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### Emily Brontë's Darkling Tales

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Abstract: This essay examines light and dark as coalescing and contradictory 'opposites' in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. The resonant interplay of light and dark in the novel, as captured and reworked to startling effect in Rosalind Whitman's series of etchings *Black and White in Wuthering Heights*, is conceived in the shadow of Romanticism. Subjecting Romantic ideals and anxieties to the pressure of Victorian prose darkens, if not quite eclipses, Keats's 'truth of Imagination', and thereby situates the novel at an interpretative crossroads. *Wuthering Heights* is poised on a literary fault-line, as an heir to the Romantic tradition that simultaneously heralds the advent of Modernism. As readers of Emily Brontë's novel, we, like the gaunt thorns and stunted firs that cling to the landscape surrounding the Heights, are hardened by the inhospitable terrain of the text and yearn for the light amidst a dense and disorientating post-Romantic darkness.

Emily Brontë's only novel, *Wuthering Heights*, is synonymous with darkness. Contemporary reviewers were confounded by its gloom, with some readers seeking respite in Anne Brontë's seemingly 'sunnier' novel, *Agnes Grey*, published with *Wuthering Heights* in a multi-volume edition in December 1847.<sup>1</sup> Critics could not help but remark on the originality of Emily's novel, with many drawn to the darkness that others denounced. For modern readers of the novel, '...as for their predecessors, it is the "dark" elements, chiefly concentrated in the figure of Heathcliff, which overshadow the sunnier and more "normal" aspects of life also depicted in the novel' (Allott, 31). The gothic happenings in *Wuthering Heights*, during which violence is either self-administered or inflicted on fellow human beings and animals, have been the subject of intense scrutiny. This scrutiny – which is arguably disproportionate to the emphasis placed on such moments in the novel – is a prominent feature of its critical heritage. Dark incidents accrue an uncanny power precisely because they are incidental; they are horrifying because they are fleeting and often passed over without further commentary. Rosalind Whitman, in a series of etchings inspired by *Wuthering Heights*, concentrates moments of emotional and physical extremes in claustrophobic spaces that blur the boundaries between internal and external. The artist's expert use of black and white, light and shade visually reproduces and destabilizes a 'sense of opposing forces' and tenebrosity in *Wuthering Heights*.<sup>2</sup>

Charlotte Brontë's influential preface for the 1850 posthumous edition of *Wuthering Heights* is equally perceptive on the subject of this essay. The paratext works hard to limit the perceived damage to both her own and Emily's reputation as writers in the wake of publication, as well as being an attempt to comprehend her sister's work in the hindsight of her death. It also recognizes the enfolding dualities of *Wuthering*

*Heights*. Charlotte's famous metaphor of the novel as a 'granite block' casts *Wuthering Heights* as crafted statuary and unreclaimed rock: on the one hand, 'dark, and frowning, [...] terrible and goblin-like'; on the other, 'almost beautiful, for its colouring is of mellow grey, and moorland moss clothes it; and heath, with its blooming bells and balmy fragrance, grows faithfully close to the giant's foot'.<sup>3</sup> Charlotte demonstrates, as she grapples with her own conflicted sense of bewilderment and admiration, a sophisticated understanding of the sublime effects generated in Emily's novel.

Having avowed that over much of *Wuthering Heights* there broods 'a horror of great darkness'; that, in its storm-heated and electrical atmosphere, we seem at times to breathe lightning, let me point to those spots where clouded daylight and the eclipsed sun still attest their existence. (Preface, 39)

Charlotte Brontë attempts to guide the reader out of the darkness, the fog of consternation, to an obscured light. The occlusion of light, for Charlotte, reaffirms its significance. Moreover, it is in moments when light seeps through the dark, or dramatically intersects the dark (as with lightning), that the darkness is illuminated. Charlotte understood that her sister's novel worked through symbolic contrasts in an ongoing dialogue. Taking these critical observations from the 1850 preface as a point of departure, this essay will examine light and dark as coalescing and contradictory 'opposites' in Emily Brontë's novel. The search for light in *Wuthering Heights* casts shadows on the suggestiveness of a narrative with its roots enmeshed in and grappling with a Romantic inheritance.

Lockwood's confinement to a sick bed at Thrushcross Grange, where he will listen to Ellen (Nelly) Dean's diverting tale, coincides with the worst of the winter weather.

