself is a measure of my indebtedness to other scholars.

For the use of their facilities I am indebted to the library staffs of the University of Aberdeen, the British Museum, and the Brontë Parsonage Museum, Haworth; for typing the manuscript, to Miss Lily Hay, Miss Joyce Anderson and Mrs Constance Keith. For invaluable help in discussing and arranging my ideas I am grateful to my colleagues in the English Department at Aberdeen University, to Peter Stein, Professor of Jurisprudence, to my students, and to my husband, without whose constant encouragement I should never have carried out either my inclinations or my contract.

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September 1967

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For any one reader who testifies to the greatness of Charlotte Brontë as a novelist, there are dozens who will testify to Emily; and there are almost as many ideas of what constitutes her greatness as there are readers to expound them. It has been common, since the establishing of a reliable text of the poems by G. W. Hatfield,¹ and the invaluable research into them by F. E. Ratchford,² demonstrating their essentially dramatic nature, to regard Emily Brontë's poems as the 'way in' to the novel – as being the impressionistic raw materials of situation, attitude, and philosophy out of which the novel sprung.³ However, such an approach, whose value is indisputable, frequently explains rather than assesses: it is taken for granted that *Wuthering Heights* is a great novel, and what follows is exposition of the elements which are presumed to constitute greatness. While acknowledging that the poems come from the same mind as the novel, and often resemble it closely in situation and in spirit, I want to examine the novel as it stands, to discover what are Emily Brontë's purposes in writing, how she goes to work, what effects she brings about, how original, and, finally, how great is her achievement.

With most novelists, especially those of the nineteenth century, two of the most profitable things to consider are the relationship between the author and his reader, and the author and his material. In Emily Brontë's novel, however, these matters are never explicit.

¹ *The Complete Poems of Emily Brontë*, New York, 1941.

² *The Brontës' Web of Childhood*, Columbia, 1941, and *Gondal's Queen*, Austin, Texas, 1955.

³ One of the most perceptive of such examinations is Mary Visick's *The Genesis of 'Wuthering Heights'*, Oxford, 1959.

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Her attitude may be powerfully felt, for it is inseparable from the responses drawn out of the reader, and these are themselves the reader's only means of discovering Emily Brontë's own feelings; her purpose can be conjectured from her choice of topic, and from the movement and selection of her narrative. She is deliberately a dramatic writer: she not only lets her characters speak for themselves, and reveal themselves by what they do, but also presents her narrative through one or other of the characters, mainly Ellen Dean and Lockwood. But this self-effacement is not so thorough as it seems. The two narrators are as much a means of involvement as a means of detachment. Through them, particularly Ellen, Emily Brontë presents a limited range of extreme emotions, all concerned fundamentally with the unity between individual man and man, or man and his natural surroundings, and with what happens when the unity is broken: centrally and primarily the unity between Heathcliff and Catherine, and their relation with Wuthering Heights. She presents them to us essentially for our admiration, for their spiritual and physical power, their courage, inflexibility and capacity for intense feeling, irrespective of whether these qualities are exerted for what is normally regarded as good or bad. Happiness in any normal sense of the word does not interest her as a novelist, but she is not inflexibly solemn. Humour is part of her method, as it is part of Shakespeare's, not only to release tension but to heighten it.

On these emotional concerns most readers agree, and the emphasis on individual scenes confirms our impressions; the great scenes are the emotional ones: Cathy's confession to Ellen of her love for Heathcliff and Edgar Linton; Heathcliff's words and her own at her death; Heathcliff's agony that night in the garden; or his outbursts to Ellen just before he himself dies. While we also recall scenes of violent action – like Hindley's drunken ravings (Chapter 9), or the occasion when he and Isabella attempt to shut Heathcliff out of the Heights (Chapter 17) – these crises of the body do not loom so large in our minds as the crises of the spirit.

