On Postformalism

There is a text in this gloss. Thanks to thirty years of theory, it is not so monolithic as the stone that Dr. Johnson kicked, but it is there and it is the object of our scrutiny, surrounded though it may be by the haze of time and the aura of language, and refracted by these and by the situation and subjectivity of the reader.

The text is *Jane Eyre*—its precise words in their fixed order beginning with “There was no possibility of taking a walk that day . . .” and ending with “‘Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus!’” That text was written by Charlotte Brontë, published by George Smith in October of 1847. Well, not exactly. The text is the Clarendon edition of *Jane Eyre*, edited by Jane Jack and Margaret Smith, published by Oxford in 1969, using the first edition as the copy text but recording “all verbal variants in the MS and the first three editions” (Clarendon xx).

These words in their fixed order determine the overall structure and sequence of this paradigmatic reading of *Jane Eyre*. Such temporal formalism in the hands of a Meir Sternberg (*Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction*) brilliantly illuminates the structure and strategies of novel texts. His definition and demonstration of such temporal factors as the “primacy” effect—how the temporal position of the early portions of a text powerfully programs the reading of that text and how other strategies can modify or subvert this influence—have proved invaluable in my attempt to explore the structure and
narrative strategy of *Jane Eyre*, and ultimately to help explain the consequent and inevitable "misreadings" of *Jane Eyre* and, by implication, of novels in general.¹

Formalist, sequential reading, however, encounters practical problems that Sternberg does not explore. Almost immediately, for example, one is confronted with the question of what constitutes the narrative unit. Such a pragmatic and relatively innocent question raises a theoretical question that challenges the formalist assumption of the sufficiency of the text: how or by what is the narrative segmented? Sooner or later, too, the reading of the text, no matter how intentionally sequential, is deflected from the unilinear by recollection of what went before, which raises questions not only of the form but of who or what does the deflecting.

One of the "answers" to these and similar questions introduces "the reader" and the theoretical issue of whether a text falling in the forest without anyone present makes a meaningful or affective noise. Those more interested in the receptive eardrum than in the textual wavelengths argue that the text until it is read is only an inert object, a material book, and that when it is read it is no longer the same text, for a new subject, the reader, has been introduced and the result is realized dialogically.

A literary text then becomes more or less equivalent to a musical score: the notes are fixed and in a fixed order, but until it is read/performed it is an unheard melody; and each performance of the text is different, for notation/language is not fully determinate. So once performed the text is no longer merely Charlotte Brontë's or the pseudonymous Currer Bell's text, but "*Jane Eyre* (the Clarendon text) as read/played by ——-". It is now one performance of what Wolfgang Iser calls the "work," which, he says, "cannot be identical with the text or with the concretization, . . . cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or to the subjectivity of the reader." It is "virtual," "situated somewhere between the two" (Act 21).

The reading, or performance, of the text immediately deflects it from its formal unilinearity, for the reader (with—or without?—signals) looks forward from the words being read, projecting a future
text, and glances backward to pick up clues not only of what is to happen next but of what kind of fictional world this is. The work has, then, a second dimension. The text is linear, the reading “spatial” (bringing present, past, and future into the moment of reading). Moreover, this fluid, dynamic, multidimensional, indeterminate reading is unstable even in the reader’s mind, for the aesthetic effect (or affective “meaning”) “constantly threatens to transmute itself into discursive determinacy— . . . it is amphibolic: at one moment aesthetic and at the next discursive. This transmutation is conditioned by the structure of fictional ‘meaning,’ for it is impossible for such a meaning to remain indefinitely as an aesthetic effect” (Iser, Act 22). Though this discursive meaning or determinacy is engendered by the act of reading the text, it “translates” the text through frames of reference external to the text.

Are the spatializing of the text and the transmutation of the reading experience and the “translation” into discursive meaning the reader’s doing, or is the reader simply following the “instructions” of the text? This is one of the key points at which modern critical theorists diverge. Even those who are considered reader-response critics differ widely, some situating the work (as we shall continue to call it) closer to the reader, so close at times as to override historical, semantic, or syntactical limits. This path can be loosely designated the poststructuralist or postmodernist (the terms themselves are subject to complex debate). Iser, however, grants much more authority to the text, situating the work closer to what he calls the “artistic” or author’s pole than to the “aesthetic” or reader’s pole. Though he still maintains the text is not a work until actualized, Iser’s valorizing of the text distinguishes him from the poststructuralists, situating him closer to what may be called “postformalist.”

This is a term inferred from Mikhail Bakhtin and applied to him and to her own early work by Julia Kristeva (Roudiez 2). It suggests not only the historical development of their position from an early engagement with and critique of Russian formalism but also a residual prioritizing of the text—and formalism—and a literary-historical and sociohistorical view uncharacteristic of traditional formalism.

