Heathcliff's Great Hunger: The Cannibal Other in Wuthering Heights

Matthew Beaumont

Pembroke College, Oxford

Published online: 15 Jan 2010.

To cite this article: Matthew Beaumont (2004) Heathcliff's Great Hunger: The Cannibal Other in Wuthering Heights, Journal of Victorian Culture, 9:2, 137-163

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.3366/jvc.2004.9.2.137

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions
Heathcliff’s Great Hunger:
The Cannibal Other in
Wuthering Heights

Matthew Beaumont

‘Fine fellows – cannibals – in their place.’
(Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness)

In an article on ‘The Future Results of British Rule in India’, published in 1857, Karl Marx elaborated a highly suggestive metaphor for the ideology of progress sponsored so aggressively by the Victorian imperial project. He pointed out that, on the colonial subcontinent, ‘the profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked’. And in a shocking final stroke he declared that ‘human progress … resemble[s] the hideous pagan idol who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain’.\footnote{1} Bourgeois civilization, from this perspective, is little more than a barbaric celebration of its own brutal capacity for collectively exploiting human beings as dead labour. Its sophisticated façade, like the profile of the ancient pyramids, conceals the massed bodies of the countless labourers that have built it. As Marx’s vaguely cannibalistic image suggests, barbarism is not the diametrical opposite of civilised culture, as it appears in contemporary ideology, but its dialectical obverse.

The consequences of this dialectic of progress were becoming more and more evident in mid-Victorian Britain, where industrial capitalism was not invariably capable of maintaining its respectable form even at home. For example, the railway boom of the 1840s, as Dombey and Son (1846) testified, quickly became symbolic of capitalism’s emancipatory potential, but it also rapidly came to be identified with the depredations of capitalism, as Dickens implied. This was partly because, in addition to the ecological destruction that it wreaked, the construction of the railway mechanically uprooted working-class communities living in the track of its apparently relentless development; and it was partly because
the rail accident, as one cultural historian has said, ‘democratized’
disaster: ‘From the middle-class perspective, there seemed an inevitable
and necessary relation between technological advance and human
sacrifice’. When picturing the mid-Victorian rail traveller, it is there-
fore tempting to imagine him facing backwards, in the direction from
which he has been so furiously hurtled – like Walter Benjamin’s angel
of history, who stares into the past at the storm that ‘irresistibly propels
him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris
before him grows skyward’. ‘This storm,’ he observes, ‘is what we call
progress.’ In his apocalyptic allegory of history we do not move
forward into the future, but are blown backwards into it, contemplating
all the while, in our wake, the destruction and horror generated by
progress.

In spite of her apparent seclusion, Emily Brontë was acutely
conscious of this contradiction structural to capitalist modernity,
whereby progress is achieved only at the cost of a certain regression
for the mass of people. The cotton and mining industries were still
transforming Yorkshire in the 1840s, and in 1842 the ‘Plug’ strikers
marched through Haworth to offer proof of capitalism’s exploitative
practice. Earlier, there had been Poor Law riots during Emily’s tenure
as a teacher at Law Hill in Halifax in 1837 and 1838; and Winifred Gérin
has argued that the view from the school above the city created a
singular impression on Emily, that of ‘a Blake-like image of the conflict
of Heaven and Hell in the contrast between the dark brew boiling below
and the serene beauty of the encircling hills’. Emily’s only novel
indicates that, if the city hardly seemed heavenly to her, she held no
illusions about the surrounding hills either. After all, their fictional
inhabitants are scarcely serene, and the isolated community on the
moors is not inviolate or even self-contained. Conflict between the
yeoman farming culture of Wuthering Heights and the agrarian
capitalist culture of Thrushcross Grange structures its social relations.
Heathcliff merely provides a focus for this and other conflicts. His
‘otherness’ – discovered by old Mr Earnshaw among the refugees
that populate the port of Liverpool, Heathcliff is associated with various
victims of British colonialism, from displaced African slaves to itinerant
Irish labourers – is not the cause of these conflicts but their symptomatic
effect. His own supposedly barbaric origins serve starkly to expose, by
comparison, the barbarism of his civilised new environment.

*Wuthering Heights* unveils the profound hypocrisy and inherent bar-
barism of bourgeois civilization, to use Marx’s expressive phrases – but
it quite deliberately turns to home in order to do so. Among other
figurative resources, it uses images of cannibalism in order to strip this
Heathcliff’s Great Hunger

culture of its respectable clothing and expose it in its naked form. This essay centres on Emily Brontë’s often allusive identification of Heathcliff with the emblematic figure of the cannibal, which, historically, has functioned in imperial discourse as the ultimate emblem of enlightened civilization’s dark other. H.L. Malchow has commented that, in the nineteenth century, cannibalism ‘is such an obviously available trigger for sensational emotion that virtually all gothic literature employs some anthropophagic element, indicating the depth of the fear/disgust response it evokes – from Frankenstein’s pulling apart of bodies to the soul- and blood-devouring demonism of Dracula’.

Brontë’s novel – which literary critics have frequently located within this very tradition of nineteenth-century gothic as a well-nigh canonical link between Frankenstein and Dracula – makes far more systematic use of the ‘anthropophagic element’ than either Shelley’s or Stoker’s novels.

However Wuthering Heights has so far been left out of critical studies of the role of cannibalism in literature. Maggie Kilgour, for example, ignores it in her monograph on ‘metaphors of incorporation’ in literature. Meanwhile Malchow briefly argues that ‘Heathcliff’s masculine strength is perverted into vindictiveness and sadism by his non-European otherness’, but he doesn’t connect these characteristics to the figure of the cannibal. Heathcliff’s ‘non-European otherness’ has of course been the focus of several ‘post-colonial’ interpretations of the novel over the last decade, though criticism of Wuthering Heights has in general ‘been slow to place the novel in the context of Britain’s imperial past’, as Patsy Stoneman points out. Only one account of this kind has linked his otherness to the irreducible alterity of the cannibal. In her impressive essay on the representation of ‘reverse imperialism’ in Wuthering Heights, Susan Meyer observes in passing that ‘the repeated motif of Heathcliff’s cannibalism is yet another image of being subjected to reverse colonization’, that is to say, ‘of being invaded and used by another’. In what follows, I want to flesh out the significance of Brontë’s figurative use of the cannibal, which, as Meyer suggests, is not merely a trigger for sensational emotion, but a form of committed social criticism.

I begin, in section I, by examining the mutual penetration of civilised and barbaric values explored by Brontë in an exemplary passage of Wuthering Heights. Section II tracks her metaphorical use of cannibalism, offering a number of intertextual references for understanding their significance. Section III further contextualizes her construction of a ‘cannibal other’, by providing an overview of some late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century political discourse that makes figurative
use of the cannibal. Section IV examines the link between cannibalism and vivisection in Victorian culture, demonstrating its relevance to Brontë’s understanding of what I have called the dialectic of civilization and barbarism. This section reinforces my earlier argument that Brontë constructs Heathcliff as a ‘Montaignean’ cannibal, whose behaviour serves to expose the latent barbarity of civilised society. But if this is the ‘critical’ function of the figure of the cannibal in Wuthering Heights, then it also possesses a ‘utopian’ one. In section V, I propose that the novel’s metaphors of consumption also relate to a Romantic longing for interpersonal unity. Heathcliff’s desire for a form of sexual consumption with Catherine which is, at the same time, a kind of consumption of her, is an expression of his own, and indeed Emily Brontë’s desire to heal at the level of individual relations the very split that structures the social world of the Heights.

