Decentering the Author: Charlotte Brontë’s Misreading of *Jane Eyre*

The novel that began with Jane ends with St. John; the novel that began with rebellion ends with martyrdom. Even the story of the proud, saucy, self-reliant orphan Jane Eyre ends with the chastened, religious, privileged, and satisfied wife and mother Jane Rochester.

Reading backward from the certainty of Rochester’s conversion, the supernatural nature of his calling out across the vast distance to Jane, and her reception of that call after she has herself asked for a sign; back to the leading light in the Rivers’s window when Jane asked Providence for guidance; further back to the twisting chestnut tree on the hitherto calm night of Rochester’s proposal; through the still ambiguous instances of fairies dropping advice on Jane’s pillow and the ambiguously discounted ghostly light in the red-room; we can at last see clearly and indisputably the nature of the universe according to the narrator, Jane Rochester, and wonder how we, like the younger Jane, could have missed the signs for so long.

The strategy of serial disclosure is superbly and significantly appropriate for the narrative, rhetoric, and ontology of *Jane Eyre*. It greatly enhances the suspense and justifies the very gradual release of the secrets of the plot and outcome as fitting and natural. The reader is surprised by sin, led to recognize that identifying with the proudly self-reliant young Jane has been not only a misperception but a moral lapse. The providentialist ontology is insinuated into the narrative...
and through the narrative cumulatively and precisely defines its own nature and further justifies the strategic reticence.

Mrs. Sherwood, as we have seen, uses an entirely different but appropriate narrative strategy for her predestinarian providentialism: *Caroline Mordaunt* begins with the first-person narrator’s announcement that she has been providentially guided and, through no deeds of her own but “through the merits and death of my Divine Redeemer” (203), has been chosen to enter heaven. In Brontë’s providentialism the individual has free will, is responsible for seeking and perceiving providential leadings and warnings, for choosing to follow such signs, and thus is responsible for his or her own salvation. Jane must acknowledge God’s Providence, but she must learn to see and interpret events for herself, stand on her principles, use her reason, hearken to her conscience, and she must herself choose to follow the leadings and heed the warnings. Since her fate is undetermined, the narrative pattern is thus appropriately one of a journey toward enlightenment punctuated with crises and consequent choices. The reader, to participate experientially in her story (and to understand his or her own life in a providential, contingent cosmos), must therefore be kept in the dark just as Jane is.

Read as a self-consuming artifact—the authorial reader at the end of the novel now in the position of author, or at least mature narrator, looking back over the novel as a spatial, closed, and permanent structure, the misleadings and misunderstandings now dismissed—the world of *Jane Eyre* is revealed as patently providential. There is at last a sense of narrative and thematic unity and of significant and comforting closure. Even the apparently dissonant voice of St. John is subsumed within the providential vision, eros and agape representing two ways but one world. That vision even justifies the narrational mode and defines the novel’s purpose: beneficiaries of providential deliverance are obligated to record their experiences to ensure their memory and to instruct and inspire others (Hunter 71). Like most novels, even dialogic novels, *Jane Eyre* has "a conventionally literary, conventionally monologic ending," an "external completedness" that is "compositional and thematic" and betrays the hand of the author (Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky* 39). As a finalized, spatial, and monologic construct re-viewed from
the vantage point of the end, then, the authorial intention seems clear and ineluctable: *Jane Eyre* is a providential novel, and its structure and strategies are designed to that end.

The subtlety of the strategy of serial disclosure has its own risks, however. It underestimates the continuous experiential engagement of the reader with the text and the obliterative power of primacy. For a good many readers then and now, *Jane Eyre* is first and foremost the unloved, abused, but independent, self-assertive, and rebellious child at Gateshead and Lowood. Her restless adventurousness, her thirst for experience at eighteen when she chooses to leave Lowood; her passion and self-esteem at Thornfield, where she falls in love, is loved and betrayed; her refusal to sacrifice herself even to God's work in the East, and her defiant return to the man she loved and loves; only reinforce, elaborate, and deepen that image. Though there are brief and occasional "anticipatory cautions" about Jane's views and behavior, chiefly in the monologic and "intrusive" voice of the mature narrator, they are readily brushed aside by the hectic pace and forward thrust of the life story and the powerful early image of Jane. The brief and unrealized suggestions of a quite different Jane are easy to dismiss. She appears—or rather scarcely appears—in the eight skipped years at Lowood when, under the influence of Miss Temple, she had "more harmonious thoughts," "better regulated feelings," and "believed [she] was content" (99), a period covered summarily in two or three pages, chiefly as an introduction to her restless desire to seek "real knowledge" of life outside the schoolroom. The first ten years of her happy marriage are also virtually elided. The reader hardly knows the Jane Rochester who has narrated her life story: except as one register in the double-voicedness of the narration or as an occasional separate voice, she is present only in the final few pages of the novel in largely expositional, undramatized narrative.

