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‘Supposed to be very calm generally’: Anger, Narrative and Unaccountable Sounds in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*

Alexandra Lewis

Who blames me? Many no doubt; and I shall be called discontented. I could not help it: the restlessness was in my nature; it agitated me to pain sometimes. Then my sole relief was to walk along the corridor of the third story, backwards and forwards, safe in the silence and solitude of the spot, and allow my mind’s eye to dwell on whatever bright visions rose before it – and certainly they were many and glowing; to let my heart be heaved by the exultant movement which, while it swelled it in trouble, expanded it with life; 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.

It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.

*When thus alone, I not unfrequently heard Grace Poole's laugh: the same peal, the same low, slow ha! ha! which, when first heard, had thrilled me: I heard, too, her eccentric murmurs; stranger than her laugh. There were days when she was quite silent; but there were others when I could not account for the sounds she made.*¹

Is *Jane Eyre* a feminist text? Many, no doubt, may 'blame' me for asking: for what is the passage above but an explosive articulation of the 'suffering' and 'stagnation' that results from social, cultural and by extension political and legal inequality perpetuated by 'custom' (125–26) on the basis of gender? This perennially popular novel, which helped introduce a new, intensely subjective narrative style into nineteenth-century fiction, has garnered a varied history of feminist response. Like Jane's pacings along the corridor, criticism of *Jane Eyre* has moved 'backwards and forwards' (125) on the question of feminism since 1847: this is no simple trajectory towards critical consensus. Is Jane's famous assertion of women's needs a feminist manifesto (as for Adrienne Rich in 1973), a proto-feminist statement (Cora Kaplan, 2007) or, as in Robert Martin's 1966 view, a pre-feminist plea not for 'political, legal, educational, or even intellectual equality between the sexes' but only for 'a recognition of woman's emotional nature'?² In 1855, Margaret Oliphant identified the novel's 'wild declaration of the "Rights of Woman"', shown through its revolutionary – and for Oliphant irresponsible, as unrealistic in contemporary courtship – aspect of 'furious love-making'.³ However, for late-nineteenth-century critic Peter Bayne – writing amid 'vociferous debate' that heralded the New Woman phenomenon – *Jane Eyre* fell short of advocating 'perfect equality': 'No man could have a right to bait and badger a woman like [Rochester did]; and if Jane had been a little more strong and a little more proud, she would never have favoured him with another look of her face'.⁴ From initial reception, through Virginia Woolf's 1920s intervention, *Jane Eyre* survived to be adopted as iconic text by 1970s second-wave Anglophone feminism. Readings since the 1980s have challenged its feminist credentials on the basis of inattention to issues of class, race and imperialism, yet the novel enjoys enduring centrality within debate about the existence of multiple different feminist ideologies. Brontë's work has certainly not suffered from 'too rigid a restraint' (125) upon analysis. Rather, it continues to open up the 'life, fire, feeling' of discussion of what feminism might mean, and how it might look within different historical and cultural contexts.

When Virginia Woolf, in her magisterial essay on women and writing *A Room of One's Own* (1929), makes reference to the 'genius' of Charlotte Brontë, it is a genius that will never be 'expressed whole and entire':

Her books will be deformed and twisted. She will write in a rage where she should write calmly. She will write foolishly where she should write wisely. She will write of herself where she should write of her characters. She is at war with her lot. How could she help but die young, cramped and thwarted?⁵

Woolf, commenting upon the passage from *Jane Eyre* extracted above, finds the 'break' between men's reported laughter at rebellious women and the 'slow ha! ha!' that alludes to the imprisoned Bertha Mason 'awkward': 'it is upsetting' to the reader that 'the continuity is disturbed'.⁶ The sale of her novels' copyright 'outright for fifteen hundred pounds' may make Brontë seem the 'foolish woman' of Woolf's reckoning,⁷ but the conflation of author and character lapses into the kind of reductive analysis that Brontë encountered in contemporary reviews and had sought – using the pseudonym Currer Bell – to avoid. The disturbance of continuity might be seen, rather, as a conscious manifestation of literary genius – Brontë indicating through fine detail what Jane does not yet know she knows about the extent of the containment of women, and gesturing also towards the importance of listening to apparently unaccountable sounds. Awkwardness is key to *Jane Eyre*: the 'break' is nowhere near so discomfiting as Brontë's dedication of the novel to Thackeray, whose own wife was (unbeknownst to Brontë) held in a London asylum.

