THE THEORY OF RECEPTION AND *"WUTHERING HEIGHTS"*

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For more than the past fifty years, the reaction to *Wuthering Heights*, has been, by common consent, one of praise for its greatness. We have seen in Emily Brontë's novel one of the greatest works of English literature, a classic. However, the work has gained its due position only after a hard struggle, as much with the literary critics as with the general public, during the hundred years since its publication. The enigmatic quality of the book, which from the beginning has encouraged the most diverse judgements and opposite interpretations coupled with its inexhaustible richness of form and depth, continues to give rise to all kinds of interpretations about its structure and significance.

The manifest impressionism and didacticism which predominated literary theory of the nineteenth century led the critic of that time to concentrate on an examination of the author's life and circumstances when judging the work of art. They depended generally on purely subjective criteria such as the sincerity and conviction of the sentiments expressed (definitively, a "communication of emotions", according to the romantic point of view), instead of analyzing the work for its own sake, or formulating a theory on which to base its study. The

said "Impressionism" showed itself when *Wuthering Heights* first came to light, in the critiques published by literary journals of the time, which had established themselves as organs of public opinion. Without a doubt, the original and extraordinary circumstances of Emily Brontë's life contributed to form all sorts of hypotheses and suppositions about her real personality, obscuring the quality and artistic value of her work.

The theory of Reception first came to light in Germany, around the decades 1960-1970, the greatest exponents of which were Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser. This theory stemmed from the premise that the literary text of itself is no more than a series of "indicators" for the reader, inviting him to construct and give significance to a piece of language. The reading of the piece is, in fact, a creative process. The interaction between the text and the reader puts the said process in motion, causing the literary work to unfold its inherently dynamic character. In effect, the text activates our perceptive and imaginative faculties and makes us able to recreate the world it presents.

The traditional technique of intepretation, based on the search for the "unique significance" of the work of art, ignored the experience of the reader, activated by the text during the process of reading. On the other hand, the theory of Reception refutes this concept adding that the primary task of the critic has to be to clarify the potential of the text; he should not limit himself to imposing the significance of the work to the reader as if this were the best or most correct interpretation. With the result that, the different interpretations in the history of the reception of *Wuthering Heights* don't claim other than to reveal such potential by means of an act of "concretization" carried out by the critic's response to the literary work. Nevertheless, the meaning of the text necessarily arises from the interaction between the structure of the novel and its receptor, "as an effect to be experienced", not an "object to be defined" (Iser 1974: 10). So it is the reader who charges himself with forming the correct judgement. As a consequence, the literary work must make itself understood not as an inert object that offers the same face to every reader every time, but as creating a dialogue which, in turn, gives rise to a new comprehension every time it is read resulting in a new and distinct realization. Now and then, the novel contains a variety of perspectives destined to transmit the individuality of the author's view

(that of the narrator or narrators, that of the characters and that of the plot...). None of these is identical to the significance of the text; however, they give different guidelines in the course of the reading, which correlate and finally converge in a common point which certainly constitutes the significance of it. During the reading process the role of the reader consists in occupying various favourable positions until he takes charge of the total situation, adjusting the different perspectives and making the necessary links in an attempt to grasp and define the text.

In *Wuthering Heights* the perspective of the two principal narrators ostensibly puts them in opposition to that of the protagonists of the story. The civilized world and its conventional values, both cultural and religious, represented by the figures of Lockwood and Nelly Dean –at whose level the ordinary reader finds himself– sees itself rejected and to a certain point ridiculed by virtue of the relationship of Catherine and Heathcliff and their world of irrational passion. In this way the reader who, in the beginning, confidently adheres to the points of view of both narrators, will soon discover their characters are unreliable, particularly as guides through the manifold events that make up the narrative.

