

The Nature of Civilization: Emily Brontë's Essay, "The Palace of Death"

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Emily Brontë, the solitary literary genius who created the world of *Wuthering Heights*, has never ceased to fascinate the critics and the general public alike. While much effort is devoted to unearthing the original and distinct qualities of Emily Brontë's novel, and her poems have also been studied,¹ her essays have so far received less critical attention. Nine of Brontë's essays have survived to this date. Originally written in French (the so-called "French devoir"), these writings were critical tasks Emily Brontë completed during her school year in Belgium.

In 1842, Emily Brontë accompanied Charlotte Brontë to the Pensionnat Heger, a school run jointly by Constantin Heger and his wife in Belgium, to further their education overseas.² After carefully examining his students, Heger was convinced that the Brontës could dispense with the usual drilling in the French grammar and vocabulary, and proposed instead to teach them through a series of critical writing assignments, a relatively advanced method to help the sisters gain mastery of the foreign language. Heger was to set the general terms for each assignment by first reading masterpieces of celebrated authors to the pupils, then asking them to reproduce a similar style. Usually an outline is dictated by Heger, leaving the pupils to fill out the details, though sometimes simpler tasks (such as writing a letter, a party invitation, etc.) were also given. Essentially a method of learning by imitation, the plan was at first opposed by Emily Brontë, who told Heger bluntly that she "saw no good to be

derived from it; and that, by adopting it, they should lose all originality of thought and expression.”³ But when the plan went into actual practice, the pupils were given more freedom to express their own thoughts. Heger years later would claim that the sisters rarely followed the guideline he assigned to them. This is especially the case for Emily Brontë. More often than not, when Heger put down the basic structure of an assignment, Emily would add in the extras, sometimes deviations from the original format, and other times subtle subversions of the initial paradigm (as we will see clearly in “The Palace of Death”). The distinctly poignant style and cogent logic in these writings show that they were nothing other than the productions of Emily Brontë’s own mind.

Both Heger and Charlotte commented on Emily Brontë’s exceptional ability of reasoning, with the former saying she possessed “a head for logic, and a capability of argument,”⁴ and the latter asserting that “I should say Ellis [Emily Brontë] will not be seen in his full strength till he is seen as an essayist.”⁵ There is no doubt that intellectual potency and logical complexity made a deep impression upon the earliest readers of these *devoirs*. Moreover, although in other genres (novel, poetry, and essay), it is common practice for Emily to speak through assumed and sometimes varied narrative voices, in the essays she often goes beyond what was prescribed for her and expresses thoughts and ideas of her own. The Belgian essays thus present to us a more public mode of writing in which the writer’s thoughts are visible to the reader, and often less encumbered by the manifold interpretative layers in the fictional work.

Different topics are touched upon in these essays, such as the mechanism of Nature, the role of women in society, and familial love, to name but a few. “The Palace of Death” delineates the expanding power of Death and the unique part Civilization plays in it. Much has been written about civilization’s relentless domination in *Wuthering Heights*, which ranges from being restrictive, to poisonous, to life-threatening.⁶ This short piece of critical writing serves as an important supplement that not only enhances existing interpretations of Emily Brontë’s works, but also brings about special insight: combined with Brontë’s other writings, it sheds new

light on her remarkable perception of the nature of civilization, especially as formed in an era characterized by rapid industrialization and overseas expansion.

In the present essay I introduce Emily Brontë's Belgian essay, "The Palace of Death," by drawing attention to some of its most illuminating aspects and by relating it to *Wuthering Heights* and to the poem "Why ask to know what date what clime." In this way I explore Brontë's subtle understanding of the nature of human civilization, her trenchant critique on the essence of social progress, and her cautionary warning concerning the future path that humans take.

To begin, it seems apt to introduce the outline of the essay "The Palace of Death." While many of the outlines of the essays have been lost, the one for "The Palace of Death" has survived in its entirety, being the only one of its kind in Emily Brontë's existing compositions. Together with her sister Charlotte's corresponding essay on the same topic, it helps to bring out the unique and distinctly personal features of Emily Brontë's essay. The outline is laid out as the following:

In times, past, when [...] Death had something to do; her sole minister was then Old Age, but before long [...] Death had so much business then that she wanted to appoint a prime minister.

