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THE (SLAVE) NARRATIVE OF *JANE EYRE*

By Julia Sun-Joo Lee

IN *IMPERIALISM AT HOME*, Susan Meyer explores Charlotte Brontë's metaphorical use of race and empire in *Jane Eyre*. In particular, she is struck by Brontë's repeated allusions to bondage and slavery and wonders, "Why would Brontë write a novel permeated with the imagery of slavery, and suggesting the possibility of a slave uprising, in 1846, after the emancipation of the British slaves had already taken place?" (71). Meyer speculates, "Perhaps the eight years since emancipation provided enough historical distance for Brontë to make a serious and public, although implicit, critique of British slavery and British imperialism in the West Indies" (71). Perhaps. More likely, I would argue, is the possibility that Brontë was thinking not of West Indian slavery, but of American slavery.[1]

From 1834 to 1846, or from the year of West Indian emancipation to the year Brontë began writing *Jane Eyre*, the British public was increasingly exposed to the plight of American slaves through the efforts of the British and Foreign Antislavery Society (BFASS), the publication of slave narratives, and the lecture tours of American fugitive slaves. This convergence of events would gradually but dramatically shift the focus away from the West Indies to America, so much so that by the 1850s, Howard Temperley writes, "the antislavery struggle [came] to mean simply the sectional controversy in the United States" (222). In 1840, the first World Anti-Slavery Convention was held in London, an event at which British abolitionists dedicated themselves to the eradication of American slavery. Helping to generate interest in the cause were fugitive slaves like Moses Roper, who fled to England in 1835, published his slave narrative in 1837, and lectured at halls and churches throughout Wales, Scotland, and England. By 1846, numerous other slave narratives had been published in England to popular acclaim, including the narrative of Frederick Douglass, first published in America in 1845. Douglass fled immediately afterwards to England, where his movements were covered by major newspapers as well as the provincial press. In December 1846, Douglass spoke at the Leeds Music Hall, and his speech, entitled, "England Should Lead the Cause of Emancipation," was reprinted in December of 1846 in the Leeds *Mercury,* one of the papers to which the Brontës subscribed.[2]

Did Brontë know about these American slaves? Did she hear them speak? Did she read their narratives? These are difficult questions to answer, but there is some enticing

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circumstantial evidence to suggest that she did. In the 1839 edition of his narrative, Moses Roper appended a list of the churches and halls he visited in his lecture tour. Included on the list are the "Independent," or Congregationalist churches in Gomersal and Skipton, two small towns near Haworth, where Brontë grew up. Mary Taylor was from Gomersal, and we know Brontë visited her several times between 1836 and 1840. We also know the two women attended services at Gormersal Church (Fraser 105). Taylor, with her radical sympathies, would have been a likely candidate to hear one of Roper's lectures. Roper also visited the church at Skipton, which was adjacent to Stonegappe Hall, the home of Brontë's employer, Mrs. Sidgwick. It was during Brontë's employ there that her student Benson Sidgwick, the likely inspiration for *Jane Eyre*'s Master Reed, reportedly threw a Bible at her (Fraser 126). A. C. Benson, a Sidgwick relative, recalls, "all that another cousin can recollect of [Charlotte Brontë] is that if she was invited to church [at Skipton] with them, she thought she was being ordered about like a slave, if she was not invited, she imagined she was excluded from the family circle" (Fraser 126).

Ultimately, the most compelling evidence that Brontë was influenced by American slave narratives is neither biographical nor historical, but textual. With its emphasis on literacy, its teleological journey from slavery to freedom, its biblical allusions to Egypt (Land of Slavery) and Beulah (the Promised Land), and its ethics of resistance over submission, *Jane Eyre* borrows many of the generic features of the slave narrative. Moreover, the young Jane Eyre *sounds like* a slave narrator, relying on the rhetorical devices so successfully deployed by Frederick Douglass, the slave narrator whose literary voice Jane most closely approximates. I would go so far as to argue that *Jane Eyre* can be read as Brontë's revision of Douglass's narrative, with the white English governess uncannily paralleling the emancipatory quest of an American fugitive slave. This reading emerges organically from Gilbert and Gubar's reading of *Jane Eyre* as spiritual autobiography, specifically "Pilgrim's Progress," where each location is allegorically linked to some form of physical or mental tyranny. Slave narratives too were infused with elements of spiritual autobiography, and this common lineage supports rather than forecloses the possibility of deeper literary kinship. Likewise, Kari J. Winter's work, *Subjects of Slavery, Agents of Change*, suggests a further locus of commonality between *Jane Eyre*, with its scenes of female imprisonment and exploitation, and the narratives of fugitive slaves.

