

The Madwoman on the Third Story: Jane Eyre in Space

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WHENCE THE ABIDING MISAPPREHENSION THAT BERTHA MASON dwells in the attic of Thornfield Hall? For Jane Eyre—and *Jane Eyre*—are quite clear that Bertha’s cheerless room is on the third story of Rochester’s ancestral home. Hardly a creepy unused garret, Thornfield’s third floor is, in Jane’s words, “interesting,” “quaint,” and “venerable” (90), and far from unpopulated: Bertha’s part of the house is also home to the servants’ rooms, the site of bustle and vitality. Given the difference between these two kinds of domestic space, the critical repetition of the word *attic* in reference to Bertha’s confinement is striking: even in articles with such titles as “Travel and Space in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*,” “A Reading of Liminality in *Jane Eyre*,” and “The Buried Stories of Thornfield Hall,” painstaking readings of the figuration of space in the novel repeat the same mistake.¹ While some critics do refer to the floor on which Bertha is confined as the “third story,” they tend to use this phrase interchangeably with “attic,” slipping between the two terms within the course of one essay.²

The novel, however, insists on placing Bertha on the third floor, clearly repeating several times its instructions for the location of her room. During the climactic scene where Jane swabs the wounds of Richard Mason after Bertha’s attack, she repeatedly refers to the third floor, immediately above her own: Bertha’s scream “came out of the third story; for it passed overhead. And overhead—yes, in the room just above my chamber-ceiling”; “Another step stamped on the flooring above and something fell”; “The sounds I had heard after the scream, and the words that had been uttered, had probably been heard only by me; for they had proceeded from the room above mine” (176); “[Rochester] glided up the gallery and up the stairs, and stopped in the dark, low corridor of the fateful third story” (177);

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“Here then I was in the third story, fastened into one of its mystic cells” (179). Yes, dear reader—in the room just above my chamber-ceiling. Make no mistake.

Misplacing Bertha is not a trivial error. In one instance, much symbolic hay is made from the claim that Bertha paces “like a caged animal in her locked attic room only inches away from Jane pacing on the roof above” (Locy 113), thus eliding the fact that an entire zone—the attic—intervenes between these two scenes of pacing. In another, a feminist analysis of the novel is anchored by the claim that “[m]an is symbolically the main structure of the social system represented as a mansion while woman is subordinate to man, just as the attic is attached to the house” (Chi 102). The attic-third story confusion is remarkable given the amount of critical attention Bertha has received in the past few decades. As long ago as 1989, Laurence Lerner noticed that “Bertha Mason has in the last two decades become one of the major characters of English fiction” (273); much of this critical analysis has focused on the particulars of her confinement in that misnamed space. The trope has solidified, become a literary-critical meme: Bertha is the madwoman in the attic, and there she remains through countless rereadings and fresh evaluations of her symbolic resonances and productive ambiguities.

So what? Is the difference between *third story* and *attic* not simply a semantic one? First of all, we know that *third story* and *attic* refer to distinct spaces because Jane tells us so: in two key scenes she discusses the “attics” of the mansion and laboriously differentiates them from the inhabited third floor. Furthermore, in *Jane Eyre* literal space and spatial metaphors are freighted with meaning. As Karen Chase has argued, “Few novels are as spatially articulate as *Jane Eyre*. . . . In [Brontë’s] hands the elaborate spatial design is not so much a way to arouse sensation as to organize it” (59–60). This insight also rings true in an impressionistic sense. All readers

remember the window seat in which Jane reads Bewick’s *History of British Birds*, the red room in which she is cruelly shut up by Mrs. Reed, and the alcove from which she gazes upon the partygoers at Thornfield.

So why do readers keep repeating this mistake? Why do we insistently relocate poor Bertha, already so maltreated, from a well-heated and decently furnished third-story room to a blank and featureless space outside the bounds of human habitation? And is it even a problem if we do so? If we do feel that the misplacement of Bertha in the attic is a mistake and thus a problem, do we not open ourselves to charges of naive (or even referential) reading? Only by implicitly positing a “real world” of the novel, about which we can make more-or-less-verifiable truth claims, do we feel the force of the error. On the other hand, to insist that it is an error is to ignore the fact that adjudicating between these two places (attic, third story) is simply a matter of marshaling the textual evidence we are always telling our students to add more of to their papers. In other words, it is simply a matter of insisting that there is a way to read better, more carefully, more fully—more closely. Is close reading naive reading in another guise?

Elaine Freedgood and Cannon Schmitt have recently drawn our attention to the “denotative, literal, technical” novelistic language that we normally dismiss as unreadable; they remind us that to skip over such language is to risk “thinning texts to predetermined sites of meaning or interpretive possibility” (1). Instead, they ask, “What if we tried to read everything, knowing that we will fail, but also knowing that otherwise we are consenting to alienation?” (8). In the case of Bertha’s chamber, this exhortation could mean simply paying better attention to textual cues about setting, not skipping over such locational data as uninteresting, and doing the hard readerly work of constructing a detailed (and accurate) spatial schema in our minds as we read. The problem of mislocating

Bertha thus raises some interesting questions about Freedgood and Schmitt's analysis: what exactly are the parameters of the denotative, literal, and technical? How seriously are we to take their "everything"? If it is so easy for us to misread something as basic as where a character is in a house, and then to spin that mistake into an extended (often highly persuasive) reading of the text as a whole, where do we draw the line between literal and literary language? Clearly we are capable of skipping over anything.³ While I find Freedgood and Schmitt's argument persuasive, I want to address the problem of Bertha's mislocation by putting pressure on this crucial distinction that they draw.

