GEORGES BATAILLE

Literature and Evil

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PENGUIN BOOKS

Emily Brontë

Emily Brontë, of all women, seems to have been the object of a privileged curse. Her short life was only moderately unhappy. Yet, keeping her moral purity intact, she had a profound experience of the abyss of Evil. Though few people could have been more severe, more courageous or more proper, she fathomed the very depths of Evil.

This was the task of literature, imagination and dream. Her life, over by the time she was thirty, was completely sheltered. She was born in 1818 and rarely left the Yorkshire vicarage set in a rugged wasteland where her father, an Irish pastor, gave her an austere education, but little else. Her mother died early and her two sisters were extremely strict. A dissipated brother ruined himself somewhat romantically. We know that in the austerity of the vicarage, the three Brontë sisters lived in a frenzy of literary creativity. They were bound together by a day-to-day intimacy, though Emily nevertheless continued to preserve that moral solitude in which the phantoms of her imagination developed. Reserved as she was, she appears to have been good, active and devoted, indeed gentleness itself. She lived in a sort of silence which, it seemed, only literature could disrupt. The morning she died, after a brief lung disease, she got up at the usual time, joined her family without uttering a word and expired before midday, without even going back to bed. She had not wanted to see a doctor.

She left behind her a short collection of poems and one of the greatest books ever written. *Wuthering Heights* is surely the most beautiful and most profoundly violent love story. For though Emily Brontë, despite her beauty, appears to have had no experience of love, she had an anguished knowledge of passion. She had the sort of knowledge which links love not only with clarity, but also with violence and death – because death seems to be the truth of love, just as love is the truth of death.

EROTICISM IS THE APPROVAL OF LIFE UP UNTIL DEATH

If I discuss Emily Brontë, I must carry a basic premise to its logical conclusion. I believe eroticism to be the approval of life, up until death. Sexuality implies death, not only in the sense in which the new prolongs and replaces that which has disappeared, but also in that the life of the being who reproduces himself is at stake. To reproduce oneself is to disappear, and even the most basic asexualised being is rarefied by reproduction. Those who reproduce themselves do not die if, by death, we understand the passage from life to decomposition, but he who was, by reproducing himself, ceases to be what he was – because he doubles himself. Individual death is but one aspect of the proliferative excess of being. Sexual reproduction itself is only one aspect – the most complicated – of the immortality of life which is at stake in asexualised reproduction. It is an aspect of immortality, but at the same time of individual death. No animal can reproduce sexually without yielding to that instinct whose ultimate expression is death. The basis of sexual effusion is the negation of the isolation of the ego which only experiences ecstasy by exceeding itself, by surpassing

itself in the embrace in which the being loses its solitude. Whether it is a matter of pure eroticism (love-passion) or of bodily sensuality, the intensity increases to the point where destruction, the death of the being, becomes apparent. What we call vice is based on this profound implication of death. And the anguish of pure love is all the more symbolic of the ultimate truth of love as the death of those whom it unites approaches them and strikes them.

To no mortal love does this apply as much as to the union between the heroes of *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff. Nobody revealed this truth more forcefully than Emily Brontë. It is not that she envisaged it in the explicit and cumbersome terms in which I have interpreted it: she felt it and expressed it *mortally*, almost divinely.

CHILDHOOD, REASON AND EVIL

The mortal inspiration of *Wuthering Heights* is so powerful that I think it would be pointless to discuss it without attempting to exhaust the question which it raises. I compared vice (which was – and which is still considered to be – the significant expression of Evil) with the anguish of the purest love. This paradoxical comparison lends itself to considerable confusion, so I shall try to justify it.

Though the love of Catherine and Heathcliff leaves sensuality in suspension, *Wuthering Heights* does in fact raise the question of Evil with regard to passion, as if Evil were the most powerful means of exposing passion. If we except the sadistic form of vice, we may say that Evil, as it appears in Emily Brontë's book, has reached its most perfect form.

We cannot consider that actions performed for a material benefit express Evil. This benefit is, no doubt, selfish, but it loses its importance if we expect something from it other than Evil itself – if, for example, we expect some advantage from it. The sadist, on the other hand, obtains pleasure from contemplating destruction, the most complete destruction being the death of another human being. Sadism is Evil. If a man kills for a material advantage his crime only really becomes a purely evil deed if he actually enjoys committing it, independently of the advantage to be obtained from it.

