

THE MORTAL PROTEST IN *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*

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by

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## **DEDICATION**

To Albemarle

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## INTRODUCTION

It may seem that after over 150 years of canonization and scholarship, not to mention generations of high school reading assignments, there is nothing new left to say about “that great, mad poem in prose,” as one critic described *Wuthering Heights* (Lewis 364). Indeed, Irving Buchen wrote in 1967 with a considerable air of finality, “the novel has been so extensively studied that it now appears to be fully processed” (64). But that was a decade before Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar ripped the lid off not only dominant critical conceptions of Emily Brontë’s novel in particular but also ways of approaching literature by women more generally with *The Madwoman in the Attic*. My own interpretation certainly owes a considerable debt to that influential work of second-wave feminist criticism, but, as is well known, there have been a great many developments in literary theory (feminist and otherwise) since then, a fact for which *Wuthering Heights*’ diverse critical record serves as testament.

Therefore, while it is somewhat daunting to attempt to approach with any degree of originality such a thoroughly culturally and scholastically imbibed literary work, intellectual history indicates to me that new ways of looking at, thinking about, and engaging with literature are continually possible. I draw confidence from such an empowered understanding about the enduring role of literary analysis in my own critical undertaking and furthermore believe that the specificity of our particular historical

moment (that is, the global ecological crisis of which overstatement is impossible, which chapter two of this thesis addresses) brings into sharper focus certain elements within *Wuthering Heights* that, while always there, resonate even more urgently now than ever.

My choice to firmly link in the following pages writers so diverse as Emily Brontë and Simone de Beauvoir may seem initially surprising. They were women separated not only by language and a century but also inhabiting in their lifetimes vastly different social milieus (the bustling Café de Flore in Paris being perhaps as removed from the remote Haworth parsonage as imaginable). While the value of this perhaps atypical critical orientation is best evidenced in the body of this thesis, a brief explanation nonetheless seems appropriate. For one thing, *The Second Sex* forcibly demonstrates literature as a kind of knowledge, one that is valid, illuminating and necessary—the abundance of myths, stories, and novels evoked in the seminal feminist text is staggering—and this basic theoretical stance about the philosophical function and importance of literature is one that my argument inherently shares. It is an attitude that in this thesis results in a nineteenth century work examined with frequent and abundant allusion to literature of other centuries in its efforts to clarify its particular argument. Moreover, Beauvoir specifically referenced *Wuthering Heights* and Emily Brontë a handful of times in *The Second Sex* and in other works throughout her prolific writing career, often in interesting and sometimes enigmatic ways that I believe are instructive about the themes that the novel is implicitly exploring. As far as I can tell this particular philosophical and literary intertextuality, despite its considerable analytic fecundity, has never been previously examined. Indeed, it was such allusions to Emily Brontë made by Beauvoir in the service of existential-feminist discourse that were my original starting point for consideration of the ways in which gender, death

and rebellion uniquely intersect in *Wuthering Heights* and that ultimately became this thesis.

As a committed existentialist Simone de Beauvoir valued freedom above all, always recognizing its situated limitations, and in the following pages I will argue that Brontë's writing evidences a remarkably similar perspective, one where liberty is paramount and anything which hinders that lived quality is viewed at least with skepticism and often outright hostility. It is from the understanding that there is no greater check on freedom than death itself that this attitude takes on its greatest philosophical significance and is the thematic space within *Wuthering Heights* with which I am most concerned. This thesis is not intended to be a thorough existentialist reading of *Wuthering Heights*, however, nor an attempt to reconcile the novel fully to an existentialist ethos (likely more or less an impossibility). Existentialism of the type being discussed, specifically the popular movement which came out of post-war France and is most famously associated with the writings and reputations of Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus (who makes an important appearance in the following pages, as well) is fundamentally a philosophy of responsibility. As such it is perhaps most accurate to assert that what *Wuthering Heights* has an affinity with is not the articulation and conceptualization of how to live in the world which the later philosophy provides but rather the particular *(dis)stress* that fuels it. That is, the novel and existentialism share an acute recognition and profoundly felt awareness of the collective yet individually experienced crisis of mortality. *Wuthering Heights* simultaneously at least indicates an endorsement of the same qualities that Beauvoir perceives as existentialism's implicit values (of authenticity, joy, and liberty). In the Beauvoirean understanding, pursuit of such iconoclastic ideals can be a minutely

enacted resistance in the face of an existence that inevitably demands both certain compromise and annihilation.

My central project in the following pages therefore is to argue for *Wuthering Heights* as a novel of specifically feminine existential revolt, discernable in the allegorically enacted central romance between Catherine and Heathcliff as well as in the novel's consistent valuation of earthly existence above supernatural (im)possibility. I also assert that such an ethos of resistance against the restrictions imposed upon all living things is the creative product of a historical, cultural and biographical specificity. Despite critics' common claims about the timeless universality of *Wuthering Heights*, it ultimately bears the artistic imprint of a nineteenth century woman's mind and the particularized relationship to death and mortality which that situation implies.

Although pulling a great deal from existentialist ideas, this thesis will not get its focus from just one theoretical lens. Instead, I will draw from and respond to a variety of critical approaches and literary interpretations (feminist, historicist, and ecocritical) in order to adequately address my complex subject. As already mentioned, among the greatest theoretical debts my argument owes is to Gilbert and Gubar, whose groundbreaking essays, including "Looking Oppositely: Emily Brontë's Bible of Hell," laid the foundation upon which several of my ideas build (it also bears mentioning that Beauvoir is frequently referenced throughout *Madwoman in the Attic*). Making another highly crucial appearance in my argument, specifically in terms of defining mortal protest and considering its relationship to literature, is existentialist writer (a term he would have likely personally denied but which is nonetheless regularly applied) Albert Camus. His famous book-length essays *The Rebel* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* set forth the conception of metaphysical

rebellion against mortal conditions that my interpretation of *Wuthering Heights* largely depends upon. Also quite helpful for my purposes is Toril Moi, a feminist theorist and Beauvoir scholar. For one, because she has done a thorough and admirable job of rescuing Beauvoir's reputation from the hands of reductionists and reactionaries (freeing me from feeling the need to do so) but also because she has recently written engagingly on the theoretical dilemma of women writers as well as on the analytic usefulness of the Beauvoirean conception of the female body. I additionally rely upon thinkers as disparate as biologist Edward O. Wilson, literary critic David Cecil, Brontë scholar Janet Gezari, historian Anthony S. Wohl, and modernist writer Virginia Woolf.

In the first chapter, "Catherine-Heathcliff: The Fracturing of Self," I argue for a reading of the text whereby Catherine and Heathcliff are allegorically understood to be one and the same, or two parts of a single entity (specifically, an uncompromised Catherine). Such understanding lays the foundation for the central argument of the chapter, which is that *Wuthering Heights* operates as an exquisitely rendered metaphysical exercise whereby the self is shown grieving and protesting its own loss of life in a way only possible through literary imagining. This section will explore the fascinating implications of the essential contradiction of the human experience that Brontë imagines (to die and yet to still live) in addition to more broadly investigating the persistent stance of rebellion that the novel presents in its consideration of such themes.

The second chapter, "'Half Savage, Hardy and Free': The Earthly Nature of Eden," focuses on discerning precisely what it is being defended in the uniquely rebellious ethos of the novel, arguing that *Wuthering Heights'* defiant stance toward death in fact reveals a proportionately extreme valuation of life. Over and over again, the natural is privileged

over the supernatural, passion over dispassion, and liberty over oppression; it is these qualities that make up the only convincing paradise that *Wuthering Heights* presents. Thus, the novel strongly avers that the earth is a force aligned with life (against death) and forcibly asserts that Eden has an existence within earthly bounds. This chapter also considers the greater implications of such a distinctly terrestrial Eden and the ways in which the novel additionally demonstrates a presciently urgent eco-protest.

Chapter Three, “Contextualizing Protest: Death and The Female Body,” places the novel’s inherently doomed but valiantly enacted mortal rebellion, which the previous chapters demonstrate speak strongly to universal themes, directly into its historical specificity. The Victorians’ distinctive cultural preoccupation with death and the author’s traumatic personal experiences with it are both studied as elements that inform *Wuthering Heights*. This chapter will also engage with questions of what death specifically signified to nineteenth century women (like the author) who inhabited a bodily moment when the psychic intersection of feminine sexuality, maternity, and mortality was uniquely pronounced. The strong legacy of the novel for women writers in later historical situations will also be briefly addressed in this section.

Each chapter opens with thematically relevant epigraphs excerpted from Emily Brontë’s collection of poetry, many of which are occupied with these very concerns.

Elizabeth Welch

Emily Brontë had stared at the moon, with its halo of reddish  
muslin, and thought: One day I shall see it no longer.

—Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*

I rebel; therefore we exist.

—Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

## CHAPTER I

### CATHERINE-HEATHCLIFF: REBELLION OF THE DIVIDED SELF

Sickening to think one hour would sever  
The sweet sweet world and him forever.

—Emily Brontë, March 1837

No promised heaven, these wild desires,  
Could all, or half fulfil;  
No threatened hell, with quenchless fires,  
Subdue this quenchless will!

— Emily Brontë, February 1845

In an essay that appeared in a 1916 edition of the *Times Literary Supplement*, Virginia Woolf attempted to characterize the particular type of genius exhibited in the writing of the Brontë sisters, Emily and Charlotte, asserting “there is in them some untamed ferocity perpetually at war with the accepted order of things” and that furthermore this restless and rebellious quality, which “makes them poets,” appears in greatest measure with the author of *Wuthering Heights* (158). Woolf correctly perceives, some sixty years before Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s seminal (or perhaps, ovular) argument in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, that *Wuthering Heights* is a novel of rage. It both chronicles and is imbued with the passionate fury of a powerful feminine mind in covert rebellion against the trappings of the world she was born into. As Gilbert and Gubar eloquently maintain, this can be seen as directed specifically at the stifling requirements of patriarchy and the loss of authentic self into the social expectations of

mid-Victorian womanhood. The following argument does not depart from such basic interpretation, but attempts to delineate further how the “untamed ferocity” that is the positive creative force behind Brontë’s novel is more audacious than such analysis indicates—indeed that it is simultaneously being leveled at nothing less fundamental than the limitations of mortal existence itself.

That mortality is a main thematic concern of *Wuthering Heights* is difficult to deny. Simone de Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex* with penetrating simplicity, “Emily Brontë has questioned death” (711). This assertion comes from the groundbreaking existential feminist text’s discussion of “the independent woman,” her future possibilities as well as those renegade past women who achieved her approximation against great odds. Beauvoir’s curtly triumphant declaration indicates her recognition that not only is *Wuthering Heights* (a reference to Brontë is almost invariably an evocation of her only novel) a high achievement in both literary and feminist terms, but also a work uniquely and importantly preoccupied with death. Indeed, the novel shows absolutely no consciousness free from contemplation of personal mortality, however slightly considered. From the first pages, it “swarm[s] with ghosts” (23) and memories of the deceased; the plot encompasses a total of eleven deaths, one of which colors absolutely everything else that takes place, and its concluding scene is of tombstones, both aged and freshly laid. As one critic puts it, Brontë is a fundamentally “death-oriented poet” (Buchen 63) whose lyrically rendered novel dramatically demonstrates, as another phrases it with similar astuteness, “the speculative intellectual faced with individual mortality” (Glen 28). A recent article in *Bronte Studies* is even more adamant in its

assessment; Laura Inman writes “death dominates the narrative [and] drives the plot [. . .] *Wuthering Heights* is a veritable meditation on death” (192).

But even if the novel’s underlying preoccupation is not difficult to identify, the particular nature of its thematic statement is somewhat more elusive, as the copious and often contradictory scholarship surrounding the work verifies. In pursuit of critical orientation, it is helpful to return again to Beauvoir’s characteristically illuminating declaration in *The Second Sex*. She does not claim that Brontë described death, or even explored death, but rather that she *questioned* death. This verb choice is quite significant. It is active, challenging, and—especially when one considers its object—boldly confrontational. As such, it is very nearly accurate.

Questioning appropriately captures the uncommon lack of acceptance that characterizes *Wuthering Heights*’ attitude towards death (one does not question what one accepts). It also fittingly implies skepticism, and given the cosmic context, even irreverence. The verb furthermore evokes an intrepid interrogator behind its act, a mortal brazenly addressing the formidable forces of (im)mortality. This aptly describes Catherine and Heathcliff’s position in the novel, and through them, as Beauvoir asserts, the author as well. But while Beauvoir’s statement (the meaning of which she does not further expand upon) is keenly insightful about the novel’s primary focus and also helpfully suggestive of its specific attitude, it is nonetheless incomplete. It still falls short of conveying the fierce iconoclasm that Woolf rightly discerns functioning in the work. Therefore, with due respect to Beauvoir’s implicit analysis, the following pages will argue for an addendum. It is more apt to assert that in *Wuthering Heights*, Brontë not only questioned death, she *protested* death. Perhaps unique in all of literature (so atypical is its

case that critic F.R. Leavis famously termed the novel a “sport,” (27) unlike anything written before or after), it strongly describes and operates as an act of mortal protest.

The mortal protest<sup>1</sup> is a concept that, like most things deep dwelling and universal, is far older than its frank codification in mid-twentieth-century philosophical thought. While perhaps rarely so thoroughly and uniquely presented as in *Wuthering Heights*, a strain of mortal rebellion persists throughout much of literary history, manifested in a variety of different forms. The many *carpe diem* and *memento mori* works that populate the distant reaches of the canon are connected to its impulse, although it would be a mistake to define all of those often unambiguously pious works as insurrectionary. However, the same tension is always there, the same sense that evanescent sublunary existence is both dictated and defined by the potentially imminent and certainly incontrovertible reality of death (*memento mori* translates to “remember you must die”). This understanding of life as shadowed throughout by its end in death—the old artistic trope of a beautiful youth depicted next to a gaping skull—has sometimes contained insurrectionary elements alongside it, frequently inherent in the very act of its expression. Indeed, it could be argued that at some level a stance of metaphysical rebellion always exists within the phrases of any great writer whose attempt at the pen is simultaneously one at immortality. Nowhere is this so finely elucidated than in the closing couplet of Shakespeare’s sonnet 18: “so long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee” (13-14). Such strain of implicit resistance arguably increased into greater explicitness as literature progressed in accordance with

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<sup>1</sup> Mortal protest/rebellion/resistance and metaphysical protest/rebellion/resistance will be used roughly interchangeably. The seeming contradiction is not one: the mortal rebel protests against his mortality and thus against named or nameless metaphysical forces.

philosophical (particularly Enlightenment) thought, perhaps most candidly expressed in Dylan Thomas's famous poem, written in 1951, which forthrightly incites mortals to "not go gentle into that good night [. . .] rage, rage against the dying of the light" (3).

Contextually, this appears in specifically personal terms (Thomas is writing on the death of his father) but in larger poetic effect speaks to a more universal potentiality.

Novelist and existentialist philosopher Albert Camus, a contemporary of Beauvoir, first formally defined the idea of metaphysical rebellion in his essay, *The Rebel*. Published in 1956 (only a few years after Thomas's poem, which he does not mention) the rigorous analytic work repeatedly turns to literature in its presentation and consideration of the ontological concept, beginning with an oblique reference to Heathcliff and Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*.<sup>2</sup> Camus pinpoints the cultural origin of metaphysical protest with the story of Prometheus, which he calls "the most perfect myth of the intelligence in revolt" (26). Other metaphysical rebels from literature that he considers are Milton's Satan, particularly as he is conceived and appreciated by the later Romantics, Dostoyevsky's Ivan Karamozov, and perhaps most unexpectedly, characters imagined by the Marquis de Sade. Camus sets forth his definition of distinctly metaphysical rebellion by making a comparison to traditional or historical rebellion:

Metaphysical rebellion is the movement by which man protests against his condition and against the whole of creation. It is metaphysical because it contests the ends of man and of creation. The slave protests against the condition in which he finds himself within his state of slavery; the

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<sup>2</sup> Although Camus uses Brontë's novel in his introduction to the philosophical concept of metaphysical rebellion that this interpretation of *Wuthering Heights* is building upon, he does not do so in the same way. In *The Rebel* he compares Heathcliff driven mad by love for Catherine to a rebel leader who has become disenchanted with the ideal he once held.

metaphysical rebel protests against the condition in which he finds himself as a man. The rebel slave affirms there is something in him that will not tolerate the manner in which his master treats him; the metaphysical rebel declares that he is frustrated by the universe. (23)

The assertion that *Wuthering Heights* powerfully describes (and demonstrates) just this type of metaphysical rebellion is dependent on one understanding of the text in particular: the idea that Catherine and Heathcliff function as doubles and counterparts for each other.

