

‘Forsake thy books, and mateless play’: Emily Brontë’s Closed Book

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Synopsis

This essay focuses on the ambiguous representation of books in Emily Brontë’s works. In order to tackle the key question of why books are hated and destroyed by the central characters in *Wuthering Heights*, I take a phased approach from three perspectives. First, the social and domestic circumstances around books in nineteenth-century England and the Brontë family are overviewed. In not only Emily’s works but also the whole of society at that time, the position of books was unstable and fluid. Then I interpret the examples of books represented in the actual texts of the Brontës. Between Charlotte, Emily, and Anne, there are unmissable similarities in their representations of books, especially in the context in which books are expected to function as family bonds. Finally, I return to the initial question of Emily’s problematical way of representing books, which is conspicuously different from that of the other sisters. Referring to some of her poems as well as her only novel, and also to the Lacanian idea of ‘death drive’, this essay maintains that it reflects her failed attempt to recover her lost beloved and childhood through her own poetic language.

Keywords: Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, representations of books in literary texts, the Lacanian Real, metonymy and metaphor

Introduction

The book for Emily Brontë had the highest priority throughout her short life. Both as a writer and a reader, she always lived with books and wrote many poems¹ and an only novel, *Wuthering Heights*. Already in her childhood, she built an inseparable relationship with the world of books. Regardless of such a background, books are often presented in some strange ways in her works. For example, in *Wuthering Heights*, the most significant characters Heathcliff and Catherine² seem to be characterised as persons who are indifferent to, and dare to destroy, books. In her childhood, Catherine cries ‘I hated a good book’ (*Wuthering Heights* 21)³

and, with Heathcliff, hurls her religious book at a kennel. Their aggressive attitude towards books contrasts with the second generation's. In the end of the novel, the reconciliation between Cathy and Hareton is attained through the medium of books. In front of these new lovers bonded by books, Heathcliff loses his desire for revenge somehow. This enigmatic relation between the lovers of the first generation and books may imply something very significant in spite of many readers' likely impression that they are persons who just dislike reading.

In previous studies, the image of books and the act of reading in this novel have tended to be connected with the stable, cultivated world of Thrushcross Grange and the second generation rather than the chaotic, wild world of *Wuthering Heights* and the first generation. Cathy, who grows up surrounded by books and inherits the refined culture, can utilise books skillfully as a means of building good relationships and negotiating with others, such as Linton, Michael the groom, and most importantly, Hareton. According to Robert C. McKibben, the image of books in the novel can be interpreted as 'the reflection of the stabilizing love of Cathy and Hareton' (160). As for the relation between the first generation and books, however, negative aspects have been frequently emphasised. Elisabeth Th. M. van de Laar, who analyses each character's attitude towards books and the Bible, concludes that books have no positive value for Heathcliff and Catherine. According to her, Heathcliff's behaviour of merely glancing at a book over which Hareton and Cathy bend together and then returning it to the former 'without any observation' (*Wuthering Heights* 322) can be read as 'an admission of defeat' (Laar 203) before his enigmatic death.

It tends to be emphasised that books have little to do with the world of the wild lovers of the first generation and symbolise the victory of the value of Thrushcross Grange over that of *Wuthering Heights*. However, such readings ignore some important, perplexing problems. First of all, it is inappropriate to label books simply as the embodiment of the 'order' of Thrushcross Grange in comparison with the 'disorder' of *Wuthering Heights*. In the nineteenth century, when the novel was written, the problem of how to read books was causing various contradictory reactions among the public. Books influence readers sometimes positively and at other times negatively and cannot be fixed in the frame of the simple binary opposition between *Wuthering Heights* and Thrushcross Grange. In addition, the apparently weak relationship between the lovers of the first generation and books conversely poses some significant questions. In *Wuthering Heights*, there are many gaps in the narrative, such as the case of Heathcliff's three-year absence, leaving the reader to endlessly imagine without any definitive clues. These narrative gaps should not be treated merely as omissions because of the unimportance of the issues. Indeed, there is a possibility that Emily Brontë intentionally left some of the narrative void or untold. Were the gaps something too important for her to write? The question of why Heathcliff and Catherine do not read is worth reconsidering from this perspective.

Interpreting the representation of books in the novel, we cannot help facing the fact that *Wuthering Heights* itself is a book. This paper, whose ultimate aim is to deal with these metapoetic questions, consists of three chapters. Chapter I is going to survey what kind of meanings reading had for the public in nineteenth-century England and how the children of the Brontës developed their taste for reading in the social context of that time. Chapter II will focus on the representations of books in the actual text. In this chapter, several works by Emily's sisters, Charlotte and Anne, will be referred to for comparison. Finally, my interpretation

of Emily's unique way of representing books in her book will be given in Chapter III with reference to some of her poetic imageries and also the narrative structure of *Wuthering Heights*.

Chapter I : The Social Background of Reading and the Brontë Family's Environment

It was in the nineteenth century that 'a mass reading public' emerged for the first time in England. Although the word 'a mass reading public' is used in the singular in connection with the audience for the printed word, it 'was not really a cohesive, homogeneous unit but a whole cluster of publics, as various as the society to which they belonged' (Altick, *Victorian People and Ideas* 59). Among such publics, one of the most significant groups was 'the amorphous stratum between the old-established middle class ... and the working class proper', which consisted of 'skilled workers, small shopkeepers, clerks, and the better grade of domestic servants' (Altick, *Common Reader* 82-83). These people, whose occupations required retention of literary skills, greatly owed their prosperity to the spread of elementary education. Book learning as the key to success was commended for improving individual morality, which would ultimately lead to the maintenance of order of the whole nation.

