

**The Comedy of  
Tragedy:  
A Marxist Reading of  
“Wuthering Heights”**

**Jean-Jacques  
Lecercle**

**Abstract:** The essay starts from a critical question: why does Heathcliff, at the height of his power, give up everything, let himself die and allow what was so far undiluted tragedy end on the comic mode of a happy end for the second generation. The question is linked to the narrative scandal of a novel that breaks the transcendental framework of the Aristotelian “complete story” by allowing, from the first volume to the second, a repetition of the plot with variation and reversal. This reversal is a revolution in the *rapport de forces* between two groups, or classes, the “upper orders”, i.e. the “old families” of the Earnshaws and Lintons, and the subordinate classes, of which Heathcliff is the representative. The rise to power of Heathcliff is assimilated to a social revolution and his brutal and systematic destruction of the old order is an image of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The rest of the essay seeks to demonstrate that such anachronic concept is relevant to the novel, with reference to the two social and political conjunctures of the Luddite troubles and the Chartist movement.

**Keywords:** Aristotle, Chartism, class struggle, complete story, dictatorship, Luddite troubles, orders (upper and lower), proletariat, *rapport de forces*, repetition, revolution, *Shirley*, transcendental framework, working-class novel.

### 1. Why did Heathcliff give up?

There is something puzzling in the ending of *Wuthering Heights*. Why did Heathcliff, at the very acme of his power, when his enemies have been crushed or are dead, and their offspring reduced to a state of abject poverty and dependence, suddenly give everything up and let himself die, thus allowing the world of *Wuthering Heights* to return to its initial state, through the coming marriage of the second Catherine and Hareton Earnshaw, a “happy end” that allows comedy to succeed what so far had been undiluted tragedy? The Gothic explanation – he is haunted to death by the ghost of the first Catherine is hardly sufficient to account for this late reversal.

I am afraid that at this point a brief reminder of the intricacies of the two volumes of this complex but symmetrical narrative is in order.

In the first volume, Heathcliff is a foundling, brought back to *Wuthering Heights* from Liverpool by old Earnshaw (who promptly dies). He is hated by the son, Hindley Earnshaw, but loved by the daughter, Catherine Earnshaw. With the death of his protector, he is reduced by Hindley, the new master, to the status of a farm hand, a mere servant, as wild as he is scruffy. As a result, Catherine is torn between her love for him (“I am Heathcliff!” is one of her better-known lines) and her attraction for her more civilised neighbours the Lintons of Thrushcross Grange, who belong to the same social class as she does, and whose son,

Edward, she decides to marry, upon which Heathcliff vanishes.

He reappears several years later, affluent and elegant, but as wild as ever and still endowed with the vital strength the Lintons signally lack, only to find a wedded Catherine in the last stages of a decline - she dies giving birth to the second Catherine, Catherine Linton. The second volume is largely devoted to Heathcliff's revenge, which takes him the best part of twenty years. Now rich and powerful, he systematically crushes the Earnshaws (he ruins Hindley and ends up battering him to death; he appropriates Wuthering Heights and reduces Hareton, Hindley's son, to the status of a servant, uncouth and illiterate) as he destroys the Lintons (he marries Isabella Linton, whom he despises, with the sole purpose of spiting her brother Edgar; he kidnaps the second Catherine and forces her to marry his weakling of a son, Linton Heathcliff - who promptly dies; with the help of a crooked attorney, he manages to capture Catherine Linton's inheritance and becomes master of both Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights). Then, at the height of his power, he chooses to die, leaving Hareton Earnshaw and the second Catherine in amorous converse.

The puzzle of this sudden renunciation is merely the symptom of the problem posed by the narrative structure of the novel. Why, in what seemed to be essentially the tragedy of the impossible love between the first Catherine and Heathcliff, is the resolution of the plot a happy one (Hareton and the second Catherine will recover their lost property, marry, be happy and have many children)? How can the starkest of Romantic tragedies thus end in the comic mode?

