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THE ETHOS OF *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*

Wuthering Heights so baffles and confounds the ethical sense because it is not informed with that sense at all..."¹ So proclaims Dorothy Van Ghent. A bit more accurate, I think, is this statement by David Cecil: "Emily Bronte's outlook is not immoral, but it is pre-moral. It concerns itself not with moral statements, but with those conditioning forces of life on which the naive erections of the human mind that we call moral standards are built up." Unfortunately, there follows no elaboration on this pronouncement other than the following: "The conflict in her books is not between right and wrong, but between like and unlike."² As true as I think Cecil's observations are, they do not go quite far enough. Nor, incidentally, do I accept his thesis that the theme of *Wuthering Heights* revolves around a conflict between the principles of storm and calm. It is my opinion that the novel is fundamentally ethical, that the ethical concern in fact determines the very structure of the novel. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine the nature of the ethical problem which is the thematic and structural nucleus of *Wuthering Heights*.

In the first paragraph of *Wuthering Heights*, Lockwood's impression of the moor country is worth noting. "In all England, I do not believe that I could have fixed on a situation so completely removed from the stir of society." Lockwood is the urbanite, the man at home entirely in the social sphere. He notices the indomitable solidness of the house at *Wuthering Heights*. The obvious analogy, to be worked out in the course of the novel, is between the house and its inhabitants who do not yield or fluctuate in their positions in relation to each other and to the world. They are completely alien to the social world of mutual accommodation. There is a marked, though not explicit, contrast

between Heathcliff and Lockwood in the first chapter. And there is irony in the presentation of this contrast because Lockwood imagines an affinity with Heathcliff. Attributing his own characteristics to Heathcliff, he entirely misjudges him. "He'll love and hate, equally under cover..." Nothing could be more inaccurate than this account of the man who loves and hates so overtly and monumentally. Lockwood confesses his inability to go beyond the surface medium of social intercourse in his relationships with people in his account of the affair with the "fascinating creature" at the sea-coast. At the end of the first chapter Lockwood comments: "It is astonishing how sociable I feel myself compared with him." This is quite an understatement, for Lockwood is through and through "sociable", and on his return visit blunders repeatedly in his efforts to place the people at the Heights in recognizable social positions to determine his behavior toward them. He cannot understand *their* behavior in the least and tries to account for it and then modify it in terms of his social experience.

Lockwood's withdrawal from the social world is a gesture only. He finds the loneliness intolerable very quickly and welcomes the company of Nelly Dean. His thematic function in the novel is important, and the contrast with Heathcliff is not simply between the natural man and the civilized man. He represents the opposite pole from Heathcliff in what I believe to be the basic ethical dilemma presented in the novel. Lockwood can function efficiently in the social world but is somehow unable to realize or externalize *himself*. What he really *is* remains hidden beneath the surface. He says, of his inability to enter into real relationships with women: "By this curious turn of disposition I have gained the reputation of deliberate heartlessness, how underserved, I alone can appreciate." Heathcliff's true feelings are usually manifest, but, it will be seen, he is unable to manipulate events in the social dimension to bring them into harmony with his desires.

In the first of Lockwood's dreams in Chapter III, he is treated to a sermon delivered by the Reverend Jabes Branderham in the same chapel that, as has been often pointed out, is seen going to ruin at the end of the novel, which fact is usually taken as an indication of Emily Brontë's disregard of conventional religion or morality as significant forces in man's life, or at least in the lives of people like Heathcliff and Catherine. The dream has a related function, for the sermon concerns, as Lockwood recalls, sins "of the most curious character—odd

transgressions that I never imagined previously." These are violations of a moral code unfamiliar to Lockwood, a forewarning, perhaps, that a new ethical system will be forthcoming. The last sin, the "First of the Seventy-First", seems to be something like sheer ennui, and it is perhaps conventional moral standards which stand accused finally, for Lockwood first condemns Jakes, who in return condemns Lockwood, and no one seems able to determine who is guilty. Jakes at last stands in the pulpit "pouring forth his zeal" with no effect whatsoever, while his parishioners cudgel each other.