As I will demonstrate in the next section, the language of the slave narrative emerges most distinctly at moments of crisis, as Jane desperately grasps for the words to articulate her condition. It is at these moments that the novel's heteroglot formation congeals around its constitutive parts and we can see most clearly the language of slave narrative as it jostles against the language of gothic romance, ghost story, and adventure tale. In keeping with the teleology of the slave narrative, I have structured my discussion around the stages or stations in Jane's journey towards freedom. This structure is, by necessity, chronological and diachronic, allowing the reader to track Jane's progress. In the first section, I explore literacy's critical role in giving Jane a voice, first at Gateshead and then at Lowood, where she explicitly identifies herself with the defiant slave. In the second section, I will look at Jane's tenure at Thornfield, a place of "false freedom" that initially offers safe refuge but in turn becomes a locus of servitude and subjugation from which she must escape. Finally, I will look at Jane's liberation, predicated on her flight from Thornfield and her eventual discovery of her inheritance at Marsh End.

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Learning How to Read

> From this time I was most narrowly watched. If I was in a separate room any considerable length of time, I was sure to be suspected of having a book, and was at once called to give an account of myself.
> –Frederick Douglass, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*

AT GATESHEAD, READING BECOMES an illicit act. Jane retreats to a "hiding-place" (7; ch. 1) to read Bewick's *History of British Birds* and is struck by John Reed for her "sneaking way" (8; ch. 1). In a fit of proprietorship, he exclaims, "You have no business to take our books" (8; ch. 1), a claim that encompasses both the material form of books and the act of reading itself. Wielded by the master, literacy becomes a weapon of subjugation, a fact made clear when John Reed flings the volume of Bewick at Jane and causes her to fall and hurt her head. Yet in the moments after her injury, Jane wrests the power of literacy from her attacker:

> "Wicked and cruel boy!" I said. "You are like a murderer – you are like a slave-driver – you are like the Roman emperors!"
> I had read Goldsmith's "History of Rome," and had formed my opinion of Nero, Caligula, &c. Also I had drawn parallels in silence, which I never thought thus to have declared aloud. (8–9; ch. 1)

It takes a book to trigger this abrupt change in Jane, from an ethics of endurance and submission to one of defiance and resistance. In that brief moment after she is hurt, Jane discovers the words to articulate her condition, responding to the physical assault of "Bewick's Birds" with the verbal assault of Goldsmith's "History of Rome." In other words, Jane figuratively throws her own book back at Master John. She imaginatively transforms Master John Reed into a "slave-driver," a "murderer," and a "tyrant," characterizations so potent that Jane is finally able to comprehend her own condition and to resist.

Jane's epithets mark the novel's initiation into the language of slave narrative. And while she draws parallels between her own situation and that of the slaves in Goldsmith's history, her language, with its "morbidly" realist, first-person accounts of oppression and violence, is more evocative of contemporary African-American slave narratives. The very incident recalls a moment in Douglass's narrative, where he too discovers in a book – in his case, "The Columbian Orator" – the words to describe his own plight: "[The Columbian Orator] gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance . . . the reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts" (55). Such textual resonances intensify as Jane is dragged to the red-room. She recalls, "I resisted all the way: a new thing for me . . . and, like any other rebel slave, I felt resolved, in my desperation, to go all lengths" (9; ch. 2). Her sudden rebellion evokes Frederick Douglass's famous resistance to Mr. Covey, a moment that is likewise triggered by an act of violence. Thrown to the floor by Covey, Douglass suddenly "resolved to fight" (81):

> From whence came the spirit I don't know . . . and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose. He held on to me, and I to him. My resistance was so entirely unexpected, that Covey seemed taken all aback . . . He asked me if I meant to persist in my

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> resistance. I told him I did, come what might; that he had used me like a brute for six months, and that I was determined to be used so no longer. (81)

What had begun, for Douglass, as an impulsive act of defiance develops into a permanent change of consciousness. His potent combination of verbal and physical resistance is adopted by Jane, who now lashes out whenever provoked. "Determined to be used so no longer" by Master John Reed, she reacts to his taunts with increasing fervor, meeting violence with violence and startling her family with her unexpected rebelliousness

