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Ethical Engagements Over Time: Reading and Rereading David Copperfield and Wuthering Heights

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CHAPTER NINE



Ethical Engagements Over Time

Reading and Rereading

David Copperfield *and* Wuthering Heights

In chapters 7 and 8, respectively, I have shown how up-close and detailed ethical criticism can yield both positive and negative judgments. In this chapter I show how up-close and detailed ethical analysis can yield mixed judgments based on an account of how an auditor's perceptions of an artwork can change over time. The contents of this chapter also develop the thread of argument introduced in previous chapters, namely, that issues raised by ethical criticism are often profoundly personal. In this chapter I demonstrate that the personal influence stories sometimes exert on ethos is not limited to whatever effects end when the story ends, but are sometimes effects that change every time the story is revisited. Given that the development of an ethos is organic, not mechanistic, it may be the case that while a given story can exert a *persistent* influence on us, it may not always exert the *same* influence, especially over long periods of time.

How each of us learns from narratives that we encounter many times over many years is a complicated process, one worthy of its own narrative. In what follows, I will explore as case studies my ongoing ethical engagement with two narratives, Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. My claim is not that all readers will or

should respond to these stories as I have done, but that my experience offers one version of a more general phenomenon with stories that I believe other story lovers will recognize. One's ongoing interactions with a given story are certainly not a once-and-for-all thing like a brass casting.¹ Ongoing interactions with any narrative may mean that an auditor is, at one point in time, especially open to the story's ethical vision, but that at other points in time he or she may be especially susceptible to misreading that vision or seeing it through a glass darkly. My story illustrates several facets of this general phenomenon, and more.

Ethical Vision in *David Copperfield* and Its Usefulness to Me

Many of Dickens's most passionate readers first discovered him when they were children, but I did not. My personal relationship with *David Copperfield* began when I discovered Dickens's novels as a twenty-four-year-old graduate student at the University of Chicago. In a bright Chicago autumn in a class taught by the great scholar Morton Dauwen Zabel, I discovered the banquet table of Dickens's novels, and I devoured one after another as rapidly as I could. I strode around my tiny married-student apartment reading to the walls the speeches from different characters, laughing my head off at Vincent Crummles's story of the circus pony in *Nicholas Nickleby*, whose mother, says Crummles, "ate apple-pie at a circus for upwards of fourteen years, and went to bed in a nightcap; and, in short, took the low comedy entirely" (286); was brought nearly to tears in *Little Dorrit* over the sadness of Arthur Clennam's childhood, which Clennam remembers as "a legion of Sundays, all days of unserviceable bitterness and mortification, slowly passing before him" (30); or raged bitterly with Dickens against the callous neglect of the poor as the narrator of *Bleak House* responds to Jo's death with his thunderous denunciation, "Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day" (649).

I can just hear the disapproval of some of my readers. "Laughter and tears? How gauche! How naïve! How unprofessional!" Yes, these responses are all gauche, naïve, and unprofessional. I plead guilty on all

counts. But I also remain unrepentant on all counts. My responses were naïve and unprofessional because they were not responses I cooked up for the sake of looking good in Zabel's class or for the sake of teaching my own Dickens classes later. (As for having responses that I might later publish in a book, I would at that time have considered this possibility no more likely than writing the Great American Novel on the back of a napkin.) My responses, naïve and raw, came directly from the heart of Dickens's ethical visions to my own heart, which was intensely hungry for an ethical vision of life more generous, compassionate, humane, thoughtful, connected, and nourishing than the ethical vision of Protestant fundamentalism and parental meanness foisted on me in my childhood.

Since my discovery of Dickens's novels during that bright autumn of my graduate school years, the components of Dickens's ethical vision have woven themselves like living threads into the warp and woof of my life. They form an active part of my personal history. The Dickens novel that has had the greatest effect on me is *David Copperfield*, at the heart of which lies an ethical vision of nurturing versus destructive relations between children and adults: an ethical vision of how some kinds of child/adult relations create the foundations for human flourishing, and how other kinds of child/adult relations create weakness, self-absorption, self-loathing, and stymied development.

When I first read *David Copperfield*, I especially vibrated in sympathy to the way the history of my own young life mirrored the history of Davy's young life, primarily because my own father shared many features of character with Mr. Murdstone. My own Murdstone father was my biological father, not my stepfather. Like Mr. Murdstone, he was egotistical, tyrannical, and rigid and had a short fuse that could explode into sudden violence, mostly directed at me and nearly always delivered behind the mask of self-righteous, pious, Murdstonian ideologies like "spare the rod and spoil the child," and "discipline is good for the soul," and (the most infuriating piety of all) "this hurts me worse than it hurts you."²² David Copperfield's description of the character assumed by both his new stepfather and his odious sister, Miss Murdstone, also fits my own father:

Firmness, I may observe, was the grand quality on which both Mrs. and Miss Murdstone took their stand. However I might have expressed my comprehension of it at that time, if I had been called

upon, I nevertheless did clearly comprehend in my own way, that it was another name for tyranny; and for a certain gloomy, arrogant, devil's humor, that was in them both. The creed . . . was this. Mr. Murdstone was firm; nobody in his world was to be as firm as Mr. Murdstone; nobody else in his world was to be firm at all, for everybody was to be bent to his firmness. (49)

It was also that case that my own mother, like Davy's, was fearful, weak, easily dominated, and weepily ineffectual—a world-class expert at living in withdrawal and denial—and thus offered me no protection from my Murdstone father. At the age of twenty-four, when I first read *David Copperfield*, I had not processed—indeed, I was still at that time unable even to see—the bruising dynamics of having been raised in a family of highlight-reel dysfunctionality, but you can imagine how sympathetically I responded to Davy's childhood sufferings. I never bit the hand that caned me, but even though I was in my twenties when I first encountered this scene in *David Copperfield*, I received a major jolt of vicarious pleasure in the payback.