My title playfully refers to Terry Eagleton’s essay ‘Heathcliff and the Great Hunger’, which identifies Brontë’s protagonist as ‘a fragment of the [Irish] Famine’.10 And my investigation of Heathcliff’s aggressive appetite – an appetite that has probably been sharpened by the deepening crisis in Ireland in the mid-1840s – suggests that he is also a sliver left over from the slave trade’s economy of consumption.

In Wuthering Heights, Emily Brontë demonstrates that the barbaric is a fantastic projection structural to the self-identification of civilised culture, and that, as such, it is ultimately a reflection of this culture’s own fractured and troubled identity. This can be observed in the scene in volume I chapter VI, in which Heathcliff describes how, as young children, he and Catherine are caught sneaking a look into the drawing-room at Thrushcross Grange. Both children have ‘gone native’. In this benighted condition, they gravitate to the drawing-room window (‘the light came from thence’).11 The interior into which they precariously peer is a baroque shrine to bourgeois civilization, described by Heathcliff in terms of estrangement: ‘ah! It was beautiful – a splendid place carpeted with crimson, and crimson-covered chairs and tables, and a pure white ceiling bordered by gold, a shower of glass-drops hanging in silver chains from the centre, and shimmering with little soft tapers’ (48). The urchin’s circumlocutory description of the chandelier, for which he has no name, is a poignant mark of his exclusion from the culture of the Grange.

This culture, if in a rarefied fashion, turns out to be quite as cruelly barbaric as that of the Heights – and all the more so because of its
deceptively polite surface. In the drawing-room, Edgar and Isabella, the former ‘weeping silently’, the latter ‘shrieking as if witches were running red-hot needles into her’, stand either side of an injured dog, the possession of which they have been fighting over (48). ‘Here’s the world half blind / With intellectual light, half brutalised / With civilisation,’ Elizabeth Barrett Browning was to write in *Aurora Leigh* only ten years later. Heathcliff tells Nelly, ‘I’d not exchange, for a thousand lives, my condition here, for Edgar’s at Thrushcross Grange – not if I might have the privilege of flinging Joseph off the highest gable, and painting the house-front with Hindley’s blood!’ (48). The sheer excessiveness of his language here serves to remind us that, for Emily Brontë, the savagery of the Heights is far more full of life than the refined world of the Lintons. If the drawing-room chandelier, with its ‘shower of glass-drops’, is symbolic of this icy, frozen culture of reified artificiality, then Heathcliff’s language – as in his description of the chandelier – is by contrast vital and creative.

Indeed, Heathcliff’s language is quite violently vital and creative in its reference to Joseph and Hindley. It is also suggestive of the social inversions staged by early nineteenth-century slave rebellions. His colourful fantasy of systematically effacing the lives of his chief persecutors is wonderfully inventive in its evocation of an entire culture of ritual human sacrifice. It almost amounts to a romantic celebration, secretly, by Emily Brontë herself, of barbarism – as if, like William Morris forty years later, she is consoled ‘to think of barbarism once more flooding the world, and real feelings and passions, however rudimentary, taking the place of our wretched hypocrisies’. Certainly, its verbal energy is such that, retroactively, it even infects what at first sight seems to be Heathcliff’s innocently colloquial turn of phrase – his intemperate claim that he would not exchange the Linton’s lives ‘for a thousand lives’. Here, a perfectly casual metaphor, the apparently careless hyperbole of an unthinking cliché, acquires a frankly sociopathic aspect. Heathcliff’s recoil from the culture of the Grange manifestly exceeds his personal hatred for his persecutors. It is a measure of his *ressentiment*. ‘The slave uprising in ethics,’ Nietzsche was to note in *The Genealogy of Morals*, ‘begins when *ressentiment* becomes creative and brings forth its own values: the *ressentiment* of those to whom the only authentic way of reaction – that of deeds – is unavailable, and who preserve themselves from harm through the exercise of imaginary vengeance.’ But Heathcliff’s *ressentiment* may be based on an inchoate class analysis as well as on mere social animus. The language of exchange that inflects Heathcliff’s turn of phrase can be seen as an allusion to the source of the Lintons’ wealth, the material
basis of their opulent bourgeois interior. Edgar Linton’s ‘condition’, Heathcliff seems to be hinting, is itself founded on sacrifice, on the lives of labourers and even slaves, and on the exchange-value their work has generated for the agrarian bourgeoisie.

When Catherine and Heathcliff are caught spying on the Lintons the latter is immediately treated as a criminal. Examining Heathcliff, the magistrate Mr Linton wonders whether ‘it [would] not be a kindness to the country to hang him at once, before he showed his nature in acts as well as features’ (50). As the entire Linton family concur, once they have inspected Heathcliff under their chandelier (the light from which no longer seems quite so securely symbolic of the values of Enlightenment), he looks like a gipsy: ‘He’s exactly like the son of the fortune-teller that stole my tame pheasant,’ Edgar tells the others (50). As Meyer comments, ‘scrutinized through spectacles, and pronounced upon as if he were a specimen of some strange animal species, Heathcliff is subjected to the potent gaze of a racial arrogance deriving from British imperialism’.16 When it becomes clear that the urchin’s companion, who had lost consciousness after being attacked by the Lintons’ dog, is Miss Earnshaw, she is welcomed inside. Heathcliff, by contrast, is ‘dragged’ into the garden, from where he resumes his ‘station as spy’, watching the Lintons as they offer comfort to Catherine (50-1). ‘She was a young lady, and they made a distinction between her treatment and mine,’ he tells Nelly with disarming simplicity (51).

Until her convalescence at Thrushcross Grange, when she assumes the accoutrements and manners of the landed gentry, Catherine and Heathcliff are fellow insurrectionaries. At that point, quite irreversibly, she is ‘converted into a stranger’ to her foster brother (56). Nelly notices that, on her return from the Lintons, Catherine’s fingers are ‘wonderfully whitened with doing nothing and staying indoors’ (53). Catherine, for her part, observes that Heathcliff is dirty, that he has ‘dusky fingers’ (54). This is the incontrovertible fingerprint that identifies his status as a manual labourer on the one hand and a non-European foreigner on the other – two roles that are played out in the image of the slave that haunts his early biography. Heathcliff is from the start referred to as a human commodity, an item of property. Mr Earnshaw describes how, having found the child in Liverpool, ‘he picked it up and inquired for its owner’ (37). This objectification of Heathcliff underlines Emily Brontë’s hint that he may be some by-product of the British slave trade, which wasn’t abolished until 1808, several years after the most recent events to be narrated in the novel. Heathcliff’s commodity-status is reinforced in the following chapter, when old Mr Linton identifies him as ‘that strange acquisition my late
neighbour made in his journey to Liverpool’ (50). Certainly, after old Mr Earnshaw’s death, his son Hindley treats Heathcliff as a slave, ‘insist[ing] that he should labour out of doors instead, compelling him to do so, as hard as any other lad on the farm’ (46). He may be compelled to labour as hard as any other lad on the farm, but we must assume that he does not do so for payment. Hindley is punishing Heathcliff for his free status, as a fostered member of the family rather than merely a labouring body, by secretly subjecting him to the conditions of slavery. It was estimated in 1772 that there were 15,000 black slaves in Britain. Possession of these slaves was not officially outlawed until 1834, when an Act of Parliament also legislated against slavery in the English colonies.

