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THE RECEPTION OF ANTIQUITY IN *WUTHERING HEIGHTS* BY EMILY BRONTË

Abstract: The following paper concentrates on the reception of antiquity in the novel by Emily Brontë *Wuthering Heights*. The primary concept of the analysis is to exploit such critical tools as: Reader-Response Criticism, dialogics and transtextuality. In this context one can notice such ancient references as: the structure of a labyrinth (prefiguration), the archetype of Hercules, Apollo and gods, as well as the reference to learning ancient languages (revocation). All the references to antiquity are used in the novel in question not only as ornaments, but mainly as the tools to comment on, among others, the social situation in Victorian England.

Key words: intertextuality, reception of antiquity, archetype, dialogics

Introduction – methods of research

Wuthering Heights – the famous novel by Emily Brontë – has become the source of literary analysis from different points of view and along with the development of the study of literary criticism other new perspectives can be applied to it. In this context, the novel constitutes an inexhaustible source for interpretation, especially due to its untypical character; the question of authorship has always been problematic, its language seems not to be typical for a woman. Emily never mentioned her novel and there was no her signature under the manuscript (Ostrowski 2013: 45). Moreover, the construction of the novel, the lack of chronological order in the presentation of the events and the variety of narrators makes the work perfect material for a comprehensive analysis. One of the most interesting aspects of interpretation that can be traced in the novel by Brontë is the appearance of antiquity, understood as the presence and usage of

ancient motives and languages (Latin and Greek). Antiquity, or classics, can be also perceived as the term that means “the world of ancient Greece and Rome and ‘the classical tradition’ means reflexes of, uses of, reconstitutions of, or responses to, the ancient world from the disintegration of the Western Roman Empire to our own day” (Silk, Gildenhart et al. 2014: 4). Due to the rising popularity of an interdisciplinary approach to literature, the study of reception seems to be gaining a crucial position in the context of widely understood literary studies.

To present the idea of the reception of antiquity in the novel by Brontë it is crucial to employ particular methods of research. First of all, Reader-Response Criticism is the basic method to be used, as the reader is seen as central in the process of interpretation. The text is no longer autonomous, but its sense is created on the basis of the reader’s perception. What is more, the reception theory itself which is a kind of reader-oriented criticism, originates from rhetoric popular in ancient Greece, which is now connected with the ways a reader may respond to a given literary work (Guerin et al. 2005: 351-353). So, the elements of antiquity that can be found in *Wuthering Heights* are to be analysed in connection with the reader’s knowledge, culture and personal experience. Another literary approach that is applied in the following research is Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogics. According to this method, a novel can be analysed as a polyphonic work – meaning that in the literary work there are multiple voices (many points of view, different genres and free speech of the hero) (Guerin et al. 2005: 363). In the context of Bakhtin’s theory *Wuthering Heights* seems to be a rich source of intertextual references. Intertextuality, or, as Gérard Genette calls it, transtextuality, serves as the perfect tool to highlight the elements of antiquity in the novel and their role. In the work by Brontë hypertextuality seems to be the most frequently used type of transtextuality¹. It means that text B (a new text) is created by imitating text A (an ancient pattern) but a direct commentary on text A is rare here. Nevertheless, text B cannot exist or be fully understood without the existence of text A. Genette’s hypertextuality corresponds with the ways of analysing ancient motives offered by Stanisław Stabryła. These are: revocation (imitations or repetitions of a motif, with no essential change of meaning) and prefiguration (analogies in terms of the fate of the characters and of the structure of the presented world) (Stabryła 1996: 8-9)². The idea of employing ancient

¹ According to Genette (2014: 7-11), there are five types of transtextuality: 1. Intertextuality (the presence of one text in another). 2. Paratext (title, illustrations, etc.). 3. Metatext (critical commentary often without quoting another text). 4. Hypertextuality (text B is created on the basis of text A but with no direct comment on text A). 5. Architextuality (paratextual reference of a taxonomic character, e.g. *Essays*, etc.).

² Other ways of exploiting ancient motives according to Stabryła are: reinterpretation (change of the basic sense of a given motif either by polemics with the original sense or by creating new meanings of the ancient element) and incrustation (stylistic figures, ornaments used in poems) (Stabryła 1996: 8-9).

motifs in British novels was not new, however, as Casper J. Kraemer claims, it is crucial to notice the rising importance of Greek elements in comparison to Latin ones in the British literature of Victorianism (1927: 486-487)³.

