

Girl Talk: Jane Eyre and the Romance of Women's Narration

"We talk, I believe, all day long."

Jane Eyre 476

"a cult text of feminism"

Gayatri Spivak 244

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I. "Speak I Must"

With the childhood declaration, "*Speak I must*" Jane resolves to narrate her own story (68), to explain and vindicate her life, to exercise her voice and participate in the "joyous conversational murmur" (198). In spite of her extreme youth, her habits of quiescence and submission (resistance was "a new thing for me," she readily admits [44]), her need to be loved and approved, even if only by her oppressors, Jane stands up for herself and for fairness. "I will tell anybody who asks me questions this exact tale," Jane warns Mrs. Reed. "People think you a good woman, but you are bad, hard-hearted. You are deceitful!... If any one asks me how I liked you, and how you treated me, I will say the very thought of you makes me sick, and that you treated me with miserable cruelty" (69, 68). Jane experiences her first moment of self-narration, in conflict with the official version of her life given by Mrs. Reed, as a moment of "unhoped-for liberty," "the first victory I had gained," "the strangest sense of freedom, of triumph, I ever felt" (69).

No wonder, then, that *Jane Eyre* has come to occupy a position of privilege in the feminist canon.¹ The novel is read as a "revolutionary manifesto of the subject" (Cora Kaplan 173). Jane's value as a feminist heroine is "figured in the ability to tell (if not direct) her own story" (Poovey 140; see also Homans, Peters). The story of Jane's voice, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have argued, is "a

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¹ One vivid example of this privilege can be gleaned from a recent anthology of feminist criticism, an over-one-thousand-page collection entitled *Feminisms*, edited by Diane Price Herndl and Robyn Warhol. Their expanded table of contents orients the reader to feminist positions on important contemporary questions with such headings as "body," "class," "desire," "discourse," "history," "imperialism," "lesbian writers," "madness," "psychoanalysis," "sexuality," and others. Among these, only one text—*Jane Eyre*—rates its own listing as a crucial feminist topic.

Jane Eyre has been the object of extensive feminist recuperative/archeological work: "the significance of Brontë's use of structure, language, and female symbolism has been misread and under-rated by male-oriented twentieth-century criticism, and is only now beginning to be fully understood and appreciated," writes Showalter. The bulk of this recuperative work has concentrated on the novel's description of women's social conditions, female psychology, and women's relation to writing, storytelling, and voice. See, for example, Woolf, "*Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*"; Spacks, *Female*; Rich, "Temptations"; Yeazell; Adams; Moers; Gilbert and Gubar; Bodenheimer; Homans; Armstrong; Poovey; and Lanser.

Interestingly, even feminist critics who seek to decenter *Jane Eyre*'s privileged position in the feminist canon, to critique its racial and national politics, nonetheless continue to treat *Jane Eyre* as a paradigmatic text. See, for example, Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and, most recently, Spivak, Meyer, David, Perera.

pattern for countless others ... a story of enclosure and escape ... of [the] difficulties Everywoman in a patriarchal society must meet and overcome" (338–39).² Reading Jane's voice as a "challenge [to the] limits on female authority" and "the trope par excellence of power" (Lanser 177, 183), a tradition of feminist criticism has constructed its romance with *Jane Eyre* by reading it as a model of resistance, not only to "the Victorian conception of woman's place" (Christ 67) but to "women's fate within the symbolic order" (Homans 86).

Jane does move from silence to speech, thus providing a model of feminist resistance and liberation. And she directly involves the reader in that liberatory process, providing a model of feminist criticism as a collaborative heroics, of the feminist critic as the ideal listener for which the text longs. So it should hardly be surprising that feminist criticism would borrow much of its romance with women's narration, its metaphors of voice, and its own self-understanding as an enterprise from this novel. But feminist criticism's affair with Jane's voice and story has too often depended on taking the novel's own romance for granted, even on taking romance—"perfect concord" (476)—on its own terms.

In addition to its politics of voice, a complex and developed erotics of talk also informs—and complicates—the entire novel. While *Jane Eyre* is a paradigm of the narrative desire for intimacy and recognition, the insight that human life has a "fundamentally dialogic character" (Taylor 32), and while Jane laments her "isolation—this banishment from my kind!" (361) and acknowledges that to be shut out of human dialogue, to be silenced, isolated, and spoken for by others is to be denied identity and being, denied the space, as Mikhail Bakhtin puts it, where the self "lives" (183), the novel also acknowledges that what Jane longs for is precisely what *cannot* be fulfilled.

Even if the structure of all language (and therefore of subjectivity as well) is fundamentally dialogic—because, as Bakhtin would have it, every utterance exists only in relation to other utterances—it does not follow that this dialogic relation is always defined by equality and mutuality or that every exchange makes good on its subject-affirming potential. On the contrary, there is no guarantee that any given utterance will succeed as either self-expressive or other-responsive. Conditions of inequality, in fact, virtually guarantee that it will not. What Hans-Georg Gadamer calls a "true conversation," in which neither partner dominates, controls, coerces, or instrumentalizes the other, in which the partners "do not talk at cross purposes," is an object of Jane's narrative desire to the very extent that it is not a feature of her everyday lived experience (see Gadamer 330; see also Crapanzano). And so mapping this dynamic means locating sites of failure overwritten by utopian desire.

Prevailing feminist paradigms read Jane, in Elaine Showalter's words, as a "heroine of fulfillment" (112). But this reading often eclipses the novel's erotics of talk (even if, as I will argue later, it may clandestinely covet and even mimic it by imagining not only that Jane finds her ideal listener/lover but that Brontë does as well—in us). The occlusion of the novel's erotics is important on two counts.

² If Gilbert and Gubar are right that Jane posits herself as an "Everywoman," this act itself may be a form of subversion insofar as "the very authority of masculine autobiography derives from the assumption held by both author and reader that the life being written/read is an exemplary [i.e. white, male, bourgeois] one" (Brodzki and Schenck 2–3).

First, because Jane's achievement of her discursive ambition proves uneven; and second, because Brontë's romantic (and discursive) model is not as strictly (or simply) heterosexual as it may appear. Jane's search for an ideal listener—the novel's erotics of talk—ties that image of an ideal listener to the romantic quest for an ideal lover, recasting the classic romantic quest (which conventionally promises a happy ending) as a search for just this form of receding, elusive, seemingly impossible completion. When that ideal listener is gendered as another woman, as feminist critics have often perceived it to be in *Jane Eyre*, an erotics of talk becomes a way not only to mediate between the different forms of discourse traditionally relegated to the public and private spheres, but also to reflect critically upon the norms and ideologies of heterosexual romance even as the form of romance gives shape to that very inquiry.

Romance is double-edged. It requires, as various feminist critics have noted, that women's anxieties about gender inequality be both aroused and allayed. In Janice Radway's words, "romantic fiction originates in the failure of patriarchal culture to satisfy its female members" (151). Therefore, it must interpolate a critique of heterosexual gender norms into its compensatory formula of fulfillment if it is, ultimately, to do the work of normalizing and affirming heterosexuality itself. On this account Jane's longing for an ideal interlocutor is an index of patriarchal culture's failure to meet her needs, not only for intimate recognition, but, as Anthony Giddens suggests, for "free and equal relations" in the public sphere as well ("Transformation" 184–85). A happy, chatty, satisfying marriage to Rochester apologizes for gender and class inequality by suggesting that even women and poor governesses can find "fulfillment" within the status quo.

Brontë inserts a pause into the inevitable machinery of this compensatory formula, both projecting and questioning this kind of poetic justice. This novel's erotics of talk provokes anxieties about the political and the personal order which are not ultimately allayed by its romantic resolution. In fact, a significant tension is built into what seems, at first blush, a, perhaps *the*, classic happy ending. Jane does provide a model of "voice," as feminist critics have argued. And the novel both describes and provides many discursive pleasures. But important discursive desires are nonetheless unmet. Jane's private search for discursive intimacy and, through it, the novel's investment in an erotics of talk that casts dialogue as mutuality rather than contestation or power politics, needs to be mapped against the public quest for a rebellious voice most feminist readers of the novel have celebrated.