The language of slave narrative similarly emerges when Jane confronts her aunt following a visit by Mr. Brocklehurst. Chafing at how her character has been maligned, Jane muses, "*Speak* I must; I had been trodden on severely, and *must* turn: but how? What strength had I to dart retaliation at my antagonist?" (30; ch. 4).[3] Although Jane has not, in this particular case, been physically abused, her response is strikingly visceral; she feels "trodden on" and wonders if she has the "strength" to respond. "Shaking from head to foot, thrilled with ungovernable excitement" (30; ch. 4), she passionately disavows Mrs. Reed, an act that exacts a physical toll on her body. Immediately afterward, she describes,

> Ere I had finished this reply my soul began to expand, to exult, with the strangest sense of freedom, of triumph, I ever felt. It seemed as if an invisible bond had burst, and that I had struggled out into unhoped-for liberty . . . I was left there alone – winner of the field. It was the hardest battle I had fought, and the first victory I had gained. (30-31; ch. 4)

It is hard not to hear to hear the voice of Frederick Douglass's behind Jane's, from her dramatic account of victory over an oppressor to her language of spiritual liberation. In a parallel moment in his narrative, Frederick Douglass describes the aftermath of his seminal struggle with Mr. Covey:

> This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood . . . It was a glorious resurrection from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place. (82-83)

In Jane's case, she bursts the "invisible bond" of familial oppression; in Douglass, he throws off the "crush[ing]" weight of psychological oppression. The effect of their rebellion on their oppressors is likewise devastating. Mr. Covey "trembled like a leaf" (81); Mrs. Reed "looked frightened," and "was lifting up her hands, rocking herself to and fro, and even twisting her face as if she would cry" (30-31; ch. 4).

Jane channels the voice of the "rebel slave" in moments of despair as well as triumph. Immediately after she defies Master Reed and is relegated to the red-room, she suffers from overwhelming feelings of powerlessness. She contemplates "running away, or, if that could not be effected, never eating or drinking more, and letting myself die" (12; ch. 2). Awakened to the injustice of her situation, Jane enters a period of ontological crisis. She writes, "What a consternation of soul was mine that dreary afternoon! How all my brain was in tumult, and all my heart in insurrection!" (12; ch. 2). Her situation is, in many ways, untenable: having risen up, she can no longer submit quietly to her fate. And though her sentiments may appear overwrought – she is, after all, a young girl who has been disciplined – the narrator Jane

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lends credibility to young Jane's feelings by revealing their continued resonance even after the passage of many years.

Douglass, too, struggles to reconcile himself to his enslaved status. He writes, "I often found myself regretting my own existence, and wishing myself dead; and but for the hope of being free, I have no doubt but that I should have killed myself, or done something for which I should have been killed" (56). Later, in his famous apostrophe to the ships in Chesapeake Bay, he cries, "'O that I were free . . . Why am I a slave? I will run away. I will not stand it. Get caught, or get clear, I'll try it. I had as well die with ague as the fever. I have only one life to lose'" (76). Douglass's queries and resolutions resonate with Jane's, and he similarly considers killing himself or running away. His mental anguish predicts Jane's "consternation of soul," as he writes, "Thus I used to think, and thus I used to speak to myself; goaded almost to madness at one moment, and at the next reconciling myself to my wretched lot" (77). In accordance with Orlando Patterson's definition of slavery, Jane and Douglass seek liberation from social death in the only two ways available to them: through physical death, or through escape.[4]

Yet how "Christian," after all, is an ethics of resistance? In Elizabeth Rigby's famous 1849 review of the novel, Jane Eyre is accused of being:

> the personification of an unregenerate and undisciplined spirit, the more dangerous to exhibit from that prestige of principle and self-control which is liable to dazzle the eye too much for it to observe the inefficient and unsound foundation on which it rests. . . . Altogether the auto-biography of Jane Eyre is pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition. . . . We do not hesitate to say that the tone of mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same with has also written *Jane Eyre*. (452)

Jane's proclivity for violent resistance (and Brontë's tacit approval of such) puts her in what Rigby considers dangerous company, alongside Chartists, Jacobins, and all else who have "overthrown authority." Within the novel, Helen Burns shares Rigby's reservations, espousing a pacifist ethics culled from the New Testament. Jane, however, is an Old Testament devotee; she prefers to retaliate rather than turn the other cheek. Her fury, Brontë makes clear, emerges not from anti-Christian values but rather from the hypocritical Christianity of her oppressors, from the Reeds to Brocklehurst to St. John Rivers. Douglass was forced to answer similar charges upon the publication of his narrative, and in an appendix written in April of 1845, he writes, "What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the *slaveholding religion* of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference" (120). Against this false Christianity, the victim, Douglass implies, has the right to rebel.

