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# Passion, Narrative and Identity in *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*

Tony Tanner

We learn from Mrs Gaskell's incomparable biography of Charlotte Brontë that one day the father of the Brontës wanted his children to reveal their true feelings to him. So he put masks on their faces and invited them, thus concealed, to give absolutely truthful answers to his questions. To be honest, his questions were not such as to bring out the secret inner life of his children, but we may take the occasion as in one way being a prophetic paradigm of what the children, and most importantly Emily and Charlotte, would subsequently do. They put on narrative masks and revealed feelings and problems and inner contestations which could never surface in Haworth Priory. We are exceedingly familiar with the idea of "masks" by now. But I want to start by suggesting that the different choices of narrative devices made by Emily and Charlotte are not only intimately related to what the books are about: these decisions, I think, already latently contain the ultimate meaning of the novels. In this sense the chosen form really is, in large part, the content. Let us consider the adopted narrative techniques in the two novels in question. Neither uses an omniscient third-person authorial voice. Emily chooses as a narrator a figure who is in all crucial respects her opposite – male, emotionally etiolated, and a product of the modern city. He in turn gets most of his evidence from Nelly Dean. That is to say that between us and the experience of Catherine and Heathcliff there is Lockwood's journal and Nelly Dean's voice – a text and a tongue, thus effecting a double translation, or refraction of the original story. Catherine and Heathcliff are as far as possible away from the narrative, and they recede into terminal dissolution when nothing can be narrated because nothing can be differentiated. They become rumour and legend as they cease to be corporeal identities. Charlotte chose a precisely opposite technique. *Jane Eyre* – a potentially passionate girl with some experiences not unlike her creator's – tells her own story not only in but on her own terms. Her narrative act is not so much one of retrieval as of establishing and maintaining an identity. She survives. She is her book. Catherine and Heathcliff escape – from houses, from identity, from

consciousness, and indeed from the book. This gives some indication of the different ways in which the two imaginations worked.

*Wuthering Heights* has often been regarded as pure romance, a timeless drama which has no particular reference to nineteenth century England. Yet we notice that the book does not start "Once upon a time ..." but with a date – 1801. And, in addition, it is Lockwood we encounter first. Why? I think there are a number of reasons which make the book immeasurably richer than it would otherwise have been, but two comments by other authors might help us here. They are both addressing themselves to the problem of how to write about the supernatural or the demonic, the timeless, the utterly non-civilised. Thomas Mann (referring to his narrative method in *Dr Faustus*) succinctly says that for ironic purposes it was better "to make the demonic strain pass through an undemonic medium." James, writing about ghost stories, asserts that "(supernatural) prodigies, when they come straight, come with an effect imperilled; they keep all their character, on the other hand, by looming through some other history ..." So the demonic intensity of Heathcliff is refracted through the very undemonic, emotionally timid, Lockwood. By showing us Lockwood and Heathcliff as inhabitants of the same universe Emily Brontë it seems to me increases the impact of her story. Because part of the force of the book comes from the fact that a passionate yearning for timelessness and placelessness is forced to inhabit time and place. 1801. By making us see Lockwood and Heathcliff existing in the same space, Emily Brontë can show how space can become uneasy, problematical, holding incompatibles.

Let us look a little at the way the novel opens, for a good deal of the novel is contained, in embryo, in the first three chapters in which Lockwood describes his first meeting with Heathcliff and his first entrance into *Wuthering Heights*. As Lockwood records his penetration into the house considerable ironies are generated. For instance he thinks of Heathcliff as a gentleman like himself who prefers not to manifest his good feelings, or again his domesticated eye can only see the wild dogs as tame pets (an error he will pay for when they set on him!) He even tells about a recent amorous incident in his own life which is comically the reverse of the story we are to hear. He reveals that he once found himself attracted to a girl but when he managed to draw her glance – "I shrank icily into myself, like a snail ..." This is a good example of the attenuation and deadening of feeling which can be a result of "civilised" existence, where individuals live more and more separately and their passions diminish into egotistic self-withdrawal. On Lockwood's sec-

