Ideology and the Act of Reading: The Cold Cumbrous Column

Though the narrator says that God must have led her on as she left Thornfield, young Jane had not prayed for guidance, and the narrator's language describing Jane's journey neither indicates nor denies explicitly the presence of a directing force. Jane has not chosen her destination but has gone as far as the coachman will take her for twenty shillings. Stripped of her inner resources, she is now also at the end of her material resources—she has spent her last shilling and has left her belongings on the coach. She is destitute, lost, empty, and alone: "Not a tie holds me to human society... I have no relative but the universal mother, Nature" (412). There is at this point no mention of a universal Father, no suggestion of an ordered or purposeful universe. There is no longer any hint of divine guidance, nor is the passage marked as monologic by quotation marks. It is, however, in the present tense and thereby deliberately separated from the authority of the retrospective narrator.

She is set down at Whitcross, "a stone pillar set up where four roads meet" (412). Jane does not find the name or crossing significant in any way. Despite her prayers of desperation, her theistically underwritten moral principles, her resorting to the once-rejected Psalms, she is still predominantly the down-to-earth secularist: the cross, she says to herself, "is white-washed, I suppose, to be more obvious at a distance and in darkness" (412). And still the narrator is silent, the passage monologic. The name of the destination, however, over Jane's
head, takes its place in a suspiciously Bunyanesque series: Gates-head, Low-wood, Thorn-field . . . Whit(e)-cross. Has the narrator been giving the places of her past allegorical names? Has the editor/author Currer Bell done so? Are these names providential signs which Jane should be reading? What is problematized here is the narrative strategy, the relation of author to narrator, and narrator to her younger self and to the reader. What is suspended here, along with the plot and Jane's future, is the whole nature and authorial meaning of *Jane Eyre*.

Jane, meanwhile, entrusts herself not to God the father but to Nature, her mother, who, she is certain, will give her shelter for the night (413). Under the stars, however, she becomes aware of the Father, of God's "infinitude, His omnipotence, His omnipresence," but not as a source of guidance:

Sure . . . of his efficiency to save what He had made; convinced I grew that neither earth should perish, nor one of the souls it treasured. I turned my prayer to thanksgiving: the Source of Life was also the Saviour of Spirits. Mr. Rochester was safe: he was God's, and by God would be guarded. (414)

Jane goes to sleep comforted and for the reader the future looks bright, but we learn once again, however, how linear *Jane Eyre* is, how occasion-specific the local utterances, and how dangerous it is to project a total configuration of meaning or outcome based on a single passage. Though the next day is warm and beautiful, "Want came to me, pale and bare"; she wishes to die but feels it her responsibility to keep alive. She can find no work, no food, is reduced to offering her handkerchief or gloves for bread, but even then without success. The shift in mood may even problematize Jane's or our confidence that Rochester will be protected, which seemed so certain the night before in the bosom of Nature.

The narrator at last intervenes, not to authorize or interpret but to elide: "Reader, it is not pleasant to dwell on these details . . . : the moral degradation, blent with the physical suffering, form too distressing a recollection ever to be willingly dwelt on. . . . Let me condense now. I am sick of the subject" (419–20).

A few people help Jane a little, but not out of their human concern
for her. A farmer gives her a slice of bread—not out of charity but because he thinks her "an eccentric sort of lady who had taken a fancy to his brown loaf" (420). The next day, after a night of rain and fear of "intruders," she is given some porridge because "'T' pig doesn't want it" (421). She can expect, and receives, but little help from her fellow humans. At nightfall it is still raining. Even her mother, Nature, no longer seems willing or able to protect her. Her physical self is now as devastated as her moral and psychic self was at Thornfield. She knows if she sleeps again outdoors she will die:

"And why cannot I reconcile myself to the prospect of death? . . . Because I know, or believe, Mr. Rochester is still living: and then, to die of want and cold, is a fate to which nature cannot submit passively. Oh, Providence! sustain me a little longer! Aid—direct me!" (421)

Once more her choice is overdetermined: she will live because she knows—or believes—Rochester lives; she will live because (human) nature (life) will not give itself up—one does not willingly die of exposure and starvation. Again, this is a "soliloquy," quotation marks once more signaling that her present thoughts, including the belief that Rochester lives, do not necessarily have the narrator's authorization. The overdetermination and the unauthorized voice of experiencing Jane here as elsewhere leave the nature of the fictional world in doubt: their function is at once to further the suspense about the outcome and problematize the ontological grounding of the world of the fiction.

Immediately after her plea or prayer, Jane ascends a hill, seeking a place to lie down and hide, "when, at one dim point, far in among the marshes and the ridges, a light sprung up. 'That is an ignis-fatuus,' was my first thought" (422). False lights, such as passion, have appeared before in Jane's narrative, and false lights have proved potentially dangerous to other young women in the fiction of the time, but this light does not vanish: it burns on "quite steadily." Jane follows the light, discovers a house, peeks through a window, sees an elderly servant and two young ladies. She knocks. The servant, though kindly, turns her away. Jane resigns herself to death: "'I can but die,' I said [aloud], 'and I believe in God. Let me try to wait His will in silence'" (429). She is overheard by the brother of the two ladies, a clergyman, who is just
now returning; she is taken in, fed, put to bed. "I thanked God—experienced amidst unutterable exhaustion a glow of grateful joy—and slept" (431).

The ambiguity of the interpolated phrase is typical of this entire episode—"grateful" to whom? To the clergyman and his sisters, to God, or to both? Or is the passage so thoroughly double-voiced that young Jane is grateful to the family and the narrator to God? The twenty pages of this chapter refer to God several times, but almost always double-voicedly, embedded in a factually descriptive, detached, understated prose, or in passages where choice and reasons are overdetermined, so that the grounding of the fictional world remains in doubt. It is not that the narrator does not intervene in this chapter, but when she does so it is not to clear up the nature of the cosmos. Some early Victorian readers may have seen these passages as unambiguously affirming God’s presence in human lives; readers who identified Jane Eyre with the governess novel or domestic realism especially would be prepared for some revelation of a religious subtext or emergent theme. In subsequent years both the culture and its fiction became more and more secularized and the religious dimension of Jane Eyre more and more ignored. But the world of the 1840s in and out of fiction was itself in flux. There were many public and fictional voices enunciating literary, social, and moral norms that, when juxtaposed, mixed, or otherwise defamiliarized, cast the burden—or privilege—of interpretation on the reader.