The implication is that the conventional religious and moral complex is not valid, or at least not universally valid. Earlier in the third chapter we find the account written by Catherine as a child of a Sunday afternoon at Wuthering Heights which pictures the active resistance of Heathcliff and herself to Joseph's attempts at inculcating conventional morality within them through long sermons and religious tracts. Not only does Lockwood provide a focus of normality with which the reader may feel fairly comfortable, but his preparation is also the reader's preparation for the extraordinary events soon to be disclosed, whose significance perhaps cannot be assessed by any conventional standards. Nevertheless, whether or not Lockwood does represent normality, and therefore may be the character in the novel with whom it is easiest to identify, the implicit condemnation of him should be noted. Though he feels an increasingly strong attraction for the younger Cathy, he is unable to make his feelings known to her.

So much for the opening chapters. Lockwood, of course, does not narrate the substance of the novel. The problem of Nelly Dean as narrator has received considerably more critical attention than the function of Lockwood,³ but the only point I will bring up is the obvious, but important, one of the effect of aesthetic distance achieved through having the events of the major part of the novel set in the past and reported by an observer. (I will not say an impartial observer, for Nelly Dean's understanding is strictly limited because she does not share in the ethical dilemma which confronts the other characters.) Though most of the events from the past can be assigned a date of occurrence,⁴ the story is not attached to any specific historical time. That is, events in the novel are not related to, or influenced by, what happened to be going on either in England or in the rest of the world during the period in which it is set. So the story remains, like a myth,

non-historical, out of time. This tends to emphasize the paradoxical nature of the characters: they stand, in a sense, as something of outlines of characters, as not fully realized because certain aspects are so completely communicated while others are completely ignored. Yet they are not unbelievable because their immediacy has been of necessity weakened because of the point of view. Their presentation as fully-rounded characters has been sacrificed to endow their struggles with a symbolic quality. This is because the novel aims at conveying an essential human problem of functioning in the world (more fundamental than the typical Jane Austen difficulty of knowing and understanding other people), a problem that, in Cecil's term, is "pre-moral".

Yet I feel justified in claiming that the real theme of the novel is ethical in nature, if "ethical" is taken broadly as meaning a concern with arriving at some notion of how a man should act. The ethical system of *Wuthering Heights* is determined by a philosophical schema implicit in the novel. When extracted, it can be expressed something like this: There is a dimension of some kind of essential reality, which I hesitate to call "transcendent" because metaphorically it seems to emerge as "fundamental", as lying *beneath* visible or empirical experience. There is something in every man, some essence, which is derived from this fundamental dimension and which is unchanging. Man's situation is thus ambivalent, as it seems to be in most idealistic or dualistic philosophical systems. That is, he is both part of the continuous physical flux and able, traditionally through reason, to gain knowledge of the permanent and unchanging. This latter is *not*, however, Emily Brontë's view, for the unchanging part of man is not an abstract concept or an ideal existing in a transcendent realm, but is within and part of the man, existing along with the changeable physical and mental aspects: it is not apprehended by reason, but is felt, intuited, is perhaps even ultimately unknowable in rational terms. Yet the dualism is still there: man exists as a kind of bridge between Being and Becoming, and it is this ambivalent position which constitutes the basis of man's ethical problem. He must somehow, to survive physically, act within the empirical world. This world, for man, has become society, civilized institutions, all the accumulation of non-natural channels for doing and acting that man has created. Yet in acting in this world, a man must somehow find a way to give expression

to the essential part of himself. The problem becomes metaphorically a juggling act of sorts: physically man must accommodate his actions to existing facts and social structures. To obtain some measure of happiness, of fulfillment, he must also manipulate empirical facts to bring them into harmony with that essential part of his being.⁵

