

Reversing perversion: the Byronic hero in *Wuthering Heights*

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I have been asked to talk about a work of literature which might help to illuminate the theme of perversion that has been the focus for this term's seminars. In this context I think it would be interesting to talk about certain aspects of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Her treatment of the theme of the Byronic hero in this extraordinary novel is culturally very significant, unique and highly influential, and relates very much to the question of how to overcome the type of perversity that leads to an impasse in personality development.

The title is *Wuthering Heights* because it is about turbulent times – partly in a social sense but above all in a personal, developmental sense. The winds of change blow through its landscape of a moor-mind and bring catastrophic change (in Bion's sense). It is at such times that the mind is perhaps most vulnerable to tyranny and perversity. *Wuthering Heights* is an exploration of what may happen when a split-off, buried, ancient, primitive aspect of the mind is brought to light (in the form of Heathcliff) and an attempt is made to reintegrate it into the personality, the existing order of things. Such an aspect appears alien and is associated with death and with the unmourned or unmournable; and it arouses conflicting reactions in the mind and its various 'characters' or objects.

When Bion said that the Romantics were the first psychoanalysts, he meant that the Romantic poet-philosophers brought a new selfconsciousness to a process of psychic investigation and representation that had been going on for many hundreds of years, and whose subject had always been the struggle between perverse and healthful or developmental parts of the personality - named by Freud Thanatos and Eros, or by Melanie Klein Envy and Gratitude. As psychoanalysis well knows, this is not simply a moral debate but a structural problem that governs mental growth, as Money-Kyrle reminds us when he defines the death impulse as 'entropy', and the

life impulse as 'synthesis' (1961, p. 58).

Meltzer in *Studies in Extended Metapsychology* says that Bion's formulation of LHK and minus LHK enables us to differentiate between unpleasant emotions such as hate, and perversity - which belongs to the negative grid of anti-emotions (minus L and minus K). The positive or real emotions are all beneficial, however conflicting they may be; whereas the pseudo- or anti-emotions represent the forces directed against self-knowledge and personality development.¹ In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Bronte set herself the task of filtering the genuine or passionate elements of love and hate from their destructive imitations that tend towards entropy, emotional paralysis and revenge (the Claustrium). Key to this process of filtration was her ambiguous Byronic hero Heathcliff, who functions as an organising principle in the novel and as a magnet for both positive and negative emotions; he has the potential both to promote and to retard growth.

The Byronic hero was a cultural construct that originated in Shakespeare's Hamlet and in Milton's Satan, with the addition of some local colouring from contemporary popular tales of ghosts and vampires in the Gothic novel. The denomination attached itself to Lord Byron owing to his flamboyant public persona - 'mad, bad and dangerous to know' as he was described by one of his lovers (Lady Caroline Lamb); also because of the apparent similarity between himself and the heroes of his poems.² The Byronic hero had, typically, a passionate but melancholic nature; mysterious origins (that is, unknown or disguised parentage); a childhood in some respects happy - even idealised - yet darkened by hints of incest or some other crime. He was a restless character, stigmatised by society for 'murkiness of mind' (*The Giaour*), though 'not all degraded' and showing 'brighter traits with evil mixed'. In other words, he was an adolescent. The Romantics invented not just psychoanalysis but also The Teenager - a type that the Enlightenment with its serenity and rationality seemed to have forgotten, at least since Shakespeare. Byron was the celebrity of the age like a modern pop-star, and all the young Brontes hero-worshipped him. He died in 1824 when the Brontes were teenagers, and they knew about his more complex side from the publication of his letters, in which - like Hamlet - he championed the melancholic, haunted, obsessive type of thinking that accompanied the sense of being an outcast from society and seen as a menace or a 'devil', whilst always driven by a 'quest of hidden

knowledge' (*Manfred*). For these antisocial propensities were inextricable from the metaphysical concerns that characterised the Romantic movement – that is, what kind of substance is a Mind? I quote an extract from one of Byron's letters:

Man is born passionate of body, but with an innate though secret tendency to the love of Good in his Mainspring of Mind. But God help us all! It is at present a sad jar of atoms.