The crucial segment of the episode in cosmological terms is probably that in which Jane asks herself why she struggles on and gives a typically overdetermined answer, then pleads, "Oh, Providence! sustain me a little longer! Aid—direct me!" (421). This is clearly more than an appeal to an ordinary Providence—"May it be that the world is so organized that I will survive"—but a prayer to an extraordinary Providence—"God, intercede directly on my behalf with help or at least guidance." As Paul Hunter points out, "Theologians usually distinguish between general (or ordinary) providences—in which God simply watched over developments he had willed through his natural laws—and special (or extraordinary) providences, in which a specific act of interposition was involved" (356). Jane is sustained, but is she
aided and guided? A light does lead her to a house where she is taken in, but is the guiding light a response to her prayer, a coincidence, a bit of Victorian melodrama—or an ignis fatuus? Before she sees the light she chooses to walk out onto the moors. There is nothing in the prose of the three paragraphs—perhaps three-quarters of a page—to suggest that this choice is influenced from without. It is when Jane, turned away by Hannah, says aloud (ironically) that she will wait God’s will in silence, that the listening clergyman responds. It seems likely, but neither he nor the narrator makes the point explicitly, that it is Jane’s faith that convinces him to help her. Even when, as Jane prepares for sleep and the chapter ends, her prayer of thanksgiving and her “grateful joy” at her survival are joined in a single sentence, they are set apart by hyphens, just enough to sustain the ambiguity for those not predisposed to see a religious novel emerging.

Jane’s appeal to Providence is refracted through the prevalence of Providence in all genres of fiction even as late as the middle of the nineteenth century, and Special Providence is virtually constitutive in religious governess novels. In The English Governess, Clara Neville, whom we have met several times before, sees from the beginning the hand of Providence in her life, follows where it leads, and is specially protected. There are moments of trial when she must struggle “to keep in mind that ‘not a sparrow can fall to the ground’ without the permission of our heavenly father” (216), but that Providence directly intercedes in her life is ultimately made quite clear; her villainous stepfather catches up with her in Gibraltar on a ledge fifteen hundred feet above the Mediterranean and throws her over—but: “It was evident that her fall had been providentially arrested, first by some thorny shrubs which had entangled in her muslin dress, and then by a very large American aloe” (234). She hangs on until rescued. Her stepfather, however, stumbles and falls to his death, and that too is judged to be providential.

Though Providence is pervasive in the fiction of the time, those who read Mrs. Sherwood’s Caroline Mordaunt—and they were legion, Sherwood being an extremely popular novelist—would have special insight into Brontë’s strategy. We have already remarked in almost every chapter in this study details in Caroline Mordaunt that reappear
in *Jane Eyre*: disgusting porridge, coach rides to governess appointments, scenes of humiliation, and, as Vineta Colby has observed, the bringing of Caroline back to religion by a pious pupil who dies in her arms, just as the pious Helen Burns, a fellow pupil, dies in Jane's arms. *Caroline Mordaunt* thus has virtually become part of the repertoire of the novel and the reader. But unlike Brontë, Sherwood has from the first told the reader that this is the narrator's story of how Providence operated in her life; the very first words of the novel are:

I am now arrived at that period of life, and, I thank God, to that state of mind, in which I can look back at the various adventures of my past years with no other feelings than those of gratitude to that Divine Providence which has rendered every apparent accident, and every difficulty which I have encountered in my passage down the stream of time, more or less subservient to my everlasting welfare: for I cannot doubt but that the peace I have enjoyed during some of the latter years of my life is no other than an earnest of that perfect rest in which I hope to enter, through the merits and death of my Divine Redeemer. (203)

The narrator-autobiographer of *Jane Eyre* could have begun in the same way, but Brontë's strategy has been to hybridize the narration, doubling the narrator's voice with that of the younger Jane's, masking her narrator's informed vision and revealing it only as it is discovered by the maturing Jane. The choice is a matter not only of narrative strategy but of rhetorical or moral strategy; or, rather, such narrative strategies are a function of worldview. Men and women in Brontë's moral universe must earn salvation. They must acknowledge their reliance on God, seek and choose to submit to providential guidance, read signs, and choose to heed warnings so as to find the path. So we must follow the young Jane, and for our own moral good learn to submit, read, follow, and avoid *along with her*. In Sherwood, our destiny, like Caroline's, has been predetermined; there is no reason to be kept in doubt, to search or interpret:

... my heavenly Father predestined me, with thousands, and tens of thousands, and thousands of thousands of lost and undone creatures like myself, to glory, before the world began; and provided justification and sanctification for me in the death and merits of his Son, who is at once both God and man, before I entered into life; and, being entered, he
revealed his Son to my soul, and made me to be assured not only that I am justified, but also that I am sanctified: therefore I know that I am redeemed, and that I possess a life eternal, and that nothing can snatch me from my heavenly father’s arms. (278)

But even in the final volume of *Jane Eyre*, we, like Jane, are not sure what choices she should or will make, how her story will end, just what she—and we—will discover. Providentialism is not necessarily predestinarian or fatalistic: God shows signs, but we may choose to notice and follow or not.

As Jane slowly recovers from her ordeal, she—and we—gradually learn about the house that gives her refuge and its occupants. The house is called Moor-House or Marsh-End (both names, but especially the latter, fit snugly enough into the Bunyanesque list of place names in the novel, and the two names—are we on the moor still or at the end of the marsh?—perpetuate the ambiguity of outcome and thus the suspense). The sisters, Mary and Diana Rivers, though not wealthy, are clearly ladies; their brother, St. John, a “parson.” The governess strand, pulled forward once more by our learning that the Rivers sisters have been governesses, may suggest that St. John will be very important indeed in Jane’s future: many fictional governesses, including Caroline Mordaunt, marry clergymen. That strand may in fact be made up of two filaments—a love story and a religious worldview—twisted into a single strand, so that to remain loyal to Rochester is to infer a secular, sublunary world; to choose the clergyman is to choose the religious worldview.

Though providential and governess novels underpin the narrative development and refract our comprehension and our tentative projections, at this late point in the novel projections may also be based on retrospection of all that has gone before in the novel *Jane Eyre* itself and our readerly need to make patterns from earlier details in the text as well as from context. Both sources raise the possibility of St. John’s becoming a suitor: it is not only Jane Austen’s Mrs. Bennett who may ask what other function a handsome and single gentleman can have in the life story of a young girl whose first love has been cruelly thwarted. And it is inevitable that if we think of St. John as suitor we must think
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of Rochester, and must, consciously or not, compare the two, for the history of Jane and Rochester is a palimpsest upon which the emerging story of Jane and St. John is inscribed. And the old lines or their mirror images abound. Jane helped Rochester up from his fall from his horse when they first meet; St. John lifts up Jane from his doorstep. Jane thought the dog that preceded Rochester might be a specter called the Gytrash (136), and Rochester later admitted that when he first came upon Jane he “thought unaccountably of fairy tales, and had half a mind to demand whether you had bewitched my horse” (149). When St. John responds to the words Jane utters aloud as she awaits her fate on the Rivers’s doorstep, she is terrified. “Who or what speaks?” she asks; she becomes aware of him then as only a form: “—what form, the pitch-dark night and my enfeebled vision prevented me from distinguishing” (429). When she is taken in, the Rivers find Jane so thin and bloodless she seems a “mere spectre” (430). After their first meeting, Rochester did not seem anxious to see Jane again, sending for her only toward the end of his first full day home (though we later learn he was watching her without her knowledge [399]); and even thereafter, “for several subsequent days [she] saw little of Mr. Rochester” (157). St. John comes to see her only once during the three days she is recuperating. When, with Adèle and Mrs. Fairfax, Jane first entered the drawing-room, Rochester “appeared . . . not in the mood to notice us, for he never lifted his head as we approached” and even after Jane was seated “[he] neither spoke nor moved” (146-47). When Jane is left alone in the parlor with St. John, he keeps “his eyes fixed on the page he perused, and his lips mutely sealed” (440). Jane on both occasions has a chance to look at her new acquaintance carefully—and to describe him. She noted Rochester’s