His return to health, as well as his recovery of the narrative, is mapped onto the coming of spring. Initially driven from the Grange to the Heights by the prospect of warmth and company, Lockwood is trapped by the ‘dark night coming down prematurely, [as] sky and hills mingled in one bitter whirl of wind and suffocating snow’, an outward manifestation of the ‘dismal spiritual atmosphere’ that descends over this dysfunctional family (56). Lockwood’s traumatic waking dreams during his overnight stay at the Heights take place between descriptions of Cathy’s maiden and married names, and Heathcliff’s haunted face as hot wax drips over his bare hand, moments brought into focus by concentrated pools of candlelight before the wind blows out the flame. The narrator quickly rekindles his candle, to relieve the otherwise unnavigable darkness, but light has thus far only stimulated his imagination to macabre fantasy and revealed his landlord’s restless nighttime torments. This intense yet intermittent light brings figures, objects, and inscriptions into a disconcertingly sharp relief against a void of darkness, as when ‘a glare of white letters started from the dark, as vivid as spectres’ (61). Hurried shifts from light to dark are dizzying and the darkness that prevails seems darker by contrast with the ephemeral light. The proverbial writing on the wall – the briefly illuminated variants of Cathy’s surname – remains indecipherable to the confounded reader within and outside the text.

Light, when it is not engulfed by darkness, is frequently diffused through an equivocating fog or dimmed at dusk. Heathcliff is associated with dusk and with liminal times and spaces more generally. He is also the character around whom darkness, both literal and metaphoric, would appear to converge. Heathcliff is first presented to us, from Lockwood’s perspective, as a ‘dark skinned gypsy’ with ‘black

eyes' (47, 45), a description reinforced by Nelly's portrait of 'a dirty, ragged, black-haired child', 'as dark almost as if it came from the devil', after his arrival at the Heights (77). His darkness is taken to denote a malevolence that intensifies as he dwells morbidly on 'dark things' towards the end of the story (354). Modern criticism has explored the racial othering of Heathcliff as have recent reimaginings of the novel.<sup>4</sup> The lasting impression made by the 2011 film of *Wuthering Heights* is not only of the landscape – close-ups of the heath's flora and fauna contrast sharply against the overcast skies and grey mist – but of a darkness that encompasses and extends outwards from the black actor (James Howson) cast as Heathcliff.<sup>5</sup> Naturalistic lighting effects are achieved by the use of candles and fire; when the camera moves away from these globes of light, the action becomes almost imperceptible. Visual effects capture a sense of disorientation, often filtered through Heathcliff, that the reader of the novel experiences. In the novel, the relative 'blackness' of Heathcliff's features and his spirit are noted at specific moments, as when Cathy returns from the Grange to the Heights and when Heathcliff returns after his dramatic departure. In the former scene, Cathy's 'whiteness' from her stay at the Grange, 'doing nothing, and staying indoors', highlights Heathcliff's darkness. Her life of leisure, removed from his 'contaminating' companionship, draws even greater attention to how 'very black' Heathcliff has grown, partly from the demeaning labour he is subjected to on the farm and partly from the mood that reportedly beclouds his face (94). Similarly, in the latter scene at the Grange, the adult Heathcliff's 'dark face and hair' are reflected externally in his 'dark clothes', according to Nelly (132).

The narrator's fashioning of and reliance on a self-fulfilling identity politics, which insists on a correlation between interiority and appearance, is as much in evidence at

the Grange as at the Heights. Cathy and Heathcliff are initially attracted to the former by the prospect of lights.

The light came from thence; they had not put up the shutters, and the curtains were only half closed. Both of us were able to look in by standing on the basement, and clinging to the ledge, and we saw – ah! it was beautiful – a splendid place carpeted with crimson, and crimson-covered chairs and tables, and a pure white ceiling bordered by gold, a shower of glass-drops hanging in silver chains from the centre, and shimmering with little soft tapers. [...] We should have thought ourselves in heaven! And now, guess what your good children were doing? Isabella – I believe she is eleven, a year younger than Cathy – lay screaming at the farther end of the room, shrieking as if witches were running red-hot needles into her. Edgar stood on the hearth weeping silently, and in the middle of the table sat a little dog shaking its paw and yelping, which, from their mutual accusations, we understood they had nearly pulled in two between them. The idiots! That was their pleasure! (89)