To do so, I will first demonstrate why Bertha's location is important by offering a reading of the spaces of Thornfield Hall in which domestic interiors represent the literalized loci of certain psychological and memorial functions. Brontë's characters tend to conceive of mental states and emotions as spatial configurations. After looking at Jane's drawings, for example, Rochester asks her if her mind contains "other furniture of the same kind within" (106); later, Jane confesses that with people she esteems highly she feels a compulsion to cross "the threshold of confidence, and [win] a place by their heart's very hearthstone" (319). Brontë uses these figurations elsewhere: in a letter to her close friend Ellen Nussey, for example, she snippily asks of a badly behaved acquaintance, "Is her upper story sound?" ("To Ellen Nussey").

More specifically, *Jane Eyre* associates the spaces of Rochester's house with different psychological registers that are in turn associated with different kinds of meaning making. I will delineate these registers by mapping them onto the Lacanian schema of imaginary, symbolic, and real orders; while the novel develops the implications of these three modes in its own terms, the Lacanian model is a useful critical heuristic. This schema also helps to draw out another crucial aspect

of the novel: its engagement with a nascent depth psychology. The analysis that follows will situate that engagement in the context of a robust discussion of memory and the unconscious that unfolded throughout the nineteenth century. My reading is thus intended partly as a response to recent approaches that have focused deliberately on the superficialities of the novel—surface or "phrenological" readings—at the expense of its preoccupation with depth hermeneutics: the novel, as I will show, stages its own preemptive strike against "surface reading."⁴ Finally, I will return to the question of Bertha's room and suggest how the novel's own symbolic architecture might help us address the question of this puzzlingly entrenched reading mistake.

The various spaces in Thornfield, and the mansion itself, are simultaneously laden with portent and deeply ambiguous: while most readers remember Thornfield as a vast and sinister pile, few seem to remember that Jane describes it as "modern," "stately," and "picturesque" (83–84) and its individual rooms as "pretty," "beautifully clean," and "well-arranged" (139). With not quite as much cheekiness as Jane Austen, Brontë insists that we consider and then resist the clichés of the Gothic during our protagonist's introduction to her new home. The creepy-cozy dialectic even furnishes a moment of light flirtation for Jane and Rochester: "[T]hat house is a mere dungeon; don't you feel it so?" he asks. "It seems to me a splendid mansion, sir" (183). Thornfield becomes a projection, and a psychological *extension* of character: Rochester goes on to explain their difference in perspective by reminding Jane that the "glamour of inexperience is over [her] eyes" and that she sees "through a charmed medium" (183–84)—she is, to his mind, free from the burden of particular memories.

This is just one among a myriad of moments when the associations clustering around Thornfield clash: while Rochester

laments to Jane, “I was wrong ever to bring you to Thornfield Hall, knowing as I did how it was haunted” (256), Jane’s amorous and even erotic feelings are so intertwined with the house that they cannot be separated from it. When, at the end of the novel, she returns from Moor House to find Rochester, she indulges in a bizarre dilatory aside describing her discovery of the ruin:

A lover finds his mistress asleep on a mossy bank; he wishes to catch a glimpse of her fair face without waking her. . . . [A] light veil rests on her features; he lifts it, bends lower; now his eyes anticipate the vision of beauty. . . . How he suddenly and vehemently clasps in both arms the form he dare not, a moment since, touch with his finger! How he calls aloud a name, and drops his burden, and gazes on it wildly! . . . He thought his love slept sweetly: he finds she is stone dead.

I looked with timorous joy towards a stately house: I saw a blackened ruin. (361)

We can think of the resolution of the creepy-cozy dialectic, its architectural *Aufhebung*, as Thornfield’s destruction by fire, a spectacle of glorious wastefulness (“such an immense quantity of valuable property destroyed” [363]) that combines elements of heath (the wild outdoor spaces to which Thornfield returns) and hearth (the symbol of domestic comfort par excellence that ironically furnishes the destructive agent in the form of fire).

The main process by which Jane’s cathexis is formed is her obsessive revisiting of the third story and roof of Rochester’s house. Again, if we pay close attention we notice that Jane clearly differentiates the mansion’s “attics” from the floor of Bertha’s confinement and distinguishes the two spaces architecturally and symbolically. In the scene where Mrs. Fairfax first takes Jane around her new place of employment, the two women spend some time exploring the third story, which Jane describes in detail and about which she formulates several immediate philosophical

interpretations. Directly after Jane wistfully inquires after resident ghosts (the answer is no), Mrs. Fairfax moves down the hall and Jane asks her where she’s going:

“On to the leads; will you come and see the view from thence?” I followed still, *up a very narrow staircase to the attics, and thence by a ladder and through a trap-door to the roof* of the hall. I was now on a level with the crow colony, and could see into their nests. Leaning over the battlements and looking far down, I surveyed the grounds laid out like a map. . . . No feature in the scene was extraordinary, but all was pleasing. (90–91; emphases added)

Jane is at pains to describe the uneventful part of the journey from third story to roof that involves traversing the attic. As if one mention of a nondescript space were not enough, she repeats the strange narrative gesture on the way back down:

When I turned from it [the vista] and re-passed the trap-door, I could scarcely see my way down the ladder; the attic seemed black as a vault compared with that arch of blue air to which I had been looking up, and to that sunlit scene of grove, pasture, and green hill, of which the hall was the centre, and over which I had been gazing with delight. . . . I, by dint of groping, found the outlet from the attic, and proceeded to descend the narrow garret staircase. 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. (91)

