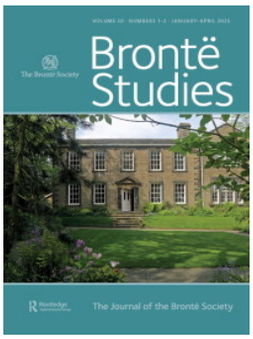

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Depathologising Excess in *Wuthering Heights*

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ABSTRACT

This article re-evaluates the semantics of excess in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). By looking back at the variants between the original edition of 1847 and the 1850 edition, which was extensively revised by Charlotte Brontë, it tracks Emily's development of her own vocabulary and conception of excess in the novel. It argues that in contrast to contemporary socio-medical narratives of excess, which continued to perceive its manifestations in definite physical terms, Emily shows an interest in more abstract representations of excess as affect. Anchoring this approach in eighteenth-century sentimental fiction, the article goes on to present the ways in which Emily moves beyond this tradition and its regulating discourses on feeling and offers instead a view of excess as energy and opportunity, both on the level of narrative and the text more broadly conceived. The article thus positions *Wuthering Heights* as a major mid-century cornerstone in the literary process of depathologising excess.

KEYWORDS

excess; emotion; *Wuthering Heights*; Emily Brontë; the novel

All excess is vicious.

Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794)

In an unsigned review of *Wuthering Heights* (1847) in *The Atlas*—one of five reviews that Emily Brontë kept in her desk—the author describes Heathcliff as 'the presiding evil genius of the piece, the tyrant father of an imbecile son, a creature in whom every evil passion seems to have reached a gigantic excess' (Allott 1974, 231–32). Heathcliff is not the only character with whom the reviewer takes issue: 'There is not in the entire *dramatis personae* a single character which is not utterly hateful or thoroughly contemptible' (231). We might term this assessment, with its repeated reaching for extremes and absolute statements, equally excessive in its condemnation. Excess, in variously precise and general terms, is a quality that has been associated with the novel and its characters ever since its publication. In each case, accounting for the novel's too much-ness has formed part of the attempt to account for its strangeness, of explaining away Emily's irreverence for both established moral and formal conventions.[1] In this

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article I consider the internal semantics of excess in *Wuthering Heights* in order to illustrate Emily's contribution to contemporary discourses on excess as one that undoes this ostensibly inextricable link between excess and evil, hatefulness and contempt. In turn, I want to recalibrate our own inherited critical attribution of this term to her work and to demonstrate how thinking about excess as energy can provide a useful framework for understanding Emily's idiosyncratic approach to the novel.

It is in the third chapter of *Wuthering Heights*, in which Lockwood narrates his nightmarish stay at the Heights, that Emily first explicitly uses the term 'excess'. Or does she? Complaining of his torment by Catherine's ghost in the night, Lockwood notes the palpable effect the story produces in Heathcliff. Not yet privy to the cause, he simply records the symptoms: 'I guessed by his irregular and intercepted breathing, that he struggled to vanquish an access of violent emotion' (Brontë [1847] 2003, 28).[2] The noun 'access' in this edition, based on the first 1847 printing, becomes interchangeable with 'excess' in the second edition of 1850, famously sanitised by Charlotte, who felt obliged to defend her sister's work in a new preface to the novel.[3] The rarer term 'access' is much more conspicuous in its echo of medicalised language used to denote '[a]n attack, or the onset (of fever or disease)'.[4] Charlotte herself uses the term in this way in *Villette* (1853), so it evidently formed part of the sisters' vocabulary.[5] It is equally relevant, as we shall see, in its figurative meaning as 'a burst of energy', which places it altogether outside the realm of pathology.[6] The term 'excess', in contrast, contains an inherently negative judgement: one must establish a sense of what is usual or necessary in order to designate either excess or lack. Charlotte's likely edits, then, pronounce a judgement on the inappropriateness of this display of emotional surplus absent in Emily's original word choice. Like Lockwood, Charlotte watches and labels Heathcliff's reaction from the outside. Yet Heathcliff never explains himself, and crucially, neither did Emily.[7]

In fact, Emily appears fascinated rather than fazed by the opportunities afforded by excess, both on the level of content and form. Since the above episode forms the first extended study of perceived excess in the novel, it bears closer analysis. Crucially, it starts with Lockwood *hearing* 'the conflict' of Heathcliff's emotions working themselves through his breath, an attunement disturbing enough on his part that he 'continue[s his] toilette rather noisily' to drown it out, before making his exit (Brontë [1847] 2003, 28). It is only once Heathcliff believes Lockwood to be gone that he gives up this conflict, allowing for the most immediate and private depiction of access/excess of emotion in the novel, since the majority of the narrative is filtered through Nelly's recollections. A progressive change in volume takes place, as we move from listening to Heathcliff's breath to his sobs, then a series of frantic invocations. Remarkably, as Heathcliff gives vent to 'an uncontrollable passion of tears' (28)—at least according to Lockwood—his everyday prose takes on a conversely rhythmic and measured poetic form. This is not the pasting in of a poem between prose done elsewhere by both Anne and Charlotte, but the running of one form into the other, reflective of this sudden loss of control. Almost entirely monosyllabic, the two lines Heathcliff utters could easily be written in interchangeably iambic and trochaic hexameter:

> Come in! | come in! | Ca-thy, | do come. | Oh do—| *once* more! | Oh!
>
> my heart's | dar-ling | hear me | *this* time—| Cathe-rine, | at last! (28)[8]

That extra 'Oh!' is a false start. Catherine does not appear, but neither does Heathcliff give up, calling her by three different names ('Cathy', 'darling' and 'Catherine') and apparently changing tack by his fluctuations in stresses. Stevie Davies writes that, in life, 'Catherine's speeches have a poetry that magnetises the reader' (2002, 91), and so it follows that, on the level of the narrative, Heathcliff adopts poetic conventions, and those of epic metre at that, to get close to her in death. This uncontrollable outburst, then, paradoxically follows its own particular logic.

Through Heathcliff's attempts to invoke the dead Catherine in this way, Emily appears to be gesturing in this early scene to the more common meaning of 'access' in the sense of admission or entry: the power or opportunity to come near to someone or something.[9] It is an opportunity that Lockwood initially firmly rejects—'I'll never let you in, not if you beg for twenty years!', he shouts at Catherine's ghost in his dream (Brontë [1847] 2003, 25)—but which Heathcliff's reaction re-opens, prompting Lockwood to immediately follow up on the family history in the next chapter. As Heathcliff physically strains out of the window in his desperation, on an authorial level, we find Emily straining against the restrictions of genre (realist/gothic) and form (prose/poetry) in an attempt to portray the full intensity of this moment.[10] And yet Emily does not dispense with the conventions of the realist narrative altogether. Her persistent, detailed attempts to depict these volatile psychologies, closely observed and recounted by her various narrators, highlight the instabilities they generate. What may be considered generic or formal excesses become necessary multiplicities, which jump-start the narrative in the process: it is through excess that we as readers gain access to the novel. That Nelly's story, and accordingly Emily's prose, will 'rouse … to animation' rather than 'lull … to sleep' (33) is made clear from the outset.

The same discrepancy between the 1847 and 1850 editions of *Wuthering Heights* occurs twice more in the embedded narrative: in the description of Edgar's 'access of emotion' (115) upon Heathcliff's return to the Heights and, later, in Catherine's 'access of frenzy' (131) in her final illness, all key moments of heightened emotionality in the first half of the novel.[11] In both these instances, however, excess is defined through the attempt at its de-escalation during moments of interpersonal conflict. Although it hinges on the same descriptor, Nelly's record of her master's reaction at unexpectedly finding his wife at home with Heathcliff is quite different from my first example:

> Mr Edgar was taken with a nervous trembling, and his countenance grew deadly pale. For his life he could not avert that access of emotion—mingled anguish and humiliation overcame him completely. He leant on the back of the chair, and covered his face. (115)

If Heathcliff's excess of emotion had inspired an outburst of energy—he literally wrenches open the lattice and bursts into tears—it drains Edgar 'completely', leaving him momentarily helpless and in need of physical support. Unlike Heathcliff, Edgar also appears to make no sound; in fact, he does not speak again in the scene. Both Catherine and Heathcliff proceed, as if in response to his silence, to loudly mock this response and to offer a vigorous cure: a flogging. They can only meet one excess with another. Emily overloads their inexhaustible back-and-forth with exclamations,

willing the prose itself into action. Meanwhile, even when provoked to violence, Edgar remains tied to the stubborn finality of clipped preterites and full stops: 'my master quickly sprang erect, and struck him full on the throat a blow that would have levelled a slighter man' then 'Mr Linton walked out by the back door into the yard, and from thence to the front entrance' (115). This time, the generic compass inches towards sensationalism, as Heathcliff promises that he 'shall murder him sometime' for it (115).

