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The Frenchness of *Jane Eyre*

David Steel*

Michel I first met in 1959 at the rue d'Ulm, one of a small group of exceptionally gifted *normaliens anglicistes* — including Jean Gattégno — to whom I had the privilege of “teaching” English, though their English, Michel’s in particular, was already excellent. Our friendship dated from that time.

It seemed appropriate, then, in his memory, to choose a topic involving both France and England. Rather than about Anna Shackleton, the young Gide’s gently puritanical mentoress and muse, which had been my first thought, two reasons led me to prefer to write on *Jane Eyre*¹. Michel, in later life, had translated Charlotte Brontë’s *The Professor* for the ‘Pléiade’ edition of her work. I spent my youth in a Yorkshire mill village a mile or two from Haworth. While Michel, as a boy, criss-crossed the High Atlas, clinging to the pillion-seat of his Adventist pastor father’s motor-bike on his missions to convert the “infidel”, I, a thousand and more miles away, after release from church choir duty, roamed the high moors and glens that had etched themselves so strongly into the imagination of the Brontë sisters. Michel had tangled with Brontë texts. I was shaped by the Brontë landscape.

Any reader of *Jane Eyre* must be struck by the allusions threaded throughout — some seventy in all, an average of one every seven pages or so — to French people to things French, and by the inserts of French language. Nor is France the only foreign country used as referent. So wide is the world net Brontë casts that at times in the text it is as if England were mapped from the air, from space even — there is banter at one point about a trip to the moon — as part of the greater globe, and it is true one has, from the moorland heights over Haworth, some sense of the sweeping curvature of earth:

A splendid Midsummer shone over England : skies so pure, suns so radiant as were then seen in long succession, seldom favour even singly, our wave-girt land. It was as if a band of Italian days had come from the South,

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¹ No *angliciste*, I have consulted no Brontë criticism for this spontaneous analysis. Any overlap between it and any item in the Brontë critical corpus will be entirely fortuitous.

like a flock of glorious passenger birds, and lighted to rest them on the cliffs of Albion (chap. 23).

With the exception of one early composite mention of Norway, Lapland, Iceland, Greenland and Siberia, evoked by the reading of Bewick's *History of British Birds*, for much of the novel references to abroad are limited to France. Half-way through however, the scope widens to gradually encompass Jamaica, Madeira, Italy, Germany, Russia, Egypt, Madagascar, the Cape, India, the Himalaya, the Guinea Coast, "eastern suns" and "Asian deserts". The northernness of the novel, its utter Englishness, is partly engendered by its being thus embedded in a complex surround of overseas locations, some close, some distant, which both enhance its topographical specificity and signal its universality. As well as highlighting Englishness by their difference from it, these global indicators also have political and economic effect, flagging up, even if fragmentarily, the socio-cultural framework of expanding empire to which the local love drama is, sometimes directly, sometimes remotely linked.

Of the six locations of the evolving narrative, Gateshead, Lowood, Thornfield, Moor House, Morton and Ferndean, five involve connections with geographical and cultural otherness. At Lowood Jane first meets a French person and from her learns French. The Thornfield action reveals details of Rochester's past life in Jamaica and France. Moor House introduces a minor but telling German element into the novel. At Morton vistas are opened to Africa and the East. Even at Gateshead, as well as evocation of arctic lands in Bewick, there is mention of a "Marseilles counterpane" on the bed of the Red Room where the terrified Jane is imprisoned, a premonitory scene for the claustration of the insane Bertha in the Thornfield attic. Later at Gateshead Jane learns of Eliza Reed's appointment as Mother Superior to a convent in Lille.

