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Jane Eyre: Text, Context, Ur-text

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Jane Eyre : l'histoire sans fin

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Jane Eyre : l'histoire sans fin

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Résumé
Le roman de Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre, *est habité par la voix inextinguible de l'héroïne. L'usage de la première personne n'est pas seulement structural mais il donne aussi sa tonalité au récit et crée une impression d'intimité. L'histoire racontée par Jane est éminemment subjective. Ce parti pris nous rappelle qu'elle est une menteuse potentielle. Mais ses mensonges ont pour but de protéger son intimité et de maintenir le lien qui la rattache au lecteur. En outre, Jane en tant que personnage ne sait et ne comprend pas tout. Son récit est donc d'une part inévitablement incomplet. D'autre part, elle grandit et mûrit au fil de l'histoire, s'approchant toujours un peu plus de son double narratif. Afin de maintenir le secret sur son présent, la narratrice hésite donc souvent entre distance et identification. Les hésitations de la narration rythment la progression de la diégèse. Au fur et à mesure qu'elle évolue, l'héroïne découvre de nouveaux lieux dans lesquels sa vie semble prendre un nouveau départ. Ces recommencements de l'histoire sont autant d'invitations au lecteur qui peut ainsi redécouvrir le roman sous un angle toujours renouvelé. Des auteurs, des réalisateurs ont répondu à cette invitation en écrivant leur propre version et en faisant de* Jane Eyre *une histoire sans fin.*

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Charlotte Brontë's novel has inspired and initiated the creation of numerous texts, films and plays. Written some 160 years ago, it has never ceased to attract readers and to nourish the imagination of authors. One of the reasons is that *Jane Eyre*[1] presents itself as a work in creation. On its publication in 1847, the novel was entitled *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*. The focus is thus the heroine herself. Even before opening the book, the reader is informed that it is her story and that she is also the narrator, which explains our interest in the close link that exists between the act of reading and the creative act of writing. The first person narrative and the powerful depiction of Jane throughout the novel are at the heart of the book's enduring success and, as we hope to show, of the hypotextual quality of this novel.

[1] C. Brontë, *Jane Eyre* [1847], New York : Norton, 2001. All parenthetic references to *Jane Eyre* (*JE*,) will be to this edition.

Shaping Jane's world

The fascination of *Jane Eyre* lies perhaps mainly in the magnetic delineation of its heroine. As Rochester puts it when he is disguised as a gipsy, Jane's face and countenance seem to declare:

> I can live alone, if self-respect and circumstances require me so to do. I need not sell my soul to buy bliss. I have an inward treasure born with me, which can keep me alive if all extraneous delights should be withheld (*JE*, 171).

Jane owns something precious which sustains her when she is excluded from the family circle at Gateshead and when she discovers Rochester's treachery. This quality of hers that radiates through the novel has also captivated readers and inspired writers. Thus Jasper Fforde's heroine Thursday Next, the protagonist of *The Eyre Affair*, notes that "her face was plain and outwardly unremarkable, yet possessed of a bearing that showed inner strength and resolve[2]".

Although Jane tells her friend Helen at Lowood that she would rather die than bear hatred from the people around her (*JE*, 58), she always survives her distress because she can raise herself to a level of intellectual or moral superiority. This uniqueness, this sense of the self, fits in with the first person narrative. Jane is not an ordinary, commonplace girl despite her plain features. She has indeed an acute sensibility to what happens to her, a sensibility which develops and sharpens as she grows older. Therefore she can sustain the interest of the reader throughout. Moreover, all the elements that make up *Jane Eyre* are exclusively relevant to the narrator's life. Every detail in the novel is conveyed by the heroine, every description depends on her perception, and every action is related in her own words. Jane's vision therefore encloses the whole novel and leads its author to give birth to a work of art. Significantly, when she comes to be kidnapped in Jasper Fforde's novel, the narrative loses all interest: "There isn't much to read [...]. *Jane Eyre* was written in the first person; as soon as the protagonist has gone, it's anyone's guess as to what happens next[3]".