Assembly in her palace; all the purveyors of Death are seen arriving; each one justifies his claim; her majesty Death seeming extremely perplexed [when the door opens] and a beauty [...] Description of Intemperance [...] Death chooses her as viceroy and dismisses the assembly [...]⁷

From this outline we can see clearly that the essay is intended to describe an assembly called by Death at its palace for the purpose of choosing a new prime minister to replace the existing one—Old Age, whom Death finds can no longer satisfy its needs. As the meeting proceeds, the attendees come forward to justify their claims for the vacated position. When Death is trying to make up its mind, a late guest—Intemperance—

arrives. After it gives its speech, Death chooses it as the new prime minister without reserve.

Both Emily's and Charlotte's essays more or less follow this nominal outline. But unlike her sister Charlotte, who gives detailed descriptions of the outward appearance, costume, and demeanour of the figures at the scene (Wrath, Famine, Plague, Ambition, Fanaticism, etc.) and makes several biblical and classical allusions, Emily shows no intention to follow her teacher Heger's proposal to imitate established authors' styles. Even the specific description of Intemperance, which has been listed in the outline, is condensed into two short phrases in Emily's essay.⁸ As Sue Lonoff comments, "nothing in her *devoir* is extrinsic to its arguments, and little derives from outside sources."⁹

Given its succinct style, it is all the more telling when we find that Emily in her essay has introduced a new player into the field, Civilization. By so doing, she inserts a considerable twist into the prescribed narrative plot. Not only does Emily Brontë write little on the outward appearance of Intemperance, but she also opts not to reveal Intemperance's name until the end of the essay. As Lonoff observes, "Nominally, Emily follows Heger's outline in making Intemperance the winner. But Intemperance remains unnamed until Death embraces her," and all the while, Intemperance "speaks as the confederate of Civilization, the evil that Emily chooses to make paramount."¹⁰ Here is Intemperance's introduction of its intimate ally—Civilization:

[...] I have a friend before whom this whole assembly will be forced to succumb. Her name is Civilization: in a few years she will come to dwell on this earth with us, and each century will amplify her power. In the end, she will divert Ambition from your service; she will put the brake of law on wrath; she will wrest the weapons from Fanaticism's hands; she will chase Famine off among the savages. I alone will grow and flourish under her reign; the power of all the others will expire with their partisans; mine will exist even when I am dead. If once I make acquaintance

with the father, my influence will extend to the son, and before men unite to banish me from their society, I will have changed their entire nature and made the whole species an easier prey for your Majesty, so effectively, in fact, that Old Age will have almost a sinecure and your place will be gorged with victims.¹¹

This speech, along with its novel features and fierce logic, belongs entirely to Emily, since no corresponding or similar passage could be found in either the topical outline or Charlotte's piece. As a part of the content that is not required by the teacher, its voluntary appearance in the story suggests that the author is speaking her own mind. While in the process of doing so, Emily has also endowed the prescribed fable with a new internal logic, which deviates from the one designated by the teacher. While the original intention of the essay is to simply pronounce Intemperance as the winner (the moral of which is to remind people of the importance of restraint and husbandry), Emily's essay traces the source of Intemperance to Civilization, and furthermore makes the connection that the former relies on the power of the latter to exist and flourish. In both originality and vigour, this is a much bolder and more provoking claim, as it pulls the nature, direction, and destination of Civilization into the scene while also illustrating its predominantly negative effects on humankind. The passage is worthy of detailed examination.

Intemperance's introductory line, "in a few years she will come to dwell on this earth with us, and each century will amplify her power," proclaims to the assembly the increasing power and dominance of Civilization on earth as time goes by. It also points to the expanding tendency of Civilization, which so long as it lives along with us, will grow in strength and scope. The following four clauses prophesy the ultimate triumph of Civilization over Ambition, Wrath, Fanaticism and Famine—some of death's other minions: "she will divert Ambition from your service; she will put the brake of law on Wrath; she will wrest the weapons from Fanaticism's hands; she will chase Famine off among the savages." They cannot outlive Civilization and will eventually become its prey.

Therefore, not one of them is suited to compete with Intemperance for the position of Death's Prime Minister. We are shown Civilization's regulating power, its ability to clear unruly elements or irregular factors out of the way as it exerts its increasing control over both the psyche of human society (Ambition, Wrath, Fanaticism) and the rule of Nature (Famine), for the sake of its own continuous development and flourishing.

