

THE INTERPLAY OF IMAGINATION: BALTHUS'S ILLUSTRATIONS FOR EMILY BRONTË'S *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*

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“Controversial painter of disquieting themes.” This was how the *Guardian* (19 February 2001) headed its obituary of the painter Balthus (Balthazar Klossowski de Rola), who died on 18 February 2001. The tone of the obituary in the *Times* was more sophisticated but the headline was just as pointed: “Reclusive painter whose equivocal depictions of near-adolescent children were admired by his peers but also provoked revulsion” (19 February 2001). Balthus, long considered one of the great figure painters of the twentieth century, evokes, and will probably continue to evoke, strong and divided emotional reactions.

Born in 1908 in Paris of Polish parents, Balthus was a self-taught artist. When he was fourteen, his book with some forty ink drawings, *Mitsou*, was published, with a preface by poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who was his mother's lover. Balthus learnt his craft mostly by copying such old masters as Piero della Francesca and Nicolas Poussin, while he was also influenced by Gustave Courbet, Georges Seurat, and Pierre Bonnard. His representative works, such as *The Mountain* (1937), *The Room* (1952-54) and *The Passage du Commerce Saint-André* (1952-54), strike us with a sense of mysteriousness: they are both strangely serene and disturbing, at once “deeply traditional and radically modern” (Davenport, jacket cover). From 1983 to 1984, retrospective exhibitions of his work were held consecutively in three different cities: at the Musée National d'Art Moderne – Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and at the City Museum in Kyoto. These were followed in 1993 by another retrospective in Lausanne and the next year by a major exhibition in Tokyo. Of the numerous publications available on his work, the most thorough is *Balthus: Catalogue Raisonné of the Complete Works*, which features some 2100 of his works.

In the early 1930s, Balthus attempted to make a series of illustrations for Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. In an unpublished letter to his father dated 15 May 1933, he writes:

I lived with [Pierre Leyris from the winter of 1932] until March 1933, working on the illustrations of “Wuthering Heights” by Emily Brontë. I had started this on my return from Morocco [i.e. the end of December] and had taken it up several times. I am still working on it without having yet attained a definitive form, a satisfying one.

But it's a thing that moves me so, that I feel so deeply, that I believe I will get there. Maybe, then, I'll also find an editor.¹

Young Balthus, inspired by the novel, started the series of drawings without any prospective publisher in mind.² He was as yet a poor unknown artist. He finished the First Volume by February 1935,³ but soon afterwards gave up any further attempt⁴ and called the series complete with fourteen drawings, eight of which were published in late 1935 in the periodical *Minotaure*.

Significantly enough, the series of illustrations covers only Chapters 3 to 15 of the novel, and focuses on the childhood and adolescence of Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff. An art critic, Jean Leymarie, points out that in the drawings Balthus "identifies himself with Heathcliff" (13), while Sabine Rewald adds that Catherine is "a portrait of Antoinette de Watteville, a young Swiss woman with whom Balthus was in love" (160).

While he was executing the drawings, Balthus often wrote to Antoinette. In one of these letters, dated 8 November 1934, he reveals his own ambitions:

At the moment I'm working virtually day and night, taking advantage of a wave of "inspiration." I want to put a lot into it, a lot of things: some tenderness, some childish nostalgia, some dream, some love, some death, some cruelty, some crime, some violence, some cries of hatred, some roaring and some tears! All that, all that is hidden at the bottom of ourselves, an image of all the essential elements of the human being stripped of its thick crust of slack hypocrisy! A synthesizing view of Man as he would be if he still knew how to be great; the book is just that.

He enthusiastically talks of pouring into his drawings various conflicting passions. He finds in *Wuthering Heights* "an image of all the essential elements of the human being stripped of its thick crust of slack hypocrisy," "[a] synthesizing view of Man as he would be if he still knew how to be great." How does he translate this powerful reading of the novel into a visual work of art?

¹ Unpublished letters of Balthus are cited in this paper with his family's kind permission. I would like to thank Lee Waddell who helped me translate them into English.

