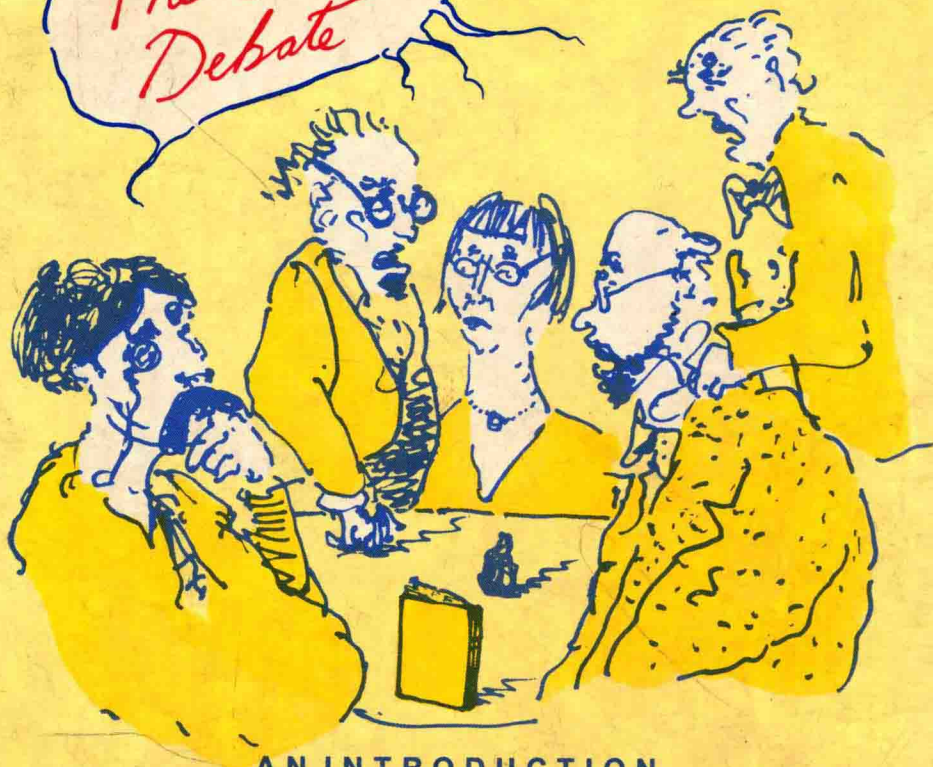


*The Critics
Debate*



AN INTRODUCTION
TO THE VARIETY OF CRITICISM

WUTHERING HEIGHTS

PETER MILES

WUTHERING HEIGHTS

Peter Miles

M
MACMILLAN

For Win and Mike, with love and in memory

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Peter Miles

General Editor's Preface

OVER THE last few years the practice of literary criticism has become hotly debated. Methods developed earlier in the century and before have been attacked and the word 'crisis' has been drawn upon to describe the present condition of English Studies. That such a debate is taking place is a sign of the subject discipline's health. Some would hold that the situation necessitates a radical alternative approach which naturally implies a 'crisis situation'. Others would respond that to employ such terms is to precipitate or construct a false position. The debate continues but it is not the first. 'New Criticism' acquired its title because it attempted something fresh calling into question certain practices of the past. Yet the practices it attacked were not entirely lost or negated by the new critics. One factor becomes clear: English Studies is a pluralistic discipline.

What are students coming to advanced work in English for the first time to make of all this debate and controversy? They are in danger of being overwhelmed by the cross-currents of critical approaches as they take up their study of literature. The purpose of this series is to help delineate various critical approaches to specific literary texts. Its authors are from a variety of critical schools and have approached their task in a flexible manner. Their aim is to help the reader come to terms with the variety of criticism and to introduce him or her to further reading on the subject and to a fuller evaluation of a particular text by illustrating the way it has been approached in a number of contexts. In the first part of the book a critical survey is given of some of the major ways the text has been appraised. This is done sometimes in a thematic manner, sometimes according to various 'schools' or 'approaches'. In the second part the authors provide their own appraisals of

the text from their stated critical standpoint, allowing the reader the knowledge of their own particular approaches from which their views may in turn be evaluated. The series therein hopes to introduce and to elucidate criticism of authors and texts being studied and to encourage participation as the critics debate.

Michael Scott

A Note on Text and References

PAGE NUMBERS in round brackets refer to the World's Classics edition of *Wuthering Heights*, edited by Ian Jack (Oxford and New York, 1981), which reprints the authoritative Clarendon text of the novel.