Emily Brontë is clearly always concerned to enter utterly into the emotion of the moment, the 'now' of the story, without reservations or withdrawal, but yet with the power to see its relevance

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not merely to what comes immediately before or after, but to its place in the whole. The story is told in such a way that we either know the result already, or we are prepared to expect a particular outcome. The results of this method are several, and illuminate Emily Brontë's intentions, her attitude, and that she intends for the reader. By telling us the end of her story first, so that we know that the three main moving spirits are dead – Catherine, Edgar Linton and Hindley Earnshaw – she does away with one of a novel's usual main powers, suspense. She is in a way therefore 'realistic', and gives us the feeling of history rather than of fiction; no event is rushed or scamped by the artificial narrative excitement of wondering what is to happen next; nor is the reader racked beyond bearing by the distress of some of the events, as he might well be if suspense or even hope were added to the other emotions he is made to suffer. Emily Brontë the creator, and the reader sharing her knowledge, can be almost godlike, since her characters are clearly acting according to their own wills, and yet, knowing what their future will be, we feel them to be predestined. We can at the same time enter into the agonies and struggles of the characters – any of them, at any moment – yet remain detached from them by knowing their fates. We understand without necessarily sympathizing, and are never given the chance to 'identify' in the usual way with either hero or heroine. Pity of the usual sort for individuals is never elicited, but Ellen, nostalgic for the past, feeling the plight of her fellows and of mankind, without fully understanding it, allows us a sorrow that we partake as well as observe.

These emotions we are offered are all those whose impulse we can readily understand at their beginnings – they are emotions such as any child can feel – but their manifestations become more violent and more extensive than we could imagine. This is even true of Catherine Earnshaw, probably the most difficult person of all: she explains quite simply and clearly to Ellen (Chapter 9) how she is divided between Heathcliff and Edgar Linton and why she must marry Edgar, an unusual but by no means impossible condition. The torments she suffers, and in her suffering inflicts, as a result of tearing herself spiritually in two are beyond anything we expect to encounter, but are rendered intelligible by their simple and

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intelligible cause. All the emotions felt by characters are, while powerful, essentially static, immutable, and curiously impersonal. Everyone remarks the state in Catherine and Heathcliff, but it is also true of the younger Catherine loving Linton, repellent as he shows himself to be, or of Ellen's ties to Hindley Earnshaw and Hareton, brutalized and degraded though they become. We do not understand these characters by rational effort, but only by accepting what they do and say, by allowing Emily Brontë to build up setting, mood and action gradually, and by entering into the experience she offers. Only then can we look back, analyse, and perceive how she has induced our understanding of the whole. She calls on childhood as the age of spiritual understanding from which the rest of life is either development or falling away. She sees man and his environment as inseparable and even at some points as part of a greater whole. In their unity is peace, and in their breaking the violence of misdirected or frustrated energy.

A pattern can therefore be seen established, a relationship between violence and power, where the greater the outward expression the less real power beneath it suggests. Degrees of violence and cruelty actually relate either to degrees of ineffectuality and impotence or to degrees of frustration. Emily Brontë works with great skill to establish her negative – a difficult task. Linton Heathcliff, the feeblest person, is the most willing to indulge in gratuitous cruelty, and all that prevents him from physical violence is incapacity – the will is there. The two most violent scenes in the book are caused by Hindley and Isabella, two of the characters most lacking in purpose and power. Cathy rages herself into delirium and insanity, not when being ill-treated by Hindley, but when she is helpless under the fate she herself decreed, separated from Heathcliff by being bound to Edgar. Heathcliff, the most powerful figure of all, is for a long time the least violent, and as will later be seen, never initiates action, but only responds to it.

Emily Brontë, then, though committed to revealing passions which must express themselves in fierce and even cruel action, is not herself absorbed by cruelty, nor does she wish her reader to be so. Many brutal or sickening scenes are avoided.¹ Power

¹ Notably Linton Heathcliff's slow dying and Catherine's agonies during it.