## 2. Tragedy.

The first volume, from the point of view of the plot, is entirely coherent. It tells of the tragedy of Catherine Earnshaw, a version of the Romeo and Juliet *topos* in its modern bourgeois version. The love between Catherine and Heathcliff is not the object of an interdiction, due to a feudal conception of family honour, but it is tainted with social disapproval: a member of the "upper orders", as they used to be called, like Catherine Earnshaw cannot marry a member of the lower orders, namely a foundling, of dubious proletarian origin, who is at that moment no better than a farm hand. This impossibility is experienced by Catherine in the form of a subjective contradiction, between the requirements of her social position and her irrepressible love for Heathcliff. She experiences the classic dilemma of the tragic heroine: she must make a choice, but whatever choice she makes will have disastrous consequences. And she pays the price of this unavoidable choice by dying at the end of the first volume. As to Heathcliff, he is caught up in Catherine's tragedy in the form of the bourgeois Romantic *topos*, "she is another man's wedded wife", a situation which causes the suicide of young Werther

and of Jacopo Ortis, the hero of Foscolo's *Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis*. Heathcliff too dies, seemingly haunted by the ghost of Catherine, but it takes him the whole of the second volume and the best of twenty years to do so, two decades devoted to systematic social revenge.

And yet, that the tragedy of the first Catherine is the essence of the novel is widely recognized. We find an excellent instance of this type of reading in the first film version of the novel, William Wyler's 1939 *Wuthering Heights*, where Heathcliff is played by Lawrence Olivier and Catherine by Merle Oberon. That version will puzzle anyone who has read the novel. It is natural that the film version of a classic should take liberties with the original text. But the film takes this practice to extremes - it cancels half of the novel, namely the whole of the second volume: no second generation, no second Catherine, very little of Heathcliff's revenge. The first Catherine dies in Heathcliff's arms, not in giving birth to the second.

What the film cancels is the structure of repetition (with inversion, that is with passage from tragedy to the comedy) that characterises the novel. But there is coherence in this choice. The tragedy of Catherine Earnshaw having reached its due end in the death of the heroine, all that remains is the expectation of the inevitable death of the hero, as a direct and quasi-immediate result of her death. There is no need to wait twenty years for this: Romeo cannot survive Juliet to the point of becoming rich and powerful and destroying the Capulets. There is something scandalous in Emily Brontë's narrative, a scandal due to the structure of the plot.

### 3. Scandal.

The narrative scandal of a plot which, from one volume to the other, is repeated with variation and inversion has a clear origin: the novel breaks the transcendental frame of narratives, a frame that was first sketched by Aristotle and the maxims of which are conformed to by the generality of 19<sup>th</sup> century novels. We can formulate three such narrative maxims.

Maxim n°1, the maxim of completeness: a complete story is a story that has a beginning, a middle and an end. You have recognised a famous passage in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle is dealing with the plot of tragedy as the "combination of incidents", which he calls the fable, and he analyses the way the fable may be constructed ("since, he adds, this is the first and most important part of tragedy"):

Now we have assumed tragedy to be an imitation of an action that is complete and entire; and that has also a certain magnitude; for a thing may be entire and a whole and yet not be of any magnitude. By entire I mean that which has a beginning, a middle and an end. A beginning is that which does not necessarily suppose anything before it, but which requires something to follow it. An end, on the

contrary, is that which supposes something to precede it, either necessarily or probably, but which nothing is required to follow. A middle is that which both supposes something to precede and requires something to follow. The poet, therefore, who would construct his fable properly is not at liberty to begin or end where he pleases, but must conform to these definitions.<sup>1</sup>

On the face of it, this is a string of resounding platitudes. But that is only a superficial reading. What Aristotle is sketching is a transcendental frame, the reason why the author of a fable “is not at liberty to begin or end where he pleases”. This frame has two characteristics: it imposes a fixed order on the narrative (you do not begin your story *in medias res*, nor do you end it before its natural closure) and it supposes a certain form of progress, a teleological impulse that moves the story forward towards its end in both senses of the term, its terminal point and its goal. Thus, the proper end of tragedy is the death of the hero, the appeasement of the Gods and the restoration of order.