On the other hand, the spread of reading bred social unrest especially during the first half of the century. Marianne Thormählen points out the frequent reluctance among Sunday-school organisers to teach the poor to write, while Sunday school was 'the only chance for the child of poor parents, who were dependent on the labour of their offspring during the week, to receive any kind of schooling' (16). Based on the idea that the purpose of educating the poor was only to enable them to read the Bible, these organisers had a negative attitude towards teaching unnecessary skills.

Kelly J. Mays' study on the 'disease of the individual and social system produced and signified in practices of textual consumption' (166) in nineteenth-century England argues the problem from roughly three points of view: national identity, gender, and the class system. A great number of articles on the question of 'how' and 'what' people should read were published throughout the century. Writers of such articles, being afraid of a harmful influence on the whole of society if abundant reading material was supplied to ignorant readers, tried to teach 'appropriate' ways of reading. They insisted on the importance of reading moderately and regarded a burning thirst for books as something similar to alcohol or drug addiction. Negative impacts caused by improper reading were frequently associated with 'inferior' groups like 'Orientals', women, and the working classes. Indulgence in reading without restriction was considered to degrade civilized people to the level of animals with only primitive desire, which meant the 'Orientalizing' (Mays 177) of English readers. Also, women readers were often labelled as undesirable readers who read in a desultory, disorganised way without stable discipline. It was believed that women were naturally inadequate readers because of their feminine quality of mind, which could make them fickle and prevent them from concentrating on one thing consistently. Likewise, the mentality of working-class readers was seen as unbalanced and unstable. Therefore, it was feared that improper reading habits would 'feminise' male readers and spread the inferior character of the working classes all over the country. In this way, the study by Mays reveals that reading in an inappropriate way was regarded as a threat to Englishness, masculinity, and the class hierarchy, which constituted the existing order of the society. In different contexts, however, self-education and self-improvement by reading were encouraged as means of stabilising the nation.

The tone of the debate about the problems caused by improper reading was always changing with the times. As an example of such a changing dimension, people's reaction to working-class readers in the latter part of the century was greatly different from that in the earlier part. Regardless of the negative evaluation of working-class readers as undesirable early in the century, these readers began to be considered as 'ideal reader[s] and a potential model for middle-class readers' (Mays 179) late in the century. Unlike middle-class readers with an excess of leisure time for reading, working-class readers were not exposed to the risk of spending a lot of time in reading unhealthily. They remained uninfected with the vice of the ever-greater literary marketplace. It was said that working-class readers, who could establish a well-balanced way of reading with the avoidance of extremes, would occupy an important position as ideal readers of the next generation. As Mays mentions, such a vision of a future dominated by working-class readers 'invoked the Darwinian model of "survival of the fittest"' (180) and must have stirred anxiety among the public. Working-class readers, whether ideal or undesirable, could be a threat to people belonging to the other classes.

The circumstances of women readers were as complicated as those of working-class readers. Although women readers tended to be regarded as the embodiment of the vice of reading in the same way as working-class readers, the important relationship between maternity and reading was often emphasised by writers on education in the nineteenth century. According to Kate Flint, 'it was commonly believed that women exercised a stronger role than anyone else when it came to establishing future reading habits' (41) throughout the century. Educationists in the early and mid-nineteenth century pointed out that 'the mother was the natural teacher of her children' and was responsible for giving them 'decisive early religious instruction' (Thormählen 37). Especially, the significance of mothers' role in developing daughters' reading practices was frequently underscored. '[A] connection between maternal nurturing responsibilities and the daughter's ingestion of print' (Flint 42) was repeatedly drawn by Victorian and Edwardian commentators. As children are given food by mothers, so are they given knowledge from books read to them by mothers. In this context, women's reading was associated with the virtues of womanhood.

In such an ambivalent social situation, the Brontë sisters spent their childhood and developed their literary talent within the small circle of the family. Thormählen argues that 'the Brontë girls grew to adulthood in a social context where the education of the poor was regarded as a means of promoting peace and prosperity in Britain' (24), while some had a negative opinion towards the extension of literacy. To support the education of the poor was seen as 'the duty of every educated individual who had the means to do so — money, influence, teaching ability, and so on' (Thormählen 24). The sisters' father, Patrick Brontë, performed this duty from the viewpoint of his being the curate of Haworth. In fact, Patrick himself, born in County Down in Ireland, was a person of humble origins. He determined to earn his livelihood 'not in the hereditary manner by agricultural pursuits, but by the labour of his brain' (Gaskell 21) and managed to be admitted to Cambridge at the age of twenty-five as a result of self-education through book learning. Patrick, with such an independent spirit, played an essential role in encouraging a taste for reading in his daughters.

In addition, the importance of the existence of Maria, the eldest child of the family, is pointed out by many Brontë biographers. After their mother's death in 1821, she became a maternal figure for the younger siblings. In a little 'up-stairs' room called the 'children's study' (Gaskell 28), she read newspapers instead

of children's books to the other children.⁴ As Deborah Lutz explains, '[b]ecause of the high rate of illiteracy and the expense of paper during the early nineteenth century, books and newspapers were often shared by reading aloud' (28). While reading alone was the source of deep pleasure for the children, reading to each other in the children's study was a means of collaborative education or wiling away time together which strengthened the bond between the siblings.