In the fictional landscape of *Jane Eyre* geographical and cultural otherness usually looms as a threat. The India to which Rivers wishes to take Jane as his missionary wife endangers her free spirit and hopes of a loving home life with Rochester. Rochester's Jamaican experience blights his English existence and his Spanish Town wife broods manically over his and Jane's lives with the murderous intent "of the foul German spectre – the Vampyre". A potent brew, this Spanish-Jamaican-German mix. Bertha Mason's Jamaican-based brother destroys Rochester's attempt at salvation through bigamous marriage. If Rochester's wounding experience across the western ocean and period of cross-Channel vice is behind him, St John Rivers's voyage of virtue across eastern seas lies ahead of him, though in the book's unsatisfactory final paragraphs we learn of its fatal outcome, one that Jane foresaw awaited her too had she accompanied him: "If I go to India, I go to premature death". Where the Jamaican Bertha is mad, the French Céline Varens was bad, though both succumb to impulses of uncontrolled

libido. The Parisian Céline represents the dissipation which Rochester cultivated as an antidote to the Caribbean nightmare, though Céline is just one of various mistresses, French, Italian, German, with whom he sought consolation as, fleeing his past, he flung himself into the future through St. Petersburg, Paris, Germany, Rome, Naples and Florence.

France as the rich Englishman's sexual playground rings a somewhat clichéd bell for post- nineteenth-century readers. At the 1847 publication date of *Jane Eyre*, just a year before revolutionary turmoil, it may have struck a less banal note. The country had been *terra non grata* throughout the Napoleonic Wars and their aftermath. As hostility receded into history, it was only the accession of the anglophile Louis-Philippe in 1830 and the attendant admiration for British parliamentarianism of numbers of the French liberal political class which led to a near twenty-year period of reasonably good Anglo-French relations. Twenty years before 1847 the Gallic strand in *Jane Eyre* would have hardly been possible in a work of English fiction. If it is the proto-*entente cordiale* of 1830-1845 that allows socio-political justification for Rochester's French experiences and for the wider French input into the text, the same hardly explains the psychology of the worldly aplomb with which the not-yet-twenty-year-old, provincial Jane opines that "a wealthy Englishman's passion for a French dancer, and her treachery to him, were everyday matters enough no doubt".

It is a clever dramatic ploy by Brontë to jointly house under Rochester's roof both Bertha and Adèle, respectively demon of dementia and delightful demoiselle, sulfurous secret and open act of charity (though one with a whiff of scandal), living embodiments both of his Jamaican and French exotic sexual forays. As threat from Jamaica still lurks, so danger in France is not just a thing of the past. After the wedding fiasco Jane is dogged by fears Rochester will rush "in reckless desperation to some former haunt on the continent". The only exception to the foreign as threat is the beneficent Mr. Eyre in Madeira who, a tad *deus in machina*, finally bequeaths Jane a fortune, though it is notable that, whilst living abroad, he is an Englishman.

Notwithstanding the gothic tension with which the author energizes the narrative through its Jamaican current, it is France that most marks *Jane Eyre* with national otherness, not least by the many textual insertions in French. Paradoxically, whilst the country is mapped as the terrain of immorality, it is also understood, as in the previous century, as the motherland of civilization, refinement and fashion. Even Mrs Brocklehurst wears (Brontë is given to alliteration) a "false front of French curls". As with fashion, the language of diplomacy and culture is French still and *Jane Eyre* demonstrates the degree to which, for the English upper classes, it is a mark of social sophistication to speak it.

A number of French nationals figure in the novel directly or by evocation. The first of these is the "strange, foreign-looking, elderly lady, the French teacher" at Lowood school, a native of Lille; the second is Adèle Varens ; the third her nursemaid, Sophie. The fourth, evoked only, but at length, and an important psychological cypher, is the "French opera-dancer" Céline Varens, Adèle's mother and Rochester's former mistress ; the fifth her *vicomte* lover whom the betrayed Rochester wounds in a duel. Later we learn of Mme Joubert, sometime governess to Blanche Ingram (Brontë chooses a slightly affected French first-name for the society rival of her "disconnected, poor and plain" Jane), whom the Ingram offspring mocked mercilessly till "the poor old stick used to cry out 'Oh you villains childs' " — a neat touch this of early *franglais*. Note too the inversion : Mme Joubert governess to an English girl ; Jane governess to a French girl.