In 1967, Kathleen Tillotson argued that *Jane Eyre* "has the least relation to its time" of comparable Victorian novels. It is not, she argued, "a novel of contemporary life ... such social commentary as it may offer is oblique, limited, incidental. It is both in purpose and effect primarily a novel of the inner life, not of man in his social relations; it maps a private world" (8). But Jane's erotics of talk does map profoundly social desires as well as private ones. The desire for discursive intimacy which I will be tracing through the trope of an erotics of talk is a map of a public sphere which, like Atlantis, Jane imagines buried beneath the unequal gender, class, and sexual relations of Victorian England.

This vision of intimacy sometimes works against the grain of the novel's more

obviously subversive politics of voice as a covert critique of what's missing from social relations. Jane's seemingly private desire, every bit as much as her rebellious public ones, "speaks the language of revolution," to borrow Giddens's phrase for how ideas of intimacy encode our responses to transformations in the public sphere.³ Unlike the contestatory voice of rebellion Jane successfully wields, Brontë's erotics of talk refuses to compensate for the failures of the public sphere. It reaches towards a vision of social relations marked as unrealizable under the forms of social organization she documents and even, at times, seems to celebrate. A difficult question, to which I will return at the end of this essay, has to do with how we might view and understand Jane's evolution into a writer who, like Brontë, must address her narration to that very heterogeneous—and demonstrably failed—public.

The imperatives of a politics of voice and an erotics of talk are frequently at odds. When Jane says "speak I must" and then vows to tell her own story at whatever cost, she expresses the novel's politics of voice and speaks to the importance of self-articulation and self-determination. When, however, she reports on the quality of her marital bliss, it is an erotics of talk she describes: "we talk, I believe, all day long; to talk to each other is but a more animated and an audible thinking. All my confidence is bestowed on him, all his confidence is devoted to me; we are precisely suited in character—perfect concord is the result" (476).

Conversation is the "paradise of union" to which Jane aspires (284). A romance with conversation is at the heart of *Jane Eyre*. "I could never rest in communication with strong, discreet, and refined minds, whether male or female, till I had passed the outworks of conventional reserve, and crossed the threshold of confidence, and won a place by their heart's very hearthstone," Jane confides (400).

Although Jane's disempowered, delegitimated narrative position—"all said I was wicked" (44); "I was silent. Mrs. Reed answered for me" (64)—might reasonably lead her to distrust discourse, she remains hopeful. Nothing seems to shake her longing to talk, her desire for narrative and story, her belief in the possibilities of exchange. Indeed, while the novel's opening immerses Jane in negations—she is denied activity ("there was no possibility of taking a walk that day"), banished ("dispensed from joining the group"), and muzzled ("be seated somewhere; and until you can speak pleasantly, remain silent" [39])—and thus establishes her exclusion from the symbolic order, it also establishes her love of narration, figured in her turning to a book to compensate and console her for being shut out of the family conversation. Thomas Bewick's *History of British Birds* might seem like dull reading for a young girl, but interspersed among its descriptions of birds and their environs there are engravings of storm-tossed seas, shipwrecks, rocky promontories, drunken men urinating and vomiting, drownings, lynchings, abandoned graveyards, devils of all sorts, and a variety of monstrous predators: just the sort of thing to excite an under-stimulated imagination. "Each picture told a story," Jane relates; "with Bewick on my knee I was then happy: happy at least in my way" (40–41).

³ On intimacy as a social form which articulates political desires—desires for a polity that may not exist—see also Brenkman, Luhmann, and Sennett.

Jane measures human relationships by a yardstick of narrative exchange. Bessie is loved for her "remarkable knack of narrative" (61) and because sometimes she "told me some of her most enchanting stories" (72). Jane likes Mary Ann Wilson because she "had a turn for narrative" (109). Her cousins, Diana and Mary Rivers, "could always talk; and their discourse, witty, pithy, original, had such charms for me, that I preferred listening to, and sharing in it, to doing anything else" (420). As a governess, Jane feels isolated and lonely at Thornfield because she cannot find companions who are "of a descriptive or narrative turn" (142). Mrs. Fairfax, unfortunately, can neither tell stories nor converse: "there are people who seem to have no notion of sketching a character, of observing and describing salient points, either in persons or things: the good lady evidently belonged to this class; my queries puzzled, but did not draw her out" (136).

Some of the more gothic moments of the novel become most intelligible when viewed through this investment in discursive exchange. Jane is saved from sacrificing herself to St. John's missionary ideals, for example, by a famous moment of transcendent dialogue with Rochester. "Jane! Jane! Jane!" she hears and answers "'I am coming.... Wait for me!... Where are you?'" (444-45; see Yeazell). This is not merely an authorial sleight of hand. It also gives dramatic shape to a tropological conceit that has informed the ethos of the entire novel by providing an "ethical framework for a democratic personal order." "Revelation to the other," Giddens observes, "is a binding aspiration of democratically ordered interaction," because it establishes the "cluster of prerogatives and responsibilities that define agendas of practical activity," "the rights and obligations" which "define what intimacy actually is" (Giddens, *Transformation* 188).

The story Jane tells is not simply the story of her movement from victim to agent, orphan girl to familial heiress, governess to wife; it is also the story of her own longing to talk, to find someone to credit her version of her life, to sympathize with her trials and listen as a friend. It is, ultimately, the story of the growth of a writer, someone who can extend the gesture—or invitation, if you will—of her own, assured voice to an unknown and unpredictable other (the reader). Jane's desire for discursive intimacy is shaped by protest against her place in the social order and by a concomitant vision of social change. When describing why it would grieve her to leave Thornfield, she recounts how conversation with Rochester has compensated for dehumanization and brutalization:

I grieve to leave Thornfield: I love Thornfield: I love it, because I have lived in it a full and delightful life—momentarily at least. I have not been trampled on. I have not been petrified. I have not been buried with inferior minds, and excluded from every glimpse of communion with what is bright and energetic and high. I have talked, face to face, with what I reverence, with what I delight in—with an original, a vigorous, an expanded mind. (281, emphasis added)

The grammar of this passage is remarkable. Reiterated no less than ten times, the repetition of the pronoun "I" dramatizes, as Brenda Silver puts it, that "social discourse [is] necessary for an ontological affirmation of self" (102).

In a direct parallel to her childhood resolution "speak I must," Jane makes a

most spectacular proclamation of self in the following statement to Rochester: "I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh: it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal—as we are!" (281). If the declaration "speak I must" embodies the novel's politics of voice, then this resolution to talk as equals embodies the "ethical framework" of its erotics of talk. Celebratory as both of these orations may be and celebrated as they have been by generations of feminist readers, they are also represented as utopian, exceptional moments. They are etched with impossibility. When Jane speaks back as a child, the mature Jane underscores that action as other-worldly: "it seemed as if my tongue pronounced words without my will consenting to their utterance: something spoke out of me over which I had no control" (60). The imagined world in which she and Rochester can communicate as equals is represented as an *other* world, beyond life itself. It was, Jane relates, "as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal—as we are!" Both outbursts do project the discursive ideals toward which Jane will strive. But such ideals may, nonetheless, be represented by Brontë as substantially unrealizable.

In short, *Jane Eyre* raises doubts about the workings of poetic justice. Under conditions in which a writer feels that the only—or best—form in which she can press for justice is in literature, she may look to represent justice in textual terms. Poetic justice, then, internalizes—rather than necessarily challenging—a gap between the literary and the political. *Jane Eyre* also raises doubts about the possibility of discursive satisfaction for women. The possibility of such satisfaction recedes in part because the demands of speaking out come into conflict with Jane's desire for a conflict-free intersubjective exchange: a clash, in short, mapped as one between the novel's politics of voice and its erotics of talk. But the social conditions Jane faces as a speaker also have much to do with why such desires remain utopian. Jane has vowed to liberate herself by telling her story to "anybody who asks me." The problem is that hardly anyone *does* ask. And when they do ask, the request is not often based in the sort of intimacy Jane desires, but in a judgmental, juridical, even tyrannical position.

