

Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction* (Wiley Blackstock 2005).

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Chapter 6 The Brontës

There were four surviving Brontë children, not three. The sisters had a less celebrated brother, Branwell, whose scapegrace career might have sprung straight out of one of their own novels. Being the sibling of those sisters can't have been easy, but Branwell made a more spectacular hash of it than seemed strictly necessary. Hash, indeed, is the word. When he was not cadging gin money from his cronies, Branwell was busy poisoning himself with various shady chemical substances scrounged from the local pharmacy. Chronically unemployable, he spent much of his time carousing with raffish, down-at-heel artists in a Bradford hotel, and with characteristic ill luck took up portrait painting at just the point where the industry was being killed off by the invention of the daguerreotype. He had a strange passion for boxing, and a morose conviction of being eternally damned.

Flushed with dreams of literary grandeur, Branwell scribbled 30-odd literary works between the ages of 10 and 17, most of it second-rate melodrama. One of his characters, the dissolute, selfdestructive Alexander Percy, anarchist, atheist and aristocrat, is clearly Branwell himself shorn of the dope and gin-tipping. Percy is in debt to the tune of £300,000, a suitably glamourized version of his author's slate at Haworth's Black Bull, and is egged on by his villainous comrades Naughty and Lawless to commit parricide to restore his fortunes. That Oedipal fantasies of father-killing should crop up in Branwell's writing will come as no surprise to anyone even mildly acquainted with the character of his tyrannical father. One of Percy's most trusty comrades is a lawyer who lives in 'Derrinane Abbey'. Derrynane, in County Kerry, was the seat of the barrister Daniel O'Connell, the Irish nationalist leader (indeed, so it has been claimed, the most popular politician of nineteenth century Europe), who was then conducting his mass political campaigns against British colonial rule in Ireland. We shall see the significance of this in a moment.

The tragicomic Branwell also amused himself by experimenting with exotic pseudonyms, and drawing pen portraits of himself hanged, stabbed and licked by hell fire. Despite his assurance of eternal damnation, he taught in the local Sunday school, savaging the cowed children of Haworth in befuddled vengeance for his misfortunes. His old-school father provided him with a Romantic education which completely unfitted him for industrial middle-class England. His imagination was prematurely arrested, obsessively fixated on heroic, traditionalist, military figures like Wellington and Bonaparte. His sole bid for fame came when he visited London with the vague hope of becoming an art student. Overawed by the metropolis, conscious of his own shabby, provincial appearance among its sophisticated crowds, he wandered around the streets of the capital in a dream, kept his letters of introduction to famous artists firmly in his pocket, and drank away his money in an East End pub. He returned to the Haworth parsonage with an implausible tale of having been mugged. He ended up, bathetically, as a ticket clerk on a Yorkshire railway station, where he promptly embezzled the takings. In September 1848, he scrawled his final document—a begging note for gin—and expired soon after in his father's arms, wasted and bronchitic.

Branwell's first name was actually Patrick, after his Irish father, and he himself lived a flamboyant stage-Irish existence. Indeed, almost everything he did conformed to the English stereotype of the feckless Mick: idle, drunken, pugnacious, rebellious, imaginative, extravagant, improvident. None of this was lost on the good people of Haworth. On one occasion, Patrick Brontë Senior took to the hustings as a Tory candidate for parliament only to find himself howled down by the crowd. When Branwell intervened loyally on his behalf, the local populace demonstrated their displeasure by burning an effigy of him with a potato in one hand and a herring in the other. The Brontë family may have tried to conceal their Irish origins, but their canny Yorkshire neighbours evidently kept it well in mind. At about the time that they were adorning Branwell's effigy with a potato, that crop was failing catastrophically in the Great Irish Famine, leaving one million of the Brontës' compatriots dead and driving millions more into exile.

By 1847, around three hundred thousand of those Irish emigrants had washed up in the port of Liverpool. One London journal portrayed them, and their famished children in particular, as looking like starving scarecrows dressed in rags with an animal growth of black hair obscuring their features. Two years earlier, Branwell Brontë had himself taken a trip to Liverpool, where he might well have witnessed such scenes. The Great Famine was yet to break out at the time of Branwell's visit, but there would no doubt have been a good many semi-destitute Irish hanging around the city, most of them Irish-speaking. A few months after Branwell returned from the port, his sister Emily began writing *Wuthering Heights*—a novel in which the male protagonist, Heathcliff, is picked up starving off the streets of Liverpool by old Earnshaw. He is described as 'a dirty, ragged, black-haired child'

who speaks a kind of ‘gibberish’. The novel will later portray him as savage, lunatic, violent, subversive and uncouth—all stereotypical nineteenth-century British images of the Irish.

Whether or not Heathcliff was originally Irish, the Brontë sisters certainly were. ‘Brontë country’ for the English means a stretch of Yorkshire, whereas for the Irish it still signifies a region of County Down, the birthplace of Patrick Brontë Senior. The Brontës’s father Patrick was a classic example of the scholarship boy, the son of an impoverished Ulster family which had struggled its way from cabin to cottage to tenant farm. He himself had worked as a blacksmith, linen-weaver and schoolmaster, before blazing an ambitious trail to Cambridge University, holy orders, high Toryism and an Anglican parsonage on the Yorkshire moors. Somewhere in the process, the Irish family name Brunty was Frenchified to Brontë, and Patrick liked to boast of aristocratic friendships cultivated at Cambridge. Like Heathcliff, he transformed himself from humble outsider to English gentleman, though with rather more success than Emily’s creation. You can take Heathcliff out of the Heights, but you can’t take the Heights out of Heathcliff.

