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Author(s): Arnold Krupat

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# The Strangeness of *Wuthering Heights*

ARNOLD KRUPAT

OUR EXPERIENCE of *Wuthering Heights* is now more than a hundred and twenty years old, but there still seems to be only one aspect of that experience about which there is general agreement. From "Currer Bell" to the present, readers of the book have found it strange, different somehow from other books.

*Wuthering Heights* must indeed seem a "rude and strange production" to those unfamiliar with the West-Riding of Yorkshire, Charlotte Brontë admitted in her 1850 Editor's Preface; yet, even to her, a native of that place, the book is "terrible and goblin-like" as well as "beautiful." The *Examiner* for 8 January 1848 began its review with the comment "This is a strange book," while other contemporary reviewers spoke of "wildness," "violence" (the *Britannica* for 15 January 1848), and "power thrown away" (the *North American Review* for October 1848). In our century, Lord David Cecil (1935) starts from the fact that *Wuthering Heights* is quite unlike other Victorian novels, and compares Emily Brontë to Blake in order to assert that some of the strangeness in her book disappears if we consider that she—like Blake—was a "mystic." Dorothy Van Ghent, indeed, finds *Wuthering Heights* unlike fiction generally, noting (1953) that the content of the book, grotesque and passionate, is more usual as the content of ballads than novels. Some similar perception of what goes on in *Wuthering Heights* is no doubt also behind F. R. Leavis's famous last word in 1954 that the book is merely a "sport." Of course, such sports, unlike many novels perhaps, may be honorable members of a prose tradition of their own. If, to approve of strangeness in fiction, we require a category for it, Richard Chase, with his interesting distinctions

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Arnold Krupat is a member of the literature faculty, Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, New York.

between “novel” and “romance,” gives us just such a category (1957).

I take the nearly universal feeling that the book is strange as a central fact about it. I am not here concerned with what this strangeness may *mean*; I do not wish to interpret and translate it into statements that might constitute “Emily Brontë’s philosophy.” Nor am I concerned with taking sides in regard to the material of the novel as either in favor of or opposed to the odd, the violent, the demonic in fiction. Content by itself is generally neutral: murder and mutilation may amuse us, as in *Candide*, rather than horrify us. What I want to explore is how the book works to make us think it so strange. And so it is to technique—the handling of the materials—that I think we must turn for a clue to the book’s effect. I want to make one suggestion as to what it might be that Miss Brontë has done to create a novel with which—even after a hundred and twenty years—we do not yet feel comfortable.



Closely attended to, all experience in fiction is strange. The worlds of *Moll Flanders*, *Jonathan Wild*, or *Humphrey Clinker*, taken seriously, are quite as frightening and full of anxiety as perhaps even the world of Kafka. Even so seemingly tractable a novelist as Jane Austen presents us—as the labors of recent critics have amply demonstrated—with a world full of deep-seated and unsettling ironies, fraught with dangers no less real for their domestic nature. But the world of *Wuthering Heights* is marked for its strangeness instantly and even by readers who do not attend closely nor go to the critics for help. In this respect it seems to invite comparison with the visions of writers like Hawthorne, Melville, and Faulkner, with Nathanael West and Djuna Barnes, more than with those of Defoe or Jane Austen. Fiction’s more obviously strange visions<sup>1</sup> have generally been presented in a style that may seem equally strange; and critical works like Richard Poirier’s *A World Elsewhere* brilliantly study the search—successful or impossible—for a style adequate to the expression of unusual and highly personal visions.