The third imposed mention of excess in the novel comes after the fact: 'Catherine lay in a troubled sleep: her husband had succeeded in soothing the access of frenzy; he now hung over her pillow, watching every shade and every change of her painfully expressive features' (131). Like Lockwood's earlier assessment of Heathcliff's emotionality, the judgement on Catherine's frenzied behaviour seems to be Nelly's, or perhaps even her husband's, as he insinuates himself so thoroughly into this scene. In some ways, then, it does not matter that we definitively settle on these accesses or excesses. What reading both terms side by side brings into focus is the subjectivity of excess. It is not that Emily never draws on the term, nor that she does not recognise its social functions, but that she wants as a matter of priority to explore its energetic potential.[12] Stevie Davies has commented on 'the unparalleled economy of Emily Brontë's intelligence, its power to digest and concentrate information' (1994, 50) regarding her reading material, a quality clearly reflected in the form of her own fictional writing. In this single sentence, in which we watch Catherine sleep, Emily manages to neatly capture several of the idiosyncrasies surrounding excess with which the narrative grapples, and which I discuss in this article: the dynamic, rousing connection it provides between Heathcliff and Catherine; Edgar's ostensibly 'soothing', soporific role in this relationship; and the tension it engenders between the mental and the bodily in all three of them. As Catherine sleeps, so does the narrative rest: temporarily. Heathcliff runs, off-page, with Isabella and over the next two months, we are told, Catherine recovers. But her 'troubled' sleep here already hints at the double-fold return of her illness, predicated as it is on Heathcliff's return. Like Edgar, we have learned to read the minute details of these characters' expressive features, and to spot the tell-tale markers of excess on their bodies. We have also learned to associate this excess with energy, opportunity and animation.

I have already mentioned that the term 'access' was linguistically associated with the kind of brain fever with which Catherine is diagnosed. The language of excess, too, was becoming increasingly medicalised by the mid-nineteenth century. In the Brontë family medical manual, a copy of Thomas John Graham's *Modern Domestic Medicine* (1826), it is referred to predominantly in a physical sense, specifically to warn against the dangers to health of intemperate drinking and eating habits. For example, the manual warns, 'when taken in excess [wine] intoxicates, producing sickness, head-ache, giddiness, and looseness, with nervous tremors … indigestion, emaciation and debility, inflammation of the lungs and liver, palsy, gout, dropsy, and a long train of diseases and wretchedness' (Graham 1826, 73). Likewise, 'any excess or imprudence in diet' is listed as a cause or aggravating factor of a number of conditions from asthma to typhus (202, 507).[13] What had once been a moral question had now become closely wrapped up with matters of personal and public

health. In a survey of the sanatory conditions of London and Paris conducted in 1844, one of the queries posed to the authorities under the subheading 'Morals' was 'Are [the working classes] given to excess in the use of wine, beer, or spirits?' (*The Lancet* 1847, 236). These were real, measurable excesses that the Brontës had watched their brother Branwell indulge in, and real diseases that they had experienced or witnessed first-hand.[14] It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) Anne Brontë uses the term 'excess' most frequently in reference to Huntingdon's 'love of wine', which causes him 'daily to overstep the bounds of moderation, and, not infrequently, to disgrace himself by positive excess' and eventually becomes his ruin (A. Brontë [1848] 1995, 191). Although she devotes a significant portion of the narrative to Hindley's dissipation, Emily never refers to alcoholism in this way in *Wuthering Heights*.[15] As we have seen in all three examples from the novel so far, she is preoccupied with different kinds of excesses, which escape straightforward classification and pathologisation.

One particular physical excess with which the novel has been charged is its violence. The quantity of previous criticism on the violence of *Wuthering Heights* would perhaps set it up as the novel's most obvious and persistent force.[16] In my first example, no sooner does Heathcliff shout at Lockwood 'with savage vehemence', than this verbal abuse seeks a physical outlet and unable in this instance to strike his guest, 'he struck his [own] forehead with rage' (Brontë [1847] 2003, 27). Yet, as Graeme Tytler has recently shown, 'so much physical violence takes place almost entirely within the boundaries of the mind and the tongue' (2021, 266), with the majority of threats of violence in the novel remaining unfulfilled. In the second scene discussed in this essay, Heathcliff never flogs Edgar and leaves to avoid a scuffle with the gardeners and coachman. His murder threat remains equally empty. What Emily focuses on again and again are conflicts of emotional excess. Even at the intersection of emotional and physical excess, the latter often feels of secondary importance in the presence of the former. For example, it is only Nelly who appears to notice the 'four distinct impressions left blue in [Catherine's] colourless skin' by Heathcliff's grasp in their final charged union before her death (Brontë [1847] 2003, 161). The implication of the term 'impressions' is that these physical markings are only the surface of a much deeper bond that connects them.

