Emily Bronte and the Terrorist Imagination

Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* has long enjoyed a place at the heart of the nineteenth century literary canon. For much of this time, criticism has focussed on the metaphysical, even mystical, elements of the text; and rather less so on the more prosaically political.¹ Yet, there is, of course, no easy separation of the poetic and the political, and the purpose of this article is to take Emily’s novel and the place it within the context of one very pressing contemporary political debate; that which oscillates around the ‘war on terror’.² Elizabeth Gaskell famously observed that *Wuthering Heights* is full of ‘grim and terrible criminals’, its author too obviously entranced by narratives of ‘positive violence’.³ As her near contemporary Emile Montegut confirmed *Wuthering Heights* is a novel of ‘terror’ and ‘criminal passions’.⁴ Of course, connotations and conceptions of terror change over time; that is part of its enduring fascination. Just as we today are warned that we live in an ‘age of terror’, so too were those who read *Wuthering Heights*. Of course, we are supposed to be terrified by Islamic fundamentalists rather than by Jacobins and revolutionaries, haunted by images of ranting clerics and deluded suicide-bombers rather than by images of rioting slaves and demonic orphans. But the expectation is just the same. The threat which Emily Bronte insinuated, of an English idyll visited by an ‘other’ of dark and apocalyptic violence, is a familiar one.⁵ In casting it before her audience in early 1847, Emily was adopting the position of a radical, ‘even revolutionary’ writer; one that was prepared, not merely to dally with terror, but to insinuate its political credibility.⁶

The Terrorist Imagination

As the months and years have passed since the events of September 11 2001, and the ensuing inauguration of yet another ‘war on terror’, it has become ever more obvious that neither the war nor the terror is easily defined. It is not a war in any sense which is familiar within the tenets of Westphalian international order, or its jurisprudence,  

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¹ The danger of falling into the temptation of reading *Wuthering Heights* as a muse on life in ‘never-never land’ was famously articulated in Kettle, vol.1 at 130. For a more recent commentary on the necessary temptations of the metaphysical reading, and the equal necessity of a balancing realism that can ‘earth’ the novel, see Davies, *Heretic*, 60-9, and also 78-9, observing, with a degree of whimsy, the danger of arriving at the novel with alternative metaphysical or political ‘bees in our bonnets’.

² For the impossibility of separating the poetic and the political in the context of Emily’s novel, see Armstrong, 430.

³ Sister Anne, Gaskell confirmed, was just as obviously influenced by such tales but, the imputation ran, had the mental strength to resist their enchantment. Gaskell, 24, 104-5, 111 and also 257 commenting on the array of ‘grim and terrible criminals’.


⁵ For confirmation that the novel can be read as a social and political as well as purely lyrical or metaphysical text, see Ingham, 121-7.

⁶ For this supposition, see Davies, *Heretic*, 47-8.
which is why no one seems too sure as to who is supposed to be winning it, or indeed what a victory might look like. Established tenets of international law, particularly those of humanitarian law, or the law of war, are swept aside, jurists agonise about the ‘spirit of the laws’ sacrificed to a terrorist threat that appears to be almost willed into existence. The age of terror has ushered in a complementary age of what the US President cheerfully terms ‘kick ass’ politics. And as for terror, its terminological and conceptual slipperiness is already notorious. The relativist question is a familiar, if no less unsettling, one: when is a terrorist a freedom fighter? There is no answer; except that which is momentarily urged upon us by our political leaders. As Conor Gearty has recently put it, the aspersion of terrorism has ‘become the rhetorical servant of the established order, wherever it might be, and however heinous its own activities are’. The present age of terror, like all the ones that have gone before, is also the age of the polemicist.

Of course, few of us experience terrorism in the immediate prosaic sense. But we experience it all the same. At a radical edge, Slavoj Zizek argues that modern terrorism is the archetype of ’virtualization’, where spectacle assumes its own ‘reality’. The terror is no less ‘living’, Jean Baudrillard concurs, just because it is ‘virtual’. In this sense, the ‘war on terror’ is indeed a virtual war; one we experience through various images and texts. We are, constantly, exposed to polemic and rhetoric. And in the immediate context of terrorism and political violence, it is a virtual experience which we savour. As Ariel Dorfman has noted, it has ‘become the spectacle to end and outsell all spectacles’. Needless to say, much is made about the peculiar nature and extent of the present threat. Today’s terrorism is always presented as being altogether more terrifying than yesterday’s. Ours is the age, not just of terror, but of ‘hyper-terrorism’. A ‘devastating storm’ of ‘mega-terrorism’ is pending. The ‘whole of history and power’ has been ‘disrupted’, the ‘terrorist imagination that dwells in all of us’ awakened once more. An age of ‘Hobbesian anarchy’ awaits. Our political leaders, likewise, toy with our deeper political emotions, assuring us that the future of ‘civilization’, of ‘progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom’, is at stake.

In this context, it is hardly surprising that commentators have increasingly argued that terrorism, and the present ‘war on terror’, are essentially imagined; an experience shaped by myriad icons and symbols, texts and taboos. Terrorism, to borrow Michel Foucault’s phrase, has a ‘magical aspect’. It seeks to ‘dazzle’, to ‘fascinate, terrorize and immobilize’ in equal measure. Terry Eagleton puts it bluntly. On closer inspection it rapidly becomes apparent that terrorism is not ‘political in any conventional sense of the term’. It is, rather, mythic and rhetorical,

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7. Koh, ‘Spirit’, 23 and also ‘Exceptionalism’, 1496, 1527, concluding that ‘we have almost literally left the light and entered the shadows of a new age of global pessimism’.
10. Zizek, 9-11, 16.
11. Baudrillard, 10, 81, confirming that we now appear to live in a state of ‘perpetual terror’.
13. See Schell, 5 and Raufer, 30-51.
15. Baudrillard, 4-5, 73-4.
17. President George Bush, quoted in McGoldrick, at 11.
18. Foucault, 68, 72, 265, 270.
our experience of it the dialectic of alternative, necessarily fluid, often barely tangible, terrorist and counter-terrorist narratives. Aspersions of demonism and bestiality abound; insults showered by terrorist and assumed counter-terrorist alike. Half a century ago, President Franklin Roosevelt appealed to cold reason in the face of violence, warning that a free society has nothing to fear except fear itself. But the countervailing forces, of virtual terror and virtual counter-terror, are overpowering. Hyperbole devours reason.

It has, of course, always been thus. In his recent *Holy Terror*, Eagleton has traced the origins of the modern terrorist imaginary back to the drama of Euripides, and then through various mutations, from Milton to Burke to Conrad. As an imagined experience terrorism is rooted, of necessity, in text, its vitality assured by a process of constant rebirth through history. And because it is imagined, because it is something we conjure, because it is something that gains its vitality from human invocation, so too is it ever-present, a testimony to our own passions. As Eagleton puts it, recasting a critical appreciation shared by Burke and his fellow Enlightenment traveller, Immanuel Kant:

> There are times when the terror which the symbolic order has safely defused, sublimating it into the majesty of law and sovereignty, comes bursting through the fault lines of that order in the shape of the ineffable Real. It is this which we know among other things as terrorism, a fury which is unleashed not least when the law has fallen into disrepute. Yet it is also a built-in possibility, a disaster waiting to happen.

The invocation of Milton and Burke, of course, has a particular resonance in the context of a study of *Wuthering Heights*. On the one hand, a vigorous strain of feminist critique has sought to place the novel in a literary tradition that can be traced back to Milton’s depiction of paradise lost and the descent into eternal damnation; terror as the visitation of an ‘angry Jove’. Meanwhile, Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, at the heart of which lay the scarcely veiled threat that Jacobin terror might so easily be visited upon the English commonwealth, is just as commonly interpreted, not just as the first modern counter-terrorist polemic, but also as a ready invocation of the ‘existential sublime’ of violence originally presented in his *Philosophical Enquiry*. Politics, as Burke emphasised in *Reflections*, is a ‘great drama’, violent politics particularly so. For ‘We are alarmed into reflexion (as it has long since been observed), are purified by terror and pity; our weak unthinking pride is humbled, under the dispensations of a mysterious wisdom’. We shall revisit this drama in due course.