² It is not until some fifty years later that Balthus found an editor to have *Wuthering Heights* published with his illustrations. There are now two editions: *Les Hauts de Hurle-Vent* (Paris: Segquier, 1989) and *Wuthering Heights* (New York: The Limited Editions Club, 1993).

³ In an unpublished letter to Antoinette de Watteville, dated 9 February 1935, Balthus mentions that he has finished the First Volume and has been tackling the Second.

⁴ See Balthus's "Afterword" to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (The Limited Editions Club, 1993), 207-08.

As I have mentioned, Balthus completed fourteen drawings.⁵ What the art critics appear to have overlooked is the fact that four of the fourteen, in other words more than a quarter, are devoted to a single chapter of the novel, Chapter 6. There is one drawing each for Chapters 7, 8, 10, 11, and 15, two for Chapter 3, and three for Chapter 9. But it is only Chapter 6 that is illustrated with four drawings. Why is this chapter particularly important to the artist?

In order to answer this question, let us first look at the beginning and the end of the series to gain an overall view of the drawings before examining those that deal with episodes in Chapter 6.

Balthus's works often convey a sense of cruelty, violence or insecurity. The human figures look awkward or almost unnatural in their postures, as if they have been frozen in the middle of an action. The body is twisted, the face and torso pointing in different directions, a leg stretched like a long stiff pole, or the whole figure absurdly inclined to the right or to the left.

Take, for example, Plate 1 "Pull his hair when you go by," which illustrates an episode in Chapter 3.



Plate 1: "Pull his hair when you go by" (Chapter 3)

Hindley Earnshaw, the young master of *Wuthering Heights*, watches his wife Frances pull without mercy the hair of a little boy, Heathcliff, while Catherine anxiously looks up at her playmate.

⁵ Balthus executed numerous preparatory studies, some of which remain in existence. See Giovanni Carandente, *Balthus: Drawings and Watercolours* (Thames and Hudson, 1983), 25-38; Sabine Rewald, 160-66; Jean Clair and Virginia Monnier, *Balthus: Catalogue Raisonné of the Complete Works* (Gallimard, 1999), 485-94.

In the composition Hindley is set apart at the back, whereas the figure of Frances in the middle and the children at the front form a group, creating together a triangular structure. Note the little chair on the floor that has been knocked down, presumably by Frances. Taking the left end of this chair as a point of departure, direct your eyes upward, touching upon the tip of the outline of the right foot of Frances, of Heathcliff's right shoulder, of his head, and of Frances's massive hair. This will bring you to the top of the drawing. Now, turn at this point and direct your eyes downward, touching upon the right tip of the outline of Frances's hair, of her left elbow, of Catherine's long hair and of her skirt. The children, you realise, are squeezed into a space enclosed by these two lines, a mountain-like shape that is dominated by the sadistic Frances. The tiny chair that has been knocked down on the floor, in contrast to the large, throne-like chair in which Hindley rests, epitomises the children's helplessness under the tyranny of the adults.

Frances's figure is depicted in an extremely exaggerated manner. Her right leg is like a long straight pole, her elbows stick out to the right and to the left, while her face is enormous, with Medusa-like hair, as if to emphasise her threatening presence. Catherine, on the other hand, is compressed into a small figure. She sits acrobatically with her legs crossed to her left, her upper body facing forward, and her head twisted over to look up at Heathcliff. This is no other than a physical representation of her inner anxiety as well as that of the suppressed feelings of Heathcliff, her other self.

What then does Plate 14, the last of the series, represent? It has a caption, "Catherine's arms had fallen relaxed, and her head hung down."



Plate 14: "Catherine's arms had fallen relaxed, and her head hung down" (Chapter 15)

The piece, which illustrates Chapter 15, shows a room in Thrushcross Grange. Heathcliff, standing at the front, jealously holds the dying Catherine in his arms as he turns back with glaring eyes to fend off his rival, Edgar Linton, and the nurse, Nelly Dean.

