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THE ELEMENT OF LIVING STORM: SWINBURNE AND THE BRONTËS

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THAT ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE loved the Brontës is well known, and his interest in them well documented. His admiration for Charlotte and Emily, in particular, prompted two studies, a short book and an article,[1] which were instrumental in establishing their critical reputation as it exists today. "Those great twin sisters in genius," as he wrote in 1877, held a powerful sway over Swinburne's imagination (*A Note* 188–200). He considered them his Yorkshire kinswomen, bred in the wild borderlands of the North[2] (although Swinburne was born in London and spent most of his life in southern England, his family was based in Northumberland, and he never lost his allegiance to the county, calling himself a "Borderer" to the very end[3]). He sensed in their work – Emily's especially – the haunting, poetic influence of the moors, a passionate, romantic spirit that saturated his own verse and prose. More, they were his novelistic predecessors, and his essays on them shed considerable light on his own fictional practice. In framing himself as the Brontës' apologist, Swinburne was "far ahead of his time," shaping Victorian criticism (Hyder 15–16). His praise of *Wuthering Heights* is considered "by some literary historians to be epochmaking" and altered the way in which novels were discussed, analysed, and ultimately evaluated (Watson 247). There are also striking features that suggest Swinburne's own novel *Lesbia Brandon* – in its trans-genre form and unique milieu – was conceived as an exercise in the manner of *Wuthering Heights*.

Swinburne's fascination with the Brontës greatly pre-dates his critical writing. He could almost never review authors about whom he did not hold a strong opinion, a foible that gives his essays their chequered quality: heights of fervent enthusiasm juxtaposed with shamelessly prejudiced vitriol. Most often, however, he restricted himself to the "noble pleasure of praising" (Hyder 17). We know that "Swinburne formed his most intense literary attachments while he was young" (Hyder 4) – the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, Percy Shelley, Victor Hugo, Charles Dickens, and Walter Savage Landor, amongst others – and one of those childhood passions was the Brontës. This continued at Oxford, where in 1857, "as an undergraduate member of Balliol's literary and debating society Old Mortality, Swinburne gave a paper on *Wuthering Heights*" (Rooksby 86).[4] This youthful zeal would find more sophisticated, measured form in his adult critical work. "From the first hour when as a schoolboy I read 'Jane Eyre' and 'Wuthering Heights,'" he wrote T. Wemyss Reid in

1877, "I have always retained the first intense desire I felt then to know all that I might or ought to know about the two women who wrote them" (*Letters* 4: 881). This "intense desire" to *understand* the Brontës, their background and the powers that moulded their prose, would prove important subsequently, as Swinburne's study of the sisters is more explicitly biographical than his other criticism.

Swinburne is keenly aware of landscape and setting in the Brontës' work, considering their novels as products of a unique place and specific circumstances. This approach is perhaps due to the affinity he felt for his "countrywomen" (*A Note* 15–16). The Brontës lay closer to him than many of his other subjects. Although their humble upbringing and modest circumstances differed greatly from his own, patrician background, they shared a bond, the spiritual heritage that he believed was the birthright of every Northerner. Later, in his defence of Charlotte Brontë, he was to disparage George Eliot as (among other things) "the now more popular Warwickshire woman" (*Letters* 3: 804). Couching his critique in overtly regional terms, Swinburne establishes himself alongside the Brontës as a Northern voice amidst the clamour and dominance of Southern letters.

Swinburne's regional bias bears further scrutiny, but it is important to realise that his early interest in the Brontës was almost purely biographical. In a letter, he relates an anecdote from his youth:

> Many years ago I lent a copy of that book [*Wuthering Heights*] to a lady of the class described in it – daughter of a Westmoreland "statesman" or small gentleman-farmer living on his own land, – warning her that though I liked it very much I knew that people in general called it "terrible" etc. etc. She returned it to me, after reading it through, with the remark that (so far from the incidents being impossible – as the cockney critics said – and say) she had known wilder instances of lawless and law-defying passion and tyranny, far more horrible than any cruelty of Heathcliff's, in her own immediate neighbourhood.

Swinburne then relates this "wilder instance," telling the tale of a gentleman-farmer, "who having bullied his wife to death was left alone in the farm with a beautiful daughter, whom he used with horrible brutality." He concludes that "seeing that Emily Brontë was a *tragic poet*, and reared in the same degree of latitude which bred this humbler version of the 'Cenci,'[5] I cannot think that anything in her book is as at all excessive or unjustifiable" (*Letters* 4: 881, my emphasis). He affirms that the "law-defying passion and tyranny" so negatively remarked by Brontë's early critics is not quite so shocking for those raised in wilder, hardier regions. Further, he argues that there is a certain genius, such as that possessed by Emily Brontë or Shelley, which can transfigure such tyranny and brutality through "tragic poetry" into something lofty and passionate. But Swinburne's most salient point is not that such "tragic poets" simply exist, but that, when "reared" in environments providing a certain "degree of latitude," the subject matter they choose appears more "excessive" than it truly is. The interaction of circumstance and a naturally tragic spirit yields, especially in the case of Emily Brontë, scenes of magnetic, startling power. Swinburne characterises the events of *Wuthering Heights* – which offended milder sensibilities – as quotidian in certain "neighbourhoods." It is through Brontë's visionary writing, he argues, that the tale transcends its circumstances, otherwise merely a catalogue of brutal incidents.

This suggests a parallel with Swinburne himself. He, too, had come under attack for the "excessive" characteristics of his verse, for being the "libidinous laureate of a pack of satyrs,"

and depicting individuals and behaviours that often repulsed his readers (Morley 145–47). His "Dolores" offended as much as Emily's Heathcliff or Anne's "coarse" and "brutal" Arthur Huntingdon ("The Tenant of Wildfell Hall," *Spectator* 662–63). His critics were unaware, of course, that he was concurrently writing two novels, the second of which still represents his most incendiary effort.[6] The characters of *Lesbia Brandon* are wild, passionate, and extreme: violence, incest, and flagellation thread through the novel. Like *Wuthering Heights*, *Lesbia Brandon* is peopled with bizarre, often-brutal individuals who behave in strange, terrible ways. Such passionate perversity is central to Swinburne's aesthetics of cruelty and beauty, pain and desire. For him, the novel transcends all through its innovative, genre-bending structure, and like his poetry, lyrical power. In deflecting criticism levelled against *Wuthering Heights*, he indirectly comments on his own detractors and defends his aesthetic. Something about the Brontës compelled Swinburne, a connection beyond their common background or regional proximity. Their themes and subjects, conveyed in fresh, untrammelled style, compelled him. With Emily he felt a close literary kinship. He believed her misunderstood by her early readers. She, too, wrote unflinchingly of the heights and nadirs of human experience and possessed the sort of transformative lyrical power that ennobled what many termed a "dreadful book." He of course knew and liked her poetry, but affords her the highest praise when he calls her a poet of the novel. And in averring that "with all its horrors, it is so beautiful!" Swinburne shifts from a youthful fascination with *Wuthering Heights* and its gripping "horrors" toward a mature appreciation of its literary merits (*Letters* 4: 881).

Swinburne was not alone in his admiration of the Brontës. Many members of his immediate circle found their work impressive. The Pre-Raphaelites read *Wuthering Heights* with interest, as reflected in D. G. Rossetti's well-known description:

> I've been greatly interested in *Wuthering Heights*, the first novel I've read for an age, and the best (as regards power and sound style) for two ages, except *Sidonia*. But it is a fiend of a book, an incredible monster, combining all the stronger female tendencies from Mrs Browning to Mrs Brownrigg.[7] The action is laid in Hell – only it seems places and people have English names there. (D. G. Rossetti to William Allingham, 19 Sept 1854. *Letters* 224)

Rossetti "responded ardently" to Emily's "poetic power," (Allott 33) while acutely aware of its brutality ("a fiend of a book, an incredible monster"), a sensation that critics – even friendly ones – could never quite shed. He remarks that the novel is the "first I've read for an age"; Rossetti's evaluative criteria, then, are slightly different from those of other reviewers, who inevitably compare *Wuthering Heights* to other works within the genre. As a novel, *Wuthering Heights* faced significant opposition; as a work of elemental power and sound, however, it received high praise. Critics who compared it to the comic realism of Dickens or the later, high realism of Eliot were disappointed, not just by its extreme plot, but also its evasive style and odd, framed narrative structure. Those, however, who regarded it as different – a hybrid that might revise genre conventions – exulted in its lyrical intensity. Such dichotomy is especially significant when we consider that Swinburne referred to his own novel, *Lesbia Brandon*, as a "hybrid book" (*Letters* 1: 106) and a "scheme of mixed verse and prose" (*Letters* 1: 174).

