Notes on the Gothic – romantic – realistic synthesis in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*

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Abstract: The present paper aims to give a sketchy presentation of some the main elements of composition and structure that turned Emily Bronte's masterpiece into a work of synthesis, combining gothic, romantic and realistic features. The author artistically presented the background made up of the the last days of rural England in her masterpiece, with the contradictions tearing apart the society in Yorkshire and Lancashire, mainly triggered by the rapid industrial growth. Arguably, the book represents one of the turning-points placed at the watershed between the typically Gothic indulgence in the macabre, and the perception of its rough artistry. The (apparent?) realism of *Wuthering Heights* may be said to clash with its unique poetry, and yet the writer achieved a rare feat of realistic presentation of the physical world. By and large, the book is a modern literary enterprise, of vigorous conception and consummate art, a revolutionary, though rather odd, demonstration of literary genius turned to full account, which left behind poor imitations.
Key-words: gothic, romantic, Emily Brontë, realistic synthesis, structure

Introduction. An analysis of literary distinctions and identity is fully in order with respect to Emily Brontë's masterpiece, a work which transcends the classical divisions established by the traditional definitions of the literary currents. Emily Brontë grew up in the last days of rural England, a background that she artistically presented in her literary masterpiece, *Wuthering Heights*. The many contradictions that torn apart the society in the Yorkshire and Lancashire areas at the beginning of the 19th century – mainly triggered by the rapid pace of industrialization, which brought about a conflicting work-capital relationship, and turned these regions into the heart of the English workers' movement – are reflected in a negative manner in Emily Brontë's father's household, as Patrick Brontë, a man of conservative views, believed that "the workers had to be kept in their place": likewise, he chose to bring up his children in an authoritarian way, in the silent, dreary parish house in Haworth. (As a matter of fact, class disparities will appear as a significant subtext in *Wuthering Heights*, on a par with the conservative tendencies of the times). The monotonous and mysterious Yorkshire heath, including Haworth and the surrounding lands, with the wilderness of the high tablelands swept by the ceaseless winds, were thus paralleled by the intensity of the tumultuous world in the English industrial centres, with their harsh reality. The young Brontës' attraction to the world of imagination, which also accounts for the preeminent (yet so fecund and suggestive) contradictoriality of their writing. Moreover, their mostly secluded childhood on the moorlands was based on an extremely close mutual relationship, essentially based on their being part of a complicated fantasy world, an intricate game of make-believe, resulting in the tiny books of stories, plays, histories and poetry they produced. It appears that for Emily the *Gondalian* world of fantastic adventures was as actual as the lonely, day-to-day world of the household and the walks on the moor. Consequently, the poeticality suppressed in her soul will overflow onto the immediate externality; in *Wuthering Heights*, the familiar Yorkshire environment, with its wind-swept moors, cold winters, and brown hills, becomes the setting for a tragedy whose exquisite passion is equal to anything that could be imagined. For *Wuthering Heights* is a finely constructed, agonizing tale of passion and revenge set in the Yorkshire moors. Emily felt well only in the midst of the nature and in the silent presence of the animals, with which she used to talk. During her absence from home, the girl yearned for the liberty that she was accustomed to at Haworth, the very environment where she had her roots. (See Catherine's symbolic dream, suggestive of her connection with her native land: "*If I were in heavens, Nelly, I would be very unhappy!… I once dreamt that I was finding myself there. The heaven seemed to me a strange place; and I was crying so hard because I wanted to go back on the earth; and the angels got very upset and they threw me out, right in the middle of the bushes, up at the Wuthering Heights, where I woke up crying of happiness*"). Having spent her short life mostly at home, Emily Brontë used her own fertile imagination, and also the inspiration she drew from the local landscape, as well as her

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own familiarity with folklore, religion, illness, human suffering, and death. She could deal assuredly with such themes as nature, cruelty, social station, and imperishableness of the spirit. A shy, sad, uncommunicative person, engrossed in her own reflections and thoughts, it is something of a literary enigma how Emily Brontë, who lived most of her brief life in the circumspect atmosphere of her father's parsonage, with very few social contacts apart from her family, managed to create in *Wuthering Heights* a world teeming with tempestuous, passionate, vengeful characters.

