Interpreting Emily: ekphrasis and allusion in Charlotte Brontë's

'Editor's Preface' to *Wuthering Heights*

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Abstract

In writing her 'Editor's Preface' to *Wuthering Heights* in 1850, Charlotte Brontë reimagined Emily's novel as a statue roughly hewn from 'a granite block on a solitary moor'.[1] The statue stands before us, wrought in words: an ekphrasis; a border-crossing between the arts, present here, in Brontë's preface, as an attempt to render the visual and plastic in verbal form (and vice versa). This gesture is also multiply allusive, weaving together the language of *Wuthering Heights*, the judgement of literary critics, and ideas concerning poetry and permanence derived from Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Ozymandias' (1818). This article performs an extended close reading of the novel-statue, exploring the rhetorical work it performs as part of Brontë's careful negotiation of Emily's posthumous print identity. As an editor, biographer and preface-writer, Brontë used the 1850 edition of *Wuthering Heights* to transform Emily's art: she inscribes a different legacy for her sister, reimagining the dead novelist as a poet yet to find her audience.

Keywords: allusion; Charlotte Brontë; editing; ekphrasis; Emily Brontë; 'Ozymandias'; Percy Bysshe Shelley; sculpture in literature; *Wuthering Heights*

In early September 1850, Charlotte Brontë cast her eyes over a *Palladium* review, a survey of hers and her sisters' published works. The essayist was Sydney Dobell, and despite Brontë's disavowal in a note to the third edition of *Jane Eyre* (1847), he persisted in collapsing the three Bell pseudonyms into a single authorial figure, that of Currer Bell. But when it came to

Wuthering Heights (1847)*,* Dobell beat against the critical tide. Mistaking it for an apprentice work, an early novel published late, he praised its inconsistent genius and sought to reassure Currer Bell that there were 'passages in this book […] of which any novelist, past or present, might be proud'.[2] James Taylor, a manager at Brontë's publishers, Smith, Elder & Co., had sent the article to Haworth Parsonage, and in a note of thanks she confessed to its being 'one of those notices over which an author rejoices with trembling'.[3] There was pride and pleasure in having *Jane Eyre* lauded as a work that would 'endure with the prose literature of our language', and in having her authorial signature identified as a 'chief apostle' in art's mission to reconstruct society.[4] But equal in importance was Dobell's reading of *Wuthering Heights*. The second anniversary of Emily's death was fast approaching, and Brontë was moved by his appreciation of her sister's work. To Taylor, she remarked upon the bittersweet nature of Dobell's 'late justice';[5] to Harriet Martineau, who first revealed the anonymous essayist's name, the theme recurs: 'one passage in it touched a deep chord, I mean where allusion is made to my sister Emily's work, *Wuthering Heights*; the justice there rendered comes indeed late, the wreath awarded drops on a grave'.[6]

Dobell's article proved decisive for the development and execution of Brontë's next literary project. He found fault with *Shirley* (1849) and advised Currer Bell to wait and watch, replenishing her 'exhausted treasury' of experience before attempting another novel.[7] Brontë's letters at this time are punctuated with hints that progress on a third novel was slow to nought; in this, she agreed with Dobell: 'D[eo] V[olente] [God willing] I will do so. Yet it is harder work to wait with the hands bound and the observant and reflective faculties, at their silent unseen work, than to labour mechanically'.[8] Unable to write fiction but longing for an occupation, she readily agreed to Smith, Elder's proposal that a new edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* (1847) be prepared, to include 'a prefatory and explanatory notice of the authors'.[9] Dobell's article, therefore, appears to have precipitated, if not quite originated,

Brontë's adoption and combination of the roles of editor and biographer. But to think of these labours as merely mechanical, of the kind she claimed to desire, is to elide their significant interpretive potential and to willingly overlook their power to shape readers' encounters with texts. Dobell's article may have convinced Smith, Elder there was money to be made in reprinting Emily's and Anne's work, but for Charlotte, his words proved a spur to her new career as custodian of her sisters' literary and biographical afterlives. In working as their editor, she intervened directly in their texts, substituting and (re)arranging their words, authoring two distinct prefaces—the 'Biographical Notice' and 'Editor's Preface' to *Wuthering Heights*—and selecting previously unpublished poems from their literary remains. The 1850 edition stands in dialogic relation to Dobell, and in her preface-writing in particular, Brontë responds to a series of provocations in his article: the 'late justice' afforded to *Wuthering Heights*, and questions of authorship, authority, reputation and posterity.

