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“A MESSAGE FOR MISS EYRE; OR, JANE IN WONDERLAND,” *Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens: Revue du Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Victoriennes et Edouardiennes de Université Paul-Valéry*, 8 (1979) 1-9.

My title is not meant to be coy. It attempts to delineate the heroine of *Jane Eyre* as she appears in the largest rhythms of the novel. Jane is a receiver of messages, and she is also, in quite another sense, a decoder of what is inscribed in every feature of her world. In this latter role, she is, proleptically, an Alice in Wonderland, a character who must shape her experience by acting as a semiotician. As a receiver of messages, Jane becomes a character for whom language is a transparent medium. She always knows absolutely the meaning of whatever announces itself as message: clear, direct, unequivocal statement. But as semiotician, Jane also projects her equally adroit capacity to read between the lines of her experience, to see the latent meanings that are available in the text of the world.

This is really to approach *Jane Eyre* in a not unfamiliar way. Many readers have remarked upon the curious blend of social realism and Gothic romance out of which Brontë formed her story. Jane is a heroine who in several ways resembles the heroes of Scott's novels, figures who are equipped with the customary desires and motives appropriate to low mimetic fiction but who, nevertheless, are subject to the disorienting intrusions of the bizarre, the marvellous, and the distant into their lives. To see the modalities of Jane's relationship to the linguistic orders out of which the novel is made is to see in another, and, I think, important way, how the novel uses its dialectic of realism and romance to identify and explore its themes.

The issue becomes clear if we look at that climactic moment in the novel which so many readers have found unconvincing and even absurd. Jane, under the constant pressure of St. John Rivers' rather icy wooing, is almost ready to accept his proposal of marriage.

I could decide if I were but certain.., were I but convinced that it is  
God's will that I should marry you, I could vow to *marry* you here  
and now — come afterwards what would<sup>1</sup>.

Though she says this to her suitor, inwardly she is entreating Heaven for a sign: Show me the path, show me the path! At this moment the whole house becomes preternaturally still, and Jane hears a voice calling her. It is Rochester's voice. And so, with that, the crisis is passed, and Jane, who has not had a word from Rochester since she left Thornfield, and who does not know that Bertha is dead, dismisses St. John Rivers and sets out the next day to find the man from whom she had fled so desperately.

Critical discussion of this episode has been re-opened recently by Ruth Bernard Yeazell, and, in a rejoinder to Yeazell, by George Worth<sup>2</sup>. Yeazell is very illuminating. She argues that Jane, while authentically seeking the possibilities of romantic love, understands the imperative need to maintain something of the independence for which she always struggles, not because she remains incapable of moving from narcissism to desire for the other, but because absolute love must always be spiritually false in an inherently divided and fallen world. The love offered initially by Rochester, and later by St. John Rivers, is ultimately artificial since it presupposes a

self-transcendence which can never be achieved by real people. Brontë's sense of this falsification is quite precisely rendered in Richard Wilbur's dialogic poem, "The Aspen and the Stream," in which the stream stands for a mad desire to abjure completely the burdens of selfhood.

There may be rocks ahead  
Where, shivered into smoke  
And brawling in my bed,  
I'll shred this gaudy cloak;

Then, dodging down a trough  
Into a rocky hole,  
I'll shake the daylight off  
And repossess my soul

In blackness and in fall,  
Where self to self shall roar  
Till, deaf and blind to all,  
I shall be self no more<sup>3</sup>.

Jane sees the destructiveness of this position. As Yeazell puts it, "The laws and principles to which Jane clings keep her sane, for they provide that continuity by which the self is defined; Jane 'plants her foot' on what she has 'always believed' because it is only thus that she can resist the chaos which threatens to engulf her" (p. 136). When, therefore, at the moment of crisis, Jane hears, across a far distance, the mysterious summons which calls her to Rochester, she does so because the process which she undergoes before this point prepares her to do so. She is ready now, as she has not been before, to respond to love's call, and the mysterious summons is an outward sign of that inner readiness (p. 129). Her experience at Whitcross has been self-defining for her in a way that, as it might be said, liberates her for love.

Yeazell makes a further point of considerable interest for us. She notes that the dialectic of separateness and communion upon which the final success of the Jane-Rochester relationship will depend is mirrored in the repartee and verbal play that dominates the conversation of Jane and Rochester from the very beginning. Their mode of discourse reflects the world of duality and division, "a world in which love is the attraction, but not the absolute identification of two separate selves" (p. 142).

To these acute observations, Professor Worth adds another, namely that Jane acts on the urging of some voice speaking to her in crisis on two earlier occasions — when she was motivated to advertise for a position as governess and when she decided she must flee from Rochester and Thornfield after the exposure of Thornfield's secret. For Worth, much more than for Yeazell, these various summonses can only be fully explained as supernatural manifestations growing out of Jane's flinty belief in God" (p. 570). Worth, however, is a little uncomfortable in this conclusion, it seems, because he basically agrees with Barbara Hardy that Jane's growth in religious feeling is the one quality not demonstrated in the novel itself.