The value of such vicarious experience, however, surely lies not in the enjoyment of petty paybacks. If the value of reading about Davy biting Murdstone were merely vicarious payback, I'm sure that I would have soon outgrown the novel. The *value* of this narrative experience for me, and, presumably, for others, lies not in its cementing of petty emotions, but in its ethical invitation to deepen my understanding of both my past and my present, and thus to acquire a different ethos from the person I would have been as merely the victim of that past. Even at the unreflective age of twenty-four, I could see more clearly in Davy's life than I could see in my own life certain consequences of having been raised under tyranny, namely, the way a tyrannized child tends to respond both too uncritically and too eagerly for his own good to any crumb of support and sympathy from an outside source, as Davy responds too eagerly and loyally to Steerforth's careless and manly but elegant attentions.³ I could see in Davy's case that the no-nonsense support of Betsy Trotwood, who expected reciprocal support from Davy, modeled for Davy a more mature ethos than he would have had if he had received the kind of compensation for childhood suffering that every suffering child wants: unlimited sympathy.

But I could only see these things, of course, because they were there to be seen, because they form part of the ethical vision of Dickens's novel. Seeing the history of David Copperfield's relationship to Mr. Murdstone helped me place my relationship with my own father before me as an object to be apprehended and *thought* about, not just felt. I don't want to overstate the case and say that the scales fell from my eyes on my first reading, but the novel affected me deeply, and in so doing it prepared me to see more objectively my relationship with my own father.

Claiming that this story helped me see things more clearly contradicts Plato's claim that imitations only confuse our hearts and muddle our thinking, but Plato is so often right in this claim that contradicting him requires taking a moment for explanation. It won't do to dismiss Plato as if his claim were always and on principle wrong. Plato sees clearly that many imitations—stories, to us—do indeed invite us to think shallowly, self-interestedly, and unclearly about life. Who would argue that Broadway musicals, Disney movies, pornography, and most TV soap operas and sitcoms help us see life whole and see it more clearly? Plato was dead right—even though he didn't have *All My Children* or Andrew Lloyd Webber musicals or *The Little Mermaid* to point to—when he claimed that a lot of narratives pander to fantasy (in the worst sense of losing ourselves in ego wish fulfillment), pride, ambition, and unearned fulfillments. Where Plato loses the best thrust of his argument is in its overextension, his assumption that there are no distinctions to be made between the clarifying representations of Homer and Sophocles, on the one hand, and the poetry of mindless repetition he hated from the rhapsodists. Dickens helped me see my own life more clearly not by pandering to my self-pity but by showing me how Davy's defects of character are *not* solely rooted in Mr. Murdstone's abuse, but also grow from Davy's maudlin self-pity, his sentimental emotionalism, and his excessive trust in self-styled authority figures. *David Copperfield* did not pander to my own excesses; it challenged them, and it helped me see them more clearly, thus helping me establish an ethos of greater maturity and generosity than I would have been able to establish without its guiding models and informative presence.

A relevant distinction here (and an additional point) is a distinction between ethical models that we might wish to emulate and ethical models that assist or enrich our understanding. Davy's biting attack on

Murdstone decidedly did not give me a useful model to emulate. This episode did not make me wish to bite my father's hand, and biting it would not have solved anything anyway. Reading that scene did, however, prepare me to understand better some of my childish resentments and also my childish tendency, even in young adulthood, to unwittingly exaggerate the extent of my father's power and authority over both me and others.

Two other passages generated by this novel's ethical vision have carried great weight for me, both when I first read *David Copperfield* and throughout my many years of rereading it. My relationship to these two passages has been changing and variable, more like the dynamic relationship one has with a lifelong friend than the static relationship one has with a toaster or an automobile (see Booth, "The Way I Loved" and *Company*). The passage early on in which young Davy portrays himself in his tiny attic bedroom, reading and rereading the delightful cache of novels that he has discovered there as a kind of secret legacy from his dead father struck me with great force because it so mirrored my own youthful reading. In the chapter called "I Fall into Disgrace," a condition into which both Davy and I were frequently cast by our father figures—a condition which goes far to explain why we both spent much solitary time in our rooms reading—Davy describes himself in the following passage, which I have considerably shortened:

My father had left a small collection of books in a little room upstairs, to which I had access. . . . From that blessed little room, Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, Humphrey Clinker, Tom Jones, the Vicar of Wakefield, Don Quixote, Gil Blas, and Robinson Crusoe, came out, a glorious host, to keep me company. . . . It is curious to me how I could ever have consoled myself under my small troubles (which were great troubles to me), by impersonating my favorite characters in them—as I did. . . . I have been Tom Jones . . . for a week together. I have sustained my own idea of Roderick Random for a month at a stretch, I verily believe . . . and for days and days I can remember to have gone about my region of our house, armed with the centerpiece out of an old set of boot-trees—the perfect realization of Captain Somebody, of the Royal British Navy, in danger of being beset by savages, and resolved to sell

his life at a great price. . . . When I think of it, the picture always rises in my mind of a summer evening, the boys at play in the churchyard, and I sitting on my bed, *reading as if for life*. (55–56; emphasis added)

I, too, as a boy, spent a good deal of time roaming the areas where my family lived, usually rural areas, pretending I was a character from one of my latest-read novels. But the significance of the “reading as if for life” passage has not meant the same thing to me over the years. At the time I first read it, I had not yet dealt with the painful truths of my upbringing, but the image of young Davy escaping from family troubles and trying to avoid further disgrace by retreating into a world of imagination and readerly experiences elicited responses from me that were warm and sympathetic, although fairly mushy and muddled. My reaction was partly formed, I believe now, out of unacknowledged self-pity and a sense of kinship with any young child to whom reading was not only the means of escaping a forbidding and frightening father but indulging in a private pleasure beyond anyone else’s dismissal or contempt.