ond visit to the house he sees Cathy (the daughter) and makes two embarrassingly wrong guesses as to her relationship with the other men. This only serves to show what an utterly alien world he has moved into: he can have no notion of what goes on in this house. He gets it all wrong. His urban/urbane discourse cannot comprehend the wild exiled depths he has stumbled into. He thinks in terms of a bland and tempered sociability, but in the house all is hatred, violence and anarchy. There is an additional point. He thinks in terms of conventional relationships. But Heathcliff is disruptive of genealogy and the whole web of familial relationships which make for social clarification and continuity.

Again Lockwood is set upon by the dogs and has to stay the night. This effectively takes him deeper into the secret of the house, for he is shown into a bedroom which, in turn, contains a small sort of closet (rooms within rooms), which makes a panelled bed. In this Lockwood seeks security. "I slid back the panelled sides, got in with my light, pulled them together again, and felt secure against the vigilance of Heathcliff, and every one else." It is a revealing gesture. Lockwood, as a civilised man, likes to secure himself, to shut out possibilities of darkness and violence. In every sense he locks the wood. However, inside his refuge he notes various things. Some writing for a start – "a name repeated in all kinds of characters, large and small", or rather three names, Catherine Earnshaw, Catherine Linton, Catherine Heathcliff. Here indeed is Catherine's problem – she cannot reconcile the three identities, and in which of them shall she find her self? The varying experimental inscriptions point to the insoluble dilemma of her life. Then Lockwood finds some diary entries by Catherine. They describe Catherine and Heathcliff's revolt against institutionalised religion and even civilisation itself. The fanatical Calvinist Joseph apparently forced two books on them – "The Helmet of Salvation" and "The Broad Way to Destruction". In a gesture of revulsion they fling the books into the dog kennel. It is a crucial repudiation of the word. And to fling the books in the dog kennel suggests an inversion with larger implications. If they put the books in the dog kennel, where would they put the dogs? From an early age it would seem that Heathcliff and Catherine were associated with an inclination to reject the controls of orthodoxy and to "unkennel" things more usually boxed up and confined.

Lockwood then goes to sleep and dreams and in his second dream he comes into contact with the drama of the book. Catherine, gripping his hand through a broken window, cries to be let into the house from the



moors. Lockwood, in his dream, is hideously cruel: "I pulled its wrist on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bed-clothes." When he gets his hand free he tries to bar the window and cries out: "I'll never let you in, not if you beg for twenty years." It is notable that he tries to keep her out by piling up *books* to block up the gap in the window, trying to use print to stem the penetration of passion. He dreads any possibility of emotional leakage, any threat to his snail's shell. It is striking that Emily Brontë should use a dream to involve Lockwood in the violence and cruelty of Wuthering Heights, and I don't think it is just a matter of his somehow tapping the atmosphere of the place while unconscious. It is surely significant that the apparently "civilised" Lockwood dreams of doing just about the cruelest and most sadistic act in a book full of cruelty. It suggests that Emily Brontë knew very well that in the most civilised effete mind there may well lurk a distorted and perverse proclivity to violence. The kind of extreme passional impulses embodied in Catherine are usually "kept out" by society, disavowed and repressed by the individual. But in dreams – "the return of the repressed" in a frighteningly grotesque form. Catherine represents a passion which society has excluded, cannot accommodate – just as Lockwood tries to keep her *out*. But in the world of this book the window which separates the house from the moor, the civilised from the uncivilised, consciousness from unconsciousness, ultimately life from death – this window has been broken. Much of the power of the book stems exactly from this "breaking of the window": things that are normally "kept out" clamour for admission or come flowing in.