If the connection between the hypocritical Christianity of Brocklehurst and that of American slaveowners is not yet evident, Brontë inserts several telling scenes into her Lowood chapters. In another demonstration of literacy's transgressive potential, Jane attempts to avoid Brocklehurst's notice by "[holding up] my slate in such a manner as to conceal my face" (55; ch. 7). Jane's desire to avoid detection hearkens back to her attempt to conceal herself, in "double retirement," in the window seat with Bewick's *History*. Whether writing or reading, Jane understands implicitly the danger of such activities; they must be done in secret or, at the every least, outside the master's gaze. Jane continues, "I might have escaped notice,

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had not my treacherous slate somehow happened to slip from my hand and falling with an obtrusive crash, directly drawn every eye upon me; I knew it was all over now, and, as I stooped to pick up the two fragments of slate, I rallied my forces for the worst" (55; ch. 7). Jane's clumsiness with the slate suggests that she has not yet learned how best to leverage literacy's subversive power. She uses the slate as a makeshift shield, protecting herself from Brocklehurst's unwanted scrutiny, but when she lets its slip, it becomes "treacherous," exposing her for what she is: a rebel and a traitor.

Jane's subsequent public humiliation invokes scenes of Christian persecution in Goldsmith's *History of Rome*, but it also brings to mind scenes of physical exposure and torture from American slave narratives. Earlier, Jane had witnessed Lowood discipline firsthand when Helen is "sent to stand in the middle of the large schoolroom" and later forced to loosen her pinafore to be whipped with a "bunch of twigs" (47; ch. 6). Jane tells Helen, "it seems disgraceful to be flogged, and to be sent to stand in the middle of a room full of people; and you are such a great girl: I am far younger than you, and I could not bear it" (47; ch. 6). Jane's emphasis on Helen's age underscores the sexually degrading aspect of her punishment. Helen is a "great girl"; her public disgrace is a breach of her womanly modesty. Yet Jane now finds herself in a similar situation, "mounted aloft" a stool, that "pedestal of infamy," where she is "exposed to general view" (57; ch. 7). Her response is intensely physical: her throat closes and she cannot breathe. And in the moments that follow, she explicitly describes herself as a "slave or victim" (57; ch. 7) whose summoning to the "pedestal of infamy" serves as a warning to the other "slaves" – in this case, the pupils of Lowood School.

A conflation of these scenes closes the first chapter of Douglass's *Narrative*, in which the young Douglass is first introduced to the horrors of slavery. Aunt Hester, having disobeyed her master, Colonel Lloyd, is stripped naked and prepared for a whipping. Douglass writes,

> [Colonel Lloyd] took her into the kitchen, and stripped her from neck to waist, leaving her neck, shoulders, and back, entirely naked. He then told her to cross her hands, calling her at the same time a d–d b–h. After crossing her hands, he tied them with a strong rope, and led her to a stool under a large hook in the joist, put in for the purpose. He made her get upon the stool, and tied her hands to the hook. She now stood fair for his infernal purpose. Her arms were stretched up at their full length, so that she stood upon the ends of her toes. He then said to her, 'Now, you d–d b–h, I'll learn you how to disobey my orders!' and after rolling up his sleeves, he commenced to lay on the heavy cowskin . . . I was so terrified and horror-stricken at the sight, that I hid myself in a closet, and dared not venture out till long after the bloody transaction was over. I expected it would be my turn next. It was all new to me. I had never seen any thing like it before. (26)

Although Helen is not stripped from "neck to waist" like Aunt Hester, she must partially undress to expose her body to the blows of the twigs. And though she is not called a "d–d b–h," she is deemed a "slattern" (45; ch. 6), slovenly in person and, by implication, in morality. Jane experiences a similar bodily mortification when she is placed on the stool, and her situation is made worse by the presence of Brocklehurst, with his menacing masculinity.[5] Brocklehurst, the "Christian" clergyman, becomes a godless predator, and Jane, despite his judgment that she is "worse than many a little heathen," raises her head with the righteous defiance of a slave or Christian martyr. Where previously she had attempted physical (and verbal) mastery over her opponents, here she demonstrates a mastery over her own self.