II. "If Any One Asks Me"

Three moments of self-narration, all fairly early in the novel, demonstrate how a practice of successful discursive contestation is no guarantee of intersubjective exchange. Talking back gains Jane little, beyond a sense of personal strength, confidence, and "self-esteem" (55). It does not alter the unequal power relations which must be transformed before a democratizing, subject-affirming dialogue might be achieved. Insofar as equality is both prerequisite to and a measure of the discursive intimacy Jane seeks—"equal—as we are"—the failure of that democratization calls into question whatever success may be won by narrative exchange.

Jane's "first and only opportunity of relieving [her] grief by imparting" her tale of "miserable cruelty" comes with Mr. Lloyd, the "good apothecary" who has been called in to see to Jane's health after her confinement in the red room.

As so frequently befalls Jane, Bessie insists upon interposing her own official version of events: "She had a fall" (55). The "shrewd" and "hard-featured yet goodnatured" Mr. Lloyd gives Jane the opportunity to speak for herself: "the fall did not make you ill; what did then?" (55). Indeed, he seems to be asking for her story, as Jane hoped someone would. To Jane's description of what it is like to be an orphan in a mean-spirited family, however, Mr. Lloyd counters that she has "a kind aunt and cousins" (56). To her insistence that "John Reed knocked me down, and my aunt shut me up in the red-room," Jane receives only the rejoinder that Gateshead Hall is "a very beautiful house" and that a girl in her position ought to feel "very thankful to have such a fine place to live" (56). Mr. Lloyd does conclude that "the child ought to have a change of air and scene" but he bases this finding on what he sees as her weakness, not on the abuse she suffers at Gateshead. Her "nerves," he determines, are "not in a good state" (57). Jane's nerve, her resolve to fight back and to protect herself, is the healthiest thing about her.

The second time Jane tells her story, she also fails to realize the intimacy she seeks. If anything, her speech seems to alienate and antagonize her interlocutor. Here, Jane has been debating what she describes as Helen Burns's "doctrine of endurance" (88), countering it with her own ethos of reciprocity, based in the precept that one need only be "good to those who are good to you" (89). When Jane declares that she "must resist those who punish me unjustly" (90), her would-be soulmate challenges her to explain this "heathen" and "savage" view (90). Jane responds by proceeding to "pour out, in my own way, the tale of my sufferings and resentments" (90). But Helen's reaction is hardly sympathetic. She "said nothing" (90). When Jane presses for a response, Helen upbraids her for "nursing animosity" and then stops talking in order to "converse with her own thoughts" instead (91). Telling her story to Helen fails to provide Jane with either an "ontological affirmation of self," as Silver puts it (102), or a democratized mirror of the public sphere. It does not win her a place by the "heart's very hearthstone." Indeed, Helen chides Jane for her desire for intimacy after Jane confesses that "to gain some real affection" she would "willingly submit to have the bone of my arm broken, or to let a bull toss me, or to stand behind a kicking horse, and let it dash its hoof at my chest" (101). "Hush, Jane!" Helen retorts, "you think too much of the love of human beings" (101).

The third time Jane attempts to win both justice and "real affection" with her story, the hazards of this double imperative become even clearer. Once again her self-narration has a good outcome practically but fails to provide the emotional intimacy she seeks. Following Mr. Brocklehurst's decision to banish her from sociality and his admonition to her classmates to "shut her out from your converse" (98), Miss Temple notes "that when a criminal is accused, he is always allowed to speak in his own defence" (102). Jane's defense is again to tell "all the story of my sad childhood" (103). And her efforts are rewarded by Miss Temple's declaration that "to me, Jane, you are clear now" (103). Two things, however, complicate Jane's apparent success here. First, Miss Temple requires outside corroboration before she will clear Jane formally: "if [Mr. Lloyd's] reply agrees with your statement, you shall be publicly cleared from every imputation" (103).

Second, and more importantly, the intimacy which follows from this exchange occurs not between Miss Temple and Jane but chiefly between Miss Temple and Helen Burns. Despite the fact she is rewarded with some of the nourishing contact she has been seeking, Jane spends most of the evening as a listener observing "a conversation [which] followed between [Miss Temple] and Helen, which it was indeed a privilege to be admitted to hear" (104). It is Helen, not Jane, who finds her voice and becomes a speaker in a scene remarkable for the passionate overtones of Miss Temple and Helen's relationship and for Jane's sense of eavesdropping on such passion:

They conversed of things I had never heard of; of nations and times past; of countries far away; of secrets of nature discovered or guessed at.... Helen she held a little longer than me; she let her go more reluctantly. It was Helen her eye followed to the door; it was for her she a second time breathed a sad sigh; for her she wiped a tear from her cheek. (105)

Miss Temple's weeping ostensibly has to do with her awareness of Helen's impending death. But we could hardly ask for a more vivid picture of the erotics of talk than the fervor in which Helen's transformed beauty—"a beauty neither of fine colour nor long eyelash, nor pencilled brow, but of meaning, of movement, of radiance" (105)—is generated by yearning and Miss Temple's sighs and tears by pining and desire. Jane may have "passed the outworks of conventional reserve" and offered us her own version of her life, but it is as a witness to "real affection," not as a participant, that she does so. Perhaps it is unreasonable on Jane's part, as Michel Foucault might suggest, to look for intimacy under juridical conditions. Insofar as her story is adduced as attestation by those with more power and narrative authority than she herself possesses, Jane is positioned disadvantageously.⁴ Jane's challenge is not only to gain legitimacy and authority as a speaker, but also to locate a competent, legitimate, and qualified audience, an audience with whom it would be possible to satisfy the imperatives of "true conversation." "Jane's progress in the novel," as Rosemarie Bodenheimer writes, "has to do with finding a fit audience for whom she can give a proper shape to her own story" (389). Yet Jane, interestingly enough, seems not to view the double imperative of self-defense and intimacy as necessarily at odds. Indeed, Jane welcomes opportunities to defend herself as chances to seduce, perhaps even to create, an ideal and sympathetic listener. Jane craves recognition and hence embraces contestation.

In this context I want to advance an alternative reading of what is probably, among feminist critics at least, the novel's most frequently cited passage:

Anybody may blame me who likes, when I add further that ... I longed for a power of vision which might ... reach the busy world, towns, regions full of life I had heard of but never seen; that then I desired more of practical experience than I

⁴ One could argue, as Giddens does for example, that self-representation and subjectivity—as relational, discursive practices—are always juridical constructs. But this would not answer the question of how such social pressures are differently—and historically—inscribed in a variety of literary forms.

possessed; more of intercourse with my kind.... It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquility: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot.... 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. (140–41)

Beginning with Virginia Woolf, feminists have turned to this speech to analyze Jane's revolt against "stagnation," and her plea for a wider life than "making puddings and knitting stockings ... playing on the piano and embroidering bags" (141). "What are they blaming Charlotte Brontë for?" Woolf asks (*Room* 71). For seeking, in Jane's own words, to "do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex" (141).

Often read as a sudden eruption of a dissatisfaction for which neither the reader nor Jane has been particularly well-prepared, this passage is in fact anything but anomalous. The "restlessness" which "agitated [her] to pain sometimes" is, as the grievances which bracket this speech make clear, her unsatisfied desire for a "fit audience," her need for a place within "the joyous conversational murmur." In the preceding chapter, Jane has been complaining of people who cannot sustain a conversation or tell a story. She returns to this complaint immediately after presenting her "manifesto," noting that "I made some attempts to draw [Grace Poole] into conversation, but she seemed a person of few words: a monosyllabic reply usually cut short every effort of that sort" (142). Sophie, she adds, "was not of a descriptive or narrative turn [either], and generally gave such vapid and confused answers as were calculated rather to check than encourage inquiry" (142).

Jane's bold statement that "anybody may blame me who likes" is not simply an assertion of moral autonomy. It is a plea for an interlocutor and, as such, it parallels her own (and Brontë's) act of writing: gesturing to a future listener who, it is hoped, might be able to hear. By beginning defensively, Jane suggests that she would prefer an argument to continued "isolation." Far from unprecedented, this speech is part and parcel of Jane's ongoing willingness, as described to Helen Burns, to suffer virtually anything to "gain some real affection."