In order fully to develop the materials of *Moby Dick*, for ex-

1. I use “strange” to mean simply that sort of experience which immediately strikes most readers as deeply different from the experience of their own lives. In Jane Austen and Defoe, as well as in Henry James and even George Eliot, experience is ultimately strange, for art is ultimately unlike life; but, immediately, what goes on does not appear so odd as it does in the Americans I’ve named.

ample, Melville invented a very special style, a strikingly distinctive narrative manner. Our awareness of Ishmael's words, of the peculiar tones of his voice, looms as large, in any recollection of the novel, as the events which the voice describes. It is as if only *that* speaker could have told *that* tale; we feel throughout the novel a close compatibility of matter and manner. The same is true in the case of Faulkner, for we walk through his world only with the help of an extraordinary rhetoric, the voice full of sonority and ceremoniousness, repetitive and insistent, that is Faulkner's mature style. But, again, not only immediately strange or "gothic" worlds have made demands that they be presented in extraordinary styles. Henry James's tortuous and involuted later style is no more than the necessary vehicle for the almost maddeningly inclusive inner eye of James's later vision. And Henry Green seems to achieve his effects almost entirely in the realm of syntax and punctuation, where inversions and dislocations are not highly conventional or the sign of speech consciously invoking a tradition, but of—something else. Commas, in Green, don't do the kind of linking and separating we expect; pronouns, with great consistency, do not refer to the usual antecedents, and are replaced by nouns exactly where we have no need for that sort of help. Whatever Green may intend by all of this, we cannot miss that he does intend it; one cannot read his books—any more than one can read those of James, Melville, or Faulkner—without becoming aware of the style. In all these books, writing is, as Poirier remarks in another context, "a kind of drama of the search for clarity."<sup>2</sup>

There is no such drama in *Wuthering Heights*, and Emily Brontë's peculiar achievement is precisely not to have invented a style adequate to her materials. This obviously is not an adverse judgment; on the contrary, I see her book as an extraordinarily intelligent and nearly perfect fiction with a completely absent author (ten years before *Madame Bovary*) whose existence is implied only by the literary gestures (the juxtapositions and arrangements) that call attention to it. We have really no reliable word from anyone in the book as to how to take it, and, in fact, we do not quite know how to take it; we feel it all as very strange. And this strangeness we feel is the consequence of a technical decision, the result of the consistency with which matter and narrative manner have not been joined. Where so many writers have struggled

2. *A World Elsewhere* (New York, 1966), p. ix.

to achieve the proper style for their vision, Miss Brontë, in *Wuthering Heights*, seems to have struggled to avoid it. She has produced an uncomfortable book precisely because it is a book which suggests that no telling can properly convey this tale.<sup>3</sup>

Miss Brontë first refuses the temptation to create a single narrative voice comprehensive enough for the material. There is no omniscient narrator as in *Madame Bovary*, nor is there a single character like Melville's Ishmael or Conrad's Marlow who can at least pretend to be competent to narrate.<sup>4</sup> Instead, we have Lockwood, whose particular value as a narrator seems to be that he is the man least likely to be capable of telling us the story as it ought to be told.<sup>5</sup> All the words not in quotation marks are Lockwood's; even those attributed to Nelly Dean come, finally, from him. But because he claims to pass Nelly's words along mostly as she herself spoke them, and on occasion "only a little condensed,"<sup>6</sup> we would do well to take Nelly into account as a narrator of the story.

Of Lockwood and Nelly as characters and narrators, much has been written. Nelly is a "specimen of true benevolence and homely fidelity," said Charlotte Brontë in 1850. And in 1956, John K. Mathison agrees, but with a warning: "Nelly is an admirable woman," he writes, "whose point of view . . . the reader must reject."<sup>7</sup> Clifford Collins believes, however, that it is Lockwood who should be rejected. "Lockwood," says Collins, ". . . exhibits the

3. There is a philosophical implication in such a procedure. To find an adequate style or to convey one's mighty search for it is to convey also one's belief that the world can be understood, subsumed under the category of language. Not to struggle for an adequate style implies the opposite, the belief that the world can neither be understood nor managed because words can't be found for it. Nathanael West's *A Cool Million* is a fairly recent example of a book that is, I believe, intentionally clumsy in style in order to illustrate just this point: the world is incomprehensible and with fair success resists the artist's efforts to shape it. The artist who suspects this in advance, of course, may, like Emily Brontë, hardly try to give the appearance of shaping it at all, and will not place a great value on distinction of style.

4. The first three narrators of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, for instance, also have built in disabilities in their narrations which call them into question. But the fourth narrator, the omniscient third person, seems to narrate with full competence, so that all is neatly rounded out.