This foundational argument is not an arduous one to make. For one thing, it is simply a matter of taking both characters at their ardently reiterated word. Throughout the novel, over and over Catherine and Heathcliff repeatedly make powerful declarations of absolute oneness with each other. These are instances of dialogue that in their ferocity function like pure poetry, where what Woolf terms the novel's "inarticulate passion" (158) is at its most concentrated, and from which everything else that takes place seems but precursor and remainder. In one of the most famous passages, Catherine hotly tells Nelly, "He's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same" (73). She makes an even more adamant assertion of sameness shortly after: "If all else perished, and *he* remained, I should still continue to be [...] Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff! He's always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being" (74-75). There can be no mistaking that Catherine directly aligns not only her primary affections with Heathcliff (despite having just become engaged to Edgar) but also emphatically and explicitly her identity and selfhood. When Catherine dies, Heathcliff similarly describes their connection in

terms of a vital unity, lamenting, “I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!” (153).

While such statements could be conceived as merely the characters’ rhetorical attempts to communicate the psychic enormousness of their feelings, simply hyperbolic effusion that is not thematically significant, to do so is to fail to recognize the uniquely allegorical dimensions of *Wuthering Heights*. Woolf and others describe Brontë as instinctively a poet and it is instructive to consider even her novel as working in the realm of metaphor and myth. It is inhabited less by recognizable men and women (although Lockwood and Nelly certainly have this intermediary role) than by allegorical stand-ins for forces and experiences more universal, perhaps even primordial. David Cecil concurs, positing that Brontë “sees human beings [...] in relation to the cosmic scheme of which they form a part [...] in relation to time and eternity, to death and fate and the nature of things” (Cecil 300). Although Cecil’s intensely theistic interpretation of the novel is ultimately at odds with this one (and as such is indicative of much criticism that wishes to view Brontë as a visionary and *Wuthering Heights* a spiritually derived text) there is significant congruence in his acknowledgment of the scope of the themes she treats, if not how she treats them. Once the novel is understood to be talking not about the relationships of ordinary people but rather in sweeping metaphorical terms about elemental experiences, it reveals itself to be in possession of the sort of logic discernible in a highly symbolic and brilliantly worked poem.

Indeed, within the particular allegorical ethos of the novel, the two characters *are* the same, they are one being in two bodies, they are, as Gilbert and Gubar succinctly and provocatively put it, “Catherine-and-Heathcliff—that is, Catherine and Catherine” (270)

or “Catherine-Heathcliff” (301). The following pages will frequently employ this latter compound appellation, Catherine-Heathcliff, as a shorthand indication of the singular nature of the protagonists’ identity. The distinctly feminist signification of the term is also intentionally evoked as this interpretation shares Gilbert and Gubar’s understanding that *Wuthering Heights* is fundamentally Catherine’s story and Heathcliff operates symbolically as a split facet of her authentic self. The feminist critics further argue that *Wuthering Heights* operates like an epic poem, specifically a kind of origin myth, a rebellious upending of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* where Catherine and Heathcliff enjoy in their inseparable and therefore “androgynous[ly] whole [...] childhood” (284) an Edenic existence (for them hellish as far as the patriarchal world defines) from which everything else that follows is a fall.<sup>3</sup> The characters’ fiery proclamations of sameness therefore contain a significant truth: “Catherine’s assertion that Heathcliff was *herself* quite reasonably summarized, after all, her understanding that she was being transformed into a lady while Heathcliff retained the ferocity of her primordial half-savage self” (293). Furthermore, if Heathcliff is Catherine’s double, her “rough-headed counterpart,” (Brontë 47) “her rebellious alter ego [and] her id,” (Gubar 275) then his fierce and unyielding rage, which so determines the course and color of the novel, is also the embodiment of Catherine’s. It is partly rage at being forced to give up that early androgynous paradise and submit to adulthood and society, but it is also, by tacit extension, rage at having to someday give up absolutely everything in death.

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<sup>3</sup> This paradisaical earthly state will be investigated more thoroughly in the next chapter, which takes as its focus the specific nature of the mortal experience that the novel’s rebellious energies are spent so strongly defending.

The link between childhood's end and death is a trope of ancient establishment, the inevitable former being but harbinger of the inevitable latter. By becoming Mrs. Edgar Linton of Thrushcross Grange, the "wild wicked slip" (37) of a girl named Catherine Earnshaw, who happily "scamper[ed] on the moors" (18) with a gipsy orphan boy, did in a sense die, and she and Heathcliff both deeply lament the fact. Nelly's early comment, "the greatest punishment we could invent for [Catherine] was to keep her separate from [Heathcliff]," (37) has a retroactive poignancy because this is precisely what first society and then the universe requires of them. As such, the loss of their childhood Eden is but a foretaste of the total loss demanded in Catherine's death, which takes place seven years later in childbirth. This event, occurring midway through the novel, initiates a metaphysical conundrum, as one half of "Catherine-and-Heathcliff" is in the grave and the other quite painfully above it. This situation allows Brontë to explore the unprecedented terrain of what it means to bear witness to the death of the self.

Stevie Davies, an otherwise eloquent and nuanced Brontë scholar, misses the point entirely when in her 1988 critical consideration of the novel she derides its "literalists" that take the main characters' claims of mutual selfhood seriously. She asserts that "in confronting its own self-consistency, this unifying language of mutual identity breaks upon the invincible contradiction offered it by exterior reality: the loss of Catherine" (59). What Davies fails to recognize is that this is precisely the crux of the unique metaphysical exercise that Brontë so powerfully offers in *Wuthering Heights*. That the "two halves of a single soul, forever sundered and struggling to unite," (Lewis 367) will never succeed in reunification, that one must die while the other lives to experience that loss, is exactly what gives the novel its tremendous ontological import. It

is this decisive aspect of Catherine and Heathcliff's situation that allows the self to be shown grieving, raging and protesting against the immutable fact of its death in a way impossible outside the freedoms provided by literary imagining.

Buried in a volume of literary criticism that takes as its central subject Brontë's collection of poetry, Janet Gezari presents in abbreviated form exactly this argument about *Wuthering Heights*' allegorical portrayal of the death of the self. Her endorsement of the unusual reading comes on the heels of her consideration of a precursory interpretation that sees Heathcliff's mourning as the predictive embodiment of Sigmund Freud's concept of melancholia. Recognizing the metaphysical import of the anomalous reading to follow, Gezari introduces it with reference to a prominent philosopher:

Wittgenstein asserts that "death is not an event in life; we do not live to experience death," but insofar as Catherine *is* Heathcliff (she asserts) and Heathcliff's "life" and "soul" are Catherine (as he avers), *Wuthering Heights* may be as close as we can get to a representation of death as an event in life. According to this reading, Heathcliff is not only the novel's central mourner but someone who lives to experience his own death, and Emily Brontë undertakes to represent not just an unresolved and inconclusive melancholy mourning in *Wuthering Heights* but an auto-mourning. (114)

Auto-mourning is particularly apt as the term succinctly implies the absolute stake that Catherine's death holds for Heathcliff. The quasi-Freudian language clarifies how *Wuthering Heights* is not simply the dramatic story of what it means to survive the defining love of one's life, but rather—far more interestingly, and ontologically

significant—what it means to survive that very life itself.

The passage from Wittgenstein accurately suggests that it is a fairly steadfast rule of existence that in death one is saved from the excruciating awareness of one's sudden non-being by virtue of that non-being. Yet in the unique allegorical and metaphysical design of *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff, as the living counterpart of the deceased single entity of Catherine-and-Heathcliff, is not so lucky. Thus, the suffering he experiences when she (he) dies is matchless in its intensity. It is instant and terrible:

He dashed his head against the knotted trunk; and, lifting up his eyes, howled, not like a man, but like a savage beast getting goaded to death with knives and spears. I observed several splashes of blood about the bark of the tree, and his hand and forehead were both stained; probably the scene I witnessed was a repetition of others acted during the night. It hardly moved my compassion—it appalled me.

(153)

As Nelly's reaction attests, this is something far greater than ordinary grief, as agonized and heartfelt as that often can be. The disturbingly graphic scene is Brontë's attempt to imaginatively bridge the gap between the cognitive impossibility of facing one's own death and Heathcliff's need to do so according to the metaphysical requirements of the novel. In other words, to use Gezari's coinage, it is representative of an auto-mourning. As such, it has a noteworthy affinity with Beauvoir's description in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* of the acute physically enacted agony that marked her own sudden awareness of personal mortality: "One afternoon, in Paris, I realized that I was condemned to death. I was alone in the house and I did not attempt to control my despair: I screamed and tore

at the red carpet” (138).

In the grip of the mortal grief that knows no relief, both nineteenth-century fictional character and twentieth-century existential writer resort to expressive recourse in the limitations of their physicality. The very bodies that are to be taken from them, that will one day fail along with their hearts and minds, eventually to be buried in and merge with the earth, become while they are alive the poignant vehicles for their frenzied protest against precisely that mortal certainty. At Catherine’s loss, Heathcliff lets forth the cry of a wild animal and repeatedly bloodies himself on a tree, just as, at the realization that she will eventually cease to exist, Beauvoir inarticulately cries and claws at a Parisian carpet. Although the impulses behind the two actions are twins, each representative of an auto-mourning and mortal protest, it is appropriate that Heathcliff’s display is the more extreme—he dwells in the imaginative realm of fiction, while Beauvoir inhabits the world of the actual. As such, she may only approximate through her agonized fear of death that which Brontë so powerfully creates as Heathcliff’s fully experienced and paradoxically *lived* reality. It is perhaps no surprise then that Beauvoir’s writing frequently contains allusions to Brontë and her only novel; it is vividly concerned with the human mystery that arguably occupied Beauvoir most of all, that of personal death.

It bears speculation (and *Wuthering Heights* certainly prompts such speculation) that should one have the opportunity to observe the hour of one’s end, to witness the loss of one’s individual consciousness into the common oblivion and furthermore experience the indifferent continuation of the world thereafter, one very well might howl and gnash. Or as Heathcliff miserably phrases it in the novel, “would you like to live with your soul in the grave?” (148). Appropriately, this auto-mourning is as protracted as it is intense; it

ultimately consumes Heathcliff's remaining partial-existence (and through his actions, the lives of many others) for the next twenty years. This unyielding rage is so often considered in distinctly inhuman terms by other characters in the novel: "Is Mr. Heathcliff a man [. . .or] is he a devil?" [xx] Isabella bitterly asks Nelly. Some of the novel's initial critics took a similar view. "Demon in the human form," describes an 1848 anonymous review in *Douglas Jerrod's Weekly Newspaper*, "a creature in whom every evil passion seems to have reached a gigantic excess" asserts one in the contemporaneous *Atlas*. But, in fact, this rage reveals itself to be profoundly human. It is a dramatized expression of the often unconscious or repressed anger and despair of all who live knowing they will die. Heathcliff's furious behavior is thus literary affirmation of Beauvoir's aphorism in *A Very Easy Death* (her quite personal but fundamentally philosophical essay chronicling the loss of her mother, Françoise Brasseur de Beauvoir) that "all men must die: but for every man his death is an accident and, even if he knows it and consents to it, an unjustifiable violation" (106).

Indeed, the movement of the novel's latter half depends wholly upon the fact that Heathcliff absolutely refuses to admit that Catherine's death—and thus, his own—is anything less than "an unjustifiable violation." As she is dying, Catherine imagines a very different future after she is gone, scathingly asking Heathcliff: "Will you forget me? Will you say twenty years hence, 'That's the grave of Catherine Earnshaw. I loved her long ago, and was wretched to lose her; but it is past [and] I've loved many others since' [...] Will you say so?" (145). Catherine's wretched dialogue provides a glimpse of another type of auto-mourning, one which may take place during those deathbed scenes (real and imagined) when the end of the self is so imminent as to make the despair its specter

provokes acute and undeniable. Beauvoir concludes that this type of final auto-mourning or last-minute rebellion is perhaps not uncommon, a conclusion she arrives at in her extensive study of old age, *The Coming of Age*, where she paraphrases Admetus in Euripides' play *Alcestis* angrily declaring, "old people always say they long for death—their age crushes them—they have lived too long. All words! As soon as death comes near, not a single wants to go" (104). If this ancient-derived assertion is true, then nearly every mortal is a collaborator in this metaphysical resistance, if doomedly and only at the very end of life. *Wuthering Heights* therefore functions as a finely wrought allegorical manifestation of a potential universality, simply a taking of this impulse toward auto-mourning to its furthest imaginative (allegorically rendered) extension.

Of course, the novel's conclusive response to Catherine's particular deathbed query is emphatically no. Unlike perhaps many, she is hardly forgotten "twenty years hence" (the exact time frame of the remainder of the novel). Indeed, in accordance with the work's unusual allegorical design and ontological concern, there is likely no other character in all of literature so thoroughly and ceaselessly mourned as Catherine is by Heathcliff. Yet the future she fearfully imagines at the end of her life is in fact the description of a fairly healthy reaction to bereavement—that is, the loss of the loved one (or loved object, in Freudian terms) becomes integrated into one's life over time as one moves forward to have new experiences and form new attachments<sup>4</sup>. What Catherine's dying dialogue therefore forcibly indicates (and Heathcliff's rebellious insistence on perpetual mourning thereafter demonstrates) is that when the loved object in this standard scenario is *oneself* its prospect may not only be far from comforting but in fact be frankly

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<sup>4</sup> This loosely paraphrases Freud's description of the normal mourning process in his highly influential essay *Mourning and Melancholia*.

appalling, even nightmarish. Mortal loss becomes a question of perspective and the one ultimately offered by Heathcliff(-Catherine)<sup>5</sup> in *Wuthering Heights* is unusual indeed: the view of individual death from the vantage of the one deceased. It therefore follows that the rhetoric of healthy grief negotiation is horrifying— and so denied—because it necessitates the erasure of the self, the stark dreadfulness of which can only ever be fully appreciated by that selfsame self.

Hence, in response to such terrifying conditions of (non)existence, one might understandably be inclined toward rebellion. Catherine-Heathcliff's stance of metaphysical protest is most explicitly articulated during one scene in particular. When Heathcliff unexpectedly returns to *Wuthering Heights* after his mysterious three-year absence, in Catherine's effusive rapture at being reunited with her "all in all," (114) she makes what amounts to a blatant confession of mortal insurrection: "The event of this evening [Heathcliff's return] has reconciled me to God and humanity!" (91). Brontë does not parse her language or her point here; the heroine is expressing former feelings of opposition to *God*. Catherine immediately augments this exclamation with one even more plainly heretical, further admitting to Nelly that she had previously "risen in angry rebellion against Providence" (91). Her words could hardly be more definitional of mortal protest. But Catherine only makes these assertions retrospectively, from the perspective of having joyously abandoned such mutinous sentiments in the face of a universe suddenly proved kind with Heathcliff's reentry into her life. However, this is in fact an important aspect of the scene's subversion, as it unsettlingly reveals that a

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<sup>5</sup> Sequence of Gilbert and Gubar's compound nomenclature altered to emphasize that it is Heathcliff who actually enacts the post-mortem auto-mourning experienced by the sundered whole Catherine-Heathcliff.

seemingly contented recently married young Victorian woman had been secretly harboring passionately insurrectionary sentiments against “God and humanity.” Furthermore, although Catherine expresses this shocking attitude in the past tense—she no longer feels that way—events soon dissipate her momentary happiness and one can logically conjecture that her protest against elemental forces also returns.

It is worth noting that Catherine-Heathcliff is not the only character in the novel that voice a stance of defiance against death. When the servant girl breathlessly announces the birth of Hareton and the doctor’s prediction that Frances will not live much longer, she remarks as an aside, “If I were her, I’m certain I should not die: I should get better at the bare sight of [the baby]” (57). It is a naïve comment made by one who is young and not yet acquainted with the tragic perimeters of common human experience, but it is also an implicitly rebellious assertion: I would not desire to die, so I would not! That death heeds no one’s wishes or expectations is underscored a page later: “One night, while leaning on [Hindley’s] shoulder in the act of saying she thought she should be able to get up tomorrow, a fit of coughing took [Frances]—a very slight one—he raised her in his arms; she put her two hands about his neck, her face changed, and she was dead” (58). Hindley’s reaction in bereavement is not terribly different from Heathcliff’s later one, and the metaphysical root is the same: “[Hindley] cursed and defied: execrated God and man, and gave himself up to reckless dissipation” (59). It is death, and the attendant mortal anger at the universe, that even so early in the novel is responsible for sinking *Wuthering Heights* into its dismal and violent condition.

