Repression and Sublimation of Nature in *Wuthering Heights*

It is a critical commonplace that *Wuthering Heights* is informed by the presence of nature: metaphors drawn from nature provide much of the book's descriptive language—as when Cathy describes Heathcliff as "an arid wilderness of furze and whinstone"—and the reader leaves the book with the sensation of having experienced a realistic portrayal of the Yorkshire landscape. There are, however, very few scenes in the novel that are actually set outdoors. With a few exceptions, the crucial events take place in one or the other of the two houses. Cathy and Heathcliff, the characters whose relations to nature would seem to be the strongest and the most important to the novel, are never presented on the moors, together or apart, in either of the two major narrative layers. From their formative childhood we have as evidence of their attachment to nature Cathy's diary account of their naughty escapade under the dairy maid's cloak, but she omits any direct description of what they actually did out-of-doors. In contrast to the lack of detail about Cathy and Heathcliff, the character who is most devoted to staying indoors, Linton Heathcliff, is seen in two extensive outdoor scenes during his meetings with the second Cathy. Cathy both talks about and is seen in nature, but her grand excursion to Penistone Crags, her most significant foray into nature, is left to conjecture. All that is shown of the whole adventure is the encounter inside Wuthering Heights after Nelly arrives.

It is difficult to catalog something that is not there, but surely it is peculiar that Brontë did not show us even once what her protagonists were like in their element. Heathcliff disappears into a raging storm after hearing Cathy say it would degrade her to marry him. Why does the author not give us one moment's observation of Heathcliff struggling against the storm? There is a brief description of Cathy going out to the road in search of him, "where, heedless of my expostulations, and the growling thunder, and the great drops that began to plash round her, she remained calling, at intervals, and then listening, and then crying outright." But Brontë quickly switches the narrative from Cathy to the scene indoors, so that most of the storm is narrated in terms of how it feels and sounds from inside: the effect of a falling tree limb is measured by the clatter of stones and soot it knocks into the kitchen fire and by Joseph's moralizing vociferations. The next time Cathy enters the narrative she has come back indoors, because the narrative is itself a kind of house, which the characters leave and enter and leave again. Brontë always seems to bend her vision away from nature.

This avoidance of direct presentation of the natural context is caused in part by the chosen perspective of Nelly, who cannot be expected to have followed her characters out into the wilds. She is a "domestic" and her perspective is necessarily housebound. Nelly's indoor perspective would seem to be reinforced by Lockwood's perspective as an invalid in bed during the first part of the narrative and by his displeasure with nature throughout, his own single contact with the elements having been almost lethal. Yet Nelly's narrative has achieved impossibilities elsewhere in the novel, and there is no reason to think that Brontë could not have maneuvered her narrators into position for natural observation if she had wished to do so. She must have had a purpose in choosing two such domestic characters for narrators in the first place.

In a novel whose elaborate structure of narrator-within-narrator puts in doubt the very possibility of talking about a "real" presence of nature or of anything else, it is still necessary to designate a hierarchy of narrative layers according to their relative degrees of realism. The implausible fiction that Nelly spoke her highly literate and structured tale to Lockwood and that Lockwood remembered it and wrote it down verbatim might be evidence for an argument that
Brontë is dismissing the current convention of narrative realism. Yet, in spite of this self-proclaiming fictiveness, the novel also makes the effort to maintain the most common attributes of realism: characters that are meant to seem and do seem quite plausible, a cohesive geographical layout, a plot that obeys the laws of cause and effect. The present distinction between the reader's impression of a detailed portrait of Yorkshire life and landscape and the actual absence of such a presentation is itself part of the fine balance Brontë maintains between fictional realism and overt fictiveness. The layering of the narrative enacts the range of degrees of fictiveness. The reader is asked to take Lockwood's account of his own actions and impressions as the most real, since it is the most experiential; Nelly's quoted story would be the next most real, because Lockwood listens to it; but descending from these relatively trustworthy accounts is the hearsay evidence of the various interpolated narratives and letters, which are increasingly further from Lockwood's own experience and liable to greater distortion.