If, however, this "manifesto" is Jane's call, from whom, if anyone, does Jane's response come? Two candidates immediately present themselves. As often occurs when she is "thus alone," Jane's speech is answered by Bertha's "eccentric murmurs," which fascinate her but which she cannot meaningfully decipher. And, heralded by "a rude noise" and "a positive tramp, tramp" (143), Rochester appears, as if to suggest that he, rather than Bertha's wild, childlike muttering, is the answer to Jane's call for "intercourse with my kind." He predicts that Jane will be "natural" with him and remarks that he finds it "impossible" to be conventional with her (170). Their earliest conversations indeed establish a link between discourse and desire as Rochester reflects on the pleasure (his pleasure at least) of good talk: "I ought to be at liberty to attend to my own pleasure. Miss Eyre, draw your chair ... a little farther forward" (161). As this quotation suggests, Rochester and Jane's romance is, in many ways, the chronicle of a seductive discourse. Jane sums up the erotic quality of their teasing, poetic,

mock-combative *repartee* when she confesses, "I knew the pleasure of vexing and soothing him by turns; it was one I chiefly delighted in ... on the extreme brink I liked well to try my skill" (187). Indeed, they are so bound up in seductive discourse, in the seductiveness of discourse, that it is hardly hyperbolic for Rochester to proclaim that everything that matters to him in the world is "concentrated in my Jane's tongue to my ear" (464).

This expression positions Rochester as listener and Jane as narrator. While it is true that the ending of the novel seems to wrest narrative control away from him and hand it to her by ensuring that he "cannot read or write much" anymore (476),⁵ Jane is usually positioned inside the story she tells *not* as narrator (and thus "a heroine of fulfillment") but as Rochester's narratee. Although she *seeks* fulfillment through conversation with Rochester, what she finds is considerably more complicated and constrained. Feminist paradigms for reading this novel have, in the main, presumed that Jane's desires as a speaker are fulfilled with Rochester and that her (and Brontë's) desires as a writer are fulfilled with us. In what follows I am going to question both premises. While Brontë does indeed create a narrator who delights in narrative and, as almost every reader of *Jane Eyre* observes, offers extraordinary narrative delights, that narrator's struggle is not wholly successful.

III. "The Eagerness of a Listener"

Rochester poses as a gypsy to tell his guests their own stories. When Jane appears before him, the last of the women in the house to *do* so, she warns the "old Crone" that she has no "faith." Distinguishing *herself* from gossip-loving women with the caustic comment that "the eagerness of a listener quickens the tongue of a narrator" (228), she suggests her own indifference to having her fortune told.⁶ Rochester, nonetheless, is quick to tell her *that* she is "cold," "alone," "sick," and "silly" (226). This is hardly the first time that Jane has been in the uncomfortable position of listening to others *narrate* her story. Rochester frequently tells Jane her own story and, as Mary Poovey observes, his "most serious transgression has been to usurp Jane's control over what is, after all, primarily her story" (139). Bodenheimer has noted that "much of the drama in the Gateshead section of the novel is created through the tension between Jane's—and our—listening in outraged silence to the versions of her offered by members of the Reed household, and Jane's explosive outbreaks into speech" (389). Instances of such usurpation are legion. This reversal of storyteller and listener that is prepared for and perpetrated by an array of characters including Mrs. Abbot, Bessie, Rosamond Oliver, and the innkeeper near Thornfield is summed up and compounded by St. John Rivers. Impatient "to hear the sequel of [Jane's] tale," her imperious cousin decides that it is better to tell it himself: "on reflection, I find the matter will be

⁵ "At the end of the novel," Bodenheimer writes, "Rochester's blindness leaves Jane in sole command of the narrative field; she becomes the single source of evidence, the voice which tells what her audience cannot see, and the arbiter of what is and is not to be told" (393). See also Peterson on Jane's ability to become a writer as a consequence of Rochester's maiming (107–08).

⁶ One could read this scene as ironic, insofar as gossip, as Spacks has shown, is a form of intersubjective exchange very like what Jane seems to strive for. "Gossip," Spacks writes, "provides a resource for the subordinated (anyone can *talk*; with a trusted listener, anyone can say anything), a crucial means of self-expression, a crucial form of solidarity" (5).

better managed by my assuming the narrator's part, and converting you into a listener" (405). Jane sets out to *find* an ideal listener, but she seems forced to settle, instead, for *being* one, being, as Rochester remarks a number of times, an "eager" listener:

Know that in the course of your future life you will often find yourself elected the involuntary confidante of your acquaintances' secrets: people will instinctively find out, as I have done, that it is not your forte to tell of yourself, but to listen while others talk of themselves. (167)

When he "tramps" into the novel, Rochester seems positioned to provide Jane with the opportunity to be a voluntary narrator rather than an involuntary confidante. Instead, however, he takes his "own pleasure" in discourse with Jane. "I, indeed, talked comparatively little, but I heard him talk with relish (177), Jane says, in a statement that is remarkably ambiguous about whose "relish" it is. Jane maintains that she took a "a keen delight" in hearing his ideas and stories (177). But his talking is described as *his* cure and *his* redemption, while Jane's listening is the agent of *his* pleasure and *his* refreshment: "The more you and I converse," he maintains, "the better; for while I cannot blight you, you may refresh me" (175). Rochester's restorative "right to get pleasure out of life," to "get sweet, fresh pleasure ... as sweet and fresh as the wild honey the bee gathers on the moor" (167), drives the discursive dynamics between himself and Jane. He tells her his life story twice, both times in an effort to redeem and heal himself. First, he tells Jane the story of his affair with Céline Varens. Second, he tells her the story of his marriage to Bertha Mason, attempting to convince Jane that "it would not be wicked to love me" (343). "Can you listen to me?" he begins (332), then launches an exposition on why he is "not married" but "free to love and be loved" (331, 337).

In spite of the many differences between Rochester and Jane (who has not after all married a sensual West Indian woman for her money, found their sensibilities incompatible, declared her insane, and locked her up in an attic), Rochester's life, like Jane's, is hellish because it lacks "kindly conversation" (333). When he asks Jane, "can you listen to me?"—having already established Jane's skill as a consummate listener, "made to be the recipient of secrets" (174)—this is no idle question. It is his hope of "pleasure" and of cure. His desire, in turn, is rooted in her willingness to play the "eager listener." Rochester's narrative, however, fails to convince Jane of his "right to pleasure." She does not forget the basic inequalities of class and gender that divide them. She is convinced—rightly, the novel suggests—that if she were to "become the successor of these poor girls [his three former mistresses], he would one day regard me with the same feeling which now in his mind desecrated their memory" (339). Under conditions of inequality, Rochester has no more "right" to the conversational pleasure he desires than Jane has reason to expect a self-affirming dialogue where equality is not the rule.

While Rochester tells his story without achieving the success he seeks, Jane never does tell her story in its entirety, except to "the Reader." In the final scene

of the novel, which reconciles the lovers after Bertha's death and provides for their symbolic parity through Rochester's injuries and Jane's inheritance, Jane withholds that story. "I listened to Mr. Rochester's narrative, but made no disclosure in return," she states (472). This is startling. Jane is still a listener, even when it seems no longer necessary, even when she has seemingly unlimited access to narrative control, even when she has a more than willing audience for her story. Brontë might easily have written: "Reader, ascertaining that my tale would no longer be insupportable to Mr. Rochester's weakened nerves, I poured out my story to him." But she didn't. "The act of withholding," as Bodenheimer puts it, is "curiously stressed at the end of the novel.... [Brontë] makes a special point of telling us that Jane withholds" (394). Jane, neither then nor later, indulges in the redemptive performance of self-disclosure. Why *doesn't* Jane tell Rochester her story? Why does she only tell it to her unknown "Reader" instead?