In converting himself into an autocratic right-wing English cleric, Patrick was proving his fidelity to two venerable Irish customs: getting out of the place as soon as you could, and becoming more English than the English in the process. From Richard Steele, Oliver Goldsmith, Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Edmund Burke to George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde and Brendan Bracken (Winston Churchill’s impeccable anglicized personal secretary), the aim of the Irish immigrant was to beat the British at their own social game, thus demonstrating that imitation is the sincerest form of mockery.

If the Brontë sisters were ethnically divided between Irish and English, they were equally divided as female authors. ‘Author’ suggests authority, a capacity to speak commandingly in one’s own voice, which was for the most part denied to nineteenth-century women. Hence the sisters’ custom of concealing their gender behind male pseudonyms, a ploy all the more necessary because of the ‘indelicate’, indecorous nature of their turbulent texts. For some Victorians, it was bad enough having to read about bigamy, social climbing, grotesque physical violence and interracial marriage without the additional outrage of knowing that a woman’s delicate mind lay behind these scandalous subjects.

The Brontës were caught up in social and geographical contradictions as well. They were provincial novelists, writing from a rugged, far-flung rural fastness for the cultivated readership of the metropolis. This underlined their isolation, a condition which was already apparent in the educated consciousness which cut them off from the common people, and to which their restricted circumstances as women mightily contributed. As with Dickens, solitude in their fiction sometimes seems, ironically, the situation of all men and women in a brutally individualist society which abandons them to their own devices. The sisters very ‘eccentricity’ is resonant of a common condition. To be alive in this social order is to be an orphan. Charlotte’s protagonists typically set out on their narratives bereft of all kinsfolk, with nothing but their own robust enterprise to sustain them. The self in these novels is naked, unhoused and therefore perilously vulnerable; but for the same reason it is conveniently set free from all constraint, able in classic middle-class style to write its own script and forge its own destiny.

The Brontës’ environs were more those of Nature than culture—though if they wrote for people who might never have climbed a hill, they also addressed themselves to those who might never have seen a mill. Haworth may have been marooned in bleak moorland, but it was close enough to the Yorkshire mill towns for the sisters to have witnessed a good deal of near-destitution on their own doorstep, not least in the so-called Hungry Forties. The Brontës were caught between country and city, rather as D. H. Lawrence was later to be brought up in a twilight zone between the rural east Midlands and the Nottinghamshire coal field. Indeed, the years of the sisters’ childhood were a time of ruination for thousands of hand-workers scattered in hill-cottages throughout the region—one aspect of that destruction of the handloom weavers which Karl Marx described in *Capital* as the most terrible tragedy of English history. The Brontës’ later years coincided with strikes, Chartism, struggles against the Corn Laws and agitations for factory reform. Indeed, the West Riding of Yorkshire where they lived was perhaps the stoutest stronghold of Chartism and working-class radicalism in the north of England. One contemporary government official wrote that there was ‘a ferocious civil war’ boiling in the district; and the Brontës’ own village of Haworth had several worsted mills and a more than century-old industry.

The sisters grew up near one of the sources of the Industrial Revolution, in an English county divided between large landed estates and intensive manufacturing; and far from being mysteriously sequestered from all this, living only in their own private imaginative world, their fiction is profoundly influenced by it. In fact, Charlotte’s novel *Shirley* is explicitly set in a landscape of industrial manufacture, large-scale capitalist agriculture and working-class unrest. The Brontës were not, then, three weird sisters deposited upon the Yorkshire moors from some metaphysical outer space. On the contrary, their lives were shaped by some of the most typical conflicts of early Victorian England—conflicts between rural and urban, colony and metropolis, commercial south and industrial north, female ‘sensitivity’ and male power.

In this sense, one can detect in the sisters' own individual crises of identity the 'identity crisis' of a whole social order, which with the early emergence of industrial capitalism is being shaken to its roots. The wretchedness, desire, repression, punitive discipline and spiritual hunger which mark the Brontës' fiction, intensely personal though they are, also speak of a whole society in traumatic transition. It is, as Raymond Williams puts it in consciously Blakeian terms, 'a world of desire and hunger, of rebellion and pallid convention'. [1] The so-called 'industrial novel'—the Brontës, Elizabeth Gaskell, Disraeli, Charles Kingsley and their colleagues—is not merely recording these cataclysmic upheavals: it is a forensic instrument in the attempt to interpret and assimilate them.

Religiously speaking, the Brontë family belonged to the Anglican establishment, and were in this sense socially respectable; but their father Patrick was 'Low church', and from him and their Calvinist Cornish aunt they inherited a Dissenting, Evangelical strain. Their mother was strongly Methodist. This tension between orthodoxy and dissent was then reflected in their social status. In common with most of the leading novelists of nineteenth-century England, the Brontës, as children of an educated ambitious yet far-from-affluent parson with the inferior status of a 'perpetual curate', sprang from that unstable, ambiguous spot in the social hierarchy, the lower middle class. Dickens, son of a financially harassed clerk who had seen the inside of a debtors' prison, hailed from much the same precarious point, and never ceased to be fascinated in his fiction by the poignant, preposterous world of the shabby-genteel. Despite his fascination with London, his home town was in rural Kent, so that this street-wise Cockney was actually up from the country. George Eliot was the daughter of a Midlands farm bailiff, and Thomas Hardy the son of a small-time West Country builder. Even Jane Austen, though hardly of the shop-keeping or pen-pushing classes, occupied a similarly ambivalent position towards the lower edge of the upper class.

