

# The Brontë Th(under)er

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# The Cowan Bridge Controversy

## by CHRISTOPHER COOPER and OTHERS

Talk given at the ABA meeting on 2 February 2013

One of the great debates in the world of literary theory is whether it is relevant to know about an author's life in studying his or her writing or whether the text should stand on its own.

At one extreme there are those who emphasise the creativity of the author and argue that a work should only be studied from within. At the other end of the spectrum there are those who maintain that every literary work is to some extent an autobiography.

Like the nature/nurture debate in child psychology the answer lies somewhere in the middle. There's no such thing as pure originality. Every author draws upon their own experiences as the raw materials of their work, but then creates from it something new.

These experiences may come from the life of the writer or they may come from stories that they have read or heard. It's hard to imagine Emily Brontë having many direct experiences along the lines of those in *Wuthering Heights*. In her case her originality grew out of stories she had read and, perhaps more importantly, heard from the servants. Charlotte on the other hand drew mostly on her direct experiences.

The exception was *Shirley*, of course, where she deliberately researched the historical accounts of the Luddite uprising as the framework. But even there we can see the influence of her direct experiences, such as the remarkably funny account of the three curates in the opening chapter. Her father often entertained young curates in the parsonage and she regarded most of them as ridiculous, even Arthur Bell Nicholls whom she eventually married.

When one finds an echo of something in the author's life in their writing it is tempting to assume that it is a faithful and accurate account. But, as we all know, the creativity of the author changes or exaggerates these personal experiences or combines different experiences into one description.

When it comes to the Lowood School in *Jane Eyre* we all know that it is the Cowan Bridge School. When the novel first appeared there were ex students and teachers who recognised their school even before they knew that its author, Currer Bell, was really Charlotte Brontë, who attended their school in its early days. For this reason you have to conclude that it was an accurate picture in some respects. But we must not imagine that the real school was anywhere as extreme as the fictional one.

In the couple of years after *Jane Eyre* was published nobody identified the real and the fictional schools in print and so the controversy smouldered. What fanned it into a roaring flame was the publication of Mrs Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*. After Charlotte's death in 1855, her friend Mrs Gaskell asked Mr Brontë's permission to write a biography and it appeared in 1857. In it Mrs Gaskell left it in no doubt that Cowan Bridge School was every bit as bad as Lowood.

By then the school had moved about 4 miles to Casterton, near Kirkby Lonsdale. In 1857 the Carus Wilson family was still very much involved in Casterton School and were much distressed by the identification of Lowood with the earlier school. Mrs Gaskell, who had taken the trouble to visit Casterton while doing the research for the *Life*, undoubtedly tried to be fair, but her sympathy with Charlotte's sufferings led her into criticisms of the school regime which Mr Carus Wilson and his supporters deeply resented and which provoked much correspondence, some of which we will hear later.

As you know, ever since his wife's death, Patrick Brontë had been searching, unsuccessfully for a new wife for his five girls and son. His sister-in-law, Elizabeth Branwell, had been filling in but was anxious to return to Cornwall, although she never did. In 1823 Mr Brontë asked Elizabeth Firth for advice and she suggested her own school, Crofton Hall. But a couple of months later he saw an advertisement for a new school that was to be opened in Cowan Bridge. It was to be a school specifically for impoverished clergymen's daughters. Each girl was to pay £14 a year for clothing, lodging, boarding and education. "The Education will be directed according to the Capacities of the Pupils, and

the Wishes of their Friends. In all Cases, the great Object in View will be their intellectual and religious Improvement, and to give that plain and useful Education, which may best fit them to return with Respectability and Advantage to their own Homes, or to maintain themselves in the different Stations of Life to which Providence may call them.”

The fees were half those at Crompton Hall. It seemed ideal. The school consisted of some low stone cottages and an old bobbin mill next to a small river. Only the cottages remain today.

The school was designed to take up to seventy-two girls but as the school had only been opened a couples of months when Maria and Elizabeth arrived there in July 1824 there were only sixteen others. In August Charlotte joined them and in November Emily started at the school.

By February the next year Maria, the eldest Brontë child, fell seriously ill and Patrick fetched her home. She died in May. Later that month Elizabeth became ill and the three girls were sent to Silverdale on the coast. It was hoped that Elizabeth’s health might have improved with the sea air. But Elizabeth became worse and she was sent home in the care of a servant. Patrick immediately went to Silverdale to bring back his other two daughters, never to return. Elizabeth died in the middle of June at the age of 10.

Several other pupils died that year. It is debatable whether it was due to neglect, or the unsuitable location in a river valley or because typhus was rampant at that time. Nevertheless the school moved about four miles away to Casterton in a healthier environment.

So what was life like at the school? We have the account of Lowood School, but we have to be careful not to take that too literally. We have Charlotte’s account of the school when she wrote to W.S. Williams at her publishers, Smith Elder and Company. She insists that her account of Lowood was quite accurate and indeed that she withheld some details to avoid being thought over sensational. Then we have some descriptions by other pupils. One pupil, Emma Jane Worboise, describes Carus Wilson as a “kind and thoughtful friend of the pupils”.

She said of him: His works of love and mercy were manifold. He was thoroughly sincere and unostentatiously generous. A kinder man I never, knew.” She tells of baskets of gooseberries being sent to the school and picnics at Carus Wilson’s seaside home at Silverdale. Miss Worboise wrote a novel *Thornycroft Hall* based on her time at Cowan Bridge. Admittedly she went to the school long after Charlotte did.

So what can we piece together of life at the school in Charlotte’s time? The girls slept two to a bed in a long dormitory over the schoolroom. But this was usual in boarding schools at the time. In one boarding school for boys in Yorkshire they slept three to a bed.

The girls rose before dawn and washed in basins, sometimes after cracking the ice that formed – one basin for every six girls. Then there was an hour and a half of prayer before breakfast. Breakfast, what there was of it, had to be gulped down in fifteen minutes before school began at nine.

At twelve they had a short break for play until midday dinner. After this lessons resumed, finishing at five o’clock. They then had a half a slice of bread and a small mug of coffee. There was free time for half an hour then study. Supper was a glass of water and a piece of oatcake. Then prayers and bed.

The Sunday routine was different. They walked two miles across the fields to attend the Reverend Wilson’s church at Tunstall. After the service they had a cold packed lunch in the church, and then the afternoon service.

Back across the field they went and as a special treat they were able to have a whole slice of bread and butter. The evening was spent in suitable religious activities.

The story about burnt porridge and foul smelling food in *Jane Eyre* may well have had a basis in fact. The cook who was at Cowan Bridge school while the Brontë sisters were there was sacked shortly afterwards for being slovenly.

Carus Wilson’s wrote many religious books and tracts. *The Children’s Friend* was a monthly magazine containing stories of missionaries and other stories with an evangelical flavour. The issue of

December 1826 contains the story of Sarah Bicker who died in the previous September. Charlotte and Emily would have known her. When she was asked if she was ready to die she said, "Not Yet because I should wish to have time to repent, and be a better child." The story ended with Carus Wilson's comment: "I bless God that he has taken from us the child of whose salvation we have the best hope and may her death be the means of arousing many of her school fellows to seek the Lord while he may be found."

This preoccupation with infant mortality strikes us as overly morbid, but it was not that unusual for the time. The book *Hymns For Infant Minds* was awarded to a pupil at Cowan Bridge in 1826 and the title doesn't sound particularly morbid. But open it and look at the frontispiece is a picture of a little girl weeping at her mother's grave. The caption reads "Oh! if she would but come again, I think I'd vex her no more."

In fact thinking back to my own childhood I am reminded of a pair of china bookends I got for Christmas. One displayed a girl and the other a boy. They were both leaning on tombstones which formed the straight edges that were against the books. It's funny that only now does it seem a little morbid to me.

So let's hear the correspondence in various newspapers and periodicals following the publication of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. Charlotte is now dead, as is the Reverend Carus Wilson senior. So it falls to his son to take up the fight on one side and to Arthur Bell Nicholls, Charlotte's husband, to defend her side of the debate. It is interesting that despite the fact that Nicholls hated conflict and publicity he felt he must defend his wife's honour.

**W. W. Carus Wilson TO THE LEEDS MERCURY May 16, 1857**

Gentlemen, This letter from a lady who was a former superintendant of Cowan Bridge is a complete answer to the statements in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* regarding my father's charitable institutions.

The columns of the leading papers have for some time past been occupied with obituary notices of the late Miss Brontë, and many conveying the impression that her treatment at the Clergy Daughters' School when at Cowan Bridge, was of a character not only to affect her health but to darken her prospects in after life. Now, as I have it in my power to refute these charges, I should consider myself guilty in a measure concerning them, did I not make known to the world the truth of the case, and thereby exonerate an excellent and eminently useful clergyman from the imputations cast on him in *Jane Eyre*, as well as vindicate an institution which has been to the poverty-stricken clergy a blessing of inestimable value. In July 1824, Mr Brontë arrived at Cowan Bridge with two of his daughters, Maria and Elizabeth; the children were so delicate that there were doubts whether they could be admitted into the school. They were received, and went on so well that their father brought in September two more, Charlotte and Emily. During both these visits Mr Brontë *stayed* at the school, sat at the table with the pupils, and saw the whole routine of the establishment.

They all inherited consumption from their mother, and were taken home; none of them, as has been stated, had any attack of fever or died at the school. I can truly say that none of the pupils were denied a sufficient quantity of good food; they were never limited: meat, vegetables, and puddings daily in abundance; any statement to the contrary is most false. Charlotte was a bright, clever, happy little girl, never in disgrace. Let us hope that in caricaturing an institution which has been such a blessing to the daughters of her own church, she had no injurious motives, but, misled by a vivid imagination, and a dim recollection of thirty years, when she was but a child, she published in an unguarded moment, unmindful of the consequences, misstatements, the tendency of which has been to calumniate a most excellent institution, and to bring disgrace on religion.

In addition to this lady's testimony we have the testimony of hundreds of pupils, who with their parents have gratefully acknowledged the advantages they received at these institutions, rather than the account of one, however talented, who when but a child of nine left the establishment, and has so ungenerously cast an odium upon him who

first planned such a help to our poorer clergy, and who has yearly undertaken the risk of the support of near 300 pupils and teachers, for, including a preparatory school, there are about 150 daughters of clergymen boarded, clothed, and educated, at only £14 a year each, including everything, and in the “Servants' School,” above 100 girls trained for service, each paying only £10 a year.

The schools are situated in Westmoreland, built on Mr Carus Wilson's property, half a mile from Casterton Hall, his residence. They stand amid beautiful scenery, on high and healthy situations. They require above £1,000 a year, in addition to the payments of the pupils, to cover all expenses.

**Arthur Bell Nicholls TO THE LEEDS MERCURY May 23,1857**

Gentlemen, On Saturday last you published, by request of Mr W. W. Carus Wilson, an extract from a review, containing, he says, “a complete answer to the statements regarding his father's charitable institutions.”

Now let us examine the “complete answer,” and see how these charges are disposed of. And first, Mr Carus Wilson assumes that these statements rest solely on the testimony “of one who, when but a child of nine, left the establishment”; a reference, however, to the *Life of Charlotte Brontë* will show that this is a false assumption. He praises the situation of the school, “on Mr Carus Wilson's property, half a mile from Casterton Hall, high and healthy”; but he has not the candour to state that this description applies to the present site, and not to that referred to in *Jane Eyre*.

He eulogises Mr Wilson's liberality, but omits to state that funds are raised from the public for the support of the establishment which Mr W. W. Carus Wilson modestly calls his “father's charitable institutions”.

He makes a somewhat erroneous statement respecting Mr Brontë's family; hazards some conjectures about the intentions of the author of *Jane Eyre*; and lays before us a bill of fare at Cowan Bridge – “Meat, vegetables, and puddings, daily in abundance.” Very good! But what about the cooking that spoiled these provisions, boiled the puddings in unclean water, compounded the Saturday's nauseous mess from the fragments, accumulated in a dirty larder during the week, and too often

sent up the porridge, not merely burnt, but with offensive fragments of other substances discoverable in it?

To the day of her death “Curren Bell” maintained that the picture drawn in *Jane Eyre* was on the whole a true picture of Cowan Bridge School, as she knew it by experience: that the institution was subsequently greatly improved she knew and stated in the same work in which she exposed its former mismanagement.

Trusting to your sense of justice to give this letter a place in your Saturday's impression, I am, gentlemen, your obedient servant,  
A. B. Nicholls.

**Carus Wilson TO THE LEEDS MERCURY May 28, 1857**

Gentlemen, — If the Rev A. Nicholls will refer to the refutation which in your paper of last Thursday he endeavours to answer, he will see that I wished there had been space to have inserted all of the letter of the lady who was over the Cowan Bridge School when C. Brontë was there. She wrote that during the Spring of 1825 a low fever, though not an alarming one, and the managers, naturally anxious to know if any local cause occasioned it, asked the doctor's opinion of the food that had happened to be on the table. She recollected that he spoke rather scornfully of a baked rice pudding, but as the ingredients were rice, sugar and milk, its effects could hardly have been so serious as have been affirmed.

In addition to the above, my father has denied the accounts in *Jane Eyre*, and declared he was most particular about the food at Cowan Bridge.

I leave your readers to form their own judgment between the testimony of this lady and my father, and a child who left the institution when but nine years old.

If there are any besides, perhaps a dismissed pupil or teacher, who can bear out C Brontë's assertions, there are many more Cowan Bridge pupils who have written to me during the last month saying “how happy they were there, how all loved my father, how entirely false the character Mrs Gaskell has sketched of him, and how good the food was, better (some have said) than they got at their own home.”

Mr Nicholls complains of the expression “my father's charitable institutions”. It was my father who first established them, had them built on his own property, collected single-handed for thirty years all subscriptions for them, running the risk himself of their yearly support, and thereby doing for his brother clergy what no other man has done. No Committee of Management was formed till about six years ago, when ill-health obliged my father to live abroad.

Mr Nicholls is surprised that no defence was made on the publication of *Jane Eyre*. But that was a novel, and persons and places were not publicly and certainly identified till the obituary notices of the press in 1855 and the memoir of Charlotte Brontë appeared. It was in 1855 that the letter was written by the lady who was over Cowan Bridge School, when Charlotte Brontë was there.

It is only natural that Mr Nicholls should seek to defend his wife's assertions, but considering that to add force to her fiction she casts odium on an invaluable institution, and a public benefactor to mankind, which as Mrs Gaskell says she often afterwards regretted, I think Mr Nicholls should be the first to share in that regret and to repair the great injury that has been done. – Yours, etc., W. W. Carus Wilson.

**Arthur Bell Nicholls TO THE HALIFAX GUARDIAN June 6, 1857**

Sir, Let me thank Mr Wilson for his last letter. In his former statement all was perfection at Cowan Bridge, now we have the following points admitted. That “during the spring of 1825 there prevailed a low fever, though not an alarming one” (what would alarm Mr Wilson if the illness of about forty girls failed to do so?); that “the doctor rather scornfully” condemned the girls' food. But mark how easily Mr Wilson disposes of adverse testimony – “if there are any besides Charlotte Brontë, perhaps a dismissed pupil or teacher.”

Now even at the risk of incurring such a summary dismissal I cannot forbear giving him the following extract from a letter which I have received from a former pupil at Cowan Bridge:

“On first reading *Jane Eyre* several years ago I recognised immediately the picture there drawn, and was far from considering it any way exaggerated; in fact, I thought at the time, and still think the matter

rather understated than otherwise. I suffered so severely from the treatment that I was never in the schoolroom during the last three months I was there, until about a week before I left, and was considered to be far gone in consumption. My mother (whose only child I was) was never informed of my illness, and I might certainly have died there without her being informed of it, had not a severe illness of her own caused her hastily to summon me home. She was so much shocked at my appearance that she refused to allow me to return, though pressed to do so. I attribute my illness to the unhealthy situation of the school, the long walks to church in bad weather (for in winter our feet were often wet during the whole of the service), and the scanty and ill-prepared food. The housekeeper was very dirty with the cooking. I have frequently seen grease swimming on the milk and water we had for breakfast, in consequence of its having been boiled in a greasy copper, and I perfectly remember once being sent for a cup of tea for a teacher, who was ill in bed, and no spoon being at hand, the housekeeper stirred it with her finger, she being engaged in cutting up raw meat at the time. I could give you scores of such instances as these which fell under my own observation. Our food was almost always badly cooked, and besides that we certainly had not enough of it, whatever may be said to the contrary.

In a word, the system at Cowan Bridge was a very harsh one, and I was very glad to hear that an improvement took place after the school was removed to Casterton, for it was much needed. I had no knowledge whatever of Mrs Nicholls personally, therefore my statement may fairly be considered an impartial one. You are quite welcome to make what use you think proper of this letter.”

**Sarah Baldwin TO THE HALIFAX GUARDIAN June 13, 1857**

Sir, It gives me inexpressible pain to see the repeated attempts made, by the distortion and exaggeration of facts, and what looks very like wilful misrepresentations of character, to disparage a valuable institution, and to cast odium upon a venerated minister of our church, who has spent his best days in energetic labours in his Master’s cause, and for the benefit of the families of his poorer brethren in the ministry.

As an old pupil, both of the school at Cowan Bridge, and at Casterton, I claim to be heard.

Charlotte Brontë was, if I have been correctly informed, a pupil at Cowan Bridge about nine months. I was a pupil there for two years; and subsequently at Casterton for more than seven years; thus my residence extended over a period of more than nine years.