It is made quite apparent in the account written by Catherine as a child, which Lockwood reads in Chapter III, and in the early chapters of Nelly Dean's narration (Chapters IV-VI), that there is a bond, a strong and fundamental one, between Heathcliff and Cathy. They both find the desolate moors quite hospitable. The moors, I think, represent more than just nature: they are symbolic of that underlying reality of which nature, and also a part of man, is a manifestation. Nature does not have the power to pervert the essential quality within it. That man does is central to the theme of the novel. It is interesting to note that at the end of the third chapter, Heathcliff guides Lockwood, the social man, across the moors. In Lockwood's dream the ghost of Cathy cries: "I'd lost my way on the moor." The moment she began to lose her way is, of course, the night she and Heathcliff visit Thrushcross Grange. Van Ghent has, in her excellent discussion of window imagery in the novel, pointed out the importance of this scene, though, in her terms, the inside of Thrushcross Grange represents the "human", the outside, some kind of alien force called the "other". The social dimension into which Cathy first finds admission is certainly "human" since it is a human creation (though by my qualification I am using the word in a different sense), but what she turns her back upon is the essential, the "fundamental", part of herself. Heathcliff, as Van Ghent notes, cannot get inside. His inability to function effectively in the social world was foreshadowed in the account given of his origin: he can be assigned no specific social context. He seems to have been the child of wandering gypsies, outside the social order altogether. When he laments his physical dissimilarity to Edgar Linton (Chapter VII), Nelly consoles him with: "Who knows but your father was Emperor of China, and your mother an Indian queen..." Of unknown or heterogeneous origin, he is misplaced in any social situation.

The first part of Nelly Dean's narration is a rhetorical unit, for she breaks off at half-past one to resume four weeks later after Lockwood's illness. It is also a thematic unit, for this section is an account of the one great error from which most of the subsequent action of the novel

springs: the sundering of Catherine and Heathcliff. Responsibility for this division of kindred spirits, which prevents their essential, underlying unity from being ever effectively mirrored in the empirical dimension, is shared by Catherine, Heathcliff, and Hindley. The latter, in his hatred and blindness, acts to divide the pair by enforcing Heathcliff's "degradation," for which Catherine ultimately rejects Heathcliff as a marriage partner. Heathcliff himself, however, makes no attempt to compete with Edgar Linton in the social sphere and depends solely upon the deep natural bond between Catherine and himself to keep them together. His deliberate eschewal of social forms culminates in his forsaking the Heights altogether. As Catherine moves more and more into the social world of the Lintons, Heathcliff moves farther and farther away from it until the moment of his departure, which actively signifies his rejection of that world. The separation is a gulf, between the two, leaving the field completely open for Edgar Linton.

Catherine's decision to marry Edgar is an ethical mistake in the terms I have presented because it involves a deliberate perversion of her fundamental nature. Instead of directing her actions to bring the empirical dimension into harmony with the essential part of her that is indissolubly bound to Heathcliff, she predicates her actions upon the existing situation. Her oft-quoted speech to Nelly, in Chapter IX, is worth quoting again:

"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 great miseries in this world have been Heathcliff's miseries, and I watched and felt each from the beginning; my great thought in living is himself. If all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be; and, if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the Universe would turn to a mighty stranger. I should not seem a part of it. 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..."

She has metaphorically expressed the two dimensions which man bridges, Being and Becoming. Her mistake is in not realizing that her actions in the empirical dimension can thwart the fulfillment of her essential nature in that dimension: there is an interaction between the two, a mutual influence. Surface changes are possible, and Cathy has

become socialized, but only to a certain extent, for her knowledge of the social sphere is strictly limited, despite her ability to function in it more effectively than Heathcliff because of her acquaintance with the Lintons. She is, in a sense, still "fundamentally" oriented because the social dimension seems entirely superficial to her. Her action is partially a result of a mistaken attempt to manipulate events to harmonize with the hidden reality. She says, of her marriage to Linton: "I can aid Heathcliff to rise." The error is that in trying to raise both herself and Heathcliff to a higher social level and thereby enhance their basic unity, she is turning her back on that basic unity by placing an obstacle between them. Her action is still predicated on empirical factors with the assumption that they will not interfere with the fundamental communion of the two people. She says indignantly, "He quite deserted! We separated!...Every Linton on the face of the earth might melt into nothing, before I could consent to forsake Heathcliff."