Onto the "seven or eight years old" Adèle, Rochester's "French floweret", Brontë conveys the light insouciant charm stereotypically associated with Frenchness, darkened only by her provenance as "illegitimate offspring of a French opera-girl", a phrase later coarsened to "French dancer's bastard". A loose strand of the novel, albeit a strength in its open-endedness, is the possibility that she actually is his daughter, much as there drift the ashes of a skeleton of a notion that Jane herself, in love with a man whom Mrs. Fairfax suggests "might almost be your father", could just conceivably be the orphaned fruit of a brother-sister relationship - Rochester is not the only character in the novel to "stand on a crater-crust". Adèle, whimsically innocent, is foil to sane, sensible Jane, unvigilant chaperone on occasion, when author needs to bring governess and employer into intimate conversation, in the garden for instance. In England for not six months at the novel's outset, she spoke no English on arrival but now mixes it with French, addresses Jane as "Mdlle. Jeannette", dances and recites French poetry. She it is who legitimizes much of the spoken French fed into the text, for though Jane also habitually talks French with Sophie, we are given none of their conversation. It is an additional contradiction that while France may be the home of manners and civilization, Adèle's stereotyped French frivolity is seen as in need of sober English discipline — in the final summary of post-drama events we learn that "a sound English education corrected in a great measure her French defects". Enough said.

The English characters who speak French include, before she leaves for Lille presumably, Eliza Reed; a number of the society guests at Thornfield; Rochester himself and Jane. Described as black-haired and "dark as a Spaniard", the antithetically-named Blanche Ingram, at Thornfield, "talked French apart to her mama; and she talked it well, with fluency and with a good accent" — a remark that not only signals Lady Ingram's equivalent language skills, but implies also the narrator's linguistic competence as judge. We learn that Louisa Eshton, another guest, knows

French since she laughs at the mistakes made by Henry Lynn when he converses in the language with Adèle. The entire scene in fact involves a deal of talk and banter in the foreign language with the education of the provincial English upper-class somewhat affectedly on display. On the other hand despite a command of the language fortified if not acquired by lengthy residence in Paris, snatches of French from Rochester are rarefied, in order, one suspects, not to erode his rough, unhandsome masculinity. Although the grand tour was a cultural pre-requisite for upper-class English males, there hovers the implication in *Jane Eyre* that the acquisition of good French is more a female requirement – but then the novel follows the education of a woman, not of a man.

Henry Lynn's faulty French is not enunciated and it is a feature of the text that, with possibly one exception, the numerous French fragments which appear and which are never translated, are consistently correct in idiom and grammar². Clearly, author-narrator, to assimilate the two for the moment, are extremely well-versed in the language. Brontë aside (and her life is deliberately side-lined in this article) who may have had the French of her manuscript checked in Yorkshire — or London — the first-person narrator, as we learn late in the novel, has, between events told and the point of telling some ten years on, visited France and Germany, the evidence being the sole remark that “since those days I have seen paysannes and Bäuerinnen”. As to narrator Jane's command of French, the novel chronicles her acquisition of it — perfected no doubt by those later unrecorded travels in the country.

Her early appetite to learn it is whetted by Bessie at Gateshead talking of schooled young ladies and “of French books they could translate”. She is first taught it by the Lilloise Mme Pierrot at Lowood, the pupil's role-models being Helen Burns and Miss Temple who “seemed so familiar with French names and French authors”, and she wonders, after that first lesson, about her “ever being able to translate currently a certain little French story which Madame Pierrot had that day shown [her]”. At the end of her Lowood years, six as pupil and two as teacher, she describes herself, in the advert she drafts for a post as governess as “qualified to teach [...] French”. It is to be presumed in addition she had some knowledge of French culture — she compares Mr. Eshton to “*un père noble de théâtre*” — though only one work of literature is mentioned, La Fontaine's *La Ligue des rats*, and recited by Adèle.

