

“Visionary Woe” and Its Revision: Another Look at Jane Eyre’s Pictures

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FROM G. H. Lewes’ 1847 review of *Jane Eyre* to the more elaborate critical commentaries of recent years,¹ Jane Eyre’s pictures and her word painting have invited comment. Certainly, as Lewes said of Charlotte Brontë’s book, “the pictures stand out distinctly before you: they *are* pictures, and not mere bits of ‘fine writing.’ The writer is evidently painting by words a picture that she has in her mind, not ‘making up’ from vague remembrances, and with the consecrated phrases of ‘poetic prose.’”² This seems doubly true of Jane’s verbal descriptions of her own drawings, particularly the three that Rochester pulls from her portfolio in chapter XIII. Jane spends more time discussing these than she does any of her others. Each is meticulously described and all are commented upon both by Jane and by Rochester in their dialogue about Jane and the art of creation, a dialogue which takes place shortly after Rochester’s first appearance at Thornfield and while he is trying to get to know Jane’s qualifications as governess for Adèle. To focus upon this section of chapter XIII is, I believe, important. For when read symbolically, Jane’s three drawings tell her story at Thornfield, on the moors, and with St. John and therefore prefigure the more skillful word painting of Jane’s autobiographical narrative for the next twenty-three chapters of *Jane Eyre*. And when read carefully, Jane’s confessions of failure with respect to her three paintings suggest that in *Jane Eyre* Charlotte Brontë may have been making a distinction between visionary, fanciful, almost involuntary art and a more studied, conscious art — the art of Jane’s narrative, which is written in retrospect, not in prospect.

In this distinction she would have been following the dictates of romantic art and anticipating those of modern psychology.

Surrealistic is probably the best word for Jane Eyre's three watercolors.³ They are, as Rochester observes, like something Jane "must have seen in a dream."⁴ He asks whether she was happy when she painted them and remarks that she must surely have existed "in a kind of artist's dreamland while [she] blent and arranged these strange tints" (I, 160). Here Rochester catches the essence of surrealistic art, which tends toward the kind of involuntarism best known in dreams, aiming, when it does aim, at automatism and toward the unconscious. Jane of course was not aiming anywhere. As she says, she was simply "absorbed" and her subjects had "risen vividly on [her] mind" (I, 160). Hers is a thoroughly naive and natural surrealism, a spontaneously dream-like art.

In this context it is interesting to remember that Jane believes that dreams are "signs" and "presentiments." Bessie once told her that "to dream of children was a sure sign of trouble, either to one's self or one's kin" (I, 285), and time and again in her narrative this proves to be true for Jane.⁵ As she herself observes:

Presentiments are strange things! and so are sympathies; and so are signs: and the three combined make one mystery to which humanity has not yet found the key. I never laughed at presentiments in my life; because I have had strange ones of my own. Sympathies, I believe, exist: (for instance, between far-distant, long-absent, wholly estranged relatives; asserting, notwithstanding their alienation, the unity of the source to which each traces his origin) whose workings baffle mortal comprehension. And signs, for aught we know, may be but the sympathies of Nature with man. (I, 285)

Much as do these signs and sympathies, the mysterious workings of Jane's art in the three watercolors produced while she was in her "artist's dreamland" seem to baffle Jane's comprehension. Moreover, like some of her dreams these drawings also seem to be presentiments of trials that are to come for Jane, so that what Rochester later says

of her dreams applies to Jane's pictures as well: they are a kind of "visionary woe" (II, 55).⁶

Of none of the drawings is this more true than of the first. According to Jane's description, this one

represented clouds low and livid, rolling over a swollen sea: all the distance was in eclipse; so, too, was the foreground; or rather, the nearest billows, for there was no land. One gleam of light lifted into relief a half-submerged mast, on which sat a cormorant, dark and large, with wings flecked with foam; its beak held a gold bracelet, set with gems, that I had touched with as brilliant tints as my palette could yield, and as glittering distinctness as my pencil could impart. Sinking below the bird and mast, a drowned corpse glanced through the green water; a fair arm was the only limb clearly visible, whence the bracelet had been washed or torn. (I, 159)