In Woolf's view, 'anger' and 'ignorance' were 'tampering with the integrity' of the novelist:

She left her story, to which her entire devotion was due, to attend to some personal grievance. [...] Her imagination swerved from indignation and we feel it swerve. [...] The portrait of Rochester is drawn in the dark. We feel [...] a rancour which contracts those books, splendid as they are, with a spasm of pain.⁸

But the bitter assertion of a flawed, 'rotten' core at the heart of many nineteenth-century women's novels, in contrast to which Woolf would place her own knowing, modernist aesthetic, works against her broad claim that 'Literature is open to everybody', and that 'there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of [a woman's] mind'.⁹ Woolf critiques the 'now grumbling, now patronizing, now domineering' voice of the male critic which drags 'even into the criticism of poetry criticism of sex'¹⁰ but falls into a similar trap in judging *Jane Eyre*'s anger. She holds, first, that anger is necessarily a 'swerve' from

effective narrative, and second, that such a swerve must be read biographically. This interpretive framework delimits, for Woolf, Brontë's artistic success. Brontë's titular character is keenly aware of limitation: prior to the rhetorical question 'Who blames me?' Jane has 'longed for a power of vision which might overpass' her horizon of employment as governess, 'which might reach the busy world, towns, regions full of life I had heard of but never seen: [...] I desired more of practical experience than I possessed' (125). Woolf transmutes this fictive sentiment into evidence of the author's own life and blames not Jane but Brontë: 'in those words she puts her finger exactly not only upon' the realization of potential withheld from 'her sex at that time' but also upon 'her own defects as a novelist'.¹¹ Female anger, like madness, becomes another kind of monstrosity that is best locked away. But ought narrative, like the stunted women of Jane Eyre's analysis, really 'be very calm generally' (125)?

For other writers, expressions of disruptive, impassioned belief are precisely the means by which *Jane Eyre* inaugurates a literary tradition concerned to ensure that women will no longer be 'cramped and thwarted'.¹² Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) placed *Jane Eyre* at the forefront of a (respectively) 'feminine' or 'rebelliously feminist' tradition of women's writing. Gilbert and Gubar cite approvingly the novel's violation of codes – of proper feeling and behaviour – observing that it was 'less the coarseness and sexuality of *Jane Eyre* which shocked Victorian reviewers' than 'Jane's anger', with the threat it poses to the order of society.¹³

Uncontainable dangers of independent mind such as had 'overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home,' were seen by early reviewer Elizabeth Rigby in *Jane Eyre*. Rigby attacked the novel as a 'proud and perpetual assertion of the rights of man';¹⁴ and Brontë's consciousness of links between class- and gender-based oppression is evident in the movement of Jane's mind from reference to other 'political rebellions' to the 'ferment' (125) felt by women. Jane quietly establishes a basic presumption of equality from the beginning of her observations on dissatisfaction: her initial adoption of the category 'human beings' quickly becomes the claim that there are 'millions' of women who will – like their male counterparts – 'make [action] if they cannot find it' (125). The diction bespeaks restraint: the finality of 'condemned' suggests that a 'still doom than mine' remains the inevitable course for many women of Jane's generation; the revolt, after all, is largely 'silent'; the 'privileged' and 'narrow-minded' men described politely as

merely 'thoughtless' in the harm they cause women. The revolutionary potential and 'thrill' of such a train of thought, however, is clear.

