In search of Ellis Bell: Emma Tennant's *Heathcliff's Tale*

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Abstract

Like several of Tennant's books, Heathcliff's Tale *is a revision of a canonical English novel.* Wuthering Heights *has continued to intrigue readers ever since its publication, partly owing to the disturbing gaps in the story which provoke various, even contradictory readings. Just as the central character in Brontë's novel remains mysterious, so the authorship of the novel has been subject to re-interpretations. Published under a pseudonym, the novel was initially ascribed to Emily's brother, but establishing the correct authorship posed further questions pertaining to the sources of Emily Brontë's inspiration. These questions are imaginatively pondered in Tennant's neo-Victorian novel.* Heathcliff's Tale *reinterprets* Wuthering Heights *by completing the gaps inserted by Brontë in the original version as well as draws attention to its own artifice by imitating and enhancing the structural complexity of the original. Tennant's book is analysed here as representative of the literary dialogue with the Victorian past undertaken by a considerable group of contemporary English novels.*

While the neo-Victorian novel is a noticeable phenomenon in English fiction of the last decades, fictional links with the Victorian age have taken a variety of shapes. The simplest return to Victorianism consists in setting a novel in the Victorian period in an attempt to reconstruct it both in content and form. However, as Anne Humpherys claims, these novels offer little scope for analysis since they do not engage in a deliberate dialogue with the past, whereas the Victorian setting serves there above all to justify the complexity and strangeness of the action (444). Humpherys uses the term 'aftering' to describe the alternative kind of engagement with the past in which the fact that "we are all caught up in repeated conventions and old stories" is foregrounded. Contemporary texts which derive from affinity with their Victorian originals have to be read "doubly" because "The reader must interpret two texts at once – the pretext which exists in memory and the aftertext which exists on the page" (445). A more detailed classification of the modern uses of Victorian fiction is suggested by Robin Gilmour. One of his categories, "the modern reworking or completing of a

classic Victorian novel" (190) best corresponds to Humpherys's definition, since here the intertextual relations are the most obvious, the Victorian pre-text being specific and defined from the start. The intertextuality may also be explicitly made into a theme in the neo-Victorian revision, resulting in "the research novel" (another category distinguished by Gilmour).

Emma Tennant's *Heathcliff's Tale* illustrates both forms of neo-Victorianism, simultaneously corresponding to the two kinds of enigma that *Wuthering Heights* has posed ever since its publication. From the modern point of view certain issues in Victorian fiction may seem underdeveloped or conspicuous by their absence for the sake of moral and social standards (an obvious example is the suppression of sexuality) – or ignored because they did not command the kind of attention they arouse nowadays (British colonialism is rare subject matter in Victorian fiction; the marginalised story of the Jamaican madwoman in *Jane Eyre* induced Jean Rhys's contemporary re-writing). In *Wuthering Heights*, however, certain lacunae (the fundamental one being, of course, the identity of the central character) are both deliberate and vital to the plot, and, consequently, to the interpretation of the novel. The other area of indeterminacy concerns the writer herself – few writers in the history of English literature have been as reclusive and enigmatic as Emily Brontë. Both mysteries are imaginatively addressed in Emma Tennant's *Heathcliff's Tale*, featuring Henry Newby, a (fictional) nephew of the notorious (genuine) first publisher of *Wuthering Heights*, on a mission to retrieve Emily Brontë's manuscript of a second novel. Newby visits Haworth parsonage soon after Emily's death and becomes caught up in the story of *Wuthering Heights* and simultaneously the story of the Brontë household, often being unable to distinguish fact from fiction. While researching the life of the writer, Newby re-lives some of the experiences described in *Wuthering Heights*. Hence Emma Tennant's novel is an attempt to fill in some of the gaps both in the fiction and in the biography. The Editor's Note (which is an inherent part of the book) claims that

> The following pages may help to elucidate one of literature's greatest enigmas: viz. the origins of the most evil hero ever to be portrayed. The second puzzle lies in tracing the causes and reasons behind the authorship of the great novel in which this demonic figure appears. How could a young woman with no experience of the world – or, indeed, of passion – have brought into being a man such as Heathcliff? (1)

Answers are indeed given to both but their inevitable reductiveness is redeemed by the structural complexity of the book. The narrative of *Heathcliff's Tale* is multilayered and disjointed since Newby as narrator incorporates his own correspondence, summaries or quotations from a manuscript which in itself contains extracts from other texts. Newby's text, never conceived as a coherent whole, is additionally framed and interrupted by the anonymous editor who sounds distinctly nineteenth-century. In constructing this elaborate format, *Heathcliff's Tale* not only imitates the narrative method employed by Emily Brontë, but complicates it by supplying three more narrative levels. It will be remembered that the frame narrator of *Wuthering Heights* is Lockwood who introduces the main narrator Nelly, with some episodes related to her by other characters personally or reported by letter. The opening of *Wuthering Heights* ("1801 – I have just returned from a visit to my landlord…") helps to define it as Lockwood's diary.