In one of the most compelling contributions to this maelstrom of often conflicting commentaries on the myriad political, cultural and literary dimensions of

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20 Quoted in Barber, 50.
21 Eagleton, *Terror*, 47.
22 This theory is strongly argued by Gilbert and Gubar, suggesting at 189, and again at 255, that *Wuthering Heights* is a ‘radically corrective misreading’ of *Paradise Lost*, presenting an inverted ‘fall’ from hell to heaven, and again at 253 concluding that *Wuthering Heights* is ‘haunted by Milton’s bogey’. Milton, they further argue, at 193-5, is a dominant figure across the Bronte canon, appearing again, perhaps most obviously in Charlotte’s presentation of the ‘titanic’ Eve in *Shirley*. See also Paulin, 22-3, 31-2, 156-7 and 164-7 placing Milton at the root of a distinctive dissenting literary culture which takes in *Wuthering Heights* and much else in the Victorian canon.
23 See also Crowther, 128-9.
24 Burke, 175.
9/11 and the ‘war on terror’, Martha Nussbaum, like Eagleton, has returned to Euripides in order to engage a more constructive, more literate, response. It is too easy to allow such experiences to nurture emotional responses of fear and hatred; responses which, with an inevitable tragedy, merely provoke responses of seemingly concomitant counter-violence. More difficult, but more vital, is to see in such experiences a reinvested capacity for human ‘compassion’; not just compassion as a ‘warm feeling in the gut’, but compassion as an appreciation of human relation, a ‘pattern of interaction’ which defines an ‘us’ which reaches beyond limited communal or even national boundaries. In this way, and against the terrorist ‘imagination’, Nussbaum presents a counter-imaginary, an ethic of compassion, of reciprocal ‘human dignity’, as an alternative to the necessarily violent and conceptually indeterminate idiocy of a ‘war’ on terror.

It is, of course, a recommendation that she has made, in the broader context, on a number of occasions; the peculiar potential of literature to rejuvenate political morality in terms of ‘imagination, inclusion, sympathy and voice’. In *Love’s Knowledge*, Nussbaum presented politics, as well as morality, as an imaginative construct, contending that literature, rather than political or legal treatise, is better able to sketch the parameters of the ‘good society’ precisely because it can more readily access our ‘narrative emotions’. In this way, it can promote in us an ‘ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have’.

There is a ready echo, in this injunction, of Richard Weisberg’s appeal for a poethical jurisprudence, one that can ‘revitalize the ethical component of law’ by deploying narratives of justice and injustice. ‘Stories about the “other”’, Weisberg enjoins, ‘induce us to see the other, and once we do so, we endeavour consistently to understand the world from within the other’s optic’. Weisberg is not, of course, alone in making this claim. It has become a common place of critical jurisprudence. The idea that justice might be best understood as a ‘narrative way of world-making’, that it is something ‘imagined and enacted’ and ‘comprehended’ within ‘vernacular contexts’ is strongly urged, for example, by Allan Hutchinson. Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey likewise present justice as the product of a process of social and political ‘storytelling’.

In this context, the demise of international law and order, in the face of the supposed hyper-terrorist threat, both matters more and less. It matters less because there is nothing inviolate about the jurisprudence of international law constructed during the second part of the twentieth century. It matters more because the potential for tyranny, that of both terrorists and counter-terrorists, is starkly apparent. If terrorism is indeed in large part an imaginative construct, maybe even an imaginary one, then the case for re-examining its canon becomes ever more pressing. And at the heart of this canon, it might be suggested, is *Wuthering Heights*.

**Grim and Terrible**

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25 See Nussbaum, ‘Compassion’, 230-8, and also 249, concluding that ‘we will achieve no lasting moral progress unless and until the daily unremarkable lives of people distant from us become real in the fabric of our own daily lives’.
27 Nussbaum, *Knowledge*, 53, 75-6, 94-6, 165-6, 190-1.
29 See Weisberg, 46.
30 See Hutchinson, 13-14.
31 See Ewick & Silbey, 19, 223, 226.
Criticism of Emily Bronte’s novel, as we shall see, tends to see the root of all evil in the seemingly demonic Heathcliff. But in fact, violence is pervasive. It saturates the novel. It consumes the Earnshaws, and, in time, the Lintons too. In this, as critics such as Laura Berry and Patricia Yaeger have suggested, *Wuthering Heights* is very much a novel of domestic terror, and of terrorism. And ‘grim and terrible’ criminals abound. The ‘thought of murder’, as one horrified reviewer in the *Christian Remembrancer* observed, seems to be ‘habitual’ to all those fated to live amongst the pages of Emily Bronte’s novel. Wives are beaten, children are beaten, servants abused, animals tortured. Drunkenness, Godless-ness, licentiousness, myriad forms of delinquency; all removed from polite conversation in mid-nineteenth century England, but all, rather too obviously, on show in the pages of *Wuthering Heights*. Of course, much of this, not least the spousal and child abuse, would barely have attracted criminal sanction in mid-nineteenth century England. But that only added to the sense of pervasive anarchy.

In the whole, contemporary critics were unsurprisingly appalled by the novel. A presentation of ‘incidents’, a reviewer in the *Spectator* concluded, ‘too coarse and disagreeable to be attractive, the very best being improbable, with a moral taint about them, and the villainy not leading to results sufficient to justify the elaborate pains taken in depicting it’. The reviewer in *Britannia* agreed. The ‘scenes of brutality are unnecessarily long and unnecessarily frequent’. So did the reviewer in *Jerrold’s Weekly Newspaper*: ‘In *Wuthering Heights* the reader is shocked, disgusted, almost sickened by details of cruelty, inhumanity, and the most diabolical hate and vengeance’. ‘How a human being’, the reviewer in *Graham’s Magazine* rejoined, ‘could have attempted such a book as the present without committing

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32. As the contemporary reviewer in *Britannia* observed, ‘*Wuthering Heights* would have been a far better romance if Heathcliff alone had been a being of stormy passions, instead of all the other characters being nearly as violent and destructive as himself’. Writing in 1877, T.W. Reid noted that ‘there is hardly a personage in the story who is not in some shape or another the victim of mental or moral deformities’. In Allott, at 224 and 399 respectively.

33. According to Gilbert and Gubar, Emily depicts a world of ‘sour hatred’ and ‘aimless violence’. See 260. For a similar conclusion, see Nestor, xxviii, and also Davies, *Heretic*, 89-90. ‘No other Victorian novel’, according to Hillis Miller, ‘contains such scenes of inhuman brutality’. At 167.

34. The novel as a whole, in the words of Patricia Ingham, is ‘hellish in the obvious sense that it is full of suffering’. See 210. For a similar observation regarding the pervasive violence, see Davies, ‘Three’, 94-5.

35. On this supposition, see Berry, 32-3 and 40-1, arguing that the novel can be read as a series of strategies designed to break down domestic ‘disciplinarian barriers’, and also more generally Yaeger, 203-29.

36. In Allott, at 368.

37. As G.H. Lewes noted in his review of the novel in the *Leader* in December 1850, concluding soberly ‘such brutes we should all be, or most of us, were our lives as insubordinate to law; were our affections and sympathies as little cultivated, our imaginations as undirected’. In Allott, at 292. In a more recent critique, Camille Paglia has listed the ‘catalog of chthonic horrors’ which *Wuthering Heights* presents its readers, the myriad instances of ‘whipping, slapping, thrashing, cuffing, wrenching, pinching, scratching, hair-pulling, gouging, kicking, trampling, and the hanging of dogs’. See Paglia, 449.

38. For overviews of the precarious legal situation of abused women in the mid-nineteenth century, see Aristodemou, 110-12 and also Shanley, 22-48.

39. As they were, of course, with regard to each of the three sisters novels published in 1847. For a commentary on this reception, see Miller, 17-25, and also Jacobs, 205-7.

40. In Allott, at 217.

41. In Allott, at 225.

42. In Allott, at 228.
suicide before he had finished a dozen chapters, is a mystery’. It is, he continued, ‘a compound of vulgar depravity and unnatural horrors, such as we might suppose a person, inspired by a mixture of brandy and gunpowder, might write for the edification of fifth-rate blackguards’. 43 Wuthering Heights, E.P. Whipple concluded, in the North American Review, presents a ‘Pandemonium’ of familial and human ‘depravity’. 44

The familial context is critical. By the time Wuthering Heights was published, the ‘woman question’ had become a matter of considerable popular concern; just as it was clearly a subject of particular and intense discussion amongst the Bronte sisters. And in these debates, the state of the family, and especially the role of women in securing it, was pivotal.45 It was for this reason, for example, that there was such anxiety regarding women who remain single, prospectively eschewing the family unit; a subject which is, again, repeatedly addressed across the Bronte canon. 46 ‘Home’, as the adage which adorned so many mid-Victorian walls ran, ‘is the nest where all is best’.47 A more martial metaphor invoked a ‘fireside heroism’, of women who devote themselves to stoking the family hearth, and with it underpinning the English commonweal; an image which, as we shall see, enjoyed an authoritative resonance in English constitutional and political polemic.48 The extent to which the idyll of the mid-Victorian family was increasingly revealed to be a fiction has been well-chronicled by modern historians. Lisa Surridge has recently emphasised the brutal realities which the idyll strove to mask, whilst Mary Poovey has charted the gradual alignment of an emergent and distinctively female, if not feminist, literature alongside this process of unmasking.49 As James Hammerton has revealed, moreover, legal reforms, especially relating to divorce and separation, and in time property rights, made a significant contribution to this process.50 But the process was, again, gradual.51 And whilst it may well be that the mid-Victorian fantasist clung to Coventry Patmore’s iconic image of the ‘angel of the house’ with an increasing desperation, cling they did.52 The myth retained a diminishing power; as those, such as Frances Power Cobbe, who were so determined to debunk it, well appreciated.53 Deploying a vocabulary, and indeed a metaphor,
which has an added currency in the context of this article, John Ruskin confirmed that
the ‘true nature’ of the Victorian home could be discerned in it being ‘the Place of
Peace; the shelter, not only from injury, but from all terror, doubt and division’. 54
And, by way of reassurance, there was the grandest manifestation of all: the idol of
Queen Victoria, her seemingly idyllic consort, and their rapidly growing brood. By
the end of the 1840s, Victorian Britain was saturated with images, lithographs,
engravings and prints, of the happiest of all its families. 55 Wuthering Heights, as
Nancy Armstrong has argued, is presented as a precise antithesis of this fantasy; a
novel of repeated familial and sexual ‘violation’. 56

