Strategies of the Text

Though this study set out to read the text of *Jane Eyre* with rigorous sequentiality, it was immediately deflected from that "straight line" to the fictional context, the dialogue or discourse of the novel into which it was "speaking" and through which it was generating its ideational and affective significance. Though there will still be occasions when it must define itself and make its meaning in terms of the contemporary or traditional fictional context, the earlier portions of the text itself serve increasingly as its own context, much as an author's early novels serve as context for his or her later ones. Once again, therefore, the reader is deflected from the unilinear forward movement through the text, now not "beyond" the text but "backward" along the line of the text, in order to bring to the textual or reading moment or detail recollected past moments that seem relevant. The recollection acts almost like an "alien" text in refracting the present textual moment, and, more important for our purposes here, it renders synchronic, vertical, or spatialized what was diachronic, horizontal, temporal, and consecutive. Connecting the past moment(s) to the present moment of reading is an act of comprehension, making a pattern which then projects a tentative configuration of what is yet to come, a configuration of the novel as a whole. Like formal units, such spatialization may be seen as a function of the textual code or as an operation of the reading subject, and as we did in discussing segmentation of the text into units, we may invoke our dialogized quantum
theory that accepts neither version as definitive but accepts both in a dialectical relationship. Looking for the moment from the vantage point of the critical reader, spatialization—the bringing together of elements from earlier portions of the text and projecting forward a configuration—though deviating from the unilinear progression from word-the-first to word-the-last of the text, is not a deviation from but is inherent in the act of reading.

The first section of this study concentrated on the linear and contextual dimensions. This second section, though it continues to read the text linearly and will not neglect the novelistic context when appropriate, will concentrate on the spatial or vertical dimension of the text. It will consider the directions for spatializing as strategies of the text but will often trace the realizing of the strategies through the reader's performance of the work.

To illustrate this recollective, projective, spatializing reading and the ambivalent roles of textual signals and the reader, we might depart for a moment from linear reading to look at a passage well into the third volume of *Jane Eyre*:

I was almost as hard beset by him now as I had been once before, in a different way, by another. I was a fool both times. To have yielded then would have been an error of principle; to have yielded now would have been an error of judgment. So I think at this hour, when I look back to the crisis through the quiet medium of time: I was unconscious of folly at the instant. (534)

We see in this passage the three virtual dimensions of time in the fictional action of the novel that give the second, spatial dimension to the text: “now,” despite the past tense of the narration (“I was almost . . .”), is the virtual present, the moment of the fictional action; “then” is the fictional past—in this case an event which has been dramatized earlier in the novel; “in this hour,” which is the narrator’s present, the moment in which she is writing this part of her autobiography, is, in terms of the fictional action, the future, for the reader does not as yet know of the events that intervene between the fictional present and the time of narration.

These signals guide the reader's active participation in the text.
The virtual present is also the reader’s actual present: the reader is at this moment taking in the information given in the text. The virtual past—"then"—is in the reader’s actual past, the reader having read the scene referred to in the past, but the text here recalls it, and not other earlier scenes, into the reader’s present, so that it is present only as memory is present. The narrator’s present is, for the reader, present, past, and future: the thoughts being thought by the narrator “at this hour” are being read in the actual present, but the knowledge the narrator has of the fictional events between the fictional “now” and the narrator’s writing about them is in the reader’s future; yet, of course, the entire book has been written in the past, before the reader has read even the title and opening sentence. The time of the fictional action, then, is that of the reader who is taking in what is happening in the passage, recalling the earlier scene in which Jane was “beset” and comparing and distinguishing it from that of the present, unaware of what will happen between the time of this action and the time of the narration. The statement that Jane “was unconscious of folly at the instant” informs the reader that Jane at the time of the narrating knows that for Jane at the time of the fictional action, to have yielded would have been folly; it also heightens the suspense by informing the reader that Jane was then unconscious that it would be folly and so just might yield.

Except at the very beginning and ending of a novel, these three aspects of narrative time are continually present. We take in the information given in the text’s present. We recollect what we have read and put it together with what we are at present reading in order to comprehend the text, and we make a pattern of the as-yet-incomplete novel. This tentative configuration inevitably anticipates the narrative and thematic future of the text and is an image not only of “the whole story” but also of the “whole world” or worldview of the novel.

