

REANIMATING THE DEAD: SUGGESTIONS TOWARD THE ANALYSIS OF A BRONTË BORDER NARRATIVE

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Every narrative leaves a trace and begins in an encrypted network of other narratives whose edges in some way touch. By this I mean all those edges that form the running border of what is called a text can be understood as a territorialization of time and identity, and for aesthetic purposes these borders are always framed and staged. A text is said, for example, to have a beginning and ending, a title, sets of margins, a unity or disunity of linguistic corpus within and spiraling outward from the text, or a referential realm outside the text and often within it. These are its spatial framework creating the edges with which we give texts generic and theoretical identities, or a chronological beginning and sense of an ending. But then some interpretative gestures flatten out these edges, in the words of Jacques Derrida, turning text into a “differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces” (Derrida, 84). Thus the text overruns all the limits assigned to it as writing. But this too produces a response: attempts to resist, shore up old partitions, to “blame what could no longer be thought without confusion, to blame difference as wrongful confusion!” (84). The show of artful temper in Derrida’s own self-defense is an interesting one in his essay, but more important is his argument, with a French note of playful cynicism, that the essay will “work out the theoretical and practical system of these margins, these borders, once more from the ground up” (Derrida, 88). But we should also be interested in his construction of the framing of the border and the margin.

This essay will make three critical interventions in the analysis of this framing and staging process of narrative as a spatial practice. The first intervention proposes to briefly place the literary and culture debate about “representation”, which is hinted at in Derrida’s essay and which has played such an important role in debates about the ways in which we frame signs, into a wider cultural context. The second intervention will be focused on the staging of representations of desire in the haunting of the heroine in the second chapter of Charlotte Brontë’s

Jane Eyre (1847). Despite Jane's central place in this early chapter of the novel, her haunting is presented in scenes in which she frames the narrative and then disappears: as if the scenes take place without her being there. These ghostly re-presentations of her desire place her consciousness of her body and the social order itself at a little distance from her identity. The third intervention will also begin in the same chapter of the novel, and then move to Chapter 20, to focus on how the incarceration of the heroine is a frame-up: a self-created act of narrative restructuring. But such a narrative naming can only come about after an audible and visual separation in the text. Screams heard and cries made are framed as exotic images of escape as if Jane Eyre was absenting herself from the experience while returning as the imagined Other. Jane's reaction to Bertha's scream in chapter 20 of the novel is to label it the act of another (an Other): a condor. But in the process, as we shall see, the semiotic act of comparison of the audible sound to an exotic bird of prey is a metaphoric substitution for narration—saying one's own name. The narrator has to name herself so that she can set "things to rights" i.e. writing is a moral responsibility. But this act of representation through narration also carries with it a desire to disappear, but not without a trace.

Let us take a well-known example of the staging and framing of a narrative—the allegory of the cave in the *Republic*, Book VII. Socrates relates that the cave itself is a framing representation that, like the shadows cast on an interior wall by means of fire and human shapes, blocks us from seeing the Real. And yet this famous image of the cave is a forum, an opening out on to a stage, by means of which Socrates will inspire Glaucon with the knowledge of the pure forms, of that reality men are bound never to see. Socrates holds up an image, and illuminates it by allegorical extension: on a wall or mental screen a shadow is perceived. But so much here depends upon a stage prop, a prop carried there by the philosopher through his narrative and put before his pupil so that "all this can be seen".