In fact the entire issue of language acquisition is curiously prominent in *Jane Eyre* — not so curiously perhaps when one recognizes the powerful stylistic gifts that evince Brontë's love affair with language itself. Nor is the

2 “Est-ce que je ne puis pas prendre une seule de ces fleurs magnifiques, mademoiselle?” (chap. 1) is awkward if, strictly speaking, grammatically correct.

concern limited to second languages. At one point in the novel the problematics of varieties of English and the teaching of English concern her. The Moor House sequence features Brontë's attempts to reproduce orthographically if not the broad Yorkshire, then the northern dialect she has housekeeper Hannah speak, whilst the writer makes the children at the Morton school which Jane opens incomprehensible at first to their teacher — "At present they and I have difficulty in understanding each other's language", so Jane sets to teaching them "the elements of grammar", to read and to write³. At Lowood we see Helen Burns "construe a page of Virgil" from the Latin her father has taught her and Jane herself wields the odd Latin tag — *lusus naturae* for instance. Jane's first steps in French at Lowood are to learn "the first two tenses of the verb *Être*". The homeless, starving Jane first catches sight of Diana and Mary Rivers as, with the intention of later teaching it to others, they get themselves "crabbed but glorious Deutsch" with the sole help of a dictionary — "it's tough work fagging away at a language with no master but a lexicon", says Mary. After the many fragments of French, it is German that is now quoted, untranslated, in the text. Following the model of the Rivers girls Jane too then begins learning German, working by trial and error translation, with literary text, dictionary and grammar. Meanwhile, she reveals, St. John Rivers is also busy language learning: "I fagged away at German, he pondered a mystic lore of his own: that of some Eastern tongue, the acquisition of which he thought necessary to his plans". Rivers works away "deciphering his crabbed oriental scrolls" ("crabbed", now archaic, means "hard to fathom"). His target language is "Hindostanee" — modern-day Urdu — and he later bullies Jane into abandoning German to learn it with him in preparation for his intended role for her as his missionary wife in India. Other language learners apart, by the end of the narrative Jane is an accomplished polyglot, knowing French, German, "a little Hindostanee" and probably some Latin.

The strikingly inter-textual language-learning scene where Brontë has Jane peer through the window and see the Rivers girls tackling German reads as a multi-layered micro-statement of a whole swathe of the novel's meaning. For the second time, one notes, Jane is about to meet a strong male who gives her haven; on the first occasion it was the man disabled, now it is she who is incapacitated. The inside scene viewed is theatricalized by the framed window and the indoor lighting. No male is yet present, only two

³ Concerning Morton, the surname Eyre is homonymous with Aire, the river of which the Haworth Worth is a tributary and which nearby flows past Morton. The Millcote of the novel is described as a "large manufacturing town on the banks of the A..." (102); note also the exchange on Adèle and Jane's first meeting: "And Mademoiselle — what is your name?/Eyre — Jane Eyre./ Aire? Bah! I cannot say it." (118) and the late revelation of St. John: "I was christened St. John Eyre Rivers" (464), all of which teasingly hint that the local river's name had input, probably consciously, into the heroine's.

“graceful” young women and an elderly housekeeper. A book and two volumes of dictionary are on the table.

(Diana) read something, of which not one word was intelligible to me; for it was in an unknown tongue – neither French nor Latin. Whether it was Greek or German I could not tell.

“That is strong,” she said, when she had finished: “I relish it”. [...] At a later day, I knew the language and the book; therefore I will here quote the line: though, when I first heard it, it was only like a stroke on sounding brass to me — conveying no meaning:

‘Da trat hervor Einer, anzusehen wie die Sternen Nacht’. “Good! Good!” she exclaimed, while her dark and deep eye sparkled. “There you have a dim and mighty archangel fitly set before you! The line is worth a hundred pages of fustian. ‘Ich wäge die Gedanken in der Schale meines Zornes und die Werke mit dem Gewichte meines Grimms’ I like it!” [...]

