



Adorno at Ferndean: Some Considerations on Slavery and Aesthetics in *Jane Eyre*

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Jane Eyre is a novel that begins at its end. In the retrospective style of the bildungsroman, the narrative of Jane's life ends with the scene of its own writing as she announces "[m]y tale draws to its close" and slips into the present perfect tense of "I have now been married ten years" (445). The novel documents the growth of its subject into a novelist and the end of the novel's narrative is, properly speaking, the beginning of its own inception as the reader is finally confronted with adult author-autobiographer Jane. The genre of the novel as fictionalized autobiography, in its combination of Jane as both the writer of her tale and as character in the novel, overlays two distinct temporal schemas. In Gerard Genette's terminology, the *narration* of the text, i.e., the narrative act of Jane the narrator, is overlaid onto the novel's *histoire*, or the story which is narrated, the plot-content of the bildungsroman (25–7).¹

Only at its end does the novel announce its stakes and lay its cards on its own writing-table: its concern is not a reflective realism, a description of a social totality which exists beyond it. Rather, it documents a form of consciousness which is both the formal organizing principle of the text as well as a character within it. Jane reveals that the novel has been filtered through and shaped by her, bringing her bildungsroman to the level of its own contemplation. In forsaking the confines of reflection the novel, like Jane on the moors, finds itself in an open wilderness of aesthetic mediation.² The text is thus constitutively concerned with its own aesthetic form.

¹Genette's is actually a tripartite narratological distinction. Alongside *narration*, or the act of narrating, and *histoire*, or the story/plot-content, Genette also distinguishes *discours* or the utterances which constitute the text itself. *Narration* and *discours* are often treated together by Genette, who uses the term 'narrative-discourse' to refer to this conjunction of the two (25–7).

²Such a distinction from reflection theories of realism may seem to take Adorno's polemic against Lukacs in "Reconciliation Under Duress" too much at face value. However, it is partially informed by Peter Uwe Hohendahl's distinction between

Yet, in its concluding paragraphs, the novel veers away from this closed structure: Jane abdicates her own authorial voice and St. John's letter has the last word. The precise point at which the novel affirms its own writing and discloses its structure is also when Jane's (as author-autobiographer) narrative act fails to encompass the totality of the novel and is supplemented by a text from a colony. This sudden swerve off course, this letter from India which exorbitates from the circular structure of the novel, is a problem of form which belies the self-enclosed finality of 'plain Jane's progress,' to use Gilbert and Gubar's description of the story.

This paper is an attempt at thinking through this contradiction in form and what it is indicative of. As this disjunction emerges precisely when Jane is shown to write her autobiography, it forces us to go over the text of the novel once again with sedulous care. This problem at the level of *narration* must be sought out not just at the level of *histoire*, confounded as they are within the novel, but must also be parsed in the *discours*. It is to this latter critical task that this paper shall chiefly address itself by considering *Jane Eyre* as part of the traffic of texts which populated the transatlantic world of the nineteenth century.

On Form

Before dropping anchor in the Atlantic world, the paper returns to the moment at which the projected totality of the text disintegrates. The letter is caught in a double movement: it escapes Jane's authorial voice yet finds its trajectory folded back into the novel. Through the letter, *narration* and *histoire* separate out of each other: the letter cuts through the discursive density of Jane's narrative act but its very inclusion in the novel requires it to be congealed within the plot at the end of the *histoire*. This troubled inclusion, the retardation of its exorbitating motion, is central to the challenge it poses. It is, as Theodor Adorno notes in *Aesthetic Theory*, "...only as finished, molded objects that [artworks] become force fields of their antagonisms" (177).

Tracking the letter takes us into the heart of the novel's force-field. Simultaneously, the exposition on form, mandated by the text's own preoccupation with form, requires a technical attention to narrative structure which moves us away from both plot-content and a social reality outside the text. How, then, might a movement from specialized technicalism to social critique be charted, if not attempted?

reflection and representation in the context of the polemic in *The Fleeting Promise of Art* (103–128).