In her book entitled *Metaphysical Rebellion in the Works of Emily Bronte*, Jill Dix Ghnassia uses similar terminology to express the similar conclusions she comes to about

the presence of a deep-seated inclination toward protest in Brontë's writing. Although her focus is mainly on the poetry, she declares, "Brontë's personae and her characters express feelings of frustration, confusion, despair, and rebellion. [...] Through their rebellious utterances, she affirms her bond to humanity through suffering and shared existence" (209-210). In *The Rebel*, Camus strongly emphasizes how crucial is this relationship between more traditional protest (personal and historical resistance) and that of a cosmic nature. He avers simply, "human rebellion ends in metaphysical revolution," (25) and this is precisely the trajectory of protest in *Wuthering Heights*. What begins as mostly social rebellion in the first half—so clearly delineated by Gilbert and Gubar, among others—finally culminates in full-blown metaphysical rebellion after Catherine dies. It is therefore instructive to consider the novel's sustained fixation on injustice and tyranny more generally (the language of which can be found on nearly every page) in the context of this connection to the larger metaphysical project of the novel.

The multiple oppressive energies in *Wuthering Heights* should be understood as operating in direct relationship to—that is, as precursors and doubles for—the final tyranny of death. It is a novel that is profoundly critical of authoritarianism, expressing that to be a "master" is to inevitably be a "tyrant" (17). A succession of characters each briefly exemplifies this contemptible master-tyrant plurality: First there is distant and unjust Mr. Earnshaw, then embittered Hindley, followed by seemingly benevolent Edgar (as Gilbert and Gubar compellingly maintain [280-282]), and lastly, reactionarily, Catherine-Heathcliff. Despite the apparent intractability of the respective epochs when each character is the figure of ultimate authority (and therefore tyranny over someone) they are but evanescent foreshadows of the tyranny of tyrannies that finally undoes them

all. Indeed, the many discussions and depictions of tyranny throughout the text are implicit discussions and depictions of the oppressive force here dubbed the death tyrant (which may but needn't be synonymous with God). Likewise, resistance to these tyrannies functions metaphorically for the overall thematic stance of mortal resistance. This connection can be seen at the beginning of the novel, when Nelly describes how Mr. Earnshaw's harsh words to young Catherine ("I cannot love thee") "made her cry at first; and then, being repulsed continually hardened her, and she laughed if I told her to say she was sorry for her faults" (38) The insightful excerpt provides not only a psychological explanation for Catherine-Heathcliff's rebellion, but also a philosophical one. Faced with an oppression that robs one of that which is infinitely precious, such as the affection of a father or indeed existence itself, a certain type of individual will revolt and find some measure of satisfaction in the sheer act.

The novel's uniquely pronounced anti-tyrannical and even anti-authoritarian tone has long been the subject of critical discussion. Terry Eagleton famously put forth a Marxist interpretation of the text that views it primarily in terms of class struggle, Heathcliff representative of those antagonistic forces which find themselves at failed odds with overwhelmingly oppressive capitalist values. More recently, Ian Ward in "Emily Brontë and the Terrorist Imagination" considers how Heathcliff embodies a distinctly Jacobin radical ethos, one dangerously threatening to the establishment and its vested interest in maintaining status quo inequality. Notably, Heathcliff himself explains his terrifying capacity for vengeance in just such terms of being a victim of injustice. He tells Catherine that his anger at the pain she has caused him will not be directed towards her, but rather against others, because "the tyrant grinds down his slaves and they don't

turn against him; they crush those beneath them” (103). Heathcliff’s analogy does not precisely follow, as through his actions in the latter half of the novel he also punishes himself (his is a miserable lot) and in doing so, Catherine as well. But such talk of tyranny and slavery always contains greater ontological significance. The second generation (younger Catherine, Hareton Earnshaw, and Linton Heathcliff) hardly possesses the metaphysical power of the death tyrant but nonetheless suffer deeply and unfairly at Heathcliff’s hands as a result of his anger at larger cosmic forces.

More generally, mortality and injustice share an intrinsic connection; it is precisely the fact everyone is mortal and everything is ephemeral that lends all rebellions their urgency. As Camus points out, mortal protest is the most radical sort of protest possible. It is inherently at the root of every act of resistance, whether personal or political, because the impulse toward life is the unifying characteristic of all rebellion. Unfettered life, authentic life, free life—in some form or another, this is invariably the driving motivation of all movements of resistance. *Wuthering Heights* therefore powerfully imparts the sense that death is not only a grave injustice (pun noted) but indeed the concluding injustice of a constitutionally unjust condition. This is emphasized in the fact that by the novel’s end, all of the aforementioned tyrants, as well as those who staunchly rebelled against tyranny (not a mutually exclusive group), are inalterably silent beneath the Yorkshire sod (308). It cannot be but concluded, and the novel’s final scene of tombstones prompts its recognition, that no matter how audaciously enacted the mortal resistance—and Catherine-Heathcliff is arguably among the most audacious metaphysical rebels in literature—triumph over the death tyrant is never possible.

Yet the mortal protest is a rebellion no less poignant because it is also absurd. In

Camus's earlier essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he presents the philosophical concept of the absurd. The absurd is the paradoxical state of intellectually and emotionally honest human experience, when meaninglessness and mortality are fully appreciated and yet life must be forged through nonetheless. It is the condition when one's "appetite for the absolute and for unity" is confronted with "the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle" (x). In slightly altered form, the phenomenon appears in Beauvoir's writing as the "tragic ambiguity" (x) of existence. Again Camus locates philosophical knowledge in literature and myth, presenting Sisyphus as the ultimate absurd hero—not simply because he is condemned eternally to push a rock up the mountain (although certainly that) but moreover because he attempts literally to imprison the death tyrant. As Camus states, "the absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (21). Because his attempt at resisting the death tyrant fails, Sisyphus's existence is rendered absurd. Camus notoriously considers in the essay whether suicide is required in response to the universal absurd condition. His answer, however, is unequivocal, and it is also Catherine-Heathcliff's: "No. It requires revolt" (xx). Although metaphysical resistance can never succeed in overpowering the death tyrant, Camus concludes that it is nonetheless the only authentic and laudable response to the mortal state. One may therefore deduce that while it is Dostoyevsky and Kafka's literary creations that Camus considers, Brontë's Catherine-Heathcliff is an exemplary absurdist rebel hero(ine). Upon Catherine's death, Heathcliff persists in a state of absurdity to which he responds with unyielding rebellion.

Susan Meyer's argument coincides with the principle contention of this chapter in pinpointing Catherine's loss as the precise moment in the text when the defiant rumblings

of the first half become unequivocally metaphysical: “After Catherine dies, sickening from being split off from the most vital part of herself, Heathcliff lives on, embodying energies of resistance that persist after his original figurative role [of Catherine’s double or counterpart] seems over” (488). This transition is immediately obvious the moment that Heathcliff learns that Catherine is deceased. Prior to his frenzied self-bloodletting against the tree, Heathcliff makes an inherently metaphysical demand. “In a sudden paroxysm of ungovernable passion” (153) he requests not only that Catherine *not* rest in peace (commonplace mourning again receives Brontë’s sardonic treatment) but also that she ceaselessly and relentlessly haunt him as a moor-wandering spirit. In the agonized throes of a rebellious auto-mourning only knowable in literature, he cries:

I pray one prayer—I repeat it till my tongue stiffens—Catherine Earnshaw, may you not rest as long as I am living! You said I killed you—haunt me, then! The murdered *do* haunt their murderers. I believe—I know that ghosts *have* wandered on earth. Be with me always—take any form—drive me mad! only *do* not leave me in this abyss where I cannot find you! (153)

By fervently believing in ghosts and desperately wanting to be visited by Catherine’s, Heathcliff manifestly “protests against his condition and against the whole of creation” (Camus 23). He is, in effect, trying to quite literally deny and defy death—Catherine’s and therefore also his own.

A traditional Christian framework for viewing the world does not seem to fit

neatly into the thematic landscape of *Wuthering Heights*.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it would be reaching and perhaps projecting to term the novel actually atheistic (Camus is careful to point out that “the metaphysical rebel is [. . .] not definitely an atheist” [24]) but at least a crisis of conventional faith is evident. While God and heaven are frequently evoked, it is usually with less than pious conviction and occasionally tinged with outright anger. As a child, Catherine uses her “ready words” to “turn Joseph’s religious curses into ridicule,” (37) a character whose primary function seems to be to illustrate the insufficiency and hypocrisy of a particular type of religiosity. (Nelly is quite right when she describes him as “the weariest, self-righteous Pharisee that ever ransacked a Bible to rake the promises to himself and fling the curses on his neighbors” [36]). But perhaps the most pointedly impious moment of dialogue in the entire text comes when Catherine, speaking to Nelly after agreeing to marry Edgar, disparagingly refers to God as “the wicked man in [Heaven]” who “brought Heathcliff so low” (73). Such open contempt for the deity on the part of the heroine is seriously remarkable, although the blasphemous parenthetical is rarely sufficiently remarked upon in criticism. That being said, as Ian Ward points out, “the anti-clerical tone of the novel has been long appreciated” and indeed cumulatively “insinuates more than a simple skepticism of scriptural authority” (542).

This attitude of greater than simple skepticism, which aligns the novel’s undercurrent of protest with a proto-existentialist stance, is best revealed in one of Catherine’s most famous outbursts. She exclaims to Nelly, “I cannot express it; but surely you and everybody have a notion that there is, or should be, an existence of yours beyond you. What is the use of my creation, if I were entirely contained here?” (74). While this is

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<sup>6</sup> The ways in which the novel strongly privileges the natural over the supernatural and mortal experience over promised hereafters is more fully explored in the next chapter.

sometimes misread as an assertion of faith in a hereafter, it is more accurately a lament at the implausibility of one. The inclusion of the qualifier “or should be” is of course critical; such a phrase does not appear by accident. A careful reading therefore demonstrates that what Catherine is saying is not that there *is* some kind of duration of individual consciousness beyond the earthly realm, but rather that there *ought to be*. Thus, the early statement contains within its skepticism the seeds of metaphysical protest: Catherine strongly implies (in particular with her final question) that if this temporary mortal existence, with its checks and limitations, is all that anyone is allotted—which must be furthermore admitted as entirely possible—than this fact is unforgivably unjust.

The first epigraph that opens this thesis comes from the conclusion of the second volume of Beauvoir’s autobiography, *The Prime of Life*. Having spent the nearly five hundred pages prior reflecting upon her “hardy and free” (115) years (Brontë’s paradisaical words can be applied here with some existential accuracy) when she emerged as the premiere intellectual woman of her time, Beauvoir turns in the final pages to her anguished knowledge that she will one day be separated from even those memories in death. She does not elaborate in the volume about why she specifically evokes Brontë for her discussion, but it is perhaps not a surprising a choice. Any reader of *Wuthering Heights* must be aware that it is a dark and furious novel whose concern is with the most fundamental stuff of existence. Certainly Beauvoir would have caught its metaphysical implications, and indeed, following that point of allusion, she goes on to tentatively explore similar themes to that which this critical investigation ascribes to the novel itself:

[Brontë’s moon] was the same moon that all our eyes reflected; why then, in the equation of time and space, were we all isolated elements,

irreducible one to another? Death is common to us all, yet each individual faces it alone. While life still exists, we can die together; but in dying we pass beyond this world, to a place where the word “together” no longer possesses any meaning. (477)

That Beauvoir broaches the mystery of death through the specificity of Brontë and goes on to elucidate the terrible aloneness that defines the death experience is not coincidental, as *Wuthering Heights* is intimately concerned with precisely these questions.

The troubling conflation of mortality and aloneness that Beauvoir describes is expressed and explored repeatedly over the course of the novel. During the illness that marks Catherine's initial physical decline, which eventually results in her death during childbirth, she glimpses her wasting face in the mirror and does not believe it is her own. She cannot believe what its ravaged aspect is telling her about her mortal vulnerability, and with all the anxiety of the dying cries, “I am afraid of being alone!” (113). The scene is a powerful depiction of how painful is the personal recognition that *oneself* must die—entirely different from death as it appears in the abstract, horrifyingly and acutely personal. Beauvoir returns even more intimately to this idea in *A Very Easy Death*: “the misfortune is that although everyone must come to it [death], each experiences the adventure in solitude. We never left Maman during those last days [. . .] and yet we were profoundly separated from her” (100). That each individual experiences death alone and can have no direct experience of another's death is one of the primary subjects of Beauvoir's existential writings, and certainly can partly explain her long-term interest in *Wuthering Heights*, as evidenced in her multiple allusions. After all, in creating Catherine

and Heathcliff as ostensibly separate beings, Brontë exclusively attempts to solve this very dilemma of aloneness, at least within the textual boundaries of *Wuthering Heights*.

During Catherine's tearful goodbye scene with Heathcliff, Nelly ominously states that "she was fated, sure to die" (145). But this is Catherine's fate only so much as it is everyone's; being fated to die is the basic state of life. In turn, Catherine-Heathcliff's ultimately novel-length protest against what Camus in *The Rebel* terms "the universal death penalty," (100) is representative of greater than their specific experience. As Charlotte Brontë's narrator in *Jane Eyre* somewhat mysteriously asserts, "millions are in silent revolt against their lot. No one knows how many rebellions beside political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth" (114). Camus's critical exposition of mortal resistance coupled with the literary history of *memento mori* works indicates that such existential preoccupations are at least as ancient as the human ability to express them.

Thus, while with supremely original design, *Wuthering Heights* investigates a primordial lament. Throughout several different scenes and on several different levels, the text's two main characters (or single main character) are indeed symbolic of unknown multitudes, representative of Miss Eyre's army of noiseless rebels. It is absolutely true, as Cecil claims, that in *Wuthering Heights* the "characters exist in virtue of the reality of their attitude to the universe" (300). But when Catherine and Heathcliff's repeated assertions of fundamental unity are examined through an interpretative lens that both approaches the novel on the allegorical terms of poetry and fully appreciates its sustained iconoclasm (its "untamed ferocity perpetually at war with the accepted order of things" [Woolf 158]), this attitude to the universe unequivocally reveals itself to be, quite

contrary to Cecil's intended understanding, one of fixed mortal or metaphysical rebellion.

The concerns of this chapter have necessarily been with death; it is simply a fact that *Wuthering Heights* is very much about the forces that condemn all to their graves. Yet throughout the novel, the earth is also expressly evoked— it is notably the last word in the novel— with “moths fluttering among the heath and hare-bells [and] the soft wind breathing through the grass” (308). Brontë's implication seems to be that alongside mortality there is always another oppositional force at work: passionate life, inherently mutable, but still powerful and intensely valuable. Protest cannot be understood as only an act of negation, it is always made in defense of something. The next chapter will investigate precisely what *Wuthering Heights* indicates mortal resistance to be protecting.

## CHAPTER II

### “HALF SAVAGE, HARDY AND FREE”: THE EARTHLY NATURE OF EDEN

Our love was love from heaven;  
At least, if heavenly love be born  
In the pure light of childhood's morn—  
Long ere the prison-tainted air  
From this world's plague-fen rises there.

—Emily Brontë May 1844

We would not leave our native home,  
For any world beyond the Tomb.

— Emily Brontë July 1841

Nelly, the primary narrator of *Wuthering Heights*, apologizes for the darkness of the tale she imparts, confessing sadly, “my history is dree, as we say,” to which the listening Lockwood’s thoughts immediately echo an agreement: “Dree and dreary!” (129). And certainly thus far this critical investigation, which has attempted to further establish the novel’s uncommonly death-focused thematic concern, specifically its depiction of the individual death experience as the concluding oppression of a constitutionally oppressive world, would seem to be in accordance with Nelly’s qualitative assessment. However, such apparent dreariness is hardly the sum total of the novel’s ontological effects, nor the locus of its enduring euphonious charms. As Stevie Davies asserts, even if somewhat “somber” in several respects, “the tonality of the novel’s voices is quite otherwise: it is joyous. Its language, from the wicked ironies of the narrative voice to the dream speech of its lyricism, is pure *jeu d’esprit*” (89). Davies’s

exuberant sentiment echoes something of May Sinclair's earlier assessment in *The Three Brontes*, where she posits "love of life and passionate adoration of the earth [. . .] burns in *Wuthering Heights*" (116). The following pages will explore the significance of these celebratory elements within the novel in regard to its larger project of mortal protest.

