Emily Brontë and Sir Walter Scott

Ian Brinton

The recent publication of Rob Roy and Waverley in the outstanding Edinburgh Edition of Scott’s novels presents the reader with two essential precursors of Emily Bronte’s Wuthering Heights.

On July 4th 1834 Charlotte Bronte wrote to her friend Ellen Nussey offering advice about what should be read and when it came to novel-reading the advice was uncompromising:

For fiction—read Scott alone; all novels after his are worthless.

Sir Walter Scott’s rise to popularity came initially through his poetry with the publication in 1802-3 of a collection Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border. The Bronte family read Scott’s poetry avidly and a particular favourite was ‘The Lay of the Last Minstrel’ much of which they learned by heart from Patrick Bronte’s 1806 edition which he had purchased whilst at Cambridge. Both the poetry and the novels were particular favourites of Emily and in December 1827 she chose Scott to be her chief man and Arran for her island in the play ‘Tales of the Islanders’. When the world of Gondal was being created the landscape which dominated the poetry reflected Emily’s reading as much as it did the moorland surrounding Haworth. In her comprehensive account of The Brontes (Weidenfeld and Nicholson 1994) Juliet Barker refers specifically to Scott’s novel Rob Roy, first published in 1819, as being the book which haunts the world of Wuthering Heights:

Wuthering Heights which, ironically, is regarded as the archetypal Yorkshire novel, was actually Gondal through and through and therefore owed as much, if not more, to Walter Scott’s Border country as to Emily’s beloved moorlands of home. Echoes of his novel Rob Roy, for instance, are to be
found throughout the book. In *Wuthering Heights* one is irresistibly reminded of *Rob Roy*'s setting in the wilds of Northumberland, among the uncouth and quarrelsome squirearchical Osbaldistones, who spend their time drinking and gambling. The spirited and wilful Cathy has strong similarities with Diana Vernon, who is equally out of place among her boorish relations. Heathcliff, whose unusual name recalls that of the surly Thorncliff, mimics Rashleigh Osbaldstone in his sinister hold over the Earnshaws and Lintons and his attempt to seize their inheritances.

The influence of Scott’s novel can be felt from the beginning where Frank Osbaldistone arrives in the north of England in ‘the geography of the unknown land’, a country in which he is ‘wrecked’. As Rashleigh points out to him, there is a significant difference between a romanticised view of the world into which he has come and its harsh actuality:

…it is no isle of Calypso, umbrageous with shade and intricate with sylvan labyrinth, but a bare ragged Northumbrian moor, with as little to interest curiosity as to delight the eye—you may desery it in all its nakedness in half an hour’s survey, as well as if I were to lay it down before you by rule and compass.

Lockwood’s opening comments in *Wuthering Heights* reflect a similar idealised sense of what isolation might contain which is later presented as a direct contrast to the stark reality of what is there:

1801—I have just returned from a visit to my landlord—the solitary neighbour that I shall be troubled with. This is certainly a beautiful country! In all England, I do not believe that I could have fixed on a situation so completely removed from the stir of society. A perfect misanthropist’s Heaven…

With his second visit to the Heights the reality is different:

On that bleak hill top the earth was hard with a black frost, and the air made me shiver through every limb. Being unable to remove the chain, I jumped over, and, running up the flagged causeway bordered with straggling gooseberry bushes, knocked vainly for admittance, till my knuckles tingled, and the dogs howled.
This sense of the bleak isolation of the Heights acting as a direct contrast to any romantic vision of what it might be is brought home to the reader in the direct comments made in Isabella’s letter to Ellen describing her arrival at her marital home:

How did you contrive to preserve the common sympathies of human nature when you resided here? I cannot recognise any sentiment which those around share with me.

Indeed both the Heights and Osbaldistone Hall seem to have the power to infect the behaviour of those who reside there, exaggerating traits which already exist within characters, perverting them by making them more extreme. In chapter one of *Wuthering Heights*, Lockwood informs us of his ‘deliberate heartlessness’ in the way he behaves to a young lady whilst ‘enjoying a month of fine weather at the sea-coast’. However, when staying under the roof of the Heights this trait becomes shockingly physical as he pulls the wrist of a young girl ‘on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bed-clothes’. The courteous and artistically inclined narrator in *Rob Roy* becomes the drunken figure who ‘contradicted whatever was asserted, and attacked, without any respect to my uncle’s table, both his politics and his religion.’ Frank goes on to strike Rashleigh and has to be contained locked up in his own room. When confronted by Di Vernon in the cold light of the following morning he offers ‘as an excuse for follies I am not usually guilty of, the custom of this house and country.’

What the figure of Heathcliff owes to that of Rashleigh Osbaldistone is evident from the opening descriptions of both whilst his name owes something perhaps to Rashleigh’s brother, Thorncliff. When Lockwood first sees his landlord he refers to ‘his black eyes’ withdrawn ‘so suspiciously under their brows’ whilst behind Rashleigh Osbaldistone’s ‘shaggy eye-brows’ there lurks

an expression of art and design, and, on provocation, a ferocity tempered by caution, which nature had made obvious to the most ordinary physiognomist, perhaps with the same intention that she has given the rattle to the poisonous snake.

