

Chapter 1

Female Beauty and Portraits of Self-Effacement in Charlotte

Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

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Introduction: 'Plain' Jane

The 'revolutionary' impact of Charlotte Brontë's proverbially 'plain' Jane paved the way for heroines no longer reliant on outward appearance.¹ In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), Elizabeth Gaskell famously wrote of her departed friend:

...Charlotte determined to make her heroine plain, small, and unattractive, in defiance of the accepted canon.

The writer [Harriet Martineau] of the beautiful obituary article on 'the death of Currer Bell,' most likely learnt from herself what is there stated, and which I will take the liberty of quoting, about Jane Eyre.

'She once told her sisters that they were wrong – even morally wrong – in making their heroines beautiful as a matter of course. They replied that it was impossible to make a heroine interesting on any other terms. Her answer was, "I will prove to you that you are wrong; I will show you a heroine as plain and as small as myself, who shall be as interesting as any of yours." Hence "Jane Eyre," said she in telling the anecdote: "but she is not myself, any further than that."'2

Jane Eyre merits consideration in this volume for its radical rethinking of the relationship between women and beauty in literature. This chapter will also argue for *Jane Eyre* as a novel rooted in, as well as sceptical of, a mid-Victorian imprint of

beauty. A persistent split between debt to and departure from convention results in conflicted portraits of women that are more elusive, and arguably more innovative, than has hitherto been recognized. Brontë is mistrustful of beauty on moral grounds, as Gaskell records; and, yet, as this chapter seeks to establish, although the beautiful women who populate Brontë's fiction perturb the eponymous heroine, beauty, in different forms, does not cease to instruct or captivate. Paula Rego's series of lithographs, worked on between 2001 and 2002, offer a creative foil for the 'artist's dreamland' of *Jane Eyre* and reinforce the primacy of the pictorial in a novel that reverberates with a visual language predicated on looks and looking.³ Rego's *Jane Eyre Series* reinterprets the heroine's idiosyncratic regard for beauty and renders visually immediate the narrative 'art' of self-effacement in Brontë's novel. As such, Rego's twenty-first century artwork confronts the viewer with the striking yet unsettling interconnections between ekphrasis, identity, and gender that nineteenth-century readers first met when *Jane Eyre* appeared, to much controversy, in October 1847.

The protagonist and narrator of Charlotte Brontë's sensational novel is the antithesis of everything a heroine was expected to be in 1847. The nursemaid Bessie reinforces Jane Eyre's immediate declaration of her 'physical inferiority' when she reflects, 'you were no beauty as a child'. Later, as an adult taken in at Moor House, the inhabitants try to read Jane's character from her facial features; all are agreed that she has an 'unusual physiognomy', acknowledging the interiority that she comes to be recognized for, and yet St John Rivers feels compelled to pass the following judgement: 'She looks sensible, but not at all handsome.' [...] 'Ill or well, she would always be plain. The grace and harmony of beauty are quite wanting in those

features'.⁴ Rivers stops short of declaring Jane to be ugly; rather, this 'plain' Jane is devoid of the necessary attributes to be regarded, by herself or by others, as physically attractive. Paula Rego's 'Jane Eyre' (Figure 1:1, reproduced in published version), part of a suite of nine lithographs collectively known as *The Guardians*, is of the heroine facing away from the viewer. 'Her sumptuous image of Jane Eyre from the back displays Rego's virtuoso skills', applauds Marina Warner, adding that 'the play of light in the cloth, the contrast of shadows moulding her head and body with the recessive darkness towards which she is moving, form a perfectly attuned rendering of the heroine's isolation, desperation and – determination to resist'.⁵ Although Warner is 'attuned' to Rego's accomplishment as an artist inspired by Brontë's novel, the image takes on a new dimension when viewed alongside the passage that accompanies it, which occurs the morning after Jane's arrival at Thornfield Hall:

I rose; I dressed myself with care: obliged to be plain – for I had no article of attire that was not made with extreme simplicity – I was still by nature solicitous to be neat. It was not my habit to be disregarding of appearance, or careless of the impression I made: on the contrary, I ever wished to look as well as I could, and to please as much as my want of beauty would permit. I sometimes regretted that I was not handsomer: I sometimes wished to have rosy cheeks, a straight nose, and small cherry mouth; I desired to be tall, stately and finely developed in figure; I felt it a misfortune that I was so little, so pale, and had features so irregular and so marked. And why had I these aspirations and these regrets? It would be difficult to say: I could not then distinctly say it to myself; yet I had a reason, and a logical, natural reason too. However, when I had brushed my hair very smooth, and put on my black frock – which, Quaker-like as it was, at least had the merit of fitting to a nicety

– and adjusted my clean white tucker, I thought I should do respectably enough to appear before Mrs Fairfax; and that my new pupil would not at least recoil from me with antipathy. Having opened my chamber window, and seen that I left all things straight and neat on the toilet table, I ventured forth.⁶

Both Warner and Aline Ferreira read this view of Jane from the rear as ‘unflinching’ and ‘poised to move defiantly forward’.⁷ Rego’s pseudo-portrait has two vantage points, however; the rear of the subject, that ‘completely dominates the canvas’, and the space that the viewer accesses through or around her. ‘Jane Eyre’ can therefore be read as a visual intertext that speaks to the shifting focus between the surveying subject and the surveyed in Brontë’s novel. In this way, it gestures beyond a dichotomous view of Jane Eyre as either empowered or disempowered, making visible simultaneously the heroine’s assuredness and anxiety, her self-absorption and self-effacement. The image is an artistic complement to a woman whose only acknowledged attribute is plainness – an absence of specific attributes. Jane declares herself to be in ‘want’ of beauty, in terms of her lack of what is evidently valued as an asset, and dodges her own probing question, ‘...why had I these aspirations and these regrets?’ In spite of the physical ‘misfortune’ that precipitates this question, Jane remains attentive to matters of personal appearance. Her fastidious neatness suggests a need to neutralize perceived disadvantages, or even to turn them to advantage: her self-regarding simplicity rationalizes her habit of dress and transforms the vice of vanity into a virtue. Tasteful modesty, for the evangelical reformer Hannah More, denoted a ‘marker of moral potential’ and a willingness to participate in the marriage market.⁸ It indicates, moreover, Jane’s desire to control her own image and the

impression she makes on others, which has implications for the way in which the reader approaches the broader canvas of her first-person narrative.