A second maxim derives from this maxim of completeness, which we might call the maxim of unity. It is formulated through the following antimetabole: the life of a story is the story of a life. We all know the rules of unity that were supposed to govern classical tragedy: one hero, one action, one day. The prose narrative develops its “magnitude” (according to Aristotle, a fable must have a “certain magnitude”) along the progress of the life of the main character, thus translating the maxim of completeness into the contents of the plot: the heroine’s or hero’s birth, loves and death. The titles of 19th century novels testify to the importance of this rule: *Anna Karenina*, *Madame Bovary*, *Jane Eyre*, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*.

The third maxim is the maxim of resolution. It defines the end of the fable in both its senses. And here, a choice is offered, which concerns the novel rather than the original fable of tragedy. The maxim, therefore, has two formulations, a comic one, “they were happy and had many children,” and a tragic one, “they were miserable and died”. Tess is hanged in Dorchester prison, and Jane Eyre utters her exultant cry, “Reader, I married him!”.

The transcendental frame is made up of maxims, not laws or constitutive rules: it is meant to be exploited and flouted, as are Grice’s maxims of conversation, from which implicatures are derived. Thus, novels have recourse to analepses and prolepses that flout the maxim of completeness in that it imposes a fixed order on the story, but they presuppose that order. And the maxim is also flouted by focalisation on one moment of the natural progress of the story, as in the common and garden love story (we know nothing of Elizabeth Bennet’s childhood or of

.....  
<sup>1</sup> Aristotle 1963, p. 17-18.

her life after she marries Darcy) or in the *Bildungsroman*. Not to mention Tristram Shandy, who takes his time being born. As for the maxim of unity, it is exploited through extension from one life to two (the conjoined lives of Elizabeth Bennet and Darcy, in the comic mode, or of Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff, in the tragic mode) or to a whole family (*The Buddenbrooks*).

Flouting the transcendental maxims, therefore, is common practice for the novelist – they are *meant* to be exploited, as “rules” of grammar are exploited by the poet for expressive reasons: without such flouting, Grice’s maxims of conversation would not give rise to implicatures. There should be, therefore, no scandal in Emily Brontë’s flouting of the narrative maxims – she could even have a tragedy with a happy end (this is called tragicomedy, the best example of which is Corneille’s *Le Cid*). But there is, not because of the flouting, but because of the contradictory juxtaposition of conformity and infraction. *Wuthering Heights* contradictorily flouts the maxims and follows them, in an unholy mixture of conformity and nonconformity. Thus, to take the maxim of completeness, the novel has a middle (between two volumes, two generations, two Catherine’s), but this middle is also an end (to the tragedy of the first Catherine) and a beginning (to the comedy of the second). Or again, to take the maxim of unity, the life of this story is the story of one life, the life of the first Catherine, as in the film, a life entwined with that of Heathcliff, but it is also the story of two lives, not in their conjunction but in their succession, as the second Catherine’s life repats the life of her mother with inversion of mode. As a result of which the maxim of resolution is also flouted as the novel chooses both the tragic ending, in the case of the first Catherine, and the comic one, in the case of the second.

The narrative scandal of the novel lies in that confusion, the epitome of which is the passage from tragedy to comedy, a passage that ruins the tragic coherence of the story, a coherence so powerful that the comic ending appears to be an arbitrary imposition of the author, a kind of narrative *deus ex machina* – tyrants do not resign and there is no justification for Heathcliff giving up.

#### 4. Reversal.

The site of this narrative scandal is the second volume, as the film implicitly recognizes by cancelling it. The repetition it enacts has two striking characteristics that form a contradiction: the exacerbation of tragic violence, over the twenty years of Heathcliff absolute power, which turns the tragedy of unfulfilled passion into a Jacobean revenge tragedy; then, in contradiction, the sudden passage to the comic mode in the shape of the bourgeois happy end. This sudden reversal is the crux that needs to be accounted for.

But before that, at the turning point of the volumes, another reversal has taken place: the rise to power of Heathcliff, a power which he exerts with the utmost violence. That power is political in the widest sense, that is both social and economic: it is sustained by a complete reversal of power relations.

The reversal can be spelt out in six propositions, or theses.