Each of the main elements in this watercolor — the swollen sea, the drowning corpse, and the cormorant with its bracelet — will figure strongly in the word painting that recounts Jane's stay at Thornfield. The sea, first of all, anticipates the water imagery which dominates Jane's horror and dismay at the disclosure of Rochester's mad wife. And this dominance is prepared for by Rochester's words as he describes the flooding rage of his own intense jealousy at the discovery of Céline's lover:

"You think all existence lapses in as quiet a flow as that in which your youth has hitherto slid away. Floating on with closed eyes and muffled ears, you neither see the rocks bristling not far off in the bed of their flood, nor hear the breakers boil at their base. But I tell you — and you may mark my words — you will come some day to a craggy pass of the channel, where the whole of life's stream will be broken up into whirl and tumult, foam and noise: either you will be dashed to atoms on crag points, or lifted up and borne on by some master wave into a calmer current." (I, 182)

Here again is prophecy; Jane will come to just such a pass when she learns that Rochester is about to become a bigamist.

This further suggests that the corpse sinking into the green water of the picture is a vision of Jane right after her break with Rochester, a suggestion strongly borne out by Jane's vivid account of her emotional inundation just

before her decision to leave Thornfield forever. Feeling totally alone and cut off from all possible comfort, at this point Jane wishes for death to come like a "torrent" from the mountains. But the torrent comes as grief, not death, and Jane feels the "whole consciousness of life lorn, love lost, hope quenched," and "faith death-struck." Finally she finds in the words of the Psalmist the only fitting description of her bitterness: "the waters came into my soul; I sank in deep mire: I felt no standing; I came into deep waters; the floods overflowed me" (II, 75). Here she is certainly caught in the "channel" that Rochester already knows and fears, "where the whole of life's stream [is] broken up into whirl and tumult." Submerged by its uncontrollable waters, she lives out the disaster only envisioned by the first of her drawings.

In a different way so does Rochester, whose raven blackness and dominant power are suggested by the cormorant in the drawing, "flecked" with the "foam" of his former jealousy.⁷ Often Jane refers to Rochester as a bird of prey: he is like a "caged eagle" (II, 256) when she comes upon him chastened at Ferndean, and has a flashing "falcon-eye" (I, 43) when he comes toward her in passion at Thornfield. As predator, Rochester still causes Jane to "quail" after the two have plighted their troth, and his predaciousness is related to his desire to possess Jane even in love. This also may be the reason that he must be chastened and purged by the fire. Rochester quite literally clutches and grasps at Jane, desiring to make her his own. And when he fails, he speaks with the savagery of one thwarted to the point of feeling like a wild bird trying to gain power over a caged one: "Whatever I do with its cage, I cannot get at it — the savage, beautiful creature! If I tear, if I rend the slight prison, my outrage will only let the captive loose And it is you, spirit — with will and energy, and virtue and purity — that I want: not alone your brittle frame" (I, 103).

Still another way in which Rochester tries to possess Jane is through his gifts, particularly through jewelry.

Here once again he resembles the cormorant which holds a gold, gem-studded bracelet in its beak, while Jane is again like the "corpse" whose "fair arm" has had the bracelet "washed" or "torn." This time the symbolic representations of the main characters strongly anticipate chapter XXIV, where Jane shows herself unwilling to be enslaved by Rochester's "golden shower" of gifts or to play "harem inmate" to his sultan's pose. In no way will she be forcibly bound to Rochester, not even by gratitude — especially for something she does not want. Thus the only gift that she will accept, and then only just before her wedding, is a modest pearl necklace, and that too she leaves behind when she is overwhelmed by her torrential grief and decides to leave Thornfield. Interestingly, Rochester later fastens this necklace under his cravat and keeps it there even during his retreat at Ferndean. Once more like the cormorant, he holds on to his bauble even when it no longer forms a bond with his drowning woman.