Protest is an inherently reactive stance that is made when something that is perceived to be a right is infringed upon in some way. Metaphysical rebellion should be appreciated on these same terms, as a categorically defensive act. The primary purpose of this chapter therefore is to delineate the ways in which, as Sinclair's assertion suggests, the subject of such ardent defense in the ostensibly macabre text is in fact one's (birth)right to life—and a very particular quality of living, as will be explored. Indeed, an intensely defiant stance toward mortal limitation such as *Wuthering Heights* exhibits can only exist in conjunction with a proportionately extreme valuation of the preceding mortal experience. As J. Hillis Miller succinctly asserts in *The Disappearance of God*, "the violence of Emily Brontë's characters," perhaps most notably Catherine-Heathcliff, "is a reaction to the loss of an earlier state of happiness" (170). Later existentialist philosophy is also often (mis)taken for being "dree and dreary," largely because of its similar fixation on human finiteness, but as its theorists variably assert, complete valuation of mortal experience is dependant upon this recognition that it will not last. Or as modernist poet Wallace Stevens later expresses, "death is the mother of beauty" (604). It can thus be understood that even the darkest aspects of the superlatively "strange," "fearful and repulsive" novel, as anonymous reviews in *Atlas* and *New Monthly Magazine* termed it respectively, are directly related to a profound—and profoundly frustrated— appreciation for all the wonder and sublimity offered in evanescent sublunary experience.

To be sure, a high estimation of mortal experience has frequently been concurrent with metaphysically rebellious expressions in art and literature. *Memento mori* works are related to and sometimes overlap with those considered *carpe diem* (“seize the day”) where reminders of mortality are meant to serve specifically as the impetus toward a more full and active appreciation of ephemeral earthly existence: “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may” Robert Herrick famously urged in the seventeenth century in his poem, “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time.” It is thus worthwhile to examine and attempt to identify the distinctive nature of Brontë’s “rosebuds,” to borrow the poet’s metaphor for the best possibilities offered in human experience, as they appear within *Wuthering Heights*’ peculiarly rebellious ethos. While the novel presents the death tyrant and its life-ending capacity as the unconditional target of persistent resistant energies, it is not equally true that absolute life—that is, whoever’s life and however it is lived—is presented as inherently valuable and defensible. Rather, it is only existence enacted according to very particular values, values operating in the text as its joyous brief-blooming “rosebuds,” that are the implicit subject of its metaphysical concern.

It has been frequently noted that *Wuthering Heights* features a series of dichotomies, which have been given various critical definition and emphasis.<sup>1</sup> This argument posits that the novel unmistakably endorses one side of these binaries over the other and that such endorsement is related to the novel’s broader ontological perspective. Specifically, the following unorthodox values are presented repeatedly in *Wuthering Heights*, and with an abundance of interconnected and overlapping textual manifestation:

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps most influentially, in 1935 David Cecil put forth the idea that the novel is based around the interplay between the cosmic principles of calm and storm, resulting in an equilibrium state. His argument serves to provide a unifying interpretation that has been critically responded to (explicitly or implicitly) ever since. See Works Cited.

childhood is privileged over adulthood, androgyny over gender essentialism, unseemly passion over seemly dispassion, the natural over the supernatural, the imagination over mysticism, and wild(er)ness over civilization. Moreover, all of these oppositional tensions are the reverberations and implications of the novel's most over-arching struggle, which is that of liberty and freedom (perhaps the most prized and elusive Herrickian "rosebuds") against tyranny and oppression. Not only do these privileged qualities make up the only convincing paradise that *Wuthering Heights* presents, their unprivileged opposites are inevitably aligned with the annihilating forces of mortality—that is, as menaces to authentic life, they are ultimately in league with the death tyrant.

It is a testament to the potency of Brontë's prose, which Virginia Woolf argues possesses the perfect distilment of poetry (158), that all of these aforementioned defense-worthy values are enigmatically represented along with their opposites in a single instance of dialogue. They appear together amid the great torrent of semi-sensical speech that Catherine frantically issues forth in chapter twelve. Having spent several days locked in her chamber after quarreling with Heathcliff and Edgar, staunchly refusing to eat or see anyone, Catherine is not only morbidly distraught but also physically unwell. In desperation, half to Nelly and half to herself she cries agitatedly:

Oh, I'm burning! I wish I were out of doors! I wish I were a girl again, half savage and hardy, and free; [. . .] Why am I so changed? [. . .] I'm sure I should be myself were I once among the heather on those hills.

Open the window again wide: fasten it open! (115)

Catherine's unrestrained dialogue here functions like a climactic threnody within the intricate design of Brontë's "mad poem" (Lewis 364). It is the crucial moment when she realizes not only that she is inescapably doomed to die, but that furthermore, in an important sense, she already has. From the vantage point of lapsarian womanhood, Catherine mourns with nearly manic lucidity the irrevocable loss of the only paradise in which she can believe, that she knew as a little girl at Wuthering Heights. Eden thus operates as an extended trope in the novel indicating a quality of lived experience rather than any kind of mystical factuality.<sup>2</sup> Catherine's half-delirious lament inadvertently reveals the very particular (unconventional and even proto-existentialist, as will be explored) qualitative composition of this Brontëan paradise. As such, it will be repeatedly returned to over the course of this examination of that earthly epoch.

The previous chapter argued for those interpretations that read Catherine and Heathcliff as a single being that is divided against itself, not in the metaphorical sense that "poetic lovers have declared for centuries that their beloved is the compliment of their own soul [...] but literally true," (Mendelson 53) with all the ontological significance that nearly unprecedented literary situation implies. Therefore, what Catherine so epiphanically desires in this scene ("I wish I were a girl again!" [115]) is nothing less than to return to the time prior to such catastrophic sundering, when authentic, whole, and reveling in rather than rebelling against mortal conditions, Catherine-Heathcliff existed uncompromised. It has been said that the novel "is essentially about children" (Buchen x), but perhaps it is more accurate to assert that it is

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<sup>2</sup> The biblical language of paradise will be frequently evoked to describe the type of mortal existence that *Wuthering Heights*' metaphysical rebellion is defending. This follows in a tradition of scholarship, most notably Gilbert and Gubar, which views the novel's action in terms of a fall from an unconventional state of earthly grace.

essentially about *childhood*, the brief matchless interim wherein, according to Brontë, one is not yet divorced from one's authentic self. As the epigraphic poem at the start of the chapter underscores, in the Brontëan ethos there is no paradise except that available in childhood, rendering that "enclosed province" possessing "a unity more profound and comprehensive than anything adults can experience" (Mendelson 47), priceless beyond measure. The novel's not only constitutional but superlatively tragic terms thus emerge, as any true tale of childhood must inevitably disclose its end in adulthood, which in *Wuthering Heights* is emphasized as the first augural of the presence of the waiting death tyrant. The fury later directed at the latter indeed stems from love for that earliest state.

Catherine-Heathcliff do not appreciate this childhood era as Edenic until after it has been forever closed to them. During their "very thick" (33) years together as children at *Wuthering Heights* there is no need to make any assertions of mutual unity because it is simply understood as their inherent state of being, unquestioned and unexamined. When those assertions do finally (and repeatedly) come, making up among the novel's most famous instances of dialogue, it is only after the cataclysmic dividing of selfhood has already taken place. This event operates as Brontë's version of the fall, a fall into inauthenticity and adulthood, and specifically into normative Victorian gender roles, all of which operate as not only precursors for the inevitable mortal fall into death but also as literal means to it. The precise moment Eden is left behind can be pinpointed to the scene when Catherine-Heathcliff wander carelessly onto the grounds of Thrushcross Grange, whose deceptively appealing interior (in young Heathcliff's words, "ah! It was beautiful [. . .] we should have thought ourselves in heaven!" [42]) actually constitutes a locus diametrically opposed to (and threatening toward) Brontëan paradise. The traumatic

separation this event bodes is appropriately inaugurated with blood and pain when Skulker bites Catherine's ankle, "purple tongue hanging half a foot out of his mouth, and his pendant lips streaming with bloody slaver" (43). Heathcliff-Catherine thus experience the first sundering of self, a sundering that is completed in death.

Soon afterward Catherine begins to don the social requirements of Victorian womanhood, moving her ever further away from the androgynous wholeness she knew as Catherine-Heathcliff and further along the trajectory toward her final "narrow home [. . .] with a headstone" (79). Thus, the novel not only privileges childhood experience over that of adulthood but also distinctly values its pre-sexed or intersexed state, presenting adult sexualization as related not only to loss but to the ultimate loss of self in death.<sup>3</sup>

Carolyn Heilbrun in *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* understands Catherine's decision, only a few chapters later, to marry Edgar and leave *Wuthering Heights* in quite similar terms, explaining that "she was seduced by the offers the world makes to women to renounce their selves" (80). This relates to one of Simone de Beauvoir's more popularly known evocations of the author of *Wuthering Heights*, which appears in *The Second Sex*. In her discussion of "the young girl," Beauvoir avers that the vast majority of the time the aforementioned "slowly buries her childhood, puts away the imperious being that was she, and enters submissively upon adult existence" (365). In considering how rare it is for one to do otherwise, she asserts:

Not without reason did George Eliot and Margaret Kennedy have their heroines, Maggie and Tessa, die young. The Brontë sisters suffered a

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<sup>3</sup> The connection Brontë makes between feminine sexuality and death will be more fully explored in terms of its historical context in the next chapter.

harsh fate. The young girl is touching because she makes a stand, alone and weak, against the world. But the world is too strong; if she persists in her opposition, it breaks her. [. . .] ‘You all die at fifteen,’ wrote Diderot. (365)

There are several relevant aspects to this passage. Beauvoir again seems to conflate the Brontës with their work (and only in their case, Eliot is distinguished from her creation) evidencing an attitude that implies Beauvoir interprets *Wuthering Heights* as uniquely embodying the author’s own philosophical outlook. But moreover, resisting adulthood is put in specific terms of a doomed rebellion that is categorically associated with mortality.

That the image and language of mortal protest is evoked in discussion of adolescence is thematically appropriate, for it is specifically Catherine’s entry into womanhood that initially divides Catherine-Heathcliff and forebodes its indelible completion in death. She is almost thirteen years old, at the archetypal precipice of sexual maturity, when she spends the five weeks at Thrushcross Grange wherein Mrs. Linton instills the “plan of reform” (46) that results in Catherine’s normative gender performance.<sup>4</sup> In the Beauvoirean understanding, the existentially paramount “values of freedom—generosity, lucidity, realism, reciprocity, authenticity and autonomy—are neither masculine or feminine, but simply *human*” (Moi 194). This androgynous ideal seems to also characterize Brontëan grace, the fall from which is textually signified as complete when Nelly encounters Heathcliff “by himself,” and thus sexed, a sight hitherto so unusual that Nelly confesses “it gave me a start to see him alone” (42). Interestingly,

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<sup>4</sup> This argument implicitly relies upon Beauvoir’s profoundly influential idea that gender is a social construction. As she famously avers in *The Second Sex*, “one is not born a woman, but becomes one” (xx). *Wuthering Heights* presents this process of becoming as the great pre-mortem tragedy of gendered existence.

however, the prior blissful duration of Catherine-Heathcliff's intersexed state functions as a lacuna within the novel, already over by chapter seven and figured mostly as a retrospective yearning. As Jay Clayton remarks in *Romantic Vision and the Novel*, "If we move backward [. . .] looking for a place in the text that records an authentic moment of union, we can locate nothing but a gap, a hole in the narrative beyond which the topic of union becomes prominent" (83). This is not a flaw in the novel, but rather demonstrates how for Brontë the genderless realm of childhood is so precious as to be nearly unspeakable, the province of poetry and inarticulate sensation in a sense that is conventionally associated with divine locations. This is particularly fitting for a state of being that is textually positioned in opposition to death, the ultimate ontological point of unknowability.

In the lead up to the above excerpt from *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir deplores how few young girls "go on as adults with the passionate designs of adolescence" (364). Here is indicated a quality of childhood that is held in such high regard according to *Wuthering Heights'* implicit value system as to constitute its own Herrickian "rosebud" status: passion. Indeed, if any single attribute distinguishes Catherine-Heathcliff from all the other characters in the novel, and even unites them descriptively once they are separated, it is their capacity for passionate feeling and expression. This is sometimes manifested as joyousness, particularly in the more cheery atmosphere of androgynous childhood, as when Nelly describes Catherine(-Heathcliff) as having "ways about her such as I never saw a child take up before [. . .] her spirits were always at high-water mark, her tongue always going—singing, laughing, and plaguing everybody who would not do the same" (37). In other childhood instances such passionate disposition is figured more negatively

(at least as far as Nelly is concerned) as being “saucy” (42) or “naughty” (72). But perhaps the novel’s most spectacular displays of passion are those exhibited in the lapsarian assertions of mutual sameness, such as in Catherine’s ardent, “Nelly, I am Heathcliff!” (xx). Woolf refers to these speeches as the poetic novel’s “summits of emotion,” (xx) wherein its lyrical genius is most concentrated. Thus, passion is esteemed not only according to the unorthodox value system enacted by Catherine-Heathcliff but also operates as a distinctly textual value—that is, the text is euphoniously valuable insofar as its characters’ passionate declarations function as its instances of solid poetry.

In the scene where all the metaphorical flora that constitutes the Brontëan good life are represented, Catherine declares “I’m burning,” (115) and while doubtless giving an accurate account of her feverish state, she also makes unconscious allusion to this textually ascendant value, which is frequently symbolically figured as literal heat. From the beginning, Catherine-Heathcliff is described in terms of blaze and flame (Heathcliff’s eyes are “full of black fire” (87); she is “our fiery Catherine” (114)) against which others are contrasted as variations on cold and ice. In one such instance, during the “wicked rage” that would soon result in her delirium, Catherine taunts her husband, “your cold blood cannot be worked into a fever: your veins are full of icewater; but mine are boiling and the sight of such chillness makes them dance” (108). That heat imagery both symbolically unites Catherine-Heathcliff after their division in adulthood and indicates their vital difference from those around them is again evidenced in Catherine’s assertion that “whatever our souls are made of, [Heathcliff’s] and mine are the same; and Linton’s is as different as a moonbeam from lightening, or frost from fire” (73).

The parallel between this constantly reiterated language of fire and ice and the corporeal warmth of life and coldness of death is obvious enough as to hardly require greater explication. In a novel that is fundamentally about the struggle of life against death, it is unsurprising that life passionately lived (and defended) is an intrinsically valued trait. A more apt term for this textually valued aspect of mortal existence is likely vivacity or brio, with the words' similar and thematically appropriate definitions and etymologic roots (according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, vivacity comes from the Latin for "vital force, liveliness," and brio comes from the Italian for "mettle, fire, life,"). As such, this somewhat elusive Herrickian "rosebud" enacted by Catherine-Heathcliff is perhaps best dubbed briophilia: a love of liveliness, fire, and ardor. Catherine-Heathcliff's utter scorn and contempt for those who do not share such capacity for ardent mortal appreciation (and rebellion—two sides of the same coin) is itself demonstrative of the high esteem in which briophilia is held. Indeed, despite all urging and even their own attempts to do so, Catherine-Heathcliff ultimately refuse to live out proper Victorian lives of the type that T.S. Eliot would later describe in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" as "measured out [. . .] with coffee spoons" (51). (Notably, the only characters associated with preparing or imbuing that particular imperial brew are the novel's respective narrators, Lockwood and Nelly; the two central characters' lives would presumably have to be measured out in utensils for a more ebullient substance, like lava.)

Yet even the characters in *Wuthering Heights* that are not associated with briophilia (or more accurately, are associated with it only in terms of contrast) invariably demonstrate some kind of respect for this value that they themselves do not possess. In reporting the decisive initial encounter at Thrushcross Grange to Nelly, Heathcliff

describes Catherine's "superior" vibrant presence as in fact "kindling a spark of spirit in the vacant blue eyes of the Lintons" (45). While some readers may find Edgar's gentleness, civility, and constancy admirable, he is presented as intrinsically antithetical to the cardinal ethos of passion embodied by Catherine-Heathcliff and should be understood as an unwitting but unequivocal agent of the death tyrant. It is his relationship to Catherine (first in friendship, then courtship, and lastly marriage and parenthood) that portends her mortal end. It thematically follows that he is so often met with Catherine-Heathcliff's fiery resistance and is associated with a constitutional lack of *liveliness*. Even Nelly admits, "he wanted spirit in general" (60) and more dramatically, Heathcliff declares, "if [Edgar] loved with all the powers of his puny being, he couldn't love as much in eighty years as I could in a day. And Catherine has a heart as deep as I have" (xx). As this briophilic display attests, to love and live deeply, and to deeply love to live, are ideas repeatedly textually conflated and intertwined. Nonetheless, Edgar does care about Catherine, desiring her (in a sense that Gilbert and Gubar argue is fundamentally patriarchal [280-282]) at least partly because of that very passionate nature.