broad and jetty eyebrows; his square forehead, made squarer by the horizontal sweep of his black hair . . . his decisive nose, more remarkable for character than beauty; his full nostrils, denoting, I thought, choler; his grim mouth, chin, and jaw . . . . His shape, now divested of cloak, I perceived harmonized in squareness with his physiognomy: I suppose it was a good figure in the athletic sense of the term—broad chested and thin flanked; though neither tall nor graceful. (146)
St. John, she now notes, is

young—perhaps from twenty-eight to thirty—tall, slender; his face riv­
eted the eye: it was like a Greek face, very pure in outline; quite a straight,
classic nose; quite an Athenian mouth and chin. . . . His eyes were large
and blue, with brown lashes; his high forehead, colourless as ivory, was
partially streaked over by careless locks of fair hair. (440)

The unhandsome, chunky, middle-aged roué whom she helped up
from his fall; the handsome, tall and slender, young, ascetic clergyman
who lifted her up from his doorstep—the contrast may well suggest a
choice in Jane’s future.\(^5\)

Though St. John is young and handsome, an upright clergyman
like many of the heroes of governess novels, and spends “a large pro­
portion of his time . . . visiting the sick and poor” (448), and though he
has saved Jane’s life, he will have a difficult time replacing Rochester
in Jane’s affections or the reader’s. Rochester’s love and Jane’s love
for him, give him, among other things, the power of primacy. Though
Rochester himself was not initially presented with unqualified favor
and for a time seemed as likely to be Gothic villain as Byronic hero,
he has largely overcome our doubts. Rivers is presented with a simi­
lar “rhetoric of anticipatory caution,” the characterization so qualified
from the beginning as to be ambiguous. That our uncertainty matches
Jane’s is typical of this interpretive rhetorical strategy:

[There is] a correspondence between the reader’s and the protagonist’s
impression formation. The dynamics of response, hypothesis construc­
tion, and chronological reconstruction, within the rhetorical framework
consisting in the relationship between author and reader, has a con­
currently sustained dramatic equivalent, within the fictive world itself.
(Sternberg 130)

If, on the one hand, the governess genre and the implicit contrast
with Rochester, who has been “disqualified” as Jane’s lover, make St.
John seem an “eligible” suitor, his early characterization does not seem
to promise romance. Jane calls him a “penetrating young judge” (442).
His kindness to her is not out of compassion but “evangelical charity,”
as Jane says and St. John acknowledges (444). He is not even an ideal
Christian, much less the perfect clergyman: “Zealous in his ministerial
labours, blameless in his life and habits, he yet did not appear to enjoy that mental serenity, that inward content, which should be the reward of every sincere Christian” (448). His sermon is thrilling but bitter and seems to originate from his own disappointment and “insatiate yearnings and disquieting aspirations” (449). Both as potential lover and as religious model, St. John has a way to go. But if Rochester is the more compelling romantic hero, there are impediments to his love, and religiously and morally he is virtually beyond the pale. Jane may help St. John on his path to serenity, but it is difficult to see at this point how she can reform or rescue Rochester.

Most romantic and modern readers scarcely need the warmth of their feelings towards St. John restrained, regardless of governesses or Bertha Rochesters. Within the broad boundaries of “liberal humanism,” St. John’s “anti-life” austerity puts him ideologically beyond a different pale from that which obstructs Rochester. Such readers are only too eager to ignore or rush past the cautionary signs to reinforce Rochester’s primacy, and their first impressions of St. John are of him not so much as a rival of Rochester’s but as a younger counterpart of Brocklehurst. Q. D. Leavis, for example, sees him as only “a more subtle bully” than Brocklehurst:

Just as Brocklehurst with his doctrine was seen by the child Jane as a “black pillar,” so St. John Rivers is “a white stone,” “cold as an iceberg” to her. . . . St. John is apparently a high-minded cleric representing an ideal in Victorian literature, the man who prides himself on subduing his impulses for the service of God. . . . Actually he is only a more subtle moral bully than Mr. Brocklehurst and his missionary vocation is an excuse for making others submit to his will and for forcing them to make sacrifices too. (22-23)

Even Eagleton, who sees St. John somewhat more sympathetically and compares him to Helen Burns rather than Brocklehurst, says that “like Helen Burns, he signifies a perspective which it is vital to acknowledge but perilous to take literally,” and that he “presses the orthodox view that duty must conquer feeling to a parodic extreme” (Eagleton, Myths 23, 20). Others, like Gilbert and Gubar, grant that “unlike hypocritical Brocklehurst, he practices what he preaches,” though “he is finally, as Brocklehurst was, a pillar of patriarchy” and “wants to
imprison... her soul in the ultimate cell, 'the iron shroud' of principle" (365, 366). Though Gallagher also seems obligated to distinguish him from Brocklehurst—he is no hypocrite—she recognizes that he "seems to hold before Jane the possibility of spiritual change. His Evangelicalism is thus much more complex than the extreme represented by Brocklehurst" (Gallagher 66).

