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NARRATIVE DISTANCE IN 'JANE EYRE':
THE RELEVANCE OF THE PICTURES

'I have now been married ten years',¹ the narrator of Jane Eyre tells us in the final chapter, and the paragraph thus introduced goes on to celebrate the unity and perfect happiness of that marriage. It is only at this late point that the narrative perspective of the book is precisely defined as that of the thirty-year-old Mrs Rochester, though its distance from the action has been implied throughout and the contrast between the calm comprehension of the narrator and the turmoil of the young Jane Eyre is significantly underlined as early as Chapter Two:

What a consternation of soul was mine that dreary afternoon! How all my brain was in tumult, and all my heart in insurrection! Yet in what darkness, what dense ignorance, was the mental battle fought! I could not answer the ceaseless inward question — why I thus suffered; now, at the distance of — I will not say how many years, I see it clearly. (Chapter II; I, 12–13)

The autobiography of Jane Eyre shows her advance from 'darkness', 'ignorance', and 'tumult' to the serenity of the final chapter, and in this early indication of what is to be the ultimate achievement the pattern of the whole book is imaged — as is also the strategy by which the perspective stemming from that achievement will be manipulated. By the simple device of refusing to say what period has intervened between the events and their narration Charlotte Brontë evades the obligation to maintain a constant narrative distance; at the same time she retains the unifying effect of the single first-person narrator. The frequent closing-up of the distance between narrator and events does not disturb a reader who has not had the official perspective insisted upon, and throughout the novel there is, in fact, a productive tension between the judgements of thirty and the vision of ten or eighteen.

Episodes are brought into closer range in a variety of ways: by shifts into the present tense; by the invocation of powerful images of universal application in a series of polarities (e.g. light and dark, warmth and cold, satisfaction and hunger, liberty and confinement); by the use of dramatic presentation, with dialogue directly transmitted rather than reported; by soliloquies or present-tense accounts of Jane's feelings at particular moments. All these devices result in our seeing with the eyes of the girl rather than of the woman; individual passages are heightened and, more importantly, the changing portrait of Jane Eyre herself is vividly created. We come to know the heroine not merely by receiving narrative information about the events and circumstances which have affected her character, but by sharing her developing vision of the world around her.

One important way in which Jane's vision is given expression in the novel is through the description of her pictures. These, as outward manifestations of her emotional state at particular moments, obviously offer one means, among many, of charting her growth to maturity. It seems possible to argue, however, that they also assist us in distinguishing between the shifting narrative perspectives of the

¹ Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre, Shakespeare Head edition, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1931), II, 281. All subsequent page references are to this edition and are incorporated into the text.
novel by providing an instrument for measuring the angle and coloration of the narrative at a given point.

When Bessie Leven visits Lowood her practical mind is impressed by the picture which Jane has painted for the school superintendent:

“Well, that is beautiful, Miss Jane! It is as fine a picture as any Miss Reed’s drawing-master could paint, let alone the young ladies themselves; who could not come near it: and have you learnt French?” (Chapter x; I, 115)

‘Miss Jane’ now possesses the accomplishments of a lady, and to a degree which will ensure her economic independence as a teacher. The picture Bessie sees is not described; it has no significance for Jane other than as a social gesture, and in the structure of the novel it functions simply as a milestone on her advance to independence. The first direct view we have of a more personal form of expression is in the description of the three pictures which Rochester picks out from Jane’s portfolio. As has often been remarked, these are highly Romantic in tone and subject matter, and play a premonitory role in the overall pattern of the novel. Although Jane insists that their subjects appeared before her ‘spiritual eye’ (I, 159), and that each painting is a direct if ‘pale portrait’ (I, 159) of that vision, the sources of the principal images are quite clearly literary: this is most obviously true of the third picture, a strange mixture of Milton and Bewick, but all three contain features common to the magazines and ‘keepsake’ volumes of the early nineteenth century. Even though Rochester is impressed by their being ‘for a school girl, peculiar’ (I, 161), the reader finds their portentousness, lack of originality, and naivety somewhat embarrassing — and this cannot be dismissed simply as a modern reaction.

The temptations of a biographical interpretation are very great at this point. Since Rochester is impressed, perhaps Charlotte Brontë means the reader to be impressed: after all, she herself had artistic pretensions and ruined her eyesight, ironically enough, in copying engravings.1 But to look to the author’s biography for aid in interpretation is to move away from the novel itself; it is also, in this instance, to assign undue importance to Jane’s pictures, to see them as ends rather than as means. If biographical interpretation is relevant here, it is so in relation not to Charlotte Brontë but to the eighteen-year-old Jane Eyre: whereas the superintendent’s picture indicated accomplishments with social and economic value, these pictures reveal Jane’s emotional status. Clearly, she has made little progress here; the pictures speak all too plainly of the conditions of isolation in which they were produced and of that unhealthy fascination with the dismal which was both product and curse of Jane’s affection-starved childhood. The experience of the lonely schoolgirl artist is still painfully narrow and she must go to literary sources for most of her images, so that she differs from the rejected child of the

