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Written in Blood: family, sex and violence in *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*

In Volume 1 of his *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault takes issue with the notion of Victorian repression. Close study of the way in which two Victorian writers, Emily and Charlotte Brontë, create narratives that are reliant on violence, sex, and abortive family ties, would seem to suggest that he has a point.

The novels

Jane Eyre, written by Charlotte Brontë, was published in 1847, to great acclaim. It remains one of the most famous novels of all time. It is the story of a life, written in the first person. It pre-figures the lovelorn, bereft childhood of a Philip Pirrip, of *Great Expectations* (1860-1), and combines it with the spirit of an early incarnation of Maggie Tulliver, of *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). Jane is unloved, yet has attitude; she combines passion and stillness in almost equal measure. She moves through a life full of romantic potential with the watchful and repressive eye of an ascetic, yet attracts such quantities of mythical action that her reader is in no doubt as to the heart within.

Wuthering Heights, written by Emily Brontë, was published in 1847, to wide confusion. It was her only novel. Charlotte herself commented on the 'horror of great darkness' which is the soul of this majestic, bizarre and terrifying work. The ideas it generates, via Cathy and Heathcliff, are to do with incest, sex and death, physical abuse and psychological torment, transcendent love and exquisite selfishness. In Cathy, too, the passionate and reflexive relationship between the natural world and the soul is writ large – although Wordsworth would recognise nothing in this blasted, bleak, weather-torn landscape. It is written in a language unlike that of any other book, a primal language, related to need and desire, pain and instinct.

Blood - metaphorically, literally, and colourfully - is the single most prevalent and powerful image employed in the novels I have outlined. It is a sign used by these writers (and others of the period); it is there to be interpreted in ways related to violence, sex and family. Blood tells a story, or many different stories. What follows is an analysis of some of them.

Blood-line as narrative

When an unknown man interrupts her wedding, Jane Eyre discovers the existence of Rochester's first wife, thus preventing his imminent and bigamous marriage to her. Rochester pleads to Jane that ignorance of kin led him like a lamb to the slaughter to marry Bertha Mason – the 'madwoman in the attic' – kept imprisoned in Thornfield Hall (it is her brother who stops the marriage). Bertha's mother was incarcerated in a lunatic asylum, and Rochester's plea is that if he had known this, he would have imagined that the daughter would follow her there. Instead, he could only watch, as the plot thickened around him, and

Bertha's character 'ripened and developed' in frightening ways. He feels like the prisoner of the blood plot, helpless as 'the true daughter of an infamous mother' comes into her own (pp. 333-4). And so he feels justified in ignoring her existence, and trying to marry again.

At the beginning of the novel, mis-readings of the blood-line also have a dramatic result. Brontë manipulates the reader's expectation of what 'family' means. Family, we might think, means love and care, duty and responsibility. So when the orphaned Jane writes, 'I was a discord in Gateshead Hall; I was like nobody there; I had nothing in harmony with Mrs Reed or her children' (p. 47), she is wrong, surely, for she has blood in common with them. Their father's and her mother's blood was the same. The Reeds do not behave as though this is the case. Brontë, in depicting this notion of family, has subverted the genealogical plot, in which shared blood, here clearly signaled, generally means a positive tie.

In contrast, the first-time reader of *Wuthering Heights* could be forgiven for becoming lost in the mire that is the bloodline of this text. It is hideous, incestuous, it mirrors the claustrophobic imprisonment of all the major characters – shut up in small spaces or shut away from their significant other; one of the main narrators, Lockwood, lies incapacitated through illness. A reading of the second generation at the Heights and Thrushcross Grange is hampered by confusion with names: Earnshaw and Heathcliff and Cathy and Linton, first names and second names transposed and unhelpful. Emily Brontë prevents us in this way from ascribing specific traits and behaviour patterns. Emotion thus becomes more important than character: energy transcends individuality in this text. There is a development, however, and the second generation can express sexually, by marriage, some of the feelings of the first.

Why the obsession with blood lines? It's in part due to the Victorian obsession with time. Robin Gilmour writes that

People of the nineteenth century were fascinated by time because they were conscious of being its victims. This was the age of the memento, the keepsake, the curl of hair cherished in the brooch, the photograph in the locket – all those sentimental stays against the quickening pace of time's erosion. Wherever one looks, one encounters a preoccupation with ancestry and descent, with tracing the genealogy of the present in the past, and with discovering or creating links with a formative history (p. 25).