The text offers a possibility immanent within it: since the problem of form occurs at the level of both narrative act and plot-content, the failure of the narrative act must necessarily lead to a consideration of the plot-content, as suggested in this paper's introduction.

Indeed, this formal antagonism returns in the content of the final chapter. The letter comes to Jane from India, reminding the reader of the possible death she foresaw for herself there. The fear of being "grilled alive in Calcutta" vivifies her rejection of St. John and the letter becomes a *memento mori* which Jane cannot fully suppress (411). But death, which breaks through the structure of the text, moving the letter centrifugally out of the orbit of the novel, also exerts a counterforce—a centripetal pull. St. John's voice is itself presented as a dying voice, indeed, the prospect of his demise is lit by a halo of religious anticipation: "his glorious sun hastens to its setting" (447). England and India are connected by death and dying, as the colonial antipodes appear to Jane as both nurse and nemesis. St. John's letter is buffeted by pressure and counterpressure: it is subject to the novel's forces rather than being a static component of an aesthetic form conceived of as an unyielding and immobile totality. It is this processual nature of artworks that Adorno draws attention to when he notes that "[a]rtworks' paradoxical nature, stasis, negates itself" (*Aesthetic Theory* 177).

But to seek within form its own explanation, immanent in it, is to confer on its enclosing circumference the very stability unbalanced by the letter. It is, of course, entirely possible to move in the well-worn grooves of ideology criticism, dismiss form as a "reactionary tendency to obscure sociopolitical content and to propagate false consciousness," and dissolve the paradox of the letter altogether (Kaufman "Adorno's Social Lyric" 354). Aesthetics becomes mythmaking, and all texts are fed into the paper-shredder of an ideology-critique constitutively incapable of doing anything but violence to the objects of its inquiry.

Instead, to do justice to artworks and to not confront them solely as veils of ideology shrouding the world, this study turns to Theodor Adorno's aesthetics. For Adorno, it is the "law of form" that ensures that "art's autonomy remains irrevocable": "[a]rtworks detach themselves from the empirical world and bring forth another world, one opposed to the empirical world *as if* this other world too were an autonomous entity" (*Aesthetic Theory* 1–2, emphasis added). The 'as if' is the fulcrum on which Adorno moves the world of Kantian aesthetics: art negates the world and in its negation bears the imprint of

that which it has left behind. Art's autonomy confronts aesthetics as a *fait accompli* but it is, for all this, no less a *fait social*. J. M. Bernstein's precis is particularly incisive:

The sublimation of content through the law of form that is art's resistance to society is itself something social. In this respect, artworks' presumption of being autonomous, spiritual items in opposition to the conditions of material production is a piece of false consciousness, indeed a form of fetishism[...] The fetish character of the artwork is its illusory claim to be a being in and for itself (to be a thing in itself). ("The dead speaking" 148)

Adorno's theory thus walks the tightrope between ideology-critiques and recent works on aesthetics in which "the autonomy of artworks is taken for granted," a tendency which Peter Hohendahl, in his work on Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, identifies in the works of Elaine Scarry and Peter de Bolla (Hohendahl 5). Art, for Adorno, finds its origins in magic. Something of this magic lives on in art through form, which draws around artworks a magic circle within which emerges a new world, subject to its own laws. To linger on the cusp of this circle, at the periphery of bewitchment and the horizon of disenchantment, is this paper's imperiled endeavor.

To return to the task of disambiguating the many valences of form in *Jane Eyre*, the paper draws its inspiration from one of Adorno's more programmatic assertions on the relationship between form and reality: "The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form" (*Aesthetic Theory* 6). If texts are force-fields, then the letter's escape from the text's orbit drags the solidifying form of the novel along its own ex-centric path. Its disturbance creates within *Jane Eyre* singularities, new orbits, ricocheting fragments which gleam briefly, throwing an eclipsed light on the text, before being consumed by the fires of the work's logic, like much else.