Now, however, many years later, this “reading as if for life” passage is still important to me, but in a quite different way. Instead of evoking a vague dissatisfaction with my lot and awakening in me a childish self-pity about my abusive upbringing, it evokes for me the satisfying realization that my youthful reading, no matter what unhappy pressures may have been partly responsible for it, ultimately yielded more benefits and advantages for me than almost anything else I have ever done, second only in importance and benefits to the wife and daughters who grace my life. I can look back now on “reading as if for life” and think, “Yes, I did read not merely *as if for life* but in a way that has made reading a way of life in itself. I have kept on reading for life and can’t imagine another or a better one.”

The second passage that has greatly assisted me over the years in my pursuit of a stable personal identity (Eldridge, Eakin, Ricoeur) is the opening sentence of *David Copperfield*: “Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show” (1). This sentence has been a touchstone for me in times of confusion and uncertainty, helping me return to a clearer and more purposeful sense of myself. It has played this role in

my life because it plays this role in the ethical vision of the novel, which is nothing if not an ethical vision of how David Copperfield becomes an independent and self-knowledgeable ethical agent instead of the frightened lump of self-pitying weakness that he was programmed to be.

But children such as Davy Copperfield and I don't *easily* discover or travel the path to independent agency. For many years "whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life" nearly haunted me. I knew intuitively that it did not refer merely to masculine daring—firing the torpedoes, winning the game, or saving the child—but instead to something more like internal integrity, self-direction, and self-knowledge. I knew that being the hero of my own life meant believing that I could become something like a "best version" of myself despite not having been properly nourished and supported as a child. But I also knew intuitively, and this intuition troubled me greatly, that I could not be the hero of my own life unless I broke free from the emotional insecurities of having been a child who was forever and forever "falling into disgrace."

One of the many dangers of being an unloved and powerless child is that such children tend to resist rather than embrace personal agency and personal responsibility. Unloved children too often become adults who never see failures as their own fault, but as the fault of those who should have cared for them more and loved them better. *Unloved and powerless children have great trouble embracing the truth that being unloved does not let them off the hook for being responsible agents in the world.* They tend to think at the very least that the trade-off for suffering ought to be *not* being held responsible. They never say this to themselves explicitly, but it is a perspective on themselves that they find easy to maintain. I wanted agency for the obvious reason that autonomy is a superior mode of life compared to slavery, but I also resisted it because it meant not only that I would have to become responsible for my own life, but that I would have to give up nursing my childish angers and resentments. For many children these angers and resentments can become lifelong habits of their adult hearts.

M. M. Bakhtin's analysis of novelistic discourse offers a useful model for the kind of ongoing relationship with a novel that I am describing here. Bakhtin's conception of the dialogic relationship among multiple voices within novels invites an analogy to the dialogic relationship that can develop between novels and their readers over time. In Bakhtin's words,

The way in which the word conceptualizes its object is a complex act . . . and into this complex play of light and shadow the word enters. . . . If we imagine the *intention* of such a word, that is, its *directionality toward the object*, in the form of a ray of light, then the living and unrepeatable play of colors and light on the facets of the image that it constructs can be explained as the spectral dispersion of the ray-word . . . in an atmosphere filled with the alien words, value judgments and accents through which the ray passes on its way toward the object; the social atmosphere of the word, the atmosphere that surrounds the object, makes the facets of the image sparkle. (277; emphasis in original)

Adapting this image so that the object becomes the reader and the word becomes the novel—but preserving Bakhtin’s insight into the nature of dialogic interaction—captures the sense of my own historical relationship with the ethical vision of *David Copperfield*. This work, this novel-as-word, entered my life like a ray and established a dynamic relationship with something alien to it, something not itself—that is, my consciousness and the facts and conditions of my life—such that I, as the object of the word, came under the influence not of a passive word but of an interactive discourse, what Bakhtin has just called “the spectral dispersion of the ray-word.” Dickens’s ethical vision of what it might mean to “become the hero of my own life” threw light on my ambition, my deep impulse, to liberate myself from Murdstone-like oppression. Along with other influences, the light of ethical vision in *David Copperfield*—as-word helped me see the possibilities of my own life in a new way and, in helping me see it, helped midwife my emergence into maturity. Stories are often a kind of midwife to character, but unlike physical children who get born only once, character is always *being* born, shaped out of the ongoing choices we make. As an ongoing thing of emergence, then, rather than a one-time fixed thing, character is susceptible to enduring dialogical relationships with a great many influences, including stories, as *David Copperfield* has been to me.

For me the relationship with my father acted as a lens that focuses sharply on certain representations in *David Copperfield*—namely Davy’s relationship with Murdstone—but it is easy to imagine that other

readers—women, for example—might have typical experiences of females in a patriarchal society that invite them to focus not on Dickens's depth of psychological insight into Murdstone's pathologies, but on his shallowness of psychological insight into the possibilities for female fulfillment. I can imagine that many if not most women could not be happy having to choose between the clichéd silliness of Dora Spelton or the clichéd saintliness of Agnes Wakefield.