This article pays close attention to the rhetorical work performed in Brontë's prefaces to the 1850 edition, particularly her 'Editor's Preface' to *Wuthering Heights*. These texts construct a posthumous authorial myth for Ellis Bell, one that seeks to accommodate *Wuthering Heights* while mitigating its critical controversies. At the heart of this project is ekphrasis: a mode of writing defined by James Heffernan, in the broadest terms, as '*the verbal representation of visual representation*'.[10] In her preface, Brontë transforms *Wuthering Heights* into a statue, enacting a border-crossing between the arts. This image provides her with a suggestive, allusive language that mirrors her ambivalence: it renders the novel strange and other, without denying Emily's powers as an artist; it also repeats her disavowals of authorship, re-inscribing the distinction between Currer and Ellis Bell. But ekphrasis is doomed to fail—for, in W. J. T. Mitchell's pithy formulation, 'Words can "cite," but never "sight" their objects'.[11] Ekphrasis, then, is always accompanied by allusion. Though Brontë's novel-statue has no material counterpart, its likeness can be discerned across various intertexts: in Dobell's

Palladium article, in *Wuthering Heights*, and, most significantly, in a citation of Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Ozymandias' hitherto overlooked by critics. An extended close reading of the novel-statue reveals a biographer-editor caught between competing demands and loyalties of sister writers and sister arts. In tracing the twists and turns of these antagonisms, the picture that emerges into view is not one of straightforward rivalry and subjugation. In transforming Emily's art, Brontë transforms Ellis Bell: she inscribes a different legacy for her sister, reimagining the dead novelist as a poet yet to find her audience.

Prefacing

Brontë agreed to the new edition in early September 1850, and before the month was out, she had drafted the 'Biographical Notice' (dated 19 September in the published volume). The idea for an 'Editor's Preface' to *Wuthering Heights* came later, prompted by re-reading the novel preparatory to revising proofs—her first return to the Heights since Emily's death. Brontë's letters to her publisher proved a testing ground for ideas and resolutions she would later develop in the prefaces-in-progress. That *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) was 'a mistake', that Anne composed it 'under a strange, conscientious, half-ascetic notion of […] severe duty', that the revelation of 'brief and simple' biographical detail 'might set at rest all erroneous conjectures respecting their identity'—this was first laid down in letters to William Smith Williams.[12] Also to Williams, she confessed to finding *Wuthering Heights* an oppressive novel—'the reader is scarcely ever permitted a taste of unalloyed pleasure'—and while her reading had convinced her of its 'power', she was nonetheless confirmed in her view that certain modifications were desirable, particularly to 'the orthography of the old servant Joseph's speeches—for though—as it stands—it exactly renders the Yorkshire accent to a Yorkshire ear—yet I am sure Southerns must find it unintelligible'.[13]

Correcting errors, making the novel intelligible—these ambitions recur in her letters and across the prefatory writings in the 1850 edition. In conceiving of her biographical and editorial duty in this way, Brontë anticipates the theorizing of Gerard Genette on the subject of paratexts, those 'productions' that 'surround […] and extend [a text], precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to *make present*, to ensure the text's presence in the world'.[14] Readers of the 1850 edition do not, and cannot, engage with *Wuthering Heights* or *Agnes Grey* as unadorned, isolable texts. These novels are made present, materially and discursively, through shared paratexts: paper, typeface and spatial arrangements on the page; advertisements, prefaces and editorial interventions. The 1850 edition is assembled thus:

'Extracts from reviews of *Wuthering Heights*' (from the *Palladium*, *Britannia* and *Atlas*)

Title page

Printer information

Contents page

'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell, by Currer Bell'

'Editor's Preface to *Wuthering Heights*'

Text of *Wuthering Heights*

Text of *Agnes Grey*

'Selections from the Literary Remains of Ellis and Acton Bell' (biographical preface to selected poems, focusing in particular upon Emily)

Poems by Emily (edited with annotations)

Poems by Anne (edited with an introduction and annotations)

Genette conceived of paratexts in spatial terms: they are a 'threshold', a zone of 'transition' and 'transaction' where readers encounter the many hands (and voices) involved in a book's production.[15] This is a porous space, invoking and addressing the world outside the text: a site

where authors, editors, publishers and printers attempt to direct readerly engagements with the work at hand. As a biographer and editor, Brontë suffuses the 1850 edition through the paratext—sometimes invisibly, through unmarked editorial interventions (in her changes to the paragraphing and dialect speech in *Wuthering Heights*, for example); sometimes in the guise of her pseudonym. For an ideal reader obedient to the structure of the material book, leafing through and reading each page in turn, Currer Bell is present sequentially; first, as the author of the 'Biographical Notice'; second, as the editor of *Wuthering Heights*. These opening prefaces are hybrid forms according to Genette's schema, combining the form and function of original and later prefaces. They are original in the sense of being written for, and appearing simultaneously with, the 1850 edition; they are also belated, accompanying novels that already circulate in the literary marketplace. In their hybridity, they combine the primary functions of original and later prefaces: they seek to '*ensure that the text is read properly'* in accordance with that will-o'-the-wisp, authorial intention (and editorial intention, the waters being muddied in this case); and they offer 'a response to the first reactions of the first public and the critics'.[16] Their desired end, therefore, is a proper re-reading of the lives and work of Emily and Anne, where this standard is arbitrated by Charlotte under the authorial and editorial signature of Currer Bell.