Another thread introduced in the first part of the narrative is the return of Hindley with his bride Frances, the subsequent death of Frances, and the beginning of Hindley's dissipation. Frances and Hindley seem as much a unity of two beings as Heathcliff and Cathy. They are content with each other's company and oblivious to the world. Frances, however, dies. This is an event in the empirical world, and Hindley cannot adjust himself to it. The other end of the mutual influence is introduced: if man should try to manipulate empirical events to harmonize with his essential nature, he must also somehow adjust himself to *inevitable* events in the empirical dimension. The task is two-sided and the ethical problem is to take account of both sides. Hindley's failure to adjust himself to the death of Frances contrasts with Edgar Linton's conduct in the third part of the narrative. For Hindley's error is double: he also ignores an empirical fact, his son Hareton. Edgar, on the contrary, uses his daughter's existence to fulfill himself while he still lives, while he physically remains a part of the empirical world. In this case Edgar also contrasts with Heathcliff, for Edgar does not lose his devotion to his dead wife and is successful in acting, in manipulating events to achieve happiness. He says to Nelly, in Chapter XXV: "Ellen, I've been very happy with my little Cathy...But I've been as happy musing by myself among those stones...on the green mound of her mother's grave, and wishing, yearning for the time when I might lie beneath it."

In the second part of Nelly Dean's narrative, Chapters X through XVI, both Heathcliff and Catherine cut across social conventions from the night of Heathcliff's return, when she insists, over Edgar's protestations, that Heathcliff be received in the drawing room rather than the kitchen, until the dramatic scene in her bedroom on the day of her death. The details of Heathcliff's civilizing are never revealed, but however he acquired his gentlemanly veneer, it does him little good, for he does not put it to use. Even Isabella is attracted by his dark and romantic appearance rather than his gentlemanly bearing. Heathcliff's actions, in marrying Isabella and in acquiring the Earnshaw estate, spring from much the same motivation as Cathy's marriage to Edgar. He wants both to obtain the material possessions which stood between Cathy and himself and to revenge himself upon those who stood in his way. But, just as Cathy ignored the possibility that the marriage with Edgar could become a barrier between them, Heathcliff now minimizes its importance, almost pretending that Edgar does not really exist. In his accusations to Catherine in the violent argument scene at the end of Chapter XI, he returns to the past, to Catherine's decision, almost as if time has, in a sense, stood still and nothing important has happened since that initial betrayal. Heathcliff refuses to take the empirical fact of Edgar as Catherine's husband into consideration. For this reason, his actions do not effectively produce the end desired, of bringing him once again close to Catherine, for they ignore the social reality. Heathcliff is not able to ingratiate himself with Edgar in some sort of accepted social fashion. His actions are predicated on the social situation of three years past when possession of lands and money would have made him a rival to Edgar. He is trying to assert his fundamental nature without manipulating empirical reality to bring it into harmony with that nature; or, rather, he is manipulating in the wrong way, proceeding on the wrong assumptions. Catherine's decision, of course, reduced Heathcliff's power to accomplish the real union with her that he desires. Any relationship that he might now succeed in establishing would be a paltry sort of substitute. He is not a social man and he does not want a social relationship with Catherine. He wants to reassert their essential kinship, and therefore he ignores the social dimension which can bring him only a placebo.

Catherine's choice has, quite obviously, rendered her a divided creature. In her delirium (Chapter XII) she, paradoxically, sees clearly

her error. She finds the idea of Edgar and his books repellent and throws open the window for a breath of cold wind off the moors.⁶ She is, she recognizes at last, as much out of place in the social realm as Heathcliff. Having dreamed of being in bed at the Heights, she awakes to discover herself at the Grange and is seized by horror. She says, of the feeling: "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." She describes precisely the effect of the decision she made that perverted her true nature. A few lines later she sends the dare on the wind to Heathcliff to join her beyond death, for only in death is their union possible.

