

WUTHERING HEIGHTS: THE QUEST FOR CONTINUITY

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Abstract

In this article, I shall explore George Bataille's notions on eroticism in relation to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. The main focus of my analysis are the scenes illustrating Heathcliff's involvement in acts of necrophilia and gradual starvation, as they reflect the Bataillean ideas of continuity and discontinuity in *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, which account for the processes of union and disunion between the protagonists (Catherine and Heathcliff). Just as the French philosopher argues that the human being, despite its finite condition and determinations, seeks to go beyond its limitations and individuality, Brontë shows the different moments of rupture and the final unity of the lovers. In that sense, Heathcliff manifests an ardent desire to overcome the boundaries of his existence by giving his own life and be reunited in an act of selflessness with the body of his beloved. In doing so, he restores the cosmic flow and attains intransience and immutability beyond death.

Resumen

En este artículo, mi intención es explorar las nociones de George Bataille acerca del erotismo con respecto a *Wuthering Heights* de Emily Brontë. El interés principal de mi análisis radica en las escenas que ilustran los momentos de necrofilia y de hambre que experimenta Heathcliff, puesto que reflejan las ideas Batailleanas de continuidad y discontinuidad en *Erotismo: Muerte y Sensualidad*, las cuales explican los procesos de unión y separación entre los protagonistas (Catherine y Heathcliff). Del mismo modo que el filósofo francés afirma que el ser humano, a pesar de su limitada condición y sus determinaciones, aspira a trascender sus confines e individualidad, Brontë muestra los diferentes momentos de ruptura y la unión final entre los amantes. En ese sentido, Heathcliff manifiesta su ardiente deseo de rebasar los límites de su existencia al entregar su propia vida y de reunirse en un acto de generosidad en el cuerpo de su amada. De este modo, restablece el flujo cósmico y alcanza permanencia e inmutabilidad más allá de la muerte.

Key words: continuity, death, discontinuity, eroticism, finitude, individuality, separation, union. *Palabras clave:* continuidad, muerte, discontinuidad, erotismo, finitud, individualidad, separación, unión.

In his introduction to *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (1986), Bataille defines his notions of continuity and discontinuity as the traits which determine human existence. In his view, we are discontinuous beings marked out by both our distinctiveness and finite nature, although we yearn to pull down the boundaries of our solipsism. Therefore, in this article, I shall address the question of eroticism in *Wuthering Heights* (2003) as an expression of the sacrifice of the individual's intactness and his dissolution in the other, attitudes which prevail in the figure of Heathcliff after the loss of his beloved. As the topic itself is overly broad, I have resolved to focus on the idea of love beyond death suggested in some passages in the novel. Thus, two main scenes will be the starting point of my analysis: Heathcliff's desecration of Catherine's grave, and his subsequent process of starvation. These crucial moments, which will rush Heathcliff's self-consummation, illustrate the lovers' rupture and their final union in the afterlife.

In *Wuthering Heights*, every individual, except for the major figure of Heathcliff, is suspended in their innate individuality, which not only entails a shift away from the other, but also an overstated attentiveness of one's own self. Only when the ego ventures to tear down the solid demarcations of its existence, can it be able to overcome its solitude and merge into the other. It is precisely by way of death that the human being is restored to its original harmony. Invoking Bataille's words: "We are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity" (1986:15). Our solipsistic human condition yields to definitions and determinations; we live and die alone, but in our heart, we desire to transgress the limitations of our reality. That is, we manifest a desire to live as if we were not going to die. Notwithstanding, our consciousness of death makes us vulnerable creatures, and brings about states of melancholy and anxiety. As Richardson claims,

without death we would exist as separate beings ignorant of and irrevocably separated from anything that exists outside ourselves. Death, then, is violence, but it is at the same time communication. It is the consciousness of death, not life, that makes community a possibility. Death (or rather the consciousness we have of it) therefore lies at the heart of being, without which we would not be what we are. (1994:103)

Although Bataille argues for a form of continuity which exceeds human limitations and individualism, our existence is unavoidably destined to discontinuity and loss. In *Wuthering Heights*, moments of separation prevail over union. However, it is the bodily and spiritual merging of the lovers that I shall account for in terms of Heathcliff's scene of necrophilia, which will end in his self-sacrifice.

