

A Deconstructionist Reading of *Wuthering Heights*

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I. Introduction to Deconstructive Text

The ledge, where I placed my candle, had a few mildwed books piled up in one corner; and it was covered with writing scratched on the paint, This writing, however, was nothing but a name repeated in all kinds of characters, large and small—*Catherine Earnshaw*, here and there varied to *Catherine Heathcliff*, and then again to *Catherine Linton*.

In rapid listlessness I leant my head against the window, and continued spelling over Catherine Earnshaw—Heathcliff—Linton, till my eyes closed; but had not rested five minutes when a glare of white letters started from the dark, as vivid as spectres—the air swarmed with Catherines; and rousing myself to dispel the obtrusive name, I discovered my candle wick reclining on one of the antique volume, and perfuming the place with an odour of roasted calf-skin.”

Who is reading these “floating signifiers?” What are these “Catherines” that swarm “as vivid as spectres”? Here I am citing one text in order to read another text. As Jacques

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1) Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1972), pp. 25-26. Further references from this text will be given parenthetically by page number.

Derrida has written, "One text reads another Each 'text' is a machine with multiple reading heads for other texts."²⁾ According to Vincent B. Leitch, this citation is a "con-text" which "implies a text and an environment, which necessarily means a difference exists between these entities."³⁾ If the context is limiting, this implies a "border" to the text, but I have already overrun the borders by my citation within this paper :

The text is framed and bounded. The context limits the text. Only through a controlled application of difference can the separation text/context appear and persist. All of which means that the matter of context depends on the operation of difference and the installation of borders. Once borders are overrun and difference is set loose, context multiplies itself to infinity.⁴⁾

This follows Derrida's understanding of the theory of "iterability" or "the structure of the remnant,"⁵⁾ which is an "inherent process of writing (*écriture and* *trace*)."⁶⁾ Iterability by suggesting differences subverts the context of the writing : "The activity of *iteration* . . . inaugurates difference and subverts stabilizing context. *Iteration* describes the possibility of writing itself. Without it there could be no writing."⁷⁾ Because context is mobile and has no limits, this leads to the idea of intertextuality which implies a mobility between texts and seemingly infinite borders. In order to discuss the citation, however, it must be recognized as a text within a text named *Wuthering Heights*. But within this writing it can be cited in terms of a way of discussing the critical method of deconstructionism.

II. Deconstructionist Questions

To return to the initial question about the speaker, there is a "narratorial voice", which in Derrida's definition is the "voice of a subject recounting something, remembering an event or a historical sequence, knowing who he is, where he is, and what he is talking about."⁸⁾ The speaker as a subject describes himself as leaning his head in "vapid

2) Jacques Derrida, "Living on," *Deconstruction & Criticism* (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 107.

3) Vincent B. Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 160.

4) Leitch p. 160.

5) Derrida, p. 81.

6) Leitch, p. 160.

7) Leitch, p. 160.

8) Derrida, p. 104.

listlessness". The word "vapid" is marked by a lack of energy or enthusiasm: "lacking or having lost life, sharpness, or flavor; inspid; flat; without liveliness or spirit; dull or tedious (*The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*). But this "I", this "ego" who describes himself as lacking energy, acts "to dispel the obtrusive name." He "scatters, disperses, dissipates, dispects," which are all synonyms which "cause something, considered as a mass or aggregate, to break up" (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*). The "I" or the actor in this narrative scatters the vertiginous signifiers, the "Catherines", in the metaphor the "bees". The word "obtrusive" from obturde+ive is associated with "bees", as "obtrude" implies "to thrust (something) forward or upon a person, especially without warrant or invitation; to thrust forth; push out" (*The Random House Dictionary*). This vapid and listless "I" acts with force to "dispel" the unwanted, undesired "Catherines", as he discovers that he is burning an ancient text with his candle.

To respond to the second question about "Catherines", it will be helpful to dismantle some key words. The word "swarm" is associated with the action of bees; accordingly, the "Catherines" that swarm like bees are like vertiginous members of the insect family of Hymenoptera, i.e. from the Greek hymenopteros, "membrane-wing". The names are repeated and transformed écriture, scratched into the wood of a windowsill, scratched on the edge of membrane, a hymen. All the three variations have the name "Catherine" in common. Catherine influenced by the Greek, *katharos*(pure), implies the catharsis or a purifying or figurative cleansing of the emotions or in psychoanalysis a technique used to relieve tension and anxiety by bringing repressed material to consciousness. Thus, the etymological meanings of the key words are related to sexual imagery, which will be more clarified as this writing goes.