Let me turn now to the end – again we have three chapters from Lockwood and another date. 1802. The book started in storms and mists and snow, the very dead of winter. It ends in "sweet warm weather": wildness has given way to peace, storm to calm, and all kinds of savage disruptions and molestations to an image of a reconstituted society. To remind you of the picture Lockwood brings us. We have a new relationship between the young Cathy and Hareton, the legal inheritor whose *name* stands over the door of the house (remember Catherine's trouble with names). For a period Heathcliff has come between the house and the name, causing an anti-social rupture. This is now being healed. The new couple present a purely domestic scene of pleasant harmless peace. Hareton's "ignorance and degradation" have dropped away from him under the civilising care of Cathy. Significantly, they come together over books – "I perceived two such radiant countenances

bent over the page of *the accepted book*, that I did not doubt the treaty had been ratified on both sides; and the enemies were, thenceforth, sworn allies." (My italics). The "accepted" book is to be set against the *rejected* book – as in the gesture of Heathcliff and Catherine. Books, the written word, are the very essence of civilisation. To put it very simply, they accept the separation of man from man and recognise that we can only communicate indirectly – via sign systems. Accepting the book (in this novel) amounts to accepting the conditions of socialisation. Heathcliff and Catherine had no time for books – because they were not interested in any form of mediated communication. They desired actually to become one another – indeed insist on that identity. Such an impulse for total identification and assimilation is necessarily inimical to anything we can call society.

A word, now, about Heathcliff. He is a figure who in some way seems to transcend history – he is certainly not at home in it. He is the dark stranger from outside the home, the eternal alien of no known origin. He is found wandering in the streets of the great anonymous modern city (Liverpool), a gypsy child, an outlaw. Note that when Mr Earnshaw carries him home – i.e. to the *inside* of the domestic circle – he is utterly exhausted by the effort. More, in the process of carrying Heathcliff, Mr Earnshaw finds that all the toys he had bought for his own legitimate children have been broken. We may sense that, from the beginning, Heathcliff, if contained, is more prone to cause destruction than further creation. (It is, for instance, unthinkable that he should have Catherine's child: he has no connection with social and familial continuity. He is himself alone: no parents, no successors. The son he has inherits none of his power – he is really the negative of a child and dies before coming to life). While Heathcliff and Catherine are children they are utterly happy. They live as one person inside what Emerson called "the magic circle" of unself-conscious nature, sleeping together as they run together. But the essence of growing up is that the individual grows aware of his own separateness, his otherness and apartness from all other men (and women). And it is exactly this severance – this emergence into separateness – which proves such a torment for Heathcliff and Catherine. Inevitably, one way or another, their energies will be devoted to breaking all the boundaries which make for this separation, to recapture some of that wild delight when, as one person, they ran over the moors all night.

Cathy is in some ways more complex than Heathcliff. She wants to be a "double character" and indeed she suffers from something like

schizophrenia as she tries to reconcile marriage (Edgar) and passion (Heathcliff). The division of energies is fatal and she dies between them (with Edgar, significantly, at his books). In her famous speech to Nelly just before her marriage she asserts that she and Heathcliff are inseparable and concludes: "Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff!" For his part Heathcliff asserts that "I cannot live without my life! I *cannot* live without my soul!" In effect they are both saying – I exist only because the other exists. Catherine feels her real self to be Heathcliff: Heathcliff feels that his life and soul are Catherine. This is the extreme form of that romantic passion which attempts to merge completely with another person – to end the inevitable, intolerable separation between two people. To be deprived of this kind of union – in Emily Brontë's world – is to suffer an utter hell of isolation and destitution (her poems return constantly to this sort of suffering). Clearly there is in this sort of passion a drive towards death. As Catherine says, if she cannot have Heathcliff she will choose to die. On the other hand if she could merge totally with Heathcliff that too would mean death – the annihilation of the boundaries which contain and separate the living individual. This is hinted at in the one passionate embrace of Catherine and Heathcliff which is at the same time an embrace of love and an embrace of death. Heathcliff seems to be crushing Catherine into himself, to be merging into her. After she dies his one real desire is to share her grave – an event he prepares for by having one side of her coffin removed. Death is the final release from separateness, the individual merging back into the endless continuum of sheer matter and Being. There Heathcliff and Catherine can merge into each other and become one, because there everything is merged with everything else. Unconscious nature is a pure unity and, even from the beginning of their lives, Heathcliff and Catherine are really seeking to rejoin it. Their energies are ultimately aimed at destroying the 'shell' of the separate self.