It is symbolic that not long after the deaths of the older sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, the remaining four children, Charlotte, Emily, Anne, and Branwell, began to craft tiny books and fill them with stories in which characters can be revived by magic. For the Brontë children, writing probably functioned as a kind of consolation. 'While it must have become obvious at the start that books cannot replace bodies, the children never stopped trying to find in the act of writing a means to overcome death' (Lutz 27). Because of the shortage of paper, these handcrafted books were so small that adults could not read them. The miniature size of their books made their fantasy world a secret shared by the four only.

The following extract from Charlotte's diary of 1829 gives some interesting information on how the Brontës treated books:

Once Papa lent my sister Maria a book. It was an old geography book; she wrote on its blank leaf, 'Papa lent me this book.' This book is a hundred and twenty years old; it is at this moment lying before me. While I write this I am in the kitchen of the Parsonage, Haworth; Tabby, the servant, is washing up the breakfast-things, and Anne, my youngest sister (Maria was my eldest), is kneeling on a chair, looking at some cakes which Tabby had been baking for us. Emily is in the parlour, brushing the carpet. (Gaskell 55)

Inscription on pages for recording ownership of books tells the history of the books and their owners. The geography book containing Maria's handwriting must have reminded Charlotte of various memories with her eldest sister. According to Lutz, 'Inscribing books was such a common practice that it is hard to find a volume from a personal library before the mid-nineteenth century that does not have some sort of handwriting in it, or at the very least a bookplate glued onto its boards' (16). In the lifetime of the Brontës, who left a lot of handwriting in the books that belonged to them, '[b]ooks weren't always distinguished from albums or keepsake, souvenir, scrap, or commonplace books' (Lutz 19). The function of books at that time had many aspects different from that of books today.

Another remarkable thing that the diary quoted above reveals is that the kitchen of the parsonage was commonly used for writing and reading. For the Brontës, '[b]ooks were not out of place in the kitchen' (Lutz 29). Their leisure time for reading was restricted by their many household occupations, in which Aunt Branwell expected them to become proficient. Gaskell's description of Emily, who made all the bread for the family after the servant grew too old to do so, shows how skillfully the sisters kept the balance between domestic duties and reading: '[A]ny one passing by the kitchen-door, might have seen her studying German out of an open book, propped up before her, as she kneaded the dough; but no study, however interesting, interfered with the goodness of the bread' (90). Women's 'desultory' (Mays 177) way of reading while doing domestic chores at the same time tended to be condemned by some intellectuals, but

the well-balanced combination between these two activities seems to have constituted one of the essential elements in developing their taste for literature in the case of the Brontës.

The Brontës, to some degree influenced by the social context of the nineteenth century when the meanings of books and reading were unfixed and ambivalent, created their own book community, whose value was shared by the family members only. Their relationship with books consisted of many different layers, from a more public aspect related to the whole society to a more private one concentrating on the narrow context within the family. The next chapter will shift attention towards how books appear in the actual texts by Emily and her sisters.

Chapter II : Representations of Books in the Works by the Brontës

Representations of books in the texts by the Brontës tend to be problematic. They can be divided into three types: positive, negative, and ambiguous ones. When books are represented with positive implications, they help characters build good relationships and function as the symbol of ideal bonds between lovers or family members. On the other hand, negative implications of improper reading can be found in their novels at the same time. Abused books do not perform their proper function but reveal the weakness and incompleteness of their possessors. Furthermore, in the case of *Wuthering Heights*, some representations of books, such as seen in the strange attitude of Heathcliff towards books, include ambiguous aspects which cannot be classified simply as positive or negative. Such problematic representations of books in Emily's novel may be related to the characters', or the author's own, psychological state.

The inhabitants of Thrushcross Grange show typical examples of incorrect reading. Although they tend to be seen as well-educated, refined people who are fond of reading, their inappropriate way of reading is often connected with isolation and self-deception. Edgar shuts himself up 'among books that he never opened' (*Wuthering Heights* 120) and avoids communicating with Catherine. Here the library of Thrushcross Grange is used just as an excuse for his withdrawal from harsh reality and does not perform its original function as a suitable place for reading. Catherine blames her husband and cries: 'What in the name of all that feels, has he to do with *books*, when I am dying?' (122). Afterwards Edgar makes an effort to fill the gap between his wife and himself with a book. Interestingly, his method of reconciliation is somewhat similar to his daughter's at the end of the novel, but in his case his efforts are in vain. In the following description by Nelly, an ignored book symbolises the deep gulf between the couple, in contrast with a shared book as the symbol of the second generation's love:

A book lay spread on the sill before her [Catherine], and the scarcely perceptible wind flattered its leaves at intervals. I believe Linton had laid it there, for she never endeavoured to divert herself with reading, or occupation of any kind; and he would spend many an hour in trying to entice her attention to some subject which had formerly been her amusement. (158)

Isabella's reading is another example of improper reading, especially connected with the problem of gender. She misunderstands the true nature of Heathcliff as a result of her excessive dependence on

information from books. In Heathcliff's words, she abandons Thrushcross Grange 'under a delusion', 'picturing in me a hero of romance, and expecting unlimited indulgences from my chivalrous devotion' (149). Heathcliff's contempt for Isabella's blindness might remind the reader of the controversial issue of women's reading of fiction at that time.

Such negative images of books can be found in the other sisters' works, too. In *Agnes Grey*, for instance, Rosalie Ashby says to Agnes, 'I will show you the library; I never examined its shelves, but, I dare say, it is full of wise books, and you may go and burrow [*sic*] among them whenever you please' (154). From her remark, the reader can imagine the personality of Rosalie, who has no interest in reading books and regards them just as a sort of furniture for display of her wealth. In this way, in the works by the Brontës, like in many other nineteenth-century novels, 'an introduction to a character's books is an introduction to the character' (Lutz 15).

