

Elaborations on Kingdoms of Childhood

Phoebe Colley

“There are two ways to revolt against the real world, dominated as it is by reason and based on the will to survive. The most common and relevant is the rejection of its rationality.”¹

At the forefront of Georges Bataille’s critique of Emily Brontë, opening his work *Literature and Evil*, is an affection for her nuanced understanding of the interplay between Evil and Good, which provides the framework for *Wuthering Heights*. Rather than inciting a juxtaposition of these two forces through the confines of morality, Bataille argues that Brontë instead posits Evil as defiance of the structures that enable society to function, aka what is Good. The key distinction between this conception and its Christian counterpart is that Evil does not spring from an act, but rather intentions: “We cannot consider that actions performed for a material benefit express Evil. The benefit is, no doubt, selfish, but it loses its importance if we expect something from it other than Evil itself - if, for example we expect some advantage from it. The sadist, on the other hand, obtains pleasure from contemplating destruction.”²

Thus, any unsavoury deed committed in the interest of preservation or elevation stems from an adherence to Good cultural values; survival and status. Heathcliff’s character, in Bataille’s opinion,

¹ Georges Bataille, “Emily Brontë” in *Literature and Evil* (London: Marion Boyars, 1976) p. 20

² Bataille, “Emily Brontë.” p. 17

derives its Evil from a violent need to keep hold of the “sovereign kingdom of childhood”, where the love he shares with Catherine both manifests and remains.³

The two children spent their time racing wildly on the heath. They abandoned themselves, untrammelled by any restraint or convention other than a taboo on games of sensuality... But even if children have the power to forget the world of adults for a time, they are nevertheless doomed to live in this world. Catastrophe ensues. Heathcliff, the foundling, is obliged to flee from the enchanted kingdom where he raced Catherine on the heath, while Catherine, though she remains as rugged as ever, denies her wild childhood... The subject of the book is the revolt of the man accursed, whom fate has banished from his kingdom and who will stop at nothing to regain it... It is the revolt of Evil against Good.⁴

It could be argued however that it is precisely this notion of interminable struggle against cultural pressures that binds Heathcliff and Catherine to such polarising circumstances. Jean-Francois Lyotard suggests that to transform the dialectic of society vs. subversives into a ‘libidinal economy’, “...it is not a revolution we need, it is one revolution, and one, and one more. . . *permanent* revolution if you like, but on condition that this word cease to denote continuity and mean: we will never be sufficiently refined.”⁵ In an essay on Bataille titled “A Preface to Transgression,” Michel Foucault defines sexuality in terms concomitant with Lyotard’s permanent revolution, suggesting “Sexuality points to nothing beyond itself, no prolongation, except in a frenzy which disrupts it.”⁶ Rather than a force that

³ *Ibid.* p. 19

⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 18-19

⁵ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993) p. 20

⁶ Michel Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression” in *Bataille: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998) p. 24

acknowledges and affirms the sovereign human subject, for Foucault sexuality is a fissure - "...one which marks the limit within us and designates us as a limit" - that is thus carried to *its* limit by transgression.⁷

Transgression, then, is not related to the limit as black to white, the prohibited to the lawful, the outside to the inside or as the open area of a building to its enclosed spaces. Rather, their relationship takes the form of a spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust... Since this existence is both so put and so complicated, it must be detached from its questionable association to ethics is we want to understand it and to begin thinking from it and in the space it denotes... Transgression is neither violence in a divided world (in an ethical world) nor a victory over limits (in a dialectical or revolutionary world).⁸

The exposition of sexuality that occurs through transgression is thus not one that dichotomises morality and desire, but instead projects and extrapolates desire away from binary narratives, opening limits in order to force limits: "Transgression contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being - affirms the limitlessness into which it leaps as it opens this zone of existence for the first time. But correspondingly, this affirmation contains nothing positive: no content can bind it, since, by definition, no limit can possibly restrict it."⁹

While it may seem redundant to implicate sexuality and transgression into Brontë's work, given its typically Victorian chastity, I would argue that to confine the presence and subversion of sexuality to a manifest sexual act is to place transgression within the positive/negative framework that Foucault

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 25

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 28

⁹ Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression." pp. 28-29

explicitly states it surpasses. In Brontë's depiction of Catherine, sex is barely implicated in the conception of her daughter; instead childbirth is posited as a natural consequence of marriage. Thus, sexuality is not equated with an action but with a union, and in rejecting her union with Heathcliff in the kingdom of childhood, Catherine forgoes transgression or Evil, in favour of the societal Good.