Hindley’s logic is not unlike that of Thomas Carlyle, whose ‘Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question’ (1849), as Simon Dentith attests, was ‘a kind of rearguard action against the abolition of slavery in the colonies’, and one which is symptomatic ‘of a wider discursive shift at mid-century towards more explicitly authoritarian and oppressive attitudes on the question of race’. Carlyle’s ‘nightmare dream’ of decolonisation is that Britain will have ‘“emancipated” the West Indies into a Black Ireland’, a colony more objectionable even than ‘our own white or sallow Ireland, slutishly starving from age to age on its act-of-parliament “freedom”’. With his cryptic and apparently compound racial composition, Heathcliff, who might of course be genetically related to refugees from across the Irish Sea in the 1840s, is the premonitory representative of this Black Ireland.

II

For the colonial culture of late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britain, the cannibal was the ultimate image of the other. In an article of 1890, ‘intended to show that some cannibals at least may be very respectable members of society’, one contributor to Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine looked back over the last one hundred and fifty years, and benignly acknowledged that ‘the word cannibal is associated in our minds with scenes of the most debased savagery that the imagination can picture; of men in habits and appearance a little lower than the brute; of orgies the result of the most degrading religious superstition’. The almost unspeakable barbarity of cannibalism is an unassailable popular rationale behind Europe’s civilising mission throughout this period. Since the classical world, as Kilgour has argued, it has provided ‘an image for the forces hostile to the civilising process, a wild untamed nature that threatens the advances made by culture’.
The ideological role played by the cannibal in imperial propaganda has a long and distinguished history. Cannibals play a significant ideological role in the mythological imaginary of the young Brontës. Angria, the fictional setting for the games and stories enjoyed by all the Brontë children, was a British colony on the western coast of Africa. It had been inspired by the twelve toy soldiers that Patrick Brontë had given to his son Branwell in June 1826, when the trade wars between Britain and Ashanti, which ended in 1831, were at their height. Emily Brontë was at this time almost eight. The soldiers, known as the ‘twelves’, represented a British expeditionary force; and a set of tiny ninepins represented the ‘Ashantees’. These natives, as Branwell made clear, were cannibals. ‘The Acrof-croomb cannibals here mentioned,’ he notes in a short story dated 1830, ‘were ninepins whom we let fight just such a battle as I have mentioned, and also kill their prisoners and eat them.’ A little later on in ‘The History of the Young Men from Their First Settlement to the Present Time’, he elaborates this point by narrating an incident in which the Ashantees capture some of the British soldiers and their native allies: they ‘retired to a small distance from the capital [Acrof-croomb] and there, horrid to relate, roasted and made a feast of them, (the place where they were eaten is still shown)’. Enraged, the surviving soldiers mount a counter-attack and kill hundreds of Ashantees, ‘till they came to the decaying embers of the fire where lay the mangled and half eaten bodies of their friends’. They appeal to the Genii that protect them, and ‘instantly the dead and wounded twelves with the half-eaten victims to the Acrof-croombers started from the ground, living, vigorous and free from wounds’.† The ‘civilization’ imagined by Branwell in Angria is built out of opposition to savage cannibal practices, as the magical reconstitution of those half-digested bodies makes evident. Cannibalism is one of the founding myths of the Brontë children’s imaginary world.

The Brontës read reports about the Ashantee Wars in local newspapers and in Blackwood’s, their favourite periodical. A letter on ‘The British Settlements in Western Africa’ was printed in Blackwood’s in 1829, and its pungent description of cannibal practices surely flavoured the imagination of Branwell and his sisters, to whom Patrick Brontë probably read it aloud. In a sarcastic attack on the Abolitionist cause, its author describes a fierce battle between the Ashantee forces and the English settlers, whose native allies, scornfully referred to as ‘Mr Wilberforce’s “brothers”’, are identified as cannibals:
The barbarities exercised by the people amongst whom the English had resided for more than two centuries, is beyond belief. The heart of an Ashantee chief was taken out, divided, and eaten amongst the ‘poor black’ chiefs, his jaw-bones were taken out and hung on the drums; whilst living, his ears were twisted to the back of his head, and fastened with a skewer, whilst his fingers were cut off at the joints, the flesh eaten, and the bones hung as a necklace, whilst reeking with blood, round their necks – these barbarities performed by people who had lived long with the English, had attended the schools, and whose children were at that moment attending the English school, and frequenting the church at Cape Coast Castle!23

If this appealed to the Brontë children’s imagination, it is unlikely to have appealed too to their emergent political consciousness, which, it can be speculated, was on the contrary sympathetic to ‘Mr Wilberforce’s “brothers”’. William Wilberforce, who was a Yorkshire MP as well as the most celebrated spokesman for the Abolitionist cause, probably exercised considerable political influence on the Brontë family. After emigrating from Ireland in 1802, Patrick Brontë had from 1804 been sponsored by him at St John’s College, Cambridge, and he subsequently sent his daughters to the Clergy Daughters’ School at Cowan Bridge, where Wilberforce was a patron. Furthermore, ‘it seems more than likely’, according to Juliet Barker, ‘that Patrick was one of those fortunate enough to be invited to Keighley vicarage to meet the great man’ in 1827, when Wilberforce stayed for four days with their mutual friend Theodore Dury.24 Humphrey Gawthorp has recently insisted that Haworth Parsonage would have been ‘fairly humming with passion and indignation at the injustice of slavery’.25

In his Strictures on the Charge of Cannibalism on the African Race (1821), James Stephen, who was the brother-in-law of Wilberforce, carefully refuted the idea that cannibalism was anything more than a fantasy on the part of colonisers. ‘That the poor Africans sometimes regard their white purchasers as cannibals is a fact beyond dispute,’ he announced instead.26 Stephen’s pamphlet called into question the racist rhetoric of many contemporary ethnographic studies of Africa and the Caribbean, which, like William Snelgrave’s classic account of cannibalism, A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave Trade (1734), described cannibalistic sacrifices in order to justify the slave trade. Stephen himself may have been influenced by the rhetorical tactics not only of abolitionist polemics, like Coleridge’s ‘Lecture on the Slave Trade’ (1795), but also of literary disquisitions like Southey’s ‘Poems Concerning the Slave Trade’ (1797), which take familiar ethnographic
terms and apply them to the colonial culture. ‘Abolitionist poetry,’ Debbie Lee contends, ‘took the terms of ethnographic literature, turned them into metaphors, and then thrust them back onto British consciousness: British monstrosity and cannibalism caused monstrosity and cannibalism in the slave population.’27 Emily Brontë, who along with her sisters greatly admired both Coleridge and Southey, is indebted to this rhetorical tradition.