The 'Biographical Notice' first separates Currer from Ellis and Acton Bell, then works to establish Currer's authority as proxy to speak on their behalf. Brontë gives up her sisters' first names, acknowledging their pseudonyms without relinquishing this protection for herself, and she emphasises the collaborative nature of their writing, from childhood games to shared efforts to enter the literary marketplace. Brontë's biographer persona employs a redoubled rhetoric of intimacy as a foundation for these prefatory labours: sibling intimacy, implicitly sororal; creative intimacy within a literary coterie. Her pseudonymous signature comes under pressure as an acknowledged fiction, but the preface is as much an exercise in concealment as

revelation: as a private figure, name unknown, Brontë speaks with the authority of a sister who loved and lived with these writing women; as a public figure clinging to her pseudonym, Currer Bell speaks with the authority of a professional author and experienced sparring partner of the critics. Hers, then, is a position of power and privilege set against the failures and ignorance of Ellis Bell's first reading public. Barring the single example of Sydney Dobell—the 'one exception to the general rule of criticism'—Brontë makes much of the seeming unintelligibility of *Wuthering Heights* and its author:

> The immature but very real powers revealed in *Wuthering Heights* were scarcely recognised; its import and nature were misunderstood; the identity of its author was misrepresented; it was said that this was an earlier and ruder attempt of the same pen which had produced *Jane Eyre*.[17]

The critics had missed *Wuthering Heights* and Ellis Bell—misrepresented, misunderstood, misrecognized. Brontë, however, resists the temptation to labour her point. Rather she mitigates blame through the act of biographical myth-making, fashioning for Emily a singular and idiosyncratic nature: 'Stronger than a man, simpler than a child', she had 'never seen her parallel in anything'.[18] Little wonder, then, if critics found Emily and her work unintelligible. Their failure speaks to the need for an intermediary, for help: 'An interpreter ought always to have stood between her and the world'.[19] Constructing Emily and her work as somehow incomprehensible serves Brontë's prefatory ends: by implication, the signature of Currer Bell—professional writer, sister-collaborator, editor-biographer—is uniquely able to serve as interpreter. Brontë places herself between Emily and the world, authorizing herself to intercede and promising to interpret, in keeping with genre expectations of preface-writing. Readers moving sequentially through the 1850 edition would look to the coming 'Editor's Preface' for the fulfilment of this promise. Significantly, the imagined act of intercession is bilateral,

serving author and audience alike: Ellis Bell's powers as a writer would be recognized, and the reading public would, at last, understand *Wuthering Heights*.

On the final page of the 'Biographical Notice', Brontë returns to the cue for her preface-writing: the 'sacred duty' of restoring her sisters' posthumous print identities. Biographical storytelling and literary interpretation are reimagined as the wiping of 'dust off their gravestones, […] leav[ing] their dear names free from soil'.[20] This metaphorical detritus comprised attacks on the inferred morality of the Bell pseudonyms in addition to criticism of their work—the former often emerging from the latter. The desire to clear her sisters' names was complicated by persistent errors in reviews and advertising that attributed all the Bell novels to a single authorial figure (an error that died hard, as Sydney Dobell proved). Wiping the dust and soil from their gravestones was also, therefore, an attempt to clear Currer Bell's name. The result is a conflict at the heart of Brontë's editing and preface-writing: her urge to defend her sisters as writers and women is in tension with an urge to distance and defend herself. She had already given up her sisters' names while retaining her pseudonym, building her authority to interpret Emily and *Wuthering Heights* upon claims to privileged knowledge—but the act of interpretation involved her own authorial interests, and so, in the 'Editor's Preface', she demurred.

Ambivalence and ekphrasis

Readers of the 1850 edition who move from the 'Biographical Notice' to the 'Editor's Preface' may well be surprised at the change in Currer Bell. Having drafted the first of these supplementary texts, Brontë began to re-read *Wuthering Heights* and plan her editorial interventions. This appears to have prompted concerns over the responsibilities and uses of interpreting Emily, and Charlotte's growing ambivalence leaves an indelible mark on the second preface. The 'sacred duty' remains the same, and Brontë continues to defend her sister's

power as a writer, acknowledging the importance of *Wuthering Heights*. But she strains at the limits of preface-writing, refusing to be prescriptive in her efforts to secure a proper re-reading of the text, and withdrawing from the earlier, implicit promise of definitive interpretation as signed and authorized by Currer Bell.

