Liberal Anguish: *Wuthering Heights* and the Structures of Liberal Thought

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In 1961 Raymond Williams wrote: "we need quite different forms of analysis, which would enable us to recognize the important contradictions . . . between different parts of the general process of change."[1] Looking back on Williams's call, it seems to have been an early articulation of the centrality that "complexity" would assume in studies of Victorian liberalism for the decades that followed his *Long Revolution*; Williams's search for forms of analysis dealing with complexity might well qualify as the defining effort of liberalism critique. The existence of apparently contradictory yet intertwined conceptual commitments in liberalism has set the critical agenda for decades now. Autonomy and dependence, individual and community, abstraction and embodiment, objectivity and situatedness, progress and hierarchy, freedom and subjection, optimism and bleakness, control and arbitrariness,

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[1] Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), p. 294.

reason and emotion, rationalism and enchantment—and the list continues with slight variations on themes—all trouble critical thought. These dualisms have provoked the complexity imagery animating liberalism critique: tension, paradox, incoherence, indeterminacy, subversion, contradiction. The source of complexity is, more often than not, the second of the two terms in each of these conceptual pairs: liberal idealism lies in the first commitment; its historical reality is made complex, for better or worse, through the second.

Yet analyses dealing with complexity involved in the process of change themselves evolve. Studies of Victorian liberalism of this century appear distinctive in their efforts to explore new frameworks for theorizing complexity, which salvage liberalism from devastating critique. These frameworks develop the observation of complexity into nuanced accounts of its structures. They offer new ways of conceptualizing the coexistence of incongruities without downplaying the historical meaningfulness of either side of the dualisms at hand, and thus move beyond suspicious hermeneutics toward new forms of evaluation. Less or more inclined to reembrace liberalism, criticism now seems to develop new responses to the anxiety that Williams had captured.

Examples include Elaine Hadley's *Living Liberalism* (2010), which recovers abstract embodiment as the form through which liberal ideals such as disinterestedness and reflection were practiced as a politics in embodied ways.[2] Lauren Goodlad's *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State* (2003) explores Victorian liberal governance beyond Foucauldian paradigms.[3] The task of progressive liberal thinkers, Goodlad argues, was to imagine a governing agency that would be rational, all-embracing, and efficient, but also anti-bureaucratic, personalized, and liberatory, a project enacted through shifting ideals of character. Amanda Anderson's *The Powers of Distance* (2001) explores forms of contending with the tension between objectivity

[2] Elaine Hadley, *Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2010).

[3] Lauren M. E. Goodlad, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State: Character and Governance in a Liberal Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2003).

and situatedness.[4] Anderson defends the liberal search for a distanced view not in terms of a successful impartiality, but rather as a self-aware aspirational effort continually facing its own limits. Bruce Robbins's *Upward Mobility and the Common Good* (2007) uncovers the ties between individualist stories of mobility and welfarist concerns with redistribution.[5] Robbins's work lines up with a broad-ranging effort to explore communal aspects of liberalism and consider the forms of their entanglement with liberal atomism.[6] These and other studies collectively reconceive complexity as inherent and therefore challenging for easy assessments of liberalism as a normative program, assessments too suspicious but often also too enthusiastic—for liberal idealism is not, cannot be, revived.

This essay engages a no longer standard exercise in discussions of Victorian liberalism, that of reading a single canonical work, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). It does so, however, for what may be a nonstandard reason. *Wuthering Heights* constitutes an early and sophisticated argument about the structures of complexity in liberalism. Not only does Brontë's novel merit entry into the discussion as a conceptual contribution (rather than an example of liberal complexity), but it also offers an aesthetic enactment of the anguish that liberal structures of complexity were to evoke for generations to follow—the modern anguish of incomprehensibility and eruption at the heart of a liberal order, experienced already at the novel's troubled reception.

Generations of *Wuthering Heights* readers have reiterated a sense of duality in the novel. That sense constitutes one of the very few elements that many contested readings of *Wuthering Heights* are likely to concede. A partial list

[4] Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001).

[5] Bruce Robbins, *Upward Mobility and the Common Good: Toward a Literary History of the Welfare State* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007).

[6] A recent example is Ayelet Ben-Yishai's *Common Precedents: The Presentness of the Past in Victorian Law and Fiction* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), which explores the coexistence of communal and rational-positivist forms of knowing in the Victorian era.

going from the late 1940s to our own time includes treatments of the duality in terms of personal vs. social, spiritual vs. practical, necessary vs. agreeable;[7] daemonic depths of the soul vs. limited and limiting lucidities of consciousness;[8] metaphysical (a reservoir of society's unrealized value) vs. social, personal intensity vs. social domain;[9] woman (emotion, desire) vs. man (worldliness, education, travel, novel-reading);[10] passion vs. social intercourse privileging morality, religion, gender and class;[11] Romantic individualism vs. socialization;[12] and passion vs. contending social forces.[13] The sense of duality has also given rise to discussions of genre: *Wuthering Heights* might be treading between Romanticism and realism. Most generally, the sense of duality has generated rich and often contradictory readings, from which *Wuthering Heights* emerges as an elusive text resisting interpretation.[14]

In the reading that follows I conceptualize the duality in terms of the social and the psychic. These are two alternative

[7] Derek Traversi, "Wuthering Heights after a Hundred Years," in *Emily Brontë: "Wuthering Heights,"* ed. Miriam Allott (London: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 157–76.

[8] Dorothy Van Ghent, "Dark 'Otherness' in *Wuthering Heights,*" in *Emily Brontë: "Wuthering Heights,"* ed. Allott, pp. 177–83.

[9] Terry Eagleton, "Myths of Power in 'Wuthering Heights,'" in *Emily Brontë: "Wuthering Heights,"* ed. Patsy Stoneman (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 118–30.

[10] Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987).

[11] Bette London, "*Wuthering Heights* and the Text Between the Lines," *Papers on Language and Literature*, 24 (1988), 34–52.

[12] Linda M. Shires, "The Aesthetics of the Victorian Novel: Form, Subjectivity, Ideology," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Deirdre David (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), pp. 61–76.