While libraries belonging to the rich frequently appear merely as the symbol of status of the possessors, the existence of servants with a taste for reading occupies an essential position in the Brontës' fiction. As Jean Fernandez argues, 'in addition to the traditional list of virtues required of servants, such as honesty, faithfulness and diligence, literacy begins to figure as a new and desirable pre-requisite for proficiency in domestic service' (1) in nineteenth-century England. Although the extension of literacy caused anxiety about rebellion among some people as mentioned in Chapter I, more and more people were becoming aware of the undeniable influence of literate servants on the home. Some depictions of the servants in the novels coincide with such a social context. In *Wuthering Heights*, Nelly and Michael can be categorised as book-loving servants. Nelly's explanation to Lockwood implies some pride in her own education, while she admits that her knowledge is limited as an inevitable result of her humble origin: 'I have undergone sharp discipline which has taught me wisdom; and then, I have read more than you would fancy, Mr Lockwood. You could not open a book in this library that I have not looked into, and got something out of also' (63). Michael, the groom of Thrushcross Grange, 'is fond of reading' (247) according to Cathy. He negotiates with Cathy and prepares her pony for her secret visit to Wuthering Heights in exchange for her books and pictures. The fact that even such a minor character is depicted as a book lover may reflect the commonness of literate servants with a taste for reading in those days.

Regarding the works by Charlotte and Anne, it is remarkable that similar would-be readers in the lower classes appear as more or less influential figures in the heroines' lives. Lucy Snow, the poor orphaned heroine of *Villette*, buys a book for her former nurse, the only counsellor that she can depend on before going to London: 'I bought a little book — a piece of extravagance I could ill afford; but I thought I would one day give or send it to Mrs Barrett' (54). *Agnes Grey* has a habit of visiting the poor's cottages in order to 'read to one who was sick, or seriously disposed' (*Agnes Grey* 77), and there becomes acquainted with Nancy Brown, who is incapable of reading because of an inflammation in the eyes. The intimate relation between them built through Agnes's reading the Bible to her gives the heroine the opportunity to make the acquaintance of her future husband Mr Weston as a result. Similarly, in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Rachel, the servant who helps Helen Huntington dedicatedly, is apparently familiar with books belonging to the household: 'Mamma, I couldn't find the book in either of the places you told me to look for it ... but Rachel got it for me at last' (414). The Brontës, who were forced to manage both domestic duties and

reading as already discussed in Chapter I, may have had some sympathies with these lower-class book lovers who were allowed to read only in the little spare time they had from their work. The closeness of these characters to books, though it is true that all of them are minor characters, seems to function as a sign of their trustworthiness and to imply an image of ideal family bonds strengthened by books.

The characters mentioned above are given a discreet but meaningful position, from which they silently contribute to the formation of an ideal family for the main characters. Nelly, the narrator-servant of *Wuthering Heights*, affectionately watches Cathy and Hareton reading together as if she were their mother.

In her poem 'Faith and Despondency', Emily Brontë depicts a conversation between a father and his daughter on a gusty night. In the first stanza, the father speaks to his daughter, who is reading alone:

'The winter wind is loud and wild,
Come close to me, my darling child;
Forsake thy books, and mateless play;
And, while the night is gathering grey,
We'll talk its pensive hours away; — (*Complete Poems* 153. 1-5)

This quoted part of the poem shows how books can function, in fact, as a source of conversation. The reader can imagine the way the daughter closes a book in her hands in response to her father's speech. However, this act of closing a book does not mean the denial of the worth of books. The book continues exerting its power even after this closure. While 'seeking congenial society between the covers of a book perused in silence was becoming a common and accepted pastime' (Thormählen 148) in the early nineteenth century, the importance of sharing books and reading them to each other was still recognised by many, as the Brontës show in their works. One of the biggest purposes of reading in the lifetime of the Brontës was to have a connection with others. Many characters in the Brontës' fiction seem to read for this purpose, and more specifically because of their hunger for family warmth. As discussed in the previous chapter, the function of books at that time had various aspects and was not restricted simply within their pages. Indeed, the conversation which is to begin after the book is closed, as in this poem, is an important part of the book.

This chapter has so far dealt with the similarities in the way books are represented in the work of the Brontë sisters. However, this knowledge about the cultural context of nineteenth-century English society and the Brontë family is still insufficient to answer the most significant question of this paper: why Heathcliff and Catherine do not read. While *Wuthering Heights* actually shares some qualities with the other sisters' works, this novel can be regarded as conspicuously different from the other Brontë novels. Thormählen comments that '[w]here Emily is concerned, any attempt to trace a consistent set of values and beliefs ... is vain' (26). In *Wuthering Heights*, as in Emily's own world in which she lived with few direct connections to the outside world, '[w]hen people read books and learn things, it is because they want to' (4). No one cares about the moral obligation associated with reading. On the other hand, Charlotte and Anne tend to highlight the importance of books as a means of moral improvement in their works, obviously reflecting the social situation in which self-education by book learning was valued. In fact, it is inappropriate to categorise Heathcliff simply as an immoral, villainous character who does not read

comparable to the depraved non-reading characters in the other sisters' works, such as Arthur Huntington, the unfaithful husband of the heroine of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