Neither Lockwood, the sophisticated dandy, or Nelly, with all the cordiality and sensibility of a housekeeper, are certain to understand the exceptional quality of the romantic relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff. Their incapacity for participation and involvement in the strong emotions and dramatic intensity of the story as well as their limited and subjective opinions about the happenings, will lead the reader to reject them, and not to rely on them. He will then go on and be carried away by the genuine loving passion of the protagonists, turning himself into the active interpreter of the significance of the work. The authoress has managed to create a distance between her narrators and the central theme of her story, all within the structure of the narrative. In fact, Catherine and Heathcliff find themselves on a superior level, "incomparably beyond and above", to the conventional and civilized world of Nelly, Lockwood and the reader. At no time has the writer pronounced herself to be of a determined perspective: the absence of all commentary of praise or condemnation of the action or the characters is a deliberate recourse that Emily Brontë uses to

confront the reader with her novel. It is up to him alone to establish the connections of the text of *Wuthering Heights* and to establish its significance. What is more, the ending of the story is suspended in a double alternative or option which corresponds to two different and seemingly contradictory philosophies of life: the romantic apotheosis of the first pair of lovers, Catherine and Heathcliff, and all the irrationality and destructiveness that goes along with their relationship, as opposed to the domestic love (in line with Victorian convention) of the second pair of lovers, Cathy and Hareton, with its prevailing values of order, harmony and rationality. Neither one of these two views superimposes itself on the other. The ambiguity of the commentaries made by Nelly and the skepticism of Lockwood's posture in respect of the reunion and consummation of Catherine and Heathcliff's love after their death, leave the reader to resolve the dilemma posed by the novel.

However, coming back to the question of Reception, Hans Robert Jauss stated the objective of his work "Toward an aesthetic of reception" to be the restoring of history to the centre of literary studies. The ideal of objectivity sought after and proposed by the nineteenth century literary historian fundamentally consisted in the presentation of a series of essays dealing with the life and work of different authors in chronological order, eventually coming down to a type of history of culture incapable of being critically evaluated. Jauss proposes to span the distance between history and literature and taking the viewpoint of the consumer or reader, goes on to sustain that the historical essence of a work of art cannot be explained by merely examining its production or describing it. Better still, literature must be treated as a dialectic process of production and reception.

"Literature and Art only obtain a history that has the character of a process when the succession of works is mediated not only through the producing subject, but also through the consuming subject, through the interaction of author and public" (Jauss 1982: 15).

The consideration of literary history as a dialogue between the work and the public makes the contrast between its historic and aesthetic aspects disappear, thanks to the continuing mediation of the past appearance of the work and its present experience. By this means

history and aesthetics are united: the aesthetic implication clearly shows itself in the fact that the first reception of a work by the general public implies a test of its aesthetic value in comparison with other known works previously read; and the historic implication shows itself also in the fact that the appreciation of the first reader's experience will be continued and enriched by means of successive reception from generation to generation. In this process of the history of reception the reappropriation of past works occurs simultaneously with the perpetual mediation of past and present art and of the traditional evaluation and actual literary attempts (Jauss 1982: 20).

The Victorian novel and the canons by which it was governed set out essentially to instruct as well as please its audience. As an emerging type it triumphed in the decades of 1840 and 1850, feeding an exorbitant public that was incredibly heterogenous due to the expansion of education, the technological advances, the use of machinery and cheaper forms of publication. On the other hand, the current of Realism with its reprodution and cold analysis of reality –and more specifically– of everyday life, coloured a good part of literature and critical comment of the time, imposing itself over the romantic fervour of the previous decades. Precisely in this climate of social, religious and political tensions brought on by the Industrial Revolution, along with the prevalence and incisive influence of Evangelicalism and Utilitarianism on the mentality and conduct of Victorian man, the novel *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë appeared in 1847, causing great astonishment with the public and in literary circles of the time. Certainly, the absence of a moral goal or intention, the improbability of the related happenings, the immoderate tone and the utilization of two incompetent narrators in telling the story, made of this a mere fantasy crudely constructed. Readers as well as critics (the latter being the principal guardians of typical Victorian taste and decorum) had no doubts in labelling the work as being "rude, disagreeable and alarming", seeing, with real disgust the coarseness if not the brutality of the emotions and personalities described in it. The rules of decorum and delicacy, as much in the treatment of the theme as in the language used, that had to be observed in all works of fiction, appeared to have been openly ignored by the authoress, as yet unknown, of this novel. While, on the other hand, the power and originality and authenticity with

which it was executed surprised and at the same time increased the curiosity of those first readers.

The past dimension of *Wuthering Heights* corresponds however to the critical evaluation that was adjudicated to it in this first reception, insisting on its force and emotive character and not on its deep artistic structure. Now the progressive development and fixation of the criterions by which prose fiction would be governed as a work of art throughout the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, will lead to the discovery of the perfectly organised tecnique of Emily Brontë's novel. In 1926, Charles Percy Sanger was to show the precision, exactness and symmetry of its pedigree, and the minute attention to legal, botanical and topographical detail used by the authoress in her work. In other words, far from being an "immature" writer who had produced a stupid and improbable story, she was, on the contrary, a "conscious artist" (as she is now called), who had worked with care and diligence, under the power of her creative and genial imagination, in the task, of presenting a consistent story.