Other signals in the text can serve functions similar to such words as “then” and “now”: repetitions of key words or images, for example, may invite the reader to recall in the reading present events from the reading or fictional past. Here, for example, the phrase “then . . . principle” would recollect for us that Jane had, in that earlier scene, based her refusal of Rochester on principles and the laws of God and man and had at the time identified violation of such laws not only as mere
folly but also as something that has significantly figured in the novel already—insanity:

"I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man. I will hold to the principles received by me when I was sane, and not mad—as I am now. Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation: they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigour; stringent are they: inviolate they shall be." (404–5)

The word and concept of "principles" in connection with the later scene should act as a mnemonic trigger, especially since the reader has been reminded of it at least once before. When Jane has just become a teacher at Morton, she asks herself whether this rather desolate position is better than living in France as Rochester's beloved and indulged mistress. She answers, "Yes; I feel now that I was right when I adhered to principle and law, and scorned and crushed the insane promptings of a frenzied moment. God directed me to a correct choice: I thank his Providence for the guidance!" (459). Here again, to yield is identified not with folly—of which Jane is capable—but with insanity. It is difficult to believe that Jane, having already witnessed the example of Bertha, would allow herself to succumb to insanity—loss of rational or moral control. While we therefore expect her to resist, we also have a horrific vision of her future should she yield now to St. John.

If we can bring forward these passages with a certain degree of circumstantiality and verbal recall, this passage from the ninth chapter of volume 3 will not only educate our expectations and the projected configuration of the plot but will also weave the action together with the thematic patterns of passion and principles, uncontrolled passion and insanity, principle and Providence, into a deep and rich texture.

To say that the textual signals should recall the scene in which Jane was "beset" by Rochester and might well recall such thematic elements as principles, passion, insanity, and Providence is not to say that this is all they can or should recall. If all readers will recall Rochester's proposal, many the role of principle, some the intermediate reference to principle and insanity, each will respond to what he or she hears as other echoes—Jane's defiance of Brocklehurst, for example, who also "beset" her in his way and who, as a black pillar, may recall St. John.
Rivers, the man of marble. Neither do these signals definitively determine the reader’s configuration and projection of the future shape or development of the text. Nor does the richness of the reading and the consequent configuration guarantee the projection of the right narrative or thematic outcome. At times, indeed, the rich reading only complicates our expectations by multiplying the possibilities and therefore inevitably involves “misreading.” But good reading does not necessarily consist in guessing correctly what will happen or what the text will show its world to be, but in being aware as much as possible of what the novel suggests might be.

As with earlier chapters, the four chapters and afterword to follow are not exclusively focused on what the theory-oriented titles and Jane Eyre-specific subtitles denote. The strategies and subjects central to one chapter are inevitably considered elsewhere as the sequential reading of the text dictates. Thus we have already noticed in earlier chapters that sometimes the narrator speaks in her own (mature) voice; sometimes monologically in that of the younger, experiencing Jane; and often in a combination of the two that we refer to, following Bakhtin, as hybridized. The modulation of the narrating voice is a significant part of the narrative strategy and perhaps an even more significant factor in the ontological strategy. Often these strategies coincide with or complement each other. It is important for plot and suspense that we do not know all that the narrator knows from the beginning but are subject to the same doubts, errors, and discoveries in more or less the same sequence as Jane; there are but few instances in which Jane’s ignorance or blindness or error is treated ironically. What Jane will learn about the cosmos in the course of the novel is that Providence and not she is in charge of her life; the reader who is reading here as a member of what Rabinowitz calls the “authorial audience”—assuming and attempting to grasp an authorial intention—only gradually learns the same lesson, and that is the apparent didactic lesson of the novel, which would be rhetorically ineffective if it were prematurely divulged to the reader over Jane’s head. If Providence were Fate and Jane’s life predestined, both she and the reader could be apprised of this at once. But Brontë’s Providence merely guides and warns. It is the
PART II