There are, in fact, several similarities on the surface between Heathcliff and Arthur in their attitudes towards books and education. Arthur, who 'never reads anything but newspapers and sporting magazines' (*The Tenant* 175), at one point 'snatche[s] up a heavy book and hurl[s] it' (179) at his dog's head. Also, he 'delight[s] to encourage [his son] in all the embryo vices a little child can show, and to instruct [him] in all the evil habits he could acquire' (296). Similarly, Heathcliff, who 'never reads', takes 'it into his head to destroy' (*Wuthering Heights* 301) Cathy's books. He calls books 'idle tricks' or 'trash' (30) and blames Cathy for her reading without working. In his childhood, he disobeys Joseph's oppressive religious instruction and kicks his religious book into a dog-kennel, sympathising with Catherine, who 'hated a good book' (21). As regards his attitude towards Hareton, Heathcliff deprives him of any educational opportunities and teaches 'him to scorn everything extra-animal as silly and weak' (219) in order to revenge himself on Hareton's father, Hindley.

These qualities pointed out above may encourage the reader to classify Arthur and Heathcliff as part of the same group of anti-book characters at first glance. There are, however, some unmissable elements which differentiate Heathcliff from Arthur. The most important one among such elements concerns his strange relationship with Hareton. While Heathcliff tries to corrupt Hareton, he admits that his enemy's son has precious qualities of mind. His bond seems far stronger with Hareton than with his real son, Linton, in many senses. In fact, his contradictory feelings towards Hareton confuse Heathcliff himself. Charlotte says in the preface to the 1850 edition of *Wuthering Heights* that 'the single link that connects Heathcliff with humanity is his rudely confessed regard for Hareton Earnshaw — the young man whom he has ruined' (*Wuthering Heights* xlix).

The difficulties in interpreting the relation between Heathcliff and books may be related to the author's psychology, which is metaphorically presented in the image of a book. In order to pursue this problem in more detail, the final chapter will analyse some of Emily's poems and the distinctive narrative structure of *Wuthering Heights* as the keys to understanding the nature of her creative power.

Chapter III : The Book in the Poetic World of Emily Brontë

The reason why this final chapter focuses on Emily's poems is that some unique characteristics of *Wuthering Heights* are those usually seen in poems rather than in novels. Indeed, Emily's creative activity seems to have its root in her poems. Naomi Lewis, the editor of a collection of Emily's poems, argues that 'Emily never readily turned to prose for setting down or working out her deepest personal thoughts' (*A Peculiar Music* 31). For Emily, the best way of expressing the inner world of her mind was to use poetic language. Her language tended to be metaphoric rather than metonymic. Metaphor, or poetic and philosophic language, is based on difference and relation, while metonymy, or our everyday language, is based on contiguity and assumption. *Wuthering Heights* reveals the author's subtle sensibility towards linguistic difference. Most narrators of the novel tend to use conventional, everyday language, living in the world of metonymy. On the other hand, Heathcliff and Catherine live in the poetic world, which is made of metaphoric language. So, Catherine's contradictory metaphor, 'I am Heathcliff', is beyond Nelly's understanding. The world of

Heathcliff and Catherine is the ideal of Emily herself, who is dissatisfied with the metonymic book in the world of Nelly and Lockwood but desires the metaphoric, or the 'real', one.⁵

As a female poet, Emily is conscious of the issue of the limitedness of language that is available to her. In the following lines, the poet laments her lack of 'the precious gift' to speak. The 'gift', in this context, means the language that is to be used by the poet.

I asked my self O why has heaven
Denied the precious gift to me
The glorious gift to many given
To speak their thoughts in poetry (22. 11-14)

While this metapoetic poem seems to show Emily's own ambition for her career as an independent poet, she regrets that she does not possess any suitable language for speaking her thoughts.

Furthermore, Lockwood's allusion to John Milton's *Paradise Lost* provides us with some hints in considering this novel's poetic aspects. '[H]aving thrown away the chance' (*Wuthering Heights* 308) to win Cathy's heart, Lockwood can only stare at the new couple enviously and grumble: 'They [Cathy and Hareton] are afraid of nothing ... [t]ogether they would brave satan [*sic*] and all his legions' (337). This remark reflects the description of the Angelic War by Raphael, the messenger sent by God to Adam in order to admonish him for Satan's malicious conspiracy in *Paradise Lost*.⁶ Significantly, it is Lockwood, an outsider in the world of *Wuthering Heights*, who uses the language of the epic told by the authoritative male poet. Neither as a listener nor as a narrator is Lockwood good enough to understand the truth of Catherine and Heathcliff's world. His inappropriate allusion to Milton seems to imply Emily's attempt to problematise Miltonic language. The poet cannot be satisfied with conventional language, either of poets or of novelists, since none of them is sufficient to convey her distinctive thoughts. While she gives Lockwood the role of a listener-narrator in spite of his incapability and characterises his personality both ironically and humorously, Emily seems to feel impatient with herself for not being able to express what she wants to because of the lack of suitable language. In both her novel and poems, she is struggling to obtain a language of her own which is completely different from traditional language and which is appropriate to give shape to her inner world.⁷ Considering her nature as a poet in this way, her only novel deserves to be examined with comprehensive reference to her poems.