Thus, although Catherine-Heathcliff's passionate displays are often narratively presented as foreign, inconceivable, and even disturbing, this is not done so convincingly or consistently in terms of the cumulative textual effect, which is in its favor. Even Lockwood, perhaps the novel's most dispassionate (briophobic) character, thoroughly tone-deaf to the heady ethos that characterizes Catherine-Heathcliff's worldview, becomes obscurely aware of his own lack in hearing about them: "I could fancy a love for life here almost possible; and I was a fixed unbeliever in any love," (56) he muses. For all the general myopia of Lockwood's emotional outlook, he correctly surmises Catherine-

Heathcliff's passionate disposition to be synonymous with active and profound "love for life." The other apparently unsympathetic narrator, Nelly, has a similarly misleading relationship to Catherine-Heathcliff's displays of passion. Although ostensibly chiding or expressing alarm at it, at some level she also subscribes to its implicit value system.

When young Heathcliff wishes to be like Edgar, Nelly reprimands him for the momentary lapse of that quality which even she perceives as sacred, retorting "and cried for mama, at every turn [. . .] and trembled if a country lad heaved his fist against you, and sat at home all day for a shower of rain. Oh, Heathcliff, you are showing a poor spirit!" (50).

In broadly reticulated form, the text conspires in Catherine-Heathcliff's implicitly rebellious valuation of intensely inhabited experience, their keen appreciation of what Beauvoir calls in *A Very Easy Death* "the infinite value of each instant" (106). As Camus correspondingly asserts in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "outside of that single fatality of death, everything, joy or happiness, is liberty" (87). In Brontë they have a theoretical precursor; C. Day Lewis alludes to the poetry as well as the novel in coming to his conclusion that the author "was all her life consumed by a desire for freedom" (364). Each of the "rosebud" values that make up privileged existence in the Brontëan ethos can be understood as means to and synonyms for freedom. Thus, Catherine-Heathcliff strongly recalls Camus's liberty-yearning absurdist hero Sisyphus not only in "his scorn of the gods [and] his hatred of death," but also in his corresponding "passion for life" (Camus 89). Catherine-Heathcliff's trajectory in the novel indeed avers that it is only from a deeply passionate appreciation for the best offered through life (all approximations of freedom) that equally profound mortal protest (against freedom's final destroyer) can spring. This connate relationship between mortal love and metaphysical rebellion is

reiterated in Beauvoir's existentialist contemplation of the passing of her mother in *A Very Easy Death*, wherein she asserts "Maman loved life as I love it and in the face of death she had the same feeling of rebellion that I have. [. . .] Whether you think of it as heavenly or earthly, if you love life immortality is no consolation for death" (91-92).

Likewise, in *Wuthering Heights*, the potentiality of a hereafter does not provide real solace; it is unconvincing pseudo-comfort at best and works to do the severing from true states of bliss at worst. Brontë spares no scorn in her depiction of those types of religious hypocrisy that work to deny the paradises that are actually offered—fleetingly, precariously—in passionate earthly experience. *Wuthering Heights'* specific commentary on these themes is encapsulated in an early scene of high emotion, this time inhabited by very young Catherine-Heathcliff at the sudden terrible realization that Mr. Earnshaw has just died:

"I shall bid father good-night first," said Catherine, putting her arms around his neck before we could hinder her. The poor thing discovered her loss directly—she screamed out—"Oh, he's dead, Heathcliff! He's dead!" And they both set up a heart-breaking cry. I joined my wail to theirs, loud and bitter; but Joseph asked what we could be thinking of to roar that way over a saint in heaven. (39)

Joseph's reaction parodizes Christian responses to death that scornfully negate the need for deep mourning by pointing out that death is but a gateway for the eternal existence that truly matters. This obtuse and insensitive stance is juxtaposed against the sincere suffering of Catherine-Heathcliff and even Nelly, who all recognize intuitively that death for certain means the end to the time in this world—and what momentary paradises it

may offer—a loss that alone causes great pain. At a certain level, Catherine-Heathcliff's impassioned “heart-breaking cry” at their first encounter with the death tyrant operates metaphorically for the thematic project of the whole novel. That is, false consolations are rejected in the face of death's actuality and the complete emotional volume of a moment is fully experienced, however painfully, betokening a passion-induced knowledge that may eventually lead to conclusions that take the shape of mortal rebellion.

Even Mendelson admits, for all his belief in the visionary nature of Brontë's literary inspiration, that “the note of sorrow” in her writing “suggests she had little hope that any kind of heaven really existed, on earth or elsewhere” (69). This argument diverges from Mendelson's, instead asserting that *Wuthering Heights* is emphatically insisting that such heaven in fact exists *only* on earth. Davies's description of the author as a “heretic” is dependent upon what she likewise perceives as “the displacement of heaven [. . .] from the supernatural to the natural” (119). Certainly to Catherine-Heathcliff, the prospect of heaven undeniably suffers in comparison to all that the world may provide. In a famous scene, Catherine(-Heathcliff)<sup>5</sup> declares ardently:

If I were in Heaven, Nelly, I should be extremely miserable. [. . .] I dreamt once that I was there [and] that heaven did not seem to be my home; and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth; and the angels were so angry that they flung me out into the middle of the heath on top of Wuthering Heights, where I woke sobbing for joy. (72)

As Ghnassia avers, the message is that “everything earthly can be offered and confirmed through imagination, while everything supernatural, such as hoping in a hereafter, for

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<sup>5</sup> Gilbert and Gubar's compound nomenclature is altered to emphasize that it is Catherine voicing the metaphysical lament on behalf of the sundered whole.

example, can never be confirmed” (212). Relatedly, Inman points out that even the novel’s Gothic “descriptions of ghost appearances include explanation to dismiss a paranormal occurrence” (196). So while *Wuthering Heights* discusses heavenly states, and is seemingly inhabited by ghosts and “devil” men (113), it is finally above all passionately concerned with sublunary existence and all attendant matters, most spectacularly the indelible fact of mortal loss in death. Supernatural elements (heaven; hauntings) are shown as the very human imagination’s attempts to come to grips (or not) with the conclusive permanence of death. This materialist perspective provides an explanation for Catherine-Heathcliff’s ardent briophilia: in the absence or insufficiency of heaven or any hereafter, it is in lived reality where holiness is to be found.

The “emotional summits” (Woolf xx) attained by Catherine-Heathcliff at different points, a mortal ardor which itself characterizes energies of metaphysical resistance, are echoed in ferocity and function only one other place in the novel: the surrounding Yorkshire landscape, with its literal heights, rugged moors, and “violent wind[s]” (77). A consideration of the novel is often an intuitive evocation of this austere natural setting against which all of its action takes place. The intimate northern England scenery depicted in the novel is often considered one of its great strengths, as Woolf asserts: “by speaking of the moor [Bronte] make[s] the wind blow and the thunder roar” (150). Cecil echoes something of this idea when he rhapsodizes further: “we hear [the title] perhaps spoken and our mental ear is filled by the rush of streams, the shock and reverberation of thunder, the whistling of the wind over the moors” (298). Although, Cecil’s understanding of *Wuthering Heights* diverges from this one (and Woolf’s) in being earnestly mystic, he similarly recognizes the unusually prominent role that the northern

England setting takes in novel. Not only do the rustic surroundings act as a sympathetic chorus for the fierce passions of Catherine-Heathcliff, but there is also as much a relationship of symbiotic accord with the rural landscape as there is with one another.

As Davies points out, “beyond the human focus of desire (Catherine’s love for Heathcliff) is implied the larger object of desire (Catherine’s love for the heath)” (63). This indicates that alongside the Catherine-Heathcliff enacted value of passionate existence, of biophilia, is a kind of corresponding environmental biophilia, which is biologist Edward O. Wilson’s term for “the innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms” (x). This biophilia hypothesis, which Wilson advances in his Pulitzer-prize winning book *Biophilia* (1984), posits that humans have an instinctive bond with living systems and the natural world as a result of our evolutionary development and biological heritage. In *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine-Heathcliff demonstrate such bond with in their ardent consanguinity with the surrounding Yorkshire landscape, and most particularly the rugged moors. Mendelson indicates that this empathic state is notably mutual, even reciprocal, when he points out that “nature is itself torn violently apart when Catherine and Heathcliff are separated [. . .] a tree at the corner of the house is split in two by a thunderstorm, and a huge bough falls on the chimney” (67). Thus, the natural world itself implicitly composes a crucial subjectivity within the amalgamate condition of this heath(en) childhood paradise, not only foreshadowing events but passionately identifying with and commenting upon them.

Like the intersexed element to Catherine-Heathcliff’s childhood state, this intense biophilic aspect of their blissful union functions largely as a lacuna within the text. Davies points out the “seldom-noted fact” that the moors are in fact “barely described in

physical terms during the crucial first half of the novel,” (63) furthering the impression that intact Brontëan paradise is inherently inexpressible. “It was one of their chief amusements to run away to the moors and remain there all day,” (41) Nelly explains simply. Yet it is not only other characters’ reminiscences or even Catherine-Heathcliff’s own ardent self-proclamations (“my soul will be on that hill-top!” [132]) that attest most strongly to this initial harmonious ecological state. Along with the obvious imagery contained in Heathcliff’s name, which is perhaps literature’s most dramatic example of fusing character and setting, there are other signifiers denoting this essential relationship with the surrounding environment. Catherine-Heathcliff is often “barefoot” (42) during childhood because such state symbolizes closeness to the earth and so often “dirty” (48) because it means to be covered with “the wet mud or mire of the ground, consisting of earth” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Indeed, the novel’s metaphorical “rosebuds” categorically include literal flora, as well as the dirt from which it springs. Thus, when Heathcliff hotly says to newly groomed Catherine, “I shall be as dirty as I please: and I like to be dirty, and I will be dirty” (48), her ladylike cleanliness is a painful affront to him because it signifies not only their fall from a state of union with one another but also the end of their joyful inosculation with the earth. As such, Heathcliff’s declaration should be understood as also an articulation of resistance.

Brontë is commonly thought to have had a similar unusually intimate relationship with the harsh yet beautiful scenery (akin to that depicted in *Wuthering Heights*) around the Haworth parsonage where she grew up. She famously hated to leave the rugged landscape that she loved and chose to feature prominently in her novel, and indeed only

did so a handful of times in her life before departing from it forever in death.<sup>6</sup> As her sister writes, “Emily had a particular love for [the moors], and there is not a knoll of heather, not a branch of fern, not a young bilberry-leaf, not a fluttering lark or linnet, but reminds me of her” (Gaskell 345). Like Catherine-Heathcliff’s heath(en) stance in the novel, Brontë’s “reaction to Christianity [. . .] was in essence retaliatory” (Davies 140). Yet simultaneously “wherever Emily Brontë is, there also is God. [Her writing] has a quality of *out-of-doors*; no church could hold it” (Davies 144, emphasis mine). Brontë’s biography (sparse as it may be) combined with the cumulative emotive effects of the novel make it difficult to deny that the passionately earthen and earthly qualities that compose Catherine-Heathcliff’s Edenic state (perhaps more accurately identified now as Catherine-Heathcliff-Earth) are also textually favored.

That is, despite some deceptive narrative frames superficially endorsing a more traditional Victorian ethos, valuable existence is powerfully figured in the novel as a distinctly androgynous pre-socialized childhood state enacted passionately close to (and in union with) the equally responsive natural world. It is decidedly not found in those decorously dispassionate lives eked out in the gilded parlor rooms of great houses, textually represented by Thrushcross Grange and its original inhabitants. Such buildings are shown to block out the necessary sunshine and “wind [. . .that] comes straight down the moor” (xx) with devastating consequences, just as the elegant interiors of rooms are shown to effectively divide one, not least from oneself: Scoffing at his recollection of Edgar and Isabella arguing over a toy inside Thrushcross Grange, Heathcliff rhetorically

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<sup>6</sup> For an in-depth biographical examination of Brontë’s reclusive proclivity for Haworth see “Emily Brontë’s Homesickness” by L. M. Austin in the Summer 2002 edition of *Victorian Studies*.

asks Nelly, “would you catch [. . . Catherine and me] yelling, and sobbing, and rolling on the ground, *divided by the whole room?*” (43, emphasis mine). Indeed, Heathcliff quickly recognizes the suffocating nature of this Victorian domesticity, declaring, “I intended shattering their great glass planes to a million fragments, unless they let [Catherine] out” (45). All this is notwithstanding Nelly’s later fallacious articulation of Catherine’s choice to become mistress of Thrushcross Grange as a fortunate “escape from a disorderly comfortless home into a wealthy, respectable one” (71). While the former adjectives might well apply to the Hindley-controlled interior of *Wuthering Heights* at the time, they do not come close to communicating the freedom that Catherine-Heathcliff knows in the vast spaces of the moorlands that surround it; as for wealth and respectability, these are hardly valued assets in the Brontëan paradisiacal ethos but rather help constitute those forces which attempt to destroy it. Thus, Nelly’s “escape” is in fact an imprisonment from revitalizing nature, one that operates as precursor and placeholder for the ultimate sepulchral confinement.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir acknowledges the young girl’s kinship with nature as a point of psychological insight and ingress to ecstatic states of freedom that she is categorically denied shortly thereafter in social adulthood. Beauvoir declares that women like Brontë “have known such [nature elicited] fervors in their youth—and retained the experience,” (363) as apparently later evidenced in artistic refraction, an oblique reference to *Wuthering Heights*’ celebratory preoccupation with the environment.

Beauvoir asserts that when the young girl is:

among plants and animals, she is a human being [. . .] a subject, a free being. She finds [. . .] in the wide horizons of the plains a tangible image

of her transcendence; she is herself this limitless territory, this summit flung up to heaven; [. . .] seated on the hilltop, she is mistress of the world's riches, spread out at her feet, offered for the taking. (363)

This passage evokes not simply the spirit but also the imagery of Catherine-Heathcliff-(Earth)'s early bliss. When years later Catherine is feverish and miserable, she yearns for just this unity and freedom, crying "I wish I were out of doors!" imagining that "once among the heather on those hills" (115) she would be restored to her authentic self. This demonstrates that she still does not realize the irrevocability of what has been lost in her entry into social womanhood or the pernicious terms of the bargain she has made.

As Clifford Collins states, "the 'moral center' of the novel [is] the opposition between the actual inner identity which Heathcliff and Catherine share and accept, and the relatively insubstantial social and conscious existence which [. . .] is typified by Thrushcross Grange" (313). Additionally, the novel warns that the seemingly innocuous social energies exemplified by Thrushcross Grange are in fact powerfully threatening to the "actual inner identity" known in Catherine-Heathcliff's blissfully biophilic childhood. Authentic eco-paradise risks being irrevocably lost in favor of an apocryphal alternative in the form of society, which the novel indeed avers, for all its superficial "insubstantial[ity]," glitters alluringly, seductively, as a false paradise: "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 glassdrops hanging in silver chains from the centre, and shimmering with little soft tapers" (42) exclaims young Heathcliff, initially besotted about the very locus of power that initially demands the catastrophic loss of selfhood that he spends the rest of the novel in a state of rebellion

against. It is only too late, after the vast vistas of nature have already been replaced with the stifling aureate walls of society, that all that has been sacrificed may be recognized.

For Catherine(-Heathcliff)'s passage from the intersex wholeness of biophilic childhood into the lapsarian inauthenticity of proper Victorian wifehood is nothing less than adumbration and intimation of the inescapable mortal passage from life into death, equally protested, mourned, and final. In conversation with Nelly directly after her engagement to Edgar; Catherine passionately declares that she would never be separate from Heathcliff and "shouldn't be Mrs. Linton were such a price demanded!" (74) The fervor of her resistance to the preliminary sundering of selfhood is noteworthy, but this is after all precisely the terms to which she has just agreed. In "forsak[ing]" Heathcliff (and thus herself) Catherine simultaneously forsakes their "paradise on the heath" (Gubar 18). And as in Genesis, paradise once abandoned can never again be truly retrieved except in aching, inadequate memory (and perhaps also, in the case of Catherine-Heathcliff, fevered delirium and fantastic imagining). Beauvoir likewise conceives of this youthful biophilia in elemental terms, as encompassing energies that are inherently oppositional to death even as they are simultaneously susceptible to it. With characteristic simplicity, Beauvoir asserts that for the young girl in nature, "scents and colors speak a mysterious language, but one word sounds out triumphantly clear: the word *life*" (363).

