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PAULA REGO, *JANE EYRE* AND THE RE-ENCHANTMENT OF BLUEBEARD

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Paula Rego's sequence of 25 lithographs from 2001/2 based on Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) draws on their common intertext: Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard" (1697).¹ It is referred to both directly and indirectly in *Jane Eyre*, in that it forms part of the elaboration of Rochester's character and his troubled triangular desire involving both Jane Eyre (his new love) and his imprisoned, though not murdered, former love, Bertha Mason. Bluebeard clearly casts a shadow over many other such triangular and frequently murderous literary configurations (often in women's writing) including, most famously Jean Rhys's later prequel to *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), and Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938).² The overlapping nature of the relationship between these three constitutes the basis of their connection to the "anti-" aspect of the "anti-tales" theme of this collection. In Rego's work, as in Brontë's, this begins with the precise and often disconcerting, though not at all exclusive, focus in her images of girls and women. Thus, Rego's contemplation of Perrault's "Bluebeard" story, like Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, is far less intrigued by the powerful and enigmatic wife murderer, than with the problems of the women and girls who are sucked into the stormy world of his enigma.

My two principal questions in this chapter are: first; in what ways do Paula Rego's 25 *Jane Eyre* lithographs constitute "anti-tales" in terms of their visual and narrative content; that is, how do they re-imagine the questions about female identity formation, female embodiment and desire raised by *Jane Eyre*? Second; in what sense does the "anti"-ness of these images relate instead to narrative or to the idea of the tale itself rather than to their content. The aim is to question whether Rego's art, which is so frequently discussed as "narrative" art because of its common starting point in literary stories or dramatic narratives (for example, *Peter Pan*

¹ Paula Rego, *Jane Eyre* (London: Malborough Graphic, 2003), Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Perrault's *Fairy Tales*, A.E. Johnson (trans), illus. Gustave Doré (New York: Dover Publications, 1969).

² Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca* (London: Virago, 2003).

[J.M. Barrie, 1904], Walt Disney's *Fantasia* [1940], opera, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, nursery rhymes, Jean Genet's *The Maids* [1946]) is in any sense narrative at all. Indeed is it that Rego's *Jane Eyre* work is not only an "anti-tale," but is also in some way more than an "anti-" or subversive narrative; it is subversive *to* narrative itself and thereby presents different ways of relating ideas and images. Finally, this material prompts a further question about whether Rego's work is engaged in "disenchantment" of the primary fairy tale material, or rather a *re*-enchantment of it towards different ends.

Sensuality, Narrative and Texture

The sequence is composed of the following images, gathered under these four section/chapter headings:

Getting Ready for the Ball

1. Getting Ready for the Ball (coloured lithograph on 3 sheets)

The Sensuality of the Stone

2. Inspection (lithograph on stone)
3. Schoolroom (lithograph on stone)
4. Jane and Helen (coloured lithograph on stone)
5. Self Portrait with Grandchildren (hand coloured lithograph on stone)
6. La Lique des rats (lithograph on stone)
7. Pleasing Mr Rochester (lithograph on stone)
8. Dancing for Mr Rochester (lithograph on stone)

The Guardians

9. Jane Eyre (lithograph)
10. Crumpled (lithograph)
11. Up the Tree (lithograph)
12. Loving Bewick (lithograph)
13. Come to Me (coloured lithograph)
14. Mr Rochester (lithograph)
15. In the Comfort of the Bonnet (coloured lithograph)
16. Undressing (coloured lithograph)
17. Biting (coloured lithograph)

Poetry and Story

18. Crying (lithograph)

19. Dressing him up as Bluebeard (coloured lithograph)
20. Bertha (coloured lithograph)
21. The Keeper (coloured lithograph)
22. Girl Reading at Window (coloured lithograph)
23. Refectory (coloured lithograph)
- The Fearfulness of the Night
24. Night (lithograph: dyptich, 1)
25. Scarecrow (lithograph: dyptich, 2)