From here, the modern history of *Wuthering Heights* begins. Since the findings of Sanger, twentieth century critics have tried, from the most varied points of view, to clarify the significance of the work, by means of studying its narrative structure (especially the function carried out by the two principal narrators, Lockwood and Nelly Dean), and at the same time the relationship and parallels between the two pairs of lovers who make up the two sections or parts of the same. All the actual literary interpretations that this novel has awakened in its readers provide us with its present dimension, and although the conclusions of these interpretations have been also very different, (*Wuthering Heights* as a symbolic novel, or metaphysical, allegorical or mythical or sociological etc.) all of them emphasize, nevertheless, the central nucleus or core around which the novel revolves. And this is the tragic amorous relationship of metaphysical nature and essential identity which is incarnated in the first pair of lovers, Catherine and Heathcliff, symbolizing the forces of nature and rejecting every moral imperative; contrasting with the more generous and more human love of the second pair of lovers, Cathy and Hareton, which has its roots in civilization and morality. The narrative technique employed by Emily Brontë, the indirect and oblique method maintained by the narrative of

Lockwood and Nelly Dean, serves to create a distance from the facts presented, and makes the theme of the novel extremely ambiguous for the reader. However, this ambiguity has been, nevertheless, calculated from the very beginning by the authoress, up to the point where the story's ending is an equilibrium of structural tensions. It falls to the reader then to make the final decisions between the two options developed in *Wuthering Heights*. Will he side with Lockwood and the dogmatism which leads him to reject anything that is unorthodox? Or will he prefer the pragmatism of Nelly and her belief in superstition? Which of the two visions satisfies him more, the romantic idealism of Catherine and Heathcliff or the domestic love of Cathy and Hareton?

The past and present dimensions of this work unite thus to give us an authentic judgement of its artistic value. Emily Brontë has triumphed in making the reader participate in the fullness of her experience. She herself entered into the depths of human nature (and those of the heart) and what she found there she presents to us with total frankness and without inhibitions. The basic theme of *Wuthering Heights* is the passion of the human soul, with love (coupled with its opposite, hate) as the most sublime.

This implied a challenge to the supposed decorum, in language and in scenes, that novelists had to look out for in conformity with the Victorian moral code. However, although Emily Brontë's novel apparently disregarded the rules in force in the field of prose fiction, it didn't depart from its fundamental rules, given that in constructing the world of her novel she tried, above all, to include her own insight and philosophy of life in a gigantic artistic conception. At the same time, she forced the readers to bring into play all their faculties in order to act out and to establish explicitly the significance of the text in the process of reading it. In reality, we can say that in the interaction of author, reader and literary text Emily Brontë's novel is recreated and comes alive, and remains open for successive generations of readers and critics to form judgements of its value.

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OLIVER TWIST: "AN IRRECLAIMABLE WRETCH"

Chantal CORNUT- GENTILLE D'ARCY

Oliver Twist appeared inmediately after the *Pickwick Papers* which had established the popularity of its author Boz. *Oliver Twist* or *The parish Boy's Progress* was the first of Dicken's books to be published under his own name and represented a bold departure from the genial tone of the *Pickwick Papers*. Some of the same comic genius is evident in part of *Oliver Twist,* but fundamentally, *Oliver* is Dickens's first serious novel, and the first book in which we encounter the deeply satirical social criticism that was to concern him for so much of his life.

Since the target that clearly comes under attack in this novel is the polemical 1834 Poor Law and the promoters of the said Law, it may be said that Oliver is not, strictly speaking a hero. According to Philip Hobsbawn, Dickens uses his main character as "a means of setting society in perspective"[1]. Or, in Angus Wilson's words: "Oliver is no reality, he is (...) merely an image of humanity worked upon by external forces (...)[2]. Oliver, therefore, is more an emblem than a character. Dickens achieves this distancing effect through a third person narrative and through a continual, pervading Carlylean tupe of irony. The description of the newborn Oliver decidedly recalls professor Teufelsdrockh's Clothes philosophy in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus:*