Heathcliff's description of the event attends to the matter of the unclosed shutters and the 'half closed' curtains, both creating and gesturing beyond a narrative gap, through which a scene of splendour is glimpsed by the brilliant glow of the chandelier, 'a shower of glass-drops hanging in silver chains from the centre, and shimmering with little soft tapers'. Heathcliff's response to this concentration of light, made brighter by innumerable reflections, is an astonished exclamation; it is a luxury unknown to him and the inhabitants at the Heights. The constant light at the Grange also ensures that the unguarded actions and petty cruelties of Isabella and Edgar Linton can be observed from outside the protective boundaries of their immediate sphere. It is at this moment that class colours the formerly unfettered relationship between Cathy and

Heathcliff. Heathcliff's insistence on a collective response to this scene of splendour – 'Both of us', 'we saw', and 'We should' – is painfully at odds with Cathy's budding social aspirations. Light, and access to it, polarizes the divisions between Heathcliff, Cathy, and those whose privileged status is illuminated and exposed by the bedazzling light at the Grange.

Light and dark, as they interrelate with issues of class and threshold spaces, is the subject of Rosalind Whitman's 'Bulldog Bite' (Figure 1). In this etching, it is the Lintons who peer out from the well-lit Grange into the night (the shining globe of the chandelier is observable behind Mr and Mrs Linton) as Cathy is attacked by the huge dog, Skulker. The rapid movement of the fleeing pair reflects unfavourably on the aloof Lintons who look on at the savagery in the foreground. This critique of class extends to the theatrical stage setting of the window and door, which frame the Linton family's reserve and composure. Whitman's etching depicts Cathy and Heathcliff as they disrupt the boundaries between inside and outside with their act of trespass and lay bare a false front of monied refinement.<sup>6</sup> Heathcliff also tests an understanding of light and dark as binary opposites in the novel when he emerges from among 'undefined shadows', concealed or semi-concealed in the darkness, for his 'well-formed' figure to be brought into the 'light' (132, 135). Presenting himself as a wealthy gentleman, upon his return to the Grange, he stands before the same windows that afforded the prospect of the resplendent glow considered in the previous paragraph; these windows now act as a barrier, 'which reflected a score of glittering moons, but showed no lights from within' (133). Glimpsed openings or gaps are closed off, as the light outside now eclipses the light within, inverting Heathcliff's earlier impression of the Grange's brilliant interiors. The Grange, in this somewhat

surreal description, is transformed into an enormous projector for a sequence of moons, magnifying Heathcliff's hardened perception of Cathy's inconstancy. Heathcliff is associated with the trickery of twilight from this point in the novel, eloping with Isabella as the sun sets, returning to the Heights with the coming darkness after roaming the moors, and retiring to his bedchamber at dusk before his death.

**Figure 1 reproduced in published version.**

**Rosalind Whitman, 'Bulldog Bite'**

The description of Heathcliff, immediately prior to his death, borders on a parody of gothic melodrama that shows up Nelly's limitations as a narrator:

The light flashed on his features, as I spoke. Oh, Mr Lockwood, I cannot express what a terrible start I got, by the momentary view! Those deep black eyes! That smile, and ghastly paleness! It appeared to me, not Mr Heathcliff, but a goblin; and, in my terror, I let the candle bend towards the wall, and it left me in darkness. (359)

This flash of light recalls Charlotte Brontë's description, in her 1850 preface, of lightning dramatically intersecting the darkness. The contrasting effects of light and dark captured here, conjuring the effect of a spectre, are a prominent feature in Whitman's 'The Death of Heathcliff' (Figure 2). Heathcliff's gaunt body is laid out within a dense architectural space of inset windows and alcoves; and he is illuminated, like a religious icon, with a shaft of light streaming from his chest. Whitman's transmogrified Heathcliff is drastically different to Nelly's sensational portrait of his sneering corpse in the novel, however. Indeed, the etching, which



frames the dead Heathcliff between the figures of Nelly and Joseph, as they both move to the left of the image, visually incorporates their emotional detachment from this miraculous scene. Although Hareton shields his face in grief, as he sits before Heathcliff, his raised forearm also separates him from this surrogate father figure. In the novel, Nelly enters Heathcliff's bedchamber to bring a candle and to rekindle the fire. Rather than being solicitous for his health, such acts have previously drawn out Heathcliff's sense of foreboding concerning the shadow world he now occupies. Nelly employs the same pretext, of lighting candles, to announce Heathcliff's return to the Grange earlier in the novel and elicits Heathcliff's report, even earlier, of what transpired with Cathy at the Grange by hurrying to 'put out the candle' (88).