The deeper political and constitutional import of this fantastical image of
familial harmony was well, if teasingly, appreciated by Walter Bagehot. No one better
understood the centrality of such imagery, as well as its fragility. Bagehot the
‘ironist’, to borrow Jacques Barzun’s appellation, knew that the strength of a
constitution rested, not in statutory text or judicial pronouncement, but in the vitality
of its impression on the public mind. 57 A constitution, as he famously confirmed, must
be not only ‘efficient’, but ‘dignified’. 58 It must present a picture replete with icons
that all its supplicants can recognise and admire, and to which they can equally aspire,
no matter how rough the approximation might be. As he observed, in a justly famous
passage in his English Constitution:

The use of the Queen, in a dignified capacity, is incalculable… Most people
when they read that the Queen walked on the slopes at Windsor – that the
Prince of Wales went to the Derby – have imagined that too much thought and
prominence were given to little things. But they have been in error; and it is
nice to trace how the actions of a retired widow and an unemployed youth
become of such importance. 59

Nothing so engages the ‘heart’ of the collective English public than the spectacle of a
happy family, particularly a royal one; a ‘visible symbol of unity to those still so
imperfectly educated as to need a symbol’. 60 Little, it might be observed in passing,
has happened in the intervening century and a half to diminish the acuity of the
observation.

In terms of constitutional jurisprudence, the idyll of the English
commonwealth, as the imagined construct of myriad constituent commonwealths, of
myriad happy families as it were, could be traced back to the treatises of late sixteenth
century jurists such as Richard Hooker. 61 More recently, it had found an influential
restatement in Edmund Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France. According to
Burke, the vitality of the English constitutional ‘mind’ was rooted in a ‘generous
sense of glory and emulation’, a reverence, for certain quintessential national
institutions and icons. 62 In a pivotal passage at the heart of Reflections, Burke declared:

54 Quoted in Shanley, at 4.
55 A fact which, as Margaret Homans notes, necessitates its own ambiguities; the ideal private
family placed before a voracious, if adoring, public gaze. See Homans, 18-33.
56 See Armstrong, 431-2.
57 See Ward. ‘Bagehot, 73-4.
58 Bagehot, 5.
59 Bagehot, 34.
60 Bagehot, 37, 41.
61 See Tosh, chapter 2.
62 Burke, 137.
In this choice of inheritance we have given to our frame of polity the image of a relation in blood; binding up the constitution of our country with our dearest domestic ties; adopting our fundamental laws into the bosom of our family affections; keeping inseparable, and cherishing with the warmth of all their combined and mutually reflected charities, our states, our hearths, our sepulchres, and our altars.  

The affinity of ‘hearth’ and ‘sepulchres’ carries an especial consonance in a treatise which, in effect, substituted the established Church for an absent declaratory constitutional text. It is in this particular affinity that the ‘spirit’ of the English ‘constitution’ resides. Of course, it is all rather flimsy, as such fancies must be, and as Bagehot wryly observed: ‘We must not let in daylight upon magic’. Which is precisely why, of course, the likes of Frances Power Cobbe determined to do precisely this, noting caustically in her essay *Criminals, Idiots, Minors and Women*, that: ‘Themis, when she presides at the domestic hearth, doffs her wig and allows herself to be swayed by poetical, not to say romantic considerations’. It is the ‘beautiful ideal’ upon which we are invited to reflect, not the brutal reality. And so, as one contemporary reviewer noted, did Emily Bronte, presenting before her readers a ‘group of deformities such as we have rarely seen gathered together on the same canvas’. But the fancy retained its hold. Half a century after the publication of *Wuthering Heights*, and a century after Burke presented his *Reflections*, Mona Caird cast an ironic and rueful eye over a century of debate regarding the ‘condition of women’, and noted the pervasive tendency of the conservative Victorian to raise the spectre of Jacobin terror every time a woman composed a polemic in defence of female education, or the reform of laws relating to marital property, or against wife-beating.

And a century further on, in the wake of 9/11, when he wanted to raise a particularly horrifying spectre, President George W. Bush went, almost instinctively, to the sanctity of the family hearth, invoking the image of an ‘enemy determined to bring death and suffering into our homes’. As Susan Faludi has recently confirmed, at the heart of the ‘rescue myth’ which underpins the grander foundational ‘frontier’ narratives of American identity can be found, consistently, the recurrent images of the sacred homestead, replete with vulnerable female, threatened by marauding dark-skinned savages. There was nothing, in this context, terribly new about the threat which President Bush presented to his countrymen and women in the months that followed 9/11; quite the contrary. It was precisely the threat which Emily Bronte presented to her audience in 1847; only where Bush preferred a banal cartoon of hazy Hollywood caricatures, Emily proffered an altogether deeper, more troubling spectre of textual violence. The terror of *Wuthering Heights*, and the terrorism, lies in the strategic destruction of the patriarchal order plotted and executed, with demonic

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63 Burke, 120.
64 Burke, 117.
65 Bagehot, 50.
67 In Allott, at 232.
68 See her pointed rebuttal of Mrs Lynn Linton, in *A Defence of the So-called Wild Women*, in Hamilton, at 298-9.
69 Quoted in Faludi, at 5.
70 See Faludi, particularly chapters 10 and 11.
precision, by the ‘gypsy brat’ Heathcliff and his sexually deviant accomplice, Cathy Earnshaw.

A Diabolical Prudence

If Emily Bronte’s novel is indeed stocked full of ‘grim and terrible criminals’, then Heathcliff appears to be the grimmest and most terrible of all; a Hobbesian force, as Terry Eagleton notes, of supremely ‘arbitrary’ and ‘gratuitous’ violence. \(^{71}\) Heathcliff rules by terror. Sometimes his terror seems petty such as the torture and hanging of Isabella’s dog (128-9). \(^{72}\) Other times it resides purely in his imagination; such as the plan to kill Hindley which he confesses to Cathy (97). \(^{73}\) More often than not, though, the terror is neither petty nor imaginary. *Wuthering Heights* is the home of myriad expressions of violence, child-abuse, wife-beating, insinuations of sexual depravity, criminal conversation perhaps and adultery, at the more extreme, rape, incest even. \(^{74}\)

There is an obviously demonic connotation written into the character of Heathcliff; after all, he is presented at the very outset as being ‘dark almost as if’ he ‘came from the devil’ (36). \(^{75}\) Is ‘he mad?’ the newly wed Isabella Linton writes to Nelly in horror, ‘And if not, is he a devil?’ (136). Nelly is already convinced, declaring Heathcliff’s particular tendency to abuse his own children, genetic or adoptive, a peculiar and ‘diabolical violence’ (270-1). \(^{76}\) Yet, whilst it would be wrong to dismiss the diabolical Heathcliff, it would be an equal mistake to ignore the deeper human reality that Emily prescribes for the unhappy Earnshaws. \(^{77}\) Heathcliff may or may not be a devil, but his crimes are not so unusual; not even within the Bronte canon. The Huntingdon case, chronicled in sister Anne’s *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, presents much the same, the child abuse, the wife-beating, the casual regard for sexual propriety, only without the diabolical presence. \(^{78}\)

The cruelty which Heathcliff inflicts has, critically, a human root. It is the violence of experience, and custom. Perhaps the most familiar violence, certainly for those who might have already encountered the similar travails of Helen Huntingdon, or who were abreast of contemporary debates on the subject of what Frances Power

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\(^{71}\) Eagleton, *Myths*, 102, 110.

\(^{72}\) All references to the text of *Wuthering Heights* are taken from Bronte, 2003, and given internally.

\(^{73}\) See also 139-40 and 76-7 for Hindley’s reciprocal intent. For a discussion of Heathcliff’s ‘homicidal’ tendencies, imagined or otherwise, see Gilbert & Gubar, 296-7.