The 'Editor's Preface' cuts against the grain of Brontë's previous rhetoric of intimacy. Though she cannot now relinquish her claims to biographical knowledge, she works hard to mitigate the privilege, taking flight into the very misunderstanding and misrecognition that served as her *bête noir* in the 'Biographical Notice'. Currer Bell's new editor persona inscribes an empathetic connection with outsiders, those 'other people' who found *Wuthering Heights* 'unintelligible, and—where intelligible—repulsive': 'strangers who knew nothing of the author; who are unacquainted with the locality where the scenes of the story are laid.' Reading with these different eyes, the editor concedes that *Wuthering Heights* is 'a rude and strange production' and admits a revelation: Currer Bell catches a 'clear glimpse of what are termed (and, perhaps, really are) its faults'.[21] As a sister, Brontë instrumentalizes Emily's biography by way of apology. The novel's lives and landscapes, its so-called 'rusticity', are attributed to Emily's being 'a native and nursling of the moors'; her strange characters are the result of social isolation, her tendency to explore the 'tragic and terrible traits' of a community with whom 'she rarely exchanged a word'.[22] But at the threshold of sustained literary analysis, she stops short. There are some cursory remarks on Nelly Dean, Edgar Linton and Joseph, but in turning to the novel's central antagonist, the editor equivocates: Heathcliff is a character almost entirely 'unredeemed', and yet, he cannot be dismissed as a mere 'man's shape animated by demon life—a Ghoul—an Afreet'. Heathcliff's 'solitary human feeling' for Hareton Earnshaw is, for Bell, an unsolvable puzzle, a stumbling block—this singular tie to humanity, to a realist rather than gothic mode, both fascinates and repels. Heathcliff, then, demands serious attention from his readers, and from an editor who can hardly bring herself to look upon his form.

In the final lines of the 'Editor's Preface', Heathcliff becomes a synecdochal figure for *Wuthering Heights*, the text that produces and contains him. It is here, in the movement from part to whole, that Brontë refuses to stand a moment longer between Emily and the world: 'Whether it is right or advisable to create beings like Heathcliff, I do not know: I scarcely think it is'.[23] Currer Bell's editor persona cedes authority to circumspect, uncertainty and moral ambiguity ('*Whether* it is right'; 'I *scarcely* think'—emphasis added). The preface retreats into metaphor:

> *Wuthering Heights* was hewn in a wild workshop, with simple tools, out of homely materials. The statuary found a granite block on a solitary moor: gazing thereon, he saw how from the crag might be elicited a head, savage, swart, sinister; a form moulded with at least one element of grandeur—power. He wrought with a rude chisel, and from no model but the vision of his meditations. With time and labour, the crag took human shape; and there it stands colossal, dark, and frowning, half statue, half rock: in the former sense, terrible and goblin-like; in the latter, almost beautiful, for its colouring is of mellow grey, and moorland moss clothes it; and heath, with its blooming bells and balmy fragrance, grows faithfully close to the giant's foot.[24]

This was not Brontë's original conclusion. One further paragraph was omitted at the request of William Smith Williams, to which she readily acceded: 'I believe it was not expressed with the best grace in the world'. Her assurances to Williams that he caused no offence shed partial light on what was left unsaid: 'I was thinking of the Critics and the Public, who are always crying for a moral like the Pharisees for a Sign'.[25] Whether Bell's editor persona railed against these cries, or bowed unwillingly to their demands, will never be known—the manuscript preface is now lost. But our knowledge of this absent final paragraph throws the present, printed conclusion into greater relief: what kind of moral or sign was the novel-statue to offer to baying critics and the reading public? In closing without comment, is interpretation refused or left endlessly open?

Brontë's metaphor for *Wuthering Heights* exploits the ekphrastic impulse to reach beyond mere description of the artwork as object, exploring broader possibilities for '[representing] representation itself'—ekphrasis is, after all, the attempt to access through words the representational possibilities of a non-verbal medium.[26] Brontë's ekphrastic gesture is broad, encompassing artwork and artist alike as she transforms textual inscription into plastic construction. More than the material, obdurate fact of the novel-statue, she imagines the temporal, transient act of creation: writing becomes sculpting; and the writer's hands, moving pen across paper, become those of a statuary chiselling granite—hewing, eliciting, moulding, wringing. Brontë employs ekphrasis to produce what W. J. T. Mitchell has called a 'hypericon': a 'doubled' picture or image that 'imagine[s] the activity of imagination'; a '[figure] of figuration'.[27] To suggest, therefore, that she refuses to interpret Emily may, at first glance, seem a little perverse. The hypericon, the novel-statue, remains stubbornly figurative, but it nonetheless promises to elucidate, to clarify the nature and meaning of Emily's art and how it came into being. It does this *because* it is ekphrastic. For Murray Krieger, ekphrasis responds to 'the semiotic desire for the natural sign (a sign that resembles its referent—indeed is a visual substitute for its referent)', rather than those arbitrary signs that comprise language: it is a 'desire that prefers the immediacy of the picture to the mediation of the code'.[28] Currer Bell reads with an outsider's eye, pleading ignorance or an unwillingness to decipher the code that mediates *Wuthering Heights*. But in providing the ekphrastic hypericon, the editor persona imagines a counterfactual encounter with the text, one that satisfies our desire for an immediate picture, rendering interpretation redundant—for, if *Wuthering Heights* stood before us like a statue, we could take it all in at once, we could see and understand.

