

Jane Eyre

C.Brontë

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I read 'Jane Eyre' in a Penguin edition in the spring of 1972 I believe. I recall being on a train reading it, and someone remarked that literature of that order one should not read as light literature on a train, it required more concentration. I was amused and gratified. Clearly I was on such an elevated intellectual level, that which was tough for most peoples was light to me. Such is the naive arrogance of youth. What do I recall from the book? To be honest almost nothing. Of course I know of the mad woman in the attic, but this is part of general lore, and I cannot tell whether it is part of my own personal recollection or simply a reflection of the collective recollection. In short, the book must not, unlike that of her sister's 'Wuthering Heights' which I had read two years earlier, have made much impression on me. 'Wuthering Heights' is a tempestuous love story seen from the outside and set among bleak moors. In fact the first real love story I ever read, and maybe setting some impossible standards. 'Jane Eyre' on the other hand is seen from the perspective of a young plain girl getting taken by an older man. Clearly there were little with which I was able to identify, not that I had not read books in childhood with the perspectives of girls and greatly appreciated them, but maybe at that particular age my ability to transcend gender differences was impaired. Now almost three times as old I decide to reread the book, after having seen a somewhat garbled BBC dramatization. My original Penguin edition I cannot find on the expected shelf, maybe one of my daughters has claimed it, but there is an old illustrated edition from my parents library, which will serve even better (except it will not provide the extensive foreword to dip into afterwards). As an old man you read a book like that differently. It will hardly service you with new sensations and experiences, nor will it be able to provide you with valuable instructions to serve you into your future life, as that is already more or less gobbled up by the past. Thus you take a birds-eye view, you look for qualities extrinsic to the world itself, such as literary or historical ones. In short you look at the novel as a thing in the world, not as a world in itself, in which you may be gulped down.

First there is a tradition of Gothic Novels stemming from the 18th century and providing much of the fare that young women were sustained on when reading novels at the time. Jane Austen's 'Northanger Abbey' makes fun of the tradition, and is consciously partly styled on one, providing one of the stock scenarios of a dirty secret being purposely hidden from view from the heroine. No wonder the reading of novels were frowned upon and held as a destructive pastime. 'Jane Eyre' is obviously set in this tradition, with the point of view of a plain girl becoming privy to the realities of the big wide world she longs to embrace. The mad woman in the attic is clearly a Gothic element if any, and no doubt not without a precedent. The big house itself, mysterious and bleak, with a landlord only occasionally visiting it, and finally being reduced to smoldering ruins, is yet another obviously Gothic element. But a great work of art transcends the tradition in which it appears. The outward plot of a story, is but an excuse, a mere cloth-hanger onto which

to drape the actual creation. One has only to look at Shakespeare, who borrowed freely before putting his own stamp on it. Execution is almost everything in art, more so than plot and ideas, which furnish but the material of which the work itself is formed.

Charlotte Brontë is an accomplished writer, having learned her craft no doubt through extensive reading, including that of Gothic Novels, in addition to more edifying literature. In former times, the Bible was the only book to be found in a home if any, so anyone with an urge to read, was typically confined to peruse its pages. The precocious siblings Brontë grew up in a Clergyman's home (the poor man eventually surviving not only his wife, but all his children, of whom none left any further issue) where there consequently were far more books than the Bible to read. In fact throughout the 19th century the clergymen constituted the backbone of the intellectual elite and did at least in rural areas enjoy a fair amount of prestige and relative material comfort.

Her skills consist first in a command of a narrative technique. The story is, unlike that of 'Wuthering Heights', presented chronologically¹, yet she avoids tedium, knowing when to present something in media res, when to slow down, and when to speed up. This is a skill which you may not necessarily notice, because it does not call attention to itself, in fact only when it malfunctions does it become apparent. Secondly there is an attention to describing nature and the passing of seasons. This on the other hand is something that people may note, and some even resent when the pleasure they seek is nothing but the unfolding of a plot. It is also intimately related to another aspect of an old novel, namely its ability to evoke the sense of time. This is not something which is necessarily intentional on the part of the author but a consequence of her close observance, and Brontë is a close observer of the scene, as is the heroine Jane. Those elements go beyond the mere unfolding of a plot and provide much of the pleasure of reading, at least for more mature readers. But as to the plot it has certain obvious flaws, the most obvious one being that of fortuitous coincidences, such as that family of a young clergyman and his two sisters Jane encounters in an isolated cottage while on the brink of expiration as a fugitive, would turn out to be cousins of hers. This is straining credulity, yet of course one should never forget that fiction is fiction while reading it, and that it is not fair to forbid fiction what may after all happen in real life just because of improbability². There are also other things to criticize, such as the rather clear divisions into good and evil people, with the insipid fools thrown in the middle. There is the spiteful Mrs Reed, her vicious son John, the cold-hearted and mean Mr B. who owns the school to which the hapless Jane has been sent as to be out of the way. While at the same time the head mistress at the school is a paragon of virtue. Now poetic license should always be accorded a work of fiction, after all its *raison d'être* is to realize what should be, but happens not to be. If real life is confusing and capricious, fiction can at least provide order and justice. Now the school at Lowood would logically have been hell on earth, as in an inspired tale by a Dickens, but

¹ In the BBC adaptation, this is jumbled and a more tortuous approach is selected with a lot of flashbacks, in the more or less vain hope of adding drama to the story.