[13] Beth Newman, "*Wuthering Heights* in Its Context(s)," in *Approaches to Teaching Emily Brontë's "Wuthering Heights,"* ed. Sue Lonoff and Terri. A. Hasseler (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2006), pp. 36–43.

[14] Discussions of (and disagreements about) the literary descent of *Wuthering Heights* abound. See for example, Mary Ward, "Introduction to *Wuthering Heights,*" in *Emily Brontë: "Wuthering Heights,"* ed. Allott, p. 103; Jacques Blondel, "Literary Influences on *Wuthering Heights,*" in *Emily Brontë: "Wuthering Heights,"* ed. Allott, pp. 229–41; Nancy Armstrong, "Emily Brontë in and out of Her Time," *Genre*, 15 (1982), 243–64; Lyn Pykett, "Gender and Genre in 'Wuthering Heights': Gothic Plot and Domestic Fiction," in *Emily Brontë: "Wuthering Heights,"* ed. Stoneman, pp. 86–99; and U. C. Knoepflmacher, *Emily Brontë: "Wuthering Heights"* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989). Readings of *Wuthering Heights* typically open with a review of the history of critical disagreement. For a recent example, see Joseph Carroll, "The Cuckoo's History: Human Nature in *Wuthering Heights,*" *Philosophy and Literature*, 32 (2008), 241–57.

logics for interpreting human experience, which evoke the incongruous dualisms involved in liberal consciousness. My reading maintains a dialogue with existing analyses of duality in *Wuthering Heights* while slightly shifting the emphasis in two senses. First, I underline the crucial relation of these dualisms to complexities constitutive of liberal thought in Victorian times. Second, I observe a subtle difference between the social/psychic duality and other dualities noted by readers. The social/psychic tension does not draw only on familiar contradictions; it tends to deepen the sense of incoherence by pushing beyond them. The point will become clear through the close readings that follow. Estrangements of familiar dualisms deny readers the comfort of readability of social relations and personal actors. Some dualisms, like progress/hierarchy, or individual/community, are simply too accessible in the nineteenth century to impart discomfort—to create an aesthetic *experience*, not just an intellectual understanding—of complexity. To offer an experience of complexity, *Wuthering Heights* moves beyond the familiar zone. The significance of the tension for the discussion that follows thus lies less in the reframed content of specific dualisms, and more in the very act of reframing. Pushing beyond (some) familiar dualisms, the social/psychic relationality enables a particularly acute enactment of complexity—an aesthetics of incoherence capturing a liberal anguish.

Lockwood, the socialized visitor to the psychic Heights, is trapped in social metaphors:

> "One state resembles setting a hungry man down to a single dish, on which he may concentrate his entire appetite, and do it justice; the other, introducing him to a table laid out by French cooks. He can perhaps extract as much enjoyment from the whole, but each part is a mere atom in his regard and remembrance."[15]

For Lockwood, the residents of the Heights form deeper attachments for lack of multitudinousness available in his world.

[15] Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights: The 1847 Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Richard J. Dunn (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2003), p. 49. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

Lack of multitudinousness emerges, however, in a qualitative difference that Lockwood's quantitative metaphors do not capture. It is not that things matter more; they matter differently. Isabella senses something of the qualitative difference: "I cannot recognise any sentiment which those around [at the Heights] share with me" (*Wuthering Heights*, p. 106).

The social logic in *Wuthering Heights* belongs to "the busy world" (*Wuthering Heights*, p. 196), a realm of the moderate, the rule-bound, the external, the understandable. The source of all of this is an existence understood and mediated through the comparative abstractions offered by the very idea of society, that is through a plurality of associations—including *dissociations*—with other persons and groups of persons, and individuals' priorities (normative, ontological) vis-à-vis such persons and groups. Functional differentiation—or the capitalist division of labor—is an important aspect of the social logic.

The psychic realm, at the heart of the Heights, is, by contrast, intensely emotional, a realm of the inconsistent, and inexplicable. It is not simply antisocial; its qualities emerge—and here lies the crucial difference I should like to emphasize—from an existence *unmediated* by a plurality of interpersonal and group associations, and by the functional differentiation of society. The *specificity* of contact between persons at the Heights emerges from and in psychic combinations that are almost beings. (Think of the representations of Cathy and Heathcliff, a relationship that lacks psychological boundaries between selves, and even, finally, physical ones.) These combinations gain their meaning without the option of nonspecificity—of remote or generic association, and of dissociation—available in the social; without the option of a coherent individual identity constructed in some relation to various persons and groups and to social functions. These comparative abstractions are not part of the processes of meaning-making within the psychic logic. It is not that life in *Wuthering Heights* cannot be understood in social terms; it is that the social is not the controlling frame of reference; the fact that it *can* be is a constant threat.

The social/psychic tension runs through *Wuthering Heights*. It not only bifurcates the novel down the middle, as has often

been argued; it actually bifurcates the novel's entire representational schema.[16] It occurs between frame and embedded stories: the sociality of Lockwood (the frame narrator) is more developed than that of Nelly (the embedded narrator), who is closer to the Heights. It also occurs between houses or families—the more social Grange vs. the psychic Heights, the more socialized Lintons vs. the psychic Earnshaws; within individuals, for example in Heathcliff, who embodies psychic and social elements; and between them and their house, for example between Nelly, who embodies some social elements, and the psychic Heights. The tension is importantly enacted in the novel's name: Wuthering Heights signals the social: it is a name of an estate, with the social-status connotations involved (can you help reading even "Heights" in a double sense?), and a name gaining its meaning from a provincial (read: socially decentered) use of language: "'Wuthering' being a significant provincial adjective." Concurrently, the name draws on the psychic—its atmosphere, at once naturalistic and uncanny, and its deep incoherence: "'Wuthering' . . . descriptive of the atmospheric tumult to which its station is exposed in stormy weather" (*Wuthering Heights*, p. 4).

