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WUTHERING HEIGHTS: Legend and Paradigm

a reply to Duke Maskell

Dr Leavis famously described *Wuthering Heights* as a "sport", as though it were an exotic fruit on the boughs of the English novel, as though it emerged from some lost corner of the English mind, a broken fragment of English civilisation. Well, the setting is bleak and remote enough—the edge of the moors in the West Riding of Yorkshire—but it is as though the sensibility that permeates the book is just as exotic, though in an austere and un-English way. Here are no fertile fields and quaint cottages; no sprawling towns with smoking chimney stacks; no merchant fleet riding at anchor; just the rise and fall of the unfenced landscape, the big skies, the racing clouds. And this unbroken land has its own language in the harsh, barely intelligible accents of Joseph, the Earnshaw family retainer: "They's rahm for boath yah un' yer pride, nah, Aw sud think, i' th' hahse. It's empty; yah muh hev it all tuh yerseln, un him as allas maks a third, i' sich ill company!" Yet it isn't only the sound of the language that is rebarbative but the moods and beliefs within it—a jeering inhospitability, a conviction that the one in need must be a villain succoured by the Devil. Joseph is a crazed zealot anxious to build the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, but a savage and gloomy kingdom it would be.

Why is it that the Yorkshire moors bespeak so different and so hostile a terrain when compared with Hardy's Vale of Blackmoor or Egdon Heath, Wordsworth's Lakes, or even the Scottish mountains? Perhaps it is the very absence of dramatic forms, of signs of hopeful cultivation, the consciousness of an unbounded scope; or is it the feeling we have that it is already spoken for, spoken in the voices of Catherine and Heathcliff? For when it comes to it, it is the book itself which has defined the Yorkshire moors for us, and that definition is harsh and lonely more than anything else. Not that the sun never shines in Emily Brontë's book— and when it does it is a portion of Paradise—usually a Spring sun; nor that we need forget that Wuthering Heights itself is a working farm, as is Thrushcross Grange, the manor farm. What our classic authors do for us—and this includes Hardy, Wordsworth, Scott and others, like D. H. Lawrence with his evocation of the Nottingham-Derbyshire borders—is bestow upon favoured places a spirit, a Spirit of Place, which makes us see those places through their inspired eyes.

Heathcliff is of course an embodiment of the moors—wild, fierce, ruthless, like a force of Nature, without pity; more like a goblin or an animal than a human being, as is several times asserted by Nelly Dean and Catherine. He can display charm and good manners only when "interested", to gain an end, which is generally for revenge or material benefit. But it is true that, where love is concerned, he has infinitely greater resources than his rival, Edgar Linton—at least where love is equal to passion. And this is where his presence turns the book upside down: for the villain becomes the hero. Love, in *Wuthering Heights* is like the Devil in Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "Energy is the only life, and is from the Body; and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy."

Morally speaking we must deplore the systematic bullying of Heathcliff by the bigger and older Hindley, Mr Earnshaw's heir, and applaud sister Cathy for standing by him, but it should be remembered that Heathcliff—who is either a gipsy, an American or a Lascar—is the cuckoo in the family nest, the father's favourite child, and so only equivocally defended by Nelly who would cleave to the feudal heritage of Hindley. But the bond of friendship between the children, Heathcliff and Cathy, establishes them in the reader's eyes as the principal characters.

But it is through the relatively insignificant picture of Lockwood, battling with the elements, that we get our first, and lasting, impression of the moors:

> On that bleak hill-top the earth was hard with a black frost, and the air made me shiver through every limb. Being unable to remove the chain, I jumped over, and, running up the flagged causeway bordered with straggling gooseberry bushes, knocked vainly for admittance, till my knuckles tingled and the dogs howled.

But this hard-edged material image of a fragment of the moors is far less telling than the ghostly visitation by the child-spirit of Catherine Earnshaw that the innocent Lockwood is bound to

experience as he lodges in her old room. This is surely a masterpiece of prose expression that carries the fluid resonance of poetry. Nightmare it is, but visitation too, as Heathcliff jealously knows, having waited twenty years for the material return of his Cathy. Doors bang, the shutters shake, a branch scratches at the window, soon to "become" the hapless child begging for admittance as the storm rages. Here is an image of terror that signifies the whole scope of the novel, that lives in the memory like the storm scenes of *King Lear*. And so does the life of the moors comprise more than the outward scenery they form. The clouds, the winds, the winter storms constitute the invisible being just as our own breath constitutes ours.

There is much comedy in the first chapters of *Wuthering Heights*, generally turning on the discomfiture of Heathcliff's new tenant for Thrushcross Grange, Mr Lockwood, who has come as a long-stay tourist, seeking solitude and, perhaps, romantic sensation. He bites off more than he can chew—an uninvited guest at the *Heights* trying to make polite conversation with a company of rustic savages; but the pregnant atmosphere among the natives is fraught with the darkest of dark clouds, disabling him from exercising the arts of civilisation, as he knows them. Mr Duke Maskell, in his interesting pair of essays on this novel, sees comedy as the author's way of reconciling her desire to evoke horrors of an even pantomime magnitude and wordiness with the need to retain a credible degree of realism. In so far as I can make out, Mr Maskell sees the comedy in which she embeds even the nightmare scene as a way of her judging the drama she has written as rhetorical exaggeration—though this leaves me with the problem of knowing how to take Heathcliff seriously afterwards. Mr Maskell writes:

> Emily Brontë is trying to do something . . . that she hasn't the means for—hasn't because those means aren't a possibility of nineteenth century prose.