If a narrative scheme were to account only for degrees of narrative realism, then the diary fragment in Cathy's handwriting that Lockwood discovers on a blank page of the Reverend Jubes Branderham's "Seventy Times Seven . . ." would be among the most mediated of narrative layers, distanced as it is by time and by having been accidentally read by, and not spoken to, Lockwood. Yet the descending pattern of realism outlined above is qualified by the fact that Lockwood is also the least reliable narrator, understanding the least, while the interpolated narratives, being increasingly closer to the events themselves, are the most reliable. By this token, the diary fragment is also the most authentic, as well as the most distant, of the narrative layers. It circumvents the complexity of narrative layering, leaping out uncannily to the reader's attention, in spite of the fact that the writer is long dead and her writing is contained between dusty covers. It has the same intrusive effect on the reader that the ghostly Catherine of Lockwood's dream has: it breaks the rules of the narrative scheme just as a ghost breaks the laws of nature. Within the fictive frame of the novel, that is, momentarily allowing the assumption that the events and conversations did take place and that there is somewhere a core of truth from which Lockwood's and Nelly's reports probably swerve, the diary fragment is the only unmediated record of the veritable voice and attitudes of one of the central characters. Isabella's letter to Nelly is another "proof" document, but she is not a central character and her letter is interesting more because it supplies part of the story that Nelly could not have witnessed herself than because it is a sample of a precious voice. The content of the diary fragment is not really important from the point of view of plot, since Nelly later narrates similar episodes from her own recollections. For the rest of the story, the reader must maintain a constant skepticism about the alterations Nelly must have made in the remembered speeches of her characters and also about the alterations Lockwood may have made in his transmission of Nelly's report and in his own remembrances of conversations he himself heard. Written down, and therefore less likely to have been tampered with by Lockwood, Cathy's little testimony of woe rings true, as the closest thing to hearing her speak for herself (although it is admittedly a little disturbing to hear a supposed eleven-year-old using words like "sobriety" and "asseverated"). It is also in the diary fragment that Cathy is introduced in the novel, before the reader meets her in Nelly's narrative, so it touches the reader with a special force of priority.

The fragment serves as an opening statement of the relation between nature and writing in the novel. It is justifiable to take it paradigmatically because it is a diary, as the whole form of the novel is a diary, and, as a written text within a text, it draws attention to itself as writing, in a way that Nelly's spoken story, for example, does not. Like Lockwood's own diary, in which Nelly brings her narrative up to the present time of Lockwood's visit, Cathy starts in the past and writes up to the present time of her writing. But more important than the continuity in time is the significant break in her narrative. After she is caught up to the present she and Heathcliff go for their "scamper on the moors" under the dairy woman's cloak, but this she does not describe. Lockwood leaves a space in his account and then says, "I suppose Catherine fulfilled her project, for the next sentence took up another subject . . ." (p. 64). The adventure takes place
in the lacuna. A synecdoche for the narrative as a whole, this little story, like the rest, averts its eyes from nature. Cathy writes nothing about the scamper itself, narrating only what happens indoors, before and after: her anticipation of the event and then, after the gap, her sorrowful reaction to the punishment they receive as a result. The scamper is clearly the preferred alternative to writing: “I have got the time on with writing for twenty minutes; but my companion is impatient and proposes that we should appropriate the dairy woman’s cloak, and have a scamper on the moors, under its shelter. A pleasant suggestion...” (p. 64). Writing is broken off in favor of action. Further, when Cathy returns to her writing, that action suffices in itself and cannot be improved on by writing it down. Writing is no more than a solace, reserved for hours of boredom, or of loneliness, or of sorrow. Cathy does not write about the scamper itself because writing is stimulated for her only by need, and she needs nothing when she is on the moors. Writing and events in nature are, to the young Cathy, incompatible.

Cathy’s omission of any description of the romp on the moors is perfectly in keeping with the pattern of Brontë’s own omissions, and, further, it suggests a reason for those omissions. Writing creates an order of priority. Ordinarily, a word presents itself as coming first to the reader, putting its referent in second place. The only way to preserve the priority of something is not to have it named, so that what is primary is just that which is left out of the text, and surely these omissions of descriptions of events in nature are significant holes. Everything else about the diary fragment suggests that nature is primary and that writing is intended to be made secondary. For example, as Lockwood is leafing through the book, Cathy’s writing seems at first to be commentary on the printed text, filling out the margins, adding to a text already complete. The caricature of Joseph that precedes the written diary, “rudely yet powerfully sketched,” suggests an alternative mode of expression for Cathy’s exasperated sense of injustice, indicating in a different way that writing is not primary. She begins writing only because she is caught indoors by the rain and by the fierce sabbath discipline of Hindley and Joseph and must fill up the dreary time because there is nothing else to do. The omission of nature is consistent with this emphasis that nature is primary or original relative to a text, and all the rest of Brontë’s omissions make this point too. Both Brontë and her Cathy avoid description of nature or of events in nature because there is no way to name nature without making it secondary. Primary nature neither needs to be nor can be referred to.

The reader becomes accustomed to Brontë’s habitual use of the image of the house, with its windows and doors variously locked or open, as a figure for varying psychic conditions—from the locked door that Lockwood encounters on his second visit to Wuthering Heights, where Cathy, Hareton, and Heathcliff are all prisoners of some kind, to the open doors and lattices he finds on his last visit, after the barriers of hatred have broken down between the remaining protagonists. To review this pattern quickly, the closed house generally represents some sort of entrapment: the body as a trap for the soul, as when the window of Heathcliff’s room swinging open and letting the rain in signals his death or the flying out of his soul; the entrapment of one character by the will of another, as when Heathcliff locks Nelly and Cathy inside in order to force the marriage with Linton; or the trap of society or convention, as when Cathy remains inside Thrushcross Grange while Heathcliff, expelled, watches from the outside and longs to shatter the great pane of glass that separates them. In view of this symbolic system, the preponderance of scenes taking place indoors and the absence or omission of directly represented natural landscape indicate that the condition of the narrative as a whole is some kind of entrapment too; the author herself feels her creative possibilities limited by an inadequacy in the house of language.