Wuthering Heights represents the psychic and the social as incompatible logics. Yet their incompatibility does not rely on there being, anywhere, a "pure" case of either, but instead on textual representations of excess: the core of the Heights is excessively psychic, the periphery frame story excessively social, and so forth. The novel lets its characters (narrators included) process and interpret action predominantly through one construction or the other. At the same time that these logics are structurally inseparable on every level of representation in the novel, each of them, through this setting of excesses, becomes a disturbance to the other.

[16] Shires's argument, with which this essay shares many grounds, is actually more complex: while she argues for a bifurcation between the novel's two halves, the middle and end of the novel, on her account, are not committed to either side of the dualism (which she views as Romantic individualism/social pressure) (see Shires, "Aesthetics of the Victorian Novel," pp. 66–67). Yet the analysis can be taken further, as I suggest below.

The social/psychic relationality functions as the text's enabling tension. *Wuthering Heights* registers its historical moment—the rise of liberal consciousness—through the pervasiveness of the tension: an experience of inescapable complexity.

Having grounded this experience, the novel delineates the structure of complexity in two related moves: it marks the social's triumph over the psychic—the point at which the story becomes more recognizable for liberally trained readers; but it also defines that triumph as a matter of a titling of balance only, one in which the psychic remains a constitutive force, capturing a painful locus of disquiet, inherent and enduring, contained within the social. The formal structure of containment thus transpires in two seemingly opposite effects: it delimits the power of the psychic, and it keeps the psychic alive—conceptually secure within Victorian liberalism.[17]

Both the social/psychic tension and the process of containment are represented in the novel through paradigmatic metaphors of Victorian liberalism: promises and money. By closely reading promises and money in *Wuthering Heights*, I aim to underline both the novel's structural dependence on the social/psychic relationality *and* the process of containment, a containment so familiar that its significance has gone almost untheorized.[18] *Wuthering Heights* does not enable disregard; it calls attention to this structure of complexity. In effect, the novel renders the catastrophic qualities of the tale an aesthetic amplification of a broadly applicable anguish, one ingrained in the conceptual structures of a liberal world.

It is illuminating to read *Wuthering Heights* through its three main promissory junctions. In the first junction, Heathcliff arrives as a broken promise, in lieu of presents promised by Mr. Earnshaw to his children and Nelly. In the second and third, Heathcliff moves to power over the

[17] For more on this structure in liberal thought, see Anat Rosenberg, "Entanglements: A Study of Liberal Thought in the Promise of Marriage," *Cardozo Journal of Law & Gender*, 20 (forthcoming 2014).

[18] Beyond suspicious claims of cooptation, that is.

Earnshaws and the Lintons: he comes to own Wuthering Heights and to dominate Hindley's "representative," Hareton, through an exercise of his rights as mortgagee after Hindley dies unable to repay his accumulated game-debts to Heathcliff; then he comes to own Thrushgross Grange and to dominate Edgar's "representatives," Isabella and Catherine, through his own marriage to Isabella and a marriage between Catherine and his son Linton, in both cases following promises of marriage from the women. Around these promises in the embedded story, there is the frame story of Lockwood, connected to the Heights through yet another promise: a lease contract.

The centrality of promises is no coincidence. Promises were a favorite paradigm of Victorian liberal thought, central in *Wuthering Heights* as elsewhere.[19] Here, however, promises stand out as signs of doom. Thus, Lockwood ends his lease contract dismayed. In the embedded story, the first promissory failure by Mr. Earnshaw and the next promissory "successes" by Heathcliff are all junctions contributing to his destructive passion. The common theme informing all of these promissory contexts is the social/psychic tension that makes for the common role of the promises as signs of doom. The social's rise to dominance is signaled in the gradual move in the final chapters of the novel from promises, where the tension is open and turbulent, to money, a social medium that works to contain and delimit the psychic's presence.

Lockwood's frame story surrounds the psychic landscape of the Heights with sociality, a connection achieved through a lease contract.[20] Lockwood's socialized framing of a psychic world, however, is untenable. The tension carries calamity for

[19] Victorian discourses centralized promise as a new paradigm of social relations as older ones, from feudalism to religion, lost their hold. Canonic novels were one site. Another central one worth noting is law, which turned contract—centered on promise—into the heart of private law. For additional discussion, see Anat Rosenberg, "Contract's Meaning and the Histories of Classical Contract Law," *McGill Law Journal*, 59 (2013), 165–207.

[20] Arnold Kettle calls the different view point of Lockwood (and Nelly) a "common-sense point of view": "[Nelly's and Lockwood's] function . . . is partly . . . to comment on it [the story] from a common-sense point of view and thereby to reveal in part the inadequacy of such common sense" (Arnold Kettle, *Introduction to the English Novel*, 2 vols. [London: Hutchinson House, 1951], I, 141). The choice of relatively "social"

this bewildered tenant: attacked, insulted, and turned ill, Lockwood soon realizes that he and Heathcliff are anything but "a suitable pair to divide the desolation" (*Wuthering Heights*, p. 3). They do not share a joint understanding of desolation, and therefore have nothing to divide.[21] In a comic opening, friendly Lockwood describes Heathcliff: "A capital fellow! He little imagined how my heart warmed towards him when I beheld his black eyes withdraw so suspiciously under their brows" (*Wuthering Heights*, p. 3). The opening is matched by an equally blind and amusing soliloquy of Lockwood toward the close of the novel: "What a realization of something more romantic than a fairy tale it would have been for Mrs. Linton Heathcliff [Catherine], had she and I struck up an attachment . . . and migrated together into the stirring atmosphere of the town!" (p. 232). Lockwood relies on socialized concepts bearing no relation to the psychic state of the Heights; he cannot decipher what he sees. His effort throughout is to impose his own terms on the story. Social sense-making, however, will require overbearing the Heights, and terminating the contract. In the interim (the embedded story), the tension brings disaster.

When Earnshaw comes home with Heathcliff, his children's and Nelly's expectations of promised presents are disappointed. The combined reaction of the disappointed promisees contains a mixture of psychic and social terms. This combined reaction, convergent on Heathcliff, propels the plot of Heathcliff's degradation and revenge.