The manoeuvre co-opts our faith in the power of language to conquer impossible worlds of representation. It is outwardly optimistic, drawing upon what W. J. T. Mitchell has described as 'ekphrastic hope': our persistent belief in the possibilities for 'overcoming […] otherness'.[29]

Underpinning this is an act of dominance: an 'active, speaking, seeing subject' working in language, encountering the plastic or visual artwork as a 'passive, seen, and (usually) silent object'.[30] Ekphrasis provides a stage for this meeting, and for the anticipated victory of words in knowing the other. Brontë attempts to bring *Wuthering Heights* before the mind's eye as a statue; so doing, she seeks to subjugate the novel by rendering its otherness comprehensible. But the manoeuvre is a sleight of hand: it re-inscribes otherness even while seeming to overcome it. In these final lines, words turn against words: Brontë inverts, then reverts, the direction of ekphrastic description, transforming dynamic language into inert stone and back again as her editor persona encounters the statue. Distracted by imagined shapes in chiselled granite, Currer Bell elides and silences the troubling eloquence of *Wuthering Heights*, substituting this ekphrastic image for Emily's original words—the novel-statue is something to be spoken of, and for, albeit by a reluctant editor. Otherness is likewise projected onto the artist who conceived of and executed the statue—for, to present Emily as a statuary is to present her as something other than a novelist. If *Wuthering Heights* proved unintelligible to readers and critics, this was because Ellis Bell worked in a strange medium, her unfitness for novel-writing revealed by the incoherence of Brontë's hypericon. Ekphrasis had promised to clarify, to bring the novel entire before the mind's eye, but this promise is broken. Currer Bell glimpses the statue in snatches: a head; a foot; half figure; half rock; covered in moss; obscured by heath. There is nothing to suggest absolutely that the statue lies in ruins, but it is nonetheless experienced in pieces. This is an echo of Sydney Dobell's *Palladium* article (one of several, as discussed below): 'one looks back at the whole story as to a world of brilliant figures in an atmosphere of mist; shapes that come out upon the eye, and burn their colours into the brain, and depart into the enveloping fog'.[31] Brontë's hypericon reworks this metaphorical register: for editor and essayist alike (Dobell being the 'one exception to the general rule of criticism'), *Wuthering Heights* possessed an undeniable power, but its genius is flawed and inconsistent.

Ambivalence, then, is the keynote. Rather than interpret the novel—in line with generic expectations of preface-writing, working to ensure a proper re-reading—Brontë's Ouroboros-like ekphrasis (where words become carved stone translated back into words) retains the otherness of *Wuthering Heights*. Such contradictions persist at the heart of ekphrasis, as noted by W. J. T. Mitchell when hope gives way to doubt over the desirability of equivalence between the arts: 'ekphrastic fear perceives this reciprocity as a dangerous promiscuity and tries to regulate the borders with firm distinctions'.[32] To collapse distinctions between the literary, visual and plastic arts is to undermine their hierarchical relation, to risk losing the assumed pre-eminence of language as an all-conquering power. But ekphrasis must fail: the verbal cannot be visual; the novel cannot be a statue. For Murray Kreiger, this is the 'extraordinary assignment' of '[e]kphrastic ambition': it '[seeks] to represent the literally unrepresentable'.[33] Perversely, then, Brontë's turn to ekphrasis in the 'Editor's Preface' reveals the extent to which the unintelligibility of *Wuthering Heights* had become essential to her management of Emily's literary afterlife, and for her negotiation of authorial signatures: the intimate relation between Currer and Ellis Bell. The 1850 edition provided her with an opportunity to correct errors and speculation concerning authorship; in particular, it was a chance to protect Currer Bell from the critical fire drawn by *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Brontë's 'Biographical Notice' inscribes a dividing line between the surviving writer and her deceased sisters—the former still pseudonymous, the latter now Emily and Anne. But in moving from one preface to the next, from biography to editorial reflection and literary criticism (however stilted and reluctant the latter), this distance begins to narrow. To stand between Emily and the world is to take a step closer to Ellis Bell; to refuse or fail to interpret *Wuthering Heights* is to reaffirm difference.

It is significant that Brontë associates unintelligibility with power. It is too easy, too reductive, to read the 'Editor's Preface' as a straightforward act of literary competition, in

which Currer Bell denigrates the work of a rival novelist. Rather, the othering of *Wuthering Heights* chimes with a sentiment expressed earlier in the preface: that Emily, in forming those beings who populate the Heights and Grange, 'did not know what she had done'; that 'the writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master—something that at times strangely wills and works for itself'.[34] Brontë's editor persona refuses to equate significance with authorial intention; indeed, neither Emily nor Currer Bell are able to limit or control *Wuthering Heights*. The hypericon tantalizes without satisfying: the novel-statue, experienced in pieces, is productive rather than prescriptive; it multiplies possible interpretations rather than imposing a single authorial or editorial line. Thus conceived, *Wuthering Heights* becomes endlessly (re-)readable. (The irony, of course, is that Brontë censured misreading in the 'Biographical Notice', but here it becomes an ineluctable and necessary guarantee of the novel's power.) This gesture borrows from the Romantic poets whose varied responses to monuments and statuary sought to yield 'fair living forms' (to borrow Keats's words in *Endymion*).[35] For Bruce Haley, figures such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats, whose works were read by the Brontës, demonstrate a persistent interest in poetry's capacity to reconstitute art, to transmute material into ideal form, '[making] possible endless further reproductions': 'No forms thus changeable are really dead'.[36] Brontë distances her pseudonym from *Wuthering Heights*, repeating disavowals of authorship and refusing to interpret the novel, but the contradictions that inhere in ekphrasis also allow her to defend the work: as novel-statue, it is 'living form'.