Jane is compelled by circumstance to be plain. She also informs us that she was ‘by *nature* solicitous to be neat’ (added emphasis). Yet, according to her own narrative, a doctrine of ‘plain fare, simple attire’ is first instilled at Lowood School.⁹ Her uniform may be practical, as well as a protective safeguard against prying eyes, but the enforced uniformity of the girls’ appearance is symptomatic of Mr Brocklehurst’s tyrannical regime. It is almost impossible to distinguish the heroine of the novel from the ‘children walking two and two’,¹⁰ with downcast eyes and identically striped dresses, on the front and back covers of the 1943 Random House edition of *Jane Eyre*.¹¹ The symmetry of Fritz Eichenberg’s engraving produces the effect of inmates mechanically walking circuits and captures the ‘air of oddity’ that Jane associates with the institution. Where the curls of pupils at the school must be shorn, to mortify vanity and instill modesty, Brocklehurst’s daughters display elaborate curls and his wife wears a ‘false front of French curls’. The contrast between what is unaffected and what is counterfeit, between what is forced in female fashion and what is spontaneously artless, converges on a number of moral concerns in *Jane Eyre* that relate to both class and nationality; above all, however, Brontë is exposing the hypocrisy that seeks to justify the subjugation of young women with the assumed ethics of Protestant sobriety. Jane adheres to a doctrine of serviceable utility – rejecting the jewels that Rochester attempts to adorn her with – as she also advocates the rights of the individual over conformity. It is Rochester who intuits a disparity between Jane’s ‘quaint, quiet, grave, and simple’ exterior, a ‘garb and manner [...] restricted by rule’, and an independent mind, regarding her, from the

beginning of their relationship, as ‘full of strange contrasts’. Eichenberg captures this conflict in an engraving entitled, ‘This morning, the village school opened. I had twenty pupils’.¹² The pupils are seated ‘two and two’ in rows, forming a visual parallel with the educative practices of Lowood as depicted in earlier illustrations; and, yet, the appearance of the girls in Jane Eyre’s classroom is subtly dissimilar and some of the pupils smile up at their attentive teacher.

Internal and External Beauty: Rochester and Jane

It is not only the subject of female beauty that elicits a keen and divided response from the heroine of Brontë’s novel. Jane Eyre’s innate fear of male beauty is seemingly dispelled when detecting Rochester’s ‘personal defects – deformities’:

Had he been a handsome, heroic-looking young gentleman, I should not have dared to stand thus questioning him against his will, and offering my services unasked. I had hardly ever seen a handsome youth; never in my life spoken to one. I had a theoretical reverence and homage for beauty, elegance, gallantry, fascination; but had I met those qualities incarnate in masculine shape, I should have known instinctively that they neither had nor could have sympathy with anything in me, and should have shunned them as one would fire, lightning, or anything else that is bright but antipathetic.¹³

As Jane is, for Rochester, a ‘perfectly new character’, he is, for her, ‘like a new picture introduced to the gallery of memory’.¹⁴ This emphasis on newness not only cements their mutual accord; it signals an innovative addition to the portrait gallery of prose fiction. Brontë advertizes the originality of a hero and heroine whose appeal derives not from their handsomeness but from their empathetic equivalency.¹⁵ Jane’s retort to Rochester’s questions about his physiognomy underscores her

unconventional attitude when dismissing his ‘lack of *mere* personal attractiveness’, even if she concedes to being ‘*too plain*’ on this occasion. The opinions volunteered here are unsettling in some respects, however. The heroine’s declaration that ‘beauty is of little consequence’ is the customary response she claims she should have given and qualifies the honesty for which she is otherwise esteemed.¹⁶ Furthermore, the discourse of ‘defects’ and ‘deformities’, through which Rochester’s irregular appearance is depicted, becomes overlaid with a disturbing irony when he is disabled, and rendered vulnerable about his own physical attributes, towards the end of the novel. Rochester’s fate can be seen, in this regard, as the consequence, the collateral damage even, of beauty’s liberation from that which is arbitrarily conventional.

Rochester may be ‘more remarkable for character than beauty’, at first, but an admiration of his inner qualities soon ameliorates his external flaws. The premium placed on character invigorates bold features, which, when seen with a familiar affection, are valued anew as ‘not beautiful, according to rule; but they were more than beautiful to me’. Jane is, in turn, no beauty to the hero’s beast. And, yet, Rochester’s initial assessment of her – ‘you are not pretty any more than I am handsome’ – is subsequently revised. The morning after his marriage proposal, Rochester excitedly exclaims that his bride-to-be is ‘blooming, and smiling, and pretty [...] truly pretty’, confirming both a delight at his reciprocated feelings and Jane’s vivacity. However, this outer reflection of inner happiness and hopes, the ‘internal effects’ that formulate ‘external appearances’ as George Henry Lewes observed in an early review of the novel, is no unproblematic process of self-realization.¹⁷ Rochester’s description of Jane represents something of a wish fulfillment – the ‘little sunny-faced girl with the dimpled cheek and rosy lips; the

satin-smooth hazel hair, and the radiant hazel eyes' comes close to Jane's portrait of the ideal beauty she contrasts herself against in the passage quoted above – and a note of caution is voiced as the hero has 'new-dyed' the heroine's eyes from their 'changeable green'. Rochester attempts to translate his subjective appreciation of Jane, 'a beauty just after the desire of my heart', into an objective reality, 'I will make the world acknowledge you a beauty, too'. When faced with what she regards as the degrading prospect of becoming a pampered mistress, Jane reaffirms her former mantra: 'Don't address me as if I were a beauty; I am your plain, Quakerish governess'. There is much to commend in Rochester's insistence that he will thaw Jane's austere reserve and dispel the 'Lowood constraint';¹⁸ but when he tries to give the heroine a 'makeover', she takes refuge in a dour sexlessness.