III. Narratorial Voices as Misinterpretations

The "I" in the citation is the narratorial voice named Lockwood who, after his dream experience, decides to "decypher her (Catherine's) faded hieroglyphics" (p. 26) that he has found in her old diary, which might be another text within a text. Lockwood, representing the logocentricism of traditional criticism, strives for meaning and fights against the signifiers detached from their signified. He does not accept the reality that there is no lultimate signification to this writing, and that this writing is enigmatic and inexhaustable. As J. Hillis Miller says, however, "Seeing is never simply a matter of identifying correctly what is seen Seeing is always interpretation, that is, what is

seen is always taken as a sign standing for something else, as an emblem, a hieroglyph, a parable."⁹ These "Catherines" are merely what Derrida calls "traces" or "effects of meaning," which is allied to the conception of the "differance". M. H. Abrams clarifies the conception of Derrida's "differance" :

Derrida's point is that the effect of meaning in any utterance is generated by its differences from innumerable alternative meanings, and at the same time that, since this meaning can never come to rest on an absolute presence, its determinate specification is deferred, from one substitutive linguistic interpretation to another, in a movement without end. The meaning of any utterance or writing, as Derrida puts it in another of his numerous coinages, is disseminated—a term which includes among its deliberately contradictory significations the notions of having the effect of meaning, of dispersing meanings among innumerable possibilities, and of negating meaning.¹⁰

Thus, in the dream when Lockwood attempts to scatter the "Catherines", he is performing a deconstruction on their meaning.

Lockwood actually has three dreams in succession which are significant to deconstruct the text. In the second dream he dreams of going to hear a sermon by the Reverend Jabes Branderham titled, "Seventy Times Seven, and the First of the Seventy-First," with Joseph, the servant at the Heights :

"Sir," I exclaimed, 'sitting here within these four walls, at one stretch, I have endured and forgiven the four hundred and ninety heads of your discourse. Seventy times seven times have I plucked up my hat and been about to depart—Seventy times seven times have you deposterously forced me to resume my seat. The four hundred and ninety first is too much. Fellow martyrs, have at him! Drag him down, and crush him to atoms, that place which knows him may know him no more!"

"*Thou art the Man!*" cried Jabes, after a solemn pause, leaning over his cushion. 'Seventy times seven didst thou gapingly contort thy visage—seventy times seven times did I take counsel with my soul—Lo, this is human weakness; this also may be absolved! The First of the Seventy-First is come. Brethren, execute upon him the judgement written such honour have all His saints!" (p. 29)

9) J. Hillis Miller, "Optic and Semiotic in Middlemarch," *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, ed. Jerome H. Buckley (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 143.

10) M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981), p. 38.

So, in the dream, Lockwood is attacked by all the congregation present for his sin of unforgiveness. This dream merges into the third and last dream. When he hears the tapping of Jabez Branderham on the pulpit during the uproar, that sound becomes a branch of a fir tree tapping against the window pane, and that sound evolves into a little hand rapping on the window pane. Unable to unlatch the window to stop the sound, Lockwood breaks the glass and in the nightmare his "fingers closed on the fingers of a little, ice-cold hand!" (p. 30). The ghost cries that she is "Catherine Linton" who is come home to Wuthering Heights after twenty years. Lockwood, in terror, rubs the little wrist back and forth against the broken pane to make the ghost go away. Then, in order to keep the small child from coming in as she cries to do, he piles Catherine's books (texts) up against the broken window.

Having had two dreams about a "Catherine" as he lies in the paneled closet bed which had been her old bedroom at Wuthering Heights, Lockwood is understandably interested in her identity. Because the novel is constructed with a double "narratorial voice," the story that Lockwood writes is mediated through the voice of Nelly Dean. As the housekeeper of Thrushcross Grange at the beginning of the novel, she gives her interpretation of the story to Lockwood and her interpretation is necessarily, as Miller says, a "misinterpretation": "For Miller all interpretation is misinterpretation. To read is to connect elements and construct patterns out of the diffuse materials in a writing. As a reader works through the chain of words in a text, he or she imposes meaning in an act of willed mastery. Texts are unreadable—or undecidable—in that they allow a host of potential misreadings."¹¹ Nelly's narrative attempts to unravel the mystery of the "Catherines" for Lockwood, and her narrative creates the text out of her memories.