It is at this precise moment that Jane first hears Bertha’s laugh, which she is told emanates from the servant Grace Poole. But let us leave them all there for a moment and return first to the attic and the roof, as Jane repeatedly does throughout her early days at Thornfield Hall. Her description of the precipitous

passage to the leads is, naturally enough, vertical in orientation. (Gaston Bachelard reminds us that a “house is imagined as a vertical being. It rises upward. . . . It is one of the appeals to our consciousness of verticality” [17].) Yet Jane’s description is insistently so: the vertiginous nature of the trip is emphasized by terms like “very narrow staircase,” “trap-door,” “looking far down,” “way down the ladder,” “groping,” and “outlet.” Her almost dreamlike stumbling and groping up and down these narrow passages intensifies the sense of extraordinary openness—horizontalness (and, indeed, horizon)—that Jane finds on the roof:

Leaning over the battlements and looking far down, I surveyed the grounds laid out like a map: the bright and velvet lawn closely girdling the grey base of the mansion; the field, wide as a park, dotted with its ancient timber; the wood, dun and sere, divided by a path visibly overgrown, greener with moss than the trees were with foliage; the church at the gates, the road, the tranquil hills, all reposing in the autumn day’s sun; the horizon bounded by a propitious sky, azure, marbled with pearly white. (90–91)

The horizon visible from the roof is echoed by the “long passage,” “narrow, low, and dim, with only one little window at the far end” that opens up at the other end of the vertical passage between roof, attic, and third floor. Lest we imagine that this echoing constitutes an opposition, say, between freedom and confinement, or benevolence and evil, we must notice that the novel disallows such a simplistic reading. At every turn, the intuitive associations of these spaces are called into question by Jane’s own processes of symbolization.

First of all, the passageway on the third floor is the scene of acute—if melancholy—pleasure for Jane in her first weeks at Thornfield:

[R]estlessness was in my nature; it agitated me to pain sometimes. 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, 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. (93)

The third story is the site of narrative, indeed of narratability. Even its association with Bluebeard contributes to its sense of romantic and sensational possibility, as does the fact that it sequesters a real intradiegetic mystery. The panoramic view that Jane enjoys from the roof, on the other hand, resists the marshaling powers of narration:

[N]ow and then, when . . . I climbed the three staircases, raised the trap-door of the attic, and having reached the leads, looked out afar over sequestered field and hill, and along dim sky-line . . . *I longed for a power of vision which might overpass that limit*; which might reach the busy world, towns, regions full of life I had heard of but never seen. . . . I desired more of practical experience than I possessed; more of intercourse with my kind, of acquaintance with variety of character, than was here within my reach. (92–93; emphasis added)

On the roof she is faced with the limits of her “power of vision,” which painfully recall her lack of “acquaintance with variety of character”—in short, she laments her restricted powers as a narrator, as a writer. The horizon she can see from the leads is “bounded” and the prospect “sequestered” and “dim,” whereas the imaginative world that opens up to her on the third story, the world of her own narrating, is continuous and never-ending.⁵

This is not to say that the scenes of Jane’s pacing are romantic or romanticized. For one thing, she begins her description by acknowledging that she was “agitated . . . to pain” during these sessions (93). Furthermore,

critics such as Rosemarie Bodenheimer have long warned against misreading these descriptions of Jane's fantasy life as either liberatory or even valorized by the perspective of the novel. However, I believe Bodenheimer overstates the case when she claims that this scene on the third story represents "an image of imprisonment rather than one of romantic escape" (389); the terms in which the roof and the third story are described do not allow for this neat opposition. As John Kucich reminds us, "Brontë cultivates withdrawal, not simply as a sanctuary, but as the preferred field for a turbulent kind of emotional experience" (51).

Interestingly, when during their courtship Rochester narrates to Jane his own process of falling in love, he confesses that he used to spy on her pacing up and down the gallery, the wide corridor on the *second* floor, home to the main sleeping chambers. He describes her as being in a state of deep reverie: "I think those day visions were not dark: there was a pleasurable illumination in your eye occasionally, a soft excitement in your aspect, which told of no bitter, bilious, hypochondriac brooding; your look revealed rather the sweet musings of youth, when its spirit follows on willing wings the flight of Hope, up and on to an ideal heaven" (267). This description of Jane's pacing differs so radically from the one she gives that we must conclude either that Rochester is terrible at divining Jane's thoughts or that Jane indulges in very different kinds of dreaming on the second floor and on the third.⁶

Indeed, her third-floor pacing has already been marked as a special type, differentiated from her rooftop brooding in a way that is perhaps counterintuitive: Jane insists that we reverse the customary dichotomy between the putatively wide-open spaces of the roof and horizon and the putatively cramped interior space of the long, narrow passageway. Chase, in an otherwise elegant parsing of interior space in the novel, I think gets this part wrong. While she makes the crucial

point that "[c]onfinement is a grave peril in *Jane Eyre*, but no more grave than its spatial antithesis: exposure" (62), her claim that "the prospect represents a saving alternative" (88) ignores the ways in which Jane experiences the prospect from Thornfield's roof, one of the most painstakingly described in the novel, as limiting and limited, stultifying, and oppressive—particularly in comparison to the boundless (if painful) world of her imaginings on the third floor.