Voice and self-expression are important here, as throughout the novel. By allowing her 'inward ear' to open and her 'mind's eye to dwell on whatever bright visions rose before it' – without the censorship of self or others – Jane is alive to the 'many and glowing' possibilities of imagination. Acknowledging the physical 'pain' of discontent ensures that the 'trouble' that swells her heart will also expand it 'with life'. But of the desired freedoms that Jane 'had not in my actual existence': are these 'narrated continuously' as a kind of escapist fantasy (in which case the revolt is doomed to remain 'silent') or as a mode of directing her mental impulses towards making viable an alternative future? Women as angels of the house are 'supposed' – both expected and, as a result of their adherence to this expectation, presumed – 'to be very calm', but this stance (perpetuated in many nineteenth-century advice books) sits uneasily atop Jane's sense of her more passionate 'nature' (125), and she is elsewhere alive to the need to counter 'the insinuation of helplessness and distraction' (430) so often used punitively against assertive women. Echoing Jane's rejection of an enclosed life of 'tranquillity' (though she requires 'solitude' for reflection, this should be elected not imposed) (125), and subtly layering in a glimmer of pathologization and medical control, St John's later exhortation 'you must really make an effort to tranquillize your feelings [...] your head becomes confused' is dismissed by Jane as 'Nonsense!' (431). Where others advise her to *be* 'composed' (430), Jane scorns affective falsehood and instead moves towards an existence where she *can* compose: recording the experiential truths of her own life narrative in a way that demonstrates – ahead of twentieth-century second-wave feminism – how the personal is political.

Yet, for all its subversive potential, *Jane Eyre* has been criticized for upholding reductive typologies (beautiful/plain, virgin/whore) and appeasing gendered convention, at worst undermining its own feminist impulses in Jane's and Rochester's final union. The heart of the problem appears to be the uncomfortable intersection of romantic love and personal independence. In a psychoanalytic reading which invokes French feminist theory on the role of language in perpetuating patriarchal oppression, Jean Wyatt argues that the text's lucid advocacy of women's autonomy is sabotaged by its 'unchecked' quest for 'that most restrictive of all female spaces, the bubble of bliss promised by romantic love'.¹⁵ But despite Jane's assertion that to be deprived of the people and places she loves (not just Rochester, but also Helen Burns) is 'like looking on the necessity of death' (283), she also convinces her reader that '*I* care for

myself. The more solitary [...], the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself' (356). Jane's life force springs not from any 'bubble' of romance but from her spiritual conviction and the possession of 'an original, a vigorous, an expanded mind': 'I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will' (283–84). Structurally, as Jane's exploration of her own limited horizons takes up the plight of 'millions' (a form of collective or communal analysis) (125), so the relative seclusion of her later married life expands to considerations of broader social harmony and even St John's missionary ventures in India. A married, maternal Jane those ten years later may likely be 'making puddings and knitting stockings' (126) – this irony is not lost on the reader – but the suggestion is that her life is not 'confined' to these elements alone. Vitally, in Rochester's company Jane feels 'as free as in solitude' (500), so we might imagine that although she speaks of being 'my husband's life as fully as he is mine', she yet retains that unceasing narrative of her own imagination, so glowing to her mind's eye and inward ear. With a chastened Rochester, she can share her narrative on equal terms (in so far as this is possible under coverture within the marriage contract), whereas with St John she would have been ensnared as helpmeet devoid of enlivening love.

But it is, fundamentally, with a chastened Rochester that union is possible: and this is key to much feminist discontent with Brontë's delineation of Jane's trajectory. Jane's sense of morality ensures that she resists inappropriate advances (encompassing both the language of ownership and Rochester's attempted bigamy). Jane had viewed the imbalance of social and financial power between them as threatening her identity. But is it not the case that the conditions in large part making possible their eventual 'equal' partnership – her inherited fortune and his physical incapacitation – rely on fairy-tale-like improbability, raise problematic symbolic resonances and (with Diana and Mary Rivers also freed from dependency by Jane's shared fortune) gloss over the repressive conditions for women, and particularly the liminal figure of the governess, in wider Victorian society? Rochester's conversion from amorous tyrant to grateful recipient of Jane's now freely-given love relies in part upon his 'seared vision!' (493), and his own interpretation of his 'crippled strength' (where he must submit to another's 'guidance' (495)) coheres with Showalter's reading of his 'symbolic immersions' in 'feminine experience'.¹⁶ If an equation of women with weakness perseveres within the text despite Jane's self-assertions, also troubling is the idea that blindness might be a metaphor for castration (as some feminist critics have suggested): the text, on this view, plays into normative gender hierarchies even as it averts its gaze from the reality of disability.¹⁷