If sexuality points to nothing beyond itself, it finds its equivalent in the kingdom of childhood: as Bataille maintains, "Good is based on common interest which entails consideration of the future. Divine intoxication, to which the instincts of childhood are so closely related, is entirely in the present."¹⁰ The kingdom of childhood is a state that cannot be regimented or captured in order to aid a future cause; it is the limit of limits, expressing itself only as a threshold to which Heathcliff clings. Considering the kinship Heathcliff and Catherine share, I intend to compare this kingdom of childhood, routinely affirmed and denied throughout *Wuthering Heights*, to the tumultuous relationship between Janey and her father, Johnny in Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School*.

Like Heathcliff, Janey's relationship with Johnny is inextricably linked with Evil; incestuous, masochistic and entirely without reward, the two characters grapple with each others feelings and desires until Johnny, in a manner echoing Catherine's defection to Edgar Linton, "betrays" Janey's love and forces her to leave him. This abandonment does not facilitate a judgement of guilt or innocence on either character however, for Heathcliff wrought damage upon others in manners comparable to the injustices that transpired against him; "...he is the remorseless and passionate cause of Catherine's disease and death, though he believes her to be his."¹¹ Likewise, as Janey recounts,

¹⁰ Bataille, "Emily Brontë." p. 22

¹¹ Bataille, "Emily Brontë." p. 19

Once we were safe inside our kitchen, we rehashed all the times he had wanted to be close to me and I had refused; all the times I had driven him away when he loved me; all the times he had rejected my timid advances of sex, and all the times I had cut him dead, I had told him i would never care about him... how I reacted to his hurting me so badly by looking for someone more stable; how hurt causes increasing hurt.¹²

Both Janey, in her complicitous incest, and Heathcliff, in his inability to consider relations external to himself, embody a state of wild abandon, lawlessness and temporal ignorance that is analogous with the kingdom of children. Their differing genders and ages bear no relation on their actions, they are instead epitomised by their transgression of limits, just as Catherine and Johnny are characterised by their resistance to, and subsequent detachment from the transgressions Heathcliff and Janey represent: as Bill says to Janey, “You have to realise you’re the one person he hates, you’re everything he’s trying to get rid of.”¹³ Where these two stories differ however, indecent scriptures aside, is Acker’s utilisation of unorthodox narrative structure.

Drifting from scripted dialogue to first person monologue, spectral narration to genital illustration, Acker’s child heroine offers up her inner turmoil and excitation to the reader through a work that reads as if the epitome of Lyotard’s ‘intensities’: “...always *this and not-this*, not at all through the effect of castration, of repression, of ambivalence... but because intensity pertains to an asynthetic movement, more or less complex, but in any event so rapid that the surface engendered by it is, at each of its points, at the same time *this and not-this*.”¹⁴ *Blood and Guts* substantiates its protagonist as both victim and villain, its content as both diary and stage production, in the same way that Brontë

¹² Kathy Acker, *Blood and Guts in High School* (New York: Grove Press, 1978) p. 20

¹³ Acker, *Blood and Guts in High School*. p. 11

¹⁴ Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*. p. 15

alleviates the need for judgement of Heathcliff or Catherine by way of the numerous narrators who dictate *Wuthering Heights* - a literary tactic by no means less innovative than Acker's when considering the works respectively.

J. Harris Miller elaborates on this technique in an essay accompanying the novel, titled "Repetition and the 'Uncanny'". He argues that a series of inept interpretations by Lockwood, which pepper the opening chapters of *Wuthering Heights*, work to prepare the reader for deducing their own exegesis.