The strength of this kind of rhetoric was strategically reinforced by careful historical research in the Quaker William Howitt’s writings, with which Charlotte and Emily Brontë, according to Christopher Heywood, conducted a silent dialogue. Heywood has suggested that Howitt’s portrait of The Rural Life of England (1838) helped Emily in particular to appreciate that the picturesque landscapes of Yorkshire were imperceptibly shaped by the colonial plantations owned by the local proprietor class. A ‘web of patronage at the heart of the rural economy provided the secret but self-evident theme of slavery and the probable model for the specific traces of African origin which characterize Heathcliff’, he argues.28 In Colonization and Christianity, also published in 1838, Howitt painstakingly constructed ‘A Popular History of the Treatment of the Natives by the Europeans in all their Colonies’. With admirable clarity, its introductory chapter establishes an ironic relation between civilised and barbaric values in an imperial culture:

We have long laid to our souls the flattering unction that we are a civilized and a Christian people. We talk of all other nations, in all other quarters of the world, as savages, barbarians, uncivilized. … We shudder at the war-cries of naked Indians and the ghastly feasts of Cannibals; and bless our souls that we are redeemed from all these things, and made models of beneficence, and lights of God in the earth.

It is high time that we looked a little more rigidly into our pretences. … It is high time that we look boldly into the real state of the question, and learn actually, whether the mighty distance between our goodness and the moral depravity of other people exists.29

Brontë’s characterization of Heathcliff, if at an allegorical level, is precisely this sort of an enquiry into the flattery of ideological myths that sustain the culture of colonialism.

The first, premonitory indication of Heathcliff’s cannibalistic tendencies comes in volume I, chapter XVI of Wuthering Heights. There, Nelly relates a conversation with him during the course of which he declares that, if Catherine did not respect her husband Edgar, and if Edgar were not in some sense therefore a part of her, he would kill him instantly. ‘The moment her regard ceased,’ he says, ‘I would have torn his heart out, and drank his blood’ (146). This threat carries vampiric
overtones of course, but it also underlines the racial identification of Heathcliff as a savage that runs throughout Nelly’s narrative – the two images combine to create a flickering evocation of the figure of the cannibal.

That racial identification of an unnaturally appetitive savage is reinforced in a crucial subsequent episode narrated by Isabella. This is the murderous confrontation between Heathcliff and Hindley in volume II, chapter III. In order to reach Hindley, who is armed with a curious pistol surmounted by a blade, Heathcliff breaks the casement of the window. ‘His black countenance looked blightingly through,’ Isabella reports (176). His blackness, it can be surmised, is literal as well as metaphorical. Momentarily, in an image that carries an unmistakable racial charge, Heathcliff is framed dramatically by the window: ‘His hair and clothes were whitened with snow, and his sharp cannibal teeth, revealed by cold and wrath, gleamed through the dark’ (176). The whiteness of the snow emphasises Heathcliff’s skin colour, which, fully as much as the night itself, surely comprises the ‘dark’ through which his ‘cannibal teeth’ gleam. This is a portrait of Isabella’s husband as a cannibal, as the reference in the following sentence to his ‘girning’, which may mean either to snarl and bare one’s teeth or to trap and ensnare, seems to confirm (176). It recalls contemporary depictions of cannibalistic natives in fictional romances set in Africa. In Mrs R. Lee’s The African Wanderers (1847), for example, the shipwrecked heroes start to suspect that they are staying with a tribe of cannibals when they notice, first, that their hosts’ teeth are ‘filed to a point’, and, second, that there is ‘a strange and sullen expression about most of them’.30 A black countenance, combined with sharp teeth, is the indelible mark of the cannibal.

When Heathcliff and Hindley subsequently struggle across the awkward window into the kitchen, the former wrenches the pistol from the latter’s hand, exploding the charge in such a way that the knife attached to it closes sharply on its owner’s wrist:

Heathcliff pulled it away by main force, slitting up the flesh as it passed on, and thrust it dripping into his pocket. He then took a stone, struck down the division between two windows and sprung in. His adversary had fallen senseless with excessive pain, and the flow of blood that gushed from an artery, or a large vein (176-7).

Heathcliff continues to batter Hindley about (he ‘dashe[s] his head repeatedly against the flags’), before finally dragging the body to the settle. This attack of frenzied aggression is scarcely free from cannibalistic associations. Isabella’s description of the incident carries

Heathcliff’s Great Hunger
an unsettling suspicion that Heathcliff might make use of Hindley’s flesh for food. Certainly, she describes his violence in terms that might be called appetitive: ‘He exacted preter-human self-denial in abstaining from finishing him, completely’ (177). The implication here is that he must exercise more than human will in order to resist his less than human appetite. Hindley’s ‘apparently inanimate body’ (177) is already nearly the ‘carrion’ (185) that, by the end of this chapter, it will have become.

The act of ‘slitting up’ the flesh, though accidental, has a sinister precision to it. It is not unlike more explicit descriptions of cannibalism in contemporary literature. In R.M. Ballantyne’s popular classic, *The Coral Island* (1858), the narrator describes seeing a native who had stooped over an enemy killed in battle, ‘and with a knife, made apparently of stone, cut a large slice of flesh from his thigh’. ‘We knew at once,’ he adds, ‘that he intended to make use of this for food, and could not suppress a cry of horror and disgust.’

*The Coral Island* is of course a colonialist adventure narrative, which embroiders various savage rituals, including cannibalism, to justify the civilising mission of mid-Victorian Christianity. But even here the boundaries between culture and anarchy threaten to break down, as Jack’s unnervingly frenzied attack on the cannibals on the beach subsequently reveals. Nigel Rigby has correctly remarked that ‘there is a certain tension evident in Ballantyne and the missionaries between a supreme confidence in European civilization, and a fear of its eventual demise’.

In a blackly comic reprisal of the scene set in the kitchen at the Heights, Lockwood later describes visiting the house in order to tell Heathcliff that he intends to return to London. Lockwood is urged by Heathcliff to take dinner with him and Hareton (Cathy and Joseph are forced to eat in the kitchen). ‘A guest that is safe from repeating his visit, can generally be made welcome,’ he says, before telling Cathy to convey them ‘the things’. ‘Catherine reappeared,’ Lockwood reports, ‘bearing a tray of knives and forks’ (301). The knives and forks, in the light of earlier references to Heathcliff’s appetite, serve as the tools for a cannibal repast. So they lend a sinister inflection to Heathcliff’s comment that his guest will not repeat his visit (he does come back of course, though under changed circumstances). There is a clear hint here – although Lockwood, characteristically, seems unaware of it – that he will not leave the Heights alive. These cannibalistic *doubles entendres* themselves echo an earlier passage in which Emily Brontë indulges in some especially gruesome wordplay. When, shortly after Catherine’s death, the doctor, Mr Kenneth, tells Nelly of another death, she assumes that it is Heathcliff’s. The doctor, however, reassures her that ‘he is...
rapidly regaining flesh since he lost his better half’ (184). Kenneth is unconsciously making an organic connection here between the decomposition of Catherine’s flesh and the recomposition of Heathcliff’s. Heathcliff, Kenneth seems to imply, has been subsisting secretly off Catherine’s corpse.