The major nineteenth-century English novel, then, is for the most part the product of the provincial petty bourgeoisie, not of the metropolitan upper class. As we have seen already, the novel had always been regarded as something of an upstart, ill-bred form, and thus an appropriate literary mode for those who are socially aspiring, sidelined or displaced. Moreover, writers like Dickens and the Brontës, caught as they were between conflicting spheres and allegiances, were able to dramatize some of the definitive contradictions of a mobile, dislocated, rapidly altering social landscape, in a way less possible for those like Thackeray or Trollope more comfortably ensconced in a single social domain. Because of their equivocal position, they could look both up and down the social hierarchy, thus taking in a broader, richer, more complex range of experience.

The novelist who has a populist ear for the voice of the people, yet at the same time commands the resources of high culture, is likely in such circumstances to outflank all competitors. The lower middle class—'contradiction incarnate', as Karl Marx caustically described it—is wedged painfully between a higher, more civilized realm to which it aspires, and a plebeian world into which it is in perpetual danger of being thrust down. Ursula Brangwen of D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* feels as a child 'the grudging power of the mob lying in wait for her'. And this potentially tragic conflict between aspiration and self-undoing lies close to the heart of Victorian society.

It certainly lies close to the heart of the Brontës. All three of the sisters became governesses, a role which exactly captures the contrariness of their social condition. The most vivid account in their fiction of the social violence inflicted on the governess is Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey*. The governess is a servant, to be hired and fired like a footman; but she is an 'upper' servant, one employed because of her learning and cultivation and entrusted with the children of the family. If she is the social inferior of the hard-headed Yorkshire manufacturers who hire her talents, she also feels herself their spiritual superior, throttling back a ferocious resentment at being treated like a housemaid, and inwardly indignant at having to care for their pampered brats. Her culture has become a commodity—the point at which an inner world of spiritual value and an outer world of economic necessity come incongruously together.

All this is reflected in the curious contradictions of what one might call the Brontë sensibility. On the one hand, there is a streak of dissent, blunt exasperation and turbulent rebellion, directed often enough at the privileged gentry. This more earthy aspect of the sisters admires in stereotypically north-of-England style whatever is plain, shrewd, hardy and cool-headed. It values energetic enterprise and individualism, the advancement of one's interests through canny calculation; but this self-promoting impulse can also take the form of radical protest and an egalitarian sympathy with the victims of the system. There is an angry, injured demand for recognition in the Brontës which is genuinely dissident. On the other hand, there is the side of the sisters which aspires to gentility, feels a conservative or Romantic reverence for rank, heroism, tradition and social achievement, and dutifully conforms to the established conventions. If the outsider feels irate at the social system, she or he is also the one most likely to value what status and security it has to offer. Besides, you do not kick away the ladder you are trying to climb. It is not hard to read in this fissured sensibility something of the actual situation of the Brontë sisters, wedged as they were between male and female, patrician and plebeian, Irish and English, metropolis and province, deference and rebellion. They are an extraordinary combination of gushing Romantic fantasy and astute rationality, quivering sensitivity and bluff common sense.

Of all three sisters, Anne Brontë's fiction is the least touched by these contradictions. Whereas Charlotte's heroines are both allured and repelled by worldly success, *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* enforce a more simple contrast between love, truth and moral integrity on the one hand, and social achievement on the other. It is not a matter of reconciling true love with the upper-class marriage market, as it is in *Jane Eyre*, but of rejecting the latter for the former. The upper classes in Anne's fiction are for the most part vain, shallow and egoistic, and in both of her novels they are countered by morally righteous protagonists who feel nothing of the glamour of worldly status, the promptings of social ambition or the seductiveness of Romantic fantasies.

One can read Charlotte Brontë's novels, by contrast, as strategies for reconciling the conflicting sets of values we have outlined. Charlotte's heroines are typically divided selves—women who are outwardly demure yet inwardly passionate, full of an erotic and imaginative hungering which must be locked back upon itself in meekness, self-sacrifice and stoical endurance. This is as true of Lucy Snowe, heroine of *Villette*, as it is of *Jane Eyre*; indeed, it speaks eloquently of the situation of all women of intellect and aspiration in a stiflingly patriarchal order. A woman must look out for herself in a predatory society; yet in Charlotte's novels, the sturdy self-reliance which this involves is at odds with the need to find true security by submitting to the protection of a more powerful male. The self's lonely integrity must be defended by silence, prudence and cunning, yet this involves a self-lacerating mutilation of one's spontaneous being.

The point, then, is to harness prudence to the ends of passion, reaching for your fulfilment only when such an act will not make you dangerously vulnerable. The strategy of Charlotte's novels revolves on allowing these solitary, self-tormenting figures their emotional and imaginative self-realization, but in a form which will satisfy the social conventions, and thus bring them status and security at the same time. To fulfil your desire outside such conventions, not least for an unprotected woman, is to be perilously exposed and defenceless. To fulfil it within the conventions means that the extravagant demands of romance can be met with no detriment to the sober requirements of realism.