Catherine's actual death in Chapter XVI marks the end of the second part of the narrative. The second part stands as a division between an interesting contrast in Heathcliff's behavior within the first and third parts. In the first part he evidences disdain for the empirical, absolutely refusing to assume any semblance of manners in order to compete with Edgar Linton. In the third part he is totally occupied with the empirical dimension, obsessively competing with Edgar for his material possessions, including his daughter (the sister already having been obtained). This is a complete reversal from part one. Part two, however, is a transition stage in that Heathcliff is both acting upon his inner nature in cutting across social boundaries to re-establish communion of sorts with Catherine, and beginning his scheme for obtaining all the land and money that once stood in his way. Thus there is a nice symmetry, yielding a kind of mirror image. Just as Catherine's marriage rendered his actions futile, so her death makes it impossible for him to manipulate empirical events to fulfill himself. On the other side of the ethical responsibility, he cannot adjust himself to her death. In this way he parallels, of course, Hindley. But he also contrasts quite markedly with Hindley in that Hindley completely withdraws from empirical reality and loses all his material possessions, whereas Heathcliff immerses himself in the empirical and gains an abundance of material possessions. Thus he errs in neglecting the essential part of him which longs for union with Catherine. This union can be achieved, of course, only through death, not through action in the empirical world. He

eventually must, in fact, forsake that world altogether when he learns that no channels for fulfillment are open to him there. The solution to the ethical problem, of course, has to be some kind of balance between the inner nature and the social responsibilities, a balance Heathcliff never finds, for even in accomplishing the union with Cathy, his all-consuming desire, it is only by turning his back on life itself.

Despite his immersion in the empirical, Heathcliff is still not a social creature, and he distorts the various social roles that come within the scope of his actions— husband, father, and father-in-law. His marriage with Isabella is the obverse of Catherine's marriage with Edgar. The marriage of young Cathy and Linton represents a perversion of Cathy's nature. (Symbolic of the difference between the two is the passage in which each describes his imaginary heaven.) It is interesting to note the similarity between the relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine just prior to her engagement to Edgar and that which ultimately obtains between young Cathy and Hareton. Hareton, like Heathcliff, is described in animalistic terms;⁷ he suffers the same "degradation" and revels in it. Yet his struggles to acquire knowledge, when he begins, are motivated by an awareness of what must be done in the empirical dimension to obtain the respect of young Cathy. Cathy shows no inclination toward the social Lockwood but at last labors to educate Hareton, to bring empirical reality into harmony with the inner impetus toward each other that both feel.

It is important to note that the fourth part, told to Lockwood upon his return visit to the Grange and the Heights, contains accounts of two "right" ethical decisions. Heathcliff perhaps at last realizes that his action in the empirical world are futile and can in no sense bring him happiness. Therefore, he literally, and apparently purposely, departs the physical altogether for a reunion with Cathy beyond death. It is left as merely a kind of old wives' tale that Cathy and Heathcliff, now free from all hindrances to fulfill their natural desire for union, walk the moors, their native element. If it is true, it is fitting, for it would then be only that essential, fundamental part of them which survives death, which lasts when the world of flux has been left behind. That part could be called the "soul", I suppose, but it is obvious that only Nelly Dean wants to impose a Christian interpretation, not Emily Brontë. It does not matter, however, if the ghosts really do walk the moors, for this seems to me to be only a kind of metaphor for their permanent

union which is actually beyond the physical altogether. Visible ghosts are only a metaphor for that which is beyond sensual perception.