Proposition one: in *Wuthering Heights*, repetition (of the first volume by the second, of the first generation by the second) takes the form of an inversion, or reversal.

Proposition two: this reversal is an inversion of power relations, whereby the dominant party is now dominated, the slave becomes master.

Proposition three: the reversal concerns not so much individuals (Heathcliff vs Edgar Linton) as whole families, i.e. social groups: the Lintons and Earnshaws are overthrown by Heathcliff, the upstart, the son of nobody, who has neither family nor lineage.

Proposition four: as a result, this reversal is social and political, an inversion in the power relations between social groups or classes. The groups in question are two: the lower vs the upper orders, servants vs masters. Thus, when Heathcliff reappears, although he is rich and looks like a gentleman, Edgar Linton refuses to receive him “in the parlour”, which provokes the indignation of his wife, who addresses Nelly Dean thus: “Set two tables here, Ellen : one for your master and Isabella, being gentry ; the other for Heathcliff and myself, being of the lower orders”.<sup>2</sup> The first Catherine of course exaggerates when she claims to be a member of the lower orders, but such is Heathcliff’s status in the first volume.

Proposition five: the effect of the reversal is a form of Saturnalia, only one that aims to last more than a few days, as the destruction of the former social order is systematic and appears to be definitive.

Proposition six: the essence of Heathcliff’s revenge, animated not so much by passionate rage as by extreme cruelty, is the systematic destruction of the old order, that is of the means of domination of the former ruling class, which are replaced by those of the new dominant class.

Before turning to Heathcliff, who is the very embodiment of the reversal of power relations, I offer two hints of such inversion.

In *Wuthering Heights*, few characters strut upon the stage for the whole length of the novel. The first generation, with the exception of Heathcliff, die, either at the end of the first volume, like Catherine Earnshaw, or in the course of Heathcliff’s revenge, like Edgar Linton and Hindley Earnshaw. And the second generation, of course, are born in the middle of the story, thus starting the repetition of the first story

.....  
<sup>2</sup> Brontë 2003, p. 95.

by the second. But Heathcliff is not the only one to survive: two other characters are present from beginning to end - Joseph, the puritanical servant who grumbles in dialect, and Nelly Dean, who brings up two generations, in the persons of the first and the second Catherine. In other words, the masters are transient characters, and most of them die, but the servants survive. Heathcliff embodies this survival of the fittest class, the lower orders.

This inversion of power also occurs in the narrative framework of the novel. The novel has two successive narrators. The first, Lockwood, belongs to the upper orders: he is affluent and rents Thruscross Grange from Heathcliff, its new owner. But, a recent arrival, he knows nothing of the past and must rely on Nelly Dean, whom Heathcliff has promoted as housekeeper of Thruscross Grange, for the details of the story – to the point that he soon abandons his role as main narrator and is content to repeat Nelly Dean’s words, only, as he says, a little condensed. And he adds that “she is, on the whole, a very fait narrator and I don’t think I could improve her style”<sup>3</sup> – in other words, he resigns his function as narrator of the tale and transfers narrative power to a servant. And Nelly Dean is no mere narrator, but an active participant in the action, even if her agency takes the form of passivity: she withdraws information from her employer, Edgar Linton, thus, in her own words, betraying him at the critical moment, which makes her a *de facto* accomplice of Heathcliff’s machinations. This occurs twice, when Heathcliff elopes with Isabella, Edgar’s sister (not without hanging the small dog that is the favourite pet of his future bride), and when he kidnaps the second Catherine and forcibly makes her marry his weakling of a son. Even if she repeatedly denies it, Nelly Dean practises a form of class solidarity with the social upstart and helps him become “the master” (as she now calls him).

The agent of the social revolution is of course Heathcliff himself. What is striking in his rise to power is not so much the extent to which he is successful (he does become the master of both houses and their surviving inhabitants) but the systematic cruelty (that confines to sadism) with which this power is exerted. This is not the rage of blind passion, this is malice aforethought – not uncontrolled violence but systematic destruction. I have mentioned the hanging of the dog, which shows that the only reason why he marries Isabella Linton is to use her as an instrument to make the Lintons suffer and hasten their destruction. Another instance of this cruelty occurs when, having kidnapped the second Catherine, he tries to prevent her from going home to be with her dying father in his last moments. In so doing, he breaks a moral injunction central to Victorian culture: the necessity for the offspring to be present by their parents’ death bed, hence the crucial importance of the family death bed scene (Dickens was famous for these).

