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JANE EYRE'S ROOKS AND CROWS

Francis O'Gorman

Abstract

This short paper looks again at an intriguing pattern in Charlotte Brontë's imagining of corvids in *Jane Eyre* (1847), suggesting that these creatures are indications of a particular, and very probably unconscious, imaginative habit in the novel. The birds appear in the text at crucial moments as if they are closely associated in Charlotte's mind with important turns in the plot. The end of the paper considers the subtle implications of these creatures of the air for the novel's wider interest in the air itself.

There is a curious pattern, which involves a curious inconsistency, in what might appear at first glance an absolutely minor feature of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography* (1847). But this minor matter—the starting question is whether Charlotte knew the difference between a crow and a rook—has, it seems to me, potentially thought-provoking implications for understanding something of the way in which the novel's plot works through careful anticipations and parallel narratives even in local episodes and, equally, for understanding a little more of the nature of some of Brontë's most subtle imaginative habits.

Charlotte's references to birds have, for sure, attracted attention before. Among the most interesting discussions is Susan Taylor's 'Image and text in *Jane Eyre's* avian vignettes and Bewick's *History of British Birds*' (2001),¹ which compares Bewick's descriptions of birds—including crows and rooks—with Charlotte's prose. A volume of Bewick is, of course, exactly what Jane is quietly reading in the very first chapter of *Jane Eyre* and which is eventually hurled at her by the obnoxious John Reed. Taylor's essay notes, for instance, that Bewick's engraving of a

rook in Volume I (1797) has a large house in the background, as if it were a ghostly precursor of Charlotte's imagining of Thornfield.² Apt connections are, too, drawn between Bewick's descriptions of birds mentioned in the novel and characters. Bewick's account of corvids as displaying 'indiscriminating voracity', for example, is suggestively linked with Rochester's vexed description of Bertha as "at once intemperate and unchaste".³

Most recently on this avian topic has been, among others, Emily Roberson Wallace's essay for these pages on 'Caged Eagles, Songsters and Carrion-Seekers: Birds in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*', published in 2016.⁴ Wallace's article does not concern Bewick but, rather, considers what it claims is the 'symbolic' value of birds in both novels, proposing always a straightforward link between the particular bird referenced and a plot moment, as if the language of birds were plainly translatable. This assumption, incidentally, is also Helena Habibi's in her gender studies reading of the role of Bewick in *Jane Eyre* published in 2019.⁵ The result in both cases, to my mind, is an overly schematic 'de-ciphering', as if one thing—a bird, in these instances—can always be read for its encrypted meaning as something else. Charlotte's imagination is rendered as a kind of code to be broken. Yet her noticing of birds in the imaginative world of *Jane Eyre* is, I think, more subtle and strange.

Here, then, are the rooks, to begin with, of *Jane Eyre*. On her first morning at Thornfield, long before she has met Mr Rochester, Jane describes the appearance of the house. Thornfield's 'grey front', Brontë has Jane say,

stood out well from the background of a rookery, whose caving tenants were now on the wing: they flew over the lawn and grounds to alight in a great meadow, from which these were separated by a sunk fence, and where an array of mighty old thorn trees, strong, knotty, and broad as oaks, at once explained the etymology of the mansion's designation.⁶

Only a few lines later we read:

I was yet enjoying the calm prospect and pleasant fresh air, yet listening with delight to the cawing of the rooks, yet surveying the wide, hoary front of the hall, and thinking what a great place it was for one lonely little dame like Mrs Fairfax to inhabit, when that lady appeared at the door.

(*JE*, i.184)

This is, of course, an important early moment in the plot: the beginning of the Thornfield narrative that will culminate in the meeting of Jane and Rochester, with all its consequences. Brontë makes clear—for those not reading the novel for the first time—that Jane is unwittingly naïve: how little does she know that there is more than a lonely little dame living at Thornfield. And we might easily imagine that the rooks swoop around the very apartment—if ‘apartment’ is quite the word—in which Bertha Mason lurks.

Few would remember these rooks, no doubt, were it not for the fact that they shortly return at another early point of significance in the Thornfield plot. Jane goes to post Mrs Fairfax’s letter and it is on this journey that she meets Mr Rochester—unknowingly—for the first time. The meeting itself involves a horse and a dog, rather than any birds. Yet how odd it is that, only a few lines before that meeting is narrated, Brontë has Jane sit on a little stile and look back along the route she has come. ‘From my seat’, we read, ‘I could look down on Thornfield: the grey and battlemented hall was the principal object in the vale below me; its woods and dark rookery rose against the west’ (*JE*, i.211). There are those rooks again—and this time more closely associated with Bertha’s domain and the very battlements from which she, Bertha, will eventually launch herself, like the Saxoness Ulrica in Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* (1819), to her death.