The most immediate disruption occurs in its defiance of the sublimation of the self into the social world. Jane, at the end of the novel, attempts to recede into the shadows of her own work, as she becomes Rochester's arms and eyes. The fractious individuality which has come to be associated with her and the text's nascent feminism crumbles under the weight of wifedom and motherhood. Paradoxically, the negation of the self is the price that female selfhood must pay if it must continue its existence in society, the bankruptcy of which is intimated by this honorarium that it demands of Jane. Yet,

with the advent of the letter, Jane's voice returns with urgency to counteract it and sublimate St. John instead. Bertha was consumed by hellfire while Jane presages a similarly fiery divine ecstasy for St. John: a senescence illuminated by the sun.

Simultaneous with the deferral of the image of a harmonious social whole is another process which unravels the novel's threads. Jane's acceptance of Rochester as her husband is predicated, in the proto-feminism of the text, on her inheritance bequeathed to her by an uncle. It is colonial lucre, extracted from Jamaican slavery that ushers Jane into her marital bliss at Ferndean. Raised to the class-position of a bourgeois woman Jane, as an author-autobiographer, attempts to produce a text in which her narrative act and her life itself are coextensive and coterminous. Indeed, she is the autonomous bourgeois *par excellence*: hers is the fiction of a self-producing individual. She is spun entirely out of her own narration, Jane Eyre is cut from the cloth of *Jane Eyre*. In his brief notes on Balzac, contemporaneous as he is with Brontë, Adorno diagnoses this incipient delusion: "the bourgeois illusion that the individual exists essentially for himself" ("Reading Balzac" 130). Jane's inability to absorb the letter into her narrative intimates that this is less a sustained illusion than a vanishing mirage, receding even as it is approached. The letter is an irregularity in her self-fabrication, the residue of the world which cannot be further reduced to Jane. In the element of discontinuity it inserts into the movement of the individual towards the social, the contradictions which inhere in the world and the bourgeois consciousness which perceives them are illuminated at the very moment of their projected closure.

The rise of the bourgeoisie, and the concomitant rise of this illusionary individual, is predicated on the commodity-form which itself relies on the abstraction of human labour (Marx 176). This abstraction was to become a source of grave consternation for both Adorno and Walter Benjamin (Kaufman "Lyric Commodity Critique" 208–9). For Adorno, in particular, the novels of realists such as Balzac gain importance for the "sensory evidence" they provide of the "terrifying radiance" of the commodity-world and its reification and abstraction ("Reading Balzac" 122). In talking of early nineteenth century realism, he argues that it could limn the straight line between "the unfreedom of human beings" and their subjection, under industrial capitalism, "to machinery, and its latent law, the commodity form" ("Parataxis" 127).

To move past this assertion of human unfreedom, and its purported relationship with realism, it is instructive to remember Marx's comments on the commodity-form in the first volume of *Capital*. For

Marx, “the equality and equivalence of all kinds of labour,” the bedrock of the commodity form and, hence, Adorno’s analyses of abstraction, could only be apprehended by consciousness when “the concept of human equality has already acquired the permanence of a fixed popular opinion” (152). Only the floodlights of human consciousness, fastened to the pinnacle of the superstructure of ‘popular opinion,’ can illuminate the economic base of the marketplace from where they draw their being and sustenance. This significant detour leads back, through forked pathways of critical concern, to the signposts of the novel’s end which points both to social life and Jane’s selfhood.

The formal contradiction of the novel is that of the bourgeois individual confronted by slavery, which gives the lie to vaunted notions of human equality. It is the wealth generated by slavery as well as the metaphors and rhetoric it furbishes Jane with that make her mistress of Ferndean. Yet, if slavery makes the writing of the novel possible, it also exposes Jane to the breakdown in the logic of commodity exchange. Jane cannot, with any conviction, believe that slaves are non-human: the metaphors of slavery have been integral to the moral force of her self-definition. The realization that human labour cannot be counted out in ounces, equivalent weight for equivalent weight, because of the inhuman inequality of slavery reveals the irrationality of a system whose rationality is everywhere assumed.