The focus on emotional excess which instead characterises Emily's fictional method has its roots in the eighteenth-century sentimental tradition.[17] Characters in novels by Samuel Richardson, Laurence Sterne, Frances Burney, Eliza Parsons, Charlotte Smith and Maria Edgeworth, among others, typically possess 'in a great excess all those keen feelings which fill a heart of extreme sensibility' (Charlotte Smith 1788, vol. III, 122), are found to have 'loved to excess, and hated … in proportion' (Parsons 1793, vol. II, 68–69) and are often 'quite overcome' by their feelings (Richardson [1740] 2001, 84, 248, 426, 484); in other words, they are 'continually extracting the excess of misery, or delight, from every surrounding circumstance' (Radcliffe [1794] 2008, 79–80). The politics of these states were already anchored in class and gender assumptions about the emotions; while a refined sensibility indicated superior intellect, women were thought to be overly emotional and in need of restraint. Literary discussions of 'the poetics of excess', to adopt Karen

Jackson Ford's wording, have consequently examined and reclaimed this association between women and excess.[18] However, in a text such as *Wuthering Heights*, where gender boundaries are constantly blurred—we started, after all, with an image of a man in tears—it is difficult to make the same straightforward connection. The kind of energetic excess that drives the narrative indiscriminately envelops male and female characters alike.

What readers of eighteenth-century fiction were to learn from these narratives was that, per my epigraph, 'all excess is vicious', and to moderate their own emotions accordingly. We have already seen this assertion underpin medical advice for a range of conditions in the nineteenth century. This is less surprising than it may seem, for as Kyla Schuller has shown, 'the two most prominent discourses that consolidated political power at the site of the feeling body [were] science and sentimentalism' (2018, 5). The joint pathologisation of excess in medicine and literature is indicative of a wider social anxiety. Mary Wollstonecraft's anonymously published review of Charlotte Smith's novel *Emmeline: The Orphan of the Castle* (1788), provides an early warning against the dangers of the literary depiction of such states. In reference to a climactic scene of abduction, Wollstonecraft writes: 'Such an exhibition of violent emotions and attitudes follows as we cannot describe or analyse; yet, we fear, the description will catch the attention of many romantic girls, and carry their imaginations still further from nature and reason' (1788, 331). Wollstonecraft's concern that the description she dare not reproduce will 'catch the attention' of young female readers centres ideas of contagion, as do many other contemporary accounts surrounding the negative influence of novel reading—again, especially on women—which continue into the nineteenth century with the rise of cheap print and increased literacy rates.[19] In an anonymous letter from Charlotte Brontë to Hartley Coleridge in 1840, a response to his feedback on an early novel manuscript, Charlotte shows a familiarity with several of the novelists I listed earlier: Richardson, Smith, Burney and Radcliffe. While she expresses her own admiration for them, the letter demonstrates the reduced cultural status of their novels by the mid-nineteenth century:

> it is long, very long since I perused the antiquated print in which those tales were given forth—I read them before I knew how to criticize or object—they were old books belonging to my mother or my Aunt … I read them as a treat on holiday afternoons or by stealth when I should have been minding my lessons—I shall never see anything which will interest me so much again—One black day my father burnt them because they contained foolish love-stories. (Smith 1995, 240)

Patrick Brontë's behaviour seems an extreme reaction to ridding the household of these 'foolish love-stories' (240). Charlotte may of course be exaggerating for effect, but the eager secrecy in which she returns to these novels illustrates their subversive potential. In the editor's preface to *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte writes instead of having 'shuddered under the grinding influences of natures so relentless and implacable, of spirits so lost and fallen' (C. Brontë [1850] 2003, lii). Yet her own experience of reading eighteenth-century fiction attests to the enduring and powerful interest that emotional excess can exert prior to, and outside of, the capacity for

moral or literary criticism. Excess appears catching—even involuntarily—in and across texts.

In all the examples presented so far, discussion of excess of emotion has been rooted in character. However, excess in *Wuthering Heights* is not always confined to, nor does it necessarily originate with, 'creations like Heathcliff, like Earnshaw, like Catherine' (C. Brontë [1850] 2003, lii). E. M. Forster would admire this very quality about the text in his 1927 series of lectures on the novel: 'the emotions of Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw function differently to other emotions in fiction. Instead of inhabiting the characters, they surround them like thunderclouds', filling the novel with a rush of sound 'more important than words and thoughts' ([1927] 1974, 131). The movement towards the diffusiveness of clouds and the ineffability of sound, which Forster praises here, is a movement towards affect. It goes beyond the boundaried experience of emotion on an individual character level, and towards a more atmospheric quality that cannot be so easily psychologised.[20] In her important conceptual study *The Transmission of Affect* (2004), Teresa Brennan writes that '[t]he transmission of affect was once common knowledge; the concept faded from the history of scientific explanation as the individual, especially the biologically determined individual, came to the fore' (2). Brennan's project aims to reclaim the social dimension of 'these affects [that] do not only arise within but also come from without. They come via an interaction with other people and an environment' (3). This approach is intuitive to Emily's fictional method, interested as she in the 'intense attachments' people form in and with one place over time (Brontë [1847] 2003, 189). In order to depict the full intensity of the interactions that inform these attachments in *Wuthering Heights*, Emily seeks to construct an environment—textually centred on 'the atmospheric tumult' of the Heights (4), and formally within the shape of the novel itself—perpetually sustained by excess affects. It is an extreme manifestation of a tendency to leave affects unprocessed and therefore at their most exciting and generative. The language of resolution and reflection in the novel is rarely found, moving from conflict to conflict with little intermittent relief but plenty of onward momentum.

