

Inquiring into *Wuthering Heights*: Where are the Moors?

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Her [Emily's] descriptions of natural scenery, are what they should be, and all they should be. (Charlotte Brontë)

To Ellis Bell (Emily Brontë), the hills where she grew up were not merely “a spectacle,” but were where she could truly live and through which she lived. It is for that reason that the natural scenes she depicted were “what they should be,” “all they should be” (325). The nature in *Wuthering Heights* was also essential to the filming of the work; it became a kind of fundamental “equipment” for each of the films. The statement quoted below is one Charlotte Brontë made about her younger sister, Emily. Emily’s scenery is secured and assured by Charlotte, who was also a writer.

Ellis Bell did not describe as one whose eye and taste alone found pleasure in the prospect; her native hills were far more to her than a spectacle; they were what she lived in, and by, as much as the wild birds, their tenants, or as the heather, their produce. Her descriptions, then, of natural scenery, are what they should be, and all they should be. (325)

Charlotte likens *Wuthering Heights* to a half statue, a savage form terrible and

goblin-like, wrought from a granite block in the moors that makes people tremble in fear. At the same time, she sees the work as half rock, almost beautiful (328). Charlotte closes her preface to the book (second version) with a description of the untouched heath that grows at the foot of the statue-rock. It is as if she firmly believes that the work of *Wuthering Heights* itself also “live[s] in, and by,” nature.

Arnold Kettle makes a similar observation:

There is nothing vague about this novel; the mists in it are the mists of the Yorkshire moors; if we speak of it as having an elemental quality it is because the very elements, the great forces of nature are evoked . . . the realization is intensely concrete: we seem to smell the kitchen of *Wuthering Heights*, to feel the force of the wind across the moors, to sense the very changes of the seasons. Such concreteness is achieved not by mistiness but by precision. (139)

Yet, is this truly the case? If perceived from a slightly different angle, don’t the moors take on a different appearance? In this paper I will examine the moors that should have been self-evident in *Wuthering Heights*

as almost “a truth universally acknowledged,” to borrow that famous phrase from Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*.

David Cecil points out that nowhere does *Wuthering Heights* contain a “set-piece of landscape-painting” (174). He made this observation eighty long years ago.

It shouldn’t be forgotten that while he notes the lack of a “set-piece of landscape-painting,” he adds that nature, which forms the backdrop of the work, permeates the entire story (174). It is quite true that there is no “landscape-painting”; he notes the fact that the work is nevertheless overflowing with nature. He continues:

Indeed, no other writer gives us such a feeling of naked contact with actual earth and water, presents them to us so little bedizened by the artificial flowers of the literary fancy. To read Emily Brontë’s descriptions after those of most authors, is like leaving an exhibition of landscape-paintings to step into the open air. (175)

Cecil’s hypothesis is expressed artlessly and succinctly, if you will, but at the same time it is pregnant with suggestion. Even in this age when scholars have access to a plethora of literary theories, this is a provocative statement.

For example, let’s look at an excerpt from Margaret Homans’s “Repression and Sublimation of Nature in *Wuthering Heights*”:

It is a critical commonplace that *Wuthering Heights* is informed by the presence of nature . . . and the reader

leaves the book with the sensation of having experienced a realistic portrayal of the Yorkshire landscape.(9)

She points out that the close relationship between *Wuthering Heights* and nature is “a critical commonplace” and that as examples of those who have had “the sensation of having experienced a realistic portrayal of the Yorkshire landscape,” Mark Shorer as well as the above mentioned Kettle are among them.

In actuality, Homans’s true aim is to pose the following: “There are . . . very few scenes in the novel that are actually set out-of-doors” (9). Just where then are the moors? The moors themselves in Homans’s thesis are the target of analysis that pervades the world of *Wuthering Heights*. As can be surmised by the words “repression” and “sublimation” in Homans’s title, she uses Freudian analysis to discuss the work, as well as images from the theories of Dorothy Van Ghent, thus informing the paper with a multiplicity of theories from which to begin examining *Wuthering Heights*.

In temporal terms, there has been a half century, or at least about a quarter-century between Cecil or Kettle and Homans. During this period, literary analysis has changed so dramatically as to present totally different viewpoints. Yet the lack of nature in *Wuthering Heights*, or more precisely, the lack of direct references to nature in the text, is the one consistent thread common to both Homans’s assertions and Cecil’s. Homans’s observation that “There are . . . very few scenes in the novel that are actually set out-of-doors” is nearly identical to Cecil’s “There is not a single

set-piece of landscape-painting in her book.” (To state the conclusion in advance, Kettle’s observation, which could be the most representative example of the “critical commonplace” noted by Homans, also hardly differs from her own.)

