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Jane Eyre's Imagination

JENNIFER GRIBBLE

Then my sole relief was to walk along the corridor of the third story, backwards and forwards, safe in the silence and solitude of the spot, and allow my mind's eye to dwell on whatever bright visions rose before it—and certainly they were many and glowing; to let my heart be heaved by the exultant movement, which, while it swelled it in trouble, expanded it with life; and, best of all, to open my inward ear to a tale that was never ended—a tale my imagination created and narrated continuously; quickened with all of incident, life, fire, feeling, that I desired and had not in my actual existence (I, XII, 138).¹

THIS CENTRAL PASSAGE has caught the eye of most critics of *Jane Eyre*, for it focuses the novel's peculiar quality of subjective revelation. Charlotte Brontë's first successful novel is all too clearly self-projective, both in its account of the workings of the imagination and in its concern with social demands and tensions. "I will show you a heroine as plain and as small as myself" ² she told her sisters, who still believed in the convention of the beautiful heroine. And Charlotte Brontë shares with her heroine the tremendous energy of an imagination pressing at the confines of a governess's social context and a nervously retiring personality. Her letters refer again and again to the compensatory and vicarious role of "the faculty of imagination" in her own dreary life. There is, of course, as Suzanne Langer notes,³ an intimate connection between social tensions and imaginative activity: we are driven to the symboliza-

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¹ Volume, chapter and page numbers cited thus refer to *Jane Eyre*, Shakespeare Head ed. (Oxford, 1931).

² Quoted by E. C. Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (Dolphin Books, New York), p. 259.

³ *Feeling and Form* (London, 1959), p. 253.

tion and articulation of experience when we must understand it to keep ourselves oriented in society and nature. Jane, like Charlotte Brontë, is sustained by imaginative activity of various kinds; they have a common tendency to render their experience by extended images, frequently images drawn from the creative process itself. The intense and varied imagining is at times undisciplined, unrelated to the novel's real imaginative logic: in this, as in other ways, the distinction between the narrator and the heroine begins to blur.

Charlotte Brontë's tendency to an uncritical identification with her heroine, and in particular her fascinated interest in Jane's imaginative powers, suggest why the novel can so easily be dismissed as "subjective," or as "romantic" in the pejorative sense. The presence of what look like very conventional romantic elements—the mad wife, the bogus wedding, the visionary dreams and coincidences—seems to provide further symptoms of such a romanticism. Phrases like "our first romantic novelist," "our first subjective novelist" usually imply judgments like Kathleen Tillotson's, that *Jane Eyre* is "a novel of the inner life, not of man in his social relations; it maps a private world,"⁴ or of G. Armour Craig, that it is "the reduction of the world to the terms of a single vision."⁵ For Craig, as for the novel's first critic, G. H. Lewes, this central passage on Jane's imaginings gives evidence that Charlotte Brontë sees the imagination as a consoling escape from the realities of life.

It seems to me that Charlotte Brontë's romanticism is of a more exploratory and interesting kind than has generally been acknowledged: that in *Jane Eyre* she is attempting, if not always consistently and successfully, to examine the workings of the creative imagination. *Jane Eyre* is a portrait of the artist in a less explicit way, perhaps, than most other novels of the kind, though it is clearly a near portrait of Charlotte Brontë as a young woman. Jane is an artist in the formal sense only by virtue of her skill in drawing. But in concentrating attention on the significance of Jane's active and sensitive imagination and its relationship with, and responses to, what it encounters, the novel inevitably unfolds the processes by which art is made. In Jane, to use Coleridge's very

⁴ *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (Oxford, 1956), p. 257.

⁵ "The Unpoetic Compromise," *English Institute Essays, 1955* (New York, 1956), p. 40.

relevant terms, we see the functioning of the primary imagination, or basic acts of perception involved in the most normal contacts of the mind with "nature." But further, the novel presents and emphasizes the contrast between the more sophisticated organizing activities—the fancy, by which Jane ties the elements of her experience into uneasy and arbitrary synthesis, and the secondary imagination, which, like poetry, fuses the disparate of experience into profound and meaningful order. In Jane's responses to events, in her drawings and her dreams, we see a mind actively creating its experience. Charlotte Brontë's interest in the imagination, "that strong restless faculty that claims to be heard and exercised,"⁶ is less coherent than Coleridge's (whose poetry she certainly absorbed—there is no evidence of her reading his prose), but her novels show an increasing insight into its vagaries and powers.