\(^{74}\) At the radical edge of the sexuality critique can be found Algernon Swinburne’s reading of sado-masochism in the novel, a possibility revisited rather more recently, and controversially by Camille Paglia, at 445-9 and 458-9, in which she also advances the incest theme as a un-natural complement. For Swinburne, see Ingham, 221. For a closer consideration of the incest theme, see, for example, Winnifrith, 108-9, noting the common theme of aspirational adultery in *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and also Miller, 195, contemplating the ‘overtones of sibling incest’. For an overview of the serial instances and insinuations of pornographic and sexual violation in the novel, ‘rape, pedophilia, necrophilia, so some combination of these’, see Armstrong, 43.

\(^{75}\) The demonic Heathcliff is strongly presented by Gilbert and Gubar, at 252-6 and also 266.

\(^{76}\) See Gilbert & Gubar, 296-7, suggesting that ‘infanticidal tendencies’ are written into Heathcliff’s character.

\(^{77}\) See Gilbert & Gubar, 259, rightly noting the constant tension in the novel, between fantasy and harsh reality, and Davies, *Heretic*, 54-5, likewise arguing that the tendency to imagine the mystical Emily tends to blind us to the reality that she was depicting a harsh reality that was all too familiar in all too many Victorian families.

\(^{78}\) For a comment on the obvious affinity between the novels here, see Frank, 228-9.
Cobbe was to provocatively term ‘wife-torture’, is that suffered by Isabella Linton. Degraded by her husband, maligned as a ‘mere slut’, confined by means of barely concealed violence to remain physically incarcerated in her new home, ultimately forced to flee in fear of her life, Isabella’s was precisely the kind of fate which polite Victorian society preferred not to countenance too deeply (149, 171-3, 208). The more Isabella sought to love him, Nelly recounts, the more an uncomprehending Heathcliff was given to greater brutality (150). There is, again, something peculiarly terrifying about the insinuation ‘If you are called upon in a court of law, you’ll remember her language, Nelly!’ (151)

But Heathcliff is not terrifying merely because he rules by terror. Perhaps more troubling is the realisation that he will use his power to sequester the Earnshaw and Linton estates, and thus disrupt the natural patriarchal authority that the common law exists to preserve. Having sowed the seeds of marital disharmony in the Edgar Linton-Cathy Earnshaw marriage, he then marries Isabella simply to inherit the Linton estates in default of heirs male; a ‘diabolical prudence’, as the latter discovers rather too late. These will be sequestered to the Earnshaw estate, the mortgages of which Heathcliff has already acquired from Hindley as he declines into a state of terminal alcoholism, and their accommodation secured, or so it is intended, by the prospective marriage of Linton and the young Catherine (186-8, 215). And just to be sure, Heathcliff corrupts the family lawyer too, ensuring that there could be no prospect of the Linton estate, including Thrushcross, passing into anyone else’s control (283-4).

Home, hearth, domestic integrity; all the idylls cast down. Taken together, it becomes clear that Heathcliff terrifies because he threatens to devastate the familial commonwealth into which he has been invited. Heathcliff is a purveyor of demonic terror, the kind of godless brute Burke warned middle England about; the necessary ‘other’ upon which, as Edward Said has intimated, the western literary canon always falls back when it wants to terrify. Heathcliff, in short, is a Jacobin. Contemporary commentators certainly seized upon the demonic traits, and the subversive. As the reviewer in the Examiner observed, ‘Heathcliff may be considered as the hero of the book, if a hero there be. He is an incarnation of evil qualities; implacable hate, ingratitude, cruelty, falsehood, selfishness, and revenge’. The ‘hardness, selfishness, and cruelty of Heathcliff’, the baffled reviewer went on in a curiously prosaic tone, ‘are in our opinion inconsistent with the romantic love that he is stated to have felt for Catherine Earnshaw’. E.P. Whipple, in the North American Review, was driven to florid revulsion:

He is a deformed monster, whom the Mephistopheles of Goethe would have nothing to say to, whom the Satan of Milton would consider as an object of simple disgust, and to whom Dante would hesitate in awarding the honour of a place among those whom he has consigned to the burning pitch.

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80 See Gilbert & Gubar, 297.
81 For a commentary on this aspect of Heathcliff’s strategy, see Ingham, 126.
82 This idealised model of patriarchy is explored in Tosh, chapter 2.
83 See Said, chapter 1, and also, making the same essential suggestion, Eagleton, Myths, 102-4.
84 In Allott, at 220-1.
85 In Allott, at 248.
Possible models for Heathcliff are various; and have long fascinated critics. Amongst the flesh and blood alternatives, Oliver Cromwell, Lord Byron and brother Branwell have their advocates. Amongst the fictive, in turn, a compelling case might be made for the degenerate Arthur Huntingdon.

Heathcliff is introduced in the very outset of first chapter of *Wuthering Heights*, when Lockwood is moved to note the ‘singular contrast’ which his host makes with the relative normality of his ‘abode’. ‘He is’, Lockwood observes, ‘a dark-skinned gypsy in aspect, in dress and manners a gentleman’. And it is not just his appearance that seems incongruous. There is also his manner. Heathcliff has an ‘aversion’ to ‘manifestations of mutual kindliness’ (5). His introduction to the Earnshaw family is no less peculiar, brought home by their father following a business trip to Liverpool, a foundling, denied the Earnshaw patronym, and ‘dark’, as we have already noted, as if he ‘came from the devil’ (37-8). A ‘dirty, ragged, black-haired child’, as Nelly Dean confirms, speaking ‘gibberish that nobody could understood’, a ‘gypsy brat’ (36-7). Joseph makes the same presumption, a ‘flaysome devil uf a gypsy’ (87).

The gypsy pejorative recurs. It is Isabella’s immediate assumption when Heathcliff is caught in Thrushcross grounds, and one reinforced by her father who, pondering the orphan’s ‘acquisition’ in Liverpool hazards that he might be ‘a little Lascar perhaps, or an American or Spanish castaway’ (50). There has been much speculation as to Heathcliff’s supposed origins. Some have suggested a colonial referent; Heathcliff as the offspring of an escaped or freed slave perhaps. Rather more have read into the ascription an Irish tone, not least, once again, because of the Liverpool association. Such speculation can never be more than that, speculation. It is, anyway, the generic ascription that matters. Heathcliff is a gypsy alien, a boy

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86 The suspicion that Heathcliff might have been modelled, at least in part, on Branwell, was insinuated by T.W. Reid in his 1877 review of the novel. In Allott, at 400. It is discussed at some length in Miller, 206-18. The Byronic alignment is championed by Pauline Nestor at xx. According David Musselthwaite, who hazards the possibility that Cromwell might have provided a model for Emily’s protagonist, ‘One of the great sports of literary criticism and scholarship must be the search for the origins of Heathcliff’. See Musselthwaite, 97.

87 Especially given the close nature of their composition. See Frank, 228-9. Contemporary reviewers such as E.P. Whipple, assumed the two novels to be written by the one, presumably depraved and deluded, author. See his comments in his review in *North American Review* in Allott, at 247-8.

88 For a commentary on the lack of a second familial name, and the pagan, even heathen, connotations which surround ‘Heathcliff’, see Davies, *Heretic*, 210-12.

89 For a discussion of contemporary anxieties regarding the ‘gypsy problem’, a perception which, as George Eliot cast it, presumed that gypsies were a ‘race that lives on prey as foxes do on stealthy, petty rapine’, see Behlmer, 231-53.

90 Indian seamen were commonly known as Lascars. See Meyer, 97-8, and also 100 suggesting that Heathcliff is consistently subject to an imperialist ‘gaze’.

91 For a recent overview, see Meyer, 98-101, and also, engaging a forensic analysis of the colonial referents in the novel, in the context of regional associations with the slave trade and colony-dependent industry, see Heywood, 184-97.

92 Original support for the Irish association can be found in Gerin, 225-6. More recently it can be seen in Chitham’s *Irish Background*, chapter 12, and also, in measured tones, in Terry Eagleton’s *Heathcliff*, surmising, at 19, that the young Heathcliff ‘starts out as an image of the famished Irish immigrant’. For contextual commentaries on popular perceptions and prejudices regarding the Irish in Liverpool during the mid-nineteenth century, see variously Macraid, 155-84, and Hollen, 217-29, discussing the extent to which mainland authorities were reluctant to include Irish migrants amongst those entitled to relief under the poor laws.