Indeed, the close atmosphere of the Heights subsumes not only the first generation of its inhabitants—Hindley, Catherine and Heathcliff—but excess appears to work transhistorically, as well as spatially, across generations. A high-tension scene between Hareton, Cathy and Linton in the second half of the novel shows each equally culpable in the affective transmission of excess. Provoked by his cousins' teasing regarding his illiteracy, Hareton 'seize[s] Linton by the arm' and 'nearly throws him into the kitchen', prompting Linton to threaten repeatedly—and once again, emptily—'I'll kill you!' and Cathy, to come full circle, giving Hareton 'a cut with [her] whip' (250–52). The linguistic echoes of previous scenes, such as when Catherine asks for a new whip (36) or notoriously laments 'You have killed me' (160), serve to augment the parallel centrality of excess that spreads across the two generations. The catching movement of excess affect can also be perceived filling the room in the description of Joseph's 'quivering' frame as he watches the events unfold, immediately followed by that of Linton, 'white and trembling'; even the doorknob 'shook' (251). Nor does it stop at the man-made boundaries of the space: the sudden

inundation of bodily fluids including blood, tears and presumably spit re-enforces the characters' inability to contain themselves and the scene, as Catherine must go in search of Zillah and insist on 'dragging her in' (251). Excess seeks and finds bodily expression. The extent of this permeability had already been evident in Lockwood's dream, when this apparently 'civilised' outsider commits—or at least imagines committing—one of the most graphic acts of violence in the novel: 'I pulled its wrist onto the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bed-clothes' (25). To and fro we too must go in order to keep up with these violent excesses.

In a novel driven by excess things tend to overflow. Caroline Koegler recently considered 'how hatred expands and proliferates beyond Heathcliff, ultimately infecting every relationship in the novel and even spilling over to its readers' (2021, 272). It is true that in *Wuthering Heights* no character is immune from this affective osmosis, but Emily also consistently pushes against the conventions of realist delineation of character and event in order to depict the inexplicable movements of excess across various human and non-human bodies, from doorknobs to windowpanes. As such, she untethers such negative certainties as 'hatred' from a central core (Heathcliff) and seeks to make new connections across time and space. Brian Massumi's more neutral definition of affect as 'intensity', 'narratively de-localized, spreading over the generalised body surface' (1995, 85), finds remarkably early application here. For excess in the novel has no clear start or end point; it spreads over the body of the text itself. In doing so, Emily works to depathologise this process of 'infecting'—she never uses the term or the loaded language of contagion herself. In removing its workings from the realm of association with disease and abnormality, Emily seeks to explore the dispersive capacity of excess on its own terms. In fact, her text constantly works to sustain its own high energy, ready to burst out with new force at any given moment.

This is not to say that the movements of excess in the novel are entirely divorced from meaning-making, or directionless. For example, the concept of affective transmission provides an explanation for the 'strange change' that comes over Heathcliff in the final part of the novel (Brontë [1847] 2003, 323). In her definition of affects plural, Brennan, too, emphasises their 'energetic dimension': 'This is why they can enhance or deplete. They enhance when they are projected outward … [and] deplete when they are introjected' (2004, 6). While Brennan uses affection and the warmth it produces when introjected as an exception, it is violence—verbal, emotional, physical—that energises Heathcliff. We are reminded of his outbursts of energy in the final scene before Catherine's death: 'in a stride or two [he] was at her side', 'he bestowed more kisses than ever he gave in his life before', even as she 'seize[s] his hair' and bitterly asks, 'Why shouldn't you suffer? I do!' (Brontë [1847] 2003, 159, 160). This latter exclamation illustrates the symbiotic nature of this relationship, with Catherine's biggest complaint against Edgar being that '[she] might kill him and he would not wish to retaliate' (99). After her death, Heathcliff tries violence on a whole string of victims—Hindley, Hareton, Linton, Cathy—but none proves his match. Eventually, he tells Nelly, 'I do not care for striking, I cannot take the trouble to raise my hand!' (323). Thus Heathcliff begins to resemble the man he

had once ridiculed for his passivity. But even this quality he takes to an extreme: not only does he not strike, he can barely raise his hand and has almost to 'remind [his] heart to beat' (324). Characteristically, the depletion of his energies is compactly communicated through the various meanings (a physical blow, a regular rhythm) of that diminished 'beat'. This general loss of energy in the novel is signposted, as Elaine Scarry notes, by the switch from Emily's typical use of active verbs prior to Catherine's death to that of predominantly passive verbs in the second half of the novel (2021, 150). As ever, Emily is acutely attuned to the interrelationship between the energies of her characters and the energy of her text, which grinds to a halt a chapter later.