These various perspectives on the meaning of the "message" in *Jane Eyre* inevitably take us back to a consideration of the novel's mixed linguistic orders and to the question of Jane's

remarkable sensitivity to the sign systems of her world. The key passage, unnoted by either Yeazell or Worth, comes at the beginning of chapter twenty-one.

Presentiments are strange things! and so are sympathies; and so are signs; and the three combined make one mystery to which humanity has not yet found the key. I never laughed at presentiments in my life, because I have strange ones of my own. Sympathies I believe, exist (for instance, between far-distant, long-absent, wholly estranged relatives asserting, notwithstanding their alienation, the unity of the source to which each traces his origin) whose workings baffle mortal comprehension. And signs, for aught we know, may be but the sympathies of Nature with man. (p. 249)

Brontë's terms here are chosen very carefully. Presentiments constitute an internal conversation. (Jane goes on at this point to reflect on dreams.) Sympathies constitute something like telepathic communication. (The term "telepathy" was not available to Brontë; it was coined by George Eliot's friend, F.W. Myers, in 1882). "Sympathy" is clearly the condition which permits communication between self and other at some level unserved by language in its merely material state. Signs constitute the evidence of consciousness in the natural world which, in effect, minimizes or even abolishes the separateness of self from the order of nature.

All three modes of signification point to the individual's ability to transcend the boundaries of verbal discourse. What is most important, however, is Brontë's emphasis on the union of the three modes. They form a mysterious metalanguage to which humanity has not yet found the key. Within the framework of this metalanguage, the assumptions of positivism are silenced for Brontë is claiming, as did Coleridge, that consciousness is primarily a principle of knowing and that it has access to knowledge in every direction that positivism would disallow. Individual consciousness sees beyond mere matter through signs; it penetrates the consciousness of the other through sympathy; and it contacts the supersensual through presentiment. Moreover, by emphasizing the union of these modes, Brontë is indicating that the manifestation of one mode entails the presence of all three.

It is against this background that the "mysterious summons" Jane hears is to be understood. Professor Yeazell privileges the diachronic context of the summons by stressing its representation of Jane's psychological maturity. Professor Worth has implicitly weakened Yeazell's case by showing that the device of the summons is a synchronic feature of the narrative. Yeazell's method leads her to the conclusion that Brontë wants us to see a process which is primarily psychological: Jane Eyre attains to the frame of mind which will enable her to love successfully. Worth's method leads him to the conclusion that Brontë wants us to see a process which is primarily religious: Jane Eyre is constantly under the watch of Providence and Providence delivers her to Rochester. Interestingly, each critic is, inadvertently, almost drawn into a confession that his approach is reductive. I have already noted that Worth is unconvinced by the growth of Jane's religious feeling even though he attributes the messages Jane receives to the operation of Providence. Yeazell, on the other hand, concludes her discussion of Jane's psychological growth by announcing, unexpectedly, that Brontë is actually portraying an "unmediated connection between the individual and the divine, a connection which "is fiercely Protestant in its assumptions" (p. 143). If this is the case, then Yeazell's fine analysis of the dialectic between independence and love is casually stripped of its provocative existentialist implications.

It is for these reasons that we do better to attend to the full range of Jane's role as receiver and interpreter of "messages." To be sure, there are moments throughout the novel, when Jane seems to act under the tutelage of an inner voice which closely resembles the voice of Providence as conceived by evangelical Protestant theology. That this voice is more than the whispering of a secularized and rationalized conscience is evident from the irreducible spiritual mystery surrounding it. The point is confirmed in innumerable aspects of the novel, not the least of which is its explicit indebtedness to *Pilgrim's Progress*. And yet the novel firmly roots Jane in the palpable world of low mimetic fictions and envisions her as self, not soul. Indeed, it holds out, and decisively rejects, the strictly religious transcendence toward which evangelical Protestantism reaches. The story of Helen Burns is woven into the narrative as a deliberate example of religious excess.

For Jane, then, the paramount issue is always how to make her way as a pilgrim, a child of God, without surrendering her will, her commitment to self-avowal. She cannot come to self-determination if she yields absolutely to Rochester and to the apocalypse of romantic love as Rochester sees it. However, if she needs independence from Rochester as Yeazell claims, she also needs distance from God. The same argument that Yeazell makes for the persistence of some gulf between the self and the beloved in romantic love can, and must, be made with respect to the self's relation to God. Jane can only approach Rochester obliquely for she must first possess identity in order to love. Similarly, she must approach God obliquely for in a fallen world the religious pilgrim is obliged to found even spiritual passion on the resources of the strictly human.

The mixed linguistic orders of the novel serve this paradox by showing us how Jane's apparently inexplicable capacity to receive what are very nearly telegrams from Heaven telling her what to do in clear, unmistakable terms is in itself an achievement of consciousness which she has secured precisely because she has come so fully into possession of selfhood that she knows the language of presentiments, sympathies, and signs. The implication here is that the rich development of personal identity so profoundly assists the imagination's grasp of the world's hidden meanings that the self can finally understand the language of the soul.