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rather than violence of feeling absorbs her, and much of this is expressed in imagery in Ellen's analyses or in speech. It is these images quite as much as what is actually done that move us at great moments.¹

This power rests in Catherine and Heathcliff, and Emily Brontë's attention, like ours, is always upon them. The only events retailed are those which involve Catherine and Heathcliff in their relations with each other either personally or indirectly: they are what shapes the novel and selects the incident. Emily Brontë clearly directs how the reader shall respond to her heroes, even though she is so self-effacing.² She regulates the tone by the events and their juxtaposition, and by the discrepancy between what we see and how Ellen sees it. Characters are frequently repellent and estimable by turns and in quick succession, and a fine richness of meaning and response is won, while still using quite uncomplicated emotions in the characters. One of the most powerful instances occurs in Chapter 11 where Ellen visits the Heights and hears the young savage Hareton's view of Heathcliff; returns home to see Heathcliff surreptitiously paying court to Isabella, to hear him cry out to Catherine that she has treated him 'infernally'; and then witnesses the quarrel in which Linton attempts to turn Heathcliff out of the house and strikes him, the quarrel in which Catherine throws the key in the fire to deliver to Heathcliff the husband she has just been defending against him. Emily Brontë has in quick succession made a recoil from Heathcliff as the destroyer of peace at the Heights and Thrushcross, and yet recognized his agony at being rejected by Catherine; has recognized Linton's rights and dignity as husband and master of the house, yet despised his physical feebleness; and has, finally, exposed Catherine's ungoverned temper and perversity in scolding Heathcliff and scorning Edgar and apparently using her frenzy for her own ends. All these rapidly-produced responses and random incidents culminate in Catherine's last mortal illness, whose justification we feel the more by having responded and

¹ Hence, as many have noted, the easiness with which outsiders like the doctor Kenneth and the servant Zillah accept what is happening.

² It is clearly not a matter merely of accepting Ellen's guidance, since the reader is frequently compelled to be both wiser and more responsive than she.

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reacted ourselves to the tensions that have caused it. She does not arouse admiration or pity, but rather a horrified recognition, respect and understanding of the power of a passion that can break both mind and body – a passion that Ellen, the only obvious guide, neither recognizes, approves, nor understands at all. The reader is clearly in the hands of an accomplished author who while not dealing in any of the usual forms of structural irony, yet leads him to read and respond differently from what he normally does, and to perceive more than any one character can do. These are Catherine's own words about Heathcliff:

'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 never say to him let this or that enemy alone, because it would be ungenerous or cruel to harm them – I say Let them alone, because *I* should hate them to be wronged: and he'd crush you, like a sparrow's egg, Isabella, if he found you a troublesome charge. 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. There's my picture; and I'm his friend – so much so, that had he thought seriously to catch you, I should, perhaps, have held my tongue, and let you fall into his trap.'

Miss Linton regarded her sister-in-law with indignation.

'For shame! for shame!' she repeated, angrily, 'You are worse than twenty foes, you poisonous friend!' (Chapter 10)

Plainly this says much more than Isabella perceives, since we believe Catherine is telling the truth, but it also does more than Catherine herself here intends: it presents the conventional as both trivial and enervated – 'a rough diamond', 'a pearl-containing oyster' – and directs us to value the apparently repulsive – 'a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man' – for being neither trivial nor mean. It recalls Catherine's earlier great confession of love to Ellen, and so we feel the enormous truth here of 'I'm his friend'. Isabella's reply, 'You are worse than twenty foes', is indeed about to be proved ironically true, since it is Catherine herself who brings about her own and Heathcliff's great miseries. There is force also in her next remark, 'he has an honourable soul, and a true one, or how could he re-

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member her?', which Catherine does not or cannot answer, since the next speech is Ellen's and changes the topic.