Far from envisaging the imagination as an escape from the realities of life, Charlotte Brontë must surely have agreed with G. H. Lewes⁷ that it is only through the imagination that "reality" can fully be explored and understood. In fact, the source of the debates between Reason and Fancy that recur in her letters and novels is a purposeful effort to explore the relationship between "inner" and "outer" worlds. The impulse behind her first novel, *The Professor*, had been a determined adherence to "the real," a repressing of the fantastic romances of Angria, the dream kingdom she had shared in childhood with her brother. "Nature and Truth," the two great neoclassical deities, were to be her guides.⁸ But the insistent claims of her own inspiration, her own invention, proved too strong to be repressed. Increasingly she strives, like Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*, to reconcile "the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of the imagination."⁹ As M. H. Abrams shows, the whole tendency of Coleridge's thinking, especially the distinction between fancy and imagination, is to relate the "mechanistic" "fixities and definites" involved in the theory of the passive,

⁶ *The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondences* (Oxford, 1932), p. 153.

⁷ "Recent Novels: French and English," *Fraser's Magazine*, XXXVI (Dec., 1847), 687.

⁸ See her exchange with Lewes after his review of *Jane Eyre*, in *Correspondences*, Vol. II, 152.

⁹ *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (Oxford, 1907), Chap. xiv.

reflecting mind to his central concern with the active, creating mind.¹⁰ Less consciously, Charlotte Brontë is attempting, from *Jane Eyre* onwards, to balance the claims of an objective, shared world of phenomena of which she must give faithful account, and a belief in the transforming, organic power of the imagination. *Jane Eyre* questions the kind of dichotomy between inner experience and outer world that she (and also G. H. Lewes) had once believed necessary. The novel attempts what Coleridge describes as “the mystery of genius in the fine arts”—“to make the external internal, to make nature thought and thought nature.”¹¹ In no abstract theoretic way, but in the very terms of the imaginative activity itself, it reveals how shifting is the sense of “reality,” or that which the mind plays upon, how uncanny is the power of the imagination to anticipate and transform the stuff of experience, to forge its own version of the facts, to find in the natural world that complex sense of relatedness that the romantic poets find.

Such a concern makes difficult demands of the novelist, however, especially one with a predilection for autobiographical form. In *Jane Eyre* there is the need constantly to distinguish between Jane’s imagination and Charlotte Brontë’s, and the two are not always distinguishable. Further, despite her “romanticism,” Charlotte Brontë is not writing a form of romance but attempting to register the claims of the imagination within the conventions of the nineteenth-century novel. Her novel is as firmly committed to the evaluation of Jane as a social being, to the ways in which her social experience forms her, as it is to what her imagination discovers about that experience. Such a balance of claims is not easily maintained. Charlotte Brontë’s attempt to show, through Jane, the power of the imagination to anticipate, organize, and even transform the stuff of experience, is in danger of succeeding too well, that is, of lapsing into wish-fulfillment, the kind of imaginative absolutism to which Craig objects. “Annihilating all that’s made” may be possible in the lyric situation of Marvell’s garden, where the speaker’s isolation from a social context is also clearly limited in duration. But Charlotte Brontë has set herself the task of showing that her heroine’s imagination is necessarily limited as well as extraordinarily powerful. It is only by confronting Jane with those aspects of society and identity that resist the controlling, synthesiz-

¹⁰ *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York, 1958), Chap. vii.

¹¹ “On Poesy and Art,” *Biographia Literaria*, Vol. II, 256.

ing activity of the observing and perceiving mind that she can represent the power of her own imagination to tell a tale that comprehends more than Jane's, and, as well, the validity of other versions of the facts. This is, of course, essentially the meaning of our demand for "objectivity" in the novel—that the total view we absorb from its pages should take its bearings from more than one mind's view, that against any central character's integrity of vision should be ranged the other possible visions (including the author's) that make up the complexities of our composite experience. In other words, while Charlotte Brontë may explore, through Jane's experience, the interaction and fusion of internal and external, individual and society, thought and nature, she must represent as objectively as possible the facts on which Jane's imagination works, and also that which is intractable, which challenges Jane's sense of herself, her desires, her imaginative domination.