The novel offers us a fascinating and complex puzzle. We have a character who tells a story about struggling to use her voice. But the voice in which she tells that tale, as I will argue later, seems to bear no traces of that struggle. On the contrary, it addresses its unknown, heterogeneous public with remarkable grace, self-confidence, and strength. It is a supremely seductive voice. Jane's decision not to tell her story to Rochester has to do with her own complex, perhaps even contradictory, criteria for what constitutes an ideal listener. On the one hand, Jane desires a listener/lover unlike herself. On the other hand, she *seems* able to speak only to a listener/lover with whom she can identify. This pull-and-tug—Jane's embodiment of a dialectic of identification and desire—takes shape in a longing for "kinship" that ultimately applies to both.⁷

IV. "To Pine After Kindred"

Jane's longing for "kinship" is a complex one. It speaks to a number of different—and not necessarily reconcilable—desires with important political corollaries. Recently, a number of feminist critics have drawn attention away from Jane's voice as a paradigm of resistance to focus on Brontë's deployment of national, colonial, imperial, and race narratives in constructing Bertha as Jane's "other." A politics of sameness, they argue, underlies this novel's seemingly egalitarian message. Questions of justice and rights, even implicitly of humanity, are germane only to those already like us and hence the sacrifice of Bertha is an allegory of racial and national ideologies of likeness (see Spivak, Meyer, David). What I want to suggest is that what Poovey calls a "coercive construction of ... likeness" applies not only to the novel's politics of nation and race (108–09). It saturates Brontë's politics of gender, determines the possibilities for an erotics of talk, and, perhaps paradoxically, serves to enable a critique of the ideology of love and romance launched from well inside the boundaries of that very ideology. For Jane to be fulfilled through discourse—becoming as much a narrator as she has been a listener and affirming through that reflexivity what Giddens calls a degree of "ontological security" (*Modernity* 36)—would not only codify romantic ideology and its convention of happy endings, but also complicate the very terms by

⁷ For a more extensive discussion of this dialectic, see my *The Erotics of Talk: Women's Writing and Feminist Paradigms*.

which romance performs its cultural work of shoring up heterosexuality and an oppressive social order.

First, as I have already noted, the novel's erotics of talk decrees Jane's shift from *being* an ideal listener to *having* one, a shift which entails parity between narrator and narratee. But this equality does not mean a mere parity of power, or money, or class privilege. If such redistribution were enough to resolve Jane's dissatisfactions, Rochester's symboliccrippings would be unnecessary; Jane's new-found family connections and inheritance would have sufficed to recalibrate their status. Prerequisite to Jane's romantic fulfillment is sameness, or as Jane puts it, "likeness" as well.

Second, the logic of a heterosexual romantic resolution of contradictions and differences would seem to be at odds with a desire for "likeness" and sameness.⁸ Jane certainly represents it as such in a debate with St. John Rivers over various routes to "domestic happiness" (413). "Marry! I don't want to marry, and never shall marry," Jane asserts. Instead, "the craving ... for fraternal and sisterly love" (413) emerges as central to Jane's discourse of desire: "I do not want a stranger, unsympathizing, alien, different from me; I want my kindred: those with whom I have full fellow-feeling" (413). But marriage *per se* is not represented as inimical to this "intercourse with my kind." Far from representing the converse of such kinship, her love for Rochester appears to Jane as its very embodiment, reinforcing the democratizing impulses of intimacy: "he is not of their kind. I believe he is of mine—I am sure he is—I feel akin to him ... while I breathe and think, I must love him" (204). Because Rochester "felt at times as if he were my relation rather than my master" Jane maintains, "I ceased to pine after kindred" (177).

Similarly, Rochester's language of love is peppered with assertions of kinship and likeness. "Are you anything akin to me, do you think, Jane?" he asks, just before proposing. "My equal is here, and my likeness. Jane, will you marry me?" (282). In fact, Rochester's language of love carries Jane's discourse of equality and kinship one step further. Making explicit what is only implicit in why Jane "must" love him, he recasts love of the other as self-love and sexuality as an erotics of likeness, a love of the same, in Irigaray's term, a "ho(m)mo-sexuality" (*Sex* 171).⁹ "You—you strange, you almost unearthly thing! —I love you as my own flesh," he proclaims (283). In one sense, of course, this language of kinship is neither peculiar nor unique. Such an ethos and eros of "merger" merely articulates romance conventions adapted from religion and common to romance mythology. An idealist tradition of romantic love, as Irving Singer has shown, represents romance as the remedy for a permanent state of human loneliness by positing that "the lovers are one, and in some sense always have been" (5–6).

⁸ For arguments that Brontë's metaphors of kinship is merely a means of desexualizing romance so as to recast it along safer, more familial, or "Victorian" lines, see Adams, Moglen, and Steiner. Radway reads the conventional ending of romance, epitomized by Rochester and Jane's reconciliation, as a disguised family romance and argues the genre is always a displacement of the longing to return to the "original, blissful symbiotic union between mother and child that is the goal of all romances despite their apparent preoccupation with heterosexual love and marriage" (156). While I do not find this mother-daughter plot sufficient or compelling, I would agree with Radway that this formulaic ending needs to be put in terms of "kinship," broadly conceived. See also Langbauer.

⁹ While a reading of heterosexuality as an economy of likeness or kinship is implicit in much of Lacan's discussion of the dialectic of identification and desire, this suggestion remains only implicit in Lacan, who, like Freud, remains wedded to a concept of normative heterosexuality. See Warner 190.

The demand that Rochester be "like" Jane is embodied most forcefully (and violently) in the poetically just final accident that inflicts what virtually all critics writing on the novel have agreed are feminizing wounds.¹⁰ This feminization of Rochester challenges (or compensates for) the differences of power and authority inscribed into gender inequality and, more important, suggests that a viable "ethical framework for a democratic personal order" must include not just gender parity but gender symmetry. For Rochester to be a good mate—and a potential listener—within the logic of this novel, he must be, in effect, a good sister, not "unsympathetic and alien." By rewriting romance codes rather than abandoning the schema of romance altogether, Brontë is able to uphold romance ideology in the face of the manifest inequalities of Victorian gender arrangements, to provide a happy ending for her romantic heroine even as she "writes beyond" the formula of romantic resolution (see DuPlessis). Rochester's transformation into a good sister is a heterocritical use of romance conventions: critical of them, but critical from a vantage point located firmly within heterosexual ideology and even within romantic idealism itself.

Nowhere is Brontë's heterocritical romance ideology more apparent than in the demand that her romantic heroine be a subject and not merely an object of male desire, that her subjectivity be constituted and not merely constrained. The question is whether or not Jane's romance with Rochester plays into those ideals or cuts against them. It is hard to overstate the consensus of critical opinion which takes for granted, following Jane's own descriptions of "pleasure," "perfect concord," and "reward" (476; 470), that Rochester, as Joseph Boone puts it, embodies Jane's "true source of earthly happiness" (Boone 9).

In fact, however, Jane's most compelling description of ideal human interaction and satisfaction of her desires for contact is offered not in terms of Rochester, but, rather remarkably, in terms of her exchanges with Diana and Mary Rivers, exchanges that recall Jane's friendship with Helen Burns and with Miss Temple. Diana and Mary fulfill "the craving I have for fraternal and sisterly love" (413). They provide the "delicious pleasure" of "genial affections," "mutual happiness," "intimacy," the "full satisfaction," of "mutual affection—of the strongest kind" (413; 411; 377). In one of the most telling passages of the novel, Jane describes the "unusual pleasure" (379) she secures from being able to "converse" with Diana and Mary:

There was a reviving pleasure in this intercourse, of a kind now tasted by me for the first time—the pleasure arising from perfect congeniality of tastes, sentiments, and principles.... Thought fitted thought: opinion met opinion: we coincided, in short, perfectly. (376–77, emphasis added)

That she only experiences the redemptive powers of talk with Diana and Mary is an interesting twist in a love story where seductive talk unites the lovers. For

¹⁰ See, for example, Eagleton, Moglen, Rich, Steiner, and Showalter, among others. Bloom takes the anomalous, almost inexplicable position that "we are [not] to apply the Freudian reduction that Rochester has been somehow castrated, even symbolically ... but certainly he has been rendered dependent upon Jane, and he has been tamed into domestic virtue and pious sentiment.... The charmingly wicked and Byronic Rochester ... is given a lot more punishment than he deserves" (3–4). On the symbolism of gendering wounds in another context, see Kahn.