5. A later example of just this sort of thing is Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* in which John Dowell, the tale's only teller, is he who least understands it. Here, too, we feel that the world of the book (in this case, a world whose prime characteristics seemed precisely to have been orderliness and predictability) is highly unstable, strange to the point of being dangerous.

6. *Wuthering Heights*, ed. William M. Sale, Jr., Norton Critical Ed. (New York, 1963), p. 130. All further page references are to this edition and will be documented in the text.

7. "Nelly Dean and the Power of *Wuthering Heights*," *NCF* 11 (September 1956): 106-29.

reactions that may be expected from the ordinary reader (thereby invalidating them, for his commentary is carefully shown to be neither intelligent nor sensitive). . . .”<sup>8</sup> Critics have tended to take sides between them, approving or disapproving of Nelly and Lockwood. Mathison, for instance, ultimately finds Nelly the villain of the piece, while Mary Visick, on the contrary, thinks she is “a sane narrator.”<sup>9</sup>

But I think we cannot quite accept any of this literally. There simply is no rejecting Nelly or Lockwood, because both are importantly present. They are the chief narrators of the book and we get at what happens in the novel only through them; there is no existence for the events of *Wuthering Heights* independent of their existence in the diction of Nelly, Lockwood, and those whom they directly and accurately (such is the convention) quote. Any “rejection” of one or another of these characters’ points of view can only be an acceptance with qualifications. We cannot reject the point of view of either Nelly or Lockwood—for it is *there*—except in the sense that we judge it inadequate and inadequately expressed. We can, that is, note the considerable disparity between what is being said and the way it is being said.

In fact, rather than being opposite to one another, Nelly and Lockwood are very much alike and speak in remarkably similar fashion. To translate Lockwood into a type called City Man and Nelly into another marked Country Servant and to see them, then, as representatives of opposing principles and life styles is to ignore the evidence of their speech. Any observation we may make about Lockwood’s diction is almost certain to be equally true of Nelly’s. The differences in their backgrounds and education seem, therefore, quite irrelevant, for these differences have led only to sameness. In Nelly and Lockwood, country and town share a single bland speech.

The most prominent characteristic of this shared speech is its fixity. Heathcliff, Hindley, Hareton, both Catherines, and the Lintons are engaged in constant change; for them, everything—property, feeling, life itself—is always at stake; and now in greater, now in lesser degree, their speech testifies to that fact. But for the narrators, nothing is at stake. Listening closely to Nelly and Lock-

8. “Theme and Conventions in *Wuthering Heights*,” *The Critic* 1 (Autumn 1947): 43–50.

9. *The Genesis of “Wuthering Heights”* (Hong Kong, 1958), p. 6.

wood, one would think that their vocabularies were completely determined for good some time long ago, so that no further options—experiential and linguistic—can ever exist. Yet their positions in the story do not make this necessarily so; indeed, their positions are such as to call constantly for the ability to be open to experience, open to language.

As close to everyone and everything as Nelly Dean has always been, surely on many occasions much could have been at stake for her. And yet, those events which make so great a difference in the lives of the inhabitants of Heights and Grange turn out of no great matter to Mrs. Dean. She is in no way changed by them.

As for Lockwood, his awareness of the second Catherine, a distinct temptation to involve himself in the life of the novel and to make his stay on the moors of genuine worth to him, is neutralized by his language. His words inform us that his notice of her is no more than a sentimental gesture on his part. There is nothing to indicate that she is really important to him; indeed, she finally has existence for him only as a kind of glass in which he hopes to see reflected his own high estimate of himself.

Nelly is the one who knows and first speaks of most of what happened, and the details of her story—in Lockwood's words or her own—constitute the "facts" of the novel. But these "facts," which are of various kinds and seem therefore likely to elicit various emotions from the one who recounts them, are announced always in the same tone, with no real variation at all. The emotional range displayed in Nelly's speech is extremely limited; for to display varying emotions is to change from one occasion to the next, and Nelly does not change. It is as if the world were exceedingly dangerous, so that change could only be to something unspeakable—quite literally unspeakable. And so her diction is a careful defensive construct against the unspeakable, as if to deny it words were to deny it being. To tell her story truthfully, Nelly must name the many violent upheavals in her world; but to tell her story safely, she must name them as conventionally as she can, with determined and persistent equanimity.