To be sure, the novel puts forward a form of immutability suggested by the fusion of the lovers, which is the counterpart of the obsessive nature of romantic love and its transcendence beyond death. If the protagonists suffer from the seamless wound of discontinuity in their instances of separation, they also experience the rapturous exultation of continuity in death and eroticism. As Bataille argues,

only the beloved can in this world bring about what our human limitations deny, a total blending of two beings, a continuity between two discontinuous creatures. Hence love spells suffering from our isolation in so far as it is a quest for the impossible, and at a lower level, a quest for union at the mercy of circumstance. Yet it promises a way out of our suffering. We suffer in our isolation in our individual separateness. (1986:20)

Hence, love assuages the anguish originated by the wound of discontinuity. It releases the human being from its individualism, and subsumes it within the aura of the beloved. In this manner, the bliss that passion promises is celebrated through the total dissolution of the lovers. *Wuthering Heights* is expressive of their cosmic permanence, although before its accomplishment, the protagonists are to be separated by the existing abyss between life and death. This disjunction can be read as the result of Heathcliff's revenge on all those who have deprived him of his object of desire. In that sense, his vengefulness is only a deterrent which delays the continuity with his beloved, and once it comes to an end, he will not find any reason to continue living. Thus, he will give himself to nature, where Catherine's omnipresence is reminiscent of his painful loss:

For what is not connected with her 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! (Brontë 2003:247)

For Heathcliff, the world has become an uninhabitable place after the loss of his beloved. However, her presence, dispersed and melted into every form of the outer space, chases him, and is rendered perpetual. If continuity here is

established by way of Catherine's dissolution in the natural world, the lovers are still physically separated by life and death. Heathcliff strives in vain to replenish the void that is consummating his entire being. Thus, in his agony, he desecrates Catherine's grave, where he dreadfully seeks a total merging into her. However, Catherine only manifests herself in the form of a ghost whose sigh and breath remind him of her ephemeral presence, and of an insufferable discontinuity. Heathcliff describes the moment of profanation as the impossibility of attaining the desired fusion with his beloved:

I fell to work with my hands; the wood commenced cracking about the screws, I was on the point of attaining my object, when it seemed that I heard a sigh from someone above, close at the edge of the grave, and bending down –“if I can only get this off,” I muttered, “I wish they may shovel in the earth over us both!” and I wrenched at it more desperately still. There was another sigh, close at my ear. I appeared to feel the warm breadth of it displacing the sleet-laden wind. I knew no living thing in flesh and blood was by– but as certainly as you perceive the approach to some substantial body in the dark, though it cannot be discerned, so certainly I felt that Cathy was there, not under me, but on the earth. (Brontë 2003:221).

In this scene, Heathcliff seems to be transgressing one of the prohibitions associated with death: the contact with corpses. If death is denied by virtue of the dreadfulness of annihilation and, moreover, of the return to the impure and unclean, Heathcliff restores the human being to its original condition by giving himself to the decay in nature (Bataille 1991:80). This erotic encounter with Catherine's corpse can be read in view of his attraction for that which customarily arouses horror and repulsiveness. Heathcliff delights in defilement and waste. In other words, he feels the urge to be in touch with what is socially unacceptable and generates repugnance and nausea. By doing so, he breaks the forbidden laws, and ultimately endangers his own identity. He can be considered to be a character of abjection,¹ in Kristeva's words, in that his actions call into question those liminal spaces which divide life from death, and thus, become the site for desire and repulsion. His abject disposition is explicit in the following dialogue with Nelly:

“And if she had been dissolved into earth, or worse, what would you have dreamt of then?” I said.

¹ On the concept of abjection, Kristeva remarks, “it is thus not a lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection, but what disturbs identity, system or order. What does not respect borders positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (1982:4).