.....  
<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 157.



In both cases, the intensity of the cruelty which, at first sight, is unnecessary, conforms to a rationality that is not individual and emotional, but social. What Heathcliff seeks to destroy is not so much individuals as social positions. As a result, he exerts his new power in three privileged fields, in which he practises systematic destruction: the family, property and the law.

We have seen the main instances of his successful attempts to destroy the Linton family. And he does the same with the Earnshaws: he ruins Hindley Earnshaw and gets hold of his property, Wuthering Heights; he causes his death by physically manhandling him; he captures the inheritance of his son, Hareton Earnshaw, whom he reduces to the position in which he himself was when a child. This assault on the family is aimed at overturning the old social relations of domination: the “old families” disappear, or rather are reduced to a state of subservience, as power is now in the hand of the ex-servant. This clearly appears in the case of Heathcliff’s wife, Isabella: “So much had circumstances altered their positions, that he would certainly have struck a stranger as a born and bred gentleman; and his wife, as a thorough little slattern!”<sup>4</sup>.

The dissolution of the old families is hastened by an assault on property. Heathcliff, whom Nelly Dean describes as a miser, manages to appropriate the property of both the Lintons and the Earnshaws, which enables him to deprive the second generation of their rightful inheritance and reduces them to a state of dependence. And it is true that he behaves like a miser in that he doesn’t make use of his ill-gotten fortune and continues to live a life of abstinence. In other words, he is not so much a miser as a revolutionary, who overturns property relations in so far as they are the basis of relations of domination.

Lastly, Heathcliff now has the power of the law on his side. When Edgar Linton becomes aware of his coming death, he seeks to protect his daughter Catherine’s inheritance by making changes to his will. But the local attorney is now the legal instrument of the new master and he manages to postpone his visit to Edgar Linton, who dies leaving his daughter’s inheritance unprotected. The law has not changed its function, as the instrument of the domination of the ruling class rather than the expression of an abstract universal right: it is now clearly the servant of the new ruling class.

The time has come for an interpretative jump. I have moved from the neutral language of social groups (the higher vs. the lower orders) to the language of class. What I am describing, therefore, is the destruction of the instruments of domination of the old, pre-revolutionary ruling classes by the new, emergent ruling class. If the said “old” ruling classes are the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy or gentry, as was the case at the time of the writing of Emily Brontë’s novel, then the name of this

.....  
4 Ibid, p. 146.

destruction is the dictatorship of the proletariat. Hence my provocative central thesis: Heathcliff's revenge stages (is a metaphor for) the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The provocation is immediately countered by two objections, one chronological, the other epistemological. Even if the phrase appears in Marx as early as *The Class Struggle in France*, first published only three years after our novel (Marx is describing the communism of Blanqui, in its three characteristics: a permanent declaration of revolution, the class dictatorship of the proletariat and the suppression of all classes), the concept was not independently developed before the texts on the Paris Commune, and it had to wait for Lenin not only to produce the theory of it but to put it into practice. This objection is weak: neither the class struggle nor, in E.P. Thompson's terms, "the making of the working class," waited for the scientific concept to be produced. But it does take into account the retired life the Brontë sisters led in their parsonage, far from the madding crowd and seemingly oblivious of the social unrest by which most of Europe was torn and which culminated in the revolutions of 1848. The second objection is even more serious: I am introducing a concept, which makes sense within a field, the theory of the state, into another field, the literary field, in which it is totally irrelevant. In other words, how can I read an expression of exacerbated romantic passion, which is individual and strictly subjective (*parce que c'était lui, parce que c'était elle*) in terms of the rational behaviour of a social class, as it conducts the class struggle against its class enemy? Answering the first objection will be easy, but the second will take a little more time.