**Figure 2 reproduced in published version.**

**Rosalind Whitman, 'The Death of Heathcliff'**

These lighting effects are engineered by Nelly to induce her own retrospective terror and to generate a conducive atmosphere for her audience. Having let the candle go out in the passage quoted above, plunging herself and Heathcliff into darkness, Nelly indulges in lurid musings. First, she speculates on whether he might be 'a ghoul, or a vampire?' (359), fuelled by the fiction she reads; second, she asks, 'where did he come from, the little dark thing, harboured by a good man to his bane?' Nelly's wearied state of semi-consciousness, through which she rehearses stories of Heathcliff's origins, 'with grim variations', is more important than it might initially appear to be when considering the 'darkness' of her tale (360). Much of the superstition in *Wuthering Heights*, although by no means all, originates with Nelly, as does the association between Heathcliff and the devil or a creature of another world.

Her 'reflective faculties' are sound, as Lockwood notes, but she is also a 'true gossip' given to, as she confesses, 'harassing my brain with a hundred idle misgivings' (103, 361). At the close of the novel, the boy's report of Heathcliff and Cathy as ghosts on the moor is deemed to be 'nonsense' that is stimulated by local legend and an over-active imagination. And yet Nelly gladly repeats his story, ensuring that the setting for this final part of her tale is an appropriately 'dark evening threatening thunder' (366). Rather than the normative presence that Charlotte Brontë cleaves to in her preface, Nelly subverts an anticipated correspondence between the literal bringer of light and a metaphorical disseminator of truth. As she marshals and extinguishes light throughout the course of the novel, Nelly casts an estranging darkness on the events she narrates. It is Nelly, in effect, who renders Heathcliff a persistent textual problem that cannot be perceived clearly or reliably.

Lockwood's displacement of Nelly's narrative presence in the final paragraphs of the novel ostensibly works to refute the 'Idle tales' that she relates (366). The reader is as, if not more, cautious of his closing sentiments, however. Lockwood muses, when before the graves of the dead, 'how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers, for the sleepers in that quiet earth'. The irony of this contrived 'benediction', set beneath a 'benign sky', studiously occludes his own 'unquiet slumbers' (367) at the beginning of the novel and reveals, as Allan R. Brick argues, 'his incapacity for insight'.<sup>7</sup> The tale is troubling for Lockwood, as it is for the reader, but our empathy with the framing narrator is curtailed by his comic misapprehensions and status as an outsider. The ground that Lockwood stands on seems to shift and revolve in Whitman's etching, 'Lockwood Attacked by Dogs' (Figure 3). It is not clear whether Zillah and Joseph are 'attacking' the dogs or joining in with the assault on Lockwood as more

dogs emerge from the furniture. The 'vast oak dresser' (47) that Lockwood describes is animated by canine assailants, 'heightening the sense of containment', as Simon Cooke states, 'rather like a drug-induced version of Pre-Raphaelite detail'.<sup>8</sup>

Lockwood occupies the 'common centre' of Whitman's etching (49), as he presents himself in the equivalent scene of the novel, but he no longer occupies his self-ascribed 'situation of the looker-on' (102).<sup>9</sup> In shielding his eyes, Whitman draws attention to Lockwood's short-sighted attempt to block out what he experiences firsthand at the Heights. The composition of the etching, with a swirling foreground set against slanted lines, visually reconstructs the stratified narrative of the novel and speaks to Lockwood's skewed perspective.

**Figure 3 reproduced in published version.**

**Rosalind Whitman, 'Lockwood Attacked by Dogs'**

This stranger, as Nelly continues to call Lockwood, seeks a refuge from the 'busy world' after an abortive relationship that he then fails to replicate with the younger Catherine (288). His description of the spurned woman as 'a most fascinating creature, a real goddess' (48) is similar to the language he uses in relation to Catherine and the 'fairy tale' (335) romance he fabricates. In the closing scenes of the novel, he flees at the sight of Catherine and Hareton's mutual affection, as reflected by moonlight, an effective contrast to the hatred and mistrust reflected by Heathcliff's earlier vision of serial moons at the Grange. Lockwood's description of his malady, prior to the commencement of Nelly's story, tells us much about the state of mind in which he receives and reconstructs the narrative: he is 'chill', with an excitable mind, 'almost to a pitch of foolishness through my nerves and brain' (76). This pathological