It is important to stress here that Brontë finds language inadequate only for representing nature or events in nature. The diary fragment omits nature, but its portrayal of emotional life, once it has gone indoors, is sophisticated; Cathy’s ability to re-create the dramatic scene in the house is just as remarkable as her omission of the scene outdoors. In other regards besides that of representing nature, Brontë’s confidence in her rhetorical power is manifest. Most first readers feel that her portrayals of the size and subtlety of the
passions exceed all expectation; one senses no limitation there besides that of life itself. She is not disturbed, as writers are today, by the inherent fictiveness of all language. For example, Nelly’s first-person narration casts no shadow over the events she narrates; that Brontë dares to give her narrators such specific characters and yet expects her readers to form their own interpretations freely manifests considerable confidence in the objectivity or transparency of language. The limitation of language in regard to nature, while central to the novel, is brought into relief by the lack of limitation in other regards.

Nature is absent from literal presentation, but it is present in figurative language. All language is figurative, as most critics now see it, but there are degrees of figuration just as there are degrees of narrative realism resulting from the layering of the narrative. It must be possible to use the term “figurative language” for that which is overtly figurative, as opposed to “literal language,” which is only relatively literal, less self-consciously figurative than what is properly called figuration. The idea of nature would have to undergo a radical change in the transition from a posited (but absent) literal sense to a figurative use. There is no literal use of nature because, strictly speaking, to write of it at all is to deny its literalness or primariness, but there is rarely even any relatively literal use of nature, that is, any description of nature for its own sake, without reference to anything outside the immediate scene. The respect for nature’s primacy, which this abstention from description implies, is completely bypassed when nature is used for figurative purposes. Nature as a figure becomes subservient to whatever it is used to describe, dropping from the primacy of the unnamed to what might be described as a tertiary status, since it is named not for its own sake but for the sake of something else. This could be called nature as adjective or pronoun, where the place of the noun in such a syntactic model is occupied by the characters who are generally the objects of such figurative descriptions.

To use nature as a figure is to make nature secondary to what it describes, and to describe someone by means of figures—or with language at all—is to impose a limitation of perspectivism or metaphor that reduces whatever is primal in that character. When Heathcliff is “like a savage beast getting goaded to death with knives and spears,” both man and beast are brought together into a region of compromise, which impinges on the primacy of each. Heathcliff’s agony would seem to be unspeakable, indescribable, so that to reduce that experience to speech is, in some slight way, to diminish its grandeur. The indefinite is sublime; the finite, that which can be figured, is not. Every time the reader’s vision of Heathcliff is made definite by a specific comparison, Heathcliff becomes more human and less demonic, even, curiously, when he is compared to a demon. The passages that serve instead to expand the reader’s sense of him are those in which the narrator says that some event has been evaded or omitted by the narrative, when a space of absence is opened up, such as his mysterious three-year sojourn or his nighttime wanderings just before his death. Those numinous absences usually take place in unseen nature, just where we have located nature’s primacy as well, and have the same status of being primary or original that unseen nature has. There are, then, two radically separate versions of nature in the novel: the primal or literal, which is unseen or evaded, and the figurative, which thrives on the textual surface of the novel.

A characteristic figurative use of nature, often cited as evidence for the presence of “real” nature in the novel, is the device of employing a natural object as a metaphor for character, almost with the force of a metonymy or a symbol, in that frequently the natural object substitutes syntactically for the person described. These are among the most memorable passages in the book not because they introduce “real” nature but because they confirm the reader’s sense that the novel is organized by the two opposing principles embodied in the two houses, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange; they aid the systematization of reading. A brief survey will show that these passages almost always involve a polarity between two extremes, which are implicitly unspeakable unless reduced to a system by natural figures. By taking part in this reductive action nature is similarly reduced: both nature and character serve the ends of comprehensibility. Of Cathy’s choice between Linton and Heathcliff Nelly says, “The contrast resembled what you see in exchanging a bleak, hilly, coal country for a beautiful fertile valley.”
Margaret Homans

(110). Quickly following this is the related complex of Cathy's own sets of metaphors for her two lovers:

"Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same, and Linton's is as different as a moonbeam from lightning, or frost from fire." (p. 121)

"My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods. Time will change it, I'm well aware, as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath—a source of little visible delight, but necessary." (p. 122)