The cave itself is a frame, both for narrative and for the interpretation (See Mitchell, 14-15, Rapaport, 91-94). It is interesting how an image, itself framed, can immediately stage itself as a stage (both as part of a process and the platform for the process) and, in that way, disappear from the viewer's consciousness as an image, object, prop, or border? Remember that Socrates begins the allegory by say-

ing: "Picture men dwelling in a sort of subterranean cavern"—the word picture frames, stages or encloses the image of the cavern, but the cavern will in turn stage or frame other images. No narrative can begin without such a framing border: the power of the allegory then depends upon an image that fades into a frame. Henry Rapaport argues that what Glaucon "sees in the image of the cave is the consequence of the staging enacted by the image, a staging that counts on the dissolution or phantomization of an image in order that we can see through it . . . The image fades, then, and in doing so makes us "forget" this image even as we use it to see something else. What makes the image fantasmic or powerful in its effect on us is the fact that even if we forget it, the image's impression remains." (93-4)

What I am suggesting here is the need to acknowledge the double narrative, of the vision enclosed in the general narrative and then to examine the "line" (border) that separates the enclosed narrative from the other. One approach would be to analyze how images serve to stabilize or frame a fantasy (See Hartman, 35-37), while recognizing that the border that frames or separates the enclosed narrative from the other will not be served by simple demands for interpretative closure. This is not to suggest that we should always read a narrative as through a glass darkly, but to propose that the textual or medial borders within or around aesthetic works are related to the borders represented in these works.

But there is another literary issue in the example I have chosen above: the ambiguous role "representation" plays here. The role of representations in our understanding of literature and the contexts in which literature is interrogated has a long history. (See W.H.T. Mitchell's article "Representation" in *Critical Terms for Literary Study* for an excellent summary of the theoretical issues, 11-21). More recently the problematical place of representation, re-presentation, and figuration have been applied to the processes of "framing a sign" (Culler, 139-230) or to the interpretation of the representations of gender, race, and class within literary and cultural texts. Additionally in the last twenty years, in criticism influenced by post-structuralism and politically motivated deconstruction, (but also within feminist and post-colonial studies), there has been an attempt to realign existing theories of representation with the history of the term in political science. In political theory representational theories of sovereignty,

legislative authority, and relations of individuals to the state have been used to explore the cultural implications of power within institutionalized spaces, or the ways in which representations of individuals impact the structuring of communication between groups within the State.

To use three well-known examples of commentators who are critically reevaluating “representation” in literature and the arts: W.H.Mitchell has written extensively on ways in which representation and the framing of the sign plays a significant role in the study of aesthetic phenomena (See W.H.T Mitchell **“Ekphrasis and the Other”**, from *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) reproduced as part of The Romantic Circles' Electronic Edition of Shelley’s “Medusa”, W.H.T Mitchell, “What is an Image” from *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 7-52); Herbert Rapport has written on the intersection of literary and psychoanalytical theory in the metaphoric representation and constructions of desire in English, French and German fiction and poetry of the 17th to the 20th centuries (See Rapaport, *Milton and the Postmodern, Heidegger and Derrida: Reflections on Time and Language*) ; and in subaltern studies, in postcolonial theory, there have been many attempts to “read against the grain” of colonial representations (See Spivak, Prakash, Chrisman, and the collection of essays edited by Gates, “Race”, *Writing and Difference*). In fact, this later group of critics seem at times to be united in their attempts to disclose, representations as the disembodied voices of ancestors, forgotten history, disfigured and decentered subalterns who have been distanced, displaced, and relocated out of sight.

I

Let us now analyze some familiar Nineteenth Century texts in English, in which writers view an object or individual, or investigate a dream or memory, as if they are taking its measure against a frame in the foreground: as if they were seeing one text in the other. They establish a perspective by looking through one thing at another: they frame an image, by calling attention to and then loosing, the border. This is not simply a *palimpsest* in which the original narrative or writing is effaced or scraped clean, in order to make way for other writing. A simple sentence from one of Shelley’s letters will make the point: “I see the