Somehow, the presence of the rooks lodged in Charlotte’s imagination in relation to further moments of plot significance. The morning after accepting Rochester’s offer of marriage (and the blasting of the great horse-chestnut tree), Jane is in a state of rapture. That encourages her to be generous:

A beggar-woman and her little boy—pale, ragged objects both—were coming up the walk, and I ran down and gave them all the money I happened to have in my purse—some three or four shillings: good or bad, they must partake of my jubilee. The rooks cawed, and blither birds sang; but nothing was so merry or so musical as my own rejoicing heart.

(*JE*, ii.218)

The voices of the rooks are heard again in, so to speak, the sound-track of *Jane Eyre*, and again at an important moment. This is Jane's first whole day as a fiancée and the first time we ever read of great happiness in relation to her. Indeed, this is the only time in the novel where Jane uses the term 'merry' to describe simply herself. But the rooks—flying over the cell in which Rochester's mad wife lives—seem here to be associated with a notable plot parallel. Jane in her new happiness—she has only four weeks to go before the wedding—leaves the house to welcome a beggar-woman and her son, 'pale, ragged objects both'. This is an unsettling counterpart to that episode, after she has left Thornfield, when Jane *herself* is a pale beggar-woman, asking for a slice of bread, a clump of cold porridge, and eventually, desperately, for shelter. Outside the door of Moor House/Marsh End, Jane in Volume III is refused entry or help at all from Hannah, the Rivers' maid. No one rushes out to greet *her*. And Jane is only in this dire, and nearly fatal state, because—so to phrase it—she did not know until too late who lived in the room above the battlements at Thornfield. It is an intriguingly compressed but suggestive anticipation; part of the novel's famous doubling in miniature and its re-telling of the same stories in different forms and moods. The rooks are part of this.

So it is remarkably consistent that the next time we hear or see a rook in *Jane Eyre* is just before we find out who indeed lives behind those battlements at Thornfield: a minute or two before the calamitous revelation at the altar that Mr Rochester has a wife still living. As Jane and Rochester reach the churchyard, Charlotte gives these words to Jane:

And now I can recall the picture of the grey old house of God rising calm before me, of a rook wheeling round the steeple, of a ruddy morning sky beyond.

(*JE*, ii.284)

Here are portions of Thornfield, a grey old structure with rooks, transposed onto the sacred space where Rochester is about, to the catastrophic destruction of his and Jane's happiness, to attempt to commit bigamy.

The birds return once more. And they do so yet again at a crucial moment: as Jane herself returns to what proves to be the burned out shell of Thornfield. Before she reaches the mansion, towards the end of Volume III, she relates her thoughts on what she might find. 'At last the woods rose', we read:

the rookery clustered dark; a loud cawing broke the morning stillness. Strange delight inspired me: on I hastened. Another field crossed—a lane threaded—and there were the courtyard walls—the back offices: the house itself, the rookery still hid.

'My first view of it shall be in front,' I determined, 'where its bold battlements will strike the eye nobly at once, and where I can single out my master's very window: perhaps he will be standing at it—he rises early: perhaps he is now walking in the orchard, or on the pavement in front. Could I but see him!—but a moment![]'

(*JE*, iii.251-2)

The memory of the cawing rooks takes the reader back to Jane's first morning at Thornfield and to everything she did not then know. And, of course, what the anticipation of her return involves here is also about not knowing: she does not yet realise that Thornfield has burned down, that Bertha is dead, and that Mr Rochester, while badly injured, is free to marry her. Cawing rooks are

present in Jane's, or rather Charlotte's, sonic imagination and at yet another turning point in the plot.

Those are all the moments when we see or hear rooks. At one level, it would be easy to say that the rooks are recorded in the novel simply when Jane goes outside, particularly outside Thornfield: they are part of the realist texture of the novel because cawing rooks are real. This is true—and yet there is a curiously non-realistic element, which invites a reader to consider whether these creatures signify something more about Charlotte's imagination than her verisimilitude. For what happens, just as Jane approaches what will turn out to be that burned-out shell of Thornfield, is that the birds change species—and then are given thoughts. 'The crows', she writes, not commenting on the transformation,

sailing overhead perhaps watched me while I took this survey [of the grounds of Thornfield, while on the way to the house]. I wonder what they thought. They must have considered I was very careful and timid at first, and that gradually I grew very bold and reckless. A peep, and then a long stare; and then a departure from my niche and a straying out into the meadow; and a sudden stop full in front of the great mansion, and a protracted, hardy gaze towards it. 'What affectation of diffidence was this at first?' they might have demanded; 'what stupid regardlessness now?'

(*JE*, iii.253)

Corvids here become even more closely related in Charlotte's imagining with telling moments in the plot of *Jane Eyre*: moments where something crucial is about to occur—the first meeting with Rochester, the moments before the wedding, and, here, the moment before the discovery of what has happened to him and to Thornfield. And at this point in the novel, at this just-before-a-realisation instant, Charlotte cannot narrate except *via the birds*. They have become more than an auditory motif in Charlotte's associative imagination: they are briefly corvine characters, narrating

at a climactic point in this great novel of revelation (and at the end, in yet another parallel, Revelation).