Well, it seems to me that she *has* done it, and done it in the nightmare scene, which is like a passage of seventeenth century prose or verse itself. The medley of serious and comic modes is even a characteristic of that century's literature. However, I should say that the underlying theme of *Wuthering Heights*, its essential inspiration, is so much darker than it is light that the comedy of the novel is very nearly snuffed out.

Ellen Dean (Nelly) is the target of Mr Maskell's ruthless analysis, analysis which has this upshot:

> Nelly is one of the great liars of English literature . . . or would be if "liar" were not too coarse a word for her. Iago's lies ask to be exposed, by a straightforward appeal to the evidence and statement of the truth. But Nelly's mixture of truth, untruth and part-truth, self-justification disguised as self-criticism, deceit and self deception, moralising and immorality is much more slippery and much truer to the deceptions and self-deceptions of ordinary life. It isn't "exposure" it asks for but criticism—which is what makes it the test for readers it is.

Mr Maskell's forensic pursuit of Nelly is masterly, but since he finds her so much a creature of everyday life, I cannot see the reason for his surprised exasperation with, and angry hostility to, her. Nor why she is so welcome a target for criticism, literary criticism that is; for the level at which that criticism must work is strictly a factual one, whereas the criticism which most matters is the sort which concerns itself with the soul.

It seems that an aspect of Mr Maskell's undoubted originality is to see the unfortunate traveller, Mr Lockwood, as a warrior in a class-war, between eighteenth century politeness and the truth-tellers, like Heathcliff. His superficial politeness is enough to warrant that landowner's hearty contempt and we are encouraged to believe that Emily Brontë herself would simply share the joke, whereas the progress of the novel shows a heroine who, with hesitation, throws in her lot with the civilised Lintons. Of course, that is a too simple way to describe the novel's plot, but so is the way Mr Maskell discusses this cultural issue. He warms to his theme as if the matter really were as simple as four legs good two legs bad.

> The question, as Heathcliff sees it (and as I do myself), and the test—for Cathy and the reader—is simply and familiarly, one of class: what do you live by, money and social position or realities?

And this narrowing of the novel's theme leads to an assimilation of Lockwood with the Linton family, constituting one bloc of genteel nullity to be annihilated by Heathcliff's threats and otherwise intolerable behaviour, such as visiting Catherine, at Thrushcross Grange, in the role of a lover. I should say that Cathy herself viewed her Linton relatives much more seriously, despite knowing, in her heart, that " Every Linton on the face of the earth might melt into nothing, before I could consent to forsake Heathcliff."

To Mr Maskell, Lockwood is a mere buffoon, whereas I see him as an innocent observer, an emissary from the world below the Heights, the world of metropolitan England, a touchstone to remind us of normal life and society; and it is a puzzle to me to note the degree of contempt Mr Maskell (as well as Mr Heathcliff) shows for him, amounting to veritable hatred. Such a response to a minor character in the novel would be merely eccentric, if it were not that Mr Maskell, in these two essays, is attempting to order a new Battle of English Prose Styles. On the one side we have the degenerate vestiges of eighteenth-century Augustanism, incorporating in its latinate vocabulary and elaborate grammatical structures the values of an obsolescent phase of civilisation, one which is incapable of passion, of sincerity, of disinterested action, and on the other side we have the emergent drive of revolutionary Romanticism: in short the truth-tellers. Heathcliff against the Lintons and Lockwood.

Now, though this thesis is based on Emily Brontë's cultural distinction between the life at Wuthering Heights and that at Thrushcross Grange, roughly approximating to the families Earnshaw and Linton who occupy those houses respectively, its literary-critical dimension argues an expansion of Mr Maskell's idea beyond Emily's, and it would consequently be unwise to take his conclusions as being sound in terms of the novel. I would put it this way: Deep in Emily is consciousness of the conflict between a life free of social restraint and one tightly controlled by social, and perhaps religious, rules—at worst, the first sort of life might lead to the unhappiness of chaos; the second sort to insipid routine. But she knows something else too. She knows that what gives meaning to life is activity of the spirit, such as is experienced in love—and it is this element that stamps the novel as being of classical status. Strangely enough, though he gives an extensive account of the agonies suffered by Heathcliff in the hour of Catherine's death, Mr Maskell leaves us feeling that we have witnessed but half the truth of this case. The greater truth is uttered by Catherine herself:

> . . . I cannot express it; but surely you and everybody have a notion that there is, or should be an existence of yours beyond you. What were the use of my creation if I were entirely contained here? . . . My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods. Time will change it, I'm well aware, as winter changes the trees—my love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath—a source of little visible delight, but necessary. Nelly, 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 . . . .