At the end Heathcliff and Catherine are once more sleeping peacefully in the same bed – as they did as children though now they have entered the second stage of unself-consciousness, death. The second Cathy and Hareton "accept" separateness and survive as restorers of a calm society. They will find their identities in marriage: Heathcliff and Catherine lose their identities in an unsocialised and unsocialisable passion. In their way they finally elude Lockwood's narrative "framework" – he works with traces and indirect evidence for much of the time – just as, in a different way, Cathy and Hareton conclude it.

## II

Matthew Arnold saw in *Jane Eyre* only "hunger, rebellion and rage" while a contemporary reviewer considered the book "pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition" and associated the novel with Chartism and the threat of social rebellion. Yet we can now see that the novel is most importantly about the creation of a self out of nothing except consciousness and sensation – and language. That is to say, Jane Eyre has none of the things that most people have to help them establish their first sense of reality – no family, no friends, no ties, no house (she is made to feel utterly unwanted and alien in the Reed household – aptly named Gateshead Hall, for they do indeed lock Jane up and try to imprison her mind). She has no connections – no context. She is alive but has no place in which to live. Let me remind you that the book starts in winter in extremes of cold, and this mood continues well into the book: while when Rochester "proposes" it is mid-summer. The important point about this is that all of Jane's early experiences are of cold, literal cold, shivering freezing fingers, no bodily comfort, but also icy looks, harsh hands, cold treatment, the chilling deprivation of warm contacts and real mutuality. I stress this because when she comes to write her life she in effect arranges her experience according to a range of metaphors drawn from these early physical and mental experiences. Experience is usually cold, too cold. This of course leads to a yearning for some kind of warmth, melting, and fire – and I shall say more about this later on. But in her experience she also notes that if things thaw too suddenly they overflow, and that if fire gets out of hand – literal fire but also mental and emotional fire – it consumes and destroys. Experience can be too cold, but it can also be too hot – the geographic realms of the West Indies and India are equivalents of emotional and psychic areas of excessive heat leading either to madness and derangement or a loss of self through scorching aridity.

Now let me bring in language and narrative. Jane Eyre has to write her life, literally create herself in writing: the narrative act is an act of self-definition. Given her social position the only control she has over her life is narrative control. She is literally as in control of herself as she is of her narrative. Early in the book when she tells her life story to new friends – like Helen Burns – she is liable to lose control, become incoherent with resentment and rage and suppressed emotions – just as she is driven "out of herself" by being locked up in the red room. Helen tells her that she must learn to tell her story with more control and this is



a crucial lesson. For what Jane's narrative can contain, and order, and control – she herself can. A loss of narrative control is analogous to a loss of self-arrangement. From this point of view her identity is her text. This is particularly important in her dealings with the two key men in her life: they each in different ways try to take her to extremes, in effect to take her into non-lingual areas where the elemental annihilates the societal. Jane Eyre instinctively knows that if she allows herself to be taken into these extreme areas she will not be able to maintain her identity – though she has that in her which is drawn to such non-lingual extremes, to passional dissolutions of the self. What she has to do is to assimilate aspects of these extremes into her narrative. You can regard narrative – particularly “autobiographical” narrative – as an exercise in assimilation and exclusion. The narrator decides what enters his/her narrative world, and in what form it enters – hence Jane's metaphoric and symbolic treatment of her experience. In *Wuthering Heights* Heathcliff and Catherine try to get beyond language – they throw away their books – and by the same token try to get beyond identity – they finally throw away their social roles. And they die. But Jane, aware of what lies outside language and identity, struggles to assimilate and contain the non-lingual and trans-lingual aspects of experience in her narrative – and she lives. Lives not as some false self or distorted role that other people try to impose on her, but lives with her own self-created, self-defined identity.