Labyrinth as a prefiguration of the ancient archetype

The labyrinth is one of the most popular motives of ancient culture. Its structure can be applied to the study of literature and in the novel by Brontë it refers to the structure and constitutes a reflection of the characters' moods, feelings and mental states.

First of all, the novel *Wuthering Heights* as a whole, can be called labyrinthine. As Michał Głowiński states, such a novel can be characterized by questioning any linearity on the level of both narration and plot. The rules of continuity and coherence are not followed as far as the sequence of facts, perspectives and points of view are concerned (1990: 206-207). Brontë constructs her novel in a particular way; there are two major narrators: Nelly Dean who tells the story up to chapter 14, and Lockwood, who continues narrating the story. These two perspectives differ from each other, but combined, they create a labyrinth of thoughts, facts and descriptions, especially due to the fact that the two narrators do not use chronology in their telling, and the novel starts *in medias res*. Patricia Ingham notices that the reader can only rely on the two narrators' opinions, not on the presentations of the events, and this somehow, imposes on the addressee of the novel a particular perception and interpretation of the story (2008: 208). Apart from the two major narrators, there exist other sources of narration such as letters and diaries. Together, they all construct a set of different elements which can be compared to a collage or a patchwork: they are seemingly inconsistent, but do, in fact, constitute a coherent whole.

Another characteristic feature of a labyrinth that can be found in *Wuthering Heights* is the presence of supernatural elements and the mixing of dream with reality. As Głowiński claims, in a chronological, third-person narration the author separates the two worlds: the real one and the other one which has been created in the character's imagination, while in a labyrinthine novel modal frames are not clearly exposed, they can be non-defined (1990: 206-207). In the novel by Brontë this element can be clearly noticed in Lockwood's behaviour and state of mind:

³ The rising popularity of Greek elements in the nineteenth-century English literature was mainly caused by the influence of Germans and of the British Romantic poets, such as Coleridge, Wordsworth or Byron, who showed his particular romantic attachment to ancient Greece. Moreover, the archaeological discoveries and the findings of the texts by some classical authors influenced the interest in ancient Greece as well (Kraemer 1927: 495-496).

In vapid listlessness I leant my head against the window, and continued spelling over Catherine Earnshaw – Heathcliff – Linton, till my eyes closed; but they had not rested five minutes when a glare of white letters started from the dark, as vivid as spectres – the air swarmed with Catherines; and (...) I discovered my candle-wick reclining on one of the antique volumes, and perfuming the place with an odour of roasted calf-skin (Brontë [1847] 1994: 32).

Later, Lockwood dives deeper into the labyrinth of his dreams and hallucinations, not actually knowing whether he is dreaming or consciously experiencing unnatural phenomena:

I remembered I was lying in the oak closet, and I heard distinctly the gusty wind, and the driving of the snow; I heard, also, the fir bough repeat its teasing sound, and ascribed it to the right cause (...), I rose and endeavoured to unhasp the casement. The hook was soldered into the staple: a circumstance observed by me when awake, but forgotten. I must stop it, nevertheless! I muttered, (...) stretching an arm out to seize the importunate branch; instead of which, my fingers closed on the fingers of a little, ice-cold hand! (...) a most melancholy voice sobbed, 'Let me in – let me in!' 'Who are you?' I asked (...). 'Catherine Linton,' it replied (...). 'I'm come home: I'd lost my way on the moor!' (...) 'Let me in!' (...). 'How can I!' I said at length. 'Let ME go, if you want me to let you in!' (...) 'Begone!' I shouted. 'I'll never let you in, not if you beg for twenty years.' 'It is twenty years,' mourned the voice: 'twenty years. I've been a waif for twenty years!' (Brontë [1847] 1994: 36-37).

The above quotation proves the novel has a heterogeneous composition based on the complexity of labyrinthine construction. Lockwood is not sure whether the ghosts he sees appear in his dream or in reality; he does not know whether the voices he hears are just the product of his imagination or a part of his dream. The character's uncertainty resembles a person that is lost in a tangle of ways in a labyrinthine structure.