In order to give a better representation of Good and Evil I shall return to the fundamental theme of *Wuthering Heights*, to childhood, when the love between Catherine and Heathcliff originated. The two children spent their time racing wildly on the heath. They abandoned themselves, untrammelled by any restraint or convention other than a taboo on games of sensuality. But, in their innocence, they placed their indestructible love for one another on another level, and indeed perhaps this love can be reduced to the refusal to give up an infantile freedom which had not been amended by the laws of society or of conventional politeness. They led their wild life, outside the world, in the most elementary conditions, and it is these conditions which Emily Brontë made tangible – the basic conditions of poetry, of a spontaneous poetry before which both children refused to stop.

But society contrasts the free play of innocence with reason, reason based on the calculations of interest. Society is governed by its will to survive. It could not survive if these childish instincts, which bound the children in a feeling of complicity, were allowed to triumph. Social constraint would have required the young savages to give up their innocent sovereignty; it would have required them to comply with those reasonable adult conventions which are advantageous to the community.

This opposition is of primary importance in *Wuthering Heights*. As Jacques Blondel pointed out,[1] we must always keep in mind that 'the feelings are formed during Catherine's and Heathcliff's childhood'. But even if children have the power to forget the world of adults for a time, they are nevertheless doomed to live in this world. Catastrophe ensues. Heathcliff, the foundling, is obliged to flee from the enchanted kingdom where he raced Catherine on the heath, while Catherine, though she remains as rugged as ever, denies her wild childhood: she allows herself to be seduced by the easy life personified by a young, rich and sensitive gentleman. Her marriage with Edgar Linton does, admittedly, retain an element of ambiguity. It is not a true decline. The world of Thrushcross Grange, where Catherine lives with Linton near Wuthering Heights, is far from being a sedentary world in Emily Brontë's eyes. Linton is a generous man. He has not lost the natural pride of youth, but he is settling down. His sovereignty goes beyond the material conditions from which he benefits, but if he were not in profound agreement with the well-established world of reason, he could not benefit from it. So, when he returns rich from a long journey, Heathcliff is prepared to believe that Catherine has betrayed the sovereign kingdom of childhood to which, body and soul, she *belonged* with him.

This, then, is a somewhat clumsy synopsis of a story in which Heathcliff's unbridled violence is recounted calmly and simply. The subject of the book is the revolt of the man accursed, whom fate has banished from his kingdom and who will stop at nothing to regain it. I have no intention of giving a detailed account of a series of fascinating episodes. I am simply going to recall that there is no law or force, no convention or restraining pity which can curb Heathcliff's fury for a single instant – not even death itself, for he is the remorseless and passionate cause of Catherine's disease and death, though he believes her to be his. For I intend to deal with the moral significance of the revolutionary nature of Emily Brontë's imagination and dreams.

It is the revolt of Evil against Good. Formally it is irrational. What does the kingdom of childhood, which Heathcliff demoniacally refuses to give up, signify if not the *impossible* and ultimate death? There are two ways to revolt against the real world, dominated as it is by reason and based on the will to survive. The most common and relevant is the rejection of its rationality. It is easy to see that the underlying principle of the real world is not really reason, but reason which has come to terms with that arbitrary element born of the violence and puerile instincts of the past. Such a revolt exposes the struggle of Good against Evil, represented by violence or by puerility. Heathcliff passes judgement on the world to which he is opposed. He cannot identify it with Good because he is fighting it. But even if he is fighting it furiously, he is doing so lucidly: he knows that he represents Good and reason. He hates the humanity and goodness which provoke his sarcasm. If we imagine him outside the story, bereft of the charm of the story, his character seems artificial and contrived. But he is conceived in the dreams, not the logic, of the author. There is no character in romantic literature who comes across more convincingly or more simply than Heathcliff, although he represents a very basic state – that of the child in revolt against the world of Good, against the adult world, and committed, in his revolt, to the side of Evil.

In this revolt there is no law which Heathcliff does not enjoy breaking. He sees that Catherine's sister-in-law is in love with him, so he marries her in order to do Catherine's husband as much harm

as he can. He abducts her and, as soon as they are married, scorns her. He then proceeds to drive her to despair by his callous treatment of her. Jacques Blondel[2] is right to compare the following two passages from Sade and Emily Brontë: 'How sensual is the act of destruction,' says one of the executioners in *Justine*, 'I can think of nothing which excites me more deliciously. There is no ecstasy similar to that which we experience when we yield to this divine infamy.' 'Had I been born where laws are less strict and tastes less dainty,' says Heathcliff, 'I should treat myself to a slow vivisection of those two, as an evening's amusement.'