The other "right" decision is, of course, the marriage of young Cathy and Hareton, and as a part of it, the decision to take action to make the empirical correspond with the fundamental in educating Hareton. For Hareton is as like Cathy in nature as Linton was unlike. Her contempt for Hareton was based upon his empirical, not his essential, characteristics. The empirical can be changed in order to further the realization of the fundamental. In fact this is the justification of action in the empirical world, the ethical task itself. In Catherine and Hareton's marriage, they act to rectify the distortion imposed by Heathcliff. The elder Catherine had submitted to the distortion imposed, in part at least, by Hindley. Thus two opposite responses to uncongenial empirical situations stand in contrast, and the first and fourth parts of the narrative stand as mirror images in terms of ethical decisions. So in a sense does the second part contrast with the fourth. Having shown no inclination toward Lockwood, young Cathy has placed no barrier between herself and Hareton so their actions can lead to the establishment of a real relationship, while Heathcliff's actions toward the living Catherine could not. The elder Catherine's error is rectified when Heathcliff joins her beyond the empirical dimension. Heathcliff's machinations which resulted in distorting the social situation away from the true nature of young Hareton are finally diverted.

The novel ends with Lockwood in the cemetery of Gimmerton Kirk. Lockwood can act in the empirical world, but, paradoxically, only in ways that cannot serve to express his true nature. His ethical failure, though only sketched in the novel, is greater than Heathcliff's since it stems from a species of cowardice. His perception is thoroughly empirical, and the novel ends with the same point of view with which it began. An existence beyond the physical is not a possibility in the social Lockwood's scheme of things. Looking at the graves of Catherine, Heathcliff, and Edgar, he reflects:

I lingered round them, under that benign sky; watched the moths fluttering among the heath and hare-bells; listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass; and wondered how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth.

Notes

1. Dorothy Van Ghent, "On *Wuthering Heights*," *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), pp. 187-208.
2. David Cecil, "Emily Bronte and *Wuthering Heights*," *Early Victorian Novelists* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1962), pp. 147-159.
3. See, for instance, John K. Mathison, "Nelly Dean and the Power of *Wuthering Heights*," *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, XI (1956), 106-129, or James Hafley, "The Villain in *Wuthering Heights*," *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, XIII (1958), 199-215.
4. Charles Percy Sanger's valuable paper, "The Structure of *Wuthering Heights*," which contains a detailed chronology of the novel, is now accessible in several works, for example, Alastair Everitt, ed., "*Wuthering Heights*": *An Anthology of Criticism* (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1967), pp. 193-208, and Richard Lettis and William E. Morris, eds., *A "Wuthering Heights" Handbook* (New York: Odyssey Press, Inc., 1961), pp. 4-16.
5. After having worked this schema out, I discovered a statement in an article by Clifford Collins, "Theme and Conventions in *Wuthering Heights*," *The Critic*, I (1947), 43-50, which seems to indicate that Collins anticipated my analysis by some twenty-three years. This was not surprising since I believe that the ethical difficulties, as I have outlined them, actually are the thematic and structural materials of the novel. Collins states:

This is the 'moral centre' of the novel, the opposition between the actual inner identity which Heathcliff and Catherine share and accept, and the relatively insubstantial social and conscious existence which Isabella Linton best exemplifies, and which is typified by Thrushcross Grange. Heathcliff is a principle, a dramatic symbol; and his relation to Catherine stands for the 'life-force', the impersonal essence of personal existence. But just because their relation is this, it cannot exist in life on its own. Some synthesis between it and external social action is necessary, and this is achieved in the love of Hareton and the younger Catherine, in which the opposite qualities of *Wuthering Heights* and Thrushcross Grange are reconciled.

I certainly do not agree that the relationship of Heathcliff and Catherine cannot exist in life. It is simply that wrong ethical decisions made by both Catherine and Heathcliff stand in the way. The "reconciliation" as represented by Collins seems a *deus ex machina* inserted to round off the novel, whereas I think the marriage of Hareton and Cathy stands as a right ethical decision, not a reconciliation of abstract forces. However, the significant point is that Collins' statement is left undeveloped. His article subsequently takes a different tack altogether, and how he might have applied his idea to the novel in more detail is pure speculation.

6. Dorothy Van Ghent also points this out.
7. For a discussion of the imagery of the novel, see Mark Schorer, "Fiction and the 'Matrix of Analogy,'" *Kenyon Review*, XI (1949), 539-560.