If Emily is described better as a poet, Charlotte is more obviously a novelist. The repetitive addresses to the reader in Charlotte's novels show how sensitive she was to the existence of readers of her works. In her novels, the border between the voice of Charlotte herself and that of the narrator is sometimes ambiguous. Such doubled voices of the author and the narrator seem to imply Charlotte's own desire for attracting and working with readers. Although in the case of Anne the thoughts about readership are not as explicit as with Charlotte, she depicts the significance of writers' acquiring ideal readers in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. It has been argued that there are some similarities between *The Tenant* and *Wuthering Heights*, such as the dual narrative structure. Their narrative structures, however, are contrastive at a profound level. The whole story of *The Tenant* shows the process of Helen's acquiring an ideal reader of her diary, namely, her future

husband Gilbert Markham. By contrast, Arthur, who invades Helen's privacy and reads her diary forcibly, is an undesirable reader. In this novel, Helen's diary at the centre of the narrative structure functions as a book and has a quite strong impact on the main plot. Gilbert reads the diary handed to him by Helen herself and then discovers the truth of her past in it. This incident ultimately leads to their happy marriage in the ending. This process in which Helen's diary as private writing is made public by acquiring a sympathetic readership seems to symbolise a book being published. In this way, the narrative structure of *The Tenant* with a diary, or a yet unpublished book, at its centre is open towards the outside world.

On the other hand, the narrative structure of *Wuthering Heights* has no book at its centre, for the most important characters, Heathcliff and Catherine, apparently do not read. Around this empty centre with no book, the characters are telling each other narratives and listening to them, but these exchanges of narratives tend to end in failure because of shortcomings on both sides. Ironically the most significant example of such an inadequate listener-narrator is Nelly. At first, Nelly plays the role of a listener imperfectly. Because of her position as a surrogate mother in the motherless world of *Wuthering Heights*, some motherless characters confide their inmost thoughts to her. For example, Isabella writes in her letter to Nelly, 'I must write to somebody, and the only choice left me is you' (*Wuthering Heights* 136). Catherine chooses Nelly as the listener to whom she cries her famous remark, 'I am Heathcliff' (82), for '[t]here was not a soul else that she might fashion into an adviser' (68). Even Heathcliff speaks his mind to Nelly before his death: '[Y]ou'll not talk of what I tell you, and my mind is so eternally secluded in itself, it is tempting, at last, to turn it out to another' (323). Unfortunately, Nelly is unable to understand their personal narratives sufficiently. The responsibility for these failures to communicate narratives, however, does not rest with Nelly alone. In fact, it is doubtful whether any of the narrators mentioned above truly has the ability to narrate their thoughts intelligibly or not, as the following words of Catherine imply: 'I couldn't explain to Edgar how certain I felt of having a fit, or going raging mad, if he persisted in teasing me! I had no command of tongue, or brain ...' (125). After playing her role as a listener, Nelly plays the role of a narrator as well towards Lockwood and tells him the narrative which she herself does not understand well. Both her capability of narrating and Lockwood's capability of understanding her narrative are doubtful. Indeed, the whole narrative structure of *Wuthering Heights* consists of a long chain of the failures to communicate narratives.

In a sense, narrators can be equated with listeners in Emily's works. While the border between the voice of the author and that of the narrator is sometimes ambiguous in Charlotte's works as mentioned above, in Emily's poems the distinction of the voice of the speaker and that of the listener tends to be uncertain. This tendency can be found in an especially explicit form in her two poems titled 'The Philosopher' and 'Self-Interrogation' respectively.⁸ As the latter title suggests, in these two poems, a person plays two roles as a speaker and a listener at the same time, one who wonders to oneself.

Multiple voices in Emily's poems can be condensed into an internal conversation within one mind, or the mind of the poet herself. The following untitled poem, for example, implies the complicated coexistence of three voices: of the Virgin Mary, a mother in the secular world, and her child who has been left alone:

Sleep not dream not this bright day

Will not cannot last for aye
Bliss like thine is bought by years
Dark with torment and with tears
.....
I love thee boy for all divine
All full of God thy features shine
Darling enthusiast holy child
Too good for this world's warring wild
Too heavenly now but doomed to be
Hell-like in heart and misery
.....
And blame me not if when the dread
Of suffering clouds thy youthful head
If when by crime and sorrow tos[t]
Thy wandering bark is wrecked and los[t]

I too depart I too decline
And make thy path no longer mine
'Tis thus that human minds will turn
All doomed alike to sin and mourn
Yet all with long gaze fixed afar
Adoring virtue's distant star (13. 1-28)

This poem can be interpreted from both religious and secular viewpoints. The imagery of the first fourteen lines reminds us of the Virgin Mary's voice towards the Child Christ, in which his Crucifixion in the future seems to be foretold. On the other hand, in a more worldly sense, the speaker can be seen as a mother worrying about the future of her son, whom she will leave alone in this world full of sufferings after her death. Then suddenly, the voice of 'I' becomes ambiguous again in the last stanza. It seems as if the voice of the child has merged into and taken over that of its mother. It is difficult to decide whether in the final stanza the child is singing about the dead mother who has already 'depart[ed]' and 'decline[d]', or whether the mother is singing about her child who has died young before its mother's death like Christ. This ambiguity of the voice leaves the impression of the poet's failure to represent her lost mother. In some of Emily's poems which include voices of parental figures such as this poem and 'Faith and Despondency', which was referred to above in Chapter II, the child-poet is making efforts to recover the voices of her lost beloved and then her lost childhood, through which she may find her own origin. However, her attempt results in a confused self-conversation in which the individual voice is hardly distinguishable from that of others, while the real object of her desire remains forever missing.