### 5. Conjuncture.

The retired life of the Brontë sisters is mere appearance. Their Yorkshire was not only a landscape of wild moors, it was one the main sites of the industrial revolution. The contrast between the landscapes of Emily Brontë's and Jane Austen's novels is not so much between the sublime Yorkshire heath and the charms of Hertfordshire as between a county where the industrial revolution, with its emergent working class, occurred and an agricultural, still semi-feudal county, the site of Cobbett's rural rides.

And the class struggle did come close to the Brontë family. In the history of the luddite troubles which I have read, the reverend Patrick Brontë makes an appearance, even if it is in the guise of a minor character.<sup>5</sup> He witnessed the night marches of the luddite weavers and was said to carry a brace of pistols in his pockets in case he was attacked by enraged revolutionists. The anecdote must have been part of the family folklore, as we find a trace of it in the opening pages of

.....  
<sup>5</sup> Reid 1988, p. 31-7.

*Shirley*, where the Irish curate, Mr Malone, carries pistols in his pockets and spends the night drinking in the local mill owner's counting house, under the pretext of protecting his threatened property.

True it is that the luddite troubles took place in 1812, and the novel was written in the eighteen forties, but the memory of what had been one of the first examples of class struggle by an emergent proletariat was still alive. All the more so as the forties were a time of social and political turmoil. A history of the early Victorian period states that "no period in British history has been richer in movements for radical and social reform than the years 1830-1850".<sup>6</sup> This is of course an allusion to the Chartist movement, the first time the British working-class produced a political party to represent its interests, much to the dismay of the ruling classes, which used all the instruments of repression at their disposal to crush the Chartists. The same history quotes an old Chartist who, at the end of the century, reminisced:

People who have not shared in the hopes of the Chartists, who have no personal knowledge of the deep and intense feeling which animated them, can have little conception of the difference between our own times and those of fifty or sixty years ago. The whole governing classes – Whigs even more than Tories – were not only disliked, they were positively hated by the working population. Nor was this hostility to their own countrymen less manifest on the side of the "better orders"?<sup>7</sup>

It would appear that hatred, the feeling dominant in Heathcliff's psyche during the long years of his revenge, was widely shared among the antagonistic social classes involved in the class struggle. It would also appear, therefore, that the historical conjuncture is not absent from the novel, even if we must take the only chronological information supplied by the text, the single date "1801", as the usual *in illo tempore* of fairy tales. The part the luddite troubles play in the collective psyche of the Brontë family is equivalent to those dreams analysed by Freud in which the dreamer, on the eve of a challenging day, re-sits an exam he passed with distinction when he had to take it: as with the Luddites who were duly defeated, so it will be with the Chartists who are threatening our social order.

We find yet another indication of the influence of the historical conjuncture on the writing of the novel in the fact that roughly at the same time, Charlotte Brontë was writing *Shirley*, which was published in 1849 and whose eponymous character is said to have been inspired

.....  
6 Harrison 1971, p. 179.

7 Ibid., p. 186.

by her sister Emily. That novel, together with novels by Disraeli, Charles Kingsley and Mrs Gaskell is one of the so-called “working-class” novels, which sought to take into account the new social question of what was not yet called the class struggle. The novel, set at the time of the Luddite troubles, contains a famous scene of the attack of a textile mill by a crowd of unemployed workers.

It would seem, therefore, that the phrase, the dictatorship of the proletariat, is not entirely irrelevant for a reading of *Wuthering Heights*, in both its aspects of dictatorship (Heathcliff’s systematic use of his total power to destroy the old social order) and of proletariat (the political revolution whereby the lower orders become dominant). But two problems remain for my Marxist reading of the novel. The metaphor is very indirect and there is no question of a reflection of concrete historical events, as there is in the “working-class” novels – this indirection remains to be analysed. And my initial question, why does Heathcliff suddenly give up? - in other words why does the novel change its mode from tragedy to comedy? - still remains unanswered.

## 6. Feeling.

Indirection first. There is no question in *Wuthering Heights* of the “realism” of *Shirley* and other working-class novels. If realism there is, in other words if the historical conjuncture is somehow inscribed in the novel, it is not a realism of actions and events, but of affect, of what Raymond Williams calls a “structure of feeling”.<sup>8</sup> We must try to describe that structure of feeling.