In chapter six of *Rob Roy* Diana Vernon refers to the power wielded by Rashleigh within the family by telling Frank that although Rashleigh is the youngest of the brothers ‘he has somehow or other got the entire management of all the others, and every one is sensible of the subjection’.
This is a man who ‘had gradually insinuated himself into the management of his [father’s] property.’ Later, in chapter thirteen, Frank goes on to refer to the power of Rashleigh’s ‘avarice or ambition’ and this comment comes not long after another one made about the powerful and manipulating strength of this character:

Well, Rashleigh is a man to be feared and wondered at, and all but loved; he does whatever he pleases, and makes all others his puppets.

However, the connections between *Rob Roy* and *Wuthering Heights* do not rest solely with the characters of Rashleigh and Heathcliff. There are interesting parallels that can be drawn between the spirited and proud Diana Vernon and the figures of both the elder and the younger Cathy. For instance when Catherine Earnshaw blocks the way out of the Heights as Edgar insists upon leaving having been slapped round the face in a fit of pique, she tells him ‘You must not go!’ Edgar was on the point of leaving with the words ‘I’ll not come here again!’ when Catherine changes her tone:

Her eyes began to glisten and her lids to twinkle.
‘And you told a deliberate untruth!’ he said.
‘I didn’t!’ she cried, recovering her speech. ‘I did nothing deliberately—Well, go, if you please—get away! And now I’ll cry—I’ll cry myself sick!’

In *Rob Roy*, the young and romantically impressionable Frank feels himself deeply in love with Diana Vernon and is hurt by having discovered that not only does the young lady have a secret liaison but also that she has lied to him. As he attempts to leave the library she stops him with the peremptory order

“Stop, Mr Frank,” she said; “ye’re not to leave me in that way neither.”

As he is ‘on the point of leaving the apartment, and breaking with her for ever, it cost her but a change of look and tone from that of real and haughty resentment, to that of kind and playful despotism…to lead me back to my seat, her willing subject, on her own hard terms.’

The character of Di Vernon is seen by the Justice in *Rob Roy* as one that has been left alone ‘and deserted on the face of this wide earth, and left to
ride, and run, and scamper at her own silly pleasure’. When she first meets the London visitor she repels Frank’s attempt at polite flirtation with the words

I must inform you at once, Mr Osbaldistone, that compliments are entirely lost upon me. Do not, therefore, throw away your pretty sayings—they serve fine gentlemen who travel in the country, instead of the toys, beads, and bracelets, which navigators carry to propitiate the savage inhabitants of newly discovered countries. Do not exhaust your stock in trade—you will find natives in Northumberland to whom your fine things will recommend you—On me they are utterly thrown away, for I happen to know their real value.

The stock-in-trade compliments which Lockwood attempts to bestow upon the younger Catherine meet with a similar block as he comments upon ‘an obscure cushion full of something like cats’ only to discover that it was ‘a heap of dead rabbits.’

The landscape itself of *Rob Roy* seems to offer a model for Emily Bronte’s novel:

Our road continued to be, if possible, more waste and wild than that we had travelled in the forenoon. The few miserable hovels that shewed some marks of human habitation, were now of still rarer occurrence, and, at length, as we began to ascend a huge and uninterrupted swell of moorland, they totally disappeared.

The language of violence which so shocked the early readers of *Wuthering Heights* is viscerally evident in Helen Campbell’s comments to Dougal when she commands his loyalty by telling him ‘to cut out their tongues and put them into each other’s throats to try which would there best knap Southron, or to tear out their hearts and put them into each other’s breasts to see which would there best plot treason against the MacGregor’ and this bears some comparison with Heathcliff’s comments to Nelly about having ‘the privilege of flinging Joseph off the highest gable, and painting the house-front with Hindley’s blood!’ However, to see how much Emily Bronte used her sources for her own distinct effects it must be noted how the comments of Helen Campbell have a ferocious martial tone to them whilst the use of the phrase ‘painting’ and ‘house-front’ associates the young Heathcliff with the horrors of domestic murder.
The violence of *Rob Roy* culminates perhaps in the brutal murder of Morris as he is hurled over a cliff-edge into a lake:

The victim was held fast by some, while others, binding a large heavy stone in a plaid, tied it around his neck, and others again eagerly stripped him of some parts of his dress. Half-naked, and thus manacled, they hurled him into the lake, there about twelve feet deep, drowning his last death-shriek with a loud halloo of vindictive triumph, above which, however, the yell of mortal agony was distinctly heard.

In his 1981 introduction to the World’s Classics edition of *Wuthering Heights* Ian Jack points to an impressive list of similarities between that novel and *Waverley*, particularly Lockwood’s arrival at the Heights and his resemblance to Scott’s typical young heroes—observant and educated yet also ignorant—who travel into a more primitive and violent society. Emily Bronte ‘was using one aspect of Scott’s technique with considered deliberation: she was using a straightforward, naïve stranger as a visitor to a region which she knew would be new and exciting to the novel-reader of the 1840s’.