The novel, as noted before, concerns itself not solely with social reflection but with consciousness and the wound at the heart of rationality finds its expression in the dissolution of realism in the text at precisely those moments at which Jane must confront the *dissecta membra* of slavery which pierce the text. Hers is a lacerated consciousness, whose very existence entails chafing against the fraying fabric of the world it inhabits.

Towards Content

Form, in *Jane Eyre*, points to content, the cords of *narration* and narrative-discourse are twined together. Spectres of death haunt the edges of the text threatening Jane and looming over St. John in India. The letter, in encapsulating the thematics of death in a formal contradiction, points to the precise mode through which the irrationality of colonialism may be articulated by Jane. The mode is that of the Gothic. Spectres glide through the text refusing exorcism and visiting Jane at moments when she can no longer turn a blind eye to colonialism: the fainting spell in the red room which ‘oppresses’ Jane as she is bathed in the preternatural glow of mahogany, a wood procured from

levelled forests in the West Indies or her confrontation with Bertha who as “the foul German beast – the vampire” is living death itself (Brontë 15-19, 281; Freedgood 40–44).

If attention to content is sanctioned by the form of the text the task remains to square this imperative with Adorno’s thesis that art’s autonomy is secured only when “it opposes the empirical through the element of form” (*Aesthetic Theory* 5). “Adorno’s formalism,” as J. M. Bernstein dubs it, emerges from his close consideration of high modernist artworks which turn inwards on themselves through the abandonment of social content (“Readymades, Monochromes” 84). In the paintings of German expressionism, for instance, the contents of the painting, pared down to light, line, and colour, are also its form, much like in Beckett’s plays Adorno discerns only a post-mortem of metaphysics and the cadaverous remains of language (Bernstein “Readymades Monochromes” 87; Adorno “Trying to Understand” 241–2).

Adorno’s austerities of form do not tend to fare well with artworks which do not militate against reality with the complete asceticism of modernism. Adorno himself seems to realize this, ambivalently enough, in his readings of nineteenth-century novels. As Peter Hohendahl notes in an analysis of Adorno’s writings on Balzac, “it is the content rather than the form that arouses Adorno’s interest” (105). Thus, in speaking of Balzac, Adorno speaks of an imitation of the rhythms of the bourgeois world, of friendships, and of names in Balzac’s novels (“Reading Balzac” 123). Equally at the heart of these analyses is a misgiving surrounding the novel form as a genre which straddles the domains of an emergent mass culture and the parallelly increasing autonomy of high art. The novel can violate the proscriptions of the law of form, indiscriminately drawing content into itself and troubling the boundary between prose artwork and newspaper reportage (Cunningham 194–5).

This aporetic moment in Adorno’s thought can be read in tandem with the text’s own movement towards content, threading together the weft of the novel’s content with the warp of other texts from the Atlantic world. To do so, this paper spotlights those sections of the text in which an explicit treatment of the Atlantic can be found. It is in these sections of the novel that this paper hopes to discern the sutures of language through which *Jane Eyre* is tethered to the world.

On Transatlantic Texts

The months preceding June 22, 1772 at Westminster bore witness to a case brought against James Somerset, a black man, by Charles Stewart who alleged that Somerset was a slave who had escaped his ownership (Wiecek 87). As this case proceeded, however, it gradually became a legal crucible in which the arguments for and against slavery were hammered out to the limits of their logic. The arguments in the courtroom turned around the possibilities of hereditary privilege, the legality of slavery, and the historical antecedents through which slavery could be established as valid under English common law (Wiecek 89–91). The verdict of the case, which granted Somerset, and by extension all slaves, the right of *habeas corpus* to prevent from them from being seized by a master, found wide purchase in the rhetoric of a mushrooming abolitionist movement.

This rhetoric drew crucially from the text of the judgement itself as well as the highly publicized arguments put forth by Granville Sharp, who would become a prominent English antislavery leader through his association with the case, in favour of Somerset. Sharp's speech troped England or, more specifically, the land and earth of England itself as being infused with freedom. For Sharp, Somerset could not be seized by his former master because England was, necessarily, a country of free men, making the existence of slavery impossible (Wiecek 113–120). Slavery was defined as “essentially “un-British”, as an alien intrusion which could be tolerated, at best, as an unfortunate part of the commercial and colonial “other-world”” (Davis 377). It was precisely this argument, put forward by Sharp, that became the rhetorical legacy of the Somerset case in the discourse of abolition.