In another self-portrait, which occurs shortly after Rochester's proposal, Brontë makes it clear that it is Jane's internal radiance that transforms her external air.

While arranging my hair, I looked at my face in the glass, and felt it was no longer plain: there was hope in its aspect, and life in its colour; and my eyes seemed as if they had beheld the fount of fruition, and borrowed beams from the lustrous ripple. I had often been unwilling to look at my master, because I feared he could not be pleased at my look; but I was sure I might lift my face to his now, and not cool his affection by its expression. I took a plain but clean and light summer dress from my drawer and put it on: it seemed no attire had ever so well become me; because none had I ever worn in so blissful a mood.¹⁹

Jane no longer *feels* plain, yet the choice of clothes from her limited wardrobe remains a plain summer dress. Her emotional expression introduces a discordant note

into the meticulously managed blank canvas of her earlier portrait. Love may be ‘a means of existential definition, an exploration of the potentials of her [Jane Eyre’s] self’, as Angela Carter claims, but it also renders the heroine vulnerable to the ‘rules’ that measure the value of a woman through her looks.²⁰ The consequence of Rochester’s reversion to an exemplar of feminine beauty is his (temporary) loss of sight towards the end of the novel. Although it could be argued that he comes closer to appreciating Jane in his mind’s eye, the blinding of Rochester is a violent punishment for his betrayal of their affinity. When he attempts to metaphorically enslave the heroine with the garb of an inherited wealth that has already proven to be a literal straightjacket for his incarcerated wife, Rochester is deprived of the faculty with which he can interpret or misinterpret the interiority that is inscribed on Jane’s body.

Performed and ‘Perfect’ Beauty: Blanche Ingram and Rosamond Oliver

As Jen Cadwallader states, ‘Jane’s plainness takes on the dimension of social critique’, defying the model of upper-class beauty that is manifest in Rochester’s thwarted attempt to, in Jane’s words, ‘masque your plebeian bride in the attributes of a peeress’.²¹ However, critics have recently argued for Charlotte Brontë’s debt to silver-fork novels and to the popular gift annuals she would have been familiar with; ‘known for their sumptuous engravings of aristocratic beauties’, women in these gift-books were portrayed largely in terms of their dress.²² Beauty, even in the superficial or restricted form reproduced by glamorous gift-books, does not cease to be an iconographic indicator of identity in Brontë’s fiction. In Paula Rego’s triptych, ‘Getting Ready for the Ball’ (Figure 1:2, reproduced in published version), Jane observes an assembly of women as they are preened or preen themselves in readiness

for a dance. Where the ‘Goya-like grotesques [...] who mill about like creatures in a nightmare’ invite a condemnation of female vanity, the less identifiable figures lurking or cowering in background recesses reveal glimpses of a mindscape troubled by darker desires and insecurities.²³ Yet, although the viewer may assume that this disjointed lens is an outward expression of Jane’s inner viewpoint, there are multiple entry points into and axis points that align these visual narratives. There is no fixed viewpoint and no fixed view of the heroine – she might be any number of ‘Jane’ avatars in the painting, including a young woman writing in the bottom left of the image.²⁴ This young woman could be the Jane who, upon her return to Gateshead Hall, occupies herself ‘in sketching fancy vignettes, representing any scene that happened momentarily to shape itself in the ever-shifting kaleidoscope of imagination’.²⁵ In ‘Getting Ready for the Ball’, Rego projects the latent and unfolding curios of Jane’s imagination onto a canvas, affording an insight into what Carter described as *Jane Eyre*’s ‘peculiarly unsettling blend of penetrating psychological realism, of violent and intuitive feminism, of a surprisingly firm sociological grasp, and of the utterly non-realistic apparatus of psycho-sexual fantasy’.²⁶ Rego extrapolates and expands upon the interplay between art as illusion and the psychodynamics of realism in the novel.

It is one of the figures we assume to be Jane, casting a shadow against the wall behind her in the left panel, that forms a visual counterpart to the figure we assume to be Blanche Ingram in the right panel. The physical distance between the heroine and her nemesis is narrowed and the barriers between the stylish gift-book beauty and her apparent opposite are rendered permeable. It is Blanche Ingram’s imperious beauty that comes closest to threatening what Elaine Arvan-Andrews refers to as ‘Jane’s new

visual template for representing female subjectivity'.²⁷ Mrs Fairfax's 'belle of the evening' is the occasion for the portrait of perfect beauty that Jane completes prior to Blanche's appearance in the novel. Although the heroine deems her poverty and plainness to be defects in the light of this template, the exercise of comparing an abstract with a reality does not have the required result; Jane's attempt to capture 'the loveliest face you can imagine' is rendered, in her ivory miniature, into 'a lovely face enough'.²⁸ In practice, there is a discontinuity between a vision of Keats's 'essential beauty' and his declaration that 'What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth'.²⁹ The tautology of 'a lovely face enough' sets the tone for the subsequent critique of a self-conscious practitioner of modish upper-class finery and manners. Blanche's comparison of Rochester to an 'English hero of the road' does not convey the 'chivalrous devotion' to romantic heroes that hoodwinks Isabella and is cruelly mocked by Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*.³⁰ In *Jane Eyre*, Blanche's knowing references to a 'gallant gentleman-highwayman', an 'Italian bandit', and a 'Levantine pirate' denote a ploy to entice and entrap the hero.³¹ As a result, Blanche is impatiently denounced as the very enemy of Keats's axiom, 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty':³²