EMILY BRONTË AND TRANSGRESSION

The mere invention of a character so totally devoted to Evil by a moral and inexperienced girl would be a paradox. But the invention of Heathcliff is particularly worrying for the following reasons: Catherine Earnshaw herself is absolutely moral. She is so moral that she dies of not being able to detach herself from the man she loved when she was a child. But although she knows that Evil is deep within him, she loves him to the point of saying, 'I am Heathcliff.'

Evil, therefore, if we examine it closely, is not only the dream of the wicked: it is to some extent the dream of Good. Death is the punishment, sought and accepted for this mad dream, but nothing can prevent the dream from having been dreamt. It was dreamt by the unfortunate Catherine Earnshaw as well as by Emily Brontë. How can we doubt that Emily Brontë, who died for having experienced the states of mind which she described, identified herself with Catherine Earnshaw?

Wuthering Heights has a certain affinity with Greek tragedy. The subject of the novel is the tragic violation of the law. The tragic author agreed with the law, the transgression of which he described, but he based all emotional impact on communicating the sympathy which he felt for the transgressor. In both cases atonement is connected with transgression. Before he dies and as he dies, Heathcliff experiences a curious state of beatitude, but this beatitude has something terrifying about it: it is tragic. Catherine, who loves Heathcliff, dies for having broken the laws of fidelity – not in the flesh but in the spirit. And Catherine's death is the perpetual agony which Heathcliff suffers for his violence.

In *Wuthering Heights*, as in Greek tragedy, it is not the law itself that is denounced: what it forbids is simply described as an essentially human domain, made for man. The forbidden domain is the tragic domain or, better still, the sacred domain. Humanity, admittedly, banishes it, but only in order to magnify it, and the ban beautifies that to which it prevents access. It subordinates access to atonement – to death. Yet the ban is no less an invitation at the same time as it is an obstacle. The lesson of *Wuthering Heights*, of Greek tragedy and, ultimately, of all religions, is that there is an instinctive tendency towards divine intoxication which the rational world of calculation cannot bear. This tendency is the opposite of Good. Good is based on common interest which entails consideration of the future. Divine intoxication, to which the instincts of childhood are so closely related, is entirely in the present. In the education of children preference for the present moment is the common definition of Evil. Adults forbid those who have still to reach 'maturity' to enter the divine kingdom of childhood. But condemnation of the present moment for the sake of the future is an aberration. Just as

it is necessary to forbid easy access to it, so it is necessary to regain the domain of the moment (the kingdom of childhood), and that requires temporary transgression of the interdict.

Such temporary transgression is all the more free since the interdict is considered intangible. So Emily Brontë and Catherine Earnshaw, who both appear to us in the light of transgression and atonement, depend less on morality than on hypermorality. Hypermorality is the basis of that challenge to morality which is fundamental to *Wuthering Heights*. Though he does not actually refer to the principle I have developed, Blondel has sensed the connection. He writes:[3]

> Emily Brontë shows herself … capable of emancipating herself from all prejudice of an ethical or social order. Thus several lives develop … each of which conveys a sense of total liberation from society and morality. There is a desire to break with the world in order to embrace life in all its fullness and discover in artistic creativity that which is refused by reality. This is the revelation, or rather the inauguration, of hitherto unsuspected potentialities. That this liberation is necessary to every artist is certain; and *it can be felt most intensely by those in whom ethical values are most deeply rooted.*[4]

This intimate connection between the transgression of the moral law and hypermorality is the ultimate meaning of *Wuthering Heights*. Elsewhere[5] Jacques Blondel describes the religious atmosphere: Protestantism influenced by the recollection of an exalted type of Methodism, in which the young Emily Brontë was brought up. Her world was crushed by moral tension and severity. Yet Emily Brontë's form of severity differs from that on which Greek tragedy was based. Tragedy is on a level with the basic religious taboos, like those forbidding murder and incest, which cannot be justified rationally. Emily Brontë had emancipated herself from orthodoxy: she had moved away from Christian simplicity and innocence, but she participated in the religious spirit of her family to the extent in which Christianity is strict fidelity to Good based on reason. The law violated by Heathcliff – and which Catherine also violates by loving him in spite of herself – is the law of reason. It is, at least, the law of a community founded by Christianity on an alliance between primitive religious taboos, holiness and reason.[6] In Christianity God, the underlying principle of holiness, partially escapes from the arbitrary violence on which the divine world was based in ancient times. The primitive taboo was essentially directed against violence – in practice reason fulfils the same purpose as the taboo, while the primitive taboo itself has a distant relationship with reason. There is, in Christianity, an ambivalence where God and reason are concerned which has given rise to a feeling of unease and such subsidiary phenomena as Jansenism. After this long-drawn-out Christian ambivalence, what suddenly comes to light in Emily Brontë's attitude, by means of an intangible moral solidity, is the dream of a sacred violence which no settlement with organised society can attenuate.