It is this interest in the problems of living in society, then, that provides the necessary counterpoise to the imaginative powers of the heroine. Jane's progress, like that of many another Victorian heroine, is ostensibly a social one; the basic structure of the novel depends on her defining, developing movements from context to context. Jane is pathetically eager to belong: "I saw you had a social heart," Rochester observes of her. In the acting out of her longings to establish herself socially, to discover a role appropriate to her sense of self, she encounters some challenges, hardships and restraints that no imaginative energy can transform. Throughout the novel, a series of crucial episodes summarize Jane's imaginative and social progress. A discussion of two of these, and their informing contexts, may help to demonstrate the connected relationships between Jane and Charlotte Brontë, Jane and society, and the question of the power and function of Jane's imagination.

Jane's traumatic experience in the red-room is one such episode: it starkly images Jane's life at Gateshead and her developing sense of herself in relationship with others. Although she is herself narrator, the interest of her tale lies more in the dramatizing of her relationship with the Reed family than in any outpourings of her inner life. She is "humbled by the consciousness of [her] physical inferiority to Eliza, John, and Georgiana Reed," excluded from the family group at the fireside until she should acquire "a more sociable and childlike disposition, a more attractive and sprightly man-

ner.” And although John Reed’s brutality and his mother’s antagonism are more sharply felt by being presented through the consciousness of Jane, we are still made aware that the Reeds are not as monstrous as they may appear to the sensitive alienated child, but comprise a not untypical Victorian family of spoiled children and coldly correct mother faced with a strange child who in no sense belongs to them. Imprisoned in the fearful red-room, the child, who scarcely understands her disgrace and alienation, has the uncanny experience of catching her reflection in the glass:

Returning, I had to cross before the looking-glass; my fascinated glance involuntarily explored the depth it revealed. All looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality: and the strange little figure there gazing at me, with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still, had the effect of a real spirit; I thought it like one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp, Bessie’s evening stories represented as coming up out of lone, ferny dells in moors, and appearing before the eyes of belated travellers (I, II, 11).

Jane’s imagination, playing on this sharply isolated image of herself, reveals to her the essential nature of her position at Gateshead and makes explicit what lies implicit in the preceding pages. She is a strange small creature, a visitor among ordinary people, bringing with her from her own lonely region a startling power and even a malevolence (of the kind, we later note, that terrifies Mrs. Reed). It is a genuine perception of the creative imagination, blurring the distinction between the Jane who looks in the mirror, and the reflected Jane who looks up out of the hollow: “All looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality” and yet the reflected figure “had the effect of a real spirit.” The interaction between fact and imagination, between external and internal, is such that we are compelled to accept a composite view of the child’s insignificance and her power, of her subjection to experience and her control of it. And of course the incident is a paradigm of romantic theories of the imagination, in its playing on the mirror paradoxes of activity and passivity, inclusion and exclusion, egotism and self-abnegation, and in that the essential creative insight into the social facts comes at the moment of most complete social isolation.

The real success of the passage is perhaps that Charlotte Brontë’s own imagination is working so precisely and relevantly. Jane’s

vision, while losing none of its power, is complemented by Charlotte Brontë's "placing" of the child. The later reflections of the mature Jane extend this placing: "they were not bound to regard with affection a thing that could not sympathize with one amongst them, a heterogeneous thing, opposed to them in temperament, in capacity, in propensities" (I, II, 13). Her experience at Lowood school is a further stage of Jane's self-discovery in relation with others, where, in particular, the stoic Helen Burns radically questions Jane's tendency to a self-justifying view of the Gateshead years. Helen's doctrine of endurance begins to influence Jane as she attempts to "return good for evil," "to eschew the self-centredness of day-dream and self-righteousness," and to adhere to certain fixed social and moral principles. This social and moral growth leads Jane to submit with patience to the coldness of her dying aunt and to the selfishness of her cousins. And it bears directly on her rejection of Rochester.