I was one of the victims of that visitation of fever at Cowan Bridge, about which so much has been said, and to this hour I have a vivid recollection of the motherly care and attention I received, and the tender solicitude shown towards me on that trying occasion. Nor have I the slightest reason to think that I was treated better than my fellow-pupils. Nor do I for a moment believe that the fever took its rise from the quantity or quality of the food provided, but was introduced to the school from the village, or by a pupil returning to the school.

I solemnly affirm that our food was uniformly abundant, good, and generally well cooked; but no reasonable person could expect that in a large establishment like that, any more than in a private family, a failure in cooking should not sometimes happen.

And as to the pupils walking to the church in wet weather, and sitting the whole time of service with wet and cold feet, I do not say this never occurred; but this I do say, that it was the usual practice for the pupils not to go to church in wet weather, but to have prayers and a sermon at the school; so that this occurrence must have been rare indeed.

The character of the founder of that institution has been cruelly and falsely assailed, as all who know him will readily admit; but he will think it no dishonour “to suffer for righteousness’ sake.”

It would be almost too much to expect that no injury should be sustained by the institution from the repeated attacks made upon it with such perverse energy; most thankful therefore should I be could I enlist the sympathies of the wealthy in this locality in its behalf, and add to the numbers of its subscribers. I know of no institution that has a stronger claim to the sympathies and support of the Christian Church.

Trusting to your sense of justice and impartiality to insert this in your next publication, — I remain, sir, your obedient servant.

**Arthur Bell Nicholls TO THE HALIFAX GUARDIAN July 4, 1857**

Sir, — Mrs Baldwin says that she has “had more ample opportunities of forming a judgment on the management of Cowan Bridge School than Charlotte Brontë.” Now, Charlotte Brontë described the institution as she found it. Mrs Baldwin was not there at the time, consequently she cannot personally know whether the statements in *Jane Eyre* are true or false. Hear the testimony of a lady who was at the school with Miss Brontë: — “I would rather see a child of mine in its grave than subjected to the treatment I endured, and which I shall never forget.”

Mrs Baldwin, after informing us that she is “preparing to send two of her own dear little girls” (a first instalment, I presume) to “the charitable institution” already so liberally patronised by her family, proceeds to do a little congenial business, and with exquisite taste presents a begging box to the Halifax gentry. Surely such a graceful and disinterested appeal cannot be made in vain.

**Sarah Baldwin TO THE HALIFAX GUARDIAN July 11, 1857**

Sir, — Mr Nicholls’ letter is written in a style so coarse and unusual among educated people, that it is quite undeserving of notice, and would have been allowed to pass at once into oblivion, but for one or two misstatements it contains.

He intimates that because I was not at the school at the identical time with Charlotte Brontë, therefore I cannot know whether the statements in *Jane Eyre* be true or false. I do not pretend to know by personal observation whether all these statements are true or not; but I have very satisfactory evidence, of a personal nature and of other kinds, that they are not; and especially so to Mr Wilson, the accusations against whom, and the misrepresentations of whose character are, to my mind, the gravest part of the whole question. I think I may be allowed to speak with some confidence, because for nearly ten years I knew him intimately, and had full opportunity of observing his religious character, his temper, disposition, and general treatment of the pupils; and it was such as to produce in me, and in the good majority of them, feelings of unaffected love and veneration. This testimony is founded upon nearly ten years’ experience. Charlotte Brontë speaks only from personal

observation and experience, extending over a period of nine months and when she was a mere child, a little more than nine years old. I went to the school at Cowan Bridge about a year after she left, when, I believe, the state of things was much as during her stay there.

With your permission, I will now give the testimony of one of the first pupils at Cowan Bridge. As a pupil at Cowan Bridge in its first days, I feel it a privilege to be able to bear testimony in direct opposition to Miss Brontë. I could mention many interesting little incidents corroborative of my opposite testimony, calculated to account for the affectionate feeling with which I myself, and my fellow-pupils, regarded the kind Carus Wilson family. I have not read *Jane Eyre*, for I felt it a waste of time to read tales founded on falsehoods; but when I have heard remarks made upon it, and now on the Memoir, it has afforded me satisfaction to refute the ungrateful slander cast on Mr Wilson, and to bear my testimony to the practical consistency of his character, which, with me, gave weight to all his religious instructions. My annual subscription for many years to the school betokens my interest in it; and I now send a little donation as a further proof of my regard for him and it.”

This is one of more than three hundred letters that have been received by Mr W. W. Wilson within the last few weeks, almost all grieving over the assertions made in *Jane Eyre* and in the *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, which crush entirely any testimony that can be produced to the contrary.

The Miss Temple of *Jane Eyre* is exhibited in a most favourable light by Charlotte Brontë herself, and is spoken of in highly eulogistic terms by the authoress of the *Life of Charlotte Brontë*. The following is from a clergyman, the husband of the lady who is represented under the name of Miss Temple, and who died only last year. “Often,” he says, “have I heard my late dear wife speak of her sojourn at Cowan Bridge. I never heard her speak otherwise than in terms of admiration at Mr Carus Wilson's personal sacrifices, and of the parental affection he manifested towards the pupils. Of the food and treatment of the children she always spoke in terms of general approval. I have heard her allude to some unfortunate cook, who used at times to spoil the food, but she said she

was soon dismissed.” This testimony from such a quarter is strong indeed.

I have as little inclination as Mr Nicholls to continue the correspondence, especially as it is conducted by himself in defiance of all the rules of courtesy and propriety. Having borne my humble, but most conscientious, testimony in this matter on the side of truth and justice, I am so far satisfied. With many thanks for your kind indulgence.

**Carus Wilson TO THE HALIFAX GUARDIAN July 18, 1857**

Sir, I don't wish to make any defence for Mrs Baldwin. Your readers will, I am sure, agree with me, that she is quite able to take care of herself: neither do I wish to notice the strain of Mr Nicholls' letter, at which many have expressed to me (to use the lightest term) their astonishment; but I hope I may now be able to close this controversy by saying, that in a correspondence I have had with Mrs Gaskell, I have found her most willing to rectify the injury she has done to my father and his institutions, and I believe her third edition will be a work which none can cavil at, but all extol.

I gladly do her justice in saying that I am sure she only desires to elicit truth. I do think she is more to blame than C. Brontë, for having too much endorsed as facts the exaggerated fictions of *Jane Eyre*.

C. Brontë's wonderful writings being but novels, we must allow her gifted pen more licence.

It has been said that the statements of pupils who were not at school with C. Brontë are of no avail. But I have seen the testimony of teachers and pupils who were with her, and those who followed her, as did Mrs Baldwin (who finds from her father now that she was at Cowan Bridge for a much longer period than she stated in her first letter), would surely have heard of the horrors depicted in *Jane Eyre*, if they had had any reality. And as regards my father's conduct towards the pupils, those at Casterton, as well as Cowan Bridge can give evidence about that.

I am ready to give your readers the addresses of any of my correspondents and I only wish they could read a tithe of the letters I have had from old pupils.

Shortly after C. Brontë left Cowan Bridge, which has been designated as a second Dotheboys Hall, the late Bishop of London visited the school, after an examination of the classes, and a careful inspection of the whole establishment, observed to my father, that “if it should please God to deprive his daughters of their parents, he knew no institution where he could more desire them to be placed.” I do trust that this letter may close this controversy.

**Arthur Bell Nicholls TO THE HALIFAX GUARDIAN July 18, 1857**

Sir, I regret to find that Mrs Baldwin takes such strong exception to my last letter, but if she indulges in charges of “distortion and exaggeration of facts and wilful misrepresentation,” she must not feel surprised if she be answered in a manner less gentle than one would wish to use in replying to a lady.

She cannot, it seems, perceive the fallacy in her argument, and yet it is very plain. She assumes that because the management was good in her time, it must have been so always. With equal correctness might she argue that because she is now in a position to “send two of her dear little girls’ to this charitable institution,” she has been always in a similar interesting situation. For the statements I have made I have produced proof. Mr Wilson's friends have not, that I am aware of, produced the testimony of a single pupil who was at the institution with Charlotte Brontë.

Mrs Baldwin says she went to Cowan Bridge about a year after Miss Brontë left it. This can hardly be so, for in that case she must have been sixteen years at school instead of nine, as she says herself. This, however, is of little consequence. I merely wish to point out the inconsistency. But contrast the testimony of a lady who did go to the school at that time.

The following extract is from a letter addressed to me by her husband, a clergyman: — “Feeling interested, in common with thousands, in the fame of C Brontë, and indignant at the aspersions cast on her veracity, I think it may not be disagreeable to you to receive from an independent source a statement confirmatory in some respects of the

account of the Clergy Daughters' School given by your late lamented wife.

My own wife and one of her sisters were educated at Cowan Bridge, entering shortly after Miss Brontë left, and remaining there five years. At the time of their entrance, the school was considered to be in a course of progressive improvement, and my wife makes no complaint of dirt, but her account of the food supplied during the early part of her residence is very unfavourable in respect to the quantity and quality.

The breakfast consisted of ill-made porridge, without bread. Many girls from the southern counties, unused to such food at home, could not eat it, and for six months my wife and her sister had no breakfast whatever. On one occasion it was observed that her sister was not taking her porridge. She was required to eat it. Attempting to do so, her stomach rejected it, upon which she was treated, not to a meal of bread or other wholesome food, but to a strong dose of senna tea.

The dinner was sufficient, but not good. The evening meal consisted of a cup of milk and water, and one small piece of bread, not weighing two ounces.

Many of the girls being thus always hungry, there were continual attempts to procure bread clandestinely. This was brought to light by the following incident. It was usual for each pupil to repeat on Sunday morning a text of her own choice; and one, who had, I believe, been punished for stealing bread, repeated in her turn the verse which declares that men do not despise a thief who steals bread to satisfy his hunger. This girl died shortly after of consumption.

My own wife, on her return home for the first vacation, was considered by her family to be half starved, and her brother, a medical man, has told me, that in his opinion, her health suffered for years from the consequences of insufficient nourishment.

My sole desire in this controversy has been to defend the dead from the aspersions cast on her by interested individuals. Against the Clergy Daughters' School, as at present conducted, the author of *Jane Eyre* has not written a line, nor have I. The management is, I am told, unexceptionable. I am, sir, your much obliged and obedient servant,

**Sarah Baldwin TO THE HALIFAX GUARDIAN August 1, 1857**

Sir, Mr Nicholls's misapprehension as to the duration of my residence at the school is easily rectified. The only uncertainty in my mind was the date of the removal of the school from Cowan Bridge to Casterton; it was at a later period than I thought; so that I was at Cowan Bridge a longer, and at Casterton a shorter, period than I at first stated. This, it will be perceived, adds some strength to my former testimony.

In dismissing, as I hope finally, this subject, I must observe that in what I have said I have been influenced only by a regard for justice and truth, and of gratitude to Mr Wilson. The school and Mr Wilson were misrepresented and misunderstood, and no voice lifted up here in defence. Many of my former fellow-pupils in other parts of the country had stood forward with their favourable testimony. I felt constrained to use my feeble powers and influence in the same cause. I feel thankful that I have done so, and thus been enabled to discharge in some small degree the debt of gratitude I, in common with the hundreds, owe to the excellent and benevolent founder of the school.

**Arthur Bell Nicholls TO THE HALIFAX GUARDIAN Aug 8, 1857**

Sir, The question, stripped of extraneous matter, is simply this: What was the state of the school during the time that Miss Brontë was there?

She and others described the treatment as harsh; the food as indifferent and insufficient. Up started Mrs Baldwin, and, asserting her own superior means of information, said in effect: Don't believe a word of it; hear me. I went to Cowan Bridge seven years (according to Mr Wilson's date) after C Brontë left, and "I solemnly affirm that the food was uniformly abundant and good." I pointed out to her that she could not personally know whether the statements were true or not, because she was not at this charitable institution at the time referred to. She then said: "I do not pretend to know by personal observation whether the statements are true or not. I went to the school about a year after she left, when, I believe, the state of things was much as during her stay." How conclusive! But Mr Wilson has "300 testimonials" in his favour – he may have 500 – and all just as worthless as Mrs Baldwin's, unless proved to have been written by pupils who were at school with Miss

Brontë, which has not been done in a single instance. You will observe that Mrs Baldwin does not deny that the girls were driven by hunger to steal bread.

Of Rev Carus Wilson I know nothing personally. I would only say that I have heard him spoken of by clergymen in terms very different from those employed by Mrs Baldwin.

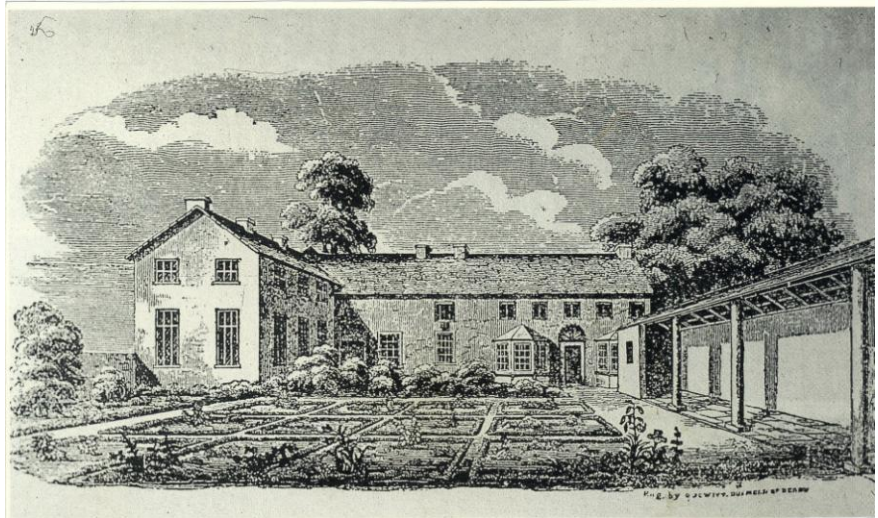
And now, sir, I have done with this subject. I have discharged a painful but necessary duty. Henceforth Charlotte Brontë's assailants may growl and snarl over her grave undisturbed by me.

### **TO THE EDITOR OF BELGRAVIA May 1868**

I think that we may refer to the old precedent of the gold and silver shield, and say that each writer is right from her own point of view. My experience of the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge is two years later than that of *Jane Eyre*, and began in 1827. I have a feeling of the strongest respect and gratitude towards my old school, both for the principles instilled, and for the thorough conscientious teaching which we received in all branches of our education. The food was abundant, good, and well-prepared. But there were traditions of things having been very differently managed under former superintendence and service; and to that time Jane Eyre's experiences, coloured by her vivid imagination, may refer. Numerous as we were, a somewhat Spartan discipline was perhaps necessary, and a Spartan tone was cultivated by the girls themselves. Any tendency to "softness," in the north-country depreciatory phrase, was avoided by us. Girls would protest that they were well, and faint as the words were uttered. To young delicate children, peculiarly reared and peculiarly constituted, as "Jane" and her sisters were — and I may say to any invalids — the Clergy Daughters' School was scarcely fitted. The general feeling towards Mr Carus Wilson was one of the deepest reverence — I may say, of a more unquestioning and implicit reverence than might have been expected in so very Protestant a school. His colossal stature doubtless told in the impression he effected amongst us. All justice, by showing the other side of the shield, is due to a school which has benefited so many hundreds directly, and through them so many more.

So there you have it. You must make up your own minds as to the extent that Lowood was really Cowan Bridge School. Of course in the fictional world of *Jane Eyre* Lowood may have undergone great changes, as indeed Cowan Bridge School has changed dramatically. Oh yes, Cowan Bridge School is still teaching girls today, from kindergarten to A levels. Of course it is no longer at Cowan Bridge, and it is now called Casterton School.

It takes both day pupils and boarders, but I'm sure that each girl has her own room and the porridge is no longer burnt. If you Google "Casterton School" and visit the school's website you will see that the Cowan Bridge Controversy has not hurt their reputation. The website proudly proclaims that Charlotte and Emily Brontë had both been pupils of the school.



**Cowan Bridge School in the time of the Brontës**

## ***Jane Eyre as Bildungsroman***

**by MICHAEL GIFFIN**

**Talk given at the ABA meeting on 6 April 2013**

My talk today proposes something that may seem obvious but is actually quite subtle. There's a relationship between the novel that explores the hero's maturity (*bildungsroman*) and the spirit of her age (*zeitgeist*). In other words—in the anglosphere at least—how an author defines and measures maturity, and the process through which her hero matures, changes in three broad stages.

If we describe these stages in terms of literary genres, Stage 1 was before the mid-19th century, during the neoclassical and romantic periods. Stage 2 was between the mid-19th and mid-20th century, during the realist, naturalist, and modernist periods. Stage 3 emerged in the wake of World War II, when the failure of modernism became widely evident and both postmodernism and post-postmodernism took *bildungsroman* in different directions.

Today I'm sticking to Stage 1, which includes both Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë. By way of fundamental background, I'll begin with a few words about Austen, because as you all know *everything* begins with Austen, and because although Brontë wasn't fond of Austen—and wanted her novels to be different from Austen's—in some ways they're similar. For example: Austen's preference for reason and Brontë's preference for feeling were opposite sides of the same metaphysical coin.

### ***BILDUNGSROMAN IN SENSE AND SENSIBILITY***

For an Austen hero, maturity is a learned response to her society; it's knowing how and when to act appropriately within that society. Any study of how Austen defines and measures maturity needs to begin with a historical fact: females were much more vulnerable then than they are now. Social life was governed by property and patronage. Economic life was controlled by a market economy subject to cycles of boom, bust, and extended periods of high inflation. Public health was poor and full of inequities; even wealthy females suffered from what we now regard as unacceptable levels of preventable disease and premature death. There was a high degree of social mobility, upward and downward. Every class was restless, insecure, and under threat. There was no safety net as we now know it. So, because of this individual and collective vulnerability, the Austen hero has to discover urgent answers to the question: How will I survive?