One can see well enough how this strategy operates in *Jane Eyre*. Jane herself is both demure and dissenting, ambitious and self-effacing, submissive and self-assertive; and the narrative, by conveniently disposing of Rochester's mad wife Bertha, allows her to fulfil both her erotic desires and worldly aspirations without the social disgrace of committing bigamy. Jane refuses the temptation to transgress the social conventions, and will reap her reward for it, ironically, by winning herself a husband who is attractively unconventional. She also refuses the dreary life of moral duty offered to her by the austere fanatical missionary St John Rivers, which would both deny her fulfilment and remove her from the social world altogether. What Rivers demands of her is self-sacrifice; but if this sounds disagreeable enough to us, it is by no means entirely so to Charlotte Brontë. On the contrary, for her characters to renounce self-sacrifice demands considerable self-sacrifice.

Why is this so? It is because Charlotte's fictions are as enthralled by the vision of relinquishing the self as they are by the prospect of affirming it. In this, as we shall see, she has something in common with George Eliot. In a potent blend of social conformity, Evangelical guilt and female submissiveness, the lure of self-abasement in Charlotte's fiction is especially strong. It is, paradoxically, one way in which the self can be most deeply gratified. Few passions are more seductive than the passion for self-immolation. There is a Romantic allure, for *Jane Eyre* as much as George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver or Dorothea Brooke, in the vision of a martyr-like surrender of the self to some loftier cause or superior power. Yet there is always a danger that one will abnegate the self without reaping any value in return; and it is this that Jane must learn to avoid. Her schoolfriend Helen Burns chooses this saintly, self-abnegating path, but Jane is determined not to follow her along it. 'I must keep in good health, and not die', she tells the odious Mr Brocklehurst with commendable impudence, and so indeed she does. She must find a form of self-effacement which will bring self-fulfilment in its wake. Submission is a virtue, but only up to a point.

This, seen perhaps a shade cynically, is what happens in her relationship with the devilishly Byronic Mr Rochester. Part of what wins Rochester's heart is exactly Jane's Quakerish, deferential mien, in contrast to the flashy egoism of a frigid beauty like Blanche Ingram. At the same time, however, the lower-middle-class rebel finds a resonance of her own nonconformist spirit in the cavalier licence of the gentry. Rochester would not find Jane attractive if she was simply dull, so the novel must ensure that she blends flashes of spirit and flirtatious self-assertion with her docility, without any suggestion that she is, in Lucy Snowe's revealing words about herself, 'bent on success'. Worldly success will spring from a proper unworldliness, rather as spiritual victory for St John Rivers will flow from martyrdom. It is just that what counts as martyrdom for Rivers would be spiritual suicide for Jane.

D. H. Lawrence once described the ending of *Jane Eyre* as 'pornographic', and one can see what it is about it which would scandalize a male chauvinist like him. In order to prepare the way for Jane and Rochester's union, it is not enough to topple mad Bertha in flames from the rooftop; it is also necessary to cut the wickedly beguiling

Rochester down to size by maiming and blinding him. This achieves a number of ends simultaneously. For one thing, he is less likely to go off philandering if he can't see, which helps to secure Jane's power over him. In a gratifying reversal of the power relationship, it is now he who is humbly dependent upon her. But taming his anarchic energies also ensures a certain fulfilling equality between the two lovers, shrinking the social gulf between them; and Rochester is not so symbolically castrated as to cease to captivate Jane as her ruggedly handsome lord and master. In some ways, indeed, he is now even more of a seductive rough beast.

Crippling the object of Jane's affections is also the novel's way of wreaking vengeance on Rochester for threatening to lead its heroine astray, as well as a guilt-stricken self-punishment on Jane's part for her own illicit desires. The smouldering social and sexual resentment which Jane has prudently throttled back throughout the narrative is now, so to speak, released by the novel itself on her behalf in a lurid Gothic melodrama—and its target is the symbol of social order and sexual aspiration, the local squire Mr Rochester. He is the novel's sacrificial offering to social and moral orthodoxy—yet he is sacrificed in such a way as to allow Jane her deference and self-achievement along with her rebellion. She is also granted a deeply gratifying victory over horrors like the Reed family—in fact, over several of those who have rivalled her or done her down. This fantasy of wish-fulfilment is so blatant that, without the softening effect of Jane and the novel's more homely, down-to-earth dimension, it might well prove too distasteful for the reader. We are repelled by too-palpable fantasies of this kind in fiction as we are in our friends.

If the relationship between Jane and Rochester takes the form of a power struggle, so in fact do almost all human relationships in the Brontës' fiction. In fact, they have a distinctively sado-masochistic quality about them, which is part of what made the sisters' writing so scandalous to some of their contemporaries. It is not quite the kind of thing one finds in Mrs Gaskell. With Jane, Lucy Snowe and William Crimsworth, protagonist of Charlotte's novel *The Professor*, there is a delight in both domination and subjugation, one which reflects something of the complex class dynamics of the Brontës' world. The lower middle class is caught between deference and defiance, and it is as though sado-masochism is the 'political unconscious' of this ambivalence, the form it takes in the sphere of the erotic and interpersonal. Sexual ambiguity is both painful and pleasurable, which can also be true of both exercising power and submitting to it. Charlotte Brontë's fiction admires autocracy as much as it feels outraged by it.