At first Russian formalists renounced historical knowledge and
virtually ignored the "historicity of literature." Ultimately, however, many, like Viktor Shklovsky, were forced to rethink the principles of diachrony. The literariness of literature is conditioned . . . diachronically by the opposition to the givens of the genre and the preceding form of the literary series. When the work of art is "perceived against the background of other works of art and in association with them," as Viktor Shklovsky formulates it, the interpretation of the work of art must also take into consideration its relation to other forms that existed before it did. (Jauss 17)

Medvedev/Bakhtin considers such movements of formalism into the area of literary history "personal development[s]" which were inconsistent with the system of formalism itself but which were necessary "in order to move forward again" (75), that is, to move toward "postformalism." The formalists' tentative historicizing tried to keep history at least within the bounds of literary history. The concept of "literary evolution," for example, envisioned historical change only in terms of the interaction, the growth and decay, of literary schools:

According to Viktor Shklovsky and Jurij Tynjanov, there exists in each period a number of literary schools at the same time "wherein one of them represents the canonized height of literature"; the canonization of a literary form leads to its automatization, and demands the formation of new forms in the lower stratum that "conquer the place of the older ones," grow to be a mass phenomenon, and finally are themselves in turn pushed to the periphery. (Jauss 17)

Even within this limited view of "history," we can see that, without recourse to "sub"-literary (folk) or "extra"-literary cultural and social forces, the "not-quite-post"-formalists approach such Bakhtinian areas as carnivalization and official language.

This study concentrates on the temporal form of *Jane Eyre* and the dialogic relationship of Brontë's novel to anterior and contemporary novels. In its formal and intraliterary focus, therefore, it may appear to be more "neoformalist" or "pre-postformalist" than "postformalist" tout court. However, not only do I reach out explicitly from time to time to extraliterary history—the condition of the governess, for
example—and, especially in the later chapters, to extraliterary ideol­ogy, but the clash of novel species detailed here is dialogically related to the contextual struggle of cultural and social forces. Each of the genres carries social, political, philosophical ideologemes—domestic realism is radical in the nineteenth-century sense, individualistic, frequently feminist, yet bourgeois and laissez-faire; the Gothic romance essentially patriarchal and aristocratic, and so on. Indeed, literature often anticipates the development of such ideologemes, Bakhtin suggests, though “in an undeveloped, unsupported, intuitive form” (Medvedev/Bakhtin 17). From the late-capitalist, gender-conflicted position of our late twentieth-century reception, realism and romance, the bourgeoisie and aristocracy, are all “official,” centripetal voices, so the most relevant and significant centrifugal aspect of *Jane Eyre* we can hear is the feminist quarrel with patriarchy. The voice of early feminist criticism was often essentialist or “formalist,” in that it was decontextualized, oversimplifying the complexity of the struggle of social forces and the heteroglossia of the social—and of the literary—discourse. More recent feminist criticism, including its criticism of *Jane Eyre*, has resituated its voice historically, within the contemporary social context. This has greatly facilitated my attempt to blend that voice into the chorus (and babble) of voices in the text so that it might resonate in the “concrete heteroglot conception of the world” (Bakhtin, Dialogic 293) of *Jane Eyre*. That this study of *Jane Eyre*, despite its concentration almost exclusively on the texts of novels, is postformalist in its implied relation of literary to social forces may best be illustrated, perhaps, by interpolating “the novel,” “narrative elements,” and “literary” in a passage from Bakhtin that treats language, the word, and the social:

Language [/the novel] is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world. All words [/narrative elements] have the “taste” of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word [/narrative element] tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially [/literarily] charged life; all words [/novels] and [narrative] forms are populated by intentions. Contextual overtones (generic, tendentious, individualistic) are inevitable in the word [/narrative element]. (Dialogic 293)
(And one would of course want to add "gender" to "profession," "genre," etc.)

This study initially tries as rigorously as possible to read *Jane Eyre* sequentially, with no other intentional ulterior motive or theory. Very quickly and ineluctably it is deflected from the unilinearly sequential, and ultimately into the literary—or novel—context of the 1840s. Driven by issues thus raised by its inability to sustain the "natural," sequential reading of the text, it explores the causes and the theoretical and methodological implications of the deflection. In due course, then, this study situates itself somewhere in postformalist territory, between the more relentlessly temporal formalism of Meir Sternberg, who follows the novel text linearly; and Iser, who follows the reader following the text; and Bakhtin, within whose comprehensive view of language, of genre, and of the novel as a culture- and occasion-specific (and thus historical and intertextual) utterance this study takes its place. While it explores only the occasion-specific particularities of Brontë's novel, it will also serve as an example of, if not a paradigm for, the reading of novels.