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Longing for the World of Sounds: The Battle of Nature against Civilization in *Wuthering Heights*

Miho Katayama

I

A large number of critics have discussed *Wuthering Heights* in terms of the question of the strife between nature and civilization. Dorothy Van Ghent writes, "*Wuthering Heights* exists for the mind as a tension between two kinds of reality: the . . . reality of . . . natural energies, and the . . . reality of civilized habits, manners, and codes" (204).

Many of the critics believe that, in the warfare of nature against civilization, Catherine and Heathcliff of *Wuthering Heights* in the first generation are linked to nature, because their deep relationship with nature, represented by the moor, the storm, and the wind, is highly impressive. V. S. Pritchett says that Emily Brontë has a "vision of the union of man and nature" (453). What draws our attention here is that Catherine and Heathcliff, who are often among natural things, are closely linked to the sound of nature which shows the power of life which natural phenomena, storms, winds, animals, and streams, for example, have. E. M. Forster suggests that Catherine and Heathcliff are related to the sound of nature, like that of storm and wind, saying that their feelings have much to do with the forces of nature:

[T]he emotions of Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw function differently to other emotions in fiction. Instead of inhabiting the characters, they surround them like thunder

clouds, and generate the explosions that fill the novel from the moment when Lockwood dreams of the hand at the window down to the moment when Heathcliff with the same window open, is discovered dead. *Wuthering Heights* is filled with sound – storm and rushing wind. . . . (83)

Making a contrast with Catherine and Heathcliff in the first generation who are related with nature, the critics think that Hareton and the younger Catherine in the second generation take the side of civilization in its conflict with nature. One of the reasons is that Hareton learns his letters from books, helped by the younger Catherine. The letter is an emblem of civilization which separates man from nature. J. Hillis Miller says that the books used to teach Hareton are “the books which reclaim him from savagery” (205). In this paper, I will discuss the battle of nature against civilization by considering in detail the question of sounds in conflict with letters.

II

In the warfare of nature against civilization, *Wuthering Heights* and its inhabitants, the Earnshaws, are related to nature. The bond of *Wuthering Heights* with nature is shown in its very name, *Wuthering Heights*, which is taken from an onomatopoeic adjective conveying the sound of a violent stormy wind. In a diary, Lockwood describes “wuthering” of *Wuthering Heights* as “a significant provincial adjective, descriptive of the atomospheric tumult to which its station is exposed in stormy weather” (4; ch. 1); he also writes that “one may guess the power of the north wind, blowing over the edge, by the excessive slant of a few stunted firs at the end of the house; and by a range of gaunt thorns all stretching their limbs one way, as if craving alms of the sun” (4; ch. 1).

Wuthering Heights is inseparably associated with a powerful natural phenomenon, namely, a strong stormy wind, and so are its inhabitants. When Mr. Earnshaw dies, a fierce wind gusts outside, making a frightfully loud sound: "A high wind *blustered* round the house, and *roared* in the chimney: it *sounded* wild and stormy" (33; ch. 5; emphasis added). The turbulent natural activity corresponds to the condition of Mr. Earnshaw.

Catherine, too, is deeply linked with natural phenomena. When Heathcliff hears her say that the marriage with him will "degrade" her and leaves the Heights (62; ch. 9), she runs out of the house and is exposed to a raging storm, calling out for him. The furious storm, the fierce thunder, and the violent rain are Catherine's disturbed state and her passionate feelings for Heathcliff, whom she misses desperately. Passion, often discussed in criticism of this work, is strongly linked to the power of natural phenomena. J. Frank Goodridge says that a human being is united with nature through passionate feelings in this scene: "As often in *Wuthering Heights*, there is here a genuine interaction between human passion and natural phenomena. An uncontrollable passion draws her out of the defenses of the house into the storm . . ." (71).

She . . . at length took up a permanent situation on one side of the wall, near the road, where, heedless of . . . the *growling* thunder . . . and the great drops that began to *plash* around her, she remained, *calling* at intervals, and then listening, and then *crying* outright. She beat Hareton, or any child, at a good, *passionate* fit of *crying*. (66; ch. 9; emphasis added)

Here, the powerful storm in which Catherine cries is depicted in words expressing sound, "growling" and "plash." These onomatopoeic words describe the sounds of roaring thunder and furiously pouring rain which correspond to Catherine's wild

"calling" and "crying" for Heathcliff whom she loves intensely. Catherine is exposed to the raging natural activities, and her passionate feelings are inseparably related to the fierce thunderstorm and the torrential rain whose power is shown in their violent sounds. The oneness of nature and a human being is striking here.