Another contemporary reviewer contended that '*Wuthering Heights* would have been a far better romance if Heathcliff alone had been a being of stormy passions, instead of all the other characters being nearly as violent and destructive as himself' (Allott 1974, 224). However, this proves impossible within the internal logic of excess in the novel: Heathcliff's literal lifeblood is sustained by violent exchange with others. Thus violence remains paradoxically life-giving. Heathcliff himself refers to Catherine as 'my life' on multiple occasions, most famously in Volume II, Chapter II, which stands in direct parallel to the later (in the narrative sense) scene in Volume I, Chapter III with which my analysis of *Wuthering Heights* started. Having just learned of Catherine's death, Heathcliff's heavily punctuated cries of 'haunt me then!' and 'drive me mad!', followed directly by 'I *cannot* live without my life! I *cannot* live without my soul!' (Brontë [1847] 2003, 169; emphasis in original) illustrate the importance of emotional masochism to their relationship and eventually prove prophecy rather than melodrama. The first outburst of excess of emotion we see in the third chapter of the novel is ironically Heathcliff's last. However, not even Heathcliff's own death puts an end to the violent excesses of *Wuthering Heights*, which continue to circulate, if not openly, then more insidiously, within the closing chapters of the novel. One of the final images of the second generation with which Emily leaves us is that of Cathy teaching Hareton to read in turns by a kiss and 'a smart slap on the cheek' (307). Hareton does not seem to mind. These dynamics may signal a change in intensity, but not in essence.

As we have established, in the mid-nineteenth century, excess met by definition—to recall Samuel Johnson's 'faulty superfluity'—with negative connotations, to be avoided at one's own and others' peril.[21] As George Levine has previously shown in the context of Darwin's work, '[f]or a culture repelled by excess, the Victorians were oddly defined by it' (2019, 11), living through major expansions in population, production and infrastructure. Because anxieties over excess on a wider scale could not be so easily allayed, further pressure was placed on the necessity to practice restraint from excess at least within the private sphere. Yet in Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* (1847), first printed alongside *Wuthering Heights*,[22] the titular governess 'tremble[s] lest [her] very moral perceptions should become deadened, [her] distinctions of right and wrong confounded, and all [her] better faculties be sunk' by the bad influence of those around her (A. Brontë [1847] 1995, 426). Again, the fear is of a kind of affective moral contagion that poses a threat even to the upstanding individual. Meanwhile, Emily strips away the ethics, purposefully confounding

distinctions. As we have seen so far, *Wuthering Heights* might not celebrate the motivations and consequences of excess, but neither does it denounce them. I want to take this one step further to suggest that the novel actually scorns the view of its sister-tale in print that 'there is nothing like a cheerful mind for keeping the body in health' (A. Brontë [1847] 1995, 393), with the capacity for emotional excess in *Wuthering Heights* most often associated with physical health. Whenever Mr Kenneth, the local doctor, speaks it is either to pronounce Catherine a 'stout, hearty lass' who 'does not fall ill for a trifle'(Brontë [1847] 2003, 129), or Heathcliff 'a tough young fellow' who 'looks blooming to-day' (185). As Janis McLarren Caldwell states, 'Cathy and Heathcliff fall ill only when they will it, and only because their strong wills are stronger than their strappingly healthy bodies' (2004, 70): 'You have killed yourself', Heathcliff countered Catherine's accusation (Brontë [1847] 2003, 162). In contrast, Lockwood, whose emotional reserve characterises the frame narrative, remains bed-bound by illness for much of Nelly's account of the story, blaming those 'dilatory country surgeons' such as Kenneth for his prolonged indisposition (91). Here Emily is not only capitalising on the energetic dimension of excess but actively asserting its psychosomatic health benefits.

This is a direct reversal of the view taken by the majority of contemporary medical literature, which warned against the harmful effects to health of physical, but also, increasingly, mental excesses. Although major breakthroughs in the understanding of the material basis of the brain would come in the second half of the century, mid-century medical practitioners were already aware of the implications for pathology of the close relationship between body and mind. In an 1846 article in *The Medical Times* on the causes of insanity—one of the most studied conditions of the early nineteenth century, and one which Emily invokes, if not necessarily ascribes to Catherine in her illness—the author, Joseph Williams, writes that '[i]n savage and low life, insanity may generally be traced to physical causes; but in more civilised life, and amongst the educated classes, it more frequently results from metaphysical, mental, or moral causes' (1846, 106). A collated table of the various causes identified by clinical professionals across Europe follows, naming a range of physical and mental triggers from emotions such as love, jealousy, misery, rage and family affections more generally to excesses including excess of study, novel reading, sensuality, onanism and the staple abuse of spirits (107). The nature and range of this list makes evident the extent of the socio-medical construction of the pathology of excess by the mid-nineteenth century. Yet Emily is equally careful to avoid the pathologised language of psychological excess in *Wuthering Heights*. Only one character is ever accused of speaking with 'hysterical emotion': Frances Earnshaw (Brontë [1847] 2003, 45). She dies not of insanity, but of consumption and complications in childbirth.[23] Nelly herself admits to misreading Frances's behaviour—'I knew nothing of what these symptoms portended' (45–46)—exposing the precarity of diagnosing excess.