While readers agree on how they respond emotionally to characters, how they judge them is not always so unanimous. Even so, the reader is clearly being directed. Conventional religious and moral standards soon come to feel curiously inadequate. While Ellen often speaks of Catherine and Heathcliff as evil – using words like 'wicked', 'unprincipled', 'diabolical', 'selfish', and 'unchristian' – and while Lockwood soon judges Heathcliff to have 'a bad nature', neither of the protagonists themselves recognizes the relevance of such concepts to their behaviour. As a boy Heathcliff cannot understand the notion of 'envying' Catherine (Chapter 7), he claims the right to revenge on most shakingly convincing grounds, 'God won't have the satisfaction I shall', just as Catherine feels that being able to help Heathcliff will be her best reason for marrying Linton (Chapter 9). Emily Brontë has laid aside Christian morals. God clearly exists in the novel, not a Christian God, but one who while being the source of damnation has no power or right over the characters or what they suffer: even Hindley can declare that far from having mercy on his own soul he will have 'great pleasure in sending it to perdition to punish its Maker' (Chapter 9). Religious references (in contrast to principles) are frequent, because some theory of right and wrong and salvation is clearly being worked out, and Emily Brontë must use the terms at her disposal. But she is merely availing herself of Christian references as a narrative method, without inviting us to postulate a Christian basis for action. She takes her stand on the concepts of personal salvation and damnation, and personal wrongs. The first admission of any kind of sin is Catherine's 'If I have done wrong, I'm dying for it', replying to Heathcliff's declaration, 'Because misery, and degradation, and death, and nothing that God or satan could inflict would have parted us, *you*, of your own will, did it' (Chapter 15), where God and Satan are almost synonymous. The first definition of Heaven is Catherine's also, revealed in her dream that she was in heaven and broke her heart with weeping, 'and the angels were so angry that they flung me out, into the middle of the heath on the top of Wuthering Heights; where I woke sobbing for joy'

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(Chapter 9.) We come to feel that nothing is good or bad except as it affects the union of Heathcliff and Catherine, and Heathcliff can at last say, justly, 'I've done no injustice, and I repent of nothing' (Chapter 34). It is never suggested (in any way that we can agree with) that characters ought to control or attempt to change themselves, but only that they should direct their impulses so that they do not cause trouble, suffering, or crime.¹ What is required and accepted is that they experience the full consequences of their actions.

This attitude on which Emily Brontë has founded the novel is that of the Brontës' juvenile epics as far as we can know them. While she has clearly purged the vulgarities of the early work, she has not changed the attitude. She has managed to find a setting and a situation which can partake extensively of the stuff of normal life and natural setting, and set aside the social and moral values that would normally accompany it. In a way she has not grown up, or developed as Charlotte Brontë has. One might compare her characters and the assumptions on which they act with those on which Jane Eyre acts as a child before she has learned all that experience of other men can teach her:

'You are good to those who are good to you. It is all I ever desire to be. If people were always kind and obedient to those who are cruel and unjust, the wicked people would have it all their own way: they would never feel afraid, and so they would never alter, but would grow worse and worse. When we are struck at without a reason, we should strike back again very hard; I am sure we should – so hard as to teach the person who struck us never to do it again. . . . I must resist those who punish me unjustly. It is as natural as that I should love those who show me affection, or submit to punishment when I feel it is deserved.'

Jane Eyre (Chapter 6)

Such are the feelings of all the active characters in *Wuthering Heights*, suggesting that Emily Brontë has created mankind in her

¹ They clearly can curb impulses if they wish – Heathcliff delays his revenge for years – but they are not asked to do so – Isabella, a minor, is left free to run away with Heathcliff.