Bibliographical details of critical studies mentioned in the text are listed in the References section.

Where more than one study by a particular author has been cited, references in the text differentiate between them by date of publication (and by 'a' or 'b' to differentiate within particular years). Page numbers in square brackets refer to the study immediately under discussion.

Introduction

'Wuthering Heights': Popular Memory/ Critical Debate

FREQUENTLY adapted for children's editions and for film and television, *Wuthering Heights* has left an indelible mark on British consciousness. Mention of the novel's name or of its principal characters almost guarantees the evocation in most minds of the idea of a love story, a sense of landscape, or an atmosphere of storm and conflict. One scene, where Cathy and Heathcliff call each other's names from distant hillsides, seems especially deeply engraved in popular memory – the more intriguingly so for the fact that no such scene is directly presented anywhere in Emily Brontë's text.

That visual myth of *Wuthering Heights*, embodied in those yearning figures on the moors, has entered twentieth-century popular memory not only as shorthand for Emily Brontë's novel, but as a sign for romantic love itself – for a love which survives all difficulties and which through its strength and vision, and through the overriding value accorded it by the protagonists, transcends time and space to testify to the spiritual potential of humanity. Denied each other in life, the lovers' creation of a unique union in death announces the scale of their experience and gives them entry to a standard iconography of love alongside such exponent figures as Romeo and Juliet, and Antony and Cleopatra.

British culture has frequently revisited that image of Cathy and Heathcliff on the moors in reviewing its own changing values. Reworkings of the received idea of the novel in popular

memory can be ephemeral, superficial, or aim merely at immediate humour, yet they may still be enlightening, and not least for their implicit confidence in the large audiences they address sharing an understanding of what is meant within the culture by '*Wuthering Heights*'.

For example, in the popular culture of the last twenty years one group of voices (Kate Bush, Genesis) continued to redeploy *Wuthering Heights* as a sign inherently affirming romantic passion and idealistic aspiration. Other voices reworked the mythical scene through travesty: Monty Python's 'semaphore version' of *Wuthering Heights* (where Cathy and Heathcliff stiffly communicate by flags from their respective hill-tops), and Dave Allen's sketch where the lovers rush down from the hills to collide at full speed, emerged from a sexually revolutionised culture and a new degree of social mobility in which the idea of lovers separated by constraint, or driven to communicate by indirection, could appear as simply absurd – at least from the viewpoint, in Kingsley Amis's phrase, of an 'I Want It Now' society.

Conversely, William Wyler's famous Hollywood version of 1939 asked its audience to see nothing absurd in the division of lovers by circumstance or by moral and social constraint, and cinema audiences watched Laurence Olivier and Merle Oberon in *Wuthering Heights* with the same kind of sympathetic attention as they would shortly watch the trials of Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca*, of Trevor Howard and Celia Johnson in *Brief Encounter*.

Whether to endorse, to satirise, or to exploit (as in recent advertisements showing the Cathy and Heathcliff of the moors transferring their passion to a brand of video-recorder), these revisitings – while scribbling short-term modulations of value over its surfaces – recognise the resilience of *Wuthering Heights* in popular memory as an icon of romantic love. In that respect, Wyler's adaptation was typical in single-mindedly focusing on Heathcliff and Cathy; one critic was so pleased that he declared the film 'poetically written as the novel not always was, sinister and wild as it was meant to be, far more compact dramatically than Miss Brontë had made it'. This is revealing, both for the assumption that the wild and the sinister is what *Wuthering Heights* is essentially 'about', and for bizarrely implying that some perfectly wild *Wuthering Heights*

preceded, and was imperfectly rendered in, Emily Brontë's version. Recently Tom Winnifrith [1983] has indeed suggested that a shorter *Wuthering Heights* may well have been first submitted for publication: many critics would have preferred that hypothetical draft; Moser has not been alone in maintaining that the second generation of characters contradict 'the novel's true subject' [p. 2]. Yet even were Winnifrith's speculation proved just, readers and critics have often collaborated too readily with popular memory to privilege their ideal *Wuthering Heights*, even at the expense of Emily Brontë's text. Besides, other significances have been discerned in the novel's conclusion, a constructive rejection of Heathcliff [Allott, 1958], or the gain of a feminisation of relationship [Senf, p. 212], rather than just the negative of Hareton's 'symbolic emasculation' [Thompson, p. 74].