The ontological import of both the fall away from this state of wholeness (into gender; adulthood; inauthenticity; death) and the subsequent stance of social and metaphysical resistance increases significantly, even exponentially, when considered in the context of this environmental biophilia. New (eco)critical implications inevitably emerge as Catherine-Heathcliff's experience in *Wuthering Heights* takes on not only a

personal but a panoramic historical significance, necessitating an enlarged delineation of the thematic stance of mortal protest at work in the novel. That is, alongside the mortal trajectory of Catherine-Heathcliff, which is already established as having metaphorical resonance beyond the specificity of the described existence, an even larger mortality is also being evoked: that of the life-sustaining power of the earth itself. *Wuthering Heights* was published in 1847, during the height of the industrial revolution that was irrevocably altering not only the global landscape but also humankind's relationship to it in ways that are only now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century being fully appreciated. As such, the not only ecologically biophilic but even distinctly anti-civilizational language employed in evocation of Brontëan paradise, should be understood as expressly political.

Once considered in this light, the radically charged nature of *Wuthering Heights* narrative and language becomes difficult to miss. In their textually endorsed childhood Eden, Catherine-Heathcliff repeatedly threaten to “grow wild,” (46) in “heathenism,” (45) and as “savages” (42). Brontë's deceptive framing makes these ostensibly derogatory assessments, but as has already been argued, they are being applied to the condition that the text implicitly endorses. It is fitting that Heathcliff, as the embodiment of the sundered whole's most rebellious energies, is in particular associated with the pre-civilized state of wild(er)ness: “an unrelcaimed creature, without refinement, without cultivation; an arid wilderness of furze and whinstone” (94). Just as society and civilization are figured as forms of confinement, this heath(en) pre-industrial “savage” (today one might properly use the term native or indigenous) state is textually synonymous with freedom, as in “half-savage and hardy, and free” (115). In the novel's intense valuation of human intimacy with the environment and opposition to a

nineteenth-century society increasingly and unprecedentedly separate from nature, Brontë implicitly enters into the ongoing debate about the consequences of the industrial revolution. The cumulative effect of the novel is such that she is not only clearly siding with contemporary critics like Friedrich Schiller, William Wordsworth and Thomas Carlyle,<sup>7</sup> who variously came to see in the industrial revolution disturbing trends of alienation and despair, but also intuits an even more elemental threat at work.

Certainly scholarship has well established the ways in which the entwined and entrenched ideological forces of both capitalism and imperialism are subjects of *Wuthering Heights*'s implicit criticism.<sup>8</sup> But these pernicious forces furthermore have massive and devastating ecological consequences, something Brontë's defensive celebration of nature serves to additionally emphasize (and protest). In this sense, the novel operates as a remarkably prescient radical green<sup>9</sup> political stance in opposition against those forces of civilization that work to erode and destroy the life-sustaining power of the earth. The very oppressive energies that in the novel are contained in specified form as Thrushcross Grange and work to divide Catherine-Heathcliff from their authentic wholeness are the same that in a macro historical context contribute to the division of people from ancient biophilic cultural arrangements, and thus, the global environmental crisis phenomenon more generally. Indeed, in *Wuthering Heights*'s extreme fixation on mortality and association of the best of mortal experience with

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<sup>7</sup> See Schiller's *Letters Upon The Aesthetical Education of Man* (1795), Wordsworth's *Preface to The Second Edition of Lyrical Ballads* (1800), and Carlyle's "Signs of the Times" (1829) among other contemporary writings critical of the industrial revolution.

<sup>8</sup> See Terry Eagleton's *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës* (1975) and Susan Meyer's *Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women's Fiction* (1996) for a more in-depth discussion of these themes.

<sup>9</sup> Term used in the present-day political sense that the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as "of, pertaining to, or supporting environmentalism."

besieged biophilic states, the novel predicts modern day concerns about the dire threat industrial practices pose not only to individuals' relationship to the earth but in fact broader environmental survival. The novel's mortal protest thus expands far beyond "half-savage, hardy and free" Catherine-Heathcliff to indeed encircle the globe. The restless tone of anger and elegy that so pervades the novel is therefore finally directed not only at the certainty of sublunary loss, but the potentiality of its greater permanence. It is indeed out of a quite literal love for the world and defense of the earth that Catherine-Heathcliff so deeply protests the death tyrant and all its precursors in *Wuthering Heights*. Or, another way of thinking about it: While *Wuthering Heights* is unquestionably (and furiously) concerned with mortal loss, it is also about paradise, as offered in those renegade moments of lived authenticity—in androgynous childhood, in passionate experience, and amid the flourishing, healthy, responsive natural world.

While this chapter has occasionally hinted at the historical background for *Wuthering Heights*, the next chapter delves deeper into its cultural and biographical context in order to better apprehend its uniquely rebellious message. In Woolf's perceptive essay concerning the particular quality of genius discernible in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, the latter of which she correctly identifies as possessing a metaphysically dissident aspect, she compares the distinctive craft(wo)manship of *Wuthering Heights* to "hearing a girl sing old songs to herself as she rocks in the branches of a tree" (160). It is an appropriately lovely, mysterious, and nature-laden image to conjure in discussion of the novel's author, about whom remarkably little is known beyond the rare facility of her use of language and her deep love of the moors. The

questions Woolf's image prompts—who is she? why is she singing?—are the same that *Wuthering Heights* often raises about its author, and which chapter three will explore.

### CHAPTER III

#### CONTEXTUALIZING PROTEST: DEATH AND THE FEMALE BODY

O Mother I am not regretting  
To leave this wretched world below  
If there be nothing but forgetting  
In that dark land to which I go . . .

The wind the winter night is speaking  
Of thoughts and things that should not stay  
Mother come near my heart is breaking  
I cannot bear to go away.

—Emily Brontë, 1837

A brief, eerie, and easily missed moment occurs early in *Wuthering Heights*, before Heathcliff's disappearance but after the disruptive intrusion of Thrushcross Grange into the Edenic childhood symbiosis of Catherine-Heathcliff, which contains within it the thematic concerns of the novel in haunting miniature. In the scene, Nelly is rocking little Hareton to sleep while she hums to him a strange lullabye, which goes, "it was far in the night, and the bairnies grat [children wept] / The mither beneath the mools [mothers in their graves] heard that" (69). This bizarre fragment of song has been identified as coming from a translation by Sir Walter Scott (one of the Brontës' favorite authors) of an old Danish ballad (Stewart 180). It serves in its grim imagery of weeping orphaned children and their dead mothers (who are somehow still listening in their decomposed state) to evoke with appropriately dark lyricism precisely those thematic concerns that most strongly occupy *Wuthering Heights*. Death, of course, is its primary

subject, but even the rebellious imagination's rejection of mortal limits is intimated in its insistence (akin to Heathcliff's) that dead mothers may have conscious ears. Something of *Wuthering Heights'* fixation with the responsive Yorkshire landscape is also represented in the short lyrical scene, as according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* "mools" literally means soil or earth used to fill a grave. But most importantly, the disturbing ballad manifestly correlates death with specifically female ("the mither beneath") corporeal experience, which is precisely what occurs in a variety of implicit and explicit ways throughout Brontë's uniquely death focused novel. Indeed, as this chapter takes as its focus the historical context (in biographical as well as cultural terms) from which *Wuthering Heights* comes from, it inevitably touches upon this persistent thematic entwining of death and female experience. Although critics sometimes assert that the poetic novel inhabits a space of timeless universality, this chapter will argue that it in fact bears the unmistakable intellectual imprint of a female Victorian mind and the attendant bodily situation (in the Beauvoirean sense, as will be explored) which that implies. This socio-historical as well as biological particularity is both the locus of *Wuthering Heights'* inspiration and also the source for its exceptional undercurrent (and sometimes overcurrent) of fiercely rebellious energies.

An old and at least once-hallowed tendency of the literary critic is to attempt to "fix" the problem posed by a difficult work, in other words, through dazzling feats of analysis to resolve the work's complexities and ambiguities into a tidily coherent thematic whole. *Wuthering Heights* in particular seems to call for (and often receive) such treatment, perhaps precisely because the novel *is* so complex, challenging and ultimately elusive. In the earliest stages of its construction, this thesis's approach toward

Brontë's solitary novel was likewise, to borrow a phrase from the work in question, an attempt to thoroughly "decypher her faded hieroglyphics" (17). However, over the course of research, it became obvious that to attempt a single comprehensive thematic explanation and interpretative key for all that puzzles and perplexes in *Wuthering Heights* is to significantly misunderstand the particular character of its genius. As David Sonstroem puts it in his examination of the work, "an important element in the actual page-by-page experience of reading [is] the uneasiness of the reader: his vacillating allegiances, his sense of being afloat on a troubled conceptual and ethical sea" (51). The extent to which *Wuthering Heights* succeeds in doing this, in forcing the reader to inhabit its chaotic moral ambiguity, perhaps distressingly, is an indication of the novel's prescient brilliance, which notably anticipates modernity in its refusal to provide the reader with a comforting or consistent way in which to interpret the often disturbing events it narrates. Any attempt to force thematic cohesion onto the work through expository prowess or critical pyrotechnics, while maybe psychologically understandable on the part of the beleaguered reader (an initial experience with the text is often as much one of bewilderment as enchantment) would therefore necessarily be an exercise in reductionism. So while the previous and following pages do attempt to unravel particular thematic threads within the complicated tapestry of the novel, highlighting its interlaced energies of mortal protest, this effort does not come from a misguided critical desire to "solve" or "explain" the novel in any grander or totalized sense.

The commitment to recognizing the impossibility of that, and rather to respect the work for the very fact it eludes any attempts to do so, is furthermore a *political* commitment. As Toril Moi points out in *Sexual/Textual Politics*, and specifically in her

discussion of the limitations to Gilbert and Gubar's theoretical perspective in *Madwoman in the Attic*, such determination to critically conquer or possess a novel like *Wuthering Heights* comes out of and is ultimately a form of patriarchal oppression:

This emphasis on integrity and totality as an ideal for women's writing can be criticized precisely as a patriarchal or—more accurately—a phallic construct. As Luce Irigaray and Jacques Derrida have argued, patriarchal thought models its criteria for what counts as “positive” values on the central assumption of the Phallus and the Logos as transcendental signifiers of Western culture. The implications of this are often astonishingly simplistic: anything conceived of as analogous to the so-called “positive” values of the Phallus counts as good, true, or beautiful; anything that is not shaped on the pattern of the Phallus is defined as chaotic, fragmented, negative, or non-existent. (Moi 66)

It is has thus been a principle aim of this thesis not only to be comfortable with the inherent limitations of its investigation but also to appreciate the work on precisely those gynocentric terms that deny any attempt to comprehend it easily or perfectly. There is no omnibus interpretation that can encapsulate all that there is to *Wuthering Heights* any more than there is a single understanding of Emily Brontë that will satisfactorily explain how a young and isolated nineteenth-century Yorkshire woman created a work of such startlingly unusual passion, beauty, and darkness. Even as this chapter will attempt to shed some light on the enigma of literary creation that is *Wuthering Heights* through various historical contextualization, such endeavor is undertaken with the latent understanding that literary creation always remains a point of elusiveness, and perhaps

nowhere so superlatively as in the case of this particular work. In every sense, *Wuthering Heights*' mystery is its magnificence; its majesty is in its thematic structural mimicry, not of the seemingly "whole, unitary, simple form" of the Phallus, but rather of what Moi describes as the often patriarchally "terrifying chaos of the female genitals" (66). This in no small part helps explain early readers' discomfort and bafflement with the novel; it simply (and radically) did not conform to patriarchal standards or expectations of literature. It illuminates the particular appeal this novel has had for women writers (and perhaps modernists above all) who have so often returned to and remarked upon this literary antecedent. In this regard, *Wuthering Heights* is not only an eccentric work as far as it stands among its contemporaries, but furthermore a decidedly vatic *ex-centric* work, one which comes from and thus is marked by specifically female lived experience.

Recognition of *Wuthering Heights* as a historically shaped and even distinctly sexed creative product is a fairly recent scholarly perspective on the novel. David Cecil is typical of more common critical reception in his beatific declaration, "*Wuthering Heights* is undimmed, even partially, by the dust of time [. . .] like Blake, Emily Brontë is concerned *solely* with those primary aspects which are unaffected by time and space" (300). Certainly the previous pages of this thesis have argued strongly for an allegorical understanding of the novel that reveals a metaphysical rebellion and auto-mourning that is both intensely far-reaching (even global) as well as quite ancient in its implications. But every artistic universal comes out of specificity and, despite Cecil's above assertion, the novel was indeed penned by a very specific woman in a very specific time in a very specific place. Arnold Kettle puts it even more simply: "*Wuthering Heights* is about England in 1847. The people it reveals live not in never-ever land but in Yorkshire.

Heathcliff was not born in the pages of Byron, but in a Liverpool slum [. . .] the mists in it are the mists of the Yorkshire moors” (139). Such specificity as Kettle delineates inevitably informs the contents of not only the novel’s apparent timelessness but also its idiosyncratic attitude towards death and is therefore deserving of analysis. Heather Glen agrees about the necessity of contextual examinations of *Wuthering Heights*, positing that it is precisely this tendency of “even avowedly historicist critics to speak of the novel in essentialist and universalist terms [. . .] that most requires that leap of the historical imagination which can recognize it as [. . .] shaped by and responsive to historical and culture experiences” (17). The express purpose of this final section is to do precisely that: to place the protracted allegorically enacted mortal resistance that is explicated in the first chapter, and more thoroughly considered in the second chapter, directly into the historical specificity of its conception, resulting in a deepened understanding of what the author is possibly articulating through the prism of her prose.

It is hardly a highly original act of scholarship to suggest that there exists important connections between the Brontë sisters’ early motherlessness (the author of *Wuthering Heights* was only three years old when her mother passed away) and the particular thematic fixations of their later writing. The traumatically informing nature of Maria Branwell Brontë’s premature death on British literature is indeed part of the near-mythic understanding that has collected around the increasingly celebrated Brontë sisters in the over a century’s time since they first published. It is easy enough to perceive that the protagonists of the novels written by the isolated half-orphaned sisters are quite frequently also orphans. *Wuthering Heights* notably features several: Catherine is orphaned early in the novel, her rebellious counterpart Heathcliff never knows anything

at all of his parentage, and the second Catherine actually enters the text as “the feeble orphan,” (155) her birth indeed proclaiming the former’s death. In a more abstract manifestation, the pervasive sense of loss that is predicated on the maternal absence experienced early by all the primary characters lends an initial atmosphere of mortal vulnerability that predicts the further losses to come. In this sense, as Phillip Wion argues extensively and compellingly, the novel demonstrates with poignant subtlety the Lacanian understanding of mother-loss as the primary informing aspect of the human condition (a loss experienced not simply in death, but in the sundering from prenatal states of mother-child wholeness in birth). There are further sexed indications to such experience, however, for if an orphaned daughter (like the author) must know mortal fragility and loss early through the incomparable trauma of losing her mother, she must also grow up to recognize the capacity for such loss in her own female embodiment, a specific anxiety *Wuthering Heights* articulates and evidences in a variety of ways.

Elizabeth Gaskell’s famous nineteenth century biography of her friend, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, written only a couple of years after Brontë’s death in childbirth, is organized in part around this idea that the Brontës’ early experience of maternal loss was profoundly affecting, and casts, at least dimly, its long shadow into their later literary art. In a key but stylistically characteristic excerpt, Gaskell writes, “Mrs. Brontë died in September, 1821, and the lives of those quiet children must have become quieter and lonelier still” (46). Carolyn Dever avers that it is not maternal loss alone but indeed death more generally that is “the central trope through which Gaskell structures her version of the Brontë children’s youth” (2). Nor does this initial and fairly sustained biographical recognition of the artistic legacy of the Brontës’ childhood proximity to death seem

disproportionate. Only a few years after the loss of their mother, the two oldest sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, caught tuberculosis during their time at a miserably unhygienic boarding school, later fictionalized but recognizable in *Jane Eyre* as Lowood, and died shortly thereafter, age 11 and 10 respectively. Such huge mortal losses for one family, even for the Victorian period, and all occurring before Brontë was even seven years old, would necessarily be traumatic and leave their psychological mark. It seems perfectly understandable that, as Gaskell early indicates, Brontë's later literary treatment of death would be informed by her own formidable formative experiences with it.