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own image, that all her characters are facets of their creator: it is a book rather of mood than of character in the usual sense; hence the novel's enormously concentrated power and unity. With the single exception of Linton Heathcliff, the one thoroughly repellent personality, all characters are passionate, honest and frank, they show little fear, they have a shared elation – even joy – in a natural impulse reaching a natural end, even though it may be a savage one, and they share a sense of the humour of the grotesque and incongruous at moments of stress. Conversely, frustration is always agony – Isabella's ill-founded love, for instance, tries her much more than her subsequent hate – and in general all characters respond similarly to it by obeying an urge to revenge upon the oppressor. All characters are given great freedom from the common social pressures – whether through neglect, like Cathy and Heathcliff, or Hareton; or through spoiling, like the younger Catherine and Linton Heathcliff – so natural tendencies and impulses are not checked, or concealed, by social decorum or personal reticence. Even the natural ties of blood relationship are done away with as far as possible: parents die, brothers and sisters are estranged, the feeling of cousin for cousin soon changes to sexual love. A parent's love for the child – the commonest of causes for return from the dead in folk-lore and ballad – is deliberately set aside as a motive for action: when Hareton is born his mother Frances has 'nothing to keep her [alive]' (Chapter 8) and Edgar is as eager to die and rest with Catherine as to live and take care of his daughter (Chapter 25). The dead do not walk for the child's sake. All the characters are alone and expect no help or understanding in crises, even from those who love them, and do not attempt to give it. Isabella regrets marrying, but does not condemn her unforgiving brother; the younger Catherine, brought up though she has been by Ellen, never looks to her for help. Even Catherine and Heathcliff do not understand themselves or each other in any usual sense of the word, not even when Catherine is dying. They merely accept their fate and react to their suffering. Morality, as obedience to outside standards of right and wrong, does not exercise any influence on any person at any moment of crisis. There is never the least suggestion that they can call to their aid humility, patience in suffering, or Christian

resignation.¹ Ellen, the voice of morality, is rejected, and the effect is not to make the reader condemn, but to reach a proper understanding:

'Mr Hindley do take warning (begs Ellen). Have mercy on this unfortunate boy, if you care nothing for yourself!'

'Any one will do better for him, than I shall.' (Chapter 9)

Hareton's drunken father's reply rings much truer than does what Heathcliff once called Ellen's 'cant'. The ultimate moral paradox is Catherine's, since her one 'unselfish' act – marrying Linton for Heathcliff's sake – is her ruin.

Characters are in fact more like each other than they are unlike – a rare condition in a novel; the one main and great difference is between Catherine and Heathcliff, and all the rest. The violent outbursts of all except Heathcliff are ill-directed and pointless: Hindley in his drunken raving threatens Ellen with the carving knife, Isabella vents her spite on her wedding ring; in crises they despair and degenerate, Hindley to dipsomania, Isabella to sluttishness. By contrast Heathcliff, cut off from Catherine, actually rises in the world and returns two years later as a gentleman; while in his time of greatest agony when, fretted by marriage to Isabella, he has to watch Catherine dying helplessly and at a distance at Thrushcross, he is 'the only thing [at the Heights] that seemed decent' (Chapter 14). We therefore admire him and Catherine for their power and strength, and despise Heathcliff's victims for what is in fact only comparative weakness.

Wuthering Heights on one level is about what Virginia Woolf so admirably expressed, a sentence beginning 'We, the whole human race, and you, the eternal powers';² but on a more graspable level it is about, centrally, one thing only, the love of Heathcliff and Catherine. Of these two Catherine Earnshaw is the ruling force, and it is she who, though she dies almost exactly half-way through the novel, dominates the whole. She is the driving force, and after her death Heathcliff is her instrument. Though the reader need not

¹ Isabella's 'love' is the nearest thing to these, and this is clearly romantic, sentimental, and deluded, and we do not respect her for her unreal attempts to keep faith in Heathcliff.

² *The Common Reader*, First Series, Hogarth Press, 1925.