Then there is Nelly's description of the relation between Cathy and her new family: "It was not the thorn bending to the honeysuckles, but the honeysuckles embracing the thorn" (p. 131). Culminating the sequence is Cathy's description of Heathcliff's bestiality, though notice that it too hinges on a balancing natural description of Isabella's fragility:

"Tell her what Heathcliff is—an unreclaimed creature, without refinement, without cultivation; an arid wilderness of furze and whinstone. I'd as soon put that little canary into the park on a winter's day as recommend you to bestow your heart on him! . . . He's not a rough diamond—a pearl-containing oyster of a rustic; he's a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man. . . . He'd crush you, like a sparrow's egg, Isabella, if he found you a troublesome charge." (p. 141)

The disparity between the characteristics of Wuthering Heights and those of the Grange is neatly formulated in opposable natural terms, and those natural symbols center in the part of the book most involved with the tension between the two worlds. Predictably, this kind of description occurs once again and last in a passage about Hareton, in whom the alternatives of the two houses are programmatically combined:

"Good things lost amid a wilderness of weeds, to be sure, whose rankness far over-topped their neglected growth; yet notwithstanding, evidence of a wealthy soil that might yield luxuriant crops, under other and favorable circumstances" (p. 231). Heathcliff's furze and Linton's fertile valley combine schematically in the second generation.

These figurative uses of nature, which have always seemed to most readers to bring "real" or unorganized nature into the book, actually provide a vehicle for abstract order. This strategy brings the extremes into an arena of discussion and makes possible relations that might otherwise seem unthinkable. For example, Isabella's attraction to Heathcliff seems extraneous, as "fantastic" to us as it is to Linton, until Cathy's natural metaphors align the axis of their relationship by giving it a basis in the natural law of predator and prey and make it all too logical and comprehensible. Comparisons that intend differentiation actually subvert differentiation, serving to bring two characters closer by furnishing the necessary common ground. Similarly, Cathy means to use rock and foliage, frost and fire, to show herself and Nelly why she believes that her two loves will not impinge on each other (they fulfill two different needs as they exist in two different natural realms); yet by bringing them into such a comparison she also lets the reader, if not herself, discover why such a separation of interests will certainly fail. The natural metaphor is a basis for an interaction that she misunderstands. Any kind of figure would serve as well to bring the unspeakable into the realm of the speakable, but only nature as a source of figures is big enough to act as so effective a ground of mediation.

If natural figures work as a ground for comparisons or alignments that might otherwise not be made at all, it is implied that there must be some ground or point of reference beneath these figures, some generalized sense of "nature" that unifies the individual instances. The impression that the novel gives of depicting the rough Yorkshire landscape and climate is not a wrong one and must come from some source in the novel. This assumed reference might be the same primary nature that is omitted from the diary fragment as from the rest of the narrative, but, if that nature resists naming, it would certainly be separate from any schematization taking place at the textual level. Primal nature remains submerged. Natural figures are instead grounded in another verbal version of nature, symbolic landscapes that are only slightly less figurative than the organizing figures discussed above, in that they appear to be closer to "real" nature and less subservient to the foreground of character. These are landscapes that are described as though they were or could be literally visible but that are as descriptive of the human situation as
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the more explicit figures are. There remains a
gulf between unwritten and written nature.

In the scene just before Heathcliff's return
after his long absence, the landscape between
the Grange and the Heights hovers on the edge
between literal and symbolic description, be-
tween degrees of figurativeness. Cathy and
Edgar are gazing out at twilight, and, to Nelly,
“both the room, and its occupants, and the scene
they gazed on looked wondrously peaceful” (p.
133). Yet the action of looking out from inside,
which is peaceful, clearly predicts the event to
come, almost as though the characters were
waiting in expectation. The main feature of the
landscape is the “long line of mist,” which de-
scribes the axis of the two houses but does not
quite connect them. The line of mist is on the
verge of symbolizing the reconnection of the two
houses about to take place, but not quite, be-
cause, although the hills called Wuthering
Heights rise above the vapor, the house that
takes its name from them “was invisible—it
rather drops down on the other side.” It is a
beautiful passage, but it is almost occluded by
the requirements of symbolization. The passage
intends a vision of repose before the onslaught
of Heathcliff’s arrival, yet nature is never repose-
ful because it is always talking, radiating signifi-
cance. Cathy and Edgar think they are looking
out at the unconscious beauty of nature, but they
inhabit a text, and the reader knows that they
are in the presence of a veritable book of in-
struction.