“Of dissolving with her, and being more happy still!” he answered. Do you suppose I dread any change of that sort? I expected such a transformation on raising the lid, but I’m better pleased that it should not commence till I share it. Besides, unless I had received a distinct impression of her passionless features, that strange feeling would hardly have been removed. It began oddly. You know, I was wild after she died, and eternally, from dawn to dawn, praying her to return to me –her spirit– I have strong faith in ghosts; I have a conviction that they can, and do exist, among us! (Brontë 2003:220)

In contemplating the decayed matter, Heathcliff not only manifests his animal impulses, but also, and more significantly, an erotic activity intimately tied up with death. The encounter with Catherine’s corpse suggests a state continuity unleashed by the emergence of the supernatural. The phantasmagorical elements of the novel inherent in romantic experience represent the erotic confluence between life and the absence of it, the ego and the other. This sublime aspect helps in arriving at a state of permanence by suppressing the boundaries that separate the tangible reality from the beyond, and discrete entities from a total exposure to a different consciousness. As Bataille puts it, there is a “connection between the promise of life implicit in eroticism and the sensuous aspect of death” (1986:59). By virtue of eroticism, Heathcliff yearns to obliterate his own isolated being only to consecrate it in the body of Catherine, relinquishing his self-sufficiency and returning to the earth with his beloved. Bataille describes this altruistic act as intimacy, in that the individual desires to be within the other, rejecting its own identity:

In love’s first impulse, love yearns for death. But yearning for death is itself an impulse to go beyond death. Going beyond death, yearning aims at the “beyond” of individualized being. This is revealed by the fusion of lovers, who confuse their love with the love each has for the other’s sex. Thus love associated with choice slips endlessly towards an impulse of nameless debauchery.

The isolated being dies in debauchery. Or, for a while, gives way to the horrible indifference of the dead.

In an individual slipping towards the horrors of debauchery, love attains its intimate meaning at the brink of nausea. But the opposite movement (an instant of reversal) can be more violent. At that moment the particular chosen being discovers himself or herself again, but he or she loses the intelligible appearance linked with definite limits. (Richardson 1998:105)

These lines, which belong to Bataille’s “Alleluia, the Catechism of Dianus,” correlate the thrust of love with death, as the debauchery in which lovers fuse, epitomize their self-dispossession, and ultimately their immersion in the flow of the universe. That is, the limits of human existence are

relinquished, and so is the world of the intellect, which reduces the object to mere abstract functions. This rejection of one's own ego opens up a new reality "where objects are on the same plane as the subject, where they form, together with the subject, a sovereign totality which is not divided by any abstraction and is commensurate with the entire universe." The mind only perceives subject and object as two solitary beings, but in truth they are two desires that "meet, intermingle and merge into one" (Bataille 1991:112, 113).

Precisely, Heathcliff struggles for that unification. His contact with Catherine's corpse is an attempt to overcome the chasm that separates them. In that space, the breath of Catherine's ghost is a trace of her presence that vanishes the moment Heathcliff appears to apprehend her:

[...] 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 fervor of my supplications to have but one glimpse! I had not one. She showed herself, as she often was in life, a devil to me! And, since then, sometimes more, and sometimes less, I've been the sport of that intolerable torture! (Brontë 2003:221)

Heathcliff's grief accounts for the bond between erotic desire and death, from which he does not shrink back in fear. In fact, he makes that decisive step towards continuity and permanence by attempting to be reunited with his beloved. If this action reveals the sexual anxiety to give oneself and be within the lover, it also brings about a total destruction. This abstract negativity is a sovereign attitude that challenges death and human limitations. In Derrida's words, "to stay alive, to maintain oneself in life, to work, to defer pleasure, to limit the stakes, to have *respect* for death at the very moment when one looks *directly* at it –such is the servile condition of mastery and of the entire history it makes possible" (1978:255). In this quotation, there is an implicit critique of capitalist structures, founded on the deferral of desire, and production with a view of the future, rather than on living the present to the fullest. Heathcliff can be considered to be a detractor of that system, as it compels individuals to live in a restrictive economy of emotions. For him, eroticism, death and sensuality are the alternatives to the solipsistic condition of humankind, and the quest for the union with his lover enacts the agony and frenzy of his desire. As Bataille puts it,

[...] anguish, which lays us open to annihilation and death, is always linked to eroticism; sexual activity finally rivets us to the distressing image of death, and the knowledge of death deepens the abyss of eroticism. The curse of decay constantly recoils on sexuality, which tends to eroticise it; in sexual

anguish there is a sadness of death, an apprehension of death which is rather vague but which we will never be able to shake off. (1991:84)

Anguish is the paradox of the human condition, as it expresses not only the desire to return one's own being to its undifferentiated continuity, but also the fear to transcend the limits between the self and the other. Thereby, the acceptance of our incompleteness allows us to long for our initial stability. According to Bataille, "it is the sentiment of a danger connected to the inextinguishable expectation," a sentiment that not only brings about loss and exuberance, but which also impels us to overcome the limitations of our being by showing ourselves in the vulnerability of our nakedness (Richardson 1998:37). According to him, "stripping naked is the decisive action. Nakedness offers a contrast to self-possession, to discontinuous existence, in other words. It is a state of communication revealing a quest for a possible continuance of being beyond the confines of the self" (1986:12).