The Brontës and Mid-Victorian Criticism

SWINBURNE'S CRITICISM ON THE BRONTËS is especially important in light of its context: the publication history and reception of the "Brothers Bell." General opinion was mixed: *Jane Eyre* was almost immediately a success, while *Wuthering Heights* inspired both perturbation and grudging praise. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was lauded, if not for its artistry, as a solid moral and didactic tale. Though Victorian critics were often less sanctimonious and more discerning than is assumed, the Brontës' reception was certainly patchy. *Wuthering Heights*, in particular, suffered strong censure on the grounds of immorality, lack of artistry, and subject matter that was deemed revolting and repellent. This is where Swinburne's efforts would have greatest force. For Emily and her novel he was a staunch, passionate, and prescient advocate. Where others were negative, he was not only positive but positively rhapsodic. He praised her novel for its tragic arc, dramatic value (landscape, setting, characters, and language), and poetic power. In comparing Brontë to Shakespeare, he initiated a trend in *Wuthering Heights* criticism that remains important today. He helped to "contextualize the uneven and often negative reception of *Wuthering Heights*" and the other Brontës' works by "considering the role of and expectations for the novel in Victorian England" (Bloom 143). To better understand these prevailing expectations for the genre and the ways in which Swinburne revised them, we turn to contemporary reviews. As we will see by their breadth and quantity, the Brontës ran little risk of foundering in critical oblivion without Swinburne's spirited defence. His work, however, was instrumental in cementing the Brontës' reputation far into the future and foregrounding Emily as the greatest of them. These essays reshaped late Victorian theories of prose, influencing critical discourse on the Brontës and the novel until the present time.

The story of how the Brontës published their first novels is now a familiar one. Mythologized by Mrs. Gaskell in her *Life of Charlotte Brontë*,[8] anecdotes of their literary struggles, choice to write under pseudonyms, and ultimate success fill the archives of Brontëana. 1846 saw the publication of *Poems by Currer*, *Ellis*, *and Acton Bell*, followed by *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Agnes Grey* in 1847. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* emerged in 1848, shortly before Branwell and Emily died. Anne succumbed to tuberculosis in 1849, the same year that Charlotte's *Shirley* appeared. The 1850 memorial edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* contained Charlotte's famous Preface, which provided hitherto unknown information about her two sisters. *Villette* appeared in 1853 and finally, in 1857, Charlotte's first novel, *The Professor* (initially rejected) was posthumously published. Over this very brief span of time (Swinburne was nine when *Poems* appeared, and thirteen when Charlotte's Preface eulogising her sisters was published), the Brontës produced work that has evoked a disproportionately high critical response. Considering the sheer quantity of Brontë reviews, monographs, and essays, we often forget how little primary material is extant. It is a testament, not only to their provocative writing, but also the compelling nature of the Brontë myth. The enigmatic sisters still draw attention, but this is not merely a recent fascination. As Allott indicates, Brontë criticism "has grown enormously, but interest in the Brontës on the part of the general reading public was already thriving by the turn of the century" (Allott 1). Thus, during Swinburne's adolescence, heated discussion of the Brontës, their lives, and work was already underway. As an adult, he was able to contribute to still-lively discourses.

The biographies that appeared soon after the Brontës' deaths contributed much to this ever-expanding family mythology and sustained public interest. Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life* is,

of course, the most famous example. It was followed some while later by A. M. Robinson's *Emily Brontë* (1883), the first full-length biography of the younger sister. In the meantime, several posthumous articles kindled critical enthusiasm. T. Wemyss Reid's complimentary *Charlotte Brontë: A Monograph* was published in 1877. Swinburne's *Note on Charlotte Brontë* was originally planned as a review of it. Shortly thereafter, Leslie Stephen replied to Swinburne's monograph with one of his own. Finally, Swinburne's essay on Emily Brontë, written in response to Robinson's biography, was published in the *Athenaeum* in 1883.

Even before this surge of posthumous writing, there was a mass of critical work written about the Brontës during their lifetimes. As the work that met with the most immediate success, it is fair to begin with *Jane Eyre*. In late 1847, the *Athenaeum* praised it for "exciting strong interest" and serving "the novel-reader who prefers story to philosophy, pedantry, or Puseyite controversy." At the same time, the novel was criticised for its improbable latter half, where the convergence of serendipitous events seems forced, where "obstacles fall down like the battlements of *Castle Melodrame*, in the closing scene" ([Chorley], "Jane Eyre" 1100–01). The *Spectator*, however, took issue with its central characters: "There is a low tone of behaviour (rather than of morality) in the book; and, what is worse than all, neither the heroine nor hero attracts sympathy. The reader cannot see anything loveable in Mr. Rochester, nor why he should be so deeply in love with Jane Eyre." It did, however, commend its "considerable skill in the plan" and vigorous intensity ("Jane Eyre," *Spectator* 1074–75). G. H. Lewes, in *Fraser's Magazine*, offered almost unmitigated praise. "No such book has gladdened our eyes in a long while," he effuses, "Reality – deep, significant reality – is the great characteristic of the book. It is an autobiography, – not, perhaps, in the naked facts and circumstances, but in the actual suffering and experience." Lewes concludes with an injunction to the author, "keep reality distinctly before you, and paint it as accurately as you can, invention will never equal the effect of truth" (Lewes 84–87). George Eliot, however, was slightly less complimentary. She wrote to Charles Bray, "I have read *Jane Eyre*, mon ami, and shall be glad to know what you admire in it . . . I wish the characters would talk a little less like the heroes and heroines of police reports" (*Letters* 1: 268). Thackeray enjoyed it immensely, claiming that "it interested me so much that I have lost (or won if you like) a whole day in reading it at the busiest period" (*Letters* 318–19). The *Critic* affirmed that Currer Bell "has fertile invention, great power of description, and a happy faculty for conceiving and sketching character. *Jane Eyre* is a remarkable novel" ("Jane Eyre" 277–78). Albany Fonblanque called it a "very clever book," a "book of decided power . . . it is anything but a fashionable novel." Later, he judges it lacking as a "history of events," finding merit in its "analysis of a single mind," its "earnest human purpose" ([Fonblanque] 756–57). In contrast, Elizabeth Rigby, of *The Quarterly Review*, labelled *Jane Eyre* "pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition," its eponym "a being totally uncongenial to our feelings from beginning to end." Although Rigby grudgingly admits Jane's "firmness" and "determination," "the impression she leaves on our mind is that of a decidedly vulgar-minded woman – one whom we should not care for as an acquaintance, whom we should not seek as a friend, whom we should not desire for a relation, and whom we should scrupulously avoid for a governess" ([Rigby] 153–85).

This quick sketch of reviews highlights several major trends in the nature of Victorian critical discourse. The responses to *Jane Eyre* were largely positive, tinged with slight reservation. Critics primarily appreciated its impassioned heroine, not because she is a supreme fictional creation, but because of the sympathetic response she evokes. Several remarked that *Jane Eyre* makes no pretensions of intellectualism; it is not concerned with

the weightiness of philosophy or history, but rather with telling of an individual's struggle and development. It is for these very qualities that *Jane Eyre* has regained and maintained academic attention over the past century: the psychological characterisation at which Brontë excels has proven intriguing for scholars of many persuasions. Her habit of directly addressing her reader, combined with the interiority of the text, has been a fruitful field for feminist, psychoanalytical, and even deconstructionist interpretations.

Noteworthy is the number of Victorian critics who responded to Jane's personality, whether positively or negatively. Very few focused on the novel's structural or even aesthetic attributes; there is an "absence of detailed attention to particular narrative procedures" (Allott 16–17). It is Brontë's ability to evoke vivid, lively characterisation that compelled her reviewers. They asked common questions: are these individuals true to life? Do they reflect "deep, significant reality"? For some, she demonstrated "considerable skill" in portraying her atypical, plain heroine and a surly, yet charismatic anti-hero. For others, like George Eliot, her characters talk "like the heroes and heroines of police reports," in flat, excessive language. Elizabeth Rigby condemned Jane by claiming that "we should not care [for her] as an acquaintance." This tendency, of imagining fictional creations as living people, was accompanied either by praise for Brontë's honesty or moral censure for her "vulgar-minded" heroine and the plain, rough language in which her characters converse.