This chain established, at the beginning, the situation of the reader as one of gradual penetration from text to text, just as Lockwood moves from room to room of the house... The reader of *Wuthering Heights* must thread his or her way from one interpretive narrative to another - from Lockwood's narrative to Nelly's long retelling (which is also a rationalising and conventionally religious explanation), to Isabella's letter, or to Catherine's dream of being thrown out of heaven, to her interpretation of this in the 'I am Heathcliff' speech, and so on.¹⁵

This 'I am Heathcliff' speech bears particular importance for Miller. As Catherine recounts her dream to Nelly, she admits "It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now; so he shall never know how I love him; and that, not because he's handsome Nelly, but because he's more myself than I am... I *am* Heathcliff - he's always, always on my mind- not as a pleasure, any more than I am a pleasure to myself - but, as my own being."¹⁶ Here, Miller suggests, we are given a sign as reader that

¹⁵ J. Harris Miller, "Repetition and the 'Uncanny'" in *Wuthering Heights* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003) p. 364

¹⁶ Emily Brontë, "Wuthering Heights" in *Wuthering Heights* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003) pp. 63-64

to search for a discrete point of origin within the complex of narratives available is futile: at every potential point of revelation, we are denied access.

The reader never sees directly, for example, the moment in childhood when Cathy and Heathcliff slept in the same bed and were joined in a union which was prior to sexual differentiation. This union was prior to any sense of separate selfhood, prior even to language, figurative or conceptual, which might express that union... Storytelling is always after the fact, and it is always constructed over a loss. What is lost in the case of *Wuthering Heights* is the 'origin' which would explain everything.¹⁷

With this concept in mind, it could be argued that Brontë's literary technique is in itself a transgression: never able to exhaust itself by 'lifting the veil', the novel oscillates interminably through the conjunctive relationships it narrates; "...a second language in which the absence of a sovereign subject outlines its essential emptiness and incessantly fractures the unity of its discourse."¹⁸ To deprive the literary act from its essential function - communicating a cohesive statement - is precisely what Kathleen Hulley suggests Acker strives to achieve via five disjunctive practises, "...to wedge into the heteroglossia sub-texts of behavioural, literary and nonliterary voices speaking between the cracks in authorised textuality," in her essay "Transgressing Genre: Kathy Acker's Intertext."¹⁹

¹⁷Miller, "Repetition and the 'Uncanny.'" pp. 370-371

¹⁸Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression." p. 37

¹⁹Kathleen Hulley, "Transgressing Genre: Kathy Acker's Intertext" in *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) p. 172

Through shifting characters and stories, plagiarism and diverse crossings between autobiography and fiction, Acker disrupts and attempt on the reader's part to construct an originally point, or semblance of unity. However, as Hulley maintains,

...it is in her sentence structure that acquire most decentres the textual subject.

She alternates wildly between the present tense, which situates the narrator inside the linguistic process - and, therefore, at the mercy of her narration - and the past tense, which constructs a narrator who is already written... The flickering subject dreams the cultural fiction that she can live outside the discourse that she mimics. But as the subject disappears before our eyes, Acker drops her audience abruptly into an abyss where the polyvalent dependences of meaning slide ceaselessly, one against the other.²⁰

Here, as with Brontë, the refusal of summative literary tropes engenders an opacity that will not be resolved into transparency. Without origin or ending, both *Wuthering Heights* and *Blood and Guts* occupy an interstitial present that is free from the limitations of a single narrative or character.

Miller suggests that a comparison can be made between the lineage of the families involved in *Wuthering Heights* and the lineage of interpretations available; neither one being bound to the confines of the story. "The deaths of Heathcliff, Edgar Linton and the first Catherine have by no means put a stop to the reproductive power of the two families. This force finds its analogue in the power of the story to reproduce itself. It is told over and over by the sequence of narrators, and it is reproduced again in each critical essay, or each time it is followed by a new reader."²¹ Likewise,

²⁰ Hulley, "Transgressing Genre: Kathy Acker's Intertext" p. 174

²¹ Miller, "Repetition and the 'Uncanny'", p. 371

All rights reserved.