So these novelists are partly adapting a current intellectual idea; their frameworks of cause and effect are symbolic of the national urge for explanation. This is part of the truth. Another part of the truth is that the matrilineal blood-line can be a way of men interpreting women, of predicting their history. The mother's blood, when it is 'bad', is here considered to be stronger than the father's (think of Thomas Hardy's novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* too in this respect); Rochester seeks Jane's pity because he has failed to read this information correctly. Thus novelists illustrate women's supposed corruptive power in terms of genetics.

Blood tells of violence

Blood is a physical entity, and when spilled indicates a boundary crossed. Brontë novels are full of such occurrences. Here is a passage from *Wuthering Heights*:

[Linton] quickly sprang erect, and struck [Heathcliff] full on the throat a blow that would have leveled a slighter man. It took his breath for a minute; and while he choked, Mr Linton walked out by the back door into the yard, and from thence to the front entrance.

“There! you’ve done with coming here,” cried Catherine. “Get away, now; he’ll return with a brace of pistols, and half a dozen assistants [...]”

“Do you suppose I’m going with that blow burning in my gullet?” he thundered. “By hell, no! I’ll crush his ribs in like a rotten hazel-nut before I cross the threshold! If I don’t floor him now, I shall murder him some time; so, as you value his existence, let me get at him!” (Chapter XI)

This is strong stuff. But the material is saved from becoming overblown and farcical, always a risk with this kind of high drama, because of the way in which the blood, or threat of it, seems in some way to be demanded by the visceral themes with which Brontë is working in this tale. Cathy’s separation from Heathcliff is like the most primitive abandonment, based as it is on a quasi blood-tie: Heathcliff was adopted by Cathy’s parents. The two grow up as brother and sister, but, unless you believe the more radical critics, who suggest the possibility of Heathcliff being Mr Earnshaw’s illegitimate son, they are not actual siblings. Emily introduces this notion in order for the true impact of Cathy’s desertion to be felt. It is worse that she leaves him, and her destiny with him, because there is the symbolic indication of a blood tie. Cathy responds to the deprivation (which she instigates for social reasons), by seeking a rich man in recompense. This man will make up for the losses of the soul with the gains of the body – material wealth stands in for the loving embrace. But not completely, as she learns. As she dies, bloodied in childbirth, she encounters Heathcliff again, and they revert to their original intensity: she rips out his hair, he froths at the mouth, she passes out, he threatens death. The characters in the text almost routinely are gashed and bloodied, bitten by dogs and cut by glass or knives. This is to show the cost of betrayal in the currency shared by us all, Grange inhabitant or Heights inhabitant. Inarticulate of speech, articulateness comes in the flow of blood to these characters; their blood speaks for them.

In *Jane Eyre* too, the blood of violence is spilled, though less frequently than in *Wuthering Heights*. *Jane Eyre* is more a novel of manners and society than Emily Brontë’s novel could ever be, but the language of blood is still potent. At the beginning of the text Jane’s head is cut open by her cousin, John Reed. He throws a book at her head, which flings her head into a door, cutting it. For this incident, she is punished, removed to a nineteenth-century version of a medieval torture chamber, full of Oedipal ghosts and superstitious memories (the room is red, signifying perhaps the onset of puberty/menstruation as well as Oedipal desires). Here she sits, her head still bleeding, looking at a strange incarnation of herself in a mirror. When the blood of violence comes, as in instances like this, it is to indicate primal feelings and jealousies, rages and deprivations. John Reed is Mummy’s boy, insipid and impotent, fat and stupid. Jane was his father’s favourite, she is strong and intelligent. In *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff usurps Hindley Earnshaw’s place in his father’s affections in a similar way. Hindley punishes Heathcliff for it once Mr Earnshaw dies, setting a vengeful precedent.

Blood as sexual indicator

Later in *Jane Eyre*, blood is a symbol of depravity, sexual craving out of control, and it is spilt in the supposedly unnatural attempt of Bertha to assert herself. Locked up in the attic of Rochester’s mansion, her lips a swollen symbol of sensuality and lust, Bertha Mason awaits the opportunities she fights for to express her carnality. She always does so by drawing blood. Jane asks herself as she watches by the mauled body that is Bertha’s brother:

What crime was this, that lived incarnate in this sequestered mansion, and could neither be expelled nor subdued by the owner? – what mystery, that broke out, now in fire and now in blood, at the deadest hours of night? What creature was it, that,

masked in an ordinary woman's face and shape, uttered the voice, now of a mocking demon, and anon of a carrion-seeking bird of prey? (pp. 239-40)

It is the crime of sexuality. In true Gothic style, anticipating *Dracula* (1897), the flowing of blood is used as an analogy for sex. And Jane does call Bertha a vampire (see p. 311). When Rochester takes the wedding party to ogle her, after the abortive marriage to Jane, she again threatens to break out:

The three gentlemen retreated simultaneously. Mr Rochester flung me behind him: the lunatic sprang and grappled his throat viciously, and laid her teeth to his cheek: they struggled. She was a big woman, in stature almost equaling her husband, and corpulent besides: she showed virile force in the contest – more than once she almost throttled him, athletic as he was. (p. 321).