Similarly, in *Wuthering Heights*, every important character can be seen as part of the whole world within Emily's thoughts. While Heathcliff and Catherine represent the deepest part of the mind that resists

recovery, Nelly remains an imperfect guide of the reader's travel towards their hidden world. Her act of narrating the story of their lost childhood symbolises the author's own search for her origin. The whole story of the novel has the form of a self-interrogation, whose aim is to reveal the nature of the self. In this sense, the narrative structure of Emily's novel is closed towards the outside world.

One of the haunting images of Emily's poems is the tomb. In the following poem, for example, the poet stands 'by a marble tomb / Where royal corpses lay' (11. 11-12) in a dream and sees a ghost:

And truly at my side
I saw a shadowy thing
Most dim and yet its presence there
Curdled my blood with ghastly fear
And ghasstlier wondering
.....
It seemed close by and yet more far
Than this world from the farthest star
That tracks the boundless blue

Indeed 'twas not the space
Of earth or time between
But the sea of death's eternity
The gulf o'er which mortality
Has never never been (11. 17-40)

Also, in another poem, the speaker depicts this 'shadowy thing' as something that she cannot see while she is awake:

Sleep brings no rest to me
The shadows of the dead
My waking eyes may never see
Surround my bed

Sleep brings no hope to me
In soundest sleep they come
And with their doleful imagery
Deepen the gloom (29. 5-12)

Although the shadows of the dead are fearful and deprive her of rest, the poet seems to lament the gap that lies forever between the living and the dead and desire to see the shadows clearly when she is awake, not in her dreams. These poems quoted above may be compared with Heathcliff's statement of his act of digging

up the grave of Catherine:

I looked round impatiently — I felt her by me — I could *almost* see her, and yet I *could not*! I ought to have sweat blood then, from the anguish of my yearning, from the fervour of my supplications to have but one glimpse! (*Wuthering Heights* 290)

While tombs are visible, figures of the dead buried in them are invisible to the living. This contrast is related to the fact that death itself is unrepresentable. Catherine Belsey points out that 'many societies have made their tombs exceptionally visible, as if to remind the living of their own finitude' (40). 'We cannot represent death to ourselves' (41), therefore we utilise tombs as the symbol of loss. Through visible tombs, we indirectly perceive the 'paradoxically absent presence' (41) of death.

Such Lacanian/Belsian ideas about the relation between death and tombs are helpful in interpreting the following remark by Heathcliff:

[W]hat is not connected with her [Catherine] to me? and what does not recall her? I cannot look down to this floor, but her features are shaped on the flags! In every cloud, in every tree — filling the air at night, and caught by glimpses in every object, by day I am surrounded with her image! The most ordinary faces of men, and women — my own features — mock me with a resemblance. The entire world is a dreadful collection of memoranda that she did exist, and that I have lost her! (323-324)

For Heathcliff, everything in the world is a signifier of Catherine, but he cannot find the signified. This is parallel to the way we feel the gap between the living and the dead when we see tombs as signifiers of the latter.⁹

The desire to fill a gap between the living and the dead and perceive death directly, which is found in both Emily's poems and *Wuthering Heights*, reminds us of the death drive, or the Lacanian Real. The Real is at once inaccessible to the Symbolic and yet only possible to approximate through it. The novel's paradoxical narrative style in representing books, in a sense, dramatizes this impossibility to access the Real. As mentioned above, Emily's writing has some qualities of introversion. The act of self-interrogation in her poems can be seen as 'mateless play' in a sense. Within Emily's mind, multiple voices coexist. The poet can be the speaker, the listener, the father, the mother, and the child at the same time. Especially, the state of being the mother and the child simultaneously is an important issue worth discussing with reference to the fact that Emily lost her mother and elder sisters in her early childhood. The ideal image of the mother for Emily may have a strong connection with Maria's reading books to her younger sisters.¹⁰ After the death of this maternal figure, the Brontë children including Emily began writing lots of stories eagerly. Perhaps the representation of the poet as being the mother and the child at the same time reflects her unconscious drive for the unbridgeable gulf between her dead mother and herself, or a sort of Lacanian death drive.

In her 'mateless play', Emily has to play two roles of the mother and the child simultaneously and read books to herself because of the loss of her mother. Although books are desired to function as the only

way to approach her lost mother, they tend to make her aware of her state of being alone without her mother at the same time. Here books are in contiguity with tombs in that both are close to the memory of one's beloved. The poet, however, cannot stand these being in mere contiguity. This point seems to contribute to the paradoxical way of representing books in *Wuthering Heights*. While books are undeniably important for her, Emily dares to 'forsake' them in this novel. The book that Heathcliff and Catherine forsake is the signifier of unrecoverable love that was nourished in their lost family life as young siblings. Furthermore, each lost narrative in a long chain of the failures to communicate narratives in the motherless world of the novel can be seen as a forsaken book. Thus, the lost and still unwritten book in *Wuthering Heights* embodies the poet's conflicting drive for the Real, or her lost and unrecoverable world.

It is symbolic that this novel ends with the lovers' graves, in front of which Lockwood makes an ambiguous remark:

I sought, and soon discovered, the three head-stones on the slope next the moor — the middle one, grey, and half buried in heath — Edgar Linton's only harmonized by the turf, and moss creeping up its foot — Heathcliff's still bare. I ... wondered how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers, for the sleepers in that quiet earth. (*Wuthering Heights* 337)

In spite of its multi-layered narratives, the whole novel never reveals what is in its core but only tells of irreparable loss. The hidden world of Catherine and Heathcliff, or the 'real' book of Emily Brontë, remains forever a void. In this way, *Wuthering Heights* itself is 'a dreadful collection of memoranda' left by a young aspiring female poet. When we open and read it, we are paradoxically reading a book that has already been closed, and the truth of which will never be discovered.