The allure of self-sacrifice, in which the self reaps pleasure from the prospect of its own deathly dissolution, belongs with this sado-masochistic syndrome. In terms of sexual stereotypes, sadomasochism involves a crossing of masculine and feminine roles. William Crimsworth of *The Professor* is really a cross-dressed version of a Charlotte heroine, and the sisters themselves 'cross-dress' in order to become authors, taking on male pseudonyms. The heroine of *Shirley* is a mill-owner and landowner, and thus a woman with stereotypically masculine status and authority. Even the virile Rochester, who has an intriguing resemblance to his tall, black-visaged, emotionally tempestuous wife, disguises himself as a woman, symbolically divesting himself of his manhood in an egalitarian overture to a woman (Jane) who herself reveals many of the 'masculine' virtues of endurance, rugged self-reliance and self-enterprise.

William Crimsworth of *The Professor*, like *Jane Eyre*, is both spirited and cautiously conventional. Like Jane, too, though far more consciously, he learns how to turn his cool, protective self-possession to devastating advantage, in his turbulent power struggles with his female pupils. He is both man and woman, victim and master, exile and insider, rebel and conservative. Lucy Snowe of *Villette* is another of Charlotte's schizoid heroines, outwardly frigid yet inwardly fantasizing, who finds her fulfilment in the figure of the agreeably autocratic Paul Emmanuel. [2] Paul, who tenderly informs Lucy that 'you want so much checking, regulating, and keeping down', is himself both Romantic dissident and traditionalist Tory, defiantly individualist yet morally and socially orthodox; and it is just this combination which Charlotte's novels need to resolve their conflicts. To unite with such a figure is to have your own spiritual waywardness confirmed, but also enjoyably chastised.

Villette offers us an ambiguous, indeterminate conclusion, as it is not clear whether Paul is drowned at sea. It is as though the Romantic, wish-fulfilling impulse in the novel is too insistent to have Lucy's happiness snatched cruelly away, even as the book's more bitterly realist vision suggests that suffering, not least for women, is more probable in this sort of world than felicity. It is thus the only one of Charlotte's novels to sound a semi-tragic note—though the end of *Jane Eyre* is ominously overshadowed by an echo of the spiritual absolutism of St John Rivers, who is allowed the last word now that he no longer poses an actual threat. In the end, Charlotte's writing has the comedy of the picaresque, in which a solitary yet resourceful protagonist finally attains to social integration. Yet it also knows much about the torment and instability of identity in this kind of society—the perils and humiliations which must confront the exposed self on its trek to fulfilment, all of which threaten to strike its achievements hollow.

To turn from Charlotte to Emily is to shift from comedy to tragedy. What distinguishes *Wuthering Heights* is its refusal to compromise its desire, to strategically negotiate it, in the manner of Charlotte's fiction. The story of Catherine and Heathcliff is one of an absolute commitment and an absolute refusal. There is now an implacable conflict between passion and society, rebellion and moral orthodoxy—which is to say that Emily's great novel is that rare phenomenon, a tragic novel in the epoch of high realism.

Take, for example, Catherine's need to choose between Heathcliff and Edgar Linton. What she does, confronted with this dilemma, is try for a Charlotte-like compromise which tragically fails. Catherine rejects Heathcliff as socially inferior and opts instead for the landowning Linton; but she hopes, even so, to maintain a Charlotte-like split between her inner and outer selves, the Romantic and the realist, by gracing the social sphere as Mrs Edgar Linton while holding fast to her love for Heathcliff in some more inward dimension. Desire and social convention may thus be managed together. Catherine's conviction that she is Heathcliff, that because their identities are at one she can never fundamentally betray him, unsurprisingly fails to impress Heathcliff himself, who would rather be a real-life lover than an ontological essence. He takes himself off in high dudgeon, and the tragic action is accordingly triggered. In this novel, so it would seem, there is a remorseless absolutism of desire which will brook no trade-offs or half-measures, and which finally drives both lovers to their death. Death is the outer limit of society, its natural or metaphysical Other, the only place where a ferociously destructive desire is finally appeased. And even that, so the novel's ending suggests, may be a touch optimistic.

This is not to take sides between Heathcliff and Linton, not least because the complex, decentred narrative structure deliberately complicates any such partisanship. As far as that option goes, there have been two broad schools of *Wuthering Heights* opinion: Heights critics and Grange critics, camps as intractably at odds as the fans of Celtic and Rangers. Heights critics are secretly in love with Heathcliff, finding in his dark, primitive, subversive existence a source of natural vitality far more fertile and fulfilling than the selfish, brittle, skin-deep civilization represented by the Lintons. This, one may note without excessive surprise, is a view largely endorsed by Heathcliff himself, for whom Linton is little more than an overbred fop. On this reading of the novel, the passionate, egalitarian relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine sketches a utopian possibility which, finding no place in a brutal, hierarchical society, must finally take up its residence in the realm of mythology.

For Grange critics, who seem to have included Charlotte Brontë among their ranks, such an account absurdly idealizes both Heathcliff and Catherine, as well as unjustly demeaning the Lintons. Heathcliff on this view is less some fertile life-force than a pitiless exploiter—a brutal, demonic, domineering property baron who treats Catherine violently and could never have developed a mature relationship with her. It is hard to imagine him drying the dishes or bathing the baby. From a Grange viewpoint, the couple's so-called relationship is an infantile, imaginary symbiosis which can survive only by shutting out the social world. Indeed, given that their liaison lacks any real sense of otherness or alterity, the very word 'relationship' is problematic. There is something curiously impersonal at stake in their frenzied loving, which Grange critics might associate with its dehumanizing violence, and Heights critics with a domain of mythology deeper and richer than personal identity.