radiant Orion through the mighty columns of the temple of Concord" (Letter to Thomas Peacock, March 1819 cited Reigier, 92). The temple functions as an image, but as one that also disappears as it frames or stages an image that appears as if from within it, the radiant Orion. To see one thing through another, as a number of critics have suggested, is often the case in Shelley's poetry (see Reigier, 20-60, de Man, 51, and Derrida, 91-2). In fact, Derrida makes Shelley's *The Triumph of Life* a central example in his essay, discussed above, "Living on: Border Lines". But what is worthy of note is the underlying "re-citation" of narration and imagery that critics have found in the poem: the framing of a view into which we see through to another thing. It is not simply that there is a simple one to one correspondence or allegory but rather that the poet stages his literary tropes or figures by making one image a frame or screen through which another image is viewed. Shelley would have the reader see through to the "triumph" of life at the edge of death. But then in another Shelley poem, *Prometheus Unbound* he stages a death as if to insist that death is a border that only displays itself in terms of delay, deferral, distancing, or a stay of execution. Throughout Shelley's poetry framing images function like the Platonic allegory discussed above. They depend upon an image that knows how to fade into a frame: the spectacle Glaucon sees in the image of the cave is the consequence of the staging enacted by the image. The image fades, and then in the process makes us forget this image even as we use it to see something else.

Now let us look at how such staging takes another form in a fictional Nineteenth Century narrative, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. Since 1985 and the publication of Gayatri Spivak's celebrated essay, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" (Gates, 262-80) representation and re-presentation has become central to an analysis of the novel. Spivak's essay is a study of three canonical western texts and their relations with western proto-feminism and anti-imperialism. Its "gestures of inversion" have been often cited, especially in its allegorical reading of the figure of Bertha Mason. Despite Mason's objective identity as a member of the white plantocracy, she is made to embody the subject-position of the subaltern woman in early western feminist discourse. The effect of Spivak's "catachrestic" reading is to suggest that there has been a deep, and largely unconscious complicity of western proto-feminism with the project of overseas hegemony

from the Mid-Nineteenth Century on. Spivak's argument uses both an allegorical technique and assumptions about representation to argue that the emergence and consolidation of the figure of the western "feminist" women in the Nineteenth century is inextricably structurally linked to the marginalization, even the disappearance, of "women from the colonies" in the discourses of canonical texts.

In my second intervention, I would like to suggest that the Spivak's reading makes assumptions about "representation" which the novel's text may frame in ways she does not acknowledge. For example, many critics have stressed the brilliance of the opening chapters of the novel. How the structuring narrative devices shape the overall design, and that the locked red room and ghostly haunting introduce the reader to the process of narrative itself. My analysis of two scenes from Chapter Two of the novel is meant to be suggestive not exhaustive but I think we need to read in a slightly different fashion. The object here is not to point to the ways in which the opening fore shadows the narrative and metaphor patterns of the rest of the text, but to analyze how the images and disembodied cries heard by the narrator create a haunting whose staging will allow the reader to see and hear traces that are a sign of difference and an encrypted framing of desire for both revenge and narrative power.

II

The second chapter of *Jane Eyre*, in which she is locked in the "red room", is a chiasmic scene that will be repeated a number of times in the text. Mrs. Reed is punishing Jane for her disobedience by locking her in a spare bedroom in Gateshead. The red room is the chamber in which Mr. Reed, her sworn protector and guardian "had breathed his last" and in which he lay in state, nine years earlier. She is forced into this room after a "rebellion": her "mutiny" against the tyrannical rule of Mr. Reed's son, John. She is to be disciplined for disobeying authority and for the violence of her fiery temper.

I began to recall what I had heard of dead men, troubled in their graves by the violation of their last wishes, revisiting the earth to punish the perjured and avenge the oppressed, and I thought Mr. Reed's spirit, harassed by the wrongs of his sister's child, might quit its abode—whether in the church vault or in the unknown world of the departed—and rise before me in this

chamber. I wiped my tears and hushed my sobs, fearful lest any sign of violent grief might waken a preternatural voice to comfort me, or elicit from the gloom some haloed face, bending over me with strange pity . . . Shaking my hair from my eyes, I lifted my head and tried to look boldly round the dark room; at this moment a light gleamed on the wall. Was it, I asked myself, a ray from the moon penetrating some aperture in the blind? No, moonlight was still, and this stirred; while I gazed, it glided up to the ceiling and quivered over my head. I can now conjecture readily that this streak of light was, in all likelihood, a gleam from a lantern carried by some one across the lawn; but then, prepared as my mind was for horror, shaken as my nerves were by agitation, I thought the swift-darting beam was a herald of some coming vision from another world. (48-9)