In Austen's period, the key to survival was negotiating a successful marriage; however, while Austen intends to establish her heroes in

successful marriages, none of these eventuate until the end of each novel. They aren't achieved easily; neither are they achieved by fate, accident, or providence. They're the hard won product of conflict, misunderstanding, and growth. They're forged in difficult social, economic, and moral circumstances. They occur at the end of the hero's journey into maturity, and, the success of that journey depends on how the hero exercises her free will and learns from her circumstances and also from the consequences of her choices.

For Austen, two competencies are crucial here. First, the hero needs to obtain a correct balance of reason and feeling, according to Plato's model of the mind. Second, the hero needs to acquire correct understanding, according to a formula proposed by Locke. These competencies were fundamental to both British Empiricism and Georgian Anglicanism.

Regarding the first competency, Plato believes the mind has a tripartite structure (rational, spirited, and appetitive) analogous with different parts of the body (head, heart, and lower abdomen). These three parts are qualitatively different. We get a sense of this difference in *The Republic* (c.380 BC) where Plato refers to the old quarrel between philosophy and poetry; a quarrel that, traditionally understood, is about different truth claims. Because it comes from the rational mind (analogous with the head), he believes philosophy has higher truth claims. Because it comes from the spirited mind (analogous with the heart), he believes poetry has lesser truth claims. Because it's analogous with the lower abdomen, and isn't far from the heart, the appetitive mind can easily corrupt the spirited mind; however, the rational mind is the least corruptible, because it's furthest away from the lower abdomen. This binary of rationality and irrationality is central to the metaphysical system Austen and Brontë share.

Regarding the second competency: In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Locke proposes the mind is tabula rasa (a blank tablet) at birth. In a typically Enlightenment attempt to reconcile Greek

reason with Jewish revelation, he argues reason is natural revelation and revelation is natural reason; also, he believes we arrive at reason primarily through reflecting on our experience: that is, reason is not primarily the development of innate ideas. This formula for achieving correct understanding is fundamental to how Austen defines and measures maturity. The closer we read her novels, the more obvious this formula becomes. The leitmotiv of each novel is how the hero engages with the dialectic of reason, revelation, and reflection on her experience, in order to arrive at correct understanding and hence to mature.

Like all of Austen's novels, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) is an extended parable, which begins with a description of human fallenness and ends with a description of human redemption. This is the metaphysical frame in which all Austen's heroes mature. Chapter One describes the precarious situation of Mrs Dashwood and her daughters; a situation caused by the combination of the ineffective stewardship of Mr Dashwood, his premature death, primogeniture, and the greed of his son and daughter-in-law, Mr and Mrs John Dashwood. With each sentence Austen heightens our awareness of how the commandment to honour thy father and mother, and the injunction to care for the widowed and orphaned, have been violated. Once that violation is described, and its consequences are revealed, Austen presents the different temperaments of two sisters—Elinor's sense (reason) and Marianne's sensibility (feeling)—which determine their neoclassical and romantic responses to their female vulnerability.

The novel is about how and why Elinor's rational response to society is appropriate, although it is imbalanced and seems preternatural in a young woman of nineteen, and about how and why Marianne's irrational response to society is inappropriate, because it makes her vulnerable and self-destructive, although it seems more natural in a young woman of seventeen. This does not mean Elinor is without feeling and Marianne can't reason. Austen maintains an exquisitely symmetrical sense of the balance each sister must achieve to be mature, depending on whether she's destined to be first lady of the parish or first lady of the estate.

In Austen's terms, Elinor's affinity with reason will make her an ideal priest's wife, once she matures, once her reason is balanced by feeling. In Austen's terms, Marianne's affinity with feeling will make her an ideal squire's wife, once she matures; once her feeling is balanced by reason. Once the reader notices this dynamic, Austen's nexus between parish and estate becomes obvious and her concern to establish successful marriages in each domain is easier to understand. After her trials, Elinor is rewarded with a successful marriage to a priest, Edward Ferrars, in which feeling provides a corrective balance to her reason. After her trials, Marianne is rewarded with a successful marriage to a squire, Colonel Brandon, in which reason provides a corrective balance to her feeling.

Why are these marriages significant to Austen? Because, in the unregulated agrarian capitalism of her period, clergy couples and gentry couples were the two predominant and influential social units that could affect an entire community, for better or for worse, in an age of enormous social, economic, and moral upheaval. Apart from Anne Elliot, whom Austen is grooming to become mistress of a home with no traditional boundaries, her ideal clerical marriages represent reason tempered by feeling, and her ideal gentry marriages represent feeling tempered by reason.

### ***BILDUNGSROMAN IN JANE EYRE***

Although both Austen and Brontë were clergy daughters, and although both of them took their Anglican faith seriously, they were influenced by different *zeitgeists*. By Brontë's period, neoclassicism was over; romanticism was at its peak; capitalism was becoming less agrarian and more industrial; society, the economy, and class dynamics were changing. This may partly explain why Brontë regarded Austen as "shrewd and observant" and confessed she "should hardly like" to live with Austen's ladies and gentlemen "in their elegant but confined houses".

Apart from their different *zeitgeists*, however, there is little philosophical difference between Brontë's focus on feeling and Austen's focus on reason. Both authors wrote within the same metaphysical paradigm; both depended on Plato's tripartite structure of the mind for their narrative logic. In fact, the more *Sense and Sensibility* and *Jane Eyre* (1847) are compared, the more philosophically similar they both appear, and the more exquisitely symmetrical they both seem. Each novel argues that the rational mind (head) must prevent the spirited mind (heart) from becoming corrupted by the appetitive mind (lower abdomen), since the spirited mind is forever at risk.

Austen makes it clear Marianne has to learn her lesson the hard way, because she has the potential to become another Bertha Mason—the madwoman upstairs—if her spirited mind is corrupted by her appetitive mind. Brontë makes Jane a more resilient amalgam of Elinor and Marianne. She learns her lesson about the dangers of her appetitive mind early, at Gateshead Hall and Lowood School. The rest of the novel is about her struggle for happiness, which depends on maintaining a particular mental balance.

The madwoman upstairs is an object lesson in romantic excess. Bertha has an unstable mind and a passionate nature, both of which contributed to her madness, but the novel also suggests she has tertiary syphilis, a madness-inducing disease, associated with romantic excess, for which there was no cure in those days. As Austen and Brontë both understand the consequences of syphilis, and know that many if not most families had a syphilitic relative somewhere in the past or the present, Plato's tripartite structure of the mind is for them the equivalent of a public health message before the germ theory of disease and the discovery of antibiotics. However, Austen and Brontë believe there's more to life than protection from the mental imbalance that triggers moral danger, disease, and madness. They want their heroes to thrive not merely to survive; they want their heroes to be physically and metaphysically fulfilled. That's why it's so important for their heroes to negotiate successful marriages, have enough money to live on, and remain as

healthy as possible. All this depended on the right balance of reason and feeling; a balance that's slightly different for each author.

For Austen, maturity depends on Locke's formula for correct understanding. If she wasn't conscious of Locke, he was still fundamental to her *zeitgeist*. For Brontë, maturity depends on a different formula. In *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1807), Hegel proposes that absolute knowledge, and hence maturity, can't come about until one's consciousness becomes self-conscious and recognises the self-consciousness of another. To illustrate this proposition, he tells the story of a master-servant dialectic, which can be about an individual's struggle for freedom as she tries to realise herself, or a society's struggle for freedom as it tries to realise itself. If Brontë wasn't conscious of Hegel, he was still fundamental to her *zeitgeist* and it's difficult if not impossible to discuss *Jane Eyre* as *bildungsroman* and ignore how the hero's maturity depends on the way she internalises Hegel's enormously influential dialectic.

In one interpretation of the dialectic, when one I encounters another I, its pre-eminence is compromised and it experiences the other I as a threat. Its only means of reasserting itself is through a struggle for pre-eminence; hence the two relate as master and servant. However, unless their authority and accountability are equal and reciprocal, no shared identities such as being committed, being responsible, or having social status are possible.

Brontë explores this Hegelian dialectic with great consistency in *Jane Eyre*, and her exploration occurs within Plato's tripartite structure of the mind. At Gateshead Hall, the young Jane experiences the consequences of her appetitive mind. At Lowood School, she learns to control her appetitive mind and benefits from her education there. She becomes a young teacher who prays to God for liberty, change, and stimulus, but when her prayers are not answered she cries out desperately: "Then, grant me at least a new servitude!" This appeal to the master-servant dialectic frames the rest of the novel, as Jane explores the consequences

of needing a master while having fixed ideas about the master she needs: a master who embodies the right balance of reason and feeling.

At Thornfield Hall, she resists giving herself to a contemporary version of a medieval knight, the romantic hero with a flaw, Edward Rochester, whose spirited mind has been compromised by his appetitive mind. At Moor House, she resists giving herself to a contemporary version of a medieval priest, St John Rivers, whose rational mind isn't balanced by his spirited mind. Each wants Jane as a wife. Each wants her to be a different kind of servant within the dialectic. In both cases, she almost succumbs to their benevolent attempts to dominate her. However, the romantic Jane is more modern than medieval; she knows that, unless husband and wife share equal and reciprocal authority and accountability, they can't have the identities or status Brontë wants for them.

The novel opens with the young Jane at Gateshead Hall; an orphan living in a disordered estate without a master to prevent it from squandering its inheritance and sliding into ruin. Her late uncle, Mr Reed, was a kind man and had he lived he might have made her the focus of renewal at Gateshead. Without him, she has no champion, no protector, no master to serve. Without him, she sees herself as “a discord in Gateshead”. She has “nothing in harmony” with its inhabitants.

Jane's widowed aunt, Mrs Reed, and her three cousins — John, Georgiana, and Eliza — treat her badly. She tolerates this treatment, up to a point, but eventually rebels; because she has a passionate nature; because she doesn't regard herself as their “slave”. As punishment for this rebellion, and for her inability to control her appetitive mind, she's locked away in the “red-room”, her uncle's bedchamber, the room in which he died, where she experiences an existential terror and loses consciousness. (Note: The memory of this terror returns to her many years later, once she realises she is at mental and moral risk from Rochester's appetitive mind.)

Because aunt and cousins treat her badly, she's pleased to hear she's being sent away to school. Knowing she's leaving Gateshead, she vents her grievances and gives her aunt a piece of her appetitive mind. While this ventilation gives Jane a sense of victory, it's pyrrhic; it makes her feel as if she's been poisoned, which in a sense she has. This feeling of having been poisoned is the first of many lessons through which she learns about the light and dark aspects of her own character, according to the Platonic logic that her feelings need to be released rationally if they are to be constructive rather than destructive. The ultimate measure of her maturity is recognising her need of forgiveness and her need to forgive others. This recognition occurs at the centre of the novel, during one of its shapely turns—or, if you like, its climax—when she returns to Gateshead from Thornfield as a young woman, in the bloom of love, to forgive her dying aunt for treating her badly as a child.

If Gateshead Hall represents the disordered estate, Lowood School introduces the disordered church. This is where Jane's journey into maturity begins; a maturity that depends on a right balance of reason and feeling; a maturity that allows her to recognise what's wrong with the church as well as the estate. Under Brocklehurst's influence, Lowood is a terrible place, both physically and metaphysically; its eighty pupils are weakened by freezing rooms, thin clothing, and inadequate food; many of them die during an epidemic of typhoid fever. During that epidemic, Helen dies of consumption, not typhoid fever, and a sleeping Jane is embracing her when she dies.

Why does Helen die while Jane survives? Because, in Brontë's metaphorical scheme, Helen's faith is self-abnegating and weakens her while Jane's faith is self-affirming and strengthens her. When Brocklehurst's hypocrisy and neglect are discovered, he's sidelined by Lowood's benefactors, who improve conditions and build new school accommodation. Jane eventually benefits from the education Lowood gives her and becomes a teacher. She survives as a servant within its symbolic order but Brontë wants her to thrive not just survive. To thrive

as a servant, physically and metaphysically, she needs a new symbolic order and a new master.

What kind of symbolic order? What kind of master? There are two orders for Jane to test her servitude within, the secular Thornfield Hall and the religious Moor House; each is temperamentally distinct and depends on Plato's tripartite structure of the mind. Rochester's order represents feeling needing to be balanced by reason; Rivers' order represents reason needing to be balanced by feeling. Notice the similarities here, between the neoclassical *Sense and Sensibility* and the romantic *Jane Eyre*, but notice the differences too.

Thornfield Hall is gothic not neo-gothic. It was probably built during the high or late medieval period, which links it to those myths of chivalry that, as far as women are concerned, are attractive on some levels but unattractive on others. There's a body of 20th century research that describes how the role of women changed during this period; how the myths of chivalry affected them. Before the chivalry period, women were more independent: for example, in some jurisdictions they could operate businesses independently and their husbands weren't responsible for their corporate liability. During the chivalry period, women became more dependent. While we can't assume Brontë was aware of this tendency, she was aware of the negative aspects of romanticism while being romantic herself. That's why she made Thornfield a gothic and romantic metaphor and Rochester a gothic and romantic master.

Brontë gave Rochester most of the stock characteristics of a romantic hero: he's a leader; he's restless, powerful, introspective, alienated, isolated, filled with melancholy and wanderlust, and associated with nature; also, he has a fatal flaw. She even gets Jane to question him about the two romantic characteristics she hasn't given him; self-criticism and regret for his actions; two characteristics which often lead other romantic heroes towards philanthropy as a way of atoning for their fatal flaw. And at one point Jane even asks Rochester if he's

philanthropic! As he says no, we know he's consciously avoiding anything that might atone for his fatal flaw. He believes remorse is "the poison of life". He doesn't believe, as Jane does, that religious repentance is the cure for remorse. He believes secular reformation might be; however, while he has the strength to reform, if he wants to, he doesn't want to.

Apart from these romantic characteristics, Rochester has a conscience; also, his spirited mind is noble; like Jane, and like Marianne, his spirited mind is in touch with truths the rational mind isn't; however, his conscience and nobility are always threatened by his appetitive mind. So within the gothic metaphor of Thornfield, he's master of a disordered estate, some of which he inherited, some of which he made himself. He knows Thornfield is disordered. He wrestles with the disorder he inherited from his father and older brother, who treated him badly, who conspired to arrange his marriage to Bertha. He wrestles with the disorder he created, as a result of being a flawed hero whose appetitive mind always undermines his spirited mind. What's the cure? As he doesn't believe in repentance, and isn't willing to reform, he keeps on brooding while searching for a cure that suits him.

As *Jane Eyre* is a novel, Rochester's search is rhetorical, like Jane's search, and there's a resonance about George Eliot's comment on Brontë: "I wish her characters would talk a little less like the heroes and heroes of police reports". We see this rhetorical tendency throughout the novel, as the protagonists interrogate each other in ways that act out Plato's tripartite structure of the mind and the Hegelian dialectic. During the Thornfield section, Rochester and Jane conduct an interrogation that gradually moves from exploration to flirtation to romance. He's not handsome, and she's not beautiful, but they're attracted to each other on many physical and metaphysical levels. He tests her; she tests him. He wants to be her master; she wants to be his servant. He wants her heart to become less guarded; she wants his heart to become more guarded. Who wins this struggle?

Rochester takes the view that, since he's a man of conscience, and since happiness has been irrevocably denied him, he can use his will to obtain pleasure, by any means, at any cost. Notice the parallel here with Marianne's belief in hedonism, the doctrine that moral value, and the distinction between right and wrong, can be defined and measured by a pleasure principle. Jane takes the view that, since hedonism isn't a good guardian of conscience, this path only leads to further degeneration. True to her belief in repentance, she returns to Gateshead to forgive her Aunt Reed on her deathbed. On her return to Thornfield, Rochester continues with his plans to seduce Jane into his dark domain. The temptation nearly succeeds; however, at the last moment, at the altar, as they are about to exchange marriage vows, an impediment is declared: Jane learns that Bertha is Rochester's wife.

What should Jane do? She must flee temptation. Rochester isn't going to change; his appetitive mind is making his spirited mind increasingly desperate. She no longer has the strength to remain near him free of moral danger. He can't be her master; she can't be his servant. So she leaves Thornfield in the dead of night taking nothing with her. As *Jane Eyre* is a religious allegory, she travels through Whitcross, which literally means the Spirit of the Cross. This course of action is fundamental to the development of Brontë's religious moral. The point here is: Readers who believe Jane should run away with Rochester, who believe they can spend the rest of their lives as happy exiles, are fundamentally misguided. This may be what Rochester wants but it isn't an option for Jane.

After four days of existential crisis, during which Jane experiences exposure, poverty, and hunger, she collapses on the doorstep of Moor House, the family home of a brother and two sisters who have recently returned there following the death of their father. St John is a young single priest; Diana and Mary are young single governesses. They take Jane in. They save her life. After a while, she discovers they're cousins of hers. She discovers they share a recently deceased uncle, a merchant in Madeira, who had been trying to locate her so he could make her his

heir. He even once wrote to her aunt, asking for information about how to contact her, but Mrs Reed told him Jane died during Lowood's typhoid epidemic.

So Jane now has the family she's always wanted, and a fortune of twenty thousand pounds, which was a lot of money in those days. What does she do with it? She gives five thousand to each cousin and keeps five thousand for herself, as that's more than she can ever imagine needing. St John can rethink his plans to become a missionary in India, if he wishes. Diana and Mary no longer need to earn their living as governesses. Each has a competency. Each is independent. None is rich. All are comfortable. They are now bourgeois and free from the stain of the decaying upper class, whether at Gateshead or Thornfield. Jane is happier and more in control of her destiny than she has ever been before. There's no need for her to beg God for a new servitude, as she did at the end of her years at Lowood.