If, then, Jane's first picture is premonitory of her relationship with Rochester at Thornfield and its disastrous conclusion there, her second foresees Jane's wandering on the moors just after her resolve to leave Thornfield. This is the second traumatic experience of Jane's adult life and parallels her first. At Thornfield Jane had found and then lost the possibility of married love; whereas on the moors she has found and then lost a sense of rapport with the world of nature. Her account of that loss in chapter XXVIII is again remarkably close to this earlier description of her watercolor:

The second picture contained for foreground only the dim peak of a hill, with grass and some leaves slanting as if by a breeze. Beyond and above spread an expanse of sky, dark blue as at twilight: rising into the sky, was a woman's shape to the bust, portrayed in tints as dusk and soft as I could combine. The dim forehead was crowned with a star; the lineaments below were seen as through the suffusion of vapour; the eyes shone dark and wild; the hair streamed shadowy, like a beamless cloud torn by storm or by electric travail. On the neck lay a pale reflection like moonlight; the same faint lustre touched the

train of thin clouds from which rose and bowed this vision of the Evening Star. (I, 159-60)

There are several aspects of this "vision," especially the hill and the "suffusion of vapour," which point to Jane's trudge through the "dim and misty landscape" (II, 120) and over the "dusky hill" toward Moor House. In both of these scenes, it is twilight, in chapter XXVIII a "wet twilight" in which Jane is tired, hungry and desperate to find shelter and companionship. As one might expect, the woman in the drawing, with her streaming hair, dark, wild eyes and pale neck, strongly resembles Jane, who is drenched, wild-eyed and pale as a "spectre" when found by the Rivers. Also, the evening star with which the woman is crowned seems to prefigure the ever-receding light of Moor House. Jane even calls this light her "star" (I, 121) and her "forlorn hope," wishing that it may be like the "kindly star" of the milder preceding night when nature seemed to smile upon her, but fearing that it is merely an *ignis fatuus*. Each of these aspects will be her second drawing thus closely envisions what will be her trial while wandering between Thornfield and Moor House.

Jane's third drawing, on the other hand, prophesies her emotional encounter with St. John, the third and final trial before her eventual reunion with Rochester.⁸ Descriptive of a polar landscape dominated by a huge head, it gives a foretaste of the imagery which Jane again and again will associate with St. John in chapters XXXII-VIII:

The third showed the pinnacle of an iceberg piercing a polar winter sky: a muster of northern lights reared their dim lances, close serried, along the horizon. Throwing these into distance, rose, in the foreground, a head, — a colossal head, inclined towards the iceberg, and resting against it. Two thin hands, joined under the forehead, and supporting it, drew up before the lower features a sable veil; a brow quite bloodless, white as bone, and an eye hollow and fixed, blank of meaning but for the glassiness of despair, alone were visible. Above the temples, amidst wreathed turban folds of black drapery, vague in its character and consistency as cloud, gleamed a ring of white flame, gemmed with sparkles of a more lurid tinge. This pale crescent was "The likeness of a Kingly Crown;" what it diademed was "the shape which shape had none." (I, 160)

Like the head of this picture, St. John lives in a rare, cold atmosphere. He himself says that he is a "cold hard man" (II, 180), while Jane describes him, muffled in his snow-covered winter cloak, as a "tall figure all white as a glacier" (II, 183). With his "snow-wet hair" and pale cheek and brow, he is also "like chiselled marble" (II, 184). Even at the fireplace he seems not to thaw, but to be "a cold cumbrous column, gloomy and out of place" (II, 204). He is, then, like the iceberg of Jane's water color as well as like the "colossal head" of its foreground.

But the head of the picture leans toward and rests upon the iceberg much as St. John does upon the Rock of Ages, which he possessively and domineeringly asks Jane, too, to use as her support (II, 217). Thus it is quite possibly St. John's cold, bloodless, and dogmatic version of Christianity that Jane prefigures in her polar landscape, which simply serves as the backdrop for a prophetic sketch of St. John himself, with his "lofty forehead, still and pale as white stone" (II, 204). Even the veil that obscures the head is later echoed in the vivid language of chapter XXXIV (II, 222), where Jane notes that for a moment "the veil fell from his [St. John's] hardness and despotism."