It is also a curiously sexless kind of desire, which can equally be seen both ways. For those to whom this is a regressive relationship, its sexless quality may be an unconscious defence against incest. Perhaps Heathcliff and Catherine are half-siblings, which might account for their profound, persistent sense of affinity. Or perhaps the relationship seems impersonal and unconventional for just the opposite reason—that in its sense of equality and unswerving mutual commitment, it prefigures a future world in which men and women might shuck off the crippling constraints of gender. Perhaps those whose perception is clouded by the existing power structures can only see such social possibilities in mythical or metaphysical terms, or as a state of Nature beyond the social altogether.

Are the two lovers, then, outside the social order in the way that revolutionaries are, or in the manner of a child who is allowed to run half-wild? Are they anti-social in a positive or negative sense, or are they both at the same time? It seems hard to speak of the Catherine-Heathcliff 'relationship' in conventional ethical terms such as compassion, affection, friendship, even love. But is this because, like infancy, it falls below the ethical realm, or because, like a revolutionary form of life, it goes beyond it? In the censorious eyes of the Grange, Catherine and Heathcliff are frozen in some mythological sphere, incapable of entering on the historical world. Linton may be insipid and effete, but he is a kindly, tender husband to Catherine, which Heathcliff is unlikely to have been. He may exist at the 'shallow' level of the social and the ethical, lacking the enigmatic depths and fierce animal energy of a Heathcliff, but the savage injuriousness of that energy could benefit from a touch of Edgar's pity and humanity.

Both Heights and Grange critical accounts have something to be said for them. But this is not to argue that the truth, as the good liberal instinctively imagines, lies somewhere in between. Lockwood is one of the good liberals of this book, and turns out to be a narrator at least as biased and befuddled as he is reliable and perceptive.

Wuthering Heights is less a middle-of-the-road than a dialectical work, which allows us to see what partial justice there is on both sides without ceasing to insist on their tragic incompatibility, or fondly trusting that these two cases add up to some harmonious whole.

The difference with Charlotte is instructive here. With Charlotte's novels, we are almost never in doubt what to think, since we have an authoritative narrator to steer our responses and cue our judgements. It is true that this voice-over is sometimes disturbingly resonant with pride, spite, prejudice, petty malice, sly self-exculpation, eloquent omissions and special pleading; but it rarely leaves us in doubt about who is meant to be villainous and who virtuous.

By contrast, the complex, Chinese-boxes narrative structure of Emily's novel, in which one potentially unreliable narrative is embedded within another not entirely trustworthy one, and that perhaps within another, places any such assured assessment beyond our reach. It is clear enough, for example, that Nelly Dean has her knife into Heathcliff, which limits the value of her testimony. And we are only a few pages into the book before we realize that its first narrator, Lockwood, is hardly the brightest man in Europe. *Wuthering Heights* is a novel without a meta-narrative, and this formal quality is closely related to its complex seeing. It is not in a hurry to tell us whether Heathcliff is hero or demon, Nelly Dean shrewd or stupid, Catherine Earnshaw tragic heroine or spoilt brat.

Charlotte's novels give us direct access to a single, controlling consciousness; Emily's work interweaves its various mini-narratives in a way which makes this impossible. Malice, spite and pride are here emotions explored by the narrative, not, as occasionally with Charlotte, qualities of the narration itself. The book also makes matters more opaque by its garbled chronology. Charlotte's narratives tend to unfold in a straightforward linear way, reflecting the progress of the protagonist; *Wuthering Heights* reveals a more convoluted relation between past and present, progress and regression, the time-scheme of a narrator and the time-schemes of which he or she speaks.

We have seen that Charlotte's novels portray a conflict between genteel cultivation on the one hand and down-to-earth practicality on the other. What for her is a clash of values or lifestyles becomes in the more ambitious, cosmically framed *Wuthering Heights* a complex dialectic between Nature and Culture. During the Brontës' lifetime, England was in transition from being a largely rural to a predominantly industrial nation; and the sisters themselves, as we have seen, were geographically as well as historically cused between both worlds. What was also in transition, as English history shifted from Wordsworth to Darwin, was the perception of Nature itself. If Nature in Emily's novel remains a source of vitality and transcendence, it is also creeping much closer to the vision of an evolutionary universe red in tooth and claw. Indeed, Emily writes in another place of how 'Nature is an inexplicable puzzle, life exists on a principle of destruction; every creature must be the relentless instrument of death to the others, or himself cease to live'. [3]

In *Wuthering Heights*, this might well serve as much as a description of human society as of Nature. As the nineteenth century unfolds, there is a merging of Nature and culture in the minds of some thinkers, so that an evolutionary version of Nature as violent, predatory and pitiless is projected on to social relationships themselves. It is 'natural' for men and women to tear each other to pieces, even if, ironically, this conformity to Nature is from a civilized viewpoint 'unnatural'. At the same time, an early industrial-capitalist society which is itself a notably callous, exploitative place begins literally to shape Nature in its own image, which consequently becomes less and less a matter of Wordsworthian strangeness and solace.

