Wuthering Heights and Lord David Cecil

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In one of the BBC television series of programmes entitled ‘The Big Read’ (broadcast in late 2003) *Wuthering Heights* was enthusiastically acclaimed as ‘a great love story’; the great love story being that of Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw. It would seem that the interest in Emily Brontë’s novel as a popular classic is commonly confined to the love between these two characters. However, *Wuthering Heights* is of course concerned with much more than this and a fuller interpretation of the novel that has proved influential over the years was offered by Lord David Cecil in *Early Victorian Novelists* (1934). Cecil argued that *Wuthering Heights* presents a vision of ‘the whole created cosmos’, a cosmos consisting of two complementary principles, that of ‘storm’ and that of ‘calm’ with these two principles being represented in the novel by the two family houses:

On the one hand, we have Wuthering Heights, the land of storm; high on the barren moorland, naked to the shock of the elements, the natural home of the Earnshaw family, fiery, untamed children of the storm. On the other hand, sheltered in the leafy valley below, stands Thrushcross Grange, the appropriate home of the children of calm, the gentle, passive, timid Lintons. Together each group, following its own nature in its own sphere, combines to compose a cosmic harmony. It is the destruction and re-establishment of this harmony which is the theme of the story.

To illustrate the influence of this interpretation I might mention that Walter Allen in *The English Novel* (1954) spoke of the two houses in the novel as symbolising ‘two opposed principles which…ultimately compose a harmony’. David Daiches in the 1965 Penguin English Library edition referred to Cecil’s interpretation as being ‘persuasively argued’ though not fully acceptable and the entry on *Wuthering Heights* in the 2002 Oxford Companion to English Literature says that the ending of the novel points
to a union of ‘the two contrasting worlds and moral orders represented by the Heights and the Grange’. With these comments in mind I think I must insist that Cecil’s interpretation contains a serious misreading of the novel and that Emily Brontë is concerned with human harmony rather ‘cosmic harmony’ and that the values which she sees as making up this harmony do not include a ‘principle of storm’.

Lockwood, the outsider who has become the tenant of the Grange in 1801 and the narrator of the first three chapters, is given an increasingly hostile reception when he pays two visits to his landlord, Heathcliff, up at the Heights. His remarks about the ‘dismal spiritual atmosphere’ of the Heights are an indication of what will come to characterise that building for most of the novel. On his second visit Lockwood is obliged to spend the night there because of the foul weather conditions and he comes across the diary comments written by Catherine Earnshaw ‘some quarter of a century back’. The diary reveals that both the young Catherine and Heathcliff were persecuted by the bigoted Calvinistic Joseph, the servant whom Lockwood has already encountered. The diary records that the young children were subjected to a three hour sermon in a garret and were compelled to study ‘The Helmet of Salvation’ and ‘The Broad Way to Destruction’, providing us with Emily Brontë’s satirical portrait of the oppressive Puritan who makes his own contribution to that ‘dismal spiritual atmosphere’.

When Lockwood returns to the Grange his housekeeper, Nelly Dean, is able to give him the history of Wuthering Heights since she was a servant there for many years and it is from this point forward that she becomes the principal narrator for the rest of the novel. She takes us back to the point where Mr Earnshaw came home from a trip to Liverpool with a foundling boy whom he then adopted by the name of Heathcliff. Earnshaw, though kind-hearted, foolishly favoured the orphan above his own children and so ‘from the very beginning he bred bad feeling in the house.’ David Cecil’s interpretation describes Heathcliff as an ‘extraneous element’ who becomes a source of discord but when Nelly Dean refers to that ‘bad feeling’ she emphasises that this is the result of Earnshaw’s favouritism, highlighting the fact that the initial source of discord was the owner of the house himself. The discord took a new turn when Hindley became the master of the Heights and proceeded to vent his hatred on Heathcliff by depriving him of the education he was receiving from the local curate and treating him henceforth as a servant and labourer. Whenever Joseph complained that Heathcliff and Cathy had avoided attending church on Sunday Hindley ordered the boy to be flogged and, as Lockwood had read in Cathy’s diary, his treatment was ‘atrocious’ provoking the two to seek refuge on the moors: rebels from the Heights.
It is made abundantly evident by now that the development of Heathcliff’s character is dependent upon the treatment he received from Hindley.