III

In the opening paragraph of *Wuthering Heights*, Lockwood had congratulated himself on emigrating from the city to such a perfectly secluded part of the countryside: ‘In all England, I do not believe that I could have fixed on a situation so completely removed from the stir of society’ (3). The novel’s vocation is to strip away this self-deceptive assumption by exposing the fact that, in spite of its inhospitable landscape, the atomised community on the moors is uncannily susceptible to the stir of society. This community reproduces the depredations of capitalist society, its asymmetrical relations between men and women, between classes and between races, and it does so in a form that is both exaggerated and disguised. The barbaric social practices that thrive at the Heights under Hindley and then Heathcliff, including cruelty to the animals and children, are an inseparable part of metropolitan society too, though they appear to be the implausibly brutal remnant of some pre-capitalist culture. ‘There’s law in the land, thank God, there is! Though we be in an out-of-the-way place,’ Nelly threatens Heathcliff out of exasperation at one point (271). Her desperate conviction is cruelly unmasked by Brontë’s narrative: it reveals, first, that in this out-of-the-way place there can be no protection, in formal terms, from the law; and, second, that as a consequence the laws that do effectively prevail are the ones that characterise the society Lockwood purports to escape, those of a merciless competition for survival.33

Elizabeth Gaskell’s description of the moors after her first visit to Charlotte Brontë in September 1853 is an attempt to grasp the social imaginary that shapes the mythical landscape portrayed in Emily’s novel (which in actual fact conflates the mountainous limestone highlands to the north of the West Riding and the low-lying gritstone moorland to the south).34

On the Moors we met no one. Here and there in the gloom of the distant hollows she pointed out a dark grey dwelling – with Scotch firs growing near them often, – and told me such wild tales of the ungovernable families who lived or had lived therein that Wuthering Heights even seemed tame comparatively. Such dare-devil people, – men especially, –
and women so stony and cruel in some of their feelings and so passionately fond in others. They are a queer people up there. Small landed proprietors ... uneducated – unrestrained by public opinion – for their equals in position are as bad as themselves and the poor, besides being densely ignorant, are all dependent on their employers.35

The ‘queer people’ are so inseparable from nature as to appear unnatural. Their domestic culture is an utterly alien one. In this letter to John Forster the moors are the anthropological equivalent of an unconquered colonial territory. Gaskell’s rhetoric recalls contemporaneous accounts of the discovery of tribal civilizations on imperial expeditions. John Williams, for example, in his Narrative of Missionary Enterprises in the South Sea Islands (1837), depicted a landscape of ‘grandeur, wildness and sublimity’, inhabited by ‘cannibals of the worst character’, the ‘ferocious habits and cruel practices’ of whom exhibited ‘the most degraded and wretched state of barbarism’.36 Citing Williams’ comments, Malchow ascribes them to ‘the gothicizing of geographical and anthropological discovery in the nineteenth century’.37 But a supplementary point needs to be made. For an anthropological impulse informs the treatment of domestic geography in gothic fiction of the mid-nineteenth century.

Malchow has asserted that ‘to a very large degree, the nineteenth-century middle-class Englishman imagined the cannibal realm of the black by projecting upon it the gothic images he found most disturbing in his own world’. It might also be said that in the nineteenth century middle-class men and women imagined the forces that they found most disturbing in their own world by projecting cannibal images onto them. After the French Revolution, Edmund Burke, and, subsequently, Carlyle, associated the menace of the working class with cannibalism. ‘A generation after Burke,’ Malchow writes, ‘in the industrializing England of the early nineteenth century, representations of the degraded and demonised poor of the factory towns as cannibalistic savages ... give a somewhat different meaning to the familiar label “the hungry forties”’. For example, the popular novel Varney, the Vampyre (1847) portrayed the proletarian mob as cannibalistic. But it was not only the working class that laboured under these cannibal associations. In the famine conditions of the 1840s in particular, when rumours of ‘starvation cannibalism’ resurfaced on the mainland, Ireland was identified with a ‘Celtic cannibalism’.38 Both the English and the Irish working classes were abominated in terms of the image of the cannibal in mid-Victorian Britain.

Emily Brontë troped this rhetoric by distancing herself from her narrators’ identification of Heathcliff with the figure of the cannibal...
in order to question the facile opposition between civilization and barbarism so prevalent in mid-Victorian culture. At the end of the eighteenth century, Thomas Paine had appropriated the ideological image of the cannibal in the *Rights of Man* (1791). Mocking Burke’s description of France as a ‘cannibal republic’, he had complained that, with the exception of firstborn males, who qualified for the inheritance of property, the children of the aristocracy ‘are thrown to the cannibal for prey, and the natural parent prepares the unnatural repast’.

It is precisely the cruelty of this system of primogeniture that Heathcliff cannot forgive, because, as Catherine says, if Hindley ‘had not brought Heathcliff so low’, she should never have had to marry Edgar (80). Heathcliff’s revenge, in the form of his obsessive attempts to secure the financial inheritance of the Linton family, therefore literalizes Paine’s metaphor: it hurls the superficially well-bred cannibalism of Edgar back in his face, and in a form that is physical as well as financial.

*Wuthering Heights* may have taken this tactic from a contemporary counter-discourse that saw the poor themselves as cannibalised – by the new Poor Law for example. Having arrived at this reversal of official values, at the notion of ‘the cannibal cannibalized’, Malchow proposes, it was a short step, in the social criticism of the time, ‘to the larger motif of a cannibalising political economy’, and this did indeed become ‘a familiar trope of the attack by both humanitarians and radicals in the emerging capitalist system’.

One polemic published in North America ten years after *Wuthering Heights* denounced capitalism as ‘little better than moral cannibalism’; ‘for all good and respectable people are “Cannibals all”’, it spluttered, ‘who do not labor, or who are successfully trying to live without labor, on the unrequited labor of other people’.

If Heathcliff combats the cannibalistic rituals of an aristocratic mode of inheritance, then he ultimately does so with the tools provided by the cannibalistic culture of capitalist competition. His return to the Heights, after his ‘transformation’ (95) – in part his transformation into a capitalist – marks the onset of what we might call his phase of primitive accumulation. As Eagleton has suggested, he is ‘contradiction incarnate’, since ‘his rise to power symbolises at once the triumph of the oppressed over capitalism and the triumph of capitalism over the oppressed’. He is, we can conclude, both cannibalised and cannibal.

So to the extent that Heathcliff is associated with cannibalism, he can be read as a cannibal in the Montaignean sense – that is to say, as a cannibal who serves as the very instrument of a critique of civilization. He upsets the easy opposition between the civilised and the uncivilised. At one point in his celebrated essay, ‘On the Cannibals,’ Montaigne describes the ritual murder of a prisoner by two men in the New World.
colony he calls ‘Atlantic France’. ‘They roast him and make a common meal of him, sending chunks of his flesh to absent friends,’ he records, adding that ‘this is not as some think done for food – as the Scythians used to do in antiquity – but to symbolize ultimate revenge’ (235). After noting that this tribe subsequently adopted the vengeful practice of torture used on their captured enemies by the occupying Portuguese colonists, he comments:

It does not sadden me that we should note the horrible barbarity in a practice such as theirs: what does sadden me is that, while judging correctly of their wrong-doings we should be so blind to our own. I think there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead; more barbarity in lacerating by rack and torture a body still fully able to feel things, in roasting him little by little and having him bruised and bitten by pigs and dogs (as we have not only read about but seen in recent memory, not among enemies in antiquity but among our fellow-citizens and neighbours – and, what is worse, in the name of duty and religion) than in roasting him and eating him after his death (235-6).