The "I" excludes details that would not enhance our knowledge of the narrator or our understanding of the situation. The world of the novel is entirely Jane's. The impression of narrowness is all the stronger since the heroine is an outcast and always seems to live at a remove from society: at Gateshead Hall she lives in isolation from her aunt and cousins; then at Lowood her integration is restricted to the small world of the orphan asylum. Even at Thornfield, though she achieves some equality with Rochester, the ladies and gentlemen of the house party ignore her, and when she runs away she finds herself alone again and cut off from

[2] J. Fforde, *The Eyre Affair*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001, 67.

[3] *Ibid.*, 301.

any connection. It is only at Moor House and Morton that she eventually meets her relatives and gets a real place in society as a teacher. Her inheritance and her marriage will be her ultimate steps towards integration. Nevertheless, the integration is partial. Indeed, her last home in Ferndean is an isolated refuge deprived of any refinement and screened off by the thick wall of a forest. If Jane's status evolves undeniably, her place in society is always liminal. Her world enlarges gradually and this progression accompanies her own intellectual and moral development, but the feeling of intimacy and closeness remains.

True lies

A similarly equivocal evolution can be traced concerning Jane's story-telling skills. The Lowood section offers an interesting illustration of her increasing knowledge in this field, although, in reality, it shows that she is becoming aware of the need for an equilibrium between telling and dissimulating in her narrative: she is learning "not to tell[4]" as Lisa Sternlieb suggests.

At first, Helen tenderly reproaches Jane for being too "impulsive" (*JE*, 59). After the humiliating punishment Brocklehurst imposes on the heroine, she is indeed unable to listen to Helen's reassuring words and keeps crying. This excessive behaviour and the inability to be articulate and calm recall the red room episode and contrast sharply with Helen's "pure, full, fervid eloquence" (*JE*, 62). The latter expression could be perceived as an understatement about the sort of story-telling Jane should ideally achieve. Her efforts towards it are underlined when she manages to give a seemingly reliable account of her days in Gateshead in front of Miss Temple and Helen:

> I resolved, in the depth of my heart, that I would be most moderate—most correct; and, having reflected a few minutes in order to arrange coherently what I had to say; I told her all the story of my sad childhood. Exhausted by emotion, my language was more subdued than it generally was when I developed that sad theme; and mindful of Helen's warnings against the indulgence of resentment, I infused into the narrative far less gall and wormwood than ordinary. Thus restrained and simplified, it sounded more credible: I felt as I went on that Miss Temple fully believed me (*JE*, 60).

There is some degree of irony in these lines, as sounding reliable—"more credible"—means in fact managing to lie skilfully and unobtrusively, and to select information while ignoring a few inconvenient facts. For story-telling is sometimes synonymous with manipulating, as the example of Rochester demonstrates: he disguises himself as a gipsy to talk with Jane, he conceals the existence of his mad

[4] L. Sternlieb, "Hazarding Confidences", *in* C. Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, *op. cit.*, 505.

wife and makes use of the Gothic atmosphere of Thornfield to hide and unveil the truth at the same time. Being a skilled liar, he naturally becomes one of the narrators in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

In *Jane Eyre*, though, he is but a character depicted by Jane herself. Each action, each speech and each image presented in the text are in fact what Jane saw, heard or felt at the time of the events. She is the one who selects data and manipulates them. But we must not forget that the heroine is a potential or assumed liar. First, such an accusation, made by the Reeds and trusted by Mr Brocklehurst, is what leads her to be sent to Lowood. It then brings about the humiliating scene in which she is called "a liar" (*JE*, 56) in front of the whole class, before being able to address Miss Temple directly and tell the truth about her story—or rather give her own truthful version of the facts.

Lisa Sternlieb shows how Jane's ability to lie truthfully is a key to the development of the novel:

> Brontë has written what is arguably the first important female *Bildungsroman* in English literature, and it is crucial to her novel of education that the heroine learn to lie. Paradoxically, in order to argue that Jane is lying to us we must accept much of what she tells us as the truth. We must accept her version of Rochester's words so that we can see how her narrative style echoes his. […] We must accept that Rochester is a liar in order to see how Jane beats him at his own game—how she is a better liar, for her narrative is able to expose all of his lies without revealing her own[5].