Nelly Dean's story is about the two families who lived at Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange: The Earnshaws and the Lintons. Having grown up as a daughter of a servant to the Earnshaws, Nelly was present when Mr. Earnshaw brought Heathcliff home from Liverpool and adopted him into the family. She narrates the intertwining of these characters through two generations until the point that Lockwood arrives on the scene as a tenant at Thrushcross Grange. Heathcliff as a child and young man had been bullied and mistreated by Hindley Earnshaw, who was jealous of the newcomer, but had developed an abnormally close relationship with Hindley's sister, Catherine Earnshaw. Nelly relates how Catherine and Heathcliff ran across the moors to observe life at the other

11) Leitch, p. 190.

great house, Thrushcross Grange, and became acquainted with Edgar and Isabella Linton. Edgar falls in love with Catherine and they ultimately marry. Overhearing Catherine tell Nelly Dean that it would degrade her to marry him, Heathcliff runs away from the Heights for three years, returning after Edgar and Catherine's marriage. Having mysteriously become a rich gentleman during this absence, Heathcliff sets about to revenge himself against Hindley who had married and had a child named Hareton. Hindley's wife, Frances, dies, and Heathcliff, taking advantage of his grief and despondency over her death, begins to gamble with him and generally degrades his position. He also intensely hates Edgar Linton for taking Catherine from him and in spite marries Isabella who foolishly has seen him as a romantic. Catherine dies in childbed for her daughter Cathy, and Hindley is in a drunken stupor. And Heathcliff has Hindley's son under his control and he is master of Wuthering Heights. He affects the second generation as horribly as the first, taking his son, Linton, after his wife's death (Isabella had run away from him before the child was born and resided in southern England) and using him cruelly to gain control of Cathy through forcing the two young people to marry. Through some legal maneuvers, he disinherits Cathy from her right to Thrushcross Grange and instead the title of the estate falls to Linton when Edgar dies. Linton only survives the marriage by two months and leaves the Grange to Heathcliff who now has succeeded in gaining control over both estates. His revenge is seemingly complete when the novel opens, but he has not attained the oneness with Catherine that he has longed for throughout his life.

Wuthering Heights has itself to a variety of interpretations or misinterpretations since it was published in 1847 by "Ellis Bell." The very fact that it was published under a pen name opened this text to more mystery and thus extended its borders to include all the ambiguity revolving around who this "Ellis Bell" actually was: male or female, known or unknown. All the Brontë biography has contributed to the textuality of the writing called *Wuthering Heights*. The novel's two part structure involving the passionate love of Heathcliff and Catherine in the first generation and the calmer love affair of Cathy and Hareton in the second generation has raised countless questions as to the authorial intent and the meaning of the story. Behind the ambiguity and variation of interpretation lies the enigmatic personality of Heathcliff and his horrible need to accomplish his revenge.

In order to see how in Miller's words the text is subverted and undercut,¹²⁾ it is necessary to look more closely at the roles of Nelly and Lockwood, the two narrators who write

12) J. Hillis Miller, "The Critic as Host," *Deconstruction and Criticism*, p. 252.

the story, for they function as the means to deconstruct the text. Lockwood's character shows every sign of sexual repression as he indicates in the little anecdote he tells about himself early in his narrative. He relates how he had fallen in love with a young "goddess", but the moment she responded to him, he "shrunk icily into myself, like a snail, at every glance retired colder and farther" (p. 15). Having come to the north Yorkshire moors to escape from people, he calls himself "a misanthropist" and considers, at first, that he and Heathcliff are of a similar disposition: "I bestow my own attributes over-liberally on him" (p. 15). Besides a difficulty in giving and receiving love, he exhibits a cruel and sadistic trait in his dream images.

IV. 'Nature' and 'Supplement'

In order to find the loose stone of the text and unravel the mystery, it is necessary to look at how Nelly Dean functions as well. She tells the story of the two families to Lockwood as he recuperates from a cold. All of the tale of the past unfolds from her point of view; her action is a determining factor in the plot. She, thus, gives Lockwood an ambiguous narrative because she seemingly betrays the other characters according to her own desires. To use Derrida's term, Nelly Dean's actions seem to represent the "supplement" in the story. Discussing the concept of Derrida's "supplement", Leitch illustrates the relationship between nature and culture: "In the evolution of man from nature into society, the latter stage of existence is pictured as an addition to the original happy state of nature. In other words, culture supplements nature. Before too long culture comes to take the place of nature. Culture, then, functions as a supplement in two ways: it adds on and it substitutes. At the same time it is potentially both detrimental and beneficial."¹³ Nelly vacillates in her decision adding to the confusion usually in terms of culture over nature. The story has a number of antithetical elements: Heathcliff and Catherine opposed to Edgar and Isabella or Nature against Culture; the image of *Wuthering Heights* as opposed to Thrushcross Grange carrying the same image, the demonic Heathcliff against the saintly Edgar. Nelly as the self-proclaimed arbiter, as a representation of "supplement", "comes naturally to put itself in Nature's place."¹⁴