While heredity was listed as the most common underlying factor in the development of mental disorders such as insanity, in *Wuthering Heights* it is the link between mental excess and physical health that is propagated in the younger generation. That young Linton 'lay in bed all day' and 'was constantly getting coughs, and colds, and aches, and pains of some sort' (211) is evidently depicted as a natural

inheritance from his maternal family. His objection to Nelly, 'Oh! it is killing, a breath of night air!' (xx), forms a stark contrast with Catherine's memorable plea to open the window to the wind on a winter's night during her illness: 'Do let me feel it … do let me have one breath!' (124). Although young Cathy displays 'a heart sensitive and lively to excess in its affections' (189) and Hareton is 'a well-made, athletic youth, good-looking in features, and stout and healthy' (196), each child is remarked upon by Nelly as a reminder of and improvement on their mother and father, respectively; the dispositions of the progeny serve all the more sharply to highlight the absence of the child that Catherine and Heathcliff might have had. The intimation is that it, too, would have had 'the ruddy health that you generally meet in these parts' (191). In a novel that serves as a compendium of excesses, this lack is all the more striking. Crucially, the onus is not on Catherine's and Heathcliff's constitutions, but on the pressures of circumstances—economic and gendered in particular—that prevented them from merging rather than diluting their line. This is also where the creative act of writing itself stops, deeming its current cast of characters incapable of generating the energy needed to sustain the text.[24]

It is true that Catherine's and Heathcliff's unassuaged thirst for excess might in its own way be considered a psychological fever or disease—to return to that definition of 'access'—and that both are at least indirectly killed by it, whereas Lockwood lives beyond the narrative. Yet even in death it is 'the sleepers in that quiet earth' (337)—note that the earth, not its sleepers are at rest—who exert the final narrative interest. Emily therefore asks us to question both the typical readerly associations of the happy ending—survival, union, reproduction—and the over-privileging of this ending as a measure of the success of the novel in representing excess. That Agnes Grey and Mr Weston live and Catherine and Heathcliff do not, does not depreciate their experiences; if anything, it serves to preserve their intensity. D. A. Miller's claim in *Narrative and its Discontents* (1981) regarding the challenges surrounding narrative closure in the novel finds particularly apt application here: 'The problems of closure … testify to the difficulty of ridding the text of all traces of the narratable, even—especially—at the moment when it is supposed to be superseded' (267). Whether the village boy's closing vision of 'Heathcliff and a woman, yonder, under t'Nab' (Brontë [1847] 2003, 336) is imagined or real is in many ways irrelevant. What the anecdote points to is the residual excess energy—the narratable—still present at the end of the novel. It reveals a reluctance on Emily's part to tie up loose ends and goes some way to explain the intense reaction the novel continues to provoke in so many of its readers.

It follows that the vision unsettles the rational Lockwood, whose survival seems to necessitate a return to London—the location where the sickly Linton, too, was brought up—and the giving up of another love interest in the form of the second Cathy: 'I'm of the busy world, and to its arms I must return' (256). Although the 'change of air' cure became very popular during this period, doctors could not always agree on which regional conditions were more favourable to disease prevention.[25] The novel, on the other hand, clearly forms links between native character, excess and physical wellbeing while remaining sceptical of the muted emotional scope and ill-health of urban educated society, refusing to unite both in marriage. It is not enough to visit these parts: strong character is born and bred on its moors. Pauline

Nestor sees this as more of a narrative opportunity than socio-political comment: 'In some ways the whole world of the novel is dreamlike. Geographically remote, socially and temporally apart, it is a world operating as a law unto itself' (2003, 211). Lockwood's participation in the novel's excesses remains but the momentary fantasy of a dream. Crucially, the narrative does not unfold through a successive series of visions but through arranged scenes of storytelling. Our own second-hand engagement with this narrative attests to the ultimate ineffability of its excesses.