The picture titles in themselves quickly demonstrate a significant deviation from the novel's plot order; for example, image 12 ("Loving Bewick") is nearly halfway through Rego's sequence, yet it clearly refers to the novel's opening chapter describing Jane's escapist submersion of herself in Thomas Bewick's *History of British Birds*³ in which "Each picture told a story."⁴ Thus, what must be clear to anyone with even the shakiest memory of the narrative of Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is that Rego's revised sequence throws the original story order up in the air to start again. And yet the slightly poetic sub-headings here also suggest linked groups of images: chapters, rather than random ordering. The second sub-heading, "The Sensuality of the Stone", also guides our attention to the physical, textual qualities of the images in terms of their connections as much as their thematic linkages: the allusion here is firstly to the stone on which the lithographs were drawn, and which lends its distinctive grainy texture to each of the seven heavily filled images, like a curtain of rain always present in the background. Yet these light, grainy backgrounds also suggest a dreamlike quality in contrast the clearer, cleaner lines and starker contrasts of most of the other images.

Yet registering the presence of the stone also takes on narrative and symbolic significance since in these images Jane is either ignored ("Dancing for Mr Rochester" has Adele performing for the cold-hearted Rochester) or shut away and maltreated in the freezing cold stone rooms of Lowood school ("Jane and Helen"). Thus the stone registers its presence in various troubling and contrary ways. It is first a register of presence and sensuality: the sensual pleasure of the artist, the traces of whose pleasure are left behind in the image and which lend each of them a personal, tactile and haptic quality. Secondly, however, these traces also inevitably lend both darkness and shadow to the images, the contents of which depict suffering and cold-heartedness. The textured darkness,

³ Thomas Bewick, *History of British Birds* Vol.1 (Newcastle: Sol. Hodgson, 1797).

⁴ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 9.

therefore, is both generative of stasis and life, pleasure and pain, a dynamic of sadistic and masochistic desire that, I shall be suggesting, runs through these images and through her work as a whole, but is also what often takes it beyond the narrative dimension of the image.

Rego has been clear in several interviews that, although she is very interested in narrative and in stories (the custom built and recently opened gallery near Lisbon that is dedicated to her work is called *Casa das Histórias*: “House of Stories”), she does not wish to be regarded as an illustrator of stories. In the case of the *Jane Eyre* images, as I have been suggesting, it is the textural and the visual - and indeed imagined figures - not the textual origins that provide the material and the energy of movement throughout the revised sequence. The *Jane Eyre* images, then, do not return the viewer to Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* with a renewed understanding of the novel’s meaning, simply in a different order; instead they take their sense of order from the physical, figural and textural dimensions of the previous image and not from any sense of a need to build narrative or construct tales.

Realism, Narrative and Inter-text

In what sense, then, do these *Jane Eyre* pictures constitute any kind of tale or anti-tale and in what way can any single image be considered a “narrative” at all? What is the relationship between the original “story” material and the picture story material? Susan Casteras, referring to Gustave Doré’s 1864 illustration of Perrault’s “Little Red Riding Hood” refers to the “covert” and “overt” elements of the story in the image that could be read by “audiences eager to recognize and interpret plot, character, and props.”⁵ These three elements (plot, character and props) must surely be the core elements of any sense of narrative, along with the twin structures of time and space within which they must be placed and understood. Importantly, however, Casteras also points out that “the central thing” that unites all the work in this narrative genre “was an artist’s ability to project a convincing imitation of the world through mimetic realism.” Realism, she argues, is essential if viewers are to be able to “unlock visual ‘clues’” and they are helped in the process of doing so by the frequent appeal to strong emotion worked by the pictures. So the two key features of narrative painting are, first, the deciphering of clues

⁵ Susan P. Casteras, “The Never-ending Dream: Love, Courtship, and Femininity in Mid- to Late Nineteenth Century British and French Art”, *Artist Narrator: Nineteenth Century Narrative Art in England and France* (Oklahoma: Oklahoma City Museum of Art, 2005), 55.

and, second, emotional interaction and arousal, although Casteras sees these both as being founded in mimetic realism, not detachable from it.

Rego broadly works within this definition of narrative conventions in that she frequently employs a sense of character and prop, often (though not always) also mapping relationships of time and place in a single image. For example in “Jane and Helen” the two girls in the foreground are visually and narratively linked to three other scenes from a different space in time depicted in the images behind them. Yet although the images are clearly mimetic, in the sense that they present recognizable human and animal figures and objects, they cannot be argued to operate within the terms of realism for two clear reasons. First, Rego refuses to give the pictorial narrative elements any sense of logic or temporal sequence, which, as we have seen, is also the case in the sequence of lithographs as a whole in that they do not follow the plot of *Jane Eyre*. What these images seem to do, therefore, is suggest the *possibility* of narrative realism by providing some of its elements, but at the same time they remove the very glue of proportion and realism that held together the nineteenth century narrative picture together. In a mode that could perhaps more accurately be called magic realism, Rego warps any realistic sense of dimension into fantastical proportions. In doing so, what I want to show next, is that she brings the many inter-texts of the image into the foreground.