There are, indeed, signs or hints in the text that St. John, with a little guidance, might suit Jane. If he is cool, hard, restless, bitter, disappointed, we must remember Rochester's gruffness and apparent coolness, his restlessness and inexplicable mood swings, his Byronic/Gothic-villain ambivalence. Jane is not attracted to the soft and satisfied. Coolness does not necessarily indicate lack of passion, and "insatiate yearnings and disquieting aspirations" may be satisfied and calmed. Such a task has enmeshed more than one fictional—and, reportedly, real—heroine. Moreover, if St. John is not at peace, neither is Jane, as she herself acknowledges:

I was sure St. John Rivers—pure-lived, conscientious, zealous as he was—had not yet found that peace of God which passeth all understanding: he had no more found it, I thought, than had I; with my concealed and racking regrets for my broken idol and lost elysium—regrets to which I have latterly avoided referring; but which possessed me and tyrannized over me ruthlessly. (449-50)

Their common restlessness and dissatisfaction may well serve as a bond of sorts. Jane has no peace because of regret, not for her actions, for leaving Thornfield, but for her loss of Rochester, a loss described here in terms—broken idol, lost elysium—that make that loss seem irrevocable, like a mourning for the dead, and, no matter how painful, morally necessary. We do not yet know the reason for St. John's lack of peace or the nature of his "yearnings" and "aspirations." St. John, too, recognizes a similarity in his and Jane's makeup: "[In her] nature is an alloy as detrimental to repose as that in mine; though of a different kind" (451); she is not, like him, ambitious, he says, but is "impassioned." He tells her,

[you] cannot long be content to pass your leisure in solitude, and to devote your working hours to a monotonous labour wholly void of stimu-
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lus; any more than I can be content . . . to live here buried in morass, pent in with mountain—my nature, that God gave me, contravened; my faculties, heaven-bestowed, paralyzed—made useless. (454)

If Jane cannot go back and if St. John's unhappiness is because of a goal or desire as yet unachieved, their restless paths may yet happily converge. St. John's obvious pleasure in Jane's accepting the humble position he offers her as mistress of a village school for poor girls, and the reinforcement of the governess theme in her new vocation (a schoolmistress was a "governess," and Jane thinks of the position as an alternative to "that of a governess in a rich house" [453]) further projects a possible future in which this governess, like other fictional governesses, may marry the clergyman rather than the gentleman.

While the rhetoric of anticipatory caution in the early depiction of St. John Rivers most obviously involves plot (suspense) and characterization, it also implicates doubts about the nature of the moral world of the novel. Though ideology may blind readers to one configuration or another, St. John is presented with a remarkable even-handedness that leaves open different possibilities. He seems to be described in two dissonant voices, or viewed in the context of two conventional but conflicting value systems, and is thus defamiliarized. Even his own loving sister Diana—who is so favorably presented that her words may be considered virtually "authorized"—testifies to the ambivalence:

"He will sacrifice all to his long-framed resolves," she said: "natural affection and feelings more potent still. St. John looks quiet, Jane, but he hides a fever in his vitals. You would think him gentle, yet in some things he is inexorable as death; and the worst of it is, my conscience will hardly permit me to dissuade him from his severe decision: certainly, I cannot for a moment blame him for it. It is right, noble, Christian: yet it breaks my heart." (455)

This short passage could almost be used as an example of primacy-recency response, the first five lines implicitly characterizing St. John as unnatural, repressed, and anti-life, the final four lines explicitly as "right, noble, Christian." But here the question is not merely whether the person described is one way or the other—there is no doubt about this, for the description is as precise as it is ambivalent—but whether
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his choices, his values are “good” or “bad,” are to be approved or disapproved, whether he therefore will be suited to the role of hero and deserving of Jane. Secular, romantic, post-Freudian readers can scarcely be expected to approve the sacrifice of “natural affection”—much less the thinly veiled “feelings more potent still”—to an ambition, no matter how holy, and such readers are reinforced by the powerful primacy of Jane’s love for Rochester. A devout reader can hardly blame a decision, no matter how severe, that is “right, noble, Christian.” It is in the disharmony of these dialogic, equally official voices, the conflict of these conventional and current (perhaps in our culture, perennial) value systems (and the analogous and related generic conflict), that much of the originality and significance of Jane Eyre lies.

Conflicts of conventions or values on “the borderlines of existing systems,” Iser tells us (72), enable a work to both operate within the literary and social conventions of its time and simultaneously call them into question, or at least hold them up for examination, even for contemporary readers. And, “for the later reader, the reassessed norms help to create that very social and cultural context that brought about the problems which the text itself is concerned with. In the first instance, the reader is affected as a participant, and in the second as an observer” (Iser 78). But in this portion of Jane Eyre there is a clear dialectical relationship between the phenomenology of reading and the ontological repertoire of the fictive world on the one hand, and the ideology of the reader on the other. Ideology is stronger than primacy: devout contemporary readers of religious fiction and of governess novels, particularly those novels with a religious cast, may well have inferred at this point in the novel that Jane, well rid of the immoral and irreligious Rochester and chastened by her experience, will remember Helen Burns’s insistence on the superiority of divine to human love, of eternity to this brief life, and will marry St. John. Indeed, as Robert Colby says, “Probably a greater shock to Lady Eastlake’s [i.e., Elizabeth Rigby’s] generation than Jane Eyre’s boldness in declaring her love to Rochester was her rejection of St. John Rivers, because the reward for the governess’s trials, including [Anne Brontë’s] Agnes Grey’s, was generally marriage to a clergyman” (194). But perhaps a more secular,
humanist ideology raises an even higher barrier, blocking the reader's ability to permit the "reassessed norms . . . to create that very social and cultural context that brought about the problems which the text itself is concerned with." Such readers would have difficulty in engaging the text's struggle with those norms and apprehending the narrative and thematic strategies that govern it. It is here that the contemporary fictional context, not restricted to other masterworks, as a kind of third dimension of the text, can help in the recovery of such norms. Of service in such a recovery is that notable but not unique example of a governess novel, Mrs. Sherwood's *Caroline Mordaunt*, the novel we have already identified as so closely resembling *Jane Eyre* in its genre, plot, providentialism, and in many of its details, as to have virtually become part of the novel's and reader's repertoire. Caroline's cousin (and St. John will soon be revealed to be Jane's cousin) is a clergymen and her moral guide:

My good cousin loved to enumerate these sundry perambulations [the trials she has undergone], and to trace the hand of God in all that had befallen me, showing how my various misadventures had been calculated to humble me, and bring me to a knowledge of myself . . . "blessed, therefore, are those who have been stripped of all self dependance, even although the process may not have been over agreeable to flesh and blood." (298)

Though Caroline does not love him as she understands love at the time, in order to serve as his helmpmate (a request St. John will soon make of Jane), reader, she marries him, and now, at the end of the book, she is grateful for "the best of husbands," children, friends, peace, and happiness (305). *Caroline Mordaunt* offers a precedent that for readers then and now deeply problematizes the outcome of the narrative (specifically the love story) and the worldview of *Jane Eyre*, and offers us later readers the means by which we may observe how the norms of the social and cultural context "that brought about the problems which the text itself is concerned with" are being reassessed.