Nor does Lockwood, her immediate audience, feel himself in any way cheated by such a narration. On the contrary, he is an admirer of Nelly's style; mostly, I think, because it is so like his own. Lockwood's speech is also marked by fixity and a narrowness of emotional range. His, too, is a diction of enforced limitedness—



and, therefore, also inappropriate for the narration of *Wuthering Heights*.

Lockwood, a gentleman sensitive to appearances, is intelligent and well-educated. His speech, perhaps more obviously even than Nelly's, is self-conscious and self-protective. Yet Lockwood's diction, for all its guardedness and premeditation, still pretends to a fitness for any occasion. Lockwood the gentleman is never actually speechless or tongue-tied, never embarrassed or surprised into complete incoherence (although his nocturnal encounter with the ghost of the first Catherine almost—but not quite—does the trick). However inappropriate his comment, Lockwood is rarely without one; nor are his words ever without at least the possibility of irony.

There are those who find the novel structured toward "educating" Lockwood in the value of more basic or primary passions than any he has formerly known. But for this to be true—if, that is, the novel succeeds in this purpose—we should be able to find evidence of Lockwood's having learned something in his diction. We should be able to find some notable difference between the speech of Lockwood newly arrived at the Heights and Lockwood ready to depart forever. In fact, there is no such difference.

For example, early in the book, noticing the second Catherine and Hareton, Lockwood remarks:

Here is the consequence of being buried alive: she has thrown herself away upon that boor, from sheer ignorance that better individuals existed! A sad pity—I must beware how I cause her to regret her choice. (21)

The jocular snobbishness of these words is repeated later on in the book when the same subject prompts him to similar patronizing comment. Of Catherine he says:

She obeyed his [Heathcliff's] directions very punctually; perhaps she had no temptation to transgress. Living among clowns and misanthropists, she probably cannot appreciate a better class of people, when she meets them. (240)

That such talk may be indicative more of insecurity and frustration than of mere arrogance is not to the point. What is to the point is that Lockwood's experience of the world of the moors



has not at all changed him. His account of his last intercourse with the characters of the novel (“... pressing a remembrance into the hand of Mrs. Dean, and disregarding her expostulations at my rudeness, I vanished through the kitchen... and so should have confirmed Joseph in his opinion of his fellow-servant’s gay indiscretions, had he not, fortunately, recognized me for a respectable character by the sweet ring of a sovereign at his feet” [266]) betrays him as quite as high-handed—no matter how upset he may be—as he was at the start. Lockwood appears to have learned nothing.

Not only has his behavior not improved, but so little has he been educated or changed by his experience of Heights and Grange that his imaginative capacities have not really been enlarged either. Early in the book, he remarks on Mrs. Dean’s tale:

I am too weak to read, yet I feel as if I could enjoy something interesting. Why not have up Mrs. Dean to finish her tale? I can recollect its chief incidents, as far as she had gone. Yes, I remember her hero had run off, and never been heard of for three years; and the heroine was married. I’ll ring; she’ll be delighted to find me capable of talking cheerfully. (80)

Heathcliff is only the “hero” to him, and Catherine the “heroine”; all is quite ordinary—“interesting,” merely. He can “recollect” the “chief incidents” of the “tale,” though, so trivial is it, perhaps not its details. He invites Mrs. Dean to tell him some more as an occasion for him to talk “cheerfully.”

Later, his final visit to the Heights and the Grange comes about as no more than an accident, the indulgence of a whim. His visit will, he says, “save [him] the trouble of invading the neighborhood again” (241) to settle money matters with his landlord. His habitual, high-handed, self-regarding tone has held firm. Lockwood hears of Heathcliff’s death, but his imagination is still not stirred; he is moved more by what is before his eyes, the ample evidence that Catherine has never valued him according to his own estimation, nor thought more of him than he has of her. His last words in the book, spoken at “the three head-stones on the slope next the moor,” find him “wonder[ing] how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth” (266). Whatever else these words may mean or intend, they state literally that Lockwood questions the imaginative powers of others. Nelly has just spoken to him of a little boy who claims to have seen the ghosts of “Heathcliff and a woman” (265). But Lockwood,

again as always, is superior to the natives of the place; he wonders how they can imagine what they do and entertain such foolish notions.