The space of a labyrinth is an organised and considered space. It differs from other spaces since it always influences the behaviour of those who find themselves within its limits (Głowiński 1990: 130). In the context of the novel in question the situation of women can be the prefiguration of a labyrinthine structure: females in the nineteenth century were limited to their domestic sphere, which constituted a kind of a labyrinth for them. Although they seemed to have some freedom, could take care of the household and children, their sphere of action was always limited to clearly defined boundaries – they could read but only the books dedicated for women, they could talk but only about particular topics, carefully chosen for females, they could lead a social life, but based only on meeting female friends or on presenting their skills (playing a musical instrument, singing), they could marry a man chosen for her by her family, etc. So, women could move within a particular space; crossing the limit could have dangerous consequences, for instance: exclusion from society, being doomed to become a spinster, etc. Catherine Earnshaw decides not to leave the

safe space of the labyrinth and marry Edgar Linton. Nevertheless, this action appears to be pernicious to her. Moreover, Catherine's bad mood caused by the necessity of marrying a man socially equal to her causes her to experience the deceptive character of the labyrinth of social dependence.

Well, if I cannot keep Heathcliff for my friend – if Edgar will be mean and jealous, I'll try to break their hearts by breaking my own. That will be a prompt way of finishing all, when I am pushed to extremity! But it's a deed to be reserved for a forlorn hope; I'd not take Linton by surprise with it (Brontë [1847] 1994: 109).

It appears that in a labyrinth nobody feels good; the space belongs to nobody in particular, it is, rather, a strange space. The movement of a character creates the movement of thoughts, a cognitive process, which is supposed to lead the character to get to know further segments of the space and to find their bearings as far as their situation is concerned (Głowiński 1990: 134). During one of her conversations with Nelly, Catherine expresses a strong desire to be free from the social constraints which create a prison similar to a labyrinth. She paradoxically locks herself in one of the rooms in the Lintons' house trying to escape from the situation which imposes on her the necessity of choosing between Heathcliff and Edgar:

'How long is it since I shut myself in here?' she asked, suddenly reviving.

'It was Monday evening,' I replied, 'and this is Thursday night, or rather Friday morning, at present.'

'What! of the same week?' she exclaimed. 'Only that brief time?'

'Long enough to live on nothing but cold water and ill-temper,' observed I.

'Well, it seems a weary number of hours,' she muttered doubtfully: 'it must be more. (...) I thought (...) that I was enclosed in the oak-panelled bed at home; and my heart ached with some great grief which, just waking, I could not recollect. (...) Oh, I'm burning! I wish I were out of doors! (...). Open the window again wide: fasten it open! Quick, why don't you move?' (Brontë [1847] 1994: 115-116).

Catherine feels lost and ambushed in the labyrinth of conventions, feelings and relations. Finally, when she leaves the room in Trushcross Grange, she feels better. Flowers brought her by Edgar help her to recover, as they remind her of beautiful landscapes, *Wuthering Heights* and open space waiting for her walking there.

But labyrinth mainly refers to an enclosed space. In a labyrinthine novel there exists a certain paradox; the major subject of this type of writing is a limited space which is closed, but at the same time, this kind of literature can cover works which aspire to be open (in terms of interpretation). The difficulty of orienting in the structure of a labyrinth is left for the reader – so, 'openness' favours emphasising separateness (Głowiński 1990: 208). In *Wuthering Heights* Nelly and young Cathy experience the separateness – they are imprisoned by Heathcliff in a room and try to escape through the window or the attic. Unfortunately, it appears to be impossible. After releasing Cathy, Nelly is left

alone in her prison and starts to analyse her situation and all the events in the two houses. Her imprisonment makes the reader stop and reflect on the events; in this way, the addressee of the novel can autonomously interpret the actions taken by the characters, this being the expression of ‘openness’.

Another prefiguration clearly visible in the structure of the novel by Brontë is its construction similar to that of an ancient tragedy. Some of the characters, like Heathcliff, Catherine or Edgar resemble tragic heroes: they are unhappy, some of them are subjected to the rules of a higher power (obedience to the rule of marrying a person from the same social class), there are several deaths, but, finally, the reader can experience catharsis, because every character of the novel finds peace and quiet (Buda 2017: 53).

The motif of the ancient labyrinth is used in this literary work as a structural basis. The narration is not chronological, and it exploits different points of view. It also contains supernatural elements, and the action takes place somewhere between dream and reality. The space of the labyrinth is organised, and it evokes in the characters negative feelings. Nevertheless, it enables the reader to freely interpret the world presented as they must orient themselves within the structure, this is, therefore, one of the most accurate examples of interpreting a literary work in the context of Reader-Response Criticism.

Ancient motives in the role of hypertextual references

Apart from the motif of a labyrinth, *Wuthering Heights* contains numerous examples of revocation, which constitute a typical instance of exploiting ancient elements in a literary work. The usage of these motives should not only be listed and treated as a group of borrowings, but it should be perceived as a method of commenting on the events described in a given work of art. The function of commenting is one of the major features of intertextual references.