We can understand Jane's wish that the ghost will avenge her wrong, by haunting and punishing Mrs. Reed and her children. Her wish both frightens her and gives her pleasure, but we also need to see this as the staging of a desire to voice a nightmare. One from which she might not awaken. The room is locked and the narrator becomes claustrophobic. Jane experiences a disjunction between her identity and this new space, between her inner and outer worlds—she finds there is a gap between her desire as imagined in the ghostly aura and the emptied space in the room she has to occupy. (In a sense, this is also a presentation of the place she occupies as an empty signifier in her "adopted" family). For example, if we go back two pages before the scene I have just quoted, to the first description of the locked room as a "jail", we can read the staging of the second scene in the first. In the first scene, Jane sees herself in a looking glass.

All looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality: and the strange little figure here gazing at me with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still, had the effect of a real spirit: I thought it like one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp, Bessie evening stories represented as coming out of lone, ferny dells in moors, and appearing before the eyes of belated travelers. (46)

Early in her confinement to the red room she sees herself, fostered by her reading, as a phantom: half one thing and half another. This is the

first staging of herself as a phantom in the novel, and it is the mirrored self as seen through a glass darkly.

Now in the second scene, she uses the mirrored phantom, who is and who is not Jane, to seek her desire for vengeance. She projects on to the presence of Mr. Reed's ghost the need to punish others for wrongs done to her: "I began to recall what I had heard of dead men, troubled in their graves by the violation of their last wishes" (48). It is a scene staged using the imagery of a frightful nightmare: "a vision from another world". What we see happening here is that Jane's scream and eventual fainting fit signifies the crossing of a boundary: the staging of a punishment directed toward others but also toward herself. After all the entire chapter ends with the narrator's statement: "unconsciousness closed the scene" (50). In a sense, she cannot bear to look upon her own desires.

She also knows that she will be locked up in the room until she can meet her aunt Reeds demands "it is only on condition of perfect submission and stillness that I shall liberate you." (49). Jane's stillness never gives her pleasure, in fact, much of what motivates her, later in the novel, is her desire for movement. Being forced across a threshold and locked into the red room, (a room haunted by a ghost), Jane presents a reading of her own desire for revenge by framing and then moving through stages of interpretative possibility and action. The narrator is often waiting, in hot pursuit, to interpret or reinterpret a staged scene. For example, Jane's narration of her confrontation with the gypsy fortuneteller in Chapter 18 is an attempt to stage another impression of her self for the reader, she uses Rochester's disguise to frame her own desire for Rochester.

But if we return to Chapter 2 of the novel, we need to examine one more staging of desire. Within this chapter is an embedded reference to the interpretation of a Platonic allegory: "shaking my hair from my eyes, I lifted my head and tried to look boldly round the dark room, at this moment a light gleamed on the wall" (48). The narrator then seeks to interrogate the scene, asking she what it "means"? Two explanations follow: one is in the voice of the present of the writing of the text (framed narrator) who rationalizes and "conjectures that this streak of light was . . . a gleam from a lantern" but then, the narrator of the "now" reverts to the past of the narrated moment and states that her mind was seized with horror "shaken as my nerves were"—the

“swift-darting beam was a herald of some coming vision from another world” (49). However, the vision is also framed in a sound “which I deemed the rushing of wings”. Jane is oppressed, suffocated; her claustrophobia becomes audible in a scream.