Limitations of Ethical Vision in *Wuthering Heights*

In contrast to the instant bond I felt with the ethical vision of Dickens's novels, I have had an up-and-down relationship with the ethical vision at the heart of *Wuthering Heights*, and it is precisely this history of up-and-down interactions that makes an account of my relations with this story useful to the present discussion. Here I focus primarily on who I was when I first read *Wuthering Heights* and who I was when I engaged in subsequent rereadings of this novel at different points in time, and how the differences in who I was at each point in time both influenced my reading and was influenced by my reading.

- I first read *Wuthering Heights* when I was in high school, deeply steeped in all of my family's dysfunctional turbulence.
- The second time I read *Wuthering Heights* I was in college, where my budding intellectual development and my distance from home allowed me to read the novel less pressured by family dynamics.
- The third time I read *Wuthering Heights* I was in graduate school, where my reading was driven primarily by growing skills of technical analysis, especially narrative technique, and this change in reading technique led me to a total reevaluation of the novel's ethical vision.⁴
- The fourth time I read *Wuthering Heights* was in the spring of 2004, thirty-five years after graduate school, as part of my preparation for writing this chapter.

Only my last and most recent rereading of *Wuthering Heights* occurred at a far distant time and in a vastly different psychic space from all entangle-

ments with my family's dysfunctionality. My first painful confrontations with this dysfunctionality had occurred when I was thirty, which was also my age when I finished my doctorate, when I had finished the first three years of my professional career, and when I had just experienced the thrill of my first daughter's birth, the catalytic event that led me, finally, to face my family's sad pathologies. Each planetary tilt of my responses to *Wuthering Heights* has been produced by an interactive dynamic between the gravitational pull of the novel's ethical vision and my own ethical quest for autonomy and self-knowledge as I orbited around it.

It speaks to the educational power of story in general to say that, in my view, the greatest contribution to this quest was made by story, not by desire. In the first place, to describe myself as engaged in a "quest for autonomy and self-knowledge" is not something I could have said before reading *David Copperfield* and *Wuthering Heights*. Reading these novels did not do all of the work for me, but they positioned me *closer* to this kind of self-awareness than if I had never read them at all. In the second place, while it would not be smart to underestimate the motivational power of human desire, the truth is that desire by itself, no matter how intense, doesn't necessarily produce progress or generate light. In order to grow toward autonomy and self-knowledge I needed more than desire. I needed ideas, concepts, images, and models to work with—in short, I needed food for thought—and this I found in abundance in the novels I was reading.

My High School Reading of *Wuthering Heights*: Heathcliff and the Ethic of Power

In my powerlessness and lack of agency in high school, at age fifteen, what most attracted me about the ethical vision of *Wuthering Heights* was Heathcliff's power, or, more precisely, his *rise* to power from an early position of abuse and deprivation. Heathcliff in his youth was precisely all the things that I was in my youth at the time I first encountered him in the pages of Brontë's novel. He was psychologically battered and physically beaten, unappreciated, and treated unfairly, with no one to turn to for redress (after the death of old Mr. Earnshaw). After Heathcliff left

Wuthering Heights and returned to it a few years later as a man, however, he showed that he had become all the things that I was not and that, in truth, I could not at that time even imagine becoming. Heathcliff returned as a man who was independent, certainly, but most of all he returned as someone powerful—powerful enough to place himself beyond the injustice and pain inflicted on him by those who had delighted in mistreating him when he was young.⁵

Most significant of all, Heathcliff generated the energy and the means for his rise to power—somehow—out of his own internal resources. For neither Heathcliff nor me was there a *deus ex machina* in the form of a king, God, Saint George, a magistrate, or the Cheeryble brothers to help us out or to right our wrongs. But Heathcliff, unlike me, tapped sources of internal power and righted his wrongs for himself, a spectacle that was for me highly charged. I took care (unconsciously) not to identify with these feelings with any precision, for I had good reason to know in my relations with my father, as Heathcliff knew in his relations with Hindley, that it was dangerous to reveal either verbal or physical signs of rebellion. But underneath—in those murky regions of the human heart where nascent intentions are often disguised by the smoke of passion—Heathcliff’s ethic of power fed my rising spirit of rebellion.

Reading *Wuthering Heights* this way meant that there were many facets of Heathcliff’s ethical character that I simply failed to take into account: that Heathcliff uses his power not merely to protect himself from others’ abuse but to seek revenge (and to seek it in out-of-scale ways); that Heathcliff shows profound disrespect for others by his willingness to use them as tools; that Heathcliff takes out his spite on innocent creatures like Isabella’s spaniel, whom he hangs, and on Catherine Linton, who is not entirely innocent but who has never wronged Heathcliff in any way that merits the hatred he bears her; that Heathcliff cruelly enjoys inflicting pain; that Heathcliff is willing to sacrifice (by force) others’ happiness, not to mention their very well-being, to serve his avarice; and that Heathcliff is not just deficient in charity but *devoid* of charity (as well as fellow-feeling, generosity, civility, and compassion) not only toward anyone who ever wronged him, not only toward anyone who is innocently *associated* with anyone who ever wronged him, but to some people who have *never* wronged him, such as Lockwood.

The abused, deprived, and needy frame of mind in which I read *Wuthering Heights* when I was fifteen prevented me from seeing these facts in their proper light. I hurried over these uncomfortable facts and squeezed them into the background of my attention. Because I was so tightly riveted to the spectacle of Heathcliff's rise to power, I failed to see the totality of his character, even though the data about Heathcliff's character is clearly laid out in the text. In trying to save Isabella from certain misery in forming an attachment to Heathcliff, Catherine Earnshaw says clearly—and as the only person who loves Heathcliff, her condemnation carries both veracity and force—that Isabella must not “imagine that [Heathcliff] conceals depths of benevolence and affection beneath a stern exterior! He's not a rough diamond . . . he's a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man” (89–90). On the other hand, it is a curious feature of the ethical vision of this novel as mediated by a skillful narrative technique that I and all other readers of *Wuthering Heights* are *invited*, despite the explicitness of Catherine's characterization and Heathcliff's own actions, to make, if not an incomplete assessment of Heathcliff's character, as I did, then a more ethically benign assessment than the novel's own evidence, viewed merely as data, calls for.