Homans states that “It is difficult to catalog something that is not there” (9). (Of course, her reasoning makes perfect sense.) Yet Homans is actually a more modern critic than Cecil. Although she refers to the difficulty, she carefully analyzes each instance of what Cecil had declared was a lack of even a “single set-piece of landscape-painting” to provide evidence for what “is not there.”

Here I will give a representative example of her evidence. Catherine Earnshaw makes the statement, “Nelly, I am Heathcliff . . .” (73), but Heathcliff, who was supposed to overhear these crucial words in the shadows, does not. That is because they are said after he has already dashed out onto the moors in the storm. Though it is a dramatic scene, the author does not trouble herself to pursue Heathcliff out onto the moors. Homans’s (rhetorical) question probably reflects that of many readers: “Why does the author not give us one moment’s observation of Heathcliff struggling against the storm?” (9). The silence of the author, Emily, is deafening. Even Catherine herself, who runs out onto the moors after Heathcliff, does not begin her crucial narrative until after she arrives back indoors.

Homans assiduously discusses each lacuna to provide overwhelming evidence, which is, however, naturally not merely an addendum to Cecil’s observation. This is the commencement of her argument; she has

simply begun the conversation through this paradigm. Homans detects in this omission that Emily must have had a purpose, which achieves a “fine balance” between “fictional realism” and “overt fictiveness.”

The present distinction between the reader’s impression of a detailed portrait of Yorkshire life and landscape and the actual absence of such a presentation is itself part of the fine balance Brontë maintains between fictional realism and overt fictiveness. (10)

According to Homans, the author intentionally creates a “hole.” This becomes the central theme of Homans’s article. But Homans’s aim lies elsewhere. I will briefly introduce Homans’s argument here before returning to the gist of my own paper.

Homans gives as a reason for Emily’s intentional avoidance of direct description of the landscape her respect for nature. According to Homans, nature is primary to Emily, and it is out of deference to this highest priority that she avoids describing it immediately. It is in the naming that things lose their significance, and this is the case for Emily vis-à-vis nature. In order to preserve the priority of something, it is essential that the thing must not be named. The terms “omission” and “avoidance” (so to speak, Emily’s intentional schemes), terms themselves that appear repeatedly in Homans’s paper, link to the creation of the “significant holes” in the text.

The only way to preserve the priority of something is not to have it named, so

that what is primary is just that which is left out of text, and surely these omissions of descriptions of events in nature are significant holes. (11)

According to Homans, for Emily, nature was not something that should be written about directly, which was the reason she chose to use “metaphors” (12). Homans argues that behind this decision was Emily’s self-repression (19); Homans then develops her argument by invoking the theories of Freud.

It may be said in this connection that such directionality is similar to what Arnold Kettle calls “oppression” at the end of his discussion on *Wuthering Heights*. The piece predates Homans by a quarter-century. Kettle sees in *Wuthering Heights* the oppression of Emily herself:

This unending struggle, of which the struggle to advance from class society to the higher humanity of a classless world is but an episode, is conveyed to us in *Wuthering Heights* precisely because the novel is conceived in actual, concrete, particular terms, because the quality of oppression revealed in the novel is not abstract but concrete, not vague but particular. (155)

Did Emily perceive this “oppression” as a social reformer who aimed at a classless society, or the “repression,” as defined by Homans? Perhaps both are accurate, or neither. It is impossible to determine at the present which is true. Here I will put aside Homans’s Freudian analysis and return to a rather primitive reading of the text itself.

Let’s examine *Wuthering Heights* not from the point of view of the depths of Emily Brontë’s psyche as mentioned above, but from the impressions made on the reader. In other words, let’s consider not the psychological elements involved in the author’s creation of the literary work, as Homans describes, but the literature (that is, putting aside whether or not it was the result of psychological elements) that centers on nature in Emily’s *actual creation*, which unfolds before the reader’s eyes. Here I will return to the intentional “holes” created by Emily’s avoidance of direct descriptions of nature, and will proceed with my argument.

Why is it that readers have such a sense of nature in *Wuthering Heights* if Emily does not directly portray nature? It isn’t only Cecil who feels that reading Emily’s descriptions is like “leaving an exhibition of landscape-paintings to step into the open air.” Clearly, Emily’s “metaphors,” as noted by Homans and many others, also play a large role. To get right to the point, such metaphors in some ways can also be considered another kind of, or a transformed, intentional “hole.” To avoid diffusion of the thesis, however, here I will confine my argument to nature as a literal “hole.”