The scene of necrophilia is an illustration of Heathcliff's state of undress, in that he relinquishes his own life in order to be consummated by the force of passion. Unlike his lover, he shows himself in a genuine state of nakedness, in his penetrability, defenselessness and insufficiency. In that exposure, he is divested of his own self and opened to the sovereign totality of his beloved. In contrast, Catherine reneges on her sentiments for Heathcliff by covering her body and spirit with the clothing of the Lintons', that is, she does not show herself in her nakedness. The transformation that she undergoes at Thrushcross Grange manifests her shame of that nudity, which not only distresses the relation between herself and Heathcliff, but also rushes the process of discontinuity. If his love is an act of absolute selflessness, hers is introduced in terms of separation, not only from Heathcliff but, in doing so, from herself. Thus, Catherine's transition entails the betrayal of the natural world shared with her beloved at childhood. The intense and stimulating power of nature, deeply rooted in Romantic ethos, was at the outset the protagonists' retreat from the restrictions of civilization. Nevertheless, Catherine ends up substituting this world of exuberance and relentless passions for the tranquil household of the Lintons. As Bataille points out, "man appears to be the only animal to be ashamed of that nature whence he comes, and from which he does not cease to have departed" (1991:62). Human beings recoil from the animalistic impulses of the flesh, the filth in nature and the naked body. In that sense, Catherine has negated the condition which constitutes her inmost being. Her artificial image responds to the urge felt at Thrushcross Grange to clean her, and clothe her. In this manner, she ends up assimilating Christian morality, which insists on this shame. That may be the reason why Heathcliff's love is hostile to the

inauthentic and passionless feelings of duty and humanity predicated by the Lintons' religiosity, as it is regulated by social morals and calculation, both of which deprive individuals of giving themselves to the other.

Conversely, his attitude is analogous to the classical activity of *parrhesia*,² or truth-telling, in that he harmonizes his *logos* and his *bios*, that is, his discourse and his way of life. He acts according to what he says and, by doing so, he is exposed to an imminent danger, even to death. According to Nussbaum, "the love of Heathcliff for Cathy contains the total exposure of self [...]. Only Heathcliff permits his very soul to be at risk. The other is in him and is him. In her death, he dies in a surrender, incomprehensible to the narrators, of reason and of boundaries" (Dunn 2003:403). Unlike Linton, Heathcliff lives in a general economy of unbridled passions which pushes him to sacrifice his own life for love, the most selfless act of all. He repudiates the hypocritical Christian morality of pity and charity, as it excludes all those who distance themselves from pre-established hierarchies and from the belief in a static paradise. On the contrary, his behavior responds to a true self-sacrifice, as he gives his entire life to his beloved. As he states:

[...] Two words would comprehend my future –*death* and *hell*; existence, after losing her, would be hell.

Yet I was a fool to fancy for a moment that she valued Edgar Linton's attachment more than mine. If he loved with all the powers of his puny being, he couldn't love as much in eighty years as I could in a day. And Catherine has a heart as deep as I have; the sea could be as readily contained in that horse-trough, as her whole affection be monopolized by him. Tush! He is scarcely a degree dearer to her than her dog, or her horse. It is not in him to be loved like me: how can she love in him what he has not? (Brontë 2003:117)

These words are an expression of Heathcliff's total attachment to his object of desire. Whereas he manifests his devotion for Catherine and his unconditional love by acknowledging the torment of his existence after her death, Catherine is thrust to disguise that nakedness with the Lintons' ethics of marriage and progeny, for fear of exposing herself to pain, social exclusion and

² According to Foucault, "*Parrhesia* is a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his own life through danger, a certain type of relation to himself or other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty. More precisely, *parrhesia* is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself)" (2001:19).