Emily Brontë's moor landscape is a metaphor for just such an adolescent mind, full of conflicting characters that make it a 'sad jar of atoms'. This appears first in the famous dream in which a storm of snowflakes merges with the letters of Catherine Earnshaw's name, whirling around in Lockwood's brain. The child's hand bleeding as it thrusts through the broken glass of his bedroom window, indicates the sado-masochistic background to the idea of the deprived or excluded child. 'Terror made me cruel', says Lockwood – the apparently civilised city-dweller who has come to the moors filled with romantic notions about country life and quietness, but ignorant of the violent emotions that lie buried beneath a latency mentality. After the dream Lockwood finds the moorland covered in snow, obliterating all his familiar landmarks. As Byron put it:

'I awoke from a dream! – well! And have not others dreamed? – such a dream! – but she did not overtake me. I wish the dead would rest, however.' (1913 Journal)

After his dream, Lockwood falls sick and is confined to bed, physically immobilised. Here, like the patient on the analyst's couch, he starts to consider what lies behind his dream, as Nelly Dean tells him in gradual stages the story of Mr Heathcliff's arrival and interaction with the Linton and Earnshaw families.

Before Heathcliff arrives on the moor, the mental landscape is one of stasis – what Bion calls a 'commensal' state, in which two things coexist but do not interact. In Byronic terms he is the adventurer who will turn existing moral values upside down; in Bionic terms he is the monstrous 'new idea' whose advent arouses turmoil in the existing personality. The Lintons and the Earnshaws are long-established, respectable families, who

are however oblivious of one another's good and bad qualities. They only recognise each other from visits to the Church on Sunday, but otherwise have no communication, and the moor-mind is tending towards a state of stagnation. As Byron put it, mankind degenerates owing to 'the hardships and struggles through chaos into conformity' ('Detached Thoughts' 101).

Into this decaying civilization, old Mr Earnshaw imports the child Heathcliff: dark, wild, uncouth; a street urchin whom he rescues on a journey to the port of Liverpool. He is described ambiguously as 'a gift from God' but 'as dark as the devil' – words that Nelly Dean repeats at the very end of his life: 'Where did he come from, the little dark thing?' He is associated with an Earnshaw child (named Heathcliff) who died in infancy, so is in a sense a member of the family who is resurrected from the dead. His arrival is described as a type of difficult birth; Earnshaw carries him wrapped up in his greatcoat where he writhes and struggles, and in the process, the fiddle which he is also carrying, as a gift for his legitimate son Hindley, is crushed. This prefigures the destruction of Hindley's sensitive musical soul in the ensuing war between him and his foster-brother. Heathcliff is in effect the outcast or unknown child, or part of the self, whom old Earnshaw somehow recognizes needs to be integrated into his family life. Yet he cannot do this without splitting away his affection for the existing son, Hindley. Heathcliff becomes old Earnshaw's favourite, and Hindley is cast out instead; while Cathy, in order to retain her place in her father's affections, allies herself adhesively with the newcomer, in a way that develops into the famous romantic statement 'I *am* Heathcliff' (a direct echo of Byronic romance).

Shortly after introducing this new perspective to family life, old Earnshaw dies, followed by his wife, and not long afterwards by old Mr and Mrs Linton. The journey to Liverpool and back represented the utmost reach of Earnshaw's imagination. But movement has been stirred in the moor-mind and a state of tension has been set up, with criss-crossings between the two houses. This begins at the significant age of twelve, on the rainy day when Cathy and Heathcliff, sheltering under the dairywoman's cloak, peer through the window of Thrushcross Grange, marvelling at the spoilt Linton children, and Cathy is drawn into the other family by means of the bulldog's bite. Dogs in the story are associated with passions, and this wound images the adolescent angst which ultimately splits her personality

and results in her rejection of Heathcliff and her marriage to Edgar Linton.

The reason Cathy and Heathcliff are 'scampering' on the moor in the rain in the first place, is to escape from Hindley and his new wife Frances, the new master and mistress of the house who indulge themselves - 'burning their eyes out before the fire' - while the younger siblings are confined to the shadowy corners or the back kitchen. Theirs is the first flawed marriage of that generation. It is a marriage of love, but like the crushed fiddle, Frances's music is doomed even before her arrival at the Heights. Her sparkling eyes and flushed face have sinister undertones of tuberculosis, and it is inevitable that Hindley should choose a wife with these dual characteristics. She embodies the weakness and perversity within himself that is also demonstrated in his tyrannical treatment of the other children. Frances when pregnant carries death as well as life within her, and when she dies after giving birth to Hareton, Hindley feels Heathcliff has triumphed over his soul, in the sense of sado-masochism or the death principle.