The road to the kingdom of childhood, governed by ingenuousness and innocence, is thus regained *in the horror of atonement*. The purity of love is regained in its intimate truth which, as I said, is that of death. Death and the instant of divine intoxication merge when they both oppose those intentions of Good which are based on rational calculation. And death indicates the instant which, in so far as it is instantaneous, renounces the calculated quest for survival. The instant of the new individual being depended on the death of other beings. Had they not died there would have been no room for new ones. Reproduction and death condition the immortal renewal of life; they condition the instant which

is always new. That is why we can only have a tragic view of the enchantment of life, but that is also why tragedy is the symbol of enchantment. The entire romantic movement may have heralded this,[7] but that late masterpiece, *Wuthering Heights*, heralds it most humanely.

LITERATURE, LIBERTY AND THE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

The most remarkable thing about this movement is that its doctrine, unlike that of Christianity or of the ancient religions, is not aimed at an organised community of which it would be the foundation. It is aimed at the isolated and lost individual to whom it gives nothing except in this one instant: it is solely literature. The path towards literature, free and inorganic, leads towards it. For this reason it falls behind the teaching of the pagan sages or of the Church, which has to come to terms with social necessity represented, in most cases, by conventions (abuses) as well as by reason. Only literature could reveal the process of breaking the law – without which the law would have no end – *independently of the necessity to create order*. Literature cannot assume the task of regulating collective necessity. It should not conclude that 'what I have said commits us to a fundamental respect for the laws of the city' or, like Christianity, that 'what I have said (the tragedy of the Gospel) shows us the path of Good' (which is really the path of reason). Literature, like the infringement of moral laws, is dangerous.

Being inorganic, it is irresponsible. Nothing rests on it. It can say everything and would be a great danger (to the extent in which it is authentic and complete) were it not the expression of 'those in whom ethical values are most deeply rooted'. Though the immediate impression of rebellion may obscure this fact, the task of authentic literature is nevertheless only conceivable in terms of a desire for a fundamental communication with the reader. (I do not, of course, refer to the mass of books designed to put a great many people on the wrong scent.)

Literature, connected since romanticism with the decadence of religion in that it tends to lay a discreet claim to the heritage of religion, is not so much cognate with the content of religion as it is with the content of mysticism which, incidentally, is an almost asocial aspect of religion. Similarly mysticism is closer to the truth than I can possibly say. By mysticism I do not mean those systems of thought on which this vague name is conferred. I refer, rather, to the 'mystical experience', to those 'mystical states' experienced in solitude. In these states we can see a different truth to that which is concerned with the perception of objects, or indeed of the subject, connected, as it is, with the intellectual consequences of perception. But this is not a formal truth. Coherent discussion cannot account for it. It would be incommunicable if we could not approach it in two ways: through poetry and through the description of those conditions by which one arrives at these states.

These conditions correspond decisively with the themes which I have mentioned and which constitute the basis of true literary emotion. Death alone – or, at least, the ruin of the isolated individual in search of happiness in time – introduces that break without which nothing reaches the state of ecstasy.[8] And what we thereby regain is always both innocence and the intoxication of existence. The isolated being *loses himself* in something other than himself. What the 'other thing'

represents is of no importance. It is still a reality that transcends the common limitations. So unlimited is it that it is not even a thing: it is *nothing*.

'God is nothingness,' said Eckhart. In everyday life it is surely the 'loved one' himself who is the removal of the limitations of others – he is the only being in whom we no longer feel, or in whom we are less aware of, those limitations of the individual confined within that isolation which is in itself a defect. The mystical state is characterised by a tendency to suppress, radically and systematically, that multiple image of the world in which one finds the individual existence in search of survival. With a sudden impulse (as in childhood or passion) the effort ceases to be systematic: the limitations are broken passively, not by intense intellectual will power. The image of this world is merely incoherent, or, if it has already found its cohesion, the intensity of passion exceeds it. It is true that passion seeks to prolong the enjoyment experienced in the loss of the self, but surely it starts with the obliteration of one self by the other. We cannot doubt the fundamental unity of all those instincts by which we escape from the calculations of interest and in which we feel the intensity of the present moment. Mysticism is as far from the spontaneity of childhood as it is from the accidental condition of passion. But it expresses its trances through the vocabulary of love. And contemplation liberated from discursive reflection has the simplicity of a child's laugh.