Jane, whose self-fashioning involves the metaphors of slavery, draws on the vocabulary of this imagined England when she rejects Rochester's authority as a ‘master’ and flees Thornfield Hall, permitting herself to think of him only much later when she was “gleeful, settled, content” as a village schoolmistress (Brontë 355). Inevitably, her ruminations on Rochester turn on the axis of land and location: she seems, if only for a paragraph, to luxuriate in the possibility of “waken[ing] in a southern clime, amongst the luxuries of a pleasure villa,” only to wrench herself from these seductions (Brontë 355). Her movement away from ‘southern climes’ and her refusal to submit to Rochester's desires is displayed in the following asseveration: “Whether is it better, I ask, *to be a slave* in a fool's paradise at Marseilles—fevered with delusive bliss one hour—suffocating with the bitterest tears of remorse and shame the next—or to be a village-schoolmistress, free and honest, in a breezy mountain nook in the

healthy heart of England” (Brontë 356, emphasis added). Bundled together with the idea of freedom from slavery is the image of the healthy heart of England, fanned by cool breezes. This moment is thus linked to Rochester’s last words to her in its obsession with climate and enslavement: the “temperate clime of Albion” finds its mirror-image in Jamaica as an island of eternal damnation (357).

Jamaica is set ablaze with the fires of hell in Rochester’s memories of a “fiery West Indian night” in which the “air was like sulphur-streams” (Brontë 281, 305). Paradoxically, this heat is accompanied by the prefiguration of rain by “black clouds” which “precede the hurricanes of those climates” (Brontë 305). “The sounds of a bottomless pit” thrill through Rochester’s body as the ocean’s waves sound to him like an earthquake and the moon glows red resembling a hot cannon-ball (Brontë 305). In the logical impossibility of this rhetoric are the traces of a West Indian Gothic which emerged in reaction to the Haitian revolution. The radical interrogation of the truncated fraternity of the French Revolution, restricted as it was to whites, as well as its military successes quickly became a source of deep-seated anxiety for whites in Europe as a veritable mini-industry of printed material sprung up across the Atlantic, carrying news, fictive reports, and fiction throughout the region. Important personages in the slave trade, such as MP and Jamaican planter Bryan Edwards, would draw on these fictive reports borrowing incidents from them only to inflate them with the hot air of hyperbole and embellish them with all the grotesquerie that Gothic vocabulary had to offer (Hoermann 193–194).

The picture of the West Indies which emerges from Edwards’ account, as the spilled blood dries up and the bodies decompose and disappear from sight, is not of the otherworldly horror associated with Gothic tales set in Europe, haunted and populated as they are by ghostly presences (Paravisini-Gebert 231). Rather, what we see is an other-world in which the defiance of the blacks is transferred onto a landscape which resists British invasion tormenting the soldiers who dare step onto land. “The rains were incessant and constant,” notes Edwards, and the “tropical climate” led to “the most fatal consequences,” chief among which was “...that never-failing attendant on military expeditions in the West Indies, the yellow or pestilent fever” (149). Black violence against the inhumanity of slavery is distorted through the prism of white anxiety into a desire for vengeance. It is parsed through the excesses of Gothic horror which is, however, not elevated to the realm of supernatural monstrosity but is, instead, read into a landscape which expresses the will of nature as revenge against white men.

In the context of this military vocabulary, Rochester's reference to cannon-balls becomes significant, calling to mind the tropes of a West Indian climate at war with the white man. Sedimented in the paradoxes of this language, which break apart the surface of the text's realism, are diffused links of imagery and trope which disclose the historical force of abolition and slave-revolts in literature. This accumulation of linguistic resonance over decades reveals to us not just the highly mediated links of the work of art to historical reality but also more immediate anxieties. The imagery of fire is central to this anxiety, as the sparks kindled in the West Indies by Bertha eventually burn Thornfield to ash, calling to mind the Jamaican slave revolt of 1831 as well as more contemporary accounts of mansion-burning in the West Indies (Meyer 254).