One other point here about Jane's narrative. Jane is nourished on nursery tales by Bessie (with the usual fantastic figures to be found in such stories): one of her favourite books is *Gulliver's Travels* which, let me just remind you, proposes the creation of extreme fictive realms in which people are impossibly small or impossibly large (or animals – horses and apes). In addition Jane Eyre admits that she needs a kind of compensatory fantasy world to make up for the boring routines of her actual one (as we know Charlotte Brontë needed – for a time – her “Angria” fantasies). Thus when Jane hears something strange on the “third story” at Thornfield, she is drawn to it as a realm which nourishes her imagination, starved by the stagnation of the lower two stories. “Then my sole relief was to walk along the corridor of the third story ... and best of all, to open my inward ear to a tale that was never ended – a tale my imagination created, and narrated continuously; quickened with all of incident, life, fire, feeling, that I desired and had not in my actual existence.” The general point I am making is that Jane has a gift for narrative – imaginative, given to “enlargement” and symbolic

extremes – which is larger than the very constricted compass of her actual social existence, or indeed almost non-existence (she is “nobody”). In her life she is subjected to pressures which would take her beyond the boundaries of her imaginary narrative altogether – into another kind of non-being, not inside society but outside it. What she needs is somehow to make her life both as ample and controlled as her narrative. The domestic must be intensified; at the same time the elemental must be socialised. The medium for this is language and imagination – that “third story” which brings meaning and significance to the two below it. But there is also madness on the third story (Mrs Rochester): this indispensable dimension of consciousness is necessarily ambiguous and Jane has to tread – and fantasize – carefully.

So while there is much in the book that is drawn to wildness, abandon, the unhindered release of accumulating emotion, there is also much that contests the imperatives of passion and asserts the need for control and containment. Domestic and civilised realities are honoured and acknowledged at the same time as internal and external storms are raging. We often see Jane Eyre in different houses and rooms standing close to the window more involved with the unstructured space and the climatic extremes outside the glass than with the often painful routines and orderings within the house. Yet the one time she leaves all houses and abandons herself to the elements – in her flight from Rochester – she is brought close to death, and at the nadir of her exhaustion she stands outside a house looking enviously *in* at the comfortable domestic routine. Jane Eyre has to learn how to control the dialectic of inside and outside, containment and release, structure and space, just as she has to establish for herself a sort of middle psychological geography, avoiding the extremes of the West Indies and India, and even the wicked south of France where Rochester would take her as a mistress but not as a wife. From one point of view her narrative is an act of psychological cartography. And at the end, Jane is safe, inside a house, having negotiated the outside; in England, a psychological England, not in the West Indies or France or India; and honoured by a legal marriage, not enslaved as a mistress or an object to be used.

When we first see Jane she is standing apart – prevented from “joining the group”; she retires into the window seat behind the red curtains and studies, first the cold winter landscape outside and then Bewick’s *History of British Birds*. Inevitably “birds” communicate a sense of liberty, a free circling in the immense spaces of the air (and of course Jane’s surname contains a pun on that freest of elements – and more than