Civilization's expanding nature and its formidable abilities to overcome obstacles correspond well to the characteristics of the age of industrialization in which Emily Brontë lived. The conquering of Famine also points out that Civilization produces and ensures material abundance for human society. Thus far, Civilization has maintained an overall positive image in the narrative. In an age when in general things were moving in the upward direction, it was easy to assume that material enrichment would soon translate into a better and brighter future for humankind. Indeed, this kind of projection could be easily seen in mainstream early Victorian narratives.

But on this point Brontë clearly thinks otherwise, for next, Intemperance goes on to say: "I alone will grow and flourish under her reign; the power of all the others will expire with their partisans; mine will exist even when I am dead." Intemperance is ingrained in the core of Civilization. Being part of its core constituents, the two are like inseparable twins and will exist and flourish alongside each other. But not only this. Before humankind realises its power and tries to expel it from human society, Intemperance will already have changed the entire nature of humankind and "made the whole species an easier prey" for Death, so that it will leave Old Age with little to do.

This is a dismal prediction on the course of Civilization and the collective future of humankind. First, it trenchantly reveals the material basis of Civilization as well as its intrinsically exploitative and expanding nature. Second, the speech also points out that Civilization has a goal and destination of its own. In the relentless execution of its grand plan, humans will likewise be assimilated, becoming its slave to serve its purpose. The speech has thus revealed that the backbone of

Civilization is material interests, the pursuit and acquirement of which never stops and is beyond humanity's power to harness. It is, as it stands, a chilling observation.

This view is consistent with some ideas embedded in *Wuthering Heights*. In a symbolic exchange between an ability to love and a desire for material prosperity, the Lintons (who represent the new gentility) gained their seemingly comfortable life at the price of a diminished ability to love, and perhaps to live. Catherine, in explaining to Nelly the impossibility of her marrying Heathcliff, says that if she does so, "we should be beggars."¹² The decision to go with Linton is in fact driven by material considerations, which determines the chances of survival in the jungle of modern times. Heathcliff seeks to beat Civilization at its own game when he adopts its level-headed principle of investment and benefit, as he tells his servant that he won't spend a farthing on his dying son because "his life is not worth a farthing."¹³ Under the reign of Civilization, human life is, and perhaps should be, quantified into moneyed terms. In the story, both Catherine's and Heathcliff's attempted alliances with Civilization end in tragedy. The impulse to live an authentic, freewheeling, independent life is fundamentally antagonistic to the direction of modern progress, which primarily depends on the generation and accumulation of material wealth. It has torn each of them apart. But as far as the direction of human history goes, it seems they are hardly given an alternative choice.

In the last poem left by Emily Brontë, titled "Why ask to know what date what clime," the same ideas can also be seen. The poem is narrated by a foreign soldier who fights on foreign soil. Through his eyes we see a deserted corn field:

It was the autumn of the year
When grain grows yellow in the ear
Day after day from noon to noon
That August's sun blazed bright as June

But we with unregarding eyes
Saw panting earth and glowing skies

No hand the reaper's sickle held
Nor bound the ripe sheaves in the field

Our corn was garnered months before,
Threshed out and kneaded-up with gore
Ground when the ears were milky sweet
With furious toil of hoofs and feet
I doubly cursed on foreign sod
Fought neither for my home or God¹⁴

It is Autumn, the season of harvest, but none can be seen working the farmland since the corn has been destroyed by warfare months ago. The corn field was then the battleground; it witnessed the shedding of blood and the deaths of soldiers, which also destroyed its own verdant ears. The harvest of human lives and the harvest of crops thus coincide with each other and are both done prematurely, before the time in the natural course of things has arrived. Furthermore, the crystallization of a “dough” kneaded up by blood, with crop seeds and soil lying on the ground, provides an unnatural image that betrays the events that have occurred on the suffering land and further reveals the damning nature of war.

In the concluding line, the narrator states that he “fought neither for my home or God.” When associating this statement with the longer version of the draft, which is of Gondal origin, we come to realize that the soldier is a mercenary.¹⁵ As someone who fights in the war neither out of loyalty to country nor for any inherent belief, the mercenary fights primarily for money. This shatters the usual high ideals used to justify war, such as “liberty” or “loyalty,” and exposes the true nature of warfare. What really drives combatants into war is monetary profit, which engenders a disregard and disrespect for human lives and nature.

Moreover, the poem shows that the participants in the war pursue a profit that is far beyond meeting necessities, which could have been provided by the destroyed crops and farmland—products of both nature and human labor—that would have supported both basic survival and human society. Thus, the picture of a farmed land left unharvested and

deserted reveals excessive desires. Humans are so obsessed by their selfish and intemperate goals that the "unregarding eyes" choose to ignore what they already have, which is right in front of them. This realization adds a tinge of absurdity to the scene, which vividly displays what happens when humankind is devoured by avarice and greed.