For all the force and insight of Jane's imagination, then, we are still aware that it here subserves as well as renders Charlotte Brontë's controlling insight, and that the essential distance between creature and creator is preserved. For contrast, one might take the comparable passage where Jane first explores Thornfield Hall:

I lingered in the long passage to which this led, separating the front and back rooms of the third story: narrow, low and dim, with only one little window at the far end, and looking, with its two rows of small black doors all shut, like a corridor in some Bluebeard's castle.

While I paced softly on, the last sound I expected to hear in so still a region, a laugh, struck my ear. It was a curious laugh; distinct, formal, mirthless (I, XI, 135).

Here the distinction between the imaginations of heroine and creator is lost: the impact of that laugh surely depends for its effect on the kind of sensation suggested in "the last sound I expected to hear in so still a region," that is, on a quietness, an absence of threat. In fact, however, Jane's impressions of the small, dark, close corridor, her telling "Bluebeard's castle" comparison, have prepared the way for just such a sinister note, so that Jane's surprise at the intrusive noise is not as convincing as it should be. In this case, Charlotte Brontë's imagination has leapt ahead, forestalling her heroine and calling in question the dramatic integrity of her responses.

There is, of course, a further vision in the red-room. The real trauma comes after night falls, and the child's mind dwells on the morbid associations of this place where her uncle has died:

I began to recall what I had heard of dead men, troubled in their graves by the violation of their last wishes, revisiting the earth to punish the perjured and avenge the oppressed; and I thought Mr Reed's spirit, harassed by the wrongs of his sister's child, might quit its abode—whether in the church vault or in the unknown world of the departed—and rise before me in this chamber. I wiped my tears and hushed my sobs; fearful lest any sign of violent grief might waken a preternatural voice to comfort me, or elicit from the gloom some haloed face, bending over me with strange pity. This idea, consolatory in theory, I felt would be terrible if realised: with all my might I endeavoured to stifle it—I endeavoured to be firm. Shaking my hair from my eyes, I lifted my head and tried to look boldly round the dark room: at this moment a light gleamed on the wall. Was it, I asked myself, a ray from the moon penetrating some aperture in the blind? No; moonlight was still, and this stirred; while I gazed, it glided up to the ceiling and quivered over my head. I can now conjecture readily that this streak of light was, in all likelihood, a gleam from a lantern, carried by someone across the lawn: but then, prepared as my mind was for horror, shaken as my nerves were by agitation, I thought the swift-darting beam was a herald of some coming vision from another world. My heart beat thick, my head grew hot; a sound filled my ears, which I deemed the rushing of wings: something seemed near me; I was oppressed, suffocated: endurance broke down; I rushed to the door and shook the lock in desperate effort. Steps came running along the outer passage; the key turned, Bessie and Abbot entered (I, II, 14).

This is one of several occasions in the novel where weight is given to Jane's "fairy" powers; later incidents go even further, and suggest that she actually does possess supernatural or extrasensory perceptions. Here, we are in no doubt that Jane has only seen a gleam of light. As the lengthy analysis of her thought process indicates, the final climactic delusion is the imagination's attempt to transform the facts of her imprisonment and alienation. One more readily accepts this incident than the comparable later one of the mystic call and answer between Jane and the blinded Rochester, because here Charlotte Brontë, although showing the power of Jane's imagination to affect her own perceptions, is in no danger of endorsing those perceptions in the face of all probability. Nevertheless, the interest of the incident clearly lies in the *effects* of Jane's vision, for however private and deluded it does bring about

the desired end, changing Jane's position from outcast to object of pity and wonder, and thus of acceptance.

The relationship with Rochester is the obvious danger point for Charlotte Brontë's tendency to be overinvolved in Jane's success. Jane's life as governess at Thornfield Hall, even before she meets its master, encourages her in the kind of escapist dream quoted at the outset. Her dreams are of movement—busyness, people, towns—the qualities Charlotte Brontë found lacking in the novels of Jane Austen: "what throbs fast, full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through."¹² The "stormy seas" and violent motions of which she dreams on the night she saves Rochester from the fire, and her strange prophetic drawings, have the melodramatic coloring of conventional romanticism, a coloring of which Charlotte Brontë is usually aware. But it is Craig's contention that Jane's visions, swinging free of any "objective" facts the novel might provide, become the substance of the novel.