Heathcliff the child may be 'natural' because he springs from outside the social community, and has his heart set on a fulfilment which goes beyond its limits; but as an adult he is also 'natural' in the sense of embodying the predatory, competitive, anti-social appetites of capitalist society itself. He is at once too much the outsider and too much the insider. What he is precisely not is a rough diamond—a man whose *farouche* exterior, rather like Rochester, conceals a compassionate heart. On the contrary, beneath that flinty exterior beats a heart of stone. It belongs with the novel's magnificent realism to refuse any such sentimentalist reading of its male protagonist—while at the same time insisting, against those like Nelly who would blacken him from the outset, that he is the heartless crook he is because of the monstrous treatment he received at the hands of the Earnshaws as a child. It was, the narrator observes, 'enough to make a fiend out of a saint'.

That his villainy has rational causes, however, does not mean that it is non-existent. On the contrary, the real condemnation of the social order which oppresses him lies in the fact that it is terrifyingly real. Once his entirely reasonable desire for Catherine is rebuffed, it becomes pathological and implacably destructive—a desire, in fact, for death, self-violence and negation rather than for any achievable relationship. Even so, we are meant to keep in mind that it is the society which refuses Heathcliff human recognition which drives him in the end to hijack its property and cultural capital, and outdo it in its own exploitative techniques. What forces him increasingly on to the inside of this world of cheating and property-dealing, ironically, is a desire which knows no earthly confine.

Some Victorian thinkers, like the Positivists and Social Darwinists, collapse Culture into Nature; others, like George Eliot and T. H. Huxley, recognize the need for human civilization to resist slipping back into some primordial slime. Thomas Hardy understands that human culture has its basis in Nature, but that it should not therefore make the complacent mistake of assuming that Nature is spontaneously on its side. But the problem with either cheering for Culture or championing Nature is that humanity seems to be straddled amphibiously between the two, made up of both worlds but fully at home in neither. Or—to put it another way—there can be no simple-minded affirmation of the Heights as a vital, natural community, any more than there can be some one-sided option for Thrushcross Grange as an oasis of civility in a cruel world. If crotchety old Joseph is hardly an image of utopia, neither are the overcivilized Lintons.

Instead, *Wuthering Heights* grasps the ambiguous relations between Nature and culture—the ways they are both related and mutually resistant. They are related, for example, in the fact of kinship, which is both a biological and a cultural reality, and which provides the novel with a vital organizing principle. They are also related in the reality of work, which consists in ‘humanizing’ the raw stuff of Nature. Humanity is a natural species, a random offshoot of evolution; yet what is distinctive about the human form of animality is its ability to transcend its own limitations and construct its own world. It is this constructed world that we know as culture, or perhaps as history. Culture, then, goes beyond Nature but also has its roots in it. Indeed, it is only because we are the peculiar sort of natural animals we are that we are able to rise above the natural world.

There is a less abstract way of putting the matter. The Lintons, who are the largest capitalist landowners in the district, literally draw their culture from Nature, in the sense of living by exploiting the land and those who labour on it. The fatal blindspot of this kind of culture, however, is that it refuses to acknowledge its dependency on Nature, and imagines itself instead to be an autonomous sphere. The cosy, well-appointed drawing-room of the Grange is the product of material labour, but at the same time shuts that labour out. The Heights, by contrast, is home to that peculiarly English class, the yeomanry, meaning those minor gentlemen who work their own land. It is thus closer to the realities of Nature and labour than Thrushcross Grange, as well as in general a more egalitarian, rough-and-ready place where you eat in the kitchen rather than the dining room, and where the lines between master and servant (is Hareton a servant or not?) are more blurred than among the Lintons.

Yet exactly because the Heights is the more ‘natural’ place, it is also more harsh, unmannerly and casually violent, ‘uncivilized’ in a negative sense as well as a positive one. The point about the English yeomanry is that the family is a working unit, so that personal relationships are cramped and moulded by economic constraints. There is little room in this tight, harshly functional community for the finer feelings, the enjoyment of relationships or spiritual values for their own sake, or indeed for non-family or non-working members. If Heathcliff is the former, Catherine is the latter. Heathcliff’s intrusion into the Earnshaw family, as a creature seen ambiguously as both a gift from God and as dark as the devil, marks him out as what the ancient Greeks called a *pharmakos*—that double-edged being, at once sacred and polluted, who represents the dregs and refuse of humanity, and who poses a radical challenge to the community he confronts. If it can transcend its fear and accept this outsider thrust gratuitously upon it, a power for good will flow from this act; if it rejects him, it is cursed.

The Earnshaws, however, have no place for the sheer superfluity which Heathcliff signifies. The niggardly, mean-minded, brutally utilitarian spirit of an old Joseph would not recognize a spiritual value even if one leapt into his lap. One of the novel’s boldest achievements is thus to demystify the Victorian ideal of the family as a protected enclave of humane value in an inhuman social order. In the tight-fisted world of the peasantry and yeomanry, the family is a socio-economic order, warped and pressurized by those imperatives, and so much less easily romanticized. We shall see something similar in the later Dickens. The grotesque domestic violence in *Wuthering Heights* is scandalous even to the calloused modern reader, let alone to the high-minded Victorian one.

It is as though the Heights cannot afford to be humane, whereas the Grange can. To put the point cynically: if you enjoy enough of an economic surplus, then you have the leisure and resources to engage in personal, moral or spiritual issues for their own sake. And this is known as culture. Culture springs from having more material labour at your disposal, not less. As we have seen, it tends snobbishly to disown its down-at-heel parent, Nature; but in doing so it can cultivate the resources to indulge in friendship, art, the intellect and humanity as ends in themselves, free of the exigencies which disfigure human affections at the Heights.