In the essay "The Palace of Death," Intemperance's last words, "[...] before men unite to banish me from their society, I will have changed their entire nature and made the whole species an easier prey for your Majesty, so effectively, in fact, that [...] your place will be gorged with victims," form an audible resonance with the wasted corn field in the poem. For in the endless and unremitting pursuit of more, which is encouraged and propelled by the wheel of Civilization, Intemperance will, given time, insidiously seep into the heart of all members of human society and make them subject to its temptations, until the entire human race is at its service. Under the reign of Intemperance, victims of war in the poem lose their own value and are either reserved or disposed of for the sake of Civilization's advancement and expansion. And this would make the entire human race an easier target for Death.

In view of the expansion of the British empire and the rapid progress of industrialization in the early Victorian age, one may reckon that Emily Brontë's gloomy view on the direction of human civilization is not so much based on perceivable, empirical facts during her lifetime, as derived from a penetrating insight into the true nature of Civilization. It would be a stretch to say the author foresaw nearly two hundred years ago what would become of us today. However, her words find an uncanny echo in the current age, for today, the core drive of Civilization appears to be a material accumulation based upon the ceaseless exploitation of the earth and our fellow human beings. Thus, Civilization has arrived at the destruction depicted in Brontë's poem. Today, Brontë's vision of destruction has expanded to include melting ice caps, wildfires, floods, earthquakes, plagues of locusts, and pandemic—a bitter reckoning. Still, the engine of Civilization goes on regardless. The sacrifice of nature and human lives for the purpose of capital gain depicted in Emily Brontë's writings has at last exceeded its fictional arena and found parallels in today's world.

Notes

¹ There have appeared notable works focusing on Emily Brontë's poetry during the last 30 years or so, for example, Janet Gezari's *Last Things: Emily Brontë's Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), and John Maynard's "Poetry of Anne, Charlotte and Emily Brontë", in *A Companion to the Brontës*, ed. Diane Long Hoeveler and Deborah Denenholz Morse (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2016), 229-47. These critical works have helped to establish Emily Brontë as one of the great mystic poets of the nineteenth century.

² The Brontë sisters planned to open a school of their own at the time, which led to the decision of Charlotte and Emily's going overseas to receive additional education and qualifications. The plan of running a school, however, never materialized.

³ Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* [1857] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), Chapter 11, Kindle edition

⁴ Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* (London: Hachette Digital, 2010), Chapter 14, Kindle edition.

⁵ Charlotte Brontë, "To W.S. Williams," 15 February 1848, in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë: With a Selection of Letters by Family and Friends, Vol. 2, 1848-1851*, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), 28, electronic edition.

⁶ See, for example, Terry Eagleton, "Wuthering Heights" [1975], in *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 98-122.

⁷ Emily Brontë, "The Palace of Death," in *The Belgian Essays*, ed. and trans. Sue Lonoff (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 224. It should be noted that in her translation of Emily Brontë's original *devoir* from French into English, Lonoff has opted to gender the abstractions (Death, Intemperance, Civilization etc.) as female, leading to great theatrical effect. But this is not necessarily Brontë's own intention since in the original French, the same gendering derives simply from grammatical gender. Thus, in the following discussion, for the sake of

accuracy and adherence to the original, I will refer to the abstract characters as "it".

⁸ "[...] she had a figure that seemed to glow with joy and health, her step was as light as a zephyr," *Ibid.* 228.

⁹ Sue Lonoff, *Belgian Essays*, 234. The present essay has benefited greatly from Sue Lonoff's comprehensive edition of the Brontë sisters' surviving *devoirs*, along with a very thorough and thoughtful introduction of the background of the texts.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 234.

¹¹ Emily Brontë, "The Palace of Death," in Lonoff, *Belgian Essays*, 228-29.

¹² Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. Ian Jack (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 72.

¹³ *Ibid.* 259.

¹⁴ Emily Brontë, "Why ask to know what date what clime," in *Emily Jane Brontë: The Complete Poems*, ed. Janet Gezari (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 190, ll. 12-25.

¹⁵ The poem is a reworking of the one called "Why ask to know the date—the clime?" composed many months earlier and identified by the editor Janet Gezari as of Gondal origin. Gezari, *The Complete Poems*, 280-81.