Hindley asks his father for a fiddle, a figure of careless gaiety, but also one of delicacy and deeper notes. When the fiddle is "crushed to morsels" quite literally by Heathcliff, who is carried by the betraying father, Hindley's untroubled childhood is crushed with it. *Crushed to morsels*: irretrievable, not

narrators goes deeper still. The psychic is the unnarratable; it escapes language. By definition, narrators cannot come from the psychic alone.

[21] And, as Knoepflmacher has noted, a true misanthropist can hardly join another as a "suitable pair" (Knoepflmacher, *Emily Brontë: "Wuthering Heights,"* p. 13). Note, however, that Lockwood, like everyone and everything else in *Wuthering Heights*, contains something of the psychic, but in him this can only appear in his dreams, given his overly socialized character—and even in a dream Lockwood rejects the psychic that is felt by him to belong to the Heights, not to himself.

merely functionally but imaginatively, Hindley's hopes are irrestorable. Hindley reacts with tears; this reaction is more insightful than Nelly credits when she wonders at his "blubber [ing] aloud" (*Wuthering Heights*, p. 30). Hindley can never overcome his crushed-to-morsels fiddle, and he retaliates against Heathcliff. Heathcliff's ensuing revenge is an internalization of the same refusal to readjust. Extreme emotional states in *Wuthering Heights* are about perfections and crushings. Yet Hindley cannot account for the results alone: he is, in himself, too plain, too understandable to account for the psychic state of *Wuthering Heights*. The inverse image of his sister is required here.

Cathy asks for a horse whip. She is barely six, and already less plain-hearted than her brother. Cathy can "ride any horse in the stable" (*Wuthering Heights*, p. 29)—she senses her power, and asks for the instrument that confirms it. Unlike Hindley's crushed fiddle, Cathy's whip is simply lost. The lost whip is replaced by Heathcliff, a new object of power.[22] Cathy spits and grins at Heathcliff—not simply expressing loss, but reacting to and through Heathcliff himself; she at once announces disappointment at the change of terms and reveals her understanding that there is no change of substance. Cathy's complex reaction to her broken promise is reproduced in the following years, most crucially in her decision to marry Edgar, made of dual sentiments: Cathy feels it would degrade her to marry Heathcliff (the sentiment of repulsion introduced at the loss of her promised whip), but she also wishes to create a safe haven for Heathcliff at the Grange (the sentiment of attraction introduced when Heathcliff arrives in lieu of the whip). Cathy's dually motivated desertion ignites Heathcliff's lifelong revenge, which is an internalization not only of Hindley's rigid breakdown, but also of the depths of troubled attachment that Cathy is capable of.

[22] For a "fairy-tale analysis" of the three wishes, claiming that Cathy's wish is figuratively fulfilled, see Sandra Gilbert, "Looking Oppositely: Emily Brontë's Bible of Hell," in *Emily Brontë: "Wuthering Heights,"* ed. Stoneman, pp. 137–38. Gilbert argues that Catherine achieves an extraordinary fullness of being, now that her wish is fulfilled. As I argue, Cathy's "fullness of being" is a complex (and less than ideal) reaction to the less-than-perfectly-fulfilled wish (promise).

Cathy's story has another twist: she sees *herself* in Heathcliff; her reactions to Heathcliff are figuratively an internal dialogue. Cathy's double-sense of anger and attraction thus alters the meaning of her promise: if the promise began as a sign of an emotional relation to her father, then its breaking signifies a turn inward. While Hindley remains isolated without his promise (an isolation signifying his unwholeness at the breakdown of the father-son relationship), Cathy's turn inward unravels an emotional independence.

A third angle is still missing. Between emotional breakdowns and emotional ties, emotional dependence and emotional independence, there exists the more earthly idea of enabling conditions that underlie Heathcliff's fall and rise, pain and revenge. And here comes Nelly: she contributes the social, practical angle.

Nelly's promise of apples and pears signifies the unstable position she occupies from childhood between servant and family member. Nelly is not forgotten when other children receive promises; yet she does not get to choose her promised gift, and, more important, she is not kissed. The paragraph narrating Earnshaw's departure registers Nelly's promise as a symbolic replacement of a kiss. The paragraph ends: "He promised to bring me a pocketful of apples and pears, and then he kissed his children good-bye, and set off" (*Wuthering Heights*, p. 29). Placing her promise alongside the kisses, at the closing sentence of the scene after which everything changes, reveals Nelly's unspoken desire to be more than a servant, to become part of the emotional ties at the Heights.

When Nelly's promise is broken she is made to stay within socially defined ties: a servant. Thrust back into the social, she never mentions her broken promise. She narrates the children's reactions, and nothing about herself. But her own story is implicit: in criticizing Hindley's outburst, inappropriate for his (and her) age, Nelly narrates her own appropriate silence. Criticizing excessive emotional outbursts in other persons marks Nelly's social role. Nelly also takes action: she leaves Heathcliff on the stairway, "hoping it might be gone on the morrow" (*Wuthering Heights*, p. 30). Unable—as servant—to express expectations, and critical of uncontrolled passion, she

denies her action's relation to the promise, framing it instead as mere senselessness. Nelly is banished from the house as punishment and returns on her own initiative; she insists on finding a place at the Heights. From here on, Nelly acts out her social-status anxiety, seeking to surmount her servant position.

At crucial points in the narrative, Nelly's discretion, reflecting a constant denial of her inferiority, conditions the turn of events. Nelly is responsible, for instance, for Heathcliff's painful misconstruction of Cathy's emotions and his fleeing, for Cathy's inability to prevent Heathcliff's violent marriage to Isabella, for Catherine's marriage to Linton, and the list goes on. Nelly at one point muses: "I [was] . . . passing harsh judgment on my many derelictions of duty; from which, it struck me then, all the misfortunes of my employers sprang. It was not the case, in reality, . . . but it was, in my imagination" (*Wuthering Heights*, p. 211). Or was it?[23] Nelly symbolizes causality: she is a practical facilitator in Heathcliff's story, a role suitable for a social component.