Gilbert and Gubar's influential identification of Bertha as Jane's double, an embodiment of the imprisoned rage within every woman (or 'Everywoman') in Victorian society, at once 'ushered feminist criticism into a new age of maturity'¹⁸ and opened debate about essentialism and the uneasy relationship between allegorical interpretation and realist narrative. The reduction of Bertha's 'madness' to an aspect of Jane's psychic life has dangerous implications: such a reading shifts attention away from Rochester's mistreatment of mental illness and also from the issues of race and imperialism threatening the text's borders. Gayatri Spivak's 1985 reading of *Jane Eyre* critiqued the imperial tendencies of western feminism, calling into question the text's dehumanization of the racial other.¹⁹ There can be no 'Everywoman' when Bertha's entitlements to the kinds of equality sought by the English governess are so firmly and fatally eroded.

Other writers have sought to reconcile Brontë's feminism with postcolonial criticism, situating Jane and Bertha as 'oppressed rather than opposed sisters'.²⁰ Rochester's threat to 'try violence' if Jane does not 'hear reason' (340) recalls the conquering 'force' (357) of colonialism, and Jane employs the discourse of enslaved subject when she resists the costumes imposed upon her, threatening to 'stir up mutiny' among Rochester's (presciently imagined) 'harem inmates' (302). But, if there is such a sisterhood, it is vital to note that Rochester's teasing threat to 'attach [Jane] to a chain' is presented as 'figuratively' spoken (303), whereas the 'wild animal' Bertha is literally 'bound' with 'rope' (328). If the 'eastern allusion' bites Jane with a sense of 'annoyance and degradation' (301), she is strangely quiescent on the issue of a woman kept 'in a room without a window' (327), forced to seek expression by laying her teeth to Rochester's cheek (for how can Bertha sustain her own 'inward ear' and 'bright visions' (125) in such captivity?). Where Bertha has been 'mastered' (328) beyond salvation, Jane can declare 'I am my own mistress' (483) and is seemingly satisfied with an individualist triumph enabled by what Spivak calls Bertha's self-immolation. But this is fictional autobiography (*Jane Eyre. An Autobiography*. Edited by Curren Bell), and Jane's and Brontë's perspectives are not synonymous. As Susan L. Meyer has asserted, the novel 'betrays Brontë's lingering anxiety about British imperialism' and about her own literary treatment of associations between resistance to the ideologies of male and imperialist domination, respectively.²¹

Criticism, as Cora Kaplan has argued, 'has an emotive history': 'the fact that *Jane Eyre* continues to incite a highly charged contentious response [...] so full of present feeling that it seems out of sync with the novel's historical

status, suggests that its narrative condenses unresolved questions in and for feminism today'.²² *Jane Eyre's* descriptions of gendered 'nature' and 'custom' (125–26) as well as its explorations of attitudes to marriage, desire, property, work and independence have made it an iconic text, both shaped by and strongly shaping the historical tradition of feminist thought in literary analysis. What is the place of anger, love and individualism in feminist ideology? Fortunate are we that Charlotte Brontë rose above the advice of poet laureate Robert Southey to forget her aspirations: 'Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be'.²³ Brontë's novel at once asserts a female desire for change and acknowledges the difficulty in bringing that change into view, let alone into being. If *Jane Eyre's* 'bright visions' gestured, through their very limitations, towards the material conditions making equality a distant prospect, they yet inspired a vibrant, continuing tradition of feminist criticism concerned to look beyond existing structures the better to hear and understand apparently 'eccentric murmurs' or the 'slow ha! ha!' (125–26) of oppressed voices. Sounds registered as unaccountable when first uttered might coalesce into necessary and effective 'rebellions' (125). The restless, agitated drive to creativity seen by Woolf as a kind of deformity gives rise to some of *Jane Eyre's* (and *Jane Eyre's*) finest feminist moments.