Such censure was much more pronounced against *Wuthering Heights*. The *Spectator* called it "an attempt to give novelty and interest to fiction, by resorting to those singular "characters" that used to exist everywhere, but especially in retired and remote country places." Its incidents, it claims, "are too coarse and disagreeable to be attractive, the very best being improbable, with a moral taint about them." It nonetheless praises the writer for a "delineation [that] is forcible and truthful" ("Wuthering Heights," *Spectator* 1217). The *Athenaeum* asserted that, "in spite of much power and cleverness; in spite of its truth to life in the remote nooks and corners of England *Wuthering Heights* is a disagreeable story." Chorley suggests that Brontë's artistry and truthfulness, taken alone, do not redeem the unpleasantness of her tale, as there is "enough of what is mean and bitterly painful and degrading gather[ing] round every one of us during the course of his pilgrimage through this vale of tears" "to absolve the Artist from choosing his incidents and characters out of such a dismal catalogue" ([Chorley], "Wuthering Heights" 1324–25). The *Examiner* adjudged the "strange book" as "not without evidences of considerable power: but, as a whole, it is wild, confused, disjointed, and improbable; and the people who make up the drama, which is tragic enough in its consequences, are savages ruder than those who lived before the days of Homer." It proceeds to applaud "an author who goes at once fearlessly into the moors and desolate places," with the caveat that "he shall not drag into light all that he discovers, of coarse and loathsome, in his wanderings" (*Examiner* 21–22). A subsequent critic described that "the reader is shocked, disgusted, almost sickened by details of cruelty, inhumanity, and the most diabolical hate and vengeance, and anon come passages of powerful testimony to the supreme power of love" (*Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper* 77), while yet another calls it "a book that seizes upon us with an iron grasp, and makes us read its story of passions and wrongs whether we will or no" (*Literary World* 243). A final, scathing review came from G. W. Peck in the *American Review*: "*that originality which is conscious to the writer, is not genuine*, and is soon found out and disliked. . . . His [Ellis Bell's] book has the air rather of an *exposé* of his life-suffering, to use a Germanism, than a purely ideal composition" ([Peck] 572–85).

In contrast to *Jane Eyre*, whose protagonists most critics found sympathetic, the characters of *Wuthering Heights* evoked almost universally disgusted responses. They are "savages," representing the most "coarse and loathsome" in human behaviour. Significantly (one exception apart) Brontë's reviewers do not critique her tale because it is "improbable," but rather because it is one that should not be told. The very qualities for which *Jane Eyre* was praised – firm attachment to reality, the resoluteness of its language, its depiction of individuals as they are – equipped critics with their strongest arguments against *Wuthering Heights*. The author was denounced for perversely "dragging into light" the worst "cruelty, inhumanity, and most diabolical hate and vengeance." The choice to portray such a story is, reviewers argued, a conscious one, and one that lends a forced quality to the narrative. Peck claimed that the author is "consciously original," writing an "*exposé*" out of ghoulish pleasure in revealing all that is morbid and horrific, rather than creating a "purely ideal composition." The same criticism that was levelled against the Ann Radcliffe / "Monk" Lewis schools of Gothic fiction is here employed against Brontë. The momentum of the text comes, he states, not from any aesthetic merit, but from the steady accumulation of horror upon horror. An *exposé*, the novel describes with unflinching accuracy, but provides no normative worldview.

The prevailing early view of *Wuthering Heights* was simply that it was too much: extreme, excessive, and intense. While *Jane Eyre* carefully treads the line of what can and should be written, keeping an overarching moral in sight, *Wuthering Heights* evades such summation. Even detractors acknowledged, however, its merits. Some phrased their compliments in very hesitant terms, stating that *Wuthering Heights* "makes us read its story . . . whether we will or no." Its "power" is widely noted. Ellis Bell's "work is strangely original. It bears a resemblance to some of those irregular German tales." This sense of compulsion is prevalent. It is, Lewes writes in an 1853 review, "a momentum which propels the mind into regions inaccessible to calculation, unsuspected in our calmer moods," that forces the author to write with such violence and the readers to be drawn against their better judgements ([Lewes], "Wuthering Heights" 163–64). For Lewes, "such inspiration might be tolerated if it were no more uncontrolled than in *Jane Eyre*, but in *Wuthering Heights* it was too wild" (Brick 358). It possesses, too, a foreignness that many critics remark. This might simply be an effort to distance *Wuthering Heights* from British letters. Perhaps, however, it reflects an understanding that the novel belongs to a different literary tradition. Her reviewers were quite perspicacious in noting Brontë's German influences.

Victorian critics did not quite express what Melvin Watson describes as "complete disapproval" of *Wuthering Heights* (244). In general, however, they often stumbled over language sufficient to describe it. They edge around issues of narrative and style, and often attribute the work's power to the story's "impetuous force." Some even wrote that "it is in parts very unskilfully constructed . . . many passages in it display neither the grace of art nor the truth of nature, but only the vigour of one positive idea" (*Britannia* 42–43). Its content and theme, they imply, overwhelm *Wuthering Heights*, rendering its construction and language rushed and scattered. While *Jane Eyre* was critiqued for its over-tidy conclusion, the neat tying-up of Jane and Rochester's relationship, and the happy relegation of St. John Rivers to faith and martyrdom in India, *Wuthering Heights* is disparaged for just the opposite. For its contemporary reviewers, it was a work of great native power, lacking artistry and cohesion; most importantly, it lacked a central protagonist who could evoke empathy and compassion.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, Anne Brontë's second publication, was inevitably compared to her sisters' earlier efforts. The *Spectator*'s critique of the novel echoes much that was

written about *Wuthering Heights*: "there seems in the writer a morbid love for the coarse . . . he might reply, that such things are in life . . .mere existence, however, as we have often had occasion to remark, is not a sufficient reason for a choice of subject" (*Spectator* 662–63). The *Examiner*, however, noticed Anne's moral bent, writing that *Tenant* shows "distinct markings of character" ("Tenant," *Examiner* 483–84). *Literary World* identified it as one "of novels of a new class, which will be strung on . . . to the popular work *Jane Eyre*." Although "inferior to" Currer, Acton possesses the happy ability to "convey the scene he (or she) describes to the mind's eye, so as not only to impress it with the mere view, but to speak, as it were, to the imagination, to the inner sense, as is ever the case with the Poetry as the Painting of real genius" (*Literary World* 544–47). But E. P. Whipple (like many other American critics of the Brontës) was a good deal harsher, writing that "the reader of Acton Bell gains no enlarged view of mankind . . . but is confined to a narrow space of life, and held down, as it were, by main force, to witness the wolfish side of his nature literally and logically set forth" (Whipple 354–69). Others thought Anne's didactic message went sadly awry. "We cannot but express our deep regret," claimed *Sharpe's London Magazine*, "that a book in many respects eminently calculated to advance the cause of religion and right feeling, the moral of which is unimpeachable and most powerfully wrought out, should be rendered unfit for the perusal of the very class of persons to whom it would be most useful, (namely, imaginative girls likely to risk their happiness on the forlorn hope of marrying and reforming a captivating rake)" (*Sharpe's London Magazine* 181–84).

Scholars have observed that Anne was soon "settled in her familiar shaded place beside her more famous sisters" (Allott 16), a remark substantiated by this brief overview of *Tenant's* critical fortunes. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was only lauded for the same qualities that won *Jane Eyre* acclaim. Many reviewers actually call it a paler version of Currer Bell's work, lacking that impassioned spark that vivifies Charlotte's protagonists. Even Anne's facility for imagination and description, which in *Tenant* is not slight, was under-appreciated, being considered more a family trait than anything else. Most readers noted Acton Bell's moral purpose (which certainly sets her apart from Ellis), but either found that *Tenant* was only mitigated by touches of "character" or, at worst, actually unfit to read. While *Wuthering Heights* was considered the vigorous work of an *enfant terrible*, a powerful writer who did not yet have control over his (her) own skills, whose unswerving determination led him to narrate brutal people and events, and whose startling amorality was both compelling and horrifying, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was chastised for being a moral tale told wrong. For many critics, Acton Bell's ends did not justify their means. This critique of supposedly inappropriate, "excessive" subject matter is a common one for all the Brontës, and one to which Swinburne would return in his defence. But he, too, disliked *Tenant*, albeit for different reasons. Calling it "ludicrously weak, palpably unreal, and apparently imitative," he argued that it is useful as a "study of flaccid and invertebrate immorality," a "faithful transcription from life" of Branwell Brontë ("Emily Brontë" 440). Its themes, which earlier reviewers found abhorrent, interested Swinburne as a didactic lesson and realistic dissection of weak character.

Of Charlotte Brontë's next two novels, *Villette* fared rather better than *Shirley*. Neither, however, received the effusive praise of *Jane Eyre*. With *Villette*, however, we do see Victorian criticism come into maturity, a change that anticipates the essays of the latter half-century. Of *Shirley*, *Atlas* expresses, "the new has not come too soon to supersede the old, even if the new work were another *Jane Eyre*. But it is not another *Jane Eyre*." By 1849, *Jane Eyre* had attained an almost unimpeachable status; it became the standard against which all Brontë

novels – and, indeed, many novels in general – were measured. "Now *Jane Eyre* has taken a high, a very high, place among English novels," writes the reviewer, "but whether Currer Bell could take a high place among English novelists remained to be proved" ("Shirley," *Atlas* 696–97). Could the reputation of a novelist rest on one dazzling success? Critics began to explore these questions with Charlotte's later output. Currer Bell's ambiguous gender, which in the initial flush of publication had been largely circumvented, also becomes a more pressing concern. For most critics, *Shirley* eliminated any previous doubt: "It sets at rest now and for ever all question of the sex of the writer." A "more womanly book than *Jane Eyre*," *Shirley* was also less "irresistible" (*Atlas* 120–21). Readers conflate style and gender, suggesting that Brontë's earlier, more androgynous writing boasts a vigour that her later, "womanly" prose lacks. The *Athenaeum* similarly points to *Shirley's* "languid" and "cumbrous" pace, noting that "we do not think that *Shirley* is an advance upon *Jane Eyre*" ("Shirley," *Athenaeum* 1107–09). Albany Fonblanque, whose admiration for *Jane Eyre* has already been discussed, enjoyed *Shirley*, but damns with faint praise, writing that "the writer works upon a very limited range of rather homely materials, yet inspires them with a power of exciting, elevating, pleasing, and instructing" ("Shirley," *Examiner* 692–94).

