1-1-1966

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Recommended Citation

MacKay, Ruth M. (1966) "Irish Heaths and German Cliffs: a Study of the Foreign Sources of Wuthering Heights," *BYU Studies Quarterly* Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 3. Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol7/iss1/3

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Irish Heaths and German Cliffs: 
a Study of the Foreign Sources of Wuthering Heights

by Ruth M. MacKay

Most of the literary explorers who have "dreamed the dream and experienced the despair"1 of trying to find the sources of *Wuthering Heights* can be placed into three categories: those, like Somerset Maugham, who believe Emily Bronte came under the influence of the German Romantic writers2; those, like Laura L. Hinckley, who assert Emily's Irish ancestry provided the plot of her novel3; and those, like Lord David Cecil, who emphasize that the novel is indisputably English in its conception.4 But no critic, as far as I have been able to ascertain, has ever considered that *Wuthering Heights* is a combination of all three influences. Yet once it is theorized that Emily Bronte brought into conflict "two countries, two civilizations, two histories"5—the German and the Irish—by fusing the shorter Irish tale into the longer German story, and that she added incidents from her ancestral history and English experience, then the mystery of her sources is solved, for the similarities between *Wuthering Heights* and these sources can be perceived and the dissimilarities explained.

The many coincidences which led to my finding the two tales which, I believe, Emily combined to produce *Wuthering Heights* are not important here. Suffice it to say that she read "Das Majorat" as part of a reading assignment while studying

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German at M. Heger’s school in Brussels. The Irish story, “The Bridegroom of Barna,” appeared in the November, 1840, issue of *Blackwood’s*, the magazine from whose pages “came, we may be sure, many an inspiration of plot or phrase” in the writings of the Brontes.

This Irish tale portrays a love of passionate intensity and has a minor revenge plot. The German tale depicts a revenge of implacable hatred, and it has a minor love plot. A combination of the two tales in a novel would give it strong plots of love and revenge, and one certainly cannot consider *Wuthering Heights* merely “a revenge tragedy”; “to consider it merely an account of Heathcliff’s and Cathy’s love is equally fantastic.”

But, realistic as this interpretation is, it does not take into account the minor plots. Mark Schorer has said that in the novel “one world explodes within another—the world of primary passions . . . within the world of conscious propriety.” I feel that the world of primary passions is the world of the Irish tale, and the world of conscious propriety is the world of the German tale. Moreover, Mr. Schorer has failed to sense that, within each of these two worlds, recurring blasts are set off by the minor plots, for the fiery revenge of Irish origin detonates continuously against the cold steel of implacable German revenge, and the controlled love of the German tale dies in a shower of sparks as it is consumed, in *Wuthering Heights*; by the blazing conflagration of Irish passion. Once we are aware of the repercussions of each world exploding within itself, and then of one world exploding within the other, we are able to understand how the novel generates its atomic-like power. But Emily does not allow these worlds to blow themselves to pieces; she controls this fusion of elemental forces by using Heathcliff, the one character in whom she has embodied all the explosive elements of both tales, as the axis on which both worlds revolve. He is the German younger son, who swears vengeance on his brother; he is also the Irish Hugh, the passionate lover who disinters the body of the girl he loves, to hold her in his arms

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again. Thus, as Dorothy Van Ghent says: "Two kinds of reality intersect in him."10

The old German baron, Roderick, binds his descendants to the ancestral castle by entailing the estate. To do this he has to pledge the services of his heirs to his sovereign.11 In Wuthering Heights, it is the old Hareton Earnshaw who establishes the estate, apparently in the year 1500, for that is the date the visiting Lockwood notices above the door. The incidents in the German tale take place between the years 1760 and 1799, a period of thirty years or more; the incidents in Wuthering Heights take place, according to C. P. Sanger, between the years 1771 and 1803, a period of thirty-two years.12 Now, if Emily was actually following the German story, why did she have to go back to the year 1500? Simply because, in my opinion, she had to establish that the estate was in tail, i.e. that the male inherits all in order of birth. Mrs. Gaskell has revealed that Emily would have had some knowledge of what entail meant because in the district around Haworth Parsonage, "the land has often been held by one family since the days of the Tudors; the owners are, in fact, the remains of the old Yeomanry."13 Henry VII, the English king who founded the Tudor dynasty and who originated the Yeoman of the Guard to serve as his personal bodyguard, reigned from 1485 to 1509. Is Emily's use of the date of 1500 therefore significant? Did she have the old Hareton Earnshaw establish the estate of Wuthering Heights to imply that the estate was entailed, just as the German estate was entailed, and that both estates were founded on service to the respective kings. I think so, and a legal question which Emily raises in her novel supports my view.