There are, for all the similarities between Sherwood's hero and St. John, significant differences. Caroline's clerical cousin, for example, is gentle, almost fatherly, not cold and ambitious. Though we may readily find governesses marrying clergymen and there are crowds of
clerics in contemporary fiction, it is difficult to find a clergyman who resembles St. John. He is often identified with such Evangelical hypocrites as Mrs. Trollope's eponymous villain The Vicar of Wrexhill or Brontë's own Brocklehurst or such Calvinistic, Evangelical hard-liners as Dickens's Mr. Murdstone. These are not norms, or if norms, they do not raise the problems that Brontë's text is concerned with. St. John, however, is a norm and a problem, and, so far as I have been able to determine, is a clerical figure wholly new to the novel, one who, if found in life, had not yet been found narratable.

That such a clergyman may exist as a norm or ideal in the real world despite his absence in such a role to this point in the fictional world is suggested by the fact that the original of Rivers is generally thought to be not a fictional but an actual clergyman, the Reverend Henry Martyn (see, e.g., Gérin, Brontë; Winnifrith; Harrison). Martyn befriended Patrick Brontë in university—St. John's College, Cambridge—like Rivers had two sisters, and, early in the century, left his beloved in England, and went to India as a missionary. His letters and his friends frequently refer to his illnesses (chiefly tuberculosis), and in 1812 he died at the age of thirty-one in Persia. A Methodist saint, he translated the gospels into Hindi, Persian, and other Eastern languages, set up schools, and distributed tracts throughout the region. In 1807, while in the East,

Such strong representations had been made by those whose judgment he highly valued, respecting the dreariness of a distant station in India, and the evils of solitude; that he had deemed it agreeable to the will of God to make an overture of marriage to her, for whom time had increased, rather than diminished, his affection. This overture, for reasons which afterwards commended themselves to Mr. Martyn's own judgment [Linda Greville was reluctant to leave her aged mother], was now declined; on which occasion, suffering sharply as a man, but most meekly as a Christian, he said, "The Lord sanctify this; and since this last desire of my heart is also withheld, may I turn for ever from the world, and henceforth live forgetful of all but God." (Sargent 261–62)

Such denial and dedication were not new to him, however. In 1803, before ordination, before leaving England, before being a rejected suitor, he wrote, "I desire...to be dead to the world, and longing for the..."
coming of Christ” (Sargent 98), and this impatience—and struggle—with this world and longing for the next pervades his letters and journals (e.g., from the journal entry of 13 September 1806: “It is an awful and arduous thing . . . to root out every affection for earthly things, so as to live for another world” [199]). Charlotte Brontë may have read Sargent’s *A Memoir of the Rev. Henry Martyn, B. D.* and found Martyn a “narratable” character from the memoir or from her father’s stories of his old friend. He was obviously admired in the household and revered by Evangelicals.

Martyn’s piety and self-immolation were, in their fashion, a norm of that bygone era we may recapture from biographies and letters, but, before St. John, his ascetic Christianity was marginalized in early capitalist England, and a life like his scarcely seemed “narratable.” The norms of spiritual sacrifice and the fulfillment of the secular self were seldom presented as “problems” that involved complex exploration and reassessment, as opposed to either satire or pietistic affirmation, in the popular novels of the day. Even among popular religious novelists the conflict between religious self-denial and life in the world was an uncomfortable topic, and, when raised, was usually resolved—again, especially in low church fiction—in a “common sense” way that validated everyday, sublunary (and middle-class) life. Even the very religious Elizabeth Sewell, for example, has her honorable Mrs. Herbert say, “Certainly God does not require that we should all live exactly the same lives as the [ascetic saints] . . . — He does not command us all to leave our homes and go to the deserts” (327). Brontë’s bringing asceticism from the borderline of the existing norms into relation with the more dominant, “common sense,” middle-class Christianity recodifies, defamiliarizes, and reassesses the “social and historical norms” (Iser 74, 78).

It is not so easy as Iser seems to assume for later readers to permit the literary text to enable them “to transcend the limitations of their own real-life situation” (79), to read even initially as a member of the “authorial audience” while retaining the right and privilege of subsequently seeing the text as it cannot see itself. Most modern readers and critics valorize the passionate and rebellious young Jane, and not only do not seriously consider St. John’s emerging role as hero
a possibility—unless Jane's life story is to be a tragedy of waste and patriarchal oppression, or of life-denying repression—but, as we have seen, have little good to say about St. John in any role, and that only grudgingly. A learned, sensitive, and open reader of *Jane Eyre*, Barry Qualls, may serve once more as an example of how one's unacknowledged or unrecognized ideology—here, roughly, "humanist"—can, in assuming an ideological norm a "natural" truth, distort the phenomenological processes of the act of reading. His resistance to the providentialist worldview, to seeing Jane "grow" from rebel to Victorian matron, and his jaundiced view of St. John are, as they almost always are by readers, connected. Earlier he has noted that Jane is now using the language of the Psalms, but rather than giving up his unqualified admiration of the Jane who confronted Brocklehurst and announced her dislike of the Psalms, rather than entertaining the possibility that Jane as a child was somehow immature or benighted and that her experience of suffering has taught her more humility, Qualls believes she is now confused: "That she chooses language from the Psalms rather than from the biblical histories she enjoyed as a child indicates her confusion and her want of a certain road to journey along" (60). Qualls sees in St. John, therefore, the "old religion," that which opposes and threatens her humanistic world: "Brontë concentrates her attack on the deadness of the old religion in the figure of St. John, whose otherworldliness affronts the present world of fellow-feeling which, Jane has learned, is essential to life" (63). By "life," Qualls, like most of us in the twentieth century, means earthly, not "eternal," life, but that is not necessarily what Jane or Brontë means without qualification by the term. And, as we have seen, "fellow-feeling" was not what Jane found from her fellow beings in her wanderings about the moors until Providence guided her to the home of her cousins. Qualls's distortion is not inherent in his values but in his misreading details of the text, implying that his reading approximates authorial intention. Without distortion or misreading, he might well read it from his ideological position, read the text "against the grain," show it as it cannot see itself, exploring the contradictions in the norms Brontë juxtaposes. That, indeed, is the reader's duty, for, as Iser says, what the text "does not do . . . is formulate alternative values . . . ; unlike philosophies and ideologies,
literature does not make its selections and its decisions explicit. Instead, it questions or recodes the signals of external reality in such a way that the reader himself is to find the motives underlying the questions, and in doing so he participates in producing the meaning” (74).

The outcome of the plot may reward those who were never led to believe that Jane might marry St. John, but to ignore the possibility or not to take it seriously is to miss the affective force of this portion of the novel, the doubt and the suspense. Not to explore the “motive underlying the questions” Brontë raises in juxtaposing conflicting contemporary norms by prematurely imposing modern conventional views of that world is not only to miss the opportunity of recovering the “reassessed norms” of the 1840s but to misunderstand the nature of Jane’s choice, the novel’s evaluation of St. John, and, ultimately, the moral world of the novel as it sees itself.