It is often – especially in films – made out that the love between Catherine and Heathcliff is highly romantic and ideal, and its tragedy is one of external fate - constrained by society and circumstance. However their love is in fact as flawed and egocentric as that between Hindley and Frances, though it has a similar passionate core. It is a standard Byronic situation of a doomed incestuous attachment formed in childhood – such as Byron's with his half-sister.³ Catherine tells Nelly that Heathcliff 'is more myself than I am.. whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same, and Linton's is as different as a moonbeam from lightning, or frost from fire'. However she knows, on one level, that she cannot marry a part of herself, as there would be no future in such a liaison. She does not *wish* them to separate – quite the contrary; but she knows they *must* do so if things are to develop, in the shape of the next generation. As Heathcliff says, it was not society that parted them, but 'you of your own will, did it'.

Catherine's fragility comes to the surface when this separation from Heathcliff is effected. The storm that follows - 'rattling over the Heights' - reflects the inner turbulence that causes her 'brain fever', after which her personality appears changed. She is no longer the wild defiant girl but the delicate, almost invalid mistress who will collapse if her will is in any way challenged. There is a sense in which, emotionally, she never gets beyond the age of 12 – as she says during her delirium in pregnancy, the

intervening years have become a 'blank'. The pregnancy is initiated by a momentary fusion within herself of Edgar and Heathcliff aspects. There is a beautiful passage when Heathcliff returns to the moor, on the verge of disturbing its new but fragile tranquillity: Edgar and Catherine are sitting quietly and contentedly behind a lattice window which 'reflects a score of glittering moons', and Heathcliff emerges from the shadows. Catherine's excitement at this temporary possession of both aspects of her split self cannot be sustained. Her pregnancy is initiated; yet she can barely carry it to fruition. At six months she lapses into a delirium, brought on by an inability to integrate these contrasting features of her creative self. During her dreamlike delirious state she tears her pillow with her teeth, releasing a storm of feathers that echoes Lockwood's opening dream of snowflakes and hieroglyphics. The feathers are those of moorland birds, and when the contents of the pillow are revealed, she describes her fear that Heathcliff may have shot lapwings (birds) on the heath:

'This feather was picked up from the heath, the bird was not shot – we saw its nest in the winter, full of little skeletons. Heathcliff set a trap over it, and the birds did not come. I made him promise he'd never shoot a lapwing after that, and he didn't. Yes, here are more! Did he shoot my lapwings, Nelly? Are they red, any of them?'

Heathcliff-as-Byronic hero represents on the one hand the vital principle behind her pregnancy, and on the other, destructiveness towards the nest of internal babies, the lapwings. The birds are the thoughts for which the moor-mind is trying to find expression, but is perpetually hindered by its own perversity or vengefulness – something which, although stirred up by Heathcliff, is not confined to him alone, but permeates all the characters of that generation.

The ultimate dark stranger in the Bronte household was, of course, death. The mother Maria died leaving six small children, born barely a year apart, saying 'my poor children!'. The eldest girl became a type of mother to the younger ones, then she and the next sister also died at school. As well as Byron, there is a touch of Patrick Brunty in the 'gypsy' Heathcliff – the fantasy of an excessive Celtic passion submerged beneath his Anglicised religion, going back to the family's ancestral 'ghosts' whose energy derived from Ireland before being transported across the waters to the

'heathy sea' of Haworth moors.⁴ The writings of all the Brontes are in a sense an attempt to defeat death by a process of detoxifying the perversity of the Byronic hero.