Their conjugal embrace is a bite soon taken out of his cheek (was this in Sylvia Plath's mind as she bit Ted Hughes?), a vile expression of perverted and thus insane blood lust. Blood is indicative of revolution, Brontë implies; Bertha is sexual, and strong, and expresses this in a manner that cannot be tolerated by her husband. Some critics of the novel suggest that she is Jane's unrepressed alter ego. Possibly, for some things are common to them both. As well as being traceable to her matrilineal forbears, Brontë indicates that Bertha's madness is tied simply to her sex. Her spells of madness seem to be determined by the cycle of the moon, suggesting the menstrual cycle. Jane is not conscious of this link, but she tells us about the state of the moon as she relates each incident of Bertha's madness. Enlightened medicine of the time believed that women were in thrall to their reproductive organs, ruled by them, and Charlotte seems to suggest an affinity with this belief. So in this text, in a different manner from *Wuthering Heights*, the currency of blood is a particularly female affair. Bertha's blood-line and her blood lust signify her sexuality and her tendency to madness equally. Charlotte Brontë doesn't take the logical next step and suggest that society, by depriving women of expression of their sexuality, could be said to instigate madness borne of repression, but Jean Rhys does in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), when she tells the story of Bertha which *Jane Eyre* left out.

Blood as indicator of marriageability

In many novels, women are there to be seen. The colour on their bodies, the warmth in their faces, the clothes against their skin, the blood in their veins, are rendered visually (Tess's blushes in Hardy's novel are one of the best examples in literature). The society of *Jane Eyre* has associated too much blood with too much sex; but there is, after all, one occasion (also offering ripe visual material) when society values the link between women and blood: the wedding night. On this occasion the husband, metaphorically, begins to inscribe his text on an ideally 'blank page' (when Jane is about to marry she is called an 'expectant, ardent woman'; after the marriage is prevented, she becomes pale again, and is compared with a snow-covered landscape (p. 323)). Rochester chooses Bertha because she is rich: her father can settle on her a fortune of thirty thousand pounds (p. 332). But his disgust with her is shown to begin on his honeymoon. Though she is rich, perhaps we are supposed to infer that he has discovered that she is not a virgin? In this way she would cancel out her economic benefits with a level of female sexuality Rochester, and society as a whole, would not condone. [See here Isak Dinesen's short story 'The Blank Page' (1957).]

Blood as dedication

Blood can be read as an indication of female value, then. Though too much blood is dangerous, in the right quantities, and in the right location, it signifies the rule of right. In Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), the child Paulina shows her dedication to her father by wounding herself. The narrator Lucy Snowe (note the surname) describes her:

holding in her hands a shred of a handkerchief, which she was professing to hem, and at which she bored perseveringly with a needle, that in her fingers seemed almost a skewer, pricking herself ever and anon, marking the cambric with a track of minute red dots, occasionally starting when the perverse weapon – swerving from her control, inflicted a deeper stab than usual (p. 73).

A sadomasochistic/psychoanalytic reading of this passage is almost inevitable with C20th eyes. The weapon, when out of her conscious control, stabs more deeply than usual, her unconscious inflicts wounds that will produce more blood and therefore indicate more love, than her conscious control will allow. It is as though Polly is some kind of martyr to her love for her father, and wants to display the bodily signs of it to him in the gift that he will take away when he leaves her for a trip abroad. Polly is also constructing a narrative of sorts in this way. Using a bodily ink, and showing the high price of her devotion as she does so, the child displays that her father is more important to her than physical comfort and ease.

Where do these stories told in blood end? Cathy Earnshaw is dead, as are many of her fellow characters. Bertha is burnt to death in a blaze at Thornfield Hall. Jane Eyre then settles for a life with a man much physically reduced from his days of romantic glory. Passion has been contained, family restored, and violence ceases accordingly. Perhaps these texts signify a kind of repression after all? More difficult to judge is Lucy Snowe in *Villette*, who loses her man but retains her independence. She retains a whiteness that resists inscription, of either the edifying, or the sexual, kind.

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