There are, I think, two points at which one must agree that Charlotte Brontë is not securely in control of her heroine's imaginings—where an unqualified conventional romanticism is offered and endorsed. One is the episode following the mock-marriage, where Jane, in flight from the bigamous intentions of Rochester, coincidentally discovers some long-lost cousins. Jane's encounter with a new and different social context is part of the basic pattern of the book. But her cousin St. John's subsequent offer of a "missionary marriage," embodying just that adherence to right principle that Jane found lacking in Rochester's proposal, is too schematic, too much the passionless opposite of Rochester's. For this reason I cannot see it, as Craig does, as a climax of Jane's progress. It is a "religious call" certainly, but in context it looks more like a humiliation than a victory. The final heaven-directed reunion with Rochester circumvents the whole dilemma. And again, in the mystic call and answer between the separated lovers Charlotte Brontë seems to be straining to deliver her heroine, laboring the connection between Jane and Rochester to the point where events are falsified to vindicate Jane's vision. In both these cases, the evidence lies in a dislocation of the delicately balanced relationship between Jane's imaginings and the world they encounter. That

¹² *Correspondences*, Vol. III, 99.

world, reduced to the schematic and the coincidental, is temporarily a mere adjunct of Jane's willful imagination.

These points of weakness, however, surely do not vitiate Charlotte Brontë's purpose in the novel as a whole. That Jane's dreams and drawings are highly colored and girlishly romantic the author does indeed see and know as part of a girlhood she had herself lived through. It is the intent of this novel to show that the heroine, in her development from daydream to maturity, hovers between fancy and real insight. The interest is not primarily in the quality of Jane's imaginative activity, but in its relationship with the context in which it works. Jane's drawings, so clearly springing from, and prophesying, aspects of her experience—from the ornithological book she reads at the opening of the novel, to the blinding of Rochester—but lurid in themselves, are a case in point. We are, I think, compelled to accept that Jane's imagination has extraordinary powers: the detailed analysis of her physical symptoms at moments of heightened awareness—the rapid beating of the heart, chill, paralysis—convey an almost scientific vindication of such states of being. Jane's sensitivity and the acuteness with which she judges Rochester's whims justify in part his favorite descriptions of her—"mocking changeling," "almost unearthly thing"—and his parable of their love, for his step-daughter: "it was a fairy come from elf-land." And the dreams in which Jane foresees her separation from Rochester and the devastation of Thornfield Hall seem to me to relate validly to the "actual." Like her drawings, Jane's dreams combine sensations already experienced in the narrative, such as the social barrier that divides the lovers, and Jane's sense of duty—"burdened with the charge of a little child." The settings of these dreams, too, recall the actual, notably the roadway on which the lovers first met and parted, and the strange, deceptive structure of Thornfield Hall itself. The effect is to show how Jane's sensitive response to her experience can foresee, through the transmuting and organizing activity of dream, the calamity implicit in what has already been lived through.

Certainly, then, the coming of Rochester transforms Jane's existence, but for the most part it provides something actual on which her imagination can feed, in Rochester's own fascinating personality and in the introduction of the neighboring society. We in no sense feel that Jane creates this life, or that Rochester is a mere puppet of her imagination. There *is* a sense in which her imagina-

tion comprehends and assimilates him, anticipating the course their relationship will take. As Rochester first rides towards her she remembers Bessie's fable of the Gytrash, or North-of-England spirit, which comes upon belated travelers, and she glimpses, as horse and rider and dog pass her, "one mask of Bessie's Gytrash." The fancy links the rider with the Jane of the mirror vision and prefigures the ways in which Jane does come to control Rochester, and he to depend on her. A moment after, his horse has slipped and thrown him. Later, the incident has a strange unreality for Jane, the element of fable again catching the blurring of fact and fancy or wishing. On her return home she stops again at the stile "with an idea that a horse's hoofs might ring on the causeway again, and that a rider in a cloak, and a Gytrash-like Newfoundland dog, might be again apparent" (I, XII, 147).