1 For relevant comments on Charlotte Brontë’s attitude to art as revealed in Jane Eyre, see Robert Bernard Martin, The Accents of Persuasion: Charlotte Brontë’s Novels (1966), pp. 106–7; Professor Martin does not attempt to force on the pictures a limited autobiographical interpretation. In contrast, Lawrence E. Moser, S.J., ‘From Portrait to Person: A Note on the Surrealistic in Jane Eyre’, Nineteenth-century Fiction, 20 (1965), 275–81, while protesting no fear of the biographical fallacy, seems nevertheless to fall a victim to it in his somewhat arbitrary interpretations of the three pictures Rochester selects from Jane’s portfolio; no discussion of the other pictures is offered and the article, despite its confident handling of biographical material, unaccountably refers to Charlotte as the youngest of the Brontë sisters.
opening chapter only in being able to project images of her plight instead of merely absorbing them in passivity.

The central Thornfield episodes of the novel are presented largely in terms of the same vision which produced the pictures, and the latter thus provide an early clue by which the emotional coloration of those episodes — including the highly Romantic depiction of Rochester — can be discerned and properly evaluated. The way Jane's creative imagination goes to work on its materials is quite precisely revealed in the genesis of the pictures she actually completes while at Thornfield, those contrasting portraits of 'a Governess, disconnected, poor, and plain' and of 'Blanche, an accomplished lady of rank' (I, 206) which she intends as medicine for a mind which love of Rochester has infected with wishful thinking. The picture of Blanche is taken not from life but from a description of Mrs Fairfax's:

"Tall, fine bust, sloping shoulders; long, graceful neck: olive complexion, dark and clear; noble features; eyes rather like Mr Rochester's: large and black, and as brilliant as her jewels. And then she had such a fine head of hair; raven-black, and so becomingly arranged: a crown of thick plaits behind, and in front the longest, the glossiest curls I ever saw. She was dressed in pure white; an amber-coloured scarf was passed over her shoulder and across her breast, tied at the side, and descending in long, fringed ends below her knee. She wore an amber-coloured flower, too, in her hair: it contrasted well with the jetty mass of her curls." (Chapter xvi; I, 203)

This is a factual account whose dramatic and Romantic details are the creation of the figure described and not of Mrs Fairfax. But when Jane translates this description into instructions for her paint brush she still further heightens and romanticizes the colours and the details: the eye becomes 'oriental', the neck and bust 'Grecian'; there is now a 'dazzling' arm, 'diamond ring', and 'gold bracelet'; the white dress is of 'aerial lace and glistening satin', while the rose has changed from amber to 'golden' (I, 206).

When the real Blanche is before her, Jane discerns no difference between Mrs Fairfax's description, her own portrait, and the actual woman:

As far as person went, she answered point for point, both to my picture and Mrs Fairfax's description. The noble bust, the sloping shoulders, the graceful neck, the dark eyes and black ringlets were all there . . . (Chapter xvii; I, 221)

This inability to distinguish between actuality and her own imaginative vision affects Jane's perception of all the festivities at Thornfield. Outwardly she seems calm and detached — an isolated observer in the window-seat — but the frequent shifts into the present tense¹ and the non-realistic presentation of the guests as though they were a vast horde of generic types rather than a few individuals show a high degree of distorting involvement. The infrequent interventions of the voice of thirty serve only to underline the disastrous loss of perspective, and it is quite clear that — whatever the 'official' narrative viewpoint of the novel may be — the central episodes at Thornfield are presented from an angle which the pictures have already established as literary, somewhat sentimental, and thoroughly naive.

Blanche, as we have seen, is a literary product even before she is re-interpreted by Jane. Her dress, speech, taste, all exhibit an excessive Byronism, and what we receive, in the narrative as in the pictures, is the blending of Jane's conception of

¹ For a full discussion of the present-tense passages, see Edgar F. Shannon, Jr., 'The Present Tense in Jane Eyre', Nineteenth-century Fiction, 10 (1955), 141-5.

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Blanche with Blanche’s image of herself. Precisely the same process is at work in the accounts of Rochester at this point in the novel; what makes him seem so melodramatic is that he is the product of two literary imaginations, his own and Jane’s, both fully understood and controlled by the author. Rochester behaves, quite deliberately and self-consciously, like a Byronic hero, taking up dramatic poses, singing Corsair songs, acting arbitrarily and inscrutably; he talks of his past in *Childe Harold* terms; he delights in dressing up and playing exotic roles. When such a figure is presented through the still more naively Romantic imagination of the eighteen-year-old Jane Eyre, the coloration becomes positively violent.