Miss Ingram was a mark beneath jealousy: she was too inferior to excite the feeling. Pardon the seeming paradox: I mean what I say. She was very showy, but she was not genuine: she had a fine person, many brilliant attainments; but her mind was poor, her heart barren by nature: nothing bloomed spontaneously on that soil; no unforced natural fruit delighted by its freshness. She was not good; she was not original: she used to repeat sounding phrases from books: she never offered, nor had, an opinion of her own. She advocated

a high tone of sentiment; but she did not know the sensations of sympathy and pity; tenderness and truth were not in her.³³

The heroine's rival is shrivelled within and made 'barren' by her skilful yet cynical performance. Where Rochester detects the potential for 'sweet, fresh pleasure' in Jane, a wellspring of renewed prospects, Blanche offers nothing more than stale platitudes. On the one hand, Jane's aversion to Blanche's artifice is understandable given her growing attachment to Rochester. On the other hand, her own lack of sympathy, along with the charge of intellectual poverty, is curious given Blanche's gendered status in the marriage market (she is playing what she understands to be a clever game, her only hand in fact, as is reinforced by the charades she acts out with Rochester). The type of beauty Blanche represents may go some way to account for Jane's pejorative response. Where Rosamond Oliver, with her blond hair and blue eyes, embodies a delicately feminine beauty, Blanche is referred to, with sadistic relish by Rochester, as a 'strapper'. That she is statuesque and raven-haired is more in keeping with fashionable attitudes towards female beauty at the start of the nineteenth century, when the novel is set, than with the mid-nineteenth-century publication date. Blanche is as 'dark as a Spaniard', according to Jane, which connects her to Miss Temple's fashionable attire, with Spanish trim, as well as to the novel's 'fallen' beauty, a parallel the hero is keen to emphasize: 'My father [...] told me Miss Mason was the boast of Spanish Town for her beauty: and this was no lie. I found her a fine woman, in the style of Blanche Ingram; tall, dark, and majestic'.³⁴ While an antithetical connection is established between Jane and Bertha, it is Blanche who most closely resembles Bertha. Both Bertha and Blanche are 'dark' and dehumanized beauties who are soon set aside by Rochester.

At the opposite end of the beauty spectrum, it is Rosamond Oliver, the object of St John Rivers's buried desire, that comes closest to, in the heroine's words, 'realiz[ing] the ideal of beauty'. Jane veers between an admiration of her 'perfect beauty' and an acknowledgement of its limitations.³⁵ It does not take long for Jane to learn everything there is to know about Rosamond's character. Where Jane represents an 'open' text, facilitating multiple trajectories of meaning, Rosamond amounts to a 'closed' text of predetermined meaning.³⁶ In this way, Rosamond would seem to exemplify Roland Barthes's 'figure of beauty' as a self-referential, 'empty object of comparison':

Beauty (unlike ugliness) cannot really be explained: in each part of the body it stands out, repeats itself, but it does not describe itself. Like a god (and as empty), it can only say: *I am what I am*. The discourse, then, can do no more than assert the perfection of each detail and refer "the remainder" to the code underlying all beauty: Art.³⁷

Jane's description of Rosamond is not, however, a superfluous exercise in 'assert[ing] the perfection of each detail'; it is a balanced deliberation over specific traits. The self-proclaimed 'cool observer of her own sex' is careful to qualify her judgements:

Miss Oliver already honoured me with frequent visits to my cottage. I had learnt her whole character; which was without mystery or disguise: she was coquettish, but not heartless; exacting, but not worthlessly selfish. She had been indulged from her birth, but was not absolutely spoilt. She was hasty, but good-humoured; vain (she could not help it, when every glance in the glass showed her such a flush of loveliness), but not affected; liberal-handed; innocent of the pride of wealth; ingenuous; sufficiently intelligent; gay, lively,

and unthinking: she was very charming, in short, even to a cool observer of her own sex like me; but she was not profoundly interesting or thoroughly impressive.³⁸

The cumulative effect of this passage could be said to be circuitous, with the analysis structured by way of repeated conjunctions. Yet the penetrating observations of the heroine reach beyond what Barthes codifies as the inarticulable ‘art’ of beauty, and a distinctive rather than derivative individual emerges. Rosamond may first become visible to us as a portrait of nineteenth-century femininity – a portrait of beauty that, when seen through the eyes of a ‘cool observer’, the reader instinctively doubts – but the heroine gives voice (perhaps in spite of herself) to what is otherwise rendered ‘mute’.³⁹ The female first person narrative breaks new ground in this instance not by discrediting beauty or by distancing itself from what might be perceived as beautiful. Rather, the capacity and capability of the narrator expands to fill the visual void of ideal beauty with salient verbal subtext.

Imperfect, Indeterminate and Interiorized Visions of Beauty

Be they modest or immodest, an English rose or an exotic flower, the conventional beauties in Brontë’s novel are overlooked or discarded by the men they seek to attract. Socially sanctioned beauty is invariably found wanting and proves to be more limiting to the lives and prospects of Blanche Ingram and Rosamond Oliver than Jane’s professed plainness. The heroine’s unconventional ‘imperfections’ become synonymous with a depth of character that can evade objectifications and evaluate beauty. This interpretative skill may be honed through dehumanizing Blanche and rehumanizing Rosamond, but it is first observed in relation to Helen Burns. Helen’s beauty is kindled through kindness and is a product of ‘her own unique mind, [...] of

meaning, of movement, of radiance'. Her elevating eloquence, from whence 'language flowed', communicates a soulful 'lustre', as Jane will do later in the novel.⁴⁰ The relationship between beauty and the body is made meaningful through the responsive intellect of the heroine, taking her cue from Helen, and enables a revisionary ekphrasis to emerge. Scrutinizing what is accepted as beautiful in practice does not preclude the 'theoretical reverence and homage for beauty' that Jane confesses to in her first encounter with Rochester, rather promoting an understanding and interrogation of its effects. Non-material beauty becomes a precision tool for the 'social regenerator' to expose the expedient assumption that 'external show pass[es] for sterling worth'.⁴¹ Cerebral beauty thereby recalibrates the moral compass of the novel.