Diana’s characterization of her brother is soon validated for Jane. First, though, the Rivers learn that an uncle has died and that they are not to inherit even a small portion of his considerable fortune; the sisters leave “for distant B——”; St. John moves back to the parsonage, and Jane goes to Morton and her new position. The opening of chapter 31 (vol. 3, ch. 5) marks another geographical shift in Jane’s life. She is in her cottage at Morton after her first day of teaching. Her feelings are described in the present tense and thus monologically, without the advantage of the narrator’s hindsight. In her forthright way she admits that she feels desolate and degraded, but she is determined to make the best of her new lot: “Much enjoyment I do not expect in the life opening before me: yet it will, doubtless, if I regulate my mind, and exert my powers as I ought, yield me enough to live on from day to day” (458). She is convinced that she has progressed morally, for she knows her negative feelings are wrong and is convinced that, no matter what the emotional cost, she has made the right, the God-guided choice, avoiding the “silken snare” of living with Rochester in France: “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, emphasis added).

The love and religious strands are thus even more tightly twisted
together. For the first time Jane explicitly and unconditionally ac-
knowledges that she has been guided, confirming her earlier feeling
that “God must have led me on” (410) when, without will or con-
science, she stumbled away from Thornfield. She does not yet affirm,
however, that she had been led to Marsh-End in response to her plea
for guidance from Providence. We are not yet quite certain that the
world of Jane Eyre is governed by Providence, especially since the
present tense withholds the narrator’s authorization. But even the pos-
sibility that this might be so, clearly foregrounded for the moment,
must influence the shape of the novel we project ahead or must prob-
lematize configurations that do not take Providence into account.

Jane’s right choice, leaving Rochester, is not the painless choice,
and she weeps. Her tears are interrupted by St. John. Once more he
is juxtaposed to memories of Rochester (and, to make the parallel
stronger, like Rochester long ago, he has been preceded by his dog).
St. John notices her tears, infers that she has been thinking of her past,
and, though he does not know that past, advises her not to look back
and to control her desires: “It is hard work to control the workings
of inclination, and turn the bent of nature: but that it may be done, I
know from experience. God has given us, in a measure, the power to
make our own fate” (461).

Like Mordaunt’s hero, he is here Jane’s moral guide, the more
effective for instructing her not merely by exhortation and principle
but by the example of his own life and struggles. He tells of his am-
bitions to be an artist, author, orator, soldier, or politician rather than
clergyman, of his dark night of the soul, and of his recognition of a
God-given vocation that would require all his skills and energies—
that of missionary to the East. And he indicates that he has had to
struggle with feelings and “human weakness” to persist in his course.

Jane soon sees the power of his temptation. A voice startles him “as
if a thunderbolt had split a cloud over his head” (463); it is Rosamond
Oliver, the heiress with “a face of perfect beauty.” He is clearly in love
with her—“I saw his solemn eye melt with sudden fire, and flicker with
resistless emotion”—and she with him. Even physically they seem
suited: “he looked nearly as beautiful for a man as she for a woman”
(465). Jane watches his struggle, and affirms Diana’s judgment: “This
spectacle of another's suffering and sacrifice, rapt my thoughts from exclusive meditation on my own. Diana Rivers had designated her brother 'inexorable as death.' She had not exaggerated" (466).

The affirmation, the juxtaposition, and the emphatic position of this paragraph as the last in the chapter—giving the reader the opportunity to absorb, contemplate, and evaluate the character of St. John and of the moral world of the novel—if they are not designed to shatter the primacy effect of Rochester’s love and of the negative view of St. John as “unnatural” or “antilife,” certainly seemed designed to make it conceivable that Jane herself might, perhaps should, “overcome” her ill-fated love and find that her life will be joined to St. John’s. Even at this late date, the conventional romantic ending—governess marries gentleman—is shadowed by anticipatory caution: can it be that this governess belongs to the other, the religious convention, and will marry a clergyman?

When Jane is convinced that Rosamond prefers St. John, that he loves Rosamond, and that, in her view, he can do more good in the world with Oliver’s wealth than he can as a poor missionary, she tries a little matchmaking. Throughout the chapter, however, there are subtle reminders of the Thornfield experience. Jane sketches a portrait of Rosamond as she did of Blanche Ingram, for example, and, as different as the characters and the circumstances are, this detail puts Rosamond in the position of the beautiful rival of plain Jane. When we learn St. John has rejected Rosamond because one part of him knows that she will not make him a good wife—she could not sympathize with his aspirations, could not suffer and labor—just as, for other reasons, Blanche would not have made Rochester a good wife, it is difficult not to recognize that Jane would make him, as she would have made Rochester, a good wife (regardless of whether we believe St. John, or either man, would make Jane a good husband). St. John is clearly coming to think of Jane as a helpmate—“I watch your career with interest,” he tells her, “because I consider you a specimen of a diligent, orderly, energetic woman” (479). They both describe giving all for love as madness: Jane refers to “the insane promptings of a frenzied moment” (459), St. John calls it “delirium and delusion” (476). Jane adhered to law and principle and thanks God for providential
guidance in making a decision she knows is right; St. John is grateful that religion has pruned and trained his nature. If Jane regrets her lost love, St. John has resigned himself to rejecting the love that could be his, though acknowledging that religion cannot “eradicate” nature. Both seem to feel, then, they are right in their choices to sacrifice earthly love for moral and religious values. That St. John will not give up “one hope of the true, eternal Paradise” for “the elysium” of Rosamond’s love (469) retroactively casts new light on Jane’s “lost elysium,” as she not long ago described her love for Rochester and his for her (450). Is the elysium of human love for her as for St. John, then, not the path to the true Paradise, not a legitimate goal in life? Was Helen correct in telling Jane years ago that Jane thought too much of human love? Was Caroline Mordaunt well-advised to marry her cousin and moral guide out of respect and admiration, anticipating, correctly, that love would be sure to come in due course?

We scarcely have time to consider how to project the future course of Jane’s life and of the novel, when, before the end of the chapter, a new distraction is introduced. St. John is startled by something on a piece of Jane’s drawing paper, looks hard at her face, and surreptitiously tears off an edge of the paper and takes it with him. When he leaves, Jane scrutinizes the paper. “I pondered the mystery a minute or two; but finding it insolvable, and being certain it could not be of much moment, I dismissed, and soon forgot it” (480). But these are the last words of the chapter, and we cannot dismiss the mystery quite so readily; does the paper have something to do with the converging paths of Jane and St. John? with Rochester?