The validity of seeing a combined creative endeavour at work in this central portion of the novel is established by the next group of pictures, whose fairy-tale and Romantic elements have their origin equally in Jane’s own wishful thinking and in Rochester’s literary and fanciful version of their love. While Jane is away at Gateshead, she not only sketches Rochester—all in heavy black pencil and complete with flashing eyes—she also indulges in fancy vignettes, representing any scene that happened momentarily to shape itself in the ever-shifting kaleidoscope of imagination: a glimpse of sea between two rocks; the rising moon, and a ship crossing its disk; a group of reeds and water-flags, and a naiad’s head, crowned with lotus-flowers, rising out of them; an elf sitting in a hedge-sparrow’s nest, under a wreath of hawthorn-bloom. (Chapter xxI; 1, 302)

The seascape has the familiar elements present in all the pictures associated with Jane’s inner emotional life, while her yearnings are symbolically embodied in the ‘naiad crowned with lotus-flowers’ rising beyond what are presumably the Reeds of Gateshead, and in the elf, completely at home in the ‘hedge-sparrow’s nest’ of what the ‘hawthorn-bloom’ suggests is Thornfield. Fairy-tale elements cluster round the relationship of Jane and Rochester from their first meeting, but in Jane’s case they serve mainly to suggest her closeness to childhood, while her common sense is constantly asserting itself to brush aside old superstitions and to mock Rochester’s persistent toying with images of Elf-land. The realistic side of Jane finds an ally in the sternly materialistic Adèle, who insists that Jane is no fairy, and calls Rochester ‘un vrai menteur’ (11, 37). Nevertheless, Rochester continues to play with images drawn from Arabian Nights tales, fairy stories and ballads, and with references to Jane as some kind of small bird, and no matter how much Jane may overtly resist this indulgence in fantasy, her Gateshead vignettes reveal how completely her imagination has been ensnared.

The responsibility for the evasion inherent in the creation and continuation of this dream-world thus rests jointly with Jane and with Rochester, both of them burdened with pasts whose surviving effects they have not yet seriously confronted. Jane finds images for her day-dreams in Rochester’s fantastic conversation, and her sense of everyday values is no match for her Romantic imagination and her inexperience, both of which impel her to respond positively to Rochester’s Byronic pose. The thirty-year-old narrative voice emphasizes the moments of realism, but the struggle between common sense and Romantic sensibility finds immediate expression only in haunted dreams and in strained, self-conscious day-time behaviour which matches in its archness the artificiality of Rochester’s desire to deck his bride in silks and jewels.

The flight from Thornfield following the interrupted marriage ceremony marks the turning-point for Jane, and she undergoes a trial on the moors which brings
her face to face with the real meaning of the personal worth and independence to which she had somewhat prematurely laid claim. The newly-found humility of the schoolmistress of Morton shows itself in her next pictures, which are of ordinary subjects taken from life, one the portrait of a pupil, others 'sundry views from nature, taken in the Vale of Morton and on the surrounding moors' (ii, 172). They are followed by the portrait of Rosamund Oliver — a portrait whose pleasure for Jane comes from having 'so perfect and radiant a model' (i, 172). Jane's first description of Rosamund presents a figure seen entirely from an artist's angle: 'eyes shaped and coloured as we see them in lovely pictures', 'the pencilled brow', 'the livelier beauties of tint and ray' (ii, 163–4). The ease with which this terminology is manipulated shows a new detachment in Jane, as well as suggesting a certain superficiality in the figure she examines. In the actual portrait the contrast with the picture of Blanche is clearly implied: this is a copy from life, not an imaginative interpretation, and it is intended for public display, not private flagellation. The fidelity of the resulting likeness is attested not by Jane herself, but by Mr Oliver and by the startled St John Rivers.

There is one further stage, and it is marked, significantly enough, by the total cessation of Jane's artistic activities. In the account of Jane's married life in the final chapter, all her imaginative activity and pictorial skill are devoted to the severely practical yet emotionally satisfying task of embodying in words, for the benefit of her blind husband, whatever passes immediately before her eyes:

He saw nature — he saw books through me; and never did I weary of gazing for his behalf, and of putting into words the effect of field, tree, town, river, cloud, sunbeam — of the landscape before us; of the weather round us — and impressing by sound on his ear what light could no longer stamp on his eye. (Chapter xxxvii; ii, 282)

Jane's powers of visual realization, far from being suppressed, now share in that exaltation and fulfilment which her whole being has found in the daily demands of an altruism from which the maturity of her love has shorn every hint of self-sacrifice.

Earlier in the novel Charlotte Brontë has exploited the considerable freedom afforded by the first-person convention to manipulate and vary the narrative distance in order to achieve her dual purpose of depicting both the story and the personal development of the story-teller; in so doing, as we have seen, she makes full use of Jane's paintings to mark clear points on the scale of narrative involvement. Now, in the last chapter, the closing up of the gap between the narrator and the events narrated is coincident with, and dependent upon, a final integration of all aspects of Jane's personality. If there is, at this stage, no further mention of painting or drawing, that is because measurements of narrative involvement are no longer required and, equally, because the aptitudes and impulses which Jane displayed in her pictures are now devoted not to compulsive self-expression, nor even to coolly objective portraiture, but to human communication of a peculiarly intense and passionate kind. To say that Jane Eyre, the heroine, merges at last with Jane Rochester, the narrator, is to make at one and the same time a statement about the novel's technique and about the novel's meaning. That this should be so is a high tribute to the sophistication of Charlotte Brontë's art.