Jane wisely unfolds the tale without telling all about herself. As a narrator, she is reluctant to unveil her secrets: "Jane is most likely to share intimacies with her reader […] when she is most loath to tell her story to anyone else in her narrative[6]". It is significant that we never see her writing and that the other characters are not aware of her literary activities[7]. The end of the novel is emblematic of this desire for privacy, when she withdraws from the scene to let St John Rivers speak in the first person.

So, Jane may well be a liar. However, our unlimited sympathy for her character suggests that she is not lying in order to manipulate and deceive, but rather to protect her own integrity and to make sure of our trust in her. Moreover, there is another reason why she does not tell all, namely that she simply does not perceive or understand all. Some time after she has told Miss Temple about her childhood, she describes her intercourse with another girl in Lowood while Helen is ill. She explains

[5] L. Sternlieb, *op. cit.*, 504.

[6] *Ibid.*, 505.

[7] "While Jane never writes in front of us, her moments of greatest closeness with the reader are always when she is most invested in concealing her position as narrator from Rochester", *Ibid.*, 512.

that this Mary Ann Wilson "had a turn for narrative, I for analysis; she liked to inform, I to question" (*JE*, 66). Despite her "inner strength and resolve", Jane is often at a loss as she is faced with harsh facts. As an illustration, we can mention the beautiful early summer evening when she suddenly realizes that Helen might die. She feels that she eventually understands the common metaphor used to allude to death. When she asks the nurse about Helen's health, she gets a euphemistic reformulation of the doctor's answer:

> "He says she'll not be here long."
> This phrase, uttered in my hearing yesterday, would have only conveyed the notion that she was about to be removed to Northumberland, to her own home. I should not have suspected that it meant she was dying; but I knew instantly now: it opened clear on my comprehension that Helen Burns was numbering her last days in this world, and that she was going to be taken to the region of spirits, if such region there were. I experienced a shock of horror, then a strong thrill of grief, then a desire—a necessity to see her, and I asked in what room she lay" (*JE*, 67).

She seems fully aware of the cold truth that has to be encountered here. But a few minutes later, she fails again to understand to the full. Facing Helen, she clings to the hope or illusion that her friend will recover. For when Helen alludes to her own death, Jane appears to have forgotten about her newly acquired awareness:

> "I came to see you, Helen: I heard you were very ill, and I could not sleep till I had spoken to you."
> "You came to bid me good-bye, then: you are just in time probably."
> "Are you going somewhere, Helen? Are you going home?" (*JE*, 69).

Jane refuses the reality of death. She wants to believe that Helen "is not going to die" (*JE*, 68) and that if she actually leaves, it is to go back to her place in Northumberland. She uses the metaphor of death as homecoming, but in doing so she rejects the implied meaning and accepts the literal meaning only: she clings to the signifier, forgetting that the signified is slippery, unstable and ungraspable. The metaphor she herself utters dysfunctions: instead of voicing death, it screens it. When Jane eventually acknowledges the hopelessness of the situation because of Helen's insistence, the pain and the horror she feels deprive her of her usually proficient use of language: "No, no, Helen!" (*JE*, 69) is all she can say, this double denial reflecting her own refusal of mortality and loss.

Writing for Jane appears therefore as a way of bearing the horror of her past, of screening her fear of loneliness and death. It is a means of not dying and not forgetting. If Jane lies, it is in an attempt to survive and turn her sad story into a beautiful and powerful tale. She weaves the thin threads of her existence into a long and comforting metaphor that makes

her memories bearable: this is how she can survive the remembrance of her humiliations, be it as a poor orphan child or as a deceived lover.

Her attitude is unheroic. Her fear of death is very human. The difficult discovery of reality and life, the limited understanding of a humble and ordinary consciousness probably account for the sympathy that Jane inspires. To that extent she is modern already; she seems to be seized by this feeling of a new beginning. A change in the meanings of words, so that there are no landmarks. No frontiers anymore[8]. Despite her concealing and selecting facts to sound more convincing and truthful, the reader very easily shares Rochester's tender feelings toward this "delicate and aerial" narrator (*JE*, 220).