There are many demonstrations of this process in the novel. One of the most vivid comes when Jane, destitute and miserable, after departing Thornfield, struggles for a way to survive without means, without friends, without even shelter.

"My strength is quite failing me," I said in soliloquy. I feel I cannot go much farther.... And why cannot I reconcile myself to the prospect of death?... Oh, Providence! sustain me a little longer! Aid! — direct me!"  
(p. 356)

Moments after she says this, she will see the house which becomes her haven, the home of St. John Rivers and his sisters. A naive reading would suggest that supernatural relief is afforded to Jane because of her humble appeal to Providence. The details of the episode, however, tell a different story. Jane struggles up a hill. As her eye roves over the moor edge, she sees a solitary light. At first she thinks it is an *ignis fatuus*. Then, when it does not vanish, she interprets it as a bonfire. But it does not spread. At last, she believes it is a candle. Jane, here, is making and correcting sense perceptions. But almost immediately, the narrative begins to render the material objects of sense as "signs." Jane says, "This light was my forlorn hope: I must gain it" (p. 357). It then becomes, not a light, but a "star" which she follows. The "star" vanishes:

Some obstacle had intervened between me and it. I put out my hand to feel the dark mass before me: I discriminated the rough stones of a low wall — *above it, something, like palisades, and within, a high and prickly hedge... The guiding light shone nowhere. All was obscurity.*” (p. 357; italics added)

This passage is crucial. In the midst of her anxiety to get to the light, Jane’s consciousness also registers the thick layer of significant hindrance that lies between her and her “hope.” Later, as we know, she will have to make a courageous effort to discriminate between the renewed life that Moor House authentically bestows on her and the emotional nettle that it harbors for her in the person of St. John Rivers. Just as Jane is, in her struggle to reach the light, rescued by her “hope,” so also is she rescued by her ability to reach out in the very darkness of her despair and accurately interpret “palisades” for what they are — a prison. The whole passage introduces us to Jane’s arrival at Moor House in a way that stresses her enduring sensitivity to presentiments, sympathies, and signs.

Brontë, in such episodes, avows the role of Providence in Jane’s experience. Her prayer is important. But Jane finds the will of Providence only because she retains her ability to read the text of the world in its multiform structure of significance. It is altogether to the point that the upward swing of Jane’s life at Moor House begins when she joins Mary and Diana Rivers in the task of *translating*.

The “message”, then, that comes to Jane across a great physical and emotional chasm, calling her to Rochester’s side, is neither a simplistic introduction into the narrative of adventitious supernaturalism nor a clumsy symbol of psychological readiness generated by an awkward imperative of the plot. It is, rather, Brontë’s attempt to explicate the climactic convergence of Providential protection and human aspiration that must somehow finally eliminate the gulf between the infinite and the finite. The meaning of Jane’s experience is defined simultaneously in the synchronic structure of the novel, which persistently reveals the presence of Providence, and in its diachronic structure, which is centrally concerned with Jane’s increasing possession of the self’s highest power — symbolic consciousness.

The ultimate demonstration of this convergence is really not in the mysterious summons which brings Jane to Rochester, but in what happens when she arrives at Ferndean. Rochester, of course, is blind. And he is constrained by both his past behavior and his present disabilities to assume that Jane is forever beyond him as a lover. Once again, we see the two of them engage in repartee and verbal play. Brontë at one point defines the form of their conversation as “cross examination.”

However, in this closing movement of the novel, the intrinsic separateness of self and other, which is projected in such discourse, is broken down by Jane’s ability to make Rochester cognizant of that intuited reality which alone sustains love and which is merely hidden by material vision and material language. Nursing him, Jane says she finally “had wakened the glow: his features beamed.” And Rochester breaking through both verbal and visual barriers, says:

Oh, you are indeed there, my skylark! Come to me. You are not gone, not vanished? I heard one of your kind an hour ago, singing high over

the wood; but its song had no music for me, any more than the rising sun had rays. All the melody on earth is concentrated in my Jane's tongue to my ear (I am glad it is not naturally a silent one); all the sunshine I can feel is in her presence. (p. 464)

This identifies the moment when Jane, having realized her own being by reading the signs of the world, is able to announce herself symbolically to the other, and bring an end to separateness. Into Rochester's parabolic emptiness, Jane inserts herself as presence. It is she who becomes for him presentiment, sympathy, and sign.

#### NOTES

1. *Jane Eyre* (Penguin Books, 1966), p. 434. All citations are to this edition.
2. Ruth Bernard Yeazell, "More True Than Real: Jane Eyre's 'Mysterious Summons,'" *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 29 (1974), 127-143; and George Worth, "Commentary," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 30 (1976), 570-571.
3. *The Poems of Richard Wilbur* (Harvest Books, 1963).

*Addendum:* Since this essay was published two excellent discussions have appeared that are related to its main subject: Thomas Vargish, *The Providential Aesthetic in Victorian Fiction* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1985) and Carolyn Williams, "Closing the Book: The Intertextual End of *Jane Eyre*," in Jerome McGann, (ed.), *Victorian Connections* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1989) pp. 60-87.