In the German story, under the law of entail, the younger brother would inherit should the older brother die without issue. But in Wuthering Heights, Heathcliff, being a nameless waif, could not claim the property. Emily, therefore, had to devise a

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way for him to take possession so that she could follow the German plot. It was easy enough, with Branwell for an example, to make Hindley a gambler who mortgages his inheritance to Heathcliff, and a drunkard who does not really know what he is doing. But Emily wanted the estate to come down to Hindley's son, just as the estate comes down to Wolfgang's son in "Das Majorat," and to do this, she had to ensure that the mortgage on Wuthering Heights was illegal. Otherwise, on Heathcliff's death, because he left no will and no heirs, the property would have "escheated to the Crown in bona vacantia." But it doesn't. The estate is inherited by the young Hareton, just as though the estate were entailed; Emily had achieved her purpose with one simple, brilliant stroke. She simply made the lawyer who effected the mortgage—crooked. There seems to be no other valid reason for Mr. Green of Gimmerton being crooked, for the only other legal business he is called upon to transact is to make some alterations in Edgar Linton's will, but at that time, he had already sold himself to Heathcliff, presumably in the matter of the mortgage.

However, in taking the story back in time in order to follow the German story, Emily ran into a problem. She needed but three generations of the family to coincide with those of the German family: the old Baron Roderick; his son, Wolfgang; and his grandson, Roderick. But Emily has the old Hareton Earnshaw; his descendant, Mr. Earnshaw; Mr. Earnshaw's son, Hindley; and the young Hareton, Hindley's son. Emily, however, deliberately played down Mr. Earnshaw; he does not have a given name, and he appears in the story "only long enough to introduce Heathcliff to the Heights and exits too early to be more than a puppet." Disregarding Emily's puppet, then, we have the old Baron Roderick and the old Hareton Earnshaw, both founders of their respective estates; Wolfgang and Hindley, heirs to the properties; and Roderick and Hareton, both of whom are named after the founders of the estates, and with both of whom the stories end.

Wolfgang inherits the German castle of R--sitten on the death of the baron, and Hubert, the younger son, feeling him-

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*Sanger, p. 18.


*Watson, p. 92.*
self dispossessed, vows vengeance on his brother. Hindley inherits Wuthering Heights on the death of Mr. Earnshaw, and Heathcliff, who has been given the name of, and been treated as, a younger son, feeling himself dispossessed, vows vengeance on his foster brother. During his father's lifetime and while away from the castle, Wolfgang has secretly married. During his father's lifetime and while away from the Heights, Hindley has secretly married. Wolfgang has a son, named Roderick after the founder of the estate; Hindley has a son, named Hareton after the founder of the estate. Both wives have neither name nor money to recommend them, and both die after having brought the third generation of the families into the world. Wolfgang is murdered and Hubert, although he knows the young Roderick is the rightful heir, takes over the castle. Hindley is driven to his death and Heathcliff, although he knows the young Hareton is the rightful heir, takes possession of the Heights. Time elapses and both the young Roderick and the young Hareton grow up. Just before his death, Hubert repents and the castle reverts to the rightful heir, Roderick. He marries the girl who has inherited Courland, a pleasant estate near the castle. Heathcliff, just before he dies, loses his desire for revenge, and the property reverts to Hareton, who marries the girl who has inherited Thrushcross Grange, a pleasant estate near the Heights. It seems quite apparent that, consciously or not, Emily followed the German plot of revenge quite closely.

And she followed the Irish love plot just as closely. The Irish Hugh is passionately in love with Ellen, whose mother and brother detest him. Heathcliff is passionately in love with Cathy, whose mother and brother detest him. While out on the moors with Hugh, Ellen catches a chill from which she never fully recovers. Cathy, while out on the moors searching for Heathcliff, catches a chill from which she never fully recovers. Both girls die at nineteen: Ellen, of consumption; Cathy, of consumption and a mental disorder. Apparently, she inherited a mental disorder from Seraphina, the girl in the German tale, for a facet of Emily's genius was that she could fuse the char-

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17'The Bridegroom of Barna,' Tales from Blackwood (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, n.d.), p. 73. Subsequent references to this story will be introduced in the body of the essay and followed by page numbers in parentheses.