Poetry and allusion

Brontë's hypericon is strangely, silently eloquent on the subject of Emily's oeuvre, its muted articulacy never more fluent than when its intertextual allusions are fully heard and recognized. The novel-statue is an assemblage of other texts and influences, its point of origin almost

certainly being Sydney Dobell's *Palladium* article. His words form part of the 1850 edition in more ways than one: a long quotation is included among the advertisements at the front of the book, and his article makes frequent use of ekphrastic metaphors, including the novelist-statuary and novel-statue. Dobell employed the figure to express a false solution to the question of authorship: 'That any hand but that which shaped *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley* cut out the rougher earlier statues, we should require more than the evidence of our senses to believe'. And he returns to this metaphor to imagine an ideal artist, a model for Currer Bell, developing their work according to self-determined principles: 'strike off the clay mould from the bronze Apollo, throw your critics to one wind and their sermons to the other, let SELF be made absolute as you take up your pen and write, like a god'.[37] *Jane Eyre* was not the bronze Apollo, notwithstanding its genius, for Dobell was certain that Currer Bell's greatest work was yet to come. Brontë adopts the novelist-statuary for Emily-as-other, not for herself, distancing her pseudonym from the apprentice artist who worked in imperfect, chiselled stone. Developing Dobell's metaphor, she plunders *Wuthering Heights* as a further intertext: Heathcliff is hewn from rock; her sister, the statuary, shapes his 'dark', 'frowning', 'terrible' and 'goblin-like' features—all this echoes Emily's diction in the novel. Further allusions situate *Wuthering Heights* more broadly in relation to genre and tradition, ranking Ellis Bell among the Gothic writers: the statue's head and foot bear more than a passing resemblance to the giant limbs of Alfonso, Horace Walpole's restless ghost in *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), while the novel-statue's frowning sublimity are reminiscent of Emily St. Aubert's approach to the castle in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794).[38]

Brontë's most pressing allusion is to poetry, not prose—for, *Wuthering Heights* as partial colossus evokes the broken statue and desert sands of Shelley's 'Ozymandias' (1818):

> I MET a traveller from an antique land
>
> Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone

Stand in the desart. Near them, on the sand,

Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,

And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,

Tell that its sculptor well those passions read

Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,

The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:

And on the pedestal these words appear:

'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:

Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare

The lone and level sands stretch far away.[39]

Emily's novel-statue still stands, but our perception of it is limited by an editor who looks through the statuary's eyes upon the head, frown and foot. In Shelley's sonnet—again at a double remove, the speaker recounting the traveller's words—we learn of the statue's 'trunkless legs' and frowning, 'shattered visage'. The latter is a monument to a dead king, 'half sunk' in desert sands, seeming to return to elemental mineral; the former is the imagined work of a dead novelist, ekphrastically transformed into beautiful stone fragments that emerge from and back into the moors. Here in the 'Editor's Preface', *Wuthering Heights* as novel-statue is resonant with Shelley's poetry.

That Shelley influenced Emily's writing has been established by biographers and literary critics since the late 1960s and 1970s (notably Winifred Gérin and Edward Chitham, and more recently in the work of Patsy Stoneman and Michael O'Neill).[40] It is likely the Brontës first encountered Shelley through Byron, then later through Mary Shelley's 1839 edition of her late husband's work (where 'Ozymandias' appeared in the second volume). The hypericon's allusion is a fitting nod, then, to this significant figure; but more than this, Brontë's

intertext returns us to ekphrasis. 'Ozymandias' is a verbal representation, a sceptical investigation, of plastic art. What endures is not the colossus, nor the political power it sought to represent in material form, but *words*: the inscription on the pedestal. This, too, is ekphrasis. For Murray Kreiger, epigrams antedate more developed ekphrastic ambitions in art, but the family likeness is clear: they '[seek] verbally to represent—and, on occasion, to speak for' the sculptures, statues and tombstones they accompany.[41] The epigram in 'Ozymandias' speaks for the statue in words that imitate the voice of a king: 'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:/ Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!' This utterance reaches our eye and ear in loose iambic pentameter, doubly subject to the degradations of memory as re-told by traveller and speaker alike: eleven syllables comprise the first line, an extra stress (on 'king') in the final foot; a trochaic substitution begins the second line. There is a strange affinity between the epigram and dismembered statue, between verbal and visual art as reimagined by Shelley: both are imperfect. 'Ozymandius' does more, then, than give shape to the hypericon's novel-statue; it models the process and potential of 'living form' as theorized by Bruce Haley, for whom this sonnet is a prime example: '[Shelley's] poem as a whole is an exercise in imaginative recreation. Everything is envisaged'. The statue is restored and renewed through these endless readings: by the epigram, repeated by the traveller, by the poem's speaker, and then, by readers of a sonnet containing multitudes in just fourteen lines: 'Form protects the inscribed image from dead historicity, reduction to object status'.[42]