If we accept beauty as an 'open' instead of a 'closed' text in *Jane Eyre*, and come to value abstract beauty as both transmuting and transcending material beauty (the soul reflected through and governing the body in effect), what kind of 'beauty' can and does the heroine represent – if, indeed, we are to see her as 'beautiful' at all? Perhaps Rego's lithograph, 'Jane Eyre', discussed above, invites us to see the heroine as an everywoman, a faceless female figure upon whom we can project an identity. Then again, perhaps her anonymity invites the viewer to empathize with Jane, to see through her 'spiritual eye'.⁴² Both of these visual experiences are equally possible and are linked to the complex series of interactions between observing self and observed subject in *Jane Eyre*'s retrospective narrative. Yet there remains as much of a barrier to straightforward acts of identification in Rego's artwork as there is in Brontë's fiction. The series of suggested self-portraits in the novel indicates, at first glance, a Lacanian 'Imaginary order', with the passage quoted above from chapter 11 coming

close to an approximation of an actualisable self.⁴³ Jane's features are described as 'marked'; but all we are actually told is that she is little and pale, the sole characteristics that Brontë reportedly insisted on to her sisters. How are we to visualize the heroine's 'extreme simplicity', a face devoid of notable signifiers? Are we not as stumped, in trying to piece together a portrait of Jane from what she reveals of her psychological interior, as she is in trying to read her future husband, a 'strange depth partially disclosed'?⁴⁴ What if the narrator's oblique ekphrastic powers do not serve as a 'carrier of female identity', as Antonia Losano argues, but rather expose female identity in this mid-nineteenth-century novel as an empty or unviable vessel?⁴⁵

The reader is suitably perplexed when presented with Jane's paintings in chapter 13. Once again, the heroine's 'spiritual eye' is accessed through an inner realm that permeates the outer reality of her existence; a sequence of fantastic images leaves an indistinct albeit potent impression of the imagination's unfathomable depths. Rego was drawn to and took inspiration from this and other ekphrastic interludes in the novel. Yet her image of the second watercolour, entitled 'Night', depicts a cloaked woman that alludes to both the heroine's stealthy departure from Thornfield in chapter 27 and forebodings that surface in a dream in chapter 25. This elliptical montage is in keeping with an artistic practice that avoids the generic limitations associated with illustration; Rego was keen to stress that 'My paintings tell stories; they do not illustrate stories'.⁴⁶ The originality and oddness of both Jane Eyre's verbal paintings and of Paula Rego's visual evocations of those verbal paintings is produced by way of an ekphrastic indeterminacy that insists on the 'art' of narrative story-telling as it challenges the concept of representational art. Moreover, the suggestive descriptions of Jane's surreal paintings invest in a Romantic

impulse to articulate what is artistically inarticulable, and consequently reveal, as Rochester states amidst his intrusive questioning, only ‘the shadow of your thoughts’. This sense of a strange simulacrum that gestures towards and forestalls interpretation is emphasized towards the end of the passage with an allusion to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: ‘This pale crescent was “The likeness of a Kingly Crown;” what it diademed was “the shape which shape had none”’.⁴⁷

This Miltonic borrowing, which affirms the significance of form through the negated semblance of it, takes on an added dimension when considering Jane as a child living at Gateshead Hall. She has already mentioned her ‘shadowy [...] half-comprehended notions’, and in the red room scene we are given a portrait of a ‘disturbed mind like a dark deposit in a turbid well’.⁴⁸

My seat, to which Bessie and the bitter Miss Abbot had left me riveted, was a low ottoman near the marble chimney-piece; the bed rose before me; to my right hand there was the high, dark wardrobe, with subdued, broken reflections varying the gloss of its panels; to my left were the muffled windows; a great looking-glass between them repeated the vacant majesty of the bed and room. I was not quite sure whether they had locked the door; and, when I dared move, I got up, and went to see. Alas! yes: no jail was ever more secure. Returning, I had to cross before the looking-glass; my fascinated glance involuntarily explored the depth it revealed. All looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality: and the strange little figure there gazing at me, with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still, had the effect of a real spirit: I thought it like one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp, Bessie’s evening stories

represented as coming out of lone, ferny dells in moors, and appearing before the eyes of belated travellers. I returned to my stool.⁴⁹

We are told that, when before the ‘great looking-glass’, the ‘fascinated glance involuntarily explored the depth it revealed’. Jane is as ‘fascinated’ with her own reflection as Georgiana Reed or, later in the novel, Adèle Varens. The heroine’s engagement with, or mental articulation of, that reflection is neither superficial nor premeditated, however; its consequence is predicated on its spontaneity. The ‘depth’ that our heroine intuits promises psychological detail, a disclosure to match the momentousness of the passage; and, yet, the ‘majesty’ that rebounds in the only reflective surface that isn’t ‘broken’ or ‘muffled’ is ‘vacant’. The grand mirror that frames Jane’s reflection serves to intensify her invisibility within the Reed family and within the class they represent. But the significance of the scene is not limited to adolescent alienation or social isolation. In this ‘visionary hollow’, paralysed by fear, Jane not only perceives the self as otherworldly, a ‘strange little figure’; she invokes a language of fictitious halflings and diminutive apparitions taken from Bessie’s ‘evening stories’.⁵⁰ The imaginative and imprecise ‘art’ of story-telling retards the realization of what can be construed in the text as a coherent self. In other words, the abstractions that the novel aspires to articulate, and which are embedded in the traditional narratives (the ‘old fairy tales and older ballads’) that Brontë both relies on and rewrites, defers a material female identity.