18Sanger, p. 21.
characteristics of various persons." After Ellen’s burial, Hugh disinters her body and sits at the graveside “enclosing in his arms the form that had once comprised all earth’s love and beauty for him. . . . The wan face was turned up to his as if it could still thrill to the mad kisses in which he steeped it, while he had twined one of the white arms around his neck.” (77) After Cathy’s burial, Heathcliff goes to Cathy’s grave “determined to hold her in his arms again.” (305) Hugh is shot by the police at the graveside and is buried with Ellen. Heathcliff, however, is forced to live on, tormented by his love, for many years, for, in fusing the two tales, Emily could not let Heathcliff die at this point in her novel; he had to fulfill his role of the German avenger and wait for the young Hareton to grow up. It is significant, however, that to bring Wuthering Heights back into line with the Irish story, after Heathcliff has achieved his revenge, Emily has him re-enact the scene at the grave before he dies. The hiatus in the novel is clearly discernible and V. S. Pritchett states that after the death of Cathy, the “high power [of the novel] is gone; the storm has spent its force,” and that only when Heathcliff begins to “relive the ineluctable love” does the power return.26

Having conjured up Heathcliff by blending, in a witch’s brew, the elemental drives of both Hubert and Hugh, Emily faced the problem of getting him into the story. She could not make him Hindley’s younger brother, as Hubert was Wolfgang’s, because she wanted him to fall in love with Hindley’s sister, Cathy. And she could not have him a land-tenant like the Irish Hugh, because she wanted him to be dispossessed of property by Hindley, as Hubert was dispossessed by Wolfgang. So once more she resorted to combination. In the Irish story, there is a gypsy-like foundling, named Bush. Hugh, the main character, had known no family since his boyhood, and Emily’s Irish grandfather, Hugh, “had been a runaway lad who came under the brutal power of an adopted uncle.”27 Heathcliff is a gypsy-like lad (Bush) who is found running around the streets and is adopted by Mr. Earnshaw (Grandfather Hugh), who could find no relatives of the boy (Hugh). With Heathcliff’s literary birth established, Emily introduces him into the story

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26Pritchett, p. 453.
27Hinkley, p. 5.
with a minimum of explanation—Mr. Earnshaw brings him home.

In "Das Majorat" and in *Wuthering Heights*, as well as in the Irish tale, there are two narrators: the first, a stranger; the second, a family retainer. The story of the German family is recounted to the stranger by the family retainer, who is ill in bed. The story of the family of *Wuthering Heights* is recounted by the family retainer to the stranger, who is ill in bed. Theodore, the German stranger, has a role in the love plot of the German story, but Emily drops her stranger, Lockwood, as a lover in favor of Heathcliff. She was not, however, able to divest Lockwood of all of Theodore's romantic inclinations, for more than one critic has seen "a hint that he was attracted to the younger Catherine," and that "although something was to have been made out of Catherine's beauty and Lockwood's complacent susceptibility, nothing happens, the intention is scrapped." Precisely, for it is exactly at this point that Lockwood is dropped so that Heathcliff can carry out the role of the passionate Irish lover, Hugh. As Allan R. Brick says: "The reader casts him [Lockwood] aside, anxious that the new focus be directly upon Heathcliff." Both Theodore and Lockwood return, after an absence, to their respective tales to finish the stories. A sudden impulse seizes Theodore to revisit the area of R-sitten; he finds the owner of the estate is dead. (319) A sudden impulse seizes Lockwood to revisit the area of the Heights, and he learns the final events of the family history. Heathcliff has died in his absence. (323)

The second German narrator is, appropriately enough, a lawyer, for this story is concerned mainly with the law of entail. Nelly Dean, the second narrator of *Wuthering Heights*, who most critics believe was taken from Tabby Brown, the parsonage housekeeper, is, however, "better educated than Tabby." She loves to read and Lockwood tells her: "You have no marks of the manners which I am habituated to consider as peculiar to your class. I am sure you have thought a great deal more than the generality of servants think." (65) If Emily did indeed

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follow the German story, then this veneer of education is a carry-over from the German family-retainer lawyer. But Emily was not finished with Nelly; to this combination of English housekeeper and German lawyer, she added a dash of Irish magic. In the throes of delirium Cathy calls out: "Ah! Nelly has played traitor . . . Nelly is my hidden enemy. You witch . . . I'll make her howl a recantation." (136) The witch Nanse, Nelly's corresponding figure in the Irish tale, has actually pretended to play traitor for Ellen.