Ekphrases and allusions accrete palimpsestically in Brontë's 'Editor's Preface': *Wuthering Heights* as statue; Shelley's 'Ozymandias'; an epigram in verse. These transformations and citations return ineluctably to questions of dominance between the arts, asking how one form might adopt, exploit and exceed the representational (im)possibilities of another. Brontë's hypericon silences *Wuthering Heights*, transforming it into mute stone, a statue in pieces, flawed in execution but suggestive of the artist's power. Romantic 'living

form' warns us against conflating imperfection with failure or lost meaning; it reveals instead the work's expressive potential. Furthermore, Brontë's allusion to 'Ozymandias' prompts those who recognize it to consider what endures in and around the 'colossal wreck' of Emily's art, to gaze upon her literary remains and seek the equivalent of Shelley's pedestal. In citing a sonnet that brings a broken statue to life, the 'Editor's Preface' directs the search: what endures is poetry.

Standing between Emily and the world

It is as a poet, not a novelist, that Brontë mythologizes her sister in 1850: prose was not Emily's medium, and *Wuthering Heights*, though beautiful, defied interpretation. In the 'Biographical Notice', Brontë praised the 'peculiar music—wild, melancholy, and elevating' of Emily's verse—a gesture that would become familiar, for here in the first preface she employs a metaphoric translation between the arts, articulating something ineffable. Where *Wuthering Heights* provoked ambivalence in its editor, Brontë is confident when handling poetry. *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell* garnered little critical attention when published in 1846; it was not, therefore, a source of dust and soil to wipe from her sisters' gravestones. Brontë could stand firm in her conviction that 'all of it that merits to be known are the poems of Ellis Bell'.[43] And it is poetry that closes the 1850 edition: twenty-six previously unpublished verses, seventeen by Emily and nine by Anne, selected and introduced by Brontë who resumes her guise as sister-biographer.

Across the 1850 edition, Brontë directs the reading public to remember her sisters as poets, and to regard Ellis, now Emily, among the first rank. This work is quiet but insistent: it fashions a biographical myth where the primal scene of professional authorship is the discovery of poems in a private notebook; it shapes an editorial practice that turns from prose to poetry in the volume's final pages, transmuting these verses (through annotation and commentary)

into life-writing. This latter point has been argued persuasively by Susan Bauman, who considers Brontë's editing of the poetry in 1850 as part of an attempt to recover—or rather construct, in defiance of censorious critics—her sisters' reputations for appropriate femininity.[44] The poems that close the 1850 edition are presented as a 'tiny nosegay' of melancholy blooms, 'the colour and perfume of the flowers are not such to fit them for festal uses'.[45] Bauman notes the gendered nature of this metaphor: 'a conventional image of women's poetry', and its use reveals 'Charlotte's awareness of her audience and the niceties a Victorian woman felt she could observe before her readers'.[46] There is an irony to this transition from prose to poetry, from giant statue to miniature bouquet—for, though Emily's novel is hewn from stone, it is the plucked flowers, seemingly doomed to fade and droop, that endure. The nosegay image is apologetic but ill-fitting, at odds with the permanence suggested by Brontë's title for the volume's closing pages: 'Selections from the Literary *Remains* of Ellis and Acton Bell' (emphasis added). It is these seventeen poems, not the pieces of her novel-statue, that become Emily's monument.

Brontë gifted a copy of the 1850 edition to Sydney Dobell, sending it with a note signed in her own name, not her pseudonym, thanking him for 'the noble justice' he had rendered to Emily.[47] If Dobell had since forgotten the substance of his *Palladium* article, he need only have opened the book to be reminded—for, there are his words, quoted directly and indirectly in the edition's advertisements and prefaces. Like other readers, Dobell might have chosen to step into the paratext, this 'threshold of interpretation' that will shape his encounter with *Wuthering Heights* in revised form, like a picture in a frame.[48] Turning the pages in sequence, he will glimpse the statue through the eyes of the editor: the foot, the frowning face. Leaving Lockwood to contemplate the 'unquiet slumbers' of Edgar, Catherine and Heathcliff, Dobell will journey further still.[49] Like Shelley's traveller, he will encounter the pedestal, the words that endure: the nosegay, the literary remains, the poems that close the volume. But here too

there are sleights of hand. Susan Bauman describes the encounter with these poems as 'licensed trespass': they are private texts made public without the knowledge or consent of the poet; they are part of a manuscript landscape, rendered in print, through which Brontë 'acts as guide […] marshalling the public gaze in the appropriate direction'.[50] In the 'Editor's Preface', Brontë relinquished her authority to interpret Emily's novel; but here her hand is at work again, silently and invisibly.[51] *Wuthering Heights* proved usefully inexplicable, but Brontë intervenes in the poetry, changing her sisters' words and arrangements in order to shape the story they tell—for Bauman, she '[explicates] her eccentric sister', '[selling] Emily to Victorian readers as a solitary poetess of the moors'.[52] To describe this as trespass is telling, for it assumes the presence of a different, legitimate path. Having reached these final pages of the 1850 edition, Dobell, like other readers, is quietly encouraged to return to *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell*, a work that Brontë fought hard to keep in print, convincing Smith, Elder to purchase and reissue unsold copies from Aylott and Jones in 1848.[53] As the editor of *Wuthering Heights*, Brontë withdrew from interpreting Emily; but as the editor of her poems, she continued to stand between her sister and the world.