In Tennant's story, Lockwood's diary (different from the published version), is presented by Newby and published by the editor as Newby's deposition. The obvious advantage of employing multiple narrators in Brontë's original was to obliterate authorial views and open up a variety of interpretative options, especially that careful reading reveals numerous deficiencies and limitations in the seemingly reliable and confident accounts by the two narrators. In many respects, in the rewritten version Newby replicates Lockwood's role. Like him, Newby is an urban and urbane outsider, confronted with the fundamental inadequacy of his attitude in the secluded microcosm of the moor dwelling. He gets similarly unpleasant reception although, like Lockwood, he arrives at night, worn out by winter weather, in search of civil company. His demands for the manuscript, cast in legal jargon, are undercut by Charlotte's curt instructions to turn him away. It is only thanks to the servant's compassion that he sneaks inside. However, in default of a Nelly-like mediating story-teller Newby is even more prone to mistakes and misjudgments – he chances on charred and singed fragments of Lockwood's diary and plunges into the story, not recognising its fictionality. Newby obviously has not read the part that his uncle published. Whereas Lockwood's understanding of the story is shaped by Nelly's constant presence and her undeniable credentials as an eye-witness, Newby lacks this modifying factor. Remarking that Nelly is a very fair story-teller, Lockwood implicitly assures the reader of *Wuthering Heights* that he does not interfere in her narrative; and indeed, the very sparse glimpses of Lockwood-the listener do not detract from the overall impression that after the initial ghost episode, he plays no more part in the action, being merely a faithful

chronicler of Nelly's words. Lockwood's implied reader is a person sharing his background and ideas – it is highly probable that most of Emily Brontë's audience consisted of rational, polished, conventional-minded readers, who could give their attention to the strange tale of violence and passion only if it was conveyed to them by someone of their own kind. It has often been remarked that with a view to expected reception, Lockwood is "admirably conceived as a narrator"; his role being to "add convincing evidence to what Nelly tells us through him, since he has no need to lie, no subconscious urge to conceal, reveal, or justify" (Dobrée, 115). Lockwood provides an escape from the intense emotional atmosphere of the story, and his rational presence is a palatable antidote to the supposedly spiritual dimension of *Wuthering Heights*. Quite naturally, Newby in Tennant's version identifies himself as Lockwood's target reader: "I was plunged half-a-century back, and I read the account of Mr. Lockwood on his visit to these parts as if he wrote solely for your loyal nephew, Henry Newby" (10).

Yet, engrossed in the story, Newby falls prey to the alluring delusion of the fictional world and begins to confuse it with empirical reality. His role evolves from that of a lawyer demanding his uncle's property to a reader in search of the author and, finally, to the position of a literary character (which he ultimately is) in pursuit of other characters. He begins to perceive Lockwood as a real-life person: "Oh, if I could only have known Mr. Lockwood! – but his pages are dated 1802 and Mr. Lockwood, should he be alive still, would very likely have forgotten the import and even the content of his visit here, close on half a century ago" (42). Newby transcends the ontological boundary between fiction and reality; later he transgresses even further by ignoring the temporal distance separating him from the events described by Lockwood – we see him frantically trying to rescue Isabella from Heathcliff, although she is dead by the time of Lockwood's first visit. He is ready to become "another Lockwood" and alter the story: "I saw myself in bed, tended by Nelly despite her advanced years, sipping grog while she recounted to me the story I now could not exist without, the tale of Heathcliff and the sad aftermath of his unholy love" (118). Paradoxically, the more Newby identifies with Lockwood, the more he differs from the character created by Emily Brontë. Her Lockwood treats Nelly's story as a welcome respite from the tedium of his illness, and, despite his initial bewilderment, does not seem to be profoundly affected or transformed by the story. His final comment on visiting the graves of the unhappy lovers is "[I] wondered how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth" (245) – Lockwood remains as unimaginative – or as commonsensical – as he was on arrival.

By contrast, Newby becomes emotionally involved. His experience reflects the biographical heresy committed by most early reviewers of *Wuthering Heights*. Due to the unusual circumstances of Brontë's life, nineteenth-century scholarship tended to focus on the author rather than the text, while even interpretations of the novel sought to link it to the author's life and personality. As late as the 1930s, Mildred G. Christian complained: "Objective writing about the Brontës is scanty, and scholarly examination of them rare" (In Orel, xiv).