One of the ancient references present in the novel discussed here is the description of the mansion Wuthering Heights, which is contrasted with Trushcross Grange – the house of the Lintons. While the house of the Earnshaws is associated with mystery, chaos, violence, darkness and a lack of emotions and positive feelings, the Lintons’ mansion is described as a perfect place similar to the house of ancient gods. Lockwood notices the terrifying character of Wuthering Heights the very moment he enters it for the first time: “Before passing the threshold, I paused to admire a quantity of grotesque carving lavished over the front, and especially about the principal door; above which, among a wilderness of crumbling griffins and shameless little boys, I detected the date “1500,” and the name “Hareton Earnshaw”” (Brontë [1847] 1994: 20). The above quotation contains several important pieces of information which refer to the reception of antiquity. First of all, the description includes references

to the ancient figures of griffins which are “crumbling”; it may be understood in such a way that the mansion is no longer in a good state, its former glory no longer to be seen. This imposes on a reader a particular perception of *Wuthering Heights* as a house facing some serious problems, an image to be confirmed later in the novel. Another important ancient reference that appears in the description of the house is the mention of “shameless little boys”. These are the representations of the god of desire and love – Latin Cupid or Greek Eros⁴. Although this figure is usually portrayed as a pleasant boy with a bow, here it is called “shameless”, which suggests indignation on his part at the inappropriateness of the carving. The whole description of the front of the house may imply that *Wuthering Heights* is a hostile place, far from the ideal of a family home, further confirmed in the course of action presented in the novel. In contrast, *Trushcross Grange* is portrayed as a perfect mansion and seems to be similar to Olympus – the place of living of the ancient Greek gods:

We ran from the top of the Heights to the park, without stopping. We crept through a broken hedge, groped our way up the path, and planted ourselves on a flower-plot under the drawing-room window. The light came from thence; they had not put up the shutters, and the curtains were only half closed. Both of us were able to look in by standing on the basement, and clinging to the ledge, and we saw – ah! it was beautiful – a splendid place carpeted with crimson, and crimson-covered chairs and tables, and a pure white ceiling bordered by gold, a shower of glass-drops hanging in silver chains from the centre, and shimmering with little soft tapers (Brontë [1847] 1994: 53).

This description shows the contrast between the two houses by exploiting, among others, the usage of ancient motives. This is also proof of the dialogical character of the novel: different voices speak here to offer the reader a particular point of reference, the novel refers to the reader’s knowledge of antiquity. Olympus is mainly associated with a place not easily accessible for humans, so here it is like the representation of wealth, family love and respect. That is why it evokes curiosity in the young friends: Catherine and Heathcliff. Moreover, the inhabitants of *Trushcross Grange* are perceived as ideal, similar to gods and god-like figures. Heathcliff longs to achieve a good social position and Edgar seems to be a good point of reference for him: “But, Nelly, if I knocked him down twenty times, that wouldn’t make him less handsome or me more so. I wish I had light hair and a fair skin, and was dressed and behaved as well, and had a chance of being as rich as he will be!” (Brontë [1847] 1994: 60). Heathcliff’s dream is to become similar to a god or to the figure of Apollo – the symbol of an ideal man. He desires to be like Edgar, and this desire seems to be too distant for Heathcliff – as Olympus was for humans. Here, the knowledge of antiquity

⁴ In the Polish translation by Janina Sujkowska “shameless little boys” are translated as “bezwstydyne amorki”, so the connection between these figures and their ancient counterparts is visible/obvious at the first sight.

serves as the reference to the universal symbols, it expresses a longing for ideals which are frequently difficult to achieve. In this context, antiquity appears to be the point of reference to the ideal world and it can be contrasted with the difficult times of the nineteenth century.

Apart from the Lintons, Catherine Earnshaw is also perceived as a deity, especially by Edgar. Being in love with her, Edgar idealises her and is shocked when she behaves like a nasty girl; he cannot face the fact that she would lie or be violent. When Catherine hits Nelly and becomes hysterical, Edgar is devastated (Brontë [1847] 1994: 72).