The author's profoundly individual poetic vision and deep authorial commitment, which mystified the first critics of the book, who condemned it for the excess of passion and would-be coarseness, still captivate and delight modern readers through the genuine poetry displayed, springing out of a severe self-discipline and passionate creative faculty. Emily Brontë's book strikes through its imagery, its complex structure, but no less its ambiguity, as many reasons for its enduring, ever-fresh celebrity. The elaborate structure of the novel asseverates the limited and tragically self-consuming nature of passion.

The many romantic influences pervade the whole fabric of the book – clearly non-Victorian in tone, style and overall quality, atmosphere and implications – though the climax of the romantic movement had long lapsed (it is a fact that Emily Brontë's isolated life placed her well behind the times – very much like Jane Austen, in fact).

The most striking point of romantic indebtedness is the book's rebellious personage, Heathcliff, who is a very close (if unintentional) approximation of the Byronic character, in spite of his origins and the fact that he lacks the distinguishable self-pitying typical of such personae; a man of tempestuous emotions, Heathcliff resents the social ostracism he has been subject to: he is a mutinous, ungovernable hero, whose only law is his own choice. Heathcliff appears like a perfect monster, an inhuman creature, the very image of incarnate evil, a despicable (and equally pitiable) man, lacking the notion of forgiveness, though thirsting for superior love. In her 1850 preface to the book, Charlotte Brontë reflects: "Whether it is right or advisable to create things like Heathcliff, I do not know: I scarcely think it is." Analyzed from the angle of the "romantic" motif of the novel, ascribing Heathcliff the part of the damned spirit, the status of a victim that the hero enjoys seems rather blurred and contradictory; he cannot be killed from without, but can die only in so far as he wants his own extinction. Such is the sense of morbidity and violence in most central characters, highlighted by the dreadful and repulsive scenery, the distressing general atmosphere, and the comparatively offensive taint of the language used, that even the author's sister Charlotte had to admit that the "horror of great darkness" could affect the public's appreciation of subject choice, or narrative and psychological treatment.

The reception of the book was arguably placed at the turning-point leading away from the tpically Gothic indulgence in the macabre, which was so successful in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, towards a more sophisticated kind of Victorian sensibility, in spite of its disturbing, shocking ring, and the clear perception of its (would-be) rough artistry. This tragic drama was so unlike most Victorian fiction that the critique was long mystified, and many critical approaches had to rely heavily on comparisons with the Jacobean playwrights, and especially with Shakespeare (a comparison still to be met with today). Nevertheless, the judicious physicality of Wuthering Heights sets it apart from both the gothic and the Jacobean / Shakespearean elements.

The novel abounds in gothic episodes and images, part of a larger "romantic-gothic" mode, which eventually retreats into fictional history. The distinctly gothic world presented in the novel displays a wide assortment of miscellaneous nuances, each having its own functional load within the larger context. The various gothic romances enacted in the book, in close association with the timeless, immutable fairytales, legends, and myths that contribute to making up the fabric of its idea grounding, bear on the characters themselves, whose chronological existence is suspended – they cannot develop, they actually represent attitudes. The synthetical dimension nof the novel faces the reader with an innovative sense of both the romantic and the gothic.

As the novel approaches its end, the stylized gothic romance gradually makes room for something more like realism, with the segmented chronology turning into a more concrete, easily perceivable string of events, and mysteries being dispelled, either elucidated, or driven away into

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the background. The second movement of the novel, though less rich in dramatic force, realizes the gradual shift from the "gothic romance" to its realistic counterpart. The transition from the gothic sensibility was anticipated by the previous narrators' (i.e. Lockwood and Ellen Dean) methodically detailed accounts. Hence, one can say that, by dint of the multiform issues presented, where the (melo)dramatic is in close contact with the supernatural, and unrestrained passion chimes with (romantic) poetry, *Wuthering Heights* lies midway between Gothic and Romantic fiction.