Brontë skillfully pulls off this interesting, ethical sleight-of-hand primarily by employing two storytelling strategies that nearly always work when an author or movie or TV director wants to cement her audience's sympathy for a character of dubious ethical nature. First, just as Thackeray makes us sympathize with Becky Sharp during the first half of *Vanity Fair* (1848), despite giving us plenty of evidence of her heartlessness—by showing Becky as *comparatively* better (in an ethical sense) than those around her or at least as no worse (and a whole lot more entertaining)—Brontë works for the same kind of amelioration of judgment by surrounding Heathcliff with people who, especially in his youth, are clearly just as fierce, wolfish, and pitiless, if not more so, than Heathcliff himself, and who have physical power over Heathcliff that they exploit to Heathcliff's disadvantage and pain. Second, in his youth, Heathcliff's physical courage and his attachment to Catherine give him a better-seeming character, comparatively, than those around him. Third, Brontë coerces leniency of judgment from her audience toward Heathcliff, as authors and storytellers have been doing forever, by

showing him wrongfully abused, a technique that is especially effective if the abused character is a child. If all of the different kinds of evidence for and against Heathcliff's character are given full consideration, no careful reader could conclude that *Wuthering Heights* fails to give him or her all the data needed for seeing the wolfish and pitiless character whom Catherine accurately describes, but the strategies I have just cataloged also invite readers, even careful ones, to lean sympathetically in Heathcliff's direction and allow Brontë to have her narrative cake and eat it too. As a youthful reader I was wrong to focus so narrowly on Heathcliff's rise to power—wrong for letting the lens of my life obscure my clear view of the novel's own data—but Emily Brontë plays a calculating game as narrator in making such a misreading easier for me (and for any other reader as well) than if she had given her readers the ethical skinny about Heathcliff's character in a more straightforward manner.

But of course Brontë is right to tell her story in her own way. She's a novelist, not my moral babysitter, and as long as she doesn't deliberately contradict the terms of her own representation, which she doesn't, what she achieves by means of her novel's ethical vision of complex rights and wrongs is a layered portrayal of the multidimensional context in which ethical character emerges and in which ethical judgments are generated. She shows clearly that the interplay between ethical character and ethical judgments is messy, complicated, always susceptible to corruption from the play of self-interest, and highly prone to error because of human beings' limited ability to draw correct ethical inferences from others' concrete conduct. But she also shows equally clearly that nothing is more important than sustaining an energetic effort, despite its difficulties, to get it right: to understand what ethical character is and to see clearly the criteria by which to judge it.

My College Reading of *Wuthering Heights*: Embarrassing Credulity about Nelly

When in my third year of college I read *Wuthering Heights* for the second time, my increased skills of analytical reading led me to see Heathcliff's villainy of character more clearly than I had before. The more I thought about Heathcliff in this new light, the more it became apparent to me that

Heathcliff did not represent the kind of power I wanted for fending off my father's injustices. Now I saw Heathcliff's wolfish pitilessness as just another version of my father. Since even in my abused youth I longed for power primarily as a means of self-protection, not self-aggrandizement, my now clearer view of Heathcliff's villainy led me as a reader to a highly uncritical acceptance of the only person in the novel, Nelly Dean, who persistently articulates explicit judgments against Heathcliff's character. As a college reader I was still allowing the dynamics of my troubled family relations to guide my reading of *Wuthering Heights* in ways that continued to obscure my understanding. What I failed to see on this second reading, of course, was all the evidence that Nelly Dean is often an unreliable narrator and is always a self-serving narrator. As I attempted in my college reading to correct my high school fascination with Heathcliff's power by now distancing myself from his villainy, I used Nelly's platitudinous judgments as my means of doing so.

I cringe to admit that Nelly's platitudes became my platitudes. When Nelly smugly tells readers that "I went about my household duties, convinced that the Grange had but one sensible soul in its walls, and that lodged in my body" (103), my too-credulous college-reader self (*mea culpa!*) believed her. And when she responds with a pious cliché to one of young Heathcliff's many angry claims that he will one day work his revenge on Hindley—"For shame, Heathcliff!," said I. 'It is for God to punish wicked people; we should learn to forgive'" (57)—I took her to be prescribing civilized and sensible medicine for the cure of Heathcliff's bitterness. On the face of it this *is* what Nelly is doing, of course, but prescribing generic medicine that fails to take the patient's circumstances into realistic account is not actually a help. It's just moralizing for the sake of moralizing.

But there are instances when Nelly's judgments are sufficiently shrewd, insightful, and ethically satisfying that inattentive or inexperienced readers such as I was in college can be lulled into lowering their critical guard and taking everything else that Nelly says at face value, including her sentimental elevation of all the novel's "nice" characters and her exaggerated depreciation of the "not nice" characters. Inattentive readers can also be led to accept the persistently self-serving commentary that Nelly uses to justify her control over the flow of domestic information in her employers' homes. Acting as a kind of information gatekeeper,

Nelly sometimes deletes information, sometimes alters it, almost always spins it, and sometimes just makes it up. But despite these questionable ethical practices—questionable on the ethical fronts of honesty, respect, integrity, compassion, and sometimes just plain kindness—Nelly buys a vast deal of credit for herself with the few arrows of criticism that fly dead center to her target, as when she deftly delivers a slitty-eyed rejoinder to Catherine’s complaint that she is always having to baby Edgar’s and Isabella’s feelings. Nelly shoots back, “‘You’re mistaken,’ Mrs. Linton,’ said I. ‘They humor you. . . . You can well afford to indulge their passing whims, as long as their business is to anticipate all your desires’” (86). Readers who delight in the dead-on accuracy of this insight, and a few others that Brontë strategically salts throughout her tale, are tempted to view all other insights by Nelly as having equal authority. The only problem is, they *don’t* all have equal authority. I simply failed to see this fact in my college-level reading of *Wuthering Heights*.