The composition is complicated. The way Edgar, who stands at the back, has his arm flung to the left suggests a possible triangular structure. We may draw a line from his head downward to the tip of Nelly's right heel, and another to the tip of the leg of the chair on the left. This triangle, however, does not hold together. For the two legs of Heathcliff forcefully tear through its base, as it were, while in holding up Catherine, his upper body breaks through its left side, and Nelly, in bending backward, breaks through its right.

The central figures thus burst outward and create another structure, a triangle that is upside down. Taking the left heel of Heathcliff as a point of departure, first direct your eyes upward to the tip of the outline of Catherine's hair, then to that of Nelly's head. These two lines form the shape of an opened-out bell, a shape that is structurally insecure as the heavy base is at the top.

The line that bends to the left particularly attracts our attention. It traces the shadowy, darker side of Heathcliff's left leg and that of Catherine's upper body, the ambiguousness of which momentarily deludes us with the idea that his leg is directly attached to her, or *is*, in fact, her own leg. This momentary vision of the lovers' bodies as unified, however, awakens us all the more to the striking contrast of their upper parts: Heathcliff's eyes fire out with "life," while Catherine's hanging head and arms denote nothing but "death." The flabbergasted looks of Edgar and Nelly only prove that they are powerless witnesses, witnesses to the lovers' "union" as well as to Catherine's "death."

The introduction and the conclusion of the series thus deal with Heathcliff in childhood and early manhood respectively. A cruelly oppressed boy at Wuthering Heights pitied by his alter ego, Catherine, and a reckless youth, too eager to see his dying lover, invading Thrushcross Grange. The series then, we may say, reveals Heathcliff's transformation through his relationship with Catherine, from a helpless boy to a rebellious, tragic man who mourns the eternal loss of his lover.

But if Balthus is interested in Heathcliff's metamorphosis, why does he pay particular attention to Chapter 6, of all the chapters in *Wuthering Heights*?

You will recall that, in Chapter 6, the narrator Nelly tells of Hindley's return to Wuthering Heights after the death of old Mr. Earnshaw. Hindley idolises his wife Frances, but he becomes tyrannical towards the children, driving them out of the house and reducing Heathcliff to the level of a labourer. The episodes that Plates 1 and 2 illustrate belong to this period, although they are narrated in the form of Catherine's diary, which has been browsed over by sleepy Lockwood in Chapter 3.

Plate 2, entitled "I have got the time on with writing for twenty minutes," shows Catherine on the floor, writing the diary, while Heathcliff presses her to go out for a ramble.



Plate 2: "I have got the time on with writing for twenty minutes" (Chapter 3)

In some publications this drawing is mistakenly introduced with the title "Because Cathy taught him what she learned." *Balthus*, an authoritative art catalogue with critical essays, published by the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1984, is a good example (27). With this title the drawing becomes an illustration for Chapter 6, whereas Balthus entitled it otherwise in *Minotaure* (No.7 1935 60). This confusion in title is quite understandable, however, since some of the episodes in Chapter 3, as I mentioned earlier, deal with the same period as that of Chapter 6.

Please note the inkbottle on the left bottom of the drawing. Now, taking the top of this bottle as a point of departure, direct your eyes upward to Heathcliff's heel and to his hindquarters. This line, interestingly enough, parallels the outlines of Catherine's arms, of the left side of her skirt (of her legs within), and finally of the two solid poles of the chair behind her. The horizontal line of the table and that of the floor, on the other hand, have their counterparts in the outlines of Catherine's torso. Catherine's upper body and arms are so stiff and immobile, like the pieces of furniture around her, that her skirt, which seems to move in swaying motion, strikes us as all the more erotic.

Heathcliff's head is located at the top of a triangle, a structure that dominates the composition. Moreover his legs, which create another triangle, seem to imprison Catherine, whose figure forms a rectangle within. Heathcliff's right leg resting on a chair cruelly oppresses her, whereas her skirt seems to move strangely in response to his sensuous hindquarters. The relationship of the couple, still sexually dormant, is infinitely dangerous, one that is just barely supported by the rigour of the structure.