Meanwhile, back at the manse: if the third story is the realm of narrativity, it is also the realm of the symbolic. It is the literalized "region of doubts and portents, and dark conjectures" (139). It is also the "home of the past: a shrine of memory" (90) where furniture and pictures are stored once they become too old-fashioned to grace the saloons belowstairs.⁷ (When Rochester's houseguests decide to play charades, they "ransack" "certain wardrobes of the third story" [155] for the costumes and props they need—the raw material of narrative.) On the third floor of Thornfield Hall, the "bedsteads of a hundred years old; chests in oak and walnut . . . rows of venerable chairs . . . stools more antiquated, on whose cushioned tops were yet apparent traces of half-effaced embroideries, wrought by fingers that for two generations had been coffin-dust" function as reified forms of memory (105), or "furniture within" in the psychologized schema of the house. This compartmentalization also explains why Jane's second- and third-floor pacings are so different from each other: the "sweet musings of youth, when its spirit follows on willing wings the flight of Hope" align the second floor with futurity, while the third floor remains the realm of the past. It thus underscores the inextricability of narration and memory in the novel: Jane might dream on the second floor, but only when she dreams on the third floor, associated with memorial function, are her reveries characterized as narrative.

The idea of a spatialized “storehouse” of memory recurs throughout the novel: when Jane meets Rochester after his fall from a horse, she somewhat disingenuously insists that the encounter “was an incident of no *moment*, no romance, no interest in a sense”; however, she immediately admits that the “new face” was “like a new picture introduced to the gallery of memory” (98–99). Later, Rochester addresses Jane thus: “Little girl, a memory without blot or contamination must be an exquisite treasure—an inexhaustible source of pure refreshment” (115–16). In Rochester’s formulation memory morphs from a treasure to a source, reflecting the duality of the word itself: memory as discrete *item of remembrance* versus memory as the psychological *capacity for remembrance*, often figured spatially in the period as a storehouse.

Jenny Bourne Taylor draws our attention to the significance of the metaphors Victorians used to conceptualize memory. She quotes Forbes Winslow, who describes the memory as a “cerebral treasure-house, destined to garner, preserve and protect from injury the myriads of ideas that enter the mind through the medium of the senses” and thus concludes that the “‘hidden storehouse’ in the unconscious can never be completely lost” (153–54). Another nineteenth-century commentator writes, “[S]tripped of all mystery, what is memory? Is it not the mind’s power of retaining its possessions? If Sensation, Perception, Attention are the collecting faculties, Memory is . . . the custodian of the collected treasures” (“On Memory” 150). Jane herself uses this imagery when she exhorts Rochester to mend his errant ways: “if from this day you began with resolution to correct your thoughts and actions, you would in a few years have laid up a new and stainless store of recollections” (117).

Taylor points out that this conceptualization of memory enabled “what William Carpenter termed the ‘consciousness of agreement’ between past and present iden-

tity” that nineteenth-century psychology insisted gives us a “sense of a deep and continuous self, connected with a long ancestral past” (153). Carpenter writes:

[T]he doctrine of the indelibility of Memory rests on the spontaneous revival . . . of the long dormant “traces” left by . . . former impressions. . . . [T]hese “traces,” being soon covered up by those resulting from the new experiences of restored activity, remained outside the “sphere of consciousness,” until revived by a Physical change, which reproduced the images of the objects that had left them. . . . [T]here must be, in addition, a *recognition* of the reproduced state of Consciousness as one which has been formerly experienced; and this involves a distinct Mental state, which has been termed the “consciousness of agreement.” Without this recognition, we should live in the present alone; for the reproduction of past states of Consciousness would affect us only like the succession of fantasies presented to us in the play of the Imagination. (454–55)

For Carpenter the “sphere of consciousness” denotes events and impressions accessible to memory, a light cone of remembrance and attention. By extension, the unconscious consists of items that have slipped into the darkness beyond this sphere, including former states of consciousness.

This emphasis on psychological depth runs exactly counter to the reading of *Jane Eyre* that Nicholas Dames proffers in his study *Amnesiac Selves*. Dames argues that for Brontë, the influence of phrenology—which, as he points out, does not have a place for memory in its spatial schema (78)—leads to a superficial and atemporal view of character (76–124). Jane and Rochester, for example, are immediately readable to each other, and they do not develop or change. Dames argues that by stubbornly insisting on interpreting the novel as an exemplar of modern notions of characterological depth and psychological interiority, critics fundamentally

misread Brontë's work, which is concerned with "*surfacing* the personality" and "making it completely legible" so that "what we as twentieth-century readers habitually associate with interiority, namely memory, is obscured and demoted" (86).

Brontë criticism, Dames complains, takes for granted "that meaning and human significance reside in a deep interior, which is masked by duplicitous surfaces. . . . Critical opinion on Brontë centers around a strong consensus that the secret, the deep, the non-visual is where value rests for Brontë and her narrators," a mode of reading that runs counter to Brontë's own phrenological schema. Dames's objection depends on the assumption that this consensus is a modern excrescence—he traces this critical approach back only as far as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, claiming that it is a legacy of "Laura Mulvey's reading of Lacan and film" (85). However, critical opinion also centered there for Brontë's first reviewers. One contemporary commentator claimed that "[t]he author of *Jane Eyre* has too deep an insight into human character—too profound a knowledge of the sources of human passion, to commit [the] mistake" of indexing personality too closely to appearance ("From an Unsigned Review, *Atlas*" 68): it is hard to imagine a stronger disavowal (and denunciation) of phrenological reading or writing than this. Another reviewer points out that the "writer dives deep into human life" ("From an Unsigned Review, *Era*" 79), while George Henry Lewes opines that "[r]eality—deep, significant reality—is the great characteristic of the book" and that "that reality is not confined to the characters and incidents, but is also striking in the descriptions of the various aspects of Nature, and of the houses, rooms and furniture" (84, 86).