This mystery, unlike that of Thornfield Hall, is soon solved, however. To elude Rochester, should he have searched for her, she had told the Rivers her name was Jane Elliott. But she had written “Jane Eyre” on the corner of paper he tore off. St. John therefore knows who she is and knows too that she is an heiress, for her uncle in Madeira has died and left her his fortune. (It was this “convenient but not very novel resource of an unknown uncle dying abroad mak[ing] her independent” that the Spectator reviewer did not like [Allott 75], and, indeed, it is not very novel even in governess fiction: Lady Blessington’s governess heroine, Clara Mordaunt, is one of those who “[thanks to the
timely death of a rich uncle] becomes the rich heiress again and marries a lord” [Ewbank 63].) To compound the romance-like nature of the plot—or is it the affirmation of a providential leading?—St. John and his sisters are now discovered to be Jane’s cousins. Having found cousins, for Jane, “was wealth indeed!—wealth for the heart!” (491). The orphaned Jane who was unwelcome in her Aunt Reed’s home and kept from their hearth because she did not suit them, and who went out into the world alone to experience life, now has a family, made up as she defines it of a brother and two sisters (as was the Reed family), a family that accepts her and that she loves. She insists on sharing her money with those whom her existence deprived of the full inheritance. Under those circumstances it would be “a legacy of life, hope, enjoyment,” and, she tells St. John, much to the complication if not confounding of our projections and configurations, that she “will live at Moor-House . . . and I will attach myself for life to Diana and Mary. . . . I don’t want to marry, and never shall marry” (493–94). There is some solace for attentive romantic readers, whether it is Rochester or St. John they prefer, however, for the promise is in quotation marks; it is the excited commitment of young Jane without the narrator’s endorsement or authority. And there is another loophole: her reason for the pronouncement is, “No one would take me for love; and I will not be regarded in the light of a mere money-speculation. And I do not want a stranger—unsympathizing, alien, different from me; I want my kindred: those with whom I have full fellow-feeling” (495). Rochester and St. John are both, in different ways, enfranchised by this stipulation.

Early in volume 3, chapter 8, there is a rare intervention of the narrator and reference to events in the “future,” the time between the narrative action and the narrating, that seem on the surface to be nothing more than a chauvinistic digression difficult to account for in terms of the frame of reference or world of the novel. Jane, preparing to move to Moor-House where she will live with Diana and Mary, is closing Morton-school, and the best of her peasant-scholars give her a sense of national (contemporaries would have called it “racial”) pride: “The British peasantry are the best taught, best mannered, most self-respecting of any in Europe: since those days I have seen paysannes and Bäuerinnen; and the best of them seemed to me ignorant, coarse,
and besotted, compared with my Morton girls” (497). The nationalistic utterance that seems so like a digression here proves to be peculiarly functional, though it may require some historical imagination to recapture several social norms and their relationships. It does not function as a very definitive clue to the future of the novel—an unmarried Jane as heiress or teacher may in the future visit the Continent; she may go there as Rochester’s mistress or wife; or she may see “paysannes and Bäuerinnen” in Europe or in the East as St. John’s wife or accomplice. The “digression” does serve, however, to reveal the clash of value systems, though their terms need to be “unpacked” (even if they cannot be justified) for modern readers.

Jane valorizes the domestic, in the sense of the home, and now, it appears, the domestic includes as well the homeland. Joined to the public values of patriotism are personal values not naturally associated with them—joy, the physical, and the sensual. Home and homeland, joy and sensuality, are subsumed by the larger category of the earthly, the here and now, and this sublunary life itself: all of these are under the sign of the domestic. St. John’s “undomestic” values involve, on the other hand, the self-sacrificial, the heroic, the sacred, the transcendental, and the eternal, all of which in our secular century (and for many in the 1840s) are/were more likely to be associated with the life-denying. What must have created real doubt and suspense in Victorian readers is the possibility that St. John is identified with religious belief or the religious worldview and Rochester with the sensual and secular. How, then, as Robert Colby infers, could they have believed Jane will reject St. John, for to reject him seems virtually to reject God?

On the other hand, the exchange between Jane and St. John at this point in the text may seem somewhat confusing to modern readers who do not link, and to some degree oppose, the sensual and the domestic as defined by housework. Jane has been on a binge of cleaning and redecoration, activities most modern readers would not associate with her rebellious, adventurous, independent, and “better” self. Indeed, St. John insists that she look “a little higher than domestic endearments and household joys,” though not in the sense we would do so. She counters, perhaps to us rather disappointingly if we do not understand the linkage in the term “domestic,” that these things are
the best the world has to offer. St. John, for his part, links his advice to look beyond housecleaning to his admonition that she not "cling so tenaciously to ties of the flesh," for "this world is not the scene of fruition"—clearly opposing the domestic to the transcendental. Opposed too are the homey and the heroic, the hearth and the great world beyond England. Jane realizes that her domestic values—including those of the senses—and St. John's cosmic ones are not compatible:

The humanities and amenities of life had no attraction for him. . . . Literally, he lived only to aspire—after what was good and great, certainly: but still he would never rest; nor approve of others resting round him. . . . I comprehended all at once that he would hardly make a good husband: that it would be trying to be his wife. I understood, as by inspiration, the nature of his love for Miss Oliver: I agreed with him that it was but a love of the senses. I comprehended how he should despise himself for the feverish influence it exercised over him; . . . I saw he was of the material from which nature hews her heroes—Christian and Pagan—her lawgivers, her statesmen, her conquerors: a steadfast bulwark for great interests to rest upon; but, at the fireside, too often a cold cumbrous column, gloomy and out of place.

"This parlour is not his sphere," I reflected: "the Himalayan ridge, or Caffre bush, even the plague-cursed Guinea coast swamp, would suit him better. Well may he eschew the calm of domestic life; it is not his element. . . . He is right to choose a missionary's career—I see it now." (501-2)

The domestic—England, the earthly and earthy—is thus that which St. John rejects and Jane values. The nationalistic digression, then, functions to further and more fundamentally define the dialogic clash of values on the borderline of those "reassessed norms" we may now call the domestic and the heroic.

St. John, who has pruned and trained his natural self, suppressed the "fever of the flesh" (478), and turned himself into what Jane sees as a "cold cumbrous column," is clearly not pleasing or attractive. Whether he is nonetheless admirable will depend on how valid, how heroic we consider the mission for which he has denatured himself. His ambition as he defines it is to "spread my Master's kingdom; to achieve victories for the standard of the cross" (479). He has, he says, "hopes of being numbered in the band who have merged all ambitions
in the glorious one of bettering their race—of carrying knowledge into the realms of ignorance—of substituting peace for war—freedom for bondage—religion for superstition—the hope of heaven for the fear of hell" (477). His Christian asceticism is a prevailing norm. The text, through Jane, endorses his evaluation of his mission as "truly the most glorious man can adopt or God assign" (516).