This pattern of symbolic landscape continues
throughout the novel, and there is a gradual pas-
sage from equivocal to unequivocal symboliza-
tion. In a passage about nature’s obliviousness
to Heathcliff’s grief over Cathy’s death, a symbol
for tears lurks in the image of “the dew that had
gathered on the budded branches, and fell pat-
tering round him” (p. 202). Four pages later,
only hours after Cathy’s burial, the spring
weather turns to winter and we are back in a
fully symbolic landscape. It is no coincidence
that the second Cathy’s “coming of age,” the
dreary walk she takes at about the time of her
seventeenth birthday when she confronts both
her father’s coming death and her knowledge of
Heathcliff’s true evil, is the setting for her dis-
covery of symbolism in a landscape. Thinking of
the omission in the other Cathy’s diary, one
might say that childhood is a time when nature
is perceived as itself, with no effort to transform
it into a text or to give it any extranatural signifi-
cance, while adulthood is partly an initiation
into symbol making. Nelly points out a last
bluebell remaining from summer, under the
roots of a tree where Cathy used to climb and
sing, “happier than words can express,” and
suggests that she “clamber up, and pluck it to
show papa” (p. 263). Cathy stares at it a long
time, then gives it a meaning, as grown-ups
would: “No, I’ll not touch it—but it looks mel-
ancholy, does it not, Ellen?” A little later Cathy
and Linton disagree about their ideas of a natu-
ral heaven, more or less realizing that nature has
become a symbol for character. Toward the end,
when Heathcliff’s approaching death dominates
the narrative, the tendency to render the land-
scape symbolic is epitomized in his vision of
Cathy’s spirit in the landscape. He does consid-
erably more than take the landscape as a repre-
sentation of Cathy, because the landscape is
literally replaced by her image: “I cannot look
down to this floor, but her features are shaped in
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!”
(p. 353). Days before his death, walking
through the house with his eyes focused on a
spot a few feet in front of him, Heathcliff seems
really to see her ghost and we are asked to be-
lieve in a projection, which undoes any remnant
sense that the landscape might have qualities of
its own. The boy who sees the two ghosts “under
t’ Nab” after Heathcliff’s death verifies the fact
that this landscape is saturated not just with the
presence of an authorial consciousness but with
the human “spirit” as well.

Heathcliff’s vision of the world-as-Cathy and
the suggestion of ghosts in the landscape are a
climax of the tendency toward rendering the
landscape symbolic, and they also suggest a fur-
ther reason for the omissions of scenes of literal
or primal nature. We have seen earlier that
Brontë does not consider language to be ade-
quate to the task of representing nature, and
such representation is neither possible nor de-
sired, but primal nature is textually shunned for
another reason as well. The use of nature as a
figure and the rendering of highly and increas-
ingly symbolic landscape suggest an active flight
away from attempting a (relatively) nonfigurative representation of nature. Why should there be so pronounced a turn? The first encounter with nature in the book is also the closest textual approach to literal nature that Brontë presents. The snowstorm of Chapter ii, wholly adversary, all but obliterates both the path back to Thrushcross Grange and Lockwood's health. The path was previously marked by stones daubed with lime, but the storm has covered the ground so deeply that, “excepting a dirty dot pointing up, here and there, all traces of their existence had vanished” (p. 73). Nature is combating the human attempt to make nature legible, and the scarcity of those “dirty dots” causes Lockwood to founder in his reading of nature. After this episode, the narrative veers away from such direct contacts with nature, as if the narrative, which constantly imposes a reading on nature, would suffer as much as Lockwood does. Literal or primary nature, entering the region of consciousness or textuality, is death-dealing. Avoiding literal nature in the novel, Bronte offers instead a tertiary version of nature, which has, in contrast, the life-sustaining qualities of all figuration: figures mark a helpful path around or over rather than through nature, avoiding the dangers of snowstorms. She compares Heathcliff to a wilderness of furze in order not to show him in an actual wilderness, which would be difficult and painful to describe. Figuration lifts her from the ground.

Freud describes repression as a defense mechanism that is turned against instincts, primarily sexual ones. To gratify these instincts would bring immediate pleasure, but it would ultimately bring an even greater degree of displeasure, because it would call up fresh causes for repression. Literary critics interpret repression to mean an action performed not on sexual instincts but on analogous threats to psychic pleasure or psychic life. In Poetry and Repression Harold Bloom tells us that poets must repress their awareness of their debt to literary precursors in order to keep on writing. To oversimplify vastly Bloom’s complex argument, this repression occurs because, although capitulation to the greatness of the precursor would solve the immediate painful conflict, it also would bring about the greater displeasure of writing weak poetry or no poetry at all. Jacques Derrida in his article “Freud and the Scene of Writing” gives repression a similarly privileged role in making writing possible. Repression partially breaks the contact between the unconscious or memory and the conscious or perception, so that memory does not block the acquisition of new perceptions, and writing is then the relation, the single point of contact between memory and perception. It is not necessary to go so far as to point to the displacement into nature of either Brontë’s libido or her precursors as the cause of her repression of nature. The common characteristic of that which is said to be repressed, whether it be instinct, precursors, or memory, is that it carries the force of literal meaning and thus has primacy, because figuration is a deviation from the literal and is therefore secondary. Instinct, precursors, and memory are involuntary residents of consciousness: that is, if they are part of psychic content it is not because the psyche wills it so. They hinder psychic health, or creativity as a literary form of psychic health, by putting everything that is a product of the will into a secondary position, the position of having deviated from an original. They dominate the claim to primacy. In the case of Brontë, literal nature has the effect of blocking creativity by making her feel that anything she writes about it will be secondary. I am not attempting here to psychoanalyze the biographical Emily Brontë; I am referring to the psyche that is available to the reader, Brontë as she presents herself in the text, intentionally or not. If actual people repress threatening drives by abstaining from those activities, or repress dangerous memories by forgetting them, then the corresponding act of repression for the literary psyche would be to keep the dangerous element out of the text, which is that psyche’s version of consciousness. Brontë must repress literal nature by not naming it directly, in order to write.