Conclusion

This paper has dealt with the problem of representations of books in the world of Emily Brontë from several angles, such as the social context of nineteenth-century England, the narrower context of the Brontë family, the similarities and differences between the Brontë sisters, narrative structures, and the philosophical and spiritual world of her poems. What is consistent throughout all the aspects mentioned above is the fact that the meaning of books is unstable. Books influence readers both positively and negatively according to how they are read. As the variety of statements about the problems of reading in the lifetime of the Brontës shows, books were metonymically connected with order, disorder, civilization, degradation, prosperity, and rebellion. Apart from these social circumstances, the originality of the relation between the Brontës and books was developed within the small family circle. Even among the sisters, who shared many experiences in their childhood, there were conspicuous differences in their attitudes towards books, whereas some similarities, such as the negative images of reading connected with libraries in seemingly sophisticated households and the positive ones of would-be readers in the lower classes, were found. In the case of Emily, her motive for writing seems related to an internal quest, rather than the acquisition of readership in the real world. In the motherless world of *Wuthering Heights*, a lot of failures to communicate narratives occur. The

strange fact that Catherine and Heathcliff seem to be characterized as people who do not read is interpreted to have paradoxically a lot to do with the author's psyche. For Emily Brontë, the book is, in a sense, the metaphor, rather than the metonymy, for the motherless poet's anxiety and ambition, or in other words for her magnificent, hidden universe. In this way, pursuing the issue of Emily's representations of books leads us to the realisation that *Wuthering Heights* resists fixed ideas on books and implies the rich and profound complicatedness of the meaning of books.

Acknowledgments

This paper is a revised version of my thesis which was submitted to the Department of English of Ochanomizu University in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of B. A. in December 2019. I would like to thank my former supervisor, Professor Tetsuro Shimizu, for supporting countless throughout the writing process of the thesis and drawing my attention to Emily Brontë's poems and Lacanian theory. I am also grateful to Associate Professor Andrew Rayment of Chiba University for reading the draft of this immature essay and giving me helpful advice kindly. Any remaining errors in this essay, however, are of course solely my own.

Notes

¹ Only twenty-one of her poems were published during her lifetime. The first complete edition published in 1910 by Hodder & Stoughton contains 177 poems, though the authorship of some of them is doubtful. See *The Complete Poems* (1992) edited by Janet Gezari, pp. xv-xvi. The title of this paper is based on one of her poems, 'Faith and Despondency'. This poem will be discussed in detail in Chapter II.

² In this paper, in order to distinguish between the two heroines with the same name, 'Catherine' and 'Cathy' are used for the first and second heroines respectively.

³ All the quotations from *Wuthering Heights* in this paper are based on the Penguin Classics edition (2003) by Pauline Nestor.

⁴ Regarding what kind of books the Brontë children had access to, Elizabeth Gaskell suspects that there were no children's books at the parsonage, and that these eager children browsed among a wide range of English literature without any disturbance (35). Also, the question of where they got books has been frequently discussed among Brontë scholars for a long time. Clifford Whone argues that the Keighley Mechanics' Library 'was undoubtedly the first regular source of books' (345) for the Brontës. On the other hand, Bob Duckett challenges this traditional idea and suggests that there were many other available sources, such as circulating libraries, booksellers, and their friends.

⁵ In the introduction to her edition, Nestor describes the whole world of the novel as dreamlike and explains its poetic features:

In dreams one can be at once the onlooker and the participant, the self and the other. The dream world is a place of multiplicity which does not demand the exclusions of choice. It is not structured by causality but by contiguity, so that within it, difference can exist side by side without disturbance

or interaction. It is a mode more commonly associated with poetry than prose, yet it is distinctly the mode of *Wuthering Heights*. (xxvi)

'Contiguity' is the key concept of metonymy. Later in this chapter, I will also try a psychoanalytic approach to Emily's creative world referring to Jacques Lacan, who pays attention to the important roles of metonymy and metaphor in our perception, which is dependent on the system of language. Books, culture, and status are in contiguity with each other, and therefore can be metonymically used. 'Contiguity' or metonymy, however, more properly applies to the conventional language of the narrators of this novel than the author's own. Regarding the definition of metonymy, see Littlemore, p. 9.

⁶ Lockwood's words 'satan [*sic*] and all his legions' allude to the following lines:

he [Satan] resolv'd
With all his legions to dislodge, and leave
Unworshipped, unobeyed the throne supreme
Contemptuous ... (V. 668-71)

Cf. Helen Small's note on these lines in the Oxford World's Classics edition, p. 341.

⁷ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar interpret *Wuthering Heights* as a revision of *Paradise Lost* from a feminist point of view in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Emily's attempt to obtain her own language can be interpreted as a female poet's defiance towards male language based on patriarchy.

⁸ 'The Philosopher' and 'Self-Interrogation' are numbered 157 and 130 respectively in *The Complete Poems* edited by Janet Gezari.

⁹ Lacan comments on the algorithm S/s, which is read as 'the signifier over the signified, "over" corresponding to the bar separating the two stages' (164) :

One cannot go further along this line of thought than to demonstrate that no signification can be sustained other than by reference to another signification: in its extreme form this amounts to the proposition that there is no language (*langue*) in existence for which there is any question of its inability to cover the whole field of the signified, it being an effect of its existence as a language (*langue*) that it necessarily answers all needs. (165)

¹⁰ See Chapter I above.

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