By calling Charlotte master of her "limited range of rather homely materials," Fonblanque returns her to the gendered analysis that the (undiscovered) persona of Currer Bell helped to avoid. Her work is compared, not to novelistic efforts in general, but to the endeavours of the female novelist. Within this constricted sphere, her tiny manoeuvres and delicate touches are appreciated, their "elevating" and didactic purposes commended. Yet we see very little comment on her narrative style or structure, little attention to her role in developing the genre. The study of Currer Bell as a woman novelist reached its peak with G. H. Lewes's notorious piece in the *Edinburgh Review*. Lewes, who was still a proponent of *Jane Eyre*, writes that "it is certain that, for many years, there had been no work of such power, piquancy, and originality. Its very faults were faults on the side of vigour . . . a more masculine book, in the sense of vigour, was never written." But Lewes disagrees with his fellow-critics, asserting that "this same over-masculine vigour is even more prominent in *Shirley* and does not increase the pleasantness of the book." *Shirley*, he writes, lacks "unity," the "passionate link" that connects disparate elements in *Jane Eyre*. Currer Bell "has much yet to learn," namely "the discipline of her own tumultuous energies." Lewes closes with the example of Madame de Stael, quoting Schiller's comment, "This person wants every thing that is graceful in a woman; and, nevertheless, the faults of her book are altogether womanly faults. She steps out of her sex – without elevating herself above it" ([Lewes] "Shirley" 153–73). This rather harsh evaluation, which Charlotte Brontë found devastating, might perhaps explain Swinburne's later, virulent antipathy to Lewes as a critic. Womanly vices without her virtues – such is Lewes's essential claim about Brontë's writing – coarse vigour without balancing refinement; undisciplined feeling without logical cohesion. When Lewes seeks to praise (as when he calls *Jane Eyre* a vigorous book), he describes Currer Bell as masculine. Yet his rejection of *Shirley* is that it is "over-vigorous," that it takes masculine traits to an extreme and hence renders them feminine. In the hands of a woman, masculine strength becomes coarseness, energetic drive the undisciplined emotion of the hysteric. He pathologises the female novelist when she steps out of her sphere. And it was precisely such narrowness that Brontë sought to avoid.

Villette, which still garners praise as Brontë's most sophisticated novel, was appreciated by her contemporary critics as well. In 1853, Harriet Martineau draws an extended

comparison between Brontë and Balzac[9] (high praise, indeed), stating that "an atmosphere of pain hangs about the whole . . . in this pervading pain, the book reminds us of Balzac." Martineau's primary reservation is that Brontë's women – Lucy Snowe in particular – are too needy, too desperately empty without love. The "writer's tendency to describe the need of being loved" grates on readers "whose reason and taste will reject the assumption that events and characters are to be regarded through the medium of one passion only" ([Martineau] 173). Martineau reacts against Brontë's singular introspection, her tendency to write of events through the transformative lens of one individual's consciousness. While readers of *Wuthering Heights* are impelled forward by a wide, tumultuous energy, those who approach *Villette* are irresistibly drawn into the claustrophobic, repetitive confines of a single mind, emotion, and perspective. Plurality, as almost all of her reviewers remark, is not Charlotte Brontë's strength. *Shirley* is criticised for being a poorly-delineated panorama, a weak attempt at presenting multiple characters and viewpoints. For her contemporary readers, Brontë is at her best when sharply and realistically sketching the interiority of an individual. At the same time, however, that talent which defines her also limits her capabilities as a novelist.

The *Examiner* argued that "the men, women, and children who figure throughout [*Villette*] have flesh and blood in them." Like Martineau, it applauds Brontë's faculty for lively description; unlike Martineau, it does not find the filtering of the narrative through a single impulse problematic. Its sole critique lies in the "needlessly tragical" character of Lucy Snowe. The critic is frustrated that, "when happiness is placed within her reach . . . she daubs her brush across it, and upon the last page spoils it all for no artistic purpose whatsoever" ("Villette," *Examiner* 84–85). Ironically, it is *Villette's* notoriously ambiguous conclusion that has attracted so much positive, recent attention. In contrast to *Jane Eyre*, whose tidy "Reader, I married him" has often proven frustrating for the post-modern eye (382; ch. 38), *Villette*'s poetic "pause; pause at once" strikes a note both momentous and aesthetic (474; ch. 42). Rather than "daubing [a] brush across" the conclusion, smearing a well-constructed tale, the subjective ending of *Villette* poises the novel on a brink, an artistic choice that demarcates it from Brontë's earlier work. Let the reader interpret, Lucy Snowe writes, "There is enough said" (474; ch. 42). The reviewer's unease points to a striking dissimilarity between contemporary opinion and the movement of later criticism. Conceiving of her characters as real people, many of Brontë's critics are profoundly unsettled when they imagine for them unhappy, unfulfilled lives, or worse, death. But, as the Victorian novel comes into its own, literary opinion alters with the influence of writers such as George Eliot, not to mention Swinburne himself. The novel becomes not so much a forum where brisk, vibrant characters realise happy lives, but rather a space where the ambiguities and tensions of art, philosophy, and psychology interact with life. From this perspective, we can understand why *Villette* has steadily moved up the ranks, becoming more acclaimed even than *Jane Eyre*.

Lewes, whose comments on *Shirley* so deeply offended its author, revised his opinion yet again upon reading *Villette*. He remarks (as others did) that *Villette* contains very little by way of plot: "it is a less interesting story than even *Shirley*. It wants the unity and progression of interest which made *Jane Eyre* so fascinating." But he is drawn, he writes, by the very faults that he earlier condemned. Complaining that Currer Bell is coarse while applauding her power and intensity is, he claims, like wandering "delighted among the craggy clefts and snowy solitudes of the Alps, complaining at the want of verdure and of flowers" ("Villette," *Leader* 163–64). To expect the delicacy of Jane Austen with the violent individualism of

Charlotte Brontë is almost as improbable as the above metaphor. Even more important than Lewes's praise, however, is that of George Eliot. Although her approbation of *Villette* was not made public, she wrote about it to her friend, Mrs. Bray: "I am only just returned to a sense of the real world about me, for I have been reading *Villette* . . . there is something almost preternatural in its power" (*Letters* 287). Brontë's power, which in *Jane Eyre* failed to impress Eliot, receives high acclaim in *Villette*.

Before turning to Swinburne's work on the Brontës, it is useful to consider contemporary arguments about art and morality in their novels. The debate around art for art's sake would of course assume great importance toward the end of the century. Swinburne, in particular, offered the (hitherto) most explicit articulation of Aestheticism in English in his seminal *William Blake*.[10] The notion of *l'art pour l'art*, which Gautier made widespread, had been circulating since early in the century, and would channel through Swinburne to be adopted by Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and other British successors. G. H. Lewes, in yet another review of *Villette*, asks the question, "Should a work of Art have a moral?" He continues:

> In other words, must the Artist, during creation, keep the wandering caprices of his fancy within the limits of some didactic formula? . . . It has been seen, on the one hand, that the merely didactic tale frustrates, in a great measure, its own objects: the reader resents having his pill gilded – resents having the leaves of a religious tract slipped in between the pages of a novel; and in the spirit of reaction, it has been said that the Artist has nothing to do with morality. ("Villette," *Westminster Review* 485–91)

Lewes first considers that an overtly "didactic formula" cramps enjoyment of art. One's pleasure in reading a novel is significantly lessened when one realises its edifying purpose. If we turn to art for entertainment, then a moral lesson makes art a utility rather than an amusement. He then outlines George Sand's critique of morals in art on the following grounds, "readers have always wished to see vice punished and virtue rewarded . . . but poetical justice proves nothing . . . when vice is not punished on the stage or in a book – as it very often is not in life – this does not prove that vice is unhateful and unworthy of punishment; for a narrative can prove nothing" ([Lewes], *Westminster* 209). Here a common conflict – one very evident in differing opinions on the Brontës – emerges. Opinions on the artist's duty vary: for some, like Sand (and, to a certain extent, Lewes), it is to depict reality; for others, like Chorley, it is to keep "within the limits of some didactic formula," to shy away from portraying all that is true to life, for life contains much that is hateful, horrible, and unjust. For Sand, morality has no place in art, not because it does not exist, but because dramas and novels cannot adequately confirm or refute it. For example, she suggests, a novel's villain may escape unpunished. This is not because his vice is *not* immoral, but rather because an accurate depiction of life must necessarily include traditionally immoral situations or individuals. Thus, for Sand, the portrayal of a character like Heathcliff, whose behaviour is, by conventional standards, blasphemous, should not itself be considered immoral. Such persons exist.