My Grad School Reading of *Wuthering Heights*: Whiplash Judgments about Nelly

When I reread *Wuthering Heights* in graduate school at the University of Chicago, however, I nearly gave myself intellectual whiplash from the force of my rebound interpretation of Nelly Dean’s status as an ethical judge and social commentator. Having developed my reading skills exponentially since college, and having just read Wayne Booth’s *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, as well as having taken classes in literary criticism from Booth, Ronald Crane, and Elder Olson, I walked to the batter’s box on my next rereading of *Wuthering Heights* fully prepared not to swing at any sucker pitches. Nelly Dean, stuck with her script, naturally, threw all of the same explanations and judgments that had sailed right by me in earlier years like those low inside pitches that hitters who like high outside balls never see. Now, however, armed with all kinds of major league skills for hitting spitball pitchers who try to slide platitudinous, unreliable curve balls over my narrative plate, I knocked poor Nelly off the pitching mound by line-driving all her meddling, dishonest, trimmed, shaved, and trumped-up information right back at her.⁶

As you can doubtless infer from my batting metaphors, I certainly felt intellectually virtuous and highly professional in having learned how to do this sort of reading, and now I had an even greater problem with *Wuthering Heights*' ethical vision than I did with Nelly Dean as narrator. I especially disliked what I perceived—and continue to perceive—as the novel's championing of an ethical vision that favors undisciplined, rampant Romanticism: a configuration of rights and wrongs that asks readers to admire intensity of feeling for its own sake, no matter how self-indulgent or irrational or harmful, and that asks readers to be fascinated with near-mad emotionalism, as if such emotional extremity constitutes an obviously higher mode of existence than everyday soberness and judicious thought.

Wuthering Heights honors not just fiercely intense emotions but fiercely intense emotionalism, a state of being in which one is addicted to extreme feelings in the same way that Duke Orsino is a man addicted to being in love with love. This kind of emotionalism for its own sake was all too similar to the anti-intellectual emotionalism of the Protestant fundamentalism I had been raised in, and I knew all too well how easily it could mask limitless forms of self-aggrandizement, selfishness, and cruelty. When Heathcliff makes histrionic utterances such as “The moment [Catherine's] regard ceased [for Linton], I would have torn his heart out, and drank his blood!” or “[Linton] couldn't love as much in eighty years as I could in a day” (125–26), I'm convinced that Brontë wants all of her readers to feel that the energy, the vigor, the masculine power, and the brutal assertion of self-interest so honestly portrayed is a good thing—or at least a good thing in comparison with the mealy-mouthed piety of Linton. Heathcliff's contempt for Linton seems to be Brontë's contempt as well, the product of an ethical vision all aswoon over Romantic intensity.

The novel's over-the-top melodrama ethically repelled me even in my graduate school days. Catherine's violent response to Edgar's anger about Heathcliff is a good example: “There she lay dashing her head against the arm of the sofa, and grinding her teeth, so that you might fancy she would crash them to splinters!” “Good,” was my reaction, “I hope she hits wood and knocks some sense into her head.” I was even unhappier with the novel's rip-off of Ophelia's mad scene in which she distributes

the flowers to the Elsinore courtiers⁷ and the later rip-off of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale."⁸ If I had thought that Brontë was using these rip-offs to satirize excessive and irrational emotionalism, I might have appreciated their deft appropriateness in revealing Catherine's character, but it seemed to me then—and still seems to me now—that Brontë uses these rip-offs not to satirize the characters but to show that despite their social and psychological pathologies they enjoy a more intense and therefore superior kind of existence to that of everyone else.

Nothing separates the ethical vision of Brontë's ersatz, immature Romanticism from the ethical vision of mature Romanticism better than a contrast with the near ending of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," which is also a literary representation about escaping bodily constraints and living in some golden realm where bodies do not shatter and feelings do not shred. But Keats, unlike Brontë, is enough of a hardheaded realist to accept facts rather than indulge in fantasies. "The fancy cannot cheat so well," he admits. The fancy, in other words, cannot provide real escape from the built-in conditions of human existence. In the end, the bird's song, which throughout the poem has symbolized a transcendent avenue of escape from the mundane, *simply goes away*—"Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades"—leaving human beings positioned where they are always positioned: negotiating their existence in the context of a thousand competing desires and conditions, but never escaping their muddled, mixed state as creatures of innumerable contraries.

If an ethical vision either in a narrative or in a life serves any concrete end at all, it provides the resources for making or not making the kind of call that Brontë's ethical vision avoids and that Keats's ethical vision embraces. Brontë seems intent on ordering the rights and wrongs of her fictional world in such a way that, at least for Heathcliff and Catherine, escape really is possible. In the end, Brontë tries to pass off this bogus notion to her readers, initially through Lockwood's vision of Catherine's ghost at the beginning of the novel, and subsequently through Heathcliff's visions of that same ghost as he becomes more and more distractedly entangled with it, such that he can neither eat nor sleep, until he dies, at which point he and Catherine are joined together, presumably, forever.