By inserting these discourses into the text's exposé of the irrational position of the bourgeoisie vis-à-vis colonialism, the novel dampens the force carried by the concept-metaphors which Jane uses to articulate her freedom from Rochester. Jane's self-effacement at the novel's end, her transformation into Rochester's prosthetics, is driven home by the intricate undoing of the logic by which she seeks to assert herself, which is also the logic of the text's movement due to its double character as both novel and autobiography. Adorno spoke of modern works of art as fireworks, which ascend and leave the world behind only to combust in a momentary flash of brilliance (*Aesthetic Theory* 81). The case of *Jane Eyre*, preoccupied as it is with fire, is slightly different. The novel smuggles into itself the dying embers of a moribund Atlantic economy only to immolate both Jane and Bertha with them—the spectre of the destruction of the self visits both Creole and colonizer. The text's pyrotechnics do not simply propel it away from the world. Rather, it is the world itself which supplies the gunpowder by which the novel might set itself ablaze and throw new light on reality.

Conclusion

Bertha's depiction in the novel, a mangled form, half-human, half-beast, stitched together by Gothic excess, has often been critiqued in terms of the ideological distortion of a colonized Other. To the extent that "ideology is untruth, false consciousness, deceit," this is integral to an understanding of the text. To the extent that the novel is not merely an ideological artifact, such a reading does violence to it (Adorno "On Lyric Poetry" 39). This paper has attempted to read the Gothic mode of the text more productively, seeing within it the possibility of critique immanent to the text. In the glow cast by form, the

darkened recesses of the Gothic world take on fresh perspectives along with new aspects. The Gothic is not merely a demonizing distortion, it is also intimately linked with the total logic of the text, disclosing to us Jane's vexed position and the attendant modes of thought of her historical situation.

Equally, this paper has been concerned with Adorno's aesthetic theory, to which it owes the very idea of the immanent, processual movement of artworks. If Adorno's aesthetics preserve both the uniqueness of literary artworks and the imperative of social criticism, they must also be pushed up against their own aporias. The preeminence of form in Adorno, inherited from Kant, fails, even by his own reckoning, in confronting the novels of the 19th century. Moreover, Adorno's startling reticence in commenting on matters beyond Europe, oft remarked upon, fails the task Adorno himself set for philosophy: to do justice to human suffering (Said 278; *Negative Dialectics* 17). This paper has attempted to transcend these aporias through their synthesis in the logic of the commodity which is woven, and unwoven, in the text.

Over the last few decades there have been attempts to reformulate Adorno's aesthetics in the face of the challenges posed by contemporary art; this paper has sought to make his aesthetics relevant to a novel that antedates his writings.³ Indeed, Adorno's own aesthetics cries out, from within itself, for such a revaluation, which transcends the need for fidelity to *Jane Eyre*. If, as Adorno asserts in the final sentence of the paralinguistic to *Aesthetic Theory*, "[e]ven in a legendary better future, art could not disavow remembrance of accumulated horror; otherwise its form would be trivial," then art's relationship to slavery must be accounted for and Adorno's aesthetics, by fulfilling its own desire, must be made adequate to the task (324).



³Instead of seeing Adorno's aesthetic theory as one that is "...so incisive and so ideologically compelling as to admit few equals" and which fails only when applied to newer contexts, I argue that a significant portion of the history of capitalism must be elided for Adorno's writings on aesthetics to become as eloquent as they are (Lazarus 134). Adorno's theory doesn't just require some stretching to fit contemporary situations; it also fails to reckon adequately with the literature of the 19th century that precedes modernism. It is only in recent works, such as Amy Allen's *The End of Progress*, that one finds the question of Critical Theory's relationship with colonialism posed more broadly and thoroughly.

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