The content featured in this publication is the intellectual property of Phoebe Colley

Acker's works defy their physical boundaries through fictive adventures with non-fictive characters, such as Jean Genet, President Carter and even the Brontë sisters themselves.²² She addresses these penchants in a short text titled "A Few Notes on Two of My Books", arguing that "By using each other, each other's texts, we keep on living, imagining, making, fucking, and we fight this society of death... If there's a self, it's probably the world. All is real. When I placed 'true' autobiography next to 'false' autobiography, everything was real. Phallic identity's another scam that probably had to do with capitalistic ownership."²³

In an essay titled "A Short Libidinal Economy of a Narrative Set-up: the Renault Corporation Relates the Death of Pierre Overney", Lyotard assesses narrative in an analogous manner. Discussing a statement released by the Renault corporation, he maintains "We are not going to analyse the text of the corporation according to the axes: real story - narration - narrative - referential story. It is rather necessary to imagine the synchrony or complete achrony of the story, narration and narrative. It is from out of the complex block that they form that the axes in question emerge, along with the possibilities of articulated diachronisation."²⁴ The author reaches a similar conclusion when examining Freud's attestations of loss in the baby/mother paradigm in *Libidinal Economy*: "There is the possibility of a pain through lack, even the possibility of an absence, only because it has been previously supposed that there was the presence of a mother, of *someone*... it is not the mother which the child loses, it is the lips-nipple connection which now appears as a connection, from now on as a paradoxical juncture of two zones, of a this and a not-this, when this was never a synthesis, but an intense libidinal zone."²⁵

²² See Kathy Acker's "My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini" in *Literal Madness: Three Novels* (New York: Grove Press, 1988)

²³ Kathy Acker, "A Few Notes on Two of My Books" in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (Volume 9, Number 3) (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1989) pp. 31-33

²⁴ Lyotard, "A Short Libidinal Economy of a Narrative Set-up: the Renault Corporation Relates the Death of Pierre Overney" in *The Lyotard Reader & Guide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) p. 203

²⁵ Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, pp. 22-25

All rights reserved.

The content featured in this publication is the intellectual property of Phoebe Colley

This intense libidinal zone seems to me an intrinsic factor in the kingdom of childhood. As Miller outlined, the union of Catherine and Heathcliff, like Janey and her father, occurs prior to both the narratives that the authors offer up to the viewer, and the conceptualisation of a unified self by the subject. Like Freud's baby/mother connection, once acknowledged thus divided, what was before both novels a zone of amalgamation can now only be experienced as a loss/absence, that grows more prominent as Heathcliff and Janey go on. To leave the kingdom of childhood is to become a quantifiable unit - Heathcliff leaves the any-space-whatever of the Moors, Janey moves to New York City, and both become functional citizens of commerce.

But while the lips-nipple connection is resolutely displaced from libidinal zone to external connection, the kingdom of childhood is from its inception internalised, and inextricably linked to its subjects. Like the literature of Acker and Brontë, the kingdom of childhood extends no conclusive gesture; instead, it reintegrates itself through Heathcliff and Janey's transgressive acts. Despite the best intentions, these characters are perpetually conducive to Evil.

All rights reserved.

The content featured in this publication is the intellectual property of Phoebe Colley

Bibliography

Acker, K. *Blood and Guts in High School*. New York: Grove Press, 1978.

Acker, K. *Bodies of Work*. London: Serpent's Tail, 1997.

Acker, K. & Paul Buck, *Spread Wide: An Encounter Between Kathy Acker and Paul Buck with Further Interventions from Rebecca Stephens and John Cussans*. Paris: Dis Voir, 2004.

Bataille, G. *Literature and Evil*. London: Marion Boyars, 1976.

Botting, F. & Scott Wilson, (eds.) *Bataille: A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998.

Botting, F & Scott Wilson, (eds.) *The Bataille Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997.

Brontë, E. *Wuthering Heights*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003.

Crome, K. & Williams, J. (eds.) *The Lyotard Reader & Guide*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

Lyotard, J-F. *Libidinal Economy*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993.

O'Brien, J. (ed.) *The Review of Contemporary Fiction (Volume 9, Number 3)*. Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1989.

O'Donnell, P. & Robert Con Davis, (eds.) *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.

Stoekl, A. (ed.) *Georges Bataille: Visions of Excess, Selected Writings, 1927-1939*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials For a Theory of the Young-Girl*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2012.