² Consequently in the BBC adaption this coincidence is edited out and replaced. This is done by a realistic subterfuge and something similar may have been provided by Brontë, after all the connection by blood is not necessary. It is quite likely that if the author had had occasion to review her work one more time, she may have changed that point.

by a lucky chain of events, which admittedly, through a typhoid epidemics causing many a death, proves rather catastrophic to many students, the outcome is to the advantage of our heroine, who, after a change of government of the school, gets a solid education and in fact spends the last two years there as a teacher. But she is restless, she wants to get out in the world and not to get stuck in her old school and puts in an advertisement for a position and within a week or two she gets a response and sets out on a journey which will prove to be the adventure of her life.

It does start out rather well. The lady of the house, who really is not the lady but merely the housekeeper - Mrs Fairfax, is pleasant enough, and her charge - Adele, a young silly girl of French provenance, giving the author opportunity to show off her French (and thereby gratifying the many readers who can still follow her), is pleasant enough. Yet she is bored being stuck there, after all she longs to get out in the big wide world with its excitements and commotions. And then the lord of the house appears, the Mr Rochester, and the rest is history.

What does she, a young woman see in him, about twice her age? He is not handsome, and beauty be it in men or women, is important for Brontë, or at least to her protagonist, no doubt reflecting a pervasive mood of the times, a mood, which of course is as present today, if not as plumply and innocently expressed, as it was back then. On the other hand he has money, he has power, but those are worldly things. But there is more to his power than that comes with position and wealth, it is the power of personality. Similarly what does he see in her? She has youth, that it is true, but she has no beauty, in fact we are told that she is quite plain, a fact to which she has painfully become aware of. Nor does she have any wealth or position to her credit, she is quite unprepossessing, but not, and this is the point, neither insipid nor innocuous. A bond is established between, a bond not based on superficial traits, such as are objective and open for everyone to see and comment upon and judge, but a bond which is purely subjective, thus opaque to outsiders. Thus the author expresses her conception of true love, as something that is entirely private, touching upon the secret inner self of which every true man and woman is centered around. This kind of love is not voluntary, it is not the result of a reasoned calculation, on the contrary it is wholly involuntary, going against reason, being more in the nature of a visitation. Just like truth itself which may be sought but can never be manufactured and is only recognized when confronted with. What arises, in a fairly brief span of time, is the mutual realization that they 'touch', that there is a secret indissoluble bond that connects their inner beings and that they cannot be separated unless both be torn apart internally.

But the course of true love never runs smooth nor straight, as the saying goes. In order to add drama and suspense, and to stick to the Gothic conception, there has to be complications more or less contrived. There is the mock courtship of Rochester for a certain Miss Ingram. In fact one of the stock characters employed by Brontë to heighten the contrast between true private love and its counterfeit, the public love engaging the trappings of desire and attraction, such as beauty and wealth. Miss Ingram is all surface but no content with which to fall in love. Her conversation, her interests, her concern, her very behavior, all reveal the emptiness inside. This courtship is then explained as a ruse, whose sole purpose was to provoke the jealousy of Jane and hence instill in her a reciprocation of that love that Rochester himself has been gripped by. There is the mock

gipsy woman, seen though only by Jane, not by the haughty Miss Ingram, whose encounter with the apparition proves very upsetting to her. (In fact it is revealing that Jane notices her agitation by paying sustained attention to her pretense of indifference by noting that she never once turned the page of the book she pretended to be engrossed by. Only a true observer would notice that, and no doubt this is a reflection on the author herself, who must have played that marginal role, and at least once in her life, noted the putative reader who never turns a page.) And then of course the presence of the mad wife in the attic, revealed as the final vows are to be made. This revelation, along with the crisis that follows, is of course the climax of the book.