state is remediated through the editing of what he deems to be a 'dreary' tale when he declares, 'I'll extract wholesome medicines from Mrs Dean's bitter herbs' (191). Lockwood sets out to 'remedy' a story he neither understands nor sympathizes with. Both Nelly and Lockwood are given to 'idle misgivings' and 'idle whim[s]' (361, 334): superstitious speculation in Nelly's case and starry-eyed sentimentalism in Lockwood's. These narrators may be homodiegetic, participants in the events they relate (especially Nelly), but they remain bystanders on the periphery of passions that are anathema to them. Is it any wonder that *Wuthering Heights* is such a capricious anti-romance when one narrator recoils coldly from the prospect of love and the other can barely bring herself to speak of it? Given that our narrators are found to be chronic misreaders, what possible light can be shed on the events and emotions depicted in Brontë's novel?

The narrators, at different times, are situated at a crossroads. Nelly first, when conjuring a vision of Hindley as a child at the guide-post between the Heights and the Grange; Lockwood second, when he seeks out company, once more, 'with the glow of a sinking sun behind, and the mild glory of a rising moon in front; one fading, and the other brightening' (337). This double prospect is instructive about the function and purpose of light in the novel and speaks to a broader Brontëan ambivalence that is apparent in Emily's poem, 'O evening why is thy light so sad?'. Here, the passing of the 'sun's last ray' is mourned even as the night sky intensifies with its own profound beauties: 'And dark the shades of twilight grew / And stars were in the depth of blue'.<sup>10</sup> What is changed by Lockwood's view to the east or the west is not the levels of light but the tonal qualities and effect of that light. The synchronous sun setting and moon rising positions Lockwood at a crossroads not only in terms of the direction he

will travel and the chiaroscuro of the scene; it also positions him as an internal reader before whom diverging paths and destinations are illuminated to varying degrees. In other words, the intersecting narrative crossroads of Brontë's novel, which simultaneously opens out and closes down interpretative vistas, is consciously embedded within the text.

The reader of *Wuthering Heights* must acclimatize to the manifold indeterminacies that are resisted by the narrator's outlook. From the start, Lockwood seeks out markers to light his way, as he does when guided back to the Grange by a reluctant Heathcliff, only to find that 'all traces of their existence had vanished' (73). He cannot even claim to close the tale a 'sadder and a wiser man', like the wedding guest in Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'.<sup>11</sup> Lockwood's hapless confusion and blithe elisions are set in sharp relief to Brontë's 'relish of the dark side', as she 'conceiv[es] an Iago' in her chameleonic anti-hero, Heathcliff.<sup>12</sup> But where Brontë draws poetic energy from the 'uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts' of what Keats conceptualizes as Negative Capability,<sup>13</sup> *Wuthering Heights* tips the balance between 'light and shade' into a discernible proclivity for the latter. Her 'gusto' for gloom is not necessarily comparable with what Keats distinguishes as 'foul', however. For Brontë, in her post-Romantic poem 'Stars', the 'cool radiance' of nightfall is a reprieve from the 'dazzling sun' (20, 1).<sup>14</sup> The night sky that replenishes the speaker's vision is charged with a calm changefulness:

I was at peace, and drank your beams

As they were life to me;

And revelled in my changeful dreams,

Like petrel on the sea. (9-12)

Brontë imbibes a pleasurable sustenance from her Romantic inheritance. Yet a subtle ambivalence also surfaces. The image of the 'petrel on the sea' is suggestive of a lively iridescence akin to the Ancient Mariner's rejuvenated appreciation of the water snakes, as seen in 'elfish light', in Coleridge's poem (275). The Mariner's earlier, murky vision of the 'slimy things' in a sea that stagnates 'like a witch's oils' is simultaneously present, however, as the petrel leaves a sheen or film which coats and shades the imagination (125, 129). The Romantic constellation of 'Stars' inspires an indelible poetic doubleness that both brightens and deepens the darkness of Brontë's verse.