Dames's larger claim about the novel itself, that there is no interiority or depth to Brontë's characters, similarly runs counter to the language of those characters themselves, who have recourse to many reading methodol-

ogies other than the phrenological. For example, Jane claims at one point that she knows St. John's "thoughts well, and could read his heart plainly" (316). There are numerous examples of such quasi-Romantic moments of reading that depend on a metaphors of depth: Jane thinks of Rochester's life—his past experiences and memories—as possessing "the depths of the sea to which the brook runs," while her own is like "the shallows of [the brook's] strait channel" (239). At another point she characterizes her own mind as "a rayless dungeon, with one shrinking fear fettered in its depths" (343); at another, she imagines her life with St. John as one in which "my body would be under rather a stringent yoke, but . . . [t]here would be recesses in my mind which would be only mine, to which he never came; and sentiments growing there fresh and sheltered" (347). Dames's insistence that Brontë engages in actively "*surfacing* the personality" (86) is uncomfortably juxtaposed to the eloquent metaphors of characterological depth we see throughout the novel and its criticism.⁸

This is not to discount Dames's otherwise fascinating reading of *Jane Eyre*. His insight that acts of memory in the Victorian novel are in the service of "*askesis*, a method of self-control and regulation" (6), glosses perfectly one of the central scenes of memory in *Jane Eyre*, where Jane admonishes herself for starting to care for Rochester:

I reviewed the information I had got; looked into my heart, examined its thoughts and feelings, and endeavoured to bring back with a strict hand such as had been straying through imagination's boundless and trackless waste, into the safe fold of common sense.

Arraigned at my own bar, Memory having given her evidence of the hopes, wishes, sentiments I had been cherishing since last night . . . , Reason having come forward and told, in her own quiet way a plain, unvarnished tale, showing how I had rejected the real, and rabidly devoured the ideal;—I pronounced judgment to this effect:—

That a greater fool than Jane Eyre had never breathed the breath of life; that a more fantastic idiot had never surfeited herself on sweet lies, and swallowed poison as if it were nectar. (136)

Certainly, voluntary memory is here pictured as wholly in the service of a program of “self-control and regulation”; this is hardly a Rousseauian reverie or a Proustian *mémoire involuntaire*. Yet alongside these moments of instrumental recollection in the service of self-discipline, there remains an insistent metaphoric of depth and spatialization of psychological and memorial functions that is not accommodated by Dames’s analysis.

That analysis ignores the dialectical way in which *Jane Eyre* treats acts of purposeful recollection such as that in the long passage quoted above, and those on the long passage of the third story of Thornfield Hall. Memory in this schema is central to the process of identity formation and thus of narrative capability: we can see Carpenter’s “consciousness of agreement,” the volitional recognition of “a reproduced state of Consciousness as one which has been formerly experienced” in the scene where Jane’s Memory and Reason testify to her romantic self-delusion. It is telling that in the midst of her damning self-judgment, Jane pointedly names herself: “a greater fool than Jane Eyre had never breathed the breath of life.” Memory is inextricably intertwined with the narrative depiction of a felt sense of self. The entire novel is, after all, framed as an extended act of remembrance in the service of identity formation: an autobiography under the emblem “Jane Eyre.”

The insistent metaphoric of treasuring and storing I discussed earlier militates against the idea of memory’s impermanence and fallibility, yet the storehouse metaphor carries with it negative side effects. In a recent paper on “mental clutter” in the Victorian novel, Athena Vrettos notes that for nineteenth-century theorists the mind was

often envisaged as a literal *site*, and thus subject to the constraints of physical space: “Victorian authors frequently envisioned the mind as subject to overcrowding. It could overflow like a mercantile warehouse, or become cluttered like a middle-class drawing room, with a population of useless details and purely ornamental knowledge” (“Curious Effects”). The mid-Victorian psychological theorist Alexander Bain, for example, claims, “It is a fact that you cannot go on storing the memory for ever” (240). Moreover, the metaphor of mental space implies the disturbing potential for uncontainability; later in the century, as Vrettos notes elsewhere, “the potential for memories to move outside the minds that contained them became a subject of literary, psychological, and parapsychological speculation” (“Displaced Memories” 199). A mind could both become overcrowded with information, facts, and memories and also imprint such data (particularly when their etiology was traumatic) onto its physical surroundings, creating a quasi-mystical object, such as the leather funnel in the 1903 Sherlock Holmes story of that name, whose stored memory could later be deciphered by those sensitive enough to “read” it.⁹ Memory threatens to move beyond the body and thus destabilize the very boundaries of self it is invoked to establish and reinforce.

We can see the threat to self that such perverse acts of memory might represent in two moments in the novel. As Jane says of the rooms on the third floor, “I liked the hush, the gloom, the quaintness of these retreats in the day; but I by no means coveted a night’s repose on one of those wide and heavy beds” (90). Tellingly, she does not dread a sleepless night gripped by the kind of fear she experienced in the red room in Gateshead Hall; it is repose that she fears, an interval of forgetfulness in the midst of emblems of memory. Yet as we see in the famous passage where Jane skips over most of her time at Lowood School, mere acts of remembrance are not adequate to

narrative: “I am only bound to invoke Memory where I know her responses will possess some degree of interest; therefore I now pass a space of eight years almost in silence: a few lines only are necessary to keep up the links of connection” (70). The rememberable is not coterminous with the narratable. Both forgetting and “the boundless and trackless waste” of the unsymbolized imagination are coeval threats to the budding autobiographer.