As time passes, the storm redoubles in force. Not only Catherine but also Wuthering Heights where the Earnshaws live is subjected to the natural tumult. The storm hits the Heights in real earnest: "About midnight, . . . the storm came *rattling* over the Heights in full fury" (66; ch. 9; emphasis added). The storm descends on the Heights with dreadful sound. Wuthering Heights is filled with the sounds now.

Let us now turn to the attitude of Catherine of Wuthering Heights, or the world of sounds, towards writing, which is emblematic of civilization. Here, we realize that Catherine turns her back on the civilized world of writing and chooses the world of nature. She writes a diary in the back-kitchen into which she has been thrown by Hindley, but she stops writing and goes to ramble on the moors when Heathcliff suggests it, though the day has been "flooding with rain" (16; ch. 3). She is rebellious toward writing. Catherine does not necessarily enjoy reading the books in which Lockwood finds her diary: her books "have been well used, though not altogether for a legitimate purpose" (16; ch. 3). The script in the diary which she carelessly writes in the margins of the books is difficult to read, so that Lockwood has to "decypher her . . . hieroglyphics" (16; ch. 3); moreover, she tends to avoid using the written word: in her diary, a picture of Joseph is included; furthermore, some sentences in the blanks of those books are mere "detached sentences" (16; ch. 3). Catherine who is rebellious towards writing goes to the moors with Heathcliff.

Catherine has a scamper on the moors and frees herself from the realm of writing for a moment; however, in the real world, it is impossible to get away from it: in this very ramble on the moors, she is trapped in Thrushcross Grange where she meets Edgar who lives a civilized life, likes reading books, and proposes marriage to her several years later.

Catherine marries cultivated Edgar and seems to have forsaken Heathcliff; however, she cannot entirely give up Heathcliff with whom she ran wild on the moors where instinctive, passionate feelings broke loose from the restraints of civilization; accordingly, when Edgar demands that Catherine choose Heathcliff or himself completely, she lapses into mental disorder.

In the scene of Catherine's delirium, there is strife between Catherine of Wuthering Heights, or the world of sounds, and Edgar Linton of Thrushcross Grange, or that of writing; in other words, a battle of nature against civilization. In contrast with Catherine, Edgar of Thrushcross Grange likes reading books and frequents his library. Thrushcross Grange has a large library holding a great number of books. Keith Sagar points out its significance as a symbol of civilization: "Set against the Heights is Thrushcross Grange . . . with . . . its well-stocked library, its civilization and luxury" (56). What should be noted here is that, while Catherine is suffering from serious mental confusion and is dying, Edgar is reading a book in the library. Compared with Catherine's passionate calling for Heathcliff in the storm when he has left the Heights, Edgar's cold-hearted attitude when Catherine is dying is an especially important point to stress. Catherine cries out for Heathcliff in the "plashing" rain and the "growling" thunderstorm and is closely related to the sounds of nature, but Edgar is in his library, reading a book which is closely linked with written

language, an emblem of civilization, when Catherine is dying. Miller remarks that his indifference to others has much to do with writing: "[T]he printed page . . . is an expression of . . . self-enclosure of Edgar Linton" (209). Passionate Catherine cannot bear such a person and desperately shouts that Edgar is one of those who do not "feel" for people around him: "What, in the name of all that feels, has he to do with *books*, when I am dying!" (94; ch. 12). Quoting this cry of hers, Robert C. McKibben writes: "This is the appeal of the totally involved, those who live in the realm of passionate consciousness and willful action, to the reclusive . . ." (38). Just after the despairing cry about Edgar's coldness, Catherine, who cannot bear his indifference, is seized by madness.