Nelly's social-status anxiety could be quite easily processed within social terms, but not in the psychic realm of the Heights. The characters never think about Nelly in these terms. They absorb her into their world, heedless of her danger, and the incompatibility of logics wreaks havoc.[24] The combination made up of the emotional alternatives represented in Hindley

[23] Discussions of Nelly's involvement in the plot go a long time back. See, for example, Knoepflmacher, *Emily Brontë: "Wuthering Heights"* (analyzing Nelly as an outsider coveting an insider position, an appropriator of homes which are not hers); Ward, "Introduction to *Wuthering Heights*" (noting Nelly's role and complaining about the clumsiness with which it was created); Carl R. Woodring, "The Narrators of *Wuthering Heights*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 11 (1957), 298–305 (discussing Nelly's imprint on the action, at times motivated and at others not); James Hafley, "The Villain in *Wuthering Heights*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 13 (1958), 199–215 (declaring that Nelly is the villain of the novel, a villainy rooted in her wish to be considered a social equal); and John Fraser, "The Name of Action: Nelly Dean and *Wuthering Heights*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 20 (1965), 223–36 (arguing against Hafley's analysis, claiming that Nelly's interventions are generally sound and reasonable, and her confrontation of the world of the Heights admirable).

[24] For a discussion of Nelly's position as servant, as well as differences between her and other servants in the novel, particularly Joseph (whom I discuss below), see Carolyn Steedman, *Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007), pp. 193–216.

and Cathy and the social angle added by Nelly sets the terms for the rest of the story.

Heathcliff, arriving as a broken promise, not only acts on the psychic and social terms supplied by the three disappointed promisees, but he also embodies within him the same tension, a quality allowing him to act on both logics equally well. Heathcliff vacillates between the social and the psychic; ostensibly the most socially untamed character, acting on passion and living for it alone, Heathcliff is also the most socially aware person in the little group.[25] The Grange and Heights residents grew up in a well-defined, secluded world. Heathcliff, by contrast, has two blanks in his past: his early childhood in Liverpool, and his three years away—away somewhere within society. His arrival itself is disruptive of the Heights' perfectly secluded existence and provides readers with the first sense of threat of incompatible logics; Heathcliff's physical blackness and gibberish language are the figurative representation of the unknown lives that might exist in Liverpool, the unknown meanings of a poor social outcast suddenly bursting upon a limited and familiar world.[26] Heathcliff understands the social meaning of savagery and degradation much better than his acquaintances. He also understands Nelly better.

Heathcliff's name, we recall, creates a double intimacy with a lost son at the same time that it excludes him from the Earnshaw family. He changes from "it" to a double Heathcliff, the doubleness at once distancing and maintaining his "it" quality. The naming thus represents the same emotional-social tension

[25] For claims linking Heathcliff directly with the social order, see for example John T. Matthews, "Framing in 'Wuthering Heights,'" in *Emily Brontë: "Wuthering Heights,"* ed. Stoneman, p. 54 (arguing that Heathcliff reflects the violence of the social order itself, that he observes social codes); and Daniela Garofalo, "Impossible Love and Commodity Culture in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*," *ELH*, 75 (2008), 819–40. Heathcliff, I argue, cannot be reduced to the social alone—he embodies a more complex tension, which neither represents nor serves the social order. Discussing the lack of a certain route into Heathcliff's mystery, Harold Bloom argues that aesthetically "this is more of a gain than not, since it saves Heathcliff from psychoanalytic or sociological reductions" (Harold Bloom, *Heathcliff* [New York: Chelsea House, 1993], p. 2). Heatchcliff, for Bloom, escapes time and received traditions of representation.

[26] The Liverpool port was a major slave-trade center, was extensively populated by transient foreigners, and was also a refuge for the Irish who fled famines. Heathcliff, whatever his origins, is aware of multiple forms of human stratification.

in Heathcliff: he is made to appreciate both depths of feeling and longing and depths of social exclusion.

Both Heathcliff's treatment *by* Hindley and Edgar and his revenge *on* them is conducted in social terms of power, acquisition, and interest, and Nelly serves him in the process. Yet Heathcliff mediates it all through his passion for Cathy. He turns the story linear through a psychic construction, delineating the story's social parts in emotional terms; yet the strength and peril of his totality stem not from his passion alone, but from his ability to enlist and submit the social to its idolization.

Daniela Garofalo suggests that Heathcliff is an early example of making engagement with capitalism a form of personal self-expression. She relies on Gordon Bigelow's argument that "the expressive theory of the romantic subject . . . corresponds exactly to the dominant theory of economic value which takes hold after the 1870s in England, where the desire of the individual economic agent is assumed to be inherent in the individual, an authentic indicator of selfhood, which finds its objective representation in the commodity."[27] Garofalo maintains that Heathcliff's passion-motivated accumulation of assets offers an origin story that explains capitalism and lends it an aura of virility and excitement ("Impossible Love and Commodity Culture," p. 828). In other words, she argues for compatibility between the psychic and the social, the former serving the latter.[28] But this argument requires a twist: self-expression is not just a problematic term for the slippery concept of selfhood in the novel; as much as it can be viewed as self-expression, Heathcliff's passion is not directly translated into the basis of a social system. His acquisitions, being mixed up with the

[27] Gordon Bigelow, *Fiction, Famine, and the Rise of Economics in Victorian Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), p. 72. Quoted in Garofolo, "Impossible Love," p. 828.

[28] Armstrong argues along somewhat similar lines when she suggests that *Wuthering Heights* (and the Brontës' fiction more broadly) was historically crucial in producing universal figures of modern desire cast in psychological terms (see *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, pp. 186–99). Armstrong notes the different ontological plane on which identity is construed in *Wuthering Heights*, but she reads it as the other side of the social incompatibility pervading passion in the novel. My suggestion is that Brontë's ontology is not simply a figure for social incompatibilities, but a form that moves outside their logic.

psychic, are a source of catastrophe; a social system emerges here only with struggle. If Heathcliff's passionate acquisitions are constitutive of a liberal outlook or supportive of a capitalist system, they are so not as direct origins but as an ineradicable possibility that requires a constant, and painful, effort of containment.