once she is described as a bird – e.g. by Rochester: “I see at intervals the glance of a curious sort of bird through the close-set bars of a cage.”) But Bewick’s book has another significance. Musing on the illustrations Jane’s imagination is drawn to the notions of the Terrible Arctic Zone – “those forlorn regions of dreary space”: she thinks about “death-white realms”; she is drawn to the pictures of “the rock standing up alone in a sea of billow and spray; to the broken boat stranded on a desolate coast; to the cold and ghastly moon glancing through bars of cloud at a wreck just sinking.” The lonely rock, the broken boat, the sinking ship – these images of the threatened promontory and boat with no firm land at hand adumbrate various stages of her life and the continuous threat to Jane’s precariously emerging sense of her own identity. If “air” is the element which attracts her, water is the one which warns of possible dissolution. On one occasion before Helen Burns dies, and just after a moment in the woods feeling how pleasant it is to be alive, she suddenly has a moment of what we may call metaphysical dread, or in Laing’s term – “ontological insecurity”. Her mind tries to understand the idea of life after death – “and for the first time it recoiled, baffled; and for the first time glancing behind, on each side, and before it, it saw all around an unfathomed gulf: it felt the one point where it stood – the present; all the rest was formless cloud and vacant depth: and it shuddered at the thought of tottering, and plunging amid that chaos.” This feeling of being “at sea”, of not having any certain ports behind or ahead in life (which equals a loss of a sense of origin and destination), of there being only the palpable “now” that one can be sure of – this is a basic and recurrent predicament for Jane. At another time she experiences temporal dislocation a sort of existential amorphousness: “I hardly knew where I was; Gateshead and my past life seemed floated away to an immeasurable distance; the present was vague and strange, and of the future I could form no conjecture.” That is, she cannot bring definition to the tenses of her life – was, is, will be. Awash in time, her life is in danger of losing all grammar and syntax. She also experiences a comparable spatial dislocation: “It is a very strange sensation to inexperienced youth to feel itself quite alone in the world, cut adrift from every connection, uncertain whether the port to which it is bound can be reached, and prevented by many impediments from returning to that it has quitted.” At the end she is not only in possession of Rochester’s house, Ferndean; she also has his watch in her keeping – i.e. she is finally in control of time and space. (Her own paintings reveal something of her fears: one “represented clouds low and vivid, 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*" (my italics). There is only a wreck, a cormorant holding a bracelet, and a sinking corpse. This is the very image of that "formless cloud and vacant depth" into which she fears she might plunge. Other paintings, of a wild woman's face in the sky, of a face "blank of meaning but for the glassiness of despair" resting on an iceberg, likewise reveal her dreads and dreams. They portray wild or miserable lone human faces being reabsorbed into the elements – sinking into the sea, rising into cloud. They hinge on the notion of the evaporation or dilution and vanishing of the distinct human form).

Given that she has no assured place, no fixed location, Jane Eyre's sense of identity is necessarily very vulnerable. When Rochester tries to deceive her into a false marriage he effectively tries to appropriate her by an illicit act of renomination, calling her "Jane Rochester". But it only makes her feel "strange" – as though she cannot find herself in the name. When the potentially bigamous marriage is revealed she is even more lost. "Where was the Jane Eyre of yesterday? – where was her life? – where were her prospects?" This loss of a sense of her own self goes even further when she is in flight from Rochester and wandering in the "outside" world of nature. The birds she sees are no longer an attractive image for her but a reproach: "birds were faithful to their mates; birds were emblems of love. What was I?" Not "who" – but "what"? Her sense of her own distinct being and human actuality is close to annihilation. The "outside", then, offers her no sphere for self-realisation. But when she is "inside" for the most part people try to "imprison" her in different ways. When she is locked up in the red room – a traumatic experience – it is felt to be a "jail". There are other dungeons in the book – Lowood school, Thornfield as described by Rochester, even her little school in Yorkshire, while St. John Rivers turns her mind into a "rayless dungeon". In a crucial scene a game of charades is played at Thornfield, and the word chosen to be enacted is "Bridewell". Bridewell was in turn a royal palace, an hospital, and a house of correction or prison. The name focusses Jane's problem. She must "bride well" (i. e. make the right marriage) otherwise she will find herself in one kind of prison or another – her sense of self negated by the volition of a more powerful other. It is worth noting that only twice in the novel does she make the clear and confident assertion – "I am Jane Eyre", and these are both moments when a character who has at one time been a dominant and powerful menace to her unhelped dependence appears before her weak, helpless, crippled or dying. I will return to these moments.