Jane no longer needs to think about finding a new master. She can be her own master. She can reframe her life apart from the Hegelian dialectic, if she wants to, but she doesn't want to. Why? Because, as far as Brontë is concerned, that would undermine *Jane Eyre* as *bildungsroman* and the symmetry of Jane's story would be incomplete. It was once fashionable among secular critics to stress the novel's fairy tale aspects and notice—as if it was a violation of some realist, naturalist, or modernist sensibility—how Brontë invokes providence as an informing principle; however, Brontë knows maturity doesn't come with providential fairy tales; if it did, each generation of literary author would not be defining and measuring it differently. As a practicing and committed Anglican, Brontë understands the price of maturity; while she knows that nature needs to be perfected by grace, she understands the theological distinction between cheap grace and costly grace. Jane's maturity would be meaningless if it came with her inheritance, which is why Brontë extends the Hegelian dialectic to St John as a contemporary version of a medieval priest, who is antithetical to Rochester as a contemporary version of a medieval knight.

The 21st century reader needs to ask an obvious question here. Once Brontë's Platonic logic is understood, Rochester's character is easy to grasp, since it falls within the conventions of a romantic hero, and there's an obvious logic about his spirited mind being compromised by his appetitive mind. However, as religion is now widely regarded as non-rational if not irrational, why does Brontë make St John a symbol of extreme rationality? As he represents religion in the novel, isn't this contradictory? No, it isn't, if we remember the temperamental distinction Austen and Brontë make for the secular state-estate sphere and the religious church-parish sphere; for both authors, the former exists under the sign of feeling and the latter exists under the sign of reason. The idea that religion is non-rational if not irrational is relatively new.

The relationship St John develops with Jane at Moor House is antithetical to the relationship she develops with Rochester at Thornfield Hall. In both relationships, the question-and-answer police report dialogue, which Eliot objects to, emphasises Brontë's development of the Hegelian dialectic. St John is a noble character, like Rochester, but he's also the wrong kind of master for Jane. He needs a wife to serve him and to serve the Lord with him. The more he learns about Jane, the more suitable she seems as his servant and the Lord's servant. Jane has no qualms about this form of religious servitude; however, she's only willing to go to India as St John's missionary sister not as his missionary wife. Why? Because she needs romantic love; the kind of love she felt with Rochester; the kind of love St John is incapable of.

Before Jane says no to St John's last proposal, she visits Thornfield to see how Rochester is faring. On arriving at Thornfield, she discovers the Hall destroyed by fire; she learns that Bertha has died and Rochester was blinded and maimed trying to save her. There's a scriptural allusion here; the requirements of Matthew 5:27-31 have been fulfilled; the impediments of adultery and divorce have been removed. Most importantly, Rochester's fatal flaw as a romantic hero has been cured,

according to the only cure Brontë believed possible, extreme as it seems to us.

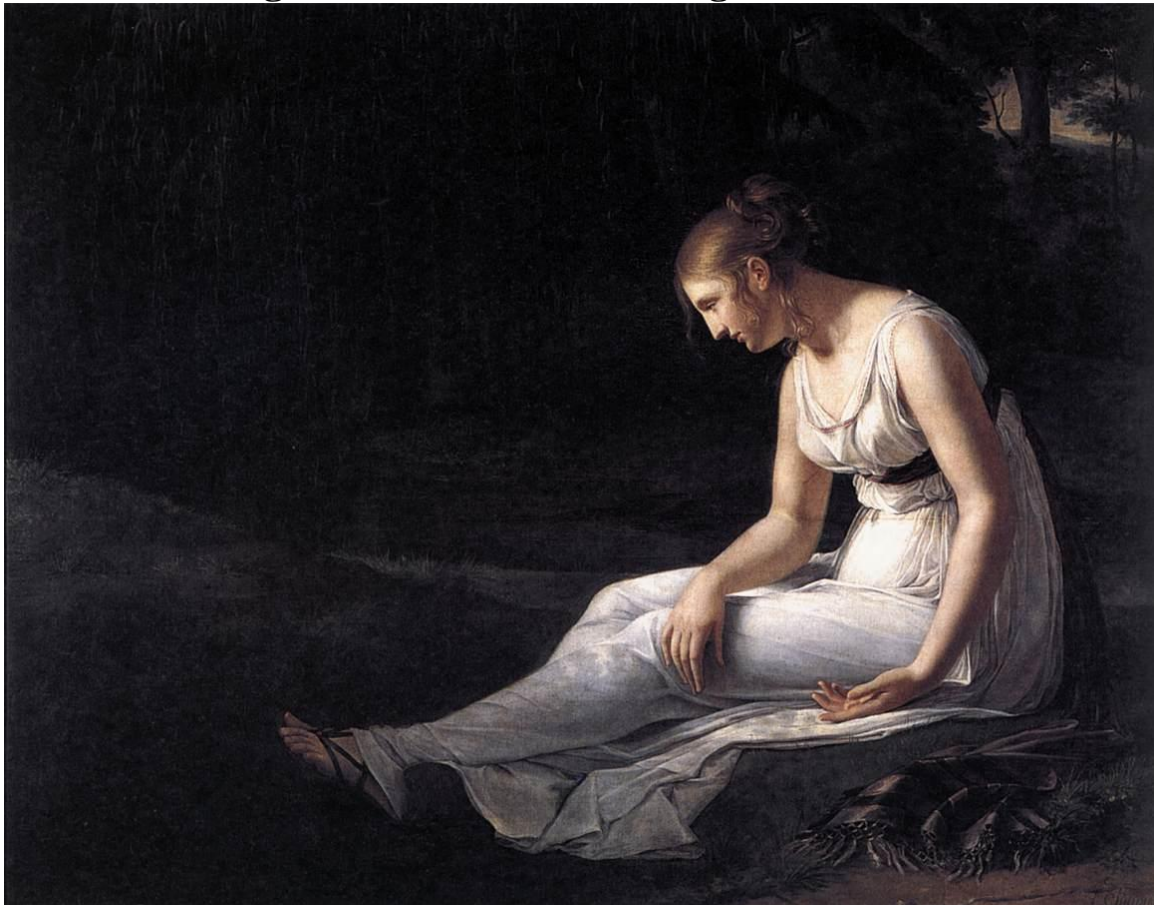
Rochester is living not far away, in another property of his, Ferndean Manor, a humble and more natural environment than Thornfield. Brontë reconciles the Hegelian dialectic here, at Ferndean, where Jane can finally be the “servant” of her ideal “master”, on an equal footing, now that his physical disadvantage gives her a metaphysical advantage. In one sense they can now journey together as equals; in another sense she can now lead him into the way of truth instead of being dragged by him into a degenerate realm of romantic excess. Of course, such a contrived ending would not ring true if the novel sought to imitate life, but in a religious allegory, where *bildungsroman* represents the *zeitgeist*, the ending is consistent with the moral. In highlighting this moral, Brontë wants us to remember that Jane is no less a Christian for refusing to take up the same cross St John did in India. Her world is full of other crosses that will do instead.

Jane will always regard St John as an ideal, even if that ideal isn't the focus of her chosen vocation, and she'll shed sincere tears on hearing of his death in the mission field. Given Brontë's religious sympathies, it's fitting her novel should end with the mantra “Come, Lord” (Maranatha). Here the religious reader will recognise that *Jane Eyre* can also be read as an exploration of Christian orthodoxy. If St John favours the atonement over the incarnation, Jane's incarnational vocation is just as authentic, and just as centred upon Christ, as the vocation of any other committed Christian.

# Frost in her Heart: Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* & Melancholia

by A/Prof Anne Collett, English Literatures Program, University of Wollongong

Talk given at the ABA meeting on 1 June 2013



[Fig.1 *Melancholy* by Constance Marie Charpentier, 1801]

Having refused to participate in the kind of literary tourism that venerates the person and place of the author at the expense of a reading of the author's work that positions Imagination as paramount, I recently capitulated with a visit to the Brontë parsonage at Haworth. The visit changed my mind about the value of literary tourism as it alerted me to two aspects of the Brontës' lives that had significant impact on their literary works but to which I had not attached sufficient importance: the first is related to the dwelling itself and the degree to which it attests to

middle-class nature of the Brontës' world (about which I will not speak today), and the second is related to the grounds of that dwelling, grounds dominated by a graveyard – I wondered what it would be like to wake up every morning and go to bed every evening in such close proximity to the dead.



**[Fig.2 Haworth Parsonage in Autumn]**

I wondered about the impact of living *in* a graveyard, and having also recently been struck by the at times almost suffocating darkness at the heart of *Villette* (published in 1853), I began to think about the impact of death, isolation and depression in Charlotte's life. What relationship might be drawn between her state of mind when writing *Villette*, the life experience she draw upon, and possibly the lessons learnt, that inform the novel. I do not want to suggest that Lucy Snowe, the protagonist of *Villette*, stands in for Charlotte, but I do what to think about relationship between author and character, in particular the melancholy that besets, and to an extent, disables, both. Using Charlotte's letters, and with

knowledge of the history of social and medical understanding of melancholia, we can perhaps better appreciate what Charlotte suffered, how she felt and thought about that suffering, and how this in turn impacted upon her characterisation of Lucy and the authorial narration of *Villette*. So to set the scene, and mood, I will begin by reading a lengthy passage from the novel:

Those who live in retirement, whose lives have fallen amid the seclusion of schools or of other walled-in and guarded dwellings, are liable to be suddenly and for a long while dropped out of the memory of their friends, the denizens of a freer world.

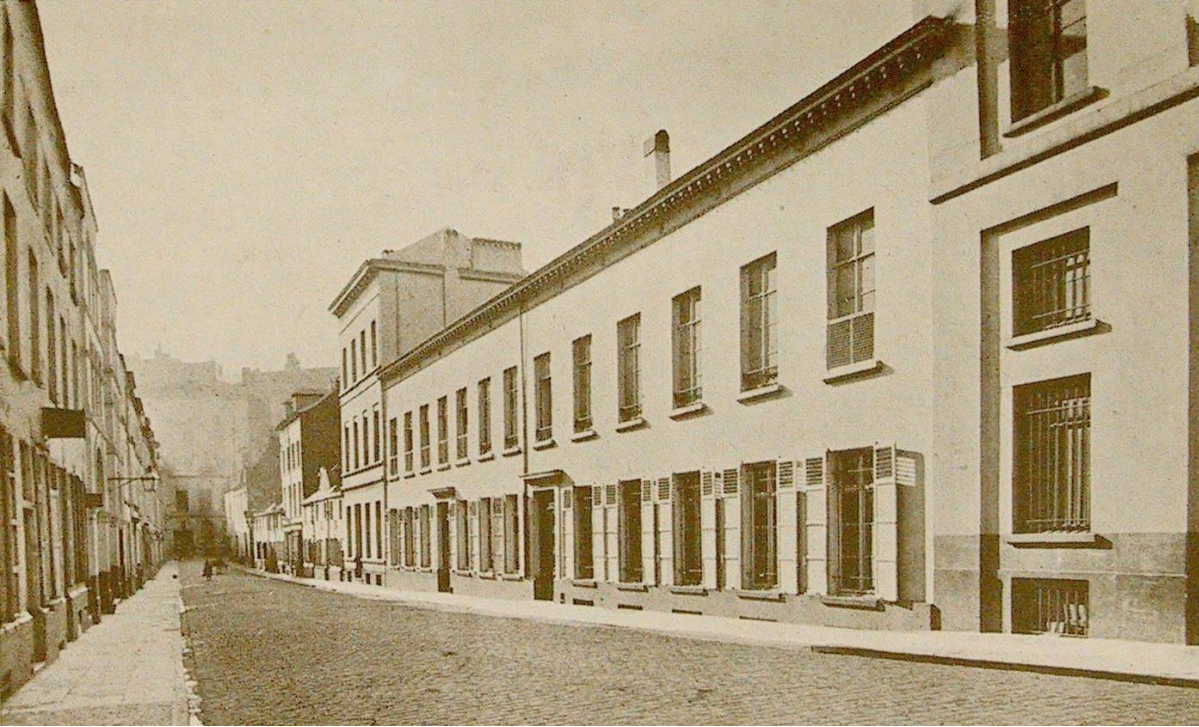
Unaccountably, perhaps, and close upon some space of unusually frequent intercourse – some congeries of rather exciting little circumstances, whose natural sequel would rather seem to be the quickening than the suspension of communication – there falls a stilly pause, a wordless silence, a long blank of oblivion. Unbroken always is this blank; alike entire and unexplained. The letter, the message once frequent, are cut off; the visit, formerly periodical, ceases to occur; the book, paper, or other token that indicated remembrance, comes no more.

Always there are excellent reasons for these lapses, if the hermit but knew them. Though he is stagnant in his cell, his connections without are whirling in the very vortex of life. That void interval which passes for him so slowly that the very clocks seem at a stand, and the wingless hours plod by in the likeness of tired tramps prone to rest at milestones – that same interval, perhaps, teems with events, and pants with hurry for his friends.

The hermit – if he be a sensible hermit – will swallow his own thoughts, and lock up his own emotions during these weeks of inward winter. He will know that Destiny designed him to imitate, on occasion, the dormouse, and he will be comfortable: make a tidy ball of himself, creep into a hole of life's wall, and submit decently to the drift which blows in and soon blocks him up, preserving him in ice for the season.

Let him say, "It is quite right: it ought to be so, since so it is." And, perhaps, one day his snow-sepulchre will open, spring's softness will return, the sun and south-wind will reach him; the budding of hedges, and carolling of birds and singing of liberated streams will call him to kindly resurrection. *Perhaps* this may be the case, perhaps not: the frost may get into his heart and never thaw more; when spring comes, a crow or a pie may pick out of the wall only his dormouse-bones. (Brontë, *Villette*, 348)

"The frost may get into his heart and never thaw more" ... These dark words, 'spoken' by Lucy Snowe, are taken from the opening of Chapter 24 of the novel. At this point in the novel, Lucy's isolation as an English teacher in a school for girls in the French-speaking town of Villette has been alleviated by a reunion with her godmother's family. Subsequent to a night out at a theatre with her godmother's son, Graham Bretton (or Dr. John as he is known at the school), Lucy has waited seven weeks to receive a letter, or indeed any form of communication, from this man with whom she has formed an emotional attachment. "Following the eventful evening at the theatre," she writes, "came for me seven weeks as bare as seven sheets of blank paper: no word was written on one of them; not a visit, not a token." (349) Lucy details the different expedients she employs to "fill existence": "I commenced an elaborate piece of lace-work, I studied German pretty hard, I undertook a course of regular reading of the driest and thickest books in the library" (349), but for all her efforts, "the result was as if I had gnawed a file to satisfy hunger, or drank brine to quench thirst." (350). She speaks of seven weeks of "bitter fears and pains, strange inward trials, miserable defections of hope, intolerable encroachments of despair" ... whose breath "went right through me. I used to feel it, like a baleful air or sigh, penetrate deep, and make motion pause at my heart, or proceed only under unspeakable oppression" (350). The hoped for letter from Graham, which Lucy describes as "all of sweetness in life I had to look for", does not come.



**[Fig.3 *Pensionnat Héger, Rue d'Isabelle*]**

We know that both *Villette* and *The Professor* draw in large part upon the time Charlotte spent in Brussels, initially with Emily, and then for a year by herself. The sisters travelled to Brussels with their father by packet and stage coach in February 1842. They enrolled in the boarding school run by Monsieur Héger and his wife, with the aim of improving their language skills and later, to glean how they might set up a school themselves in England. Charlotte taught English and Emily, music, their teaching being payment in kind for board and tuition. In October of that year their Aunt Elizabeth died, forcing their return to Haworth. Charlotte returned alone to Brussels in January 1843 to take up a teaching post at the *Pensionnat*; but it was during this year that Charlotte became homesick and lonely. Elizabeth Gaskell writes of Charlotte's "depression of spirits" during the second half of her stay in Brussels: "Mere bodily pain, however acute, she could always put aside; but too often ill-health assailed her in a part far more to be dreaded. Her depression of spirits, when she was not well, was pitiful in its extremity. She was aware that it was constitutional, and could reason about it; but no reasoning prevented her suffering mental agony, while the bodily

cause remained in force.” (Life of Charlotte Brontë, 186) During this year Charlotte writes to Emily of feeling in “low spirits”, and that she was “not ill in body. It is only the mind which is a trifle shaken – for want of comfort.” (Dec.19,1843. Letter 129, Clement). It was also during this year that Charlotte developed an emotional attachment to Constantin Héger. The depth of that attachment was not known for some time (being concealed by Elizabeth Gaskell), but the letters Charlotte wrote to Héger after leaving Brussels in 1844 were given to the British Museum in 1913, and printed in *The Times* in July of that year. In the first letter Charlotte writes,

I may, then, write to you, without breaking my promise. The summer and winter have seemed very long to me; in truth, it has cost me painful efforts to endure up to now the privation I have imposed upon myself. You, for your part, cannot understand this! But, Monsieur, try to imagine, for one moment, that one of your children is a hundred and sixty leagues away from you; and that you are condemned to remain for six months, without writing to him; without receiving any news from him; without hearing anything about him; without knowing how he is; well, then you may be able to understand, perhaps, how hard is such an obligation imposed upon me.