Joseph, who "hed aimed tuh dee wheare Aw'd served for sixty year" (338), is a replica of the German Daniel, whose "only wish was to end his days at R--sitten." (280) It is Daniel who murders Wolfgang, and on the night of the murder he is seen to come out of the castle and cross the courtyard. He opens the stable-door and goes in, and soon afterwards brings out a saddle-horse. Then he leads the horse back into the stable and locks the door, and also that of the castle. (292) These actions are duplicated by Joseph in *Wuthering Heights*. Isabella explains that Joseph took the saddle-horses and led them into the stables, "reappearing for the purpose of locking the outer gate, as if we lived in an ancient castle." (145) Emily's use of this incident and of the word "castle" is interesting. At the end of the German story, only Daniel's ghost is left to haunt the castle; at the end of *Wuthering Heights*, only old Joseph is left at the farmhouse.

This farmhouse is certainly not a castle, but Emily's description of it gives a semblance of one. The name above the door, the date of its founding, its locked doors and gates, and the fact that the architect had "had the foresight to build it strong; the narrow windows are deeply set in the wall, and the corners defended with large, jutting stones" (2) make it appear as much like a castle as a farmhouse. Both the German castle and the English farmhouse are set on high ground: the castle "high on the sea-cliffs of the Baltic Sea," (320) and the farmhouse "high on a barren moorland." (2) The German castle has "a thin forest of firs on the landward side" (218); the farmhouse has "a few stunted firs at the end of the house." (2) The fir forest around the castle is inhabited by wolves; the house and grounds of the Heights are infested by dogs, one of which is named "Wolf." (16) This dog sneaks "wolfishly" (16) towards Lockwood, "her lip curled up and her white teeth
watering for a snatch." (4) Lockwood says that the dogs came from "hidden dens" (5) and "he was not anxious to come in contact with their fangs." (5) Theodore is attacked by a German wolf; Lockwood, by English dogs, who could claim the German wolves as first cousins. If my theory is correct, then it is plain that Emily made use of every thread of the two tales she combined.

Over this combination of German and Irish tales, Emily threw the aura of the love-gospel and spiritual essence of German Romanticism, of which the writer of the German tale, E. T. A. Hoffman, was a devoted follower. I believe Emily became obsessed with this philosophy because it promised her a reconciliation with God, against whom she had sinned in loving her brother, Branwell. The spiritual essence of this philosophy is based on Plotinus' idea that "the ultimate purpose of the soul is to achieve an ecstatic reunion with its heavenly father." 26

The "love-gospel" 27 is based on the Platonic conception of love. According to the German Romantics, Man, cast out from the presence of God and unable to achieve a reunion with Him, transfers his yearning to a beloved woman, for "the heart thinks to find in the loved one the infinite treasure it seeks; this yearning, this love, permits man to penetrate the absolute and eternal." 28 But this woman must be unattainable, such a love being "foredoomed to tragic frustration on this earth, but for that very reason the lovers'... renunciation of physical love, and their eventual martyrdom will undoubtedly... secure their eternal union in the next life." 29 Emily makes Cathy unattainable for Heathcliff by having her marry Edgar Linton, and there can be no doubt that Heathcliff yearns for her unceasingly. When he comes back to the Heights, Cathy says his return has reconciled her to God. (104) Both Cathy and Heathcliff, therefore, are, in the spirit of German Romanticism, two half-hearts yearning to be united with each other, and so to God. They are "divided halves who seek one another so as to restore their original unity." 30 The whole secret of the followers of this philosophy was that they knew "the body and the soul and

27Ibid., p. 309.
29Tymms, pp. 304, 305.
30Ibid., p. 309.
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their unity."31 No two characters in literature exemplify this precept better than do Cathy and Heathcliff. Cathy maintains: "If all else perished, and be remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger. . . . I am Heathcliff—he's always on my mind . . . as my own being." (86) And after Cathy's death, Heathcliff is in a torment: "I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!" (197) Cathy, as she is dying, argues: "I'll not lie there by myself; they may bury me twelve feet deep and throw the church down over me; but I won't rest till you are with me." (134) Heathcliff, having completed the role of avenger, with Hareton ready to take over the estate, prepares to join her. He says:

I have a single wish, and my whole being and faculties are yearning to attain it. They have yearned towards it for so long, and so unwaveringly, that I'm convinced it will be reached—and soon—because it has devoured my existence—I am swallowed in the anticipation of its fulfillment. (344)

Heathcliff dies of no apparent ailment (356); it is as if, wanting "only to unite himself with Catherine,"32 he wills himself to die. In having him die in this manner, Emily is following the German Romantic doctrine of the "infinite power of the Will."33 This power is expressed in a passage referring, not to Heathcliff but, to Novalis, the writer considered to be "the key to the German Romantic School."34

His sweetheart . . . had died. He determined to die, but not by suicide. He determined to will himself to death, to concentrate on the thought till death came to him, and he was firmly convinced that as he belonged spiritually to this dead girl, that as he was one with her, so he must eventually die from the very strength of this conviction. The soul was to consume the body. He went out to her grave.35

Heathcliff attains his wish, and he is buried in the same grave as Cathy. But he asks to be "carried to the churchyard, in the evening." (354) Why the evening? Because the German Romantics believed that "night is the beginning of the higher,

31Walzel, p. 82.
32Cecil, p. 177.
34Ibid., p. 181.
35Ibid., p. 185.
I believe that Emily was following the philosophy that "Night—holy, unspeakable, mysterious night—will bring comfort, and reunite him with his bride, for now: The earthly day is over. . . . He sinks with her on the altar of night. . . . Night is the womb of love, the means by which the higher consummation of life, existence at its highest potential, will be fulfilled." It is quite significant that the last words in Emily's novel reflect the peace which Heathcliff and Cathy have found in the grave. Lockwood, visiting their graves on his return to Wuthering Heights says:

I lingered around them, under the benign sky; watched the moths fluttering among the heath and the hare-bells; listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass; and wondered how anyone could ever imagine unquiet slumbers, for the sleepers in that quiet earth. (358)

No wonder that Lockwood finds the graveyard peaceful, for the separation of Heathcliff and Cathy, which caused torment and upheaval in their lives on earth, has been overcome in the grave, and their reunion with each other brings about a reunion with God. "Like Paradise Lost the novel has set out to 'justify the ways of God to Man.' No novel in the world has a greater theme."38

That Emily Bronte should have chosen such a theme is not surprising, for through it she was able to resolve her own frightful dilemma, the conflict between her strong religious principles, instilled in her by her clergyman father, and her love for Branwell. Through German Romanticism she was able to believe that love of a mortal was actually an expression of love for God, that the lovers had necessarily to be separated—in her case by a family relationship—and that only when reunion had been effected in the grave could the spirit be ecstatically reunited with God.

If we substitute Branwell and Emily for Heathcliff and Cathy, and we can, for their love "resembled the . . . over-intense, Heathcliff-Cathy type love,"39 then we can see Emily, not as a genius, not as a spinster with no experience of life, but as a woman capable of deep love and intense suffering, a

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38Tymms, p. 168.
37Ibid., pp. 169, 188.
39Cecil, p. 178.
woman torn apart by the conflict between love of God, and love of man. Lines from one of her poems convey the impression of an illicit love affair: "None but one can the secret repeat/ Why I hate that lone green dell." Emily’s love for Branwell would explain her fierce homesickness whenever she was away from the parsonage; it would explain Charlotte’s otherwise inexplicable action in burning Emily’s papers. "She displayed an extraordinary eagerness to obliterate all traces of her sister’s private life, and . . . there is a hint of baffled terror in her reticence when she writes of Emily." What was Charlotte afraid of? That the object of Emily’s love would be revealed to the world? Incestuous love would break Emily and Branwell’s link with the God they had been brought up to worship. This separation, personified in religion as Satan, was evil, and from it, torment and suffering resulted. In one of her poems, Emily wrote: "That sin was purified by woe/ I’ve suffered by night and day/ I’ve trod a dark and frightful way." Once the sin had been purified by woe, the lovers could be united in the grave, and then reunited with God. It was Branwell who died first, but Emily followed him quickly. She never "went outside the door again after his death." She would have no doctor to attend her, she would take no medicine, and she died just eight weeks after her brother. One can only hope that the peace and tranquillity which descended on Heathcliff and Cathy also descended on Branwell and Emily.

"Ibid., p. 42.
"Crandall, p. 60.
"Maugham, “The Ten Best Novels,” p. 91.