To recapitulate, we have a triple promise (fiddle, whip, and fruit), representing potential attachments bearing emotional and (for Nelly) social implications, as well as a link to a distant, unknown social world. It is broken through a symbolic thrusting of the social on the scene (outcast Heathcliff), and emerges in three disappointed promisees tied together by Heathcliff, featuring as the replacement of the promised objects. We have a promisee (Hindley) who could not do without an emotional relationship and is thus broken, a promisee (Cathy) who did away with the relationship and denies that the new one is at all external to her (and is thus too whole), and a promisee (Nelly) whose need of the relationship is mediated through her social position and who continues to reenact her social insecurity once emotionality is denied. Heathcliff revenges on the breakdown of the first promisee (Hindley), absorbs into the internal wholeness of the second (Cathy), and does both through the third (Nelly). Heathcliff can use these elements in his revenge because he appreciates both the social and the psychic terms at work here.

Heathcliff moves to power by manipulating weaknesses. He becomes Hindley's mortgagee and creditor (and so obtains the Heights) in dice and card games undertaken by a broken alcoholic. Similarly, Catherine promises to marry Linton under coercion, having been imprisoned at the Heights while her father is dying (and so Heathcliff obtains the Grange). With these promises, the novel carefully treads the line between legality and illegality. The rights over the Heights are perfected with a lawyer who confirms their validity (*Wuthering Heights*, pp. 144–46); Catherine declares that she had promised to marry Linton of her own accord (p. 209).[29] Yet both cases are

[29] I do not refer here to the property laws applicable assuming the validity of the mortgages and marriages; rather, I refer to the promissory moments at stake. For an

not clearly legal: in the first story (possessing the Heights) there is a constant current of complaint about the injustice done to Hareton (Hindely's heir): "Hareton . . . [is] quite unable to right himself, because of his friendlessness, and his ignorance that he has been wronged" (*Wuthering Heights*, p. 146). In similar vein, the lawyer's corruptness casts doubt on the legality of procedures. In the second story (the Catherine-Linton marriage) there is similar effort to keep things in the gray zone through a careful narration of the exchange between Heathcliff, Catherine, and Nelly: while Catherine declares her free will to marry Linton, Nelly frames the scene as unlawful coercion, and Heathcliff draws on both elements, telling Nelly: "she [Catherine] must either accept him, or remain a prisoner. . . . If you doubt, encourage her to retract her word" (p. 210)—both force and the word.

By contrast to these two gray-zone cases, Heathcliff's marriage to Isabella—the last element in Heathcliff's revenge—appears clear from legal doubt. Isabella was infatuated; she ignored the warnings of her friends, and she ignored Heathcliff, who never made pretences:

> "She [Isabella] cannot accuse me [Heathcliff] of showing one bit of deceitful softness. The first thing she saw me do . . . was to hang up her little dog. . . . was it not the depth of absurdity—of genuine idiocy—for that pitiful . . . brach to dream that I could love her?" (*Wuthering Heights*, p. 118)

And Heathcliff is careful to maintain legality: "I keep strictly within the limits of the law. I have avoided . . . giving her the slightest right to claim a separation" (p. 118). We are legally in the clear.

Heathcliff's victims react in inverse relation to their legal position. Hindley, and then Hareton, never challenge the

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analysis of the property rights that Heathcliff did and did not gain over the various properties, see C. P. Sanger, *The Structure of "Wuthering Heights"* (London: Hogarth Press, 1926). Sanger argues, for instance, that, as a matter of property laws, Heathcliff would not have had any right to an estate for life over the Grange through his marriage to Isabella or as Linton's father. The centrality of promises for the novel's world means that questions of land rights are set aside; the turn of events depends on the role of promises.

consequences of the promissory story by which Heathcliff obtained ownership of the Heights. Catherine, though miserable, never challenges the consequences of her marriage to Linton.[30] Isabella, by contrast, cannot rest. She is looking to undo her own folly, escaping from Heathcliff in the (vain) hope of removing her son from his power. This discrepancy relies on the social/psychic tension. Hindley and Catherine are acting on the psychic plane. They are moved solely by emotional concerns. Hindley was acting out his enmity with Heathcliff and was, in this sense, experiencing fair play; Hareton after him was acting out his emotional dependence on Heathcliff: "Earnshaw [Hareton] took the master's [Heathcliff's] reputation home to himself, and was attached by ties stronger than reason could break" (*Wuthering Heights*, p. 245). Catherine was trapped by her loving wish to unite with her dying father and by an emotional commitment developed to Linton. She too experiences a sense of fair play within these terms. That the social-legal terms may tell a different story using the same facts is for them uninteresting. Isabella, by contrast, was not acting on a true emotional attachment, but on a fantasy of romance. This fantasy is a socially constructed one: it reflects a conventional expectation about romantic intercourse (apparently picked up from literature, as Heathcliff suggests: "picturing in me a hero of romance" [p. 118]). Isabella, to begin with, was acting within the social and not within the psychic.

In a double inversion, then, it is in the stories that lack liberal "free will" and "rationality" (recall, "stronger than reason could break"—a lack of reason is supposedly at stake) that we find a consistency of logic, while in the story containing a formally "free will" we find the opposite: "I can hardly regard her [Isabella] in the light of a rational creature," says Heathcliff (*Wuthering Heights*, p. 118). The promissory stories complicate the view of these three events as similar, cynical manipulations of the law by Heathcliff and expose a more complex picture of the play of the emotional, psychic, and irrational, with the

[30] There is one exception: immediately before Heathcliff's death, Catherine talks Hareton into planting flowers in the garden, in a symbolic act of repossession. She soon comes to repent that line of revolt, given Hareton's refusal to accept its deeper implications. I discuss this further below.

social, moderate, and rational in promise.[31] And these motives mix further: the alternatives represented by Hindley and Catherine, on the one hand, and Isabella, on the other, are not mutually exclusive; rather, Isabella's story is trapped between the other two promissory contexts. It is through his possession of the Heights that Heathcliff learns about Linton's arrival and seizes him despite Isabella's efforts. It is then through Catherine's marriage to Linton that Heathcliff secures his rights to the Grange—Isabella's home, beyond doubt. Psychic rationality and social irrationality are mixed together, locating the existence of promises in a complex and often unacknowledged conceptual region.