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Lifting herself from the degradation of her situation, Jane becomes a "heroic slave" (to borrow the title of Douglass's 1852 novella) – a slave in fact, but no longer a slave in spirit.

Jane survives her public humiliation and the episode becomes a rite of initiation, introducing her to the life of a covert dissident. She now "had the means of an excellent education placed within [her] reach" (71; ch. 10) and learns of "nations and times past; of countries far away; of secrets of nature discovered . . . of books" (62; ch. 8). Education, and specifically literacy, empowers Jane within a power structure that enslaves her, eventually offering her the means of "escape" through her job as governess. The change in Jane's tactics of resistance deliberately parallels her physical maturation: knowledge replaces brute force as the most tenable strategy of liberation. At Lowood, Jane first learns how to conjugate the French verb, "*être*," a lesson whose significance is not so much grammatical as ontological: Jane learns how to speak, but she also learns how to *be*.[6] From these humble beginnings, Jane scratches together the skills necessary to engineer her next escape, this time to the confines of Thornfield.

A New Servitude

LOWOOD HAD PROVIDED GREATER autonomy than Gateshead, and so Thornfield promises greater autonomy than Lowood. Still, the ultimate prize remains stubbornly out of reach: "I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer; it seemed scattered on the wind then faintly blowing. I abandoned it and framed a humbler supplication; for chance, stimulus: that petition, too, seemed swept off into vague space: 'Then,' I cried, half desperate, 'grant me at least a new servitude!'" (72; ch. 10). Jane craves the "delightful sounds" of "Liberty, Excitement, Enjoyment" (73; ch. 10) a motto that evokes the French revolutionary cry, "*Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*" as well as the American promise of "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." Yet she recognizes her need to compromise, to postpone full liberty to some distant future. Governessing, though a means to escape the "rules and systems" of Lowood, becomes only an intermediary step in her pursuit of self-emancipation.

Rochester, too, recognizes the "new servitude" that is governessing. After proposing marriage to Jane at Thornfield, he announces, "You will give up your governessing slavery at once" (230; ch. 24), an order that Jane immediately defies. In a famous passage from the novel, Jane implies that her situation is not unique:

> Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer. (93; ch. 12)

Critics have rightly noted the gender implications of the above passage, building upon Gilbert and Gubar's contention that "the distinction between male and female images of imprisonment is – and always has been – a distinction between, on the one hand, that which is both metaphysical and metaphorical, and on the other hand, that which is social and actual" (86). And Jane's language, with its visceral emphasis on stillness, silence, rigidity, and stagnation, does evoke a very literal form of confinement.

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Yet Jane's stated solidarity with "millions" of other victims seems to transcend easy gender boundaries. She feels "just as men feel" and she suffers as much as her "brothers," a rhetorical plaint that argues for the erosion of gender distinctions: Jane does not so much uphold Gilbert and Gubar's notion of discrete "male and female images of imprisonment" as explode them. Her belief in the universality of human suffering and her metaphors of fraternity and fellowship resonate with the famous abolitionist plea, "Am I not a man and a brother?"[7] Jane may be a governess and a woman, but she suffers "precisely as men would suffer." To bolster this claim, we need look no further than one of Jane's first conversations with Rochester. In provoking Jane, Rochester observes, "The Lowood constraint still clings to you somewhat; controlling your features, muffling your voice, and restricting your limbs; and you fear in the presence of *a man and a brother* – or father, or master, or what you will . . ." (118; ch. 14, emphasis mine). Rochester's words, with their emphasis on restriction and silence, echo Jane's earlier apostrophe to the reader. More intriguingly, however, his invocation and subsequent modulation of the abolitionist slogan suggests that Rochester, too, feels as Jane feels.

A union between Jane and Rochester, however, is impossible, for it simply transforms Jane from a governess-slave to a mistress-slave. Rochester suggests as much when describing his past debauched existence: "Hiring a mistress is the next worse thing to buying a slave: both are often by nature, and always by position, inferior: and to live familiarly with inferiors is degrading" (266; ch. 27). With such an analogy, slavery is, in fact, privileged: it is "the worst" thing against which all other relationships are compared, the benchmark of degradation. As Jane strays away from true freedom, references to the heathen abound, further confirming the heretical nature of Jane's actions. Jane feels like a "second Danae with the golden shower falling daily round [her]" (229; ch. 24), a slave in Rochester's "seraglio" (229; ch. 24). In fact, by accepting Rochester's bigamous marriage proposal, Jane succumbs to a new level of degradation, one that adds sexual enslavement to her prior experiences of physical victimization and economic exploitation.