In the crucial scene when Catherine confides to Nelly that she is going to marry Edgar

13) Leitch, p. 170.

14) Leitch, p. 173.

Linton instead of Heathcliff because "It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff, now . . ." (p. 72), Nelly deliberately does not let Catherine know that Heathcliff overhears the conversation. She instead lies to Catherine that Joseph, the servant, made the noise. Only Nelly hears Catherine's confession of love for Heathcliff: "so he shall never know how I love him; and that, not because he's handsome, Nelly, but because he's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same, and Linton's is as different as a moonbeam from lightning, or frost from fire" (p. 72). These words haunt the novel, adding to the mystery of their relationship, and because Heathcliff does not hear them, lead to his motivation for revenge.

Nelly gives Lockwood all the details of Heathcliff's revenge against Hindley and Edgar, implying that Heathcliff probably killed Hindley at least indirectly and describing how he kept Edgar's daughter imprisoned at Wuthering Heights while Edgar lay dying. However, she never deals with the fundamental breakdown in Heathcliff's character. In her narration, he receives her interpretation of Heathcliff's great passion for unity with Catherine up until the final scenes when he is dying and imagining himself possessed by her spirit. However, Nelly is not able to deal with the fact that Catherine is only a "floating signifier" for Heathcliff like the whirling "Catherines" in Lockwood's dream. The loose stone lies embedded in Lockwood's dream: Heathcliff can never seek forgiveness so he is never really able to love at all. Heathcliff is totally caught up in his self-referentiality; he is in his own hell because he is not in relation to anyone else. He lives only in his illusions which ultimately destroy him when he assumedly has conquered all of his enemies. He cries out to Nelly: "The entire world is a dreadful collection of memoranda that she did exist, and that I have lost her!" (p. 255). In reality, Heathcliff and Catherine are "vivid spectres" whose relationship remains divided by the differences between them, her betrayal and his hatred. This unforgiveness becomes the unbreakable membrane (the hymen) that separates them.

The "aporia" or "irreconcilable paradox"¹⁵⁾ which subverts the text is Lockwood's interpretation of the final rest and peace of the characters of Heathcliff, Catherine, and Edgar. Lockwood's interpretation or misinterpretation of Nelly Dean's story leads him to write in his text:

I lingered round them, under that benign sky; watched the moths fluttering among the heath and hare-bells; listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass; and wondered

15) Abrams, p. 40.

how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth. (p. 266)

However, Nelly has told him that the "country folds . . . would swear on their Bible that he *walks*" and often with a woman (p. 265).

V. Conclusion

To return to the etymology of the name, "Catherine" (catharsis), Lockwood interprets the story from his own self-reference. He presumably is writing a diary, a text, and so in his text within a text he has experienced a catharsis of his own emotions. Out of the cruelty and sadism of Heathcliff's behaviour, he has sublimated his own similar tendencies. Because of his repression, he is able to interpret the ending of the story as a peaceful resolution. Lockwood is a character who does not act; instead he sublimates action. The suppressed side of his personality appears in his dreams in which he attacks the "Catherines", Jabez Branderham, and the ghost of Catherine. He is as incapable of giving a true interpretation as in Nelly; they both give their own misinterpretation. Thus they both are "narrative voices" to use Derrida's explanation. According to Derrida, Blachot distinguishes the "narrative voice" from the "narratorial voice", and defines the former as "a natural voice that utters the work from the placeless place where the work is silent."¹⁶