The despair of the head is less easily pinpointed in the later narrative, but it may signify St. John's dismay over Jane's refusal to accompany him to India as his wife, while the turban may indicate India itself,⁹ the place where St. John is to fulfill his "ambitions of the high master-spirit" (II, 283) as a missionary. In any event the "Kingly Crown" seems to be a clear allusion to the end of St. John's heroic aspirations, and "the shape which shape had none" is death, preparing for the fate of St. John which is anticipated at the very end of *Jane Eyre*:

St. John is unmarried: he never will marry now. Himself has hitherto sufficed to the toil; and the toil draws near its close: his glorious sun hastens to its setting. The last letter I received from him drew from my eyes human tears, and yet filled my heart with Divine joy: he anticipated his sure reward, his incorruptible crown. I know that a stranger's hand will write to me next, to say that the good and faithful servant has been called at length

into the joy of his Lord. And why weep for this? No fear of death will darken St. John's last hour: his mind will be unclouded; his heart will be undaunted; his hope will be sure; his faith steadfast. His own words are a pledge of this:—

"My Master," he says, "has forewarned me. Daily he announces more distinctly, — 'Surely I come quickly!' and hourly I more eagerly respond, — 'Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus!'" (II, 284)

There is an interesting difference between Jane's earlier vision of St. John in the third drawing and this, her final vision. In the drawing, St. John's "Kingly Crown" recalls Milton's crown, worn by Death itself (*PL* II. 673), and suggests that the missionary may find only death's crown, not a victory over death, as the reward for what Jane calls his "troubling impulses of insatiate yearning and disquieting aspirations." But here St. John gets his "incorruptible crown," the untarnishable crown of the saint or martyr which in Christian iconography signifies victory over sin and death. Jane is far kinder to St. John here than at any other time in her narrative.

I believe that this altered attitude of Jane's is related to the difference between Jane Rochester, the narrator of *Jane Eyre*, and Jane Eyre, the painter of the three pictures we have been discussing. Because Jane works hard to preserve a sense of immediacy in her narrative, keeping pace with her own feelings and thoughts at the time when events really took place,¹⁰ to some extent we have a Jane imaginatively much younger giving us the description of the three pictures and the subsequent narration of events than we have concluding the entire book with a prediction of St. John's fate. The earlier Jane, as Jane Millgate¹¹ has noted, generally falls short of the more mature vision possessed by Jane Rochester, and the book *Jane Eyre* bridges the gap of time and skill that separates these two artists.

For our purposes, this may be made clearest by taking a further look at the passage which concludes the novel and making a further comparison between it and the description of the third picture. Each is a projection into

time, but there is a significant difference between the two, since the final description of St. John is no longer a vision of woe. The more than ten years that have intervened between Jane's first cold dream of St. John, her living out of that vision, and her final assessment of the crusader seem to have given Jane a sense of perspective, even compassion. Having become independent of the dominance of both Rochester and St. John, yet secure in her marriage to a chastened Rochester, Jane is now free to deal more warmly with her forceful, second suitor. St. John, who no longer poses a threat to her individuality, is seen by Jane as fulfilling his own destiny, much as she has fulfilled hers. He is given the wish of the Christian knight and of his own heart: "Amen; even so come." This St. John awaits the will of his God rather than imposing his own will upon others.

All the same, recounting, not predicting, dominates Jane Rochester's book as it does all autobiography, and it is in recounting that Jane excels. As a writer who recollects in tranquillity, she far outshines herself as a visionary or prophetess, although in both of these ways of expressing herself she obviously joins the company of the great nineteenth-century artists. What Jane has when she retells her woes that she does not have when she dreams of them through drawing is control. We have no sign that her execution fails to match her imagination in her narrative, but in her drawings there is a large discrepancy between the two. To Rochester she confesses that this discrepancy deeply affects her:

"The subjects had indeed risen vividly on my mind. As I saw them with the spiritual eye, before I attempted to embody them, they were striking; but my hand would not second my fancy, and in each case it had wrought out but a pale portrait of the thing I had conceived." (I, 159)

And again:

"I was tormented by the contrast between my idea and my handiwork: in each case I had imagined something which I was quite powerless to realize." (I, 161)

In both of these statements, Jane presents the dilemma of unrealized vision, a problem which often besets the surrealist artist—Coleridge, for example, in "Kubla Khan." What she feels seems to be the result of her interpreting the creative force as something beyond her power to control.¹²