To summarise a little, the book is organised around five separate establishments, the names of which suggest a progression through a changing landscape – Gates(head), (Lo)wood, Thornfield, Moor(house) also known as Marsh(End), and Fern(dean Manor). In each of these establishments except the last, various pressures, influences, and threats are brought to bear on her sense of her own identity. Initially she is regarded as – or “transformed” into – an “interloper and alien.” But the main threats come from the two men who try to impose “bad” marriages on her. Rochester tries to impose a false identity and role upon her – turning her into a make-pretend wife whom he really wants for his mistress (his references to harems and “seraglio” indicate his “eastern” proclivities). That is the point of his efforts to heap all sorts of clothes and jewels on her before the “wedding”: he is literally trying to deceive her by dressing her up as a “bride” – i. e. to make her play a role in his fantasy. But she resists: “I can never bear being dressed like a doll.” He calls her his “angel” but she refuses this: “I am not an angel . . . I will be myself”; and later: “I had rather be a *thing* than an angel” – intimating she would prefer petrification to idolisation. Rochester thinks he has the “power” to change the rules of society, indeed to change reality itself. Two of his comments are pertinent here: “unheard-of combinations of circumstances demand unheard-of rules.” Jane resists this line of argument sensing that “unheard-of rules” would be no rules at all. Concerning his mad wife Rochester says: “Let her identity . . . be buried in oblivion.” Jane recognises that if he thinks he can do this to one woman he can do it to any woman – hence her flight, a flight from identity-oblivion. Passionally, she is all but lost, but “mentally, I still possessed my soul, and with it the certainty of ultimate safety.” In her flight she discovers that “I have no relative but the universal mother, Nature.” It is not enough. We have come too far. We must find our identities in some kind of society, not simply in nature. Because of thought and reflection. We may decay with and in nature and mingle with its processes – but at the cost of a living identity. “Life, however, was yet in my possession: with all its requirements, and pains, and responsibilities. The burden must be carried; the want provided for; the suffering endured; the responsibility fulfilled. I set out.” There it is. “I set out.” The human obligation.

Refusing Rochester and the “stage-trappings” he tries to impose on her, Jane asserts: “I shall not be your Jane Eyre any longer, but an ape in a harlequin’s jacket – a jay in borrowed plumes” and insists instead – “I will be myself.” She would rather be a real Jane Eyre – no matter what

the privations – than a false “Mrs Rochester”. With St. John Rivers the problem and threat take another form. Whereas Rochester offered – or threatened – too much fire, St. John Rivers is at various times likened to a glacier, marble, stone, glass. His eyes are like “instruments”; he speaks at key moments “like an automaton.” He is a man of iron who forges his own chains: he locks too much up. His beauty is that of a dead classic statue; his religion is bitter and deathly. As he significantly says: “I am cold: no fervour infects me,” while Jane replies: “Whereas I am hot, and fire dissolves ice.” Rivers gradually subdues her and she feels an “iron shroud” gather round her. His ice and iron seem to be winning over her innate fire. She gets to the point where she agrees to go with him to India – but not as his wife. “I abandon half myself,” she meditates – but only half. She will not marry him, and in her answer to his pressing proposal she makes a distinction which is central to the issues I have been discussing. “And I will give the missionary my energies – it is all he wants – but not myself ... my body would be under rather a stringent yoke, but my heart and mind would be free. I should still have my unblighted self to turn to: my natural unenslaved feelings with which to communicate in moments of loneliness.” This is the crucial act of resistance and assertion of her own identity. Her inner life is to be her own; whatever else she gives she will hold on to her “unblighted self.” Her response to the telepathic call from Rochester indicates a sure intuition of where life lies for her. In leaving Rivers she is fleeing from ice, stone, iron and an inflexible religious will which is corrupted by detectable sado-masochistic impulses: she is fleeing, that is, from everything that threatens the death of her self and the cold, relentless extinction and obliteration of her inner life, her passional integrity.