The episode at Thornfield marks an important deviation from the teleology of Douglass's narrative, as Jane is lulled into willing subjugation. Unlike Douglass, whose gender protects him from the sexual advances of his masters, Jane is vulnerable to male seduction.[8] Perhaps for this reason, this middle section of *Jane Eyre* diverges from the generic paradigm of the slave narrative and clings more closely to the model of the gothic novel, with its familiar tropes of female victimization. The presence of Bertha Mason, however, insures that issues of slavery and race lurk not far from the surface. As Spivak, Meyer, and Jenny Sharpe have argued, Bertha's West Indian background, her (presumed) ownership of slaves, her bestiality, and her insanity conspire to racialize her character and to render her either the victim or the perpetrator of colonial exploitation. Jane, with her reassuring white Englishness, appears the antidote to the tainted and foreign Creole, but in borrowing the language and topoi of the slave narrative, she is more accurately the literary ally, not the "antipodes" (265; ch. 27), of the West Indian Bertha Mason. The narrative of Bertha's enslavement surfaces as Jane's narrative is submerged, a displacement that supports Gilbert's contention that Bertha serves as a monitory figure for Jane.

Once Jane does escape Thornfield, the novel quickly reverts to the language of slave narrative and evokes once again parallel episodes in Douglass's journey to freedom. Remembering his own flight North, Douglass describes his "feelings of great insecurity and loneliness" (111) upon arriving in New York:

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> There I was in the midst of thousands . . . of my own brethren – children of a common Father, and yet I dared not to unfold to any of them my sad condition . . . It was a most painful situation; and, to understand it, one must needs experience it, or imagine himself in similar circumstances. . . . I say, let him place himself in my situation – without home or friends – without money or credit – wanting shelter, and no one to give it, . . . and at the same time let him feel that he is pursued by merciless men-hunters, and in total darkness as to what to do, where to go, or where to stay, – perfectly helpless both as to the means of defence and means of escape, – in the midst of plenty, yet suffering the terrible gnawings of hunger, – in the midst of houses, yet having no home. (111-12)

Jane is, in fact, placed in such a situation, "without home or friends – without money or credit," in constant fear of exposure as she makes her way not through New York but through Yorkshire. Jane avoids roads and takes to the heath, where she "had a vague dread that cattle might be near, or that some sportsman or poacher might discover [her]" (275; ch. 28). Just as Douglass is "afraid of speaking to any one for fear of speaking to the wrong one" (111), Jane frets that "strangers would wonder what I am doing, lingering here at the sign-post, evidently objectless and lost. I might be questioned: I could give no answer but that would sound incredible and excite suspicion" (275; ch. 28).

Jane's literalized enactment of the slave's flight extends to include the methods employed to recover her. "The country had been scoured far and wide," St. John later tells Jane, "[but] no vestige of information could be gathered respecting her. Yet that she should be found is become a matter of serious urgency: advertisements have been put in all the papers" (324; ch. 33). In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England and America, it was not uncommon for governesses to run away from unhappy positions. Owners would publish notices in local papers, including a physical description of the woman and sometimes the promise of a monetary reward. Marcus Wood has shown how advertisements for runaway servants bore a striking resemblance to advertisements for runaway slaves – down to the printer's icon of a fleeing man or woman that headed such advertisements. To avoid discovery, runaway slaves like Douglass changed their names, as much to avoid recapture as to symbolize their rebirth as free men.[9] Jane, for "fear [of] discovery" (297; ch. 29), adopts the name Jane Elliott.

It is impossible, of course, to claim Jane's plight ever truly approaches that of American slaves, who were fleeing brutal slaveowners, not spurned lovers. But at this moment in the novel, Jane comes closest to approximating the experience of a true runaway slave. She is beset by feelings of "hunger, faintness, chill, and [a] sense of desolation" (281; ch. 28), and this despair exceeds even her childish misery at the hands of the Reeds and Brocklehurst. Having wandered briefly into a life of ignorance and ease, Jane must be reinitiated into the life of the dispossessed, and the slave narrative becomes the engine that propels a reluctant Jane forward, reigniting an emancipatory quest that had temporarily stalled.