Factually, Nelly remains the survivor in the story. To use the analogy of the swarm of bees at the beginning of this writing, Nelly Dean emerges as the beginning of this writing. Nelly Dean emerges as the beginning of this writing. Nelly Dean emerges as the queen bee. "The queen honeybee does not rule the colony, but she is the force that holds it together" (*The World Book Encyclopedia*, 1983). All the characters ultimately are only swarming signifiers seeing only from their own points of view, cut off from their signification. Nelly and Heathcliff, and Lockwood all add to the ambiguity of the text. Charlott Brontë in her "preface to the 1850 Edition" of her sister's novel called Nelly a character of "true benevolence and homely fidelity" (p. 11). However, near the end of the novel Nelly says: "I seated myself in a chair, and rocked, to and fro, passing harsh judgement on my many derelictions of duty; from which, it struck me then, all the misfortunes of all my employers sprang." But she doesn't really think this because she goes on to say: "It was not the case, in reality, I am aware; but it was, in my imagination, that dismal night, and

16) Derrida, p. 104.

I thought Heathcliff himself less guilty than I" (p. 220). A wide variety of interpretation is possible for anyone of these characters in an uncanny text. The undecidability of the novel would lead one to ascribe to Miller's opinion that texts deconstruct themselves, and that "There can never be 'objective' interpretation—only more or less vital misreadings."¹⁷ The reader of *Wuthering Heights* ultimately writes the text.

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17) Leitch, p. 191.

〈국문초록〉

『폭풍의 언덕』에 대한 해체주의 글읽기

변종민

작크 데리다(Jacques Derrida)를 중심으로 하는 해체주의(Deconstructionism) 이론은 근본적으로 〈언어의 불안정성〉에 그 개념적 기초를 두고 있다. 〈기표〉(signifiant)와 〈의의〉(signifié)의 임의적이고, 불안정하며, 유동적인 관계를 강조하는 해체주의에서는 언어의 의미를 끊임없이 생성되고 지워지는 일종의 〈흔적〉(trace)이자, 상대적 변별성에 의해 무한히 그 의미가 유보되는 〈차연〉(différance)의 개념으로 이해한다. 그래서 인간의 모든 언어활동은 끊임이 〈흔적구조〉를 남기며 무한한 〈의미화〉의 과정을 거치는 비결정적이고 비종결적인 특성을 지니고 있다. 따라서 작가가 글을 쓰는 행위도, 작품속의 이야기가 서술되는 과정도, 독자가 글을 읽고 비평행위를 하는 과정도 모두 〈의미화〉의 한 과정으로서 창조적 가치가 있는 것이다. 이렇게 볼 때 해체주의라는 것은 기존의 것을 해체하는 데서 끝나는 것이 아니라, 해체를 통해 또 하나의 〈흔적〉을 남기며 새로운 〈의미화〉의 과정을 시도하는 〈탈-구축〉의 개념을 내포하고 있다.

이 논문은 데리다의 해체주의 이론을 중심으로 에밀리 브론테(Emily Brontë)의 『폭풍의 언덕』을 새롭게 읽어보므로서 해체주의적 실제비평의 가능성을 논의해 본 것이다. 작품속의 극히 일부를 인용해 해체를 시도한 결과, 이 소설은 두 명의 서술자들, 즉 Lockwood와 Nelly에 의해 이루어지는 이중적 서술구조를 지니고 있다. 그런데 이들 각자는 나름대로의 이유와 방법에 의해 Catherine이라는 여자주인공을 중심으로 하는 본래의 이야기를 오역(misinterpretation)하고, 해체하고, 재진술하는 이른바 〈탈-구축〉의 과정을 밟게되며, 결국 이 과정속에서 텍스트의 내용은 〈흔적〉과 〈차연〉에 의해 구성되게 된다.

주로 기억을 통해서 진술되는 Nelly의 서술은 오역일 수 밖에 없으며, Lockwood는 자신의 심리적 성적 억압을 반영시키므로서 Nelly의 오역을 재 오역한다. 그 결과 텍스트는, 문화(culture)가 자연(nature)을 대체하듯, 두 명의 서술자들에 의한 오역의 補換(supplement)으로 그 중심내용을 이루게 된다. 결국 Lockwood와 Nelly의 서술은 텍스트의 애매모호성을 증가시킬 뿐이며, 독자는 불가사의의 텍스트(uncanny text)을 통해 폭넓고 다양한 해석을 이끌어 내게 된다. 요컨대 텍스트는 텍스트 자체를 파괴하게 되고, 비결정적이고 비종결적인 독서만이 있을 뿐이며, 객관적 해석은 있을 수 없는 것이다. 이렇게 볼 때 『폭풍의 언덕』의 독자는 궁극적으로 텍스트 그 자체를 쓰고 있는 것이다.