It has been said that the way out of tragic impasse and the standard revenge cycle is to "convert ghosts into ancestors".⁵ The problem confronting Emily Bronte at the culmination of the era of the Byronic hero was: Will the mind lapse into self-destruction, persisting in its revenge on its internal forebears, or will it find a way of using stormy adolescent energies constructively to 'remake itself' (as Yeats put it)⁶ - perhaps by reviewing its own ancestry and effecting a transformation from persecutor to muse or facilitator? This is the area in which the Byronic hero merges with the metaphysical preoccupations about the nature of existence and of mind itself that Emily Bronte imbibed from the Romantic poets – or as psychoanalysts today would express it, in internal objects and in what sense they become the mind's 'ancestors'.⁷

In *Wuthering Heights*, the next attempt to modify or reform the perverse aspects of the Byronic hero is pictured in the marriage between Heathcliff and Isabella Linton. It is of course an unsuccessful attempt, but it is nonetheless a learning experience. As Heathcliff sneers, Isabella misconstrues his personality when she views him as a 'hero of romance'; Catherine warns her not to become one of her dead birds – comparing her to a 'sparrow's egg' that Heathcliff will crush. Although Heathcliff maintains he seeks 'no revenge' on Catherine, only on her family, he fails to observe the identification between the two girls. On the night he elopes with Isabella (as substitute for Catherine herself) there is a description of Isabella's little dog left hanging by a tree, twitching white in the darkness like a 'lost soul'. This resonates with the 'great occasion' of his final meeting with Catherine (the day she dies and gives birth) in the description of her white dress and the white leaves of her book fluttering in the breeze by the open window, a soul waiting to escape to the hillside beyond. The love, hate and perversity are closely entwined.⁸ Isabella needs to be released from her romantic fantasy (Bion's negative grid) and brought in touch with the genuine emotion of hatred, before she can escape from the sado-masochistic community at the Heights. As she runs out of the back door after the final violent confrontation between Heathcliff, Hindley and herself, she glimpses the child Hareton hanging a litter of puppies from the back of a chair.

This element of perversity has been bequeathed to all the next generation, and they have to find their own way of dealing with this inheritance – a way of selecting the ghost’s vital aspects and discarding the tyrannical vengeful ones.⁹ For it is a significant feature of the book’s structure that a single generation is not considered enough to cope with the turmoil aroused by the impact of the ‘new idea’ on the moor-mind. It takes at least 3 generations to absorb its impact constructively – to make what Bion calls a ‘catastrophic change’ in the mind’s structure. We can view these three generations not just in the literal sense, but also as a metaphor for the multiple levels of working-through that are necessary to achieve integration or synthesis of the useful parts, and to accept without denial the uselessness of the perverse ones (the Linton Heathcliffs) and the waste of vitality that they incur. This understanding is founded on a progressive process of filtration, across linear time and also in a transverse dimension, crossing backwards and forwards between the two houses at either end of the moor, weaving the web of a new mentality.

The bad or useless characteristics of the moor-mind congregate in the pathetic, selfish and sadistic figure of Linton Heathcliff. He embodies Isabella’s illusion and Heathcliff’s revenge, and that of all the previous generation. His arrival at Thrushcross Grange is anticipated eagerly by the second Cathy, but this turns out to be a false romance of its own – a kind of innocent perversity. She tries to make a toy or ‘pet’ of him, but he is ineducable, and instead, he becomes her burden and responsibility until the moment of his own death. Her ‘marriage’ to him – though it is not a real marriage – suggests the closeness that is required to detoxify the perversity that he embodies. This is where the new generation differ from their predecessors. They have a capacity for suffering (in Bion’s sense) not merely for feeling pain. They can grow out of their psychic illusions. Much of the imagery of the book demonstrates the second Cathy’s resilience – she is ‘elastic as steel’ not volcanic and brittle like the imagery associated with the Catherine-Heathcliff relationship. The concept of suffering entails thinking as well as feeling – it is a process of mental refinement (working up from dreams to thought-symbols). While the first generation collapsed into selfish tantrums, Cathy and Hareton learn to nurse and digest their wounded feelings (imaged physically in such things as Cathy’s bleeding lip, the fighting dogs, or the cut of the whip she delivers to Hareton). Crucially, Hareton

can survive the humiliation when his inability to read his own name is brought into the open; and Cathy can survive the destruction of her books and the locket with her parents' portraits inside – she learns instead to internalise their image.