93 As Susan Meyer rightly concludes, it is perhaps more sensible to see in Heathcliff a ‘collective’ of Victorian bogeymen. See Meyer, 102.
without a name, or a history, or a family. And he looks different, and speaks
differently.\(^94\)

And, perhaps, most importantly, he feels different. At a critical moment in the
novel, as Heathcliff contemplates his appearance, Nelly tries to cheer him with the
observation: ‘You’re fit for a prince in disguise. Who knows, but your father was
Emperor of China, and your mother an Indian queen, each of them able to buy up,
with a week’s income, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange?’ (58) The
comment has long intrigued commentators investigating the colonial context of Emily
Bronte’s novel, particularly those who like to discern in Emily’s Heathcliff
resonances with various contemporary images of colonial violence and revolution.\(^95\)
The collateral terrorist insinuation is obvious; the ultimate imperialist ‘nightmare’, as
Susan Meyer puts it, the former slave turned slave-master.\(^96\) Terry Eagleton agrees,
albeit at a slight variance, presenting Emily’s Heathcliff as the realization of an
equally terrible vision, the ‘furious insurrectionary energy’ recklessly invited into the
English homestead; a vision which, in the immediate context of 1846-8, and popular
anxieties regarding rumoured associations of Irish Confederates and English Chartists
in the north-west, would have gained an added, suitably terrifying, lustre.\(^97\) Heathcliff
will return, to sequester the estate, degrade the patrimony, and enslave the remaining
progeny.\(^98\)

Contemporary critics were, once again, suitably appalled.\(^99\) Heathcliff, as one
contemporary reviewer noted, is the ‘epitome of brutality’.\(^100\) As the doggedly prosaic
reviewer in the Examiner commented, ‘it is with difficulty that we can prevail upon
ourselves to believe in the appearance of such a phenomenon, so near our own
dwellings at the summit of a Lancashire or Yorkshire moor’.\(^101\) It is not just a
geographical, or even a racial or cultural, other-ness; though this alone, in the context
of mid-Victorian England sensitivities regarding the textually emergent ‘oriental’
other, was reason enough to horrify.\(^102\) Heathcliff is essentially different, a primal
force that attaches the romantic sublime in the purity of its rage and violence. He is, in
short, a precise image of the spectre that Burke discerned in his Philosophical Enquiry
into the nature of the sublime, and which he then raised in his Reflections.

The lack of ethical compass, what Lisa Wang terms a ‘moral silence’ at the
heart of the novel, reinforces the primal sense.\(^103\) To a certain extent the primal
element in Heathcliff connotes the demonic. As he reflects on the prospect of life after
Cathy’s death, he declares: ‘Two words would comprehend my future, death and hell
– existence, after losing her, would be hell’. It has been suggested that another
possible literary model for Heathcliff is Milton’s Satan. He is certainly one of the
‘Devil’s party’, and proud, it seems, to be associated.\(^104\) As Charlotte concluded,

\(^94\) See Michie, 133-4.
\(^95\) See Meyer, 112-14, further discussing the possible context of the Chinese Opium wars.
\(^96\) See Meyer, 117-19 and 123-4, discussing the ‘inverted colonial gaze’.
\(^97\) See Eagleton, Heathcliff, 20-1. For a discussion of the possible extent of Confederate-Chartist
association, and contemporary anxieties, see Bisceglia, 207-15.
\(^98\) See 207 for Heathcliff’s reference to his returning son Linton as ‘my property’, and also 209.
\(^99\) See Musselthwaite, 97-8.
\(^100\) See E.P. Whipple in Allott, at 248.
\(^101\) In Allott, at 221.
\(^102\) See here Said, Orientalism, 3-5, 18-23 and 93-5.
\(^103\) Wang, 161, 169.
\(^104\) See Thomahlen, 101-2, and also 108-9 revisiting the supposition that there is broader generic
affiliation with Milton in the novel as a whole.
ultimately her sister’s creation was ‘neither of Lascar nor gipsy, but a man’s shape animated by demon life – a Ghoul – an Afreet’ (liii).\(^\text{105}\) Except that the connotation is too convenient. Heathcliff’s rage is not purely demonic.

It is nurtured. As Nelly insinuates, Heathcliff has an ‘utter lack of sympathy’ for a reason (212). He is tutored in violence.\(^\text{106}\) Within days of arriving at Wuthering Heights, he is squabbling with the resentful Hindley, just as he begins to form a curiously dependent relationship with Cathy; all the extremes of violent emotion, passionate hatred and passionate love. A couple of chapters later, spurred by a disparaging remark as to his appearance, the he throws a tureen of hot apple sauce in Edgar’s face; a gesture which only results in Hindley visiting an equal violence in retaliation. On return to the kitchen, Hindley advises the sobbing Edgar to ‘take the law into your own fists – it will give you an appetite!’ (59-60) Cathy is, of course, contemptuous of her future husband, whilst Heathcliff, eschewing the thought that only God punishes the wicked, vows a more personal revenge (61). Violence, like loathing and contempt, is endemic. Heathcliff and Hindley repeatedly engage one another. Even the pacific Edgar is driven to striking Heathcliff at one point, and when Hindley is not assaulting Heathcliff, he is beating his own son Hareton (109-10, 115).

And he is tutored in resentment too.\(^\text{107}\) Heathcliff occupies a curiously ambivalent place, both in the novel and in the Earnshaw family; neither inside, nor as Frank Kermode has argued, securely outside the Earnshaw family.\(^\text{108}\) Nelly’s suspicion is, of course, symptomatic: ‘We don’t in general take to foreigners here’ (46). Heathcliff is taken into the homestead, but never admitted to the family. In time, following Hindley’s assumption of patriarchal responsibilities in the household, he is further excluded, treated ‘like the other servants’, sent into the fields, like a slave indeed, to toil away (54).\(^\text{109}\) In time, he comes to hate his appearance, his very being even (57-8). But it is the emotional exclusion which matters most, devastatingly so when it is articulated by his beloved Cathy. It is not that Cathy no longer loves Heathcliff. She marries Edgar Linton because he is a scion of the landed aristocracy, the prospective patriarch of a family of untainted respectability, in a word legitimate. Marrying Heathcliff would ‘degrade’ her, Cathy fatefuly informs Nelly; even as she confirms the depth of her love for him (81-2). Heathcliff turns to hatred for a reason.

In one of their final exchanges young Catherine perceives the root of Heathcliff’s cruelty, and his sadness:

Mr. Heathcliff you have nobody to love you; and however miserable you make us, we shall still have the revenge of thinking that your cruelty rises from your greater misery! You are miserable, are you not? Lonely, like the devil, and envious like him? Nobody loves you – nobody will cry for you, when you die! I wouldn’t be you. (288)

Heathcliff has, of course, loved and deeply. And he has been loved. But he has also been rejected ultimately by the only person who ever loved him. And he has been

\(^{105}\) Nelly wonders if the dying Heathcliff has become a ‘ghoul’ or ‘vampire’, at 330.
\(^{106}\) See Jacobs, 212-14, and also Hillis Miller, 168.
\(^{107}\) An insinuation noted by Thorhählen, 134-6, suggesting that Heathcliff’s story might, in these terms, be imagined to be a species of ‘revenger’s tragedy’, one of spiralling violence.
\(^{108}\) See Kermode, 123-4, and also Aristodemou, 115-16, and Musselthwaite, 99, making a similar observation regarding Heathcliff’s oddly transient state, ‘a man of no beginnings and no ends’.
\(^{109}\) See Meyer, 110, discussing Heathcliff’s reduced state, and also Ingham, 122.
bred to hate, just as he has learnt through bitter experience the utility of violence as a tool of domestic governance.  

The passion and the politics are mutually constitutive. There may be much in Heathcliff that resembles the Byronic hero, sorry resonances of Branwell too, but there more still in the visage of the Miltonic ‘avenging angel’, originally cast in the revered image of Oliver Cromwell, and now more latterly revisited in all the terrible spectres of Jacobinism raised by the likes of Burke and Carlyle; images which, as David Musselthwaite has confirmed, were very familiar to the young Emily, not just from her Gondal tales, but from essays written under the Heger tutelage in Brussels. When Heathcliff returns to Wuthering Heights after his hitherto unexplained absence, Nelly described him thus:

He had grown a tall, athletic, well-formed man… His upright carriage suggested the idea of his having been in the army. His countenance… looked intelligent and retained no marks of former degradation. A half-civilized ferocity lurked yet in the depressed brows; and eyes full of black fire, but it was subdued; and his manner was even dignified, quite divested of roughness though too stern for grace. (96)

In the case of Heathcliff, the insinuation of military service is deeply unsettling, whilst the appearance of respectability is concerning precisely because it is an appearance. Heathcliff, seemingly better tutored in both the violent and the theatrical arts, has become precisely the most dangerous and insidious kind of revolutionary conjured in Burke’s Reflections, whilst his ruthless corruption of Cathy, alongside his calculated sequestration of the Earnshaw and Linton estates, touched all the deepest fears that the tremulous Burkean might have shared for the prospective fate of the English idyll.

I Am Heathcliff

Charlotte famously did her best to detach her sister from the darker suspicions which troubled contemporary critics of Wuthering Heights. In correspondence, she had privately mused ‘Whether it is right or advisable to create beings like Heathcliff, I do not know’, concluding pointedly ‘I scarcely think it is’. In public, she sought to present a sister who was of a ‘spirit more sombre than sunny’, too easily fascinated by the ‘tragic and terrible’, who wrote out of naivety rather than a desire to terrify. The novel, as she affirmed in the preface to the 1850 edition, ‘was hewn in a wild

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110 See Eagleton, Myths, 111, observing ‘I take it that Heathcliff, up to the point at which Cathy rejects him, is in general an admirable character’, and also Jacobs, 213-14, on learning from the experience of violence.