Though the (apparent – as some critics insisted) realism of *Wuthering Heights* seemingly clashes with its unique poetic quality, realism has its own special, well-defined part in the larger economy of the novel. Emily Brontë achieved a rare feat of realistic, minutely detailed presentation of the physical world making up the setting of the novel, with a clear topography, evidently based on the evocation of her own birthplace, vividly brushed out of incredibly precise observations and accurate directions, with the scraggy rocks and mossy mounds, the grey churchyards, the open moors, the spare vegetation, the leaning trees, and the crows flying about ("A bit of moss, or a tuft of blanched grass, or a fungus spreading its bright orange among the heap of brown foliage" – Chap. XXII). When the landscape is delineated in its more vigorous, at times stormy aspects, even the most violent events become fully credible. Yet observation of the outer world is by no means restricted to the elementary world of the moors, described with extreme fidelity and natural sympathy. In Emily Brontë's novel, on a par with the evocation of the landscape, the interiors of the houses, no less than the local ways and mores (even notes relating to the Yorkshire dialect), are as clearly and vividly depicted as anything presented in the universally recognizable Balzacian manner, giving *Wuthering Heights* the literary magnitude of an astonishingly mature work of art. The peaceful, rather humdrum life of preindustrial England that the Earnshaws had been living, in keeping with the seemingly age-old patriarchal relationships, is violently (though not always directly) disrupted by the conflicts and tensions of England in the 1840s, reflected by the strained atmosphere of the novel. The social issues the plot is centred on are characteristic of mid-nineteenth century English society: property, class-mentality, more often than not at loggerheads with the individual's aspirations. Considering the author's own rather meagre reservoir of practical experience and first-hand knowledge of the world, her achievement in realistic writing is unbelievably high. In tackling the larger world of society, Emily Brontë's achievement is also remarkable in many ways: for instance, social conventions (especially with regard to gender and the status of women) are heartily derided, in a "natural" mood that has everything to do with realism. There are critics who maintain the view that Emily Brontë was a genuine, no-nonsense realist, and the romantic and gothic elements in her book were something of a superadded stylistic apparatus.

The accord of the poetic and the "prosaic" is virtually perfect, and the balance between the physical and the metaphysical is exquisite. In contradistinction to the realistic writers of her age, Emily Brontë's preoccupation was not so much focused on presenting the social background, with its mechanics and varieties, as to bringing to light its innermost meaning, through careful, synthetic and extrapolating literary reflection. We have to acquiesce to the lyricism of the text, while also recognising the high quality of the presentation of contemporary realities, as well as its status as a spiritual drama of universal human value.

Far from belonging to a strictly delimited literary category, *Wuthering Heights* has every quality of a work of synthesis, where the various elements, from plot and description to character-drawing, are subordinate to a larger artistic structure. The microcosm of the book felicitously captures the universal scheme, extracting sense, spiritual / artistic interpretation out of the 'barren' concreteness of the mere fact presentation; thus, the work of art is duly endowed with the prerequisites of superior universality, becoming a drama of a higher order, an achievement of philosophical depth, where the harmony of the contraries is perfect. The dialectics of life is illustrated through such antithetic pairs as: Man vs. Nature, storm / tumult vs. quiet/peace, moorland / heath vs. lowlands / cultivated vegetation (and, consequently, Wuthering Heights vs. Thrushcross Grange, the Earnshaws vs. the Lintons), freedom versus tyranny, etc.

Composition itself exhibits elements of novelty, with a precisely delineated chronological arrangement (it covers a period of more than two decades, presenting the conflicts of four

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generations ordered in five phases, like the five acts of a drama), and an effective, if not highly intricate, 'polyphonic' narrative technique: the story is told by deputy, i.e. Mr. Lockwood and Ellen Dean, respectively; these two narrative instruments are used in accordance with the intensity of the fragments in cause, acting as a filter that gives, or denies the readers' access to the intimacy of the facts and characters being presented. These voices can be said to be the interposed elements which separate the tragedy from the reader, or the writer's tools of persuasion.

Early criticism deemed that *Wuthering Heights* was "a strange book (…) not without evidence of considerable power; but as a whole, (…) wild, confused, disjointed, and improbable", and its author was perceived as a strange genius, who indulged in pure imagination, and construed messages of preeminently mystical purport; contrarily, far from being disjointed, the book's time-scheme testifies to full consistency, being worked out with supreme meticulousness. In actual fact, the book is a modern literary enterprise, vigorous and original in conception, and consummate in form, standing out as an oddly newfangled demonstration of literary genius turned to full account. Although Emily Brontë's novel was not the source of any significant literary line or tradition, leaving behind but rather poor imitations, the overall influence of this *sui generis* book has been a major one, mainly on account of its undeniable, fully original sincerity of sentiment and poetic power.

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