Past and present

The effect of the first person narrative is to make *Jane Eyre* sound like what Raymond Williams called a "private letter", a "private talk[9]", in which the reader alone is allowed to share Jane's intimacy.

> There was no possibility of taking a walk that day. We had been wandering, indeed, in the leafless shrubbery an hour in the morning; but since dinner (Mrs. Reed, when there was no company, dined early) the cold winter wind had brought with it clouds so sombre, and a rain so penetrating, that farther outdoor exercise was now out of the question.
> I was glad of it: I never liked long walks […] (*JE*, 5).

We are her confidents. She soon speaks about herself, her tastes, her loneliness which the reader can soothe. Even though we guess she writes at a time when she has reached happiness, still she writes alone, excluded from the world in Ferndean, and without letting the other characters know of her literary activity: Rochester is not included in the act of writing and remains an object in it. On the contrary, the impression of intimacy with the reader is intensified by the use of direct addresses, for we, as readers, find ourselves in the position of Miss Temple listening to Jane's childhood story, only to a much larger extent. We hear her voice although we do not see her actually writing, as if her tale were told without any mediation. Because we see everything through the protagonist's eyes, we adopt her feelings and opinions while total identification is skilfully avoided thanks to the narrator's self-control. The older Jane reacts with a certain composure to and distance from the

[8] These remarks are inspired by Henri Meschonnic's observation: « *La modernité est le mal du siècle […]. Le sentiment d'un recommencement. D'un changement du sens des mots tels qu'on n'a plus de repères. Plus de cloisons* ». H. Meschonnic, *Modernité, Modernité*, Paris : Folio essais Gallimard, Editions Verdier, 1988, 17.

[9] Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1971.

events she relates despite her emotional involvement, as at the beginning of chapter XI when she is forced to stop at an inn despite her anxiety to discover Thornfield:

> Reader, though I look comfortably accommodated, I am not very tranquil in my mind. […] and when I asked a waiter if any one had been to inquire after a Miss Eyre, I was answered in the negative: so I had no resource but to request to be shown into a private room: and here I am waiting, while all sorts of doubts and fears are troubling my thoughts (*JE*, 79).

The hesitation between the present and the past tenses suggests that the narrator's involvement in the tale is genuine and that at the same time she attempts to analyse and depict the situation carefully. The frightened heroine who discovers the room in the inn is in a different state of mind from the mature teller. In this context, the address to the reader both emphasizes the distance between narrator and narratee, between the one who knows and the one who learns, and encourages us to sympathize with Jane whose vivid memories revive her younger self.

Each time, the reader is called upon precisely when he or she is most likely to identify with the protagonist. These interventions usually interrupt the emotional continuity of the diegesis and provide the reader with a moment of pause and reflection. For instance, the narrator addresses the reader during the episode of Jane's wandering on the moor, a key moment when the heroine is experiencing agony. Jane eventually chooses to follow principles rather than her natural bents and leaves Thornfield, although she is aware that her flight might cause Rochester's downfall:

> Gentle reader, may you never feel what I then felt! May your eyes never shed such stormy, scalding, heart-wrung tears as poured from mine. May you never appeal to Heaven in prayers so hopeless and so agonised as in that hour left my lips; for never may you, like me, dread to be the instrument of evil to what you wholly love (*JE*, 274).

The narrator insists on the temporal divide between her and the distress that Jane "then felt". The reader is made to look at the character from a distance and can decide whether Jane was right to leave Thornfield. The apostrophes are especially numerous in the last chapter and, by making the narrative act so conspicuous, they highlight the character's belonging to the past. Although readers are invited into Jane's world through the intimate dialogue that she initiates, they are also kept at a safe distance as attention is drawn to Jane's writing activity.

Indeed, by growing more mature and more self-reliant, Jane is gradually identifying with the narrator, therefore coming closer and closer to the world of the reader.

> I have now been married ten years. I know what it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth. I hold myself supremely blest—blest beyond what language can express; because I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine (*JE*, 383).