Although she focuses on the poetry rather than *Wuthering Heights*, Teddi Chichester synthesizes these early biographical events with Brontë's literary treatment of death in a particularly astute and thematically crucial way. Writes Chichester: "The fact that Emily Brontë's first momentous encounters with death robbed her of her beloved female family members and thus suggested femininity's particular vulnerability to mortality significantly colors her presentation of the feminine, and especially of the maternal" (2). This is certainly true of Brontë's novel; quite simply, in *Wuthering Heights*, once women become mothers, they die. Whether immediately from the difficulty of childbirth, as in the case of both Frances and Catherine, or sometime afterward, as with Isabella and indeed the elder Mrs. Earnshaw and Mrs. Linton, marriage and motherhood invariably betokens death for the novel's female characters. Nelly is the only female member of the first generation who never marries or gives birth (although arguably she is a mother figure to many) and as such is the only one to survive to the end. Even as the younger Catherine is left alive at the novel's conclusion, her burgeoning

romance with Hareton nonetheless carries with it the faintest adumbration of the waiting death tyrant.

Such persistent linkage of death with motherhood provides fuller explanation for the metaphysically rebellious privileging of androgynous childhood states (when Catherine knew “hardy” [115] wholeness as Catherine-Heathcliff) over that of sexually mature adulthood (when she was fractured into vulnerable Mrs. Linton). That is, in the struggle of life against mortal limitation that comprises the main thematic concern of the text, the coming of adult sexuality is to be protested precisely because it so often operates as death’s harbinger, at least for women and especially nineteenth century women like the author. Thus, the seemingly universal mortal rebellion that plays out so originally in *Wuthering Heights* is shaped by a specifically sexed as well as historically placed consciousness of the death experience. As Chichester argues about the poetry, Brontë’s novel evidences “an extreme anxiety about death which she associates with the female body” (2). It is thus understandable that the novel’s mortal anxiety is so pronounced because, of course, it is also a woman (a female embodied consciousness) behind the narrative that so repeatedly makes this disturbing association. This implicit and historically understandable conflation of death and the female body explains not only the rebellious depictions of Catherine(-Heathcliff)’s mortal trajectory in the text, but perhaps also Brontë own life choices. After all, however she may have construed the decision, she personally chose not to marry and thus not risk loss in childbirth. That she nonetheless died young further illustrates the vulnerabilities of her specific bodily situation.

This idea of the female body as a “situation” is an illuminating critical approach pulled from contemporary feminist theory. In her essay “What is a Woman?” Toril Moi

explores the weakness of the gender/sex binary that has dominated and needlessly convoluted recent feminist theory (she specifically mentions Judith Butler) and returns to Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist and phenomenological understanding in *The Second Sex* for a refreshingly lucid model of how to conceptualize woman. Moi finds that Beauvoir presents woman as determined by biological difference, but without any kind of acceptance that such difference justifies oppression, providing a helpful alternative to the essentialist versus anti-essentialist debates that have so occupied recent feminist theoretical discourse. The most important idea Moi finds in Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is that "the body is not a thing, it is a situation" (Beauvoir 35)—that is, historically, socially, and personally situated. Moi clarifies further:

To claim that a body is a situation is to acknowledge that the meaning of a woman's body is bound up with the way she uses her freedom. For Beauvoir, our freedom is not absolute, but situated. Other situations as well as our particular lived experience will influence our projects, which will in turn shape our experience of the body. [. . .] There are innumerable different ways of living with one's specific bodily potential as a woman. I may devote myself to mountain climbing, become a ballet dancer, a model, a nurse, or a nun. I may have lots of sexual relations or none at all, have five children or none, or I may discover that such choices are not mine to make. (65-66)

For Brontë, and for the female characters she describes in *Wuthering Heights*, much of their bodily situation as women falls into this latter category of being beyond the realm of their freedom. The requirements of Victorian womanhood largely preclude the

possibilities Moi enumerates. Even the barefoot androgyny that Catherine-Heathcliff enjoys amid the heath(en) paradise of Brontë's mythical rendering of childhood is not a real option thereafter, for all their ardent lapsarian desires and protestations. And indeed Brontë's elegaic depiction and obvious privileging of this intersexed childhood state is a manifest response to the restrictions imposed by Victorian expectations of adult womanhood. Indeed, despite the briophilic, biophilic and bisexed requirements for Catherine's authentic wholeness, evinced in the single entity of moor roaming Catherine-Heathcliff, her situation presents few alternatives to the materially beneficial marriage that she chooses, as she correctly perceives. "Nelly, I see you think me a selfish wretch; but did it never strike you that if Heathcliff and I married, we should be beggars?" (84) she remarks in a critical moment of candor. Had Catherine been born into Hindley's male body, for example, her Victorian freedom would have been considerably expanded and she may have been able to make choices that did not ultimately result in her fracturing of selfhood and, along with it, her death; for it is an undeniable fact that in the larger historical situation of (as Kettle correctly identifies) Yorkshire in 1847, marriage invariably meant not only nearly certain motherhood but, with it, bodily risk.

Full appreciation of the mortally rebellious thematic project of *Wuthering Heights* thus far delineated is thus dependant upon a nuanced understanding of the particular historical bodily situation that so informs the personal bodily situation of the author and, as a result, this ostensibly "outside of history" (Glen 12) text. The novel's metaphysical resistance enacted by Catherine-Heathcliff was after all created out of and as commentary upon a physical reality. Thus, it is notable that even as the overlapping focus on mortality and motherhood is especially heightened in *Wuthering Heights*, which takes death as its

central thematic concern, a very similar conflation appears in some form throughout most Victorian literature. As Dever plainly asserts in *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud: Victorian Fiction and the Anxiety of Origins*, “to write a life, in the Victorian period, is to write the story of the loss of the mother” (xx). The era’s sustained thematic focus on mortal tensions around maternal loss, a focus that is more expansive than only the biographical experience of Brontë and yet appears quite foreign when compared to the concerns and anxieties of post-Victorian literature, relates directly to the shifting nature of the historical situation of women’s bodies. That is, the Victorian female body’s situation was such that it precipitated certain cultural anxieties about death (particularly in women, but as demonstrated by the ubiquitous nature of the focus Dever describes, indelibly in their often orphaned sons as well) that are less pronounced or absent in later literature because that bodily situation had likewise changed, demonstrating that woman is indeed “an open-ended becoming” (Beauvoir 83).

While prior to the nineteenth century, the female body was very infrequently thought rightfully employed in serious writing, the Brontë sisters were born into a situation historically as well as personally at least somewhat conducive to their literary productivity. Although intellectual sexism was persistent enough to require them to choose potentially masculine pen names, the sisters were fairly well educated, were certainly well read, and were even familiarly encouraged in their endeavors. They also had access to the necessary hours of leisure time to write, This situation provided them with relatively greater freedom than many of their similarly talented female predecessors could have known, as Virginia Woolf so ably explains in her discussion of “Judith Shakespeare” in *A Room of One’s Own*. At the same time, the Brontës’ subjectivity was

undeniably shaped by what can only be called the serious restrictions of their freedom as embodied subjects within the situation of Victorian era England. The varied constraints and expectations placed on the female body by the nineteenth century situation are felt not only in their biographical experience and narrow condition of choice therein, but also expressed in numerous ways in their literature. In *Wuthering Heights*, such limitations are perhaps most pronounced because they are simultaneously being rebelled against. It is appropriate that when Catherine makes her situationally mandated decision to sunder herself from Catherine-Heathcliff into Mrs. Linton, she feels and expresses the loss in physical terms (“‘Here and here!’ replied Catherine, striking one hand on her forehead, and the other on her breast [. . .] ‘I’m convinced I am wrong!’” [81]) because it soon enacts a likewise bodily toll.

As has been indicated several times, the most critical of these historically imposed limitations on the female body is the social expectation and material requirement that as a Victorian woman one must get married and become a mother, especially in light of the mortal vulnerability these indivisible situations pose. An 1878 article in *The London Times* entitled “Mortality of Mothers in Childbirth” recorded the speech given by obstetric physician Arthur W. Edis on the subject. His statistics are grim: “In the 30 years from 1847 to 1876, no less than 106,505 mothers [in England] died in childbirth; that is, five to every 1,000 children, one to every 200 born alive. [. . .] This is a deep, dark, and continuous stream of mortality.” This disturbing stream of mortality is further augmented when one considers the fact that women at this time women typically had multiple pregnancies, with many ending in miscarriage or still births, again suggesting the female body as a continual site of potential mortality. Whether the children lived or not, each

successive pregnancy also inevitably added to the weakened and vulnerable state of that female body, as Andrew S. Wohl points out in *Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain*: “Women had to face the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth right into late middle age. The more children she had given birth to, the more likely it was that her uterus was exhausted” (38).

For a woman like Brontë living this historical situation of the body, it would be impossible to be unaware of the mortal risk posed by the common social expectations of one’s sex, even as the particular marital activity that led in biological terms to such vulnerability was shrouded in cultural silence (in this sense, as has been pointed out by various critics, present day and Victorian culture have traded silences: sex for death, death for sex). This implicit relationship later appears with greater frankness in modernist writer Djuna Barnes’s poem “Midwives’ Lament,” which is among a series of reflections upon the often unfortunate lives of members of her own nineteenth century family tree:

Who died as women die, unequally  
 Impaled upon a death that crawls within;  
 For men die otherwise, of man unsheathed  
 But women on a sword they scabbard to.  
 And so this girl, untimely to the point,  
 Pricked herself upon her son and passed  
 Like any Roman bleeding on the blade—

(Barnes 77)

Indeed, although never stated in such relatively explicit terms, it is the embodied authorial awareness of just this situational intersection between feminine sexual

experience and mortality that so profoundly colors Catherine-Heathcliff's trajectory unto division and death, as well as their passionately resistant stance toward it. Thus, the bodily situation into which Catherine is sundered is evoked in the novel in distinctly antagonistic terms, as is thematically appropriate for the death tyrant's conveyance.

But perhaps the character in *Wuthering Heights* that most straightforwardly exemplifies the mortally precarious situation of Victorian female embodiment, as well as the special anxiety of its subjectivity, is Hindley's wife and Hareton's mother, Frances. Dying young in childbirth, Frances operates in the novel specifically and almost simplistically as a woman in the situation of Victorian mistress (she is first introduced as simply "his wife" [19] in Catherine's journal) just as Catherine-Heathcliff inhabit their unified but increasingly besieged childhood paradise. As such, Frances appears (and disappears) as a disturbing foretoken of Catherine's impending fate as an adult Victorian female body. It is therefore particularly significant that Brontë has Frances demonstrate a prescient awareness of her own imminent death, indicating the ways in which this embodied vulnerability translates to psychological states and lived experience. While for the most part Frances behaves in a manner typical of Victorian prescribed femininity, when she is frankly confronted with mortality following Mr. Earnshaw's sudden death, she responds in so distraught a manner that Nelly describes her as "half silly":

She ran into her chamber, and made me come with her [. . .] and there she sat shivering and clasping her hands, and asking repeatedly—'Are they [the mourners] gone yet?' Then she began describing with hysterical emotion the effect it produced on her to see black; and started, and

trembled, and at last, fell a-weeping—and when I asked what was the matter? Answered, she didn't know; but she felt so afraid of dying! (40)

As Nelly's attitude toward Frances's behavior suggests, her extreme personal reaction seems somewhat baffling on the face of it, yet makes perfect sense when placed into the aforementioned context of her function as the representative Victorian female body. Even as Frances is a fairly flat character into which little real insight is provided, Brontë nonetheless indicates through her heightened response to death that Victorian women, as bodies in a historical situation that makes them particularly vulnerable, have a subjective position regarding mortality that accordingly suffuses their experience of the world. In Frances's case, it makes her frightened at the sight of mourning weeds, reminding her (correctly, as the reader soon discovers) of her own greater mortal susceptibility. And in Brontë's case, this subjectivity provides her the necessary empathic insight to write an enduring novel about the human experience unto death that seems universal in its scope.

Unlike the hero(ine) of *Wuthering Heights* (who, as the previous pages have exhausted themselves arguing, faces the particularized dictates of the aforementioned subjective positionality with ardent but doomed rebellion) Brontë was able to make the decision not to marry and so avert bodily risk in childbirth. But despite taking this advantage of the ambit of freedom provided her by her specific bodily situation, she nonetheless died at only thirty years old, not long after the publication of *Wuthering Heights*. Tragically, not least for British literature, Brontë succumbed to tuberculosis, the same disease that took her older sisters over two decades before. She caught it from her brother Branwell, whose death shortly preceded her own, and followed in short time by her sister Anne (Gaskell refers to it as the “fatal year”[43]). This quite personal “stream

of mortality,” (Edis) to borrow the Victorian doctor’s euphoniously appropriate phrase, suggests further dimensions of vulnerability to Brontë’s bodily situation that would doubtless contribute to the unique quality of her death focused novel. That is, while maternity and thus feminine sexual experience were disturbingly linked in the (particularly female) collective Victorian psyche, death was also simply more culturally present in broader terms. Trevor May writes, “it is hard for us to understand the Victorian preoccupation with death. [ . . . ] While they did not welcome it, they felt relatively at ease with it. They could, indeed, celebrate it, for no other stage of life demanded such elaborate rites of passage” (4). People died younger, more often, and quicker during the nineteenth century than they do in the same places in the modern era and the century’s relationship with death reflects just this intimacy. *Wuthering Heights* takes as a given this living proximity to death, but is simultaneously not content with the common cultural attitudes about it, thus rejecting religious consolation and aestheticized mourning for metaphysical rebellion.

It is a further testament to Beauvoir’s existentialist theory about the alterable situation of the female body that mortality rates, maternal and otherwise, were so much higher during the nineteenth century than they are now. The illness that so devastated the Brontë family (and many others) is now preventable with a common vaccine, indicating but one pertinent way in which that situation concretely shifted, with significant attendant psychological effects. Therefore *Wuthering Heights*, although able to continually speak to new generations of readers, is a creative product of a distinctly Victorian situation of the female body. Not only the narrative plot but also the tone and thematic concerns attest to this historically specific relationship with death, just as does the unfortunate biography of

the Brontë family. The comparatively backward state of nineteenth century medical knowledge and hygiene practice undoubtedly has a great deal to answer for in the particular contours of this historical situation, which is even evidenced within the novel: When Catherine becomes feverish and seriously ill following the news that Heathcliff, having overheard her decision to marry Edgar, has disappeared from Wuthering Heights (another fittingly physical response to the sundering of selfhood which this event bodes) the modern day reader can't help but cringe at her accompanying medical treatment. Nelly reports matter-of-factly, "Mr. Kenneth bled her, and he told me to let her live on whey, and water gruel" (80). Such basic inadequacies of healthcare that characterized the period are further compounded by the desolate Yorkshire landscape; when Lockwood falls ill there he complains bitterly of the bleak scenery as well as the "dilatatory country surgeons" with their "pills and draughts, blisters and leeches" (82). Even as the actual scene of Catherine's childbirth, per the standards of Victorian literature, occurs without narration, one can assume that the same standard of medical care was involved.

In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Gaskell expands further upon the environmental factors contributing to the peculiar relationship the Victorian inhabitants of Howarth had with mortality. The village, she reports, "is built with an utter disregard of all sanitary conditions: the great old churchyard lies above all the houses, and it is terrible to think how the very water-springs of the pumps below must be poisoned" (99). Not only a setting superlatively conducive to mortal contagion, it is also a place permeated with the presence of death in a multitude of subtle and affecting ways. Gaskell uses auditory detail to conjure a macabre scene that the Brontë family would have found quite familiar:

The passing and funeral bells so frequently tolling, and filling the heavy air with their mournful sound—and when they were still, the ‘chip chip’ of the mason, as he cut the grave-stones in a shed close by. [The Brontës were] living, as it were, in a churchyard—for the parsonage is surrounded by it on three sides—and with all the sights and sounds connected with the last offices to the dead [an] every day occurrence. (99)

As the children of the Vicar, the sisters would have furthermore frequently been required to attend the funerals held there, in sight of the graves of their sisters and mother. Thus, as Gaskell pointedly attests, Brontë grew up with an intimacy to death that surpasses even that typically known in the Victorian period. It is hardly a wonder that such a setting would prompt significant contemplation of personal mortality, which in time could prime a sensitive and poetically gifted consciousness to create a work like *Wuthering Heights*, which takes such themes as its primary occupation.