even death (Dunn 2003:407). Her inability to follow the dictates of her own heart, and accept her love for Heathcliff, will lead her to a state of desperation and self-destruction, a process occurring the moment Hindley debases her lover. Hence, Catherine will betray her heart and marry Edgar Linton, with whom she will settle at Thrushcross Grange, a place where she lives in a permanent exile, constantly grieving for her lost childhood, sense of boundlessness and freedom. In her own words,

I wish I were a girl again, half savage, and hardy, and free; and laughing at injuries, not maddening under them. Why am I so changed? Why does my blood rush into a hell of tumult at a few words? I'm sure I should be myself were I once among the heather on those hills. (Brontë 2003:98)

Catherine, then, yearns for the past childhood of the moors and of the savage nature contained in Wuthering Heights. Her self-imposed exile not only wreaks havoc in her consciousness, but also manifests the existential vacuum and imprisonment of her own being. On the other hand, Thrushcross Grange, the enactment of civilization and Catherine's confinement, offers a stark contrast to Wuthering Heights, a space which evokes freedom and wilderness. This realm, according to Joyce Carol Oates, is a celebration of the "timeless" and "phantasmal" reminiscent of the romantic and gothic tradition of Poe. According to her, "these elements cannot survive in the sunlit world of sanity" (1982:437) of Thrushcross Grange, where the feebler and younger generation will end up living and assimilating the restrained values of Christianity. These scenarios manifest the antagonistic forces represented by their dwellers. If Hareton and the adolescent Cathy ally themselves with the conceptions of beautiful love, Heathcliff and Catherine's self-consuming passion enacts the primeval and devastating forces of the sublime in nature.

For that reason, Catherine fades away in a space that compels her to contain her debauchery and vigor. The repression of desire is what cancels out her hopes and illusions, which are truncated the moment she takes up residence with the Lintons. Thus, she falls prey of ennui and dejection. For her, death is the only alternative to her confinement and anxiety:

The thing that irks me most is this shattered prison, after all. I'm tired, tired of being enclosed here. I'm wearying to escape into that glorious world, and to be always there; not seeing it dimly through tears, and yearning for it through the walls of an aching heart; but really with it, and in it. (Brontë 2003:125)

In that sense, Thrushcross Grange is representative of Catherine's self-imprisonment, to which she agreed the moment she resolved to marry Linton. It is precisely her marriage with Edgar that gives Heathcliff no option but

departing from *Wuthering Heights* and from his lover. Therefore, she will suffer continuous crises, which will ultimately bring about her death. In the final encounter between both of them, Heathcliff accuses her of having betrayed her heart as, in marrying Linton, she has killed her own self, and by extension, she is also killing him. As he says,

Because misery and degradation, and death, and nothing that God or Satan could inflict would have parted us, *you*, of your own will, did it. I have not broken your heart –*you* have broken it; and in breaking it, you have broken mine... *Why* did you betray your own heart, Cathy? (Brontë 2003:126)

This is the moment when both lovers fuse in an embrace. The abyss that divided their existence is eventually overcome by the spring that Catherine makes towards Heathcliff. What Nussbaum designates as “a horizontal movement toward the lover of her soul” (Dunn 2003:395), I shall identify with Bataille’s passage through continuity. The fusion of their bodies is the realization of the physical desire repressed in the course of time, and the anticipation of bliss to be enjoyed, before turbulent agitation. As Bataille puts it, “passion fulfilled itself provokes such violent agitation that the happiness involved, before being a happiness to be enjoyed, is so great as to be more like its opposite, suffering. Its essence is to substitute for their persistent discontinuity a miraculous continuity between two beings” (1986:19). In their embrace, the lovers create a microcosm in which their two desires complement and replenish each other. Whereas the Platonic and Christian ascendancy towards a heavenly paradise challenges the deceptive character of the senses through catharsis (“purification,” “cleansing from defilement”), the essence of the protagonists’ passions lies in the forces of the body and nature. This romantic love runs parallel to Bataille’s sensuous aspect of death and eroticism. As he puts it,

It is indeed difficult to perceive, clearly and distinctly, how death, or the consciousness of death, forms a unity with eroticism. In its principle, exacerbated desire cannot be opposed to life, which is rather its outcome. The erotic moment is even the zenith in this life, in which the greatest force and the greatest intensity are revealed whenever two beings are attracted to each other, mate and perpetuate life [...] These entwined bodies, writhing and swooning, losing themselves in an excess of sensuous pleasure, are in opposition to death, which will later doom them to the silence of corruption. (Richardson 1998:107)