Nevertheless, elsewhere in this section Jane's seeming control of her experience, her imagination leaping ahead of the action in dream, vision, prophetic drawing, is counterpoised by aspects of her experience that are not susceptible of her control or her foreknowledge. Rochester's strange caprices bewilder her; the visiting gentry, despite their Angrian behavior, reduce her to a mere grey shadow. Neither Jane's imaginative powers, nor Charlotte Brontë's tendency in a few cases to claim too much for them, can be said to cancel out Blanch Ingram's social superiority, the uncomprehending hostility of the Reeds, the recurring disharmonies between the desire of the individual mind and the intractable facts of life. "There is no difference between the mind that knows the world of this novel and the mind that seeks to know it in terms of a private vision," Craig insists. Perhaps I can best conclude my disagreement with him by taking up the relationship between Jane and "nature."

Jane's feeling for and dependence on the natural world may well seem to question the kind of social orientation I have been stressing. In the anguished days after she leaves Rochester, when her sense of identity, purpose, meaning is completely shaken and she feels all ties with human society cut, throwing herself on the mercy of the elements, she seeks the solace of nature:

I touched the heath: it was dry, and yet warm with the heat of the summer-day. I looked at the sky; it was pure: a kindly star twinkled just above the chasm ridge. The dew fell, but with propitious softness; no breeze whispered. Nature seemed to me benign and good; I thought

she loved me, outcast as I was; and I, who from man could anticipate only mistrust, rejection, insult, clung to her with filial fondness. To-night, at least, I would be her guest—as I was her child (II, xxviii, 111).

And yet the solace is temporary: “I was a human being, and had a human being’s wants.” “Human life and human labour were near. I must struggle on: strive to live and bend to toil like the rest” (114).

Jane’s closeness to nature, her sensitivity to its signs, is linked with her tendency to visualize in order to understand—the natural world offering the most immediate, as well as the most deeply felt, source of analogy. She goes to nature in order to discover and define, but her discoveries lead back inevitably to the problems of social living. It is the relevance of nature, as well as the kind of natural world represented, that distinguishes Jane from such a Jane Austen heroine as Fanny Price. Fanny turns from the troubled household of Mansfield Park to look at the scene outside the window,¹³

where all that was solemn, and soothing, and lovely, appeared in the brilliancy of an unclouded night, and the contrast of the deep shade of the woods. Fanny spoke her feelings. “Here’s harmony!” said she; “Here’s repose! Here’s what may leave all painting and all music behind, and what poetry only can attempt to describe! Here’s what may tranquillize every care, and lift the heart to rapture! When I look out on such a night as this, I feel as if there could be neither wickedness nor sorrow in the world; and there certainly would be less of both if the sublimity of nature were more attended to, and people were carried more out of themselves by contemplating such a scene.”¹⁴

It would be inconceivable for this heroine to throw herself into such intense physical contact with nature as Jane Eyre does, when, for example, she sleeps on the bare turf. The ordered eighteenth-century landscape on which Fanny delights to look, her very formulation of response to it—“carried more out of themselves by contemplating such a scene”—measures the distance that separates her from Jane. For it is essential to Charlotte Brontë’s intent, to her conception of the imagination, that she should attempt to blur such distinctions between the observer and the scene and to make the world of nature contiguous with the human mind.

¹³ *The Verbal Icon* (New York, 1964), p. 110.

¹⁴ *Mansfield Park*, Bentley ed. (London, 1877), p. 98.

Again we must press the distinction between Charlotte Brontë and her heroine, however. Both of them are striving to apprehend analogies in nature, Jane's imagination reflecting that of her creator. Rochester, for example, takes on the shape of the mighty tree riven by storm, in the dream of Jane as in the actual garden created by Charlotte Brontë. But Jane's analogies sound stock, second-hand, at a remove, as indeed they are. Jane visualizes the noise of Rochester's coming

as, in a picture, the solid mass of a crag, or the rough boles of a great oak, drawn in dark and strong on the foreground, efface the aerial distance of azure hill, sunny horizon and blended clouds, where tint melts into tint (II, XII, 140).

There is an irrelevance as well as a remoteness here. But Charlotte Brontë's imagination, at its creative work, conveys the quiet, suspended existence of Jane in her winter walk, in the integrally related terms of the peaceful bare countryside:

If a breath of air stirred, it made no sound here; for there was not a holly, not an evergreen to rustle, and the stripped hawthorn and hazel bushes were as still as the white, worn stones which causewayed the middle of the path. Far and wide, on each side, there were only fields, where no cattle now browsed; and the little brown birds which stirred occasionally in the hedge, looked like single russet leaves that had forgotten to drop (I, XII, 140).