Jane to find this pleasure not with her lover but with her symbolic sisters instead seems to question or at least complicate the (hetero)sexual contract underlying romantic fiction.

When Jane leaves Diana and Mary, then, to answer Rochester's "telepathic" call, can we say that she is she merely capitulating to the "sororophobic" terms of the heterosexual romantic contract?¹¹ Is Brontë's chief impulse, as Eagleton maintains, "to negotiate passionate self-fulfillment on terms which preserve the social and moral conventions intact" (491–96)? Is Brontë's vision, finally, as Showalter has maintained, a "world without female solidarity, where women in fact police each other on behalf of patriarchal tyranny" (107)? In making Helen (by death), Miss Temple (by marriage), and finally Diana and Mary (by convention) impossible objects of Jane's desire, does Brontë accept that feminization, as Irigaray puts it, requires sororal repudiation?

What exhilarating pleasure it is to be partnered with someone like oneself. With a sister, in everyday terms. What need, attraction, passion, one feels for someone, for some woman, like oneself.... But the need, the charm felt for one's like will be repressed, denied, turned into their opposites in what is labeled "normal femininity." (Speculum 103–04)¹²

Does Jane, as Jean Wyatt has maintained, give up "the community at Moor House, which includes everything but romance, to return to Rochester and the fulfillments of passionate love" just as she had earlier elided the possibility of kinship with Bertha (209)? Does Jane, in a word, need to trade identification off against desire?

If we read Jane's return to Rochester as surpassing the "exhilarating pleasure" of kinship and mutual exchange she experienced with Diana and Mary, then, I believe, we would have to conclude that Brontë does harness romantic idealism to the task of enforcing "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich, "Compulsory"). We know that Jane and Rochester talk "all day long," that Rochester "cannot read or write much," and that Jane feels "a pleasure in my services, most full, most exquisite" (476). This would seem to suggest that if talking to Diana and Mary is a pleasure Jane experienced "for the first time," it is one which ultimately pertains to life with Rochester. The continuity between sororial affection and the kind Jane finds in Rochester might present us with an unresolved contradiction were it not for the fact that Brontë problematizes Rochester's gender identity. If "romance," as Cora Kaplan argues, "tends to represent sexual difference as natural and fixed" (148), Brontë undermines this fixity by trans-gendering Rochester: both in the final scene of the novel and in his pose as a gypsy fortune teller (148). What does it mean that the lovers only establish an "ethical framework for a democratic social order" through their talk once Rochester is wounded and symbolically transformed? The central ambiguity by which Rochester becomes

¹¹ See Michie, *Sororophobia*.

¹² Michie notes that Irigaray's description of same-sex desire rests on identification and sameness, on desire between women as a form of autocriticism. "Marks of difference disappear," Michie writes, "as 'same' and 'like' get absorbed into the text and into the undifferentiating and capacious trope of sisterhood" (177). One could certainly argue, however, that the rhetorical strategies of Irigaray's writing self-consciously and self-reflexively draw attention to this very problem.

Jane's ideal listener/lover both by virtue of his difference—sexual and class—and by virtue of the likeness to Jane he increasingly attains is crucial to the novel's working out of a romantic solution that is also a critique of romance.

To make matters even more complicated, Jane still holds back, even after Rochester's symbolic transformations. Jane refuses to position Rochester as her ideal interlocutor: "I listened to Mr. Rochester's narrative, but made no disclosure in return." Although Rochester seems certainly apt if not truly ideal at this point, Jane has apparently yet to achieve that completely "fit" listener she longs for.¹³ How can we explain, in this most paradigmatic of novelistic romances, the apparent failure of Jane's overwhelming desire? And why, having suggested that failure, does the novel seem at such pains to mask it by assuring us that Rochester and Jane do talk all day long and that their marriage is one of "perfect concord"?

To make sense of this logic, we must set aside the requirement that Jane be a (or our) "heroine of fulfillment." Insofar as her refusal to tell Rochester her story tempers the bliss of their reconciliation, Brontë is able to suggest that patriarchal, Victorian, British culture *cannot* provide complete fulfillment or satisfaction for a woman such as Jane. Although Jane's ostensible reason for withholding part of her narrative is a wish to spare Rochester "unnecessary pain" from things "too awful and inexplicable to be communicated or discussed" (465; 472), ending the novel with Jane's story still untold (to Rochester) and, importantly, still unsolicited by him, subtly resists the compensatory machinery of romantic idealism.

The tension between a realized politics of voice and a utopian erotics of talk is grounded in two competing—even contradictory—paradigms of identity and desire. Insofar as they prove irreconcilable, the hope of meeting the double imperatives of voice to which Jane is impelled must, necessarily, be qualified.

On the one hand, Jane is able to demonstrate the efficacy of speaking up and talking back—"speak I must"—because she never loses faith in the transformational potential of human beings, in the ability of people to be changed by one another's point of view, in the usefulness of trying to show the "wicked people" why they should not "have it all their own way." Rochester's partial transformation from being a domineering, overpowering, possessive, and preemptory "master," to a "dependent," "powerless," "repentant," and tearful "Edward" is testimony to this potential for personal change. Underwriting such transformation is a hypothesis that identity is mutable, constructed, and, potentially at least, fluid and transformable.

At the same time, however, Jane's overwhelming need for "kindred," her inability to satisfy her craving for affection and talk with anyone other than a (symbolic) sister, suggests an essential—rather than a transformational or constructionist—model of identity.¹⁴ If a politics of voice—"the trope par excellence of power," the challenge to "woman's place" and her "fate within the symbolic order"—can be exercised, given a certain personal boldness, regardless of one's

¹³ For very different readings of Jane's remarkable decision not to tell Rochester that she has heard him, see also Craig, and Peters, who argues that in spite of Jane's refusal, there is an evolution "towards communication" and not "towards narrative concealment" (231).

¹⁴ For an argument that questions the opposition between essentialism and constructionism, see Fuss.

relative disadvantages and lack of social power, an erotics of talk seems to require a different set of rules. Rochester, who partly satisfies both imperatives, was always "akin" to Jane. His injuries corporealize what was an essential (if provisional) sameness all along. Brontë, it seems to me, is staging her own ambivalence about the possibilities—and the outcomes—of speaking across difference, an ambivalence which, at some register, must register with us as well.

Feelings of true kinship cannot easily be acquired, as Jane has learned from St. John Rivers's inability to accept her as "his kinswoman." The difference between St. John and Rochester—a difference which makes the thought of sex with St. John repulsive and conversation with him an infinite regress of misunderstanding, "offence," and failure (438), with "no yearning after reconciliation" (436)—is the fact of difference itself. Jane can argue with St. John, but their essential differences of character and view will never, it is implied, allow for harmony or love. Jane can take "a pleasure in [her] service [to Rochester], most full, most exquisite" (476), but can not "love [her] servitude" to St. John Rivers (423) because to wait on Rochester is, also in the strong sense, to serve her own self. He is different, in other words, but not too much so. As much as Jane may desire recognition that can cut across difference, Brontë is unsure, I would suggest, of its potential.

This makes the fact that Jane withholds her story from Rochester all the more ironic. The story—"too awful and inexplicable to be communicated or discussed" (472), the story of their mystical, other-worldly dialogue—is a story about utopian conversational exchange. It is the story of speaking to and hearing one another, in spite of differences not only of age, class, gender, and station, but in spite of geography, betrayal, and deceit as well. It is not just her own story that Jane refuses to disclose to Rochester, but an image of conversational "bliss" that can transcend any boundary—psychological, social, or material, the very image which shapes the narrative desire of the novel. We recognize this narrative desire because Jane does not, as she claims, keep "these things" to herself only to "ponde[r] them in [her] heart" (472). Jane narrates "these things" for the reader, making clear, as she does so, that these are "things" no one else has been deemed fit to hear.