It is just because of Lockwood's habitual arrogance and superiority, in fact, that we may find it all the more curious that he does not especially value himself above Nelly Dean (though he still can, at the book's end, behave rudely to her). Commenting specifically on her diction, Lockwood says: "Excepting a few provincialisms of slight consequence, you have no marks of the manners that I am habituated to consider as peculiar to your class" (58). Patronizing as this is, it is nonetheless intended as clear praise for her manner of narration—and Lockwood is extremely stinting of praise. The reason Nelly's narrative style pleases him so well, of course, is that it is so like his own; the "few provincialisms" are indeed of "slight consequence." Nor do they pose any threat. It should come as no surprise that Lockwood chooses to continue the story "in Nelly's own words, only a little condensed," for he finds her "a very fair narrator," and doesn't think he "could improve her style" (130). In matters other than narration, Lockwood is usually ready enough to improve upon others' styles.

Nelly's style shows the same defensive conventionality and stubborn fixity as Lockwood's own. Her stake in the events, I have said, might well have been great, but her voice everywhere insists that nothing has mattered and nothing really can matter for Nelly Dean. Whatever may have happened to the Earnshaws and the Lintons, whatever Nelly herself may have done to advance or retard those happenings, is hardly worth getting excited about. The chief impulse behind Nelly's speech is always to calm things down and level things out. But to speak in as ordinary a fashion as possible, to proclaim by tone and diction that all is well enough, to describe even the most extraordinary occurrence as less than fit occasion for upset or worry, is not a decision on Nelly's part reflecting her judgment that a calming influence might be valuable at such and such a time, but a fixed and invariable manner. This is why Lockwood is so willing to attend to her narration, so little tempted to alter it, for he wishes only amusement and good cheer from the distinctly unamusing tale of recent life at the Heights—and nothing could be more to Nelly's taste than telling her tale amusingly.

"My history is *dree* as we say," Nelly announces in a tone quite bouncy and *dree* not at all, "and will serve to wile away another morning" (130). This of the story of *Wuthering Heights!* She and

Lockwood are clearly made for each other. "Dree, and dreary!" intones Lockwood, "... and not exactly of the kind that I should have chosen to amuse me. But never mind! I'll extract wholesome medicines from Mrs. Dean's bitter herbs. . . ." (130) To turn "bitter herbs" into "wholesome medicines" is just what Nelly Dean's style is constructed to do. Almost everywhere her tone is self-righteous and unperturbed, and her diction attuned to the single purpose of maintaining a façade of ordinariness, of conventionality, of quiet.<sup>10</sup>

It is in the nature of things that there should sometimes be good reason for her doing so. When she admits, for example, to having "... tried to smooth away all disquietude on the subject," (129) and the subject is Heathcliff's desire to see the mortally ill Catherine Linton, we must admit that such smoothing was surely sensible. So, too, may it have been most sensible near the end of the book where Nelly states her reason for not mentioning that Heathcliff's death may have been a suicide. She explains: "I concealed the fact of his having swallowed nothing for four days, fearing it might lead to trouble. . . ." (264)

But there are other times when Nelly's efforts to "smooth away" are hardly so sensible, constituting, instead determined attacks on linguistic and imaginative possibilities, serving Nelly's self-protection rather more than anything else. Readers have been much moved by Catherine Earnshaw's description of her love for Edgar Linton as like "the foliage in the woods" and for Heathcliff as like "the eternal rocks beneath" (74), but such passionate and suggestive speech is not for Nelly, who annihilates it with: "If I can make any sense of your nonsense, Miss . . . it only goes to convince me that you are ignorant of the duties you undertake in marrying; or else that you are a wicked, unprincipled girl. But trouble me with no more secrets. . . ." (74) Nelly will not pursue such talk, will not, finally, even allow it to others, for the possibilities it hints at are more than she cares to deal with. Her response, rapid, habitual, is the definitive undercutting of self-righteousness.<sup>11</sup> Such self-righteousness, arrogant in its assumptions of superiority, is of course the perfect counterpart in Nelly