In the delirium, her true self is set free from the restraints of the real world, so that she yearns to get away from the civilized Grange and desires to feel the wind blowing from the Heights. *Wuthering Heights* is inseparably related to the wind. Catherine has cried in the raging storm which has brought a fierce wind when Heathcliff had gone. She wants to return to nature where she can expose her passionate feelings and come back to her true self of the days when she ran wild on the moors with Heathcliff. She remembers her childhood when she has heard the sound of the wind from the lattice window of a room in the Heights and asks Nelly to open the window to feel the wind which she describes as "sounding": "'Oh, if I were but in my own bed in the old house!' she went on bitterly. . . . 'And that wind *sounding* in the firs by the lattice. Do let me feel it — it comes straight down the moor — do let me have one breath!'" (96; ch. 12; emphasis added). However, when Edgar comes from the library to the room, he is surprised to see mad Catherine standing by the window which is wide open in the middle of winter, so that he shouts, "Shut the

window, Ellen!" (98; ch. 12).

Catherine can neither bear being separated from nature nor stand being surrounded by people who do not have union with those around them. In her madness she rebels against the civilized world of writing: she sits near a window every day, but she never reads a book which Edgar lays on the sill:

A book lay spread on the sill before her, and the . . . wind fluttered its leaves at intervals. I [Nelly] believe Linton has laid it there, for she never endeavoured to divert herself with reading, or occupation of any kind, and he would spend many an hour in trying to entice her attention to some subject which had formerly been her amusement. (121; ch. 15)

Catherine is against the written word to some extent even when she is not mad, as is seen in the scene of her diary, but, in the real world, she could not help but be influenced by the power of letters, or civilization. Catherine's shackles to the real world, however, have come off now and she completely rejects the book which Edgar lays before her. In her bad moods, Catherine shows anger toward Edgar who brings her, again and again, a book. Nelly describes his misdirected efforts to comfort her by offering a book: "[S]he would turn petulantly away, and hide her face in her hands, or even push him off angrily . . ." (121; ch. 15). "Edgar," as McKibben puts it, "uses the logical instrument to bring her into his household again, the book" (38), but Catherine who has fallen into madness, never reads a book.

III

The relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff, too, cannot be considered without thinking about the influence of the

battle of nature against civilization. Here we notice that written language cannot be used to communicate in their relationship, which has deepened while they are rambling on the moors. Heathcliff acquires literacy in his absence from the Heights because Catherine has felt uncivilized Heathcliff debased and has married Edgar. He knows how to write a letter now and leaves a letter for Catherine with Nelly to get consent to meet the half mad Catherine, but Catherine, freed from the bonds of the real world, rejects the letter. She does not even look at the letter which Nelly hands to her, and it falls from Catherine's hand:

"There's a letter for you, Mrs. Linton," I [Nelly] said. . . .
"You must read it immediately, because it wants an answer. Shall I break the seal?"

"Yes," she answered, without altering the direction of her eyes.

I opened it — it was very short.

"Now," I continued, "read it."

She drew away her hand, and let it fall. (121; ch. 15)

Catherine will not read it even when Nelly picks it up and puts it in her lap. Catherine does not understand its meaning, that Heathcliff wants to see her, even when she tries to read it. She only points to the signature: "I [Nelly] found she had not gathered its import, for . . . she merely pointed to the name, and gazed at me with mournful and questioning eagerness . . ." (122; ch. 15). Mad Catherine is against the world of writing related to the cold attitude of civilized people. Heathcliff, who has been waiting for Nelly in the garden of the Grange to know Catherine's answer, walks into the house and finds Catherine's room eventually, and they meet each other. Written language which is characteristic of a civilized life has nothing to do with their bond, which has been formed when they had

been spending time together in nature.

After this meeting with Heathcliff, Catherine dies. In this real world where man is inextricably linked to civilization, the death of Catherine, who rebels against civilization, is inevitable. Longing to be back to her "savage" self on the moors (97; ch. 12), but trapped in a civilized life, the only way that is left to her is to die.

We will now turn to the question of the influence which the warfare of nature against civilization has on Heathcliff. In his childhood, he runs about on the moors with Catherine all day long. After he leaves the Heights, he acquires literacy and manners, so that, when he comes back to her, he appears to be a cultivated gentleman; however, Heathcliff is still closely related with nature and does not change internally.

His firm relationship with nature is clearly reflected in his bond with animals such as the dog and the wolf. Goodridge points out that there is a strong suggestion of a bond between the animal, or nature, and human beings, in the case of Heathcliff and Catherine in particular: "We should consider . . . how throughout the novel human beings are described, especially by Catherine and Heathcliff, in animal images, which Brontë uses as emblems of the breaking down of barriers between the animal and the human" (70).