Jane's Declaration of Independence

JANE'S LIFE OF SERVITUDE ends definitively on the fifth of November, or Guy Fawkes Day. As a child, Jane had been likened to "a sort of infantine Guy Fawkes" (21; ch. 3) and her rebellion at Gateshead and her discovery of her uncle's legacy both occur around this date. Jane's association with Guy Fawkes underscores her rebellious nature, and like the famous perpetrator of the Gunpowder Plot, she is painted as a traitor and outcast by the Reeds. Yet Guy Fawkes Day is also Jane's Independence Day, the moment at which she finally achieves

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sovereignty over herself and her life. As such, the holiday invokes Jane's earlier longing for "Liberty, Excitement, Enjoyment" and the republican sentiments of France and America. Jane is a successful rebel, one who is not tortured, killed, and then burned in effigy but who definitively overthrows her oppressors.

Jane's independency gives her just that – independence. Upon learning that she is an heiress, Jane thinks, "It was a grand boon doubtless; and independence would be glorious – yes, I felt that – *that* thought swelled my heart" (326; ch. 33). Still more, the size of her inheritance allows her to purchase not just her own freedom, but the freedom of those she loves. About Mary, Diana, and St. John Rivers, she thinks, "They were under a yoke: I could free them: they were scattered, – I could reunite them – the independence, the affluence which was mine might be theirs too" (328-29; ch. 33). Jane seeks to release her cousins from no less than governessing slavery and foreign exile – to restore a family unit that had been sundered in the way the "strongest ties in human beings" (Douglass 60) are sundered by slavery. When St. John resists Jane's generosity, saying, "Jane: I will be your brother: my sister will be your sisters – without stipulating for this sacrifice of your just rights," Jane retorts, "Brother? Yes; at the distance of a thousand leagues! Sisters? Yes; slaving among strangers! I, wealthy – gorged with gold I never earned and do not merit! You, penniless! Famous equality and fraternisation! Close union! Intimate attachment!" (330; ch. 33). Jane's choice of words again reveals her indebtedness to French and American ideals of "equality," "fraterni[ty]," and "union." Moreover, her invocation of sister- and brotherhood reinforces Jane's sense of solidarity with those in similarly oppressive plights – the "millions" who are also "in silent revolt against their lot," who are her sisters and brothers in suffering.

The way in which Jane learns of her legacy – by absentmindedly scrawling her name in the margins of a drawing – is the culmination of a process that began in her childhood, when she first learned that literacy, placed in the hands of the oppressed, could be turned into a weapon of resistance. It is a conviction that is tested when Jane lets her slate slip and is punished by Brocklehurst; that is fortified through her acquisition of French, German, and Hindustanee; that is employed through her work as a governess at Thornfield and a teacher at March End; and that is finally proven when she traces "in Indian ink, in [her] own handwriting" the words "Jane Eyre" (325; ch. 33). For in absentmindedly tracing her name, Jane has written her way to freedom. Scrawled in the margins of a piece of paper, her signature is, quite literally, a piece of marginalized writing, reflective of Jane's position at the margins of society and the gendered space occupied by scribbling women.[10] But despite its origin in "some moment of abstraction," Jane's signature is no meaningless or frivolous act. In writing her name, Jane writes herself from the margin to the center, from dispossession to independence.

Nearly every point in Jane's passage from literary ignorance to empowerment finds its precedent in Douglass's journey from benighted slave to freeman. Douglass's seminal textbook is "The Columbian Orator" rather than "The History of Rome." His school slate is the "board fence, brick wall, and pavement," his "pen and ink was a lump of chalk" (58). He dwells within the literary margins, learning to write by scrawling "in the spaces left in Master Thomas's copy-book" (58). He too subsequently turns literacy from a tool of oppression to one of resistance, teaching others how to read and write in a furtive Sabbath School and penning free passes for himself and others. The triumphant conclusion to Douglass's journey is the successful composition and publication of his *Narrative*, a feat Jane likewise accomplishes in penning her own "autobiography."