In images that have several elements to them, as in “Jane and Helen” or “Self-Portrait with Grandchildren,” this leads to apparently background images or incidental objects unsettling the foreground. In this image we might ask why Rego herself is suddenly in the narrative and what sort of violence the five figures in the background are up to? How do they relate to the five women in the foreground? Even in the (more common) images that focus on a single or double figure or figures in isolation, with little or no background, the inter-textual and the subtext of the configuration frequently erupts within the meaning of the image and wrests it away from the original material of *Jane Eyre*. Yet this happens without losing the sense of strong feeling or depth of emotion that is often present in, for example, surrealist art - a category in which Rego is often placed.⁶ Rego’s inclusion of strong emotion, unlike the more straightforward feelings of pity, empathy, or melancholy of nineteenth-century pictorial art, always remains troublingly yet compellingly unresolved as well as energetically heterogeneous, and this is why the images succeed in a more positive process of re-enchantment rather than merely disenchantment.

⁶ See, for example, Fiona Bradley, ‘Introduction: Automatic Narrative’, *Paula Rego* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1997), 9-32.

Loving Bewick's Birds

The lithograph 12: "Loving Bewick" is an especially strange, troubling image that is placed midway through the sequence. T. G. Rosenthal claims that it "could serve as a paradigm of how Rego *translates* a novel into another artistic medium."⁷ His claim is intriguing for the way it clearly identifies something both exemplary and distinctive about the picture, yet his emphasis on the work of translation, with its implications of parallel meanings and correspondences in the two works of art that emerge (only the medium changes) seems wrong, perhaps partly because it comes close to suggesting what Rego denies: that her work merely illustrates or brings out something already there in the original.

The strangeness of this picture comes initially from its odd mix of the calmness and serenity in Jane's face, the familiarity and recognition of both Jane and the name of Bewick from Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, combined with the odd presence of a pelican - its oddness accentuated by the violent intrusion of its beak into Jane's mouth. The familiarity comes from the fact that the first scene of the novel has the ten year old Jane hiding herself away in the red room from her sadistic play fellow John Reed, consoling herself with Bewick's book. Yet oddness clearly overtakes reassurance and recognition within the economy of the picture. There are no pelicans in Bewick's *History of British Birds* since pelicans do not inhabit the U.K., except in special circumstances. Neither are pelicans ever referred to in *Jane Eyre*. They can, however, be seen in Rego's native Portugal which means that the image maps exotic and distant landscapes that are quite other to the novel (though not to Rego) onto the picture. Rego has several images from 1996 (for example, "Girl Swallowing Bird") of women and girls positioned with similar birds which are also, therefore, a preparation and an inter-text for the "Loving Bewick" image. Thus the image of the bird is already an impossible conflation of Thomas Bewick and his book, as well as a conjuring up of a non-native bird, Rego's own childhood, her other art, and various other symbols and myths associated with the pelican.

It is these symbolic and inter-textual associations that attach themselves to the image of the pelican that work to re-enchant the image. Clearly pelicans are distinguished by their peculiar beak which has the dual function of both equipping the bird with a long, hard weapon with which to attack aggressively, but also an enormous soft throat pouch underneath in which to store food with which they can feed and sustain

⁷ T. G. Rosenthal, *Paula Rego the Complete Graphic Work* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 173.

their young. The use of the pelican within popular symbolism and mythology plays on this latter aspect of the beak in the common depiction of the Pelican as a nurturing bird – one that is known for looking after its young to the point of self-sacrifice – of giving them her own blood if it could not find food. Since the Medieval period, however, it has also become a symbol in Catholic iconography and hymn for the passion of Christ and of the Eucharist.⁸ For this reassuring association, perhaps, the pelican has been adopted as the corporate logo by the Portuguese bank Montepio. So this specific bird already evokes a complex set of emotions and ideas that are natural, religious and cultural, but also contradictory in that it signifies both the sadistic (the strong aggressive beak), and the nurturing (to the point of masochism and self-sacrifice) in its association with Christ.