111 Musselthwaite, 96-100 also intimating in closing that Emily might have been similarly influenced by poetic representation of Joan of Arc which she encountered at Heger’s Academy. As an icon Joan of Arc was often aligned, for good or bad, with contemporary images of French Jacobinism.

112 See Musselthwaite, 105, on the English-ness of the idyll which Emily appears to cast down, and also Eagleton, Myths, 110-12, noting the peculiar threat which the new Heathcliff presents.

113 See her comments in her ‘Biographical Sketch’ to Wuthering Heights at xlvi, particularly anxious to clear up confusion as to the author’s identity, as well as personality, and at xlix, concluding ‘This notice has been written, because I felt it a sacred duty to wipe the dust off their gravestones, and leave their dear names free from soil’. For a comment on ‘what might be called Charlotte’s smoke-screen’, see Davies, Heretic, 16.

114 In Barker, 534. For a commentary on the particular ‘ambivalence’ that Charlotte felt towards her sister’s work, see Miller, Myth, 188-92.
workshop, with simple tools, out of homely materials’, and having ‘formed these beings, she did not know what she had done’ (li-iv). Her efforts, reinforced by Gaskell, all lent to the image of a literary ‘genius’, as Walter Swinburne termed her, composing paragraphs and stanzas as she walked the moors and cooked supper in the parsonage kitchen. Emily is perhaps the most mythic element in the sometimes overwhelming mythology of the Bronte sisters. ‘Shakespeare’s youngest sister’, an awed Angus Mackay suggested in 1898.

The authorial paradox presses. It is not just that the novel was written by a woman; subversion enough in the eyes of some, not least the revered laureate Robert Southey who sagely advised sister Charlotte that ‘Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life: & it ought not to be’. It is that a young woman should have written such a novel. As Georges Bataille famously observed:

Emily Bronte of all women seems to have been the object of a privileged curse. Her short life was only moderately unhappy. Yet keeping her moral integrity intact, she had a profound experience of the abyss of evil. Though few people could have been more severe, more courageous or more proper, she fathomed the very depths of evil.

How is this? The question haunted contemporary and modern critics alike.

The subversion operates at two necessarily related levels; that of authorial creation, and that of authorial pathology. The latter is, of course, bound up the grander Bronte mythology; within which attempts to align various characters with various members of the family remains a supremely popular exercise. Critics have long pondered the extent to which any of the novels might be autobiographical, and the possibility of an Emily/Cathy identity has long entranced. To a certain degree, in attesting to her sister’s peculiar qualities, the ‘secret power and fire that might have informed the brain and kindled the veins of a hero’, Charlotte added considerable grist to this mill (xlviii). In similar vein, critics have noted the sympathetic resurrection of the recently deceased Emily in the eponymous heroine of Shirley. It is easy to see why some might wish to project a bit of Emily the ‘wild pagan’ in Cathy the ‘wild, wick slip’, as Nelly terms her, such a haunted, and haunting, soul (42). The fact that Elizabeth Gaskell further confirmed, in the process of sacrificing one sister in...
the cause of canonising another, that Emily had a ‘fierce, wild intractability’ provides
further reinforcement to the Emily/Cathy myth.\footnote{127}

The creative subversion attaches more closely to the character of Cathy Earnshaw, the sorcerer’s eager accomplice.\footnote{128} ‘Nelly, I am Heathcliff – he’s always, always in my mind – not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure – but, as my own being’, Cathy Earnshaw famously declares. He is ‘more myself than I am’ (81-3).\footnote{129} It is a declaration that carries an insinuation, not just of androgyne, even incestuous affinity, but also sublimation.\footnote{130} Resisting all the cultural norms of gender acculturation, and determined to remain ‘half savage and hardy, and free’ Cathy sides with an aspiring Jacobin of uncertain racial origins and even less certain moral and sexual propriety.\footnote{131} Again, horrified critics preferred to blame Heathcliff. Writing in 1857, John Skelton stressed the fate of a ‘half-savage child’ held in her primitive condition by a ‘chain of fire’ to Heathcliff, the ‘brawny young Titan’.\footnote{132} W.C.Roscoe, writing in the same year, placed the blame more squarely. Heathcliff’s presence infuses in both Cathy Earnshaw and Isabella Linton both ‘coarseness and malice’.\footnote{133} Praising the strength of Cathy’s ‘loyalty of love’, Sydney Dobell suggested that even ‘in the very arms of her lover we are not doubt her purity’.\footnote{134} The alternative, that Cathy willingly embraced her role as Heathcliff’s accomplice, that, in her sublimation, she ultimately takes possession of him, was far too troubling.

In this, as in so much else, \textit{Wuthering Heights} was written to disturb, to unsettle, to terrify.\footnote{135} The anti-clerical tone of the novel has been long appreciated; the canting Calvinism of Joseph; the physical and metaphorical decay of Gimmerton chapel; the closing depiction of the sexton opening up Cathy’s tomb so that she and Heathcliff may finally rest together, a symbolism which achieved the peculiar alignment of three of the most feared of contemporary Christian abominations, incest, necrophilia and sacrilege (228-9).\footnote{136} The presence of this tone in the voice of Cathy

\footnote{127}{See Miller, \textit{Myth}, 202-5.}
\footnote{128}{For a strident affirmation of this supposition, that Cathy terrifies because she is such a willing accomplice to Heathcliff’s many ‘crimes’, see Musselthwaite, 77-80, and also Gilbert and Gubar, 270-1, discussing the Satanic connotations written into Cathy Earnshaw.}
\footnote{129}{For commentaries on this particular declaration, discussing its subversive, transgressive implications, see Gilbert and Gubar, \textit{Madwoman}, 276-7 and also Davies, \textit{Heretic}, 13-15.}
\footnote{130}{See Nestor, xxix, Miller, \textit{Disappearance}, 177-8, and also Aristodemou, 117-19 exploring Bataille’s suggestion that the novel is, primarily, an exploration of death and eroticism, two of the greater taboos in mid-nineteenth century polite society. See also Davies, \textit{Heretic}, 26-7, and 198-200, and for a closer discussion of the possible insinuation of ‘sibling incest’, and also Paglia, 446-7 and 453-7, and Miller, \textit{Myth}, 195, both suggesting that Emily may have taken the theme from Byron’s \textit{Manfred}.}
\footnote{131}{See Meyer, 104-5.}
\footnote{132}{In Allott, at 337.}
\footnote{133}{In Allott, at 349.}
\footnote{134}{In Allott, at 278.}
\footnote{135}{Though, Gaskell was keen to suggest that Emily might have been totally unaware of the likely audience for her novel, or their equally likely response. See Gaskell at 122 claiming that Emily ‘never came in contact with public opinion’. On the broader issue of authorial intent and responsibility, see Davies, \textit{Heretic}, 38-40.}
\footnote{136}{For various commentaries on Joseph, Gimmerton chapel, and the closing imagery of Cathy and Heathcliff lying together, see Thormahlen, 82-3 and 176, Ingham, 193-4, and Davies, \textit{Heretic}, 148-5. For more general commentaries on the writing of theology and religion in the novel, and speculation on Emily’s personal faith, or lack of it, see Hillier Miller, \textit{Disappearance}, chapter 4, suggesting that her dissent tipped over into a far more threatening atheism. In her \textit{Heretic}, at 19 and 140, Stevie Davies likewise suggests that Emily was a ‘retaliatory’ dissenter, determined to eschew any formal theology. See also Thormahlen, 8, concluding that Emily’s own almost pathological ‘reticence’ prevents any more conclusive view of her personal faith, and also 102-3, suggesting that novel represents a ‘hellish’
Earnshaw could only have enhanced the horror of contemporary readers. The vision Cathy recounts to Nelly, of being in heaven and being cast out, insinuates more than a simple scepticism of scriptural authority:

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 heath on the top of Wuthering Heights; where I woke sobbing for joy. (81)

Critics have suggested that this vision crystallises a parody of the Miltonic ‘fall’, with Cathy seeking a return from the ‘heaven’ of Thrushcross to the ‘hell’ of Wuthering Heights. To many it must have seemed that, in her willing sublimation into the person of the demonic Heathcliff, Cathy Earnshaw had equally become possessed by a Satanic fury. Lockwood certainly comes to that conclusion.