“Is there any country where they talk i’ that way?” , asked the old woman [...] “give ower studying; ye’ve done enough for tonight.”

“I think we have: at least I’m tired. Mary, are you?”

“Mortally ...”. (chap. 28)

Jane is here the female voyeuse of an act of language acquisition by females. Intense pleasure, “relish”, is involved in getting the gift of tongue. Exhaustion follows it. The all-woman drama of which she is the one-woman spectator-narrator is one of female intellectual self-empowerment : two girls grapple to seize meaning and knowledge through acquisition of an information system until now beyond them. It is a feisty act of cultural emancipation, admired and envied by the onlooker and quickly imitated by her, soon copied too in the fictional structure, with the echo-scene of Rosamond Oliver’s arrival at Jane’s school cottage-room and her “electrified” delight to discover there “two French books, a volume of Schiller, a German grammar and dictionary”. The opening Moor House scene carries in cameo the insignia of the novel ; the extension of woman’s voice, her cognitive potential, the self-enhancement of an orphaned discard, “a resolute, wild, free thing”, as Rochester defines the inner Jane, through education to fulfilment, be it or not in happy partnership on agreed terms with a loved and loving man.

Some further points strike about the Moor House scene, epiphanic despite Jane’s distress. Though not identified, the learning text is Schiller’s *Die Räuber* (1781) — quoted from Act V, Sc.1, where robber chief Frantz recounts to old servant Daniel, in fulgently rhetorical mode, a nightmare he has experienced⁴. By an eerie phonic coincidence with Moor House (or an intriguing Brontë after-image) the play’s protagonist family bears the name

⁴ Several versions exist of *Die Räuber*. Brontë’s quotation is adrift from the Magill/Willoughby, Oxford, 1972, Blackwell edition, p.78.

of Moor and much of the action is set in Moor Castle. *Die Räuber* moreover is a convulsive admix of post *Sturm-und-Drang* sexuality and violence, an astonishingly bold — or naïve — choice, by author and characters, as learning support for two young, unmarried middle-class ladies of the, let us say, 1830s, though German Romanticism would have a natural appeal to Brontës' imagination. This late, brief clip of German in the novel, after its permeation, up to now, exclusively by French, neatly encapsulates the swerve in intellectual fashion in mid-nineteenth-century England away from French *civilisation* towards German *Kultur*, a trend largely instigated by the young Carlyle who translated Goethe and one of whose first works was a life of Schiller (1823-24). Even so, splinters of German in the narrative would have represented a greater semantic challenge than the many snatches of French for 1840s English readers, as they would, if not more so, today even.

Why no translations? The social realism of imprinted textual difference? A Brontë compliment to her reader's culture? A challenge to it? Authorial one-up-womanship? A wish to avoid clumsy explanatory notes? What is certain is that a whole timbre of the novel is deadened in published French translation, with much of its French otherness lost, wizened at best to italics or to a limp, bottom-of-the-page "*en français dans le texte*". How did Noémie Lesbazeilles, Emile Souvestre's eldest daughter and Brontë's first authorized French translator, confront the problem? And did the 21-year-old Anna Shackleton, like Jane a governess, but to the mother of André Gide, read *Jane Eyre. An Autobiography* on first publication in 1847 or prefer, aged 27, to read *Jeanne Eyre. Mémoires d'une institutrice* of 1853? Like Jane, Anna knew English, French and German and painted well. Like Jane, she would have loved to be a translator. Indeed she did translate, though never published. As Gide remembered in *Si le grain ne meurt*, when a boy, of her translations, one in particular delighted him, Goethe's *Reineke Fuchs*.