Rochester further defines this possibility when he gives Jane his interpretation of her failure:

"You have secured the shadow of your thought: but no more, probably. You had not enough of the artist's skill and science to give it full being: yet the drawings are, for a schoolgirl, peculiar. As to the thoughts, they are elfish. These eyes in the Evening Star you must have seen in a dream." (I, 161)

Being visions, like something "seen in a dream," the drawings are derived from Jane's unconscious, and she does not yet seem able to give them a conscious shape as well. For this reason each is partly obscured, with either a misty foreground, an eclipsed distance, or a veiled figure.

Compared with the clearer word painting of the novel itself, then, these drawings, which have provoked so many interpretations, seem particularly difficult to elucidate, and recall Jung's description of the kind of art which "feels the creative force as something alien."¹³ In fact, Jung's distinction between this vatic type of art and an art which "identifies with the creative process" is particularly helpful here. In the first type, according to Jung, we would expect "a strangeness of form and content, thoughts that can only be apprehended intuitively, a language pregnant with meanings, and images that are true symbols because they are the best possible expressions for something unknown — bridges thrown out towards an unseen shore." For this reason, we must be "prepared for something supra-personal that transcends our understanding to the same degree that the author's consciousness was in abeyance during the process of creation." On the other hand, in the second type of art, which is "a conscious product shaped and designed to have the effect intended," we can expect

no overstepping of "the limits of comprehension" because our understanding can more easily parallel the artist's.

I believe that within the course of *Jane Eyre*, Jane moves from Jung's first category of artistry to his second, making her novel a *Kunstlerroman* as well as a *Bildungsroman*. Thus by viewing all of Jane Eyre's pictures as indicators of her personal maturation one can, as Jane Millgate does, attempt to trace Jane's total development. From this kind of examination one logically concludes that Jane, as wife of the blind Rochester, learns to embody in words the insights of her painterly eye—primarily to become Rochester's eyes. This would give her practice as a raconteuse, exactly the kind of practice that she would need to become adept at the word painting she would later employ in her autobiography. Jane herself tells us that she reads to Rochester, describes for him everything that she sees, relates for him the story of her life since they were parted, and even learns to play Scheherazade: "You shall not get it out of me to-night, sir; you must wait till to-morrow; to leave my tale half-told will, you know, be a sort of security that I shall appear at your breakfast-table to finish it" (II, 265). All of this practice helps to build Jane Rochester into an artist with the kind of conscious control that distinguishes Jung's second type of author. Yet there is obviously enough of the old, visionary Jane left to insure that Jane Eyre will remember how to represent her earlier way of seeing also. Thus by recollecting her old modes of seeing and painting, Jane can also give us "a language pregnant with meanings, and images that are true symbols because they are the best possible expressions for something unknown," to use Jung's terminology. Reliving her old experiences plus living her new ones seems to equip Jane with the double focus of the artist of the unconscious and the conscious and helps to make *Jane Eyre* the powerful book that it is.

If contemporary psychologists of art are correct, Jane's sexualization, in addition to the skill in communication

which brings the end to her expectation of woe, may give Charlotte Brontë's narrator the psychological impetus to unite the unconscious and conscious and to produce her autobiography. Ernest Kris, for example, thinks that the kind of consciousness of experience which the mature artist must have in order to determine the meaning of his material is only possible after he has sexualized his thought. He also believes "that [it is] in the process of becoming conscious the preconsciously prepared thought is sexualized, which accounts for the experience's accompanying revelation. Id energies suddenly combine with ego energies . . . to produce the unique experience of inspiration. . . . Unconscious fantasies at work in some specific instances can be reconstructed."¹⁴ In her own way and in her own time, Charlotte Brontë seems to have perceived something like this. Her heroine's maturity unquestionably involves Jane's avowed fulfillment as wife to Rochester and mother of his son. And it is this maturity, too, that enables her to recount with such vividness events that were once only the dream-like, prophetic visions of her drawings.