Emily’s nature as literary achievement is deeply variegated, even overflowing. It is also related to directly portrayed nature. More accurately, it is related to *non-existent* directly portrayed nature. That is, the nature that readers sense in *Wuthering Heights* materializes precisely because there are no direct descriptions of it. As mentioned earlier, the intentional holes (lacuna, gaps, or spaces—, which, so to speak, “by any other name would smell as sweet”) in the text

constitute the very nature in *Wuthering Heights*.

If such is the case, the “omissions of descriptions” in this work, as Homans so perspicaciously notices, have active meaning, and interestingly enough, they are connected at a fundamental level in terms of, for instance, Roland Barthes’s “*indirect* language” and Ann Gaylin’s “eavesdropping” (though I must limit my examples here to two because of space limitations).

Barthes says that the production of indirect language is the first condition of literature; the avoidance of naming things gives ultimate meaning to them.

One might say that the first condition of literature is, paradoxically, to produce an *indirect* language: to name things in detail in order not to name their ultimate meaning, and yet to retain this threatening meaning, to designate the world as a repertoire of signs without saying what it is they signify. Now, by a second paradox, the best way for a language to be indirect is to refer as constantly as possible to objects and not to their concepts: for the object’s meaning always vacillates, the concept’s does not; whence the concrete vocation of literary writing. (231-232)

Though the expression of it differs somewhat, Barthes’s statement that “the best way for a language to be indirect is to refer as constantly as possible to objects and not to their concepts” is reminiscent of Kettle’s concept.

Homans starts her discussion with a reference to Kettle as an example of the

“critical commonplace.” It is quite true, as quoted above, that he savors the nature of Yorkshire, but, needless to say, he is not a critic who is simply satisfied with that sensation. He explains that the very elements of nature are evoked, and as a result, “the realization is intensely concrete . . . Such concreteness is achieved not by mistiness but by precision.” Here the similarity to Barthes’s “*indirect* language” becomes apparent.

Emily Brontë works not in ideas but in symbols, that is to say concepts which have a significance and validity on a level different from that of logical thought. . . . logical analysis may penetrate but is unlikely adequately to convey, so the significance of the moors in *Wuthering Heights* cannot be suggested in the cold words of logic (which does not mean that it is illogical). The symbolic novel is an advance on the moral fable just in the sense that a symbol can be richer—can touch on more of life—than an abstract moral concept. (140)

Kettle and Barthes are interested in different things. Here, the former is rather interested in ethics, whereas the latter is primarily concerned about meaning, or more precisely, signification. Naturally, the eras to which they belong and their critical methodologies also differ, but Kettle’s assertion that the implications of the moors in *Wuthering Heights* is not conceived in “merely logical terms” or expressed as an “abstract concept” is reminiscent of Barthes’s “concept.” Not only did the sensation of

nature in *Wuthering Heights* please Kettle, but it probably gives clear insight into the essence of Emily's nature as well.

Emily's nature resembles vestiges of Barthes's "*indirect* language." Taking a previous example, in spite of Homans's complaint (or, to put it in more equitable terms, Homans's observation), of a lack of description of "the moors" with which Heathcliff was supposed to have had a struggle, "the moors" are actually and vividly expressed in the figure of Catherine coming back exhausted from the moors. "Catherine," in a wet, frenzied state, as well as the various "objects" she is involved with, functions in a sense as "*indirect* language." In "Catherine," it becomes possible for us to read the moors, or perhaps even to create them.

The moors in *Wuthering Heights* are a blank. Yet the surroundings are enclosed in detail. To borrow Kettle's wording quoted earlier, "the novel is conceived in actual, concrete, particular terms" (though Kettle uses this wording in reference to Emily's "oppression").

Emily's nature is nourished by these details as it flows into the hearts of readers. The "hole" follows the temporal flow of the reader's experience, gradually and subconsciously being created, steadily expanding, and deepening in form. It is here that the quintessence of the power of Emily's nature lies.

Considered in these terms, the reader (receiver) does not seem passive. Rather, we begin to perceive an active "something." This something can be understood as active behavior on the part of the reader, as is the case in Gaylin's "eavesdropping."