Such a declaration shows the author knows where she is going, knows what her intention is, but the love itself is found through the texture of the whole novel, in the dialogue (as here), the events of the narrative, etc. Or here:

> She laughed and held me down, for I made a motion to leave my chair.
>
> "This is nothing," cried she: "I was only going to say that heaven did not seem to be my home; and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth; 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. That will do to explain my secret, as well as the other. I've no more business to marry Edgar Linton than I have to be in heaven; and if the wicked man in there had not brought Heathcliff so low, I shouldn't have thought of it. It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff, now; so he shall never know how I love him; and that, not because he's handsome, Nelly, but because he's more myself than I am. 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.

Perhaps Mr Maskell's boldest move was to include Heathcliff among his select group of literary truth-tellers, among whom are Hamlet, Elizabeth Bennet, and Birkin. In the first place, as Mr Maskell so brilliantly demonstrates, Heathcliff speaks up for love—albeit in many ways an extremely selfish love—in those few pages evoking Catherine's death. Yes, he can be a lover, a husband, and even a step-father to Hareton; but if Heathcliff can cope at such a crisis, there might also be a time when the gentler arts of Edgar Linton would be in place. But, that said, his "honest" treatment of Edgar on other occasions could only be described as the insults of a bully, whilst his behaviour towards his wife, Isabella, would do credit to a guttersnipe. What other instances of Heathcliff's truth-telling are there? He coveted Hindley's pony, forcing him to swap it on pain of tale-telling: Heathcliff would carry a tale to the master Mr Earnshaw. Hindley cut up rough, but Heathcliff had his way. Not a very edifying story perhaps. If one esteems the passionate sincerity of Heathcliff and Catherine's love—despite Catherine's "betrayal"—as the centre of the book, as the truth which the book tells, then Heathcliff must have a hand in it and some of the credit. Perhaps this makes him indeed one of the literary truth-tellers.

Villains have been heroes before. Isn't Baudelaire the hero of his own *Fleurs du Mal?* And isn't the wicked Lord Byron a hero, too? Aren't these truth-tellers? But to pass the title on to Heathcliff is to pass it on to a partially ugly soul, a primitive one too, who bows down to the god of Revenge. His early sufferings cannot excuse this. Perhaps what can excuse it is the love of Catherine, her love for him and his for her. He has become a fine figure of a man, with good but not handsome features, making any woman proud to stand by his side, and doesn't the impressionable Isabella fall madly in love with him? If he is a degree more deeply dyed in villainy than your average heroic villain, being only questionably not allied to the goblin breed, with "cannibal teeth", is that enough to debar him from taking his place among the truth-tellers? I think not.

We think of Cathy as a wild spirit of the moors, and so she is; but she is also a sophisticated eighteenth-century lady of the manor spitefully turning the tables on her *ingenue* sister-in-law Isabella, smitten with love of Heathcliff, who despises her. She maintains a cold hauteur throughout that Chapter 10, perhaps the most surprising chapter in the book. The conversational polish—allowing for the absence of Alexandrine verse—is almost French; the relish for victory as keen as could be; the "punishment" relentless; the disgrace complete. One might quote anywhere for illustration:

> "Come in, that's right!" exclaimed the mistress, gaily, pulling a chair to the fire. "Here are two people sadly in need of a third to thaw the ice between them; and you are the very one we should both of us choose. Heathcliff, I'm proud to show you, at last, somebody that dotes on you more than myself. I expect you to feel flattered—nay, it's not Nelly; don't look at her! My poor little sister-in-law is breaking her heart by mere contemplation of your physical and moral beauty. It lies in your own power to be Edgar's brother! No, no, Isabella, you shan't run off," she continued, arresting, with feigned playfulness, the confounded girl, who had risen indignantly.

It is tragic to see Catherine, in her sickness, becoming a selfish hysterical personality manipulating those she loves or can exercise power over. Perhaps it entitles her to be considered one of the first fictional heroines to exhibit such a neurasthenic splitting of the psyche. Of course, neither physical nor mental deterioration can injure love, and it is perhaps paradigmatic that the lovers can quarrel while one of them is lying on her death bed. It is fitting, too, that this novel should end on an ambiguous note. Heathcliff has asserted his conviction that ghosts exist and he has perhaps been haunted to death by Catherine. The final change in his personality has been witnessed by Nelly Dean, and convincingly conveyed in Emily Brontë's assured prose; so why should we demur when asked to believe that the lovers have themselves become a legend? Lockwood tells us that his walk across the moors was interrupted, on one occasion, by a shepherd boy blubbering and trembling because he could not get the ewe and two lambs he was driving past "Heathcliff and a woman, yonder, under t'nab." Lockwood, who addresses the boy, can see nothing, but we learn that he avoids being out after dark, and is anxious to leave "this grim house."

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I am indebted to Richard Stotesbury for the reminder that Nelly Dean, as a loyal servant to the Earnshaws, would feel a natural inclination to side with the family against outsiders like Heathcliff.

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