Jane is so stilled in wintry suspension of life that, like the birds, she has become as inanimate as the last dried leaves. The natural world is more than mere analogy here—it is an essential and harmonious dimension of human experience. With similar evocative particularity, the whole of nature seems to attend the coming together of Jane and Rochester in the garden “sheltered and Eden-like” and to provide, in a way no analysis could do, a sense of the force and naturalness of their love, aspects only suggested by the crisp repartee that characterizes it. And Jane's delight at the harmony of Thornfield is given in natural terms; her return to Thornfield on a warm evening is full of harvest sights and sounds, the “shooting leaf and flowery branches,” the midsummer sun, the skies of extraordinary purity:

Nature must be gladsome when I was so happy. A beggar-woman and

her little boy—pale, ragged objects both—were coming up the walk, and I ran down and gave them all the money I happened to have in my purse—some three or four shillings: good or bad, they must partake of my jubilee. The rooks cawed and blither birds sang; but nothing was so merry or so musical as my own rejoicing heart (II, xxiv, 23).

This passage is particularly interesting, I think, in explaining how this kind of relationship with nature differs from mere pathetic fallacy. As W. K. Wimsatt has pointed out, such a relationship works, in romantic nature poetry, by blurring the distinction between literal and figurative—the poet wants to read a meaning into the landscape, but he also wants to find it there.¹⁴ Jane's rejoicing heart identifies itself with the birds' songs, nature's jubilee increases her own, and out of the fullness of her joy she seeks to transform human lives too. Yet Charlotte Brontë is careful that the passage also acknowledges the presence of poverty and suffering, the more sober cawing of the rooks. And there comes a time when Jane's misery puts her out of tune with nature's bounty and creativity:

He who is taken out to pass through a fair scene to the scaffold, thinks not of the flowers that smile on his road, but of the block and axe-edge (II, xxvi, 107).

Birds began singing in brake and copse: birds were faithful to their mates; birds were emblems of love. What was I? In the midst of my pain of heart, and frantic efforts of principle, I abhorred myself (II, xxvi, 108).

These passages seem to me to preserve the kind of validity I find in the novel at best—to show on the one hand the energy and power of Jane's imagination in transforming, or making its own, aspects of the natural world it seizes as relevant, yet on the other hand, the integrity of the natural world as something that exists in its own right. For further illustration of the distinction between Jane's imagination and Charlotte Brontë's in this respect, there is a moment when Jane's imagination, powerfully tenanted by grief, plays upon the destruction of her happiness:

Jane Eyre, who had been an ardent, expectant woman—almost a bride—was a cold, solitary girl again: her life was pale; her prospects were desolate. A Christmas frost had come at midsummer; a white December storm had whirled over June; ice glazed the ripe apples,

drifts crushed the blowing roses; on hay-field and corn-field lay a frozen shroud: lanes which last night blushed full of flowers, today were pathless with untrodden snow; and the woods, which twelve hours since waved leafy and fragrant as groves between the tropics, now spread, waste, wild, and white as pine-forests in wintry Norway (II, xxvi, 74).

It is significant that such is Jane's sense of dispossession, of alienation at this point that she deliberately turns from the contemplation of nature in its midsummer beauties, and by her metaphor transforms its sights and sounds, the former emblems of her courtship, into the fanciful equivalents of her own darkened vision. Hers is a landscape that swings away from the actual, and it is part of our understanding of her state of being at this crisis that we should see it so. And this case of the absolutism of the imagination is clearly recognized as absolutism by Charlotte Brontë.

But in general, nature is for Jane no mere escape from the pressures of social living but a means by which she comes to understand more surely and deeply what her social experience teaches. And for Charlotte Brontë the mind's relationship with the natural world offers the most immediate illustration of the powers and limitations of the imagination. For this remarkable novel does not merely map a private world. It attempts, though not always successfully, something quite original. In probing the relationship between one mind's world and the larger world of social relations it demonstrates the insights of romanticism within the conventions of the nineteenth-century English novel.