Notes

[1] 'Editor's Preface to the New Edition of *Wuthering Heights*', *Wuthering Heights and Agnes Grey* (London: Smith, Elder, 1851; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. xix-xxiv (p. xxiv).
[2] [Sydney Dobell], 'Currer Bell', *Palladium*, September 1850, pp. 161-75 (p. 166).
[3] *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Margaret Smith, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995-2004), II (2000), p. 460.
[4] Dobell, pp. 162, 170.
[5] *Letters*, II, p. 461.
[6] *Letters*, II, p. 480.
[7] Dobell, p.174.
[8] *Letters*, II, p. 460.
[9] *Letters*, II, p. 463.
[10] James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 3 (emphasis in the original).
[11] W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Ekphrasis and the Other', in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 151-81 (p. 152).
[12] *Letters*, II, pp. 463, 466.
[13] *Letters*, II, p. 479.

[14] Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 1 (emphasis in the original).

[15] Genette, p. 2.

[16] Genette, pp. 197, 240 (emphasis in the original).

[17] 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell, by Currer Bell', *Wuthering Heights and Agnes Grey* (London: Smith, Elder, 1851; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. vii-xvi (pp. xii, xi).

[18] 'Biographical Notice', p. xiv.

[19] 'Biographical Notice', p. xv.

[20] 'Biographical Notice', p. xvi.

[21] 'Editor's Preface', p. xix.

[22] 'Editor's Preface', pp. xx, xxi.

[23] 'Editor's Preface', p. xxiii.

[24] 'Editor's Preface', p. xxiv.

[25] *Letters*, II, pp. 483, 484.

[26] Heffernan, p. 4.

[27] W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 6, 5, 158.

[28] Murray Krieger, 'The Problem of Ekphrasis: Image and Words, Space and Time—and the Literary Work', in *Pictures into Words: Theoretical and Descriptive Approaches to Ekphrasis*, ed. by Valerie Robillard and Els Jongeneel (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1998), pp. 3-20 (p. 6).

[29] Mitchell, 'Ekphrasis and the Other', p. 156.

[30] Mitchell, 'Ekphrasis and the Other', p. 157.

[31] Dobell, p. 166.

[32] Mitchell, 'Ekphrasis and the Other', p. 155.

[33] Krieger, p. 4.

[34] 'Editor's Preface', pp. xxi, xxiii.

[35] Keats's *Endymion: A Romance* was published in 1818 by Taylor and Hessey.

[36] Bruce Haley, *Living Forms: Romantics and The Monumental Figure* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 10.

[37] Dobell, pp. 164, 167.

[38] I am grateful to my colleague, Professor Angela Wright, for bringing this allusion to Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* to my attention. Note also that Radcliffe's protagonist and Brontë's novelist-statuary share a name, and that Radcliffe features in *Shirley* where Rose Yorke reads *The Italian* (1797).

[39] Shelley's 'Ozymandias' was first published in the *Examiner* on 11 January 1818. It was signed 'Glirastes'.

[40] Winifred Gérin, *Emily Brontë* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); Edward Chitham, 'Emily Brontë and Shelley', *Brontë Society Transactions*, 17.3 (1978), 189-96; Patsy Stoneman, 'Catherine Earnshaw's Journey to Her Home Among the Dead: Fresh Thoughts on *Wuthering Heights* and "Epipsychidion"', *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, 47.188 (1996), 521-33; Michael O'Neill, 'Visions Rise, and Change': Emily Brontë's Poetry and Male Romantic Poetry', *Brontë Studies*, 36.1 (2011), 57-63.

[41] Krieger, p. 9.

[42] Haley, pp. 196, 197.

[43] 'Biographical Notice', p. viii.

[44] Susan R. Bauman, 'Her Sisters' Keeper: Charlotte Brontë's Defence of Emily and Anne', *Women's Writing*, 14.1 (2007), 23-48.

[45] 'Selections from the Literary Remains of Ellis and Acton Bell', *Wuthering Heights and Agnes Grey* (London: Smith, Elder, 1851; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 469-73 (p. 471).

[46] Bauman, pp. 28, 28-29.

[47] *Letters*, II, p. 526.

[48] The subtitle of Genette's study of paratexts.

[49] Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed.by Hilda Marsden and Ian Jack (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 414.

[50] Bauman, p. 28.

[51] Bauman has written extensively on Brontë's editing of the poems in relation to her mythologizing of Emily and Anne, *op cit*. For further information on Brontë's interventions and additions to Emily's poetry in 1850, see also *The Poems of Emily Brontë*, ed. by Derek Roper with Edward Chitham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

[52] Bauman, pp. 26, 25.

[53] See *Letters*, II, p. 117 n. 2.

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