Balthus seems to have been delighted with the form for he attempted it again in oil. It resulted in *The Children* (1937), which Pablo Picasso, who admired Balthus's work, procured and cherished throughout his life.⁶

Plate 3, entitled "But it was one of their chief amusements to run away to the moors," is the first to illustrate Chapter 6, the chapter in question. The children are set at liberty in an open space, the wide moors. We should note that this piece, together with Plates 4 and 5, is set outdoors, and that these illustrations are exceptional in the series, which generally depicts the characters' interaction within doors.



Plate 3: "But it was one of their chief amusements to run away to the moors" (Chapter 6)

The composition of Plate 3 invokes serenity, although Heathcliff's shaded face, looking down upon Catherine, has a touch of melancholy. He sits on the moors, his legs thrown sideways to his right. Catherine places her upper body on his knees, stretching her lower body on the grass to her left. A slightly upturned curve, which starts from Heathcliff's heel and goes along the sensuous outline of Catherine's lower body, is gently repeated in the shape of the hill.

Plate 4, entitled "Cathy and I escaped from the wash-house to have a ramble of liberty," presents Catherine and Heathcliff at a large window.

⁶ For an analysis of this work by a Brontë critic, see U. C. Knoepfelmacher, *Wuthering Heights: A Study* (Ohio UP, 1994), 120-23.



Plate 4: "Cathy and I escaped from the wash-house to have a ramble of liberty" (Chapter 6)

Note that by one perpendicular line Balthus boldly divides the surface of the paper: the left forms the wall of Wuthering Heights, the right the wild moor. He then cuts a large window out of this wall, the inside of which is left in darkness. Catherine sits barefoot on the ledge of the window, her upper body inclined to her left and arms spread out, thus diagonally linking, as it were, the corners of the window. She bends her right leg upward at an angle, and stretches the other to her left. Heathcliff, on the other hand, stands outside, one leg firmly put forward to his right and the milkmaid's gown flung to his left. These children's alternate movements towards the right and towards the left weave a rhythmic, geometric pattern on the big white wall.

If the children, in Plate 3, harmonise with the landscape and, in Plate 4, move in a rhythmic pattern, they are thrown into chaos in Plate 5, which is entitled "The devil had seized her ankle."⁷

⁷ Plate 11 is often taken to be an illustration of Chapter 6 with the caption "We ran from the top of the Heights." See for example *Balthus* (Centre Georges Pompidou) 30. I argue that this is a mistake. In *Minotaure* Balthus gives the caption: "Calling at intervals, and listening." In summer 1999 when I asked him what this illustrates, Balthus promptly answered that this is "a scene that shows Catherine searching for Heathcliff who has disappeared." Needless to say this is an episode in Chapter 9. I would like to point out another piece of evidence that supports this, namely the form of dress that Catherine is wearing. She comes back from Thrushcross Grange transformed into a gracious lady, wearing "a long cloth habit which she [is] obliged to hold up with both hands" (52). In faithful correspondence to the text of *Wuthering Heights*, Balthus shows Catherine in this long habit in the subsequent drawings.



Plate 5: "The devil had seized her ankle" (Chapter 6)

In Plate 5, Heathcliff seems horrified as Catherine's leg is bitten and held by a bulldog belonging to Thrushcross Grange. No triangle or rectangle provides any sense of stability; instead, an everlasting circle governs the composition. Using the tip of the bulldog's tail as a point of departure, direct your eyes to its paws, to Catherine's right knee on the ground, to Heathcliff's fist, raised high up in the air, and then to his head, and you will come back again to the bulldog's tail. Imprisoned in this magical circle, the children seem frightened, pointing their four arms in all directions, while the black woods at the back ominously close in upon them.

Plate 6, "I saw they were full of stupid admiration," the last to illustrate Chapter 6, may be called the antithesis of Plate 1.

You recall that Plate 1 portrays the Earnshaws at Wuthering Heights. The members of the family are squeezed into a small space. They are pressed both from the right side and from the left by big pieces of furniture: a cupboard, a table and a pair of large chairs. A small doll's chair and some blocks, moreover, have been knocked down and scattered on the floor. For the children, Catherine and Heathcliff, this is a house of suffocation, chaos and cruelty.