V. "Jane's Tongue to My Ear"

Are we to understand, then, that we—as readers—are the fit audience for whom Jane, and perhaps Brontë by implication, has longed? Are we to understand that we are somehow more "akin" to Jane than anyone else? Precisely this assumption, I propose, has led not only to this novel's place of privilege in the feminist canon—Brontë's politics of voice alone could explain this—but also to the particular romance which feminist criticism has long carried on with this text, what Adrienne Rich has described as its "special force and survival value" for women readers, the "sense that it contains," Rich wrote, reflecting on decades of rereading the novel, "some nourishment I needed then and still need" (*Blood* 89). This assumption has been made, in spite of the fact that Brontë genders "the Reader" as male, positions him as a "judge" by representing Jane's discourse as a story

wrenched from her not by affection or intimacy but in consequence of some moral or personal censure. Something about the quality of Jane's voice provides generations of readers with a pleasure often experienced—akin to Rochester's own—as curative, redemptive, exhilarating, erotic, and essential.

The novel is not only about the political imperatives and erotic pleasures of talk, it also provides an erotically charged, politically-resonant experience of talk which seems to provide many feminist readers with just the pleasures of conversation Jane has sought. Numerous readers describe the pleasure of reading *Jane Eyre* in nostalgic terms which directly evoke what many of us may remember as "girl talk":¹⁵ an erotically charged, intimate conversation that imbricated romance, sexuality, and sisterhood, that oscillated between gossip and self-reflection, that provided so many occasions for affirmation, recognition, and social critique.¹⁶ Harriet Martineau, for example, speaks for many generations of readers when she describes feeling "convinced that it was by some friend of my own, who had portions of my childhood experience in his or her mind" (qtd. in Wyatt 199). Lanser argues that the novel positions its narratee as a "confidant":

*[the addresses to the reader are a way of] recapturing in a public fiction the immediacy of epistolarity.... Nowhere in previous literature have I found a female personal voice so insistently, even compulsively, in contact with a public narratee.... The search for contact implied in these addresses certainly corresponds to the behavior of Jane as character, for voice is to her as much the trope of intimacy as of power. (185–86)*¹⁷

Good "girl talk" always worked by stirring up an array of issues. It provided opportunities for identification and self-differentiation. It was both familiar and exquisite. Desire was always on the table. *Jane Eyre*, like all good girl talk, covers a wide range of issues: psychological self-division, ambivalence about passion and sexuality, anger over the suppression of female desire and ambition, the difficulties of self-assertion. And, like all good girl talk, *Jane Eyre* explores a range of potentially appealing—if not necessarily consistent—solutions and sources of satisfaction: reconstituted family, communal identity, changes in class and financial status, martyrdom, sexual liberation, adventure, social service, career (educational or artistic, of course), chastity, marriage, domesticity, and motherhood.

No wonder that feminist criticism has had such an enduring romance with

¹⁵ On "girl talk" as a specific, and gendered, form of cultural expression see also Eckert, and Spacks, *Gossip*.

¹⁶ The narrative voice of *Jane Eyre*, Lanser observes, is so unprecedented and "singular" that it has sometimes "been perceived as almost tyrannical in its power to impose a stance" (186). Indeed, Bloom, altogether missing the narrative's search for intimacy and contact, reports feeling "battered" by Jane's voice: "Reader! Jane keeps crying out, and then she exuberantly *cudgels* that reader into the way things are, as far as she is concerned. Is that *battered* reader a man or a woman?" Bloom inquires (4, emphasis added). Peters argues that this "genuine, mutually-controlled interplay of feelings and ideas between novel and reader" (219) does not develop until the last third of the novel, where Jane develops "a voice capable of dialogical confrontations with other narrative voices" (220). See also Adams, Moglen, and Wyatt.

¹⁷ Confession is an "exemplary model of consciousness-raising," according to Felaki, because confession makes particular claims to intimacy. Thus, "the implied reader of the feminist confession is the sympathetic female confidante ... the importance of the reader's role is directly related to the belief that she will understand and share the author's position ... [feminist attempts to] evoke the illusion of face-to-face intimacy" (99–100).

Jane Eyre. No wonder that a woman reader would report that "rereading *Jane Eyre* I am led inevitably to feminist issues" (Adams 183), that "women writers from Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Harriet Martineau to Doris Lessing and Adrienne Rich have named the novel as a primary authorizing source" (Lanser 188), that "students in Women in Literature classes, as well as female colleagues a generation older, respond to *Jane Eyre* passionately, feel it has something important to say about their own lives" (Wyatt 199), or that novelist Jane Lazarre would describe rereading the novel as "part of [her] own healing process" when, after completing three earlier novels, she suffered a crisis of authorial identity that left her unable to write (226).¹⁸ What Spivak refers to as the "cult" status of this novel and Rich as its "special force and survival value" is this ability to draw the reader into a rebellious voice that is passionate, affirming, exhilarating, and erotic. The question I want to take up here, in conclusion, is whether or not the text does, in fact, invest its reader with the erotic energies with which a generation of feminist readers, at least, has invested it.

Brontë's strategy of casting the novel as an autobiography cuts two ways. By making Jane an autobiographer, a writer who speaks to a public, Brontë can figure Jane gaining the chance to talk effectively, to give an account of herself over which she has both formal and substantial control, and to establish an intimate and familiar dialogue with a "sympathetic" listener. One could, however, as easily argue the opposite. In presenting Jane's story as a fictional autobiography that reveals all to the reader but—fully at least—to no one else, Brontë demonstrates the limits of Jane's potential to give such an account and establish such a dialogue, the difficulty, even the futility, of her finding a "fit" listener. Brontë's use of autobiography serves less to suggest the forms of social recognition and fulfillment to which Jane might lay claim than to suggest the forms of social recognition and fulfillment which she is denied. The conceit of fictional autobiography, in this context, suggests that Jane tells her story not, as Showalter and others would have it, because she is a heroine of "fulfillment," but rather because she is still looking for a "fit listener," still longing for an ideal or at least apt interlocutor. Writing, in this sense, is directly homologous to Jane's "Anybody may blame me who likes" speech: a call for a response, a gesture, an invitation, one that cannot know what will follow, that cannot be guaranteed of its outcomes. At times, certainly, the reader does seem to be positioned as that ideal confidante of what Raymond Williams describes as a "secret" discourse: "there are secrets, to put it at its plainest, that you and Charlotte Brontë are meant to share, as if you were on your own; tones which are not so easily accessible if other people are listening" (156). But what does being Jane's confidante mean? Might this position carry connotations other than the trusting, intimate, reciprocal familiarity embodied in "girl talk"?

Michel Foucault's work on the genre of confession is suggestive here. The act of confiding, Foucault writes, is not only therapeutic. It is always, in part, an act of submission to authority, of compliance with the injunction "to tell" which can be demanded of the (relatively) disempowered on the part of the (relatively) em-

¹⁸ "Now I am writing a new novel about a rebel-girl," Lazarre reports, "a born survivor who must choose the proper medium for the expression of her powers. Her name of course is Charlotte" (223).

powered. Confession is "a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship ... one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile" (61–62). Telling one's story *performs* the power of its listener. It is "an obligatory act of speech" that occurs under "imperious compulsion ... wrung from a person by violence or threat ... torture has accompanied it like a shadow" (62, 59).

Foucault interprets confession as a "technology of the self" which (mis)represents self-disclosure as freedom—the freedom to tell one's own story, for example—when it is in fact part of a regime of discipline and subjectification—the compulsion to submit one's story and hence one's "self" to the authorities for examination and interpretation. He suggests that it is the recipient of a confession and not its author whom storytelling empowers: "the agency of domination [within the relations of confession] does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he [sic] who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing; not in the one who knows and answers, but in the one who questions and is not supposed to know" (62). The ideal of a self-affirming dialogue (of an affirmed "self" at all!), on this account, could never be other than utopian. Such an erotics would operate, in fact, as the inducement or seduction that goads, tricks us even, into giving up our stories and empowering their listeners.