But Sand's argument for faithful representation does not wholly convince Lewes, who argues that, although "in the strict sense of the word, Art proves nothing; yet it is . . . an exhortation, if you like, not a demonstration" (209). The feelings and thoughts evoked lead, Lewes suggests, to some consequence outside of the novel or drama or verse. In this he is not radically different from earlier Victorian critics, particularly those who took issue with *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* for their subject matter. Even within

these readers, however, there exist several schools of thought. Those, like Chorley, who believe such conditions should simply not be described, worry about the potential moral corruption of readers. Others, like Anne Brontë herself, believe that through realistically presenting the most brutal circumstances important lessons can be learned, thus warning impressionable readers and serving a preventive function. Thus, the purposes of the novel – as entertainment, accurate representation of reality, moral guide, or social instigator – are explored through various strands of Victorian criticism, which at this juncture was preoccupied with the novel's "moral function in society" and "its claims to intellectual and imaginative profundity" (Graham 1). It would require more time, however, before "the aesthetic principles of its form" (Graham 1) and such elements as Gautier's concept of art *without* a moral purpose, *l'art pour l'art*, joined such discourses.

Swinburne: A Note on Charlotte Brontë *(1877) and "Emily Brontë" (1883)*

SWINBURNE WROTE TO THEODORE WATTS in late 1876: "I presume you have read with as much interest as I the last instalment of Charlotte Brontë's correspondence. If I have time and spirits for the work, I think of taking it as the text for some brief discourse on her" (*Letters* 3: 770). This "last instalment" was T. Wemyss Reid's "Charlotte Brontë: A Monograph," which appeared in *Macmillan's Magazine* during the latter half of 1876. Over the next few months, there is considerable evidence of Swinburne's expanding argument, as when he decides to consider Brontë "in contrast to George Eliot from first to last" (*Letters* 3: 804) or revisits her novels and explains that they "completely knock me up and break me down (almost) even to think of" (*Letters* 3: 843). In late 1877, he wrote to Reid himself, thanking him for his "vindication" of Charlotte but taking issue with his criticism of *Wuthering Heights*. Reid describes Emily's novel as now "practically unread," a work that "is repulsive and almost ghastly," despite bearing evidence of considerable genius. "From the first page to the last there is hardly a redeeming passage in the book . . . the hero himself is the most unmitigated villain in fiction"; Reid continues with this *ad hominem*: "love, except for the love for nature and for her own nearest relatives, was a passion absolutely unknown to [Emily Brontë]." The novel is the "work of one who . . . was a mere child" though equipped with enormous talent. It is to Reid's claim of improbability that Swinburne responds with the story of the Westmoreland gentleman-farmer, and to Reid's professions of disgust, he retorts, "with all its horrors, it is so beautiful!" (*Letters* 3: 881).

Though always an ardent defender of Emily, Swinburne's attentions at that time were primarily focused on Charlotte. His *Note on Charlotte Brontë* appeared in late 1877, and was reissued in 1894. To begin, Swinburne classes imaginative work into three divisions:

> the lowest, which leaves us in a complacent mood of acquiescence with the graceful or natural inventions and fancies of an honest and ingenious workman . . . the second, of high enough quality to engage our judgment in its service, and make direct demand on our grave attention for deliberate assent or dissent; the third, which in the exercise of its highest faculties at their best neither solicits nor seduces nor provokes us to acquiescence or demur, but compels us without question to positive acceptance and belief. (*A Note* 187–88)

He gives no examples of the first class, but identifies George Eliot and George Meredith as writers of the second. In typical, unabashedly partisan fashion, he categorises Charlotte

Brontë as the most glittering instance of the third. Her gift is "what I cannot but regard as the highest and the rarest quality which supplies the hardest and the surest proof of a great and absolute genius for the painting and the handling of human characters in mutual relation and reaction" (*A Note* 188). This effusiveness is hard to take seriously, and Swinburne's convoluted prose further obscures his point. It is worth considering, however, that he was aggressively on the defence. He considered himself the protector of Charlotte's reputation against the encroaching popularity of George Eliot and other social realists. And, as was his wont, Swinburne's defensive stance is generally overdone, over-compensating for what he considers years of misunderstanding.

Now, of course, having access to the broad range of Victorian critical opinion, we realise that Charlotte's reviewers were kinder and much more discerning than might be assumed. But "strong emotion sometimes lurks behind Swinburne's literary opinions" (Hyder 5), and in order to write compellingly he often required something (individual, institution, concept) against which to react. This dualism is typical of Swinburne; it appears in his verse and fiction as well as his critical writing. His thinking is often binary: love and death, pain and pleasure, chastity and voluptuousness. Thus, in his work on Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot figures as the opposite, the magisterial, cold voice in contrast to Charlotte's fiercely passionate outcry. Rather unkindly, he writes, "it would, as I venture to think, be little or nothing more or less than accurate to recognise in George Eliot a type of intelligence vivified and coloured by a vein of genius, in Charlotte Brontë a type of genius directed and moulded by the touch of intelligence" (*A Note* 190). Splitting writing along a continuum of intellect and inspiration, he advances a spiritual, rather than materialist, ideology, in which Brontë's "genius moulded by the touch of intelligence" seems finer than Eliot's intelligence "vivified . . . by a vein of genius."

These essays on Charlotte and Emily were written in response to biographical and critical work by Reid and Robinson. Similarly, Leslie Stephen reacted to the *Note on Charlotte Brontë* with a piece in the *Cornhill Magazine*. In it, he criticises Swinburne for his subjectivity, declaring that, although the poet "bestowed" his praise "upon worthy objects," he was too likely to be driven by "the contagion of enthusiasm" rather than the "rigid impartiality" of "an independent spectator." He then takes issue with Swinburne's condemnation of George Eliot, stating that praising one's literary hero does not require "burning the effigies of the hero's rivals." Throughout, Stephen calls for a scientific approach to criticism, an analysis that rests "upon a purely rational ground," to "be exposed to logical tests." He separates Charlotte Brontë from George Eliot as a poetic, rather than a scientific thinker; Brontë, he argues, favours synthesis over analysis, while George Eliot embodies those qualities of reason that her "poetic" counterpart lacks. He is here in agreement with Swinburne, who also separates their qualities of genius. What Swinburne finds compelling, however, Stephen finds imprecise. Where Swinburne finds Brontë's work harmonious and cohesive, Stephen perceives a "feverish disquiet" that leads, not only to vivid expression, but also to "fretful" degeneration (Stephen 413–15). But Swinburne's approbation of Brontë is not, as Stephen suggests, merely the partial "fervour" of an enthusiastic temperament. He offers concrete reasons for his praise, and although many subsequent critics have, like Stephen, accused him of unscientific and emotional evaluations, there is much in his essays to counter such claims.

Some of Swinburne's sentiment is deeply influenced by a regional bias. If Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot are literary opposites, they are set apart even further by their geographical differences. Reinforcing the common belief that the urban south was

cosmopolitan and cultured where the industrial or wild north was isolated and rustic, he remarks that "in knowledge, in culture, perhaps in capacity for knowledge and for culture, Charlotte Brontë was no more comparable to George Eliot than George Eliot is comparable to Charlotte Brontë in purity of passion, in depth and ardour of feeling, in spiritual force and fervour of forthright inspiration" (*A Note* 190). The erudite and wordly Eliot speaks of and moves in a wholly different milieu from Charlotte Brontë. Swinburne emphasises Charlotte's rustic background, her Northern "ardour of feeling" and "fervour of forthright inspiration." This is romantic, and appeals to Swinburne's romantic sensibilities. "Like the Romantic poets, Swinburne assigns a central role to the imagination," and he applies Romantic criteria to his judgement of prose as well (Hyder 10). Hence his exaltation of inspiration over intellect, sympathy and empathy over detachment and objective scrutiny. of the wildness and purity of natural forces over the smog and intelligence of urbanity.

But as much as Swinburne claimed himself a Borderer, he, like George Eliot, moved in avant-garde circles, spent most of his life in London or its vicinity, and breathed the same atmosphere of pollution, "knowledge" and "culture" as she. His fantasy portrait of Brontë as a simple, cloistered West Yorkshire girl, writing with pure intuition and native "genius," is problematic. He underestimates Charlotte's intellectualism, doing her a disservice by confining her talent to "pure passion" and "spiritual force." As we now know, the Brontë sisters were not quite the naïve, simple girls characterised by later, well-meaning apologists. Though they did not have access to the sort of education that Swinburne (or their father, who attended Cambridge) had, they were largely self-taught, read avidly, and were exposed to far more diverse and important streams of thought than previously believed. Nonetheless, Swinburne does not dramatically diverge from previous critics in arguing that Charlotte Brontë is closer to pure feeling than pure intellect; he describes her as such in order to make a point and distinguish her from George Eliot.