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is a text that plays with and harnesses the possibilities of excess. Thus the rhythms of its prose are perhaps best encapsulated by the young Catherine's instruction early on in the novel: 'Run, Heathcliff, run!' (Brontë [1847] 2003, 49). The effect is a sense of breathlessness. The abundance of such short, sharp dialogue, the continuous confessional style, the narrative doublings, repetitions and multiplications all reflect a prose constantly trying to keep pace with the excesses that propel it. Emily's careful consideration of the relationship between the narrative and formal representations of excess invalidate Charlotte's simplistic claim in the 1850 preface that in writing the novel, Emily 'did not know what she had done' (C. Brontë [1850] 2003, lii). In fact, Emily is responding to existing literary and medical representations of excess to refigure excess as powerful, if not actively life-giving and healthy. In depathologising excess, and in insisting instead on the vigour of emotional excess in particular, Emily asks us to consider the socio-medical policings of feelings and behaviours deemed unacceptable. Why does excess make us uncomfortable? And what is too much for whom? This line of questioning, if less extreme in its approach, would continue to inform the novel project and its interest in exploring the boundaries of experience throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. Positioned as it is between the sentimental and the sensation novel tradition, *Wuthering Heights* does not neatly fit into either genre of excess. Instead, Emily retains a healthy scepticism of both stable generic and affective categories in order to insist on the energetic opportunities excess offers the novel form.

Notes

1. Reviewers in *The Spectator*, *The Examiner*, *Atlas*, *Britannia*, *Douglas Jerrod's Weekly Newspaper*, *Literary World* and *American Review* all commented on the novel's strangeness or peculiarity. See Allott (1974, 217–42).
2. On the history of the term 'violent emotion', see Krauze (2025).
3. In a letter of 1850 to Ellen Nussey, Charlotte writes that she has been 'closely engaged in revising, transcribing—preparing a Preface—Notice &c.' for a reprint of Emily and Anne's works (Smith 2000, 481–82). As Pauline Nestor observes in her 'Note on the Text' to the Penguin edition, 'Charlotte made considerable changes to the second edition of Emily's novel' (2003, xl).
4. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'access', n. I.1.
5. In *Villette*, Dr John is called in 'to prescribe for some access of illness in old Madame Kint' (C. Brontë [1853] 1970, 245).
6. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'access', n. I.2.
7. Anne wrote a preface in defence of her subject matter for the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). Aside from the 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell', Charlotte wrote prefaces for the second edition of *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Shirley* (unpublished) and *The Professor* (1855), often directly attacking her critics.

8. I hear two syllables in 'Cathe-rine' in keeping with the northern pronunciation of the name, although an argument can be made for a final trisyllabic stumbling here, stressing both the subject and the desperation of Heathcliff's pleas.
9. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'access', n. II.3.a.
10. Algernon Charles Swinburne would describe *Wuthering Heights* as 'essentially and definitely a poem in the fullest and most positive sense of the term' (1883, 439–40).
11. For clarity, I refer to Catherine's husband as Edgar, and to their daughter as Cathy.
12. Emily notes, for example, the way in which Heathcliff's 'naturally reserved disposition was exaggerated into an almost idiotic excess of unsociable moroseness' during his teenage years (Brontë [1847] 2008, 68). Her use of the term is nonetheless rare. Charlotte uses it much more freely in her novels and letters.
13. For an indicative range, see also the entries for 'Apoplexy', 'Dropsy', 'Epilepsy', 'Eruptions on the Skin' and 'Fainting, or Syncope' (Graham 1826, 198, 275, 288, 293, 296).
14. Charlotte and Emily were exposed to an outbreak of typhus at Cowan Bridge school in 1825. Anne suffered from asthma throughout her life. For a full list of diseases with which the Brontës would have been familiar and the various ways in which they feature in their fiction see Torgerson (2005).
15. On alcohol abuse in *Wuthering Heights*, see Lock (2019).
16. For recent discussions of violence in *Wuthering Heights*, see Shuttleworth (2019), Arata (2023) and Craig (2023). For a forthcoming re-examination of violence and the Brontës see Franklin (2025).
17. See Ahern (2007). I do not mean to undermine here the long-recognised and important influence of the Romantic poets on Emily's writing, but simply to chart the genealogy of this trope in fiction.
18. See Ford (1997). For a discussion of Cathy's desire figured as feminine excess, see Berg (1996, 74–88).
19. See Pearson (1999).
20. As Alex Houen (2020) has recently shown, it is difficult to make a case for literary affect as entirely distinct from cognition, emotion and language. My use of the term captures an interest in moving beyond these categories, but also in returning to them.
21. See *A Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. 'excess', n.s. 1.1773.
22. The 1847 printing contained *Wuthering Heights* (vols. I and II) and *Agnes Grey* (vol. III).
23. 'It is rarely that a hysteric fit has become dangerous; though it has, in a few instances, terminated in epilepsy or insanity' (Graham 1826, 348).
24. Interestingly, both the 1939 and the 1970 film adaptations of the novel omit the second generation entirely, concluding with Catherine's death.
25. See Morris (2018).

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