Gaylin develops her argument by stating that if Heathcliff hadn't overheard only part of what Catherine said or if he had stayed long enough to overhear her entire conversation, *Wuthering Heights* as we know it would not have been written. Gaylin defines her argument around this eavesdropping (that is, "narrative lack") (27). In support of her thesis, Gaylin refers to the research of the linguist Graham McGregor, which has profound significance in relation to the current discussion:

McGregor points out that interpretive activity constitutes more than three-quarters of listeners' responses to overhearing. Significantly, most interpretive responses consist of *creating* stories to explain the overheard conversation.(27)

People who eavesdrop make various inferences about what they have heard. According to McGregor, they use over three-quarters of their energy in interpretative activity. In order to make consistent their own understanding with what they have overheard, they even create stories. Using McGregor's linguistic evidence, Gaylin asserts that eavesdropping is not a passive activity but an action that produces new narratives. She points out that such eavesdropping is also related to the fact that *Wuthering Heights* is a dramatic tale.

Thus, eavesdropping begets additional storytelling; such listening is not passive, for it generates new narrations (acts of telling) as well as retellings. . . . Eavesdropping is aptly suited to

narratives replete with dramatic scenes, as *Wuthering Heights* is, abounding in episodes—or as Emily Brontë’s sister Charlotte Brontë would say, filled with “story.” A great deal happens in Emily Brontë’s novel precisely because this eavesdropping scene occurs. (27)

In order to fill in the gaps in conversation created by eavesdropping (in other words, conversations filled with “holes”), the listener creates a new story. Couldn’t it also be true in the case of a “nature” full of holes? More precisely, of the nature in *Wuthering Heights* that lacks direct depiction.

Where, in reality, are the moors in *Wuthering Heights*? Here, to answer this question that would be better left unasked, I will quote another Emily, Emily St. Aubert. This Emily is confined to an old castle in Italy, and is literally psychologically restricted by “oppression” and “repression”(just like Emily Brontë herself might have been to some extent if the observations of Kettle and Homans are truly insightful.) Emily here is the protagonist of Ann Radcliffe’s monumental female Gothic novel, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Emily laments upon her favorite book, which she holds before her:

“Are these, indeed, the passages [of the visionary scenes of the poet], that have so often given me exquisite delight? Where did the charm exist? —Was it in my mind, or in the imagination of the poet? It lived in each. . . . But the fire of the poet is vain, if the mind of his reader is not tempered like his own,

however it may be inferior to his in power.” (383)

The Mysteries of Udolpho often has been criticized because it presents a grand mystery yet discloses an anticlimactic ending. It has even induced ridicule—so much so that “It appears the labour of a Mountain, to bring forth a mouse” (Smith 182).

If we use an ironic and rather farfetched interpretation, it can also be said that Radcliffe, the author herself, recognizes such a flaw in her fiction well enough to secretly interpose a rationalization beforehand through the device of the sigh of the artless Emily. On the other hand, if we follow the reasoning in this paper, those phrases uttered by Emily St. Aubert appear surprisingly to have an insight into the essence of literature. Emily Brontë is surely even superior to the “poet” whose exquisite (as might be thought) depictions of scenery are favored by the protagonist of this Gothic novel. This is, however, not because the author Emily is able to demonstrate nature better than he is. On the contrary, it is precisely because she is able to depict (or rather, create) it *without* describing it that she can indicate nature.

In reality, Emily Brontë has placed the moors and nature in *Wuthering Heights* intentionally into a void. Her “moors” are, without doubt, the result of “the imagination of the poet,” but it is also something nurtured in the hearts of each reader according to his own individual character (or rather, his own creativity). In this case, it is something intense and unique because the meaning of the moors of Emily Brontë, as Barthes points out, “always vacillates,” and is filled with

“interpretive action,” as Gaylin notes. More than anything else, it occupies the strongest position, such as in the *mind* of the reader. The *void* (that Emily Brontë contrives) occupies the mind—though it may sound paradoxical that it is because of that phenomenon that her nature is always alive and never grows old. It is something imagined by the reader and precisely because of that fact, it will continue to exist as firmly as the reader’s existence itself.

Cecil savors “a feeling of naked contact with actual earth and water” (175) in the nature of *Wuthering Heights*. He states that her descriptions can be felt literally as the nature of the “open air” rather than as a landscape painting. On the other hand, Kettle makes the observation quoted earlier that the reader seems to smell the kitchen of *Wuthering Heights*, to feel the wind on the moors, and to sense the changes of the seasons. Perhaps this is as Kettle himself discerns; that is, “the very elements, the great forces of nature” are aroused. This, too, is not unrelated to the omissions that Emily uses in her text. In *Wuthering Heights*, the nature of the open air that Cecil breathes, the wind from the moors of Yorkshire that Kettle experiences—they are all, no doubt, most vibrant, graceful, and tenacious.

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