responsibility of the "pilgrim," who has free will, to notice these signs, read them aright, and follow the guidance. The reader, put in the same ontological state as young Jane, must also learn to look for and interpret signs. Both the suspense and the psychological and moral power of *Jane Eyre* rely heavily on the control of the hybridized and mono-logic voices. This is further complicated by the fact that Jane grows spiritually as well as physically during the course of the novel, so that Jane's voice in the early chapters is not necessarily the same as her voice in the middle or later chapters. There are, then, not two voices of Jane—narrator and actor—but three: narrator and younger and maturing Jane. Hybridization, along with the consequent spatialization, and the interrelation of plot and ontology are the major critical areas of exploration in the fifth chapter of this study.

The sixth chapter explores that portion of the novel in which the secret of Thornfield Manor is revealed and Jane leaves it and Rochester behind. These chapters offer a particularly dramatic instance of spatialization. In effect, the whole Thornfield half of the novel and even to some degree the Lowood chapters that preceded it are devastated. Jane's life and her life story retreat to the first pages of the novel. As Jane says, she is a cold, solitary girl again. This chapter examines the frequent repetitions, recollections, and revisitations of earlier scenes and details in this most recapitulative section.

One of the dramatic repetitions with variation involves the way the volumes are structured: the last words of the second volume echo the troubled-water imagery and Biblical allusions with which the first volume ended, but where the earlier was full of hope tinctured with anxiety, the later is full of despair. Here the strategy seems most indisputably to be the formal strategy of the text; the reader's only responsibility for realizing this powerful "reminder" is to notice.

The seventh chapter continues examining the roles of text and reader. St. John Rivers emerges as a virtual antagonist, at least for many readers. He offers Jane a new life as his wife and helpmate on a sacred venture, but for Jane (and the reader) this would mean giving up all thoughts of Rochester, of romantic love, of fulfillment of what she has to this point thought of as her own nature. Chapter 7 of this study argues that in order to realize both the affective impact and the
nature of the ontological choice being made by the text, this possibility should be taken seriously and entertained as a potentially godly path. We should be in doubt about not only the outcome of the plot but even which outcome is the more desirable within the world and ideology of Jane Eyre. This is, in effect, to recommend reading at this point and at least for a time as a member of the "authorial audience." It is clear that the majority of readers then and now, and especially now, "see the text as it cannot see itself," and do not take the possibility of Jane's marrying St. John seriously and certainly do not think it desirable.

Here there is a dramatic instance of the ubiquitous but usually less-clearly visible dimension of the text that goes beyond the linear, spatial, and even the contextual dimensions: the reader's dimension or site (see n. 1). The reader, no matter how determined to be a loyal part of the authorial audience, can never fully "coincide with" the text or fully realize its or the author's "intention." The "words" of the text are always occupied for the reader by alien terms. In that sense, a sense that is constitutive of this study, all readings are therefore "misreadings." Where there are significant historical or cultural shifts between the time of the text and of the reading, the entire ideological base of the text may seem alien or even invisible. Though to read a text only from our own cultural and ideological site is perhaps no more a misreading than that of the Victorian novel-reader, we forgo an advantage that we have over that reader: he or she cannot see the text from our historical-cultural-ideological position, but we can see it both from our own and, to some extent, from the recovered norms or conventions of 1847, which not only permits us to see the text as it cannot see itself—even as historical ignorance would—but permits us to see thereby the contingency of our own ideological site.

Perhaps part of the difficulty in comprehending St. John is "ideological" in a more purely literary sense: that is, he is the most truly original creation in this novel (at least, I have been unable to find a precedent for his character and role in the novels of the time). In a sense, then, he is not "narratable" and so cannot fulfill for the reader the dialogic role given him by the author or text.

The final chapter of this study also concentrates on St. John, but here in an attempt to explain why in terms of an authorial-audience
reading he is the focus of the final, Biblically oriented words of Jane Eyre’s autobiography. In doing so, the chapter explores historically and theoretically the nature of the largely period-specific genre of the fictional autobiography.

Chapter 8 suggests that Jane Eyre moves beyond Jane; the afterword suggests that it moves beyond Charlotte Brontë.