10. Cf. "What a noise for nothing! I cried, though rather uneasy myself. 'What a trifle scares you! It's surely no great cause of alarm, etc.'" (75) Or: "The latter's distraction at his bereavement is a subject too painful to be dwelt on, etc." (137)

11. Cf. "I went about my household duties, convinced that the Grange had but one sensible soul in its walls, and that lodged in my body" (103). Or: "I blamed her, as she deserved, for bringing it all on herself. . . ." (124)

to Lockwood's pretensions of gentlemanly superiority to the country boors. Indeed, superiority to the events and persons around them is a marked trait in both Nelly and Lockwood, and insofar as this superiority seems fixed and unshakable it serves constantly to distance them from the material and render them unfit to speak properly of it.

There is discernible in the novel—many critics, in fact, have discerned it—a development (perhaps several developments) from one point to another. One may chiefly notice the passing of one generation and the succession of another; or, it may be the process of destruction and the promise of reconstruction that catches the attention. At any rate, something *important* seems to have taken place in *Wuthering Heights*. And yet we cannot find a justification for any such judgment in the speech of those who have chiefly told us what has happened. Nelly and Lockwood, as I have tried to show, have styles best suited to the narration of the trivial, not the important. Miss Brontë has steadfastly refused us narrators with a style consistent with the material. If the vision is very special—odd, strange, whatever—most of the words are not. It is in this maintained and consistent disparity between matter and manner, I think, that our feeling of the book's strangeness may reside.



That Miss Brontë might have given us narrators with a more interesting or important style, that she could perfectly well have imagined speech more appropriate than any Nelly and Lockwood can produce is clear from the speech of almost all of the other characters, but foremost from the speech assigned to Heathcliff. Heathcliff's diction is precisely not fixed and unshakable, nor is it fully formed from the start. His style has a certain development throughout the novel.

Heathcliff's first words as a child are described as "gibberish that nobody could understand" (39), and his last words are a curse of sorts. In between are many modulations. Almost always rough and violent, Heathcliff can nevertheless speak politely, even wittily; near the end of his life the roughness and violence begin to alternate with tones of weariness. Heathcliff's voice also has an element of unpredictability largely lacking in Nelly's and Lockwood's; we can guess the words that will accompany his responses to events rather less well than we can guess theirs.

Among the other characters, we may note briefly that Catherine

Earnshaw's diction is not fixed either; yet she dies halfway through the book, before we can hear her speak to as many occasions as we would like. Hareton's diction also has a development, but in his case, similarly, we stop hearing the voice—for the book ends—just as its development seems likely to become interesting. These characters, too, tend more to occasional speechlessness than do either Nelly or Lockwood, as if to testify to the possibility that some responses to some experiences may be incapable of verbalization, that the world may not always be manageable—at least not in words. From them we hear speech often as strange as the experience it seeks to deal with.

The point, of course, is that Emily Brontë chose to give us little of Heathcliff's sort of speech and much of Nelly's and Lockwood's. One reason for this, as I have said, is that to develop at length a highly distinctive diction consistent with highly distinctive materials is always to some extent to tame those materials. Simply to maintain such a special style (like Melville's or Faulkner's, for example) at length is to assert that strangeness can be contained, shaped, and ordered—or at least survived. But this is not what Emily Brontë wished to do, nor has it been the effect of her method. The effect of what she has done has been to leave the world wild, for it is just the wildness of the world, its untamable strangeness, that all of us have felt in *Wuthering Heights*. To have conveyed a vast, shapeless sense of things in a thing beautifully limited and shaped is the peculiar effect of Emily Brontë's technique. And the chief strategy of her technique is the persistent split between the materials of the book and the style in which they are presented.