Here then is where I want to move to my third intervention as we have a new direction in the narrative: a turn toward the audible. In the first two examples I have used, there is a separation of self into two parts framed by the images of a mirror, and then the staging of a desire as an allegory. The narrator sees (visualizes) the two images as little girl and “phantom”, “imp and fairy” (46), passive victim and vengeful ghost. But in the third example, what has been sight will become sound.

Screams are often uttered and heard in the novel. For example in the middle of the text, at the beginning of Chapter 20, Bertha Mason’s screams are described in a comparison with a wild and exotic condor: framed in a comparison with birds of prey. And again, I think, readers are meant to see through this image to another that signifies the return of the repressed: Bertha Mason and beyond that Jane Eyre herself.

In Chapter 20 of the novel, Jane has just been awakened by the moonlight, having forgotten to draw her curtain or let down her window-blind. She hears the screams of Bertha from the third story: “the night was rent in twain by a savage, a sharp, a shrilly sound that ran from end to end of Thornfield Hall” (235). The sound fills the space, and the comparison Jane makes is interesting: “Whatever being uttered that fearful shriek could not soon repeat it: not the wildest-winged condor on the Andes could, twice in succession, send out such a yell from the cloud shrouding his eyrie” (235). We know from the opening pages of the novel, when Jane is reading *Berwick’s History of British Birds* that bird sightings and sounds, and bird metaphors will play an important role in the text. But what fascinates in this example is the strong association of a scream (sound) with the creation of a border that must be crossed into the formation of the visual image of a condor protecting its nest. The condor’s action can be symbolically represented in Bertha’s scream. But the name of the nest contains not the sound of a scream, but Jane’s name: eyrie. In our third intervention, the signifier is framing another/ Other’s name and pushing them together: Bertha and Jane Eyre. Jane is identified with

Bertha's nest, i.e. Thornfield Hall, but is also displaced by the exotic Andes.

At this point, we can begin to see that Brontë's text is haunted by a repressed, but not fully acknowledged recognition, of subaltern resistance that is contained and maintained within the structure of the narrative act itself. Not so much in the references to slavery in the text, but within the construction of the signifiers. There is a mutually repeating elision, which emphasizes the enabling and reinforcing evasions in a relationship between a proto-feminist aspiration and anti-imperial resistance. If this can be shown to be the case, and I have only used two examples from the novel, then Spivak's argument about the structural complicity of nineteenth century feminism in "the axioms of imperialism" will require at least some modification.

Once we become attuned, in Brontë's writing, to the framing of borders which are to be seen through or which disappear, in the narrative act itself, then we can draw interesting parallels between texts. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) also begins with dark locked rooms inhabited by ghosts, visions of punishment for real or imagined wrongs, and a "haunting" in which screams or cries are heard. In fact, the opening chapters of both texts seem to set narrators in a space where they are able to raise the dead by reading, and then hear voices and see shapes which formulate a repressed desire: one which has to be analyzed. Thus a reading of each novel might start with how seemingly haunted these texts are by the past and by history. The dead remain among the living because of a self-created need, expressed by the narrator for revenge for real or imagined wrongs. Thus the problem is how finally to put the ghost to rest, to deliver the last rites as an act of separation. Burying the dead will end their earthly existence: proper burial and a proper naming of the dead allows them to go in peace, to be forgotten in the sense that memory depends upon the pain of a still open sore. Conversely in each novel, digging up the dead reanimates all parties involved. Marking the return of a repressed desire, and of a repressed history. Each of these scenes is framed by recognition of a staging which is both platform and process, and which embodies the conflicting interconnections within the social and cultural spaces of their expression.

This brief analysis of the framing images within border crossing narratives in Charlotte Brontë's novel, has argued that border poetics,

which studies the ways in which we frame our representation and representation of texts, can make a contribution to an analysis of texts and also interrogate certain strategies of reading texts. But also that it can help us study the cultural implications of narrative formations themselves, noting their impact on the structuring of literary communication and history.

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