Following Catherine’s sudden physical decline at the discovery of Heathcliff’s absence, she is whisked away by “Old Mrs. Linton” to Thrushcross Grange in order that she may be more properly cared for and quickly regain her health. Catherine indeed survives this early bout of illness, although the incident serves to portentously indicate that, newly divided from her authentic herself, she is no longer so “hardy” (115) as she once was. However, things do not bode so well for her future mother in law. As Nelly expresses, “the poor dame had reason to repent of her kindness: she and her husband both took the fever, and died within a few days of each other” (80). This briefly narrated double death scene is another demonstration of mortality’s casual but extensive pervasion of the narrative, but moreover, it reveals how the socially prescribed feminine role of

bedside caregiver to the sick is an added element of bodily risk to the Victorian female situation. A Victorian woman thus not only risked death at an increased rate with each successive childbirth (eight or more were typical [May]) but also in fulfilling the associated cultural expectation that whenever others are ill or even dying, whether in her own household or, as with Mrs. Linton's decision regarding Catherine, elsewhere, it is her duty to properly care for them. As such, Mrs. Linton's death is another lesson for Catherine about the quite serious mortal risks of adult Victorian female embodiment.

Even those mothers, unlike Catherine, who do survive along with their children the bodily trauma of Victorian parturition are hardly in the clear as far as brushes with death. As Brontë's older sisters' fate at boarding school attests, and as pallid Linton exemplifies ("The worst-tempered bit of a sickly slip that ever struggled into its teens!" Nelly calls him [228]) Victorian youth is a mortally precarious period. The natural exuberance and shock of love that archetypally suffuses the consciousness of the mother upon beholding the child that she has carried within her for the past nine months must be tempered in the Victorian period with the painful knowledge that the little creature may very well not make it yet. As Patricia Jalland writes in *Death in The Victorian Family*,

Victorians had to face the terrible tragedies of the loss of their children far more often than we do today. The deaths of babies and children were a common fact of life. [. . .] The statistics for infant mortality record a particularly grim story of consistently high death-rate throughout the nineteenth century. [. . .] Child deaths constituted one quarter of all deaths. (120-121)

Thus, not only their mothers but also the children themselves (at least those old enough to be able) had an awareness of death quite foreign to modern day childhood experience in Britain. Indeed, this youthful mortal cognizance is something that Brontë's specific situation would have necessitated her to come to particularly early. In illustration of this cultural fact of childhood, May describes a popular Victorian street game, the lyrics to which went: "Grandmother, Grandmother, / Tell me the truth, / How many years am I / Going to live? / One, two, three, four . . .?" (4). That the song does not run "mother, mother" potentially indicates another level of mortality being matter-of-factly referenced.

Thus, beyond the subjectivity of the adult Victorian woman, as potential mother and site of both new life and mortality, there is also the subjectivity of the surviving motherless child; Brontë occupied both these bodily subjectivities, and both can be discerned in her writing. The epigraphic poem that opens this chapter movingly attests to this tensional relationship. As a site of birth and death, love and loss, and for the female embodied subject, personal bodily anxieties, such deep-seated confliction about the maternal is understandable. In *Wuthering Heights*, this manifests itself largely as an absence and unspoken yearning; the maternal exists in the novel as a lacuna that nonetheless occupies a central aspect of its thematic concern with death and loss. Relatedly, Nelly tells Lockwood of the time when, excepting herself, all "the children fell ill of the measles [. . .] Heathcliff was dangerously sick [. . .] he got through, and the doctor affirmed it was in great measure owing to me" (34). Nelly recognizes ("I suppose he felt I did a good deal for him, and he hadn't the wit to guess I was compelled to do it" [34]) that it may have been her nurturing behavior toward him during this early illness that explains why Heathcliff bestows a relative and quite uncharacteristic gentleness upon

her thereafter. This also makes sense given the larger philosophical context of the novel; Nelly provides (Catherine-)Heathcliff with precisely that maternal affection that makes up the his most basic lack, and in doing so furthermore helps him resist an early onslaught from the very death tyrant he would spend so much of his life protesting.

*Wuthering Heights*, in implicit and multitudinousness ways, plays and pivots upon the endpoints of mortal light that modernist Vladimir Nabokov famously describes in *Speak, Memory*: “the cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness” (19). Brontë’s novel is intensely occupied with the relationship between just these existential endpoints of womb and tomb, in ways that are perhaps only so deeply appreciable to the female embodied subjectivity. The less often quoted continuation of Nabokov’s aforementioned line of thought goes: “man, as a rule, views the prenatal abyss with more calm than the one he is heading for (at some forty-five hundred heartbeats an hour)” (190). As the primary argument of this thesis has conveyed, *Wuthering Heights* certainly does not evidence a mind contemplating the latter abyss with anything like calm; indeed, the novel showcases restless protagonists who not only “do not go gentle into that good night” (Thomas 11) but rather face it with distinctly insurrectionary sentiments, which as Nabokov alludes with his arresting imagery, is a potentially more frequent response (in degrees, at least) than might be assumed. But if absurd cosmic resistance of the type Camus describes in *The Rebel* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* is a perhaps not uncommon modernist reaction to the mortal condition, it is not in the least a typical Victorian one. Indeed, for all the ways in which the author and her creative product are shaped by historical specificity, Brontë is not a typical Victorian writer and *Wuthering Heights* is

not a typical Victorian novel. In response to nineteenth century conditions of life and death, Brontë wrote a work conveying a personally developed radically rebellious ethos that had little in common with most of her literary contemporaries.

Her biography (short and sparse as it may be) attests to the same unconventional and even deeply iconoclastic perspective that the novel reveals. After falling so ill after Branwell's death that her sister described in a letter to a friend, "I believe, if you were to see her, your impression would be there is no hope," (Gaskell 65) Brontë staunchly refused to seek medical treatment or even be cared for as one who is very sick. Gaskell's description (gleaned from her sister) of Brontë's final days is, like the latter's solitary novel, a description of metaphysical rebellion, an admirably absurd attempt to categorically refuse and deny the death tyrant's presence: "When a doctor had been sent for, and was in the very house, Emily refused to see him. Her sisters could only describe to him what symptoms they had observed; and the medicines which he sent she would not take, denying that she was ill" (292). However, the ultimate sign that her mortal protest in the face of death, despite the audacity and bravery of her efforts, was nonetheless being crushed occurred when Brontë was presented with the artifacts of her beloved biophilic Eden but could no longer appreciate them. Gaskell writes, "Miss [Charlotte] Brontë shiver[ed] at recalling the pang she felt when, after having searched in the little hollows and crevices of the moors for a lingering spray of heather [. . .] to take in to Emily, she saw that the flower was not recognized by the dim and indifferent eyes" (292). Even still, even in a bodily situation with little hope, Brontë's tenacity to live in defiance of death did not run out—precisely as Camus applauds Sisyphus for, she persisted onward in the face of the absurdity of her condition, with the same grim

determination that marked Catherine-Heathcliff's own reaction to the mortal experience: "to the last, Emily adhered tenaciously to her old habits of independence" (Gaskell 293).

The intractable tuberculosis that was ravaging her body just as it had her brother and her two older sisters long before indeed bode the same fate for Brontë, although she stubbornly rejected the self-evident fact. Gaskell writes movingly of her last hours:

One Tuesday morning, in December, she arose and dressed herself as usual, making many a pause, but doing everything for herself, and even endeavoring to take up her employment of sewing: the servants look on, and knew what the catching, rattling breath, and the glazing of the eye too surely foretold; but she kept at her work [ . . . ] The morning drew on to noon. Emily was worse: she could only whisper in gasps. Now, when it was too late, she said to Charlotte, "If you will send for a doctor, I will see him now." At about two o'clock she died. (294)

Brontë chose to face death as would an absurdist heroine like the one she invented, behaving as if living or dying is her choice only, entirely within the ambit of her freedom to decide. This is an inherently metaphysically rebellious stance. Brontë would "not stop for Death," as Emily Dickinson famously later wrote, and so was stopped by him—although it would be more in character for the author of *Wuthering Heights* to openly resist the carriage ride that Dickinson's narrator takes so demurely. A footnote in the edition of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* with notes by Temple Scott and B. W. Willett adds, "it is said that Emily died standing up in the parlour, refusing to go to bed, but leaning one hand upon the table" (293). Whether or not this is true (and it sounds highly fictionalized, as so much has been in the absence of much real biographical knowledge

about Brontë) it nonetheless speaks to the attitude with which she met life and death; an attitude as unique as her only novel, one of unyielding rebellion and commitment to individual authenticity, and which is strongly reflected within its unusual pages.

It is this very perspective evidenced in *Wuthering Heights*, its “untamed ferocity” (Woolf 158) and rebellious treatment of limitations in both life and death that has so attracted later non-Victorian readers to the work. It explains why, unlike *Jane Eyre* for example, *Wuthering Heights*’ critical reputation has only further risen in the years since its initial publication (and general misapprehension) in 1847. It has greater thematic likeness with the literature that came afterward, even while it is marked in other ways by its own historic specificity. At one point, Catherine declares “I’ve dreamt in my life dreams that have stayed with me ever after, and changed my ideas: they’ve gone through and through me, like wine through water, and altered the color of my mind” (72). The novel’s unprecedented narrative dimensions, implicitly gynocentric sensibility and metaphysically insurrectionary undercurrent seems to have functioned in a similar way in the consciousness of later writers, and women writers in particular. Allusions to the novel as well as to (quite notably) the author herself abound in the works of later nineteenth and twentieth century women of letters, who while often occupying entirely new situations of the female body, turned to their literary antecedent for encouragement and illumination.

Dickinson famously drew intense inspiration from her precursor across the pond, reportedly requesting Brontë’s poem “No Coward Soul is Mine” to be read at her funeral; Sylvia Plath entitled one of her most enigmatic and vivid poems “Wuthering Heights”; and Stevie Davies, whose extensive scholarship concerning the novel appears in this thesis, wrote a charmingly imaginative take on the impact of *Wuthering Heights* on its

readers in her own creative work, *Four Dreamers and Emily*. But perhaps the most personal of these manifestations is *Shirley*, composed by her sister not very long after her death, and whose title character was reportedly “what Emily Brontë would have been had she been placed in health and prosperity” (Gaskell 292). While this is only the briefest catalogue of the author of *Wuthering Heights*’ continuing textual relevancy in works by women writers, it illustrates just how unusually prominent Brontë and her only novel have been in the collective female intellectual consciousness. This indicates the ways in which the multiple rebellious energies of *Wuthering Heights*, as Gilbert and Gubar as well as a number of other critics have articulated, are focused in such a way as to have particularly feminist resonance. This phenomenon has been implicitly explored throughout this thesis, particularly in regard to *Wuthering Heights*’ sustained appearance in the criticism of Woolf and, most pronouncedly, Beauvoir. As an existentialist, Beauvoir valued freedom preeminently and the previous pages have argued that *Wuthering Heights* implicitly evidences a likeminded philosophical view, one developed out of historical female embodied specificity, and which accordingly views any forces that work to obstruct such liberty as deserving of ardent protest—not least death.

## CONCLUSION

In Virginia Woolf's essay about the Brontë sisters, a quote from which opens the first chapter of this thesis, the modernist writer declared that Emily Brontë "looked out upon a world cleft into a gigantic disorder," (159)—a disorder, as has been delineated, of patriarchal inequity, nature imperiled by civilization, and mandatory loss in death—

and felt within her the power to unite it in a book. That gigantic ambition is to be felt throughout the novel—a struggle, half-thwarted but of superb conviction, to say something through the mouths of her characters which is not merely 'I love' or 'I hate' but 'we, the whole human race' and 'you, the eternal powers . . .' the sentence remains unfinished. (159-160)

It has been my aim in this thesis to attempt to finish that sentence, or at least to have a general impression of its perhaps ineffable sentiment. I have concluded that Brontë's response to these "eternal powers" is unequivocally one of resistance—passionate, audacious, and absurd. In its earliest pages *Wuthering Heights* indeed provides a miniaturized example of this very articulation that ultimately characterizes the metaphysical stance of the entire work. In Catherine's journal, which Lockwood reads incomprehendingly years later, Hindley is described as a tyrannical presence, cruelly inhibiting the biophilic intersex bliss Catherine-Heathcliff have hitherto known together. And so, in the simplest terms, the hero(ine) scribbles an authentic answer to such

oppressive conditions: “H. and I are going to rebel” (17). What is here leveled merely at an unjust older brother, in time comes to encompass the cosmos themselves.

For all Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir’s obvious appreciation for and attraction to *Wuthering Heights*, and intuition that Brontë’s thematic concern is nothing less than the most primal questions of mortal existence, all of which the previous pages have explored, neither was able to recognize that it is this very attitude of discontent and insurrection that constitutes its particular genius. While Beauvoir wisely asserts in *The Second Sex*’s consideration of women writers that “a literature of protest can engender sincere and powerful works” (709) she immediately augments this with a caveat, drawn from Woolf’s earlier assessment, that showcases how deeply even these superlatively forward thinking feminist intellectuals internalized a patriarchal literary measure:

Still, as Virginia Woolf has made us see, Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, George Eliot, have had to expend so much energy negatively in order to free themselves from outward restraints that they arrive somewhat out of breath at the stage from which masculine writers of great scope take their departure; [...] this explains why [. . .] *Wuthering Heights*, in spite of its grandeur, does not have the sweep of *The Brothers Karamazov*. (709)

Toril Moi is absolutely correct when in *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of An Intellectual Woman* she refers to this assertion that truly great literature has strictly been the purview of male writers, especially coming from the pens of excellent women writers like Woolf and Beauvoir, as “particularly disturbing” (195).

But as the last chapter of this thesis has particularly underscored, one’s freedom and understanding as a woman is situational, and both Woolf and Beauvoir are products

of their historical positionality. As Moi acknowledges, “it is clear that Beauvoir does not imagine challenging the criteria for ‘greatness’ [. . .] For Beauvoir, women’s writing under patriarchy remains less ‘universal’ than that of men” (195). In other words, at that point in feminist theoretical development, political objection to the patriarchal canon and its standards of assessment simply did not yet exist. From the twenty-first century vantage point from which I write this conclusion, however, Woolf and Beauvoir’s point of feminist myopia seems perfectly obvious. Quite conversely from their mutually flawed assessment about the novel, and as this thesis has demonstrated over the course of its argument, it is in fact the creative subjectivity that is partly formed by being a woman under patriarchy that allows for *Wuthering Heights* to possess such a uniquely brilliant ferocity—a brilliant ferocity which makes it great. *Wuthering Heights* indeed possesses a “sweep” different from that discernable in *The Brothers Karamazov*, but no less of one.

Moi also avers that Beauvoir’s theoretical blind spot on this point is actually refuted by *The Second Sex*’s existentialist consideration of woman more generally. That is, Beauvoir’s “philosophical understanding of woman’s condition [is that] as long as they are consciously experienced and accepted, women’s contradictions and conflicts make them more acutely human than men” (199). As the vast majority of the world experiences some kind of oppression, knows intimately something of marginality and limitation, and indeed is inevitably thwarted in attempts at freedom and authenticity, then protest is ultimately the most legitimate, important, and yes, universal stance from which creativity can issue forth. Indeed, beginning from her personal rage at the specific restrictions of rural Victorian womanhood, Brontë wrote a rebellious novel that took on nothing less fundamental than the limitations of the human condition itself.

As such, *Wuthering Heights* serves as a model for the ways in which literature of protest can be the most successful and necessary of all. “Literature is the opposite of a nuclear bomb,” novelist and activist Arundhati Roy recently said. One meaning of this enigmatic but haunting statement is that literature written by mortal people in a finite and unjust world is necessarily an act of rebellion, that an artistic response to the world which is not rooted in rebellion is pathological and, moreover, without resonance. Thus, when considered on such contemporary gynocentric terms rather than against old patriarchal measures, *Wuthering Height’s* genius gleams unequivocal across the centuries.

## VITA

Elizabeth Albright Welch was born in Raleigh, North Carolina on June 27, 1982. In August 2006, she graduated from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill with her Bachelor of Arts in English. After graduation, she moved to Austin, Texas, where she completed an AmeriCorps term of service and worked as a social worker. She entered the graduate literature program at Texas State University-San Marcos in August 2008. She will graduate in August 2010 and return to North Carolina where she plans to continue reading, writing, and teaching.

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