In Sternberg's account of the experiments involving the primacy effect, he reports not only that when contradictory blocks of information are presented, the "leading block established a perceptual set, serving as a frame of reference to which subsequent information was subordinated as far as possible" but, more surprisingly and significantly, that, "strange as it may at first appear, the overwhelming
majority of subjects did not even notice the glaring incompatibility of the information contained in the two successive segments” (94). Brontë’s strategy of serial disclosure and the power of primacy, then, enable readers not only to fail to anticipate (much less desire) the ultimately disclosed providentialism and its socializing, subduing consequences but to be “blind” to it. Though the “blindness” is excusable, if not justified, to overlook, ignore, or dismiss the providential ontology of *Jane Eyre* is a misreading of what seems demonstrable authorial intentions.

The “author” whose intentions are sought in an authorial reading is the implied or virtual author embodied in the text, not necessarily Charlotte Brontë in her proper person. Something of Charlotte Brontë’s intentions, however, can be inferred from her complaints about how her novel was misread. It was not the “timorous or carping few” in the press and among early readers who most troubled her—she disposed of them in the preface to the second edition of her novel—but the “injudicious admirers” of her heroine, Jane’s many friends, the well-intentioned readers. When she came to write *Villette*, therefore, she was determined that her new heroine-narrator, Lucy Snowe, “should not occupy the pedestal to which ‘Jane Eyre’ was raised by some injudicious admirers” (*Letters* 4: 52-53).² The Jane the “injudicious readers” too much admired is clearly the younger Jane, the Jane experienced in the temporal reading, buttressed by the primacy effect—and blinded by it. Brontë’s image of Jane is that of a Jane off the pedestal, not the rebellious child or defiantly independent and wholly self-reliant young lady, but the mature Jane Rochester who writes the story of how she found God’s plan and her place.

That the author’s vision of Jane is essentially that of the matron at the end of the novel is reinforced by Mrs. Gaskell’s report of Charlotte Brontë lamenting “that, when she read *The Neighbours*, she thought every one would fancy that she must have taken her conception of Jane Eyre’s character from that of ‘Francesca,’ the narrator of Miss Bremer’s story” (387). Gaskell is puzzled: “For my own part,” she says, “I cannot see the slightest resemblance between the two characters, and so I told her; but she persisted in saying that Francesca was Jane Eyre married to a good-natured ‘Bear’ of a Swedish surgeon” (387).
Bremer does tell us things about her heroine that resemble what we know of Jane Eyre: Francesca “is little, very little” (Bremer 9); poor; “had no beauty” (13); when sixteen, thought she “must have adventures, let it cost what it would” (43); and she says she thought herself in youth “unquiet and unreasonable” (51). Just as we see little of Jane Eyre when she is settled and mature, however, so we see little if anything of Francesca when she was young and adventurous. The young Francesca and the mature Jane are characters the reader has only more or less heard “about.” The characters the readers of the two novels know from their reading experience do not substantially resemble each other, though they may be similar in the eyes or mind of the authors. The Jane Eyre Brontë does not see, the Jane who is injudiciously admired, and the Jane Brontë does see, who is only insubstantially there in the text, suggest that Brontë herself “misreads” Jane Eyre and the work called Jane Eyre, the text presented to the reader but which must be performed into the work.

Like Charlotte Brontë herself, the author implied by the text misreads the text, as paradoxical as that may seem; for the experience of the novel being read and the shape of the novel after having been read are two different textual objects. The Author looks at the novel as a spatial configuration seen from the end with full disclosure, and sees one novel; the engaged Reader looks at the novel from the beginning and projects configurations sequentially and continuously, and experiences a quite different novel. Both are good readings and both are misreadings. Jane Eyre the novel as read and being read exists both as an experience of rebellion and as a meaningful statement of reconciliation to God and society. These two voices and ideologies are in dialogue: not in a dialogue with a reconcilable thesis and antithesis, nor as an antinomy, but interactively, as if the whole novel were a single utterance hybridized, “a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses” (Bakhtin, Dialogic 358).