When situated at a liminal place – the crossroads – at a liminal time – twilight – Lockwood is drawn to the Heights, as Brontë is inexorably drawn to her literary kin in the poem 'Stars'. All narrative paths, even when negotiating a fork in the road, converge on the Heights as a locus of implied meaning, a symbol of the perplexing possibilities of a Romantic bequest. The Heights emblemizes the poetic doubleness of Romantic influence in Brontë's writing. It is a habitation of contrasts, a semiotic intersection, where the 'building old and dark' (240), as Nelly describes it, is, on occasion, suffused with sunshine. Light, like the semantically mobile 'petrel on the sea', is observed radiating within or penetrating the darkness. When Cathy stays up all night waiting for Heathcliff's return, Nelly discovers her the next morning, huddled up to the 'almost extinguished embers' of the fireplace, with 'sunbeams piercing the chinks of the shutters' (126). As Nelly then floods the room with the light from outside, Cathy recoils from this searing 'Slant of light, [...] That oppresses', and demands that she close the window.<sup>15</sup> The language of light, in relation to the Heights, is frequently of forced and unwelcome intrusion, as though it were somehow alien to

or artificial within the habitual gloom. Such instances in the novel share a parallel with the penultimate stanza of 'Stars', which pleads for the 'gentle night' to 'hide me from the hostile light, / That does not warm, but burn' (41, 43-4). The 'huge fire-place' at the Heights provides sought after warmth, drawing inhabitants and visitors to it (46-7). But, like Brontë's immersion in a Romantic element, exposure to the source of inspiration – the 'one sweet influence', which 'Thrilled through, and proved us one' ('Stars', 15, 16) – scorches and burns. This fiery epicentre of Romantic creativity reflects both light and heat at one end of the sitting room, fortifying the farmhouse against darkness as a default. It is also an immense furnace, perpetually stoked: the heart of a house built on Romantic foundations and the metaphoric mouth of hell.

The reader is first introduced to the Heights in Lockwood's well-known description:

Wuthering Heights is the name of Mr Heathcliff's dwelling. 'Wuthering' being a significant provincial adjective, descriptive of the atmospheric tumult to which its station is exposed in stormy weather. Pure, bracing ventilation they must have up there at all times, indeed: one may guess the power of the north wind, blowing over the edge, by the excessive slant of a few stunted firs at the end of the house; and by a range of gaunt thorns all stretching their limbs one way, as if craving alms of the sun. Happily, the architect had foresight to build it strong: the narrow windows are deeply set in the wall, and the corners defended with large jutting stones. (46)

The situation of the Heights refuses a romanticized view that the farmhouse emanates from or harmonizes with its surroundings. Access to natural light, or the ability to perceive it, is minimized by deep-set, narrow windows – necessary defenses for a building that abuts the landscape and is locked in a perpetual battle with the elements.

The Heights is built like a prison under siege from a hostile environment that retards the surviving vegetation. At the end of the novel, Lockwood observes a church where ‘many a window showed black gaps deprived of glass’ (367). Apertures are now dark voids through which nothing can be seen. These gaps in the fabric of the building are even ‘deprived of’ a surface through which the narrator can reconstruct what is reflected there. And yet the gaps speak to the suggestiveness of light, or the lack of it, within the story. The loosened slates will, over time, open up the roof to shafts of light and simultaneously close off vantage points through the darkness of advancing dilapidation. The descriptions of architecture that feature at the start and the end of the novel would seem to generate a textual space of symbolic happenings, ‘antechambers of narrative [...] to be framed and filled by the loquacity of the narrators’.<sup>16</sup> But the impending holes in the roof of the church are a final reminder of the gaping holes in our narrator’s understanding. Lockwood’s ‘diversion’, as he describes his route to the kirk, takes the reader from the robust structure of the Heights, which has endured for three centuries, to the disrepair of the church. A possible reading of spiritual crisis, or the dimming of God’s light, emerges, as does the prospect of a diminished literary inheritance for successive Romantic acolytes. But this would be to ignore the ‘crumbling griffins and shameless little boys’ that are carved onto the frontage of the Heights and seem out of place adorning a farmhouse (46). The heathenism that has apparently darkened – or, more specifically, demolished – the door of organized religion both is and is not a property of the Heights. The Heights is largely, if not entirely, untouched by the passage of time. The building essentially remains the same: a stronghold of Romantic influence to be revisited by generations to come.