The author of the novel uses other popular motives of antiquity, which serve as a means to comment on the world presented. One of them is the motif of Hercules and his efforts. It is exploited by Brontë to describe the figure of Heathcliff who tries to destroy some of the characters of *Wuthering Heights*. Heathcliff is presented here as possessing great Herculean power and strength. To take revenge on the Lintons, Heathcliff makes Isabella fall in love with him and humiliates her. Physical skills of Hercules are replaced here by Heathcliff's mental influence on others. This is how Heathcliff describes the situation to Nelly Dean:

'She abandoned them under a delusion,' he answered; 'picturing in me a hero of romance (...). But, at last, I think she begins to know me (...). It was a marvellous effort of perspicacity to discover that I did not love her. (...) for this morning she announced, as a piece of appalling intelligence, that I had actually succeeded in making her hate me! A positive labour of Hercules, I assure you! If it be achieved, I have cause to return thanks. Can I trust your assertion, Isabella? Are you sure you hate me?' (Brontë [1847] 1994: 135-136).

Another time, Heathcliff uses the same motif of Herculean efforts to describe his attempts to destroy the two houses: *Wuthering Heights* and *Trushcross Grange*:

I get levers and mattocks to demolish the two houses, and train myself to be capable of working like Hercules, and when everything is ready and in my power, I find the will to lift a slate off either roof has vanished! My old enemies have not beaten me; now would be the precise time to revenge myself on their representatives. (Brontë [1847] 1994: 268).

In the above context, Heathcliff can be compared to the figure of Hercules, which implies his great strength rather than any intellectual or social potential. This comparison may be understood as a bitter comment on the social conventions in Victorian England; if a man is of unknown origin and has neither wealth nor good family background, he is perceived mainly as a physically strong person – strength being his main characteristic. Here the figure of Hercules serves as an archetype; it is a universal symbol, popular in numerous cultures, in which it has the same or a very similar meaning (Guerin et al. 2005: 184).

Except for mythical and supernatural references, *Wuthering Heights* contains some allusions to science and literature. Nelly Dean tells Lockwood the story of her education: she used to read quite a lot of books, but she is not familiar with

those written in Latin, Greek or French. She is, of course, able to recognize these languages, but as a daughter of a poor man, she cannot read in them nor understand these foreign languages (Brontë [1847] 1994: 65). Catherine, on the other hand, used to read a lot:

'I was always reading, when I had them,' said Catherine; 'and Mr. Heathcliff never reads; so he took it into his head to destroy my books. I have not had a glimpse of one for weeks. Only once, I searched through Joseph's store of theology, to his great irritation; and once, Hareton, I came upon a secret stock in your room – some Latin and Greek (...).They are of no use to you; or else you concealed them in the bad spirit that, as you cannot enjoy them, nobody else shall (Brontë [1847] 1994: 250).

The above comparison referring to the education of Nelly and Catherine shows the place of ancient languages in the process of education of nineteenth-century people. Catherine, belonging to the middle class of society, is acquainted with the difficult ancient languages, while Nelly is only aware of their existence. This observation is confirmation of the Victorian tendency of teaching ancient languages to middle and upper classes in order to create a particular noble image of this part of society. As Ogilvie states, learning Latin and Greek was compulsory in the Grammar Schools in Britain (1964: 97) and it became the characteristic feature showing the belonging of a person to the middle or upper class of society (Haynes 2006: 44).

The author of *Wuthering Heights* not only exploits ancient motives and structures, but she herself seems to be the epitome of antiquity. As the novel was written under a male pseudonym and its narration seems to be typical for a male (the story does not match the female morality of those times), Emily Brontë can be compared to the figure of Heathcliff. Camille Paglia notices the analogy in the change of the sexes; Brontë becomes a hermaphrodite who fights with society, law and destiny as she did not find satisfaction in art. Emily crosses the limits of her sex by identifying herself with Heathcliff – a mad character. What is more, both Heathcliff and Catherine feel like twins, their love is asexual, they are like brother and sister similar to the siblings from *The Oresteia* by Aeschylus, introducing themselves into the states of love and hate. Emily Brontë, at the same time, is like a sniper who kills her characters from an invisible place, and in this context she can be compared to the figure of Artemis (2006: 405, 410, 412, 415-416).

Conclusions

To sum up, the reception of antiquity constitutes a very crucial part of literary analysis. Such modern tools of literary criticism as Reader-Response Criticism, dialogics and different types of literary reception enable the reader to elicit a variety of intertextual dependences, based on their knowledge of culture, history and literature. The most popular references to antiquity which can be found in

the novel *Wuthering Heights* are based on prefiguration (the motif of a labyrinth) and revocation (the motives of Hercules, ancient gods, the figure of Apollo, references to classical languages). Moreover, the whole concept of the novel appears as a reflection of Emily Brontë's identification with Heathcliff – the combination of male and female – a hermaphrodite, which confirms the fact that this famous work is an inexhaustible source of inspiration and critical interpretation.

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