For later readers like us, such a norm when juxtaposed to another of its period, like Jane's domesticity, can "help to create that very social and cultural context that brought about the problems which the text itself is concerned with" (Iser 78). From our postcolonialist site, however, we may, like John Kucich, see St. John's "missionary zeal serving as an apology for economic exploitation" (Kucich, "Jane Eyre and Imperialism" 105). Indeed, Gayatri Spivak says that though she is not "necessarily" accusing Brontë "of harboring imperialist sentiments" (257), "it should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English" (243). Reading Jane Eyre "in the frame of imperialism" (257) will thus show us the text as it cannot see itself, "incite a degree of rage against the imperialist narrativization of history" (244), and be "politically useful" (257). Reading Jane Eyre in the context of imperialism, she suggests, will also ineluctably deconstruct the oppositional terms in St. John's mission—to bring European-Christian knowledge to Indian-pagan ignorance, religion to superstition, freedom to bondage (249)—and undermine his (and the text's) evaluation of his missionary project.

Jina Politi, in an earlier, more penetrating and inclusive postcolonial and Marxist-feminist reading of the text as it cannot see itself, "places" imperialism and St. John's religious zeal within the political framework of the whole novel, masterfully ringing changes on its use of the term master, a term first repressively insisted upon by John Reed but later voluntarily adopted by Jane in addressing Rochester.

The political ideology behind the transformation of this term will be that people, i.e., races, nations, classes and women are happy in inequality and have no reason to revolt against the domination/subordination structure
of their social existence so long as they are free to choose their masters and so long as this freedom of choice hides its exploitive purposes behind the humanitarian guise. (58–59)

The text will therefore "conceal the complicity of the Church and Imperialism and will present St. John as the disinterested missionary whose only purpose in life is to help the uncivilized Indians choose for themselves the true and only Master" (59). Politi sees the ideology of master/servant bound by love as more than authorial: "[it] writ[es] itself into Jane Eyre and, generally, into the text of Victorian fiction" (59). We are therefore seeing the text as Brontë could not see it and as it cannot see itself.

The text is also blind to the fact that the money that circulates in the novel is based upon colonial exploitation, including the vilest of all, slavery. As Penny Boumelha points out, there are "ten explicit references to slavery in Jane Eyre," all critical. "They allude to slavery in Ancient Rome and in the seraglio, to the slaveries of paid work as a governess and of dependence as a mistress. None of them[, however,] refers to the slave trade upon which the fortunes of all in the novel are based." It is, in fact, the inheritance from Jamaica that subsidizes St. John's mission, enabling him to "labour for his race" in India (62).

While reading from our postcolonial site illuminates unacknowledged ideological assumptions and consequent omissions and evasions in Brontë's novel, we must be attentive as well to our own cultural site and ideological assumptions. Just as Spivak warns us against essentializing "woman" and seeks to "situate feminist individualism in its historical determination rather than simply to canonize feminist individualism as such" (243), so we must not "anachronize" or essentialize imperialism but locate it too in its historical context.

First of all there is the history of the word itself. The first use of the term cited in the OED postdates the publication of Jane Eyre by some eleven years, for another decade refers only to Roman or French imperialism, and for thirty years is always used pejoratively. But "imperialism" by any other name would still stink. Well before the nineteenth century, colonies were "maintained for the sake of their trade with the Mother Country," a trade that was protected from
outsiders by tariffs and in some cases outright prohibition (Somervell 176). This "old Tory" position, however, was challenged after the Napoleonic Wars by the Benthamite Liberals and other free traders, for, they claimed, free trade would make colonies useless and, as Cobden argued in 1842, would even eliminate the major cause of European wars:

"The Colonial system, with all its dazzling appeals to the passions of the people, can never be got rid of except by the indirect process of Free Trade, which will gradually and imperceptibly loose the bands which unite our Colonies to us by a mistaken notion of self-interest. Yet the colonial policy of Europe has been the chief cause of wars for the last hundred and fifty years." (qtd. in Somervell 178)

Insofar as the term *imperialism* as we now use it implies "capitalist" exploitation, its use with reference to *Jane Eyre* may be somewhat anachronistic, for the opposition or indifference to colonialism in the first half of the nineteenth century was "mainly a middle-class creed" (Somervell 183). The triumph of British imperialism belongs to the last third of the century, as the history of the word implies, and, ironically, one of its contributing causes—along with the discovery of diamonds in Kimberley in 1869 and the frightening rise of Bismarck's Germany—was the Reform Act of 1867 enfranchising the working class, for the working class, along with Disraeli's Tories, were great supporters of imperialism (Somervell 183).

E. J. Hobsbawm—the title of whose volume *The Age of Capital, 1848–1875*, incidentally dates the beginning of the capitalist era as the year after the publication of *Jane Eyre*—also confirms the chronology implied in the history of the word *imperialism* by locating its rise during or following "the astonishing expansion of capitalism in the third quarter of the century" (130). No friend of imperialism, Hobsbawm nonetheless concedes that British rule in India, where St. John intends to begin his mission, at first brought an unusual stability and peace to a region seldom peaceful or "free." And, of specific relevance to the evaluation of that mission, Hobsbawm points out that in India as in South America "the imperialism of the capitalist world was to make no . . . systematic attempt to evangelize its victims (129).
The mere existence of foreign rule in itself posed no major problem here [in India], for vast regions of the sub-continent had in the course of its history been conquered and reconquered by various kinds of foreigners (mostly from central Asia). . . . That the present rulers had marginally whiter skin than the Afghans . . . raised no special difficulties; that they did not seek conversions to their peculiar religion with any great zeal (to the sorrow of the missionaries), was a political asset. (133)

Not only, then, did neither Brontë nor St. John think of his mission as enabling the commercial exploitation of India, but historically—in 1847 or in the vague earlier time in which the novel was set—there would seem to have been no “complicity of the Church and Imperialism” that had to be “concealed” in order to “present St. John as the disinterested missionary whose only purpose in life is to help the uncivilized Indians choose for themselves the true and only Master” (Politi 59). That Christ was/is “the true and only Master” and that it would be to the best interests of the “pagan” Indians to know him and acknowledge his mastery, the text and Brontë would no more deny than they would the presumed superiority of the English culture. Indeed, they would scarcely expect to have to deny it, because they could not imagine its being questioned.

Except proleptically, the text of Jane Eyre could scarcely see St. John and his mission as complicit with imperialism. To see it thus would be more than seeing it as it does not see itself; it would be seeing it as it could not see itself. It would not be discovering its ideology but anachronistically imposing our own upon it. Whatever we may think of St. John, his creed, or his “courtship” of Jane, to appreciate the text as authorial audience, to appreciate its narrative and ontological strategies, “to re-create that very social and cultural context that brought about the problems which the text itself is concerned with,” we must for the time being at least try to see that “cold, cumbrous column” as one of nature’s heroes, even though his values may run counter to ours and lie across the “borderline” from and in conflict with Jane’s own “domestic” values.