Her journey to Rochester is marked by a symbolic suggestiveness. The way gets darker and more constricted with trees until she feels she has lost her way. There are no longer any roads – indeed there is “no opening anywhere.” It is as though she is returning to some pre-social space where all the conventional definitions are erased and where she can begin again. In the “formlessness” of Ferndean she at last can reform relationships and roles on her own terms. When she finds Rochester he is of course the helpless one now, in a semi-impotent state (blindness being a recognised symbol for some degree of castration) – his imperious desire and antinomian energies now tamed. And this is the second moment when Jane asserts her full free-standing independent identity as she announces to him – “I am Jane Eyre.” Rochester has of course throughout been associated with fire by Jane – where she sees



Rivers in terms of ice. The latent fire – and need for warmth – in Jane is roused by the perceptible flames in his own temperament. Her worry is that she must not be consumed and annihilated in one sudden conflagration (such as is partially blinded and crippled Rochester). Fire of course has always been the most ambiguous metaphor drawn from the elements. It has meant so many contradictory things: it is the very stuff of life and the most deadly agent of destruction; it is the gift of the gods and the eternal punishment of hell; it is Promethean illumination and the source of civilisation – and it is apocalypse, holocaust, judgment day. This radical ambivalence is suggested by the large number of references to fire in the book – indeed David Lodge in an admirable essay has counted them; eighty-five references to domestic fires, forty-three references to figurative fires, ten literal conflagrations, and four references to hell fire. I simply want to refer to two key uses of fire. The “fire” of uncontrolled passion (such as destroys Thornfield) is of course something which Jane must avoid, but that does not mean that Jane is to be seen as opposing the fire-element. Certainly she knows that she will die in extreme heat – or utterly lose her identity; but that does not mean she would be more at home in arctic wastes – geographically or psychologically. Indeed we would perhaps do best to see her as a spirit of *controlled* fire. Let me point to a notable coincidence. I mentioned that it is when two of the once dominant opposing or coercive forces in her life appear before her humbled and incapacitated that Jane asserts her full identity – “I am Jane Eyre.” Well, it is precisely at those two moments that we see her kindling a fading fire. In Mrs Reed’s house the action seems merely an unconsidered reflex – “the fire was dying in the grate. I renewed the fuel.” But note that this is exactly when she is thinking of Mrs Reed dying upstairs. Jane is in charge of the fire in the house which once imposed on her a cold and miserable isolation. Again, when she returns to Rochester (who earlier had tried to draw her too close to the fire until she complained that “the fire scorches me” – see chapter nineteen), it is now her turn to be guardian of the fire while he sits by, helpless and passively grateful. “Now let me leave you an instant, to make a better fire, and have the hearth swept up.” And soon, through his dimmed eyes, he sees “a ruddy haze.” It is in just such a nourishing but non-annihilating warm glow that Jane will now lead her life with Rochester. Not suffering extinction in either the extremes of cold (a dead marriage) or heat (an adulterous liason), but completely and fully her own self, sustained by a controlled warmth of passion which is essential to the well-being of her inmost life. The excluded orphan has finally become that crucial domestic figure – the mistress of the hearth.

It is worth noting that one of the first lessons that Jane Eyre masters is “the first two tenses of the verb *Être*” – I am, I will be, or I was. This is indeed exactly what she has to learn to say with full confidence and authority, to know what the self is in time, to stabilise the self in its relation to what is around it. If you can say “I am” then you can also say “You are” – self-apprehension leads to proper recognition of the other. Learning to articulate and define and hold on to her own identity, Jane Eyre is also able accurately to identify others. In this way she is able to resist being absorbed into, or transformed into, false selves which other people wish to make of her for their own selfish means. She can resist the kind of manipulation, reification, and falsification which threaten her at every key stage of her life (her narrative devices are an inscription of this resistance). Catherine and Heathcliff want to say “I am you” which may be good passion but is bad grammar: they want to destroy pronouns, tenses, genders, prepositional distances and differentiations – indeed they want to get out of grammar altogether. On the other hand Jane Eyre’s achievement, and not only the subject of the book but the reason she wrote it, is the proper mastery of the verb *Être*, or the attainment of the unchallenged ability to say – “I am Jane Eyre.”