Bertha Mason—the avatar of voicelessness, forgetting, and loss of self—is literally close by Jane’s scenes of third-floor pacing. The proximity of Jane’s narratorial freedom to Bertha’s confinement on the third story betrays the inseparability of the various modalities of memory—its ephemeral and potentially uncontainable and traumatic character. As I have already discussed, we see these negative side effects in the novel, this threat of destabilization, in the descriptions of Jane’s pacing on the third story, the “region of doubts and . . . dark conjectures” (139). Just as memory is thoroughly imbricated with daydreaming and narrative making, so is it inseparable from a traumatic recognition of the possibility of forgetting and loss of self. The novel spatializes this dialectic between memory and its threats.

If the third floor is the field of the symbolic, of narrative, and of memory, the roof is the realm of the imaginary. It is where Jane goes to escape, where she attempts to dream but comes up short against the boundedness of the prospect. The roof is the realm of impossible demand, the region where she confronts lack, the space of *méconnaissance*. Here Jane flees to hide from Adèle’s games, Mrs. Fairfax’s jelly making—in short, her responsibilities and duties in the household. Her traversing the attic, climbing the ladder, and lifting the trapdoor thus constitute a regression to a state of infantile demand. She finds there nothing but the raw material for pacing; it is the realm of the presymbolic. Generations of feminist critics, beginning

with Virginia Woolf (82–84), have applauded Jane’s third-story *cri de coeur* that frames the description of these scenes and explains her desire to flee to the leads:

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; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. (93)

Without denying the radical potential of these words, I would point out that they also have a psychological valence that transcends gender. Jane insists that these feelings *unite* women with men, “their brothers”; she recognizes the frustration that drives the psyche back on the imaginary as a universal apprehension of loss.

We see the effects of the roof-imaginary association in the scene where Jane “decides,” after learning the truth about Bertha Mason, that she must flee Thornfield:

That night . . . I was transported in thought to the scenes of childhood: I dreamt I lay in the red-room at Gateshead; that the night was dark, and my mind impressed with strange fears. The light that long ago had struck me into syncope, recalled in this vision, seemed glidingly to mount the wall, and tremblingly to pause in the centre of the obscured ceiling. I lifted up my head to look: the roof resolved to clouds, high and dim; the gleam was such as the moon imparts to vapours she is about to sever. I watched her come—watched with the strangest anticipation; as though some word of doom were to be written on her disk. She broke forth as never moon yet burst from cloud: a hand first penetrated the sable folds and waved them away; then, not a moon, but a white human form shone in the azure, inclining a glorious brow earthward. It gazed and gazed on me. It spoke to my spirit: im-

measurably distant was the tone, yet so near,
it whispered in my heart—

“My daughter, flee temptation.” (272)

In this dream-vision, the roof is “resolved” by the threat of a written “word of doom.” The stern interdiction of a parental figure and avatar of the symbolic order—which arrives, tellingly, in the form of a traumatic childhood memory—both resolves and *dissolves* the roof, the realm of infantile dreams of autonomy and wholeness. The fantasized (and premature) resolution of the scene of childhood trauma is one to which the novel returns several times. While the metonym “roof” for house or home is not uncommon, it takes on a loaded significance in Jane’s narration of her return to Gateshead, where roofs become personifications of familial rejection:

On a dark, misty, raw morning in January, I had left a hostile roof with a desperate and embittered heart—a sense of outlawry and almost of reprobation—to seek the chilly harbourage of Lowood. . . . The same hostile roof now again rose before me: my prospects were doubtful yet; and I had yet an aching heart. I still felt as a wanderer on the face of the earth; but I experienced firmer trust in myself and my own powers, and less withering dread of oppression. The gaping wound of my wrongs, too, was now quite healed; and the flame of resentment extinguished. (194)

Jane’s insistence that her “gaping wound” is “quite healed” is belied both by the doubtfulness, wandering, and aching she has just described and by the scenes of putative reconciliation with the Reeds that are to follow. The passage deploys the words “roof” and “prospect” as abstractions, as opposed to the pacing scenes at Thornfield, which describe them as concrete things; the former directs us in our reading of the latter. Jane’s encounters with the physical roof of Rochester’s house and the actual prospect she sees therefrom are rhetorically aligned with the scene

of her childhood trauma, to remind us that the trauma is endlessly repeated in attenuated and rationalized forms—in fact, that all such acts of repetition are forestallings of proper closure, whose exigencies are not yet in place.

This leaves us with the attic, the featureless space whose blankness prohibits Jane from seeing as she makes her way back down the ladder. As “black as a vault,” it forces her to grope her way. Jane crosses the attic over and over again to reach the roof and regain the third story, yet while she painstakingly reminds us of its existence each time, she has absolutely nothing to say about it. The attic is beyond symbolization, a region of simultaneous plenitude and lack, the realm of the real, the extraliterary, the unrepresentable. As a contemporary of Brontë’s writes, “What though our garrets are like chaos and old night! They are the last hiding places of superstition” (“Essay” 405). The garret, like the primordial void that predates the existence of matter in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, is resistant to representation and memory.