In the following extract, Heathcliff identifies with a savage dog. In the very opening chapter, about Lockwood's first visit to the Heights, Heathcliff interacts with a fierce dog which angrily emits a low sound at Lockwood who pats it. Heathcliff, too, "growls" just as dogs do when they get angry and threatens him with the dog to stop him:

I [Lockwood] . . . filled up an interval of silence by attempting to caress the canine mother, who . . . was sneaking wolfishly to the back of my legs, her lip curled up,

and her white teeth watering for a snatch.

My caress provoked a long, guttural gnarl.

"You'd better let the dog alone," *growled* Mr. Heathcliff in unison. . . . (5-6; ch. 1; emphasis added)

The onomatopoeic word "growl" in this extract suggests that Heathcliff, who shows his anger with the ferocious dog, has a firm relationship with animals, or nature. He belongs to the world of the sound of a savage animal and is not like a man in a civilized society. Donna K. Reed says the "growl" of Heathcliff means that civilization has not internally influenced him: "Heathcliff may be cloaked later in the mantle of civilized gentlemanliness, but underneath he is a . . . fierce monster who literally 'growls' at other people" (223).

Heathcliff cries like a raging beast after Catherine's death, too. In the garden of the Grange where he is staying to be near dead Catherine, he "howls" and emits a long, agonized sound just like a cornered wolf or dog which is about to be killed: "[H]e dashed his head against the knotted trunk; and, lifting up his eyes, *howled*, not like a man, but like a savage beast getting goaded to death with knives and spears" (129; ch. 16; emphasis added). Reed writes that in this scene "he suggests a pre-civilized form of savagery" (223). The onomatopoeic word "howl" shows that even when Heathcliff has acquired literacy and manners and appears to be cultivated, he is still inseparably linked with the world of nature.

There is another sound of nature which shows his bond with nature: the murmur of a brook flowing through the moors. Before he dies, he feels Catherine by him amid the sounds of the small stream wandering from a town near Wuthering Heights, leaning against the ledge of an open window in a room of the Heights:

[T]he room was filled with the damp, mild air of the cloudy evening, and so still, that not only the *murmur* of the beck down Gimmerton was distinguishable, but its *ripples* and its *gurgling* over the pebbles, or through the large stones which it could not cover. (249; ch. 34; emphasis added)

"[T]he murmur of the beck," "its ripples," and "its gurgling" are heard in the room where Heathcliff is thinking about Catherine. He is within the sound of nature. Heathcliff is a man who is linked to nature.

Heathcliff takes a defiant attitude toward the civilized world where people are separated from one another. He has had to acquire literacy and accept the dominance of written language in the real world, but he does not submit tamely to its influential power. Heathcliff dislikes books which are emblematic of civilization: he never reads a book and even "destroys" the books which have been brought by the younger Catherine in the second generation, who likes reading just like her father, Edgar Linton of Thrushcross Grange. The answer which the younger Catherine makes when bookish Lockwood, a tenant of Thrushcross Grange, gives her a little note from Nelly clearly shows that there is nothing that is related with the world of literacy at the Wuthering Heights of Heathcliff:

"You [Lockwood] must tell her [Nelly] that I [the second Catherine] would answer her letter, but I have no materials for writing, not even a book from which I might tear a leaf."

"No books!" I [Lockwood] exclaimed. . . .

"I was always reading, when I had them," said Catherine, "and Mr. Heathcliff never reads; so he took it into his head to destroy my books. I have not had a glimpse of one, for weeks. . . ." (228; ch. 31)

Heathcliff takes the side of nature in the strife of nature and civilization. He obviously shows reluctance to accept the fact of the dominance of writing in the real world.