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like her any more than Ellen Dean does, and certainly never identifies with her – both remarkable conditions for a heroine – it is vital that he should understand her and feel her power. Hence we see her first (Chapter 3) in her triple role – Earnshaw, Heathcliff, and Linton – as the writer of the journal-fragment, and as the child-phantom of Lockwood's dream: all of which epitomizes, Blake-like, her 'spiritual form'. Her spiritual power is instantly established; her unity with Heathcliff is strongly felt – physical hardship has moved her merely to defiance, but separation from him has made her head ache 'till [she] cannot keep it on the pillow; and still [she] can't give over [weeping]' (Chapter 3); and while it is natural for Lockwood to dream of her as a child, his doing so suggests that this child Catherine at eleven or twelve years old is the true Catherine. The hopeless child-phantom's tone looks forward to Cathy's at her death, and the whole lifelike nightmare, beautifully placed just after the comic and grotesque dream of Jabez Branderham's sermon, seems so nearly real that when Heathcliff cries out to the phantom we are shaken and shocked, but not at all inclined to feel him ridiculous or mad. Emily Brontë's greatest victory over the reader's disbelief is thus already won at the end of Chapter 3. The whole of Ellen's story of the Earnshaw childhood is then read in the light of this supernatural illumination, which causes us to modify and re-interpret all that Ellen relates about Cathy and Heathcliff.¹ Ellen the external observer can emphasize Catherine's perversity, her charm, and her likeness to her brother, and leave her spiritual state alone, until it is imperilled by contact with the Lintons. The relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff is clearly a calm thing, not requiring any kind of expression until it is in danger of being broken.² The first onslaught upon their relationship is made by

¹ One of the most important incidental effects of hearing of Catherine as the man Heathcliff's 'heart's darling' (Chapter 3) is that we never think of the two as brother and sister, even though Catherine 'was much too fond of Heathcliff' (Chapter 5) from the age of six. Incest is not Emily Brontë's concern and she takes care it shall not be ours – if we are reading with the proper responses.

² Catherine scorns Hindley and his wife (six years her senior) for 'kissing and talking nonsense by the hour – foolish palaver that we should be ashamed of' (Chapter 3), already seeing herself and Heathcliff as potential lovers in their turn.

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Hindley's persecuting Heathcliff and neglecting Catherine, but this is not actually the force which breaks them apart, it is merely the circumstance which allows Catherine to follow her mistaken impulses to their fatal end. Catherine suffers, like Jane Austen's Emma, from 'the power of having rather too much her own way' (*Emma*, Chapter 1).

The second key to Catherine is her 'confession' to Ellen in Chapter 9, and this is the key to her actions, just as the journal was the key to her personality, as her delirium will foreshadow the resolution of the dilemma, and as her dying words will indicate the events that are to prelude the resolution. All these revelations are complex, and all by their constantly shifting ideas of time and change set the isolated girl and woman against eternity. This confession is vital to Heathcliff as well as herself, since her reason for marrying Linton is what drives Heathcliff into all he says and does in the rest of the action:

'If the wicked man in there, had not brought Heathcliff so low I shouldn't have thought of it.' (Chapter 9)

She gives him the impulse to leave, driven away by her rejection, and intensifies the impulse to revenge, by naming Hindley as the cause of separation. We are made to see dramatically the errors of Catherine's reasoning: 'I have only to do with the present' (Chapter 9), she claims, yet her dream of heaven, and her love for Heathcliff which resembles 'the eternal rocks beneath' (*ibid.*), both reveal, not the present, but deserts of vast eternity. She says, and we believe her on the evidence of all they have done as children,

'I *am* Heathcliff – he's always, always in my mind – not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself – but, as my own being – so, don't talk of our separation again – it is impracticable. (*ibid.*)

The last clause is the vital one – one of the first instances of the casual remark that is shockingly and literally true, and proved so by the whole of the story. By rejecting Heathcliff, Catherine spiritually tears herself in two. Ellen's shock and reply help to define our own feelings:

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'If I can make any sense out of your nonsense, Miss, it only goes to convince me that you are ignorant of the duties you undertake in marrying; or else, that you are a wicked, unprincipled girl.'
(*ibid.*)

Catherine clearly does understand her 'duties' and is not 'unprincipled'. She does not want Heathcliff as a lover in any usual sense: indeed, the physical attraction she feels is to the comely and eligible young Linton. The reader is driven from his two easiest reactions and forced to see Catherine by her own light:

'Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same, and Linton's is as different as a moonbeam from lightning, or frost from fire.'
(*ibid.*)

Hereafter, happiness is at an end for Catherine. By accepting Linton, she makes a full life impossible for herself. She, who has been the most living personality, becomes by her own act the embodiment of frustration, and the source of disunion and disaster. Neither she nor Heathcliff can find release from their trouble by revenge, and have only death left to them as an escape. Catherine, up to now 'half-savage and hardy and free' (Chapter 12), suffers such agony that a brain fever at sixteen weakens her health, and another at twenty unseats her reason and kills her.

Emily Brontë makes Catherine a child violent and wilful by nature, because violence and seeming wilfulness are to be the means by which we see her suffering. The violent scene in which she quarrelled with Heathcliff, defied Ellen, and boxed Linton's ears (Chapter 9) is a first witness to her spiritual turmoil, which her confession and later conduct explain. Her rages, which seem to Ellen like ungoverned passion, are really outbursts deflected by intolerable frustration. Sitting all night in her wet clothes and bringing on her first fever is clearly much more than Ellen's word 'naughtiness' (Chapter 9) comprehends. She is doing nothing; because with Heathcliff gone, her motive for doing anything is gone. She is having her first taste of what Heathcliff feels as 'living without

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your soul' (Chapter 15), and consequently nearly fails to live at all.¹

Structurally Catherine does not exist until Heathcliff returns.² She is restored to life and delight when he comes back, only to be almost immediately re-engaged in the struggle with her fate. She can bear, uneasily, the passive division exemplified by her suggested mode of dining:

'Set two tables here, Ellen; one for your master and Miss Isabella, being gentry; the other for Heathcliff and myself, being of the lower orders.'
(Chapter 10)

But open conflict drives her again to distraction. Her frenzy (Chapter 12) is the combined consequence of quarrelling for the first time with Heathcliff and of seeing Linton and Heathcliff confronted and opposed. Their enmity makes a war within herself; her hatred (essentially of herself for creating her dilemma, knowing, as Ellen has told her, that she herself drove Heathcliff away) turns on to Linton, since it cannot turn to Heathcliff who 'is more myself than I am', and when Linton strikes Heathcliff he strikes, in effect, at his own wife. Her delirium and death follow.³

¹ Despite its homely and even trivial evidences, Catherine's fate feels almost tragic by the irony which surrounds it, in anticipation, at the time, and retrospectively. Being overheard by Heathcliff, she confesses her love when trying to conceal it, and by trying to aid him she drives him away; she suffers herself 'the fate of Milo' (an athlete who was trapped by the hands in the tree he was attempting to split, and was devoured by wolves) that she promises to anyone who tries to separate them, and hears only the following morning that Hindley was about to turn Heathcliff out, an act that would paradoxically have united him and Catherine for ever: 'if you do turn him out of doors, I'll go with him.'
(Chapter 9)

² The years from her illness to six months after her marriage being bridged only by a return to Lockwood's narrative, a chapter division, and a few sentences from Ellen.

³ But Emily Brontë takes care to persuade on the natural level as well as the spiritual: she has already hinted that Catherine is pregnant:

'She's her brother's heir, is she not?' he asked, after a brief silence.

'I should be sorry to think so,' returned his companion. 'Half-a-dozen nephews shall erase her title, please Heaven!'
(Chapter 10)

and her pregnancy gives colour to her derangement, and the premature birth is the immediate cause of her dying.