Swinburne praises Charlotte's facility for evoking "mutual relation and reaction." Her work, he asserts, stands unique because in other novels "we rarely or never feel that, given the characters, the incidents become inevitable; that such passion must needs bring forth none other than such action, such emotions cannot choose but find their only issue in such events" (*A Note* 189). This logical cohesion of character and circumstance he finds particularly compelling, arguably due to his classical background. Swinburne appreciates unity, and thus the individual development of Jane Eyre or the singular consciousness of Lucy Snowe, for he sees in these characters a believable, personal trajectory. His use of the word "inevitable" is noteworthy – it recalls an Aristotelian arc – and, for Swinburne, Lucy Snowe is in many ways a tragic heroine, "a sad, passionate, and valiant life" (*A Note* 197–98). At the same time, the inevitable comes not from Fate, but from character. Like Heraclitus, Swinburne believes that character is fate.[11] "With [Swinburne] character is primary: the action must be consistent with the character," and he goes so far as to critique Shakespeare's *As You Like It* because Celia's union with Oliver is not consistent with either one of their characters. Celia's moral superiority does not harmonise with Oliver's "earlier baseness" (Hyder 12), and the latter's Damascene conversion is not sufficient to explain their unaccountable pairing.

For Swinburne, unlike Lewes, it is not the effect of morality, but rather of moral harmony, that a novel ought to render. He is at core a lyricist, wordsmith, and singer, and such musical law is applied to the meanings and ramifications of prose. This is a subtlety often missed in rigid interpretations of art for art's sake.[12] Swinburnian moral harmony is not a simple matter of virtue or vice, but rather whether virtuous characters behave in virtuous ways (likewise

for their counterparts). And if a novel achieves this, its effect cannot be anything but "fresh" and moving (*A Note* 193–94). Attuned to patterns and musicality in verse, Swinburne is concerned with coherence, the unity of the whole – reaching beyond language and rhythm into the harmony of situation, circumstance, and meaning. He approves that Charlotte Brontë's characters maintain the momentum of the action without intrusive narrative methods, *vis-à-vis* the logical interaction of personality, behaviour, and circumstance. The conclusion of *Villette*, which for earlier critics seemed hasty and unartistic, makes perfect sense given the character of Lucy Snowe. Her struggles are inward, her pleasures equally understated; it would be forced and unaccountable if she were to grasp happiness in the form of marriage to M. Emanuel. Such an ending would be antithetical to her personality. How much more appropriate her final words, simultaneously hopeful and despairing, which leave the reader feeling unsettled.

Aside from the convolution of the initial paragraphs, it is at this point in the *Note* that Swinburne's remarkable acuity as a critic becomes evident. He brings to bear his considerable skill as a scholar, both of classics and the Elizabethan dramatists, as well as his poetic sensibilities and burgeoning theories of prose (we must recall that, by this time, he had already written three novels). This radically alters the language with which the Brontës are discussed. While earlier reviewers discuss Charlotte's characters as living people, with whom they would like to be acquainted (or not), Swinburne discusses them in a manner more familiar to us. He analyses whether they are successful as artistic creations, and further, considers them in the context of a larger novelistic tradition. For previous critics, Jane Eyre and Shirley Keeldar are passionate, lively, interesting characters. For Swinburne, they represent broader themes. He studies them in contrast or similarity to one another, upping the level of discourse on Brontë's work.

In particular, his comparison of St. John Rivers and the Reverend Brocklehurst in *Jane Eyre* seems strikingly contemporary. St. John he calls the "white marble clergyman," "counterpart, as it were, of the "black marble" Brocklehurst" (*A Note* 193). This is important because the narrator's sympathies do not actually lie with either figure. They are presented differently, not because one is fundamentally good and the other fundamentally bad, but because of the character of Jane herself. And of course, we see everything through her narration; her outlook becomes ours, her development our own dawning awareness. Her tantrum against Brocklehurst occurs at a young age, before she has learned to restrain her temper or keep her opinions, often scathing, to herself. Yet, when St. John Rivers appears, he shares remarkable characteristics with Brocklehurst; in a way, Jane must overcome another figure of "marble" before she can return to her passionate "Vulcan," Rochester. This she does, only this time through restraint and civility. There is a final striking similarity, however: Jane can only escape St. John through yet another passionate outcry. This time, it is the mature assertion of an adult woman, as opposed to the furious fit of a little girl.

Swinburne is particularly adept at identifying such rich veins of interpretation. His attention to dualities within the text, as well as its underlying structures, anticipates much later criticism. "Disparagers of Swinburne's criticism" accuse him of "intemperance in 'the noble pleasure of praising'" (Hyder 17), but if any require proof that Swinburne does not merely admire indiscriminately, there is a glaring dearth of praise for Charlotte Brontë's style and writing. Although he eulogises her sketches of character and her success in "spiritual portraiture," he simply circumvents the issue of language. She is psychologically acute, but she lacks lyrical genius. This commendation he reserves for her sister, Emily.

Strangely, in an essay entitled *A Note on Charlotte Brontë*, Swinburne devotes a remarkable amount of space to Emily. It is when writing about the younger Brontë that Swinburne really waxes eloquent, and he obviously felt strongly enough to write a second piece[13] dedicated solely to her. *Wuthering Heights* foregrounds many of Swinburne's own preoccupations: landscape and passion, violent storms on the moors and equally tempestuous human conflicts. Like Swinburne, Emily was a poet, and this connection cannot be overestimated, for not only does "Swinburne [see] in Emily his own antichristian feeling, his nature-worship, his love of liberty, and the creed of self-reliance," but also his lyrical gift (Rooksby 91). Indeed, some of Swinburne's own verses could easily be uttered by Brontë's characters. Is it a stretch to imagine Heathcliff speaking the opening stanza of "The Triumph of Time"?:

> Before our lives divide for ever,
> While time is with us and hands are free,
> (Time, swift to fasten and swift to sever
> Hand from hand, as we stand by the sea)
> I will say no word that a man might say
> Whose whole life's love goes down in a day;
> For this could never have been; and never,
> Though the gods and the years relent, shall be.
> ("The Triumph of Time," *Poems and Ballads, First Series* ll.1–8)

Her writing, too, is more akin to Swinburne's own. If Charlotte is all deft characterisation and sharp psychology, Emily is all metaphysical concern[14] – passion and hate, isolation and union, heaven and hell. Emily deals with larger questions than Charlotte (contemporary reviewers, preoccupied with detailing horrors in *Wuthering Heights*, rarely moved beyond them to understand greater themes). Swinburne, however, cuts past specific incidents to praise Brontë's overarching ideas.

He writes that "the tragic use of landscape was wellnigh even more potent and conspicuous in Emily than in Charlotte … all the wind and all the sound and all the fragrance and freedom and gloom and glory of the high north moorland" (*A Note* 193–94). For Swinburne, as for Brontë, the "fascination of the moors" (Hyder 3) lies not only in their ferocious beauty, but in their richness as an emotional and spiritual outlet. Swinburne's language when he writes of Brontë's use of landscape is intensely poetic: "the sound and all the fragrance and freedom and gloom and glory." For both, the wildness of nature is a crucial locus for human interaction. In Swinburne's *Lesbia Brandon*, as in *Wuthering Heights*, many pivotal scenes (particularly between lovers) take place outside on the vast expanses of moor. Swinburne's verse, too, displays a similar motif. Like Swinburne's "mother-maid," the sea, nature is both healing and coldly insensitive to individual struggle. Nature, for Brontë and Swinburne, is simultaneously responsive and uncaring, and this interpretation prefigures the wasteland landscapes of their modernist successors. For both, like Hardy, "the somber majestic heath represents" not only a "great force" that evokes "violent protest" or "adulation," but also "the vast and unchanging reality around man."[15]

Swinburne points to Brontë's "tragic use" of landscape, a description that at first seems almost trite. Even Brontë's slightly bemused contemporaries identified that *Wuthering Heights* was at core a tragedy. For these reviewers, however, the tragedy of the novel lay

in "all its horrors": brutality, abuse, cruelty, and death. Swinburne, with his classical eye and Elizabethan sensibilities, is instead referring to its tragic arc, the "logical and moral certitude" inherent in the novel's atmosphere, setting, character, and incidents. These, we are assured, will without "monotony," "repetition" or "discord" fulfil their "stormy promise" ("Emily Brontë" 438–44). And Brontë's use of nature is essential to this vision. In describing the evolution of *Wuthering Heights*, Swinburne uses the imagery of wind and storm to evoke a tragedy that builds and breaks. He calls the novel's inception a "dawn" ("Emily Brontë" 439), and likens its close to "issuing . . . from the tumult of charging waters" ("Emily Brontë" 443). The darkness of Brontë's tempestuous tale is mitigated by "changing wind" and "flying sunlight" ("Emily Brontë" 439). For Swinburne, Brontë's novel itself takes on the shape of the landscape. And in its discussion of *Wuthering Heights*, Swinburne's criticism assumes prosodic contours, almost becoming a poem itself: "from the first we breathe the fresh dark air of tragic passion and presage" ("Emily Brontë" 439). This is of course significant for later critics (Pater being the most obvious example, but even T. S. Eliot), whose subject matter bleeds into their lyrical prose. Thus, his essay on *Wuthering Heights* conflates most of Swinburne's major preoccupations: nature and its ability to reflect the condition of the human soul, a quality shared by poetry itself, and the key notion of harmony.