When Cathy is dying, Heathcliff asks Nelly to let him see her. Nelly is reluctant, but makes a promise:

> . . . in the long run he forced me to an agreement. I engaged to carry a letter from him to my mistress; and should she consent, I promised to let him have intelligence on Linton's next absence from home, when he might come. . . .
>
> . . . I fear it was wrong, though expedient. (*Wuthering Heights*, p. 120)

Nelly eventually gives the letter to Cathy, but at that moment Heathcliff walks in anyway. Nelly's promise in this case was clearly irrelevant to the turn of events, yet she narrates it in detail and meditates on her moral dilemma. Why?

This is a turning point in the novel, followed by the climatic scene between Cathy and Heathcliff, and leading to the second-generation story. At this point Nelly is torn between the psychic and the social on all levels: the Heights and the Grange, Heathcliff and Edgar, her unclear position as family and servant, her emotional and social (or engagement-based) involvement. The significance of this turning point is marked by a change in narrators: after Nelly's account of her promise to

[31] The same inversion occurs in Lockwood's contract: he is the one seeking social ties and love, while his passionate landlord Heathcliff insists on the contract's thin rationality.

Heathcliff, Lockwood tells us that *he* from now on continues the history, only a little condensed, in Nelly's "own words. She is, on the whole, a very fair narrator" (*Wuthering Heights*, p. 121). But Lockwood had been reporting to the reader Nelly's stories all along anyway. This subtle change is Lockwood's move to domination: it is a mark in the slow ascendance of the social achieved through a distancing from the psychic scene, shifting attention to the literary technique and Lockwood's role, away from the embedded tale. The extended attention to Nelly's promissory quandary emanates from this promise's location at the peak of the social/psychic tension, just before the scales begin to tilt.

The final ascendance of the social is represented through another servant, Joseph. Like Nelly, Joseph lives the family/servant tension: he lived in the house until banished to the kitchen by Hindley; he too had held a position of more than servant, assuming responsibility for the Earnshaws' religious observance. And Joseph becomes, from this position, the character introducing the final containment of the Heights in the social.

Joseph's world is shaken in the closing chapters of the novel when the "perfect misanthropist's heaven" (*Wuthering Heights*, p. 3) loses its character: Catherine and Hareton become lovers, and Heathcliff, dying, loses his will to inflict pain. As the process builds up, the text dramatizes escalating encounters, through Joseph, with the idea of bare materiality, culminating in abstract money as the source of relations. If promissory ties in *Wuthering Heights* contain psychic and social elements in a complex entanglement in which measurability and abstract value had been lacking, then at these final stages measurable material objects assume prominence, with money displacing the more layered concept of promise. The move to money involves the abstractions of the social logic, foreign to the psychic.

Three stages make up the symbolic erosion of the psychic. First, when Joseph discovers the affection between Catherine and Hareton he is "perfectly aghast" (*Wuthering Heights*, p. 241). Too confounded to voice an observation, "his emotion was only revealed by the immense sighs he drew, as he solemnly spread

his large Bible on the table, and overlaid it with dirty bank-notes from his pocket-book, the produce of the day's transactions" (p. 241). Using explicit imagery, Joseph's Bible as a source of superiority is replaced by Joseph's relation to the world of nameless bank-note-producing transactions. Joseph perceives that his catechizing days are superseded by abstract materiality —an idea so far foreign to the Heights. Until this point, transactions sealed by social institutions, like Heathcliff's contracts and property rights, had been specific both with regard to subject matter and with regard to parties, and had been between characters in the two houses. Now, by contrast, dealings are not with another character mediated by the social world, but dealings *with* the social world, and they can have no meaning but the dirty one of money. Yet abstraction here is not complete: Joseph's transactions work to sooth his anxiety at the Heights—he is seeking another source of power in his own world. The transactions represented by the notes are spread over the Bible and maintain contact with the never-acknowledged servant/family trouble plaguing the tale, mixing psychic with social terms.

In Joseph's next disaster Hareton pulls up black-currant trees, which are "the apple of Joseph's eye" (*Wuthering Heights*, p. 242), in order to plant flowers for Catherine (note the change to a milder plant, but also one that does not bear fruit—signaling an end). Joseph is "unmanned" (p. 244) by this act, bitterly lamenting to Heathcliff. While Hareton is speechless in the face of Heathcliff's anger, Catherine voices a material complaint: "You shouldn't grudge a few yards of earth for me to ornament, when you have taken all my land! . . . And my money. . . . And Hareton's land, and his money" (p. 244). Catherine's logic reduces Joseph's distress to a material struggle, and translates the tensions at the Heights into essentially materialistic, property-tuned tensions. This struggle had been there, as a potential, all along, but had been found wanting, and now it suddenly gains grounds. After a fury, Heathcliff uncharacteristically withdraws. Catherine's logic is not crushed; Heathcliff does not have the last word. Yet here too the psychic retains a role. Despite her apparent victory, Catherine avoids further voicing of the material idea, because Hareton resents its

implications for his emotional attachment to Heathcliff. The material idea raises its head and is suppressed, but it has made its mark: Catherine now chooses to give up a line of thought that is found relevant. The choice of removing materiality from affective relations is already part of a more familiar Victorian sociality, with its attention to the division of labor and the separation of spheres. This kind of thinking had been absent in the earlier transformations of land acquisition in *Wuthering Heights*. The terms of interaction begin to fall into more recognizable patterns as the psychic quality wears down.

The final stage of the social's ascension occurs at the closing of the novel. Lockwood, the representative of the social, exits the Heights for the last time. Lockwood leaves through the kitchen—the servants' space representing the complex passage between the Heights' psychic quality and the social world. The last person Lockwood encounters is Joseph, and he shapes Joseph's opinion: "[Joseph], fortunately, recognised me for a respectable character by the sweet ring of a sovereign at his feet" (*Wuthering Heights*, p. 258). As the psychic loses its dominance, bare materiality in the form of a gold coin is thrust on the scene, and, with it, abstract social differentiation becomes painfully clear as Joseph is made not only to pick up the coin thrown so contemptuously at his feet, but also thus to recognize Lockwood's respectability.