After waiting some time for a reply, Charlotte in some anguish, wrote a second letter in which she tried to remedy what she conjectured might have caused offence in the first communication: “Ah, Monsieur! I know I once wrote you a letter that was not a reasonable one, because my heart was choked with grief; but I will not do it again! I will try not to be selfish; although I cannot but feel your letters the greatest happiness I know. I will wait patiently to receive one, until it pleases you, and it is convenient to write one. At the same time, I may write you a little letter from time to time; you authorized me to do that.”

Again she received no reply, but upon meeting “a gentleman amongst my friends” who “was passing through Bruxelles” she asks that he deliver her letter into Monsieur Héger’s hands – “so that I shall be quite

certain that you receive it.” (October 24, 1844) After another two months of silence she writes a final letter,

I submit to all the reproaches you may make against me; if my master withdraws his friendship from me entirely, I shall remain without hope; if he keeps a little for me (never mind though it be very little) I shall have some motive for living, for working. Monsieur, the poor do not need much to keep them alive; they ask only for the crumbs that fall from the rich man’s table, but if these crumbs are refused them, then they die of hunger! For me too, I make no claim either to great affection from those I love; I should hardly know how to understand an exclusive and perfect friendship, I have so little experience of it! But once upon a time, at Bruxelles, when I was your pupil, you did show me a little interest: and just this small amount of interest you gave me then, I hold to and I care for and prize, as I hold to and care for life itself . . .

It would seem that, on reflection some years later, Charlotte felt embarrassment that she had responded to Héger’s refusal, indeed, denial of relationship, in so “unshielded” a manner; thus Lucy refrains from calling attention to her feelings. A younger Charlotte however brings what will be her final letter to Héger to a close with these words:

I know, by some secret instinct, that certain absolutely reasonable and cool-headed people reading it [this letter] through will say: “She appears to have gone mad.” By way of revenge on such judges, all I would wish them is that they too might endure, for one day only, the sufferings I have borne for eight months - then, one would see, if they too did not “appear to have gone mad.” One endures in silence whilst one has the strength to do it. But when this strength fails one, one speaks without weighing one’s words. I wish Monsieur all happiness and prosperity. (January 8, 1845)

It would appear that Charlotte received no communication from Héger. For Lucy however, a letter does arrive after seven weeks [not eight

months mind you] of “inward winter”. But it is a missive from her godmother, not Graham. Nevertheless, Lucy observes that “a letter like that sets one to rights! I might still be sad after reading that letter, but I was more composed; not exactly cheered, perhaps, but relieved. My friends, at least, were well and happy: no accident had occurred to Graham; no illness had seized his mother – calamities that had so long been my dream and thought” (356). This relief however is coupled with another, just as strongly felt: “how very wise it is in people placed in an exceptional position to hold their tongues and not rashly declare how such position galls them!” (356).

Lucy has no family or friends to whom she can speak of her loneliness and tendency to melancholia, but Charlotte could speak openly of her distress to her trusted friend, Ellen Nussey, of a failing in health and spirits. In 1838 she writes, “A calm and even mind like yours, Ellen, cannot conceive the feelings of the shattered wretch who is now writing to you, when, after weeks of mental and bodily anguish not to be described, something like tranquillity and ease began to dawn again.” (June 7, 1838. Letter 46, Shorter); and of a “heaviness of spirit” which has made her “faculties dull, made rest weariness, and occupation burdensome.” She speaks of “the silence of the house” and “the solitude of [her] room” pressing on her “like a weight” that she finds difficult to bear” and notes that she has “ere this been warned of approaching disturbance in the atmosphere by a sense of bodily weakness, and deep, heavy, mental sadness, such as some would call *presentiment*.” (Feb 16, 1850. Letter 418, Shorter) In December of 1850 Charlotte writes (again to Ellen) about “a prolonged bout of depression” that “has for nearly three months been sinking me to the earth.”: “I shall never forget last Autumn. Some days and nights have been cruel.” (Letter 483, Shorter)

Lucy’s palpable sense of relief that she refrained from voicing her disappointment or frustration in regard to the non-receipt of the hoped-for letter, is followed by a perceptive and sad observation on the degree to which depression, or indeed, any mental or spiritual deprivation and subsequent instability or ‘ailing’, is uncomprehended, and for which no compassion or aid is available. Charlotte, through her ‘cipher’, Lucy, writes:

The world can understand well enough the process of perishing for want of food: perhaps few persons can enter into or follow out that of going mad from solitary confinement. They see the long-buried prisoner disinterred, a maniac or an idiot! – how his senses left him – how his nerves, first inflamed, underwent nameless agony, and then sunk to palsy – is a subject too intricate for examination, too abstract for popular comprehension. Speak of it! You might almost as well stand up in an European market-place, and propound dark sayings in that language and mood wherein Nebuchadnezzar, the imperial hypochondria, communed with his baffled Chaldeans. And long, long may the minds to whom such themes are no mystery – by whom their bearings are sympathetically seized – be few in number, and rare of encounter. Long may it be generally thought that physical privations alone merit compassion, and that the rest is a figment. (356)



**[Fig.4 *Nebuchadnezzar* by William Blake, 1795]**

This is not the first instance of depression that Lucy has suffered. In fact, the first prolonged episode, a shocking encounter for not only Lucy, but the reader, occurs during the long summer vacation which Lucy spends virtually alone at the deserted school. The palpable anguish of this episode stayed with me long after my first encounter with *Villette*; and it was clear to me on subsequent reading, that Lucy suffers in fact the classic symptoms of depression, called as such by Charlotte in her description of Lucy's agonized state, but elsewhere termed melancholy, and the effect of which is named "hypochondria" by Dr. John (see p.256-7)

This state is described by Charlotte (albeit through Lucy's voice) in Chapter 15, The Long Vacation:

"How vast and void seemed the desolate premises! How gloomy the forsaken garden – gray now with the dust of a town-summer departed. Looking forward at the commencement of those eight weeks, I hardly knew how I was to live to the end. My spirits had long been gradually sinking; now that the prop of employment was withdrawn, they went down fast. Even to look forward was not to hope: the dumb future spoke no comfort, offered no promise, gave no inducement to bear present evil in reliance on future good. A sorrowful indifference to existence often pressed on me – a despairing resignation to reach betimes the end of all things earthly." (228) Lucy is suicidal – "crushed" by what she describes as a deadly paralysis (229), a mental pain that was "wasting and wearing" (229) and persistent insomnia that lasts for nine days: "At last a day and night of peculiarly agonizing depression were succeeded by physical illness, I took perforce to my bed. About this time the Indian summer closed and the equinoctial storms began; and for nine dark and wet days, of which the Hours rushed on all turbulent, deaf, dishevelled – bewildered with sound hurricane – I lay in a strange fever of the nerves and blood. Sleep went quite away. I used to rise in the night, look round for her, beseech her earnestly to return. A rattle of the window, a cry of the blast only replied – Sleep never came!" (231)

If we turn to Charlotte for similar symptoms of debilitating depression, we have only to read her letters of 1851 and '52 .

Throughout 1851 she is often disturbed by what can only be understood as depression – speaking of “an inexpressibly flat state” and of parts of many a night spent “in extreme sadness” (June 11, 1851, qtd Todd, 211) In September Charlotte mentions “a night of peculiar vigil and fear” and in November she writes to Mrs Gaskell of attacks of depression that occur throughout the Autumnal or Vernal equinox – “a period of the year which, I have noticed, strangely tries. Sometimes the strain falls on the mental, sometimes on the physical part of me; I am ill with neuralgic headache, or I am ground to the dust with deep dejection of spirits.” (Nov 6, 1851. Letter 540, Shorter) By December of 1851 Charlotte is writing to Ellen that she has been confined to bed, being terribly weak, having no appetite for 3 weeks, and sleep badly. She explains that she is “well aware ... that extreme and continuous depression of spirits has had much to do with the origin of the illness” (qtd Todd, 212). Throughout the winter of 1851 and spring of 1852 and again in the autumn of that year Charlotte suffers bouts of debilitating depression. To her friend Laetitia Wheelwright she writes of: “long, stormy days and nights ... when I felt such a craving for support and companionship as I cannot express. Sleepless, I lay awake night after night, weak and unable to occupy myself, I sat in my chair day after day, the saddest memories my only company.” (April 12, 1852, qtd Gaskell, II, x, 382).



**[Fig.5 melancholy angel]**

At this point I would take you back to Lucy who has suffered nine nights of sleeplessness; finally falling asleep only to be visited by a most appalling nightmare. The following morning, believing no doctor can offer her cure, she leaves the house in the twilight of an evening she feels is sympathetic to her suffering. Heading out of town, Lucy is arrested by the sound of bells and is called within, only to discover it is a Catholic church and confession is being taken. When asked by the priest why, being a Protestant, she has come, Lucy replies: “I was perishing for a word of advice or an accent of comfort. I had been living for some weeks quite alone; I had been ill; I had a pressure of affliction on my mind of which it would hardly any longer endure the weight.” (233) Ultimately the priest does not know how to respond to Lucy’s case, in part because she is a Protestant, and she leaves the church, having at least the benefit of talking to someone: “the mere relief of communication in an ear which was human and sentient, yet consecrated – the mere pouring out of some portion of long accumulating, long pent-up pain in to a vessel whence it could not be again diffused – had done me good. I was ... solaced.” (234)

But it is now dark, Lucy gets lost in a part of town with which she is unfamiliar, and due to the extremity of her suffering that is both psychological and physical (she is not only suffering the effects of sleep deprivation but has eaten practically nothing for days), she collapses into unconsciousness. All Lucy can recall is that “Instead of sinking on the steps as I intended, I seemed to pitch headlong down an abyss,” (236), and on awakening, somewhat serendipitously in the home of her godmother, she speaks of her soul re-enter[ing] the prison of this earthly world with pain and reluctance” (237). Lucy has been administered to with tenderness by her godmother and Graham. But the point I want to make in recounting this pivotal episode, is not only to alert you to the symptoms of depression shared by Lucy and Charlotte, but also to the poverty of understanding (not only amongst the general population but also amongst medical practitioners) and the unavailability of cure, medical or religious.

During the brief days of Lucy’s recovery under the care of those who come closest to ‘family’, Graham, alias, Dr. John, is shocked to discover

that the house keeper is as yet unaware of her absence, so deep was Lucy's isolation. 'With what care you must have been waited on!', he remarks with some sarcasm, and inquires why the school proprietor, Madam Beck, had left her alone. The conversation leads to Dr. John realising the extent to which Lucy's illness is 'nervous'. When Dr. John asks if Lucy's "nervous system bore a good share of the suffering?", she remarks that she is not sure what her nervous system is, but that she was "dreadfully low-spirited," to which Dr. John responds that this "disabled me from helping you by pill or potion. Medicine can give nobody good spirits. My art halts at the threshold of Hypochondria: she just looks in and sees a chamber of torture, but can neither say nor do much. Cheerful society would be of use; you should be as little alone as possible; you should take plenty of exercise." (257) Given Lucy's state of 'hypochondria' would appear to be the result of long-term isolation from human company, at least human intelligence and spirit to which she feels a correspondence, the prescribed remedy might indeed have some effect, but this is very much dependent upon the state of depression – its depth and the extent of its injury to the body and mind. It is interesting to note the use of the word "hypochondria" which the notes to my edition claim meant "morbid depression" in the period of Charlotte's usage, but that has come to be associated with imaginary ills, or a predisposition to exaggerate claims to suffering – a purely psychological state - so little is the human "nervous system" understood. Medical practitioners Todd and Dewhurst contend that although Charlotte "had more than her fair share of ill-health, disappointment, and bereavement ... the stresses to which she was subjected served only to catalyse attacks of despondency to which she was inherently prone and which at times occurred in the absence of an obvious precipitating factor." (215) This diagnosis is supported by a letter Charlotte writes to Ellen in 1836 in which she speaks of having "some qualities which make me very miserable, some feelings that you [Ellen] can have no participation in, that few people in the world can at all understand. I don't pride myself on these peculiarities, I strive to control and suppress them as much as I can, but they burst out sometimes, and then those that see the explosion despise me, and I hate myself for days afterwards." (qtd Todd, 209)



Depression is referred to at times in Charlotte's work and letters, and during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as melancholy or melancholia. So at this point I would like to give you a history of thinking about and artistic response to the illness.



**[Fig.7 Melancholy by Domenico Feti, 1620]**

Hippocrates is considered the first physician to describe melancholia or depression, clinically. The word Melancholia comes from the Greek *melancholia*, meaning “sadness” or literally “black bile”. Melancholia is derived from the ancient belief in the four humors - disease or ailment being caused by an imbalance in one or other of the four basic bodily liquids, known as humors – black bile (Gk. *melan chole*), yellow bile (Gk. *chole*), phlegm (Gk. *phlegma*), and blood (Gk. *Haima*). A



In his work, *On the Temperaments*, Galen identified four temperaments in which one of the qualities, warm, cold, moist or dry, predominated and four more in which a combination of two, warm and moist, warm and dry, cold and dry or cold and moist, dominated. These last four, named for the humors with which they were associated became better known than the others. While the term *temperament* came to refer just to psychological dispositions, Galen used it to refer to bodily dispositions, which determined a person's susceptibility to particular diseases as well as behavioural and emotional inclinations.

The four temperaments (Clockwise from top right: choleric; melancholic; sanguine; phlegmatic).

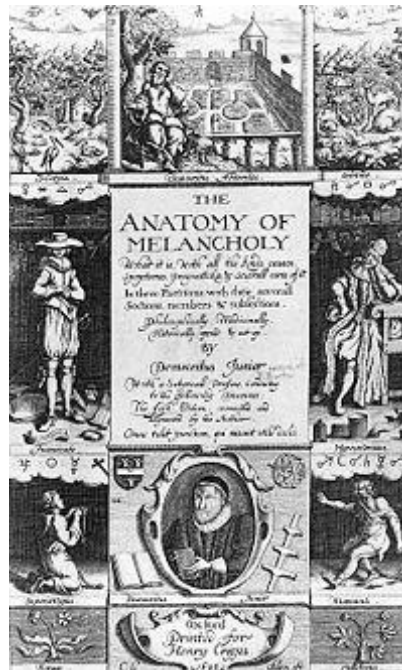


**[Fig.9 Temperaments]**

The four humours, their corresponding elements, seasons, sites of formation, and resulting temperaments are:

Humor	Season	Element	Organ	Qualities	Name	Characteristics
Blood	Spring	Air	Liver	Warm & Moist	Sanguine	Courageous, Hopeful, Amorous
Yellow Bile	Summer	Fire	Spleen	Warm & Dry	Choleric	Easily angered, Bad tempered
<b>Black Bile</b>	<b>Autumn</b>	<b>Earth</b>	<b>Gall, Bladder</b>	<b>Cold &amp; Dry</b>	<b>Melancholic</b>	<b>Despondent, Sleepless, Irritable</b>
Phlegm	Winter	Water	Brain, Lungs	Cold & Moist	Phlegmatic	Calm, Unemotional

Melancholia, the disposition with which black bile is associated, was described as a distinct disease with particular mental and physical symptoms in the 5th and 4th centuries BC. In his work, *Aphorisms*, Hippocrates characterized all “fears and despondencies, if they last a long time” as symptomatic of melancholia. The most extended treatment of melancholia was published by Robert Burton in 1621. Titled *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, this work treats the subject from a medical and a literary perspective.



[Fig.10 The Anatomy of Melancholy by Robert Burton, Frontispiece, 1638 edition]

Burton writes:

*Melancholy*, the subject of our present discourse, is either in disposition or in habit. In disposition, is that transitory *Melancholy* which goes and comes upon every small occasion of sorrow, need, sickness, trouble, fear, grief, passion, or perturbation of the mind, any manner of care, discontent, or thought, which causes anguish, dulness, heaviness and vexation of spirit, any ways opposite to pleasure, mirth, joy, delight, causing forwardness in us, or a dislike. In which equivocal and improper sense, we call him melancholy, that is dull, sad, sour, lumpish, ill-disposed, solitary, any way moved, or displeased. And from these melancholy dispositions no man living is free, no Stoick, none so wise, none so happy, none so patient, so generous, so godly, so divine, that can vindicate himself; so well-composed, but more or less, some time or other, he feels the smart of it. Melancholy in this sense is the character of Mortality... This *Melancholy* of which we are to treat, is a habit, a serious ailment, a settled humour, as Aurelianus and others call it, not errant, but fixed: and as it was long increasing, so, now being (pleasant or painful) grown to a habit, it will hardly be removed.

### **Postscript**

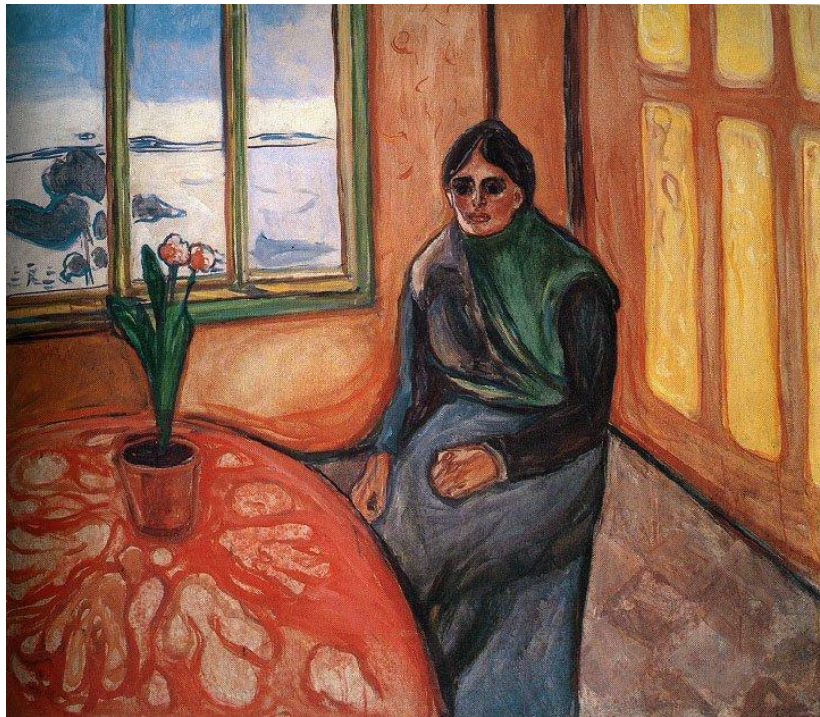
At this point in my talk I took the audience through a range of portraits of melancholy from the 16<sup>th</sup> through to the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. [see Figs.11-13] But to conclude here, it would appear from Burton's description that Charlotte suffered from the "settled humour" of Melancholy – "as it were long increasing, so, now being (pleasant or painful) grown to a habit", and Autumn is its season. So as not to end on too dark a note, I will bring this essay to a close with an untitled poem by Charlotte that evokes melancholy in its less turbulent, less painful form, than that which plagued her protagonist Lucy, and Charlotte herself throughout much of her life.