Yawn. This is an ethic of escapism, not an ethic of generosity or kindness or self-control or honesty or compassion. In short, it is not an

ethic that has anything to do with *ethics* as principles to which we might appeal for assistance in living a deliberate life in which, at the very least, we do no harm, or a life in which, at the most, we might actually make life for us and our companions better than it would otherwise be. This is a humble enough ethical vision, to be sure—there’s nothing grandly heroic about doing no harm or trying to create the conditions in everyday life that encourage human flourishing—but who can deny that an ethical vision based on honesty, justice, kindness, self-control, generosity, compassion, and the capacity to feel shame when we have done wrong would make the world more hospitable to human happiness than the ethic of *Wuthering Heights*, an ethic that honors the selfish assertion of fiercely intense emotionalism above all other ethical qualities.

Rereading *Wuthering Heights* After Thirty Years: Coming to Terms

But perhaps Brontë is more subtle than I have just described her to be. Perhaps she is not simply out to honor the selfish assertion of fiercely intense emotionalism but, in fact, after larger, different, and more interesting game.⁹ An alternative way of understanding the ethical vision of *Wuthering Heights* is to see it as a critique of middle-class power, middle-class niceties, middle-class sentimentality, and, above all, middle-class hypocrisy. Viewed in this way, the ethical vision of *Wuthering Heights* positions Thrushcross Grange as a kind of miniature kingdom dominated by middle-class values, and existing in direct opposition to *Wuthering Heights* as a kind of miniature kingdom dominated by *anti*-middle-class values.

From this perspective, both kingdoms are places where power matters most but where the typical power of each kingdom manifests itself in radically different ways. The power at Thrushcross Grange is socially legitimate, historically traditional, and massively patriarchal—God the father above all, King the “sire” above all subjects, men above women, husbands above wives, fathers above children, masters above servants—and is accompanied by all the behaviors that traditionally identify and reinforce middle-class power: going to church, getting educated, observing proprieties, paying lip service to the pieties, using a refined accent, dressing

like other middle-class persons, observing traditional gender roles, and, above all, sticking with class peers in all matters of tension, competition, or trouble between middle-class persons and the lower orders, especially about matters of sexual tension in which persons threaten to blur class lines by falling in love and getting married across class boundaries.

This is a more interesting hypothesis about the ethical vision at the center of *Wuthering Heights* than my earlier hypothesis about rampant Romanticism because it makes Brontë's ethical vision in support of the intense emotionalism at *Wuthering Heights* a means to an end, not an end in itself. From this perspective, Brontë's ethical vision is designed to make us see the corrupt ethics of middle-class power—typified by the configuration of rights and wrongs in the kingdom of Thrushcross Grange—for what it really is. Its end, in other words, is to expose a kind of velvet-hammer middle-class oppression, and its means is to show us what that oppression looks and sounds like when it drops the velvet hammer and picks us the ax and pitchfork, when oppressiveness asserts itself in the most raw, selfish, callous, undisciplined, unguarded, unfeeling, and unkind ways possible, which are the ways that it typically expresses itself in the kingdom of *Wuthering Heights*.

Throughout her novel Brontë exerts persistent pressure on middle-class ideals and values. She keeps smashing at them the way Heathcliff smashes at the windows and locks of Thrushcross Grange, and Heathcliff and Catherine are her main smashing tools. Of Isabella, whose love for Heathcliff seems based on a middle-class archetype of the blunt-man-with-a-gruff-exterior-who-turns-out-to-be-honorable-and-loving-underneath-the-surface, Heathcliff says, once Isabella's eyes are opened to reality, "I don't care who knows that the passion was wholly on one side, and I never told her a lie about it. She cannot accuse me of showing one little bit of deceitful softness" (127). His speech of contempt about Linton's love for Catherine is even more explicit in its attack on middle-class notions of decency, decorum, and rightness: "And that insipid, paltry creature attending [Catherine] from *duty* and *humanity*! From *pity* and *charity*! [Edgar] might as well plant an oak in a flowerpot, and expect it to thrive, as imagine he can restore [Catherine] to vigor in the soil of his shallow cares!" (129; emphasis in original).

There's no middle-class gallantry here, and no middle-class niceness, but there is an honesty of contempt. Surely Brontë is right to sug-

gest that contempt is also present in many middle-class relations, only in *those* relations contempt is masked by middle-class charms, conventions, and well-bred smiles. If this is what Brontë hates, she does a good job of showing what its real nature looks like once its middle-class garb is removed and it stands naked before us in all of its self-interested ugliness. But if Brontë wants readers to infer that honestly expressed oppression is to be preferred, especially on ethical grounds, over middle-class hypocritical oppression, I can only say to her, “ask the victims whether it really matters or not.” The distinction between middle-class modes of hypocritical oppression and honestly raw self-interested oppression is a nicety unimportant to victims.

An ethical vision that only tears down what we hate cannot help us build up what we love. If Thrushcross Grange represents middle-class values and conduct and *Wuthering Heights* represents *anti*-middle-class values and conduct, what this ethical vision seems unable to comprehend is that an anti-middle-class ideology is not a program for living—or, if Brontë does comprehend it, she seems to have boxed herself in with a story that cannot go beyond it. The ethical vision of *Wuthering Heights* expresses objections to human diminishment but includes no theory of human flourishing. If Brontë thinks, as she apparently does, that an anti-middle-class ideology can be substituted for a positive theory of life, then perhaps she has not departed very far, after all, from the Romantic escapism I earlier accused her of indulging in. Having used Catherine and Heathcliff to critique middle-class hypocrisy, but having no view of how they might actually construct a positive life together in the mundane realm, the best that Brontë seems to be able to offer them is that bogus life-after-death, which posits that they live for the remainder of eternity wandering the moors together as ghosts.