To be able to transform events parallel to these visions into the moving and explicit narratives of Thornfield, the days on the moors, and the time at Moor House and in Morton is, in any case, the accomplishment of an artist at word painting. Moreover, it is the accomplishment of a woman with a revised perspective about former "visionary woe." For Jane's achievement takes her to the ultimate realization of the surrealist artist: the realization of the integrated individual who both acknowledges and has the power to employ internal riches.¹⁵ No longer mystified by or controlled by her unconscious, the Jane who concludes *Jane Eyre* has learned to grapple with and master what Rochester once called "the shadow of her thought." Her dream-like drawings have become the stuff of her life and then, once again, of her art—this time an art which confronts head on the reality of our deepest intuitions and continues to speak to generation after generation of readers.

NOTES

- ¹See Lawrence E. Moser, "From Portrait to Person: A Note on the Surrealistic in *Jane Eyre*," *NCF*, 20 (1965), 275-81; Thomas Langford, "The Three Pictures in *Jane Eyre*," *VN*, 31 (1967), 47-8; Jane Millgate, "Narrative Distance in *Jane Eyre*: The Relevance of the Pictures," *MLR*, 63 (1968), 315-19; John Hagan, "Enemies of Freedom in *Jane Eyre*," *Criticism*, 13 (1971), 351-76; and M. B. McLaughlin, "Past or Future Mindscapes: Pictures in *Jane Eyre*," *VN*, 41 (1972), 22-24.
- ²"The Reality of *Jane Eyre*," *Frazer's Magazine* (December, 1847), p. 693.
- ³For further discussion of surrealism in this context see Moser, pp. 275-77.
- ⁴Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, Shakespeare Head edition, 2 vols. (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1931), I, 161. All subsequent volume and page references in my text are to this edition and are incorporated into the text.
- ⁵In particular see I, 285 and II, 54-5.
- ⁶Langford (p. 47) feels, as I do, that the pictures are prophetic; but he then makes the first vision one of Lowood, which is already in the past.
- ⁷Hagan (p. 360) believes that the cormorant forecasts Bertha, who is "a carrion-seeking bird of prey." This seems plausible, although there seems to be less reason to identify Bertha with this black bird than the more prominent and significant and equally swarthy Rochester. Hagan also believes, and I wholly agree, that it is the prophecy of Jane's thwarted marriage to Rochester that is depicted here.
- ⁸Several interpretations of this drawing come close to agreement. Langford, for example, is convinced that the picture "foretells Jane's experience with the cold crusader, St. John Rivers" (p. 48) but believes that it is the experience itself, not St. John, which is represented. Hagan (p. 359) also accepts this interpretation.
- ⁹Hagan (p. 359) also notes this.
- ¹⁰Kathleen Tillotson in *Novels of the Eighteen-forties* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), p. 295 ff., was probably the first to make note of this.
- ¹¹p. 315.
- ¹²In quite another context, as critic of *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte Brontë discusses the power of the creative force as "something of which [the creative artist] is not always master." The writer, she suggests, will lay down "rules" and "principles" for his art, but at some point the creative force may take over and require the artist to become passive. This can, and should, happen in the very highest forms of art, as well as in Jane's pictures; in those higher forms, however, there is not the gulf between conception and execution that Jane feels is true in her case. (See "Charlotte Brontë on *Wuthering Heights*," in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Miriam Allott [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974] pp. 287-88.)

- ¹³All references to Jung are to *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, vol. 15, Bollingen Series XX, ed. Sir Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, Gerhard Adler, and William McGuire, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 75-76.
- ¹⁴*Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* (New York: International Universities Press, 1952), p. 317.
- ¹⁵See Yves Duplessis, *Surrealism*, trans. Paul Capon (New York: Walker and Company, 1962), pp. 4-5.

All Summer I Hear the Angry Word "Rest."

All summer I hear the angry word "Rest."
It whispers out of unread books,
From typing paper as yet untyped.
I have come to know its hot, breathy sound.
Thoughts walk off my notes. Change into trunks
And jump into some pool without a word.
Sometimes I plunge after them, going deep
Into my dreams where the rest cannot hide.
But even a poem cannot bring them back alive.
Angry, things intend to remain all summer.

Sanford Pinsker