*The Autumn day its course has run. The Autumn evening falls  
Already risen the Autumn moon gleams quiet on these walls  
And Twilight to my lonely house a silent guest is come  
In mask of gloom through every room she passes dusk and dumb*

*Her veil is spread, her shadow shed o'er stair and chamber void  
And now I feel her presence steal even to my lone fireside  
Sit silent Nun – sit there and be  
Comrade and Confidant to me.*



**[Fig.11 A Melancholy Young Man, by Isaac Oliver, 1595]  
[Fig.12 Mirth & Melancholy, by George Romney, 1788]**



**[Fig.13 Melancholy, Edvard Munch, 1890s]**

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# Was Heathcliff Black?

by Robert Dingley

Talk given at the ABA meeting on 3 August 2013

I don't expect anyone to believe me, but I really had thought up the title for this paper before I first heard of Andrea Arnold's 2011 film version of *Wuthering Heights*, in which my question was answered emphatically in the affirmative and the mature Heathcliff was played by James Howson, a black actor. Moreover, by momentarily exposing the scars of a previous flogging when the child first appears at the Earnshaw farm, the film very strongly suggests a connection between Heathcliff's colour and the African slave-trade. Several critics not only praised this decision

as a radically interesting one, but hailed it as a choice fully justified by the evidence of Emily Brontë's text. The reviewer in the *Canberra Times*, indeed, rather airily observed that the film merely confirmed what she had known all along and what should always have been obvious to any alert reader. Arnold herself, it later emerged, had not been quite so sure: she had first approached the Romany community in search of her Heathcliff and had only then auditioned actors of mixed descent among Yorkshire's Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Middle Eastern communities before finally settling on Howson. Her choice, it seems safe to assume, was dictated less by her close reading of the novel than by her star's perceived acting ability and camera-worthiness. Nevertheless, the film and its reception appeared to suggest that the possibility of Heathcliff's blackness was an idea whose time had come and that my chosen title at least had the virtue of topicality.

Actually, however, my question 'Was Heathcliff Black?' was intended to be both mildly provocative and more than a touch facetious, combining as it does John Sutherland's *Is Heathcliff a Murderer?* with Shirley Fishkin's study of Mark Twain, *Was Huck Black?* And inasmuch as I intended the query to be taken seriously at all, my short answer to it is NO – not necessarily in thunder, but still with a fair measure of confidence. For had Emily Brontë really intended to do anything so unexpected –almost, indeed, so unprecedented – as to introduce a black protagonist, she would surely, I submit, have signalled that intention very clearly to her unsuspecting readers. As it is, however, Heathcliff's admittedly dark skin-tone is almost invariably coupled in the novel with speculation about his gypsy origin, and although characters certainly canvass more exotic possibilities, blackness is not one of them. Nothing, that is, that anybody in the novel says or hints lends any support to the hypothesis of Heathcliff's negritude.

None of which, of course, has deterred critics from pointing out that in 1771, when Mr Earnshaw is supposed to have acquired custody of Heathcliff in Liverpool, that city was one of the busiest slaving entrepôts in the world, the port from which ships embarked for the Guinea Coast,

where they loaded their holds with human cargo, and then continued across the Atlantic to the burgeoning markets of the New World, before returning to Britain laden with rum and molasses – and with any slaves who had failed to attract purchasers. But Liverpool at this time, and at the time of the novel’s publication, was not notorious only for its connection with slavery. It must also, for example, have been either a temporary or a permanent home to a sizeable population of those skilled native sailors who crewed ships trading between Britain and the Indian Ocean – sailors known since the seventeenth century as Lascars – and that is another possible explanation for Heathcliff’s swarthy appearance, postulated not only by Mr Linton but by the novelist’s sister in her Preface to the book’s second edition. And then again, as Winifred Gérin modestly pointed out in her biography and as Terry Eagleton has more recently announced with far greater fanfare, Liverpool was also, throughout the early nineteenth century, the principal port of embarkation for Ireland and the first stopover for evicted and dispossessed Irish tenants on their way to a new start in North America or Australia. Admittedly, no-one in the novel actually suggests that Heathcliff might himself be Irish, but given the Brontë family’s Hibernian roots it seems a plausible enough conjecture, and if the book’s own characters can’t make up their minds, there seems no good reason why subsequent readers shouldn’t produce equally evidence-free contributions of their own.

That Heathcliff should have been discovered in Liverpool therefore provides less of a clue to his origin than might at first appear. Moreover, I am not the first reader to have wondered whether Mr Earnshaw ever in fact went to Liverpool in the first place. After all, it’s hard to imagine what possible business a ‘little farmer’, as Nelly calls him, could have in an international trading port and Mr Earnshaw pointedly offers no explanation for his trip. Furthermore, he walks there and back in three days – a distance, as he takes care to stress, of sixty miles each way (a ‘long spell’ indeed) – and when he gets home he again emphasises the extent of his exertions – ‘he would not have such another walk for the three kingdoms’. Nelly, too, insists on the duration of the journey – ‘It

seemed a long while to us – the three days of his absence’ – and one can be forgiven for wondering whether all this harping on time and distance is intended to raise questions in the reader’s mind. A hundred and twenty miles in three days, sixty of them burdened with a fractious foundling and allowing time, presumably, for rest and refreshment, the transaction of whatever mysterious business Mr Earnshaw is on, and the making of enquiries about Heathcliff? Well, they were great walkers in the nineteenth century, but it still seems to me a pretty tall order. Not impossible, of course – Emily Brontë sees to it that none of our speculations is impossible – but still carefully poised on the cusp of likelihood. And if Mr Earnshaw hasn’t been in Liverpool (or even, for that matter, if he has) mightn’t his general caginess suggest that he’s hiding something? Perhaps this unexplained addition to the family circle is fully entitled to membership; perhaps he is Mr Earnshaw’s illegitimate son by some unknown woman – gypsy, Lascar, whatever – who never gains entry to the Heights or the novel. Heathcliff, after all, is christened after an earlier son who had died in childhood and Mr Earnshaw persists in treating him with more affection than he extends to his official heir – as a Joseph to Hindley’s Esau.

We are, I think, tempted to come up with proposals of this kind not only because there’s a fictional precedent for them (readers of *Tristram Shandy* who pay careful attention to dates will notice that Tristram must have been conceived when Mr Shandy was, but Mrs Shandy and Parson Yorick were not, away from home), but also because, as I have already noted, speculating about where Heathcliff comes from, what and who he is, is among the favourite leisure activities of the characters themselves. Nelly, like many subsequent readers, wearies herself with ‘imaging some fit parentage for him’. Lockwood is immediately struck by the paradox that Heathcliff is ‘a dark-skinned gypsy in aspect, in dress and manners a gentleman’ and so feels moved to investigate; Mrs Earnshaw seems content to settle for ‘gypsy brat’ as does Mrs Linton, but her more expansive husband goes off into a miniature riff about his late neighbour’s ‘strange acquisition ... in his journey to Liverpool’ (and does the laboured irony imply that he has his suspicions?), hazarding

that the boy may be ‘a little Lascar, or an American or Spanish castaway’. Almost the only character, in fact, who doesn’t seem bothered by Heathcliff’s origin is Heathcliff himself, and that, indeed, is one of the characteristics that makes him remarkable in the fiction of his age. After all, as Hillis Miller remarks in another context: ‘Most of the great works of nineteenth century literature have at their centres a character who is in doubt about his own identity and asks, “How can I find something outside myself which will tell me who I am, and give me a place in society and the universe?”’, so Heathcliff’s utter indifference to such questions both defines his uniqueness and acts as a provocation to observers both inside and outside the narrative to ask them for him. His very refusal to be interested in where he comes from (as far as he’s concerned, after all, his identity is sufficiently defined by his relationship with Cathy) marks a troubling liberation from antecedents that might limit his range of possibility, and Nelly’s suggestion that he could take advantage of that freedom to invent his own ancestry seems perfectly feasible:

You’re fit for a prince in disguise. Who knows, but your father was Emperor of China, and your mother an Indian queen, each of them able to buy up, with one week’s income, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange together? And you were kidnapped by wicked sailors, and brought to England. Were I in your place, I would frame high notions of my birth.

But this potential for open-ended self-fashioning is so abnormal that it can also prompt debate about the extent to which Heathcliff is human at all. ‘Is Mr Heathcliff a man?’ wonders Isabella: ‘If so, is he mad? And if not, is he a devil?’. ‘Is he a ghoul,’ muses Lockwood, ‘or a vampire?’. Nelly doesn’t feel that she’s ‘in the company of a member of my own species’, and Heathcliff is reported to ‘gnash and foam like a mad dog, to howl like a savage beast getting goaded with knives and spears’ and to be an ‘evil beast’ with the ‘sharp, cannibal teeth’ of a ‘wolfish man’, thus adding lycanthropy to a list of possibilities ranging all the way from subhuman to superhuman.

Now all of this carefully deposited equivocation about Heathcliff's status is, of course, familiar territory to readers of Brontë criticism. The uncertainties preoccupy us because crucial information is being deliberately withheld, information which we have been conditioned to expect by our experience of other novels by other Victorian novelists, in whose work our origins – social, economic, ethnic – make us ineluctably what we are. Nor is it sufficient to explain that withholding of knowledge by reference to the antirealistic conventions of the Gothic novel; too much of *Wuthering Heights* is too firmly rooted in the recognisable world of chapels and farms and small manor houses, of marriages, wills and class relationships for us not to feel acutely the absent presence of missing pieces in the jigsaw. As George Saintsbury grumbled in 1899:

Despite the intense reality of much of the scenery and of such characters as Joseph and the elder Catherine, the thing is on the whole rather too unearthly; the never-explained origin of Heathcliff and some other points leave it too close upon the confines of the fairy tale.

For Saintsbury, a proudly unregenerate Victorian, the book's weird fusion of 'intense reality' with unearthliness locates it in disturbingly unfamiliar territory, but for later readers Modernist and postmodern experiment has enabled a very different response, in which just such generic miscegenation as Saintsbury deplored can be embraced for its subversive possibilities. For us, Emily Brontë has become a prophetess of the *mise en abyme*, a celebrant of exhilarating indeterminacy.

I have no wish to challenge any of that. *Wuthering Heights* is indeed, I believe, a dazzlingly original, even an experimental, novel in its use of multiple narrators (all of them unreliable), in the calculated ambiguity of its ending, in its defiant refusal to reveal so much of the data that we would need in order to resolve the problems with which it insistently confronts us. But to leave it there, to hail the book merely as a triumph of narrative innovation, seems to me an insufficient response. The

question we need to ask – the question, at all events, that I want to address – is what all that innovation is *for*, why there are so many unreliable storytellers, so many suspended questions, so much ambiguity.

I want to begin my answer to this question by reminding you of Heathcliff's first arrival at Wuthering Heights as Nelly Dean recounts it for the ailing but curious Lockwood:

We crowded round, and, over Miss Cathy's head, I had a peep at a dirty, ragged, black-haired child, big enough both to walk and talk – indeed, its face looked older than Catherine's – yet, when it was set on its feet, it only stared round, and repeated over and over again some gibberish that nobody could understand.

Heathcliff's introduction to the family circle in the farmhouse, I want to suggest, resembles very closely the beginnings of two other life-stories, both of which became famous throughout Europe in the half century before the novel's publication and both of which open, like Heathcliff's, not with a birth but the abrupt and inexplicable appearance of a nameless and alien stranger, an intruder into the settled order of the present who brings with him no past.

Before daybreak on January 9 1800 a child was found digging with his hands for vegetables in the garden of a tanner in the village of Saint-Simon in southern France. In the words of the cultural historian Roger Shattuck, who has written the best modern account of the incident:

No one expected him. No one recognised him. He was human in bodily form and walked erect. Everything else about him suggested an animal. He was naked except for the tatters of a shirt and showed no modesty, no awareness of himself as a human person related in any way to the people who had captured him. He could not speak and made only weird, meaningless cries. Though very short, he appeared to be a boy of about eleven or twelve, with a round face under dark matted hair.

As the detail of the tattered shirt suggests, this was not the child's first contact with the human community; he had been sighted occasionally in the area since 1797, had been captured once or twice, and had always escaped – back, it was assumed, to the surrounding woodlands in, and on, which he must have been subsisting. There were no clues to his origin, though the presence of scars on his body and throat was suggestive, but, in fact, little effort seems to have been made to trace his history. Indeed, such enquiries might even have been felt to be counterproductive by the people who assumed charge of his welfare, for they recognised that chance had presented them with a remarkable opportunity, with the possibility of discovering what a human being would be like if it had been allowed to develop in complete isolation, divorced from the nurture and stimulus of other members of its species. What characteristics were innate, and which could be induced only by a process of education? Would such a child possess inherent moral virtues – the capacity for gratitude, affection, self-sacrifice – or would it behave with the fierce self-interest attributed to other large animals? Might it be possible, indeed, by studying the boy's behaviour, to determine the limits of his capacity, to find out what it means to be human?

This fascinating speculation was almost short-circuited at the outset. The child was, after a brief delay, taken to Paris and installed at the National Institute for Deaf-Mutes, where Philippe Pinel, one of France's leading physicians, examined him and decided that he was so mentally damaged as to be beyond help, a vegetable rather than a 'child of nature', from whom no general conclusions could be drawn. Fortunately for the boy, however, he was placed in the protective custody of a younger doctor with a name to establish, Jean Itard, who refused to credit his patient's irredeemability. Over the next six or seven years, Itard sought, through a long process of trial and error, to socialise the boy, whom he called Victor – just Victor, as in just Heathcliff – but his success was at best a partial one. Victor appeared to possess (like Heathcliff) a heightened responsiveness to the natural world, but he never mastered more than a handful of words, and every minute step towards domestication was

generally followed by a reversion. He was either unable or refused, for example, to recognise the idea of property, seizing or stealing anything which took his fancy – and here we might recall the young Heathcliff's dogged insistence on appropriating Hindley's horse when his own has been lamed. Moreover, Victor appeared to remain very largely unresponsive to the feelings of other people and especially to the genuine kindness and affection of his carers, which, Dr Itard sadly reported, could not 'rouse in his heart the smallest flicker of gratitude'. 'The feeling of pity' Itard concluded in 1806 'is yet to be born in his heart' and this apparent absence of affect is another characteristic he shares with Heathcliff, whose indifference to the partiality of Mr Earnshaw is reported by Nelly:

I wondered often what my master saw to admire so much in the sullen boy who never, in my recollection, repaid his indulgence by any sign of gratitude. He was not insolent to his benefactor; he was merely insensible.

And just as Mr Earnshaw grows resigned to Heathcliff's insensibility, so, by slow degrees and over the course of several years, Dr Itard grew resigned to Victor's. Progress had been made, but never enough to satisfy the hopes of that first encounter, and the questions which the child's mysterious arrival had seemed providentially designed to resolve remained unanswered. Victor of Aveyron died in 1828, still an inmate of the National Institute for Deaf-Mutes, still incapable of speech, still unable to vindicate Itard's Enlightenment confidence in the potentialities of natural man.

It would be possible to say a great deal more about Victor, and I'll certainly be trying to say some of it, but his is not the only life-story I want to recount, the only reported case of a human being who abruptly arrives, like Heathcliff, in the centre of a civilised community to disturb its rhythms and its certainties. On 26 May, 1828, a public holiday, a strange young man suddenly appeared, as if from nowhere, in the streets of Nuremburg. He seemed to be about sixteen years old, he was dressed

in an outlandish peasant costume which didn't fit him, and he appeared unused to walking – so much so that passers-by thought he was drunk. Unlike Victor, he came equipped with documentation in the form of a semi-literate anonymous letter requesting that he be enlisted in the local cavalry regiment. Also unlike Victor, he appeared able to speak, though it was soon discovered that his repertoire was restricted to a handful of stock phrases, which he had clearly learned by rote, and to a minute vocabulary of which the word 'Ross' 'horse' was the most frequently repeated item. He was even, it turned out, able and willing to write his, or a, name, Kaspar Hauser, though he was apparently unable to write anything else.