What then is the household of the Lintons like? In Plate 6 we see Catherine half reclining on a divan, enjoying the attention of Mr. and Mrs. Linton, who stand on the left, and of Edgar and Isabella, who are stationed on the right. She is acting like a queen, as her enormous head symbolises, while she shows off her wounded leg. Unlike the oppressive household of Wuthering Heights, the spaciousness of this place seems to promise her freedom. But in reality the Lintons, as they surround her, present themselves in a strictly hierarchical order, the levels of their heads corresponding to their precise places in society. What is more, it is simply because she has gone

through the initiation rite of shedding blood that she has attained the outwardly majestic position of the Grange.



Plate 6: "I saw they were full of stupid admiration" (Chapter 6)

To Heathcliff and Catherine, the discovery of Thrushcross Grange has a profound significance. Having left Wuthering Heights, that is to say, having left Heathcliff, Catherine loses her identity. She is miserably entrapped by the Grange, and by the social order. Heathcliff also suffers from having lost his alter ego, but more than that, from having lost his own soul. It is quite ironical, that having come back alone to the Heights that night, Heathcliff boasts to Nelly: "I saw they were full of stupid admiration; she is so immeasurably superior to them – to everybody on earth, is she not Nelly?" (51) Heathcliff is half drunk with the victory his alter ego has attained and demonstrates his ignorance.

Heathcliff and his playmate are no longer one, but are now two separate beings. Catherine moves from the stage of Innocence to that of Experience. This is what Chapter 6 signifies.

The underlying theme of Balthus's illustrations is clearly the death of innocence and the loss of childhood. The loss is made poignantly clear in Plate 14, as we have seen, where Heathcliff, forlorn and desperate, holds Catherine's dying body in his arms. In his early manhood Heathcliff experiences Catherine's physical death, but the symbolic death of their relationship is narrated in Chapter 6. Balthus's interpretation of the novel, which finds the turning point in Chapter 6, is not at all pointless. In fact it anticipates the readings of such important critics as Georges Bataille and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar.

Bataille, who defines the "formula" of eroticism as "assenting to life up to the point of death" (*Eroticism* 11), writes:

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.

Their love for one another can be reduced, according to Bataille, to "the refusal to give up an infantile freedom." Catherine, however, allows herself to be seduced by the easy life, personified by Edgar Linton, whereas Heathcliff to the end represents a more elemental 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" (*Literature and Evil* 4-8).

Similarly Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar call *Wuthering Heights* "a rebelliously topsy-turvy retelling of Milton's and Western culture's central tale of the fall of woman." They sum up the novel as follows:

This fall [Catherine's sexual awakening], says Brontë, is not a fall into hell. It is a fall from "hell" into "heaven," not a fall from grace (in the religious sense) but a fall into grace (in the cultural sense). Moreover, for the heroine who falls it is the loss of Satan rather than the loss of God that signals the painful passage from innocence to experience. Emily Brontë, in other words, is not just Blakeian in "double" mystical vision, but Blakeian in a tough, radically political commitment to the belief that the state of being patriarchal Christianity calls "hell" is eternally, energetically delightful, whereas the state called "heaven" is rigidly hierarchical, Urizenic, and "kind" as a poison tree. (255)

Thus both Bataille and Gilbert and Gubar, though their expressions vary, find in Brontë a radical concept of Good and Evil and see her work as providing insights into the problem of sexuality, a cause of conflict between the child's world and the adult world. Some forty years before them, Balthus had seen in the childhood of Catherine and Heathcliff a most fascinating state of innocence, eroticism and violence fused together, a state which is to be irrecoverably lost with the awakening of sexuality. The illustrations indeed constitute a sensitive and thought-provoking reading of Brontë's novel. His series as a whole undoubtedly represents, it may be said, the profound response of one artistic imagination to the work of another, a modern response to one of the monumental works of the Victorian Age.

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