Although Sigmund Freud does not discuss the pelican per se, he did, famously, write in his essay, “Leonardo da Vinci” of da Vinci’s memory of being repeatedly tapped on the mouth by the tail of a vulture (though it was later revealed his essay was based on a mistranslation of the Italian word for a kite), a memory that Freud, of course, claims was a fantasy.⁹ The tapping is both insistent and playful. For Freud birds in general, but specifically the pleasure of flight associated with them, are strongly tied to “a longing to be capable of sexual performance”, itself a wish with “infantile erotic roots.”¹⁰ His reading of the bird as a figure for an eroticism that begins in early childhood both applies to “Loving Bewick” and yet does not. Brontë’s Jane Eyre is ten years old when she seeks solace in Bewick’s bird book, but Rego’s lithograph clearly depicts an adult woman. Thus Rego visually overlays the adult onto the infantile state it recalls through the bird fantasy. Yet the image is made explicitly sexual not so much through the bird’s potential for flight as through its beak and the manner in which it is pictured entering the girl’s mouth; a motion that prefigures both nurturing feeding/sustenance (Freud identifies an over-attentive, smothering mother in Da Vinci’s case) and a penis (homosexual

⁸ See, for example, verse 6 of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s translation of St. Thomas Aquinas’s hymn (“Bring the tender tale true of the Pelican;/Bathe me, Jesu Lord, in what thy bosom ran---/ Blood that but one drop has the worth to win/All the world forgiveness of its world of sin.”), “S. Thomae Aquinatis” in W.H. Gardner and N.H. Mackenzie (eds), *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967) 211-12.

⁹ Sigmund Freud (1923), ‘Leonardo Da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood’ James Strachey (trans) in Albert Dickson (ed.) *The Pelican Freud Library Vol.14: Art and Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) 151-231.

¹⁰ Freud, ‘Leonardo Da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood’, 219/20.

desire in Da Vinci's case, heterosexual here). Finally, however, the bird's symbolically overlaid beak returns us to Jane Eyre and Bluebeard since the blue beard in question is an unmistakable signifier of a sexuality which, in its blueness, is undoubtedly coded as perverse and often pictured as quite long (in "Dressing Him up as Bluebeard" it appears in a particularly non-aggressive and unkempt version).

Each of these observations about the Pelican in this drawing are just a few of the possible inter-texts that come into play in talking about this image: others would include the pictorial and stylistic influences that are visible in this image, and in Rego's work as a whole (Francisco de Goya's etchings as well as Gustave Doré's), other literary influences such as Charles Dickens and Rhys (*Wide Sargasso Sea*), and mythological references, most explicitly to Leda and the Swan. What is clear here, however, is that rather than being the material that is "translated" as Rosenthal would have it, from an original (Brontë's novel), into some new tale (or even anti-tale) of Jane Eyre and Bluebeard/Rochester, Rego's sequence of images are much more like, as Ruth Rosengarten puts it, "a restless and ardent thrashing through of multiple inputs"¹¹ and a strange pulling at extremely diverse sources in a way that draws attention to their textual, sensual, intellectual, and inter-textual status. Even while Rego creates an image which is at once apparently visually coherent and harmonious (perfectly proportioned, clear smoothly drawn lines depicting a loving embrace), she sabotages any and every coherent tale we might be able to tell about it from within. A sense of time and space is confused: nothing in the image itself indicates either, though we know from the novel that Jane encounters Bewick as a child. Yet here Jane is clearly not a child and the object she holds is transformed from a book about birds to a bird too exotic to be included in the book. Thus the space of the image is not one of narrative but a provisional and imaginative one in which both the meaning of human figures and objects slip around between a set of historical, literary, cultural, psychological, artistic, symbolic and literary possibilities that pull in contrary but nonetheless enchanting new directions. All of these signifiers and desires work through the process of visual condensation and spatial disproportion and incongruity that, even while they appear to allude to a tale, do so in a way that makes it an impossible one to tell, even while the effects of this encounter may enchant, re-enchant or unsettle.

¹¹ Ruth Rosengarten, 'Home Truths: The Work of Paula Rego', *Paula Rego* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1997), 44.

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