Once again, caring mentors were quickly found, principally a young teacher and amateur psychologist named Georg Friedrich Daumer and a distinguished ex-judge and legal theorist called Anselm von Feuerbach. Under their ministrations, the boy flourished and, unlike Victor, he very quickly acquired sufficient powers of self-expression to narrate what little he knew of his own history. He had no information to offer about his origins and his only memory was of being kept in a locked and darkened room, hearing nothing, meeting no-one, unaware not merely of passing time but of the succession of day and night. At regular intervals a man came to leave him food and water, but he never spoke, never brought a light to Kaspar's cell, and kept his back turned at all times. It was only a few weeks before Kaspar's abandonment in Nuremburg that the man finally revealed himself, when he began to teach the child to copy letters, to pronounce words, and to walk upright – sometimes encouraging him, sometimes playing with him, sometimes beating him savagely, before finally forcing him to stagger for hours or days (Kaspar was unable to gauge duration) and leaving him to fend for himself in the city streets.

For a year or so, Kaspar flourished, acquiring social and verbal skills and moving his minders, as Victor had done thirty years before, by his heightened sensitivity to the daytime world of natural sights and sounds, that universe of sensory experience which he had hitherto been denied.

And then, without warning, he was the victim of a mysterious assault: as he confusedly described it, a man dressed in black had caught him alone and delivered a vicious blow to his head. Although he recovered physically, the attack rendered Kaspar fearful and anxious and he began to regress, becoming dull and suspicious, unwilling or unable to learn, deceitful and (like Victor before him) liable to make off with other people's possessions. Once again, reading contemporary accounts of Kaspar's traumatised withdrawal, one is reminded of Nelly's account of Heathcliff after the death of Mr Earnshaw and the vengeful return of Hindley:

... he had lost the benefit of his early education ... and there was no prevailing on him to take a step in the way of moving upward when he found he must, necessarily, sink beneath his former level. The personal appearance sympathised with mental deterioration; he acquired a slouching gait, and ignoble look; his naturally reserved disposition was exaggerated into an almost idiotic excess of unsociable moroseness.

Heathcliff's regression (or perhaps reversion) is occasioned by his exposure to brutality and neglect; those factors also exacerbated Kaspar's decline when in 1831 he was transferred from Nuremburg to Ansbach and from the sympathetic guardianship of Daumer and Feuerbach to the tender mercies of a spiteful and vindictive schoolmaster called Meyer, whose petty tyrannies made him nostalgic, he claimed, even for his darkened cell. But his sufferings ended as abruptly and mysteriously as they had begun. In 1833, when he was still living in Ansbach under the loose and intermittent patronage of Lord Stanhope, an eccentric English traveller, Kaspar, walking alone in a public park, was again attacked by the man in black and this time the attack was fatal. Bleeding from a deep stab-wound he managed to make his way home and died four days later, murmuring 'I am tired, very tired, and I have a long way yet to go.' His killer was never identified.

Now I am not, I should emphasise, claiming that the narratives of Victor and Kaspar which I have just outlined are direct sources for the narrative

of Heathcliff, though I'd also be very far from wishing to dismiss that possibility: both stories, after all, were widely known in English versions and Itard's account of Victor, for example, prompted Coleridge to speculate that his case would make an ideal poetic subject for Wordsworth. What, though, I do want to propose is that these factual histories of rootless children are more simply than isolated curiosities, and that the kinds of issue they raise can provide a revealing analogy to a significant part at least of Emily Brontë's project in *Wuthering Heights*. For Victor of Aveyron and Kaspar Hauser are, of course, examples – indeed, they are probably the best-known examples – of what we nowadays generally designate with the phrase 'feral children' or, more popularly, in distant recollection perhaps of Romulus and Remus, 'wolf boys'. In both cases, a human being has apparently spent its formative years outside the nurturing and educative influence of the human community, and accident has created the ideal conditions for what Roger Shattuck called, in a resonant phrase, the 'forbidden experiment', the possibility, by isolating a single specimen child, of determining what, if anything, distinguishes our own species from other forms of animal life.

In reality, however, and despite the evident similarities in their two cases, the specific questions which contemporaries asked about Victor and Kaspar were markedly different, if not in kind then certainly in emphasis. As I noted earlier, no-one seems to have thought very hard about where, exactly, Victor of Aveyron came from, about who his parents were and what had happened to him before his capture. Instead, observers were almost exclusively preoccupied with him as an ontological puzzle. What was his exact place in the Linnaean hierarchy of species? Did his living example confirm or contradict Rousseau's contention that human beings in nature lived in a state of paradisaic innocence which was vitiated only by the formation of complex social systems? Could Itard's extended training programme be used to vindicate Condillac's hypothesis that human development is achieved through exposure to increasingly complex sensory stimuli?

The hapless Victor, therefore, became an unwitting focus for some of the central philosophical debates of the Enlightenment. But while such considerations certainly contributed to the discussion of Kaspar Hauser (Feuerbach, for example, described him as ‘the living refutation of the doctrine of original sin’), the mysterious manner of his incarceration in the darkened cell, and the still more mysterious manner of his death, prompted other, more immediate – and one might say, more Gothic – questions. Who exactly was he? Why had he been secretly imprisoned and then suddenly released? Feuerbach’s account of the boy hinted strongly that he had discovered an explanation, that Kaspar was the legitimate heir of the royal house of Baden, spirited away by rival claimants to the throne and replaced with a stillborn infant, brought up in isolation and ignorance by a peasant and set free only when there was no longer any possibility of establishing his rightful claim. Once this rumour had entered the public domain, it very largely swamped further discussion for the remainder of the century, spawning a whole series of claims and counter-claims by a richly varied assortment of conspiracy-theorists and sceptics, and including the assertion that Kaspar was a cunning imposter who had fabricated his story (as Nelly advises Heathcliff to do) from motives of self-aggrandisement or in order to secure a comfortable future from gullible do-gooders.

The rather different kinds of question that variously attached to Victor and to Kaspar, as you’ll have recognised, roughly correspond to the types of question which the characters (and, for that matter, the critics) of *Wuthering Heights* ask about Heathcliff. On the one hand they are prompted to wonder whether or not he is a full member of their own species (‘Is Mr Heathcliff a man?’) and, on the other, they speculate about his ancestry. Either way, however, the questions they ask seem designed to establish, indeed are already premised upon, Heathcliff’s insuperable difference, his otherness, and to that extent they are less genuine questions than attempts to evade any troubling likeness between him and them – or ourselves. If, that is, Heathcliff can be taken to represent ‘natural’ humanity, whether as an extension of the animal kingdom or because he belongs to some ‘primitive’ race, then he can

also represent the degree zero against which we may smugly gauge the extent of our own civilised superiority to nature in the raw. But Emily Brontë refuses to permit us that satisfaction. Beneath the veneer of custom, civility, religion and law, human behaviour in *Wuthering Heights* very largely corresponds in its predatory self-interest to the nightmare vision of Nature which Brontë adumbrated in her French essay 'Le Papillon', written for M. Heger during her time in Belgium:

All creation is equally insane. There are those flies playing above the stream, swallows and fish diminishing their number each minute; these will become in their turn, the prey of some tyrant of air or water; and man, for his amusement or his needs, will kill their murderers. Nature is an inexplicable puzzle, life exists on a principle of destruction, every creature must be the relentless instrument of death to the others, or himself cease to live.

Human culture, we may wish to assume, raises us above such savage impulses to mutual destruction, but Emily Brontë relentlessly confronts us with a great deal of evidence to suggest that culture acts merely as a form of camouflage rather than establishing a clear boundary between ourselves and the rest of Nature. One example can suffice – Nelly's account of Heathcliff's first days at the farm:

He seemed a sullen, patient child, hardened perhaps, to ill-treatment: he would stand Hindley's blows without winking or shedding a tear, and my pinches moved him only to draw in breath, and open his eyes as if he had hurt himself by accident and nobody was to blame.

We later learn, of course, that there are credible reasons for this aggression – Hindley resents his father's preference for the newcomer and Nelly both aligns herself with his interests and fears for her position in the household – but at this stage in the book the assaults appear gratuitous and motivated only by a spite which the matter-of-fact tone allows to seem self-explanatory, indeed, in the fullest sense, *natural*, like

the victimisation of smaller by larger animals, or of the weak individual by the pack.

But there's another point about this passage that is worth noticing – Nelly's casual speculation that the reason for Heathcliff's almost autistic failure to respond to her and Hindley's violence is that he is 'hardened, perhaps, to ill-treatment'. What is remarkable about Nelly's suspicion that, even before Heathcliff has been picked up by Mr Earnshaw, he has been inured to the brutality of others, is that it is not a consideration that the carers for Victor and Kaspar permitted to affect their speculations. Itard, Feuerbach, and the rest were so determined to view their charges as *tabulae rasae* or empty vessels to be filled, that their discussions of these damaged children tend to overlook what today seems the most obvious fact about them – that they had been the traumatised victims of horrifying abuse. The scars which Victor bore on his body and his throat, Kaspar's tale of sensory deprivation in a darkened cell, implied, or should have implied, that, far from being clean slates, they were already indelibly inscribed with their own particular histories of suffering and so could not safely be used as the basis for *a priori* generalisation about the nature of being human. One might, indeed, go further, and suggest that the formulae devised by scientists and philosophers to 'explain' Victor and Kaspar, like the formulae used by Emily Brontë's characters to 'explain' Heathcliff, implicitly deflect attention from their uniqueness as subjects. By refusing to recognise their status as victims of abuse and neglect, the representatives of civilisation are not only failing to acknowledge the violence to which these children have been subjected, but actively participating in it. From this perspective, the crucial questions to ask about Heathcliff are not therefore 'Is he black?' or 'Is he a lost prince?' or 'What can he tell us about human nature?' but why, when this specific child first arrives at Wuthering Heights, is he already 'dirty' and 'ragged', able only to repeat 'over and over again some gibberish that nobody could understand', and why has 'civilised' society permitted the conditions in which such radical neglect could occur?

But the suggestion that Heathcliff is a victim of child-abuse can itself all-too readily become just another possibility to add to the growing tally of generalising ‘explanations’, and it cannot anyway, in a quite literal sense, be the end of the story. For if Heathcliff is the book’s principal case study of the ‘forbidden experiment’ which sets out to investigate what happens when children are deprived of socialising nurture, he is not the only one. Like the classic victim of abuse (and in conformity, for that matter, with the pattern of nature outlined in ‘Le Papillon’), he becomes in turn an abuser when he decides to conduct a demonic form of behavioural research on the dispossessed Hareton – ‘I have a fancy to try my hand at rearing a young one’ as he tells Nelly. Hareton, accordingly, deprived of any education and encouraged to run wild and to follow his immediate impulses, is successfully reduced to inarticulate and violent savagery. Or almost. The arrival of the second Cathy introduces a Miranda to this carefully uncultivated Caliban and, through a process of education which is progressively informed by mutual love, the experiment in conditioning is reversed. Hareton acquires a language beyond cursing and that is the beginning of a process which will eventually, one can confidently assume, convert him into the very model of an English country gentleman.

What happens in the second generation therefore appears to reverse what happened in the first, and indeed to imply a quite different conception of human possibility, a different outcome for the forbidden experiment in which nature, instead of erupting inevitably in self-perpetuating violence, can be successfully curbed and reconciled with culture. But we should, I think, neither see this as a contradiction nor seek a consistent resolution for the questions it raises. Rather, we might view it as offering yet another perspective, a further hypothesis in an unresolved and complex exploration of what makes us ourselves. The great French philosopher-historian Michel Foucault dramatically asserted that ‘Before the end of the eighteenth century man did not exist’. By that he meant that the definition of the category ‘human’ could no longer, after the Enlightenment, be taken for granted, that it became, for a wide range of reasons, a topic for contention and speculation rather than for automatic

assumption. It is this new field of debate that, although Foucault doesn't mention them, generates the early nineteenth century's fascination with feral children, and it also, I'd want to suggest, lies at the core of Emily Brontë's experiment in *Wuthering Heights*. Unlike the scientific observers who generalised from Victor and Kaspar, however, the novel never loses sight of the singularity of human lives, the liability of any generalisation based on an individual case to be undone by a further example, a different angle of vision. As Iris Murdoch, another woman novelist preoccupied with existential problems, put it in *Under the Net*: 'All theorising is flight. We must be ruled by the situation itself and this is unutterably particular'. The book's continuing vitality, I'd argue, lies precisely in the dialectic it sets up between its rigorous respect for those particularities and its insistent exploration, both for its characters and for its readers, of central human questions – questions to which Emily Brontë wisely refrains from providing any clear or simple answers.

#### **NOTE**

This essay represents an interim report on work-in-progress and is printed here very much in the form in which it was delivered in Sydney in August 2013. I have accordingly not included footnote references, but I thought it might be helpful to list some suggestions for further reading on the subject of feral children. The best studies on Victor of Aveyron are Roger Shattuck's *The Forbidden Experiment* (1980) and Harlan Lane's *The Wild Boy of Aveyron* (1977); an English translation of Itard's reports, together with an essay by Lucien Malson, was published in 1972. There is a very extensive literature on Kaspar Hauser, but the fullest modern account is Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson's *The Wild Child: The Unsolved Mystery of Kaspar Hauser* (1996); Masson usefully includes translations of some first-hand accounts. An absorbing and readable general survey, which has excellent chapters on both Victor and Kaspar, is Michael Newton's *Savage Girls and Wild Boys: A History of Feral Children* (2002), which also contains a very full bibliography. Joanna Bourke's *What It Means to Be Human: Reflections From 1791 to the Present* (2011) is an excellent historical introduction to the problem set out in its title and its brief chapter on *Wuthering Heights*, though I disagree with many of its conclusions, contains a helpful survey of recent historicist readings.

# Saving St John

by ROWAN McAULEY

Talk given at the ABA meeting on 5 October 2013

St John – and for the purposes of this paper, at least, I will say Saint John, not Sinjin – is the character most likely to be edited out of any TV or movie adaptation of *Jane Eyre*. If included, he is the most likely to have his role abridged, redacted, or so distorted that he is no longer recognisable, if even a character at all and not just a piece of human scenery.

From memory, in the latest film version, he was nothing more than a featureless vicar who, by happy coincidence, helped Jane find the inheritance waiting for her – although, to be fair, by the time St John appeared on the scene, I was no longer paying much attention, having already completely lost my temper with Rochester, who must be the most misplayed character in film adaptation history. Why film makers insist on making him young, handsome and humourless instead of letting him be just as Brontë wrote him: grouchy, hilarious and delicious – in other words: *Alan Rickman* – is completely beyond me.

Anyway, St John's truncation, or total amputation from the story is why, in my opinion, so many adaptations necessarily fail. Because when you omit St John, when you rush past him to get back to Rochester, you are not just losing a face from the background, you are radically restructuring Brontë's whole enterprise. Losing St John guts a perfectly composed myth and leaves it an empty romantic shell. It robs Jane of her hero's journey, and leaves her just another single girl on the make. And, strangely enough, losing St John also diminishes Rochester.

But let me take a step back. Why do I call *Jane Eyre* a myth?

Firstly, in many ways, it conforms to Joseph Campbell's pattern of the monomyth.<sup>1</sup> This could be a paper in itself, but suffice to say, we see Jane answer the call to adventure, cross thresholds, endure first

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 1949.

challenges and then temptations, before she experiences a revelation that plunges her into an abyss wherein she undergoes a symbolic death and rebirth. This rebirth is a phase of blessing and endowment, where she receives not just financial independence, but almost impossibly, a blood family and home, too. And then the supernatural incursion which prompts her return, bringing restoration, resolution, and her hard-won happy ending.

Secondly, Brontë indicates through almost fairy-tale naming that she intends her characters to be read as, let's say, slightly adjacent to reality. She creates a kind of 'youngest son Jack' effect by setting up multiple Johns for Jane (itself the feminine form of John) to bounce off: the diabolical cousin John Reed, who tortures her in childhood; the absent and exotic benefactor, uncle John Eyre; and of course, the man in question here, St John Rivers.

And you can hear even in that small sample, a suggestion that Brontë has another game playing – a kind of Bunyan-esque revelation of character through names. Jane is an Eyre – not only the one destined to inherit, but also an ethereal being, and Rochester is right to call her pixie and fairy. She is a creature of the in-between places, and we see her most fully expressing herself when she is hidden behind the curtains reading alone, wandering the gardens at dusk, lingering on the stairs, or sitting upon a stile in the moonlight, suspended halfway between heaven and earth, and somehow separate from either.

She begins her story mired amongst the Reeds, until like Moses she is plucked out, though in this case only to be sent to school where she can be harassed by Brocklehursts.

Her capacity for friendship and loyalty is explored once in the fatally feverish Helen Burns, and then later in the placid and benevolent Miss Temple.

Leaving school, she goes to Thornfield – the heavy, stone great house of Rochester, whose name means 'rock castle,' but whose foundations are being chipped away by Masons.

Fleeing Thornfield, Jane is taken in by the Rivers sisters: two deities of female virtue, Diana and Mary, whose brother is none other than the apostle John – the one whose vision of heaven and hell in

Revelations marks him as no longer entirely of this world. And Jane, too, can be considered a River – at least, she is of the same blood. And where is the place where four rivers meet? None other than the garden of Eden.

We also have the four elements in contest: Jane air, St John water, Rochester earth, and poor Bertha the pyromaniac, fire. The final moments of Rochester and Bertha's marriage see him crippled by fire, and she dashed to bits on the stone pavement.

Now, for some of you, this might be nothing more than a bit of da Vinci Code-style tedium, but if you agree that *Jane Eyre* is consciously constructed as myth, then as a reader you are given permission to see that nothing is accidental, nothing is arbitrary, and nothing is unnecessary. Every single element of this story has been carefully weighed, shaped and placed to make up an indivisible whole. Specifically, on close reading, you will notice that Brontë has created counterpoints to every event, character, and idea so that the story becomes a kind of system of echoes and reflections.