The first Catherine proves a better mother dead than she would have been had she lived. Instead of the fragile egotist, Edgar Linton is free to internalise the beauty and vitality of her ghost or spirit, and to transmit his idea of love to their child. The second Cathy therefore grows up “a happy creature – and an angel... It's a pity she could not be content”. She ceases to be content when she reaches the threshold of adolescence: unconsciously echoing her mother's journey at the equivalent age, when she first crossed the boundary of the Grange, Cathy now leaps her pony over the park fence and sets off to investigate the moor beyond – a road which leads inevitably to Wuthering Heights. As in a type of dream, she is attracted by a distant view of the sunlit Penistone Rocks (genitals). She repeats her mother's story but always with a difference, and her moor-crossings represent an internal voyage of discovery of the mother within her. She encounters the perverse aspects of this ghost or ancestor, in her relationship with both Linton Heathcliff and his father, and also in muted form in herself. But in doing so, she digests and changes its significance. Her curiosity about her mother's body (and her own developing one) is shown in her explorations of the structure of the old house, in particular the window of her mother's old bedroom – the window of dreams. Her dream of her mother enables her to escape Heathcliff's deadlock and reunite with her father on his deathbed, reaffirming her vision of their love.

The ultimate test is whether she will be able to survive her forced marriage to Linton – with its significance of being married to death. Linton, through cowardice, becomes a fraud, and acts as Heathcliff's agent to entrap her, so she becomes one of the birds of Catherine's premonitory dream. It is not just a case of being literally held prisoner at the Heights, or through the legal entrapment of marriage; the real danger is of mental imprisonment. The one moment of truth between the cousins occurs when Linton acknowledges his own 'bad nature' and confesses that he can do nothing about it. It is only a moment – but it is enough to enable Cathy to face reality, as did her aunt Isabella. Unlike Isabella she cannot flee the moor. Instead her trial entails undergoing a prolonged depression

that makes her feel internally frozen, suspicious and paranoid (as she is when Lockwood first encounters her). She has to watch Linton while his life slowly ebbs away and his sickness is projected into her, in mental rather than physical form. 'The frost sets in' not only outside but inside. When it is over and she finally comes downstairs she insists she has come only for warmth, not for company, because 'I feel like death'. It was not enough to renounce her original false romance with her pet cousin; she also has to suffer his torpor and despair – the false peace or quiescence that matches the Byronic restlessness.

The final movement of the novel focuses on the return to life that takes place through Cathy's relationship with Hareton. The two strands of the story – the young lovers, and the relation of Heathcliff with Catherine's ghost - interweave in a type of counterpoint.

When Lockwood first introduced us as readers to the moor-mind, it was at its nadir; the principle of perversity and revenge appeared to have triumphed. Lockwood (as Emily Bronte puns) unlocks this, owing to his genuine curiosity and his capacity to dream. His dream tells us that Heathcliff is separated from the spirit of Catherine, but it is only later in the novel that we understand how this has happened.

Heathcliff's agony – which he calls 'a strange way of killing' - is not that he is haunted, but that he is *not* haunted. This is very much a Byronic theme, an interpretation of *Hamlet* that reverses the standard connotations of Purgatory: the lover is relentlessly pursued by a ghost which never takes material form. Heathcliff finds himself shut out from the world of ghosts and consequently unable to make any personal contact or onward movement. Near the end of the book he explains to Nelly how for the past 18 years he has struggled to see with Catherine's ghost but she has always eluded him, acting like a tantalising 'devil' in death as she did in life. 'I could almost see her – and yet I could not!' We learn how on the night of Catherine's funeral he forced open her grave and was consoled by the sight of her face, and her spirit 'led him home' to the Heights. But when he got to the house, his entrance was blocked by Hindley, whose destroyed eyes (physically identical to Catherine's) represent the dead Catherine, not her live spirit. The blocking and exclusion symbolise his own loss of contact with his soul, which torments him for 18 years. He is unable to convert her ghost into an ancestor, that is, into an internal guide or teacher, not simply

an attribute of himself and his tyrannical will. His apparent triumph over Hindley has merely resulted in his own spiritual debasement.

It is his identification with Hareton that gradually rebuilds the link with his internal goddess – subject of what Nelly calls his ‘monomania’. This begins early on when, ‘by a natural impulse’, he rescues the two-year-old Hareton from being dropped over the banisters by his drunken father. His tyrannical control is caught unawares, and this sows the seed for the paternal love that grows against his will. Hareton becomes a repetition of his own teenage self – but with a difference, and this revives his own emotionality. When he insisted on adopting Hareton with the intention of debasing rather than educating the child, he said:

‘Now my bonny lad, you are mine! We’ll see if one tree won’t grow as crooked as another with the same wind to twist it’.