Whether or not we choose to apply explicitly Lacanian terms to these architectural strata, I hope I have demonstrated that the psychological qualities attendant upon those terms are also envisioned by Brontë through Jane’s descriptions. What, then, if we take seriously Jane’s insistence that we rethink the binary opposition between roof and third story? If we notice that the bounded prospect from the roof, normally the site of limitless vision and the free play of imagination, is actually subordinated to the boundless world of imaginary wanderings and narrativity that Jane finds inside, on the third story, where does that leave the attic? As an architectural zone it is an appurtenance—does this mean it is also a supplement in the Derridean sense? Is the dialectic of imagination and narrative, of roof and third story, impossible without the intermediary space of the attic? Or does the attic function more like a buffer zone (as

it does literally), keeping the two realms separate and shielding us from an awareness of the interchangeability of the narratable and the nonnarratable, the fragility of narrative? What would happen if we deconstructed this binary? What if the roof and the third story collapsed in on each other, eliding the primordial space of the attic?

This is precisely what happens at the end of the novel—at the end of its *discours* if not its *histoire*. Jane learns that Thornfield Hall has burnt down, and as she wanders around its ruin she laments the catastrophe thus: “What story belonged to this disaster? What loss, besides mortar and marble and woodwork had followed upon it? Had life been wrecked as well as property? If so, whose? Dreadful question: there was no one here to answer it—not even dumb sign, mute token” (362). She then explores the “devastated interior,” which can hardly constitute much of an interior, since she has told us that roof and battlements are gone. The house has ceased to signify; the fragile relation between imagination and narrative that its architectural specificity had held in tension is blasted to burnt stone; neither dumb sign nor mute token remains to communicate across the mantle of its wasted, “shell-like walls” (241). In a moment of proleptic theoretical commentary that is like a gift from the past to the future, Jane then opines, “No wonder that letters addressed to people here had never received an answer: as well despatch epistles to a vault” (362). The attic, as “black as a vault,” is the recipient of all dead letters—dumb signs and mute tokens—of failed interpretive practice.

Thus, the possibility of closure is upon us. The death of Bertha is the ostensible juridical reason that the marriage plot can reach its resolution, but it is really the destruction of Jane’s preferred lover, Thornfield Hall, that enables the happy ending. Yes, Bertha burns down the house, but the house is what kills her: without those battlements, that roof, that attic, through which she must pass in

order to stand outlined against the sky with her hair “streaming against the flames”—in short, without the sheer height of the mansion, secured by the supplement of its attic—Bertha would not lie “smashed on the pavement” “on which her brains and blood were scattered” (365). Narrative will move on, to Ferndean, the “insalubrious site” to which Rochester would not bring Bertha for fear of being thought a murderer (256), yet where he will cheerfully remain the rest of his days with Jane—and where she will write her autobiography in between leading her husband around, describing everything to him, talking to him all day long, and raising their children.

But before the narrative moves on, there is a moment, just a brief one, where the narratological possibilities of Thornfield are held in perfect suspension. The old servant who narrates the death of Bertha tells Jane that Rochester “went up to the attics when all was burning above and below” to (first) rescue the servants and (last) fetch his wife (364). Of course, we all know by now that Bertha and the servants are on the third story, not in the attic. It is the only time this mistake is made in the novel, and it is not made by Jane but by an old servant who has not worked at Thornfield for a number of years. So it could be simply a mistake on the part of author or character—but perhaps not. Maybe Rochester rushes back upstairs, and Bertha dashes herself on the stones, during a brief moment in which the third story and the attic really are elided, when the attic has collapsed into the third story in a literal deconstruction through fire. Bertha dies, Rochester is blinded and maimed, Thornfield releases its binding hold on Jane’s psyche, narratability and nonnarratability collapse in on each other, the symbolic is penetrated by the real, signification is arrested in a brief *point de capiton*—all at the moment that the attic ceases to hold the house together.

Just as the attic has held Thornfield together, so Bertha Mason—with very little

plot time and literally without a word—has traditionally been seen to hold the novel together. If we take seriously the spatialization schema the novel sketches, we have to confront the fact that Bertha Mason dwells in the symbolic. Bertha does indeed live on the floor inhabited by servants, the floor where Jane paces and turns daydreams into narrative, the floor that is the shrine of memory and the site of narratability. To return to the conundrums with which I began: Why do so many readers and critics misremember Bertha as sealed in the attic, the realm of the nonnarrative? And why is this a problem—or is it?

Another way of attacking these questions is to ask what changes if we relocate Bertha. According to the novel's own schema, several important consequences follow. First, Bertha and the traumatic threat of irrationality and forgetting that she represents are dissociated from narratability and memory if she is whisked away from the third floor to the attic. As I discussed, the proximity of Jane's narratorial practice, her third-floor pacing, to Bertha's Bluebeardesque confinement underscores the dialectical relationship between the positive and negative aspects of the narrative function of memory in the formation of identity. By banishing Bertha to the attic, critics simultaneously reify these negative functions (think of how many readings insist on Bertha's embodying the essence of madness, lack of control, and animalism) and disavow their constitutive nature.

Second, Bertha's removal from the third floor to the attic shifts her from the realm of the prosaic (in both senses, "characteristic of prose" and "quotidian") to a space where she ceases to *mean* in the terms set by the novel, and where she is thus more fully available to critical projection and fantasy. It is the intensity of our own desires that makes Bertha's mislocation so unsettling. And this intensity can only derive from Bertha Mason's importance for feminist (and other ideological) criticisms of the novel. As Laurence Lerner

reminds us, Bertha has become "central not only to the plot of *Jane Eyre* but also to its emotional economy and its construction of woman, indeed to the economy, meaning, and worldview of the nineteenth-century novel" (273). For Lerner this reading habit is problematic only because Bertha is often used to "symbolize" hidden structures that are in fact hiding in plain sight: "No one would guess, from some of the elaborate critical readings of Jane's hidden wishes and fears through interpretation of Bertha, that all this is explicit and openly shown in the book" (285). As explicit and openly shown as the location of her room.