Such dialogic “misreadings”—the readers’ or the (implied) author’s—are virtually constitutive in long narratives, for they have both the experiential or horizontal dimension of the point-to-point reading and the global, spatial, or final configuration of the ending. While
such dialogue is characteristic of the novel as a form, in _Jane Eyre_ it is intensified, more dramatically constitutive, perhaps, because of the historical and cultural occasion of its utterance, that is, on the cusp of the Romantic and the Victorian; because of its psychological negotiation between passion and reason; and because of its intense realization of the powerful tension between individual desire and social restraint. A significant share of its greatness lies in dramatically and archetypically incarnating the tension of that dialogue of languages, of social forces “fused into a concrete unity that is contradictory, multispeeched and heterogeneous” (Bakhtin, _Dialogic_ 365).

The heterogeneity and contradictoriness of the dialogue suggest why all readings must be misreadings. A “reading” suggests a translation of the text into a different language, one with its own—and different—frame of reference, and into a monologic “meaning.” That “reading” or “meaning” seems convincing only when the frame of reference into which the text is translated fits “collectively recognized values.” The varying interpretations over time and even within the contemporary reception show clearly that these interpretations are not objective or definitive but “sophisticated subjectivity,” culture- or group-specific (Iser 23). Our reading the text as it cannot see itself from a modern site in a way that seems “natural” or “self-evident” depends on the “sophisticated subjectivity” and “collectively recognized values” of the modern reader’s culture or group and is once more a “misreading.” Yet comprehending the text means taking it somehow into our own frame of reference, for we cannot continuously “experience” the text without inwardly or outwardly articulating our responses, rendering it into our own language. Even the affective, experiential, aesthetic “meaning” for the reader reading the text “constantly threatens to transmute itself into discursive determinacy—... it is amphibolic: at one moment aesthetic and at the next discursive.... it is impossible for such a meaning to remain indefinitely as an aesthetic effect” (Iser 22). We cannot, then, avoid mis/reading.

There is, however, another dimension of the reading of a novel text which is both aesthetic and discursive, formalist and historical, contextual and dialogic, emphasizing, even celebrating, the multiplicity
of "misreadings" (including its own) and the unfinalizable nature of the text. The dialogue of Jane Eyre is more "multi-speeched" even than outlined in the "misreadings" by author, real and implied, reader, and later critic. For each of the novel genres or species incorporated into Jane Eyre generates batteries of conventional expectations that are fulfilled or modified, and though the species operates within the fictive context of Jane Eyre, it retains its own voice, its own ethical, epistemological, and other ideological ideologemes—though, as is characteristic of literary works, "in an undeveloped, unsupported, intuitive form" (Medvedev/Bakhtin 17). Each of these generic voices joins the chorus of other voices in the novel. Fictional autobiography, for example, valorizes the individual's rights and freedoms—his and hers—and the mind's interiority, not as a mismaze but as the source of truth; it is ideologically radical (which in the nineteenth century includes the radicalism of laissez-faire). The orphan or foundling novel is often radical as well in its assumption of human innocence and innate virtue and of society's corrupting influence. The Gothic novel, while valorizing the imagination and both the role and limitations of rationalism, tends to support traditional, aristocratic, and patriarchal values; the governess novel valorizes the feminine and the genteel; domestic realism, the feminine, the traditional, and the bourgeois; and so on. These are oversimplifications, but they suggest the ideological, value-laden nature of the generic voices incorporated by the intertextuality of Jane Eyre and the ideologemes that were transforming the rebellious Romantic and aristocratic Regency world into the bourgeois Victorian world:

Literature does not ordinarily take its ethical and epistemological content from ethical and epistemological systems, or from outmoded ideological systems . . . , but immediately from the very process of generation of ethics, epistemology, and other ideologies. . . . Literature is capable of penetrating into the social laboratory where these ideologemes are shaped and formed. The artist . . . sees [ideological problems] in statu nascendi, sometimes better than the more cautious "man of science," the philosopher, or the technician. The generation of ideas, the generation of esthetic desires and feelings, their wandering, their as yet unformed groping for reality, their restless seething in the depths of the so-called

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219
"social psyche"—the whole as yet undifferentiated flood of generating ideology—is reflected and refracted in the content of the literary work. (Medvedev/Bakhtin 17)

*Jane Eyre* is such a work.