Swinburne's point about *Wuthering Heights* and landscape has important moral and aesthetic implications. Responding to previous critics, who "find here and there in her [Brontë's] book the savage note or the sickly symptom of a morbid ferocity," he argues that the "pervading atmosphere of the book is so high and healthy" that these brutal scenes are "neutralized" and "transfigured" ("Emily Brontë" 443). Further, he asserts that those who call the passion between Heathcliff and Cathy immoral might just as implausibly find in this "human emotion" a "suggestion of a baser alloy" as "in the splendour of lightning or the roll of a gathered wave" ("Emily Brontë" 443). By comparing Brontë's novel to nature, Swinburne constructs a clever argument against those critics who disclaimed *Wuthering Heights* on moral grounds. There is no disharmony in nature; its dark and light exist alongside each other, like flashes of sunlight during a storm. To condemn the emotion and intensity of *Wuthering Heights* is, for Swinburne, as fantastic as criticising lightning for striking or a "gathered wave" for its crushing momentum. Like these natural forces, Brontë's work contains much that is both beautiful and terrible; it evokes the splendid power of nature. Not only should Brontë's work not be judged on moral grounds, it is in fact ridiculous to do so. Previous critics, Swinburne implies, have missed the point. *Wuthering Heights* is not, unlike *Jane Eyre*, focused on interpersonal interactions and psychological development. Cathy and Heathcliff are not merely two teenagers in love; their passion has something of the transcendent. And although *Wuthering Heights* is a regional tale, filled with the details and eccentricities of Brontë's immediate circumstances, it is also timeless and epic, an heir to the tragic tradition. "The book" Swinburne writes, "is what it is because the author was what she was," a "writer whose genius is essentially tragic" ("Emily Brontë" 440–41).

Swinburne chooses his examples carefully: lightning has both tremendous beauty and destructive potential; to be caught in the ocean (a sensation that appears throughout his writing) is both exhilarating and terrifying. Both invoke a crucial Swinburnian moment: the experience of the sublime and simultaneous recognition of its danger. Beauty can represent peril to life; mortality is its twin-born. This double-edged awareness offers a thrill to which Swinburne repeatedly returns. In *Lesbia Brandon*, Bertie Seyton is addicted to the violent splendour of the ocean: "its incessant beauty maddened him with pleasure," "this travail

and triumph of the married wind and sea filled him with a furious luxury of the senses that kindled all his nerves and exalted all his life" (202; ch. 2). Although in *Wuthering Heights* this connection is not made as explicit, Swinburne suggests that its "human emotion" reflects powerfully in Brontë's landscape. He alludes to the "passionate and ardent chastity" of Heathcliff and Cathy's love. Its very violence, he suggests, purifies like "flame" or "raging fire" ("Emily Brontë" 443). Because it is elemental, like Bertie's "maddening," beautiful sea, it carries with it no taint of brutality or immorality.

Swinburne does concede that "twice or thrice especially the details of deliberate or passionate brutality in Heathcliff's treatment of his victims make the reader feel for a moment as though he were reading a police report or even a novel by some French 'naturalist'"[16] ("Emily Brontë" 443). This reiterates the fact that most mid-to-late Victorian reviewers, even those as progressive as Swinburne, found it very difficult to sympathise with Heathcliff after the first half of the novel. It is only in the past few decades that Heathcliff has attained new critical status as marginalised anti-hero or demon lover (among others). It is puzzling that Swinburne, who seems to cut past the incidentals of *Wuthering Heights* to identify its core concerns, still deems Heathcliff's behaviour excessive. Perhaps, however, he finds Heathcliff's "treatment of his victims" problematic in an aesthetic sense. If the reader feels "as though he were reading a police report," such an impression might damage the moral and artistic harmony rendered by the high atmosphere and vigorous passion of Brontë's work.

Swinburne is not an anti-realist (some of his greatest literary heroes were earlier French realists[17]), but he does dislike the "naturalist" school, which paints a purposefully bleak picture of human existence. His essay on Emily Brontë was preceded by a vigorous condemnation of Émile Zola, which decried *L'Assommoir* (1877) for its descriptions of loathsome "physical matters" and "details of brutality and atrocity practiced on a little girl" ("Note on a Question of the Hour" 767–68). And while he wholly denounces Zola's naturalism on moral grounds, reporting that he was deeply disturbed by the novel and wished he could "cleanse his memory of the book" (Decker 1141), he considers the late horrors of *Wuthering Heights* an artistic lapse that does not destroy its overarching harmonious effect.

Swinburne's comment about "passionate brutality" recalls T. Wemyss Reid's statement that, upon reading "the horrible chronicles of Heathcliff's crimes, the only literary work" that can be compared to *Wuthering Heights* is "the gory tragedy of *Titus Andronicus*" (Reid 202). It is difficult to imagine how even the worst of "Heathcliff's crimes" could compare to the murder, rape, and other horrors of *Titus*, but this parallel is clearly one that struck Victorian reviewers. Swinburne, however, likens *Wuthering Heights* to "*King Lear* or *The Duchess of Malfy* . . . *The Bride of Lammermoor* or *Notre-Dame de Paris*" ("Emily Brontë" 439). While Reid compares *Wuthering Heights* to a drama that is considered the crudest of Shakespeare's work, Swinburne associates it with what is possibly his greatest tragedy, the cataclysmic *Lear*. For Reid, the violence in *Wuthering Heights*, like that of *Titus*, is senseless; for Swinburne, it is haunting and, aside from a few excesses, comparable to that of the greatest dramatists and novelists.

Thus we see Swinburne laud *Wuthering Heights* in terms that transgress genre. Not only does he apply dramatic criteria to his appraisal, but he also conceives of it as a poem. The temperament of its author, he writes, is both a "tragic genius" and a poetic one. He sees Emily as a kind of British Sappho, her "passionate and inspired intelligence" coupled with a "pantheistic faith . . .far alike from the conventions of vulgar piety and the complacencies of scientific limitation." For him, she is a radical poetess, a "Titaness" (*Letters* 4: 881), "fiery and solemn," grimly inspired by her tragic circumstances and filled with the same "disdain

of doctrine" and "possessed by the sublime passion of belief" as her ancient predecessor (*A Note* 196). Later, he writes that "this it is that distinguishes the hand of Emily from the hand of Charlotte Brontë. All the works of the elder sister are rich in poetic spirit, poetic feeling, and poetic detail; but the younger sister's work is essentially and definitely a poem in the fullest and most positive sense of the term" ("Emily Brontë" 439–40). This is a radical model for the novel, and Swinburne himself realises that he suggests a very different set of criteria. To judge by the opponents of *Wuthering Heights*, he writes, "it might be supposed that the rules of narrative observed by all great novelists were of an almost legal or logical strictness and exactitude." He then proceeds to exalt the imagination, claiming that true understanding and appreciation of a work like *Wuthering Heights* requires a suspension of disbelief that allows one to look past some crudities and comprehend the poetic spirit that formed it. We must, he writes, "make believe a little as a very condition of the game" ("Emily Brontë" 442). This moment of playfulness from Swinburne allows us to see that, for him, literature is both a serious endeavour and a continuing process of creative play. His statements have added poignancy when we realise that, a few decades' before, he was himself involved in a cross-genre project, his hybrid novel, *Lesbia Brandon*, a "scheme of mixed verse and prose." We cannot, Swinburne argues, impose a "legal" and "strict" set of stipulations that comprise what a novel can or cannot be. The "symphonies and antiphonies of regular word-music" are no less important in the novel than in poetry, and indeed only through such "word-music" can the "absolutely right expression," "inexpressible in full by prose" be captured (*A Note* 195). He sees the novel, particularly *Wuthering Heights*, in conversation with the genres of drama and poetry, borrowing the arc and momentum that drives classical and Elizabethan tragedy, while maintaining the lyrical power of the ancient chorus and of verse. Without such merging, prose itself is incomplete. This confluence of interests is reflected, not only in his criticism, but also in his long narrative poems[18] and his hybrid, poetic novel.