In Freud, “successful” repression, repression that succeeds in driving the threatening force underground forever, is not as desirable as certain kinds of unsuccessful repression, if the repressed material returns in a different and unthreatening form. This is one of Freud’s definitions of sublimation, and that is what Brontë’s conversion of literal nature into figuration accomplishes: repressed material returns in a form useful to her, radiantly creative because
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it has been tamed, made tertiary, deprived of its threatening independence of meaning and subservient to imposed meaning. The energy cathexed to one has been transferred to the other. This is why there is an absolute difference between primal nature, whose lurking presence is only implied, and figurative nature, which appears so abundantly: when the repressed material returns, it must be cleared of original or literal meaning. (Sublimation is distinct from reaction-formation, which is the substitution of something harmless for something too potent. Here, sublimation offers an altered version of the same, not a substitution.)

In The Problem of Anxiety and Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality Freud proposes a model for sublimation, which may describe the process as it functions in Wuthering Heights. An activity that is not inherently erotic can become eroticized and, once it has taken on the force of a sexual drive, the individual will then abstain from it just as if it were actually dangerous. This takes place because of excessive eroticization of the part of the body that performs the activity. Freud’s image for this process is the path: a path is broken in the psyche, allowing too great contact between sex and the fingers or writing or between sex and the feet or walking. If the process is one of pathbreaking, then it should be possible to reverse the direction of the path or to travel psychically in the opposite direction, away from rather than toward eroticization. To take this path backward, to de-sexualize a function in order that it cease to require repression, is to sublimate. On the basis of this model, it could be said that there is a psychic path in Brontë between nature and some primal force, not necessarily sexual, which could be called her sense of the literal, or whatever it is that threatens to preempt her power to write or to imagine. Fearing that it is nature that threatens creativity, she abstains from bringing nature into her novel as an unmediated presence. In Cathy’s diary fragment, an experience in nature does not need to be written about, but the reader also suspects it could not be written about. Perhaps Brontë’s fear is that, if she were to attempt to write nature directly into her book, the attempt would produce silence, because reality can never enter a text without mediation. Her figurative uses of nature suggest that the path can be and is reversed. Instead of associating nature with the force of the literal, she associates it with that which is purely nonliteral, her invented characters. Nature is deprived of its primacy, or de-eroticized on the Freudian model; yet the sublimation into figure making cannot have redirected all the energy attached to the repressed material—or the path is at best a two-way street—because she still cannot write a scene in nature that does not testify to constant vigilance, and the lacunae show that repression is still at work. In some of the symbolic landscapes we have seen how she verges on affording the image some degree of independence from her characters, but her inability to sustain this for long is the trace of a repression not wholly cured or emptied out.

It is important to point out that she is repressing, not nature, but what nature has come to represent or to be associated with; nature is a vehicle for something else. In one paper on repression Freud makes a distinction between the instinct and its “ideational representative.” The repressed itself cannot be named because as such it never enters consciousness at all. Nature does enter consciousness, or the present time of the narrative (in the form of Lockwood’s fearful snowstorm), and is then driven out again, to be sublimated later. We must take the nature that is absent from Wuthering Heights as the ideational representative of something inherently unnamable, perhaps what we call reality, perhaps something else. What Freud is saying is that a process like sublimation, the process of finding a name for the feared thing, takes place even before repression proper can begin. Repression appears to be directed at the nature that is omitted in Brontë’s lacunae, but there is an even more threatening force behind that nature, for which nature is only the representative.

When Cathy is sick with her fatal “madness” she speaks the only direct or scenic presentation in the novel of any part of her and Heathcliff’s childhood on the moors. Pulling the feathers out of her pillow, she finds a lapwing’s, which looses a flood of memory:

“Bonny bird; wheeling over our heads in the middle of the moor. It wanted to get to its nest, for the clouds touched the swells, and it felt rain coming. This feather was picked up from the heath, the bird was not shot—we saw its nest in winter, full of
The description is made possible by her derangement. Such direct narration of an episode in nature, which amounts to reliving it, is not possible in a healthy state. Even if it were possible, the repression and sublimation of nature in the rest of the novel suggest that such a description could bring on madness. It is the return of repressed material not sublimated into figures but whole, direct, and all at once. It is as though, on the “path” model of the eroticization and subsequent sublimation, or desexualization, of a function, Cathy were dying of her inability to reverse the path. Only nature has become not eroticized (though that may be part of it, in that, in her love for Heathcliff and in her association of Heathcliff with nature, she may have transferred erotic longings to nature), nor is it the ideational representative of what Brontë herself is representing. For Cathy, nature is dangerous because it is so totally identified with Heathcliff. When she returns from her first visit to Thrushcross Grange, her initial reaction of repulsion toward Heathcliff comes from his dirt and his wildness, in other words, from his life as a savage in nature. She has learned, as part of the civilizing influence of the Lintons, that dirt is bad and that therefore her own savage past was bad and that therefore any relic of that past, such as Heathcliff’s perennially dirty person, is to be avoided. Nature, Heathcliff, and her former delight in nature are all rejected at once, as a complex of associated repressions. Later, when Heathcliff has come to be the most threatening of those repressed functions, the other two, nature and her memories of the past, are repressed all the more forcefully for their continued association with Heathcliff. The association becomes a representation. During Heathcliff’s absence and her marriage to Linton she successfully repressed her love for Heathcliff, but, when Heathcliff returns, the personification of a repressed instinct bursting through the barriers of her repression, the psychic health of her tranquil life with Linton is destroyed by a resumption of the irreconcilable mental strife between her conflicting loves, or rather, more specifically, by the need for a fresh effort of repression. Heathcliff, the past, and nature were repressed together. The return of one brings with it the return of the associated repressions, and the flooding return of the story of the lapwing is evidence that all those barriers have collapsed. During her illness her chief desires are to be outside on the moors and to return to her childhood, without much specific reference to a longing for Heathcliff himself. Those repressed desires might come back harmlessly if they were not still tied to her desire for Heathcliff, if she could reverse the path and undo their association with Heathcliff. But every memory of the past, specifically the lapwing story, undoes her efforts to regain psychic health.

Looking closer at the lapwing story, the reader finds a particular reason for the anxiety caused by memories such as this one that tie nature and Heathcliff together. There is something suspect about the absence of Heathcliff from her other memories. She fantasizes that she is back at Wuthering Heights, in her own room, and her constant refrain is the wish to be outside on the moors and to be her former self, but the strength-giving recollections that provoke such desires do not seem to include Heathcliff:

“Oh, if I were but in my own bed in the old house!” she went on bitterly, wringing her hands. “And that wind sounding in the firs by the lattice. Do let me feel it—it comes straight down the moor. . . . I wish I were out of doors—I wish I were a girl again, half savage and hardy, and free. . . . I’m sure I should be myself were I once among the heather on those hills. . . .” (pp. 162–63)

Waking from her first fit of unconsciousness, she finds she had forgotten (or repressed) all of her life since the last occasion of being at one with Heathcliff, just before their last expedition to spy in the windows at the Grange, the history of her defection from Heathcliff. Her remembrance of the separation ordered at that time between her and Heathcliff is extremely painful, but the recollected tears are nothing compared to the agony of the fruits of her own willing separation, when memory comes rushing back: “My late anguish was swallowed in a paroxysm of despair.” She is portraying to herself a memory of childhood that now seems relatively idyllic, because its only sorrowful moments came from an external and readily detestable agent. Regression to childhood is her escape from, and refutation of, a...
difficult adult present that is of her own making. Yet the story about the lapwing feather belies the idealization of her childhood of which Cathy would convince herself. She scans her real memories of childhood and finds a vision that is neither innocent nor curative, but nightmarish. The illogical order of the events in her account shows her mind moving nervously, too quickly, over memory. She should tell about the trap before she tells about the “little skeletons,” for example. The setting is the onset of a storm. The episode reveals acutely what the reader suspected but never could verify from previous episodes: that Heathcliff was as sadistic in his relatively happy childhood as he is as an adult. Further, the motif of abandoned infants is a recurrent one. Heathcliff himself was left to starve by his own parents, and, orphaned again by Mr. Earnshaw’s death, he was subject to the cruelty of another parent figure. In addition to being cruel, Heathcliff is already a symbol maker, old beyond his years, imposing the horrors of his own experience on a helpless world of things. The picture of the children’s experience of nature is hardly as innocent as Cathy might have led herself and the reader to believe, during her outbursts of longing for the past.