Montaigne concludes that ‘we can indeed call those folk barbarians by the rules of reason but not in comparison with ourselves, who surpass them in every kind of barbarism’ (236). The rules of reason dictate that, in defining Heathcliff’s biography, the barbarous nature of the moors, and the contradictory world of which they are emblematic, must exceed it in all sorts of barbarity. Heathcliff’s savage character testifies to the savagery of the culture that occasioned it.

At the turn of the twentieth century, in the character of Kurtz in Heart of Darkness (1902), Joseph Conrad revealed the anthropophagous urges of the ‘civilizing process’ itself. He freed the emblematic figure of the cannibal from its generic confinement in the colonial adventure story and he exploited it instead as part of his critique of imperial culture. In H. Rider Haggard’s She (1887), ‘anthropophagous customs’ are identified, emphatically, as the ‘resources of barbarism’. In Conrad’s novella, on the contrary, they are a grotesque extension of the resources of civilization. Half a century earlier, Emily Brontë had anticipated Conrad by using metaphorical references to cannibalism as a critical tool with which to unveil what Marx called ‘the inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization’.

IV

If Heathcliff’s semi-accidental slitting of Hindley’s flesh at the kitchen casement recalls the practice of cannibalism, it also smacks faintly of his later fantasy of conducting a ‘slow vivisection’ on his relatives (267).
Claude Lévi-Strauss once compared vivisection, the dissection of the living body, with the consumption of flesh, and the two practices were not unconnected in the Victorian imagination. One Swiftian satire, printed in pamphlet form in 1885, was entitled *The Revival of Cannibalism: A Story of the Coming Times, To Which is Affixed A Proposal for Restoring the Ancient Practices of Anthropophagy and Vivisection in their Just Development*. Its author volunteered a modest proposal that the poor would no longer suffer from either food shortages or over-population if women and children were eaten, and furthermore that scientific research into physiology would benefit greatly if the elderly were to be subjected to vivisection:

> It is mere prejudice and force of custom which keep English people from the use of such higher forms of food, but let us hope these prejudices are passing away; and indeed the show of the butchers’ shops at Christmas and other festival seasons, leads us to take courage and hope for the future. With such glorious exhibitions before us, surely the time cannot be far off when common sense and logic will prevail, and the shambles will be graced with the plump and delicate forms of young men and women, boys and girls.

Like Lévi-Strauss, this pamphleteer operates on the assumption ‘that certain of our own customs might appear, to an observer belonging to a different society, to be similar in nature to cannibalism, although cannibalism strikes us as being foreign to the idea of civilization’.

*Wuthering Heights* contains more than one allusion to vivisection, a practice that one pro-vivisectionist, George Etherington, unsentimentally defined in 1842 as ‘cutting and administering poison to living animals, by which pain and protracted suffering are occasioned, and not infrequently death is the result’. The morality of vivisection was debated with some animation in the 1840s, despite the fact that, as one historian has concluded, ‘the extent of vivisection in Britain was extremely slight until the late nineteenth century’. In 1847, for instance, one of the few British scientists promoting vivisection, Marshall Hall, published an article considering ‘Experiments in Physiology as a Question of Medical Ethics’ in the *Lancet*. In the previous year the Rev. David Davis, a dissenting minister, had presented a petition about the dissection of animals to Queen Victoria. The debates of the 1840s took place partly under the sponsorship of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, which had been founded with the backing of Wilberforce and three other Members of Parliament in 1824. Its mission was to administer and enforce the ‘Ill-Treatment of Cattle Act’ of 1822, which outlawed cruelty to cattle, horses and sheep.
The references to vivisection in *Wuthering Heights* underline the sense in which Heathcliff’s barbarism is a product of civilization: vivisection functions as an Enlightenment version of cannibalism. It applies the scientist’s sophistication to the brutal insensitivity of the savage. Heathcliff has a suggestively ambivalent relationship with animals. He relishes his dogs’ vicious attack on Lockwood in the book’s opening chapter (a reminder perhaps that, from the late-sixteenth century, the word cannibal, in a common misapprehension, was linked etymologically to the word *canis*, Latin for a dog). His first act of cruelty to his wife Isabella after eloping with her is however ‘to hang up her little dog’ out of vindictiveness (149). This is the first of what he calls his ‘experiments on what she could endure’, experiments he has sometimes suspended, he says, ‘from pure lack of invention’ (149). At once appetitive and pitiless, passionate and clinical, this cruelty is elaborated in his confession, later in the conversation, to an ogrish hatred of the other human beings at the Heights: ‘The more they writhe, the more I yearn to crush out their entrails! It is a moral teething, and I grind with greater energy, in proportion to the increase of pain’ (150).

But Heathcliff is more than the moral equivalent of a cannibal. In a significant later scene, when he invites Nelly into the Heights to join him for tea with Cathy and his son Linton, he remarks, as they sit down: ‘It’s odd what a savage feeling I have to anything that seems afraid of me! Had I been born where laws are less strict, and tastes less dainty, I should treat myself to a slow vivisection of these two, as an evening’s amusement’ (267). Again, the implicit reference to the culture of cannibalism, to a place ‘where laws are less strict, and tastes less dainty’ (the sort of place, it is possible, in which he was born, or from which his family came), is combined with a reference to some superficially more sophisticated or civilised activity, to the amateur vivisection of a gentleman scientist affording himself ‘an evening’s amusement’. In effect, Heathcliff’s character combines the cannibal’s aggression with the clinical interest of the vivisectionist. He thus seems to embody not only the features of a monster, but of a Frankenstein too. After all, Dr Frankenstein was himself a vivisectionist, one who ‘tortured the living animals to animate lifeless clay’. H.G. Wells would rework this theme with some relish in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), his Darwinian revision of *Frankenstein*. *Wuthering Heights* is something like a missing link between these two gothic accounts of the limits of an instrumentalist attitude to science, in its emphasis on the inseparable unity of the monster and the monster’s scientific creator, and on the dialectic of civilization and barbarism.

Brontë emphasises the inseparability of these opposites by making
frequent reference to the monstrous cruelty not just of Heathcliff but of members of the Linton and Earnshaw families too. Hindley, who is divided between his ‘wild beast’s fondness’ and his ‘madman’s rage’ (73), is himself, we are told, like Heathcliff, a ‘goblin’ – and one with a predilection for the violent use of knives. Discovering Nelly concealing Hareton from him, Hindley pulls her back ‘by the skin of the neck, like a dog’ – rather as Heathcliff must have done in hanging Isabella’s dog – and pushes the point of a carving knife between her teeth. Releasing her, he calls for scissors because he wants to crop his child’s hair; and on encountering resistance from Hareton, he threatens in cracking monosyllables to ‘break the brat’s neck’ (74). Heathcliff is not the only person at the Heights with filiphagous tendencies. Nor is he the only monstrous Dr. Frankenstein. The infant Heathcliff, badly abused by his foster brother, might be regarded as Hindley’s first experiment in the brutal reconstruction of a personality, and Hareton as his second. If, after Hindley had accidentally dropped Hareton from the stairs, Heathcliff had not by chance caught him, he might have reflected, with a belated access of conscience, like Frankenstein: ‘The remains of the half-finished creature, whom I had destroyed, lay scattered on the floor, and I almost felt as if I had mangled the living flesh of a human being’ (167).