The Brontës, however, unwittingly did much to invite biographical speculation. The male pseudonyms Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell, used for the publication of a joint volume of poetry, were repeated in the first edition of the sisters' novels, much to the confusion of readers and critics alike. The identity of the writers aroused curiosity in the literary establishment. The publisher Lockhart wrote in 1848: "I know nothing of the writers but the common rumour is that they are brothers of the weaving order in some Lancashire town" (Gérin, 195). A common tendency was to compare the works of the supposed brothers and the uncommon conclusion was that they were actually one. Such rumours were sedulously spread by Emily's and Anne's manipulative publisher Thomas Cautley Newby (the uncle of Emma Tennant's protagonist) who, jealous of the success of *Jane Eyre*, made out that his own authors and the author of *Jane Eyre* were one and the same person. To contradict the rumours as well as to answer her own publisher's query, Charlotte decided to end the game, travelling to London with Anne to reveal the identities of the Bell brothers. As Charlotte's reputation grew rapidly, Emily, by far the most reclusive of the sisters, bitterly resented having her real name disclosed to the public. The final revelation came in 1850, as Charlotte prepared the second edition of Brontës' works. Both of her sisters being dead by then, she felt both free and obliged to settle definitely the question of authorship. No record remains of Emily's last months. Any evidence there existed was destroyed either by herself or by Charlotte, out of respect for her sister's jealously guarded privacy (Orel, xvi). The fact that Newby's nephew in Tennant's novel finds a half-burnt manuscript in the fireplace of Haworth parsonage two weeks after Emily's death may not be entirely implausible. A tempting question in the Brontës scholarship is whether Emily was planning another novel. Such speculations are encouraged especially by the surviving letter of February 1848 in which Newby writes to Ellis Bell enquiring after his second novel: "Dear Sir – I am much obliged by your kind note and shall have much pleasure making arrangements for your next novel. I would not hurry its completion for I think you are quite right not to let it go before the world until well satisfied with it…." (Gérin, 228) The fictional Henry

Newby, like his uncle, is unaware of the true identity of Ellis Bell, and, like many of his contemporaries, refusing to believe that such a disturbing story could have been written by a young girl, he is inclined to ascribe the authorship of *Wuthering Heights* to Branwell Brontë. In her biography of Emily Brontë as late as in 1882 Mary Robinson still felt obliged to assert Emily's authorship against her brother's (9-11).

The introduction of three additional narrative levels in Tennant's book, although complicates it formally, ultimately serves to tentatively clarify the meaningful omissions in Brontë's narrative. The most tantalising question of course concerns Heathcliff's identity, his origins and rapid growth in wealth and social status during the three-year absence from the moors. There areas are deliberately left obscure in the original, and any clarification of the mystery must inevitably disappoint. In Emma Tennant's version, Lockwood's diary contains Heathcliff's own tale told to Lockwood – a very unlikely solution, considering Heathcliff's scornful attitude to his visitor and the stark contrast between the two men. Here Heathcliff unexpectedly makes Lockwood his confidant and tells him quite an unbelievable story of his origins. He recalls living in a forested country permanently covered with snow (a highly unlikely combination at any rate). Kidnapped to be sold as a slave in the West Indies, the child was supposedly later smuggled to Liverpool where a cruel Scottish family took him north to be their slave servant. He escaped back to Liverpool, where he was adopted by Mr Earnshaw. Although perhaps too eventful to have happened within the few years before Heathcliff's arrival at Wuthering Heights, and perhaps too well comprehended by the barely articulate child that he was at the time, the version clearly aims at exposing British involvement in the slave trade as the erased episode in the story. His later disappearance is explained as an escape to America, where he enticed a rich girl into marriage and got his wealth by disposing of her in mysterious circumstances as well as profiting himself from slave labour in the West Indies. The Caribbean trope may have been inspired by Charlotte Brontë ascribing a Jamaican background to her daemonic character in *Jane Eyre*. A similar explanation for Heathcliff's presence in Yorkshire in offered here. Yet, this part of Heathcliff's story is late contradicted by Nelly Dean's testimony in which she claims that he was Mr. Earnshaw's illegitimate child by a Liverpool prostitute. This accounts for his strange attachment to the boy. In Tennant's book, Heathcliff asserts that he is the father of young Catherine – a claim not wholly dismissible in the light of Brontë's narrative, but difficult to accept considering the fact that both in appearance and character Catherine Linton combines traits of the Earnshaws and the Lintons. All these versions put forward in Tennant's book have some

grounding in the original narrative, and all have been exploited by critics, for example by Eric Solomon as early as in 1959 (cf. Everitt, 146). In accord with much early scholarship of *Wuthering Heights*, Tennant's revision makes no attempt to avoid biographical criticism. Following the suspicion of incest hovering over the plot of *Wuthering Heights*, Tennant's story admits a further possibility: if the book is related to Emily's life and her brother Branwell inspired the creation of Heathcliff, then the strange relationship between Heathcliff and Cathy may be modelled on a quite unambiguously erotic one between Emily and Branwell, as intimated by the last scene of *Heathcliff's Tale*.

However, Tennant's book exposes its own artifice so obtrusively as not to be mistaken for serious critical or biographical speculation. One of the Editor's notes that intersperse the book makes us aware of the contemporaneity of the revision: "We own to a certain shame in presenting the clumsy efforts of a novice writer to become a published author: today, Henry Newby would be encouraged to join a Creative Writing Course at a respected university and instructed in the art of narrative" (133). Thus the book self-consciously calls into question the alternative *Wuthering Heights* as possibly the work of an incompetent writer, and the Editor's stance implies the presence of the contemporary author behind the textual construct.

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