Wuthering Heights, like many theatrical predecessors, encapsulates a pair of iconic lovers. We recall Swinburne's fascination for such: Atalanta and Meleager, Tristram and Iseult, the "twain . . . led to the life of tears and fire . . . the lifeless life of night" (*Tristram of Lyonesse* ll.55–58), Chastelard and Mary Stuart (*Chastelard: A Tragedy*), Sappho and Anactoria (*Poems and Ballads*, *First Series* 65–77). For Swinburne, the notion of the "twain," the "twin-born spirits"[19] (*A Note* 189) destined to love passionately and tragically, was central and mythic. The "love which devours life itself" ("Emily Brontë" 443) appears consistently throughout his work. And to this classical catalogue of lovers he adds Jane and Rochester, Cathy and Heathcliff, and perhaps even Bertie and Lesbia or Denham and his idol Lady Wariston in *Lesbia Brandon* ("he could not meet or pass her without passion and pain" 207; ch. 2). As in his verse, Swinburne is drawn to the opposing forces of violence and tenderness, of grief and joy. Neither love, joy, nor pleasure can exist without desolation, despair, and pain. In the same way, pairs of lovers embody this dichotomy, signifying the Janus-like faces of opposition and transition.

Swinburne's portrait of Emily's death is meaningful: it reappears in *Lesbia Brandon*, with the passing of yet another fierce "poetess and pagan," Lesbia herself (350; ch. 16). He imagines that the "final expression in verse" of Brontë's passionate genius "was to be uttered from lips already whitened though not yet chilled by the present shadow of unterrifying death" (*A Note* 196). To Bertie, visiting her death-chamber, Lesbia seems to fade into the darkness behind her, her pale face luminescent and cadaverous. It is a slow death, a consumptive's death – although Lesbia achieves this through poisoning herself – a "morbid and obscure"

fading like the illness that took Emily (347; ch. 16). Like Brontë – whose death Swinburne imagines was accompanied by her final, proud, individualistic declaration, "No Coward Soul is Mine" – Lesbia's last moments are unconventional, antichristian: "I hate all funerals and all the words read over us . . . all the faith and hope. I have none, and no fear." She wishes she could die outside, with her "body . . . burnt," pagan-fashion, "and the ashes thrown into the sea" (348; ch. 16). Her final thoughts centre upon Bertie's sister Lady Wariston. She dreams of her body, falling off a cliff (the parallel with Sappho is here obvious); she dreams that she herself has pushed her. Death and love are conjoined in this *Liebestod* of passionate violence. But Lesbia bears a resemblance to yet another figure: Catherine Earnshaw. "I wish I were dying out of doors," she says in an echo of Cathy's "Oh, I'm burning! I wish I were out of doors" (98; ch. 12). To the end, these fierce, poetic women seek a final communion with nature. Just as Cathy wishes to be a girl again, "half savage, and hardy, and free," running the moors or buried outside under the heath (98; ch. 12) Lesbia desires her ashes to mingle with the sea, her body to fall off a cliff, her spirit to pass outdoors, not inside, chained by walls. Communion with the beloved and communion with nature are, for Brontë and Swinburne, one and the same.

Then, too, Lesbia's death scene recalls Cathy and Heathcliff's final encounter. Bertie clasps Lesbia in a paroxysm of love, "he bowed his face upon her face . . . plunged his lips into hers, hot and shuddering; and devoured her fallen features with sharp sad kisses" (348; ch. 16). Heathcliff, holding Cathy in a similar consummation, "gathered her to him with greedy jealousy" but "could hardly bear, for downright agony, to look into her face" (123–25; ch. 15). "'It is hard to forgive, and to look at those eyes, and feel those wasted hands'," he cries (126; ch. 15). Heathcliff and Bertie represent youth and vitality in contrast to Cathy and Lesbia's "fallen," "wasted," attenuated forms, as much figures of an otherworld as of this one. And yet, while Cathy and Heathcliff's embrace implies union, Lesbia severs Bertie's clasp when she repulses him, "savage terror in her voice and gesture" (348; ch. 16). Cathy slips away from Heathcliff through death, while Bertie cannot even possess Lesbia in life. This vision, of the passion and ultimate sterility of love, suffuses Swinburnian thinking. Lesbia's love for Bertie is merely sororal, while her last and most passionate thoughts are for the woman who cannot reciprocate it.

In favouring Emily over Charlotte, Swinburne was a "brave dissenting" and "lonely voice" in Victorian criticism (Winnifrith 14–17). But in his re-evaluation of the novel's parameters, Swinburne is not completely beyond the pale. During the latter half of the century, Kenneth Graham describes a "new emphasis" began to develop, critical trends that sought to praise "fiction for its comprehensiveness that embraces the functions of the epic, drama, and lyric" (Graham 7). These changing opinions, while still uncommon, reflect altering Victorian discourse, which began to understand the novel as more than a popular, potboiler genre, but rather a serious form that could undertake and incorporate many of the same concerns as traditionally high modes (such as drama and poetry). That Swinburne was not alone in identifying this potential is important, because it places his essays on the novel in dialogue with many others. They were, as we have noted, part of a consistent conversation about the Brontës and their work, and in contributing to and evoking more responses, Swinburne, along with Reid, Robinson, and Stephen, set the tone for *fin-de-siècle* critics such as M. H. Ward[20] and her Modernist successors.[21]

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NOTES

1. *A Note on Charlotte Brontë* (1877) initially intended as an article reviewing T. Wemyss Reid's *Charlotte Brontë: A Monograph* (1877), but published as a book (Sept. 1877), reissued 1894. "Emily Brontë" was published in the *Athenaeum* (1883) as a review of A. M. F. Robinson's biography, and collected in *Miscellanies* (1886), 260–70.
2. Swinburne wrote, "we [the Brontës and himself] all belong, you know, to the old kingdom of
3. Northumbria." A. C. Swinburne, 1877, Letter to A. B. Grosart, *Letters* 4: 874, 15–16.
4. For more on this, see Rikky Rooksby, *Swinburne: A Poet's Life*, (Brookfield: Scolar, 1997) or the correspondence on this topic between T. Watts-Dunton, T. J. Wise, and E. Gosse who, after Swinburne's death, published a collection of his Border Ballads. MSS in the British Library, Ashley Collection.
5. Rikky Rooksby's "Swinburne and the Brontës," *Brontë Society Transactions* 22 (1997), serves as an excellent introduction to Swinburne's critical work on the Brontës.
6. Although there are major cultural and class differences between *Wuthering Heights* and *The Cenci*, Swinburne conflates the two, one a novel and the other a verse drama. This suggests a kinship between himself, his idol Shelley, and Emily Brontë, not only as poets, but as innovators in various literary forms.
7. *Lesbia Brandon*, begun 1864.
8. A well-known murderess, who was executed in 1767 for torturing her female apprentices to death.
9. See E. Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Alan Shelston, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975. First published Mar. 1857.
10. Swinburne was passionate about Balzac and "among his friends evangelized tirelessly" for the author. (Intro., C. Y. Lang, *Letters* 1: xviii.).
11. Published in 1868. Though "William Blake" is the clearest example, Swinburne's thoughts on *l'art pour l'art* also appear in his essay on Hugo's "L"Année Terrible" (1872), among other works.
12. Heraclitus, "A man's character is his dæmon," Fragment 119. Hardy of course applies this to the rise and fall of Michael Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, borrowing it from Novalis (via George Eliot in *The Mill on the Floss*), who in turn derived it from Heraclitus. For more on this interesting provenance, see W. E. Yuill's "'Character Is Fate': A Note on Thomas Hardy, George Eliot and Novalis," *Modern Language Review* 57.3 (July 1962): 401–02.
13. Swinburnian Aestheticism might argue that art does not have to be moral (conventionally "wicked" subject matter is acceptable), while the Paterian strand would argue that art should be pure form and aspire to the condition of music. Swinburne's notion of moral harmony, thus, does not necessarily stand outside Aesthetic philosophy, it merely broadens what Aesthetic literature might be.
14. "Emily Brontë," *Athenaeum* 1883.
15. Later criticism has often focused on EJB's realism: her canny grasp of the law, carefully planned chronology (C. P. Sanger's "The Structure of *Wuthering Heights*," 1972 is an invaluable resource), and the authenticity of her setting. And while the metaphysical themes of *WH* are Swinburne's primary focus, he shrewdly identifies the precision and accuracy of its setting, characters, and incidents.
16. Curtis Dahl explores this interesting parallel between barren landscapes in Brontë, Swinburne, and Hardy and the widespread wasteland imagery in modernist verse in "The Victorian Wasteland," *College English* 16.6 (Mar., 1955): 341–47.
17. A rather obvious jab at Émile Zola, whose *L'Assommoir* Swinburne had recently attacked in "Note on a Question of the Hour" (*Athenaeum*, 1877).
18. Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert.
19. *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865), the verse drama *Chastelard* (1878), and *Tristram of Lyonesse* (1882).
20. Cf. "On the Cliffs": "pleasure's *twin-born* pain," l.8, *Songs of the Springtides*, 1880. Also in "Dolores": "despair, the *twin-born* of devotion," 107, *Poems and Ballads*, 1866. My emphasis.
21. M. H. Ward wrote an influential introduction to the Haworth edition of *The Life and Works of the Sisters Brontë*, New York and London: Harper & Bros., 1899.

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