Other members of the family are also savagely aggressive. Catherine, terrifyingly, inflicts harm on herself. After a fight between Heathcliff and her husband Edgar, Nelly tells us, she lies ‘dashing her head against the arm of the sofa, and grinding her teeth, so that you might fancy she would crush them to splinters!’ (117). Edgar is horrified to find her stretched out cold: “She has blood on her lips!” he said, shuddering (117). Here it is the traces of vampirism, the result of a kind of cannibalistic grinding not unlike Heathcliff’s, that frightens him, and not her insensible condition. Hareton, who like Catherine has something of Heathcliff in him, is also violently aggressive. During one altercation with Catherine, we are told, ‘he seemed ready to tear [her] in pieces’ (317). Even Linton, Heathcliff’s sickly and effeminate son, manifests violent impulses. He ‘can play the little tyrant well’, as his father says; ‘he’ll undertake to torture any number of cats if their teeth be drawn, and their claws pared’ (272). Linton recalls the children that the eponymous heroine of Anne Brontë’s *Agnes Grey* (1847) has to look after – children who routinely torture animals. Like an anaemic copy of his father, he has learned that ‘the tyrant grinds down his slaves and they don’t turn against him, they crush those beneath them’ (111).

Cruelty to animals acquires a clear moral charge in *Wuthering Heights*, as in many contemporary accounts of human attitudes to animals. In a
prize-winning essay for the RSPCA of 1839, one commentator, the Rev.
John Styles, associated cruelty to animals with atheism, and with
revolutionary sentiment among the masses: ‘Cruelty, for its own sake,
exists chiefly among that class that are under little or no restraint from
the opinions and habits of those around them.’ Styles predicts that, ‘if
a crisis should ever arrive in our national affairs … if revolution and
public calamity should ever overtake us, we should not be long in
discovering the natural effects of cruelty to the lower race of creatures,
terribly displayed in the wanton savageness that would desecrate all that
is venerable in religion, imposing in authority, and illustrious in
greatness’. While Styles attacked the perceived barbarity of the
working class, Brontë recognised that cruelty of this kind is well-nigh
conventional among the haute bourgeoisie – a positive requirement of
class identity.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, under the
influence of urbanization and the agricultural revolution, game-
shooting and modern fox-hunting ‘eclipsed other field sports in
fashionability’, as Donna Landry has recently noted. Neither activity was
at this time ‘a matter of naturalistic knowledge and the ecological
science of the greenwood’. On the contrary, ‘organized formal shoot-
ing’ was in the ascendant, ‘competitive marksmanship and size of bag
having replaced the naturalistic informality of rough shooting’. This
historical shift lies behind Lockwood’s boastful announcement that in
September 1802 he ‘was invited to devastate the moors of a friend’
(302) – Brontë’s ironic voice can be detected in her character’s casual
colloquial use of the word ‘devastate’.

Formal shooting is a choreography of class belonging, the elegance
of which cannot finally conceal its underlying savagery. But Lockwood’s
underlying savagery emerges most signally at the beginning of the
novel, when he is forced to spend that uncomfortable night at the
Heights. Deprived of the physical accoutrements that make men of his
class feel civilised, he dreams of committing the novel’s most violently
vindictive act. In a hallucinatory fantasy, he lacerates little Catherine’s
wrists, as he perceives it – on the broken glass from the window through
which she is trying to crawl (25). Symptomatically, he dreams that, once
he has escaped her ice-cold grasp, he ‘hurriedly pile[s] the books up
in a pyramid’ against the pane. This pyramid – the bricks of which are
books, the basic symbols of literate culture – is also a desperate ritual
attempt to repress the painful implications of bodily suffering. It is
cruelty of this kind, the cruelty of civilised convention, that Brontë is
most keenly concerned to reveal.
The clearest emblematic image of Emily Brontë’s dialectic of barbarism and civilization in *Wuthering Heights* centres on Nelly’s conversation with Heathcliff in front of the mirror in volume I, chapter VII. Having proudly proclaimed his dirtiness to Catherine on her return from Thrushcross Grange, the child Heathcliff confesses to wishing he was more like Edgar, her young suitor, that is, to wishing that he ‘had light hair and fair skin, and was dressed, and behaved as well, and had a chance of being as rich as he will be’ (56). Staring at his reflection, he projects his rival’s ‘great blue eyes and even forehead’ over his own ‘thick brows, that instead of rising arched, sink in the middle, and that couple of black fiends, so deeply buried, who never open their windows boldly, but lurk glinting under them, like devils’ spies’ (56-7). The effect of this image is less to superimpose Edgar’s rather weak features on Heathcliff’s bold ones, than to insinuate the latter’s physiognomy beneath the former’s, so that a ‘half-civilized ferocity’ lurks still beneath his brows, as it does when he returns to the Heights after his later ‘transformation’ (95). Heathcliff’s face is the barbaric obverse of Edgar’s civilised visage. ‘[C’est] comme le crâne du Caraïbe sous le bonnet de soie noire de bourgeois,’ to quote Gustav Flaubert, who visited the Kaffirs exhibited on the Grand Rue at Christmas in 1853. Flaubert no doubt hoped that his correspondent would catch the distinct etymological echo of the word ‘cannibal’ in the word ‘Caraïbe’.

An economy of identification plays a key role in this novel, for if Edgar and Heathcliff are torn halves of a single entity that will not add up, the relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine promises to heal the social split that he had been forced to constitute, or simply to express, from the moment of his arrival at the Heights. The metaphor of cannibalism, it transpires, acquires an almost redemptive value for these lovers, in their doomed attempt to unite across the social divide that runs like a faultline through their family. As Kilgour argues:

Cannibalism can become an image for an intense and ambivalent hunger for liberation from a discrete individual identity through reabsorption into a greater corporate identity. The cost of modern autonomy is solitary confinement, isolation in the prison-house of the self, in contrast to which cannibalism becomes an ideal of a Golden Age of a larger corporate social identity. Cannibalism is thus associated with the desire to return to an original state of unity.