It is true that culture involves violence just as Nature does. For one thing, it uses such force to defend its property: the Lintons set the dogs on the trespassing Catherine and Heathcliff, thinking they are after their rent money. For another thing, there is a kind of irascible oversensitivity which springs from having a neurotic excess of civility rather than a lack of it, as the Lintons sometimes testify. In general, however, it would seem a choice between being compassionate but overprivileged, and down-to-earth but destructive. Culture is either damagingly intimate with Nature, or cripplingly remote from it. If Culture seems a mere reflex of Nature in the Heights, it is too clearly a refuge from it at the Grange. Part of the problem, too, is that what drives civilization to develop—human desire—

has an excessive, implacable, uncompromising quality about it which resembles Nature more than it does civilization, and which threatens to scupper the very culture it is busy constructing.

Rather as *Villette* offers us both a happy and a tragic ending, so it belongs to *Wuthering Heights*'s subtle power to suggest that the conflicts with which it deals both are, and are not, resolvable. On the one hand, there is no Charlotte-like wish-fulfilment: instead, we are offered a starkly tragic finale, as the love (or is it need?) of Heathcliff and Catherine for one another bursts through the social conventions to lash itself quiet in the unsocial domains of death, Nature and mythology. Perhaps it fails to find fulfilment even there. On the other hand, we are not invited to indulge some simpleminded Romantic opposition between passion and society. Desire has been revealed as a profoundly subversive force, indifferent to social distinctions; but the novel also shows that not all desire is creative and not all convention is hollow. This is why, in the final coming together of Hareton and young Catherine, there is a tentative, exploratory movement beyond the tragic deadlock of Catherine and Heathcliff—though one which lingers in its shadow, rather than disavowing it in some callow call to put the past behind you and turn a brave face to the future. The language of the scene in which young Catherine teaches Hareton to read is coy and saccharine, comfortably 'Victorian' in tone in a way that the novel as a whole is not. And it is, after all, the dead lovers themselves who are the subject of the work's last words.

What we have in the love of young Catherine and Hareton is a convergence of labour and gentility, as the crude natural energy which Hareton symbolizes can be tamed and gentrified without being emasculated. Nature and Culture, Heights and Grange, might thus finally meet in harmony. Yet if this cannot redeem the shades of Heathcliff and Catherine, neither does it have much of a material basis, at least in terms of the novel. The tale which *Wuthering Heights* has to tell, among other things, is that of the decline of the English yeomanry; by the end of the story, the Heights has been swallowed up by the Grange, as small agrarian capital is confiscated by a more powerful species of the same animal. And this reflects a real historical development in nineteenth-century English society.

At the level of actual history, then, there is nothing like the equipoise between 'natural' vigour and genteel cultivation which the novel strives to achieve at the level of values. In any case, if the more rugged, positive qualities of Heathcliff live on in Hareton, the fact remains that it is the scheming Heathcliff himself who was largely responsible for undermining the world of the Heights and indirectly ensuring the victory of the Grange. Heathcliff belongs economically with the Grange, but culturally with the Heights. As such, he is both a sign of the future, which belongs to large-scale rural capitalism, and a bittersweet memory of a past which was both more barbarous, and more rooted and resilient, than anything the future is likely to bring. It is characteristic of the novel's complex seeing that it refuses any simple judgement here.

In the story of Catherine and Heathcliff, what one might roughly call Romance and realism meet only to collide. Desire and social reality are tragically at odds. Yet if this is true of the novel's content, just the opposite could be claimed of its form. What makes this work almost unique in the annals of English fiction is its extraordinary fusion of realism and fantasy, imaginative extravagance and the everyday world. It is as though passion, far from obscuring that workaday world, lends its most casual details an almost hallucinatory clarity. There are times when it is hard to decide whether an incident represents high spiritual drama or domestic farce, or to draw the line between the passionate and the pettish. Raymond Williams speaks of the novel's 'exceptional fusion of intensity and control'. [4]

In Charlotte's writing, by contrast, these literary modes are far less unified. It is the uneven, heterogeneous nature of her fiction which catches the eye, the way it mixes Gothic, romance, fairy tale, picaresque, ghost story, melodrama and social realism. It is as though the romance or Gothic novel must now come to grips with new kinds of social experience at the heart of early industrial England, and must struggle to accommodate these bleak realities within its symbolic frames. Or—to put it the other way round—as though a new, arresting brand of social realism has still not entirely shaken itself loose from more traditional, less realist forms.

Indeed, it still finds these forms in some ways indispensable. When realism hits a genuine social problem, it can always resolve it by reaching back to these older forms and borrowing a magical device or two from them. If it is realistically unlikely that Jane will return to the now conveniently marriageable Rochester, a mysterious voice in her ear can always prompt her to do so. The ghostly intimation, the improbable coincidence, the lost and rediscovered relative, the opportune legacy, the timely death: all these tricks of the literary trade are still accessible to a social realism which needs them to smooth its rough edges and resolve otherwise recalcitrant conflicts. Realism and romance thus meet in the form of the Brontës' fiction, as they do in its subject-matter. We shall see much the same accommodation in the case of Charles Dickens.

Notes

1. Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), p.60.
2. If Charlotte's novels are mildly schizoid, they are also faintly paranoid. They portray a world of spying and surveillance, sinister Jesuitical plots and nameless mysteries behind closed doors.
3. Quoted in J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), p.163.
4. Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, p. 64.