The possession of Cathy is a vital, and resonant, theme. In his chronicle of the assault on Marie Antoinette’s bedchamber, which lay at the epicentre of his Reflections, Burke depicted a Gothic horror in the ‘horrid yells, and shrilling screams, and frantic dances, and infamous contumelies; and all the unutterable abominations of the furies of hell, in the abused shape of the vilest of women’. This insinuation, that there is something peculiarly deviant in the presentation of women who prefer violence, is a familiar one. Terrorism is supposed to be a ‘man’s game’. Women have a role to play, of course, but it is one of victim, of damsel in distress. As Susan Faludi has recently confirmed this is every bit as true after 9/11 as it was before.

Indeed, in the present rhetoric of ‘neo-con’ counter-terrorism, the strong woman is not merely a cultural aberrant, but an active ‘domestic enemy, a fifth column in the war on terror’. Emily’s Cathy is precisely such a combatant; as a troubled Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s mused, created by an author who, herself, appeared to be possessed of all the ‘stronger’ and unnatural ‘female tendencies’.

Cathy Earnshaw, and by insinuation her creator too, appears to resemble exactly the kind of ‘wild woman’ which horrified so many contemporary critics of an incipient nineteenth century feminist literature, the kind of cultural ‘unbeliever’, to adopt Mona Caird’s ironic caricature, who is made to resemble the ‘wicked sisters in a fairy tale, baleful creatures who go about the world doing bad deeds and oppressing innocence as it sits rocking the cradle by the fireside’. Not only does Emily paint an apocalyptic picture of familial dysfunction, but in making Cathy such an enchanting, if terrifying, heroine, so too does she seek to lure young women into social as well as metaphysics. The same conclusion is reached by Gilbert and Gubar, at 263, confirming that Emily presents a ‘Miltonically hellish’ world.

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137 See Gilbert and Gubar, 189.
138 See Gilbert and Gubar, 270-1.
139 Burke, 165. For an account of the peculiarly gendered context of his scene in the Reflections, see Furniss, 155-7.
140 See Greenhalgh, 161. The same conclusion is pressed by Eagleton, in Terror, particularly at 49-52.
141 See Faludi, particularly chapter 4, discussing the ‘cult’ of Lisa Beamer, and chapters 8-10, exploring the role of the ‘rescue myth’ in the shaping of the grander American foundational narratives. See also Eisenstein, 79-81, reaching the same conclusion.
142 Faludi, 22.
143 In Allott, at 300. It speaks volumes that critics, long into the century, would continue to ponder the possibility that Branwell might have written the novel; it being impossible to conceive that a woman might have. See Miller, Myth, 206-7, and 213-16, and also Davies, Heretic, 38-9.
144 Caird, A Defence of the So-called Wild Women in Hamilton, at 288.
sexual transgression. Such a woman, as Caird noted half a century later, and with a
due measure of irony, is properly termed a ‘rebel’, not because she was rebellious
necessarily, but because she was perceived to be so.145

Emily the subversive heroine is an image much vaunted in modern Bronte
criticism. Famously Albert Camus appraised Wuthering Heights as ‘one of the
greatest novels because it finishes in failure and revolt – I mean in death without
hope.’ The ‘main character’ in the novel, he added, ‘is the devil’, whilst the love
which Emily vests in Cathy and Heathcliff ‘can be continued only in hell’.146 More
recently, and more earthily, Terry Eagleton has emphasised the political as well as the
metaphysical challenge that Emily presents, a novel of myriad expressions of
‘dissonance’, where the fundamental tension lies in the irreconcilability of passion
and social reason, where a ‘pre-social relationship’ is presented as the only ‘authentic
form of living in a world of exploitation and inequality’.147 Equally, and
unsurprisingly, Emily Bronte has been particularly favoured by feminist critics; a
‘heretic’, not just in her religion, but in her determination to write against the
prevailing cultural and political norms of the time. Driven by a ‘spirit of perversity’,
Emily, in her determination to present a picture of ‘fratricidal relations’, to explore the
deeper reaches of ‘mother-loss’ and the ‘dark violence in the heart of human affairs’,
is hailed by Stevie Davies as a subversive literary rebel; perhaps not a terrorist, at
least not in the sense we now comprehend the term, but a writer who sought to terrify
all the same, someone who appreciated a fundamental violence at the root of all
human relations.148

In Defence of Strong Poetry

As we have already noted, Charlotte agonised over her sister’s reputation. In public,
she was quick to demonise the terrorist Emily had raised. Heathcliff, Charlotte
commented in the Preface to the 1850 edition of Wuthering Heights, was possessed,
of ‘a sentiment fierce and inhuman: a passion such as might boil and glow in the bad
essence of some evil genius’.149 But it was not, of course, that simple; as we have
already noted, and as Charlotte well knew, and as more perceptive contemporary
critics acknowledged too. Whilst there was, for sure, a ‘want of air and light in the
picture’, GH.Lewes observed, ‘we cannot deny its truth; sombre, rude, brutal, yet
true’.150 In similar vein, GW.Peck noted that whilst the novel ‘lifts the veil and shows
boldly the dark side of our depraved nature’, unmasking an ‘under-current of passion’,
the ‘rapid hold it has taken of the public shows how much truth there is hidden under
its coarse extravagance’.151 The imagination which the novel raises is a violent one. It
casts down icons, of domestic harmony, of gender perception, of metaphysical and
theological truth, and triumphs in their place, a natural, liberating, empowering

145 In Hamilton, at 291.
146 Camus, Essays, 265.
147 Eagleton, Myths, 100, 108.
148 See Davies, ‘Three’, 74, and also Heretic, xi, continuing in slightly rapturous tones at xii, ‘Her
ice-blue eyes beheld a world in which God was not good, civilization was a lie, humanity sordid and
corrupt, male unjustly preferred to female, life to death, adult to child, father to mother, hierarchy to
affinity, human to animal’, and also 28-30 referring again to her ‘adamant perversity’. A similar
conclusion is reached by Maria Aristodemou, at 122-5.
149 Confirming that Heathcliff is the one character who ‘stands unredeemed; never once swerving
in his arrow-straight course to perdition’. At liii.
150 In Allott, at 292.
151 In Allott, at 240.
In so doing, it becomes, as Stevie Davies suggests, a novel of ‘multiple ironies’. It presented before the mid-Victorian public precisely the kind of terror which Burke had evoked half a century before.

But, critically, it eschewed both caricature and condemnation. In this it finds an echo in subsequent novels in an emergent ‘terrorist’ genre, such as Feodor Doestoevski’s *The Demons* and Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*; at the heart of both of which was a desire to strip away the fetishes of terrorism, to present humanity in its starkest, most troubling form. It is precisely the same aspiration which can be read into Jean-Paul Sartre notorious Preface to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. Addressing a violence which some castigated as terrorist, but which Fanon preferred to justify in terms of liberty and passion, Sartre advised:

They would do well to read Fanon; for he shows clearly that this irrepressible violence is neither sound nor fury, nor the resurrection of savage instincts, nor even the effect of resentment: it is man recreating himself. I think we understood this truth at one time, but we have forgotten it – that no gentleness can efface the marks of violence; only violence itself can destroy them. The native cures himself of colonial neurosis by thrusting out the settler through force of arms. When his rage boils over, he rediscovers his lost innocence and he comes to know himself in that he himself creates his self.

‘The rebel’s weapon’, as Sartre confirmed, ‘is the proof of his humanity’. In language which would find a sharp echo in ‘war on terror’ dissenters such as Noam Chomsky and Jean Baudrillard both of whom suggest that 9/11 should be regarded as a kind of post-imperial backlash, Sartre continued:

\[\text{We have sown the wind; he is the whirlwind. The child of violence, at every moment he draws from it his humanity. We were men at his expense, he makes himself man at ours; a different man; of higher quality.}\]

*Wretched of the Earth*, as Sartre properly realised, was written in this spirit; a defence of political violence for a greater end, to facilitate the humanity of those who otherwise found themselves oppressed and degraded by an alternative culture that presumed the right to prescribe what passes for ‘morality’. The enslaved man, Fanon observed, only ‘finds his freedom in and through violence’, a ‘cleansing violence’. Heathcliff and Cathy were products of precisely the same cultural neurosis, the same degradation, the same rage and violence. As Fanon confirmed:

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152 See Eagleton, *Myths*, 105-7, suggesting that the novel constantly insinuates the ‘underlying truth of violence’.

153 A conclusion she reaches based on the series of ‘eternal oppositions’ and contingencies which Emily refuses to resolve. See her *Heretic*, 74.

154 Sartre, 18.

155 Sartre, 19.

156 Sartre, 20. For the ‘blowback’ thesis, see Chomsky, 51-61, and for Baudrillard’s similar supposition, that the imperialist west ‘fomented’ the violence which was visited upon it in September 2001, see his Baudrillard, 5, 9 and 15.

157 For this sentiment in Fanon, 118. For a commentary applauding the ‘extraordinary power’ of Fanon’s ‘surreptitious counter-narrative’ to imperialist terrorism, see Said, *Culture*, at 283, and also 235-7 and 323-7 and again 331, reiterating his admiration for Fanon’s ‘poetic and visionary’ polemic.