I believe it is essential to stress those aspects which the modern literary tradition and mysticism have in common. And indeed the similarity is striking as far as Emily Brontë is concerned. In his recent study Jacques Blondel speaks of her mystical *experience* as though Emily Brontë had experienced the visions and the ecstasy of Teresa of Avila. But Blondel probably goes too far. There is no evidence, there is no positive support for an interpretation which he, in fact, does no more than enlarge upon. Others before him have sensed a connection between the spiritual states of a Saint Teresa and those which Emily Brontë expressed in her poetry. Nevertheless, it is doubtful whether the author of *Wuthering Heights* was acquainted with that methodical descent into the self which serves as the basic definition of a *mystical experience*.

Jacques Blondel quotes a number of passages from her poems. They do indeed describe certain acute feelings and troubled states of mind which suggest an anguished spiritual life brought to the point of intense exaltation. They express an infinitely profound, infinitely violent experience of sadness or of the joys of solitude. Admittedly nothing entitles us to distinguish such an experience from a more systematic quest, subjected to the principles of religion or of a certain representation of the world, positive or negative. We might almost say that these stray impulses, regulated by chance and always attributable to rambling reflection, are sometimes the richest of all. The imprecise world which the poems reveal to us is immense and bewildering. But we should beware of equating it too closely with the relatively familiar world described by the great mystics. It is less calm, more savage. Its violence is not slowly reabsorbed in the gradual experience of an enlightenment. It is, in short, far closer to the indescribable anguish expressed in *Wuthering Heights*.

Yet I would lose no sting, would wish no torture less;
The more that anguish racks, the earlier it will bless;
And robed in fires of hell, or bright with heavenly shine,

If it but herald death, the vision is divine!

In my opinion these lines from *The Prisoner* are the most powerful example of that feeling which underlies Emily Brontë's poetry. They convey her state of mind, admirably.

Finally it matters little whether Emily Brontë really had what we call a mystical experience, for she appears to have reached the very essence of such an experience.

'Everything leads us to believe,' wrote André Breton,[9] 'that there is a certain point in the mind where life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, are no longer perceived in contradiction to one another.' I shall add: Good and Evil, pain and joy. This point is indicated both by violent literature and by the violence of a mystical experience: only the point matters.

Yet it is also important to realise that *Wuthering Heights*, the most violent and most poetic of Emily Brontë's works, is the name of a 'high place' where truth is revealed. It is the name of an accursed house, damned by Heathcliff as he enters it. By a striking paradox, 'the beings perish' once they are far away from this accursed place.[10] And indeed, the violence introduced by Heathcliff is the basis both of a misery and of a happiness which only 'enchant the violent'. The end of Emily Brontë's sombre tale is the sudden appearance of a faint ray of light.

In so far as violence casts its shadow on the being and he sees death 'face to face', life is purely beneficial. Nothing can destroy it. Death is the condition of its renewal.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EVIL

In this union of opposites, Evil is no longer as irrevocably opposed to the natural order as it exists within the limitations of reason. Since death is the condition of life, Evil, which is essentially cognate with death, is also, in a somewhat ambiguous manner, a basis of existence. Though the being is not doomed to Evil, he must try to avoid becoming enclosed within the limitations of reason. He must first accept these limitations and acknowledge the necessity of calculated interest, but he must also know that an irreducible, sovereign part of himself is free from the limitations and the necessity which he acknowledges.

In as far as it expresses an attraction towards death, and in as far as it is a challenge which exists in all forms of eroticism, Evil is always the object of an ambiguous condemnation. It can be glorious, as it is, for all its horrors, in war. But war has imperialism as its consequence … It would be pointless to deny that Evil always contains a potential tendency to become worse, and it is this that justifies anguish and disgust. But it is no less true to say that Evil, seen in the light of a disinterested attraction towards death, differs from the evil based on self-interest. A 'foul' criminal deed is contrary to a 'passionate' one. The law rejects both of them, but truly humane literature is the high point of passion. Yet passion does not go without a curse: only a 'cursed share' is set aside for that part of human life which has the greatest significance.[11] The curse is the necessary path for true blessing.

An honourable human being *loyally* accepts the worst consequences of his challenge. Sometimes he even goes out to meet them. The 'cursed share' is the gamble, the risk, the danger. It is also

sovereignty, but sovereignty must be expiated. The world of *Wuthering Heights* is the world of a hostile sovereignty. It is also the world of expiation. Once the expiation has been accepted, the true smile of life appears.