This explanation of confession as a form of coercion may be logically compelling, but it cannot, I think, account for the *need* for a listener or the "unusual pleasure" Jane describes experiencing with Diana and Mary Rivers or the joy of confessional "girl talk." We need to tease from Foucault a more nuanced sense of the *particular* conditions of social power and regulation that differentiate and demarcate different moments of narrative exchange. Throughout the nineteenth century, Foucault argues, the violence by which confession might be wrung was most routinely practiced against anyone *seen* as illegitimate or in any way unnatural: for "[i]t was time for all these figures ... to step forward and speak, to make the difficult confession of what they were" (62).

Jane, as the novel opens, *has* been charged with just such an "unnaturalness"—with being *unsociable* and unchildlike, unable to speak "pleasantly," neither "attractive" nor "sprightly." She is banished from society until such time as she might *acquire*, pace Mrs. Reed, "something lighter, franker, more natural, as it were" in her manner (39). Telling her story takes up the challenge of this charge, of proving that she is not unnatural, either in her attitudes toward justice and the rights of propertyless, orphaned women, or in her desire for "intimacy" and "real affection," or in her use of language. But Jane addresses such confession not to those who have charged her with unnaturalness, such as Mrs. Reed, or, later, St. John. She confesses to her "reader" instead. The question we must ask, then, is whether Jane's "Dear Reader" compels or coerces her story, as Foucault might suggest?

On either account, Jane reserves a kind of power by remaining a listener in her everyday existence, even by effecting Rochester's cure rather than her own. Withholding her own story is as performative as confessing it would be, a way of

both marking (so as to make visible) and resisting (without seeming to do so or seeming even to have reason to do so) Rochester's power to compel Jane's voice and coerce her behavior: "It would please me now to draw you out—to learn more of you—therefore speak" Rochester commands. "'Speak,' he urged.... Accordingly I sat and said nothing: 'If he expects me to talk for the sake of talking and showing off, he will find he has addressed himself to the wrong person,' I thought" (164, emphasis added). Jane's refusal to tell her story to Rochester is a way of resisting his power. By the same token, her telling it to the reader is more than, but not unrelated to, a form of submission to power. Alternatively, is it a sign that Jane and her reader are equal enough, perhaps even "kindred" enough, for power and judgment to no longer be at issue?

The fantasy of an ideal listener, as I have been suggesting, articulates social as well as personal desire. As Michael Holquist puts it:

Poets who feel misunderstood in their lifetimes, martyrs for lost political causes, quite ordinary people caught in lives of quiet desperation—all have been correct to hope that outside of the tyranny of the present there is a possible addressee who will understand them. This version of the significant other, this "super-addressee," is conceived in different ways at different times and by different persons: as God, as the future triumph of my version of the state, as a future reader. (38)

Whose fantasy makes us—the novel's readers—the bearers of such poetic justice? Does Brontë in fact project such a heroic image of the reader of Jane's writing or does she, as I think is the case, leave that question much more open-ended, sending the novel out, like Jane's speech from the ramparts, into a world in which intersubjective exchange may prove either nourishing or constraining—or, worse yet, altogether absent?

The text activates that very question by addressing a multiplicity of different readers—male and female, sympathetic and judgmental, competent and relatively inept. Although Jane's only gender-specific reference to the reader marks him as a man,¹⁹ it is significant that readers universally (and for generally good reasons) "think of the fictionalized reader ... as female."²⁰ It is not only in terms of gender that Jane's implied reader may prove somewhat slippery, but also in terms of competence. Sometimes her reader is addressed as knowing and understanding;²¹ the reader who "knows" that Jane cannot help loving Rochester and cannot possibly love St. John Rivers (315). But there is also the reader who thinks Jane might forget Rochester or be "so worthless as to have grown tired of [Helen's] pure society." When Jane begins her feminist manifesto with the words

¹⁹ To form an accurate impression of Miss Temple, she remarks, "let the reader add to complete the picture, refined features; a complexion, if pale clear; and a stately air and carriage, and he will have, at least as clearly as words can give it, a correct idea of the exterior of Miss Temple" (80, emphasis added).

²⁰ Silver puts Brontë's gender attributions in Foucaultian terms, as an index of where the social power to compel and judge stories is located. Brontë "may deliberately be positing a male audience to emphasize that the power to pass both literary and moral judgements on her story belonged, in the public sphere, predominantly to men," she writes.

²¹ "I had not intended to love him; the reader knows I had wrought hard to extirpate from my soul the germs of love there detected" (204); "Now I never had, as the reader knows, either given any formal promise or entered into any engagement; and this language was all much too hard and much too despotically for the occasion" (439); "the church, as the reader knows, was but just beyond the gates; the footman soon returned" (315).

"Anybody may blame me who likes" she signals her awareness that "the reader shall judge" both her story and her life. These rhetorical gestures are just that, conventions for letting Jane convey information or create impressions, but they also signal a broad awareness that one is *not* always addressing a fit listener, that the dialogic character of all discourse does not mean that each utterance hits its mark. On the contrary, it means that there is always a loophole through which our intentions may fall or slip back in.

This loophole explains the novel's appeal to that strand of feminist criticism which sees its work as the creation of an "intimate conversation" between the woman writer and the feminist critic (Schweickart). It casts the novel as a kind of consciousness-raising session, a lesson in how the successful telling of women's stories can empower both tellers and hearers, how narrative exchange can provide both social identities and social change. Placing the reader, however, in the position of ideal listener, as the text's "super-addressee" in a "dialectics of desire" where the text proves, as Roland Barthes describes it, "that it desires me" (6), postulates the successful realization of the very erotics of talk that the novel's double-edged ending so purposefully calls into question, the differentiation of different potential listeners which is the text's hard-won message. It affirms that we—whoever we are—can crack the text's code, that the novel needs us, depends upon us in fact, if its narrative pleasure is to be realized at all.

This raises some difficult questions. First, given a juxtaposition of various narratees, what is the agency of their transformation from limited to ideal? Is the text itself, as Hans Robert Jauss suggests, "an interlocutor capable of understanding"; is the text sufficient to work such a transformation? Is talking to Rochester "all day long" part of this project? Or is it the evidence that it has been successfully completed? Second, does assuming that the text "desires me" re-perform the essentialism against which this novel strains by assuming that because we can identify with Jane we must be the listener/lover she desires?

Recuperative criticism has both challenged and reaffirmed the notion that the text is the historical medium of its own social transformations. Recognizing that the text may not be able to create "an interlocutor capable of understanding" or transform all of its uncomprehending or coercive readers into reciprocal, noncoercive, erotic partners, the recuperative critic offers to act as a collaborator and accomplice. But such intervention can also turn back on itself, coming full circle, as it were, by assuming that what we need to bring those changes about is to make ourself "kin" to the textual subject we rescue, a symbolic sister, in this case, to Jane. Finally, such intervention may be freighted with its own romance ideology, with assumptions that the text's resolution, its romance with us, must provide compensations for whatever social failures and inadequacies it has exposed. For *Jane Eyre* to be a paradigm of "fulfillment," I have suggested, requires a crucial displacement. Our successful response to Jane's story must displace Rochester's failure to receive it and, in doing so, explain why *we* can hear it when he cannot. *We* must provide the sisterhood and sympathy that Rochester failed to produce. What I have tried to suggest is why it is worthwhile to resist this pull, how we might recuperate the text without resubjecting it to romance paradigms, including our own.

Jane is never unsure of what she wants or why she wants it. Her desires—for intimacy, recognition, sisterhood, a change in her gender and class position and in the meanings attached to such categories—resonate with every important theme in the history of feminist struggle. Our romance with this text, in that sense, is hardly unfounded. But if Jane knows just what she wants, the novel—quite rationally in my view—does not know how to give it to her. Even as it creates a paradigm of transcendence and romance, *Jane Eyre* also resists the unproblematic articulation of easy or utopian solutions. It remains unsure about how hierarchical Victorian conventions of gender, class, sexuality and status might be overturned, ambivalent about the limits of both constructionism and essentialism, uneasy about the promises of romance and idealism, torn between identification and desire. These cautions, I believe, are worth taking to heart. If “politics has the task of discovering the subversive work of desire” (Brenkman 196), this means unfulfilled desires, such as those I have tried to uncover in *Jane Eyre*, at least as much—or more—as those desires we might celebrate as both fulfilled and, for us, fulfilling.

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