It seems that Jane Eyre and Jane Rochester are fused and that the narration is now revealing the narrator's life. Yet, the latter soon returns to the past years of her marriage, as if to keep her present, everyday reality secret and to attract the reader's attention to the "tale", the "narrative" (*JE*, 383). When with the sentence: "My Edward and I, then, are happy" (*JE*, 385), the narrator becomes the protagonist again, she is careful not to stay in the foreground too long and rapidly moves on to talk about other characters.

The oscillation between these two *personae* recalls what we suggested about the metaphor used to allude to Helen's approaching death: the hesitation of the young heroine as to the meanings of words reflects the uncertainty of the narrator towards her former self. She sometimes attempts to deny the gap between the speaker—the diegetic equivalent of the linguistic signifier—and the character—the diegetic signified. At other times, she tries to cover the narrative voice by presenting the story vividly. But throughout, readers do see and hear both Janes.

The narrator's voice inhabits the text as much as the character gives life to the story. Besides, the calls to the reader underline the fact that Jane can narrate as long as someone is listening to her. Our absence would be her death. She is a modern subject, existing in the present of the act of writing and reading[10]. Her voice keeps her alive while her silences fuel the interest and expectancy of the addressee. As a wise story-teller, she maintains the suspense by retaining information, redirecting the plot and having each new chapter sound like "a new scene in a play" (*JE*, 79).

New beginnings

The novel is an invitation to watch Jane get older through the different episodes of her life, with each setting corresponding to a new stage in her experience: Gateshead stands for early childhood; Lowood represents the end of childhood and allows Jane to take her first steps as a young woman; Thornfield is the age of womanhood, where she discovers love, passion and fear too; in Morton and Moor House, she learns to seek wisdom, by becoming more mature and reasonable. Finally, Ferndean is the place of peace regained and matrimony.

[10] An observation suggested by Meschonnic's comment: « […] *le moderne* […] *désigne le présent indéfini de l'apparition : ce qui transforme le temps pour que ce temps demeure le temps du sujet. Une énonciation qui reste énonciation* ». H. Meschonnic, *op. cit.*, 34.

As with every change of setting the story seems to start over again, several passages in the narrative function like new beginnings. Repeatedly, Jane's arrival in a place so far unknown gives way to a description that punctuates the story in the same way as a new act indicates a new phase in a play. The narrator is well aware of this aspect of her art: "A new chapter in a novel is something like a new scene in a play; and when I draw up the curtain this time, reader, you must fancy you see a room in the George Inn at Millcote […]" (*JE*, 79). The discovery of the new setting is always heightened by the insertion of a moment of introspection and observation of Jane's surroundings. On her arrival at Lowood, she is led into a room where she is left alone before meeting Miss Temple (*JE*, 35-36). This situation is echoed by her arrival at the Millcote inn where she has to wait in a private room (*JE*, 79-80) before being led to Thornfield where the "snug, small room; a round table by a cheerful fire" (*JE*, 81) recall the "comfortable" parlour in Lowood. These places are never first seen clearly[11], which means that Jane's perception of them is partial and will evolve according to the experiences she undergoes there.

Her departures are significant too. On leaving Lowood, she is fully conscious of the importance of this new start for her and unobtrusively draws a parallel with Gateshead:

> I now busied myself in preparations: the fortnight passed rapidly. I had not a very large wardrobe, though it was adequate to my wants; and the last day sufficed to pack my trunk,—the same I had brought with me eight years ago from Gateshead.
> [...] I sat down and tried to rest. I could not, though I had been on foot all day—I could not now repose an instant—I was too much excited. A phase of my life was closing tonight, a new one opening tomorrow; impossible to slumber in the interval; I must watch feverishly while the change was being accomplished (*JE*, 76).