But as it turned out, this led to an intimate bond between them. The wind of creation twists in directions outside his control. As Charlotte Bronte said, Heathcliff’s one redeeming feature was not his love for Catherine but his love for Hareton. Ultimately Heathcliff ‘thwarts himself’ (as he puts it) – something which he considers strange:

“it will be odd if I thwart myself !... but when I look for his father in his face, I find *her* every day more! How the devil is he so like? I can hardly bear to see him!”

Hareton is the agent through whom Heathcliff’s childhood is repaired, in memory. It is re-enacted with a difference, as Cathy repairs her mother’s egocentricity, through an unconscious relationship with her ghost or memory. The resurgence of Eros the life principle begins with Cathy putting primroses (sunshine) in Hareton’s porridge, and wrapping a book in white paper to dispel the black smoky clouds of his devil-like ignorance, that perversely disguise his innate intelligence. The white flashes remind us of the central dream at the core of the book – the snow, the birds, the dress, all representing chaotic pieces of soul. These alpha-elements (as Bion would call them) await an organizing principle, to metamorphose into thoughts.

For it is neither Hareton nor Cathy alone that is capable of reintroduc-

ing spring to this winter's tale: it is the relationship between them that is regenerative. This is expressed by the moment when, sitting together reading a book, they raise their eyes simultaneously and 'encounter' Heathcliff as he enters the room. At that moment Heathcliff begins to see Catherine again – through the identity in the two pairs of eyes, moving in unison. For him they become a representation of the combined object, and this puts him back in touch with his soul, the ghost of Catherine, releasing him from the perverse tyranny of his own vengefulness. It is something he cannot explain, but merely observes: saying to Nelly that he has 'lost the will' to complete his debasement of the families. For eighteen years he has been haunted by the meaningless memory of Catherine. He was unable to dream of her, and yet her lifeless image appeared to him daily in every external object:

What does not recall her? I cannot look down to this floor, but her features are shaped on the flags!... I am surrounded by her image!... The entire world is a dreadful collection of memoranda that she did exist, and that I have lost her!

We remember Byron's 'sad jar of atoms', and the dead internal babies represented by Catherine's dream of the nest of birds. These pieces of resemblance are not alpha-elements but beta-elements – they are merely physical and not accompanied by soul or spirit. As Bion says, the death of ideas 'is not a metaphor *only*.' (*The Memoir*). The beta-elements have no vitality and are no use for thinking or dreaming, unless some major mental reorientation can take place. Until there is a synthesizing movement, such as that represented by the eyes of Cathy and Hareton moving together, these elements add up only to 'a collection of memoranda' and this is a persecution not an inspiration.

The thwarting of Heathcliff's revenge represents the de-pervverting of the Byronic hero in his satanic glamour. As Shakespeare put it, 'the greater action is in virtue than in vengeance' – a maxim which however is easier to state than to dramatise in a play or novel with its realistic fabric of everyday life and landscape. At the end of the novel, Lockwood has learned what a 'love for life' might realistically look like, and how it is supported by the ghosts – or ancestors - that quietly sleep just below the surface of the mind's moorland landscape. He wonders 'how anyone could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth'.

Ultimately in *Wuthering Heights*, the restless and tormented figure of the Byronic hero is integrated in the form of the triple headstone at the edge of the moor – the boundary between the wild and civilized. Purged temporarily of its perverse elements, it remains a source of unconscious energy – the ghosts ‘walk’ and can still frighten the shepherd boy. For as Lockwood notes, although it is summer now, there will be autumn storms when once again the mind will be stirred up and the perennial battle between life and death, emotion and anti-emotion, will resume in the context of a new conflict.