The warfare of nature against civilization is also shown in the scene where Catherine's ghost from the moors threatens Lockwood who spends the night reading books during his stay at the Heights. To consider the conflict, let us pay attention to the sounds when Catherine appears. In Forster's remark, he alludes to the importance of the sound of nature in this scene. While staying at *Wuthering Heights*, Lockwood, a cultivated gentleman, hears the sound of a violent wind, that of the snow whirled about by it, and that of the fir-bough stirred by it continuously. Catherine's ghost comes from the moors with those sounds: "I [Lockwood] heard distinctly the gusty wind, and the driving of the snow; I heard, also, the fir-bough repeat its teasing sound . . ." (20; ch. 3). Lockwood also describes the sounds as follows: "[T]he branch of a fir tree that touched my lattice, as the blast *wailed* by, and *rattled* its dry cones against the panes!" (19; ch. 3; emphasis added). This "wail" of the blast indicates, as Mark Schorer says, "[h]uman conditions are like the activities of the landscape, where . . . blasts *wail* . . ." (45). The plaintive voice is Catherine's, and this "rattle" of the fir tree against the window is the clatter of Catherine's hand against the panes. Bookish Lockwood, who belongs to the world of script, tries to open the lattice to silence the fir-bough and finds the hook of the casement fixed in the staple with solder; nevertheless he is resolved to stop it. He breaks the glass and catches hold of "the importunate branch" (20; ch. 3); however, what he grasps is Catherine's cold hand. He hears Catherine's ghost sob, too: "[I]t [the ghost of Catherine] wailed, 'Let me in!'" (20; ch. 3). Her hand "rattles" against the window, just as fir-boughs do; and she "wails," just as the wind

does. Civilized Lockwood tries to protect himself from Catherine's ghost which comes from wild moors with a symbol of the civilized world of writing, or the book: "I [Lockwood] . . . hurriedly piled the books up in a pyramid against it [Catherine's ghost] . . ." (20; ch. 3). Rod Mengham's remark supports this view: "Lockwood needs to muster all the resources of culture . . . — actually a pile of books — in order to expel the awful possibilities he has glimpsed" (95). Catherine's ghost from the bleak moors which are not under the power of civilization scares him. She tries to shake the pile of books which he uses as a bulwark of civilization: "[T]he pile of books moved as if thrust forward" (21; ch. 3). Nature is always in conflict with civilization.

IV

In a battle of nature against civilization, Hareton and the younger Catherine in the second generation choose to take the side of civilization. Hareton of *Wuthering Heights* does not know his letters, but he moves into the civilized world of writing, influenced by the younger Cathy of *Thrushcross Grange*. The younger Cathy is a girl who deepens her love for bookish Linton, reading books which she brings from the Grange together, and helps Hareton to become civilized.

Hareton is deprived of his chance to learn his letters because of Heathcliff's revenge on Hindley, who did the same to him. Hareton shows scorn for writing. When the younger Cathy of *Thrushcross Grange* asks Hareton about the inscribed name of his ancestor on the front door of the Heights which is the same as his, he says, "It's some damnable writing" (168; ch. 21). Hareton is averse to what he calls "book-larning" in the crude Yorkshire dialect used in the region of wild moors (169; ch.

21), but, laughed at by the younger Cathy, he decides to learn his letters and even not to speak his broad Yorkshire dialect:

"Con-*trary*!" said a voice, as sweet as a silver bell — "That for the third time, you dunce! Recollect, or I [the younger Catherine] pull your hair!"

"Contrary, then," answered another [Hareton], in deep, but softened tones. "And now, kiss me, for minding so well."

"No, read it over first correctly, without a single mistake." (233; ch. 32)

Soon after this, Hareton and the younger Catherine move from Wuthering Heights into Thrushcross Grange. In this world, it is inevitable for man to choose the world of writing, because, if not, he dies, as Catherine, who rebels against it in delirium, does. Man has to live in a civilized world where not only man and nature but also man and man are separated.

The world of writing, or civilization, seems to prevail over that of sounds, or nature, in their strife; however, nature still survives. It is shown in the fact that Wuthering Heights still exists for Catherine and Heathcliff in the first generation united with nature. Joseph who speaks Yorkshire dialect crudely sees the ghosts of the two at the Heights: "[T]hat old man [Joseph] by the kitchen fire affirms he has seen two on'em looking out of his chamber window, on every rainy night" (255; ch. 34). Catherine, who has missed the Heights in madness, and Heathcliff have come back to the Heights by their death. Wuthering Heights has been deserted by the younger Cathy and Hareton in the second generation in the real civilized world dominated by the written word, but the Heights, or the world of the sound of nature, still stands for those who passionately long for the oneness of nature and man and of man and man, taken care of by Joseph who

speaks a broad Yorkshire dialect. The world of sounds still exists. Nature does survive.

It seems that "the soft wind" blows near the end of the novel (256; ch. 34), but it is, to echo Denis Donoghue, "temporal and provisional" (175). As he points out, the fact of "coming autumn storms" can hardly be ignored (256; ch. 34). The furious storms will rage soon. The battle of nature against civilization still continues.

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