The mirror stage is arrested at a defining moment in the development of the narrative self. Still, it is hard to agree with Cadwallader about the ‘falseness of Jane’s vision’.⁵¹ A central paradox of Brontë’s novel is encapsulated when Jane states that her early experience of estrangement ‘had the *effect of a real spirit*’ (added emphasis).

When read with this in mind, Brontë's statement, in the preface to the second edition of *Jane Eyre*, that 'appearance should not be mistaken for truth', not only relates to a moral barometer for beauty; Brontë implies that appearances, or the outward semblance of reality, amount to an 'effect', a visible yet intangible smokescreen. The episode related above constitutes one in a series of striking visual impressions that actually serve to underscore the shortcomings of an inferred progression towards the heroine's self-actualisation. In spite of the special relationship that *Jane Eyre*'s first-person narrative fosters, the focus, while it may appear to shine a spotlight on the heroine, is on the refracted view from the inside out rather than the outside in. Jane gains an almost masochistic 'pleasure in looking' at Rochester, 'a precious, yet poignant pleasure; pure gold, with a steely point of agony', as she searches out the inner beauties beneath his seemingly ill-favoured exterior.⁵² Later in the novel, Jane's appreciation of the handsome and compassionate Diana Rivers invests in a reciprocal mode of observation that extends beyond Lewes's 'connecting external appearances with internal effects': 'She [Diana] possessed eyes whose gaze I delighted to encounter'.⁵³ An overriding concern of *Jane Eyre*, then, is not whether certain types of beauty are derided, or even whether an alternative *modus operandi* for defining an ethical or intellectual standard of beauty emerges. The novel centres rather on the obstacles posed by the heroine's resistance to her own and others' attempts at interpretation and by her heterogeneity, her aesthetic or, more precisely, her ekphrastic disunity.⁵⁴ *Jane Eyre* could be said to sidestep the dramatic question with which George Eliot opens *Daniel Deronda* (1876) – 'Was she beautiful or not beautiful?' – in reference to the captivating Gwendolen Harleth, with Brontë's heroine embodying, instead, 'the secret of form or expression which gave the dynamic quality to her glance?'⁵⁵

Conclusion: Ekphrastic Effacements

The heroine's self-assigned role of onlooker, or 'cool observer' of her own life, presents a challenge for those working in a visual medium. While this has not prevented *Jane Eyre* from becoming a popular subject for illustrations and adaptations, a common response to the portrayal of Brontë's heroine in the visual arts, especially cinematic versions of the novel, is to censure the female lead for not providing a 'truthful' portrayal.⁵⁶ It is certainly the case that the actress playing the title role often bears little resemblance to Brontë's un-beautiful heroine, but such charged reactions also speak to the personal bond between the reader/viewer and the subject. How, then, does Rego picture an introspective heroine who occupies a subjective imaginative space for the reader/viewer yet is reluctant or unable to picture herself? In what way does Rego 'remain faithful to the novel's insistence on her plainness of feature', as Warner contends?⁵⁷ Although Jane is an almost constant presence in Rego's *Jane Eyre Series*, imprinting the strong sense of self-reliance and survival that is intimated through Brontë's tale, the artist's impression of her changes according to mood and situation. Moreover, Jane Eyre, or a female figure that we take to be Jane Eyre, does not always appear as the same girl or woman, and her eyes are often turned away from the viewer or closed. It is especially difficult to distinguish between Jane and Bertha, with the effect of making visible the psychological pairing that has been established in modern critical approaches to Brontë's novel and in Jean Rhys's imaginary prequel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which was also the subject of a painting by Rego in 2000.⁵⁸

This close connection between Jane and Bertha is perhaps most apparent in Rego's 'Come to Me' (Figure 1:3, reproduced in published version). The Brontëan battle between longing and restraint is made manifest on the body – through clenched fists and strained facial features – and in the contrast between the cold blue of her gown and the fiery red background. The agonized emotional appeal that both electrifies and represses the body, and seems to set alight the backdrop, closes the distance between heroine and anti-heroine. 'Jane and Bertha are represented by the same model', Rego writes; 'one is the extreme and destructive side of the other [...]'. They are complementary but contrasting figures'.⁵⁹ Although Simon Cooke's assessment of the *Jane Eyre Series* is certainly true, that 'Jane's stolid body can be modified, chameleon-like, to express her changing emotions', the varying representations of the heroine have a significance beyond reasserting the fact that 'Rego insists that her beauty is the *least* important thing about her'.⁶⁰ Jane's irregular appearance and invariably averted gaze is shown in stark relief to the distorted corporeal figures of Blanche Ingram and Georgiana Reed. Rego resists giving the viewer a definitive portrait of Jane just as Brontë withholds a definitive portrait of her heroine from the reader. The artist appears to have achieved the impossible in 'Jane Eyre', realising the presence of this 'mere spectre', as the heroine is seen by the inhabitants of Moor House after the wilderness episode.⁶¹ In this lithograph, Rego offers an inverse mirror stage through which is reflected our 'plain' Jane, with her back turned, literally and metaphorically, to the viewer. The artist lays bare what is latent in the text; Brontë's narrative is anything but a self-reflexive mirror that reveals the heroine's adjustment to her own body image, as Annette Federico contends.⁶² The unresolved flux between word and image, surface and depth, internal and external appearance, constructs a critical commentary on an independent female rendered

faceless by the social milieu she inhabits. Conversely, it is through that facelessness, the refusal to submit to a prescribed externality in favour of an unreliable interiority, that *Jane Eyre* exerts a perennial pressure on the issue of gendered narrative identities.