Only now they are crows. The prevalence of huge rookeries in established trees, including in the grounds of ancestral houses such as Bewick had depicted, means that the birds of Thornfield are most likely to be rooks and that, simply, Brontë has made a mistake. Bewick certainly does not confuse the species and has, of course, separate entries on each of the *Corvidae* in Volume I, on land birds. But something else more interesting might be going on in this patterning in *Jane Eyre*. The rook/crow slippage had, in fact, happened before. And, yet again, as with the rooks, that slippage happened at a moment full of the anticipation of painful events to come. The rooks mutate into crows on Jane's first visit to—of all places—the battlements of Thornfield. Mrs Fairfax, on her welcome tour for her new governess, takes Jane towards the roof. Where are we going, Jane inquires?

'On to the leads; will you come and see the view from thence?' I followed still, up a very narrow staircase to the attics, and thence by a ladder and through a trap-door to the roof of the hall. I was now on a level with the crow colony, and could see into their nests.

(*JE*, i.198)

Jane is only feet away, presumably, not only from the homes of the birds but also from Bertha. But into that dwelling, disastrously, she does not yet—and cannot yet—see.

This slippage might seem a minor mistake, if mistake it is. And yet we must remember that the corvids—who are never described in the novel as ominous or directly as foreboding—are seemingly inextricable in Brontë's imagination from crucial stages of Jane's romance plot and its interruption by what lies on a level with their nests. This attaching is persistent and, because of that fact, it does not seem out of place to conclude with a few speculations about what this imaginative association could suggest about one of the many patterns of creative thought in *Jane*

Eyre. Brontë's novel is, after all, a text with a remarkably rich inclination to make links; to find doubles, as I have said; and to put episodes, characters, and events in relation to others in some sort of parallel or coincidence.

Even from Jane's name we know that what is in the air ('eyre') is of interest in the novel. Repeatedly figured as a fairy or a sprite, not least by Mr Rochester, Jane is imaginatively a creature of the air in parts of the text. And what travels through the air has major significance. There is a terrible low point, already mentioned: Bertha falling through the air to be crushed on the pavement during the fire that is the consequence of her murderous arson attempt. And there is an extraordinary high point, one of the most moving and peculiar moments in nineteenth-century fiction: when Jane hears and replies to Rochester's voice in the remarkable instance of clairvoyance, if that is what it is, at the end of Chapter 35. 'I saw nothing;', we read, 'but I heard a voice somewhere cry—"Jane! Jane! Jane!"' (*JE*, iii.244). Here the reader appears to be asked to accept not a supernatural incident but a genuine moment of acoustic passaging enabled by some form of unknown natural power. Words figuratively travel through the air and back—to Eyre and back.

Charlotte's air-attentive imagination as it is revealed in her masterpiece might also, perhaps, be discernible in the significance that the novel gives—whether Brontë was quite aware of it herself or not—to real creatures of the air. Their sound and appearance strike her always at significant, and vitally anticipatory, moments. The birds seem like a necessary component of her mind's imagining of the principal starting points, crises, and resolutions of Jane's life. And how apt it is, then, that though these creatures are easy to envisage in the mind's eye and ear—everyone knows what cawing rooks sound like, for instance—they remain, in fact, not quite real. That is because we cannot be exactly sure which species of bird is being described: rook or crow? rook and crow? Jane wonders if there are any ravens near Moor House (*JE*, iii.63). Yet the text more generally makes us ask whether, in terms of other corvids, there are rooks or crows in the novel as a whole: they seem fungible, exchangeable, and we can never be entirely confident whether

this is the result of a mistake or of a deeper sense that these creatures are not entirely of the world. The birds are not mere ‘symbols’ but something complicatedly suggestive of the probably unconscious workings of Charlotte’s mind. And, as these birds have, I think, a peculiar role in Brontë’s creative associations in *Jane Eyre*, it does not seem inappropriate to note that they have an imaginative existence more surely than they have a reliable empirical one.

Francis O’Gorman has written widely on nineteenth and early twentieth-century English and Irish literature and is Saintsbury Professor of English Literature at the University of Edinburgh.

NOTES

¹ See Susan B. Taylor, ‘Image and text in *Jane Eyre*’s avian vignettes and Bewick’s *History of British Birds*’, *Victorian Newsletter*, 101 (2002), pp. 5-12.

² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴ Emily Roberson Wallace, ‘Caged Eagles, Songsters and Carrion-Seekers: Birds in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*’, *Brontë Studies*, 41 (2016), pp. 249-60.

⁵ Helena Habibi, “‘The volume was flung, it hit me’”: Coarseness, Bird Imagery and Thomas Bewick’s *A History of British Birds* in *Jane Eyre*’, *Brontë Studies*, 44 (2019), pp. 56-67.

⁶ Currer Bell, *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*, 3 vols (London: Smith, Elder, 1847), i.184. All references to the novel—given as *JE*—are to this (first) edition and are in the main text.