There is no denying that *Wuthering Heights* is a love story – or rather, something like three love stories; or indeed that it utilises elements of the ghost tale; or that it presents powerful feelings and actions; or that it is a 'poetic' text both in offering a rich verbal field, and in utilising a rhetoric dealing in primary images of life and death, Heaven and Hell, calm and storm.

Wuthering Heights, however, also has aspects which may attract someone, such as myself, interested in the social and historical contextualisation of writing within a broad model of cultural activity. This means confronting deeply entrenched critical acceptance of Emily Brontë's 'isolation from significant social and economic forces' [Barclay, 1974, p. 8] and even hostility towards the very idea of social and historical approaches to her novel (as also to the relevance of any ethical or moral concerns in the writing or reading of the text).

In the 'Survey' section of the present book I review, on a sampling basis, issues in biography and the mythicisation of Emily, source-studies, narratological matters, psychoanalytical approaches, and formalist and post-structuralist dealings with the text. As in the 'Appraisal', a consciousness of feminist argument should be apparent through these sections.

To clarify the stance of my 'Appraisal', however, I need to indicate my own dissatisfaction with the idea of writers and texts being isolated from 'significant social and economic forces'. No human life – in Haworth any more than in London

or New York – has been isolated from such forces, which are ‘known’ less in theory than through being engaged with in living, as also in and through writing. Indeed, the studies of *Wuthering Heights* which I have personally found most stimulating (and which have influenced my ‘Appraisal’ most) are those, often Marxist – and increasingly feminist – which argue the social, historical and ideological relationships of the text: notably Kettle, Eagleton [1975], Gilbert and Gubar, Kavanagh.

Novelists may well choose not to deal programmatically with political or social issues; in writing, they may not be fully conscious of the social, economic or political resonances of the words, ideas and images they organise (and disorganise) in their texts. Yet writers cannot prevent their language speaking of its production through specific circumstances of community, education and occasion, their sense of human interaction deriving from their own experience and such experience as their culture envisages, their sensibility and values revealing relationships of allegiance and disaffiliation in relation to their own historically specific society. This is not to understand writing as producing a specular reflection of society, or as being crudely determined by its context of production, but as a historically specific phenomenon most rich in its relations at the moment of its production.

If resonance lies inert or invisible within texts, then something may be revealed about the ideological stance of the writing – and the relative lack of disturbance such texts offered readers. Conversely, texts’ capacities to make visible the invisible, to allow an exposure of the implications of the ‘normal’, the ‘ordinary’, the ‘commonsense’ in, say, class and gender relations, may testify to modulations of ideology finding construction in and through the act of writing, the laying down of a map of intellectual and emotional pressure-points, of desires and rejections, within a lived society. Language is a social medium, guilty of the meanings and values (and the tensions) of the culture in which it is used; it is not redeployed – anywhere – without some play occurring in those meanings and values, and it is within the world of those meanings and values that the text is eventually read. Writers are thus both instruments and agents of language and culture, building with pre-shaped materials – and yet able to display the composition,

to redesign the shape of those materials, through the act of constructing something new.

Unlike many contemporary students of writing, I still cling to authors, and to their social formation and biography, as being relevant to the reading and debating of texts. I well see the point and fruits of methodologies abandoning such concerns to focus upon reading as an existential process rather than as the act of some normative, 'common' or 'ideal' reader. I have taken much on board from such approaches. Yet in the urge to rediscover the flux of reading experiences, there may be overcompensation for criticism's past tendencies to homogenise readers into one politico-cultural model, and to allow ideas about authorial competence to dictate the limits of possible and permitted readings. As I have suggested, texts do outlive their authors' control and take on a more dynamic condition, a 'mode of existence', which may change kaleidoscopically through time, as a living culture – inside and outside the institutions of criticism – alters the functions of those texts [Foucault]. Any moment in a culture's history is typified by its reworking and repositioning of existing texts as much as by its production of new ones. Allusion to *Wuthering Heights* in a Margaret Atwood story about a young girl growing up occurs within a contemporary repossessing of women's writing by women writers which is quite different in its implications for its own culture from William Wyler's, or Lord David Cecil's or Monty Python's revisitings. In other hands, critical, creative or institutional, *Wuthering Heights* does continue to suggest, and to participate in, new constellations of cultural pattern, new constructions of value and belief.

Yet texts are available to define and redefine readers and cultures because this woman or that man sat down at that place, at that period, and under those conditions, to face the task and delight, the conscious and unconscious play, of writing those words for such audiences as they envisaged. If that matrix is not the end of a text and its readers, it remains for me a primary focus of debate. On any journey, knowing where you've come from is a prerequisite of knowing where you are.