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Brontë, however, does Douglass one better: she punishes, in the pages of her novel, her master. In what Richard Chase considers a symbolic castration, Rochester loses his sight and his right hand. But if we move beyond psychoanalytic theories, we can also see that Brontë deprives Rochester of literacy – the ability to read and write. Jane becomes "his vision" and "his right hand" (384; ch. 37), taking pleasure in "reading to him" and in writing "letter[s] to his dictation" (384; ch. 37). Even when Rochester regains some vision, he still "cannot read or write much" (384; ch. 37). It is literacy more so than money that provides final access to spiritual and physical freedom. Rochester is still wealthy at the end of the novel, but the injuries to his eyes and hand have lasting epistemological as well as physical effects. Without the ability to read and write, Rochester's "proud independence" is subdued and his knowledge of the world critically circumscribed. Into this void steps Jane, who writes, "He saw nature – he saw books through me; and never did I weary of gazing for his behalf, and of putting into words the effect of field, tree, town, river, cloud, sunbeam – of the landscape before us" (384; ch. 37). Jane becomes Rochester's epistemological filter, translating written words and visual images into spoken sounds. In other words, she becomes an author and narrator, and this passage becomes a *mise-en-abime* in which Jane's relationship with the reader is paralleled to Jane's relationship with Rochester.[11] Like Rochester, we "see" books through Jane, and not just the book that is *Jane Eyre,* but Bewick's *History of British Birds*, Goldsmith's *History of Rome* – and Douglass's *Narrative*.

Jane Eyre's overarching emphasis on literacy and freedom, dispossession and exile, in conjunction with its potent combination of autobiography, history, and gothic fiction, gestures compellingly to Douglass's slave narrative and to the narrative of American fugitive slaves in general. In the last pages of the novel, we learn that writing can serve as an emancipatory *and* compensatory tool, freeing the self while exacting spiritual and financial restitution for past wrongs. Jane, as Lisa Sternlieb has argued, "takes her revenge through the written word" (25), a strategy she shared with hundreds of runaway slaves, whose narratives exposed the cruelty of slaveowners and the injustice of the institution of slavery. And in a final, serendipitous convergence of fact and fiction, *Jane Eyre*'s commercial and literary success ushered in a new period of financial independence for Charlotte Brontë herself. Joining the ranks of Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and other bestselling authors of the 1840s, Brontë had made safe passage from "governessing slavery" to authorship and freedom.

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NOTES

1. I do not mean to dismiss categorically the possibility that Brontë was in fact influenced by West Indian slavery and British imperialism. Meyer, for one, has amassed compelling evidence that even as a child, Brontë "unabashedly revel[ed] in the racial conflicts of empire" (37). And Humphrey Gawthrop, describing slavery as the "*idée fixe* of Emily and Charlotte Brontë" (113), speculates broadly as to possible sources of information and influence – from books available at the local library to the West Indian affiliations of some of their neighbors. Brontë's father, the Reverend Patrick Brontë, attended Cambridge under the patronage of William Wilberforce, the great English abolitionist who helped found the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade and who was integral to the passage of the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833.

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2. In "History of the Year 1829," quoted in Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë,* Brontë writes, "We take the *Leeds Intelligencer, Tory*, and the *Leeds Mercury*" (19).
3. Jane's language echoes the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison's in the first issue of *The Liberator* (1831): "I do not wish to think, speak, or write with moderation . . . I am in earnest – I will not equivocate – I will not excuse – I will not retreat a single inch – AND I WILL BE HEARD."
4. According to Patterson's definition of slavery and social death, the slave is "alienated from all 'rights' or claims of birth" and "ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order" (5). Patterson describes the slave as a "genealogical isolate" (5), severed from his or her heritage and denied any access to the past.
5. Marcus describes how at this moment, Jane becomes the object of "sadistic visual attention" and becomes "more conscious of her body" (209).
6. See Marcus 211.
7. This was the official slogan of the British Anti-Slavery Society. It was popularized by Josiah Wedgewood, who created an emblematic medallion of a chained, kneeling slave, which bore the motto, "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?" (Oldfield 156, 166).
8. Harriet Jacobs's slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), is perhaps the best account of the particular tribulations of a female slave. Critics have drawn connections between Linda Brent's imprisonment in the attic and Bertha's plight in *Jane Eyre*.
9. Douglass in fact changed his name several times. He was born "Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey" and took the name "Stanley" when fleeing Baltimore. Upon reaching New York, he changed his name to "Frederick Johnson," but after moving to New Bedford, changed his name a last time to Frederick Douglass.
10. Jane's escape from the margins could also signal the successful escape from the legacy of Pamela, the first and most famous scribbling woman whose tale she enjoys as a child at Gateshead.
11. In what Sternlieb describes as "a series of parallel confidence games" (18), Jane now controls the dissemination of knowledge.

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