Catherine’s comment that Heathcliff is ‘more myself than I am’ (80), that she *is* Heathcliff, is a utopian expression of a Romantic longing for
total identification with the other. It cannot be more than such an 
expression of longing. For, as Dorothy Van Ghent said in her account
of Wuthering Heights, ‘it is impossible for two persons to be each other …
without destruction of personality bounds, by rending flesh and at last 
by death’.59

The last encounter between Heathcliff and Catherine does however
stage the image of a rending of flesh that renders death inevitable.
Various commentators have noticed that this scene represents the
sexual consummation of Heathcliff and Catherine’s relationship. Most
of them have however treated this act of consummation in terms of the
transcendence of corporeal reality. Edward Chitham, for example, has
recently claimed that their encounter here marks the book’s quint-
essential rejection of ‘the bodily prison in favour of a transcendental life
in “that glorious world” outside’.60 In fact, the meeting between them is
irreducibly bodily:

In her eagerness she rose, and supported herself on the arm of the chair.
At that earnest appeal, he turned to her, looking absolutely desperate. His
eyes wide and wet, at last, flashed fiercely on her; his breast heaved
convulsively. An instant they held asunder; and then how they met I
hardly saw, but Catherine made a spring, and he caught her, and they
were locked in an embrace from which I thought my mistress would never
be released alive. In fact, to my eyes, she seemed directly insensible. He
flung himself into the nearest seat, and on my approaching hurriedly to
ascertain if she had fainted, he gnashed at me, and foamed like a mad
dog, and gathered her to him with greedy jealousy. I did not feel as if I
were in the company of a creature of my own species; it appeared that he
would not understand, though I spoke to him; so, I stood off, and held
my tongue, in great perplexity (160).

This is an act of consumption as well as of consummation. With its
reference to Catherine not being released alive from Heathcliff’s
embrace, and to his ‘greedy’ jealousy, as well as to his gnashing teeth,
this passage seems to concentrate the novel’s cannibalistic imagery with
particular intensity. If it gestures to transcendence at all, then this is
because it carries faintly eucharistic connotations, connotations which,
because Christian communion is itself a ritualised form of cannibalism,
only lead us back to the body and its consumption.

In fairy tales, as Marina Warner has noticed, the ‘cannibal motif’ links
sexual union (reciprocal devouring), pregnancy (womb enclosing
child) and paternity (child appropriated after birth).61 Wuthering
Heights is never more a fairy tale than in this scene. For Heathcliff
desires not only sexual union with Catherine, but also her unborn child,
and the right to its paternity – in order to merge himself with her and,
simultaneously, to sever himself from the Lintons and the Earnshaws. This act of consumption/consummation cannot of course take place; and the fact that it is impossible may account for Heathcliff’s increasingly cannibalistic behaviour towards other people at the Heights. Heathcliff displaces his aggression onto the others out of frustration at his failure to incorporate Catherine.

Of course, Heathcliff finally abandons even this displaced form of incorporation, effectively starving himself to death, as Catherine has done, in a gesture that surely underlines the importance of consumption to the novel as a whole. Like the psychological expression of this condition of self-destruction (anorexia nervosa) and the political expression of it (the hunger strike), Heathcliff’s ‘protracted abstinence from food’, as Nelly mildly puts it (328), is a refusal of the world itself. He turns his impulse for consumption onto his own corporal being. Eating and drinking are the elementary indices of humans’ interaction with the world. Heathcliff seals himself off from the material world in the hope that his body, like that of a consumptive, will consume itself. The mortification of his flesh alone can offer the redemptive promise of some kind of spiritual incorporation with Catherine.

For a time, Heathcliff’s abuse of his body looks set to fulfil this fantasy of self-transcendence. Staring ‘as if [he] saw an unearthly vision’, he is exquisitely close to introjecting Catherine, the spectral form of whom floats before him as a ‘fancied object’ (328). As Nelly tells Lockwood:

I perceived he was not looking at the wall, for when I regarded him alone, it seemed exactly that he gazed at something two yards’ distance. And whatever it was, it communicated, apparently, both pleasure and pain in exquisite extremes: at least the anguished, yet rapture, 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 (328).

Heathcliff and Catherine are here suspended in a relation of immaterial proximity. Their identities are symmetrically opposite: the spiritualization of his body is almost complete, and, correspondingly, the materialization of her spirit is almost complete. Their mutual assimilation seems imminent. This phase of Heathcliff’s mourning for Catherine, the final phase, is accompanied by the superficially surprising return of his appetite, at least partially or intermittently: he tells Nelly that he is ‘ready to do justice to the food’ that she has placed in front of him (324), and announces also that he is ‘animated with hunger’ (325), though his abstracted thoughts serve to intervene between the intention and the act. The promise of this renewed en-
counter with the world in the act of eating seems to mark some process of re-socialization. So it is tempting to interpret Heathcliff’s protracted mourning for Catherine, at this particular point, at the moment when he sits down to eat, as, at least potentially, successful.

Heathcliff does not in fact eat. He trembles between not-eating and eating: ‘My Soul’s bliss kills my body,’ he says, ‘but does not satisfy itself’ (330). This metaphor of incorporation, like his body itself, is now a barrier to his imagining their mutual assimilation. ‘It’s unutterably too much for flesh and blood to bear, even mine,’ he says (331). These are Heathcliff’s last words, a final admission of his soul’s failure to incorporate the ‘fancied object’ at which he stares during his physical decline – just as his body was incapable of possessing Catherine when, in a necrophiliac attempt to incorporate her after her death, he disinterred her corpse. But they also intimate that his spiritual appetite may never satisfy itself, and that consequently, in stark contrast to Lockwood’s complacent expectations in the concluding sentence of the narrative, his posthumous slumbers will in fact be ‘unquiet’ after all (334). The work of mourning has been terminally interrupted: his grave will no doubt always remain bare, never to be ‘harmonized by the turf’ as Edgar Linton’s headstone is.

\[ Wuthering Heights \]

ends with a dream of mutual incorporation that, if it finally remains frustrated, nonetheless gestures towards a redemptive vision of interpersonal unity. Cannibalism thus acquires what might be called a utopian function as well as a critical one in Brontë’s novel. If the split world of the Heights cannot be healed by a social solution, like the marriage of Cathy and Hareton in the next generation, then perhaps it can at least be suspended by the dissolution of personalities (Catherine’s and his own) that Heathcliff’s fantasy of sexual and spiritual consumption seems to promise. The ‘anthropophagic element’ in \[ Wuthering Heights \] is therefore a far more sophisticated device than Malchow’s description of cannibalism in gothic fiction as a ‘trigger for sensational emotion’ might suggest. It is a means of questioning the ideological contradistinction between civilised and barbaric culture that Montaigne had interrogated with such acuity in ‘On the Cannibals’. And it is a redemptive figure for the Romantic longing to dissolve individual identity – in an attempt to escape the socially divisive community that, irredeemably caught up in the very contradictions of civilised culture to which, at first sight, it seems to be antithetical, thrives on the moors.

(Pembroke College, Oxford)
Endnotes

I am grateful to Helen Small for the insightfulness with which she commented on an earlier draft of this article, and to the anonymous referees commissioned by the *Journal of Victorian Culture* for their helpful criticisms, as well as to Lyn Pykett.

Matthew Beaumont

Branwell Brontë (Oxford: Shakespeare Head, 1936), 86n, 87.
37. Malchow, Gothic Images, 52.
38. Malchow, Gothic Images, 122, 68, 71.
40. Malchow, Gothic Images, 73.
41. George Fitzhugh, Cannibals All! Or, Slaves Without Masters (Richmond, VA: Morris, 1857), 25, 27.
47. Lévi-Strauss, Tristes Tropiques, 507-8.
**Heathcliff’s Great Hunger**


52. Ibid., 167.


57. Interchangeable in American dialects of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the two words were imported to Europe by Columbus. See J.H. Trumbull, ‘“Cannibal”’, *Notes and Queries* 5.4 (28 August 1875): 171-2.