Paths to and habitation of the Heights are not governed by a guiding light or moral compass, however, as Lockwood's position at the crossroads of the novel makes clear. Returning to the moment when Heathcliff revisits the Grange, it seems as though his field of vision is filled, albeit opaquely, with numerous reflected moons, as previously commented on. And yet it is Nelly's partial view of what he sees, or cannot see, that is communicated by Lockwood. What appears to be the expression of a fragmented Romantic interiority amounts to an external projection passed on by a third party. Heathcliff's 'inner' self is apparently drawn closer to the decipherable surface of the text only for his elusive otherness to be reiterated. Elsewhere in the novel, Nelly describes Heathcliff's eyes as 'The clouded windows of hell' (217). Seeing nothing she can recognize within, only her own superstitious dread, the proverbial windows to his soul are obscured by the viewer's inability to penetrate beyond an enigmatic impression. Windows in *Wuthering Heights* do not offer insights; they reflect thwarted attempts to see beyond the boundaries of the self and the contiguity of storytelling. Michael O'Neill's observation about Brontë's poem 'No Coward Soul is Mine' is equally pertinent to her novel: 'As she reprises a post-Shelleyan longing to address a being thought of as within and yet other, Brontë performs the quintessentially Romantic act of incarnating her perceptions in her poem's verbal unfolding' ('Emily Brontë's Poetry', 60). This 'verbal unfolding' in Brontë's poetry takes the form, in her prose, of an equally Romantic 'act' of semantic expansion and contraction, of latent contrasts contending without disclosure or resolution. In 'No Coward Soul is Mine', the creative variance between self and other is explored imaginatively from the perspective of a speaker who 'reincarnates' the Romantic. In *Wuthering Heights*, the relationship between the self and the other, the tellers and the recipients of the tale, is indissolubly divided, effecting a 'collection of

narrative gaps' that solicit but ultimately resist interpretation.<sup>17</sup> In other words, it is the darkening spaces of this novel – the precarious fissures between narrating self, subject, and audience – that generate a sense of impenetrable openness.

*Wuthering Heights* is not 'dark' because of Heathcliff's 'blackness' or because of the controversial content of the novel. It is dark because the tellers of the tale cannot shed a sustained or credible light on the people and events they witness, hear about, and recount. Brontë's novel weaves and unweaves a revisionary Romanticism that suggests, as it strains against, the intimate subjectivities of poems such as 'Stars' and 'No Coward Soul is Mine'. Hewn in a post-Romantic workshop, *Wuthering Heights* retracts, aesthetically, into what might be thought of as negative incapability or incapacity. The inscrutability embedded in the narrative architecture of the novel derives not from shining a light in dark places, so that doubt may be disambiguated, but from the darkness remaining disconcertingly dark. What is discernible in this darkness is the form of *Wuthering Heights*, as Rosalind Whitman comments,

The novel is immaculately structured: its resonance and power are accomplished as much through its form as the content. Her [Brontë's] narration resembles architecture: the reader gathers information from an accumulation of speeches delivered as rhythmic and oblique reflections of one another. ('Black and White in *Wuthering Heights*', 237)

The resonant interplay of light and dark in *Wuthering Heights*, as captured and reworked to startling effect in Whitman's etchings, is conceived in the shadow of Romanticism. Subjecting Romantic ideals and anxieties to the pressure of Victorian prose darkens, if not quite eclipses, Keats's 'truth of Imagination', and thereby situates the novel itself at an interpretative crossroads.<sup>18</sup> *Wuthering Heights* is poised

on a literary fault-line, as an heir to the Romantic tradition that simultaneously heralds the advent of Modernism. As readers of Emily Brontë's novel, we, like the gaunt thorns and stunted firs that cling to the landscape surrounding the Heights, are hardened by the inhospitable terrain of the text and yearn for the light, 'as if craving alms of the sun' (46), amidst a dense and disorientating post-Romantic darkness.

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<sup>1</sup> See Miriam Allott, intro., *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Miriam Allott, rpt (Abingdon, 2010), 29.