The trunk is the same. Perhaps the excitement too. But her feelings here are more profound than before. In Gateshead, she feared what was to come: "I stood, a wretched child enough, whispering to myself over and over again, 'What shall I do?—What shall I do?'" (*JE*, 32). She was fleeing from a sad existence with no real hope as to what was awaiting her. Yet her desire to go away from her aunt and cousins was stronger than any regret she might have had: "'Goodbye to Gateshead!' cried I, as we passed through the hall and went out at the front door" (*JE*, 34). In both cases, Jane is moved by a powerful desire not to miss a second of her experience, keeping her eyes and mind wide open, fully aware that she is changing in the process. Her departure for Thornfield is not, however,

[11] The terms "dimly" "dazzled" "shining dim" and "dim light" are used respectively on her arrival in Lowood (35), in Thornfield (81), in Moor House (282) and in Ferndean (386).

presented as a flight. While she was introduced to the other pupils in Lowood as a liar, she is given "a testimonial" assuring that "I had always conducted myself well, both as teacher and pupil, at Lowood" (*JE*, 76), before being hired as a governess by Mrs Fairfax. She flees from Gateshead and Thornfield, but she leaves Lowood and Moor House because she hopes to realize herself. A movement is imposed on the text, one that follows the oscillation of Jane's feelings between hope and despair.

Mirror effects

Such a change of moods is perceptible in Thornfield, with the sharp contrast between the romantic atmosphere that precedes the wedding and the dreary night that follows it. A new section is then about to begin: the tonality of the Moor House section will be highly different from the previous one. Significantly, much has been written on the opposition between passion and reason, or warmth and cold, that these two places respectively stand for.

The general impression left by the various contrasts in the story is that of mirror effects that come to constitute the very structure of the narrative. In addition to Jane's repeated departures and arrivals that give a certain rhythm to the story, we can mention the two proposal scenes; Helen's death that contrasts with Mrs Reed's; the confrontation between Jane and Bertha after the aborted wedding that echoes the red room episode. Each time, the act of reading brings us back to an earlier moment in the diegesis. The tale is being told by an inexhaustible narrative voice that endures as long as the reading lasts, in the same way as Jane and Rochester will enjoy a happy marriage as long as they live: "our honeymoon will shine our life-long: its beams will only fade over your grave or mine" (*JE*, 383).

Quite logically then, the ending is relatively inconclusive. The reader is suddenly led away from Jane into the life of St John Rivers, a device which is a further invitation to watch as—or maybe *how*—the tale is being told, as if it should start again. That could be why the novel has been so often used and adapted by authors and film makers. These mirror effects inside the story are duplicated through works whose textual fabrics become looking-glasses in and through which Charlotte Brontë's novel shimmers and can be rediscovered. The echo can be rather faithful, as in Franco Zeffirelli's film, or much more humorous as with Jasper Fforde's story of Thursday Next. But whatever the new form of the narrative, the figure of the heroine remains. Even in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, her pale silhouette is evoked: the powerful voice of Antoinette attracts our sympathy and makes us highly suspicious of Rochester's motives, but it does not lead the reader to abandon sympathy for Jane. Because, as a

subject, she inhabits the whole universe of *Jane Eyre*, the novel is open to other subjectivities; it is both a fully accomplished and acclaimed work of art, and a piece of raw material offered to the present of the (modern) reader.

> Subjectivity and modernity stand together. One and the same adventure. Hence, modernity is a faculty of the present. That is to say, as regards the arts, it is a possible future for a work. A future for a subject[12].

Conclusion

Jane Eyre is an open text that can be read over and over again, that can be visited—as it is literally in *The Eyre Affair*—by all kinds of readers without ever burning out its fascinating power. The first person narrative shapes the whole novel. Jane is the subject of this text. Her own creativity is acknowledged by the fact that she can paint, but also because she is able to re-write her experience. She re-creates a universe of her own—just as Virginia Woolf insisted on the necessity for a woman to have "a room of one's own". She thus becomes the author of her own life. The narrative is the music to which she dances, passing from moments of joy to moments of distress, from periods of hope to periods of doubt. The oscillations in the narrative impose a rhythm on the act of reading while allowing for other minds to receive the text and rewrite it into new works of art.

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[12] My translation of « *La subjectivité et la modernité sont solidaires. Une même aventure. La modernité, par là, est une faculté du présent. C'est-à-dire, en art, un avenir de l'œuvre. Un futur du sujet* ». H. Meschonnic, *op. cit.*, 295.