The 1840s were an era of social turmoil. Troubled times are the cause of social feeling as intense as it is deep. But such feeling is unevenly distributed among classes. As we saw, the feeling that dominated among the working classes was one of class hatred. There were good reasons for this: the violent proletarianisation of the weavers (which affected Yorkshire); the crushing of the luddite revolt that ensued; the violent repression of all demands for political reform, as exemplified in the Peterloo massacre; and, last but not least, the repression of the Chartist unrest. But we also saw that such intense class feeling was shared by the ruling classes, where it took the twin forms of class hatred for “the great unwashed” and of the fear that the revolt might be successful and the social order overturned. This powerful affect produced policies of harsh repression and oppression (remember the Tolpuddle martyrs, who were transported to Australia for daring to found an agricultural workers’ trade union), but it also produced apotropaic symbolic practices, that evoked the possibility of a rising of the working classes only to stage its defeat. This is the ideological function of the

.....  
<sup>8</sup> Williams 1976, p.132

working-class novel, of which *Shirley* is an excellent example: the point of view adopted is that of the ruling classes, of the mill-owners, the landed gentry and its parsons and the Luddites are described as a bunch of imbeciles led by a handful of inebriated scoundrels.

But such “realism” is not the only way for the historical conjuncture to be inscribed in the novel. The melodrama of the Gothic tale is another form of inscription. This is why Heathcliff in his revenge is consistently described as a devil. “Is Mr Hetahcliff a man?”, as his wife Isabella famously asks Nelly Dean. And she provides the answer herself: he is not a man but a devil and a monster. Even as the monstrosity of Frankenstein’s monster evokes the revolutionary mob, the *sans culotte* of the French revolution,<sup>9</sup> Heathcliff’s devilry is an indirect evocation of the possibility of the success of the Chartists, of the overthrow of the ruling classes and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

We understand now the intensity of Heathcliff’s apparently unnecessary cruelty (that confines to sadism), as we may answer the question which provided my starting point, namely the seemingly arbitrary passage from tragedy to comedy. The grandeur of Emily Brontë’s novel is that it takes the evocation of the possibility of revolution to its logical extreme, the dictatorship of the proletariat, with the violence and destruction it involves and that it is the only novel to do so (in *Shirley*, the attempt against the mill ends in defeat and flight for the attackers, whose leaders are relentlessly pursued, arrested, tried and duly transported). But because this evocation has apotropaic function, the novel must end in the restoration of the threatened social order, even if it at the cost of a *deus ex machina*, an arbitrary authorial intervention whereby Heathcliff suddenly gives up and dies. His death duly reestablishes the bourgeois social order in its three aspects of family (the coming marriage of Hareton Earnshaw and the second Catherine), property (they will both recover their misappropriated fortunes) and the law (which will again guarantee that all is as it should be for the dominant classes). Heathcliff’s death is the symbolic equivalent of the arrest and trial of the luddite leaders in *Shirley* – but unlike them, he has been able to wield power for the whole length of his revenge, systematically to practise the inversion of power relations that we now call the dictatorship of the proletariat, to revel in the proletarian tragedy of social revolution, before the usual bourgeois farce of the restoration of the power of the upper orders is finally enacted. As Marx famously said (in the opening pages of *The 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*), events occur twice, first as tragedy, then as comedy or farce.

.....  
9 Lecerclre 1988.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aristotle 1963, *Poetics*, London: Dent & Dutton  
Brontë, Emily 2003, *Wuthering Heights*, London: Penguin. 1847  
Harrison, J.F.C. 1971, *The Early Victorians, 1832-51*, London: Panther  
Lecerclé, Jean-Jacques 1998 *Frankenstein : mythe et philosophie*, Paris: PUF.  
Robert Reid, *Land of Lost Content*, London: Cardinal, 1988  
R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: OUP, 1976

C  
R  
I  
S  
I  
S  
  
&  
  
C  
R  
I  
T  
I  
Q  
U  
E  
  
/

Volume 10  
Issue 2