Nelly tells of an occasion when Heathcliff and Cathy strayed down to the Grange in order to spy upon the Lintons there. As the two wanderers gaze through the drawing-room window they are scornful of Edgar and Isabella, ‘petted things’. However, after Cathy had been rescued from the bulldog and remained convalescing in the Grange for six weeks her attitude to their way of life altered: she came to appreciate such socially desirable qualities as good manners, attractive clothes and cleanliness. Upon her return to the Heights she complained about Heathcliff being ‘dirty’ and although his initial reaction is one of understandable defiance, the next morning he wanted to follow Cathy’s example and said to Nelly ‘make me decent. I’m going to be good.’ This movement towards an assimilation of the Linton values was soon crushed by Hindley who insults him for ‘attempting the coxcomb’ whilst at the same time welcoming precisely the same change in Cathy: ‘you look like a lady now’. Hindley’s treatment of Heathcliff became increasingly brutal (‘enough to make a fiend of a saint’) and one result of his depriving him of any education is that at sixteen years old Heathcliff had ceased to have ‘any curiosity he once possessed in pursuit of knowledge, and any love for books or learning’. The value of books emerges as an important theme in the novel as this comment echoes Lockwood’s praise of Nelly as a person who has been able to cultivate her reflective faculties despite living a simple country life. Nelly was keen to stress the value of books to which she has access in the Grange. One result of the educational deprivation can be seen when Heathcliff complained that Cathy was spending less and less time in his company and she retorts ‘It’s no company at all when people know nothing and say nothing.’

As Cathy agrees to marry Edgar she seeks to justify herself by telling Nelly that the marriage would not diminish her ‘eternal’ love for Heathcliff. However, she also included the phrase ‘it would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now’ within his hearing and he disappears for three years to acquire the superficial aspects of social acceptability. His return throws Cathy into an emotional turmoil and she tells Edgar bitterly that she is ‘past wanting’ him and the reader is compelled to be aware of how Hindley’s degrading of the young Heathcliff caused Cathy to enter into a false marriage and Heathcliff to become obsessed with the idea of revenge. It is the working out of this idea that dominates the second half of the novel to include not only the deliberate degradation of Hareton but also the complicated legal procedures whereby Heathcliff becomes the sole owner of both the Grange and the Heights. However, the final three
chapters of the novel reveal forces of regeneration coming into effect as Lockwood returns to the Grange after seven months’ absence to discover a shift of atmosphere at the Heights. Whereas Heathcliff had gloated over Hareton’s ‘coarseness and ignorance’ Lockwood finds the younger Catherine teaching Hindley’s son to read and rewarding his efforts with kisses. As Nelly describes it, Hareton has been gradually ‘civilised’ by Catherine with ‘both their minds tending to the same point—one loving and desiring to esteem; and the other loving and desiring to be esteemed’. Education and love have moved hand in hand and Nelly says that the two young lovers are to be married on an auspicious New Year’s Day. On that day the couple will move into the Grange leaving Joseph in charge of the Heights. There is something appropriate about the tyrannical bigot being left to preside over an almost-empty Heights and we must recognise here that the novel’s conclusion is not a spiritual union of the two buildings but a rejection of all that the Heights stood for. As Lockwood sees the two lovers returning from a ramble on the moors he reflects that ‘They are afraid of nothing. Together they would brave Satan and all his legions’ repudiating the hell-fire religion of fear and judgement delighted in by Joseph.

David Cecil claimed that Emily Brontë stood outside her age and that the reader should not look for a Victorian view of life in her novel. However, Wuthering Heights is centred around the values of Victorian humanitarianism with the need for children to be raised in a loving environment, the essential virtues of ‘the common sympathies of human nature’ and the need for education as transmitted through books. For Emily Brontë, as for Wordsworth, Nature is a central source of fulfilment: the moors are a spiritual refuge from the Heights for the young Cathy and Heathcliff, Catherine and Hareton are happy ramblers on the same moorland and even the frail and peevish Linton’s idea of heaven is lying out in the middle of the moors on a hot July day. Where there is a sense of unorthodoxy in the novel it is in the treatment of Joseph and religion.

Joseph’s Puritanism is repeatedly satirised as he condemns the music played by the popular Gimmerton band as ‘devil’s psalmody’ and denounces Nelly’s singer of ‘a bonny tune’. He seems to delight in Hindley’s dissipation since he sees his vocation as being ‘where he had plenty of wickedness to reprove’ and talks, with no sense of irony, of the distinction between ‘saints like himself and sinners like his master.’ Although Patrick Brontë was an Anglican clergyman the kirk in Wuthering Heights has not much to offer as an alternative to Joseph’s Puritanism. When young Cathy was the rebellious ally of Heathcliff the curate sought in vain to correct her behaviour by requiring her to learn ‘chapters’ of the Bible by heart and when no replacement could be found for him the
church building is left in a state of ruin at the end of the novel without this disturbing the prevailing atmosphere of serenity. Nelly gives voice to Christian teaching from time to time but her advice to Heathcliff about learning to forgive is ineffectual and her suggestion that the dying Heathcliff should have a minister brought to preach the Bible to him seems pointless. That said, when Nelly speaks of Cathy being ‘at home with God’, echoing the dying woman’s own description of death as being an escape into a ‘glorious world’ we are presented with an expression of Emily Brontë’s views as expressed in the poem ‘No Coward Soul is Mine’ where ‘the world’s storm-troubled sphere’ is replaced by ‘Heaven’s glories’ shining. As the storm of the novel closes the figures of Catherine and Hareton triumphantly show that human fulfilment can be achieved in life on earth.