The impassioned union between both Catherine and Heathcliff is an erotic moment which anticipates their eternal continuity in the universe. It is the realization of the desire contained over the years on account of their resentment

and rancor. In their embrace, both lovers create a society of consumption³ which defies the principles of acquisition secured by the State. In that sense, Heathcliff is the instigator of a movement of expenditure, a movement which negates the capitalist and, by extension, the Christian tendency to produce and accumulate with a view to the future. For him, Catherine is an object of love which represents the totality of his being, and allows him to open himself to the universe. As Bataille remarks, “in the fixation of love there is no longer any distance between an indistinct but purely concrete totality of what is universally real and the object of this love: the beloved in love is the universe itself” (1991:161). Hence, when Catherine breathes her last, Heathcliff will be deprived of his own life, as his object of desire, coextensive with his entire world, has abandoned him.

From that moment on, he is aware that his revenge has been no more than a distraction which separates him from his real objective, and thus he commences his self-sacrifice, for which he will be atoned. Just as the victim in ritual practices, Heathcliff “escapes debasement, and becomes divinized. This signifies that he is no longer reducible to human measures, recalling objects to their usage” (Bataille 1994:149). In other words, sacrifice enacts the violent powers which cut off the figure of the victim from any functional practice, so that he can be conferred sacred values. To the extent that the object is threatened to be destroyed, thrown into the nothingness, not only is personal sensibility touched, but also the distance between subject and object, which is effaced and dissolved in the same spirit. In this manner, Heathcliff’s painful loss can be correlated with “those ‘mystical states’ experienced in solitude,” in that he gives himself to his beloved in an act of absolute selflessness. Through the violence that he inflicts upon himself, he is not destroyed but renewed, that is, elevated to the ecstasy of continuity with his lover (Bataille 1973:13). Nelly, who witnesses his decline and starvation, describes his detachment from reality as follows:

³ Although the term “society of consumption” is mentioned in Bataille’s “History of Eroticism” (1991:162-163), it is inspired by the notion of expenditure originally discussed in the first volume of that book. According to Bataille, material utility is related to the appropriation and conservation of goods, rather than to their consumption. Nevertheless, Bataille argues that futural thought is oriented towards accumulation, which prevents human beings from living the present moment. Thus, he proposes a form of expenditure which reacts to the capitalist tendency towards acquisition, production and conservation. In “The History of Eroticism,” then, the term “consumption” insists on the unnecessary energy spent by lovers in the sexual act; an energy which is not destined for reproductive ends, but which is only expended without being restituted.

With a sweep of his hand, he cleared a vacant space in front among the breakfast things, and leant forward to gaze more at his ease.

Now, I perceived he was not looking at the wall, for when I regarded him alone, it seemed exactly that he gazed at something within two yards distance. And, whatever it was, it communicated, apparently, both pleasure and pain, in exquisite extremes; at least the anguished, yet raptured expression of his countenance suggested that idea.

The fancied object was not fixed, either; his eyes pursued it with unwearied vigilance, and, even in speaking to me, were never weaned away. (Brontë 2003:253)

Heathcliff's gaze, impregnated with pain and pleasure, is the sign of intense passion which eventually overcomes the void of separation from his object of desire, and provides him the path of continuation towards death. This is the moment when Heathcliff is drawn to an erotic act by virtue of which he experiences the ambivalence of joy in suffering, akin to those states of ecstasy. In doing so, he initiates a communication with his beloved, and it will end in his own annihilation. As Bataille suggests,

it is true that passion seeks to prolong the enjoyment experienced in the loss of the self, but surely it starts with the obliteration of one self by the other. We cannot doubt the fundamental unity of all those instincts by which we escape from the calculations of interest in which we feel the intensity of the present moment. Mysticism is as far as the spontaneity of childhood as it is from the accidental condition of passion. (1973:13-14)

In that sense, Heathcliff's passion is correlative to the trance-like states of the mystic, and can be read as an act of self-inflicted violence which allows him to experience not only a direct confrontation with death, but also the renewal and the atonement of his being. Then, Heathcliff's sacrifice is an expression of the pleasure and enjoyment which the dissolution in the other provokes. As Nelly puts it the moment she found him dead,

[...] His eyes met mine so keen and fierce, I started; and then he seemed to smile.