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Her delirium is as vital to our understanding as Lear's madness.¹ Catherine's delirium is even tragically moving; not least by contrast with the scene of violence before it, where she has actually repelled sympathy by exposing her weak husband to his powerful rival, and by apparently threatening to exploit her own frenzy to torment both her men:

'Well, if I cannot keep Heathcliff for my friend – if Edgar will be mean and jealous, I'll try to break their hearts by breaking my own.'
(Chapter 11)

Her refuge in childhood, psychologically and naturalistically utterly convincing, is thematically and structurally vital. Her delirium evokes superstition, and seeing her own face in the mirror she sees her own 'fetch' and knows herself death-doomed:

she *would* keep straining her gaze towards the glass.

'There's nobody here!' I insisted. 'It was *yourself*, Mrs Linton; you knew it a while since.'

'Myself!' she gasped, 'and the clock is striking twelve! It's true, then! that's dreadful!'
(Chapter 12)

She returns in spirit to the moors and the Heights and the time when Heathcliff obeyed her, even in the trapping of lapwings, and then relives in images and in spirit the whole of her life between that and the present, thus rendering a spiritual history of the years the narrative omits. The unknown misery is explained by the intelligible one; Catherine imagines she is a child again

'and my misery arose from the separation that Hindley had ordered between me, and Heathcliff – I was laid alone, for the first time, and, rousing from a dismal doze after a night of weeping – I lifted my hand to push the panels aside, it struck the table-top! I swept it along the carpet, and then, memory burst in – my late anguish was swallowed in a paroxysm of despair – I cannot say why I felt so wildly wretched – it must have been temporary derangement for there is

¹ It is emphatically not weakness; there is no doubt of her power either 'to starve at once, or to recover, and leave the country' (Chapter 11); she has starved for two days when she says it, and the spirit that can control her body to its destruction is clearly a strong one.

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scarcely cause – But, supposing at twelve years old, I had been wrenched from the Heights, and every early association, and my all in all, as Heathcliff was at that time, and been converted, at a stroke into Mrs Linton, the lady of Thrushcross Grange, and the wife of a stranger; an exile, and outcast, thenceforth, from what had been my world – You may fancy a glimpse of the abyss where I grovelled!’
(Chapter 12)

The Heights become a symbol of her lost and unattainable wholeness and happiness, now to be reached only through the grave:

‘Look!’ she cried eagerly, ‘that’s my room, with the candle in it, and the trees swaying before it . . . and the other candle is in Joseph’s garret . . . Joseph sits up late, doesn’t he? He’s waiting till I come home that he may lock the gate. Well, he’ll wait a while yet. It’s a rough journey, and a sad heart to travel it; and we must pass by Gimmerton Kirk, to go that journey! We’ve braved its ghosts often together, and dared each other to stand among the graves and ask them to come . . . But Heathcliff, if I dare you now, will you venture? If you do, I’ll keep you. I’ll not lie there by myself: they may bury me twelve feet deep, and throw the church down over me; but I won’t rest till you are with me . . . I never will!’

She paused, and resumed with a strange smile. ‘He’s considering . . . he’d rather I’d come to him! Find a way, then! not through that kirkyard . . . You are slow! Be content, you always followed me!’
(ibid.)

The passage, epitomizing her relations with Heathcliff and Linton (the one must follow her, the other may please himself), foreshadows the future of both herself and Heathcliff: she will die, and so will he, unless he can find a way ‘not through that kirkyard’, which for eighteen years after her death he tries to do; and her spirit does indeed not ‘rest’ till he is with her. It reaffirms her as the moving spirit of the partnership, conditioning us to feel her as the power that will drive Heathcliff, invisibly, in a way not even Ellen can perceive, for eighteen years to come. But something is still left for her last great scene, since she will still not understand her fault:

‘Why am I so changed? why does my blood rush into a hell of tumult at a few words?’
(ibid.)