If Joseph's turn to bank-notes had been in the hope of finding a new source of power and consolation within the Heights, then the next stage, in which property struggles replace his more complex intuitions, hints at the futility of his hopes, and the coin already marks their reversal. The three-stage escalation, transactions-property-money, marks the stages from the social/psychic mixture in which promises function in *Wuthering Heights* to a dominant social logic, where abstract money is the new determinant of relationships, blind to unrepeatable, ungeneralizable contacts behind it.

This last scene, marking the social's rise to final dominance, is a convergence of the novel's frame and embedded narratives: Nelly's narrative has been brought "back to the present," and Lockwood takes over. The two narratives had been one site for the social/psychic tension; at this closing point the

distance has been narrowed through the convergence of the narratives, and the socialized Lockwood has the last word—not the last word in the frame story, but within the embedded story. Edward Mendelson has noted that Lockwood also initiated the change in the Heights with his visionary dream of Catherine at the beginning of the novel, causing Heathcliff to forgo his demolition plan.[32] The social surrounds the psychic Heights and contains it. John T. Matthews concludes: "the survival of the narrators at the cost of their protagonists defines the triumph of framing this fiction" ("Framing in 'Wuthering Heights,'" p. 65). It is significant, however, that the triumph is a matter of a changed balance. There remains a psychic element that cannot be banished.

The coin is thrown at Joseph, but he is beyond socialization. His reaction to the coin is thus mediated to the reader through Lockwood's social interpretation, while Joseph remains unseen and keeps an unnarrated—and uncontrolled—space, symbolized in the kitchen. Joseph will remain at the Heights' kitchen while the rest of the house is shut up. The symbolic psychic plane is literally narrowed down, but cannot be eradicated. In the closing words of the novel, Lockwood wonders "how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth" (*Wuthering Heights*, p. 258). This last thought begs the question and leaves it open, like Joseph's kitchen. At once minimized and centralized, the room left in the Heights, the question left by Lockwood, the sense of unsure closure left with the reader, the experience of aguish—all of which secured the novel's problematic reception, and still do—keep the psychic an active element for a liberal delineation of experience at the same time that they curtail its conceptual reach.

Wuthering Height did and does feel remarkable within the Victorian canon. If the critical mood has changed

[32] See Edward Mendelson, *The Things That Matter: What Seven Classic Novels Have to Say About the Stages of Life* (New York: Pantheon, 2006), pp. 72–73.

since the awry Victorian reception, the governing sense that its reception requires discussion remains cogent. Yet this sense stems not from marginality, but, on the contrary, from the ability of *Wuthering Height* to take apart and lay bare the experience of complexity pervading Victorian liberalism. At stake was a generally valid Victorian experience, in amplified form; the novel textually imparted, early on, the experience making for decades of critique. The textual use of the familiar metaphors of promise and money to explore that experience insistently invokes its broad applicability, and resists marginalization. I thus concur with Linda Shires when she recognizes in *Wuthering Heights* a central paradigm of Victorianism, rather than an aberration.[33] In particular, I have argued, this novel captured a problematic of Victorian liberal thinking.

The estrangements of *Wuthering Heights* offer a sense of disturbances contained at the core of a liberal order, at once viable and limited. Shires argues that tensions in *Wuthering Heights* (on her account, primarily between Romantic individualism and socialization) are kept in play rather than healed or resolved,[34] a point that I have developed and fully support. Not only is there no historical—or plot-designed—resolution here, but there is in fact a specific form of lived tension, that of containment; this is an equally significant part of the history of liberalism captured by the novel. Containment accounts not only for unresolved tensions, but also for the structural relation that set the interaction among their constitutive elements. Containment kept tensions alive, but also transformed such elements as irrationality, passion, nonsocial mediation of relationships, brute power—and much else—from within liberal thinking, and set their modes of reach in late modernity. All of these were contained within and made part of liberalism rather than overcome or delegitimized. At the same time, their relevance and power were refigured. The psychic remained a pounding locus, lurking, demanding attention, yet set within

[33] Shires, in "Aesthetics of the Victorian Novel," is interested in the irresolvability of ideological tensions and examines their relation to the novel's form, arguing that the fissures in *Wuthering Heights* were to inform the realist genre's aesthetics, their presence deserving of no less attention than realism's ideological solutions.

[34] See Shires, "Aesthetics of the Victorian Novel," pp. 66–67.

limits which justified, for those so inclined, attempts to downplay its role within large parts of human experience.

What of normative appeal? Is liberalism, thus understood, to be reembraced or newly rejected? *Wuthering Heights* maintains an aesthetic undecideability about liberal sensibilities. The social's dominance emerges in too much pain and violence to become a comfort zone, the psychic's persistence ensures "unquiet slumbers" after all the pain inflicted. *Wuthering Heights*, in other words, allows its aesthetics to complicate ideological preference: imparting a complex reading experience—liberal anguish—creates ideological discomfort. In this final enactment of anxiety, one is reminded that ideological stances depend on—as much as they enable—aesthetic satisfaction.

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ABSTRACT

Anat Rosenberg, "Liberal Anguish: *Wuthering Heights* and the Structures of Liberal Thought" (pp. 1–25)

After decades of sustained academic critiques along established lines, liberalism has recently attracted renewed evaluations. These readings treat complexity as inherent in liberalism, and proceed to explore its structures beyond suspicious hermeneutics. This essay argues that Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) constitutes an early and sophisticated argument about the structures of complexity in liberalism. Not only does Brontë's novel merit entry into the discussion as a conceptual contribution, but it also offers an aesthetic enactment of the anguish that liberal structures of complexity were to evoke for generations to follow, an anguish experienced already at its troubled reception.

Keywords: Emily Brontë; *Wuthering Heights*; Liberalism; promise; money