Though *Jane Eyre*, like other horizon-changing novels, has a moral vision and social and psychological implications—ideologemes—it is also a specifically *novelistic* utterance at a specific time in the history of the proleptically Darwinian genre called the novel. Though it appears at a particular moment of social and political history, its position as a novel is on a different time curve: "The variety of events of one historical moment . . . are *de facto* moments of completely different time curves, determined by the laws of their special history, as becomes obvious in the different ‘histories’—of art, of law, of economics, political history, etc." (Jauss 32). The varied voices of the novel species that carried ideologemes also carried *narrational* elements that severally and jointly were preserving and transforming the genre of the novel, elements that might be designated—in a word even uglier than its analogue—"narratigemes."

Charlotte Brontë was involved in the same project as her revered Thackeray. He, by deliberate parody of contemporary conventional narrative types, was trying to forge a new novel for the new, Victorian, bourgeois era; she was doing so by a different kind of parody, consciously, or not, incorporating the different generic ways of telling a story in transgeneric narratigemes, holding up familiar, conventional "plots" or novel species for examination and evaluation by putting them in an "unfamiliar light" (Iser 78)—an intertextual, mutually altering dialogue. Such an activity, Bakhtin confirms, is of the utmost importance in the development of the novel: "Literary parody of dominant novel-types plays a large role in the history of the European novel. One could even say that the most important novelistic models and novel-types arose precisely during this parodic destruction of preceding novelistic worlds" (*Dialogic* 309). *Jane Eyre* is such a model.

The transgeneric familiar narrative scene or topos, the narratigeme, defamiliarizes, "parodies," and destroys the precedent novel conventions and creates a new dialogic form. It functions at the narrative level as heteroglossia does at the verbal. It could even be thought
of as "heterogeneric": the novel species, types, or genres bringing their context and ideological implications to the topical scene, serving as the rough equivalent of the "languages" brought to the word or utterance via hybridization or heteroglossia. Indeed, since it operates on larger units and on narrative units, it may generally be a more appropriate and useful focus for dialogic analysis of long narrative forms like the novel than is heteroglossia.

Once the narratigemes in *Jane Eyre* are unpacked and their function in engendering and problematizing expectations of plot and ontology realized, how does one demonstrate their articulation? How can one evaluate whether they are successfully "fused into a concrete unity that is contradictory, multi-speeched and heterogeneous" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 365)? Unless it is sufficient merely to point to the "test of time" (e.g., the contemporary success of *Jane Eyre*, its host of imitators, and its subsequent canonization), the concrete demonstration of the dialogic, that "higher unity" which is not monologic, is, to me, one of the most daunting challenges of Bakhtinian criticism. Perhaps the narratigeme of the scenic topos may suggest a concrete way to demonstrate the multispeeched, multispecied *Jane Eyre*'s concrete unity. The narrative scene which, because it has appeared before in many different generic contexts and so brings with it "alien," refracting voices, serves to unify dialogic narrative at a higher level, just as Bakhtin claims Dostoevsky's seeing the event or "cross-section of a single moment" (*Dostoevsky* 28) does. The transgeneric narrative scene does so not as allusion, echo, or resolution, but by offering at once whole generic voices and signifiers: "We are not . . . talking here of antinomy or the juxtaposition of abstract ideas, but of the juxtaposition of whole personalities in concrete events" (Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky* 18; see also, e.g., 13, 21, 32). A narratigeme is, then, an intertextual event, the other texts representing the "personalities" or voices; the topos, the site of the interrelationships of those voices. We have seen how many species with their disparate ideologemes and narrative purposes and strategies pass through the topos of the rebellious child punished by confinement, for example. Each has a "voice" that neither stifles nor dominates the others; there is a dialogic nexus, a number of lines running through a single point. They are unified by the scene itself, but each retains its own ideologeme, its own
perspective, which is not subsumed but can reappear later in another topical scene—the dying child scene, for example—with or without the others (Disraeli, for example, is not known for his pathetic scenes of dying children). Brontë simultaneously defamiliarizes these familiar scenes and dialogizes genres in these scenes in which the generic ideologemes and narratigemes interact but retain their own voice.

*Jane Eyre* is created intertextually out of the given species of the novel in midcentury and transforms what was given into one of the fountainheads of the novel of romantic realism in the Victorian period. By “this parodic destruction of preceding novelistic worlds,” Brontë has created a horizon-changing novel, one of “the most important novelistic models and novel-types” of the nineteenth century (Bakh­tin, *Dialogic* 309). Reading it temporally, spatially, intertextually, and from sites outside itself may serve as a paradigm for the reading of all such novels.