Psychoanalytically, and metaphysically, the novel demonstrates the process of clarification that Money-Kyrle says is necessary to withdraw perverse elements and reveal the unconscious network of thought-building, starting with dreams. This takes mental time, over several generations – a process in which internal objects become modified and strengthened and the ghostly ‘combined object’ takes on characteristics that the original parents may never have had. It also takes suffering – a special term in Bion’s usage. Bion points out that there is not much difference between the sensations of pain and of pleasure – despite Freud’s ‘two principles of mental functioning’, there is little tension in these contraries. Suffering is different – it requires aesthetic conflict, and is imaged by Emily Bronte in her musical metaphor of the ‘strong thrilling or vibrating’ that accompanies Heathcliff’s ‘strange way’ of dying, and in the tautness of the second Cathy’s body ‘elastic as steel’. Modern psychoanalytic theory perhaps stresses the need for containment, at the expense of neglecting the religious concept of suffering. In *Wuthering Heights*, containment is represented by Nelly the housekeeper-mother-analyst-storyteller.¹⁰ She empathises, reflects and observes, and on a level of practical necessity she participates and promotes life. But Nelly alone cannot achieve catastrophic change in the moor-mind. The religious dimension is represented for Emily Bronte by the walking, purgatorial ghosts, ever-present on rainy nights. It was not the religion of her father’s church – at the end of the novel the church slates are on the point of falling off into the turf. But perhaps it was her perception of his internal religion, after his own crossing of the Irish sea and romantic marriage to Maria.

Byron himself never stayed long enough in one place to truly suffer. A brilliant poet, he always sought action: ‘*Onward!* - Now is the time to act!’ as he wrote in a letter. His most popular, and beautiful, lyric is the

one beginning ‘So we’ll go no more a-roving’. Pursued through Europe by Poetry, Dreams and Woman, he ended up like Hamlet with ‘a soldier’s grave’ in the Greek war of independence. Containment alone ends in the coffin. It cannot deal with perversity. Emily Bronte split Byron’s story between Lockwood and Heathcliff – forcing him to lie on the couch and listen to his internal conflicts – and in a sense rewrote the inner life of her own adolescent hero.

Read more

A Strange Way of Killing: the poetic structure of Wuthering Heights. Clunie Press, 1987.

The hieroglyphics of Catherine: Emily Bronte and the Musical Matrix. In: *The Brontes in the World of the Arts*, ed. Sandra Hagan and Juliette Wells. Ashgate, 2008.

Notes

- 1 Meltzer writes that ‘perverse areas of the personality quietly drain the vitality of object relations. And here Bion’s formulation of positive and negative emotional links sheds a brilliant light. “But am I not a part of this man’s emotional life?” the perverse area seems to say, claiming a certain respectability and rightful share in the world of human intimacy. A dualistic theory, of Life and Death, of Creative and Destructive drives, gives no definitive answer except a grudging “Yes, but you must be subservient, integrated for good and creative ends” something the perverse aspect will smilingly accept, secretly triumphant. But when the perverse trends are recognised as anti-emotions, minus L, H and K, no ground need be yielded to them in compromise.’ (p. 210).
- 2 Byron admitted this similarity but added a note of caution, quoting from *Macbeth*: ‘I doubt the equivocation of the fiend that lies like truth’.
- 3 Byron’s biography (known to the Brontes) documents ‘three Marys’ who were his childhood idols (like Catherine’s surnames). Mary Chaworth was his neighbour and (like Catherine and Heathcliff) he overheard her dismiss him as a ‘lame boy’.
- 4 Brunty (phonetically similar to Byron) was Patrick Bronte’s original surname. He romanticised and elevated it to Bronte, after a title awarded to Nelson.
- 5 Hans Loewald on the work of psychoanalysis.
- 6 Yeats, ‘Myself must I remake’ (‘An Acre of Grass’).
- 7 Bion stressed we should acknowledge our ‘ancestors’ whether known or not – they are the unnamed ‘ante Agamemnona multi’ who have shaped our minds.
- 8 In Shelley’s *Triumph of Life*, Rousseau invokes Dante: ‘him who from the lowest depths of hell... Love led serene, and who returned to tell/ The words of hate and awe’ (Bion’s Love, Hate and Awe in juxtaposition).
- 9 Money-Kyrle stresses the process of revitalising is one of clarifying and withdrawing the perverse projections, rather than of inventing something new. The death impulse is entropy; the life impulse is synthesis (*Man’s Picture of his World*, p. 58).
- 10 Byron’s containing mother-figure was Lady Melbourne, to whom he wrote: ‘Am I sure of myself?... No, but *you* are.’