The legacy of *Jane Eyre*'s revisionary attitude towards female beauty extends well beyond the mid-nineteenth century. That beauty continues to pose a problem for women in literature is evident in the opening of Margaret Atwood's most recent collection of short stories, *Stone Mattress* (2014), with Constance's comment: 'beauty is an illusion, and also a warning: there's a dark side to beauty...'.⁶³ A direct line of inheritance can be traced back from this female protagonist's mistrust of beauty to Brontë's. To return, then, to the quotation from *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* with which this essay began: 'Charlotte determined to make her heroine plain, small, and unattractive, in defiance of the accepted canon'. Rather than being 'unattractive', as Gaskell puts it, it is *Jane Eyre*'s unformed appearance that formulates psychological interiority.⁶⁴ Brontë may disengage her heroine from what is readily decipherable or prosaic; yet, as becomes evident through the proposed series of self-portraits in *Jane Eyre*, semiotic signification is stretched beyond what is immediately recognisable. *Jane Eyre* tests the limits of language and literary form not through the revelation of a powerful female subject, but through a first-person narrative that seeks an alternative mode of expression – both intimate and intellectually engaging – for an estranged existence. Paula Rego's *Jane Eyre Series* offers a lens through which to view the perplexing process of visualising what is visually inconceivable in the novel. Her art adds further fuel to the creative afterlife of *Jane Eyre* while remaining immersed in the text's visual opacity. Rego's 'metapictures' foster rather than 'figure out' the

evasive indeterminacies of this fictional female experience through a medium that can only effect, in the novel, ‘a pale portrait of the thing I had conceived’.⁶⁵ The prospect of a nonconformist beauty, even as a by-product with little or no external agency, heightens the suspense of interpretation that is endlessly deferred by Jane Eyre’s subversively shrouded self. An ineffable and edifying beauty is embedded within the visual fabric of Brontë’s negatively capable narrative.

¹ The ‘revolutionary’ influence of Brontë’s protagonist on the ‘post-Jane heroine’ is outlined in E. Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: From Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 122.

² E. Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. E. Jay (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 235.

³ C. Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 140. The lithographic prints that make up Paula Rego’s *Jane Eyre Series* were collected in limited and trade editions.

⁴ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, pp. 1, 100, 156.

⁵ P. Rego, *Jane Eyre*, intro. M. Warner (London: Enitharmon Editions, 2003), pp. 7-17, at pp. 14-15.

⁶ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 109.

⁷ A. Ferreira, ‘Paula Rego’s Visual Adaptations of *Jane Eyre*’, in *A Breath of Fresh Eyre: Intertextual and Intermedial Reworkings of Jane Eyre*, eds M. Rubik and E. Mettinger-Schartmann (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 297-313, at p. 303.

⁸ C. A. Farkas, ‘Beauty is as Beauty Does: Action and Appearance in Brontë and Eliot’, *Dickens Studies Annual*, 29 (2000), pp. 323-49, at p. 324.

⁹ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 35.

¹⁰ W. Blake, ‘Holy Thursday’, l. 2, in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, ed. A. Lincoln, Blake’s Illuminated Books (Princeton: Princeton University Press for The William Blake Trust, 1991), II.

¹¹ C. Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, illustrated by F. Eichenberg (New York: Random, 1943). Rego’s chilling image, ‘Inspection’, in which the diminutive figure of a child is held up before a gargantuan Mr Brocklehurst, echoes Eichenberg’s engraving for the same scene. Scale and shadow, in both illustrations, convey a horrifying abuse of authority. Eichenberg’s engravings can be viewed online, at

Jane Eyre Illustrated, http://janeeyreillustrated.com/Jane_Eyre_eichenberg.htm [accessed 15 October 2014]. The selection from Rego's *Jane Eyre Series* that were issued as Royal Mail stamps in 2005, with pictures of Jane and Rochester as first- and second-class respectively, can be viewed at http://janeeyreillustrated.com/Jane_Eyre_stamps.htm.

¹² Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, pp. 49, 69, 146, 351, 400.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 160, 126. Jane is confronted with this antipathetic form of masculine beauty in the classical features and cold reserve of St John Rivers, confiding in his sister that 'We should never suit'. Diana does not accept the heroine's assessment of her own plainness, referring to her as 'pretty' (p. 462).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 350, 128.

¹⁵ Rochester is original for being ugly yet redeemable whereas Emily Brontë's Heathcliff is original for being handsome and arguably unredeemable. Although the male protagonists of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* are often regarded as synonymous, their relationship to male beauty and morality is radically opposed even if equally exceptional.

¹⁶ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, pp. 146-7, added emphasis.

¹⁷ G. H. Lewes praised the 'remarkable beauty and truth' of *Jane Eyre*'s pictorial realism and the power of 'connecting external appearances with internal effects – of representing the psychological interpretation of material phenomena', in *Fraser's Magazine* (1847). Cited in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. M. Allott, rpt (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 85-6.

¹⁸ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, pp. 133, 194, 147, 288, 444, 289, 154.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

²⁰ A. Carter, 'Charlotte Brontë: *Jane Eyre*', in *Expletives Deleted: Selected Writings* (London: Vintage, 1993), pp. 161-72, at p. 161.

²¹ J. Cadwallader, "'Formed for labour, not for love": Plain Jane and the Limits of Female Beauty', *Brontë Studies*, 34:3 (2009), pp. 234-46, at p. 235; Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 312.

²² E. Arvan-Andrews, 'The "Lure of the Fabulous": Gift-Book Beauties and Charlotte Brontë's Early Heroines', *Women's Writing*, 16:2 (2009), pp. 263-82, at p. 264.

²³ S. Cooke, "'The Ever-Shifting Kaleidoscope of the Imagination": Modern Illustrations to the Brontës', *Brontë Studies*, 31 (2006), pp. 7-22, at p. 14.

²⁴ The image of Jane Eyre (or perhaps Charlotte Brontë) writing, sitting sideways on to the viewer with a dog at her feet, echoes Emily's pen-and-ink diary sketch of July 1845. See C. Alexander and J.