158 Fanon, 68. For a supportive comment, see again Said, *Culture*, 327.
The practice of violence binds them together as a whole, since each individual forms a violent link in the great chain, a part of the great organism of violence which has surged upwards in reaction to the settler’s violence in the beginning.\textsuperscript{159} There is, moreover, an obvious gender connotation to this rage; one which is written into the particular agonies of Cathy Earnshaw, and speaks to the violent need to articulate.\textsuperscript{160}

It finds a more contemporary expression in the voice of Heiner Mueller’s Ophelia in \textit{Hamletmachine}, a dramatic contribution to the terrorist genre written a generation after Sartre’s Preface: ‘I smash the tools of my captivity, the chair, the table, the bed. I destroy the battlefield that was my home… I set fire to my prison… I walk into the street clothed in my blood’.\textsuperscript{161} It was precisely this sentiment which the Italian dramatist Franca Rame articulated in her equally controversial monologues also written in the mid-1970s, \textit{I’m Ulrike – Screaming} and \textit{It Happened Tomorrow}. ‘No’, Rame’s Meinhoff declares, ‘I don’t want to be one of those women you manufacture and keep in cellophane wrapping. Frustrated! Exploited! A mother and a whore – both at the same time’.\textsuperscript{162} Remove the cellophane referent, and the residual sentiment could just as readily fit between the pages of Emily Bronte’s \textit{Wuthering Heights}. Nothing about terrorism, still less about the construction of the terrorist imagination, is comforting; and nor should it be.

Emily’s pursuit of humanity in its rawest state demanded violence. And this, again, Charlotte knew. On first encountering a draft of some of her sister’s earlier poems, Charlotte famously attested her astonishment: ‘I looked it over, and something more than surprise seized me – a deep conviction that these were not common effusions, not at all like the poetry women generally write… To my ear, they had also a peculiar music – wild, melancholy, and elevating’.\textsuperscript{163} It is not difficult to see why.\textsuperscript{164} The passion for humanity, the violent passion which erupts in \textit{Wuthering Heights}, can be readily heard in these lines from \textit{The Philosopher}:

\begin{quote}
No promised heaven, these wild desires, 
Could all, or half fulfil; 
No threatened hell, with quenchless fires, 
Subdue this quenchless will!\textsuperscript{165}
\end{quote}

And again in \textit{The Old Stoic}:

\begin{quote}
And if I pray, the only prayer 
That moves my lips for me 
Is, ‘Leave the heart that now I bear, 
And give me liberty!’
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{159} Fanon, 73.
\textsuperscript{160} For a comment on the violence of this need, see Said, \textit{Culture}, 78, 234-7, and in the more immediate context of gender and violence in contemporary Islam, see Israeli, 66, 86.
\textsuperscript{161} Mueller’s Ophelia was, of course, a recasting of the iconic German terrorist, Ulrike Meinhoff. For a discussion of Mueller’s Meinhoff, and the nature of her revolt, see Teraoka, 209.
\textsuperscript{162} Rame, 183.
\textsuperscript{163} In Barker, at 478.
\textsuperscript{164} For comments on this affinity between the poetry and the novel, see Barker, 364-5, Davies, \textit{Heretic}, 143-8, Miller, \textit{Myth}, 226-8, Musselthwaite, 85-8, and also Chitham, \textit{Birth}, chapters 3 and 4.
\textsuperscript{165} Bronte, \textit{Poems}, 7. See Ingham, 71-2, suggesting that this poem is representative of Emily’s determination to present the faculty of the imagination, or ‘fancy’, as a vital alternative to that of epistemological truth. See also Frank, 217-18, emphasising the depth of the anti-clerical tone in Emily’s poetry.
Yes, as my swift days near their goal.
’Tis all that I implore;
In life and death, a chainless soul,
With courage to endure.\(^{166}\)

This, to borrow Richard Rorty’s familiar phrase, is the sentiment of the ‘strong poet’, someone who wishes to celebrate an intense and passionate humanity without seeking recourse to epistemological ‘complacency’.\(^{167}\) In his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty offered a public philosophy founded on nothing more than an appreciation of ‘similarities with respect to pain and humiliation – the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of “us”’.\(^{168}\) Such a public philosophy is ironic in its reconciliation with the contingency of language, and liberating insofar as it welcomes the metaphorical injunctions of ‘romantic diversity’ which flow from an acknowledgement that ‘The world does not speak. Only we do’.\(^{169}\) It proclaims a message of ‘human fraternity’ and ‘romantic hope’, whilst above all triumphing a poetics of ‘compassion’. Its ultimate ambition is not to realise some grander theological or metaphysical moral vision, but simply to contribute to the ‘diminishing of human suffering’.\(^{170}\) In line with his broader dismissal of the lures of epistemology, Rorty recast the jurisprudence of human rights in a ‘poetry of justice’, of myriad ‘sentimental stories’, of a ‘thousand little commonalities’ rather than ‘one great big one’.\(^{171}\)

Such a poetry of justice finds a resonance in the critical jurisprudence of what Costas Douzinas terms the ‘human rights imaginary’, one that is constructed solely in terms of intimate ‘human relationships’ that must always ‘respect and promote the uniqueness’ of all fellow beings, one that oscillates not around rights as such, but rather the intensely human sentiments of ‘love and affection, pity and friendship’.\(^{172}\) In similar tones Drucilla Cornell has reaffirmed the presence of ethical responsibility at the heart of a non-metaphysical idea of human rights; the ‘ethical desire to enact the ethical relation’, meaning the ‘aspiration to a non-violent relation to the Other, and to otherness more generally, that assumes responsibility to guard the Other against the appropriation that would deny her difference and singularity’.\(^{173}\) Again, there is a ready affinity between this kind of the jurisprudence and the poetic and poethical strategies of Nussbaum and Weisberg. It is here, as we strive to describe the parameters of the terrorist imagination, in order not least to devise a constructive antidote, that the case for reading Milton or Conrad, or Emily Bronte, becomes compelling.\(^{174}\)

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\(^{166}\) Poems, 31.


\(^{168}\) Rorty, *Contingency*, 192.

\(^{169}\) Rorty, *Contingency*, xv, 4-8, 40, 80.

\(^{170}\) See Rorty *Achieving*, 18 and also *Social Hope*, xxix, 96-7, 122.

\(^{171}\) Rorty, *Contingency*, xiv-xvi, and *Social Hope*, 87, reiterating that, in such circumstances ‘sentimentality may be the best weapon we have’, and also 99, and also *Truth* 167-85 for his most famous essay on human rights, entitled *Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality*, originally delivered as an Amnesty Lecture in 1993.

\(^{172}\) Douzinas, 33, 341.

\(^{173}\) Cornell, 62.

\(^{174}\) As the doyenne of terrorist studies Walter Lacqueur admitted, ‘fiction holds more promise for the understanding of the terrorist phenomenon than political science’ ever can. See his Lacqueur,
Four years before she commenced *Wuthering Heights*, whilst attending the Heger Pensionnat, Emily composed an essay entitled *The Butterfly*. In it she wrote:

All creation is equally insane. There are those flies playing above the stream, swallows and fish diminishing their number each minute; these will become in their turn, the prey of some tyrant of air or water; and man for his amusement or his needs will kill their murderers. 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.175

Strong poetry indeed; written to trouble and to haunt.176 It speaks to the grander political and moral anxieties that attach to this irreducible contingency, and our febrile attempts to reconcile ourselves to it; to the thought that the vital, and necessarily violent, aspirations of justice must always reach beyond the limited injunctions law and politics.177 The same thesis would be writ large, and spectacularly so in *Wuthering Heights*; making it an exemplar of what Edward Said terms the 'literature of resistance'.178 As long ago as 1958, between the pretences of reason and the violence of passion, Albert Camus observed that violence replaces dialogue when we are no longer capable of discerning ‘beauty in the world and in human faces’.179 It is a simple, yet oddly elusive truth; one that applies equally well to the mirrored instantiation of public terrorist violence and private domestic brutality; the need to recognise in difference and violence, and in the triumph of passion over reason too, a necessarily liberating aspect of the human condition.180 If there is an imaginative ‘truth’ in *Wuthering Heights*, it is surely this.

References


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176 In her *Room With a View*, Virginia Woolf famously suggested that Emily Bronte should be read as a poet first, and novelist second, and more particularly still as someone writing with an incipient feminist urgency. See Woolf, 87, 97.
177 For a perceptive commentary on this jurisprudential insight, see Davies, *Heretic*, 159-60.
178 There is an echo too in Arnold Kettle’s earlier observation regarding the need for the reader of *Wuthering Heights* to admit, even if reluctantly, a ‘rough moral justice’ in Heathcliff’s violence. See Kettle, at 140.
180 For this conclusion, see Davies, *Heretic*, 142-5, and perhaps most strongly and most persuasively, Hillis Miller, *Disappearance*, 210-11.