I could not think him dead, but his face and throat were washed with rain; the bedclothes dripped, and he was perfectly still. The lattice, flapping to and fro, had grazed one hand that rested on the still; no blood trickled from the broken skin, and when I put my fingers to it, I could doubt no more –he was dead and stark!

I hasped the window; I combed his black long hair from his forehead; I tried to close his eyes –to extinguish, if possible, that frightful, life-like gaze of

exultation, before any one else beheld it. They would not shut; they seemed to sneer at my attempts, and his parted lips and sharp, white teeth sneered too! (Brontë 2003:256)

His “parted lips and sharp, white teeth” evoke the laughter that, according to Bataille, frees us from discontinuity, and love is the motor of that occurrence, as it has the ability to release mortals from its constraints. In so far as we can laugh at our destiny, we will be able to attain an advanced state of sovereignty. Laughter implies an irretrievable expenditure of meaning epitomized in the absolute negativity of death and sacrifice (Derrida 1978:260). It is an act of communication with the beyond that opens the human being to infinity and craze. In Bataille’s words,

in laughter, ecstasy is freed, is immanent. The laughter of ecstasy doesn’t *laugh*, instead it opens me up infinitely. The light that shines through is traversed by laughter’s arrow as it leaves mortal absence. An opening up –*deranged* as this is– implies, simultaneously, love for the arrow and a feeling of comfort deriving from an awareness of triumph. (Richardson 1998:117)

Laughter, then, is the initial movement towards what Bataille designates as “joy before death,” that is, the ecstasy attributed to that who does not believe in a beyond. It can also be aligned with the excess and energy of Dionysian forces which reconcile man with nature. The *principium individuationis*, then, is annihilated, and substituted for a state of intoxication which obliterates human will. This surrender to death, love and, ultimately, to the energy of the body is what describes Heathcliff’s ecstasy. As Bataille claims,

“Joy before death” means that life can be glorified from root to summit. It robs of meaning everything that is an intellectual or moral *beyond*, substance, God, immutable order, or salvation. It is an apotheosis of that which is perishable, apotheosis of flesh and alcohol as well as of the trances of mysticism. The religious forms it rediscovers are the naïve forms that antedate the intrusion of a servile morality: it renews the kind of tragic jubilation that man “is” as soon as he stops behaving like a cripple, glorifying necessary work and letting himself be emasculated by the fear of tomorrow. (1994:237)

This state of euphoria is based on the repudiation of servile morals, as much as on the glorification of the flesh and the present moment in contradistinction to futural thinking. The immediacy of effervescence pulls down the boundaries of discrete human beings and liberates them on the outside. Heathcliff’s laughter, then, can be expressive of the dialectical process, as it simultaneously affirms and negates the positing of prohibitions, the ego and meaning. In Kristeva’s terminology, this rapture not only entails the introduction of violent drives against the subject of the action, but also indicates

the duality of the human being to be simultaneously oneself and someone else.⁴ Thus, Heathcliff's laughter is somber and tormented, in that the overcoming of prohibitions and its expression depend to a high degree on him. At the same time, it enacts a sovereign continuity by anticipating the communion with his beloved in the flow of the universe.

In *Wuthering Heights*, then, the different moments of disunion manifest the tension of the main characters to attain final continuity beyond death. Given that Bataille's notions on eroticism are coextensive with the desire to be dissolved in the body of the lover, I have found his discourse particularly thought-provoking to be extended to the domains of Brontë's novel. The scenes of necrophilia and Heathcliff's process of starvation present the destructive effects of discontinuity, and the final union with his object of desire. These attitudes can also be correlated to the romantic ascendancy towards a dynamic universe that cancels out the boundaries between the ego and the other. By way of the physical and spiritual agony, Catherine and Heathcliff are not only driven to the consumption of their pleasure, but also to an eternal continuity within the flow of the cosmos. In Bataille's words, "only in the violation, this through death if need be, of the individual's solitariness can there appear that image of the beloved object which in the lover's eyes invests the world transparent" (1986:22). Along these lines, Heathcliff becomes conscious of the incompleteness of his own existence without the figure of his beloved, which brings about his desperation and self-sacrifice. With this generous act, both lovers not only partake in the restitution of the flow of the universe, but attain permanence beyond death itself.

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⁴ For a contrasting view, see Kristeva (1984: 217-225).

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