Sellars, *The Art of the Brontës* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 104. The painting also references ‘Las Meninas’ (1656), which includes a self-portrait of the artist, Diego Velázquez.

²⁵ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 259.

²⁶ Carter, ‘Charlotte Brontë: *Jane Eyre*’, p. 162.

²⁷ Arvan-Andrews, ‘Gift-Book Beauties’, p. 263.

²⁸ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, pp. 177, 180.

²⁹ J. Keats, letter to B. Bailey, dated 22 November 1817, in *Letters of John Keats*, ed. R. Gittings, rpt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 37.

³⁰ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 205; E. Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. David Daiches (London: Penguin Classics, 1985), p. 187.

³¹ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 205.

³² Keats, ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, l. 49, in *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, ed. J. Barnard, 3rd edn (London: Penguin, 1988).

³³ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, pp. 206-7.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 151, 244, 192, 341.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 404-5.

³⁶ See U. Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (London: Hutchinson, 1979).

³⁷ R. Barthes, *S-Z*, trans. R. Miller (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974). Quotations taken from Barthes’s *S/Z* in this paragraph and the next refer to pp. 33-4 (original emphasis).

³⁸ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, pp. 410-11.

³⁹ ‘[L]eft on its own, deprived of any anterior code, beauty would be mute’, according to Barthes. *S/Z*, p. 33. Lawrence J. Starzyk examines ‘the verbal exegesis of the mute images stored in Jane’s museum of memory’, in “‘The Gallery of Memory’: The Pictorial in *Jane Eyre*”, *Papers on Language & Literature*, 33:3 (Summer 1997), pp. 288-309, at p. 289.

⁴⁰ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 79.

⁴¹ Preface to the second edition of *Jane Eyre*, p. viii. The ‘social regenerator’ that Brontë refers to is William Thackeray. For Brontë, feminine beauty becomes an ‘alternative site for the exploration of social conflict’ and may even ‘foment reform’, according to Margaret E. Mitchell. See ‘Reforming Beauty in Brontë’s *Shirley*’, in *Gender and Victorian Reform*, ed. A. Rose (Newcastle : Cambridge

Scholars, 2008), pp. 152-60, at pp. 152, 158. Elaine Scarry argues for a positive political reappraisal of beauty in *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁴²Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 138.

⁴³ See J. Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience' (1949), in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. A. Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁴⁴ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 209.

⁴⁵ A. Lasono, 'Ekphrasis and the Art of Courtship in *Jane Eyre*', in *The Woman Painter in Victorian Literature* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008), p. 101.

⁴⁶ Cited in Ferreira, 'Rego's Visual Adaptations of *Jane Eyre*', p. 302.

⁴⁷Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, pp. 140, 139. The latter quotation reworks Milton's description of Death in *Paradise Lost*. See J. Milton, *The Complete Poems*, ed. J. Leonard (London: Penguin Classics, 1998), II. ll. 666-73.

⁴⁸ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, pp. 4, 12. The bondage suffered by the heroine is reflected through the contorted female form of Rego's 'Crumpled'.

⁴⁹ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, pp. 11-12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁵¹ Cadwallader, 'Plain Jane and the Limits of Female Beauty', p. 241.

⁵² Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 194. Jane's description of her specular pleasures as 'pure gold' evokes the objectified resurrections of Sylvia Plath's 'pure gold baby' in 'Lady Lazarus'. Brontë's ambivalent politics of looking is re-embodied by the female self as a theatrical exhibition at once abhorrent, defiling, and liberating. The speaker of Plath's poem presents her face as 'featureless' and transparent, a blank canvas after Brontë's protagonist. See Plath, 'Lady Lazarus', in *Ariel* (London: Faber, 1965), pp. 16-19.

⁵³ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, pp. 384.

⁵⁴ The heroine describes herself, in chapter 2 of the novel, as 'a discord in Gateshead Hall; [...] a heterogeneous thing' (p. 13).

⁵⁵ G. Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. T. Cave (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 7.

⁵⁶ According to Simon Cooke, the focus of illustrations has been on Jane Eyre and Heathcliff. It is their lack of individual features that has appealed most to modern artists. On the creative heritage of the

Brontës, see P. Stoneman, *Brontë Transformations: The Cultural Dissemination of 'Jane Eyre' and 'Wuthering Heights'* (London: Prentice Hall/ Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1996).

⁵⁷ Warner also claims that 'Paula Rego's portrayals of Jane do not prettify her, as have done most of the jacket illustrations and films over the years'. Rego, *Jane Eyre*, p. 13.

⁵⁸ The most influential reading of Bertha as Jane's doppelgänger is S. M. Gilbert and S. Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979).

⁵⁹ Cited in Ferreira, 'Paula Rego's Visual Adaptations of *Jane Eyre*', p. 299.

⁶⁰ Cooke, 'Modern Illustrations to the Brontës', p. 14.

⁶¹ *Jane Eyre*, p. 375. Rochester perceptively happens upon this dilemma when Jane returns from Gateshead Hall after the death of Aunt Reed: 'If I dared, I'd touch you, to see if you are substance or shadow, you elf! – but I'd as soon offer to take hold of a blue *ignis fatuus* light in a marsh' (p. 272).

⁶² A. Federico, "'A cool observer of her own sex like me": Girl-Watching in *Jane Eyre*', *The Victorian Newsletter* (1991), pp. 29-33. Federico also acknowledges that the novel is 'equally concerned with the ways in which a woman's body limits, inhibits, or subverts her ability to create herself fully' (p. 29).

⁶³ M. Atwood, *Stone Mattress: Nine Tales* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 1.

⁶⁴ Gaskell's first impression of Brontë is that she is '*undeveloped*', the only characteristic that is emphasized. Although the term conveys unfortunate connotations of a writer whose talent is somehow arrested or embryonic, the notion of Brontë as undeveloped chimes with the depiction of the female self in her fiction. *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, p. 333.

⁶⁵ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 139.