St John, then, is the equal but opposite weight to Rochester – equal in significance, authority, intensity, and claim over Jane, although polar opposites in physicality, character, and sphere of action. In the same way, Blanche Ingram, as Rochester's other romantic candidate is matched by Rosamund Oliver as St John's – again, equal in some respects: beauty, status, family connection; though opposite in their natures, and suitability, so that Blanche is as exactly wrong for Rochester as Rosamund is exactly right for St John. And again, we see that the three Rivers cousins, St John, Diana and Mary, are the equal but opposite constellation to the three Reed cousins, John, Eliza and Georgiana. One family obliged to take Jane in, but without any warmth or genuine care, the other freely offering their hospitality and compassion before any family connection is even guessed at. And of course, drunken, gambling, suicide-to-be John Reed is so opposed to the focused, unbending, martyr-to-be St John Rivers as to be practically of different species.

Jane herself is the only character without an immediate opposite, because the adventure of the story is how she reacts and what she

understands about herself as each variation unfolds. The key word for Jane is “integrity”: the quest to be whole no matter what her circumstances, to be utterly and without compromise herself, and, ultimately, to be where that self is entirely known by another.

So it is important to accept that Rochester in the first half of the book is as wrong and dangerous for Jane as St John is in the second. A more attractive danger, perhaps, but no less severe for that. He appeals to her passion and her capacity for pleasure; St John appeals to her righteousness, faith, and capacity for sacrifice. Neither of them realise that they are missing half of her – that she is equally body and soul, passion and purity, and that to demand only the part they want of her is to damage what she *is*.

Let me give you my proofs. When Rochester and Jane are happily engaged to be married, he sings to her what he thinks is a supremely romantic, idealistic song, ending:

My love has sworn, with sealing kiss,  
With me to live – to die<sup>2</sup>

Heroically unimpressed, Jane rejects the sentiment out of hand, asking, ‘What did he mean by such a pagan idea? *I* had no intention of dying with him – he might depend on that,’ and adding that though she was content enough to die, she would ‘not be hurried away in a suttee.’<sup>3</sup>

This reference to the Hindu practice of a widow throwing herself onto her husband’s funeral pyre so that she might die with him is easily passed over as just another piece of Jane’s sharp sarcasm, except that a year later, St John claims Jane as his wife, determined that the two of them should go together as missionaries to India. Jane is afraid to go – not because of unwillingness for the work, or reluctance even to leave England, but because she is sure that to go would be to die. In her own words:

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<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 1847, chapter 24.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

If I join St John, I abandon half myself: if I go to India, I go to premature death. And how will the interval between leaving England for India, and India for the grave, be filled? Oh, I know well! That, too, is very clear to my vision. By straining to satisfy St John till my sinews ache, I *shall* satisfy him – to the finest central point and farthest outward circle of his expectations. If I *do* go with him – if I *do* make the sacrifice he urges, I will make it absolutely: I will throw all on the altar – heart, vitals, the entire victim.<sup>4</sup>

Later she says, ‘to do as you wish me would, I begin to think, be almost equivalent to committing suicide.’<sup>5</sup>

There is something so ghastly about St John’s insistence on marrying Jane nevertheless, so bloodless and somehow reptilian – and don’t you shudder when Jane imagines how she might ‘endure all the forms of love (which I doubt not he would scrupulously observe)’<sup>6</sup> – that he becomes a monster. When Jane, in refusing his third so-called proposal, insists ‘I am convinced that [...] I should not live long in that climate,’ St John is contemptuous: “ ‘Ah! you are afraid of yourself,’ he said, curling his lip.”<sup>7</sup>

To St John, the spiritual requirements and rewards he offers are so substantial (if I can use that word), that the death of Jane’s body is a triviality to him. Yet, in exploring this offer, Brontë is also proving the converse: that Rochester’s proposal was monstrous as well. Rochester offers bodily opportunity and bodily rewards, but ignores that the cost would be Jane’s spiritual death. St John has mortified Jane with that cruel diagnosis ‘you are formed for labour, not for love,’<sup>8</sup> but it is hardly worse than Rochester’s refusal to take any notice at all of Jane’s protests as he fantasises about dressing her up in jewels and roses and lace. She says, ‘And then you won’t know me, sir; and I shall not be your Jane Eyre any longer, but an ape in a harlequin’s jacket, — a jay in borrowed

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<sup>4</sup> Op cit, chapter 34.

<sup>5</sup> Op cit, chapter 35.

<sup>6</sup> Op cit, chapter 34.

<sup>7</sup> Op cit, chapter 35.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

plumes.’<sup>9</sup> Neither man can properly see who it is they have before them. Both see only what they want her to be for them.

Yet both men have sufficient presence and charisma to command Jane’s respect, and both are able to tempt her. I’ll assume that you are familiar enough with Rochester’s form of seduction, but let’s look at St John’s. His third proposal to Jane is prefaced by a thundering reading from the Book of Revelation, where he makes it pretty clear to Jane that he is thinking of her when he intones that ‘the fearful, the unbelieving, etc., shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.’<sup>10</sup> He then prays with a zeal, earnestness and solemnity that is the closest Jane sees him get to passion. And being so passionate herself, it is not surprising that it touches her. She says,

All men of talent, whether they be men of feeling or not; whether they be zealots, or aspirants, or despots – provided only they be sincere – have their sublime moments: when they subdue and rule. I felt veneration for St John – veneration so strong that its impetus thrust me at once to the point I had so long shunned. I was tempted to cease struggling with him – to rush down the torrent of his will into the gulf of his existence, and there lose my own.<sup>11</sup>

Brontë’s use of sublime here is telling. A key concept for the Romantics, the sublime was understood differently by different philosophers, but I will take Edmund Burke as my authority. He writes,

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Op cit, chapter 24.

<sup>10</sup> Op cit, chapter 35.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Edmund Burke, ‘Of the Sublime,’ *On the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 1756. Emphasis in the original.

It is not an unhappy marriage Jane fears. She is not rankling at the thought of being chosen for her ability to endure and suffer, rather than because St John really loves her. She is trembling with vertigo because she is on the brink of total annihilation. What St John offers Jane in marriage, she understands, is the opportunity to extinguish herself in him. It is not India, but St John that will be the death of her. To marry him would be to throw herself 'into the gulf of his existence' – into the vacuum of space.

Jane says of this crisis,

I was almost as hard beset by him now as I had been once before, in a different way, by another. I was a fool both times. To have yielded then would have been an error of principle; to have yielded now would have been an error of judgment.<sup>13</sup>

And there is Jane: a creature of both principle and judgment. To have shown only the romance with Rochester would have given us a thin and pious Jane – a Jane perhaps nearly as bloodlessly correct as St John.

Remember the fascination with which Jane watches St John cauterise his own heart? How he gives himself exactly fifteen minutes to look at a portrait of Rosamund, to fantasise about what it would be like to be married to her, before he shuts off all that softness forever with one sudden wrench of his will. He says, with a kind of inspired misogyny,

'that little space was given to delirium and delusion. I rested my temples on the breast of temptation, and put my neck voluntarily under her yoke of flowers; I tasted her cup. The pillow was burning: there is an asp in the garland: the wine has a bitter taste: her promises are hollow – her offers false: I see and know all this.'

I gazed at him in wonder.

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<sup>13</sup> Brontë, op cit, chapter 35.

‘It is strange,’ he pursued, ‘that while I love Rosamund Oliver so wildly – with all the intensity, indeed, of a first passion, the object of which is exquisitely beautiful, graceful, and fascinating – I experience at the same time a calm, unwarped consciousness, that she would not make me a good wife; that she is not the partner suited to me; that I should discover this within a year after marriage; and that to twelve months’ rapture would succeed a life-time of regret. This I know.’<sup>14</sup>

‘Unwarped’ is a matter of opinion, but this is so very close to Jane’s own decision to leave Rochester.

Telling Jane of his life as a quasi-bachelor, taking numerous mistresses around Europe, Rochester says,

‘It was a grovelling fashion of existence: I should never like to return to it. Hiring a mistress is the next worse thing to buying a slave: both are often by nature, and always by position, inferior: and to live familiarly with inferiors is degrading.’<sup>15</sup>

Jane hears in this

the certain inference, that I were so far to forget myself and all the teaching that had ever been instilled into me, as – under any pretext – with any justification – through any temptation – to become the successor of these poor girls, he would one day regard me with the same feeling that now desecrated their memory.<sup>16</sup>

This basic distrust of the erotic – this firm conviction that the delights of the flesh are unsustainable and destined to curdle into contempt – puts Jane on a very similar footing to St John. She is, perhaps, just as Rochester accuses her: so inflexible in her morality that she is willing to inflict harm on others. He asks her in his misery, ‘Is it better to drive a

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, chapter 32.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, chapter 27.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

fellow-creature to despair than to transgress a mere human law – no man being injured by the breach?’<sup>17</sup>

There is also that quite grisly inner dialogue Jane has with her conscience when she decides she must leave Rochester, but knows she cannot bear to do it:

‘Let me be torn away, then!’ I cried. ‘Let another help me!’

‘No; you shall tear yourself away, none shall help you: you shall, yourself, pluck out your right eye: yourself cut off your right hand: your heart shall be the victim: and you, the priest to transfix it.’<sup>18</sup>

Like St John, in the very moment of her passion and desire, she wills herself to a self-denial that diminishes and injures her.

But is Jane just a female St John? She might be – or might arguably be – if there were no St John for her to react against. In the presence of St John, though, we also get to hear her lash out, ‘I scorn your idea of love. [...] I scorn the counterfeit sentiment you offer: yes, St John, and I scorn you when you offer it.’<sup>19</sup> And we hear also her understanding that,

‘if forced to be his wife, I can imagine the possibility of conceiving an inevitable, strange, torturing kind of love for him [...]. In that case, my lot would become unspeakably wretched. He would not want me to love him; and if I showed feeling, he would make me sensible that it was a superfluity unrequired by him, unbecoming in me. I know he would.’<sup>20</sup>

Erotic passion, then, is not sufficient for Jane, but it is necessary. Knowing what capacity she has for love, desire, intimacy, and warmth, she will not submit herself to anyone who would deny it.

So St John works within the myth as counterweight to Rochester, and as a foil against which we can see more of Jane than was revealed

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, chapter 34.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, chapter 35.

through her romance with Rochester alone. He also works as catalyst for her reunion with Rochester. Unwittingly, it is the extremity of feeling he pushes her to – that sublime vertigo – that ushers in the supernatural intervention.

At the peak of his apocalyptic marriage pitch, Jane is almost hypnotised by St John. She says,

I stood motionless under my hierophant's touch. My refusals were forgotten – my fears overcome – my wrestlings paralysed. The Impossible – *i.e.* my marriage with St John – was fast becoming the Possible. All was changing utterly, with a sudden sweep. Religion called – Angels beckoned – God commanded – life rolled together like a scroll – death's gates opening, showed eternity beyond: it seemed, that for safety and bliss there, all here might be sacrificed in a second. The dim room was full of visions.<sup>21</sup>

She is on the very brink of submission, St John is already triumphant, 'My prayers are heard!', but Jane wants a confirming sign. "'Show me, show me the path!' I entreated of Heaven."<sup>22</sup> Though Jane famously hears a voice, the moment described by Brontë is primarily bodily:

My heart beat fast and thick: I heard its throb. Suddenly it stood still to an inexpressible feeling that thrilled it through, and passed at once to my head and extremities. The feeling was not like an electric shock; but it was quite as sharp, as strange, as startling: it acted on my senses as if their utmost activity hitherto had been but torpor; from which they were now summoned and forced to wake. They rose expectant: eye and ear waited, while the flesh quivered on my bones.

... I saw nothing: but I heard a voice somewhere cry –  
'Jane! Jane! Jane!'<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

This ecstatic hyperawareness of her body does, at the level of plot, direct her concern to Rochester, but more importantly from the perspective of the myth, it galvanises her concept of herself. She goes on:

I broke from St John, who had followed, and would have detained me. It was *my* time to assume ascendancy. *My* powers were in play, and in force. I told him to forbear question or remark; I desired him to leave me: I must, and would be alone. He obeyed at once. Where there is energy to command well enough, obedience never fails.<sup>24</sup>

At this point, Jane has already gained her fortune, found two sisters, made a home for herself, and against the odds, secured proposals from two alpha men, but only now is there an apotheosis: only now is she endowed with an authority of her own.

The Jane who returns to Thornfield is commanding, confident, and direct. On her first journey to the district, she was so shy, it took her half an hour to work up the courage to ask for assistance in the inn. This time, she interviews the inn keeper at the Rochester Arms with no little asperity.

Once directed to Ferndean Manor, we enter the final phase of the myth, where all is finally balanced and completed. Here, Jane's spiritual self-sacrifice – the metaphorical cutting off of right hand and right eye in leaving Rochester – has become flesh: Rochester, maimed in the fire, has lost his left hand, has had one eye knocked out of his head, and the other so inflamed that it too is blind. It was to Ferndean, remember, that Rochester refused to send Bertha on their arrival in England, decreeing too cruel a punishment – apparently, so awful, that it was even crueller than locking her in an attic with no one but the gin-swilling Grace Poole for company. And this, now, is the place that he has locked himself up in his misery and retreat from the world.

Now, some commentators argue that this mutilation and humiliation of Rochester is a mark of Brontë's conventional, hierarchical world-view. That, unable to imagine a feminist reordering

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

of the marriage contract, the only way Brontë can find for Jane to marry Rochester as an equal is for him to be diminished: physically, financially, and in status. I disagree.

Rather, within the logic of the myth, for Jane to marry Rochester, he must undergo a transformation that makes him her complement – he must be her equal and equivalent, and this not measured in physical, financial, or social terms, but in the stuff of heroism, character and spirituality.

In a properly biblical fashion, where Jane submitted willingly to what was required of her spiritually, her sufferings remained spiritual, and her body was left intact – think of Job. But where Rochester resisted and defied what is right, where he refused to restrain himself and attempted to pull another down with him, he found himself passing through all but actual hell fires – a passage of both destruction and redemption, where he really lost his hand and eyes, but also was liberated from his monstrous marriage. He was also given an opportunity to exercise courage and selflessness, and did so by saving all of his staff, and attempting to rescue Bertha, at great cost to himself.

In the aftermath of this carnage, Rochester is left alone – as utterly alone and desolate as Jane has been – and experiences a true repentance and conversion. He is able at last to understand that to have taken Jane as his wife illegally would have violated her irreparably. And he accepts God's authority to judge what is right, saying that while he deserved judgment, he knows he has also been shown mercy.

If St John was faith without heart, then Rochester was heart without faith – and neither suited Jane. She is both body and soul, and needs companionship that is both physical and spiritual, so Rochester's emerging faith is necessary for him to fit Jane. Without a spiritual dimension equal to hers, Rochester will never be a large enough character to match her, not will he be able to understand her fully.

Crippling and blinding are not the only indignities Rochester must suffer before he marries Jane, though. There is one cruelty he inflicted on Jane that was quite sadistic, really unwarranted, and oddly enough, it is St John who gives Jane the power to redress it. I'm speaking of Rochester's pretence that he is going to marry Blanche Ingram, and his

gloating toying with Jane's vulnerability and affection in order to goad her to confessing her love for him. This is not just mean and manipulative, it is the behaviour of a total cad – a dangerous exposure of Jane as a friendless, orphaned, isolated young woman – and on its own, it is enough to make him the villain of the story.

Now, though, Jane is able to sit upon Rochester's knee and torture him with her other prospect for marriage – and she has the added satisfaction of knowing that she's speaking the truth. She baits him with St John's youth, education, handsomeness, manners, virtue, earnestness, and his insistence on marrying her, until Rochester is quite frothing in jealousy and distress. Jane claims it is a therapeutic intervention, thinking 'anger would be better than grief,'<sup>25</sup> but surely there is an element of revenge at play, too.

Justice now served, we hear that Rochester shared Jane's supernatural moment – it really *was* him calling to her, and he in return heard her reply. The connection between them is vouchsafed as real, transcendent and mutual. Once they are married, we see that their union is one of total complementarity. Jane says,

Mr Rochester continued blind for the first two years of your union: perhaps it was that circumstance that drew us so very near – that knit us so very close! for I was then his vision, as I am still his right hand. Literally, I was (what he often called me) the apple of his eye.<sup>26</sup>

A bodily complementarity, then. But also a spiritual one:

I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine. No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am: ever more absolutely bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh. I know no weariness of my Edward's society: he knows none of mine, any more than we each do of the pulsation of the heart that beats in our separate bosoms; consequently, we are ever together.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, chapter 37.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, chapter 38.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh, and one heart that beats in two separate bosoms – this is the language of Eden. Not the place of four Rivers that Jane was tempted to settle for, but the union of life, spirit and flesh with her exact counterpart. Everything antithetical, oppositional and injurious in Rochester has been resolved, and not because – as in so many romances – because Jane has somehow ‘tamed’ him, or because her love is curative. Rather, each is able to come to the other in fullness and integrity because each has, separately and alone, successfully completed their own hero’s journey.

But what of St John? All very well that he harassed Jane into such a state she achieved momentary telepathic powers at the very instant that Rochester was at last worthy of her, but for the proper resolution of the myth, he can’t just vanish off stage. He is far too important for that.

We hear that Diana and Mary are both happily married to good men, and that they share their lives with Jane and Rochester. St John is the only loose end, but Brontë gives him the end that he wanted: not just the glory of a life in service to God, not just the impending rewards of a martyr’s death on the mission-field, no – even better than that: St John gets to have the last word.

The final words of the book are the final words of the final book of the bible, Saint John’s book of Revelation: ‘Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus!’

And after that, there is really nothing more to say.