

from Robert C McKibben,.: "The Image of the Book in *Wuthering Heights*"
Nineteenth-Century Fiction, XV(1960), 159-69.

Hareton is stimulated by his contact with Catherine to desire education, and he tries to make himself agreeable when she begins to frequent the kitchen. There she discovers some volumes which Hareton helps her to reach: "That was a great advance for the lad. She didn't thank him; still, he felt gratified that she had accepted his assistance . . ." (chap. xxx). This is the initial hint of cooperation between the two, and although the event does not conclude happily, it is a portent of times to come. The characteristic misuse of the book at Thrushcross Grange stands between Catherine and her surroundings; but a second and decisive encounter of the two young people and the book is to dissolve the final barrier. Hareton steals Catherine's small library, and she views this as a threat to the truest level of her identity: " 'And he wants *me* to sink into a dunce, meantime'" (chap. xxxi). She and he argue; the resources of suffering and pride are marshalled and sent into action. In a climactic gesture Hareton, the slave of the psychology of the Heights repeating its distinctive misuse of the image, throws the books into the fire. The conflagration would appear to depict the victory of the ungoverned will over moderation and forgiveness: the image of a possible reconciliation is consumed; discord and brutality triumph. In 1842, while a student of M. Heger in Brussels, Emily Brontë wrote, as an exercise, a number of short essays in French. One of these curious productions is a philosophical piece on the nature of creation entitled "The Butterfly."² In it the first-person protagonist wanders on a summer day through a peaceful wood, but in the processes of nature she can see only an insane mutual destruction. Within a flower she finds "an ugly caterpillar," a symbol of human activity upon the earth, which can only derive its sustenance from annihilation; and she arrives at an unavoidable question: "why was man created? He torments, he kills, he devours; he suffers, dies, is devoured—that's his whole story" (p. 18). From this cycle there is seemingly no escape. She throws flower and insect to the ground and tramples them. But just as she does so, a butterfly, "a symbol of the world to come," flutters before her eyes; and the truth is revealed: "this globe is the embryo of a new heaven and of a new earth whose meagerest beauty infinitely surpasses mortal imagination"; and the greater conclusion is inferred:

God is the God of justice and mercy; then, assuredly each pain that he inflicts on his creatures, be they human or animal, rational or irrational, each suffering of our unhappy nature is only a seed for that divine harvest which will be gathered when sin having spent its last drop of poison, death having thrown its last dart, both will expire on the funeral pyre of a universe in flame, and will leave their former victims to an eternal realm of happiness and glory (pp. 18-19).

It is through suffering that evil is eventually purged and happiness made possible. A general conflagration separates the two worlds of pain and bliss, a conflagration in which sin and death are forever consumed. So in *Wuthering Heights*, when the prime mover of evil is exhausted, when Heathcliff suffers his *crise de volonté*, the image of the book, abused by two extremes of reality, is fed to the flames; and out of the microcosmic conflagration arises an existence of stability and peace, the ideal of the novel realized in the unheroic terms of Cathy and Hareton, who find in their natures and experience the possibility of reconciliation within the framework of society and who accept the conditions of man's limitations.

It has already been noted that *Wuthering Heights* does not invoke an omnipotent point of view

representing some absolute concept of morality; however, a mode of justice does function in the novel, and it is the same justice which is at work in "The Butterfly"; but here the apocalyptic character of the destructive fire is set within one world, only types of reality being differentiated. The collapse of the reality of the Heights takes place immediately after Hareton has consigned the volumes to the blaze. Heathcliff appears and for the first time his resolution falters: " 'It will be odd if I thwart myself' " (chap. xxxi). The fire has returned things to themselves, to the paradise of normalcy: Cathy and Hareton are ready to resume their rightful places, evil is spent. In this new life founded upon acceptance, operating as reconciliation, the book fulfills its proper duty.

When Lockwood returns to the Heights after an absence of nearly a year, he is greeted by its summer aspect, by the sight of the lovers united by the book. Catherine Earnshaw strove in her way to provide an environment for Heathcliff and herself; indeed, this was a principal reason for her marriage to Edgar; but she overestimated the power of her will, the efficacy of her love, and by so doing misjudged the nature of life itself. " 'I thought, ' " she exclaims during her spiritual breakdown, " 'though everybody hated and despised each other, they could not avoid loving me' " (chap. xii). Her crisis results in self-discovery, for she perceives that she has attempted what cannot be realized in this world, but only in some world beyond. In order to meet her challenge Heathcliff must disassociate his love from the desire for revenge, and in order to do this he must undermine the very basis of his identity, itself the creation of a thwarted will. No bond in this life can join such lovers. But Cathy Heathcliff is able to accomplish what the first Catherine could not; she places her love not within a self-created environment, the glorification of the will, but within human society, the modification of the will; and Hareton in his turn endows her existence with purpose. The bond which joins them is imaged by the book.

²Emily Brontë, *Five Essays Written in French* (El Paso, 1948), pp. 17-19.