The story is also not about Heathcliff alone. The most curious fact about it is Cathy’s half-willing complicity in its events. She finds her reward for the painful memory in the recollection of Heathcliff’s sweet obedience to her request not to shoot any more lapwings and takes it as evidence of a harmonious childhood. However, her interdict on shooting extends only to lapwings, and, by distinguishing shooting as the form of killing of which she disapproves, she half admits an attraction to the far more perverse technique that Heathcliff did use. Where spots of blood as evidence of shooting would upset her, the trap placed over the nest causes her no special distress; and there is clearly a macabre fascination in the tone of “full of little skeletons,” a mixture of attraction and repulsion. After all, if her reaction had been one of complete distaste, she would have made him promise never to kill any birds, or any animals, using whatever weapon. But she does not. The memory, almost blurted out, testifies to why she is really so afraid, to the point of madness. Real memories such as that one, memories that balance Heathcliff’s sweet submission with his diabolical cruelty and implicate her in a similar way, preempt her reconstructed memories, which are as secondary as any figure or other deviation from literal truth. Any effort to recreate a nicer childhood and so attain some degree of psychic health for the present is ruined by such influxes of the literal.

It is not Brontë’s but her fictional character’s repressions that have so disastrously returned. Nature and her memory of the past are Cathy’s ideational representatives for Heathcliff, or for that in her which “is” Heathcliff, and that repression is distinct from Brontë’s repression. Nevertheless, Cathy’s experience must be analogous to Brontë’s own. The lapwing story is just such a narrative as we might have expected to find in the part of the book about Cathy and Heathcliff’s childhood, and its late appearance, out of sequence, suggests that it functions for Brontë as a return of her own narrative omissions, a return of her own repressed. It is, of course, impossible to know whether Brontë consciously determined this pattern or whether it is truly a welling up of unconscious elements; in either case, the reader’s experience is the same. The analogy between Cathy and her creator may help to designate what it is about literal nature that Brontë finds necessary (intentionally or not) to repress. Cathy represses nature as a representative of that in her which “is” Heathcliff, because, like anything that claims primacy in the psyche, it blocks her efforts to reimagine the past. This aspect of the analogy only confirms what the reader already knows about Brontë’s avoidance of the literal in order not to let her own writing appear secondary. In this she is successful, because, even though nature is presented almost exclusively in overt figures, those figures give the reader the impression of a much more literal depiction of nature.

Cathy also represses the Heathcliff-nature complex because of the content of that primal memory, as well as because of its effect of primacy. The memory is cruel to her because it is a memory of cruelty, Heathcliff’s and her own. The lapwing story shows that love and violence, love and death are identified in him and in the medium of their relationship; it gives her to herself suicidally. Nature, or the literal as it is represented by nature, appears to provoke a sim-
ilar attitude in Brontë, whether that attitude becomes part of a conscious strategy of writing or remains unconscious. Not only is nature's literality destructive to creative energy, but nature is also literally destructive. Lockwood's snowstorm erases nature's readability, but, beyond that, nearly kills that reader, Lockwood, himself. To try to name literal nature in the novel after that, aside from the technical difficulty of doing so, would make it necessary to inflict harm on her characters in addition to the harm they do to each other. Nature, or "reality," just like Heathcliff in Cathy's memory, cuts off relations between parents and children, between those who love one another, and causes distress, starvation, and death. Nature's truth is death, and only when reimagined does it approach neutrality or beneficence.

The lapwing story, paired with the fragment of Cathy's diary, also presents an alternative paradigm for the relation between nature and writing. The diary omits an episode in nature, for the sake of not distorting nature, and the primary experience of nature, with inadequate language, while Cathy's madness produces a story that distorts her psychic health. The two stories are paradigms for narrative options or poles at the extremes of a narrative axis: blank spaces at one end and confused, fevered talk at the other. That Brontë creates a large figure for her own repressed condition, as well as making constructive figurative language out of the repressed material itself, shows that figuration is her best outlet for repression. But the difference between herself and Cathy, the eccentricity in the analogy, gives her even more than does the initial similarity. If the analogy to the diary fragment were carried out fully, then, in addition to drawing inferences from what Cathy leaves out, we would be obliged to take as a paradigm what Cathy does write about and to suggest that Brontë, too, writes as a solace for moments of solitude or sorrow. That would produce a reductive theory of therapeutic writing, which is certainly not applicable to so powerful a novelist. Similarly, the analogy drawn from the lapwing story would lead to a theory of passive or stream-of-consciousness writing or to a theory identifying fiction with dreams. Brontë can reverse the psychic path and avoid the extremes of Cathy's condition, and the diary and the lapwing story are there to admonish and to mark outer limits, rather than to provide exactly tailored paradigms. Making the figures is only part of the process of recovery; surpassing them is even better. To be tied down to a figure would only be to instigate a new cause for repression.

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Notes

3 The narrative structure has been discussed at length by many critics; in this and the following paragraph I reiterate this standard element of Wuthering Heights criticism only to introduce it as an assumption of this essay.
4 Beginning with Dorothy Van Ghent's classic study (in The English Novel, Form and Function [New York: Holt, 1953], pp. 160–63), the importance of house imagery has been acknowledged by many critics; my interpretation does not contradict this kind of reading but simply provides a context for it.
9 For a more complete discussion of this theme, see Wade Thompson, "Infanticide and Sadism in Wuthering Heights," PMLA, 78 (1963), 69–74.