One may argue that nowadays there would have been no crisis. After all what would have stopped Jane to join her lover enjoying to the end of their lives a life together in congenial surroundings traveling throughout the continent³. This is what Rochester offers her, and she is of course severely tempted to take him up on it. Not so much because of the pleasures that he intimates, but because to the deep affection she still feels for him, because her love being true, it cannot be turned off and on by will. But she refuses. Why? She does not want to be just one in line of his mistresses, one whom he so easily could cast off, as he had in the past (his charge is a memento of his brief liason with an Opera singer, whom he dumps at the first intimation of infidelity, and purportedly his own issue, although he doubts it). For a woman to refuse the offer of being a mistress and insist on marriage, may be seen as cold calculation, not unlike that of Anne Boleyn, not wanting to share the fate of her more accommodating sister, holding the lovesick King Henry at arms length, making his passion more desperate and fierce, bending him to her will. But the times were different, and what would now not be a real issue was then felt as one. Yet one does the whole crisis an injustice if one reduces it to mere conventions, which, if accidentally absent, as of today, would make the whole problem disappear. After all Jane has been the victim of a ruse, he has not confided in her, thus breaking the mutual understanding of their bondage. This is a more universal plight by being so more private. Public chores change, being subjected to the whims of fashion, while private chores being the manifestations of human nature are invariant over the ages. In a tortured interchange, where Jane displays a level of articulation only to be expected on the stage⁴, she gives vent for the need of laws and principles. She cries in fact *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. If at my individual convenience I might break them, what would be their worth? They have a worth - so I have always believed..* In a way this romantic love story suddenly transcends its given box and enters into a philosophical question of great interest, namely the need of laws and regulations that probe deeper than the mere convenience of conventions. Should we submit to the laws and principles of our making, is there in fact an intrinsic worth in adhering to them in principle?

³ This is what lies in store for Vronski and Anna, but after some time they get deadly bored by all the sightseeing

⁴ This is of course a common weakness as to the realism of all fictional representation, but if fiction were not allowed to take such liberties, its entire reason for being, would be undercut. In art we do not seek the faithful rendering of the real world, we need something more exalted.

In desperation she leaves with little money, and the little she has, she soon spends on transportation. She is soon reduced to the miserable state of a beggar being at her wits end starving. At the very end of her tether she manages with great effort to reach an isolated cottage out on the moors. In the rain and the wet she is almost freezing to death although it is summer. Through its windows she beholds a heavenly sight, two young ladies engaged in study and conversation, just ladies like her, accomplished, cultured and intellectual. She feels at home. But her access to this heavenly abode is almost forever barred by a disapproving older maid, set to protect her charges from the riffraff out there⁵, had not the brother, the clergyman, arrived to let her in in true Christian spirit.

What follows now will be a second subsidiary plot in which the clergyman, her cousin as we know (but this is due to a fortuitous choice, which, as we have been speculated in a previous footnote, may very well have been overturned in a subsequent reworking), eventually decides to propose to her. But how different are not his motives from those of Rochester. While Rochester saw and touched her secret inner being, the clergyman, aptly called St. John, sees in her only her virtues and the use he can put them to. He is a madly ambitious man, meaning disdainful of his own comfort and happiness, set to become a missionary in India, where he needs an assistant, and what better choice than Jane, with all her strengths, such as a willingness to apply herself and remain submissive (incidentally the goal set by the Lowood school in raising their charity charges). In fact, desperate as she is, she professes willing to join him and sacrifice herself in that climate that surely will kill her, but according to St. John this is impossible, convention demands that they go as husband and wife, and who knows love may come between them. Jane recoils at this proposal of calculated love, and they eventually separate for ever. Maybe the young clergyman was motivated not only by convention, but by darker urges of his suppressed libido. In fact, another instance of the stock character, the pretty but vapid woman of sensuous charms, has played a temporary role in the life of St. John. He has, if passingly, been tempted by the attraction of the flesh, but by an effort of will extricated himself from a growing passion for a woman, whose essential emptiness pricks his pride, as well as panders to its lower aspects. Maybe, he made a wrong choice, her sweetness may have tempered his ambition, to which he gives the words of *Reason and not Feeling is my guide; my ambition is unlimited; my desire to rise higher, to do more than others is insatiable. I honor endurance, perseverance, industry, talent; because these are the means by which men achieve great ends, and mount to lofty eminence..* Ambition is a great and worthy thing, but you should never chew off more than you can bite, and much ambition is nothing more than repressed vanity.

Then in the end, Jane has never forgotten her true love, but what has become of him, investigations prove fruitless, in the end she travels to Thorndyke Hall, finds it a ruin, long enough suffered in such a state, as to make nature intrude on her. From an innkeeper she finds out that happened, in particular that the mad woman is dead, having jumped to her extinction from the roof of the building she had set aflame, frustrating the efforts of her estranged husband to save her. What he got for his effort was mutilation if survival. Blind and with a stumped arm. They come together and live happily ever after producing off-springs, as an epilogue reveals to pander to the inane curiosities of the average novel

⁵ Not unlike the haggard ravaged hordes of refugees seeking entrance to Europe as I write this

reader as to what happened then.

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