<sup>2</sup> Rosalind Whitman, quoted in Dolores Le Fanu, 'Black and White in *Wuthering Heights*: The Etchings of Rosalind Whitman', *Brontë Studies*, 28 (November 2003), 237-46, 237. Whitman worked on the series, *Black and White in Wuthering Heights*, between 1997 and 2002. Sixteen of the etchings were exhibited at the Brontë Parsonage Museum in 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Charlotte Brontë, 'Editor's Preface to the New [1850] Edition of *Wuthering Heights*', in Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. and intro. David Daiches (rtp London, 1985). Subsequent references to the preface and to *Wuthering Heights* refer to this edition and will be given in the text.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Maja-Lisa von Sneidern, 'Wuthering Heights and the Liverpool Slave Trade', *ELH*, 62.1 (Spring 1995), 171-96. The following edition of the novel emphasizes regionalism and English slave holdings: Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. Christopher Heywood, rpt (Peterborough, Canada and Plymouth, UK,

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2004). Of particular note in terms of creative reimaginings are Peter Forster's wood engravings for the Folio edition of *Wuthering Heights*, published in 1991. Heathcliff's exaggerated racial features serve to emphasize his social isolation. Heathcliff's blackness and his mysterious origins are also taken as a point of departure for Caryl Phillips's recent novel, *The Lost Child* (2015).

<sup>5</sup> *Wuthering Heights*, film, directed by Andrea Arnold. UK: Ecosse Films and Film4, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Both 'Deranged at the Grange' and 'The Fall of Hareton' dissolve boundaries between interior spaces and the elements outside, compressing separate episodes from the novel within a single image.

<sup>7</sup> Allan R. Brick, 'Wuthering Heights: Narrators, Audience, and Message', *College English*, 21.2 (1959), 80-6, 85. Nelly proves to be equally unperceptive, according to Brick: 'Ultimate understanding lies as far beyond Nelly as *her* understanding lay beyond Lockwood's' (84, original emphasis).

<sup>8</sup> Simon Cooke, "'The Ever-Shifting Kaleidoscope of the Imagination': Modern Illustrations to the Brontës", *Brontë Studies*, 31 (2006), 7-22, 16.

<sup>9</sup> Beth Newman takes Lockwood's comment as a point of departure for her article, "'The Situation of the Looker-On': Gender, Narration, and Gaze in *Wuthering Heights*", 105.5, *PMLA* (1990), 1029-41.

<sup>10</sup> 'O evening why is thy light so sad?', 2, 11-12, in Emily Jane Brontë, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Janet Gezari (London, 1992). Subsequent line references will be given in the text. Light, for Brontë, is often associated with the aftermath of imaginative insight, as it is for the American poet, Emily Dickinson. In 'A Light exists in Spring', Dickinson 'feels' light as an agency manifest in the landscape, which 'almost speaks to you' (8, 12). But she registers 'A quality of loss' when it passes (17). Another

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poem by Dickinson proclaims ‘I see thee better – in the Dark – / I do not need a Light –’ (1-2). The edition referred to here and elsewhere is Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (London, 1976).

<sup>11</sup> See *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Volume 16: Poetical Works I: Poems (Reading Text)*, ed. J. C. C. Mays (Princeton, 2001), 624. Subsequent line references are taken from this edition and will appear in the text.

<sup>12</sup> Keats considers the character of his ‘camelion Poet’ in a letter to Richard Woodhouse, dated 27 October 1818. See *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (rpt Oxford, 1992), 157.

<sup>13</sup> The term ‘*Negative Capability*’ appears in a letter to George and Tom Keats, dated 21-27 December 1817, in Gittings, 43, original emphasis.

<sup>14</sup> For Michael O’Neill, Brontë’s ‘individuality enmeshes itself in and emerges from an intricate play of affinity and difference’ with the Romantic poets, and he proceeds to argue that “‘Stars” compellingly adapts Shelleyan image patterns for its own perspective’. “‘Visions Rise, and Change”: Emily Brontë’s Poetry and Male Romantic Poetry’, *Brontë Studies*, 36 (2011), 57-63, 59, 61. I am grateful to Professor O’Neill for his helpful comments on a draft of this essay.

<sup>15</sup> Dickinson, ‘There’s a certain Slant of light’, 3.

<sup>16</sup> John T. Matthews, ‘Framing in *Wuthering Heights*’, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 27.1 (1985), 25-61, 26-7.

<sup>17</sup> H. Porter Abbott, ‘Story, plot, and narration’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge, 2007), 39-51, 49.

<sup>18</sup> Keats, letter to Benjamin Bailey, dated 22 November 1817, in Gittings, 37.

Whereas, for Keats, Adam’s dream communicates truth, Cathy experiences a disjunction between the Heaven of her dream and the heaven of the Heights. Truth,

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such as it is in Brontë's novel, is to be found for Cathy in the proximity between the heath and its personified extension, Heathcliff.