Ethical Vision and Human Flourishing

Is it fair to hold Brontë, or any other storyteller, to the criterion of advancing an ethical vision that includes “a theory of human flourishing”? Certainly not—not in any abstract, absolute, deductive sense. But it is certainly not *unfair* to point out in an inductive way that *this* story or *that* story does *not* include such an ethical vision—and that *David Copperfield*

clearly does.¹⁰ I have no desire to position Emily Brontë at some precise spot on a bogus continuum that runs from “lesser” storytellers up to “greater” storytellers. But it is legitimate for me to bare the grounds of my prejudice in favor of stories that have theories, so to speak, over those that merely have objections.

This means that, for me at least, I feel a profounder resonance with stories that include an ethical vision of how life might be put together than with stories whose ethical visions limit themselves merely to attacking the failures of some other ethical vision. There were lots of things in Dickens’s world that *he* objected to—and few writers could voice their objections with the same rhetorical force as Dickens—but Dickens’s ethical vision that in a single stroke bound my heart to his works in graduate school, and that still binds me to them today, is not just his *objections* to Murdstone’s cruelty, Steerforth’s selfishness, and Uriah Heep’s meanness, but his positive theory about the kinds of human relations that make everyday life—the place where we all really live—not just bearable but joyful and productive.

Dickens, like Keats, ultimately tries to be a realist. He is certainly unrealistic in some ways, most notably in his limited understanding of romantic relations between young men and women, but his grasp of such ethical principles as *justice, kindness, honesty, compassion, and the capacity for shame* is both strong and sure. Dickens knows goodness versus oppression and compassion versus cruelty when he sees them, but he never longs for a transcendent realm of bogus escape. His ethical vision asserts powerfully that the quality of people’s lives is created not by the ideologies they applaud in the abstract, but by the ethical choices they make in the concrete world of everyday social interactions at business, in the street, at table, and when people need help or are called upon to give help. And he knows how to contrast nourishing and productive ethical choices with those that are demeaning, destructive, selfish, cruel, and self-interested.

As Dickens’s novels show and as *Wuthering Heights* does not, we really can live better lives if we shape them in accordance to an ethical vision that encourages us to live up to everyday standards of decency, honesty, justice, and compassion. The economic system of energy and values that Brontë depicts in *Wuthering Heights*, however, suggests that life is too compressed, too thin, and too competitive ever to provide the

resources for human flourishing. Once old Earnshaw brings Heathcliff home, there isn't enough love to go around any more. Hindley and Cathy are placed outside the orbit of the old man's concern. No matter where we turn in this novel we see insufficiencies. Even the cold stone floors and drafty windows and dark walls repel all approaches of human softness and warmth. There is especially an insufficiency of primitive ethical virtues and resources—concern, compassion, kindness, justice—such that everyone at Wuthering Heights grows up not only cold and lonely but stunted, deprived, manipulated, manipulative, and misshapen.

In everyday life these kinds of consequences are not determined by the huge abstractions that we like to blame for them (which has the dubious benefit of letting us off the moral hook for other people's unhappiness and pain), abstractions such as the "forces of history" or "economic laws" or "the depravity of humankind." In everyday life, our failures of ethical responsibility and sensitivity are created or avoided *not* by these huge abstractions, but by the day-by-day, moment-by-moment choices we make in our social and ethical relations with other people. Dickens sees this. He knows that any attempt to see Murdstone as merely the product of original sin, or as a product of the pressures of a commercial society, or as a product of misguided Puritanism misses the fact that Murdstone could have behaved differently if he had been possessed of a different ethical vision of life, one that is clearly available to him because other people who are equally vulnerable to original sin and the pressures of a commercial society and misguided Puritanism do *not* behave as Murdstone behaves.

In analyzing the origin of pathologies in either fictional or real-life persons, we may talk the language of politics, power, ethnicity, gender, race, class, economics, nationalism, tradition, custom, mores, and so on. All of this talk is highly relevant to an understanding of our circumstances as embodied, historically situated agents. I am not claiming that ethical visions are *not* embodied and historically situated—they are—but I am claiming that ethical visions are not so much the *products* of history and culture as they are the elemental human *orientations* that make culture and history possible.¹¹

Dickens's ethical vision taps into rock-bottom human orientations. His vision is simple but goes deep, and for this reason I will always hold

Dickens's works more closely to my heart than Brontë's works, though I want to emphasize that the point of ethical criticism is not to rank novelists and their novels on some simple scale, but to engage in complex ways with the ethical visions they offer. In this regard, I have found many rewards over a forty-year period of reading and rereading *Wuthering Heights* because the struggle I have had in weighing its values over time has taught me to think productively about the very ideas I have discussed in this chapter. I could never have written this chapter without the education I have acquired in my rereadings of *Wuthering Heights*. I value the instructiveness of this engagement almost as much as I value the ways in which *David Copperfield* has been a touchstone for me.

For all of us, a lifetime of engagements with the ethical visions of stories becomes a major component in the construction of our ethical vision of life. Engaging with new stories and reencountering old ones generate a dynamic composed of both energy and matter, desire and substance. The actions, attitudes, and judgments we see in stories become the actions, attitudes, and judgments we put together in life, and these, cumulatively considered, turn us into persons we become. Surely this not only explains but justifies a deep concern to understand, compare, and evaluate stories' ethical visions. We weave together the stories *in* our life into a pattern that ultimately becomes the story *of* our life. Learning to understand, compare, and evaluate stories' ethical visions becomes a way to understand ourselves: not only who we are and what we want, but who we ought to be and what we should want.