Yet *Jane Eyre*, as I have shown, militates against surface reading. In addition to the proximity of Bertha's voiceless suffering to Jane's narratorial dreaming, the novel insists on the dialectic between formless imagination and writing—the space of the attic holds these two "realms" in tension. (The language underscoring the location of Bertha's room is no more strangely insistent than the language describing Jane's stumblings through the attic.) Jane's repeated passage from third story to roof and back again figures criticism itself: the reader must keep passing through the black vault on the way to the scene of writing, confronting along the way the exigency of the unreadable. Relocating Bertha to the attic reveals the infantile demand at the heart of all interpretive practice: we unreasonably demand that she speak the real, even as we insist on reading her. This insight furnishes one answer to the question that Freedgood and Schmitt pose about the limits of the readable: there may or may not be limits, but there are no limits to our desire that there be no limits.¹⁰

The novel itself, in addition to warning us against superficial reading modalities, also instructs us to read dialectically—that is, to integrate the function of misremembering (misreading) at the heart of the interpretive process. As Carolyn Lesjak writes in a wonderfully bracing article on recent vogues in reading methodologies, "Surface reading's

advocacy of neutrality . . . involves a fantasy of stepping outside the subject altogether. . . . The ultimate aim, then, is toward more accurate descriptions in which subjectivity can seemingly come and go as needed” (247–78). Lesjak’s critique of surface reading is in the service of a renewed call for dialectical criticism, in which we acknowledge and even embrace the “failure” at the heart of the critical project.

To acknowledge the inevitability of interpretive failure is to embrace an unembarrassed constructivist model of criticism (either that, or to give up). Perhaps the problem is with the metaphor of reading to begin with, which implies a passivity and receptivity to the text that, *pace* “surface reading” advocates, ends up disavowing both the potential for failure and the possibility of success. To acknowledge that any reading is always wrong—partial, inadequate, mistaken—is to acknowledge that when we read we are producing persuasive rewritings of texts based on fundamental mistakes.¹¹ (Brontë provides us with an initial misreading in the old servant’s report on the Thornfield fire. We repeat his mistake ad infinitum: we repeat it because we cannot help it.) Although criticism necessarily fails in reading, it does succeed in writing. This is an insight that *Jane Eyre* furnishes in the figure of Jane Eyre (writing) herself.

While this claim may seem to contradict my protracted “correction” of a long-standing mistake about Bertha’s room, it does so only if we double down on the fantasy of critical omniscience. The correlate of extravagant claims to completeness and accuracy is extravagant claims to impossibility and failure. As psychoanalysis reminds us repeatedly, we are doomed to repeat the projections we do not acknowledge. Of course, acknowledgment is also a project doomed to failure, like “reading” itself—but as the joke about aging goes, the alternative is worse.

NOTES

1. Locy 113; Hennelly 115; Talairach-Vielmas 121; see also Bewell 800.

2. Hennelly 103–04, 115, 117; Talairach-Vielmas 121, 122. One author apparently decided to fudge the issue by referring to “the attic scene on the third floor of Thornfield” (Chen 367).

3. Freedgood and Schmitt acknowledge as much when they refer to recent cognitive studies demonstrating that we tend to move quickly from words on the page to their “gist” (9): “Reading literally, denotatively, and technically seeks to make us self-conscious about and to overcome such reflexive reading, to stop us from gliding rapidly and hazily from words to concepts” (10).

4. I have in mind here the manifesto for surface reading by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus in a recent issue of *Representations*.

5. Peter Allan Dale discusses the importance of the “endless” status of Jane’s imaginative narrative (110–12).

6. Debra Gettelman reads this scene as confirming the phrenological readings given elsewhere in the novel: “Real interiority is being denied by an account which does not reveal any of the actual depth beneath the exterior signs of daydreaming” (567). I disagree with recent “phrenological” readings of the novel that insist on this superficial treatment of character.

7. For a helpful discussion of the memory as belonging to the symbolic order, see the chapter entitled “The Place of Memory in Psychoanalysis” (122–71) in Charles Shepherdson’s *Lacan and the Limits of Language*.

8. This is not to deny that Brontë was fascinated by phrenology. Sally Shuttleworth discusses the author’s indebtedness to the schema in her study *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*. Yet as Shuttleworth herself notes, the contemporaneous discovery of such phenomena as “the effects of ether and chloroform” and mesmerism “heightened Victorian interest in . . . the unconscious movements of the mind, reinforcing belief in a concealed realm of interiority where true selfhood lay” (29).

9. In Arthur Conan Doyle’s “Leather Funnel,” the title object had been used as an instrument of water torture and was thus imprinted with the victim’s suffering. As one character explains, “According to my theory, any object which has been intimately associated with any supreme paroxysm of human emotion, whether it be joy or pain, will retain a certain atmosphere or association which it is capable of communicating to a sensitive mind” (qtd. in Vrettos, “Displaced Memories” 203).

10. Freedgood and Schmitt acknowledge as much when they advocate a reading practice that would “restore obscurity to the apparently clear, to stop language from working” (4).

11. I would not want to deny that dozens of critics have marshaled the power of the “madwoman in the attic” in the service of rich and persuasive readings under

the banners of feminist, queer, postcolonial, psychoanalytic, and other “suspicious” critical methodologies.

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